

The background of the cover is a close-up photograph of a woman's face and shoulder. She has dark hair and is looking off to the side with a slight, enigmatic smile. Her hand is visible near her shoulder, with fingers slightly curled. The lighting is soft and intimate, creating a sensual atmosphere.

RESISTING LOVE #3

Games

AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CHANTAL FERNANDO

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my family, I love you all.

T, T and J - Words can't express how much I love all of you. There is nothing I wouldn't do for each of you.

Rocky - Thank you for supporting my dream, and encouraging me. And listening to me talk non-stop about my book characters. Love you.

Tenielle - You are always there for me when I need you. And I will *always* need you. Love you infinity.

Sasha - Love you always baby sis.

Arijana Karcic - I don't think I could possibly thank you enough. You are so kind hearted, giving, helpful, amazing, talented. And hilarious. I can't forget that one. THANK YOU from the bottom of my heart for everything you do for me, you really go above and beyond and I will be forever grateful. I think everyone needs an Arijana in their lives and I'm so happy to have you in mine.

Cue the small violin

Kara Brown - Thank you so much for all of the time and effort you put into helping me! I truly appreciate you and everything you do for me. You have been such a great friend and I'm so glad to have met you.

Stephanie Knowles - Thank you for everything! Encouraging me, supporting me, offering your opinion. I really appreciate it. You are simply amazing. And the surprise box of treats you sent me was one of the most thoughtful things anyone has ever done for me.

Aileen Day - Thank you for all the support, and for loving James as your number one book boyfriend, lol.

Sara Browning - I love you <3

Tsk Tsk What to Read - A huge thanks to Shelley Bunnell and Kathryn Vanessa Spell Grimes for everything they do for me. Cover reveals, blog tours, anything. These lovely ladies are amazing, and you should definitely check out their blog!

Thank you to **all** the blogs that have supported me! There are so many of them, but here are a few that have gone above and beyond:

Three Chicks and Their Books, Mommy's Late Night Book Up, One More Chapter, Nerd Girl, Forever Me Romance, Jenee's Book Blog, Love between the sheets.

To my **beta readers** - a huge thank you for your help <3

James

visit dpgroup.org for more books uploaded by our generous members

Prologue

The past

James

I step out of my car, and scan the area surrounding the house. The front door opens, and Danielle walks to the front steps, wearing a house robe. Her gaze darts back and forth cautiously as she approaches. Her blonde hair is loose and messy, her makeup smudged around her eyes. I quickly make my way towards her, not wanting her to be seen.

You should be inside, Danielle, I chastise, but it's not harsh. I'd never raise my voice at this woman.

"I know, James. I just wanted to thank you. I finally did it... We finally did it," she whispers as she kisses me softly on the cheek. "I wrap an arm around her."

Come on, let's get inside, I encourage. We walk inside together, and I lock the door.

I'm making some coffee, she says, heading into the kitchen.

I'm about to follow her when someone knocks on the door. I open it and come face to face with the last person I expect to see right now.

"James, what are you doing here?" Sasha asks, bemused. I think for the first time in my life I'm speechless.

"James, who is it?" Danielle calls out in a worried voice.

"It's no one," I call back to her, then cringe when I realise what I said.

"No one?" Sasha repeats, the pain in her voice evident.

"I didn't mean it like that, Sasha," I say, instantly wanting to erase the hurt from her eyes.

"James, why are you here? Who is this woman?" she demands, her voice gaining steel.

"I can't do this right now, okay. You need to go home," I tell her, trying to convey with my eyes how important it is that she follows my instructions. I clench my fists, wanting nothing more than to take Sasha in my arms right now, but I don't. I can't. I have a responsibility. Sasha will understand, I'll explain everything to her when I'm able to do it. It's just not a possibility right now. When tears cloud her eyes, I swallow hard. One thing I can't take is women's tears, which is probably what brought me to where I am today.

"Go," I mouth to her, hiding as much emotion as I can.

“James, what's going on?” Danielle asks, her voice unsure.

“Sasha, you need to leave,” I demand harshly.

“Oh, I’ll go alright. Goodbye, James,” Sasha says with finality, turning around and running to her car.

She doesn’t look back.

Chapter One

The present

James

I love Layla. I really do, but right now I want to strangle her. She is flittering around my kitchen, cooking up a storm. Now, that is a good thing. In fact, she comes here just to spoil me with my favorite baked goods. The issue lies with the music she's blaring out of her iPod. The play list title should be 'depressed' or maybe 'heart-broken'. 'Miserable' would work, too.

Layla, you know I love you, but seriously? I tell her when I can't take it anymore.

"There's a price for everything, James," Layla muses with a cheeky smile.

"And?" I ask her when she says no more.

"And, the price for me coming over and slaving in the kitchen for you is that I get to choose the music," she adds cheerfully. I narrow my eyes at her, and for a second contemplate if it's even worth it. Then I smell something delicious as she opens the oven, and I realise it sure as hell is.

This song is the worst so far, because it makes me think of *her*. It makes my stomach clench, my heart beat faster. I walk over to Layla's dreaded hot pink iPod and glance at the song title. 'What If' by Babyface.

Fucking hell, it's like my own personal thoughts about Sasha put into a soppy love song. The lyrics keep getting worse as the song goes on. When the lines about not being able to move on are sung I get up and walk out of the room. What if?

What if, indeed.

What if I still had Sasha?

What if I were still happy?

What if I didn't fucking miss her every day?

What if I didn't let my job push away the woman I love?

I curse and pick up my phone, dialing the number. "Tatiana, I'm coming over."

I knock on Tatiana's door, and wait for her to open it. I met her about a year ago at work. She's a stunner. Chin length blonde hair, expressive blue eyes, and a figure that's lithe and strong, yet curvy in all the right places. Over the last two

months, we've been working together and gotten pretty close. One night after work we went out for drinks and ended up in bed. She's been hinting at wanting for us to get serious, committed, but I don't think I'm ready for that, and I know why.

Sasha. Layla is always bringing her up, talking about her, so it makes it even harder to move on. About a month after Nikki's wedding, Sasha took off around the globe somewhere. Scotland, I think. I once had a lot of missed calls from an international number, which must have been her. I was working, so I was unreachable at that time. Layla and Nikki both told me Sasha was trying to get in touch with me, but I didn't call her back. The reason for this was simple. I was trying to get over her. Layla once let it slip that she saw a picture of Sasha with someone called Jye, and that Jye was 'so gorgeous.' I hope I never have to meet this Jye character. I want Sasha happy, but I don't think I could ever bare to actually see her with another man.

The door opens and Tatiana smiles when she sees me. She's wearing a pair of jeans and a plain cotton white shirt. She looks adorable. Tatiana is a nice girl, she fits into my life. Right?

So, why can't I get over Sasha?

Sasha

Jye is now sixteen months old, and he's brought so much joy into my life. This wasn't the turn I expected my life to take, but I wouldn't change a thing about it.

"Mama!" he calls out as he slips down the slide. I clap at him, cheering him on as he plays at the playground. Jye Crawford has my dark hair, but his father's pale blue eyes. Jye is the result of a drunken night James and I spent together after Nikki and Kade's wedding.

After ignoring each other for the sober part of the wedding, or staring at each other in disdain, what happened after the reception turned into a whole other story. The entire night was a disaster, but I'd never change it. I love and adore Jye way too much, and I'm so thankful to have him. After our night together, I stormed out of the hotel room, and I haven't seen James since.

James doesn't exactly know about Jye. When I was four months pregnant and found out the sex of the baby, I tried to call James to tell him he was going to have a son. I called, but James didn't answer his phone. I kept trying to get ahold of him for two weeks. Once, a woman picked up and said James was 'busy'.

I bet he was busy. I guess he just didn't want to hear from me. I left messages with both Layla and Nikki telling them to have James contact me, but he never did. After that, I stopped trying. I still question my decision every day; did I make the right choice? It's not Jye's fault James cheated on me. Jye deserves to know who his father is. I know I'm being selfish by keeping him from James.

Would James want Jye in his life, though? If he didn't, I don't think I could handle it. Screwing me over is one thing, but if James didn't want Jye I'd be heartbroken. He'd mentioned that he liked and wanted children back when we were together, but the circumstances are extremely different now.

He's different now.

After I slept with James, I took off on a holiday just a few weeks later. I was in Scotland visiting family when I found out I was pregnant, so I decided to stay for the duration of my pregnancy and to give birth here. To say my family back home wasn't thrilled is definitely an understatement.

Trey Crawford is my cousin and an awesome guy. I'd only met him a few times growing up, but he's been so supportive. He lives alone and owns a pub right down the road from his house. He's refused to take any money from me, so I try to buy food and contribute to the household in any way that I can. Luckily, I have a decent sized savings account, so I didn't have to worry about working during my pregnancy, but when Jye was about six months old I started working some shifts at Trey's pub.

Trey watches Jye when I'm at work, and we've both made it work for us. If both of us have to work, Trey's mother watches Jye. We get along really well. She's a very kind and gentle woman, I can tell how Trey became such a wonderful man.

It's been two years now, and I think it's time for me to go home. Jye is happy and healthy, and it saddens me he hasn't met his grandparents or any of his other family. I'm trying to get Trey to come for a visit, too, but he's still undecided. With his own business to run, it's not always easy for him to get away.

Jye runs up to me and hugs my leg. Anyone who takes a look at him will know instantly that he's James' son. Besides his dark hair, he's the spitting image of his father. I can't hide out here forever.

It's time for Jye and me to go home.

"You don't have to go, Sash!" Trey tells me for what must be the hundredth

time since I told him about my plans. I feel bad leaving Trey, I know he's grown extremely fond of Jye, and now I'm taking him away.

"Oh, come on, Trey, now you can get back to your bachelor lifestyle," I attempt a joke, but Trey just scowls at me, so I walk over and muss his black hair. "I'll come back to visit, I promise, and you could always come visit us in Australia?"

Trey glances over at a sleeping Jye and sighs. "I'm gonna miss the little terror."

"Hey! What about me?"

Trey smirks. "At least I won't have to kick out all the men at the bar trying to put their grubby hands on you anymore."

I roll my eyes, and puff out a long suffering sigh. "I'm gonna miss you, Trey," I whisper.

"I know, Sash, I know," he says as he rubs the stubble on his chin. His hazel eyes are still on Jye, almost as if he's memorizing him.

"I hope his father knows how much he's missed out on," Trey mutters to himself. I swallow hard. Trey thinks that Jye's father wasn't interested in having a child. Layla and the rest of my family think I got pregnant by someone in Scotland. The whole thing is one huge cluster fuck.

I definitely have some explaining to do.

Layla is picking us up from the airport. I tried to get out of it. I told her my dad could come; I told her that Tee could, but no, Layla was determined to come and pick us up, so she is. I notice her the second I walk past the gate, standing by herself with a huge smile on her face. I relax when I don't see Chase with her. Layla runs over to us and gives me a warm, welcoming hug.

"I'm so happy you're home!" she says, her voice muffled in my hair.

"Thanks for coming to get us," I tell her.

"Oh, you know it's no problem. And you must be Jye," she says as she crouches down on her knees so she's at his level.

"Layla, there's something..." I try to say before I'm cut off.

"Aren't you handsome, Jye! You are just..." I gulp when she trails off. She looks up at me, and back down at Jye. "Oh, dear," she says.

"Layla..." I start.

"Sasha! Why didn't you tell me?" she demands in a hushed voice.

"Tell you what?" I ask her, playing stupid. I want to see if we're talking

about the same thing here.

I grimace when she pinches me. “He is the spitting image of James! Add a lip ring and blond hair and they would be twins!” she hisses, outraged. I can’t help but giggle at that mental picture.

“What’s so funny?!” she asks as she picks Jye up into her arms and cuddles him.

“Nothing,” I mumble.

“I guess I’m his Auntie squared then.”

“Layla. I can explain,” I assure her.

“Please do. I want to know why you didn’t tell me, or anyone? Why didn’t you tell James? He’s gonna be pissed. Definitely going to complicate things with his girlfriend,” Layla says that last bit to herself.

I gulp. I obviously learnt the hard way that James has women in his life, but hearing the term girlfriend in conjunction with him still hurts. Layla must see my expression because she rubs my back, comforting me.

“I shouldn’t be here, Layla. If James has a girlfriend, I don’t want to interrupt their lives. I’m taking Jye and going somewhere else,” I tell her, my mind made up. I turn around, about to walk to the ticket counter when I come face first with a wall. Okay, maybe not a wall. I cringe when I look up at Chase.

“Like hell you are,” Chase says, and if I were a lesser woman, I might have cowered at the iciness in his tone.

Layla gives me an apologetic look as Chase eyes me, then turns to Jye. Jye looks up and stares Chase down, taking a step closer to me and wrapping his arms around my leg. Chase chuckles.

“Definitely my nephew,” he says when Jye sticks his tongue out at him.

I sigh. “I can explain.”

“Come on, let’s get in the car, and then you can explain. You aren’t going anywhere, my brother deserves to know he has a son,” he says, his voice gaining steel.

I open my mouth, and then close it, knowing that arguing is futile. Chase asks me which bags are ours and collects them for us, then carries them and puts them in his car boot. I put Jye in Cole’s car seat. After he’s safely buckled in, I take a seat next to him and do my own seat belt. Ten minutes into the drive, Chase starts, “Why would you do something like this, Sasha?” he asks in a confused tone.

“I found out I was pregnant while I was overseas. Yes, I may have held a

grudge but eventually I tried to call James to tell him but he didn't answer. I left messages with Layla and Nikki, but he obviously couldn't be bothered to call me back!" I say defensively. Chase glances over at Layla, who nods, confirming my story.

"I told James Sasha's been trying to reach him and that she sounded nervous," Layla says.

"You could have tried harder," Chase says, looking at me in his review mirror.

"Get off your high horse, Chase!" I say, not appreciating his judgement.

Chase sighs, and gentles the tone of his voice. "He's our family, too."

"I know," I whisper.

"Have you been managing okay? You know if you ever need anything, money..."

"I'm fine, Chase," I interrupt. He nods once, and then stares out at the road. It's silent for a few minutes until he continues, "Layla said you're looking for a place to rent. You know I own another apartment in our building. Nikki stayed there for a bit, until she and Kade got back together, now they have their own place. You can stay there as long as you need."

"It's empty?" I ask him. As kind as his offer is, I don't want to kick anyone out. I can't help thinking that must mean James is staying in that big house by himself now.

"It's been empty since Nikki left. We can move you in tomorrow," he tells me.

"Okay, if it's not a problem that would be great. I left all my belongings at my parents before I left for Scotland," I tell them.

"We can go and get everything tomorrow, I'll hire a small moving van," Chase offers.

"Okay, and Chase," I say, fiddling with the hem of my shirt.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

"No problem, what's family for, right? Besides, there isn't anything I wouldn't do for my nephew," he says, affection lacing his voice. I will my eyes not to tear up. Who knew under all that bossiness was a kind-hearted man? Certainly not me.

Chase drops us off at my parents' and says he'll come over in the morning to help move my belongings. I hug him and Layla, thanking them both. They

both kiss Jye, before the two of us head to my parents' front door. Before I can even knock, the door flies open and my mother runs out and wraps her arms around Jye.

“Look at my handsome grandson! I finally get to meet you! You are so big!” she says, her words rushed.

“Well, hello to you too, mum,” I say in mock indignation. She doesn’t even glance up at me as she kisses Jye on his cheeks repeatedly. Finally, she looks my way, her hazel eyes narrowed on mine. “You'd think I raised you better, Sasha Crawford! Keeping my grandson from me for this long!” even as she lectures me, she walks forward and wraps me in her arms.

“I missed you, mum,” I tell her honestly.

“Missed you too, baby,” she whispers.

“Where’s dad?” I ask her.

“He’s away at work, he’ll be back next week,” she tells me. My dad is working in the mines as an engineer, so he’s away for weeks at a time. He usually works there for two weeks, and then gets one week off.

“Come on, let’s catch up on everything,” my mum says, steering Jye and me into the kitchen. She pours us both a drink, and then we get talking about everything we’ve missed in the last two years.

Chapter Two

Sasha

Chase came to my parents' house this morning, just as he said he would. We're now in our new apartment, and I love how modern and spacious it is; it's perfect for Jye and me. My bed, chest of drawers, and television are already moved in. I went shopping and bought a new bed for Jye, along with more toys and clothing since I didn't have room to bring everything back from Scotland. I'm cleaning and organizing Jye's room and when there's a knock on the door, I assume it must be either Layla or Chase so I open it with a smile. When I find myself face to face with a familiar tall, handsome, blond man, I freeze.

"James?" I say, my eyes darting all over him.

"Hey Sasha, you look good," he says without emotion.

"What are you doing here?" I ask him. I'm not ready for this confrontation yet.

"Chase told me that you need to see me, and it's urgent. What's going on?" he asks, looking concerned. I swallow hard, and play with my hair, like I always do when I get nervous. This is the moment I've been dreading. But I need to face this, and there's no time like the present. I want to be furious with Chase for telling James without warning me, without letting me do it in my own time, but I know if the situation was reversed I'd do the same thing.

"Look, James, come inside, there's something I need to tell you," I start. His forehead crinkles and his face takes on a concerned look. He walks inside and I gesture for him to take a seat, but he remains standing. Okay, then. I open my mouth to tell him, but before I can, Jye himself runs out.

"Mamaaa!" he squeals with pleasure, dragging the new stuffed toy I bought him today behind. When he sees James, he stops dead in his tracks, checking out this new person. My gaze trails back to James, who is staring at Jye with a shocked expression. His mouth pops open, and then closes with a snap. I can almost see the moment he pieces it all together, because his expression turns tortured. He swallows noticeably before speaking.

"How old is he?" he asks in a quiet tone.

"Sixteen months," I tell him, now looking at Jye instead of facing the accusation in James' eyes.

"Are you fucking shitting me?" he mutters under his breath. Jye walks over, curious, and stands next to me. He stares up at James and frowns, cuddling his toy tiger closer to his little body.

“What’s his name?” he asks me, never taking his eyes off Jye.

“Jye,” I say softly, my voice catching.

I bite my lip as he gets down on his knees, and sits back on his heels, eye level to Jye. I blink furiously to stop the tears from falling down my cheeks as my eyes begin to tear.

“Hello, little man,” James says, his gaze raking over every inch of Jye. Jye stares at him for a moment, with his head tilted to the side, as if in deep thought. Then he takes his toy and offers it to James. James smiles at Jye before taking the toy and thanking him. Jye hugs my leg once, before running back to his room. James stands up, but keeps his eyes on the floor.

“What the fuck, Sasha? How could you do this to me?” he bites out through clenched teeth. I squirm under his intense gaze.

“James...” I start, but he cuts me off.

“No, Sasha, do you hate me so much that you would keep my own son from me? Hell, I’ve missed out on everything! Fuck!”

“I tried to call you, James! I left messages, and don’t get me fucking started about when someone actually picked up the phone! After that I stopped bothering,” I hiss defensively.

“What are you talking about, I never spoke to you, so who did you talk to?” he asks, confused.

“It doesn’t matter, it’s in the past, and it’s too late to change it,” I say quietly.

James doesn’t say anything to that, because he knows it’s the truth.

“He’s beautiful,” he tells me.

“I know, he looks just like you,” I respond. His eyes close for a moment, and he takes a deep breath.

“Peaches,” he says randomly.

“Huh?”

“I want to be in his life, Sasha. I want to be there for him,” he says, changing the subject.

“Okay, James,” I agree. He sighs with relief, as if he was expecting an argument from me.

“How are we going to work this out?” he asks.

“Let’s start slowly, okay? Whenever you have a day off from work, you can come over and spend some time with him. When he gets comfortable with you, we can take it from there, okay?” I ask him, hoping he agrees.

“Okay,” he says, rubbing his hand over his jaw.

“I’m sorry, James,” I whisper.

“I can’t believe you kept him from me,” he says.

“Well, I’m sorry for that too, but I know you have a girlfriend, I don’t want to cause complications in your life,” I tell him .

James shakes his head at me. “Do you think so little of me?”

Before I can respond he says, “I’ll be here tomorrow.” Then he turns around and leaves.

James

I have a son. And he's amazing. He looks just like I did when I was his age, except for that mop of jet black hair. Sasha’s hair. The two of us have created something so perfect, and I had no idea.

I have a son, and I don’t even know him. I feel heart-broken and elated at the same time.

What does he like to eat? Does he sleep through the night? What's his favourite toy? I know *nothing*. I want to blame Sasha but it isn’t her fault alone. I should have rung her back, fuck. She could have tried to contact me again, though, but I guess there’s no point playing the ‘what if’ game.

My phone rings, it’s Tatiana. I was supposed to be at her house an hour ago. I press reject on the phone because I need some time to think before talking to her. I decide to head straight for my mother’s house. She needs to hear that she has another grandson. Then, I’m going shopping. I have over a year of making up to do.

I get out of the car, and I see the front door of my mum’s house open. She stands just outside of the door, waiting for me.

“James!” she says, her eyes brightening with pleasure as they do whenever she sees any of her children. I walk up to her and envelope her in a warm hug.

“Is everything okay?” she quickly asks.

I sigh. “Come on, let’s go inside and talk.”

We both walk in and take a seat in the living room. Mum’s eyes are full of concern and worry. I run my hands over my face, “I don’t even know where to start.” She remains quiet, waiting patiently for me to gather my thoughts.

“You remember Sasha?” I ask her, already knowing that she does. When Sasha and I dated, she and my mother were close. Her eyes light up at the mention of Sasha’s name.

“Of course, how is she? Are the two of you back together?” she asks, her words rushed in excitement. Mum knows all about Sasha and what happened. How she thought I was cheating. I ended up telling my mum everything when she caught me in a moment of weakness.

“Well you know how she was at Kade’s wedding,” I start.

“Oh, yes, we spoke for a bit. She looked stunning, didn’t she?” my mother digresses.

“Yes, she did. We ended up hooking up that night,” I say a little awkwardly, rubbing the back of my neck.

“What does ‘hooking up’ entail exactly?” she asks bluntly.

I groan. She’s actually going to make me say it. “We had sex.”

“Well then just say that, you don’t need to call it something else. The youth of today...” she huffs in exasperation.

“So, Sasha is back in Perth. I told you she was overseas, remember?” I ask her.

“I remember,” she says.

I palm my face. “I got her pregnant that night. She had my child.”

Her eyes snaps to mine, pulling her thoughts away from what I suspect were wedding plans. “Kade’s wedding was, what? Over two years ago?” she asks, her eyes narrowed.

I nod, inhaling deeply, as I watch an array of emotions cross my mother’s face.

“So do you have a son or a daughter?” she asks quietly.

“A son. His name is Jye, and he’s amazing, mum. You’ll love him,” I say.

“I already do,” she instantly replies, her eyes locked with mine.

“I’ll bring him over to see you, okay?” I tell her.

“As soon as possible. Oh, I must go shopping!” she says absently.

“Aren’t you going to ask why she didn’t tell me?” I ask her, my brows furrowed.

“I’m obviously not happy about it. My own grandson doesn’t even know me. There must be an explanation. Right now, I just want to see him, okay? Nothing is going to change the past, I just want to be in his life now,” she says as she leans over and hugs me.

“You’re going to be an incredible father, James,” she says, placing a kiss on my forehead. I love my mum.

I'm her favourite.

I walk down the aisles of the toy store, picking up anything that catches my eye. Jye had a toy tiger in his hand that he seemed fond of, so I pick up any tiger toys I come across. I also get some toy cars, making sure the age recommendation is accurate. I see a few women eyeing me and sending smiles my way. I bite my lip ring and frown.

Isn't it weird how women flock to men with children, but men run away from single mothers? Not all men, of course, but hell, I know a lot of men that steer clear.

I see a train set that catches my eye, pulling me out of my musings. I grab it, adding it to my trolley. Once it's overflowing and I can't possibly fit anything else, I head to the check out. As I'm paying for the thousand dollars' worth of toys, a thought crosses my mind. How has Sasha managed financially all this time? The idea of her or Jye going without makes me want to punch something.

"Any suggestions on where there's a good kids' clothing store?" I ask the girl at the checkout.

Sasha

To say I'm surprised when James drops by later that same evening with toys and clothes would be an understatement. I think he bought the whole damn shop, too.

"James, what is this?" I ask dryly.

"I wanted to buy my son some things," he says, stating the obvious.

"Right," I say, drawing the word out. I stare at my living room, now covered in shopping bags. My lip twitches, and I purse my lips together trying to stop myself from giggling.

"What's so funny?" James asks, obviously offended.

"You are, this is all unnecessary, James," I tell him, instantly regretting opening my mouth when I see the look on his face. He looks down, suddenly unsure. I realise James needed to do this; he needed to do something, because he's lost. He's already missed out on so much of his son's life, and has no idea how to make up for it, how to fit himself into our lives. I quickly backtrack, "But it was very kind of you. Thank you, Jye is going to love all of it, you spoiled him." When James sighs in relief and his body relaxes, my heart melts.

"Where is he?" he asks softly.

“He’s asleep.”

“Can I go in and check on him before I leave?” he asks, and I can't miss the hope in his voice.

“Of course, go ahead. It’s the first room on the left.” I watch as he walks into Jye’s room, and gently kisses his forehead. He leaves with a smile on his face.

Chapter Three

James

I talked to Tatiana yesterday, but we mainly spoke about work related things. I know there is no point in denying that it's Sasha I want, that I'll always want. Tatiana knows all about Sasha and what happened between us, all about our history. We've always been honest with one another. And I'm not going to stop now.

I knock softly on her front door, not exactly looking forward to this conversation.

"James!" she beams, her face lighting up as she sees me. She looks sexy in her police uniform. Her short blonde hair is tied away from her makeup free face in a ponytail, and her eyes are warm and friendly.

"You just get back from work?" I ask with a frown.

"No, I'm about to leave, what's going on?" she asks as I walk into her house and take a seat on her couch.

"We need to talk," I say, glancing around the house, not looking forward to this conversation.

"It sounds serious," she says as she crosses her arms over her chest.

"Sasha is back, and I have a son," I tell her bluntly.

"You have a son?" she repeats.

"Yes, it was a shock for me too," I add.

"She had your child, never told you, and let me guess, you're leaving me for her?" she says in disbelief.

"There's a bit more to it than that, Tatiana," I tell her in a gentle tone.

"I thought... It's just that I thought..." she trails off.

"Tatiana, I told you from the beginning-"

"I know, but come on James! I didn't expect this!" she yells, cutting me off.

"I have a chance to make a family for my son, I won't lose this opportunity." She had to know that we weren't solid. When she told me she loved me, I never said it back, and I was honest about why.

"You're seriously going to try and get her back, after she kept a child from you? I thought we had something special, James, I thought we were finally getting somewhere in this relationship. I thought you were finally forgetting her," Tatiana spits out bitterly.

“I know it doesn’t make any difference, but I’m sorry. I really am, Tati,” I say roughly.

“Don’t you Tati me, James! Please leave, I need to be alone,” she says.

“Okay.” I sigh, feeling like complete shit. “Are we still on for tomorrow?” I ask her before I leave.

“Yes, of course. I’m a professional, James, no one is going to change that, not even you,” she snaps.

I make my way to my car in a daze, upset that I hurt Tatiana, but I had no choice but to be upfront with her. She might not thank me now, but in the long run this is the better option. Tatiana is right about one thing though, Sasha did keep Jye from me. How does one make up for nearly a year and a half of absence in a child’s life?

Sasha

James sent me a message telling me he was coming over today to spend some time with Jye. I have to admit I’m a little nervous. It’s going to be our first family outing, as dysfunctional as our family currently is, that still means something to me. Over the past two years, I haven’t dated even once. Between pregnancy, Jye and work, I never really had the time for a love life. And it’s hard to move on, especially when you see the man you love in the face of your son every day.

I dress Jye in a cute pair of jeans and a checkered shirt from the huge selection that James purchased for him. I think James will like that. I’m wearing a pair of black tights with a knee length royal blue dress and black ballerina slippers. I spray a few squirts of perfume, the only one I ever wear, and I’m good to go. I’m not wearing any makeup, and my hair is thrown up in a high ponytail. I pack Jye’s bag with everything he needs for a day outing.

I’m just putting in a change of clothes for Jye when I hear a knock on the door. Knowing it’s James, I unlock and open the door wide. James is leaning against the door frame, looking slightly nervous. The most adorable thing is that he’s dressed up a little, wearing a white shirt that accentuates the enticing curve of his biceps and shows off a hint of his impressive chest.

“Hey, Sash,” he greets as he gives me a quick once over. The way his eyes scan me so intently makes me feel like he might want more than I’m able to offer right now. More than just working together to co-parent Jye as best as we can. I’m not sure how I feel about that.

“Hey, come on in,” I respond, moving aside for him to enter. James walks

in and grins when he catches Jye sitting on the carpet playing with one of the new toys he bought him.

“It fits him,” he says proudly, referring to the new outfit Jye is wearing.

“Perfectly, you did well,” I tell him.

“Hey, little man, do you want to go to the park today?” he asks Jye. Jye stands up and curiously walks over to James. When James asks him the question again Jye nods twice, and gives James an adorable grin.

“How do you ever say no to him?” James muses out loud.

I laugh and shake my head at him. “You better learn how to say no, and fast, James Steele.”

“I could just let you be the bad guy,” James teases.

“Mama!” Jye calls out, interrupting our banter.

“Okay, okay, we’re going,” I tell him as I pick up his baby bag. We all walk outside, James waiting while I lock up. When he picks up Jye and takes him to his car, I frown.

“Why don’t we go in my car, I have the baby seat,” I call out.

“No need, I went and bought one,” James says with a grin. Wow, he really did think of everything. I walk towards his car and watch as James buckles Jye up. I bite my lip as I see him struggle a few times before he finally gets it. Instead of driving to the local park, James takes us to some fancy park. Apparently, it’s the biggest one in Perth. When we’re parked, James unbuckles Jye and they both walk over to the swings first. After about a minute I can hear Jye’s laughter echoing throughout the playground. When Jye has his fill of the swings, I feel a pang in my chest as I watch James lean down to undo the buckle, leaving a little kiss on Jye’s forehead before picking him up and taking him to the slide. I head over to the café and get lunch for the three of us, calling them both to come and eat once it’s ready. My eyes widen as I watch both of them pick-up their sandwich, take a bite, and then wipe their mouths with the back of their hands at the exact same time.

“You’re pretty good at this,” I tell James after we’ve finished the meal. James’ blue eyes pierce mine. “I’m trying, I mean, I want to be a good father,” he says. We’re about to play some more when James’ phone rings.

“Tatiana, hi,” he says as he picks up. My whole body tenses. Is that his girlfriend?

“Shit, okay, tell her I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

I notice him cringe after he curses, probably because it was in front of Jye.

“Okay, bye.”

James glances over at me, an apologetic look on his face. “I’m sorry, Sasha, I need to go to work. I’ll have to drop you and Jye off.” If that was his girlfriend, I doubt it has to do with his work. Maybe it’s just an excuse because she wants him to come home?

“No problem,” I say, standing up and packing everything. I walk over to Jye and take his hand, walking with him towards the car.

“No, mama! I want to play!” he whines.

My eyes slide to James, who currently looks crestfallen. His eyes are on Jye and I know he feels bad about cutting his day short. I get down on one knee and look into Jye’s pale eyes.

“Baby, we need to go home now. But how about when we get there, you and I can play blocks?” I try to convince him.

Jye thinks it over for a few moments, and then nods. “Okay, mama,” he says with a grin. Crisis averted.

I pick Jye up and strap him in James’ car. When I get into the passenger seat, James is silent, not starting the engine.

“Look, I’m sorry, I’ll make it up to him, okay?” he says.

“It’s fine, but maybe next time we can just come in separate cars,” I suggest. It’s easier that way, and I can drive myself home. I see the muscle in James’ jaw tick, a sure sign that he’s not happy, but I could care less because right now, neither am I. He starts the engine and we drive home in silence. When he pulls into my driveway, I thank him for taking us out, take Jye out of the car and walk to my front door. I don’t look back.

James

I watch Sasha and my son walk into their house, and sigh heavily. I didn’t want to cut my first day out with Jye short, but I had no option. That’s the thing with my job. Sometimes I may be gone for a day or two, and I get called at random times. There’s nothing I can do to help that. It’s not the ideal job for a father, even one who doesn’t have their kid full time.

Yet.

Soon I hope to move Sasha and Jye into my house. It’s huge, three bedrooms and spacious. I bought the house from Chase, since he had no use for it, and Kade and Nikki moved into their own home. My phone beeps with a message from Tatiana, with one thing written in it. An address. I put it into my

GPS and drive to the location.

Chapter Four

Sasha

The next day, I call James' phone but he doesn't answer. I'm in a bit of a pickle, because I have a job interview and no one to watch Jye. Layla, Chase and Cole have gone away for a week, and James is now out of the question. I call my mother, who, it turns out, is more than happy to look after him for the day.

I dress up for my interview. I decide on a knee length peach colored skirt and a white blouse with puffy sleeves. I put on my favourite black pumps, adoring them for a few seconds, before packing my handbag. I applied for this job as soon as I got back to Perth; it's a part time marketing management position. My degree from uni is in marketing and advertising, so it's right up my alley. Part time work is perfect for me, at least until Jye starts school. I know this job can eventually lead to full time if they like what I bring to their company, so it's also an investment in the future.

I stare into the mirror, adding another coat of mascara, and checking over my makeup. I put on a pair of pearl earrings, and nod once in approval. It's time to work my charm.

I head to my mother's to pick up Jye, a wide smile on my face. I was told I would hear about the job in a few days, but even I can admit that it looks good thanks to the amazing reference my previous employer gave me before I left for Scotland. I find Jye fast asleep on the couch, looking angelic. I kiss him on the cheek, and breathe in his familiar scent.

"Thanks for watching him, mum," I tell her as I'm leaving.

"Any time, Sasha. You better call Ryder, too, he rang here looking for you."

I promise her I will. I tried to ring Ryder yesterday, but he was unavailable. Ryder's band is currently touring Australia, and he has taken his girlfriend Lexi with them. I always knew my cousin would end up famous, I'm so proud of him, and I absolutely adore Lexi. I drive home, and tuck Jye into bed. I love his bed; it's in the shape of a racing car and super cute. It also has railings so it's safe. After a quick shower, I get into my pajamas and crawl into my bed.

When I wake up the next morning, I notice my phone flashing with a few missed calls and text messages from James. It's been two days since I last heard from him, and I don't know how I feel about it. I suppose once I found out that James wanted to be in Jye's life, I pictured him being around all the time, but I

guess this is the reality of a broken family. Maybe Jye will only end up seeing him once or twice a week and I will have to get used to that. I've managed by myself all this time, and I can sure as hell do it again. I slip my feet into my pink slippers, and walk sleepily into Jye's room. I get into his car bed, and snuggle up next to him.

"Mama," he says groggily.

"Morning, baby."

Jye yawns and gives me a soft kiss on my cheek. I love this little boy.

"Shall we get up have some breakfast then go to the beach?" I offer. Jye grins and nods his head yes. I give him a quick bath and dress him in his swimwear, a cute pair of pirate board shorts and a matching rash guard. I whip up some scrambled eggs and toast, which is his favourite, and sit him in his feeding chair to eat. When there's a knock on the door I frown, looking over at the clock. It's nine AM. I walk to the door, a piece of toast hanging from my mouth. I unlock it and open it slightly.

James

I watch as Sasha partially opens the door, checking to see who it is. When she sees that it's me she doesn't look too pleased, but still opens the door and invites me in. I smile when I see her with a piece of toast sticking out of her mouth, she looks adorable. I've been working the last two days; I had to go on a job that was two hours out of town.

When I finally checked my phone I couldn't help cringing when I saw that I had missed calls from Sasha. Why didn't I tell her I'd be gone? I never know exactly how long it will take, but still. I could have given her some warning. I'm not used to answering to anyone, but now I have a family, and they should come first. When Sasha didn't answer my calls I assumed she was either sleeping or pissed off, so here I am.

I walk in behind her, and can't help but smile at her pink slippers and silk robe. I'm not gonna lie, her ass is outlined and it looks fucking sexy. I see Jye in his feeding chair, looking cute as ever eating a piece of toast like his mum.

"Hey, little man," I say with a smile.

"James," he says as he shoves another bite in his mouth. James. It came out more sounding like 'Jam' but still. He called me James, not dad. My heart breaks just a little.

"James, we need to talk," Sasha interrupts my thoughts with her hard voice. We head into the hallway, so Jye can't hear us.

"I'm sorry you weren't able to contact me, I had to work," I explain, my mind still on my son.

"You had to work," she repeats in disbelief.

"Yeah, I'm sorry, I know I should have told you." And I should have. I know I'm in for it; the Sasha I remember never lets anything slide.

"Look, James, obviously my expectations and yours are completely different..."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask her. She better not be implying what I think she is.

I watch as she hides her face behind her hair. She always does it when she's slightly embarrassed. "I don't know, I just thought we would try to make this work for Jye, try to be a family, even if we aren't together. The reality never hit me that you would only be here part-time. I know that's not your fault, it's just something I'll need to get used to, I guess," she says with a soft sigh.

I clench my teeth together. "Sasha, my job is unpredictable, I don't have a say in when I need to leave. It's not my choice, trust me, I *want* to be here! More than anything."

"Your job or your girlfriend?" she asks snidely. Oh, so that's what this is all about.

"Are you jealous?" I taunt.

"No, why would I be?" she replies as she looks down at her nails.

"Maybe because you still want me?" I say hopefully. Her brown eyes pierce mine, but she stays silent. She takes Jye out of his feeding chair and to the sink where she washes his face and hands.

"Hey, little man, where are you off to?" I ask Jye, noticing his board shorts.

"Beach!" Jye calls out, a huge grin on his face.

"Can you watch him while I have a quick shower?" Sasha asks, sounding anything but happy about it.

"Of course." Spending time with my son is a blessing, not a chore.

"Okay, I'll be about ten minutes."

"Take your time. Come on, Jye," I say as I take his hand in mine and pull him towards the living room.

Sasha

I take a quick shower and get ready for the beach. Jye and I both love the

ocean, and right now the weather is perfect for it. I pack a bag for both of us, and then walk out of my room wearing my bikini with denim shorts and a white kaftan over it.

While I was in the shower, I practised my speech. I get weak around James. After not seeing him for so long, I'm almost desperate to be in his presence. I can't let myself forget about everything that happened in the past.

James isn't mine, and he'll never be mine.

Broken trust isn't easily repaired.

"James?" I say.

"Yeah?" he replies, checking me out from head to toe.

"Maybe we should work out an agreement. You have Jye for the weekend, something like that."

He puts down the truck he was holding and instantly stands up. "No. Like I said, my work is unpredictable and besides I don't want to see him only two days a week. When I'm not working, I want to be here," he states.

"I needed you, James. I had a job interview, and I couldn't even reach you. I had to drop Jye off at my mother's house!"

"I'm sorry, okay? If you ever need anything and you can't get me, call Kade or Chase, they'd love to help out."

"What is it that you even do for work?" I ask in exasperation. I've asked him before, but saying you run an organization isn't really telling me anything. James' eyes soften and he steps closer to me, putting his hand on my cheek.

"When we broke up, Sasha, I never cheated on you. I fucking loved you, I would never have thrown that away," James whispers. I get a flashback of that moment, me standing at the front door of a random house and James inside, telling me that I was no one to him.

"No one," I whisper back softly.

"What?"

"I'm no one to you," I repeat in a daze like state.

"You're everything to me, Sasha," he replies in a forceful tone. When he leans forward and locks his lips with mine, I allow myself a moment of weakness. A moment to taste the man I love, to live in a fantasy. He pulls back, his chest heaving slightly.

"You have a girlfriend!" I spit out.

"No, I don't," he says with a crooked grin.

"What happened?" I ask him, needing to know the answer.

“We broke up. You and Jye are my priority. I was dating a girl named Tatiana, but now we’re over. Now that that’s out of the way, are we gonna go to the beach? Have a nice family outing?” he asks.

I nod my head yes. I realise later that he never answered my question.

Chapter Five

James

“Thank you, James,” Bethany says gratefully.

“No problem. Okay, you know the drill, the officer will be by tomorrow,” I tell her for the second time. She thanks me again. I walk out of her house, making sure she locks it behind me, and then head for my car. I sit there a moment, sighing ruefully. Another day I didn’t get to see Jye. I miss my little man, and his mama. I miss my family. The last two days have been hectic.

I check my phone, no missed calls or text messages. That’s almost worse. They don’t even need me. I just come and go, as work allows me to, but I’m not actually needed. I hit the steering wheel with the palm of my hand in frustration. I need to be with my family.

Sasha

Today we’re heading to James’ house for a family lunch. Everyone wants to see Jye, and I have to admit that I’m nervous to face his mother. I used to be pretty close with Lucy when James and I used to date, and she’s a lovely woman. Anyone would be lucky to have her as a mother-in-law, which is why I dread seeing disappointment in her eyes.

I glance at Jye in the rear view mirror and take a deep breath. He’s fast asleep and sucking his thumb, looking adorable in his distressed jeans and superman shirt. I park my car in James’ driveway and sit still for a few moments, buying time to compose myself. A slight knock on the window makes me jump, and I instantly turn my head to the right, coming face to face with James. His lips are pursed together, like he’s fighting a smile. The action draws my gaze to his lip ring that I’m so fond of.

I still remember the night he got it pierced. We were coming out of a rock concert, laughing, full of adrenaline. I mentioned before how hot I thought piercings were, and when we walked past a tattoo parlour that also did piercings, James pulled me in and got it done.

James opens my car door, bringing me back to the present. He opens Jye’s door and pulls our sleeping son out and into his arms. I can tell he’s excited to show his son off to his family, like a proud father.

“You look beautiful,” he says in greeting. I glance down at my floor length blue maxi dress, and offer him a small grin. I had no idea what to wear, so I went with an all-purpose dress. My hair is down and flowing down my back, and I

opted for a natural makeup look. James grabs Jye's baby bag, and walks towards me, leaning forward to kiss my cheek sweetly. He smells so good, I can't help inhaling deeply.

"You smell good, too. Like peaches," he adds with a chuckle. I blush with embarrassment that he caught me. Jye wakes up with all the commotion, smiling when he sees James holding him.

"Hey, little man," he says warmly.

"Okay, let's do this," I say to myself. James' head snaps in my direction, his eyebrows rising.

"No one will be rude to you, they just want to see Jye. Relax, okay," he assures me. I nod, pushing a lock of hair behind my ear. We walk to the door, and James opens it, motioning for me to enter. I hear the sound of laughter and the smell of barbecue as soon as I walk in.

"Smells good," I whisper, suddenly feeling hungry.

"You always did love your food," James says.

"There's nothing wrong with that," I huff.

As we walk into the kitchen I see Lucy, James' mum, sitting at the table with Kade, Nikki and their daughter, Grace. James' dad is away on business, and Chase and Layla are still on their trip which they decided to extend. All eyes are suddenly on me, making me feel uncomfortable. I look over at Jye trying to avoid their stares.

"Everyone, this is my son, Jye," James introduces proudly, lifting Jye in the air. The way he does it reminds me of the cub on *The Lion King* when he is held up by the monkey. The three adults walk over to Jye instantly, Nikki stopping to give me a hug.

"Look at you, MILF," she says with a cheeky grin. Married life is obviously agreeing with her, because she looks happier than ever. She is dressed in a pair of black jeans with a green singlet, looking casual, yet pretty.

Kade's eyes are narrowed, and I can tell he's not happy about this situation. At all. And who could blame him, really? I kept his nephew away from him. When I see tears in Lucy's eyes, as she hugs Jye, I feel my own eyes water.

"Can we talk for a sec, Sasha?" she asks me in her soft voice.

I nod, dreading it, but knowing I need to face up for my actions.

James

When I hear my mum saying she wants to talk to Sasha, I cringe. I knew

this was coming, but I don't want anything to chase Sasha off or make her feel uncomfortable.

"Mum," I say softly in warning.

"It's okay, James," Sasha says with a forced smile. I'm about to argue further when Kade suggests we go outside with the kids to play. Kade and I had gone to the shops yesterday and bought a play structure for Jye with swings, a slide and fort. We also got a trampoline, a sandpit, and any other outdoor toys we could think of. Kade bought him a soccer set, mini golf, and other various sporting games that he thought would make for good bonding. I give Sasha a look that says 'are you sure?' and she gives me a slight nod in return. My tough girl.

Jye is in Kade's arms as we walk outside. I love the look on Jye's face as he spies all the new playthings. His blue eyes shine as he blinks a few times in glee. Nikki takes him and Grace on the trampoline to play as I cast a glance towards the door for the third time.

"Mum's not gonna kill her," Kade chuckles next to me.

"I know, it's just..." I'm protective of her.

"Remember our awesome fort we had as kids?" he asks.

"It was the best," I say with a fond smile.

"Wasn't it? It was badass," Kade adds.

"Yeah until you set it on fire," I mutter.

"That was Chase, not me!" Kade says adamantly. He's lying, we all know it was him.

"Really?" I drawl, disbelief showing in my voice.

"Where's the proof, bro?" Kade asks with a chuckle.

"Still scared of mum, aren't you?" I tease.

"Not even. Mum loves me regardless. I'm her fav..."

"No, you're not!" I cut him off. We always get into this argument.

"How's business?" Kade asks, changing the subject.

"Good, actually. A few of my stocks have gone up," I answer him. I've been playing in the stock market for a while now, and that's how I've been able to afford my house and car, and have more than enough saved in the bank. It allows me extra time to work on other things.

"You're good at what you do," he says absently, a double meaning in his words. His voice sounds distracted, and when I glance at him I know why. He's staring at Nikki's tits as she bounces up and down on the trampoline.

“That’s a little disturbing, you know,” I tell him, blinking slowly.

“What is?” he asks, his eyes still glued to his wife.

“Nikki is innocently playing with the kids, and you’re staring at her tits,” I say with a chuckle.

Kade narrows his eyes at me. “This is the last time you will speak of my wife’s delectable breasts.”

I burst out laughing.

“You better sort that shit out, James,” he says, his voice unusually stern. I run my hands through the back of my hair, knowing exactly what he is referring too. Something I made myself pretend never happened. Now that Sasha's back in my life, I need to go back and fix things.

I see Sasha walk out alone, looking a little lost.

“Well, then, I guess it’s fair if I just...” Kade trails off, his eyes blatantly on Sasha’s chest. I know he’s just goofing around, but I slap him on the back of the head anyway. When Sasha reaches my side, I pull her closer and tuck her under my arm. She stiffens as I hold her, but she doesn’t pull away.

“Is everything okay?” I whisper into her ear.

“Yes,” she replies, but doesn’t offer anything else. I see her scan the yard, her eyes widening as she takes in all the play equipment. “It looks like a playground out here,” she says in shock, her mouth open slightly.

“I know I went a little overboard, but...”

“You’re amazing, you know that?” she asks, cutting me off. Her compliment makes me exhale in relief. I want her to think that of me, to think I’m good enough to be a father to Jye.

“You were hungry, come on, let’s go and eat,” I say.

“Jye...”

“Kade and Nikki will watch him for a minute, don’t worry,” I assure her, nodding to Kade to make sure he keeps an eye.

“Okay.”

We serve our food and head to the table to eat. I stifle a grin as I watch her enjoy and relish every bite. She licks the bottom corner of her mouth and I feel myself getting hard. This woman has no idea what she does to me. But I can’t wait to show her.

Chapter Six

Sasha

James has been spending as much time as possible with Jye and me over the last few weeks, only leaving a few times when Tatiana calls him. When he's away he makes sure to call Jye to say good night, which is sweet. He'd come over the night before, once again asking me out.

"Sasha, I want to take you out on a proper date," he said.

"I don't think so, James," I told him, hating the way his eyes dulled with my response.

"We need to have a long talk, Sasha. You can't keep avoiding it," he had said softly.

I can try, I thought to myself.

We have so many unresolved issues, and going out on a date isn't going to be in our favor. I know that. We do need to talk before we even think about going on any dates. I have no idea why his ex calls him so often, and he's not my boyfriend, so I can't demand any answers, although I desperately want them.

One good thing that happened this week, I was hired for the marketing job I applied for, so Jye now goes to my mother's house three days a week while I'm at work.

I'm ironing my clothes when I get a call from Layla saying that we're all going out tonight. That actually sounds good, it's been a long time since I'd gone out and had a good time with the girls. My mother comes over and picks up Jye, happy to keep him overnight. I take a long, scalding hot shower, and then slide on my favourite little black dress. It's backless and slinky, clinging to all the right places. I decide on my new red platform heels, and a black clutch. My hair is blown out, with lots of volume and flicks out. I apply bright red lipstick and some false lashes and I'm good to go. I spray my signature perfume before shoving it in my bag.

My phone rings, letting me know the girls must be ready to go. We decided on catching a cab, but Chase being Chase got one of his employees to drive us all.

"Hey, Layla," I answer.

"We're waiting out front!" she says cheerfully.

"Coming," I say. We both hang up. I quickly lock up and head out to the car, some massive looking black monstrosity. A man gets out and opens the door

for me.

“Thank you,” I tell him.

“No problem,” he replies. He looks to be in his thirties and he's kind of cute. I sit in the car and smile at the greetings from Layla, Nikki and Nikki's friend Simone.

“You look fucking hot!” Nikki announces. I smile.

“No seriously,” Layla concurs.

“You all look gorgeous,” I tell them. Layla is wearing a long white strapless dress, and she looks like a princess. Nikki is wearing a mini dress in her favourite green, and her hair is tied up in a high ponytail. Simone is wearing a hot red dress and looks like a siren. We all clean up pretty well.

“Tee and Lexi are gonna meet us there,” Layla tells me when I ask where the two of them are. We all walk into Steele and sit at the bar, getting comfortable. I have a feeling we're gonna be here for a while. Layla orders us our first round of drinks, and we all start chatting and catching up. Tee arrives with Lexi, and I run and hug them both, happy to see them.

“I've missed you guys,” I tell them.

“Missed you too, cuz,” Tee says. She's wearing a short leather skirt, which flairs out at the waist, and a tight black top. She looks smoking hot. Her hair is now a deep purple, longer than before. She sticks her tongue out at me to show me her new Batman tongue ring, which I love. Lexi looks like a movie star, as always. She's wearing a black see-through blouse and red shorts.

“Lexi, how are you? When did you get back?” I ask her.

“I'm good, I got in just yesterday. Ryder gets back next week,” she says with a sweet smile, absently playing with her stunning honey locks. The woman is a goner for my cousin and I couldn't be happier.

“Tell him to come over when he does, I know he's dying to lecture me,” I say dryly. To say Ryder was not happy when he found out I was pregnant and I didn't wanna tell him who the father was is an understatement. I order us a round of tequila from Payton, mine spilling around the glass when I'm suddenly nudged.

“Hey!” I huff. I look over at Tee, to see her staring at the entrance. I follow her gaze and see James walking in, alone, and he's staring right at me. I release a long suffering sigh, then down my shot. No salt or lime needed.

“Hey, pretty girl,” he says smoothly as he walks up to me. Pretty girl. He used to call me that all the time.

“Hey James,” I say softly.

“Who's watching Jye tonight?” he asks, frowning.

“My mother. I called you, but you didn't answer. No surprise there,” I mutter.

“Sorry, I was working. I only just got in, had a shower and came into Steele because Chase asked me to check on something. Although it looks like he just wanted me to check up on all you girls,” he says, his eyes crinkling. My eyes zoom to his lips, and my mind goes back to the fateful night of Nikki's wedding.

Nikki had guilt tripped me into being in her wedding. Don't get me wrong, I like Nikki, and Kade is both a funny guy and my cousin's brother in law, but the reason I didn't want to be a bridesmaid was because I was stuck being paired with James. I could tell he was just as unhappy about it as I was, maybe even more so. Which kind of pissed me off, because it was him that fucked up our relationship, not me.

I first met James about four years ago. I was having a girls' night out with my friend Janelle, and he came up to me and completely charmed me. He won me over that night, that's all it took. One night of being in his presence and I was hooked. I was still a virgin when I met James, and looking back, I was extremely naïve and filled with fairy tale romances and happily ever afters. Not to say I hadn't dated around, because I had, but I'd still kept my virginity to give to *the one*. The one I would marry, spend my life with. The one who deserved to be the only man that had me in that intimate way.

After four months of dating, I gave myself to James. He knew I was a virgin; I was upfront about that with him. He told me he would wait, that he wanted to wait. Until the right time. Until he thought I was ready. He wanted it to be special, and he made sure it was. Candles, flowers, the whole shebang. It was beautiful, a night I thought I would treasure forever, and to this day still the most romantic thing anyone has done for me. James was attentive, gentle and tender. After that, though, we both let our passion fly. James was fun in and out of bed, creative, exciting. Our sex life never lacked, I never once got bored. I really thought James was my 'one', and I thought I was his. Until that fateful day.

It was a total coincidence I saw James pull into that woman's driveway. I was on my way to Janelle's house, and I was surprised to see him there, because he'd said he was working.

The next day James tried calling me non-stop, and when I didn't answer, he dropped by my house, banging on my front door. I sat in my bed, ignoring him. I

didn't deserve to be treated like that by any man, love of my life or not.

You can imagine my surprise when Layla showed up at our family gathering with her new man, and his brother - James. What a small cruel world it really is. After two years, everything came back. The hurt, the despair, and the loss of the man I once loved. The only man I've ever loved. I saw James again at Layla's baby shower, I was told none of the men would be there but I guess they decided to drop by. As soon as I saw him, I felt that familiar pang in my chest. I tried to slowly slip away, but with the first step I made his blue eyes were pinned on me. He stared at me for a moment, before he walked over and pulled me aside, telling me that he needed to talk to me.

"What could you possibly have to talk to me about James?" I asked him dryly.

"You need to listen to me, Sasha," he demanded.

"If this is about me being *no one* to you, I'd rather not hear it," I muttered. He dropped his head for a moment, a picture of remorse. After a few moments he looked back at me, our eyes connecting.

"I'm sorry, Sasha, you weren't meant to be there. It was a misunderstanding, you don't understand..." James trailed off.

"What don't I understand, James? That I caught you with your mistress and you played it like I was the other woman?" I snapped. I could tell I pushed him with that comment, because his eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched. Noticing his jaw brought my gaze to his lips, and that sexy as sin lip ring of his. Before James could respond, Nikki came over asking if everything was okay. I took that as my cue to leave.

I didn't see James again until Layla's wedding, where thankfully I managed to avoid him. But at Nikki's wedding it looked like my good luck had finally run out. After Layla's baby shower, Nikki and I formed a friendship. We became pretty close, which is how I ended up there, being one of her bridesmaids. I should have said no, but I couldn't do that to her just because of James. I was civil, of course. It was Nikki's big day, and I'd never ruin that for her. A smile was plastered on my face the entire time. Hell, I should have been an actress, because that was an Oscar worthy performance.

As the night wore on, I was a little on the drunk side. I think everyone was, damn open bar. I giggled when I saw James get yelled at by his date. I wondered what that was about, maybe the bastard cheated on her, too. She left, stomping the whole way out. I shrugged to myself, ordering a few more drinks. My cousin Tee was there and the both of us are known to get a little wild. Hell, even our

parents tried to keep us apart as much as possible. An hour or so later, when I stood up off the chair and wobbled, I knew it was time for me to get my drunk ass home. I headed out of the reception, pulling my phone out of my bra so I could call a cab. I was trying to dial when a firm, strong hand wrapped around my arm.

“Where do you think you’re going?” a deep husky voice purred. That voice, shit. I stilled for a second before I turned around and opened my mouth to say something, but before I got the chance James’ lips were on mine. His hands gripped my hips possessively as he kissed me hungrily, nipping at my lips before he pulled away and started to kiss down my jaw. My breath came out in fast pants, and I stopped thinking about anything except what I was feeling right then. I could have one more night with him; maybe that would be my closure. Right?

I woke up groggily, with the worst headache ever. How much did I drink the night before? When I felt someone make a movement next to me I cringed. Then when the flashbacks of the night before hit me all at once, I inwardly groaned. What was I thinking? I mentally called myself all kinds of interesting and creative names. *You never learn, Sasha!* I opened one eye and peaked around. I slowly turned my head and looked over at James who was fast asleep. Time for operation ‘sneak out after a one night stand’.

I quietly got out of the bed and found my dress and bra thrown haphazardly on the floor. I put my bra on, and then the green bridesmaid dress. Walk of shame in a bridesmaid dress, that wasn't suspicious at all. I stifled another groan, and looked around for my panties. When I saw the black satin scrap on top of the television I quickly grabbed them. I was about to shove them on, when I realised they were ripped in half. Typical James! I threw my hands in the air in exasperation and scrunched the panties in my hand. When I spotted the rest of my belongings on the floor, I quickly grabbed them and started to tip toe out of the room. I was almost at the door when I accidentally tripped over James’ shoe.

“Fuck,” I heard James mumble.

Fucking shoe! I was so close!

I hesitantly glanced over at him. “I don’t know why the fuck I let you touch me, but it won’t be happening again,” I told him.

“Fuck!” he repeated, yelling it out this time. He got out of bed, and started getting his clothes on.

“I don’t regret being with you, Sasha,” he said in a steady voice.

“That makes one of us,” I hissed back at him, storming out. I called a cab, jumped in, and finally allowed the tears to fall. I’d wasted so many tears on him, and there I was once again. As the cab took off I saw James standing there, watching it drive away. His face looked strained, and his eyes were sad. Part of me wanted to run to Ryder, and have him protect me, have him go and kick James’ ass. Ryder would have said just the right thing, too, he always does. But I didn’t do that. This was something I had to bear on my own.

“Sasha?” James says, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“Sorry,” I say, picking up my drink and stirring the ice in it with my straw.

“Where did you go?” he asks curiously.

“Was just thinking,” I say.

“About?” He takes a seat on the chair next to me that Layla had vacated for him. I throw her a look but she just smiles.

I sigh and turn to look James in the eye. “About us. What happened the night of the wedding.”

“I know you don’t regret it anymore,” he says as he leans forward to play with a lock of my hair.

“No, of course not. I love Jye more than anything,” I tell him.

“And so do I,” he says earnestly. I skull the rest of my drink, and place it down on the counter. My fingers are ice cold from the glass.

“We still have a lot to talk about, Sasha,” he continues.

“I know, but tonight is about fun. We can talk tomorrow, okay?” I tell him.

“Okay,” he agrees, kissing me gently on my forehead. “You look *cute*, by the way,” he adds casually. I instantly narrow my eyes at him, and he bursts out laughing. He remembers, oh, he definitely remembers.

“You’re mean,” I state.

“No, I’m not. You’re the only one in the world who thinks that cute means something other than what it does,” he says, his eyes twinkling.

“Cute means ugly but interesting!” I exclaim.

“I can’t believe you’re still on about that,” he chuckles.

“It does! It’s what people say about babies that aren’t that cute,” I whisper so no one else can hear.

James mouth gapes wide open. “All babies are cute!”

I roll my eyes. “If someone’s baby isn’t that cute, the person will say ‘Ohhhh, he’s so... *cute*.’ which really doesn’t mean cute!” I ramble. The drinks

are definitely getting to me now.

“What does it mean then?” he asks me, trying to contain his mirth.

“Ugly but interesting,” I whisper back, looking around to make sure no one can hear me.

James is now openly laughing at me, but I tune him out when I hear the Sexual Healing remix playing. I love to dance to this song. I look around for Tee, to find her already staring at me expectantly. She loves this song, too. She makes a ‘get on the dance floor now’ motion by tilting her head and widening her eyes. I pat James on the head affectionately and then dance my way to the floor.

“Your man is yummy,” Tee announces, an evil glint in her eye.

“Yeah, he makes beautiful babies, too,” I brag.

“Yeah, I’m coming over tomorrow to see my little boy again,” she says. Tee came over last week and we spent the day at the beach with Jye.

“You gonna talk or you gonna dance?” I joke. Accepting the challenge, Tee pulls me closer and we start to grind. Tee shimmies in a sexy move, and I swerve my hips to the music. Soon everyone else joins us, except James who is still sitting by the bar watching. I can’t help but notice that his eyes are glued to me, my every move. He’s literally devouring me with just his gaze. When he starts to nibble on the corner of his bottom lip, I turn away. I’m not ready to go there with James, not with so many things left unanswered.

I pull Lexi in closer and give her a warm smile, wanting her to feel included. I laugh as Nikki and Layla do a choreographed dance, knowing them, it was something from high school. Yes, they still remember some of the routines. I shake my head at them, and look over to see Simone chatting with some guy. Maybe one of us is going to get some action tonight. Well, besides Layla, of course. That woman is getting the business every night. The blush on her face every time anyone brings it up is answer enough.

I glance back at the bar to see James still sitting there, but now he’s not alone. There’s a woman standing next to him, a little too close for my liking. I narrow my eyes on the two of them, especially after she rests her hand on his arm. I’m about to walk over when I see Tee heading that way and taking a seat next to James. Oh dear, I can just imagine how this is going to play out. Sure enough, a few seconds later the woman stomps off, and James is palming his face in what looks like exasperation. I walk over, not even caring that I’m grinning devilishly.

“Sasha, control your cousin,” James says with a chuckle.

“I’m your sister-in-law,” Tee reminds him.

“How could I forget?” James asks dryly.

“What did you say?” I dare to ask.

“I just asked him if he’d had that STD check since we were together last week,” Tee says with a grin. I shake my head at her, secretly proud.

“Didn’t want you to come over here, Sasha, we all know how you can get,” Tee teases.

“Hey! I’ll have you know, since becoming a mother I’ve toned myself down. I haven’t gotten into any trouble since I had Jye,” I say proudly, standing a little taller.

“Really? Because Trey texted me while you were over there with him and told me a few things,” she says, waggling her eyebrows.

“Who’s Trey?” James interrupts, his casual demeanor changing to something a little more serious. His body tenses, waiting for the answer.

“Sasha lived with Trey in Scotland,” Tee tells him, not adding in the fact that Trey is family.

James instantly turns to me. “You lived with another guy, with our son?”

“Trey is my cousin!” I rush out, before he comes to his own conclusions.

“Good,” is his infuriating answer. I roll my eyes and turn to face Tee, who is looking highly amused.

“We need more drinks, cuz,” she says thoughtfully.

“Yes, we do,” I wholeheartedly agree.

Chapter Seven

Sasha

The next morning, I groan out loud as a ray of sunshine hits my face. Time to face the consequences of drinking. I look over at the clock on my bedside table to find out that it's only eight am. I need to get my butt up so I can pick up Jye, after a long hot shower and a greasy breakfast, of course.

I make my way to the kitchen, freshly showered, and frown when I smell bacon. My stomach instantly rumbles, just as I hear Jye laughing. I'd know my son's laugh anywhere. I quicken my steps, taking in the scene as soon as I enter the room. James is cooking breakfast, and Jye is in his feeding chair, sitting at the table. James is wearing nothing but a pair of basketball shorts, sitting perfectly low on his hips. His muscular back ripples with each movement, and I can't help but admire the view. I purse my lips together as I see James make a funny face at Jye, and Jye bursts out laughing like it's the funniest thing he's ever seen. When James notices me standing there, he offers me a playful smile.

"I picked up Jye for you," he explains.

"I can see that," I tell him, walking over and giving Jye a hug and a kiss.

"How did you get in?" I ask James, wondering whether my mother gave him a spare key.

James gives me a funny look. "I brought you home last night, and tucked you in. I never left. I took your key so I could get back in."

"Where did you sleep?" I ask him slowly, already knowing the answer. His pleased smile confirms it. He slept with me, and I didn't even realise. How much did I drink last night?

"I thought I'd watch Jye so you can get some rest and make you breakfast. I know you need a huge greasy breakfast after a night out," he says.

"Thank you," I say sincerely, slightly surprised at his thoughtfulness and the fact that he remembers.

"Take a seat, food is almost ready," he says. I take a seat next to Jye. A few minutes pass before he serves Jye and me, carefully cutting up Jye's food for him. My heart melts. This man was made to be a father.

"Thank you," I repeat.

"Ta!" Jye says, his way of saying thank you.

"You are both very welcome," James says as he serves his own food.

"What are your plans for the day?" I ask him.

“I was hoping we could all do something together,” James says as he takes a bite of his toast.

“Sounds good,” I murmur, moaning around a bite of crispy bacon.

“Is there anything you love more than food, besides Jye?” James jokes.

I think on it. “Not really.”

“I may use this to my advantage,” he muses out loud.

“Ha! You can try,” I say with a giggle. We finish our breakfast and then I give Jye a bath and dress him for the day. James jumps in next and returns freshly showered. Something occurs to me. “Where did you get a change of clothes from?”

“I dropped home and packed a bag before I picked Jye up,” he says casually, like it’s a regular occurrence. I sigh, at a complete loss for words.

“Okay, where would you like to go today?” James asks.

“How about the indoor play centre? Jye loves it there, and they also have a nice café,” I mention.

“You just ate!” he chuckles.

“What’s your point?” I ask him. He just smiles and walks towards me, kissing me softly on my cheek.

“I love having you back in my life, Sasha,” he admits in a gentle tone, before walking away and picking Jye up into his arms. I swallow heavily, my eyes still locked onto his when he says, “You ready to go?”

“I’m ready,” I tell him, a double meaning to my words. I’m ready to revisit everything between James and me.

I’m ready to listen.

Jye is playing in the ball pit and James and I are standing by it, watching him.

“I never cheated on you,” he blurts out with no preamble.

“I saw you with another woman, you wouldn’t explain why. Then the infamous ‘no one’ line, oh and then you never explained what happened afterwards.”

“I tried to ring you to explain! You never answered. I came to your house, you refused to see me. You cut me out,” he says.

“Do you blame me? How would you feel if the roles were reversed?” I ask him. The instant clench of his jaw is answer enough.

“Remember when you asked me what I did for a living, and I told you I played in the stock market, but I also worked for an organization?” he asks.

“Yes. I thought it was pretty vague,” I admit.

“Right. I couldn’t explain it to you at the time. I still can’t explain it all to you because of confidentiality. You saw me with her, but I wasn’t allowed to talk about it. So I couldn’t give you the explanation you deserved at the time. I thought I’d wait until it was over and then I could tell you, but by then you wanted nothing to do with me. It was almost as if you hated me,” he says.

“I don’t understand, James.” He’s about to open his mouth when his phone rings.

“Tatiana, I’m kind of in the middle of something.”

“*Shit, okay.*” He hangs up the phone and I know exactly what he’s going to say.

“I’m sorry, babe, it’s work. I gotta head out, but I’ll come by tonight and we will finish this, okay,” he explains, his eyes begging with mine.

“Fine, we’ll catch a cab home,” I say stubbornly.

“No, I’ll get Kade to come and get you,” he says, his tone stern.

“Don’t bother!” I retort sharply.

“Look, I’m sorry but I have to go. Not that I want to, but I *have* to,” he says, looking frustrated.

“You have to what? Run whenever your girlfriend calls? Nice to see you have your priorities straight,” I say bitterly. I almost regret the low blow when I see the look on his face.

James narrows those baby blues on me, his posture rigid. “She’s not my girlfriend. I’m going to work, Sasha. We’ll talk about this later, okay?”

He kisses both Jye and me, apologizing again. When Tatiana calls, he runs. I know there’s more to it than that, but clearly I don’t know what it is yet. I’m not gonna lie, I’m pretty pissed off by this point.

Jye plays for another hour, when suddenly Kade arrives.

“Hey, Sasha,” he greets, his eyes brightening when he sees Jye.

“Hey, little man! He looks just like James did when he was a kid, it’s eerie,” Kade says.

“You didn’t have to come, Kade. We were gonna take a cab,” I tell him.

“No way, James would’ve killed me. Besides, it’s no problem, I love seeing Jye,” he says kindly.

“You can drop by anytime and see him, you know.”

“Really? I’d love that. I’ll bring Grace next time. If she knew I was here without her, I’d never hear the end of it,” he says with a chuckle.

“Thank you,” I tell him hoarsely.

“For what?” he asks, confused. He picks up a ball and throws it back into the pit.

“For being civil towards me, even after...”

“I’m not gonna lie, Sasha, I was pissed,” he says softly.

“I know,” I say.

“But if James isn’t holding a grudge, neither am I. It doesn’t fix anything, so let’s just move forward,” he says sagely.

“You’re amazing, you know that?” I tell him.

“My wife tells me that every night in bed,” he says, waggling his eyebrows playfully.

I roll my eyes.

Chapter Eight

James

After what I just saw, I'm going to need a drink. I walk into the kitchen and pour myself a scotch. Straight. After an exhausting night, one of the worst I've seen in a while, I definitely deserve it. A sigh escapes my mouth as I sit back into the barstool. Today needs to be over already. I know Sasha's going to be pissed at me because I never showed up at her place tonight. I never even got to explain, and Sasha is way overdue to hear what I have to say. Kade called me to say he got them home safe and sound, for which I'm grateful. I decide to call Sasha up, hoping she's not already asleep.

"Hello?" she answers, her voice husky from sleep.

"I woke you up, I'm sorry," I quickly say. I should have known she'd be sleeping.

"It's alright, is everything okay?" she asks instantly.

"Fine, I just wanted to hear your voice, and to tell you that we need to talk. I want to work things out with you, explain everything to you. I'm not seeing anyone, or anything like that, Sasha. You're the only one I want to be with," I explain, trying to make her understand where I am right now, my intentions with her.

"We'll talk, James," is all she says, but it's enough. We both say good night and hang up.

I look around my huge, empty house, and my chest hurts. They should be here, with me. Where I can protect them, be there for them. Love them. Instead I'm all alone, without my family. No more messing around, I need to get them home where they belong. I down the rest of my drink. Tomorrow is a new day.

Sasha

After talking to James on the phone last night, I'm hoping he drops by so we can finally talk. I'm not sure what to do with the hope that I'm suddenly feeling. Hope that James, Jye and I could be a family, hope that we could start anew. Hope that James has an answer for the events that took place. My internal dialogue driving me crazy, I decide I need to talk to him, and today. I drive with Jye to his house, bringing a packed lunch for all of us. When I pull into his driveway I see a police car there. Worried, I quickly unbuckle Jye and take him in my arms. I practically run to the front door, and start knocking frantically. James suddenly pulls open the door, his eyebrows raising when he sees me.

“Is everything okay? What’s wrong?” he asks, giving us both a once over.

“I thought something was wrong with you! Why is there a police car here?” I ask him, rushing out the words. James’ eyes widen and he starts to nibble on his lip ring.

“No, nothing is wrong, Sasha, come on in,” he says, opening the door wide for us to enter.

I put Jye down, and take his hand in mine as we make our way into James’ house. I freeze when I see a pretty blonde sitting at his kitchen table. She has natural beauty, with short blonde hair and no makeup.

“Sasha, this is Tatiana, Tatiana, this is Sasha,” he introduces. An awkward silence ensues, and I’m grateful for Jye when he walks up to James and hugs his leg, offering a distraction.

“Hi,” she says softly, after a few seconds.

“Hello,” I respond, not knowing what else I could possibly say. Tatiana, James’ ex, is a police officer. I must say that I didn’t see this one coming.

She clears her throat, and then says, “Well, I better get going.”

I take Jye outside to play as James walks her to the front door. Why does she still come over? Is he going to tell me that they’re getting back together? The thought makes me want to cry. Jye runs over to the sandpit and starts to dig in. After what was probably only a minute but felt like an hour, James comes back and stands next to me.

“We’re just friends,” he says, rubbing his hand down my back. I move slightly away, out of his reach. “Sasha…”

“How would you feel if you dropped by my house and an ex of mine was there?” I counter.

“This is a completely different situation, Tatiana and I work together,” he says. I glance over at him in confusion.

“Okay, I know you’re not a cop,” I tell him, my eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

“You know I make my money from the stock market,” he starts.

“Yes, but that doesn’t explain where you sneak off to all the time whenever she calls you,” I say sharply.

“Retract your claws, Sasha, and let me explain. Please,” he says sincerely.

It’s the please that gets me. “Okay.”

“I help run an organization. We help abuse victims get out of their situation by taking them away to a safe and secure spot. They’re offered therapy and

anything else they may need. Then we help them start over, so they're happy, healthy, and no longer in jeopardy. Tatiana helps with the abuser, taking the necessary steps to ensure they don't go after their victims. She sets up the houses, and works closely with social services," he says whilst staring at Jye, not me.

I'm silent, feeling slightly choked up. This man, he's good right down to his bones.

"Say something, Sasha," he says, sounding worried. I step towards him, and wrap my arms around his waist. His strong arms instantly respond, cocooning me in his warmth.

"Why did you hide this?" I ask, confused.

"I mainly work the high profile cases. The woman you met, she was the wife of a very powerful man. I still can't really talk about it, Sasha, but you could have been put in danger, I just needed you to get safely out of there. I would never cheat on you, ever," he says as he stares into my eyes.

"So you never answer your phone because?"

"These jobs get intense, Sasha. When you see a woman battered, bruised and hiding in a corner, you're not really thinking about answering your phone. I put my all into helping these women. Sometimes they want me to stay there so they feel secure. Most of the time I need to drive far to get to them or safe houses, so that's why sometimes I'm gone for a few days. I know I need to be more available now that I have a family, and I'm going to try my best to make that happen."

"You're a good man, James," I say softly, in awe.

"Does that mean you forgive me?" he asks.

"I do, I'm just wondering why it took you this long to tell me the truth," I say boldly.

"I tried," he says quickly.

"Not hard enough!" I spit out. James sighs, and crosses his arms over his chest.

"He's amazing," he rumbles, looking at our son, effectively changing the subject.

"He is," I agree.

"Where do we go from here? I want you, the both of you. I want us to be a family, and there's nothing I'm not willing to do to make that happen," he says. My heart races.

“I want that, too, James.”

His smile in response is devastating.

Chapter Nine

James

I nervously rub the back of my neck, feeling like a damn school boy. I'm taking Sasha on our first official date since we decided to try and work things out between us. This has to run smoothly, and I'm definitely feeling the pressure right now. I knock on her door, strumming my fingers on my thigh as I wait impatiently. Jye is with my mother for the night, she came and picked him up earlier. She was so excited to have some one-on-one time with her grandson.

A minute later Sasha opens the door and graces me with her beautiful smile. I hand her the bouquet of orange tulips, knowing they're her favourites, and then take a moment to appreciate just how gorgeous she really is. She's wearing jeans that look almost painted on, a red strapless top, and fuck me boots.

"Thank you," she says sweetly, smelling the tulips as she opens the door for me to enter. I walk in, and can't help it when my eyes drop to her ass. Sasha turns her head and laughs. "Eyes up here, James."

"Oh, come on, you gotta give me a break. I've been on my best behaviour for so long I'm gonna explode," I admit with a grin.

She puts the tulips in a vase, before saying "The last time I received tulips was when we were together, you know."

"What? No one brought you flowers. I know you dated a lot," I say quickly.

"Oh I got flowers, lots of flowers. Just never my favourites, so thank you," she says, obviously avoiding my dating comment. Her words make me sad, and want to punch every single man that has ever touched her at the same time.

"James?"

"Yes," I say, directing my attention to her.

"Your knuckles are turning white," she observes. I look down to see I'm gripping the ledge of the kitchen table, squeezing with all my might. I let go, and offer her a sheepish smile. She crosses her arms across her chest, drawing my attention to her breasts. Well, that's one way to get my attention.

"Do you really wanna do this, before we even go on our first second-chance date?" she asks.

"Do what?" I ask, slightly confused.

"Go through the roster, you know. Who I've been with, who I've dated?"

I cringe. "Well, when you put it that way, no, I don't."

She laughs. "I thought so, now come here," she says, her voice turning

sensual. I obey her command, coming close enough to her that I can smell her peach perfume.

“You didn’t kiss me,” she whispers. I instantly lean forward, pushing her gently against the table. I lift her face up with my palms and lower my lips to hers, capturing her in a deep kiss. It’s been so damn long since I have tasted her, I almost forgot how sweet she is. How perfect she is for me. Her tongue touches mine, not timidly, but confidently. I instantly lift her into my arms, cupping her ass into my hands and squeezing, her moan incites my own, and I pull back.

“What are you doing?” she demands, still panting.

“That was some kiss,” I say, pushing a strand of her hair out of her face.

“It was. Why did you stop?” she asks, still slightly breathless.

“I promised you a date, and we’re going to have one,” I announce. She sighs, like she’s put out, but she can’t hide the grin on her pouty lips.

“I’m ready whenever you are,” she says.

Sasha

When we pull up to *Haven* I find myself speechless. James is taking me to the restaurant where we had our first date all those years ago. I clear my throat, before turning to face him. His blue eyes are already on me, anticipating my reaction. My gaze touches over his blond hair, which is slightly longer than I’m used to, and then darts to his lip ring that I’d love nothing more than to nibble on.

“Is this okay?” he asks, slightly unsure.

“It’s perfect, James,” I whisper, leaning over to kiss him on his cheek. The stubble he has feels wonderfully rough against my lips.

“Don’t move,” he orders gently, getting out of his S8 and quickly walking around to my side to open the door for me. James has always been a gentleman. When a man treats you like a princess, you can tell he’s been raised by a queen. And I have no doubt that Lucy is nothing but a queen. On the ride over I asked him what type of car this was, and he told me it was an Audi S8. It must be a car he’s bought recently, because he certainly didn’t have it back when we were together.

“Thank you,” I tell him.

“I hope you’re hungry,” he says, his eyes twinkling with amusement. He knows I’m always hungry.

“You know better than to ask me that,” I tease.

James chuckles, shaking his head. "It's going to be a nice change from my dates only ordering salads, but then eyeing my food like they wish they could devour it."

I narrow my eyes at him. "Yeah, you might not want to mention your 'dates' ever again."

James just laughs, ignoring my glare. The waitress sits us in the exact same spot we sat on our first date. The place looks different, of course, but I can't help but feel sentimental. James pulls my chair out for me, and waits until I'm seated before he takes his own. We're handed our menus, and we both scan the items on the list.

"I hope you brought a lot of money," I tease. James looks up from his menu, his eyes dancing.

"I made sure to bring my unlimited credit card, so don't worry," he smirks.

I stick my tongue out at him. "What are you ordering?" I ask.

"I'm getting the steak, of course. Let me guess, you're getting chicken in creamy sauce with a salad and a fully loaded potato," he says.

My mouth opens in shock. "What?"

"Seriously, Sasha, you order the same thing, or as close to the same thing as you can get in every single restaurant," he says.

"I do not!" I deny. Okay, I do. James just gives me a knowing look. I scowl in return.

"Would you like to order?" a waitress asks. James orders for us, glancing over at me when he places my order to see if I'll object. I don't. That's exactly what I was going to order. When the waitress leaves James gives me a slow spreading smile.

Ignoring him, I say, "We should call and see how Jye is."

"He's fine, Sash, mum said she'd call if there are any issues. You can relax," he assures me, putting his hand on mine.

A new waitress saunters over and places our drinks on the table. I see her eyeing James, and not being subtle about it at all. When she drops a napkin in front of him with her number on it, I lose it.

"You're fucking kidding me, right?" I ask the woman, my nose scrunched in disgust.

"Sasha," James warns, picking up the napkin and handing it back to her.

Obviously not used to being told no, or not being able to take a hint, the woman leans down and says, "Keep it, you might need it for later."

I lean back in my chair, glaring at her. I hate women like this. "Have some dignity, would you? You're actually embarrassing yourself right now," I say as calmly as I can muster.

"They always come to me, honey," she boasts in a saccharine sweet voice.

"I'm sure they do. All things cheap are in high demand," I snap. The woman gasps and storms off.

"You know she's probably gonna spit in our food, right?" James drawls.

"Yeah, we know how much you hate spitters," I mumble. James makes a choking sound, and I look up to see his eyes wide with shock. Then he just shakes his head. When a waiter walks out with our food a few minutes later, I grin. "Luckily she won't get the chance."

"You know how hot you get when you're jealous?" James asks, a faint smirk on his lips.

I roll my eyes at him in response.

On our way home from dinner we pick up Jye from Lucy's before heading back to my house. I'm so full, I feel like I'm in a food coma. Dinner was delicious, dessert even more so.

"Thank you for dinner," I tell him for the second time.

"You're welcome. Tomorrow night I thought we could take Jye to dinner at Kade's," James mentions. I glance back at Jye who is sleeping in his car seat.

"Sounds good," I say. When I see James noticeably relax, I realise he thought I wouldn't agree. I look away so he can't see the flash of hurt in my eyes.

"I'm not an ogre, you know," I say wryly.

"What?" he asks.

"You thought I was gonna say no," I say.

"I was hoping you wouldn't," he admits.

"Why would I?" I ask him, confused.

"I don't know. It's not like you're real close with my brothers," he says reluctantly. I can tell this upsets him.

"Kade may be growing on me. Plus, you know I love Nikki," I say.

James grins. "Good."

James parks his car and we get out. I open the front door quickly whilst James gets Jye, locking his car door before entering the apartment and putting Jye in his bed. He affectionately kisses Jye on the forehead before tucking him

in. I watch as he stares at his son for a few moments before walking out. I run my eyes over how his chest looks in the sexy white shirt he is wearing, hinting at his defined muscles. I can't help the slight tug I feel in my lower belly.

"I'd love to tuck you in, too, but there will be no sex on the first date," James decides. I reluctantly move my eyes from his biceps and stare into his eyes.

"What? Why?" I demand.

"This is our second chance Sasha, I want it to be perfect," he says.

"It will be perfect, I promise. Come on," I try to tempt him.

"Not tonight, okay," he says as he walks over, trying to soften the rejection with a soft kiss to my lips.

"Fine. But I'd like to point out it's not really fair considering I've gone without way longer than you have," I pout.

"How do you know that?" he asks, as he crosses his arms over his chest.

"You had a girlfriend!" I point out.

"If it's not with you, it doesn't count," he says a little gruffly.

"Smooth talker," I mumble, walking to the kitchen and pulling out a bottle of water.

"Want one?" I offer, James shakes his head no, eyeing me speculatively.

"How long has it been?" he asks suddenly.

"A while, let's just leave it at that." I walk up to him and wrap my arms around his neck. He leans down and presses light kisses all over my jaw, before finally giving my lips some attention. I can feel his arousal, but he still pulls away. The man has always had a will of steel. Or should I say a will of Steele. This is the first time that I was cursing it.

"I'll see you tomorrow, pretty girl," he whispers into my ear, causing the hairs on the back of my neck to stand up.

"Okay," I reply, already planning on heading into my room for a night with my BOB.

"Don't even think about it, Sasha, your orgasms are mine to give. You'll wait," he demands. Then he reminds me to lock up after he leaves.

I inhale deeply. Well, hell. I'm not gonna lie, I've missed this side of James. My lips curl into a sly smile. He won't be able to hold out for long. I'm gonna make sure of that.

Chapter Ten

Sasha

After work the next day I head to the beauty salon for a manicure, pedicure, and some waxing. Jye spent the whole day with James today, because he didn't have to work. If he got called in to help with a safe house, he said he would drop Jye at his mum's. I didn't receive a call, so I assume everything went smoothly. I head home, to find James and Jye still not there. I pick up the phone and call him.

"Hello," he answers straight away, sounding pleased to hear from me.

"Hey, where are you guys?" I complain. I miss them both, and I haven't seen my son all day.

"Sorry, we're just at the park. Why don't you relax for a little, we'll be home in an hour, okay?"

"Okay, I'll see you soon."

We both hang up.

After a quick shower, I dress for the dinner at Kade's, and then sit down and read for a little while. It feels so good to be off my feet, and soon I get lost in a world of alpha male bikers.

"Sasha," I hear James' voice croon softly as he pulls me into his arms. I open my eyes and stretch lazily.

"What time is it?" I ask, putting my face in the crook of his neck.

"We need to leave in an hour for dinner. Jye is having a nap," he tells me. Oh, really. Planning on using this time appropriately, I lift my leg so I can straddle him.

"And what do you think you're doing?" he asks in an amused tone.

"Whatever I want," I tell him boldly. This is the thing about James. He can be very easy going and laid back, but in the bedroom? He is something else.

"Is that right?" he drawls, his fingers digging into my thighs in reprimand.

"I don't think you can handle me anymore, James," I taunt. When he pushes my face closer and devours my lips with his, I inwardly cheer.

"Not tonight, Sasha," he whispers.

"James! I haven't been with anyone since you," I admit, letting him know how badly I want this. James' eyes widen almost hysterically, as he instantly stands with me still wrapped around him, and walks straight to the bedroom, closing the door behind him.

He puts me down, then demands, "Strip."

I rush to take off my dress.

"Slowly, Sasha," he commands, sitting down on the bed so he can watch the show. I slowly push the thin straps of my dress down my shoulders, letting it slip off my body and pool at my feet. Left in only a red lace thong and black bra, I can't help but squirm under his intense gaze. I'm pretty much the same size I was before I gave birth, but now I have stretch marks on my tummy, and when James' eyes slow on that area, I suddenly start to feel a little unsure.

"Hey," he says gently, lifting his arm for me to come closer. I walk towards him and stand in between his knees. When he bends and kisses a few of the marks on my stomach, my breath catches.

"You are beautiful, so fucking beautiful. And these are just proof of how amazing you are. Of the gift you've given me," he whispers. "Of how strong of a woman you are. Don't be shy, because I love everything about you." When I stay silent, he stares at me until I acknowledge his comments with a nod.

"Good, now let me see what's mine," he says softly, but with strength in his tone. I watch his eyes turn heated with desire as I take off my bra and then my panties.

"Mmm," he rumbles in approval. I watch in anticipation as he stands up and pulls me into his arms. A shudder racks through my body as he kisses a trail up my neck, then across my jaw. Slowly, ever so slowly.

"James!" I hiss, wanting him to go faster, to give me more.

"Shh," he whispers, still taking his time. When he finally reaches my lips, he gently opens them with his tongue, the metal from his piercing ice cold against my lips. I moan into his mouth and gasp when he lifts me by my hips and lays me down gently on the bed. We kiss passionately, and when James finally pulls away we are both panting. James moves down my body and gently rubs this thumb over my nipple. My back bows off the bed, like a jolt went through my body.

"Beautiful," he says reverently, bringing his head down to my nipple and sucking. I run my hands through his thick blond hair, pushing his head down.

"James," I gasp when he nips my breast with his teeth. He continues lower, kissing and licking down my stomach, until he reaches the apex of my thighs. When he dips his head and licks my centre I buck, causing James to pin me down roughly with his hands.

"Stay still, Sasha," he commands in a rough tone. He continues to lick and suck until he brings me to climax. I ride the waves of pleasure, calling out

James' name with each tremor. When he eventually pulls away, I sag onto the bed, fully spent. I stare up at James, watching as he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. He gives me a full watt smile, eying my naked body from head to toe.

"I missed your taste," he says. I sit up and move to undo his pants, but he stops me.

"Later. We gotta go now. You get ready, I'll go check on Jye," he says, kissing me on the temple before walking out. I open my mouth to say something, but he's already left the room.

James

I knock on Kade's door, Jye in my arms, Sasha by my side. Just how it's meant to be. I feel content, and find myself smiling for no apparent reason.

"Hey bro," Kade welcomes as he opens the door, stepping aside for us to enter. His grin widens when he takes in Jye.

"Sasha," he welcomes, nodding his head, and leaning down to give her a kiss on the cheek.

"Hey, Kade," I hear her say. I put my hand on the small of Sasha's back, pushing her forward gently. As we walk through Kade's place, I hear music and laughter. I stare at Sasha, watching her take in the place, her eyes touching everything. We head outside where everyone is sitting, and I can see Chase busy at the grill. I put Jye down as I lean down to kiss Grace, Kade's little girl.

"Unca!" she squeals with happiness. I'm her favourite, too. Nikki and Layla walk over, stealing Sasha as they head inside. Probably to chat - about everything. I'm pretty sure that's what women do.

"Hey bro," I greet Chase, slapping my hand on his back.

"Hey James, 'bout time you showed up," he says with a smirk. I love my big brother. A lot of people don't understand him, but he's a good man. He's always looked after Kade and me, putting our needs before his own.

"Where's Cole?" I ask him.

"Probably wherever his mother is," he says as he flips over the steaks.

"Both Jackson men are obsessed with Layla, I see," I snicker.

"You have no idea. Where's Sasha?" he asks.

"She got kidnapped," I say wryly.

"Let the gossip begin, huh?" Chase chuckles.

"I hope I didn't do anything gossip worthy, at least recently," I muse.

“No, I don’t think it’s anything like that. More like penis sizes and sex techniques.”

I burst out laughing as Kade walks over to join us. “What’s so funny?”

“The women, discussing penis sizes,” Chase fills him in. Kade grins devilishly, folding his arms over his chest. “I’ll be happy to give the girls a demonstration.”

I chuckle, shaking my head at him. He would, too.

“Actually I was just in there, they’re both drilling Sasha on James’ size and technique,” Kade says.

“Ah, fuck,” I groan.

“Oh don’t worry, Sasha’s holding her own,” Kade smirks.

“So I hear Nikki is pregnant again,” I tell Kade.

“Yes, we think it’s going to be another girl,” he says proudly.

“Congratulations, bro. But you know you’re screwed if it is, right?” I tell him.

“Why?” he asks suspiciously.

“Two girls. You’re gonna have your hands full,” I tease. Sasha walks up to us, hearing my comment, she tucks herself under my arm, and laughs.

“Yeah, with boys you only gotta worry about one penis, with girls, you gotta worry about everyone else’s,” she says. We all burst out laughing. Except for Kade, who is staring at Grace with narrowed eyes. Probably contemplating how he’s going to lock her up, or size her for a chastity belt. His response makes me laugh even harder.

“Where’s Jye?” I ask her.

“Layla has him. Wanna go sit down?” she asks.

“Sure, come on.”

As soon as the food is ready we all eat, and watch the kids play together. When Sasha heads into the kitchen with Nikki, Layla sits next to me, and stares at me knowingly.

“What, Layla?” I ask with a sigh.

“You two are so cute together,” she replies, her brown eyes twinkling. She is dressed casually in jeans and a tank top, her hair tied up in some messy up do.

“Are you gonna ask her to marry you?” she blurts out. I recoil as soon as I hear the word *marriage*. I see her frown at my reaction.

“Layla! Get your ass in this kitchen! You promised me cookies!” Nikki

calls out. Saved by Nikki's pregnancy cravings.

"Coming!" Layla yells back, giving me a thoughtful look before she heads inside.

It's not that I don't want to marry Sasha, because I do. And I will. Now is just not a good time.

Sasha

I'm in the kitchen with the women and the kids, getting the dessert organized. Layla is baking cookies for Nikki, who's having a craving for them. I glance around, and then frown.

"Isn't this stereotypical?" I point out.

"What? All the women in the kitchen?" Layla says as she closes the oven.

"To be fair, I'm just sitting here waiting for my cookies, I'm not doing anything," Nikki says with a cheeky grin. She's wearing jeans and a v-neck top, and is spinning around in the bar stool, causing her red hair to tumble all around her, creating a curtain of hair over her face.

"So have you had sex with James yet?" Layla boldly asks.

"Do you really wanna hear about your cousin and your brother-in-law's sex life?" I ask her, already knowing the answer.

"Of course I do," she huffs.

"Well, then no. We haven't," I grudgingly admit.

"What, couldn't he get through those cobwebs?" Nikki jokes.

"You're lucky you're pregnant," I say, a warning in my tone. Nikki just laughs.

"So, you guys all knew about James' job and didn't tell me, thanks for the heads up," I say sarcastically. Two sets of eyes are instantly on me.

"Hey, I only found out cos I snooped and hired a PI," Nikki says in a hushed tone.

"What?" I yell, standing up off the bar stool. I look to Layla for confirmation, and she nods, looking sympathetic.

"Yeah, I thought James was gonna kill me. One insane husband had ordered a hit on him, and he was worried the backlash could affect us."

"A hit," I repeat slowly, sitting down again. They both nod.

"Fuck me," I mutter under my breath.

"He really needs to," Nikki replies with a grin.

“Why are we friends again?”

“I come with Layla. Oh, and we’re gonna be sister-in-laws,” she adds. Layla looks away when Nikki says that, hiding her expression. I wonder what’s running through that head of hers.

“Where’s Tee?” I ask her, changing the subject.

“She’s gone on an impromptu trip to Bali.” That sounds just like her.

My phone beeps with a message from Trey. I’d sent him some photos of Jye earlier today, and was waiting for his reply.

T: He’s getting bigger already. I miss you both, this place is so quiet without you. Take care cuz.

I text him back, letting him know we miss him too.

“Is it safe to enter?” I hear Kade call out as he opens the door. Behind him in walks James and Chase. Seriously, these three have some great genes. Layla’s eyes dart to mine and we both smile, knowing we’re thinking the same thing. The dessert is laid on the table, strawberry cheesecake, twix cookies and a red velvet cake. Layla, as usual, goes all out. I take Jye onto my lap, moving him from the floor where all the kids were playing with blocks on a play mat. I feed him a few bites of cakes, before looking up and seeing James staring at me intently through his lashes. I flash him a smile and then return my attention to our son. James walks over and stands behind me, pushing my hair off my neck. My shoulders hunch as my body tingles.

“Here, I’ll feed him, you go and enjoy your dessert,” he says as he lifts Jye from my lap.

“It’s okay…”

“Sasha, go and eat,” he says, cutting me off. My lip twitches as I get up and serve myself a huge piece of cheesecake.

“James is so cute with him,” Layla says softly. Cole is sitting in her lap, his mouth covered in cake. His black hair has grown longer, and is flopping adorably on his forehead. I glance over at James feeding our son and sigh in contentment. Nothing could be more appealing to me than watching him love Jye as much as I do.

“You look happy,” she says.

“I am happy.”

“Good.”

“Come on, let’s help clean up,” I tell her. We help with the dishes and cleaning up the kitchen. Jye is already asleep on James when it’s time for us to

go.

“Thank you for having us,” I tell Nikki and Kade as we're about to leave. Little Grace is hugging Nikki's leg, her eyes drooping. Looks like she could fall asleep any second now.

“You're family, that means you're welcome anytime,” Kade replies, giving me a wink. We say our goodbyes and head back to my apartment. For the first time, James stays the night.

James

I stare at Sasha asleep on the bed, my body shaking with silent laughter. After making a comment about how she 'better be getting some more action tonight' I come out of the shower to find her fast asleep. And snoring. She must have been really tired. I run my hand down the length of her naked back, loving the fact that I can touch her anytime I want again.

I almost want to wake her, but I don't. Instead I slide into bed, gently pull her into my arms so I'm spooning her from behind. I breathe in her scent, she smells fruity with a trace of her peach perfume lingering on her neck. I place a soft kiss on her shoulder, before falling asleep.

I wake up in the middle of the night to my phone ringing. I grab it off the side table and check the time, four AM. Looks like I'm needed at the safe house. I huff out a regretful sigh and look at Sasha for a few moments. I place a kiss on her forehead and hop out of bed to quickly get dressed. I check on Jye who is fast asleep, before locking up and heading out. I send Sasha a quick text message so she won't be worried wondering where I am. When I'm about to pull away, I look longingly at the front door. I know my time is coming to an end, because nothing is more important than my family, and they need to come first.

I need to quit this job. I can't help but feel lighter after finally acknowledging that. I know exactly what I need to do. I smile as I drive away.

Chapter Eleven

Sasha

I wake up alone, wondering where James could be. A quick check of my phone tells me he was called in to work. Jye comes into my room and we snuggle for a while before we get up and have breakfast. I do my usual routine of washing Jye, then cleaning up the house. Once that is all done, Jye and I head to the park for him to play. The day passes quickly, and before I know it, I'm back in the kitchen, cooking dinner. I'm just pulling the baked chicken out of the oven when I hear the door being unlocked. I'd given James a spare key, and he's been happily using it ever since. He walks into the kitchen looking tired, his blond hair messy and sticking out in all directions. Even though he looks exhausted, he still musters up a welcoming smile for Jye and me.

"Isn't this domestic?" he teases as he lifts Jye into his arms for a cuddle and a kiss.

"Hey, how was your day?" I ask him.

"Smells so good, Sasha," he says as he walks towards me and dips me theatrically, placing soft kisses on my neck.

"My day was tiring. But it felt good knowing I was coming home to this," he tells me. He lifts me back into a standing position and then looks around the kitchen, seemingly hungry.

"Go and sit down and relax. I'll serve the food," I offer. He kisses me again on the temple before doing just that, pulling Jye onto his lap and taking a seat at the dinner table. I serve all the food, and bring the plates to the table. When I place James' down, I can see that he's laughing.

"What's so funny?" I ask him.

"Remember when we were dating, you told me to never expect you to wait on me, because you're not that kind of girl. Now look at you, domestic goddess," he says with a smirk.

"I turned into a domestic goddess for Jye, not you! Just you remember that, James Steele," I hiss, slamming his plate down a little harder than necessary. He laughs at that. When Jye copies James and starts laughing too, I cover my face with my hands.

"Keep laughing and this will be the last home-made meal you will ever taste," I say in a saccharine sweet voice. The laughing stops. At least out loud, I can still see his body shaking in silence.

“James, can I ask you something?” I ask him after we’ve finished our meals and Jye is in bed.

“Anything. What’s on your mind?” he asks as he turns the volume down slightly on the television.

“How did you get into this? Helping abused women?” I ask him. I’ve been wondering about this ever since he told me that this was what he did, what he was passionate about. He stiffens slightly, and I feel the change in him because I’m wrapped in his arms. I’m about to tell him not to worry about explaining when he starts talking.

“An ex-girlfriend of mine, Celia, she killed herself. She was being abused by her new boyfriend. I don’t know why no one helped her. Apparently her boyfriend worked with her father, and they were family friends, so she must have felt she couldn’t turn to her own family, I’m not sure. When her body was found, she was covered in bruises, and her ribs were broken. Apparently she had contacted the police that day, but they didn’t do anything. They told her to file a report. She must have thought it was hopeless, so she ended her life.”

My breath hitches and my hand reaches for his, offering whatever comfort I can give him.

“It always stuck with me, so I looked into what options women have if they were unfortunate to be stuck in similar situations. To be honest, there weren’t many at all. The police can only do so much, I guess. So I contacted some people, and we created The Safe House. I wanted to help these women, protect them when no one else will.”

“You’re a good man, James,” I whisper.

“Will you still think so when I tell you that this is the last month I’ll be working at The Safe House?” he asks, suddenly sounding a little unsure.

“What do you mean?” I ask him, confused. I pull down the red doona so I can sit up and look into his face.

“I can’t be leaving you and Jye like this anymore. I need to be here, with the two of you,” he says, his eyes never leaving mine.

“I’d like that. I can’t help but feel selfish though,” I say honestly.

“Don’t worry, those women will still get the help they need,” he assures me.

“Who was the woman who answered your phone when I tried calling you from Scotland?” I blurt out. Another question I’ve been dying to ask. James suddenly looks sheepish.

“I actually have no idea who could have answered my phone,” he says.

When he doesn't offer anything else I open my mouth, and then snap it shut. Not knowing exactly how I want to word this question, I end up asking, "Are you saying you had so many women in your bed you have no possible idea of who could have answered your phone while your pregnant ex-girlfriend was trying to get a hold of you to tell you that you knocked her up?"

James sighs and pulls me into his arms. "No, that's not what I was saying at all. Did I have a few one night stands when I was trying to get over you again? Yes I did. Did any of them mean anything to me? No. They knew it, and I knew it, it was just for fun," he says as gently as he can.

"Obviously they didn't if one answered and said you were too 'busy'" I hiss.

"I don't know who it was, but I'm sorry. And I wish there hadn't been anyone else for me either, okay?" he says with a soft kiss on my cheek.

"It's in the past, Sasha. I could never want anyone more than I want you. How many years have passed, and I've never stopped wanting you," he tells me, his tone unwavering.

"Smooth talker," I grumble, wanting to be angry with him.

"It's the truth, Sasha," he says adamantly. By the look in his eyes I can tell it's important for me to believe this.

"Okay," I whisper, my gaze darting to his lips.

"I didn't call you back because I was trying to get over you. I thought I couldn't have you. It never worked but, fuck, never once did I think you were gonna tell me something like this. You could have just told Layla to tell me, you know. We didn't have to play games with who was or who wasn't answering the phone."

"It's not something you just pass on as a message, James," I say ruefully.

"I know, I know. Let's just move on, okay? We're all together now, and nothing's going to change that," he says.

I put my head against his chest and nod. I sure as hell hope so.

I moan softly, as my back arches. I open my eyes and glance down at the mop of blond hair between my legs. James licks me again and I start to pant.

"James," I breathe out huskily.

"Mornin', pretty girl," he says before continuing his ministrations. I shudder when his tongue laps at my clit. I sit up a little, resting on my elbows so I can watch him pleasure me, unable to help myself when I run my fingers

through his hair. James peeps up at me, his blue eyes heated, smouldering with lust and want.

“Hands on the bed, Sasha,” he demands, and I instantly comply. He licks me again, before chuckling huskily.

“You like it when I tell you what to do, don’t you?” he drawls. My head falls back on my pillow as he lazily nibbles on my thigh, keeping me anticipating.

“James!” I growl. He pulls away from me, and I whimper in disappointment. He slides his basketball shorts down his lean hips, spreading my legs slowly when he’s completely naked. He leans over me and inserts one finger gently, rubbing it against my wetness. I moan out loud as he inserts another finger, pushing in and out whilst rubbing my clit. He removes them too soon, leaving me wanting more.

“James,” I plead.

“Take what I give you, Sasha,” he says in a deep rumbling voice that turns me on even more. He puts a condom on and pushes my thighs up. I’m so wet that he slides into me in one smooth thrust. He keeps his eyes connected with mine, pushing into me a few times before leaning over me and capturing my mouth with a scorching kiss. I gasp when his fingers find my sweet spot, causing me to instantly climax. I ride wave after wave, shuddering in pleasure.

“Beautiful. Just fucking beautiful,” he says softly, watching my body’s reactions intently. He keeps pumping his hips into me, grinding himself in a sexy rhythm. His lips find mine once more, his tongue sensually dancing with mine. Soon his thrusts become more fevered, more out of control and I know he’s almost there. I squeeze my muscles together, my lip twitching at the groan that escapes his mouth. He shudders on top of me moments later, his eyes still locked with mine. I’ve never felt more connected to a man in my life.

God, I love him.

When he’s spent, he kisses my neck gently before pulling out of me. He goes to the bathroom to get rid of the condom and comes back with a cloth, to clean me up.

“I’m on the pill, you know,” I blurt out. I have been ever since I had Jye.

“Now you tell me,” he says, frowning. He jumps into the bed and pulls me into his arms, my head on his chest.

An hour later, he’s on me again.

James

I watch her sleeping and can't help but feel a surge of pride. I definitely tired her out. After the first time we made love, I woke her again another three times. I can't get enough of her. I wish we didn't waste so much time but there's no point looking backwards and reliving the past. She's here with me now, and she's all mine, so that's all that matters to me.

I leave the room, and head out into the living area to make a phone call. There's one thing I need to take care of, and now. Because if Sasha finds out... No. She won't. She can't.

I'm going to handle this.

And then I'm going to make everything be as it should be.

Chapter Twelve

Sasha

“Why do you keep checking your phone?” I ask curiously. James glances over at me casually, giving me a slight ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about’ shrug.

“Sasha, you’re up!” Kade calls out. We’re all bowling together, with the kids and everyone. I like these family events of James’. Although with Layla and Cole here, I guess it’s my family event too. Even Tenielle is joining us today, and that always makes things more interesting. I glance over at her and smile. She’s wearing long denim overalls and a white V-neck top. Overalls are back in fashion? I have no idea. I get up and take my turn, bowling a strike.

“You look like a farmer,” I hear Kade say to her.

“You look like you *used* to be hot,” Tee retorts instantly.

“Hey, he’s still hot!” Nikki says with a frown.

Tee ignores her and looks at Kade. “I heard that people let themselves go after marriage. It must be true.”

My eyes dart to Kade, who looks as sexy as ever. Maybe even more so, if that’s possible.

“Thank you, baby,” Kade tells Nikki. I walk back to my seat and sit down.

“As if she’s going to say otherwise, Kade. It’s like your mother telling you that you’re smart and special. She’s your wife, she’s conditioned to think so. I, on the other hand, call it like I see it.”

With that parting comment she takes her turn, bowling her hot pink ball and making a strike. I see her turn to me and give me an evil grin. She lives to annoy Kade. He’s like the brother she never wanted, but got anyway.

“A lesser man would be intimidated by your cousin,” James says with a smirk.

“Good, she chases off all the pussies, then,” I tease.

Jye’s turn is next. Seeing as he’s too small all he has to do is push the ball off the children’s ramp, which James ended up doing for him anyway. But at least he feels included. Layla bowls next and I burst out laughing when it goes straight to the gutter. I glance over at Chase to see him trying to hide his smile. Knowing him, he probably wants to walk over there and hit all the pins down himself. When the first game is over, we decide to play again.

“How about the Crawfords vs the Steeles/Jacksons?” Tenielle asks. We all

get organized into the teams, Kade, Nikki, James, Grace on one team. Chase scowls when Layla walks over to our side.

“I need to even up the teams!” she explains.

“I go where you do,” he states, walking to our side. When James calls out for Jye to go on his team, I visibly cringe. I might have forgotten to tell him about that. Before I can say anything, Tenielle has to say, “Jye is a Crawford, not a Steele.”

“No, he’s not.” James says casually. Then he sees the look on my face. It must be extremely guilty, because his eyes narrow instantly.

“Awkward...” Nikki adds in a sing song voice. James’ eyes say ‘we will discuss this later’. We continue the game, enjoying ourselves even though there's slight tension between James and me. I dread the ride home, but it finally arrives after we all have dinner together. The first ten minutes are silent and then he finally speaks.

“You didn’t give him my last name,” he states.

“James-”

“Can you imagine how I feel right now?” he snaps.

“I know, I’m sorry,” I say in remorse.

“You need to change his name, Sasha,” he demands.

“We aren’t married James. And we weren’t together. It’s perfectly normal for a mother to give her child her own surname. You weren’t in the picture at the time,” I tell him patiently.

“And why was that again, Sasha?” he says harshly. I look behind to make sure Jye is still sleeping. I never want to be one of those mothers that constantly fights in front of their children.

“You gonna keep throwing it in my face? I’m pretty sure that isn’t forgiveness,” I say after a few moments of tense silence.

“I forgave you but that doesn’t mean I can just forget,” he replies.

“You’re not completely innocent in this either, okay?” I bite back. James grips the steering wheel tight, his knuckles turning pale with the force.

“I’ll change his name,” I concede.

“I didn’t even get to sign his birth certificate. Is my name even on it?” he says, his anger barely contained.

“Your name is on it,” I say with a sad sigh.

“At least there’s that,” he mutters under his breath. The rest of the ride is spent in uncomfortable silence. When James walks with me into my apartment

carrying a sleeping Jye, I have a feeling he isn't going to stay the night tonight. And when he says he'll see me tomorrow and storms out, I know I was right.

James

I walk to my fridge and pull out an ice cold beer, slamming the door with extra force. I down half the bottle in one huge gulp, wishing I had something a little stronger. I hardly ever get drunk, I can't afford the luxury in case I get called into the safe house.

My own son doesn't even carry my name. My parents are going to love this. Jye Crawford. Fucking Hell. This is a mess, just when I think we're moving forward and not living in the past. I palm my face, willing myself to calm down. I need to get some sleep. Things always look better in the morning. I have a quick, cold shower and throw on a pair of worn sweat pants. Tumbling into my bed, I find myself tossing and turning. Great, I can't even sleep without her now. I hate it when we fight. I always did.

I grab the remote off the nightstand and put the TV on, to the music video channel. I groan when Sasha's new favourite song is playing, 'Everything has changed' by Taylor Swift and Ed Sheeran. She's been playing it on repeat for the last few days, overplaying the song until I never want to hear it again. She always does it too, with whatever song has her mesmerized at the time. I switch the TV off, and close my eyes, willing myself to sleep.

I dream of my family.

I do a hundred sit-ups before moving onto the treadmill. I have my plan set out for the day, and I'm going to stick to it. Work out for two hours, then shower and go to Sasha's and talk. Then I have to go and see my accountant over some financial business.

I put my ear phones in, blasting out the world with 'Closer' by Nine Inch Nails. I really need to fuck Sasha to this song. I say fuck, because this is not a song you make love to. The thought gets me semi-hard. I stop jogging and put the treadmill off, when I feel a pair of arms wrap around me from behind, touching my bare stomach.

When I glance down and see pale hands instead of olive fingers with bright polish I freeze for a second, before pulling out my earphones and spinning around. She instantly pulls her hands away, and rubs the dampness from my sweat on her uniform.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" I snap at her. She always comes here

in her uniform, because she knows I think it's sexy as hell. She admitted it to me once, and I thought it was hot back then. Now - not so much.

"I came to chat," she purrs, staring down at my basketball shorts. My hard on is still there, visible for her to see.

"Is that for me?" she asks boldly.

"No, it isn't. If you aren't here for work, Tatiana, you need to leave," I tell her frankly.

She's about to speak when her phone rings. Her ring tone is 'Mrs. Officer' by Lil Wayne. I never realised how annoying that was.

"Shit, I gotta go," she says, sounding disappointed.

"Give me back the emergency key, Tatiana," I demand softly.

"What? Why?" she huffs.

I hold my hand out and wait as she reluctantly hands it over.

"You've changed, James," she says before walking out and slamming the front door behind her.

Sasha

When I hear the door open I stand up, looking forward to talking to James. I couldn't sleep last night. I missed him that much.

"James..." I start, but am cut off when he takes my face in his palms and pulls me in for a hungry kiss. His tongue flickers against mine, and I hum my pleasure. He retreats too soon.

"We'll change his name, okay. I don't want to fight, and I don't like sleeping without you. I want you and Jye to move into my house. It makes way more sense. My house is bigger, there's more room for Jye to play, and you both belong with me," he says.

I blink. "How long did you practice that speech for?"

"The whole way over here. Did it work? Or do I have to go all caveman on you?"

"It worked. But maybe you could go caveman on me tonight in bed?" I whisper huskily.

James inhales sharply, before running his hands down over my ass, cupping and squeezing me.

"Where's Jye?" he asks.

"He's at Layla's having a play-date with Cole," I say.

“Fucking perfect,” he rumbles, slapping my ass once.

“Strip and wait for me in the bedroom. I want you laid out and ready for me,” he demands, taking a step back towards the front door.

“Where are you going?” I ask him.

“To get my iPod,” he says. I shrug and run to the room, stripping down and waiting for my man.

Chapter Thirteen

Two weeks later

James

“So, I guess the honeymoon stage is already over then?” I drawl, purposely annoying her.

She ignores me, but shoots an evil look my way, before continuing to fold the clothes. Whenever Sasha is mad or upset, she cleans.

“Sasha-”

“Why does she call you so much?” she asks, the hurt visible in the tremor of her lips.

“Sasha, it’s just about her cases, things like that,” I lie. Tatiana had indeed called last night asking questions about how solid Sasha and I are. I didn’t feel comfortable with the conversation at all. Apparently the woman still thinks she has a chance with me. I need to take care of this before it escalates. I already have enough on my plate without having to deal with Tatiana.

“Bullshit!” she curses, folding another pair of jeans. I’d lost count after five, but apparently the woman owns a lot of pairs of jeans.

“Seriously, you don’t see my exes calling me,” she snaps.

“They wouldn’t dare,” I rumble cockily. This was apparently *not* the right thing to say. I move to avoid the pair of jeans that go flying past my face.

“I only have two weeks left of this work, Sasha-”

“So, you’re going to cut her out, then?” she asks, placing her hands on her hips. Her bangles cling together with the motion.

“Cut her out?” I ask.

“Yeah, you know, when you cut someone out. You avoid them, don’t answer their calls and delete them from your life. Kind of like you did to me when I was calling you from Scotland,” she says, taking a low blow.

“Ouch,” I mutter.

“Yes or no, James,” she demands.

“I can’t just cut her out,” I sigh, rubbing my hand over the back of my neck in frustration.

“So, you can do it to me, but not her?” she asks, her voice getting higher in pitch. Definitely not a good sign.

I make a ‘calm down’ gesture with my hands that just makes her more

pissed off. I can almost see the steam coming out of her ears.

“She still wants you, James, it’s pretty fucking obvious!” she yells.

“Sasha, I broke up with her for you. I haven’t even looked at her in that way again! Stop being such a bitch for no reason!” I tell her, losing my temper. She storms into the bathroom and slams the door. Luckily Jye is at my mother’s and not here to witness this. I cringe when my phone rings and it’s Tatiana. I palm my face and wait for her to leave a message. When my phone beeps I put it to my ear to listen to it.

James, you need to head out to Carmine for the Fiona Reed case. She’s ready to be moved to a safe place. Call me, okay. Bye.

Fiona Reed is a lawyer who’s a pit bull in the court room, yet somehow scared of her own husband. I don’t know what he did to her, because there was no visible abuse, but the woman was shit scared of him.

“Sasha! I gotta go to The Safe House. Babe, I’m sorry. You’re not a bitch, you’re my beautiful, stunning, amazing, tough girl, okay?” I say, sucking up to her as much as I can.

“Just go, James,” she says tonelessly.

“Sasha, I don’t want to leave you when you’re upset,” I say in a gentler tone. She opens the door with a heavy sigh, like the world is on her shoulders.

“Come here, my pretty girl,” I croon, opening my arms to her. She jumps into my arms wrapping her arms around my neck.

“We’re okay, I love you. I’ve always loved you, and I’m never going to stop,” I tell her.

She nods and kisses me on my neck. “I’ll make it up to you tonight, okay. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Good, you can go down on me for two hours,” she says. I laugh out loud at that.

“Is that supposed to be a punishment for me? Cos it sounds like a reward,” I say honestly. I capture her lips in a possessive kiss before I head out.

Sasha

I open the front door to James’ house in agitation. Dressed in only a bath robe, the incessant knocking wouldn’t stop, so I had to jump out of my bath to answer.

“Yes?” I ask in confusion when I see two girls standing there. I blink a few times as I take in their attire. Red leather mini skirt, and a glittery bra. Or at least

that's what it looks like. The second girl is wearing a white mini dress. It's see through and I can plainly see her nipples. I rack my mind for the date, it's not Halloween is it?

"Is James here?" Red leather asks.

"No," I reply.

She pouts. "Oh. Well, how about Kade?"

"Yeah, no." I tell her, not offering her anything else. White mini dress sighs, looking put out.

"What do you want with them?" I ask curiously.

"What *don't* we want with them?" Red leather giggles.

"Right. You know Kade is happily married with children?" I ask, pulling my towel up further.

They both shrug, like it makes no difference. I blink once. And then slam the door in their face. I head back to the bathroom and jump back into the tub. Several minutes later, I hear One Directions 'More Than This' coming from my phone. I answer it with a grin.

"Hey, Layla!"

"Hey cuz. How do you feel finally moved in with James?" she asks.

"Pretty good, actually," I answer.

"Good. Anyway Cole and Jye are back from Lucy's so I'll drop him off in about an hour," she says.

"Perfect! Feel free to bring over some cupcakes," I say in a hopeful tone.

"Yeah, yeah, I already packed some for you," she says with a giggle.

"You're the best. Cole still staying at mine tomorrow night?" I ask.

"Yes! Thank you for keeping him. Chase and I need a night alone," she says.

"Anytime, you know that."

"See you in a bit."

"Okay bye Laylay." I say before we both hang up. My phone rings again, this time with 'Lightning crashes' as the ring tone. Ah. Shit. My finger hesitates around the button before I finally press answer.

"Hello Ryder," I say cheerfully.

"So you remember me baby girl?" he drawls.

"You're famous, how could I forget?"

"James Steele is Jye's father. I honestly didn't see that one coming," he says

dryly.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, Ry,” I say in all honesty.

“Well, I hear you’re happy now, that’s all that matters to me,” he says in the gentlest tone.

“When do I get to see you?” I ask him.

“Come over and see me anytime, baby girl. Bring that beautiful boy of yours,” he tells me

“Okay. Give my love to Lexi,” I say.

“I just gave her my love, as a matter of fact,” he says with a snicker.

“Yeah, ewww, Ryder,” I deadpan.

“See you soon, Sash,” he says.

We both hang up and I place my phone on the floor, taking a deep breath and sliding under the water. We finally got all my belongings moved in, and I told James to take the pole out of the living room. Kade and he both took it down together, mumbling things like ‘end of an era’ and ‘we’re getting old’. I was trying to hide my laughter but failed miserably.

I resurface the water, reluctantly draining the bath and getting out. This house has so much room, James turned one of the bedrooms into a wardrobe for me. One whole room as a wardrobe. He even fitted it with storage and cupboards for everything. I am seriously spoilt.

I dry my hair and body and then dress in a pair of black tights and a loose black top. I head into the kitchen and pour myself a juice, frowning when I see a message on the answering machine. I hit the button.

James, its Nancy. You’ve been trying to call me?

Beep.

Who the hell is Nancy?

James

It’s two AM when I finally get home. I check on Jye in his room, before heading to our bedroom. Sasha is fast asleep on her stomach, dressed in some ridiculous onesie thing that Layla bought her. She looks seriously comfortable though, that I’ll admit. I strip down to my boxer shorts and jump in next to her, exhausted and wanting nothing more than to hold her.

I love having her and Jye to come home to. It’s perfect. I kiss her on the back of her neck, tasting her skin. She’s so flawless to me, so amazing. I could watch her all day, her every move, her every smile. Fucking beautiful, every inch

of her. I hum in pleasure as I take in her peach scent, before wrapping her in my arms and falling asleep.

I wake up and almost scream when the first thing I see is Jye's face, about a centimetre from mine, his eyes so like my own, wide and unwavering.

"Good morning," I say, my voice raspy from sleep. Jye grins and shows me a scribbly drawing he's done.

"I love it," I beam, earning myself another grin.

"You had two visitors yesterday," Sasha says as she walks into the room.

"What? Who?" I ask, dreading the answer.

"Two girls. Looking for you *or* Kade. I don't think they cared which one they got either," she says dryly.

"Sorry," I say sheepishly. Sasha mutters something under her breath, about 'having standards' and then hands me a cup of coffee.

"Thanks," I say gratefully.

"How was last night?" she asks.

"It was good. The woman is at The Safe House, and there were no issues." I explain to her the events of last night, loving that I can be honest and truthful with her.

"Okay. I gotta head to work," she says as she puts on her sexy black shoes. I admire the curve of her waist in the tight skirt she's wearing.

"Looks like it's just me and you, little man," I tell Jye. Sasha finishes getting ready, kissing both of us before she leaves. I take Jye into the kitchen and put him in his feeding chair. Sasha said I should cut up some fruit as a snack for him, so I pull out a banana, pear and some strawberries, and begin cutting them up.

After his snack, Jye is seriously grubby, so I give him a quick bath before heading outside with him to play. Having been absent in his life in the beginning, I'm never going to take being a father for granted. I know the most important thing you can give a child is your time, so I intend to spend as much time with Jye as I can. I know I can offer him financial security, for which I'm grateful. I already opened a bank account for him, and a certain amount will go into it every month. Let's just say Jye is going to have an amazing car for his sixteenth birthday. The thought makes me smile.

After an hour and a half of playing, I lay Jye down for a nap. He falls asleep the second I put him down, tired from all the running around we did outside. I don't think I need to work out either, having gotten more than enough exercise

chasing Jye around. I make coffee and walk over to the answering machine when I see there's a message left on there. It wasn't new so Sasha must have checked it. I cringe when I hear Nancy's voice, instantly deleting the message. Fuck. What if she asks me who Nancy is? I don't have it in me to lie. Evade, yes, straight out lie, no.

I call Nancy back and talk to her for about ten minutes, before heading into my office to do some business. I check on Jye at twenty minute intervals, just to make sure he's okay. I'm on the phone with my accountant, when I hear a noise coming from Jye's room. I quickly tell Keith I'll call him back, rushing to his room. I can't help the curse that slips out of my mouth when I see what he's doing.

"Jye, you're not supposed to draw on the wall," I tell him, taking the black marker from his small hands. I stand there and stare at his artwork, black scribbles covering the wall at around his height.

"Come on, let's have some lunch," I tell him as I lift him in the air, putting him so he's sitting on my shoulders.

The day passes quickly, and I feel exhausted. I have a newfound respect for stay at home mothers, that's for sure, and I didn't even do any cleaning. Although I probably should have. I cringe as I glance around the messy kitchen.

"Come on, buddy, let's tidy up before your mum gets home."

I load the dishwasher, wipe down the counters, and sweep, all the while wishing that today was the day that Jillian, the lady that comes to clean the house, was in. Unfortunately it wasn't. After all that is done, Jye and I lie down in my bed and watch Aladdin.

Chapter Fourteen

Sasha

I stare at my clock. Six PM. Both James and Jye are fast asleep, cuddling each other. I take out my phone and take a quick picture. They must have tired each other out. I smirk and head for the shower. I make a mental note to never wear these shoes again, because my feet are killing me. After I shower and change I call up and order some dinner for us all, since there's no way I have time to whip something up. There's a knock on the door and I run to answer it.

"Chase, hey, come on in." I look down at Cole and smile, bending low to give him a kiss on his cheek which he instantly wipes away.

"Where's Layla?" I ask. I thought she said she was gonna drop Cole off.

Chase's lip twitches. "She is otherwise occupied."

"That's my cousin, you know," I say without emotion. Chase smiles, and when his dimples come out I can't help but sigh a little. Even though he can be scary, the man is sexy as hell.

"Where's James?" he asks, his eyes darting around the house.

"He's having a nanna nap with Jye," I snicker. Chase chuckles.

"Hey, where's the pole?" he asks as we pass the living room.

"The pole is history," I say smugly.

"How did you manage that?" he asks with a shake of his head.

"Well, James agreed, of course. And I told Kade I would let Grace dance on there if he didn't take it down."

Chase barks out another laugh. "I think you fit in with this family fine."

"I'm glad you think so," I reply. Cole runs into Jye's room and starts pulling out some toys.

"Okay, you go enjoy. Cole will be fine. I ordered in some food, and he can sleep with Jye in his room," I say.

"Alright then. I better get home or Layla is gonna kill me," he says, not looking repentant at all.

"What did you do to her?" I can't help but ask.

"She may be a little tied up right now," he says softly.

"Okay, then. Goodbye, Chase," I say, my eyes going wide. He kisses Cole on the forehead, telling him to be good before he heads off. As soon as he leaves I take Cole into the living room where we play some PS3 together, until James

and Jye wake up.

“Tired, were you?” I ask him when he walks up to me.

“Extremely,” he laughs, bending down and kissing me on my lips. There’s a knock on the door.

“Can you get the door, James? It’s dinner,” I tell him.

“Okay.”

“The money’s on the table!” I call out to him. Jye walks over to give me a kiss on the cheek before taking a seat next to Cole. He adores his big cousin. We all have dinner together, and then spend the rest of the evening in the games room playing air hockey. By eight o’clock both boys are fast asleep, and I drop into the bed, completely drained.

“I’m surprised you can even walk,” I tell Layla when I open the door. She blushes and ignores my comment.

“How was he?” she asks, changing the subject.

“He was an angel. How was Chase?” I ask nosily.

“Not an angel, that’s for sure,” she boasts. We both burst out laughing.

“We should go out this weekend,” she suggests.

“We should. How about Friday night?”

“Sounds good,” she agrees as she spots Cole.

“Hello, my baby! I missed you,” she croons as she hugs him.

“Let the kid breathe, Layla,” I tease.

“Like you can talk,” she huffs.

“Truth,” I agree.

“Okay we gotta head off. Cole has his karate class. I’ll see you on Friday then. Thanks again, Sasha,” she says.

“Anytime, you know that.” We say bye at the door, hugging like we aren’t going to see each other again for a long time. After Layla’s car has pulled out, I scowl when I see a cop car pull in. I roll my eyes when I hear ‘Mrs. Officer’ by Lil Wayne blasting from her stereo. What kind of cop is she? A few words come to mind, none of them pleasant. She struts up to the front door, and her confidence pisses me off.

“Is James in?” she asks, getting straight to the point.

“Nope,” I reply popping the P.

“His car is here,” she says, gesturing to his Land Rover.

“He went for a run,” I answer with reluctance, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Oh,” is all she says.

“Are you here for a work related reason?” I ask straight out.

“Not exactly-”

“Right, well then I think you should go,” I say frankly.

“James and I have unfinished business. You wouldn’t understand,” she says a little snidely.

“Unless you need to talk to him about work, you need to back the fuck off,” I snap.

“Threatened?” she purrs.

“I’m the one here living with him, why should I be threatened about yesterday’s news?” I bite back.

“Yeah, only because you trapped him with a child,” she hisses. I’m about to assault a police officer when James comes home, just in the nick of time.

“What are you doing here, Tatiana?” he asks. I frown at him, standing there in nothing but a pair of low slung shorts, sweat dripping down his delectable toned chest. And the bitch is checking him out, too. Well, she can look, because she’s never going to touch again, that’s for damn sure.

“I came to see you,” she says sweetly.

“I thought I told you last time you came here not to do it again,” James growls, wincing when he realises what he said.

“I’m sorry, what?” I snap.

“Oh, he didn’t tell you, he was dressed a lot like he is now when I had my hands on him,” she coos.

“You fucking b-”

“Sasha!” he rebukes.

“Tatiana, go home,” he commands, his tone deadly.

“If you’re so happy together, why hasn’t he asked you to marry him?” she sneers before walking to her car. I hate that her parting shot hurts me. I fucking hate it. ‘Mrs Officer’ sounds as she drives off, the damage she caused left behind.

“Sasha,” James starts. I ignore him and storm into the house to check on Jye, who luckily is still fast asleep. James follows me every step of the way as I head into our bedroom.

“Sasha-”

“She had her hands on you. You didn’t think that’s something you should mention?” I say in a tone so cold, I’m surprised ice didn’t come out of my mouth.

“She walked into the house. I was on the treadmill with my earphones in, she put her arms around me. I took them off and told her to leave, end of story,” he explains.

“How did she get in?” I ask suspiciously.

“She still had her key I gave her a while ago for emergencies,” he says softly.

“How fucking convenient!” I snap. I sit down on the bed, my fingers gripping into the bed sheet.

“I don’t want her. Okay? Yes, at one point I was with her, but she wasn’t you. I’d never commit to her because I always held out hope that I’d get you back. You don’t have anything to worry about,” he says sincerely, taking a seat next to me on the bed. He avoids her marriage comment, and I don’t bring it up. Does he even want to marry me eventually? I’m not saying right now, but in the future?

“Hey, what’s going through that head of yours, pretty girl?” he asks, pulling me so I’m sitting on his lap.

“Tell her to stop coming here, James. Or the mother of your son is going to go to jail for assaulting an officer. By the way, what kind of cop listens to ‘Mrs. Officer?’ Tell her to fucking get over herself!” I say with vehemence infused in my voice.

When James starts laughing, I’m not amused.

James

You think you know a woman. I had no idea Tatiana could be such a bitch. She’d been nothing but sweet the entire time we were dating. Now her claws are out, I’m not liking this side of her. Looks like I got out in the nick of time. I almost sigh in relief.

Sasha heads off to her parents’ house with Jye. Her father wants to spend some time with him, so I decide to catch up on some paperwork. An hour or so passes when my phone rings. An unknown number.

“James?” a soft voice croons. It makes me shudder involuntarily.

“Nancy, did you get the forms?” I ask her, trying to keep the panic out of

my tone.

“I did. I'll handle it, don't worry,” she assures me.

“I need it done ASAP, okay?” I tell her sternly.

“No problem, James. You can relax.”

We both hang up and I grin. Looks like everything is going according to my plan. I pull the black velvet box out of my pocket and open it, staring at the white gold princess cut ring. I hope Sasha loves it, and I hope she says yes. I stand up and get my wallet and keys, ready to head out. Chase, Kade and I are meeting up at a bar for some brotherly bonding.

“What is so good about this bar again?” I ask for what must be the hundredth time over the years.

“It has a homey feeling, don't you think?” Kade smirks. I look around at the bikers and half dressed women, still not seeing it.

“Was our childhood that bad?” I joke.

“It's his old hunting grounds. Maybe he's reminiscing,” Chase adds.

I take a swig of my beer and avoid eye contact with the blonde that keeps staring at me. I'm pretty sure she hasn't even blinked once.

“The women aren't subtle, that's for sure,” I say as I see her walk over.

“Hi, Kade, who's your friend?” she purrs, licking her bright pink lips.

“He's not interested,” I pipe up.

“How about you then, handsome?” she says as she runs her hand down Chase's chest. Chase removes her hand, distaste evident on his face.

“Sorry, we're all taken,” he says in a no-nonsense tone. She scowls, makes a comment about how we must be gay, and then saunters off to her next victim. We all take a huge gulp of our drinks. How our lives have changed. I think we are all thinking the same thing, because the next minute we're all laughing.

“Why didn't she hit on you Kade?” I ask him, genuinely curious.

Kade looks sheepish. “I took her home once, and let's just say we aren't into the same shit.”

Chase and I lean closer. “She's into pain, and yeah, not my thing,” Kade says, downing a shot as if remembering what had happened. When I see Tenielle stroll in, I grin.

“I thought this was a male only event?” I drawl.

Tee rolls her eyes and takes a seat next to me. “I thought I'd liven the place

up a little. Besides if I *were* a man, we all know I'd have the biggest penis."

"Where are you going, all dolled up?" Kade asks her.

"What, this old thing?" she asks sweetly, gesturing to her tight black dress that leaves nothing to the imagination. I notice she's still wearing combat boots though. She orders three tequila shots. All for her, not us. When a guy notices her and smiles her way, Chase hovers around her.

"Chase, you need to relax. You look like a dragon about to breathe fire." She laughs.

"You're my sister," he says.

"In law!" she corrects him.

"If you don't wanna be over protected, don't come out with us," he fires back.

Tee laughs. The woman is nuts.

"Layla told me Derek moved to Melbourne," she says to Kade.

"Yeah, he did." I notice Chase smile at the news.

"Perth is way better than Melbourne," she declares. We all nod in agreement. She downs her last shot and then stands up.

"Where do you think you're going?" Chase demands.

"I'm meeting some friends at a club. There is this sexy DJ playing tonight, pale green eyes, body to die for. Oh and he's pretty talented, too," she says with a devilish grin.

"I'll drive you," Chase says.

"How does Layla put up with you?" she mutters under her breath, as she grabs her thick hair and ties it in a messy bun on the top of her head. Her twinkling brown eyes show that she just likes to annoy Chase.

"Hey, do you guys wanna come?" she asks, picking up her bag from the bar table.

"I always wanna cum," Kade adds, being his usual self.

We all glance at each other and shrug.

"Why not?"

Chapter Fifteen

Sasha

Last night must have really been wild because Kade and Chase are fast asleep in the living room. James was up, early as ever, and took Jye out for lunch with his mother and father. He didn't drink much last night, unlike the other two. I had calls from both Layla and Nikki this morning, wanting to know exactly what went on last night. They also told me to wake their men up so they can get their asses home.

I walk into the room and clear my throat, loudly. I poke Kade in the chest and he doesn't even move. They're seriously passed out. I grin and head into the study. I pull out a black marker from the drawer, and then tip toe back into the living room. Once my artwork is done, I head out to work, laughing the entire ride.

"Did you draw penises on my brother's faces?" he asks as soon as I walk through the front door.

"Why would you ask that?" I ask nonchalantly.

"Sasha," he says, chuckling.

"They could've come home like that from the club, you know, they would have been too drunk to remember," I point out. James gives me a full belly laugh, Jye getting bounced around by his chest moving up and down with the effort.

"Sasha."

"Yes?" I ask, batting my eyelashes.

"Did you?" he asks, already knowing the answer by the twist of his lips.

"I might have. Did they get it off?" I ask with a smirk.

"Yeah, they did. I'd avoid Chase for a while, though," James says, his eyes crinkling.

"Why?"

"He's a little more uptight than Kade," he says, biting his lip ring in thought.

"That's true."

"Plus, you did something to his picture that you didn't do to Kade's," he says with a raised eyebrow. I laugh, remembering the droplet tear drops I drew on his chin. Oops.

“Hello, my baby,” I say to Jye, pulling him from James and into my arms. I peck James on the lips and then walk into the kitchen. My mouth drops open when I see beautiful dinner all set out, with candles and wine.

“What’s the occasion?” I ask in shock.

“You don’t need an occasion to get spoilt, Sasha. You had a long day at work, and I wanted to show you how much I appreciate you,” he says sincerely, his eyes taking in my reaction.

“It’s perfect, and it smells so good. Did you cook?” I ask warily, my brows furrowing.

“In fact, I did,” he says, looking proud of himself. I put Jye in his feeding chair and spin around, pulling James in for a quick, yet passionate kiss.

“I’m a lucky girl, thank you” I tell him, meaning every word.

“You’re welcome,” he says, pulling out my chair for me. I sit down and sigh in contentment when he kisses me on my head. I look down at my steak, mash potato, salad and garlic bread and smile. It looks delicious. James serves Jye’s dinner and helps him eat while I enjoy my meal.

“A girl could get used to this,” I say around a bite of succulent steak.

“How was your day?” he asks. We make idle chat, enjoying each other’s company. James puts Jye to bed while I have a shower. I decide to dress sexy, in a black bra and panties, and sit on my knees in the centre of the bed. As soon as James walks in, he nibbles on the bottom of his lip, his eyes touching every inch of me.

“What do we have here?” he asks, his lip curling.

“Jye asleep?”

“Fast,” he says as he pulls his shirt off and over his head. I watch his muscles ripple with the movement, his toned chest and defined six pack causing my breath to catch.

“You got rid of the pole, now you’re gonna make up for it,” he rasps, taking a seat on the bed. Catching his drift I stand up off the bed as gracefully as I can, and head over to my iPod dock. I choose ‘Hypnotize’ by Gemini and press play, strutting over to him to the rhythm of the music. Dipping my hips with a gentle sway I raise my arms above my head and roll my body. I swivel my hips like a belly dancer and spin in an erotic movement that causes James to make a deep sound vibrating from his chest. I turn around ever so slowly, approaching James and lifting one of my legs up until I’m straddling him. My other leg follows, and I push up on my knees, so my breasts are level with his face. I roll my body once

more, using James as one would a pole, and then I lean down and kiss the hollow of his throat. Unable to keep still any longer, James lifts his hands around to cup my ass, kneading the globes with his strong fingers.

“I love this ass,” he rumbles into my ear. I clutch his shoulders with my hands as he pushes my hair out of my face, staring straight into my eyes. It’s always like this with James. The connection. I don’t think I’ll ever feel it with anyone else.

“I love this face. So fucking beautiful. Your lips. You were made for me,” he says before capturing my lips in a rough kiss. I respond in kind, my tongue duelling with his. He frantically takes off my bra with one hand, throwing it across the room. His mouth pays homage to my breasts, one at a time, licking and sucking at me until I’m shaking with need. My underwear is ripped off and then I’m thrown onto the bed. James makes quick work of his pants, and stands before me in all his glory. The man has the finest body I’ve ever laid eyes on. My gaze lowers to his impressive erection, which is currently pointing straight at me.

When James doesn’t move I look up into his amused blue eyes. He stares down at me through his thick lashes, his eyes blazing with passion. I instantly sit up and crawl towards him, placing my hands on each strong thigh and licking the tip of him. I take him into my mouth, sucking, licking and swirling my tongue.

“Sasha,” he pants, stopping me with a finger gently touching my chin.

“Yes?” I ask giving him one last lick from bottom to tip before pulling away.

“On your stomach,” he demands.

I more than happily comply.

I frown, wondering what the hell all the commotion could be about. And then I see it. I close my car door and walk down the driveway, scowling at anyone who will meet my eyes. James is lawn mowing. Shirtless. The neighbours which happen to own vaginas are all out of their houses, conveniently checking their mail boxes. One is leaning on her fence, blatantly staring. I watch as he takes a drink of water, and a few droplets leak down onto his chest, which is currently getting a sexy tan.

“James Steele,” I call out sternly. He turns and graces me with his devastating smile.

“Hey, pretty girl,” he says, jogging over and kissing me on the forehead.

“You're causing a scene,” I tell him through clenched teeth.

“What?” he asks, his forehead creasing in confusion. I inhale and smell him, expensive cologne mixed with sweat. He smells all man.

“All the women are staring at you. Checking you out! I don't share, James. This isn't some sexy male strip show,” I explain, crossing my arms over my chest.

James stares at me for a second or two, before his eyes crinkle and he pursues his lips.

“I'm not finished yet,” he says finally. I can tell he's trying not to laugh. I turn around and glance at the neighbours, who, yes, are still gawking at my man. I stomp my foot and head into the house, coming back with a white singlet in my hand. I hand it to him. He laughs, but humors me and puts it on. I check him out, his biceps bulging, his abs visible through the tight singlet, and groan. I give up, there's just no hiding his sexiness.

“Want to come inside for a glass of lemonade?” I ask in a suggestive tone. James grins, grabs me by the hips and flips me over his shoulder, carrying me inside caveman style.

Chapter Sixteen

James

Nancy is seriously fucking around with me. After that call she hasn't contacted me again. I've called her a million times. What's her end game? I need to find it out and sort this mess out fast. I leave Sasha and Jye fast asleep and head into The Safe House. My time is almost up, and I'm definitely going to miss this place.

"We got a call from the police in Dawesville, they have a domestic abuse case over there. The neighbours have called the police several times. And the woman's mother called us," Talon informs me.

He's my replacement, and a really good guy. He stands at my height, and is muscular to the point of intimidation. I check the case file on the woman and frown. I've met her a few times. She was in the hospital, bruised and beaten, but wouldn't speak a word against her husband. I know it was him hurting her because Tatiana let me read his record.

A bad feeling in my gut, I head to her house to check out the area. After two hours of surveillance I watch as her husband pulls away. Taking my chance, I go around the back door and enter. The door is left unlocked. Unease spreads through me. I look around the house, which is empty, leaving the bedroom for last. When I enter, I see her hiding in the corner of the room, her head down. Dark locks of hair cover her face, but I can still see her body shivering from here.

"Helen, it's me, James. We met at the hospital. Remember what we spoke about?" I ask in a soft voice, not wanting to scare her. I know how skittish these women can get. She lifts her head up and I flinch when I see the bruising around her left eye.

"James?" she rasps. I can see fingerprints around her throat. My hands clench into fists. I slowly walk towards her and help her up, I hate that she whimpers when my arm touches her.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?" I ask her.

"No, he just hit... hit me, and..." she gestures to her throat. He tried to strangle her. Fucking piece of shit. I'm about to exit from the front door when I hear the rumble of a car engine. Helen's panic fills me with dread. What's he doing here? He's supposed to be at work. I quickly call Tatiana, and tell her to send some officers over here pronto. I glance out the window, and notice that Helen's husband isn't alone. He's with two other men. I have a feeling this is

about to get ugly, and fast. I gently tilt her face up to look into my eyes.

“I need you to be strong for me right now, can you do that?” I ask her. She doesn’t answer.

“Helen, I just need this one thing from you, then you won’t have to worry anymore, okay?” I plead with her.

“Okay,” she says, almost too quiet to hear. I take my car keys and put them in her hand. “My car is parked behind, next to your back neighbours’ house. Get in it, and drive to the police station. I’ll make sure he doesn’t follow you, okay?”

She nods, and I quickly walk her to the back door, just as I hear the front door open.

“Don’t come back, no matter what,” I tell her before closing the back door. I could have gone with her, I know, but I didn’t want to risk it. If those three men caught up with us, who knows how badly they would have beaten her, or even worse. I hide for a few moments, before I hear the yelling. He must be looking for her. One of the men opens the back door, but before he can turn the door knob, I pull him back. I dodge his fist, pulling back and hitting him right in his face. I hear a crunching sound, the man screams, and soon the other two men are surrounding me.

“Where the fuck is she?” one demands.

“Safe,” I say with a smug smile. Another fist comes flying at me, which I only just dodge. Extremely close call. Two men hold me down, allowing the third to punch me right in the stomach. Another punch hits me on the side of my head, just as I hear police sirens. When the third hit comes, I allow oblivion to take me, knowing that Helen was safe.

Sasha

I run into the hospital, Jye clutched in my arms. I look around the reception and my eyes find Chase standing there, staring down at the floor. His face looks drawn and for the first time ever, he doesn’t look put together.

“Chase?” I say as I make it closer to him.

“Come,” he demands, taking my wrist in his hand and pulling me gently towards the hospital rooms. We walk to a room marked A28. Chase opens the door for me and offers to take Jye. I hand him over, slightly reluctant, before walking into the room.

There lays James. Bruised and bloodied, he is lying down watching me in silence. I rush towards him, taking his hand in mine carefully so I don’t hurt him

further.

“What happened?” I ask, tears pouring down my face.

“You should see the other guy. Or guys, as it were,” he says softly, attempting to joke.

“James,” I admonish without conviction.

“Don’t worry, pretty girl. This was my last job. And I’m fine, just a little banged up, okay?” he tries to reassure me.

“When can you come home?” I ask him.

“A day or two,” he says with a sigh, like he’s heavily put out that he’s being fussed over. I hear Jye crying from the waiting room, and stand up to go and get him.

“Bring him in, please,” James says softly and I nod. I walk out of the room to see Jye sitting on Chase’s lap, struggling slightly.

“Hey Jye, I’m here, baby. Come on, let’s go and see your dad,” I tell him, taking him into my arms.

“Thanks, Chase,” I tell him.

“He was lucky. I’m glad he’s not risking himself like this anymore,” he says, pulling out his phone as it rings. He steps out to talk and I take Jye to see James. I lay my son down next to his father, and as they talk quietly, I thank god that James is alive.

Chapter Seventeen

One month later

Sasha

James' fingers grip onto my hips, his fingers clenching and releasing with each fevered thrust I take. I change the motion, moving up and down, loving it when James growls his approval. My breathing quickens as I see the wicked glint in his eyes, and before I know it, he flips me over, still inside of me, and takes control. We find release together, moaning against each other's lips.

"I love you," he whispers.

"I love you, too," I say.

"I love that you're on the pill," he says, breaking the moment. I pinch him on his butt, his shit-eating grin making me giggle.

"You're so romantic, James," I tease. He moves off me, sliding into the bed next to me.

"How would you feel about another baby?" he asks me quietly, cutting through the silence.

"Um," I say articulately. The truth is, I'd love another baby. But shouldn't we be married first? James always told me he wanted to marry me one day, so I know he isn't opposed to marriage.

"You don't?" he asks, suddenly sounding unsure.

"No, I mean. I do. You know I love children," I tell him.

"So talk to me, Sasha," he encourages, rubbing his finger down my spine.

"Don't you want to marry me?" I blurt out. I notice James stiffen, and squeeze my eyes shut, wishing I could take back what I just said.

"Sasha-"

"It's okay."

"Listen to me, pretty girl. I do want to marry you. In fact, I bought you ring a long time ago," he says.

"Then, why?" I ask in confusion, snuggling my face into the hollow of his throat.

"I was waiting for the perfect time," is all he offers as explanation.

"Any time is the perfect time," I grumble.

James chuckles, and sits up, turning to dig into the top drawer.

"You're a secret master mind at hiding things," I say dryly, mad I hadn't

snooped through there before.

“Well, you didn’t find it, now did you?” he boasts. He opens the black velvet box and a beautiful ring stares back at me. White gold with a princess cut diamond as big as a rock.

“Holy shit,” I mutter, my eyes huge in my face.

“Sasha Crawford. I’ve loved you since the day I met you, and I will never stop. You are my soul mate, my better half. Will you marry me?” he asks me.

“Of course I will!” I practically squeal as he puts the ring on my finger.

“It’s beautiful,” I say adamantly.

“I’m glad you like it,” he says, a proud smile on his handsome face.

“I love anything from you, James.” It’s true. Hell, he could give me one of those two dollar machine rings for all I care.

“Put your hands on the headboard Sasha,” he demands.

I instantly comply.

Chapter Eighteen

James

“You need to tell her, James,” Chase lectures, not for the first time.

“Like you told Layla?” I fire back.

“That was different. And you saw how that played out,” Chase says wisely. He’s right, too. I need to tell Sasha. I’m just dreading her reaction. I never planned on proposing to her the other night, it just happened. The timing still isn’t right, but that moment was perfect. I love her so damn much it almost hurts.

“The golden boy is in shit,” Kade teases in a sing-song voice. He bends over to play his shot.

“I have one word for you, Kade,” I say tonelessly.

“What?” he asks in a wary tone.

“Ashley.”

I ignore Chase as he bursts out laughing. They’re playing each other at a game of pool, and I’m waiting to verse the winner.

“Does Sasha know what you’ve done on this pool table? Or who? Hell, do you even know who?” Kade barks out, shaking his head with amusement.

“Thank you both for your life altering advice,” I say dryly.

“Just be honest. I can just imagine Layla yelling at me when this shit comes out,” Chase grumbles. Kade makes the noise of a whip.

“Pot, meet kettle.” Chase laughs at Kade.

“Oh please, Nikki knows who’s the boss,” Kade scoffs. Chase shoots in the black ball, winning the game. I stand up and get my cue ready.

“Maybe we should do a trip over there, sort it out?” Chase offers. My brother has always made my problems his own, ever since the day I was born.

“Your women going to let you out to play?” I ask dryly.

“Will yours?” Kade counters.

“I think the question is, do I want to leave her, even if it’s for a few days.” Another whip noise from Kade.

“You needa sort this out, bro,” Chase says as he breaks.

“I know. That reminds me, I needa call mum and tell her that her youngest and favourite son is getting married,” I say with a grin.

“Cue the tears,” we all say at the same time. Our mother can be a little melodramatic sometimes. Best mother in the world. I play my shot, sinking in

two balls.

“Awkward moment last week when Layla and I went out to dinner, and the blonde twins show up,” Chase says, visibly cringing. The twins are two girls that used to party at the house a lot. A lot. Awkward is an understatement, although I’m sure Layla is used to it by now, since Chase has been around town and back. Twice.

“Does Layla still get pissed?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

Chase’s grunt in answer enough. Kade laughs, earning himself a glare. I walk over to the jukebox, and put on a track.

“James, who’s gonna be your best man?” Kade asks, glancing over at Chase. Here we go.

“So, I’ve decided-”

“Let me guess, you are choosing both of us,” Chase cuts me off.

“Hey, you two both did it.” I say, smirking.

“I know. I just wanted to see who your favourite brother was,” Kade teases. Not this again. Having three in the family is sometimes a curse.

“I like you both equally,” I say diplomatically.

“Riiiggghhhht,” Chase says, with an ‘it’s okay we won’t tell Kade’ look on his face. I laugh at his expression. Not many people get to see the playful side of Chase, but trust me, he can be pretty damn hilarious at times. My phone rings again from an unknown number. I hit the green button.

“Yep,” I greet.

“James, I’m at your house,” a female voice croons. I still, hoping this isn’t who I think it is.

“Who is this?” I ask, my heart starting to race. Sasha is home, and I’m seriously not liking the sound of this.

“Nancy,” she says. I stop breathing for a second.

“Don’t you fucking go into my house, Nancy. What are you doing here?” I yell.

“Where are you, James?” she asks.

“How do you even know where I live?” I snap.

“It was easy enough to find out,” she says with a giggle. A giggle. Like my relationship with Sasha doesn’t depend on how this situation plays out.

“What the hell do you want?” I sneer. I see Chase and Kade crowd around me, looking worried and angry on my behalf.

“I came to see you. Better get home,” she says, hanging up.

“Fuck!” I yell.

“James, what do you need us to do?” Chase and Kade ask me but I’m not listening. I dial Sasha’s number and pray that she’s not home.

She doesn’t even answer.

I need to get home, and now.

Or my whole world is gonna explode.

Sasha

I frown at the knock on the door, not expecting anyone. My toe nails are painted a deep blue, and still wet, so I walk on my heels to answer the door. I hear my phone ring but I ignore it. I’ll call them back. I open it slightly and peer out at a blonde woman. Dressed casually in jeans and a tank top, her shrew dark eyes are on me, yet she doesn’t say anything. She scowls, her lips curling in distaste. I notice her suitcase, which confuses me further.

“Yes?” I ask, none too nicely.

“I’m here to see James,” she says.

“He’s not here,” I say back in a none too friendly tone.

“I’ll wait,” she says in a snooty tone.

“And you are?” I demand.

“I’m Mrs. Steele. James’ wife. Who are you?” she asks with an evil smile. My heart stops. No. There’s no way.

“Bullshit,” I scoff, calling her bluff. She pulls a document out of her handbag and hands it over to me. A licence certificate. It looks legitimate, but what do I know about forged documents?

“What do you want?” I ask her warily.

“I want my husband, of course,” she says.

I practically growl and slam the door shut in her face. My phone rings again and I answer.

“Sasha, I’m almost home. I can explain,” James says the second I answer. He sounds nervous. A bad feeling takes over.

“Are you married to her? Yes or no,” I tell him.

“It’s complicated-”

“Yes or no, James!” I yell.

“Yes, but-”

I hang up.

James Steele is married.

The love of my life is married. Great, now I'm a fucking adulteress. How could he do this to me? To Jye? To us? I try my hardest to shut my mind off. I need the numbness right now. I call my mother and ask her if she can keep Jye for another night, she says it's no problem at all. I'm grateful. I don't want Jye to see me break. To see me weak. Because right now I'm barely holding it together.

I walk outside the front door to find that bitch parked across the road in her rental car. She smiles when she sees me. She smiles. I generally don't get into fights anymore. As a mother, I want to set an example for my kid. I want to lead by example. So, I tone down my crazy. Right this very second, though, all those thoughts are out the window.

I walk right up to her car and take out the house key, dangling it in front of her. She warily puts her window down, and I put my hand in and offer her the key. She smirks and takes it. As soon as the key is in her hand, I grab the back of her head and hit it into the steering wheel. Once, twice. Thrice for good measure. Then I walk off, get into my car and drive off.

James

There's an unfamiliar car parked in my driveway, and Sasha's car is gone. I seriously don't like where this is going. I open the front door and head to my bedroom, when I hear the television on in there. The sight before me makes me see red. Nancy has made herself at home, in Sasha's and my bedroom.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" I demand through clenched teeth. I push my sleeves up to my elbows, the movements jerky with restrained anger. She looks up from where she is lying on our bed. Lying on our.fucking.bed.

"Nancy, get in the kitchen, now!" I yell.

She gets up and saunters into the kitchen, like she doesn't have a care in the world. This woman is fucking insane. Bat-shit crazy. There is no other explanation for it. I follow her into the kitchen, pinching the bridge of my nose with my fingers. Boy, do I have some grovelling to do.

"Why did you come here?" I start with.

She shrugs. The motion infuriates me. "You said you wanted a divorce. I wanted to come and see why. Maybe we could work things out?" she asks, running her tongue over her lips. Instead of turning me on, my dick shrivels up even further, if that's possible. I slept with this woman once, and I'm sure as fuck

never going there again.

“What do you want?” I ask her frankly. I’m not stupid. The bitch is here for something.

“I want some money,” she admits, glancing around and looking at my large house and nice possessions. I can almost see the dollar signs in her eyes.

“What happened to your forehead?” I ask. It’s red and puffy.

She scowls. “Slight altercation.”

Sasha. I can’t help it, I smile.

“Fuck you, James,” she hisses.

I sigh and look up at the ceiling. “I am the fucking poster boy of why people shouldn’t get drunk in Vegas,” I say to myself. Apparently it only takes one night and a bottle of scotch to ruin your life.

“You could have said you wanted money before you signed the papers, why did you have to come here and fuck my life up?” I really want to know this.

She shrugs again. She’s lucky I would never raise my hand on a woman. “When it’s all said and done, legally you’re still mine, James. Pissed me off some other girl is living here with you, enjoying all this,” she gestures to the house. “When it’s me carrying your last name.”

I stare at her, my eyes narrowing. “I just want you gone. Out of my life, for good. You’re a fucking mistake, poison. How much do you want?” I sneer.

“Two hundred grand,” she says without even a flinch.

“Sign the papers and I’ll give you a hundred. But my lawyers will draw up a contract saying you can’t come near me or anyone I know again,” I tell her.

“Fine,” she pouts. Ungrateful bitch.

“Get out. Meet me at my lawyer’s tomorrow, I’ll message you the details,” I say, not even looking at her anymore.

“You sure you don’t wanna fuck your wife one last time?” she purrs.

I shake my head in distaste. “No way in hell. Bye, Nancy.”

She stomps out and slams the door behind her.

Good fucking riddance. Nothing feels better than cutting dead branches.

Chapter Nineteen

Sasha

After driving around aimlessly for twenty minutes, I finally decide who I was going to crash with for the night. Who I wanted to comfort me right now. I press the doorbell to the mansion, and wait impatiently. After ringing it three times the door finally opens.

“Hey!” I say in surprise.

“Hey, Sasha,” Saxon says.

“Is Ryder in?”

“No, he went on a small trip with Lexi. Come on in,” he says, opening the door wide. I walk in and smile at the pictures of Ryder and Lexi smiling, hugging and kissing. So in love, those two.

“Your house sitting or something?” I ask him.

“My new house is getting built, so Ry told me to crash here,” he says.

“Oh,” I say, feeling sad Ry isn’t around. Who’s going to hug me and tell me how much of a princess I am now?

“You wanna talk about it?” Sax asks. I eye him warily. Sure we’ve met a bunch of times over the years, but we’ve never had any deep and meaningful chats.

“Ry usually hugs me and tells me how amazing I am,” I say with a dramatic sigh. Saxon laughs, and takes a step closer.

“Come here. How about I tell you all the things Ryder has said about you to me? Would that work?”

“I would like that,” I say softly, my eyes starting to water.

“Come here, Sasha,” he says sweetly, pulling me into his arms for a hug. I start sobbing uncontrollably, my body heaving with the effort. I am not a pretty crier. Instead of freaking out, Sax rubs my back in a circular motion, letting my tears drench his black singlet. He carries me into his arms and sits me down on the couch, taking a seat next to me.

“What happened?” he asks once my sobbing is under control.

“James is married.” I allow that to sink in before continuing.

“He proposed to me when he was already married! Who does that?” I yell. Sax’s brown eyes widen and then narrow in anger. My gaze is drawn to the scar that goes through his left eyebrow. It gives him a sexy bad boy edge. I wonder how he got it?

“Fuck,” he curses, eyeing me not with pity but with an apology in his eyes. What he could be sorry for, I have no idea.

“Why are you looking at me like you’re the one to hurt me?” I ask, confused.

Sax’s eyes widen at my observation, before he says, “Guy screws good girl over. Been there and done that. I guess, I dunno. I’m not completely innocent. I hurt a woman as good as you once, so while I sit here watching you cry, I want to hit James, but he’s not the only one who is guilty here, is he?”

“Sax. Don’t let your past define you. Everyone makes mistakes,” I tell him, not liking the flash of sadness I see in his eyes.

“I guess,” he says, but I can tell by his tone that he doesn’t agree with me.

“Sax,” I start but he cuts me off.

“Do you want me to tell Ry to come home?” he offers.

“No, you said you would tell me the nice things he says,” I remind him, the tears starting up again.

“That’s right. He told me you were beautiful, smart, kind-hearted, feisty.” He raises his eyebrow at the last one.

“I have my moments,” I say with a slight nod.

“He told me that he loves you, a lot. That you will always be his baby girl no matter how old you get. When you had your son he was pissed that the father wasn’t there and you were alone. He wanted to fly over but then Trey spoke to him and told him that he was taking care of you,” he explains.

“Sometimes it feels like family is the only people you can trust,” I say sadly.

“That’s because you have a good family. Not everyone is as lucky, some have to make their own family,” he says gently.

“I guess I am lucky that way.” We’re both silent for a few moments, lost in our own thoughts.

“What am I going to do about James?” I ask him, playing with the seam of my jeans.

“I can’t answer that for you, Sasha, but you’re welcome to bring your kid and stay here with me,” he offers with a grin.

“Really? We won’t cramp your style?” I ask him, surprised at the offer.

Sax chuckles, and it’s a deep, musical sound. “No, you won’t cramp my style.”

“I don’t want to interrupt any hot sex you may be having,” I say bluntly.

“Hot sex?” he asks, raising his eyebrow, causing the ring to move.

“Yeah, you know,” I make a hand gesture that could mean both nothing and everything.

“No, I don’t. Please explain it to me,” he says, his eyes dancing with amusement.

“You’re in a famous band,” I state.

“Okay,” he says, drawing out the word.

“And you’re, you know!” I try to explain.

“I’m what?” he ask, his body shaking with laughter.

“You’re a pretty good looking guy,” I say as casually as I can.
More like fucking hot.

“I’m glad you think so,” he says with a laugh, rubbing his hands over the stubble on his chin.

“I’m serious!” I say.

“I can tell,” he says, laughing. What’s so funny right now?

“What I’m trying to say is, I’m sure you have a... a healthy sex life. That wouldn’t necessarily stay within your bedroom walls. You know, a man like you would like to change things up now and again I’m sure...” I trail off, because Sax is laughing so hard the whole couch is shaking.

“This is the last time I try and have a deep and meaningful conversation with you. I’m trying to pour my heart out to you, and you’re in crampz,” I huff, crossing my arms against my chest and tapping my foot.

“Crampz?” he asks, grabbing his stomach like laughing so much has given him a stitch.

“It’s something I heard my baby cousin say. Crampz, you know, laughing so hard you get a cramp,” I explain.

Saxon just stares at me before throwing his head back and laughing some more.

“What? Apparently it’s the new LOL,” I tell him with a shrug.

“Are you always this cute?” he asks once his laughter has subsided.

“Excuse me?” I sneer.

“What?” he asks suddenly, playful demeanor gone.

“Did you just tell me that I’m cute?” I ask.

“I did. Is that a problem?” he asks, now obviously confused.

“Well, yeah, cos it’s not a compliment. Cute really means ugly but interesting,” I explain.

Sax looks at me with a blank expression for a moment. “Says who?”

“Says everyone,” I say animatedly.

“Okay. Name someone,” he says, a smirk now forming on his lips.

“Well, myself of course,” I say.

“Apparently. Anyone else?” he asks, his laugh starting to make a reappearance.

“Does there need to be other people?” I blurt out, when I can’t think of anyone else that shares my views.

“Well, no. But you said there was.”

“If someone else jumped off a bridge, would you?” I ask. Okay, I’m making no sense now.

Saxon makes a choking sound. “I’m pretty sure that saying doesn’t have any relevance to what we’re talking about,” he manages to get out.

“You’re probably right,” I admit, sighing heavily.

“Back to your initial comment, there will be no girls coming over, alright? Trust me it’s not an issue right now,” he says.

I lean towards him to give him a hug. “Thanks, Sax, I had no idea you were so awesome.”

“I had no idea you smelt like peaches,” he answers.

“Sax?”

“Yes, Sasha.”

“Either your nipples are pierced, or they are just really happy to see me.”

He bursts out in laughter.

James

She’s not answering her phone, and no one’s seen her. And I’ve called *everyone*. Jye is safe at Sasha’s mother’s house, but she’s nowhere to be found. Ryder is out of town so she’s not with him, otherwise that would be the first place I think she would have run to. I sit down on our bed and place my face in my palms. I need to fix this, and stat. The past is not going to repeat itself, I’m not going to let Sasha leave me without hearing me out first.

I rock up at Chase’s house to make sure Layla isn’t hiding her. Chase chuckles when I search all the rooms but I wouldn’t put it past Layla. I realise

coming here was a mistake when Layla starts demanding answers and wearing that 'worried' face of hers.

I head back home, feeling slightly defeated. Is she okay? I know Chase is an expert 'stalker' as I like to call it, but I don't wanna go all caveman on her. I usually save that for the bedroom. I leave the front light on, in case she decides to come home. I want tomorrow to come so I can sign the papers and get rid of Nancy once and for all. Then I can go and claim my woman.

Chapter Twenty

Sasha

“Why do men always cook breakfast shirtless? Is it because they like to live on the wild side or something?” I lower my voice in a ridiculous attempt to sound masculine. “Look at me I’m a man! I’m too manly to put on a shirt to avoid oil splashes!” I say sarcastically. Saxon shakes his head at me, and flips the bacon over.

“I hope you’re cooking a lot,” I say as I peer over his shoulder at the frying pan.

“I am, don’t worry. Sit down, Sasha,” he mock scolds me.

“Fine,” I say, ungracefully plopping down on the breakfast bar stool.

“How did you sleep?” he asks as he cracks an egg.

“Fine,” I say.

“I could hear you crying,” he says softly.

“That’s not very gentlemanly of you to mention that,” I point out.

“I’m not doing it to be mean, I just wanted to know if you uh, wanted to talk about it,” he mentions casually, with a slight shrug like it doesn’t bother him either way.

“Are you always this kind to weeping women,” I evade.

“Not always. Well, I mean, I’m trying to be a better person. Plus, you’re Ryder’s baby cousin. So you’re like family to me, too,” he says. He walks over and places a plate in front of me. Bacon, eggs, mushrooms, sausages and chilli sauce.

“Someone needs to husband you, stat,” I say, giving him a beaming smile.

“There it is,” he says.

“What?” I ask around a mouth of bacon.

“A smile,” he says as he sits next to me, taking a bite of his own food.

I moan around another bite and look over at Saxon. Tattoos, piercings, spiky brown hair - even first thing in the morning, the man is attractive I’m not gonna lie.

“What’s your story, Sax?” I ask him. I heard he used to date Lexi, or something like that.

“No story,” he says, eyeing me under his thick dark lashes.

“How’s Kidd?” I ask him.

“He’s good. He might drop by sometime this week if you’re still here,” he says.

“I have to go and pick up Jye today, I’ll need to go home and get my things. I’m not sure where I’ll end up staying tonight,” I grumble.

“Well, you’re always welcome to come here,” he offers kindly.

“Thanks, Sax,” I tell him honestly.

“Don’t thank me, it’s your cousin’s house,” he says, a smile playing on his lips.

“Yeah, but you lent me your awesome T-shirt to sleep in,” I remind him. It’s a Morning Alliance one. And I’m so not giving it back.

“Yes, you can keep it, Sasha,” Sax chuckles, his eyes twinkling.

“Did I ask you?” I’m pretty sure I didn’t.

“No, but I could see the look in your eyes.” He smirks as he say it.

“Oh,” I say, standing up and collecting my plate.

“Yes, oh. Don’t ever try and play poker,” he chuckles.

“I’ll try to remember that,” I say with an eye roll. “I’ll clean up.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he says. He’s so damn sweet!

“No way. Plus, it will give me something to do,” I tell him, grabbing his now empty plate as well. I clean up the entire kitchen, scrubbing things that are already clean. I wash and dry my clothes so I can wear them again, have a quick shower and then redress. I walk past Sax’s room and hear him playing The Script’s ‘Breakeven.’ He has such a beautiful voice, and I’ve never heard it before.

Sax plays the drums and sings back up for Ryder, but I’ve never heard him sing solo. The song makes my heart break. Is it for Lexi, is he not over her after all? Someone rings the door bell, jolting out of my thoughts. I quicken my pace, peeping through the peephole to see who it is.

It’s James. How did he find me?

I open the door and narrow my eyes at him.

“How did you find me?” I ask him, crossing my arms over my chest in defiance.

“We need to talk, baby,” he says, looking apologetic.

“Where’s your wife?” I bite back.

“I can explain,” he says, taking a step towards me.

“I’m sure you can, James. The thing is, you had a lot of time to explain, but

you didn't."

"I didn't want to hurt you," he tells me, his eyes pleading with mine. I almost want to forgive him with the look he's giving me.

"James, you're married," I say, stating the obvious.

"Sasha—"

"I've been living with and having sex with a married man. Oh my god, Jye is your secret love child!" I say in shock.

"Now you're just being dramatic," he says with a sigh, running his hands through his blond hair.

"You're married. I'll be as fucking dramatic as I want to be," I snap.

"It was a one night thing in Vegas! We hooked up, I was drunk. I haven't even seen her since then," he explains quickly, probably before I can cut him off again.

"And why didn't you divorce her straight away?" I ask him. The question of the hour.

"I didn't even remember marrying her until Chase told me I rang him, inviting him to the wedding. Apparently by the time he came it was too late. I left Vegas, and just pretended it never happened. It didn't affect me, I never saw her, and I completely forgot about it. Until you came back into my life, and then I told her to sign the papers straight away."

"Why is she here?" I ask tonelessly.

"She wants money," he growls.

"You sure know how to pick them, James," I say dryly.

"Is everything okay, Sasha?" I hear Sax say from behind me. I turn around to stare at him, wearing nothing but a pair of low slung jeans. Couldn't he put a shirt on? My eyes roam over his chest, noticing he does indeed have his nipples pierced. And more tattoos.

"I had no idea you weren't alone," James says quietly in a deathly tone. I turn back towards him to see his posture rigid and his jaw tensed. His blue eyes are as dark as I've ever seen them.

"Sax is staying here until Ryder gets back," I explain.

"Come on, I'm taking you home," James demands.

"She can stay here if she wants," Sax offers calmly.

"This has nothing to do with you," James snaps at Sax, his fists now clenched by his sides.

“Really? Because it was me that stayed up all night listening to her cry herself to sleep,” Sax replies.

“Sax!” I hiss. Didn’t he remember the gentleman conversation? I know Sax has scored a hit because James looks crestfallen. I see his adam’s apple work as he swallows, and looks down for a moment.

“Fine. Let’s just go and pick up Jye,” I relent inelegantly. James exhales in relief, and squeezes his eyes shut for a second. I turn around and give Sax a peck on the cheek.

“Thanks, Sax,” I tell him.

He nods. “Remember you can always come here, okay?”

I smile and give him a hug. He’s been so good to me. I walk out the door and past a fuming James, ignoring the death stares he’s sending Sax’s way.

The drive to my mother’s house is tense and unfamiliar. James tries to take my hand into his, but I pull it away. I don’t want to hurt him, but he’s freaking married. I just can’t get over that, no matter how or why it happened. By law, he doesn’t belong to me. I run in and pick up Jye, politely refusing my mother’s several offers of food and drinks. When Jye is safe and buckled in his car seat we drive home, only talking to Jye, not each other.

“I’ll drop you two home, then I’m going to meet with my lawyer. I’ll sort this all out, okay.” He promises.

I stay silent.

Chapter Twenty-One

James

Chase meets me at my lawyer's office, bringing his own lawyer with him.

"Don't fucking pay her off, James," he demands again, not for the first time.

I just want her to go away. If I don't sort this out ASAP I might lose Sasha, and that's not worth any price. We sit there for an hour, waiting. I'm on the verge of a full-blown panic attack when she finally saunters in, as if she has all the time in the world. The lawyers hand me the forms I need to sign. I can't sign them fast enough. Apparently because I was intoxicated and we didn't have sex after we got married, I can get an annulment. We had sex once before the wedding, but that's a whole different story.

"James, you can go, I'll handle the rest," Chase informs me. The glacial look in his eyes makes me almost feel sorry for Nancy. Almost.

"Call me when it's done, alright. I need to go and make things right with Sasha," I tell him.

"I'll call you the second it's all done," he says, slapping me on my back. I drive home, thinking about what I'm going to say to Sasha, how I'm going to convince her to forgive me.

She has to.

Sasha

"Don't you think you're a little old to still have this One Direction obsession?" I ask Layla. I'm sitting at her kitchen table, watching her as she cooks up some typical Sri Lankan food. It smells good.

"I have no idea what obsession you're talking about," Layla says, keeping a straight face. Her hair is in a high ponytail, and she looks beautiful in a simple floral dress. Chase is a lucky man, and he better not forget it.

"I saw Zayn as your phone background, Layla," I announce dryly.

"Oh, fine. Come on, admit it. He's freaking hot!" she says animatedly.

We laugh, and she turns off the stove, facing me.

"You wanna talk about it?" she asks, her expression concerned.

"What's there to talk about? He's married. He lied about it. My life sucks," I complain. Layla shoots me a sympathetic look before walking over to Cole and Jye and placing a bowl of cut up fruit in front of them. They're both sitting at

Cole's small table playing with toys.

"I can't believe Chase didn't tell me," she says with a scowl. Her wide brown eyes narrow for a moment, and I see a flash in them that I don't like.

"Don't get mad at him over this," I plead. I really don't want my drama leaking into everyone else's lives.

"I know, but still. You're my cousin, Sasha, my blood. I never wanna see you hurt," she says softly. I huff out a weary sigh, and take a chocolate dipped strawberry from the plate in front of me.

"You can always stay here with us, you know," she reminds me.

"I know. Hey, you know who's hot?" I ask randomly.

"Besides Chase and Zayn?" she asks playfully.

"Well, yes," I say dryly.

"Who?" she asks, like it never crossed her mind there was anyone else out there besides those two.

"Saxon."

"Morning Alliance Saxon?"

"Yeah, don't you think?" I ask, my nose scrunched up.

"Well, yeah, but he cheated on Lexi, and you know what they say. Once a cheater..." she trails off.

"Hey, everyone deserves a second chance," I tell her, snapping my mouth shut when I realise what I said.

"Do they?" Layla asks, her eyes twinkling.

"Totally different circumstances," I say, slightly defensive.

"True, but James would never cheat on you," Layla says.

"Silver lining. Are you the leader of the James fan club, or something?" I ask in a dry tone.

"He's a goner for you, Sasha. So he got a little *married*," she cringes when she says married and my shoulders shake with laughter.

"There's no defending that, no matter how much you try, Layla," I say around another bite of strawberry.

"This is some Jerry Springer shit," she mumbles.

"Truth."

"When does Ryder get back?" she asks after a few moments of comfortable silence.

"In two weeks. I told Sax not to tell him anything, I don't want to ruin his

holiday with Lexi,” I say. There’s a knock on the door and Layla goes to open it.

“Do you want a drink, Jye?” I ask him. He nods yes.

“How about you, Cole?”

“Yes please,” he says. I get up and take out two juice boxes from the fridge, opening both before placing them in front of them.

“There you are,” Kade says as he walks in and sees me.

“What do you mean, there I am?”

“James just went home and you weren’t there, so he’s going nuts,” Kade says, his eyes widening when he sees the chocolate strawberries.

“Looks like I arrived just in time,” he says with his trademark smirk.

“You better call him,” Layla says.

“Is he still married?” I ask Kade. He cringes but nods.

“Then I have nothing to say to him,” I say bitterly.

“If James is done, then where’s Chase?” Layla asks Kade. He eyes me for a second before answering her.

“Chase stayed back with the lawyers to sort it out. James wanted to go to Sasha.” Kade’s phone rings and he answers with, “Yes, she’s here at Layla’s. Bye.” He hangs up. I groan and palm my face.

“He forgave you, Sasha. Remember that,” Kade says casually, but the look in his eyes is anything but.

“He’s married,” I say, enunciating each word.

“Yes, I get that, but you gave birth to his child and never told him. I’d consider that even,” he snickers. I consider punching him.

“Kade, forget he’s your brother for a moment,” I say.

“Yeah, he’s an ass,” he says after thinking it over for a second.

I throw my hands up in a ‘finally’ gesture. Kade walks over to me and kisses me on the cheek.

“Wanna get drunk?” he asks.

“Yes,” I sulk.

“You two go ahead, I’ll watch Jye,” Layla says. I swear, the woman is a regular Martha Stewart.

“You know you want to,” Kade says, wiggling his eyebrows.

“Won’t James be here soon?” I ask him, suddenly suspicious.

“He will,” he agrees with a slight nod of his head.

I stand up.

“Can I ask you something?” I ask Kade.

“Of course you can. Doesn’t mean I’m gonna answer,” he smirks.

“Are you always this annoying?” I huff.

“Is that your question?” he asks with a raised eyebrow. His hair is growing longer again and I’m glad cos he’s sexier that way.

“Do I only get one question?”

“Did you just check me out?” he counters.

“I did,” I admit, downing my shot. I believe this one was called a squashed frog.

Kade sips his beer, his shoulders shaking with laughter. Does this man do anything except laugh?

“Are you gonna ask me or what?” he says as he signals for another two drinks.

“Oh, right. Why did you take me here? It looked like you wanted to kill me then all of a sudden you changed your mind and were on my side,” I ask bluntly.

He thinks it over for a bit, gathering his thoughts before answering. “You were right. I wasn’t looking at it from your point of view, only from my baby brother’s. I had Layla’s back when shit went down, now I’m gonna be here for you. James is one of my favourite people in the world, and he’s probably fuming mad right now, but he’ll deal. And you two will make up,” he says with confidence.

“What bar is this? I’ve never heard of it,” I say, looking around. It’s definitely not a place I’d frequent. I’m tempted to pull out the small hand sanitizer I carry around in my bag.

Kade smiles, almost proudly. “I love this place,” is his vague answer. I see a woman walk past wearing a bikini and short shorts.

“I’ll bet you do,” I mutter. Kade sends a message on his phone, before turning to look at me.

“You wanna play some pool?” he asks, ignoring my comment.

“Sure,” I say, standing up and wobbling a little.

“You look like Bambi trying to walk for the first time,” he says, shaking his head at me.

“Hey! I hardly ever drink, you know,” I say defensively. Kade captures me

by the arm and walks with me to the only available table. I break, and don't sink anything. Kade rubs the back of his neck with his hand, and then cracks his neck.

"That's gross," I say.

"You have bigger issues right now. Like your embarrassing pool skills," he says.

"You're probably right," I say seriously.

"Hey, man," a guy says as he walks over to Kade. They do a fancy looking handshake that I have no idea how they remember.

"Who's the hot chick?" random guy asks.

"My sister-in-law," I hear Kade tell him. The comment makes me scoff.

"I'm pretty sure your sister in law is some hag named Nancy," I say as I bend over to shoot my next shot.

"Sasha," Kade snaps. The man eyes me for a moment, not being subtle in the least.

"So, are you taken, or not?" he asks me, licking his lips.

"She's taken alright," comes a quiet voice laced with menace.

I stare at James, who is fuming, and then turn to Kade.

"You didn't," I say accusingly. Kade just shrugs and gives me a shit-eating grin.

"Can't trust any Steeles it seems," I snap. Kade's grin instantly fades, but at this moment, I don't even care. James is still staring the guy down, and I'm able to check out his handsome profile. He really is sexy.

"What a shame," I think out loud. James and Kade have some sort of communication with their eyes, and then Kade nods.

"Sasha, let's go home, baby," James says, his eyes softening. I put my cue away and head out of the bar. James puts his hand on the small of my back, in a possessive gesture. It kind of pisses me off.

"So, where's Jye's evil stepmother?" I ask, my voice spiked with sarcasm, as I slide into James' car. Kade decided to stay at the bar.

"Sasha, that's enough," James demands, slamming his hands down on the steering wheel in frustration.

I make a sound of disgust.

"I'm sorry, I'm so fucking sorry, okay?" he says softly, his voice full of hurt and regret. We drive to Layla's and pick up Jye before heading home.

"I'll give Jye his dinner and a bath. You go have a shower and then we'll

talk,” he decides. I roll my eyes at being told what to do but then a shower and bed does sound really good right now. I hug and kiss Jye and then head for a long, scalding hot shower. The ride home sobered me right up, and now I just feel agitated. I dress in my least sexy pajamas, flannel with cupcakes on them, and go to check on Jye. He's freshly bathed and in his own pajamas.

“Did he eat?” I ask James.

“Yes, I made him a sandwich,” James says, his expression not giving away his mood.

I read Jye a book in his bed until he falls asleep.

Time to face James.

James

I watch as Sasha walks out of Jye's room and plops down ungracefully onto the chair. Her eyes are slightly red, they get like that after she has a few drinks.

“Will you listen to what I have to say?” I ask gently. She nods, her wide brown eyes locked with mine.

“I messed up. I just didn't want to hurt you, Sasha. I know I've only made it worse now, but fuck. I couldn't let you run again. I won't let you run again. I want us to be a family more than anything, and I promise you I'll never let you down again. I'm willing to do anything to build the trust back between us. I'll put in so much effort to fix this. Just give me a chance, please, that's all I'm asking for. One chance.”

I watch as different emotions flicker in her eyes.

Pain.

Hurt.

Regret.

I never want to see her upset again. Her pink lips are slightly pouted, and I want nothing more than to kiss her, to erase the last few days. When she says nothing, I can't take it anymore. I walk over to her and push her long thick hair onto one side of her neck. With the tip of my index finger I lift her chin up and stare into soulful brown eyes.

“I love you so much. I want you in my life, Sasha. Now that I know what it feels like to have you here, I can't go back to being without you. You know I'll never take you for granted and I'll always treat you like the princess you are. We're perfect together, please don't give up on me,” I whisper. I'm begging and I don't even care. I will get down on my knees if I have too. I guess it's true, love

has no pride.

Sasha exhales, her shoulders drooping as she leans her head on my chest. I cradle her head to my chest, closing my eyes and savouring the feel of her touch.

“Let’s go to bed, James,” she finally says, putting me out of my misery. She stands and I take the opportunity to taste her lips in a soft kiss. She doesn’t respond but she doesn’t push me away either. She wants me, but doesn’t want to. It hurts that she feels like that, but I can fix it. I know I can.

We lay next to each other, only slightly touching.

“Are you still married?” she whispers.

“Just need a few days for the annulment to go through. It’s getting taken care of, don’t worry, okay?” I tell her, hoping I’m saying the right words. I shuffle closer to her and take her into my arms. I kiss her on her forehead, breathe in her scent, so fucking happy she’s home where she belongs.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Two weeks later

Sasha

Work drags by slowly. I know it's not helping staring at the clock every five minutes, but I can't seem to help myself. Finally five thirty arrives and I can't get out of there soon enough. I sing along to Incubus 'Love Hurts' on the drive home, probably more loudly than I should be. When I get home Jye is sitting on the floor playing with his toys. I scoop him up in my arms, and place kisses all over his face. He giggles and happy coos, "Mama."

"How was your day, baby?" I ask him. I see James watching us interact out of the corner of my eye, and I hesitantly look his way.

"How was work?" he asks me, his tone careful and deliberate. I sit Jye on my hip, and his chubby hands grip onto my arm.

"It was okay. The usual," I tell him.

"You know you don't have to work," he tells me. He's said this many times before. He has enough money, so I don't need to work. The thing is I only work part time, and I want to have my own money.

"I know, James," I respond. He knows how I feel about it, so I don't elaborate.

"Can we go out for dinner?" he asks me. He stands with his hands resting on the table, dressed in fitted, worn jeans and a white shirt. He's playing with his lip ring, blue eyes unwavering.

To say things have been slightly strained between James and me would be an understatement. I'd like to think they're slowly getting better, but I'm not so sure. His annulment was finalised but the damage it caused was still lingering.

"Actually, I'm kind of tired," I tell him honestly.

"Okay, I'll order in," he instantly says.

I walk past him and into Jye's room. We play for a little while and I read him a few books. I always make sure to spend time with him on the days I'm at work, since I don't get to see him all day.

The food arrives and we all eat together, making small talk. After Jye goes to bed, I have a shower, get dressed and then read in bed while James watches TV next to me. I know this was the wrong book to pick when a sex scene piques my interest. James and I haven't had sex in awhile. A soft moan escapes my lips, and I cringe, hoping he didn't notice.

“What are you reading?” he suddenly asks, his voice a deep rumble.

I clear my throat. “Just a romance,” I evade. One minute my Kindle is in my hands, the next James has it. I see his eyes quickly read the scene and I want to die of embarrassment. James' eyes widen, and his lips curve into a knowing smile. The atmosphere in the room changes, the air getting thick. He places the Kindle down on the side table and then stands up, lifting his top off in one swift move. I eye his rippled chest, the hard curve of his torso, and finally the deep indentured V. The man is a god.

“Clothes off, Sasha. Now,” he demands. He removes his own pants, standing there in all his glory as I undress. He kneels on the bed, and starts to stroke himself. It's then I know that he's re-enacting the scene that I was just reading. Heat pools in my lower belly, as I wait for his next command.

“Lie down on your stomach, Sasha.” I lie down and hear him open and close a drawer.

“Put your hands above your head,” he orders, and I instantly comply. He takes my wrists and binds them together with what feels like my stockings.

“Good girl,” he praises, just as the male lead did in the book.

Then he makes my fantasy come true.

James

I had no idea Sasha would be into anything like that, but it was so fucking sexy. Now that I know that she's into this stuff, I have plans for her, boy, do I have plans. We made love slowly afterwards, and I hope I showed her through my body how much I love and adore her. We're now cuddled together, and I'm enjoying the feel of her skin against mine. It was a long few weeks that I didn't have this, and I missed it. Not just the sex, but the connection.

“I missed you,” I tell her.

“I missed you too, James,” she says with a content sigh.

“You were so sexy tonight,” I say, chuckling.

She rolls her eyes.

“And greedy. My pretty girl was so greedy,” I say, amused.

“It was a long few weeks,” she agrees dryly.

“It was. Let's not let that happen again. The distance between us, I don't wanna do that again, Sasha,” I tell her, nuzzling the hollow of her neck. My hand roams down her body, cupping and kneading her ass.

“Again?” she asks breathily, as she feels me harden.

“Apparently I have some time to make up for,” I say huskily. I’m already thinking about what I want to do to her this time. Different scenarios race through my head.

I claim her lips with my own, swiping my tongue across hers. Then I flip her over and pin her down.

Time to play out my own fantasy for the night.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Sasha

I open the front door, and start screaming when I see who it is. I wrap my arms around him and squeeze. Hard.

"I can't believe you're actually here," I tell him, bouncing on my feet in excitement.

"I had to come and see my two favourite people," Trey says with a grin. He looks handsome, wearing faded jeans and a black sweater. His hazel eyes are shining and his hair is styled messily, longer in the front and shorter in the back. I jump up again and kiss him on the cheek.

"Sasha, who is this?" James demands from behind me. I roll my eyes as Trey puts his arm around me possessively, I'm sure just to annoy James.

"This is Trey, my cousin," I say proudly. James' eyes widen with realisation and he steps forward to shake Trey's hand. Trey is slightly hesitant so I give him an inconspicuous nudge.

"Where's Jye?" Trey asks when we're seated in the living room.

"He's napping. Are you staying here with me?" I ask, hoping that he is.

Trey stares at James for a second before returning to me. "No, I'm staying with Ryder."

I can see how that would be a million times more fun for him, but still. "How long are you in Perth for?"

"A month, but we'll see how it goes," he says.

"Who's taking care of the bar?"

"Landon is," he says with a grin. Landon is Trey's best friend, and a total dreamboat.

"Can I get you something to drink or eat?" I ask him.

"I'm fine, Sash. I came here from Ryder's house. I met Saxon and we hung out for a bit, got some food and stuff. He seems real nice," he says.

"He is nice," I say, my lips curving.

Trey stands up. "Okay, I can't wait any longer, I wanna see him," he says impatiently. I laugh. We walk into Jye's room, and I feel the emotion pouring off Trey. He really loves my son. Truly.

"He's gotten so big. I've missed so much," he says softly, his eyes on Jye's slight form. I reach my arm out and squeeze his bicep. I notice when Trey's eyes

land on the framed photo of the two of them together. He smiles, pleased that I kept this where Jye can see.

“You didn’t think I’d let him forget you, did I? The first man that was always there for him?” I say quietly.

“You did say you would brainwash him into remembering me,” he says, giving me a crooked smile. Jye’s eyes suddenly pop open, and he instantly sits up.

“Mama,” he says with a smile, his gaze then darting to Trey. His whole face instantly lights up as he quickly gets out of bed and runs towards us. Trey lifts him into his arms and they both embrace each other. I notice James standing at the door, watching intently. He doesn’t seem upset or mad, but he doesn’t seem happy either. I have no idea what’s going through his head right now. I leave Trey and Jye alone as Jye starts showing off all his toys to Trey. I take James’ hand in mine and we walk into the kitchen together. I start to make us all coffee.

“You okay?” I ask him when he says nothing.

“He really loves your cousin,” he says, staring out the window.

“He does. He loves you too, though,” I quickly amend, not wanting him to be upset.

“I know he does. I’m glad Trey was there for the two of you,” he says, and he leaves it at that. I know there are more emotions inside him on the matter, but he says nothing else and I don’t pry.

I pour three coffees, not able to stop the smile on my face. Trey is here, life couldn’t get any better right now. I see James’ body relax, a faint smile playing on his lips. “My woman and son are both happy right now, and I couldn’t ask for more,” he says.

Even if he wasn’t the one giving it.

“I can only imagine what Trey is going to get up to with Sax and the rest of them,” I tell him, shaking my head.

“I can imagine,” James mutters under his breath, causing me to throw an apple at his head.

“Hey what was that for?” he asks, his eyebrows furrowed.

“Oh, please. I heard about you, Mr. Sleeps-with-anything-with-a-pulse. I bet you can imagine, because you’ve already done it!” I tell him, my eyes narrowed.

“Hey, we weren’t together! And you dated a lot, too, don’t even deny it,” he growls back.

“Yes I *dated*, that doesn’t mean I slept with everyone,” I say dryly.

“How many men did you sleep with?” he asks in a hushed tone, so no one but me can hear.

“I don’t think that’s-”

“Don’t you even try to tell me it’s none of my business, Sasha Steele,” he says heatedly.

Silence.

“Is it just me or does Sasha Steele sound like a porn star's name?” I think aloud. James’ eyebrows hit his hairline at that comment.

“What? It does,” I shrug.

“How do you know what porn star names sound like?” he asks curiously.

“I’ve watched porn before, you know,” I scoff. James’ eyes widen, then an intrigued look passes over his face. Pervert.

“So, how many men?” he repeats.

“How many women?” I throw back at him.

Silence.

Stalemate.

Trey and Jye walk out, ending our standoff.

“Hey, Sash, how about we all go out to the park?” Trey asks.

“Sounds good.”

I open the door to Ryder’s house, frowning when I realise its unlocked. I didn’t see Trey yesterday, so I thought I’d drop in and say hello. I walk in and hear music pumping. I suddenly don’t think this was such a good idea after all. I prove my theory right when I see Trey sitting on the couch, a woman in his lap, straddling him. Luckily they are fully clothed, but still.

“Ewww,” I say childishly. I can’t help it, Trey is my family and I don’t wanna see this right now.

Trey’s hazel eyes immediately find me and he gently pushes the girl off, visibly cringing before he addresses me.

“Who’s this?” the girl sneers.

“Sasha, you could have called, you know. A warning maybe next time?” he complains.

“I didn’t know this was turning into Trey’s den of debauchery,” I say with my hands on my hips.

He whispers something to the girl and she walks away, to Treys room, I assume, shooting me a nasty look as she walks by.

“She’s charming,” I say sarcastically.

“You don’t like any of my girlfriends,” he points out.

“You’ve been here three days. I doubt she’s your girlfriend,” I say.

“Not the point.”

“I’m pretty sure it is,” I say.

“You wanna hang out?” he asks, changing the subject.

“I did. At least now I know not to bring Jye here,” I mutter.

“What? No. Jye can come here, just let me know when you’re coming,” he instantly says, looking worried.

“Trey, you can just come to my place to see him or pick him up, it’s no big deal,” I assure him.

“Sash-”

“When does Ryder get back?” I ask, changing the subject.

“Today. We’re gonna pick him up at the airport at six,” he says.

“Awesome. Where’s Sax?” I ask.

Sax chooses that moment to walk down the stairs. He’s wearing a pair of navy blue shorts, and that’s pretty much it.

“Do you ever wear a shirt?” I ask him, ogling his nipple rings.

“You complaining?” he asks.

“Nope,” I say popping the P.

Sax laughs.

Trey frowns.

“What do we owe the visit?” Sax asks as he hands me a can of passion fruit soda. I eye the can warily. It used to be my favourite drink until I spilled it on my laptop and broke the keyboard. It became sticky and the keys wouldn’t work. I’ve been holding a grudge ever since.

“It’s not the drink’s fault, Sasha” Trey chuckles. Oh shit, I forgot I told him about that. Sax looks at me like I’m crazy. Which I possibly am.

“So, I think we should have a family event, for everyone to come and see Trey. Maybe next week,” I announce. I also haven’t seen Jet in a long time. I feel bad, I’m not as close to him as I am to my other cousins. I should really make more of an effort. I haven’t seen Uncle Finn in ages either.

“You gonna have it here?” Trey asks.

“Sure. Ryder won’t mind,” I beam. Ryder adores me.

Trey glances at Sax for affirmation. Sax nods. “Ryder won’t say no to Sasha.”

I give them my mega-watt smile.

“You’re such a brat,” Trey says, sipping on his drink.

“You love me.”

“Unfortunately, I do,” he grumbles. I kiss him on the cheek, and then do the same to Saxon.

“You better go attend your... plaything,” I tell Trey. Saxon laughs, walking over to wrap his arms around me.

“Your cousin has needs, just like everyone else,” he advises.

“Too much information,” I scoff.

“The women here love my accent, too,” Trey adds, wearing a shit-eating grin.

“Of course they do,” I deadpan.

“Aussie women are hot. You never told me that,” he chastises.

I rub my forehead. “Right. I must have forgotten. Just make sure you wrap up your willy, Trey.”

I walk out to the sound of their thundering laughter.

Chapter Twenty-Four

James

I get home from my new job as business manager for one of Chase's new companies, grinding my teeth when I see Tatiana's cop car parked in my driveway. I have no idea why she'd be here, but luckily Sasha's not home. She'd probably be getting arrested right now if she was. She gets out of her car when she sees me, shutting the door behind her.

"What are you doing here, Tatiana?" I ask her.

"Just need to talk with you about The Safe House. Will only take a second James, okay?"

I nod and unlock the front door. We walk inside and I tell her to sit at the dining table where we can discuss things.

"What's the problem? You could have called me, you know," I tell her. She suddenly stands up to take off her jacket. She drops it to the floor.

She is wearing nothing underneath.

Nothing.

I can't help it when my gaze roams over the familiar curve of her breast, but it's more shock than anything else. I don't feel anything when I stare at Tatiana. There's no want, no need. I only want Sasha, and that's never going to change.

I turn around and clear my throat.

"Get dressed. You need to leave, now." I demand, my voice brokering no argument.

"James," she purrs, and the sound grates on my nerves.

"Now!" I yell, my fingers clenching into fists. If Sasha walked in right now, there would be no second chance for me. The thought makes me panic.

"Leave. Don't ever come back, Tatiana," I say in a lethal tone when she tries to talk to me again.

"Your loss," she hisses.

She finally leaves, shutting the door behind her, and I lean onto the wall for support, relief taking over my body.

Twenty minutes later, Sasha comes home. Talk about a fucking close call.

"Hey," she says as she sees me, walking over and giving me a kiss. I grip her hips with my palms and pull her closer to me.

"Hey, you look beautiful," I tell her. And she does. Tight jeans, showing off

the roundness of her ass and a tight black t-shirt.

“Thank you,” she says coyly.

“Where were you?”

“Stopped off at Ryder’s to see Trey,” she says. I can tell she wants me when her eyes linger on my mouth.

“Listen, Tatiana stopped by-”

“What did she want?” she asks, her attitude changing. I love the flush that turns her cheeks when she gets mad.

“Well, I guess she wanted me, but-”

“What the hell does that mean?” she fires.

“She may have tried to seduce me,” I explain sheepishly. “I told her to leave and never come back. It won’t happen again,” I tell her, my eyes and tone conveying that I’ll make sure it doesn’t.

“I can’t even leave you alone for a minute,” she says, crossing her arms against her chest. The motion draws my gaze to her plumped breasts. I always thought they were the perfect size, a little over a handful.

“Eyes up here, buddy.” She laughs, making the objects of my attention jiggle. In one swift move I lift her up and over my shoulder, ignoring her squeal of surprise. I head to our bedroom and throw her down on it, instantly covering my body with hers. I kiss her greedily, my tongue delving into her mouth, swiping at hers. I clasp our hands together, intertwining our fingers. I raise them above her head, pressing them into the bed as I move my mouth from her lips to the curve of her jaw.

“James?” she says my name huskily, her voice raspy with pleasure.

“Yeah.”

“Fuck me,” she begs.

Soft and pliant in my arms, Sasha offers me a lazy, sated smile. I am so head over heels for this woman, it’s almost embarrassing. I brush a stray lock of inky black hair from her face, leaning forward to kiss her on the temple. Sasha is so precious. And all mine. I can’t suppress the sappy grin that I know is plastered on my face.

“James?”

“Yes, beautiful?”

“You needa pick up Jye from daycare,” she says. I glance over at the clock, and what do you know, I have twenty minutes to get there. I jump in the shower

first, cos I figure smelling like sex would be inappropriate, and head off to go and pick up Jye.

I stop at the park on the way home, so Jye and I can have an hour or so of playing time together. He looks so adorable in his superman t-shirt, dark jeans and Converse. I push him on the swings, delighting in his chuckles and squeals of pleasure. When he's had enough of them, I lift him in the air so his face is level with mine. His eyes, so like my own stare back at me. I kiss him on the nose and then take him to the slide.

"Weeee," he shouts as he slides down, and I chuckle, pulling out my camera to record the moment. Yes, I am now one of those parents.

On our drive home, I see him. I recognise him instantly. He walks with a quick pace to his car, looking around suspiciously before he gets in. I memorize the licence plate. I know in that instant, I need to get home.

Right now.

I drive there as quickly as I can, unbuckling Jye and taking him in my arms. I unlock the front door and as soon as it's open, I run into our bedroom. I stand still when I see her lying in bed. Covered by red sheets, she lies there. Asleep. Perfectly fine. I put Jye down and drop to my knees next to the bed. I sigh in relief as I take her in, unhurt and safe.

Was it him I saw? One of the three men who put me in hospital that day? I make Jye something to eat, and then call my police contacts. Not Tatiana, like I usually would, but another officer. I need to know if this man is locked up, or if he was indeed in my neighbourhood, possibly seeking revenge or still looking for his wife.

I won't let anything or anyone put my family in jeopardy.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Sasha

“Did you miss me?” I ask Ryder, unable to contain my smile.

“Of course I did,” he says, pulling me into his arms for a warm hug.

“You’re not gonna lecture me, are you?” I ask him, wide eyed.

Ryder chuckles. “No, I’m not.”

“Holy shit, you’re a lucky man,” I exclaim as I see Lexi walk down the stairs in a red bikini.

Ryder looks over to where I’m staring. “Yes, I am,” he says, his voice now low.

“Isn’t Trey awesome?” I say with a wide smile.

“He is. I love having him here,” Ryder says, his eyes still on Lexi. Trey and Ryder haven’t seen each other since they were kids, but have hit it off like they were never apart. It’s like that in our family. I can’t really explain it, but the bond is always there.

“You two need a room,” I scoff.

“We’re doing the polite thing by waiting until you leave,” Ryder says, wiggling his eyebrows at me. Lexi walks over, rolling her eyes at Ryder, and embracing me in a hug.

“Long time no see, Sasha,” she says. Her honey colored hair is even longer, now reaching her hips in wisps and curls.

“I know, I missed you guys,” I tell them honestly, taking a sip from my bottle of water. I sit back down on the black leather couch, and motion for Lexi to join me by tapping on it.

“Aren’t you coming swimming? You can borrow a swimsuit,” she asks.

“Yeah, okay. Why not?” I tell her. We get upstairs and she gives me a yellow bikini. I get changed and walk out, tying my hair into a messy bun.

“Where did Trey take Jye?” Lexi asks.

“Out for lunch and to the park.”

“Trey adores him so much, he’s been talking about Jye non-stop,” Lexi tells me.

“I know. He was there from day one. They have a bond.” I look around Lexi and Ryder’s room. The walls are red and black, with beautiful art pieces hanging on the walls. The room is massive, and has the comfiest looking circular

chair in the corner that would be perfect for curling up with a book.

“Shall we?” Lexi asks.

“We shall,” I say, entwining my arm with hers. We head out to the pool, where Sax is lying on a hammock, drinking what looks like a long island ice tea, like he is on some tropical resort.

“Hey, Sax!” I call out. He lifts his drink up in greeting, doing a double take when he takes in my bikini. I laugh as I walk down the steps and into the pool, diving in completely when I’m knee deep. When I resurface, I see Jet walk out. He’s wearing nothing but a pair of blue board shorts.

“Hey, Jet!” I call out to him. He looks a little different. More muscular, definitely. Must be hitting the gym, and it’s paying off. And he has a tattoo on his chest that I’m sure wasn’t there before.

“Hey, cuz,” he says with a welcoming smile. I’ve never seen Jet in a bad mood. He usually has a smile on his face, and a ‘life is good’ demeanour. Considering the family drama that lives with him every day, I’m so very proud of him, and his outlook on life. I do two laps of the pool and then hop out, taking a seat on one of the lay-out chairs next to Jet.

“How have you been?” I ask him.

“Good. How are you and your little man doing?” he asks as he opens a can of beer and takes a sip.

“He’s good. Went out with Trey for a play date,” I grin. He hands the can over to me, offering me a sip. I shrug, and down a mouthful, then choke. Yeah, not so good.

“You should see your face,” he chuckles. I see Lexi and Ryder making out in a hammock.

“This place is like a holiday resort,” I say.

“Yep, and this isn’t even a party. This is just us hanging out,” he says with a smirk. When he talks, I see a shiny piece of metal in his mouth.

“Jet Lachlan Crawford, when did you get your tongue pierced?” I ask him.

He blasts me with a charming grin. “A couple months ago.”

“What’s it for?” I ask him, needling him.

“What do you mean, what’s it for?” he asks me.

“Did you get it so you can, you know...” I trail off.

“Sasha, you’re my big cousin. Please tell me you’re not asking what I think you are,” he deadpans.

“Fine,” I pout. I see James walk in. He said he was gonna drop by after he

finished some work he had to do. He's been a little stressed these last two days, and I have no idea why, but as he walks up to me he looks like he doesn't have a care in the world. He's smiling at me, although I see his eyes narrow when he takes in my barely there bikini. He removes his shirt as he walks by the pool, leaving him in a pair of low riding shorts. The top of the V of his hips can be seen, and I bite my lip, wanting to see more.

"Hey there, pretty girl," he says, kissing me on the lips once before taking the seat next to me.

"James, you know my cousin Jet?" I ask him, not knowing if the two of them have met.

Jet chuckles. "Of course we know each other. From Steele," he says, doing a hand shake with James. Oh right. Jet used to play at Steele, how did I forget?

"Trey still out with Jye?" James asks. I nod. He takes his hand and interlaces it with mine, relaxing into the chair and enjoying the sun. Jet excuses himself, and heads inside. Probably grateful he was saved from our conversation.

"You know how fucking sexy you look right now?" he says in a low tone.

I stretch my body out lazily, seductively pushing my chest out.

"Sasha," he growls.

"Wanna swim?" I ask him. A mischievous look appears on his face as he quickly stands and pulls me into his arms. He kisses me again, his tongue tasting mine with one swipe before he lifts me in the air and throws me into the pool. I lift my head above the water to see James jump in himself, splashing the water into my face.

"Sasha, I don't think you left any water in the pool," Sax calls out, laughing. Very funny. Then I notice my bikini top has fallen off, and is floating in the water.

"Shit," I curse, cupping my breasts with my hands. I slowly start making my way towards the top, trying to be inconspicuous. James looks at me, and I point to my top. His eyes almost bulge out of his head as he quickly grabs it and puts it back on me, using his back to block the view from the others.

"This is your fault," I remind him when I see the look on his face.

"You're lucky you're so damn beautiful, because you're a real pain in the ass, Sasha Steele," he says, leaning his forehead against mine.

"Sasha Steele sounds like a porn star's name!" Sax calls out.

I scowl at James, who just laughs and says, "You can be a porn star in our bedroom."

Perve.

Chapter Twenty-Six

James

I feel like a weight has been lifted off me. The man I saw was indeed the same man, apparently he was on the run after skipping his court hearing. This morning he was caught and now he's behind bars. Maybe he was looking for me, I don't know. For whatever reason he didn't try to come inside my house, and I am so fucking thankful I could jump in the air. I have nothing to worry about now, except getting a ring on my beautiful fiancé, and making her my wife.

Sasha Steele. I can't fucking wait. I walk into the kitchen and shake my head at her when I see what she's making.

"I can't believe you still eat that!" I exclaim.

"What? It's good," she says, pouring ketchup on it. When I first met Sasha she used to eat this all the time. A bread roll with hot chips and ketchup inside it. She takes a huge bite and vocalises her delight. I see her make a mini version of her own meal.

"Jye eats it, too?" I ask.

"He loves it," she says, her tone implying 'who the hell wouldn't'.

"Could be worse, I guess." I smirk, thinking of her favourite pizza.

"My pizza is awesome," she says defensively, knowing exactly what I was thinking about.

"Plain cheese and jalapenos is not a pizza," I recite. I've said this a million times.

"Is too," she replies in a sing-song tone.

My woman is so adorable.

"Want a bite?" she asks.

"No, thank you," I say, shuddering at the thought.

"Too good for my sandwich, are you?" she teases, one of her finely arched eyebrows lifting up.

"Now that you mention it..."

"This is quality cuisine!" she defends, poking her tongue out at me. A lock of hair falls on her face and she blows it away.

I lick my lips exaggeratedly. "I know all about quality cuisine," I insinuate. A flush appears on her cheeks.

I fucking love this woman.

Sasha

This night couldn't get any better. Kade, Nikki, Chase, Layla, Jet, Trey, Ryder, Lexi, Tee and Sax all out at the pub with James and me, having beers, chatting, playing pool and just enjoying life. I watch Trey, Ryder and Jet laugh together, and my heart melts. Also, my cousins are a pretty damn good looking bunch, if I do say so myself.

I gasp out loud when I notice Sax checking out Tee, who is not even looking his way. Knowing Tee, Sax is instantly off limits because of his past with Lexi. What a shame. They would be kinda cute together. Sax has a good sense of humour, and he'd definitely need that to be with my cousin. He'd also need a huge pair of balls.

"What you thinking about?" James whispers into my ear. Goosebumps appear on my flesh, and I inhale slightly, wanting more.

"Sax," I answer without thinking.

"I'm sorry?" James growls, any hint of gentleness gone from his tone. I turn to look at him, and can't help the sigh that escapes. He looks particularly delicious tonight.

"That's not what I meant. Never mind," I say. James grabs the back of my head and pulls me in for a ravenous kiss. I can vaguely hear a few catcalls in the distance, but can't make myself care. James pulls away, and I instantly miss his lips. Tee walks over and puts her arm around me.

"Let the girl breathe now and again, James," she jokes, giving me a flirty wink.

Just the girl I wanna talk to. "I need to go to the bathroom, come with me," I tell her. We walk to the bathroom and she stares at me, knowing something is up.

"Sax keeps staring at you," I blurt out.

"And?" she asks.

"He's hot. And sweet. And amazing," I add so she gets the picture.

"He's a dick," she replies.

"Tee-"

"He hurt my best friend. Lexi may have forgiven him, but I'm not as nice as her," she says, pulling out her dark purple lipstick from her handbag and reapplying.

"He fucked up, but he's different now. He looked after me, Tee, when I was

crying and broken over James. He's a good person, I know it," I tell her. Her eyes flicker for a moment, but then her shield goes back up, guard in place.

"Fine," I grumble, followed by a heavy sigh. Tee nudges me with her hip.

"Plenty of men out there, Sasha. Saxon just isn't for me, alright," she says, offering me a smile. She grabs my boob, and then walks out of the bathroom. I follow behind her, until I walk face first into a hard chest.

"Sasha?" a familiar voice sounds.

I look up into the eyes of my ex-boyfriend.

"Colton? Hi," I say. Great, it's always nice to run into your ex. Not. Colton was a sleaze and I didn't find out until too late. He cheated on me and then I dumped his ass.

"You look amazing," he says, staring at my boobs. A real charmer, this one.

"Thanks, well, nice seeing you," I say as I walk around him, making a clean exit. He grabs my arm, halting my escape.

"What's the rush?" he asks, a little creepy. He pulls me closer until I have to put my hand on his chest to push him away.

"Get your hands off her," James demands in an icy tone.

"Who are you?" Colton asks stupidly.

"I'm the man who's going to beat the shit out of you if you don't take your hands off of my fiancé," James says. Colton lets go of my arm, and I quickly move to James, inserting myself under his arm.

"You know him?" James asks me but his eyes are still pinned to Colton.

"Yeah, unfortunately. He's my ex," I say, cringing at having to admit it. James' blue eyes flick to me for a second, the only indication that I've surprised him. Colton is not my usual type, that's for sure. Also he's kind of an ass.

"You're marrying him?" Colton asks me. I don't like the look in his eyes.

"Yes, I am," I silently beg for him to shut up right now, but of course he doesn't.

"Did you tell him how we were engaged?" Colton asks. Well. Fuck. The atmosphere changes from ice cold to deadly. James' fingers tense and release, but he stays silent.

"Well. Time to go!" I announce with fake enthusiasm, taking a statue-like James by the arm and pulling. Or at least attempting to, because he doesn't budge.

"You were engaged," James says slowly, to which one of us I have no idea, but I gulp.

"I assume you didn't tell him," Colton smirks. Douche bag. When his eyes narrow on me I realise I said that out loud.

"No, I didn't tell him, because it didn't count. I had no idea what a piece of shit you were," I tell him, furious.

"Baby, go back to the bar," James requests. At least I think he tries to request, it comes out more as a demand.

"But-"

"Sasha," he snaps. I grind my teeth together, and glare at Colton before I spin on my heels and head back to the bar. Let them kill each other, I don't care anymore.

"You okay?" Kade asks, his brows furrowed in concern.

"Yeah," I say before I order a tequila shot.

"Who's James talking to?" he asks, staring over at James and Colton.

"My ex," I tell him, licking my hand and putting some salt on it. Kade chuckles in a 'what were you thinking' kind of way.

"Shut up," I groan, downing the shot, and then sucking on the lime.

"What's with you Crawfords and tequila?" he asks.

"I dunno, I only drink clear drinks," I say.

"Is that a rule?" he asks, clearly amused if the gleam in his eye is any indication.

"It's my rule. Vodka, yes. Tequila, yes. Anything brown, no."

"Your ex just ran out of the club like he was on fire," Kade says.

I glance over to see that Colton has indeed left the building. James walks towards us so I decide to head over to where Trey is playing pool with Layla. On my way there I can't help but notice Tee talking with Sax. Well, well, well. I slowly head that way, and hear a snippet of their conversation.

"You still seeing your ex?" Sax growls, looking unhappy.

"You still a cheating bastard?" Tee snaps back. Ouch, that was harsh. Poor Sax.

"So what, I make one mistake and have to pay for the rest of my life?" Sax asks her, a serious look on his face.

Tee's eyes soften. "No, I guess not."

"I hope your ex knows what he has," Sax says softly.

"Who said my ex was a man?" Tee replies. Okay then. I'm pretty sure the look on Saxon's face matches my own right about now. Shock, surprise, and

hell, a little bit of curiosity. I change directions and walk up to Trey.

“Sash, wanna play the next game with me?” Trey asks, his hazel eyes alight. He loves being with the fam after not seeing everyone for so long, and I don’t blame him one bit.

“Sure,” I tell him, flashing him a smile. I can feel James’ eyes on me but he doesn’t approach. Instead he chats with Kade, and Chase who has just joined them.

“What happened?” Layla asks, as she leans on the pool table.

“Colton was here,” I tell her, making a face.

Layla laughs, a musical sound. “I don’t know why you stayed with him for so long, he was a bit of an asshole,” she says casually.

When I start to giggle she eyes me suspiciously. “Really? Colton? How big are we talking?” she asks in shock, a flush of colour appearing on her cheeks.

“Not James big, but big,” I tell her, my body shaking with laughter. Nikki walks over from where she was sitting with Lexi.

“What’s so funny?” she asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Nothing,” Layla and I answer at the same time. Trey beats Layla, so I take the cue from her and play the next game.

“You miss Scotland?” I ask him as I play my shot.

“I miss my family and friends, but I gotta tell you, I love it here.”

“You should stay,” I slyly add in. I’d love it if he moved here.

“Maybe I will,” he says with a thoughtful look on his face.

“What will you do with the pub?”

“Sell it, I guess,” he says, a little sad.

“That sucks,” I say slowly.

“I know but I could use the money to buy something here.”

“True.” I play another shot, sinking the ball. I’m chalking my cue when a woman walks up to Trey and starts up a conversation. Trey runs his hands from the back of his neck up into his hair, and offers her a small smile. His hazel eyes look very intrigued, and slightly nervous.

Interesting.

“Your shot, Trey,” I call out. The woman turns around, and she really is a beauty. She offers me a small smile and says something to Trey before walking off. I watch Trey shoot his shot in silence, waiting for him to say something, but he doesn’t. So I do.

“Who was that?” I ask straight out. Yes, I’m nosey.

“A girl I met here the other night,” he says, offering me nothing else.

“What’s her name?” I ask him.

“Sadie.”

“Oh my god, I love that name!” I say excitedly. He makes a grunting noise and then leans his cue against the wall, so he can take a sip of his drink.

“She’s stunning, too,” I add, not so subtly.

“Sasha,” he warns.

“What?” I ask, batting my eyelashes.

“Play your shot,” he says.

I do.

He wins.

The drive home is filled with tension. We make it halfway home when he decides to speak.

“Were you ever gonna tell me you were engaged before?” he asks through clenched teeth.

“Why does it matter? It doesn’t affect us in any way, James. Besides it was a stupid mistake I’d rather not relive,” I tell him, looking out the window.

“Okay, I get that, but I don’t appreciate hearing shit from your ex that I didn’t know about you.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry,” I say.

“Your ex is a fuckhead,” he says, telling me something I already know.

“I know.” The atmosphere seems to clear up, the thickness dissipating.

“Good,” he says, placing his hand on my thigh and gently squeezing. I guess that’s him forgiving me.

“James?”

“Yes, Sasha.”

“I love you,” I tell him, looking at him from the corner of my eye.

“And I love you,” he says in a gentle tone. His thumb rubs my thigh in a circular motion.

“Are you going to show me just how much, when we get home?” I ask him, using my most seductive tone.

“Do you even have to ask?” he rasps back, flashing me a look so heated I

only know one thing.

We need to get home, and stat.

As I listen to Nikki attempt to sing a Mariah Carey song, I decide to go on after her. It's a smart move when you think about it, because *anyone* would sound good after her. I love that she doesn't care what anyone thinks. I choose 'Scar' by Missy Higgins, and sing my heart out. I can see James watching and listening intently, it's been a long time since he has heard me sing. I have a good voice - at karaoke level, not a professional one. James cheers the loudest when I'm done, and I walk towards him, reveling in his scent and warmth as he wraps me in his arms.

James doesn't sing, I know this for a fact. Apparently Kade doesn't either, but Layla tells me Chase has a lovely voice. She could be biased, of course.

"I forgot how beautiful your voice is, that was amazing," James says into my ear, talking loudly so he can be heard over a random person singing. I thank him and return my attention to the screen. Tee walks over to me and slaps my ass.

"Wanna order some food?" she asks. I grin. Of course I do, and she knows it.

"Club sandwiches and battered prawns?" I ask, reciting our usual. She nods and goes to find a waiter. Tee sang 'Wanted Dead or Alive' by Bon Jovi when we first arrived, and she was awesome. For some reason, she only sings songs by male artists. She's weird like that. Tonight she's dressed a little different, in a cut out style yellow dress and black knee high socks. It's a little disconcerting seeing her in stiletto pumps as opposed to her kick-ass boots, but she looks sexy. With her height, my cousin could easily be a model. Morning Alliance left for a concert, but if Sax was here, I think he'd be salivating right now.

The food arrives and is delicious, nothing like tasty food to top off a night out with your friends.

"You could leave some for the rest," James jokes. I scowl at him and take another bite of my club sandwich.

"Where does it all go?" Kade asks, a confused look on his face.

"Ass and thighs," I answer promptly, resuming my eating.

"Lucky James is an ass man," Kade chuckles.

"Would you like some, Chase?" I ask, pushing the plate towards him. I watch as his lips twitch into a smile.

“No, but thank you anyway,” he declines politely. A waiter walks past with food for another table, and Tee and I both stare at the plate of yummy looking wedges, sour cream and nachos. We both turn to stare at each other.

“Your turn,” she says.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

James

“He looks so much like you, James, I can’t believe it sometimes,” my mother tells me. Jye and I are visiting her while my dad is away on business.

“I know. Is he your favourite grandson?” I joke.

“You know I don’t have any favourites,” she reprimands.

“Okay, mum,” I humour her. We both know she loves me the best.

“You’re too much, James,” she laughs. I look around my childhood home and can’t help but feel at peace. Everything is as it should be right now. Jye comes running in holding a stuffed toy.

“Dadda!” he calls out. That one word, that’s all he has to say, and my heart swells. I love being a father. I love being *his* father. I can’t lie, I cannot wait for Sasha to get pregnant again, but for me to be there this time, not missing a thing. I want to see her swell with our son or daughter, take her to every doctor’s appointment. Go out in the middle of the night to supply her with her every craving. To feel the baby kick for the first time. I want to experience all of that with Sasha.

“Hey, Jye,” I tell him, lifting him onto my lap and kissing the back of his head. My mother goes to get her camera. Apparently this is a moment worth capturing. Then again, any moment with Jye is worth capturing.

Jye Steele.

My first born son with the love of my life.

Sasha

Wave after wave of pleasure rolls through me. My breath comes out in quick, short pants and my thighs won’t stop shaking and quivering. That was the most intense orgasm of my life. My body goes limp, as I push myself back into the mattress. James lies down next to me, crossing his arms behind his head. His chest is slick with a sheen of sweat, but he still looks like he could be on the cover of a magazine.

“It just keeps getting better and better,” he announces, sounding a little smug.

I catch my breath before I turn onto my stomach and stare into his eyes. It hits me just how much I love this man.

He’s my world.

If I could dream up a man that was meant for me, it would be him. There's nothing I'd change about him, I love him just the way he is. Through everything we've been through, we have still come out on top, still together, still loving each other.

James was made for me.

My soon to be husband.

"What you thinking about, pretty girl?" James asks in a deep, rumbling tone.

"You."

"And?"

"I want you," I blurt out.

"You have me, always," he says, his tone gentler.

"Promise?"

"You're it for me, Sasha," is all he says as he kisses me with such passion, such love, I know that he means what he says.

This is forever.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

James

"Thanks for handling Nancy," I tell Chase.

"What are big bros for?" he asks with a grin.

"How did you get her to walk away without the money?" I ask curiously, not sure if I really want to know or not.

"Let's just say I found something on her, something she wouldn't want coming to light," he says, looking proud of himself.

"I'm glad you're on my side," I say, leaning back onto the bar.

"I'm *always* on your side," Chase says seriously.

"I know," I tell him. I have the best two brothers in the world.

"So when's the wedding?" he asks. We're both sitting at a bar, waiting for Kade to show up. It's our monthly brotherly bonding night.

"Sasha said she wants six months to organize it. She wants it to be huge," I say with a smirk.

"Layla won't stop talking about dresses," he says, cringing at the thought.

"Are there any women that don't like weddings?" I ask wryly.

"Tenielle, maybe," he says, his lips curving at the thought.

"The man who tames her is gonna be one lucky bastard," I say with a laugh.

"If he can handle her," Chase agrees.

"Layla and she are so different," I muse.

"Yes, but so close. Never seen sisters closer." I hum my agreement. Kade finally decides to show up.

"Sorry I'm late. My wifey can't get enough of me," he says with a satisfied look. He takes a seat, ordering himself a beer.

"Maybe you're just not handling your business first time around, so she needs more," I joke.

Kade doesn't even justify my comment with an answer, he just grins.

"I'm starving, shall we get something to eat?" Chase asks after we finish our drinks.

"Yes, let's go," I say, standing up.

"Where are we going?" he asks.

"Where do we always go when we're hungry?" I say.

“Layla’s, of course,” Kade adds.

“My poor wife,” Chase grumbles.

Sasha

“Just got a message from Chase, the guys are coming over cos they decided they're hungry,” Layla says, heading straight to the stove to start cooking.

“You spoil them, Layla,” Nikki says.

“You don’t cook for Kade! I feel bad,” Layla says.

“I do so cook. Sometimes,” Nikki says with a shrug. I close the bridal magazine in my hands and start pulling out ingredients to help Layla cook.

“Steaks, mash potato and salad?” I ask her.

“Yep. Can you marinate the steaks? I’ll bake some brownies for dessert,” she says.

“Sure,” I say, getting straight to work. Layla puts her iPod on and we start to cook, dancing every now and again to the music. Jye, Cole and Grace are all at James' parents for the evening, so we all get some time to hang out with each other. I’ve just peeled and cut the potatoes when James, Kade and Chase arrive.

“Hey, pretty girl,” James says, hugging me from behind.

“Hey, yourself,” I say, turning my head for a quick kiss.

“We're waiting for one of you to grill the steaks,” I tell him.

“I’ll do it,” Chase says, kissing Layla before heading outside.

“Want some help?” James sweetly offers.

“Sure, you can chop these up for the salad,” I tell him, gesturing to the pile of veggies.

“You smell so good,” he whispers into my ear, causing a shiver down to run my spine.

“Stay on task, people!” Layla says as she walks by.

‘What If’ by Babyface comes on and James’ eyes light up, and a smile turns his lips.

“Why are you smiling?” I ask him curiously.

“No reason. I just like this song,” he says, flashing me a devastating grin.

Epilogue
Two Years Later
Sasha

“Mama, your tummy is big,” Jye announces.

“I know, that’s because your little sister is in there,” I explain.

“How did she get in there?” he asks, his wide blue eyes curious and demanding explanation.

“Well, you see-”

“Did you swallow the baby?” he gasps.

“No, Jye,” I try to explain, but the laughter takes over.

“What’s so funny?” James asks, as he returns from work. He takes off his jacket and tie, laying them on the bed before leaning down for a kiss. He places another kiss on my tummy before shifting his attention to Jye.

“Perfect. You can explain this to your son,” I tell him, looking forward to seeing how he answers this question. James kisses Jye and then lifts him onto his lap.

“What question, Jye?” James asks.

“Did mama swallow the baby?” he asks his father, a serious expression on his face.

“Um, no. Well, you see. When mum and dad love each other-”

I can’t take it anymore, I burst out laughing. James shoots me a glance, but I can’t help it. Jye loses interest and resumes watching his movie.

“How are you feeling?” he asks, taking one of my feet and gently massaging.

“I feel okay, my back is a little sore, though.”

I have two weeks left until our little princess arrives. James and I have decided to call her Indiana.

Indiana Lucy Steele.

James has been so attentive during my pregnancy, I couldn’t have wished for a better father for my children, and a husband for myself.

“I wish I could give you a massage or something,” he says, sounding helpless. I take his hand into mine and intertwine our fingers.

“How was work?” I ask, changing the subject. I feel a sudden stabbing pain in my lower back, and ignore it. Until it comes again. And again.

“It was good. I missed all of you, though,” he says sincerely. I take his face into my palms and bring it close to mine, so our foreheads are almost touching.

“I love you,” I whisper.

“I love you too, wife,” he says with a grin.

“Are you ready to meet your daughter?” I ask him, cringing when another wave of pain hits me.

“Of course I am, I can’t wait to- you mean now?” he asks, standing up quickly, a look of concern taking over his features.

I nod. “Can you call the hospital to tell them we’re coming in?” I ask as he helps me up from the bed. I grab my already packed bag, getting ready to leave. I feel calm right now. I know the contractions aren’t coming too close together so I have time. Plus stressing out won’t help anyone. It also looks like James is going to be worrying enough for the both of us.

James

With a mop of dark hair and wide dark brown eyes, Indiana is a spitting image of her mother.

I couldn’t be more thrilled.

She has the cutest button nose, rosy pouted lips, and chubby little cheeks. I couldn’t believe how tiny she was. Seeing Sasha go through childbirth, I’m not gonna lie, it was hell. I hated seeing her in pain, and there was nothing I could do about it. I made sure I was by her side the entire time, holding her hand, getting her anything she wanted.

Doing *anything* I could.

I was the first to hold my daughter.

I was the first person she saw as she came into this world.

It was one of the best days of my life.

Indiana is now three months old, and dressed in a pink princess-looking dress. Jye is dressed in a suit, and Sasha is wearing a yellow gown that accentuates her every curve. I definitely have plans for her tonight.

“You ready?” Sasha asks me, picking up her tiny gold handbag that I’m pretty sure can’t fit anything inside it.

After all this time, she still takes my breath away.

And I know she always will.

“Let’s go, my pretty wife,” I tell her, pulling her in for a kiss that might be

slightly inappropriate in front of the kids.

“Dad!” Jye yells, making a face. Sasha laughs, and the sound is like music to my ears. I pick up the capsule with Indiana in it and head outside.

We have a wedding to attend to.

THE END

About the author

Chantal Fernando is 26, a mother of three beautiful little boys and lives in Western Australia. Chase is her debut novel, followed by Kade, Ryder & James. She is currently working on 'Spin My Love' a new adult contemporary romance, along with a few other projects.

Facebook author page:

<https://www.facebook.com/authorchantalfernando>