New York Times bestselling author





Love was never part of the plan.

Inrended

K. Bromberg



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ONE

Rowan

Two can play this game.

That's the motto I repeat over and over with each step, each click of my sky-high *fuck-you* heels that echo as I waltz into the TinSpirits office.

My bravado might be false, but my resolve is stronger than ever.

It's been six days.

Of utter confusion.

Of chest-aching heartbreak.

Of dodging Chadwick and my mom and their incessant push for wedding plans—all of which makes my stomach churn.

Of trying to figure out how to play any and every angle of this mess to my advantage but still coming up short.

Of Holden's utter fucking silence.

Isn't that what hurts even worse than his betrayal? His ability to just cut me off like I never mattered? Like the night in New York and the unspoken *I love yous* that I thought we both felt, but clearly didn't, never mattered or existed at all?

On his end anyway.

The man gave me one of the best, most thoughtful nights of my life, a private Clayton Seaburn concert. In hindsight, it was all a part of his smoke-and-mirrors show to distract me—or assuage his own guilt—from what he was doing elsewhere.

Like screwing me over.

I keep my head held high as I walk down the hallway, praying no one congratulates me on my engagement and steeling myself against having any reaction, any expression, when I eventually see him.

Because I will see him. It's inevitable.

Three nights.

That's all I gave myself to cry in the silence of my hotel room in Georgia. Three nights of tears and heartache and being a slobbery mess who doubted herself and her ability to judge other people. Who allowed herself to be utterly heartbroken over a man she fell for when she knew she shouldn't have.

During the day I put on a brave face and sold the shit out of our company, negotiating my ass off and sealing the deal on a very forward-thinking contract with a new supplier. And then at night, I returned to my hotel room and gave myself the grace to fall apart.

But that self-imposed grace has expired.

Now that I'm back home in Westmore, I must face the reality that I gave my heart to a man who set out from the get-go to destroy it.

And as much as I'd give anything to avoid Holden with all I have, that would make me just like him. A coward.

Two can play this game.

* * *

"I know you have to get married to claim Gran's inheritance."

Chad's comment is enough of a stunner as I fly in Holden's private jet to Georgia. My hand grips the cell phone tight as I try to process the words that just came through it. Especially when they were delivered on the heels of me finding the executed contract that proved the deal was done and that Holden's word isn't to be trusted.

He screwed me out of everything he promised.

"What do you mean you know I have to be married?"

"My uncle let it slip," Chad says, referring to Gran's estate attorney.

"Awesome," I mutter. Just fucking awesome. Anger should fire at private, legal details being spilled out into the open, but I'm too heartbroken, too overwhelmed to find enough fucks to give.

But then Chad speaks.

And changes everything.

"I have a plan on how we can make this work. How we can both benefit from it. Let me explain."

* * *

My conversation with Chad replays in my mind. How was it only nine days ago that it took place and my world tilted askew again from one hour to the next?

But it did.

And I'm here.

Trying to wear it like a second skin when I hate the very feeling of it. But no one would know that from the outside looking in. I offer smiles and greetings to my staff in the marketing department as I stride through the second floor toward our in-house studio. A photographer awaits my arrival.

Holden wanted a new campaign for TinSpirits? I'm giving him one.

And in the process, I'm more than ready to show him just who he fucked with.

You wanted a war, Holden Knight.

You've got one.

Two, most definitely, can play this game.

TWO

Holden

"Is there something you're not telling me?" Audrey asks as she enters my office. As my personal assistant, scheduler, right-hand person over the years, she's the only person in this whole damn place who has the balls to do so.

"No," I grunt, my back to her as I continue to rifle vigorously through the files on the credenza behind my desk.

"Perfect. So this is about the time when I tell you how absolutely giddy I've been, getting up the past few mornings to come to work and deal with a surly fucker such as yourself," she says flatly.

I glance over my shoulder to catch the sarcasm etched in the lines of her face. My glare is the only answer I give as I continue to sort through the piles of shit on my desk.

I never have piles on my desk.

I never lose anything.

And I've never gotten screwed over by a woman before, either.

First time for everything, Knight.

I straighten up as if staring at the whole of the desktop will help me see what's right in front of me.

But I can't find the folder on WillowBend. All I see is the box of cuff links I had shoved into the corner, which makes no fucking sense in light of the current situation.

Why did Rowan leave them on my desk for me? A parting gift? A silent consolation prize or a *fuck you* as she agrees to marry dickless Chad? At least I'm assuming they were from her—the sunburst-shaped cuff links inside. *Sunshine*. My nickname for her.

I'd ask her but that would mean I'd have to talk to her. Fuck that. I will not call. I will not text.

I let my guard down.

I got fucked and don't even know why.

It won't be happening again.

"You look like shit, Holden," Audrey says.

"Charming as always, aren't you?" I mutter.

But my chest aches and my gut churns and neither will go the fuck away. Same goes for the image imprinted in my fucking brain of Rowan straddling my lap and staring into my eyes on the balcony in New York.

How did we go from that to fucking this?

Chad? Seriously? My hands fist and an acrid taste poisons my tongue.

"Want to tell me what you're looking for over there?" she asks.

I turn and face her, hands now on my hips and tension set in my shoulders. "The WillowBend folder," I state, seeing as the door is closed.

"The WillowBend folder. The contract. The transfer of ownership. All three are locked in my desk drawers along with everything else you've given me for safekeeping. Nothing has changed."

"When?"

"English, please, Holden, because you sound a tad unhinged."

"I feel a tad unhinged," I mutter. "When did you take them from me?"

"Last week? I think." She lifts her eyebrows and levels me a look. "Whenever you asked me to."

I stare at her, my teeth chewing my bottom lip. Something isn't right and I can't put my finger on what exactly that is. "And you've made sure to keep my top drawer locked as well?"

"Your top drawer is always locked." She puts her hands on her hips and huffs. Great. I've pissed her off too. "Holden Knight. In the decade we've worked together, you've never had to question my integrity about anything. Are you questioning my integrity?"

"No. Yes." I scrub a hand over my face and sigh. "It just doesn't make any sense."

"Again, I'd appreciate if you let me in on the conversation we seem to be having."

"If my drawer was locked, then she couldn't have seen it. Then she doesn't know." I tug on the drawer and it doesn't budge.

"Seen what?"

The fucking cuff links. They had to have been from her but by the time I saw them, she'd already dropped the bomb on me about Chad.

So if the goddamn contract hadn't been sitting on my desk out in the open, then what the hell prompted Rowan to do what she did? To get engaged to Chad?

I was certain that was the reason. That in some haphazard way she'd found the contract. She'd seen my betrayal. That she took it, that she believed it, rather than believe me and my word.

Because the woman I was with three days prior was all about me. Was all about us.

What the fuck happened?

"When did you take them from my desk again? You're sure I didn't leave them out on top of it?" I ask when I know I didn't.

She lifts her eyebrows. "The Holden Knight I know doesn't overlook details like that."

"Everybody has their moments."

"Seems like you're having lots of those lately."

I clench my jaw and match her, glare for judgmental glare. "Is there a reason you're in here?" I ask and take a few steps toward the window. In a move I've practiced more times than I care to admit over the past few days, I go to the window to see if Rowan's showed up to work. My feet falter. She's here.

"She's here, you know."

Don't react, Knight. Don't fucking react.

My hand falters on the blinds.

"Ah," she murmurs. "So she is in fact, the problem."

"Leave it be, Audrey," I grit out.

"Now why would I go and do something like that, huh?" When I glance her way, she's scribbling on that pad she carries around with her, but it's the ghost of a smirk on her lips that grates on my nerves.

"Perfect fucking example of why I don't do this shit," I grumble as I move to sink back down into my office chair.

Unhinged, my ass. I open my laptop. What was I going to do? I close my laptop. Wasn't I looking for something? I glance at the credenza behind me.

"What shit would that be? The seek-revenge-on-your-enemies type of shit?" she asks evenly.

Fucking Rowan Rothschild.

"Go away," I grumble.

And I'm not sure if I'm talking to Audrey in my office or Rowan owning my mind.

I don't have time for Audrey's shit.

I don't have time for anyone's shit.

The only thing I care about is burning this whole fucking place down.

"Are we in burn-this-whole-fucking-place-down mode?"

I whip my head up to meet her eyes. Did I say that out loud?

She purses her lips. *I know you better than you do*, her stare says. "Did something happen that you care to share or opine on or whatever it is you need to do?"

"Nope. Not a thing." How many times are we going to have some form of this conversation?

Rowan's here.

I don't care that she is.

Not one goddamn bit.

"She's in the studio. Second floor."

"What?" I snap.

Audrey holds her hands up. "I didn't say a word." She cautiously leaves my office.

"Good. Keep not saying a word," I mutter, knowing damn well what she just said and hating her and loving her for it all at the same time.

THREE

Rowan

I know the minute he enters the room.

His cologne. His presence. His intensity.

I can sense all three of them despite purposefully occupying myself with my male counterparts—three incredibly attractive models—to avoid looking his way.

It's their hands on my body, but it's the feeling of Holden's hands I'm reliving no matter how much I loathe him with every ounce of my being.

But I don't look toward the door he just entered. I don't give him any hint that I know he's here.

If I ever wanted to be an actress, now is the time to show that I could do it—because I'm about to perform the role of a lifetime. Let's hope I can pull it off.

The room is empty with a green screen behind us for the media department to add a beach scene to in postproduction. Sand is beneath our bare feet and a few red-and-white-striped beach balls lie strategically on it to fill the space around us. A raised red cooler is to the side of us with cans of TinSpirits in it, strategically placed so all the labels are facing out for the consumer to see.

"What's this?" Holden's voice booms through the sparsely furnished room.

"Mr. Knight. Sir," Lyle, our photographer, says and clears his throat. It's as if the whole vibe of the room shifts instantly when the staff knows he's there. That he's watching.

I hear the shuffled feet of the room's occupants. I feel the men on either side of me tense. The entire mood of the room turns from playful to guarded.

"We weren't expecting you, but are so glad you ventured down to give input," Lyle says, his eyes darting from his camera then to Holden and back.

"I wasn't aware that we were doing this today," Holden says, his voice like a heavy dose of honey over sandpaper. Each word is like a weight tugging on my heart.

"Same pose, Lyle?" I interrupt as I adjust the sides of my fire-engine-red bikini and make sure the room's focus is back on me.

Right where I want it.

On me and my itty-bitty bikini and my signature red lips I'm known in our ads for. On my new blond hair, recently dyed back, and *those* sapphire earrings that drip from my earlobes. And on the three male models and their tanned, bared chests who are on either side of me.

Holden doesn't even deserve a nanosecond of my attention, so I don't give it, but I sure as hell prepare myself for the show I'm about to give.

"Same?" Lyle repeats, his Adam's apple bobbing as he fiddles with his camera. Holden's presence clearly makes him nervous. I turn my lips up in a siren's smile as he narrows his eyes and takes a look at the scene as a whole—my makeup and hair, our staging, and the way our bodies interact. "Yes. Again. I like the feel of this and the way it looks through the lens too. I think we can get more out of this setting and sequence though."

"Sounds good. More hands? Less hands? Lean in? Almost kiss?" I ask.

"I want whatever you're comfortable with, but ideally, yes. More touching. More flirting. More product placement in the midst of all that skin."

"Hear that, guys?" I ask.

They give a few cheers in response and laughter rings out around the room.

Lyle pumps a fist. "I love the enthusiasm. Per your direction, Rowan, the goal is to sell the fantasy, so let's sell it. A single woman. A good drink. Hot men all around her vying for her attention. Her choices are hers to make."

"Great. Perfect." I turn to my male counterparts and smile as I place one hand on the brown-haired man's chest and lean in. "It's such a hard job and all. Right, guys?" I chuckle. In a practiced move, I make sure the label on the TinSpirits can I'm holding is facing the camera all while placing its red-and-white straw between my lips and hollowing out my cheeks like I'm sucking on it.

My three fellow models follow my lead, and we begin the photographic dance. One model's hands are on my waist, and another is standing like a backdrop behind us. The third model looks down at me, his lips inches from mine so we can cut the image with me as the center of attention and them just the background noise.

And I'm more than aware, with every single snap of the camera, that Holden is standing there. Watching. Stewing. Growing more irritated.

He's the one who cast me off, who used me, and he stands there with his jaw clenched and annoyance etched in every single

line of his face like he has some kind of claim to me.

Dream on, Knight. Dream the fuck on.

How long will he stay silent? How long will he even stay in here?

It's time to change the dress.

He hasn't picked up the phone to call or text since he heard those words.

That, in and of itself, says all that needs to be said. I cut things off and he didn't fight for us. For me.

Then again, how could he? He was busy being exactly who he was that first night we met. Conniving. Manipulative. Self-serving.

"Rowan, I want you to lean your back against Santiago's chest. And Santi? I want your finger between her skin and the string on her bottoms. I'm not sure if we'll use it but, Rowan, I want your marketing department to have options to play with."

"Sounds good."

I lean my back against the firmness of Santiago, never more aware of my audience of one than now. Santiago slides his hand down my bare hip and his fingers tickle as he toys with the ties there.

Chills chase over my skin and my nipples harden in a natural, reflexive reaction that most women would have when flanked by three sexy men like I am.

"We're not selling sex." The four words thunder through the room and suck the life out of the playful mood.

My pulse roars in my ears and my heart races, but I keep my hands steady and my voice even when I meet his eyes for the first time. His stoic expression is a sharp contrast to the words he just uttered and a stark reminder of just how duplicitous he can be.

It fuels me in ways I never could have expected.

"No. We're selling women on equality. On them getting to have whatever the fuck they want. Men. Careers. Ownership. Honesty. You name it." I lift my brows as if I need to reinforce my words, but I'm pretty sure the defiance in my tone did that already for me.

"I didn't okay this," he says flatly.

"You say that like I need to ask for permission to run my own department as I see fit."

"How cute. You think you have a leg to stand on. My company. My rules."

There is a lump the size of Texas lodged in my throat, and I struggle with a comeback because there are so many things I could say—want to say about his *my company* claim—but I grit my teeth instead and say what would be expected of me. "You mean *my* family's company. Until you sign those papers, it's still mine."

I meet his eyes and look for any flicker of deception. Of regret. There isn't a single iota of guilt etched in the lines of his face when he speaks. "Still with that song and dance?" he murmurs.

My only response is a lift of my eyebrows. Better to say nothing than to say something that will put me more at a disadvantage when it comes to Holden Knight.

"Again?" I say to the men around me, who suddenly feel so much stiffer in posture. Almost as if a silent threat was sent via testosterone wavelength from Holden for them to stay the hell away from me.

Screw that.

I lean forward and reach out to the third model, Noah, in front of me, thread my fingers through the hair at the back of his neck with my free hand, and look up so that our silhouettes are mirror images and only an inch apart. I hold up the TinSpirits can to get it in the shot but I don't give a damn about the photo shoot right now.

Right or wrong, immature or not, I care about making Holden jealous and showing him just what he'll be missing.

Unfortunately, I don't think it works. A glance his way has that indifferent mask back on his face.

So I try harder. More touching. More flirting. More skin. All while Lyle murmurs encouragement for us to keep putting our chemistry on display.

"Are you wanting a kiss somewhere in here?" Lyle asks. And I'm assuming he's asking me and not Holden, but Holden speaks before I can respond.

"You went blond," Holden finally says, the words again cutting through the room like a knife.

I shrug and adjust my top but don't look his way when I respond. "They say blondes have more fun, and since being a brunette netted me absolutely nothing, I figured I'd give that theory a try again."

"Look at you conforming. I'm sure your mother must be thrilled." Sarcasm drips from every syllable and earns him a glare.

"Last I checked, following the rules screwed me over. It won't happen again."

Holden's brow furrows in confusion. He opens his mouth to speak, to ask questions no doubt he can't ask with company present, but then shuts it. "So you're making your own rules now, or what?"

If looks could kill, the one I level him with would land him in a casket. "There are no rules anymore."

"Huh," he says and tucks his tongue in his cheek with a ghost of a smile on his lips. So glad one of us finds this amusing.

But why? Because he is who he is and always has to pretend to have the upper hand even when he doesn't? Or because he's figured out that *I know* and is operating under the theory that *the game must go on*?

I have a hard time believing the latter and an even harder time processing that he doesn't know that I know about the contracts being signed just yet.

"Rowan? Sweetheart?" Lyle says, breaking the visual standoff between Holden and me. "Can we try and soften the eyes a bit. We want customers to buy the product, not think you're going to murder them, right?"

"Yes. Sorry. Sure." I fall back into character, forcing myself to ignore the giant presence in the room.

I'm successful at it. At least I think I am. But freaking Holden stands there with his quiet judgment and unnerving silence for the rest of the shoot.

What is he thinking? What is he desperate to ask but his ego refuses to let him?

When the shoot is over, the staff cleans up while the models and myself remove our stage makeup and study sample shots that Lyle shows us on his camera. I continue to ask Lyle questions hoping to wait out Holden's patience so I don't have to confront him.

But he just stands there.

He waits while everyone scampers out of there.

It's not until we're the only people left in the studio that I acknowledge that my attempt to avoid him has failed.

Now it's just me. Just him. And a whole chasm of unchecked emotions between us.

"We're not going to talk?" he finally asks.

My window has closed. I have no chance to escape other than to walk past him. With my chin held high, I take the steps toward the door, but his hand is on my arm in seconds. I emit the tiniest of yelps as I'm yanked against him. He smells of soap and cologne, and I hate that it's familiar and desirable and everything in between.

My heart might be shattered, but my body clearly hasn't gotten the memo.

"Rowan?" he murmurs. It's the tone of his voice—hurt, desperate, confused—the only break in his stoic facade, that gets me.

We breathe in that small, charged space. We feel what I can assume is the same fucking heartache, but neither of us acquiesces a single inch.

Because isn't that what hurts the most? That while Holden screwed me over, I do think he was falling for me just as hard as I was for him.

But apparently he was willing to suffer and fall on the sword for his cause while I had no choice in the matter.

I pull the robe I've put on over my suit a little tighter as his eyes flicker down to my hand and lack of a ring.

Shit. Little details I've forgotten in the fog of this heartbreak warfare.

All the bravado I had earlier, my attempt at showing him what he's going to miss, has flown out the window. And while this robe might simply be cotton and thread, it's the only form of protection I have against Holden Knight.

Isn't that a fitting fucking metaphor? Fabric against steel.

Did I ever stand a chance?

"It's time to change the dress?" he asks, repeating the last and only thing I said to him.

His own line was a reminder that sometimes you need to change the dress, shed what a person thinks of you, and do something completely unexpected.

Like wearing strong and regal sapphires over the soft and romantic rubies my mother wanted for me.

Like agreeing to work with Holden to further my own best interest over the collective interest of my family.

Like becoming engaged to Chad—a man he knows I've been pressured to marry my whole adult life—once I found out about Holden's deceit, as another means to get what I need.

By the way he's standing here and the confusion in his furrowed brow, he doesn't have a clue as to the why behind the last one.

And here I assumed he had put two and two together. That I knew about the contract being signed and his machinations to completely shut me out of my family business. How could he not, though?

I struggle with the thought.

The contract was in his top drawer. I left the cuff links on the desk in my fervent need to escape. On the desk sitting *right* above the damn contract.

He's a clever man. I know him well enough to know how his mind works and that he's smart enough to deduce that I saw the contract and know the truth.

Why else would I have done what I did?

Christ. We spent the weekend together, we were ... whatever we were, and then I up and get engaged to Chadwick? What is Holden thinking? What does he suppose happened? I couldn't even make a guess because the man hasn't asked me a single question in the last six days. *Until now*.

Either he has a ridiculous amount of restraint, or he simply doesn't care.

For a man as meticulous with details as I've learned Holden to be? I opt for the latter.

And isn't that the point to all this? That I'm so sick of men taking advantage of me in my life. Of using me for their own

gains? If he can't figure out why I'm pissed, why I agreed to marry Chad, then it's not my fucking responsibility to spell it out for him.

So as hard as it is, I can't confront him. I've shown all my cards before and look where that got me.

"Excuse me," Lyle says when he walks back into the room. I startle, but one glance his way says he's just as uncomfortable interrupting as I am figuring what to say. "I just need to gather a few more things. I won't be but a minute."

"No problem." I offer him a sincere smile and wonder if I'm glad for his interruption or upset by it.

"These pictures were a waste of time," Holden says quietly through gritted teeth. It seems he was more affected by them than he let on. *Good*. "We're not using them."

"Like hell we aren't."

Lyle nods to both of us but keeps his head ducked down as he exits, clearly sensing the tension.

"In case you forgot, I have the final say on everything and you being half naked on our ad campaign isn't—"

"Isn't what? To your liking? Do you think you have any right or ownership or any say at all when it comes to me?"

"My company. My say."

"But it's not your company yet," I say. Refute me. Tell me it is. Tell me that the executed contract I saw signed in your drawer wasn't real and that you're still giving me the board seat and the 1 percent of your ownership that you promised.

Because that is what I saw.

Rhett's signature on a contract that was way different from the one you gave me to approve. The one you used as a ruse to make me believe everything you said was true.

The one that gave me a leg to stand on in my family company when all anyone else has ever pegged me to be is a reluctant society lady.

Give me a truth here, Holden, so I know you are the man I thought you were.

Holden just stands there, holding his ground with a stoic expression that borders on fury, highlighted with a clenched jaw.

Nothing.

Fuck.

Rage and hurt and heartache fire anew.

My company. My say. My ass.

"Yeah, well, for a self-proclaimed mastermind, you sure are missing the mark, Knight." With perfect timing, my robe accidentally slips, baring my shoulder and the red strap of my bikini top.

He growls, and that muscle in his jaw pulses. "Those photos will not be used," he reasserts.

"Yeah, yeah, you don't share." I wave a hand absently at him and take a step back. "I think that no longer applies."

"Rowan." My name is a warning not to walk away from him.

I retreat a few more steps. His eyes reflexively glance over the length of my body. "I expect honesty at all times," I say. "Weren't those your words?"

"Meaning?"

"Weren't they?"

"None of this makes sense," he says, and it's the closest he's come to asking why I'm engaged to Chad. I can see the question in his eyes and I so desperately want him to ask.

But he doesn't.

"And yet it makes perfect sense." I give him the same cursory once-over. "Life is black. It's white. It's gray," I repeat his words back to him about the three ways you can live your life—bad, good, or with a little mystery thrown in for added measure. He may live in the gray, but right now I prefer the stark white of the truth. "You never know which thing will be which color, huh?"

And with that, I turn on my heel and walk away without saying another word.

I keep walking.

I want him to chase after me. I want him to explain why he screwed me over.

I want so many things, but when I turn the corner and look over my shoulder, the hallway is empty.

Just like my heart feels.

Nothing has changed and yet everything has.

FOUR

Holden

It's black.

It's white.

It's gray.

Leave it to fucking Rowan to throw that back in my face.

My hands fist and my shoulders hurt from being so goddamn tense as I pace the confines of my office like a caged tiger.

That fucking pathetic excuse for a bikini. Ties on the sides and barely any fabric.

Desperate to throw something, I pick up the crystal paperweight from my desk.

Their hands on her. Three pairs of them. Her tanned skin. Their bare chests.

I put the paperweight down. The urge is so goddamn tempting my fingers ache from gripping it.

Her red painted lips. Her sexy smile with them. Her disgusted scowl at me.

I lace my fingers and pull down on the back of my neck as I cover the same ground, the same fucking twenty steps, again, but gain zero goddam clarity.

Her eyes. The hurt in them I don't understand. She did this. She caused this. What in the fuck am I missing?

I reach for the paperweight, welcome its heft again.

Her complete disregard for me.

My chest aches.

My fingers tighten.

My arm cocks back.

"Don't you dare," Audrey warns from the doorway.

The words almost egg me on more, but I lower my arm. I drop it with a thunk on my desk.

And I fucking hate that Audrey has caught me in a moment of weakness. I only show my temper when I care or when someone has gotten past my guard.

She knows that better than anyone.

"I'm in a fucking shitty mood. You probably want to stay away from me." That's about as nice as I can be right now.

"You need to go touch some grass, Holden. Remember the reason you're here."

I glare at her. "Don't think for one second I've forgotten the why." But while I might say the words, I also snatch my keys off my desk and walk past her without saying another word.

Or admitting she might be right.

I drive through the well-maintained streets of the town I despise, passing a billboard advertising Rhett Rothschild for city council, before heading across the river and over the pothole-filled, graffiti-ridden ones I feel more at home in. Past a cemetery and a headstone I still can't bring myself to visit. And I end up staring at the only place there is green grass in this whole goddamn town—if you can call the crabgrass- and weed-filled baseball field actual grass.

But the state of the field doesn't seem to matter to the kids and teens who are on it in their mismatched uniforms and playing with secondhand gear.

There's a freedom here. To be who you are away from the depressing confines of your dilapidated or dangerous apartment complex. To impress the girls who are giggling in the stands and watching your every move, or to trash-talk without the consequences of what happens beyond the chalk lines. To have a chance to be anything but the kid who goes to bed hungry at night or whose mom hustles for drugs or who's left alone to fend for themselves more times than not.

It's the one little piece you can control when everything else in your life feels so out of your control.

I know this firsthand.

But here I sit just beyond the outfield fence in my luxury SUV that costs more than most of these families make in several years' time, and I find an odd peace that I can't explain.

The game plays on absently in front of me. Balls and strikes seem like life-or-death matters to these kids when they most likely know from experience that they aren't.

But they suspend disbelief. *They pretend*.

Just like I pretend that all of this shit isn't my fault. Rowan. Her complications. Letting her in. And now needing to make sure she stays the fuck out of everything.

I'm not a forgiving man. And yet ... Christ.

Rowan.

I run a hand through my hair and replay the events of the past few months in my head.

Past few months? More like the events that took place when Chad and Rhett hit and killed my brother, Mason, all those

years ago. The ones that only became more real when the police let them off with zero repercussions, no doubt because their families are corrupt royalty in this goddamn town.

To think how long I watched from afar. How I waited to amass my own empire, my own success, all while trying to figure out the best way to take down the smarmy fuckers who ruined my world.

To show them that there are consequences to every action. And since the law in this town didn't give them to them, I took matters into my own hands.

Revenge isn't a word I subscribe to. More like getting what the fuck you're due. Finally having to pay for the suffering, for the pain, for the life-altering events they set into place.

Not revenge, no. More like fucking karma.

Who knew that a casual, late-night check-in of the Westmore duo would give me the opening I needed to set the wheels in motion?

A few keystrokes to slip behind a firewall were all I needed. Rhett Rothschild and Chadwick Williams in financial peril that they were hiding not only from the world but from their families? *My opening*.

A bit more research showed that the men had leveraged everything on a shit purchase. A quick buck they'd planned to turn on a deal that went sour because they were so pompous, so fucking arrogant, that they thought they were untouchable by ill fortune so they never did their research or read the fine print.

Imagine that.

The purchase of TinSpirits was only the means to an end. Controlling ownership in one of the two places they were siphoning money was just the start.

And now that I have them by the balls, I plan to squeeze them until it hurts.

Until they beg for mercy and know an iota of the pain they've caused me. And I sure as hell plan on giving them an extra twist as a *fuck you* from all of us little people who used to work at the Westmore Country Club who they treated as *less than* simply because we weren't them.

Expect the unexpected. Isn't that how I've lived my life? Then how the hell did I not expect Rowan? Meeting her. Wanting her. Knowing I needed to stay away from her. And then fucking caving despite every part of me knowing I shouldn't.

Shit.

Guess that part has backfired, huh?

Steal Chad's childhood crush, fuck her for the pleasure of it and for the pain it would inflict on Chad?

Guess that backfired. But why? What the fuck does Chad have that I don't?

Nothing.

Fucking nothing.

I'd bet my goddamn life on it.

But that still doesn't answer the question.

Antsy and agitated, I get out of the car without thinking. Glances are aimed my way, sizing me up and questioning what I'm doing here. A luxury SUV in this part of town usually means one of two things—a drug dealer or a pimp. I pay them no attention. They'll see the dress shirt and tie, the shine of my Rolex and the confidence in my walk, and think I don't belong here. But I do. Just as fucking much as they do. With a heavy sigh and a messed-up head, I rest my arms on the left field fence and stare back at the eyes turned my way.

It takes a moment for everyone to get their fill of me before attention slowly turns back toward the game. The inning continues and I watch a runner get thrown out at third.

Manhattan.

The jet ride home.

Feeling like I was on top of the world when we landed.

And then ... Chad and his revelation at the country club. The rug being yanked the hell out from under me. Then Rowan finally answering the phone.

Touch some grass.

Fuck that.

Not when I feel like this.

But this one was on me.

I let my guard down. I let the complication in. I let myself feel when numb is all I've ever allowed myself to be.

That's my fault.

I blow out a sigh and shake my head. *Is this really fucking worth it?* Our twisted histories? The threaded lies? Our twined fates?

"Hey, Three-Piece Holden?"

I snap my head up, more than surprised that I happen to be here when Leo is actually playing. I size him up as he jogs over toward me.

His smile is wide but cautious as he glances over his shoulder and back toward the stands.

He's still the same teenager I met on the sidewalk weeks ago, but there is a bit more confidence to him now. A swagger. And I've done nothing more than pay him to clean up where he lives—where I used to live with Mason—and give him some goals to strive for, but I like to think I added to that swagger some.

Oddly, I hold on to that.

"Hey," I say and smile.

"You came to watch me play?" That grin. The surprise in his voice. The pride as his expression lifts.

I may be looking at Leo, but I see Mason.

His innocence. His potential. His presence.

Yeah, it's fucking worth it.

Sorry, Mase. I got distracted from my goals with the outside noise.

It won't happen again.

FIVE

Rowan

"I know you want to go home to our place," I murmur to Winnie and reach a hand down to pet her head. It's been a week that I've been staying at Gran's house, but there's something about this room, about sitting behind the mammoth desk in her study, that demands one sit back and take in all its eccentricities.

The pictures lining the far wall are filled with faces of people she never knew. She never removed the packaging—usually a family or a lone individual model—inserted behind the glass of the frame. She got a kick out of everyone assuming she was senile because of it, saying, *When people think you're losing your mind, they are much freer with what they say.* And so she'd jokingly refer to her *friends* on the wall whenever she wanted people to steer clear of her.

The hutch behind me is lined with decorative jars, one after another, each holding a collection of different items she had amassed over her lifetime. The items range from normal to odd: sea glass, dice, hotel room keys, marbles, and more.

And then there is the desk and every other possible surface excluding the Oriental rug my great-grandfather brought back from his treks across Europe and Asia in the early 1900s. They are all covered with stacks upon stacks of folders and papers and receipts. Gran was not a hoarder by any means, but hell, it appears she didn't get rid of a single thing in here over the past few decades.

She lived a life that was full and rich in character and experiences. Is that what she wanted for me with the ridiculous parameters of my inheritance?

A proxy vote on the board through her private LLC was a definite bonus, but it was the other parameters that were classic Eleanor Rothschild.

Marry sooner rather than later and receive a bulk inheritance of \$30 million after two years of marriage.

Or don't marry and receive \$1 million each year for thirty years.

It's almost like she set up these constraints knowing what was going to happen when there was no way she could have.

She wanted me to marry and get the \$30 million. She wanted me to use that bulk sum to coerce and influence, or, some may say *blackmail*, other board members to gain power that could rival Rhett's.

And more than anything, she made me promise that I'd do anything and everything in my power to keep TinSpirits in Rothschild hands. To wrestle it away from my brother by any means possible because she trusted me to run it. Not him.

"You went and died, Gran, and it all went to shit," I murmur.

But isn't that why I agreed to Chad's ridiculous proposal? To use it to my advantage to honor that promise to Gran?

"But I know you're looking down. I know you'll help me if you can."

I push my fingertips to my eyes and try to hear the sound of her laughter and remember the feel of her cold hand clasped in mine.

It helps that her study smells of her perfume still. Maybe that's why I've sat in here so much during the week I've been staying here as a means to avoid my real life.

While the clutter here makes the type A in me roll my shoulders, I find an odd comfort in it. To be among her things and our memories rather than back at my house, with pieces of Holden that I can't escape and easy access to the people I'm trying to avoid.

Holden.

The confusion on his face earlier after the photo shoot owns my mind. If I thought I did a great job acting—keeping my shit together and emotions under control—he sure as shit did too. But then again, he's the king of acting with how he acted on our trip to Manhattan.

Was it too much for me to want him to put up a fight? For the man who arranged to have Clayton Seaburn do a private concert for me to show up in Georgia and fight for me? To text and call me to death until I had no choice but to answer so we could talk? To have him explain the contract and then fucking grovel after I told him I could never trust him again?

The ache in my chest has been a constant since finding the contract.

Winnie whines again, but before I can speak, the doorbell rings, followed by insistent knocking.

Shit. I've been found.

SIX

Rowan

Winnie prances around my legs as I make my way to the front door. I have half a mind to ignore whoever is here, but my mom's texts are growing more frantic by the hour. The last thing I need is for her to freak out and have the chief put out an APB on me with all that's going on.

When I look through the peephole at who stands on the other side, all I can do is sag with resignation at the conversation I need to have, but clearly by how I've been hiding out, don't want to.

With a deep breath, I open the front door and come face-to-face with a fate I sealed when I took that phone call.

You have to face the music sometime, Row.

"Chad. Hi."

His grin is one of pure relief. His eyes light up and when he steps in to give me a hug, that light fades into confusion as I take a step back to avoid it.

Chad's eyebrows furrow and his eyes assess me. "You're here." He sounds accusatory, but he has every right to be, considering I've dodged him at every chance.

"Yeah, I needed to start going through Gran's stuff. Clear my head. Just ... stuff."

"Stuff? Like the same kind of *stuff* that has you come back from a meeting in Georgia, avoid being in the office, and when you do come in like you did today, you leave without heading up to our floor or saying anything to anyone?"

I swallow and offer a disingenuous smile. "You act like I was hiding or something. I was in the studio shooting a new ad campaign."

"Today, maybe. But when have you ever come to work and then left without going up to your office?"

"I had too much makeup on. Wanted to take a shower and wash it off and work from home," I lie. My makeup was off when I left but he doesn't need to know that.

"You mean Gran's house, because you've yet to go home to yours."

"Chad?" I act confounded but shouldn't be surprised that he knows I haven't been staying at my house.

"What? You don't think I haven't been by your house to make sure you're okay? Or that I haven't been fending off our mothers from bombarding you with wedding details?" He shakes his head. "Fine. Sure. Today you needed to take a shower, but what about the past few days? What's your excuse there?"

I look inside the partially opened doorway to Gran's foyer and dread knowing the polite thing to do is to ask him. The last thing I want to do is invite him in because it's so much more than that.

Then again, it is Chad and he's the one who came up with this whole convoluted idea.

"Come in?" I ask, trying to infuse warmth in my voice.

He clears his throat and nods. Realizing that I'm not as welcoming and cheerful as I should be, he fills the awkward silence with praise for Winnie and she adds to it with the thumping of her tail.

Once we're seated in the front room and staring at each other, he lifts his hands. "So are you going to answer me? You agreed to this and then have completely ignored me," he pushes.

His guard slips ever so slightly and it's there—the love, the adoration, the hope—he's felt for me all these years. The reason he's doing this for me and hoping, somehow, it will make me feel the same in turn.

"The answer is complicated," I murmur.

"Complicated?" He snorts. "That's the type of shit someone says when they're going through a breakup. Should I worry that's why you're avoiding the office?" He looks a little closer at me, and I hold my expression as stoic as possible. "Row? Is that it?"

I struggle to find my voice. If I'm too overeager in response, then he'll know he's right. The last thing I want is anyone knowing that Holden and I were ... a thing. That would put so much in jeopardy for me—my reputation, my standing, my family's opinion that I really don't care about, but now, clearly need in my favor.

"You're being ridiculous, Chad." I wave my hand and roll my eyes.

"Oh my God. *That's it*, isn't it? Who in the hell is it?" His eyes widen and lips fall lax as he leans in closer.

Shit. "Why would you even say something like that?"

"Because I know you, Rowan Rothschild. I've known you my whole life and I swear to god that—"

"I'm not dating anyone."

"Obviously, since you broke up with and are avoiding him."

"Nor have I broken up with anyone."

"Well, we sure as shit know it isn't Holden. There's no love lost there." He snorts and my breath hitches.

"Drop it," I warn.

"You can't lie to me. Like I said, I know you."

"You really don't," I say it softly, and it's the most honest thing I've said this whole conversation.

He blanches. I could have stabbed him, and I think it would have hurt him less. "Wow. Okay." He holds his hands up. "Apologies."

We stare at each other across a dishonest silence that normally I'd wallow in. This time though? After the events of the past few weeks? I'm so sick of caring, so sick of placating everyone else.

I look down at my fingers twisting together and feel the need to revisit what exactly got us to this point. To the catalyst and my reasons for saying yes.

It's almost as if as much as I've wanted to avoid this conversation, seeing him suddenly has me needing to rehash it again.

"Tell me again how you found out about my inheritance because the longer I think on this, the more it's not exactly sitting right with me."

His sigh is resigned but expectant. He is right. He does know me—or rather he knows me well enough to know that I'd want to talk about this again. "I went to my uncle—Gran's executor of her will—to pick his legal mind about ways we might be able to get around this whole Holden mess and keep the company in our hands."

"The same company you had no problem handing away?" I lift my eyebrows, my tone more than accusatory.

"Yes. No. I mean"—he sighs—"I thought it was a good idea; it was what Rhett wanted, but then after I sat back and talked to you, after you made some very valid points, it was like all those doubts I had pushed away came back with a vengeance and made me realize just what we'd be giving away."

I snort. "A little too late for a change of heart, don't you think?"

"I think that inviting Holden in was the morally right thing to do to save the company and everyone's jobs, but his ask of a return was too high and Rhett agreed too quick."

"Go on," I say.

"He has too much power and I think it's pertinent for us to grab back as much control as we can so that there is a set of checks and balances against him."

"He'd still have the majority ownership and control."

"He would, yes." He rubs Winnie's ears and then looks back at me. "But with everyone on the board on our side, there would be constant strife against anything he wants to do that we disagree with."

"I don't think you understand Holden very well. He thrives on that kind of shit." And when push comes to shove, I don't agree with his statement that the board is 100 percent on Rhett's side.

"Perhaps, but I also know from the promises Holden's made Rhett that he clearly wants the best for the company."

Promises mean shit coming from Holden. The executed contract in his drawer is proof enough. I bite back the retort though, and study Chad.

He has to know that Rhett has already signed the paperwork, that the company is Holden's, so why this change of heart? Why now, of all times? And more important, why should I trust a man, why should I marry a man who is clearly keeping this whopper of a secret from me?

I shouldn't. I won't. But that doesn't mean I won't use him and his lifelong infatuation with me to my advantage.

Nasty and deceptive? Yes. Valid? Very much so.

"So you think me marrying you would help hold tighter to that control?" I finally ask.

"We already went over this."

"I'm well aware. Explain it to me again."

"Which part?"

"Let's start with how good ol' Uncle Henry told you the details of my inheritance," I say, baiting him to see if he'll say more this time or will stick to the same narrative.

"He didn't give me details. I told you that." He pauses and I watch his every nuance to see if he's lying. I can't say that I see an indication otherwise. "I was asking him about ways to stop the deal or help salvage the power dynamic."

"And his ideas were?"

"He said our options were more than limited and then he spewed legal shit that amounted to nothing. Then just as I was about to walk out, my uncle said, off the cuff, 'The answer is easy. Rowan needs to get married to get her inheritance. Your family has talked for years about it, so why don't you finally do it? Just marry the woman, so she has a leg to stand on."

Those words hit me once again, square in the gut.

"And that's all he said?"

"It is. I swear. Not how much. Not anything else. Just the word *inheritance*." His hands go back up to the surrender position. "Everyone in this town knows our moms talk about us getting married someday. Why wouldn't my uncle think the same?"

"It's ... too convenient."

"You grilled me on this last time. I don't know why he said that. All I know is that he thinks marrying you helps you claim your inheritance, and in the same breath, I know that if you do, you get the additional voting shares that come with taking my

last name."

My head still spins at the revelation he told me that day. How my grandfather drew up the company bylaws to guarantee my Gran some say in her family company. That anytime the CEO or COO marries, their spouse would acquire a set number of voting shares to make them vested in the company their spouse runs. A perk so they can have more influence, more pull, more everything in their favor, regardless of their performance.

No wonder the company is struggling with a corporate structure such as that.

Great for their spouses, but total bullshit for someone like me—a blood Rothschild—who is left out in the cold.

Unless, of course, I were to marry Chadwick.

"So you gain whatever Gran left you for your inheritance as well as the additional pull in the company."

"By marrying you?"

He nods. "Yes. Is that enough to help with whatever you need help with?"

I sigh. He clearly doesn't know about the two-year time-frame codicil Gran made. The codicil that makes all this null and void if I want to act now and assert my place in TinSpirits.

But it's enough, it's a start that allows me to agree to this ridiculous farce to see how I can finagle it—use Chad to finagle it, really—to my advantage.

"Yes..." It's more than anyone else is willing to help me with. "But I still don't understand the *why*, Chad. I mean, I do. The stakes for me. You agree to pretend marry me so I can get my inheritance and then we get the marriage annulled in six months, but what's in it for you?"

His smile is soft and his eyes are a mix of emotions that are way easier on me if I don't decide to read into them. "Professionally? TinSpirits is all I've ever known. I bucked family tradition, much to my parents' displeasure, and went against a career in law. In hindsight, I think we gave up too soon on it and think that it's worth teaming up with you to preserve what we can." He looks out the window and then finds my eyes again. "And personally? I've always loved you." His smile says it all and makes my heart plunge—and not in a good way. "I guess I'd hoped that you'd see I'm putting you first, that I want what you want for you—"

"You'd be betraying your best friend." It's easier than saying the hard part out loud.

"That's not how he'd see it. He'd see it as me knitting the family closer together. As me protecting his sister."

I study him. I remember all the years of comments about how we'll end up together someday. The tongue-in-cheek ones said by our mothers and the more honest ones he'd whisper after a few drinks at some society function. Ones that he'd brush off the next day somehow. I'd gotten used to them, thought they were more of an ongoing joke, and now realize, deep down, they never were.

He always meant that.

What kind of person does that make me, to use his emotions for my benefit?

I have to say the hard part out loud though. "I can't promise you that, Chad. What you want. I agreed to this as a means to an end. The plan is to get the marriage annulled."

Chad is crushed by the harshness of this reality, but it's one he needs to understand before we continue. I can see it in his eyes. In his posture. And for the first time in forever, *I don't care*.

"I know, but ... a guy can still hope." He chuckles to play it off but he's more than serious.

"You can paint me as the bad guy, you know. The one who breaks your heart in Westmore's eyes when I walk away after the annulment. I'm okay with that."

He nods. "I'd try to help mitigate that."

"I appreciate it, but it's not necessary."

He rises from his seat and moves to the window to look out at the green grass beyond. "Our moms are wondering what's going on? The engagement gets announced and then you fall off the face of the earth like you don't want this to happen."

"I've been busy."

"You've been hiding while they're chomping at the bit to plan."

They've already planned—for the past five years. Nothing I say or do is going to stop that. "Tell them we're eloping," I deadpan.

He chuckles. "You're serious?"

I nod. "It'll allow us to both save face, not waste money, and not embarrass our families when it ends after a few months."

"You've missed a lot in the ten days you've been gone and refused to answer the phone. The wedding planning train is on track and moving full steam ahead."

"Perfect." Fucking great. You agreed to this, Rowan.

"I've told them we want no frills but—"

"But they are who they are." I scrunch my nose up and imagine yards of taffeta and a sweetheart neckline.

"They are." The nerves in his voice have me looking more closely at him.

"What is it?"

"Well"—he clears his throat and reaches in his pocket—"I figured you'd need this to prove we're actually together, or it might not look real or legitimate or ... anything."

Dread drops in my stomach as he moves toward me with the ring box held out and an oval solitaire diamond nestled in its black velvet. It's ridiculously large and prisms dance all around the room from the sun hitting it.

Shit just got real.

My head spins and my mouth goes dry. My heart races and yet it feels like none of my limbs are getting any of the blood.

This is pretend. A pretend engagement. A pretend wedding. A pretend love affair.

But that diamond is fucking real.

"It's not going to bite you," Chad jokes.

"It's ... gorgeous," I stutter and try to re-wrap my head around this.

"It's yours." His smile is bittersweet. Almost as if he were wishing he were giving this to me under different circumstances.

Where'd he get this? Did he go out and buy this for a fake wedding? Is it a family heirloom?

I'm not sure which one is worse.

I'm hesitant to take it, terrified of its insinuation as well as the repercussions if I don't.

He reaches for my hand to slide the ring on my finger, and I pull a total bitch move and flatten my hand to ask for it to do it myself. He gives a slow nod and winces, but he acquiesces.

I hate that it fits perfectly. I hate that it's completely stunning. I hate that it's from Chad and I feel guilty for feeling that way.

We both stare at it for a beat before I cover it with my other hand and look up at him. "It's gorgeous. Some woman who loves you madly will be lucky to have it one day."

I see the little boy I once knew with dirt on his cheeks and an affinity for chocolate chip cookies, while also seeing the only man it seems I can trust right now.

And I don't like it one bit.

He clears his throat as I stand to break up the gravity of the moment and settle the doubt that's starting to creep in.

"We will have to sell this, Rowan. Be seen at the club. Go out to dinner and socialize. Have an engagement party with friends."

My worst nightmare.

"We'll figure that out as we go." I shove aside his comments like they're nothing.

He lifts his eyebrows, knowing me well enough to know that is me ignoring the request. "Look. I know this is weird for you, Rowan. I know this isn't what you want—least of all with me—but I'm just trying to help you save TinSpirits."

I close my eyes briefly and draw in a long breath. "And I'm the one with everything to lose."

He snorts and looks at me with a disgust I'm not used to when it comes to him. "Really? That's what you're going to say to me?"

"Yeah. It is." The ring feels so heavy on my finger. I want it off. I want him gone. I want all of this to not be something I need to do.

"You're acting just like him, you know."

"Who? Holden?"

"Rhett," he deadpans.

Well, that's a slap in the face.

"You're so full of shit."

"Entitled. Selfish. Thinking only about yourself?" He lifts his eyebrows and just stares at me. "He's my friend but I can still call it like it is. Fact is, this is about both of us. You don't think this puts my job security, my social status, my friendship on the line too? This isn't just you who would take the fallout, so stop treating me like I'm the bad guy. I'm the one putting his neck on the line to help you. And maybe I shouldn't until you see it that way."

His words are a guilt trip wrapped in barbed wire, but one that makes me feel like an asshole nonetheless.

Yes, this is my mission, but Chad's also the one falling on the sword for me.

Shit.

"Chad."

"Forget about it." He waves a hand at me as he turns on his heel and heads to the door.

"Wait."

It slams and something about the moment has me scrambling after him as the idea that's been ghosting in the back of my mind for the better part of a week lands front and center.

I fling open the door to see he's halfway down the path.

"I know how to make this work," I shout after him and his feet falter. The years and years of patriarchy that weigh on my shoulders ease slightly. "I need your help, though."

"What's that? Anything." There's an eagerness to his tone despite the moment that just transpired.

My smile is genuine for the first time we've been sitting here. I'm more than aware what a bitch that makes me considering

the only time I'm sincere is when I'm making the biggest ask of all.

And showing my cards more than I should.

"I need your help with your uncle. I've heard you tell a few friends over the years that if they need to bend the law, you can help with that."

"Row?" He takes a few steps toward me.

"I need you to convince your uncle to bend the law for me."

SEVEN

<u>Rowan</u>

"You can't hide away here in Gran's house forever," Sloane, one of my best friends, says as she lifts a glass of wine to her lips from where she sits on the floor. She absently pets Winnie's unruly fur while constantly surveying everything in Gran's study. "But this place is rather quite remarkable. Especially this room."

"It is, isn't it?"

We both look around again at the history lining its shelves and the crazy wall of photos and everything in between.

"It is. But at some point, you'll have gone through all those stacks of papers and there will be nothing left to hide behind."

"A girl can dream that they'd be endless, now, can't she?"

"She can." She nods and points to a particularly tall stack. "What is all of that?"

"Memories. Receipts from the drug store. Junk mail. Legal shit." I press my fingers to my eyes, the weight of the day getting to me. "This room was always off-limits to us if she wasn't in it. Now I can see why." I lift up the closest paper and see one of the first surprises among many that I'm certain I'll find in here. "She paid off student loans for a couple of strippers who worked across the river."

"She what?"

"You know Gran. No doubt she met them somewhere and wanted to help them out."

"Gran was a legend in the real world and a pariah in the Westmore realm for being compassionate to anyone other than her own kind."

"She was." My smile is bittersweet as I think of my shock when I found her letters to the two ladies earlier amid the first stack I tackled. When I look over, Sloane is studying me.

"This is where you feel the closest to her, isn't it?"

"It's as eccentric as she is." I make a noncommittal sound. "Was. That still seems so hard to say. To believe."

We both fall silent for a beat, but I can hear her laugh echoing down the halls like it was yesterday. I take a sip of my wine and when I look back toward Sloane, she's still looking at me.

"Are we going to talk about all of this?" she asks.

"All of what?" I feign innocence.

"Well, that huge rock on your finger for one. The blindside of finding out you were engaged through the Westmore telephone game. The whiplash shortly thereafter learning that your betrothed is none other than Chadwick of all fucking people. And then you choosing to hide out here in Gran's house and avoid the world." She shrugs indifferently. "I don't know. I think those are all great starting places."

"I already explained it to you." I glance at my finger and tap on the ridiculous ring weighing it down. "Well, except for this earlier today."

"I figured that meant Chad found you. I knew hiding from him could only last so long."

"The girl's got smarts, hence why you're the lawyer."

She rolls her eyes. "So you agreed to marry him—the man you've been dodging for years—because marriage would give you more voting shares in the company that you still won't own." When I go to refute her, she holds her hand up so she can finish. "But the marriage is less about the voting shares and more about you claiming your inheritance early despite knowing there is a two-year time period on your nuptials before you can get it?"

"When you put it like that it sounds stupid."

"But it's the gist?"

"Yeah. I guess." I scrub my hands over my face and then look at her as I shake my head. "I just need to feel in control somehow. Can you understand that?"

"Not only do I understand it, but I also encourage it." She lifts her glass my way. This is why when I needed to confide in someone, I chose her. It doesn't hurt that she's a lawyer and might be able to help me on that front.

"And I may have asked Chad that if I agree to do this with him, marry him, that he'd try and influence his uncle to find a work-around to Gran's two-year codicil."

She raises her eyebrows and blows out a low whistle. "You're playing hardball."

I shrug. "Perhaps. Or maybe it's more like I've heard Chad tell more people than I care to count over the years how his family can get rules bent if need be. So how about getting them bent for me—his soon-to-be wife?"

"His soon-to-be pretend wife."

"Yes." I hate that there is judgment in her eyes when they meet mine but also love it because isn't that what a best friend is supposed to be? Your biggest cheerleader and the person who calls you on the carpet? "It's the only reason for me to even agree to this—"

"Other than to screw Holden over."

"Yes. That." I take a sip of wine and fight that inherent part of me that knows how angry Gran would be with me while justifying it with her own words: *Assess. Adjust. Adapt. Kick ass.* "In my head I was thinking that all the men in my life had screwed me over by working the system somehow, so why can't I?"

"Again, I'm not going to argue. That man has been in love with you forever. A type of love that, if it was really real, would have led him to tell you everything that was going on with the company and your brother, rather than hide it. So yes, I hate that he'll be hurt because Chad is a good guy, but I fully support you using all means necessary to get what you need, what is rightfully yours, and getting it sooner rather than later."

"So the question, my smart, witty friend ... is *how do I do this*? Is it feasible to bypass the addendum? If I were to get the money, what is the best way to use it to hold on to TinSpirits? If none of the above, then how do I use these added shares marrying Chad will net me in my favor when Holden will still be the majority owner?"

"Is this an off-the-record or an on-the-record question?" she asks pointedly.

"It can be any kind of record you want." I scoot yet another one of Gran's collections—a jar of pennies—across the desk toward her. "If you need a retainer to make this official under attorney-client privilege, then here you go."

"Look at you being all crafty."

I smirk. "I'm not here to win favors from anyone."

"Good. That's what I like to hear." She twists her lips and nods as her expression morphs into business with hard lines and narrowed eyes. "Legally, your options are limited when it comes to Gran's will and the addendum."

"You're supposed to offer support, not squash it," I say wryly. Then I look at the four bottles of wine she brought with her earlier and remember that I do, in fact, love her despite her brutal honesty.

"You'd want nothing less from me."

"True, but no doubt, it will still hurt."

She chuckles in agreement. "So, other than Henry Williams throwing his Juris Doctor out the window and being completely unethical?"

"Yes, other than that."

"Because that is what you asked Chad to convince his uncle to do, correct? To pretend like the two-year addendum Gran drew up never happened since the only two people who knew about it were you and him."

I twist my lips. It was a big ask, a huge one. And I think Chad wants to prove his worth to me so desperately, he just might push for it.

"I didn't give specifics about the addendum—just that it held a time frame to receive my inheritance—but yes, I did ask him if he'd talk to his uncle and see if maybe he could bend the rules for me."

She whistles, low and long, and I swear I can feel the judgment like a spray of perfume misting my skin. "Good thing this is off the record." She scoots the jar of pennies closer to her and chuckles. "But is now covered by attorney-client privilege."

"Good thing."

"Is it feasible to disregard the addendum? Well, the main argument one could use with the addition of the two-year parameter is that Gran wasn't of sound mind. But that is no longer valid seeing as the question would have had to have been raised before she signed anything."

"Shit." Which is why asking Chad to pressure his uncle is that much more important.

"My other suggestion on how to deem it null and void would be if it weren't executed, or her signing it wasn't witnessed, but everything is electronic these days—"

"Not my gran. She was old-school and refused to do any kind of electronic signature."

"Well, that's even harder to prove then, given it'd be in her penmanship."

"Gah. I know something is hinky with it. I can feel it."

"Why do you say that?"

"It's stupid." I scrunch my nose and heat creeps up my cheeks. But it's Sloane. She knows every kiss, every breakup, every everything I've done. "I had a dream when I was in Georgia. Gran was in it. We were in this room."

"And that's why you're going through all these stacks? Because you think Gran was telling you something?"

I chuckle nervously. "It sounds ridiculous."

"No, honey. It sounds like grief and coping with it. This is where you feel closest to her. Of course you're going to have dreams about her and read into every single thing about them. That's what everyone does."

She meets my eyes and compassion oozes out of her. "If you tell anyone about this and how I'm losing my mind I'm going to deny it and blame it on the wine."

Her smile is lightning quick. "Deal. Besides, you have more than enough blackmail material on me, so it's a nonstarter."

My smile is quickly replaced with a groan as I rest my head back in frustration. "No doubt good of Henry would blur some lines if my name were Rhett."

She lifts her eyebrows and contemplates my comment. "You're serious about that, aren't you? You really think he'd risk his

law license for your brother?"

"I'm only hoping he'd risk it for Chad at this point because that means it would benefit me." I huff. "I don't put anything past anyone with the last name Rothschild, Williams, or Knight these days."

"Even the Williams you've agreed to marry?"

If looks could kill, she'd be dead ... but she has a point. "I'm reserving judgment, but so far he's the only man in my life encouraging me and telling me what I want is worth fighting for."

"I like Chad. He's always been a decent guy, but do you really believe he's only doing this to gain back some of the power Holden has?" she asks wryly. "Because I'm not buying it."

"I'm not that naive, no. I've made him more than aware that this is a business arrangement that will be annulled in six months."

"Six months doesn't mean shit if you can't find a way to work around the two-year addendum."

"I'm well aware, but it's all I have. Marry Chad, get his voting shares, try and convince Henry to ignore the two-year time frame, use the money I inherit to influence board members to vote how I need them to vote or to buy them out. Either way, I improve my standing in TinSpirits and become the second largest shareholder behind Holden."

"That's a lot of what-ifs," she muses.

"Well, what-ifs are all I have right now and it's better than having *no choice*, so I'm clinging to them even if that makes me a selfish person who only cares about herself. Because in only caring about myself, then that means every person at TinSpirits will still have a job. It means I try and keep my promise to Gran. So yes, it feels awful to use Chad this way, but he's walking into it knowing the outcome. It's not my fault if he thinks he's going to wear me down and win me over so I fall in love with him. That's on him because I've told him otherwise."

"Wow. Okay. The woman has a plan." She nods but bites back what I can only assume are the dozens of other things she wants to say. No doubt things I've already thought of time and again as it is. "Just do me a favor, if—when—you try and bend whatever rules you try to bend, we never had this conversation."

"I know."

"I'm racking my brain here to figure out how you can do this without breaking the law. Or rather, Henry breaking the law, because I don't see him risking everything for you. No offense."

"None taken. This is Westmore where men reign and women are supposed to be demure and compliant. I'm under no impression that Uncle Henry is going to bend at all. I'm not a man."

"No shit." She rolls her eyes, a victim at times of the misogyny in this town when it comes to her law practice. "Is it possible for you to ask Henry to see the signed addendum? Her inheritance letter to you implies it was a recent add. Maybe I can look at it and see if anything there is fishy. It's a long shot, but..." She shrugs.

"But it's something."

"It is." She rises and tops off both our glasses of wine before moving about the room. For as long as I've known Sloane, it's easier for her to think when her feet are moving. "But, if you are able to get around the two years and get ahold of the funds, then we need to start thinking about Gran's dirt on board members she left us."

"There's a lot of it," I murmur.

"There is. We just need to figure out the best way to play your cards."

Her words settle in and no matter how many times I might have actually thought of everything we're discussing, it feels so odd plotting and planning and being everything I normally am not.

"Yes. Sure. I just ... Can you explain that if this is a done deal—if the company is officially sold—why doesn't anyone know? Why hasn't Holden announced it? That makes me worry there is more to what's going on that I don't know."

Sloane shrugs and purses her lips in contemplation. "Oftentimes an NDA is put into effect for various reasons during a deal like this. The acting parties want the terms of the deal to stay confidential, or it might be as simple as not wanting to scare employees. Often a new owner or the majority ownership will run the company in secret for a set amount of time so that when the employees eventually find out the deal is done, the owners can say, 'See? We've been doing this for three months and nothing has changed. There's no need to be concerned about your job,' etcetera."

"Huh." Never thought about it that way.

"Change spooks the hell out of a lot of people, uncertainty more so."

Her words hit home in a way I didn't expect. The pressure in my chest mounts. "Oh my God. What have I done?" My chuckle is part shock, part disbelief as I lean back in the desk chair and stare at the ornate tiles on the ceiling.

"Doubts so soon?"

"Doubts every second of every day," I groan. "This is how I honor Gran's memory? By trying to find a work-around to her final wishes. Like, this isn't me, Sloane. I don't do stuff like this."

"She'd be proud of you for fighting, Rowan. For trying to keep what her family started as much in Rothschild hands as possible."

Her comment eases an iota of the weight I feel over betraying Gran's wishes. Let's just hope this is more than a pipe dream

and that I'm able to pull it off.

"It was like I saw that executed contract—Rhett's and Holden's signatures on an agreement with none of the changes we'd discussed made—and it dawned on me what a chump I'd been. Everyone's been playing dirty and without any scruples. I knew I needed to step onto the playing field and jump in the mud with them or just accept that I've given it all up."

"I would have done the same."

"Yeah, but I keep coming back to the same question. Over and over."

"What's that?"

"What is any of this netting me?"

"Time," she states evenly.

I meet my best friend's eyes and give the subtlest of nods. "Time?"

"Yes. Time to see if Henry will turn. Time to dig into the dirt Gran left to see who on the board will be the most easily influenced. Time to figure out if this is worth going through. Time to see if your dream was real. You have it all mapped out in your head, but if you don't think being the second largest owner behind Holden is worth it by October thirteenth, then at least you can walk away and be happy with your \$1 million a year for thirty years. It's not like that's anything to sneeze at."

"I'm well aware." It just doesn't give me the opportunities that a bulk \$30 million would. "Wait. What's October thirteenth?"

Sloane throws her head back and laughs as I rack my brain to figure out what's three months from now. But her laugh fades and her expression falls into disbelief when she realizes I'm serious. She eyes me for a beat. "It's your wedding date."

It takes me a second to find my words. To grapple with the reality of a date when a ring was hard enough. "I think my stomach just fell to the floor and got trampled by a wild stampede of ... something."

"Then you know exactly how I felt when I found out via a toast being offered at the country club that my dear old friend—you—was engaged." She lifts her eyebrows.

"I know. I've already apologized. Profusely."

"Although I did find it rather odd you weren't involved in the toast nor were you anywhere to be found, but ... stranger things have happened."

"Well, at least you questioned it, because it seems no one else has."

"No one? Really?" She eyes me. "Because I bet your phone has been blowing up and you're just ignoring it."

She's right on all fronts. But if I answer the messages then I have to lie to people who trust me and that's a tough pill for me to swallow.

"I feel the worst about Victoria. About Catherine," I say about our other two friends that make up our foursome. "About the egg that will be on my family's face when we end the marriage after such a short time frame. They are the hardest to lie to about this."

"Understandably. Who knows the truth?" Sloane asks.

"You. Me. Chad." Those three syllables sound so lonely.

"Jesus," she swears like she didn't already know.

"Yep, I'll be lying to everyone about everything ... because that sits well on my conscience."

"No one else seems to be bothered by their lying."

"But not everyone else has the circus my and Chad's mothers have no doubt already created."

"Not gonna lie to you. It's ginormous."

"Fuck," I hiss out under my breath. "This isn't me, Sloane. The lying. The cheating. The deception."

"You've been royally screwed over. You either lie down and die or you fight. You're fighting and no one will blame you for standing up for yourself. In fact, I think many would admire you. This is Westmore though. A town that favors men and where one bathes in the corruption of whichever last name you were born into."

"I'm trying to use that to my benefit. Fingers crossed it works."

"And the board seat you net with Miriam LLC?" she asks, mentioning Gran's private company my grandfather set up years ago. One that gave her a 5 percent stake in the company she wasn't allowed to take part in.

"The way your Gran has it in the documents you showed me is that the seat and ownership are transferred to you upon marriage too."

"So yet another thing I net by going through with this whole Chad charade."

"One could look at it that way, yes."

"But I am able to remain anonymous?"

Her smile is quick and disarming. "That's the best part. You are. Once you inherit full ownership of Gran's company, then you could vote via proxy on all board matters. Just like no one knows Miriam LLC is actually Gran's company, no one has to know it's yours either."

"She was a sneaky little bitch, wasn't she?"

"Anonymous ownership. Blackmail material. Yes, she was, and I love her for it."

- "Me too," I murmur and smile at the advantages she left me, regardless of the ridiculous parameters she attached to them. Sloane finally takes a seat across from me. "Should we get to what you're not telling me?"
- "What's that?"
- "How you're doing."
- "Fine. Great." My smile is tight.
- "You're full of shit, Rothschild. You wear your heart on your sleeve most days for those who care enough to see it ... and yours is broken."

Emotion claws its way up my throat and burns. "We're not talking about that."

- "I don't know why I'm struggling to believe he really screwed you over. It seemed like you two were..."
- "Yeah. I know. But I saw that contract plain as day. Signed by both of them. No changes made. No promises kept. Not a fucking word said as he took me on a whirlwind weekend in Manhattan."
 - "His guilt tour." She sneers.
 - "Exactly."
 - "Fucker."
 - "I believe a lot more adjectives are needed, but yeah, that about sums up how I feel about him."
 - "I'm sorry, Row. It's our fault. We pushed you to have fun with him. To sleep with the enemy. And—"
 - "And he proved why in fact he is the definition of the word *enemy*."
 - "You're positive you weren't mistaking anything? I mean..."
- "If the deal was finalized and I benefitted from it, I do believe Holden would have told me about it because he's a guy, and in a guy's mind—"
 - "He'd be rewarded with the world's best blow job ever."
 - "Bingo." I snap my fingers. "And he didn't say a word."
- The thought sticks with me long after our wine has been drunk and Sloane has fallen dead to the world in one of the numerous guest rooms.

I lie in bed, my head swimming with wine and feeling the weirdest juxtaposition of being the most prepared and most unprepared I've ever felt in my life.

Step into the gray with me.

I have nothing to lose because it seems I've already lost it all.

I'm there, Knight. I'm in the gray.

And I'm ready to take you on.

EIGHT

Holden

She was nowhere a few days ago and now she's every-fucking-where I look.

On my computer screen in proof after proof of the new marketing images. That goddamn red bikini and that straw resting between her pouty lips. The ones I refuse to use but that sell the product so damn well, even I want to drink it.

In the office. The distinct click of her heels as she strides up and down the hall with a purpose that I swear says *fuck you*, and for the life of me I can't figure out the *why* behind it.

In the clipped tone of every single email response I've gotten from her.

In the radio silence of unanswered texts I've sent her.

In that fucking annoying laugh Chadwick has that seems to be louder and more grating every time I hear it.

In that rock on her finger that has me gritting my teeth every damn time I see it flash across the room.

I've missed something when I never miss anything.

I pinch the bridge of my nose and run everything over in my head again. I spent hours digging into Chad again last night. Firewall after firewall. Social media DMs. His iCloud account. Fucking everything.

And as much as my ego is fucking bruised at the admission, there has to be something he has to offer her that I can't.

What did I fucking miss?

What does marrying him net her that I can't see?

My jaw hurts from clenching and my eyes burn from the late-night-into-early-morning scrolling.

Of course Rowan would choose what Chad has to offer over what I do. She's a Rothschild, after all. A product of this fucked-up town and backward society. Rich folk stay together. Westmore Rothschilds and Williamses do, especially.

Nothing's changed.

Fucking shame on me for thinking she was different.

"Holden?" Bob, my investigator, prompts through the connection when I've gone silent for longer than normal.

"Make it fucking hurt," I grit out.

"O-kay." He stretches the word out with curiosity edging his tone. "Is there a reason for your change of heart?"

"I wasn't aware I needed to have one."

He clears his throat. The man's worked for me long enough to know my tone means don't fucking question me.

"So, make it hurt in what respect?" he redirects as he rightly fucking should. "You've created a lot of options."

"I have, haven't I?" The thought makes me smile and feel a little better. There's no place that Rhett or Chadwick can run and hide to avoid my wrath.

I've made goddamn sure of it.

The rotten land deal named WillowBend. The exposure of their trust embezzlements. A cold case on a hit-and-run. A large payment to ensure a winning run for city council. *Them finding out that Rowan now has a seat on their board*.

So many fucking ways.

"WillowBend, I assume?" Bob asks.

"Yes. The owners are teetering on defaulting on their loan. They're more than late on their payments."

"Even with the ten percent they received closing the deal?"

I glance down the hallway through the wall of windows on my office toward Rhett's. My door is closed. I can speak freely. "That ten percent doesn't stretch far when you have to account for taxes, lawyers, accountants, the disbursement to the other shareholders." I smirk and then scowl. "Then there's the upcoming wedding. No doubt both sets of parents will request to pull funds from their family trusts—"

"Which now have virtually nonexistent balances."

"Correct. I mean, if you're throwing the biggest wedding Westmore's ever seen, then no doubt you only want the best of everything." I choke on the words and hate the acrid taste they leave on my tongue.

"It's a tough way to live, robbing Peter to pay Paul and then floating the funds again so Peter thinks he's still rich."

"Shell game," I murmur. Been there, done that. It was the only way I could survive at times. But my game was to deceive banks into giving me more loans, not to trick my parents so they don't know I siphoned all the funds from their accounts. "Spread the wealth around. Put enough in the trust to pay for the wedding so no one questions anything. Give enough of a payment on the loan to satisfy the lender that more is coming."

"The lender will allow that?"

"When your last name is Rothschild or Williams, you get endless favors."

He chuckles. "Clearly they don't truly know the man with the last name Knight."

"Clearly." I stretch my fingers and for the first time in days feel slightly more in control of things. "We'll need to watch

TinSpirits' accounts as well. No doubt they'll try something—a big payment to a nonexistent supplier or something in case they get in trouble."

"I'm assuming you have that taken care of on your end?" Bob asks.

"I have. Yes." I put triggers in TinSpirits' operating system long before we inked a letter of intent. And those safeguards have allowed me to follow a trail of payments. Knowledge is power and they have no clue how much I have on them.

"Okay, so ... what do you need from me?"

"Give them hope that WillowBend is sold. We'll string those assholes along. Get right up to the signing day and then I'll yank it the fuck away from them with a public decree of how they're falsifying reports. Get the real estate board to investigate them for fraud."

"Perfect. The fuckers are slimy."

Chadwick walks out of his office and glances down the hall toward mine. I meet his eyes but don't react outwardly otherwise. My hands fist and shoulders tense. What is it you're giving her that I can't?

"They sure are," I murmur. "Like I said, I want it to hurt."

Then Chadwick walks to the door of Rowan's office, leans his hip against the doorframe, and laughs that fucking laugh again presumably at something she says.

"Holden?"

Chadwick looks back over his shoulder and smirks my way.

Oh, how I want it to fucking hurt.

"Yeah. Sorry. Where were we?" I swivel in my chair so my back is to the show in the hall. "They're going to panic, Bob. What's the last thing you want to happen when you're running for public office?"

"A scandal. An exposé. Running out of money."

"Exactly. And right now all three are threatening Rhett. So they'll fight. They'll call in favors. They'll hold on. And then the house of cards will crumble."

"You really think Chadwick will remain loyal and at Rhett's side?"

I think of the damn lighter left in the gutter. Clank. Click. Clank. The best friend, Rhett, who's kept a secret for Chadwick for all these years.

"Each knows where the other has buried the bodies. There's no way they'd betray each other now."

"Huh. Stupid move if you ask me."

"Agreed, but mutual blackmail is a powerful thing."

"True." He pauses and I know he's thinking what I'm thinking. Same goes for us.

I let the silence stretch and my unspoken threat scream across it. Don't get any fucking ideas.

"When will you know the time is right?" Bob asks.

It's a question I've asked myself more times than I care to count. A question I might have waffled some on with Rowan threaded through the day-to-day of my life. Not anymore.

I've seen the error of my ways.

"When? When it will ruin them completely." When the company is pieced apart and sold out from under them. When all the money is gone and their parents realize they've fucked them, their financial security, and their social status right out from under them. When they're the fucking laughingstocks in this town with nothing left to offer anybody.

When they act out of desperation like I no doubt am certain they will.

"I know it seems I'm only after Rothschild," I say and glance over my shoulder to where Chadwick still stands, "but this is a zero-sum game for both."

"And one is the conduit for the other."

"Correct. It might be Rhett front and center, but make no mistake, Bob, Chadwick is sighted as well."

"I never doubted it. So I'll contact their estate agent. Tell them the deal might be back on the table."

"Yes."

"And while Rhett's campaign is as low-key as can be—"

"Because he's already bought himself the seat," I say.

"It doesn't hurt to have a friend I know over at the Federal Election Commission threaten an audit of his campaign finances. Those pesky laws can be so tricky to understand and follow."

"Might trigger a panic." Perfect.

"Just might." Bob laughs. "And with Chadwick being the campaign finance manager and all, it might just add a bit of a damper on that wedding being planned."

"Did I ever tell you how much I like you, Bob?"

"No, but my paycheck shows you do."

"At least we speak the same love language."

"We do in fact."

"Oh, hey." I glance down to my notepad with the word *Monarch* scribbled on it and circled over and over. "Does the word *Monarch* mean anything to you?"

"No. Why?"

* * *

"Monarch," Chad spits out.

"Monarch?" I ask. The word and the way he said it gives me pause.

"The reason behind it all." He glances over his shoulder to where Rhett should be coming any second.

"Behind what all?"

"Rhett. His carte blanche."

* * *

"I'm not sure." I glance again at the word. The one Chad offered up when we were in the strip club that night like a junkie desperate for a hit just to gain some clout with me. "But it means something or Chad wouldn't have said it to me."

"Context?"

"He just said that's why Rhett has carte blanche, but fuck if I can figure out what it means."

"An anonymous LLC or something?"

"Who the hell knows, but it's something."

"Especially if he was offering it to you as a means to win favor."

"My thoughts exactly."

"Huh. Interesting. Well, I'll keep all the irons in the fire so everything stays hot and ready to ignite when you say so."

"Perfect." In the meantime, I'll continue to have fun with them in my own ways.

"Have a good rest of your day, Mr. Knight."

"You too, Bob. You too."

I drop my cell onto the desk and swivel back to stare down the hallway. TinSpirits managers move about. But I focus on one doorway. On one office.

And on the woman I can't see but whose kiss I can still fucking taste.

"Audrey," I call out through the intercom.

Within seconds, my door swings open and a pair of steely eyes questions me. "Yes?"

"Has the paperwork been finished yet?"

"On the transfer of—?"

"Yes, on that."

"It should be here by week's end."

"They do know I'm paying them for their expediency, right?"

"I believe you may have said that a time or two," she says sarcastically, which earns her a dubious look. "You wouldn't have done anything to piss off our two favorite executives, would you?"

"Why?"

"Because they went from smiling and laughing in the hallway to silently whispering agitatedly behind closed doors."

A slow smile crawls over my lips. "My fingers might have slipped and hit some erroneous keys a bit ago. I'm sure whatever I accidentally hit will right itself in a bit. The panic will subside, no doubt."

What do you do to two people desperate for money? Take their accounts offline? Create a glitch that zeroes out their accounts? Maybe both. No doubt Rhett and Chadwick are holed up in one of their offices freaking the fuck out.

Things will correct themselves shortly.

In the meantime, I rather enjoy knowing the chaos I've sown.

"Tell Miss Rothschild I need to see her."

Audrey lifts her eyebrows but doesn't ask the questions I can see in her eyes. "Sure. Shall I tell her what it's in regards to?" Why she's changing the dress.

Why she's with Chad.

Because I need to see her.

"The new ad campaign."

NINE

Rowan

I'm hyperaware of everything.

The fall of footsteps down the hall. The click of office doors being closed. The specific rings to each person's cell phone. One deep baritone that I've been successful so far in avoiding.

It's my third full day back in the office and the first that Holden's been here. I try to pretend I don't care he's here but that's a lie.

"Holden would like to see you still," Audrey says from my doorway.

"And my response from the last three times you asked still stands." I lift my eyes to meet the displeasure in hers. "Everything he needs I've supplied him with via email. Every question he's asked has been answered. Every wild goose chase he's attempted to put me on has been dealt with. I'm busy and have more important things to do than to cater to his whims that don't have anything to do with my job. So, again, tell him to check his email."

I swear there is a flicker of a smile on the ice princess's lips, but it's gone as soon as I see it. "I believe the whole point of asking you to his office is that he wants to have a face-to-face discussion with you."

"Hm. Yes." I look back toward the documents I'm signing before glancing back up to her with utter disinterest. "Well, let him know I'm busy. If I get caught up, I'll be sure to find him."

Audrey raises her eyebrows and tsks. "You're playing with fire, Miss Rothschild."

I purse my lips and hold her stare. "Or maybe he's the one who is."

She gives the subtlest of nods, but it takes her a few seconds before she backs out of my office.

My sigh is long and measured as I close my eyes for a beat to center myself.

When I open them, Rhett is standing in front of me. "You good?"

"Mmm. Yep." Yet another man who is lying to me about the deal being finalized.

"You sure? You seem ... off?"

I meet eyes that match mine and get smugness when I'm hoping for guilt. "Off?" I chuckle. "Why would I be off? You've agreed to sell our company. You—"

"You're getting married. Doesn't that trump everything else, Row? You have so much to look forward to."

"Yep. Seems so."

He angles his head to the side and studies me for a beat. "You want to tell me what made you have a change of heart in regards to Chad? Talk about coming out of the blue. I mean ... I figured he'd at least have asked me if it were okay first."

I shrug. "Being blindsided sucks, doesn't it?"

"I deserve that," he says but clearly thinks I'm referring to the deal in general and not the deal being closed. "Why the about-face though?"

"I just ... "I struggle with what to say and how to explain. I've practiced the answer a million times in the mirror but facing my brother is so very different. "He's a good guy and after all this turmoil, I realized how maybe it's finally time to—"

"Out. I need to talk to Rowan," Holden orders as he strides into my office like he owns the place.

I mean ... he does in fact own the place, but I'm too busy focusing on the man I loathe and want and desire and detest to even consider the point.

"Excuse me?" I say as Rhett voices his own protest. "You can't just waltz in here and give orders."

"I believe I just did." Holden crosses his arms over his chest and lifts his eyebrows. He doesn't once look at my brother but he sure as shit speaks to him. "Shut the door on your way out, Rhett."

Rhett shifts on his feet, his eyes flickering to Holden and then back to me. "What do you want?" he asks.

"For you to shut the fucking door on the way out. Don't believe I stuttered."

Rhett meets my eyes and I give the subtlest of nods to him that it's okay for him to leave. I can read his hesitation one of two ways—that he wants to protect me or that he's afraid what Holden's going to say to me will be derogatory about him.

Sadly, I don't think it's because of the first.

"Uh—sure," Rhett states, his shoulders squared as he moves past Holden in what can only be described as threatening.

But Holden doesn't even flinch or look his way. His only visible response is the ticking of the muscle in his jaw and his unflinching stare.

Rhett shuts the door behind him but he stands just outside, looking in the small window to my office as if he's hoping to see something. Holden glances over his shoulder and that's all it takes for my brother to finally leave.

But it's when Holden turns to face me again that I know I'm screwed. That I know the true meaning of undeniable attraction. The want to step into him and take what I thought was mine and now what I loathe was is just ... there.

Betrayal.

That's what he did to me and what my body seems to be continuing to do.

He steps toward me and I take a step back.

We're in my office, blinds open, on display for anyone to see who dares to walk by and yet here we are, a foot apart, desire snapping between us as ferociously as our hatred.

"Ignoring me? Refusing to come to my office? I thought better of you than that," Holden said, the low tenor of his voice rumbling through the confined space. "More professional. More ... everything."

I hate that his words eat at me. That they burrow beneath my skin and cause guilt when I have nothing to feel guilty over.

"Says the man who has tried to fuck me out of everything I deserve—literally and figuratively."

"Fuck you out of everything you deserve?" He snorts. "Seems like you're getting exactly that by marrying Chad."

"Jealous?" I taunt.

"The anger. The bitterness. Is there a reason, Sunshine, that you seem to have forgotten who and what we were together?" He angles his head to the side.

He reaches out and I jolt back, my shoulders hitting the wall behind me. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Reminding you just how good we are."

"Good? I can't even be in the same room with you anymore." My words are strong but my inner resolve questions my strength.

"Hmpf." He trails a finger down the side of my cheek as I inhale a shaky breath. "Funny seeing as how you used to beg me to be inside of you."

"Fuck you, Holden."

He chuckles and the sound rumbles in my chest. "Doesn't seem to be part of the plan anymore, now, does it?"

"Ah yes. You and your plans. You talk a big game, Knight. Too bad you don't know how to deliver."

My yelp is instantaneous as his hand encircles my neck like a necklace—his thumb beneath one ear, fingertips against the other. A sign of ownership, of frustration ... of desire. My pulse thunders against the pads of his fingers and his cock grows hard against my thigh. "We both know I damn well deliver."

We can't be here like this.

Not in my office where people can see.

Not at TinSpirits where people can know we were ... whatever we were.

Not because he betrayed me.

And yet our proximity is intoxicating. It's addicting. It's everything I never wanted and now can't believe I have to live without.

I push against his chest to break the spell, to prevent myself from wanting him to kiss me, but he just cuffs my wrists with his free hand and holds me still. "Deliver? Huh. Guess you and I have different definitions of that term."

He looks me up and down, the warmth of his breath still hitting my lips and my heart still wanting to jump out of my chest and into his. "We need to talk and that's quite difficult when all you do is avoid me."

"Back off. I don't want or need anything from you. You made fucking sure of that," I grit out.

He lifts an eyebrow, his lips twitching at their corners. "You don't? I find that hard to believe when your breath is shallow and I can smell your arousal."

"You're such an entitled prick," I say, more than relieved that, when I push against his chest this time, he actually takes a step back.

"I beg to differ but then again, I never claimed to be anything different. What seems to be the problem, Rowan? Because this conversation is getting quite tiresome." He plucks at imaginary lint on his jacket like nothing is a big deal when it feels like everything is.

How can he stand before me, so aloof, thinking this is all about sex and desire? How can he act like nothing has happened when everything has?

Why does he believe me?

"You're the one who came in my office. You're the one who is demanding we talk when there is nothing left to talk about."

"And you're the one pretending to be someone she's not."

"Like who?" I ask.

"Like being interested in Chad."

I suck in a breath but don't respond. How can I?

"There's something going on here, Sunshine. Something you're not telling me."

"I could say the same thing of you, but then again, this whole thing started based on secrets and deception, so why should I expect anything different?"

"Is Chad really who you want? Because I didn't take you for a woman who settles for less than."

"And I didn't expect you to be a man who cared what I settled for."

And that's what this boils down to for him. Not the betrayal he's keeping from me. Not the lies he told me. It's the fact that I

picked Chad over him and his precious ego can't handle it.

You're just a pawn in his game, Row.

Move on.

He takes a step toward me, in my space, in the next air I breathe, and I fight against whatever it is he has on me that just won't let go. His eyes hold mine and glitter with unanswered questions.

"Make it make sense, Rowan."

And this is what he does. He reels me in. He makes me believe that look in his eyes means he actually cares for me. And then he uses me at his leisure.

Desperate to break his hold on me, I take another step back and rest my ass on the credenza behind my desk. I keep my fingers there, gripping its edge—a silent show of restraint. Something to touch besides wanting to touch him.

"Not everything has to make sense, Holden."

I trusted you.

"In my world it does."

"How about this? I hate you. I hate myself for wanting you. I hate this whole fucking mess—the one that happened the minute you stepped into my life, into my world. Since you showed up, everything has been wrong and messed up and—"

"Your world was upside down long before I showed up. You were just too blind to see it."

"Thanks for the clarity." I roll my eyes. "How did I ever live before I met you?"

"You did," he says softly. "You scrapped and clawed and fought on uneven and majorly biased footing. And then when I showed up, I helped level the playing field for you."

Why do his words bring tears to my eyes? Because he's right. Because he knew it, gained my trust, and then screwed me over anyway. Because he's standing here before me with a straight face and a pocket full of loaded lies.

I swallow over the lump lodged in my throat. "I didn't need you to fix anything for me. Ever."

"Did New York mean nothing to you, Rowan? Or has all of this simply been your way of using me to get what you want?"

I blink back both tears and the shock his words cause. "Get what I want? Sure. Yep. That's all it was."

"Seems like it to me." Bitterness coats his every word.

"I could ask the same of you."

"I'm not the one who's wearing another man's ring, though, am I? What happened? How did we go from New York to this? From kissing goodbye on the tarmac to finding out you're engaged to that fucking prick?"

I stare at him and my chest physically hurts because there is nothing Chad can give me that Holden can't. At least until Holden signed those papers and screwed me over.

But I'm not supposed to know that.

This is Westmore, after all, where the men make and break all the rules, and the women get screwed by them.

"I'm not doing this here," I whisper, taking the easy way out. Blame it on being in the office rather than tell the truth.

"Of course you're not. Convenient." He throws his hands up. "I deserve a fucking answer," his voice thunders and no doubt employees could hear that, but the five words give nothing away.

"I deserve a lot of answers, Holden, but this isn't the time nor is it the place to have this discussion. And truth be told, I don't owe you shit. Not an explanation. Not a reason. Not—"

"Stop talking in nonanswers," he shouts and I swear, by the frustration etched in the lines of his face, if he could shake me by the shoulders he would. He pulls down on the back of his neck, tension emanating off his entire body. "Just tell me one thing. What is it he's given you that I can't?"

Honesty. I open my mouth and then close it.

Don't cry.

Don't you dare fucking cry.

"Seems you can't figure the answer to that either," he murmurs when I don't respond. "It looks like we're no better off than when I walked in here."

"Sounds about right."

"Your loss." He holds his hands up and gives me a nod, his eyes locked on mine for a beat before he turns on his heel and walks to the door of my office. "Good thing I make it a point to never fucking care. You sure as shit proved me right there." And with those words he strides out of my office without looking back.

I don't think I've ever seen Holden Knight sad, but I swear to God he is—and I don't know what to do with that information. Just like I don't know what to do with the fact that I currently feel like all the women I've ridiculed in the past. The ones

who overlooked what a man did to them because of how he made them feel otherwise.

Too weak. Too whiny. Too smitten by a man that they should steer clear of because he betrayed them.

And yet I'm standing here staring at an empty doorway and after the man I am desperate to be wrong about.

But I saw the documents.

The betrayal was in black and white.

But that doesn't make my heart understand it any easier.						

TEN *Holden*

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO

Grief might be never-ending, but bills are still due on the first of the month.

Life moves on even when yours has stopped.

Some of Mom's clients gave her a few weeks off from cleaning their houses. Others fired her for not being able to make their scheduled days. Only one paid her even though she didn't show up.

I stare at the help's entrance of the Westmore Country Club. It's a reflection of this entire fucking place and the members who belong to it. The front entrance is a sight to be seen with its brick pathways, white columns, lush greenery, and ornate trees. Pretty at first sight but the closer you look, you can see the ugly it tries to hide—mold staining the bottoms of the retaining walls and the bug traps hanging on the backsides of each tree.

The back? It's painted just as white, just as bright as the entrance, but there are cracks in the pavement here, ruts in the mud, and the signs that are posted everywhere are warnings to employees on how to behave and what their place is rather than offering Southern hospitality and warm welcomes.

Just like the entrances, the people who enter and exit from each one know their place.

But as I study the back door and prepare myself to face another day without Mase while the dirt upon his grave is still fresh, I fist my hands knowing what I'm about to face.

And I wonder if I'll be able to keep my fucking cool.

With a deep breath and a forced swallow over the emotion balled in my chest, I enter the country club and pray the day goes fast.

And it does.

In a rare moment of decency, my boss, Darren, takes pity on me. Hours upon hours of washing dishes in the back of the kitchen is enough to drive most of us crazy, but today it is just what I needed.

He knows I'd had a loss in the family.

He knows I might need a bit of time to readjust.

While he might kowtow to the people who employ us, at least he is decent to me today.

"You good, Simpson?" Darren asks at the end of my shift as he walks past me with his clipboard in hand and the stick still firmly planted up his ass.

Simpson.

Mason's simple wish—for us to have the same last name—now seems like forever ago. Walking away from the name Knight was a no-brainer ... and easy. Especially in this town where people like me aren't looked twice at.

But hearing it right now, today, after everything that happened, feels like a punch in the gut. It sounds so foreign when said to me, but I own it with every fiber of my being. Anything to feel closer to Mason because with each passing day, he seems to be slipping even further away from me.

"Yeah. Thanks for today. For ... letting me work in the back."

"Of course." His smile is tight and fleeting. "It was a one-time thing though. You left us short elsewhere, and I'd hate for word to get out that you're slacking on the job. Not when we have a list of people waiting to work here."

Fuck you.

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Glad that's understood. Can you bring this down to the Members' Club for me on your way to the locker room?" he asks and motions to the cart full of folded, monogrammed towels.

"Sure."

Within minutes, I've pushed the cart into the Members' Club—a place for those who have paid a ridiculous amount to feel even more superior than they already do—and have unloaded the towels onto the shelves.

Lost in thought, I run a hand absently over the soft terry. Mason never got the chance to feel something like this—what money can buy you and the luxury it affords.

I was going to give him that.

I was going to figure a way.

Clank. Clink. Clank.

I freeze at the sound. At the stark reminder of who and what the person who's holding it no doubt is.

"Those aren't for you to touch," the voice at my back says.

I knew I'd come face-to-face with Rothschild or Williams sooner or later. I'd prepared and rehearsed and reminded myself over and over, *I need this job*. *I need this job*.

But nothing, and I mean *nothing*, prepared me for this feeling—this unyielding fury—I feel as I hear Rhett Rothschild's voice and turn to see him standing there with his cronies at his back. Williams. Porter. Vanderbilt. Dunkirk. Martins.

I clench my fists and then unclench them.

I need this job.

"Cat got your tongue?" Williams asks, glancing toward Rothschild.

The murderer and the accomplice.

I see red.

I see white.

And with all reason turning into rage, I charge at the two of them with fists flying and a feral growl down deep in my throat.

Thoughts are nonexistent as the hurt and the pain and the disbelief rule every part of me.

I connect squarely against them, fists flying and body shoving, pushing them into their friends. But the weight of the whole is no match for me. I lash out with hands and shouts and feet but am restrained within seconds.

And their hands on me, holding me down, is almost even worse. I've felt helpless before—when I held Mason in my arms—and I swore I'd never allow myself to feel that again.

But I do. And I am just that—helpless.

A fist connects with my cheek and I grunt at the impact but welcome the pain. To my stomach. To my chin. To my side.

Each punch is the slightest fraction of what I deserve for letting Mason go outside that day. Each one the smallest dent in the powder keg I've become.

There's shouting.

Then more hands grabbing at me but hauling me backward and away.

I look up through blurry eyes and see Darren there, pulling me back, wide-eyed and shocked. "Stay the fuck back," he growls at me and then holds a finger up. "Stay."

"What the fuck, dude?" Rothschild shouts as the door to the club shoves open before another worker pushes it back closed to keep prying eyes out.

"Closed for maintenance," my coworker says as he surveys the scene and shakes his head just like Darren did.

An altercation with a member? Fighting with a member? That's immediate dismissal and charges for the damages caused.

"Guess the help can't handle a damn joke," Porter says as he looks down at himself, checking his clothes as if I got them dirty.

I stare at them all, blinking away tears of shame with the coppery taste of blood on my tongue

Six against one.

"This didn't happen," Darren says, eyebrows lifted as he looks from me to them and back. "It didn't fucking happen."

Williams snorts. "Says who? I want that fucker's job and his head on a platter." He snaps his fingers. "One call to my dad and it's over."

"One call to your dad and he'd know about Jenny Tremane, Autumn Glendale"—the blood drains from Williams's face along with the rest of the guys'—"or any of the other ladies we've had complaints from over the past few months."

"That's total bullshit." Rothschild takes a step forward, his chest square. "Do you know who we are?"

Darren's expression gives nothing away. "Members of the Westmore Country Club," he says without flinching.

"Yep. And you're just pieces of shit who live on the other side of the river," Vanderbilt scoffs.

"The hired help," another one of them mutters.

"More like the *insane* hired help," Porter says. "One joke and the asshole loses his mind."

It hits me

They don't know. They don't have the fuckingest clue who I am or that Mason is ... was my brother.

There's another knock on the closed door that typically is open. "Closed for quick maintenance," my coworker says through the door. "Be open in five."

"Like I said," Darren repeats. "This never happened. Simpson tripped. He fell into you accidentally. That's all."

"Total fucking bullshit is what it is," Chadwick says.

"Maybe so. Maybe not. You're welcome to try me." Darren stands his ground in the space between me and them as my body continues to vibrate with a rage like I've never known before. Darren lifts his chin in their direction. "Pretty sure you should head out that door about now."

Six pairs of disbelieving eyes stare at us but feet start to shift and eventually they move toward the door still being guarded by my coworker.

"Total bullshit."

"What the fuck, man."

"Are you really not going to tell your dad?"

Their muttering continues as my coworker shuts the door at their back and then leans against it almost as if he's guarding it for us.

Darren turns on me now, his expression flustered but mouth silent.

"Why'd you protect me?" I ask as my hands still tremble and my pulse still pounds in my ears.

"I don't know." He chuckles. "I might have just fucked us both, but shit, man, those little pricks terrorize everyone, and I'm fucking sick of it."

"Yeah," I murmur, still processing what I just risked.

"Fuckers get away with way too much."

You don't know the half of it.

"You didn't have to risk your job for me." I scrub a hand over my cheek that's pounding. No doubt it's red or will be soon enough.

"True, but it's the least I can do. Your mom helped my mom get a job a while back."

"She did?"

"Yeah." His smile is quick but there. "The office building over on Front Street. She worked there until she moved the hell out of here. So ... it's the least I could do."

"I don't even know what to say."

"Say nothing. I know you need this job. I know you're dealing with something ... but man, maybe you shouldn't go picking a fight with the fucking sons of the town royalty. That's a goddamn death wish."

A death wish.

If only he knew how right he was.

"My brother died."

"Fuck." He blows out a huge sigh and the sound guts me for some reason. The discomfort in it and the uncertainty tingeing its edges.

More so the fact that he didn't know.

We're invisible.

My brother died and no one even knows or cares. We live on the other side of the river, the wasteland of depravity and destitution, and that means we are fucking invisible.

Chadwick and Rhett murdered my brother and they're living their same life, playing in their cesspool of privilege with those around them, knowing that they hit and killed a little boy, and no one bats an eye.

It's a horrible fucking feeling.

The pounding on the door jolts me to the present.

"Open up," a voice booms, and even Darren blanches.

"Fuck. It's Gary," he mutters, referring to the manager of the entire country club, and looks at me. "Let me do the talking." He then nods to my coworker to open the door.

Gary barrels through. "What's going on here?" he demands as he assesses the situation.

"Nothing, sir," Darren says as our boss raises his eyebrows in question. No doubt he doesn't believe that answer, seeing as my face is probably blotchy and there is blood on the collar of my uniform. "There was a slight altercation. Simpson here tripped—got his foot caught on the corner of the bench there—and fell on the way out. It was like a set of bowling pins being knocked down. One after another."

Gary furrows his brow as he studies both of us. "For the record, I'm not buying whatever it is you're trying to sell."

Darren glances over to me, his face a mask of innocence, before looking back at our boss. "I saw it with my own eyes. They all fell like dominos. It was hard not to laugh it was so ridiculous."

Gary nods his head slowly. He's a smart man and clearly knows there is more to the story than what we are letting on, but he just takes a step back before surveying the room again. "I don't think I have to emphasize who that just was. We're all aware, correct?"

Both Darren and I nod.

"Good. The last thing we need is to piss any of those families off."

"Agreed, sir," Darren mutters.

"I'm hoping there is nothing more that comes of this."

"There won't be, sir," I say as I move my hands to behind my back, uncertain what my knuckles look like.

"You sure about that?" Gary asks directly and holds my stare.

"There won't be," I reiterate. "Like Darren said, it was an accident. I've had a lot going on at home. I was distracted and made a mistake and—"

"What's going on in your home life isn't my or any of our members' problems. Your excuses fall on deaf ears," he spits out.

The rage bubbles back up but I tamp it down.

I should be fired.

They should be in jail.

One might not justify the other, but fuck if I don't want it to.

"Name?" Gary asks.

My Adam's apple bobs as I swallow. "Mason Simpson," I state as Darren's eyes whip over to me and the different first name I just gave.

"Huh," the manager says. "Never knew that."

Invisible.

The name doesn't ring a bell for any of the people in this room, all of whom no doubt know of the trouble Chadwick was in and had probably read the newspaper articles about it.

The ones that no doubt stated my brother's name.

But even front-page news couldn't make him nor I be visible.

"Yes, sir." My voice sounds like anger personified and then smothered with a blanket.

"Make sure I don't know it again," Gary says before walking out and propping the door open on his way out for the mounting members outside who were waiting to come in.

"Let's get out of here," Darren says and pushes me out through the staff exit on the other side of the room. The minute we're in the back hall of the staff hallway, he turns on me. "What the fuck was that about? Your name is Holden, right? Or is it Mason? What the fuck is going on?"

"Nothing. It was stupid." I wave a hand, hating that it doesn't even register for him either. "Just ... let it go."

"You sure?" He eyes me and then glances at his watch. "Shit, I've got to get to the Pro Shop."

"Thanks again." He starts to jog down the hallway. "Darren?"

He stops and turns. "Yeah?"

"The names? The women? What was that all about?"

"I made them up."

"What?"

"I made them up. There are plenty of rumors around the staff about what pricks those guys are to the women here. They're so self-centered I took a chance that none of them ever took the time to remember the names of the women they took advantage of." "Jesus Christ."

He shrugs. "Apparently I was right. Lucky for us." He flashes a grin, but the look in his eyes says it all to me. He gets it. He understands. He loathes them too. "Later, Simpson." He pushes open the door and then heads off toward the Pro Shop.

I stare after him, trying to process everything that just happened. My first day back at work. The fight. A random ally. Gary's ignorance.

Later, Simpson.

All that work so people would know we were related, Mase, and they still don't.

But they will.

I will not be invisible. I refuse to live that way.

They'll know who we are, Mason. Even if it's the last thing I do, they'll fucking know.

ELEVEN

Holden

"We're so glad you could come and help celebrate this joyous occasion," Florence Williams, Chadwick's mom, says as she claps her hands together and all but squeals seconds before reaching out and grabbing two flutes of champagne from a passing tray and handing one to me. "I feel like last time we chatted I was predicting this was going to happen, right? At the Rothschilds' barbecue?"

"Right. Sure." I've been to hell and back before but this is feeling a little too close for comfort.

I glance around the floating ... barge? It's a large platform sitting off a private dock of the clubhouse. There is a barndominium-like structure built atop it that adds a rustic ambiance for most but just looks to me like a goddamn dressed-up barge.

Apparently it's the place to host an event here in Westmore, but to me it's no better than a fucking torture chamber.

Because isn't that why I'm here? Why I accepted the invitation that was hand-delivered to my penthouse? To put myself through the torture of seeing Rowan celebrate her engagement to Chad?

To try to figure out what he has to offer her that I don't.

Because unless I can figure that out, I don't buy this is real for a second.

And it very well could be because I don't want it to be.

It doesn't help one bit that I can't fucking stay away from her no matter how goddamn much I tell myself to burn everything associated with the name Rothschild to the ground.

"No Mallory today, dear?" Florence asks in regards to the date I brought with me to the Rothschild barbecue. The one Audrey pushed on me and who was dropped off at her place more than disappointed with my hasty retreat.

She thought she'd been handed a gift—to be on my arm for the afternoon and hopefully twisted in my sheets soon thereafter. The first happened. The second? Not so much as, simply put, she wasn't Rowan.

But that was before all of this happened—Manhattan, it's time to change the dress, the engagement to Chad.

I grit my teeth and glance back over to where Rowan stands. She's in some summery sundress that accents her curves and strappy sandals with lacelike straps that wind their way up her tanned calves. The same calves my tongue has licked their way up. "No, no Mallory," I finally answer.

"Shame, dear. Love really is the fruit of life."

"Yes, well, I'm not one for believing in love." I offer a stiff smile. "If you'll excuse me, I was on my way out."

"So soon?" She hooks her arm through mine. I tense immediately but force myself not to follow my innate instinct to shrug her off. "We Williamses know how to throw one hell of a party. We're just getting started. Besides, I invite you to stay awhile longer and watch those two right there." She points to where Chad has his hand resting dangerously low on the curve of Rowan's ass. "They'll make you believe wholeheartedly in the L word."

"I'm sure they would." Or Chad might end up dead somehow. Thrown overboard. Hands wrapped around his throat. Fist plowing into the perfectly chiseled jaw. "But I have meetings to attend."

"On a Saturday evening?"

"Every evening."

"No rest for the weary?"

No, more like no rest for the vengeful. "Something like that," I murmur.

"What would be more pressing than two of your friends celebrating their commitment to each other?"

Destroying your son's and his best friend's lives.

Fucking the oblivion out of some expendable woman simply because she's not Rowan.

Figuring ways to painfully castrate your son.

"There are a few I can think of."

She pats my hand and pulls her arm out of where it's looped through mine. "Then you should focus passionately on those things until you find that love you don't believe in."

"Mmm," I say and take a drink of the champagne she handed me. It tastes like acid.

Or maybe that's the gut punch of meeting Rowan's eyes from across the room.

I'm going to need something a hell of a lot stronger than champagne to weather this fucking party.

She still wants me.

I can see it in her eyes. Can feel it in the sweep of her gaze. But there's something else there. *Hurt*? How can she look at me like I'm the one who hurt her when she's the one who ruined whatever this was and chose Chad?

I toy with my cuff links—the ones she had to have left on my desk—and wonder why I wore them here. Why I wore a reminder of a woman I don't want to want when I already can't get her out of my head.

Across the room, she parts her lips, almost as if she's going to mouth something to me, but then closes them just as promptly. What in the fuck happened?

Rowan doesn't know the deal has closed. *Can't*. I've been over where the contract was with Audrey enough times to piss her off and mentally replayed the steps I went through locking it in my drawer enough times to think I'm crazy.

And I know for a fact that Chad and Rhett haven't said shit. I made them read that fucking NDA out loud—line by fucking line—so there is zero confusion over the consequences if they spoke about it before I said they could. The lawsuit that would come down on them would be so fucking huge they'd lose more than they already have. I made sure the consequences would be worth it.

So what is it that has happened?

What caused this all to go down? What is he promising her that I can't give her?

And why is she accepting it from him over me?

"It's like they've been hiding in plain sight, sneaking around behind our backs and scheming this all up so that"—smack. Florence claps her hands together—"they come out and surprise everyone." She laughs and holds a hand to her chest. "I can't imagine what else it is they have up their sleeve."

Wait.

What?

My mind spins as I stare at Florence like she has two heads. Is that what this was all about? Here I was, too goddamn smart for my own good, caught up in my own scheming to have Rowan play me at my own game? Seduce me. Sleep with me. Try to gather intel to help the people in this town that I loathe.

It's the oldest goddamn game in the book—the helpless ingenue—and I fell for it.

Fucking hell.

But as I look at her, as I remember what that night in New York was like, my mind begs me to believe this sudden revelation—the proof is front and fucking center—but my heart, yeah, that bastard of a thing that isn't supposed to feel, tells me differently.

The way she still looks at me with hurt and longing and everything in between tells me I wasn't making shit up.

She fell for me.

She still wants me.

I swear on everything that put me here, she still fucking does. And yet ...

Florence emits that giddy little squeal, and I force myself to look back at Rowan. To Chad pulling her in for a hug and pressing a kiss to her cheek. To the stiffness in her posture that she never exhibited with me.

And when my eyes move from Rowan to Chad, he's looking straight at me with the cockiest motherfucking smirk on his lips. Our stares hold as my hands fist and my jaw aches from clenching it.

He runs his hand down her back and rests it on the top of her ass. It's aimed to piss me off. He knows it. I know it. And it fucking worked.

Fuck it.

I'm out.

"If you'll excuse me," I say before walking away.

TWELVE

Rowan

I just want this dog and pony show over. The lilies of the valley that are fucking everywhere when I hate lilies. The overabundance of the color pink, of people asking me how very excited I am, and the tapping of forks on wineglasses by people hoping that I'll rush over to Chad and kiss him.

There's a reason I'm out here—off the barge and standing inside the boathouse—observing my own engagement party from afar, and it's not because I long to get back to my guests.

"That's only for the wedding reception," I stated loudly and bought more time, but I'm not naive in knowing it'll only stall for so long.

You're selling the lie, Rowan. Selling it all while catching glimpses of Holden Knight and the misery etched in every ounce of his body.

"Honey, if you keep looking like your dog just died, people aren't going to really believe you're so thrilled about marrying Chad," my mother says with that fake Southern charm tinting her tone.

I lift my glass of wine to my lips and don't respond. It's easier that way. Lying is way harder than I thought it would be.

"Try and look a little happier, huh?" she says. "I understand you'll have nerves and cold feet, but this was simply meant to be—our two families merging in the most beautiful of ways." Someone laughs in the distance, out on the barge. "Come on. Let's go. The boathouse isn't where the woman of the hour should be hiding."

"Mom. I needed a minute and I'm taking it." From Chad's overbearing presence, the gazes on me, and the squeals of excitement from people whose opinions I don't give a flying fuck about.

"But honey, the guests are here to see you and Chad. To celebrate you." She steps up beside me cautiously. "It's simply not polite to hide out here when everyone wants to see the blushing bride."

As overbearing as she's always been in wanting me to marry Chad, there seems to be some sort of reservation on her part now that I am. Almost as if she can sense that something isn't right.

Sell the lie. Isn't that my new motto?

"I know," I say softly and try to fabricate a justification on the spot. "But this is a lot for someone like me who hates all the pomp and circumstance."

"There are going to be a lot of these little events over the next two months, Rowan. You'll—"

"That's not what I agreed to. I said I'd give you one event other than the actual wedding and rehearsal dinner. You agreed __"

"There's the bridal shower. The bachelorette party. The—"

"I agreed to one. This is your one."

"Rowan." She snaps my name out as if it's going to knock some sense into me. Never come between Emmaline Rothschild and her plans—especially when she feels they are moving her further up the social ladder.

"What?" I turn to face her, to meet eyes the same color as mine, and wonder if I want her to see through me or if I don't want her to.

She reaches out to touch a strand of my hair but then pulls her hand back. "I don't understand your hostility. These are all normal things, normal celebrations that happen when one decides to marry the man of their dreams."

I struggle to swallow at the thought. Chad, nice? Yes. Convenient and willing? Even more so. But the man of my dreams? Not even close.

Only one person flashes through my mind at those words and my chest immediately constricts at the thought. He threw that away with lies while I'm trying to make something of it with my own.

"These are all normal things for who? For you? For Westmore society? They're not me and never have been, so quit trying to make me fit in that box you've been lining with barbed wire my whole life."

"Is there something going on here that you're not telling me?" she asks as music starts playing again at the party.

"Like?"

"I don't know." She runs a hand down the back of my hair, and I'd give anything to be able to lean into her touch and grab an iota of comfort from her. But I can't. I haven't been able to for years. I'm not my forever seventeen-year-old twin sister, Cassie, and I'm more than scarred from escaping that barbed-wire box my mom's tried to contain me in. Her gasp startles me. "You're pregnant."

I sputter. "What?"

"That's why this sudden about-face with Chadwick, isn't it? You got pregnant and instead of you tarnishing our name, he's being the upstanding man I always knew him to be and marrying you."

"Um . . no." I'm rarely flustered but I'm just that. And leave it to my mom, a definite product of Westmore, to make this all

about Chad being the upstanding person if that were the situation. "That is not what happened."

She glances down to my abdomen and a smile flickers at the corners of her lips. I swear tears well in her eyes but I can't quite tell in the dim light. "Oh, honey. You should have told me. This is ... this is just wonderful." She frames my cheeks with her hands and peers into my eyes. "You're not showing. We can tell people the baby came premature. That way your reputation will stay intact. No one in this town likes an irresponsible mother who has sex out of wedlock."

Did we just step back into the 1950s?

"You're out of your mind, Mother. I am not pregnant."

"You're in denial. It's normal. I *know* these things," she says as I step back and shake my head. "It's okay. I'll keep your secret, but just know this only proves to me that Chad is the man I always knew him to be." She puts her hand over her heart, her mind made up despite my protests.

"No. He's not. I'm not. You're. Not. Listening." I roll my shoulders.

"Your hormones are surging. That's why you're being so irrational."

"If you want me back at the party, you'll go back to it yourself right now and give me some space," I grit out.

"Row—"

"And if you have any hope of me going through with this wedding, you won't breathe a word about this fucking ridiculous conversation to a soul."

She takes a step back but I can feel the weight of her stare and the misplaced compassion oozing off her. "It's our little secret," she whispers.

"Go," I order her. "Just go."

I can see her nod in my periphery as she walks away but know she doesn't believe me. For her, it's the only reasonable explanation why, all of a sudden, I agreed to marry Chad. And now that I think of it, presumably for everyone else at this party.

But telling her I'm doing it to get more voting shares and a little bit of control of something I no longer own sounds even more illogical than her pregnancy reasoning.

But even in acknowledging that, fury races through my veins and owns me. I stare out the window of the boathouse as I mentally prepare myself to go back to a party I don't belong at despite being one of the guests of honor.

I don't know how long I stand there—a song changes on the barge, laughter rings out—but there is no part of me that is going to believe the hype I'm selling myself that I need to go back there.

No doubt my mom will be here in moments to rope me back into making another fake-smile-filled appearance.

And as if on cue, footsteps shuffle behind me.

"What part of *leave me alone* did you not understand?" I snap but then jolt when I turn around to find Holden standing there with lifted eyebrows.

Jesus. My breath hitches and my heart lurches at the sight of him. Especially when I am here trying to avoid the very situation he ran me into.

"Trouble in paradise so soon?" he asks and fiddles with the cuff link on one sleeve.

The sunburst cuff links. The ones I gave him. The ones that led me to the discovery of his betrayal.

And he's both callous and arrogant enough to wear them to my engagement party. Callous because if he has connected the dots—a signed contract in an unlocked drawer sitting just below where I left the damn cuff links—then he's throwing it in my face. And arrogant because he's wearing a heartfelt thank-you I left for him for the best night of my life to my engagement party.

Does he wonder why I left them so haphazardly without a note and then turned around within days to be engaged? For a smart man, he's blinded by something and I'm not exactly sure what that could be.

"Why are you here?" I ask, ignoring his question.

"My car is boxed in. The valet is trying to find the driver of the car who parked in front of me. I have a feeling I'll be here for a while. Believe me, if I had my choice, I wouldn't be here at all."

"And why's that? Is it tough seeing something you thought was yours stolen right out from under you?" I ask and lift my brows. I could be talking about me or my company. Either works in this situation.

"Touché," he murmurs and holds my gaze. "Have you fucked him yet?" His nostrils flare and his jaw sets as he waits for an answer.

"How is that any of your business?"

"You are my business."

"I was your business. Now I'm just ... an employee."

"At least you know your place." His voice is steely and gaze intense but nowhere near as cutting as his words.

"You sure as hell made sure of that, didn't you?" I look for an escape, but of course Holden is standing at the only exit in this stupid boathouse.

"Never claimed to be a saint, Sunshine, but I don't have a fucking clue what this is all about."

"Just like you acted like you didn't know who I was that first night we met. Smoke and mirrors, Holden. It seems that's all you are."

All I can do is shake my head. One minute aloof, the next minute possessive. He seems just as goddamn confused as I am by all of this.

But that's on him.

Not me.

"Rowan. We're speaking two different languages here. Again."

"And I've given you every opportunity to speak the same one and you failed. Again," I parrot him and sigh. "I'm done expecting better from you."

"I warned you who I was. I let you see more than most. Lesson fucking learned."

I stare at him, blinking and processing. How dare he try to make me feel bad when he's the one who screwed me over? It takes everything I have not to scream this at him, and yet it will do me no good. If I tell him I went into his desk, I'll be shut out even further than I already am.

"Exactly, lesson fucking learned." I hate the tears that burn and the regret that aches beneath my breastbone. Even worse, I despise that everything I need to move forward is on that ridiculous barge outside when a few weeks ago I thought it was the person standing in front of me.

"I'll hand it to you, Rowan. You put on a good fucking show. Had me convinced you were as into me as I was you. Blinded me. But that was the plan, wasn't it? Use me. Get insider knowledge to help whatever cause you think it is that you have."

"That's rich, and more along the lines of something you'd do."

"Agreed. That's why I never saw it coming. Tale as old as time."

"Do you hear what you're saying?" I shout at him. "That I slept with you, that I ... fucking cared for you ... all for some type of corporate espionage?" I emit a sarcastic chuckle as his words add insult to an injury I'm certain he has no idea how deep it is to begin with. "You're the one who did this. You're the one who—"

"You're hiding out in a boathouse instead of being at your own engagement party." His chuckle drips with condescension.

"Goodbye, Holden."

"Not this time." Just as I begin to walk away, he spins me around by my bicep and has me pinned against the wall at my back. His chest is against mine and our lips are inches apart. He smells like whiskey and soap and everything I find myself dreaming about in my sleep and then hating myself for doing so the minute I wake up. "You're not walking out of here without a fucking explanation over what's going on."

"Fuck. You."

"Such eloquence coming from a mouth I've fucked before."

"I hate you," I grit out as my nipples harden and body aches. "Is that a good enough of an answer?"

"Enough to marry him?" He lifts a lone eyebrow as our eyes hold each other's stares.

He leans in painstakingly slowly and brushes his lips against mine. I yank my head from side to side, refusing to fall under his spell. Needing to stand my ground.

And losing the battle with each second that passes.

"What would happen if someone walked in right now? How would you explain that one away?" he murmurs.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" I fight with words while my body fights against enjoying the feel of him. Against craving the feel of him. "Anything to be the villain."

"Can't change who I am so I might as well be one."

And with those words, that threat, with his hands cuffing my wrists on the wall at either side of my head, he slants his lips over mine, the kiss unleashing a desire so violent inside of me that I struggle to breathe.

I struggle against it—thrash my head from side to side and try to pull myself off the wall, but Holden just takes what he wants from me. The warring emotions. The all-consuming sensations. The unyielding need.

He's the master of deception but in this moment so am I because I'm deceiving myself into thinking I don't want him. That I'm not throwing my morals and sensibility—my dignity—out the window for one more taste of a man I shouldn't want but can't seem to walk away from.

And when I cave, I fucking cave. *Go big or go home*. Somehow, he senses the game has changed because he releases my wrists and dives his hands into my hair, bringing my mouth to his.

My fingers fist in his shirt until the kiss turns into a greed-laced warfare of skin and scratches. Of heat and hunger. Of desperation and devastation. Of gluttony and a reminder of just how starved I've been.

It's not enough.

It never has been.

And I want more. His taste. His touch. His heat. Of him.

His hand slides down my torso and inches my dress up my thigh until his fingers find purchase. The wet heat between my thighs and the knowledge of his touch has me thrusting my hips into his hand and against the pressure of his fingers.

A loud noise sounds just outside, and it jolts me to the here and now. To the reality I must face and the future I'm forging to create.

My hands are on his chest and my anger resurfaces. At him for reminding me what I'm missing. At me for being weak. At this whole fucking situation I wouldn't be in if it weren't for my asshole brother and the empty promises of the man before me.

"Stop," I whisper-yell. "Just stop."

He takes a step back, looking over his shoulder to where the sound came from, but his shoulders heave, his Adam's apple bobs, and he runs a hand through his hair. The chuckle he emits is one of disbelief and frustration.

"You have his ring on your finger, but you—this body, those lips"—he cups the apex of my thighs with one hand and then sucks on the two fingers he had between my thighs and groans, his eyes never leaving mine—"this pussy? They only want me. It's only wet for me. So make me understand, Rowan, why you're denying yourself what we both know to be true."

Desire riots right beside fury and I let the tears I've been fighting all day come.

"Don't you dare talk to me about truth."

"Fitting you'd say that," he mocks.

Tell him you know.

But I don't.

Tell him you fucking know.

Can't.

"I know ab—"

"Rowan? You in there?" the not-so-distant voice of Chad's mother calls out.

I startle and look over my shoulder, almost as if the sound has shocked me back to reason.

I was going to tell him I knew.

I look back at Holden as I take a step back.

You broke my trust.

I ignore the confusion that flickers and fades through his eyes.

You took the one thing I gave freely and broke it.

It has nothing on the ache in my heart.

"I see you found the cuff links," I say and take another step back. "Do me a favor? Forget I ever left them for you."

And with a heavy heart and a head even more muddled, I walk out of the boathouse and back to the barge.

To a party where I have to pretend to be happy.

Around people when all I want is to be by myself.

Great.

Just fucking great.

THIRTEEN

Holden

Fuck.

Just fuck.

I sit in my office, my mood surly and head still a fucking mess.

Friday night still ghosts through my mind. The engagement party. The revelation that I'm being played. Her kiss.

None of them I want to believe happened. All of them I have to acknowledge.

It's Sunday, but I'm here burying my head in fucking work. Isn't that how I cope? How I plot and plan and figure the best way to carry out everything I've worked toward for years?

I let distraction fuck me once. That won't be happening again.

So I put my head down and sift through some of the proposals that Bob has sent my way: offers to buy, offers to sell, land that might be of interest, and palms that might willingly be greased.

It's a shady business fucking someone over, but isn't that the best part of living in the gray? You blend into the shadows without a second look?

I'm on my second glass of scotch and making ample progress as the sun slowly begins to slide from the sky. My office is growing dark but I don't get up and flick the lights on.

I don't need to.

I spent many a night in my early twenties sitting in darkened rooms staring at servers and screens. The dark has never bugged me.

A whole two hours where I haven't thought of her.

Making progress, Knight. Making progress.

It's the voices in the hallway that throw me. The cheese-dick laughs I know all too well that have me rolling my shoulders and tipping the remainder of the scotch into my mouth.

Fuck me.

I can't escape them if I fucking try.

With a few keystrokes, I check the cameras to the parking lots and see they parked in the one on the opposite side of where I did.

I bet they don't even know I'm here.

So I sit in the darkness, welcome the anonymity, and wait to see what might come.

"I don't fucking care. All that matters is it's finally fucking happening. All that hard work is coming to fruition," Chad says somewhere down the hallway.

"It is. It has. But ... how?" Rhett asks as a door opens and then shuts.

"She knows if she wants to stay with the company, I'm the best option she has. It'll make our moms happy and her life easier. I wore her down. Simple as that. And now I move on to the next phase."

"Which is?"

"Making her fall back in love with me. She did once."

Rhett snorts. "In fucking high school."

"Don't underestimate me," Chad says. "I'm a sleeper."

"You could say that again."

It sounds like hands are slapped as a high five is given, and my stomach churns. I fight the urge to stay silent but fuck that. Within seconds I'm in my doorway and staring at the backs of the two dipshits as they stand in the hallway.

"You're in my office," I say, and they both jump.

Gasps turn to awkward smiles and further still to narrowed eyes as they look at me. "You mean we're in the hallway," Rhett says.

"No. I didn't stutter. I meant my office." I offer a shark's smile as I hold my hands out and gloat in a way I'm unable to with anyone else. "My company. My building. My office."

Chad rolls his eyes.

Wrong move.

"Congrats. I guess. I didn't quite make it over to you to say that the other night." I was too busy kissing your fiancée.

He eyes me leerily—as he should. "Thanks."

"From what the two of you were just saying?" I say, causing his head to whip back up to mine. "It sounds like you two will have a marriage that will stand the test of time."

Chad clears his throat and glances over at Rhett.

"I'm talking to you, Chad. No need to look for Rhett's approval to speak to me. I thought we'd already established this fact." I lift my brows. "Anyway, as I was saying, sounds like a perfect pairing, but is that what you're going to tell your kids some day? That you badgered Mommy over and over until you wore her down to the point of exhaustion so that in a weak moment she agreed to marry you?" I blow out a whistle. "And that's how the men in Westmore think you keep a woman happy." I take a step back. "No wonder you're all so fucked up."

"No, I'll tell them I gave her what no other person in this town would," he challenges and has me standing taller.

"What's that?" I expect some smart-ass retort about happiness or some shit like that but his words knock me back.

I don't wait for a response. Don't care to. I turn on my heel, move back toward my office, and call over my shoulder, "Such a pity that your engagement party was such a hit that you have to come in to the office on a Sunday to get fucked over by me, but hey, whatever floats your boat."

I wouldn't be surprised if I turned around to find both of them holding their middle fingers up at me. In fact, I'd be disappointed if they weren't. But I don't give a fuck and make a point to prove it when I walk into my office and purposely leave my door open so they know everything they say can be heard by me.

And they wouldn't dare shut their door for privacy. That's an invitation for me to come in unannounced.

Their murmurs fill the hallway as I half work, half listen to their discussions about nothing. Curiosity has me wondering why the fuck they are here but since Bob has put the deal back on the table, no doubt they came here for the secrecy my presence isn't affording them.

And while they discuss an offer I made, I refine and revise it on my end, just steps down the hall, as I anticipate their next moves.

I pretend like I didn't hear the footsteps or expect the knock on my doorjamb when it comes. "Hmm?" I ask before I look up. Rhett's standing there, his eyebrows raised as he eyes the decanter of scotch and my empty glass.

"What's a man without a few indulgences every now and again," I say and lean back in my chair to welcome this face-off. "Feels like we've done this before. Me here. You there. What's on your mind, Rothschild?"

"You got what you wanted, the majority stake. You don't need to be such a prick," he says.

"What I wanted?" I laugh. Your head on a platter? "More like what you sold to keep your shell game going, but I won't itpick."

His glance over his shoulder says his best buddy doesn't know he's here sticking up for him.

Aw. How sweet.

"You really get off on this, don't you?"

"I do. Yes. I've never minced words about that, now, have I?" I begin to stack some of the papers on my desk. "You sold me your family company but still look at me as an enemy, so what does that make you? A hypocrite? An opportunist? Or a man desperate enough to sell the very thing that made his family just to save his own ass? Hmm?" I go to open my top desk drawer and just as I tug on it, remember I need to grab the keys.

But my half tug has the drawer opening and my whole body startling.

"What the actual fuck?" I mutter to myself as I stare at the half-opened drawer, my mind buzzing.

"Desk is old," Rhett states absently, oblivious to the shitstorm of thoughts and revelations sparking all at once. "I've always had problems with that drawer. It locks solidly at first but then the mechanism is old. The weight or something about how it's installed unlatches it sometimes."

Fuck. Me.

She knows.

She goddamn fucking knows and I wasn't crazy for thinking it.

"You okay, man? You look like you've seen a ghost."

I realize he's standing there for the first time. Sure, I heard him talking, but I physically look up and see him standing there.

"I need to make a call. Shut the door on the way out," I say without room for error. And when I look up and Rhett's still standing there, I point to the door. "Go."

You left them in the top drawer of your desk. Not a very safe place to keep something so very important.

My own words about her sapphires come back to me. The top drawer of her desk—a place to put them and hide them from prying eyes.

The same location of the contract in the locked drawer that apparently doesn't lock.

The same drawer above which she left the box of cuff links.

I should have trusted my gut in this. Should have fucking known.

The minute the door is shut and I know I can't be heard, I have my phone dialing as my heart thunders in my chest.

She knew all along.

Ring.

She knew and didn't come to me.

Ring.

She knew and sided with Chad instead of coming to me.

"It's late, Holden," Audrey scolds by way of greeting.

"I need you to call for an emergency board meeting tomorrow morning for ten A.M."

"Tomorrow is a holiday."

I glance at the calendar. "No, it's not."

"In Westmore it is. Founders' Day, to honor the captains of industry. The Rothschilds. The Williamses. All your favorite people."

Fucking perfect.

"Call a board meeting. When has a holiday ever stopped me?"

"People might not be in town."

"They're in town. No one dared miss the social event of the season," I say, referring to the engagement party.

"I did," she says dryly.

"You were the only smart one who didn't RSVP," I mutter.

"People might not get the message in time."

"Then make it for tomorrow afternoon. I don't care. If they're not here, they can forfeit their board seat."

"Can you even do that?"

I shrug, even though she can't see. "No clue, but the threat will work. These people live for their clout. They wouldn't risk diminishing it."

"You're sure to piss everyone off with this meeting."

"Good." My smile is more of a grimace, but when I think of how this is going to rock the foundation of this company, it turns into a full-blown grin. "I'm sure to do that anyway with what I have to announce. Might as well add insult to injury."

"I thought you were going to wait on this."

"It's imperative that I do it tomorrow."

"Why?" she asks as my mind runs a million laps.

Because Rowan thinks I didn't keep my word and screwed her over. Because until I prove otherwise, I've lost her.

"It's a long story." I don't owe an explanation to anyone, let alone one that's based off of conjecture. If I don't already sound a little crazy then I sure as shit would then.

But this is the only logical explanation, the only reason for Rowan's sudden engagement to Chad and accusations of betrayal.

How many times did she tell me *you lied*, to which I didn't pay close enough attention?

"I'm sure it is a very long story," Audrey says.

"One last thing—"

"Holden. It is nine on Sunday night. Don't make me pull people out of bed."

Shit. "I need all of the new documents."

"For tomorrow's meeting?"

"Yes." Start pulling people out of bed.

"They're still at the lawyers' office. You told them they had until—"

"Well, now they don't. I have complete faith you'll get them to figure out how to have them to me by tomorrow."

"Holden," she growls.

"With two sets of copies. One for Rowan and one for Rhett. Just so we can all be on the same page."

"Why the change of heart? I thought you were out to ruin these people."

"I am."

"Less one." Those two words weigh down the silence, her point made, and when I don't take the bait and react, she murmurs, "Someone is planning to light some fireworks tomorrow."

I grunt in response, "It seems I already have."

FOURTEEN

Rowan

"What the...?" I mutter to myself as I walk onto the fourth floor of the TinSpirits offices and come face-to-face with the painting that started it all.

The one Holden won in the auction over Rhett. The one that marked his presence in Westmore society. And the one that put us on this path to where we currently are—him, the majority owner of my family's company, and me, getting screwed out of the promises I so blindly thought were real.

The painting hangs on the entrance wall, positioned perfectly over a decorative table where a vase with an array of twisty sticks and fake plants usually sits. And in a position that no one can miss.

The image is chaos personified. Loud, brash, contrasting colors splashed on a canvas without any precision. There is no structure to it, no goal, and while others might find it beautiful, I find it garish at best and obtrusive at worst.

An emergency board meeting on a holiday and the appearance of this ugly, \$3 million painting that represents chaos?

That means Holden is most definitely pulling a power play to piss off my brother. And while I think I might enjoy whatever is in store over the next hour or so, I also wonder why the hell am I here?

I'm not a board member.

I don't have a seat.

I have no say in anything to do with the company.

And yet ... the invitation was extended to me as well.

Either that or he's announcing the deal is done, the company officially sold, and he wants to watch the shock of it all hit me. Almost like it's his little vindictive payback for my getting engaged to Chad.

"Rowan?"

I look down the hall to where Audrey stands with her hand on the conference room door and her eyebrows raised at me.

Yes. Sure. No problem. I can't wait to sit in the conference room where the reminder of Holden and I having sex on the table is a constant.

"Coming." I force a smile and prepare myself for the gut punch of seeing Holden again. Then again there can't really be a gut punch when my stomach has been twisted in knots ever since his lips touched mine on Friday.

With a fortifying breath, I enter the room to the list of usual suspects. The board members—mostly men—seated around the table. Many of the faces I saw less than seventy-two hours ago at the engagement party, but this time around, rather than smiles and glasses lifted in cheer, irritation and impatience emanate off all of them.

"The stupid fucking painting," I hear my brother grumble to Chad, but then their heads shock still when they see me there. Others take notice and they turn to see what Chad and Rhett are looking at. "What are you...?"

I shrug. "I was asked to be here."

"But..." But you're not a board member. I can see it register on everyone's faces around the table at different times.

I take that as my cue to smile politely and move to the only open seat left, which is, of course, at the head of the table. The one place where it's impossible to fly under the radar.

I set my things down and get settled, purposely avoiding Chad's probing stares as to why I'm here. I want to tell him I don't have a clue, but the other part of me wants to watch all of them squirm.

The deal is done, no doubt, and this is the unveiling of Holden Knight as the new majority owner.

Even though he threatened stability to everyone but the very people sitting in this room, here I am proving his intentions true. If I'm here, change is coming or is somehow on the horizon, and no doubt it's probably unsettling to all of them.

"Such a great party the other night," the man to my immediate left, Barney, says. A man who Gran's notes say is a solid guy who has secret bank accounts to hide his gambling addiction from his wife. "Susan and I were so thrilled at the news of you and Chad. You'll—"

"Good afternoon," Holden says as he strides into the room and commands its occupants' attention. Heads whip and bodies shift uncomfortably in chairs. The man definitely unsettles people.

"What's the purpose of all this?" Rhett asks, his chair scraping back as he stands. You'd think by now he'd know not to go head-to-head with Holden in front of an audience, and yet here he is, doing just that.

"Take a seat, Rothschild," Holden says, not looking his way. But he looks mine and holds our gaze. "Rowan," he murmurs with a soft nod.

I don't know how I feel about being called out in a room where I'm already an oddity, so I just nod in response.

Holden clears his throat as he takes his place at the front of the room. "I know it was short notice so I appreciate you all coming in today."

"You didn't really give us a choice," someone grumbles, but no one dares take their eyes off the man who owns our

attention.

"You're right. I didn't. Just like Rhett didn't give anyone a choice in making pay cuts last year—for the good of the company—while he gave himself a raise." His smile is as biting as his tone.

"Again," Rhett grits out as his cheeks flush red. "Why are we here?"

"I'm here to announce that the deal has been closed. I am now the new majority owner of TinSpirits." There's shuffling around the table but everyone listens with rapt attention.

Including me.

"And as your new majority owner, there are a few changes that will be made, effective immediately."

In my periphery, I see Rhett glance at Chad and then back toward Holden. My brother is the one who signed the fucking deal, so why is he so leery when he didn't get screwed out of anything?

"While I'll remain the final word on all major decisions, I will also be creating a new position." He pauses for dramatic effect. "Co-CEO."

"What the fuck?" Rhett barks out, echoing my own thoughts. The deal stated that Rhett was to remain the CEO and Chad the COO. A co-CEO? Is he going to bring in some outsider corporate bigwig to further decimate this company?

Dread filters through me. No doubt another man to push me out.

"Explain yourself," Chad says, and by the grit of Holden's jaw I fear for Chad's safety.

"I don't have to. That's what happens when you own the keys to the company." He unbuttons one of his cuffs and rolls his sleeve up. The whole room watches with bated breath. Each roll of his sleeve, a stretch of uncertain seconds.

My chest burns and my hands tremble. He's doing this, inviting me here as a witness to see what he's about to rub in my face.

"Excuse me." My chair scrapes even louder than Rhett's as I shove it out behind me. I can't be here. I struggle to breathe as the room feels like it's closing in on me.

"Rowan," Holden says my name. It's not a question, but more like a command, and that makes me even angrier. "Sit."

The room falls silent, almost holding its breath to see if I'll defy him or not. I take a step back, fold my arms over my chest, and lean against the wall.

I refuse to obey him and by the flicker of a smirk he offers me, my silent protest is noted and admired.

"As I was saying, the co-CEO is a new position I'm creating to effectively distribute authority so that there remain checks and balances on power in this office. Major decisions must be signed off by both CEOs before coming to my desk for final approval."

I can see the panic in my brother's face—the wide eyes and gray pallor—of realizing he's about to be put in check. How will he siphon money from the company if he has to get everything approved?

As much as I'm supposed to loathe Holden right now, I might admire him just a tad for doing something I can't—scaring the shit out of Rhett and stripping him of his autonomy.

"This new position is effective immediately. She'll have—"

"She?" someone repeats the same thing I'm thinking.

And my mind goes there. To the stunning woman in the pencil skirt who strutted down this very hallway a few weeks ago like she owned the place. Holden greeted her and then met my eyes as he shut his office door and proceeded to spend hours behind those doors with her.

It's her. She has to be the new co-CEO.

Acid churns in my gut at the thought of her working side by side with him. At them sitting at this conference room table after knowing how he bent me over it.

Nowhere in whatever this is do I have to justify every single person I meet with ... and you don't want to be the woman who asks me to. I assure you of that.

Weren't those Holden's words when I asked who she was?

Now I know.

"Yes," he states resolutely. "She'll." He pauses and meets the eyes of everyone at the table before continuing. A nonverbal warning that we may be in Westmore, but we're playing by his rules. "She will have the same authority as Rhett or whoever her co-CEO is." My brother bristles at the unspoken warning that he is replaceable. "As well as a seat here on the board with voting power."

"You can't just do that," Mr. Seymour, one half of a power-hungry couple sitting at the far end, says. They've been a part of this company forever but I've never liked them and always considered their seats here a bribe of some sort by someone in my family. Especially after seeing all the dirt Gran has on them.

"I can and I did," Holden states.

"There needs to be a vote somehow before anyone gets a seat on the board. You can't just add them as you see fit," Chad says.

"Not per company bylaws there doesn't." He points to Audrey in the back of the room, who holds up a stack of papers.

While we can't read the words on the cover, we can all assume they are in fact the bylaws. "As the majority owner, I have the authority to create new positions as I see fit so long as they are for the benefit of the company. Any new executive position I create also has the opportunity to gain a seat here at the table with you all if I choose." He lifts his eyebrows, a taunt to test him. "And I chose."

"We should get a lawyer to look at this," Chad says.

Holden's chuckle sends chills over my skin. "Considering it was a Williams who helped establish those bylaws way back when, I'm pretty sure they're solid—unless of course you don't trust your own family and their integrity? Should I worry, Chad? You did once tell me they would bend rules for me, didn't you?"

There are a few cleared throats as Chad's cheeks flush. "What are you talking about? I'd never say that."

"Ah, so that's how this goes. Good to know. You catch that, Rowan?" Holden asks, putting me on the spot. His little display of who has the bigger dick is more than obvious to me, but then again, no one in this room knows I've slept with him, so there's that.

"So, yes, a lawyer has looked at it for all of those still wondering. TinSpirits' own lawyers implemented it years ago and I had my own lawyers go over it with a fine-tooth comb to make sure everything I was doing was within my legal limits. In fact, this deal was closed a few weeks ago, but I was waiting to get their sign-off before I informed all of you."

"Get on with it, Knight," Bertrand and his fluffy gray eyebrows mutter from the far end. "You're wasting our time justifying what you've done. If you own the company, then there is no justification required."

The smile crawls onto Holden's lips. He just found an ally in a room full of undecideds.

"I still think we should get a say, an approval, of this person," Rhett says from his place in the middle of the table. Several other people nod in agreement.

"Not necessary. I already vetted and approved her on behalf of all of you," Holden says as he looks around the room and then back to me.

All eyes staring at their fidgeting fingers on the table swing his way. Curiosity wins out over their unease of coming face-to-face with this outsider who now has voting rights that could switch up the power play and possibly affect their share prices with her vote.

I don't know why my pulse begins to race, but it does as I look toward the open door and wait for Pencil Skirt to strut in with those gorgeous lips of hers in a smile.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the board, please meet TinSpirits' new co-CEO, Rowan Rothschild."

I hear his words but don't process them. My eyes whip to his, to the look of satisfaction in them, and I don't know what to do.

Confusion, anger, surprise, and disbelief all reverberate through me, and I don't know which one I need to hold on to.

"Don't you need to ask me first?" I ask. And while it might not be the response I mean to give or he expects to receive, he gives a slow nod and his eyes never leave mine.

"I already did. Months ago."

My brow furrows and I let the confusion reign. "I don't..."

"Yes, you do. You're just afraid to believe it."

I bolt from the conference room. Past the protest no doubt my brother is about to voice, beyond the narrowed brows of Chad as he tries to read into that exchange, and far removed from Holden Knight and this hold he seems to have over me and my emotions.

He can handle the board.

I need to figure out what I believe.

FIFTEEN

Holden

"Yes. Of course." I shake Goldberg's hand. He's a slimy fucker. If my delving into his online search history is any indication, he has a penchant for porn depicting performers who look way younger than they are. Gross on every level but even more when he is nearing eighty. "So bumps and bruises are expected during the process, but I think the co-CEO route will give everyone a better peace of mind on all decisions being made."

Are we done here? I need to go wash my hands from touching his and then go find Rowan.

Her reaction was most unexpected.

There was no excitement, there was no outward emotion, but rather a steely expression that said she didn't believe me.

"Knight."

"Not now, Rhett," I say over my shoulder. "You can file your complaint with Audrey and I'll read it when I get the time. You should be happy though. You can now keep closer tabs on your sister—you know, the one you think is the problem in all of this." I glance to the left down the hallway. Rowan isn't in her office.

"You're playing games."

Rhett doesn't know when to quit, does he?

I stride into mine and look out the window to where I have a perfect view of the parking lot. Her car is gone. *Shit*. Then again, the conversation we need to have should be done somewhere more private anyway.

"I don't play games, Rhett." I turn to face him, and his shoulders are squared in my doorway like he's ready for a fight. "Where's your favorite sidekick? Don't you need him here to witness what I have to say next, or do you prefer to make the threats you're trying to figure out how to make without someone watching?"

"I don't need a witness for anything." He crosses his arms over his chest and smirks. "You're slipping and it shows."

"Excuse me?" What the fuck did he just say to me?

"I said you're slipping. Too wrapped up in whatever it is you're doing to look at the fine print. Didn't you say something like that when we closed the deal?"

Now he most definitely has my attention.

"You're not giving her anything she can't get through marrying Chad, you know."

"How's that?" I play it off but question my own sanity in even having this conversation. I figured out why she was pissed. I rectified the situation today with the board meeting.

But you never figured out why she agreed to marry Chad.

"It's buried deep in the bylaws. A misplaced paragraph in the boilerplate of it for the purpose of it to go undetected."

"You're boring me, Rhett." But he's doing anything but.

"You pride yourself on turning the screw in, but it seems those fancy, high-dollar lawyers you have missed something, didn't they." I want to punch the smirk right off his face but I refuse to give him the satisfaction. "It was a way to keep my gran, the only Rothschild by blood at the time, as an acting part of the company. When the CEO or the COO marries, their wife is given voting shares and a seat on the board."

That's what Chad has that I don't.

That. Right there. She knew the fucking contract was signed, thought I wasn't giving her what I promised, and like the defiant, temerarious, driven woman Rowan is, she set out to get it herself.

My head spins. My breathing shallows. Jesus fucking Christ.

"What's wrong, Knight? Didn't you know that?" He shrugs. "What you're missing is she doesn't want the co-CEO title. All she cares about are the shares and the clout of a board seat. All she is desperate for is to match what I have. By marrying Chad, she'll get that."

"Then you don't know your sister very well."

"And I wish you didn't know her at all," he sneers.

I cross the room and am in his face in seconds. I get pleasure in how his breath hitches in fear. He wants to play who has the bigger balls, I'm 100 percent fucking game. "You're a fucking coward, Rothschild. You've kept Rowan at bay in this company, because she's smarter than you and within seconds will ferret out all that you've done to fuck this company over. Then you stand here and tell me she doesn't want the new position because you're too goddamn terrified she's going to show you up and make you look like the fucking pompous prick you are. That makes you weak. That makes you small. And I'm going to have so much fun knocking you off that Westmore fucking pedestal you think you own when you didn't do a goddamn thing to earn it." He opens his mouth to speak but my finger jabbing in his chest stops him. "She's not the only one who suspects you're shady as fuck. I *know* you are. And there is nothing I'll enjoy more than dismantling the man everyone in this town thinks you are for all to see. Remember whose company this is now. *Mine*. I'm here watching your every move, and I assure you my bite is much

stronger than anyone else's. My well of depravity has no bottom." I pat him on the shoulder and grin like a lunatic. "Glad we had this little talk."

I walk around him, leaving him standing just inside my new—his old—office. Audrey eyes me from where she is gatekeeping in the hallway and holds out a copy of the stapled, corrected agreement from the lawyers' office. The one that has everything I promised Rowan in it and then some.

"Thank you," I say.

She smirks and glances to where Rhett must still be. "I'll make sure the door is locked and the lights are turned off for you."

"I don't deserve you, Aud."

"I know." She chuckles. "I know."

Now for the hard part—convincing Rowan I kept my word.

And that I can give her every fucking thing marrying Chad can get her and more.

SIXTEEN

Rowan

I should expect the knock on the door, but it startles me anyway when it happens. Winnie barks like a loon but I just sit and stare at the slab of wood and try to process how I feel about any of this.

It's more than I wanted or was promised. It's the board seat he offered and then a new, elevated title that I don't particularly understand at this point.

"Open up, Rowan. I know you're in there."

If I don't talk, he'll go away eventually, right? But ... do I want him to?

"If you weren't, Winnie would be in her crate and not standing at the door."

Shit.

"We need to talk. I ... I was always going to fulfill my promise to you," he says as I rise to my feet. "I knew Rhett wouldn't sign the deal if I presented it to him with you having a board seat and voting shares. So we closed our deal, signed it per our original agreement, and then I had my legal team draw up documents to make these adjustments after." I move to the door. "To create a new position so I could offer you a board seat." I press my hands to it. "I was just waiting for it all to be completed."

"I…"

"I know about Chad. Why you agreed to marry him." My body stiffens. "It took me longer than it should have to figure it out, but I know all about the shares and the board seat that come with it. You don't need that, you don't need to go through with it because those are the same things I gave you today."

I don't respond. Can't.

"I know you can hear me," he says.

"I want to believe you, Holden, but ... how can I trust you this time? How can I..." My voice breaks and I hate how weak I sound. I hate how much I want to hope but fear to.

"How can you trust me?" His voice rises in pitch with each word, disbelief peppered in every syllable. He barks out a self-deprecating laugh that borders on hysteria. "How about because I had those documents drawn up over a month ago. I never once balked on my promise to you."

A month ago? I hate that those three words have hope bubbling up in a way I never knew I needed.

"I have proof of it, Rowan. Page after page of proof."

I stare at my hand on the handle and will myself to walk away. Is it so wrong that I want to believe him? That I want to think the one person who I thought backed me actually did?

"C'mon, Sunshine. Open the door." There's a thud against the door and I swear he is resting his forehead there. I follow suit. "I'm going to assume you went to put the cuff links in my top drawer and saw the contract there. That you ... that you thought I betrayed you. That you left and went to Georgia thinking I had and ... whatever happened with Chad happened."

I squeeze my eyes closed and draw in a sharp breath.

"I printed the emails out. The ones I sent to my lawyer before we closed the deal. They're date stamped. They show I was planning this new position, the offering of a board seat to you weeks before the deal closed. C'mon, Row. Open up and let me prove it to you."

I turn the handle without thinking, needing this to be true—not only for my sanity and my heart but for my faith in my own judgment. And when I open the door, there he is. He stands on my porch like a puppy dog with eyes begging and lips turned up in the slightest of hopeful smiles.

It's a look I'm not used to on him and it does things to my insides that I don't want it to do. I hold my hand out to see the proof in his.

And once he hands it over, I shut the door in his face.

"Rowan?" He laughs my name out in disbelief, but I don't answer as I take a few steps backward until my ass is resting against a console table in my entry.

I shuffle through the papers, one after another. I take note of the dates on each email and Holden's requests detailed beneath them.

"Please review the company bylaws I've attached to see what I can and can't do given you know my end goal."

"Please advise. What is the best way to create a new board seat and adhere to the bylaws I sent last week?"

"Get the contract drawn up ASAP for Miss Rothschild. Include the newly created position as we discussed, a board seat, and a transfer of 1 percent of my shares to her."

"I'd like you to work on getting that contract for Rowan completed on an expedited timeline. The last thing I need is this deal going south and losing her. She's a valuable asset to my team."

"As you know, the deal for TinSpirits was finalized today. Thank you for taking the trip here to make sure everything ran smoothly. I don't see the contract for Rowan though. Please forward as that is my next matter of business."

With a heavy sigh, I lower the stack of papers and shake my head. "You could have told me," I say through the door.

He's silent for a beat. "I'd much rather speak to your face than the door," he says.

I go to the door, yank it open, and hold the papers up. "Okay. Fine. These all state you were asking about it all beforehand, but you didn't say a word to me. You didn't even warn me. Instead, you closed the deal, you shut me out, and you treated me like—"

"What's the first thing you would have done had I shown you the legal documents? Huh?" He takes a step closer. "Call up your lawyer or a friend to ask for her advice whether you should sign the contract or not? How fast do you think that would have been leaked out for all of Westmore to know?"

"My lawyer, my friend, would never share anything. She's a total professional and she's loyal to me."

"I'm sure she is but her receptionist or paralegal might not be. What about the guy who cleans the office at night after everyone leaves for the evening? One of them might mention something to someone and before you know it, the game of telephone has happened in this stupid fucking town where everybody is desperate to get a leg up on someone else. Next thing you know, Rhett is calling the deal off or putting it on hold and rewriting the bylaws to prevent me from being able to give you what I promised."

"He wouldn't..." Do that. But I don't finish the sentence because he would, and the look on Holden's face says he knows he would.

It's amazing how even after all this time, my first instinct is to protect and defend my brother.

"He would, Rowan." Holden steps inside my door and shuts it at his back. "You should have heard him whining after you left today. How you're going to set the company back, cramp his style, cause delays and problems because you'll be on a power trip..."

"He was just pissed because you hung the picture up to remind him that was the second time you one-upped him."

"Power move."

I study him, my smile soft and this silly playfulness so welcome after all the heaviness between us the past two weeks. "I thought the flex was buying the painting and then cutting it up and destroying it?"

"Ah, yes. Maybe I'm reserving that for when I need to make an even bigger power move." He reaches out to tuck a piece of hair behind my ear.

My breath hitches and I fight every urge I have to lean into it.

The sudden shift in the air between us is palpable.

I take a step back, needing the clarity I think the space will afford me, and gesture to the papers as I set them down on the table beside me. "These don't fix everything. They don't erase the hurt or the confusion or the massive lack of communication on your end."

"You're right. They don't." He steps toward me again. "But I'm a man of my word and I have the contract for you to sign at the office. I was thinking that might help fix it a little bit."

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" He chuckles. "Are you forgetting that you played a role in this too? You're not absolved from not confronting me over seeing it."

"Yeah. Right." I roll my eyes. "Hey, Holden. You're intensely secretive and have plans for world domination, but are you fine with the fact that I went in your top drawer and saw some contracts I wasn't supposed to see?" I snort. "Because that would have gone over well."

He struggles with an answer and rightfully so, because he knows I'm right. He knows the gut-check reaction from a man as intensely private as he is would have been explosive.

"I'm a reasonable man, Rowan," he says softly. "For you at least."

"What if I say no?" I whisper as my eyes dart down to his lips and then back up to his eyes.

"You won't." His fingers trail down my bare arm, tickling my skin, and causing me to swallow forcibly.

"What if I need more than that?"

His groan is a seductive sound that ghosts over my skin. "I'm sorry, Rowan—"

"I don't want your apologies." The warmth of his breath hits my lips. "You're not forgiven."

His eyes are locked on mine, and I see the edges crinkle as he smiles. "You didn't let me finish. What I was going to say was, I'm sorry, but I did nothing wrong other than protect you."

"You think you're clever, don't you?" I murmur as my body hums with an anticipation I've never felt before.

"I'm here, aren't I?" His lips are a whisper away from mine.

"You are but you broke my trust, Holden. That's a hard thing for me to give away."

"What will it take to earn it back?" His warm breath feathers over my lips.

"A lot more than a contract and some printed emails."

"Noted." He brushes his lips ever so slightly against mine. "How about we start with this, then?" Another kiss. I fight the urge to lean into him and the comfort he alone provides me. My reason tells me I need to resist. That I need to make him work

harder for me. That he needs to fucking grovel.

My desire, on the other hand, screams a whole different story. It says touch me, take me, fuck me.

He cups the side of my neck with his hand so that his thumb can rub absently back and forth over the dip in my collarbone.

"Do you think that's all it takes to win me back?" I tease.

"Sunshine, it takes a lot more than that. No man is foolish enough to think otherwise."

Another brush of his lips. Another drip of gas on smoldering embers.

"You should know that I have a list of complaints to lodge with the new owner."

A hand sliding down my back and yanking me so that I land squarely against him.

"Complaints, hmm?"

I run my hands up his chest and welcome the feel of the corded muscles contracting beneath. "Yes," I murmur and scrape my nails up his neck and then thread them through his hair. "You kept this from me."

"Can't fault a man for wanting to make sure all his i's were dotted and t's were crossed."

"You could have saved us a lot of ... everything ... if you'd just told me."

"I prefer to be thorough," he says.

I reach down and pull my dress over my head so I'm standing before him in my bra, panties, and strappy heels. "Thorough, huh?"

"Good god," he mumbles.

"Then prove it."

So much for holding out.

Holden chuckles. "I do believe that was the plan."

SEVENTEEN

Rowan

From one breath to the next, we become a mass of grabbing hands, demanding lips, and moaned commands.

Of need and greed fueled by desperation.

Of depravity seeing gluttony is on the horizon.

We move through my place in choreographed chaos. His shirt being pulled over his head—our lips parting only long enough for the fabric to pass between us before reconnecting again.

His hands unclasping my bra and his low guttural growl as they cup my bare breasts.

"Christ, Row," he mutters as he dips down and pulls one nipple into his mouth, allowing his tongue to swirl around its tip.

I sag against the wall at my back and revel in the warmth of his mouth and the riot of sensations warring through me. The want to take fast and the need to go slow, to savor everything about this moment.

He's here. My hands are on him. We're okay. I can't get enough of him.

My body aches with the sweetest burn of longing and restraint. I fist one hand in the short length of his hair and pull his head back so his desire-darkened eyes meet mine.

"I need your cock, Holden. I want it."

A smirk flickers on his handsome face. One I'm not sure where I want it to pleasure me next. "Then take it. Tease it. But Sunshine, I will be in you when I come. I want to be buried so fucking deep I can't fathom anything but you."

His words. Those words. Does he realize what they do to me? What he does to me?

I reach down to his unbuttoned pants and slide my hands inside his waistband at the same time he shoves his pants down. I'm met with the hard, velvet length of his cock springing free and reminding me just how fucking fantastic he feels.

"Fuck," he groans out, the gravelly sounds scraping over my skin and causing goose bumps like they're touching me.

"I need you," I whisper against the flat disc of his nipple. "I want you." I suck it into my mouth, his whole body tensing. "You're all I've thought about even when I hate you."

His chuckle vibrates against my lips as he lifts my face up to meet his. "Christ, you're beautiful." He slips his hands between my thighs so that I involuntarily buck my hips into his hand. Needing his touch. Craving his touch. "And so fucking wet for me."

"Yes. God..." It's all I can manage as he tucks three fingers into me to prime me for his cock. My head falls back and my eyes close just as his lips meet mine.

"Get on the bed, Row. Spread your thighs. Show me that pretty pussy of yours. And then I'm going to watch it take every fucking inch of my cock until you can't take any more." He slides a hand up my chest and rests it just beneath my chin at the base of my throat. "I've been desperate to feel you like that. Wrapped around me. Soaking me. Coming for me."

He tugs on my bottom lip as his free hand squeezes my ass. I crawl into position like he asks as he slips a condom on. His moan is one of pure appreciation as he turns back to find my legs parted and my own fingers dipping into me. I wet them and then bring them up to circle around my clit. I repeat the process, our eyes locked on each other's the whole time, as his own hand lowers to fist his cock.

We pleasure ourselves, slowly, seductively, but it's our fixed gazes that make this way more intimate.

His bicep flexes with each pump of his cock. The tendons in his neck pull taut and his breath comes faster as he works himself over.

But I'm not immune to the moment either. My body is riding a high that I've come to understand only he can create. My breasts grow heavy and that electric pulse of pleasure grows more powerful with each and every flick of friction.

"Fuck those fingers, Rowan," he urges as I dip them back into me. "Fuck them. Good girl. Just like that. Rock those hips." He lets his head fall back, fighting the urge to lose himself to his hand or to watch me. "Tell me when you're ready for me."

I let the pleasure surge. Build me up. And just before I'm about to fall, I scoot to the edge of the bed and whisper, "I'm yours, Holden."

I don't have time to process the speed with which Holden grabs my legs and yanks me toward him.

I laugh but that laugh is short-lived as he pushes his way into me. The slow, sweet stretch of him filling me is absolute bliss. My hips buck and my hands grip the sheet as I take everything I can of him.

"Good god, Row. Take that cock." Holden's hips jerk involuntarily as his teeth sink into his lower lip. "Fuck, that's hot. Can you take any more? Hmm. There you go. Just like that."

His fingertips trace over the edges of where I've stretched to accommodate him and it's the hottest fucking sensation. It turns me on. It teases me more.

And then he begins to move.

There is no break-in period in this moment. It's just two people desperate for the feel of each other, the high of each other,

the release earned from each other.

We move in synch. My thighs stretching wider, his hips thrusting harder. The room is filled with the sound of our panted breaths and slapping skin.

The pressure builds. His fingers hold my hips in place as he picks up his pace. His cock rubs over every single nerve while I clench around him tighter and tighter.

His lips close over mine. His tongue matches the rhythm of his hips, and my fingernails score into his biceps as I hold on to him. As I beg him not to stop and urge him to slow down.

Hurry up and slow it down.

One brings bliss and the other makes it burn so bright it ends.

All I know is it feels right. He feels right. And I'm right back where I want to be.

With Holden. Beneath him. With him in me. Pleasuring me.

"Fuck, baby. I'm not going to be able to hold out much longer. You're ... fucking incredible." A push in. "The way you feel." A grind of his hips. "The way you taste." A pull out. "The way you take this cock and ride it."

"Holden." His name is a long, drawn-out moan as the orgasm slams into me. My gasp turns to a moan.

My back arches and hands grasp the sheets.

The moan turns into a mewl.

My legs tense and my pussy tightens.

Holden stills and lets me chase my high. "Come on, baby. Come for me. Let me feel you come."

My hips rock back and forth, pulsing around him, milking him, begging him for more.

More everything. Him. His cock. This moment. This feeling.

"Fuck, Row." He leans forward as his cock surges as far as it can be within me. He rests his head on my shoulder, hands cupping my ass to hold me still, as he pistons his hips at a relentless pace. His whole body tightens. He groans out my name, his lips kissing on my skin as his own climax hits him.

We lie there, his weight on me and his lips pressed against my skin as our hearts decelerate.

This is so much more than sex.

The thought hits me out of nowhere as the orgasmic haze abates.

So much more than sex.

EIGHTEEN

Holden

Rowan walks into her family room wearing nothing more than my shirt. Her long, tan legs peek out from beneath it with toes painted red. Her hair is a mess and her cheeks are flushed, and I feel settled for the first time in what feels like weeks.

That's what good sex will do for you, Knight.

But even I know it's more than that. I might not want to admit it to myself but the lie lingers like the scent of her does on my skin. It's undeniable and addictive as fuck.

I'm sitting on her couch with my pants unbuttoned, shirt off, and the taste of her still on my tongue.

Not that I mind in the least.

I study her. Her full lips. Her mussy hair. Her curious eyes.

"This doesn't mean you're forgiven, you know."

"Nothing is as simple as that when it comes to you," I say as she takes a seat on the table in front of me. My eyes are drawn to her parted thighs and everything the shadow of my shirt is hiding.

Everything I want to taste and then taste again.

She shifts and the ring on her finger catches light so that prisms dance all over the room. I narrow my brows, which must give her insight to what I'm upset about because she shifts so that her hand is resting between her hip and the table.

When I look back up, Rowan has her eyebrows lifted. "Yes?"

"Just thinking." Get that fucking thing off your finger.

"About?"

"Chadwick Williams." The words sound like a swear.

"What about him?" she asks beneath sex-drugged lids, and I forgive her for taunting me and dragging this on.

I'll start easy. "Please tell me he wasn't your first."

Rowan stares at me with much the same expression I probably have right now and then bursts out laughing. "Who I lost my virginity to is none of your damn business, just like yours isn't mine."

"Penelope Piccadilly. I was sixteen years old, she was seventeen."

"Piccadilly? As in—"

"Yes, as in Piccadilly Circus in London." My smile is reminiscent. "We did it on her family room floor while her parents were on vacation."

"If her parents were on vacation, then why not use her bed?" She chuckles.

"Because I was terrified of getting caught and figured if we were in the family room at least we'd hear if a car pulled up." The terror was real. Not only was I nervous about not coming before I even put the condom on, but her dad had a healthy gun collection he let everyone know about. I feared being on the other end of one.

"Logical, but I don't care who your first was."

I chew the inside of my cheek and question why I even asked. There's something about Chad that gets under my skin. The fact that he might have touched her first is a valid reason but it's something more than that—the ring on her fucking hand is a good start.

"Can we stop the charade and get that ring off your finger?" I ask. It's beautiful in its own right but not good enough for her in my eyes.

Her shoulders bristle. I can sense her taking the offensive immediately. "No."

I snort out the laugh and glance back down to her thighs. "Rowan." Her name is more of a warning than anything. *I don't share*. "You told me we need to communicate. I'm communicating. Take the ring off. Call off the engagement. In a very public setting today, I handed you everything marrying him could give you and then some. The co-CEO job. The ownership percentage. The board seat. The orgasms."

I know you, Rowan. This is what you wanted. I'm handing it to you.

She twists her lips, starts to bring her hand out of hiding to twist her fingers together like she's prone to do, but catches herself and thinks better of it. But she doesn't fucking answer.

Fine. I'll bite.

"Either you just cheated on your fiancé or it's a sham fucking engagement. The answer is yes to both. I'm not sure what the problem is. Case closed."

"Wrong tactic, Knight. I won't be strong-armed."

I level her with a glare that's fit for a king, but bite back all smart-ass comments. I have the woman back. I righted the wrong. So why the fuck isn't she making this easy?

"That's why you got engaged to him, right? What you'd gain? I'm at least right in that assumption."

"My goal in taking the deal with you, in agreeing to help you, was to further my stature in the company. It was to align myself so that I had at least equal ownership with my brother. When I thought I lost that, I did the next best thing to secure it."

"You agreed to marry Chad."

"I did."

There's something more here she's not telling me. Her guard is up. You broke my trust. Is that all it is?

"This isn't a game, Rowan."

"No one said it was. I'm looking out for myself."

"Well, you don't need to anymore. The contract is ready to sign. My word and promises held true. Call off the fucking engagement."

She stares at the floor for a beat before meeting my eyes again. "I'm sorry. I can't."

"Why not?" I throw up my hands in exasperation.

"Because there are other things marrying Chad would net me."

"What?" I bark out a laugh.

"I'm serious."

"Whatever it is I'll give it to you so I don't have to spend another goddamn second thinking about his hands on you or him being anywhere near you." The high of the orgasm is gone. It's been replaced by pure fucking confusion.

"You can't buy time, Holden."

"What the fuck do you need to buy time for?"

"For me," she states, without backing down from the surprised scowl I level her with. "Because of you."

"My bullshit radar is going off here, Row, and it never does when it comes to you."

"I'm allowed to have my own secrets. My own reasons. You're the king of them, the man who talks around all questions that are asked of him, so I figured you'd understand more than anyone."

I blow out a breath. "I'm at a loss, Row."

"Besides, how do I know you're not going to hurt me again? How do I know that you're going to follow through on the promises you made me? You are sitting in front of me, talking a good game, Holden, but I believed you before and got hurt."

"But I'm here now. I've proven to you that I was worth it."

"I know and I appreciate it, but ... we had New York where I was on the highest of highs and then I saw that contract, and for the past few weeks have been in the lowest of lows. I can't just flip a switch and forget."

I nod, understanding but not understanding. "Don't let yourself be fooled. That prick isn't looking out for your best interest," I say with way more knowledge about him than I should have.

I can't show my cards. Won't. Isn't that what this whole thing with her taught me? How easily a unique woman, who hit buttons I didn't even know I wanted hit, was able to make me uncharacteristically lose my perspective.

"No, but isn't that the point? I know that no one is. My guard is up at all times now."

Except with me. Her guard isn't up at all. She may think it is but if it were, she wouldn't be confiding in me the things that I could use against her.

She wouldn't have admitted there is nothing real between Chad and her except for her self-interest.

And a part of me loves that. A part of me hates that. And the rest of me knows I need to exploit the fuck out of it.

"So just like that, you're going to fuck me but stay engaged to Chad?"

Her shrug drives me mad, the uncertainty in her eyes even more so.

"You'll have the board seat. You'll have the extra 1 percent ownership. You'll have the new co-CEO position. What does staying with him, what does this engagement charade, net you then?"

"A plan B if needed."

"Fuck." I scrub a hand over my face and groan.

Can't blame her for it. Not one fucking bit, especially when almost everything I say or do has an ulterior motive to it. An endgame I won't compromise on.

"So where does that leave us?" I ask.

"The same as we were before. Hiding in secret. The last thing we need is to be found out because if we were, you know the first thing said would be that I slept my way on to the board."

My grimace is automatic. Her point is more than valid.

She wants to stay engaged to Chad while fucking me? Not going to say that I'm going to like it, but I'll use it to my advantage. At least I'll know more about what's going on in the Williams-Rothschild camp other than what I can gather through Bob and dipping into their computers.

"Christ," I say slowly, choking over the words I say next. "You make valid points. Ones I don't like but that I understand." I glance at the ring again and hate that it feels like a dagger to the heart.

"You understand but you're going to glare at my finger, aren't you?"

"Every chance I get."

She clears her throat and moves her shoulders some so that my shirt shifts and her nipples press against the fabric. *Fuck*.

- "What now, Holden?" Her eyes meet mine. She knows exactly what she's doing, and I'm here for the distraction.
- "We fix the company," I lie. "We figure out how to improve what we have. We root out the bad."
- "Even if that means my brother?"
- "Do you want me to answer that honestly?"

She spreads her legs a little farther apart and scoots her ass to the edge of the coffee table. Her eyebrows shoot up innocently but her lips slide into a siren's smile.

- "What I want is for you to promise me something," she says breathlessly.
- "Is that so?" I ask and slide my hands ever so slowly over her smooth thighs. Beneath the tails of my shirt. So my fingertips tickle the top of her pussy.

I love the hitch of her breath. The slow, measured exhale. The roll of her shoulders in restraint.

- "No more lies between us." Our gazes hold across the distance between us. "None."
- "No more lies." The lie rolls off my tongue with an ease that should disarm me and a guilt that I don't want to feel.

I squeeze her thighs, my thumbs grazing right where I want to be.

- "That was your rule. From the get-go. That you expect honesty at all times. Well, so do I."
- "Hey, Rowan?" I ask as I hook my hands beneath her knees and scoot her even closer to me.

Her lips part and a soft moan falls from her lips. "Hmm?" Her eyelids grow heavy as she looks up at me from beneath them.

"Do you really want to keep talking about work?" She digs her teeth into her bottom lip and her eyes roll back some as I part her slick flesh to find her clit. "About lies." I add a little friction and my balls draw tight as she lifts her hips into my hand. "About anything other than this? Right here? Right now?"

"No." She's breathless. Willing. Just how I like her.

I lean forward and kiss the underside of her jaw, using my knees to knock hers wider so I can I slide two fingers into her.

- "Holden," she moans.
- "C'mon, baby. Show me how much you missed me."
- "Missed you?" She chuckles and it dies on a moan as I work my fingers in and out of her. "Missed this. Not you." She tries to quirk an eyebrow.

"Hell of a time to find your defiance as I'm getting you off."

She stands abruptly and pushes me back into her couch. "Take your cock out. I'm going to fuck you," she murmurs.

"Then again," I say while I do as she asks, "find your defiance all you want."

When she straddles me and sinks down onto my cock, when I see only her, when I lose myself in the feel of her tightening around me as her breasts rock against my chest, I tell myself that this is all that matters.

Right here.

Right now.

The moment. The next orgasm. The incredible sex with her.

Not what happens when she finds out the truth.

No more lies, Holden.

Doesn't she know that my life was built on them?

<u>NINETEEN</u>

Rowan

"Oh my God, is it true?" Michele, one of my marketing employees, asks, and scurries up next to me as I stride down the hall.

I'm exhausted from the late night and very early morning spent becoming reacquainted with Holden. His early-morning kiss before he left and headed home still has that ache burning between my thighs when he satisfied that ache more than I could fathom in the past eighteen hours.

I'm exhilarated that it is in fact true—that I was offered the new co-CEO position here—and don't even know where to start or what to say.

I'm energized. I mean, how can I not be when I just spent hours tangled in the sheets—or rather, the floor, the couch, and then the sheets—with Holden Knight?

"It is," I say.

"That's so awesome. It's about time a woman gets some kind of clout around here," she says and grins. "I wasn't exactly sure how I felt about Mr. Knight, but I have to admit, he might have just won me over a bit with this decision."

"Pretty sure I agree with that sentiment," I say.

And isn't that what's filled my thoughts all morning long. With this new position, with the board vote that came with it, I will now equal Rhett's stature in the company.

Is that enough for me? Do I want more? Getting married to Chad would not only net me the board seat and vote that comes with taking his last name, but in addition, it would also fulfill Gran's terms. I'd gain the stake from Gran's faceless LLC and the board seat that comes with it. Both of these gains would make me the second largest shareholder in my family's company.

That's what my goal is. To overtake Rhett and have something he can't for the first time in our lives.

It's not completely honoring the promise I made to Gran about keeping the company in the family and running it as the CEO, but it's as close as I can get given the circumstances and I'll gladly cling to that.

So no, when Holden left and I lay in bed to process all that happened yesterday, none of this went unnoticed.

And at the same time it puts everything into a kaleidoscope of opportunities for me. Holden delivered and gave me what he said ... but a small part of me deep down doesn't trust that there isn't something waiting in the wings. Another shoe to drop.

So I hold tight to what I have but fear it might go away at any time.

That's where keeping up pretenses with Chad comes in. If that shoe were to drop and those things were to be taken away, then I have another avenue to stay in this figurative position of power.

I'm leery of everything at this point and trust no one.

"Rowan?" Michele asks and pulls me from my spiraling thoughts. I look in the direction of her gaze to see my brother standing with his back against my doorjamb waiting for us. This can either be good or it can be bad. This is the first time I've seen Rhett since the co-CEO announcement. "We'll talk later?" I ask Michele.

"Sure. Yes." She glances Rhett's way and then back to me, distrust in her eyes. I don't blame her, considering he fired her last month in a power play.

And once again Holden stepped in to save the day there, but gave me the credit for rehiring them back with bonuses.

"Rhett," I say, meeting his steely glare, as I move past him and into my office. What's the number one way to ease into a difficult conversation with him? *Talk about him, of course*. "I saw your gigantic billboard on the way in today."

Nothing like seeing your brother smiling cheesily at you from a billboard positioned at your highway off-ramp.

He glances over his shoulder before looking back at me. "The election's already been secured. There's no chance I'll lose, but I have to at least look like I'm giving it a fair fight."

"So you bribed your way on to the city council. How very ... Rhett of you," I say but then stop short when I notice the padded manila envelope sitting on my desk. There is a cheap red bow stuck to its top but no writing. It more than piques my curiosity.

"What's that?" he asks and steps into my office, shutting the door at his back.

"Looks to me like it's an envelope, but what do I know?" I say sarcastically.

"Open it," he urges.

"What do you want?" I ask, irritation peppering my tone as Holden's comments from last night about how much Rhett whined after I left the conference room come back. The last thing I want is to open a gift on my desk when the last time a gift was here it was the sapphire earrings.

"You're playing at something here and I can't figure out what it is."

"And if I were, you think I'd tell you?"

"This isn't the time for secrets," he says as if he can't make up his mind whether to be mad at me for the new co-CEO position, or to convince me that we need to be on the same side.

"That's rich coming from someone who sold our company out from beneath me, closed the actual deal, and didn't say two damn words to me about it."

"I was legally bound not to say anything."

"Huh. And here I thought our last name might have mattered more."

"Your fiancé knew too, but I don't see you throwing him under the bus."

"Wow. Is this like the third grade where you pull everyone else into an argument so that you don't have to answer the question yourself?" I ask.

"No, more like fourth, where if you kiss ass enough you become teacher's pet." He looks at me with disgust. "Because what the fuck, Row? You cozy up to Holden and then all of a sudden you are now my equal?"

"I'm going to rephrase that sentence for you. It should sound more like this: you worked side by side with the man I deemed worthy enough to sell our family company to because that's what was asked of you. Lo and behold, in that working side by side, that man saw your value, Rowan, and decided that maybe you had a good skill set and fresh ideas. That maybe someone should put a check on my rampant behavior which, to this point, has proven to be a detriment to the company."

"Sarcasm doesn't become you," he says as I move behind my desk and take a seat.

"For the record, I've always been your equal." My gaze veers to the manila envelope and while curiosity may own me, privacy does more so.

He shrugs indifferently. "So you're telling me this has nothing to do with your sudden change of heart and engagement to Chad?"

"What does this refer to?"

"The new job."

"No. Absolutely not. How does that even make sense? I found out about the new position the same time you did."

He holds my stare for the longest time. If I avert my gaze before he's satisfied with what he sees, he'll know I'm lying. "Okay, then why the about-face when it comes to Chad?" His eyebrows narrow and his lips purse as I try to keep up with the various directions of this conversation.

It's almost as if he's changing topics quickly to catch me off guard. But I've rehearsed the lie in my head ever since I said yes. Let's just hope the first time I have to say it out loud that it's believable. "For a lot of reasons, but mostly because Chad and I have a sense of duty to help our families. We've been told our whole lives that the best foundation to a good marriage is friendship and we have that, so why not give it a try."

"Just like that?"

"I'm not getting any younger." I shrug. "Mom has spent forever telling me Chad's the one. Maybe I wanted to make that decision for myself. Then again, maybe I've been sitting back and watching him over the past year and I realize there is so much more there than I ever thought."

Please buy the lie.

"Hmm."

Not exactly the reaction I was expecting. *Don't oversell it.* "Hmm? What is that supposed to mean?"

"It has nothing to do with anything you'd net from marrying him?"

"Well, if that's the case, it wouldn't really matter anymore seeing as I have a new position and netted that all on my own. If I were engaged to him solely for that, we'd be calling it off."

And it's true. I would be. But there's still that pesky matter about the two-year codicil to get my inheritance. I want that now, and after seeing firsthand how shitty he's acting about being equal to me, you bet your ass I want Gran's shares and vote so someday I can gloat that I have more than him.

Catty and bullshit? Hell yes. Deserved and what he has coming to him after all these years of throwing his privilege in my face? Definitely.

Rhett just stands there and stares at me, scrutinizing whatever he's seeing while he decides whether to believe me or not. "He's been in love with you for as long as I can remember."

"I'm aware." Now you're going to play good cop?

"But you don't feel the same about him." It's not a question, but rather a statement that puts me on edge.

"I don't have to explain my feelings about Chad to you. That's between him and me."

"Then I suggest you remind yourself of that because you looked like you were getting your wisdom teeth pulled at your engagement party."

"You ever been on the other end of Mom's planning? It's like a tornado wrapped in a hurricane and you're not allowed to make any decisions on how you're going to escape or hunker down because guess what? She's already made them and you have no fucking choice in the matter, down to what it is you're going to wear. So yeah, you're damn right I looked miserable, because I was." At least I can explain that one away. "And you know what? Screw you, Rhett. I have a lot going on with you upending our lives with this sale—more than you can ever fathom—and the last thing I need is your judgment on anything that doesn't pertain to you."

"Don't you get that everything has to do with me? You marrying Chad. You getting to stay here in management at TinSpirits. You being ... fucking everywhere all of a sudden." He throws his hands up but I can see him rein in his frustration. I hold back a laugh. He's actually going to claim that he's the reason I still have a job? Is he out of his fucking mind? "Chad has been my best friend since kindergarten, Row. Our families all but founded this damn town. I get you might hate me for what happened with the company, but don't use him to get back at me. The last thing I want is for him to get hurt."

That's what he thinks this is all about. That I'm stealing away his best friend to get back at him?

Christ. His selfishness is worse than I thought.

I snort. "Thanks for confirming where your loyalties lie. Friends first, sister last. Got it." His friend's heartbreak matters more than my own ever did. I walk over and open my door, trying to give him the hint that this conversation is way past over.

"Do you ever get tired of being so damn dramatic?"

"You're seriously going to say that to me after the temper tantrums I've seen you throw?" I level him with a dubious look. "Let's hope you've had the same talk with Chad, huh?" My words surprise him, his shocked eyes say as much, but when I reach my desk and turn back around, he's still standing there. "For the record, using a friend to get back at a sibling? That's something out of your playbook. Not mine."

"To think I came in here to try and make sure we were good."

"You're so full of shit."

"And so are you. You can't fool someone you've known your whole life, Row. Like I said, something's going on here. What are you playing at?"

Don't ask questions you don't want answers to. Weren't those Holden's words that are so very fitting in this moment?

And while my brother claims to know me, I know him too and he's fishing. He's scared about something and wants to know if I know more than him. His fragile, male ego has been tested with Holden bringing me on.

My smile is quick and cruel. "How to have my cake and eat it too. That's what I'm playing at. You always have, why can't

He barks out a laugh, but the nervous little vibrato says that he's not sure if he should believe me or not. "I'm not on board with this. This whole checks-and-balances thing."

"Wait. Didn't you just say you're the reason I'm still here in management? I think you'd have no one to blame other than yourself for it, then." I sigh dramatically and shake my head. "Looks like with me as your equal, you just might have to play by the rules for once in your life. Do you even know how to do that?"

"This isn't funny."

"You're right. But you were just bragging about already winning before the election even started so ... I mean, you have to have a check to all that privilege somewhere."

I'm not one who should be talking, but ...

"I did all this to make life better for the two of us. The sale of the company. The seat on the city council. Helping Mom and Dad by managing the trust. I've put all of that on my shoulders to ensure our family's continued success. I don't understand why you continually treat me like I'm screwing you over."

Does he believe this bullshit he's slinging? I had my doubts he belonged in politics. Now I do believe he'll fit in just fine.

"Transparency goes a long way, Rhett, and that's something you've failed at when it comes to this company."

"I know." His smile is reticent. "It's not always easy being the boss and bearing the brunt of stress to make sure all of these people keep their jobs." I open my mouth, a sarcastic comment on my tongue, when he points to the gift still untouched before me. "That's probably from Chad."

"It's not," Chad says from where he's just opened the door and entered my office. "We're talking about the gift, right? Because it's not." He looks from Rhett to me and then back, clearly sensing the undeniable tension. "Everything okay in here? I can't remember the last time I saw the two of you talking like this."

I smile, more than cognizant now of how closely my brother is watching Chad's and my interactions now. "Well, it seems your best friend is reading your fiancée the riot act over whether she really wants to get married and why the sudden aboutface. The way I see it, our relationship is none of his business."

There you go, Chad. Where do your loyalties lie?

Chad looks at Rhett and grins. "You've always had my back, but I'm pretty sure I've got this one." He winks.

"She has fangs," my brother says, repeating a line he used to say when we were kids. The go-to insult he'd throw my way when the boys didn't want his little sister tagging along.

The three of us laugh but I'm under no impression that Rhett's throwback joke is in good humor. He's pissed about Holden's fast one on the co-CEO thing and doesn't know how to deal with it.

"Dude, you've been on the receiving end of your mother's full-force planning mode. We're both a little shell-shocked with everything our moms are throwing at us," Chad says, unknowingly reinforcing the reasoning I gave.

It does look like we're compatible after all.

"What is in the package?" Chad says, lifting his chin at it and raising his eyebrows. "Should I be worried you have a secret

admirer trying to take my place?"

I laugh but don't pull it off very well as both of them wait expectantly for me to open it.

I swear to God it better not be something ridiculous from Holden.

Within seconds I have the envelope open, and a utility blade slides out on the desk with a clatter.

"What the hell?" they both say as they step closer, and I catch a glimpse of the card inside. The words are written in block letters. A handwriting style I've learned to recognize over the past few months.

I KNOW YOU DON'T WANT MY APOLOGIES, SO TAKE THIS INSTEAD. THE NEXT POWER PLAY IS YOURS. DO WHAT YOU WANT WITH IT. IT'S YOURS.

The painting and its preservation or its demise. That's what this note means.

Holden just gave me a \$3 million painting and the razor blade to destroy it if I so choose.

I'm in control here. I have the power and the next move is mine to make.

"Rowan?" Chad asks cautiously as he steps toward me, concern edging his tone. "Why would someone send you that?"

I cover the card with the envelop and place it in the trash beneath my desk just as Chad places his hand on my lower back like the loving fiancé he's supposed to be. More than aware that Holden is watching our every interaction now, I look over to Chad and offer a reticent smile. "It's not what it looks like." I roll my eyes playfully, heeding his worried tone from moments before. "Harris down in production borrowed my utility knife last week for something. I made a joke that no one ever returns what they borrow from me. Apparently, he's making a point that he does." The lie is effortless and they buy it because it sounds like something Harris would do.

"That's welcome news. I was certain it was a threat from our new boss." Rhett's joke falls flat as we all look toward the door as if Holden might have heard that down the hallway.

"Did you need me?" I ask Chad in an attempt to change the subject.

"No, I needed Rhett, but I called a couple of times last night. You didn't answer. Everything okay?" he asks and smooths his hand up and down my back.

"Yeah. Sorry." I look down at the utility knife. "I was..." *Asleep and my phone was on silent. I was busy fucking Holden. I was*—

"She was busy," Holden says, waltzing into my office. My poker face fails—ever so briefly—and I'm not naive enough to think the two don't catch it.

"Oh?" I'm not sure if Chad or Rhett make the sound because I'm too busy staring at Holden.

"Yep." A flash of a knowing smile aimed their way before he continues, "We were going over her contract. Negotiating her compensation." He gives a deliberate shake of his head. "Your sister plays hardball, Rhett. You could take a lesson or two from her. The lady knows how to stand her ground."

"Hm. Seems she shows a side to you the rest of us don't get to see," Rhett murmurs.

"Or maybe I actually pay attention and notice. Either way," Holden says with a flicker of his fingers, "I need to speak to Rowan. You can see yourself out."

"You can say whatever you need to say with us present," Rhett says as Chad stiffens beside me.

Holden notices Chad's reaction but it's his eyes going to Chad's hand on me that causes his jaw to clench. "No thanks," Holden says.

"Why not? If we're co-CEOs then everything's fair game, right? All conversations. All decisions. All negotiations."

"Hm. Yes." Holden flashes a shark's smile and I draw in a deep breath. Seems my brother likes to play with fire. "Except for this."

"This?" Rhett asks as Chad shifts some to face Holden more.

"Sign her contract. Finalize her compensation package. Lay out the perks she'll be getting."

Every part of my brother's body bristles. "Compensation package? Perks? We didn't have this discussion." I can hear the whiny-little-boy voice he had as a kid when he'd complain to my parents about things not being fair.

Holden raises his eyebrows. "We didn't have to. You've already taken way more than your share from the company. I reward those who don't. Shut the door on the way out." He clears his throat and then adds for emphasis, "Please."

It takes a second but they do what they're told, and when Holden sits down, when that smirk graces that beautifully talented mouth of his, he says, "I see you got my gift."

"And I see you just waged a big-dick contest."

His chuckle is devious. "I'll win, Rowan. I'll always win. But I'd be more than up for reminding you since it seems you're having trouble remembering." He glances over his shoulder to my office's interior window that looks out toward the hallway. "Those do have blinds on them, don't they? I can show you now if you'd like."

"You're being ridiculous."

"And you think I'm bluffing."

We hold each other's stares as snapshots of last night flash through my mind. By the darkening of his eyes, I have a feeling

he's reliving a few moments himself.

"I don't like his hands on you."

"Neither do I."

"It's an easy solution. Break it off or tell me what it is you're still to gain and I'll get that for you."

"Is this going to be a problem, Holden?" This isn't something I'm budging on until I know my place in this new world. I come first.

"Yes."

"But you understand."

He groans. "Just make sure you're never alone with him ... and for that matter, I'm never alone with him, and we'll be good."

"You're overstepping."

"Perhaps." He glances down to the table and then back up to me. "But overstepping is way better than Chad accidentally, say, falling out of"—he glances out my window and then smirks—"a fourth-story window."

"Not funny."

"But tempting." There's an aloofness to his tone that has me wondering just how dark Holden's fantasy is. "You got my gift, I see."

"I did. Thank you, but I can't accept it."

"A utility knife?"

"No. The..." Did I misinterpret what he meant? About the painting? About—

He starts laughing. "You will accept both, Sunshine. I meant what I said. That's my apology to you for the miscommunication. Do with it what you wish. It's yours to destroy or use as you want. The power play is yours to make."

"Why would I destroy or mar something that others find beauty in?" I ask.

He angles his head to the side and says, "I said the same thing to myself, but then again, look how I made you feel over the past few weeks." My chest burns with emotion from his words more than his apology, from his acknowledgment of how much he hurt me, but I don't have time to fully process it before he stands, walks toward the door, and then points to the blade. "And there's my apology for it."

I pick up the utility blade and let its weight grow heavy in my hand. Could I hurt something others consider beautiful?

TWENTY

Rowan

"Why are we not talking about any of this?" Caroline Vandevere asks as she pushes another extra-dirty martini across the cocktail table to me.

The patio bar at the country club is busy for a weeknight. But then again, when is it not these days? Patrons mill about and talk with others about the Westmore gossip, lie about their golf score for the day's round, or try to hit up an associate and seal a business deal.

There is always schmoozing going on here and unfortunately, today I seem to be a part of it.

"Talk about what?" I feign innocence. "My promotion?"

"Your promotion. Your engagement. I mean ... it feels like just yesterday we were teasing you about Chad, and now—now you're going to marry him."

I smile, take a long sip of the martini, and prepare to do what it seems I've gotten very good at lately—*I lie*. "I'm not going to lie. It's been a whirlwind." Guilt hits me squarely in the solar plexus.

"So it's the whirlwind"—she twirls her finger around—"and not you trying to avoid me that's had you not returning my calls."

"Caroline. I promise, it's not you. You have to know that. It's the company and Holden confusing things and me trying to figure out what is really going on, and my parents and—" Stop over-explaining. She's known you since middle school and will see right through you. "It's just been a lot."

She eyes me above the rim of her glass, and it's only after she gives me that slight nod that I know I'm forgiven. For now. "So then road-map this out for me because I'm more than a little lost." She hooks her arm through mine and drags me out of earshot from the typical Westmore Country Club evening patio soiree. "You're telling me that being with Holden made you realize you wanted Chad? I mean ... that's not a Rowan Rothschild type of action."

"Things just happened," I sputter the words out.

"A lot of things clearly happened, but I've known you long enough and one plus one isn't equaling two for me on this."

Our eyes meet and hold. I swear our years of friendship and knowledge of each other pass through the distance. I clear my throat. I struggle with how to explain or justify or reinforce the lies I'm telling one of my oldest friends. "I, uh—there's just a lot going on," I finally manage.

She reaches out and squeezes my hand, leaving mine in hers. We stand there in silence as the socializing carries on around us. I've never felt more alone in this moment and it's all my own doing. "I'm here for you if you need to talk, Row. But I'm not going to lie to you. It's quite a drastic one-eighty and if I'm asking questions, you better believe the busybodies of town are gossiping about it behind your back."

"I know. Everything is fine. I'm not pregnant like my own mother assumes. This is my choice, Caroline. It's my doing."

"How bad did he hurt you?" she asks, and I know without a doubt she's talking about Holden.

I put a brave smile on my face and nod. It's all I give her as I squeeze her hand. "I'm fine," I murmur. She knows something is up and it makes me feel a bit better that she does.

"Well, I've never known Rowan Rothschild to do something without there being a purpose or reason behind it, so I trust you."

Her words mean the world to me and I struggle swallowing the lump in my throat they've caused. In typical Caroline fashion, she's needed elsewhere for some drama or something in the club. She leaves me reluctantly but just as there is a rare sighting of Henry Williams across the patio.

Or maybe he's always there, and I'm the one who isn't.

Regardless, I make a beeline for him since it seems I can't get him to return my calls.

"Henry. Mr. Williams," I call out breathlessly to Gran's estate lawyer and Chad's uncle as I make my way across the space and turn some heads in doing so.

He turns and his eyebrows shoot up from behind his glasses. "Miss Rothschild." He glances around as if he's afraid of being seen with me. I file that thought away. "A little out of character to see you here, isn't it?"

It's not the first comment like this tonight.

Play the game, Row. Look the part. Smile the brightest while loathing the people you now have to become.

"Yes, I know, but Chadwick is bringing out all different sides of me."

"Ah, yes. That's right. I hear congratulations are in order. Forgive me for not saying so sooner. I was unable to make the party. Prior obligations had me out of town and unable to cancel for a party thrown on such short notice."

"It's been a whirlwind," I say in what seems to be the word of the evening. "I think we took everyone by surprise."

"Most definitely." He shifts on his feet uncomfortably. "Well, okay, then..."

"I've been meaning to have word with you," I say before he escapes.

"About?"

About why you never seem to return my calls. "Gran's will."

The features on his face tighten some and I don't know what to make of it. "Her will?"

"Yes. I'm more than certain that Chad may have spoken to you about it as well, seeing that you openly informed him of some of its confidential contents."

His Adam's apple bobs and eyes dart around. "Of—of course, but—but I'm off the clock."

"I'm aware, and I apologize for approaching you in this manner. I have called your office several times but your receptionist just tells me that your schedule is packed and she'll try and get a message to you."

"I am super busy these days."

That or you know you fucked up, breaking my attorney-client privilege by telling Chad about the parameters of my inheritance, and therefore are afraid to be alone with me because you know I'm going to confront you over it.

"I know you are, but I'm sure you'll take a moment for your soon-to-be niece."

"Um." His eyes flicker about nervously as if he's looking for someone to intervene.

"In addition to asking for some clarification on Gran's will, I'd also like to chat about prenups, so clearly time is of the essence."

His head startles at those words. "You're serious."

"Of course I am. I'd think that would be a smart move for anyone in either of our positions."

"Well, um ... normally I'd say yes, but in this instance, I don't think that's necessary."

The plan is for me to inherit \$30 million in the next two years, and he doesn't think it's necessary to safeguard that?

No lawyer in their right mind would think otherwise. Now I know I really need to question him further on Gran's will.

"Right." My smile is insincere at best. "I'm hoping we can get together sooner rather than later so I can clear up a few concerns I have."

He pauses as he looks at me, his head to the side and his glasses slipping low on the bridge of his nose. "Of course."

"Henry Williams. Stop badgering our girl."

I stiffen at the sound of my mom's voice while noticing his awkward smile in response.

"I'm not badgering in the least." He holds his hands up in surrender. "But I do need to excuse myself. I have plans I'm running late for."

"Of course." My mom squeezes his arm in affection while emitting that laugh those closest to her know is fake. "You just have the best time, won't you?"

"Rowan." He nods his head.

She reaches out to toy with my hair and says absently, "So glad you went back to blond."

I smile, knowing what comes next. The same thing I've been avoiding all night.

Three.

Two.

One.

"Rowan. This new co-CEO job. You simply can't accept it," my mom says as soon as Henry is far enough away.

"And why not?"

"Well, for one, you're screwing your brother over. You're stepping in his light when we women need to stay in their shadows."

"Their shadows? Whose would those be?" I've had a few cocktails, and my tongue is a tad looser than it normally is.

"Men, honey. We're supposed to stay in their shadows and let them have their time to shine."

I snort loud enough to draw attention. "Oh, and here I thought you might actually be excited over the fact that both of your kids have somewhat of an equal stake in our family company. Strange. Not sure why I thought you might actually be happy for me."

"We are happy for you," she says and waves a hand. "You know this town. They cast more judgment than a Supreme Court justice."

I glance over to the bar and long for another drink. Anything to help me survive the rest of this outing.

"What I'm trying to say is you can't work at TinSpirits and be married to a man of Chadwick Williams's stature. One, a corporate job is no place for a woman with matronly duties to fulfill, and two, it's rather emasculating to your brother to share CEO responsibilities with his little sister. He's running for city council, for Pete's sake. We can't have the citizens of this town thinking he can't handle important tasks such as keeping this gigantic company afloat."

"Exactly. He's running for city council. A job that deserves his undivided attention to do the most for Westmore, so it only seems reasonable to have me in this new role. I pick up the slack at TinSpirits so he can focus on the reason he's running—to ensure the citizens are taken care of." I allow my voice to rise in pitch so the nosy members around us can hear what I've said, and by the widening of my mom's eyes, she knows exactly what I've done.

How can she refute me when I'm looking at the best thing for our town?

She flusters—eyes wide and head bobbing—her own voice loud when she replies, "Of course. Yes. He's doing this for the people of Westmore. Growing our family business to ensure local jobs and to make sure his suppliers remain profitable. All for the people."

"You his campaign manager now?" I ask, for which I receive a withering glare. "Because that was some over-the-top bullshit."

"Why do you always have to be like this, Rowan? Combative? Argumentative? Condescending? He's your brother. Of course we want him to win."

"Interesting, seeing as how Rhett informed me he already had the council seat in the bag. I figured you were the ones who helped bribe whoever needed to be bribed."

My mom guffaws and swats a playful hand on my shoulder that I know is more for show than anything.

With a smile plastered on her face, she leans in and says, "I suggest you watch your tongue as we would do no such thing. We are upstanding citizens of this town and only want the best for it."

Seems I'm not the only one lying tonight.

"Just as I only want the best for something our grandparents built all those years ago," I say in rebuttal. "The two of us sharing responsibility isn't a bad thing."

"That's not what your great-great-grandfather would have wanted. That's not how he set the company up," my mom continues.

"He also lived during a time when women couldn't vote, so that might explain things a bit."

"We made our decision years ago to follow his protocol," my father says, stepping between us and startling me. I was so focused on my mother, I hadn't seen him walk up.

"Father," I say with a cordial nod and a strained smile.

He leans forward, presses a kiss to my cheek, and rests a hand on my lower back. "For the record, Gran agreed. To sticking with the protocol, that is."

Probably because she had no choice. "Well, Rhett changed that protocol when he went and sold it to an outsider. Talk to him." I shrug.

"Not necessary. Precedent is set," he says.

"Then take it up with Holden Knight," I counter. He stares at me, his teeth gritted and hand tensing where it rests against me. Someone isn't as thrilled with this deal as he let on.

"Rupert, dear," my mom says and squeezes his hand. "Please don't upset her now. Stress causes eating and puffiness and we can't have a puffy, bloated bride."

"Dear God," I groan.

"Emmaline, the wedding is months away," my dad says.

"Sixty-four days, to be exact. But don't you worry about that, Rupert. The last thing we need is to raise your blood pressure any more than it already is. Remember what the doctor said about getting worked up and how that's not good for your heart."

"I think Caroline needs me," I say to try to escape.

"No, she doesn't. She's busy with Muffy Newton." My mom rolls her eyes dramatically. "And Rupert, we don't have much time. Puffiness is a major concern considering we have a wedding dress appointment in the city slated for two weeks from now."

Guess I need to add that to my calendar. I doubt the any ol'dress from my closet will do is going to cut it this time around.

"Chad!" My mom waves him across the patio in a frantic yet giddy display of desperation.

"Momma!" he says boisterously so that the whole patio takes notice of the soon-to-be son-in-law. Of course they do, considering our wedding is now the most talked-about event of the fall. Fucking awesome.

He strides over and kisses my mother's cheek and shakes my dad's hand in greeting, before turning to look at me with an awkward smile. "Hi."

"Hi there," I say back.

"Oh, don't be so shy." My mom shoos her hand our way. "We appreciate the respect you have for Mr. Rothschild and me to not kiss our daughter in front of us—he's such a gentleman," she directs to my father, "but son, please go right ahead. A woman loves knowing she's cherished and adored."

Before I can utter a response, Chad's hand is on my lower back and he pulls me in for a soft kiss on the lips.

The moment happens so fast that I don't have much time to react—and maybe that's for the best—because I'm more than flustered and then soon thereafter chastising myself for not expecting that was going to have to happen sooner or later.

"Chad." I gulp over the surprise. Act normal. Act like you're in love. "Um. Hi."

"Hi." He's breathless but smiling.

In that brief look he gives me, I can see this all going up in flames. Our fake engagement. Him falling hard for me. My parents and the town disowning me.

Every dramatic thing you can imagine flashes through my head.

But I shove it away. I make like I never saw it and plaster a smile on my face to rival all smiles.

"Perfect," my mom murmurs and claps her hands together as if that one single kiss just solved world peace.

"It is, isn't it?" Chad says and nuzzles his nose against my cheek in what I hope is a move to perpetuate the lie.

I do my best to play into it, to place my hand on his forearm that's wrapped around my waist and hold it lovingly.

You can do this.

You can pretend.

It's just Chad. Just the nice guy you've known your whole life.

And I do perfectly fine, making small talk, laughing politely at his lame jokes and my mom's pushy questions. All is fine with the *fake it until you make it* portion of the program, but nothing prepares me for the jolt I feel when I look over my mom's shoulder and see Holden standing in the shadows.

He has his eyes locked on me above the rim of his drink—scotch whiskey, I'm assuming—before he downs it in one full-throated swallow. His eyes never waver from me.

That dull feeling I've had all evening? It's suddenly charged. My skin prickles with anticipation for a later meeting with him that only exists in my mind.

But damn, a girl can hope.

He stays in the shadows for a short while. I find it hard to concentrate on the idle chitchat happening between my parents and Chad when all I want to do is look his way.

The conversation covers honeymoon options before veering to Porter, Rhett's friend and owner of Greatland, one of our suppliers, and an onsite accident where a worker was hurt. It goes back to taste-testing our wedding menu and how my mom thinks we should see if a local winery can relabel some of their stock with a more appropriate name like Williams to celebrate our wedding and have served at our reception.

"Emmaline," my father chastises. "That's a tad over the top."

"But this is Westmore's most anticipated wedding in forever, honey. It'll be talked about for years. What Rowan wore. How gorgeous the flowers were. Who the guests were. The food. The cake. The wine." She clutches her hands to her chest. "Just everything. It has to be perfect."

"And here I was under the impression it was our love that was supposed to take center stage," I say sarcastically and rest my head gently on Chad's shoulder. And in doing that, I catch a glimpse of Holden moving toward the side door on the patio into the banquet hall area.

"Of course it is. How could you think otherwise. Rowan, honey—"

"If you'll excuse me, Caroline really is over there waving to me for help this time." I look at Chad and then to my parents. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

I take off toward the banquet hall door without waiting for them to respond.

What are you doing, Rowan? Chasing after the man like a little lapdog come to heel?

But there is something so damn addicting about Holden Knight that the thought doesn't even make me stutter a step.

After the past few weeks and how much he hurt me, shouldn't that be a warning to me that I should back off some? Shouldn't that be a lesson that I'm too close to a man who's proven just how capable he is of breaking my heart?

I pull open the door to find a vacant hallway. Dishes clatter at the far end of it about a hundred feet down where clearly the staff are washing them.

My feet move toward the rectangle of light there. I jump when someone comes out of a door a bit down on my left. The gentleman coughs loudly and then startles when he sees me.

"Miss Rothschild." The longtime employee of the club nods politely. "I hear congratulations are in order."

"Thank you, Jerry," I say with a smile.

"Do you need help with something? I can find someone to help—"

"No. I'm fine. I got turned around and went in the wrong door."

"Okay. See you back out there, then."

"Definitely." I infuse fake cheerfulness into my tone.

I watch him walk back out the door I came in and the minute the door closes at his back, I yelp when my hand is grabbed and I'm pulled into a darkened alcove.

Holden's hand is on my throat in that seductive, hand-necklace thing he does that makes me feel owned and wanted and desired all at the same time.

"Olly olly oxen free," he murmurs—a reminder of our sexy game of hide-and-seek—seconds before his lips find mine in a searing kiss that demonstrates every single thing his hand on my throat does.

He knocks me breathless. The taste on his tongue. The demand in his lips. The groan deep in his throat.

When he breaks from the kiss, I try to lean forward and take more but his hand holds me hostage.

"I'm being extremely tolerant with this whole Chad's hands are on you thing, but fuck if it's not testing my patience."

"I guess you'll have to make sure I don't remember what his kiss feels like."

He growls and slants his mouth over mine again. My body arches off the wall, desperate to feel the length of him pressed against me.

"You're goddamn right I will."

Our chests are heaving. The pants of our breath are the only sound in the small space along with the clatter of dishes as he rubs his thumb over my bottom lip before stepping back.

"I'll see you later?" I ask.

He grunts. "Can't. Meetings. A dinner."

"Plotting revenge, huh?" I tease.

His smile is a hesitant flicker before it spreads into a drop-dead grin. "Always."

"Everything okay in here," a male voice calls out, causing both of us to stiffen and still as feet shuffle down the hall.

"There was a yelp. Did you hear it?" another voice asks.

Holden dips down and presses a searing kiss to my lips before moving out into the hallway. "Sorry. That was me." He raises his cell up. "Dropped my damn phone."

"Mr. Knight," one says at the same time the other says, "Sir," both clearly in awe of the man walking toward them who is distracting them from seeing me.

"I have horrible luck cracking the screen," Holden mutters, playing it off.

They make small talk as their voices grow faint while I sag against the wall behind me, reliving the kiss and his words.

Plotting revenge?

Always.

Lord have mercy for whoever he's plotting against.

That's one man I wouldn't want out to get me.

Well, unless it was to twist in his sheets.

TWENTY-ONE

Rowan

I needed to play music today as much as the women here at the Sanctuary needed to hear it.

Guilt hits me for the inconsiderate thought. No one has physically harmed me. I'm not hiding out from an abusive significant other. I'm not trying to figure out how to protect my children.

I definitely didn't need this more than they did—I stand corrected. But I did need it to ground me. To remind me that when all is said and done, regardless of the outcome, I'll always be Eleanor Rothschild's granddaughter and that's a powerful thing.

"Why do you look like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders?" Mei-Ling, the center's director, asks from the doorway.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to." I look up from where I'm putting my cello in my case. "It's been a rough couple of weeks."

"Don't you dare apologize. You know as much as the next person that we don't judge anyone for their problems here."

I smile softly at her. "Thanks, it's just been ... a struggle as of late. But not any rougher than what you've been dealing with. Any news on the landlord and the eviction?"

"Not yet. I've been told it's imminent, but I just don't know when. A part of me is hoping it was just rumblings like there's been in the past, but that's wishful thinking. We're looking at other places to move to. I just hope we find one in time because there's no way I can abandon these families." Compassion oozes out of her every pore, and I struggle with what to say.

"Do you know what the potential buyers want to do with the space?"

"Rumors are it's a revitalization project, but I have a feeling there's more to it than that."

"I've had so much going on in my personal life, I haven't been helping you as much as I said I would. I'll do better. I promise."

"It's not your burden," she says honestly. "Again, like I tell the women here, no need to apologize."

"Yeah, but I'm the one with the means and the connections to try and help."

The damn painting and Holden's voice flash through my head. Do with it what you wish.

Hmm.

"We'll figure it out," Mei-Ling continues. "One way or another. I won't let these women down."

She's pulled away and as I finish packing my things, I'm more than preoccupied with how I could leverage the painting. A painting that Holden overpaid for to show my brother up, so I'm under no false pretenses that it's really worth \$3 million.

But money is money when it comes to this, and any little bit will help.

"Simon," I say long before I reach my favorite security guard.

He crosses his arms over his chest and gives me side-eye. "Girl, don't be thinking you're going to come in here and cozy all up to me after I find out you're engaged. And here I thought I was the love of your life."

"I couldn't wait anymore. I mean, your wife is just holding on to you too tight. She doesn't seem to want to let you go."

"Can you blame her?" He holds his arms out, his grin wide and his large chest jumping up and down with his laughter. "I am the catchiest of all catches."

"You most definitely are." I chuckle loudly, not realizing how much I needed this lightheartedness right now. When Simon opens the door to the Sanctuary to follow me outside, I say what I always say. "I'm good. No need to walk me out to my car."

"I know you know you're good, but after the last two weeks, I'll be walking you out myself."

"Last two weeks?" I glance over to him, and the look he gives me makes me feel like an idiot.

"There have been a few shootings. Cops ain't sure if it's drugs or gangs or just desperate people trying to take what's not theirs to survive, but three people have died."

"Oh my God."

"Yep. One in a parking lot walking to their car, so, Miss Rothschild, I'll be walking you to yours."

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

"Not a problem at all."

"Simon." I pause before I ask what I want to ask. "How come this isn't all over the news? How come it isn't a much bigger deal, or why isn't there a larger police presence?"

His smile is melancholy when he offers it to me. "Because it's Fairmont."

Those three words stick with me long after I drive down the town's pothole-ridden street, past vacant, graffiti-riddled buildings, and beyond its city limits where I feel I can breathe a little easier.

And I hate that once I cross the river, I do just that—breathe easier. But I do and it bugs me, so I find myself driving aimlessly. Through the adjacent town. Over to Westmore where I belong, but I keep driving till I'm in the city of North Hampton and am looking at the neon-blue letters of the diner's sign.

I don't know how I ended up here or why I'm sitting in my car under a gloomy, gray sky, staring out of my dirty windshield

at a diner I really only have two connections to.

My siblings. How, when I was at boarding school, Cassie and Rhett would frequent here after football games. I rarely came here myself, but somehow, every time I see this place, I think of the sister I never got the chance to know as an adult, and the brother I did, but sometimes wish were different.

And Holden. The first time we slept together happened after we sat here, shared a milkshake, and talked about anything other than work. It was the first time Holden Knight's impervious mask dropped a bit and he let me in.

It's the bright orange butterfly that catches my attention. The sun isn't out, there is none of its warmth for the insect to enjoy, but it's still out, still flitting around my windshield and just outside my driver's-side window.

Cassie

The thought makes me smile. I feel silly and hopeful for thinking it, but at the same time, the type of silly and hopeful that this is my twin's attempt to let me know she's still there somehow. That she's around.

The first tear drips over and for the first time in the longest of times, I let it fall without immediately brushing it away.

There is no one here to think I'm weak for missing her. There's no one who will tell me how wonderful she was and how she would have been the perfect Rothschild for society.

It's just me sitting in silence, thinking of my twin who will forever be seventeen years old as I sit in front of a place I'm pretty sure she helped raise hell in.

I miss her.

I don't think I realized just how much until this moment. Were we different in every aspect? Yes. Most definitely. But I could always confide in her. I knew she'd listen without judgment and appreciate me for being uniquely me.

She'd probably tell me I was out of my ever-loving mind agreeing to marry Chad so that I could secure Gran's inheritance sooner to try to gain some power back.

"Jesus," I mutter. Just thinking that makes me realize how crazy it sounds.

The butterfly continues to dip and weave and dance outside my windows.

"I see you, Cass. I miss you so damn much." The wave of sadness hits hard. Her laugh is fading. I have to watch old videos to remember its sound.

I miss the way in middle school she'd dive-bomb into my bed so we could spill secrets on what boys we were crushing on. Then later, when I was away at high school, how we'd talk for hours on the phone so she could tell me what trouble she was causing at the country club and I could bore her with all-girls-school antics.

I can't remember the last time I went to visit her grave and sat there under the huge weeping willow talking to her.

"None of this would be happening if you were still here," I say as the butterfly flutters away and the taste of salt from my tears hits my lips. "Miss you."

I don't know how long I sit there. Cars come and go. Customers walk in and out. I imagine what Cassie would look like now if she were to be one of the customers.

My laugh is loud and ridiculous sounding. Of course I know what she'd look like—*like me*. I mean, her haircut and the way she just oozed Southern style, whereas I'm more New York chic.

Would she have kids now? Be the chair of the Women's League? Hold Sunday dinners for our family to attend that were actually fun instead of feeling like a root canal? Cassie just made everyone better—me included.

I wipe the tears from under my eyes and blow out a long, exasperated breath. How funny I came here of all places to think of Cass.

Work calls. Being the dutiful daughter calls. Being an *enthusiastic* bride-to-be calls.

I start my car and glance both ways before I pull out of my spot. A dark SUV on the far side of the lot catches my attention and I hesitate on my brake pedal.

It's Holden.

He's sitting behind the wheel and from this distance, has what looks like a pensive expression on his face with his eyes hidden behind a pair of dark sunglasses.

What is he doing here? Following me?

The thought is fleeting because from what I can see, the man is in his own world.

Pencil Skirt.

The gorgeous woman flashes in my head and I loathe that my immediate thought is he is here waiting to meet up with her.

"Jealous, much?" I grumble to myself and the ridiculous thought.

I shouldn't be jealous over a woman I've never met, but there was something about his familiarity with her that day—the way he smiled at her, the way he put his hand on her back and ushered her into his office, and the way he completely disregarded my inquiry about her—that has stuck in my memory.

Holden Knight currently occupies my bed, but make no mistake, I'm under zero impressions that he doesn't keep secrets.

He's the master of keeping them.

And right now as he sits in a parking lot reflecting or working or waiting, that quiet intensity that personifies him is all I see.

What drew him to sit here in the parking lot of this diner today? What drew him to it on that first night and that shared milkshake between us? What is the significance of this place to him when he's not from here?

I put my hand on my gearshift, half tempted to put my car in park and go ask him myself, but something stops me.

The same something that just had me crying in my car over my sister. Maybe he came here for solace too.

I just wish I knew for what.

TWENTY-TWO

Holden

Do these people know what a con artist that little prick is?

Rhett stands on stage with a smug expression and flippant arrogance. Like this whole campaign rally is more than a publicity stunt when anyone with half a brain knows better.

The even bigger question is, Why the fuck are you here, Knight?

Because you're pussy-whipped.

I look over to the right of the stage at the source of that whipping. She's in a pale pink dress that's belted at the waist with shoes the same color as the belt. Her blond hair falls in pale waves down her shoulders and those lips of hers are painted to match the dress.

And her newest accessory is by her side—fucking Chadwick the dick. I'm just grateful he's so busy clapping for his buddy who's prattling on at the podium that I don't have to worry about his hands being on her.

I pull out my phone and type a text.

Me: You have them all fooled with that prim and proper dress.

I see her glance down at her phone and within seconds, her eyes flash up and search the crowd. A smile crawls on her lips as her eyes meet mine.

Rowan: Underneath is anything but prim and proper.

Me: Leather? Lace? Garters?

Rowan: Nothing.

It's my turn to whip my head up and meet her grin.

Me: Don't grin at me like that. It makes me want to fuck that mouth even more.

Rowan: Pretty. Please.

Me: Grrr.

Rowan: Later?

Me: Is there any doubt?

Fucking Rowan Rothschild. She occupies more of my thoughts than not these days. And then when I'm not thinking about her, we're finding creative ways to fuck, which makes her own my thoughts even more.

It's been two weeks since we reconciled, and in that time it's been a never-ending cycle of *sneak around, pretend we're not together, think about her all the time, repeat,* and I'm not complaining one fucking bit.

I'm just about to type another text about how creative I want to get with her when Rhett's comments break through the libidinous haze being near her creates.

"So with that, I promise to maximize what we have at our disposal to elevate our life and lifestyle here in Westmore. And by that, I mean cleaning up neighboring towns. The types of towns that hinder our security, allow deadbeat families to live in dilapidated complexes, are rife with gangs and drugs and crime, and who may one day try to creep across the river and into our everyday lives.

"Let's take Fairmont, for example. The past few weeks we've seen crime run rampant in that city. Murders. Crime. Lack of civilization. No one wants to leave that place and if they did, we don't want them here.

"Fairmont and cities like it are a toilet bowl. A circular cycle of self-imposed misery. If its citizens wanted to leave, they would. It's just that easy."

My blood boils at his ignorant, callous comments. At the fearmongering he's stoking and the privileged, paid-for pedestal he speaks from.

"But they don't want to. And if they don't want to, then it's our job to help them out." The crowd rustles uncomfortably at the mere suggestion of using their tax dollars for the good of someone else. "And by help them out, I mean raze the neighborhoods and move our captains of industry there. We can use all that cheap land to build and benefit the companies that have called Westmore home for decades upon decades. We can profit off of their lack of desire to better themselves."

The crowd around me erupts into applause as I grow more than sick to my stomach. I look up and am relieved to see the appalled look on Rowan's face.

"I already have plans upon plans drawn up for what we can do with this land. It's scorched and dying and we can make it fertile. When I win this seat, on day one we will hit the ground running. I aim to create a Westmore where we can look across the river and not cringe or worry about how much Fairmont's proximity will bring our property values down or if the crime will permeate our city limits. I will take tremendous pride in being the one known to have helped clean it up. To have made something out of the nothing that is currently there."

I can't believe I'm actually fucking here listening to this blowhard spew absolute bullshit.

What about the people who live there?

What about the families you'll make homeless with your razing?

What will happen to their jobs there when you take away their community?

I have to get out of here before I shout out my questions. Before I show my cards and risk the chance of someone remembering me after they look even closer than I know they already have.

I can hide data online. I can erase my past and create a bio for myself that can get past even the closest scrutiny. But I can't change my face or what I look like. Thank God the scrawny teenager I was with sandy-blond hair and a dimple in his chin grew about a foot in height and filled out his frame before his hair turned dark and that dimple disappeared.

Oh, and he took his real last name back when everyone else knew him to be Holden Simpson. Or just Simpson. Better yet? Most at the Westmore Country Club just called me *Hey, you* and in hindsight, that was probably for the best.

There's a reason my uncle in California used to tease me and ask if my mom had adopted me. It bugged me when we first moved there but has since served me well.

But Rhett's words bring me back to that teenager I was, to the one Leo currently is, and to my roots in a community that might seem unworthy to those here, but that made every single part of me who I currently am.

And they fire my fury and my protective nature in a way I haven't felt in what seems like years.

I need to get out of here. Fast.

With some luck, I push through the crowd without much resistance and with only a few muted greetings as to not interrupt the fucker still spewing his bullshit at the microphone.

When I get to the back I'm surprised to see Rowan there, making a beeline for the parking lot as well. Our eyes meet and we both pause momentarily.

"I can't listen to any more of his bullshit," she says quietly, conscious of anyone hearing her.

"Neither can I."

She throws her hands up as if she just remembered. "I don't have my car here. I—"

"Go for a drive?" I ask her, not ready to leave her behind, despite desperately needing to be alone in this moment.

TWENTY-THREE

Rowan

We drive.

Much like we did that first night we slept together, when confusion reigned as prevalent as our desire did. But this time we drive to abate tempers and digest the crap that Rhett just said.

Or at least that's why I needed to escape.

How could my brother think such total bullshit? Revitalization is not razing a whole city. It's not disregarding a whole subset of citizens because they are less fortunate than we are. Where were the plans for them after their displacement? For creating more jobs for them? For bettering their lives?

There weren't any.

I glance over to Holden. His face is a mask of indifference but that muscle pulsing in his jaw and the grip of his hands on the steering wheel say all that needs to be said. He's just as pissed—even more so—and I hope to learn why.

We've slept together. We've worked side by side together. I even would like to think we're in a relationship together, but there is so very little that I truly know about who he really is and what makes him tick.

My thoughts from the diner parking lot the other day come back. Holden is the master of keeping secrets.

And something about what my brother just said clearly made him, and those secrets he holds close, tick.

I struggle with what to say, which I never do when it comes to Holden. And for some reason I ask the one question I told myself I wasn't going to.

We drive in silence over the bridge toward the town my brother just disparaged. A look across the river highlights the silhouettes of Westmore and the buildings I've walked in the shadows of numerous times. The same silhouettes I can imagine the kids in this neighborhood look over at and aspire to live by.

The thought makes Rhett's campaign promises even worse and the citizens of Westmore who were clapping even more disturbing.

My thoughts run rampant as Holden drives what seems to be aimlessly.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I ask as he takes a left off the main drag.

"No." One syllable. That's all I get.

But he's angry. I can sense it. Can feel it. And for the first time, I finally ask. "Did you grow up in a town like Fairmont, Holden?"

He tenses momentarily. It's slight but there, and he doesn't answer. I nod softly and give him the grace not to have to answer me.

I know in the past he mentioned he had family who lived in Fairmont, but I never stopped to wonder where he grew up. And now, by his response to Rhett's bullshit and my question, I can assume he did grow up in a similar fashion.

I stare at the surrounding area he drives us through. We're in the town neighboring Fairmont, but it's much the same. Rundown buildings with laundry hanging on lines and construction-paper art taped to windows. Kids sitting on stoops, fanning themselves from the heat, and people working on cars in the parking lots. Graffiti on walls and hopscotches drawn on sidewalks in chalk. Signs of life lived to the best of its ability when life deals you a shitty situation.

Nothing less.

Nothing more.

I grow angrier at my brother and his callous, unfounded comments.

"Yes," Holden says softly, causing me to shift my focus back onto him. "I grew up in a place similar to this."

I know better than to say I'm sorry, than to ask more. "Clearly it's not a toilet bowl or whatever bullshit he said, huh?" I murmur as I look out the windshield as he veers around a sizable pothole.

He grunts in response.

"I don't think like him. Just in case you're wondering."

Holden glances over at me, his foot easing up on the gas in the middle of this residential street. Our eyes lock and I know there is more there. More behind that mask he wears like a second skin. In this moment, I know whatever my brother said hurt him ten times more than it hurt me.

I've lived my whole life with the sheen of privilege and affluence, not the invisible scars and scratched psyche of someone who has struggled or done without. Sure, I thought I had them—struggles—but I'm astute and selfless enough to know I had nothing hard in comparison to those who grew up on this side of the river.

To those who grew up like Holden.

"I don't want my brother to win," I say eventually, noticing our surroundings are becoming more familiar.

"Yeah, well, you Rothschilds seem to get everything you always wish for, so don't act so surprised."

"Not everything," I say, uncertain why I feel the need to rebut against the anger that emanates off that statement.

Another grunt followed by a long stretch of silence as we turn onto a street even more familiar to me. We must be near the Sanctuary, then. I try to picture my brother's vision here: warehouses, restaurants, chic apartments for urban types. Is a revitalization necessary and could it work?

Yes and yes.

But not at the cost of displacing all these people. Sure, some of the people in this town can be classified as *bad* in one way or another—theft, drugs, crime—but for the most part all the people here are simply hardworking and trying to provide for their families.

The same could be said for Westmore or any town on the other side of the river for that matter. Good people with a sprinkle of bad.

In fact, I venture to guess there are more bad people in Westmore than Fairmont. The difference is in my town people have the money to pay off their crimes and hide behind their fancy gates to pretend they never happened.

"There are other ways to defeat him," Holden murmurs.

His words stay with me long after he says them and continue to as he turns in to the parking lot of what appears to be a cemetery.

One of my least favorite places in the world.

And yet, Holden navigates the parking lot before finding a space beneath the only tree in the entire section of plots. He puts the car in park, cracks the windows some, and stares intently ahead at the sea of grave markers out there.

Headstones are few and far between, the grass struggles to stay green but is winning the fight, and pinwheels or fake flowers dot the different plots. There is love here. It's a weird thought, but you can feel the peace and the love.

I glance over to Holden. His posture has relaxed some but he is still quiet in his intensity and silent with his thoughts.

"I never knew this was here."

"Why would you?"

"Don't be a dick. I'm not my brother."

He shifts, moving his knee so that he can turn and look at me better. He paints quite the stunning picture in his silver dress shirt and strikingly good looks. But he just studies me with his head angled to the side and a whole world I can't begin to understand behind those eyes of his.

He told me in the diner that night that he'd lost a younger sibling too. His brother. He knows the weight a place like this holds. He understands, more than most could, why it's hard for me to sit here. And still he decided to stop here.

"Do you sit in cemeteries often?" I ask, glancing around as a car pulls in to our right and begins to drive the slow loop through the far end of the block that takes you closer to the plots. I shiver, nerves suddenly eating at me. And then I begin to ramble, needing to eat up the silence with words. "I hate everything about them if you want to know the truth. What they stand for. What they hold. The depth of emotion they make you feel every time you set foot in one. I sometimes think I prefer to be numb, not to feel, and then I remind myself how boring life would be without any feeling, you know?"

"Mmm," he murmurs.

"Part of the reason I hate them is because I feel horribly guilty for not going to visit Cassie more. And if I'm not going, does that mean I don't love her? Does she know I don't go? How is your love measured for someone after death? In how often you visit their headstone? I mean, the questions are endless and the guilt that goes with every single one is just as ridiculous and unfounded ... and yet they're there. Every single time, like clockwork. But then, so is death." I emit a shaky laugh. "Sorry. I'm rambling. I'm—"

Holden reaches over and places his hand on top of mine before lacing our fingers together. He squeezes, a silent show of support that for some reason hits me so very hard in the feels.

Maybe it's just because I've been thinking about Cassie so much since the other day, or perhaps I just needed to know there is a human being in this godforsaken place who is kind. Regardless, it means more to me than he'll ever know.

"I hate them too." His voice is a quiet rumble in the car. "For all the same reasons as you. Sometimes I think I visit them to ease the guilt over why my brother was the one who had to die. Sometimes I do it as a punishment for being the one still here." I squeeze his hand back. "My mom. God, she ... she spent the first few nights after he died sleeping at his gravesite with him. She was afraid that he was going to be lonely and cold, and so I think I force myself to visit the cemetery to remind me of that pain and why I need to keep going."

I swallow over the lump of emotion lodged in my throat. The visual he paints is so visceral and heartbreaking. And real.

"It's not fair. They deserved to be here with us. To get to experience all of this with us."

"Hmm," he says, opening his mouth and then pausing as if he is reconsidering what it is he was going to say. "You want to talk about real guilt? If he hadn't died, I don't know that I would be who I am. My success. My life. It was like his death created a path for me that I never would have been on. And that's a hard pill to swallow and an even tougher reality to navigate."

"Guilt upon guilt upon guilt."

"Hmm." He looks back out toward a woman who is tending to a gravesite. She's placing flowers and pulling some weeds. But my focus is on him. I have so many questions. How did his brother die? Why did it change his course in life? Why does he punish himself and wish it had been him?

So many questions ... but none of which I think a private man such as himself would answer.

"I dream about my gran sometimes." I chuckle nervously. "I don't know why I told you that, but I do. It's like she visits me in dreams to tell me things but it only serves to make me feel crazy." I run my hands up and down my thighs and feel like an idiot for the confession. "I don't dream about Cassie though. Maybe because it was forever ago. Do you dream of your brother?"

The muscle in his jaw pulses as he reins in the emotion swimming in his eyes. "No." The word sounds as tight as the tendons in his neck look.

"Tell me about him. I mean, if you want to."

His sigh stutters in response and the flicker of a smile at the corners of his mouth is more bittersweet than anything. "Ma—" He clears his throat and shock flashes over his features that I don't know how to read. "He was in middle school. It was just him, my mom, and me. A neighborhood much like Fairmont. He was a good kid, typical in that he hated homework but loved looking up to me. The life of our family. God." He chokes on the word and the broken sound of it guts me.

"You don't have to say any more," I murmur and place my other hand on top of our already joined ones.

"There's not much more to say, really. The rule was he couldn't go outside unless I was watching him—bad neighborhood and all that. I was doing homework and he talked me into letting him just out front. I let him. What could possibly go wrong?" "Oh, Holden."

"Yep." He nods and purses his lips. "I heard the screech of the tires. I couldn't get there in time or do anything or save him. Classic hit-and-run. He died at the hospital."

"Jesus. I'm so sorry."

"Isn't everyone when your sibling dies?" he says callously but I let the comment slide as he's clearly hurting. "Sorry. That was uncalled for."

"But true. Did they ever catch the person who hit him?" I ask.

His whole body tenses as he struggles with some intangible but utterly visceral emotion. He clears his throat and when he looks at me there is a darkness to his eyes. A blackness to their depths that has shivers running down my spine. "Yes, but no charges were pressed because he knew someone who knew someone. It was ruled as an unfortunate accident."

Bitterness coats my tongue at the thought. "There's nothing I can say that can make anything right about that statement at all." I'm dumbfounded.

Cassie's death was devastating in all aspects but it was her fault. Her cell phone records showed she was texting when she hit the telephone pole at seventy miles per hour. No one else was hurt. No one else was to blame.

Holden, on the other hand. Jesus.

But there is something else about this moment that hits me—Holden opened up to me. He trusted me with knowing who his brother was. It's not much in the scheme of things, but Holden is a man who doesn't share often and he did just that.

He let me in when I've worked so hard to try to shut him out. My chest swells with the thought.

"What was his name?" I ask softly.

"Put him on, will you?" Holden asks, thoroughly confusing me as he starts the engine and puts the car in gear.

"Him?"

"Clayton. Put him on." He points to the stereo. "You said he helped you. Who knows, it's looking like today I need all the help I can get."

TWENTY-FOUR

Holden

I almost told her.

I almost told her the entire truth about you, Mason, and why I'm here in Westmore. About my reasons and the one single act that has motivated me my entire life since you were taken from me.

I almost told her, and that's why I know I'm too fucking close.

The goddamn woman has me bending rules in ways I never intended to. A co-CEO position? Giving 1 percent away? Bringing her to where Mason's buried—to where I can stare at his gravesite?

This isn't right. It's fucked up beyond all reason. But as I scrub a hand over my jaw, I have no choice but to admit, she's gotten to me.

And it's more than just the sex. It's the moments like this. I look over to the passenger seat where she's sound asleep beside me and something inside me stirs that I never knew existed. *Compassion*.

I'm not happy about it. I wish it'd stop. But Rowan keeps bringing it out of me and ... it makes me feel good. Happy. Human.

Pretty fucked up when my entire reason for being here is to ruin her family and yet, it's there and won't go away.

"Holden?" she murmurs and my chest constricts. I look over at her again. The pink dress rides high on her thighs, her fingers are still linked with mine, and Clayton's music is on the speakers.

I'm still not a fan, but I am a tad more tolerant of it now.

"Shh. We're home."

"That's nice," she says dreamily.

Within minutes, I've picked her up out of the passenger seat and carried her inside. It's when I go to lay her on her bed, her hands still around my neck and my arms still under her knees, that she pulls me closer. "No. Don't go," she says dreamily into the curve of my neck so that the heat of her breath warms my skin. "Stay with me tonight."

This wasn't the plan—this isn't the plan—especially after how I was so tempted an hour ago to tell her everything.

But why? So she knows what side she's on? So I know what side she chooses? Isn't her being in this seat enough of an answer to what side she would choose?

It's not like it matters though. It's not going to change the end result. My game plan isn't changing.

Her hair tickles my cheek and the scent of her shampoo fills my nose, but it's that damn warmth that spreads through me, knowing she wants me here, that does me in.

That makes my resolve cave.

"Sure. I'll stay."

Until she falls asleep.

Just so she's not alone.

At least that's what I tell myself as I slip my shoes off and crawl into her bed beside her. She curls into me instantly with her hand resting over my heart, her lips pressed against the underside of my jaw, and her leg hooked over my thigh.

"Good night," she whispers.

"Good night, Sunshine."

"Maybe you'll go with me to visit Cassie sometime."

Yes. The word is on the tip of my tongue but I pull it back before I make a promise like that. Lies are easy. You say them. You pretend you're going to do them. You fuck everything up before you have to deliver on them.

But I won't lie about this. Not when I know the heartache. Not when I understand the guilt. And especially not when I know the pain of losing your sibling.

There are a lot of fucking lines I'll cross—but that's not one.

"Go to sleep, Row." I press a kiss to the top of her head and leave my lips there as I breathe everything about her in.

Keep playing the game, Knight.

Keep playing the fucking game like your life depends on it.

Because your brother's did.

TWENTY-FIVE

Rowan

The painting taunts me as I get off the fourth-floor elevator.

It's big and bold and some small part of me desires to take the razor blade to it to destroy something that my brother wanted so desperately—his status symbol—but I don't.

Damaging the painting would make me no better than him, wouldn't it? I'd only be destroying it for my own selfish pleasure and frustration. Wouldn't it be more beneficial to sell it and give the money to Mei-Ling? With everything Rhett said at his campaign rally, the Sanctuary is going to need it more than ever.

And I don't even want to talk about Rhett. I didn't respond to the gushing texts from my mom about how great he did or how the poll numbers show he's running away with the election. I didn't acknowledge Chad's requests to make an appearance as a couple on Rhett's behalf this coming weekend.

Instead I buried my head in the sand and chose to dote on the fact that Holden let me in a little bit more. It wasn't a lot, but it was more than I had and that's enough for me.

Did curiosity own me, and did I try to learn more about his brother and the details surrounding his death? I wouldn't be me if I hadn't, but there was nothing more to be found out than he had already divulged.

Hit-and-run in which his middle school-aged brother was killed. Details were more than scant.

Because it's Fairmont.

Simon's words come back to me. The reason why I hadn't heard of the recent gun violence in Fairmont or why there wasn't a bigger police presence after it—and I wonder if the same held true for Holden's brother. He was hit and killed in whatever low-income neighborhood they grew up in and therefore his death wasn't deemed worthy enough to write more about.

Both sets of circumstances are a tragedy.

And it doesn't help any when I turn the corner to the hallway and see Rhett's campaign signs stacked in columns up against the walls.

"Rhett," I call down the hallway.

He pops his head out of Chad's office and I have to remind myself that physical violence is looked down upon, no matter how much I want to make the exception for it here.

- "Yeah? What's up?" He strolls out with his hands in his pockets and a smarmy smile on his face.
- "This isn't your campaign headquarters. Get the posters out of here." I don't care how loud I am.
- "It's not a big deal."
- "But it is. The last thing any employee in this company needs to feel is intimidated into voting for you."
- "Why would they feel that way?" Chad asks as Rhett's shadow steps out from behind him only to further irk me.

I used to think their bromance was cute and adorable but now that Holden has pointed out how they are mirror reflections of each other who can't do anything alone, I find it rather childish and irritating.

How interesting that one person can upend our world and make us see something in a different light.

- "Because they might feel like their job is on the line if they don't vote for you."
- "They'll vote for me," he says, arrogance oozing from his every word.
- "No, they won't."
- "Whatever." He waves a hand indifferently.
- "I'm not," I state and have both Rhett and Chad staring at me with lips lax and eyes wide.
- "What do you mean, you're not?"
- "Just like what it sounds. I don't like your policies on across the river. I don't think you've thought them all the way through." I shrug, wanting the showdown but unwilling to go all the way here in front of an audience of our employees. I'm saying enough that they'll talk and my stance will spread, but not enough to become town fodder.

Who am I kidding? This is Westmore.

"How cute. You developed a soft spot for that little place where Gran used to go. You can't save the world, Rowan. I'm just trying to make it a better place in the meantime."

"Do you even hear yourself right now, you righteous prick?"

"Come on now, guys." Chad steps out into the hallway from his office and in between us, his hands held up. "Rhett? She's right. This isn't your campaign headquarters. You need to get the signs out of here."

Rhett looks at him with narrowed eyebrows. "Wow."

- "My fiancée." Chad points to me. "My friend." He points to Rhett. Then he shrugs and wins me over a little more.
- "Thank you," I say with a nod despite Rhett's less than thrilled stare.
- "Yeah. Sure." Rhett rolls his eyes. "This was just a stopping place between delivery and placement. It wasn't like I was

going to leave them here."

"Great. Then they can be gone in the next couple of hours." I start to walk away and his words stop me.

"When did you become like this?" Rhett asks to my back.

I turn and look over my shoulder. Our eyes meet and I hate the slightest bit of sadness I see in the depths of his eyes. "The same could be asked of you," I say softly.

I feel their eyes on my back as I walk down the rest of the hall.

"Rowan. Wait up."

I stop at the sound of Chad's voice and plaster a smile on my lips for all to see as I turn to face my beloved fiancé.

"Chad. Hi."

His eyes dart down to my hand holding my purse, almost as if to make sure the ring is still on. It is, but damn if it isn't hard wearing it most days.

"I got your text," he says.

"Conference room." It's my only response. The last thing I need is for Chad to discuss anything I hinted at in my text to him.

We step inside and he shuts the door at his back. "Don't worry. I wasn't going to say anything that could be overheard." He sounds offended. I don't really care.

"So what's going on with your uncle?" I ask.

Chad glances over his shoulder at the closed door. "He said he needed to take another look at the paperwork again and its wording."

"It's his wording. Does he not know what he wrote?"

"I don't know. It would be way easier if you just told me what it is you're after."

I take a leap of faith and give Chad a half-truth. Something to tell him the reason for the expediency and the huge ask. "I have to be married by a set date, and then I have to remain married for a specific time frame before I can take possession of what she left me." I take care with my phrasing and make it sound like I'm referring to something like Gran's real estate, rather than the large lump sum of money.

While Chad may be "engaged" to me, I'm more than aware his loyalty to my brother is stronger. The last thing I want him doing is blabbing about any of this, so I made sure not to give him anything more than he already really knows. *A time frame*.

"Okay." His eyes narrow as he processes what I've said. "And what you want him to throw out is the time frame?"

"Yes." I glance at Rhett walking past the conference room and looking in at the two of us.

"You want it faster," he says and then corrects himself, "whatever your inheritance may be, faster."

"Correct."

"Because you want to take the money and run?" he asks.

"Because I want to take the money and improve my standing here. Isn't that why you approached me? So that we could strip away some of Holden's power and hold on to it ourselves. Create as much of a checks-and-balances system as we can?"

"Yeah. Sure." He says the words but I still see the man hoping for more with me. Call me a bitch for playing on it. "So it's longer than six months, then?"

"Just a bit," I lie.

His smile is hopeful. "You know I'd be willing to keep this up for however long the time frame is. I mean, if my uncle can't find a workaround."

"Thank you. I appreciate it." I scramble for something more. "But there are more parameters that I have to meet. That's just the main one."

"It's a reasonable ask," he says.

I flash a smile. "Exactly. That's why I appreciate you asking Henry to bend the rules a bit for me."

"Like I said before. I'll give him another call. I have some free time later."

"Thank you." I reach out and squeeze his bicep and offer a smile. "Truly. Thank you."

His cheeks blush and expression softens as he stares at me with puppy-dog eyes. "Any time."

I head out of the conference room and to my desk, questioning if that was a smart move or not. But nothing ventured, nothing gained and I need his help to make this happen, so ...

I stutter-step when I notice the succulent arrangement sitting on my desk with a file folder sitting beside it.

Like anyone who receives a gift, I move toward it, my hands opening the card of the beautiful arrangement within seconds.

Rowan—

These plants supposedly represent endurance, strength, resilience. I thought it was a fitting gift for someone who embodies the same exact qualities. It's overdue and has been a long time coming. Welcome to the board.

I glance down to the desk and open the sealed envelope sitting there to find my new employment contract as well as paperwork that definitely pertains to being a board member. Clearly I need to sign it in front of a notary, but as I flip through it my eyes widen at the compensation package.

Despite what Holden told Rhett, there were no negotiations over my salary or the perks that come with this new position. But one glance at this paperwork, and I'm definitely not complaining.

"Congratulations."

I whip my head up to see Holden standing there. His voice is like a steady constant for me. I hear it and immediately feel at ease. I meet his stoic expression with a soft smile.

"You need to stop leaving me gifts on my desk," I say playfully through the tremendous amount of pride I have flowing through me.

"They've been warranted. Sapphires over rubies. Utility knife to make your mark or make a power play. Succulents to remind you how tenacious you are when you have a rough day." He shrugs. "Nothing near extravagant."

"Spoken like a true bazillionaire."

He chuckles and steps farther into the room. "Hardly, but go on."

"Did you need me for something?"

His gaze scrapes down the length of my body as every nerve ending heats up from the predatory look in it. "That's a loaded question, Sunshine."

The muscle in his jaw pulses and I swear, knowing that I can't have him right now makes the desire even stronger.

"Well, you're a complicated man. Nothing simple for you."

His grin is a slow crawl across his lips. "I was coming in here to ask you to show me what you could do. What skills make you worthy of that co-CEO title"—he claps softly—"but you just passed that test with flying colors before you even set foot in your office."

"I did?"

"Yes. A very appropriate dressing-down of your counterpart. I had plans to do the same but you did it for me."

His praise warms me in ways I can't put words to. "Thank you."

"Award worthy." He smiles.

"Award worthy?" I angle my head to the side. "And what might that award be?"

"The board seat should be plenty."

"Well..." I give the same slow, hungry appraisal of his body that he did mine. It doesn't help that I can see his cock twitch behind the fabric of his pants. Knowing how much I affect him is such a turn-on.

"Jesus," he says through a laugh. "Give the woman an inch and she takes a mile."

"More like give a her a good solid eight inches and she's perfectly fine."

His Adam's apple bobs as he looks over his shoulder to the hallway before stepping farther into my office. "That can be arranged."

"When and where, Knight?"

His chuckle is a low rumble that goes straight to the apex of my thighs. The man most definitely knows how to affect me.

"You'll know," he says and takes a step back. "You will most definitely know."

TWENTY-SIX

Rowan

"Put the phone down."

Rhett's eyes flash up to meet Holden's, but he holds tight to his cell and doesn't comply with Holden's command.

"I'm busy," Rhett states. "This meeting wasn't on my schedule for the day, so you'll have to excuse me if I'm busy with things that were."

Holden's chuckle echoes around the conference room where several other managers, including Chad, sit and listen in on this first meeting with both co-CEOs in effect.

"Rowan?" Holden says. "Please continue."

"As I was saying, in our quest to diversify suppliers and mitigate as many outside factors as possible, it's pertinent that we pull each and every trade in for meetings over the next few weeks. We've previously run our business with them on handshakes and how things used to be, but I've had Legal draw up new contracts with what is expected of both parties in this partnership."

"Impressive and telling," Holden murmurs.

"Telling?" Rhett asks.

"Yes. Telling as in why weren't you doing this before?" Holden states with a smile that challenges Rhett to say the smart-ass comment we can all see sitting on his tongue. "Because here's what is going to happen. You are going to be in every single meeting with Rowan when it comes to our suppliers. You are going to shake hands and cosign each and every contract with them. Then when that's done, you will both prepare a proposal for me as to what you think we can do here at TinSpirits to improve not only our customer experience, but also the day-to-day of our staff."

"Do you want this written or in a PowerPoint?" I ask.

"Christ, quit kissing his ass," Rhett says, rolling his eyes, and then meets Holden stare for stare. "We get it. You're in charge. Everyone knows. Stop pounding your chest."

Holden leans back in his chair and studies my brother, well aware that what he says next might shape the future of how our employees view him.

His smile is sharp. "I gave you my ask. I'll make sure it's put on your schedule so you have no excuses."

"I'll get to it when I can," Rhett says flippantly as he picks up his phone. Chad meets my eyes across the table and for the first time in a long time, I can sense he's not too happy with my brother and how he's acting. "I have way more important things to do."

Holden leans forward and takes Rhett's phone like he's a teenager. Rhett protests but then stops when it seems, for the first time, he notices everyone else at the table around us.

"All of those things I asked are more than important to the success of this company. If you question otherwise, I'll gladly go line by line over last year's detailed P&L in a company-wide meeting. That detail will show everyone how you squandered and sometimes outright downvoted perks and raises for our employees while quietly taking those budgeted funds to enrich yourself. Then again, you're the politician, right? That's how things are supposed to be done?"

Rhett's jaw clenches. "So that's how this is going to go, huh?"

"How it goes is up to you," Holden says and slides Rhett's phone back across the table. "This business comes first. Then your newfound political aspirations. If you can't do both, I'm sure Rowan can more than handle the role."

"You'll get your proposal and I'll be in the meetings," he says.

"I knew we'd see eye to eye on this."

"Is this over?" Rhett asks and stands up. Chad starts to also, but thinks better of it after a quick glance at Holden.

"For now. Yes. But this will be a weekly meeting. Make sure to be here and next time, leave your shitty attitude at the door." Holden's voice is ice-cold toward my brother but when he turns to address the rest of the room, his smile warms. "Thank you for your patience. I'm sorry you had to see that but as you can all attest, change for many of us can be ... hard. Moving forward..."

Holden continues his meeting with the managers and explaining the new corporate structure outlined in my contract.

I can feel the weight of Chad's stare on me, but my thoughts keep going back to yesterday. To the man speaking and how very different the corporate version is from the one who carried me to my bed and held me all night long.

The same man who bought me a congratulatory succulent because it was strong and could weather a storm.

The same man who just looked over at me, met my eyes, and made my heart tumble a little further in my chest.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Rowan

"Audrey?" I call out.

She's the last person I want to talk to right now and yet, when Audrey summons you, you go. No one risks the wrath of disobeying her.

"Audrey?" I peek my head in her office and find it with the blinds closed and the lights off.

That's weird. I check my watch. It is the time she asked me to meet her.

"In here, Rowan," Holden calls me from his office across the way.

I enter his office and hook my thumb over my shoulder. "Audrey called me."

"Shut the door," he says.

"But—"

"She asked you in here for me before she left. It's just us." He rises from his seat. "Shut. The. Door."

You'll know.

Damn. He was right. I know.

I shut the door at my back and turn the lock for good measure, noticing the blinds on the windows toward the office hall have already been drawn shut.

"Take off your panties."

"Excuse me?" I fake a protest but damn if his words don't make me instantly wet.

"This is CEO 101."

"CEO 101, huh?"

"Yes. Today we are working on skills that every CEO has needed at one time or another in their career."

"And my panties being off helps with this how?" I toy with the hem of my skirt. Thank god I wore one of my usuals, one that's short but flowy.

"No." He takes a step to the side of his chair and spins it to face me. "You sitting like a boss in the chair, getting pleasured, makes you a CEO."

"Oh." I gulp the sound out.

"Take. Off. Your. Panties," he orders and damn if I don't obey.

I make a show of sliding my palms up my bare thighs, the light fabric of my skirt bunching up with them as I go. I hook my fingers in the thin straps of my underwear and then slowly push them down my thighs—my eyes locked on his the whole time—before lifting them up and swinging them on my fingertip.

"Would you look at that? Look how wet they are?"

"Can't imagine why," he murmurs as he adjusts his hardening cock in his pants before pushing his chair toward me. "Sit."

"Lucky for you, I'm listening." I step to the front of the chair.

"Lucky for you, you know what's good for you." He quirks an eyebrow and looks at the chair as if telling me to obey.

I sit slowly as he watches.

"Spread your thighs." He takes a step toward me. "Wider." And another step as his tongue darts out to lick his lower lip. "You're holding out on me, Sunshine. Part those thighs. I know you can go wider."

He stands between my parted legs and lifts my knees so they rest on each arm of the chair. "Pull that skirt up, baby. I need to see that pretty pussy of yours."

I do as he asks, the air in the room so thick with desire it's hard to draw in a breath. The pained, appreciative sigh he emits has ache and need and greed race through me faster than a lightning bolt.

"Holden," I whisper his name as I reach out to scrape my fingernails up the fabric of his thighs.

He drops to his knees, his face between my legs, and his fingers push my thighs even farther apart. "I'll have you know, I don't get on my knees for anyone."

And without another word, he leans forward and slides his tongue between my slit.

The warmth of his mouth.

The firmness of his tongue.

The possession in his hands.

My world goes black and then sears into a white-hot heat as I begin to climb that incredible ascent forged by the dexterity of his fingers and the adeptness of his masterful tongue.

He blows.

He sucks.

He spears and slides his tongue in and out of me, up and down, before swirling it around.

There is something so damn sexy about seeing him between my thighs, looking up at me with lust owning his eyes and making his eyelids heavy.

There is no darkened room to hide behind. It's just him pleasuring me while watching to see my reactions. To know what sets me off the most. And when he sees it, he does it all over again.

"Come on my tongue, Row. Let me taste all of you." A lick up. "Every." A circle around my clit. "Damn." A flick over it. "Part." A slide back down. "Of." A dip back inside me. "You."

I detonate, fracturing into a hundred tiny pieces of rapturous bliss. I don't recognize my own cry when I hear it. It's a feral shout I can't control.

I'm pulled under the surge of sensations. Each one rising and then falling after catching up to the one before it. My body feels energized, my nerve endings charged.

I look down, his head still between my legs as my knees tighten on his shoulders. He licks me up and down, my body so hypersensitized I buck against him, causing even more friction that sends me into a frenzy.

I can't think. I can barely breathe. But damn if I can feel the warmth of his tongue and the gush of my own arousal.

"Christ, Row. You taste fucking amazing." He leans back, his chin wet and his hair mussed.

A strange sense of pride fills me. I brought the incomparable Holden Knight to his knees. And then I laugh because that sounds so ridiculous but I'm so damn giddy and on the orgasmic high, I don't care.

"Holden?" My voice is a sex-drugged rasp.

"Hmm?" A kiss pressed to the top of my pussy.

I lower my legs from the chair. "A good CEO?" I squeeze my knees shut so that he's forced to take a step back. "One who cares for her job." I lift my eyebrows as he meets mine. "Always makes sure the owner is taken care of as well." I rise from my chair and make a show of crawling my elbows onto the desk so that my bare ass is facing him. "Your turn, Mr. Knight," I say breathlessly and look over my shoulder.

Holden is standing behind me. His eyes flicker to mine, to my bared and dripping pussy, and then back to my eyes, as he unbuckles his belt and pulls his cock out.

"Now, that's a gorgeous sight, Sunshine."

He runs a hand over the globe of my ass before trailing his finger down its center and over where his tongue just pleasured.

"So fucking gorgeous."

He lines his head up at my entrance and begins to push his way in. His groan is exactly how I feel.

Wanton. Desired. Unbridled.

"So fucking good," he repeats as he seats himself root to tip within me, one hand on my hip, the other snaking up my back to grab onto my shoulder for leverage.

"Fuck me, Holden," I murmur as he begins to move. "Take me just like that." I rear back and meet him halfway, earning me a guttural groan that creates an ache on top of the burn he's already igniting. "Show me what you want." I still my hips so he can slam into me. Over and over. "Give me every goddamn inch."

The pleasure is too much, burns too damn bright that I drop my head and grab onto the edge of the desk with my fingers.

"Please." He continues his pursuit. "Right there." Again and again. "Holden." I knew the orgasm was coming, could feel it building, but nothing prepared me for the intensity of the second one when it hits.

My elbows buckle and I collapse on his desk as he claims his own.

We're a mass of tense muscles and misted sweat.

Of surging pleasure and sated needs.

Of unspoken emotion and requiet submission.

As our hearts decelerate and bodies normalize, Holden presses an unexpected row of kisses down the length of my spine. He slips out of me and collapses back into his chair, his pants around his ankles and his own chest still heaving.

"It's never been this good before," he says and then stops himself. Our eyes meet. His words take hold as he runs a hand through his hair and all but pretends to shake his comment away. "Christ. You are something else, Rowan Rothschild."

I move and straddle his thighs, pressing a kiss to his lips. "We are something else, Holden." Another kiss before I rest my head on his chest and just take in the moment.

Just take in him.

It's never been this good before....

And I couldn't agree more.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Holden

"Man, I thought you'd gone and forgot about me," Leo says as he bumps my fist, glances over his shoulder, and then peers at me through the open window of my SUV.

"Nah. Just busy with work and ... stuff."

"It's been a few weeks since you came to the baseball game. I figured you ... I don't know. That you weren't coming back." He sniffs like it's no big deal but I can hear the worry in his voice.

"I'm here. A lot of shit has happened." I thrum my thumbs on the steering wheel. "But Audrey took care of you for helping paint the back fence, right? She said you talked to her the other day."

He nods and glances behind him again like he expects someone to be there. "Yeah, but she ain't you, man. She's..."

"Scary?" I ask and laugh.

"That's the right word."

"Looks like you've been doing some good work," I say. The grass has been edged and there is new bark in the planters. All things I approved Audrey to get him the supplies for.

"Thanks," he says, and looks over his shoulder yet again.

"You good, man?" I ask.

He puffs his chest out in a way I used to know all too well—false bravado at its finest—before smiling. "Yeah. I'm good. It's just—"

A backfire sounds off somewhere down the block and we both jump at the sound, but Leo is visibly shaken.

"Hop in? Go for a ride?"

He hesitates. "My mom. She says I can't go with anyone. She has rules."

* * *

"Those aren't the rules."

"But Mom's not here, right?" He makes a show of looking around. "It's not like she'd ever know if I went outside by myself for a few minutes."

* * *

The memory hits me out of nowhere. Mason. Me. My throat burns with the clarity with which I hear Mason's voice when it's seemed so dim for so long.

"You should obey your mom's rules," I say.

"You okay?" he asks, his eyes narrowing.

"Fine." I glance around, knowing there are always eyes on you in this town and right now is no different. "You want to climb in here, sit, and just talk?"

"I don't know if that's smart either."

"Because people will think..."

"You're my drug supplier. You're my pimp. You're a gang leader. You fucking name it, Three-Piece," he says, his voice sounding tougher with each and every word.

Something is going on here.

"We'll do whatever you want."

"Meet me at the baseball field in five?"

"Okay."

I pull away from the curb and hate that he's going to walk the distance himself. Don't look now, Holden, but your God complex is showing. Leo walks these streets every day just like Mason and I used to. My being here isn't going to save him from shit.

Clearly my presence didn't help my brother at all.

And yet while I drive to the field, as I sit in the dugout, I look around every few seconds in the hopes that I see him.

When I do finally spot him, I hate how relieved I am. He glances around before he ducks into the cinder-block dugout that has as many layers of paint on it as I have years since I left this fucking place.

For the briefest of moments, I wonder if I've been set up. If Leo asked me here so we were out of sight, so that I could be jumped.

It's a fuck-all feeling that has me looking over my shoulder and asking why the hell did I allow myself to be in this situation.

I know better than this.

The streets may have hardened me but the fucking eight-hundred-thread-count sheets I sleep on every night have clearly dulled those edges.

"You setting me up, Leo?" I ask the minute he's within earshot.

His expression—shock, disbelief, *hurt*—tells me what I need to know. He isn't.

"What the fuck, man? Now why'd I go and do that when you're the only fucker in this whole town who thinks I could be more than this shit?"

My heart—the one that doesn't exist—twists in my chest and reminds me it does in fact beat.

I nod slowly. "I do believe that and you are more than this shit." I pat the bench beside me. "Now you gonna tell me why you don't want to be seen talking to me?"

"It's not nothing—"

"It's not anything," I correct and earn an eye roll of teenage proportions.

"There's just a lot of bad shit going on right now. Everybody's on edge with the murders that happened. We have two dealers who got a beef with each other and I don't want no one to think you're part of it and in turn, I'm part of it."

"Fair." I nod and glance to the outfield where two kids are riding their bikes beyond the fence. "Someone say shit to you?"

"Nah." But he averts his eyes and I know he's lying.

"What did they say?"

"Just that you must be either my daddy or my daddy and, like, how much money you be giving me for either."

Jesus fucking Christ.

"Leo—"

"I set them straight though, but like, if I climb in the car with you and then you drop me off twenty minutes later, it looks like—you *my daddy* if you get what I mean."

"I do." My stomach churns at the thought.

"People talk here. Why is Leo's mom buying more groceries than normal at the corner market? Why does she have gift cards instead of the EBT card? Like ... everybody is watching everything 'round here."

Nothing's changed, has it?

"I got you, man. We'll figure something out."

"I mean, they see me working outside. The painting, the scrubbing, the grass mowing, but no one puts two and two together and assumes the extra money coming from that. The people who do things the right way here are the ones who usually get the most taken from them."

"I understand that."

"But you still thought I had a crew and was going to jump you." He stares at me like a kid who's wise beyond his years. And like a man who just had his feelings hurt and integrity questioned.

"I didn't think you were going to jump me. I thought maybe someone threatened to hurt your mom or you in exchange for access to me." I shrug like it's no big deal when it is. It's a huge fucking deal that I should have thought of way before now. "I know how things work here, and I wouldn't fault you for giving me up to save your mom."

I watch him process the truth in what I just said; his nod is slow and his innocence tarnished like the graffiti does to these streets. "We need a code word."

"What?" I bark out a laugh.

"A code word. Something I say if I think you're in danger or if I'm put in that situation."

I stare at him, wanting to refute him and his idea—more like refute the notion that a thirteen-year-old even has to think this idea—but end up only nodding. "Smart thinking."

"What's the word?"

"Monarch." I don't know why that's the first word on the tip of my tongue—maybe because no matter how much I research the damn name and its connection to Rhett I can't find anything—but it is.

"Monarch?" He laughs for the first time since he sat down. "You think you a damn king or you girly, like a butterfly?" And once the words are out he laughs even harder. I let him have the laugh at my expense because it doesn't hurt shit to let a thirteen-year-old be a thirteen-year-old.

"We can change it."

"No, we ain't. We keeping it." He fist-bumps me and then pretends to straighten a crown on his head. "Monarch Holden, it is."

"Fine. Monarch."

The laughter fades and we fall silent as we both stare at a trail of ants coming out of the broken concrete beneath our feet and moving toward a broken chip at the far end of the dugout.

There's something else he wants to ask about, I can sense it, so I wait out the silence and let him build the courage to do so.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Ask away."

"Are we going to lose our house? Like, with all this election talk about tearing down Fairmont." He clears his throat and refuses to look at me. "I mean, I know it's not much, but it's our home, you know?"

There is a pride there, a dignity that I feel like cleaning up the complex helped him realize.

"Here's the thing about politicians, Leo. They promise a lot and never deliver on most of it."

"He's making promises from the same alphabet yours are made from."

Kid's got a point.

"You're not going to lose your house, Leo. I'll make sure of it."

"Yeah, but that dude is rich."

I laugh. It's low and has so much more meaning in it than he'll ever understand. Every part of me wants to lean in closer to him, lower my voice, and tell him, *I'm richer*, but after this conversation about being bait for the guys around here, it's best to keep that close to the vest.

"I told you I'll make sure of it, and I'll make sure of it. Have I gone back on any of my promises yet?"

He angles his head to the side and studies me. He doesn't say anything but just nods—his only acknowledgment that I haven't gone back on anything—as he stands up. "I have to go. My mom will be freaking out soon."

"Okay."

He smiles and then begins to walk away.

"Hey, Leo?"

"What up?"

"Where's your bike?"

"Got stolen at school. It wasn't anything special."

"But it was yours."

"Yeah." He nods. It was his little slice of freedom. His only way to escape faster than on foot if need be. *It was his.* "Later, Three-Piece."

"Later, Leo."

I stare after him long after he's gone, knowing I should get the fuck out of here and stop making myself a sitting duck.

As I climb behind the wheel, the concern in Leo's voice owns my head.

Can I ask you something?

And here I thought he was going to ask for more money or more gift cards. A new glove or bat. Nope. The damn kid just wanted to know if he's going to lose the roof over his head.

Fuck you, Rhett and Chad. For being the guys you always were. For being such goddamn pricks.

You are not better than anyone on this side of the river.

Not Mason.

Not Leo.

And sure as shit not me.

Just, fuck you.

TWENTY-NINE

Holden

"This is what you have me doing with my time now?" Audrey asks. "I assure you it's more valuable than buying a skateboard."

"Have you always voiced your opinions this loudly?" I ask and lean back in my chair to stare at her over my steepled fingers.

"No, but it seems you need more directing now than you ever did."

"Directing?"

"Yes." The faintest of smiles turns up the corners of her lips. "Keeping you in your lane."

"Bullshit."

"Do you love her?"

I cough over my next breath. "What the fuck, Audrey?"

"It's a valid question, is it not?"

"No."

"No, it's not valid, or no, you're not in love with her." She lifts her eyebrows.

"Do you have a point to this?"

"It's my job to make you aware of anything I see hindering you completing this project. And I see you paying a teenager for his work for I don't know what. Then you ask me to buy him a skateboard and question how much all new baseball gear is. I also see you dodging out of meetings to take calls from a certain female employee. And you sure as shit aren't hiding the way you look at her and the silly smile you get when you hang up with her."

"Your point?"

"You're too close, too invested."

"Maybe I'm keeping her close to the vest so that I know what's going on in the Rothschild world."

"And maybe you're letting the lines blur between sex, loyalty, and love."

"If I wanted a lecture, I'd call my mom."

"But you're not and that's telling in and of itself. Even more telling is how defensive you're being right now, not because I'm calling you on the carpet with this but because you know I'm right and don't want to admit it."

I grit my teeth and stew at her words and withering stare. "I know what I'm doing."

"You mean the fucking Rowan at the same time she's engaged to Chad part, or were we talking about something else?"

The fact that her saying that—"fucking Rowan"—has me rolling my shoulders should tell me all I need to know.

She's right.

I'm too fucking close.

It's not like that's a news flash or anything, so why can't I step the fuck back?

"Exactly. You just made my point for me. If I were in love with Rowan, do you think I'd let that fuckwit anywhere near her?"

"There's more going on there than you're letting on though. I've known you long enough."

"Then you'd know you're about five steps too far over the line you're not supposed to cross. Step back, Audrey, or we're going to have a problem."

She's visibly shaken by the threat in my tone. She opens her mouth to say something and then stops herself before rising to her feet and moving toward the door.

She clears her throat. "Jules said she is running late. She should be here in about ten minutes."

"Send her in when she gets here," I say of my real estate agent. The pencil skirt Rowan was jealous of.

Maybe I should have her come back at another time when Rowan is here. Wouldn't that help with her attachment issues?

Then again, if she's hurt in the end—that's supposed to be no skin off my back, right?

So why doesn't it feel like it?

Audrey pauses and looks back at me. "Are you really having Jules look at buying up pieces of Fairmont so Rhett can't touch it?"

"Are you going to tell me that that's being too close too?" The comment is unfounded and immature but gets my point across.

"No." She looks down and then back up. "I think it's poetic justice."

With that she strides out of the room, and I'm left with her words swirling in my head.

Poetic justice is a tricky thing. Especially when what I'm doing that seems to be virtuous is also a misdeed.

But Audrey is right on so many other levels.

How in the hell could I ever assume there could be anything more with Rowan after the plans I have for TinSpirits and her family? After I handily piecemeal her company apart, ruin her brother's and possibly her family's reputation, and reveal to the

world just how goddamn corrupt they are?
There will be no going back from there.
I will be the monster.

I am the monster.

I will be exactly who I came here to be.

THIRTY

Rowan

"This place is a ghost town," Caroline says as I put the car in park.

And it is. The TinSpirits parking lot is all but empty. I'm so preoccupied in my thoughts—in how Henry Williams has yet succeeded in avoiding returning any of my phone calls for yet another week—that I didn't even take notice of just how vacant this lot is.

Too many moving parts to which that man holds the keys to. I'll need to ask Chad, yet again, what's going on.

"Are we going in?" Caroline prompts.

"Yes. Sorry. Just preoccupied with something." I shake my head. "It'll be just a second. You sure you don't want to wait in the car?"

Caroline looks over at me and grins as she gets out of the car with me. "No. I don't. I rarely get out beyond the country club."

"You're so full of shit," I say as I use my master key on the front door of the TinSpirits office building. "You go everywhere and do everything that's required of a good little society lady."

"I do, don't I?" She scrunches her nose playfully.

"You do." I roll my eyes.

"Well, I'm coming with you because I know how easily you get lost in your work." She hooks her arm through mine as we wait for the elevator. "It's a Saturday afternoon, the girls are waiting for us to play bunco, get tipsy, and plan your bachelorette party. If I let you come in here alone, you'll never leave. So make it snappy."

"I will. I promise." I laugh.

"No, you won't, but I love you anyway for it."

"All I need to do is grab a folder," I say.

"I'm aware." She snips my phone out of my hand. "You'll get this back when you return."

"You're being ridiculous."

"I know, but I'll stand right here and hold the elevator in the meantime."

It only takes me seconds to get to my office, find the folder I forgot, and head back to a waiting Caroline, who is literally standing with her hand against the automatic door opener of the elevator car.

I hold my hand out. "Phone?"

She smiles and shrugs. "There you go."

"Thank you."

I step in the elevator car with her and select the ground floor but am startled when it slows down at the third floor.

And I'm even more surprised when the doors open and Pencil Skirt is standing there, looking gorgeous as ever and a tad disheveled. Her hair is mussed and her cheeks are flushed as she stands with a cell phone to her ear.

We're afforded a smile and nod as she enters the elevator car. "Yes. He's ... hard to put into words."

Of course she has a lush British accent and smells phenomenal.

What the fuck is she doing here?

"Mm-hm. I know. He requires exclusivity. It's part of his deal, but he is 100 percent worth it. A sure thing every time."

I can feel Caroline's eyes on me but I keep my eyes focused straight ahead, afraid I'll give too much away by the look on my face.

She's here. In the office. On the third floor. A place no one goes unless they want complete privacy in one of the many smaller conference rooms down there.

The person on the other end of the phone must be talking to her because all I hear from the rest of the conversation is Pencil Skirt making noncommittal sounds.

The elevator lands on the ground floor and she struts off of it. We follow behind her but she veers toward the doors leading out to the parking lot opposite from where I parked.

"Oh my God," Caroline says as the doors shut behind us and we are outside. "That's an escort if I've ever seen one."

My stomach drops. "An escort?"

"Exclusive. Privacy. A sure thing." She lifts her eyebrows. "Someone is most definitely getting laid."

"Caroline. I..." I spin around and look back through the glass doors we walked out of and through the ones Pencil Skirt did. Holden's SUV is parked right outside of them. "I—I forgot one more thing. Give me ... a second."

"Rowan?"

But I'm already back through the doors and jogging to the elevator. The car can't get here fast enough and when it does, it can't ascend quick enough. The third floor is empty as I rush through it and within seconds I am up on the fourth floor but come

to a halt this time when I turn the corner and see Holden sitting at his desk.

His back is to me as he stands, his hands braced on his desk, clearly looking at something.

He wasn't there minutes ago when I went to my office.

He's there now.

My heart thunders in my chest. My mind spirals out of control.

I beg myself not to believe the thoughts I'm thinking.

"Rowan?" he asks. "What are you doing here?"

I freeze as he turns and moves to the doorway of his office to study me. His collar is undone, the top two buttons open.

"I forgot a folder. A contract to go over." I hook a thumb over my shoulder. "I have plans. With the girls."

He takes a few steps toward me but something makes him stop. He angles his head and looks closer. "Everything okay?"

I nod. I swallow. "Yes. It's Saturday. What are you doing here?"

"I'm always working."

"Yes. Uh-huh."

"Meetings." He shoves his hands in his pockets but doesn't come any closer. "It's easier to hold them without prying eyes."

"Your world domination continues," I say flatly.

"Something like that." He takes a few steps closer and is in my personal space before I realize it. He reaches out to frame my face. "Hey? You sure you're okay?"

I nod. "Yeah."

He dips his head down and brushes his lips to mine. "Promise?"

"Mm-hmm."

Another tender kiss that has the doubts fading and then reappearing the minute our lips part. "Don't have too much fun without me."

The lump in my throat makes it feel tight to breathe. "Never."

I take a step back. Then another. He watches me all the way until I turn the corner.

Holden Knight.

Meetings. It's easier to hold them without prying eyes.

Master of secrets.

And he wonders why I still keep mine?

THIRTY-ONE

Rowan

"That's not a good idea," I say and project my voice to my phone that's sitting on Gran's desk.

"It's not a good idea to come pay you a visit?" Holden's voice comes through its speaker.

"No."

"But you didn't come into the office today."

"I needed the quiet so I could concentrate on this proposal for you without interruptions. Much like you and your Saturday meetings." I told myself I wasn't going to bring it up, but there I go, bringing it up first chance I talk to him.

"I can understand that."

I spent the better part of Saturday night tipsy and overthinking Pencil Skirt, what she said and her being there alone with Holden. Then I spent Sunday morning nursing a hangover and convincing myself that what I saw was just what Holden said—private meetings.

But over what?

The man has hands in many more businesses than just TinSpirits, so no wonder he has to hold private meetings every once in a while.

But it was when I left the Sanctuary early last night and passed by the baseball field nearby, only to see Holden's car parked there, that I was questioning everything all over again. Questioning the weird feeling that there is so much more to Holden and the truths he's told than I think there is.

Then again, there are a lot of black SUVs in Fairmont.

It's easy to talk yourself into or out of whatever you want to believe, depending on which way you look at things.

Like how Pencil Skirt was probably a private meeting over something and the SUV in Fairmont wasn't his.

And so today I chose to work from Gran's house. Free of distractions. Free of seeing him and then overthinking more. I needed the time to focus on this proposal and maybe feel a little more connected with her. She always grounded me and I need that right now more than ever.

"You're telling me that you don't want me to keep you company while you sort through all those stacks of papers?"

"One, you have your own work to do. Two, I need to be able to concentrate to get through at least two more stacks tonight. And three? There's only one kind of company you're going to want to keep with me and I'm pretty sure it means neither of us have clothes on."

He chuckles. "Do heels count as clothes? Because that's my favorite look for you. Naked and in heels."

"Such a sweet talker."

"I try," he says, amusement lacing his tone. "But you just shot me down ferociously. Maybe I should hang up and go lick my wounds."

"I'm sure you have many other women waiting to lick them for you." I don't know where the words come from, but they're out of my mouth before I can stop them.

"Yes. No doubt. Just as you have many other men waiting for you." He pauses. "Is there something you want to say, Rowan?"

"No. Not at all." Yes. So many things. "Is there something you wanted to say?" I counter.

"Yes? Call off the engagement."

"I can't."

His chuckle is frustrating at best. "I've followed through with all the paperwork, with all my promises. I've proven you can trust me. Why are you carrying on with this?"

My answer is silence.

"Ah. So you can let me into your bed, but you still don't trust me." Hurt edges his tone and the sound hits me harder than I expect.

I want to trust you desperately but still can't.

I want to justify how being with Chad makes my goals possible.

I want to explain how if I gain that \$30 million inheritance, it'll only be to eat away at some of your power and control.

I want to tell you I have feelings for you but that makes the first three things sound like I'm insane.

"You know what? You're right. You shouldn't trust me. I've told you that from day one. Why change now that we are what we are, right?"

"Holden?"

"So you'd be okay if I were fake engaged to someone else?"

Pencil Skirt flashes through my mind and every part of me bristles.

I pause, knowing my lie isn't going to suffice but say it anyway. "I'm working on it."

And then once my excuse is out of my mouth, I wonder if it really is a lie. Am I really working on not marrying Chad? Or have I resigned myself to the fact that this is what needs to happen to get my inheritance?

The thought is nauseating at best.

I riffle through a few more pages and place them in the appropriate piles. A receipt from the grocery store. A flyer for a baby shower from years ago. A tax return dated ten years ago. A canceled paper check made out to a charity.

"I suggest you work a little harder at it because I'm pretty damn sick of being jealous of a relationship that technically doesn't exist."

If he only knew the irony that statement holds.

"I know. I am. I promise."

THIRTY-TWO

Holden

The bar is dim, the music is low and bluesy, the scotch in my glass is neat, and at least four patrons sitting in various parts of this bar on the east side of Fairmont are no doubt figuring if I'm worth jumping when I walk out to my car or not.

"You good, man?" the bartender asks, to which I nod and lift up my freshly poured drink as a thank-you.

Good?

That's debatable.

"You looking for a fight?" the guy next to me asks. His baseball hat is pulled down low over his eyes, and his hair in need of a cut hangs out from beneath the back. He's definitely a barfly. The bartender doesn't ask what he wants and when a new one slides across the top, no money is exchanged because it's on a tab.

"Nah. Just needing to be reminded of where I came from."

"Here?" His laugh sounds like he smokes six packs a day as he looks me up and down. "No shit."

"No shit," I murmur.

"Why would you want to be reminded of this shithole?" he asks.

Because I have plans. I have things to accomplish. And ... fuck. What would have happened if I'd met Rowan under different circumstances?

Would I have allowed myself to entertain the opportunity of having more with her?

"Ah. It's a woman," he says before I can respond.

"It would never work," I state. It can't. It couldn't.

"No? Why not?"

My knee-jerk reaction is to tell him to mind his own business but I find myself answering him. "Because it wouldn't."

"Families hate each other? She's the wrong religion? She's your boss?" he asks.

"Hmm."

"That bad, huh?"

I shrug and take another sip of my whiskey.

"Just because it would never work doesn't mean you can't still want it. Doesn't even mean you can't enjoy it for a little bit." Those words stick with me.

As I drive through the streets of Fairmont.

As I pull up to the curb and stare at the place I used to live and wonder if the teenager I was then ever imagined the chance of finding a woman like Rowan. A woman with drive, determination, and just enough gray in her to make me smile.

I head home after some time.

I sit on the balcony of my penthouse above the city that broke me and know this same city is where I'll be made as whole as can be again.

And I think about a woman who doesn't let me forget.

Just because it would never work doesn't mean you can't still want it. Doesn't even mean you can't enjoy it for a little bit.

Sleep eludes me.

That's nothing new.

The only time it comes is when I'm with her.

THIRTY-THREE

Holden

"So from what I've gathered, the WillowBend owners are in agreement with the lender to make a lump sum payment by the end of next week," Bob says through the phone.

- "A lump sum, huh?" Where do they plan on getting that?
- "Yes, and it'll be enough to keep the wolves at bay for another month or two, but it won't last long."
- "Are you seeing any activity in the trust?"

"Weddings are expensive these days," he says. "And lucky for us, that's part of their problem. Both Rothschild and Williams had to float more funds. The money they pulled from their family trusts to avoid defaulting on their land loan had to be deposited back in them for wedding expenses. Who knows where the hell they siphoned that capital from and just in time. It wouldn't look too good if dear old Mom and Dad's checks for wedding things—venue, flowers, over-the-top bullshit—bounced because none of that money they thought was in their account was really there."

"Jesus. Whose bright idea was it to allow them to manage their family trusts?" I murmur, but I've seen the emails from years ago. The conversations between the sons and their parents around the same time when they all but schmoozed their parents into letting them take over.

A coordinated attack.

"They'll all be bankrupt in no time. Both their entire fucking families."

A grin flashes on my lips. "Exactly."

"So am I pulling the trigger?" he asks, cautiously.

"Yes. Tell them the deal is moving forward upon the receipt and validation of the methane reports."

- "Which will be bogus," he states.
- "Yes, and thus will allow me to tank the deal two seconds before signing the paperwork."
- "May I ask a question?"
- "Of course."
- "If you're trying to bankrupt them, then why are you arranging a large campaign contribution?"
- "Think about it." It's all I've thought about.

Bob clears his throat. "They'll think they've fixed their WillowBend problem. That it will be sold and that bad deal will be off their hands. They'll pay off the loan, save their credit, and return enough of the money they stole from their family trust to try and make a quick buck, so that they aren't found out."

- "Keep going," I say, enjoying listening to him think this through.
- "No one else is going to buy that shit land out there. They bought it without doing their research, reading the fine print, or who knows, listening to their lawyers, and got stuck with it."
 - "Like it seems they do with a lot of things."
- "And now they're going to falsify documents to a buyer saying there is nothing wrong with it, which is illegal and unethical."
- "Yes, it is, but since when has that ever stopped them?" I think to the deal for TinSpirits and Rhett's greed that led him to forgo reading the fine print.
- "But you're going to yank the deal at the last minute. Send them in a spiral of despair and, what? Hope that they act out? Hope—?"
 - "That's when I'll be making a multimillion-dollar donation to Rhett Rothchild's campaign."
 - "What?" Confusion is etched in his tone.
- "He'll have a loan default hanging over his head. He'll have no money to put back in the family trusts for him and Chad. They'll be close to being found out—what a bunch of frauds they are—by everyone. So he'll have a choice to make."
 - "You think he'll use the donation to save the loan default and his family's name."
 - "Campaign finance fraud is a big deal any way you look at it."
 - "But that would be Rhett. What about Chad?"
- "You actually think he'd hang his friend out to dry? Chad knows where all his bodies are buried and vice versa." Don't I know it.
- "I shouldn't have doubted that you knew what you were doing." He chuckles. "You're laying a trap for them and waiting for them to walk through it and make their own decision. They'll be in charge over which one will be their demise."
- "People like Rhett and Chad don't see it that way. They get away with everything, always have. Rules are bent for them because of the families they were born into. Consequences for them get swept under the rug."
 - "And this time you're going to prove that theory different."

- "That's the plan, Bob. I'm giving them enough rope...."
- "And then what? Just dust your hands of them once it's over?"
- "Yes." Just like they did Mason.
- "What about the money they've siphoned from TinSpirits?"
- "That's gone. I don't expect to see it. I've made peace with that. It's leverage if I need it, but I don't think I will." I glance out my window where Rhett and Chad are talking animatedly in the hallway.
 - "Call them now. Tell them the land deal is back on the table. Give them the parameters."
 - "You're watching them right now, aren't you?"
 - "I am indeed."
 - "Would you like to be on the line to hear their reaction?"
- I twist my lips and consider it, but I don't need to be on his end because I'll be watching from mine. "No. Go ahead. I'll be sure to stop in and ask what they are so excited about in a few minutes."
 - "You're twisted, Knight."
 - "Mmm. Yes. I am." A smile creeps over my lips as Bob hangs up the phone, and I turn to watch the events about to unfold.
- A few seconds pass, no doubt for Bob to switch phones and call from the burner, but the way Rhett's face lights up when he sees the number has me shaking my head.
 - He motions to Chad, pointing to the phone animatedly before ushering him into the conference room and closing the door.
 - I wait for a few minutes before heading toward the conference room and opening the door without knocking.
- Two pairs of eyes shoot up from where they stare at the cell phone on speaker on the center of the table. I hear the tail end of Bob's voice saying something and bite back my smirk.
 - "You guys good in here?" I ask. "Everything okay?"
- "Hold on a second, Roberto," Rhett says to the phone. I'm surprised he can talk he's grinning so hard. "Yep. Everything is fucking perfect."
 - Chad nods enthusiastically as I catch sight of that damn lighter sitting on the desk next to the cell phone.

Clank. Click. Clank.

- As if I needed a reminder as to why I'm doing this. Thanks, Mase. I know that was you.
- "Good campaign news, then? You're topping the polls?" I pump my fist in mock enthusiasm.
- "Something like that," Rhett says at the same time Chad says, "Even better."
- I look at both of them with a confused expression, playing the part more now than ever. "Awesome."
- "Did you need us for anything?" Rhett asks.
- "Nothing that can't be talked about later. Just supplier issues and questions on onboarding those new subcontractors Rowan has hired," I say.
 - "She's the new co-CEO. Ask her." Rhett is still so bitter over that. I fucking love it.
 - "Nah. I figure I'll make you earn your paycheck." I step back out of the door.
 - "I'm already doing my job on top of the bullshit you asked for last meeting."
 - "Hmm. That's why you get paid the big bucks, Rhett. I'll leave you to whatever it is you're doing. We'll talk later."
- I shut the door behind me as Bob's voice springs back to life on the phone behind it. I laugh at the Spanish accent he adds to his voice when talking to them.
 - But my smile is wide and my mood is fucking set.
 - It's rare you get to watch your prey creep up to the trap and see the big, fat prize hanging just within your snare.
 - But right now, I am.

THIRTY-FOUR Holden

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO

"You dumb fucker. You're going to get us in trouble," a hushed voice says from a row of lockers somewhere down the room.

I freeze. The locker room has been closed for some time.

"Dude. Relax. I do this all the time," another voice I know but can't place says.

"Seriously?" a third voice asks.

Clank. Click. Clank.

The visceral reaction I have to that sound should be illegal. My teeth grit and my hands fist while my mouth waters like I'm going to get sick.

The fucking Trouble Trio. I should've known.

"It's like taking candy from a baby. They keep all the cash tips here for the caddies. If there's no money here when they open it, they just assume us rich fuckers stiffed them all."

"Besides, we do it often enough that it's not surprising for them to find this empty."

"They're going to use it for drugs anyway."

"Crack-whore babies." There is a chuckle and then a bunch of *shh-shh*s as they fall silent.

"Is someone in here?"

"Nah. That's the kitchen. You can hear them talking through the walls."

"So you just take it?" Porter. That one's Porter.

"Yep." And that's Rothschild.

"What if we get caught?" Porter again.

More laughter. Another clank, click, clank.

"One. We won't," says Rothschild.

"Two, you know who my dad is." That's Williams.

"And three, who fucking cares? No one is going to think we did shit; even if they realize the money is missing, no one in this place would ever dare point the finger at us. We're fucking royalty in this town."

"Pretty much." Williams chuckles. "Pretty fucking much."

"C'mon. Let's get out of here before we test those theories."

They laugh and then fall quiet before they move toward the door. I make sure to shadow them so that I'm hidden by the locker endcaps.

It's only once the doors shut that I feel like I can finally breathe.

Then I sit down on the bench and try to process what I just heard. What just happened.

They stole all that money.

Money intended for my cohorts who need it way fucking more.

All that money sits there, day in and day out, ripe for the taking.

We need it way more than those fuckers do. They have more money than God; why are they taking it from those of us who need it the most? The ones who have to decide between paying the power bill or going grocery shopping?

Anger courses through me as I shake my head and push up off the bench.

But it's nothing new. Anger is all I feel anymore.

I'll never be like them.

Never.

THIRTY-FIVE

Rowan

"You left the office early. Is everything okay?" Holden asks through the speaker in my car.

I turn in to the parking lot with the signage for HENRY WILLIAMS, ESQ., and look around. It's empty save for a few cars at the far side of the lot. I haven't been here since the reading of Gran's will and Rhett's subsequent tantrum, so it feels a bit bittersweet to be here right now.

"Everything's fine, why?"

"We seem to be having these same two questions asked a lot lately. That's why I planned on tonight for us," he says. "Don't tell me you're going to cancel on me."

"No. I'm looking forward to it." And I am. The early-morning text telling me we were meeting up tonight—no excuses, was the first time in a few days that all felt a little more right with the world. "More than you know."

"It's been days. We have a lot to make up for." Suggestion laces his tone and has my body aching.

"Promise?"

"Mmm." He pauses. "I saw you exchanging words with Chad in the parking lot."

Ah. Yes. The argument over how out of hand this whole wedding thing has gotten and my request for him to help me rein in our moms and keep it simple.

"Yes?"

"How'd he take you breaking off the engagement?"

"Funny."

"I can help you along with that," he offers.

"Holden," I warn.

"Can't fault a man for trying."

"Hm. Well, I had a hot date later and left early for some extra prep time to make sure I'm waxed from head to toe for him, but if he's going to act like this, then..."

"Head to toe?" he murmurs. I know that look he has on his face right now. The one that reflects how desperate he is for me. And just the memory of that look mainlines the sweetest burn to the apex of my thighs. "You know that means I get to be the judge of that later."

"You're going to inspect every inch of me?" I ask, glad I was successful in changing the subject.

"No, Rowan. I'm going to pleasure every inch of you. With my tongue. With my fingers. With my lips. With my cock. Be prepared to be deliriously satisfied for hours on end."

"Mmm." I'm instantly wet. There's something about the tone he uses when talking like that, that's seduction in and of itself. "I'm not going to complain." I park the car and stare at the front of the nondescript building, preparing myself for that miserable feeling to hit me that I associate with this place. "We could change things up. Meet at your place," I suggest.

"You know we can't do that. We've flown under the radar so far. You show up there, and we'll be all over the Westmore proper gossip chain. You cheating and ruining your engagement to poor ol' Chad?" He chuckles. "Never mind I said that. Come to my place. Then we can end this charade once and for all."

"My place it is. I'll pick up some wine and stuff to make dinner."

"You? Make dinner?"

"Goodbye, smart-ass."

"Goodbye, Sunshine."

Within seconds, I'm walking through the front door of Henry Williams's office. I don't know why I expected there to be a waiting room full of people and a staff harried with stress, but that is definitely not what I'm greeted with.

The place is a ghost town. A sign at the front desk has a QR code to get in touch with the virtual secretary that manages the office.

That unsettled feeling I've had ever since talking to Henry the first time returns.

Without caring about boundaries, I walk past the front desk and into the back. Each office I glance into is empty.

"Henry?" I call out as I reach his back office and see him.

He startles and a yelp escapes his lips when he hears my voice. "Oh, my goodness. Rowan Rothschild." He adjusts his glasses on his nose and runs his hands over his hair that fell out of place with his jump. "What are you doing here? I have meetings? I have—"

"So I'm told regularly by your apparently *virtual* staff and yet I took a chance that you might have a few minutes for me, and look at that, your office is vacant. Great timing, I guess."

"Yes. Well." He fidgets and touches the items on his desk, straightening them a tiny fraction at a time as if he's nervous by

my presence. "Great timing. I, uh, had a cancellation."

"Either that or for some reason you don't want to talk to me."

"No. It's not that at all." I help myself to the chair in front of his desk. "I just don't think a prenup is the best course of action at this point. In fact, I'd advise against one."

"Really?" What a load of shit.

"Really. Nothing puts tension in a new relationship like thinking your spouse already doesn't trust you."

"Huh. That goes against everything I have ever been told by legal counsel."

He shrugs in response.

"And here I thought you were avoiding me in regards to Gran's will, but rather you're avoiding me asking you to write up a prenup that would exclude your nephew from taking me to the cleaners."

"You're being ridiculous." He grimaces.

"Fine. Maybe I am. In that case, let's talk about Gran." I fold my hands in my lap like a priss who's about to get down to business. "Or rather, let's talk about Gran's will."

"What about it?"

"I'd like to see her original signature on the addendum pertaining to my portion of the inheritance. The one adding the twoyear stipulation for me."

"It was signed electronically under her Miriam LLC for confidentiality. I'd be happy to provide the signature custody chain to you. We signed it right here in our office. The IP address on the custody chain will reflect that."

"Please do, but ... Gran was anti-electronic anything. She would have signed it with a pen as she's always done. She was old-school."

He goes to say something and stops. "Yes, well, this time around she had to sign it electronically."

"That doesn't sound like her."

He straightens the corners on another stack of folders. "Well, that's what happened."

"Why do my questions make you nervous, Henry?"

"They don't." Another adjustment of his glasses.

"Huh. Because it would have been highly unethical for you to e-sign the addendum to the will for Gran. In fact, it would make it null and void. What I can't wrap my head around is—what exactly was in it for you to sign that contract for her?"

"I did no such thing." He rolls his eyes and waves a hand my way. "You're letting all this wedding business mess with your head. The question is, why are you asking me to go around your grandmother's wishes? Why are you having Chad ask and push me to break the law for you?"

It's my turn to clench my jaw and stare at him.

"Because that is what you're asking, right? To invalidate your Gran's wishes which in turn would mean that I risk losing my license to practice?" He adjusts his glasses again. "Now, if I wouldn't do that, why do you think that I'd falsify Eleanor's signature?"

"I don't know. You tell me, because something isn't sitting right with me," I challenge.

He chuckles and it drips with the same condescension every other male in this town's does. "Miss Rothschild, grief can be a strong emotion. It can make you act out and say inaccurate things that are based solely on emotion. While I appreciate you stopping by, your accusations are unfounded and, frankly, bullshit. Unless you find paperwork proving otherwise, your gran's will and addendum stand as they are."

"Of course they do."

THIRTY-SIX

Holden

"Thoughts?" Rowan asks, her fingers twirling in my hair as I rest my head on her chest and listen to her heart.

"If you're looking for complaints, there are none. Your person did their job to the best of their ability." I trace a finger over the top of her bare pussy. "Not a hair to be found. Anywhere. And I truly did a thorough inspection."

She groans and if I hadn't just come, the sound would have me already hard again. "I'll make sure to let her know you approve."

"I do." I lift my head up and look at her as I suck her nipple in my mouth and swirl my tongue around its peak. "I most definitely do."

She looks down at me and cups the side of my face with her hand. There is a softness, an emotion in her eyes that I can see —can name—but can't accept if she says it out loud. For the briefest of moments, I close my eyes and allow myself the weakness to sink into it. To want it. To feel it in return.

Just because it would never work doesn't mean you can't still want it. Doesn't even mean you can't enjoy it for a little bit.

Just this once.

I clear my throat and rest my chin on her breast, our eyes still on each other's. "Why didn't you tell me the Sanctuary was in trouble?" I ask.

"Because it's not your problem."

"No, but it's something you care about."

"I care about a lot of things, Holden." She rubs her thumb back and forth over my lower lip. "But I've learned the hard way that sometimes in life, caring isn't enough."

I struggle to swallow, hearing her words and not wanting to hear them all at the same time. "I know. I definitely know."

"Wait. How did you know?"

"Spent some time researching Rhett's comments and the effect they'd have. Came across something on it." Vague is better.

Her sigh is heavy. "I keep running different scenarios through my head. How I can help them. I've even considered using some of my gran's inheritance she left me when I finally come into it ... but I just don't think that will happen in time."

When she finally comes into it? I keep my face impassive while my mind turns.

She hasn't already gotten it? Why the hell not? Is it in probate? Are there stipulations like lump sums at certain ages?

And why does she get something when Rhett didn't?

I've been through his emails. The ones sent to Chad regarding what was left to him—his grandfather's golf tee collection and where he could stuff them—were quite amusing. It was privilege personified for a man who has squandered away so much.

But Rowan's inheritance? They didn't say a fucking word about it.

Is that what I'm missing? The something more she'll gain from it? Does that mean if I ruin her family, she'll still have something of her own?

The idea strikes me.

You're softening, Knight. Trying to salvage what might be left after you detonate dynamite.

Not now. Stop thinking. Stop scheming. Just enjoy.

"I'm looking at property there," I say.

"Where? In Fairmont?" she asks, surprised.

"Mmm. Yeah. I told you that there were other ways to defeat your brother's plans."

"By buying up all the land?" She looks at me with equal parts admiration and craziness.

"Yep. If I'm strategic enough, and buy parcels in a set range and location from others, no company will buy there. A distribution center, a factory, an assembly line ... all those facilities need blocks of space. The notion of low-cost warehouses goes out the window when that one asshole, the current tenant—meaning me—holds out and refuses to sell."

"That's brilliant."

"It works in theory. Now it's a matter of trying to pick the most strategic spots and hoping the owner accepts my out-of-theblue offer on his property."

"Isn't that a waste of your money though? Something you can't do anything with?"

"Some things are more important than money, Rowan."

"Like?"

I shift up on my elbow and press a kiss to hers. It's slow and seductive and completely opposite of the free-for-all, can't-get-enough sex we just had.

I sink into the feel of her lips and the taste of her kiss. Do I want to care more?

Maybe I already do.

And maybe I already know the predetermined outcome. There's no way there can be anything between Rowan Rothschild and me.

This was just supposed to be sex.

This was just supposed to be a complication.

What happens when things get too close in my life? I cut them off.

And yet I'm still here.

Still craving more of her.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Holden

"Jules. Knight here," I say to my real estate agent's voicemail. "I have a few more ideas to go over with you when you're in town next week. I'll have Audrey send over the details so you can start looking for me. Same plan of attack, just another dimension. Talk soon."

I walk around some of the members enjoying their early evening drinks before dinner inside the Westmore Country Club. I nod when I should. I smile when I shouldn't. I play the fucking game all while looking around, wondering if she'll be here.

The other night plays in my head. The great dinner. The incredible sex. The giving myself the opportunity to let her in a little more.

Yeah. That.

I told her about my plans in Fairmont. About one of the most innocuous ways I plan on defeating her brother.

The world didn't end. The universe didn't implode.

And I gained even more from it than I expected.

Her inheritance.

There's something there. Her slip to me has teeth. Now I just need to figure out what exactly that is.

I pick up the phone to call Bob to see if he's found anything out—but know if he has, I'd already know—when there's a voice at my back.

"You talk any more on that phone, Holden Knight, it just might become attached to that handsome ear of yours."

I turn to find a striking woman. She's statuesque with auburn hair, a full mouth, and a dusting of freckles across her nose. I've seen her before—know I have, but can't quite place her.

"I wasn't aware ears could be handsome."

"And he's charming too," she murmurs and then holds out her hand. "Sloane Vandenberg. Rowan's best friend. Nice to meet you."

Interesting. I take her hand and shake it. "Pleasure," I say, guarded.

"You don't like the country club much, do you?"

I glance around the patio at the blowhards kissing each other's asses, the women kowtowing to their husband's ridiculous ideals, and at the staff being dismissed like they're nobodies. I know how that feels. "Not particularly."

"Which is interesting considering how much I see you here."

"It's a necessary evil."

"Ah. Right." She glances around herself before meeting my eyes again and just staring.

What has Rowan told her? Does she know about us? About Chad? There is a chess piece being moved right now and for the first time in my life, it's not me moving it.

"Is there something you wanted to say, Miss Vandenberg?" I ask.

"Why would you ask that?"

My smile is half-hearted. "Call it a hunch."

"Rowan has a wedding dress fitting this weekend," she says absently.

"Rowan is an employee. What she does in her free time isn't any of my business." My stomach pitches at the thought. "You tell me like I care."

Her smile is a slow crawl on those red-painted lips of hers. "I tell you because I'm a best friend convinced my best friend is making the wrong decision for all the right reasons." She lifts her eyebrows.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

She shrugs. "You're a smart man, Mr. Knight. You can figure it out." A hand squeezing my arm. "Now, you'll excuse me. I need to go talk to a client I see over there. It was nice to finally get to meet you face-to-face."

And with that, she walks off, leaving me staring in her wake, and more than fucking grateful that Chad is on the golf course somewhere, far out of reach.

Wedding fucking dress.

Because the need to punch something is real.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Rowan

I'm going to hyperventilate.

I walk back and forth outside the bridal boutique, trying to calm the nerves that own me.

This is fake. A pretend wedding as a means to an end for my inheritance ... but that doesn't make the feeling of claustrophobia clawing its way up my throat any less strangling.

I should call it off right now. It's a long shot if I still think I can find anything to invalidate Gran's addendum. It's an even longer shot that Henry Williams is going to cave to Chad's continued requests to *lose* the addendum despite the fact that Chad says he's making progress.

It's all a crapshoot that just got more than fucking real as I stand before the high-end boutique and question my sanity.

I have a strong stomach for most things. I can weather storms. I have put up with the patriarchy in this goddamn town in order to reach my goals.

But this ... this feels like a bridge too far.

Sorry, Gran. I don't think I can do this.

Just as I turn to escape, I hear my name. "Rowan?"

I startle at the sound of Chad's voice. "What are you doing here?"

He glances toward the window at my back where no doubt our moms are watching this interaction before he leans in to press a kiss on my lips. I'm so disjointed having to be here that I don't even react to it.

"They called me," he murmurs. "Apparently you were freaking out and they thought you needed me to calm you down. I'm not staying though."

I nod, weirdly comforted to have someone here that knows the truth about what's really going on here. "This is all out of hand. Our mothers have lost their minds. They're talking about custom wines and drone shows versus fireworks. About shipping in Maine lobster because it's lavish and how many dress changes I'm going to have when I don't want to have any. Henry needs to come the fuck through or I. Can't. Do. This."

Tears burn in my eyes and I know that they have nothing to do with any of these things and everything to do with the fact that I feel like my hand is being forced in a situation I wouldn't wish on anyone.

Too much expense for a ruse of a wedding. The guilt eats at me. The panic claws at me.

Chad links his fingers with mine and stares down at our joined hands. "I know. I agree."

"We're being watched, aren't we?"

"We are." He looks at me and gives me the same half-smile he used to when we were little and he was going to share his juice box with me. "I'm sorry you're in this situation. I'm sorry Rhett put us there. I'm sorry ... about so many things. I'll do whatever it is you want to. Just tell me what you need."

"It's not your fault." But it is. If he weren't a sad little puppy dog wishing for my love, accepting this ruse of a wedding in the hopes for more, we wouldn't be here in the first place.

"No, but I had a hand in it." He gives a reticent shrug. "Let me talk to them?"

I nod. "Okay."

"I'm thinking if I want to remain alive, then I should ask for them to come out here instead of risking going inside and seeing any dresses."

"If you know what's best for you, yes." But the comment makes me smile as he motions for our moms to come outside. Clearly they were watching us because within seconds, they are standing before us.

"Chad. What a pleasant surprise," my mom says.

"Emmaline, she knows you called me," Chad says, to which my mom responds with her lips parted in an O.

"Yes, well, us mothers do what we need to do," my mom says and squeezes my hand while her other is still linked with Florence's.

"So here's the deal," Chad says. "We love you. We love that you want this to be the biggest, most talked about wedding on the East Coast, but it's out of hand and nothing near what we want."

"Chadwick—"

"Mom, I'm talking," Chad says in a rare show of defiance to his mother. "There will be no private-label wine. There will be no drone show or fireworks display. There won't even be Maine lobster. And this one's going to gut you, but there will be no yards and yards of taffeta or tulle or whatever the heck you want for a wedding dress for Rowan. There will be what she wants. Hell, she'd look stunning in a paper bag, and if that's what she chooses, then I'm 100 percent behind it. This is supposed to be about us and not how much money you can spend. Is that clear?"

"Wow," my mom says softly, putting a voice to how Chad's words make me feel in this moment.

"Are we all on the same page, then?" he asks. "Because if we're not, Row and I will elope and that will make no one happy but her."

"He's going to make such an incredible husband," my mom says to Florence. "Standing up for his wife like that. Being the voice of reason."

"I've never been prouder," Florence says. "My goodness. That speech gave me goose bumps."

"We'll let you have a few seconds to yourself," my mom says, her smile proud as the two of them shuffle back into the boutique.

Chad looks at me and nods. "Better?"

My smile is half-assed but there. No. I'm not better. I still have to follow through with this to get my inheritance. "Thanks."

"You can do this." He presses a kiss to my cheek. "I hear burlap is the new satin."

I throw my head back and laugh.

And it feels so damn good before I draw in a deep breath and enter the bridal boutique, already knowing that our moms have told the specialists in there to put away all the dresses they've already pulled for me.

THIRTY-NINE

Holden

It's a gut punch to see her in the dress.

The ridiculous amount I had to pay the salesclerk for the code to access the outside door to get in here was more than fucking worth it to see Rowan like this.

She's breathtaking in it.

The floor-length sheath of ivory. A straight column of satin that tastefully hugs every curve. It has delicate straps and an open back so the fabric pools just above her ass.

It's understated yet sexy and the minute I see her looking at her reflection in the trifold mirror of the private dressing room, visions of hiking it up and fucking her in it fill my head immediately.

Shortly thereafter is a flash of jealousy so fucking strong that I don't know how to process it.

She gasps the minute she sees me. Her eyes grow wide and she steps down off the platform she's standing on, her hands going up to cover her chest as if I can't see her in the dress.

As if it's our wedding she's trying on dresses for.

"What are you doing in here?" she whisper-yells, fear in her eyes as she glances over her shoulder, toward the door leading to the sitting room where her and Chad's moms are sitting, foaming at the mouth to see her.

"It's locked," I tell her as I move across the room. "As is the one behind me."

"Oh my god. This is not good. How—"

"Don't worry about it. No one will—"

"You can't be in here. Everyone will know. You can't—"

I don't hesitate. Not a single goddamn bit. I slant my mouth over hers and take until I can't take anymore. Until my breath is faint and my head is dizzy and my balls ache with a ferocity like I've never felt before.

Her hesitation lasts milliseconds. Then her hands are fisting in my shirt and her body is pressed up against mine like she wants to unzip my skin and crawl inside.

The feeling is mutual.

"You can't be in here," she repeats until I swallow the words.

"I can. I am. And the more times you tell me I can't, the longer I fucking will be."

I think of Chad's hand on her ass at the engagement party. Of the kiss he put on her lips to piss me off.

You want to one-up me, Chadwick?

I'll win.

How about your bride in her wedding dress getting fucked by me?

Her fingers score the back of my neck as I kiss her again. "You look incredible. Stunning. And I fucking hate you for it, but more so who it's for."

"It's not real," she pants out. "It's—"

"Rowan? Is everything okay in there?" a woman's voice calls from the door.

"Yes." Rowan puts her hand over my mouth, her eyes wide. "I just needed a minute."

"The attendant said as much; do you need me to come in there? Do you not like the dress?"

"No." I begin to inch the fabric of the dress up. "The dress is..."

"Sexy as fuck," I growl into her ear.

"Perfect," she chokes over the word as my fingers slip between her thighs and find her pussy. "I just..."

"Call off the wedding," I order.

"I can't," she whispers back.

"Yes. You. Can," I say, each word accented with my fingers moving in and out of her.

She moans. There's no mistaking it, and I grow rock fucking hard at the sound all while knowing her mom just heard that.

Too bad Chad didn't too.

"Row? Honey? I'm worried. Are you sure there's nothing wrong?" her mom continues.

I push her back up against the wall as her hands move to my pants and begin undoing them. "I'm going to fuck you in this dress, Sunshine."

Her cold hands find my hard cock. My eyes roll back in my head as she pulls it out and encircles it with her fingers.

"I just, uh ... needed a minute to myself," she calls out.

"I'm going to fuck you so when you wear it and walk down the aisle, you'll remember the feel of it bunched around your waist as I fuck you into pleasure."

"Just a little overwhelmed is all," she continues and then fists my hair in her hand and yanks my mouth down to hers.

"You're such a fucking asshole doing this to me."

"Doing what?" I ask as I lift her up with both hands and use the wall for leverage before lowering her down onto my cock.

"Burning this moment into your memory. Of you in this dress while my cock is in you?" I dig my fingers into her hips as she gasps the first time I thrust up.

Good.

Fucking.

God.

It takes a few seconds for the lightheadedness the feel of her sweet pussy creates to abate some.

"Hold..." My name is a breathless pant as she squeezes around me and scores her nails in my shoulder.

"I admit it. I'm more than fucking jealous—you picked this dress out for him to see you in." Another thrust and then a hard grind so her thighs tighten on my hips. "But I'm the fucking asshole?" I tug on her bottom lip as her back arches so I go even deeper. "I'm the asshole?" I repeat as I lift her up some so I can piston into her as hard as I can. My mouth finds hers in a torrent of violent desire. And when I pull back, when I circle my hips beneath hers, when I thrust so very slowly so that all we can think about is us, I lean in to her ear and say, "Oh, baby, you haven't seen anything yet."

"Don't mess my makeup up," she mewls, her head falling back and neck arching for me to lick my way up.

I chuckle against the skin there and revel in the goose bumps that chase after it.

"Pretty sure you're going to need to be more worried about the mess between your thighs when I'm done. Wearing this dress for him while I'm still in you."

Fuck. You. Chad.

And with that I set out to finish the task. To prove to her just how fucking great we are together.

To make her know this fucking touch of mine is real.

The silk fabric bunches beneath my fingers as I hold her hips and drive into her over and over, but it's her nails digging into my skin that tell me this is real.

The bite of pain with the blush of pleasure.

It's a reminder that I'm here. That I'm actually doing this—staking my fucking claim on a woman I'm not supposed to have. And it feels so good that without that bite of pain, I just might lose my goddamn mind and forget the first two.

"Holden," she moans, and my name has never sounded sexier. "I can't—"

"You can," I growl in her ear. "You will." And so I work harder, faster, deeper, to make her forget her surroundings, forget why she's here, and to only think of fucking me.

Me.

That's the only person she needs to see right now.

Seconds burn into pleasurable minutes. Fingernails dig deeper. My cock drives farther.

And just when I think I can't hold out anymore, Rowan's entire body stiffens—her legs, her back, her lips on my shoulder—as she muffles her cry of release.

Fucking Christ. Just that little movement, her pussy pulsing around mine, drags me over the libidinous edge until I fuck her through her own orgasm so that I can claim mine.

I grit my teeth and do everything I can not to shout out—the pleasure so fucking intense it's blinding—as I empty everything I have into her.

"Rowan," I murmur as I kiss my way up her neck, my cock still jerking inside her. "Fucking hell, woman."

This woman ... she's ... incomparable.

And this moment, this sex, was ... addicting.

And unsatisfying.

Because when all is said and done, when I lower her legs to the ground and grab a tissue to help clean her up, she is still in the fucking dress.

Still in ivory for another man.

"Rowan," her mom says and knocks again. We both jolt as her voice shocks us out of the moment. "I'm more than worried out here."

"Sorry. I had to write an email," she says. "Zipping the dress back up again."

"Again? Why do you need to zip it up again?"

"Shit," she mutters but I press my lips to hers and take one last kiss.

"Call the wedding off."

"Only if you walk away from TinSpirits," she says.

What? I fight the crazed chuckle I want to emit. That's what this is all about?

"I thought you were doing this to buy time. Time for what, though? Is this about your inheritance? About something you gain through marriage? Whatever it is isn't worth going through this fucking charade."

She falters in motion.

That's my first fucking clue that I'm on to something. But Bob and I have done our due diligence. We've searched the fucking databases and haven't found shit. Henry Williams's encryption software is fucking stellar, but we broke through it and there is nothing fucking there other than the mention of a letter.

What is the fucking letter?

But the expression on her face says it's something.

"What is it, Rowan?"

She stares at me with a clarity that unnerves me. "I have to look out for me, Holden. I don't have a fucking clue where you're going to be when all is said and done, so I have to look out for me."

"When all is said and done? What does that mean?" I play into the fucking lies I've told and don't fucking care that I do. I'll think about the consequences of that later. Let the guilt come later.

But right now, the taste of her on my tongue and the sight of her in this dress don't exactly have me thinking straight.

She drops her head and draws in a shaky breath.

"Get cold feet. Have a huge fight. Give a fucking reason as to why you can't wear that dress for anyone else but me."

I can see her resolve wavering just as quickly as I can see her build it back up. "Walk away from TinSpirits and I will."

"It doesn't work that way."

"In my world it does. That's all I've ever wanted. You ruined that. You took that from me. If I have to give up something, then so do you."

I stare at her, curious and turned on by this newfound defiance but not understanding it all at the same time. "I can't do that," I say.

She nods. "Neither can I, then."

We wage a visual war as the words just uttered sink in, as the gauntlet she's thrown down settles, and I wonder if I just lost her.

The pounding on the door makes us both jump.

"Sweetie. I'm worried. She's getting me the key just in case you're not okay," her mom says.

"I guess we're in that gray area then, aren't we," I say and press one more chaste kiss to her lips before heading out the door came in.

The door shuts behind me and blocks the devastating vision of Rowan in a wedding dress with her body still humming from my touch.

She can't marry the prick.

I'll make sure of it.

FORTY

Rowan

"Only if you walk away from TinSpirits?" Sloane's eyes grow wide and the pour in her wineglass grows bigger. She sits across from me in my living room and crosses her legs beneath her. "Please tell me you really said that."

"I did." I relive the shock on Holden's face when I did.

"Oh my god. He must have gone feral."

"Well, considering I was standing in a wedding dress with the feeling of his hands still burned into my skin, yeah, he did."

"What possessed you to say that?"

"I don't know. It was like ... isn't that the endgame? Wasn't it originally for me? It's like, I've gotten so caught up in manipulating my shares and my votes and trying to get my inheritance that my original goal got lost."

"And so you asked for it."

I nod and take a sip. "He's asking me to give up my inheritance. Why can't I ask him to give up what he wants?"

"To be fair, he doesn't know that's why you've agreed to marry Chad. The inheritance part."

I thought you were doing this to buy time. Time for what though? Is this about your inheritance? About something you gain through marriage? Whatever it is isn't worth going through this fucking charade.

"I think he has an inkling that it does though."

"He's a smart man."

"He is." And now I await the pressure from him to explain otherwise.

"Then tell him to be the one to marry you. To help you get your inheritance," she deadpans.

My heart stops momentarily at the suggestion. Is it sad that I'd consider it? A man who set out to take so much from me, and I'd consider it ten times quicker than I ever did with Chad?

"Funny." I play off the comment. I try to forget it, but hell if it didn't stop me in my tracks momentarily.

"So what was his answer, then, when you told him that?" she asks as Winnie climbs up on the couch beside her to take advantage of Sloane's long fingernails.

"That he couldn't do it."

She twists her lips and studies me. "He's a bazillionaire. He could have picked a million other companies. He picked yours. Why, Rowan? There has to be something more there."

"I've asked myself that exact question a million times." I breathe a bit easier having someone else validate my thoughts. "And that's why I can't let go of the whole inheritance notion yet. That's why I trust him, like, 95 percent but hold out on the other 5 percent."

"That's why you're falling for him but refuse to admit it to yourself," she says softly.

Her words stagger me when they shouldn't. Isn't that something I've known for some time now? Since the night in Manhattan? Isn't that why my guard is up even higher?

Because I let Holden in.

I've let him in.

And it's terrifying when you still don't fully trust everything about that person.

But you want to.

My sigh says it all.

Sloane nods, her face nothing but compassionate.

"I talked to him, you know."

I whip my head in her direction and stare at her. "What do you mean you talked to him?"

"At the country club this week. He was there looking miserable, searching the crowd for who I'd like to think was you, and so I introduced myself to him."

"Sloane." Her name is a warning and a question all in one breath.

"What?" I don't buy her innocent shrug one bit. "Someone had to tell him you were trying on wedding dresses."

I close my eyes and hang my head. That's how he knew. "Of course." I nod and process. "But why?"

My best friend studies me in a way I let very few people study me. She takes her time like she's pitching a closing argument in front of a jury before she delivers her closing line. "There is such a thing as compromise, Row."

I chortle. "Compromise? You mean giving up what I've dreamed of and selling my soul for a man?"

"No. I mean sitting back and being mature enough to realize that having it all isn't always realistic. It's ambitious and what makes you wake up every day, but as you've seen, sometimes it's okay to reassess and readjust. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that."

"You of all people. I thought you understood," I accuse, but there is no vitriol behind my words.

"I do understand. But I also saw the look on his face when I mentioned you were dress shopping. And I also see you light up when you talk about him. He's given you more of your dream than you have ever expected. And he did that because he believed you, because he values your worth—not just because you're a Rothschild. That says something. It says a lot of something. You can have little portions of everything you want. You can mix and match those portions to whatever you need them to be. Each person's picture looks different."

I snort and roll my eyes. "You're telling me not to go through with the wedding to Chad?"

"I'm not telling you anything. I'm simply laying it out for you to stand back and look at objectively." She angles her head to the side. "Do you actually think that once you are officially married to Chad that you'll be able to carry on whatever this is with Holden?"

I stare at my friend as if that other shoe that I was waiting to drop just did. Her words stagger me.

No. I didn't think of that. I just ... blindly and naïvely thought life would carry on as it currently is.

Am I willing to give up whatever this is with Holden? Am I willing to put the endgame before my happiness when it seems my happiness has always been the thing no one else has cared about?

Heart over head or head over heart?

The tears come out of the blue. The weeks and months of putting on a brave front and trying to be exactly who everyone thinks I should be—including myself—hits me.

She's at my side in a second. The only person who knows the truths behind every single thing happening in my life, and it feels so good to let it all out.

To purge the hurt, the confusion, the grief, and the need to always be so goddamn strong.

Everything. All at once.

And when the tears subside, when Sloane's hand squeezes mine, I can finally admit that she might be a little bit right about everything in our conversation.

I can be falling for him but not completely trust him.

I can want the company but know it's not feasible.

I could spend the next two years busting my ass, married to Chad Williams to get my inheritance, but when all is said and done, not net anything more than I have in this moment.

And for what?

What would I have missed out on?

What would I have let myself walk away from?

FORTY-ONE

Rowan

The music moved me today.

It always does but there is something about that room, that place, and those women that fulfilled me more than usual.

Maybe it's my changing thought process or perhaps the self-imposed weight slowly lifting off my shoulders that's contributing as well.

"Looking beautiful as ever, Miss Rowan," Simon the security guard says as I lug my cello case back out to my car.

"And you are as charming as ever."

"I know," he says, matter-of-fact, and I laugh.

"Don't ever change, Simon," I call over my shoulder.

"Never."

I'm in my car and pulling out of the parking lot within minutes. But instead of going left at the first corner, I go right. I decide to drive around Fairmont and see if I can picture Rhett's vision of this place, but more important, see how Holden plans on stopping it.

I pass block after block. Some buildings are vacant, others are for sale, and a good percentage occupied.

Rhett would devastate this city. The poverty, the opportunity, the absolute desperation ... Christ.

I jump at the sound of my cell phone coming through my speaker and then groan when I see the name on the screen.

I answer the call.

"Chad. Hi."

"I talked to Henry."

"And?"

"I don't see him budging on this, Rowan. Normally I can get him to move, but not this time."

I pull over the curb and let the weight of his statement hit me. All this scheming, all this lying, all this elaborate wedding planning and it's all for naught.

"Are you there?" he asks.

"I'm here. I mean, what more can I do? I'm three-quarters of the way through Gran's office paperwork and I've found nothing to help me."

"Yeah, well ... there's still a quarter left, right? And worst-case scenario, we go through with it so you can start the countdown on that time frame. It's not like you have anyone else waiting in the wings to marry you, right?"

On first listen, I could take complete offense to Chad's comment. But it's Chad and I know him, and he's the one willing to do this for my endgame, so I shrug off the comment and chuckle when I don't feel like it.

"True. Very true." Especially when the window to wed is closing with my thirtieth birthday coming up. Once that happens, per Gran's letter, that lump sum opportunity will be gone forever. Am I willing to risk that?

Christ, between what Sloane said and now this, is it even a question why I needed the music today? Is it a wonder why I'm sitting somewhere in the middle of Fairmont trying to prove to myself that Holden really is the man he says he is?

As if seeing his plan laid out would help me with that?

"I know it's not the best-case scenario with Henry, Row, but we'll make the best of it, right?"

Something in my periphery catches my eye. Not something—someone. And when I turn to look, my heart begins to race.

"Chad, I—uh, I have to go." I hang up before he responds and am climbing out of the car.

What the ...

Pencil Skirt is on the opposite side of the street, striding in her Gucci flats toward a Mercedes.

I go to cross the street but the horn blast of a city transit bus has me jumping back on the curb. And by the time it passes, she's in her car and driving out of the other side of the lot.

"Fuck," I grit out as the panicked feeling takes hold.

With my head on a swivel, I look around to see where she possibly could have come from. The most logical place would be the convenience store but when I go in there and ask if there was a woman just in there matching her description, they look at me like I'm crazy.

It's not until the third door I enter that I find purchase.

It's a small office building. The paint is peeling but the sign on the door is bright and the woman behind the front desk is more than kind.

"Hi. Can I help you?" she asks.

"Yes. There was a woman who was just in here. Tall. Gorgeous. Expensive shoes."

"Those shoes were to die for," the receptionist says and fans herself.

"Right?" Lie your ass off, Row. "Do you happen to know who she was? She stopped in my place a little farther down the block but I missed her."

"Your place?"

"Yes." I smile brightly. You are actually so unhinged right now. Look at you, chasing after a woman out of jealousy.

I must win over the woman's favor because she slides a business card across the desk. "This her?"

I look down at the business card. At the image of her smiling on its right and then see the title and her name across the top. JULES TURNER, EXECUTIVE REAL ESTATE AGENT, BASED OUT OF ATLANTA, GEORGIA.

Jesus. Seriously? All that worry, that doubting, that assuming, and that not trusting because of a real estate agent?

"You okay?" the receptionist asks.

"Fine. Perfect, really."

"She said her client is looking to buy some property here. I'm supposed to give it to my landlord."

I don't know what I say to her. She must think I'm unhinged, but I mutter something and thank her and all but walk out of the office shaking my head.

She's not an escort.

She's a real estate agent.

Pencil Skirt is Jules Turner.

While I'm here trying to picture what Holden wants to do, Jules is here trying to make it happen.

FORTY-TWO

Holden

"What's that?" Leo eyes the folder sitting beside me on the dugout bench.

"Just a few ideas I want you and your friends to take a look at. Give me opinions on."

He narrows his eyes at me—goes to reach for the folder and then stops himself. "May I?"

"Go ahead."

He opens the folder to see the various renderings I've had done of the baseball field. New nets. Updated dugouts. A scoreboard that works. A scorekeeper's box. And on and on.

I watch the shock flicker over his features, see the excitement hit soon thereafter, and then watch him rein it back in almost as if he's too afraid to hope.

"I don't understand," he says, and looks at me for a beat before going back to the renderings.

"Well, since there is no official organization that takes care of this field, it's never going to get any better than this unless someone steps in and helps out."

"Don't be messing with me, Three-Piece," he says, a smile flickering at the corners of his mouth.

"You think you and your friends can pick the best look for me?"

"You're serious?" His voice is barely a whisper.

"I am. I know when League is in season, you play at the high school, but that gate's locked otherwise. This is the only place you have to work on your skills and get better. To have a pickup game." To stay off the fucking streets. "So ... I have some people who know some people who are going to make it a bit nicer."

He studies me. "You know people who know people. Are you all those people?" he asks.

"Does it matter?"

His eyes meet mine. "To me it does."

His words hit me in the chest in a way I didn't expect. This fucking kid, man. "So can you ask the kids who play pickup games with you here? Get their opinions?"

"Yeah, but what if their opinion isn't what I want?"

I grin. Smart kid. "I wouldn't know the difference, would I?"

He slaps me on the shoulder and laughs that carefree laugh of his that you can't help but smile at. "Nah, man, you wouldn't."

He sits down beside me and stares at the closed folder for a few moments. "You a bigwig, Three-Piece?" he asks.

"Does it matter?"

"No, but I'm pretty sure you are and I just don't understand why you have anything to do with me. Why you keep coming back. I mean, what are you getting out of this?"

I lean back against the disfigured chain-link fence and blow out a breath. "You remind me of someone."

"I'm hoping that's a good reminder."

"Yeah." I look over at him and smile. "It's a good reminder."

"Who was he?"

"He was my little brother."

Leo, no doubt, is a smart kid and catches the past tense used. Was. "What happened to him? Drugs?"

"Nah."

"Guns?"

"Uh-uh."

"Then what?"

I think of Chad. Of Rhett. Of Porter. All those corrupt fat cats using money to gain power.

Have I become what I hate?

"Doesn't matter," I say and sit up taller.

Never.

I will never be like them.

"He mattered though," Leo says softly, sensing my discord.

"He did. A lot." I reach over and ruffle his hair, a little surprised I said any of this. "He still does. He's the why behind everything I do."

FORTY-THREE

Rowan

"Holden?" I look down at the take-out dinner that was just delivered to my gran's house.

"Hi." The rumble of his voice has an automatic smile crawling across my lips.

"Why did you just have dinner delivered to me?"

"I'm assuming you're hungry."

"Well, yes. I'm always hungry, but that's beside the point."

"It's from that restaurant a few towns over. The one we went to that night—"

"That we danced on the beach." I glance down to the take-out bag again, the memory of that night so very clear. The first time we ever ventured out in public together and only because it was far enough away from here that no one would notice.

How did I miss the name on the bag and the meaning behind it?

"Yes. That one," he murmurs.

"But why are you sending me dinner?" I ask. It's been a whirlwind week. The meetings with our suppliers and subcontractors have eaten up all daylight and well into the night. Then after the negotiations came the schmoozing. The dinners out. The breaking of bread. The drinks shared to reinforce these relationships that are so very important to us.

Add to it that Holden's been out of town for a few days. Some kind of investors' meeting for the software company he bought and sold but remains on the board of.

It's been all work and no play.

"Why did I send you dinner? Because my flight is grounded due to weather and because we need this."

"What's this?"

"Dinner. Together. Without distraction. Without the endgame of sex—although that's never something that's a hardship when it comes to you."

"Holden."

"We've both been under a lot of pressure for various reasons and I thought it would be nice to have dinner together. To rewind a bit and take it back to how this should have started instead of how it actually did."

"I like our story." Is that whatever this is? Our story? I guess so.

"It's unconventional, yes. But I like it too."

"I don't even know what to say." The man gave me Clayton Seaburn. That night in New York was out of this world and over-the-top, but right now he's giving me something that is so much more. It *feels* so much more.

Him. Time with him. Out of the bed, out of the office and free of distractions.

"Tell me you'll have dinner with me."

"Yes. Of course." Who in the world would say no to that request?

"Thank you."

There is rustling on the other end of the connection as he opens whatever it is he's eating. Not doubt it's something wonderful as he sits on the tarmac in the jet, but what he sent me is wonderful too.

"So you're at your gran's house?" he asks. "Why?"

"Yes. I'm still sorting through all of her things." A needle in a haystack. "Organizing. Throwing some things away and saving others. It's just taken me longer than expected."

"Memories have a way of creeping up on you like that."

"They do."

"Any more dreams about her?" he asks and has me stopping the fork midway to my mouth and smiling.

"No?

"Ever since you said that—that you have dreams about her—I've caught myself wishing I'd have one with my brother. Silly, but..."

"Not silly at all."

We fall silent for a beat, and I pretend it's because we're chewing but I know it's so much more than that. Again, Holden is showing me tiny bits of himself without me asking and for some reason, I know that's huge.

"Your gran. She meant the world to you, didn't she?"

"She did. So much of who I am is because of her."

"Tell me about her. I want to know more."

FORTY-FOUR

Rowan

"Why here? Why tonight?" I ask.

Holden is so gorgeous it hurts to look at him sometimes. Especially on nights like tonight.

It's not because of the upscale restaurant a few towns over with the fancy menu or the fact that he was able to bypass the three-month wait to get a table. Far from it. It's more because the establishment has a handsomely paid, very discreet staff that will allow Holden and me to have one of those rare instances where we can be in public together and not have to hide how we feel about each other.

And how is it that I feel?

I've fallen for him.

Plain. Simple. As real as real can be. I have serious feelings for Holden Knight, and I don't have the foggiest clue what to do about them.

There is so much internal and external conflict that there doesn't seem to be a chance in hell that this could work ... and yet feelings are feelings. I've fought against them for so long and now I don't know how to fight against them anymore.

Or if I want to.

Do I want my company back under Rothschild ownership? Yes.

Is there a reality of that ever happening again? No. Not even with the \$30 million.

I tried to buy myself time—to convince, cajole, or even bribe Henry Williams—and that's proven to be a dead end, barring some kind of miracle.

I have to be content with being equal in ownership to Rhett. I have to assume that wherever Gran is, she'll know I tried my damnedest to fulfill my promise, and be okay with it.

Because I can't get around the two-year marriage codicil and I sure as fuck can't save the company when the sale is already complete.

They were pipe dreams that I clung to. Pipe dreams that I can't fulfill. Pipe dreams that brought Holden into my life and have made me okay with what Sloane suggested—compromise.

I need to call off the wedding. I'll pay our parents back for any deposits that are lost and the like, but I can't go through with this charade anymore.

"Where'd you go to, Sunshine?" Holden asks, bringing me back to the here and now. To the private room in the back of the restaurant, the doorway to which is blocked by a privacy shield. It's one of several in The Vine, an exclusive resort, and part of the reason celebrities frequent it when in town.

And honestly, how could I allow myself to be lost in my own thoughts when he's beside me?

I smile. "Don't ask questions you don't want the answers to."

"Ah, using my phrase. Well, fine." I yelp playfully as he takes the base of my chair and moves it so that I'm turned to face him with my knees between his spread thighs. "Then I guess I need to make you think of something else."

"Like?" I murmur and lean forward to brush my lips against his.

"Me."

"I thought you'd never ask."

The kiss is a sweet smolder of promises of more to come once we leave here. Of unspoken words and promises we can't give one another. Of compromises I'm pretty sure I'm willing to make in one area of my life to get more in another.

None of them sit perfectly with me, but it's enough for now.

It has to be.

"What the fuck?"

"Rowan?

I hear both things at the same time as Holden and I jump apart. When I look toward the doorway, my brother and Chad are standing there, jaws lax and eyes like saucers.

In an act of desperation, I stand, shoving my chair back. "It's not what you think." My whole body vibrates with adrenaline and my pulse races. "It's not—"

"Oh my god." It's my mom's shocked voice I hear when Chad steps farther into the room. It's her body shunting forward when Florence bumps into her.

It's a clusterfuck of split-second emotions that riot through me. Yes, only Chad and Rhett saw us kissing—*I think*—but the stage is set for our mothers to draw the conclusion of what is happening. The candlelit table. The bottle of wine. The place setting and turned chairs that are side by side. The private room.

"What is going on?" Florence demands, pushing Chad out of the way. And by the way the color drains from her and my

mom's faces, they know. How could they not?

"You're fucking unbelievable," Rhett says, his hands fisting as he glares at Holden.

"Rowan?" Chad asks in two broken syllables that gut me. Sure, the engagement might be a ruse, but Holden and me kissing is so much worse for him. I can see it etched in the lines of his face and the sag in his posture.

"This can't be happening," my mom mutters. "Our reputations. Our—"

"Sleeping your way to the top, huh?" Rhett says to me, disgust painting every part of his tone. "Of course you are. Couldn't get there on your own merit so you had to use what you could. I should have known."

"Fuck off, Rothschild," Holden says, stepping in front of me, his own fists clenched.

"You want to fight me?" Rhett asks.

"No, Wiping that fucking pompous smirk off your face is what I want."

"Pretty. Fucking. Please." Rhett takes a step forward as I stand there helpless and oddly relieved that this charade is all over.

But I don't have time to process either of the emotions because there is murder on Chad's and Rhett's faces.

"Stop. Just, everyone—*stop*," I shout at the top of my lungs.

One glance at my mom says I've devastated her. Embarrassed her. Disappointed her.

Another at Chad says pretty much the same with a dash of heartbreak and shock.

And then there's Rhett. He's furious at me for hurting his friend and jonesing for a reason to go at Holden.

But it's Holden's face that startles me. There's a smugness to it. A veil of pleasure almost as if he was waiting for this, welcoming this, and I don't know how that could be possible, but it's my first and last impression.

They all stare at me as tension ratchets and tempers heighten.

Everyone starts arguing at once and I do the only sensible thing possible.

I run.

FORTY-FIVE

Rowan

"There's nothing to say. I got caught and I'm not exactly sure why or how, but it happened. The irony is I was going to call the engagement off anyway, but now..."

"Now it's a scandal."

"Fucking perfect," I mutter.

Sloane gives a noncommittal sound and then pauses as she stares into her glass of wine. "What a clusterfuck."

"Pretty much." I chuckle self-deprecatingly. "No one is talking to me. Well, except for the one person I don't want to talk to. He keeps texting and calling and I'm not answering him."

"Holden."

"Yep. You got it. *Holden*." I sigh. I can still hear my mother's screech, still see the utter shock on Chad's face. Still feel the disgust from all of them. "I just need time to think and when he's in the picture, I can't freaking think."

Her smile is fleeting. "We'll get to him in a second."

"I'm sure we will."

"How did both of you end up at The Vine at the same time?"

"Holden planned a night out for us. We're always freaking hiding and so he wanted to do something nice, somewhere way out of town. He's been gone and ... I don't know. It was just—"

"And Rhett was there, why?"

"Apparently someone had treated them to it over some real estate deal they were working on. And as a treat, they invited my mom and Florence and ... well, you know the rest."

"But they walked into your private room," she stated definitively.

"Yes. There was a mix-up. The hostess brought them to the wrong table—room, whatever you call it—I don't know. It's not the poor girl's fault, but apparently she's been fired over it, seeing as the restaurant is known for the privacy it offers its guests."

"So it was a complete coincidence." She chooses her words carefully.

"What are you implying?"

"Nothing." Her face is a mask of innocence, but I know her better than that.

"What?"

"That's a lot of moving parts to all be in the same place at the same time to accidentally run into each other, is all I'm saying." She holds her hands up and shrugs. "But I'm skeptical of everything and everybody all the time."

"It wasn't planned," I say more to myself than to her.

But even as I say the words, there is something in the back of my mind that doesn't sit right. The same something I've been feeling for some time.

Something is going on.

I just don't know what.

Holden has me looking at plot maps of land and finding the LLCs that own them. He has a real estate agent looking at places in Fairmont. Rhett is closing a real estate deal. Holden's angry over my engagement to Chad.

"And your mom?" Sloane asks.

"Ha. *Emmaline Rothschild is pissed*. She's not talking to me at all. Or we'll say she did for a five-minute tirade before she hung up without letting me speak. She's livid. Humiliated. Disappointed in the choices I've made. Doesn't understand why I'd shame our family like this. Why I'd lower myself to the level of *a cheater*."

"She's met half the men in Westmore, right?" she asks.

I'm just about to top off her glass when the knock comes at the door. Our eyes meet across the coffee table and she says, "I'll get it."

"No." I rise. "I need to face whoever this is since apparently I've screwed everyone's life up."

"Good dick always screws other people's lives up."

I burst out laughing, needing her levity more than she knows in this moment. And even more so when I swing the door open and come face-to-face with Holden.

He stands before me in a navy-blue T-shirt, jeans, and flip-flops. It's not a look he wears often but it's one I've come to love. It's almost an awkward suit of armor for him when he's so used to wearing a dress shirt and slacks.

"Rowan." My name is gravel on his vocal cords. "You're not returning my calls."

I shift so that he can see Sloane over my shoulder—my own suit of armor in a sense because he can't say anything he doesn't want others to hear. He gives her a nod, but I can tell by the way he looks at me that he'd much rather be alone.

"I've been busy."

"So it seems." He nods in greeting to Sloane. "We need to talk."

"Fine. Let's talk. Sloane's my lawyer. She knows everything."

"Okay." He draws the word out and I can tell he's not too thrilled with this development. "Can we speak in private?"

"Sure. Yes." I step outside and shut the door at my back.

"I'm sorry our dinner was ruined. I'm sorry that your family found out about us that way and that there are rumors and gossip and all this shit that comes with it being whispered around town. But most of all, I'm upset that you're upset over them all finding out about us, but I won't apologize for it because I'm sick of having to hide from everyone."

"Did you know they were going to be there? Was this some master plan to—"

"Do you not trust me, Rowan?" he asks, and there is such a raw honesty in the break in his voice that I just stare at him and blink.

"No. That's the problem. I do." Two words that are so very simple but which just laid all my cards on the table.

I trust him. Finally. He earned that back from me.

His smile is slow and boyish and causes a swell of emotion inside me.

"Can't you see that's why it's a problem for me? You have me researching land parcels one week and then another you tell me you're buying up land in Fairmont."

"Your point?"

"Rhett was at The Vine celebrating some kind of real estate deal."

"And I'm sure another couple was celebrating their anniversary or birthday. It's a restaurant. It's a place people go to mark special occasions."

I draw in a sharp breath. "And we just happened to be there too."

"Yes. We did."

"Don't you see all the coincidences that would make me question you? Where there's smoke, there's fire, Holden."

"So you say you trust me, but you really don't."

"No. I do. I truly do, but I feel like there's always a game being played, and I want out. I'm sick of playing them."

"You think what we've been doing is a game? Manhattan? The co-CEO? That's all a game?" He steps into me and I hold my ground, hating the never-ending eddy of emotions. Anger looks sexy on him, and that's never a good thought for someone who is holding their ground to have. "Because the way it looks to me is that you're the one playing them. A fake engagement to buy time for something you won't explain? The same something I said I'd give to you in a heartbeat if you just fucking asked." He shakes his head and takes a step back. "You tell me you trust me. You open that door that I've been waiting on only to slam it back shut with accusations."

"Holden." I reach out to touch him and he yanks his arm back and away from me.

"Don't. Just ... fucking don't. I've asked you to end the engagement. I've proven all your bullshit reasons why you can't call it off to be wrong. Looks to me like someone is playing both sides, and it sure as fuck isn't me." He reaches out and cups the side of my cheek, his eyes conflicted. "Maybe it's me who shouldn't trust you."

With that he walks away without another word.

And leaves me wondering what the actual fuck is going on.

FORTY-SIX

Rowan

"It's a logical conclusion, don't you—"

Rhett's words stop the minute I walk into the conference room. All conversation dies and heads swivel my way. All but Chad. He keeps his head down and fingers fiddling with his pen.

"Looks like someone forgot to invite me, but please. Continue. Don't let my presence stop you from talking about me," I say as I move toward the head of the table beside my brother.

A few throats are cleared, a couple of people shift in their seats. Holden lifts his head ever so slightly in acknowledgment from where he sits in the far corner, but not a single person says a word.

I drop the binders in my arms so they land with a resounding thud on the table.

"Because that is what was going on, right? An emergency meeting to discuss my fitness to be on the board? A discussion over who I may or may not have slept with or be rumored to have slept with? Because that last one"—I whistle—"that last one definitely tells you all you need to know about me, right?"

"The dramatics aren't needed, Rowan," Rhett says.

"Dramatics? That's you're forte, Rhett. And this little bullshit referendum you called to try and oust me from my so-called equal position of power simply because you see me as a threat to your power is exactly that." I state the words to my brother but stare down the room around us.

"It is concerning," Boris Tinsley says from his seat at the far end of the table. "You weren't a thought to be on this board, and then all of a sudden you are here without us getting to vote on it."

"He has a point," Linda Gaffe says from where she sits drenched in diamonds like trophies from all her past husbands.

"What they're saying, Rowan, is that they don't think a woman who sleeps her way to the top is who we want on our board or representing our company for that matter," Rhett says.

I see Holden shift in the back of the room and I level him with a glancing glare, hoping my singular text to him is heeded. Let me handle it.

"I wonder why they'd think I'd do that," I say to him, despite knowing the rumors are already flying through the Westmore gossip train. I figured my mom and Florence would keep mum to save their precious reputations, but I never quite considered the fired hostess and what she might post on social media about it.

Or is it simply my brother attempting a power play here?

Regardless, the rumors no doubt have spread like wildfire. This meeting is proof of it.

Rhett shrugs and rises from his seat. "I can't control what people think, Rowan. Actions speak louder than words, right?"

"You're right. They do." He should be very afraid of my smile right now. Very afraid. "Let me demonstrate just how much they do." I look at Rhett. "By the sour looks on everyone's faces, it's clear you've already got to make your case. Now it's my turn to make mine." When he stands there and looks at me, I lift my eyebrows and say, "Sit."

It takes a few seconds for my brother to act like a petulant child—huffing a sigh, holding my gaze, shaking his head—before taking a seat.

"Shall we talk about mental and financial fitness?" I point to the binders I just dropped on the table. "Those are full of page after page of things Rhett has done to defraud or short TinSpirits. Unsound business decisions based on the largest personal kickback received. Lavish vacations. Questionable expenses that don't quite make sense." I open a flap of the binder then close it back up. "It's all there for you to see, plain as day, but let me guess, most of you already knew this because you yourselves have benefitted from some of his backroom deals."

"What is your point, Rowan?" Gavin Hope asks pointedly. "That a few perks overshadow or are less than you sleeping with the new owner to get something you never could get before—a seat in here?"

I walk around the table, slowly, deliberately, avoiding going anywhere near Holden, and then stop when I'm back at the front. "What you are all neglecting to see is that none of this matters—if you want me here or if you don't. None of us have the voting power to make a difference against Holden's majority." I point to Rhett. "He did that to you. He stripped you and this board of that power. *Not me*. No one is calling an emergency meeting to talk about that, huh? But you sure as shit will call one to run my name through the mud and strip me of mine." I pause, taking my time to look each of them in the eye. "My reputation matters. My work standing for itself matters. My putting the company before my own personal wants and desires matters."

I stop and smack my hands on the desk, making sure I have their attention. And if I didn't, my next words sure as shit will.

"I can go one further. If I'm unfit to be a part of this board, then maybe we should talk about how some of you are. If my sex life is on the table, then let's talk about who you stick your dicks in." There are gasps and I don't fucking care. I didn't bring a knife to this gun fight, and that's all a huge thanks to Gran. "Let's see. There's the board member here who enjoys the company of underage girls and has been caught a couple of times with them but has paid off local law enforcement from pressing any

charges." Gasps fill the room. "Or what about the member in here who meets with a dominatrix a few times a month because he has serious mommy issues?" Everyone stiffens, almost as if they are afraid to look at each other. "Then there's the person who has multiple affairs going at the same time, spreading the love and STIs, but—"

"That's enough," Rhett shouts as he pounds his fist on the table, making everyone jump.

My chuckle is low and condescending as I look at him. "Why? If that's the game we're going to play, a public discussion about what I do behind closed doors, then why can't we discuss what you all do behind yours? Because if that is in fact what we're playing, I assure you, you'll lose."

"Miss Rothschild. It's not necessary to drag everyone through the mud to lessen your infractions," Jerry says.

"My infractions?" I raise my eyebrows and meet him stare for stare. Yes, Jerry. I'm quite aware that you have many infractions in the form of that strong porn addiction. I know he gets my gist when he shrinks back some in his chair. "Let's get one thing clear, my esteemed board members. I'm here because I fucking earned it. I'm here because I learned from the ground floor up and I'm the best for the job. Ironically, the only person I don't have dirt on is, in fact, Holden Knight, the person I'm being accused of sleeping my way to the top with ... so, huh, funny how that works, don't you think."

I begin gathering my binders and look up at them one more time. "Vote. Don't vote. Just remember, whatever the outcome is will sit in corporate minutes that no one will ever see but will somehow make you feel superior. Kind of like Rhett." I step back from the table and offer a shark's smile. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go. I have way more important things to be concerned about, like how to help turn this place around so your shares retain their value and you get to keep your money."

And with that, I walk out of the conference room with a gusto I don't feel but that I reflect. My hands are trembling and my heart is beating so fast I'm lightheaded and dizzy.

But my knees hold up and turn to jelly right about the time I close the door to my office and can fall apart.

I sink into my chair and draw in a deep breath.

It was Sloane who caught wind of this meeting. Sloane who overheard a fellow board member on the phone at Starbucks this morning talking about when, where, and why the secret meeting was being held.

But it was Gran and her dirt who stole the show.

FORTY-SEVEN

Holden

Her hair is up and her head is down as she works at her desk, and every fucking part of me wants to walk into her office and take what I can from her until I'm satisfied.

Funny thing is, I don't think I'll ever be.

But I study her from just beyond her office window as she works. I don't question if I did the right thing when it came to arranging the confrontation at The Vine—*it was*. I don't wonder if I should have stood up for her in the boardroom—*she did just fucking fine*. And I don't second-guess whether what I'm doing with TinSpirits is right or wrong—sometimes being wrong is the only kind of right you need.

But I do know she is the collateral damage in all this.

At first that didn't bug me one fucking bit. It still shouldn't. Isn't that what I came here for? What I've planned for.

But ... fuck. I care about her. I more than care about her. But what does that mean when destroying her family is my endgame?

I step into her doorway and I clap. It's slow and loud and it's well deserved.

She jolts at the sound of it and then immediately jumps up and moves to look out the door.

"You can't be in here," she says, clearly putting space between us.

"Why not?"

"Because this whole stunt—whatever happened at The Vine, the power play you are all engaged in—it robbed us of the leisure or right of having any alone time in the office without gossip."

"The office is vacant. Everyone went home."

"You don't get it, do you? Your car is in the lot. My car is in the lot. At an empty office building. One person drives by in this fucked-up town and the gossip mill starts again about what we're doing here and how we always seem to be working late, and despite everything I said in there today, the assumption is I'm still sleeping my way into my position." She groans in frustration. "These are things men don't have to think about. That *you* don't have to think about. Or how I have to work twice as hard to get an iota of any credit." She turns her back to me and walks to the other side of the office. "Go away, Holden. You messed this up. You put me in the crosshairs. You won't admit it, you'll gaslight me into believing that you can't trust me, but at the end of the day, all of this is on you and I'm the one who has to pay the fucking price for it."

I look at her, the frustration, the exhaustion, and I see it. I don't want to because I'm not supposed to care, but I see it.

I messed up at The Vine. I see that now. I know that now. But fuck if it wasn't the only way to jumpstart the one thing I need for myself in all this—her not to be with fucking Chad.

Call me selfish. Call me a prick. Call me a man who's falling for a woman he can't goddamn have.

"I'm sorry what happened put you in this situation." I choose my words carefully. "You handled the board like a pro."

"You mean the board and their meeting that you didn't even tell me about? And I'm supposed to think you have my back moving forward?"

"I do have your back. That's what I was trying to do today. Have your back. Fight for you. Stand up for you."

"Uh-huh." She sounds rather unimpressed. "And you don't think that would have just further proven their point? That I need a man to speak for me, think for me, promote me, because I'm just a little woman who can't do that myself?"

I groan. "It's clear I can't do anything right at the moment."

"You don't get it. You don't understand what I was willing to compromise on, what I was willing to risk—you know what? Never mind. What you said at my door the other night is true and you just proved it. You are the one who doesn't trust me. Not to defend myself. Not to stand up for myself. Not to look at you and want you and mean it when I say I trust you. So ... yeah. You win."

I open my mouth and close it. There are fucking minefields at every turn in this conversation. And normally, I'd take my chances. Step at will and see what happens, but not right now. Not with that fury fresh on her face and that innocence still hidden behind those eyes.

"There's no winning when you're mad at me."

"Then don't make me mad at you," she states.

Fuck. This woman. She's ... "You're a force to be reckoned with, you know that? I've never seen the definition of *fight fire* with *fire* and yet you did just that earlier. It was ... impressive. Incredible. You were impressive and incredible."

"I don't want your compliments, Holden. I don't need my ego stroked."

I nod, lean my back against the doorjamb, and cross my arms over my chest. "Then what do you want?"

"I want you to acknowledge this shitstorm you created for me. That your selfishness, for whatever reason it might be, jealousy over Chad, needing to prove who had the bigger dick, I don't fucking know what—caused all of this for me. Not you.

For me."

She's right.

Every fucking word.

But I stare at her with steely eyes and know I fell a little bit harder for her earlier as she dismantled those old fuckers on the board—one by fucking one.

"How'd you know all that?" I ask. All things I knew, but am impressed that she did too.

She shrugs and smirks. "I know a lot of things about a lot of things." Except for me. You don't know shit about me. "And you're not acknowledging shit, Holden."

"I told you before that I don't give a fuck about gossip ... but I do give a fuck about you. When I'm wrong, I say I'm wrong." I hold my hands out. "You more than held your own in there, Sunshine."

"Don't call me that. I'm mad at you."

"I've never been more proud of someone before. Not like that. You were a master class in kicking ass."

"Don't. Just stop." Tears well in her eyes as she shakes her head from side to side.

"Hey. Shh. What is it?" I step in to her and cup the side of her face. "Talk to me."

"You hurt me."

There's the fucking gut punch I wasn't expecting. Fire and brimstone are much easier to respond to. "I'm sorry you were hurt." I brush my lips against hers and lean my forehead against hers.

"I meant what I said. All of it. Especially the trust part."

"Me too."

"I was calling off the whole marriage charade, Holden. That night at The Vine. I was going to tell you."

My body jolts and chest constricts. "You were? You are? Because Chad, your mom, they're carrying on like—"

"Yes," she says, her lips whispering against mine. "I just need some time to right all the wrongs I've made personally before I announce it publicly."

"Fine. Yes. Whatever."

And as our lips meet again and our hands slide up and down each other's backs, I get the nagging feeling that as much as I want this, it's the worst possible thing for me.

When she was with Chad, I had no other option but to keep everything at bay—my feelings for her, the depths of the depravity I felt toward Rhett and Chad, the plans for the future that I wanted to see.

Now there are no restrictions.

Now there is nothing holding me back.

How horrible is it to be falling in love with the woman you're going to destroy?

I'll let you in on a little secret.

It's royally fucked up, is what it is.

FORTY-EIGHT

Rowan

"To Rowan. The woman who was clearly holding out on us but who we still love anyway." Caroline holds her glass up and we all follow suit—or at least Sloane and Victoria do because I sure as shit don't feel good about any of this.

"To Rowan." They lift their glasses while I politely sip mine.

"It's not—it wasn't—it's a lot to explain," I say.

"There is no need to explain shit to us," Caroline says. "We're your best friends. This is what we do. We rally around for support. We love unconditionally."

"And we leave our questions for when you're really drunk and can't maintain a filter," Victoria says so that we all burst out laughing.

"So, real talk here," Caroline says and smacks a hand on my kitchen countertop. "Is the wedding to Chad off, then, because ... your momma hasn't canceled shit yet."

I laugh nervously. "Um, I don't think it matters if she cancels it now or next week. The deposits aren't going to be refunded on the case of her daughter being a cheating whore." I roll my eyes, oblivious to what the people of Westmore are saying about me, but educated enough to guess. Sloane reaches out and squeezes my hand. Her knowing glance holds much more weight than the rest of theirs. "It's not like she's talking to me anyway."

"No?" Sloane asks, playing along like she doesn't know.

"Nope," I say.

"And Chad?"

My sigh is heavy and I hate that my heart is too. He knew this whole thing was a farce but at the same time, the way it came out was humiliating to him. If I could take one thing back, I would. "Chad was ... he was Chad. Polite. Forgiving. Asking if I needed him to be a friend right now and if so, he could be that for me, but at the same time, I know he's hurt." I look down at my glass of wine. "I humiliated him. It's not something to be proud of."

"Jesus. He's a saint," Victoria says. "But just so you know, the men in this town might be thinking the cheating-whore part, but that's only because they all wish they were Holden Knight. And the women? They might be saying that publicly, but privately they're saying they can't blame you for taking him out for a spin."

I stare at her, blinking and processing. "Apparently Victoria does not need to be shit-faced to lose her filter," I state the obvious, to which all four of us burst out laughing.

"Never been accused of being reserved by any means," Victoria says.

"Don't we know it," Caroline says and then taps her glass to mine. "Whatever it is that *you* want, Row, we want the same for you. Even if it's against the grain of popular opinion. Your happiness is what matters to us."

"Thanks." I stare down at my hands clasped around my stemless wineglass and feel like shit.

Chad's hurt. My mom's devastated. My dad hasn't said anything more than *You've let the whole family down*. And selfishly, *I miss Holden*. We've decided to keep a low profile until I can right the wrongs and everything blows over.

Plus, it's the only thing I can think to do now that there is a target on my back. I need to prove myself—ten times harder than Rhett ever has, of course—to justify why Holden gave me the co-CEO position.

Everything is a dumpster fire inside of a shitstorm, and I just want to be able to walk down the office hallway or the aisle of the grocery store without someone lowering their voice and whispering.

"Earth to Rowan," Caroline says, waving her hand in front of my face. "Did we lose you?"

I smile, trying to cover up my warring emotions. "Just for a minute. I'm back. Sorry." My phone rings on the table in front of me. *Mom* is on the screen. I force the call to voicemail.

My first conversation with my mom is not going to be in front of my girlfriends, no matter how much they are on my side.

But when she calls again a few seconds later, I know I have to at least answer so she doesn't keep doing it.

"Mom. Hi. Now's not the time. Can we talk later?" I'm not the nicest but then again, it's been radio silence for a week, so the last person I want to talk to while I'm actually relaxing with friends is her.

"Rowan." Her voice is shaky.

Oh Jesus. Here we go with the poor me act that I can already sense is coming.

"Yes. I'm busy. What?"

"There's been an accident. It's your dad."

FORTY-NINE

Holden

"Okay. So you have nothing, then?" I ask, more than irritated.

"I wouldn't say that. I mean, we've deduced options. It's not an LLC. There are zero LLCs with Monarch in the name that have affiliation with Rhett or TinSpirits or Rothschild in general. There are a shit ton with Monarch as a last name. I'm systematically going through them, but it might as well be a needle in a haystack at this point. Do you have any clue how many people with the last name Monarch live in the state?" Bob sighs. "Best and only bet is to ask Chad again what he meant by it or chalk it up to him being drunk and desperate for your attention."

"Last I checked, I'm the one who gives orders, but we'll let that one slide." I'm in a surly fucking mood tonight and it's not Bob's fault. It's mine. But it's so much easier taking it out on him. "And Chad isn't exactly singing my praises right now so that might not be the best idea."

My home is the last place I ever do business, but this is the kind of business that needs to remain in private. On paper, Bob does not work for me. He has never stepped foot in any office I've worked in. He does not know me. We are complete strangers who have never met.

And yet due to a few palms he needed to grease and people he needed to intimidate, he's in town for less than twenty-four hours.

Bob moves across the room, his hulking frame looking normal in the vast spans of my penthouse. He removes his baseball hat—the one he wore to hide his face some from anyone who might be looking too closely—and holds out a blue file folder to me.

"Here are the plans for the dissolution of TinSpirits. We've bundled similar assets together for a quick sell-off. As you know, it's much more attractive for venture capitalists to come in and buy up like-minded pieces then to have to sort through them one by one. More bang for the buck for them and less hassle all around."

I take the folder and flip through it, knowing I'll look at it more thoroughly later. "You already have offers?" I ask when I notice the printed proposals.

"Yes. On a few of the packages. Negotiations haven't happened, so right now I'm treating them as interest forms. It's hard to sell when we can't tell them where the business is or any specifics due to confidentiality."

"I'm aware." I nod and take the folder from him. "I need a few more things lined up, though, so I can have everything hit at once."

"Timing is key."

"It most definitely is."

He prattles on, and my thoughts shift to watching Rowan at work earlier today. The tight sweater. Her command and confidence. Her controlling the meeting with a possible new aluminum company like the pro I knew she would be. "Like I said, there are proposals in there. Some want to act fast. Some want to negotiate. Some want you to throw Rowan in as a bonus."

"What?" I stare at Bob and set the file down absently without thinking.

"You're somewhere else that is not listening to me right now, but that sure as shit got your attention."

"I said I'll review them. I have another meeting to get to." I glance at my watch.

"Tonight?"

"Are you questioning me?" The chill in my smile ends the conversation.

But when he leaves, when I watch him on the cameras depart out the back door of the complex without encountering anyone, I sit down on my couch and sigh. There is no meeting for me to go to. There is no anything. Just more thoughts of Rowan and how I did what was for the best.

The Chadwick farce is over.

Halle-fucking-lujah.

I set up the little scenario at The Vine, ending the thought of Chad touching her and tarnishing her reputation a little.

Maybe I tarnished it because I wanted it to match mine?

I pour some scotch and take a sip but even that doesn't dull this shit. The feelings. The wanting. The needing. The falling.

Best-case scenario? Remind her of the man I am, not the man she wants me to be. Because the man who walked in here months ago is definitely not the same one sitting here right now.

Remind her how?

By putting the rest of the plans in motion. Kickstarting into gear why I came here.

By making her hate me before she can love me.

That's the easy way out.

But I'm pretty sure it's too late.

And not just for her. But for the both of us.

FIFTY

Rowan

If I thought my mom's call sobered me completely, rushing down the hall under the bright, unforgiving lights of Memorial Hospital finishes the job.

Worry and fear course through me. Own me. Terrorize me.

The last time I was in a hospital with these feelings was when I was seventeen and thought Cassie had been in a simple fender bender.

How wrong I was.

So tonight I rush down these halls with trepidation nipping at my heels and memories weighing me down that I've never been able to shake.

"Mom." Her name is a croak as I fall into her arms and hold on for dear life.

Because that's the thing about families. You can hate them. You can love them. You can fall out of like with them. But when it comes down to it, in a moment of crisis, they're all you have.

The fundamental differences you have are momentarily reduced to petty bullshit.

The unspoken words you wished you said or are glad you didn't now become trivial.

It's the blood you share that matters, and the years of history you cling to.

And in this moment when I breathe in my mom's signature scent of magnolias, I forget how angry I am at her for shoving a wedding down my throat and how furious I've been at my dad for handing over the company and family trust to Rhett without regard for me.

So. Many. Things. All are pushed aside, are trivialized, as I look up to see the tears streaming down her cheeks and gauge the worry in her eyes.

"The car ran a red light. Broadsided him. I just, I don't understand why you'd be driving that fast. He hadn't even put his seat belt on yet." She talks in clipped sentences almost as if she's trying to relay everything she's been told. "His head. And a cut to his femur. Internal bleeding. Huge blood loss. And some broken ribs. In surgery now."

"Okay. That's good," I say. "That means he's stable enough for surgery." But I know I could be wrong. I know he could be in there because they have no other option than to open him up. "He'll be okay, Mom. He has to be. He doesn't have a choice. He has to be."

The thought is on repeat as she hugs me, while at the same time footsteps squeak down the hall. Florence says, "Please tell me he's going to be all right."

I didn't even realize she was here. I glance around at the huddle of people, my family, the Williamses, a few others, and struggle to catch my breath.

I step back from my mom's embrace and let Florence pull her in for a hug so that she can be the comforted instead of feeling like she has to be the comforter.

Plus, I'm not going to lie, this is the first time I've faced her since The Vine, and while this is not the time nor the place, it still looms over my head.

"Where's Rhett?" I ask, realizing he needs to be here. Has to be here.

"He's here. He and Chad are getting coffee while we wait for the doctors to update us," my mom says.

I nod, arms crossed over my chest, and begin to walk slowly back and forth in the small waiting room. My phone buzzes nonstop in my pocket, but I don't pick it up, I don't look at it. I don't even care.

No doubt all of Westmore knows and is reaching out to be the first to get the inside scoop. I refuse to give it to them.

Seconds stretch into minutes.

My brother comes back and meets my eyes across the distance, giving me a gentle nod that says he's still livid with me but right now that anger is suspended.

Chad is right behind him. He begins to give me a hug and then stops when we both raise our arms to the same levels so they bump into each other. It's an awkward dance of a hug that ends up with us patting each other on the back. I stiffen at the kiss he lands on my cheek and when he steps back, everyone suddenly averts their eyes.

Christ. Even in the midst of all this, I'm being watched.

Minutes stretch into an hour.

"He's doing great. The doctors are repairing the damage—a lacerated liver, a damaged spleen—but he's losing a lot of blood," the nurse updates us. "The blood bank is running low. Are there any family members willing to donate blood just in case it's needed?"

We all volunteer, but it's Rhett who insists, since I was drinking and our mom is on blood thinners.

One hour melds into the next.

My pacing continues as I move past the nurses' station, where two nurses are going over charts. Each time I pass by, I get a different snippet.

"It's not possible. He's type AB," the blond nurse says in hushed tones.

I move to the other end of the room.

"There has to be a mistake," says the one with auburn hair.

"But it's right here on the printout. The blood type. That means he can't be—"

"Joanie," the auburn-haired nurse says, elbowing her when she sees me. She smiles wide to mask surprised eyes. "Hi. Rothschild, right? Can I help you with anything?"

"No. Thank you." Shit. They know I was listening in. "I'm just wandering while I wait for news on my dad."

"Oh. Yes." A quick glance over to her counterpart and an expression I can't read. "Um, he's still in surgery. We were, uh—waiting on blood from the blood bank to come in."

"My brother just donated for him."

"He—it was, uh—"

"He might need more," Joanie completes for the auburn-haired nurse.

"Fine. Done. Where do I go? I can donate too," I offer as that panicked feeling claws its way up my throat. Why does he need so much blood?

"The donation station is just down the hall and to the right," Joanie says.

"Sure. Yes. Thank you."

I wander after that.

And wait.

I give blood. I drink coffee. I hold my mom's hand in silence as the minutes keep ticking by.

"Rowan?" I glance over to my brother, who is staring at me.

"Hmm?"

"He's going to be okay," he says in that reassuring, big-brother tone, and yet there is a crack in the last word that has tears flooding my eyes that I blink away.

"I know. But ... why are we doing this again? Why are we here again? It feels like Cassie all over again. Just ... why again?" I ask, frustrated and angry.

"I know. Believe me, I know," he murmurs. "There are wrongs I need to right with him."

"Me too," I whisper.

"There is ... just so much shit I need to say." He groans in frustration before getting up to walk the same stretch of hallway I have been pacing.

I watch him for a few minutes, missing the little boy I grew up with and wondering how we've grown so far apart despite being so close physically in each other's lives.

Family is weird.

That's all it comes down to.

My eyes grow heavy. They close. I'm not sure for how long, but when I wake up, I'm tucked up against the side of Chad. His arm is around me and his cheek is resting on the top of my head. I allow myself the grace to sink into the comfort I don't deserve from him but that he gives me anyway.

Of course it's him who's here to comfort me. And doesn't that make me feel even worse because there's someone else I want here instead.

"It's going to be okay, Row," he says softly. "He's going to be okay."

"Rothschild?" the doctor in blue scrubs asks as he walks down the hallway, untying the top strings of his face mask so it falls to his chest. He reaches up and pulls his scrub cap off.

"How is he?" we all say in some form or another as we stand and move en masse toward him.

"Hi, I'm Dr. Massey. I'll cut to the chase because it's been a long night for all of us. He was in rough shape. Worse than we thought if I'm honest. There was a lot of internal damage that took us some time to find and repair and then find again. But for now, I think we have him stabilized. He's critical but stable."

"What does that mean?" Rhett asks, taking the lead for the family as he steps forward with his arms crossed over his chest.

"That means the next twenty-four hours are critical. What he does during those will tell us most likely how he'll fare. At this point, I think he will pull through. That doesn't mean there might not be any touch-and-go moments—the damage we repaired was extensive—or that we might have to go back in and do some more cleanup, but for now, I'm pleased with how well he's responding."

"Long-term prognosis?" Rhett asks as my mom clamps down on my hand with both of hers.

"That's tough to say right now. We'll know more in the coming hours." He looks down at his surgical cap he's worrying with his hands. "My prediction? It'll be a long road to recovery. With his age, his previous heart issues, and the very nature of his injuries, he won't be hopping up out of the bed and jogging home anytime soon, but I do think with time and a lot of rest that

- a full recovery is possible."

 - "Oh, thank God," my mom says and sags against me in relief.
 "But like I said, that's a precautionary prognosis. I can't promise anything," the doctor says.
 - "Of course," I say. "Thank you so much for everything. We're so grateful."
 - "When can we see him?" my mom asks.
 - "We're still finishing up in the OR. As soon as he's set up in the ICU, you can visit for a little bit. One person at a time."

FIFTY-ONE

Rowan

He looks frail.

Of all the ways in my life that I've thought of my dad, frail is not one of them.

And yet right now with tubes and leads attached to him, with his skin gray and his lips lax, that's exactly how he looks.

But there is a comfort to the beeps of the machines and the squeaky shoes walking on the linoleum floor. They are signs that he is going to be okay.

"I'm here, Dad," I say softly as I grab his hand and sit down in the chair beside the bed.

Ten minutes. That's all the time I get with him, but I'm grateful I at least get that.

"You scared us. Are scaring us." I wipe the tear that falls with the back of my hand and exhale a shaky breath.

But even now, even in this scary moment, there is an awkwardness between us. Between what I want to say and what I feel is appropriate to say.

I'm sorry we're not closer.

I'm sorry I'm not who you want me to be.

I'm sorry to have let you down.

But honestly, I'm not really sorry at all.

The tears come. Hard and fast, and it must just be because I'm loopy-tired and all the stress of the past few hours has finally hit me. But I think it's so much more than that.

It's the realization that I can love this man unconditionally—despite everything—and I fear that it's not reciprocal.

He hasn't really talked to me since the announcement of the co-CEO.

He hasn't said a word since The Vine.

It's one of those things to think you've disappointed your parents, but it's a whole other ball game when you realize you actually did.

And maybe it's that right now that is gutting me. The knowledge that I have to be who I am, even knowing it will forever change my relationship with my parents and how they look at me.

And then I wonder if maybe this accident, this brush with death, will allow my dad to see me in a different light.

That he'll accept me and my ambition rather than think less of me for it.

He won't.

I know deep in my heart of hearts he won't.

I study him. The strong hands I used to hold on to as a child. The broad chest I used to rest my head on when I slept. The face I used to look to for encouragement when I doubted myself. And the same face I look at now, knowing we see each other through such different gazes.

A man who did so many things right in his life and a lot of things knowingly wrong. And I realize I am silently asking him to accept me for who I am and I can't do the same for him.

Forgiveness isn't a two-sided requirement.

I rise from my seat and press a soft kiss to his forehead. "I love you, Dad," I murmur. "I love you because that's the only thing I know how to do right when it comes to you."

I give him one last look as a tear slips down my cheek.

He's going to be okay.

He has to be okay.

And then I walk out of the ICU. Each step down the clinically white hallway has memories flashing back.

Squeaky shoes on linoleum as Cassie's code was called.

Harsh commands being ordered in a rush of urgency.

A constant sound instead of the steady beep of machines.

The devastation on the doctor's face as he walked toward us.

My mom's screams.

Each step is an assault on my memory. Memories that were blocked out by the fear of losing my dad, but now that I've seen him, now that I know he's going to be okay, they come back with a vengeance.

To the point that when I walk out to the waiting room, it must be written all over my face. Chad is up and by my side in seconds.

"Row? Is everything okay? Talk to me."

"Yes. He's ... he's okay. I have to get out of this place. I can't breathe. I need—"

"Let's get you outside." He wraps an arm around me and helps me the short distance to the outdoor sitting area.

I welcome the cooler morning air as I close my eyes and lift my face to the sky. I don't even realize it but I'm humming a Clayton Seaburn piece as a means to calm myself down.

"What do you need from me?" Chad asks as he runs a hand up and down the length of my spine. "Where do you want me to take you?"

I meet his eyes but don't put a voice to the thoughts I'm sure he sees in mine. "Nowhere in particular. I think I'm just going to take a drive to clear my head."

"I can take you. I can drive."

I reach out and put my hand on his arm and squeeze. "Thank you, but I just want to be alone."

"Fine. Sure." He takes a step back and studies me. "Drive safe."

"Of course."

And as I walk to the parking lot, with the weight of his stare on my back, I hope he believes me.

I hope he doesn't know I'm going to the only place I can think to go.

FIFTY-TWO

Holden

The pounding on my front door surprises me. My eyes are bleary and I'm tired as fuck. Apparently sleep came—somewhat—if my ass nodding off in my office chair behind my computer monitors is any indication.

I scrub a hand over my face and shake my head, closing the door to my office behind me out of habit. "Just a minute," I call out and look around for my phone.

Where did I leave it?

Knock. Knock. Knock.

No good ever came from someone knocking on your door at—I glance toward the clock and yawn—four in the fucking morning.

Christ.

There is another insistent knock.

"What?" I snap, but then startle when I see Rowan standing on the other side of my door. I open it and before I can say a thing, she falls against me, arms going around me as she collapses.

"Rowan?" I wrap my arms around her, my lips finding the top of her head immediately and pressing a kiss there.

"I needed somewhere to go. I needed ... you."

"What's wrong?" She doesn't budge but her shoulders hitch a sob and she just holds on tighter. I walk back a few steps, our bodies moving as one, so that I can shut the front door. A million thoughts race through my mind, the most important one being, she came to me, to my house.

She needed me.

"You're scaring me, Sunshine," I say as I lean down to pick her up and move her with me to the couch. I expect resistance. Her to tell me she's not helpless. That's who she is.

She doesn't do either.

So I carry her to the couch and sit down with her cradled there, her face in the crook of my neck, and need emanating off of her.

"I've got you," I murmur as I hold her there, against me, uncertain why she's here, but willing to give her whatever it is she needs. "I've got you."

Selfishly I breathe her in. I memorize the feel and smell of her, the weight of her body on mine, because nothing I love stays. Nothing I care for matters more than the endgame.

"Talk to me, baby." I run a hand over the back of her hair and love the way my fingers get caught in its tangles. "Tell me who hurt you."

Tell me who I'm going to have to fucking kill.

"There was an accident," she mumbles and my heart drops.

Mason.

There was an accident.

"My dad. He was hurt but they think he'll be okay." She rambles on for a few seconds about the ICU and internal injuries and donating blood. All things I hear but don't process because she's okay. She. Is. Okay. "I couldn't stay there for another second. I couldn't breathe. I just ... you're the only place I wanted to be."

She looks up at me with red-rimmed eyes, a sadness that guts me, and a clarity that has my chest constricting in a way I finally understand.

I finally acknowledge.

I reach up and cup the side of her face, my thumb resting on her lip. My smile is soft and my heart is pounding. "I'm here. Anything you need me to be for you, I'm here."

She parts her lips and kisses my thumb. "I'm numb, Holden. I can't feel anything and I need to feel." She leans forward and brushes her lips against mine. "Make me feel." Another kiss. "Make me forget." And then another where her tongue slips between my lips and the salt of her tears hits my tongue. "Make me yours."

I hesitate for the briefest moment as a fear like I've never felt courses through me.

The kind that tells you this is the point of no return.

This is a moment that will make or break you.

This is what I've never allowed myself to have.

"Holden," she whispers and takes matters into her own hands by she shifting to straddle me, the heat of her pussy on my cock through the thin fabric of her panties. "I need this." Her slip of a dress comes off over her head, treating me with an unhindered view of her beautiful tits. "I need you." Another kiss.

Need grows into greed but uncertainty remains.

I frame the side of her head to tear our mouths apart and to look into her eyes.

"This is all wrong, Rowan."

My words encompass so many things. All of them are why she's going to hate me when all is said and done, but she hears them to mean this, right now, with her dad in the hospital.

She shakes her head free from my hands. "Everything with you has been wrong from the start. Don't you see that?" She kisses me again. It's long and consuming and so fucking hot that I struggle with what's right and wrong because all I see is her. All I want is her. She leans back and meets my eyes again. "But if you're what wrong feels like, Holden, I don't ever want to feel right."

I hold off. Resist. Count in my head. Reason poorly.

And fail.

I initiate the kiss this time. My hands on her breasts and her pussy soaking my sweats beneath her. She's cool skin and warm tongue. She's soft curves and hard nipples. She's what I've always wanted but never allowed myself to have.

She's Rowan. Plain. Simple. Extraordinary.

There is no rush to our movements. No fervent urgency. We make a slow dance of pulling her panties off one leg. Of us lifting up so I can shove my sweats down so that my cock springs free.

And when she lifts up, when I grab my cock with one hand and line it up at the entrance of her pussy while fisting my hand in the back of her hair with the other, our eyes meet.

They hold.

And they never break as she sinks, inch by violently pleasurable inch, down onto my cock.

It's the sweetest kind of burn. The most torturous type of restraint. The most intimate kind of communication where no words are spoken but our bodies and gazes are talking.

"Hold..." she murmurs as her eyes fight closing from the pleasure.

My god the woman feels incredible. Tight. Warm. Wet. Just fucking incredible.

I pull her head to me. I take from her lips. The kiss is slow and sensual as my cock remains buried as deep as possible in her. As her arousal drips down my balls and her fingernails tighten against the skin of my chest.

I can't do this anymore when it comes to her—pretend it's just sex without emotion. It's the polar opposite.

Sure, I'm making her feel to help her forget.

But I'm also spiraling out of control.

Because all there is in this moment is emotion. All we do is feel. And not just the orgasm that we're chasing. Not just the touch of her hand on my skin and her pulse beneath my fingertips. Not just the closest two people can fucking physically be.

There's so much fucking more here.

We move in the quiet of my condo. With soft sighs and pleasurable moans. We talk with fingertips and angled hips. With stuttered breaths and eyes falling closed. With giving ourselves—every single fucking thing—and not holding back.

She takes what she needs from me. I take what I've always pretended I didn't.

"Holden. Please," she finally mewls, the tears still sliding down her cheeks.

"Take what you need, baby. Take my fucking cock and take what you need," I murmur as my head falls back and pleasure washes over me.

Our orgasms hit. The slow build to the dizzying free fall that has her burying her head against my shoulder as I keep moving beneath her to draw out every last sensation for her.

To do what she asked of me—to make her feel.

And when I feel her teeth nip into my shoulder and feel the wetness of the tears on her cheeks against my skin, I allow myself to fall with her.

Off the cliff.

Into bliss.

Into her.

We sit like that, connected with her knees on either side of me and her cheek resting on my shoulder. I trail my fingertips down the length of her spine and let her hair tickle my cheek.

And when our heartbeats decelerate, when her eyes become heavy and the weight of the events wear her into slumber, I carry her into my bed.

I lay her down between the down comforter and the luxury sheets in a place I've never let anyone else into before.

But her hand remains on mine the entire time. On my hand, on my thigh, on my fingers. "Don't go," she murmurs in her sleep. And I don't. Not like I'd planned to do anyway.

Instead I sink down into my bed and stare at the sleeping, incomparable Rowan Rothschild.

Sworn enemy.

Salve to wounds I won't acknowledge.

Gasoline to the fire I'm starting.

We lie like this in the silence of my place in a position we've never been in before. One of us seeking comfort from the other. One of us needing more than just the physical.

It terrifies me.

I tried to put this back on even footing. I attempted to piss her off so she stepped back some. I tried to sabotage whatever this was.

And now she's here, like this, needing me and proving to me that I need her, and I don't have the slightest fucking clue what to do or say or how to get us back to where we should be.

Tomorrow.

I bargain with myself when I know it's a lie.

There's no going back.

Not when it comes to her.

FIFTY-THREE

Rowan

I wake with a start.

Strange room. Strange place. Familiar smell. Holden.

I sink into it and the comfort it brings.

But then last night comes back with a vengeance. The phone call. My dad. The hospital. Needing Holden.

I reach out to the nightstand for my phone out of habit but know it's not here. Within seconds I'm up and moving, slipping on Holden's T-shirt that I presume he left folded for me on the edge of his bed, and moving out into his great room to find it.

For a second, panic strikes. What if something happened to my dad and no one could get ahold of me? What if they texted and called and ... but my panic is short-lived as I find my phone where I set it on the coffee table.

I look for my mom's and Rhett's texts first to make sure that nothing has worsened. Relieved and glad to read there are signs of improvement, I begin to scroll through the rest of the texts. They're from people wishing my father well, from friends reaching out to see if I need anything, and one from Holden telling me he left to get us coffee.

Coffee. The man knows the way to my heart.

But then I startle when I see the clock on the wall that says eleven in the morning.

Whoa. I can't remember the last time I slept this late. With a deep breath and a shake of my head, I pause and realize where I am. In Holden's place. The first time, so I give myself a second to take a look around.

It's clean lines and classic decor. Modern in feel but not in furniture. The furniture is lush and looks like you could sink into it and never leave. At the same time, it looks like it's never been used. It's bright without being obtrusive and neutral without being boring.

The hallway to where the master bedroom is has four other doors. Three are open, one is closed. No doubt the rooms are never entered. I don't figure Holden for the type to entertain. In fact, I don't recall ever hearing him talk about anyone outside of the office; just his brother, and at rare times his mother.

I twist my lips and move toward his kitchen. The counters are clean with a lone espresso machine in the corner and a dish towel folded in a perfect square on the island's far corner by its sink. There is nothing else there—not a coffee cup overturned, not a dish rack waiting to be emptied, not a protein bar left out to be consumed.

It's sparse and cold and makes me kind of sad for him.

Curious, I wander toward the massive stainless steel refrigerator, taking bets with myself that it'll be completely empty when I open it.

It isn't.

But it isn't what I expect either. Two shelves of the fridge are filled with nice rows of stacked meal prep containers. Another shelf is for milk and condiments. The third has row after row of bottled water with containers of chopped vegetables and fruit, ready for consumption.

The man either just had his fridge stocked or he rarely eats. I'm leaning toward the latter simply because I know him. Food is a necessity but not something he takes time to sit and enjoy.

Except for with me.

The thought sneaks in before I can stop it. So does the warm fuzzy feeling that last night left me with.

I didn't mean to come here. That's a lie. I did mean to. But I fought it. I drove for about an hour until the tears came and the fear subsided into the weirdest mix of uncertainty.

I needed someone.

I needed Holden.

But with the warm feeling, with that soft slip into each other, comes the guilt that this is where I ran to last night when I needed comfort. Not to my mom or my family. Not to Chad who has known me my whole life or to my girlfriends who were on standby—but to Holden.

I jump when my phone rings. The unknown number throws me but with my dad in the hospital, I scramble to answer it, not knowing if the call has something to do with that.

"Hello?"

"Miss Rowan Rothschild, please."

"I'm sorry, I'm not interested," I say.

"This is Ethan Salas with Bettermint Bank. I have you listed as a beneficiary on an account here for Eleanor Rothschild. Let me see here ... your grandmother, I believe."

"Yes? How can I help you?"

"She closed out the account a few months back, but never collected the remaining funds in it. I wanted to set up a time for

you to come and collect those funds or find a way to get them to you. Regardless, a signature will be needed to confirm receipt."

"Okay. Um. What account was this for again?" I look at the space around me, wanting to find something to write with and a scrap of paper to take this all down.

"She had two accounts with us you were listed on. This one would be Monarch."

Monarch?

"Okay." Where would my junk drawer be if I were Holden Knight? I open the top few drawers on the far bank of drawers in the kitchen. Apparently he doesn't have one. "One sec, Ethan, so I can get your information. I'm not ... at my..." But on the fourth try, I pull open a drawer, moving a blue folder aside that sits on top of everything to find an orderly, non-junk-looking drawer. I grab a pen from its proper tray but when I lift the folder up to see if there is Post-it note somewhere under it, several papers from inside it fall out.

Post-it note secured, I write *Monarch*, *Ethan*, and *Bettermint Bank* on it but it's then that my eyes catch the words on the papers that have fallen in the drawer. It's then that the Post-it note and the pen in my hand are completely forgotten.

It's then that my world turns upside down.

TinSpirits Master Sell-Off Plan.

TinSpirits Packaged Liquidation.

I shuffle through the titled pages, one after another, before realizing that Ethan is still on the line. "I'm sorry. Uh. I need to call you back. Something ... someone is here."

I end the call without even hearing a response as I pick up the entire folder and begin looking at one page after another.

Each piece of paper shattering my faith in my judgment of people. In the sanctity of Holden's promises. In the trust he falsely earned again. In the real reason Holden is here in Westmore.

Holy shit.

My hands tremble and my heart races. I have to get out of there. I have to go. I have to—

"Row? You up yet?" Holden calls out as the front door clicks shut and his footsteps fall on the tiled floor.

I stand in his kitchen, thoughts racing and heart aching. Our eyes meet. "You're breaking apart the company and selling it off piece by piece?" My voice is way steadier than I feel.

Holden glances at the blue folder on the counter but his face doesn't show a flicker of emotion as he sets a cup of coffee down in front of me. "I got pastries," he says. "Doughnuts. Croissants. A few other things from that new deli just down the street."

"No more lies, remember? Isn't that what you said before? No. More. Lies." *Please tell me I'm wrong*.

He turns to face me, head angled to the side and the slightest flicker of irritation in his jawline.

"You promised me this wasn't why you bought the company. You made me feel crazy for asking. No more lies, Holden."

"Ask the question, Rowan." His voice is barely a whisper as he stands and stares at me.

"Did you buy TinSpirits to sell it off and destroy it?"

"Yes." Unflinching.

I try to process this. To understand this. To fathom this.

"I asked you a couple months ago. You lied to me."

"And months ago we didn't have this agreement. The no more lies. Now we do."

"So just like that, you're going to take what my family has created, has owned, and destroy it."

"Partially, yes."

"Partially?" I ask. What? How? I mean ... my throat feels like it's closing in and my chest feels like it hurts to breathe. "Why?"

"I have my reasons."

"Your reasons?" I shake my head and move around the counter so there is nothing between us. "I came to you last night. I was vulnerable and needed you like I've never allowed myself to need another person and you ... you took it. Took what I gave you. Took it knowing all of this was going on in the background. That this folder was sitting in a drawer ten feet away. You used me, Holden."

His jaw clenches and his Adam's apple bobs. "I believe it was the other way around if I remember correctly."

"Fuck you," I shout at him. He nods, stoic, when all I want is a reaction, a show of emotion, anything. "You're a bastard." Another nod from him. "Fight me," I shriek. "Fucking fight me."

"It's probably best if you go now, Rowan," he says as he moves to grab my car keys from the coffee table and put them next to my cell phone.

"How can you stand there and be so calm? So callous? How can you—"

"Be a good businessman and sell off the parts of the company that are dying and costing us money? Easy. That's what I came to do."

Bring it back to business instead of talking about us. Instead of bringing it back to my shattering heart and fucked-up head.

Both of which he created.

"You know what TinSpirits means to me, Holden. I've poured my heart out to you over this. I've fought with you to show you and prove this." *There's no way he can mean this.* "Even if this was your intention in the beginning, you're still willing to go through with it now, after us? After knowing what this company means to me?"

"Unequivocally. Nothing changes my endgame."

"I don't believe you." The words stick in my throat.

"Then don't. I've told you all along that you shouldn't. Facts are facts, Rowan, and your brother ran this company into the ground for his own reasons."

"What would those be?"

"Ask him." He shrugs. "That's not for me to say."

"Screw you, Holden."

He stares at me, the muscle pulsing in his jaw, and then with absolute indifference states, "I believe we did that already."

I don't know the sound I emit but it's a mixture of frustration and hurt. Of pain and disbelief. Of my heart breaking and belief in him shattering. "I came here last night because I needed you. Because I'm head over heels *in love* with you despite everything you say to me, every goddamn warning you give me not to believe you're a good guy."

The words are out, the ones I can't take back, but he doesn't even flinch at hearing them for the first time. At knowing I'm in love with him.

It hurts to breathe. The action. The air. Everything about it.

"Say something," I scream at him. "Fucking act like you care."

But he doesn't do or say anything other than stand there with his eyes locked on mine and disinterest emanating off every part of him.

He's shut down. His wall is up. There's no reaching him now.

I love him.

I love him and I said it and now I can't take it back as the truth strands in the no-man's-land between us.

But even worse than that feeling is the fact that Holden stands before me, body taut, tears welling in his eyes, jaw clenched, and doesn't say a fucking word.

Not one.

And my heart breaks all over again.

"I have to go." My voice cracks as I collect my things and head for the door.

"Rowan."

My body stops on reflex but it feels like my heart keeps going and slams into my rib cage. The pain is more excruciating than I've ever known.

He says my name but it's not to stop me from leaving. It's not to explain or to apologize. It's to ask me something.

It's for himself. *How fitting*.

I give him the only answer I can think he'd be asking a question to. I give it to him because I need something in return.

"Don't worry. I know. I can't tell your little plan to anyone. I read my contract. I know anything I see or say to you is under strict NDA or I could be prosecuted. Fine. Fuck you, but fine. But if what we shared meant anything to you, do me one favor."

He stands there and dips his chin down to tell me to ask.

"Don't destroy TinSpirits while my dad is on the road to recovery. That will kill him. He has a weak heart and now he's hurt. That company—our company—is his pride and joy. Knowing it's ending, his family's legacy is going to be destroyed, will make him lose the will to fight. Promise me you won't sell off a single piece off it until I know he's going to be okay."

There is a long pause while we stand and stare at each other with a couch between us that we made love on last night. Because we did make love. There is no question about that.

"I'm sorry, Rowan. I can't make a promise that I won't keep."

FIFTY-FOUR

Holden

It takes everything I have not to chase after her.

To not pull her against me and apologize and tell her every deep, dark secret I have. Every thread of revenge I plan to exact. Every way that I too have fallen for her.

But isn't that why she needs to go?

So I don't see the hurt in her eyes or the defeat in her posture. So I don't hear the break in her voice or see the tears slide down her cheeks.

A promise to Mason won't be derailed by a fucking woman.

But the longer she stood there, the more I risked so many fucking things. More like every fucking thing.

Get your shit together, Knight.

Get your shit together, Simpson.

This is for the best.

Then why, when I look out the window down the endless stories of this building, does every damn part of me scream in protest?

Why do I want to pick up the phone and apologize?

Why do I want last night back so fucking bad?

I thought I liked living in the gray.

Right now that gray is a smothering fog that makes every part of me hurt.

Rowan begged me to make her feel last night.

The problem is, I did. And in the process, I allowed myself to feel too.

Now I don't know how to turn it off.

To make the feeling go away.

To not hurt.

And man, this fucking hurts.

FIFTY-FIVE Holden

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO

Three pairs of eyes stare at me, arrogance etched in the lines of their faces.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Simpson," Williams says with a knowing glance over to Porter and Rothschild.

"Yes, you do. I was in the locker room. I heard the whole conversation. I know you guys took the caddies' tips."

"You can't prove shit," Rothschild says. "In fact, it sounds to me like you're confessing right now that you know where the money is kept. There's three of us and one of you. I mean..."

"You piece of shit," I mutter.

"Watch your tongue, Simpson. You're nothing here. A replaceable employee," Porter says.

"A Fairmont freak," Rothschild taunts.

"Turn yourself in or else I will. It's not fair to Memo to lose his job over this." And isn't that the truth? Memo was seen in the locker room moments before the money was discovered missing. The only reason I'm here confronting these fuckers is because Memo needs this job.

"You act like we're scared." Clank. Click. Clank.

"I'll give you until the end of the day, and then I'll say something," I threaten.

"Funny," Porter says with a roll of his eyes. "You can't prove a thing."

"The video on my phone can though," I bluff. For a brief moment, I think I have them. They glance nervously at each other moments before Williams throws his head back and laughs.

"Good one, Simpson. If you had it, you would have already shown it," Rothschild says.

"Fuck off, dude," Williams says as he strides off the green.

I have visions of jumping on his back and tackling him to the ground. Something. Anything. To hurt him a fraction of the amount he's hurt me and my family.

But instead, I stand there on the edge of the fairway in my crappy uniform while they wear their fancy clothes, and know I have nothing on them.

Truth be told, I can't say much to management other than I overheard them.

I don't know what they were wearing.

I didn't see them physically take the money.

I didn't report it when it happened.

Now it's two weeks later, and I look complicit because I didn't say a fucking word.

That truth owns my thought the rest of the day. Through cleaning clubs and washing golf carts and then later washing down the patio. I might be a jack-of-all-trades here—willing to do the work that no one else will—but that doesn't give me any more clout than the rest of the workers.

And it doesn't make me feel more confident when I trudge to my manager's office.

"Hey, Simpson," Gary says somberly when I walk into his office. "Thanks for coming in."

"Sure, but you say that like you called me in here."

His eyebrows narrow. "Ralphie didn't ask you to come see me?"

"No. I..." Shit. Why is he summoning me? "I came to talk to you about the Memo situation." I draw in a deep breath. "I know who took the money."

Gary leans back with his arms over his chest and studies me. "You do?"

"Yes. I was in the locker room and I heard them talking about it."

"Who is them?" he asks, his voice void of all emotion.

"Rothschild, Williams, and Porter."

He's quiet for a beat. A beat I read as him knowing the complexity of the situation of an employee accusing the golden children of the club of stealing. But when he speaks I'm feeling less certain of my footing. "Funny seeing as how they all came forward and said they were in the locker room and saw you stealing it."

"What?" I shriek.

He nods. "Yep. All three of them identified you as the person left in the locker room that day. Identified you by name."

I laugh because that's the only thing I can do. "That's crazy, you know that?"

"So is accusing them of stealing," he says, matter-of-fact.

"You believe them." My voice is barely audible.

"I think it's a hard stretch to believe the kids who have more money than God would need to steal from the tip jar while there is another kid broke as hell being accused."

"Just because I'm broke doesn't mean I'd steal. I'm not like that," I argue with eyes wide and a plea in my voice.

"Agreed. I've vouched for you, Simpson. Time and again. And for some reason you can't seem to stay away from these kids or out of trouble. Is it jealousy? Is it that you can't let go what they have and you don't? What is it, because if this is how you repay me for having your back, that's more than fucked."

"It wasn't me. I didn't do it," I say resolutely. "I told you who did it."

"Well, they're saying you did."

"And their word is stronger than mine."

He leans back in his chair and sighs. "They want an apology and the club wants the money returned."

I snort. "For something I didn't do." I turn to pace the room. "This is ridiculous. Fucking ridiculous. To think you believe them over me because I come from Fairmont and they're from here is absolutely fucking—"

"Your mom cleans over at the Rivercrest Office Park, no?" a voice at my back asks. I spin around to face Chief Williams, Chad's dad, standing there in his tan uniform with the huge-ass gold star pinned to his chest.

Panic doesn't just flicker, it explodes into an all-out assault on my system. Why is he here?

"Sir?" I ask as he runs his fingers absently over the handcuffs hooked on his utility belt. Subtle threat more than noticed.

"Your mom? She works over at the diner and then cleans at Rivercrest after hours, no?" He moves into the doorway, his shoulders spanning from one side to the other.

"Why? What does she have to do with any of this?" I ask cautiously as fear snakes up my spine.

"Because it would be a travesty for her to lose her job there. I mean, if her son's a thief then he had to learn it from somewhere, right? And apparently a few things have gone missing at the office complex here and there over the past few months. It's a logical conclusion to draw."

I stare at him, jaw lax, heart racing, and tongue thick in my mouth. "I didn't steal the money. And my mom didn't take anything either. I'm not—she's not like that—"

"I have three boys who say otherwise." He lifts his eyebrows. "Three against one. That's pretty convincing in the eyes of the law."

"But I didn't-"

"So here's what you're going to do, Sampson," he says.

Sampson

I stare at him, blinking. He doesn't even know who I am. He hasn't even made the connection. That's how insignificant Mason's life was to him, the life his son took, that he doesn't even know our last name or the connection to me or to my mom.

Because if he did, he'd say something, right?

"You're going to stop threatening and accusing the boys of stealing the money you took. Folks around here don't look too kindly to defamation. Then you're going to repay all the money stolen, which we have figured is about five hundred and eighteen dollars."

"What?" I shriek. "I don't have that kind of money. I don't—"

"And then you're going to write a written apology to the club members for trying to take advantage of them and their wealth so you could go buy some drugs or whatever it is you bought. So yes, they'll know who you are. And yes, they'll be aware there is a thief in their midst."

"Sir. I don't have any money. I don't have—"

"Know your place in this society, Sampson, or it won't end well for you and your family." He hooks his thumbs in his belt. "You'll do all of this or else both you and your mom will lose your jobs. The easiest way to get rid of trash is to make it so they can't afford to take up space." His smile is smug as fuck. "Understood?"

I stare at the prick, unwilling to agree but refusing to risk everything we've worked for.

"The answer is yes, son. That's the only one there is to give." He looks over my shoulder at Gary and nods. "I'm trusting you to make sure matters are cleaned up." He takes a step back. "Or the trash gets taken out."

And then he walks off, the unique sound of all his gear on his belt moving with each step filtering back through the hallway to where I stand, staring after him.

I turn to look at Gary.

"I'm sorry, man. My hands are tied."

"Better tied than in handcuffs."

FIFTY-SIX

Rowan

"Rowan. You have to talk to me at some point."

"I know, Sloane. I just ... I need to process everything." I look through my windshield at the outside of the Sanctuary.

I've driven for hours.

I've avoided physically going into the office.

I've called in several times for updates on my dad and while all remains positive, his road to recovery still seems so very daunting.

And I've avoided, to the best of my ability, all talk, all thoughts, all emotions when it comes to Holden Knight.

At least I pretend I have.

"I know you do, but you don't have to do it alone."

"It's just a lot," I whisper. "All at once."

"Where are you?" she asks in that mom voice that says she's already grabbing her keys and heading out the door to find me.

"I'm okay. I promise."

"You don't sound okay, Rowan. That's a lot for one person to take in. Let me be there for you, please?"

"I know. And you are being here for me. I just need ... right now I'm going to head into the Sanctuary and play my cello until my fingers fall off. For some reason it's all I can think of doing. To feel closer to Cass. To remind me that my problems are nothing compared to those of everyone else here who'll be listening. To just ... feel the music."

She's quiet for a beat and I can see her standing on her front porch, keys in her hand, debating whether she should ignore what I've said or listen to me.

"I promise you—this is what I need right now."

"You're sure?"

"I'm more than sure."

And that need only becomes more apparent when the upper bout of the cello rests against my chest and my fingers rest on its strings.

I close my eyes and lose myself in the music, in the sounds I create, and the emotions those sounds evoke.

Women come and go from the room where I perform. Some stay for a while, their own eyes closed and tears slipping down their cheeks, while others sit stone-faced, presumably reliving whatever events led them to this place in their lives.

I'm not one to judge how others process their grief—because isn't that what this is? *Grief*. It can come in many forms and over many things. I don't purport mine to be even close to the grief of any of these women in the Sanctuary, but it doesn't mean I feel it any less.

And it sure as shit means I'm trying to make us all feel better.

I play songs from memory. One after another after another. Some I repeat. Others I improvise. I simply allow myself the freedom to feel in this space where judgment isn't allowed or welcome.

Holden played me. He made me feel. He made me believe. He made me love ... and it was all a game to him. All a means to an end that only he knows.

One I'm not quite sure I want to.

I don't know how long I play for. The sky outside the window has turned dark and the sound of kids playing down the hall melds with the melodies I create. But at some point, I'm all played out and emotionally spent.

"That's all for today," I murmur as the last chord floats through the room. "Thank you for indulging me to come and play today."

When I look up, the whole room is staring at me. As broken as my heart is, this moment is providing the glue that will help piece it back together. I'm certain of it.

I have to save this place at all costs. There is healing that happens here. Healing and the creation of the invisible bonds of sisterhood and affirmation of just how strong they all are.

As I begin to pack up, some of the women I've seen before greet me, some thank me, and others give a slight nod before walking out.

All reactions are welcome but are not expected. This is my therapy as much as it is theirs—especially tonight.

"That was beautiful. Thank you."

I look up to meet kind eyes and the beautiful smile of the woman before me. She's petite in stature but athletic, with her hair pulled up in a high ponytail. The stress etched into the lines of her face does nothing to diminish her beauty.

"No need to thank me. It's therapeutic for me too."

"I'm new here." She jogs her head from side to side almost as if she feels like she should be apologizing to me that she is, in

fact, here. "I ... I'm just getting the lay of the land, but this was a welcome surprise. Thank you again."

I hold my hand out to her. "Rowan Rothschild. Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too." She shakes mine. "Penelope Piccadilly."

As if my world could be rocked any more this week, those two words do just that.

"Piccadilly," I repeat, my mind not wanting to believe what logic is telling me. What my gut instinct is reinforcing. "That's a unique name."

"Yeah. You should've heard the nicknames growing up. Like Piccadilly Circus in London. That's what I tell people so they remember or spell it correctly."

"Oh," I say as I study her, as I wonder ... as I know.

She narrows her eyes at me. "Is something wrong? You look a bit flushed."

"No, I just ... are you from around here or ...?"

"Born and raised here in Fairmont. Not that that's something to be proud of, but you can't change history. Why? Can I help you with something?"

Talk about being callous. I'm here to entertain, not to probe into her life or ask stupid questions because I'm pretty sure she just might be who I think she is.

"And you're okay? You're—"

"I'm going to be, yes." Her smile is bittersweet. "I got myself out of a bad situation and returned back here to be closer to friends and family, but they're all struggling on their own, so that last thing I want to do is be a burden on them. Plus my ex..." She looks down at her twisted fingers and I feel even worse now. "I don't want to put anyone helping me in danger. Here, there's security. Here, they have legal advice. Here, they have people like you who treat my soul. They help without judgment until I can get back on my feet again."

I reach out and squeeze her hand. "You're in the right place. They're wonderful here."

"It's not a place any of us want to be, but it's needed, you know." She shrugs.

"I do."

"Well, then I guess I'll see you around."

"Yes."

"Thanks again." She offers one more melancholic smile and starts to walk away.

"Penelope?" I can't help myself. I'm being selfish, and I can hate myself for it later, but I need to ask. I need to know.

"Yeah?" She turns around to look at me.

"Do you happen to know a Holden Knight? From, like, back in the day?"

Penelope's expression says it all. Every single emotion flickers across her face. Surprise. Nostalgia. Innocence. Warmth. And with each passing one, my heart falls a little harder against my rib cage. "Holden. God, I haven't thought of him in forever." Her smile is the most genuine I've seen since we started talking. "Yeah. I knew him. In fact, we both lived not far from here." She shakes her head. "Talk about a trip down memory lane. Do you know him?"

"I do. Yeah."

She angles her head to the side. "Why did you think to ask me about him?"

"Um. I don't know." It's my turn to stumble. My heart is beating so fast I swear she can hear it. "You said you were from around here. I knew he was. I don't know. I just figured I'd ask."

"Oh. Okay." She nods and takes a few steps back. "He was one of the good ones. Sweet and polite when all the other boys were jerks." She smiles again and looks back down at her hands twisting together. "I'd tell you if you see him again to tell him I said hi, but ... I'd rather him not know I'm in here. It's humiliating, you know?" She lifts her eyebrows as tears well in her eyes.

"I won't say a word." I reach out and squeeze her arm. "You did nothing wrong to be here, but I understand."

"Thank you," she whispers, and takes a step back. "See you around."

"See you around," I repeat.

I watch Penelope Piccadilly walk down the hallway until she turns the corner and I'm left staring at a blank wall.

Everything he told me was a lie.

Every goddamn thing.

Tailored lies to get in close with me. To pull me over to his side. To create a wedge between my brother and me. Between Chad and me.

Divide and conquer.

That seemed to be his plan.

Everything was a lie.

Everything.

FIFTY-SEVEN

Holden

"Eat," Audrey says as she slides a plate of chicken salad onto my desk.

I look up at her and lift my eyebrows.

"She's working remotely. *Again*. She can be reached via email if you need something for the company. The proposal will be completed on time. And Rupert Rothschild continues to improve steadily." She dusts her hands. "That about covers all the questions you're asking me daily. Do you need anything further?"

"No. Thank you."

"Yep." She moves to open the blinds on the far side of the wall. "Also, you look like shit."

"Charming, as usual." I clear my throat. "And the updates aren't needed."

She stops and levels me with a glare. "No?"

Rowan won't come into work. But I know she's working because I see the contracts come across. I'm cc'd on emails she sends other people.

Just not ones I send her.

She's a goddamn ghost. Stubborn and defiant and literally emotionally fucking me up further with each and every goddamn day that passes.

"No. No updates are needed."

"Noted," she says curtly and stops when she reaches the door. "I'm not going to tell you I told you so. I'm not even going to go as far as saying I kind of like the Holden Knight she brought out in you, but I am going to say this. She deserves more than I think you can give her. More than you're willing to. And for that, *for her*, I'm glad whatever happened, happened. Take it for whatever you fucking will."

"I didn't think you liked her," I murmur.

She looks at me and smiles. "I don't like anyone, except you, of course."

It's the first real smile I've given in days. Leave it to Audrey to know what to say and do to snap me out of my funk.

Because she's right. Rowan deserves better than this. Than me. And I can't give that to her. I can't bend on who I am and what I've set out to accomplish.

She stood there and begged me to have a heart, to show her my heart, and I showed her who I am at heart instead.

A man with a goal she doesn't understand.

A big brother fulfilling a promise to his little brother and mother.

A person who needs to carry out his own definition of justice since no one thought his brother mattered.

A man willing to torture himself and his own scarred heart to carry all this out.

Even to his own detriment.

Chad's excited chatter snaps me from my thoughts. From the never-ending circle of regret over hurting Rowan and then realization that this is how it has to be.

I got too close.

I let my guard down.

I fell in fucking love with one of my marks.

That's all on me.

I'd like to think her absence is because she's plotting how to stab a knife in my back. That's very Rowan.

And yet, all I can think of is the look in her eyes when she stormed out of my apartment. The hurt. The betrayal. The everything that floated through her eyes that I put there.

Complications.

You said no to them and walked head-fucking-first into them, didn't you, Knight?

But the show must go fucking on.

I rise from my chair and move toward the conference room where I've watched Chad and Rhett come and go over the last few hours.

They are negotiating with Bob over the WillowBend details.

Little do they know I'm Bob and I'm literally sitting fifty feet from them making their lives miserable.

Good.

They deserve it, and right now, of all times, I more than enjoy having someone to toy with to keep me preoccupied.

"Gentlemen," I say when I walk into the conference room. I rather enjoy watching them inconspicuously try to cover up the paperwork scattered on the table. *The WillowBend offer*.

I'm met with steely glares just as I expected. Rhett is still livid with me and Chad is still humiliated by me.

Fucking perfect.

The saddest part of this whole thing is that Rhett is more upset with me because his sister hurt his best friend. He doesn't give a fuck about his sister. Not in the least.

"We're busy," Rhett says.

I rest my ass against the console table and fold my arms anyway. "What seems to have the two of you so busy? Work stuff? Scheming again on how to gain more kickbacks? Or is it election stuff? Have the palms you greased not stayed slippery enough, because from what I've overheard you guys talk about, you were a shoo-in to win?"

"We don't have time for your bullshit right now, Knight," Rhett says.

"We're in the middle of something. Do you mind?" Chad chimes in.

Funny how all those years ago, I never expected him to turn out to be the pussy in all of this.

"Must be awesome to be Rhett's little bitch, huh? But then again." I shrug as the tendons in their necks grow taut. "You probably know where the other has buried the bodies so, little bitch, big bitch—neither matters so long as no one spills the other's secrets, right?"

"What's your fucking point?" Rhett barks.

"Nothing really. Just cruising around my company to get a feel for what everyone is working on." I offer a smug smile. "So what are we in the middle of? Plotting my demise so soon? And I thought we were all getting along so well."

"We're on a deadline here. We don't have time for this," Chad says.

"We. We. Such a cute couple." I purse my lips. "I'll have you know I don't look too highly on employees using company time to do their own business. Shit, Rhett. You need to up your game. You're on shaky fucking ground considering all the new suppliers your sister has brought in. She's running circles around you. I can understand why that might make you feel a tad bit inferior."

"You'd be the one to know what she is and isn't doing, right? Since she jumped in the sack with—"

"Careful." My voice is a low, charged warning. "That's a line I wouldn't dare fucking cross if I were you."

"No. That's a line you weren't supposed to cross," Chad says.

I hold his glare, can even appreciate the fact that he grew a pair and said it, but now, I'm going to fuck with them even further. Drumroll, please. "Check your watchdog, Rhett. You wouldn't want him scaring away your number-one campaign contributor."

"No thanks," Rhett says arrogantly.

"You're going to turn down my \$1 million donation?" *That got your fucking attention, didn't it?* "I figure you might need a little help pushing you over that threshold to win."

"Blood money, huh?" Rhett asks.

"Spoken like a true entitled prick." My smile is lethal. "I offer you a million dollars and you look a gift horse in the mouth. Didn't your parents teach you anything?"

"Don't talk about my parents."

I laugh and hold my hands up. "Fine. Don't take the donation. No fucking skin off my back."

But you're going to need it, Rhett. You and pretty boy Chad are going to need it.

The question is, what are you going to do with it?

"You fuck my sister. You steal my company. And now you're offering me a million-dollar donation because you realized neither of those things got you where you needed to be. So now you're trying to kiss my ass because you need me. Because you'll need me to help you when I'm on the city council. You'll know what it feels like when the tables are turned."

I plant both hands on the conference table so that I'm up close and fucking personal to the prick. "Let's get one thing straight, Rothschild. You gave your company away. You gave it away because you've fucked up so many other things in your and your family's lives that you don't have a fucking choice." His eyes widen. Yeah. Ask me what I know, fucker, because you'll be shocked. I lean in closer. "I had a thing with your sister. It's over. And rest assured, I don't want anything from you that I don't already have. If I did, I'd take it, and there's not a goddamn thing you'd be able to do to stop me."

FIFTY-EIGHT

Rowan

I've spent the better part of the week holed up here.

Gran's study. What now seems to be my go-to place.

Sure, I've ventured out to visit my dad. Polite conversations that end with him saying he's tired and me saying I've got to go now, but that's about it.

I've worked steadily but remotely. I oversaw a big contract with a regional distributor that secured a deal to put TinSpirits in a larger demographic of stores. And I hired a commercial real estate agent to contact the owner of the property the Sanctuary is on to see if I can negotiate.

If your own world is falling apart, you might as well try to make others' a better place to be.

And to top it off, my desire to stick my head in the sand and remove myself from any and all things that will remind me of, make me miss, make me think of Holden, has allowed me to make such massive progress in going through Gran's things. It's been my mission. And once this is clean, then I'll force myself to go back to my reality.

The one where Holden is the liar I initially pegged him to be and my heart is still shattered.

But the chime going off when the front door opens and then closes tells me she's here.

That didn't take her long from text to arrival.

Neither does the clomp of her feet on the stairs as she climbs them or the dread that filters through my system over finally being alone with her and having to face the music.

I keep my head down as I sort through the endless junk Gran saved, hoping to find a few more memorable tokens of hers worth saving.

"What's all this?" my mom asks from the doorway. I watch her walk in and take in the insanity of this room. The picture wall. The stacks Gran left behind and the ones I've made while sorting through it all.

"She left a mess. You know her. She was—"

"Eccentric and over-the-top and absolutely everything to you," she says softly with a resigned nod of her head. "I loved that you had that with her."

I slant a look her way. Never in a million years have I ever heard my mom say something like that. "I did. She understood me when no one else did."

She didn't come here to talk about Gran, though. I'm not naive enough to think that.

"She did." She nods and moves around the room, trailing her fingertips over the hutch, pausing to look at framed photos, and stopping when she gets to the jars of collectibles.

"What's up, Mom?" Heart-to-heart conversations aren't exactly our forte and yet I have a feeling that's what's coming.

And it's the last thing I want right now.

My emotions are being held together by broken strings. One sharp tug on them and the whole basket will break and everything will spill out.

"I don't know." She sighs.

She knows. She most definitely knows.

"Dad's okay?"

She smiles softly. "Yes. He loves being back at home even if that means we are constantly fighting over me telling him he has to stay in bed and rest. You know how stubborn he can be." She picks up a paperweight I made Gran in the fourth grade, studies it, and then sets it back down. "He has a long road to recovery. Zero to little stress needed as they are worried about his heart and the toll this whole accident has put on it. I swear Cassie's death broke it all those years ago and he never recovered from it. It was always you kids and the business that mattered the most to him. Rhett and his twin girls."

But it's right here on the printout. The blood type. That means he can't be ...

I don't know where the memory comes from or why the nurse's words come back right now. But they do, and they sit, and they hold weight.

I shake the crazy thoughts away. I must have heard it wrong. I must have misunderstood what they were talking about.

"He's going to make a full recovery, Mom."

"Yes." She nods and keeps moving. "And you and Rhett? You're good."

"We've never really been good, but we manage."

"I hate that. Just simply hate that," she says as she smiles at a picture of my dad as a young boy. "And you and Chad? Have you had a moment to sit and talk and reconcile?"

My sigh stops her. It's loud and obtuse and on purpose. "Say what you want to say, Mom."

"We haven't talked since ... everything happened." She waves a hand in irrelevance. "But I think it's time we do."

Fucking awesome. I'm here to avoid this discussion, and now she's forcing me into it.

"I'm going to be blunt," she starts. "You chose the wrong man. Yes, both are handsome in their own right, but one is kind and forgiving and right for you. The other is ... is using you."

How right she is on that one.

"I chalk Mr. Knight up to being a dalliance. A need to sow your wild oats before settling down with the man you plan to spend the rest of your life with. You sowed them, but I think you accidentally let your heart get in the way, didn't you? Now it's broken—now he broke it—and you don't know how to find your way back."

I stare at her with tears in my eyes. Yep, my heart is broken all right, but nothing else she says is true.

At least on my end of it.

"So I'm going to start. I'm going to show you how to find the way back. I'm not mad at you, Rowan. We all make mistakes. The mistakes only serve to show us the light and what path we should take instead. No one is mad at you. We all just want the best for you. We all love you and we all just want you to make this right."

I hiccup over the sob that happens. I hate that it does, but it does, and she's at my side in a second. She sits on her knees before me, looking up at me with my hands in hers.

"I didn't cancel anything yet. I mean, I was going to. The deposits were already lost so there was no rush, but I had planned on it, and then Dad got hurt and I simply—maybe conveniently forgot to." She squeezes my hands. "You can still do this, Rowan. You sowed your oats, now let Chad mend your broken heart. He's a good man. He's an even better friend. No one will think twice over you wanting this."

The woman is actually crazy. I cheat on my fiancé, things are called off, and she *forgets* to cancel the wedding? Like ... oh my god.

"Mom. I don't want this."

"Yes. You do. You want this and it's just fear pushing you to act out. A lifetime commitment is a scary thing but in time you'll see what we've always known, that Chad is the best person suited for you."

"Mom," I say sternly.

"The guests will come at a moment's notice," she says right over me. "They love our two families so much and can't wait to help celebrate with us. For you."

I close my eyes and wish her away.

Unfortunately, when I open them, she's still there.

It didn't work.

"Call Chad. Talk to him. Reconcile with him. It's really for the best."

I know there is nothing I can say right now that will make her stop. Nothing. So I say the only thing I know that will get her to leave.

"I'll consider it. But I need time. Space. Quiet."

There's nothing I gain by marrying him. Not anymore. Not for two years at least.

But she doesn't know that, and the way her face lights up when I say I'll consider it means her work is done and she'll leave me be so I can chart my own course.

She reins her hope back in. "Yes. Sure. Of course."

And as I watch her pull out of the driveway with hope plastered on her face, all I feel is despair.

FIFTY-NINE

Rowan

Music is blaring.

The wine has been flowing.

And I'm letting loose because if I don't then I'm going to snap.

Penelope Piccadilly. The name is like an alliteration in my head I can't stop saying and wish I'd never heard before.

Why did you lie to me, Holden?

Why are you hiding who you are?

Why do I even want to know?

Because online, it looks like your life only existed from your twenties on. Everything mentioning your childhood is generic without specifics.

Did your brother even exist or was that just a ruse to get in close to me? To make me feel like you understood how I felt about Cassie?

Fuck you, Holden Knight.

Fuck you.

I shimmy around the room, lost in the pop song and the anger that I can't seem to shake. Maybe I don't want to.

But I stumble—a bottle of wine will do that to you—and hit a stack I've yet to go through. Papers fall. I wave a hand toward them. I'll get to you in a minute. But then I see the canceled check flutter to the ground and land on the papers that fell.

I squat down to pick it up and laugh. Only Gran would have a real canceled check when the rest of us make do with scanned copies online.

Curiosity has me looking. The check is from an account named Monarch LLC for an even \$100,000 made out to a Kevin Monarch. The memo section says *RR—final payment*. *Paid in full*.

RR? Rupert Rothschild?

And why in the hell would she have made payments on something as late as a year ago, by the date of the check, for my dad? Bettermint Bank. Wasn't that where the guy called from? My brain tries to reach in its recesses past all the chaos of the past few weeks to remember our conversation. I struggle with it.

But it's when I take a seat on the ground to think more about it that I see it, the paper-clipped stack of papers sitting on the floor beside me with a printed email askew on top.

An email from Gran to one Mr. Henry Williams, Esquire.

Henry-

I am not particularly pleased with how you wrote the details in this addendum. We have been acquaintances for a long time yet it feels like you are trying to take advantage of me in my old age.

I am emailing you so my requests are on record but have a written list of changes to physically hand to you. As we spoke about on the phone, I need to see you in person so we can go over these adjustments.

You have the verbiage all wrong and I need to discuss the implementation of several of my new changes.

I'm more than aware it is in your best interest to have this addendum done and signed as soon as possible because it includes that newly included "endowment" we agreed upon to your family charity. I'm hoping that will motivate you to fit a house call to me into your busy schedule.

Yes, I'm saying do your job and you'll be rewarded.

Please pick out a time at your discretion to come see me. Bring a notary. As per usual, I am old-school. I refuse to sign this in that online way. I want my pen on your paper and in my handwriting.

Time is of the essence. To my dismay, I'm not going to live forever.

Eleanor

Wow. Just ... but when I look at the date of the email, that wow becomes a vociferous holy shit. The email was written and obviously printed the week before Gran passed away. I stayed with her that entire week. She had no access to a computer after that. Henry Williams did not visit her.

She did not e-sign any addendum.

She did not personally sign anything.

Henry Williams, you corrupt son of a bitch.

I'd be happy to provide the signature custody chain to you. We signed it right here in our office. The IP address on the custody chain will reflect that.

You e-signed it for her so you could guarantee yourself that newly added endowment for your personal gain.

I scan the pages behind it. Gran's original will that offers me the \$30 million upon my nuptials after a waiting period of only thirty days. I see the addendum that gives Henry \$1 million to his charity.

Thirty million dollars after being married for thirty days.

I knock over my glass of wine but don't give a fuck as I scramble for my phone. For the first time in forever I feel hope. I feel possibility.

"Miss Rothschild." Henry picks up on the second ring.

"You actually answered."

"Yes. Well, you caught me in a rare moment. It is way too late to be entertaining calls from clients. You can call back in the morn—"

"You lied," I grit into the phone. "You lied and I have all the paperwork to prove it. To get you disbarred. To sue you for fucking fraud."

I'm met with dead silence on the other end. The clearing of his throat. A soft "Excuse me, I need to take this" to whoever is with him.

"Ready to talk now?" I ask.

"Miss—Rowan, I simply don't know what you're speaking of."

"Yes, you do. She never signed the addendum. She never signed it because she sent an email to you, and I was with her every day from there on after."

"She came into my office—"

"That's bullshit and you and I both know it."

"You can't prove anything."

I chuckle and it is unforgiving. "But I can." His silence speaks volumes. "Here's what you're going to do, Henry. You're going to void my gran's addendum. The one you signed for her so you could receive whatever it is you conned her into leaving you. And if you void that addendum, I will not get you disbarred."

"What is it you want out of this, Rowan?"

Forgive me, Gran, for going against your wishes but sometimes you have to play dirty to win.

"I want my inheritance parameters reverted back to the original version of the trust—that it's to be received thirty days after I'm married. The only one that Gran signed. Then I want you to remember this phone call, this moment, and remember at all times that you owe me. And when I call in a favor to Westmore's esteemed Henry Williams, I want you to do what I ask without batting a fucking eyelash." *Holy shit.* "Is that understood?"

He clears his throat but doesn't speak.

And then I lie. "Louder, please, so the recording can pick it up."

"Yes. That's clear."

"Good to hear."

SIXTY

Rowan

I pace back and forth.

I have been for hours.

My adrenaline was high. Then it crashed. And now my wheels are turning and I can't stop thinking. There's only one feasible answer.

One right answer.

Get the \$30 million and try to buy back what Holden is going to sell off.

Beat him at his own game. TinSpirits still matters to me, even now.

I grab my phone and dial.

Ring.

Ring.

Ring.

"Rowan?"

"Chad? Hi. We need to talk."

SIXTY-ONE Holden

"Is there a reason you're here?"

I look up to see Audrey standing in the doorway. "Hey," I say. "What time is it?"

"You slept here."

"There's a couch." I point to the one behind her.

"Like I said, why are you here?"

I twist my lips and look at the tabs on my computer screen. Each one a different version of the same letter to Rowan. One a threat for her to get her ass back to work. Another a gentler version telling her we need to keep moving forward. Another a mix of the two.

That and it's easier than going home. Alone.

Besides, Rowan has to slip in here sometime to work, so if I don't leave then she'll be forced to see me.

You're talking out of both sides of your mouth, Holden. One side sleeps in the office on the off chance you'll see her, and the other says this is for the best.

There is no happy medium.

Quit trying to make one.

"Just lining everything up. I have everything coming to fruition soon and I need to make sure I didn't miss anything."

"Oh." She twists her lips. "And here I thought you were trying to avoid hearing the bells."

"The bells?"

She nods subtly. "Yes. The ones Westmore rings every time someone gets married."

That's what those mean?

"Audrey." I scrub a hand over my face. "I'm tired. I've worked all night. I'm not exactly following you."

"I take it you weren't invited to the wedding of the century then?"

I glance at my calendar. October 13. Dread is a steady trickle down my spine. "Audrey?" Her name is a mixture of every emotion possible. "Whose?" I ask but already know the answer.

"Rowan and Chad's."

SIXTY-TWO

Holden

I pound on the locked door of the venue's bridal suite. I'm out of breath from running around this whole goddamn complex trying to find her.

But I have.

And now I'm desperate.

The voices on the other side fall silent.

"Who is it?" someone calls out.

"I need to speak to Rowan, please," I say through the locked door.

"She's busy."

"I'm not leaving."

"She's not going to talk to you," the person says sternly.

"Either she talks to me or I make a scene and object at the wedding."

Silence.

Then hushed voices. Several *It's fine* voiced by Rowan, before the door is opened and a litany of people file out—bridesmaids, I presume—none of whom meet my eyes as they do so.

Except for Sloane. She shoots daggers my way.

It's only when the parade ends and I step inside that I'm met with Rowan standing in the middle of the room. She has a white robe on, her hair and makeup are done.

She's fucking breathtaking.

It takes everything I have not to pick her up and haul her out of here. To make whatever promises she needs to be made so that I can claim her as mine.

But I can't.

Won't.

"I don't want to talk to you," she says quietly. "Go away."

"No. Absolutely not. We need to talk."

"Why? So you can lie to me some more? So you can use me some more? Build me up to fuck me and my family and everything over *some more*?"

I take a step toward her and she takes a step back. And this isn't some game she's playing; there is real, true trepidation in her expression.

"We ... I just need..." Get the fucking words out, Holden. "I can't change who I am."

"I didn't want you to. I loved you because of who you were. But I won't accept the lies and I can't be with someone I can't trust."

"Isn't that why we're where we are? Because I didn't lie to you? Because I told you I couldn't promise what you'd asked?"

"Are you from Fairmont, Holden?"

Of all the things I expected her to ask or say, that was not it. "What?"

"Guess who I met last week. *Penelope Piccadilly*." It feels like someone has punched me in the gut. *What?* "Funny how those pesky exes come back at the most inopportune time."

What the fuck is she talking about?

"I don't know what you're talking about." My voice sounds like gravel over sandpaper when I speak.

"Sure you do, but like all your other lies, you don't know how to cover this one up, do you?"

"Rowan—"

"Don't *Rowan* me." She yanks her arm out of reach from me, and we stand staring at each other. I've been found out and it's way too fucking early in my timeline of events for this to be known.

My guard goes up. That wall I've built around me, the one I've let her deconstruct brick by fucking brick, goes back up in an instant. The suit of armor I've worn for so goddamn long, the one I took off for her, now suddenly feels like it doesn't fit anymore.

But I don't have a choice.

I put it on. I suffer through the stifling suffocation it feels like. And I prepare for battle—because that's the only thing I know how to do.

"You did all this for what? To turn a profit? To make a shit ton of money? To—"

"That and more." I shrug nonchalantly, trying to ignore the wedding dress hanging a few feet away. Telling myself this never could have been, so why act like it's something I'd entertain.

"It's like you have this vendetta against me. Against my family. To make it hurt the most and make us suffer as much as possible. Only sick fucks find joy in other people's pain."

I force a swallow over the acrid taste in my mouth. "We all have our reasons, *Sunshine*." Her nickname is laced with sarcasm that I don't feel in the least.

"Reasons?" she screeches. "What about fucking the person you're trying to screw over? What about letting them fall in love with you when all you are is lies? Is that your reason? Are those your reasons? What about—You know what, I..." She holds her hands up as her voice breaks. The sound almost brings me to my knees. "I've been hurt enough. I'm done."

I stand before her, stone-faced, while concertina wire tightens around my heart.

She doesn't know the truth about Mason.

She hasn't connected my past to her brother and Chad.

That's the endgame.

Those secrets need to stay close to the vest.

Those secrets are why I came here.

I've dealt with pain way worse than this before.

I can handle this. No fucking problem.

SIXTY-THREE

Rowan

I stand looking at a man I'm in love with while knowing I'm about to marry another.

One is wrong for me. One will give me what I need.

One makes me feel alive—even now. And the other doesn't make me feel anything.

My chest hurts so badly, and all I keep thinking is I can't cry. I can't mess up my makeup because it wouldn't be fair to my makeup artist to have to redo it after all her hard work.

That and it's so much easier to think about my fucking makeup than it is to think about how much my heart surged in my chest when I heard Holden's voice on the other side of that door.

Every little girl dreams of the man coming to save her from making the mistake.

Too bad that as much as I want Holden Knight, he is also the mistake.

But I have one more question to ask before I can let this go. One more nail to put in the coffin my heart resides in.

"Do you love me, Holden?" I whisper, my voice getting stronger with each word. "Were you actually falling for me or did you say that, imply that, just so I'd give you every part of me so you could break me all over again?"

His jaw clenches and his nostrils flare but he doesn't respond.

"You want to know why I was going to marry Chad? Why I stayed the course? Because I must have known you were too goddamn good to be true. And lookee here. With your lies and your deception and your plans, the only thing you did was prove me right."

He nods ever so slightly. Almost as if he is welcoming my words. Almost as if he's welcoming the pain they bring because he deserves the punishment.

"I love you, Holden. I'm in love with you. But you stand there with your unflinching posture and your hard gaze and you don't say a single word back to me. And your silence proves to me that love was built on a lie." *Tell me you love me*. "That I was nothing more than a pawn in your game." *Please tell me I wasn't crazy*. "You asked me to step into the gray with you and here I am, standing in that gray, but then there's you, standing on the other side. There's you, still coated in black."

SIXTY-FOUR

Holden

There's you, still coated in black.

"Can I help you, man?" the bartender asks as I stumble up to the outdoor bar.

"Yes." I glance around like seeing the bottles is going to add any clarity. "Six shots. Please. Just line them up."

Six shots.

Sixty minutes.

Then she's his.

"Preference?"

"Something that's going to make it hurt," I say.

"Usually people are drinking like that to take away the hurt," he says as he sets up six empty shot glasses. "But the customer's always right. Coming right up." He pats a hand on the counter and smiles. "You got a name?"

"Holden Simpson." I'm not sure where that comes from. Maybe it's because right now I feel as desperate as I was the last time I used that name.

"Great. I'll take care of you."

The first one goes down way too fucking smooth.

Stepping backward and out her door while she stood there with eyes begging me to tell her the truth—that I am in fucking love with her—will forever be seared in my brain.

The second just as easy.

"Fight me," she shrieked. "Fucking fight me."

But I couldn't then just like I couldn't today. She is not the plan. She's never been part of the plan.

The third has no taste.

Fuck you, Chad. The thought of him touching her makes my stomach pitch. The thought of her letting him even more.

The fourth has lost its burn.

You couldn't tell her you love her. The one time it mattered in your life to speak up, to sound off, to be honest, and you fucking choked. You couldn't tell her you loved her and that's on fucking you, Knight. That is on fucking you.

The fifth tastes like water.

And yet the pain is still there. Stronger than before as I picture her in that dress that was hanging up beside her. As I imagine her walking down that aisle toward me. As I think of the chaos we could sow together.

The bells ring as I'm lifting the sixth to my lips.

My chest constricts and my mouth falls dry despite the shot I just threw back.

She's gone.

She's his.

I love you, Rowan.

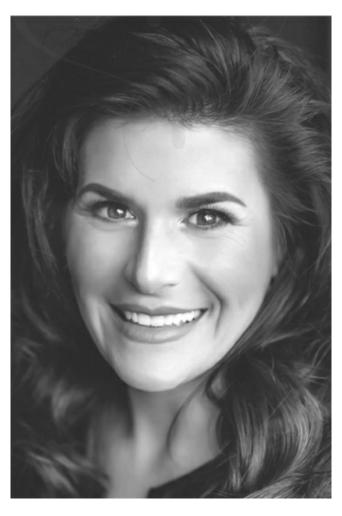
I went and did the unthinkable. I fell. But what I can't allow myself is the grace or the weakness to have what I fell for. What I want. You.

I fucking love you.

ALSO BY <u>K. BROMBERG</u>

Twisted Knight

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



New York Times bestselling author K. Bromberg writes contemporary romance novels that contain a mixture of sweetness, emotions, a whole lot of sex, and a little bit of realness. She likes to write strong heroines and damaged heroes, who we love to hate but can't help but love.

Since publishing her first book on a whim in 2013, Bromberg has sold more than two million copies of her books across twenty different countries and has landed on the New York Times, USA Today, and Wall Street Journal bestseller lists more than thirty times. (She still wakes up and asks herself how she got so lucky for all this to happen.)

A mom of three, Bromberg finds the only thing harder than finishing the book she's writing is navigating parenthood during the teenage years (send more wine!). She loves dogs, sports, a good book, and is an expert procrastinator. She lives in Southern California with her family and their dogs.

> Visit her online at kbromberg.com, or sign up for email updates here. Facebook.com/AuthorKBromberg Twitter: @KBrombergDriven Instagram: @kbromberg





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Also by K. Bromberg
About the Author
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