

A romantic couple embracing. The woman has long dark hair and is wearing a white long-sleeved top. The man has short brown hair and is wearing a black tank top. They are both smiling and looking at each other. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

A
BRITISH
BILLIONAIRE
ROMANCE

Captivated

APRIL WILSON
LAURA RILEY

Captivated

British Billionaire Romance Series

Book 2

by

April Wilson

Laura Riley

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Cover by Steamy Designs

Proofread by Adelle Mehdi

Published by

April E. Barnswell/

Wilson Publishing LLC

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* * *

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* * *

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Character List

Main Characters

Kennedy Takahashi, 28 yrs old, Japanese-American; Brooklyn, NY; a global financial risk assessment analyst

Connor Murphy, 23 yrs old, London, England; a capital investment account manager

Other Characters

Fitzwilliam Carmichael II (Will), 35 yrs old, Connor's close friend; works for Carmichael & Son Capital Investments

Skye Williams-Carmichael, 28 yrs old, Will's English-American wife; Kennedy's close friend

Penelope Carmichael, 4 yrs old, Skye and Will's daughter

Nicholas Carmichael, Skye and Will's newborn son

Brenda Williams, 58 yrs old, Skye's American mother

Maggie, 62 yrs old; Will's British housekeeper who travels with them

Sarah Allen, 54 yrs old; Connor's housekeeper in London

Bruce Allen, 54 yrs old; Connor's chauffeur in London, Sarah's husband

Haru Takahashi, 50 yrs old; Kennedy's father

Akiko Takahashi, 48 yrs old; Kennedy's mother

Yuki Takahashi, 70 yrs old; Kennedy's grandmother

Chapter 1

Kennedy Takahashi

I love New York City in the morning. I love the sound of bustling street traffic accompanied by the frantic blaring of car horns, bicyclists darting between cars, crowded sidewalks, the scent of freshly-baked bagels wafting out of deli doors, the hypnotizing aroma of fresh-ground coffees. It's one of a kind.

But it's not London.

It never will be.

Here in the Big Apple, there are no red double-decker buses lining the busy streets, no fish and chip shops on every block, no authentic British pubs with well-worn, centuries-old wooden floors on every corner.

And there's no Connor Murphy.

After five years, I still think about him. I still miss him, and I'm afraid I always will. Connor left a massive hole in my heart I don't think will ever heal.

Even now, I wonder if I did the right thing by leaving him.

At the time, I didn't think I had any other choice. We were so young then, and I had no defense against his father's

powerful family. I was trying to protect Connor, and I succeeded. But at what cost? I abandoned him. I *hurt* him. And if he was telling the truth at the time, I broke his heart—that sweet, funny, goofball heart of his.

I've never met anyone like him, and I doubt I ever will.

In hindsight, maybe I was too quick to leave. Maybe I should have told him what his grandfather said to me. But he was so young then—just nineteen. And so impetuous. I didn't want him throwing away his future—his massive inheritance—for me.

Anyway, it's too late to do anything about it now. Connor's probably married to the daughter of a British aristocrat by now. I know his grandfather, Reginald Murphy, had big plans for his sole heir. Plans that didn't include his grandson settling down with a Japanese-American girl—a *foreigner*.

I can still hear the hateful words Mr. Murphy said to me the day we attended his ninetieth birthday party. Even now, they make my chest ache.

I have to force myself to shake off these painful, bittersweet memories of my time with Connor. I try to forget the circumstances that sent me fleeing London and returning to

New York. I think the only people who were happy about my decision to return home were my parents and *Sobo*—my grandmother.

This morning, on a sunny Friday in June, I arrive at my office building and step through the front revolving glass doors.

The doorman, a sweet old gentleman with dark skin, buzzed white hair, and a beaming smile, tips his hat to me, as he does every morning. “Good morning, miss.”

I return his infectious smile. “Good morning, Mr. Walker.”

I know his name because he’s wearing a nametag.

Crossing the spacious lobby, I head for the bank of elevators and hope to catch an available car to take me up to the twenty-third floor where my employer, Wentner Global Investments, is located. My knock-off beige heels—which match my pencil skirt and jacket ensemble—click sharply on the polished marble floors, the sound echoing through the cavernous space. As I hurry past the visitor’s desk, I swipe my badge to get through the employee turnstile.

It’s an impressive building, professional and upscale. Everything is trimmed in gold, and the floors are polished

marble. It's prestigious and a bit stuffy, but working for Wentner is doing amazing things for my resume as a global financial analyst. After my stint here, I'll be able to work anywhere in the world I want—Tokyo, Shanghai, Paris, Berlin. Even back in London if I wanted to.

I wonder if Carmichael & Son Capital Investments would take me back after I left them so precipitously. I could always ask Will Carmichael for a job—he's the son of the company's CEO and founder. I'm still close to him and his wife, Skye, a fellow American.

Quit thinking about London.

Quit thinking about *him*.

I manage to slip into an elevator—or *lift*, as Connor would have said—just as the doors begin to close.

Stop it.

My brain has this stupid habit of translating American words into their British equivalents. *Lift, boot, petrol, crisps.*

Inside the elevator, the crowd shifts to make room for me. “Thanks,” I say, giving everyone a grateful smile before I turn to face forward. The button for my floor is already pressed.

“Kennedy, hi.”

I hear some shuffling of bodies behind me, and suddenly someone is looming over me. I glance back to see Marty Anderson standing directly behind me. He towers over my five-four height. “Oh, hey, Marty.” *Crap*. I smile politely. *Please don't ask me out again. Especially not in an elevator full of people.*

Marty doesn't seem to understand the meaning of the word *no*. I've lost track of how many times he's asked, and I've gently declined. I'm just not interested.

The elevator continues its ascent, stopping a few times to let passengers off. Eventually, we stop at my floor. The doors slide open, and I step out onto the twenty-third floor, directly into Wentner's impressive foyer. It's a conservative office, with lots of dark wood and gold trim, glass doors featuring etched floral designs, and flower arrangements that cost about as much as my monthly grocery bill. Fancy.

Connor would have called it *posh*.

Stop it.

I wave at Stephanie, who's seated at the front desk.

“Good morning, Steph,” I say as I pass her desk and head down the hall to my cubicle.

“Morning, Kennedy.” She waves distractedly as she answers her desk phone.

Wentner embraces a modern, open floorplan office model, with clusters of cubicles scattered throughout the floor. The front wall is all windows overlooking the Manhattan skyline. And there are a dozen conference rooms along the back wall. There’s a snack bar and a coffee kiosk that everyone shares.

On the way to my workspace, as I pass the coffee kiosk, I spot Lauren Daniels standing in line for her usual caramel macchiato. Lauren is a graphic designer in the marketing department, and my best friend here. “Lauren, I love your hair!” Usually, she straightens it, but today she’s wearing her natural corkscrew curls. I envy her. My hair is stick straight and can’t hold a curl for more than an hour.

Lauren grins as she twirls a strand around her index finger. “Thanks. Lunch today? I’m craving sushi.”

“You bet. I’ll double-check my calendar, but I’m pretty sure I’m free.”

There’s an amazing sushi cafe just two blocks from our building. Their rolls are amazing—all custom made to order. And their sauces are divine. Personally, I’ve got a weakness for their Thai peanut sauce and their sweet chili.

I scurry the last few yards and make it to my cubicle just in time. I'm trying to make a good impression because annual reviews are coming up soon, to be followed by a slate of promotions. I want one of those promotions. I've been working my butt off to ensure I get one. My boss, Jamal, has been hinting lately that I'm in the running to get one.

Once I'm settled into my chair, I turn on my PC.

Marty walks past me, pausing at the opening to my cube. "Hey, Kennedy. Want to grab lunch today?"

"Gee, I'm sorry, Marty. I already made plans with Lauren."

His smile falls. "Oh, sure. Maybe next time."

Fortunately, I'm spared a reply because he's already moved on.

Marty is one of those guys who doesn't take hints well.

While my PC is booting up, I check my phone for messages.

There's just one text, from my best friend's husband—Fitzwilliam Carmichael II—otherwise known as Will. No one calls him Fitzwilliam—that's his father. Right now, Will and Skye are at their home in Cincinnati, Ohio. They usually split

their time between Cincinnati and London, England, where Will is from. But since Skye just gave birth a week ago to their second child, a baby boy, they're staying in the US until the baby's a little bit older.

Will: Sorry it's short notice, but can you come for the weekend? Come meet your new godson. There's a flight out of JFK today at 4. Penny says pretty please with a cherry on top. She misses her auntie. Pls come. I already bought your ticket. It's waiting for you at the airline counter.

Four o'clock? I quickly work backwards. I'd have to be at the airport by two, which means I'd need to go home right after lunch, pack, then grab an Uber to the airport. I make a mental note to tell my neighbors I'll be gone for the weekend so they don't worry when they don't see me for a few days. I sigh. It's very short notice, but I've been dying to see the new baby. And I really miss Skye.

I text Will back.

Kennedy: Yes. I'm coming.

Will: Brilliant. Hamish will meet you at the airport.

I'm looking forward to seeing my friends. I'm even looking forward to seeing Hamish, Will's burly Scottish chauffeur who travels with them. I love his gruff accent.

But first things first. I head to my boss's office and knock.

“Come in,” calls a deep male voice with a strong New York Bronx accent.

I pop my head into his office. “Hi, Jamal. Have you got a minute?”

“Sure, Kennedy.” He waves me in. “What’s up?”

Jamal is more than a boss; he’s also my mentor here at Wentner. He’s been championing me since I started working here five years ago. He’s a striking figure in his short braids and Armani suit.

I take the seat in front of his desk. “Remember when I told you my friend Skye was having a baby?”

He nods. “I recall that conversation, yes.”

“Well, she’s had him—he’s a boy.”

Jamal chuckles. “I gathered as much.”

I smile apologetically. “I know this is short notice, but I’d like to go see them this weekend. If it’s okay with you, my flight leaves at four. I hope you don’t mind.”

Jamal leans back in his chair and links his fingers over his dark gray vest. His fingers are adorned with heavy gold rings, some monogrammed, and some encrusted with gemstones. I can see the tattoos on his wrists peeking out from beneath his

white dress shirt sleeves. His knuckles bear numerous scars from an adolescent career in boxing, prior to him being awarded a scholarship to Columbia University and majoring in finance—just like I did.

“Since you’re my favorite employee,” he says, “sure. Not a problem.” He waves toward the door. “Go. I’ll see you on Monday.”

“Thanks. You’re the best.” I jump to my feet and head for the door. At the last second, I stop and glance back. “And Jamal?”

“Yes?” His dark eyes twinkle as he smiles.

“You say that to all your employees.”

His booming laugh follows me out his office door.

* * *

I work through the morning, trying to tie up some loose ends on an assessment I’m working on. Unfortunately, I have to ask Lauren for a raincheck on lunch. At noon, I head for the station and catch the next train back to my apartment in Brooklyn.

On the ride home, I make a list of all the things I need to do before I leave. I have to pack and tell Mrs. Philbin where

I'm going for the weekend so she doesn't worry—she's prone to worrying. Oh, and I need to ask her to take care of Betty for me while I'm gone—my spider plant. I'll have to tell Ms. Talisman, too, another neighbor who lives on my floor. She also worries about me. They're both elderly widows who think it's their job to look after me. Actually, we take turns watching out for each other.

I'm thrilled that I'll get to spend the weekend with two of my best friends. Will's a freaking bazillionaire who could live anywhere he wants, and half the year he lives on a farm outside of Cincinnati, Ohio, Skye's hometown. Will owns numerous properties in England, and he and Skye have since bought a castle in Scotland. Granted, it's a small one, as far as castles go, but still it's a legit castle. It's on the historical register, or whatever they call it in the UK. And in addition to their many UK properties, they own a large parcel of land on the outskirts of Cincinnati, where they spend half the year to be near Skye's mom, who's an economics professor at University of Cincinnati.

That's true love for you. Will would do anything to make Skye happy.

I envy them for their fairytale love story and happy-ever-after marriage. And to think, I was there when they first met. Skye had come to London for a year-long internship in finance after completing her master's degree in the US. She and I met at Carmichael & Son Capital Investments, where we were roommates sharing a two-bedroom flat not far from London's financial district.

I was a firsthand witness to their blossoming romance. I was at their wedding, and I was there for the birth of their first child, Penelope.

Of course Connor was there, too, at both of those events. That was the last time I saw him—at Penny's birth, a little over four years ago. God, it was hard seeing him again. Being in the same room with him—hardly speaking and avoiding eye contact—was sheer agony. My heart longed for him so badly I struggled not to stare at him. He was obviously still angry at me for what I did. The few times I caught him looking my way, he glared at me.

I'm not proud of what I did, but I wouldn't change it for the world. Even though I didn't tell him exactly why I left, I did tell him it wasn't his fault. Unfortunately, I don't think he believed me.

Suddenly, I'm struck by a horrifying thought. Surely Will didn't invite Connor this weekend, too. That's the last thing I need. It's been four years since I've seen that silly, sexy, handsome face. He was nineteen when I left, five years younger than I was at the time. He was young and impulsive, and so much fun to be with. He's twenty-three now. All grown up.

I send a quick text to Will just to be sure.

Kennedy: You didn't invite Connor, too, did you?

Will: I haven't spoken to Connor in ages.

I sigh in relief. I really couldn't handle seeing Connor again.

The Brooklyn-bound train pulls into my station, and I disembark and walk the remaining distance to my apartment building on Normandy Lane, located in a quaint old neighborhood of red brick apartment buildings. Along the way, I pass the neighborhood grocery store, a pharmacy, a vintage clothing shop, a smoke shop, several restaurants, a bookstore, a coffee shop, and an ice cream parlor. All the creature comforts are within walking distance of my apartment.

I've lived here in Brooklyn, not far from the Brooklyn Bridge, since I returned to New York and started working at Wentner. Rent is ridiculously expensive in New York City these days, but I lucked out with this apartment. It's small—just a three-hundred-square-foot studio—but it's enough for me.

Fortunately, it's June and the temperature is ideal for walking. When I reach my building, I race up the smooth stone steps to the front door.

Before I can retrieve my key, the door opens and Ms. Talisman steps outside. She's eighty years old and very self-sufficient. As always, she's dressed in her finest as if she's on her way to church, a matching hat perched on top of her head. She wears her white hair short, and her skin is dark as night, as are her sharp, shrewd eyes. “Kennedy, what are you doing home at this hour? Shouldn't you be at work? Is everything okay?”

“Everything's fine. I left work early because I'm flying to Cincinnati this afternoon. I'm going to go meet my new godson.”

“How nice.” She pats my shoulder. “Have a safe trip, dear. A young lady travelling alone can't be too careful.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

As she continues on her way, I step inside the building foyer and stop to collect my mail—all junk mail flyers, unfortunately, which go straight into the recycling bin. Then I race up the stairs to the second floor, where my studio apartment is located. There are four apartments on each floor of my three-story building. I share the second floor with two sweet old ladies who have taken me under their wings and a young couple who work for a nonprofit agency in Brooklyn.

I let myself into my apartment, set my purse down on the tiny dining table that seats two, and quickly change out of my suit into a pair of tan cotton shorts, a white blouse, and sneakers. I grab the suitcase from underneath my bed and start packing.

I’m not sure what I should bring, so I throw a little bit of everything into my case. I’m going only for a weekend, so I do my best to pack lightly—one pair of slacks, a pair of jeans, two pairs of shorts. It’s summer, so it’s hot. I pack a couple of sleeveless tops and one casual dress. At the last minute I toss in a pair of sandals. I grab my cosmetics bag, shampoo, and razor and throw it all in. Last, and most important, my tablet and charger go into my carry-on bag.

I arrange for an Uber to take me to the airport. John F. Kennedy International Airport is located in nearby Queens, so it's not a long trip by bus or train, but I don't want to risk being late for my flight. While I'm waiting for my ride, I grab Betty, my spider plant, and run across the hall to knock on Mrs. Philbin's door.

I wait patiently for her to answer. She uses a walker to get around, so she's not moving very quickly these days.

Mrs. Philbin opens her door. "Kennedy!" She smiles brightly, then her gaze drops to the plant in my hands. "Are you going somewhere?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm going to visit my friends in Cincinnati this weekend. I was wondering if you'd watch Betty while I'm gone."

"Of course, honey. I'd be happy to." She steps aside to let me enter. "Put her in the usual place."

"Thank you so much." I set Betty on a small table near a window. "I'll be back Sunday afternoon."

Mrs. P grabs my hand and squeezes it hard. "Now, you be careful, young lady. Keep your eyes open and watch out for nefarious characters."

I smile because she reminds me so much of my grandma.

“I will. I promise.”

When my driver arrives, I lug my suitcase downstairs to the curb. The trunk is already open, so I drop my luggage inside and close the lid. Then I slide into the backseat.

“Kennedy Takahashi?” the driver asks.

“Yes. To JFK, please,” I say, confirming the destination.

And then we’re off, heading to Queens.

After buckling my seatbelt, I lean back and take a moment to catch my breath. Today has been a whirlwind day, and it’s not even half over.

Chapter 2

Connor Murphy

Nearing the end of a rather turbulent flight from Heathrow to JFK International, I'm more than a little relieved when the airport finally comes into sight. I gaze out the small round window on my right at the large expanse of asphalt as we make our final approach. When the wheels touch down, the plane shudders, and the tires screech until finally the aircraft comes to a stop.

I relax in my seat in business class as the plane eventually taxis to the gate. When the seatbelt light turns off, passengers stand and start collecting their belongings to disembark.

As I'm surrounded by American accents, I can't help thinking of Kennedy. I loved her American accent. I'd make her repeat words just to hear it. We'd play a silly game by which I'd say a word, and she'd say the American equivalent.

"Lift," I'd say.

"Elevator," she'd reply.

"Chips."

"French fries."

“Crisps.”

“Potato chips.”

“Petrol.”

“Gasoline.”

“Boot,” I’d say.

She’d smile and say, “Trunk.” She always thought that one was especially funny.

I’d pronounce *al-yoo-min-ee-um*, and she’d laugh.

“It’s *uh-loo-mi-num*, silly,” she’d say.

“Ha! That’s where you’re wrong,” I’d say. “There’s an extra *i* in there you’re not pronouncing. Gotcha!”

I chuckle to myself. That silly game never got old. God, I loved teasing her. Getting her riled up was my favorite pastime. It was worth it just to watch her cheeks turn pink. And then I’d kiss her, and that would inevitably lead to—*stop thinking about her. It just makes you miserable.*

The captain comes on over the loudspeaker to thank us for flying with him and telling us to have a good day. The exit door opens, and the first passengers disembark.

I don't rush to get up, instead spending a few minutes composing myself. I've never been a fan of flying. But the good news is, I survived yet another cross-Atlantic flight. Eventually, I stand and lazily fan out the lapels of my jacket. This was an impromptu trip. I came straight from the office to the airport, not bothering to change out of my suit. Sarah, my housekeeper, had already packed a bag for me, and her husband, Bruce, my chauffeur, picked me up at Carmichael & Son and drove me to the airport.

I was surprised when Skye texted me early this morning, asking me to come for the weekend. Because of the time difference, it was the middle of the night for her. Her message was uncharacteristically abrupt.

Skye: Connor, can you come? Please? It's important.

Connor: Of course. I'll catch the first flight. Is everything all right?

I was starting to worry there was something wrong with her or the new baby.

Skye: We're okay. Just please come. And don't worry about the ticket. Will's already bought it for you.

And now, here I am, just landed in New York City. *The Big Apple.*

Where Kennedy lives.

My chest tightens painfully at the realization that she's nearby.

Kennedy. My Ken. She's so close, I can almost sense her. Part of me toys with the insane idea of taking a detour and stopping in to see her. But if I do, I'll miss my connecting flight to Cincinnati. Yes, I keep tabs on her. I know she lives in a flat in Brooklyn and that she works for a capital investment firm in Manhattan—Wentner Financial, or something like that.

I'd give anything to lay eyes on her right now. One glimpse, just to assure myself she's well and happy.

As I rise from my seat and open the overhead compartment that holds my hand luggage, my ears are filled with the sound of chattering voices and the shuffle of shoes against the thinly carpeted floor as travelers head for the exit.

My gaze roves over the cabin, and I notice but don't encourage the come-hither gazes of a pair of attractive air hostesses who are blatantly checking me out.

"Ladies," I say, giving them a cool nod. Polite, yet not encouraging. I'm not interested. Besides, I don't have time to mingle with the staff. I'm on a tight schedule—I have less than an hour to catch my connecting flight.

The young women giggle like a pair of schoolgirls as I pass by.

Throwing my bag's leather strap over my shoulder, I join the queue waiting to vacate the aircraft. As I'm seated in business class, I have to wait for first class to disembark first.

I've never cared much for flying first class. I had always thought such a luxury was solely for the indulgent rich. But when my grandfather passed away a few years ago, I became one of them. Because my father had already passed a couple of years earlier, I was the sole heir of my paternal grandfather's vast accumulation of assets. At the age of twenty, I instantly became one of the wealthiest individuals in the UK. I went from being a relative nobody to the talk of the town—in London, that is—and finding my picture showing up in tabloid papers. I was thrown into a world where money talks and flying first class isn't merely a luxury but is expected. It's taken some getting used to because, at heart, I'm still just a regular bloke.

My grandfather was a co-founder of Carmichael & Son Capital Investments, eventually becoming one of the most respected members of senior management. He was second in seniority only to Fitzwilliam Carmichael, himself—my best

friend Will's father. But with my grandfather no longer warming his office seat, the weight of his accomplishments suddenly sat on my shoulders.

With his passing, a lot of expectations were placed on *me*.

I inherited not just Reginald Murphy's bank accounts, but his many properties throughout England. I also suddenly found myself elevated from my lowly position as Will's personal assistant to a junior account manager. Suddenly, I had to learn on the job. I guess Carmichael & Son couldn't have a blue-blooded billionaire working as a personal assistant.

It looks like nepotism is alive and well.

Fortunately, as it turned out, I have good instincts when it comes to determining which clients are worthy of having our firm invest millions of pounds in them and which are not.

I had the option of either running or picking up my grandfather's mantle. I chose to do the latter. After all, what else did I have to do at the time? Nothing, because I'd already lost Kennedy Takahashi the year before.

When Kennedy left me, I lost the love of my life.

I lost my best friend.

I lost everything that mattered to me.

Oh, I've dated plenty since then, but never seriously. It's been a steady stream of girls, none of them sticking. How could they? How could they measure up to Kennedy? How could anyone?

I'm not the same man today that I was back then. I'm more mature, more seasoned, and fully dedicated to my job. Now I live to work, a machine who churns out money as easily as my grandfather did before me.

After disembarking from the plane, I claim my luggage and make my way to customs. It doesn't take me long to get through the queue as I didn't bring much with me—a few changes of clothes, toiletries, and gifts for Will and Skye's children.

Once I'm cleared, I stroll through the airport, passing bodies that hum with anticipation. Footfalls tap briskly on the tiled floor, suitcase wheels squeak as their owners weave between other travelers in their rush to make their connecting flights.

In no particular hurry, I slow my steps and take in everything that surrounds me. I nearly stumble in surprise when I spot a woman several meters ahead of me who reminds

me of Kennedy. To this day, every time I see a petite woman with silky, straight black hair, my heart misses a beat.

I'm embarrassed to admit I see her everywhere, even when I know it's impossible. Back home, I might walk into a pub or a restaurant and think I spot her across the room. Or I might think I caught a glimpse of her riding on a passing London bus. And she frequently haunts my dreams, always just out of reach.

With each wishful sighting, my heart beats overtime. But the truth is, Kennedy's gone from my life, and there's no cosmic power on earth that will deliver her back to me. Fate is not going to answer my prayers and align our paths.

I continue to the check-in desk for my connecting flight to Ohio. I'm still wondering why Skye's message sounded so urgent. I certainly hope nothing's wrong. Regardless, I'd drop everything for my friends and come running if they asked.

It's been about six months since I saw them last, in London. I can't wait to see my precocious little goddaughter, Penny, meet the new baby, and reconnect with my best mate and his wife.

As I turn a corner, I catch sight of silky-straight raven hair in my peripheral vision as a petite woman hurries past me. She

walks with purpose, her pace brisk and determined.

I stop dead in my tracks, my body going ramrod straight as I stare at the retreating form of the young woman and wonder if I'm losing my mind.

No. It can't be.

I mean, yes, she lives here in New York City—well, Brooklyn to be precise—but what are the odds I'd run into her at the airport? They're astronomical.

It must be my mind playing tricks on me.

My gaze follows the woman ahead of me, and I note the familiar-looking brown leather handbag slung over her shoulder—the one her parents got her as a gift when she finished graduate school.

It can't be her.

Still, I pick up my pace, and with my long legs, I'm halfway caught up to her in no time at all. I position myself to get a closer look, fully expecting to be disappointed. It couldn't possibly be her, could it? I'm torturing myself.

I reach her side, keeping pace with her, and glance down at the young woman's profile.

Dear god.

It's her.

It's my Kennedy.

I intentionally slow my pace, letting her pull ahead of me.

Since this can't possibly be a coincidence, it's starting to make sense now. I suspect I wasn't the only one to receive a text message saying *come now*. Those devious interlopers. They asked Kennedy to come, too. I don't know whether to throttle them or thank them.

Are they trying to torture me?

Before I realize it, Kennedy has already moved far ahead. Determined not to let this moment pass, I speed up again so I can keep her within sight. I'm about to call her name when I collide with a burly gentleman heading in the opposite direction. The overstuffed bag he's carrying falls to the floor, and miscellaneous items spill out.

"Jesus, will you watch where you're going?" the portly man complains, grunting as he bends over to retrieve his scattered belongings.

"I'm terribly sorry," I say. I know I should help him collect his things—it would be the gentlemanly thing to do—but it's

bad timing as the love of my life is about to disappear from sight.

When I look again, Kennedy is nowhere to be seen.

“I’m terribly sorry, but I’m in a rush,” I say as I sidestep the man. I hurry in the direction of the check-in counters, hoping desperately to get another glimpse of Kennedy. When she comes into my line of sight once more, standing in a long queue, I slow to a leisurely stroll. She’s taking the same flight I am. It would seem Fate is smiling on me after all. And like a hunter stalking its prey, I watch her every move.

From my vantage point behind her in the queue, I see that Kennedy Takahashi hasn’t changed one bit. She’s still slender, petite, her black hair silky straight—although it’s longer now, falling well past her shoulders. Her delicate profile is unchanged, and she’s as lovely as ever. Time has been kind to her.

How old is she now? Twenty-eight?

I, on the other hand, have changed a great deal over the past few years, to the point I doubt she’d even recognize me. I filled out considerably in my early twenties. Thanks to weight training and protein shakes, I’m more muscular now, and my shoulders are broader. My hair has changed to a slightly darker

shade of blond. And today I'm dressed like the corporate bigshot I am. I doubt she would have recognized me even if I'd stepped on her toes.

I stand quietly considering my options. If I make my presence known to her now, I risk her changing flights just to avoid me. So, I decide to bide my time and wait until we've boarded the plane before I approach her. After all, she can't jump out if we're thousands of feet in the air.

Today I'm one of the last to check in, and the last to board the plane. When I pass through the first-class section, I spot Kennedy seated by the left-hand window on the front row. She's got her nose buried in a tablet, so she doesn't notice me walking by. I continue to business class and, after stowing my hand luggage, I take my seat.

Will or Skye must have bought her plane ticket, because if Kennedy had bought it herself, she'd be seated in economy. She's always been a frugal one. When we were together, she'd count every penny. Of course, as an intern, she made hardly anything at all. Same as me. We used to scrimp and save our money so we could splurge on a pizza on the weekends. Now, I'm figuratively rolling in money. If she wanted a pizza, I

could buy her a pizzeria. I would have given her the world, if only she'd let me.

It isn't long before the plane takes off and the seat belt sign turns off, informing us that we can move about the cabin. This is my moment. I head toward the front of the aircraft.

"Can I help you, sir?" a middle-aged blonde air hostess asks with a flirty smile.

I motion forward to the curtains dividing first class from business class. "Mind if I take a look in first class? I'm pretty sure I spotted a friend when I boarded."

The woman frowns. "We're really not supposed to—"

"I know, love," I say, really laying it on thick as I gaze down into her green eyes. "But if you would indulge me for just one moment."

Her gaze darts from me to the curtain. "Well, if you make it quick."

"Absolutely. I promise." And then I push through the curtain.

Immediately, my gaze lands on Kennedy, whose attention is still on her tablet. She's probably working. She always was a bit of a workaholic. As I take her in, my chest tightens, and I

struggle to catch my breath. How is it possible that she's still so utterly captivating?

I can see only her profile from here, but it's enough for me to know that her mouth is still a perfect pink bow. Her cheeks are smooth and fine as porcelain. Her oval face is accentuated by the most intoxicating eyes I've ever seen, elegantly shaped and framed by sweeping dark lashes. I'd give anything for a chance to look directly into those dark irises again and to have her look at me the way she used to.

Before she left me.

I'm sorry, Connor. This isn't going to work. It's not your fault, it's mine.

That's what her note said. It was utter bullshit.

Her ebony hair, which she used to wear in a chin-length bob, now brushes her shoulders. She's dressed casually in a white blouse—I can't see the rest of her.

Do I make myself known to her? Do I stroll over to her seat and say, "Hey, Kennedy, fancy seeing you here."

A multitude of scenarios run through my head, but instead of acting upon any of them, I stand rooted to the spot, unable to move. I'm frozen in place as I drink her in.

As if she senses my gaze upon her, she suddenly looks up and scans the cabin until she spots me. Instantly, her dark eyes widen in shock. She frowns as she studies me—like she’s trying to reconcile the impossible.

Hey, I can relate.

It takes a moment before it sinks in—I’m really here. A flash of emotions transforms her expression—first acknowledgement, then shock, followed by something that looks suspiciously like sorrow and panic—but never once do I see anything resembling joy.

She gives me an obligatory nod, as if she’s acknowledging an old acquaintance, but the tight narrowing of her eyes tells me she isn’t pleased to see me. Clearly, she’s as surprised as I am.

Every instinct in my body urges me to go to her, but instead I force myself to remember I’m no longer the man in her life. Hell, I’m not even a friend anymore. I’m just somebody she used to date.

After fighting with myself, I finally give in, and I’m about to make my way toward her when she stands. She leans close to the man sitting at her side—my guess is she’s letting him

know she needs to pass by. The man smiles before pivoting in his seat so she can step by him.

Anger pools in my stomach, burning like acid, as I watch the man's gaze linger on her pert little ass as she passes him. I'm in two minds to go over there and wipe the smug smile off his face when it dawns on me that maybe Kennedy isn't here alone. Perhaps the stocky red-haired male at her side is her significant other. Jealousy rears its ugly head, and the need to know everything about her is overwhelming.

To my surprise, she walks right up to me, tilting her head to gaze up at me. I still tower over her, that hasn't changed.

"Hello, Connor," she says, the tone of her voice guarded.

I think I detect a slight tremor in her voice, but I can't be sure. She looks poised.

Hello, Connor?

After all these years, is that all she has to say?

I take in a slow and steady breath as I finally get my wish—I'm staring into a familiar pair of mesmerizing dark eyes.

"Hello, Kennedy."

She frowns. "I guess it isn't a coincidence that we're on the same flight."

“I guess not.” When did things between us become so damn generic? This is the woman I did the most intimate things to, the woman who I’d envisioned marrying and growing old with, and yet here we are acting as if we’re nothing more than strangers. But despite the blasé tone in her voice and the impassive way she’s looking at me, I still feel that invisible pull between us. It was there the first day I met her, and it’s here now. At least it is for me. I can’t tell what she’s feeling. She’s always been good at hiding her emotions.

Kennedy shrugs before brushing back her hair. It’s a nervous trait. “Since I assume we’re headed to the same destination, I guess I’ll be seeing you around.”

She shrugs. “I suppose so.”

Damn it, I hate how dismissive she is, as if I don’t matter one bit.

She starts to step away. “If you’ll excuse me, I was heading to the bathroom.”

“Don’t you mean the loo?” I ask, grinning.

But she doesn’t even crack a smile. As she continues on her way to the toilet, I return to my seat in business class. I’ve

always wondered how different our lives would have been had
Kennedy not left.

If she'd just given us a chance.

Chapter 3

Kennedy Takahashi

My pulse is racing when I return to my seat. Thank god Connor's nowhere in sight.

Stupid, idiotic, amazing Connor Murphy is on my freaking flight!

I keep my gaze locked on my tablet and try in vain to read an e-mail from Lauren, but I can't concentrate on the words. I read the same paragraph three times and don't know what it's about.

I honestly didn't recognize him at first. When I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand, I looked around the cabin. It was then that I noticed a man staring at me. It took me another moment to reconcile the incredibly sexy, self-assured man standing in the aisle with the funny, impulsive boy I once dated in London. He was only eighteen when we met, admittedly a bit young for me, but I couldn't resist him. He was such a goofball. I was twenty-three and rather mature for my age. But, oh, my god, he was so much fun. Just being with him made me giddy. I never laughed so much in my life.

When Skye moved in with Will, I was suddenly without a roommate. Connor and I were already dating at that point, so it seemed only natural that he'd move in with me. We lived together for eight months before everything unraveled.

Even though we'd only been dating for a relatively short while, I knew he was getting serious. Frankly, I was, too. Even then, I couldn't imagine my life without him in it. He kept hinting at a future for us, at marriage and kids. He once asked me, teasingly, if I thought I'd want to marry him one day. I told him he was too young to even think about making such a commitment. We both were. Still, I was already falling in love with him. I figured we'd go on as we were for a while, take time to get to know one another better, be responsible. And one day, when he was older, I was sure we'd take that step.

And then Reginald Murphy happened. I knew of Connor's grandfather from work, of course. Not personally, just by reputation. Reginald was in a senior leadership position at Carmichael & Son. He was actually quite a big deal, not just because he was a VP, but because he was incredibly wealthy and had connections with powerful people.

One autumn afternoon, Connor and I went to his grandfather's ninetieth birthday party at a huge country estate

in Surrey. There, I met Connor's mother, Charlotte Murphy, for the first time. Like her son, she had blonde hair and blue eyes. She was friendly and welcoming, whereas I found Connor's father's family to be a bit on the chilly side.

That day, I met numerous cousins and great aunts and uncles on his father's side. Everyone was dressed to the nines, wearing expensive designer brands. The women carried expensive handbags, wore elaborate hats that matched their dresses, and wore shoes that probably cost more than two months of my income. I definitely felt underdressed in my simple, white linen dress and flat brown sandals.

"I don't even own a hat," I murmured to Connor shortly after we arrived at the party.

He laughed and pulled me close so he could kiss the top of my head. "Not to worry. This head is far too pretty to cover with a hat."

It was two days after the party that I left him and returned to New York devastated and in tears. I moved back in with my parents and *Sobo* temporarily while I searched for a new job and an apartment. I buried my broken heart in my work and cursed the day I met Reginald Murphy.

I never told Connor what his grandfather said to me that day. I couldn't bring myself to do that to him. Connor thought his grandfather walked on water, that he could do no wrong—he was the family patriarch, after all. Everyone looked up to him.

Once back in New York, I tried to forget Connor. I tried to be happy. I got an apartment in Brooklyn that I really loved. And over the years, I've made a few friends in New York, like Lauren.

I dated a bit, although it was never anything serious. I did all the things I was supposed to do, but real happiness eluded me. Every guy I dated ended up falling short when compared to Connor. He wasn't funny like Connor. He didn't make me weak in the knees like Connor. He didn't snuggle with me on the sofa and watch rom-coms and eat ice cream with me, like Connor.

No one has ever measured up. And to be honest, I'm afraid no one ever will. I had the original, and I let him go. And now the joke is on me because I had everything I ever wanted in a man, and I walked away from him. Leaving Connor was probably the biggest mistake I've ever made in my life.

But the Connor I saw just now, on this flight—he’s not a kid anymore. He’s all grown up, all man now. And my god did he grow up fine. I couldn’t stop staring at him, and all the while my heart pounded. And my brain tormented me.

He’s the one.

He’s the one.

It’s not too late. Tell him what the old man said. Tell him the truth about why you left.

* * *

It’s a short flight from JFK to Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky International Airport. To pass the time, I open an e-book and hardly get through a few chapters before the pilot instructs us to buckle up and put our trays in the upright position because we’re about to land.

My nerves are frayed because I know this is the beginning of a disastrous weekend. We’re both coming to meet Skye and Will’s new baby, Nicholas Fitzwilliam Carmichael, and that means Connor and I are going to be seeing a lot of each other over the next couple of days, whether we like it or not.

Since I’m seated in first class—courtesy of Will Carmichael buying my ticket for me—I’m one of the first

passengers to disembark. I pass right through the arrivals lounge and head to the baggage claim area. I'll stay a few steps ahead of Connor for as long as I can.

I saw the look in his beautiful blue eyes during the brief moment we talked on the plane. He's always been bad at hiding his emotions. I saw the shock, followed by confusion, hunger, and longing. There was also a lot of resentment lurking in his gaze. I recognized his emotions because I was feeling them myself. I'm just better at hiding them than he is. He wears his heart on his sleeve.

I am *so* not ready for this weekend. Just seeing him brings back so many memories, both good and bad. How am I supposed to get through this?

I'm going to kill Will and Skye. I have absolutely no doubt they arranged this little weekend reunion on purpose. Every time I talk to Skye, she asks me if I've spoken to Connor. I imagine Will asks Connor the same thing.

Our friends set us up.

I keep telling Skye to forget about the idea of Connor and me, but the longer he and I remain single, the more insistent she gets.

Oh, my god. Another horrifying thought occurs to me. What if he does have someone in his life? What if I have to listen to him regale our friends with stories about his girlfriend, or heaven forbid his wife?

Just as I expected, Connor arrives at baggage claim just a few seconds after I do. He looks a bit worked up, almost agitated, and I realize I'm not the only one who's been thrown for a loop.

As he comes to stand beside me, he runs his long fingers through his short blond hair, artfully messing it up. "We were set up, Ken."

"I know." Hearing him use his old pet name for me hurts. "And please don't call me that."

As Connor waits beside me for our luggage to appear, I'm even more aware of how he's changed physically over the years. I swear he's bigger now. Maybe it's just an illusion because his shoulders are so much broader—and his chest! I used to cuddle up against that chest while we watched movies and ate popcorn. I used to nestle against that chest in bed. I used to sleep with that chest pressed against my naked back as he spooned me all night long, his strong arm wrapped around me, his long legs intertwined with mine.

The rest of him has filled out nicely, too—namely his arms. Even through the sleeves of his suit jacket, I can see the outlines of his biceps. I'm keenly aware of his sheer physical presence as he towers next to me. It's like there's a magnetic field around him, and it's drawing me in.

I shake my head in dismay and mutter beneath my breath, "Skye's lucky she just gave birth. Otherwise, I'd kill her."

Connor must have heard me, because he laughs just as the conveyor belt begins to move, the whirring sound announcing the arrival of our luggage. We wait silently, neither of us saying anything more. I'm tempted to move away from him, because being so close to him is making me nervous, but that would be petty and rude.

Finally, suitcases begin to appear on the conveyor belt, traveling in a circle on the luggage carousel. My bright blue suitcase is easy to spot in the sea of homogeneous black luggage. When it reaches me, I step forward intending to grab it, but Connor beats me to it, his long arm snaking out in front of me as he grabs the handle and effortlessly lifts my luggage off the carousel and deposits it in front of me as if it weighed nothing at all.

His show of strength only calls attention to those biceps of his, which are lovingly showcased by his custom-tailored suit. He's dressed in a dark gray suit with a white button-down shirt, sans tie. Business attire looks good on him. I finally allow myself to get a really good look at him—at his artfully styled hair and striking blue eyes. He's even more handsome than I remember.

A moment later, Connor spots his black suitcase and hauls it off the conveyor belt. I'm wondering how he can tell his luggage apart from the dozens of other black suitcases, but then I notice the name tag attached to the handle of his bag is gold. I glance down and see his name etched in all capital letters. CONNOR MURPHY, ESQ. It's probably real gold, too, and not some cheap gold plating. Connor can certainly afford it. Hell, he could afford to buy this airport if he wanted to. I read *Forbes*. I have a good idea of his net worth these days. It's staggering.

When his grandfather died, Connor inherited *everything*, and I'm pretty sure that amounts to tens of billions of pounds.

As we turn from baggage claim, we start walking toward the exit. There, we notice a strikingly handsome older

gentleman dressed in a black chauffeur's uniform holding a sign that reads "KENNEDY & CONNOR."

"As if we wouldn't recognize him," Connor says with an amused chuckle.

"Hamish hasn't changed at all," I say.

Hamish travels everywhere with Will, so when he and Skye are in the US, so is Hamish. And when they return to England, Hamish is right there with them. He's an extension of their family, same as Maggie, their housekeeper.

"Looks like the old chap has a bit more gray at his temples since I last saw him," Connor says. "But other than that, he looks pretty much the same." Connor's smile falters as he gazes down at me. "You haven't change one bit either, Ken. Sorry, I meant *Kennedy*."

Hearing him call me *Ken* in that damn accent of his makes my knees weak. To distract myself, I laugh. "For the record, Connor, you're full of it. I'm nearly thirty now."

"You're twenty-eight, to be exact. Your birthday isn't for three more months."

He remembers my birthday.

I remember his, too. It's October twelfth, and he'll be twenty-four this fall.

Hamish lowers his sign. "Well, look at the two of you," he says in his gruff Scottish accent. He nods to each of us. "It's wonderful to see you both again. Miss Takahashi, might I say you're looking splendid. And you, sir—Connor—dashing as always." He beams at us, like an indulgent uncle. "What a coincidence you arrived on the same flight."

"It was hardly a coincidence, was it?" I ask. "Your boss tricked us."

"Really?" Hamish attempts to sound surprised. "How convenient then, that I can drive you both to the house." He reaches for the handle of my wheeled suitcase. "Shall we? The car's not far."

Connor and I follow Hamish across the street to the airport parking garage. A black Mercedes sedan is parked in a VIP spot on the ground floor, so it's a short walk.

I climb into the back seat of the vehicle while Hamish and Connor load our luggage into the trunk. Shortly after the lid slams shut, Hamish slides into the driver's seat.

Connor slips in beside me. “Your luggage is safely stowed in the *boot*.”

I can’t help but smile. “Don’t you mean the *trunk*?”

He scoffs, but the corners of his mouth turn up. “I know what I said.”

It’s so hard not to smile. “I thought you’d want to sit up front with Hamish.”

“And miss an opportunity to sit with you? Never.”

I catch a whiff of his familiar cologne, and it makes my belly quiver. I do my best to ignore the tingles I’m getting from sitting so close to him. I wonder if he’s feeling them, too.

To my surprise, he turns to face forward, as if nothing happened, and starts up a conversation with Hamish.

Being this close to him brings back so many memories. Mental images of the two of us in bed together—laughing, sleeping, spooning, making love, having tickle fights—they flash through my mind like a movie montage. A shiver skates down my spine, lighting up all the nerve endings in my body.

All of them, damn it.

This wasn’t supposed to happen.

Chapter 4

Connor Murphy

I suppress a smile as I lean forward in my seat so I can chat with Hamish. It's been a while since I've seen him—not since Will and Skye were last in London about six months ago, still early in her pregnancy. I force myself to ignore Kennedy. I know her—she needs her space sometimes, especially when she's stressed. Like she is right now. I'm not going to make the same mistake I made with her in the past. I was too eager, too enthusiastic, back then, and it backfired on me. I must have chased her away. This time, I'll play it cool and see if I get a different response.

Besides, I'd have to be blind not to have seen the effect I had on her moments ago when she realized I would be sitting beside her in the car. I saw how her breath caught and her eyes widened. She sucked in a shaky breath, and it took everything in me not to respond—not to reassure her everything was okay.

So, I'm doing the next best thing. I'm ignoring her.

It's a gallant gesture on my part, designed to show her how I've matured over the years. I'm not the same wet-behind-the-

ear lad she fell in love with. I'm a man now, and I've learned quite a bit about women over the last few years.

The two of us being thrown together like this is a godsend as far as I'm concerned. I'm not going to waste this opportunity because I'm determined to win her back.

But first things first. I can't jump the gun here because she's already on the defensive. I need to remind her why we fell for each other in the first place. I need to remind her of the spark between us, the chemistry we shared. The chemistry I hope we can rekindle. I don't think it's too late. Seeing her in person has made me realize just how much I want that to be true.

After Hamish and I get the pleasantries out of the way, I lean back in my seat and remain silent for the remainder of the car journey. Occasionally, I'll look out the window and point out something of interest to Kennedy.

Although I remain relatively reserved and passive on the outside, inside is a different story. I'm thrilled just to be sharing the car ride with her.

Thanks to the evening rush hour traffic, it takes half an hour to reach Skye and Will's home outside of Cincinnati. In the midst of rolling green hills, we exit the motorway, and

soon we're on a rather quiet country road that meanders through lush green meadows. Being that it's summer, the sky is bright blue with the occasional white cloud floating by overhead. Horses graze on gently-sloping grassy hills. It's actually quite lovely.

Hamish slows the car and turns onto a private lane. Just a few dozen meters later, we reach a wrought iron gate marked PRIVATE. He pulls the car up to an electronic keypad and punches in a code. When the gates promptly swing open, we proceed along a tree-lined paved drive.

The landscape is decorated with a colorful variety of flora, from the more subtle pastel colors to more vibrant reds and yellows in meadows populated with a variety of wildflowers. The property is what I would expect from Will and Skye, something similar to their country estate back in Bibury, England.

We drive another five minutes before a big white farmhouse comes into view, perched on a slight rise.

Will and Skye's home on this side of the pond is so *American*—a two-story white farmhouse with black shutters and a wraparound covered porch that extends across the front of the house and all the way around one side to the back. The

rear porch overlooks a charming guest cottage and beyond that is a sprawling lake.

To the right of the house is a large red barn and a small white building, which I know is home to a bunch of hyperactive chickens. Will does enjoy his fresh farm eggs. The breeze carries the sound of soft whinnying of horses coming from the paddock behind the barn.

Kennedy turns to me suddenly, her perfect little nose just inches from mine. Her dark eyes widen as she sucks in a breath, and I figure it's in surprise at our sudden closeness. How easy it would be to lift my hand and brush a lock of her hair behind her perfect shell of an ear. Her gaze drops to my lips for a moment before returning to my eyes. She looks as mesmerized by our physical closeness as I am.

I want nothing more than to tell her it's not too late for us, that everything's going to be okay. But I don't, because I'm afraid if I do reach out for her, I'll just push her even farther away. I can see the sadness and uncertainty lurking in her gaze.

I break eye contact and move back, giving her the space she desperately needs. Kennedy has her pride, and that's

something I can't damage if I want to stand a chance of winning her back.

The car comes to a halt as Hamish pulls up to the front of the house. The front doors open, and Will comes outside holding the hand of a very pretty, brown-haired, blue-eyed little girl. Ah, Penelope, my—*our*—goddaughter.

I turn to Kennedy just in time to see her features transform instantly at the sight of the little girl.

“Penny!” she cries as she unbuckles her seatbelt, opens her car door, and jumps out.

I follow at a more sedate pace trying not to feel slighted that she's showing far more interest in Penny than she did in me. She's treating me like an acquaintance, not like the man she once gave her heart to. I'm staring at the woman I love, have *always* loved, and she's keeping her distance.

Penny releases her father's hand and rushes forward to greet us. “Aunt Kennedy! Uncle Connor!”

I step aside as Penny launches herself at Kennedy, who swings the little girl up in her arms. Penny wraps her slender arms and legs around Kennedy, hugging her tightly.

“I’ve missed you, sweet pea,” Kennedy says, kissing the side of Penny’s head.

“I missed you, too,” Penny says. Then she sets her sights on me. “Hi, Uncle Connor.”

“My goodness, Penny,” I say, reaching out to muss her hair. “You’ve grown since the last time I saw you. How old are you now?”

“Four,” she says proudly, holding up the right number of fingers.

I pretend to be shocked. “Four years old! I thought you’d be fifteen by now.”

Penny giggles. “I’m four, silly. But I’ll be five soon.”

Kennedy laughs as she sets the little girl on her feet. “Yes, you will.”

“Speaking of your birthday,” I say, as I reach into my hand luggage. “I brought you an early present.” I pull out the colorfully wrapped package and hand it to her.

Penny looks up at Will. “Can I open it, Daddy?”

Will nods. “Sure, go ahead.”

We all watch as Penny tears into her gift, unwrapping it to reveal yet another Barbie doll for her impressive collection. It's Barbie the veterinarian, complete with a white lab coat and a dog as a patient.

“An animal doctor!” Penny says. She rushes forward to hug me. “Thank you, Uncle Connor. How did you know I love Barbies?”

I grin. “Just a wild guess.” *Who doesn't know about Penny's obsession with Barbies?*

As Penny clutches her new gift to her chest, Kennedy gives me a look and mouths, “Showoff.”

Will steps forward to give Kennedy a welcoming hug. “I hope you both had good flights.”

“It was a surprising flight, I can tell you that,” Kennedy says, arching an eyebrow at Will.

I'm sure she's alluding to the fact that we were both booked on the same plane coming here.

Will grins, but he's saved from answering when Hamish appears beside us.

“Shall I bring in their luggage, sir?” Hamish asks.

Will nods. “Thanks. If you don’t mind, would you take their things around to the guesthouse?”

The guesthouse? That comes as a bit of a surprise. Usually when I visit, I stay in the main house with the family.

“We’re *both* staying in the guesthouse?” Kennedy asks, unable to mask the horror in her tone.

I try not to take her reaction as a slight. Personally, I’m thrilled. If I’m going to have any chance of reconnecting with Kennedy, we’ll need some alone time, and the cozy little cottage designed for two is the perfect setting for that.

Chapter 5

Connor Murphy

Will nods as he takes his daughter's hand. "With the amount of noise this one makes in the morning—" he eyes Penny "—and the baby waking at all hours, Skye and I thought you two would be more comfortable in the guesthouse. It's far quieter and more private." He smiles. "Don't worry. It has two bedrooms."

"Two bedrooms, one bathroom, one kitchen, and one living room," Penny recites, sounding more like an estate agent than a four-year-old. "And a big TV. It's as big as ours."

I glance at Kennedy out of the corner of my eye, and my heart sinks when I see the panic in her expression. Obviously, she wasn't anticipating us staying in such close proximity. Of course, neither was I, but I'm certainly not complaining.

"I'd be happy to stay in the big house," she says, sounding just short of desperate. "I can help Skye while I'm here."

"Oh, don't worry about that," Will says. "Between me and Skye's mum, Brenda, who lives just ten minutes away, we've got everything covered." He winks at us. "I'm not completely useless, you know. You should see me change a nappy. I'm

diabolically good at it. Just ask my wife.” He nods toward the front door. “Now, come inside and meet the newest member of the Carmichael family. Mother and baby are resting on the settee in the lounge.”

Penny runs ahead, up the steps and through the front doors, and Kennedy follows her, plodding along like a convict heading to her execution.

When I hesitate, Will motions to the door. “Well, are you going to grace us with your company?”

“I’m just taking it all in, you know. It’s a lot.”

Will’s smile falters. “I know it must be hard on you, seeing Kennedy again.”

“That’s an understatement. So, you and the missus set us up, didn’t you? How clever.”

Will shrugs. “It was Skye’s doing. She thought getting the two of you together again would be a good idea.”

I frown. “I doubt Kennedy would agree with that statement.”

Will claps his hand on my shoulder and squeezes. “You never know, Connor. Miracles do happen.”

Will Carmichael is as tall as I am, and as commanding as ever. Although his face is a little more lined than it was when we first met, overall time has been kind to him. There's no sign of any premature gray in his dark auburn hair and trim beard. He's dressed smart, yet casual, in a shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbow and a pair of blue jeans. He's even wearing cowboy boots. "Country life looks good on you," I tell him.

He grins. "I can't say I'm not enjoying it." He pulls me close and gives me a bear hug. "It's good to see you again, mate."

I suppose American habits are rubbing off on him. They're a touchy, feely sort, I've learned, with one notable exception. Kennedy hasn't hugged me once today.

As I follow Will into the house, I'm consumed by the thought that Kennedy and I will be sharing accommodations for a whole weekend.

Just the two of us.

Together.

Alone.

The potential has my head spinning. It reminds me of those rom-coms Kennedy likes to watch—second chance romances, former lovers thrust together in tight quarters. I can't help thinking of the possibilities.

Just as I step into the foyer, I hear Skye's delighted squeal from the back of the house. "Kennedy!"

I reach the lounge in time to see Kennedy bending down to hug Skye, who's reclining on a long settee with a tiny form wrapped in a fuzzy blue blanket cradled in her arms.

"Ah, there he is," I say as I come farther into the room to get a peek at the little tyke. "Nicholas Fitzwilliam Carmichael, I presume. That's quite a mouthful, isn't it?"

"We call him Nicky," Penny says as she gently pats her brother's tiny head.

This little bloke has no idea that he's heir to a multi-billion-pound fortune. He and his sister both.

Skye invites Kennedy to sit on the sofa, and the two ladies hug like they haven't seen each other in years, which is a bit of an exaggeration as I know Will and Skye make a point of laying over in Brooklyn to visit Kennedy every time they fly to and from London. The girls are talking at once, and the

sound levels must be a little too much because the baby starts squirming as mewling sounds erupt from him.

Immediately, the girls break apart.

“So, where is little Nicky hiding beneath all this blanket?” I ask, stepping forward to lift a corner of the blanket and peek underneath.

Skye turns her attention to me. She looks as beautiful as always, with her long, wavy dark blonde hair tied back in a ponytail. Her blue eyes are lit with excitement, and her cheeks are a little plumper than I remember—baby weight, I’m sure. But I’ll keep that thought to myself.

She gives me an indulgent smile. “Connor Murphy, you’re as handsome as ever. It’s so good to see you.” She reaches out and squeezes my hand. “Thanks for coming all this way on such short notice.”

I shrug. “I wouldn’t miss meeting this little chap for the world.” I reach into my suit jacket pocket and pull out a small package. “This is for the young gentleman,” I say as I hand it to Skye.

She opens the package, which contains a small silver baby rattle with the boy’s name engraved on it. “Oh, Connor, it’s

perfect. Thank you so much.”

“You’re quite welcome.”

I look around the room for Will, but he’s nowhere to be seen. “Where’s Will gone off to? And Penny, for that matter.” They’ve both disappeared.

Skye points to an open doorway. “I think you’ll find them right through there. They were in the kitchen baking cookies when you arrived. Penny was hoping to surprise you both.”

“I’ll go see how they’re getting along, then.” I cross the spacious room and step into the kitchen just in time to see Will sliding a baking tray filled with little blobs of dough into the oven. “This is a sight I never thought I’d see.”

Will straightens and turns to me with a smile. “What, me in the kitchen? You’d be surprised, Connor. I’ve learned a thing or two over the years.”

Penny points to a metal cooling rack on the worktop where chocolate chip cookies are lined up in perfect rows. “Do you want a cookie, Uncle Connor? These are cool enough to eat.”

“I’d love one,” I say as I reach for a cookie.

A woman wearing a gray uniform dress and white apron walks into the kitchen. She wears her long silver hair in a

single braid. Maggie's smile widens when she sees me.

"Connor, how nice to see you again. Welcome."

"Hello, Maggie. You're looking quite well."

She nods toward Penny. "This little one keeps me on my toes."

Maggie, like Hamish, travels with the family, no matter which side of the pond they're on. She's both cook and housekeeper, not to mention an occasional babysitter and nanny.

Penny gazes up at her father. "Can I take a cookie to Aunt Kennedy? And one to Mommy, too?"

Will ruffles his daughter's hair, which is the same dark blonde color as her mother's, and just as wavy. In fact, she's a miniature version of Skye. "Of course. I'm sure they'd both love one."

I take a bite of my cookie, but it breaks in half, one half falling to the floor. "Well, crap."

Penny gasps as she points an accusing finger in my direction.

"Oops, my apologies," I say quickly, realizing my error. "What I meant to say was, 'Oh, dear. Look what I've done.'"

Penny wags her index finger at me. “Mommy says we’re not allowed to say bad words.”

I chuckle. “My apologies, little miss.”

Will’s struggling not to laugh.

“Daddy got in trouble yesterday for saying the *p* word.”

My brows shoot up. *The p word?* Surely she doesn’t mean the first *p* word that came to my mind. Baffled, I look to Will. “Excuse me?”

Penny cups her hands around her mouth and whispers loudly, “You know, *poop*. He said Nicky pooped in his nappy.”

Will practically chokes on his laughter. “Please, sweetheart, let’s not bring that up again, shall we? We don’t want to upset Mummy.”

“No,” Penny says, shaking her head adamantly. “She doesn’t like it when someone says a bad word.”

I wink at Will. “Don’t worry, we’ll watch our P’s and Q’s around you.”

When Penny carries a little plate of cookies into the lounge, Will and I follow in time to catch the tail end of Kennedy’s question to Skye.

“—can’t I stay in the main house with you guys? I could be a lot of help to you.”

Skye gives her a consoling smile. “Will and I are up and down all hours of the night with the baby. We thought you’d both be more comfortable having your own private space. It’ll be nice and quiet for you.”

Kennedy frowns. “It’s okay, really. I don’t mind.”

“Mommy, do you want a cookie? Aunt Kennedy?” Penny holds out the plate, and the ladies each take one.

“Don’t be silly, Kennedy,” Skye says. “Besides, your bedroom has the best view of the lake.”

Kennedy looks to me, defeat clearly visible in her eyes. “All right,” she says with a resigned sigh.

Will takes a bite of a cookie. “Is there a problem?”

“No, not at all,” Skye says quickly. “We were just discussing the sleeping arrangements.”

“Speaking of the arrangements,” Will says. “Penny, darling, why don’t we show your auntie and uncle where they’ll be staying? I’m sure once they see it, they’ll be thrilled with their accommodations.”

Clearly excited by the prospect of showing us around, Penny grabs Kennedy's hand and practically hauls her to her feet. "Come on, Aunt Kennedy! Let's go see the cottage. I made you a welcome sign and put it on the fridge."

Kennedy pastes a smile on her face. "Wonderful."

Will pats me on the back. "Shall we go?"

Will opens a sliding glass door at the rear of the house, and we step outside onto a covered deck designed for entertaining. There's an outdoor barbecue and a wooden table that seats six, as well as a pair of porch swings that face the lake. Wide wooden steps lead down to a stone path that passes through a flower garden, past a white picket gate, and then down a gently sloping lawn.

A small, yet charming white cottage sits halfway between the main house and the lake.

I'm going to be occupying the same space as Kennedy for the better part of a weekend. We'll be sharing a bathroom and a kitchen. I smile to myself because I see potential here. Lots of potential.

I just hope she does, too.

Chapter 6

Kennedy Takahashi

Penny runs ahead of us along a well-worn path that leads down to the guesthouse. I have to admit, the cottage looks like something out of a storybook. There's a little white picket fence out front, along with a well-tended flower garden overflowing with colorful perennials. The window boxes are filled with brightly-colored annuals.

I'm supposed to share this cottage with Connor for an entire weekend?

What in the world was Skye thinking? She knows how much it hurt me to leave him. This is going to be disastrous. I jog ahead to catch up with Penny. She beats me to the front door, opens it, and steps inside. I follow her in.

Even though it's small, the cottage is picture perfect inside and out, like something out of a home design magazine. Skye's done an amazing job decorating, making it feel larger and more spacious than it is. The white cabinetry, soft white walls, and pale wood floors give the illusion of spaciousness. The vaulted ceiling is high, and there are numerous windows

letting in tons of light, making the main living space feel bright and airy.

“This is the kitchen,” Penny says, waving her little arms as she turns in a dramatic circle.

The kitchen is compact, yet well-equipped with all the conveniences. Instead of a dining table, there are two barstools set in front of a high-top breakfast bar.

Penny points to a colorful sign drawn with crayon and stuck to the fridge door with a smiley face magnet. “And here’s the picture I made for you. It says ‘welcome.’ Mommy helped me write the letters.”

Quite the little hostess, Penny points out the pieces of furniture that take up the other half of the open space. “Here’s the sofa and the chair. And that’s the fireplace and the TV.”

Continuing her tour, Penny points to the three doors along the rear wall. “Those are the bedrooms,” she says, pointing to the two doors on the far ends. “And that door in the middle goes to the bathroom. There’s only one bathroom, so you have to share.”

All I can think is, I hope there’s a lock on the bathroom door. The last thing I need is for Connor to walk in on me

when I'm in the shower.

Penny races into the bedroom to the right of the bathroom. "Come see your bedroom, Aunt Kennedy. I helped Mommy pick out the quilt."

I follow her into a cozy little bedroom. There's a full-size bed in a white bedframe against the back wall, with a nightstand on each side. There's a small dresser with a mirror, and a door that leads to what I presume is a closet. Two good-sized windows let in plenty of light.

"Do you like it?" Penny asks me, her expression hopeful.

"Yes, it's beautiful."

The little girl smiles. "Good. I like it. Pink's my favorite color."

The color scheme is white with accents of pale pink and yellow—very soothing and restful. My suitcase is sitting on a luggage rack in the corner of the room, along with my carry-on bag.

Penny climbs up onto the bed and pats the pale floral quilt. "Uncle Connor gets the other room," she says, pointing in the general direction. "It's blue. It's for boys. This room is for girls."

Her simplistic view of gender identity makes me smile.

“If you want me to, I could sleep here with you,” Penny suggests. “We could have a sleepover. We could watch movies and eat popcorn.”

I smile because she’s a girl after my own heart. Connor and I used to—I catch myself. *Stop it.* “I would love that, Penny. Let’s ask your parents.” Hopefully they’ll say yes. Having Penny here as a buffer between me and Connor sounds like a fantastic idea.

“I’ll ask my daddy.” Penny hops down off the bed and races out the door, yelling, “Daddy!”

Taking advantage of a few precious moments alone in this lovely bedroom, I close the door and sit at the foot of the bed. This trip isn’t turning out at all how I expected. I can’t believe they invited us to come at the same time and expect us to share the same space. I’ll be a nervous wreck all weekend. The cottage is beautiful, but I can’t enjoy it if I have to worry about where Connor is every second of the day.

Maybe we could come up with a schedule. We could split our time between the cottage and the main house so that we don’t have to see each other. That sounds like a perfect

solution. It's only for a few days. Surely we can make that work.

My heart jumps when I hear a quiet knock at the door, but I quickly relax when I realize it can't be Connor. He doesn't do anything quietly.

"Come in," I say hesitantly. I don't think it's Penny, either. I don't think she'd bother to knock.

The door opens, and Will pops his head inside and peers around the room. "Is everything in order? Do you need anything?"

I wave him into the room, whispering, "Come in and close the door."

He does as I ask and watches me with a great deal of curiosity. "Why are we whispering?"

"Why did you invite us both on the same weekend?"

Will frowns. "I told Skye it wasn't a good idea, but she insisted."

"I suspected as much. When I asked you if Connor was coming, you told me you hadn't spoken to him in a while."

He grins guiltily. "That was god's honest truth, Kennedy. I hadn't spoken to him. We'd only texted lately."

I can't help rolling my eyes. "You're splitting hairs."

He laughs. "I'm sorry. I suppose it's a bit overwhelming, isn't it, seeing him again? Skye hoped if the two of you spent some time together, you'd be reminded of how you once loved each other."

My chest tightens. "It's too late for that."

"I guess we were both hoping for a miracle."

"I've lived without Connor for nearly five years, Will. I think I've managed to get the hang of it. I imagine he has, too."

And yet why does my chest ache so badly when I look at him or hear his voice? Why can't I shake this feeling that something's missing from my life—like a big piece of my heart?

Will exhales slowly, as if he hates to contradict me.

"Kennedy."

I raise my hand to cut him off. "Please don't say it."

"Honestly, don't you see the way he looks at you?" His expression softens. "Even after all this time, he still has feelings for you. It's obvious. And I suspect you have feelings for him, too. You're still single, right? And Connor's still

single. Just think about that for a moment, will you? The lad inherited a fortune worth billions, and he's *still* single when I'm sure women practically throw themselves at him. Doesn't that tell you something?"

I frown, but don't answer. Thinking about Connor with other women hurts.

"Kennedy, you know I love you," Will says. "Skye and I both do. But sometimes you're too damn stubborn for your own good. You refuse to see what's right in front of you."

With those parting words, Will walks out the door, closing it quietly behind him, and leaving me alone to wallow in fresh pain and sorrow.

And guilt.

I still feel so much guilt for leaving him. I thought the pain would lessen over time, but it hasn't.

I hear Penny's excited chatter coming from the living room, accompanied by Connor's deep, amused replies. The front door opens and closes, and then the cottage falls silent.

I walk over to the window that overlooks the lake and spot Will and Connor heading down the path to the water, each of

them holding one of Penny's hands. They swing her between them, and her gleeful cries fill the air.

I always thought Connor would make a great dad. He's pretty much a big kid himself, at heart.

I watch him as he walks away, studying him from his head to his toes. It does seem odd that no one has snatched him up yet. He's prime marriage material. Not only is he a wealthy catch, but he's handsome as hell and so much fun to be around. And yet he's still single.

While Connor's down at the lake, I return to the house to have a one-on-one chat with Skye. My dear friend has a lot to answer for. But when I walk back in the house through the rear door, I find her asleep on the sofa with baby Nicholas sleeping soundly in his bassinet close beside her.

So much for our talk.

"He's a darling baby, isn't he?"

I jump at the sound of a voice behind me to find Skye's mother, Brenda, standing in the doorway. "He's a beautiful baby," I say. "Just like Penny was. Will and Skye make pretty babies."

Brenda Bowmen is a practical, down-to-earth woman, and a great help to her daughter. Fortunately, she lives nearby, which allows her to help out a lot.

“You haven’t changed a bit, Kennedy,” Brenda says with a smile. “You’re just as lovely as ever.”

I might be blushing. “Thank you, Professor Bowmen.”

She laughs. “Good lord, call me Brenda, please.”

Skye’s mom is in her mid-fifties, and her short brown hair is starting to turn gray. She’s a beautiful woman, which explains where Skye gets her good looks.

The back doors open, and Penny races in. I swear that child has more energy than I could ever muster. Will and Connor follow her inside. Will walks over to stand behind the back of the sofa so he can gaze down at his wife and sleeping son. Connor remains by the door, uncharacteristically quiet and brooding.

“Are you Chinese, Aunt Kennedy?” Penny asks me. “I told Uncle Connor I thought you were, but he said no. He said you’re *Japanese*.”

My gaze automatically flashes over to Connor, who’s watching me. “Connor’s right. Actually, I’m Japanese-

American. I was born in the US, as were my parents. But my grandparents were born in Japan. They emigrated to America many years ago.”

“Can you say something in Japanese?”

I smile. “Sure. *Konnichiwa.*”

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Connor smiling. He always loved it when I spoke Japanese to him. Late at night, he’d ask me to whisper sweet nothings to him in Japanese.

“What does it mean?” Penny asks.

“It means hello or good afternoon.”

Penny does her best to repeat what I said, but she fails miserably.

“*Kon-nee-chi-wa,*” I repeat more slowly.

When she tries again, she nails it.

“That’s perfect,” I say, giving her a hug. I look back toward Connor just in time to see him slip out the patio door and disappear from sight.

My heart twists painfully as I watch him walk away. Memories of us together come rushing back, and it hurts so

badly I can barely breathe. Part of me wants to run after him, to fix this terrible rift between us. A rift that *I* caused.

“Do you want to come upstairs and see my room?” Penny asks as she slips her small hand in mine. “Want to see my Barbie dolls?”

Desperate for a distraction, I jump at the offer. “Yes, I’d love that. Lead the way, kiddo.”

Chapter 7

Kennedy Takahashi

An hour later, my butt is numb from sitting on the floor in Penny's bedroom as we play with a few of her dolls. "Sweetie, I have to go unpack now. I'll see you at dinner, okay?"

Penny jumps to her feet. "Do you want me to help you?"

"That's okay. I can manage on my own. Why don't you go see how your mommy and brother are doing?"

We head downstairs, and after leaving Penny with her mom, I head out to the cottage. The truth is, I need a little bit of alone time. For an introvert like me, being in a house filled with people can get overwhelming. Plus, I'm afraid of running into Connor.

Seeing him again hurts far more than I imagined it would. We had so much fun, and that's what makes this so hard. We were so *good* together. We both worked at Carmichael & Son, and we'd slip away from the office every day for lunch, usually just the two of us. While we had plenty of friends, we had eyes only for each other. There are so many restaurants in that part of London, we could pick a new place to eat each day and never run out of options.

We were two peas in a pod.

Inseparable.

Until I had to leave him.

At that time, Connor was already hinting at marriage. He never came out and asked me, but he'd make off-handed comments about how cute our kids would be.

I knew it was way too soon for us to be contemplating marriage. Besides, in the back of my mind, I was worried about what his high-society family would think of me. I'd faced enough discrimination in my life to know that it could be an issue.

I never told Connor that I'd been engaged once, when I was a student at Columbia University in New York. It was too sore of a subject to share. His name was Doug, and he was an economics major, while I was a finance major. Finance and economics—it was a match made in heaven. Or so we thought. We were both twenty-one at the time and in love. I thought nothing could come between us. Boy was I wrong.

When Doug invited me to come home with him for dinner so I could meet his parents, I was ecstatic. He'd already met

mine a few times, and they loved him. He was good-looking, smart, quiet, and respectful. There was so much to love.

I'll never forget the moment I walked into his parents' home and saw the looks on their faces when they first laid eyes on me. Immediately, I knew Doug hadn't told them I was Japanese-American. They did a lousy job of hiding their shock.

It was the worst evening of my life. Dinner was miserable. His parents hardly said a word to me. In fact, they could barely look me in the eye. Doug tried valiantly to fill the void by carrying the conversation all by himself, but it was still a disaster.

"It's getting late," his mother said as soon as dinner was over. "I hate to cut our evening short, but I have an early appointment in the morning. I'm afraid we'll have to say goodnight." Then she looked at her son, still ignoring me, and said, "I'm sure you can see yourselves out."

Doug and I drove over an hour one way to spend forty-five minutes with his parents.

On the drive home, feeling sick to my stomach, I said, "You didn't tell them I'm Japanese."

“You’re Japanese-American. There’s a difference.”

I shrugged as my heart shattered into pieces. “Not to them.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he’d said as he reached across the front console for my hand. “They’ll come around.”

But they didn’t.

Doug broke up with me shortly after he’d gone back to visit his parents the following weekend to have a heart-to-heart talk with them. He never told me what they said to him, but I could guess.

“I’m sorry, Kennedy,” he’d said to me when he came to my dorm room after returning to campus. There were tears in his eyes when he held out his hand. “I’ll need the ring back. It was my mom’s.”

Apparently, I was unsuitable for their Caucasian son, and he didn’t feel inclined to fight for me, *for us*.

I cried as I took the engagement ring off my finger and placed it in his palm. I was in shock. I couldn’t believe this was happening. Not after everything we’d shared, all the plans we’d made.

“I really am sorry,” he’d said. “I hope you believe that.”

But his words did nothing to soothe the ache in my chest. “I don’t want an apology, Doug. I want you to fight for us.”

He looked away. “I can’t, Kennedy. My parents threatened to cut me off financially if I didn’t break up with you. I can’t afford tuition on my own. I tried to talk some sense into them, but they didn’t want to listen to anything I had to say.”

After taking back the ring, Doug walked out of my dorm room and out of my life. We never spoke again. When we’d run into each other on campus, he’d look the other way.

It wasn’t my first run-in with discrimination, but it was the most painful. The most *personal*. The blatant rejection cut like a knife.

At the time, I never told anyone other than my parents about Doug. It was just too painful to admit. And any time I dated after Doug, I carried a deep-seated fear that bigotry would rear its ugly head again. In the back of my mind, I was afraid the same thing might happen with Connor’s family.

When I finally got up the courage to broach the subject with Connor and share my concerns, he said there was nothing to worry about. He assured me his family would welcome me with open arms.

After my experience with Doug's parents, I wasn't so sure.

I should have learned my lesson the first time.

Once back in the cottage, I head straight to my bedroom and unpack the few pieces of clothing I brought with me, hang them up in the closet, and stow my toiletries in the bathroom. Then I sit on the side of the bed and stare out the window at the lake. I find it soothing to watch the water. A light breeze sends ripples across the water's surface, making it sparkle like diamonds. Families of Mallard ducks paddle around without a care in the world. A fancy white motorized boat and a green rowboat are moored to the dock that juts out into the lake.

Will and Skye have built an amazing life for themselves, and it's clear they're devoted to each other. They're happy. I'm beginning to fear I'll never experience that.

I jump when I hear a knock on my door. "Yes?"

"Can I come in?" Connor asks in a low voice.

Just hearing his voice makes my pulse race. I brace myself. "What is it, Connor?"

The door groans when he leans against it. "I can't come in? Are you indecent? I don't mind—I'll close my eyes."

I bite back a laugh at the sound of his quiet chuckle.

“Can’t you talk to me through the door?”

“No, not really. I need to talk to you face-to-face.”

That sounds ominous. Quickly, I run my fingers through my hair in an effort to tidy it. “All right. Come in.”

The door opens, and Connor walks in. He has changed out of his suit and into a pair of blue jeans and a T-shirt that hugs his chest and arms. Obviously, Connor works out.

I return to my window view, needing to avoid looking at temptation. “What is it?”

The mattress dips as he sits beside me. “We need to talk, Ken.”

I close my eyes. “I asked you not to call me that.”

“Why not? You always liked it before.”

Because it hurts too much. “Just don’t. Please.”

He sighs. “All right. *Kennedy*, we need to talk.”

My stomach knots. “About what?”

“About what happened to us. That conversation is long overdue, and it’s time we had it.” When he reaches for my

hand and links our fingers together, his touch sends shivers up my arm. “Please, tell me what I did wrong.”

What he did wrong? My throat tightens painfully. “You didn’t do anything wrong. I told you it wasn’t your fault.”

“Pardon me if I don’t believe you. Why else would you have left me? I must have fucked up somehow. Was it because I talked of marriage? Was that it? Did I scare you off? I promise I wouldn’t have pressured you into marrying me if you didn’t want to.”

“Oh, my god, no.” I turn to face him, my heart breaking because he’s putting all this guilt on himself. “Connor, I swear, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

He frowns, looking truly baffled. “Then what happened?”

“I left you a note.”

“A note that explained absolutely nothing. *‘This isn’t going to work. It’s not your fault, it’s mine.’* What the hell, Kennedy? What was that supposed to mean?”

“I was trying to protect you!”

“Protect me from *what?*” He smacks his hand against his solid chest. “Do I look like I need protecting?”

“Back then, yes. There were things you didn’t know.”

“Such as?” he pleads. “Explain it to me, because the guilt I feel is eating me alive. I was bloody crazy about you, Ken.”
He stops abruptly. “No, I was *in love* with you. If you didn’t feel the same, you should have told me.”

My eyes pool with tears, and my voice comes out little more than a whisper. “Of course I cared about you.”

“You *cared* about me? That’s it? You didn’t love me?”

“That’s not what I meant. Yes, I loved you.”

“You loved me? Really?” He sounds skeptical. “Then why did you break my heart?”

The pain in his voice shatters me all over again. “Connor, I —” But the words catch in my throat.

“What? Tell me, for god’s sake, Ken.” He squeezes my hand. “Explain it to me, because I can’t make any sense of it.”

“They never would have accepted me!” The words burst out of me, and immediately I regret them. I never wanted him to know. It would break his heart.

“Who wouldn’t have? What are you talking about?”

“Your family.”

He shakes his head in disbelief. “That’s ridiculous. My mother thinks you’re wonderful. She’s told me as much on numerous occasions. Even now, she still asks about you.”

“Not your mother. I’m talking about your father’s family.”

Connor frowns, clearly perplexed. “Why do you think they wouldn’t have accepted you?”

“I don’t just think it, Connor. I *know*.”

His eyes narrow as he processes what I’ve said. I can see the wheels turning as he tries to put it all together. “Tell me exactly what was said to you.” His expression darkens. “Who said it and when?”

I stare down at our hands, joined together. It’s the first time we’ve touched in years, and yet it still feels so right.

“Connor, please—”

“Tell me,” he insists, tightening his grip on my hand.

“It was your grandfather, at his birthday party.”

Connor scowls. “When did you talk to him? I don’t remember—”

“When you were called away to speak to your mother. One of your cousins—Arthur, I think it was—came to get me. He

said your grandfather wanted to speak to me. I didn't think anything of it, so I went with him."

He suddenly goes very still. "Go on."

"Arthur led me through a maze of shrubs into a rose garden at the center, where I found your grandfather seated on a marble bench beside a fountain. He asked me to sit with him, so I did. I was nervous, but I didn't expect him to say what he said."

"Which was?" When I hesitate, he says, "Kennedy, please. I deserve to know the truth."

I stare down at our joined hands. "He said, 'Do you honestly think I'd let my heir marry outside of his social class? I would disown him in a heartbeat if he attempted something so idiotic.'"

Connor pales and shakes his head. "He wouldn't have said that to you."

I don't blame Connor for not believing me. No one wants to think of a beloved family member in that way. "He did, Connor. He said, 'My grandson will never be permitted to marry a foreigner—an American—let alone someone of your ethnicity. He'll marry an appropriate young lady from his own

social class.’ What he meant was a blue-blooded British girl with a proper pedigree. Not me.”

Connor looks positively ill. “Kennedy.”

Unable to help myself, I reach out to cup his cheek. “I’m so sorry. I never wanted you to know.”

He brings my hand to his lips to kiss. “You know I don’t care about any of that.”

“But they did. At least your grandfather did. He threatened to disinherit you, Connor. I couldn’t let that happen. I didn’t want—” I stop there, closing my eyes at the threat of fresh tears spilling over.

He holds my hand in both of his. “You didn’t want what?”

I pull my hand free and shoot to my feet to put some space between us. “I didn’t want to ruin your life.”

He stands, too. “That’s ironic, Kennedy, because you *did* ruin my life.” His voice drops an octave, raw with emotion. “You ruined it when you left me.”

We’re standing face to face, and I have to tilt my head up to meet his gaze. I ignore the tears pooling in my eyes and force the words past the lump in my throat. “Please don’t say that.”

He threads his fingers into my hair and cups the back of my neck. “Why not? It’s the truth.” His gaze lowers to my mouth, and I don’t think I’m imagining the hunger I see in his eyes.

“Because it hurts.” My throat tightens, and I’m about to start crying any second. “Go,” I beg, steering him toward the door. “Please.”

He does as I ask, but pauses at the threshold. “I was sent down here to tell you that dinner’s ready. We’re expected up at the house.”

I wipe my damp cheeks with shaky hands. “Go on without me. I need a few minutes.”

“All right.” He sounds resigned, defeated. “I didn’t mean to make you cry, Ken. I was just being honest.”

I nod because I don’t trust myself to speak. “I guess it’s past time for some honesty between us.” *No matter how much it hurts.*

Connor walks out of my room, closing the door behind him and leaving me to grieve alone.

Chapter 8

Connor Murphy

My feet drag as I head up the hill to the house. I need to shake off my dark mood and make an effort to be sociable at dinner, but my heart is still back in that bedroom with Kennedy.

She said I didn't do anything wrong. She said it wasn't me. I'm desperate to believe her, but then the alternative is almost worse. I can't believe my own grandfather said such vile things to her.

After keeping me in the dark all this time, she's finally shedding some light on her sudden departure. Images of the life we could have been living flash before my eyes. Over and over the images play out on an unending loop—the wedding we never had, the family we never started. Like our friends, we might have had a child or two by now if things had gone differently. We could have had everything we wanted. We could have been happy.

In my mind, I've always pictured us with a little boy—our son—with his mother's raven hair and dark eyes and my sense

of humor. Nostalgia tightens its grip on my heart as I mourn for the life we never had.

When a hand appears suddenly in front of my eyes, I'm shaken out of my reverie.

Will snaps his fingers in my face. "Hello there! Earth to Connor."

I blink, and the fragmented images of my alternate reality rain down around me, until they are no more.

I focus on Will. The evening sunlight beats down on his dark auburn hair making it appear almost burgundy, which is fitting as it matches the color of his T-shirt.

Suppressing a smile, he shakes his head. "You almost walked straight past me."

Shrugging, I clap my friend on the shoulder. "What can I say? Jet lag is a bitch."

Will glances down the hill at the cottage. "Where's Kennedy? Isn't she coming?"

"She'll be along," I say, trying to sound unconcerned. I don't want to admit to him that I just made her cry. "She's unpacking."

Will frowns as his gaze bounces between me and the cottage. “Is everything okay?”

I paste on a smile, hoping I come across as more assured than I feel. “Sure. Everything’s fine.” *Actually, it’s not. It’s fucked up, and I don’t know how to fix it.*

Will eyes me skeptically, but he doesn’t say anything more. “Well, come on then. Dinner’s about to be served.”

When I pick up the pace, so does he.

As soon as we step inside the house, I’m greeted by the scent of freshly-baked bread and the aroma of home cooking. I follow Will through the house to a spacious dining room with a big pine table surrounded by eight high-back chairs painted white. The walls are a light gray with white skirting boards. The décor is bright and airy, giving the room a real homey feel.

The table is set for five places. One end has been completely taken over by a range of toys, including Lego projects in various stages of construction, coloring books, Crayons, and Barbie dolls.

“Uncle Connor!” Penny’s enthusiastic cry catches my attention. She’s presiding over the toy end of the table,

bouncing in her seat while holding a Barbie doll in one hand and a Ken doll in the other. She's wearing a purple floral dress, and her hair is pulled back into a ponytail.

"Hello, little miss," I say as I take a vacant seat near her. "Don't you look pretty this evening."

"Thanks. Do you want to play with me?" She offers me the Ken doll, which is looking very dapper in a miniature suit and tie. "You can be the boy."

I snicker. "Good choice."

Will opens his mouth to speak but stops when Skye enters the room with baby Nicholas cradled in her arms. The baby's wrapped in a soft white blanket, only the top of his head and tufts of brown hair showing. Skye has faint shadows beneath her eyes, and she looks exhausted.

Will jumps up to pull out a chair for his wife. "Would you like to give the baby to me so you can go for a lie down?"

Skye squeezes Will's hand. "I appreciate the offer, honey, but right now we have guests." She winks at me. Then she glances around. "Where's Kennedy?"

I'd assumed she'd only be a little while behind me, but it seems she needs more time to compose herself. I really should

be back there with her now, making sure she's okay, comforting her if I possibly can, but instead I'm here pretending everything's okay when it clearly isn't.

She dropped a bombshell on me just moments ago, and there's a lot still to be said between us. I'm trying to get to grips with what she told me of my grandfather. I never would have believed him possible of saying such awful things. If I'd known he could be like that, we'd never have stepped foot in his house.

I clear my throat. "Kennedy was still unpacking when I left her. Maybe I should go check on her, make sure she hasn't fallen asleep or something." *By something* I mean that she isn't still in tears.

I'm about to stand, seeing this as the perfect opportunity to slip away, when Skye shakes her head. "If she's fallen asleep then let her be. If she misses dinner, we'll send you back with a plate for her."

I force a smile. "Perfect."

"So, Connor." Skye smiles sweetly. "Tell me what's new in your world?"

“Honestly, not much since I saw you last,” I say. I run my fingers through my hair, wondering what to share. I could mention the various contracts my team has secured and the new clients we’ve signed, amounting to hundreds of millions of pounds. But what I find interesting, others might find rather tedious. Besides, it’s not polite to talk business at the table. “I recently received a promotion,” I offer, deciding to stick with the basics. “I’m a senior account manager now. And—” I laugh. My voice cuts off as I wonder if this next part is a bit too TMI.

“Yes?” Skye asks. “What else?”

“Well, I got a tattoo.” There. That should liven up the dinner conversation.

Skye raises an eyebrow. “A tattoo? Seriously? Show us. I can’t wait to see it.”

I glance around the table. “Perhaps not in mixed company.”

Skye’s eyes widen. “Meaning?”

Will guffaws. “He got his arse inked.”

As Skye laughs, Penny wags her finger at her father.

“Daddy said a bad word!”

I groan. “Now I wish I hadn’t said anything.”

Skye leans forward in rapt attention. “Whatever possessed you to get a tattoo where the sun doesn’t shine?”

“What does that mean?” Penny asks.

“It means he got a tattoo on his bum, sweetheart,” Will answers.

Penny’s eyes widen. “Oh.”

Skye is trying not to laugh, but she’s failing miserably. “Connor, whatever possessed you to do such a thing?”

I quirk a brow. “Do I need a reason?” The truth is, it’s private, and not something I’m comfortable sharing.

Skye’s laughter wakes the baby, who starts crying. I watch in amusement as she tries to comfort him. Will offers to help, while Penny resumes playing with her doll, completely unfazed. They are the perfect little family, and I am merely an onlooker, an outsider observing the life I want for myself play out in front of me.

I see this as the perfect opportunity to go check on Kennedy. I’m about to slip away when she materializes in the open doorway, looking like a vision in an emerald-green

sleeveless dress that hugs her slender curves and ends just above her knees.

I stand, my heart thudding at the sight of her. “Kennedy. You look lovely.”

She gives me the briefest of smiles before she takes the empty seat beside Skye and holds out her hands. “May I?”

“Sure,” Skye says as she passes Nicholas over.

Kennedy rocks the baby in her arms. As she smiles down at him, her black hair spills over her shoulder, and I feel a tug on my heart. I’m utterly captivated by the image of Kennedy with a baby in her arms. It suits her. She seems like a natural.

Eventually Nicholas’s flushed cheeks return to their normal color, and he settles back to sleep.

Kennedy looks up. “I’m sorry I’m late. I was... unpacking. What did I miss?”

Penny readily answers. “Uncle Connor got a tattoo where the sun doesn’t shine.”

Skye sucks in her lips to control her laughter, while Will rolls his eyes, and as for Kennedy, she can’t bring herself to look at me. Physically, we are closer than we’ve been in years, and yet emotionally, it feels like we’re oceans apart.

Maggie enters the dining room pushing a serving cart holding our starters, prawns and cocktail sauce.

Skye rises from her chair. “Here, I’ll take him.” She takes the baby from Kennedy and places him in a Moses basket on a stand beside the table. “There, now you have your hands free to eat.”

Will opens a bottle of red wine, and he pours for Kennedy, me, and himself. Skye has a glass of sparkling grape juice.

Before long, Maggie returns with our meals—Beef Wellington served with mashed potatoes and roasted baby carrots. “Save room for some chocolate fudge cake,” she says, and Penny cheers.

Dinner is delicious, of course. I’d expect nothing less from Maggie, who’s a genius in the kitchen. We barely have room for dessert, but we’ll make an effort.

“Where’s your mom?” Kennedy asks Skye.

“She’s at home grading exams. I suspect she wanted to give us some time alone to catch up.”

“So, Kennedy,” I say as we’re settling down to dessert. “How’s The Big Apple treating you?” I just want to get her talking so I can hear her voice.

Kennedy swallows a bite of cake. “Fine.”

“And work?”

She takes another bite. “It’s great.”

I clasp my hands together under the table and will her to look at me for more than a few measly seconds.

Look at me, damn it.

But my wishful thinking is met only by Kennedy’s profile. She feigns a yawn as Maggie brings in tea and coffee on a silver tray.

After more conversation, the meal comes to an end.

When the baby awakens and starts fussing, Skye stands. “It’s time for his dinner. I’ll take Nicky upstairs to nurse, then see about putting him to bed.”

Kennedy rises to her feet. “I’ll come with you, if it’s okay. It’ll give us a chance to catch up.”

Skye lifts the squirming baby. “I would love that.” Then to her husband, she says, “Would you mind helping Penny get ready for bed?”

“Absolutely,” Will says just before he finishes off his glass of wine.

I recline in my seat and watch as Kennedy follows Skye out of the room. I lean forward, grab the fluted stem of my wine glass, and swallow the contents down in one.

“All right, Penny,” Will prompts. “You heard Mummy. It’s time to get ready for bed.”

With a sigh, the little girl pushes out her chair and hops down. She rounds the table to give me a hug. “G’night, Uncle Connor. Will you play with me again tomorrow?”

“You can count on it,” I say as I reach out to ruffle her hair.

Penny heads for the stairs. “Are you coming, Daddy?”

“Yes, I’ll be right up to check you’ve brushed your teeth. Make sure you do a good job.”

“I will,” she promises as she disappears from sight.

“And don’t forget to use toothpaste!” Will reminds her.

As soon as we’re alone, I slump back in my seat.

Will studies me. “All right, what’s wrong?”

I sigh heavily. “The four of us together again—it’s like old times, except it isn’t.”

Will nods as though he understands what I'm feeling.

"You still love her."

It's not a question, but I nod anyway and meet his gaze. His is filled with compassion whereas I'm still reeling inside from what she told me about my grandfather. I'm ashamed of what the old man said to her. I feel as though I've lost the battle before it even began. "I don't know how to fix this, Will. Did you see her at dinner? She couldn't even bring herself to look at me."

"I imagine Kennedy carries a lot of guilt for leaving you. It must be hard for her to see you again. Give her some time."

I nod. I hear what Will's saying, and of course it makes sense, but it's still difficult to process.

Will pours himself and me fresh glasses of wine, and we sit sipping our drinks in companionable silence until we hear the floorboards squeaking above. A moment later, we hear the pitter patter of little feet coming down the stairs. Penny appears in the open doorway, clad in pink pajamas with little ice cream cones all over them. Based on the fit, I'm pretty sure she's got the top on backwards.

She walks up to Will and, with a big grin on her face, she says, "I put my pajamas on all by myself, and I brushed my

teeth.” Then she bares her teeth in what looks like a feral grin.

Chair legs screech against the wooden floorboards as Will gets to his feet. “Great job, sweetheart. Go hop in bed. I’ll be right there to read you a story.”

Before he leaves, Will gives me one last piece of advice. “You have this small window of time to try to patch things up with her, so don’t waste it. If you truly love her, don’t give up. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a little girl who’s waiting on her bedtime story.”

Chapter 9

Kennedy Takahashi

I follow Skye up the staircase and down the hall to the second door on the right, which is Nicky's room. The nursery walls are painted a pale blue, and the crib, changing table, and rocking chair are all white. The floors are a light wood, and there's a plush blue rug beneath our feet. A small bookcase holds baby books, and a shelf on the wall displays a collection of stuffed animals.

"I bet you're glad to have a boy," I say as Skye lays Nicholas on the changing table. "You have a daughter and a son, one of each."

She smiles as she unsnaps the baby's onesie. "Yes, it's pretty perfect." She leans down and smiles at her son. "You're pretty perfect, aren't you?" she says in a cooing voice.

"Do you think you'll have more kids?" I ask.

Smiling, she shrugs. "We've been discussing it. Will likes the idea of a large family."

"What do you think?"

“I’m an only child. At least I *was* an only child before my dad married Julie, later in life, and they had Charlie and Rebecca, my young half-siblings. But still, I grew up without siblings. I don’t know what it’s like to have a house full of kids.”

“I can’t help you there,” I say, laughing. “Only kid here, too. And Will is also, isn’t he? He seems like a great dad, very involved and ready to chip in.”

Skye removes Nicky’s wet diaper, places it in the diaper pail, and grabs a clean one. “He’s a wonderful dad. I’m sure if we had a whole pack of kids, he’d be only too happy to chase them all down.”

“Penny seems to take well to being a big sister.”

“She’s been a big help, fetching and carrying for me, everything from diapers to pacifiers.”

I watch as Skye dresses her son in a white sleeper with teddy bears on it.

Once Nicholas is dressed for bed, Skye carries him over to the padded rocking chair and sits. “Would you mind turning down the light? Then have a seat.” She points to an upholstered armchair across from the rocker.

I dim the light, then sit. Skye unbuttons her shirt and arranges Nicholas so he can nurse.

“You’re a natural at this motherhood thing,” I say. “You make it look so easy.”

Skye smiles. “Well, I had plenty of practice with Penny. She was my guinea pig.” She rocks gently as the baby nurses. “So, how’s it going?”

“How’s what going?” I ask, but of course I know exactly what she means.

“Seeing Connor again. If my recollection is right, this is the first time you’ve seen him since Penny was born.”

It’s hard to imagine that much time has passed. “It’s not easy. Just when I think I’m making progress in trying to get over him, wham! I’m right back to square one. You should have told me he was coming this weekend.”

Skye winces. “Yeah, I’m sorry about that. I was afraid you wouldn’t come if you knew.” As she pats the baby’s diapered bottom, she lifts her gaze to me. “It’s been five years, Kennedy, and you’re both still single.”

“So, you think we’re pining for each other? Both of us unable to move on?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s the case for Connor. What about you?”

I shrug. “I’ve dated.”

“Not seriously.” She makes a point of glancing at my hand. “You’ve never mentioned anyone to me, and I don’t see a ring on your finger.”

Self-consciously, I cover my left hand with my right. “Maybe I like being single. Is that a crime?”

“Of course not. Or, maybe no one else has ever measured up to Connor. I happen to remember you telling me once how smitten you were with him.”

I laugh. “I’ve never used the word *smitten* in my life.”

“Yeah, but you were crazy about him, admit it.” Skye’s expression morphs into a frown. “What happened, Kennedy? You guys seemed so happy. What went wrong?”

A chill comes over me as old memories resurface. “Cold, cruel reality is what happened.” I try not to sound bitter. “Connor’s grandfather wasn’t very accepting of me.”

“That’s ridiculous. Why not?”

I motion to my face. “Hello? Japanese-American here, not Caucasian.”

Skye shrugs dismissively. “Connor doesn’t care.”

“No, but his grandfather did.”

“What are you talking about?” Skye’s expression turns wary, as if she knows bad news is coming.

I let out a heavy breath. Even now, it’s hard to talk about. “It was after Connor’s father died. Connor took me to his grandfather’s ninetieth birthday party. I was surrounded by a bunch of aristocrats, many of whom looked down their noses at me. I got a lot of cold shoulders that day when Connor wasn’t looking. *How dare their precious Connor, heir to the family fortune, date an outsider?* I wasn’t just an American, a foreigner—that was bad enough—but I was also Asian. Two strikes against me.”

Skye looks shocked. “Did you tell Connor?”

I shake my head. “No. I didn’t want to come between Connor and his family. It wouldn’t be the first time a guy’s family didn’t approve of me. I was engaged to a guy when I was in college—I was crazy about him. We were talking marriage—I even had an engagement ring on my finger. But when his parents found out I was Japanese-American, they pressured him into breaking up with me.”

Skye lifts Nicholas to her shoulder and pats his back. “I’m so sorry, Kennedy. People can be such bigoted asses sometimes.”

I look away to study a trio of baby animal prints hanging on the wall—a baby elephant, a giraffe, and a zebra.

“Connor’s grandfather told me he’d never allow Connor to marry a foreigner, let alone one of my ethnicity. He said if Connor did, he’d disinherit him. I couldn’t allow that to happen. It broke my heart to leave him, but how could I stay under those conditions?”

“Don’t you think you should have let Connor decide his own future?”

“This is *Connor* we’re talking about. He wasn’t just some random Brit. He was heir to a massive fortune. I couldn’t risk his grandfather disinheriting him.”

When the baby lets out a healthy burp, we both laugh. Then Skye resumes nursing. “He’s still in love with you.”

My chest tightens painfully at the reminder. “I know.”

“And I think you’re still in love with him. His grandfather has passed, and Connor inherited everything. There’s no one standing in your way, Kennedy. Or his. Just think about it.”

When the baby is done eating, I follow Skye to her bedroom, where the baby's cradle stands beside her bed. Skye kisses his little forehead and lays him in his bed. Then she turns on the baby monitor and switches off the lamp, leaving only a nightlight on.

As we leave the room, she quietly closes the door. "You need to let Connor make his own choices, Kennedy. He's a grown man. He doesn't need you to protect him."

"I know." When Skye yawns, I say, "It's getting late." I reach out and squeeze her hand. "I think I'll call it a night and head to bed."

"I think I will, too. After I check on Penny, I'm changing into my pajamas and crashing early. I'll see you at breakfast." Skye gives me a hug. "I'm so glad you're here. I've missed you."

"Me, too."

When I walk downstairs, I expect to find Connor and Will still sitting in the dining room, but there's no sign of them. When I check the kitchen, I find Maggie cleaning up after dinner and Will pouring hot water from a kettle into two cups. "Making tea?"

“It’s chamomile, decaf,” Will says. “It helps Skye relax so she can sleep. Is Nicholas in bed?”

Seeing Will in the role of doting husband makes me smile. “Yes, he’s asleep in his bassinet. Skye’s getting ready for bed.”

“I hope you two had a good chat.”

“We did.”

“Was I mentioned?”

I laugh. “Actually, yes, you were.”

He grins. “All good, I hope. How about our dear Connor? Did his name come up?”

I smile. “Maybe.”

“A time or two?”

I shrug. “Possibly. Speaking of Connor, where is he?”

“He went back to the cottage, said he had some work to do. He’s worked his way up in the company, you know. He’s a senior account manager now, handling hundreds of millions of pounds in investments. Not bad for a lad of only twenty-three. According to my father, Connor’s already made a name for himself at the company. He has a bright future ahead of him.”

“I’m not surprised. He always was a smart one.”

Will looks me in the eye. “You might want to cut the lad some slack, Kennedy. He *really* misses you.”

Hearing that only intensifies the guilt I feel. And the longing. “It’s getting late. I guess I’d better turn in. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I let myself out the back door and head down the path to the cottage. The walkway is lined with solar lights, so it’s easy to see where I’m going in the dark. Ahead, the front of the cottage is lit up by strings of fairy lights decorating the picket fence. It’s quite picturesque.

When I walk through the front door, I’m surprised to find Connor sprawled on the sofa, his laptop open on his lap. Connor, however, is out cold. He must be exhausted because his body is still on UK time, so that would make it two in the morning for him.

I set his laptop on the coffee table and close the lid. As I peer down at him, I finally have a chance to get a really good look at him up close. His dark blond hair is parted on the side and long enough to be called rakish. His light brown lashes are thick and long. But it’s his body that has changed the most. He’s had time to grow up. As Skye pointed out, he’s a grown

man now, no longer a teenager. No longer in need of anyone's protection.

A shiver runs down my spine at the thought of what it would be like to be with him again, with this new Connor, who's older and even more handsome than before.

My fingers itch to brush his bangs back from his forehead. He must spend a lot of time outdoors because his skin is tanned a golden brown. Since dinner, he changed into a pair of white shorts and a gray tank top. His feet are bare. His body is so familiar to me, and yet it's different now. It's a bit unsettling. Part of me yearns to reach out and touch him, pick up where we left off.

But that's impossible. It wouldn't be fair to him, not after the way I left.

"Aren't you going to tuck me in?" he asks in a low, husky voice.

Startled, I nearly jump out of my skin. "Shit, Connor. You scared me."

"Sorry." He gives me a familiar boyish grin. "I didn't mean to. But you gave me a bit of a scare, too, you know. I woke up to find a woman standing over me, ogling me like

I'm a piece of meat." He winks. "I'm not complaining, mind you. You're welcome to ogle me all you want."

On impulse, I reach down and smack his bare shoulder and am surprised by how firm it is. He could always make me laugh. Clearly, that hasn't changed. "You might as well go to bed, Connor. Your body thinks it's two o'clock in the morning." When I glance down at his lap, I notice his body is more than awake and thinking about something else entirely. I look away to avoid staring at his growing erection.

"Sorry," he says. As he sits up, he pulls a beige blanket off the back of the sofa and dumps it on his lap. "Some things I can't control."

This is surreal. Connor Murphy is sitting less than an arm's length away from me. "I didn't mean to disturb you," I say in an attempt to steer the conversation to safer ground. "I guess I'll head to bed now. Goodnight, Connor."

As I turn to walk away, he snags my hand. "Kennedy, wait."

I stop, frozen in place, and my heart starts beating double time. The pain in my chest steals my breath.

There's an intensity in his gaze that I've never seen before. When he rises to his feet, he towers over me. That's not surprising, but for some reason it feels different this time. He seems so much more in command of himself. So much more confident. And I have to admit I like it. A lot.

My skin tightens, and every nerve ending in my body comes alive. Tingles travel up and down my spine as my body heats, and I shiver. My nipples tighten in response, eliciting a smothered whimper. "Connor—"

The pull between us is palpable. It's like nothing has changed. It's like the past five years apart were just a bad dream.

Connor's gaze darkens as he stares down at me. "Can you honestly look me in the eye and tell me you feel *nothing* for me? That I'm simply *imagining* the chemistry between us?"

My breath catches, and for a split second, I picture myself letting go and falling into his arms. "It was never about a lack of chemistry, Connor. You know that as well as I do."

He reaches out to touch my hair, letting the strands slide between his fingers. "I like your hair like this," he murmurs, as if distracted from the conversation at hand. "It's longer."

Without warning, he slides his arms around me and pulls me close, so close that my breasts press against his firm chest. The pressure feels so good I could cry.

“You never answered my question,” he says in a low, quiet voice. His gaze heats as he strokes my back.

I step back, breaking out of his hold. “This isn’t a good idea, Connor.”

“Why not? We’re two consenting adults who happen to want each other.”

“I don’t think your family would agree.”

“My grandfather’s dead.”

“He wasn’t the only one who wanted me gone.”

“It doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks or says. Don’t you think it should be *our* decision, and ours alone?”

“Yes, but—”

“No *buts*, Kennedy. I don’t need your protection.” He takes my hand and presses it to his chest. “The only thing I need is you.”

I’m stunned by the mix of pain and longing I see in his eyes—and the naked honesty.

When I don't reply, Connor shakes his head in frustration. "Let me know if you still feel the same." Then he walks away, heading for his bedroom. When he reaches the door, he pauses and glances back at me. "For what it's worth, I would have chosen you over the inheritance, no question. But you never gave me the chance to make that decision, did you? No, you decided for me. And frankly, Kennedy, you chose wrong."

When he disappears into his bedroom, he slams the door so hard the wall shakes, and the sound echoes loud and ominous through the small cottage.

Chapter 10

Connor Murphy

I lean back against my bedroom door and suck in a deep breath. My heart is pounding, and my jaws are clenched so tightly I'm sure I'm close to cracking teeth.

How could she have kept this from me?

Better yet, how could my own grandfather—a man who claimed to love me—chase away the woman I loved? My grandfather was a strong personality, but I always thought he was fair. Kennedy has never been one who could be easily pushed around, but my grandfather did have the ability to bring the most confident and self-assured of people to their knees. I can only imagine the derogatory tone in which he delivered those vile words to Kennedy.

In hindsight, I realize she never stood a chance against him. He'd lived many decades in a position of tremendous wealth and power, and he was used to getting his own way. She was so much younger back then. What chance did she have of standing up to him? Especially all by herself.

I meant what I said to her. If I'd had to choose between my inheritance and Kennedy, I'd have chosen her in a heartbeat.

I'd have gladly lived a hand-to-mouth lifestyle in a pokey London flat just to be with her. As long as I had her in my life, nothing else mattered.

I push off the door and start pacing. I'm seconds away from charging through this door and confronting her, but I stop as my fingers make contact with the cool brass handle. If I've learned anything about Kennedy it's not to meet her head on, as tempting as it may be. I need to give her time to think and let her come to me.

If I was in my penthouse apartment back in London, I'd take my frustration out on the equipment in my home gym. But with nothing to do here for a release, I do the only thing I can. I strip and head for the bathroom to take a hot shower.

I switch on the overhead bathroom lights, which reflect off the slate gray tiles. The bathroom is spacious, with white cabinets. The vanity includes two sinks, and the toilet is in a little room of its own. The shower is walk-in, the walls covered with the same slate gray tiles—Italian, by the look of them. The showerhead is one of those fancy overhead fixtures. I turn on the water and set the temperature. Instantly, hot water rains down.

Nice.

It would seem Will and Skye spared no expense on the modern conveniences.

A trio of soft blue LED lights illuminates the water as it cascades down, setting a relaxing tone, which is exactly what I need right now. I need to relax before I put my fist through a wall.

I step under the spray and revel in the hot water streaming down my torso. Closing my eyes, I lift my face to the water and let it wash away my anger and frustration. I try to let it all go because I don't want to be angry at Kennedy. This mess wasn't her doing. It was my grandfather's.

I think back to a happier time when Kennedy and I shared the flat in London. I can still picture those ugly pea-green wall tiles in the bathroom and the archaic fluffy toilet seat cover. It was awfully outdated, but we didn't mind. It was ours.

At least it was ours until that damned birthday party. Knowing what I know now, I wish we'd never gone.

I can't help reliving that day as if it happened just yesterday.

Steam hung in the air like a cloud as I entered the tiny bathroom in our flat. Kennedy was standing in the shower, her

naked body a pure work of art, with soft curves in all the right places. For a moment, I just stood and watched her, mesmerized by her every move.

As always, watching her gave me a hard-on, and I had to shift my stance as I adjusted the fit of my trousers. Normally I'd waste no time in stripping off and joining her, but not today. We didn't have time for that. Today was the day I was going to introduce Kennedy to my extended family.

I tapped the sole of my shoe against the floor tile and pointed to my watch. "Come on, Ken. Stop stalling. We've got to leave soon." I knew she was nervous about meeting so many of my family.

Her gaze met mine through the half-fogged glass shower door. "Just ten more minutes," she said as she reached for her favorite lavender-scented body wash.

"You said that half an hour ago."

Her brow furrows as she scowls at me. It was then I realized she was nervous. "Shit, Ken, you're nervous."

Her dark eyes narrowed. "I am not."

I folded my arms over my chest. "Yes, you are."

"Am not."

“There’s nothing for you to be nervous about, sweetheart. My family are going to love you, just as I do.”

I didn’t imagine the shadows lurking behind her dark eyes. If I didn’t know better, I’d think she was afraid. But that was impossible. Nothing ever unnerved Kennedy.

Maybe if I’d taken her concerns more seriously, she might have opened up to me about what my grandfather said to her. If he were still alive, he’d be answering to me right now for his actions.

I turn off the water and dry myself before wrapping the towel around my waist and stepping out of the shower.

Suddenly, the door connecting the bathroom to Kennedy’s bedroom opens, and she walks in dressed in a pale pink silk robe. When she sees me, she freezes, her eyes going wide and her soft lips parting on a gasp. Her gaze sweeps down my torso to my waist and below. Immediately, I feel myself hardening beneath the towel. “Well, so much for the distraction of a shower,” I say.

“Oh, my god, I’m so sorry.” She turns and reaches for the door handle. “I should have knocked.”

“It’s all right, Ken. I’m done. You can have the bathroom.” Suddenly, my anger has been replaced by sadness. If only I’d listened to her fears that day. I’m just as much to blame as she is.

She stands still, clutching the neckline of her robe. It’s a defensive posture, as if she has to protect herself—from me.

“Kennedy, I’m so sorry.”

Her gaze snaps back to me, landing on my bare chest, then darting away. “Sorry for what?” she asks, sounding distracted.

“For not taking you seriously that day.”

She still won’t look at me. “What are you talking about?”

But now’s not the time to revisit the past. It’s late, and we’ve had a long day. We’re both tired. “The shower is all yours,” I say. “I’ll leave you alone now.”

I return to my room and close the door behind me to give her some privacy. After pulling on a clean pair of boxers, I switch off the light and lie down on the mattress to stare up at the ceiling.

My mind keeps reliving the past with a whole new perspective as I attempt to put the puzzle pieces together.

When I pressed the doorbell at my grandfather's estate, the chime was so loud we could hear it clearly from outside.

"Relax," I said as I squeezed Kennedy's hand.

"I'm trying to." She laughed, though the sound was strained and devoid of any real humor.

"FYI, my aunts are huggers, so be prepared to get pounced on." I side-eyed my girlfriend who looked divine that day. Her hair was pinned up, and her white dress billowed in the autumn breeze.

Crinkled leaves blew across the ground. Everything around us was slowly turning colors, the trees, the shrubs, the flowers. And yet against this dying rustic backdrop stood my girl, so full of life and tenacity. A woman whom I was proud as hell to call my own. I couldn't wait to introduce her to everyone.

Voices from inside the house drew closer, and the click of a key in the lock had Kennedy standing to attention.

"Relax," I said once again as the door swung open.

My great aunt Angelica—my grandfather's youngest sister—greeted us at the door. "Connor, dear, come in." As soon as we stepped into the foyer, my aunt pulled me into a hug.

“Aunt Angelica, how nice to see you.” I snuck a wink at Kennedy. She’d heard me complain about this old biddy numerous times.

When my aunt finally released me, she turned her attention to Kennedy. “You must be the friend we’ve heard so much about.”

“Girlfriend,” I corrected instantly, annoyed at the obvious snub.

My aunt’s lips flattened, and she stared down at Kennedy with glacial eyes.

Kennedy smiled and held out her hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Without another word, my aunt turned and walked away. At the time, I attributed her snub to her uptight nature, but in hindsight, it seems more ominous.

“Come, Connor,” my aunt said as she walked away. “Don’t keep your grandfather waiting.”

I wasn’t surprised by her rudeness, and I had warned Kennedy about her on the drive here. “Did I mention I’m not that close to Aunt Angelica?” I had asked, chuckling.

Pursing her lips, Kennedy didn’t even crack a smile.

Out of my grandfather's two sisters, it is Angelica we see the least. She's a cantankerous old bat, extremely bossy, and quite opinionated.

I took Kennedy's hand and led her inside my grandfather's country estate. "Come, you've got to see something."

The central hallway was vast and upon entry we were greeted by a large double staircase with a golden trim banister. It looked like something out of a museum with its polished marble finish and intricately carved pillars.

Kennedy's jaw practically dropped. "Oh, my god, Connor. This is... it's..."

"I know," I said as I gave her arm a little tug. "It's grossly over the top. But that's not what I wanted you to see. Look at these paintings."

I led Kennedy along the hallway, past an array of oil paintings dating back decades.

"Are these your grandparents?" Kennedy asked as we passed a gallery of portraits.

"Yes," I said with pride while continuing down the corridor.

Oil canvasses of my grandfather and late grandmother lined the walls, each depicting them at a different stage of their life. The first painting we passed showed them shortly after they'd gotten married. My grandmother—a beautiful lady with crystal blue eyes and platinum blonde hair—was seated on a wooden chair, while my grandfather stood behind her with his hand on her shoulder. Whereas she looked straight ahead, he gazed down at his wife, love evident in his eyes.

They aged a little more with each canvas we passed, and it was as though we were traveling life's journey along with them. Despite the inevitable passage of time, every pose was a carbon copy of its predecessor. My grandmother seated on the same chair, looking straight ahead, while my grandfather gazed down at her with love in his eyes.

As we came to the end of the long corridor, the display of paintings neared its end. By now, my grandmother looked to be in her early eighties. She was much thinner now, and her face had lost its youthful glow. Her thick platinum locks had lost their luster, giving way to a much shorter gray do. Her once blue eyes that shone so brightly with life had lost their sparkle.

That was the last painting of them together. In the final canvas, my grandfather stands alone, the chair beside him empty. It was the first time my grandfather faced forward, and I figured that was because it was too painful for him to look down at that empty chair. The love that was in his eyes had been replaced by sorrow.

“That’s the last picture my grandfather had painted.” It made me both happy and sad that a love so powerful could span many decades. Ultimately, someone always got left behind.

“That’s so sad,” Kennedy said. “He must have been devastated to lose her.”

I nodded. “When my grandmother died, she took a large piece of his heart with her. He hasn’t been the same since.”

I opened the door leading into the gardens, and out on the patio, my family gathered in small clusters. This was the first time we had all gotten together since my father passed away a few months prior, and although everyone was trying to remain upbeat, we were all very conscious that someone was missing.

“Come, let me introduce you,” I’d told her, taking Kennedy’s arm as we circulated amongst the small crowd.

Kennedy and I spent the next hour mingling, drinking wine, and eating from the buffet. I introduced Kennedy to my many cousins and their children, to my aunts and uncles on my mother's side of the family, to my relatives on my father's side.

Aunt Angelica appeared suddenly and took my arm.

"Connor, your mother wishes to speak with you."

I nodded and reached for Kennedy's hand.

"Alone, dear," my aunt said. "It's a private family matter."

I leaned into Kennedy and kissed her temple. "I won't be long, love. Will you be all right?"

"Sure," she said, giving me a smile. "Don't worry about me. I'll be here enjoying the garden."

When I returned to Kennedy some half hour later, I found her standing alone by the drinks fountain, her arms wrapped tightly around her torso. She looked unusually pale, like she'd seen a ghost.

I didn't waste any time removing my jacket and draping it over her shoulders. "Are you all right?"

She shrugged. "Do you mind if we go now? I'm feeling a little faint."

I glanced around at my family who were all deep in conversation. “Of course we can go. It doesn’t look as though anyone is going to miss us.”

On our way out, we passed by the paintings of my grandparents, only this time in reverse. My grandparents appeared more youthful with each canvas, until we reached their very first one. Like Kennedy and me, their journey was just about to begin.

I couldn’t wait to see images of our life together depicted on the walls of our home one day.

Now I’m kicking myself. I should have realized something had happened when I was away from Kennedy.

This evening, years later, I can’t sleep for remembering. As the night progresses, I plump my pillow and turn restlessly, trying in vain to get comfortable. My grandfather must have cornered Kennedy and said those awful things to her while I was called away. I should never have left her side. I should have pressed her harder about what was bothering her at the time.

We were both at fault. And I’m determined to make this right, no matter what it takes.

Chapter 11

Kennedy Takahashi

After a restless night punctuated with bad dreams, I rise early so I can join Skye for breakfast. Connor's bedroom door is still closed when I come out of the bathroom, and I haven't heard a peep out of him all morning. He must be sleeping in. It's not surprising given his jet lag. Besides, he always did need his beauty sleep, the big baby.

When we lived together in London, he'd sleep in on the weekends to make up for having to get up early for work during the week. I'd be up and dressed and on my second cup of coffee before he'd even begin to stir. Half the time, he'd sweet talk me into crawling back in bed with him. I didn't mind, though, because he's especially cuddly when he first wakes up. And morning sex was amazing.

I force myself to shake off those bittersweet memories and focus on the here and now.

As soon as I'm dressed, I leave the cottage, quietly closing the door behind me so I don't wake Prince Charming. The early morning air is crisp and cool, thanks to a nice breeze, and soft white clouds drift across a clear blue sky. The ducks

on the lake are squawking their heads off as they gripe at each other. I spot a trio of horses off in the distance grazing on a grassy hill. It's so different here from Brooklyn. I can appreciate the quiet serenity of the countryside and the slower pace, but I must confess I prefer the hustle and bustle of the city. I especially love my neighborhood in Brooklyn, so quaint and charming. It has all the amenities of Manhattan, but it moves at a more reasonable pace.

I glance up the hill toward the house just in time to see Penny racing down the back porch steps.

She waves at me. "Hi, Aunt Kennedy!"

Skye follows her daughter at a more leisurely pace, Nicky cradled in her arms. Penny jogs down the path to join me, at the last moment throwing herself at me.

I catch her before she knocks us both over. "Good morning, cupcake."

Penny grins. "I'm not a cupcake."

"Then what are you?"

"I'm Penelope Brenda Williams Carmichael."

I laugh. "That's quite a mouthful for such a little girl. If it's okay with you, I'll keep calling you Penny."

“Sure, that’s fine,” she says, tugging me forward. “Come inside so we can eat breakfast. I’m starving.”

Skye gives me an amused smile when we reach the porch steps. “I hope you slept well.”

“Quite the opposite,” I say as Penny releases my hand and races inside the house. “I tossed and turned all night.”

“Any particular reason why?”

I can tell from her expression that she knows something I don’t. “All right, spit it out. What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing,” she says, sounding far too innocent to be believable. “Come eat. The others are waiting for us.”

Others?

Penny reappears in the open doorway and captures my hand so she can drag me toward the dining room. “Come on, Aunt Kennedy. We have to hurry before Daddy and Uncle Connor eat *all* the food.”

Connor’s here already? My stomach twists into a knot.

I allow Penny to pull me along with her. Skye follows.

When we walk into the dining room, Will says, “It’s about time, Kennedy. We were about to start without you.”

Connor looks up from the table with a pleased-as-punch smile on his handsome face. He looks amazing in a pair of khaki trousers and a white Polo shirt, unbuttoned at the collar, revealing the strong, tanned column of his throat.

“Good morning, Kennedy,” he says, his accent smoothly seductive. “May I say you look absolutely lovely this morning? The country air appears to agree with you.”

I glance down at my white cotton shorts, blue sleeveless top, and beige sandals. It’s nothing special. Still, Connor’s eyeing me like he wants to eat me up.

Feeling self-conscious, I tuck my hair behind my ear and allow Penny to maneuver me into the chair beside hers. She hands me a raven-haired Barbie doll wearing a hot pink, one-piece bathing suit and matching hot-pink heels.

“You can play with her,” Penny says. “She looks like you.”

Indeed she does. The doll has long black hair and Asian features.

“Of course, Kennedy is far prettier than a Barbie doll,” Connor says as he reaches for his coffee.

When we make eye contact, I see none of the anger and resentment I saw in him last night. This morning, he seems perfectly at ease.

Will wags a finger at his daughter. "It's time to eat, sweetheart, not play with dolls. You can do that later."

"Breakfast is ready," Maggie says as she wheels in the serving cart loaded with our breakfast plates. "Ladies first." She winks at Penny as she sets her plate down. Then she passes out the rest of the plates.

"We're eating an English breakfast this morning," Penny says as she picks up her slice of toast and takes a bite. "Mommy thought Aunt Kennedy would like that."

Sure enough, I'm looking at a Full English breakfast plate in front of me, complete with sausages, bacon, eggs, mushrooms, grilled slices of tomato, baked beans, hash browns, and toast. This certainly brings back memories.

Maggie pours coffee into my cup. "Cream and sugar are on the table, dear. Do you need anything else?"

"No, thank you," I say. "This is more than enough." As I study my breakfast plate, I'm suddenly nostalgic for London. Skye and I used to visit a local restaurant every Sunday

morning to have a Full English breakfast. We would eat until we were stuffed.

When I happen to catch Connor's gaze, he winks at me. "It brings back memories, doesn't it?"

It's like he's reading my mind, something he used to do often.

Reaching for my coffee, I nod, but I don't say anything because suddenly my throat is tight. For the rest of the meal, I avoid looking at Connor. I don't know what he's up to, but I know it's something. He's far too happy and relaxed this morning, in stark contrast to his dark mood last night.

Penny smiles at me. "Uncle Connor is taking me out on the motorboat after breakfast. Do you want to come with us?"

"Um, thanks, but no. I think I'll hang out here with your mom."

"Actually," Skye says as she sips her decaf, "I didn't get much sleep last night, so I think I'll lie down and take a nap with Nicky after breakfast. You should go with them, Kennedy. It'll be fun."

"Come on, Aunt Kennedy," Penny says as she bats her long lashes at me. "Pleeease?"

“Yes, Kennedy,” Connor says. “Pleeease?” He bats his lashes as well, which makes Penny break into peals of laughter.

Yes, he’s definitely up to something. And why does that fill me with a sense of anticipation I haven’t felt in a very long time?

* * *

“Don’t you want to change into your swimming costume?” Connor asks me as we stroll down to the lake. “In case you fall in. You wouldn’t want to get your clothes wet.”

Will is walking ahead of us, Penny holding his hand and skipping eagerly.

“I’m fine as I am.”

“Suit yourself,” Connor says as we pass by the cottage on our way to the dock.

A shiny white boat that looks like it could easily seat a dozen people bobs in the water alongside the dock.

Will opens a wooden storage box and pulls out three lifejackets, two bright orange ones designed for adults and a bright pink, child-size one. He helps Penny put hers on and

buckles it securely. Then he offers me one of the adult lifejackets.

“Thanks,” I say, “but I can swim.”

“Lake rules,” Penny says. “*Everyone* wears a lifejacket while boating. Even Daddy.”

Connor shrugs as he slips into one of the orange jackets. “You heard her, Kennedy. *Lake rules.*”

I haven’t seen Connor this playful since we arrived, and it makes me smile. “All right,” I say as I slip the lifejacket on and secure the buckles. Then the four of us walk out to the end of the dock, where the boat is tethered securely in place.

Will helps Penny into the boat, and she immediately takes a seat on the passenger bench in the rear. Connor offers me his hand, and I take it as I step on board. I don’t have the best sea legs, and the last thing I want to do is fall overboard. I take a seat next to Penny.

Lastly, Connor steps on and takes the captain’s seat behind the wheel.

Will loosens the mooring ropes and tosses them into the boat. “You’re all gassed up and ready to go. Have fun.” He

looks to his daughter. “You be a good girl and listen to Kennedy and Connor, all right?”

“I will,” Penny says as she bounces eagerly on her seat.

“Aren’t you coming with us?” I ask Will, suddenly feeling a bit panicked. I’d assumed he’d be coming, too. He’d be a great buffer between me and Connor.

Will props his hands on his hips and nods back toward the house. “I think I’ll take advantage of the opportunity to nap with Skye and Nicky.”

Connor looks quite at home sitting in the captain’s chair. Leaning back in his seat, he starts the engine with ease and deftly steers the boat away from the dock. Clearly, he’s done this before.

Will waves as we head toward the middle of the lake. Gradually, Connor increases the speed until the wind is blowing through our hair and the boat skims over the water’s surface. Penny squeals as a fine mist of spray hits us in the face. I grip the chrome rail behind us with one hand, while I wrap my free arm around Penny to hold her securely in place.

Penny bounces eagerly on the bench. “Faster, Uncle Connor! Go faster!”

“I’m sure this is fast enough,” I say loudly, trying to be heard over the engine and the splash of water.

To Penny’s delight, Connor speeds up as he makes several large loops around the lake before he eventually slows the boat to a more relaxed pace. “Are you ladies having fun?” he asks as he glances back with a grin.

“Go fast again!” Penny says.

Connor laughs as he looks me over. “I think Kennedy’s had enough of fast for the time being.”

We explore the perimeter of the lake at a leisurely pace, ducking at times when tree branches hang low over our heads.

“Watch out for the spiders,” Penny warns me. She makes a disgusted face. “They’ll get in your hair.”

Periodically, as we pass along the shoreline, we hear a loud croaking sound followed by a splash as a bullfrog jumps into the water. Occasionally, a fish will jump, breaking the surface before falling back into the lake. We even spot three turtles sunbathing on a floating log.

Penny is fascinated by the wildlife, calling out every little fish, turtle, and dragonfly she spots. Mostly I enjoy watching Connor operate the boat. He seems quite competent behind the

wheel. I'm mesmerized by the way his biceps flex and bunch as he steers the boat.

"How about a swim?" he asks us.

"Yes!" Penny says. "I have my swimsuit on under my clothes."

"How about you, Kennedy?" Connor asks. "Fancy a dip?"

"Since I'm not wearing a suit, I'll just have to watch."

Connor catches my gaze and winks. "I'm fine with you watching."

My cheeks are burning. I tell myself it's just a bit of sunburn from being out on the lake, but what's really heating me up is the idea of *watching* Connor. It's not like I haven't done that before—watch him pleasure himself. And he's watched me.

After we make one last pass around the lake, we return to the dock. Connor hops out and secures the boat, then he helps me and Penny out. Without warning, he removes his lifejacket and tosses it on the dock, kicks off his sneakers, whips off his shirt, and dives right into the water. I realize the pair of shorts he's wearing are actually swim trunks.

Penny stands at the edge of the dock and waits for him to surface. When he does, he splashes her, and she giggles with delight.

“Come on in, Penny,” he says, holding his hands out. “The water’s fine.”

I help Penny remove her lifejacket so she can take off her clothes. Underneath, she’s wearing a bright pink, one-piece bathing suit decorated with unicorns and rainbows.

After I put Penny’s lifejacket back on her, she runs to the edge of the boardwalk, throws out her arms, and yells, “Watch me!” Throwing caution to the wind, she jumps fearlessly into the water, bobs to the surface, and doggy paddles over to Connor’s waiting arms.

“Jump in, Aunt Kennedy,” she calls to me. “The water’s fine.”

Hearing her parrot Connor’s words makes me smile.

The water does look inviting, and I would love to join them, but the idea of jumping in wearing my clothes is unnerving.

“Come on, Kennedy,” Connor says as he waves me in.
“Join us.”

“Yeah, join us,” Penny says. “Please?”

Connor grins. “Please?”

“All right, I’m coming in,” I say. I know I’m going to regret this when it’s time to get out, and I look like a contestant in a wet T-shirt contest.

I remove my lifejacket and sandals and jump in, gasping when the cool water hits my heated skin. I allow myself to sink down in the water a ways, then kick to send myself back up to the surface.

Penny swims right to me and wraps her arms around my neck. “You did it!”

We swim over to Connor.

“I challenge you to a race to the dock, Ms. Takahashi,” he says. “How about it?”

“Yay!” Penny says. She turns to me. “You can do it, Aunt Kennedy. You can beat him.”

I glance over to the dock, which is about twenty feet away. “Sure, why not?” I reply. I’m already wet, so I might as well go all out. I’m a lousy swimmer, and I’m sure Connor will beat me, but who cares?

Giving us no warning, Penny says, “Ready, set, go!”

I leap forward in the water, stroking and kicking as hard as I can toward the dock. I can hear Connor beside me, splashing and carrying on, mostly in an effort to amuse Penny, I'm sure. Penny squeals with laughter.

As we race toward our goal, I notice Connor is keeping pace with me, and I imagine it's intentional on his part. We both reach the dock at the same time.

I turn to face him, treading water. "You could have beat me easily if you'd wanted to."

He smiles. "I'd rather swim *with* you."

Penny dog paddles over to us and throws her arms around both our shoulders. "It was a tie," she says. "Try again."

Connor laughs, scoops Penny up in his arms, and tosses her into the air. She cackles with delight when she hits the water. "Do it again," she begs, paddling back toward him.

He tosses her up into the air a few more times, and somehow we end up playing tag after that.

We play in the water for a half-hour or so, until Skye comes down to the dock.

"Hi, Mommy!" Penny calls, waving madly. "We're swimming."

“I see that,” Skye says. “Are you ready to get out now, before you turn into a prune?”

Reluctantly, Penny climbs up the ladder attached to the dock, followed by Connor. I’m left treading water.

“Aren’t you coming out, Ken?” Connor asks, grinning at me.

I have nothing to cover up with. My wet clothes will show *everything*. “I didn’t bring a towel.”

Taking pity on me, Connor holds out his discarded shirt. “Here you go, Ken. You can use my shirt.”

Realizing I don’t have much of a choice, I climb the ladder. When I reach the top, Connor offers me his hand and pulls me up onto the dock. He hands me his shirt, and I pull it over top my wet one. Immediately, I realize this was a mistake because the shirt smells like him—faintly of cologne and man—teasing my senses. My belly clenches as my body responds. “Thanks,” I mutter, trying to hide my reaction.

He smiles. “You’re quite welcome.”

After our swim, I return to the cottage so I can shower and dress. My heart is racing after our outing, and it has nothing to

do with the exertion of swimming. No, my heart is all aflutter
because something has changed between us.

The problem is, I don't know why.

Chapter 12

Kennedy Takahashi

Back in the cottage, I stop in my room to grab a clean change of clothes, then head to the bathroom so I can strip off my wet clothes and hop in a nice hot shower. Just as I'm getting out, wearing only a bath towel wrapped around my torso, the door connecting the bathroom to Connor's bedroom opens, and in he walks. As soon as he spots me, he freezes. We both do.

His eyes widen as he skims me from head to toe. Finally, he recovers from the shock of seeing me half-naked and grins. "We've got to stop meeting like this." His gaze skates once more over my bare shoulders and arms, as if he can't help himself, then down to my toes.

"Eyes up here, buster," I say, pointing at my face as I try not to laugh. The look on his face is comical.

His gaze darts back up to mine. "Sorry. The temptation was too great. Thank god for the towel, right, or this would be really awkward."

I'm still fighting a grin. "Oh, I think it's definitely gone way beyond awkward. Knock next time, will you? This is a

shared bathroom.”

He nods. “Right. Knock.” Still, he just stands there looking at me. “I wasn’t dreaming. You’re just as lovely as I remember.”

I can feel my face heat as he continues to stare. I point toward his bedroom door. “Do you mind? I’m trying to get dressed.”

Now he’s grinning, clearly enjoying himself. “I don’t mind at all. Please, carry on. I’ll be quiet as a mouse. You won’t even know I’m here.”

When I snort out a laugh, he smiles. “That’s my girl.”

I try to look stern. “I meant, Do you mind leaving so I can finish up?”

“Oh...” He points to the door behind him. “You want me to leave?”

I’m trying to be serious, but he’s making it hard. “Yes.”

“Okay, I’m going. But first, one thing.” He takes three steps forward until he’s directly in front of me.

My breath catches in my chest, and I have to look up to meet his gaze. “What are you doing?”

“This.” He leans down, like he’s done a million times before, and kisses my forehead. “You take my breath away, Kennedy,” he whispers roughly against my damp skin. His lips linger against my forehead as he inhales deeply, breathing me in.

Time stops, and suddenly I’m transported back to the past when things were simpler between us. When we laughed and teased and loved. “Connor, I—” My voice breaks, and I don’t dare say another word.

“I know,” he says quietly as he steps back. “I’ll let you finish dressing.” And then he turns and walks out of the bathroom, quietly shutting the door behind him and leaving me in stunned silence.

To my surprise, I realize I’m smiling.

When I finally muster the courage to show my face after the impromptu meeting in the bathroom, I find Connor sitting on the sofa, his laptop set before him on the coffee table.

“Catching up on work?” I ask, trying to sound casual, ignoring the fact he kissed me in the bathroom just now.

“Yes. One of the members of my team is finalizing an investment deal for me since I’m out of the office. I wanted to

make sure everything was still on track. It's a big deal, and I don't want to leave anything to chance."

I'm amazed by how much Connor has changed. He was always such a goofball at work, cracking jokes and teasing colleagues. Of course, he was Will's PA at the time, and he didn't have much responsibility beyond getting Will's coffee and making lunch reservations. Now he's an account manager responsible for a fortune in capital investments. "So, how do you like it?"

"How do I like what?" he asks, sounding a bit distracted as he reads something on his laptop screen.

"Working at Carmichaels, being an account manager at the tender age of twenty-three. It's a lot of responsibility. How big is your portfolio?"

"Two billion pounds. And I love it," he says. "With a wave of my pen, I get to make someone's dream come true. It's quite satisfying to invest in a start-up company and watch them soar. And my track record is solid. How about you? Do you like your job in New York?"

"What's not to like? My focus is on global risk assessment, and I get to travel the world."

“Have you ever found yourself back in London?”

I shrug, quickly realizing this could get really awkward.

“A few times.”

He frowns. “You’ve been back in London and you never called me? Not even to share a pint and catch up for old time’s sake?”

Guilt hits me hard. Twice I found myself back in London for a few days on business. The desire to call him was overwhelming. I looked for him everywhere I went—on the streets, in restaurants, in pubs. Each time I found myself back in London I’d wanted to contact him, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. “They were quick trips in and out. I never had any free time.”

When Connor rises from the sofa, I notice he’s changed into a pair of gray shorts and a black tank top. His feet are bare.

“How about some lunch?” he asks.

If he noticed me staring at him, he doesn’t mention it.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m starved,” he continues, ignoring my lack of an answer. “Swimming always makes me hungry.”

I nod. “Sure, I could use a bite to eat.”

He heads for the kitchen and opens the fridge to peer inside. “It’s certainly well stocked. You’d think we were going to stay a whole week, and not just a couple of days.”

I join him, and we survey our options.

“This salmon looks too good to pass up,” he says, grabbing a package of fresh fillets wrapped in clear plastic. “How about having these with a lemon garlic butter sauce, paired with some of these baby potatoes?” He holds up a produce bag of tiny yellow potatoes the size of golf balls. “How about we steam some of these and make a salad?”

“You sound like you know what you’re doing.”

“I do actually, believe it or not,” he says. When I stare at him in disbelief, he adds, “I’ve learned a thing or two in the kitchen.”

“*You* know how to cook?” I’m flabbergasted. “When we were together, re-heating leftover pizza in the microwave was the extent of your cooking skills.”

Connor grins. “What can I say? Sarah’s been teaching me.”

“Sarah?” My stomach drops, and my heart skips a beat. I know I sound jealous, but I can’t help it. This is the first time he’s mentioned another woman’s name. “Who’s Sarah? Your girlfriend?”

He laughs. “Good lord, no. She’s my housekeeper. Sarah Allen. Her husband, Bruce, is my chauffeur. They have a private suite in my penthouse apartment. Sarah’s like a second mother to me, always reminding me to eat my vegetables and carry an umbrella when it’s raining.”

“Oh.” I try not to look as relieved as I feel. “She sounds nice.”

“She is. She and Bruce both. I’d be lost without them.”

I realize we’re both smiling at each other, and for the first time this weekend, the strain between us seems to have dissipated, at least for the moment.

“Have a seat.” He points to the breakfast bar. “Relax and watch.”

And that’s exactly what I do. I sit and watch. And impressed doesn’t even begin to cover it. He actually knows what he’s doing.

Who is this new Connor, and what have you done with the old one?

Chapter 13

Connor Murphy

I get busy prepping my workstation and trying to remember everything Sarah's taught me. It's not often that I get a chance to impress Ms. Takahashi.

After assembling my ingredients, I set a frying pan on the stove to heat. Then I fill a saucepan with water and set it on the stove to boil. As soon as the water's bubbling, I drop in the potatoes. Then I go in search of the most essential item of all—a bottle of extra virgin olive oil. I drizzle a generous amount of oil onto the pan and turn up the heat. I wait for it to spit before adding the salmon fillets.

While the fish and the potatoes are cooking, I grab a lemon and a clove of garlic and start on a simple sauce.

While keeping one eye on the food, I observe Kennedy as she watches me. She looks impressed, but having her sitting on the barstool like a cardboard cut-out isn't going to benefit either of us. It's imperative that I get her involved. She and I used to prepare the most basic of meals together all the time—even if it was just heating up left-overs—so maybe doing it

again might bring back some good memories. Besides, I don't want the heat in the kitchen to come from the stove alone.

I turn my back to her and try to act nonchalant. "Rather than having you sit there and ogle me, how about you make yourself useful?"

Her scoff is cute as hell, and I turn just as Kennedy slides off the stool. She rolls her beautifully expressive eyes as she makes her way to my side and peers into the pan. "I've got to see this."

"You wound me deeply, Ken," I say, pressing my hand over my heart. "Have you no faith in me?" It's then that I realize she no longer scolds me for calling her *Ken*. That's promising.

Laughing, she swats at my arm, while I take the spatula from the utensil holder and tip up the fillets to check their undersides.

I point to the fridge. "How about grabbing some butter for the sauce?"

While she does that, I squeeze the juice from half a lemon and crush some garlic cloves. Everything goes in a sauce pan,

along with some butter, and within minutes we have a simple, yet fragrant sauce.

As I drizzle the lemon garlic sauce over the fish, the pan sizzles.

Kennedy inhales deeply and makes an appreciative sound. “That smells incredible.” She looks up at me. “All right, Gordon Ramsey. Is there anything I can help with?”

She looks so temptingly beautiful that I have to fight the urge to lean in and kiss her. But since I don’t want to ruin the moment and risk getting smacked, I refrain. “Why don’t you make the salad?”

“I can do that.” She opens the fridge and reaches in to grab a bag of prewashed and precut lettuce, a red bell pepper, and a tomato. “Is this all right?”

“What, no cucumber? We can’t have a salad without cucumber.” I leave my station to join her at the fridge, making a point of leaning into her, my arm brushing against hers as I pluck a cucumber from the middle shelf.

I don’t miss how her breath catches. But oddly enough, she doesn’t step away, even though our arms are touching.

I give the cucumber a bit of a squeeze. “Perfect,” I whisper. I don’t back off right away, and instead savor every second of closeness. I inhale deeply and take in the minty scent of her hair. I’m pleased to know she still favors peppermint shampoo.

I can’t recall how many times I lathered her hair with the stuff when we shared the shower. Of course, her hair was a bit shorter then, a bob cut just to her chin. It’s longer now, and I’d give anything to be able to run my fingers through those black strands. I’m sure they feel as silky as they look.

Kennedy finally steps away, breaking our contact. She plucks the cucumber from my fingers. “I think this will do.”

It takes all of my self-control not to pull her back. Instead, I nod. “Excellent. You’re in charge of the salad while I finish the rest of our meal.”

After I check on the baby potatoes, which are nearly cooked to perfection, I take a peek at the salmon. “Almost ready here.”

Kennedy washes her hands, then the veg, before she locates a cutting board and knife.

I clear my throat. “So—”

She glances up as she's slicing the cucumber. "Yes?"

"I was thinking we could watch a movie tonight, after dinner. Like we used to."

Her expression becomes guarded. "I suppose."

Kennedy and I had a weekly Friday night date. We'd stay in and put on a movie, usually a rom-com, order a pizza, and snack on popcorn or ice cream. The best part of the evening was the two of us snuggling on the settee. Inevitably, we never finished the movies because we couldn't keep our hands off each other. "Surely you remember our Friday nights."

Frowning, she focuses on the cucumber she's slicing, not making eye contact.

"I didn't mean to upset you," I say quietly.

"You didn't. It's just—I try not to think about—"

My phone vibrates loudly on the worktop. I have most of my contacts set to divert, and it's only the important numbers who can get through to me. I glance at the screen. "Shit. I'm sorry, but I have to take this." I take the salmon off the heat and turn off the stove before accepting the call. "What is it, Clive?"

“Sorry to bother you, Connor, but I need your approval on the Hastings application. We’re ready to move forward.”

I put my phone on speaker and set it on the worktop so my hands are free to assemble our dinner. “Go ahead, Clive. You’re on speaker, by the way. So, how do they look?”

“Really good, actually. I’ve gone over the numbers as well as their proposed business plan. I don’t see any fault in their business model or earnings projection.”

I begin plating the salmon. “Have they finally gotten a good handle on social media marketing?”

“I’d say so. They gave me their newest pitch yesterday, and I thought it was impressive.”

“All right. If you think they’re ready, then let’s move forward. I trust your judgment.” I dish the baby potatoes onto our plates, then drizzle some of the lemon garlic butter sauce over them.

“Thanks, boss,” Clive says. “I’ll give them the tentative good news. We can meet with them early next week, after you’ve returned to the office.”

“Well done. Forward me your final assessment via e-mail, and I’ll review it before sending back my written approval.

And Clive? It's the weekend. Knock off work and take your wife out to dinner. Somewhere nice. Dinner's on me."

"Will do. Thanks, Connor."

When I end the call, I catch Kennedy staring at me.

"What?" I ask her.

She shakes her head, appearing to snap out of whatever trance she was in. "Sorry. I was distracted."

"By what?" I can't help feeling flattered. If she's staring at me, I consider it a good sign.

"By you. You actually sound like you know what you're doing."

I laugh. "I'd better know what I'm doing. Mr. Carmichael has put me in control of a lot of money. I'd better know what I'm doing."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it that way. It's just—back then you were a PA. You had no experience evaluating the risk factors of potential investment clients."

I set our plates on the breakfast bar. "Lunch is served. Why don't you get the drinks? I'll take a sparkling water. I think I saw some bottles in the fridge."

Kennedy grabs two bottles of Perrier, brings them to the counter, and hands me one. Then she sits and takes a bite of her salmon, moaning in appreciation as she chews. “Oh, my god, Connor. This is so good.”

I laugh. “Don’t sound so surprised.”

She slices a baby potato in half, dips it in some of the melted lemon and butter sauce, and pops it into her mouth and chews. She groans. “This is really good.”

“Glad you like it.”

“No, I mean it’s *really* good. Like, five-star restaurant good.” Shaking her head, she smiles. “You’re full of surprises today, aren’t you? Do you have any other new talents I should know about?”

I grin at the double entendre that I’m sure she didn’t mean to make. “Perhaps I do, but why spoil the surprise?” I shouldn’t tease her, but I can’t help it. My body is remembering what it was like when we were together. She affects me the same now as she did back then. I’m desperate to hold her in my arms again, to stroke and taste every inch of her delectable body, but I’m afraid if I make a move in her direction, I’ll scare her away. “Don’t sound too surprised. I know a thing or two about fine dining.”

We eat in silence, both of us trying not to get caught looking at the other. It's like a cat and mouse game. We're both acting like there's nothing going on here—we're just two friends enjoying a meal together—but that's a lie. At least it is for me.

There's a whole lot more going on between us than meets the eye, and I don't know how much longer I can pretend otherwise.

Chapter 14

Kennedy Takahashi

Lunch is absolutely delicious, and I'm still amazed that Connor is learning how to cook. He used to live on noodles, left-over pizza, and carry-out. If anyone did any cooking at all, it was me. I take the last bite of my salmon. "Thank you for an amazing meal, Connor."

"You're welcome." He looks truly pleased by the compliment. "It was my pleasure."

After we're done eating, we wash the dishes together. It's amazing how easily we fall back into our old routine. I wash, and he dries.

We stand side-by-side in front of the sink, and occasionally his arm brushes against mine. I don't bother trying to put space between us anymore. It feels so natural, this closeness. And it feels so *good*. I realize how badly I miss this and how much I want it back.

How badly I want him back.

After the last dish is washed, dried, and put away, he dries his hands on a kitchen towel and turns to face me, his arms

crossed over his chest. He's wearing his we-need-to-talk expression. "Kennedy." His voice is low, laced with emotion.

As I turn to face him, my pulse picks up speed. "Yes?"

"I'm going to be honest with you, Ken. My feelings for you haven't changed, and I'm hoping yours haven't changed either. I can't undo the damage my grandfather did, but it's in the past. He's no longer relevant, so you don't have to worry about protecting me." He reaches out to touch my cheek. "We were so happy, at least I thought we were. Was I wrong?"

I shake my head. My throat is tight, and I don't trust myself to speak.

His thumb brushes my cheek. "I wish you'd told me what my grandfather said to you on the day of the party. I would have told him to butt out, that whom I love is my choice, not his."

"It wasn't that easy, Connor. Your entire future was at stake. All that money and property. You risked losing it all because of me. I couldn't let that happen."

"How many times do I have to say it? *You* were more important to me than any inheritance. Damn it, Kennedy!"

Frustration edges his voice. “Why didn’t you tell me? We could have avoided all this hurt and pain.”

Tears flood my eyes, and my chest tightens as guilt overwhelms me. “I never wanted to hurt you.” My voice breaks.

But I did hurt him.

He doesn’t say the words, but they hang in the air between us.

I shake my head. “It wasn’t that easy. I didn’t want to come between you and your family. You would have lost everything.”

Connor’s voice raises as does his temper. “I did lose everything, Ken. I lost *you*. The rest was immaterial.”

“A multi-billion-pound fortune is not immaterial, Connor. Be serious.”

“I am.” His expression falls, and the pain radiating from him makes my heart hurt. “I would have traded it all for you. Every last penny. My job, the money, all of it.”

He pulls me close, and his arms feel so good around me, so strong. He’s no longer a boy, but a man to be reckoned with.

Connor gently grips my chin and forces me to look him in the eye. “Kennedy, I want you back. You’re the most amazing woman I’ve ever met.”

Shaking my head, I laugh bitterly. “Far from it.”

He pulls back slightly as his gaze drops to my mouth. His intentions are crystal clear, but in case they aren’t, he spells them out. “I’m about three seconds away from kissing you, Ken. If you don’t want that, then I suggest you speak up now. *One.*”

I swallow hard, unable to speak past the lump in my throat. Instead, I nod, because right now, there’s nothing I want more than to feel his mouth on mine. I don’t care if it’s foolish or a mistake, or if I’ll regret it afterward. And maybe it’s selfish of me. I just know I need this. I haven’t felt this kind of blistering desire in a very long time.

“Two.” He leans in closer, his mouth just inches from mine.

I can feel his warm breath on my lips. He’s giving me every chance to stop him, to say no, but I can’t bring myself to do it. Shivers race down my spine, lighting up my nerve endings. I’m tingling all over, and the sense of anticipation I’m feeling is more than I can possibly resist. My breasts ache as

the heated spot between my legs starts throbbing. Every inch of me feels alive for the first time in ages.

“Three,” he says, and then his mouth covers mine.

At first, his lips brush mine gently, a prelude of what’s to come. Or maybe he’s giving me time to retreat if that’s what I want. When I smile, he comes in for another pass, this one deeper. His lips nudge mine apart.

It’s like no time has passed. My body remembers this—the taste of him, his scent, the heat. It’s all coming back in waves.

When I moan shamelessly, he deepens our kiss. And when his arms snake around me to hold me to his firm chest, my knees buckle.

“I’ve got you,” he says, catching me when I stumble. His voice is a sexy, low rasp that seeps deep into my bones.

I want so desperately to forget the past and simply be with him again. I want to feel the intense passion we once shared. I want to believe we can put the past behind us and start over. When I moan his name, he scoops me up in his arms and takes a step toward his bedroom.

And then a knock on the door shatters the moment, bringing us to a sudden halt. With a muttered curse, he sets me

on my feet, and we break apart, putting distance between us.

We're both breathing hard as we stare at each other.

Again, there's a knock on the door. "Aunt Kennedy? Uncle Connor? Are you in there?" Penny calls loudly. "Mommy said I had to knock first. Are you in there?"

"Oh, my god," I say, bursting into nervous laughter.

Connor shakes his head. "That child's timing is impeccable."

I answer the door to find Penny standing on the front porch with a Barbie doll clutched in her hand. She grins up at me. "Hi."

I return her smile. "Hi, Penny."

She pokes her head inside and spots Connor in the kitchen putting away the rest of the dishes. "Are you guys busy? Do you want me to come in and visit with you?"

"How could we resist such an offer?" I ask as I open the door wide and wave her inside.

"Did you eat lunch?" Penny asks. "I did. Maggie made me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. What did you have?"

"We had salmon," I say. "Connor made it, and it was quite delicious."

She makes a disgusted face. “I don’t like fish. Daddy catches fish in the lake and Maggie cooks them, but I don’t like them. They have bones.” She sticks out her tongue. “I only like fish fingers, not the grown-up kind of fish. Do you want to watch a movie with me?”

My head is spinning as I try to keep up with her. “Um...” I look to Connor.

“That’s a splendid idea,” he says as he wipes his hands on a dish towel. “I was just telling Kennedy we should watch a movie.” He winks at me. “I’ll make the popcorn. I know I spotted some in the cupboard.”

“Yay!” Penny cries. “What do you want to watch?”

I steer her toward the sitting area. “Why don’t you choose the movie?”

“Hmm,” she murmurs as she contemplates her choices. “How about *Moana*? It’s my favorite.”

While Connor is popping corn in the microwave, I send a quick text to Skye to let her know that Penny is with us and that we’re going to watch a movie.

Skye: Okay, thx. I hope she’s not interrupting anything.

Me: No, not at all. We’re happy to have her.

Then I cue up the requested movie and get Penny settled on the sofa, her Barbie doll seated in her lap.

“Kennedy, would you mind giving me a hand?” Connor asks from the kitchen.

“Sure.” I join him at the microwave just as it dings. “What can I do?”

He leans close and whispers in my ear. “Would it be rude of us to take a rain check on the movie? I can think of a few things I’d rather be doing right now.”

“Very rude,” I whisper back. “She came to see us. We can’t chase her off.”

His arms slide around me, and he pulls me close. I can feel his erection pressing against me. “This is pure torture,” he whispers, his lips brushing my ear and sending shivers down my spine.

“I know. I’m sorry,” I whisper back. “We’ll just have to be patient.”

“Patience has never been my strong suit.” He leans in and kisses my forehead. “Fine. *Moana* it is. How about grabbing a bowl for the popcorn?” He nods toward the cupboard.

“There’s one in there.”

While I grab a suitable popcorn container, Connor puts some butter in a small glass bowl and sticks it in the microwave to melt.

“Got to have butter,” he says.

I pour the popcorn into the bowl, and he drizzles the melted butter over top.

“Just like old times,” he says as he offers me the bowl.

I reach for it, but he doesn't let go, and for a moment we're both holding it, our fingers touching. As he gazes down at me, I know he's communicating a lot more than he's saying.

I nod, suddenly feeling overwhelmed with emotion.

“I never stopped loving you,” he says quietly. “Not for a minute.”

“Connor.” My eyes fill with tears. I don't deserve this. I don't deserve his understanding or his forgiveness. “I'm sorr
—”

“Shh.” He lets go of the bowl and cups my face. “You don't need to apologize.”

As he leans down to kiss me, Penny says, “Are you guys ready? I'm ready. Is the popcorn ready?”

Connor grins as he straightens. “Cockblocked by a four-year-old,” he mutters under his breath. To me, he says, “We’ll finish this conversation later.”

“Coming, sweetheart,” Connor calls to Penny as he takes the bowl of popcorn from me and heads to the sofa.

I end up sitting at one end of the sofa, with Connor at the other. Penny insists on sitting between us.

“You’re in charge of the popcorn,” Connor says as he sets the bowl on Penny’s lap.

Penny’s mesmerized by the movie. I catch Connor watching me far more than he watches the screen. I can’t resist sneaking peeks at him, too, and he catches me on more than one occasion. More than once, Connor and I reach for popcorn at the same time, our fingers brushing in the process. Fortunately, Penny’s oblivious to all the subtext going on during the movie.

“How about a time-out for a quick hand wash?” I suggest when the popcorn bowl is empty.

“Good idea.” Connor winks at me as he peers down at Penny. “I doubt Skye would appreciate little buttery fingerprints all over the furniture.”

After taking a short break to clean up, we resume the movie. Connor lays his arm across the back of the sofa, and soon I feel his fingertips lightly grazing the back of my neck, sending tingles coursing through me. I make an attempt to pay attention to the movie, but the truth is, my mind is elsewhere, and my body is overheating.

All I can think about is getting Connor alone again.

After the movie ends, the three of us head up to the house to visit with Skye and Will. We find them relaxing in the family room, snuggling with baby Nicholas.

“How was the movie?” Skye asks.

“It was great!” Penny says. “We had popcorn.”

“I hope you still have room for dinner, sweetheart,” her mother says. “Maggie’s making pot roast.”

We visit for a while, reminiscing about old times back in London. Connor tells us what it’s like to be an account manager at Carmichael & Son. Penny sits on the floor with her dolls, ignoring the grown-ups’ boring conversation. I hold a sleeping Nicky for a while, and then Connor takes a turn. When the baby starts fussing, Will steals him away from Connor and rocks him to sleep.

When dinner time rolls around, we move to the dining room, where Maggie serves up her delicious pot roast. We have homemade peach cobbler with vanilla ice cream for dessert.

Throughout the meal, I feel Connor's gaze on me.

After dinner, Penny runs up to her room to play. Will lures Connor away, to his study—otherwise known as the man cave—leaving me and Skye alone with the baby.

I hold out my arms for Nicky, and Skye hands him to me. When I'm assured we're alone, I say, "Connor and I kissed."

Skye's blue eyes widen. "Yes! I had such hopes for you two. I'm thrilled to hear it. How did that come about?"

"We talked about his grandfather. He told me how he feels about me—he says he still loves me."

"Do you still love him?" she asks.

I nod. "I never stopped."

"So, now what?"

I shrug. "I'm not sure. I don't want to get my hopes up, but maybe there's a chance we can get back together."

"But? I sense a *but*, Kennedy."

“We’ve both suffered a lot because of my decision. I’m wondering if he can truly forgive me.”

Skye gives me a gentle smile. “He loves you, Kennedy, and he wants you back. I don’t think you need to worry about him forgiving you. I think it’s a foregone conclusion. Maybe you should focus on forgiving yourself.”

Chapter 15

Connor Murphy

I follow Will into the parlor and take a seat in one of the leather armchairs facing the fireplace. He flips a switch, and the gas fireplace lights up.

“It’s summer, Will,” I remind him. “I don’t think we need a fire.”

He laughs. “I like the ambience. For some reason, having a fire reminds me of England.” He walks over to the bar. “How about a drink?”

“Sure. I’d love a whiskey.”

“Right.” Will opens a bottle and grabs two tumblers off a shelf, pours us each a shot, and hands me one. “Cheers,” he says, tapping the rim of his glass to mine.

I take a sip, relishing the liquor as it slides down my throat with a hint of burn. “Thanks.”

“So, how’s it going with Kennedy?” Will asks as he sits in the other chair.

“I kissed her.”

He seems genuinely surprised. “How did she respond? Did she smack you?”

“No. She kissed me back.”

“Really?”

“I think it would have gone a lot further if a certain little miss hadn’t interrupted us.”

Will grins. “Sorry about that. Penny was dead set on going down to the cottage to see you two. She did at least knock, didn’t she? Skye told her she had to knock.”

I laugh. “It turns out that was good advice. So, I kissed Kennedy, and she kissed me back. I’m hoping we can work things out.”

Will sips his drink. “Glad to hear it.”

“Since we’re on the subject of me and Kennedy, can I ask you a favor?”

“Of course,” Will says readily. “What do you need?”

I hesitate. “This is a bit embarrassing to ask, but have you got condoms? I didn’t bring any with me. Never dreamed I’d need them.”

Will laughs. “Yes, I can help you out there. I stocked up since Skye will be off birth control pills while she’s nursing the baby.”

“Thanks. How do you two do it?” I ask.

“Do what?”

“You guys make it look so easy—you’re happily married, with two adorable kids. You juggle careers, parents, and homes on two continents. You have it all.”

“It’s not always easy,” he admits. “We have our challenges, but we work through them.”

I laugh. “You mean, you shut up and do whatever Skye says.”

Will grins. “Well, maybe there’s a bit of that, but I don’t mind. I just want her to be happy.”

After a long, drawn-out silence, I finally say, “I don’t want to lose her, Will. Did she tell you why she left me?”

He shrugs guiltily. “Not directly, but she told Skye, and Skye told me.”

I let out a frustrated growl. “If the old man were still alive—well, I can’t say what I’d do. It’s not gentlemanly.”

Will nods. “I understand, believe me. Stay the course, Connor. Kennedy still loves you. I can tell. You know, this isn’t the first time Kennedy has experienced discrimination. Did she tell you about the college boyfriend who broke up with her over his parents’ objections? She has her pride, you know. I imagine this thing with your grandfather was a triggering event for her.”

I freeze. “What in the bloody hell are you talking about?”

“Shit. I thought you knew.”

“No. What boyfriend?” I down the rest of my liquor and head to the bar for a refill.

“When she was at Columbia University, years ago.”

“Why am I just now hearing about this?”

“I’m sure it’s a painful subject for Kennedy. And then for it to happen all over again, with your grandfather—it was just too much.”

I frown, thinking about what she must have gone through, and how she faced it alone. “Damn it, Will. She told me about her concerns, and I brushed them off. I really let her down.”

Will scoffs. “You can’t beat yourself up about it. You didn’t know.”

“But still, I should have been there for her. She suffered through this alone, and I can never go back and fix that.”

* * *

After Will runs upstairs to retrieve some condoms for me, he and I return to the lounge. Skye and the baby are relaxing on the settee. Kennedy’s nowhere to be found.

Will kisses his wife’s forehead before he steals Nicky from her.

She gives him a sleepy smile. “Oh, hi, honey.” She yawns.

“Is Penny in bed?” he asks.

Skye nods. “Are you done with your male bonding?”

“We are.” Will kisses the baby’s forehead. “Now I get to bond with this little guy.”

“Where’s Kennedy?” I ask. She’s nowhere in sight.

Skye sits up. “She was tired, so she went back to the cottage.”

“It’s getting late, so I suppose I should head back, too. I guess I’ll see you two at breakfast,” I say, and I take my leave.

As I head down the hill, I can see that the cottage appears dark except for a light left on in the kitchen. When I walk

inside, the place appears empty. I'm wondering if Kennedy's in bed already.

I'm disappointed because I wanted to talk to her about this college boyfriend.

I make my way to the liquor cabinet in the corner of the lounge. It's small, but well stocked—I wouldn't expect any less from Will. I pull out a bottle of Kentucky bourbon, curious to give it a try.

"Why don't you make that two," Kennedy says from behind me as I'm pouring.

I glance back, surprised to see her, as I didn't hear her come out of her bedroom. She's in her pajamas—red plaid flannel shorts and a white tank top. My pulse kicks up instantly.

I hand Kennedy the glass I poured, then pour another for myself. "It's been quite a weekend, hasn't it?"

She smiles. "You could say that." She knocks her drink back and immediately starts coughing.

"So, what's this I'm just now hearing about a university boyfriend?"

Her eyes widen. "How did you hear about that?"

“Will mentioned it. He assumed I already knew.” I narrow my eyes on her. “I should have, don’t you think?”

She winces. “I don’t like to talk about it.”

“Well, it’s too late for that. Start talking.”

“There’s nothing much to say.” She shrugs. “When his parents found out I was Asian, they pressured him into breaking up with me.”

“And he let them? What a wanker.”

Kennedy chuckles. “I can laugh about it now, but not back then. I was devastated.”

“His loss was my gain, as they say.”

“Let’s not talk about him,” she says as she holds out her empty glass for a refill.

“Another?” I ask, surprised. She’s usually not much of a drinker. I take her glass. “I thought you didn’t care for hard liquor.”

“I could use some liquid courage.” She swallows the shot in one go and makes a face as her eyes water. She can barely speak for coughing. “Because there’s something I need to say to you.”

Now it's my turn to down my shot. I might need some courage, too. I lean against the bar counter, trying to look relaxed, and probably failing miserably. "I'm listening."

Kennedy sets her empty glass on the bar and starts pacing, finally coming to stop in front of me, clearly nervous. She swallows hard before taking a deep breath. "I love you, Connor. I—"

The moment those words leave her lips, the pieces of my broken heart slip back into place, and the air leaves my lungs in a rush. These are the words I've been praying to hear. "I love you, too." I set my glass down and pull her into my arms and kiss her. She reciprocates without hesitation.

Our kiss is heated and hungry, as if we're trying to make up for lost time. We've been apart for so long, being together feels surreal.

I run my hands up and down her torso, tracing the contours of her body, relishing the feeling of having her in my arms once more. When I brush the edge of her soft breast, she gasps.

I don't know where this is going tonight, but I do know one thing—I'm going to hold on to her for dear life and never let go.

Chapter 16

Kennedy Takahashi

The realization that he's just as affected by our kiss as I am gives me comfort. It's also scary. At least if I'm going to make a big mistake, I won't be doing it alone.

Without warning, Connor sweeps me up in his arms and carries me to his bedroom. He shoulders the door open and walks inside. My head is spinning as he sets me on my feet at the foot of his bed.

He kisses me again, his mouth hot and hungry on mine, and I can taste the bourbon on his tongue. Without warning, he grasps the hem of my pajama top and starts to raise it.

“Wait.” I catch his hands.

He lets out a heavy sigh. “What? Please, Ken, don't say no. I don't think my heart can take it.”

“No, no, it's not that. It's just—please tell me you have condoms. I'm not on the pill, and I didn't bring anything with me. I certainly wasn't expecting—” she motions from herself to me “—this.”

When he hesitates to answer, I'm afraid he's going to say he doesn't have any. But then he chuckles. "Yes, I have condoms."

"Why is that so funny?"

"Because it proves how terribly pathetic I am. I borrowed some from Will."

Now I'm laughing. "You didn't!"

He nods. "Afraid so."

"So now Will knows we're probably going to have sex."

I shrug. "What can I say? It was an emergency situation, and I wanted to be prepared." He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a strip of three condoms. He tosses them onto the nightstand, then pulls me close and gazes intently into my eyes.

"What?" I ask.

He smiles. "I'm just taking a second to appreciate the moment. *You*, in my arms. *Me*, about to undress you and kiss every inch of your delectable body. Now, where was I?"

Before I know it, he's got my pajama top off and tosses it aside. Then he kneels down in front of me and runs his hands

up my bare legs—thank god I shaved them this afternoon. He hooks his fingers in the waistband of my shorts.

“Never thought I’d be doing this again,” he murmurs as he tugs them down and tosses them aside, leaving me completely naked.

Suddenly, it hits me. *I’m naked in front of Connor Murphy.* A brand-new Connor Murphy, one who is not only older and wiser, but even sexier than the one I knew before.

His warm hands slide up my legs again, more slowly this time. They slip around to the backs of my thighs, then drift upward until he cups my butt cheeks and gently squeezes. Then he leans closer, so close, right in front of me so he can press his nose between my legs. I gasp, and my knees give way.

With a soft chuckle, he catches me when I stumble and lowers me to the bed, still kneeling in front of me.

The air feels deliciously cool on my heated skin, and I’m shivering not just from the temperature but for all sorts of reasons, namely nerves and arousal. And yes, I’m feeling a bit self-conscious. I haven’t been naked in front of someone in a very long time. Since I left Connor, no one I’ve dated has

gotten past second base. And now Connor's about to hit a homerun.

The way Connor's staring at my body makes my pulse pound. Gently, he pushes me onto my back, leaving my legs hanging over the foot of the bed. He spreads my knees so he can move in close between my open thighs. The air kisses my heated flesh, and my thighs start shaking.

He runs his hands up my thighs to my hips. "Relax, sweetheart."

And when he lowers his head, I about lose my mind.

I can't believe this is happening. Connor Murphy is about to go down on me. My mind is blown.

I gasp when I feel his warm breath on me, followed by his tongue. He gently flicks my clit, then licks me, and then his finger is between my legs, sliding inside me. I can tell I'm already soaking wet. "Connor." His name comes out as a plaintive moan.

"Shh," he whispers. "I'm busy."

That makes me laugh. And then I remember how he always made me laugh. No matter if I was in a bad mood, or tired, or cranky, he could always make me laugh.

On impulse, I slide my fingers into his hair and grasp the strands. When I tug, he groans. I relax into the soft mattress, because what he's doing feels so good. For once, I want to let go and enjoy the moment.

His tongue and fingers tease me ruthlessly, and soon my thigh muscles tighten. My belly starts quivering, as does the rest of me, and before I know it, I'm squirming and panting. I tighten my grip on his hair and moan his name. "Connor."

"Shh. Busy, remember?"

Connor's diabolically good at what he's doing. He knows just the right spots and the right buttons to push to drive my arousal through the stratosphere. He doesn't let up with the teasing and the stroking, and my orgasm hits me swift and sudden, like a freight train barreling through me, stealing my breath, sending jolts of pleasure through my body. I stiffen as my back bows off the mattress, and I see stars behind my eyelids. I try to muffle the sounds coming out of me, but it's pointless because I'm wailing like a banshee.

Connor surges up off his knees and draws me up the bed so that my head is resting on a pillow. He practically tears off his clothing and joins me on the bed, hovering over me on his hands and knees, caging me in as he leans down and kisses

me. I taste myself on his lips, warm and salty, and it's arousing as hell.

Without a word, he nudges my legs open and kneels between them, resting on his haunches. He always did like having a good view to what he was doing.

He leans over me and snatches a condom off the nightstand, rips open the packet, and rolls the sheath up the length of his erection. Kissing me once more, his breath hot and heavy, he reaches between us to grip his cock and guide himself to my opening.

The feel of him pressing into me, the heat and the pressure, followed by the soft give of my body—it's exquisite. Both of us are holding our breath as he slowly sinks into me. I gasp as he fills me so perfectly.

Smiling, he lowers his mouth to mine and kisses me gently. "Missed you," he murmurs, a wealth of emotion buried in those two little words.

My heart contracts painfully. "Missed you, too."

Once he's fully seated, he closes his eyes and starts to move, slowly at first, then faster, building momentum. I relish

the feel of him inside me. I revel in his strength and drive and passion. I have missed this terribly.

He braces himself above me, his arm muscles taut as he holds his weight off me. Soon, those arms start shaking as he nears his orgasm. With a hoarse cry, he stiffens and arches his back. He thrusts hard one last time, holding himself deep inside me as pleasure surges through him.

After his climax, he rolls off me and sits at the side of the bed so he can remove the condom. He disappears into the bathroom, where I hear the water running. A few minutes later, he returns with a warm, wet washcloth for me.

Finally, he joins me in bed and pulls me into his arms. He kisses my forehead tenderly before he trails kisses down my cheek to my lips. “I love you, Kennedy. I never stopped. Not for a second.”

My throat tightens painfully, and I feel the sting of tears forming. “I’m sorry, Connor. I never wanted to hurt you. I was trying to protect you.”

He tightens his arms around me. “Don’t need protecting,” he murmurs. Then he yawns. “Just need you.”

I smile as I turn over, my back pressed to his chest. His arm tightens around my waist as he spoons me. We lie like that, quietly enjoying each other's nearness. Gradually, his breath evens out as he drifts off to sleep.

I lie awake for what feels like hours, reliving every second, every word, every touch. I stroke his arm, tracing the line of a thick vein with the tip of my index finger.

I'm so sorry, baby.

Eventually I doze off, asleep in his arms where I belong.

* * *

I sleep soundly through the night and am awakened early by the sound of birds chirping outside Connor's bedroom window. I watch as the early dawn sunlight filters through the curtains.

A nagging bladder urges me to slip out of bed and into the bathroom. After peeing, I realize I'm thirsty, so I sneak into the kitchen to get a glass of water before returning to bed. I hope we have at least a couple of hours of cuddle time before we have to get up and start our day.

Honestly, I'd love to stay in bed all morning with Connor. Our return flight doesn't leave until two o'clock so we have all

morning to relax and visit with our friends. We don't have to be at the airport until noon. I don't want to think about what happens after that—after our return flight to New York. I suppose Connor will return to London as scheduled. I can't bear the thought of watching him leave, not knowing if or when I'll see him again.

Once in the kitchen, I grab a glass and turn on the tap to fill it. As I'm downing the cold water, I hear a phone chime with an incoming text message.

I spot my phone lying face down on the breakfast bar and pick it up to glance at the screen. It takes me a moment to realize what I'm looking at. First of all, it's not my phone. It's Connor's. And I'm seeing the preview of a text message from his great aunt Angelica—his grandfather's sister. That awful woman who gave me the cold shoulder at his grandfather's birthday party.

I can only see the first few lines of the text, but it's enough.

Angelica Murphy: I heard you've gone to America to see Will Carmichael. Tell me you are not seeing that woman. If that gold-digger gets wind of you being there, she'll—

That's all I can see from the preview. I'm tempted to try unlocking Connor's phone so I can read the rest of the message. His passcode was always my birthday, month and day. If he hasn't changed it, I can get into his phone. But I won't do it. I won't invade his privacy. Besides, I've seen enough. Apparently, nothing's changed where his family is concerned.

The memory of his grandfather's words come rushing back.

I dump the rest of my water down the sink and set the glass on the counter. My stomach is roiling now, and I feel light-headed. I have to sit down at the breakfast counter before I fall down.

I was an idiot to think our troubles were miraculously over. Obviously, his grandfather wasn't the only one in his family who wanted nothing to do with me.

My vision blurs as tears pool in my eyes. My chest aches, and I feel devastated all over again.

Nothing's changed.

I was stupid to think it had.

I locate my phone, which is on the coffee table, and check the time. It's just a few minutes after six. Quickly, before I chicken out, I open up the airline app and book a seat on the next available flight going from Cincinnati to JFK. Then I order an Uber ride.

Quickly and quietly, I dress and pack my belongings. Then I lug my suitcase and my carry-on with me up to the house. Careful not to draw any attention to myself, I pass by the house and walk down the long drive until I'm past the wrought iron gate. There, I wait for my Uber to arrive.

I'll text Skye and tell her I'm gone—and apologize for leaving so abruptly and without saying goodbye—just before my plane takes off. I should be back in Brooklyn by the time they all sit down for breakfast.

My car arrives promptly, and the driver—a middle-aged woman with a round, freckled face and a big smile—loads my luggage into the trunk.

“Where are you off to so early?” she asks.

“Back home to Brooklyn.”

“How nice. I hope you had a good visit.”

She keeps talking, making friendly idle chit-chat, but all I can do is think about Connor. Last night was amazing, like a dream, and I almost think I must have imagined it.

I should have known it was too good to be true.

Chapter 17

Connor Murphy

I wake up alone in bed, filled with a vague sense of dread, and instantly I know why.

She's gone.

Still, I get up and search the cottage—the bathroom, the lounge and kitchen, and finally her bedroom—hoping my gut instinct is wrong. But her wardrobe is empty. Her suitcase is gone, as are her toiletries. There's no sign she was ever here.

I dress quickly and grab my phone off the kitchen counter on my way out the door. Glancing down at the screen, I see I have a message from Angelica. As soon as I read it, my stomach sinks like a stone. “Oh, fuck.”

I race up the path to the house and let myself in through the back door. It's early yet, barely eight o'clock. Skye is sitting in a rocking chair in the lounge, nursing Nicholas.

When she sees me, she casually drapes a baby blanket over her shoulder. “Good morning,” she says, her expression guarded.

I don't bother with niceties. "Where is she?" But when Skye gives me a sympathetic look, I know. "She's gone, isn't she?"

"I'm afraid so. She booked an early morning flight and called an Uber ride to take her to the airport."

I check the time. "What time does she take off?"

"In ten minutes. You'll never make it in time."

"Did she say why she was leaving?" As if I don't already know. I'm just hoping I'm wrong, that she didn't see the text from my aunt.

Skye shakes her head. "I didn't actually speak to her. She sent me a text from the airport, just before she boarded the plane. All she said was that it wasn't going to work out between the two of you."

"I see." My pulse is pounding, and I want to run my fist through the wall. But I must maintain a stiff upper lip, and all that. I nod toward the back door. "I'd best get back to the cottage. I have some work to catch up on before I leave for the airport."

"Connor, I'm so sorry," Skye says. "Do you want some breakfast? It's nearly ready."

I shake my head. “Thanks, but I’m not hungry.”

Will walks into the room with Penny, who’s still in her pajamas. He takes one look at me. “I’m sorry, Connor.”

Yeah, apparently everyone knows I’ve been dumped twice now by the same woman. I nod toward the door. “If you’ll excuse me.”

I turn back to the door, but before I reach it, Penny grabs my hand. “It’s okay, Uncle Connor.” She has tears in her eyes. “We’re all sad that Aunt Kennedy left. But don’t worry. Mommy said we’ll see her again soon.”

I brush my hand over the top of Penny’s head. “Thanks, cupcake.”

I must be an idiot, I realize as I head back to the cottage. My flight to New York leaves at two, but I already know I won’t be catching my connecting flight to Heathrow. No, I’m going to track down Ms. Takahashi in Brooklyn and make her explain to me how she could make love with me like she did last night and simply vanish the next morning without a word.

This isn’t over. Far from it.

* * *

When we arrive at the airport, Hamish pulls the car up to the passenger unloading zone, and we both get out. He retrieves my suitcase from the boot while I hug a tearful Penny goodbye and shake hands with Will. The two of them came along for the ride.

“Oh, come here,” Will says, pulling me into an embrace. He pats my back. “I’ll buy you a pint when we’re next in London.”

“Goodbye, Uncle Connor,” Penny says through her tears. “I’ll miss you.”

I pick her up and hug her. “I’ll see you soon, before you even have a chance to miss me.”

“Promise?” she asks.

“I promise.”

After we say our goodbyes, I head into the airport, check in, pass through security, and take a seat near my boarding gate. As I sit waiting to board, I reread my aunt’s text. God, I wish Kennedy hadn’t seen it. I can just imagine how she felt after reading that awful message—defeated, crushed all over again. It infuriates me, and I’m tempted to call Angelica right now and give her hell, but my focus now is on Kennedy. I’ll

deal with Angelica personally, face to face, when I'm back in England.

Right now, all I can think about is getting to Kennedy. I need to tell her it doesn't matter what anyone else says or thinks. She and I love each other, and that's all that matters. Everyone else can go to hell.

I listen with half an ear as the airline staff announce the boarding schedule. When they call business class, I grab hold of my hand luggage and go stand in the queue. I go through the motions as I count the minutes until I'm in New York.

It's a short flight to JFK International Airport. Once there, I collect my luggage and then make my way through the terminal and out the front doors, where I flag one of the waiting taxis.

I acknowledge the driver with a curt nod as he takes my luggage and sets it in the boot.

"Where to, pal?" he asks in a heavy New York accent.

"Two-ten Normandy Lane, Brooklyn."

The driver pulls into traffic, and off we go.

It's not long before we pass from Queens into Brooklyn, and I get my first view of the borough. It has a different feel to

it than Manhattan does. It's more accessible, not nearly so crowded. It has a real sense of community, with quaint restaurants and shops. The streets are bustling with the sound of traffic and people going about their routines.

The taxi driver stops in front of a three-story red brick building. "Here you go," he says. "Two-ten Normandy."

I swipe my credit card to pay the fare.

We both get out of the vehicle and walk around to the back. He opens the boot and pulls out my luggage.

"Do you want me to wait?" he asks.

"No, you can go. Thanks."

As the car pulls away, I stand on the pavement and gaze up at the building. Despite its age, the property is tidy and well maintained. There are flower boxes attached to the windows on the ground floor. Smooth stone steps lead up to the front entrance.

When I reach the door, I'm about to press the intercom for Kennedy's apartment when a young couple come out the door, laughing uproariously. I catch the door as it's swinging shut and let myself in.

The foyer is clean and uncluttered, the floor polished spotless. It smells citrusy, like lemons. I walk over to a wall of brass post boxes and skim the residents' names. *K. Takahashi* lives in apartment 2B.

Grabbing my suitcase, I climb the stairs to the second floor and locate apartment 2B, which is to my left at the end of a short hallway. The exterior of her apartment is charming. Besides a door mat featuring a bouquet of flowers, there's a sign hanging on her door that says, "Welcome." A small child-sized chair sits next to her door, holding a potted plant—presumably fake.

I ring the bell and wait for a response, but there's no answer. So I knock. Again, nothing. It's possible she's out.

The door to the flat directly across the hall from Kennedy's opens, and an elderly lady with short white hair stands in the doorway, watching me warily. "Can I help you?" she asks in a wavering voice.

I turn and give her what I hope is a friendly smile. "I'm looking for Kennedy."

"She's not here."

"Do you know when she'll be back?"

“No.”

I nod toward Kennedy’s door. “I’ll just wait for her then,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest.

The old woman narrows her eyes at me. “Suit yourself, but I’ll be keeping an eye on you. If you cause any trouble, I’ll call 911. You hear me?”

Somehow, I manage to maintain a straight face. The old lady is about as intimidating as a newborn kitten. “Yes, ma’am,” I say respectfully.

I take a seat on the floor beside Kennedy’s door and try to make myself comfortable. I’m not going anywhere. The last time she left me, I didn’t go after her. My pride was bruised, and my feelings were hurt. I was angry at her, and so I made the conscious decision not to run after her—a decision I later regretted dearly. I expected her to come crawling back to me, but that never happened.

I realized soon after, in hindsight, that I should have gone after her, but it seemed too little, too late at that point. I did send her a few text messages and left her a hundred voicemails, but she never replied.

The only thing I had left of her was the brief note she left me:

I'm sorry, Connor. This isn't going to work. It's not your fault, it's mine.

I check the time every few minutes, hoping she'll return soon. My arse is growing numb. Every time I hear the downstairs door open, I hope it's Kennedy returning home. But no such luck. After a while I start to worry. What if her neighbor called to warn her about the man lurking outside her apartment?

It's an hour before I hear someone coming up the stairs. I spot Kennedy immediately as she turns the corner and heads this way with a grocery sack in each arm and her purse slung over her shoulder.

She was doing her shopping. The relief I feel is overwhelming.

As I jump to my feet, she spots me, and her eyes go wide. "Connor! What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be on a plane to London?"

Chapter 18

Kennedy Takahashi

My heart pulse is racing triple time. *He's here.* Butterflies careen around in my belly in sheer chaos at the sight of my unexpected visitor. He's the last person I expected to see this afternoon. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be on a plane to London?"

Connor shoots to his feet and smooths his black trousers. Then he runs his fingers through his hair. "What do you think I'm doing here? I'm doing what I should have done the last time you left me. I've come after you." His jaw tightens as he takes a step toward me. "You saw Angelica's text, didn't you? That's why you left."

My face burns. "Yes. I was in the kitchen getting a drink of water when I heard a phone chime. I thought it was my phone, so I picked it up. But it wasn't mine. It was yours, and yes, I read a portion of her text, enough to get the gist of it. Enough to know that your family still doesn't approve of me. I realized nothing has changed, Connor, so I left."

"That's where you're wrong." He stalks toward me and grabs hold of my upper arms. "I'm sorry you saw that text, but

it doesn't change a thing. I love you, and you love me, and that's all that matters."

"Your family—"

"To hell with them, Kennedy." He takes the sacks of groceries from me. "Open your door. We really don't need to have this conversation out in the corridor." He nods to the door directly across the hall from mine and whispers, "The walls have ears."

Apparently, he already met Mrs. Philbin. Smiling, I fish my key out of my purse and unlock my door and push it open. "Mrs. Philbin means well," I say. "She's taken it upon herself to watch out for me."

Connor sets the grocery sacks on the tiny bit of countertop in my kitchen. "I'm glad your neighbors are looking out for you, but the woman threatened to call the police on me."

"Her bark is worse than her bite," I say, chuckling. Then my gaze goes to the clock on my stove. "You missed your connecting flight."

He nods, not seeming to care in the least. "It would appear so." He looks around my apartment, his gaze scanning the single room. Besides the corner kitchen and little round table

with two chairs, there's barely enough room for a small sofa and coffee table, an antique mahogany free-standing wardrobe, a small bookcase and reading chair in the corner by the room's only window, and on the far side of the room is my double bed and nightstand.

The expression on his face is hard to read. "This is your flat?"

A knot forms in my stomach. I have no doubt my entire apartment would easily fit inside his bedroom in his London penthouse. "Yes."

He eyes me doubtfully. "This is all of it? There's nothing more to see, no secret rooms hidden behind a fake wall? Nothing more?"

I bite back a smile. "I'm afraid so." I point toward the only door in here. "There's the bathroom, of course."

He finally meets my gaze again. "Well, it's certainly cozy, isn't it?"

"It's a studio." I shrug. "It's supposed to be small. This is New York. What can I say? Rents here are outrageous. Now stop making fun of my apartment. What are you doing here when you should be on a plane back to London?"

“Because I’m not going back, not just yet anyway. I’ve come here to work things out with you.” Connor retrieves his suitcase from the hallway and sets it just inside my door. “I wasn’t about to leave America without seeing you again.”

“Connor—”

“I’m sorry about what Angelica said. I told you she was awful. You must ignore anything that comes out of her mouth. I always do. I’m afraid she and my grandfather were cut from the same cloth.”

“I doubt she’s the only one in your family who feels this way.”

He frowns. “You’re probably right. But as I said, I don’t care. We’ll ignore them.” He takes another step forward until we’re practically toe to toe. “Didn’t last night mean anything to you?” I’m stunned by the look of hurt on his face.

“Of course it did. Last night was amazing.”

“Then nothing’s changed, Kennedy, aside from a bitter old woman spewing hateful words. We’ll ban her from our lives. We’ll block her—ghost her. Problem solved.”

“You’re going to ban your father’s side of the family?”

He shrugs. “Why not? My mother adores you. That’s all that matters, right?”

I’m saved from answering when there’s a knock at my door.

“Excuse me,” I say, slipping past him to go to the door. I glance through the peephole to see Mrs. Philbin standing on my welcome mat, holding Betty in her hands. I open the door. “Hello, Mrs. Philbin.”

“I brought Betty back to you.” As she hands me my spider plant, she leans to one side in an attempt to see into my apartment.

Mrs. Philbin is eighty-five years old. She’s a tiny thing, barely five feet tall and maybe a hundred pounds when wet. Her hair is a cloud of soft white curls, her eyes a pale shade of blue. She’s also nosey as can be, but in a good way. She means well.

Mrs. Philbin peers past me, and when her gaze lands on Connor, her eyes narrow. “I saw the gentleman sitting outside your door,” she says in a hushed voice. “Who is he?”

Before I can answer, Connor strides forward and offers Mrs. Philbin his hand. “Connor Murphy, at your service,

madame. I'm honored to make your acquaintance."

Shaking his hand, she looks at me. "He's British, Kennedy," she whispers, as if that's news to me.

I nod. "Yes, he is."

"What do you want with Kennedy?" she asks him.

"I've come here to court her." Connor glances down at me. "With your permission, of course."

Mrs. Philbin's gaze bounces from me to Connor and back to me. "I didn't know you had a boyfriend, Kennedy. You've been holding out on me."

"I didn't know either," I say.

We hear the sound of another door opening and closing just down the hallway. A moment later, my other neighbor, Ms. Talisman, appears at my door. Ms. Talisman is quite the opposite of Mrs. P. She's tall and dark, her voice direct and commanding. "I heard voices. Is everything all right?"

Mrs. Philbin points to Connor. "This British fella says he's courting Kennedy."

Ms. Talisman directs her dark eyes on Connor. "Is that true, young man?"

“Yes, ma’am.” Connor nudges me back a step. “Now if you ladies will excuse us, Kennedy and I have a lot to discuss. I’m sure you understand.” And then he gently shuts the door and sighs. “Your neighbors are rather attentive, aren’t they?”

I smile. “Is that your way of saying they’re nosey?”

“Yes. Now, where were we? How about we start with a tour of your flat?”

I laugh. “Connor, you can see everything from where you’re standing.”

“Not the bathroom. I haven’t seen that.”

I point to the one door in my apartment. “It’s through there.”

He opens the bathroom door and pops his head in. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a smaller bathroom.” Then he crosses the room to the only window and gazes outside at the sidewalk.

“Just the one window?”

I nod. “Unfortunately, yes.”

Then he skims the titles on my bookcase. “Austen, the Brontës—I see you’re still a romantic.” He picks up a copy of *Jane Eyre*, one of my favorites, and peruses the copyright page. “This is a first edition. It must have cost a pretty penny.”

“Skye and Will gave it to me for my birthday last year.”

“I’ll buy you an entire library of first editions. Just say the word.”

I sit on the edge of my bed. “Connor, you know I’m not after your money.”

He frowns. “I know. And I’m sorry Angelica called you a gold digger. She couldn’t be more wrong.”

“I don’t blame her for thinking it.”

He sits beside me and takes my hand in his, linking our fingers together. “I really am sorry you saw that. It put quite a damper on what was turning out to be a fantastic weekend.”

“Has she said things like that to you before?”

He frowns. “Not lately, no.”

“But in the past? When we were together?”

He hesitates before saying, “She might have, on occasion. I ignored her.”

“You never told me.”

“Of course not. Her words meant nothing to us.”

I stare down at our hands, his so much bigger than mine.

He strokes the back of my hand with his thumb.

“Kennedy, I can’t take back what my grandfather said to you. It was inexcusable, and I’m ashamed of him. But he’s gone now. I’m here, and so are you. I want us to have a fresh start and put all the nastiness behind us. What do you say?”

Hope blossoms in my chest. “I want so badly to believe this can work.”

“It can.” He brings my hand up to his lips and kisses my knuckles. “Please say yes. Let’s have our second chance.”

I nod. “I’d love nothing more.”

He releases my hands and cups my face. Then he leans close and gives me a soft, tender kiss. “I vow to you—”

There’s another knock on my door. “For god’s sake, not again.”

I roll my eyes. “I adore Mrs. P, but sometimes she’s a bit much.”

I head for the door, but when I glance through the peephole, I see it’s not Mrs. Philbin. It’s Ms. Talisman, and she looks irate.

Like Mrs. P, Ms. Talisman is in her eighties, also a widow. Her husband was a train conductor in the city, back in the day.

She's tall and sturdy, her skin dark brown, almost black. Her hair has long since turned white and she keeps it buzz-cut short. Her eyes are as dark as obsidian.

I open the door. "Ms. Talisman, what's wrong?"

She waves a sheet of paper in my face. "Have you read this? It came in yesterday's mail. I just now opened it."

"No. I haven't had a chance to look at my mail yet. What is it?"

She shoves the paper at me. "Read it for yourself!"

I don't even need to look back to know that Connor's standing behind me, peering down over my shoulder at the sheet of paper in my hand.

Dear Residents,

This letter is to inform you that I've sold this building to a property investment firm. Your lease will be terminated 30 days from the date of this letter. Please make other living arrangements before then and be sure you have vacated your apartment by that date. Any personal belongings left behind after that date will be promptly disposed of.

Sincerely,

Mr. Leroy Brown, Property Management

"Can he do that to us?" she shrieks. "Can he sell our building and kick us out?"

I wince. "I don't know," I answer honestly. I'm completely taken aback. I'm in shock.

He sold our building?

“Don’t worry,” I say, hoping to reassure her. “I’ll call Mr. Brown and find out what’s going on. I’m sure there’s something we can do.”

Ms. Talisman sighs heavily. “I’ve lived in this building for sixty years, and I’m not about to move out now. I’ll die here in my own bed, just like my dear husband Hubert did twenty years ago.”

She takes the letter from me and heads back down the hallway to her own apartment, grumbling to herself all the way.

I grab my phone and call our landlord. When he answers, I put the call on speaker so Connor can hear. “Mr. Brown, hello. This is Kennedy Takahashi. I live in the 210 Normandy Lane building. I’m calling about your notice. Please, you can’t sell our building. Some of these tenants have lived here most of their lives. Where will they go?”

“I’m sorry, Kennedy,” the man says. His voice is gruff, with a heavy Bronx accent. “The sale’s a done deal. I advise you to start looking for a new place to live.”

“Can I talk to the new owner? Maybe he’ll honor our current leases.”

“Sorry, no. The investment company that purchased the building plans to tear it down and build a pharmacy.”

“A pharmacy? You can’t be serious. We already have two pharmacies in the neighborhood.”

“I’m sorry, young lady, but it’s out of my hands.”

When he ends the call, my stomach sinks.

“I suppose it’s a bit too early for a drink,” Connor says as he rubs my back.

He watches me sift through the small stack of mail on my kitchen table. I find the letter from the building manager and open it.

Connor holds his hand out, and after I’ve reread the letter, I hand it to him. “Can he do this to us?” I ask. “I’m not a lawyer.”

I study his face as he reads the letter. “I’m not familiar with the applicable American laws.”

“I’ve only lived here since I returned to New York,” I say. “But many of the residents in this building have lived here for decades. This building is their home. They have nowhere else

to go, and probably there's little else in the city they can afford."

He frowns as he folds the letter and slips it back into its envelope. Then he cups the back of my neck. "Sweetheart, you needn't worry about a thing."

"That's easy for you to say. Your home isn't about to be taken from you."

He catches my hand. "You're really upset."

"Of course I am. This apartment may not seem like much to you, but it's everything to me. And to many of the others in this building. They can't just tear it down."

He smiles. "Don't worry, sweetheart. I won't let them. You have my word on it. Now, about the matter at hand."

"What matter is that?"

"Us. When I told your neighbor I was courting you, you didn't contradict me. Were you just being polite?"

I chuckle. In spite of all the drama surrounding my apartment building, he can still make me laugh. "No. You know I'm not that polite."

He smiles. "Then you'll consider it?"

“Connor.” I let out a heavy sigh.

He leans down and kisses my forehead. “Just say the word, Ken, and I’ll move heaven and earth to make you happy. And as far as my relatives go, we need never see them again.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, I assure you, I am.” He releases me and props his hands on his hips. “Now, what’s for dinner? I skipped breakfast and lunch, and now I’m starving. Can we have pizza? I’ve heard New York pizza is not to be missed.” He pulls out his phone. “What’s your favorite local pizzeria?”

I know how Connor gets when he’s hangry—he’s got a one-track mind, like a dog with a bone. I sigh. “That would be Grimaldi’s.”

He grins. “Please tell me they deliver,” he says as he looks up their phone number.

Chapter 19

Connor Murphy

While we wait for the pizza to arrive, I peruse Kennedy's bookshelf. I flip through the pages of a well-loved and obviously ancient copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. Then I return it to the shelf and pick up a copy of *Emma*. "I particularly liked this one. It was quite humorous."

She looks shocked. "You've read *Emma*?"

"Well, not exactly. I saw the film—with you, remember?"

Kennedy plucks the novel from my hands and returns it to the shelf. "These are first editions. I'm trying to keep them in good condition, but that won't happen if you keep handling them."

"I'm sorry. I thought books were meant to be handled. If they're so precious, shouldn't they be in a vault, under lock and key?"

"No. I like to look at them."

I reach for a copy of *Persuasion*, another Austen classic. "This one was good, too."

"Are you referring to the book or the movie?" she asks.

“The film, of course. Is this a first edition as well?” I open it to the copyright page.

“Yes, it is.” Laughing, Kennedy snatches it out of my hands. “My god, Connor, I’m going to hit you over the head with one of these books if you don’t stop touching them.”

“That’s hardly the right way to treat a first edition, is it?” As soon as she reshelves the book, I grab her around the waist and pull her down beside me onto the bed. Rolling on top, I loom over her and cup her face in my hands. “You’re pretty when you’re riled up. Of course, you’re pretty all the time.”

When she smiles up at me like she used to, another piece of my broken heart falls back into place.

“You’re incorrigible,” she says.

In that moment, a sense of peace and rightness comes over me. This is *my* Kennedy talking. She’s back. I lean down and kiss her. “I love you, Ken.”

Her beautiful dark eyes shine. “Connor.”

When her voice catches on a shaky breath, I realize we’re at a crossroads here. *Please say it back, Kennedy. Please.*

She reaches up and brushes my hair out of my eyes. “I love you, too.”

Relief washes through me, and I realize I was holding my breath. “Then it’s settled? We’re back together? It’s official?”

“It’s that easy? You can forgive and forget what we’ve been through? What *I* put us through?” Her smile fades. “Are you sure?”

“Forgive? Sweetheart, there’s nothing to forgive. You did what you thought you had to do to protect me. Your actions were misguided, yes, but your heart was in the right place. And as for forgetting what we’ve been through—I’ll never forget what it was like to live even a single day without you.” To soften the words, I lean down and kiss her. I spoke the truth, because she deserves the truth. We both do. “Our future starts now. We get a do-over, a second chance. Not everyone is so lucky.”

She leans up and kisses me. “I don’t deserve you, but thank you. So, yes, it’s official. We’re back together. And if you live to regret it—if your father’s family shuns us—you’ll have no one to blame but yourself.”

I smile. “Don’t worry. They won’t do that.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I now control the lion’s share of the money.
They *need* me.”

Kennedy laughs, and the sound is music to my ears. Just as I’m about to kiss her to seal the deal, the intercom buzzes. Sighing, I press my forehead against hers. “Why are there so many interruptions here?”

“That’ll be the pizza delivery driver,” she says, nudging me off her so she can get up. “I have to buzz him in.”

“Can’t he wait a few minutes?” I’m seriously regretting ordering pizza. Why couldn’t it have taken an extra ten minutes to arrive?

She smiles. “Our pizza will get cold.” Seconds tick by as we gaze into each other’s eyes, neither of us seeming to want to move. I lower my mouth, about to claim her lips, when there’s a loud knock on her door.

Kennedy bites her bottom lip. “I guess someone buzzed him in.”

“I’ll get it.” I shoot to my feet and head to the door, open it, grab the pizza, and close the door.

Kennedy appears behind me. “Did you tip him?”

“No. Why should I?”

Her eyes widen. “*Why?* Because we tip here. When in Rome, you know. I always tip the pizza guy.”

“He cockblocked me,” I say as I set the pizza on the table.

Kennedy rolls her eyes. “We need to tip him.”

“Fine.” I pull a twenty out of my wallet, rush out the door, and catch the bloke on the stairs. “Here you go, mate.”

The kid’s eyes widen as he glances at the note and then pockets the money. “Thanks, man.”

When I return to Kennedy’s apartment, she has the table set with plates. “What would you like to drink?” she asks as she opens the fridge door.

I stand behind her and peer over her shoulder. “What have you got?”

“Still water, sparkling, Coke, orange juice—”

“What, no beer?”

She laughs. “Sorry, no.”

“A Coke, then.” I pull a slice of pizza from the box and take a bite. As annoyed as I am with the delivery driver’s bad timing, I have to admit this is seriously good pizza. I groan loudly in appreciation as I chew.

“Good?” she asks.

I nod as I take another bite. “I forgive the driver.”

Kennedy brings our drinks to the table, and we sit.

Now that we’re eating, I decide to broach a more serious and pressing matter—Kennedy’s block of flats. “Tell me about your landlord.”

Chewing, Kennedy shakes her head. After she swallows, she says, “Can’t we talk about something else? Something happy? I can’t bear to think of losing this place.”

I place my elbows on the table. “Kennedy, I’m not about to let anyone kick you out of your flat. Now, tell me about him.”

“His name is Leroy Brown.”

“I know that much from the letter. Where does he live?”

Kennedy shrugs. “Somewhere in Manhattan, I think. I’m not sure. I know his office is in Manhattan. In any event, it doesn’t matter. He said it’s a done deal. He’s already sold the building.”

“Bollocks.” I lean forward and take her free hand. One thing I’ve learned is you can accomplish just about anything for the right price. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course I do, but—”

“No *buts*. Let me handle it.”

“Fine.” She frowns. “But I don’t think there’s anything that can be done.”

After we eat, Kennedy excuses herself to wash up in the bathroom.

I take the moment to send a text to Joyce, my personal assistant in London. I give her the address of Kennedy’s building, along with Mr. Brown’s name, and ask her to find out everything she can about the sale. Namely, I want to know who bought it.

My phone vibrates almost immediately, and I glance down in surprise to see Joyce’s reply.

Joyce: I’m on it. I’ll send the info as soon as I can.

I’m impressed she’s answering my messages this late on a Sunday evening. I text her back.

Me: When I get back, remind me to give you a pay rise.

When Kennedy reappears, I suggest we take a walk through her neighborhood. I want to get a feel for where she’s been living her life the past few years. I want to know everything.

We exit her building and stroll along the pavement, hand in hand, as she gives me a walking tour. She shows me where she does her shopping and where she gets her hair cut. We stop at a local ice cream shop for cones to take with us. We visit a local park and watch the children at play. It's summer holidays, so the kids are off school. She points out everything of interest, and it's clear from the tone of her voice that she really loves it here.

When we get back to her flat, we relax on the tiny settee.

"I'm sorry it's so small," she says.

"No worries," I say. I can barely stretch my legs out fully.

"It's fine."

Like we've done so many times before, we end up watching a rom-com. I make fun of the characters and the predictable storyline while Kennedy occasionally snorts with laughter. Honestly, I don't care what we watch. I'm just happy to be here with her.

How easily we fall back into our familiar routine. How easily the air of awkwardness fades, and it's almost like the years we were apart never happened.

Occasionally, I catch her watching me with an air of sadness that concerns me. “Is something wrong?” I ask her.

She shakes her head and smiles. “No. Nothing.”

And even though she’s smiling, I still detect a hint of sorrow in her beautiful eyes.

I lean close and press my lips to her temple, lingering a moment to breathe in her scent. “Everything’s going to be fine, Ken. I promise.”

As the movie comes to an end, she yawns.

“It’s getting late, and you have work tomorrow, don’t you?” I ask.

She nods. “I guess I should think about going to bed.”

I stand and scoop her into my arms. “Yes, we should.”

Chapter 20

Kennedy Takahashi

“Ladies first,” Connor says as he deposits me on my feet outside the bathroom doorway. “I’ll get ready for bed after you.”

“Thanks.” I grab my nightshirt and slip into the tiny bathroom, where I wash up and brush my teeth, all the while shaking my head in dismay. I’m nervous. Last night, Connor and I slept together, but it was spontaneous. Tonight, if it happens again, it won’t be. It’ll be a conscious choice.

Thinking back to last night, I recall how it felt to have his mouth on me. God, it was so good. We fell right back into step with each other like no time had passed at all. Like those five years apart didn’t exist.

But they do exist, I keep reminding myself. We’re different people now. I’m older, and I’d like to think I’m wiser, but that remains to be seen. Connor has certainly grown up— holy cow, has he! He’s more confident now. He’s more mature and a bit less snarky, although I can’t say the same for myself.

There’s a quiet knock on the bathroom door. “I hope you saved some hot water for me.”

That's right—Connor likes to shower at night before bed. “Yes, there's plenty of hot water. Don't get your panties in a twist.”

“I don't wear panties, Ken,” he says in a low voice.

Hearing *those* words come out of his mouth in his sexy British accent sends shivers down my spine.

After changing into my pajamas, I open the bathroom door, and of course he's standing right there in only his trousers, which hang low on his trim waist. My gaze goes straight to his dark blond happy trail, which disappears beneath his waistband.

I'm dressed in an old New York Yankees baseball souvenir T-shirt that barely reaches my thighs and a pair of pink panties. “It's all yours,” I say as I slip out of the bathroom.

Connor's hands come to rest on my waist, and he captures me in the doorway, the two of us standing so close I can feel the heat of his body, not to mention the heat of his gaze on me. “I missed this—the two of us living together in close quarters, sharing the small, quiet moments.”

I can feel my face heating, along with the rest of me. I have no doubt what we'll be doing tonight in my bed. “There's

a clean towel and washcloth on the shelf over the toilet,” I say distractedly. “Help yourself to whatever you need.”

“Oh, I plan to,” he mutters.

I grin as I slip away, letting him have the bathroom. “Then you’d better hurry up.”

I swear I hear him chuckle as I head across the room to turn down the bed.

The shower comes on, and I hear him humming to himself as if he hasn’t a care in the world. I guess if you’re a freaking billionaire many times over, you don’t have many.

I, on the other hand, have a huge problem to deal with—my apartment having been sold. I’m not worried about myself. It’s Mrs. Philbin and Ms. Talisman, and all the other residents on fixed incomes who live in this building who concern me. With how high rents are in New York these days, I can’t imagine they’ll be able to find something affordable in such a short time.

As for me, right now I don’t know what the future holds. Now that it looks like we’re back together, I assume I’ll be moving back to London soon. We haven’t talked about it yet, but Connor is a big deal at Carmichael & Son. Hell, he’s a big

deal in all of England. I love my job at Wentner, and Jamal's been so good to me, mentoring me and preparing me for a promotion. I'll hate to leave, but it's a small price to pay to be back with Connor.

After getting a drink of water in the kitchen, I turn off all of the lights except for the small lamp on the bedside table. Then I slip beneath the sheet and quilt and lean against my pillow propped up against the headboard.

The water shuts off, and then I don't hear anything until the bathroom door opens, letting out a waft of warm, humid air. Connor switches off the bathroom light and makes his way over toward the bed, skillfully sidestepping the sofa in the near darkness without bumping his toes.

Before he turned off the light, I caught a quick glimpse of him in a pair of charcoal gray boxers, and the sight made my pulse race. I also got a quick peek at his chest, dusted with dark blond chest hair, and his broad shoulders. And those arms! His lean muscles make my head spin.

I swallow hard, and my mouth goes dry.

Connor walks around to the other side of the bed. There's barely enough room for him to walk between the bed and the wall. "Sorry," I say. "I know it's a tight fit."

He gives me a devious look. “Let’s not discuss tight fits at the moment, okay? Wait until I’m safely in bed.”

I snort out a laugh. “Oh, my god, Connor. You did not just say that.”

He shrugs as he climbs into bed and slips beneath the covers. “Well, I did notice how snug you were last night. It was kind of hard not to.” Like me, he props a pillow against the headboard and leans against it. He presses his palms on the mattress. “Nice bed. Very comfortable.” His expression turns serious. “You like it here, don’t you? With your terribly small apartment and the little old ladies in your building. And your family live nearby, don’t they?”

I nod. “I like the life I’ve built here, yes. I love my job at Wentner. I’m up for a big promotion this fall. And I have friends there. Lauren in the graphic design department, for one. I love New York, especially Brooklyn.” I shrug, suddenly feeling torn. I miss London, yes, but I’d miss New York if I left it. But I want to be with Connor. “What are we going to do?”

Connor takes my hand and links our fingers. “What do *you* want to do?”

“I know one thing—I want to be with you. I assumed you’d be going back to London soon, and if I want to be with you, I’ll have to go, too.” Oh, god. Maybe I’m reading too much into this. Maybe he hadn’t planned on me going back with him. “Never mind.”

He kisses the back of my hand. “We’ll have to decide what we’re doing.”

“What do you mean?”

He shrugs. “Whether we live in London or New York, of course.”

My heart swells. As much as I love my job here at Wentner, my mind keeps returning to London. The thought of going back there is so tantalizing. In some ways, it feels like going home. And yet, I have an amazing life here. Honestly, I’m torn. “Why don’t we go back and forth?” I suggest, joking of course. “We could have the best of both worlds, like Will and Skye do.”

He nods. “Right. I think that’s brilliant. We can make it work.”

“Seriously? You’d consider that?”

“Of course. I’m not going to ask you to give up your life here just for me. We’ll commute.” He reaches out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “Speaking of your work... can I come to your office with you tomorrow? I’d like to see it.”

“You’re not flying back tomorrow?”

He shrugs. “They can muddle along without me in the office a few more days. I can always be reached by mobile if there’s a fire that needs putting out. I’d really like to know what your life is like here. I’d love to see where you work, meet your co-workers perhaps, your friends.”

“Of course you can come to my office.”

“Perfect. I’ll escort you to work in the morning, and then I’ll show myself around Manhattan and do a bit of sightseeing until you get off. How about you let me take you out to dinner afterward?”

“That sounds wonderful.” This is so surreal, lying here in the dark with him like this, talking quietly like we used to do.

All of a sudden, my heart starts racing. Here we are, just the two of us, with nothing standing in our way. He seems to be thinking the same thing, because he leans close and kisses

me. His warm hand cups the back of my neck. The kiss deepens and soon we're both breathing hard.

"Kennedy," he murmurs as he leans close.

His hand slips up beneath my T-shirt and covers my breast. When his thumb brushes my nipple, I feel a corresponding spark of pleasure between my legs. Every nerve ending in my body comes awake, and suddenly I'm not so sleepy anymore.

"I'll be right back," he says, and he slips out of bed and goes to the bathroom. I hear him rifling around in there, and a moment later, he returns with a condom packet.

I guess I know where this is going tonight.

I laugh. "Courtesy of Will?"

"Yeah. I guess I need to go shopping for condoms tomorrow, don't I?"

"Definitely. I should probably look into going back on the pill."

"You haven't been sexually active?" he asks, almost hesitantly.

I shake my head. "No."

“May I ask why not?”

I swallow hard and touch his face. “Because no one else measures up to you.”

“Ken.” His voice is rough. He surges forward and kisses me, his lips coaxing mine open. He kisses me with the fire and hunger I’ve been missing for so long. He pushes my T-shirt up to expose both my breasts, staring at them with blatant hunger in his eyes. He plumps one of them with his hand, then leans down to flick the tip with his tongue. He strokes the tip tenderly before drawing it into his mouth to suckle. As he draws on me, I feel a corresponding tug between my legs.

Pleasure courses through me, and with a cry I arch my back. While he suckles one breast, his hand slides down my torso, into my panties, and he slips a finger between my legs and begins stroking me.

Connor is, and always has been, a generous lover. He’s always focused on me, on my pleasure, making sure I come first, that I’m satisfied. Obviously, that hasn’t changed. But I want tonight to be just as much about him.

I sit up and press his back to the mattress. “Tonight, it’s my turn. Lie back and relax.”

I run my fingers down his chest, past his firm abs, to the waistband of his boxers. His erection tents the fabric of his underwear. I clearly recall the pleasure he gave me last night, and I want to do the same for him.

I grasp the waistband of his underwear and start tugging. He lifts his hips to help me, and soon I have him naked. His legs are long and muscular. Between his thighs, his erection swells right before my eyes.

I loom over him and take his erection in my hands.

The air leaves his lungs in a rush. "Ken." His hands caress my thighs.

I stroke his length once, twice, from root to tip, my fingers sliding over the crown. I catch a drop of pre-cum at the tip, spreading it over the head of his cock. Then I draw him into my mouth and use my lips and tongue to drive him wild, while my hands stroke him firmly, just the way he likes.

Throwing his head back onto the pillow, he releases a heavy breath. "Oh, god, Ken, I don't think I can last long. You have no idea how many times I've dreamed of exactly this."

I smile as I continue to tease him, using everything I have to drive his arousal higher and higher. His hands grasp the

sheet beneath him, clutching and tugging the material as his hips rock and he thrusts into my mouth. “Oh, fuck, Kennedy!”

He’s breathing hard, his hips frantically thrusting, his back bowing off the bed, his shoulders digging into the mattress. He throws his head back and sucks in air. Finally, he grasps my shoulders. “No more. I can’t last much longer.”

He turns us so that I’m lying on my back, and he’s looming over me. He kneels between my legs, opening me up. He reaches for the condom and quickly sheathes himself, and then he’s there—pressing into me, hot and hard and demanding. As he pushes inside me, I feel the slight burn of the intrusion. But there’s no pain, only pressure and a delicious stretching as my body accommodates him.

He starts moving, but it’s a gentle rhythm despite how close he was to coming just moments ago. It’s as if he doesn’t want this to end anytime soon. He sets a slow, rocking pace that feels incredible.

“Connor, yes, there.” He’s hitting my sweet spot so perfectly. Pleasure swells deep inside me, from my core, and radiates outward, sending tingles coursing through me. My breath catches, and I’m panting. I’m *so* close. “Don’t stop. Please, just like that. Don’t stop.”

He continues, steadily picking up speed as his own pleasure escalates. He's able to hold off his orgasm long enough for me to implode. My muscles tighten as my climax hits me, clamping down on his erection, squeezing him tightly, and he follows right after me, arching his back and crying out hoarsely as his release rocks his body.

We lie together for a long time afterward, neither one of us wanting to move. He kisses my temple. "Kennedy, I love you."

I smile as I kiss his lips. "I love you, too, Connor."

Eventually, he pulls out and we get cleaned up before we settle back into bed. Sometime in the middle of the night, I wake up to find Connor's arm tucked around my waist. He's spooning me from behind, his knees tucked up against the back of mine. Our bodies are perfectly aligned.

As I close my eyes and allow myself to drift back to sleep, I wonder what the future will bring. Right now, I don't exactly know, and that's okay, because as long as we're together everything will be fine.

Chapter 21

Connor Murphy

I awake to the familiar sounds of city life—the sound of traffic, horns blaring, a few shouts off in the distance. The sun shines through the thin gauzy curtain that hangs over the flat’s sole window. Kennedy has only one fucking window. She needs an upgrade, and I’ll make sure she gets one.

Even though I slept in a bed half the size of my own at home, I have to admit I got the best night’s sleep I’ve had in a long time. Of course that’s attributable to the fact that I was lying beside Kennedy. Her scent teased me all night long. I couldn’t get enough of it—I couldn’t get enough of her.

I roll to face her side of the bed and sadly find it empty.

I sit up, wondering where she is. It’s not like she can get lost in this tiny flat. My curiosity is satisfied when I hear the water running in that closet she calls a bathroom. All right, she’s in the shower. I can relax.

With a groan, I stretch my arms above my head. Then I’m up and out of bed. I straighten the bedding and plump the pillows before I open my suitcase and grab a T-shirt and a pair of fashionably distressed jeans, opting for a more casual attire

for the day. After dressing, I make my way to the kitchen to whip up a quick breakfast before we depart for Kennedy's office. And to think, I thought the kitchen in Will and Skye's guesthouse was small. This is miniscule in comparison. I open the fridge and grab the most obvious choice—eggs, cheddar cheese, and fresh baby spinach.

Kennedy emerges from the bathroom dressed in a short white silk robe. She jumps when she spots me standing at the stove. "Oh, you're up."

While she's in the process of towel-drying her hair, I'm about to plate two spinach and cheddar omelets. Slices of wheat bread are in the toaster, due to pop up any second now, and butter is already on the table. "Perfect timing. Breakfast is nearly ready. It's no Full English, of course, but it will have to do."

Kennedy smiles. "You remembered."

"Of course I remember your favorite breakfast. I remember everything about you."

"It smells amazing. Thanks, Connor." She slips back into the bathroom and emerges a few minutes later with her hair freshly brushed and styled, still dressed in that scanty little robe. It's a shame she has to go to work this morning. I could

think of a far better way for us to spend the day—one that doesn't require wearing clothes.

“I just need a second to get dressed.” She makes her way to a small free-standing wardrobe across from the foot of her bed, opens it, and pulls out a gray skirt and jacket, along with a white blouse. Then she opens a drawer inside the wardrobe and retrieves a white silky bra and panty set.

I come closer to get a better look and find all of her clothes hanging neatly in the wardrobe, organized by color. There's not room for much, though. There's a clothes rod on the left side of the wardrobe, and a set of drawers on the right side. On the floor of the wardrobe are several pairs of shoes, neatly arranged.

“Clever storage space,” I say as I return to the kitchen to grab some plates.

“When you live in a small place, you have to utilize every inch.”

I set our plates on the table. “I imagine so.” I'm doing my best to engage in polite conversation, but part of me wants to say, *You should be living in a mansion, and storage space shouldn't even be a concern.* But I can't say that quite yet. She needs more time to get used to the idea.

I realize I'm gawking at Kennedy. While I'm trying to be a gentleman, part of my brain is acknowledging the fact that she's naked beneath that robe.

She makes a circling action with her finger. "Would you mind?"

I quirk a brow. "Seriously, Ken, I've kissed every inch of your body, and yet you're making me turn around?"

"Fine," is her one-word reply. She unties her robe and, while I stare in anticipation, she lets it fall to the floor, leaving her completely naked.

My mouth goes dry at the sight of all that gorgeous skin and those luscious curves. On impulse, I start toward her, but she stops me with an outstretched hand. "Don't get any ideas because we don't have time." She looks at the clock on the wall. "We have to leave in fifteen minutes."

She slips her panties on. "You're welcome to watch, but that's as far as it goes."

I swallow hard and have to clear my throat before I can form anything close to an intelligible sentence. "I'm good with watching." I watch as she pulls on each item of clothing, one

piece at a time, from her silky knickers and matching bra, to a pair of sheer stockings and a sexy gray pencil skirt.

I watch as she shimmies into that tight skirt. “Baby, you’re killing me.” And by god, I’ve never spoken truer words. Being so close to her, watching her dress, and yet unable to touch her—it’s sheer torture. “You are a cruel woman, Kennedy Takahashi.”

She grins as she reaches around to pull the zip up on her skirt. Her dark lashes flutter as she glances up at me. “I warned you to turn around. It’s not my fault you didn’t listen.”

She does that cute circling motion with her finger again, and it takes all of my restraint not to walk over there and pull her against me so our bodies are flush.

She slips her bra on, then slides her arm into the sleeve of a white silk blouse. “Fourteen minutes, Connor.”

“Fine.” I return to setting the table while she finishes dressing.

With my back to Kennedy, I spy the landlord’s letter lying on the kitchen worktop. While she’s busy dressing, I swipe the letter, fold it, and tuck it into my back pocket. Although my PA did well in finding out information on Mr. Brown, she was

unable to provide me with a current contact number. This should do it.

Kennedy joins me at the table. “This looks wonderful,” she says. “Thank you. I never take time to make a decent breakfast on workdays. I just grab a bagel on my way to the subway station.”

“Well, today you’re having a hot breakfast. You can eat bagels tomorrow.”

With our eyes on the clock, we eat quickly with minimum conversation. Afterward, we brush our teeth, one of us at a time because the bathroom’s too small to accommodate both of us at once.

Soon, we’re out the door. I have to hustle to keep pace with Kennedy as she jogs down the stairs to the ground floor. Despite her petite stature, she sure can move quickly.

She pushes open the building’s front door, and soon we’re down the steps and on the pavement, joining the early-morning rat-race. I focus on keeping up with her.

We stop at a red light.

“It’s not much farther,” she says.

I presume she’s referring to the subway station.

“Be sure to keep up.” She gives me a wink. “I’d hate to lose you in the crowd.”

The crowd thickens as we near the station, and soon we’re like sardines packed in tight, side by side. “I’m not the one likely to get lost,” I say. I tower over most of my fellow pedestrians. Kennedy, on the other hand, being on the petite side, would be easy to lose in this sea of humanity.

Finally, we reach the station, jog down the stairs, and I follow her to the proper platform. As our subway train arrives, I take Kennedy’s hand so we won’t be separated when the doors slide open and the crowd surges inside. Once again, everyone is packed tightly together. I’m not a snob when it comes to public transport—I used to take buses and the tube routinely before I had a chauffeur—but this is a lot.

With no seats available, we stand and grip the handrails above us, or at least I do. Kennedy is too short to even reach the rail, so I wrap my arm around her to hold her steady. She relaxes against me, slipping her arm around my waist. It’s a simple gesture on her part, but it goes a long way to soothing some long-festering wounds.

When the subway arrives at our destination, we exit the car and walk up to the street level. The streets are again alive

with a rush of people all heading in different directions. The brisk pace reminds me of London and makes me just a tad homesick.

In Manhattan, the buildings are huge, skyscrapers everywhere I look. The term concrete jungle seems quite fitting. It's intimidating, yet oddly enthralling. I wonder how many people work in this amazing city, how many companies operate and how much money changes hands on a daily basis. The streets are packed with cars, buses, taxis, and bicycles, all rushing past, bumper to bumper.

"That's my office there," Kennedy says as she points to a building just ahead of us. Her steps quicken.

"Are we late?" I call after her.

She checks her watch. "You, no. As for me, I have seven minutes before I'm late."

When we're almost there, her walk transforms into jog, and I hardly break a sweat keeping up with her. I gaze up at her impressive office building, thirty stories of stone and steel, with a mixture of admiration and disdain. This is where she's been coming every weekday for the past five years, when she could have been in London with me.

Kennedy stops at the revolving doors and turns as if to say goodbye. “Will you be all right on your own? You can always call a taxi to take you back to my apartment.” She reaches into her purse and pulls out a keychain. “Do you want to take my key?”

“No need. I’ll meet you here at your building when you get off. What time?”

“Five o’clock.”

“Good morning, Ms. Takahashi,” says the doorman, an older African-American gentleman wearing a smart uniform. He tips his hat to her before gazing curiously at me.

Kennedy returns the man’s smile. “Good morning, Mr. Walker.”

I follow her through the revolving doors into a nicely-appointed lobby.

“Do you want to come up to my office?” she asks me.

“By all means, yes,” I say. “I’d love to see where you work.”

She leads me to the visitor desk and signs me in. I’m given a visitor badge, which I clip to the neckline of my T-shirt.

I follow her through the foyer toward the lift. The doors open, and we step inside. A handful of men wearing bespoke suits huddle together, talking quietly amongst themselves. I gather they're executives.

"It looks like I'm a bit underdressed," I whisper to Kennedy.

She smiles. "It's okay," she whispers back. "They'd fall all over you if they realized who you were."

The old boys get out on the eighth floor. We continue up to the twenty-third floor. The lift pings right before the doors open. Kennedy steps out, and I follow.

"Here's my office," she says motioning to a modern, wide-open office space. "Wentner Global Financials."

I glance around the spacious layout. Cubicles are situated in small clusters throughout the floor. There are small seating groups scattered throughout the room. Private conference rooms line the far wall, tables and chairs visible behind glass walls. There's a short queue in front of what appears to be a coffee shop.

"Not bad," I say. "Where's your office?"

She points to one of the clusters of cubicles. "Over there."

“Good morning, Kennedy,” says a young African-American woman who walks up to us. She eyes me curiously. She’s a few inches taller than Kennedy and dressed in an emerald-green skirt and jacket.

“Oh, hey,” Kennedy says to the young woman. “Lauren, this is Connor. Connor, this is my friend, Lauren. She’s a graphic designer in the marketing department.”

“I’m pleased to meet a friend of Kennedy’s.” As I shake the young woman’s hand, I notice more than a few people standing around staring at us. I’m sure Kennedy must notice it, too.

“Likewise,” Lauren says. She tosses Kennedy a questioning glance before turning back to me. “So, Connor, are you—” She hesitates, and it’s obvious she has no idea who I am.

“Her boyfriend, yes,” I say, getting straight to the point.

Lauren chuckles. “I was going to say, Are you here on business or pleasure? But I guess you answered that.”

I return her smile. “Definitely pleasure.”

Lauren gives Kennedy a look—one that says she’ll be interrogating Kennedy as soon as I leave.

After her friend takes her leave, Kennedy shows me to her cubicle. I'm surprised by how small it is—a desk, office chair, and a computer. If she were working at Carmichael & Son, I'd make sure she had a private office.

After my tour of her workplace, she escorts me back to the lift. Just before I step inside, I take her hand. "I'll meet you downstairs in the lobby at five. Then we'll go have dinner. Sound good?"

To give her coworkers something to talk about, I raise her hand to my lips and kiss it. "Until then."

I take the lift down to the ground floor and exit the lobby. Once I'm out on the pavement, I pull the landlord's letter from my back pocket. Fortunately, there's an address printed on the letter's heading, and what a coincidence, his office happens to be located in Manhattan.

I think it's about time I paid Mr. Brown a visit.

Chapter 22

Kennedy Takahashi

The morning passes slowly. I sit through two team meetings and review a new client application. But I'm finding it impossible to concentrate. I've read the same paragraph five times now, and I can't even say what it's about. My mind keeps going to the fact that Connor's out there wandering around on his own in Manhattan.

When lunch time rolls around, Lauren comes to my cubicle and asks if I want to go out with her. I jump at the chance to get out of the office for a little while—I need the distraction. As we often do, we walk two blocks north to a charming little café, where we each order the lunch special—a half sandwich and a cup of soup.

“So, tell me all about your *boyfriend*,” Lauren says as she sips her iced tea. “Who is he, and how'd you meet? And most importantly, why have I not heard a single thing about him before now?”

I blow gently on my spoonful of chicken and rice soup. “It's a long story.” I've never told anyone here in New York about my relationship with Connor.

Lauren checks the time. “I have forty minutes to listen, so have at it. I’m all ears.” When I hesitate, she adds, “Come on, Kennedy. I saw the way he looked at you. You two clearly have history, one that involves spending time together naked.”

I fail miserably when I try not to smile. “We dated a few years ago.”

She motions for me to continue. “Go on. I’m listening.”

“Actually, when I lived in London, we shared an apartment. We both worked at the same capital investment company.”

“So, what happened? Why are you here, and I presume he’s still there, across the pond?”

My throat tightens. “I broke up with him right before I moved back to New York.”

“Girl, are you kidding me right now? Why? He’s gorgeous, and he seems really nice. Does he have horns and a forked tail I didn’t notice? Or maybe he’s a narcissistic asshole?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. He’s sweet, really he is. He’s funny and kind and generous.”

“Then why did you break up with him?”

“Because his family disapproved of me.”

“Oh.” Lauren gives me a sympathetic look. “There’s always something, isn’t there?”

“His family—well, his grandfather—didn’t want me in the picture. He said as much to my face.”

Lauren winces. “Ouch. What a douchebag.”

“He said, ‘There are plenty of eligible young women in England for Connor to choose from. He doesn’t need to marry a foreigner, especially one of a different ethnicity.’ It was something like that.”

“Yikes. He said that to your face? What a racist old fart.”

I nod. “I’ll be honest—it hurt. A lot.”

“What did Connor have to say about it?”

“He didn’t know because I didn’t tell him.”

“What! Are you serious? You should have told him, and then made popcorn to eat while you watched him set his grandfather straight.”

“I couldn’t. It’s complicated. Connor’s father had recently died, leaving Connor the sole heir to his grandfather’s fortune. We’re talking *billions*, Lauren. I couldn’t risk ruining that for

Connor. So I left, came back here, and picked up the pieces of my life. Or at least tried to.”

Lauren leans forward and narrows her dark eyes. “Did you say *billions*, with a *b*?”

I nod. “I know, it’s hard to wrap my mind around it, too. You’d never guess he’s so wealthy because he’s very down-to-earth.”

“And you walked away from *that*? All that hotness and money, too?” She shakes her head. “You’re nuts.”

I shrug as I sip my water. “I was afraid if I stayed with him, his grandfather would follow through on his threat to disinherit him. I could never live with myself if I let that happen.”

“You loved him.” Lauren nods. “I get it. I think you were stupid, but I get it. Do you still love him?”

“Yes,” I say without hesitation. I pause, letting that sink in. It looks like my head has finally caught up with my heart.

“So, how long is your boyfriend planning to stay?”

I smile hearing Connor referred to as my boyfriend again. That’s going to take some getting used to.

After lunch, we head back to the office. I force myself to stop thinking about Connor and focus on my work. Half an hour later, I break down and call him.

“Hey, Ken,” he says as he picks up the phone. “How’s your day going?”

“Fine. How’s yours?” I can hear noises in the background—hushed conversations, a phone ringing.

“Good. I’ve been sightseeing. I visited Time Square, the Empire State Building, and the Statue of Liberty. All the touristy must-see spots. I feel enlightened already.”

Smiling, I bite back a laugh. “I’m glad you’re having fun.”

“I’d have a lot more fun if you were with me, but I’m making do. Honestly, I’m just killing time until I see you again. I’m looking forward to dinner. I made reservations at a place I think you’ll love.”

“Wonderful. I can’t wait to see you.” I lower my voice. “I’m finding it hard to concentrate on my work, and it’s all your fault. I can’t stop thinking about you.”

He chuckles. “Good. I want you to keep thinking about me. Think about all the things I want to do to you tonight.” He

clears this voice. “I’ll stop by at five to collect you. Until then.”

“Bye, Connor.” I hate hanging up. It’s really starting to sink in. Connor’s *here*. He’s here in my city, and already I’m missing him and counting the minutes until I see him again.

Chapter 23

Connor Murphy

After Kennedy ends our call, I slip my phone back into my pocket. “So, where were we?” I ask George Sanderson, of Sanderson Property Development, Inc. “Ah, yes, the block of flats you recently purchased in Brooklyn, 210 Normandy Lane.”

I’m sitting in Mr. Sanderson’s fancy high rise office. As soon as Joyce e-mailed me his name and contact information, I made an appointment to see the man.

“The *what?*” he asks, his brow furrowing in confusion.

“Oh, sorry. You Americans call it an *apartment building.*”

“What about it?” Sanderson asks.

“George—may I call you George?”

The man nods.

“Excellent. I know you bought the building from a Mr. Leroy Brown for six million. I’d like to offer to take the property off your hands.”

George shakes his head. “I’m not interested in selling. It’s a prime location.”

“I’ll give you twice what you paid for it.”

Sanderson laughs. “You can’t be serious. It’s not worth that much.”

I shrug. “That’s beside the point. What do you say to my offer?”

Sanderson’s eyes narrow as he looks me over. “If you’re willing to pay twelve, I’m guessing you’ll pay fifteen just as easily.”

Ah, so this is how it’s going to go. “Don’t press your luck, Sanderson. If you turn this into a negotiation, my next offer will be ten million.” I want this property, but I’m not going to let this guy walk all over me. “Do we have a deal?”

George stares thoughtfully. “Let me get this straight—you’re offering me twelve million US dollars for a building I bought for six?”

“That’s correct. Do we have an understanding?”

He chuckles. “You’re insane.”

I shrug. “The things we do for love, right?” I pull my phone out of my pocket. “Shall I call my bank in London and tell them to initiate the transfer? I’ll have it expedited. You’ll have the money in your account within twenty-four hours.

That's when I'll come to collect the deed. Have your solicitor write up the paperwork."

"My *what?*"

I laugh. "Sorry, your attorney."

Sanderson leans back in his black leather chair. "Fine. Far be it for me to stop you from doing something foolish. It's an old, outdated apartment building. It's hardly worth what you're offering to pay."

"That's my business, not yours." I rise from my chair and offer Sanderson my hand. We shake on it.

I proceed to do just as I said I would. I call Milton Evans, my personal banker in London, and instruct him to wire the money to Sanderson's bank account promptly. "I'll be back tomorrow at this same time to pick up the deed. Have it made out to Kennedy Takahashi." I grab a yellow Post-It note off Sanderson's desk and write down her name and details.

"Good doing business with you, sir," I say, and then I walk out of his office.

"What an idiot," Sanderson mutters, laughing to himself.

I smile as I exit his building.

* * *

At ten minutes after five, Kennedy steps out of the lift. When she spots me sitting by the fountain in the center of the spacious lobby, she waves and heads my way.

I shoot to my feet and greet her. “All done for the day?”

She nods. “Yes. I hope I didn’t keep you waiting too long.”

“Your timing is perfect.” I offer her my arm. “Shall we?”

She takes my arm, and we walk out of the building onto a crowded pavement filled with pedestrians heading home from work.

“I know you love sushi,” I tell her, “so I asked around to find out what the best restaurant in Manhattan is—Masa’s Sushi Bar. Japanese cuisine at its finest. I thought that was highly appropriate, don’t you?”

She laughs. “Connor, that place costs a fortune.”

“Fortunately for us, I have a fortune. So, we’re all set. We have a reservation for six o’clock.”

She shakes her head. “You’re insane.”

“So I’ve been told.” I chuckle, thinking back to my property transaction earlier in the afternoon. I’m dying to tell her, but I won’t. Not until the deed is in my hand.

“Fine,” she says. “As long as you’re paying. It’s way too rich for my blood.”

“That’s what I’m here for, darling. Shall we walk or hire a taxi?”

“It’s nice out, so let’s walk. It’s not far.”

Dinner at Masa’s is a feast for the senses. I made a call earlier in the day and managed to score us two seats at the coveted Hinoki Counter, where we’ll get a front-row seat to watch the master chef at work as he transforms choice pieces of seafood into delectable works of art.

When we arrive at the restaurant, we’re escorted to the Counter, where we’re seated front and center.

Kennedy leans close and whispers, “I can’t believe you did this. I don’t even want to know what you paid to get these seats.”

“Then I won’t tell you,” I whisper back, winking. I lean over and kiss her temple. “It’s my treat.”

Renowned Chef Masa expertly prepares our dishes in front of us. It’s fascinating how deftly he handles those sharp knives. He sets each delicacy in front of us as it’s prepared.

“When was the last time you were in Japan?” I ask Kennedy as she picks up a piece of sushi and takes a bite.

She chews and swallows. “About three years ago. My parents and I took my *Sobo* to Tokyo to visit some of our relatives who still live in Japan.”

“That’s your grandmother, right?”

“Yes.”

“I’d love to meet her. In fact, I’d love to meet your parents as well. Since I’m here in town, now would be the perfect time. What do you say?”

She nearly chokes on a sip of sake. “You want to meet my family?”

I nod. “Absolutely. It’s only fair. You’ve met my mother. That’s not a problem, is it?”

“No, of course not. It’s just—no, it’s fine. In fact, it’s great. I know they’d love to meet you.”

“Why don’t you call them tonight and ask when they’re free? Hopefully we can fit it in before I have to leave for London.”

Kennedy takes a deep breath. “All right. I will.”

* * *

I wake up the following morning with my body pressed against Kennedy's.

"Kennedy," I whisper as I run the pad of my index finger across her cheek.

"Hmm?" she murmurs sleepily as she opens her eyes.
"What time is it?"

"Time to get up." As soon as I utter those words, her alarm clock goes off.

Groaning, she reaches for her phone and touches the snooze button. "Just one snooze."

As she dozes back off, I snuggle against her and enjoy the moment. Normally, she's the first one to wake up, but not this morning. I'm too excited to sleep. I'll be picking up the deed for this building today and presenting it to Kennedy.

When her alarm goes off again, she pushes the quilt away with a groan. She rubs her eyes with the backs of her hands.
"Okay, I'm getting up."

"Go get ready while I make breakfast."

"You're spoiling me," she says as she sits up on the side of the bed and brushes her hair back. As she arches her back and stretches, I stare mesmerized by the sleek lines of her body.

While she goes to her wardrobe to select her outfit for the day, I take advantage of the moment to go to the loo and brush my teeth.

Just as I come out of the bathroom, she passes by me on her way in. I steal a quick kiss. I'm tempted to join her in the shower, but I know if I do, she'll be late to work. So I behave myself and scour her kitchen cupboard and fridge for ingredients for our breakfast.

I end up making scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast.

"You are definitely spoiling me," she says when she comes out of the bathroom and smells what's cooking. She changes into her work attire. "That smells amazing."

"Then come eat."

While we're eating, she hears back from her mother, who invites us for dinner this evening.

"That was fast," I say, when she ends the call.

She gives me a smile. "I told you, they're excited to meet you."

Right on time, we leave her flat and head to the subway station. When we step outside, we find Ms. Talisman watering the flowers in the ground floor window boxes.

“Good morning, handsome,” the woman says to me. Then she winks at Kennedy. “You lucky girl.”

When we arrive at Kennedy’s office building, she asks me, “So, what’s on your agenda for today?”

“I thought I’d visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art.” I figure that sounds impressive. I’ll hang out at the museum until it’s time for my appointment with George Sanderson at two o’clock.

I notice Kennedy’s friend, Lauren, loitering just inside the front entrance. Obviously, she’s waiting to go up in the lift with Kennedy. When she spots us, she waves. I wave back.

“I’ll see you at five,” Kennedy says. She surprises me by going up on her toes to kiss me goodbye, right in front of the doorman.

Once she’s out of sight, I hail a taxi. After visiting the museum, I grab two hotdogs from an outdoor vendor for lunch. Then I hail another taxi.

“Where to?” the driver asks.

I slide into the back seat and reel off the address to George Sanderson’s office. When I arrive, I stroll in through the heavy

glass doors, bypass the reception staff, and head straight for Sanderson's office.

"Sir!" A young red head calls after me, but I raise my hand and cut her off.

"Mr. Sanderson is expecting me," I say. And without another word I knock on his door.

"Come in," he says.

I walk in to find Sanderson seated at his desk, a stack of papers in his hands.

"Well?" I ask.

"It's all right here." George gestures to the chair across his desk. "Have a seat."

"I trust you received the money." I know for a fact that he did, because my banker confirmed the transfer as soon as it was made.

George nods, and sifting through the paperwork, he pulls out a large Manila envelope. "I had my attorney make out the deed as you requested."

I take the envelop from him, pull out the pages, and verify that it's been put in Kennedy's name.

“Young man,” Sanderson begins, “unless the property in question is built over a pot of gold, then I believe you have more money than sense.”

“Perhaps,” I say, slipping the paperwork back into the envelope. “But as I said, it’s my business.” I tip my head out of politeness and head toward the door. “I’ll forward this to my solicitor, and he’ll be in touch if we need anything more.”

“Why’d you buy it, really?” he asks, sounding genuinely curious.

I pause at the door. “It’s an engagement present.” Then I turn to face him. “And for the record, I would have paid more if you’d insisted.”

Sanderson laughs. “You *are* insane.”

“No, I’m in love.”

The sound of his laughter follows me out the door and down the corridor.

I can’t wait to hand Kennedy the deed to her apartment building. The fate of that building now rests in her hands.

Chapter 24

Kennedy Takahashi

After I get off work, Connor meets me in the lobby of my building, and we catch a taxi to my parents' home on the Upper West Side. My parents, along with my grandmother, live in a two-story townhouse in a quiet, residential neighborhood.

The taxi drops us off in front of their home. Connor follows me up the stone steps to their front door.

“We take our shoes off inside,” I whisper to Connor. “My grandmother likes to keep some Japanese traditions.” I ring the bell and almost immediately the door opens. My mother is there front and center, with my grandmother peering around her, and my father in the rear.

“Kennedy!” My mother says. Then she turns her attention to Connor. “And you must be Connor.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Connor says, nodding. “Thank you for inviting me.”

My parents are dressed in business casual. My mother's wearing a sweater over her blouse, and my father still has his suit jacket on. My grandmother is dressed in a kimono made

from pale blue fabric with large white and orange flowers and a blue sash.

My mother steps back and motions for us to enter. Connor follows my lead as I take off my shoes and set them on the floor just inside the foyer. I slide my feet into the smaller of two pairs of slippers set out for us, and he uses the other pair.

My pulse is racing, and to call me nervous would be a gross understatement. “I’d like for you to meet my boyfriend, Connor Murphy.”

“Mrs. Takahashi,” Connor says, sounding quite formal. He nods and makes a slight bow. Then he nods to my father. “Mr. Takahashi.”

Finally, my grandmother steps forward. She’s a tiny thing, not even five feet tall.

“And you must be the very lovely Mrs. Takahashi, Kennedy’s *sobo*. I am honored to meet you. *Konbanwa*.” *Good evening*. And then he bows to her.

My grandmother’s eyes widen in pleased surprise. She bows deeply in return. “*Konbanwa*, Murphy-san,” she says in her soft, lilting voice. Then she lifts her head and winks at me.

“Please, come into the living room,” my father says, motioning us inside.

I glance at Connor. “Where did you learn that?”

He grins at me. “You’ve heard of the Internet, yes?”

We follow my parents to a formal living room, where we sit. After exchanging pleasantries, my mother and grandmother disappear into the kitchen to check on dinner, leaving us alone with my father.

“So, Connor,” my father says, as he leans back in his seat. “How are you enjoying your visit in our fair city?”

“I’m enjoying it immensely,” Connor says as he reaches for my hand.

I suspect Connor’s feeling just a bit nervous himself.

“I understand you work in capital investments, too. Is that right?”

“Yes, sir,” Connor says. “I’m an account manager at Carmichael & Son. I’m sure you’ve heard of it.” His thumb absently strokes my palm, sending shivers down my spine. I don’t even think he’s aware he’s doing it.

My father smiles. “Yes, I believe I have.” Then he winks at me. “Excellent firm.”

Before my father can ask another question, Mom returns to invite us to the table. Dinner is served in the dining room, at a formal table set for five. It looks like we're having a traditional Japanese meal this evening—Miso soup, steamed rice, pickled cucumber, salad, steamed vegetables, and grilled tuna steaks as the main course. We have hot green tea to drink, as well as sake served in small, traditional blue-and-white hand-painted cups.

“We usually don't eat like this,” I whisper to Connor as he tastes the soup.

The meal is delicious and expertly prepared. My mom and grandmother are both great cooks.

When they return to the kitchen to get the dessert, I whisper to Connor, “They're trying to impress you.”

“They've succeeded,” he whispers back, squeezing my hand beneath the table.

After the meal, we return to the living room to chat. My parents ask Connor all sorts of questions about London, his career, and his family. It's a bit embarrassing the way they're grilling him. It's practically an interview. But Connor doesn't seem to mind. He looks quite content to relax back in the sofa beside me, holding my hand.

“I love your family,” Connor says to me on our ride back to my apartment. “But I especially adore your grandmother. It was a lovely evening, and your family was very welcoming.” He squeezes my hand. “I just wish my family had been as welcoming to you. For that, I’m truly sorry.”

* * *

On the way back to Brooklyn, Connor instructs our Uber driver to drop us off at Brooklyn Bridge Park so we can take time to enjoy the view of Manhattan from across the East River. It’s still light outside, so we walk around the park, passing Grimaldi’s pizza restaurant and Juliana’s. We stop for ice cream at the Brooklyn Ice Cream Factory and continue on our way toward the river. Lots of pedestrians are taking selfies of themselves with the bridge in the background. I even catch Connor snapping a few pics with his phone.

We walk out onto the boardwalk to get a front row view of Manhattan from across the river. Ferry boats and speed boats meander up and down the waterway.

As the sun begins to set, the nighttime view transforms when all the buildings in Manhattan light up, as does the Brooklyn Bridge itself.

Then we start for home, walking back to my apartment, which isn't that far.

“My family loves you,” I say.

Connor smiles. “The feeling is mutual. Your parents were very gracious and kind, but your grandmother—she’s absolutely delightful.”

He reaches for my hand, and it feels so right, so effortless as we walk hand-in-hand along the sidewalk, passing other pedestrians and cyclists.

Connor stops us under a streetlight, and with his free hand, he pulls a folded sheet of paper out of his back pocket. “I have something for you,” he says, dangling it in front of me. “A gift.”

“You don’t need to give me anything.”

When I reach for it, he raises it over my head and out of reach.

“Before you look at it,” he says, “I want you to know that this is given freely. There are no strings attached, no conditions of any kind. It’s yours, even if we were never to speak to each other again.”

“Don’t say that, Connor. Not even in jest.” His words are unsettling. Just the thought makes my heart hurt. After everything we’ve been through, we can’t fail now.

He hands me the paper. “Go ahead. Read it.”

Standing beneath a column of light, I unfold the sheet of paper. Immediately, my gaze goes to the title at the top of the page, written in all caps. DEED. My heart slams in my chest as I skim the first few lines of the document, catching only a few key words and phrases, but enough to tell me this is the first page to the deed to my apartment building.

Kennedy Takahashi

I stare up at Connor. “I don’t understand.”

“I bought your building, paid in full, in cash. It’s yours now. Your name is on the deed.”

My head is spinning. “But—you can’t do that.”

He smiles, looking like he’s pretty darn pleased with himself. “Too late. I already have.”

I stare up at him in disbelief. “But it’s too much.”

“No, it’s not. It’s perfect. Now no one can kick you or your neighbors out of their homes.”

“Connor—I can’t even begin to know what to say.”

“A simple ‘thank you’ should suffice.”

“Thank you. Of course, thank you. But—”

“There’s no ‘but,’ love. Do you honestly think there’s anything I wouldn’t do for you?”

As my eyes burn with unshed tears, I take a deep breath. “I don’t deserve this, Connor.” My breath catches. “After what I put you through, I don’t deserve this or *you*.”

“That’s absolute rubbish.” Connor takes my free hand and presses it against his chest, right over his heart. “Besides, you already have me. Good luck trying to get rid of me now.”

“After everything’s that happened—after what I did to you—you go and do something crazy like this? For *me*?”

He pulls me into his arms and holds me close, his lips in my hair. “Don’t overthink this, Ken. I know how you get. I saw a problem—you losing your precious apartment building—and I resolved it. It’s that simple.”

“How much did this cost you?” I nearly choke on the words, not sure if I even want to hear the answer.

He chuckles. “I don’t think you want to know. Some things are better left unsaid.”

I laugh then, even though there's nothing funny about it. "Oh, Connor." I slip my arms around his waist and hold him just as tightly as he's holding me. Everything comes rushing back to me—his grandfather's hateful words, leaving London, leaving *him*, trying to learn to live without him. It's all too much. The dam breaks, and I can't hold my emotions in check any longer. With my face pressed against his chest, I burst into tears, soaking his shirt.

"There, there," he murmurs as he gently rubs my back. "You're meant to be happy about this, sweetheart, not sobbing your eyes out."

"Connor, you overwhelm me."

He chuckles. "Is that a compliment or an insult?"

Laughing through my tears, I swat his shoulder. "It's a compliment, you idiot."

"All right, then." He steps back and holds me at arm's length. Then he brushes the tears from my cheeks. "Kennedy, do you comprehend how much you mean to me?"

Sniffling, I nod. "I'm starting to."

"I can't take back the horrible things my grandfather said to you, but I can promise you one thing. There is no person on

earth who is more important to me than you are. I'm as smitten with you today as I was the day we met. Actually, more so."

"I—"

He presses his index finger against my lips. "Don't say anything. At least not right now when you're so emotional. We'll talk later, all right? How about we return to your flat so you can share the good news with your neighbors?"

We walk the rest of the way to my home in silence. My mind is racing as it tries to comprehend what he's done and how much this must have cost him. How much do apartment buildings in Brooklyn go for? It has to be in the millions.

As soon as we reach my building, we start on the first floor and work our way up, one apartment at a time, floor by floor.

First, I knock on the Andersons' door. Mr. Anderson opens it, dressed in his flannel pajamas. He looks worried, like he's afraid I've come to tell him the building's on fire. It's only nine-thirty, but the older folks tend to turn in early. But this can't wait. They'll sleep better tonight knowing their home is safe.

I hold up the first page to the deed.

He squints as he tries to read the words without his wire-rimmed glasses. “What’s that?”

Connor jumps in, simplifying things greatly. “It means Kennedy owns this apartment building now. No more sale. No more moving. Your home is safe for as long as you want it.”

Mr. Anderson’s eyes widen. “Jill, come here!”

His wife, a petite former kindergarten teacher with braided white hair, rushes up to him. “What’s the matter, Carl?”

Connor repeats his blunt explanation, and Mrs. Anderson bursts into tears.

The reactions we get from the rest of the residents are very similar. We tell all of the first-floor residents, then we climb the stairs to my floor.

We knock on Ms. Talisman’s door first and give her the good news. She drags Connor into her arms and squeezes the breath out of him.

Mrs. P has pretty much the same reaction, only she squeezes the daylight out of me instead.

Leaving my two favorite neighbors in happy tears, we tell the rest of the tenants in the building. By the time we make it

back to my apartment, it's nearly eleven o'clock, and I'm worn out.

“Why don't you change into something more comfortable?” Connor suggests. “We can relax and have a celebratory drink.”

“Is that a euphemism? Changing into something more comfortable?”

He grins. “No. I just figure your feet are killing you after wearing those heels so long.” He gently nudges me away from the kitchen nook. “Go on. Get comfortable.”

Shaking my head, and fighting a grin, I grab my PJs and head to the bathroom to change and freshen up. Connor's up to something, I can tell. I can't imagine what he's got up his sleeve now.

Chapter 25

Connor Murphy

While Kennedy's changing, I change, too. I meant it when I said we should be comfortable. I want to remind her of the time we spent living together in London, when we'd come home after a long day of work and unwind together, relax, drink some wine, and perhaps watch a little Netflix and chill.

Only this time, we're upgrading from wine. I pull a bottle of Veuve Clicquot, which I picked up earlier today at a wine shop and stashed here in her flat. I grab the ice bucket sitting on top of her fridge, fill it with cubes I find in her freezer, and stick the bottle in to chill. I locate two wine glasses, rinse them off because they're dusty—doesn't look like she drinks much—and set them on the little dining table. I find a cream-colored candle on her bookcase—it smells like vanilla—and light it using a pack of matches I find in a kitchen drawer. Standing back, I survey my handiwork—it could be better, but this is all I have to work with on short notice.

This could turn into a giant disaster if it doesn't work out the way I hope it will, but there's only one way to find out.

When Kennedy comes out of the bathroom, her face is freshly washed and devoid of make-up, her hair is brushed to a shine and pulled back into a ponytail, and she's wearing a pink pajama shorts and matching top. No bra, I might add.

She looks like a vision.

When she spots the champagne chilling on the table, as well as the lit candle she looks at me. "What's going on?"

"I thought we should celebrate."

"What?"

"The fact that you're the new landlord of this building, of course."

"Oh." She visibly relaxes. "Great idea."

I open the bottle and fill our glasses. Then I hand her one.

Kennedy rises up on the tips of her toes and places a kiss on my cheek.

"To you," I say.

I'm about to touch my glass to hers when she says, "To you, Connor. For being the amazing man you are." Her dark eyes glitter as she takes a breath and continues. "For being the

best friend I could ever hope for. For being so bloody annoying at times, and yet totally lovable at the same time.”

I tip my head. “Careful saying *bloody*. Anyone would think I’m rubbing off on you.”

“That wouldn’t be the worst thing.” She laughs, and we touch glasses once more. “To you, Connor.”

“To us,” I counter. I’m determined to turn the direction of the toast around in our favor.

The fire is back in her eyes. “To *us*.”

As we each take a sip, we stand there gazing at one another for a full minute, naturally gravitating toward one another. I lean down about to claim her lips, but step back suddenly. “I warn you, I’m about to kiss you, but before I do, there’s something I want to say.”

“And what’s that?”

“I love you, Kennedy. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want to marry you and have a family with you.”

She swallows hard. “Connor—”

“Before you respond, I want you to know I’ve been thinking about this—how we’d manage the logistics. We could

split our time between New York and London. That way, you won't have to choose."

Her eyes widen in shock. "Are you serious?"

"You have your job here, and your family. And now you're the landlord of a block of flats. I couldn't possibly tear you away from all that."

"But you can't give up your job at Carmichael & Son. It's your family's legacy. Besides, your mother would be devastated if you moved here."

"Not more so than yours." I set my glass down, then hers as well, and take both of her hands in mine. "I will follow you to the ends of the Earth. Just say where."

"But what about all your properties in England?"

"I have staff to maintain them. The properties will get along fine without me. I like your idea about alternating our time between the US and the UK. I can keep working for Carmichael & Son remotely, as Will does. It's not a big deal."

I can see the wheels turning as she thinks over my proposal. "It's too great of a sacrifice," she says. Then she gestures to her flat. "And clearly this place is too small for the both of us."

I shrug. “I was thinking we’d get a nice penthouse in Manhattan, something overlooking Central Park. You can keep your job at Wentner, and your promotion. I’ll keep my job. It’s the perfect arrangement. We’ll still see Will and Skye frequently. We could even coordinate our schedule with theirs.”

She looks dumbfounded. “You’d be willing to do that?”

“Without a moment’s hesitation.”

“Connor, I don’t know what to say.”

“How about saying *yes*?”

She smiles. “Yes. Of course, yes.”

I scoop her up into my arms and kiss her as I navigate my way over to the bed, sidestepping the tiny settee and endeavoring not to run into the coffee table. When we reach the bed, I gently set her on the mattress. “No offense, love, but can we go apartment shopping soon? This place makes me feel a bit claustrophobic. I’m afraid if I make one wrong move, I’ll break a toe.”

She laughs. “Well, I’d caution you that the property prices in Manhattan are outrageous, but—” She cuts herself off with a laugh. “I guess that’s not a problem for you, is it?”

“Not at all,” I say as I kneel on the bed. “Let’s call an estate agent soon to get the ball rolling. But, in the meanwhile...” I lean down to kiss her. “We have a lot of celebrating to do.” I freeze. “Oh, by the way, in all the excitement I forget. Did you answer me?”

“Answer you about what?”

As I lower myself to one knee on the floor beside the bed, she sits up, her eyes widening. I take her hands in mine. “Kennedy Takahashi, will you please do me the honor of marrying me? I suppose this is a bit premature, as I don’t have a ring—”

She reaches out to cup my face, then leans close to press her lips to mine. “Yes,” she breathes. “I would love to marry you.” Then she fists my hair with one hand and deepens our kiss. Her eyes glitter with unshed tears. “All those years apart, Connor—that was my doing. My fault. I don’t ever want to lose you again.”

I rise to my feet and lie her back on the bed, looming over her as I rest my hands on the mattress, one on each side of her head. “You never lost me in the first place, Kennedy. I’ve always been here. I’ve always been yours. I was just waiting for you to realize it.”

Chapter 26

Kennedy Takahashi

Suddenly I feel lightheaded, as if the room is spinning. Connor's talking about marriage. I never dreamed we'd get a second chance. That he'd forgive me for the choice I made all those years ago, without ever consulting him.

He switches off the lamp and lies down beside me. The glow from the streetlamp outside my apartment window casts a magical glow in the semi-darkness.

I feel giddy. Everything is different this time. The barrier between us has fallen—the one I created—and for once in a long time, I feel free to simply love him.

He leans over me, searching my expression.

“Connor, I'm sorry.”

“For what?”

“For not telling you what your grandfather—”

“Stop right there, Ken. What's past is past. We're looking to the future now. *Our* future. There will be no recriminations, do you hear me?”

I laugh. “You say that now, but the first time you get mad at me, I’m sure you’ll throw it in my face. ‘*Remember when you left me for five years?*’” I do my best to imitate his London accent.

He laughs. “That was god-awful. I don’t sound like that at all. Well, as tempting as it might sound, I promise to refrain from reminding you.” He cups my cheeks. “I meant what I said. No dwelling in the past. We’re looking to the future now and all the amazing things coming our way.” He leans down and kisses the tip of my nose. “You’re all I’ve ever wanted, since that first day I saw you at Carmichael & Son. I’ll never forget it, Will and I were walking along the corridor, and there you were ahead of us. When you turned the corner and I saw your profile, my breath caught. I knew then, Ken. *I knew*. In fact, I told Will, ‘That’s the girl for me.’ You can ask him. Do you believe in love at first sight, Kennedy?”

I nod because I think I do. I also remember the first time I saw Connor. “Do you know what I thought when I first saw you?”

“What?”

“I thought you were beautiful.”

Connor bats his lashes. “Gee, thanks.”

I swat his shoulder. “No, I mean beautiful like a Greek god.”

“Oh, well that’s better. I’ll take it.” He leans down and kisses me. “And now? Do you still think I’m beautiful?”

“You take my breath away.”

He grins, which makes him even more impossibly handsome. “Really?” he asks.

“Yes, really. Of course that’s only the tip of the iceberg.” I wrap my arms around his neck and pull his mouth back down to mine for a kiss. “You’re also funny.” I kiss him again. “And kind.” Another kiss. He’s smiling. “Not to mention caring and smart.”

I shiver when his warm hand slides up beneath my pajama top.

“I think you’re overdressed for the occasion,” he murmurs against my lips.

“What do you suggest?” I love that I can tease him again. He’s so much fun to tease.

“I suggest you let me undress you.” He sits up, grasps the hem of my PJ top, and pulls it up and over my head. “That’s much better.” And then his mouth is on my breast. When he

draws my nipple inside, his tongue flicking the tip, my back arches off the mattress, and I cry out. His hand cups my breast, molding and shaping it while his tongue teases me.

I run my hands up his arms, loving the contour of his biceps, to his broad shoulders, then up into his thick hair. When I tug on the strands, he groans.

He kisses his way across my chest to my other breast and treats it to the same teasing torment. His free hand skims slowly down my torso, tracing every curve, following every dip. His gentle touch makes my nerve endings sing. When his fingers reach the waistband of my PJ shorts, he tugs them down my legs and tosses them aside.

I gasp when his finger slides between my legs and begins stroking me. I'm already wet, already aroused, and his finger glides easily. Then his thumb is there, pressing against my clit, while his middle finger slips down to my opening. I start squirming then, swamped by the pleasure of this double assault—his finger stroking inside me, his thumb tormenting my clit. With unerring precision, he finds the sweet spot inside me and strokes it persistently, until my thighs start shaking and my breath catches in my throat.

“Connor.” His name is little more than a breathy moan. A sweet flood of need courses through me.

“It’s all right, sweetheart. Just let yourself go. Let it happen. I want to hear your pleasure. I want to feel it and taste it.” His mouth covers mine then, his tongue slipping inside to stroke mine.

Pleasure swamps me, gradually overwhelming me to the point that I’m seeing stars. My body tightens, my legs tremble, and my orgasm steals my breath. He holds me until my body comes down from the high. Then he stands beside the bed and pulls his shirt off and tosses it onto the sofa.

“I should be undressing you,” I say.

“No time.” He shucks off the rest of his clothes, turning briefly to toss them onto my sofa, giving me a perfect view of his taut backside.

“Connor! What’s that on your ass?” I sit up and stare at the symbol inked onto his right buttock.

He steps back to give me a better view. “It’s Japanese.”

“Yes, I can see that,” I say, laughing. “You tattooed the Japanese word for *love* on your ass?”

“Yes. I did it a couple of years ago in honor of you.”

“Thank you.” I wince. “Didn’t that hurt?”

“Yes, it bloody killed!”

Smiling, I pull him down onto the bed with me. “You’re such a romantic.”

“I know,” he says, always the humble one. He scoots me up the bed so that my head is on my pillow. Then he’s there beside me, reaching into the top drawer of the nightstand and pulling out a condom packet.

I reach for the condom packet, but he stills my hand. “Not yet. I plan to make this last.”

He trails kisses down my throat, down my torso, to my waist. He teases my belly button before moving farther down. Soon I feel his warm breath between my legs, then his teasing tongue. I reach down and grasp his hair, tugging firmly.

Gently, he nudges my legs apart and slips between them. His fingers pry me open, and then his tongue is there, teasing me relentlessly. I’m alternately petting him and tugging on his hair. I’m panting one minute and then whimpering the next.

I’m so sensitive down there, my body is shaking, so I grab hold of his arms and pull him up beside me so I can roll him onto his back. And then I move over him, my hair brushing

against his belly. He sucks in a deep breath as I draw him into my mouth.

A rough breath explodes out of him as he fists the sheet.
“Kennedy!”

With my hands and my mouth, I suck and stroke and tug on his erection. His breathing is harsh, his body tense and straining as he lifts his hips. Soon he draws me away and pulls me up beside him. “No more,” he groans. “I won’t be able to hold on much longer.”

He opens the condom packet and quickly rolls in on. Then he’s above me, lying between my thighs, and guiding himself into me. He sinks deep in one slow, fluid motion. My body clings to his, welcoming him. I wrap my arms around his neck. Our lips meet, soft and gentle this time. Tender kisses and soft puffs of air mingle. He starts to move, sliding easily inside me. It feels so good. *He* feels so good.

Our bodies rock together. As he thrusts, I rise up to meet him, taking him deep into me. I tighten my muscles, and he groans harshly.

We’re both panting now, breathing hard, our hearts pounding.

How did I manage so long without this? Without him?
Tears prick my eyes, and when he notices, I close my eyes,
feeling too exposed, my emotions too raw.

When his climax hits him, he cries out, his entire body
tensing. His muscles tighten, his big body quakes. Finally, as
he comes down, thrusting slowly inside me as if he doesn't
want this to end, he leans down and kisses me. "I love you,
Kennedy. I never stopped." He kisses one closed eyelid, then
the other. "No regrets," he whispers. "No recriminations. Just
us, together, as we should be. That's the only thing that
matters."

My throat tightens. "I never stopped loving you, either."

* * *

"So, what's next? What do we do now?" I ask as we lie in
each other's arms. Our legs are intertwined. My head rests on
his shoulder, and my arm is draped across his waist.

He wraps his arms around me and strokes my bare
shoulder. "I'll need to go back to London to make
arrangements to work remotely. I'll need to speak to a few
people, namely Will's father. I'll pack up my personal
belongings and have them shipped to New York. I should be
able to arrange everything within a few weeks." He tips his

head to meet my gaze. “Do you mind if I invite my housekeeper, Sarah, and her husband, Bruce—my chauffeur—to come, too? Like Will and Skye bring Maggie and Hamish with them?”

“Of course. That’s fine.”

“They can live with us, as they live with me now in London. Or they can remain in London. It’s their choice.” He leans over to kiss my temple. “Once we’re settled, we’ll have to invite my mother to come for a visit. She loves New York, and I know she’ll want to spend some time with you. She’s always liked you.”

* * *

The next morning, while we’re eating breakfast, Connor makes a phone call to Will, updating him on our big news. The guys put their phones on speaker so Skye and I can join in on the conversation.

“Kennedy, I’m so happy to hear this,” Skye says, her voice filled with excitement.

“Aunt Kennedy, are you getting married?” Penny asks.

When I say yes, she squeals with delight.

“We’ll come visit you when you’ve had a chance to get settled into your new home,” Skye says.

* * *

That night, Connor and I lie in bed and plan our strategy.

“The first thing I’ll do when I’m back in London is talk to Mr. Carmichael about my plan to split my time between New York and London.”

“Do you think he’ll have a problem with that?” I ask.

Connor shakes his head. “Not at all. His own son is doing it. I’ll just need to talk to some of my colleagues at work and explain the plan. What about your job? Do you think your boss will be okay with you working remotely from the UK for half the year?”

“I’m not sure. There are a few people at Wentner who worked remotely. What if they tell me no?”

Connor chuckles. “Then I’ll buy a controlling interest in the company, and voila—we have a change in policy.”

I lean over and kiss his cheek. “Money solves everything, right?”

“Generally, yes.” He returns my kiss. “Don’t worry. This will work out. Hey, why don’t you come with me to London?”

We'll make a holiday of it, maybe spend a week in the UK before we come back here and start house hunting." He comes over me, resting his hips between my thighs. "Do you think Mrs. P would mind watching Betty for you?"

I smile, feeling very pleased that he's asked me to come back with him. This is really happening. "Yes, I think she'd be amenable to that."

The next few days are nothing short of chaotic. I hire a reputable property management company to manage the apartment building for me, because with the trip to London, then back here to start house hunting, I won't have time to do it all. Even though I won't be living here, myself, for much longer, my neighbors will, and I want things to run smoothly for them.

I offer my apartment to Lauren, and she jumps at the chance to have her own space. Right now, she's sharing a tiny two-bedroom apartment in Queens with three other young women. Moving to Brooklyn will cut her commute in half. I'll offer to let her live here free of charge, in exchange for her promise to look out after Mrs. P and Ms. Talisman for me.

* * *

Connor sits on my bed and watches me pack for the flight to London. “I can’t wait to show you my penthouse in London. And I know a lot of people at Carmichael and Son will be eager to see you again. You made quite an impression on a lot of them.”

It takes Connor a whole ten minutes to pack his luggage for the return trip. When we’re done, we set our bags by the door and wait for our Uber ride to arrive.

“Come here,” he says, pulling me into his arms. He leans down and kisses the top of my head.

We stand there holding each other for a long while, just enjoying the closeness. I don’t think either of us will ever take this for granted.

Connor’s phone chimes with a notification that our ride is approaching. “Shall we, Mrs. Murphy?” he asks as he grabs his suitcase handle and mine.

I pick up our two carry-on bags and my purse. “We’re not even married yet.”

Connor follows me out the door and waits beside me while I lock it. He leans over and kisses my cheek. “I’m just practicing.”

Chapter 27

Connor Murphy

Our flight from New York to London is perfect. I was able to talk Kennedy into sitting in first class. She said it wasn't necessary, but I wanted to spoil her just a bit. Halfway across the Atlantic, we drink a toast to our future with glasses of champagne.

Once we land and collect our luggage, and Kennedy passes through customs, we finally head to the exit. Bruce is waiting for us with the car, looking very sharp in his black uniform. His short dark hair is starting to gray at the temples, giving him an air of distinction.

I take Kennedy's hand and draw her close. "Darling, this is Bruce Allen, my driver. Bruce, may I present Ms. Kennedy Takahashi, my fiancée." God, it feels good to finally be able to call her that.

"Your—" Bruce's eyes widen.

I'd given him a heads-up that I was bringing someone back with me. He just didn't know she was the woman I'm going to marry.

Kennedy gives him a warm smile. "Hello, Mr. Allen."

“Just Bruce, miss,” he says with a trace of his Yorkshire accent. “That’ll be fine.”

“Bruce.” Kennedy says. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. Please call me Kennedy.”

Bruce nods respectfully. “Certainly, miss.”

Bruce is old school, so calling Kennedy by her first name is probably a bit of a stretch for him.

“Excellent,” I say. “Now that we’re all friends, shall we get on the road? Kennedy and I are starving.”

Bruce opens the rear door of the Mercedes, and I motion for Kennedy to slip inside the vehicle. I follow her in, and Bruce closes the door. While he stows our luggage in the boot, Kennedy glances around the black leather interior.

“You have a bar in your car?” she asks, eyeing the small brass rack that holds a bottle of whiskey and two glasses.

I shrug guiltily. “It’s for special occasions.”

Bruce slips behind the wheel, and we’re off, heading for London.

“Where’s your apartment located?” Kennedy asks. Her nose is practically pressed against the glass as she stares out her window at the passing scenery.

“Actually, it’s in the same building as Will and Skye’s flat. Our two penthouses take up the entire top floor of the building. We have stunning views of The Thames, and we’re only minutes from the office building. It’s the perfect location.”

Kennedy smiles wistfully. “Remember our flat in London?”

Memories of our time there certainly bring a smile to my face as well. In her flat was where we made love for the first time. I treasure those memories. After Skye moved in with Will, I wasted no time moving in with Kennedy. I was giddy with excitement being so close to her. We spent every free moment together.

I bring her hand to my lips to kiss. “I remember every second.”

She blushes. “*Every* second?”

“Oh, yes.” Just remembering some of the things we did there makes my body stir, and I shift in my seat to make room for an inconvenient erection. I don’t think there was a room—or a flat surface—in that flat we didn’t christen.

Kennedy notices my physical discomfort. Grinning, she whispers, “I guess we’ll be making some new memories in your place.”

I squeeze her hand. “I’m counting on it.”

When we reach the city, Kennedy lowers her window. “Do you hear that? Those are the sounds of London.”

I laugh. “It sounds like any large city to me.”

“No, listen.” When we stop at a red light, she lowers the window further, and we can hear the conversations drifting pass us as groups of people move along the pavement. “Hear those British accents, the cadence of the language.” Then she points at a corner business. “And pubs on every corner.”

She leans back in her seat and sighs. “I’m craving fish and chips. Shoot, I’ll even eat the mushy peas.”

I laugh. “You hate mushy peas.”

She turns to me. “I know, but I’m feeling nostalgic.”

Soon we arrive at my building. Bruce pulls up to the front entrance to let us out. I’ll take Kennedy in through the front lobby and up the lift to the penthouse floor. Bruce will park the Mercedes in the garage and bring our luggage up through the private service lift.

Kennedy glances around the lobby, with its marble floors and gold accents. “It’s just as impressive as I remember,” she says. And then I remember we visited this building several times back in the day, to see Will and Skye.

When we approach the front desk, the two security guards straighten.

“Welcome back, Mr. Murphy,” one of them says, his curious gaze flitting to Kennedy.

“Thank you, Thomas. Gentlemen, this is my fiancée, Kennedy Takahashi. She’ll be residing with me in my flat.”

After the introductions are complete, I direct Kennedy to the express lift that will take us to the top floor of the building. I whisper the four-digit access code into her ear. “That’s the lift code. Memorize it, or you’ll be locked out.”

She rolls her eyes. “Connor, that’s my birthday. I’m not likely to forget that.”

“Of course it is.” I lean over to kiss her cheek. “What else would I use?”

The lift takes us up to a small, yet well-appointed private lobby. “Here’s our place,” I say. She follows me to the door.

Before we reach it, the door opens, and Sarah, my housekeeper, is there to greet us.

“Welcome home, sir,” Sarah says with a big smile. Her curious gaze moves to Kennedy. “And you must be the lovely Ms. Takahashi I’ve heard so much about. Welcome.”

“Thanks. I hope it wasn’t all bad,” Kennedy says.

“Not at all, miss.” Sarah gives her a warm smile. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Please, call me Kennedy.”

“Yes, miss,” Sarah says, dipping her head in deference.

Sarah’s in her late fifties. Her light brown hair is twisted up into a bun of sorts. She has blue eyes, freckles, and a pretty smile. She’s also a fantastic cook. When it comes to managing a household, I’d be lost without her.

“Sarah and Bruce are married,” I explain to Kennedy.

“They share the flat with me. They have their own private suite of rooms.”

While Bruce delivers our luggage to my suite, Sarah begins unpacking for us. I take Kennedy on a quick tour of the apartment, showing her the lounge, spacious gourmet kitchen, dining room, work-out room, home office, and home theatre.

Last, but not least, we step outside onto the balcony that overlooks The Thames.

“Do you fancy a boat ride while we’re here?” I ask her as we stand at the railing and watch boats cruising up and down the river.

She glances down at the marina below us. “You have a boat?”

“I do. She’s built for speed. How about it? Shall we take her out on the river if we have time?”

“I’d love that. While I can’t promise I won’t get seasick, I’m game to try.”

“Don’t worry. Skye’s been sick on my boat twice now—over the edge each time, thank god. Of course she was pregnant, so I forgave her.” I laugh at the memory.

Good times.

But the future promises even better times now that Kennedy and I are back together. We’re both where we belong. I slip my arm around her and draw her close.

“It’s windy up here,” she observes as the cool breeze ruffles her hair.

I pull her into my arms and press my lips to her temple, breathing deeply of her warm, feminine scent. Instantly, I grow hard. “I’ll keep you warm.”

The sun is setting, so we stand a moment and admire the view. Kennedy leans back and rests her weight on me. I wrap my arms around her torso.

“It’ll be dark soon,” she observes. “We should probably think about trying out your bed soon so we can get ahead of jet lag tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to ask me twice,” I say with a grin. “And for the record, it’s *our* bed.” I turn her to face me. “Everything I have is yours, Kennedy. I mean that, whether it’s my bed or my apartment, my properties, or my bank account.”

She laughs. “Ever heard of a prenup?”

“I don’t need one. I meant what I said. It’s all yours, too, as far as I’m concerned.”

Her dark eyes gaze up at me. “What about your heart? Is it still mine?”

I lean down and kiss her lips, reveling in their softness. “It never stopped being yours.”

Just as I'm about to prove my point, the glass door behind us slides open and Sarah pops her head outside. "Are you two hungry? Would you like something to eat?"

I look to Kennedy, who nods. "Maybe something really light? We're pretty tired, and we'll be going to bed soon."

"Certainly," Sarah says. "I'll make up a nice little cheese board, with crackers and some fruit. How does that sound?"

"It's perfect," Kennedy says. "Thank you so much."

With a parting nod, Sarah disappears back into the penthouse.

I kiss the side of Kennedy's head. "I guess bed will have to wait until after dinner," I tell her. "As eager as I am to get you into my bed, the least I can do is feed you first." I grin. "You'll need the calories to keep up your strength."

Chapter 28

Kennedy Takahashi

From my vantage point on the balcony, I feel like I'm standing in the tower of a castle, with my own prince behind me, his strong arms wrapped around my torso.

Seeing him here in this high-end penthouse apartment makes me realize how much his life has changed. Connor's a big deal now, and I imagine he carries a lot of clout these days, both socially and financially. I wasn't here for this transformation. I should have been here for him, and I wasn't.

I'm fighting a wave of sadness as I realize just how much of Connor's life I've missed. Not only did I miss his grandfather's passing, but I missed his career taking off at Carmichael & Son. I don't even know if he likes working in capital investment. I have so much to catch up on, so much to learn about him.

The glass doors open, and Sarah pushes a serving cart out onto the balcony. On top of the cart is a large oval platter holding an artful array of cheeses, crackers, and cuts of fresh fruit.

"Thank you, Sarah," I say. "This is perfect."

Smiling, she nods. “You’re quite welcome, miss.”

When she leaves the room, I shake my head. “Is it so difficult for your staff to call me by my first name?”

“Apparently,” Connor says. “I’m sir, or the young gentleman. I think if she called me Connor, one of us would faint from the shock.”

Connor opens the bottle of white wine that’s peeking out of a silver ice bucket and pours two glasses and hands me one. “To our first meal together in London again,” he says, raising his glass to me.

* * *

That night, as we’re lying in bed, wrapped in each other’s arms after christening Connor’s enormous bed, I ask him, “Do you like your job? Do you like capital investment?”

He looks at me like I have two heads. “Sure. What’s not to love about it? It’s like playing a big game of Monopoly, only with other people’s money.”

Laughing, I nudge his shoulder with mine. “Be serious. Do you like it?”

“I do. As it turns out, I’m good at it. As an account manager, my success rate is one of the best in my department.”

I reach out to stroke his cheek. “Look at you, a finance mogul.” I lean close to kiss him. “I’m so impressed with the man you’ve become.”

Smiling, Connor rolls closer and kisses me. “Coming from you, that means everything.” He nuzzles the side of my face. “Talk to me in Japanese,” he murmurs in a low voice.

The deep resonance of his voice sends a tingle down my spine. “What do you want me to say?”

“Tell me you love me.”

I smile and tell him what he wants to hear.

“Tell me more,” he begs, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me close.

I continue speaking my ancestral language. I tell him how I feel about him, how much I love him, how sad I am for the time we missed. I think he senses from the tone of my voice that the words I’m speaking are tinged with sadness and regret because he tightens his hold on me and presses his lips to my temple.

“I love you, Ken,” he murmurs. Then, to lighten the mood and put a smile on my face, he tickles me.

I screech as I fend off his marauding fingers. “No fair! No tickling!”

He moves over me with a panty-melting grin on his face. “If you want me to stop tickling you, you have to kiss me.”

I wrap my arms around his neck and roll us so that I’m on top. I sit upright, straddling his hips, and pin his wrists to the mattress. Already I can feel his growing erection prodding between my legs.

Leaning down, I touch my nose to his. “I’ll do more than kiss you,” I say softly. “I’ll make you see stars.”

He groans when my hands start roaming over his torso. “Ken,” he says hoarsely when I take hold of him in my hand. “My Ken.”

He doesn’t say much more after that. He’s breathing too hard to speak.

I keep my promise and make sure he sees stars.

Chapter 29

Connor Murphy

Monday morning, Bruce drives us the short distance to the office. When he pulls up to the front of the building, I jump out of the car and hurry around to the other side to open Kennedy's door. I offer her my hand and help her out.

"I can open my own car door, you know," she says, laughing as she takes my hand nonetheless. "I'm perfectly capable."

"I know you are. Indulge me. I like spoiling you." Then I wave to Bruce. "See you at five."

I reach for Kennedy's hand, and side-by-side we approach the entrance to Carmichael & Son. She slows to a stop and gazes up at the building's façade. I'm used to it, of course, seeing it nearly every weekday. But she's been gone a long time. It's almost new to her.

"Impressive, isn't it?" I ask. The building's traditional white marble architecture makes it stand out, even in the staid and conservative financial district. The building is impressive, with its wide sweeping stone steps leading up to a grand

entrance of gold-trimmed glass turnstile doors. White stone pillars stand like guardians in front of the building.

Kennedy tilts her head to look up at the building. “I’d forgotten how huge it is.”

“Wait until you see my office,” I tell her. “I’ve come a long way from being Will’s PA. I have my own staff now.”

We cross the lobby to the welcome desk, where I introduce Kennedy to the security guards on duty. One of them actually remembers her from her time here as an intern.

We take one of the lifts up to the second floor. “My office is to the right,” I say as we step out. “Let me pop in there and say hello to my staff. Then I’ll go have a chat with the big man himself, Fitzwilliam.”

“Do you think Will has already told him about us?”

I shrug. “Possibly.”

“Do you think he’ll be upset?”

“Who? Mr. Carmichael? I sincerely doubt it. He’s a very practical man. He cares about the bottom line, not how we get there.” I wink at Kennedy. “He can hardly deny my request to work remotely when his own son does the same thing.”

I lead Kennedy to my office suite, which is made up of two rooms, an outer office where my secretary and PA work, and the inner office, which is where I do my work.

I introduce Kennedy to my secretary, Nancy, and to my PA, Joyce. They're both middle-aged women with a tremendous amount of experience with the company, which means my office runs like clockwork.

I show Kennedy into my office. "I'll leave you to relax here while I go talk to Mr. Carmichael."

After she gets comfortable in my big office chair, I give her a kiss and then head over to Mr. Carmichael's office. When I arrive, his secretary waves me in, as he's expecting me.

"Well, Connor," the man says when I step into his inner sanctum. Fitzwilliam Carmichael reminds me a lot of his son. They share a great resemblance, except for the fact that the father has a bit of a paunch, and his auburn hair has thoroughly grayed at the temples. "Sit." He motions me to take the chair in front of his desk. "I trust you had an enjoyable trip to the States to see my son and his family?"

I take a seat. "I did, sir."

“I hope they’re all well. How’s my new little grandson?”

“He’s quite the perfect little chap. Eating like a champ already. I’m sure he grew a centimeter over the weekend I was there.”

Carmichael nods. “Excellent. I’m glad to hear it. And my granddaughter, Penelope? She’s well, I take it.”

“She is. The young lady is a delight.”

“And my daughter-in-law?”

“Skye’s as wonderful as ever.”

Carmichael’s head bobs as he continues to nod. “Good, good. I’m glad to hear it.” He leans back in his leather chair and eyes me. “So, what’s this I hear about you wanting to relocate to New York City?”

“Ah, I see you’ve spoken to Will.”

He nods. “He might have mentioned something about it, and he might have pressured me into saying yes.”

I chuckle. “Kennedy Takahashi and I are engaged to be married, sir. Since she lives and works in New York City, and that’s where her family live, I thought we’d commute between the two countries, like Will and Skye do. Have the best of both worlds.”

Carmichael frowns. “I see.” He steeples his fingers on his desk and eyes me with great contemplation. “What is it with these American women stealing all our best resources? First my son, and now you.” But there’s a slight grin lurking at the corners of his lips.

I shrug. “What can I say? They’re irresistible.”

The man nods. “Well, what can I say other than congratulations? If I say no, you’ll simply resign, isn’t that right?”

Trying not to laugh, I nod. “Quite right, sir. Although I’d prefer not to have to make that choice. I rather like working here.”

“I like you working here, too, son. You’ve made this company a lot of money.”

“Then can I assume I—*we*—have your blessing?”

“You do, on one condition.”

“And what’s that, sir?” I can tell he’s just being cheeky now.

“I fully expect to be invited to the wedding.”

* * *

After my talk with Mr. Carmichael, followed by a conversation with someone in the human resources department to make all the arrangements, I return to collect Kennedy. To my surprise, I find a number of Carmichael & Son employees congregating in my office.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t invited to the party,” I say as I make my way into my own office. There are easily ten people standing around—mostly support staff, but also some of Kennedy’s former colleagues—chatting with Kennedy, who’s sitting in my office chair.

“Word got out I was here,” she says to me, shrugging innocently. “They came to say hello.”

“Murphy, you lucky dog,” Herbert McManus says, as he playfully punches my arm. He was Kennedy’s supervisor when she did her internship here. “I understand congratulations are in order.”

I nod. “Yes, Kennedy and I are getting married.”

A few more people stream in and out of the office, all wanting to come say hello to Kennedy and welcome her back.

Before long, it’s lunch time, and I attempt to steal Kennedy away so I can have her to myself for a few minutes.

It's not easy, though, because there's a small crowd here wanting to catch up with her.

“We'll be around for at least a week,” I tell them. “You'll all have more chances to visit with her later.”

We finally make our escape and head for the lift. “How about we visit our favorite fish and chips shop, for old time's sake?”

“That sounds perfect,” she says.

We walk a short distance to one of our past favorite restaurants. The place is packed with the lunch crowd, but we manage to find a small table for two in the front corner, near a window. Kennedy waits at our table while I go up to the counter to place our orders.

When I return to our table with our lunches and two beers, Kennedy is staring out the window at the traffic and pedestrians.

“Two battered cod, chips, a pot of curry sauce, and mushy peas,” I say as I set our tray on the table. “Can't get more British than this.” As I'm taking my seat, I slide a chip into my mouth.

Kennedy watches out the window as a London tour bus passes by.

“Do you fancy a bus tour while we’re here?” I ask. “We can do the whole tourist thing. You know, Buckingham Palace, Big Ben, The London Eye, Notting Hill. Would you like that?”

Kennedy turns to me with a smile. “I’d love it. It feels so good to be back.” She reaches out and squeezes my hand. “Just think, we can spend half the year here in London. Pinch me, because I feel like I’m dreaming.”

When I reach out to do just that, she laughingly swats my hand away. “I didn’t mean that literally.”

I steal a chip off her and take a bite. “We’ll need to coordinate our schedules with Will and Skye so that we’re on the same continent at the same time.”

Kennedy dips a chip into a pot of curry sauce. When she takes a bite, she closes her eyes and smiles. “God, I’ve missed this,” she says with a moan. Then she takes a bite of her fish.

My phone chimes with an incoming text. I glance at the screen. “Sarah wants to know what you’d like for dinner tonight.”

“What *I’d* like? Really?”

“Of course. You’re the future lady of the house, aren’t you? So, what would you like? Just say the word.”

Kennedy dabs her mouth with a serviette. “I can ask for anything?”

“Absolutely.”

She grins. “Don’t laugh, but how about a Full English breakfast?”

“You want breakfast for dinner?” I ask, needing confirmation.

“Yes. That’s not too weird, is it? I often make breakfast for dinner.”

“All right, then. A Full English, it is. I’ll let Sarah know.” I reply to the text.

Another red double-decker passes by our window, catching Kennedy’s attention.

“All right,” I say as I reach for my beer. “I think some sight-seeing is in order for today. After lunch, I’ll skip the office and we’ll do the tourist thing so you can get your fix.”

Kennedy smiles as she pops another chip into her mouth. “I thought you’d never ask.”

* * *

After an afternoon of touring London by bus, I phone Bruce and ask him to pick us up near Buckingham Palace. He arrives shortly after and drives us home.

When we reach our building, Bruce lets us out in front of the lobby, and we walk inside and take the private lift up to our floor.

Kennedy slides her arm around my waist and leans into me. “Thank you for today. It was perfect.”

I wrap my arms around her and pull her close. “It was my pleasure.” I lean down to kiss her. “And it was a perfect day. Not because we were sightseeing, but because we were together. While we’re here, I’d like to show you some of my properties.”

“*Some* of them?” she asks.

“Well, there are quite a few I inherited, but we don’t need to see them all. Most of them are occupied by family members, but there are a couple I’d like to show you.”

Kennedy shakes her head. “This is all a bit hard to take in. When I last saw you here in London, you were a carefree teenager focused on your weekend plans. Now, you’re one of the rich and famous.”

I laugh as I kiss her temple. “I’m hardly famous.”

“Just rich?”

I nod. “It’s not my fault, you know. You can’t hold it against me. My heritage was an accident of birth. And underneath it all, I’m still just the same bloke who fell in love with you when I was fetching and carrying for Will.”

The lift delivers us to the penthouse floor, and we walk through the door. Kennedy disappears into our bedroom to change into something a bit more comfortable.

I can’t imagine anything better than returning home after a long day with the woman I’m crazy about. Life really doesn’t get better than this.

On my way to the lounge I bump into Sarah.

She runs her hands down the white apron secured at her waist. “Dinner will be ready soon. A Full English, as you requested.”

“Wonderful,” I tell her. “Perhaps it’s a bit odd for dinner, but perfect just the same. And after dinner is served, you can take the rest of the evening off. We won’t be needing anything. I imagine we’ll be turning in early—still feeling a bit of jet lag, you know.”

Sarah bites back a grin. “Of course.” She’s never known me to entertain a lady in my flat before, so she must find this all very intriguing.

“I’d better change, too,” I say, and I give her a parting wink as I head to the bedroom.

After we eat dinner, I ask Sarah and Bruce to sit with us for a minute. We fill them in on our plans to split our time between England and America. “We’d love for you to join us in New York, if that’s something you’d like. You don’t have to, of course. You’re welcome to stay here while we’re away and manage things for us. But, if you’d like to come, we’d love to have you. Why don’t you two talk it over? You don’t have to answer immediately. Take some time to think it over.”

* * *

That evening, as we’re getting ready to retire early, I open the top drawer of my chest of drawers and remove a small ring box that I’ve been holding on to for years. My mother gave it to me when I first started dating Kennedy. I wasn’t able to give it to her then, but I can now.

As she’s sitting at the foot of the bed, I kneel before her and offer up the little black velvet box.

She eyes the box and then me. “Connor.” Her voice is hushed, almost reverent.

I hand it to her. “Open it.”

Kennedy’s hands shake as she pries open the lid and stares at the contents of the box.

“It was my mother’s engagement ring,” I explain. “Now it’s yours, if you’ll have me.”

Tears spring into Kennedy’s eyes as she stares at me. “If? What do you mean *if*?” She leans close and kisses me. “I would love nothing more than to spend the rest of my life with you.”

I take the ring box from her, remove the ring, and slip it onto her finger. It’s a little loose on her, but we can have it adjusted to fit. “Kennedy, I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life making you happy.”

She gazes down at her hand, at the slim gold ring with a perfect sapphire nestled in an oval setting surrounded by tiny diamonds. “It’s beautiful, Connor. I love it.” She kisses me once more, her lips trembling. “Thank you,” she whispers against my lips. “I hope we have a lifetime of happy memories ahead of us.”

I take her hand in mind and kiss her ring finger. “When I called my mother to tell her I was back in London, I gave her the good news. She’s invited us to dinner this weekend.”

When Kennedy’s smile falters, I squeeze her hand. “Don’t worry. She’s going to welcome you with open arms, I promise.”

* * *

Saturday afternoon, we head to Surrey to have dinner with my mother at her home in the country. When my father passed away, my mother inherited all of his property, which included an estate in Surrey and a house in London. She mostly stays in Surrey, surrounded by her flower gardens and a small pond.

It’s about an hour away, so we leave mid-afternoon and enjoy a leisurely drive through the countryside.

When we arrive in Surrey, I reach for Kennedy’s hand. “Sweetheart, I need to make a quick stop on the way to Mum’s house.”

“Okay,” she says with some hesitation, looking a bit perplexed.

“It won’t take long, I promise. I just need to take care of a bit of family business.”

Bruce drives us to the destination, and when he pulls up in front of a sprawling old estate, Kennedy tenses in her seat.

“This was your grandfather’s house. Why are we coming here?”

“It was,” I say. “Now a relative is living here. I just need to pop in for a sec. I won’t be long. You wait in the car.” I kiss the back of Kennedy’s hand, then lean forward and kiss her on the lips. “Ten minutes, sweetheart. That’s all.”

I exit the car and walk up to the front door and ring the bell. The housekeeper answers the door.

“Hello, Emma,” I say. She worked for my grandfather for decades. We know each other well.

“Connor, what a pleasant surprise! We weren’t expecting you, were we?”

“No. This is an impromptu visit. I’ve come to have a quick word with my aunt. Would you mind summoning her, please?”

“Of course.” Emma steps back and motions for me to come inside. “Why don’t you make yourself comfortable in the sitting room? I’ll let Ms. Murphy know you’re here.”

“Thank you.” I kill time while waiting by perusing the collection of family photographs that line the bookcases and

fireplace mantel. Angelica never married and has no children of her own. These photos showcase all of her nieces and nephews, as well as their children.

“Connor, how nice to see you. I didn’t know you were back from the States already.”

I turn at the sound of my aunt’s breathy voice coming from the open doorway. Apparently, she wasted no time coming. “Angelica.” There’s no warmth in my greeting. No smile on my face.

“I was just about to have afternoon tea,” she says, nervously smoothing her skirt. “Would you like to join me?”

“No. This isn’t a social call.”

She appears apprehensive, as well she should be.

“I’ll make this quick,” I tell her as I head in her direction. I stop a couple of feet from her and face her head on, looking her directly in the eyes. “If you ever say another unkind word about Kennedy—my future *wife*—I will make sure you regret it. Am I being perfectly clear?”

We both know I hold all the cards here. She lives in this house because I allow it. She has no income other than the generous monthly stipend I provide to her.

Angelica swallows hard. “I don’t know what you’re—”

I lift my hand, cutting her off. “I don’t want to hear any excuses.” I walk past her, out into the foyer, and head for the door.

“Connor, wait!” she calls as she hurries after me.

But I ignore her because she has nothing to say that I want to hear. If she can’t be civil to Kennedy, we don’t need her in our lives. Kennedy will always come first.

My heart is a little bit lighter as I leave Angelica’s and return to the car. I slide in beside Kennedy and kiss her. “Did you miss me?”

She laughs. “Hardly. You were barely gone five minutes.” Then her expression sobers. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes, perfectly fine.” I link our fingers and rest our joined hands on my thigh. “It was just a bit of overdue family business.”

We continue on our way to my mum’s house, and when we arrive, Bruce drives us up a paved lane to the front of a sprawling estate. He passes the tiered fountain in the center of a circular drive and deposits us at the front door.

As she gets a good look at the place, Kennedy's dark eyes widen. "Connor, it's stunning."

"I'm glad you think so." I lean toward her side of the car and peer out her window. "This place is special to me. It's where I grew up."

I glance at the potted flower perched on Kennedy's lap—a gift for my mum. Kennedy picked it out herself when I told her about my mother's fascination with orchids.

"I think you'll really like my mother's greenhouse," I say as I open my car door. "It's a lush paradise, filled with all sorts of tropical flowers and ferns and potted trees. When I was a child, I'd play for hours in there hiding amongst the greenery."

I walk around the rear of the car to open Kennedy's door for her, but as usual, she's already let herself out. "Will you ever let me play the gentleman?" I swear, her middle name should be *Independence*.

I lean down to speak through the front passenger window to Bruce. "Why don't you park the car and visit the kitchen? I'm sure someone will feed you a nice dinner. I'll let you know when we're about ready to leave."

Bruce nods with a grin. “Yes, sir. I won’t say no to dinner.”

I watch Kennedy as she stands beside me and takes in the house and its surroundings. “So, what do you think?”

“Your mother lives here all by herself?”

“Well, yes, along with half-a-dozen staff and several dogs and cats.”

I’d offer Kennedy my arm, but her hands are full with the potted orchid. I lean close and whisper, “You look beautiful.” And indeed she does. She’s wearing a pale-blue dress that falls almost to her knees and a pair of white sandals. Her silky black hair hangs loose this afternoon.

“Need me to carry that?” I ask her, nodding to the orchid. It’s big enough that she needs both hands to hold it.

She adjusts her grip on the heavy pot. “No, it’s okay. I’ve got it.”

When Kennedy asked me what my mother liked, I said flowers, especially orchids. My mum’s a bit obsessed with them. So, on our way here, we stopped at a florist’s shop in London and bought the prettiest orchid they had. It’s tall, stately, with lovely deep purple flowers.

I open the front gate and push it wide so Kennedy can walk through. She's done well to hide her feelings thus far, but I know she's nervous. "Relax, Ken. My mother is going to be thrilled to see you again."

"We'll see," is her reply when we reach the welcome mat.

"Breathe," I remind her as I press the doorbell.

The door opens a second later, and there stands my mother in a red floral maxi dress. She must have been watching for our arrival. She's wearing her favorite pearl necklace—a wedding anniversary gift my father gave her years ago. She saves it for special occasions, and I'd definitely say today qualifies.

Mum's smiling gaze lands on me first, then on Kennedy, and lastly on the orchid. "Welcome," she says, stepping back and motioning for us to enter. "Please, come in."

"Hello, Mum," I say as I close the door behind us. I kiss her cheek. "Thanks for inviting us."

My mother pulls me into a hug. "Hello, my darling boy. I'm so happy you're here." She releases me and turns to Kennedy. "Kennedy, you look lovely. I'm so glad to see you again."

I realize the last time Kennedy saw my mother was at my grandfather's birthday party. Quietly, I press my hand to her back to offer emotional support.

Kennedy smiles. "Thank you, Mrs. Murphy."

"Please, dear, call me Charlotte. There's no need for us to stand on formality."

"This is for you," Kennedy says, offering Mum the flower. "Connor told me you love orchids."

"I do," Mum says as she takes the plant. "It's absolutely gorgeous. What a thoughtful gift." She studies the flower for a moment, then says, "She's lovely. I think I'll call her Donna."

Kennedy stills a moment before a smile transforms her expression. "You name your plants?"

My mother smiles warmly. "Guilty."

Kennedy laughs. "I have a spider plant at home named Betty."

"We are indeed kindred spirits, aren't we? Later on, I'll show you my greenhouse and introduce you to all my lovely orchids. For now, let's sit and visit while we wait for dinner to be served."

When we enter the lounge, Mum sets the orchid in the center of a mahogany coffee table. Kennedy and I sit on the settee, and my mother takes a seat on a chair facing us.

She smiles sadly at Kennedy. “I can’t apologize enough for the way my husband’s family treated you. Connor told me everything. Gerald, my late husband and Connor’s dear father, was nothing like them, I assure you. He was a kind, caring man, and he would have welcomed you to the family just as I do.”

“Thank you,” Kennedy says, clearly touched by my mother’s words. She visibly relaxes her posture.

This evening’s dinner couldn’t have gotten off to a better start. After five long years of feeling unwelcome, Kennedy is finally being embraced by my family as she should be.

Just then, Mum notices the engagement ring on Kennedy’s finger. Her eyes brighten, and I can tell she’s eager for an announcement. “Is there anything you two want to tell me?”

I smile as I reach for Kennedy’s hand. “As a matter of fact, there is. Kennedy and I are engaged to be married.”

My mother beams. “Oh, my goodness. How wonderful! I’ve always wanted a daughter, and now I’ll finally have one.”

We're soon called to the dining room, and dinner is served. The three of us are seated at one end of a long table.

"Connor, sweetheart," Mum says, "would you please carve the roast beef?"

"Of course," I say, standing and reaching for the knife.

While I'm carving the meat, Mum asks Kennedy, "So, tell me all about New York City. How exciting it must be to live there. I've visited a few times in the past with Connor's father. We always enjoyed the experience immensely."

I listen in as Kennedy and my mother chat about New York and Kennedy's job there. Mum laughs when Kennedy tells her I bought her apartment building.

"That sounds like something Connor would do," Mum says. "There's no limit to what he'll do for those he loves."

I can't wait to tell my mother of our future plans. There is so much to look forward to, and I can't help but feel as though today will go a long way toward undoing the damage my grandfather did so many years ago.

On the drive back to the penthouse, Kennedy leans back in her seat and sighs.

I lay my hand on her thigh. "I told you she loves you."

Kennedy smiles. “Given how amazing you are, it’s no surprise that your mother is just as wonderful.”

I lean close and kiss her temple. “This is just the beginning, sweetheart.”

Epilogue

Five Years Later

Kennedy Takahashi-Murphy

Our lives have been a whirlwind ever since Connor and I got back together.

A year after we reunited, Connor and I were married at his mother's country estate in Surrey.

The following year, I gave birth to our son, Adam Connor Murphy.

For our first wedding anniversary, Connor surprised me with a home in Bibury, England, located along the River Coln in the Cotswold District. But he didn't buy just any home. He bought the storybook, picturesque centuries-old country estate located right next door to Will and Skye's home. Now, at least for part of the year, we're neighbors, and our kids can play together.

Our country home, like theirs, has the original stone exterior, surrounded by the most amazing rose gardens and a charming picket fence. The house is set back on a private tree-lined lane. Besides the house, there's a carriage house on the property, a barn, pastures, and a chicken coop. A stone wall

separates our properties, complete with a little wrought-iron gate that we pass through on our daily visits.

Today, we're celebrating. We all recently returned to England, and this week we're staying at our Bibury homes so we can spend some good quality time together, and the kids can play. We invited the Carmichaels over this afternoon for a barbecue luncheon.

We have a lot to celebrate.

Skye and I are both pregnant, each of us about five months along, and we're both having girls. The guys swear we planned this, but of course that would have been impossible. It's just luck. Needless to say, Skye and I are thrilled.

We've all decided to stay in England until our babies are born. In fact, it looks like we'll be staying a bit longer. Skye's mother, Brenda, accepted a year-long teaching assignment at Oxford University—as a guest professor.

I gasp when I feel the baby kick. She's an active one, that's for sure. I think this little one is going to give her big brother a run for his money.

I jump when I hear a crash coming from upstairs. Connor and Adam are painting the new nursery pink for Aurora. Our

new daughter, Aurora Yuki Takahashi-Murphy—Yuki after my grandmother—will be born at Christmas time.

“That’s certainly a mouthful,” my mother likes to say. She, Dad, and my grandmother have been to England many times already to visit. And they’re planning to come for Aurora’s birth.

The crash is followed by hysterical laughter from both Connor and Adam. Adam is definitely Connor’s little mini-me. While he looks like me—black hair, dark eyes—he definitely has his dad’s personality. He’s outgoing, funny, and guaranteed to be the life of the party. He and Skye’s little boy, Nicholas, who is five, make quite the pair. Penny, who is nearly ten now, has turned into quite the little lady. She’ll be a great helper when her new baby sister is born.

“Everything all right up there?” I call up the staircase. I find myself holding my breath as I wait for the answer.

“Yes!” Connor replies. “Everything’s fine. Absolutely fine. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Why am I not reassured by your answer?”

When there’s more laughter, I’m tempted to climb the stairs and peek in on them to make sure they haven’t spilled a

gallon of pink paint all over the recently refinished wood floors. But the truth is, I've been up and down these stairs several times this afternoon, and I'm beat. My feet are killing me, as is my back.

I lay my hands on my little baby bump. "I'll be so glad when you're here, little lady."

I wonder if she'll take after me or her father. Will she be serious and pragmatic, like me, or more easy-going like her daddy?

As I walk down the central hallway, back toward the kitchen, I pass *The Wall*, as Connor calls it. Like his grandfather and grandmother did years ago, we've continued the tradition of having an annual portrait taken to commemorate the evolution of our family. Although instead of oil paintings, we're opting for family photographs. Luckily for us, Skye has taken up photography, and she's quite good at it. She's become our family's official photographer.

* * *

Connor Murphy

Nothing beats good old father-son time. When I suggested that Adam help me paint his future baby sister's nursery, Kennedy wasn't thrilled with the idea. She was sure most of

the paint would end up on the floor, or on him, instead of on the wall. Sure, there's a little bit of paint on him—in his hair, on his clothes, on his face—but it's all about the experience. Besides, it'll wash up, eventually. Honestly I wouldn't have it any other way.

“All done, buddy,” I announce as I apply the final brush stroke of *Pale Pink Petal* paint to the wall and plop back onto the floor.

Adam copies my actions, dropping onto the floor beside me with an exaggerated huff. Unfortunately, he drops his paint brush, too, sending a splatter of pink paint onto the newly-painted wall.

I side-eye my son, who side-eyes me right back.

Adam points to the wall. “Paint.”

“Yes, you helped me paint the wall. And you did an excellent job, buddy.” I can't help laughing. My little sidekick may look like his mum, but he definitely has my sense of humor. When his little face transforms into a wide toothy grin, I reach over to muss his paint-splattered hair. “Not bad for a three-year-old.”

I haul myself to my feet and smooth down the legs of my overalls. “Look at the time. We’d better get cleaned up before your mother sees us. Our guests will be here in an hour.”

I glance around the new nursery, with its freshly painted pink walls, white skirting boards, and smooth wooden floors. There’s no furniture in here yet. That’s been specially ordered from London and is due to arrive within the week. The room is large and rectangular with different shaped alcoves in the walls. Each alcove will be home to a trinket. The first will be my mother’s prized musical box, and the second will be Kennedy’s grandmother’s precious hand-painted fan that depicts an ancient Japanese temple nestled in a snow-covered mountain. When the kids are old enough to travel abroad, we plan to take them to Japan so they can learn about their ancestry on their mother’s side.

A sound at the door has me turning to find Kennedy viewing our progress. She looks a bit pale right now because she’s been busy all day getting the house ready for our guests. “It looks amazing,” she says, smiling as she peruses our work.

“Sweetheart, why don’t you go rest for a while? I don’t want you to wear yourself out.”

She smiles. “Everything’s ready, so I’ll sit for a while and catch my breath.”

“Mummy.” Adam attempts to stand but slips on the protective floor covering.

“Here you go, buddy,” I say, offering him a hand and hauling him to his feet.

Kennedy walks further into the room so she can get a better look at the walls. “I can’t wait to see the room when it’s all finished.”

“The rugs will be delivered on Friday,” I say. “The new cot and changing table on Saturday, and the rocking chair, well who knows when that will get here.” My words trail off when I notice how she’s looking at me—her gaze is filled with love and admiration.

I knew we’d be good together.

I knew she was the one.

When I advance toward her, she immediately holds up her hands and says, “As much as I want to kiss you right now—and believe me, I do—I don’t want to be covered in paint. Please go get washed up, both of you. Our guests will be here soon.”

Looking down at myself, I laugh. I'd been so careful not to get paint on my clothes, but I can't miss the little pink fingerprints on my jeans. "Gee, I wonder how those got there."

Adam is staring in amazement at his paint-covered fingers. "Paint." He holds up his hands to show me and then his mum. "Paint."

I pick him up. "That's enough paint for one day. Let's go get cleaned up."

I notice how Kennedy unconsciously runs her hands over her protruding baby bump. Already showing, she's dressed in a white knit maternity dress. I can hardly believe our daughter is going to be here just before Christmas, when we will go from a family of three to a family of four. I can't imagine a better Christmas present.

I step closer to my wife. My voice drops an octave. "I want to kiss you so badly right now, Mrs. Murphy."

Kennedy laughs. "No way, buster." She motions to both me and Adam. "You two, clean up now. Have you forgotten? Skye's bringing her camera so she can take a new family photo for our wall."

“I have not forgotten,” I say. How could I? These photographs are my favorite family tradition. This newest photo will be the first one showing Kennedy pregnant with our daughter.

When I sling Adam over my shoulder, he cackles with glee as I carry him toward the nursery door. “Off to the shower!”

I’m careful as I step past Kennedy. The old Connor would have found it highly comical to leave a paint-splattered handprint on her butt cheek, but this Connor is older and wiser. Besides, I’ve learned not to piss off a pregnant Kennedy unless I want to spend the night in one of the guestrooms.

As I pass Kennedy, I lean close, and our lips lock. The kiss is fleeting, yet sensual, holding a promise that later there will be more.

“Make sure you’re both paint free!” Kennedy reminds me.

“Yes, ma’am.” I make a two-fingered salute.

As I carry my son down the upstairs hallway to our suite to wash up, I’m moved by the knowledge that our second child will be born in just four short months. I can only hope our daughter will be followed by a half-dozen more babies. I want a house full of loud, energetic children. I want the rooms to be

full of life, love, and happiness. I want to hear the pitter patter of little feet racing up and down the corridors. I want it all.

After we're showered and dressed, Adam and I make our way through the landing and down the main staircase. I smile to myself seeing Adam dressed in little blue jeans and a T-shirt that says *Big Brother*. It's his favorite shirt these days because he's looking forward to being *Ror-rah's* big brother.

The doorbell chimes, and Adam runs ahead. I've never seen the little guy move so fast. In no time he has cleared the stairs and is heading straight for the front door.

A moment later I hear the familiar sounds of Will's and Skye's voices. I walk into sight just in time to see Kennedy and Skye hug, which is comical if I'm being honest seeing as there are two baby bumps getting in their way.

I side-eye my friend, who's wearing a navy-blue shirt and a pair of khakis. He looks quite the part of the English gentleman farmer. "Will!" I'm about to take his hand when Adam and Nicholas dart past and hurry outside into the garden. Our two collies, Sugar and Spice, run after them, barking in excitement.

"Like fathers, like sons," Will says, nodding in the direction our boys left.

Best friends.

Penny steps from behind Will. “Hi, Uncle Connor.”

“Hello, Penny,” I say, about to pull her into a hug when I notice something dangling from her wrist. It’s a charm bracelet like her mother’s. But unlike Skye’s, which jingles whenever she moves her wrist, Penny’s bracelet is still pretty bare of charms. I can make out a tiny gold ballerina, which I figure is to represent her many dancing achievements, and the other is a duck. I can only link that to their home back in the States, to the ducks on their lake. I can’t help imagining all the adventures she’ll have in her life, living on both sides of the pond. Before long, I’m sure her bracelet will be filled with charms.

I pull her into a hug. “Have you been on the London bus tour yet?”

Laughing, Penny shakes her head. “Nope. Dad says he isn’t a fan of public transportation.”

I shake my head and turn my attention to Will, who shrugs. “I thought you got over that years ago when you took Skye to see the sights of London.”

Will shrugs. “What can I say? I’m still a sucker for the finer things in life. And anyway, I told Penny, Hamish will take us on a tour of London. She can see the sights in grand style.”

Penny lets out an exaggerated sigh. “It’s not the same, Dad. I want to ride the bus. I want to sit on the top and get a really good view. Mom and Aunt Kennedy say it’s the only way to tour London.”

I wink at her. “Don’t worry, kid, your uncle Connor will take you. While we’re out, we’ll look for a bus charm for your bracelet. Just like the one your mum has.”

We make our way through the house and out into the garden. The boys are playing tag on the grass, and the ladies stand talking under the shade of the gazebo. Will and I light the barbecue.

“This is the life, isn’t it?” Will says, grabbing a cold bottle of beer from the cool box. He passes it to me.

“Sure is.” I open the bottle and take a big gulp.

We sit outside at a table beneath a shade tree to eat.

“How’s school going?” Kennedy asks Skye.

Since their kids move back and forth from the US and UK, Skye has taken a break from her job to homeschool both Penny and Nicholas. “It’s going really well,” she says. “It lets me spend more time with them, and I’m actually enjoying it a lot.”

After everyone has eaten and the kids are cleaned up and presentable, we make our way toward a large weeping willow, where Skye’s photography equipment has been set up.

Nicky stands behind his mother pulling faces at Adam while Skye snaps away. Kennedy looks at the camera, while I glance down at her, the woman I have loved for a decade. The woman who means everything to me.

“Last picture,” Skye announces, and I glance up. She holds her camera to her face.

I hold up my hand, and Skye lowers the camera. “Is everything all right?”

“That thing has a timer setting, right?”

She nods. “Yes, why?”

I open my arms in a sweeping motion. “How about a group photo, then? All of us, one big happy family.”

Nicholas doesn't need asking twice. He's already at Adam's side, and the two of them are jockeying for position. Nick holds two fingers up behind Adam's head, making the bunny ears sign.

Boys will be boys.

Will and Penny join us as Skye sorts the settings on the camera and places it on a tripod. She does a kind of half run, half waddle to Kennedy's side.

"Wait!" Penny cries. "We forgot Sugar and Spice. They're part of the family, too."

I call the dogs, who come running, probably hoping food is involved. I'm sorry to disappoint them, but they make a pretty picture seated at our feet.

"Get ready," Skye says cheerfully. "Everyone say *cheese*."

"Cheese!"

The camera flashes, and in that one flash holds a memory that will be forever captured in time, a photograph that will hang with pride in our hallway.

I picture Kennedy and myself, years from now, walking alongside our hallway gallery of photographs, a visual record of our life-long journey. But as I've learned in the past, it's

never good to look too far forward. What matters is the here and now.

Right here, right now, our journey is just getting started.

* * *

Thank you so much for reading Kennedy and Connor's story. Laura and I hope you enjoyed it. We've loved writing both *Charmed* and *Captivated* together. It was a labor of love for both of us.

* * *

Check out Laura Riley's next release, *A Billionaire's Vow*, the first book in her new series called The Calloways, which features three billionaire Calloway brothers and their younger sister.

* * *

April's next release is called *Damaged Goods*, featuring Liam McIntyre of the McIntyre Security Protectors series.

* * *

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For links to my audiobooks, please visit my website:

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