

**PULSE**

**The Free Novella**

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# Copyright

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## From Me to You

This is a bittersweet moment for me. I fell in love with the characters of Nathan and Jessica when I wrote PULSE – Part One last summer. I had such trouble saying goodbye to them that I wrote IMPULSE so readers can gain a glimpse into the mind and heart of one of my favorite male characters. This free novella gift for all of you brings an end to the story of these two characters.

This won't be the last you'll see of them though. Both Jessica and Nathan will pop up in future series and full-length books I'm releasing this year.

I hope you enjoy the final chapter in Jessica and Nathan's story.

With all my love and gratitude,

Deborah xo

## Chapter 1

"I'm angry." I tap my foot against the tiled floor. "I'm so mad right now, Nathan."

"Why did you leave me?" His voice cracks as he leans down to rest his forehead against mine. "I thought you'd take the night off."

The notion had fleetingly crossed my mind after I'd taken the train from New York back to Boston this afternoon. I'd stopped by Nathan's office briefly and that's when I had completely fallen apart emotionally. During the hour I was with him I'd managed to pull his mood down so it aligned with mine. I'd raced out of his office and here to the restaurant when I saw the first glimpse of tears in his eyes. "Avoiding work isn't going to change things, Nathan. I have to accept what happened. I don't have another choice."

"Jessica." His lips sweep over my cheek. "I need to hold you. I can't do that here."

My eyes dart around the crowded kitchen of Axel Boston. After Nathan and I had moved back here from New York, I'd worked hard to climb up the ranks. I'd started as a junior chef and now, a year later, I'm in line to take over one of the head chef positions the moment there's a vacancy. It means working under the watchful eye of Tyler Monroe, our executive chef. He's the 'it' guy in the culinary world right now and being his protégé means I'll be that much closer to having the knowledge, skills and confidence I need to open my own restaurant one day.

"We're fully booked tonight." I gesture towards all of my co-workers who are frantically trying to get food out of the kitchen quickly. "This isn't a good time for us to talk."

The words sound more dismissive than I want them to and they bite into Nathan. I can sense it in his reaction. The wince on his face says more than the words that accompany it. "Do you want me to leave?"

I have to tell him that I do even though I want him to stay so he can be the one to tell me that everything will be okay. I do this when I panic. I push myself into overdrive to avoid dealing with whatever is making me feel I have no control. I've always done it. Nathan has helped me recognize it and deal with it. The difference is, this time, I know that working harder or going to the gym to exercise after my shift tonight, won't change the harsh reality of what happened earlier today.

"We can talk when you get home." He leans forward to graze his lips across mine. "I'll go home and put Aiden to bed and then when you get there, we'll talk."

I'm going to be a coward and take the easy way out. I won't tell my husband that I'm planning on staying here so late that I'll know he'll nod off to sleep before I get home. I know his schedule. I know that since he gets up every morning before the crack of dawn that he can't keep his eyes open past midnight. I love teasing him about it. He complains but the smile on his face whenever I remind him that he's in his mid-thirties now is all the encouragement I need to keep telling him that his partying days are behind him now.

"Is your mom with Aiden now?" I know the answer to that question. Nathan's mom, Gloria, had taken over as our full-time sitter after the woman we hired to care for our son had moved. Gloria had offered to do it temporarily, to help us out, but she insisted, after just a few weeks, that we'd never find anyone more qualified than her to care for her grandson. She was right. I never worried, for even a moment, when Aiden was safe at home with his grandmother.

"She is." He cocks a dark brow. "I need to get home so I can tuck him in."

Nathan is adamant about tucking Aiden in every night. Even when the two of us have a 'date night,' he insists we don't go out until our little boy is asleep. I knew Nathan would be an incredible father but even I didn't anticipate he'd devote so much of his time and attention to his son.

"You should hurry." I glance past him to the large clock that hangs in the kitchen of the restaurant. This is my home away from home and tonight it's providing me the respite I need to gather together my feelings. "Will you give him a kiss for me?"

"You know I will." He leans in and brushes his lips over mine. "I love you, Jessica. No matter what happens, you'll always have me."

I feel a sob in my throat. I throw my arms around his waist. I need to feel close to him even if it's just for a brief moment before he walks out of the door.

"Hurry home." He pulls me into his chest. "I can't wait to hold you."

"I love you, Nathan," I whisper into his shirt. "Never forget how much I love you."

"Hunter told me your husband is a lawyer."

I glance over my shoulder at Tyler's face. He's handsome. I've thought that since the first day I started working at the restaurant. When the owner, Hunter Reynolds, had introduced me to him, Tyler had held my left hand in his, his brown eyes cast on my wedding rings.

"He is," I confirm with a smile. I'm always proud when I get to share anything about Nathan with the people I work with. When we first moved to Boston, Nathan eagerly jumped into a position with a small firm. It didn't take more than a few weeks before he was offered a partnership with one of the large firms here. He didn't hesitate before he took on that role. It's been good for him.

He's been happier and is fuelled by the challenges he faces with his clients.

"I need a lawyer," he says hoarsely.

"What for?" I blurt out without thinking.

His dark brow pops up. "What about lawyer and client confidentiality?"

I pull my hand to my mouth to suppress a laugh. "My husband is a securities attorney. If you've been arrested, you'll need a defense attorney."

He crosses his arms over his chest before pulling his hand to his chin. "What makes you think I've been arrested? Do I look like I'd break the law?"

I can't tell if he's teasing. He's my boss. If I tell him that he looks like he'd make a great criminal because of the tattoos that cover his forearms and the dark scowl that's almost always on his face, I might be pulling weekend shifts again.

"I doubt you'd break the law, Tyler." I push some wayward strands of my hair off my face. "You're a good boy."

"A good boy?" He throws his head back with a deep chuckle. "I'm older than you, Jess."

"Barely," I counter. "My guess is that you're twenty-seven."

"Twenty-eight," he corrects me.

"If my husband can't help you with your legal questions, he'll know someone who can," I tell him. "Do you want his number?"

He fishes his smartphone out of the pocket of his jeans. "Give it to me."

## Chapter 2

"Where were you last night?" His hands are on my hips. "I tried to stay awake but I was so tired."

I knew that would happen. When I'd finally gotten home just after midnight, Nathan was out cold. I'd sat in the chair in the corner of our bedroom just watching him sleep for more than an hour.

"You're too old to stay up late." I don't open my eyes as I tease him. "Maybe you should start taking naps in the afternoon. There are a lot of people your age who do it."

"One day you're going to be my age, Jessica." His hand slides over my bare leg. "I'll be the one teasing you then."

"You'll be so old by then that you won't remember my name." I giggle so hard that I pull my hand to cover my mouth. "You're always going to be a lot older than I am, Nathan and I'm always going to tease you about it."

"You better." His lips press softly against my cheek. "I want to wake up every morning for the rest of my life to hear your giggle. I live for that sound. You know that I do."

I do know that. I've never doubted the depth of Nathan's love for me. I've never had a reason to doubt it. He reminds me each and every day how much he absolutely adores me. He tells me every morning when he wakes up before he leaves for work. He texts me throughout the day to remind me and each night, he tells me he'll wait up for me to get home from work so he can make love to me. He almost always falls asleep but he makes up for it in the morning.

"I was hard when I fell asleep last night." His hand darts between my naked thighs. "I was thinking about the way you taste."

"I'm here now," I tease as I kick the blanket aside. "You don't have to rush off to work, do you?"

"Work can wait." He eases his body down mine. "This can't wait."

I moan softly as I twist my fingers around the strands of his soft, black hair. I arch my ass off the bed the moment his tongue runs over my smooth cleft.

"I crave the taste of you, Jessica." His breath teases my wetness. "I get hard every time I think about it."

His words only spur me on more. I drop my other hand to his head. He knows exactly how to touch me to push me to the edge of my release quickly. He wants me to come first so he can fuck me. I can sense it. I felt how hard he was when he brushed his cock against my hip when he was next to me.

He licks me quickly. The moans that flow from his lips fill the quiet space in our bedroom. I hold my breath knowing that if I let my body express what it's feeling that I'll scream. Nathan is the only man I've ever known who has the ability to make me forget the rest of the world even exists. When the two of us are intimate, every problem, every thought I have floats into the ether. The only thing that matters right now is the connection I feel to him.

"You're close, Jessica." He glides his fingers over my folds before he licks my clit softly again. "I can tell that you're close."

He's right. I'm on the verge of having an explosive orgasm. "I want you inside of me. Please, Nathan, please."

"No." His lips trail over my core as he shakes his head. "You'll come like this and then I'm going to fuck you hard."

My body reacts before I have time to think. My hips buck off the bed as I cling tightly to his hair, moaning into the still morning air as I fall into the grip of my climax.

"That was so good," he growls as he raises himself up. "Look how hard I am."

I can barely open my eyes as I sense him above me. I whimper when I feel him pulling my legs apart and I grab tightly to his

broad shoulders when he grazes the lush head of his dick over my pussy.

"I love you." The words fall in a heated rush from his lips as he plunges into me in one swift movement. "You're everything I need."

I kiss him softly before I whisper only loud enough for him to barely hear me. "You're everything, Nathan. Everything."

## Chapter 3

"Do you work tonight?" His voice is muted; the tone is low and deep. "I can't remember if you have tonight off or tomorrow night."

I open my eyes to look right into his deep blue eyes. They are the same eyes I stared into not more than thirty minutes ago when I came again with him inside of me. He'd chased his own release as he fucked me slowly to another climax. I'd fallen back into the rumpled sheets of our bed after he'd cleaned me gently with a warm cloth. I must have drifted back to sleep while he was in the shower.

"I need to work tonight," I grumble. I wish I didn't. All I want right now is to hide inside the walls of our apartment with Aiden. Our little boy celebrated his first birthday just two weeks ago. It was a bittersweet day for me. I wanted to revel in the excitement that was bursting from Nathan as he watched Aiden try to eat birthday cake but all I could focus on was my daughter and the fact that I never once saw the joy in her eyes when she opened her birthday gifts or when she made a birthday wish.

"You can't keep doing this to yourself, Jessica." His fingers graze my forehead. "You need to focus on your life here."

Logically I know that he's right. He's been trying to convince me of that fact since we moved to Boston but each time I try and leave the past where it belongs, my heart feels as though it's drowning in an endless pit of sorrow that I can't escape from.

"It's not that easy," I whisper as much to myself as to him. I've repeated that phrase countless times since we moved away from Manhattan. "It's just not that easy."

"She's gone, Jessica," he points out bluntly. "Her parents took her to London. You have to let her go."

He can't know how deeply his words hurt. He can't possibly understand the pain that I feel every time he reminds me that Thomas and his wife are Jenna's parents. I'm her birth mother. I may not be her mother on her birth certificate. I may not be the woman who rocked her to sleep when she was an infant and who helps her with her homework each night, but in the innermost recesses of my heart I am her mother. I am her parent and an ocean between us won't change that fact.

"I can't do that." I push my cheek into the pillow. "I haven't been able to do that since we saw her at the museum."

His expression gives nothing away. I can't tell if he's exasperated by my never ending need to dwell on the subject of the daughter I gave up on the day she was born or if he is just trying his best to remain the steadfast compassionate voice of reason that he always is.

"They've moved across the world, Jessica." His voice is soft and steady. "Thomas explained to you that when she becomes an adult, if she's interested in knowing you, he'll give her your name and tell her where to find you. Until then, you have to let her go."

I want to slam my fists into the mattress. I want to scream at the top of my lungs, but I can't do anything. I can only close my eyes and wish that I'd done things differently. I'd watched my daughter walk through JFK airport yesterday holding tight to the hand of her younger brother and her father as she disappeared from my sight into the security line before she boarded an airplane that would take her to another continent. I couldn't say a word to her. I wasn't even allowed to approach her. I've known since the day Thomas let me see Jenna that Nathan's career hangs in the balance. He compromised himself so I could have that one chance to see my daughter at the museum. I've always been well aware of that. I've always done everything I can to protect him from Thomas.

"Thomas should have to pay for what he did," I spit the words out. "I thought when he got caught that things would change."

"All Thomas lost when the scandal broke was his job," Nathan sighs deeply. "His wife is going to stand by him, Jessica. He'll go to London, take on the position he was offered at that law firm there and he'll be old news in a week or two."

He's right. Thomas was exposed in the press for being a lying, cheating bastard but it didn't mean anything for me. I already knew it. I also knew that he was a cold hearted asshole. He'd never let me see Jenna again after that day at the museum even though he was the one who often reached out to me via text to taunt me with pictures of her and stories about her life. He tried to persuade me to visit him in Connecticut, although I knew that each invitation had more to do with what he wanted from me than what he could provide. Judging by the sordid stories that had hit the Internet about Governor Thomas Lane's affairs with his female staffers, he was still, and would always be, chasing after young women. The only difference between those liaisons and the relationship he had with me was that ours had produced a beautiful little girl.

"It hurts, Nathan," I confess behind closed eyes. "It really hurts."

"Jessica." His breath trails over my forehead. "She's happy. She has a family who loves her. You have a family who loves you. One day you may get to tell her just how much you love her."

I try to find comfort in his words. I have to. The promise of a relationship with Jenna when she's an adult is all I have to cling to now. It's time to let her go, even if that feels virtually impossible.

## Chapter 4

"What's the deal with your husband?"

I'm so startled by the sound of his voice that I almost scream. I'd come into the cooler to do inventory. It wasn't on my list of responsibilities but I know that Tyler appreciates when it's done. I'm definitely not opposed to going above and beyond here at the restaurant if it means I'll get to rise up the ranks faster.

"Tyler." I spin around on my heel. "You scared the hell out of me."

"I'm sorry, Jess." He surveys the empty shelves behind me. "Has today's delivery come in yet?"

"Not yet." I scribble a few numbers onto the pad of paper in my hand. "It should be here within the hour."

"Good." He crosses his broad arms over his chest. "I talked to your husband this morning."

I've learned through trial and error that most people who ask me for Nathan's number are looking for free legal advice. My husband is helpful and he handles my co-workers inquiries with tact and grace. He'll typically direct them towards another attorney who is better qualified to help them with their issue. It happened when one of the servers needed advice about her divorce and just a few weeks ago one of the sous chefs asked Nathan about a custody problem. "Good. I forgot to tell him you'd be calling."

"Really?" He rubs his hand over his chin. "He didn't seem that surprised."

It's part of the charm of being an attorney. Nathan has such a stoic poker face that I've given up trying to guess any of the gifts that he gets me for my birthday or for the holidays. He can hold his composure better than anyone I've ever met.

"He likes helping," I say genuinely. "Was he able to offer you any advice?"

He nods brusquely. "He gave me the name of a lawyer friend of his. The guy seems on the up and up."

My curiosity wants me to push to find out what's going on in Tyler's life but I have a hard and fast rule about keeping arm's length between me and my co-workers. Business is business and I want, and need, to keep it that way.

"I need to take a few days off, Jess." He taps the edge of the paper I'm holding in my hand. "Do you think you can hold down the fort?"

"Hold down the fort?" My pulse is instantly racing. I know what he's asking but I want confirmation.

"You should run the kitchen while I'm gone." A small smile tugs at the edge of his lips. "Hunter will be good with it."

"You think so?" I question him. I want the opportunity to prove that I can handle the kitchen at one of the busiest restaurants in all of Boston.

"I know he'll be fine with it." He shifts slightly on his feet. "It's fucking freezing in here. I'm heading out for a few hours. You can handle the delivery, right?"

I just nod. I can handle it all. Tyler is giving me a chance to prove that I have what it takes to be a head chef and I won't let him, or myself, down.

"If I didn't know better, I would guess you were the executive chef," Hunter Reynolds, the owner of Axel Boston, says with a wide grin on his face. "You killed it tonight, Jess."

I did. I'm not one to toot my own horn, but I handled the night like a champ. I didn't let anything rattle me. Hunter moved to New York a few months ago. We aren't subjected to him watching us so closely very often anymore but tonight I welcomed the

chance to prove to him that I have what it takes to run this kitchen. I know I'm years away from being the executive chef, but if I can grab hold of a head chef position, I'll be the happiest woman in Boston.

"I loved it." I try to contain my excitement. "It's such an adrenaline rush."

"I'm really impressed," he went on. "You're on board for taking on more responsibility, right?"

It's not the most direct question I've ever been asked, but I can read between the lines. The kitchen is a hot point for gossip and Hunter has always been as diplomatic as he can be when it comes to making staff changes. "I'll take on as much responsibility as you need me to."

"I'm glad to hear that, Jess." He smiles broadly. "I'm really glad to hear that."

## Chapter 5

"I think I'm going to get a promotion at work." I pull the brush through my hair. "Hunter didn't come right out and say it, but I could tell."

"You what?" Nathan wraps a towel around his waist. "What did you say, Jessica?"

"Hunter asked if I was okay with taking on more responsibility," I say excitedly. "I think he might give me a head chef position when one opens up."

"Do you know how beautiful you are?" His hands are on my bare shoulders. "Have I told you lately how much I love that you get ready for work every day in the nude?"

I push my head back into his chest as I laugh out loud. "You tell me that almost every day, Nathan. You just like looking at nude women."

"No." His hand leaps to my chin. "I love looking at you. If I never see another woman's nude body until the day I die, I wouldn't care, Jessica. You are the world to me."

I turn quickly, wanting to look into his eyes. When he says things like that to me, I want to cling to him as tightly as I can. I'm grateful each and every day that he loves me as deeply and profoundly as he does. I've heard enough of the grumbles from female co-workers to know that not every husband is as attentive and devoted as Nathan.

"I don't know how you found me, Nathan." I kiss him softly on the lips. "I don't deserve someone like you."

"You were made for me." He taps the tip of my nose with his index finger. "We were meant to be."

"Are you happy?" I ask not because I suspect that he's not. It's because of a brief telephone conversation I had with his mother the other day. I haven't had an opportunity to bring it up to him, but now, with Aiden napping and no distractions in sight; this seems like the perfect time.

"What kind of question is that?" he chuckles. "The huge smile on my face all the time isn't enough evidence of how happy I am?"

I love that he makes light of it. I know he's happy but his mother incessant questioning about when I'm going to be ready for another baby always pulls me into the middle of a cloud of self-doubt. Nathan and I have talked about the subject of a sibling for Aiden more than once. I know what he tells me when we have those conversations. He always assures me that he wants the very same things I do. I'm content with the family we have now. I don't feel any need to have another baby. Listening to Gloria, Nathan's mother, talk about how she can tell he wants another child has been hard for me. I want to hear it from his lips.

"I was talking to your mom," I begin before I reach past Nathan to grab his robe from where he hung it on a hook on the back of the bathroom door. I don't want to have this conversation when I feel completely exposed physically. It's going to make me feel vulnerable emotionally and I'm not even sure I can handle that at the moment.

"About?" He adjusts the towel around his waist. "What were the two of you talking about?"

"Aiden," I start before I look down at the floor. "Your mom wanted to talk about Aiden having a little brother or sister."

There's no mistaking the deep sigh that he pulls in. "My mom wanted to badger you about the fact that you don't want another baby. Is that what happened?"

Causing any tension between my husband and his mother isn't my goal. I love Gloria like a mother. She's actually been a better mother to me the past few years than my own mom. My mom hasn't seen Aiden in person yet. When I offered to take Aiden to

Connecticut for Christmas she announced that she'd met a man and was taking a cruise with him for the holidays. Each time Nathan has called her and told her that he'll pay for her to fly to see us, she declines. It's painful but I've learned to find comfort in Nathan's family.

"She loves being a grandma," I state with a smile. "I don't think Aiden could have a more caring and loving grandparent."

"She does have that grandma thing figured out." He brushes a strand of hair from my forehead. "She means well, Jessica but I've told her that we're both really happy with being Aiden's mom and dad."

"I don't want you to think that I don't want another baby because of Jenna," I say it as much to convince him as myself. The truth is that I'm not sure why I don't want another baby. I know that it has little to do with timing or Aiden's age. I don't want another child now and I can't imagine that will change in the future.

"I love our family." He glides his full lips across my forehead. "I love Aiden. I love being his father. "

"Did you talk to your mom about wanting another baby?" I toss the question at him without any forethought. "I mean...I'm just wondering if you said something to her about wanting another child."

"No." He shakes his head slightly from side-to-side. "I wouldn't do that. Whether or not we have another baby is our decision, Jessica. I wouldn't talk about it with anyone but you."

I take comfort in the words. As I wrap my arms around his waist I can't help but wonder if his heart is longing for us to have another child just as mine is longing for the child I gave away.

## Chapter 6

"What do you think about Tyler Monroe?" Nathan pulls on a pair of sweatpants. It's late on Saturday afternoon and he'll do the same thing he does every Saturday while I'm at work. He'll heat up the dinner I left in the fridge for him and Aiden and then he'll settle in to watch television before he falls asleep. "He came by my office the other day."

"He came to your office?" I finish buttoning up my white chef's jacket. "I gave him your cell number. I had no idea he would come to your office."

"I invited him." He rakes his hand through his still damp, black hair. "He started explaining his situation on the phone but I had a meeting to get to so he came down to talk."

"I told him you were a securities attorney." I pull tightly on the ponytail on the top of my head. "I don't know if he even understood what that is."

He throws his head back in laughter. "He understood. His grandfather died recently. Tyler and his sister, Kayla, inherited some property."

"I had no idea his grandfather died," I mumble. I shouldn't be surprised by that fact. Tyler and I aren't friends. I'm not sure he's close to anyone who works at the restaurant.

"He went to his service a few days ago." He adjusts the collar of my jacket. "It was in Manhattan."

I feel a pang of sadness over Tyler's loss. When my own grandfather died several years ago it had impacted me deeply. He had been not only a grandparent but one of my closest friends. I'd mourned his loss for months. I'd given my son his name with the

hope that my beautiful Aiden would inherit some of the same strong character traits that his namesake had.

"So you're going to help him with his case?" I ask in an effort to change the subject. "Aren't you supposed to keep things confidential?"

"I'm not helping him." A small grin tugs at the corner of his mouth. "My friend, Garrett, is going to handle the probate of the will."

Garrett Ryan and I have only met a handful of times before our wedding. He lives in Manhattan with his fiancée, Vanessa. She's the sister of my boss, Hunter. Whenever they're in Boston to visit Garrett's family they stop by to see Nathan and me. Although my first impression of him may not have been the most favorable, I like him now. He's changed since he fell in love.

"Do you think I should say something to Tyler about his grandfather?" I cup Nathan's cheek in my hand. "Would that put you in a bad position?"

"The first thing Tyler said to me when he came into my office was that I could tell you anything he told me." He looks down at me. "He said he likes you a lot, Jessica. He knows how important being a chef is to you. It's the same for him."

The irony of his words doesn't escape me. Tyler and I haven't spoken about anything personal. I did notice a brilliant smile on his face when Aiden and Nathan came to see me at work last month. Aiden was just finding his balance on his feet and he grabbed tightly to Tyler's pant leg as he hobbled precariously around the restaurant before we opened one morning. Tyler had reached down to scoop Aiden's tiny hands into his before he carefully walked him around the perimeter of the dining room while talking softly to him.

"I admire him," I confess. Before we were married I would have thought twice about sharing my admiration for another man with Nathan but his jealous streak has softened since we exchanged

vows. "The wait for a reservation is crazy right now. Everyone wants to eat at Axel Boston because of Tyler."

"He's going places." Nathan's lips graze across my cheek. "You are too. You're going to be just as in demand as he is one day. You can take that to the bank."

## Chapter 7

"Nathan told me about your grandfather." I nudge past Tyler to reach for a bunch of carrots in the cooler. "I'm really sorry."

"Thanks," he says with no readable expression in his tone. "It's been a rough few weeks."

I want to offer compassionate words about how I understand completely what he's feeling because of the pain I had to shoulder after the loss of my own grandfather but I can't. I don't want to open up that floodgate again. I struggle each time I talk about my granddad. Sobbing in the middle of the busy kitchen of the restaurant isn't on my agenda for tonight. I'm working on preparing sides for Tyler and I don't want to get pushed away from my focus.

"Hunter said you took care of things while I was in New York." He reaches around me to grab a large stainless steel bowl from a counter. "He actually said you were almost as talented as me."

I don't care if Hunter said the words in jest or not. I'm taking them at face value. I know I'm good at what I do. Even though I started my career path as a paramedic, cooking has always been my first love. It's what I need to do and I'm so fortunate that I can now do it and earn a pay check at the same time.

"You're the most talented chef I know," I say confidently. "I bet one day you'll have your own restaurant and people will be lining up to eat there."

"If I did," he begins before he turns to face me. "Would you work there with me?"

"Hypothetically speaking?" I cock a brow.

"If I opened a restaurant would you work alongside me there, Jess?" He crosses his broad arms over his chest. "Would you be my right hand man? Or woman?"

"You're seriously asking me that?" I feel the need to clarify. Judging by the serious expression on his face, he's actually asking me if I'd leave Axel to work with him.

"Hunter hasn't told you yet?" he pushes the question at me. "Hasn't he talked to you about what our plans are?"

"No," I answer truthfully.

He motions for me to follow him into the small office that is next to the kitchen. "We should talk, Jess. Come with me."

I don't hesitate as I place the carrots on the counter, turn towards the office and follow him in.

"You're going to partner with Hunter?" I furrow my brow. "You and Hunter are going to open a new restaurant together?"

"Technically it's going to be me, Hunter, his dad and his friend, Jax." He taps his fingers against the leg of his jeans. "We already bought a space in Manhattan. We've got a contractor working on the plans right now."

My excitement crashes when he mentions New York. "You want me to work with you in New York?"

"Exactly." He claps his hands together. "Your husband told me that you two met there. You used to work at Axel NY, right?"

I did. I was a lowly sous chef there and I can't say that my experience was memorable. My superior back then was a man named Drew who almost came between Nathan and me. My career was going nowhere then and when I was offered the chance to take on a position at the Boston location, I had jumped at the chance. It was the perfect move for Nathan and me. We got to be closer to his family and he was able to reconnect with many of his old friends and colleagues. Our life is here now. I don't want to

upend everything to move back to New York just so I can pursue my dream. I have a family to consider.

"I did work at Axel NY," I offer while I scramble for something more to say. In the span of not more than a few minutes I've gone from the high of believing that I would be second-in-command at Tyler's new restaurant to the low of knowing that a move back to Manhattan isn't part of my future plans.

"It's the perfect time for me to open my own restaurant. Hunter's investing but I'm retaining majority control." Tyler's face beams with a wide grin. "I know I can make it a success if I have the right people on my team. You're perfect for it, Jess."

This is when I need to open my mouth to tell him that I can't do it. I shouldn't be hesitating as much as I am. I know that if it was just me, I'd run with the opportunity he's giving me, but Nathan and Aiden are everything to me. I need to think about our future, not just my own.

"Once the renovations are done, we'll talk about it more." He nods towards the door of his office. "We should get back out there. It's going to be a busy night."

I pull in a deep sigh as he brushes past me on his way out of the room. I glance down at the floor. This is where I belong. Boston is my home and regardless of what dreams may be on the horizon for me in New York City, I can't go back.

## Chapter 8

"You're awake?" I try not to sound as completely surprised as I am. It's near two in the morning. I'd walked home from work hoping that the fresh early morning air would help clear my thoughts. I kept replaying Tyler's words over and over again in my mind. He is offering me everything I want career wise and I have to turn him down. I should have done that on the spot, but I want to hold onto the dream at least for a few more days.

"I fell asleep." Nathan swings his long legs over the side of the bed, revealing his nude body. "I woke up panicked that you weren't here, Jessica."

I stare at him in the faint light that is seeping into the room from the attached bathroom. He always leaves a light on in there for me so when I get home I'm not tripping over my own feet in the dark. He's considerate to a fault. He's also the most handsome man I've ever seen. Even with a sleepy look on his face and his hair a dishevelled mess, he's still completely irresistible to me.

"You know that I don't get home from work until late." I skim my hand over his forehead, pushing back some of the hair that has settled there while he slept. "I walked home tonight."

"I don't want you to do that." He grabs hold of my hand. "You can drive our car to work or you can take a taxi home. I know you think Boston is safe, but I worry about you walking around in the middle of the night alone. Something might happen to you."

He's over exaggerating. The walk from Axel to our condo isn't far. The streets in this part of the city never quiet and below the large streetlights I always feel safe and secure. I know I could defend myself if it came to that, but I doubt that it ever would. I've

never felt threatened in any sense here. It's one of the reasons I feel so compelled to raise my son here.

"Next time you feel like walking home, I want you to call me." He shuffles his bare feet over the hardwood floor as he sits on the edge of our bed. "Promise me you'll call me, Jessica."

Some women might absorb the words as overbearing or controlling. I don't. I know that he just wants what is best for me. I feel exactly the same way about him. "I like that you worry about me, Nathan."

A small smile tugs at the corners of his lips. "I'll always worry about you. It comes with being your husband."

"What else comes with being my husband?" I ask playfully as I start to unbutton my chef's jacket.

He watches in silence as I completely undress. "Get in the bed, Jessica. I need you. I need to show you how much I want you."

I reach out my hand, knowing that he'll pull me into his embrace and he'll take me to a place where nothing matters but the two of us.

"Nathan," I whisper softly into the darkness of the room as I feel him slide his cock into me. "I can't."

"You can," he growls. "I need to come again. You do too."

I can't tell if he's right or not. I came twice while he exquisitely licked my core. Then when he entered me swiftly and fucked me hard, I'd had to push my mouth into his shoulder to stop the scream I felt approaching. Now, less than an hour later he's hard again and as he claims my body one more time, I feel both the physical ache from riding him to my climax and the emotional need to just fall asleep in his arms.

"I love you," I tell him as he finds a slow and easy rhythm. "I love you more than you know."

"Jessica." He leans forward, scooping my ass into his hand so he can tilt my pelvis. "I love you."

I push my lips into his as he ups the tempo and drives himself into me with easy strokes until we both come again.

## Chapter 9

"What's bothering you?" He doesn't turn as he moves the hot pan on the stove. "I can tell something isn't right."

I know that he can tell. It's Sunday morning. I always cook breakfast for Nathan and Aiden on Sunday mornings. Typically I make scrambled eggs but today Nathan is standing in front of the stove dressed in pajama bottoms trying not to burn the second batch of pancake batter he just added to the skillet. He has no real clue what he's doing but I know that regardless of how the breakfast will taste, the effort that he's putting into it makes it already the best breakfast I've ever had.

"Is it Jenna?" he asks the question in such a low tone that I have to inch forward in the wooden chair I'm sitting in to hear him. "We can talk about it, Jessica. I'll help you get through it."

Even though I haven't brought it up in the past few days, the continuing ache in my heart over giving up my daughter to her father is still there. I feel emotionally spent over it. I know that there's very little I can do to change that situation. She's happy and she's thriving with a family that loves her. Nathan has told me, in the past that I'm sacrificing a lot for Jenna's happiness but I've never viewed it that way. I have regrets over the decisions I made when I was a teenager. I don't want to have any of those regrets now. If I kept trying to forge a relationship with her, I'd end up hurting Nathan and Aiden and disrupting my daughter's life. I can't do that.

"It's not Jenna," I answer. "Do you want me to go wake up Aiden?"

I watch him from behind as his shoulders surge forward with a small shrug. "Don't do that. I don't want you to shut me out."

Talking to my husband about Tyler's proposition isn't something I planned on doing. I'm horrible at masking my emotions. Nathan already knows that something is bothering me and if I try and edge around the topic it's only going to create a divide between us. "I'm not shutting you out, Nathan. It's just not worth talking about."

He abruptly slides the hot pan across the stove until it's resting on one of the cold burners. I hear him pull in a heavy breath before he turns to look at me. "I can see it in your face. I can see that something isn't right. I need you to tell me what that is."

I can see the veil of concern in his eyes. I thought I could hide what I'm feeling but Nathan knows me almost better than I know myself. If I've had a bad day at work, he can sense it immediately. I need to tell him what I discussed with Tyler. I just have to put it out there.

"Did something happen at work?" He pulls out one of the wooden chairs by the table and lowers himself into it, crossing his arms over his broad, bare chest. "Is there a problem at Axel?"

"It's Tyler," I begin before I push my back into the chair. "Tyler is going to open a new restaurant and he wants me to work alongside him."

"He's leaving Axel and he wants you to work at the new place with him?" He leans forward to rest his elbows on the table. "That's amazing news, Jessica."

The wide grin on his face isn't surprising to me. Nathan has always encouraged me to chase my dreams. He's the one who insisted we move to Boston when I was offered the position at Axel. He didn't hesitate for even a minute. I know that a large part of that was related to him wanting to be closer to his family but he also genuinely wanted me to do what was best for my career.

"It's really flattering," I offer, not wanting to sound as though I don't value what Tyler sees in me. "I can't take the job though."

"Why not?" He reaches across the table to touch my hand. "Are you worried about the hours you'll have to work? I can pick up the slack. My schedule is flexible."

His schedule is flexible because he's a partner. It's been his dream since he graduated from law school. He was passed over for a partnership at the firm he worked for in New York so when he was offered this one in Boston, it felt like fate to both of us.

"It's not that," I say truthfully. I just need to put it out there. I know when I do Nathan is going to push his own career aspirations aside and tell me to jump at the chance. He'll do that without blinking an eye.

"Tell me what it is." He pats the top of my hand again. "We can talk about anything. You know that."

"Like I said, Tyler is going to open a new restaurant. He's going to do it with Hunter and his friend, Jax," I start.

"Jax Walker?" Nathan interrupts me. "I know Jax Walker."

"I guess that's him." I shrug my shoulders. "Tyler just said the investors were Hunter, his dad and a guy named Jax."

"Jax is the husband of my friend." He cocks a dark brow. "Ivy. You met her a few times when we lived in New York."

"The woman who owns the jewellery store?" I question. "That blonde woman with the adorable little boy?"

"Jackson," Nathan says his name with a smile. "I've been friends with Ivy since we were kids."

"You think her husband is the Jax that Tyler was talking about?"

"It's him." Nathan leans back in his chair, crossing his long legs. "He's been floating around from business venture to business venture for years now. He's close friends with Hunter."

That fact doesn't help my anxiety over telling Nathan that the restaurant is in New York. I know that he views Ivy as a younger sister and he loves her son just as much as he loves his actual niece and nephew. "It's a small world. I had no idea Tyler was talking about Ivy's husband."

"You need to take the job, Jessica," he says without any hesitation. "Working that closely with Tyler would be the best thing for your career."

"I can't take it, Nathan," I spit the words back at him. I wish I never would have brought any of it up to being with. "I can't."

"You can take it." His voice is low and calm. "You need to. There's no reason why you shouldn't take it."

"It's in New York," I blurt out. "The restaurant is going to be in New York."

## Chapter 10

"I'll pack my bags the moment you say it's a go." He inches to the edge of his chair so he can pull it across the tiled floor towards me. "We'll go back to New York as soon as they need you."

"Nathan." I reach to rest my hand on his thigh. "The restaurant isn't going to open for at least a half a year, maybe more. It's so far in the future. We shouldn't even be talking about it right now."

"Now is the perfect time to talk about it." He pulls my hand into his. "This is when we start planning so I can find a new job and we can think about child care and where we'll live in Manhattan."

Nathan had sold his apartment in the city when we made the decision to move to Boston. Since we arrived, we've been living in the condo he's kept here. It was his so-called bachelor pad but it's actually a beautiful three bedroom condo in a quiet and mature neighborhood. I've decorated it to suit both our tastes and it's the first place where I've ever truly felt as though I'm at home.

"I love Boston," I say quietly. "I really love it here."

"You love New York too." He scrubs his hand over his face. "We can go back and rebuild the life we had there."

"What about your job?" I throw the question out without considering his comeback. I already know what he's going to say.

"It's just a job, Jessica," he says quickly. "I don't love my job the way you do. It's not my passion in my life. You and Aiden are."

"You and Aiden are my passion too."

"Before I went to law school I wanted to be a teacher." His eyes dart down to his lap. "I always thought I'd be a teacher."

My heart drops when I hear that. Nathan and I have spent hours sharing the smallest details of our lives with each other. I've

been to the home that he lived in as he was growing up. He took me to his high school when they were hosting an open house just so I could see his locker and get a glimpse into the classrooms where he used to spend his days. Each morsel of his past has helped me gain a better understanding of the man I love and now, hearing him tell me that he longed to be a teacher, it just makes my heart crack open a bit wider with adoration for him.

"You would have been a great teacher, Nathan."

"You're goddamn right I would have been." He chuckles deeply. "Back then I wanted to teach physical education so I could coach the boys' basketball or football team. I was completely into sports."

He still is. I'll often walk into the living room on a Sunday afternoon to find him and Aiden, both wearing football jerseys, watching the game. He's told me repeatedly how excited he is to get season's tickets once Aiden is old enough to go with him.

"Why didn't you pursue that?" I rest my hands in my lap. "Why did you become a lawyer?"

"Money," he confesses. "My family wasn't well off. We struggled and I didn't want that for my family. I knew lawyers and doctors were making bank. You know I can't stand the sight of blood, so the only option was to be a lawyer."

He's making light of it but I can't deny the deep sense of loss I feel for him. He didn't chase after his dream and since I've met him, he's only spurred me on to chase mine. It's unfair. "Have you ever thought about going back to school to get a degree in education?"

"Me in school?" He cocks both brows. "Seriously, Jessica? Do you think there's a professor who can handle me?"

I laugh at the question. He may want me to believe that he's unreasonable or difficult to manage, but he's respectful and helpful to everyone he meets. "You'd do just fine in school."

"I'm too old to start over." His voice is husky. "I actually like being a lawyer."

"Like and love are very different," I point out. "I hate the thought of you going to a job every day that you don't love."

"I love you and I love Aiden." He traces his index finger over the edge of the kitchen table. "Giving you the life you deserve and want is the only job that matters to me."

I close my eyes to ward off the tears I feel approaching. I've never done anything in my life that warrants this depth of love from a man. "I want us both to be happy."

"I'll be happy if you tell me that you'll really think about the job Tyler is offering you." He licks his bottom lip. "Give it a few days. Think about it carefully and then we'll talk about it again."

He may not have wanted to be a lawyer when he was younger, but he certainly has the innate sense of logic that any good attorney needs.

"Promise me, Jessica," he pushes. "Don't make a decision based on what you think I want. I want to be with you. I'd move anywhere in the world for you. I mean that."

I nod softly as he pushes himself away from the table. "I'm going to get Aiden. Maybe you can give me a hand with the pancakes?"

I laugh. "I'll take care of breakfast. I love cooking for you and our boy."

## Chapter 11

"Did you and Nathan talk about having another baby?"

The tea kettle in my hand stops in mid-air. I stare down at the porcelain tea cups she gifted to me and Nathan on our wedding day. They are a family heirloom and every time that she comes over to visit, I make tea for her and serve it in those cups. It's sentimental but it's also comforting. Gloria, Nathan's mother, treats me like a daughter and that includes feeling comfortable enough to say whatever is on her mind.

"We did," I say quietly. I didn't want to have this conversation with her today. I'm working a split shift at the restaurant to cover for another of the junior chefs who is out sick. I've already put in four hours to help serve lunch and I'll need to leave within the hour to make it back to the restaurant in time to lend a hand for dinner service. I'm exhausted and my day isn't even half over yet.

"What did Nathan have to say about another baby?"

I can't fault her for asking. Nathan's sister, Sandra has two beautiful children. She has a son and a daughter and every time we all gather together for a family dinner I see the love between those two. I'm not an only child so I know the benefits of having a sibling for Aiden. I'm just not sure it's what I want in my heart.

"Did he tell you that he wants Aiden to have a brother or a sister?" she presses on, oblivious to the fact that my hands are literally shaking as I try to pour the scorching hot water into the tea cups.

"Nathan and I aren't sure we want another baby, Gloria." I keep my back to her. "Aiden just turned one. He's still very young."

"That's true but if you get pregnant now, he'll be the perfect age when the baby arrives."

"He won't even be two." I finally pick up both cups of tea and turn around.

"Nathan and Sandra are only two years apart." She rises from her chair to reach for one of the cups. "Do you have lemon, dear?"

I nod before I place my cup down. I pivot back towards the kitchen counter to run a sharp knife through a lemon. "We just aren't sure that we want another baby."

"You can't just have one." She squeezes half a lemon into her tea before she pulls a spoon through it. "Aiden will be lonely."

I've thought of that. I've also thought about all the attention that Nathan and I can shower on him and him alone. We want to show him the world. We have plans to take him on a trip every summer during his school vacation. "Aiden will have a beautiful life."

She pulls her gaze from her cup to my face. "I don't doubt that, Jess. I just know what my son told me."

I look down into my tea cup in the hope that she won't catch a glimpse of the shocked look on my face. I don't want to betray Nathan by asking his mother to divulge the details of a private conversation that the two of them shared. I shouldn't be so eager to hear what my husband told his mother but I can't resist. "What did he say?"

"It's probably the same thing he says to you all the time." Her voice is controlled. "He was heartbroken when he saw Jenna."

Hearing Nathan's mother say my daughter's name sends me into an emotional tailspin. He told me that he had shared sparse details about my pregnancy and the fact that I gave a daughter up for adoption. I had no idea that Gloria knew my daughter's name. "You know her name?"

"Jess." She leans forward in her chair. "Nathan showed me the pictures he has on his phone of her. She looks just like you."

I'm not one to rifle through my husband's phone. I did that once, before we knew each other very well. Back then, the hellish treasure that awaited me was a long list of women's phone

numbers. Now, apparently, the secrets that he has hidden in his phone are all about my daughter.

"Nathan has pictures of Jenna?"

"He showed me two." She brings the delicate cup to her lips before she takes a small sip. Her index finger glides over the rim to brush away the wayward traces of her pink lipstick. "I can't get over the resemblance."

They're words that cut deep into my heart and buoy me at the same time. Jenna is a beautiful young girl. I saw myself in her face when I first saw her at the museum. Since that day, I've caught brief glances of her when her family has been in New York. The only benefit of Thomas being in the limelight had been his notoriety. He made numerous appearances in New York in support of one of the many charities his wife supported. If I timed things properly I could catch a glimpse of my daughter entering or exiting their town car as they arrived at the hotel they always stayed at.

"Do you know where he got the pictures?" I press. I don't care if she tells Nathan that I pushed for answers when he walks through the door after work. I'm past worrying about what he'll think. I had no idea that he even had pictures of my daughter. I certainly had no clue that he had showed them to his mother.

"I don't know." She shrugs her shoulders. "I was so focused on her pretty little face that I didn't notice anything else in the pictures."

"I'll ask him." My voice trails as I search for the words that I'll use to bring this up with him. I feel a pang of envy when I realize that he has something that I don't. I had been tempted to snap a picture of Jenna as she walked out of the museum holding tight to her father's hand but I had stopped myself out of fear that Thomas would lash out.

"He would have been a wonderful father to that girl." She pats her hand against her chest. "If you would have kept her, Nathan would have loved her like she was his."

I don't need to hear this. Nathan has told me all of this himself and it never lessens the burden of guilt that I carry with me every day. I know that my life would never have taken me to Manhattan if I would have kept Jenna. I would have lived in Connecticut with my mother until I could find my own way. Nathan and I wouldn't have met at the club that night. I wouldn't be married to him now and Aiden wouldn't be my little boy.

"Nathan and I have talked about this." I know the words won't quiet her persistent need to share what she knows. "Jenna is with her father. She has a family who adores her."

"I'm sure they love her very much." She swallows so hard that it's audible. "Maybe one day you and Nathan can be part of her life."

"I hope for that," I say under my breath. "I'm counting on it."

"He wants another baby Jess." Her voice is composed. "My son wishes he had a daughter. He has always wanted that."

I want to push back that he has a son who he loves with every fibre of his being. I want her to understand that Nathan is content and fulfilled being Aiden's father but I can't. "Did he tell you that, Gloria? Did Nathan tell you he wanted a little girl?"

"Yes." She crosses her arms over her chest. "He's always said that he hopes one day he'll have a daughter."

## Chapter 12

"You would do anything for me, wouldn't you, Nathan?" I nuzzle my face into his neck.

"After what you just did for me, Jessica." He wraps his strong arms around me. "I would do anything for you."

I can't contain a hearty laugh as I slap my hand over his bare chest. "I'm not talking about sex."

"I am." He inches his hand down my back. "That was seriously amazing."

It was. Nathan had stayed awake to wait for me after my shift. The moment I walked into the bedroom and saw him naked in the middle of the bed, I had stripped and taken him in my mouth. I loved giving him pleasure. I lived to hear the noises he made as he gripped tightly to my hair when he came down my throat. He'd used his hand to bring me to my own release and now, as we lay together in the darkness, I can feel his heart beating as his breathing finally levels again.

"Is there anything you wouldn't do for me?" I realize the moment I ask the question that it didn't come out the way I wanted it to. "That's not what I meant."

"I would do anything for you." His hand leaps to my hair. "I would do anything to protect you. I would do anything to make you happy."

"What about if it was something you knew wouldn't make you happy?"

His strong hand grazes over my forehead. "I don't know what that would be. Seeing a smile on your face is everything to me."

"You always put me first," I say it matter-of-factly. "You never put yourself first."

"You do the same with me," he counters. "I know that if I asked anything of you, that you would do it."

"Even having another baby?"

The silence that fills the space is overwhelming. It doesn't last for more than a few moments but it feels endless.

"If you wanted another baby," I start before I shift my body so I can look at his face. "If you really wanted us to have another baby, Nathan, would you tell me?"

He doesn't answer immediately and within that span of time I see something flash over his expression. "Do you want another baby, Jessica?"

I don't answer because I have to be honest with him. Right now, at this point in my life, I don't want to bring another child into our family. I want to focus on Nathan, on Aiden and on my career.

"Did my mother say something to you again?" His hand glides to my chin so he can pull my gaze to meet his. "Did she tell you I wanted a baby?"

"She told me that you have pictures of Jenna on your phone." I try to sound calm even though my heart is pounding an erratic beat within my chest. "She told me she saw them."

"Fuck," he says it so softly that I'm unsure if I actually heard the word.

"You do have pictures?" My voice cracks beneath all the tangled emotions I'm feeling. "You have pictures of her that you can look at whenever you want?"

"No." He grabs hold of my shoulder. "Jessica I don't have pictures that I'm keeping from you. Don't think that."

"What am I supposed to think?" I try to pull back but his grasp is too strong. "Your mother saw them."

"Christ." He rakes his hand through his hair. "I pulled them up from an image search on Google. I just wanted her to see your daughter."

"You didn't take pictures of her?"

"You think I'd do that and not tell you?" His tone is clipped. "It hurts me just as much as it hurts you to look at her."

"It can't hurt you as much," I push back against his chest. "You're not her parent. You don't know what I feel."

I see the pain the instant it takes over his face. "She is part of you, Jessica. I love her too. I wish every day that she was here. I want our son to know her. You don't think it kills me inside to know that your child isn't part of our family?"

I stare at him, unable to string together anything that could pass as an acceptable response to what he just said to me. I've never once considered how Nathan felt about any of this. I've always stood behind the wall of my own sorrow. I never realized how deeply this was impacting him too.

"I have talked to dozens of family law attorneys trying to find a way to get visitation rights for you... for us." He taps his hand on his chest. "You were coerced into signing those papers giving her up. You were too young to know what the hells was going on. I wish I had been there. I wish I could have protected you and her."

Tears well from deep within me and pool in my eyes. I swipe my hand over my face trying to quell the rising emotions I'm feeling. "I wish you had been there too. I wish we could have had her."

"I know." He pulls me closer into his chest. "I know that I can't understand everything you feel. I know that but I feel too."

"I know." I nod my head against his chest. "I know you do."

"We can't change things," he whispers against my forehead. "When she's eighteen, I'm going to find her, Jessica. I promise I'll find her so you can know her and so Aiden can know her."

"I want that."

"Our son should know his sister one day. I want him to know he has a beautiful sister."

"I want that for him," I agree softly. "I want Aiden to know her."

"He deserves it." He heaves a sigh. "She's his family too and maybe one day they'll love each other as much as I love my sister."

## Chapter 13

"Tyler told me he talked to you about the new restaurant," Hunter takes a drink from the bottle of water in his hand. "It's pretty exciting stuff."

It would be more exciting if that damn restaurant was in Boston. Since Nathan and I discussed Jenna the other night my mind has been going non-stop. I've been thinking about our future as a family. I'm not ready to jump into motherhood again right now, but I'm not pushing the idea completely off the table either. I want Nathan to be happy and more than that I want to give my son the best possible life I can. That may, or may not, include a sibling. I can't make that decision right now. I have to keep an open mind and heart and in order to do that; I need to get my career planned out.

"It sounds exciting," I say half-heartedly. I'm going to be working as a junior chef here in Boston while some other chef takes over as Tyler's next-in-charge in Manhattan. It sucks and as much as I want to tell Hunter that, I can't. I need him to understand that I'm grateful that I have the job that I do have and that I'm still just as eager to move up the ranks here at Axel Boston.

"Pierce is going to take over Tyler's position when he leaves," he offers. "He's a great chef."

Pierce is an amazing chef. He had worked for much of his career in the corporate world and then when he celebrated his fortieth birthday, he'd thrown all caution to the wind and he went to culinary school. Now, five years later, he's been picked to be the executive chef here at Axel. I'm thrilled for him.

"He must be pumped." I giggle. "Did he jump up and down when you told him?"

"You know it." Hunter chuckles. "He pulled me into a big bear hug. I thought he was going to break my ribs."

I laugh loudly. "I wondered why he looked so happy today. I mean...Pierce is happy every day but he was especially stoked today."

"I told him this morning. He couldn't wait to call his wife."

Pierce's wife is just as sweet as he is. Knowing that I'll get to work with him helps lessen the disappointment of knowing that I'm going to be staying in Boston and not taking the position of a lifetime that Tyler offered to me.

"He deserves it," I mumble under my breath. "Pierce is an amazing chef."

"So are you." He places the empty water bottle on the table. "You're a great chef too, Jess."

My plan had been to tell Tyler that I wouldn't be following him to Manhattan but since Hunter is an investor, I see no reason not to share the news with him. If I ask him not to tell Tyler until I have a chance to, it will give me the time I need to find the courage to tell Tyler that even though I admire him and want to work with him, I can't.

"I wanted to talk to you about the new restaurant," I begin before I stop to look over Hunter's shoulder at the kitchen of Axel. "I love working here, Hunter. I just want to say that before I say anything else."

"When I first met you in New York, Jess, I knew you had potential." He smiles. "That first night I could see your natural talent. I knew then that we'd need to keep you on board with us. I see great things for you in the future."

He's not just saying that. Hunter Reynolds may be one of the most polite and endearing men I've ever met but he's also a shrewd businessman. There's a reason that he and his father have built a restaurant empire in the northeast. They know how to tap into the culinary market and I'm just glad I'm along for that ride. I'm

grateful every day that he sees something in me that no one else did.

"One day I know it will be you opening your own restaurant and hopefully you'll let me and Bruno invest in it."

I smile at the mention of Hunter's father. He's a charmer and every time he waltzes into the kitchen of the restaurant, he's busy kissing the hand of every woman who works for him. He's a kind man who loves bringing his grandchildren in for lunch when they're in town with Hunter.

"My dream is to have my own restaurant."

"You'll make it happen, Jess." He circles his finger around the base of the water bottle. "You'll be one step closer when you take that head chef position that Pierce is vacating."

I scratch my chin trying to decipher the words he just said. I bring my gaze up to his. "Can you say that again, Hunter?"

"I want you to be a head chef, Jess." He pauses. "You're Pierce's first choice too."

I'm taken back by the admission. This wasn't what I imagined. I didn't expect to be promoted to head chef this quickly. I'm spring boarding past other junior chefs who have been at Axel much longer than I have. It's an unfortunate part of working in this industry. Seniority doesn't always equal automatic advancement.

"Tyler wanted me...he said that he..." I stumble through the words trying desperately to latch onto any that will help guide me through what I need to say.

"Tyler wants you to come back to New York," he interrupts, saving me from myself. "He told me. Tyler doesn't have a family, Jess. He doesn't understand that level of responsibility. I know you're settled here. I know your family is here."

He's right on all counts. This is my home. I belong here. "Does he know you're offering me the head chef position?"

"I told him I was." He leans forward in his chair. "I also told him that you have roots in Boston and that you're raising your family here but ultimately the decision is yours. If you want the New

York job, that has your name all over it. It's completely up to you, Jess."

## Chapter 14

### *6 Months Later*

"I'm not nosy." He brushes my hair back away from my shoulders. "I don't snoop in your things, Jessica."

"You wouldn't have known if you didn't snoop, Nathan," I tease. "If you hadn't looked in my purse for my pills, you never would have thought to ask."

"I asked because I have a right to know," he pushes back softly. "It's my...I mean, it's my..."

"What?" I tease as I lean back into his nude body. "It's your what?"

"You know what I'm talking about." His voice is low and melodic. "I had a right to know."

"When was I supposed to tell you?" I pull in a heavy breath. "Did you want me to stop you right before you fucked me last week so I could say it?"

"You couldn't have stopped me." His hand dips to my breast, pulling one of my hard nipples between his fingers. "I was a man on a mission."

"A mission to come," I say briskly. "You were on the same mission yesterday and the day before that and the day before that."

"I like making love to my wife." His breath floats across the skin of my shoulder. "I can't resist her."

"She can't resist you either." I pull his other hand to my wetness. "I love being this close to you. I hope we're always this close."

"I can't breathe if I'm not this close to you, Jessica." His voice cracks slightly. "You literally are everything to me. I mean that."

"I feel the same way."

"When did you decide that..."

"That I wanted to create another beautiful life with you?" I ask quietly. "When did I decide that I wanted another child who is a part of you and a part of me?"

"Yes." He buries his face into my neck. "Tell me when you decided."

"It was two months ago," I start before I lean back to kiss his cheek. "You were sitting on the floor with Aiden working on that big puzzle of his."

"That goddamn trick puzzle my mother bought him for his birthday?"

I giggle loudly. "When I do the puzzle with him, I have no trouble."

"Don't brag, Jessica." He chuckles deeply. "We both know you're better at that shit than I am."

"You were sitting there with him." I take in a deep breath. "I was coming out of the kitchen and I stopped when Aiden stood up."

He doesn't say anything. He only pulls me closer into his chest.

"He walked over to you and put both his tiny hands on your face," I say the words through a sob. "I saw the way you looked at him. I saw love right then. It was everything."

"He's my boy." He swallows hard. "I'd give my life for him."

"I know. I see it every time I'm with the two of you."

"I love you so much, Jessica but I never knew I could love anyone the way I love Aiden. It's amazing to be his father."

"It's amazing to be his mom." I rub my hand over his. "It's going to be just as incredible to be a mom again and to see you be a dad again."

"You're sure you want this?" I hear the hesitation in his tone. "You're absolutely sure that you want another baby?"

"I've never wanted anything more," I say honestly. Since I've taken on the job as head chef at the restaurant, my life has felt more settled. Pierce has helped me work out a schedule that gives me more time with Aiden. I've watched my little boy grow and I've felt my heart open up. The ache to have another child has nothing

to do with losing Jenna, or wanting a sibling for Aiden. It comes from a pure place of maternal need. My arms long to hold a newborn again. My heart has room for another life that is part of my wonderful husband and part of me. I want a baby. I need one and since I stopped taking my birth control pills two months ago, I've been hoping that soon I'll be sharing the news that I'm pregnant with Nathan. I assumed that he'd eventually notice that I stopped taking my pills and earlier today when he was fishing around in my purse for my car keys, I have a feeling that he'd realize the pills weren't in the pocket I usually keep them in.

"We should try again, don't you think?" I reach down to wrap my hand around his thick cock. "I think now might be the perfect time for me to get pregnant."

"I was just about to say the same thing." He shifts his body so he's facing me.

"Our baby is going to be beautiful," I whisper into his kiss.

"I already know that," he growls as he pulls back to slide his body over mine. "You're the most beautiful person I know."

## Epilogue

### *9 Months Later*

"I don't understand how it happened." He stands in front of me with his arms crossed over his chest. His suit jacket is hung over the chair in the corner and his tie is askew. He's a hot mess and judging by the way the nurse eyed him up when he walked into my room, he's just as desirable to other women as he was the night I first saw him at the club.

"Well," I begin as I adjust myself on the bed. "Nine months ago we had sex and that night your sperm..."

"Jessica." He waves his hands in the air. "You're not funny."

"I am funny," I counter with a huge grin. "You know that I am."

He shakes his head slightly. "That's not what I'm talking about. You know it."

"I know that you're freaked out." I point towards a chair in the corner. "You look like you're going to pass out, Nathan. Maybe you should sit."

He scrubs his hand across the back of his neck. "I can't sit down right now."

"You need to take some deep breaths." I glance down at my smartphone. "Did Gloria say when she was bringing Aiden?"

"I don't know." His eyes dart from my face to the door of the room. "Maybe at seven."

"It's almost seven," I say excitedly. "I can't wait for him to get here."

"I knew I shouldn't have gone to the center today." He taps his foot against the floor. "I almost missed it because of that."

"You didn't miss anything." I pat the edge of the bed. "You got here in time. I'm glad you took that job."

"I should quit," he quips. "I don't have time for it. I can't focus right now."

He's exaggerating. Two months ago Nathan took on a mentorship role at one of the community centers here in Boston. He goes down to the center once a week to work with kids who have lost their way. He helps them see the value in a good education and he's been working to help some of them upgrade so they can get into college. Initially he was going to apply for a teaching role at one of the colleges, but when this opportunity popped up, he had jumped at the chance. It was a way for him to teach in a non-traditional sense. He loves it. We've both been excited at the prospect of him putting in even more time there while I'm on maternity leave for the next six months.

"Those kids depend on you," I shoot back. "You can't leave them, Nathan. They need you."

"You need me." He finally lowers himself onto the bed next to me. "I almost missed our baby being born, Jessica."

"You didn't miss it." I point towards the small bundle of joy nestled in the blankets in the clear bassinet next to the bed. "You made it with time to spare."

The truth is that I barely made it to the hospital with time to spare. My water had broken when I was napping in the bed with Aiden. I'd called Gloria and she had rallied Nathan's sister, Sandra, to help. She was the one who had raced me to the hospital and had told Nathan to get his ass to the delivery ward as soon as possible. Fortunately, we both made it just in the nick of time.

"Why didn't you tell me you were in labor when I left?"

"I wasn't in labor then." I giggle. "It took me by surprise too."

We both turn abruptly as the door to the room flies open and Aiden bolts through with Gloria on his heel. "I'm here, Mommy. I'm here now."

"My little man is here." I hold my arms open. "Come give mommy a hug."

He's on the bed before Nathan or I have time to react. His black curls bounce as he plops himself next to me. "I came fast. I came really fast to see you."

I cling tightly to him as I mouth 'thank you' to Gloria before she slips out the door with her hand over her mouth to quiet her emotions.

"Where's the baby, daddy?" Aiden taps Nathan's hand. "Show me my baby."

"The baby is right there." Nathan scoops Aiden into his arms. "I'll show you the baby."

"I love the baby," Aiden says softly as Nathan crouches next to the bassinet, Aiden still in his arms. "I love my baby."

"This is Tait." Nathan places his hand on the baby's forehead. "This is your brother, Tait."

I feel the tears well as I hear Nathan say our son's name for the first time. It's the name of his grandfather. He was a man who helped shape my husband into the remarkable person he is today. Both of our boys will always carry the names of the men who helped us to become the people we are.

"Tait is my brother," Aiden says as Nathan lifts him above the bassinet. "I'll take care of him."

"I will too." Nathan looks directly at me. "I'll take care of all of you for the rest of my life."

"He's the best, daddy." Aiden reaches down to run his small hand over Tait's forehead.

"You're both the best." Nathan's eyes well with tears. "I never thought I'd be this lucky. I have everything I've ever wanted. Everything."

"Me too," I say as I cling to his gaze with mine. "Me too."

## A Preview of CHANCE

### *A Full-Length Standalone*

"You're telling me that I've never fucked you?"

You'd think I'd walk away at this point. It would make sense for me to turn on my heel and march out of his apartment. I'm not even sure why I'm here.

Today started out like any other day. I woke up and then I brushed my teeth after I had a glass of orange juice. I cursed myself for doing that and vowed that tomorrow I'd drink the orange juice after I brushed my teeth. I dressed in a navy blue pencil skirt and a pale blue blouse. I'd let my dark brown hair fall in waves down my back and I'd hurried to make the train before it sped uptown. I walked through the door of my office at precisely two minutes before nine. It was the same routine I followed every single day.

I spent my morning in meetings with the development team and I had lunch with the owner of the company. He'd been focused on his phone. It's normal for him. He can't resist his wife and whenever she texts or calls him, the world, as he knows it, halts on its axis.

Once I got back to my office, I settled in at my desk to go over last month's budget. It was exactly five minutes to two when my phone rang and I dropped everything to get in a taxi to come here. I'm in a spacious apartment on Park Avenue, sitting across from the one man who has popped in and out of my life since I was a child.

"Caleb," I say his name as I cross my arms over my chest. "What the hell was the emergency? Why am I even here?"

His finger darts into the air to silence me. It's a gesture that he knows I can't stand. He's pushing me and if I thought it would

benefit me at all, I'd push him right back. I know his game though. I know exactly what's going on.

"I have to go." His deep voice fills the room. "I'll call you later, baby."

I shake my head slightly as he ends the call. "If you called me down here so I could listen to you talk to some woman who can't remember being fucked by you, I have better things to do with my time."

"I didn't fuck her." He pushes his chair back from the desk as he crosses his long legs. "If I had, she'd remember it."

I cover my face with my hands. "I have a lot to do today. I have to get back to my office."

"Why haven't you quit that job yet, Rowan?" He throws up one hand. "I need you to work with me. I'm prepared to sweeten the offer."

"What offer?" I fumble inside my purse for my smartphone. "You know I'm never going to work for you."

"I know that you will one day." He stands quickly, pulling his large frame up. "Tell me what they're paying you at Corteck and I'll double it."

"I'm not telling you how much money I make." I scan my phone, reading the new emails that have come in since I left the office almost an hour ago. "When have I ever told you how much money I make?"

"When you worked at that fast food place right before you graduated from high school," he points out. "I told you my professor assigned a project about young people in the workplace and you let me interview you."

"You were such an asshole." I don't look up from my phone. "You were twenty-two, Caleb. You should have been partying hard. Instead you were harassing me."

"I was curious." He rounds the desk. "I wanted you to come and work for me then, don't you remember?"

I do remember. I remember how envious I was that he was able to work for his father and that he was pulling in more money than my parents were making combined. Caleb Foster has never had to do an honest day's work in his life and he's still trying to get me to pick up the slack for him.

"I like my job at Corteck. I work in a real office." I scan the home office we're sitting in. "Don't you ever actually go into the office building that has your last name plastered all over the front of it?"

"You mean that one you pass every day when you go to your job at Corteck?"

"I need to leave," I say briskly. "Don't keep calling me down here for nothing. I have a job to do."

"One day you're going to ditch all that so you can work with me." He grabs my arm as I walk past him.

I stare up into his face. His body may have changed since we were children but the same glint in his dark eyes that I saw when he chased me around the playground is still there. His short hair is darker now than it used to be. There's no denying that he's gorgeous. He knows it and he uses it at every opportunity. He's tall and muscular and if I didn't know him as well as I do, I might even label him as emotionally dangerous. It's the reason I've always avoided getting romantically entangled with him. Caleb breaks hearts whether he's aware of it or not.

"I'm leaving." I pull my arm free of his grasp. "Don't call me again unless you actually need something from me. I'm tired of you wasting my time."

'You don't mean that Rowan." He moves in step beside me. "You don't actually mean that you'd rather I don't call you."

"I mean exactly that." I pat him on the chest. "You can't just interrupt my life for your bullshit."

He presses the call button for the elevator. "It's not bullshit. I'm hurt that you think that's what it is."

I sense the grin on his handsome face before I see it. "Why am I even here? You could have offered me the job on the phone."

"You always say no when I ask you on the phone."

"That's because I'm never going to work for you." I push the call button again. "Is the elevator broken again?"

"It looks that way." He gestures towards a door a few feet from us. "You can take the stairs or you can wait until they fix it."

"I have a lot to do today. I can do the stairs."

I follow him through the doorway into a long and narrow hallway. "Do you want me to walk down with you?" He raises a brow.

"I'll be fine." I reach to open the door but it doesn't budge. "Is this broken too? You'd think a place on Park Avenue would have a better maintenance man."

"The door is fine." He grabs hold of the door handle and gives it a quick twist. He swings it open effortlessly. "You're sure you don't want me to walk down with you?"

"Of course not," I brush past him into the stairwell. "Promise me you're not going to keep calling me for nothing. I have important stuff I have to tend to."

"More important than me?" He swings his arms in the air as he walks into the small stairwell. "Don't try and tell me that our friendship doesn't mean everything to you, Rowan."

"It doesn't." I laugh as I look up at him. "You know that it doesn't. I have to go."

"Wait." His hand pulls on the edge of my skirt. "There is something I need to tell you."

My eyes open wide. "Why do you insist on wasting my time? It's just a game to you. You're lucky my boss doesn't care when I leave in the middle of the day."

"This isn't a game." He swallows hard. "I do need to tell you something. I have to tell you something. I just don't know how to."

I've known Caleb Foster my entire life. I know the instant when something is wrong. A sudden darkness has overtaken his face. It's not just the lighting in this dim and musty stairwell.

"Row." His jaw tightens. "I'm sorry, Rowan. I can't believe I have to tell you this."

"Tell me what?" I grab onto the lapel of his jacket. "Just tell me. You're scaring me now."

His hands clench at his sides. His lips move slightly but nothing comes out.

"Caleb, tell me."

He sucks in a deep breath, cups his fingers around my chin and looks directly into my eyes. "Promise me you'll still be my friend when I tell you. Promise me you won't stop talking to me."

"I promise," I whisper softly. "I'll always be your friend."

"You're the only person I can tell this to. You're the only person who'll understand," he starts before he pauses to pull in a deep breath.

*Coming Spring 2015*

## A Preview of EMBER

### *A Three-Part Series*

"If you're coming back to my place I need to buy some condoms."

The fork in my hand stops in mid-air. I don't look up. I can't. I've barely taken one bite of the roasted squash salad the waiter brought me not more than four minutes ago. This is New York City. This is the place where I thought I'd find the love of my life. What the hell was I thinking?

"You're up for coming back, right?"

My head darts up and I study him. This might actually be the first time I've seriously looked right at him. I'm on a blind date. Maybe the term itself holds more meaning than the literal. Obviously, I had no idea what Larry looked like before I walked through the doors of Axel NY a half hour ago. More than that, I couldn't have predicted that we'd be talking about sex before I'd finished my first glass of wine.

"I don't know you," I say bluntly. "Why would I go home with you?"

It's a question that borders heavily on rhetorical. I don't think that Larry's bright enough to weave those tangled pieces of subtly together. He's an assistant to a paralegal. That says a lot about his drive in life considering he looks like he's in his mid-forties. He's also dying to be fucked. He's not shy about it at all.

"We're on a date, Bridget ..." The words linger there on his thin, smug lips. He doesn't add to them because why would he? Those words have clearly and succinctly spelled out every intention that he has. They aren't masked in anything but the truth. Larry wants

his dick to see some action tonight and I'm apparently the main attraction in that circus.

"It's just a date," I explain. "I'd like to get to know you first."

"Why?" He pushes the food from his fork into his mouth and chews.

"I'm not interested in a quick fuck."

His unruly brow cocks. "I heard you were up for just about anything."

*Fuck you, Zoe Beck. Fuck you for whatever the hell you said to him when you arranged this date.*

"I have no idea what my friend told you about me," I pause while I contemplate how to put this delicately. I stare at him. The wayward piece of kale that is stuck between his front teeth is only adding to the allure that is Larry.

He leans forward on the table. The patch on the elbow of his inexpensive suit jacket brushes against the linen table cloth. "This place isn't cheap. I brought you here because I thought you were a sure thing."

*A sure thing? A fucking sure thing?*

I wince at the words. "The only sure thing tonight is that you're going home alone."

It's obvious immediately that Larry is contemplating those words with all the grace of a pack of wild dogs. His hand slams heavily against the spotless white linen table cloth. "I didn't buy you that expensive salad for nothing. The least you can do is blow me."

No, the least I can do is tell him to fuck right off. "I am not interested in you."

"I'm not interested in you either." He flings his napkin at me and it lands squarely in my squash salad. I was actually going to have another bite of that. "I like brunettes."

Touché. "I like men with hair."

Ouch. I can feel Larry's pain from across the table. Obviously no one, including all the brunettes he's been with, has pointed out

the bad comb over that's happening on the top of his odd shaped head.

'We're leaving now.'

I actually look to the right and the left to see who Larry is talking to. I'm gathering that he's still engaged in a conversation with me even though I'm trying desperately to ignore him. People are starting to stare and I have no aversion to a little extra attention, but tonight, I don't want to be the main attraction in Larry's side show.

"Get up." He grabs tightly to my bare bicep and yanks hard.

I cry out sharply. Considering the fact that most of my body is still stuck next to this table in a chair my arm can't leave with Larry. "Let go of me."

"Is there a problem?" A deep, husky voice asks.

I turn towards it even though Larry is still trying to separate my arm from my shoulder to take as a consolation prize. I look up into the dark eyes of a brown haired man. He's staring down at me with a noticeable look of concern on his face.

"Hey," he calls across the table at Larry. "Enough. You're hurting her."

"Get lost." Larry loosens his grip only momentarily. "My girlfriend and I don't need your help."

*Wait. No. Hell no.*

'I'm not your girlfriend,' I growl at him. "Let go of my arm already."

"You're coming with me." Larry pulls harder and I can't help but cry out in pain.

Within an instant my arm is free and the lapel of Larry's jacket is firmly entrenched in the fisted hands of the handsome man with the dark eyes.

"Are you okay?" He cocks a winged brow. "Did he hurt you?"

"I'm fine." My voice is quiet and small. Maybe I'm not as fine as I thought. I lean my hands on the table, suddenly feeling dizzy.

I hear movement behind me before I sense someone crouching next to me. "He's gone. Are you sure you're okay?"

I turn to the left and look into the same deep brown eyes. "I'm fine. He just shook me up."

"He may have torn something in your shoulder." He presses it lightly with his fingers. "I'd get it checked out if it's sore tomorrow."

"Are you a doctor?" I know he's probably on a date with someone. The dark suit he's wearing doesn't hide his muscular frame.

"No." A small grin pulls at the corner of his mouth. "I'm a firefighter. I'm Dane."

"Bridget," I say with a wince as I try to move my arm to shake his hand.

"I'm taking you to the ER now." He pulls on the back of my chair. "Come with me."

I don't protest. Why would I? He's a fireman and he wants to rescue me. I may actually have to thank Zoe for this date, after all.

*Coming soon*