

THE  
EVOLUTION  
OF  
A KING

# THE FINISH LINE



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INTERNATIONALLY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# THE FINISH LINE

Kate Stewart

PAN BOOKS

# Contents

[Note to Reader](#)

[PROLOGUE: Tobias](#)

[CHAPTER ONE: Tobias](#)

[CHAPTER TWO: Tobias](#)

[CHAPTER THREE: Tobias](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR: Cecelia](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE: Tobias](#)

[CHAPTER SIX: Tobias](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN: Cecelia](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT: Tobias](#)

[CHAPTER NINE: Tobias](#)

[CHAPTER TEN: Cecelia](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN: Cecelia](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE: Tobias](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN: Cecelia](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN: Tobias](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN: Tobias](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN: Cecelia](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: Tobias](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: Tobias](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN: Cecelia](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY: Tobias](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: Tobias](#)

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: Tobias  
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: Cecelia  
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: Tobias  
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: Cecelia  
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: Cecelia  
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: Cecelia  
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: Cecelia  
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: Tobias  
CHAPTER THIRTY: Tobias  
CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE: Cecelia  
CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO: Cecelia  
CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE: Tobias  
CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR: Cecelia  
CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE: Tobias  
CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX: Cecelia  
CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN: Cecelia  
CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT: Tobias  
CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE: Tobias  
CHAPTER FORTY: Tobias  
CHAPTER FORTY-ONE: Cecelia  
CHAPTER FORTY-TWO: Tobias  
CHAPTER FORTY-THREE: Tobias  
CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR: Cecelia  
CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE: Tobias  
CHAPTER FORTY-SIX: Tobias  
CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN: Cecelia  
EPILOGUE: Tobias

One month later: Cecelia

Two years later: Sean

THANK YOU

For Mon Trésor, Maïwenn

And for my readers for taking this journey with me. Merci.

# Note to Reader

Wow. What a journey!

The little bonus epilogue that could has now become my lengthiest novel to date! Most of you who've been following the progress of the 'bonus epilogue' on social media know this was never supposed to be a trilogy. After finishing this book, I stand firm that this last installment was always there, waiting for me to unearth it. And I'm so glad I did.

In order to properly pen the ending I saw fit, I had to make a few—very few—changes to the previous scripts. Do not let this alarm you in any way. These are minor details, so minor they're probably undetectable to most. These slight changes were necessary to keep timeline flow and if you're a stickler for details, please know we've corrected them to the absolute best of our ability.

That said, these minimal tweaks should not, in any way, alter your enjoyment of the final book.

It's been an honor and one of the most memorable highlights of my career to write *The Ravenhood*.

I so hope you enjoy *The Finish Line*, and I thank you so much for taking this journey with me.

All my love.

XO

Kate

# PROLOGUE

## Tobias

*Age Forty-Four*

*Saint-Jean-de-Luz, France*

*“Viens ici, Ezekiel,”* Come here, Ezekiel. *I walk over to where he stands, his hand lowered, a round, brown seashell with a flat bottom resting in his palm. When I go to take it, he moves it out of reach.*

*“Qu’est-ce que c’est?”* What is it?

*“Un clypéastre, un dollar de sable. Lorsque tu en trouveras un, garde-le. Et lorsque tu seras prêt, alors tu le casseras. Mais tu dois le faire bien au milieu pour pouvoir en récupérer son trésor.”* A dollar of sand. When you find this, you keep it. And only when you’re ready, do you break it. But you have to do it right down the middle to claim the treasure.

*“Quand serai-je prêt?”* When will I be ready?

*He ruffles my hair. “Tu le sauras.”* You’ll know.

Standing on the shoreline, I skip rocks along the foamed waves flooding in at my feet. I never recalled the whole conversation from that day my father brought me here; only the look of the sea, a glimpse of sand, the flash of early sun peaking behind him, and the strange shell in his palm. It was on my last visit to the institution that he recalled our discussion verbatim during one of his rare and lucid moments. He told me the story of his son, Ezekiel, and repeated our exchange that day with surprising clarity just minutes before he asked me to search for him.

Whether it was a sign, or fate, or something else playing a factor, I found a sand dollar on the beach in pristine condition the day I broke ground on the house. Though he didn’t jog my memory until years after, the why of



what drew me to keep it when I found it was made clear. Somehow without knowing the details, I knew the significance of it.

It's ironic and cruel how the mind works, mine especially. Some memories I re-live regularly but would do anything to forget, the details so vivid, so ingrained, it can be torturous. While others, the memories I hold most dear, at times evade me. But it's my fickle memory that planted a seed that day and instinct that had me hiding that shell—that makes it all the more meaningful. And it wasn't until I looked up the significance of the 'treasure' that I understood his state of mind that day, a state very much like my own mindset now.

We were never close due to my mother fleeing from him because of his temper and mental illness—a diagnosed schizophrenic—but I feel some connection to him now. However, I've been fearful since the day I found him decades later, covered in his own shit and rambling frantic French at any stranger who passed him on that street in Paris. Seeing him in that state gave way to trepidation that one day I would suffer the same fate—that everyone who claimed to care for me would eventually abandon me—due to mental illness and lack of control. A fear that crippled me for years and kept me from investing, in believing in people fully.

To me, love was always conditional—until her.

My mother never fully understood the extent of my father's illness. It's my belief now that she assumed he'd just gone mad. Although that's partly true, it wasn't by conscious decision. It wasn't as if he'd let some dark side of him take over, which I believe was her stance on him up until the day she died. It was sickness that claimed him and the fear of inherited sickness that's plagued me for so long.

But at this stage in the game, the odds and my age are in my favor that I will never suffer his fate.

Retrieving the sun-bleached stone from where I hid it a lifetime ago, I start toward the winding cliff-side staircase that leads to my finish line. It's more apparent than ever that it was never the house I was waiting for. It was today, this moment of clarity—a day where my head and heart are no longer at odds.

If I had to sum up my life, my journey in one word, it would be today. I did it all for this moment. The irony is, I never knew through my plotting and scheming a day like this could exist for me. Fate threw me the cards

while Karma had its wicked way with me. Luck was never factored in, but it came through for this opportunist enough to know that at times, it was present, and others it had abandoned me completely.

*Noted, luck. And fuck you for it.*

But if I have to measure my life against the uncontrollable powers of what could be, at any time, for or against me, I'll have to bat them all away. I'll have to choose something else to measure my life by, a different entity all together, a cosmic force to trump all others, *her*.

Without her, my purpose would feel meaningless, as would this day.

Because she wasn't wrong. We, what we have and what we found in each other, is all that matters. The path I traveled to get here would amount to nothing without someone to reflect on it with. And there's no better storyteller, no better reflection of my worth than in the eyes of the woman who shared in my journey and helped me navigate my way through the worst of it.

She's my mirror, my judge, and has revealed herself as my sole purpose. She brought direction back to my deadening soul when I lost my way, and she continues to guide me back, a star too bright to ignore, no matter how far I stray.

There's no more strength in life than a man's purpose. For so many years, I thought mine was something else entirely—until she showed me the truth. I always considered myself a lone traveler until she blazed her way onto my path as my opponent, my lover, teacher, confidante, and best friend.

Any significant sum of every day I've spent on this Earth will always amount to her.

If I would have succeeded in throwing my purpose away, if I were successful at self-sabotage, I wouldn't know such a complete feeling existed. I would have never found such peace inside myself. The panic would have seized me long ago and made me sick to the point of no return.

The minute I step through the door of the house, I won't ever look back on the cruelty of the path or how many steps I took alone. Instead, I'll appreciate each bend of the journey, aside from a single blow so fucking merciless, I'll never be able to shake it off. Not ever. A loss so painful, there won't ever be a day it won't hurt.

*My brother.*

*Her savior.*

An irreversible scar that will never fully heal and proof of my weary travels. I'm halfway to the top of the cliff when my phone rattles in my pocket.

Lady Bird is in the nest.

However, I've already sensed her nearby. From above, I hear her shout my name as she races through the house; clear panic and excitement in her voice as I begin taking the stairs two at a time, heart thundering.

"I hear you, Mon Trésor," I reply, hastening my steps, chest pounding, the delicate offering safe in my hand. *I will always hear you.*

Already choked up with emotion, I nod at the two Ravens standing guard at the back of the property as I pass and enter through the back door. Beau greets me with his typical cock check before he allows me to run my fingers over his ears. I've learned to tolerate him over time, despite the fact that he's still ridiculously territorial over our woman.

"Bonjour, you greedy fucker."

Of all the planning I've done in my life, this is the idea I've obsessed most about coming to fruition. But if Beau's here with her, that means not only did she get my text, but she clearly understood the double entendre.

Meet me at the finish line.

Though I've never set foot in this house and have refused to without her, I pay it little attention as I stride past the wrought iron staircase railing, knowing exactly where I'll find her. I've dreamt this dream a thousand times over the years, and both my heart and head know the way.

A light breeze guides me down the long, Spanish-tiled corridor, past the sand-textured caramel walls. The house is just a few rooms short of a mansion, but fitting enough for a queen.

The details I soak in through passing are few because my sole focus is far more appealing. There's nothing but fire and need in my hammering chest, which is beating as hard as it was the last time I came to her with a request. Then, I was just as fucking terrified. Terrified she'd refuse to take me back. Terrified she believed my lies. Terrified I believed them for so long, I convinced myself they were true.

Twelve years ago, I forced her out of my life. In doing so, I lost myself, my purpose, my meaning, and my fucking mind.

Over half of those years I spent without her were due to fear, guilt, and self-condemnation.

Today, I come to her a changed man because of the years we lost and because of the years that brought us here. She may not have believed my lies, but I always believed *her truths*, in her love, in the surety of her heart.

Because she saved me.

Earning her and her heart has been my greatest accomplishment, making it my most prized possession.

A treasure any worthy thief will try to steal.

A treasure many *have* tried to take and failed. Because I made fucking sure of it. Before, I would never have gloated about such a feat of winning her because of the cost. Before, the guilt made it impossible to make such declarations.

Before . . . was too fucking painful.

I was selfish then, as I am now with her, without much apology, because the need outweighs the guilt—mostly.

After forty-four years of life, I'm positive she's the only thing I can't live without.

And for the next forty-three, I will *never* love another.

She's loved many. That's the nature of who she is. It's what shaped her, but I've been greedy with my heart, and it has one sole owner. Nothing has, or could ever, compare to what she stirs inside of me.

My selfishness, my ambitions, my jealousy, and greed almost cost me my future, cost me her.

Since she accepted me back, I've spent every single minute of our time together paying penance while biding my time for this day.

Sentence served.

My time is up, and I'm officially a free man.

Which is exactly why I have to find her. Right. Fucking. Now.

Napalm desire, along with the ache in my chest, has me hastening toward her as Beau struts next to me, determined to be the first to seek her affection.

“Fuck off, mutt, she's mine for the rest of the night.”

Beau continues to prance next to me, ignoring my order. It took over a month to ship him here and another six weeks in quarantine to get him to the house. Now it seems he's already staked his claim as the head of it.

“Go. Now. Or I'll never cook you another steak.”

His ears perk as if aware of the implication of my threat, and he stops when I do, circling at my feet. Snapping my fingers, he returns my gaze, unphased, before he struts off.

Fucker.

When I reach my destination, I find her exactly where I thought she'd be, perched on the balcony, her long, breeze-blown hair tangling around her face. Her hands lay flat on the thick clay ledge as she gazes out at the sparkling sea. She's dressed in white, the silky material dipping low in a V on her back, exposing every inch of her spine. Her skin golden from the sun, but it's the sight of the delicate wings along her shoulders that gets me hard. My thirsty eyes drink her in with a mix of desire and relief.

Getting her here was the final step of countless many.

I wait for her to recognize I'm near, and within a second of me standing at the door, I see her tense in awareness. Furious, watery, dark-blue eyes find mine as I take her in, emotion clogging my throat.

We've come so far since that day in the parking lot in Virginia, where all I had, literally, was the shirt on my back, an apology that would never be enough, and the fight she stirred within me to win her, to keep her, to reclaim what I stole all those years ago.

And we've come so far.

So. Fucking. Far.

From then to now seems like a lifetime ago.

In a sense, I've been waiting . . . but as of this moment, it's over.

In a matter of seconds, I will have done everything I set out to do. But it's the first day of my sentence that comes to mind when I breach the doorway and charge toward her. In the flash of the seconds it takes to reach her, I re-live it all.

“I was never really insane except upon occasions when my heart was touched.”—Edgar Allan Poe

# CHAPTER ONE

## Tobias

*Age Thirty-Eight*

*Hell, day one.*

The sudden weight on my chest jolts me into consciousness a second before hot, putrid breath hits my face. Opening my eyes, I'm met by the unmistakable shadow of a four-legged fucking devil.

The rabid dog stands proudly on my chest as snarl-induced saliva smacks me on the chin and his phlegmy sounding bark rings in my ears.

"Psychopathe." *Psychopath*. I grumble, batting away the crazed French bulldog, whose howl only increases the more I rouse and fight him off. He doesn't weigh much, but his bark indicates he's got an incredible self-image.

The fucker hasn't stopped growling at me since I walked through the front door yesterday, which Cecelia found highly amusing.

I did not.

Lifting to sit in the blackened room, I palm the empty space next to me on the bed. Beau, a namesake I truly wish she hadn't wasted on a dog, snaps his jaws where she slept next to me just hours before, sitting on his haunches, yapping, to make sure I fucking hate him.

And mere hours after our introduction, I decide I do.

Tense due to her disappearance, I glance out the window to see it's still dark, midnight dark.

I run a hand down my face, trepidation sneaking its way in.

I'd shown up after eight months, promised her the world, explanations, breakfast, and vowed to earn her. Instead, I got a brief tour of the house before I took a shower and passed right the fuck out. I don't remember

much after the relief of getting through the door, mingled with the hot steam relaxing me to a point I haven't been able to reach in years.

And after all those promises I made, I failed to deliver on every single one a mere hour after I uttered them—due to exhaustion. With the adrenaline gone, I crashed and crashed hard.

What in the fuck, Tobias?

Tossing off the covers, I dress in the clothes I arrived in and slip into my boots.

Searching the room for a clock, I spot a small one that looks antique—solid gold with bells on top—sitting on one of her bookshelves and manage to make out the time.

Four a.m.

The time stamp marks my first day of hell.

Not only that, I'm fairly certain she's freaking out.

*Merde.* Shit.

I hoped she would sleep through the night, but I knew better. Jet lagged from a thirty-six-hour trip, I passed out before we had a real conversation, went practically comatose before I could give her a single explanation of what kept me away. Briefly, I recall she changed into head-to-toe flannel pajamas while I was toweling off. This detail I remember because I found it amusing that she would go to such lengths to make sure I knew she wasn't going to reward me for returning—with her body. It didn't stop her at all from eye-fucking me when she thought I wasn't looking.

I'm sure she usually wakes early to open her café, but it's still too early for her to have gotten enough sleep. But I slept like a rock in those hours, better than I have in years because I was in her bed. I know she hasn't rested for the same reason.

Because of *me* and my grand entrance back into her life.

I may have gotten my foot in the door, but she's still got her hand on the knob, ready to slam it with me on the other side if I fuck up. And I'm off to an amazing start.

I groan in frustration as Beau continues to shriek at me in what seems to be a canine declaration of territorial war until finally, I bark back.

“Putain, tais-toi!” *Shut the fuck up!* Immediately, Beau goes silent, head cocked, beady black eyes questioning the authority in my tone.



“Couché.” *Get down.* Beau obeys without issue. He’s got the simple commands down pat. Commands he understands clearly, in *French*.

The pointy-eared dog bounces around my heels as my eyes adjust to the dark. Though I’m anxious to get to her—wherever she may be—I can’t help but glance around her bedroom out of curiosity. This room far different than the one we got acquainted in. The room in her father’s home where I manipulated her, fucked her, damaged her before I began to worship her, love her.

She said her place wasn’t much, but every part of the space has been touched somehow by color, inspiration, or houses some sort of creature comfort.

It’s as if she’s carefully designed every room in this house both as sanctuary and proof of her evolution. I can see it, all the subtle pieces of her in this house, in the artwork, in her choices.

Turning on a mosaic-colored Tiffany-style reading lamp on her repurposed desk, I sift through some hardbacks she has yet to shelve and eye a few of her handwritten notes next to a stack of bills, one a to-do list.

Organize a Thanksgiving food drive. (Drop at Meggie’s)

Join the Chamber of Commerce.

Take a cooking class?

Hot Yoga?

Girls’ Night with Marissa?

Book Club?

Entertain Mr. Handsome?

I tame the surge of fire that threatens and decide not to start our morning conversation with ‘Who the fuck is Mr. Handsome?’

Everything about my doghouse predicament has me batting away my natural instincts to dominate, so I can make peace with her before I declare any sort of territorial war. And by war, I mean the full-fledged battle to make fucking sure we do everything imaginable to retrieve what we were beneath the ruins of our *last* one.

Perturbed by what I’ve discovered, I make my way toward the kitchen in search of her. When I find it empty, my unease kicks up, but I can’t help my

grin at the sight of the French press sitting on the counter. And that's when my chest begins to ache due to the double-edged sword that is my situation.

I might be here, with her, but not in the way I want to be.

Patience is crucial in winning her back, but also my Achilles' heel.

It's been far too long since we were truly together. Merciless years since the day we were last wrapped up in the other while confessing our love in Roman's back yard before being torn apart by the worst of circumstances. Some of which I myself created.

From that point, years ago, to this one, along with all of the hurdles I've dealt with in the past eight months, all the obstacles I've battled in order to get here, to this point, through her door, feel justified.

But even with her near, she's not *with me*. Not yet.

Doubt creeps in when I glance around the kitchen for any obvious place for a note and find nothing. On instinct alone, I know she's not inside the house. Opening the back door for Beau, a cold gust of wind slaps my face as panic starts to set in.

Did she leave?

Sweat gathers at my forehead as I stare down her Napoléon-complexed mutt as he drops his morning deuce, all the while snarling at me. It's clear we're going to have issues, but the bigger one has blood pounding at my temples.

Could I blame her if she did leave?

Yesterday was a big step, but as the high of my sudden appearance wore off and reality set in, I could feel her distancing herself for protection.

Monitoring Beau from the porch, I blow into my hands. With Indian summer fleeting, a cold snap seems to have arrived overnight, much like me, without ample warning. Autumn chill seeps into my bones as I step off the porch and further into the yard, relieved when I spot her. She's hunched over her garden, a shop light illuminating where she works in nothing but her flannel pajamas and black Uggs.

The urge to touch her, taste her, fuck her, reclaim her, thrums through me—a low-lying demand I refuse to entertain even though I'm aching everywhere, and I know she feels the same need.

It's who we are.

With us, looking is love, fighting is love, fucking is love, and even now, while we muddle through our collective but distinctly different fears, it's

love.

A fact she refused to let me deny. A fact I've come to embrace. The fuel I need for the fight I'm in for. *"No matter how we came to be, we were and still are. You stole my heart, and you let me love you with it, and you made damn sure I knew where its home was."*

I need to believe it. I have to believe it. Her words are my driving force. It may have been eight months, but the journey to get back to her has felt like an eternity.

Everything between us has always come down to love, as she so boldly pointed out until I had no choice but to face it fully and give in to the truth.

The truth being that I love her so fiercely, that I can't stand the idea of letting this drag out another day—fuck, another hour. But I will. For her, I'll find the patience.

And my demands will be few.

On the drive home, she glanced over at me in the way of a stranger she was trying to understand, posture guarded. It's the same rigid posture she's displaying now as she stabs into the dirt with a small shovel. She's on the offensive.

When I approach, I know it's just a matter of time before she'll sense me near. She always has, as I have her.

Beau, the greedy fuck, makes it to her first.

"Hey baby," she murmurs to her dog, her voice raw, as she takes off a soiled gardening glove to run her fingers down his back. She doesn't bother to glance my way when she speaks. "Did he wake you?"

"Doesn't matter. It's freezing out here. I'll get you a coat."

"I'm fine." She slides her glove back on and resumes her work, tossing a patch of dirt to the side before grabbing a container of mixed mums.

"Did you have a dream?" I ask, knowing it's some of what's bothering her.

"Don't I always?" She replies in a biting tone.

I kneel next to her as she continues to stab at the dirt.

"Need help?"

"No. I've got it."

"Talk to me," I urge, studying her profile in the yellow light.

She digs and stabs—as does her silence—and I do nothing to stop her. She's nervous or hurting or both, and that's the last thing I want.

*Day one, Tobias.*

“Talk to me, Cecelia.”

“Maybe I don’t want to.” Her reply is low, so low I’m not sure if she wanted me to hear. But I don’t bother armoring up. She’s already won. Today’s not the day to brawl. It’s a day to surrender. I’ve missed her so fucking much. Over the years and as the months passed, I sometimes wondered if I imagined some of my need, my affection for her. That theory was blown all to hell the minute I stepped into the boardroom to face off with her after years of separation. It was just another lie I told myself in the days and months after I sent her away. Trying to reason with love is fucking pointless. It doesn’t care about your reasons, right or wrong. Love has no regard for circumstance, nor does it give a fuck what state it puts you in. It’s a relentless and unforgiving emotion that will never let you lie to yourself.

Fixed on her profile, in desperate need of a hit of her ocean blues, I sit back on the heels of my boots, settling in for the first battle of many.

“Why now?” She asks, palming a mum from the container and placing it in the waiting soil. “You wait until I’m settled into a *new life*. A new life that doesn’t include you. That doesn’t suit you at all. Why?”

“I had to . . .” I exhale a weary breath when she gives me the side-eye. “No matter what I tell you right now, it will sound like an excuse, but I do have reasons, a lot of them. And I’ll give them all to you.”

She briefly stills the fingers pressing the soil around the plant. “I’m listening.”

“I’m sorry I fell asleep. That’s the last thing I wanted to do. I’m jet-lagged.”

She doesn’t bother asking where I was. She’s too used to not being in the know. Or worse, she doesn’t care.

“I was in Dubai on Exodus business. We just acquired a company. It was my last task as acting CEO before Shelly took over. I haven’t slept in days. When I tied things up, I came straight to you and—”

“Straight to me?” She scoffs. “You know, you’re right, Tobias, anything you say right now will sound like an excuse. You should probably go back to sleep.”

“Let me explain.”

“I don’t know if I want your explanations right now.”

“Well, you deserve them, and it’s fucking cold out here. Let’s go inside and talk.”

She ignores my request and continues her task as though she didn’t hear me.

“I’m not leaving,” I whisper softly, knowing I’m getting nowhere. She doesn’t want to hear me, not now. I stand and do the opposite of that declaration, entering the house and heading back into her bedroom. I grab a hoodie from her chest of drawers and make my way back outside just as she empties another container. She eyes me when I thrust the thick shirt out to her.

“I’m fine.”

“Cecelia, it’s freezing.”

She stands, pulls off her gloves, and yanks the sweatshirt from my hands before tugging it down over her head, the university logo a glaring reminder that I missed her through four years of college, and the summers she spent in France in between, and the years after. A painful reminder she experienced a lot of living without me. Even with a daily report of her well-being and what I could stomach about her personal life, I don’t know most of the intimate details. I couldn’t handle knowing them, though I got overly curious more than once and drank myself stupid, setting my progress back. She stands in front of me now, eyes wary, and even so, it’s lightning in my veins being so close. Our attraction tangible, a constant pulse thrumming between us since the day we met. Even in the murky yellow light, I can see the faint freckles on her nose. She’s symmetrical perfection, from the shape of her face to the tiny divot in her chin. I move to reach for her, and she steps away.

She’s swinging hard already, and I feel every blow. Shoving my hands in my jeans, I toe a loose rock that edges her garden back into place with my boot. “What was the dream about?”

She bites her lip, lifting her faraway gaze when she speaks. “I guess if I had to Freud it up, the interpretation would be that I don’t *really* know you.” She resumes her place on her knees. “I don’t know your brand of toothpaste.”

“That’s an easy fix. What else happened?”

“I don’t remember.”

“You’re lying. I’m willing to bet you’re out here because of that dream. Because *I know you*.”

She lets out a labored breath. “I need to get this done.”

“It’s called multi-tasking,” I again kneel and nudge her to the side to share workspace. I grab another shovel from the old-fashioned wooden toolbox sitting on the stone sidewalk behind us.

“It’s early, you’re tired, and I don’t need your help.”

“We’re going to be together. Today, tomorrow, and the day after, Cecelia.”

“Just . . . back off, Tobias.” The shake in her voice tells me all I need to know as she stands and walks over to a large bag of potting soil before dragging it my way. I don’t help because I’m fairly sure she will stab me with her little shovel if I try to come anywhere near her.

She’s angry. I expected it, but it hurts just the same. I’d forced my way into her space yesterday, much like I did when we got together, and I no longer want that to be the case, but the urge is strong.

She hangs her head as if she feels the conflict in me, although I didn’t flinch. “I don’t want to fight, Tobias.”

“Since when are you so fucking afraid of confrontation?”

“I’m not afraid.” She rips through the thick plastic easily, a very, very, angry gardener. “I just don’t have anything to say to you right now.”

“How many lies are we going to start with?”

Her dark blue eyes ice over. “I made a *life* here. Temporary as it may be, I’m not leaving it *for you*. Not again.”

“Well, I can see why. You’re on the fast track to one *exciting* life. Hot yoga? The Chamber of Commerce?” I fist my hands at my sides. This is an argument for a different time.

“Of course, you went snooping. Isn’t that just like you to come in and invade my privacy after *years* apart.”

“You knew who you were falling for.”

“Doesn’t mean I wanted to.”

“Time and separation don’t matter when it comes to us. That’s clear now.”

“But it does. It does *matter*. It matters to me. I know I agreed to try, but what exactly are you thinking will happen? That I’ll just fall back into

place, no questions asked, legs spread, heart wide open? I'm not that girl anymore, Tobias, and I'm no longer that woman, either."

"This is you we're talking about, so I fucking know better. If you weren't capable of being that woman anymore, the one who forgives and loves the way only you can, I wouldn't have slept in your bed last night. As far as plans go, I don't know because we haven't talked yet the way we need to, or made a single fucking plan, *together*. We're now in negotiations. What. Was. The. Fucking. Dream?"

"What else would it be?"

"I'm not leaving you. Not today, not tomorrow, and not the day after. Hell will freeze over. I'll eat a McRib first."

Wrong thing to say.

"You think this is funny?" She glares at me, covered in soil, her eyes gleaming with accusation and residual anger.

"I think a sense of humor may make this a lot less bloody, but it's clear by the look on your face you don't share that opinion."

"You lived with her." The admission is just above a whisper.

"You dreamt about Alicia?"

"She *knew* you. You *let* her know you. *She* knew your brand of toothpaste. *She* probably picked out your fucking ties in the morning. Things you *let* her know."

"Don't," I shake my head, hating the direction this is going, "don't do that."

"You threw me away, but you *lived* with her. I never even got to see where you lived."

"Yes, you did. You saw the only place I ever considered home. The shithole my aunt owned at the edge of town. That was the only home I knew in Triple Falls. The rest were just places to rest my head between business trips. I haven't had a real home since my parents died, and I didn't *live* with her."

"She made it seem like you did."

"And I let you think that."

"Of course, you did," she lets out an exasperated laugh.

I can't help the bitter edge with my delivery. "Glass houses, Cecelia. Need I remind you that you were wearing a fucking two-carat engagement

rock when you drove back to Triple after leaving your *live-in* fiancé? Or is he still an afterthought?”

*Chill, Tobias. Right fucking now.*

I close my eyes, dreading seeing the evidence of that cutting comment.

“How dare you,” she croaks, her voice barely audible. “So, it’s my fault? I had to move on. It’s not like you gave me a choice.”

“I know,” I swallow. “I’m sorry. That was jealousy speaking. Ask me anything.”

She looks away, and her silence only makes the ache grow.

“We have to talk about this. We’ve wasted enough fucking time.”

“We?”

“Fine, *me*. Merde!” I clench my fists. “If you want to play the blame game, I take it all, all of it, okay? As far as living arrangements, I . . . *we*, have a condo in Charlotte, a townhouse in Paris, an apartment in Spain, and a hideaway in Germany.”

“You and Alicia?”

“Are you fucking serious right now? We, as in *you and me*. She was never my future, Cecelia.”

She seems to mull it over. “And the finish line?”

I nod. “Still there. Never set foot in it. And you and I practically lived in Roman’s house together.”

“It’s not the same. And that was all an illusion anyway, wasn’t it?”

“No, it wasn’t. But what you had was just a dream. I know they feel real to you, but it was just a dream.”

“Or a warning I should take seriously.”

Stab. I feel it everywhere. But I’ll let her have this fight and a thousand more.

“We weren’t together long,” I offer and cringe when I see it does shit to help.

“Neither were we if we’re keeping score and if *dating* is what you want to call it.”

“What we did was not dating, don’t downplay what’s brought us back to this point. We fell in love, and it devastated us and everyone around us to the point we destroyed lives, including our own. And I’m to blame. But here we are, and we still love each other, more so now because we’re wise enough to know what we’ve lost. It’s not going to take a day to get over the



things I've said and done, the lies I've told, or the shit we're going to have to work through. But I'm owning my part, the way you asked me to, the way you need me to, the way *I need to*. And all I'm hoping for is that you ask me what you need to, so I can own up to it, and we don't waste any more time."

She sits back on her heels and drops her gaze. "Fine. Then start with what you promised. The truth. Why did you come back now?"

"A lot of it has to do with carrying out plans I set into motion over twenty years ago, especially Tyler's position in the White House. I didn't expect it to take so fucking long, and the longer it took, the more I was sure I had to get everything off my plate in order to do this right. I had to heavily vet the few I trusted to take over with Sean, so you and I could . . ." I groan in frustration. "The last thing I wanted to do was come after you and turn around and leave while we were sorting ourselves out . . ." Anger surges at the hell I went through after she left. "And you disappeared for seven fucking weeks before I found you."

"I had every reason to."

"For seven weeks, I went off the rails because you didn't leave a trace," I clench my fists on my thighs in an attempt to temper my anger. "You made sure of it."

"Cash," she supplies. "It goes a long way, as you well know. That's why this house and the diner *legally* belong to my mother." She stops her digging. "Maybe I didn't want to be found."

"I was losing my fucking mind with worry."

"I was no longer yours to worry about. You made sure of it."

"You've always been mine. I've had eyes on you since you were eleven years old, Cecelia, no matter how I felt about you. Maybe I deserved the hell those weeks were not knowing, but there will never be a time in your life you're not under my protection. I failed you once, and I'll do everything in my fucking power not to fail you again. Believe me, by the time I arrived yesterday, I made every effort to make sure you had *no one* but *me* coming for you."