PLOT SUMMARY

**Chapter Eight**

**Rowan**

"I know life sucks sometimes, but can things just finally make sense at this point?" I mean, what's the point of reconnecting with Mia or even meeting her in the first place if she's never going to give in to her emotions?

It’s early, too early for me to be at this level of agitation, but ever since Mia sneaked out on me, I’ve been on edge.

I stride to the conference room, the click of my shoes against the marble floor echoing in the usually silent space. The large glass windows offer a panoramic view of the city, but the sight does nothing to soothe the tension building in my chest.

Ethan is already in the here, flipping through some documents, but when he looks up, there's a smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth. "You're here early, "his tone is annoyingly casual.

Annoyed, I drop my briefcase on the table with more force than necessary. “Is that a problem?” This only makes this pain in my ass to chuckle, shaking his head. “Not at all. Just surprised, is all. You’re usually fashionably late.”

I glare at him, not in the mood for his teasing today. “I have things to do.”

“Like meeting with a certain event planner?” he teases, leaning back in his chair, arms crossed. “You’ve been particularly interested in this one, Rowan. It’s almost like you’re looking forward to seeing her.”

“I’m interested in ensuring the gala is a success,” I snap, my voice sharper than I intended. “Nothing more.”

Ethan raises an eyebrow, clearly unconvinced. “Sure, sure. You might want to work on your poker face, though. You’ve been way too eager about these meetings, especially when Mia is involved.”

My jaw tightens, and I force myself to hold back from saying something that would wipe that mischievous smile off his face. I won’t let him get under my skin. “I’m focused on the job, Ethan. Don’t read into things that aren’t there.”

He chuckles again but thankfully doesn't push it further. "Whatever you say, boss."

Turning away from him, I stare out the window, trying to calm the restlessness gnawing at me.

*He’s right, though.* I have been looking forward to seeing Mia. More than I should. And that realization pisses me off. Since when did I start acting like some love-struck fool?

I’ve spent years building walls around myself, keeping everyone at a distance, and I’ll be damned if I let one night—*one incredible, earth-shattering night*—undo all of that.

I need to snap out of this and get my head back in the game.

I hear the door open, and instinctively, I glance over my shoulder. Mia walks in with Jenna right beside her, both of them carrying folders and tablets.

Mia's elegance hits me first. She is wearing a simple black dress that hugs her curves in all the right places, her dark hair cascading over her shoulders. The neckline of her dress gives me a glimpse of her cleavages, allowing the anger I felt earlier to be replaced by want.

I raise my eyes to her delicate neck, her complexion a flawless contrast to her hair, and somehow, my eyes rest on her lips. She's pouting defiantly, but somehow, that excites me.

Our eyes meet, and something flickers in her soft gaze—something that makes my stomach tighten with anticipation and annoyance.

"Good morning," Mia greets, her voice calm and professional, but there's an edge to it that I can't quite place.

"Morning," I reply, my tone clipped. I'm not about to let her see how much she's gotten under my skin. Jenna and I exchange greetings as well, while Ethan smiles and welcomes them.

We all take our seats around the large oval table, and I nod for them to begin.

Jenna starts by pulling up the presentation on the large screen, her voice steady as she walks us through the basic outline of their plans for the gala. “We’ve decided to go with a classic, elegant theme—lots of whites, beige, and champagne golds. There'll only be subtle touches of black in ribbons and some ornaments. We believe it’ll evoke a sense of timelessness and sophistication, which aligns with the foundation’s image.”

I glance at Mia as Jenna speaks, trying to read her expression. She seems focused, but there's a tension in her posture, as if she's bracing herself for something.

Maybe she’s expecting me to tear apart their ideas. *Well, she’s not wrong.*

When Jenna finishes, I don’t waste any time before diving in. “This is… basic,” I say, my voice flat. “It’s regular and too safe.”

Mia’s eyes narrow slightly, but she remains silent, letting Jenna respond.

“We thought classic would be the best approach,” Jenna says, sounding a bit uncertain now. “It’s elegant and—”

"It's boring," I cut in, my gaze locking on Mia. "This gala is supposed to make an impact, to stand out. And this?" I gesture towards the screen. "This isn't it. We need something more innovative, more… memorable."

Mia finally speaks up, her tone measured but firm. “The goal of the gala is to raise money for the foundation, not to throw a lavish party that overshadows the cause. We thought a more understated approach would resonate better with the guests, keeping the focus on the foundation’s mission.”

Her words are logical, reasonable even, but something about her tone irks me. It’s like she’s questioning my judgment.

"I didn't hire you to manage my finances," I say, my voice dropping a notch, making it clear I'm not in the mood for arguments. "I hired you to make this gala unforgettable. The venue, the decorations, and everything else need to reflect the high standards of this foundation. We're not here to penny-pinch."

Mia's eyes flash with defiance, and for a split second, I think she's going to push back. Instead, she takes a deep breath and says, " I apologize for not meeting your expectations, but we're only working within the budget you provided, Mr. Slade. We're trying to maximize the impact of the funds raised, not overspend on things that aren't necessary."

I lean back in my chair, crossing my arms over my chest. “If the venue and decor are mediocre, no one’s going to be motivated to open their wallets. The guests need to be impressed the moment they walk through the door. They need to feel like they’re part of something grand, something worth their money.”

“So, you want us to prioritize the appearance of the event over the actual cause?” Mia pushes, obviously feeling I'm intentionally trying to make them annoy them.

I can see the fire in her eyes. I do want to show them that I'm the boss, but at the same time, I need the decorations to be unusual.

I lean forward, my gaze is intense as it locks onto hers. "I want you to understand that presentation matters, Mia. People don't just donate out of the goodness of their hearts. They donate because they feel inspired, moved. And sometimes, that starts with the environment we create."

There's a moment of silence, thick with tension. Ethan shifts uncomfortably in his seat, glancing between us, clearly sensing the brewing conflict. It seems he's about to say something before his phone rings, and he excuses himself by taking his call outside.

Mia finally breaks the silence, her voice lower now, almost resigned. “No problem, Mr Slade. We'll revisit the venue and decor options. Though I still believe that our approach to the gala’s budget should reflect the foundation’s values.”

I nod curtly, satisfied that she gets the point now. “Do that. And I want to see the new plans by the end of the week.”

The rest of the meeting is a back-and-forth between us, a battle of wills.

Mia is stubborn, I'll give her that, but she's also intelligent. She makes valid points about the allocation of resources and about ensuring the money raised goes directly to those in need rather than being wasted on superficial things. And while I can respect that, I can't let her undermine the importance of making a solid impression.

And a part of me wishes I could delay the meeting for a couple more hours so I can spend more time around her. But the meeting came to an end, and Mia and Jenna agreed to use a different venue with grander decorations. Nothing short of perfection.

By the time we wrap up, there's a palpable tension in the room. "I notice you guys didn't drive, " Ethan prys.

"The car is at the mechanic's. " Jenna explained.

"Oh, then I hope you don't mind me dropping you off. " Ethan offers, but I can't let him. I need more time around her. I should drive them.

"Remember you have a meeting in twenty minutes?" I lie, hoping Ethan plays along. " I'll drive them, don't bother about that." I can tell Ethan is suspicious, but he doesn't argue; instead, he gives me a knowing look before excusing himself.

"I'll drive you both," I repeat as I turn to them, not leaving room for argument. Jenna agrees almost too eagerly while Mia's expression shifts from surprise to what looks like annoyance.

It’s a small victory, but I’ll take it.

As we walk to the parking lot, I can feel Mia's eyes on me, probably trying to figure out what my game is. The truth is, I'm not entirely sure myself. All I know is that I'm not ready to let her walk away just yet.

We reach my car, and I open the door for them, waiting as Jenna climbs in first. Mia hesitates for a fraction of a second before following suit.

I slide into the driver’s seat and start the engine, stealing glances at her in the rearview mirror. There’s a storm brewing behind those eyes of hers, and despite myself, I’m drawn to it, to her.

The ride is mostly silent, with Jenna making small talk to fill the gaps, but I'm only half-listening. My thoughts keep drifting back to Mia and her resistance to me, to the way she stood her ground during the meeting, unflinching.

It's really infuriating how much she gets under my skin. And yet, the more she tries to push me away, the stronger I hold on to her. There's just something about that fire in her that I can't shake, and it's driving me crazy. I

As I pull up in front of their office building, Jenna thanks me for the ride, stepping out with a cheerful goodbye. Mia lingers for a moment, her hand on the door handle as she turns to look at me.

“Thank you for the ride,” she says, her voice soft but laced with something I can’t quite place.

“Don’t mention it,” I reply, my tone more gruff than I intended.

She hesitates like she wants to say something more, but then she just nods and steps out, closing the door behind her.

"Mia, wait..." I begin, but she cuts me off.

"You really don't have to say anything, Rowan."

I watch as she and Jenna walk into the building, my hands gripping the steering wheel tighter than necessary.

I wait to see if she'll change her mind and come out, or maybe Jenna will calm her down, but after a few minutes, it is obvious she doesn't want to talk. And that, more than anything, pisses me off.

**Chapter Nine**

**Mia**

Planning this particular charity event has been both a blessing and a curse.

On the one hand, it's given me something to focus on, a way to channel all my nervous energy into something productive, but on the other hand, it's meant working closely with Rowan Slade— more like working closely with a psycho who seems to have a talent for getting under my skin without even trying.

The past two weeks have been a whirlwind of decisions, meetings, and late-night brainstorming sessions. Jenna and I have been practically living at the foundation’s office, trying to get everything in order.

The staff here is incredible—friendly, efficient, and always willing to help out with whatever we need. But Rowan? Rowan is a different ballgame, especially when he wakes up on the wrong side of the bed.

He’s infuriating. Arrogant. And yet, somehow, I can’t stop thinking about him. It’s like he’s lodged himself in my mind, and no matter how hard I try, I can’t dislodge him.

We argue at every point—about everything. Lately, however, those arguments have taken on a different tone. There's an undeniable pull between us that I can't quite explain, a charged atmosphere that turns every disagreement into something… more.

Jenna calls it flirting. I call it insanity.

Every time he walks into the room, I feel my pulse quicken, my skin tingling with an awareness that I wish I didn’t have. And then there’s the baby. The secret I’ve been carrying around like a ticking time bomb, knowing that eventually, it’s going to explode in my face.

I know I have to tell him. Sooner rather than later. The thought of facing him, of seeing the look on his face when he realizes the truth, terrifies me. But I don’t have a choice. We’re going to be working together on this project for months, and there’s no way I can hide my pregnancy forever.

My body is already starting to change in ways I can’t control, and it won’t be long before it’s obvious to everyone.

Today is just like any other day—another meeting at the foundation center. Jenna and I arrive a few minutes early, as usual, and I spend those minutes trying to steady my nerves.

Rowan is already there when we walk into the conference room, sitting at the head of the table with his usual air of authority. He looks up as we enter, his eyes searching mine for a split second before he turns his attention back to the papers in front of him.

“Where’s Ethan?” Jenna asks, glancing around the room as she takes her seat.

“He had to step out for a meeting,” Rowan replies, his voice clipped. “It’ll just be the three of us today.”

I swallow hard, forcing myself to sit down across from him. Being in a room alone with Rowan is the last thing I want right now. With Ethan around, it didn't have to feel so... personal. But today, there's too much at stake, too many emotions bubbling just beneath the surface, and I don't trust myself not to say something I'll regret.

Jenna's here, but that doesn't help.

“We’ve been looking at the best venues in town,” Jenna starts, pulling out a folder full of options we’ve spent the past week compiling. “Mia and I narrowed it down to a few that we think you'd like, and it'll work well for the event.”

She slides the folder across the table to Rowan, who flips it open and begins to leaf through the pages. I watch him carefully, trying to gauge his reaction, but his expression is as unreadable as ever.

He pauses on one of the pages, his brow furrowing slightly. “This one,” he says, tapping a finger on the photo of a charming, historic building. “It’s not good enough to be on this list.”

My heart sinks.

I spent hours researching that venue, thinking it would be one of our best options for the event. The architecture is beautiful, the location is ideal, and it's within our budget. But, of course, Rowan finds it lacking.

“What’s wrong with it?” I ask, unable to keep the defensiveness out of my voice.

“It’s too small,” Rowan replies, his tone dismissive. “And the decor is outdated. We’re hosting a high-profile event here, not a community bake sale.”

Rowan's eyes snap up to meet mine. The room is silent for a moment, the weight of his words hanging heavy in the air. I can feel Jenna's eyes on me, urging me to back down and let this go. But I can't. Not this time.

“You’re not the only one who cares about this event, Rowan,” I say, my voice trembling slightly despite my best efforts to keep it steady.

Rowan’s gaze softens just a fraction, but his expression remains stern. “I’m not saying you don't want it to be successful. I’m saying we should use the resources we have to their full potential. You’ve got good ideas, Mia, but you’re holding back. Don’t. If we’re going to do this, let’s do it right.”

For a moment, I’m caught off guard by the intensity in his voice. Despite my frustration with him, I respect that.

Just then, I feel a wave of dizziness wash over me, the room tilting slightly as I grip the edge of the table. My vision blurs for a second, and I blink rapidly, trying to steady myself.

Jenna is now talking, but her voice fades into the background as I struggle to focus on the conversation, my thoughts scattered like leaves in the wind. This can't be happening now. Not in front of Rowan.

I’ve managed to hold it together this long, but my body seems to have other plans. I glance over at Jenna, who’s still talking, oblivious to the way my hands are trembling under the table.

My stomach churns, and I know I need to get out of here before I embarrass myself. Forcing a tight smile, I push my chair back and stand up, the sound of my chair scraping the floor and my movement making my head spin.

“Excuse me,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. “I need to use the restroom.”

Rowan’s eyes snap to me, a flicker of concern crossing his face, but I don’t give him a chance to respond. I turn and make my way toward the door, each step feeling like I’m walking through quicksand.

The corridor outside the conference room seems to stretch out before me, the walls narrowing as I try to focus on putting one foot in front of the other.

I'm slowly losing my balance. I reach for the door handle to steady myself, but my vision darkens at the edges, and I feel the strength drain from my body.

The last thing I see is the polished tile floor rushing up to meet me before everything goes black.

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The first thing I sense when I wake up is the sterile scent of antiseptic. My eyes flutter open, and the harsh fluorescent lights overhead make me squint as I try to make sense of my surroundings. The lights in are too bright. They cast an unnatural pallor over everything, making it all feel surreal.

My head is pounding, and there's a slight pressure at the back of my neck that I wish I could massage away, but my arms feel too heavy to lift.

I blink a few times, trying to clear the fog from my mind, but the haze of panic quickly replaces the drowsiness.

I was in the middle of a meeting, arguing with Rowan as usual, when everything started to spin. I excused myself, just needing a moment to steady my breath, to stop my heart from racing.

But now I'm waking up here, in this hospital bed, with Jenna’s worried face staring down at me.

“Are you okay?” Jenna’s voice is soft, but there’s a sharp edge to her tone, the kind that tells me I’ve scared her half to death.

“I’m fine,” I manage, though my voice is a raspy whisper. I can feel the dryness in my throat, a sure sign I’ve been out for a while.

“How long have I been out?” My voice is hoarse and dry.

“About a couple of hours,” Jenna replies, offering me a small smile. “You scared the hell out of me, you know that?”

“I’m sorry,” I murmur. “I didn’t mean to… I should’ve been more careful.”

Jenna shakes her head, her smile fading into a look of stern concern. "Mia, you've been overstressing yourself, and I feel like it's my fault. You're pregnant, for God's sake. You need to slow down."

Jenna narrows her eyes at me, the worry in them deepening into something more like frustration. “You shouldn’t be overworking yourself like this, Mia. Especially not in your condition.”

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. *My condition.* The baby. I had been so careful to keep my pregnancy hidden, but fainting in the middle of a meeting? That’s the kind of slip-up that could ruin everything.

“Rowan,” I croak out, my heart now beating faster than it ever should, considering my condition. “Does he know?”

Jenna hesitates for just a second, but it's enough to send my mind spiraling into panic. "The nurses… they asked about any medical conditions before they treated you. They asked if you've been going for antenatal checkups and mentioned your pregnancy."

My hands, now free of the weight I felt before, fly to my stomach as if trying to protect the secret that’s no longer just mine. “Oh God… Jenna, does he know?”

"Not exactly," Jenna says carefully. "But he was the one who drove you here, Mia. We both brought you here, scared to death. He stayed the entire time, asking the doctors questions, and when they mentioned how far along you were, he… well, he's not stupid. "

I reach up to touch my forehead, finding an IV needle taped to the back of my hand.

I can feel the blood draining from my face as a million scenarios play out in my mind. None of them end well. What would he say? What would he do? Rowan isn’t the type to back down from a fight, and if he knows I’ve been hiding something this big…

The door opens before I can finish that thought. And there he is, filling the doorway like a storm cloud, his presence dominating the small hospital room.

His usually composed features are hard and unreadable. My heart skips a beat, and it's not just from the lingering dizziness.

“Jenna,” Rowan says quietly, his voice carrying a note of command that brooks no argument. “Can you give us a moment?”

Jenna looks at me, her eyes full of concern, but she knows better than to argue with Rowan.

She nods slightly, squeezing my hand before she reluctantly leaves the room, casting one last worried glance over her shoulder as she goes.

And now it’s just us.

The air in the room seems to thicken with every passing second. I want to say something, anything, but my throat is too dry, and my mind is too full of all the words I can’t say.

Rowan steps closer, his gaze never leaving mine. There’s no anger in his eyes, no outrage, just an intensity that’s almost worse. I’ve seen him angry, cold, dismissive even, but this… this calm is terrifying.

“Mia,” he says finally, his voice as steady as the ground I wish would just swallow me up. “How far along are you?”

I open my mouth, but the words won’t come out. *How do I even begin to explain?* The truth is too raw, too dangerous.

But I can see from the look on his face that he won’t let this go. He’s not the type to ignore something this important, and he’s certainly not the type to be kept in the dark.

“About three months,” I finally whisper, my voice barely audible.

He nods slowly, his expression unreadable. “And when were you planning on telling me?”

I flinch at the accusation in his tone. I knew this moment would come eventually, but I had hoped to delay it for as long as possible. “I was going to tell you,” I say, but the words sound weak, even to my own ears. “I just… I didn’t know how.”

His eyes narrow, a flicker of something darker passing through them. “You didn’t know how? Or you didn’t want to?”

The accusation stings, but I know he has every right to be angry. I’ve been keeping this secret, not just from him but from everyone.

I’ve been hiding, pretending that I could somehow control the outcome. And now, here we are.

“Rowan,” I start, but he cuts me off with a sharp gesture.

"Is it mine?" The question is blunt, but his tone is laced with something that's almost desperation. The way he's looking at me as if the truth could destroy him. It makes my heart ache.

I nod slowly, not trusting myself to speak.

He lets out a breath I didn’t realize he was holding, his shoulders relaxing just slightly. But the tension is still there, lurking beneath the surface.

"Why didn't you tell me?" His voice is still controlled, but there's an edge to it that makes it clear he won't accept any more evasions.

“I was scared,” I admit, finally letting the truth spill out. “Scared of what you’d say, what you’d do. I didn’t know how you’d react, and I didn’t want to risk making things worse between us.”

“Worse?” He echoes, his brows furrowing. “You think this makes things worse?”

I can see the hurt in his eyes now, and it tears at me. “Rowan, I… I didn’t know how to handle this. I didn’t want to burden you with something you didn’t ask for.”

“Burden me?” He repeats, his voice rising slightly. “Mia, this isn’t just about you. You should have told me. I had a right to know.”

"I know," I whisper, my voice trembling. "I know, and I'm sorry. I was just trying to protect you. I didn't want you to feel trapped like you had to take responsibility for something you weren't ready for."

His eyes flash with something I can’t quite place. “You think I wouldn’t take responsibility for my own child? You think I’d just walk away?”

The pain in his voice is almost unbearable, and the ocean of tears I've been trying to hold back comes pouring with reckless abandon. "I didn't know what to think, Rowan. I didn't know if you'd even want this… if you'd want me."

For a moment, there’s nothing but silence between us, the weight of my words hanging heavy in the air. Then, Rowan steps closer, his hand reaching out to gently tilt my chin up so I’m looking directly into his eyes.

“I want to make one thing very clear,” he says, his voice low and intense. “You are not a burden to me. This baby is not a burden. I’m not going to walk away from this, from you.”

"You can't just do that.. it doesn't work that way, Rowan. I'm scared. I'm so scared. I am not even in control of anything happening right now. Everything can't just be okay simply because you're fine with it."

**Chapter Ten**

**Rowan**

All I can do is stare at Mia, lying there in that hospital bed, her face pale and drawn, and think of how drastically everything has just changed.

Mia is pregnant.

The words echo in my mind, a dissonant refrain that refuses to settle. My thoughts scramble, trying to find some footing, some explanation that makes sense of this chaos.

I try to process the information, but all I can feel is this overwhelming mix of disbelief, anger, and something else—something raw and desperate that I can’t even name. My heart is pounding, and I have to force myself to take a breath before I can speak.

And if my calculations are right—if the timeline fits—then the baby she’s carrying could very well be mine.

I'm reeling from the possibility, my mind running through every detail of that night we spent together, trying to remember anything that might confirm or refute this terrifying thought. But it all blurs together—her touch, her scent, the way she looked at me like I was the only man in the world.

It's all tangled up in this moment, in the present, where I'm standing in this sterile room, facing a truth that I'm not sure I'm ready to accept.

I swallow hard, my chest tightening. “Is it mine?” I force the words out, needing to know, needing some kind of confirmation that I’m not just imagining this, that I’m not the only one with these thoughts racing through my mind.

The question comes out harsher than I intended, but I need to know. I need to hear her say it. My whole world is hanging on her next words, and I can't take the uncertainty anymore.

I’m not sure what I’m more afraid of—her saying yes or no.

She nods, just a small, hesitant movement, but it’s all the confirmation I need.

My breath rushes out in a heavy exhale, and my shoulders drop, the tension releasing just a fraction. But I can’t relax; this isn’t over.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” My voice comes out steady, but the edge is there, sharp and undeniable. I’m holding on by a thread, my emotions barely contained. She’s kept this from me—this life-changing, earth-shattering secret—and I need to know why.

“I was scared,” she admits, and there’s a vulnerability in her voice that pulls at something deep inside me. Smart, sassy, sexy Mia is scared? She sees the doubts in my face and continues. “Scared of what you’d say, what you’d do. I didn’t know how you’d react, and I didn’t want to risk making things worse between us.”

“Worse?” I echo, my brow furrowing in disbelief. “You think this makes things worse?”

I can see the guilt and fear in her eyes, and it guts me. The thought that she felt she had to carry this alone, that she couldn’t come to me, twists the knife deeper.

“Rowan, I… I didn’t know how to handle this. I didn’t want to burden you with something you didn’t ask for.”

“Burden me?” The words tear out of me, louder now, and I can’t keep the hurt from seeping into my voice. “Mia, this isn’t just about you. You should have told me. I had a right to know.”

"I know," she whispers, her voice trembling, and her tears begin to pour out. "I know, and I'm sorry. I was just trying to protect you. I didn't want you to feel trapped like you had to take responsibility for something you weren't ready for."

I can barely comprehend what she’s saying. “You think I wouldn’t take responsibility for my own child? You think I’d just walk away?”

The pain in my voice is almost unbearable, and I see it reflected in her eyes as the tears finally break free, streaming down her face. “I didn’t know what to think, Rowan. I didn’t know if you’d even want this… if you’d want me.”

Her words hang heavy between us, cutting through the air like a blade. I step closer, needing to close the distance between us, needing her to understand. My hand lifts, gently tilting her chin up so she has no choice but to look at me.

"I want to make one thing very clear," I say, my voice low, every word burning with an intensity that is almost bursting out of me. "You are not a burden to me. This baby is not a burden. I'm not going to walk away from this, from you."

But she shakes her head, panic flaring in her eyes. “You can’t just do that… it doesn’t work that way, Rowan. I’m scared. I’m so scared. I’m not even in control of anything happening right now. Everything can’t just be okay simply because you’re fine with it.”

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. I’ve been so focused on my own shock, my own emotions, that I didn’t stop to think about what this has been doing to her.

She’s been carrying this weight, this fear, all on her own. And now, we’re both standing on the edge, staring into the unknown.

But no matter how scared she is, no matter how much this changes everything, I know one thing with absolute certainty. I can’t—won’t—lose her. Not now. Not ever.

“So you weren’t going to tell me?” I ask, my voice laced with hurt. “You were just going to keep it a secret? My baby, Mia? Did you think I didn’t deserve to know?”

She flinches at the accusation, her eyes filling with tears. “I didn’t know how to tell you, Rowan. I didn’t want to burden you with this… with me. And then… then we started working together, and it just got harder and harder to say anything.”

I shake my head, my mind reeling from everything that is happening. “You’ve been working for me, Mia. You’ve seen me almost every day, and you didn’t think it was important enough to tell me that you were carrying my child?”

Her tears spill even more, and she wipes at them furiously, her hands trembling. “I was scared, okay? I was scared of how you’d react, of what this would mean for us, for everything. I didn’t want to ruin everything.”

My anger deflates at the sight of her distress, replaced by a wave of something else—guilt, confusion, fear. She’s right to be scared. This changes everything. But what she doesn’t understand is that I’m just as terrified as she is.

The door to the room swings open, and the doctor walks in, oblivious to the tension that’s choking the air. “Ms. Everett, Mr. Slade,” she says, nodding to each of us in turn. “I’ve reviewed your tests, and everything seems to be fine, but I do want to stress the importance of rest. You’ve been overexerting yourself, and that’s not good for the baby. You need to take it easy from now on.”

Mia nods mutely, not looking at me, and I feel a fresh surge of protectiveness rise within me. She shouldn’t have to go through this alone—not anymore.

I’ve been so wrapped up in my own shock and anger that I haven’t stopped to consider what she’s been dealing with these past few weeks.

“I’ll make sure she gets the rest she needs,” I say, my voice firm, leaving no room for argument.

The doctor smiles approvingly. “Good. I’ll discharge her now, but remember—no more stress, Ms. Everett. Your health and the baby’s health are the most important things.”

As the doctor leaves, the silence between us grows heavier, the tension thick enough to cut with a knife. I know we’re not done with this conversation, not by a long shot. But right now, she needs rest, and I need time to process everything that’s just been thrown at me.

I turn back to Mia, who's still avoiding my gaze, her hands twisting in the blanket. "We're not done talking about this," I say quietly, trying to keep my voice gentle though the anger is still simmering beneath the surface. "But you need to rest now. I'll take care of everything."

She finally looks up at me, her eyes red-rimmed and filled with uncertainty. “Rowan, I…”

“Rest,” I interrupt, not wanting to get into it now. “We’ll talk later.”

With that, I turn and walk out of the room, the door clicking shut behind me, sealing off the whirlwind of emotions threatening to consume me. Outside, Jenna is waiting, her face lined with worry.

“How is she?” she asks immediately, her eyes searching mine for answers.

I take a deep breath, running a hand through my hair. “She’s okay. The doctor says she needs to rest.”

Jenna nods, her shoulders relaxing slightly. “I’ll stay with her. You… you look like you need some time.”

She's not wrong. I'm torn between staying by Mia's side and needing to be alone to sort through everything that's just been dumped on me.

“Thank you,” I say, my voice rough with emotion. “I’ll be back soon.”

As I walk down the hallway, my mind is spinning, every thought a chaotic jumble of fear, anger, and confusion. The hospital’s sterile walls seem to close in on me, the fluorescent lights too bright, too harsh, as if they’re magnifying the reality I’m trying to escape.

By the time I make it to my office, I’m a bundle of nerves, my thoughts still whirling as I try to make sense of everything. *Mia is carrying my child.*

The words feel foreign and surreal as if they belong to someone else, some other version of me who's ready to be a father. But I'm not sure if I know how to be that person.

The drive back to my Slade's Industry is short as I struggle to focus on the road. I get into my office and slump into my chair, my head in my hands, as the weight of it all crashes down on me.

What the hell am I supposed to do? How do I even begin to navigate this? I’ve spent my entire life building walls, keeping people at a distance, and now… now I’m faced with a reality that I can’t run from, a responsibility that I can’t ignore.

Ethan’s voice pulls me out of my spiraling thoughts, and I look up to see him standing in the doorway, concern etched into his features. “Rowan, what’s going on? I heard about Mia… is she okay?”

I nod, though it feels like a hollow gesture. "She's fine, physically, at least. The doctor says she needs rest, that's all."

Ethan steps into the room, closing the door behind him. His eyes are narrow as he studies me, picking up on the tension that's still coiled tight in my muscles. "What's going on, Rowan? There's something you're not telling me."

I take a deep breath, my mind still reeling from the truth that Mia just dropped on me. How the hell do I even begin to explain this? I’ve known Ethan for years; he’s been my closest friend, the one person I’ve trusted through everything. But this… this isn’t something I ever imagined I’d be dealing with.

“Mia…” I start, my voice betraying the turmoil inside me. “Mia’s pregnant.”

Ethan's eyes widen, his mouth dropping open slightly in shock. "Pregnant?" he echoes as if he can't quite believe what he's hearing.

“Yeah,” I confirm, the word feeling heavy on my tongue. I swallow hard, forcing myself to say it out loud, to make it real. “She’s carrying my child.”

For a moment, Ethan just stares at me, processing the bombshell I’ve just dropped. Then he lets out a low whistle, running a hand through his hair. “Holy shit, Rowan. I didn’t see that coming.”

“Neither did I,” I admit, leaning back in my chair as the exhaustion I’ve been holding at bay finally begins to seep in. “I found out just now… she fainted, and I brought her to the hospital to meet the shock of my life.”

Ethan’s expression shifts from shock to concern as he takes a seat across from me, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. “What are you going to do?”

I wish I had a clear answer to that question. I wish I knew what the hell I'm supposed to do next. But all I can do is shake my head, the uncertainty gnawing at me. "I don't know," I say honestly, my voice barely above a whisper. "I want to be that father. I want to be everything my child and Mia need, but I don't even know where to start. I'm sure that's why she hid it all along; I'm not prepared."

Ethan’s gaze softens, and he reaches out, placing a hand on my shoulder. “You don’t have to figure it all out right now, Rowan. This is a huge thing, and it’s okay to be scared. But you’re not alone in this. You’ve got Mia, and you’ve got people like me who care about you. You’ll figure it out together.”

His words are meant to be comforting, but they do little to quell the storm of emotions raging inside me. The thought of being responsible for another life, for a child, is terrifying in a way that nothing else has ever been.

It's not just about me anymore; it's about this innocent being that's going to depend on me, that's going to look to me for guidance, protection, and love. After my traumatic past, am I truly ready to be responsible for another human? Can I keep them safe?

“I can’t let her go,” I say suddenly, the conviction in my voice surprising even myself. “I can’t let my child go. No matter what happens between Mia and me, I need to be there for my kid. I need to do right by them.”

Ethan nods, his grip on my shoulder tightening in a show of support. “That’s the right thing to do, Rowan. But it’s also important to remember that you don’t have to do this alone. Mia’s in this with you, and you need to figure out how to work together, for the baby’s sake.”

With Ethan's words echoing in my mind, I stand up, the weight of everything that's happened still pressing down on me, but now there's a glimmer of hope, a sliver of determination that wasn't there before. I'm scared as hell, but I'm not going to let that stop me. I'm going to be there for Mia and my child, and I'm going to figure out how to keep them safe in spite of my demons.

As I leave my office and head back to Mia's hospital room, I know that this is only the beginning. There are still so many questions and so many uncertainties, but for the first time, I feel like maybe—just maybe—I can do this.

I’m not going to let my child go.

And whatever it takes, I’m going to figure out how to be the man they deserve.

**Chapter Eleven**

**Mia**

I never planned for any of this. I didn’t plan to get pregnant, and I certainly didn’t plan to tell Rowan in the middle of a hospital room after fainting in front of him. But life has a way of throwing curveballs when you least expect them, and now I’m stuck trying to figure out what the hell I’m supposed to do next.

The sound of the door opening snaps me out of my thoughts, and I turn my head to see Rowan standing in the doorway. His expression is unreadable, his eyes locked onto mine with an intensity that makes my heart skip a beat.

My pulse quickens, fear and uncertainties thrumming through my veins.

“We need to get you out of here.” His voice is low and controlled, but there’s an edge to it that tells me he’s been thinking just as much as I have.

I blink, not sure I heard him right. “What?”

“I’m getting you discharged,” he repeats, stepping into the room with a determined look on his face. “And you’re coming with me.”

I sit up, my heart racing. “Rowan, I can’t just—”

“You can,” he cuts me off, his tone firm, brooking no argument. “And you will. I’m not leaving you here.”

My chest tightens with a mixture of frustration and anxiety. “You can’t just decide that, Rowan. I’m fine here. I don’t need—”

“You need rest,” he interrupts again, his voice dropping a notch, becoming softer but no less insistent. “And you’re not going to get it here. You’re coming with me, Mia. End of discussion.”

I open my mouth to protest, but he’s already moving, turning to Jenna, who’s been sitting quietly in the corner, watching the exchange with wide eyes. “Jenna, thank you for staying with her. You can go home now. I’ll take it from here.”

“Are you sure, Rowan? I can stay if you need me to—”Jenna looks from me to Rowan, her expression uncertain, but she nods and starts gathering her things.

“I’m sure,” Rowan says, giving her a reassuring smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Thank you.”

I watch helplessly as Jenna leaves, my chest tightening even more as the door closes behind her.

This isn't how I wanted things to go. I feel like I'm losing control of the situation as if Rowan is swooping in and taking charge without even considering what I want.

“Rowan, you can’t just—”

“Mia,” he says again, more forcefully this time, as he steps closer to the bed, his gaze locked onto mine. “I’m not leaving you here alone. You’re coming with me, and that’s final.”

I stare at him, my heart hammering in my chest. I want to argue, want to tell him that he can’t just make decisions for me like this, but the look in his eyes stops me.

There’s a determination there, a stubbornness that I recognize all too well. I know Rowan, and I know that once he’s made up his mind, there’s no changing it.

“I don’t need you to take care of me, Rowan,” I say, my voice trembling slightly, but I force myself to meet his gaze, to hold my ground. “I’m not some damsel in distress. I can handle myself.”

“I know you can,” he says, his voice softening as he reaches out and takes my hand, his touch warm and steady. “But you don’t have to do this alone, Mia. Let me play my role in all of this. You need me more than you've realized."

The sincerity in his voice catches me off guard, and for a moment, I feel the fight drain out of me. But then the reality of the situation crashes back down, and I pull my hand away, shaking my head.

“This isn’t your responsibility, Rowan,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. “I can take care of myself, and I can take care of this baby. You don’t have to—”

“I want to,” he cuts me off, his voice firm, leaving no room for doubt. “This isn’t just your baby, Mia. It’s ours. And I’m going to be there for both of you, whether you like it or not.”

I can't help the tears that well up in my eyes. I've spent so long trying to convince myself that I could do this on my own and that I didn't need anyone's help, especially not Rowan's. But now, standing here in front of him, hearing the conviction in his voice, I realize how wrong I was.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” I admit, my voice cracking as the tears spill over, and I look away, unable to meet his gaze. “I don’t know how to be a mother, Rowan. I don’t know how to do any of this.”

Rowan steps closer, his presence a comforting warmth that I hadn’t realized I needed until now. He reaches out, gently tilting my chin up so that I’m looking into his eyes, his expression softening as he sees the tears on my cheeks.

“You don’t have to do it alone, Mia,” he says, his voice gentle but firm. “We’ll figure it out together. I promise.”

For a moment, I just stood there, staring up at him, the consciousness of everything that had happened pressing down on me. I want to believe him, and I want to trust that he'll be there for me and our baby. But there's a part of me that's still scared, still unsure if I can let myself rely on him.

But then I see the determination in his eyes, the sincerity in his words, and I realize that maybe, just maybe, I don’t have to do this on my own.

“Okay,” I whisper, nodding slowly as I wipe the tears from my cheeks. “Okay, Rowan.”

He smiles then, a real smile that lights up his eyes, and for the first time since this whole mess started, I feel a glimmer of hope. *Maybe things aren’t as hopeless as I thought.*

Maybe, just maybe, we can figure this out together.

Rowan helps me out of the hospital bed, and we walk together to the nurse’s station, where he signs the paperwork for my discharge.

I feel strange emotions as I stand there, watching him fill out the forms with the same determined focus he brings to everything he does. Part of me is grateful and relieved that he's taking care of everything, but another part of me is still uneasy, still struggling to come to terms with everything that's happening.

It’s not long before we’re walking out of the hospital, Rowan’s arm around my waist as he guides me toward the exit. I’m still feeling a little shaky, but there’s a sense of calm that comes from having him by my side, a feeling I hadn’t expected but am too exhausted to question right now.

To our greatest shock, as soon as we step outside, we’re met with a wall of flashing cameras and shouting voices.

My heart lurches in my chest, and I instinctively step closer to Rowan, my hand gripping his arm tightly as the paparazzi swarm around us, shouting questions and snapping pictures.

“Rowan! Mia! Are you two together?”

“What’s the relationship between you?”

“Is it true Mia is pregnant with Rowan’s baby?”

I’m frozen, unable to comprehend what’s happening. How do they even know about this? I look up at Rowan, my eyes wide with panic, but he’s already moving, his hand tightening around mine as he pulls me through the crowd, his expression hardening into one of determination.

“Just keep moving,” he murmurs in my ear, his voice steady despite the chaos around us. “Don’t stop, and don’t say anything.”

I nod numbly, letting him guide me through the throng of reporters and photographers.

The questions continue to fly, each one more invasive than the last, but Rowan’s grip on my hand is the only thing keeping me grounded, keeping me from completely falling apart.

Finally, we reach his car, and Rowan opens the door for me, helping me inside before he quickly moves around to the driver’s side.

As soon as he’s in, he starts the car and pulls away from the curb, leaving the paparazzi behind us in a cloud of dust. I sit in the passenger seat, my hands trembling in my lap as I try to process what just happened.

The flashing cameras, the shouting voices, the invasive questions—how did they even know? How did this get out so quickly?

I glance at Rowan; his jaw is clenched, his grip on the steering wheel tight as he navigates through the city streets. He’s always been composed, always in control, but there’s a tension in the air that’s thick enough to cut through.

My mind is racing with questions, but I don’t know where to start. Everything is happening too fast, spiraling out of control, and I feel like I’m being pulled along for the ride without any say in it.

Finally, I found my voice. "Rowan, what the hell just happened back there?"

His eyes remain fixed on the road, his expression unreadable. “The press got wind of something. I don’t know how, but they did. It doesn’t matter now.”

“Doesn’t matter?” I repeat, incredulous. “They were asking if I’m pregnant with your baby. How could they possibly know that?”

Rowan's jaw tightens, and for a moment, he doesn't respond. The silence stretches between us, heavy and suffocating, until finally, he exhales sharply and turns to look at me. "We'll figure it out, Mia. Right now, the priority is getting you somewhere safe. Somewhere, they can't get to you."

Safe. That word hangs in the air, and I realize just how vulnerable I feel. It's not just the paparazzi that have me on edge—it's everything. The pregnancy, Rowan knowing about it, and the uncertainty of what comes next.

It’s all too much, and the fear is creeping in, threatening to take over.

I don’t even realize we’ve arrived at Rowan’s sleek mansion until the car comes to a stop. He kills the engine and turns to me, his gaze intense. “Come on,” he says, his voice softer now but no less commanding. “Let’s get inside.”

I hesitate, my hand resting on the door handle. This is all too much, too fast. I’m not sure I’m ready for whatever comes next. But the look in Rowan’s eyes, that unyielding determination, pushes me to follow him.

I step out of the car, my legs shaky, and Rowan is by my side in an instant, his hand on the small of my back as he guides me to the front door.

The moment we step inside, I'm enveloped by the warmth of his home. It's quiet, almost too quiet, after the chaos outside, and the tension that's been simmering between us seems to amplify in the stillness.

Rowan doesn’t waste any time. He shuts the door behind us, locking it, and then turns to face me, his expression unreadable.

“We need to talk,” he says, his voice steady, but there’s an undercurrent of something else—something I can’t quite place.

I nod, swallowing hard as I follow him into the living room.

"I know this is all overwhelming," he starts, his tone measured and controlled. "But we need to make some decisions, Mia. Things are moving faster than either of us expected, and we can't afford to let this situation spiral any further."

I stare at him, trying to keep up with the whirlwind of emotions swirling inside me. “What do you mean, Rowan?”

“We need to get married.”

I blink, sure I must have misheard him. “What?!”

He steps closer, his gaze never leaving mine. “You heard me. We need to get married. With the way things are going, it’s the only way to protect you and the baby.”

The words hit me, knocking the wind out of me. I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Marriage? To Rowan? This can’t be happening.

“Rowan, you can’t be serious,” I manage to say, my voice trembling with shock. “We can’t just—just get married because of this.”

“Yes, we can,” he insists, his tone firm, leaving no room for argument. “It’s the only way to make sure you’re safe, that our baby is safe. The press is going to be all over this, Mia. They won’t leave you alone. But if we’re married—if we present a united front—they’ll back off.”

“A united front?” I repeat, feeling like I’m caught in some kind of surreal nightmare. “Rowan, this isn’t some business deal. This is our lives we’re talking about. We can’t just—”

He cuts me off, his voice rising slightly. “I’m not letting my child be born into a scandal, Mia. This is the only way to avoid that.”

I shake my head, trying to make sense of his words, trying to understand how he can be so cold, so calculating. “What about love, Rowan? What about actually wanting to be with the person you marry?”

“Love is overrated,” he says flatly, his eyes hardening. “It’s not always about love. It’s about doing what’s best for you and the baby.”

I stare at him, my heart breaking a little at his words. “You really believe that, don’t you? That love doesn’t matter?”

“It’s not that it doesn’t matter,” he says, his tone softening just a fraction. “It’s just not the most important thing right now. What’s important is that we’re having a baby, and we need to do what’s right by them.”

I feel a tear slip down my cheek, and I quickly wipe it away, trying to hold myself together. “You think we’d be good together? Just because we’re attracted to each other?”

Rowan's gaze locked onto mine, and I could see the frustration in his eyes, the tension coiled tight in his body. "We are attracted to each other, Mia. You can't deny that. Attraction is a start. It's something we can build on."

I let out a bitter laugh, shaking my head. “Sex isn’t love, Rowan. It’s not even close.”

He steps closer, his voice dropping to a low, dangerous whisper. “It’s closer than you think. And it’s a hell of a lot better than nothing.”

The intensity in his eyes is overwhelming, but I refuse to back down. “This is insane. We can’t build a marriage on sex, Rowan. That’s not how it works.”

"Then tell me how it works, Mia," he challenges, his voice hardening again. "Because from where I'm standing, the only thing that matters right now is making sure our child has a stable home with two parents who are committed to raising them."

The tears are flowing freely now, and I don’t bother to stop them. “And what about us, Rowan? What about what we want? What about actually being happy?”

He stares at me, his expression unreadable, and for a moment, I think I see a flicker of something—hope, maybe, or sadness—but it’s gone as quickly as it appeared. “Happiness is a luxury, Mia. And right now, we can’t afford it.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. The Rowan I knew, the Rowan I thought I knew, was never this cold, this detached. But maybe I never really knew him at all.

I stand up, wiping the tears from my face as I try to get a grip on my emotions. “I can’t marry someone I don’t love, Rowan. I can’t do that to myself, and I won’t do that to our child.”

Immediately, he moves closer, and I can feel the heat radiating off him as he stares down at me, his eyes intense. “You’re already doing something for our child, Mia. Whether you like it or not, we’re in this together.”

I open my mouth to argue, to tell him that this isn't what I want, that this isn't how things are supposed to be, but the words catch in my throat. The air between us is tense, the unspoken words hanging heavy, and I feel myself being pulled into his orbit, drawn to him in a way I can't explain, even though I know I shouldn't be.

Before I can stop myself, I take a step closer, dancing according to his intensity, closing the distance between us. Rowan’s eyes flash with something—desire, anger, maybe both—and then his hands are on my arms, pulling me closer, his grip firm and unyielding.

"Rowan," I whisper, but my half-hearted protest seems to sound like a plea.

In a split second, his lips are on mine, crushing me with the weight of everything that's been left unsaid. The kiss is hard and demanding, and I can't stop myself from responding, kissing him back with an intensity that surprises me.

It's as if all the frustration, the fear, the confusion is pouring out of me, channeled into this one moment, this one desperate act.

His hands move to my waist, pulling me even closer, and I can feel his heart pounding just as fast as mine. I know this is wrong, that it's only complicating things even more, but right now, I don't care. I don't care about anything except the way Rowan makes me feel, the way his touch sets my skin on fire, the way his kiss seems to consume me whole.

**Chapter Twelve**

**Rowan**

I pull her close again, feeling her breath hitch as my fingers curl into her hair, tilting her head back to meet my gaze. “You say sex isn’t love, Mia, but it’s damn close,” I murmur, my voice hoarse with all the desire burning inside me. “And sometimes, it’s the only thing that makes sense.”

She opens her mouth to argue, but I don’t give her the chance. I crash my lips onto hers again with a fervor that surprises even me.

It's not just a kiss; it's a claim, a declaration of everything I feel but can't put into words. I want her to understand that this isn't just about lust—it's about the way she makes me feel alive like I'm finally waking up from a long, dark sleep.

The tension between us snaps like a live wire, and she responds with a hunger that matches my own. Her fingers tangle in my hair, pulling me closer as her body melts into mine. It’s like she’s fighting against herself, torn between what she thinks she should do and what she really wants.

I lift her off the ground, and she wraps her legs around my waist instinctively. The feel of her pressed against me is enough to drive me insane.

My hands roam over her slender back, memorizing every curve, every inch of skin that’s mine to explore. I walk us backward until her back hits the wall, and I pin her there, my mouth never leaving hers.

I’m lost in the sensation of her, in the way she trembles with my touch, and I can’t get enough.

“Mia,” I growl against her lips, barely recognizing my own voice. “Tell me to stop, and I will. But if you want this, if you want me, then say it.”

Her eyes lock onto mine, wide and flooded with fear and desire. For a split second, I think she might push me away, but then she surprises me. "Rowan," she breathes, her voice shaky but resolute. "Do all you want with me. I'm not fighting it anymore."

That’s way more than I needed to hear.

I pull her away from the wall and carry her to my bedroom, kicking the door shut behind us. There’s no hesitation, no second-guessing.

I lay her down on the bed, and for a moment, I just stared at her. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, and her hair fanned out around her like a dark halo. She looks like a fucking goddess, and she's mine—at least for tonight.

I lean down and kiss her again, softer this time, letting the moment stretch out as I savor the taste of her.

My hands slide under her black dress, pushing it up until she lifts her arms, allowing me to pull it over her head. My gaze roams over her purple cup bra and matching panties. The urge to rip them off is almost overwhelming, but I force myself to slow down, to savor every moment.

“You’re beautiful,” I whisper, my voice hoarse with need. I lean down, trailing kisses along her collarbone, down to the swell of her breasts.

She arches into me, shutting her eyes passionately as I reach behind her to unhook her bra. It falls away, and I take a moment to admire her, to let the image of her naked in my bed sear itself into my memory.

Mia’s fingers tug at my shirt, and I oblige her, pulling it over my head and tossing it aside. Her hands immediately explore my chest, her touch igniting a fire that spreads through me like wildfire.

I kiss her again, harder this time, and she responds with equal fervor, her nails digging into my shoulders as she pulls me closer.

I move my lips down her body, worshipping every inch of her. When I reach the edge of her panties, I pause, looking up at her for permission. Her eyes are half-lidded with desire, her lips parted as she breathes heavily.

She nods, and I make quick work, sliding it down her legs in one swift motion.

She’s completely naked before me now, and the sight nearly undoes me. I kiss my way back up her body, my hands caressing her thighs, her hips, her waist. She’s trembling beneath me, “Rowan,” she whispers, her voice laced with desperation. “Stop teasing me…”

I don’t make her wait any longer. I shed the rest of my clothes and position myself over her, looking into her eyes as I slide inside her.

The sensation is overwhelming, and I have to close my eyes for a moment to keep from losing control. She’s so tight, so warm, and it takes everything I have not to lose myself right then and there.

Mia gasps, her nails digging into my back as she adjusts to the feel of me inside her. I start to move slowly at first, savoring every second of being connected to her like this. But soon, the need becomes too much, and I increase the pace, driving and slamming into her with a hunger that borders on desperation.

She meets me thrust for thrust, her body arching off the bed as she moans my name. The sound of it, the way she says my name, drives me wild. I grip her hips, pulling her closer as I bury myself deeper inside her, losing myself in the rhythm of our bodies moving together.

“Mia… fuck,” I groan, burying my face in her neck as I feel her tighten around me, her breath coming in short gasps. She’s close, and I can’t hold back any longer. I thrust into her harder, faster, chasing the release that’s just out of reach.

She cries out, her entire body tensing as she reaches her climax, and the sight of her coming undone beneath me is enough to push me over the edge. I follow her into oblivion, my release crashing over me like a tidal wave, leaving me breathless and trembling.

For a moment, neither of us moves. I collapse beside her, pulling her close as we lie there, our breathing slowly returning to normal. She’s curled up against me, her head resting on my chest.

I stroke her hair, my mind racing with a million thoughts. I know I should say something, but I don’t know what. The weight of what we’ve just done hangs in the air, heavy and suffocating.

But before I can find the words, I realize that Mia has fallen asleep. She’s curled up against me, her breathing soft and even, and I can't stop myself from smiling in contentment.

She looks so peaceful, so vulnerable, but I know that this moment won’t last. Tomorrow, we’ll have to face the consequences of all our actions today.

And I have no idea what’s going to happen next.

With a sigh, I carefully slide out of bed, making sure not to wake her as I pull on some clothes. My stomach growls, reminding me that neither of us has eaten since we left the hospital. I head to the kitchen and throw together something simple—grilled chicken, some vegetables, nothing fancy. But by the time I return to the bedroom with a tray, Mia is still fast asleep, her breathing deep and even.

I set the tray down on the nightstand and sat on the edge of the bed, watching her for a moment. She looks so peaceful, so content, and I wonder what she's dreaming about. I brush a strand of hair out of her face, my heart clenching with emotions I can't even begin to untangle.

I lean down and press a gentle kiss to her forehead before slipping under the covers beside her.

She instinctively curls up against me, and I wrap an arm around her, holding her close as I drift off to sleep.

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I wake up to the warmth of Mia's body on my skin, the scent of her hair still fresh in my senses. I half expected her to sneak out on me again, and like the first night we spent together, my usual nightmares didn't torment me all night.

I move slowly, not wanting to disturb the fragile peace of the morning, but my phone’s shrill ring cuts through the quiet atmosphere.

Ethan’s name flashes on the screen, and I’m already dreading the conversation. I answer, keeping my voice low. “What is it, Ethan?”

“Rowan, the media—”

"I know," I cut him off, thinking he was about to give me the usual rundown of our latest PR nightmare.

“You don’t,” Ethan presses, his voice tense. “They’ve found out about Mia’s pregnancy. Someone must have overheard you two talking. The story’s already out. They’re saying Mia’s carrying your baby, and they’re speculating about everything—from how long you’ve been together to whether you’ve been cheating on her with other women.”

I hang up before he can finish, a cold fury settling into my bones. I open up the news app on my phone, and there it is—pictures of Mia, headlines screaming about the pregnancy, the rumors, the supposed scandal.

The paparazzi have taken every word and twisted it like vultures picking apart a carcass. They've turned our private lives into a spectacle.

The fury surges, but I push it down. I need to stay calm for Mia.

I glance at her still-sleeping form, the gentle rise and fall of her chest a stark contrast to the storm brewing inside me. I can’t let this spiral out of control.

She stirs, her eyes fluttering open as she notices my uneasiness. “What’s wrong?” she asks, her voice groggy.

I sit on the edge of the bed, my gaze locking with hers. “The media knows about the baby.”

Her eyes widen in shock. “What?”

“Someone overheard us. The news is everywhere.”

I watch as the realization sets in. She sits up slowly, wrapping the sheets around her like they could shield her from the world outside. “What are we going to do?”

"We need to get married," I say, the words rushing out before I can stop them. They're harsh and unfiltered, but the urgency of the situation demands it.

She looks at me, disbelief flashing in her eyes. “Married? Rowan, I’m not signing my life away just because of this.”

“Mia, be reasonable,” I snap, frustration lacing my tone. “The media knows about your pregnancy. They’re already speculating, making things worse than they are. We need to do something.”

She pulls away, her gaze turning defiant. “I’m not going to marry you just to fix this mess.”

“Then what? You want to face this alone?” The words come out sharper than I intend, and I see the hurt in her eyes. I soften, taking a deep breath.

“Look, I’m not saying we have to get married forever. But we need to at least be in a relationship. The media needs to believe that we’re together.”

She folds her arms, her expression still stubborn. “What are you suggesting?”

“A fake engagement,” I say, the idea forming even as I speak. “It’ll keep the press off our backs and give us time to figure this out.”

She hesitates, doubt flickering in her eyes. “I don’t know, Rowan…”

“It’s the best we can do right now,” I insist, leaning closer. “Think about it. We announce our engagement, and the media frenzy dies down. We get some breathing room.”

She bites her lip, considering it. I can see the wheels turning in her mind, the way she’s weighing the options.

“And who knows,” I add, allowing a smirk to curl at the corner of my lips, “maybe I’ll win you over in the process, and you’ll actually agree to marry me.”

She rolls her eyes, but there’s a faint smile on her lips. “You’re impossible.”

“But you’re considering it,” I point out, not letting her off the hook that easily.

She sighs, finally nodding. “Fine. We’ll do the fake engagement.”

“Good. I’ll call my PR manager and get the ball rolling.”

As I reach for my phone, she stops me with a hand on my arm. “Rowan, this has to be convincing. We can’t let anyone suspect it’s fake.”

“I know,” I say, meeting her gaze.

I make the call, instructing my PR manager to prepare a press release about our engagement. The moment I hang up, I turn to Mia, who’s still sitting in bed, her expression guarded.

“You should stay home and rest,” I tell her. “The doctor said you need to take it easy.”

She nods, but there’s a lingering unease in her eyes. I know this isn’t easy for her—none of this is. But we don’t have a choice. Not if we want to protect the baby, protect ourselves.

I dress quickly, heading out the door. As I pass by the mirror, I catch a glimpse of myself—tense, on edge. This is not how I imagined my life turning out, but here we are.

On my way to work, I stop at a jewelry store. The selection of engagement rings sparkles under the bright lights, each one more dazzling than the last.

I pick one that I think suits Mia—something elegant, understated, but undeniably beautiful.

As I hold the ring, a thought crosses my mind. This might be fake, but I want her to have something real. Something that shows I’m serious, even if this is just for show.

**Chapter Thirteen**

**Mia**

I’m trying to wrap my head around everything that’s happened in the last twenty-four hours, but the universe isn’t giving me a break.

Rowan stepped out a while ago. I hear a soft knock on the bedroom door. Before I can respond, the door creaks open, and an older woman with a warm smile steps in, carrying a tray.

“Good morning, dear,” she says brightly, her eyes twinkling as she sets the tray on the nightstand. “I’m so happy to finally have a woman in this house. It’s been far too long.”

I blink at her, still groggy from my early morning conversation with Rowan and my thoughts. “Good morning,” I manage to mumble, trying to figure out who this woman is and what she’s talking about.

“I’m Mrs. Gallagher, the housekeeper,” she says, smoothing out the wrinkles in the bedspread. “Mr. Slade mentioned you’d be staying here for a while. I must say, it’s about time he brought someone like you home.”

There’s a flutter of panic in my chest. I open my mouth to explain the situation—that this engagement isn’t real, that it’s all just for show—but the words die on my tongue.

Mrs. Gallagher looks so genuinely happy, and I don’t have the heart to burst her bubble.

“Thank you,” I say instead, offering her a weak smile. “It’s… nice to be here.”

She beams at me, completely unaware of the chaos swirling in my mind. “If you need anything, anything at all, you just let me know, dear. I’ll be around all day.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Gallagher,” I say, trying to sound as normal as possible.

As she leaves the room, I let out a long sigh. This is only the beginning. I haven’t even had my coffee yet, and I’m already on the edge.

I glance at the tray she brought—toast, eggs, and a steaming cup of coffee. My stomach growls, reminding me that I’m eating for two now. I take a sip of the coffee, savoring the warmth as it spreads through me. It’s not enough to settle the growing unease in my gut, but it’s a start.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand, and I pick it up to see Jenna’s name flashing on the screen. It's a video call, of course. I take a deep breath before answering.

"Mia!" Jenna's voice is practically shrieking with excitement."You look so much better." Then she noticed the ring I wore to snap a few casual early morning shots for Rowan's PR team. "Oh my God, girl, how did you manage to get a ring on your finger in just a few hours? You move fast!"

I rub my forehead, already feeling the headache coming on. “Jenna, it’s not what you think.”

She gasps. “Don’t tell me you’re already regretting it. I mean, Rowan Slade is gorgeous, rich, and completely into you. What’s the problem?”

"The problem is that it's not real," I admit, letting out a frustrated sigh. "This whole engagement is fake. We're just doing it to keep the media off our backs and… well, because of the baby. He literally just bought the ring and brought it home before leaving for work. Nothing serious about it aside from the fact that we're doing it for the baby."

She pauses and just stares. When Jenna speaks again, her voice is softer. “Mia, are you sure about that? I mean, I’ve seen the way he looks at you. It doesn’t seem fake to me.”

I close my eyes, trying to block out the memory of Rowan’s intense gaze, the way he asked me to marry him like it was nothing more than a business transaction. “He doesn’t believe in love, Jenna. He’s made that pretty clear. The last thing I want is to end up in a loveless marriage just because we're attracted to each other."

Jenna hums thoughtfully. “Maybe. But you never know what might happen. Sometimes love sneaks up on you when you least expect it.”

I shake my head.“I don’t want to think about that right now. I just need to focus on getting through this mess.”

“Alright, but don’t be surprised if this fake engagement turns into something real,” Jenna says, her tone optimistic. “I’ve seen stranger things happen.”

“Thanks, Jenna,” I mutter, not wanting to dwell on her words. “I’ll talk to you later.”

We hang up, and I toss the phone back onto the bed, feeling more conflicted than ever. Jenna might be hopeful, but I know better than to let my guard down.

I can’t afford to get my hopes up. Not with Rowan. Not with someone who doesn’t even believe love is important in marriage. I have feelings for him, but we need something more profound. Not some fleeting emotions and sex.

I force myself to focus on something else, grabbing my laptop and settling in to do some research. Work has always been my escape, my way of shutting out the world when things get too complicated.

But even as I try to immerse myself in my projects, my mind keeps drifting back to Rowan, to the way he looked at me last night, to the feel of his lips on mine, and the intensity of the passion we shared.

I’m lost in thought when my phone buzzes again. This time, it’s my mom. I haven't heard from her in weeks. My heart skips a beat, knowing exactly why she’s calling.

“Mia,” she says the moment I answer, her voice filled with concern. “What is going on? Why didn’t you tell us you were getting engaged? And why am I finding out about it from the news?”

My stomach twists into knots. “Mom, I’m sorry. It all happened so fast…”

“The last time we talked, you were heartbroken over being dumped by Asher, and now you’re engaged and pregnant? Mia, this isn’t like you.”

I swallow hard, forcing myself to sound calm. “I love him, Mom. Rowan and I… we just didn’t want to wait.”

There’s a long pause on the other end. I can practically hear my mom processing this new information. “Well, if you’re sure… Your father and I would like to meet him. Bring him home this weekend.”

Panic floods through me. “This weekend?”

“Yes, Mia,” my mom says firmly. “Your father wants to meet the man who’s going to be our son-in-law. And you know how he is—he won’t take no for an answer.”

I close my eyes, feeling the weight of the situation bearing down on me. “Alright, we’ll be there.”

“Good. I’ll see you then,” my mom says before hanging up.

I stare at my phone, the reality of what I've just agreed to sink in. I have to bring Rowan home to meet my parents. They're expecting to meet the man I'm supposedly in love with, the man I'm going to marry.

And they can’t know it’s all fake.

I’m still reeling with thoughts when Rowan walks through the door a few hours later. The moment I hear his footsteps, I rush to meet him in the hallway, my heart pounding in my chest.

“You’re back,” I blurt out, the words spilling out before I can stop them.

He raises an eyebrow, a smirk playing on his lips. “Missed me?”

I cross my arms, trying to regain some composure. “You’re the one who came running home so early. Don’t tell me you missed me.”

To my shock, he doesn’t deny it. “Maybe I did.”

My heart does a strange little flip at his words, but I quickly push the feeling aside. He’s only doing this for the baby. I have to remember that.

“I need to talk to you,” I say, biting my lip as I try to figure out how to break the news. “My parents… they want to meet you.”

He doesn’t look surprised. “When?”

“This weekend,” I say, my voice a little too high-pitched. “I told them we’d be there.”

He nods as if this is all perfectly normal. "Alright. I'll cancel my plans."

I blink at him, stunned. “You… you’re really going to cancel all your plans just like that?”

“Of course,” he says, his tone casual. “I wouldn’t want to disappoint your parents.”

This is not the reaction I was expecting. “Rowan, I can’t tell them the truth,” I confess, my voice trembling. “It would break their hearts. They’re so excited… They think this is real.”

He steps closer, his gaze locking with mine. “Then we’ll make them believe it’s real.”

I open my mouth to argue, but the words get stuck in my throat. He’s so close, his presence overwhelming. And the way he’s looking at me… it’s making it hard to think straight.

"You think it's going to be that easy?" I finally managed to say, my voice barely whispered.

He reaches out, brushing a strand of hair behind my ear. “We’re really together, Mia. It won’t be hard to convince them.”

My breath catches in my throat. There’s something in his voice, in the way he’s looking at me, that makes my heart race. But I can’t let myself fall for it. I won’t.

“It’s just an act,” I remind him, more to convince myself than him.

His hand lingers on my cheek, his thumb grazing my skin. "Is it?" I don't know what he's talking about. “If you say so.”

I feel a flutter in my belly, but I tell myself it’s just nerves. He’s trying to get me to marry him for the sake of the baby. That’s all this is.

But as I stand there, caught in his gaze, I wonder if there’s more to it. If maybe, just maybe, Jenna was right.

And that terrifies me more than anything else.

**Chapter Fourteen**

**Rowan**

As the weekend approaches, I find myself feeling something heavy and unfamiliar—self-doubt. Would they really accept me? I told Mia it was not real, but deep down, I wanted them to welcome me wholeheartedly. With that, I know I have just Mia to win over.

But what if they warn me to stay away from their daughter, considering that I've already gotten her pregnant? The tension is driving me nuts, but I can't let her know how I truly feel. It's ridiculous, really. I'm Rowan Slade.

I’ve been in boardrooms with men who’d sell their souls to crush me, and I’ve walked away unscathed every time. But this… this feels different.

Meeting Mia's family and stepping into her world is like exposing a part of myself I've long kept buried. And for what? For a woman who's supposed to be a temporary arrangement, not someone who'd have me second-guessing every move. Yet, here I am, packing a suitcase with more care than I've given to anything in years.

Mia moves around the apartment with quiet efficiency, but I can feel the tension radiating off her. She's anxious, too.

We haven't really talked about this trip beyond the logistics—flight times, hotel reservations, the gifts I insisted on buying for her family. But I can tell this is about more than just a weekend visit to her. This is about us and the tangled mess we've found ourselves in.

“Ready?” Her voice snaps me out of my thoughts. She’s standing in the doorway, her gaze wary.

I nod, grabbing the last of my things. “Yeah. Let’s do this.”

I ask Williams to drop us off.

The drive to the airport is mostly silent, punctuated only by the occasional question about the flight or some other inconsequential detail. I want to say something to break the tension, but I don’t know where to start.

Every time I look at her, I’m reminded of how everything started. My brother's wedding. Bumping into her. The moment I lost control.

By the time we board the plane, the tension between us has grown so thick it’s suffocating. She takes the window seat, and I settle in beside her, the armrest between us feeling like a chasm.

I want to reach out, to take her hand and say something—anything—that would ease the strain. But I don’t. Instead, I close my eyes and try to focus on the upcoming weekend.

I can handle her parents.

I've handled it worse. But there's something about this that feels different, more personal. This isn't just about business or money. This is about Mia and the way she makes me feel things I thought I didn't give a shit about.

Roughly an hour later, we landed in Florida, and as we stepped off the plane, the humidity hit me like a wall. The airport is bustling with people, and for a moment, I'm grateful for the distraction.

But then Mia spots her dad and whispers to me before putting on a smile, her facade. I spot him, too, standing just beyond the security checkpoint. He's a tall man, broad-shouldered, with the kind of presence that demands respect. He has a sprinkle of grey hairs on his black hair, signaling his rich age.

He spots us and starts walking toward us, his gaze fixed on me.

I straighten, instinctively squaring my shoulders. *This is it.*

“Dad!" Mia greets him, her voice surprisingly warm.

“Mia,” he replies, pulling her into a hug before turning to me. His eyes narrow slightly as he looks me up and down, sizing me up. “So, you’re Rowan.”

I nod, extending my hand. “Mr. Everett. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

He takes my hand in a firm grip, his eyes never leaving mine. “We’ll see about that.” *What? This is worse than I thought.*

The drive to Mia’s childhood home is quiet, my nerves tugging at me. Her father doesn’t say much, and I can tell Mia is on edge. I glance at her occasionally, but she’s staring out the window, lost in her thoughts.

I can't blame her. I'm feeling the weight of this situation, too, and it's only getting heavier with each passing minute.

When we arrive at the house, Mia's mother is already waiting on the porch. Her personality is in contrast to her husband's—warm, smiling, and with open arms. She pulls Mia into a hug that lasts a little too long, then turns to me with the same welcoming smile.

“You must be Rowan,” she says, pulling me into a hug before I can react. “Welcome to our home.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Everett,” I manage, caught off guard by her warmth.

“Please, call me Nancy,” she insists, waving off the formalities as she ushers us inside.

The house is cozy, filled with the kind of warmth that comes from years of family gatherings and shared memories.

It’s so different from the cold, empty spaces I’ve grown accustomed to. I’m not used to this kind of environment, and it makes me feel out of place.

Mia’s siblings are quick to introduce themselves—an older sister named Emma, a younger sister named Sophie, and a younger brother named Jake.

They all seem to warm up to me quickly, offering smiles and friendly conversation. But her father… he’s reserved and more observant. He watches me closely, his gaze sharp, as if he’s waiting for me to slip up.

After a brief tour of the house, I hand out the gifts I brought with me—carefully chosen tokens meant to win them over. The sisters are thrilled, and even Jake seems impressed. But her father takes one look at the carton of wine I brought for him and raises an eyebrow.

“You think you can buy us over with gifts, son?” His voice is calm, but there’s an edge to it.

“Dad!” Mia’s voice is sharp, and I can see the embarrassment on her face. “That’s enough.”

I hold up a hand, cutting her off. "It's fine, Mia." I turn to her father, meeting his gaze head-on. "Mr. Everett, I didn't bring these gifts to buy your approval. I bought them because I wanted to show respect to your family. I know how much Mia means to you, and I want you to know that I'm here for her—for all the right reasons."

He studies me for a moment, then nods slightly as if acknowledging the point. "If you say so."

Mia pulls me aside later, her face flushed with anger. “I’m sorry about my dad,” she mutters. “He’s just… protective.”

I shake my head. “Don’t apologize. I get it.”

She sighs, rubbing her temples as if she’s trying to ward off a headache. “This is just… not how I imagined this going.”

“Hey,” I say, reaching out to touch her arm. “We’ll get through this. Together.”

She looks up at me, her eyes searching mine for something—reassurance, maybe. I don’t know if she finds it, but she nods, letting out a breath she seems to have been holding.

Dinner is a quiet affair, at least at first. The family chatters about mundane things—local gossip, work, school. But then Emma, the older sister, turns to Mia with a teasing smile.

“So, Mia,” she begins, her tone playful. “I guess you’ve finally moved on from that last heartbreak, huh?”

Mia stiffens, and I can feel the tension radiating from her. I glance at her, curious about who had hurt her before, but I don’t ask. This isn’t the time.

Mia forces a smile, trying to brush off the comment. “Yeah, well… life goes on, right?”

Her mother jumps in, steering the conversation away from the awkward topic, but I can’t stop thinking about it. Who had hurt Mia so badly? And why does it bother me so much to think about it?

As the conversation continues around me, I find my thoughts drifting back to my own family—my late parents. This dinner, with its warmth and laughter, reminds me of what I’ve missed all these years.

Under the table, I feel Mia’s hand gently tugging at mine. I glance at her, surprised to see concern in her eyes. She’s noticed the shift in my mood, and for a moment, I wonder if she knows what’s going through my mind.

“You okay?” she whispers, her voice barely audible over the chatter.

I nod, squeezing her hand in reassurance. “Yeah. I’m fine.”

But I’m not. Not really. The guilt of the accident has returned. It's eating away at me, and I can’t stop thinking about how much my parents would have loved to meet someone like Mia.

They would have adored her, I’m sure of it. And yet, here I am, lying to her family, pretending to be something I’m not.

After dinner, I excuse myself, needing some air. I step out onto the porch, the cool night breeze doing little to calm the turmoil inside me. I lean against the railing, staring out at the darkened street, my thoughts racing.

I hear the door open behind me, and Mia steps out, closing it quietly behind her. She doesn’t say anything, just comes to stand beside me, her presence a comfort I didn’t know I needed.

"You're thinking about your family, aren't you? You never talk about them," she asks softly.

I glance at her, surprised by her perceptiveness. “Yeah,” I admit. “I am.”

She nods, not pressing for more. Just offering her silent support. And for a moment, I let myself lean into that. Into her.

To my greatest surprise, she pulls me into a warm embrace - a much-needed hug, actually- and I completely cling to her, letting myself feel everything I shut out years ago.

It's almost as if she knows what happened to them as she holds onto me firmly, not letting go.