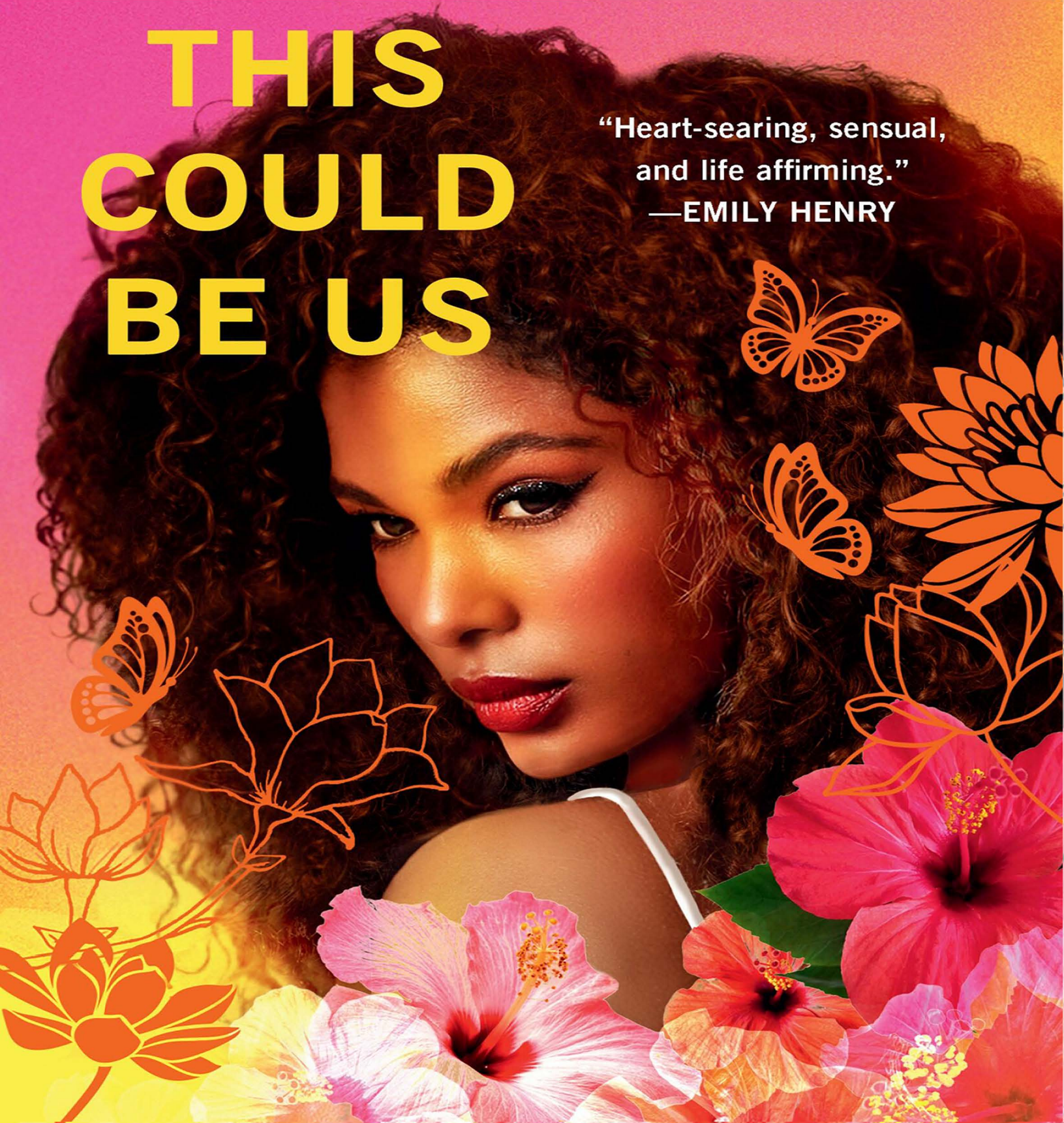


KENNEDY RYAN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THIS COULD BE US

“Heart-searing, sensual,
and life affirming.”
—EMILY HENRY



THIS COULD BE US

KENNEDY RYAN



FOREVER

New York Boston

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Prologue: Judah](#)

[PART I](#)

[Chapter One: Soledad](#)

[Chapter Two: Soledad](#)

[Chapter Three: Soledad](#)

[Chapter Four: Soledad](#)

[Chapter Five: Judah](#)

[Chapter Six: Soledad](#)

[Chapter Seven: Judah](#)

[Chapter Eight: Soledad](#)

[Chapter Nine: Soledad](#)

[Chapter Ten: Soledad](#)

[Chapter Eleven: Judah](#)

[Chapter Twelve: Soledad](#)

[PART II](#)

[Chapter Thirteen: Soledad](#)
[Chapter Fourteen: Judah](#)
[Chapter Fifteen: Soledad](#)
[Chapter Sixteen: Soledad](#)
[Chapter Seventeen: Judah](#)
[Chapter Eighteen: Soledad](#)
[Chapter Nineteen: Judah](#)
[Chapter Twenty: Soledad](#)
[Chapter Twenty-One: Judah](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Two: Soledad](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Three: Judah](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Four: Soledad](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Five: Judah](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Six: Soledad](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Seven: Soledad](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Eight: Soledad](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Nine: Soledad](#)
[Chapter Thirty: Judah](#)
[Chapter Thirty-One: Soledad](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Two: Soledad](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Three: Judah](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Four: Soledad](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Five: Judah](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Six: Soledad](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Seven: Soledad](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Eight: Soledad](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Nine: Judah](#)

[Chapter Fort: Soledad](#)

[Chapter Forty-One: Soledad](#)

[Chapter Forty-Two: Judah](#)

[Chapter Forty-Three: Soledad](#)

[Chapter Forty-Four: Judah](#)

[Chapter Forty-Five: Soledad](#)

[Epilogue: Soledad](#)

[Reading Group Guide](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Recipes](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Discover More](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Praise for Kennedy Ryan](#)

[Also by Kennedy Ryan](#)

*To those of us who never quite fit into the spaces they
made for us.
May we find our people. May we make our way. May we
find our home.*

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FOREVER

AUTHOR'S NOTE

There are parts of this story I've been writing for the last twenty years. More accurately, there are aspects of *This Could Be Us* I've been *living* for the last twenty years, since the day my son was diagnosed with autism. He is a mold-breaker. A one-of-a-kind supernova who manages to convey so much compassion and kindness and curiosity even without many words. He's a big guy, over six feet tall now, and everywhere he goes they call him "gentle giant." LOL. He doesn't talk much, but he *speaks*. His life speaks, and I wanted to depict a character navigating the world in my pages of fiction the way he does every day. When they call autism a spectrum, they ain't lying. It's everything from my son, who requires intense supervision and has very high support needs, to someone who may have a lot more independence and appear pretty typical from the outside. Those folks have unique challenges of their own. Both "ends" of the spectrum and everything in between deserve respect and dignity.

Can I be honest for a second? I can? Good. It took me a long time to write about autism because I was concerned that I would get things "wrong." I've written a lot of stories that weren't my lived experience, always with interviews and research and sensitivity readers. But this, my lived experience as a parent and someone who loves an autistic person, kinda intimidated me. The last thing I wanted to do was misrepresent or inadvertently harm the community that has embraced my family and my son so beautifully his entire life. But as I started thinking about Soledad's story and her passion for *her* children, I knew these two boys you are about to meet in *This Could Be Us* would play a pivotal role, so it was time.

For this story, I interviewed several autistic people and parents, hoping to capture a broad range of experiences. There's no way everyone will see themselves exactly as they are, but my hope is that many will feel resonance—will feel seen, cared for, respected, and hopeful.

Many things in the autism community become "hotly debated." Even

how those on the spectrum should be addressed. Specifically, someone “having autism” versus “being autistic.” I have chosen to use “autistic” for this story, and I respect those who choose otherwise. I also reference level 1 and level 3 as clinical classifications. There are some who don’t embrace that language and some who do. I reference it in the story merely as part of their formal diagnoses. If you are autistic or a loved one of someone who is, we are all navigating the tough parts and, hopefully, celebrating the terrific moments when they come. However it looks for you, however you are managing, I extend you grace and wish you the very best.

I hope I’ve written the twin boys in this story with the same compassion I always want to see extended to my son. I hope you love them as I do.

As you begin this story, I want to mention that there is discussion of a parent’s death, in the past, off the page, and of cancer. Please take care of yourself as you read.:~)

“There are years that ask questions and years that answer.”

—Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

PROLOGUE



JUDAH

I'm sure I loved her once.

And she loved me.

I remember the fluttery emotions early on, the quick-burn passion, the commitment that felt like it was anchored in cement. It became something that required little thought or feeling. What had once been a groove carved between our hearts settled with dismal comfort into a rut. Seated across from Tremaine now as we “mediate” the end of our marriage, looking into her eyes, I only see the remains of that love—mutual affection and respect.

We failed each other epically. Not through cruelty or infidelity, but through neglect. The idea we had of a love that would last forever, it's a casualty of hardship and indifference. This should hurt more. I should be more disappointed that my marriage is over, but instead there is a sense of relief that almost overwhelms me. A breath that has been lodged behind my ribs, maybe for years—I released it when Tremaine finally asked for the divorce. What should have felt like a slice through me instead felt like a sigh.

Yeah, this should hurt more, but it doesn't. So all I can think about now is the end and the new beginning, whatever that means for her, me, and our twin boys, Adam and Aaron.

“Custody,” says Kimberly, the child specialist, glancing up from the small stack of papers on the coffee table in our living room. “We need to create the parenting plan.”

“Right,” Tremaine agrees, uncharacteristic uncertainty in her eyes. A

small frown knits the smooth brown skin between her brows. Her hair, in two-strand twists, billows around her face like a weeping willow, softening the keen features. “I don’t know how much they understand.”

“Adam gets it,” I say. “He’s been asking about divorce nonstop. He told me today it derives from the Latin *divortere*, which means separation. He can’t always wrap his emotions around things, so he leans more on facts.”

“Wonder where he got that from?” Tremaine asks with a wry smile.

Tremaine used to joke that the diagnoses for our twin boys might not be autism. Maybe they’re just *mine* because they share so many traits with me. I admit I may not have a formal diagnosis, but the more we’ve learned about autism over the last decade, the more of myself I’ve seen and understood.

“In my meeting with the boys,” Kimberly continues, “it did seem that Adam grasped what was happening. Aaron... I’m not so sure.”

Both boys are on the spectrum, but they present differently. Aaron doesn’t have much expressive language and is classified as level 3, which simply indicates the intensity of support he needs. Many tend to underestimate him, to overlook him, because he doesn’t often speak. Adam, classified as level 1, is less “observably” autistic than Aaron to others, so people often assume he needs less support than he actually does. Because he’s so bright in the ways in which we often measure intelligence, people may offer him fewer accommodations or expect things he has trouble giving. Some people still speak in terms of more or less severe, but it’s all autism. Just different needs that evolve, and we meet them as best we can.

We don’t compare Aaron and Adam, but try to meet each of them where he is with whatever he needs. They started at basically the same place, but along the way their paths diverged—Adam making more gains faster and Aaron lagging behind, still gaining, but less and more slowly.

“Aaron may not talk a lot,” I say. “But his receptive language—what he understands—is much higher.”

“Most of the time he just doesn’t care to let you know he understands what you’re saying.” A smile dents dimples in Tremaine’s cheeks. “That boy. There’s a whole world in his head he keeps to himself.”

“I did sense that,” Kimberly says. “Regardless of how much they understand, this is a huge transition. It would be for most, but especially for kids who need routine and predictability as much as Aaron and Adam do,

for kids with autism.”

She pauses, looking between us.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I should have checked. Do the boys like to be referred to as ‘autistic’ or ‘with autism’ or...”

“‘Autistic’ is fine,” Tremaine replies. “We appreciate you asking.”

“Just wanted to make sure. Different families prefer different things.” Kimberly closes the file on the coffee table. “We’ll have to handle this transition with care.”

“Tremaine and I want to do anything we can to ease their way,” I offer.

“That’s what this whole process is for, right?” Tremaine sends me a quick look, as if to confirm we are on the same page. I nod and reach over to squeeze her hand where it is clenched on her knee.

We’ve both made sacrifices, each of us working from home or not at all early on when the boys kept getting kicked out of daycare centers or we had to assume their education ourselves. Adam, so bright he eventually placed in gifted classes, struggled with potty training even at seven years old. He has poor interoception—meaning his body can’t always sense what’s happening inside it. He had trouble telling when he needed to go, and by the time he realized how close he was, it would be too late. Interoception is a complex concept even for some adults to grasp, and kids definitely didn’t understand. They teased him badly. Adam felt so much shame when he had accidents at school and begged us to let him learn from home. Tremaine delayed law school and worked at night, staying home with the boys during the day, while I took the evenings. One year I freelanced, pursuing forensic accounting cases that allowed me to work remotely, squeezing in the boys’ lessons while Tremaine busted her ass at the firm.

“We’ve decided the boys will stay here with Tremaine during the week and me on the weekends,” I say.

“Yeah,” Tremaine weighs in. “Them being in one place all week is more stabilizing for their schedule at school.”

“We’ll split the commute, doctor appointments, therapy, et cetera as evenly as possible,” I say. “But they’ll spend most of their time here in the house, where they feel most comfortable.”

“Have you told the boys yet?” Kimberly asks.

“Not yet. We wanted to see what you thought first,” Tremaine says. “Aaron responds better to visual aids, so we’ll create a schedule for when

they'll be with each of us to help him understand."

"Sounds like a great plan." Kimberly claps once. "No time like the present. Why don't we call them downstairs and see what the boys think?"

Tremaine stands and crosses over to the stairs. Even at home wearing casual clothes, she's elegant and commanding, like she could persuade any jury or judge. "I'll go get them."

Ours is what they call a "collaborative divorce." It's as amicable as you'd expect when two people who respect each other deeply, and used to be in love, agree their kids are the only things they still have in common.

"I'm glad we have you," I tell Kimberly. "And thanks for coming to us."

Kimberly typically meets clients in her office, but she made an exception tonight considering Adam's been having a rough time lately. Just when we think we've found a solution to reduce the seizures associated with his tuberous sclerosis, they come back with force.

"No problem." She reaches for the glass of water on the coffee table and takes a quick sip. "We love seeing parents put their kids first in situations like this."

The boys come bounding down the stairs. They're identical and so different. Both have my eyes and facial shape, but their smile is all Tremaine. Their hair is a little coarser than mine. Their skin a little lighter. Adam glances from Kimberly to me, his expression curious. Aaron doesn't look at anyone but sits down on the couch, an assistive communication device cradled in his lap. It took us a long time to get him using it, but now he carries it everywhere. Severe apraxia limits the words he can *spea*k, but the device with its images and voice approximations exponentially increases what he can *say*.

"Boys," Kimberly starts, looking between Aaron and Adam, "remember what we talked about last time? That you'll have two houses soon? And your mom will live in one, and your dad will live in the other?"

"Divorce from *divortere*," Adam says immediately. "*Di* means apart and *verte* means different ways. Mom and Dad are going different ways."

"That's right," I say carefully. "You'll stay in this house with your mom. My house will still be here in Skyland. Just a few blocks away. You'll be there on weekends, but I'll see you during the week too."

"Do you understand what we're saying, Aaron?" Tremaine asks, her brows furrowing.

He doesn't respond but starts scrolling through images and picture cards we've collected and loaded into his device over the years.

"It may take a little more time," Kimberly offers, watching Aaron work with his device. "He may not—"

She stops midsentence when Aaron wordlessly sets the communication device in her lap. She glances down, a frown forming on her face. "I'm not sure..."

"Let me see." I extend my hand to accept the device and glance at what he pulled up to show her.

It's a candid shot Tremaine took of us a few years ago. Both boys have often had trouble sleeping. During one of Aaron's big growth spurts, he barely seemed to sleep at all. Sometimes I'd read to him, hoping it would help when the melatonin didn't. In this photo, I had fallen asleep right there with him, *Goodnight Moon* open on the bed between us.

I look up now to find him watching me intently. Eye contact can be difficult for both boys. They often gather information through quick, flitting glances and through other senses—exploring the world more deeply with touch and sound and taste. Sometimes they connect by simply sitting close or even holding my hand. But right now, Aaron's holding my *stare*. His eyes bore into mine, conveying a silent message I pray I'll understand. It's a window opening into his mind, a world I don't always have easy access to.

"Son, I don't..." I falter, not wanting to admit I don't understand what he's telling me. When he tries like this, I don't want to let him down. I wish like hell I knew exactly what he's trying to say. Does he want to make sure I'll still read to him once I move out?

He takes the tablet, fingers flying across the surface, pulling a few words into a short sentence. His reading skills are almost as limited as his speech. Something about words on the page never seems to click for him. Reading has been like the tide, coming, then receding. Progressing, then regressing. He'll gain words and then they'll slip from his mind before he can truly own them, but simple phrases he can manage. He hits three buttons, and a digitized voice emerges from the device's speakers.

"Stay. With. Me."

He doesn't have the filter most would by twelve years old, the one where he feels awkward voicing his preference for one parent over the other. That is one of the blessings with this kid. You get what you get. There

is no guile, no deception, no dissembling.

He wants to stay with me, or rather he wants me to stay *here*.

Somewhere along the way, Tremaine and I became co-caregivers, glorified roommates and even the best of friends. We may not have passion anymore, but we have that bond, and we know each other too well. I hazard a glance at my soon-to-be ex-wife. She's a magnificent mother, a warrior or a nurturer as needed. To hear Aaron express a preference for me to stay here could hurt. She meets my eyes squarely, a half smile quirking one corner of her mouth even as she blinks back tears.

"We should have seen this coming," she says with a shrug and a swift swipe under her eyes. "You're his person, Judah. If he has you and Adam, the world falls into place. I know he loves me. Don't worry. We'll just flip it. Five days with you. Two days with me. You stay here and I'll take the new house. That will be the easier transition for him. And we know Adam wants to be wherever Aaron is."

"Are you sure?" I ask, still concerned that this stings more than she's revealing.

"Are *you* sure?" Tremaine chuckles. "You know we'll split all the responsibilities as evenly as possible. I'll see them every day, but they'll spend most of the time under your roof."

Aaron spoke. Every word out of that kid is like gold to me, even when it comes from a voice box. There's nothing I won't do to make this transition better for our boys.

"Yeah." I nod, unable to look away from Aaron and Adam, my heart split into two identical parts. "I'm sure."

PART I

“The longer I live, the more deeply I learn that love—whether we call it friendship or family or romance—is the work of mirroring and magnifying each other’s light.”

—James Baldwin, *Nothing Personal*

CHAPTER ONE



SOLEDAD

Three Years Later

Tonight is really important, Sol.”

I glance up from my jewelry tray to stare at my husband’s back as he strides into our walk-in closet.

“It’s a company Christmas party,” I reply dryly. “Not a board meeting.”

“May as well be,” Edward mutters, knotting the tie his mother gave him last Christmas.

God, I hate that tie. It’s plagued with red oversized polka dots that closely resemble drops of blood.

“Delores Callahan will be there,” he continues, a warning in the tone and the look he aims over his shoulder at me. “Let’s not have a repeat of last time.”

“The woman asked.” I grimace, remembering the last conversation I had with the daughter of CalPot’s CEO.

“Pretty sure she didn’t expect a Yelp review of our own product. Much less a scathing one.”

“It was not scathing.” I cross our bedroom to join him in the closet and flip through his ties, which I’ve organized by color. “It was honest. I told her the new pan only accommodates three average-size chicken breasts, and I’d love it even more if I could cook four at a time.”

“And the heat thing?” Irritation pinches the corners of his green eyes.

I shrug, plucking an embroidered Armani tie from the red section. “Well,