

# **My Despicable Ex**

By  
Sierra Rose

Copyright 2013 by Sierra Rose

Smashwords Edition, License Notes

This e-book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This e-book may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to Smashwords.com and purchase your own copy.

Thank you for respecting the hard work of these authors.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners.

## ***She thinks he's despicable. He wants her back...with a vengeance.***

Ashly Roberts and Jake Connors are barely twenty when they decide to take the proverbial plunge and walk down the aisle to exchange vows in front of the dearly beloved. Basking in bridal bliss, Ashly feels she is living the perfect fairytale, until she's faced with a runaway groom, dumped at the altar by bad-boy fiancé, Jake Connors.

Five years later, Jake steps back into her life, realizing that being a no-show for their nuptials was the worst mistake of his life. A little older and slightly more mature, he is ready to fight for Ashly's love once again. When Ashly sees him, she can't deny the attraction she feels, but her hormones are overruled by the horror of what he did to her in the past. Nevertheless, Jake's most potent weapon, those dazzling baby blues, ignites a spark in Ashly, no matter how angry she wants to be. She cannot deny the spark, and she only hopes the inferno it ignites will not consume her heart again.

According to the terms of her mother's will, Ashly cannot cash in on her inheritance until she and Jake travel to nearly a dozen locations around the globe. The thought of pairing up with her old flame makes her blood boil, but she has little choice other than to put up with her despicable ex.

Can Ashly put up with Jake through her globe-hopping scavenger hunt to get her family fortune? Will she ever be able to forget or forgive being dumped on her wedding day? When wounds run so deep, is forgiveness even possible between old lovers? Or is it, “Goodbye!” all over again, after everything is said and done?

**I'd love to hear your comments or thoughts! Facebook Fan Page:**  
<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Romance-Author-Sierra-Rose/638168736195548>

## **Chapter 1**

I was born and raised in New York City. Every day, I'm amazed by the breathtaking landscape and awe-inspiring skyline. The Big Apple is, truly, a city that never sleeps. Bright lights, honking taxicabs, and noise are present twenty-four/seven, but somehow, in the midst of all that hustle and bustle and crowded chaos, I found my soulmate. Gazing down at my glittering diamond engagement ring, I couldn't stop smiling.

Jake Connors lived in the Bronx, the son of a housekeeper who worked for a multimillionaire business tycoon. His mother's boss used his personal connections and whipped out his checkbook to help Jake enroll at the same elite private school where I was a student. Jake was smart, but he still had T-R-O-U-B-L-E written all over him. In school, he was reprimanded numerous times and even suspended twice. If it wasn't for his benefactor's connections, he would have been thrown out right on his naughty butt.

Bad boys are irresistible (as any private school girl, teacher's pet, or preacher's daughter will tell you), so of course it wasn't long before Jake and I fell madly in love against my parents' wishes, and the rest is history.

At the ripe old age of twenty, I was about to begin my life as Mrs. Jake Connors. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach, and excitement and nerves washed through me like a tidal wave. Matchbox Twenty's "Overjoyed" played softly in the background, one of the songs on the playlist I'd put together just for that morning. I loved the way the beading from my wedding gown sparkled under the bright lights of the church.

I pulled the lace material down over my shoulders and turned to gaze at Nadia, my best friend since childhood. Her long blonde hair was twisted and woven into an elegant and elaborate up-do, and her sapphire-blue silk dress and matching heels was a stunning ensemble.

A tear rolled down her face as she adjusted my veil and diamond tiara. “There. You look perfect, just like Cinderella,” she said, wiping her eyes. “I know I promised I wouldn’t cry, but I’m so happy that your fairytale is finally coming true.”

I gushed with emotion. “I’ve dreamt about this moment my entire life.”

Her brown eyes gleamed. “I know. You’re gonna be Mrs. Ashly Connors!” she squealed, clapping her perfectly manicured hands together.

I couldn’t stop grinning. “I’ve never loved anyone the way I love Jake.”

“And you’re putting all those doubters to rest.”

“I know. Everyone swore we’d never make it, yet here we are, about to walk down the aisle!” Tears welled up, and I started fanning my face. “This is the happiest day of my life.”

She reached for a tissue. “Don’t cry. You’ll ruin your makeup that I spent so long trying to get just right.”

“I-I can’t help it,” I said, sniffing and in a trembling voice. “I’ve never ever been this happy and excited.”

“This is just the beginning,” Nadia said. “You two are going to have a fabulous life together.”

I smiled. “We are, aren’t we?”

“Definitely!” she said, squeezing my hands in reassurance.

Grinning, my cousin walked in with a dozen red roses. “Looks like somebody sent the bride flowers.”

I lit up. “They’re beautiful,” I said, taking the bouquet to read the card.

“Well? Who sent them?” Nadia asked curiously.

I shot her the widest grin. “Who else? They’re from Jake. The card says he’s dreamt of this day forever, and that he can’t wait for our lives to begin together as husband and wife.”

“Aw!” Nadia said. “That’s so sweet.”

A tear rolled down my cheek. “Is he here yet? I have to go thank him.”

“No way, young lady!” Nadia scolded. “As your maid of honor, it is my duty to make sure he doesn’t see you before the ceremony. It’s bad luck, and we can’t have that.”

“Then have him come to the door, and I’ll open it just a crack.”

“He’s not here yet,” my cousin informed me.

“What!?” My jaw dropped. “He was supposed to be here an hour ago. I just assumed he was with all the groomsmen, because the photographer said he was heading that way to get some pictures. Where do you think—”

“I’m sure he’ll be here any minute,” my cousin said, cutting me off before I went off into a full-blown panic. “I’ll go look for him and tell him his beautiful bride is waiting.”

I plastered on a fake smile as she turned around and left. “Hey, Nadia, can you do me a huge favor?” I asked. “Can you tell Jim I need to talk to him?”

She lightly patted my shoulder. “Harassing the best man isn’t gonna get your groom here any quicker.”

“I know, but... I just know Jake would never be late—not for this. Where’s my cell phone?” I asked, frantically digging through my purse. I looked back up at Nadia. “Do you think anything happened, that something came up or—”

“Calm down, Ashly,” she said in a soft tone. “I’m sure he’s fine. He’s probably planning some kind of romantic last-minute surprise.”

“You’re right. I need to calm down,” I said, taking deep breaths, “but I can’t. Where the heck is my phone anyway?” I asked, anxiously darting my eyes all around the room. I set the flowers down and smiled when my cell phone rang.

Nadia picked it up from the table. “Here. It was right where you left it.”

“I’m such a scatterbrain.”

“Well, it’s excusable today. You’re a bride with a million things running through that pretty little head of yours.” She glanced down with a huge smile. “Put all your worries to rest. It’s Jake.”

“Oh, thank goodness.” I breathed a sigh of relief as I reached for the phone. “Jake!” I squealed in excitement. “I got the flowers! They’re just gorgeous.”

When he didn’t say anything, I felt a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“Why aren’t you here yet? And where the heck are you? The ceremony starts in less than thirty minutes.”

“Ashly, uh... there’s something I need to tell you,” as he awkwardly said the words no woman would want to hear on her wedding day.

I clenched my hands into tight fists; something in his voice made me really nervous. “Jake, what’s wrong?”

“I’m so sorry, but... look, I-I just can’t do this.”

Confusion and shock overwhelmed me. Through the fog in my mind, it took me a minute to realize what he was actually saying. “What do you mean?”

“I can’t make it,” he said in a grim tone.

I tried to process his words, but everything had begun to spin around me, as if I was caught in some nightmarish hurricane. “What do you mean you can’t make it? And why are you so nonchalant? This isn’t just some Superbowl get-together with your buddies, Jake! It’s our wedding!”

Silence was his only response.

“Babe, are you just getting cold feet or what?” I asked in a panicked voice. “Tell me you aren’t seriously considering backing out and leaving me at the alt—”

“Ashly, I’m *not* ready to get married. I’ve been thinking about it hard. I’m only twenty years old, and I’m not sure if I’m ready for all of this—for any of it, really.”

Shock flooded over me, and every square inch of me, inside and out, seemed to crumble, as if I’d been hit by a Mack truck. “So you tell me thirty minutes before you’re supposed to walk down the aisle? What am I supposed to tell everyone?”

“I’m sorry.”

“I love you, Jake. I love you so much. Please don’t do this.”

He didn’t even bother returning those three precious words.

My hand trembled as I held the phone. “We need to talk face to face. I at least deserve that, don’t you think?”

“I’ve gotta go,” he whispered.

“Baby, please don’t! Jake!” I begged.

*Click.*

My heart lurched. I frantically called him back, but it just rang and rang. “C’mon, Jakey. Please pick up!” I shouted. A second later, my panic had turned to anger. “Pick up the damn phone.” With shaky fingers, I texted him: “U have 2 talk 2 me!”

“It’s over. I’m sorry. I think it’s best if U never call this # again.”

As I gazed down at the heartless, dismissive text, I screamed. The thought of never talking to him again, of never seeing him again, of him not sliding that ring on my finger tore me in two.

“What’s wrong?” Nadia asked.

Overcome with a rollercoaster of emotions, I threw my cell phone, shattering it against the wall. “He’s backing out. Jake’s not coming.”

“What?” she questioned in complete disbelief. “Where is he?”

My breath hitched in my throat.

“Ashly?”

“I-I don’t know.” My heart was beating a million times a minute. “He’s not coming,” I repeated, my voice barely able to tremble out the words.

She gripped my shaking hands. “What do you mean?”

“He’s pulling the plug on our wonderful life,” I barely choked out, “and he just told me to never contact him again.”

“That’s crazy,” she retorted. “Why?”

“He says he can’t...that he’s not ready,” I gasped between sobs. “I feel like I’ve just been hit by a semi, and I didn’t even see it coming!”

“He’s despicable!” Nadia shouted, pulling me into a close embrace.

Emotion flooded through me, more like a monsoon this time, and I let out a sob so loud I was sure the entire church had heard it. I’d never felt pain and grief rip through me like that. *How could he dump me at the altar? He couldn’t have told me this last night, before all the guests came, before I got all dressed up like some stupid fairytale princess in this ridiculous dress? Who needs all these beads and lace anyway?*

I shouted. I cursed. I cried. He was everything I wanted and more, and now I’d never have him.

*No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no! Brides are supposed to run away, not grooms! Didn’t he ever see that Julia Roberts movie?*

I couldn’t breathe.

I fell into a pit of despair as my world crashed down around me. I couldn’t help wondering what the heck had happened. We’d seen each other the night before, and everything had seemed fine, perfect as always. As usual, we couldn’t stop staring into each other’s eyes. When we talked about the wedding, he’d seemed more excited than me. As a matter of fact, it was all he talked about, and he said more than once that he couldn’t wait to see me in my wedding dress. I thought we shared such a deep connection, that we’d forever be madly in love. *Why would he just throw it all away? For what? Why? And why won’t he even talk to me about it?*

“Nadia,” I said, sniffling.

“Yeah? What is it, sweetie?”

“I’ve changed my mind. This is the absolute worst day of my life.”

\* \* \*

Weeks passed, and I continued to mourn my loss of Jake. Every breath and movement took effort. Some days, the pain was so overwhelming that I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, couldn’t function, and couldn’t control the tears. No one understood what I was going through, but everyone tried to be of some comfort on the rough days, and I appreciated that. On other days, I felt like I could manage. I hardly ate and woke up in cold sweats left over from my nightmares. I knew I’d never get over the loss of Jake dumping me, and I’d learned the hard lesson that in the blink of an eye, one’s whole world could take a swan dive; the elevator from heaven to hell was a fast-moving one. One minute, my life had been perfect. I’d been a princess with her Prince Charming. Then, in the next, I was a damsel in distress all over again. *How will I ever move forward?* I wondered. My heart was torn.

Sometimes the grief was so paralyzing that I had to remind myself to breathe. I knew there was no roadmap to get me through the throes of pain, but I hated that it hurt so damn much and for so damn long.

“I love you, Jake... and I miss you,” I whispered. “Not a minute goes by when I don’t think about you,” I muttered, recalling his beautiful face, those captivating features that I missed so much.

Everyone told me it would get easier in time, but it hadn’t—not after all those weeks. Knowing I’d never feel Jake’s touch, see his beaming smile, or hear his laugh again was almost unbearable. I missed the way he said my name, and it pained me that I wouldn’t feel his hand in mine. I’d never be able to look into his beautiful blue eyes again. There would be no more romantic dinners under the stars, no more slow dances, no more romantic birthday celebrations. All of that had been stolen away from me, leaving a giant, gaping hole in my heart.

I could still hear his voice in my head, could still feel his touch. It was something like that old country song I’d heard on the radio somewhere: I couldn’t stop loving him. I simply didn’t have the strength. As I went through his clothes, I could still smell him. All of my senses told me that he was right there in that room with me, that nothing had changed, but it had. It had all changed for the worst.

## Chapter 2

*Five years later...*

I crossed my legs and glanced out the window, watching the sheets of rain pelt the glass and the ground and the trees. I'd buried my mother three months ago, and I'd finally summoned the courage to hear the reading of her will. Losing her to cancer was like having my heart ripped out. She'd always been such a strong, guiding, domineering force in my life. Sure, she always criticized my friends, choices, and lifestyle, and she totally controlled my dad. She always nagged me for everything she found inappropriate, which was everything from fast food to a minor curse word to a skirt above the knees. In fact, she found fault with me no matter what I did, but I didn't care. She was my mother, a damn good one, and I loved her for it. Beneath that hard exterior of hers, I knew she always had my best interests in mind, and even during her hard-fought battle with that cruel disease, she'd tried to look out for me.

A tear slipped down my face, like the raindrops on the windowpane, as I met my lawyer's gaze. "Can we please get started? Being here is just making all of this more painful."

It was seven p.m., and I'd spent the better part of the day taking high-fashion photos of glamorous models in designer gowns. I still had to review the pictures and write up the article. As a fashion journalist and photographer, I always seemed to have to take work home with me. Honestly, after the day I'd had, I just wanted to take a hot shower and curl up with a good book and an even better glass of wine—anything to take my mind off the pain and loneliness of having yet another precious person ripped out of my life. After her death, I'd cried every night and even at work in the bathroom. In the midst of those emotional meltdowns, I felt the world crashing all around me.

My attorney looked down at his watch. "He's late."

"Who's late?" I inquired.

"Your mother left very specific instructions, and we have to abide by them," he said.

I hoped he'd give me a little clue about who our mystery date was going to be, but he remained secretive and mysterious. Mr. Shelby had been my mother's lawyer for thirty years,

and she'd trusted him completely. I knew there was more to the whole thing than he was telling me, and I could tell by his nervous twitch that he was up to no good.

"Please tell me what's going on, Mr. Shelby," I begged. "You know how much I hate surprises."

Lifting a brow, he recited robotically, "I'm sorry, Miss Roberts, but according to the terms of the decedent's Last Will and Testament, I am not permitted to mention his name."

"But who else would she include? All of her closer friends and the rest of my relatives have already received whatever she bequeathed them. I thought I was the only one left."

He picked up a file and smiled a grin that looked even faker than his toupee. "Please just be patient a while longer."

My mind raced with questions. I was really the closest person to my mother. My father had died two years earlier from a heart attack, and I had no siblings. My mother had been a lonely child, so I just didn't get it. We were just a small, close-knit family, so it didn't make sense that she'd brought in an outsider.

Mr. Shelby looked at me. "You may want to check your face. It seems your mascara is running."

I rolled my eyes. "Well, excuse me for crying. This is very difficult for me."

"That's understandable," he said softly, sounding surprisingly human and handing me a tissue.

I pulled out my compact and stared in the little round mirror at my bloodshot hazel eyes. I looked so tired and beat. I used the tissue to wipe the blackish-gray rivers from my cheeks and to touch up my raccoon eyes with the Samsonites under them, then fixed the long brown strands of hair that had insisted on falling out of my French braid. Fortunately, my clothing had stayed pretty much intact; I'd opted for a long-sleeved, covered placket blouse tucked neatly into fashionable black slacks.

A knock on the door made me glance up, eager to see who we'd been waiting for.

"Come in," the lawyer said.

When the heavy walnut door creaked open, my jaw dropped. There, standing before me, was my high school sweetheart, though he somehow looked like a stranger. Speechless, I stared at his beautiful face. His rain-soaked black locks fell around his shoulders in silken ebony waves. My

eyes slid up his towering body, gliding over his high cheekbones and the dark stubble shading his sharp jaw.

I felt like I'd been struck by lightning. My breath froze in my throat, and my stomach clenched. The last time I'd seen the man was when he'd stood me up on my wedding day, five years prior. Now, all that loneliness rushed right to my head again, leaving me lightheaded. All over again, I felt like that broken girl in the fluffy white gown, shooing guests away from the ceremony that was not meant to be. I had no idea how to react to such an unexpected intrusion. I couldn't breathe, and the attorney's office seemed to suddenly grow smaller and hotter.

He just stood there, staring at me with those baby blues, those eyes I thought I'd spend the rest of my life getting lost in. He was casually dressed in a white T-shirt that stretched over his broad shoulders and tucked into a tight pair of jeans. He was all grown up, far more muscular than the last time I'd seen him. He was more manly, more masculine, but that didn't stop me from wanting to punch him right in the jaw, just to make him feel the pain I'd felt on the most horrible day of my life. I'd never been more humiliated, shocked, and devastated. It had felt like a bunch of Romans had taken a battering ram and hit my stomach a thousand times. When he'd run away like a coward, when he'd abandoned me, he had, quite literally, knocked the wind right out of me.

We'd spent days, hours, minutes, and countless seconds talking about our new life together, and it was all supposed to be perfect. We'd planned the perfect wedding and the perfect reception. I'd even found the perfect wedding gown, and Nadia had pinned up my hair and perfectly draped my dangling curls around my tiara. We were supposed to ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after, but he had prevented that. I would never forget those questions that ran across my mind for months after that dreadful, embarrassing, heartbreaking day: *Why wasn't I good enough? Pretty enough? Smart enough? Sexy enough? What's wrong with me? Aren't I enough of a woman?* I had collapsed into my mother's arms, sobbing, and the memory of that stung all the more now that she was gone.

"Ashly," Jake softly said.

As anger flooded through me, I lunged at him and slapped him in the face. "You! You betrayed my love and trust. You're nothing but a spineless, gutless, pathetic coward, Jake! You dumped me, your fiancée, and didn't even bother to call to check on me or see how I was," I said sternly, hoping my slap had stung him as much as his betrayal had stung me.

His frown deepened. “I apologize. Truly. From the bottom of my heart.”

I just stared at him in disgust.

“You’re probably wondering what I’m doing here.”

“Yeah, you could say that. My mother hated you after what you did to me, so I don’t see why she’d leave you anything, and I couldn’t blame her, you lying son-of-a—”

“Look, I’ve got no idea what I’m doing here either. I’m just as confused as you are,” he said, cutting me off.

“If you’ll have a seat, Mr. Connors,” the attorney said, “we’ll get started.”

My heart rate doubled, then tripled, until I thought might just burst out of my chest. Seeing him again was too much, too painful. Nausea rose from the pit of my stomach. I decided that if I had to vomit, I’d aim for Jake’s shoes. I stood and reached for my purse. “No, I don’t think I can do this. Sorry.”

“Uh...would you like to reschedule?” Mr. Shelby asked.

“I think that would be best,” I said, my voice cracking like an adolescent boy’s.

As I started to walk to the door, Jake gently reached for my arm, and I shuddered from his touch. I hated that he could still make me feel that way, especially since I despised the man.

“Please...” he begged.

“I just can’t,” I said, throwing those dreadful words back at him, the three little words he’d spat at me on our would-have-been wedding day, instead of the “I love you” he should have said.

“I’d like to see what your mom wanted to say to me.”

“So let me get this straight. You’ve gone and screwed up your life, and now you’re broke, so you’re hoping my dead mother left you some expensive vase that you can pawn the second you get your hands on it?”

“Haven’t lost that sarcastic edge, have you?” he said.

“I’ll tell you one thing I have lost.”

He cocked a brow, as if daring me to say it.

“I’ve entirely lost my desire to date pretty bad boys from the wrong side of town.”

“I’m so sorry about what I did, Ashly, but I was young and—”

“How could you dump me like that in front of all my friends and family?” I shouted, cutting him off.

Tired of the drama, the lawyer interrupted. “Folks, if we’re going to read the will, we must get on with it. If not, we should reschedule. I don’t feel comfortable being in the middle of this very personal argument, and I have a family obligation tonight.”

Jake pulled a chair and motioned me to sit down.

“Fine, but you’d better read it fast, because I can’t stand being in the room with this jerk a minute longer than I have to be.”

Jake met the lawyer’s gaze and winced. “In case you didn’t notice, she hates me.”

“Can you blame her?” Mr. Shelby said, much to my surprise. “You left this beautiful woman at the altar. I was there when she told all of the guests there wouldn’t be a wedding. What you did to her was... it was just deplorable.”

“Thank you for defending my honor,” I said, smiling sheepishly.

“Well, since it’s clear that neither of you are in my fan club, is there any way we can make this short and sweet?” Jake asked.

“The pawn shop closed at six,” I said. “What’s your hurry?”

“Number one. I’m a fireman with a nice sized studio, so please quit treating me like a homeless man. Number two. In case you haven’t noticed, you could cut the tension in here with a knife. Then again, I’m more worried that you’re gonna cut me with this guy’s letter opener if I’m here much longer.”

“You never should have come back, Jake.”

“I’m sorry if my presence upsets you.”

“You didn’t even thank my mom for getting those assault charges dropped. Even after everything you did, my mother used her connections and helped you out. She only did that because I begged her to. I loved you so much that I couldn’t bear to see you hauled off to jail. Now, I’d like to put the cuffs on you myself and throw you in a hole where you’ll never see the light of day.”

“I only punched that guy because he nearly tried to rape you. You know that as well as I do.”

“Ahem.” The lawyer cleared his throat. “Are you both ready, or would you like a little bit more time to discuss things?”

“If you don’t mind, Counselor, I’d like to talk to Ashly alone,” Jake said.

I shook my head and vehemently proclaimed, “Not a chance!”

Wanting to get it all over with, the attorney ignored Jake's request and began with the proceedings. I almost tuned him out as he went over all the legalities of the will. Anger flooded through me like a stormy ocean, and I couldn't even think straight, let alone focus. I was fuming. *What is he doing here anyway? Why in the hell would my mother give him anything?* She had begged me to break it off with him countless times. She'd told me constantly that he'd never amount to anything, warned me that he was a loser, and she'd yelled at the top of her lungs, "My daughter deserves better!"

I took a quick peek at Jake as he wiped the water from his brow. My mind drifted back to months after the breakup. I dreaded telling people I was single. Nadia encouraged me, telling me my renewed bachelorette status was going to be a fun and wonderful experience, but I only considered it a punishment, as if I'd committed some terrible crime that had pissed fate off. I was sure nobody could ever love me again. Nadia assured me that wasn't the case, but I refused to listen. My world had crumbled and shattered all around me. *Maybe if I was prettier, sexier, or smarter, Jake would've stuck around,* I told myself. I felt upset, worthless, and beyond depressed. "What did I do that was so wrong?" I often asked. Nadia was insulted by such questions and made me write down a list of twenty-five things that I loved about myself. Learning to value and accept myself had helped with the healing process, and eventually I did feel a little bit better, but there was no therapy that could help me put my broken heart back together; Jake had, after all, taken some of the biggest pieces with him.

"Are you listening?" he asked. "Did you hear what the man just said?"

"What?"

His eyes were wide in shock. "Your mother left her estate and the sum of fifty million dollars to...us."

"What!?" I shouted, standing back up. "Why would she leave anything to *him*?" I pointed to the will. "Check it again. This has to be some kind of mistake!"

"My team and I were the ones who put it together," my attorney said. "Your mother's intentions were quite clear."

"No! My mother would never do that, not in a million years." The room started to spin, and everything grew hotter. He handed the official documents to me. As I ran my fingers over the raised notary seal and stared down at the words and my mother's signature, I couldn't believe my eyes. *Why?*

“She did not just flatly leave the money to him. There are some, uh...stipulations to getting the money,” my lawyer said.

I sucked in a deep breath, then let it out slowly. I was frazzled, confused, and discombobulated all at once. “What kind of stipulations?”

“I think it’s best that you sit down, Ashly,” Jake said. “Let’s figure this out together.”

I didn’t want to obey a word he said, but I sat down and tried to keep my composure. I knew lashing out at Jake wouldn’t change the instructions my mother had left. I wanted to ask more questions, but at that point, I could barely breathe. I was on the verge of hyperventilating, and the last thing I wanted was for either of those two to give me mouth-to-mouth.

“Take slow, deep breaths, Miss Roberts,” my lawyer coaxed.

“In and out deeply,” Jake chimed in.

I stared into his eyes. “I’m not giving birth here, and even if I was, you sure as hell wouldn’t be my labor coach.”

“C’mon, Ashly. I’m just trying to help.”

“Shut up, Jake,” I said. “I don’t need your help. I don’t need anything from a coward like you.”

He let out a huff and turned back to the lawyer. “What are these so-called stipulations?”

“Miss Roberts’s mother, Virginia, chose several locations around the world that you must visit together. Everything will be paid for, and you will be given an ample allotment of funds for food, personal items, and traveling expenses. In order to fulfill the requirements, you will have to provide a photograph of the two of you together at each destination.” He then turned his gaze to me. “Your mother referred to these as ‘Kodak moments’. When you obtain all the pictures, come back to my office for verification. If they are legitimate, each one of you will be given twenty-five million dollars of your mother’s fortune.”

Jake and I met each other’s gaze, staring for a long, stunned, silent moment.

Finally, he let out a long breath. “Whoa. I can’t even imagine that amount of money. It’s just...huge.”

My lawyer crossed his hands on the cherry wood desk. “Each picture must be an eight-by-ten, depicting something that proves you were at each destination together.”

“So no Photoshopping, eh?” Jake joked.

Rolling his eyes at Jake, Mr. Shelby continued, “Virginia paid in advance to have the photos examined for originality and authenticity. I wouldn’t dream of making that mistake.”

“How long do we have for this little globe-trot?” he questioned.

“You must complete the entire trip, stopping at each destination one after the other, within the next twelve months.”

“And exactly where do we have to go?” I asked.

He handed me the list.

As I looked down at the names of the exotic locations, I couldn’t believe it. “What the...? Japan? South Africa? Paris?” I shook my head. “None of this makes any sense. My mother was on hefty morphine in her last days, and she babbled a lot of incoherent stuff. I think we should consider that and burn this will. She clearly wasn’t of sound mind when she—”

“Burn it?” Jake said in disbelief. “Why? Just because I’m in it?”

My lawyer looked at me. “Miss Roberts, your mother made this will a few weeks after she found out she had cancer. She was, in fact, of very sound mind at the time, and this was what she wanted. If you are successful in this endeavor, there is a video diary that will be shown to you, and her reasons will become clear. However, you must first complete the task in good faith.”

It was such a bizarre request, and for the life of me, I couldn’t figure out why the heck my mother would want me to spend time with a man she openly deplored, the selfish jackass who had left me at the altar and embarrassed our entire family. I didn’t understand any of it. Worst of all, she hadn’t even discussed it with me; as far as I knew, my mother never kept secrets from me. Frustrated, I handed the list to Jake.

He studied it closely. “We can get some of these done fast.”

I bit my lip hard and didn’t say a word.

“We just have to be together in the picture, right? But we can be far apart, no handholding or smooching?” he asked.

I shot him a glare.

“What?” he said. “I know you’ll bite my head off if I invade your personal space, so I’m just asking. Always good to read the small print.”

“You won’t have to worry about that,” I said smugly, “because I don’t want the money. You can go on this little adventure by yourself.”

Mr. Shelby turned to Jake. "I'm sorry, but if Miss Roberts doesn't go with you to the locations, the contract will be null and void."

"And what about the money?" I asked.

"It will be held by this office indefinitely."

Jake looked at me with his eyes wide. "Ashly," he said softly, "if you don't do it, I'll get nothing."

"Yeah, I got that much, Einstein."

"There's so much I could do with this money. And why give away your inheritance to a lawyer? I can't believe you'd do that just to get back at me. At least if you go, you'll get half of what your mom left behind."

"I don't care about the money," I said. "Revenge is so much sweeter. Maybe that's why Mom planned it this way. She knew I'd sit here and let you suffer, you pitiful idiot. How's it feel for someone to dangle something great in front of you, only to have it snatched away?"

"I'm so, *so* sorry."

"Is that all I get? Some lame apology? I was supposed to spend the rest of my life with you, a man I foolishly loved and cherished. But you threw me under the bus for your freedom. You're pathetic! What was it Nadia called you? Despicable!"

"Maybe you two need some time to think," the attorney said. "Now that the will has been read, you have one week to change your minds. If you'd like to proceed, just contact my office and come in and sign the papers."

"I don't plan on changing my mind. If my mother thought I was gonna prance around the globe with this idiot and smile for pictures, she was sadly mistaken."

"We don't even have to smile," Jake said. "You don't even have to be near me, except to take pictures. Why not just do it and get our money? After that, we can go our separate ways—just a little wealthier."

"If you'll have a seat, Mr. Connors," the lawyer said, "we'll get started."

I stood and reached for my purse. "No, I don't think so." Seeing Jake had been too great of a shock. I had cried my eyes out over him for way too long, and I wasn't ready to hand my mother's money over to the man who had hurt me so badly. "I think it would be best if I just go," I said, my voice cracking.

Again, Jake reached for my arm, and again, I shuddered from his touch. "Please," he begged.

“I can’t control what you do and where you live, but you’d better stay as far away from me as humanly possible. If you come near me or bug me, I’ll slap a restraining order on you so fast, your head will be spinning.”

“Listen, I promise to leave you alone if that’s what you want. I was really just hoping to spend some time with you, but if you feel this strongly, I... well, I won’t cause you any further heartbreak.”

“Spend some time with me? What!? You never wrote or emailed me to tell me what happened, not in five long years, so why should I care now? I’m so over you, that it’s not even funny.”

“I thought you’d want closure.”

“Nope. I don’t care anymore. You’re just the worst mistake I ever made, and I want to forget about you forever. So why don’t you just respect my wishes and leave?”

“Because this money would help... It’d help so much.”

“So now you want to take advantage of something my mom wrote when she was out of her mind, just diagnosed with a deadly disease? Really, Jake.”

“I’m so sorry about what I did, Ashly, but I was young. I was facing a four-year prison term for punching out that guy, for defending you.”

“You got scared and ran for your freedom, Jake. There’s no excuse for running away, young or not.”

“Don’t be bitter,” he said.

My jaw dropped. “Bitter?” I repeated, then shifted my gaze to my lawyer for help. “Did you hear that? Can you believe the nerve?”

My lawyer sighed and squirmed uneasily in his seat. “I really think we need to tie up this will and decide if you two are going to go through with—”

“I haven’t seen this idiot since he high-tailed it from our wedding, without giving me any logical explanation. Did you think I was gonna greet him with a big smile and a warm hug?”

“Ashly,” Mr. Shelby said.

“I’m sorry. I know I’m out of line. It’s just that... well, seeing him here has thrown me for a real loop.”

Jake motioned for me to sit down again and looked at me with that sad look on his face. We stared into each other’s eyes. For countless years, I’d wondered if I’d ever see him again, and

## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

