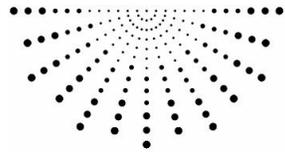


a don't let me sequel

let me
love
you

WALL STREET JOURNAL & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KELSIE RAE

LET ME LOVE YOU



KELSIE RAE

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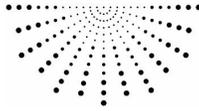
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MIA



“Well, I did it,” I tell the girls, slapping my purse onto the kitchen counter. “I talked to Gertie.”

Gertie is our landlord. She’s also a thousand years old and has the personality of bad sushi, but the lady did give in and agreed I could stay in our place until the end of the summer. And even though I hate handouts more than almost anything in the world, I’m grateful. Because it means I have eighty-two more days before I need to find somewhere else to live. Eighty-two more days of *almost* affordable rent and free utilities. And after that? Well. I’ll get there when I get there...if I don’t starve to death first.

Okay, I’m being a little dramatic. It’s not like I’m actually going to starve. Bartending earns me a decent amount of tips most days. But I can’t help it. Not when I just hung up the phone with my last potential employer, who informed me they hired someone else for the nursing position.

Yay, me.

“What’d Gertie say?” Ash asks as she fills the dishwasher with dirty utensils.

“She said I had until the end of the summer, then I need to find a new place,” I tell her.

“I still think it’s a stupid rule,” Blake interjects. Her bare feet are propped on the coffee table as she scrolls through her phone, only half-listening to our

conversation. But I understand why she's annoyed. This whole living situation is affecting her as much as it's affecting me.

"So what if you want to live here after graduation?" she continues. "What's the big deal?"

"No idea. But you know Gertie," I mutter.

"Regardless," Ash says, "I'm proud of you for actually talking to her instead of avoiding the conversation like you had been."

"I wasn't avoiding the conversation."

"Uh-huh. Sure."

So maybe I was avoiding the conversation, but it's not my fault. I know the rules. I know Gertie only gives deals on rent to girls who are enrolled at LAU, and I knew as soon as I graduated a few weeks ago I wouldn't qualify for said deals. But I also know my life is so up in the air right now if she kicks me out, I have nowhere to go.

Nowhere.

"Now, if I could get a job, that'd be great," I announce, searching in the cabinets for a salty distraction.

Chips. Yes. I want chips.

"Oh, come on. You're gonna do awesome," Ash tells me. "I'm sure last week's interview was great, and they're going to give you a call anytime."

"Yeah, they already called," I reply, grabbing the almost empty barbecue chip bag from the cabinet and digging inside. "And before you ask, no. I most definitely did not get the job." It's not the first time I've had to say those words. And I have a hunch it definitely won't be the last, either. For some reason I still do not understand, actually getting a job with my nursing degree seems impossible lately.

Maybe it's like the old chicken and egg scenario. They want to hire someone with experience, yet I can't get said experience without a job where I gain it. However, as much as I want to believe this is the case, I have a hunch about what's behind all the rejections, but admitting it out loud is a

bitch. I have a sinking feeling they've learned about my OnlyFans account and are hesitant to employ someone who could loosely be tied to the skin trade. I wasn't doing anything illegal, but as soon as I started posting explicit photos of myself, the lines blurred a little.

I pop another chip into my mouth and lean against the kitchen counter.

It doesn't matter that I was safe and responsible and kept my face out of the photos. It doesn't matter that I used a VPN and did everything in my power to keep my actual identity hidden. My ex, Shorty, just had to fuck me over.

I still can't believe the asshole sent out all my information to the world when he found out I'd created an OnlyFans account. Then again, he always was a fan of screwing me over, so I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. I let the thought settle into my bones as I set the bag of chips on the counter and grab a glass from the cabinet next to the fridge. With a flick of my wrist, I fill it with water from the tap and take a long drink.

I am royally screwed if I can't find a nursing job soon. But I guess we all have our own shit to deal with, don't we?

Speaking of...

I turn to Blakely lounging in the family room like she doesn't have a care in the world when we all know she's in as much of a pickle as I am.

"Have you talked to Gertie yet?" I ask.

Giving us her full attention, Blake tosses her phone onto the cushion beside her and props her elbow on the edge of the couch. "What's there to talk about?"

"So I take it you haven't decided where you want to stay next year?" Ash questions her as she grabs the detergent and turns on the dishwasher.

Blake folds her arms. "No, 'cause you guys suck."

"I'm sorry; how is this our fault?" Ash counters.

The girl has the audacity to pout as she glowers at us from across the room. "Because you all decided to be born earlier than me and had a head

start on college.”

“Yeah, like it was our choice,” I say with a laugh.

“I’m so bummed I didn’t graduate with you guys this year.” Blake’s frown deepens. “Do you know how bad it’s going to suck living here without all of you?”

“So you *are* going to renew your contract?” I ask.

“I would if you weren’t going to be kicked out by the end of summer. At least I’d have one familiar face here next year.”

Yeah, it would be really nice to have something familiar and stable instead of being tossed out onto my ass by the end of the summer. Then again, I should probably be grateful our landlord was willing to give me eighty-two extra days to get my shit together before kicking me to the curb so she could make space for some new LAU freshmen. Most landlords would’ve kicked me out by graduation, but Gertie didn’t. Maybe the lady does have a heart.

“If you’re not renewing your contract, where are you going to go, Blake?” Ash asks.

“Not all of our boyfriends have invited us to move in with them,” Blake replies cheekily. “When are you going to let us come see your new fancy-schmancy place?”

“It’s nothing crazy,” Ash deflects. “Only a little apartment—”

“That happens to be right across from the school where you’re teaching,” Blake points out.

“I heard it has a pond. And ducks,” I add. “If that isn’t thoughtful of Colt, I don’t know what is.”

Ash bites her thumbnail, grinning shamelessly. “He is pretty thoughtful, isn’t he?”

Nose scrunching, Blake grabs her phone and stands up, heading toward the kitchen from the family room. “*Gag*. You’re talking about my brother, remember?”

“Is Ash getting all swoony over Colt again?” Kate inquires as she walks down the hallway from the bedrooms.

“Like you’re one to talk,” I tease. “We’ve all seen you with Mack.”

“Uh, if I remember correctly, you’re the one who told me to jump his bones,” she quips.

The girl has a point, and I don’t regret it in the slightest. Macklin’s a catch. Even I could see it. It isn’t my fault our girl needed a little push to give him a chance.

“And I regret nothing,” I reply. “Although, I am a little jealous you’re moving in with him.”

“Yeah, his place is gorgeous,” Blake agrees.

It really is.

Hidden in the woods. Away from the hustle and bustle and chaos. It’s their own little oasis tucked away in the mountains.

“I mean, it just made sense,” Kate defends. “My lease was ending, I was graduating, and he’ll be on the road a lot for work. We wanted to be able to see each other as much as possible.”

“You don’t need to justify it to us,” I remind her, popping another chip into my mouth. “Seriously. We’re happy for you and Mack.”

“So happy,” Blake agrees with a gleam in her eyes. “Now I can hold it over Theo’s head whenever I want something.”

I snort into my now empty bag of chips, then toss it into the trash can.

Theo is Blake’s boyfriend. He’s also Macklin Taylor’s younger brother. Blake has no problem comparing the two whenever it suits her or when she wants to get under Theo’s skin. As we’ve all seen, the boy’s competitive with a capital C, and Blake isn’t afraid to extort that side of him.

“And when are you planning on cashing it in?” Kate prods.

“Meh. I haven’t decided yet. However, I need booze if I’m gonna make my decision about renewing my lease or not. Who’s busy tonight?”

“I have work,” I tell her.

“Boooo,” Blake groans, shoving her messy red hair into a bun on the top of her head. “What about you guys?”

“Mack and I were gonna watch a movie at his house, but we can always watch it here and hang out,” Kate offers.

“Ooo, yes.” Blake snaps her fingers. “I like it. How ‘bout you, Ash?”

Ash smiles shyly. “Sorry. Colt and I have plans.”

Now it’s my turn to gag.

I’m only half kidding. The girl has had the hots for Colt since day one. They’re so sappy it gives me a toothache most days. I can’t decide if it’s out of jealousy or actual disgust. Because they’re perfect together. Literally perfect. And even though my long line of shitty relationships has left me doubting I’ll ever find a guy worth dating, Ash and Colt give me hope. That maybe, just maybe, I’ll surprise myself. Or...a mystery man will surprise me. Then again, I’m a bit of a cynic, so it’s not like I’ll be holding my breath.

Relationships and I?

Yeah, no.

We’ve never been a good fit.

Especially when it comes to the opposite sex.

Even my relationship with my dad was strained before he borrowed money from some very shady people and wound up dead. It happened a while ago, and overall, I think I’m over it. Well, maybe not over it, but I’ve dealt with it well enough. Regardless, I haven’t exactly sown a lot of fruitful relationships since.

Exhibit A: Shorty. The jerk who not only manhandled me on more than one occasion but also decided to tell the entire internet NaughtyGirl213’s real identity.

Thanks a lot, asshole.

I shove aside the thought, set my glass in the sink, and turn to Ashlyn. “You guys gonna pick out linens to go in your perfect little apartment?”

Ash rolls her eyes. “We’ve already picked out our linens, thank you very

much. Tonight, we're unpacking the last boxes and christening the bed." Her brows bounce up and down.

I snort while Kate quips, "Not gonna lie. Probably the biggest benefit of Mack already having his house put together is only needing to pack my clothes."

Blake's bottom lip juts out. "And I need to convince Theo to ask me to move in with him."

"Yeah, like it's a chore. The guy's crazy about you," I remind her.

And I'm right.

She knows I am.

Her frown turns upside down. When she catches herself grinning from ear to ear, she sobers instantly. Still happy, sure, but not quite as in your face as she would be if I wasn't here.

Because the girl knows who she's talking to. The pathetic little seventh wheel. The girl who doesn't date. The girl who can't find a job with her brand new nursing degree. The girl who has creepy stalkers hunting her down after Shorty announced her real name on the internet.

But at least Blake has options. At least she isn't alone. At least she has someone who adores her and would do anything for her at the drop of a hat.

Me? Well. I'm fucked.

"Don't give me that look," I mutter. "Have fun tonight. I'll talk to you guys later."

I head down the hall toward my room. It's more barren than it used to be. The desk is empty now. All my assignments have been turned in. I slip off my shirt, grab a black tank top and jeans, SeaBird's standard uniform, and put them on. I don't have to be at work for a few more hours, but maybe I can grab an extra shift.

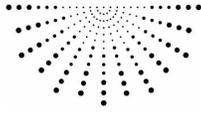
Besides, I could use the distraction.

And the money.

And the reminder that even though everyone else's life is moving

forward, maybe with enough perseverance, mine will too.
After all, I'm nothing, if not stubborn.

COLT



“Do you ever feel like we’re playing house?” Ash asks. She drags her hands along the gray sheet, smooths out the material, and grabs a thick white comforter from the laundry basket.

It’s our first night living together. Officially. Sure, she’s slept over more times than I can count since I moved in, but our first official night? Without her place as a backup home base? Yeah. It’s tonight.

And it’s fucking amazing.

Ash felt too guilty to leave her friends before her lease was up, and I didn’t want to pressure her. She’s already endured enough pressure over the last few months. With all the NHL publicity, the puck bunnies, and LAU winning the national championship, let alone graduation and Ash finding a job as an elementary school teacher, the pressure’s been building. The guilt I’m experiencing over all of it is crushing.

But now it’s official. We’ve unpacked the last box. Her clothes are lined up in the walk-in closet next to mine. And for the first time since I moved in, the apartment actually feels like a home.

“Been wanting to play house with you for more than a year now, Sunshine,” I remind her.

“Well. I guess today’s your lucky day.” With a shy smile, she bends over, giving me the perfect view of her ass, but I snap out of it. Reaching for the

opposite end of the comforter, I help her spread it across the king-sized bed.

“There,” she announces. “It looks good, don’t you think?”

“Looks great.” I round the edge of the bed and pull her against me. “You have good taste.”

And she does. The whole place screams of her. From the little touches of yellow to the drawer filled with girly shit I can’t even pronounce to the vanilla-scented candle burning in the bathroom.

I love it.

All the little things.

The way she’s been with me, even when she resisted moving in until now.

I moved in a few months ago, anxious to get away from all the partying at the Taylor House. Theo took it in stride, agreeing it was probably time to pass the party baton to someone else on the team once the season ended. But me? I was done. And when I saw Ashlyn’s eyes light up as soon as she caught a glimpse of the pond outside, I put a deposit down and moved in, anxiously waiting until after graduation when Ash could justify moving in with me.

“I still think you should’ve been a big boy and chosen your own towels,” she quips.

I clutch at my chest, feigning heartbreak. “And here I thought I was being a gentleman, letting my girlfriend have free reign to decorate the place however she wanted.”

She laughs and shakes her head. “Speaking of being a gentleman...I think you should kiss me now.”

“Oh, you think?”

“Mm-hmm,” she hums. The sound shoots straight to my dick.

“Subtle, Sunshine.” I close the distance between us and slip my fingers under the hem of her white crop top. Her skin feels like silk. It always has. I’d assumed things would calm down with her after a while. That we’d find

our routine. But it hasn't. Every time I'm a lucky enough bastard to touch her, I savor it. Because if I learned anything from my dad's death, it's our future isn't guaranteed. And I'd be a fool to waste a single second not appreciating every inch of Ashlyn Peterson, both inside and out.

Fuck, I love her.

My fingers flex on impulse, and I tug her against me, her curves molding to my chest as she rises onto her tiptoes.

"You're all sweaty from moving," she says with a laugh.

"You worked me hard today."

"Oh, I did, did I?"

"Mm-hmm," I growl, nipping at her bottom lip.

"Then I should probably clean you up, shouldn't I." It isn't a question, but the soft curve of her lips makes my cock twitch as she tangles her fingers with mine and leads me into the master bathroom.

The place is white and clean, with touches of yellow, gray, and rich browns like the rest of the apartment. The combination shouldn't work, but it does. With a twist of my wrist, I turn on the shower, letting the water start to warm up. I grab Ash's waist and set her on the bathroom counter.

"Wanna know my favorite thing about this bathroom?" I ask, stepping between her warm thighs.

Her hands slip around my shoulders, and she plays with the hair at the nape of my neck, the same familiar smile toying at the edge of her lips. "What is it?"

The counter is the perfect height for some pretty sexy shenanigans. I scoot closer, letting my cock rub against her center, and her eyes light up with understanding.

"Oh," she breathes out. "That is nice."

"Thought you might like it."

"You've been living here for how long and didn't show me this fun little trick?"

“Thought it could be a moving day surprise.”

She hooks her ankle around my waist and tugs me closer. “Consider me surprised.”

With a laugh, I shake my head and kiss her again. She’s still the sweetest thing I’ve ever tasted. Her fingers tangle in my shirt, and she pulls it off me as the steam swirls in the air around us, fogging up the mirror.

I grin and nip at her mouth again, helping her get naked. And fuck me. It’s my favorite part of the day. I take a step back and shamelessly check her out while also enjoying her reflection in the mirror behind her. My dick stiffens even more.

Her attention flicks to my cock standing at full attention, and her grin widens. “Like what you see, Colt?”

“You tell me.”

She bites her bottom lip, watching as a droplet of precum seeps from the head.

Yeah. She knows what she does to me. It’s been clear since day one. But having her eyes on my shaft? Seeing the heat in her gaze? Pretty sure it’ll never get old.

“Wanna know what else I think you’ll like?” she whispers. Her toes touch the white tile as she slides off the granite counter and steps closer to me.

“What?”

She drags her index finger against my bare chest and taps it once against my sternum. “The mirror on the closet door you hemmed and hawed over hanging.”

“I don’t use full-length mirrors,” I remind her.

“Pretty sure I can make you change your mind.” With a smirk, she steps away and swings the door separating the bathroom from the walk-in closet almost completely closed. As we come into view, my dick twitches. She leaves the door open enough for steam to escape, so our reflection remains visible.

Her tight ass and long, lean legs make my hands clench as I watch her in the mirror.

Fucking beautiful.

It's moments like this where I forget she's mine. Where I'm jealous of the bastard in front of her. Jealous of the guy watching as she slides to her knees in front of him, her big doe eyes peeking up at him.

I don't deserve this girl.

I've never deserved this girl.

But I'll be damned if I'll ever let her go.

Her touch is gentle as she presses her hand against my hip and twists me until my ass rests against the counter. Then, she follows suit, her lips a few inches from my aching cock. She glances at the mirror and grins as her eyes meet mine.

"Still think you won't use full-length mirrors?" she quips.

My attention snaps to the mirror showcasing the girl of my dreams on her knees, her long blonde hair hanging down her back. My balls tighten. My senses are overloaded, and she hasn't even touched me yet.

"Ash." I reach toward her and run my thumb along her cheek.

Her smile softens as she leans against my palm, her teeth digging into her bottom lip. Her dainty little hands trail up my bare thighs, and she slowly rubs the base of my cock.

"I love it when you look at me like this," Ash whispers. Her eyes hold mine hostage as she licks her palm from heel to fingertips. Then, she teases me again, her pace slow and steady. With a groan, my veins flood with heat as her thumb rubs over the head. She gathers my precum and fists my cock a little harder. "Like I'm the only girl in the world."

"You don't have to be on your knees to be the only girl in the world for me," I remind her. My restraint is already close to snapping even though she's barely touched me.

Her eyes crinkle with amusement. "I know. It's what makes me want to

be here.” Her lips are soft as they ghost over the head of my cock. She opens her mouth more and takes me in further, her eyes never leaving mine. I gaze at the mirror hanging from the closet door as she bobs up and down. My abs flex. The sight is hotter than anything I’ve ever experienced.

“Fuck,” I groan, cupping her cheek and forcing my hands to stay rooted. All I want to do is grab the back of her head and thrust. Harder. Deeper. Meld our souls until we’re one.

As if she can read my mind, she pulls off of me, but her hands continue their assault. “Are you holding back?”

“Trying to be a gentleman,” I grit out.

“While I appreciate it, I’m gonna need you to let go, Colt Thorne,” she chides, using her tutor voice. The sound turns me on even more. “We wouldn’t want to waste all the hot water, would we? After all, you’re dirtying me up pretty good, don’t you think?”

My amusement turns into another groan as she dives back in. Her tongue finds my slit and plays with it. When she takes me deeper, my eyes almost roll back in my head. I force myself to watch, enjoying the show too much to miss a moment. The way her cheeks are hollow and flushed. The way her hips shift slightly, hinting she’s as turned on as I am. The way her hair is pushed away from her face. Fucking beautiful. My balls tighten against her touch as she rolls them in her hand and tugs softly on the sack.

I drop my head back and stare up at the ceiling.

“You trying to kill me, Sunshine?” I ask through gritted teeth.

She doesn’t answer, sucking me harder.

Yeah.

She’s trying to kill me.

Unable to take it anymore, I grab her head and force myself into her mouth, giving into her game and letting go of the last of my restraint. I pump my hips faster and faster. She takes every inch, allowing me to use her. Own her. Body and soul. Heat spreads to my balls as I stare at our reflection one

more time.

She's the prettiest fucking thing I've ever seen.

And she's all mine.

"Gonna come," I warn her, letting go of her head and fisting my hands at my sides. But she doesn't back off. Doesn't pull away. She swallows me whole, tugging on my balls until I come down her throat.

Hard.

As I catch my breath, Ash stands up and wipes at the corner of her mouth. I grab the back of her neck and pull her into me, kissing the shit out of her.

"What you do to me..." I murmur against her lips. "You have no fucking clue."

"Glad the feeling's mutual." She pecks my lips again. "Now, I think you owe me a hot shower, mister."

Without another word, I open the glass door and guide her into the shower. The hot water cascades over us, turning her skin a perfect shade of pink within seconds. Her favorite shampoo sits next to my body wash on the marble shelf, and I grab it, lathering it in my hands. I dig my fingers into her scalp, massaging her soft blonde hair as she closes her eyes.

"Mmm...feels so good," she murmurs.

Her head falls back, and I continue drawing small circles with my fingertips along her scalp. I help her rinse it, and as the suds stream down her back and over her round ass, I'm reminded of how lucky I am to call her mine. The realization isn't new, but I still find it hard to believe she chose me and gave me a chance after all the shit she's been through.

"Face me," I order.

My back blocks the water from striking her face as she turns around. I squirt some conditioner in my hand and comb it through to her blonde ends, allowing her to relax while I pamper her the way she deserves. She doesn't say a word. Simply rests her head against my bare chest as I take care of her.

"Love you," she breathes out.

The words never get old. And neither do her quiet sighs of contentment. It's a nice break from the anxiety hounding her lately. I wish I could quiet her thoughts this easily every day instead of watching the anxiousness eat her alive.

Over the last year or so, she's gotten used to being dragged through the mud. For some reason I still don't understand, the paparazzi, women, and die-hard hockey fans have decided Ashlyn's conned her way into my heart. That she stole me or some shit. That if it wasn't for her, I'd be on the market, and any old puck bunny would have a chance with me.

I'd laugh at how ridiculous it sounds if it wasn't cutting Ash so deeply. But we've dealt with enough drama for one season. If I'm being honest, it's been nice. The break we've had since the hockey season ended. I'm not ready to face the inevitable backlash once the draft ends and the next season starts.

No.

I'd rather hide away in the shower with Ash, living in our own perfect little bubble no one can pop.

"Love you too," I tell her, well-aware of how little justice the words do to portray how I feel about her. How much she means to me. How she's my entire world.

I massage her breasts with body wash, loving the little whimper as I slide my hands up and down her smooth skin.

"You're perfect," I murmur. And she is. Inside and out. What she does to me. It's simply the person she is.

Once she's rinsed off, I grab a fluffy towel from the hook outside the shower, wrap her in it, then take her to our room. *Our* room.

As she lays on the comforter, sprawled out and naked, I can't help but stare.

"Perfect," I repeat.

"Lucky," she replies quietly. "Now, get over here and make love to me, mister. You owe me an orgasm or two."

With a laugh, I spread her thighs and pay her back. Twice. Like she deserves.



I WAKE UP WITH A YAWN, MY PHONE VIBRATING ON THE NIGHTSTAND. IT'S late. The room is blanketed in darkness. Slipping my arm from beneath Ash's head, I pick up my cell and squint as the bright light from the screen makes my eyes feel like they're bleeding. I close my eyes and try again, letting my eyes adjust. There's a text from an unknown number. My brows furrow as I open the message.

935.555.4246

Hey. We need to talk.

ME

Who is this?

935.555.4246

It's Eleanor Elshner.

Fuck.

I sit up fully and walk to the bathroom, closing the door quietly behind me.

ME

What do you want, Eleanor?

935.555.4246

Geez. Someone's snippy tonight.

ME

You're texting me in the middle of the night, and we haven't talked in almost two years. You'll have to cut me a little slack.

935.555.4246

Look, I'd prefer if we didn't do this over text. Can you call me? Please? Or we can even meet up for coffee.

ME

Not gonna happen.

935.555.4246

Fine. We'll do it your way.

Another text follows right after, and I know—I fucking know—it's gonna ruin everything.

935.555.4246

You have a son, Colt. Congratulations.

A stone drops in my gut, and I squeeze the phone, my fingers turning white from the pressure. A haze falls over the text as I reread it a dozen times.

No.

No. I don't accept it. She's lying. She has to be.

I jab out a response.

ME

Not possible.

935.555.4246

Trust me. It is.

ME

We haven't seen each other in a year and a half.

935.555.4246

Yeah. I know.

ME

And you never thought to reach out before now? Before I signed with the Lions this year? Looks a little greedy, doesn't it? Excellent timing, Eleanor.

935.555.4246

I was a little busy with my divorce, so you'll have to cut me some slack for the crappy timing.

My chin falls to my chest, and I take a deep breath. I'd heard about the divorce. Heard about how I ruined her marriage with Professor Elshner after

he found out about the affair. Heard about how he refused to pay child support for their kid and insisted on filing a paternity action. Yeah, I've heard way too much about the past affair and the fallout after I was kicked out of Dixie Tech and transferred to LAU. But I never looked into it. Never wanted to. It was in the past where it belonged. Where it needed to *stay*. Ash already knew I'd slept with a married woman. No need to reopen old wounds. Besides, the aftermath was a bunch of bullshit that didn't involve me, so I kept my nose out of it, wishing everyone else would too.

It didn't stop a few players from throwing accusations at me on the ice, though. I wish I could ignore Eleanor the same way I've ignored all the haters at the rink.

But I know Eleanor. And I know she isn't a shitty person. A lonely person, sure. But she wasn't some reckless housewife desperate for a good fucking. She was quiet. Lonely. We met at a coffee shop next to campus. And I never got greedy vibes from her, either. So why the hell is she reaching out now?

I scrub my hand over my face, guilt bubbling in my gut, nauseating me.

I hate my past. Everything about it. Who I was. How I acted. What I did.

I was so fucked before I found Ashlyn. So destructive. To everyone and everything around me.

Even Eleanor.

We were only hooking up. I might not've known she was married, but when I look back at our history, I can't help but wonder if I subconsciously ignored the signs instead of acknowledging she was taken. If I made up bullshit excuses for the pretty fucking huge red flags, and if I'm doing it again under the guise of not wanting to rock the boat with Ashlyn.

And this? Eleanor's accusation? It wouldn't rock the boat. It would fucking obliterate it.

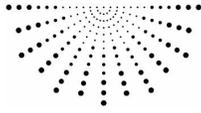
I can't let it happen.

Colt, I know I messed up, and I should've told you. But ignoring me isn't going to make your son go away. Will you please call me so we can talk about this?

Shaking my head, I block Eleanor's phone number and delete the conversation without giving myself a chance to second-guess my actions. But it doesn't erase the swell of regret settling into my bones.

What the hell am I gonna do?

BLAKELY



Drenched in sweat, I look both ways and run into the crosswalk when a loud honk makes my bone shake. Tires squeal, and I barely dodge the bright red Camaro as it slams on its brakes.

Slapping my hands against the hood, I yell, “Are you serious right now?”

Logan grimaces, looking almost apologetic behind the wheel. When he recognizes me, he simply shrugs one shoulder. Like *I’m* the one in the way.

“You almost hit me!” I shout.

“Sorry,” he mouths blandly, motioning for me to move so he can be on his merry way.

Asshole.

It’s not the first time I’ve almost been run over while exercising, and it probably won’t be the last.

Then again, I have a feeling being nearly hit by a car was the cherry on top of a craptastic morning. At the start of my run, Gertie cornered me on the sidewalk and demanded to know if I was planning to renew my lease, so I told her the truth. And now, I’m gonna be homeless soon.

Fan-freaking-tastic.

Desperate for coffee—and Theo—I make my way across the last stretch of asphalt and over the grassy hill, heading to The Bean Scene.

After our little movie session the other night with Kate and Macklin, he

promised to meet me here when I finished my run. Usually, he'd join me, but Mama Taylor needed his help with a few things around the house, so I'm on my own this morning.

Lucky me.

The sunshine kisses the back of my black tank top, and I slow my pace, stretching my arms over my head as the birds chirp in the trees. I've been running more lately, too stressed to do anything else. Between debating the lease debacle, creating new activities for the youth program I'm spearheading, and registering for the fall semester at LAU, I'm beat. Mentally. Physically. Emotionally. I catch my breath and reach for the swinging door stamped with a giant coffee mug, the words "The Bean Scene" scrawled across the cup. As I step inside, the familiar scent of freshly brewed coffee hits me square in the face, and I breathe it in, letting it fill my lungs.

Mmm...coffee.

"Blake!" a low voice calls.

Theo is at the table in the far corner of the coffee shop, with two iced lattes and a tall glass of water in front of him. I smile, wipe the sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand, and head toward him, weaving between the line of customers waiting for their drinks.

"Hey." With a quick peck against Theo's stubbled cheek, I collapse into the chair beside him. The coolness of the metal seeps into the back of my thighs and makes me shiver as I reach for my cup of coffee.

"How was your run?" he asks.

"Good." I lift the iced drink in a silent cheers motion. "Thanks for the coffee."

"Don't mention it." He leans back and stretches his legs wide, making him look like every girl's fantasy laid out on a silver platter. "Did the run help your stress?"

"Nope." I pop the 'p' at the end and give him a syrupy sweet smile. "How are you doing? How are your parents?"

“Stressed,” he admits with a smile. “Mama and Papa Taylor wanna sell the Taylor House since I’ve officially graduated, insisting they, and I quote, ‘*don’t need a frat house full of idiots.*’”

“Also known as your teammates,” I quip.

“Aka idiots,” he repeats wryly.

I laugh, stealing a sip of my coffee and setting it back on the stainless steel table. “Speaking of housing, Gertie finally cornered me and asked if I’d made a decision about my living arrangement for the fall semester.”

“And?”

“And I told her I’m moving out.” I grab the ice water and chug half of it.

His brows knit as he watches me carefully. “Why?”

“I dunno. It feels weird. Staying at the townhouse when everyone else is moving on, ya know?”

“I get it,” he returns thoughtfully. “Have you decided where you’re gonna move instead?”

“No idea. I’m trying to not be annoyed with everyone’s plans, but I can’t help but feel like I’m being left behind. Even you and Colt will be on the road soon, and where will I be? In class.” I give him a thumbs up. “Yay, me.”

“Hey.” My chair legs scrape against the concrete floor as he drags me closer to him without waiting for permission. When I’m close enough to smell his aftershave and tempted to lick it off him, he tickles the back of my neck with his fingers, massaging the tense muscles. “What’s going on, Baby Thorne?”

It’s an excellent question. But the answer’s kind of pitiful. Admitting it to myself is one thing, but voicing it out loud is a whole new level.

His thumb and forefinger dig into the nape of my neck, moving in small circles, and I drop my head forward with a low moan. “Oh, don’t stop. It feels amazing.”

“Tell me what’s going on,” he repeats.

“I don’t want to make new friends.” I lift my head, jutting my bottom lip

out. “And, yes, I’m well aware of how pathetic I sound right now, but it’s true. And the idea of the Taylor House being gone too? It makes me sad. We had so many good memories there.”

“Hey,” he murmurs. His fingers tighten their hold as he drags me closer and presses a kiss to my temple. “We’re gonna make more memories. Even better ones.”

I close my eyes and rest my head against his shoulder, too drained to care how smelly I am after my run. “Why do I have to be younger than everyone else? Why can’t I have graduated like you guys?” I lift my head and glower at him. “Seriously. I think I’m getting hives from thinking about doing the whole college life without everyone else.”

“It’s two semesters, Blake.” He squeezes the back of my neck again, continuing his magic assault against my tense muscles. I can hear the amusement in his voice. “Not the end of the world.”

“Feels like the end of the world,” I mutter. “Where am I supposed to live now?”

“You could always move in with me.”

“But you said the Taylor House is being sold,” I remind him.

“I mean at my new place.”

I pause and lift my head. “New place?”

“Yeah. With the signing bonus from the Lions, I figure I have options. Would you wanna move in with me?”

Move in with Theo? I mean, we were kind of already living together at the Taylor House, but making it official? With a label and everything? It’s a big deal, isn’t it? To be fair, it’s Theo, and we’ve been dating for almost a year now, but still. I’m barely twenty. Is it too soon by society’s standards? Do I even care if it is?

“Are you serious?” I ask.

He nods. “Yeah.”

“Like...*serious*, serious?”

“Yeah, Blake,” he repeats, his mouth quirking up in the smallest of smiles. “I didn’t want to cut your college experience short by suggesting it before, but if the idea of you finding new roommates gives you hives, I have a better solution.”

“Which is us moving in together?”

“Yeah, why not? I love you. We practically live together anyway. Now it’ll be official.”

“But...you’d have to choose somewhere relatively close to campus.”

“I was gonna choose somewhere close to campus anyway since it’s where you’ll be. Why don’t you do some digging, and we’ll look at a few places this weekend?”

“You want me to pick a place for us to live?” I confirm.

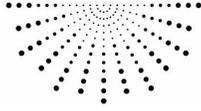
“Yeah.” He smiles. “I trust you.”

With the straw between my teeth, I can’t help my grin. Those words will never lose their charm, especially considering our past and his lack of trust and communication in the beginning. To be honest, we pretty much sucked at communicating when I first moved to LAU. But after I found the Lions contract in his room and begged him to start actually talking to me instead of making decisions without any communication on his part, he finally understood where I was coming from. And now? Now, he’s the king of communication and trust, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Okay,” I tell him, taking a sip of my iced latte. “I’ll see what I can find.”

“Perfect.”

KATE



“So...?” My voice trails off as I watch Macklin chop lettuce. He has a black apron wrapped around his waist, making him look like a sexy Betty Crocker with a side of mountain man.

“So...?” he repeats, glancing up at me.

“How’d it go?”

“It went well.” The knife slices through the lettuce with another swift slice as he returns to chopping.

“Seriously? That’s all you have to say?” I collapse onto the leather barstool in Macklin’s kitchen and rest my chin in my palm. He had a meeting with Buchanan and Dr. Peroshi, the head of the medical staff for the Lions for next season. I still can’t believe Buchanan hired Macklin to reel in the team and make sure they’re taking care of themselves in hopes of keeping the team thriving. He’ll be perfect for it, though, so I guess I shouldn’t be too surprised.

Macklin’s eyes are alight with mischief as he scoops the lettuce into a bowl and begins slicing tomatoes. “Yeah. It went well. Peroshi seems like a good guy.”

“Is he older? Younger? Nice? Laid back? Grumpy? Come on, Macklin. I need some adjectives here.”

Adding the sliced tomatoes to the salad bowl, he answers, “Older.

Reserved. Nice. It's about all I have so far. It was only an hour-long meeting."

"And? Do you feel good? Confident you'll get along? Nervous he'll step on your toes?" I push, watching as he grabs an avocado and slices it as well.

"I don't think he'll step on my toes. The guy's kind of quiet. I can see why Buchanan might've thought I'd be a good fit since I'm not afraid to go head-to-head with players." His mouth quirks up, and he stops cutting the avocado. "I think Peroshi's too nice."

"Nice is good," I muse. "But is he *golden retriever* nice or...?"

"Wise-old-man nice," Mack clarifies while scooping out the avocado from the skin with a metal spoon. "Not sure he has the energy to be much of anything else. Buchanan pulled him out of retirement so he could help with the Lions."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Buchanan wasn't kidding about wanting to run the team differently. We'll see how it goes." Sliding the knife under the sliced avocados, he sets the layers on top of the rest of the salad, making the dish look like it belongs on a freaking Food Channel show. Satisfied, he wipes his hands on his apron, then turns off the burner behind him. The scent of cumin and garlic fills the air. My mouth waters as he picks up the chicken breasts from the stove and sets them on his cutting board, giving them time to rest. "It'll be good, I think," he adds. "We'll probably be rooming together during away games unless you or his wife tags along."

"He's married?" I ask.

"Yeah. Been married for fifty years."

"*Fifty?*" I squeak.

He nods.

"That's insane."

His chin dips again, and he starts cutting the chicken into cubes. "What's insane is how much travel is involved with all of this. You sure you're okay

with me being away so much?”

“I mean, I’d rather be with you, but I’m a big girl, and this is an awesome experience,” I remind him. “Besides, ModernLabs is great with time off and has already agreed to let me work from home whenever I need to. My schedule is four ten-hour days, so my Fridays will be free too. I think you’ll be surprised how often I’ll be able to tag along. How do you feel about it? Are you excited? Nervous? To be traveling so much?”

“Nervous,” he decides after a beat of hesitation. “But excited too. I didn’t have a chance to travel before Hazel was born. To be young and adventurous. I was tied down before I had time to grow up and experience life. Don’t get me wrong. I love Haze and Miley more than anything, but having a chance to travel and be carefree without missing my kids’ lives?” He pauses, looking anxious and almost...lost. “It’s such a foreign concept, Kate. I don’t even know how to wrap my head around it.”

Feeling the nervous energy surrounding us, I stand up and walk around the edge of the counter. I wrap my arms around his waist and rest my head against his back. “I’m glad you’re getting a second chance to travel and be carefree.”

And I am. Getting married and becoming a father in high school has to mess with your head. Sometimes, I forget he didn’t grow up completely unscathed from the whole thing. He’s always so put together. So in control, yet laid back and easygoing at the same time. Like he’s ready to roll with the punches but has prepared a solution for any and every outcome. Sometimes, I’m jealous of how well he handles whatever life throws at him. Then I remember he had to be. And this opportunity? It’s his first chance to be selfish. To do something for himself. To have fun and put himself above everyone else. He deserves it more than anyone.

“It’ll be good,” he murmurs, still lost in his own thoughts. The knife lands on the cutting board with a quiet thump, and Mack turns in my arms, facing me. “Doesn’t mean I won’t miss you like crazy.”

“Even when I’m feeling prickly?” I quip.

“Especially when you’re feeling prickly.” He leans closer, blowing a raspberry on my neck, and I squeal.

“Macklin!”

His grip around my waist tightens. “Love you, Kate.”

“Love you too.”

He picks me up and sets me on the counter next to the cutting board and salad, scooting up the hem of my jade-colored sundress until my thighs are on full display and the material is bunched around my waist.

His blue eyes heat as he steps between my thighs. “We’re gonna make it to fifty years, Kate.”

“Oh, we are?”

His fingers trail along my hip, toying with the lace of my thong. Rising higher, he pushes my hair off my shoulders. It hangs down my back as he drags his fingertips along my neck and jaw.

“Yeah. I’ll be an old man, and you’ll have to push me around in a wheelchair or some shit, but we’re gonna get there.”

“Can’t wait,” I reply softly. He leans closer and kisses me, his mouth hot and addictive. I spread my thighs a little more and curl my arms around the back of his neck. I love this man. So damn much. He slips his tongue into my mouth, teasing me. When a soft moan slips out of me, he smiles against my lips, slowing the kiss, and murmurs, “Now, I feast.”

My brow quirks as he pulls away and grins.

I gulp.

Holding my gaze, he slides onto his knees, his wavy brown hair already mussed from my wandering hands. But the look in his eyes? Hungry and wanting.

Blue. Blue. Blue.

“Macklin,” I warn.

“You gonna leave me hungry, Kate?”

“Dinner’s right here.” I motion to the southwest chicken salad on the counter next to me. I’m not sure why I’m playing devil’s advocate when I could most definitely use a solid orgasm. But there’s something about being wanted despite the other options available, and it spurs me on.

“Damn right, it is.” His fingers dig into my ass as he yanks me toward the edge of the counter, and I fall back, resting my elbows on the cool granite.

The man doesn’t waste any time dragging his nose along my damp panties and breathing me in. As if they’re nothing but a scrap of cloth, he tears them from my body.

My back arches as he french kisses my core, not wasting any time as his tongue drags along the seam and dips into me.

Shiiiiit.

He sucks on my lips and spreads my thighs wider, leaving me sprawled out beneath him like I’m his own personal buffet and he hasn’t eaten in weeks. But I love this about him. His desperation. His neediness.

His fingers are almost punishing as he digs them into my inner thighs. I gasp, the rough calluses on his hands turning me on even more as they scrape along my sensitive skin.

He laps at me over and over, adding a finger and crooking it, hitting the perfect angle inside of me while spreading my folds with his opposite hand. My clit pulses as he flicks it with the tip of his very talented tongue, and I’m convinced I’ve died and gone to heaven. When he softly drags his teeth against the sensitive nub, I bite my bottom lip, nearly choking on my moan.

Yessss...

The heat from his mouth combined with the cold granite against my bare thighs and back is such a stark contrast I nearly melt on the spot. I lift my hips in rhythm with his tongue, and it feels so good. So freaking good. I press my fingers against the granite surface as I fight the urge to push his face against me and ride his mouth. Instead, I let him take the lead. Torturing me.

Finally, he latches onto me, sucks hard, and groans. The vibration against

my clit pushes me over the edge, and my mouth drops open in a silent scream while the world shatters around me.

Holy. Freaking. Shit.

It never gets old.

Ever.

The way he kisses me. Worships me. The feel of his tongue. His hands. His mouth. His cock.

“Get inside me,” I demand. My desperation takes over at the thought of his erection. I start to sit up, but he gently pushes me back down.

“Stay,” he orders.

“Get inside me now,” I volley right back at him.

My clit is still pulsing as he stands up, a cocky smirk teasing his lips. Quickly, he unbuckles his pants, shoving into me with one long, delicious thrust. My back bows off the counter at the exquisite burn as he stretches me, and I soak it up. The way he feels. The addictive intrusion. His heavy breathing as he attempts to control himself.

Without giving me time to adjust, he grabs my waist and tugs me toward him, pistoning in and out of me as I ride out the rest of my orgasm. Another follows right after. My skin feels hot and tight, and my breathing is erratic, but his thrusts? And the way he knows exactly where the right spot is?

“Mack, I’m gonna...” I shake my head back and forth as he yanks me toward him even harder, forcing me to ride his cock over and over. “I’m gonna come.”

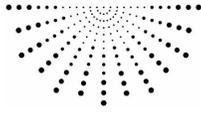
“Come with me, baby,” he grunts. “Come with me now.”

He jerks inside of me, and I tumble after him, clenching around him as euphoria blossoms from my center and out to my limbs, leaving me limp and satiated. Macklin’s grip on my waist eases a few seconds later, and he slips out of me. The familiar ripping sound of a paper towel mingles with my unsteady breaths before he wipes me clean and helps me sit up, pressing another kiss to my lips.

“Love you, Kate.”

“Love you too.”

BLAKELY



C licking my tongue against the roof of my mouth, I scroll through the apartment options online. Everyone else is out of the house. Ashlyn's room is completely empty, and so is Kate's. It's only me and Mia left here. I have no idea where she is right now. Work, probably. Or sleeping. I check the time on my cell. It's ten in the morning. Yeah, she's definitely sleeping.

With my laptop propped in front of me, I lay on my stomach on the bed and peruse my choices. Or...*our* choices, considering I'm moving in with Theo.

Holy crap on a cracker, Batman!

I'm moving in with Theodore Taylor.

Never in a million, billion, kajillion years would I have guessed I'd wind up with Teddy Taylor. Even now, it's surreal. Like I'm watching my life unfold from an outside perspective, and damn. Blakely Thorne hit the jackpot.

Another listing catches my attention, and I click on a link to a tiny one-bedroom with a gorgeous view of the mountains.

"Oooo, this one's close to the gym," I say under my breath.

The counters are Formica, and the floors are linoleum.

Yikes.

Pretty sure there's a cockroach in the picture too.

Seriously? No one thought to pick it up before snapping the photo?

I click the back button and return to my search.

It's still weird. Exciting but weird. Shopping for apartments. Setting up times to view said apartments. Imagining living with Theo for *real*. My heart flutters at the prospect. Which is kind of ridiculous since we sleep together half the time, anyway. But the idea of making it official? Of living under the same roof?

If ten-year-old Blakely could see me now.

I grin and click on the next potential apartment when my phone rings. It's Mom.

"Hello, Mommy Dearest," I answer, pinning my phone between my ear and shoulder as I continue scrolling through housing options.

"Hey, honey. How are ya?"

"I'm good. Looking at apartments." My eyes thin as a basement apartment catches my attention.

"Aw, so you decided to officially move out of the house with the girls?" she asks.

"Yeah. I think it's for the best."

"I know you're bummed they're all leaving."

"It's fine," I reply, and for the first time, I actually mean it.

A beat of silence follows. "Well, someone's tune has changed," she muses.

To be fair, she's right. I've been bitching about my lack of a diploma for the past two months and all the changes inevitably following once graduation rolled around.

"It's like you always say when one door closes, another one opens," I tell her, examining a photo of a tiny shower barely big enough to fit one person, let alone two.

Goodbye, shower sex.

"That's my girl," Mom cheers. "So, where are you thinking of moving to?"

Are you and Mia going to try to get a place off campus, or are you going to move in with your mama again and keep me company?”

“While both of those options sound pretty tempting, Mia’s yet to find a job, so she doesn’t want to sign a lease until she knows her salary and the location where she wants to be. And you, Mommy Dearest, are a big girl who—from what I’ve heard—has been all too invested in her Bunco group *and* has been staying out at all hours of the night. You honestly think I want to come home and babysit my mother?”

She laughs but doesn’t deny it. And honestly, I wouldn’t have it any other way. After my dad died, Mom broke. She put on a strong face for Colt and the rest of my brothers, but as soon as they were out of the house, I’d find her crying in the kitchen. In her bedroom. Even showering was more effort than it was worth for a while. It’s why I decided to stay with her during my first two years and take online classes instead of dipping my toe in campus life. Hell, she practically had to kick me out a year later because I was so worried about her. And in the end, it was the best decision I could’ve made.

“So you’re going to find some new girls to move in with?” she asks, her tone laced with confusion. “I thought you said it was the last thing you wanted to do.”

“It is, and I’m not.” I pause, finding a three-bedroom apartment. It’s way overpriced, but I click on it anyway. “Oooo, this one could have an office *and* an in-home gym. Yes, please.”

“Honey, focus,” Mom scolds. “If you’re not finding some new girls to move in with, where are you moving?”

I close my eyes and rein in my overstimulated squirrel brain, explaining, “Theo asked me to move in with him.”

“He what?”

“He asked me to move in with him.” I slap my laptop closed and roll onto my back, staring up at the ceiling as the familiar kaleidoscope of butterflies makes another appearance.

“And you agreed?” she questions.

“Duh. I kind of love him, remember?”

Silence.

I sit up, shifting my phone from one ear to the other. “Mom? Are you there?”

“I am.”

Silence.

“And?” I press, my nerves getting the best of me.

“And I love Theo. You know I do.”

I scowl. The warning bells in my head ring loud and clear as I try to read between the lines, but I don’t have enough information to even make a far-fetched assumption, let alone an accurate conclusion.

Why isn’t she happy for me?

“Ooookay?” The word hangs in the air as I wait for her to say something. Anything.

“And I think he’s your forever,” she adds carefully.

“Ooookay?” I repeat. “If you think he’s my forever, why are you acting weird?”

“I’m not. I’m...” She sighs. “Are you sure you’re ready?”

I jerk back, surprised. Actually, I’m pretty sure I would’ve been less shocked if she’d slapped me.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I remind her, “Ash moved in with Colt.”

“Colt and Ash are both older than you and have graduated. It’s the next step in their lives.”

“And it isn’t the next step in mine?”

Her sigh grates on my nerves, but I bite my tongue. She’s always been this way. The devil’s advocate. The calm to my chaos. The level-headed sage brimming with wisdom and bringing me back down to earth. Which only makes me second-guess myself even more. Is she onto something? Am I doing something wrong? Am I not thinking this through?

No. It's fine.

It's Theo.

We've practically already been living together, and everything's been great. So it's not a big deal.

"Mom, we're only moving in together. It's not a big deal," I argue, voicing my thoughts aloud.

"Living with someone and being in their personal space all the time *is* a big deal. I want you to be sure you're both ready for this level of commitment. That's all. And you know Theo. He'd do anything for you. He proved it during last season. But he's also impulsive, Blake. Are you positive this is what he wants? Is he ready for this? I want to be certain you're both communicating what you really want."

"Are you suggesting I pressured him into asking me to move in with him?" I ask.

"I'm saying it isn't a competition. Your relationship with Theo versus Ashlyn's relationship with Colt. It's all right to do things at your own pace and in your own time."

"So you think the only reason I want to move in with Theo is because I'm competitive and I want to...what, exactly? Beat Colt and Ash?"

"You and Theo were made for each other, and I could see it from when you were both little. You know I approve of your relationship, Blake."

"Then why are we even arguing about this?" I demand, rubbing at my temples. Is it just me, or do I feel a headache coming on?

Dammit. I'm annoyed. And frustrated. Here I was, excited to go apartment shopping, and now, I feel like the wind's been taken out of my sails.

"You're right," Mom rushes out. "I'm sorry. I overstepped my bounds, and that's on me. I raised you to be a bright young woman, and it's exactly who you've become. I couldn't be more proud, and I'm genuinely excited for you and Theo. Seriously. I am. Let me know where you decide to move, and

I'll bring a housewarming present."

I shake my head. "Thanks." Then I hang up the phone and toss it onto the bed.

A light knock sounds from the front of the house, cutting my pity party short. With a groan, I head to the front door and open it.

"Hi."

"Hey, are you—" Theo frowns, taking me in. "What happened?"

"Nothing." I turn on my heel, leaving the door open. I grab my keys from the bowl in the center of the kitchen island, but he stops me from slipping past him and retreating to his car.

"What happened?" he repeats. His chest brushes against mine, and he waits.

I stare at the faded black and red LAU logo strewn across his chest, unable to look him in the eye as I replay my conversation with my mom.

"Tell me," he pushes.

"Did I bully you into asking me to move in with you?" I blurt out.

"What?"

"Did I bully you into asking me to move in with you?" I repeat. My voice is stronger as my eyes meet his from beneath the brim of his worn black baseball hat.

His mouth lifts. "Tell me you're joking."

"No, I'm not joking. I wanna know."

He grabs my hands hanging limply at my sides, laces our fingers together, and wraps them around his back. Satisfied I'll keep them there, he tugs me against him and starts swaying from side to side as I close my eyes and rest my head on his chest. The steady thrum-thrum of his heartbeat calms my own as I take a deep breath.

"Been dying to live with you since we were kids and you'd steal my gummy bears from my bedroom, Baby Thorne," he tells me.

"Don't say that."

“It’s the truth.” He rubs his hand up and down my spine, comforting me. “And I mean it.”

“Am I being competitive? Am I jealous Ash and Colt moved in together, so I’m manipulating you into letting me move in with you?”

His dry chuckle warms my cheeks as he pulls away from me and forces me to look at him. “Who got in your head?”

“No one.”

“Blake,” he warns.

I wiggle out of his grasp and rest my forehead against his sternum instead. “I told my mom we were moving in together, and now she’s making me second-guess my motives. And yours.” I peek up at him again. “What are your motives, by the way?”

“For starters, I want to wake up to you every morning.” I snort as he leans closer, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “I also want to have my skin scalded in my morning showers I share with you.” He kisses my cheek. “I also want to hear your laugh and your sarcastic responses when you tell me about your day.” His lips trail down to my throat as his hands find my back pockets. He slips them inside, cupping my ass. “And I want to fuck you whenever I want.” Craving friction, I press my breasts against him and spread my legs, letting his thigh settle between mine. “And I wanna call you mine.” His teeth drag against my neck as I tilt my head. “I don’t give a fuck about Colt or Ash. I only give a fuck about you, Baby Thorne.”

His fingers dig into my ass as he forces my hips to grind against his thigh, and I nearly moan, the pressure hitting in just the right place.

“Teddy,” I breathe out. “If you aren’t careful, we’re gonna miss our appointment.”

“Is this one for an apartment?” he murmurs against my throat, his hot breath making my skin tingle.

“Mm-hmm,” I hum.

“Then I don’t give a shit.”

I pull back, surprised. “What?”

“I don’t want to rent. I want to buy a house with you, Blake. And I want you to decorate it. And to make it cute and shit. And to pick out our sheets and our towels and everything else you want.”

“You forgot gym equipment,” I point out.

He chuckles and picks me up with ease, cupping the back of my thighs. I wrap my legs around his waist. The familiar ridge of his cock teases me through my jeans, and it takes everything inside of me to *not* grind against him.

“Whatever you want, Baby Thorne,” he murmurs, his voice low and sultry and...

Yeah. I don’t give a shit about our appointment anymore, either.

My palm slaps against the front door as I slam it closed, and he walks me back toward my bedroom without waiting for an invitation.

“And this isn’t you being impulsive or saying all the right things so you can get in my pants?” I ask, grabbing his hat and tossing it onto my bed.

“We both know I’m too stubborn to agree to something I don’t want.”

With a soft thump, I bounce on the mattress as he lets me go. He picks his hat up from the bed and places it backward on my head, my messy red curls sprawled around my shoulders.

His eyes darken, and his tongue darts out between his lips. “And now, you’re gonna ride me, Baby Thorne. And when we’re done, you’re gonna show me some houses you really want because we both know you went down the rabbit hole and looked at those while you were searching for rentals.”

The bastard knows me too well.

I kick off my jeans on the bed while he stays standing and unbuckles his belt, his eyes on me. When his very hard erection comes into view with a drop of precum glistening on the mushroom head, my mouth waters. I rise onto my knees as he rubs his hand up and down his shaft, letting me watch him. But when I reach for the hem of my shirt, desperate to get this party

started, he shakes his head. “Get over here.”

“Shirt on?” I question.

“Need you now.”

He sits on the edge of the bed and snatches my waist, picking me like I’m a ragdoll and putting me exactly where he wants me. With both thighs on either side of his, I straddle him, rubbing his thick length against my core. I love this part. Being with Theo. Connecting with Theo. Feeling him against me. His scent. His skin. The sheen of sweat across his forehead as he pushes me over the edge.

And I want it.

I want it right now.

Again.

Like the last time. And the time before that.

Because it never gets old. Never gets monotonous. Not with Theo.

“You trying to kill me?” he grunts as I lift my hips and run my thumb along the head of his erection, lining him up with my entrance.

“Is it working?” I ask.

Refusing to let me take the lead, he grabs the back of my thighs, stands up, and tosses me onto the bed. I yelp in surprise, and his hand encompasses my ankle. As if I weigh nothing, he drags me to the edge of the bed and cages me in with his arms, bending at the waist while his feet stay planted on the ground. His mouth connects with mine in a hot and messy kiss. Then, he thrusts into me. My mouth opens on a gasp, but he doesn't let me adjust. Doesn't let me catch my breath. He fucking pounds into me over and over, snaking one of his hands between us and finding my clit with his thumb.

“Shit, Teddy. Shit. Shit. Shit.” I chant the words as his cock finds the bundle of nerves inside of me, and he burrows his head into the crook of my neck, sucking on the sensitive flesh.

Fucking hell.

It's so good. He's so good.

“Fuck, Teddy. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I love you so much. I love you so fucking—”

He bites my neck. The sharp bite causes me to fall apart, and I dig my nails into his ass, holding on for dear life.

But I love this Theo.

How frenzied he is.

How desperate.

How easily he makes me come.

How much my body craves his.

He lifts his head, his eyes meeting mine as he grips my hips and lifts my ass up. Faster and faster, he pistons inside of me, watching my baby boobs bounce beneath him while he forces my body to ride his dick. “Fucking love you, Blake.”

I smile, barely holding on. I rake my fingernails through my hair, his hat long forgotten. His gaze rolls over every inch of my exposed skin beneath him.

There it is.

He’s close.

“Come inside me, Theo,” I beg.

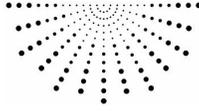
With a low groan, he comes, his body frozen as he jerks inside my core. When he collapses on top of me, his weight presses me into the mattress, and a laugh slips out of me. I try catching my breath, no matter how impossible it feels when I’m being squashed under a massive hockey player. But I love this too. The comfort his weight brings. The familiarity of it. It’s like home.

I don’t need an apartment with him or a house or anything else. I only need Theo. And moments like this prove it. None of it is a competition. Because nothing else matters. No one else matters.

Only me and Teddy.

Not gonna lie. He’s kind of stuck with me.

MIA



“**M**iss Rutherford,” an older woman addresses me. Her wrinkled lips thin as she looks me up and down, her attention pausing for the briefest of seconds on the tattoo peeking out from beneath my long-sleeved blouse. Bet she’d have a heart attack if I dared to wear a tank top and let my tattoo sleeve make a full appearance.

And here I thought the piercings covering my ear would be the final blow to my resume.

Lucky me.

Honestly, I should be impressed. It’s been, what? Three seconds? And she’s already decided she doesn’t like me. This might be a record.

If that doesn’t mean this interview is already in the toilet, I don’t know what does.

Pushing to my feet, I give her a smile while ignoring her iciness no matter how impossible it feels. “Hello,” I greet her.

“Come inside.” She waits by the office door, and I slip past her. The office has one window, a yellow lacquered desk looking like it’s from the nineties, and a filing cabinet with a sad, almost dead plant resting on top. A plaque with the name Ms. Desiree Foster is printed in brass and placed front and center on the desk, along with a single chair set up directly in front of it, looking less than comfortable.

I turn around and face her again. “I want to thank you for meeting—”
“Take a seat,” she orders.

Oof. Someone’s got a stick up her ass this morning.

Spine straight, I sit on the edge of the metal chair as Ms. Foster rounds the desk littered with papers and sits down, shuffling a few stacks around as if to look busy. When she finds what she’s looking for, her beady eyes scan the single sheet of paper in front of her. When they shift to me, they are cold. Calculating. Which is weird, considering she looks like Mrs. Claus with a round belly, snow-white hair pinned into an updo, and red, rosy cheeks.

“So. You would like to work at Lockwood Heights Medical,” she announces. “Why?”

“Well, for starters, it’s a great hospital,” I reply. “One of the top-rated in the state. The other nurses, doctors, and staff all rave about the environment online, and it’s close to my home, which is also a great perk.”

“And why do you think you’d be a good fit?”

“I’m friendly. A hard worker. Patient. Smart. Quick on my feet.” I ramble on and on, repeating the same lame answers from my previous interviews as I watch her eyes narrow from behind her wire-rimmed glasses.

Surprisingly, she isn’t bored.

She’s pissed.

And I can’t figure out why.

“Are you aware of our anti-fraternization policy?” she interrupts.

I pause, taken aback. “Uh, I assume it’s like most anti-fraternization policies. Am I correct?”

“And do you know what an anti-fraternization policy means?”

Does she think I’m an idiot?

I clear my throat and answer, “No romantic relationships between coworkers.”

“And is it a problem for you? To abstain from relationships with coworkers?”

My brows knit. “Not at all. Relationships aren’t exactly on the forefront of my mind.”

“Hmm.” She takes off her glasses and sets them on the sheet of paper she’d been studying. I can now see it is my resume. She steeple her fingers in front of her. “Nice to meet you.”

I jerk back in my seat. “That’s it?”

“Yes, that will be all.”

She has to be joking. Even my worst interviews have been longer than two minutes. She didn’t even bother to ask some of the most basic standard questions in the health industry.

Like seriously. What is this woman’s problem?

“That will be all,” she repeats, her tone as sharp as a fucking tack.

Snapping myself out of my paralysis, I stand and offer my hand. “Well, thank you for your time, Ms. Foster.”

Her smile is forced at best. I’m not surprised when she shakes my hand gingerly, her fingers barely touching mine. Like I’m diseased or some shit.

At this point, I’d be more surprised if I *did* wind up getting the job.

“Good day to you, Miss Rutherford.” She lets my hand go, wipes it on her chocolate-colored slacks, and motions to the office door. “We’ll reach out if we’re interested.”

Aaaand, that’s my cue.

Without a word, I turn my back on the head of Lockwood Medical’s Human Resources department, finding the office door still cracked open. Either she’s spacey and doesn’t know the meaning of privacy, or she meant to keep it open and had no intention of giving me a real shot in the first place. My fingernails dig into my palms as I push the door open the rest of the way and stop short.

A woman in scrubs is on the opposite side, her expression apologetic. She’s pretty. With hazel eyes, blue hair, and a kind smile.

“Hey,” she greets me with a small wave of her left hand. A tattoo covers

her forearm, and it's beautiful. A book with a rose. Something is written, too, although I can't make it out.

Maybe my tattoos didn't piss off Ms. Foster after all.

It was probably my gleaming personality.

My guard immediately drops around the stranger, and I glance over my shoulder at Ms. Foster's office. I clear my throat. "Hi. Did you want to talk to ___"

Raising one finger in a silent give-me-a-second motion, she steps around me, closes Ms. Foster's door with a quiet click, then turns to me again.

"I want to apologize for Ms. Foster," she starts.

My brows raise. "Excuse me?"

"I'm Caity, by the way." She offers her hand for me to shake, so I take it, more confused than ever.

"I'm Mia," I reply. "Hi."

She grimaces and lets my hand go. "I know who you are."

What the hell?

I tilt my head, looking at her again, but she's as much of a stranger as she was a moment ago. Maybe she's been into SeaBird? No, I'm usually pretty good with faces, and I've never seen this girl before.

I shake my head and ask, "I'm sorry. How do you know me?"

"Well, for one, I handle Ms. Foster's schedule, and second, I may have overheard a few of the nurses talking about you, and..." Her voice trails off, and her gaze falls to the floor, leaving her looking guilty as hell.

"I'm sorry...the nurses were talking about me?" I ask. "How would they even know about me?"

The girl looks about as comfortable as someone having a pap smear when her eyes meet mine again. "No offense, but a lot of people know about you."

Understanding dawns on me, and my jaw tightens, my nails forming crescents on my palms.

Fuck. You. Shorty.

She knows about the OnlyFans account. I don't know how. Actually, scratch that. It's probably the first thing to pop up if you Google my name. I refuse to confirm that particular theory out of full-blown fear over what I might find.

Regardless, Caity doesn't need to say anything else. I know exactly what she's talking about, and it pisses me off.

"Do I have any chance of getting this position?" I demand.

Her hazel eyes fill with remorse as she hesitates. Her head does the tiniest of shakes. Hell, if I hadn't been paying attention, I probably would've missed it. But the regret in her gaze? The pity?

Fuck that.

"I felt like you had a right to know it isn't your fault, and you didn't do anything wrong in the interview," Caity rushes out, sensing how close I am to blowing a fucking gasket. "Don't take it too hard."

My molars grind as I shake my head, fighting off tears of frustration. "Nice to meet you, Caity."

"Wait," she begs. "Let me walk you to your car."

"I'm fine."

"Seriously." She glances at Ms. Foster's closed door again, and I storm off, not giving a shit whether or not she follows because I'm too pissed to care.

The sun is bright as I march outside, my blood boiling. Squinting until my eyes have time to adjust, I spot my car in the parking lot and bolt toward it.

"Damn, Mia, you walk faster than my dogs," Caity mutters, rushing to keep up with me.

I almost laugh but swallow it back.

I used to have a dog. And she was beautiful. Crazy. Messy. Huge. And drooly. Pixie. Her name was Pixie. Then, my uncle inadvertently stole her. Since my dad was the one who'd originally bought her for me and my mom is anti-dogs, I let my uncle keep her.

But man, how I miss her.

She's still alive, but she isn't mine anymore. I should go see her again. Maybe take her on a walk since she's way too old to go on a run with me nowadays. But a walk? It might be nice. And shit, I could use the comfort and familiarity right now.

I wipe at my cheeks, the last of my self-respect finally seeping from my tired bones, leaving me nothing but a shell of the strong badass I used to be.

I tried so hard.

So fucking hard.

To be better. To be stronger. To fight for what I want. Be who I wanted to be. But it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter how many obstacles I've had to get past. How many hurdles I've jumped over.

It still isn't enough.

I can feel Caity watching me. Her arms are folded, her head tilted down. Like she wants to help. Wants to fix the mess I've made. But she doesn't know how.

She's younger. Probably close to my age. Probably has her own shit to deal with. But she was nice. To tell me the truth.

My keys jingle as I pull them out of my purse, but I don't climb into my car. Not yet.

"What kind of dogs do you have?" I ask her.

"Two are litter mates, and they're lab pit mixes. Then I have a chihuahua and toy Australian Shepherd mix."

A laugh sounding a lot more like a pathetic sob than actual amusement slips out of me. "What are their names?"

"Chuck, Daisy, and Luna," Caity replies.

I sniffle. "Cute names."

"Thanks. Me and my hubby, Alec, came up with them."

I nod, thumbing my keys in my hand and looking at her again. "How'd they find out about my OF account?"

The same swell of pity swirls in her hazel eyes. “One of the nurse’s boyfriends was friends with a guy named...Shorty?” Caity shakes her head. “Not that it matters. Most hospitals and doctor’s offices do their research before interviewing people, let alone hiring them. Ms. Foster usually asks me to do a quick search on social media, and I tell her what I find.”

My head bobs up and down absently. She’s right. I should’ve known I wouldn’t have been able to keep my OF account a secret. It didn’t matter that I never showed my face in any of the photos. Didn’t matter that the majority of pictures were only of my feet or me in a bikini or lingerie. The damage is done. And if I’ve learned anything from my experience, it’s that once the photos are out there, they’re out there forever. There’s no going back.

And it fucking sucks.

I could always call Uncle Fender. After all, the guy’s a rockstar with more connections than some of our presidents. He’d probably be able to get most of the photos taken down. But the damage is already done, at least locally. If I want a real chance at being hired, I’m going to have to move away. And I don’t want to have to move away. My chin touches my chest as I take a slow, deep breath.

This freaking sucks.

“Can I buy you a coffee or something?” Caity asks. “Maybe an iced caramel mocha with whole milk?” she prods. “My treat.”

“It’s fine.” I wipe beneath my eyes with my forefinger, attempting to keep my dark eyeliner in place. “Thanks, though.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“I like your tattoo,” I add, my attention dropping to the same book tattoo with a rose through it I’d noticed earlier. “What does it say?”

She lifts her arm, dragging her fingers over the ink as if lost in thought. “It says to be continued...”

“I like it,” I murmur. “I like it a lot.”

“Me too.” Her hazel eyes meet mine again. “Don’t let Ms. Foster get you

down. Or any of the other shit,” she clarifies with a reassuring smile. “You got this.”

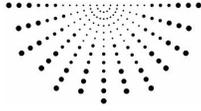
“Thanks.”

And for some reason, as I watch her walk back into the hospital, I can’t help but think maybe she’s right. It might not be in the nursing field, but if I’ve learned anything in my life, I’ve learned I will get back up again. I have to. I think back on her tattoo.

To be continued...

I got this.

ASHLYN



The scent of garlic and parmesan hits me full force as Colt opens the restaurant door for me. He's a little more on edge than normal. I don't know why. He's been shifty ever since I moved in with him, but a lot's changing, so I get it.

And what better way to step back and enjoy the little things than to go on a date with the one you love?

Red leather booths and gold chandeliers greet us, giving us the perfect and most beautiful ambiance a girl could ask for, especially when my stomach is rumbling the way it is. I spent the day helping Blakely with a few kids at the basketball court, and I'm famished.

Food. I need food.

With Colt's hand pressed against my lower back, he guides me to the hostess stand and tells her his last name so she can pull up our reservation.

Once she finds it, the girl grabs two menus and leads us back to our table. As I slip into the booth, Colt sits on the opposite side and laces his fingers in front of him, his eyes rolling over my curves and the white sundress I'd chosen for our date tonight.

"You look beautiful, Sunshine," he tells me, turning me into putty with a single genuine compliment.

And it's funny.

How it doesn't get old.

His thoughtfulness.

His attention to detail.

His desire to make me feel appreciated and, above all, *seen*.

I was never seen with my ex, Logan. Not really. I was more of a prop. A body filling the title of girlfriend. I was replaceable to him, even if I didn't recognize it in the beginning.

But with Colt? He's never made me feel anything but irreplaceable. Special. Beautiful. And I love him for it.

"Thank you." I smile and open my menu, but I don't look at the words. Instead, I shamelessly check him out from above the edge of the menu, taking in his chiseled jaw and cocky smirk as he stares right back at me. "You don't look so bad yourself over there, mister."

"Why thank you," he returns dryly.

I laugh and begin scanning the menu options as I ask, "So, how does it feel? Seeing your name plastered across all the sports channels? Everyone's discussing draft picks and who would be the best fit for the Lions, considering who their Left Wing and Center are on the roster. They're pretty excited to see you play, Mr. Thorne."

"Someone's been brushing up on their research," he notes.

I shrug one shoulder and hold his eyes as I take a sip from my water glass.

"You staying away from the gossip columns?" he prods.

I roll my eyes and set my glass on the cream-colored tablecloth. "We aren't talking about me."

"Mm-hmm," he hums, looking less than convinced.

Which I understand, considering how many times I've shown him an article while crying. Whether it's because they've called me a bitch, or because they've rated my outfit choices and have told me I have no sense of style. It hasn't mattered. Reporters and paparazzi have had a hell of a time

dragging me through the mud simply because they can. Because they know I'm an easy target who'd prefer to stay out of the limelight despite dating one of the most newsworthy players in the NHL.

Things have been quiet. Lately, anyway. Probably because they're focused on the upcoming draft, but I've been soaking it up for as long as I can. The silence. The peace. The reprieve from the gossip columns while knowing they'll probably start up again as the new season approaches.

I shake off the reminder. "Right now, we're talking about you and your hockey career. With your break winding to an end, how do you feel?"

"Honestly?" He pauses and settles back into the booth a little more. "It feels surreal. I never thought I'd be here."

He's right. He never did think he'd be here, or at least not after his father was killed. It's interesting. How much a single moment can lead us off course. And yet how another single moment can bring us right back to where we belong. I still can't believe I was dating Logan when I first saw Colt at the stoplight by my house. I still can't believe he AirDropped me his phone number and had the audacity to hit on me when he was well aware I was dating his best friend.

Then again, I think he felt the same connection I did.

From the first moment we met, I think he could see how unhappy I was in my relationship with Logan and how little Logan cared about me. I think he could see how much better he could treat me if given a chance. And he's proven it in spades.

Here we are. Together.

We made it.

The waitress interrupts, and we give her our orders. When she walks away from the table, I prod, "So, how are you doing?"

"Fine. Why?"

"I feel like you've been...off lately," I admit, rubbing the edge of the maroon napkin between my fingers as I address the elephant in the room.

“Not off, just...” He squeezes the back of his neck. “Stressed, I guess.”

“About what?”

“About a lot of stuff.”

“Such as...?” I press.

“Such as this upcoming season. And the paparazzi who don’t like to leave you alone. And who the Lions are gonna draft, and if they’ll be a good fit for the team.”

“Those are a lot of stressors,” I note.

He reaches over and grasps my fidgeting hand, rubbing his thumb back and forth along my skin. The innocent touch warms me. Comforts me. Eases the anxiety that loves to follow me wherever I go.

“Yeah. But I’m still sorry,” Colt apologizes. “If I’ve seemed off. There’s a lot on my plate right now, but it’s no excuse.”

“I didn’t suggest we go to dinner so you’d feel like you need to apologize. You’ve done nothing wrong. I’ve felt like you’ve been a little preoccupied, and I wanted to make sure you’re okay. That’s all.”

“I’m okay,” he murmurs. “And I’m sorry. I’ll try to be better.”

I nod. “All right.”

“So you never told me...” Colt mentions, changing the subject. “Did Mia end up telling your landlord she’s moving out?”

“Actually, yeah. A couple weeks ago,” I answer. “The landlord gave her until the end of the summer before she needs to find a new place, but I have no idea what she’s going to do because her interviews haven’t been going well, and if she doesn’t find something soon, I don’t know where she’s going to live.”

Colt is well aware of Mia’s financial issues, the same way I’ve been since we moved in together.

And even though they’re only friends, he cares about her like I do.

“How did her last interview go?” Colt asks, letting my hand go and taking a sip of his water. “The one at Lockwood Medical.”

I shake my head and shrug one shoulder. “She didn’t get it.”

“Is she sure?”

“Yeah.” Wringing my hands in my lap, I admit, “I’m kind of worried about her, Colt.”

It's probably my biggest flaw and greatest strength. The way I worry about everyone around me. I care about them and their happiness and whether or not they're doing all right. Whether it's financially, or emotionally, or physically, it doesn't matter. I care. And when I care about someone who is as self-destructive as Mia? Well, needless to say, it weighs heavily on my mind sometimes.

“You’re always worried about her,” he points out with a knowing smile.

“I can’t help it. It’s who I am.” I groan and cover my face.

“And it’s why you’re gonna be a great teacher.”

“I think you might have too much faith in me,” I mutter, dropping my hands back to my lap. “If I feel like this much of a mama bear around my friends, can you imagine how protective I’ll feel about all my students?”

“Yeah, but it’s what’s gonna make you a great mom one day.”

“Mm-hmm,” I hum through pursed lips.

We’ve never had the official kids talk. We aren’t even engaged yet. But he knows I want a big family. And I know he wants a few children too. Not today. Not for another few years. But one day.

I like my *one days* with him.

“Enough stressful talk,” I announce. “Tell me something good.”

“Well,” Colt starts. “Let's see. Something good. Something good.” He pauses as the waitress appears with our food and sets two pasta dishes in front of us.

Twirling his fork in his linguini, Colt takes a bite. A bit of the white sauce paints his upper lip, and I smile, shamelessly drooling over the guy. The man is so boyish, so handsome. He doesn't even realize it most days.

Feeling someone's gaze on us, I turn and find a pair of women around our

age staring at us. From across the room, one covers the side of her mouth and whispers something to her friend. It takes everything inside of me to *not* roll my eyes.

Subtle, girlfriend. Really subtle.

“Seems you have some fans,” I mention to Colt as one of them stands up and walks toward us on high heels.

“Excuse me,” she gushes. “But I’m a huge fan. Could you sign this for me?” A napkin and sharpie are thrust at Colt, and he chuckles, taking the items and scrawling his name across the maroon-colored napkin.

“Can I get a picture too?”

Colt motions toward me on the opposite side of the booth. “I’m sorry, but I’m on a date.”

“Oh, come on. Please? I’d absolutely die if I had a photo of us together.”

Colt glances at me, looking helpless, so I mutter, “It’s fine.”

Her massive breasts practically spill out of her dress as she presses them against Colt’s shoulder and leans down, snapping a selfie of them together. Satisfied, she stands up again and squeezes his shoulder. “Thanks, Colt. I’m already following you, but I’ll tag you when I post the picture. Ya know, so you can follow me back.” Her dark eyes flick to his, and she smiles coyly. “I’ll see ya later, Colt.”

Then she walks back to her table, leaving me speechless.

“Wow.” I twirl my fork in my pasta without bothering to take a bite, no matter how desperate I am to erase the bad taste in my mouth. But seriously. Did that just happen? I’m not surprised. I’ve had girls blatantly hand him their number right in front of me without batting an eye. Taking a selfie and pressing their boobs against him? Hey, why not?

Colt looks up at me and shakes his head. “Ignore them.”

“Oh, how much easier it is said than done,” I mutter under my breath. “Do you ever get sick of it?”

We’ve had this conversation before. Honestly, we’ve had it more times

than I can count, and he's probably tired of it, but it doesn't matter. He knows me. He knows my past with Logan. He knows my insecurities, and how quickly they rise to the surface anytime girls are around. And the man's sweet enough to stay patient in spite of it.

His pasta forgotten, Colt reaches across the table and grabs my hand rubbing his thumb against the back of mine again as he holds my gaze, knowing the innocent touch is my Kryptonite. "Sunshine, who am I here with?"

I close my eyes.

"Look at me." My gaze meets his. "I'm here with you. I love you. I'm living with you. Not them. *You.*"

"I know."

But it doesn't ease the tightness in my chest or the reminder that there are dozens, if not hundreds, of girls who would happily take my place in this booth if Colt ever wanted to replace me.

Screw you, Logan, I think to myself. Screw you and all of these stupid insecurities you've given me.

It isn't fair.

It *really* isn't fair.

Not in the slightest.

But they aren't going anywhere. And every time my insecurities begin to slip into the back of my mind, I'm hit with the reminder of how replaceable I am, despite Colt going out of his way to prove the opposite.

Like right now.

With the girls less than twenty feet away.

Staring at us.

Giving *me* dirty looks.

And giving *Colt* looks of appreciation.

Because I'm the villain. For taking him off the market. For stealing him from their clutches. It's ridiculous.

And annoying.

Oh, the joys of dating a hot hockey player.

“I’m gonna go to the bathroom.” I try to slip out of the booth, but he grabs my wrist and stands up, leaning across the table and enveloping my throat. He tilts my head toward him and kisses me. In front of everyone.

And it isn’t a sweet kiss.

It isn’t a chaste kiss.

It’s downright dirty and naughty and *hot*.

Without waiting for permission, he shoves his tongue between my lips and drags it against mine, thrusting it in and out of my mouth as a whimper lands in the back of my throat.

Damn you and your kisses, Mr. Thorne.

The man can play me like a fiddle.

Satisfied he has me right where he wants me, he smiles against my mouth and lets me go.

“What was that for?” I ask breathlessly.

“Just showing them what you do to me, so they never have to question it.”

Well, damn.

On shaky legs, I stand up and head to the bathroom. I don’t know what my problem is. Actually, that’s not entirely true. I know exactly what my problem is. It’s the puck bunnies. The girls who watch Colt on the ice and feel like they have the right to drool over him. The right to fantasize about him. The right to scribble whatever they want on posters and hold them in the air during his games in hopes of grabbing his attention.

It isn’t Colt I’m frustrated with.

It’s those girls.

Girls like the ones outside.

Girls who think they know my man. Who think they can treat him better than I can. They’re wrong. And thankfully, I trust Colt enough to know it.

But it doesn't make them go away, no matter how much I wish it would.

Once I've finished my business, I wash my hands in the sink when the bathroom door opens.

Two girls walk in, their high heels clicking against the tile as they head straight toward me. One of them is the girl who took a selfie with Colt, and the other is her friend from the table. Both of them were ogling Colt while staring daggers at me.

Did they actually follow me in here?

My annoyance battles my insecurities as my attention slides down their little red dresses. Of course, they're matching.

Classy, ladies.

"Hi," the blonde with fried ends who'd taken a picture with Colt greets me.

The crinkle of paper is my only response as I dry my hands on a paper towel.

"Surprised you're still in here," the other girl tells me. She's prettier than the blonde. Her hair is darker, and it hangs down her backless dress. I shouldn't notice, but I'm pretty sure assessing the greater threat in any situation is woven into our DNA, and I can't help it.

"Awfully trusting of you. Leaving Colt out there all by himself. If I were you, I wouldn't let him out of my sight," she states, examining her blood-red nails.

My lips thin, but I stay quiet as I toss the used paper towel into the trash. They're growing bolder lately. Probably because they know I'm too nice for my own good. Or maybe it's because Colt has graduated, and they know their window for sinking their claws into him is limited. Neither option leaves me with many warm fuzzies.

Annoyed, I reach for the door, but the brunette steps in front of me.

"You know what I think?" she continues.

"What?" The blonde chirps as she crosses her arms, pushing her massive

boobs up until they're practically spilling out of her dress. If she's going for sexy, she isn't exactly pulling it off. Nope. The girl looks cheap as hell. Like a prostitute only freshmen can afford.

Gross.

"I think while Colt's exchanging his LAU jersey for a Lions one this upcoming season, he might as well exchange his current girlfriend for an improved one too."

"Yeah. Someone like me." The blonde flips her hair over her shoulder.

"And me," the other quips.

"Oooo, a two-for-one. I bet Colt Thorne would love it. Don't you?" the blonde asks me.

Gag.

"Excuse me." I slip past them and head back to the booth despite not feeling hungry anymore.

Colt stares at me, his expression darkening. The familiar clatter of silverware on ceramic cuts through the booth as he drops his fork onto his plate.

"What happened?" he growls.

"Nothing. Girls being bitches, as usual."

"They followed you?" he grits out. His gaze follows the two girls as they head back to their seats.

"Of course they did." I roll my eyes and tuck my hair behind my ear. "I think tonight was a bust. Let's get the check and go home."

His upper lip curls as he turns to me again. "Fuck them, Ash."

"I know."

"I'm serious. Fuck them. They don't matter."

"I know," I repeat. And it sucks because I do know. I know they don't matter. I know Colt doesn't play hockey for fame. I'm not even sure he does it for the money. He plays because he loves it. Because he loves being on the ice. Because he loves his teammates. Because it reminds him of his dad and

his older brothers. That's why he plays. It isn't for the women in the stands, and it sure as hell isn't for the girls sitting across the restaurant.

"You want me to talk to them?" he asks. "Want me to remind them of where they stand?"

I shake my head. "No. I want you to take me home and remind me you're mine and you'll never be theirs."

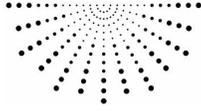
Without a word, he slips a hundred-dollar bill onto the table and guides me back to his car. He drives me back to our place before making me come with his mouth twice, then pushes himself into me with one long thrust while whispering how much he loves me in my ear.

And for a little while? The girls' voices disappear, and I'm left at peace. With Colt buried deep inside me.

Why do we ever leave this bed?

Because right now, I can't remember.

KATE



“**H**ey, Mack,” I answer the call as I pull into the parking lot. “I just got to the doctor’s office, so give me a second. The phone’s gonna switch from Bluetooth to my phone.”

I turn off the car and press my cell to my ear. “You still here?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” Mack replies.

I breathe out a sigh of relief. “Hi.”

“Hey,” he returns. “How long do you think you’ll be? I’m gonna make dinner and want to make sure I time things right.”

“It’s only a blood test today, so nothing too crazy,” I reply. “How about I text you when I’m on my way home?”

“Sounds good. You sure you don’t want me to meet you for your appointment? I can be there in fifteen—”

“It’s *only* a blood test,” I remind him, pushing the lock button on the white Jeep Mack purchased for me after graduation when he asked me to move in with him.

“You sure you’re okay?” he asks. “I’m happy to come.”

“Yup. I’m a big girl, remember?”

Sometimes I forget how lucky I am to have found someone who knows everything about my condition. Epilepsy’s a bitch, and the learning curve can be pretty steep. But Mack’s taken everything in stride, including attending all

of the visits to my neurologist when we decided to change my medication. I guess I shouldn't be surprised he's hesitant to miss something as simple as a blood draw.

"Seriously, I'm fine," I repeat. "P.S., what's for dinner? I'm starving."

"I was thinking ravioli with pesto?"

My mouth waters at the thought as I walk into the doctor's office and sign my name on the check-in sheet at the receptionist's desk.

"You're too good to me," I tell Mack.

"Nah, just gotta remind you how awesome I am so you don't leave me for someone else while I'm traveling with the team."

"Says the man who's going to be surrounded by puck bunnies everywhere he goes." I sit on a cushioned chair in the back of the waiting room and cross my legs.

"Trust me, Porcupine, they'll be watching the players, not me," Macklin says.

I snort. "I think you are seriously underestimating your sexual prowess, Mr. Golden Retriever."

"And I think—"

"Kate? Kate Winchester?" a nurse calls.

I clear my throat and mutter into the cell, "I've gotta go. They called my name. See you at home."

"Love you," Mack murmurs.

"Love you too."

I hang up the phone and stand, heading toward the front desk.

After having my blood drawn, I'm brought to one of the small rooms and answer the standard questions. When we're finished, the nurse promises the doctor will be in soon. I've had the same doctor for years and have been coming to this office for the same amount of time. But even so, it doesn't exactly feel like a home away from home. Pulling out my phone from my purse, I find a mindless game and start playing when a soft knock vibrates

through the wood door. It opens with a quiet creak.

“Hello, Kate,” Dr. Reed greets me.

Slipping my phone back into my black purse, I set it on the chair beside mine and fold my arms. “Hi.”

He heads to the small desk, sitting on a swivel stool in front of the computer screen. Once his password is typed in, he pulls up my file and scans the blood test results while I watch with bated breath.

This never gets easier. These appointments. Their diagnoses. Wondering if I’m still okay. If the medication is still working. If it’s messing with my organs. If I need to switch things up.

“ASM levels look good,” he murmurs. “Your kidneys and liver look good too.” His eyes narrow as he reads something else, and they widen in surprise.

“What is it?” I ask, my nerves getting the best of me.

“Give me one second.” The slight click-click from the mouse echoes throughout the otherwise silent room as he rereads something on the computer screen and turns to me. “I, uh, I don’t know how to say this without just saying it. Uh—”

“You’re freaking me out, Doc.”

“Your hCG levels are quite high, Kate.”

“What’s hCG?” I question.

I’ve never heard the acronym, though there’s a shit-ton of them in the medical field, so I’m not exactly surprised.

“Human chorionic gonadotropin,” he clarifies, once again nose-deep in my chart.

Confused, I shake my head and ask, “What does a high hCG mean?”

He looks away from the screen, studying me carefully. “Did you change your birth control practice after we switched your medication a few months ago?”

“Was I supposed to?” I ask.

“What birth control have you been using?”

“I’ve been getting the shot.”

“I see.” He closes down the computer program and turns back to me, his fingers laced together and his elbows on his knees, giving me his full attention. “For the medication we switched you to, the only female birth control that works is a hormone-free IUD.”

“I don’t have an IUD,” I tell him.

“No. No, you don’t.”

“W-what are you trying to say?”

“I’m trying to say congratulations are in order.” He smiles. “You’re pregnant.”

My mouth falls open as I register his words, but even then, they don’t sink in.

“I assume you didn’t know?” he asks.

“I’m sorry. What did you say?” I return, begging for clarity.

“You’re pregnant, Kate.”

The room starts to spin, and I dig my hands into the edge of the seat, grateful I’m sitting down. Because he can’t be serious. There’s no way. Yes, technically, there’s a way since Mack and I have been having sex for months, but I’m on the shot, so...

“How is this possible?” I shake my head in hopes of clearing it, but it doesn’t do anything. Nope. I’m as lost as ever. Because this isn’t possible. Not when I’ve been so careful. Hell, it’s the one thing I have been careful about. And a baby? It’s not the right time. We weren’t planning—

“Like I said,” the doctor announces, “the medication we switched you to only works with a hormone-free IUD. Since you’ve been on the shot and sexually active, the birth control you’d been using didn’t work. You’re pregnant.”

The word feels like it’s something foreign. Something made up. Something imaginary. Because it can’t be real. There’s no way. I can’t be pregnant. This wasn’t the plan. In any way, shape, or form. I’m not ready.

Mack's not ready. How could we be ready for something like this? Does he even want more kids? Like *really* want more kids? I don't...I don't know. We kind of talked about it, but... This doesn't make any sense.

"Kate, are you all right?" Dr. Reed prods.

"You're serious," I whisper.

"Yeah, I am. Congratulations."

I nearly scoff but hold it back, my mind spinning.

"Now, I assume you haven't been taking any prenatal vitamins?"

I shake my head but stay quiet, staring at my lap.

"I'll write you a prescription," he decides. "Do you have a preference for an obstetrician?"

Again, I shake my head. I've never needed one. Even with my birth control, I only had to go to the doctor's office on campus.

"I can give you a few recommendations if you'd like," he offers.

"I thought it was a bad idea for me to get pregnant." I look up at him again. "With my medication and everything."

"Unfortunately, there are not a lot of studies done with the new medication we switched you to and its effects on pregnancy, so we're not entirely sure how it will affect the baby."

Baby.

My stomach tightens, but I force myself to focus when all I want to do is have a mental breakdown right here in the middle of my doctor's office.

"Should I stop taking it?" I ask.

"The dangers of being off your medication outweigh the potential danger of staying on it. But don't worry. We're going to give you the best care we can, and so will your obstetrician."

He rattles off a copious to-do list for me and sends my prescriptions to the nearest pharmacy. And then, after a final congratulations, I walk back to the Jeep. My legs are numb, my chest is tight, and my stomach rolls.

I've dealt with a lot of unpredictable situations in my life. But this one

takes the cake.

Baby.

There's a baby inside me.

And I don't know if it's okay. Or if it's developing properly. Or if Macklin even wants him or her. Do *I* even want him or her?

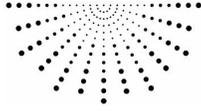
I release a shaky breath and touch my lips, staring blankly out my windshield as a tear falls down my cheek.

I do. I do want him or her. More than anything.

I just hope my epilepsy doesn't ruin this baby's body the same way it's messed with mine.

Resting my head against the steering wheel, I break down and cry.

ASHLYN



SeaBird is hopping. The bar is packed with people, but I'm finally feeling a good buzz. With Colt's hands on my hips, we dance to the band on the stage, the lights dimmed low.

This.

This is what I needed after those girls messed up our date night last weekend. The familiar ambiance. The music. The infamous Colt Thorne as my designated driver for the night, whose eyes and hands are currently on me and *only* me.

"I love you," I repeat for the tenth time since my last vodka cranberry. It's buzzing through my veins, leaving a delicious warmth in its wake.

He grins and leans closer, kissing me. "Love you too."

"Wanna marry you someday," I add, twisting in his arms until my back is to his front.

"Wanna marry you, too, Sunshine."

"Wanna have your babies too," I tell him. My hands slide up as he bends down, and I wrap my hands around his neck, keeping him close.

"How many do you want?" he asks.

I shrug one shoulder, my hips swaying from side to side. "I dunno? A dozen? Maybe two?"

His laughter spurs me on, and I grind my ass against his crotch, loving the

way his grip tightens on my waist.

“Careful, Ash. If you don’t stop, I might have to drag you to the bathroom so we can practice making those babies.”

Memories of the last time we hooked up in SeaBird’s bathroom hit me like a shot of whiskey, and I almost moan, my back arching against him while playing with the short strands at the nape of his neck. He splays his hands along my lower stomach, and his pinkie slips beneath the button of my skirt right above my pubic bone. And that’s all it takes. The simplest of touches, and I’m close to jumping his bones in the center of the dance floor.

I peek up at him from over my shoulder. “Don’t tease me, mister.”

He inches even closer and nips at the shell of my ear. “I thought you liked it when I teased you.”

“I like it when you call me pretty.”

“You’re very pretty,” he notes, dragging his nose along my throat. “So pretty, it’s taking everything inside of me to not beat the shit out of those guys over there.”

My brows pinch. “What guys?”

He lifts his chin toward the edge of the dance floor, where a group of guys is hanging out, drinking beers, and chatting.

I laugh and shake my head. “They aren’t even paying attention to me.”

“Debatable,” he grunts, forcing me back around until I face him again. Mint teases my senses along with the familiar scent of his aftershave as he holds my gaze. “You’re not the only one who gets jealous, Sunshine.”

“I like it when you’re jealous,” I reply. “I like knowing you want me.”

And I do. I like the push and pull. The overwhelming need I feel whenever he’s around me. Scratch that. I feel it when he isn’t around too. Maybe even more so. The pull. The need.

“So bad, Sunshine. I want you so bad.” He closes his eyes, his hands pressing into my lower back. “All the time. In the shower. When I’m at practice. When you’re with your friends. I want you all the time.”

“Like right now?” I ask. The song changes to a slower, sexier beat, and I drag my hand down his chest, slipping it between us. His eyes darken as I rub him softly through his jeans. He’s hard. So freaking hard. Probably because I’ve been rubbing up against him like a cat in heat all night, but damn, it feels good. Touching the physical evidence of what I do to him. And now, I want more. Feeling bold, I cup him harder, pressing into him as I shimmy lower, letting my breasts push against the front of his jeans before standing up again.

“Fuck, Ash,” he groans.

“I’m sorry. Is there a problem?” I quip.

“Not unless you have a problem with public indecency.”

“Right now?” I rise onto my tiptoes and flick my tongue against his bottom lip. “It doesn’t sound so terrible.”

“And when you’re sober tomorrow morning?” he challenges, his brow cocked.

The bastard knows me too well.

“Fiiiine.” My hand slips back around his neck while my clit pulses in my skirt, begging for relief.

Stupid sober Ashlyn and all her stupid sober hangxiety.

Colt’s touch is gentle as he pushes my hair behind my ear. His calloused palms caress the side of my face and leave tingles everywhere.

“Want me to get the truck?” he asks.

I lean into his touch for another second. After a few beats, I grumble, “Fiiiine. Let me say goodbye to the girls first.”

“All right. I’ll pull around front.”

“Mmkay.” I rise onto my tiptoes, balancing against his chest, and kiss him again because, dammit, the man’s addictive, and I can’t help myself. My tongue dances with his, then I suck him into my mouth, practically begging him to invade me in every way possible.

His groan rumbles up his throat as he pulls away, pressing his forehead to mine. “Making it awfully difficult to walk away, Sunshine. The bathroom’s

looking pretty good right about now.”

I pat his chest and let my heels touch the ground again. “Go get the car. I’ll meet you outside.”

His fingers flex against my ass one more time, then he lets me go. “Fine.”

Blake and Theo are at the front of the bar, and Mia’s talking to a guy in a suit with dark hair and broad shoulders. The lights are flashing now, so I can’t see his face.

“Blake!” I call out.

“Hey, my down-and-dirty friend,” she quips. “You know he’s my brother, right? And it’s super gross?” She waves her hand toward the dance floor flippantly. “Maybe next time, get a room. Mmkay, pumpkin?”

My eyes nearly bug out of my head. “You saw us?”

“Uh, the whole bar saw it.” She grins shamelessly. “You, my friend, are not very subtle when you’ve had a few.”

“And your boy has enough drama going around,” the stranger adds, turning to me fully.

My face heats, and my eyes drop to the top button left undone on his pressed white dress shirt, leaving his olive skin on full display.

Yeeeeeah. Apparently, the hangxiety is hitting earlier than usual. But seriously. Did Colt’s new boss, and my longtime professor, see me groping my boyfriend on the dance floor?

“Hello, Professor Buchanan,” I mutter, forcing myself to look him in the eye.

“We’re not in the classroom. You can call me Henry,” he returns.

“Hello, Henry,” I clarify.

He smiles coolly. “Hello, Ashlyn.”

My brows furrow as my brain finally decides to catch up to what he’d initially said. “Wait. What drama’s going around about Colt?”

His jaw tightens as he tugs on the sleeves beneath his suit and clears his throat. “You’ll have to ask Colt for the details. Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

He glances at Mia again and dips his chin. “Mia.”

“Professor,” she murmurs dryly.

Then, he walks away.

“We’re gonna head out in a few,” Theo tells me, the neck of a beer bottle pinched between his fingers.

“Us too,” I reply. “Actually, we’re heading out in a *one*. Colt’s bringing the truck around.” I glance toward the exit and back at Blake again. “That’s why I came over. To say goodbye because I’m exhausted.”

“Exhausted, my ass,” Blake chirps. “You’re heading home ‘cause you’re about to get laid.” She slides off the barstool and pulls me into a hug. “Love you!”

“Love you too.” I squeeze her back and turn to Mia. “See ya, Mia!”

She lifts her chin while popping the tops off two IPA bottles, multitasking like a champ. “See ya!”

When I all but stumble through the exit, the noise cuts almost instantly. It’s quiet outside. Other than a few cars passing on the street and the deadened noise from SeaBird, it’s almost peaceful.

The air is warm too. Stars hang overhead in the cloudless, dark sky, and I look up. I’m admiring them when a bright flash makes me flinch.

What the hell?

“Miss Ashlyn? Are you Miss Ashlyn?” a voice calls out.

I squint, attempting to blink away the bright square tattooed on my irises as my foggy brain catches up. “Uh, can I help you?”

“Ashlyn! Ashlyn!” The voice is louder now and more persistent. “Do you have anything to say about your boyfriend and the court order?” The camera clicks a few more times, and I swear I see stars as I shake my head.

What’s he talking about?

I back up slowly, desperate for more space, when SeaBird’s rough brick scrapes against my back.

“Ashlyn! Ashlyn! Do you have anything you want to say?”

Flash. Flash.

I shake my head again. The stark contrast between the bright flash and the dark sky, combined with one too many drinks at the bar, leaves me dizzy and disoriented.

“The court order. What do you have to say?” the stranger demands.

Flash. Flash.

I lift my hand, attempting to block it out. “What are you talking about? What court order?”

The stranger lowers his camera and tilts his head. “You mean you don’t know?”

“Ash!” Colt yells. He hops out of his truck and rounds the front of it, taking in the shit show I’m currently enveloped in. With his gaze glued to the reporter or photographer or whatever he is, Colt steps in front of me, shielding me with his tall, muscular frame.

“Get away from her,” he growls.

“I only wanted to ask you guys some questions. You’ve been dodging my calls.”

“‘Cause I’m not interested in talking,” Colt spits.

“Yeah, well, figured your girlfriend might be. Does she know you were deemed the sexiest hockey player for this upcoming season?”

Like velcro, my fingers find the back of Colt’s shirt, and I cling to it, fisting the soft material in my hands.

“Does she know about her death threats?” the reporter continues. “How many girls would kill to take her place?”

“Get in the truck, Ash,” Colt grits out.

My grip tightens on his shirt before I let it go and take a step toward his vehicle.

“Does she know about the paternity action filed against you?” the reporter adds.

I stop short, confusion leaving me lifeless. I turn back to Colt. “Paternity

action?”

“Just get in.”

“She doesn’t know?” The reporter snaps another picture, and I squeeze my eyes shut. “What do you have to say, Miss Ashlyn? Any comments? Questions? We’d love to hear—”

A loud crunch echoes throughout the street as Colt shakes out his clenched fist while standing over the reporter. The camera is lying on its side, and the screen is cracked from hitting the pavement.

Colt hit him.

Shit.

He hit him.

That’s...assault, isn’t it? Or maybe not, since the reporter was harassing us, but shit.

“Stay away from her,” Colt grinds out. Then he closes the short distance to his still-running truck, opens the passenger door, and helps me inside.

Silence fills the cab as Colt pulls away from the curb a minute later. But I’m too numb to notice. Too busy analyzing the reporter’s comments. Resting my head against the passenger window, I let the steady whirl of the tires calm me as Colt drives us home. He parks in his spot and turns off the engine. The veins pop along the backs of his hands. The dashboard highlights his bruised knuckles.

As I take in the red, angry color, my thoughts scatter like leaves in the wind. Carefully, I reach for his hand, dragging my thumb along the damage, looking up at him.

He turns away and murmurs, “It’s only a rumor.”

“Death threats?” I whisper.

“Some celebrity made a bullshit comment about how she’d kill to be my girlfriend. The paparazzi twisted her words. It wasn’t a real threat.”

I nod. “And you being voted sexiest new player?”

“I dunno. I don’t pay attention to shit like that.”

He's right. He doesn't.

I lick my lips. "And the...court thing? Paternity...something?"

"Only a rumor," he repeats. But his eyes don't meet mine.

"You sure?" I whisper.

And I don't know what it is. I don't know why this one seems different. But it does. The tightness in Colt's jaw. The anger and frustration emanating from him. The way he can't look at me. The alcohol swirls in my gut, leaving me nauseated as I stare at the side of his face.

This is what Buchanan was talking about. The drama following Colt around. The question is, why didn't Colt tell me about it? Is he hiding something?

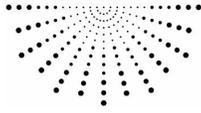
We don't keep secrets from each other. We've never kept secrets from each other.

Sensing the shift in the air, he turns to me, his brows pulled low. "I'll figure it out, Sunshine. Promise. Let's go inside."

I let go of his damaged hand and tuck my hair behind my ear. "Okay."

And man, how I want to believe him.

THEO



“Come on, man. You sure you gotta sell the Taylor House?” Tukani whines as he laces up his skates.

Coach Sanderson was nice enough to let the team and its former players scrimmage on Saturday mornings at the rink. And even though I’m officially a graduate, I’m not ready to give them up. Pretty sure it’s one of the main things I’ll miss from my college hockey career. All right, that’s a lie. I love the games. The crowds. Even the fucking cowbells are a familiar constant.

But the practices and team scrimmages have always been fun, a time to let loose and shoot the shit without the added pressure of scouts or opposing teams.

I’ll miss my teammates. Especially the ones I’ve lived with. They’re more like brothers than anything else, and even though it’s inevitable since all of us are going our separate ways, leaving them is still a bitch to swallow.

Shoving aside the melancholy thoughts and the reminder of how quickly everything is changing, I slap my hand against Tukani’s shoulder. “I’m not the one selling it. Mama Taylor is. Sorry, man.”

With a groan, he stands up and grabs his gloves. “This fucking sucks. Where am I gonna live for my senior year?”

“You’ll figure it out,” I tell him. “Hell, maybe even Gwyn will let you sleep on her couch.”

Tukani snorts but doesn't deny it.

"I'll meet you on the ice," I add.

As he heads down the tunnel toward the rink, I grab my hockey stick from my locker and find Logan smirking at something on his cell.

"Surprised you came," I say to him.

He looks up, shoves his phone into his locker, and pulls his skates out. "I had to wake up early, anyway."

"Snuck out of a random girl's bed again?" I quip.

He grins shamelessly. "You know how the Kappa Pi's are. Besides, I heard there was some drama with Colt at SeaBird last night. Wanted to hear more about it."

Yeah, same old Logan. Sticking his nose in shit that has nothing to do with him.

I heard about the outburst last night too. Thankfully, Buchanan was still at the bar and overheard the commotion. He offered the paparazzi some cash to stay quiet and not press charges. The guy agreed, as long as he could post a photo from last night. Thankfully, he did promise it wouldn't have anything to do with Colt's fist smashing into his face.

Reluctantly, Buchanan agreed, muttering under his breath something about whether or not Colt was worth the headache.

Buchanan's right to be worried. Despite Colt's desire to blend in, there's something about the asshole attracting more attention than anyone else I've ever seen, and the season hasn't even started yet.

I shake off the thought and offer Logan my hand, helping him up despite our shit from last year. We might not be as close as we used to be, but we're still friends, even when he acts like a dick.

"Come on, man. Let's go play."

Colt, Burrows, Tukani, and Austin are already on the ice, along with a few more players. They're warming up, skating around the rink, and talking shit together. Helmets are lined up on the half-wall separating the bench from

the arena, along with a few LAU water bottles. Colt's off to one side, lost in his own head, hitting the puck into the open net on the opposite side of the rink as if three defenders are on his ass, and he could be checked at any second.

When he catches me watching him, he stops and raises his chin. His face is red, and his shirt is drenched in sweat. My worry piques.

"Hey, can we talk?" I call out.

He hesitates, his eyes finding the puck he shot into the net, and he grudgingly skates toward me. He ignores Logan's smirk as he moves past him and meets me on the mats.

But the bastard doesn't look at me as his attention drifts from the ice to the stands to his skates.

"What's up?" he asks.

I cock my head, curious if he actually believes he's fooling anyone. "Everything all right?"

"Yeah. Fine. Why?"

"Last night—"

With a sharp look, he cuts me off. "Buchanan took care of it."

"How long have you been here?" I try again.

"Not long."

"Dude, you're drenched," I point out, taking in his damp hair clinging to his forehead. "Are you okay?"

His jaw tics as he looks out at the ice, watching Depp check Tukani against the glass. Their laughter rings throughout the arena.

"Colt..."

"I'm fine." He shoves his wet hair away from his forehead. "Just some shit I gotta figure out."

"What kind of shit?" I demand.

"Later," he mutters, looking at me for the first time, and *fuck*. I'm worried.

“Let’s start the game.” He skates back to the center line, and I follow behind.

Once we’re split into two teams, we start playing, passing the puck and darting from one edge of the rink to the other. In no time, my muscles ache from exertion when a loud crack reverberates from the opposite end of the ice.

What the fuck?

Colt shoves Logan away from the board, his expression twisted with rage as he pulls off his gloves and chucks them onto the ice. Logan simply laughs. Colt cocks his arm back and decks him in the jaw. And just like that, whatever Logan thought was so funny dissipates. He charges after Colt, barreling into his gut with his shoulder and slamming them both into the glass. The same familiar crack echoes throughout the empty arena, and I rush toward them.

“What’s going on?” I yell.

Logan lands a punch to Colt’s chin, and his head swings to the side. Colt reciprocates, his knuckles skating across Logan’s cheekbone.

Depp, Tukani, and I break them apart while Austin stands uselessly at the edge of the chaos. Once there’s space between them, Colt spits blood, his lip curling as Logan grins.

“What the fuck happened?” I yell at both of them.

“I simply asked if Colt saw the article yet or not,” Logan tells me, his eyes never leaving Colt.

Colt sneers, jerking in Tukani’s hold. “Shut the fuck—”

“What article?” I demand.

With the back of his hand, Logan wipes the blood from beneath his nose. “The one saying he’s a daddy.”

I turn to Colt, but he only shakes his head. He shoves Tukani off him, and once he’s free, he skates toward the exit without a word. I follow after him.

“What article?” I demand again.

We make it to the locker room, but Colt doesn't answer me as he unlaces his skates.

"What. Article?" I repeat.

"I didn't see the article," he grits out.

"But you know what it's about?"

He scrubs his hand over his face, the last of his fight draining out of him. "Eleanor texted a few days ago. Said she has a kid, and I'm the father."

"Eleanor, as in"—I hesitate, my mind reeling—"the Dixie Tech professor's wife you slept with?"

His head jerks with a single nod.

Fuck.

I pace back and forth in front of him, hooking my hands behind my head as I stare at the ceiling.

But seriously. *Fuck.*

This isn't good.

"So the rumors are true?" I press. "The shit they were saying on the ice last season?"

"I dunno." He digs in his locker, pulls his phone out, and types his name into the search engine. He's looking for the article Logan mentioned on the ice. I don't blame him. I'd wanna know what I was dealing with too.

"It's not like I've done a paternity test or anything," he mutters. "I thought Eleanor was being greedy or something, coming after me since she's finalized her divorce and knows I signed with the Lions."

"It could be true," I offer.

"Yeah." His head hangs. "Could be."

"You don't think it is?" I prod.

"She's not a greedy person. Or at least, she didn't seem like one. She was...lonely. *Fuck,*" he seethes, his gaze glued to his cell.

"What is it?"

Without a word, he hands me his phone. An article lights up the screen.

As I scan the paragraphs, my stomach falls.

This is bad.

Really bad.

And if any of it's true...

"Has Ash seen this?" I ask.

With a new sense of urgency, Colt shoves his skates into his gym bag and puts his Nikes on. "Fuck."

He grabs his phone from my grasp and runs out of the locker room toward the parking lot without a backward glance.

A familiar ring echoes off the walls, and I dig into my locker for my own phone. A picture of Blake kissing my cheek lights up the screen, and I answer it.

"Hey—"

"Is Colt with you?" she demands.

"Just left."

"Did you see the article?"

I pause, gritting my teeth. "Logan showed it to us."

"Is it true? Does Colt have a kid?"

"I don't—" I roll my shoulders, attempting to keep the knots from inevitably forming between my shoulder blades. "I don't know. Did Ash call you or something? How'd you find out?"

"Logan forwarded it to everyone on his contact list 'cause he's an asshole. I assume Ash blocked his number, but..." Her voice trails off while guilt taints her words or lack thereof.

"But *what*, Blake?" I seethe.

She takes a deep breath. "But I may or may not have forwarded the link to her."

"What the hell, Blake!"

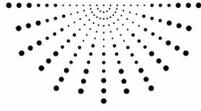
"I know! But she's my best friend, Teddy. And she has a right to know if —"

“I gotta warn Colt.”

I hang up the call and pull up his contact info, pressing the call button as my heart thrums faster and faster.

“Pick up, motherfucker,” I mutter as the call rings in my ear. “Pick up.”

ASHLYN



I wake up with a hangover. Not surprising since I probably had one drink too many last night. And boy, how I wish I'd stayed sober. Maybe then, I'd be able to piece together everything the paparazzi said. Instead, I'm left... fuzzy. And confused.

I press my hand to my temple and shift on the mattress, finding Colt's side of the bed cold and empty other than a note.

The folded piece of lined paper looks like it was ripped from a notebook. My name is scrawled across the front in Colt's handwriting. With a smile, I pick it up and read the message.

Sunshine-

Meeting up with the team for a quick skate session, then I'll grab your favorite bagels and coffee at The Bean Scene. Advil and water are on the nightstand. I'll be back as soon as I can.

Love you.

Colt

After chugging down the water and Advil he set aside for me, I check my phone plugged in on the nightstand. Colt must've plugged it in after we got home last night.

There are a dozen texts, most of them from unknown numbers.

My lips pull into a frown as I read a few, but none of them make any sense.

376.555.2324

That two-timing asshole. I want you to know I stand behind you, and so do my friends.

435.555.5960

It's too bad you couldn't keep his dick satisfied. Glad he found someone else to help him out instead.

943.555.4227

He's STILL too good for you. Poor, pathetic little Ashlyn.

376.555.9445

We stand with you, Ashlyn. Colt's a jerk.

What. The. Hell?

I sit up fully, resting my back against the headboard as I continue scrolling through the cryptic messages when Blake's name pops on the screen with a text.

BLAKE

Hey. Not trying to freak you out or anything, but did you know about this? www.getpucked.com

I click the link.

IS THE RECENTLY CROWNED SEXIEST HOCKEY PLAYER ALIVE A DADDY?

Many fans have been begging for months to call Center Colt Thorne their daddy, but Ashlyn has held the title for quite some time. At least, it's what the new Lions player would like you to believe.

But it seems our up-and-coming golden boy has a naughty streak. And this time, the repercussions might be more than Ashlyn Peterson bargained for.

A photo of me standing outside SeaBird last night is splashed among the article. The image makes me look like I've seen a ghost or something. My eyes are wide, and my skin looks almost pale as I stare at the camera in shock. Yeah. Not my most flattering photograph. I shake off my annoyance and scroll past it. The words from the article blur together as a picture of a baby comes into view. My breath hitches. He can't be more than a year old, with soft brown curls and a baby blue onesie. He has long, straight lashes and an adorable smile too. But his eyes... His eyes cut me, making my body recoil. Because they look familiar. So damn familiar. Same shape. Same color. Same little flecks of yellow around the irises.

I scroll back up to my picture and read the rest of the article, too stunned to speak.

This can't be real.

Is this true?

It can't be true.

Colt told me it was a rumor.

But this doesn't look like a fucking rumor.

He doesn't look like a fucking rumor.

Anger and sadness battle for precedence as the phone slips from my

fingers, and I bring my knees to my chest, letting the sheets fall to my waist. Numb, I stare out the master bedroom window, unsure what to do. What to think.

The curtains are pulled back. The morning light filters through the glass. The trees are green, and so is the grass below. Ducks are swimming in the small, glassy pond. An old couple is feeding them bread. It's beautiful. All of it. The skyline. The promise of a beautiful day.

And yet here I am, my world falling apart.

It's funny. How insignificant we really are. All of us. Me. Colt. His baby. *Our* world is unraveling at the seams, yet the real one is still spinning. Still moving forward. And here I am. Stuck in bed. Paralyzed. While wearing one of Colt's favorite T-shirts. I bring the collar to my nose and cry as his woody scent washes over me.

This can't be happening.

The front door opens with a quiet squeak, but I don't move. I simply stare out the window.

This can't be happening.

Heavy footsteps sound from the family room, moving closer with every passing second, and I lean my head against my knees.

This can't be happening.

A shadowed figure standing in the doorway hits my periphery. But I don't look at him.

I can't.

"Ash." Colt's deep voice is a stark contrast to the silence I'd been shrouded in.

I dig my fingernails into my bare legs, but I don't answer him. I keep sitting on the bed, staring out the window. If I say something, I'll break. I'll finally lose my shit and say something I shouldn't. Something I don't want to. Something I won't be able to take back.

"Talk to me, Ash." His heavy footsteps reverberate off the hardwood

floor as he steps closer to me.

Not too close, though.

No. He's keeping his distance.

Because he knows he fucked up.

We both do.

I can feel him watching me. Feel his anxiety. His fear.

But I'm too numb to care. Too drained. Too broken.

"Is it *still* only a rumor, Colt?" I whisper in the quiet room.

The moisture in my eyes blurs my view of the skyline. I blink, letting the tears roll down my cheek as I force myself to finally look at him. His hair is wet from his shower, the curls tighter than usual. Or maybe it's sweat. He's been gone for a while. And he's used to pushing himself physically when he's feeling lost or overwhelmed.

And fuck me, I'd be overwhelmed, too, if I was lying to my girlfriend and had a kid walking around somewhere no one knows about.

His chest heaves like he's out of breath. He probably rushed to find me so I wouldn't have to be alone. So he'd have a chance to explain everything before I woke up and saw Blakely's text and the article. There's probably more. More articles. More rumors. More assumptions. More lies? Or are they truths? It doesn't matter. Everyone knows about it now. Everyone has all the little details lined up in a row. Everyone's already drawn their conclusions. It makes sense, considering all the messages from strangers. I stopped caring about what strangers thought of me a long time ago.

But if a random stranger knows, then...

Shit.

The article.

The pictures.

Everyone knows.

My mom. My dad. My friends.

Everyone.

Everyone knew before I did.

How messed up is that?

"You know what's insane?" I choke out. "All I ever wanted was a normal life. Nothing fancy. Nothing crazy or out of the ordinary. Just...normal. Even monotonous would've been great. Like, I didn't think my standards were very high, ya know?" My bottom lip trembles, and I suck it into my mouth, praying he doesn't notice.

"Sunshine," he begs. His tone is laced with desperation as he reaches for me but stops himself at the edge of the bed.

"Then, I met you," I whisper, turning back to the window. A bird is sitting on one of the branches of the closest tree. Its blue and white feathers gleam in the sun. "And it was so easy. Falling for you. I mean, yeah. Logan was an ass, and I was scared to accept the fact that a guy as amazing as you could love me. But it was still...easy." I look at him again, my heart breaking. "It was so easy falling in love with you, Colt. So easy trusting you."

"You can still trust me."

"Are you gonna take the test?"

"What test?" he asks.

"The article mentioned a paternity test."

"He isn't—"

"You don't know!" I yell. "You don't know whether or not it's true. If he is or isn't yours. And denying it or pretending he doesn't exist isn't going to get you anywhere, Colt."

"But at what cost, Sunshine?" He rushes toward me and grabs my arms as if he doesn't want to let me go. As if he wants to shake some sense into me. As if he's terrified I'll leave. "If I go down this road, what will it cost me?" he rasps. "Because so help me, if I lose you because of this..."

"It isn't a rumor, is it?" I whisper.

And the haunted look in his eyes? It tells me more than words or empty promises ever could.

A loud knock on the door rattles my bones. Colt hangs his head, but he doesn't move to answer it.

"Go," I whisper.

"They'll go away."

I pull away from his grasp and rest my head against the bed frame. "Answer it, Colt."

Even though it kills him, he lets me go and heads to the front door. Low words are exchanged, but I'm too numb to pay attention.

When Colt returns, he holds a small stack of white papers limply in his grasp.

He looks so defeated. So broken. So drained and exhausted.

It kills me.

Seeing him like this. Wanting to make him feel better when I currently feel like my world is being cut apart while knowing he's the one with the scissors, snipping away at everything I love and care about.

"Ash." He says my name like a prayer. A plea.

My bottom lip quivers, but I suck it into my mouth and bite hard. "Who was it?"

As if the papers weigh a thousand pounds, he drops them onto the mattress, and I watch them fall, barely making a dent in the white comforter.

"It's a subpoena," he murmurs.

"For a paternity test?"

He collapses onto the edge of the bed and rests his head in his hands. "Yeah."

I hate how defeated he still looks. How battered and broken.

"How long have you known?" I ask. "About the baby."

"Been hearing rumors since last winter," he rasps. "But I didn't think it was possible. We used protection. And after I left, she was in the process of a divorce. I thought her ex was trying to stir up shit so he could get out of paying child support for their kid. I didn't think..." He looks up at me, his

dark eyes rimmed with red. “I didn’t think I could’ve fucked up this much. My life. My future.” He turns to me, his lower lip trembling. “*Our* future. Tell me how to fix this. Tell me we’re okay.”

I want to. I want to tell him we’re okay. I want to tell him we’ll get through this together. I want to tell him he’s going to be a great dad, and I love him now more than ever. But I can’t. I can’t say any of those things. Because he lied to me. He tried to keep this from me. He tried to hide this from me.

And if he’s hiding this, what else is he hiding?

I thought I knew everything. I thought he knew he could tell me anything. But is this only the tip of the iceberg, or is this it? Is this everything? I shove my hands through my hair, tugging on the roots as the last of my fight seeps out of me.

“Ash,” he starts.

“I need a minute.”

“All right.” He pauses. “Take a shower. I didn’t have time to pick up your bagel, but I’ll make you some breakfast—”

“No, I need a *long* minute,” I clarify. My voice cracks despite how sweet he is, even right now. “A day or two. I need some time to wrap my head around this and what it means. What I should do. What you should do.”

“Ash...”

“Colt—”

“Tell me we’re okay,” he cuts me off. “I’m begging you. Please.” He reaches for my hands, loosening their death grip on my messy hair and bringing them to his lips. He kisses my knuckles and squeezes me tightly as if he’s terrified it’ll be the last time I let him touch me. The last time he’ll get to kiss me. “Please tell me we’re okay.”

It’s like a knife is lodged in my chest. Like I can’t breathe. And hearing the pain in his voice? It leaves me shredded.

“I’m not breaking up with you,” I whisper. The need to comfort him is

too strong to deny, but I pull one of my hands away and wipe beneath my eyes. “I just...I need a minute. Can you give me that? Please?”

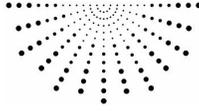
He nods and lets me go. “Yeah. Sure thing. Whatever you need.”

“Thanks.” I sniff and slip out from beneath the covers. “Will you text Blake or Mia or *someone*? Ask them to come pick me up?”

“Let me take you to them,” he begs. “Please?”

“Okay.”

MIA



I called in sick.

So sue me.

After Logan sent everyone a link to a super shitty article involving Ashlyn and Colt, I knew we'd need girl time now more than ever.

Most of the items in the townhouse have already been packed up and carted away since only Blake and I still live here. But I figured the familiar ambiance would settle Ashlyn's already frazzled nerves. Twisting off the lid from the tequila bottle, I pour shots and line them up next to the salt shaker and wedges of lime. It's barely noon, but sometimes a little day drinking is just what the doctor ordered, and I plan to deliver.

Kate waves off the shot, choosing a ginger ale instead. Blake, Ashlyn, and I lick our hands, shake some salt into them, and slap the shot glasses against the counter, drinking the bitter liquor and biting into our limes. Round two has us repeating the ritual. Ashlyn's nose scrunches as my phone vibrates with a text. I pull it out, finding a message from Colt.

Ashlyn's nose scrunches as my phone vibrates with a text, and I pull it out.

COLT

Ice cream's on the porch. Didn't want to interrupt but figured you girls could use some snacks. Tell Ash I love her.

My lips tilt up as I tuck my phone back into my pocket and open the front door. Sure enough, there's a sack full of different flavors of Ben & Jerry's ice cream, along with a pack of gummy bears. Normally, I wouldn't be affected by the charm of a groveling man, but Colt's different. Because he does thoughtful things like this even when he *isn't* in the dog house. And it has to count for something. Right?

"What are you doing?" Ash asks. Her eyes are still red from crying. The girl's been sobbing on and off since Colt dropped her off this morning.

I lift the sack and show her. "A little elf dropped off goodies."

Blake snatches the bag from my grasp and digs through it, raising the cinnamon bears high into the air. "Two elves. Thank you, Teddy!" she calls to no one in particular and rips it open with her teeth.

"Now it's time to spill." I head to the couch, tucking my feet beneath my butt on the worn cushions while the rest of the girls join me in the family room. Once they're seated, I begin. "How are you feeling about everything, Ash? We promised you didn't need to talk about it until you'd had a stiff drink, and you've had two shots, so spill."

Ash closes her eyes but takes a deep breath, letting the warmth from the tequila spread into her limbs the same way it's spreading into mine.

"I feel...really crappy." Her laugh breaks my heart as she opens her eyes again. "I feel like my entire world has shifted on its axis, and I don't know what to do about it. I feel like the baby looks just like Colt. And I feel guilty for being upset about it. I feel like I'm a bad girlfriend for even considering breaking up with Colt over this. And it's not like I want to," she clarifies. "It's... Am I standing in the way? I know what it's like to have parents who aren't present in your life. What if Colt wants to give his relationship with this woman another chance?"

"Whoa," Blake interrupts. "No offense, but Colt's head over heels for you. There's no way he'd want to try and have a relationship with someone else."

“And I don’t want him to,” Ash argues. “But saying it out loud? Doesn’t it make me a terrible person?”

“You’re not a terrible person,” I interject. “Seriously. You’re one of the most amazing, thoughtful, and caring people I’ve ever met.”

“Agreed,” Kate adds, taking another sip of her ginger ale.

“Agreed.” Blakely quips.

Ashlyn nods, her eyes as glassy as ever. “I had this future all planned out in my head. One with a house, and a dog, and a few little kids. We’d be married and happy and…” Her voice trails off as her teeth dig into her bottom lip. It trembles, and she sniffs.

“It’s so frustrating, you guys,” she continues. “I know he didn’t cheat on me. I know this all happened before we ever met, but it doesn’t mean this doesn’t hurt. I need some time to wrap my head around everything. He lied to me. He told me it was a rumor. But I don’t think it is. And do you want to know the really pathetic part?” She squeezes her eyes shut and shakes her head back and forth. “I can still see him. Still see the little boy’s face. It’s like it’s branded into my memory, and I don’t even know his name.”

“Do you still love him?” Kate whispers from the ugly floral print chair in the corner of the family room. “Colt? Even though he threw your plans off? Your dreams?”

“More than anything, which almost makes it worse.” Ash’s voice cracks, and she lets out another pathetic laugh. “Because if I didn’t love him, I could walk away. But the idea of walking away feels like I’m being dipped in a vat of acid, so…yeah. Not so great.” Blakely lifts the tequila bottle tucked in her lap and offers it to Ashlyn. Without a word, she grabs it, taking another long pull from the bottle, making a sour face as the fire trails down her throat.

“Okay. I’m all spilled out,” she announces. “Now, can we please watch a show and eat junk food?”

“I’ll grab the spoons,” Blake offers.

“I’m gonna”—Kate stands, her skin paler than usual as she wipes her

hands on her summer dress—“go to the bathroom real quick.”

She rushes down the hall like a ghost is chasing her, and my eyes narrow.

Sensing something’s off, I follow her. When we’re far enough away from the kitchen, I keep my voice quiet and call out, “Hey.”

She pauses and turns around, her eyes filled with unshed tears like she’s barely holding herself together.

“Whoa. What’s wrong?” I demand.

“I’m pregnant,” she blurts out.

My jaw drops, and I look over my shoulder, confirming we’re still alone.

“You’re pregnant?”

She sucks her bottom lip into her mouth and nods.

“Since when?”

“Couple days ago?” Her hands press to her pale cheeks, and she shakes her head, clarifying, “Er, I found out a couple of days ago.”

“Holy shit.”

She laughs, but it turns into a whimper, her emotions all over the place.

I inch closer and grab her hands. “Does anyone else know?”

Her head shakes back and forth again.

“What about Mack?” I ask.

“I haven’t told him.”

“So, are these happy tears or sad tears?” I question, motioning to her glassy eyes, unsure exactly which way we’re taking this conversation.

Her shoulders lift in a shrug, and another pathetic laugh slips out. “They’re just tears. My emotions are all over the place. I don’t know what to do or say or think. And now, with everything going on with Ashlyn and Colt and a freaking baby that doesn’t belong to her, I’m even more scared to say anything, ya know? Like, what do I say? How do I tell her? Or anyone else, for that matter?”

“Yeah, I can imagine.” I pull Kate into a hug and rub my hand up and down her back. Neither of us is known for loving physical affection, but it’s

what she needs right now. To not feel alone. To not feel like she has to carry this pretty freaking massive burden all by herself. And yeah. A baby is a pretty freaking massive burden. A good one for some people, yes. But a burden, nonetheless. Being a parent can't be easy, no matter how excited you may or may not be to become one.

And Kate?

Clearly, she's a mess.

"You're not alone," I tell her. "And even if you marched into the family room and told the rest of the girls, we both know Ash and Blake would be nothing but supportive and excited for you."

"I know," she whispers against me. "I know they would be. But I don't even know if *I'm* happy yet, especially when I don't know how Mack will feel when he finds out. But I also don't want to tell him because I'm not ready to find out what his reaction will be. Does that make me a bad person?"

I pull away from her. "Pretty sure you don't have a bad bone in your body, Kate. But I gotta ask, what are you so scared of? Macklin loves you. And he's already a great dad to his daughters. I'm sure he'll be stoked—"

"That's just it. He will be. But will he be excited because he's *actually* excited, or will he pretend he's excited because it's how everyone expects him to react?"

Actually, the girl has a point. I know Mack would step up. Everyone who's ever had a single conversation with the guy knows he'd step up. The guy doesn't run from anything. Even his failed marriage only ended once his ex told him she was done.

And it's why Kate's scared to tell him.

Because she knows he'll put everyone else before himself and his happiness. And when you're with someone like that, how do you know what they truly feel versus what they're saying they feel?

Damn.

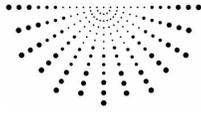
"I'm so sorry, Kate," I mutter, pulling her in for another hug.

Because this? This freaking sucks. And there's nothing I can say to make it better.

She knows it.

And so do I.

KATE



I set the keys on the kitchen counter, my brain sluggish yet still managing to go a million miles a minute. Not sure how it's possible, but it's been constant ever since my doctor's appointment.

"Hey, babe." Macklin stands from the couch, meets me in the kitchen, and wraps me in a hug.

I lean into him and close my eyes. "Hey."

He starts to pull away, but I grab onto the back of his shirt to keep him close. "Not yet."

His muscles tense for the shortest of seconds, then he squeezes me tighter. "Are you all right?"

"Mm-hmm," I lie. "Just missed you."

"How'd girl time go?"

"Fine. Crappy, but fine."

"Is Ashlyn okay?" Mack's breath kisses the crown of my head.

Man, he smells good. Like home and comfort and warmth all rolled into one.

I steal a final squeeze, then let him go and answer, "I think she will be. Eventually."

"Good. Are you?" His eyes narrow, but I shake him off and grab his hand, guiding him to the couch.

There's a romance novel on the cushion. He sets it on the coffee table, making space for me, and we both collapse onto the couch.

I'm worn out. Whether it's from the pregnancy and the influx of hormones or because I'm keeping a secret that feels like it's suffocating me, I'm not sure. But I don't like it. That much I do know.

Desperate for a lighter topic of conversation, I let my muscles melt into the soft leather cushions and motion to the romance book. "So, how is it?"

"It's good," he replies. "Hazel and Miley are reading it too."

"Is it weird? Reading spicy scenes while knowing your daughters read them too?"

Grimacing, he grabs my legs and swings them into his lap. "I like to pretend they skip those parts, but thanks for reminding me and making it weirder."

My amusement turns into a moan as he slips off my shoes, rubbing his thumbs into the arches of my feet. "Ooooh, that feels good. Keep doing it."

"So tell me about your night," he prods.

"The girls got shitfaced, and we watched a movie, ate a bunch of junk food, and then I came home."

"No alcohol for you tonight?"

"Nope." Thankfully, because of my epilepsy, I don't usually drink anyway, so he isn't suspicious. Neither were the girls when I declined the tequila shots that started our day. The fewer lies I have to tell everyone, the better. I shouldn't be lying in the first place. I rest my head against the armrest on the opposite end of the couch and close my eyes, fatigue taking over me.

Seriously. I'm freaking beat.

"Do we know when Colt will find out if he's the dad?" Mack asks.

Keeping my eyes closed, I answer, "No idea. Ash said he received his subpoena earlier today. He'll meet the baby when they do the paternity test."

"Does he *want* to be a dad?" Mack prods.

I open my eyes again and meet Macklin's gaze. "I think so."

"And Ash? Would she want to be a stepmom?"

"She loves kids. I think she wishes all Colt's kids would've been with her, ya know? And it's not like I have any advice. It's different with you and me. Colt's"—I lift my hand and do air quotes—"kid isn't even one yet. The baby's going to need a mother figure, but I've never had to take on that role. Hazel and Miley are more like friends than anything else."

And it's true. My relationship with Mack's daughters started pretty rough, but we're close now. Friends. And honestly, it's all I could ask for anyway.

"But for Ash, she'd have to play mom," Macklin concludes. "Is she ready for it?"

My teeth dig into the inside of my cheek as I shrug, unable to form words even if I wanted to.

Is she ready to play mom?

Am *I* ready to play mom?

"Whoa, what's wrong?" Macklin demands, sensing my shift in emotions. It's not difficult. I'm all over the place.

"Nothing's wrong." I cover my face with my forearm and take a slow, controlled breath.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Just tired." I will my tears away, move my arm, and meet Macklin's concerned gaze. "Can we snuggle and watch a show?"

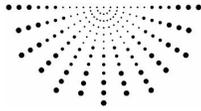
A beat of silence passes as he watches me carefully.

"Please?" I whisper.

Giving in, his chin dips with the smallest of nods, and he tugs me up. I rest my feet on the coffee table next to the romance book while Macklin turns on a documentary and hooks his arm along the back of the couch. I snuggle into him and close my eyes.

How the hell am I going to tell him?

BLAKELY



“**Y**ou sure you want to do this?” I ask, climbing into Theo’s car.

“Duh.” He flips his hat backward and pulls out of the driveway, resting his hand against the headrest on the passenger side. “Was the realtor nice on the phone?”

“I think so? I dunno? I’ve never dealt with a realtor before.” I shrug, puffing out my chest and sitting a little taller in the passenger seat. “I feel so grown up.”

With a laugh, he reaches over and squeezes my knee. “Look at you. Acting like an adult and shit.”

“Gee. Thanks.”

After putting the location for the first house into the GPS, we talk about the Colt and Ashlyn drama for a little while. He pulls up to a little three-bedroom house a bit later. It’s...cute. Definitely needs a little elbow grease, but there were plenty of worse options on the MLS, so I’m gonna consider it a win.

“This is it?” Theo asks, pulling up to the curb. He stares out the windshield but doesn’t bother to put the car in park as he examines the pink stucco and cracked sidewalk.

“Uh, yes?” I answer.

He turns to me with a look screaming I’ve sprouted a second head. “Do

you want a fixer-upper?”

“It’s not a fixer-upper,” I lie as I take in the missing shutters and ribbon of material flapping in the wind from the shredded window screens. To be fair, I didn’t exactly know our budget and didn’t want to make any assumptions, but this one isn’t too bad.

Is it?

Theo laughs and looks out the windshield again. “So, what would you call this?”

“Umm...quaint?” I offer.

He laughs a little harder. “Is this what you want? This piece of shit?”

“Hey!”

“Don’t get me wrong, Baby Thorne. You know I love you and will do anything for you, including moving into a place like this if your goal is to fix it up and shit. But if we’re gonna get married one day, we might need to raise your standards a bit.”

My lips part, and I blink slowly, convinced I’ve misheard him.

“What?” he asks when I’ve been quiet too long.

“Did you just say the M word?”

“I believe I did, yes.”

My heart skips a beat, and I try to keep myself from jumping to the wrong conclusion. “You wanna marry me someday?”

“We’re buying a house together.”

“Well, yeah. But I thought—” My mouth snaps closed as a realtor climbs out of the car parked behind us. No idea how long it was there. I’ve been a bit distracted.

“Thought what?” Theo pushes.

“I thought *you* were buying this house. Not *we*.”

“Why?”

“I dunno? Because it’s your money, and—”

“I’m gonna stop you right there.”

I suck my teeth between my lips, unsure what to say. His wrist rests against the top of the steering wheel, and his legs are spread wide as he gives me a look, turning my insides into goo.

“You gonna be my wife one day, Blake?”

“Teddy...”

“You know, for someone so hellbent on telling everyone Macklin’s your future-brother-in-law, and I’m gonna be your husband someday,” he notes, “you sure as shit are looking squeamish over there.”

“When I say it, it’s...” I bite my bottom lip, and he grabs my throat, dragging me toward him.

“So help me, Blakely Thorne, if you say it’s a joke when you tell people I’m gonna be your husband one day, I’m gonna spank your ass.”

I squirm in the seat and swallow, hoping it’ll erase my dry mouth as he pins me with a pointed look, daring me to deny it.

“It isn’t a joke,” I murmur.

“Then what’s wrong when I say it?”

Nothing. Nothing’s wrong. I actually like it a lot. Like, *a lot*, a lot. So much so, I kind of want to kiss the shit out of him. But I don’t. I sit here. Looking into his stupidly attractive eyes as my heart rate goes haywire beneath his hand still wrapped around my throat.

“What’s wrong when I say it?” he repeats, his sexy low voice turning raspy.

“It makes it more real,” I whisper.

“And that’s a bad thing?”

I shake my head.

“Good thing?” he asks.

I nod, my pulse thrumming faster and faster against his thumb. When he feels it, his mouth curls up in the corners. “Good girl. Now, I’m gonna ask you one more time. You gonna be my wife one day, Blake?”

I smile. “Yes.”

“You gonna carry my babies one day?”

“Yes.”

“You gonna put as much effort into our marriage as you’re putting into our relationship right now?”

“Yes,” I repeat.

“Are we partners?”

“Yes.” My smile widens.

“Then, what’s mine is yours, Baby Thorne. In sickness and in health. In richer and in”—he lets me go and waves his hand toward the shack—“whatever this is.”

I laugh and look out the window. “It’s not so bad.”

“It’s one hundred percent bad. Now, what do you really want? Because we both know you found at least one perfect house worth drooling over, and it sure as shit isn’t this one.”

“Well...what’s your—*our*—price range?” I question him carefully.

He rattles off a number, making my eyes nearly bug out of my head. “Are you serious?”

“You’re gonna marry an NHL player, Blakely.” He pushes the driver’s side door open. “Let’s meet the realtor and tell her what we actually want.”

I nod, unable to help the dopey grin spreading across my face. “Okay.”

“Hey, stranger, how are you?” the realtor greets me as I climb out of the car. “I’m Amy. Amy Poulton. We spoke on the phone earlier?”

“Yes. Hi,” I return, shaking her hand. “I’m Blakely, and this is Theo.”

Her dark blue eyes shoot to Theo, and she gives him a smile. “Hello. Nice to—” She pauses, her polite exterior breaking when she recognizes him. “Wait. You’re Theodore Taylor.”

“Uh, yeah. Hi.”

“Hey,” she repeats. “My husband and I are huge hockey fans. Sorry if I’m being weird, but seriously. We are so excited you’ll be playing for the Lions this season.”

Theo chuckles yet has the decency to look sheepish. “Uh, thanks. Maybe if this whole thing works out, I’ll be able to get you guys tickets to one of the games.”

“He would die,” she returns with a grin, and I can’t help but immediately like her. She’s nice. Friendly. Laid back. And she isn’t drooling over Theo because of his looks. She’s gushing because she and her husband are hockey fans. Yup. I really like her.

“Are you guys ready to go inside?” she adds, hooking her thumb over her shoulder toward the entrance to the fixer-upper from Theo’s Hell.

“Actually, we were thinking of maybe looking at something a little more...” My voice trails off, and I grimace. My guilt over bringing us here in the first place makes me feel like a child instead of a serious buyer, which is the last thing I want.

With a laugh, Amy waves me off. “Don’t worry. This happens all the time. We show up to a place, and it gives off a different vibe than the pictures online. Not a big deal.”

My shoulders relax as I breathe out a sigh of relief, grateful for her kindness. “Thanks.”

“Sure thing. So, what are you looking for?”

Theo and I exchange a look, and I blurt out, “We have no idea.”

“All right. Not a big deal,” she repeats. After tucking her strawberry blonde hair with pink highlights behind her ear, she taps her finger against her chin. “Hmm... Let me ask you a few questions, and we’ll see if I can find you something. Question one. Do you need a yard?”

A yard?

Good question.

“Um...no idea,” I admit. I should’ve thought these things through.

She laughs. “It’s totally fine. Let me ask you this. Do you have any kids?”

“Nope,” I answer.

“Do you have any dogs?” she prods. “Or are you thinking of ever getting

any dogs? Because my dog, Tonka, would die without a yard.”

“Then, yes. We need a yard,” Theo announces.

“Perfect. Hmm...” She clicks her tongue against the roof of her mouth.
“How many bedrooms are you thinking?”

Theo turns to me, his brow quirked.

“Um...three?” I offer.

“Maybe four,” Theo adds.

“And bonus points if there’s an in-home gym,” I add, anticipation buzzing through me.

Her smile spreads. “I know the perfect place. But first, how do you feel about the color green? Personally, I love it, but...” She turns to me, and Theo does the same, putting me on the spot.

“Um...I think I like it?” I answer with a shrug.

“Perfect.”



NOPE. I DON'T LIKE GREEN. I LOVE IT. THE FRONT OF THE HOUSE HAS IVY growing up the tan stucco, and the front door is painted a mossy color making it stand out against all the other ones we've driven past. Not to mention the freshly mowed green grass and planters filled with lush green foliage. It's freaking gorgeous. And unique. And, dare I say, classy?

Yup. Definitely classy.

After Amy gave us a quick tour, where we learned she isn't only a real estate agent, but a teacher, too, she gave us some space to explore the house by ourselves. I want to put an offer in to be sure she receives the commission.

But even if she didn't, I'd still want to put an offer in. Because hands down, it's the prettiest house I've ever been in. And the in-home gym?

Squeal.

It's perfect.

“What do you think?” Theo asks, watching me as I check out the master bathroom, complete with dual shower heads and heated Italian marble floors.

Yup. This’ll do just fine.

“Blake?” he prods.

I drag my fingers against the dark counter and face him again. “I think it’s pretty gorgeous. What do you think?”

“So, it’s a yes? You like it?”

“Uh, I kind of love it,” I admit. “But you never answered me. What do *you* think?”

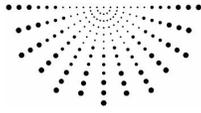
“Amy!” he calls, not bothering to answer me. “Let’s draw up the paperwork.”

I squeal again and jump into Theo’s arms, kissing the shit out of him as he cups my ass and lifts me up until my legs are wrapped around his center.

Yup.

This’ll do just fine.

COLT



My knee bounces up and down as I stare at my phone. I called the lawyer's contact information on the subpoena while Ashlyn was with the girls yesterday. After a quick chat where I explained I wasn't going to be a dick and would cooperate, she gave me two options. One, I can pay for a private lab to perform the paternity test and receive the results sooner. Or two, we can wait until the court sets everything up, which could take up to three or four months.

Pretty sure neither Ash nor I can stomach that long of a wait without knowing the truth.

Am I gonna be a dad?

Do I want to be a dad?

I opted for the private lab. Apparently, Eleanor agreed because her lawyer, Ali Marshall, just sent a text with the time and place.

Resting my ass on the bed and my elbows on my knees, I hang my head as the bathroom door opens, revealing a freshly showered Ashlyn in nothing but a fluffy gray towel wrapped around her torso and knotted between her breasts.

"Hey," I mutter.

She pulls her wet hair over one shoulder and starts combing it. "Hey."

After I picked her up from Blake and Mia's house last night, she passed

out and slept in. I still don't know if it's because of the alcohol or if she's avoiding me on purpose.

"How are you feeling?" I ask.

"I'm okay. Should probably be worse," she admits with a soft smile. Sobering slightly, she adds, "I'm sorry I got mad at you."

Her apology makes my chest ache, and I shake my head, pushing to my feet. "You had every right to be mad at me."

"Yeah, but I get it." Her movements are strained as she sets the comb back onto the counter. Our gazes collide when she faces me again. "How are you feeling? About the whole thing?"

"Stressed. I talked to the lawyer."

"And?"

"And I'm gonna have the test done on Monday."

Her eyes widen. "So soon?"

"Yeah." The familiar sense of being suffocated washes over me, making it hard to breathe. I tug at the collar of my T-shirt. "Will you come with me?"

Her pretty, full lips pull into a frown as she hesitates. "Do you *want* me to come with you?"

"You know I d—"

"Do I?" she interrupts.

"Ash," I plead.

"No offense, but you hid this from me. Doesn't exactly make me feel like you want to include me in any of this."

"I was scared."

"Yeah, well, so am I," she argues. "Which is ironic since I know this has nothing to do with me, but—"

"It has *everything* to do with you." I rush toward her and grab her hands, hating how they shake. Hating how I'm the one who made her feel this way. The one who's making her uncomfortable. Anxious.

Fuck, this is all my fault, and I'd do anything to fix this. To make it

better. To erase the little divot between her brows. But there's no going back. There's no fixing this. Our only option is to move forward. And dammit, I *need* us to move forward.

"We're in this together, Sunshine. I want us to be in this together."

Her attention falls to our laced fingers. She closes her eyes. Pained. Insecure.

"Are you sure?" she whispers.

"Can't say it any more bluntly, Sunshine."

A breath of laughter spills out of her, but she looks like she's about to cry, leaving me feeling helpless.

"How can I fix this?" I beg.

"I'm scared," she breathes out. Her declaration fans across my face.

"Me too." I fight the urge to pull her against me. To sweep us away and never look back. But I can't. I can't run. I can't escape. No matter how much I want to. I have to face this, but I need Ash by my side as I do. If she leaves? If she calls it quits? I'm not sure I'll survive.

"I don't want this to come between us, Ash," I tell her. "I need us to face this together, or I'm scared I won't be able to face this at all."

And it's the truth. I can't do this. Not without my Sunshine.

"Okay." She gulps. Then, her eyes meet mine. "I'll go with you."

"Thank you." I move slowly, giving her plenty of time to reject me. When my lips brush against her forehead, and she doesn't jerk away from me, I breathe a little easier, the vice around my chest loosening. And fuck, a tiny spark of hope ignites inside of me as I repeat, "Thank you."

Her body sags against mine, and she nods.

"The baby will be there too," I add. "Just so you know. I don't want you to feel blindsided or anything."

She nods, digesting the curveball. "And your ex?"

"She was never my ex." I squeeze her hand.

"I mean, technically..." Her voice trails off as if she can't stomach the

idea of me being with someone else. And honestly, I get it. I can't stomach the thought of her being with anyone else, either. It doesn't matter that we both have our pasts and wish we could erase them. They're still there. They'll always be there. Even when the reminder is a bitch to swallow. And mine is glaring down at us. My past. The reminder I've been with someone else before I even knew she existed. But she doesn't get it. I could've been with a thousand women before her, and none of them would've mattered. Because they weren't *my* Sunshine.

My Adam's apple bobs in my throat as I try to find a way to help her understand it, but I don't know how.

Her wet hair hangs down her back, and I toy with the strands as if they're my lifeline. "You gotta understand who I was back then, Ash. I was a different guy. A stranger. Couldn't even look in the mirror most days. I was her dirty little secret, and she was..." I shake my head, unsure of what else to say.

"What was she?" Ashlyn prods.

"She was a distraction. From the guilt I'd been carrying around after my dad passed."

With a small nod of understanding, Ash asks, "Will she want me there? I don't want to make anything more awkward than it already is."

"I want us to be a united front throughout all of this. And I'm not letting you go, Ash. Not for anything."

Her sad smile greets me, but she nods again. "Okay."

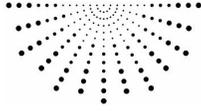
"We're gonna make it through this. You and me."

"You and me," she repeats.

My arms hold her a little tighter.

You and me.

ASHLYN



Colt's death grip on my hand makes my fingers tingle, but I don't pull away as we walk inside the building. It's gray and old, the smell somehow riding the line between bleach and stale air.

The waiting room is mostly empty. A few metal chairs are spread around the edge of the room, and there's a woman behind a reception desk, her gaze glued to her computer. Another woman stands when we cross the threshold. She adjusts the top of her cream-colored blouse and walks toward us. I don't recognize her.

"Mr. Thorne?" she asks.

"Yeah. *Colt*," he answers.

"Hello." The stranger offers her hand. "I'm Alexandra Marshall, Ms. Elshner's attorney. You can call me Ali. We spoke on the phone earlier. It's nice to meet you."

She looks young. Gorgeous. With dark chocolate eyes and curly brown hair reaching her collar bone and framing her face, and a conch and daith piercing.

I'd expected a stingy old dude in a suit with a constant frown etched into his aged, weathered skin. But Alexandra Marshall? Yeah, she's pretty much the opposite of who I expected to be dealing with. I warm up to her almost instantly.

Maybe this won't be so bad after all.

Colt takes her offered hand and shakes it. "Nice to meet you, Ali. This is Ashlyn, my future wife."

My eyes pop as Ali greets me. "Congratulations, Ashlyn. When's the big day?"

"No idea," I answer, forcing a laugh as I shake her hand too.

If Colt wanted to toss a bomb on me this morning, he's succeeded, but Ali simply takes it in stride. "I understand you're—"

"Sorry I'm late," a feminine voice calls out. We turn around to find a gorgeous brunette middle-aged woman with a baby carrier hanging from her right forearm. She strides toward us in black heels and a black pencil skirt hugging every inch of her curves. Not gonna lie. When I pictured a mysterious professor's wife, she was a stern woman with a slicked-back bun, a type-A personality, and a fetish with rulers. But this woman? She's—I gulp—stunning.

"Jaxon was hungry, and I had to make a quick bottle," she continues.

I step back, not wanting to intrude when she walks into the little circle we'd created while chatting on the opposite side of the room. Colt's attention falls to the car seat, but he doesn't say a word.

"Have you unblocked my number yet?" Eleanor asks him. There isn't any malice in her question. Only genuine curiosity and a dash of remorse.

She has his number?

Duh. Of course, she would have his number. They've slept together, remember?

I attempt to swallow the lump of jealousy in my throat, but it doesn't dissipate.

"Not sure this is the time, Eleanor," Colt mutters.

Ali clears her throat and announces, "I'm glad all of you could make it. Now, if you'll follow me, we'll get started." She takes a step toward a closed door but pauses, almost apologetic as she glances at me. Turning to Colt, she

addresses him. “Mr. Thorne, do you mind if your fiancée waits out here? Unless Ms. Elshner is all right with her accompanying us?”

Eleanor’s smile is guarded as she looks at me for the first time and adjusts the car seat on her forearm. “Um...sure? I guess I don’t mind.”

“All right, then. Follow me, everyone.” Ali heads through a thick black door to a private room in the back of the building, and Eleanor follows behind, giving us a peek at Jaxon as she walks in front of us. A bright blue binkie wiggles back and forth while he takes in his surroundings, catching Colt’s stare. Curious, Jaxon stares right back at him with wide eyes.

Colt’s steps falter when their gazes connect.

And it kills me.

I want to know what he’s thinking. What he’s feeling. If he knows how much Jaxon looks like him or if he can’t see the same similarities I do. Hell, I don’t even need to know the paternity test results anymore. Jaxon is clearly one hundred percent *Thorne*.

The baby disappears into the room a second later as Eleanor carries him inside, but Colt stays in place, his breathing shallow. My grip tightens for a brief second on Colt’s hand as I urge him forward, and we follow everyone into the room.

It’s similar to a doctor’s office with a gray swivel stool and a small computer on the counter lining the back wall, along with a massive chair that looks like it turns into a bed in the center of the room. Black picture frames hang on the wall, showcasing smiling families I can’t help but envy. I tear my attention from a father and son photograph to take in the rest of the room.

This laboratory is larger than most. Past the oversized chair in the center of the room, there’s a small, rectangular table along with four chairs placed around it. Colt pulls out a chair for me, and I sit down, watching as Eleanor sets the car seat on the table. She sits next to Ali on the opposite side.

Ali pulls an iPad from her leather bag and begins explaining the details and what to expect moving forward, but I don’t hear a word. I’m too busy

staring at the baby boy's eyes and round cheeks. My heart feels like it slipped into an automobile crusher.

I care about him already.

He isn't even mine.

But he's Colt's. He's a piece of Colt.

And it breaks my heart that he's never met his father until today.

He deserves so much more.

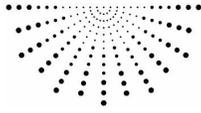
They both do.

I squeeze Colt's knee beneath the table's surface.

Everything's gonna be okay, Colt.

No matter what.

COLT



“**T**he lab technician will be in any minute,” Ali announces. She gives us a step-by-step breakdown of how everything will play out, but I can’t pay attention. I’m too distracted by the baby in the car seat to hear any of it. Eleanor set it on the table, giving me a front-row seat to the little boy she’s convinced belongs to me.

He looks like my baby pictures. The ones my mom has tucked away in a photo album. But maybe I’m imagining it. Maybe we aren’t so similar. My teeth grind together as I take in his little hands. The pudginess of his fingers. The tiny knuckles and short fingernails.

When Eleanor catches me staring, she shifts the car seat until it fully faces me. “His name’s Jaxon,” she tells me.

“Jaxon.” I swallow, my mouth suddenly dry.

He’s bigger than I would’ve thought. Still small but less like a slug who sleeps all the time and more like an actual little human with his own thoughts and feelings and shit. His bright blue binkie wiggles back and forth in his mouth. His eyes meet mine, and he smiles.

“I’m Eleanor, by the way.” Eleanor offers her hand to Ash. “I don’t think we were formally introduced.”

“I apologize,” Ali interjects, looking up from her iPad. “Eleanor, this is Ashlyn. Ashlyn, this is Eleanor.”

Ash takes Eleanor's hand from across the table and shakes it.

"Nice to meet you," Eleanor says. "And I'm sorry about the circumstances."

"It's fine," Ash lies. She looks less than comfortable as she motions to Jax on the table. "He's adorable."

"Yeah," Eleanor replies, accepting Ashlyn's compliment without hesitation.

I glance at Eleanor again, and she smiles when our eyes meet. "He got his good looks from his daddy."

Daddy.

Fuck.

Nausea rolls through me, and my stomach clenches, but I ignore it as a sharp knock on the door interrupts us. The door opens, revealing a young guy in black scrubs. He must be the lab technician Ali mentioned.

Or the coroner, since I'm pretty sure I've died, yet I can't decide if this is heaven or hell.

I always wanted to be a dad.

No, that's not true.

I wanted to be a dad until I lost mine. At the time, I vowed to stay single for the rest of my life, enduring the time I'd been given for as long as I had to until I could be put out of my misery.

Then, I transferred to LAU, where I met Ashlyn. And everything changed.

I knew she'd be a good mom. A great one, actually. She's patient. Kind. Generous. And she wanted kids. Damn if I was gonna be the one to stop her. And honestly, I don't want to. I knew if I ever had kids in this life, they'd belong to her. And we'd raise them together. In whatever dream home Ashlyn could create in her imagination. I'd build it for her. And we'd live happily ever after. Me and my Sunshine. Just like we both want.

My eyes flick to Jaxon in his seat again, tearing my future to shreds. But I

don't fault him for it.

He's an innocent little kid.

A cute one too.

I scrub my hand over my face and try to focus on Ali's instructions, though I'm shit at accomplishing it.

"Thanks for squeezing us in with such short notice," Ali greets the lab technician when he enters the room.

"No problem. Let's get started."

The guy runs through everything, but again, I'm too distracted to pay attention. I feel like I'm watching the entire situation unfold from a distance. Like I'm not really here. Like this isn't happening to me. Like I'm removed from the whole thing and can only mutter, *poor sonofabitch*, to the bastard on screen whose life is being turned upside down.

"And you've opted for the cheek swab?" Ali confirms with Eleanor, interrupting the lab technician as she jots something else down on her iPad. The bright yellow case is a stark contrast to the emotions filtering through the room, but even its cheery color isn't enough to lift the melancholy hanging in the air.

I stare at the textured surface, lightheaded and dizzy, while I catch Eleanor nodding at Ali in my periphery. "Yes. If it's what they recommend, a cheek swab is fine. Thank you."

"Of course. Go ahead," Ali urges the technician.

His nitrile gloves snap into place while Eleanor pops the binkie out of the kid's mouth. Jaxon doesn't care until it's replaced with a cotton swab. His little forehead wrinkles, and his nose scrunches as he fights with the lab tech, trying to push his hand away. The pads of my fingers dig into the hard wood surface of the table, but I keep them in place. I want to tell him to stop. Clearly, the kid doesn't like it. But I don't. I sit here. Watching. Waiting. Feeling like I'm in the Twilight Zone. Because why the hell should I care if Jaxon doesn't like it? If he's uncomfortable? It's like some fatherly instinct

has already been tapped, and I don't know how to turn it off.

The lab technician chuckles at Jaxon's scrunched face and slips the tip of the swab back into a little sanitized tube once he's finished torturing the little dude. Then, he turns to me. "Have you eaten or had anything to drink in the last eight hours?"

Ali had already told me what to expect from today, so I shake my head. "No."

"Good. Can you confirm your birthday and full name for me?"

I rattle off the information as he reads the label on the tube identical to Jaxon's.

Satisfied, the lab tech lifts a long cotton swab into the air. "Open wide."

I open my mouth. He drags the cotton against my cheek and slips it into the labeled tube. Once he's finished, he tells us we should have the results within three to six weeks and disappears through the door.

"All right," Ali announces. "If you'll sign here, Eleanor." She hands Eleanor the iPad, and Ellie scribbles on the screen.

"And you." Ali pulls up a different section on the screen and slides it toward me. I drag my finger across it, my heart thumping in my chest. I feel like I'm signing my life away. Like this is my execution notice. And here I am, accepting it with open arms. Once I'm finished, I fist my hand and force myself to rest it on the table. Like this isn't killing me. Like I'm not being torn apart.

"Perfect," Ali announces. "It looks like this is everything—"

"Do you want to hold him?" Eleanor interrupts.

Him.

My son.

The innocent bystander wearing the weight of my past.

I look at Jaxon tucked in his car seat, oblivious to the shit storm swarming him from all sides. He has four teeth. Two on top. Two on bottom. The front of his green onesie is wet as he gives me a toothy grin when he catches me

staring, and Eleanor rubs at the stain with the edge of his blanket.

“Sorry,” she apologizes. “Jaxon’s teething and has been drooling worse than a St. Bernard lately. Here.” The sharp click from the buckle unlatching is like nails on a chalkboard. She slips Jaxon’s arms from the straps and offers him to me.

“I—” I clear my throat and turn to Ash, lost.

“Hold him,” she urges. Her smile is encouraging but broken at the same time. I don’t have time to decipher it. I don’t need to. This has to be killing her. Seeing me with him. With a baby who doesn’t belong to her.

My palms are sweaty. I wipe them on my jeans and grab Jaxon beneath his arms from Eleanor.

He’s lighter than I expected but heavier, too, and I can’t help but wonder how small he must’ve been when he was born. How much he’s probably grown over the last...year now? And I wasn’t there for any of it.

Fuck.

Acid churns in my gut as I hold the kid away from my body. Unsure what to do or what to say or how to even handle a baby. His little brows scrunch, and he looks back at his mom, as uncomfortable as I am, his legs and arms hanging there.

Eleanor gives him an encouraging smile. “It’s okay, Jaxon. He’s nice. I promise.”

“Hold him closer to you,” Ash murmurs beside me. She helps guide Jaxon to my chest. Grabbing a Tigger stuffed animal from the car seat, she wiggles it back and forth, bounces it on my shoulder, and, with a quick tap on his hands and nose, brings it back to my shoulder, turning the exchange into a game.

Jaxon relaxes almost instantly. His muscles soften as he melts into me. He likes it. The game. Ashlyn boops his nose with the stuffed animal again, and with a grin, Jaxon reaches for the toy, so Ash gives it to him.

“He likes you,” Eleanor says, watching our interaction, her attention

falling to Ash again. “You’re good with children.”

“She’s a second-grade teacher,” I announce. My chest swells with pride, but Ash waves me off.

“I *will be* a second-grade teacher. I just graduated, and technically, my first year teaching isn’t until this fall.”

“I think that’s great.” Eleanor smiles at Ash, and this time, it’s more genuine. Less guarded. “We need good teachers now more than ever.”

Tucking her hair behind her ear, Ash murmurs, “Thank you.” She turns back to Jaxon. His tiny jeans have ridden up a few inches, and her touch is gentle as she rubs his bare ankle with the tip of her fingers. But she stays quiet, almost somber, watching him.

“So, have you two set a date yet?” Eleanor asks.

“A date?” Ash tears her attention from Jaxon and me to Eleanor again.

“Ali said you’re engaged?” Eleanor clarifies.

Ash frowns. “Oh. We aren’t—”

“We haven’t set a date yet,” I interrupt. “Soon, though.”

“Colt,” Ash whispers. A warning. A plea.

Eleanor’s nod is slow as she forces another smile. “I see. Well. Congratulations. You both seem happy.”

“I am happy,” I tell her with an edge of warning in my voice. Because I need to make my stance clear. What I want. And who I want it with.

“I’m glad, Colt.” Eleanor smiles at me again, but it doesn’t reach her large brown eyes. “You were in such a dark place back then, and now…” Her voice trails off, and she looks down at her lap. “You seem really happy.”

I stay quiet. Unsure what she wants me to say. Like I said to her, I am happy. Or I was until she reached out to me. But it isn’t her fault. I know it’s not. And I’m not one to run from my responsibilities. Not anymore. Ash taught me this. But fuck, this particular responsibility comes with a shit-ton of baggage, and I’m not sure how to carry it all.

I glance at Ash beside me as Jaxon flaps his little arms. She’s been so

quiet. A spectator. She's chewing on the inside of her cheek, but I can feel her nervous energy. Her turmoil. The way she's been knocked off-kilter by this entire ordeal and doesn't know how to handle it. The distance scares me. The way she's pulling away, even while she sits right beside me. I can feel it. The indecision. The fear. Like she doesn't want to intrude. Like she's afraid she's interrupting something or some shit.

"Do you mind if Ash holds him?" I ask Eleanor.

"Oh. Um, sure? Of course, I don't mind," Eleanor replies, but Ash stands up, her chair legs scraping against the linoleum floor.

"I actually need to use the restroom. I'll be back in a minute."

Eleanor watches her leave. The quiet click of the door cuts through the silence in the room as I set Jaxon on my knee and bounce him softly.

Ali shifts in her seat, as uncomfortable as the rest of us. But she doesn't leave. Not sure if she can or if it's against the rules to allow her client to be alone with the defendant, if that's what I am, anyway. But her attention shifts from me to Eleanor to the closed door. Meanwhile, the tension swirls in the air around us, growing thicker and thicker with every passing second.

"Did I say something wrong?" Eleanor finally breaks the silence.

I shake my head. "It's a lot to adjust to."

Her nod is soft. "Yeah. Especially for your fiancée. I can't imagine ever falling in love with a guy only to find out he had a child with someone else."

And fuck, if it isn't the truth.

I might not have signed up for this, but these are the consequences of my actions. *Mine*. And I'll own up to them because it's my responsibility. But Ash? There's nothing tying her to this mess but me.

And the question is... Am I enough?

"I should probably get going," I mutter.

"Of course." Eleanor rounds the edge of the table, and I stand up, unsure what to do or say.

With another toothy grin, Jaxon reaches for his mom with his chubby

little arms as soon as he sees her. Eleanor laughs, making silly faces at Jaxon while I shift my weight from one foot to the other, smiling at their interaction.

At least I didn't have a kid with a monster. And clearly, Jaxon's loved more than anything else in the world.

Eleanor takes him from me and puts him back in his car seat as I wait for Ash to return. Once Jaxon is safely tucked away, Eleanor pulls me into a side hug and looks up at me.

"I am sorry, Colt. For everything. I know I should've told you I was married. I know I should've told you about the pregnancy and everything. I've screwed up so much..."

I pull her into a full hug, her sorrow polluting the air around us. "We've all fucked up, Ellie. But you're a great mom. Jaxon's lucky to have you."

She snuffles and pulls away. "Thanks. Debatable," she clarifies. "But thanks. And I'm happy for you and Ashlyn. She seems very sweet."

"She's the sweetest," I say with a smile, letting Eleanor go. "I'll talk to you later?"

"Sure. And I'm sure Ali will keep you up-to-date on everything too."

"I will," Ali confirms. She slides her iPad into her bag.

"So, I'll see you in three to six weeks?" I offer.

Eleanor turns to Ali for confirmation, and she nods.

"Three to six weeks, it is," Eleanor repeats. "Do you want to see Jaxon before then? Or would it be too weird?"

I gulp, my indecision tearing me in two as Jaxon's wide eyes look around the sterile room.

It's such a simple question, but the answer is more complicated than I can even grasp.

What if he isn't mine?

Do I want to spend time cultivating a relationship with a kid who doesn't belong to me? No. Because I'll fall for the little shit. I know I will.

But what if he is mine?

If he is, it's three to six more weeks of wasted time. I'm already drowning in guilt for missing his first year. I'm not sure how much more I can take.

"I'll let you know," I answer quietly.

"All right." Eleanor nods and squeezes my arm one more time. "I really am sorry, Colt."

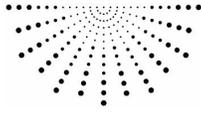
I look down at where she's touching me. It's innocent. Like a friend. But it still feels wrong when Ash isn't here, so I shrug out of her grasp, creating some distance between us. If she's embarrassed or annoyed, she doesn't show it.

"I'm sorry too," I reply.

She smiles, hiking Jaxon's car seat onto her forearm. "Good to see you again. And if you wanna catch up or anything, let me know."

I squeeze the back of my neck. "Yeah."

COLT



After Ashlyn's bathroom break, Ali promised to be in touch, and we walked back to my truck.

Ashlyn's quiet. Lost in her thoughts. Probably feeling whiplashed the same way I am. But I don't break it. The silence. I let it wash over us. Giving us time to process everything. The what ifs. The potential outcomes.

The sun is high in the sky now, beating down on us. It's warm. Hot. Unlike the chilly gloom clinging to Ash and me with every step. I want to know what she's thinking. What she's feeling. If she's pissed at me. At the situation. How I kept this from her for so long. But I don't ask her. I'm too scared. Too scared of the fallout. The repercussions. I thought the puck bunnies were bad, but this? A kid? A kid who looks like me? I scrub my hand over my face, my Adam's apple lodged in my throat and my steps faltering as a silent Ash walks up to the passenger door of my truck.

The hinges squeak softly as I open the door and help her inside without a word.

When I pull out of the parking lot a minute later, Ash murmurs, "She seems nice."

"Who? Ali or Eleanor?"

"Both," she answers. "But I meant Eleanor."

"Oh. Yeah." I nod. "She is."

“A little exhausted,” she clarifies. “But nice.”

I chuckle. “Yeah.”

“And beautiful.”

Beautiful?

With a frown, I glance at Ash from the corner of my eye. But she isn't looking at me. She's chewing on her thumbnail, lost in her own thoughts.

Is she jealous?

“Ash,” I warn. Because fuck me, I can't take it. I can't take her jealousy right now. I can't take the silence. I can't take anything. I can't.

“I'm only saying—”

“I know what you're saying,” I interrupt. “But I need you to stop.”

“Why?” she asks with a dry laugh. “Because you don't like me saying your ex is beautiful?”

“Ash.”

She lifts her hands in surrender. “You're right. I'll stop.” We drive in silence for a few more minutes. My heartbeat pounds in my ears. As I pull onto the main road, she murmurs, “Listen...”

The metallic taste of blood seeps onto my taste buds as I wait, knowing I'm not gonna like what Ash has to say, even though she deserves the opportunity to speak her mind. To tell me what she's thinking.

But the foreboding is too strong. Too heady. She's been acting off ever since Eleanor introduced herself. Like a switch flipped or some shit, and I don't know why.

I look at her from the corner of my eye again, but her lips are pulled thin, and her arms are crossed. Like she's lost her nerve.

Unable to take the silence for another second, I grit out, “Just say it, Ash.”

“I think you need to give her another shot.” She stares blankly at the dashboard as the words tumble out of her. “A *real* one.”

Fucking hell.

I slam my hand against the steering wheel, the last of my patience making me snap. “Are you serious right now?”

“Listen—”

“I don’t want Eleanor!”

“I know you don’t.” Her voice is quieter now. But it’s almost worse. The tightness in her tone. The slight rasp. The small hitch. Because I know Ash isn’t saying this to be a bitch. The girl doesn’t have a bitchy bone in her body. No. She’s trying to look out for me. She’s trying to be selfless. Trying to do what’s best, even if it kills her.

“I don’t want Eleanor,” I repeat, softer. My exhaustion battles my frustration until my vision blurs. “I *don’t*. I want us. I want our future. I want everything we’ve dreamed of. Everything we’ve planned.”

“Our plans went out the window as soon as Jaxon came into the picture.”

“*Don’t* say that,” I seethe, and she jerks back at the animosity in my voice.

“You’re right,” she whispers. “They aren’t gone or anything, but they *have* changed, Colt. You have to see it.”

“Why do they need to change?”

“Because you have a baby. It’s a pretty big curveball, Colt. All I’m saying is it needs to be taken into account.”

“And I’m taking it into account with you,” I grit out. “I don’t want to hear any of this bullshit about me giving Eleanor a chance.”

“She’s the mother of your child,” Ash reminds me. “You know what it’s like to live without a father in your home. I can’t be the reason your little boy grows up the same way. It isn’t fair.”

“Don’t say shit like that,” I order. I throttle the steering wheel with all my strength, my patience slipping more and more with every word spoken between us.

“Just because it isn’t what you want to hear doesn’t mean I’m not allowed to say it.”

“I don’t want Eleanor,” I repeat.

“I believe you, Colt. I do, but...” Again, her voice trails off, and she closes her eyes. As if this is killing her.

“But what?” I demand.

“That little boy deserves you *and* his mother in his life. Deserves parents who are present, unlike how mine were. At the very least, he deserves you to think about it. To think about mending your relationship with his mom. To give the idea of a real, happy family a shot.”

“Why are you doing this?” Defeat settles in my chest, making it hard to breathe. “Why are you pushing me on this?”

“Because I know you, Colt. I saw the way you looked at Jaxon.”

“We don’t even know if he’s mine or not.”

“I think we both know what you just spouted is a bunch of bullshit,” she argues as if her frustration is finally getting the best of her. A single tear slips down her pale cheek, and she wipes at it angrily. “He’s yours, and Eleanor had to twist your arm to hold him.”

“I feel guilty, all right?” I snap.

And fuck, it hurts. The pain in her voice. The tightness in my own. But I don’t know what she wants me to say. This entire situation is so messed up I can’t even wrap my head around it, let alone figure out what the hell I’m going to do to fix it. To make things okay. With Ash and me. With Jaxon and me. I should’ve been there. From the beginning. I should’ve held him. Woke up with him in the middle of the night. I should know everything about him. What he likes to play. What he likes to eat. Does he have a favorite show? Is it *Winnie the Pooh*? There are so many questions, but I don’t have any answers. Not for a single one of them.

“I wasn’t there, Ash,” I mutter. My guilt rises with every passing second as I stare at the expanse of road in front of us. “I wasn’t there for him for the first year of his life. What kind of father does it make me?”

“You thought he was nothing more than a rumor. You didn’t know—”

“I knew.”

Her breath hitches. The sound cuts through the tense air like a knife.

“What?” she whispers.

“In my gut, I knew, Ash. When someone told me about him, I knew.” The words feel like an oozing sore. Infected. Painful. Disgusting. But almost cleansing too. Like the building pressure from the last few months since I first heard about him has finally burst, relieving it.

When Ash stays quiet, too shocked to respond, I clear my throat and force myself to continue. “It was someone who knew about the drama at Dixie Tech and why I transferred to LAU. They mentioned Eleanor had a kid, and I’d abandoned him, Ash. I—” The words catch in my throat, and I shake my head.

Her touch is gentle as she reaches over the center console and squeezes my knee. “You were scared. And you made a mistake. We all make mistakes, Colt. But Jaxon deserves what’s best for him. Not what’s best for you or for me. You need to ask what’s best for the little boy who looks so much like his father it hurts. That’s all I’m saying.”

My jaw tenses. “I’m not gonna lose you.”

“Listen to me,” she pleads.

I swallow past the lump in my throat and let our eyes meet, waiting.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she promises. “I love you more than anything. And you being a dad is by no means a dealbreaker. Especially when he’s as adorable as Jaxon. Like seriously, my heart. I can’t handle it.” She clutches at her chest with a sad laugh, and it guts me. But her words sober. “I...I need you to take a step back and really look at your little boy’s future.”

I hesitate, my molars grinding.

“How do you want it to look, Colt?” she prods. “Do you want him to grow up splitting his time between his parents? Growing up with half-siblings when there’s a possibility he could have full ones if I was out of the picture?” Her lower lip trembles, and she closes her eyes. “Fuck, Colt. You have no

idea how much it kills me to even say it out loud.”

I pull over onto the side of the road and hang my head, my sorrow getting the best of me. Because this is my fault. It's my fault she's put in this position. It's my fault she has to consider a life without me all because she wants Jaxon to have the best childhood possible. It's my fault she looks like she wants to cry. It's my fault she has every right to.

“Don't say shit like that, Sunshine.”

“I'm only trying to help you see this from an unbiased perspective,” she murmurs, squeezing my thigh one more time and placing her hand back in her own lap. “If I were out of the picture, would you give Eleanor a chance? That's all I want to know.”

“I love you, Ash—”

“I know you do,” she interrupts. The same sad yet encouraging smile mars her pretty face. “And trust me when I say I love you more than anything else in the world. But I can't sign up for this, knowing I might be the reason behind a little boy's future being less than perfect. And I'm not sure I can live with the guilt.”

Like a knife to the chest, my lungs struggle to inflate, and I rub at my sternum, praying I'm jumping to conclusions. Praying we'll get through this.

“So what are you saying?” I ask numbly.

“I dunno. I dunno what I'm saying.” She wipes beneath her red-rimmed eyes, then rubs the moisture from her tears on her jeans. “I think I'm saying I want you to take a step back and reevaluate everything before we move forward. And I won't hate you no matter what your decision is. I promise. But if there was ever a reason to pause and reevaluate our relationship, I think this one is it. Don't you?”

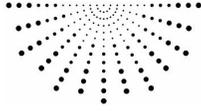
“I love you, Ash,” I repeat. Because I don't know what else there is to say. Do I like Eleanor? Yeah. I think she's a good person. I think she's a great mom. But do I love her? No.

But could I? For Jaxon?

Fuck.

I don't want to.

MACKLIN



Kate's been tense since her doctor's appointment. I don't know why, but I'm not a fool. I can see it. Feel it. Taste it. The distance. The way she's distracted. Like she's somewhere else, even when we're in the same room.

It scares the shit out of me.

Even now, with the morning light kissing her skin, I don't think she's noticed me. Too busy lost in her thoughts. She's sitting on the front porch step, staring absently in front of her with a mug of coffee pressed to her lips. Her hair is braided down her back, and she's wearing the same clothes she slept in. *My* clothes.

I think she likes it out here. The birds chirping in the trees. The soft breeze.

"Gonna have to buy you a rocking chair or porch swing," I tell her.

She turns toward me and smiles. It doesn't reach her eyes. Making room beside her, she scoots to her right and pats the space with her hand. "The step works just fine."

"Why settle for *fine* when you could have something better?" I walk toward her and sit down, stretching my legs out in front of us. The concrete steps are warm from the morning sun, and I bask in the light, enjoying the comfortable silence. "You gonna tell me what's going on?"

Her eyes widen above the brim of her mug, and she clears her throat.

“What?”

“I’m not stupid, Kate. Something’s bothering you.”

“Mack.” She says my name like it’s a plea.

“Is something wrong with your medication? Did your neurologist suggest we switch things up again? What’s wrong?”

“My medication is fine.”

“Then, why have you been acting like this?”

“Like what?”

“So…” I shake my head. “Detached. Is it because I’ll be traveling? Is it nerves from starting the new internship? Talk to me.”

She presses the mug to her lips, takes a small sip, and pulls them between her teeth. “It’s everything,” she finally mutters. “Ashlyn and Colt. The internship. You traveling.”

“Is that all?” I push.

Her thumb rubs against the front of her mug. The words, *World’s Greatest Dad* are scrawled across the front in thick, blocky letters. Miley and Hazel gave it to me for Father’s day when they were little. The contents inside grab my attention. It’s lighter than coffee. Clearer than her usual creamer-filled morning treat.

I steal the mug from her and take a sip, pulling it away and letting the tea seep into my taste buds. My brow cocks. “Ginger?”

“Yeah.”

“Since when do you drink ginger tea?”

She shrugs but takes the cup back, sipping once more.

“Kate, what’s going on?” I demand. “Do you need a night off? A break from everything?”

A shuddered laugh pierces her numb facade, and she shakes her head, turning back to the forest in front of us. “I wish I could take a break from everything.”

“Then, let’s do it. Let me take you out. Let me help give you a breather.”

“Mack, I’m pregnant.”

My muscles turn into steel, convinced I’ve heard her wrong. “What?”

She doesn’t look at me. Doesn’t acknowledge me. But there’s a slight tremble in her hands as she brings the cup to her lips again. She’s scared.

Fuck, she’s scared.

I take the mug from her grasp, set it on the porch behind us, and force her to look at me. Glassy eyes meet mine as I rub my thumb along her cheek. “Are you scared because you don’t want a baby, or are you scared because of how I’ll react?”

Her eyes close for the briefest of seconds as she leans into my touch. Pinning me with her gaze, her gray irises are stormier than ever.

“The second one.” She hesitates. “And the first, kind of. Not that I don’t want a baby. I do. But this wasn’t the plan, ya know?”

“Technically, falling for you wasn’t the plan, either, Kate, and it was one of the best surprises I’ve ever received.” I rest my forehead against hers as she closes her eyes again, her soft, unsteady breath caressing my jaw.

“I’m scared,” she whispers.

“Why are you scared?”

“What if my medicine messes with him, and he’s born with a birth defect? What if I can’t be left alone with him? Or if I can’t give him baths because he could drown under my watch? What if I have a seizure while holding him, and he gets hurt?” Her eyes open. They’re filled with unshed tears. “I’m a ticking time bomb, Macklin.”

“Sh…” My heart fucking shatters. But I can’t take it. The pain in her voice. The weight she’s carrying. The knowledge and how much it’s been killing her.

“Tell me again, Porcupine,” I urge.

She closes her eyes.

“Tell me we’re gonna have a baby.”

Another shaky breath slips past her lips, but she opens her eyes, forcing

herself to hold my gaze no matter how terrified she is. And she is terrified. She's shaking. And I swear I can hear her racing heart.

"We're gonna have a baby, Macklin," she whispers.

A grin spreads wide across my face, practically splitting it in two. I slam my mouth against hers. She tastes like ginger and Kate. I thread my fingers through the hair at the back of her neck, not giving a shit if I mess up her braid. The damp strands ground me as I tilt her head back and devour her whole.

Because shit. The emotions rolling through me are like a hurricane. Chaotic and messy. But as I pull away from her and rest my forehead against hers once more, those stormy gray eyes meet mine, and I know it's gonna be okay. I know we're gonna be okay. And I know our baby is gonna be okay. Because she's gonna be the best fucking mom a kid could ask for. We're gonna have a little piece of me and Kate Winchester walking around this place.

"Will you marry me, Kate?" I rasp.

Her breath hitches. "What?"

"I wanna marry you. I wanna make more babies with you. I wanna call you mine for the rest of my life."

"Stop," she begs. "Don't ask me that."

I pull back, surprised by the pain in her voice. "What?"

"Don't ask me when you're feeling obligated—"

"Stop." The word hangs in the air for a long second.

"Mack, you've already proposed to one girl all because she was pregnant. I'm not going to let you—"

"Wait here," I order.

I push to my feet and jog inside, searching in the cabinet above the fridge since Kate's short frame would never dream of looking in here. When I find what I'm looking for, I turn around and rush back to Kate outside. After taking the porch steps two at a time, I fall to one knee on the pavement

beneath the stairs and peer up at the most gorgeous girl I've ever laid eyes on. Her lips are parted and swollen from our kiss as she stares down at me on one knee.

"What are you doing?" she whispers.

"I was always excited to be a dad," I tell her. "Even when I found out Hazel was coming all those years ago. But I never wanted to be a husband until this moment. You're right, Kate. My first marriage might've been out of obligation. But this? You and me? I wanted this before I found out you're pregnant. Before I pictured a crib in the guest bedroom and toys sprawled out in the family room by the fireplace. I bought this ring after your graduation and debated whether to give it to you then or if I should stick with the Jeep." Her hand covers her mouth as I smirk up at her. "We both know which one I decided on. But it wasn't because I didn't want to ask. It wasn't because I didn't know if you were my forever. It was because I didn't want to freak out your parents when we'd only been dating for a few months."

A light laugh slips out of her, and she rolls her eyes.

"I love you, Kate. And we both know I don't play games." I hold up the little blue Tiffany box and open the lid, showcasing the engagement ring I bought long before I found out we were gonna have a baby together. "Marry me."

Her hands tremble as she takes the ring, dragging her finger along the edge of the square-cut diamond and thin, white gold band. But her expression is unreadable. Locked down. Impenetrable. Like when we first met. When she felt the need to keep her feelings close to her chest. When she was most vulnerable. Most breakable.

I set the empty teal box beside her hip on the porch and cradle both sides of her face, praying she can see my sincerity and my need to make her mine. "Marry me, Porcupine. Be my wife. *Please.*"

"*Blue. Blue. Blue.*" The hushed words fan against my cheeks as her chin dips in the tiniest of nods, and a smile stretches across her face, making her

more beautiful than I've ever seen her. And fuck me if I'm not the luckiest man alive.

"Is that a yes, Kate?"

"That's a yes, Mack."

My heart gallops, and I kiss her again. It's more teeth than lips this time. But I can't stop smiling. *This*. This is what it's supposed to feel like. To love someone. To be engaged to someone. To tie your future to someone.

Excitement. Anticipation. Peace.

My grin broadens, and I kiss the tip of her nose. "I love you, Kate."

"I love you, Mack."

I press another kiss to her lips, feeling like I'm on top of the world. Because I am. I'm on top of the world. I get to marry Kate Winchester. I get a second chance. When I pull away, I chuckle dryly and shake my head, a surreal feeling flooding my system as my mind catches up with this morning's turn of events. "I'm gonna be a dad again."

"Mm-hmm," she hums.

"You're gonna be a mom."

She rolls her eyes and shakes her head like she can't believe it, either. "I know."

"You nervous?"

Her smile falters. "Scared out of my freaking mind."

I laugh and kiss her again. "You're gonna be a great mom."

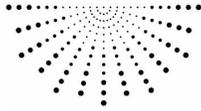
"And the whole epilepsy portion of things?" she challenges. The same overwhelming vulnerability shines in her gray eyes.

"We'll get through it," I promise. "We'll get through anything. Together."

"Together," she repeats, letting the words ease the nerves buzzing through her system. Her smile returns to full force. "I love you, Mack."

"Love you too, Kate."

MIA



The band is killing it on the stage. They're not Broken Vows, but they're pretty good. Alternative rock with a dash of blues. My head bobs up and down with the beat as I wipe out a freshly-washed glass with a clean towel when someone approaches me at the bar.

If it isn't the devil himself.

"Hello again, Professor," I greet him. "Two trips to SeaBird in one week?"

"It's been a tough one," he grumbles.

"You know, if you lost the suit, you might not stick out like a sore thumb around here."

"Yeah." He looks down at his dark, fitted suit making him look like a GQ model. As he smooths down the rich fabric, light reflects off the Rolex wrapped around his sexy wrist and catches my attention. I didn't know wrists could be sexy, but with the dapple of dark hair and veins popping along the top of his hand, I stand corrected. Not surprising since the man was voted the sexiest bachelor alive prior to his girlfriend taking him off the market. If that isn't an accomplishment, I don't know what is.

"Guess I forget I don't look like a student anymore," he adds dryly, assessing his odd choice of clothes compared to everyone else around him.

Yeah, no. Not even close. The guy might not be a student anymore, but

he's aged like a fine fucking wine. I started paying attention to the Buchanan name when I found out Evelyn Buchanan, Henry's little sister, was dating my father's killer. Well, technically, two men were arrested for my dad's murder, but still.

Thankfully, the Buchanans weren't involved in my father's disappearance. However, their names were still dragged through the mud, thanks to Henry's dad running for Senator at the time.

After the police made the connection, the Buchanan name hit the newspapers for weeks. Henry was friends with the guy too. Troy McAdams. The frat boy asshole who became friends with the lowlife loan shark who killed my dad and asked Troy to help him cover his tracks.

And what would you know? I ended up having Professor Buchanan, Troy McAdams' friend, as a teacher at LAU a few years later.

It's eerie how small the world feels sometimes.

Then again, I could've moved across the country to escape from it all. I could still move across the country to escape from it all.

But I won't.

Because what little family I have is here in this small town, including my friends, and I doubt they're going anywhere.

"Missing the good ol' days, Professor?" I quip. "When you'd blend in with the rest of the students at SeaBird instead of sticking out like a sore thumb?"

Apparently, Henry Buchanan attended LAU too. Rumor has it this is the same bar where his little sister met her husband, Jake Jensen. And it's a good thing she found such a perfect fit for her snooty-tooty family because the guy's a software nerd who took over B-Tech Enterprises after Henry passed along the responsibilities and decided to become a professor instead.

Henry's full lips press together as he scans the bar, barely sparing me a glance as he reminds me, "You've graduated. You don't need to call me Professor anymore."

“And what would you prefer I call you? Professor? Daddy? *Doctor Buchanan?*” My sultry voice hangs in the air as my mouth pulls into a shameless grin. But I can’t help it. The guy’s grumpier and more guarded than a rhinoceros. He’s always had his guard up high around me. Which is fine. My guard’s high around *everyone*. But it does make me want to poke at him for it.

“Henry’s fine,” he grunts, refusing to give in to my teasing.

“All right, *Henry*,” I purr. “What can I get ya?”

The guy scans the bar again, not bothering to look at me. “Whiskey. Top shelf.”

I turn around and stand on my tiptoes, reaching for the nicest bottle SeaBird owns. I pour two fingers of the caramel-colored liquid into the freshly cleaned glass tumbler.

“So, what brings you in tonight? Looking for another chat with Theo and Colt?” I ask, setting the drink in from him.

He doesn’t answer me as he shoots the liquid back and places the glass on the counter. With a dark look, he waits for me to refill it, so I do.

“Or maybe you’re looking for your girlfriend?” I add.

His gaze narrows. “Has she been in here?”

“Yup.”

“Was she with a guy?” he grits out.

And damn. I can see why he’s such a shark in the business world. The hairs along the back of my neck raise as if he’s daring me to lie. To withhold what he wants. To push him when he’s clearly not in the mood to be *pushed*.

I know the look. The look telling me he already knows the truth without needing to witness it firsthand. The look showing me he’s already seen the red flags but wants proof. *More* proof. But he won’t get it here. Not when I have less faith in the opposite sex than I do in aliens or God.

“She was out with her friends,” I lie. I shouldn’t. He deserves to know the truth. But it isn’t my place, and I don’t know the full story. Hell, maybe

Henry's had someone on the side for months now, and his girlfriend found out and is looking for revenge. Maybe they already broke up, and he's stalking her. I doubt he'd do it, but... I cock my head, examining his tight jaw and the vein throbbing in his neck. Actually, scratch that. Professor Buchanan definitely looks like someone who isn't afraid to dirty his hands in order to get what he wants.

"So, she left?" he demands.

"Yup."

His ever-perfect posture slumps slightly, and he turns to me fully, giving up on his search as he takes a sip of whiskey from his glass. "How's your mother?"

My expression sours. Not because I hate my mother, but because Henry's the one asking about her.

"She's fine."

"And your uncle?"

"Fine," I repeat.

Henry Buchanan knows me too. Mia Rutherford. The girl with the murdered daddy. To be fair, most of Lockwood Heights knows me. My face was splashed all over the news for weeks after my dad's body was found like the Buchanan name was. If I was smart, I would've moved away. But I didn't want to give the assholes who took my father from me the pleasure.

"You find a job yet?" he questions.

Sometimes I hate the way he keeps tabs on me. Hell, he's worse than Uncle Fen. Part of me wonders if it's because he feels guilty. For knowing Troy McAdams. For being friends with him. For not spotting the red flags or how dangerous his friend was. I don't blame Henry. I've fallen for a wolf in sheep's clothes on more than one occasion.

"No," I answer.

"Why not?"

Resting my elbows on the counter separating us, I steeple my fingers in

front of me and hold his dark gaze. “Because I started selling pictures of my body on the internet to make ends meet, and now every doctor’s office and hospital within a hundred-mile radius knows about it and wants nothing to do with me.”

I don’t know why I tell him. I shouldn’t. It’s none of his business, and shining a light on the mess of my life probably isn’t the brightest thing I’ve ever done, but I can’t help it. Wanting to shock the impenetrable bastard in front of me. Wanting to see him flinch. To see him *feel*. Something. Anything. Even if it’s only disgust.

His dark, flinty eyes dip to my low-cut black tank top, traveling south along my waist and hips, leaving me squirming.

I’m used to being checked out.

Call it a blessing or a curse, but it is what it is. I’m pretty in an emo, untouchable, this-girl’s-got-daddy-issues kind of way. Add in the fact I’m a bartender who looks like she enjoys getting freaky in the sheets, and I’ve been hit on more times than I can count.

But being checked out by Henry Buchanan? It’s new. And I’m not sure how I feel about it.

“Eyes up here, *Professor*,” I warn.

His nostrils flare as his eyes meet mine again, and he tips the rest of his drink back. The glass clinks against the bartop once he’s finished. “Selling pictures of your body on the internet was a poor decision.”

“One of many,” I point out.

Without a word, he pulls out a small stack of bills and sets them on the counter. “Keep the change.”

Then, he walks out of the bar without a backward glance. When the door closes behind him, I pick up the bills, my jaw dropping.

Five hundred bucks.

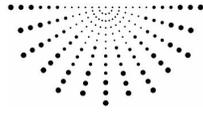
His tab was maybe a hundred.

Sometimes, I hate his pity.

Always, I hate his charity.

And lately? I've hated how he gets under my skin whenever he's around.

ASHLYN



We haven't spoken about Jaxon in days.

I'm not sure if it's because Colt thinks I'll spiral as soon as he does or if it's because I actually *will* spiral if I bring him up. But after our conversation in the car where I asked Colt to think about his future and what's best for everyone, including him, me, and his potential *son*, I've been sitting on pins and needles, waiting to find out his response while being terrified to know what it is.

Colt has enough on his plate. I don't want to add to it, but I don't know how to disappear from the entire situation, either. Which makes me feel terrible.

It doesn't help that we can't seem to catch a break from the spotlight. Someone snapped a photograph of all of us leaving the laboratory the other day and sold it to a few websites. The articles painted me as the homewrecker trying to split apart Colt's estranged but happy little family. It doesn't matter that Colt and I are the ones in a committed relationship. I'm still the bad guy for tearing his family apart. It's so messed up, it's not even funny, but there isn't a thing I can do about it.

We've tried to ignore it. Colt and me.

But it's hard when it feels like it's hitting us from all sides.

And even though we've still snuggled together at night and have tried to

find a semblance of normalcy, I'm afraid the onslaught of drama and red tape surrounding any topic involving Jaxon has left us both in a weird limbo neither of us knows how to escape. And honestly? I'm not sure if there is an escape. Not until we get those damn test results.

After the NHL draft last week, things have been relatively finalized from the Lions' perspective, and Buchanan invited everyone in the organization to a team dinner tonight.

But it feels weird.

Shopping for a pretty dress.

Getting ready.

Doing my makeup.

Matching my heels to the champagne-colored fabric of my gown.

Buchanan's secretary insisted the event required formal attire, and I've never felt less like myself than at this moment.

I run my fingers along the silky fabric as a shadow flashes in the mirror.

Colt's resting his shoulder against the bathroom doorjamb, watching me.

"I like your dress, Sunshine," he murmurs.

His words hit like a ton of bricks, but I force a smile and look back at the fabric stretched along my curves, unsure what to do with my hands.

"I remember the first time I saw you." He shoves away from the doorjamb and stalks closer to me. His touch is gentle as he runs his fingers along my bare arms and pushes my wavy hair over one shoulder. "You were wearing a gray T-shirt and were messing with the radio or something."

"I was fiddling with the heater."

"Of course you were." He chuckles, watching my skin pebble beneath his touch. "I'd just gotten off the phone with my mom. She'd been begging me to sit down with Coach Sanderson for a chat. I snapped at her." His eyes hold mine in the mirror. "I didn't want anything to do with hockey. Didn't want the reminder of my dad and all the good times we'd had together. He taught me how to skate. How to hold a stick. How to do everything. She told me

he'd want me to be happy, but I hung up on her. Because I didn't think I deserved happiness after I was the one behind the wheel when he died. And I felt like shit as soon as I hung up because"—he shrugs one shoulder—"you know my mom."

"She's the sweetest person on the planet," I admit. And she is. Becca Thorne has been more of a mother to me in the past year and a half since I started seeing Colt than my own mom was during my entire childhood. She even sends me daily texts to see how I'm doing and if she needs to smack her son upside the head for anything. The thought makes my chest hurt.

"I'd been a dick to her," Colt continues. "I felt so low, Ash. But I was used to the darkness hanging over me. I was so numb I barely felt anything. Even the guilt from hanging up on my mom was nothing compared to the guilt I carried for disappointing her every single day after my dad's death or the guilt for his accident in the first place." He shakes his head as if fighting off the memory. "And then, what do you know? I look up and see the most beautiful girl in the car beside me. A girl who looked like the perfect distraction. A girl who looked like she could take the weight from my shoulders even if it was only for a little while." He tucks my hair behind my ear, then turns me to face him fully and lets his hands rest against my lower back. "And you have. You've taken the weight, Sunshine. And here you are, continuing to take it."

My chest squeezes. Because the weight he's talking about? It's so damn heavy I feel like it could crush me entirely. But I wouldn't go back and change it. Not for anything. No matter how cumbersome it is.

"But I gotta confess something, Sunshine," he continues.

"What?"

"You were a pretty shitty distraction, making me face my demons and shit."

I laugh and shake my head. "I'd say I'm sorry, but..."

His thumb skates across my lips, quieting me. "Don't you dare. You're

good at shining a light on scenarios, Ash. Good at making me see things from different perspectives. But I think it's my turn." He swallows thickly and drags his thumb against my cheek. The rough calluses tickle my skin, but I stay rooted to the spot. "Look at this from *my* perspective, Sunshine. The girl of my dreams is standing in front of me, looking sad. And all I want to do is make her feel better. Make her happy. I know my hands are tied. Words aren't enough to prove how much I love you. But I'm afraid my actions wouldn't be taken seriously right now if I got down on one knee and tied you to me forever. So what do I do? How do I make this better?"

"Not sure if you can," I admit. "Not until we get the results from the paternity test."

"The results shouldn't matter."

"The unknown is killing me, Colt," I murmur.

He nods. "I get it. But since it's out of my control, maybe I can distract you for a night. How does that sound?"

"Sounds pretty perfect," I reply.

His smile tugs at my heart as he leans closer and presses his lips against mine. I savor the taste. The feel of his lips. The softness. The way they make me feel. The comfort something so innocent brings. I want to wrap myself up in him and never leave this room. I want to block the outside world and keep him to myself. Away from the drama and his ugly past and our unknown future.

"You really do look beautiful." The words skate across my lips as he pulls away, causing me to smile while reminding me of our history. Of how we wound up together in the first place. Of how he promised he'd always notice me. How he's always made me feel worth noticing.

"You always say that," I murmur.

"Because it's always true. And your dress?" He whistles, taking a step back, grabbing my hand, and twirling me around. "Damn, Sunshine. Pretty sure I won't be able to take my eyes off you." My heart pitter-patters away at

his simple compliment and how it makes me feel. Like I'm worthy. Like I deserve the world. Like we can get through this.

"Come on." He tugs me toward the bedroom. "The limo's here."

"Limo?"

"I promised I'd distract you for the night, didn't I?"

"You only voiced the promise a few minutes ago. How did you plan for a limo?"

"Guess it proves how well I know what you need, huh?" He quirks his brow and presses his hand to my lower back. "Now come on. I'm tempted to mess up your dress and makeup."



BUCHANAN WASN'T KIDDING. IF THIS ISN'T A FORMAL PARTY, I DON'T KNOW what is. Apparently, he flew out the newest recruits after the draft and invited a bunch of press to cover the Lions' event.

Trays of hors d'oeuvres are balanced on caterers' arms as they weave through the throngs of people. An open bar is set up along the back wall, and a stage is on the opposite side, along with a small stand and microphone used for speeches.

It's weird being here. Like everything is normal. Like the upcoming season is the main thing on our minds instead of the life-altering paternity results hanging over our heads.

But I should enjoy this. This moment. I should soak it up, committing everything to memory. The cream-colored table cloths. The crystal chandeliers overhead. The soft music. It took a lot to get here, but he did it. Colt did it. He really did it.

I look at Colt and smile, cherishing the moment. His hair is pushed away from his face as if he's been running his hand through it as he orders our drinks from the bar across the room. Once we arrived, Blake demanded Theo

and her brother get our drinks, then carted me to our table. Thankfully, our assigned seats are next to each other. Macklin and Kate are also here, but they're at a different table, surrounded by other staff members and their significant others.

"How are you doing?" Blakely asks me as I stare at my man across the room.

"Kind of an emotional wreck," I admit with a dry laugh. "How are you?"

"If I say good, will you be mad at me?"

I laugh a little harder and shake my head. "Not at all."

"Good," she replies. "You look hot, by the way."

"Thanks." I look down at my dress and turn back to Blake. Her slinky black dress shows off her curves and toned shoulders, making the rest of us look like couch potatoes. But her smile? The rosiness in her cheeks? She's happier than I've ever seen her. "You look hot too. And happy."

Blakely practically preens and sits up more in her chair. "I do, don't I?"

With another laugh, I reach for the glass of water on the table and take a sip as a couple of strangers approach our table.

"Hey, chickadees," one of them greets me. She's gorgeous. With shoulder-length pink hair, brown eyes, and tattoos covering both arms, I'm reminded of Mia and decide I'm going to like her almost instantly.

"Hi," I return.

"I'm Melissa. Nice to meet you."

"You too," Blake replies. The man beside her leans in and kisses her cheek. "I'll be back in a minute. Gonna grab our drinks from the bar. Do you want a Coke Zero?"

"Yes, please," she returns, peeking up at him. "Thanks."

A soft sigh escapes her as she watches her date walk toward the bar, and she turns to us again. "Those hockey players..."

"We know," I say, exchanging a knowing look with Blake. Yeah. They might be the death of us one day, but what a way to go.

“So, who are you here with?” she asks, taking a seat across from us.

“I’m here with Colt Thorne,” I answer.

“And I’m here with Theodore Taylor,” Blakely adds.

“Ah, the LAU duo. They’re good,” she notes. “This is their first year playing in the NHL, right?”

“Yup,” we answer in unison.

“You guys ready for this?” she asks. “Cause it’s chaos. This is Ryan’s fourth season, and we still don’t have the hang of things. He used to play for the Avalanche before he was traded to the Lions, but we’re super excited to be here.”

“We are too,” I reply.

“Are either of you married or have children?” Melissa asks.

My breath catches in my lungs, but I force myself to let it out slowly.

“No on both counts,” Blakely answers for me, squeezing my knee beneath the table.

“Ah, well then, you’re fine. The chaos doesn’t really start until then. Ryan and I have three kids. Zo, who’s a mini adult and is seven; Fin, my four-year-old tornado; and Magnolia, who’s two and is my adorable terror.” She ticks each of them off her fingers, then reaches for the glass of water in front of her and takes a sip.

“Sounds like you have your hands full,” Blakely notes with a smile. I can tell she’s jealous. Then again, so am I. It seems like Melissa’s living the dream.

My dream.

Or at least the dream I had before finding out about Jaxon. My attention flicks back to Colt at the bar. He’s discussing something with Theo and Ryan. He looks happy. In his element. Talking shop and trading stories. My chest twinges.

“Yeah, our hands are definitely full,” Melissa continues. “But trust me. It’s worth it. Be sure you invest in a solid massage gun, and you’ll be

golden.”

Blake laughs. “Way ahead of ya.”

Tearing my attention from Colt, I turn back to Melissa. “So what do you do?”

“I’m a nurse practitioner,” she answers.

“Oh, that’s awesome,” Blake gushes. “Our friend recently graduated with her nursing degree.”

“Ah, fun. She’ll love it.”

“Have you found a job here yet?” I ask.

“Actually, yes. Just got a job at Lockwood Heights Medical earlier today.”

“Congrats,” Blake interjects. “Our friend is struggling to find one so far.”

“Well, tell her to stay strong,” Melissa returns. “I’m sure she’ll find something.”

“We hope so,” I reply as the men all approach with a drink in each hand and set them down in front of us. Warm lips press against my cheek, and I lean into them, closing my eyes and savoring the familiar heat.

“Missed you,” Colt murmurs against the shell of my ear.

I peek up at him and smile. “You were gone for five minutes.”

As he sits beside me, he mutters, “Five minutes too long.”

I don’t have a chance to reply because Buchanan takes center stage and clears his throat, the sound echoing from the microphone and through the built-in speakers in the ceiling.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he starts. “I want to thank you for joining us today. As you all know, we’re excited to hit the ground running this season and want to thank not only our players but also their spouses and significant others for their support. We all know who keeps these men in check, and without you, most of them would still have their heads up their asses.” The crowd laughs. Buchanan waits for everyone to settle and continues. “Since one of them insisted he needed to prove it in front of everyone, let me hand

the mic to our new starting Left Wing.”

Theo smirks and pushes his chair away from the table as Blakely’s jaw drops.

“What are you doing?” she seethes, but Theo only winks back at her.

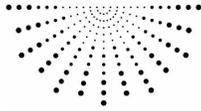
Well, this is a surprise.

I lean closer to Colt, and he wraps his arm around the back of my chair with a shit-eating grin spread across his face.

Clearly, Colt knows exactly where this is going, and I have a feeling I do too.

Well, giddyup, Blake. I believe congratulations are in order.

BLAKELY



My heart feels like it's beating a billion times per minute as Theo heads toward the stage with a pep in his step. He takes the stairs two at a time and saunters over to stand behind the podium.

His black suit fits him like a glove, showcasing the broad shoulders I know intimately as he scans the room. His gaze lands on me.

“I want to thank everyone for being here. But especially, I want to thank the Thorne in my side, and no, I'm not talking to you, Colt.” The crowd laughs, and I roll my eyes as Theo gives me a pointed look and adds, “And before you ask, no. I'm not up here because I lost a bet, Blake.”

I laugh a little harder, ignoring the attention from the guests surrounding me while staring up at the man of my dreams on stage. Their attention doesn't matter. Because right now, it's only me and Teddy, the crowd disappearing more and more with every passing second, though I have no idea where he's going with this.

“This year has brought a lot of changes for all of us,” Teddy continues. “Whether you've played professionally and were traded to the Lions, or you're signing your first contract. Whether Buchanan offered you a job to work on the medical staff like he did with my older brother, or if you're moving here because you fell in love with a professional athlete who, for better or worse, can have their life turned upside down at the drop of a hat,

and you now have a new state to call home.”

Melissa smiles across from me and grabs her husband’s hand resting on the table.

“Whatever it is, I want you to know you’re not alone. We’ve all experienced many changes, and they can be scary sometimes.”

His gaze meets mine again, hitting me square in the chest.

Because yeah. There have been a lot of changes lately. And yeah. Those changes have been scary as shit.

“I dunno about you, but when I’m hit with a lot of changes in a short amount of time, I like to cling to the familiar,” he adds. “The things I don’t want to change. The things that get me through the day, no matter what life throws at me. Things or people or routines that bring a sense of comfort when the rest of our lives can feel like a mess. It can be something like coffee. Or your favorite couch. Maybe it’s a TV show you have memorized.” His gaze meets mine. “For me, it’s a person. A girl. A girl who’s been my constant. A girl who’s stood by me no matter what. A girl who knows me better than anyone. A girl who would move mountains if she needed to, just to see me smile.”

My teeth dig into my bottom lip as I stare up at him, fighting the moisture collecting in my eyes no matter how impossible it feels.

Damn you, Teddy.

For being so sweet and thoughtful and embarrassing and sexy and...

I bite my bottom lip and mouth to him, “Olive juice.”

His smile turns my insides into mush. Then, he addresses the rest of the room like I’m not even here. “Now, she’s young. And her mom’s gonna give her a lot of shit for this, but I knew if I didn’t put a ring on it, if I didn’t stand up here and make a fool out of myself in front of all my future teammates and the Lions organization in general, I’d regret it.” He finds me again in the crowd and grins, the look melting me on the spot. “So will you, Blakely Thorne, the Thorne in my side, the cinnamon-loving, hell on wheels with the

mouth of a sailor,”—the crowd laughs—“most beautiful person I’ve ever met, both inside and out. Will you be my wife? My constant? My rock?” He gulps, his confidence shifting to uncertainty with a side of sincerity and hope. “Will you marry me?”

Will. You. Marry. Me.

I blink, my brain short-circuiting.

Yup. It’s definitely what he just said.

Holy crap on a cracker, Batman.

Did Teddy Taylor just propose to me in front of his entire team?

Am I dreaming?

Am I hallucinating?

Am I really going to be a Taylor for the rest of my life?

Theo rocks back on his heels and clears his throat, looking uncomfortable for the first time since he took the stage. “Any day now, Baby Thorne. Take your time.”

My laugh bubbles out of me as I cover my mouth and blink back tears, but they roll down my face anyway, ruining my makeup as I stare up at the man in front of me.

“Nothing to say?” he prods. “What? Do you like me looking like a fool up here? Come on, babe. Put me out of my misery and answer the damn question.”

“Yes!” I yell. “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

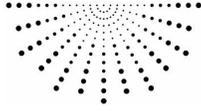
The tightness in his shoulders melts away, and he dips his chin. “That’s my girl.” With a cocky smirk, he jumps off the stage and grabs my face, kissing the shit out of me in front of everyone as his thumbs run along my damp cheeks, smearing my makeup even more and making me look like a freaking raccoon. But I don’t even care. Because Teddy Taylor just proposed to me.

Teddy. Taylor. Just. Proposed. To *me*.

I wrap my arms around his neck and squeeze as tight as I can.

I've never been happier.

ASHLYN



After Theo's proposal, Buchanan made a brief speech, everyone cheered, and we ate a delicious dinner of prime rib, mashed potatoes, and more sides than I could even count. My belly's full, and I'm content. Or at least, I would be if I knew the results of the paternity test.

Theo invited everyone at the banquet to meet at SeaBird afterward to celebrate his engagement to Blake, but I'm so exhausted I'm not sure I can stomach it. The people. The music. The small talk. The alcohol. My senses are already on overload. Finishing my night at SeaBird feels like it might tip me over the edge.

Colt tosses his arm around my neck and pulls me against him as we wait for the limousine to pull up in front of the building. His breath is laced with whiskey, and a lazy smile is on his lips as he leans closer and kisses me softly.

"So, I take it you knew?" I ask as the limo arrives.

"Yeah. Theo asked my permission," Colt admits when he pulls away from me. "You happy for them?"

"Of course," I reply. And I am. Blake and Theo are perfect together. Like two Energizer bunnies in a pod with a side of sarcasm. "Does your mom know about the engagement?"

"Theo asked if he should mention it to her, but I told him to ask

forgiveness, not permission.”

“That’s mean,” I tell him with a laugh.

Colt guides me into the limo, then slides in beside me. “It’s Garrett and Knox who are gonna shit a brick when they find out Blake’s engaged to Theo, not Mom.” He shifts on the leather seat, getting comfortable as the limo pulls away from the curb and begins the drive to SeaBird when Colt adds, “Not gonna lie. I was tempted to beat him to it.”

I can feel his gaze caressing my cheek, but I don’t look at him. I stare at my lap instead, twisting the shimmery fabric in my hands. In another world, I’d be swooning. In another world, I’d ask what’s holding him back.

But the truth is, I already know. And unfortunately, it’s quite the doozy.

“Would you have wanted me to beat him to it?” Colt prods.

I shake my head. “Not with everything else going on.”

His eyes dim, but he doesn’t deny it. How bad of an idea it would be to get engaged right now. How we already have enough on our plates. How it’d be mental and possibly social suicide to get engaged when a public father announcement could be right around the corner, depending on the paternity results. But I don’t need the results to know Jaxon is Colt’s son. I’m simply biding my time until it’s official. Until the press has written their articles, and everyone receives confirmation of the shit storm we’ve been drowning in for weeks.

It doesn’t mean Colt has to feel bad about the inevitable results.

He should be excited. He should be happy. He’s going to be the best dad on the planet, and I can’t wait to see the relationship he builds with his little boy.

I grab his hand and squeeze it softly. “I want to thank you.”

“For what?” he asks.

“For inviting me tonight. For being with me. For being so thoughtful and sweet. For distracting me.”

“It’s my fault you need a distraction in the first place, Sunshine,” he

reminds me.

“Not your fault,” I argue. “It’s...a messy situation we’re going to have to get through.”

“As long as we get through it together.”

“Yeah.” I rest my head on his shoulder as the car continues down the road.

And dammit, I hope he’s right.

“What are the odds Blake and Theo will hate me if I go home instead of attending their little after-party at SeaBird?” I ask.

“You don’t wanna come?”

With a sigh, I admit, “I’m exhausted, Colt.”

His shoulder shifts beneath my ear as he studies me carefully. Sometimes I love how well he knows me. Like when I’m hungry or overwhelmed or feeling flirty. He meets me in stride, giving me whatever I need. A pint of ice cream or my favorite blanket or a solid texting session, no matter how much he hates them.

Then there are times like these. When I hate how well he knows me. How easily he can read my feelings like they’re stamped on my forehead instead of hidden beneath layers and layers of defense mechanisms gifted by my parents, who never bothered to get to know the real me until Colt convinced them I was worth the effort.

“What are you thinking?” he murmurs.

With a sad smile, I shake my head. “Don’t play dumb, Colt. We both know what I’m thinking about.”

“Then, stop thinking,” he offers with a crooked smile. But it’s forced.

“We both know I would if I could,” I tell him.

His fake smile falls, along with the phony facade he’d been wielding. “I’m sorry, Sunshine—”

“You don’t need to apologize,” I interrupt. “Seriously. I know I’m being a butt right now, and I know I should be handling this better, but I’m tired.”

“I know.” He scrubs at his jaw. “Wanna know what I’m terrified of?”

Unable to look at him, I stare at my lap instead. “What?”

“I’m terrified a few extra hours of sleep isn't going to fix your exhaustion. And fuck, Ash.” He kisses the crown of my head. “It scares the shit out of me.”

“It scares the shit out of me too,” I whisper.

Pressing the intercom button, he addresses the driver. “Truman, can you take us back to our apartment, please?”

“Sure thing, Mr. Thorne,” a low voice answers through the speaker.

“Come on. Let’s get you in bed,” Colt tells me.

“You should go,” I urge.

“To bed?”

“No, to SeaBird,” I clarify. “Theo will want you there. And Blake’s your sister.”

He shakes his head. “I wanna be with you.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I tell him, but the words have never felt heavier or more daunting. Because even though I want them to be the truth, it doesn’t mean he won’t leave me if he has to. If it’s what’s best for his son and for the life his little boy deserves.

“Ash,” Colt warns, the bastard reading my thoughts as if they’re his own.

“I’m fine,” I lie. “I love you.”

His expression twists, and he bends forward, burying his head in my hair and breathing me in. “Fuck, Ash.” *Another breath.* “Love you more than anything.”

And he does. Which makes me feel selfish. So damn selfish. For wanting to stay. For wanting to keep him all to myself when I know it isn’t fair. To Jaxon. To Eleanor. To the reporters who love giving him the spotlight.

I gulp past the lump in my throat and kiss Colt. It’s soft. Barely a touch of the lips. But the weight to it? The fear amplifying it? It’s almost more than I can take.

“I fucking love you. *You*,” he emphasizes. “Always you.”

“I know. But that’s the thing, Colt,” I whisper. “This isn’t about me.” I kiss him again, letting the slight scruff tickle the tips of my fingers as I cup his cheek, drowning in his sorrowful gaze. He really is gorgeous. All chiseled and kind and aloof to anyone but me.

When the limo pulls up in front of our apartment, I drop my hand onto my lap. “Now, go. Have fun. I’ll be in bed when you get home.”

“And if I wanna stay with you?” he asks.

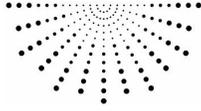
“Then that means I have to go because it isn’t fair to Theo or Blake if we skip it because I’m being a Debbie Downer.”

“Always the martyr, Ash,” he mutters. “One of these days, you’re gonna have to let me fix that.”

“Mm-hmm,” I hum, pecking his lips one more time as I push the back door open. “Love you.”

“Love you.”

THEO



The bass is thumping as we push SeaBird's doors open. Half of the team is already here, lining the bar and placing their orders as Sammie, the bartender and owner of the establishment, pours their beverages and hands them over. Mia's here, too, but she looks busy, slinging drinks and sliding them across the counter toward their owners, a coy smile teasing her lips. Bet it helps her with tips.

Good.

She needs them.

Blake giggles against my side and grabs my face, tugging me down and kissing me. She had a couple of shots at the banquet and is clearly feeling pretty good as she slips her tongue into my mouth. Fireball greets me, and I smile against her perfect, full lips.

"You taste like cinnamon," I note.

"I taste like deliciousness." She tangles our fingers together and leads me onto the dance floor, not even bothering to say hello to anyone who came to celebrate with us. Then again, I'm not complaining. Blake's happy, so I'm happy. It's that simple.

With her lithe body pressed against me, we dance to the beat. My cock hardens against the curve of her ass before the first song even has a chance to finish. With a knowing smirk, she turns around to face me, sliding her hands

along my chest, hooking them around my neck, and dipping her tongue into my mouth again.

“Ya know, for someone who was giving your brother and his girlfriend shit the other day for getting handsy on the dance floor,” I growl against her, “you’re having a hell of a time torturing me out here.”

She bats her long lashes up at me. “Is there a problem, Teddy?”

I cup her ass and grind myself against her.

“I’m sorry. Can you show me the problem one more time?” she quips. My dick rubs against her toned stomach again, and she whimpers. “Yeah, I think you should take me to the bathroom.”

The music’s so loud my ears ring, so I lean forward and bite her earlobe. “Oh, I should?”

“Yup.” Her big, green eyes cause my balls to tighten as she peeks up at me. “And then you should fuck me in it.”

“Blake...”

She grabs my hand without waiting for my response and weaves us through the crowd. The place is busier than usual. Everyone is sandwiched together, probably breaking the fire code. I bet a few of the Lions’ players posted their whereabouts tonight on social media, meaning there are probably paparazzi mixed in with the puck bunnies and hockey fans already sporting the Lions’ logo on their jerseys. If I wasn’t so fucking horny, I might even suggest we end the engagement party now and tell everyone to go home.

Instead, I follow the fiery redhead in front of me as she squeezes between the bathroom door and the person who’d just finished using it, cutting in front of the throng of people waiting for their turn. She quickly locks the door behind us. The person we’d cut off bangs on the door with their fists, cursing us out, but the noise fades away as Blake hooks her fingers in my pants and unbuttons them.

“Been craving you since you walked on stage,” she mumbles, releasing my cock and grabbing it with her hand. Up and down, she pumps my dick,

and my head rolls back.

“Fuck, Baby Thorne.” My chest heaves. “You’re gonna need to slow down if you want me to last.”

Her thumb sweeps along the head as she rises onto her tiptoes and bites my neck. “And I’m gonna need you to come inside me in the next two minutes because I pissed off a lot of people in the line out there, and you’ve been teasing me for a solid two hours, so chop-chop, Mr. Taylor.”

I grab her throat and squeeze, slamming my mouth against hers as I shove her silky black dress up. The bathroom doesn’t have individual stalls. Only a toilet, a garbage can, a small black counter with a sink, and a single mirror. I turn Blake around, forcing her to face it. Her palms land on the cold countertop with a light slap as she holds my gaze through the reflection, looking more incredible and wild than I’ve seen in a long time. Her hair hangs messily around her shoulders, and her lips are swollen from our kiss. But her eyes are what do me in. The dare in them. Fucking sparkling with mischief and more tempting than she’ll ever understand.

My fingers find her thong beneath the hem of her dress. I rip them off, shoving the flimsy scrap of material into my pocket, and line myself up with her entrance. She gave me two minutes to get her off, and I’m not gonna waste a single fucking second. With a quick thrust, I shove myself inside her, and she lurches forward, catching herself before her head has a chance to slam into the glass.

“Fuck,” I grit out, lost in the feel of her tight, hot channel wrapped around me and the guilt from ramming into her too hard. “Sorry.”

Her laugh cuts me off. “Never apologize for splitting me in two, Teddy. Now, hurry up. You have ninety seconds.”

Accepting her challenge, I grab her hips and push into her harder, using her body as my own personal fuck toy while watching one of her hands slip down her torso in the reflection while the other holds her steady. She plays with her clit, moaning louder and louder as the scent of sweat and sex swirls

in the air around us. It's one of the hottest things I've ever seen. My cock sliding in and out of her. Her dainty little fingers playing with herself. The slight flush along her freckled skin. The way her muscles tremble beneath my touch.

I dig my hand into her hair and tug her up fully, forcing her back against my chest. I slide my hand into the front of her v-shaped neckline and palm her breast. Fuck, I love this girl. The way she was built for me. The way she pushes me. Turns me on. Makes me laugh. Every single thing about her is perfect. Even her small breasts. Once, she told me how insecure she was about their size, and I laughed. Then promptly shoved my head beneath her shirt, sucked them into my mouth, and made her come on my fingers.

After that, she never mentioned their size again.

I squeeze her right breast roughly, savoring the tiny mewl as she arches her back into me. Her nipple pebbles against my palm, and my balls tighten, but I don't come. Not yet. Not until she's ready to—

“Fuck, I'm coming,” she whimpers.

I explode inside her, my heart pounding and my arms squeezing her against me until I'm not even sure if she can breathe. But the need to hold onto her with all my strength is almost more than I can bear. Forcing my muscles to relax, I rest my head against her freckled shoulder, my gratitude making it hard to breathe.

I can't let her go. And now, I'll never have to. She's gonna be my wife one day. My *wife*. Never really thought about marriage until Blake. Never even wanted to. But Blake owns me. She's always owned me. And because she said yes tonight, I get to make it official.

As we both come down from our high, our chests heaving, I lift my head from her shoulder, press a kiss to her cheek, and let her go. The familiar rip of the paper towel cuts through our heavy breathing. I hand it to her. Once she's cleaned up, Blake fixes her dress and hair in the mirror, then rises onto her tiptoes one more time to kiss me.

“Love you, Mrs. Taylor,” I tell her.

Her grin makes my heart beat faster. “Love you, Mr. Taylor.”

Hand in hand, we walk into the hallway. The people waiting in line for the bathroom gawk at us when we appear, but Blake’s chin is held as high as ever. Shamelessly, she walks past the bystanders without a backward glance and heads toward the front of the bar. Like she didn’t just have sex in a public restroom. Like she doesn’t have my cum dripping down her thighs. Like she doesn’t know her panties are tucked into my slacks. And fuck me, it’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.

As we approach the bar, I spot Colt hanging out on a barstool in front of Mia. He’s nursing a drink and looks tired as hell while a girl paws at his arm.

“Not interested,” he grunts.

“Oh, come on!”

“I have a girlfriend.”

“So?”

Blake’s lips thin, but she doesn’t interrupt them as she sidles up to Colt’s back, keeping us from his view.

“So, I have a girlfriend, and I’m not interested,” he grits out.

“Yeah, but how do you know?” the girl asks. She runs her hands along his bicep and flips her hair away from her face. “How do you know you’re not interested?”

“Because I have a girlfriend,” he repeats.

“Well, yeah, but you had a baby with someone else. That’s gotta count for something, right? Like, clearly, you’ve enjoyed sticking it in girls who aren’t your girlfriend.”

“He said he’s not interested,” Blake seethes, grabbing both of their attention without giving a shit she was most definitely caught eavesdropping. “Now go away.” She shoos the girl with her hand. “This is my engagement party.”

The girl huffs out her annoyance but gives us some space as Colt turns on

his barstool and faces us fully.

“Hey, guys,” Colt greets us, and Blake wraps him into a hug. “Hey, big brother.”

“Where were you?” He returns her hug, then lets her go.

“Not an answer you wanna know,” I tell him dryly.

His nose wrinkles as understanding washes over him. “Yeah, that’s answer enough, asshole.”

With a grin, Blake taunts, “Says the guy who I know for a fact has hooked up in the very same bathroom.”

“How the hell do you know?” Colt demands.

“Ash told me about it a few months ago. Bravo, brother. Didn’t know you had it in ya.” Blake winks but shivers and plops down on the seat beside his. “Although I *am* pretty freaking scarred after hearing all about it.”

Colt picks up his glass and shakes his head. “You and me both.”

“Speaking of Ash, where is she?” Blake asks.

“She was tired, so I dropped her off at home,” Colt tells her as Mia approaches and offers Blake a bottle of water without even asking if she needs it.

Blake grabs it, untwists the cap, takes a sip, and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. “You two doing okay?”

“Hope so,” Colt mutters into his almost empty glass.

He looks frustrated. Tired. And a little drunk. The liquid goes down smoothly as he tosses the rest of it back and asks Mia for another one.

“You sure you’re all right?” I press. “That bunny seemed pretty forceful.”

“Why doesn’t this shit happen with you?” Colt demands, casting a quick look at the bunny in question standing a few feet away.

“It’s because Ash is a sweet little wallflower,” Mia explains as she sets down Colt’s fresh drink. “And Blake isn’t afraid to mark her territory. It makes it easier for the bunnies to test the waters with you than Theo.”

“Well, it fuckin’ sucks.” Colt takes a swallow of his freshly poured drink.

“True,” the rest of us agree. And it does. Seeing Colt like this. How much it’s affecting him. The guy looks like he’s lost his mind.

“Seriously,” I tell him, “Thanks for coming, but don’t feel like you have to stay. Do what you gotta do.”

“Thanks,” Colt mutters into his glass. “I’ll stick around for a few.”

“Great.” Blake slips off the barstool and grabs my hand. “We’re gonna dance.”

“All right. I’ll find you when I leave,” he replies.

“You have a ride home?” I ask.

He nods. “Limo’s parked out front.”

“Ah, now I understand why it’s busier than normal,” Mia interjects as she throws ginger beer, lime juice, and vodka into a copper cup for another customer. “Well, that, and I overheard a few players inviting puck bunnies to hang out.”

“How do they already have their numbers?” Blake asks. “The season hasn’t even started yet.”

“As long as it stops at puck bunnies and I don’t have to deal with any paparazzi, I’m happy,” Colt mutters. “Actually, that’s a lie. The bunnies can go to hell too.”

“Yikes.” Blake and I exchange a worried look. “You sure you’re okay over here?”

“Yeah. Fine,” he lies. “Mia can keep me company. Go dance. I’ll see you in a few.”

“You sure?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

“Alrighty, then,” Blake murmurs, guiding me toward the dance floor.

Before we have a chance to make it far, Colt snaps, “I told you not to touch me!”

A body slams into Blake, and she tumbles into me like a set of bowling pins. I grab her waist to steady her, but the original pin is lying on the ground,

her bleached blonde hair sprawled around her.

“What the hell, Colt?” the girl screeches. “Why’d you push me?!”

Lights flash, and I look around the bar, unsure if it’s from the strobe lights or a camera. The sinking feeling in my gut expands as I search the area.

“Fuck,” Colt grits out as he stares down at the woman on her ass in front of him. But he doesn’t apologize. Doesn’t help her up. Doesn’t do anything. He simply glares at her.

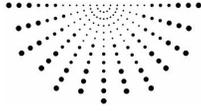
“Ya know, the articles and news people have you all wrong,” the woman spits. “You’re not some gentleman or golden boy. You’re an asshole who likes to push girls around, aren’t you?”

Colt storms off, disappearing through the exit without bothering to listen to her bullshit lies while the rest of us are left reeling.

“Whoa,” Blake murmurs.

“Yeah.” I grab her waist and pull her against me, leaving as much room between the stunned girl and us as possible. “Whoa.”

ASHLYN



The mattress dips beside me, and I wake with a start. The room is painted in darkness other than the moonlight streaming in from the window, and it takes me a second to recognize the shadow beside me.

“Colt?”

“Hey,” he rasps. His wavy dark hair is a mess, and his tie is loose around his neck. “We need to talk.”

My mind is still foggy from sleep, but I sit up, reaching for the lamp on the nightstand. As it flickers on, I flinch at the harsh light and take in Colt’s morose expression.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

Shoving his hair away from his face, Colt sighs while unbuttoning the top button on his dress shirt. His suit jacket is gone, leaving him in a white button-up shirt. The sleeves are rolled up to his elbows and showcase his tan forearms. The same forearms that caught my attention at the stoplight when we first laid eyes on each other. The memory makes my heart ache as I reach out and grab his hand, desperate to erase the frown marking his features.

“Colt, what’s wrong?” I repeat.

As if I’m a lifeline, he squeezes my hand, his normally bright eyes polluted with worry and stress and...defeat. “Some stuff went down at SeaBird. A few paparazzi were around and took some photos.”

The paparazzi.

I freaking *hate* the paparazzi.

Of course, they're involved.

I should be used to this by now. It isn't the first time they've twisted a story to earn clicks online. But I'm still annoyed. Still frustrated.

Attempting to keep my emotions in check, I question him again. "What happened?"

"A girl wouldn't leave me alone. I kept walking away. Keeping telling her I was taken. But she wouldn't take no for an answer. Not gonna lie. I'd had a few drinks, and even now, I'm not entirely sure what happened, but..." He pinches the bridge of his nose and takes a deep breath.

"But what? Colt, tell me what happened," I push.

"I don't even know. She, uh, she grabbed my arm, and when I wrenched it away, she fell and caused a scene, saying I pushed her."

Understanding washes over me. I lean my head against the headboard and stare up at the ceiling. This is bad. This is very bad. "Shit."

"Yeah," he mutters. "I thought you should know what happened in case there's an article about it in the morning."

Frustrated, I shove my messy hair away from my face. "I freaking hate the articles they write."

"Me too."

"Why does this always happen to you? Why do they target you? I'm not saying it's your fault, but... *Why?* Ya know? Why can't they leave us alone? The paparazzi, the girls." My voice cracks. "Why can't we catch a break?"

"Yeah, it's a lot right now," he admits, letting my hand go and bending over, cradling his head in his hands. Like he's as drained as I am. And I hate it. Seeing him this way. The way it's killing him. You'd think the limelight would be more fun, but in my limited experience, all I've seen is it sucking the life out of the man I love more than anything else in the world.

"Why do they target you?" I repeat.

“Who?”

“Everyone? The women obsessed with sleeping with hockey players. They know you’re off the market. Why won’t they leave you alone?” The words tumble out of me, gaining momentum with every passing second as all the stress and frustration since Colt started playing hockey rises to the surface. I can’t take it anymore. I can’t take the spotlight. The women stalking my boyfriend and writing completely inappropriate things on poster boards during the games, let alone walking up to him and trying to flirt with him like I’m not even there. Add in the whole paparazzi fixation on top of everything else, and I’m ready to throw in the towel. To walk away and say goodbye to everything. And I would. If Colt would come with me.

The metallic taste of blood seeps onto my taste buds as I bite my tongue to keep from rambling and lashing out any more than I already have, but it doesn’t calm me down. It doesn’t make me feel better. It makes me want to knee the paparazzi in the balls and rip out every single handsy woman’s extensions until they’re all walking around the arenas bald and miserable.

Yeah, that sounds pretty great, actually.

“I asked Mia the same question,” Colt admits. He lifts his head and looks at me. “She was at SeaBird tonight.”

“What’d she say?”

“She said it’s because you’re a wallflower.”

“And there’s something wrong with being a wallflower?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “You’re perfect, Sunshine, so, no. There’s nothing wrong with being a wallflower. But even if there was, it wouldn’t matter. I don’t want you to change because of my profession. This isn’t on you. This is on them. I only woke you up and told you about what happened because I thought you should hear it from me. I’ve already fucked this up once by keeping the truth from you. I don’t want to mess it up again.”

I touch his hand, wishing I could take away the sharpness in his words along with the hint of self-deprecation. “You haven’t screwed this up, Colt.”

And it's true.

He hasn't.

I'm still in this. Still here. Still fighting for what I want, even if he can't see it right now.

"Don't let them win. Please?" he rasps, slipping under the covers beside me without bothering to strip off his clothes. He lays his head against my breast, right above my heart. "Don't let them make you question shit. About us. About how I feel."

I flick off the lamp on the nightstand and close my eyes, grateful for his warmth. For his touch. The way it calms my racing heart. The way it soothes my annoyance and frustration. This. This is why I love him. Why I'm willing to put up with this stuff. Because it isn't Colt's fault. It's an unhappy side-effect of dating an attractive man who's good at hockey, and I hate how it's slowly killing him.

His hair is soft as I run my fingers through it, comforting him the only way I know how because my words haven't done shit lately.

"I hate how I can't control them," he continues. "The women. The paparazzi. I can't control what they do or what they write. But I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry they keep dragging us through the mud. Sorry they make you question shit."

"They're not the ones making me question shit, Colt," I murmur, tangling my fingers in his silky hair and tugging softly on the roots.

"Is it me?" he asks. "Am I the problem?"

I shake my head even though he can't see me. "No. You're not the problem."

"Then how can I fix this?"

"One hurdle at a time," I remind him. "After your...whatever with Eleanor, we'll cross this bridge. But until then, it isn't worth our energy. Not when we don't even know if they're going to post anything about what happened tonight."

“They’re gonna post,” he mutters against my chest, and I swear I can taste his defeat. His resignation.

“How do you know?”

“Because every new player on the Lions’ roster was there. They’d be missing out on a huge opportunity by letting tonight pass by without sharing all the sordid details.”

He’s right. And the starting Center for the Lions pushing a girl at a bar in the middle of the night is excellent click-bait, no matter how inaccurate it is. Like the previous articles, they don’t care what’s right or wrong. They care about how many people click on the link. How many people tell their friends about what they read and who wrote the piece. It’s all they care about. And me and Colt? We’re nothing but news fodder for gossip-loving vultures. And I hate it. But what I hate even more? It feels like my hands are tied. Like there’s nothing I can do about it.

My eyelids feel heavy, and I close them as I continue playing with Colt’s hair. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It isn’t your fault. It’s mine.” He lets another gush of pent-up frustration seep out of him, melting into me even more. “All of this is my fault. I know I shouldn’t run from my problems, Ash. But sometimes, I feel like it’d be easier if I walked away. If I stopped playing. If we moved to a no-name town and disappeared. Just me and you.”

Just me and you.

My eyes well with tears, but I blink them away, praying he can’t hear the way my heart beats unsteadily beneath his ear. But the reminder of our harsh reality sucks, leaving me even more tired than before I’d fallen asleep.

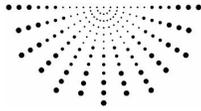
“We don’t know if it’s just me and you anymore, Colt,” I whisper. “Not yet.”

His breath soaks into the thin cotton of my pajamas, but he doesn’t deny it. How can he?

“Goodnight, Colt,” I whisper.

“Love you, Sunshine.”

THEO



Buchanan slaps the magazine onto the desk in front of Colt and me, jabbing his finger onto the title of the article he'd turned to as if to prove his point.

“What the fuck happened last night?” he orders.

Colt and I knew we were in for a lecture when we both received a text message this morning from him, along with a link to the article, demanding we meet with him in his office at B-Tech Enterprises.

I look around the spacious office, ignoring Buchanan's glare branding the side of my face from behind his desk. The room is nice. Fancy. Massive. I'd ask for a few fingers of his Poppy Van Winkle on the bar cart at the edge of the room if I wasn't sporting a hangover from the engagement party at SeaBird last night. After the shit storm with Colt and the bunny, I decided being the designated driver for the evening was overrated. I got shitfaced with Blake and hired an Uber to take us home.

It was crazy.

Wild.

Hell, I can still see Colt's shocked expression when the girl's ass hit the floor after she'd bumped into Blake and me.

Yeah. None of us expected it, and we sure as shit didn't anticipate how the article would paint Colt as an abusive asshole who's cheating on his

girlfriend.

Needless to say, it hasn't exactly been a stress-free morning.

Without bothering to look at the photograph of Colt and the nameless bunny on the floor, I shift in my seat and spread my thighs wide. "So, the engagement party got a little rowdy..."

"I'll get to you in a second," Buchanan snaps. "This reporter is saying Colt hit a woman."

"I didn't hit anyone," Colt growls beside me. The guy looks ready to blow a gasket, and I can't blame him. For once, the Lions' golden boy has been painted as an asshole. It's gotta chafe. "The girl wouldn't keep her hands off of me."

"Where was Ash? Huh?" Buchanan seethes. "Do you have any idea how bad this makes you look?"

"Yeah, we get it," I interject, but Colt ignores me and answers, "It makes me look like I was cheating on Ash with this random girl and then hit her in public."

"Yeah," Buchanan returns. "That's exactly what this looks like. First, me covering your ass after hitting a reporter outside SeaBird, then the baby allegations, and now this?" He waves his hand toward the magazine again. He rounds his desk and sits on the edge of it, towering over us as he crosses his arms. "You're making it awfully hard to have your back, Colt. I didn't invite you to play for the Lions so you could create headlines like this one."

Fuck.

I always knew Buchanan was a hardass, but I didn't think he was a dick.

Staring out the window behind Buchanan, his expression unreadable, Colt mutters, "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, you should be. We need good publicity, boys. *Good* publicity. Not shit like this. Do you have any idea how bad this makes the team look?" Buchanan turns to me, his eyes narrowing. "I agreed to let you propose during the banquet because you promised it would help with ticket sales.

Instead, the entire shit show is being overlooked and twisted to make it look like I've recruited men who not only cheat on women and produce illegitimate kids but also beat women. Not to mention promoting underage drinking with minors. Blake isn't twenty-one yet. What's she doing in a bar with the entire Lions team? Huh?"

Aaaand, there it is.

My fuck up. To be fair, Buchanan warned me he'd get to me in a second. Guess it's my time to shine. I hadn't even thought about the repercussions of Blake being under twenty-one in a bar because half the girls who hang out there all have fake IDs and are the same age she is. Doesn't make it right, but all the college kids hang out at SeaBird. It's not exactly out of the ordinary. Still, Buchanan's not wrong. It didn't matter before the paparazzi were involved. Before our names could be splashed across social media. Before we were representing the Lions organization. Truth be told, we fucked up, and we both know it.

"What? Nothing to say?" Buchanan growls.

"She wasn't drinking," I offer blandly.

Buchanan scoffs. "Doesn't matter. Because she's in a twenty-one and older bar, surrounded by men who are all her senior. You're lucky the only photo they snapped of her was when she was hugging Colt, her brother, instead of looking like she's some underage puck bunny being passed around between players."

I jerk back, disgusted. "Careful, you're talking about my fiancée."

"The paparazzi don't give a shit who she is. They're gonna do what it takes to get clicks, and a congratulatory article announcing an engagement isn't going to give them half as many as an abusive prick cheating on his girlfriend." He casts another glare at Colt beside me.

"I'm sorry," Colt repeats. But he doesn't look apologetic. He looks bored. Because his mind is elsewhere. It's how it's always been with Colt. When shit gets rough, he detaches. It's how he survived his father's death, and it's

how he's surviving this. Meaning, he's a hell of a lot more gone than I'd assumed.

Fuck.

"We need to fix this," Buchanan orders. "We need to show that the players on the Lions team are loyal, respectful, and don't beat their women. Understood?"

Colt and I nod.

"Good. Now sign this." Buchanan grabs a single sheet of paper and hands it to Colt.

As he scans the document, I ask, "What is it?"

"It's a contract stating if either of you is involved in another stunt like this, you're off the team."

The scratch of pen on paper grates on me as Colt scrawls his name across the dotted line. I do the same.

Satisfied, Buchanan stands up and rounds his desk back to his chair, effectively dismissing us. "Now, get the hell out of here."

With our proverbial tails tucked between our legs, Colt and I stand and walk out the door, taking the elevator to the main floor in silence.

"You okay?" I ask when we reach Colt's truck.

But he stays quiet, his attention glued to the ground as he climbs behind the steering wheel. When I slide into the passenger seat, I look at him again and wait. Because I know Colt. And I know he needs to talk, even if he doesn't want to. If he keeps all this shit bottled up inside, he'll explode. He'll do something rash. Something he'll regret.

"Talk to me," I order.

Scrubbing his hand over his face, he gives in and grumbles, "My life is so fucked, man."

"It isn't—"

"It is." He leans his head back against the headrest, staring up at the ceiling. "I think Jaxon's mine."

I hesitate. Unsure what the hell I'm supposed to say. Because if I found out I'd knocked up a girl before I was with Blake, and she showed up on my doorstep with the kid, I'd lose my fucking mind. But there's no going back. Not now. So do I congratulate the bastard?

"Ash is playing the martyr and wants me to consider giving Eleanor a real shot so Jaxon can have both his parents playing house together. On some level, I can see where she's coming from. I don't want to be a shitty dad who's too selfish—"

"You're not selfish," I insist. "But you *are* stupid. Do you actually think it would work? Don't you guys remember how it turned out with Mack and Summer?"

Colt hesitates, letting my words sink in. After a short pause, he shakes his head and continues. "It's not just Jaxon. I'm screwing up left and right. I ruined your engagement announcement, and now, I look like I enjoy pushing women around. I..." his chest heaves, and he shakes his head back and forth. "I wanna quit. I'm tired of this. The spotlight. The attention. The responsibility. I wanna...disappear."

"You tried disappearing once," I remind him dryly. "How'd it work out for you the first time?"

He snorts and turns on the ignition. The engine rumbles to life. "Pretty shitty."

Yeah, pretty shitty is an understatement. After his dad died, he quit hockey, rejected his scholarships, and enrolled in a random university as far away from his previous life as he could get.

Yet he was still miserable. Still unable to accept his father's death. Still unable to run from his love of hockey no matter where he hid.

Yeah. If he's learned anything from the last few years, it's running doesn't get you anywhere. Not sure why he thinks this time would be any different.

"Sometimes fighting through the hard shit brings out the best shit, ya

know?” I murmur.

“Yeah.” He swallows thickly and shoves his truck into drive. “Yeah, you’re right.”

We drive in silence for a few minutes, each lost in our own thoughts. Finally, he adds, “If it counts for anything, I really am happy for you and Blake.”

My mouth lifts in a smile. It’s the first one I’ve had all day. “Me too.” The familiar *click-click, click-click* from his blinker echoes in the otherwise silent cab as he turns right, and the rhythmic sound ceases. I add, “So Ash wants to be the martyr and let you go so you can get back with Eleanor?”

He sighs. “Last we’d talked, she’d gotten it in her head Jaxon’s best chance at a good, normal childhood is if his parents are still together. While I wanna fault her for it, I can see where she’s coming from. Having divorced parents would’ve sucked as a kid.”

“Well, yeah, but having parents together when they shouldn’t be sucked too. Ask Hazel and Miley,” I argue. “Besides, it’s *Ash*.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Colt seethes. “I’m not gonna give her up. I can’t. It would fucking shatter me, man. I’m barely hanging on as it is. But I can’t make her stay if she doesn’t want to. And I’m afraid Ellie and the baby are the final straws. With all the shit I’m putting Ash through, the shit from the articles, and the girls who won’t leave her or me alone...it’s killing her. And it doesn’t matter what I do. I can’t protect her from all of it while she tries to fade away and pretends none of it exists. I’m fucking lost, man.”

He’s right. Ash has been put through hell. More than Blake. More than any other player’s significant other in the league. And adding a baby mama on top of everything? She’s gotta be close to the tipping point. Any other girl would be.

“Running doesn’t sound so terrible anymore, now does it?” he jokes as he pulls up in front of my new place. Colt’s phone rings through the speakers, and Eleanor Elshner’s name flashes on the dashboard screen.

Colt stares at the name as if it belongs to a ghost.

“Why’s she calling?” I ask.

Colt shakes his head. “I dunno.”

Ring. Ring.

“You gonna answer it?” I push.

His upper lip curls, and a mumbled *fuck* vibrates up his throat. He answers the call through the Bluetooth speaker.

“Yeah?”

“Hey, it’s me. Ellie,” a feminine voice answers as I open the passenger door and step onto the sidewalk, unsure whether or not Colt wants privacy.

“Hey, Ellie.” Colt scrubs his hand over his face, catches me staring, and mouths, “I’ll talk to you later,” effectively excusing me.

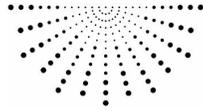
“Hey. I’m glad you answered my call,” Ellie says. “I was hoping you’d maybe want to grab coffee—”

I slam the passenger door closed, cutting off the rest of Eleanor’s sentence as my hands clench into fists.

Because *fuck*.

I don’t know why his ex is calling, especially when Colt doesn’t have the test results yet, but after hearing Ash’s side of things, it’s clear he’s walking a fine line. If he isn’t careful, he might lose the only person who’s ever mattered to him.

MIA



It's barely one in the afternoon when the bell on SeaBird's door rings, notifying me of a new customer. When I look at the entrance, all I find is Ashlyn. She looks like she hasn't slept in days. Her straight blonde hair is pulled into a high, messy ponytail, but the bags under her eyes are a dead giveaway, and so is the worn hoodie swallowing her small frame despite it being the middle of summer and less than chilly outside. Just a hunch, but I bet she stole it from Colt so she could feel close to him. After the mess from last night, I don't blame her. I read the article this morning. Needless to say, they raked Colt over the coals for what happened and twisted him into a cheating asshole who likes to hit women.

Yeah...not so great. But at least it wasn't entirely about her this time, right?

"Hey, what are you doing here?" I ask as she plops onto the barstool across from me.

Tucking her hair behind her ear, Ash looks around the nearly-empty space and murmurs, "Oh, missing my best friend, so I thought I'd stop by."

I frown. "You doing all right?"

"Not really." She sniffs. "Am I too soft? Am I too much of a wallflower?"

I laugh and pour some Diet Coke into a glass, setting it in front of her

with a straw. “Colt told you what I said, huh?”

“Yeah.” With a jabbing motion, she stabs the straw against the counter and removes the wrapper, sliding the straw into her soda and swirling it around the caramel-colored liquid. “Was it bad last night? The mess with the girl and everything?”

“Yeah,” I admit. “But Colt handled it as well as he could.”

She nods while rolling the paper wrapper in her hand, unable to look at me. Unable to drink her drink, staring absently at the condensation already collecting along the glass.

“You sure you’re okay?” I repeat.

Her tongue darts out along her bottom lip, and she shakes her head. “I’m drowning, Mia.”

The slight hitch in her voice makes my heart break. “What can I do to help?”

“I dunno. Can you make all the drama with the random women, the paparazzi, and the paternity test disappear?”

“Aw...honey,” I murmur. “That right there is the whole problem.”

“What do you mean?” Her gaze flicks to mine.

My teeth dig into the inside of my cheek as indecision swells through me. After a quick mental debate, I give in and rest my elbows on the counter, looking her straight in the eye. “Listen, Ash. Do you want firm Mia or soft Mia?”

With a pathetic laugh, she mutters, “Not sure I can take firm Mia right now.”

“Yeah, but I think she’s who you need.”

Her eyes thin before she sighs and flicks the paper wrapper at my boob. Her aim is dead on.

Amused, I lurch back, asking, “What was that for?”

“For all the mean stuff I know firm Mia’s gonna say.” She squares her shoulders. “But you’re right. I’m ready for it. Lay it on me.”

She isn't, but I decide to tell her the truth anyway.

"Here's the thing," I start. "The fact you asked if I could make all the drama disappear is, to me, the core of the problem."

She frowns. "What do you mean?"

"It isn't my job to make all the drama go away. And honestly? It isn't entirely Colt's job, either."

"Oookay?" she questions.

"The first thing you need to decide is if you're gonna poop or get off the pot," I tell her.

She jerks back. "What?"

"You heard me. You need to decide whether or not you want your relationship with Colt."

"Of course, I want my relationship with Colt."

"So you're not backing out of it because he has a kid with someone else?" I challenge.

Her frown deepens. "I'm not backing out of my relationship with Colt. I'm...giving him time to reevaluate whether or not I'm the smartest or best option anymore with the burden he now has of having to worry about someone else."

I'd laugh if she didn't look so serious right now.

"No offense, but do you understand how crazy you sound?" I ask, my tone laced with amusement in hopes of it softening the blow. "Colt loves you. You love Colt. Colt wants you. You want Colt. It's literally that simple."

"Yeah, but Jax—"

"Will have great and supportive parents regardless of whether or not they're together. I've already heard your excuse when you mentioned it at our girl's night a few weeks ago, and honestly? Get ready, Ash, 'cause I'm about to say something you won't like," I warn. "It's a load of bullshit."

Clutching her untouched drink against her chest, she defends, "I'm scared, so sue me."

“You’re allowed to be scared,” I concede. “But your fear shouldn’t hold you back from fighting for what you want. You’re so used to taking hits to the chin you’ve forgotten how to defend yourself, let alone fight back.”

A beat of silence passes between us. Her wide eyes are glued to the glass in front of her. “Ouch.”

“Hey, you’re the one who came in here and asked for my advice,” I remind her.

“Didn’t know you’d be so blunt,” she mutters. “And what does the paternity test have to do with the paparazzi and puck bunny drama?”

“Everything,” I argue. “They all stem from the same place. Whether or not you recognize it, I think you’re feeling insecure in your relationship with Colt, and instead of fighting for him, you’re rolling over and playing the martyr. You’re letting the paparazzi and the random girls push you around, leaving Colt to not only fend for himself but also to try to protect you. It isn’t fair to him. Yes, you deserve to have a man who stands up for you, and we both know Colt does it all the time. But he also needs you to stand up for yourself.”

“I’m trying.”

“Good. Because Colt’s profession requires him to stand out, and he’s being torn apart trying to accommodate you and make you feel comfortable while chasing his own dreams. But it isn’t sustainable. Don’t get me wrong. We both know he’d give everything up for you in a heartbeat, but I also think we both know you’d feel terrible if he ever felt like he needed to make that choice.”

“I would never ask him to choose,” she whispers.

“You wouldn’t have to ask. He knows you. And if he knows you’re miserable, he’ll do anything in his power to fix it to make you happy.”

With a sigh, she takes a sip of her drink and looks up at me again, determination swirling in her big green eyes. “So what do I do?”

“Stop being the martyr. Stop letting people push you around. Don’t be

afraid to stand up for yourself or for Colt, even when it makes you uncomfortable. Don't shy away from the spotlight. Bask in it. Colt's happy to have you by his side, so claim the spot instead of trying to blend in... including when it comes to Jaxon. Colt's gonna need your help raising him. So be there. Be his other half, the way he's always been yours."

She blinks, attempting to process the word vomit I gifted her with as she takes another sip from her glass and chews on the straw. But I don't backpedal. I don't apologize for being too harsh or for telling her how it is. I simply wait. And honestly, part of me hopes she does lose her temper. Hopes she yells at me or tells me I'm being unfair. Something. Because, so help me, she needs to snap out of this funk, or she might wind up losing the best thing to ever happen to her.

After a solid minute, her quiet voice breaks the silence. "Wow. Seems like firm Mia has quite the perspective on things."

"She's kind of a badass," I agree dryly.

With a laugh, Ash nods. "She totally is. Thanks, Mia."

"You're welcome," I reply. "Do you want a drink?" I motion to her barely-touched Diet Coke. "A stiff one?"

She shakes her head and pulls her cell out of her back pocket. "Actually, no. I think I'm gonna give Colt a call."

"Great idea," I agree.

Resting her elbows on the countertop, she types something into her phone and brings it to her ear.

"Hey," she says into her cell. Her brows wrinkle. "Oh." *Pause*. "Yeah, sure." *Pause*. "Uh-huh." *Pause*. "Love you too. Bye."

She disconnects the call as her eyes fill with tears.

"Whoa, what's wrong?" I ask.

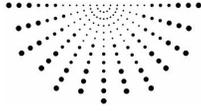
"Colt couldn't talk. He's, uh, he's on the phone with Eleanor." She sets her phone on the bartop and sucks her cheeks between her teeth, shaking her head. "They're making plans to go out for coffee." With a watery smile, she

meets my gaze and taps the edge of her glass. “I think I’m gonna need that stiff drink after all.”

“Oh, Ash.” My heart breaks even more as I add a splash of whiskey to Ashlyn’s drink, making it a double.

I have a feeling she’s gonna need it.

ASHLYN



I haven't even had a chance to take my first sip of Jack and Coke when my phone buzzes, Colt's name flashing across the screen.

"Is it him?" Mia asks, wiping out the freshly cleaned glasses with a white towel and staring at me like I might break at any second. Then again, I don't blame her.

I feel like I'm gonna be sick.

With a subtle nod, I answer the call before I can talk myself out of it, refusing to roll over and play the victim because Mia's right. I've been doing it too much lately, and I need to stop.

"Hey," I answer.

"Hey. Sorry I couldn't talk for a second. What's up?" Colt asks.

"Just checking in," I lie, avoiding Mia's pointed gaze as I swirl the straw in my glass. "How was the meeting with Buchanan?"

"Shitty," he mutters. "I don't know if you read the article or not, but it was bad. One more bad stunt and I'm off the team."

"Shit."

"Yeah." His sigh confirms how much he's hurting, and I rub at the knot in my chest, wishing I could hold him. Wishing I could make the pain go away.

If only I had that much power.

“How was your conversation with Eleanor?” I ask.

“Fine. We’re gonna meet for coffee in a few days.”

My throat tightens, so I take a sip of my drink to clear it. “Oh.”

“It isn’t a date,” he tells me. “She just wants to talk.”

I force a smile even though he can’t see me, attempting to channel my inner badass, but it’s harder than I expect. “I believe you.”

“Ash, I’m serious.”

“I trust you,” I tell him. And I do. I trust Colt more than anyone else in the world. And I hate how he feels caught between me and everything else. I hate it more than anything. Mia’s right. I’ve been playing the easy card, rolling over and allowing people to take what they want from me without standing up for myself. So I’m done. I want Colt. I choose Colt. Even when it’s hard. Like right now.

“You all right?” he asks.

“Yeah. Exhausted like always, lately,” I admit with a laugh. “But I’m okay.”

“Where are you?” he prods. “You don’t sound like you’re at home.”

I glance at the noisy couple a few stools away from me and cover the mouthpiece on my phone, trying to block them out. “Yeah, sorry. I’m at SeaBird.”

“Why?” he questions.

“I wanted to talk to Mia and get her advice.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. She made a good point.”

“About what?”

“About you and me and how I’ve been treating you lately,” I admit.

The defeat is clear in his tone as he sighs my name. “Ash...”

“I’m sorry, Colt. I’m sorry I’ve been in such a weird mood lately. I’m sorry for acting like I’m not all in with us. I’ve been struggling to see where I fit in with everything. But I’m tired of making myself small in hopes of

accommodating everything and everyone else around us. So, I'm not going to do it anymore. I'm done being a coward. I'm done being the martyr like you mentioned last night."

"Ash—"

"Let me finish," I beg. "I know you feel like it's your job to take care of me and to make me happy. And you do. You do take care of me. You do make me happy. So freaking happy, Colt. But it isn't your job to make sure I'm not being a martyr. It's mine. So I'm gonna stop," I promise him. "Even when it's hard. Even when I want to give up. I'm not gonna roll over and sacrifice the most important thing in my life. *You* are the most important thing in my life. I want you to know I'm all in. I love you. I choose you." My voice cracks, and my hands shake, but I force myself to keep talking. To keep making promises I'm determined to keep. "Regardless of the paternity results, I want us. I'm happy to make room for Jaxon. I really am. But I don't want you to give Eleanor another shot, even if admitting it out loud makes me selfish. I want the future we've been dreaming about. And I want it with you."

I mean it. Every word.

I want him. I want us. I want something solid. Something steady. Despite the world turning to shit around us. I need him to know he can rely on me the same way I know I can rely on him.

Silence follows, and it kills me, burrowing under my skin and leaving me a bundle of nerves.

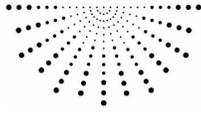
"Say something," I plead.

Another wave of silence hits. It only lasts a second, then he murmurs, "Fuck, Ash. You have no idea how much I needed to hear all of this." His relief is practically palpable as he releases another sigh. This one is more cleansing than the first. "I love you too."

"I'll see you at home?" I offer.

"Yeah. See you soon."

KATE



My stomach rolls as we pull up to Mama Taylor's house and Mack cuts the engine.

"You okay?" he asks.

I nod, refusing to acknowledge how sick I feel.

"You sure?" Mack prods.

"Can't decide if it's morning sickness or nerves." I smooth out my hair, attempting to look presentable, and turn to Mack in the driver's seat. "You really think this is a good idea?"

"My parents will be stoked, and so will Miley and Hazel," Mack promises. "Don't stress."

Don't stress.

Pretty sure those two words are the bane of my existence.

"Like I can turn it off," I mutter under my breath.

His chuckle warms my insides as he grabs my hand, preventing me from climbing out of the car, and tugs me toward him. In an instant, his mouth is on mine, and I sigh against his lips.

Damn, I love this man.

He nibbles my bottom lip, and I part my mouth, savoring the moment as he slides his tongue into me. He tastes like toothpaste. I shift in my seat, anxious to move closer to him. To feel him against me. To let him ease my

anxiety in a way only he's ever been able to do.

He smiles against my lips, dives in for one more long kiss, and pulls away. "There."

"Hmm?" My eyelids flutter open, and I meet his gaze. "What was that for?"

"Thought you could use something else to focus on." His mouth lifts in the corner, and I shake my head.

"Think you can play me like a fiddle, do you?"

"Am I wrong?"

"Ew!" two distinct feminine voices screech from outside the car, and a pair of hands slap against the driver's side window. Hazel and Miley make gagging noises as they pass Mack's parked car. Hazel stops at the car's hood, looks back at us, and calls out, "Get a room!"

"Good to see you too," Macklin yells back at them. Then, he looks at me with a shit-eating grin.

It's funny. How much happier he is now with his relationship with his girls on the mend. Like he can finally breathe again. And I'm grateful for it. The carefree Macklin I've come to know and love. I hope the bun in my oven doesn't ruin it.

"Come on," he urges. "Let's go inside."

With our fingers laced together, we walk inside Mack's childhood home. A spread of breakfast foods takes up the dining room table, from blueberry muffins to fresh coffee, bacon, and eggs. Normally, my mouth would be watering at the smorgasbord of deliciousness, but today? Not so much.

My stomach tightens, and I let out a slow breath.

"Not feeling it?" Mack murmurs, keeping his voice low so only I can hear him.

I shake my head. "It's fine."

Mama Taylor appears from the kitchen with an apron wrapped around her waist as she greets us, kissing Mack's cheeks and doing the same to mine.

“Hello, my beautiful Macklin. Hello, my beautiful Kate.”

“Hi, Mama Taylor,” I reply.

“Hi,” she repeats. “Now, come sit down. Theo and Blakely have an announcement.”

An announcement?

Oh.

The engagement.

Mama and Papa Taylor must not know about Theo’s proposal during the Lions’ banquet. Honestly, it’s kind of surprising. I figured Theo would be shouting it from the rooftops. When Blake said yes, the guy looked like he’d won the lottery. And in a way, I guess he has. They’re perfect for each other. I’m excited to see Mama and Papa Taylor’s reaction to the whole thing, despite my newfound desire to keep the bun in my oven a secret so I don’t steal the limelight. I glance at Macklin and squeeze his hand, curious if he’s thinking the same thing. Before he has a chance to read my mind, Blake and Theo round the corner from the kitchen, each balancing mugs of hot coffee. Blake’s red hair is even messier than usual, and she’s sporting a dopey grin, her lips red and swollen. When he mutters something under his breath to her, Blake smacks his shoulder, smooths out her hair, and touches her fingers to her lips as if they can hide the fact she most definitely looks thoroughly kissed.

Thankfully, Mack’s a gentleman and doesn’t give her shit for it as he calls out to them. “Hey, guys.”

With a hard slap on the back, Theo pulls Mack into a brotherly hug, balancing his coffee mug between them while Blake grins at me. “Hey.”

“Hey.”

Her smile wanes as she looks at me more closely. “You doing okay? You look a little pale.”

“I’m fine,” I lie.

Her gaze narrows. “You sure?”

I tug her closer and drop my voice low. "I'll tell you later. Promise."

"Hmm." The hum is quiet, but her lips stay pursed as Miley and Hazel join everyone in the foyer, and we all chat for a minute. When Mama Taylor ushers us into the dining room, I stop short, another wave of nausea rolling over me.

Seriously. When did bacon start smelling so disgusting?

"Kate?" Mack questions.

"I'll be right back," I mumble to no one in particular, rushing to the bathroom on the main floor. The door has barely latched when I'm on my knees, spilling my guts into the porcelain bowl. Fatigue creeps inside me as I rest my head on the cool seat and take a deep breath, wiping the corner of my mouth with my thumb.

So this is the morning sickness I'd been warned about.

I haven't felt great here and there, but I hadn't actually puked until today.

Great.

After another minute, I push myself up, wash my hands with soap, and rinse my mouth with cold water. I'd kill for a toothbrush, but I'm shit out of luck. Maybe I'll buy a travel-sized one for my purse in case this happens again. Smoothing my hair out in the mirror, I square my shoulders and open the bathroom door but stop short.

Papa Taylor's on the other side, his brows stitched with concern. "You okay?"

"Uh, yeah," I hedge.

"You sure?"

"Mm-hmm."

"You have the flu or somethin'?" he prods.

"It's nothing." I slip past him, keeping my head down. "We should probably get back."

His concern morphs into understanding. He nods slowly. "Mama Taylor had the same response with meat. Felt better by week twelve."

Eyes wide, I turn back to him but keep my voice quiet. “How did you...?”

“If you were sick, you would’ve said something.” His mouth lifts, showcasing an exact replica of Theo’s and Macklin’s smiles as he steps closer. “Besides, you’re a terrible liar.”

“You can’t—”

“I won’t say anything,” he promises. “But congratulations, Kate. I’m really happy for you and Mack.”

My chest swells with relief. Both for his promise to keep quiet and his best wishes. Over the last few months, I’ve gotten to know both Mama and Papa Taylor, and they’ve become like second parents to me. It’s nice. Knowing they have my back and I have their support. Especially when it comes to this. A baby.

I’m having a baby.

For once, the thought doesn’t scare me. It excites me.

I’m having a baby.

With a smile, I murmur, “Thank you.”

“Come on,” Papa Taylor prods. “Let’s get back before my wife starts asking questions ‘cause I doubt she’ll be as quiet about the whole thing when she finds out.”

Ain’t that the truth.

When Mack sees me, he stands, pulling out the chair beside his. I sit down and offer a smile, but it’s strained.

“You all right?” he whispers, adjusting his napkin on his lap as Hazel catches everyone up on her new boyfriend.

With a nod, I reach for a blueberry muffin while avoiding the bacon entirely, my gut squeezing at the sight.

Once Papa Taylor is seated at the large oval table with everyone else, Hazel finishes her story. Mama Taylor smooths out her apron and turns to Theo and Blake. “Okay, I’m dying here. What’s the announcement?”

“Yeah, what’s the announcement?” Miley asks. “You’re not pregnant, are you?”

“Ah, I wanna be an aunt,” Hazel gushes.

“Technically, you’d be the cousin,” Theo tells her. “But, no. We’re not pregnant.”

“We *are* engaged, though,” Blakely announces.

“Shut up.” Hazel’s jaw drops, and she reaches across the table. “Where’s the ring? I wanna see!”

Blakely shows off the gorgeous diamond on her finger. She must’ve slipped it on while everyone was dishing up their brunch. She takes turns offering her hand from one person to the next so everyone has a chance to rave over Theo’s excellent taste in rings.

And even I can’t deny the man did well.

The real question is, do Macklin and I steal the spotlight or save our news for a different day?

I cast a quick look at Mack, and he nods, squeezing my thigh beneath the table as Mama Taylor peppers Blake with questions involving the proposal. Unfortunately, I’m too nauseated to pay attention to any of it.

Yup. Bacon’s a trigger. It’s official.

I nibble on a piece of blueberry muffin, praying it’ll calm my stomach as Mama Taylor prods, “And when’s the big day? Have you decided anything yet?”

“Not yet,” Theo tells her. “Blake’s still young, so we’re fine with a long engagement.”

“I’m thinking two years out, probably?” Blakely adds, thinking aloud. “Maybe three.”

“Aw, but that’s so long. Your mama wants more grandbabies, dammit,” she scolds Theo.

“Give ‘em a break,” Papa Taylor chimes in. “If you wanna be bossing anyone around for more grandbabies, it’s Macklin. Your oldest isn’t getting

any younger.”

My jaw drops as I register Papa Taylor’s words, and he quirks his brow. The bastard just threw me under the bus. And clearly, he finds it way more amusing than I do.

“Dad,” Mack warns, witnessing the silent exchange between his father with the talent of an expert sleuth and me.

Papa Taylor chuckles and relaxes in his seat. “Kate, can you pass the bacon?”

My gaze narrows, but I don’t move a muscle.

He thinks he’s funny, does he?

I’d always assumed Mack and Theo got their saucy personalities from someone in the family, and once I met Papa Taylor for the first time, it was clear I’d found the culprit. We’ve slowly gotten to know each other over the past few months since Mack and I started dating. This isn’t the first time I’ve been on the teasing end.

“Dad, today’s about Teddy and Blake,” Mack interjects.

“And if it wasn’t?” Mama Taylor prods. “If they hadn’t made an announcement?”

Kill me now.

Kill me now.

Kill me now.

Caught between his mother’s curious stare and his father’s knowing one, Mack looks at me and shrugs his shoulders. “Kate?”

“We’re, uh...” I lick my lips and set the muffin back onto my plate, brushing my fingertips together as little crumbs scatter along the ceramic surface. “We’re pregnant.”

Silence falls across the table for a beat, then...

“Are you serious?”

“I’m so happy for you!”

“Congratulations!”

The hum of celebratory chaos beats around us as my gaze lands on Hazel. Once upon a time, we were friends. Then she hated me. And now? Now, I don't know where we stand. If all the progress we've made over the last few months just went down the drain or if she's excited for me. For her father. For everyone. Instead of giving me a hint as to what she's thinking, her expression is stoic. Indecipherable.

Miley nudges her older sister's shoulder. "Haze."

And just like that, a shit-eating grin nearly splits Hazel's face in two as she tears her attention from me and looks at her dad. "Seriously, old man? You're gonna have another baby?"

"You're fine with the idea of being a big sister again?" he probes.

Her eyes roll, and she shakes her head. "Only if I don't have to change any diapers."

Miley squeals and shoves herself to her feet, rounding the table to pull me into a hug. Her excitement is palpable. "I'm so happy for you, Kate! Seriously, this is gonna be so much fun!"

My eyes meet Mack's as his youngest squeezes the crap out of me. Another pair of arms swallow me whole, then another.

In the middle of a Kate sandwich, I close my eyes, overwhelmed with gratitude. Because this could've gone so many ways. I could've offended Blake and Theo. I could've pissed off Hazel or Miley. I could've freaked out Mama or Papa Taylor. But instead, they're happy for me. Everyone's happy for me. And I couldn't be more grateful.

"I'm gonna be an aunt!" Blake squeals, replacing Miley and Hazel's hug with one of her own.

I squeeze her back and breathe in the scent of cinnamon clinging to her red, curly hair.

"Sorry for not telling you and for...stealing your moment," I tell her.

"Take it from someone who's really good at it. Never apologize for making a splash, Kate." She plops a loud-smacking kiss on my cheek and lets

me go. "I'm gonna buy this baby so many clothes."

"Dude, the kid's gonna be the cutest little Lions fan on the planet," Theo adds. He slaps Macklin's back, and I point at Papa Taylor.

"Ya know, Macklin and I were discussing using your first name for the little one's middle name if he's a boy, but after the little stunt you pulled, you can kiss that option goodbye."

"Oh, I can, huh?" He laughs.

"Mm-hmm. Big mistake, throwing me under the bus."

He shakes his head and slaps his hand against Mack's shoulder. "You did good, Mack."

"Thanks, Dad." Mack looks at me, his head cocked. "I did. Oh. And we're getting married. Probably should've mentioned that part."

Blake gasps and claps her hands. "Yay! We can plan our weddings together!"

I consider waving my forefinger around as if it's a white surrender flag but stop myself and say, "Can't wait, Blake."

And the crazy part?

I really can't.

A few minutes later, the chairs scrape against the hardwood floor as everyone sits back down, a buzz of excitement filtering throughout the dining room when I feel Mama Taylor staring at me.

As I meet her gaze, I shy away in my chair, embarrassed, though I don't know why. "What is it?" I ask.

"You've hardly eaten a crumb," she notes, motioning to the lonely, barely-touched blueberry muffin on my plate. "I'm so sorry. Is it morning sickness?"

"Yeah. I'll be fine," I lie. Well, technically, it isn't a lie. I'm sure I'll be fine at some point. It might take a few weeks, but...

"Well, can I get you something else?" she offers. "When I was pregnant with the boys, I always felt better when I had something in my stomach."

I consider her question and scan the plethora of food in front of me. Unfortunately, none of it looks appealing. At all. In fact, the idea of any of it touching my mouth makes me want to run to the bathroom all over again. But Mama Taylor's probably right. My stomach feels like a shaken-up can of soda. I should eat something.

But what?

Then it dawns on me. What I'm craving. The realization causes a completely irrational burn to hit behind my eyes, and I squeeze them closed.

"Ah, honey. What's wrong?" she asks. "What can I get you?"

Noticing my shift in emotion, Macklin stares down at me, his brows pulled low in concern as he squeezes my thigh beneath the table. "What is it?"

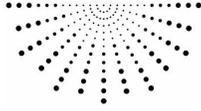
I nod. "It's..." A pathetic laugh slips out of me. "I, um, could really use a cookie right now."

Practically preening, Mama Taylor gets to her feet and heads to the kitchen, returning with a Tupperware container loaded with her famous chocolate chip cookies. She sets them in front of me, and I take the lid off, breathing in the familiar scent of chocolate, vanilla, and brown sugar.

Yup. These are exactly what the doctor ordered.

Apparently, this baby is a Taylor after all.

BLAKELY



“**Y**ou look like you’re gonna puke,” Theo notes as we pull up to my mom’s house.

“I *feel* like I’m gonna puke.” I press my hands to my hot cheeks and blow out a deep breath.

“Why are you nervous?”

“Because I want her to be happy for me,” I mumble as Theo cuts the engine in front of my childhood home. “She’s my only parent, Theo. If I don’t have her support...” My voice trails off, and I let out another sigh. It doesn’t do shit to ease the weight in my chest.

This is scary.

Terrifying.

And I’m not used to being scared.

Well, most of the time.

I’m a grab-the-world-by-the-balls kind of girl. But disappointing your mom? I can’t be the only one terrified of doing it, can I?

“You’re mom loves me,” Theo quips. “She’s gonna be fine.”

“She’s gonna think I’m too young,” I argue.

“Which is why we’re waiting a couple years before tying the knot.”

“She’s gonna ask why we felt the need to get engaged so quickly.”

“And we’re gonna tell her it’s because I’m afraid you’re gonna be

scooped up by someone else when you realize you're out of my league.”

I smack his shoulder. “I’m being serious, Teddy.”

“So am I. But if she wants a real reason, then let's tell her I wanted to be sure if something happens to me, you get the house. The 401K. And everything else.”

My brows furrow. “You have a 401K?”

With a bark of laughter, he asks, “*That’s* what surprises you?”

“Well, no offense, but you aren’t always known for being responsible or thinking of the future.”

“Which is why I proposed. To prove I *am* thinking of the future. And you”—he grabs my throat and tugs me toward him—“are my future.” He lands a lip-smacking kiss against my temple, and I grin.

“Fine. You win,” I mutter. “Let’s do this.”

The front door’s locked. I’m not surprised. It’s almost 9pm, and my mom has no idea we’re coming. To be fair, I didn’t know we were coming either until Theo pulled onto my street and told me I couldn’t procrastinate over telling my mom about our engagement any longer. After all, we told his parents this morning and asked if they could keep it a secret for a few days. Theo and I know we’ll be lucky if Mama Taylor waits a solid twenty-four hours to spill the beans to the entire neighborhood.

Regardless, Theo promised me three orgasms tonight if I get it over with and rip the whole thing off like a Band-Aid.

The man found my weakness way too easily, and clearly, he isn’t afraid to use it against me. But seriously. Who’s gonna say no to three orgasms in one night? Not me.

My stomach is a jumble of knots as I tap my knuckles against the front door and wait. A few seconds later, the lock unlatches, and my oldest brother opens the door.

“What the hell?” I blurt, but it’s muffled by the massive chest pressed against my mouth as my oldest brother envelops me in a bear hug.

Garrett swings me around. “Hey, sis! Long time no see.”

When he finally lets me go, I ask, “What are you doing here?”

“Colt suggested I visit, and since I had the weekend off from residency, I figured why not? Come inside. Mom’s FaceTiming Knox.”

He retreats toward the couch, but Theo and I stay in the foyer, sandwiched between the family room and the front porch, both of us reeling from the turn of events.

“Did you know he’d be here?” I whisper.

Theo shakes his head. “I told Colt we were dropping by, but—”

The revving of an engine cuts him off. Theo looks over his shoulder out the still-open front door. I follow his gaze in time to witness Colt’s black truck turn onto our street.

“Did you invite him too?” I nearly screech.

What the hell is going on?

Theo has the decency to look sheepish as he tucks his hands into his front pockets and rocks back on his heels. “No, but he asked if I wanted to go out for drinks, so I told him we were telling your mom about—” My glare deepens, and his mouth snaps closed as my mom stands up from the couch a few feet away.

When she reaches us, Mommy Dearest pulls us both into a group hug, wrapping her arms around our necks until Theo’s crouched over like the hunchback of Notre Dame.

“Aww, I’m so glad you guys could make it!” she gushes.

“Uh, yeah. No problem,” I mutter. “Since when did Garrett decide to come home?”

“Colt told him he had an announcement to make.” She lets us go and drops her voice low. “Either he proposed to Ash, or they received the results from the paternity test, and I have a grandbaby, but I’m not sure which. What’s your guess?”

I force the oxygen from my lungs and glance at Theo, offering him a

shrug. “Uh, no idea. Although, now that you mention it, those are two pretty good guesses.”

And they are. Colt and Ash have plenty going on in their lives my mom would love to be filled in on. Maybe it’s a coincidence Colt decided to do it the same day as me. But if Theo told Colt about our plans to tell Mom about the engagement, would he actually tack his announcements onto ours? It would be weird, wouldn’t it? I mean, technically, Kate and Mack did the same thing earlier today, but it was different. Papa Taylor practically forced their hand. I didn’t mind. I’m actually freaking stoked about their pregnancy and engagement, but still.

Two curveballs in one day? Seriously?

“Hey, sis,” Colt greets me, giving me whiplash as he takes the porch steps toward us with Ash by his side.

“Uh, hey?” I offer.

Slipping past us, Colt chats with Mom and Theo as I pull Ash aside and demand, “Are you getting married?”

“What?” Her eyes practically bug out of her head. “No, why?”

“Because everyone’s here!”

“I thought they were here for your...” she clears her throat as her eyes drop to my left hand. If I was smart, I would’ve taken off the engagement ring, but no. It’s still hanging out on my finger like a damn homing beacon.

“Nope,” I tell her, hiding my left hand behind my back as inconspicuously as possible. “As far as I know, they have no idea about... I mean, yeah, we were gonna tell my mom, but not my brothers too.”

Ash sees something over my shoulder, and her jaw drops. “He didn’t.”

“Didn’t what?” I follow her line of sight to find Colt smirking back at me. He’s standing beside Theo but isn’t listening to a damn word Mom or him are saying. Instead, he’s watching me. Waiting to see my reaction. To realize he orchestrated this entire. Freaking. Thing.

“Wait.” I gasp. The view is way too familiar coming from the

mischievous older brother I grew up with, and I turn back to his girlfriend. “Did he set this up?”

“To mess with you?” Ash offers with a laugh, giving me a glimpse of the best friend who’s been missing ever since the article appeared with Jaxon’s baby photograph printed in it. “Maybe?” She glances at Colt again and shakes her head. “Honestly, I wouldn’t put it past him.”

My mind is on autopilot as I clench my hands into fists, taking a step toward him, ready to knee Colt in the balls or tackle the bastard like when we were kids and he’d piss me off. “I’m gonna kill him,” I grumble.

“Come on, come on,” my mom interrupts. She strides back to us with a skip in her step and ushers the group into the family room while simultaneously preventing me from knocking Colt upside the head.

“Knox doesn’t have much time left to chat,” she tells us. “So we need to speed this up.”

I squish between Garrett and Theo on the couch. The space feels smaller and smaller with every passing second as silence descends over us. Everyone’s eyes shift from one person to the next, waiting for someone to say something. To tell us why we’re all here.

I can handle telling Mom and listening to her lecture me about how young I am and how I have all the time in the world to make such a huge decision. But listening to my two oldest brothers give me the same lecture while Colt smirks away in the corner? Yeah, no. Not so much.

I thought Colt was excited for me. But if he was, why would he invite everyone else to witness Mom’s potential meltdown? Theo tosses his arm around my back as Ash and Colt sit on the loveseat on the opposite side of the room. Mom begins angling her laptop at them, but Colt waves them off.

“Don’t point it at us. We’re only here for the announcement.” He smirks at me and cocks his head. “Blake...”

“You know I’m gonna kill you, right?” I tell him, but Colt simply laughs and adjusts Ashlyn on his lap, looking as cool as a cucumber while

confirming he did, indeed, plan this whole thing just to be an ass.

Older brothers.

They're the worst.

"Yo, Blake. What's going on?" Knox's voice crackles slightly through the computer's speakers, and I turn to the screen.

"Hey, big brother. What's up? How's everything on base?"

"It's good. I'm being transferred to a new base in a couple of months, so I should be closer to home."

"Ah, yay!" I clap my hands quietly and scoot closer to the computer resting on the coffee table in front of the couch. "That makes me happy."

"Yeah. Sorry I couldn't be there in person, though."

"Oh, it's not a big deal," I lie, shoving my hair over my opposite shoulder when Garrett chimes in, "Wait, is that an engagement ring?"

Shit.

I should've taken the stupid thing off before we came here.

Tucking my hand beneath my thigh, I cut into the last bit of distance between Theo and me while pasting a fake smile on my face. "Oh, I, uh..."

"Blake?" Mom murmurs. She's been so quiet, sitting on the floral accent chair in the corner of the room, sipping a glass of red wine. I'd almost forgotten she was here.

She frowns and turns to my fiancé beside me. "Theo?"

Theo's eyes practically sparkle with pride. Not an ounce of regret or shame pollutes them as he looks down at me, waiting for me to take the lead. To tell them the truth. To announce something I'm pretty freaking happy and excited about, no matter how delusional it might seem from the outside looking in. Because they don't get it. They don't know Theo. Okay, they do. But they don't know him like I know him.

How he's thoughtful. And sweet. And stubborn. And sexy. How he's the last person I think of when I close my eyes and the first one I want to see when I open them. How he bought a house with me without giving a shit

what others would think because he knew none of them mattered. Their opinions. Their judgments. Nothing. The only thing that matters is if I'm happy. And dammit. I am.

So. Freaking. Happy.

All because of the man beside me and how he treats me. How he makes me feel. How he looks at me like I'm his world. Like I'm the only person who matters.

The reminder leaves my veins buzzing with anticipation as I reach up with my left hand and touch Theo's cheek, tugging him down and kissing him, giving the whole damn room a perfect view of the ring on my finger. The ring Theodore Taylor gave me when he asked if I'd be his wife. It's cheesy and romantic, and I smile against his lips. Pulling away, I stare each of my family members in the eye, one by one. The room is so fucking quiet I swear I could hear a pin drop.

"Theo and I are—"

"Yes!" Knox interrupts. "I fucking won! Pay up, assholes!"

I jerk back, surprised by his fist pumping into the air on the computer screen along with his whoop of victory.

"Wait, what?" I screech.

Colt explains, "I promised Garrett and Knox I'd keep them updated, and —"

"Updated on what?" I demand. "My relationship with Theo?"

"All right, back up a bit, Colt," Garrett suggests. "Start from the beginning."

Colt nods at our oldest brother, his eyes meeting mine. "Remember the one night when you were like, I dunno, thirteen? Fourteen? And Garrett was home from school for Christmas break? When mom convinced you to wear a dress for once?"

"Uh...yeah?" I answer.

"Yeah, well. You came down the stairs while we were all playing COD,

and Theo blew up in the game because he was too busy staring at you,” Colt finishes.

“So?”

“So, afterward, we all made bets about whether or not you guys would wind up together.” He shifts Ash in his lap, the same shit-eating grin plastered across his face.

“I didn’t want to acknowledge it,” Garrett admits beside me. “‘Cause you’re my baby sister, so I said nothing was gonna happen.”

“And I knew you guys got along since I saw it firsthand all the time, so I guessed you’d at least hook up at some point,” Colt adds.

“And *I* had a feeling he was gonna marry you one day,” Knox yells from the FaceTime call. “And I won. So pay up, brothers. I’ll take Venmo or PayPal.”

“Hold up,” I interrupt. “Are you all honestly telling me you made a bet about whether or not Theo and I would end up together?”

“Duh,” Knox snarks.

“It’s exactly what we’re saying,” Colt confirms.

With a pointed look at Colt, I demand, “So, if you lost, why are you grinning like a lunatic?”

“Because my best friend’s marrying my little sister, and I’m happy for you guys.”

“He also tried to change his bet, but we wouldn’t let him,” Knox says.

“You guys are ridiculous,” I decide. “You know that, right?”

“Yeah, we know,” Garret replies. “We also bet on which one of us would wind up getting a girl pregnant first, but the jury’s still out on that one, right?” He pins Colt with an amused smirk, and Colt flips him off in return as Ash’s spine straightens in his lap.

“We’re not discussing potential grandbabies right now,” Mom announces. She stands up from the flower chair and walks toward me, her hand outstretched. When she’s within reach, she tugs my left hand into hers and

examines the green emerald, her expression unreadable.

And it's scary.

Waiting with bated breath as to whether or not I'm gonna be yelled at. I doubt she'd yell at me. The woman rarely raises her voice in general, but still. She has the power to make or break this moment. To make it happy and exciting or downright dreadful. I bite my bottom lip, my hands growing sweaty as Theo tangles his fingers through my messy waves and softly massages the back of my neck.

But still, Mommy Dearest doesn't utter a single word. She simply stares at the ring, running her index finger along it carefully.

"So?" I whisper, practically drowning in the silence. "What do you think?"

"Oh, honey." Mom's gaze flicks to mine. Her eyes are gleaming with unshed tears. "I'm so happy for you."

Relief spreads like wildfire from my chest to the top of my head and down to my toes. With a grin, I murmur, "Thanks, Mom."

She smacks Theo's chest with her opposite hand. "You know, I would've appreciated it if you'd asked me first!"

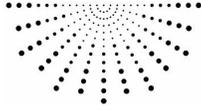
"Always ask forgiveness, not permission, Mama Thorne. You know that."

Dabbing beneath her eyes with her forefingers, she laughs, "Har, har. All right. Now, who wants cake?"

I perk up. "Cake?"

"Ignore the blue frosting and Colt and Ash's names. I didn't know you were the one making an announcement, but"—she grabs my hand and pulls me to my feet—"I seriously couldn't be happier for both of you. Even if you are too young." Her mouth lifts wryly. "Come on. Let's talk wedding dates."

ASHLYN



He's with her. Eleanor.

And I shouldn't be freaking out, but I am. Eleanor wants to talk about Colt's expectations with Jaxon. I asked why she couldn't wait until the results were in. Apparently, she wants to get their potential ducks in a row in case they don't receive the paternity results prior to the hockey season officially starting, when Colt will be distracted by his new career. She has a point. Besides, Colt wants to ask if she's heard an update from Ali because the waiting and what-if games are killing both of us.

Before he left, Colt asked if I wanted to tag along, but I declined. Not because I didn't want to or because I'm rolling over and playing the martyr, as Mia so eloquently pointed out a few days ago. It's because if I were Eleanor, I'd want one-on-one time with the father of my child without his girlfriend hanging around and listening to the whole thing.

They need a chance to discuss their plan and how everyone should move forward. She also needs a safe space to express her concerns about my involvement in her son's life. While I've chosen Colt, and we've decided we want to treat Jaxon like he belongs to both of us, technically, I'm not related to Jaxon. And if I was his birth mom, I'd want a say in who's allowed to be around my son. She should have a say too.

It doesn't mean I don't feel like puking, though.

I'm scared to come between Eleanor and Colt, even in a platonic way. Mia was right. I'm a wallflower. I don't do drama. I don't do chaos. And sticking around and staying with Colt will likely bring all of it. It doesn't matter how determined I am to stay. If Eleanor doesn't want me involved in her little boy's life, it will complicate things for Colt. I don't want to make things more complicated for him, but if I'm going to stay, we're a package deal. And I can only hope Eleanor doesn't hate me because of it.

Please don't hate me.

I squeeze my eyes shut, fatigue creeping over me all over again, despite having recently rolled out of bed. But this kind of stress? This kind of duress? It doesn't go away with sleep. It sinks deeper, leaving me bone tired no matter what I do.

And I'm so. Damn. Tired.

My body feels heavy as I brush my teeth with my baby blue toothbrush. Colt bought it for me when I moved in. It was such a little thing. A freaking toothbrush. But Colt excels at the little things. My favorite flavor of ice cream. My favorite movie. My favorite blanket. My favorite T-shirt, which happens to belong to him. Or at least, it used to. I stole it. But I still catch him wearing it sometimes to mark it with his familiar scent again. I smile, and the reminder of exactly what I'm fighting for gives me strength.

I spit the toothpaste into the sink, rinsing my toothbrush under the cold water. The white foam swirls down the drain, mixing with the water from the faucet and disappearing completely.

I hate how selfish I feel for not bowing out. For choosing to stay. But I don't regret it. I refuse to, no matter how guilty it makes me feel.

My face is hot when I touch my cheeks and let out a slow breath.

Please don't hate me, Eleanor. Please don't make Colt's life a living hell because I'm sticking around.

Please. Please. Please.



THE DOOR OPENS WITH A SOFT CLICK, FOLLOWED BY FOOTSTEPS AS I LOUNGE in bed, attempting to play a game on my phone. I've been too distracted to be successful.

"Hey, Sunshine," Colt murmurs when he reaches the bedroom doorway.

I set the phone on my chest, giving Colt my full attention. "How'd it go?"

"Ali called Ellie while we were out. Apparently, she has the results."

My fingers touch my lips as I'm caught between excitement and absolute dread. "And?"

"I dunno yet."

My eyes widen in surprise. "What?"

"I told them I didn't want to find out the results without you."

"Colt." I shake my head, caught between exasperation and amusement over his stubbornness at a time like this. "Aren't you dying to know?"

"I am, but not without you." He strides toward the bed and sits down beside me. "I told Ellie you're not going anywhere. You're going to be in Jaxon's life."

"And?"

"And she asked if I wanted to give our relationship another try first. Just in case."

A tremor of dread rolls through me, but it's followed by full-blown disbelief. Is he serious? "Oh." I hesitate. "Wow." A sharp pain spreads through my chest, confirming my greatest fear. "Uh, I did not see that one coming—"

"I told her there's no going back," he interrupts. "There's no *after* you. You changed me. You made me a better man. But I can't go back to who I was, and honestly, I don't want to."

My breath hitches as I hold his gaze. Because I know this look. It's filled with determination. And sincerity. And ferocity. It's one I've seen when he's

on the ice. When he isn't afraid to get his hands dirty or to fight for what he wants. When it doesn't matter what the score is. When it doesn't matter if his back is against the glass and he's being cornered by every defenseman on the opposite team. He's going to give it his all. He's going to fight. He's going to win. No matter what. And there isn't anything to change his mind or convince him to give up or throw in the towel.

Nothing.

And part of me is grateful. Seeing his determination despite not knowing if it's for the right reason. Because I love him. Every piece. And I don't want to give him up. I don't want to give this up. Not for anything. Not even for the little boy who belongs to him.

"You said that to her?" I ask.

"Yeah. I told Ellie I want you," he continues, pushing my hair away from my forehead as a soft smile graces his lips. "I want all of you. I wanna see you with Jax. Holding him. Loving him. I told her I wanna marry you." His hand slides down to mine, the heat from his palm warming me as he tangles his fingers with mine. "I wanna make babies with you. I told her you aren't going anywhere, but you'll treat Jax like your own, and she should be happy for me. Happy I found someone who will support her son the same way she does."

"What was her response?" I prod.

"She said she wants to talk to you. Alone." He squeezes my fingers one more time, bringing them to his lips and kissing my knuckles.

Panic claws at my insides, eradicating whatever semblance of hope I'd felt from his declaration, and I jerk away from him. "What?"

"Eleanor's outside. She wants to talk to you."

My head shakes back and forth as I push myself up from the mattress and press my back to the headboard. "Colt, if she told you she wants to give you another shot, I have nothing to say—"

"Yeah, well, she does. And I think you need to hear it from her."

“Colt,” I plead. I don’t even know what I’m begging for. Solace? Understanding? A scapegoat?

His smile softens. “Trust me, Ash. I wouldn’t throw you to the wolves.”

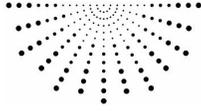
“She has to hate me, Colt.”

“If Jaxon’s mine, Eleanor isn’t going anywhere, but you’re not going anywhere, either, which means you gotta sort this shit out. But trust me,” he repeats. “I think you’re gonna wanna hear what she has to say.”

“Colt...” My voice trails off as he stands up, offering his hand. And because I’m insane and a sucker for the man in front of me, I take it.

Helping me to my feet, he prods, “Go.”

ASHLYN



My nerves feel like they're connected to a live wire. Like even the tiniest circumstance—a look or a pause—could set me off at any second, but I force my legs to move anyway.

After my conversation with Colt, I grudgingly piled my hair into a messy bun on top of my head, and Colt grabbed me a change of clothes from the closet, offering them to me. Once I'd changed and looked halfway decent, I took the stairs, as ready as I'd ever be, while trying not to puke.

Again.

This feels weird. Talking to Eleanor. Knowing I'm the reason she'll never have her happily ever after with the father of her child while being too drained to care anymore. Especially after she informed Colt she'd be willing to give things another try with him. How awkward. Do I ignore it? Do I tell her to go to hell? If only I could figure out why she wants to talk to me and why Colt thinks this will be a good idea. But he's right. I need to trust him, and I *do* trust him, which is the only reason I'm not running in the opposite direction right this second.

When I reach the main floor, I take a deep breath and walk outside. The late morning sun is high in the sky and kisses my cheeks, warming me. Spurring me on.

A Range Rover is parked out front, and Eleanor's hazel eyes meet mine

through the windshield.

She's even prettier than I remember.

More put together than at our previous meeting. Like she had time to get ready for her coffee date instead of rushing out the door. Or maybe it's only my imagination. My insecurities strangle me, but I force myself to swallow as I walk toward her.

The driver's side window rolls down, and she tilts her head toward the passenger door. "Hey. Climb in."

"Do you mind if we go for a walk instead?" I counter.

She shakes her head no. The window rolls back up, the engine quiets, and she unfolds from the car. She's taller than I remember too. Like a willow. Long and lean.

I've never been more intimidated in my entire life, despite Colt already making his stance clear. Because she wants him. She said so herself, didn't she?

"Where to?" she asks.

"There's a pond." I turn on my heel and head toward the gorgeous open space in the center of the complex. It's one of the reasons I fell in love with this place. One of the reasons Colt put money down after our little tour of the apartment. Because he knew I loved it. The quiet. The mature trees. The geese and ducks waddling along the trimmed green grass. The bike path and benches. All of it is my favorite. But even the familiar ambiance refuses to settle my nerves.

Muffled footsteps follow behind me as I take the winding path without waiting for Eleanor to catch up.

This is awkward.

More awkward than the paternity test.

But I'm lost.

I don't know what to say. I don't know her. She's a stranger. A stranger who slept with the love of my life. A stranger who's never going away if the

paternity test confirms what everyone suspects. A stranger who may or may not hate me after Colt announced he'd chosen me instead of her, and I'm too terrified to find out how she feels.

Peering over my shoulder, I force my steps to slow. "So, who's watching Jax?"

"He's with my mom."

I nod and fold my arms.

"He's the father, Ash," she tells me. "My lawyer told me on the phone. Colt doesn't know yet. He wanted to wait until you were around."

Shock wracks through my system, despite the confirmation. I was right all along. Yet I'm still left reeling. He's the father. Colt's a father. I lick my lips, a cacophony of emotions ripping me in two as I let out a deep breath and turn back to Eleanor. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because now you know. Now we aren't playing the what-if game."

She's right. Now, it's official. And now, we need to figure out whether or not we're on the same team. Because Colt's a dad. And no matter what, I know he'll be a great one. But I'd prefer it if his first experience with parenthood isn't an awful one.

"You should tell Colt," I add numbly as Eleanor catches up to me.

"I think it's sweet how you care about Jax already," she says, not bothering to acknowledge my comment.

But I don't deny it.

I do care about him.

So much.

"Do you want children of your own?" she asks.

Avoiding her gaze, I look at the rows of trees surrounding the pond instead and nod again. "Yes. I do."

"Me too. *More* children," she clarifies. "Jaxon's my life. And I'm not gonna lie. I hate how he spent his first year with a mom who was distracted most of the time, thanks to her divorce."

My steps falter. I hadn't thought of that. What it must've been like for Eleanor to juggle being a mom for the first time while cutting ties with her long-time husband.

"How long were you married?"

"Fifteen years."

My eyes widen, and she smiles. "I know. Long time, right? Terrance never wanted kids," she adds. "He was a very...logical man who preferred spending his time in a classroom than being home with his wife. To be honest, when I met Colt, I was bored and lonely. I got caught up in a boy who expected nothing from me but a good time which was perfect because it's all I could give him."

Acid swirls in my stomach, but I nod. Because I need to hear this. The good. The bad. And the ugly. And she deserves a chance to say her piece. It doesn't matter that I've seen Colt make out with a girl who wasn't me before we officially started dating. It doesn't matter that I know he's far from a saint and has a shady past. But making a child with someone who isn't you? It's different. It hits harder. Especially now. And I think she knows it too. Especially if she wants him back.

"When Terrance found out about everything, he convinced the dean to kick Colt out of Dixie Tech," Eleanor continues.

"I heard."

"I'm not going to lie. I felt terrible because of it, but I'd hoped a clean break would be enough for both of us to move forward. I never expected the wrench thrown our way."

I bite back my annoyance and stare at the ground as we stroll down the path side by side. I don't know what she expects me to say. Duh. No one expects a surprise pregnancy. That's why it's called a *surprise*.

"I was so scared to reach out to Colt. I want you to know I really did try to search for a solution not involving him. I've seen the newspapers. I've watched him on TV. He's going places, and I hated the idea of ruining his

future by coming out of the woodwork. Yet, here I am.” She lifts her arms wide and shakes her head, disgust and shame twisting her gorgeous features. “I’m going to be honest here. I need help. Financially. Physically. The idea of leaving Jax in daycare while I go to work literally makes me sick to my stomach.”

“I understand.”

She nods as if she’s grateful for my understanding. Then, a haze of discomfort settles over her, making my stomach curdle with unease.

“I assume he told you I asked if he’d be willing to give our relationship another try...romantically speaking,” she murmurs.

My chest squeezes, and I kick a pebble, watching it skitter across the asphalt. “He mentioned it,” I force out.

Her steps slow, and I stop walking, wanting to end this conversation as quickly as possible. Because I’m too overwhelmed. By everything. The results. Eleanor’s walk down memory lane. *Everything*.

“You seemed so...stand-offish during the paternity visit. I didn’t know where you stood or if you even wanted to stay with Colt anymore. It’s why I brought it up. The possibility of Colt and me trying to work things out,” she clarifies. “But I want you to know I wasn’t trying to step on your toes or anything—”

“It’s fine,” I lie.

It isn’t. At all. But what else am I supposed to say? Of course, she’d want to work things out with Colt. He’s Colt fucking Thorne. He’s perfect. I can’t blame her for wanting him. Everyone wants him. But now I’m too greedy to give him up. To let him go. Over my dead body. But how do I make my stance clear with the woman Colt shares a child with?

“Ash, listen,” she rushes out, sensing my barely restrained animosity. “It’s *not* fine. I know that now. But when I brought it up to him, Colt told me he loves *you*. And here’s the thing. I’ve been in a relationship with someone whose love was split between me and someone or *something* else. With

Terrance, it was his job. And after our conversation this morning, I realized if I ever went down this road with Colt, it would be you. Even if you left him, it would still be you. It would *always* be you. I don't want to do that again. The heartache was awful, and Terrance and I wound up hurting each other in irreparable ways. Don't get me wrong. It would be a hell of a lot easier if Jaxon's parents loved each other and made things work. But Colt doesn't love me. And he never will."

I gulp and look up at her.

"As long as *all* of Jaxon's parents love him and are there for him, including you, then I think it's more than enough. And I think he'll turn out just fine. Don't you?"

All.

As in...equal.

The olive branch is more than I could've ever expected and makes me want to cry.

"Yes, I'm his mother," she adds. "But I came for help. For partners in raising him. And who would've thought, as it turns out, I'd get a pretty awesome two-for-one deal." She pulls me into a hug, and I return it, wrapping my arms around her as a shuddered breath escapes me.

I didn't know I needed her acceptance, her blessing, until this moment. But I feel lighter than ever.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"Thank *you*," she returns, letting me go. "We're all in this together, ya know?"

"Like in *High School Musical*?" I quip.

"Huh?"

"We're All in This Together," I try again, but she looks as lost as ever. My jaw drops. "Don't tell me you've never seen *High School Musical*."

"Girl, I'm almost forty," she reminds me. "It came out when I was in college."

“Well, yeah, but still.” I hook my arm through hers and guide us back to the apartment. “It’s Zac Efron. He’s a babe.”

“Yeah, he’s *almost* as cute as your fiancé.” Eleanor winks. “Are you going to say yes when he asks you now?”

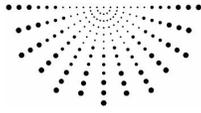
“We’ll see,” I reply. “But first, you need to tell Colt the good news.”

“*We* need to tell Colt the good news,” she corrects me.

And damn. No other word has ever felt sweeter.

We.

COLT



“**Y**ou,” Ash murmurs gripping the edge of the doorjamb, “deserve a medal.”

Chuckling, I set my phone on my chest as my eyes slide down her body. “And you look fucking sexy in my T-shirt.”

“Oh, this old thing?” She rubs her thighs together, her hair pulled over her shoulder as the collar of my T-shirt slips over one shoulder, leaving her clavicle on full display. The innocent slip of skin makes my mouth water, and my cock hardens beneath the sheets. The bathroom light casts a glow around her, making my Sunshine look like a fucking angel.

I’m still not sure what Eleanor told Ashlyn on their walk around the complex, but whatever it was, it’s exactly what Ashlyn needed to hear. When they came back, Eleanor had a bottle of champagne in her hand, and they told me I’m Jaxon’s father.

It’s still surreal. Knowing he’s officially mine. But even more surreal is Ashlyn’s reaction to the news.

She’s excited.

Happy.

After we popped the cork on the champagne and each had a glass, Eleanor promised she’d be in touch, then left me alone with the love of my life. We went baby shopping online for a crib, diaper bag, car seat, and all the

other essentials. Once we'd finished, I ordered takeout. We ate, did more online shopping, and decided to get ready for bed.

And now, here she is, my own personal wet dream standing in front of me.

“You gonna come here, Sunshine? Or do I gotta come to you?”

With a smirk, she pushes away from the doorjamb and saunters toward me, her hips swaying with every step. Her thighs feel like silk beneath my fingertips as she straddles my lap and touches my face. Gently. Softly. Like I'm precious or some shit.

“Why are you looking at me like this?” I ask.

“Because I love you,” she whispers, leaning closer and kissing me. Her lips frame my bottom one, and she sucks it into her mouth and nibbles. My cock jumps beneath her from the love bite, and she smiles against me.

“And I love your mind,” she continues. “And your lips.” She kisses me again. “And your heart.” Her hand trails down my chest, resting on my left pec. “And your cock.” She grinds herself against me. “And your patience.” Her hips roll again, and I groan.

“Not gonna be very patient if you keep this up, Sunshine.”

Her laugh kills me as she throws her head back, and I take full advantage, nipping at her throat and sucking her sensitive skin into my mouth.

A soft whimper slips out of her. Her grip tightens on my shoulders as she uses them for leverage, grinding herself against my shaft through my boxers. Heat spreads along the ridge, and I cup her ass beneath the white LAU T-shirt draped over her body. All I feel is skin.

Hot. Smooth. Skin.

Fuck.

“You wearing underwear, Sunshine?” I growl.

“Does it feel like I'm wearing underwear, Mr. Thorne?”

I thrust against her bare pussy again. Then, I cradle the back of her head and snake my arm around her waist, flipping us over until her spine is pressed

against the mattress.

“Hey!” she squeals through a breath of laughter.

But I don’t answer her. I’m too desperate. To make her mine. To make love to her. To come inside her and claim her and be reminded she isn’t going anywhere. She’s staying. She’s in this with me. Forever.

I shove the shirt up a few more inches and watch my dick rub against her as she lays on her back, her thighs cradling my waist. The thin material of my boxers is the only thing keeping us apart, and fuck if it isn’t one of the hottest things I’ve ever seen. “Told you I was done being patient.”

I kiss my way down her body, ignoring my aching cock and how much I wanna push myself inside her.

I can feel her eyes on me as I press kisses to her toned stomach, trailing my mouth further south. I wanna taste her. I wanna make her come with my mouth. I wanna worship her and remind her why she was made for me. Why we belong together.

“And here I thought you deserved a reward for being so sweet with me over the past few weeks,” she quips, dragging her nails along the back of my head as I spread her thighs wider. “Putting up with my bullshit and giving me time to figure things—ah!”

I kiss her core, licking at her juices as my hands grip the little divot between her thighs and lips.

Her hips tilt up to meet my mouth as a soft moan slips out of her, and I savor it. The sound. The taste. The way her muscles tighten beneath my grasp. The way my name sounds when it’s mixed with her breathy whimpers. I savor it all, knowing how close I was to losing her. How close I was to fucking this up.

“Yes,” she breathes out as my mouth finds her clit. I press the flat of my tongue against it, and she tugs at my hair.

“Yes. Yes. Yes.” The words are barely whispered. Like a prayer. But it spurs me on, and I suck harder on the nub, adding a finger and crooking it

inside her. Her hips buck off the mattress, and she arches her back as I continue licking her over and over. Soon, she comes against my mouth. I lap it up, letting her orgasm roll over her until her muscles relax and her grip eases on my head.

“Fuuuuck,” she breathes out and laughs, looking down at me. Her skin is pink, and her smile is wide. Like she’s on top of the world. Like she’s still high from her orgasm. And my chest swells with pride. Because I put it there. Her smile. And I’ll do anything to keep it in place for as long as possible.

“You should get inside me now,” she announces.

“Oh, I should, huh?”

“Mm-hmm. Let’s work on building our family.”

“You like the idea of me putting a baby in you?” I challenge as I stand, shove my boxers off, and crawl up her lithe body. She raises her knees and cradles me between her thighs.

“I like the idea of you putting a baby in me a lot.”

“Yeah?”

“Mm-hmm. The idea of your cum inside me makes me want you even more.”

My dick jerks at the thought, so I line it up at her entrance and push inside her.

Hot.

Tight.

Wet.

I burrow my head into her neck as her gasp echoes around me from the intrusion.

“I fucking love you, Ashlyn.”

Her fingers scrape along my spine and beneath my shirt. She pushes it up my torso, craving as much skin-on-skin contact as I am.

“I love you too.” Her legs wrap around me until her ankles are hooked right above my ass.

Slowly, I start to move, my dick rubbing along her inner walls as I thrust in and out of her. She tightens around me. I nearly come on the spot but push myself onto my elbows to watch my cock enter her. She follows suit, looking down to where our bodies connect, her breaths becoming faster and faster with every thrust. She tosses her head back as another orgasm rolls through her, squeezing me. Pulling me deeper. Her pleasure triggers my own, and my cock pulses as I come inside of her. My arms give out, and I collapse, pushing her into the mattress.

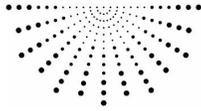
Her soft laugh is followed by a kiss on my temple. And I've never felt more at home. More at peace. More ready to take on the world and all the crazy curveballs it has headed our way.

“Love you,” I repeat.

“Love you,” she returns. “So. Freaking. Much.”

And without a doubt, I know she does.

BLAKELY



“**A**ll right, so here’s the deal,” I announce to Kate. “I need to know when you’re going to tell Ash about the baby so I don’t spill the beans on your behalf.”

She groans, clutching the decorative pillow to her chest as Theo and Macklin lift the bookshelf from the family room and carry it to the curb. It’s officially moving day for Mia and me. Obviously, I’ll be moving in with Theo, and Mia is...Mia. I’m not sure what her plans are, but apparently, she has a place to live for the time being and is now helping the Lions with their social media? Honestly, I’m not one hundred percent sure, but she assured everyone she has a game plan, and she’s happy for Theo and me and all the chaos in our future.

Not gonna lie. I was a little terrified to tell Mia I was moving out, but she didn’t bat an eye, telling me she’d even placed a bet with Kate about how long I’d last before moving in with Theo. I’d be annoyed if I weren’t so proud. After all, I’m a sucker for bets. Regardless, I’m still sad to see the place so empty. So...bare.

Like we’re officially closing a chapter in our lives.

I’m not sure I’m ready for it.

To let go.

To move on.

I shake off the thought and turn back to Kate standing by the family room window. Macklin won't let her lift anything other than the decorative pillows and throw blankets, which makes sense, considering the baby in her belly. But Ash and Colt don't know, and they're on their way here, so I'm not sure if Kate will be able to fly under the radar without them noticing her lack of lifting.

"Take it from someone who's kept Ash in the dark on shit," Mia adds from the hallway, "the longer you wait, the worse she'll react."

"Besides," I continue, "she's going to be so excited for you like we were."

Kate's worried gaze bounces between Mia and me as she chews her bottom lip. "Yeah, but you guys aren't dating a man with a baby mama on the side. There's a difference—"

"Are you guys talking about Eleanor?" Ashlyn asks from the entrance.

The blood drains from Kate's face, making her look like she's seconds from losing her lunch, so I throw her a bone and interrupt. "Uh, yeah. How's that going anyway? You and Eleanor and...everything?"

Colt grabs Ash's hips from behind her and bends forward, brushing a kiss against her cheek. With a smile, Ash leans into his embrace and peeks up at him. "You wanna tell them?"

"Sure." He kisses her forehead and turns to us. "The results came in, and it's official. He's ours."

Ash rolls her eyes and clarifies, "He's Colt's biological son, and he'll be mine in every other sense of the word."

"And you're okay with that?" I ask carefully.

"I mean, it's been quite the curveball, but yeah," Ash replies. "I love Colt, and I'm already falling for Jaxon too. I think I was scared to open that door. Afraid of stepping on Eleanor's toes or always being the third wheel when it came to everything. But we all had a nice long chat after the results came in, and Eleanor told us she's more than willing to accept any help Colt and I can

offer. *Both* of us. And since I'm not going anywhere when it comes to my relationship with Colt, we decided we're all going to be there for Jax and help raise him together. And honestly? I'm excited about it. So, yeah. Now you're all updated." Ashlyn tangles her fingers with Colt's around her waist, lacing them together. "We're in this together."

I'd make fun of them for being all gushy if I wasn't so damn happy they finally figured their shit out. Instead, I clap my hands. "Yay! I'm gonna be an aunt again!"

"Blake!" Kate snaps.

My lips zip, and my eyes go wide.

Ahhhh, shit.

"*Again?*" Ash steps further into the room, tossing questioning looks to anyone who will make eye contact with her.

Or at least, I assume it's what she's doing. It's not like I'm gonna look at her. Not right now. Nope. The faded carpet is looking pretty interesting at this moment. Just sayin'.

"Hey, man. What's up?" Theo asks as he walks through the front door with Macklin trailing behind. Both of them are oblivious to the bomb I've dropped. I wipe my sweaty palms against my dark leggings, unsure of what the hell I'm supposed to do or if I've already done more than enough.

Scratching the scruff along his jaw, Colt clears his throat and steps aside, giving Macklin and Theo more space in the family room. Theo stops short, reading the weighted silence in the small area. Meanwhile, Macklin heads straight toward a frozen Kate, who looks like she might pass out at any second.

"What's going on?" he asks her. "You okay?"

"I'm fine."

"*Again?*" Ash repeats to no one in particular. She doesn't sound upset. She sounds confused. Like she's been told the punchline to a joke but never heard the first half of it to begin with. "Blake's gonna be an aunt *again?*"

“I was kidding,” I try to brush it off. “You know me. Being a smartass and all.”

“Blake, it’s fine,” Kate murmurs. Rubbing her hands up and down her bare arms, she steps into Mack’s embrace and turns to face everyone. He wraps his arms around her shoulders. She holds onto his wrists and takes a deep breath when Ash strides toward her, grabbing her left hand. The diamond ring glints in the light. “Wait, are you engaged?”

“Uh...yeah,” Kate answers shyly.

Ash’s eyes snap from the gorgeous Tiffany ring to Kate’s face. “And you’re...pregnant?”

Kate gulps. “Yes?”

Mia and I exchange worried glances, each of us holding our breaths.

Ash throws her arms around Kate’s neck and hugs her tight. “I am so happy for you!” She reaches for Mack and hugs him too. “And you! You guys! This is amazing!”

Mack instantly relaxes, returning Ashlyn’s hug while leaving Kate sandwiched between them. “Thanks, Ash.”

“Congrats, man,” Colt interjects. He strides toward the group hug in the center of the family room in time for Macklin to let Ashlyn go. Colt pulls Mack into a quick man-hug, then squeezes Kate too.

“How far along are you?” Ash asks. “And why didn’t you tell me? This is amazing! Seriously. I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks,” Kate murmurs. “It’s still pretty new. I’m almost out of my first trimester, but I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. With everything going on, I didn’t want to...” Her shoulders lift, and Ash nods her understanding.

“I get it,” Ash says. “But seriously. I’m so excited for you. You’re gonna be the best mom!”

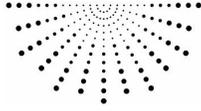
“So are you,” Kate replies. “Jaxon’s lucky to have you.”

“P.S. When are we gonna meet him?” I interrupt.

Colt looks at me and smiles. “Soon.”

“Perfect.”

ASHLYN



Colt's nose wrinkles as we pull into the parking spot outside our apartment. "I think he pooped."

I look over my shoulder to find Jaxon kicking his little legs, the Tigger stuffie hanging precariously off the edge as if it might fall onto the leather seat any second. The sour stench hangs in the air, and I laugh, turning back to Colt. "Pretty sure you're right."

"How do I change a diaper?" Colt asks.

Surprised, I reply, "Wait. You've *never* changed a diaper?"

He shakes his head, worry crinkling the corners of his eyes as he cuts off the engine. The guy looks so lost. So out of his element. I kind of want to kiss him for it.

With another laugh, I urge, "Come on. I'll show you."

We head inside the apartment. The car seat swings next to Colt's legs as he carries Jaxon with us. After Ali confirmed to everyone Colt is indeed his father, we sat down for dinner with Eleanor and discussed custody, which was surreal on an entirely different level.

Thanks to Colt's career choice and lack of involvement in Jaxon's first year of life, we decided to take things slowly, only watching him on the weekends when Colt's in town. I exchanged numbers with Eleanor in case she ever needs someone to keep an eye on Jax while Colt's out of town. As

for child support, Ali walked us through the traditional breakdown, and Colt agreed without batting an eye.

And now. Here we are. Having our first night together.

Colt. Me. And Jaxon.

“Do you think he’ll like the crib?” Colt asks.

“Yeah, I think he’ll like it just fine.”

“And the toys? They aren’t too young for him or anything, right?”

“I think he’ll love them,” I reply.

Colt sets the car seat inside the front door after opening it and fumbles with the straps, helplessly turning to me.

“Here.” I click the massive red button between Jaxon’s thighs, and the buckles unlatch.

Colt nods, soaking up my demonstration like a dry sponge.

“There you go,” I offer.

I step back and give Colt some space as he slowly picks Jax up. Colt’s watery eyes meet mine, and his expression sours. “Holy shit, that stinks.”

With a laugh, I reach for the diaper bag, rummaging through everything, pulling out the wipes and a clean nappy. “Here.”

It’s kind of adorable. Watching him dry heave while wiping the poop from Jaxon’s bum. Once he’s finished, I teach Colt how to change Jaxon’s clothes, then run the soiled diaper to the outside garbage can because there’s no way we’re keeping it inside our house.

When I return to the apartment, Jaxon is clinging to Colt’s fingers as he waddles around in the kitchen, learning how to walk. Colt’s head snaps up when he hears the door close and grins. “Look how good he’s doing.”

“He’s killing it,” I agree.

They both are.

How seamlessly they fit together. How much Jaxon makes Colt laugh. How much Colt cares about Jax and if he’s comfortable. If he’s having fun. If he likes his smashed peas. Everything. Every tiny interaction. Every laugh

and “Hey, Ash, look what Jax is doing!” has had me grinning from ear to ear.

By the end of the night, my ovaries want to burst, but I ignore the feeling and snuggle into Colt’s side. Jaxon’s asleep in the crib, and the monitor is set up on Colt’s nightstand, giving him a constant view of his little boy in the next room.

“I’m exhausted,” he mutters.

“You and me both.”

He drops a kiss on the crown of my head, then lays back on the pillow.

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For putting up with me.”

“You know I love you,” I remind him.

“Never doubted it for a second.” He pauses. “Well, maybe a second, but —” I smack his shoulder, and he yelps. “Hey!”

Pushing myself up, I look down at him. “Don’t you dare question for a single second whether or not I love you.”

“Okay. I won’t.”

“Good.”

“Good,” he quips, his eyes shining with mirth.

“What is it?” I ask.

“You,” he murmurs.

“What about me?”

“Watching you with him.” A smile plays at the corner of his lips as he toys with the ends of my hair hanging over my shoulder. “Watching you watch me with him.”

“Who says I’ve been watching you with Jax?” I challenge.

His brows raise. “Are you gonna try to deny how sexy you think I am, Sunshine?”

I snort. “No need to inflate your ego any more than it already is, Colt.”

“Ah, so you *do* think I’m sexy.”

“I think I’m tired,” I tell him.

“And I think I wanna marry you someday.”

My heart flutters in my chest, and for the first time since we found out about Jaxon, I’m not scared at the idea of marrying Colt Thorne. In fact, the idea sounds pretty freaking incredible.

“Oh, you do, huh?” I reply. “You *think* you wanna marry me someday?”

“Mm-hmm.” The sound is low and throaty and shoots straight to my core. “Wanna know what else I think?”

“What?”

“I think you’re an amazing mom to Jax.” He lifts his head from the pillow, kissing my cheek. His mouth slides down, and he nibbles my jaw playfully. “And I think you’re gonna be an amazing mom to the rest of our kids too.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. Wanna know what else I think?” he repeats.

“What?”

“I think we should try. Right here. Right now. To make a baby.”

Warmth seeps into every corner of my soul as I bite my bottom lip, attempting to keep my emotions in check. “Oh, you do?”

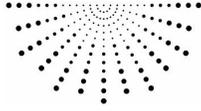
“Mm-hmm.” His hand slides down my waist, toying with the waistband of the boxers I’d stolen from him.

“You do know I’m on the pill, right?”

“All right,” he pushes me onto my back and rolls on top of me. His grasp is tight around my wrists as he shoves them above my head, pinning me in place. “We’ll call this one a practice round.” Then he leans forward and kisses the shit out of me, leaving me a squirming mess beneath him.

And damn, it’s the best thing I’ve ever felt.

ASHLYN



It's the first preseason game, and the Lions killed it.

After the press conference, the players lined up in a giant room and are now taking photos with fans, signing posters, and smiling for the cameras currently lighting up the place.

After saying goodbye to Becca, Colt's mom, Blake and I found a quiet spot in the back of the room and are hiding out, waiting for the guys to finish so we can go home and celebrate their first win, even if it doesn't officially count. Jaxon's with Eleanor tonight. Which is good. He'd probably hate all the noise. I promised Colt I'd bring him to the next home game so Jaxon can watch his daddy on the ice.

Thankfully, Eleanor didn't bat an eye when I suggested it and even admitted she has a date with her doorman, so it works out.

Things have been going smoothly since our talk, and we've even found a routine that works for all of us. Colt's an amazing father, and I've never been more proud to call him mine. I catch myself staring at him from across the room, chatting with a ten-year-old in a Lions jersey.

Seriously. There's something sexy about seeing your man in a room full of people, each of them vying for his attention while knowing you're the one who owns it.

It helps to have his name stamped across the jersey I'm wearing and his

number painted on my cheek. Blake convinced me to try it out, and I'm not gonna lie. I don't hate face paint. I'm also not hating the death looks from the puck bunnies like I normally do.

I dunno. Maybe it's because we've already been through the wringer this year, but if anything, the target on my back is growing on me, and I can handle it. The heat. The angry looks. The hushed voices anytime I walk by. Because they're jealous. And honestly? I can't blame them. I'd be jealous, too, if I couldn't claim Colt as my own.

Kate and Macklin left after the game, and Mia's around here somewhere. I search the room for her but return my attention to Colt when I don't spot her anywhere. His hair is still damp from the shower, but the little boy he'd been talking to is missing, replaced with a leggy blonde in a tiny mini skirt and a crop top. She must be freezing, though it doesn't look like she's complaining. Nope. She's too busy groping Colt's bicep.

My muscles tense as I watch Colt's nostrils flare. He says something to her, but it's too loud in the room to hear him. He's smiling at her, but it's fake. I can see it in his eyes and the tightness in his muscles. The way he's throttling the sharpie in his hand as he scrawls his name onto the poster with a picture of the team printed across the front of it.

I stand up slowly and walk closer, catching his mouth moving as I make out the words, *stop touching me*. His stern look is glued to her hand on his bicep, but she only laughs, the sound tinkling through the air as I head toward them.

"Careful!" Blake calls, and I toss her a quick smile over my shoulder as I make my way through the sea of people.

"I have a girlfriend," Colt informs her. He hasn't seen me yet. He's too distracted by the handsy fan in front of him. While his smile is still present, his jaw tics as he waits for her to let him go. Besides, the smile isn't for her. It's for the cameras. He can't make another scene. Not after the SeaBird incident. And I have a feeling the girl knows it.

“Oh, come on,” the bunny pleads, her tone syrupy sweet. “Your girlfriend knows she’s dating a hockey player.” She lets go of his bicep and drags her hands along the lapel of his suit, making me see red as she takes the poster from his fisted hand. “Enjoying your options is part of the appeal of being a player, isn’t it?”

Colt looks pissed, but he doesn’t jerk away. He steps back, giving himself some room as cameras flash around him and the rest of the team. The girl’s clueless. Or determined. I can’t decide which. But it doesn’t matter. She’s like all the rest of them. Attention whores who feel like they can paw at Colt Thorne because they know if he pushes them away, he’ll be eaten alive by the media. Again. If he was a woman, and a man was touching her when she didn’t want him to, the person would be ripped apart. Instead, people are laughing. Taking photos and posing for pictures with the other teammates like she isn’t crossing a line right in front of them. My nose wrinkles as I watch the interaction, waiting for someone to intervene. But no one does.

Seriously. Sometimes the double standard is mind-boggling.

I close the last few feet between us, keeping my pace steady and controlled in hopes of not showing the paparazzi exactly how much I’m fuming.

When Colt’s within reach, I loop my arm through his and interrupt, “Excuse me.”

The girl looks at me and smiles, but she doesn’t remove her hand from his chest, practically cupping his pec through his suit. “Oh. Hi.”

It takes me a second to recognize her, but when I do, my eyes widen for a split second before narrowing. It’s one of the girls from the restaurant. The one who cornered me in the bathroom with her friend. The girl who full-on admitted she wanted to steal Colt away from me.

No. Freaking. Way.

I look at the cameras, pasting on an innocent smile as I step closer and drop my voice low so only she can hear me. “I think it’s time you move on

and let some of the other fans greet Colt, don't you?"

Sensing the animosity emanating from me despite my smile, she lifts her hands and rubs her fingers together as if savoring the feeling of his muscles beneath her palm from a moment ago. "I'm sorry. I was under the impression he still had his balls and could speak for himself."

I laugh and step closer to her as if we're old friends, when in reality? I'm seconds from wrapping my hands around her neck and squeezing. "Oh, trust me. He most definitely has his balls and a great cock too." I smirk. "But he's also a gentleman, and it's the only reason he didn't rip your hand off when you touched him the first time. Do you want to know a secret?" I whisper, pulling her into a hug while feeding the perception we're friends. The cameras click around us and document our embrace as I drop my voice even lower. "Colt might have to keep the peace because his contract tells him to, but I haven't signed a single document stating I need to play nice or keep up appearances. Do you know what that means? It means I don't care if I look crazy for the paparazzi anymore because they will write what they want to write no matter what I do. I don't care if they paint me as a villain or a deranged sociopath. If you ever touch him again, I'll rip out your extensions and shove them down your throat in front of everyone." I smile and pull away from her. "Understood?"

Her expression tightens, but she backs away like she believes me.

Good.

She should.

"Good to see you again," she mutters, continuing the charade.

"You too. Have fun saying hi to the rest of the players." I wiggle my fingers back and forth and watch her move on to the new goalie, Beck.

Poor guy.

A pair of hands wrap around my waist, and a husky voice tickles the shell of my ear as people continue shuffling around me, each of them making their way to their own personal hero while mine cradles me against this chest.

“What was that?” Colt murmurs.

I twist around and rise onto my tiptoes, kissing him softly. “That was me standing up for myself. And for you. You deserve to be up here, Colt. You deserve to shine and have fun. And while I can’t be more grateful for how you’ve tried to take the heat and protect me from all of this, I’m not afraid to rock the boat anymore. Not afraid to set boundaries and enforce them. Now, get back to work. You have some fans to pose with.” I kiss him one more time, then head to the back of the room, taking my place beside Blake, who looks thoroughly impressed.

“What was that?” she asks.

“That was me claiming my man instead of letting all the stupid puck bunnies push me around,” I announce.

“Yeah. I thought she looked familiar,” Blake notes, barely casting a glance at the bitch as she turns back to me. “Wanna know what else it was?” She kicks her feet up onto the chair in front of her.

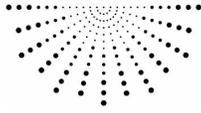
“What?” I ask.

“Freaking hot.” She laughs. “Seriously. I kind of want to high-five you for it.”

“Well, I think it’s past time I stop letting people push me around, don’t you?”

“Yup.” Her shoulder bumps against mine. “And I couldn’t be more proud.”

COLT



I grab Ash's waist and pick her up, pressing her back to the wall inside our apartment as I devour her whole. Watching her defend me after the game, watching her claim me and kiss me in front of all those cameras, was the sexiest fucking thing I've ever experienced.

Her arms and legs wrap around me as she kisses me back, our tongues dueling for dominance.

"Do you have any idea," I grit out between kisses, "how fucking hot you were defending me?"

She laughs and bites my bottom lip but doesn't answer me, her hands tangling through my hair and tugging. Hard. The sharp pain shoots straight to my cock. I groan. With my hands on her ass, I carry her to the bedroom and fall on top of her, caging her in on both sides.

"Fucking love you," I grunt. The flimsy material of her leggings is wrenched down while she unbuttons my slacks and shoves them past my ass, making my dick spring free. Once we're both undressed, she pumps my cock in her hand and guides me back down.

"I'm not afraid anymore," she whispers. "Not afraid to give you everything. To let you be my everything."

I close my eyes and press my forehead to hers as her words sink in. My breathing is ragged with every pass of her silky palm against my length. I'm

blown away, yet again, by what this woman does to me. How she makes me feel. Like I'm unraveling. Like I'm being sewn together again.

Sensing how close I already am to coming, she opens her thighs and lifts her hips, sliding my erection along her clit. "Yes," she breathes out. "Yes."

Unable to handle the torture, I grab my dick and line it up with her entrance, pushing into her with one long thrust. And fuck, she feels good. Stretching around me. Letting me in. Physically. Emotionally. Like the last of our barriers—my career and all it entails—is finally gone, leaving us closer than ever. I quicken my pace, and she takes it all. Every grunt. Every thrust. Every breath. Every fucking flaw of mine she takes in stride, accommodating it. Accommodating me. Loving me. Claiming me.

Slipping my hand between us, I thumb her clit, playing with it in soft, small circles. Her breath hitches, and her teeth sink into the crook of my neck. Biting. Licking. Sucking.

"I'm gonna come," she whimpers. "Colt, I'm gonna—"

Her pussy clenches around me, and I gasp, coming inside of her as my vision blurs.

Fuck.

Perfect. So fucking perfect.

When I'm finished, I grab a towel from the bathroom and help her clean up, and we both climb into the bed. Her breath is warm on my bare chest as she snuggles against me, letting a hum of contentment vibrate up her throat. The sound makes me feel like the Grinch, my heart swelling in my chest until I'm pretty sure it could burst at any second.

But I'm happy.

So damn happy.

And it's all because of Ash.

"Gonna marry you one day, Sunshine," I promise her.

"Gonna say yes one day, Colt," she quips.

One day.

As the words slip past her lips, I realize how desperate I am to reach it. One day. How anxious I am to take the next step instead of only talking about it like we have been for months. And after tonight? After Jaxon and Eleanor and all the outside drama and hockey contracts, I've never been more ready to seal the deal. To make one day reachable. To make it final. To make it *real*.

Rolling onto my side, I dig in the nightstand for the box I've kept hidden for months. I've been waiting for the perfect time to bring it out without realizing how many opportunities I've let slip by in the process. Opportunities like this one. That are perfect in their own ways. Without the flash or the spotlight. Just me and Ash. The way we were always meant to be.

When I turn back around, I rub my thumb along the edge of the little black box and take a deep breath. Because even though I've known I've wanted her for over a year now, taking this step—making it official—is scary as shit, and I don't want to screw it up.

Ash is already half-asleep and curled on her side, her long blonde hair sprawled across her pillow. She looks gorgeous like this. Carefree. Satiated. Perfect.

"Hey, Ash?" I murmur.

Her eyelids are heavy, but she pulls them open. "Yes?"

"I love you."

She smiles. "I love you too."

"I love the way you steal my clothes." I push her hair away from her face. "I love the way you treat Jax like he's your own." My thumb skates across her cheek. "I love the way you tuck your hair behind your ear when you're nervous and how you mother everyone around you, making sure they're taken care of." Bending down, I kiss the tip of her nose. "I love the freckles along your nose and the way you kiss me. I love how you have my back and how you aren't afraid to claim me in front of everyone, especially people you hate." Her light laugh makes my heart skip a beat. "I love the life we've

started building and the one we've dreamt of creating together."

"Me too," she whispers.

"I'm ready to chase those dreams. I'm ready to grab hold with both hands." I sit back and open the black velvet box in my hand. "Because as long as you're by my side, I have everything I could ever ask for, Sunshine. Will you marry me?"

Her eyes turn glassy as she sits up and looks down at the engagement ring I'd picked for her. Dazed. Surprised. In awe. Her emotions flicker in her green gaze, but she doesn't whisper a single syllable, leaving me on pins and needles as I wait. With her fingers pressed against her barely parted lips, she tears her attention from the rose gold band and teardrop diamond I knew she'd love, letting her eyes meet mine.

"Are you serious, Colt?" she whispers.

"Marry me," I repeat.

"You *are* serious," she decides, her voice filled with awe.

"Marry me," I push.

A soft smile toys at the edge of her lips. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay, I'll marry you."

I laugh and thread my fingers through her hair, pulling her against me. "Thank fuck."

Then, I kiss the shit out of her.

Because the curveballs life throws our way don't matter. The dreams we both want are worth fighting for. And we're in this for the long haul. We're in this together.

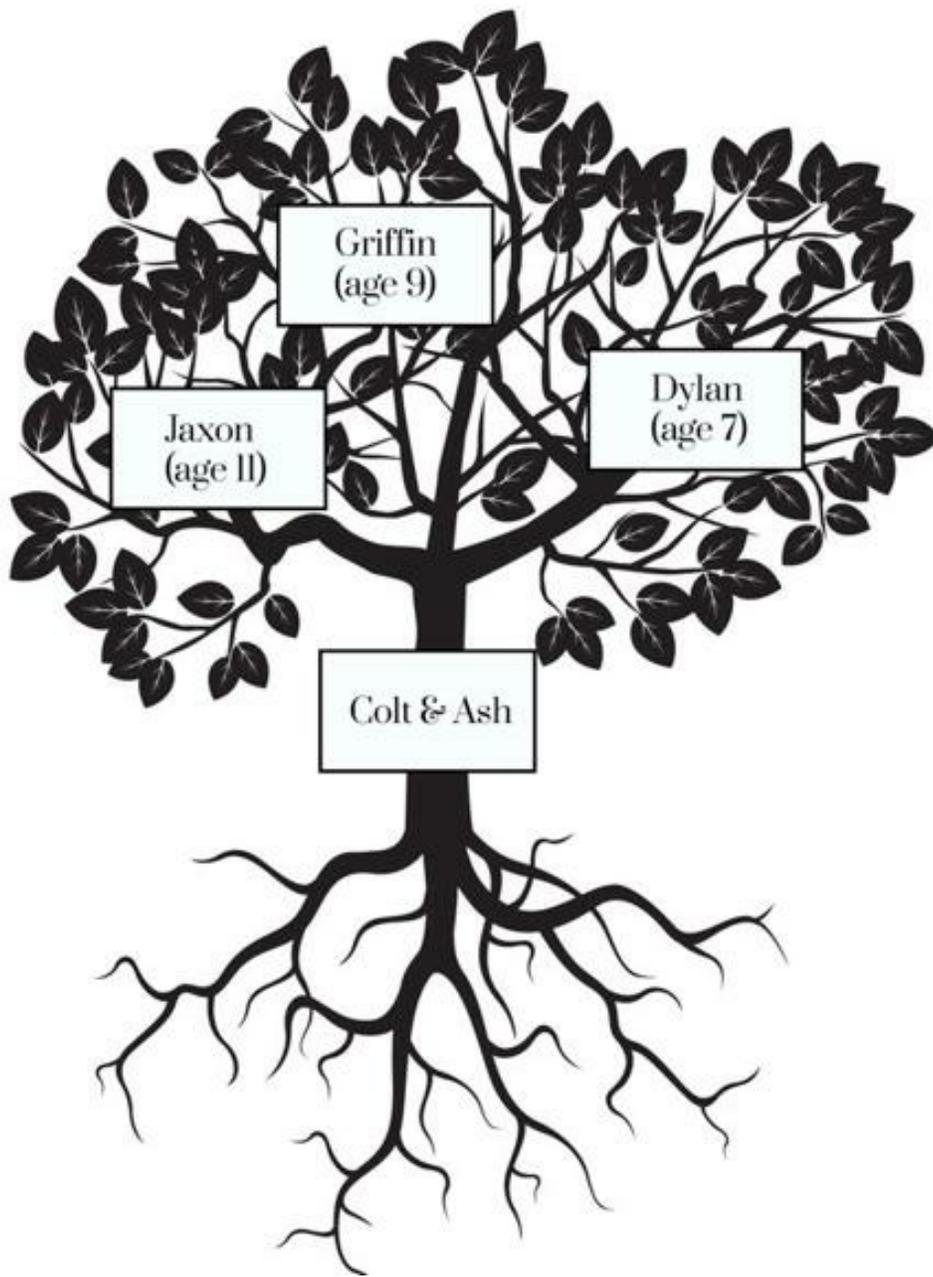
"Thank you," I whisper against her swollen lips.

"For what?"

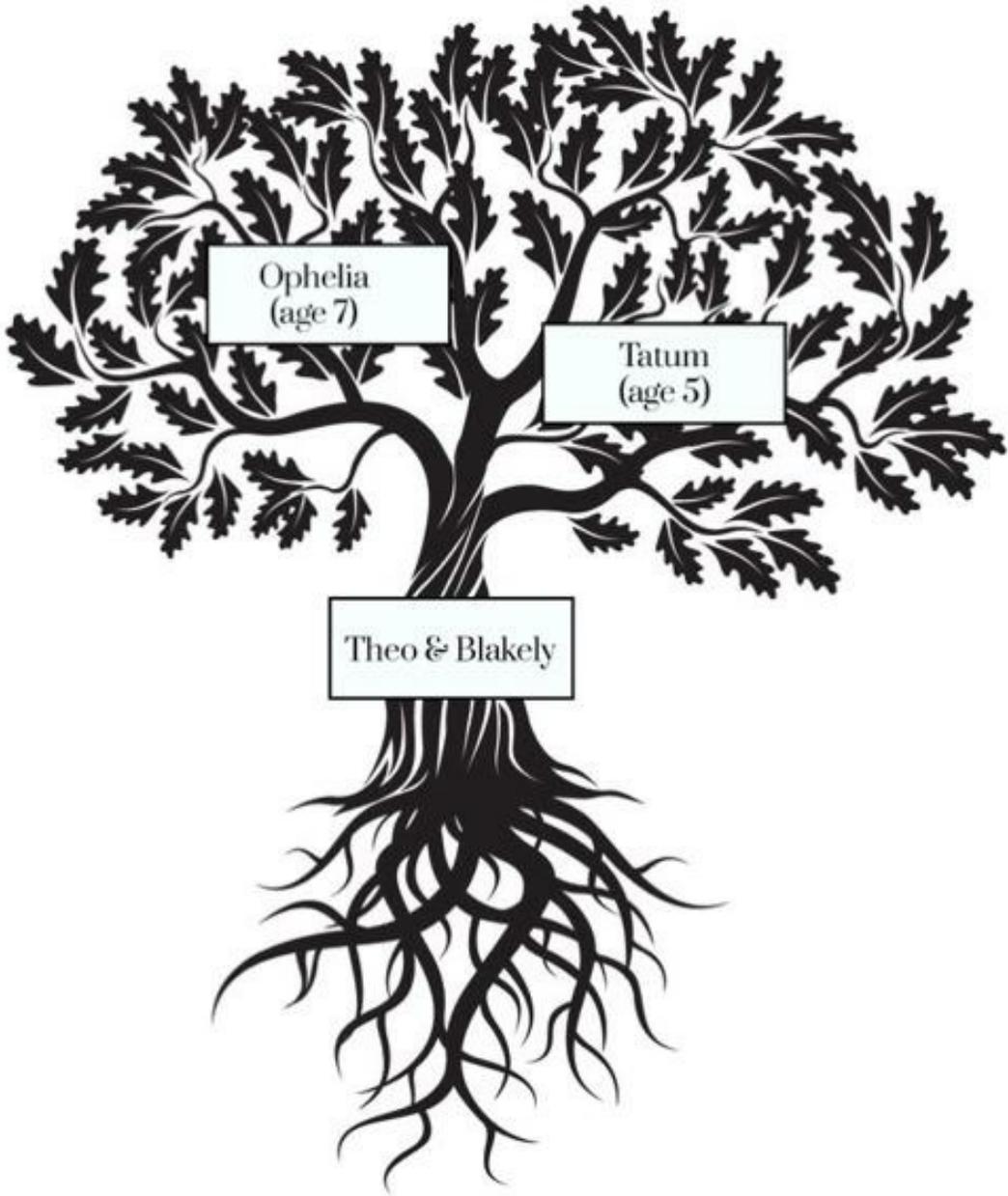
"For letting me love you."

And fuck, it's the truth.

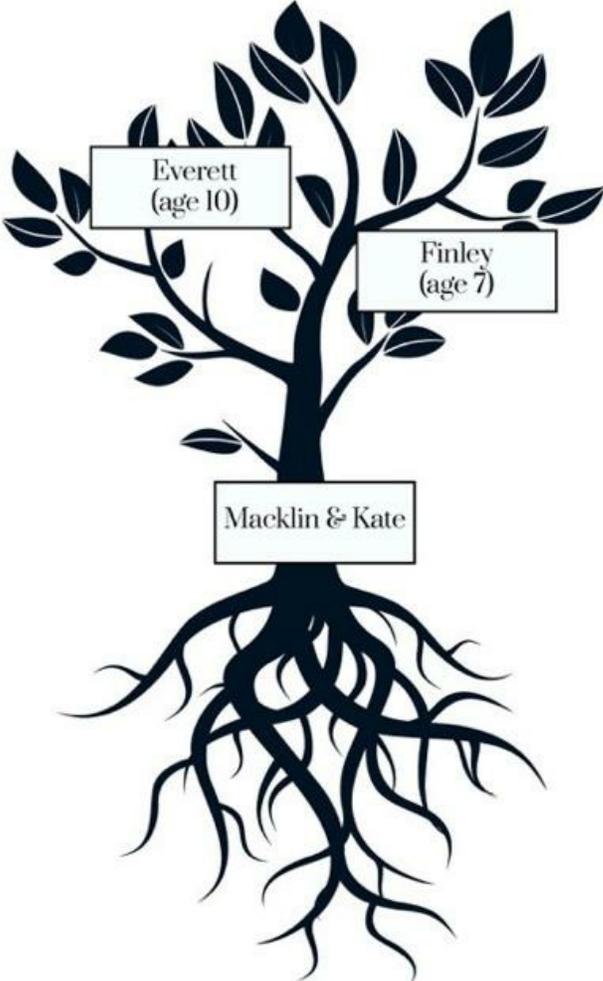
COLT AND ASHLYN'S FAMILY TREE



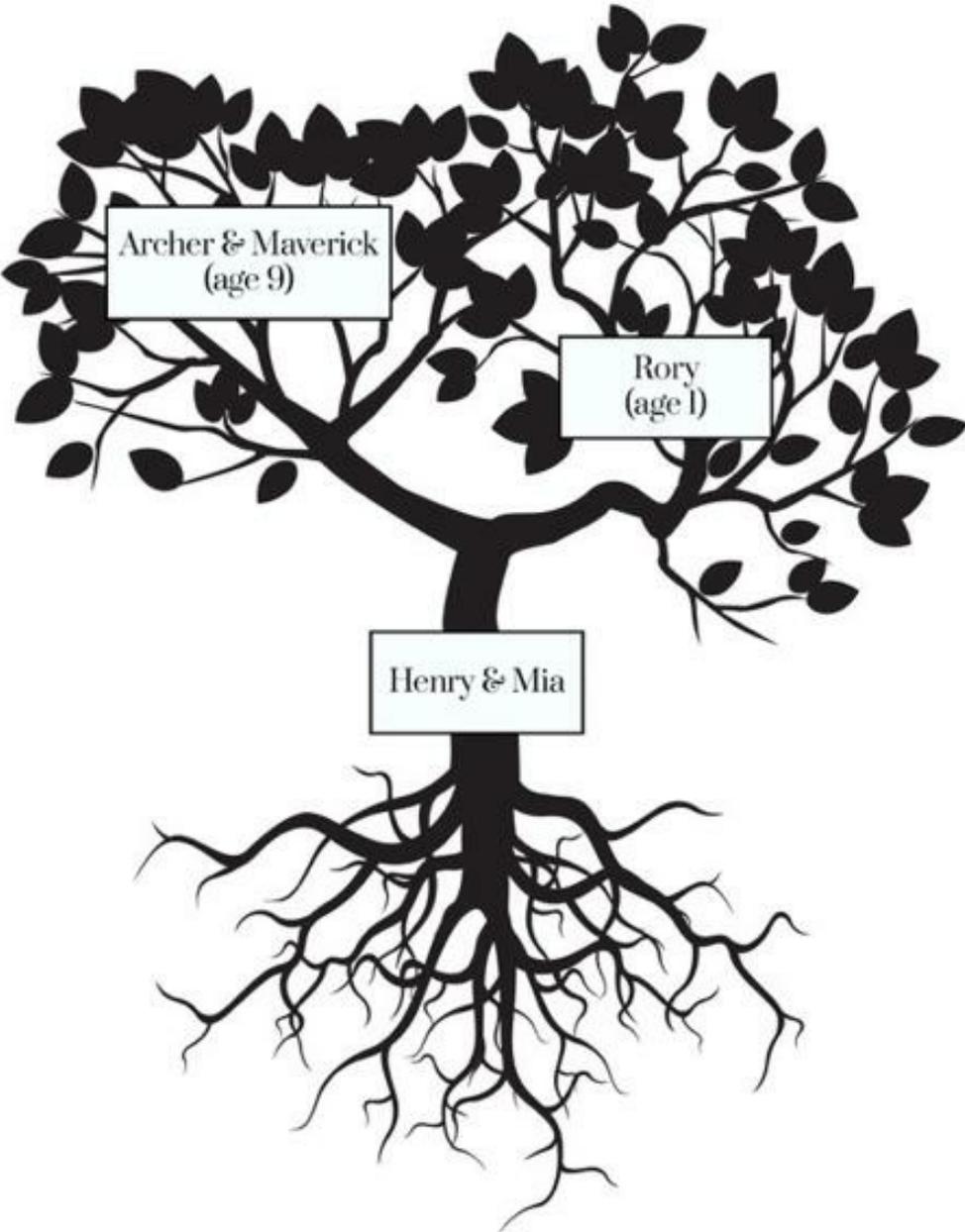
THEO AND BLAKELY'S FAMILY TREE



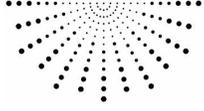
MACKLIN AND KATE'S FAMILY TREE



HENRY AND MIA'S FAMILY TREE



EPILOGUE



JAXON

Ten years later

“O h, come on!” the twins yell as Griffin, my little brother, slaps the puck into the top corner of the net. Ophelia’s glove barely misses it by an inch. It’s a cheap shot. Ophelia’s so short, she would’ve had to jump to catch it, but my little brother isn’t afraid of playing dirty to get what he wants. It doesn’t help that Ophelia’s a couple of years younger than Griffin, Everett, Archer, and Maverick, either. But despite missing the catch, she still knows how to hold her own. I give it a week, and she’ll figure out how to block the shot the next time Griff tries to pull something like it again.

“Yes!” Everett, Uncle Mack and Aunt Kate’s oldest kid, cheers as he skates toward his best friend and gives Griffin a high five.

Archer and Maverick shake their heads, calling the play a cheap shot as their goalie, Ophelia, flips them off.

“Watch it, Lia!” Aunt Blakely warns from the sidelines, rocking Aunt Mia’s youngest daughter, Rory, on her hip.

Ophelia’s shoulders fall.

“Yeah, watch it, Opie,” Arch and Mav tease as they skate toward her.

“My name isn’t Opie,” she growls. Her dark eyes follow their movements as they skate around her, taunting her. “It’s Ophelia,” she clarifies. “Or Lia.

But it isn't *Opie*." Her gloves skitter across the ice as she chucks them at the twins like she's ready to brawl, and her eyes never leave them as they circle her like a couple of sharks.

"Come on, Jax," Archer calls to me, not stopping the stare-down between him and Ophelia. "Put Opie on your team. We want Griff."

Yeah, like I'm gonna give them my best teammate.

"No deal." I cross my arms. "We already decided on the teams. Griff, me, Everett, and Tatum against you, Mav, Dylan, and Lia. We're not gonna trade just 'cause you're losing."

"How come we get the babies?" Maverick argues.

"I'm not a baby!" Ophelia launches herself at Mav and takes him to the ice as Aunt Blake yells at Uncle Theo to break them apart. Shaking his head, Uncle Theo skates toward them, grabbing the back of Maverick's and Archer's jerseys, separating the fight. He hauls them up and drags them to the penalty box, tossing them inside while Ophelia wipes beneath her nose with the back of her hand as she watches them go. Her long pigtails are slightly skewed beneath her helmet, and she glares at the twins like she's wishing laser beams could shoot from her eyes and hit them right where they're sitting.

Gotta give the girl credit.

She's like an alley cat.

Feisty. And with sharpened claws she isn't afraid to use. Dad says she gets it from her mom, who is his little sister, Blake. But I'm still not convinced. 'Cause I know Aunt Blakely. And Opie? She's somethin' else.

She might be the same age as my little sister, Dylan, and Aunt Kate's daughter, Finley, but Opie's crazy. Probably because she's the oldest kid in her family and likes following the older kids around, but what do I know?

"Ophelia Grace Taylor!" Aunt Blakely yells from the board. "Get your butt over here right now."

Opie's head snaps to the benches. "But, Mom—"

“No, buts!”

With her chin to her chest, Opie skates toward the sideline, but not without a final glare at the twins, who look like they wanna strangle her. Archer and Maverick have always had it out for Opie. Dad says it’s because she doesn’t let them push her around, but I think it’s because they’re intimidated she might wind up a better player than them. It’s gotta hurt since Uncle Theo played in the NHL for years, and Uncle Henry, Mav’s and Archer’s dad, doesn’t even know how to skate.

Yeah, the twins might have some solid raw talent, but Dad and Uncle Theo have been coaching Opie ever since she could skate.

“Well, what do we do now?” Griffin throws his hands in the air like it’s my fault Arch, Mav, and Opie are all in trouble. “Their entire team is in the penalty box.”

“Split the teams again,” our dad, Colt, suggests. “Griffin and Tatum against Everett and Dylan.” His voice cuts through the crying baby. He pinches the bridge of his nose and turns to me. “Jax, why don’t you calm Rory down while Aunt Blake takes care of Opie.”

“I’m not Opie!” Ophelia snaps, overhearing him.

Aunt Blake rolls her eyes and turns Ophelia’s back to us. She bends down and continues her lecture.

“But I wanna play,” I argue, ignoring Rory’s wails from the benches.

Dad gives me a pointed look. “Please? Just until Aunt Mia or Uncle Henry get here?”

I know his look. It isn’t a question. It’s an order.

“Fine,” I grumble, skating to the half wall and collapsing onto the bench closest to Rory’s car seat. Finley, Uncle Mack and Aunt’s Kate daughter, is rocking the car seat back and forth with her foot. She’s only half paying attention to the little monster, which upsets Rory even more. Her face is red, and she’s flailing her little arms around, pissed as always.

“She’s mad,” Finley informs me.

“Duh,” I reply. “Scoot over. I got it.”

Finley scoots further down the bench, giving me some room. Rory’s still little, and Aunt Mia swears she’ll grow out of throwing tantrums soon, but I kind of doubt it. She hasn’t even hit her terrible twos yet. In fact, we celebrated Rory’s first birthday a few weeks ago, and even covered in cake and ice cream, she was *still* crying. For some reason I don’t understand, she hates everyone. Well, everyone but me. She loves me.

“Hey, Squeaks,” I mutter, squatting in front of the car seat while balancing myself on my skates. I stick out my tongue and make a weird face before puffing out my cheeks and crossing my eyeballs. Her crying stops almost instantly. It’s replaced by a toothy smile. I roll my eyes and pull her out of the car seat, bouncing her on my knee as Griffin steals the puck from our little sister, Dylan.

“Come on, Dylan!” I shout. “You can take Griff!”

“Yeah, come on, Dylan!” Finley shouts beside me. They’re both seven and are best friends, but they couldn’t be more opposite if they tried. They do agree on one thing: girls rule. Boys drool.

And I couldn’t agree with them more, especially after my dad gave me “*the talk*” and reminded me it’s my responsibility to look after the girls and make sure they don’t do anything stupid. Yeah. The less I have to worry about them and boys, the better.

“Hey,” Aunt Mia says. She slides onto our opposite side on the bench along with Aunt Blakely as Ophelia skates back onto the ice.

“Hey.” I tear my attention from the rink and glance at both of them.

Aunt Mia’s looking at me and Squeaks with a smile. “Thanks for keeping an eye on her. She loves you, ya know.”

“Eh.” I shrug. “All the ladies love me.”

With a laugh, Mia ruffles my dark wavy hair. “Now, *that*, I believe. You got your daddy’s looks.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Whatever.”

I turn back to the game, but Aunt Blake adds, “Thanks for looking after Rory while I dealt with Lia.”

“I’m always looking after Rory,” I remind her.

“And everyone else,” Aunt Mia agrees, bumping her shoulder against mine. “What would we do without you, Jaxon?”

I shrug again.

It’s a good question. I’m always holding someone, helping someone, or playing with someone. As the oldest kid in the group, the pressure’s always there. To make sure everyone’s okay. To make sure everyone’s taken care of. It’s just the way it is. I’m used to it by now.

“You’re always going to look out for her, right?” Aunt Mia prods.

I look down at the blue-eyed baby on my knee, finding her already staring up at me. Her little hand reaches for my nose, and I dodge it, grabbing her hand and giving Aunt Mia another shrug. “Yeah, don’t worry. I’ll take care of her.”

“That’s my man.” Aunt Mia gives me a side hug, then catches Opie, Maverick, and Archer shoving each other near the net. Again.

“What’d the twins do this time?” she demands.

“You know how they are with Lia,” Aunt Blake grumbles. “I swear. I knew I was a spitfire as a kid, but I’m pretty sure my girl is gonna be the death of me.”

“Or the death of my boys,” Aunt Mia quips. “Come on.”

They both stand and head toward the ice as Dad intervenes for the hundredth time. I can’t help but laugh. Because this? The chaos? The yelling and fighting and laughing and crying?

Well, it’s just another day in the life of Jaxon Thorne, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.



Don't Let Me Down

Chapter One

Mia

THE BAND IS KILLING IT ON THE STAGE. THEY'RE NOT MY UNCLE'S BAND, Broken Vows, but they're pretty good. Alternative rock with a dash of blues. My head bobs up and down with the beat as I wipe out a freshly-washed glass with a clean towel behind the bar.

Over the past couple of years since I started working at SeaBird, it's slowly become my home away from home. I love the atmosphere. The smell of coconut and salt lingering in the air. The lights that can go from dimmed to flashing in an instant. The customers. Well, most of them, anyway. Some are assholes, but I've had a habit of attracting them since I was a kid, so I'm not sure if the problem is SeaBird or if it's just me. Regardless, if being a bartender paid better, I'd almost consider sticking around and working here for the rest of my life since my initial plan to become a nurse hasn't exactly panned out the way I'd been hoping.

Not yet anyway.

I shove the familiar little black reminder aside, and set the clean glass next to the others when someone approaches me at the bar.

If it isn't the devil himself.

Henry Buchanan. The suave billionaire from new money, who's not only the son of a governor, but a recently retired LAU professor, and the new owner of the NHL Lions Organization.

I took a couple classes with him before graduation, but even if I hadn't, I'd still know him. Everyone knows Henry Buchanan. Or at least, they know of him. He's got this air about him. The way he demands attention without uttering a single word. Hell, he enters a room and people can feel his presence. At this point, I'm not even sure if it's because of his family name and the weight it holds, or if it's just...Henry.

I force myself to not take in his strong jawline, and pick up the same freshly cleaned glass instead, hoping it'll distract me enough to stop checking the guy out as he strides toward me.

“Hello again, Professor,” I greet him. “Two trips to SeaBird in one week?”

“It’s been a tough week,” he grumbles.

The man was basically born with a silver spoon in his mouth and isn’t exactly a consistent customer at SeaBird, but he was here earlier this week. Probably because he wanted to talk to the new Center and Left Wing for the Lions, who happen to be dating my friends, Ashlyn and Blakely. Yeah, Colt Thorne and Theodore Taylor are hockey gods, and they definitely know it. Thankfully, they’re good dudes and treat my friends like gold. If they didn’t, I’d neuter them, and they both know it.

However, they aren’t here tonight. Which leaves me to question, why is Henry Buchanan?

“You know, if you lost the suit, you might not stick out like a sore thumb around here,” I add, as he takes a seat on the barstool in front of me.

“Yeah.” He looks down at his dark, fitted suit as if just realizing how little he blends in while wearing it. Not going to lie, it makes him look like a GQ model surrounded by peasants. As he smooths down the rich fabric, light reflects off the Rolex wrapped around his sexy wrist and catches my attention. I didn’t know wrists could be sexy, but with the dapple of dark hair and veins popping along the top of his hand, I stand corrected. Not that I’m surprised. The man’s even been voted sexiest bachelor alive before his girlfriend took him off the market. If that isn’t an accomplishment, I don’t know what is.

“Guess I forget I don’t look like a student anymore,” he adds, dryly, assessing his odd choice of clothes compared to everyone else around him.

Yeah, no. Not even close. The guy’s at least thirty-three, and has aged like a fine fucking wine. I started paying attention to the Buchanan name

when I found out Evelyn Buchanan, Henry's little sister, was dating my father's killer. Well, technically two men were arrested for my dad's murder, but still.

Man, it feels like a lifetime ago.

Thankfully, the Buchanans weren't involved in my father's disappearance, but their names were still dragged through the dirt thanks to Buchanan's dad running for governor at the time.

After the police made the connection, the Buchanan name hit the newspapers for weeks before Henry's dad could squash the rumors and distract the media with a new story.

Buchanan was best friends with the guy, too. Troy McAdams. The frat boy asshole who became friends with a lowlife loan shark named Marty. After loaning my dad a bunch of money and realizing my father would never be able to pay him back, Marty killed my dad and asked Troy to help him cover his tracks. Apparently, Buchanan's had a hard time letting anyone get close to him ever since.

I don't blame him.

I don't let people get very close to me, either.

But what would you know? My path crossed with the infamous Henry Buchanan, and I ended up having Professor Buchanan, Troy McAdams' friend, as a teacher at LAU a few years later.

It's eerie how small the world feels sometimes.

And how much fate likes to screw with me.

Then again, I could've always moved across the country to get away from it all. I could still move across the country to get away from it all.

But I won't.

Because what little family I have is here, in this small town—including my friends—and I doubt they're going anywhere.

"Missing the good ol' days, Professor?" I quip. "When you'd blend in with the rest of the students at SeaBird instead of sticking out like a sore

thumb?”

Apparently, Henry Buchanan went to LAU, too. Rumor has it, this is the same bar his little sister met her husband, Jake Jensen. And it's a good thing she found such a perfect fit for her snooty-tooty family, because the guy's a software nerd who took over B-Tech Enterprises after Buchanan passed along the responsibilities and decided to become a professor instead.

As if only half-paying attention, Buchanan presses his full lips together as he scans the bar, barely casting me a glance. “You've graduated,” he reminds me. “You don't need to call me professor anymore.”

“And what would you prefer I call you? Professor? Daddy? Doctor Buchanan?” My sultry voice hangs in the air as my mouth pulls into a shameless grin. But I can't help it. The guy's grumpier and more guarded than a rhinoceros. He's always had his guard up high around me, though. Which is fine. My guard's high around everyone. But it does make me want to poke at him for it.

“Henry's fine,” he grunts, refusing to give into my teasing.

“Okay, Henry,” I purr. “What can I get ya?”

The guy scans the bar again, not bothering to look at me. “Whiskey. Top shelf.”

I turn around and stand on my tiptoes, reaching for the nicest bottle SeaBird owns before pouring two fingers of the caramel colored liquid into the freshly cleaned glass tumbler.

“So what brings you in? Looking for another chat with Theo and Colt?” I ask, setting the drink in from him.

He doesn't answer me as he shoots back the liquid before setting it on the counter again. With a dark look, he waits for me to refill it, so I do.

“Or maybe you're looking for your girlfriend,” I add.

His gaze narrows. “Has she been in here?”

“Yup.”

“Was she with a guy?” he grits out.

And damn. I can see why he's such a shark in the business world. The hair along the back of my neck raises, as if he's daring me to lie. To withhold what he wants. To push him when he's clearly not in the mood to be pushed.

I know that look, though. The look that already knows the truth without needing to witness it firsthand. The look that shows he's already seen the red flags, but wants proof. More proof. But he won't get it here. Not when I have less faith in the opposite sex than I do in aliens or God.

"She was out with her friends," I lie. I shouldn't. He deserves to know the truth. But it isn't my place, and I don't know the full story. Hell, maybe Buchanan's had someone on the side for months now, and his girlfriend just found out and is looking for revenge. Maybe he's stalking her and they already broke up. Not that I think he'd do that, but... I cock my head, examining his tight jaw and the vein throbbing in his neck. Actually, scratch that. Professor Buchanan definitely looks like someone who isn't afraid to get his hands dirty if it'll get him what he wants.

"So she left?" he demands.

"Yup."

His ever perfect posture slumps slightly, and he turns to me fully, giving up on his search as he takes another sip of whiskey from his glass. "How's your mother?"

My expression sours. Not because I hate my mother, but because Buchanan's the one asking about her.

"She's fine."

"And your uncle?"

"Fine," I repeat.

Henry Buchanan knows me too. Mia Rutherford. The girl with the murdered daddy. To be fair, most of Lockwood Heights knows me. My face was splashed all over the news for weeks after my dad's body was found, just like the Buchanan name. If I was smart, I would've moved away. But I didn't want to give the assholes who took my father from me the pleasure.

“You find a job yet?” he questions.

Sometimes I hate the way he keeps tabs on me. Hell, he’s worse than Uncle Fen. Part of me wonders if it’s because he feels guilty. For knowing Troy McAdams. For being friends with him. For not spotting the red flags or just how dangerous his friend really was. Not that I blame Henry. I’ve fallen for a wolf in sheep’s clothes on more than one occasion.

“No,” I answer.

“Why not?”

Resting my elbows on the counter separating us, I steeple my fingers in front of me and hold his dark gaze. “Because I started selling pictures of my body on the internet to make ends meet, and now every doctor’s office and hospital within a hundred mile radius knows about it and wants nothing to do with me.”

I don’t know why I say it. I shouldn’t. It’s none of his business anyway, and shining a light on the mess of my life probably isn’t the brightest thing I’ve ever done, but I can’t help it. Wanting to shock the impenetrable bastard in front of me. To see him flinch. To see him feel. Something. Anything. Even if it’s only disgust.

His dark, flinty eyes dip to my low cut, black tank top before traveling south, along my waist and hips, leaving me squirming.

I’m used to being checked out.

Call it a blessing or a curse, but it is what it is. I’m pretty in an emo, untouchable, this girl’s got daddy issues, kind of way. Add to the fact that I’m a bartender who looks like she enjoys getting freaky in the sheets, and I’ve been hit on more times than I can count.

But being checked out by Henry Buchanan? That’s new. The man’s a stone cold statue. I’m not sure how I feel about it.

“Eyes up here, Professor,” I warn.

His nostrils flare as his eyes meet mine again, and he tips the rest of his drink back. The glass clinks against the bartop once he’s finished while his

gaze continues holding mine hostage. “Selling pictures of your body on the internet was a poor decision.”

“One of many,” I point out.

Without a word, he pulls out a small stack of bills and sets them on the counter. “Keep the change.”

Then he walks out of the bar without a backward glance. When the door closes behind him, I pick up the bills, my jaw dropping.

Five hundred bucks.

His tab was maybe a hundred.

Sometimes, I hate his pity.

Always, I hate his charity.

And lately? I’ve hated the way he gets under my skin whenever he’s around.

Chapter Two

Henry

My jaw is tight as I press my phone to my ear outside SeaBird. Even though it’s past midnight, the air is still warm from the Summer sun, leaving me hot in my fitted suit. Annoyed, I tug at the top button as if it’s strangling me and wait for the head of my IT department to answer the phone. The call rings twice before Gordy’s voice cuts through the rhythmic ringing.

“H-hello?” His voice is rusty from sleep, but I don’t apologize for waking him up. I pay him enough to be on call at all times. He knows it as well as I do. Tonight isn’t any different.

“There’s a girl named Mia Rutherford,” I tell him. “She has indecent photos online. I need them wiped from the internet.”

“Mia...what was the last name?” His yawn echoes into my ear, followed by the familiar ding of Gordy’s computer being turned on.

“Rutherford,” I grit out. A headache slowly builds behind my eyes as I

shift my phone to my other ear. I attempt to reign in my annoyance after my conversation with Mia, but it's proving to be difficult. The girl's so damn frustrating, part of me wants to strangle her, and the other part wants to wash my hands of her altogether.

"Rutherford," Gordy repeats. The click-click-click from his fingers tapping against the keyboard picks up speed. "Uh yeah. I'll take care of it right now."

"Good."

I hang up the phone and head back to my apartment. It's on the south side of town in the tallest building outside of LAU's college campus. Originally, I'd purchased the building as an investment, and moved into the penthouse when I began teaching. After taking a hiatus from the classroom so I can focus on the Lions organization, I've been debating on moving out so I can stay closer to my office at B-Tech Enterprises, but decided against it. After all, it's my home, and my girlfriend would pitch a fit if she found out I wanted us to move.

B-Tech Enterprises is my father's business. After I'd initially graduated from LAU, I became the president of the corporation until my sister, Evie, met Jake. Jake was a much better fit for the role, and I had no problem passing along the responsibilities so I could focus on receiving my doctorate.

If Jake was anyone else, my father would've never signed off on the idea, but since my brother-in-law has the same passion for technology as my father does, it didn't take long before Jake was welcomed into the role with open arms.

My career change, however, was a much more difficult pill for him to swallow. And now that I've paid nearly eight hundred million dollars to create the NHL Lions, he's even less impressed.

Too bad I don't give a shit.

I've already multiplied my trust fund hand over fist since I turned twenty-one and gained access to the money. If I've learned anything from my

endeavors, it's to trust my gut. For the past year, it's been screaming at me. LAU's hockey organization has earned a lot of support over the past decade. Despite my father's lack of faith, the town's ready for a professional team. I know it.

I should've driven to SeaBird, but I'd walked, too frustrated with Scarlett's text to drive here. It's only a ten minute walk, though. Besides, I needed the time to think. To figure out my next move. I've been dating Scarlett for a year and a half. We met when I was in Milan for a business meeting. Scarlett was modeling for a designer who was dating one of my business associates and joined us at dinner. As soon as I laid eyes on her, I took her back to my hotel, fucked her, and we've been together since.

She told me she was with Gianna tonight, but Gianna's at an event with my sister and brother-in-law. Which means Scarlett lied. Again.

It's growing more difficult to push them aside. The lies. The impromptu trips with friends. The canceled dinners.

My hands clench at my sides as I reach my building and dip my chin at the doorman.

"Hello, Dr. Buchanan," he murmurs, opening the door.

"Goodnight, David." I slip past him and head inside. When I reach the elevator, I press my keycard against the lock pad, and push the top floor. The doors open a few seconds later, revealing the penthouse.

Not a thing is out of place. The blinds are drawn, and the kitchen light is on, casting shadows along the slate colored walls and chrome finishes. It's cold. Lifeless. Just like me. Slipping off my suit jacket, I lay it on the back of the black leather couch when my phone rings.

"Hello?" I answer.

"Hey, it's me," Gordy replies. "I sent you all the photos and wiped them from the internet. Ms. Rutherford had made her OF account inactive a few months ago, but I went ahead and deleted it permanently."

"Thank you."

“Sure thing,” he replies. “What do you want me to do with her other accounts?”

“What accounts?” I growl.

“TikTok, Instagram, BeReal.” He continues rattling off the social media platforms as I pinch the bridge of my nose. “She’s got quite the following, sir.”

“What kind of following?” I demand before flipping the call to the speaker while pulling up the photos Gordy forwarded to my email account.

“Depends on the platform, but across the board? Just above three million. I can only imagine how much she made on OF because the subscribers alone had to be bringing in at least a hundred grand a month.”

My eyes narrow on the toned body in a white lacy thong in the photograph. The picture is cut off at the girl’s throat, but I’d recognize the tattoo sleeve anywhere. The intricate swirls. The flowers on her shoulder. The word “pixie” inked along the inside of her delicate wrist. Her back is angled toward the camera, showcasing her long spine and thin waist, along with her round ass usually hidden beneath her clothes.

My dick jerks at the sight.

“Sir?” Gordy’s voice cuts through the haze of lust like a hot knife through butter.

“What content does she post on the platforms? Is it like the photos?” I demand, unable to tear my attention from the image despite the shot of disgust pulsing through me.

And she’s on more platforms?

My blood boils at the thought.

Stupid. Fucking. Girl.

She really thought this was a good idea? Posting naked photos on the internet? It doesn’t matter if Gordy took them down. He can’t hack into every single person’s server to delete any downloaded photos from their computers.

What the hell was she thinking?

If she needed money, I would've given it to her.

Stupid. Fucking. Girl.

“Nah, she doesn't post stuff like this on her other platforms,” Gordy answers. “More like makeup tutorials. Life as a bartender. Exercise hacks. Those kinds of things. Honestly, they're pretty good. I can see why she's built such a big following. The girl has a knack for marketing.”

I stare at the photo for another second before snapping the computer closed.

“So, what do you want me to do with the accounts?” Gordy prods. “Keep or delete?”

“Keep them,” I decide.

“All right. Do you need anything else, sir?”

“That'll be all. Thanks, Gordy.”

“Sure thing.”

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I would also be very grateful if you could take the time to leave a review. It's amazing how such a little thing like a review can be such a huge help to an author!

Thank you so much!!!

-Kelsie

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelsie is a sucker for a love story with all the feels. When she's not chasing words for her next book, you will probably find her reading or, more likely, hanging out with her husband and playing with her three kiddos who love to drive her crazy.

She adores photography, baking, her two pups, and her cat who thinks she's a dog. Now that she's actively pursuing her writing dreams, she's set her sights on someday finding the self-discipline to not binge-watch an entire series on Netflix in one sitting.

If you'd like to connect with Kelsie, follow her on [Facebook](#), sign up for her [newsletter](#), or join [Kelsie Rae's Reader Group](#) to stay up to date on new releases, exclusive content, giveaways, and her crazy publishing journey.

