The IceHawks Series

FIGHTING CHANCE

Mads Rafferty

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The IceHawks Series

FIGHTING CHANCE

Mads Rafferty

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For the ones who had to lose themselves
before they found their worth

You were worthy the first time,
and you are worthy of every second chance life gives you.

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A note from the Author

Hello beautiful readers,

Before diving into Kieran and Layla's story I want to mention that Fighting Chance is more than just a sports romance. It dives into the very real and hard topics of abandonment, chronic illness, suicide ideation, infertility, mentions of sexual assault (off page) and mental health, including, dissociation and anxiety.

I hope that you find I touched on the heavy topics of this book with grace and gave them the care they deserve.

Please proceed with caution if any of these topics are triggering.

I would also like to quickly make note that there is a small timeline discrepancy with the NHL schedule. I am fully aware of this and made the conscious creative decision to tweak the NHL schedule for the plot and to keep consistency with the first book in the IceHawks series, Breaking Point.

With that in mind it is a very small timeline discrepancy and will not in any way impact your reading experience.

With that being said …. Welcome back to the IceHawks series.

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Prologue

KIERAN

KIERAN

I asked Bella if you got a new number in Berlin

Imagine how my heart broke hearing she said no…which means you are in fact getting all my texts and choosing to ignore them

BUT, looking on the bright side, at least now I don't have to break into Bella's phone and steal your number

Which I absolutely did not do at all

invasion of privacy and all that

how is Berlin by the way?

are they treating you right? I hope they are. if not let me know and I can hit a puck square between their eyes

I can also give them a stern talking to if you're against physical violence

you'd have to text me back and let me know which option though

okay fine…

no physical violence

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Chapter 1

Kieran

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

Is everything all right?

Anderson is pissed you took off mid practice

Ashford?

You're starting to freak me out dude. call me back

The scream that rips through my chest burns like fire.

My cheeks puff in and out as I force my legs to move. My brain keeps screaming faster, faster, faster.

Suddenly, everything around me blurs, and I have to blink quickly to clear my eyes, the tears running down my cheeks never-ending. No matter how hard I try to pump my legs and lift my knees, I'm not fast enough.

The black car I've sat in a million times—with the paint chipping away, the fabric seats torn and scratched, the clunking sound the engine makes—kicks up dust as it speeds off…without me.

"Mom!"

I don't recognize the voice that comes from me. It doesn't sound like me at all.

I sound broken.

My voice is beginning to crack, fading away along with my mom's car as it rounds the bend.

I don't see the pothole. Another panicked cry rips from me when my shoes clip it, my eyes widening as my mom's car takes the turn around the trees, disappearing at the same time my body smacks against the ground.

A wail of pain rushes from me as my knees, cheek, and hands scrape along the gravel. The heat of the cuts joins the fire burning in my chest and throat.

As I try to stand, the pain wrenches a yelp out of me, this one different. I sound like one of the animals on the nature channel when a predator tears into it.

Lifting my head, my lip quivers, my gaze blurred through the pooling tears.

"Mom, please! I'll be good I p-promise!"

My heart pangs forcefully, skipping beats before it thud, thud, thuds. Another wave of panic rises for an entirely different reason.

My grandpa died of a broken heart. Am I *dying of a broken heart?*

Scrambling up, I ignore the pain flaring in my body, because it's nothing like the hurt in my heart. Maybe I can catch up to her…

I try to run again, but my legs won't let me.

Whimpering, I fall to my knees as I sob, "Mom, please."

Is this because I ate the last Pop-Tart? I couldn't stop myself. I was so hungry my stomach was hurting. I hadn't eaten in days.

She didn't look mad when she told me to check the side of the road for the puppy but maybe she got mad that I couldn't find it for her? I looked really hard; I searched and searched but I couldn't see it.

"Mom?" I croak out.

My stomach churns with that squishy feeling, spit filling my mouth.

Oh no.

I hate vomiting. It scares me. It comes out of my nose and I can't breathe.

No one can help me feel better, not that my mom did anyway, but sometimes when I was sick and she wasn't home I'd lie in her bed and cuddle her pillow.

Her pillow isn't here for me to cuddle.

I have nothing.

My eyes widen as my stomach rolls and before I can move to the side of the road I'm vomiting, gagging and choking on it as tears run down my cheeks.

Not a lot comes out because all I've had was the strawberry Pop-Tart.

"P-please," I hiccup when the vomiting stops, not knowing who I'm begging.

I'm alone. Panic like never before—stronger than the times she left me in the apartment for days without food and water, stronger than the fear of never seeing her—fills my entire body.

Stronger than the bad man that visits sometimes.

My hands start to tingle, my chest rising and falling so fast I'm scared I'm going to fall asleep and never wake up. Black spots like the night sky take over my eyes.

Did she…leave me here? For good?

"Mom?" I whisper between sobs.

I'm up the mountain. We were in the car for hours before she saw the puppy. I'm not allowed to be alone outside of home. Mommy says bad things happen to little kids like me when we're alone.

Are bad things going to happen to me?

"Mr. Ashford."

Her voice is like a whip, striking my brain to the here and now.

Grunting in response, I try to give myself a second to shake off the feeling that memory always leaves me with.

Although sitting in *this* room…I'll never be able to feel safe.

Trying to rid my throat of the lump of emotion, I swallow, my nostrils flaring as it hovers, demanding to be let out in a scream.

I fucking hate this office and I fucking hate *that* memory.

A deep sigh escapes her. "Mr. Ashford."

Despite her clear annoyance, I take my time, forcing myself to take a steadying breath as I flick my gaze to the aging woman behind the wooden desk, to the woman that I would love nothing more than to ruin.

Mrs. Sommerfield.

More like the Antichrist.

Demon.

Devil.

Satan.

Though I don't think the devil even compares to this monster.

Mrs. Sommerfield is the "matron"—as she calls herself—to this hellhole of a foster home. For over thirty-five years, she's never once done the right thing by the children who came through her front doors.

I would know.

I thought I would never see her face again, promised myself, in fact, that I would never allow her close to me again. Not after everything that happened in this place.

Fate, it seems, fucking hates me.

A muscle ticks in my jaw as I suppress the urge to call her every dirty name in the book. I note the irritation dancing along her features that she can't keep at bay—the anger lurking in the corners of her eyes, her dipped brows, her tightening lips.

Yeah, she remembers me all right.

"Yes?" I all but spit.

Okay, so maybe she's doing a better job at controlling her anger.

Hers, however, isn't justified. She's a horrid old woman who hates children and chose the wrong career path. I, on the other hand, am trying to quench my rage from how she never protected me.

"Did you hear me?"

Taking a shuddering breath, only to quickly exhale the musty stale air, I ask, "Can you repeat yourself." My hands fist in my lap as I force myself to say, "Please."

Her brow arches. "I see you finally found your manners."

I give her a tight-lipped smile. "Only took…what was it? Over seventy whippings?"

Her beady brown eyes blaze. "We do not participate in such barbaric disciplinary actions in this foster home."

"My memory begs to differ."

She rolls her eyes. "Still got that mouth on you, boy—"

"Man, and you better remember that I'm not some terrified little boy anymore, Matron, so get on with whatever you summoned me for so I can be on my way before I decide to call the authorities."

I should have done it years ago, should have done it the second I aged out of this home.

But despite my declaration, fear won out. That, and shame.

Along with the knowledge that the foster home would get shut down and the children would be shipped off to another one. I've heard horror stories worse than mine, and I wouldn't be able to handle it if my actions sentenced innocent children to a far worse fate.

Doesn't mean I did nothing though.

Although I think the children would have preferred being saved from her wrath rather than anonymous donations that kept food in their bellies and clothes on their back.

She picks up the paperwork on her desk, her red-framed glasses sitting on the perch of her nose as she drawls, "A child was brought to us two weeks ago, one named Emmy Callaghan." She lowers the paper in her hands, peering at me over her glasses. "Does the name ring a bell?"

Raking through my memories, I throw the name around, coming up blank. "No, should it?"

"Well, considering she's your daughter, I hoped it would have."

A bomb detonating would be far less shocking than how that sentence rattles through my body.

Time seems to slow, the room growing cold and silent, the only sound the blood rushing through my ears. I might have stopped breathing.

"M-my daughter?" I stutter. "I don't have children."

"That you're aware of."

My heart skips a beat.

No.

I'm careful, beyond fucking careful.

"This must be a mistake. I would know—"

She slides a piece of paper across the desk, silencing me. "No mistake. We still have your DNA on file from when you were living with us, and as you know, we run the DNA of the children who come to us in the hopes a living relative would be available to contact. Imagine my surprise when it rang alarm bells, pointing to you as her father."

It isn't until I lean forward to pick up the document that I realize how badly my hands are shaking. My eyes flick back and forth, and I only get through the first paragraph before the words start to blur, the room spinning. The sheet falls from my hand.

By the gleam in the matron's eye, she's savoring this moment. Soaking up every second of my shocked stupor.

If I were in my right mind, I'd ask for a moment alone to process the revelation but I'm not because…Christ. A daughter—I have a *child*.

How could I not know? Why didn't her mom tell me?

And more importantly, why the fuck is she here?

That thought hits me like a ton of bricks.

My head snaps up, my teeth baring as I lunge forward, placing my hands on the desk and crowding the matron's personal space. "I swear to fucking god, if you touched so much as a single hair on that child's head, I will fucking destroy you."

She has the wits to pale as she leans back. "As I said before—"

"Cut the bullshit," I spit. "Did you touch her?"

The matron shakes her head. "No."

I swallow the urge to reach out and throttle the woman that beat me to a bloody pulp so often that I lost count, reminding myself I'd be no better than her, and physically force myself to take my seat once more. I slowly breathe in through my nose. "You said she's been here for two weeks. Why wasn't I contacted sooner?"

"The DNA results just came in yesterday."

I have a million and one questions swarming my mind, all of them fighting for the chance to roll off my tongue first. One wins out.

"How did she end up here?"

The she-devil rubs the nape of her neck, and that single movement has me shielding my heart and mind, preparing myself for the worst. "What happened to her mother?" I demand.

She clears her throat. "Natasha Callaghan was found in her bed after an overdose."

My brows skyrocket in surprise.

An overdose.

I know I've had a fair share of women in my life, but I would have never affiliated myself with someone doing drugs.

"Was it a suicide?"

"Heroin."

The wind is knocked from my lungs, taking me deeper into the chair as I fall backwards. Surprisingly, the matron isn't reveling in my reaction any longer.

My tongue has a mind of its own as I ask, "You said her name was Emmy, right?"

The matron dips her head.

Emmy.

My daughter's name is Emmy.

Was she with her mother?

Has she been exposed to heroin?

How long was her mother on drugs?

How neglected was Emmy?

Swallowing thickly, I tell myself to get a grip. *Get all the information you need right now and then you can process and break down and allow yourself to feel when you're alone.* I sure don't want to cry in front of this abusive piece of shit.

"How old is Emmy?"

I don't even remember a woman by the name Natasha, but I have to admit, I never try to remember the names of the women I sleep with. The further away they are from me emotionally, the better. There's no point memorizing someone's name when I have a one-night-only rule, but I've never given them the impression they couldn't tell me about a child though…right?

"Emmy turned three in February." She purses her lips. "You should also be made aware that she seems to have delayed speech for her age."

My brows lower, a frown creasing my skin. "What do you mean?"

"She hasn't said a single word since she's been with us."

My head rears back. "She hasn't spoken? Is it the trauma?" *Oh my fucking god.* "Please tell me they didn't find her mother with her there in the home."

"Emmy was present, yes. She was found in the bed beside Natasha, presumed to be alone for four days." She sighs before taking off her glasses. "It's a miracle she's alive. I was informed she was living off—"

"Cereal," I finish for her, sounding like a shell of myself.

She cocks her head. "Yes…how did you know?"

I shrug off her comment. "Just a hunch." I'm not telling this woman shit.

"Well then. Do you wish to claim her, or should she remain in our care? If you'd like to relinquish parental rights, I can have the documents drawn up in—"

"I'm taking her," I'm quick to blurt.

There is not a single ounce of me that will ever allow a child of mine to go through what I did. She's almost the same age as when I was brought here, I was four turning five.

"I'll sign whatever you need for me to make that happen, but I'm taking her today. She's not spending another minute here."

She sighs as she deadpans, "We're not that bad, Kieran."

"Keep telling yourself that so it's easier to sleep at night."

She rises, I note it's slower than what I remember as a child. Good. Maybe she's getting too old to be able to physically hurt the children.

"I'll forward you the documents. It's all very standard."

My brows snap upwards as I stand. My body locks up as she passes me and by the roll of her eyes, she doesn't miss it either. I follow her out of the office. "So, I can just…take her? That seems odd. She doesn't even know me."

"You're her father," she throws over her shoulder as she ambles down the old hallway.

Father.

My brain comes up with a thousand comebacks and quips, but I can't muster up the energy to say one, can't find humor in this situation.

The light blinds me temporarily as we step onto the veranda overlooking the backyard. The children are out here, screaming and playing. It's perplexing. They sound happy and they look it, but I know from firsthand experience every single one of them has a hole in their heart, has deep-seated beliefs that they will never be loved or adopted as they age.

The matron comes to a stop, her aging hand shaking slightly as she lifts her pointer finger. "That's her, in the corner."

Time seems to slow. But not my heartbeat. That doubles as my gaze slowly drifts to the corner of the yard where she's pointing.

"Emmy."

The name tears from me as my eyes lock on a small child crouched in the garden, and there is no doubt in my mind that she's mine. Two pigtails on both sides of her head hold the short brown locks off her face as her shoulders quake.

She's crying.

My legs move of their own accord.

The matron calls out something behind me, but I can't hear anything past the rushing blood in my ears. I, for once, don't even have a thought.

Everything has escaped me, and I've got tunnel vision on the little girl sitting by herself.

Coming to a stop before her, my knees give way as I all but drop to the ground. Large round brown eyes snap to mine.

I don't know what I was expecting. Recognition? That's silly to expect, but my heart—it's beating so hard, and it *knows*, it utterly *knows*, that she's my daughter.

"Emmy," I whisper.

Her small sniffles have my heart cracking, shattering into a million pieces. My mouth opens, only to snap shut.

What the fuck do I say to her? How do I even start to explain this, so she understands?

She's three. Three, and she just lost her entire world.

I choose to go with, "I knew your mom." Her eyes widen at that, but she remains silent. I force myself to go on. "I'm not sure what I'm doing," I say honestly, "or how to say this but—"

My words cut off as she lifts her small hand and places it on my cheek, her eyes narrowing as she then pulls back, her fingers wet.

My breath hitches.

I must be crying.

Quickly wiping away the tears on my cheeks to not frighten her, I'm suddenly speaking, the words tumbling out of me. "I-I'm your d-dad."

And I have no fucking idea what the hell I'm going to do.

"I'm going to take you to my home. I'll make it a home for you," I promise. Holding out my hand, I offer, "Would that be okay?"

I stop breathing, my body lined with tension. The last thing I want to do is take her out of here kicking and screaming, but to my utter shock, she bursts forward quicker than I anticipated, and the next thing I know, her arms are clinging around my neck like I'm her lifeline.

I suppose I am.

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Chapter 2

Kieran

KIERAN

I need you.

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

I'm here, always

What do you need?

KIERAN

Can I swing by yours?

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

Bella's here, is that okay?

KIERAN

Yeah, I could actually use her help too

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

We're here, come over whenever

Emmy hasn't let go of the grip she has around my neck.

The only time she did was when the matron did the nicest thing she's ever done in her life and gave me a car seat, because of course she needs a car seat. She's three.

I have a three-year-old daughter.

My thoughts haven't stopped spinning and I doubt they ever will.

As the elevator in my apartment complex rises, the numbers climbing, so do my questions. I have so fucking many.

Why can't I remember her mom?

Why didn't she tell me?

Did she try to tell me and someone from my management or publicist team thought it was fake?

Do I need to fire someone?

How much trauma does my little girl have?

What do I need to buy for her?

What do you feed a three-year-old?

Do they sleep alone?

Do they need to have naps during the day?

What about daycare? Are they in preschool or something?

The ding of the elevator has my eyes snapping open.

Blowing out a shaky breath, I hold Emmy close to my chest, not daring to let go of her until she pulls away first. I yank my keys out of my pocket and slide it into the lock, pushing open the door. The sound of it slamming behind me rings out at the same time I come to a skidding stop.

I don't make it past the entryway.

Everywhere I look, all I can see is how I've defiled every nook and cranny. The couch that Grayson likes to remind me is the exact same as his, the walls, the windows, the kitchen—fucking hell, I'm a whore.

Don't even get me started on the bedroom.

I can't help but grimace. Emmy can't touch anything in here.

This is not a home.

There's no warmth, no art, no photos, furniture. I promised Emmy a *home*. And this is certainly not one that she should ever live in.

My eyes close of their own accord as my hold on Emmy tightens.

"You deserve better," I whisper gutturally before spinning on my heel and never looking back.

Call it whatever you want—coincidence, fate, the universe, serendipity—but the only house available to move into today, if I threw enough money around, is the one across the street from my best friend. The house I passed every time I visited him, the one I looked at and thought I'd never have, because why would I buy a house that big just for myself? Why would I subject myself to the ache of loneliness?

Yet here I am, standing in a four-bedroom, two-story house, now officially neighbors with Grayson Crawford. The keys in my hand feel light, as light as the pen used to sign the paperwork to buy said house thirty-four minutes ago.

I had to pay a lot more than the asking price to get things moving as quickly as I did, but the thought of even staying in a hotel with Emmy after all she has lost, after being ripped from her home and placed into foster care and bouncing around with me, didn't settle well.

Especially since she still hasn't let go of my neck, her head lying on my shoulder.

God, the real-estate agents' faces when I walked into their office and demanded a house that I could move into today were priceless. Shock doesn't even begin to cover it. I wish I had the forethought to capture a photo. I was only taken seriously because one of the agents is a fan of IceHawks and knew I had the money to back up my demand.

I suppose when you have money, anything is possible.

Isn't that a sickening thought?

Taking a seat on the entryway steps that lead to the large living room, I gaze around the place, making a mental note of everything I need to buy.

A sofa. I can bring my flat screen TV from the loft but I'll need a new coffee table. And two beds. I don't want Emmy near my old mattress. That thing should be burned.

She'll need toys. Clothes as well. She only had a handful of clothes that barely fit her.

Stools for the kitchen. And maybe a high chair? Do three-year-olds sit in high chairs?

Oh my god, do I need to baby proof everything? Is she still a baby? No, she's a toddler. What the hell do you feed a toddler?

I need to get her a therapist…along with a speech therapist. Or is that a two-in-one situation? She's suffered too much trauma at her young age already.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, breaking through my thoughts and giving me a second of reprieve.

It's probably Grayson, though I know he isn't the only one blowing up my phone. The entire team has reached out asking what happened. Even Coach left a voicemail, said he would be chewing out my ass if it weren't for the fact I've never run out in the middle of practice.

That, and apparently it looked like I had seen a ghost.

I had.

The ghost of my past.

I know the foster home number by heart, and when I checked my phone while taking a bathroom break, my heart lurched in my throat, beating erratically when I heard the matron's voicemail. Despite being twenty-eight years old, her voice made me feel like that petrified little boy again, my body bracing for inevitable impact. By the pounding of my heart and the tightness of my chest I was mere seconds away from having a panic attack.

I blow out a breath as I see the barrage of worried texts from Grayson. Tightening my hold on Emmy, I stand from the steps, taking one long glance at the empty house before turning.

"Time to face the music," I whisper to myself.

Logically, I know the walk across the street is nothing and yet it feels like an eternity, my steps slow and clipped. Even my hands feel numb as I punch in the gate code.

It's as if I'm not in my body. I'm watching myself walk down Grayson's long tree-lined driveway, and I can see Emmy looking back at me. Her big brown eyes are taking in everything around her, her thumb stuck in her mouth as she does so. Her other little hand is playing with the locks of my shaggy black hair at the back.

Blinking quickly, I come back to myself, steeling my heart and mind for the conversation I'm about to have.

The moment I walk through that door, this all becomes real. *This* becomes my new reality.

Everything I ever knew is about to change. It already has. It changed the moment the matron left that voicemail demanding I come to the house due to an emergency.

Suddenly, my emotions begin to drown me in their depths, sucking me into their whirlwind. I lift my hand to ring the doorbell when my feet stay rooted to the welcome mat, refusing to move forward.

Now they'll really know something is wrong.

I never ring the doorbell.

And by the way the door flies open to reveal Grayson's deep frown and Bella's wide eyes, I know I've blown any semblance of cool out the window. Grayson's gaze flicks between Emmy in my arms and my face.

Do I look as petrified and confused as I feel?

"What did you do, steal a child?" Grayson asks incredulously.

Bella blinks. "God, Kieran, we can help with a lot, but kidnapping is where I draw the line." She scrunches up her nose. "Please don't tell me you're going through a single mother stage. They deserve more than a quick shag."

My lips part to speak but my tongue doesn't move.

I want to tell them she's mine. I want to speak, goddammit, but for once in my life my tongue is a dead weight in my mouth and I find I'm unable to form a single word. Instead, I implore Grayson with my gaze, begging him to understand what I can't say verbally.

His head tilts before his expression slackens.

Taking a step back, I watch shock thunder through him, his hand reaching out to stabilize himself with Bella's touch. "No…"

Bella's face turns stricken as she looks to her boyfriend. "Grayson? What is it? Is…" She trails off, and I can see the moment it dawns on her too. Her hand covers her mouth as she gasps, her eyes flying to Emmy.

Grayson seems to compose himself, barely, as he whispers, "Kieran, whose kid is that?"

The tension between us all is so potent even Bambi approaches from behind, ever so carefully. It's like she knows that what I'm about to say will change all of our lives.

"Mine," I croak out.

And the emotions—the utter terror and fear of fucking this kid up, the sadness I feel for what she's gone through—bubbles to the surface, and before I can think better or control myself around Emmy, a strangled sob tears from my chest as I whisper my best friend's name like a plea. "Crawford."

I can feel it. I can feel my mental control about to snap. The events of today, the weight of this revelation, is about to burst from me, and I can't keep it at bay any longer.

My anguish must be clear across my face because Bella steps forward, placing a gentle hand on Emmy. “Hi darling, do you want to see a doggy? Do you love doggies?”

To my utter surprise and relief, Emmy peels herself away from me, all but toppling into Bella’s arms, and I see that I’m not the only one with tears in my eyes. Her little turned-up nose is flushed, her eyes red- rimmed, the bags beneath them far too dark for a three-year-old. The second Emmy is around the corner, Bella’s soft words soothing her as Bambi trails behind them, I take one look at Grayson and collapse to my knees and weep.

He quickly drops beside me and wraps his arms around me, trying to put me back together again.

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Chapter 3

Kieran

COACH ANDERSON

hope everything is all right Ashford

call me when you get a chance

Perched on the veranda steps, side by side with Grayson, we peer down at his backyard, watching as Emmy comes to life for the first time since I saw her crying at the foster home.

Bella, Bambi, and Emmy all frolic in the yard, but more so Emmy and Bambi; Bella has become a third wheel almost. She's tried everything to coax even so much as a laugh from Emmy but her lips are sealed like a vault. Although Bambi, who hasn't left my daughter's side since she set her doggy gaze on her, has managed to pull out a small timid smile.

The breath was completely knocked from my lungs when I saw it, and I was flooded with the primal urge to do everything in my power to make it happen again.

"She was found beside her, Grayson," I mutter. "She sat with her dead mother for God knows how long." My voice cracks as I add, "They think it was four days."

Grayson is quiet beside me. Let's face it, what the fuck do you even say to that?

"I have no idea what I'm doing. I have no family to give her…no one, Grayson. I am utterly alone. She's as good as an orphan."

Grayson's head whips to me. "You have *us*, Kieran. We're your family." The conviction in his tone makes me lift my gaze to his. "Me, Bella, and the team. Not to mention my parents. My mom will be heartbroken over Emmy's story but you know what she's like, she'll be claiming Emmy is her grandbaby the moment she finds out about her."

I take my hat off my head and run my fingers through my hair, then put the cap on backwards. "Of course you're all my family but…you know what I mean."

He shakes his head. "No, I don't. You have a family; you have since the day we met. I'm your brother, regardless that we don't have the same blood, and I know Drew would be saying the exact same thing right now if he were here."

The reminder of Drew sends a pang through my chest. Fuck do I wish that funny bastard was here right now giving me shit over this and lightening the mood.

I allow Grayson, the only one in this world I've ever felt comfortable with, to see my vulnerability as I whisper gutturally, "What if I'm not enough? What if I fuck up? Grayson, I don't want her to have the same childhood I had. It would crush me if I were the very thing to destroy her."

Grayson's hand lands on my shoulder. "The fact that you're so concerned that you're going to upset her or fuck up is already proving that you're the right person for her. You *care*, Kieran, and that's more than any of the supposed parental figures in your life did." He blows out a breath. "And I'm sorry to say, but you absolutely will fuck up."

His hands rise in surrender at the look I give him.

"All parents do. Even my sweet angel of a mom can say and do the wrong thing sometimes because she's human. It would be unnatural if you randomly got handed a child and suddenly knew exactly what to do."

"So you're saying I'm for sure going to fuck up my kid's head?" I scoff. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, Cap."

Grayson rolls his eyes. "You know what I mean. Case in point, I said the wrong thing despite my great intentions."

My stomach sinks. "I'm fucked."

"No, you're not. I'll have my mom come over and help, give a crash course on parenting, and Bella and I are here—"

I snort out a laugh. "Yeah, about that…—" I drop my head back with a groan. "You're going to think I'm crazy. I bought the house across the

street.”

“You *what*?” He sputters out a surprised laugh. “When the hell did you do that?”

“This afternoon.”

“You don’t do shit half-assed, do you, Ashford?”

I look down at the yard, watching Emmy chase Bambi around a tree. “It seems I don’t.”

We fall into a comfortable silence, the weight of my new reality weighing upon both our shoulders. Because Grayson’s right, we are brothers in every sense of the word. What happens to me happens to him as well.

“She’s very cute. She looks exactly like you.”

My lip twitches, daring to lift into a smile. “You think?”

He nods, his gaze transfixed on Bella as she squeals with laughter as Bambi tackles her, shortly followed by a timid Emmy. “Yeah, she has honestly everything but your eyes.”

“The Ashford eyes,” I murmur, a flash of my mom invading my mind.

Thank God Emmy doesn’t have my eyes. It’s hard enough as it is looking in the mirror and seeing my mother.

“My life will never be the same again,” I admit quietly, so quietly I’m afraid Grayson didn’t hear me and I’ll have to say it again. To say that is selfish, I know, considering Emmy was found sitting beside her dead mother and here I am worried that my life has irrevocably changed. Hers did that day too.

But Grayson just nods. “It’s realistic and true and I’m sorry that it happened this way without any time for you to prepare.”

I shrug despite the heaviness of the topic. “I have to be honest, though, I have a feeling I won’t mind. It’s just…”

“Scary,” he offers for me.

I dip my chin. “Extremely.”

Bella picks Emmy up and as they head our way, I quickly turn to Grayson and I swear to him and myself, “I will give her the life I never got, and I’ll do everything in my power to make it a good one.”

He searches my eyes before giving me that famous Crawford dimpled smile. “I never doubted for a second that you wouldn’t.”

Bella’s slightly out of breath as she ambles up the deck stairs with Emmy on her hip. It’s the first time since the foster home that Emmy has

been able to assess me from afar and she does just that.

She's got extremely inquisitive eyes.

We have more in common than just our looks and genetics, and it fucking crushes my heart and soul to know that we relate to instantly assessing those around us for danger. I hold my hands out for her before I can even think, the move coming as natural as breathing, and Emmy topples forward until I catch her, something in my chest settling as she lays her cheek against my shoulder, her arms wrapping around me.

"First order of business is food," Bella announces, already making her way through the back deck doors with Bambi hot on her heels. Grayson and I stand, trailing behind her into the kitchen as she calls over her shoulder, "Then we need to figure out who's going to watch her while you work."

A frown settles deep into my face, the groove between my brows forming. "I don't trust anyone to do that."

Bella stops searching the pantry to turn to me with wide eyes. "We would use a reputable agency—"

"No way in fucking hell am I going to let a stranger take care of my child." The fierceness of my words has my gaze sliding to the small bundle in my arms.

Shit, I should probably stop cussing around her, right?

Grayson shares a look with Bella and I can tell they're having an entire conversation without me.

"I don't care if I sound crazy, I'm not doing it. You don't know who you're hiring and Emmy has suffered enough. I'm not putting her at risk."

Not after what I went through.

"It's okay, I probably would feel the same way," Bella assures me. "I'm sorry I suggested it."

Now I feel like a dick for snapping.

My shoulders slump as I take a seat at one of the bar stools, waving off Bella's apology. "No, don't be sorry, I'm just—"

"Protective," she offers with a kind smile. "It's a good look, Ashford. Suits you."

I can't help it, my cheeks flame as I mutter out a thanks.

"Making my teammate blush, Blaze?" Grayson drawls.

She rolls her eyes, swatting away his hand as he wraps her in a hug.

As they whisper back and forth, I wave my free arm in the air. "Hello, world just exploded, I have a child on my hip. Unless you want to make

your own can we get back to what matters?”

Grayson snorts into the crook of Bella’s neck as she scoffs out a laugh. He doesn’t take his hands off her as he leans against the kitchen bench, taking her with him. “What about my mom? Would you trust her?”

“Of course, with my life and Emmy’s, but she has work and our schedule is all over the place. I don’t want to ask her to uproot her life and move here. That’s not fair.”

He frowns. “Shit, you’re right.”

Bella elbows him. “Language. We have little ears in the house now.”

Grayson winces, mouthing me an apology. “That’s going to take some getting used to.”

“You’re telling me,” I mutter as Bella suddenly squeals, clapping her hands. Even Emmy lifts her head.

“What about Layla?” she asks.

My back straightens. “Layla’s back?” I send a seething glare Grayson’s way. “Why didn’t you tell me she was back?”

He holds his hand up in surrender. “I didn’t know you’d want to know.”

“Okay, and the sky is goddamn blue.”

“What the hell does the sky have to do with this?”

“I thought we were naming obvious shit.” Wincing at my language—again—I whisper to Emmy, “When you do feel like talking, don’t say that word. It’s not kind.”

Bella huffs out a laugh across the island as she pushes away from Grayson and begins prepping dinner, him trailing beside her like a shadow, trying to help in any way he can.

“I would love Layla to look after her, but does she not have a job lined up? Also, how was Berlin? She never responded to my texts. Is she okay?”

Bella takes a deep breath before spinning to face me, ignoring Grayson, who’s trying not to laugh. “First of all, that’s a lot of questions.”

“I have time.”

Cocking her hip, she begins to tick things off her fingers. “Layla would be perfect for the job. She adores kids, wants to become an elementary school teacher. Second, Berlin was good for her, more than good in fact, but I’ll let her tell you that. And yes, she got all your text messages.”

My nose wrinkles. “Then why didn’t she reply?”

“Because you tried sexting her?”

My eyes practically bug out of my head as Grayson throws his back on a laugh. “I did not!”

“So, you weren’t trying to flirt with her?” Bella asks, her brow cocked.

“Flirting, yes.” I cover Emmy’s ears and whisper-hiss, “Not sexting.”

Bella shrugs and goes back to cooking at the stovetop. “She was focused on healing, and honestly, she thought you’d get sick of pining after her.”

As Grayson looks at me a bit too closely, I force myself to scoff. “I wasn’t *pining*.”

“Texting her every day, despite her not responding, gives off the impression that you were pining.”

Of course I was. Has she not met Layla? Stunning redhead, sassy mouth, gorgeous icy blue eyes that like to roll a million times when I’m around?

Who the fuck wouldn’t stop thinking about her? But by the silent conversation Bella and Grayson are having—once again—I choose to keep the fact that the little redhead has been driving me wild for well over a year to myself.

“We’re getting off topic. You think she’d want to work for me?”

Grayson kisses Bella on the cheek, moving to grab waters from the fridge and handing me one as he takes a seat at the bench beside me. He gives Emmy his famous megawatt smile as they no doubt lock gazes. I have to bite the inside of my cheek to not laugh as she looks back at Grayson warily.

She may not be speaking, but that doesn’t mean she isn’t watching everything.

Bending my head, I whisper, “He’s a gigantic idiot but he’s harmless.”

Grayson slaps my shoulder. “Don’t be teaching her bad things.” Turning back to Emmy, he cups his chest. “I’m not an idiot”—he sends a glare in my direction—“but your dad is, because it’s mean to call people names.”

“So mean that you just called me a name?” I say smugly.

Bella claps her hands from the kitchen. “You’re both as bad as each other right now, knock it off. Layla has been looking for a job without any luck. She’d probably take anything at this stage.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m not that bad.”

“Didn’t say you were.”

Layla sure acts like I’m carrying a plague, though. I’ve never had a woman avoid me as much as she does, and it drives me insane.

Of course the one woman I have interest in beyond a one-night stand is someone who can’t stand me.

“I’ll have her come over.”

That has me straightening. “Now?”

Bella shrugs. “Why not? We could all have dinner together.” She points at Emmy with her spatula. “You can see if they get along.”

Running a hand through my hair, I note how my palms are suddenly slick with sweat. “Okay, want me to text her?”

“If you want her to turn up, I’d suggest you let me do the texting.”

I don’t care who texts her. As long as that wild red hair makes an appearance tonight, I’d be a happy man.

And a very nervous one.

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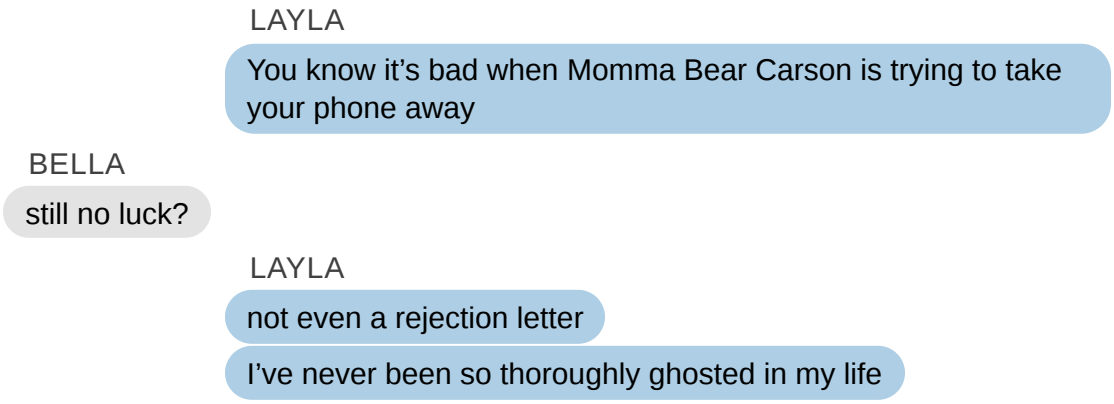
Chapter 4

Layla



Clinging to the towel wrapped around my body, the fluorescent lights of my bathroom highlight the water droplets gliding down my skin as I stare at the medicine cabinet lined with endless orange and white-capped bottles.

Twelve years.

Hundreds of doctor appointments.

Thousands of needles.

Endless hospital admissions.

Infinite tests.

Countless doctors shaking their heads in confusion, and an ungodly number of them telling me it was all in my head or that it was simply anxiety or PMS.

Every symptom my body showed was noted, tracked and recorded. My entire existence under a microscope because science for once didn't have answers.

And if they did it led me in circles.

Until I finally heard the diagnosis that came with equal parts relief and terror.

Lupus.

Incurable.

The diagnosis put the doctors who gaslit me to shame.

Every moment my body failed me, the times I was forced to sit out major life events. Friends birthdays, my own parties, prom, dances, dates… all of the medical trauma I've suffered through the past twelve years has come down to one singular white pill.

Bella was right to hope about Berlin and the trial program I was accepted into. It was my sanctuary, my haven, my beacon of light after all these long and dark years. Because for once, the trial medication is *working*.

And not the type of medication that suppresses everything in order to do so. Not the type to make me borderline catatonic, not the type to ruin my appetite, and not the type that comes with a heavy list of side-effects.

It's as if I was given a new body—a new chance at life.

A second shot.

Everything feels different. I can practically feel the way the medication courses through my blood. The scars are there internally—I don't think they will ever leave, not after such misfortune—but on the outside, I look whole.

Then again, I usually did. No one ever knew I had a silent illness, not unless the flare-up was bad enough that the weight dropped off my body like an anchor or that my eyebags looked like black eyes.

I've experienced freedom from the shackles of lupus, from the confines the disease wrapped my heart in and tried to bleed me dry…and now that I have I am utterly terrified.

Because I never want to go back.

The anxiety that rips through my body at the slightest change is so powerful I fear I'll never be able to truly describe it to someone. If I wake up groggier than usual, it makes my heart rate spike and my thoughts spin. If my body begins to ache here and there, I call the doctor and book an emergency appointment, because surely I'm out of remission and my lupus is flaring up.

Everyone prays that you get better and yet when you do no one sticks around to help talk you off the mental ledge of terror.

Because what no one warns you of is that once you know how it feels to be well rested, and dare I say healthy, truly *anything* that feels slightly off will have you Googling if you're flaring or developing some form of cancer.

Because it has to be something…right? You have to be sick because you've never been healthy since you were a preteen, and to be healthy just feels…weird, and yet entirely euphoric.

That is my secret.

My deep, dark secret.

I am utterly terrified to be better because it means I could fall sick again.

I take the pills like clockwork every evening at half past six, no matter where I am. I savor it on my tongue—because if being sick the majority of your life teaches you anything, it's how to swallow pills like a pro—and say a silent prayer that they continue to work.

Placing the pill on my tongue, I do just that.

Swallow.

Pray.

I'm not even religious, but there's nothing quite like nearly dying that makes you suddenly turn to the sky and beg for someone or something to heal you.

Wiping the condensation off the mirror, I peer at myself, turning my head this way and that, ignoring the smattering of freckles and my wet hair to look for the relapsing signs.

My nightly checklist.

No bags.

No paleness—beyond my already pale complexation.

No hormonal acne breakouts.

No hair loss.

No brittle nails.

No swelling.

No circulation issues.

As I move down the list, the tightness in my chest eases.

The first day the medication began to take effect, when they upped my dosage after three months in the trial, I thought it was a fluke. Thought that

as I opened my eyes, stretching my body this way and that without pain and stiffness, I was still dreaming. I even snapped up in bed, peering down at my body as if I suddenly transferred into another one *Freaky Friday* style, but no. I was still me.

That was the day I began to cling to my health. Began to beg and plead before I closed my eyes at night that I'd wake up and tomorrow would be the same. Especially when my parents not only put their lives on hold and spent hours by my side, championing my case against the doctors who gaslit me, but when they gave up the entirety of their retirement fund in the sheer hope and desperation that a medical trial in Berlin would help me.

Heading back to my childhood bedroom, I'm just sliding into my tracksuit pants when my phone vibrates, lighting up on the dresser in front of me with Bella's name. Her contact photo is one of us at Totti's, our eyes bleary and red.

A smile spreads across my cheeks as I quickly answer.

"Do you know how good it feels to finally be able to call each other at a normal time?"

I'm greeted by a snort on the other end. "You're telling me. Those 3 a.m. phone sessions hit different."

I still don't know how to repay her for the sleep she sacrificed. Bella was hellbent on me getting a full night's sleep while in Berlin so I knew exactly what was working in the trial, which meant that Bella had to wake up in the middle of the night just to talk to me.

"Sorry, B."

I can tell just by her tone she's flapping away my concerns. "No apology necessary. However, you could make it up to me," she sings.

Anything.

"What do you have in mind?"

"Dinner tonight? At mine and Grayson's?"

I can't stop my smile from stretching. It feels so good to hear those words, not only because I can just pop over and see my best friend whenever I want and not through a tiny phone screen, but the fact that I was right all along on the chemistry between her and Grayson. I've never seen such a perfect match outside of my parents but I knew it the second I saw them together at the charity event.

"Of course! Honestly, anything to distract me from the lack of emails hitting my inbox."

I knew it would be hard to find a job. I have no experience, never went to college, and barely passed high school. Not from a lack of intelligence, but no one can do well in school when they miss more days than they attend and they have brain fog so bad it makes them forget how to spell their own name. That was an embarrassing moment, to say the least.

I've been back for two weeks and I hit the ground running. I applied to over thirty-four jobs the week before I left Berlin, only to land in Colorado with a zero response rate.

"Still nothing?"

I sigh down the line. "Nothing." Quickly changing the subject, I perk up, moving off my bed to get changed into something other than my tracksuit pants. "Nothing that your amazing cooking can't distract me from. I'll be over in twenty!"

I all but fly through getting ready, desperate to leave my childhood bedroom.

I'm mentally reviewing other options I should try for work, because paying back my parents' retirement fund is my top priority, when I come to a dead stop in the entryway of Bella and Grayson's home.

There's a tiny human standing in the middle of the hall blinking up at me with big brown eyes.

Before I can stop myself, I'm frowning down at her.

Is this why Bella invited me over? Did they adopt a child without telling me beforehand?

She sucks on her thumb, her clothes far too small for her body. Jesus, why isn't she wearing clothes that fit her?

Squatting down so I'm at eye line with her, I smooth out my furrowed brows and smile, clocking how she's watching my every move. "Hi! I'm a friend of Bella's. My name's Layla." I keep imploring her with my smile as she continues to stare. "Do you have a name?"

She shakes her head ever so slowly.

I chuckle softly. “You don’t have a name?”

She keeps shaking her head.

Stumped, I choose to go along with it. “Do you want a name?”

Twin dimples pop out to greet me as she smiles around her thumb.

I tap on my chin, dramatically thinking. “Hmm, what shall your name be? How about…Princess Eddie?”

Her little nose wrinkles and I mirror her, pretending to vomit. “You’re right, not a good name for a princess.”

Flicking my gaze behind her, I can hear faint voices that seem to be coming from the backyard. Maybe I’m not the only one they invited over. I highly doubt Bella adopted a kid without telling me; we tell each other everything. Even I have to admit that train of thought was a bit of a leap.

Looking back down at the girl, I hum under my breath, continuing with this spiel. “What about Princess Mia?” I suggest, thinking of *The Princess Diaries*.

She shakes her head, far more emphatically than the first time, that smile still shining.

“Queen Lilly?”

A giggle flies past her thumb and a spark of happiness flares in my chest at her adorably soft laugh. I swear, the cutest sound in this world is children laughing.

I chuckle along with her. “You like being a queen?”

Her head nods this time so much I have to reach out and gently cup her arm to steady her before she topples over her own two feet.

Putting on a posh British accent, I ask, “And what is your name, my queen?” I finish with a head bow.

Her laughter floats toward me, and before I know it a small hand is cupped around my ear as she whispers, “E-e-mmy-y.”

Her voice is timid, crackly and rough as she stutters. For some reason, the sound of it has my heart pinching. She must be shy if she’s nervous to say her own name.

Pulling back with a large smile, I feign a gasp, putting my hand on my chest. “That is the prettiest name I’ve ever heard!”

Her thumb is firmly back in her mouth now but the smile remains, until I hold out my hand and ask, “Want to take me to your mommy and daddy?”

The light vanishes behind her eyes and I know I've said the wrong thing. Thinking quickly on my feet, I whisper conspiratorially, "Have you met Bambi?" Her eyes widen the moment I mention the deaf dog my best friend adopted last year. "Where is she? Should we go find her?"

She nods as I stand, and to my surprise, she lifts her arms, albeit as much as she can in a dress too tight, asking to be carried. Not thinking much of it, I gently grab her, my heart panging and my ovaries crying as she lays her cheek on my shoulder.

"You're so sweet, Queen Emmy," I whisper, earning a soft chuckle.

Biting the inside of my cheek so I'm not grinning like the Cheshire Cat as I round the corner, I almost lose my footing when I spot Kieran on the deck.

My breath hitches and I stop walking.

Standing at the living room threshold, with all the flirty text messages he sent me burning a hole in my pocket, I drink in the sight of him in.

He is another one of my secrets.

It took all of my willpower to not respond to a single text of his. That, and a heavy dose of online stalking to remind myself how much of a player he is. However, that doesn't mean I can't admire how attractive he is because that man is the definition of handsome. The cheeky smiles he gives, the flirty winks, the utter confidence that oozes from every pore. The way his eyes drink you in as if he wants to savor you to memory.

Everything about him is alluring.

Although that cheeky swagger of his seems to be missing tonight. I don't think I've ever seen him frown before and yet here he is, his head hanging low, his expression perplexed as he runs a hand through his hair. Grayson murmurs something beside him.

My heart sinks. Did something happen?

Walking out onto the deck, I make my presence known by declaring, "Queen Emmy here is the best welcome party I've ever received."

At my voice, Kieran's head snaps upright. His eyes land on me, seeming to spark, before they shift to the small girl in my arms, and suddenly, he's standing. "Did you just say Emmy?"

Sudden worry overtakes his features, Bella and Grayson wearing mirroring expressions. "Yes? This is Emmy, right?"

Kieran nods slowly, his jaw dropping, at a loss for words.

That's a first.

I would know, the man sent me over 577 text messages.

Bella moves first. “How do you know her name?”

Now I can’t help but laugh. “Come on guys, stop freaking me out. She told me.”

Kieran sucks in a sharp breath. The look he gives me and Emmy…no words could comprehend it.

Swallowing thickly, I turn to my best friend. “Can someone please fill me in on why you’re all looking at me like I grew a second head? And while we’re at it”—I lower my voice—“who does she belong to?”

Grayson steps forward, clapping Kieran on the shoulder. “This one has to come from you.”

Ignoring his best friend’s cryptic words, Kieran musters his courage before asking, “She talked to you?”

Frowning, I hold her a little tighter in my arms, suddenly feeling cornered and defensive over our exchange. “Yes.”

He shakes his head. “She hasn’t spoken to anyone…in weeks.”

I rear back before I crane my neck to try and catch Emmy’s eye, but she just nuzzles her head further into the crook, not allowing me to see her. “Cheeky queen,” I whisper, biting my tongue as she giggles.

Kieran’s eyes all but bug out of his head.

I try to find her parents on the deck but come up empty. “Where are her…” I stop myself from saying *parents* after what happened earlier in the hallway.

Kieran rubs the nape of his neck before he rounds the table, past a shell-shocked Bella and toward me. He holds out his hands and before I can stop her, Emmy tumbles into his arms, wrapping around his neck instinctively, as if they’ve done this move before.

“We put her down for a nap on the couch. I guess she woke up when you got here,” Kieran says, his usually flirty tone gone, replaced with a certain monotone that has me steeling my heart.

Something in my stomach begins to churn, a queasy feeling as I look from the little girl in his arms to his face.

Then it clicks.

The resemblance is uncanny when they’re next to each other.

Taking a step back, I mutter, “Oh my god.”

Kieran’s eyes lock on mine and hold me in place, trapping me in the blue depths. He looks so vulnerable in this moment, so small and afraid,

like the wrong reaction from me will make him crumble.

This version of Kieran is so far from the man I met over a year ago it steals my breath.

I miss the man who pushed my buttons and flirted with me endlessly.

I want the man with the light in his eyes.

And by the way he's looking at me, he doesn't want to say the words. So I do him this favor. Squaring my shoulders, I offer him a smile. "Is she yours?"

At my shift, his shoulders loosen, that caginess leaving his eyes as he dips his chin. "It's a very, *very* long story."

Bella and Grayson fade into the background, as if it's just Kieran and me here in this bubble as I whisper, "Are you okay?"

I don't know what compels me to ask it, whether it's compassion for the man who was beside me helping my best friend through her grief, empathy since he was there for her and Grayson when I couldn't be, or sympathy as someone who always can extract a laugh from anyone in the room.

Kieran falls silent, and I realize with utter clarity that he can't lie to me.

Before I know what I'm doing, I blurt, "She needs new clothes."

Kieran barks out a laugh. "I just dropped a bomb on you that I have a three-year-old and that's all you have to say?"

I can't help but shrug. "Well, she does. They're too tight."

"All of her clothes that I was given are the same." He turns to Bella. "I don't suppose you have anything?"

Bella winces. "I don't exactly have clothes for children lying around."

"I can go to the store and pick up some things for you if you want. She seems the same size as my cousin's kids," I offer.

Bella jumps to stand, rushing to Kieran as she claps her hands with a squeal. "You know what, Kieran, that sounds like the perfect opportunity! Why don't you drive Layla?"

She moves to take Emmy off his hands, her going willingly, but I know my best friend and I know that *tone*. I eye Bella, mouthing, *What are you doing?*

She pretends not to see me and all that does is let me know she absolutely is up to no good.

"I can go myself. It's—"

"*No*," she blurts, sitting on the deck beside Grayson and already ignoring Kieran and me as they both start to fuss over Emmy. "Kieran will

take you," she says, leaving no room for argument.

She shoots Grayson a look, and his eyes widen before he nods along. "Yeah, that's the best idea."

Kieran frowns, putting his hands on his hips. "What are you two doing?" Their seething eye rolls has Kieran straightening. "Oh shit, yeah." Turning to me, that charm dials on and Kieran flashes me a smile that has my core clenching.

God, this man is attractive. No wonder women drop their panties so quick for him.

He grabs a hat that was on the table and slides it on backwards, solidifying that thought as he winks. "Come on, Red, let's go."

Groaning, I drop my head back. "You did not just call me Red. Do you have no imagination?"

Ignoring me, he picks up his keys, only to pause by Emmy.

Grayson's gruff voice snags Kieran's attention. "She'll be okay. I promise, Kieran. I won't let anything happen."

Kieran's body locks tight before he forces out a breath, along with the tension. "I'll be quick."

"Take your time. You could use a breather."

Spinning on his heel, Kieran puts his hand on my lower back, leading me toward the front door. I take a large step away from his touch as I feel the early onset of a shiver from just the mere graze of his hand.

"I know where to walk," I clip.

"I see Berlin didn't take that spark from you."

I glare at him over my shoulder. "Hard to take something away when it's only brought out by your presence." Returning my gaze to the front door, I come to a stop, my nose wrinkling as I take in the driveway. "Where's your car?"

Kieran's brow quirks as he gives me a shit eating grin. "Miss I know where to walk suddenly confused?"

At my glare he clicks his tongue, jutting his chin to the front gate. "Parked it on the street." Walking past me Kieran clutches his chest, his charisma returning the farther we get from the house. "I'm flattered that I bring out a new side in you though."

Snorting out a laugh as we step through the front gates, Kieran opens his passenger door for me, allowing me to slide into the seat of his truck. As he jumps into the driver's side and turns on the ignition, I drawl, "Trust me,

it’s not something to boast about.” He backs out of the driveway, his arm slung behind my chair, and I have to pointedly ignore the veins rippling down his biceps. “Speaking of new facets in our personalities, *Daddy Ashford*,” I say pointedly, “seems you left a few things out in your text messages.”

His brows flick up as we turn off Grayson’s street. “Oh, so you did receive them. I thought your phone broke.” He turns to me with a grin. “You know, considering you never responded.”

“Nice deflection.”

“Right back atcha, Red.”

“No.” I hold up my hand. “Absolutely not. You will not call me Red, and stop ignoring the elephant in the room.”

“Truck.”

“Semantics much?”

“Persistent much?”

“When there’s a literal child involved, absolutely.”

Kieran bites the inside of his cheek before sighing. “I got a call this morning from a foster home in the city.” His eyes darken as a shudder rolls through him. “Emmy’s mom passed away. Heroin overdose.”

A gasp escapes me as horror slices through my veins.

Kieran’s head bobs up and down as if he’s agreeing with my reaction. “I feel like the biggest piece of shit there is because if I’m entirely honest, I don’t even remember her mom. I’ve been racking my brain all day, searching my memories for even a slither of resemblance but I’ve come up with nothing.”

I chew on my bottom lip. “Are you sure she’s yours?” I ask gently.

He flicks his indicator on as he rolls to a stop at a red light. “I’ve seen the DNA results. She’s all mine.” He barks out a short laugh. “Honestly though, I didn’t need to see the results. She looks like a mini version of me.”

“Except for the eyes.” Her eyes are all her. Shaking my head, his words finally process as he turns into the Target parking lot. “How did they run the DNA test so quickly if you only found out today?”

His body tenses immediately.

“Kieran?”

His head flops against the headrest. He laughs, but it doesn’t hold any humor. “Pulling out all my deepest secrets today it seems, Red.”

“Layla,” I correct before fully turning to him. “You don’t have to tell me,” I offer softly. “I mean, you owe me nothing.”

He takes a deep breath before lifting those ocean eyes to mine, searing me to the spot. “They had my DNA on file because I…grew up in the foster home,” he whispers. “I was brought there when I was four.”

If I thought my heart had dropped before, it is nothing compared to this moment.

It feels like I’m riding a rollercoaster and we just plummeted down the face of the hill, my stomach rising into my chest.

I would have never known, would have never guessed by looking at him.

Although, isn’t that hypocritical of me? I’ve suffered from an invisible illness. Most people would never be able to guess that I’ve seen more hospital waiting rooms than I’ve celebrated birthdays. I know more than anyone that you should give people the benefit of the doubt because you never know what they’re battling. And yet here I am, shoving Kieran into the box of a playboy because it scares me how I feel around him.

Peering at Kieran, with his heart on his sleeve as he reveals a secret he no doubt keeps close to his chest I whisper the only thing that comes to mind, “I had no idea.”

“It’s not something I go around telling people.”

“God, Kieran, I’m so sorry,” I whisper. “Today must have been—”

“A lot,” he finishes for me.

His weary tone has my heart pinching. His world just turned on its axis and if that wasn’t enough, having to pick up the daughter you had no idea existed from the same orphanage you were abandoned at would have sliced open every ugly wound that he’s tried to keep buried.

I sit up a little straighter. “You know what, you’ve probably been hounded with enough questions today. Mine can wait. Let’s go get your mind off things.”

I open the door but when I notice he doesn’t move, I peer over my shoulder at him. He’s put his chin on his fist, a smile toying along his lips.

Frowning, I mutter, “What?”

“That was an adorable declaration, but we are here to buy clothes for my daughter. I don’t think that will get my mind off it.”

Right.

My cheeks flush scarlet. “Can’t blame a girl for trying.”

He winks. “Never.”

Hopping out of the truck, I turn to him before I close the door, my nose wrinkling. “You seriously found that cute?”

He shakes his head on a laugh as he jumps out, shutting his own door, but not before I hear him whisper, “You have no idea everything you do is cute.”

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Chapter 5

Kieran

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

I would pick up some nuggets on the way home if I were you

KIERAN

Emmy not eating?

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

big time

Bella's starting to take personal offense and you know how determined she can get…

KIERAN

Nuggets it is

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

thank you

you're saving my kitchen and sanity

Layla's not stopped talking for over ten minutes, and I've just been happily following behind her pushing the cart as she yaps.

It took one statement, just one small mention of how I didn't know Target sold books, and she was off like a rocket.

I knew she read books, had eavesdropped on enough of Bella's phone calls with her this past year to pick up on her love for them, but my god, the

spark that enters her eyes as she talks about them… I'd ask a million questions over and over just to see it again.

It's how I imagine I look when I step on the rink.

It's the expression of pure joy.

She's been going on and on about printing and distribution and how it's changed since the resurgence of reading that she only now realizes where she's walked to. She comes to a sudden halt, almost making me crash into her with the cart as she twists this way and that in the cleaning aisle.

"Why are we here?" she asks with a frown.

Shrugging, I admit, "I just followed you."

Muttering something under her breath that I can't catch, she spins on her heels and ushers me out of the way.

"I got distracted." She shakes her head. "I swear I lose my marbles when I start taking about books. Why didn't you stop me?"

"Why would I want to do a thing like that?"

Now heading in the right direction, her brow quirks. "Boredom?"

My voice is thick as I drawl, "Do I seem bored to you?"

Coming to a stop, her gaze trails down my body and fuck me, as she takes her lower lip between her teeth, I want to kiss her so badly my grip turns white on the cart.

Layla has no idea how attractive she is. *None*.

She makes a *hmph* sound as she turns away, but not before I catch the blush blooming along her cheeks. Shaking my head and getting a wrangle on my emotions, I face the endless aisles, entirely overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the baby section. "Christ," I curse. "Where the hell do we start?"

"I had a feeling we were going to need more than just clothes," she explains. "Emmy doesn't have much, does she?"

My eyes shutter closed at the memory of the very small trash bag the matron handed me containing *all* of Emmy's belongings. And the few clothes in there don't even fit her.

"Emmy essentially has nothing."

Forcing out a deep breath, I open my eyes and see the same sadness mirrored in Layla's.

"I know," I whisper, feeling utter devastation for what Emmy has had to endure.

She’s fucking three years old, and was found next to a woman who overdosed on heroin.

Layla wipes a tear from her cheek. “People can be so cruel.” She seems to mull something over before nodding to herself. “Well, she has you now and you won’t let anything bad happen to her.” She says it with such conviction I’m momentarily stunned.

There she goes again, having no idea the effect she has on me.

“While we’re on the topic of that,” I say, watching her brows furrow in concentration as she reads the labels on— “Wait, does she still wear diapers? How do we know if she needs them, and what kind?”

I take my hat off for a moment to run my hand through my hair before sliding it on again. It’s quiet for a beat too long before I catch Layla staring at me.

I give her a lopsided grin. “See something you like?”

She narrows her eyes. “You have dandruff.”

“I do fucking not,” I scoff.

She shrugs. “Only reason I was looking, and yes, I think we should get nighttime diapers for her to sleep in.”

Layla takes off without another word, ignoring me completely. As she inspects the labels again, trying to find the right one, I quickly remove my hat to double-check.

A snort escapes me.

Dandruff my fucking ass. She was ogling me.

“What were you saying?” she calls over her shoulder as she moves onto the next thing.

My smirk is now firmly in place.

Little Miss I-Don’t-Text-Back was checking me out.

Layla all but growls as she snaps her fingers. “Earth to Kieran, what were you going to say?”

“Are you still looking for a job?” I ask. Before she can answer me, Layla places a handful of oddly shaped plates in the cart. I frown. “What the fuck are these and why do I need them?”

Layla’s sigh is more humor than annoyance. “They’re plates with suction cups on the bottom. It sticks to the table so kids don’t throw their food.”

My nose wrinkles. “Three-year-olds throw food?”

“If they’re cranky and don’t want to eat something, yes.”

“How do you know so much about this stuff?” I ask as she adds colorful plastic spoons, forks, and knives too. “You don’t have a secret kid in hiding, do you?”

“Funny,” she snorts. “But no, my cousins all have kids. I’ve picked up a thing or two over the years.” Rounding the corner, she pops that bottom lip between her teeth, back to checking out the items.

Fuck, I should be reading alongside her. She shouldn’t really be doing this at all and yet here I am, leaning against the cart, following her like a distracted puppy because well…

Layla’s back.

Not that she ever left my mind.

“And yes, I’m still looking for a job.”

My eyes snap up. An emotion passes across her face but before I can decipher it, it’s gone.

We finally stumble upon the clothing aisle and sift through the racks, guessing Emmy’s size. I decide to go up two sizes from the clothes she’s currently in now and it seems Layla had the same thought. I pick out onesies, dresses, tops, and pants. It’s the middle of August so winter gear isn’t needed yet; I’ll do another large haul for her before then.

I’ll take her shopping next week to children stores to let her pick stuff out. If she chooses her own clothes and toys, maybe it can give me a peek into what she likes and that shy little personality she’s hiding.

Layla and I fall into a comfortable silence but the words I need to speak are building on my tongue and I don’t know why I can’t seem to force them out. Squaring my shoulders, I take a steadying breath, pushing my panic, and oddly, my fear of rejection down deep as I turn to her and ask, “Would you work for me?” I quickly go on to explain as she cranes her head to look at me. “For Emmy…would you be interested in a nannying job?” I have no fucking clue why I feel so exposed right now. “I don’t want to hire a stranger to look after her and, well, after you got her to speak, I feel like she would be comfortable with you.”

To give myself something to do as Layla continues to stare at me, I place the sunflower top in my hands in the cart, adding to the pile. “I’d pay you a very comfortable salary, along with health insurance. Your schedule would have to be flexible because of my games, and when I go away, you’d have to stay at my house with Emmy—”

“This isn’t a pity job, is it?”

I trail off, in shock. “Why would it be a pity job?”

Layla’s swallow is audible as she averts her eyes, embarrassment tinting her cheeks. “Because I haven’t been able to land a job yet.”

Stepping forward, I gently place my hand on hers, drawing her attention. “I don’t pity you, Layla, far from it,” I say earnestly. “And no, it’s not why I’m offering. I trust you and clearly Emmy sees the goodness in you too, otherwise she wouldn’t have spoken.”

Something I said landed, and in replacement of her wariness is elation.

“I’d love to,” she breathes. “I love children. I want to be—”

“An elementary teacher,” I finish for her, smiling as she reacts with surprise.

“How did you know?”

Stepping back, I shrug. “Bella told me.”

“Keeping tabs on me, Ashford?” she asks, cocking her hip.

“Always,” I half joke, though it’s not entirely a lie.

She licks her lips. “I feel like we need to have a conversation about my health before you officially offer me a job to take care of your daughter.”

Leaning against the clothing rack, I fold my arms over my chest, noting how her gaze flicks to my biceps and lingers. “How was Berlin?” I ask, although I only do that so I don’t sound like a creep. Little does Layla know I hounded Bella almost every day for updates on her medical treatment. When it became apparent Layla wasn’t going to respond to me, I had to get creative. Something tells me Layla would cuss me out for that.

Is it weird that I want Layla to cuss me out?

She nods, a small smile stretching across her plush lips. “Good. Actually, really good. Just a pill a day and it keeps my symptoms at bay.”

I make my brows rise in feign surprise, pretending like this is the first I’m hearing of it. “That’s amazing. I’m really happy for you, Layla. You deserve it.”

“Thank you,” she murmurs. “But it didn’t fully heal me. I still have lupus, always will. I could have a flare-up any day.”

Despite her words, she lifts her chin with such determination it takes everything in me not to smile. You wouldn’t know it when you meet Layla—the kindness that is so ingrained in her is disarming—but beneath it, there’s a type of spark that only a survivor has. She’s endured a lot and she’s a fighter through and through.

It takes one to spot another.

“That doesn’t mean I can’t do this job, though, and I would like to be treated just like a regular employee. I can manage my illness and help you with Emmy just fine.”

“I know.”

Her mouth opens, only to snap shut as she quickly shakes her head. “With that being said, we should have a plan in place…just in case I have a flare-up. Perhaps I could give you the name of my doctor and send you my medical files for—”

I push off the rack and slowly stalk toward her, loving and savoring the way she inhales a sharp breath, her small frame swallowed by mine. “I trust you to manage your own body, Layla. You don’t have to share your private medical files. If you have a flare-up, we can cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Her head rears back. “Oh. T-thank you,” she stammers out.

Winking, I turn back to the clothes to find Emmy some pajamas. I wonder what TV shows kids watch these days. There seems to be a lot of *Bluey* and *Paw Patrol* merch.

I should Google which one is best for kids. Or should I be a parent that does no screen time? Fuck, maybe we should go down to the book section and pick out some parenting books.

“You can’t flirt with me.”

Layla’s sudden outburst has me turning to face her, my lips twitching at her crimson cheeks.

“Excuse me?” I drawl, my voice filled with humor.

“You’re going to be my boss. You can’t flirt with me.”

I snort out a derisive laugh. “Yeah, that’s not happening.”

“*What*?” she asks incredulously.

I place my hands on my hips as I stare her down. “I’m not going to stop.”

She all but huffs, crossing her arms over her chest. “And why not?”

Smirking, I let my eyes trail down the length of her shamelessly, savoring every inch before admitting, “It would be impossible to stop.”

“Then I won’t take the job.”

“You’re taking the job,” I say.

She throws her hands in the air in exasperation. “Kieran, you can’t flirt with me!”

“And why not?”

“Because…because it would confuse Emmy.”

“Fine, I won’t flirt with you while she’s around.” Winking, I all but purr, “But all bets are off when she’s not there, Red.”

“Layla,” she snaps, correcting me once more.

Is it wrong that I love her flash of irritation every time I call her Red?

Probably.

I’ll stop eventually. I don’t want her to think it’s because of her, though. Truth be told, Red doesn’t suit her as a nickname. Doesn’t do her vibrant personality justice.

“That’s as far as you’ll get with me on the matter,” I call over my shoulder as I take the cart and head down the next aisle. Layla trails behind me, cursing and cussing me out under her breath.

Grabbing blankets and teddy bears because why the hell not, I throw them in the cart as I turn to her, stopping her mumbling in her tracks, literally. She crashes into my chest and I gently cup her arms, righting her before she falls on her ass.

I can tell she’s about to snap something at me, that feisty side that only comes out and plays with me, but before she can I say, “One of these days you’re going to admit just how much you love flirting with me.”

Her eyes blaze. “With you? This is all one-sided and entirely for your own merit.”

“Keep telling yourself that.”

“I don’t have to tell myself shit.”

My grin is devilish as I bend down, my lips a hair’s breadth from hers. “Then why are you clinging to me like you don’t want to stop touching me?”

Her eyes snap down to her hands on my biceps and she jumps back a foot, gasping. She spins away. “You’re insufferable!”

“Whatever makes you sleep at night,” I sing to her retreating form.

Her growl of frustration from the next aisle over has me throwing my head back on a deep belly laugh.

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Chapter 6

Layla

BELLA

photo attachment

LAYLA

stop

that is the cutest photo I've ever seen

BELLA

I found Emmy snuggled up in Kieran's arms this morning on the couch, both dead to the world

LAYLA

they even sleep in the same position

how come they're on your couch?

BELLA

Kieran called it a big 'sleepover' to try and make it fun for Emmy

LAYLA

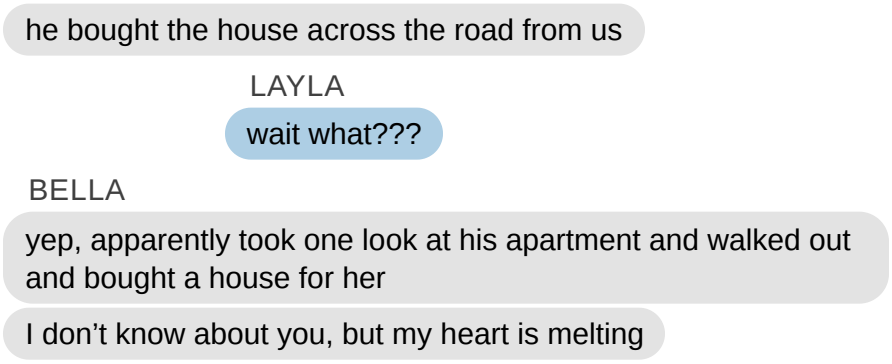
I hate to admit this

something tells me he's going to be utterly adorable with her

BELLA

he already is

he's going to do everything and anything for that little girl



This is either going to be the best decision of my life or the worst.

Kieran and I barely scratched the surface of what my duties would entail, his parenting style—although that one comes down to the fact he doesn’t even know yet—my hours, what I’d help with, and what I’d take a backseat on.

Does he want help around the house as well, or will he hire a cleaner?

Hell, we didn’t even talk about my salary and yet here I am, driving toward his house, my heart pounding a ferocious beat because I equal parts hate and love when Kieran flirts with me, and flirt he will.

He made that very clear last night in Target…and on the ride home.

As I turn into Kieran’s driveway, I know I’ve made the right decision to come over uninvited and help. Parked across and taking up the majority of the cobblestone driveway is a large delivery truck. Grayson is hauling boxes down the ramp while two movers trail behind him, carting what seems to be part of a sectional sofa.

At the sound of my door shutting, Grayson’s head whips up, a grin spreading across his cheeks. “Hey! Bella didn’t say you were stopping by.”

Slinging my purse over my shoulder, I meet him by the front door, stepping out of the way of the two delivery drivers, dripping with sweat. “Figured I could lend a hand. I assumed things would be a bit hectic.”

Grayson blows out a breath as he puts the box down on the floor between us. “We could use it. He decided to get everything brand new.” Which is evident by the truck behind him, still half full. “I’d usually call the team for help when there’s this much to move but…”

“He hasn’t told them yet?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Not yet. I think he wants to feel settled before telling them.”

“Fair enough. I’m sure he isn’t ready to answer all their questions too.” Turning to the truck, I murmur, “He really didn’t bring anything from his old apartment?”

Grayson’s bemused laugh rings out. “Nothing besides the clothes in his wardrobe.”

My brows rise. *I wonder why he’d add extra stress of ordering new furniture on top of everything.*

I peer over Grayson’s shoulder, checking no one is around before lowering my voice. “How’s he doing?”

Grayson pauses. “If I’m being honest, I think it will take a while for his head to stop spinning.”

“I can imagine.” Looking into the house, I spot Bella round the corner, opening a pile of boxes and unwrapping items. “How’s B doing?”

If I thought the smile he greeted me with was big, it’s nothing compared to the pure joy on his face as he turns and sets his sights on his girl. “She has good and bad days, but I think the heaviest has passed,” he admits softly, talking about Bella’s grief. “It never completely fades but I think she’s climbed out of the deepest trenches of it.”

Something tells me he isn’t just talking about Bella’s grief but his own. The memory of Drew must be stinging with everything that’s going on. Bella told me the three of them—Grayson, Drew, and Kieran—were as close as if they were all blood brothers.

Kieran must be missing him dearly.

“It really is like losing a limb, thinking it’s there when it’s not.” I’m not sure why, maybe because I feel like I can’t admit this to Bella out of fear of upsetting her, but I find myself confessing, “I miss Trish so much. It’s weird not to be at her house anymore.”

Grayson’s smile is sad. “She was a beautiful woman.”

“That she was.” Taking a shuddering breath, I try to shake off the sadness that always overcomes me when I think of Bella’s mom and her passing. “I’m going to head inside and help. Give a shout if you need anything!”

Taking off, I note how different Kieran’s house is compared to Grayson’s. Right past the entryway, the living and dining rooms stretch out to the back patio, with the kitchen being nestled and tucked inside to the left. Grayson and Bella filled their house with warmth, but with deep rich

wood and trim work designs, Kieran's comes with it. As if the house is a character all on its own, the beauty of it in its base, not the decor.

"Beautiful," I whisper.

Someone shrieks, and suddenly, Bella's happy face is rushing for me. "Ahh! I'm so glad you stopped in! I was just about to text you." As she wraps her arms around me, I soak up her warmth, still savoring the hugs we can finally give each other again.

"Put me to work. How can I help?" I ask. I can finally be the type of person that can carry my weight without getting hit by lethargy or a skyrocketing heart rate twenty minutes in. I've even started helping my mom clean the house, which might sound so odd and mundane to most, but I used to get dizzy just from looking down and pushing the vacuum.

Who would have ever thought I'd be excited to vacuum?

Bella looks around the space littered with boxes and half put-together furniture before her head cranes to the backyard. Following her gaze, I spot Kieran sitting on the grass, his arms slung over his knees as he watches Bambi chase Emmy around the yard.

"You know what, Grayson and I have this. Kieran paid extra to have the delivery guys put the furniture together so once they unload, it will honestly be super busy in here." A knowing glint shines in her brown eyes before she turns and starts to retie her ponytail. "Why don't you go outside with Kieran and Emmy?"

I frown. "There's so much to do here though."

She waves me off, moving onto a box and pulling out pieces of what will soon resemble a chair. "I think Kieran could use the company. He's been in his head a lot." She points a finger at me. "Plus, you two need to get on the same page about your roles."

"We do," I admit.

Her smile widens. "Then off you go!"

I can't help but feel like she's scheming in some way, but at the end of the day, I should be making sure Emmy feels comfortable being left alone with me.

Bella doesn't give me a chance to put up a fight, joining Grayson and the delivery drivers. I take that as my cue and step outside onto the dark wood porch. Kieran's yard doesn't have a view of the mountains like Grayson's does; instead, it overlooks a large forest, and my god is it breathtaking.

Kieran does a double take when I sit next to him before a grin slowly spreads across his face. “Can’t get enough of me, can you, sunshine?”

My brows rise. “Sunshine?”

“You said I couldn’t call you Red.”

I roll my eyes. “My name would suffice.”

“Hmm,” he hums before drawling, “I beg to differ. I love your name rolling off my tongue, but I think sunshine suits you.”

A squeal rings out through the yard, drawing my attention to Emmy running around, Bambi close on her heels. She’s wearing one of the dresses we bought her last night, the soft pink pastel falling below her knees.

“She looks so…”

“Carefree?”

“Yeah,” I breathe. “It’s so different to how she was yesterday. I mean, granted, she spoke to me, but that still took a lot of convincing.”

“It’s Bambi. I swear, those two took one look at each other and that was it. I’ve never seen a dog bring out a kid’s personality like she has with Emmy.”

I can tell what he means by that. She was giggling with me, but it was quiet and hidden behind her thumb. Now, her smile is wide, her dimples on full display. Emmy looks like any other kid her age playing with a dog, certainly not one whose life was just flipped on its axis.

“Bambi’s a better parent than I am.”

Kieran’s declaration jars me so much I end up glaring at him. “Hey, don’t say that. You’re doing amazing so far.”

“So far,” he mumbles.

“Kieran, most people would have buckled under the weight of the cards you’ve just been dealt, but you have stepped up in every possible way. Don’t discredit that.”

My words create a tension I can’t put a finger on, one that fills between us. He’s staring at me as if he’s trying to discern if I’m telling the truth or not.

Kieran gets compliments all the time. Women throw themselves at him and he laps it up. Why is this compliment such a difficult pill to swallow?

He grins suddenly, a playfulness entering his gaze. “Didn’t realize you were such a fan of mine.” He leans back on his hands. “I couldn’t even get so much as a text back for over a year and yet now here you are singing poetry about me. I’m flattered.”

Snorting out a laugh before I can stop it, I mutter, “Glad to have you back. You were getting too serious there for a moment.”

His grin turns into a full-blown smirk. “So you do like my company. I knew it.”

I move my gaze forward, knowing that if I locked eyes with his mischievous glint, I’d blush. “Whatever lies make you happy.”

He slides down until he’s propped up on his elbows. “You texting me back would have made me happy.”

I scoff. “I’m sure one of your many puck bunnies will text you back and curb your appetite for flirting.”

“None of them entertain me like you do.”

I smack a hand to my chest. “Oh Kieran, I’m so flattered! That’s what every girl wants to hear!”

“I’m serious.”

“So was I.”

His eyes narrow as he searches my face. “Do you really think I’m doing okay?” he asks. “I mean, I know it’s only been two days but…”

“You don’t want to mess it up,” I finish for him, his sudden seriousness making me answer honestly. “I think you’ve been selfless and have jumped headfirst into everything with your chin held high.”

He sits forward, splaying his hands out in front of him. “But I have no idea what I’m doing. I downloaded parenting books last night and I’ve never been so overwhelmed in my life.” He blows out a breath before hanging his head, running a frustrated hand through his dark black strands. “I mean, what the fuck? There are debates over everything…*everything*! Processed food versus whole food. Screen time versus no screen time. Standard schooling versus homeschooling. There is quite literally a decision every single step of the way and each side throws out such valid concerns and points I’m always left in the middle like I’m watching a fucking tennis match.”

My hands itch at my sides to comfort him. “My cousin had the exact same meltdown you’re having right now.”

“Really?” he asks dubiously.

“Yep,” I say popping the *p*, thinking back to that day in her house. “My mom, my aunt, and I had to confiscate her laptop and pregnancy books for nearly three weeks because she went down such a research rabbit hole. I’m

telling you, Kieran, everything you're feeling right now is extremely valid and *normal*."

A thought comes to mind and before I can stop myself, I'm whipping out my phone and sending off a text. "You know what, you need someone who's been a mother before to answer your questions."

Kieran's phone buzzes beside him. His eyes flick to mine with surprise before something akin to heat replaces it.

"Did Layla Carson just…send me a text?" He throws himself down on the ground, punching the air. "My life has been fucking made!"

I playfully whack his shoulder. "Oh, shut up. I texted you my mom's number."

"I'm flattered, but I'm already head over heels for her daughter."

I shake my head, though I can't stop a smile from blooming. "You're such a flirt. I told her about your situation, and she would be more than happy to answer any and all of your questions."

His brows furrow. "Really?"

"Of course."

"That's very kind of you both."

"She's just happy I have a job and honestly, I'm surprised she's not here right now. It took a lot of convincing to make her stay home and not go full-blown Momma Bear Carson on you and Emmy."

I laugh to myself, but stop when I realize I'm the only one giggling. Kieran is still locked on our text thread.

"Kieran?"

"Why would she want to help me?" he quietly asks.

The utter confusion in his voice freezes me. "Why wouldn't she?"

His tongue darts out to lick his lips. "Besides Grayson's mom, I've never had a mother figure in my life, and the only reason she isn't here right now is because they're away on vacation."

My heart tumbles.

The more I learn about Kieran, the more I realize how very different our childhoods were. My stomach flips and my hands itch to touch him, pleading with me to lean forward and comfort him, but what could I ever say to soothe the ache of him knowing no one wanted to love him growing up?

I hate everyone who ever made him feel that way.

I have to clear a lump of emotion in my throat to say, “Well, if you want it, my mom would love to help.”

He blows out a shaky breath. “I’ll take all the help I can get. I’m not going to turn it away, not when it comes to Emmy. Which brings me to you. We should talk about what I need from you, along with your salary.” He rubs the nape of his neck. “I’ll have my agent draw up a contract. I just…I haven’t told anyone else and there’s still the house to do—”

“Don’t even worry about it. Let’s just focus on one thing at a time. First step is getting the house done.”

“And figuring out what type of parent I want to be,” he all but growls, his frustration bubbling to the surface.

Worrying my lower lip, I tread with caution, not wanting to overstep. “I don’t want this to come across like I’m throwing another idea at you…”

His gaze sears me to the spot. “I’m always open to hearing your thoughts.”

“Why don’t you just be yourself? Emmy has had enough serious situations for someone so young, and by the way she’s playing with Bambi, maybe that’s all she needs right now.”

“A dog?”

“*Fun*,” I correct. “She needs fun. She needs to feel like a kid.”

He muses over my words. “But I can’t just be a fun parent all the time. All the parenting blogs I read last night said how important stability and a firm parenting style are. They said you can’t be too much of a friend, otherwise they won’t respect you.”

I weigh my head from side to side. “Everything needs balance, Kieran. I think you’ll learn that as you go. Moments of fun, moments of tantrums and sadness, but right now, Emmy needs lightness.” I nudge him with my shoulder. “Also don’t forget that all those parents writing the blogs are first-time parents, too. Nobody knows all the answers and every child is so different you can’t be too rigid in your approach because what’s right for one might not fit another.”

Kieran stares at me so deeply I can’t help but feel self-conscious. As the silence stretches, I wipe at my cheeks, murmuring, “What? Do I have something on my face?”

“No, I’m just…you always amaze me. Whenever I think I have you figured out, you go and surprise me again.”

“I can’t tell if that’s a compliment or not.”

His lip twitches. “It’s very much a compliment. I can usually read everyone.” He pauses. “You’re very wise for someone our age.”

“First of all, you’re older than me.”

He snorts. “By three years, but if an age gap is your type of kink I’m happy to get a fake ID.”

I fear that by the end of this job my eyes will be stuck in the back of my head by how often I roll them around Kieran. “You’re shameless, Ashford.”

“Only with you.” He nudges my leg with his knee, the ghost of his touch heating my skin, the warmth traveling up my body.

Do not blush over a knee brush, Layla. I repeat, do not *blush over a goddamn brush of his knee.*

I blush.

“And the second thing?” he prompts.

Clearing my throat and my mind, I go on. “Having an illness ages you, especially one that robbed you of your childhood.”

Kieran’s quiet for a moment before he whispers, “Seems like Emmy isn’t the only one who deserves some fun.”

I smile at that. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“I’ll be your vault.”

I’m not sure why I want to confess this to him. I haven’t even told Bella about it, but I suddenly find myself saying, “I made a life list.”

Kieran sits up straighter, dramatically gasping. “Layla! How scandalous of you!”

I slap his chest again, but note this time how my hand tingles and his chest rises on a sharp inhale at the quick contact. I quickly avert my gaze. “Don’t make fun of me. I read a lot and as much as I love it, I’ve recently realized that I was reading that much while I was sick because I could live vicariously through the books. But now that I can do things without my body failing me…”

“You want to experience life outside of books.” All pretenses of humor have faded away.

I nod. “Hence the life list. I’ve written down moments from books that I want to experience.”

“Why is it a secret? I think a life list is an amazing idea. You deserve to live, Layla.”

My cheeks flush, no doubt matching the shade of my hair. “Because some of the things on the list are…embarrassing, to say the least.”

“How come?”

I shrug self-consciously. “I’ve not experienced as much as the average twenty-five-year-old. I was constantly in and out of the hospital growing up, so I missed out on a lot of firsts in my life. Many of them are things most people do as teenagers.”

“Can I see the list?”

My eyes are wide as I bark out a laugh. “God no. I don’t need *anyone* seeing how much I haven’t experienced. That’s humiliating.”

“There’s nothing humiliating about your situation, Layla. You were sick.” He sits up straighter. “Come on, tell me at least one thing.”

Biting my lip, I shake my head.

And then Kieran *goddamn* Ashford softens his face, giving me that megawatt smile. “Come on, sunshine, just one.”

“It’s dumb,” I blurt.

“I’m sure it’s not.”

I wave my hand in the air. “It’s just stupid stuff like forts and water fights and—”

“Done.”

Kieran stands suddenly, cupping his hand around his mouth as he calls out, “Hey, Emmy! Have you ever had a water fight?”

She careens to a stop, wobbling on her feet. That guarded look reenters her gaze and I can feel Kieran stiffen beside me, just before she moves her head slightly back and forth. No.

Kieran spins, holding his hand out to mine. “Looks like you both are ticking off some firsts.”

Licking my suddenly dry lips, I whisper, “You’re crazy.”

“Good-looking.”

“And cocky.”

“I prefer the term confident.” He sticks out his hand even farther. “Come on, Layla, what do you say? You and Emmy against me and Bambi?”

Eyeing his hand, I can’t help but smile as I slide mine in his, feeling his rough callouses against my smooth skin. A sudden charge fills between us, a palpable energy as we touch. I try to shake it off, try to force the butterflies taking flight in my stomach to settle.

This is why I never responded to his texts.

Flirting for him is second nature and doesn't mean anything, but for me, it awakens something inside my heart that I never thought I'd experience. It doesn't understand that Kieran isn't mine, nor will he ever be.

I purse my lips and concede. "Fine, I'll play, only if it's us girls against you. Because there's no chance in hell you'll be able to drag Bambi away from Emmy."

He crosses his arms over his chest, and I order myself not to look at his straining biceps. "And what do I get if I win?" he drawls.

"We're betting now?"

"Why not?"

My hip cocks to the side. "What do you want?"

"A date."

"Absolutely not."

"You asked me what I want and that's exactly it." Striding off down the steps, he bends to pick up Emmy as she comes running, sweat sticking her hair to her face. "What do you want if you win?"

"You skimmed over that date idea pretty quickly, Ashford."

"Because I'm not budging." He turns to me, Emmy on his hip. "So tell me, sunshine, what do you want?"

I pause to think. Knowing a date is on the table, I have to win. I can't be subjected to his charm because…I'll fall for it, and the last thing I need is some guy who never commits to more than one night with a girl to break my heart just as my life is finally taking a turn for the better.

Kieran snorts. "Don't think too hard about it. Just blurt whatever comes to mind first."

"Fine. Books," I say. "I'd love you to buy me a new book."

Kieran's eyes come alive at my answer. "Deal," he drawls.

He holds out his hand to shake and I'm so momentarily stunned by his promise that it takes me a second to slide my hand in his again. As we shake on our pact, Kieran's hand lingers around mine, holding on for several beats, as if he never wants to let me go.

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Chapter 7

Kieran

MY FUTURE WIFE

Momma Bear Carson's phone number

KIERAN

A dream come true

I finally got a response

I can die a happy man

MY FUTURE WIFE

wasn't a response

KIERAN

OH MY GOD IT HAPPENED AGAIN

My wet sneakers hit the grass as I run through my backyard. Winding this way and that through the trees, I stop, my chest heaving as my shirt, soaked all the way through, sticks to me like a second skin.

With the water gun I had quickly DoorDashed held to my chest, I try to calm my breathing and listen for the pitter-patter of feet, but the yard is utterly silent. I'm not sure how long we've been playing for but I'll keep going just to hear the sound of Emmy's small chuckles and Layla's squeals.

Who knew I'd be obsessed with the sound of laughter?

My fixation with Layla's laugh aside, a date is on the line.

A fucking date!

I can’t believe she agreed to it.

Keeping close to the tree, I slowly peek my head out—only to rear back with a cry of shock as water directly squirts the middle of my forehead.

“*Ahh!*”

Layla’s boisterous laugh explodes through the air, alongside a hesitant bark.

Bambi has just recently started testing out her vocal cords. Since she’s deaf, it’s deeper than most barks I’ve heard, especially for a female dog. Nevertheless, it’s the most adorable thing.

“I’m going to get you for that!” I sputter, flicking water off my face.

“Quick, Queen Emmy, run!”

Emmy squeals and as I peek out around the tree—not being doused by water this time—I spot Bambi chasing after Layla. She’s holding Emmy’s small hand, urging her little feet to move faster.

I tell myself that I’m standing here to give them a head start, not because Emmy’s carefree smile has my stomach performing somersaults and the sight of Layla with my daughter makes me want to do despicable things.

Before I can dart out, Bella beelines for the trees, her feet kicking up leaves in her mad dash. She doesn’t get far before she’s screaming out in surprise as my best friend squirts her in the back. Grayson bends at the hips a second later, dropping his water gun, wrapping his arms around her waist, and lifting her in one fell swoop. He runs off with her between the trees.

“Put me down, Grayson!”

“Never!” he calls out as he vanishes from my sight.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I make my move, sprinting for the nearest tree and dropping low. Bambi’s deep bark rings out from the other side of the yard.

Got you.

I push off the tree, keeping my water gun down low. Except Layla suddenly emerges, knocking me to the side and striking me in the chest with an icy spray of water.

“Jesus, woman!”

Her manic laughter chases me as I hightail it away. She must have hid Emmy somewhere with Bambi.

Coming to an abrupt stop, I curse. “Why the hell am I running?”

I spin and lift my water gun, my smile downright dirty. Layla's mouth pops open in surprise, and I don't hold back in the slightest. Her scream is so high-pitched I'm surprised a glass doesn't break in the distance. She tries to run away, the sight of her hair clinging to her face drawing a deep belly laugh from the depths of my soul.

She was right. Maybe we all needed a little fun.

Bella is urging Emmy to run faster in the distance, Bambi's barks coming more and more, but they're still in the opposite direction of us.

"Ahh!" Layla screams when I don't let up. "Truce! Truce! Truce!"

I take my finger off the trigger as Layla holds her arms up in surrender, but I keep the gun aimed on her. "Truce? Sorry, sunshine, but I want that date."

She flicks water out of her eyes, laughing. "Truce, white flag, handshake, I don't care what we call it but just give me a break from the cold!"

Her teeth begin to chatter and I instantly feel terrible. I lower my gun, only for hers to rise on a snicker. "Sucker."

I don't have enough time to shoot off an attack before water is exploding across my chest and face, my white t-shirt clinging to me. I can't even see to shoot her back.

Suddenly, my foot catches on a branch behind me and I go down on my ass—*hard*.

Layla stops, gasping. She rushes to me, her knees landing beside my chest. "Are you okay? I swear you went down in slow motion. I didn't mean to—"

I cut her off with a spray of icy water directly on her stomach. Her eyes widen before she launches at me, smashing her entire weight against my chest. A deep *oomph* flies from me as she scrambles for the water gun in my hand. In the far distance, I can hear Grayson calling out for Bella to relent but I can't focus on their water fight when I have a very wet, very *persistent* Layla climbing all over me.

Fuck me. If she doesn't stop wriggling my dick is going to make an unwanted appearance.

"Damn, sunshine. If you wanted me this bad all you had to do was ask," I tease.

She curses me under her breath, the water still squirting her as she tries to wrangle it from my hand. "You're such a cocky bastard!"

“A cocky bastard you’re throwing yourself on.”

Growling with frustration, she lunges once more, right as I wrap an arm around her stomach and flip us, pinning her arms down and between my knees.

“Kieran!” she screams, her eyes flaring.

I put all my weight on her, chuckling to myself. She grunts, trying to wriggle out from beneath me as I lift the water gun and aim at her heart. “Any last words?” She lifts her chin in defiance, making one of my brows cock. “Damn, you’re stubborn.”

Her chest is heaving, her breathing labored as a blush spreads across her cheeks.

“What’s the matter? Liking this a bit too much? One of your many dreams of me coming true?” I tease shamelessly.

If I thought she was blushing before, it’s nothing compared to the scarlet traveling up her neck now.

Wait, has she dreamed about me?

She grits her teeth trying to buck me off, her sudden movements making my thoughts float away. I’d get off her if I knew she really wanted me to, but I can tell she’s having fun with this. Despite the determination in her gaze, her lips are twitching as she fights a smile.

“You’re insufferable!”

I lower my head, savoring the way her breath hitches. “Did you mean dashing? Charming? Sexy?”

She snorts. “Did I stutter?”

“No, but judging by your breathing, you’re close to.”

“Ugh!” She sucks in a deep breath, no doubt about to call for backup, and that’s when I take my shot. Squirting her stomach with the water gun, she cries out, goosebumps now lining her skin.

Yanking myself off, my laugh turns manic as she lifts her water gun, aiming at me. “You’re going to pay for that.”

With a lopsided grin, I hold out my arms. “Do your worst, sunshine.”

Layla practically stalks toward me until she’s right at my chest, so close I have to look down and she has to tip her head back, searing me to the spot with those gorgeous, heart-stopping, drop-to-my-knee-and-marry-her eyes.

“You like toying with me?” I taunt.

“With you?” she says slowly, her voice lowering to a soft whisper. “Always.”

She doesn’t even seem to notice the way her hand falters, her body swaying forward.

“For someone who despises my advances, your body sure seems to like getting close to mine.”

She sneers, lips parting.

Screams suddenly ring out as Bambi and Emmy come barreling through the trees, her little chest huffing and puffing. Her big brown eyes are ignited with such enthusiasm the moment between Layla and me dies a swift death.

Crouching low with my arms out ready to catch her, I swoop her into my hold right as Bella appears between the trees, skidding to a stop beside Layla. “Get him!” she yells.

Layla doesn’t hesitate. I step out of the line of fire just as the girls lift their water guns and hit Grayson the moment he rounds a tree, knocking him over on his ass. Bella and Layla burst into a fit of giggles alongside Emmy, whose little body starts to shake not only from her chuckles but the cold water. Bambi runs between her parents, barking every now and then as if she has no idea who to go to, her loyalty torn.

“I think it’s safe to say the girls won,” Bella declares with a smug grin.

Layla looks over her shoulder at me. “Isn’t that right, Kieran?”

I choose to go along with it, even though knowing I won’t get my date —for now. I heft Emmy up higher on my hip. “We lost, buddy,” I say, turning to Grayson as he sputters out a cough.

Bella whoops, high-fiving Layla, and they cheer at our demise.

“Where the hell did you get these water guns from?” Grayson grumbles. “I swear when we were kids they didn’t have this type of kick.”

“You’re telling me, I think I’m going to wake up with bruises in the morning.” Walking over to him, I hold out my free hand and help him up. “I’m going to call it and take Emmy inside to get her warmed up.”

Grayson nods, peering over my shoulder, and by the heated look that fills his eyes, he’s staring at Bella. “We’ll do the same at ours. The guys should be done unpacking the new furniture but if you need a hand later just let me know.”

Clapping him on the back we walk side by side toward the house, the girls trailing behind, whispering to each other. “I seriously can’t thank you enough.” Swallowing the lump in my throat, I all but choke out, “I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

Grayson wraps his arm around my shoulder, careful not to bump Emmy. “You would have been okay, but I’m glad I can be here for you. I mean it, Kieran, if you need anything, *anytime*, I’m just across the road.”

I nod, the setting sun peeking over the roof of my new home. *I can’t believe I bought a house on a random Tuesday.*

Grayson rubs the nape of his neck. “Fair warning, I may have told my mom. She and Dad immediately left their vacation and are on their way to help.”

My breath hitches.

Despite knowing Grayson for years, his family practically my own, I can never seem to get used to the generosity and care Allie and Carlton Crawford give me. Allie, especially. She stepped up for me the moment I walked into her house with my too-small shoes, ratty old T-shirt, and skeletal frame.

Since that day, she made sure I was always fed. Had shoes that fit. Clean clothes that wouldn’t make the other kids bully me.

And most importantly, she gave me the motherly love that I had been deprived of for years.

I’ve heard about the deep connection mothers form with their children and even that wasn’t enough to make her love me. Yet someone who has no obligation to me stuck around.

It’s something I still can’t seem to grasp, and I don’t think I ever will.

All I know is that the people who care about you leave. Whether it be my mother dumping me on the side of the road like an unwanted dog, the foster parents who sent me back to the home, or even the teachers that swore to help only to forget about me the moment I stepped out of their classroom.

Everyone left.

But not Grayson and his parents. *Yet*, a small voice whispers in my head.

Clinging to Emmy a little tighter, I make another promise to her, one of a million to come, though this one might be the most important of all.

I swear on my life that my daughter will *never* feel the way I did growing up.

Blowing out a breath, I confess, “I feel bad, but I would be a fool to turn their help away right now.”

Grayson snorts. “You could try but you know what she’s like.” He grows quiet, no doubt thinking back to the year he didn’t speak to her out of misplaced guilt. He shakes his head and the cloud recedes. “Have you sorted details out with Layla yet?”

“No, I haven’t,” I sigh, my mental to-do list becoming an endless growing thing to conquer. Grabbing a towel on the deck from the few Bella managed to scrounge up before our water fight, I bundle Emmy in it like a burrito, rubbing my hand up and down her back. Her shivers are getting fiercer and her baby teeth are chattering.

“I’ll let you get her dry,” Grayson says. Moving to wrap an arm around Bella, he places a small kiss on her temple. “Come on, let’s get warm before we catch a cold.”

“That’s a myth,” Layla says.

“Seriously?” I ask.

“Apparently.”

“Are you a MythBuster now, sunshine?”

Bella’s brows rise. “Sunshine?”

Layla rolls her eyes, pointing an incredulous finger at her best friend. “Don’t encourage him.”

“No encouragement needed,” I declare, grinning triumphantly.

“Interesting,” Bella murmurs under her breath before stepping forward and tickling Emmy, earning a cute chuckle from her. “Bye, sweet girl, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Figured I’d come over and keep her and Layla company during the game.”

“We have a game tomorrow?” I ask, my head swinging to Grayson.

“Yeah, preseason game. It’s all right, figured it slipped your mind. I was going to call you tomorrow morning.”

That’s the first time in my entire NHL career that I have ever forgotten about a game.

Scratch my career, I’ve *never* forgotten a game, scrabble or practice otherwise. Ice hockey has always been my everything.

Grayson must see something on my face, must be able to tell the direction my thoughts are taking, because he says, “It’s okay, Ashford. It’s been a hectic two days.”

I’m nodding yet guilt still eats away at me, manifesting as an unwanted pressure against my chest.

How do people do this?

How do they manage such large facets of their lives? Just two days into having a child and I forgot about my job, the job I have slaved over for years and poured my entire soul into. Shaking my head, I decide to put a pin in my desolate thoughts and cut myself some slack.

These are not normal circumstances.

Forcing a smile, I relent, “You’re right. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Grayson and Bella wave their goodbyes, leaving a shivering Emmy in my arms and Layla looking at me quizzically. Before I can think much of it, I blurt, “Have you got plans tonight?”

Her brow quirks. “Trying to break our deal already?”

“Believe it or not, I’m not flirting with you.” I cover Emmy’s ears and whisper, “Do you want me to though?” I wink. “Say the word and I’ll come at you full force.”

“You haven’t come at me full force?”

“Oh baby, I’ve only scratched the surface with you.”

Her cheeks bloom a beautiful pink. I try my fucking hardest to not smile at it while committing the sight to memory.

She all but forces her eyes to roll as she wraps the towel tighter around herself. “What did you have in mind?”

My tongue darts out to lick my lips and I feel deep satisfaction as her eyes drop to my mouth, watching the move as if in a trance. My voice is deep, rough as I drawl, “Why don’t I show you what I’ve come up with for her bath and bedtime routine? Then I’ll make us some dinner after, and we can set some ground rules for what this will look like.”

“Dinner?” she all but squeaks before clearing her throat. “That sounds perfectly reasonable.”

I can’t help but tease, “You all right, sunshine? Looks like you got a little drool.”

“You’re insufferable.”

“Says the one who couldn’t stop staring at my lips.”

Her eyes flare. “I was not!” Storming past me, she pushes open the screen doors, turning to peer at me over her shoulder. “Well, are you going to shut your intolerable mouth long enough to come show me what you have in mind?”

“I’ll have to open my intolerable mouth for that.”

Her head drops back with a groan.

Chuckling, I make my way over. “Come on.”

Stepping to the side, she lets me inside. I barely glance at the furniture placed everywhere, choosing for it to be a problem for my future self, though I look back to make sure Layla doesn’t trip over anything. A coy smile dances along her lips.

“What?” I ask.

Her eyes snap up to mine, her head automatically shaking.

“No come on, spit it out.”

She shrugs. “It’s nothing. I just think it’s a good sign you’ve come up with a routine already.”

I take the stairs carefully, scared I’ll trip with Emmy in my arms. “The parenting books are very big on routine, especially during nighttime to prepare them for sleep.”

Walking down the hall, I stop before the second door on the left—Emmy’s room. I take her right inside into the ensuite. After turning on the faucet, checking the temperature with my hand, I set Emmy on the closed toilet lid and search through the bags of items we bought from Target, praying there’s some baby soap. That was another thing I saw online, how sensitive their skin can be to products—

My thoughts halt as I notice in my peripheral that Layla isn’t moving.

She’s just standing in the doorway, staring at me. She usually stares at me—she thinks I don’t see it but I do. But this look is different. It’s more… perplexed, as if she’s trying to figure out a puzzle.

I can’t help but grin. “You know, you’re beginning to give me a complex. Keep looking at me like that and my head is going to grow.”

“I don’t think it can get any bigger,” she mutters, finally moving past me into the bathroom.

I snort out a laugh, just as I spot not only baby soap but some bath toys, too. “You’re a legend.”

“Huh?” Layla says, clinging to her towel.

I hold up the bath toys as explanation before frowning at her shivering body. “You can’t stay in those wet clothes. You’ll freeze to death.”

Her lips thin. “I didn’t bring spare clothes with me. I didn’t think I’d need to.”

Picking up Emmy again, I place my hand on Layla's lower back. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"You can shower in my bathroom and I'll give you something warm to wear." I hold up my finger, ushering her to the master bedroom next door. "Don't even try and fight me on this. You can't sit in wet clothes all night."

She stops at the threshold to my bedroom. It's filled to the brim with boxes of clothes but I packed everything I'd need for the next week in a suitcase. I find it by the window overlooking the yard and quickly grab my favorite set. Gray tracksuit pants and a large oversized hoodie.

I hand them over to her. "You'll be comfortable in these. Soap's already in the shower, but I didn't buy shampoo yet. Sorry."

She shakes her head, reaching out to grab the clothes. "That's okay. Thanks, Kieran," she says softly.

Her arm breaks out in goosebumps as our fingers brush, her cold hand sending a spark of warmth through mine. She snatches it away, clutching the set to her chest.

And then something dawns on me.

I take in a shuddering breath, trying to calm my suddenly racing heart as I realize the woman I've been obsessed with for over a year is going to be naked in my bathroom.

Just a single door separating us.

Fuck my life.

Coming back to myself, I stroll out of the room and close the door before I do something stupid like ask to join her. "Call out if you need anything. I'll be in Emmy's room."

I've thought about Layla nonstop since I met her at that charity event.

I've thought about the way her eyes spark when I tease her, the way she challenges me but doesn't do the same to others. I've thought about her soft voice, her laughter, her smile, the way her nose scrunches if she doesn't like what she hears.

I borderline harassed Bella into telling me about her best friend because I was a fiend and needed to know more about her. The small tidbits were never enough.

I want to know everything.

I want *her*.

Yet never in a million years, in a thousand fantasies, did I ever think she'd be naked, showering in my bathroom just down the hall from me. Because she is untouchable.

Layla Carson is sunshine personified.

She is the girl that men trip over their own two feet trying to impress.

She's an angel at her core, and I'm nothing but the boy no one ever wanted.

Blowing out a breath to try and stabilize my barrage of thoughts, I help Emmy get into the bathtub, making giant mountains of bubbles and giving her the bath toys Layla and I bought.

"I'm screwed, Emmy," I whisper. "Royally screwed."

Emmy lifts her head, those soulful brown eyes piercing me to the spot.

How do I tell her that I've been slowly falling for her nanny? That her auntie Bella has been feeding me scraps and with every single one I collected I fell just a little further?

How the fuck do I stop having feelings for Layla? Would it make me a horrible parent if I didn't?

Because I don't think I can.

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Chapter 8

Layla

LAYLA'S LIFE LIST

~~Have a water fight~~

I'm wearing Kieran Ashford's clothes.

Correction.

Kieran Ashford's clothes are wearing *me*.

His large six-foot-three frame swallows me up when he stands beside me. I practically get a kink in my neck every time he does it, too, but this is ridiculous. I've had to roll the sweatpants *six* times, and they still keep falling down. Growling under my breath, I kick them off completely. "I'm just going to have to do without."

The hoodie swims on me anyway, coming to rest just above my knees, and I only need to wear it until my jeans are dry. Thankfully, his washer and dryer are already hooked up.

Walking back to Emmy's room, I steel my spine, preparing myself for his comments and flirty winks but stop short when I hear him making explosion sounds, followed by loud splashes. Emmy laughs hysterically, and before I know it, my lips are tugging up into a smile. I turn the corner, finding him playing with the fish toys I picked out.

The sight is more than adorable…until I realize he's pretending to blow the fish up with bombs.

“Are men incapable of playing without blowing stuff up?”

Kieran’s already smiling as he turns to me, but the humor in his eyes suddenly vanishes. His tongue darts out to lick his lips as his gaze trails over my body ever so slowly, and I swear I can feel it along my skin like a phantom touch.

Emmy squeals as she throws a plastic fish into the water. It splashes over the tub and into Kieran’s lap.

That certainly snaps him out of it.

Shaking his head, he moves to grab the fish. “I do, actually. I tried to play mermaids with her but she wasn’t interested.”

“You tried to play mermaids?”

“I grew up in a foster home with lots of girls. I was forced to play mermaids more times than I can count.”

My heart pinches.

The more I learn of Kieran’s childhood the more I want to wrap him in a blanket and give him a hug for all the times he wasn’t given love.

With the tension now lining his shoulders, I move the subject along, taking a seat on the toilet lid. “Queen Emmy doesn’t like mermaids? But what about the mermaid princesses?”

She scrunches her nose at that, still keeping a firm press on her lips. She hasn’t uttered a word since telling me her name.

“Queen Emmy is going to turn into a fish herself if she doesn’t hop out soon,” Kieran declares. “Her hands and feet are pruning.”

Tapping my chin, I land on a plan before gasping dramatically. “Emmy, have you seen your new bed?” At her head shake, I stand, walking to the bathroom door and letting out an excited squeal. “Emmy! Oh my gosh, it’s so pretty! I want one exactly like it. Can I have yours?”

She all but scampers out of the tub to try and get to the door, shaking her head aggressively.

“I can’t have it?” I ask as Kieran wraps her in a bath towel.

The second he’s got her bundled she’s off like a rocket, running past me to throw herself onto her bed.

“Genius,” Kieran mutters. “It took me over an hour last night to get her out of the tub.”

“Two words, Ashford: bribery and imagination.”

“And when that fails?”

I pull a face as I move to grab her pajamas. “Prepare for a tantrum.”

An hour after walking me through Emmy's routine, Kieran pauses at the bottom of the stairs and groans softly, his eyes closing after taking in the carnage of his living room.

The furniture's in disarray. I must have been too preoccupied with Kieran and Emmy when we came in earlier to notice.

"I'll help you move everything into a normal spot," I offer, already grabbing a piece of furniture when Kieran's hand darts out, gently capturing my wrist.

"We've done enough today. I'm dead on my feet so you must be too. Let's just sit on the couch and order food while we go over my schedule for the next week."

His hand is still wrapped around my wrist, his calloused skin sending a tingle of awareness through my body.

"I love that idea, Kieran, but…"

"But?"

I wince. "The couch is in the kitchen…and in separate pieces."

He throws his hands in the air. "Fuck it. We're sitting on the couch in the kitchen then." He stomps over toward the cushions. "Surely this is a first we're ticking off on your list?"

"On the list, no." I practically moan as I flop down on the sectional. "A first, yes. My god, Kieran, where did you get this couch? It's like a cloud."

He takes a seat beside me because it's either that or the small square on the other side of the living room where we would have to yell to hear each other. The sectional piece is large but not large enough that we can sit without touching.

My breath freezes in my lungs as his legs brush the bare skin of my thigh, and it takes everything in me not to shiver at his heat. He changed into dry clothes, opting for black shorts.

"Worth every penny," he utters as he spreads his legs farther, having no qualms about touching me as he gets cozy.

Of course he doesn't care about leg touching, he's no doubt done everything under the sun with women.

His features soften and relax, his eyes closing as his body practically melts into the couch.

"Do you want to do this another night? It looks like you've reached your quota for the day."

Kieran opens one eye. "Are you telling me I look exhausted?"

Folding my legs so my knees are pressed together, I prop my head on my fist. "No, I just think it's been chaotic for you."

"It has been but being around you doesn't tire me."

"It doesn't?"

He shakes his head before pulling out his phone. "What's your favorite food?"

"Oh, I can eat anything."

"I know, but I asked what your favorite food is."

I huff out a laugh at his stubbornness. "Pasta," I admit. "I'm a sucker for pasta and garlic bread."

"Pasta it is," he declares with a lopsided grin. "Want to help a guy out and let me know what type of pasta?" He hands me his phone, a delivery app open on a local Italian restaurant.

Our fingers graze as I take it, that odd tingly sensation running up my arm again.

Swallowing thickly, I avert my eyes to the phone, not entirely aware of what pasta I pick because I can feel his gaze on me like a hot brand. You can never hide from Kieran Ashford; he sees everything, and right now, I'm holding his attention.

Kieran's fingers linger as he takes the phone back as slowly as he can, his knee still pressed against my thigh.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I peer over my shoulder at the living room, giving myself anything else to think about besides the wildly attractive hockey player watching me as I sit on his couch in nothing but his oversized hoodie.

I knew all about Kieran before I met him. Saw the many posts and rumors spread from puck bunnies. He's the most infamous on the team for how he only spends a single night with women, and yet it only takes a night to get them hooked.

I looked at photos of him, but it wasn't until I met him that day at the adoption event that I truly understood why women throw themselves at him. It wasn't just his looks, it was the air in which he held himself, that cocky and yet downright playful personality. The charisma that rolled off his tongue, the way his eyes, as deep as the Atlantic Ocean, seemed to sparkle as he stared through me, all the way down to the trenches of my soul.

Bella teased me endlessly about my *firecracker* side, as she called it, that came out around him. He pushes my buttons, yes, but if I'm honest with myself, it's because I'd be like every other girl and fall for his charm if I let him in and I don't want to be.

I don't want to be a single night.

I don't want to be a notch on his bedpost.

Not when it leads to heartbreak. Not when it will leave me feeling used and discarded.

"Layla?"

His soft voice draws me away from my thoughts. "Hmm?"

He pauses before asking, "Do you want to go over my schedule?"

Our gazes lock and hold, his trying to peer through my soul, mine trying to keep my walls high. Nodding, I pull out my phone, opening up my calendar and shaking off the feeling of my heart getting far too excited.

Forty-five minutes later, with one jam-packed schedule noted, emergency contact numbers exchanged, routines written down, and an extremely hefty salary spoken into existence, Kieran and I are devouring pasta and garlic bread.

I moan around my spoonful. "My god, is this good."

Apparently, I picked well while in my Ashford haze.

I never would have been able to eat this last year, would have had to excuse myself and leave early to eat the extremely bland, anti-inflammatory

meal I ate on rotation. Food is the one thing I am endlessly grateful I don't have to stress over anymore. I don't have to wake up in the middle of the night cupping my extended stomach through scream-worthy cramps.

Kieran turns to face me fully, his bowl of pasta resting on his knee. "I was thinking that you should come with me to Emmy's first speech therapy session. You'd have to wait outside for the majority of it, but when it comes to the end, I'd love for you to be there to hear what the therapist thinks is the best approach for her."

Kieran's eyes never once leave my lips as I chew my penne, and they seem to flare more as I lick them.

"Of course, I think that's a great idea. I don't want to say or do the wrong thing and have her regressing."

His lip twitches. "Good. I'll text you the details when I book it."

He continues to stare, not eating, and I finally ask, "What? Do I have sauce on my face somewhere?"

"No, it's just—" He stops abruptly, chuckling.

"What?" I whack his shoulder as he continues to laugh. "Stop laughing at me!" I wipe at my face despite what he said, and my fingers come back with no sauce.

He bites his bottom lip. "I've just never seen someone love pasta so much."

"Oh." My cheeks flame and I can't help it, my eyes dart away, a flurry of embarrassment and insecurity swarming me.

"Shit, sorry, that came out wrong," he curses, moving forward. "It's a good thing. I'm glad you like it."

I nod, offering a forced smile, still riddled with the heat of humiliation.

His hand captures my chin before gently forcing my head up until his worried blue eyes are in my line of sight. He cups his chest with his free hand. "I'm sorry, that was a dumb thing to say. I just meant that I'm really happy to see *you* happy over food."

My brows furrow.

"I…forced Bella to give me updates on your treatment, and one of them was how you could eat food without pain." He smiles, and it momentarily stuns me as he goes on. "I don't think you realize how radiant it is to be around someone experiencing things with such joy. So please, don't stop enjoying it. In fact, I'll hate myself for eternity if you stop doing those breathy little moans when you take a bite."

My eyes widen. “I do not moan!”

He stares at me blankly.

“Okay fine, I moan…a little,” I say teasingly, my thumb and pointer finger pinched together.

He snorts out a laugh, dropping his hand from my chin as he sits back, twirling his fork through his fettucine. “Well don’t stop. It’s sexy as fuck.”

A burst of shocked laughter escapes me. “Are you always this blunt?”

He nods emphatically as he chews around a mouthful. “I’m surprised you’re just now realizing. Did you seriously not read my text messages?”

My eyes roll of their own accord. “Of course I read them, I had my first stalker. I was somewhat proud of myself.”

“I’m happy to have ticked off another thing on your life list.”

“Having a stalker wasn’t one of them, Ashford,” I tease.

“You just didn’t know what you were missing out on.”

Not when dark romance novels exist. “Trust me, I knew.”

He stretches his arm along the back of the couch and I swallow, hyperaware of his hand being a mere inch from my body.

“What is on your life list?” he asks suddenly.

My cheeks flame as I think about the list I have under lock and key in my phone, protected by a password. Half the stuff on there…let’s just say the books I’ve read have heavily inspired me.

Kieran is beyond sweet for bringing to life one of my desires today with the water fight, but I don’t have the heart to tell him that most of the things on the list I most certainly can’t do with my *boss*.

He automatically assumed innocent life things but mine are more along the line of firsts…in the bedroom.

Like losing my virginity.

Cocking his head, he studies me, his eyes suddenly narrow. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Shoving a forkful of pasta in my mouth, I shrug, not trusting myself to speak.

“Can I see it?”

My eyes practically bulge out of my head.

That was all he needed to see. A dirty grin spreads across his lips. “Oh, I’m going to do everything in my power to pry that list out of you.”

“You can try,” I sing-song. “But you won’t get very far.”

“Never challenge an athlete. We’re extremely competitive.”

“Noted.”

He rears back. “You really aren’t going to tell me what’s on it?”

“Nope,” I say, popping the *p*.

He snorts. “Why, is it sexual fantasies?”

I drop my gaze quickly, picking up his empty bowl and making myself busy as I head toward the sink. “No, don’t be ridiculous.” I feign scoffing at the notion.

I hear him flip around on the couch. “Holy shit, I was joking but…” He trails off and I’m grateful for the ringing in my ears and the loud rush of water so I can’t hear what he says next.

I scrub our dishes like a madwoman before I drop the bowls in the sink and rush past him and his knowing stare, calling over my shoulder, “I’m going to check on my clothes.”

I note my sky-high heart rate and the slight shake in my fingers as I step into the laundry and open the dryer. I all but slump with relief as my hand brushes against my warm clothes.

Shutting the dryer door with my hip, the click rings out as I pull Kieran’s hoodie over my head. His voice rings out behind me, making me scream.

His chuckle mixes with the sound of my sigh as I spin and cover myself, relief flooding my system as I find the laundry door still closed.

“Kieran!” I shout. “Let me change in peace!”

I can practically hear the smile in his voice. “You ran out of that room awfully fast, sunshine. Is there something you’re avoiding?”

“No!” I snap.

Huffing, I pull my jeans on, sighing at the warm fabric. After slipping on my own sweater, I fold Kieran’s, ignoring his yapping on the other side of the door. I pull it open quickly enough that my fiery red hair flies out behind me.

Whatever I was about to say dies on my tongue as I find Kieran leaning against the doorframe, smirking down at me.

Before I can move past him, he lifts a hand to the top of the doorframe and leans in closer. “Tell me one thing on the list and I’ll drop it,” he whispers.

My brow arches. “You expect me to believe you?”

He clicks his tongue. “Fine, how about you tell me one thing, and in exchange, I’ll tell you a secret.”

A secret from Kieran Ashford?

I honestly would die to know what goes through this man's brain.

"You're considering it." He winks. "I'll make it a juicy secret."

"How do you do that?" I whisper.

"Do what? Be oh so charming all the time? It's a skill—"

"Not that," I cut him off. "How do you always seem to know what people are thinking?"

He's quiet for a moment before he drops his head an inch, bringing our faces so close together his warm breath puffs across my skin. "If you want to know the answer to that," he drawls, "you have to tell me something on the list."

I sigh, resolving to tell him one of the lesser of evils. I could lie and make something up but that isn't fair, not when it looks like he's serious about answering my question.

Dropping my gaze to my feet, I wrack my mind through the list, trying to remember everything that I wrote down. If I stared into his eyes any longer, I would just end up saying something stupid.

Ugh, I hate that he has this effect on me.

He makes it incredibly hard to think, especially when his eyes do that twinkle thing—*gah*.

"Spill it, sunshine," he whispers, that damn nickname catching and holding.

Lifting my chin, I smirk, satisfied with the PG one I remembered. "To be kissed in the rain."

Kieran's excitement winks out like a fire that's had water thrown on it. "That's nowhere near as dirty as I thought it was going to be."

I shrug innocently. "You never said I had to give you one of the dirty ones."

His eyes flash. "So there *are* dirty ones."

Scoffing, I push him away, my heart leaping as my hand connects with his warm chest.

I swear he pouts.

"Should have been more specific with your deal, Ashford. Cough it up, what's your secret? How do you always know what someone is thinking?"

If I didn't know any better, I would have thought the topic sucked out all the air in the room. Tension lines his shoulders before he seems to force himself to relax.

“The foster home I grew up in.” A muscle ticks in his jaw. “The one I picked Emmy up from, they were…the lesser of evils compared to some of the foster homes I was sent to, but it was still evil nonetheless.”

My heart drops.

I expect him to avoid my eyes but instead he lifts his chin, locking those blues on me and holding as he rips his chest open and bears his emotional scars. “You had to be on high alert, at all times, and I guess I just never stopped watching for signs.”

“Signs?” I find myself asking.

He shrugs. “A pinch of a lip here, a tightness around the eye there, a change in tone, tightening shoulders…You know, signs.”

“Of?” I whisper, dreading the answer that I already know is coming.

Kieran holds onto our eye contact like it’s a lifeline. “A fist soon to come…or a belt.” He inhales deeply, only for the breath to leave him in a rush. “A cigarette to the arm, a kick in the ribs, a slap to the cheek, food withheld for a day or two, a night spent outside like a dog…”

My eyes burn.

My chin quivers.

And my heart…

My heart shatters at our feet.

I bite my lip to try and stop my tears, to try and be strong when he’s standing here with his chin held high as he relives the most horrific crimes you could ever commit to a child, but I can’t stop the flow, the picture he’s painting…

He lifts his hand and gently brushes away the tears I’m trying so desperately to hold in.

“Don’t cry for me,” he whispers. “It ended a long time ago.”

“It should have never happened,” I swear vehemently.

“No, it shouldn’t have,” he agrees softly.

“So let me cry for you, Kieran. No one deserves that, let alone an innocent little boy.”

Kieran falls quiet for so long we’re left standing in the thick of his admission, the revelation that the man before me not only didn’t experience the love of a parent but the foster home that was meant to care for him and keep him safe utterly terrorized him shatters something in my chest.

The system failed him.

The foster home failed him.

Child protective services failed him.

His mother failed him.

Everyone failed him.

He smiles down at me but it's sad, that flirtatious, bubbly personality nowhere to be seen now. "You feel deeply, don't you, my darling?" Before I can answer, he reaches up to catch another tear as he murmurs, "It's a beautiful quality to possess."

And then his warmth, his touch, and his soft words retreat as he takes a step back, that charming smile firmly back in place. "See you tomorrow, gorgeous. I hope to see you wearing my jersey."

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Chapter 9

Kieran

ALLIE

Hi honey!

will you be around tomorrow?

KIERAN

yes, come over whenever you want!

ALLIE

don’t tell me that, I’ll turn up at the crack of dawn

I can’t wait to meet her Kieran

I know she’s special, she’s half of your beautiful soul

KIERAN

I don’t think I can claim much credit at all but she is very special

ALLIE

then she must be all you

I’ve been sitting in the recliner chair in the corner of Emmy’s room for the past forty minutes, trying to wrack my mind around what I told Layla.

I’ve never told anyone what happened to me.

Not even Grayson. I mean, I think he suspects some things—we met during middle school and there were a few too many marks that I struggled

to lie about—but he's never said anything.

I think by the time he was old enough to understand what was happening to me, I was also old enough to fight back. The matron didn't like to go against anyone her own size. The moment I sprouted like a weed and started putting on muscle, she left me alone.

The sad truth is, I don't know what was worse—being under her watchful eye and punished for anything she perceived as an infraction, or becoming a ghost.

There was a very distinct moment when she realized she couldn't hurt me anymore, a night where I fought back for once. The next morning, her gaze shot past me like I didn't exist, and until the other day when I was sitting in her office, she never looked at me again.

For nearly four years I was nothing in that foster home.

Peering down at my forearm, I look at the ink I got the second I turned eighteen to try and cover up the burn marks the matron put there with her cigarettes. I squeeze my eyes shut, forcing myself to count to ten while I slowly exhale, trying to ease the tightness in my chest.

I can't believe I told her.

And in exchange for a shabby life list wish. She has more on there, I knew it the moment her cheeks flushed and her breathing sped up like she was running, and yet I couldn't stop the words from rolling off my tongue.

In my defense, I feel like I've spoken with her every day for well over a year. Yes, I sound like a complete and total loser saying that because she never texted me back, but I got enough from the phone calls I could pipe into when I was at Bella and Grayson's house and the updates I nagged her for. I do know Layla, just through Bella.

Layla is the most down-to-earth person I've ever known. I doubt she would even kill a bug, and I think a part of my soul recognizes that, a smaller version of me desperately trying to get close to someone who wouldn't hurt me like others have done in the past.

I mean, why else would I be hung up on this woman?

Maybe I'm a masochist, but I don't usually fall for women, let alone ones that ignore me. Usually, I'm the one dodging texts and calls and yet my phone holds a helluva lot of unanswered texts from the one girl I would quite literally do anything to be around.

Shaking off the bizarre feelings running havoc through my chest, I pick up my phone, figuring it's time to face my situation. I know myself well

enough to recognize that I won't be able to play well tomorrow at the preseason game with this secret hanging over my head. It would gut me if my teammates found out through the press and not through me.

It's why I fire off a text.

ICEHAWKS BITCHES

KIERAN

can everyone come to the arena twenty minutes early tomorrow?

IRVING

why the fuck would we do that

I need my beauty sleep

JOHNSON

clearly you fail miserably at that daily

IRVING

you calling me ugly, Johnson?

JOHNSON

you said it not me

VALENTI

harsh

IRVING

thank you Matteo, always can count on you

VALENTI

I'd say he gets in one good beauty sleep a month

JOHNSON

HAHAHA

IRVING

fuck you

KIERAN

if you dipshits aren't there early I'll leak the videos from Cabo

ELLINGTON

damn dude, harsh to hang that over their heads

JOHNSON

I KNEW someone managed to get a video

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

do I even want to know what happened in Cabo?

and of course we will all be there early, right guys?

O'CONNOR

I'll be there Ashford!

MITCHEL

only cause Cap asked so nicely

ELLINGTON

Matteo and I will be there

VALENTI

we will?

ELLINGTON

yes idiot

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

is there a reason Irving is suddenly silent after the mention of Cabo?

IRVING

I'm just biting my tongue so I can stay on Kieran's good side

KIERAN

good boy ;)

Biting my fist to stop myself from laughing, I shake my head. These guys are fucking hilarious. Every time I'm feeling low, all I have to do is open up the group chat and suddenly the heaviness in my chest isn't there any longer.

Grayson was right, they are my and Emmy's family.

Sliding one earbud in, I pull up the audiobook that was highly recommended on numerous parenting threads online.

I should be asleep in my new bed but, truth be told, even with the child monitors I set up, every time I walk down that hall and away from Emmy's room, it's like a hand reaches out and grips my heart, filling it with dread. I know it's irrational—this house has a security system and my bedroom is right next door—and yet I am utterly *terrified* to leave her.

This can’t go on for long, it’ll become unhealthy. But I think while I wrap my mind around the fact that the little human sleeping peacefully in her new princess bed is entirely my responsibility to keep safe, I’ll allow myself some grace and sleep in the recliner chair.

Hitting play on the audiobook, I flick out of the app, the sweet voice of the female narrator filling my right eardrum as I open up my notes and get ready for another night of research.

Because I refuse to fail Emmy.

Grayson cuts his eyes down to my knee bouncing up and down furiously in his passenger seat as we make our way to the arena. Thank God we have a home game tonight; I don’t think I’d be able to physically leave Emmy for a day, let alone get on a flight to a different state.

“You good?” Grayson asks suddenly.

“Clearly not, fucker.”

He snorts. “At least you’re still your cheery self.”

“I would be a lot better if you weren’t out of Froot Loops,” I mutter.

“You know you have your own house, right? And your own money to buy cereal?”

“Of course I do,” I say, blinking back at him.

“Then maybe buy your own?”

“I do.”

He shakes his head. “Fucking cereal,” he murmurs under his breath.

Both his hands remain glued to the wheel, his gaze quickly jumping back to the road. I don’t think he’ll ever be able to feel relaxed driving again, but he’s come a long way since last year. He even earned his eleven-month sobriety token last week.

I text him all the time how proud I am of him and how he’s turned his life around.

Grayson sighs loudly as he flicks his blinker on.

“What are you doing?” I ask. *Is he taking a detour?*

“You’re going to be a nervous wreck if you don’t have some.”

Before I know it, Grayson is pulling into a gas station and a laugh is bursting from me.

I clap his shoulder as I jump out of his truck. “You’re a legend, Crawford!”

“Yeah, yeah, go get your goddamn cereal and hurry up, you weird freak.”

Practically skipping into the gas station, I finally feel like I can breathe as my eyes land on a small box of Froot Loops. I whistle under my breath, smiling like the damn Cheshire Cat as I pay the attendant and make my way back to the car, my hand already buried in the box.

Grayson just shakes his head at me as I slide into his truck.

“Are you ever going to tell me the fascination you have with cereal?”

“Nope,” I lean back in my seat, my knee finally still.

I check my messages to see if Layla has texted but come up empty. This is the first time I’ve left Emmy with someone else and you’d think I’d be more nervous about *that* than telling the team I have a daughter I just met, but apparently not.

“I’m telling you, the guys will be nothing but supportive.”

Chewing around a mouthful of cereal, I nod along. “I know, I have no idea why I’m even stressed.”

“I mean, your situation isn’t exactly the norm.” He keeps his gaze pinned on the road as he rolls to a stop at the lights, waiting to turn into the arena parking lot.

Fuck, why couldn’t the car ride be longer?

“How do I even say it though? How the hell do you announce that you just found out you have a daughter who sat next to her dead mother—who, like the dick that I am, I *still* cannot remember—and now I’m terrified she’ll never speak again?”

Suddenly, not even the cereal is working its magic, and as Grayson places the car in park, my chest heaves.

Grayson turns to me. “They don’t need to know that. They only need to know what *you* want them to know.” He peers at me, worry lining his face. “Are you sure you want to do this now?”

Shoving my hand in the cereal box, I keep it there, just the mere act of my fingers brushing the Froot Loops calming my breathing slightly. “No, I want to do it now. Rip the Band-Aid off.” I inhale another heaping mouthful

before gently placing the box on the floor of Grayson's car. "Just freaking out a little is all," I confess quietly.

Sliding out, I round the truck and meet Grayson at the trunk, averting his troubled gaze.

"A little freak-out is okay," he assures me as we grab our kits.

"Nothing about this is okay."

"W-well no but…" He sighs, closing the trunk and clapping me on the shoulder, no doubt trying to catch my eye. "I'm right here, Ashford. You've got this, and if you don't, I'll be right there beside you."

Meaning every word he vowed, Grayson remains by my side like glue as we walk into the arena together. All the while, I chant the mantra over and over in my mind.

Rip the Band-Aid off.

Rip the Band-Aid off.

Rip the Band-Aid off.

Grayson won't stop staring at me.

Probably because I haven't been able to rip my tongue from the roof of my mouth long enough to form a coherent sentence. I've never been so terrified to let someone down.

The last time I felt this way was when I accidentally broke one of Allie's favorite paintings. Grayson tried to assure me it was fine but I was so nervous to tell her I ended up puking all over her shoes instead.

And telling my team I have a daughter is making my stomach roll.

Irving also won't shut the fuck up, which doesn't help matters.

"I swear to God, she said she was from Switzerland. A Swiss! Do you know how attractive Swiss women are?"

"Yes, because you've been yapping about her all fucking morning, but I'm sure that won't stop you," Johnson grumbles from the other end of the locker room.

Irving fists his hands on his hips. "You're just a grumpy old bastard."

“And you’re a young pesky fly that won’t stop fucking bothering everyone.”

“No one’s bothered by me.” Irving looks around the locker room, waiting for someone to back him up, but when it remains quiet, he deflates. “What the hell, guys? I’m not annoying!”

Mitchel strides into the locker room, dropping his duffel on the floor. He takes one look at Irving and sighs. “Jesus Christ, Johnson, don’t make the poor kid fucking cry again.”

Irving’s eyes bug out of his head. “He only made me cry once!”

Johnson looks like he’s swallowed a lemon. “Fucking hell, Irving, just stop your jabbering about your Swiss woman and we’ll be okay.”

Mitchel’s brows rise. “You banged a Swiss?”

“Oh, you wouldn’t fucking believe the story I have to tell you.”

At that, the entire locker room groans.

Usually I wouldn’t mind Irving’s stories—they’re legendary and funny as fuck—however he’s told it every time a player walked through the locker room doors. I’ve heard it eleven times already.

Johnson growls under his breath, rushing for Irving and crowding his space as he hisses, “If you tell that goddamn story one more time, I’m going to buy Swiss cheese and shove it so far down your throat you’ll never speak again. Got it?”

Irving gives him a small smile before patting him on the head like a dog. “Seems like someone forgot to pull the stick out of their ass this morning.”

“No one wants to hear about the Swiss woman!”

“I do,” Mitchel declares with a wave of his hand, dooming us all.

“All right, who’s ruining Swiss women for Johnson?” Ellington asks as he rounds the corner.

Johnson points incredulously at Irving. “That fucker! He’s ruining dating Swiss women for me!”

Ellington tsks. “That should be a crime, Irving.”

“Not my fault the old man has no sense of humor.”

“I have humor,” Johnson grumbles.

“Yeah, the grade-A dick kind,” Irving jabs back.

A leg kicks me in the shin. Frowning, I snap my head up to Grayson. “What?”

“What do you mean, *what*?” he whisper-hisses.

“Did I get dragged here just to watch Johnson and Irving have a domestic?” Matteo Valenti drawls as he strides into the room, his hands in the pockets of his pants.

With my eyes still locked on Grayson’s, I have the perfect view of him raising his brows at me.

Before I can chicken out, I jump to my feet, the sudden movement making heads whip my way. My chest freezes and my lungs don’t know how to expel air, let alone draw in a breath.

Grayson’s hand claps down on my shoulder, the touch rough enough to jostle my lungs into working once more.

“Fuck me, why does Kieran look like he’s two seconds away from shitting himself?” Lewis asks.

Johnson eyes me warily. “You’re not dying, are you?”

Grayson smacks his forehead. “You lot have no decorum.”

“Why would we bring house décor to the locker room?” Irving asks innocently.

The men groan.

“That’s decoration, you dumb shit,” Johnson snaps.

“I’m not dumb, you old hag!”

Grayson’s sigh is long, his eyes tightly squeezed shut. He pauses, like he’s counting to ten. “Irving,” he says calmly. “Decorum means appropriate behavior, like social etiquette, manners—”

“Everything you don’t have.”

“Shut it, Johnson.”

The man lifts his hands in surrender, instantly backing down. Grayson is the only one he seems to listen to.

“My bad, Cap,” Irving says quietly, his cheeks tinted pink.

“All good, just give Kieran a moment to say what he needs to say. It’s why we’re here early, remember?”

Irving mimics zipping his lips and throwing the key away, while Johnson claps his hands together like he’s thanking the heavens.

If I didn’t feel like I was about to projectile vomit all over these fuckers, I’d be laughing my ass off.

“Is everything okay?” Matteo asks.

“Spit it out. You’re starting to scare Irving,” Ellington declares, pointing at Irving who seriously does look pale and green.

Oh for fuck’s sake.

“I have a daughter.”

The words fly out of me like a gunshot, cracking through the room.

Everyone falls deadly quiet, and I’m not the only one who holds their breath.

Until the room explodes with activity, my team throwing questions at me so fast I’m suddenly swept into chaos, standing in the eye of the storm.

“How do you have a kid?’

“Are you sure she’s yours?”

“What the fuck happened to wrapping up?”

“How old is she?”

“Who’s the mother?”

“Is she a puck bunny?”

“What’s her name?”

“Are you keeping her?”

“Who the fuck asked that last question?” At my bark of pure rage, the locker room falls silent.

Grayson shakes his head. “Boys, I suggest you handle this topic with sensitivity and fucking care. Don’t be heartless. Let the man speak and stop bombarding him.”

“Sorry, Cap,” everyone mutters in unison.

I try to brush the comment aside but I can’t. “Of course I’m fucking keeping her. She’s my family, and I’d be shocked if one of you ever turned your back on family. That’s not what we do at IceHawks.” Running a hand through my hair, I blow out a breath and explain…everything.

How I found out about Emmy, what I know of her mom, her upbringing, her mutism, and how I’ll need help, support, and love from those around me moving forward.

And once I’m done, I see that it’s gotten through to them, that they know how much I care for Emmy, that’s she’s mine in every sense of the word.

She is my daughter.

To my surprise, it’s Irving who’s the first to stand. “We’ve got your back, Ashford.”

Johnson nods, too. “All the way.”

“Whatever you need,” Valenti adds.

Ellington stands and walks over, pulling me in for a hug. “Congratulations, Ashford.”

Mitchel jumps up, pulling Lewis with him as he cheers, “Ashford is a fucking dad!”

“Let’s fucking go, Daddy Ashford!”

“I want to meet her.”

“When’s her birthday? Is it too soon to buy her a present?”

“Is she coming to a game?”

Over the flurry of questions, I spot Grayson behind the group of guys with a bright smile stretching his lips. He mouths, *I told you.*

Yes, yes he did.

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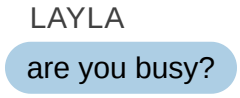
Chapter 10

Layla



Incoming call from Momma Bear

As a twenty-five-year-old woman, I'm not ashamed to admit that when I see my mom's name flash across my phone with an incoming call, I sigh in relief. Emmy is still playing with the dollhouse Kieran bought her, so I swipe my finger across the screen and answer. My mom doesn't even give me enough time to say hello before her worried voice rushes down the line.

"Is everything okay? Do you want me to come over and help you?"

Before I can contain it, I snort.

"Everything's all right, no need to come over. If you meet Emmy, I want Kieran to be here and be okay with it."

"Of course, of course!" she gushes, the telltale sound of a keyboard clacking coming through in the background. "Kieran said I can come over the next time he has a day off."

I look down at my phone, my brows furrowing before I bring it back up. "Wait, what?"

"We've been texting," she says as way of explanation. "He's such a sweetheart. The questions he asks are adorable."

“I didn’t realize he took me up on my offer.”

“He messaged me yesterday evening.” The clacking continues, her fingers flying across her keyboard.

I’m about to ask why she didn’t tell me my boss texted her, but I’m sidetracked when I realize it’s a Saturday. “Why are you working on the weekend?”

My mom took a job as a virtual assistant when I first fell ill. Every decision from that day onward was made to accommodate my healing process, and I don’t think I’ll ever be able to repay her for that.

She huffs down the line. “I shouldn’t be, but Teddy called me four times saying it was urgent and, well, you know me.”

“Yes, being a people pleaser seems to be a Carson trait.”

“I wish it wasn’t,” she sighs before her voice changes. “Is everything okay with you though? You’re not feeling unwell, are you?”

The last of her words taper off, her worry evident.

I’m not the only one who fears a flare-up.

Putting my mom on speaker, I set the phone on the couch and begin to arrange the furniture in the living room. Kieran said to wait until he was back but I’m not going to sit around while he’s gone. He has enough on his plate. Besides, Emmy seems content in moments like this to play on her own. Kieran’s worried about her and rightfully so, but I’m surprised at how much she’s already settled in. It’s like she’s relieved to be here, her body finally having a chance to relax.

“I’m just a little nervous is all,” I admit softly, trying not to let Emmy eavesdrop.

“Oh, sweetie, how come?”

Pushing the couch pieces in front of the fireplace, I stand, still shocked I can do this without having a dizzy spell. I take my phone off speaker and plop down on the now put-together couch. “Maybe nervous isn’t the right word. Perhaps…apprehensive? It’s just, this is the first time I’m meeting someone new without being known as the sick girl. I’m sure Bella told Cindy about Berlin, but it’s so strange to be here setting up and not having to…”

“Go through torture?”

“Exactly,” I say, playing with the threads of my sweater. “It feels weird to be…normal? I mean, is this even normal? Or am I going to be bedridden again, back to you helping me put on makeup because my bones ache too

much or having to recover for a week after trying to socialize like a human being?" The torrent of words pour from me before I bite my lower lip. "Okay, maybe I am a little anxious."

"Anxious to be feeling good?" my mom asks softly, carefully.

"Yes," I admit.

I keep my eyes pinned on Emmy, watching as she plays with a little girl doll and a dog. Probably imagining them as her and Bambi. When they're in the same room, they're stuck to each other like glue.

"Sweetie, I think you need to give yourself some grace on these feelings and just let yourself have them. You've missed out on so much in life, of course your brain is going to go a little haywire when you start to do the activities that took a toll on your body. It's going to take some time adjusting and that's okay."

My mom's words wrap around my heart like a soothing balm.

"You're right." I stand, placing my phone in the crook of my neck and moving onto the coffee table that is strangely sitting by the front door. "I think it will take me a while to get used to it. I mean, I'm carrying a frickin coffee table right now, Mom. A coffee table! And it's heavy!"

A bubble of laughter comes over the line.

"I'm so happy for you, Layla. Every day I prayed for a miracle like yours, and look at you, not only carrying a coffee table"—she chuckles at that—"but maintaining a job now, too. We never in a million years would have thought you'd be capable of doing so." Her voice softens and I can practically hear the smile in it. "Give yourself some time to get used to this new version of yourself. The woman you are today is completely different to the one who flew to Berlin a year and a half ago."

I pass the mirror mounted on the wall and stop. "You're right," I murmur, catching all the differences. The glow to my skin, the *life* in my eyes. "I am different."

Completely and wholly altered from the girl that put on four layers of concealer to hide the bags under her eyes. The girl that bundled herself in several layers because the cold flared up her arthritis symptoms. The girl that constantly canceled on plans and cried herself to sleep.

The strong woman staring back is nothing like the old me.

I wish I could go back and give myself a hug.

"Bella says Cindy is really nice," I tell her.

"That's exciting! Possibly a new friend."

“Yeah, she thinks we’ll get along well.”

She picks up on it before I do, my deeply rooted hesitation, the fear.

“Just be yourself, sweetie. That will always be good enough.”

Exhaling, I give Emmy a big smile as she looks up at me. Like her father, I feel as if she can read every emotion on my face, so I decide to say, “Thanks, Mom. I’ll tell you all about it when I get home tonight.”

“Okay, good luck. I’ll be waiting up for you.”

“You don’t have to,” I’m quick to add.

“Nonsense, I’m excited to hear about it. I didn’t get to wait up for you often when you were growing up, so let me have this.”

Emotion clogs my throat.

This illness didn’t just steal from me. It robbed everyone around me like a greedy burglar.

“Okay, I love you.”

“I love you more.”

She ends the call, her words having warmed my heart and calmed my thoughts. When I smile at Emmy this time, the small dog figurine clutched to her chest, it’s real.

“Do you want to get the house ready for Bambi?”

Her eyes widen before she jumps to her feet, nodding her head so forcefully she almost topples over.

I chuckle at her eagerness as I lead her up the stairs to her room. “First, we have to get dressed. What do you want to wear tonight, Queen Emmy?”

Her little laugh at my nickname melts my heart. I’m quickly realizing Kieran isn’t the only one who will do anything to hear it.

Two hours later and with Emmy’s overseeing—and by overseeing, I mean pointing in directions and clapping—we’ve rearranged the loungeroom to look more like a home and less like a cluttered yard sale.

Now standing in the kitchen, Emmy beside me on a platform contraption Kieran bought for her so she can safely help with cooking, we're covered in chocolate, the brownie batter splattered more on us than in the baking tray. I can barely see the pink floral pattern on Emmy's dress anymore, but all the mess is worth it with the smile she's sporting, those dimples of hers on full display and incredibly identical to her dad's.

"We need to make doggie treats next time," I emphasize as she licks the chocolate frosting off the spoon. "Chocolate is bad for dogs. They can't eat it, otherwise it'll make them very sick."

Emmy looks down at the brownies like they've personally killed Bambi.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I try not to laugh. "It's okay, Emmy, we'll keep it high on the kitchen bench where she can't get them."

"Hello, hello!" I hear Bella call out.

Before I can grab her, Emmy climbs down and under the bar that stops her from falling backwards. She moves like a slippery worm, but right as she frees herself, I scoop her up.

"In here!" I call back to Bella.

Bambi, with her nose to the floor, rounds the corner, her tail thumping a mile a minute. She lets out a little bark as she spots Emmy in my arms and rushes forward, waiting for me to put her best friend down.

Emmy starts wriggling out of my arms, the only time she hates being held—when Bambi is around.

"Emmy, you're covered in chocolate, darling. You can't let Bambi lick you," I try to explain, but she's not having a bit of it.

I'm trying to stop her from all but leaping to the ground when Bella rounds the corner and throws her head back on a laugh at the state of Kieran's kitchen and myself.

"I knew you weren't the best cook but Lil, this is next level," she gasps out through her fit of laughter.

I look around the kitchen and shake my head. "Don't even get me started."

Bella grabs Bambi's collar and pulls her back, away from the chocolate assault.

Emmy keeps wriggling. "Come on, let's go get changed. Remember, Bambi could get very sick if she has chocolate. We don't want that, do we, Emmy?"

She stops suddenly, looking down at Bambi. She shakes her head slowly, finally ceasing her wriggling before pointing upstairs wildly.

“Yes, yes, we’re going. I’ll be quick, I promise.”

In her room, I replace her dress with a cleaner one, a blue version with sunflowers scattered over it. The second I tie the bow at the back, Emmy’s off in a blink.

I trail her down the stairs, finding her and Bambi already playing chase around the living room couch.

“The place looks amazing!” Bella exclaims, gesturing to the space.

I take in the living room again, how homey all the pieces of furniture look together. “We just finished moving everything around before we started baking.”

“Brownies and home redecoration. Kieran isn’t paying you enough.”

“Oh, he’s paying me plenty, trust me.” *Enough to alleviate the guilt as I help my parents rebuild their retirement.* I point to her. “Which reminds me, he wants to commission pieces off you.”

A blush creeps along her cheeks at the mention of her art. I was worried when she was in the thick of her grief that she had finally hung up the towel on it, being that it was her mom who got her into art, but she did the opposite. She poured her grief into her work, and it shows—the passion, love, and care.

Trisha would be beyond proud of her and how far she’s come, and the gallery she opened.

Anytime she posts a piece, the demand for her prints sells it out within mere hours. Grayson, always her cheerleader, is extremely active on social media on her release days, telling everyone to buy.

It’s inspiring to watch her chase her dreams and conquer them. Perhaps one day I’ll try chasing my own, and not just the measly dream I tell everyone. No, the secret one I’ve harbored since I was young, the one I haven’t dared tell a soul in case I never achieve it in this lifetime.

“How many does he want, and did he even say what he has in mind?”

I can’t help but laugh. “No, he was onto the next to-do list item before he even finished telling me. I’ll have him talk to you about it. He did say something about every room though.”

Bella’s eyes widen. “That’s a lot of pieces.”

“And it will look stunning. What time is Cindy coming over, by the way?”

Bella pulls out her phone. “She texted when she left. She’s probably ten, fifteen minutes away.”

“Perfect, want to help me with the charcuterie board?”

“Cheeseboards are my middle name. Do you have wine?”

Groaning, I slump a little. “Damn it, I knew I forgot something.”

She waves her hand in the air. “It’s okay. I’m still not drinking that much and Cindy knows you can’t with your medication, so she most likely will bring her own bottle.”

Relief courses through me, swift and sudden that I don’t have to endure that awkward conversation. I’ve never understood it, why people can be so offended about what you do and don’t put in your body, but this past year as I’ve had to swear off alcohol, I’ve come to realize that others have an oddly strong aversion if you choose not to drink.

I’m sure Bella would know—she and Grayson have had countless similar situations when Grayson informs strangers he’s sober. Especially since Bella decided to go sober alongside him in support, with just the odd glass of wine here and there.

I doubt Cindy would be one of those people based on the things Bella has shared of her, but I’m grateful all the same that I don’t have to talk about my medication right off the bat.

“She’s so excited to finally meet you.”

“I’m excited too. I feel like I already know her.”

Opening the fridge, I pull out the groceries I bought today for the cheeseboard and sides. As I search around for utensils, I make a mental note to help Kieran order more serveware.

Bella locates something to use as a serving board as she says in awe, “I’m so proud, Lil. Look at you, kicking lupus’s ass.”

I couldn’t stop smiling even if I tried. “And now I work just across the road from you!”

Bella squeals as she gets out a knife to cut the cured meats. “We’re making up for lost time.”

“Longest seventeen months of my life,” I mutter. “Although not as bad as you had it. I still can’t believe you woke up in the middle of the night to talk to me.”

She lifts a shoulder. “I’d do anything for you.”

“Anything?” I ask.

Her eyes slide to mine. “What do you have in mind?”

“Any chance you’d let me steal Bambi for Emmy’s speech therapy session on Monday?”

“Oh my gosh, of course!” She smiles. “Can’t believe I didn’t think of that sooner. Bambi always manages to bring her out of her shell.”

“I ran the idea past Kieran this morning—”

“How’s that going, by the way?”

“Him being my boss? Or the nannying role?”

A coy smile dances along her lips. “More like, how is his flirting?”

I roll my eyes. “We have a deal in place. He can flirt with me but not while Emmy is around.”

“And how’s *that* going?”

I frown down at the cheeses. “Surprisingly, we’re around each other a lot without her.”

Bella howls with laughter right as I hear the front door open and a soft cheery voice call out, “I brought food!”

As I turn to greet Cindy, a small body slams into my legs, little hands clinging to my jeans. Bella moves past me to say hello, while I peer down at Emmy now hiding behind my legs.

With the way my hands turn clammy from nerves, I wish I could hide behind someone’s legs too.

I feel like I’m on the cusp of something new. That there’s a shift happening within me, an older version of myself being left behind as I step into a newer version. A version who can meet people with a smile on her face that isn’t forced, a pep in her step that isn’t fake, and a radiance that can’t be feigned.

It terrifies me to let go of my older self that I was trapped within for over twelve years.

But not as much as it excites me.

Cindy rounds the corner, her blonde hair perfectly blow-dried, her loose curls bouncing as our smiles mirror each other’s. With my hand gently on top of Emmy’s head, I hold out my free arm as Cindy squeals and rushes for me.

She throws her arms around me and squeezes. “I’ve been waiting to meet you for what feels like an eternity!”

Her joy is infectious, her energy lighting up the entire room.

“I know, I can’t believe we haven’t yet!”

Cindy pulls back, her eyes roving over me. My brain is instantly waiting for a comment about how I don't look like I have a disease, but to my surprise, she whistles.

"God damn, Layla, this sweater suits you so well!"

My shoulders loosen, the breath I was holding escaping me in a rush. Flicking my gaze down to the sage green sweater I'm about to say thank you but she's already moving on, her smile stretching further as she drops to her knees.

Bella wasn't wrong, she bounces from topic to topic like a gorgeous blonde hurricane.

Emmy's grip on my jeans tighten as she nestles her head further into my calves.

Cindy rummages in her bag. "A little birdie told me that Bambi is your best friend," she whispers.

I feel Emmy's head nod up and down along the back of my leg.

Cindy gives her a knowing smile as she leans forward. "Then this is most certainly for you." She pulls out a plush teddy bear—a golden retriever.

Emmy's hands disappear from my legs. Bella and I grin, watching Emmy take it gently from Cindy's outstretched palm, her eyes round with awe. She wraps her arms around the teddy bear and cradles it to her chest like it's the most precious thing in the world.

"Something tells me she's never going to let go of that," Bella says.

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Chapter 11

Layla

KIERAN

please tell me my child is still alive

LAYLA

photo attachment

Emmy is very much alive and well

good luck tonight!

KIERAN

don't need luck when you're as good as me ;)

LAYLA

andddd there he is, the cockiest man to ever live

KIERAN

never left baby

Cindy's gasp is so loud that Bella rushes back into the living room, a brownie hanging out of her mouth. Cindy's hand flies to her chest as if I physically wounded her. "You did *not* just say that."

Wincing, I pop a grape in my mouth. "Sorry."

"What the hell is going on?"

Cindy turns to Bella as she sits down between us. "Your best friend right there"—she points an accusatory finger at me—"just said she's never seen *Lord of the Rings*."

Bella peers at her out of the corner of her eye as she slowly eats the remaining chunk of her brownie.

Cindy leaps up. “Oh fuck no! You too?” As quickly as she swore, she slaps a hand over her mouth, looking over at Emmy lying on her back on the floor, head popped up on Bambi’s belly as she watches TV. “Sorry, Em.”

I cough to hide my laugh, but it quickly dies as she turns those accusatory eyes on me again. “We’re watching it, right now.”

Bella snorts. “The guys’ game starts in five minutes.”

She flaps her hand, waving Bella off. “*Lord of the Rings* is more important.”

“Asher will be pissed.”

“I’ve watched him play since he was seven. Trust me, I don’t think he’d mind if I skipped a game.”

“Seven?” I ask, not being able to hide the awe in my voice.

“They’ve known each other since they were in diapers,” Bella explains.

“No way! That’s the cutest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“It’s cute until you remember that he’s seen *everything*. Every awkward hormonal teenager phase, braces, acne, boy band obsessions…” She gives me a look. “And he has the photo evidence to back it up.”

I slice some brie and put it on a cracker. “I highly doubt your bad phases were even bad. You’re drop dead gorgeous.”

“You’ll have to trust me on this one. Puberty was nice to me but before that…” She shivers. “Ugh, I tried to burn the photos once and my mom lectured me for two hours before hiding them in the house somewhere. I *still* haven’t been able to find them.”

“I’d kill to have dirt on Grayson. That man is practically a saint.” Bella’s quiet for a moment before springing upright, whipping out her phone. “I’m going to text Allie. She’ll bring his baby photos if I ask.”

“She’s coming tomorrow, right?”

Nodding, Bella types away furiously. “Yep, but knowing Allie they’ve probably already arrived. They’re so excited.”

Cindy drops her voice, her gaze darting to Emmy, checking to make sure she’s still riveted by the cartoons on the TV. “My heart broke when you told me.”

Bella winces. “Sorry I asked you to keep it from Asher.”

“Don’t worry, everyone has to keep secrets from time to time.” Something clouds her eyes before it’s gone as quickly as it arrived and she’s smiling again. “Do you know if Kieran will tell them soon, though? This is a pretty big thing to hide.”

I nod. “He said he was going to tell them before the game.”

Cindy whistles as she leans forward, plucking food from the charcuterie board. “The group chat is going to explode.”

“Group chat?”

Bella huffs out a laugh. “The team’s group chat. My god, Lil, you gotta see it. It’s the funniest thing you’ll ever read.”

“You read the group chat?”

“All the wives and girlfriends do.” Cindy smirks. “Pure entertainment.”

“Irving is the funniest,” Bella states.

Cindy shakes her head. “No way, Jack Lewis is.” Pointing to me, Cindy goes on. “Kieran will show you the chat if you ask him. He’d do anything you asked.”

I frown. “No, he wouldn’t.”

Bella pats my knee. “Oh, Lil. Yes, yes he would.”

“He never shut up about you while you were gone.” Cindy places a kernel of popcorn in her mouth. “Literally not one day went by where Kieran *wasn’t* asking about you.”

Sighing, I turn toward the TV just as the players start skating onto the ice. “That’s because he’s never had a woman say no to him before. He’s like a dog with a bone.”

“A relentless dog,” Bella murmurs before taking a sip of her drink. “I have to admit, I miss Totti’s.”

Cindy clicks her fingers. “We need to go, next week.” She turns to me. “And I won’t take no for an answer. If Bella hasn’t told you, I’m pushy.”

“Next week it is,” I say. I just don’t admit that I’ll be drinking mocktails.

No one directly said that alcohol would create an adverse reaction to my medication, but being a trial drug, I suspect it’s because they don’t even know yet. I’m not ready to take that leap of faith yet, and why would I? I’d probably spend the entire night paranoid about triggering a flare-up. As much as I want to let loose, I can have fun without alcohol.

Cindy’s lips part right as Emmy suddenly springs up off the floor. With the golden retriever teddy bear clutched in her arms, Emmy sprints for the

TV, coming to a skidding stop before it.

All three of us girls pop off the couch, beyond confused on what the hell made her—

"Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" Emmy shrieks, jumping up and down and clapping her hands together.

My jaw drops.

"Surely not," Bella whispers.

I'm about to say—hell, I have no clue—but the camera pans to Kieran again and Emmy goes *wild*.

"Daddy! My daddy!"

I'm not sure what I'm stunned at more. At hearing Emmy's voice again, the soft innocent lilt, or that the words she's so excited to keep repeating are because of Kieran.

Either way, my heart is pounding a thousand miles an hour while simultaneously feeling like it's melting.

"I wonder if her mom put the games on for her," Bella whispers.

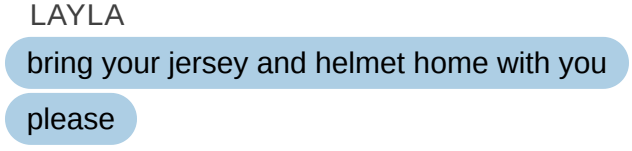
"She must have. She knows which one he is," I say. "But Emmy hasn't called Kieran Daddy, though."

"It could be the jersey number," Cindy suggests, her tone just as dumbfounded.

Bella's eyes widen. "It's because Kieran's helmet is on. She can't see his face."

Quickly pulling out my phone, I hit record just as Kieran skates past on the TV screen, making Emmy squeal again. Bambi is beside her, bouncing on her paws. She can't hear Emmy's excitement, but her infectious joy is obviously spreading.

I'm not going to send it to him; something tells me he should be alone when he watches this. I do, however, fire off a text.



Cindy reads the text over my shoulder before she lets out a hoot of laughter. "He probably thinks he's getting lucky."

"As if." I wave her off. "He would never actually sleep with me. It's just a game to him."

Pocketing my phone, I watch the TV before realizing it's grown silent. The girls are looking at me like I'm… I don't know how they're looking at me, actually.

Frowning, I ask slowly, "What?"

"You genuinely believe that?" Cindy whispers.

"Believe what?"

Bella seems to shake herself out of a thought. "Layla…my dear sweet Layla. Honey, that man is smitten with you and has been since he met you at the charity event."

I can't help but scoff. *That's absurd.*

My cheeks begin to flush, and as I feel that telltale heat climbing up my neck and along my cheeks, I turn my attention to where it's safe—Emmy. If I thought the cartoon's had her enthralled its nothing compared to now. Her eyes are glued to the TV, trying to catch a glimpse of Kieran.

Is this what it's been for her? Waiting with baited breath for a small glimpse of her dad? What did her mom tell her? That he didn't want her? How terribly heartbreaking that the only chance she got to see her dad was through a screen.

"I'm telling the truth," Bella pushes.

"Kieran likes the chase and I'm the only one who has never given in to him. That's it. I don't doubt that the second I gave in to him, he'd lose any and all interest."

Cindy folds her arms over her chest. "And how would you know that?"

I shrug as if it's the easiest answer in the world. "Because it's who he is. He's only ever been with women for one night. That's his rule." I can't help but wince. "I adore him and think he's a kind man, but that doesn't change the fact that he's a fuckboy."

"You can be a fuckboy *and* be infatuated with someone."

I click my tongue at Bella. "Infatuated. Right."

Bella and Cindy share a look, one which I honestly don't want to decipher. I don't need anyone putting ideas in my head that my boss *actually* likes me beyond our teasing nature. Kieran and I flirt, yes, but that's it. He sees me as the woman who turned him down, and all he wants to do is rectify that and push my buttons. He would never want to take it further than that.

I think that's why I love teasing him so much. If I keep denying him, he'll continue to flirt with me…and I don't want to admit that to the girls.

Yes, I know it’s a little sad and pathetic.

Although let’s be honest, I don’t think that many women would blame me. Because when Kieran gives you his full attention, it’s like you’re the only woman in the world.

I didn’t have the heart to move Emmy up to her bed when the girls were here. Her hand was clinging to Bambi’s paw so hard we had to switch it out with the teddy’s paw when Bella went home thirty minutes ago.

Sighing, I gently sit beside Emmy still sleeping on the couch, the TV light brightening the room every now and then. A smile stretches across my face. Tonight was so much fun and such a success for so many reasons.

Bella was right. Cindy is so sweet and bubbly she pulled me right out of my shell, and I forgot I was even feeling nervous at all. The last time I clicked with someone that well was when Bella and I met in middle school.

And god, did it feel good to eat junk food and sit on a couch watching men beat each other up while giggling with my girlfriends. It healed a part of my soul, to be sitting here now with a dopey smile on my face instead of a wince as I hobble into bed due to exhaustion.

But not only that—Emmy.

Sweet little Emmy spoke.

She *spoke*, and not just one timid whisper like when I met her. This happened multiple times, her excited squeals, claps, and praise for her dad filling the living room anytime Kieran came on screen.

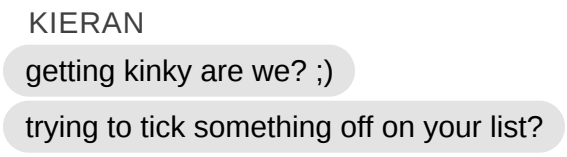
Cindy’s right, Emmy must have been tracking Kieran’s jersey number.

He has been dying to put the pieces of Emmy’s life together. Of how her mom treated her, if she was always a junkie, if Emmy was socialized. He’s had so many questions and rightfully so. The last three years of Emmy’s life are a complete mystery, and with her not uttering a word, we’ve both been left on the outside.

But tonight shined a small light into her past, that her mom at least told her about Kieran.

I can't wait to tell him.

His response to my text was exactly what I expected.



It took every ounce of self-control to not burst out laughing when I read that. I knew the moment I did the girls would pounce and they'd be relentless in asking questions.

It's just flirting. Harmless flirting, I tell myself.

The sound of keys at the front door has me jumping up. Quickly meeting Kieran at the entryway, I put my finger to my lips as he drops his bag.

He winks. "I'd prefer you loud and screaming but whatever you—"

I slap my hand over his mouth, ignoring the twinkling mischief in his eyes. "You are horrible," I whisper-hiss. "Emmy is asleep on the couch. She looked too cute to move."

His face melts at my words.

I soften too, until his tongue darts out and licks my hand. I snap out of it quickly and pull my hand away. "Ugh!" I wipe it off on his T-shirt. "Disgusting."

"Don't lie, you've been dying for my saliva," he whispers in my ear as he moves past me.

"Only in your dreams, Ashford."

"Every night," he calls over his shoulder.

Trailing behind him, I stop to watch him slow behind the couch, his heart on his sleeve as he gazes down at her fast asleep. His smile steals my breath. Joy is a beautiful thing to witness in others, but not as much as seeing Kieran Ashford fall head over heels in love with his daughter.

He lifts his head, catching me staring. I wait for him to call me out on it, but instead he asks, "Where did the teddy come from?"

"Cindy."

I'm stunned when I feel myself move, my feet walking toward him of their own accord, as if he's the other half of my magnet. Forever reeling me into his orbit.

He doesn’t drop his gaze until I step beside him and peer down at Emmy.

“She’s gorgeous,” he murmurs.

“She looks like you.”

His smirk turns devilish. “Knew you found me attractive.”

“Not like that, you idiot. She just…” My words trail off because, yes, it is like that. Kieran’s gorgeous—I would have to be visually impaired to say he wasn’t—and Emmy has all of his features besides the eyes.

“Cat got your tongue, sunshine?”

I turn to him, knowing that when he sees the video his smugness will die off. I don’t speak, just hand my phone over with the video up, ready for him to press play.

His brows furrow as he takes it from me, his finger grazing mine sending goosebumps down my arm.

Kieran’s chest stops moving as the sound of Emmy’s soft voice floats from the speaker. The moment she says Daddy, Kieran’s eyes fill with silver. The hand holding my phone begins to tremble as the other snaps out, clasping the back of the couch to steady himself.

When the video stops, Kieran replays it immediately, and it’s only then do I realize his face is starting to turn red.

I place my hand in the center of his chest and whisper, “Breathe.”

His chest rises on a sharp inhale, and the hand that was on the couch moves up and clutches mine, locking me in place.

“She knows who I am,” he whispers in astonishment.

He plays the video again, his tears brimming over and rolling down his cheeks. His eyes are on the phone, on his daughter, but mine are on him.

It’s not until his seventh rewatch that he lifts those teary eyes to mine. Smiling at me as if I just gave him the greatest gift he’ll ever receive.

“She told her about me.”

“She told her,” I repeat, a part of me knowing he needs to hear it.

My own eyes begin to sting with unshed tears as I smile back at Kieran, soaking up this moment, this small win for him. “She knew about you,” I say again. “The girls and I think she didn’t recognize you because you have your helmet on in games. She must know the jersey number.”

“That’s why you asked me to bring my kit.” He looks back down at Emmy, blowing out a heaving breath full of emotion.

He lets go of my hand then, and the loss of his warmth has me fisting it at my side to try and create my own heat.

"I'll put it on tomorrow," he murmurs. "I want her to keep sleeping."

"Can you tell me how it goes?" I ask, selfishly wanting to be a part of it.

His head snaps up. "You're not going to be here tomorrow?"

"You don't have me scheduled."

Something shutters over his eyes as he gives me a tight smile. "Right, sorry. I forgot you're getting paid for this."

Cocking my head, I wish I had his ability to read people well enough to know what that meant. Although after what he confessed…

God, my heart can't handle this many emotions.

"Thank you," he whispers gutturally. "Thank you for filming this and telling me. I don't think you realize how happy this has made me." He bites his lip before asking, "Can you send this to me?"

My cheeks burn. "Of course."

Kieran's hands twitch at his sides, a thousand thoughts floating behind his eyes, before he quickly steps into my space and wraps his arms around me, burying his head in the crook of my neck.

The warmth of him that envelopes me, his scent, his touch—my heart stops beating.

Only to return like a wild horse as he says, "Thank you for giving me this small part of her."

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Chapter 12

Kieran

ICEHAWKS BITCHES

KIERAN

video attachment

IRVING

OH MY FUCKING GOD

LOOK AT HER LITTLE CLAPS

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

holy shit dude she said Daddy!

you have me wanting a kid now

that’s the cutest thing I’ve ever seen

JOHNSON

we have a new cheerleader

VALENTI

we need to get her a jersey

ELLINGTON

fuck a jersey

she needs everything

IRVING

earmuffs

O’CONNOR

little mittens!

do they make small enough mittens?

LEWIS

BEANIE!!!

I’ll learn to sew

can we meet her???

IRVING

please please please!!!

Sitting in the recliner chair in Emmy’s room, I’m watching the video on repeat, a constant loop that would probably have those around me questioning my sanity.

I can’t help myself.

It’s the first time I’ve heard her voice.

Layla got to hear it, but I never did, not until she gave me this video and my god every time I watch it I don’t think my heart could melt anymore and yet it does.

It’s soft, high-pitched, and so adorable. She doesn’t seem to have a stutter at all, not like how the psychologist assumed she would. I spoke with her on the phone at length yesterday morning in preparation for her appointment Monday.

The speech therapist wanted me to know going in that her mutism could be for a plethora of reasons, some even medical, but after seeing this, I fear that her silence is a choice, one she fell into from trauma.

Another tear drops onto my phone screen.

I gave up wiping them off my cheeks since they won’t stop flowing.

I had accepted her heart and soul the moment the matron showed me the DNA results, and while Emmy has been comfortable around me, she hasn’t quite accepted me back. I know she’s gone through hell, has seen terrible things no child ever should, but hearing her so excitedly say I’m her dad made something click in my heart. We’re each other’s family.

I’m not sure how to go about it though. Do I wake her up and put the helmet on? Have the helmet on already? How do I merge the version of me she recognizes on TV with the man she was given to after her mom died?

Be yourself. Have fun with her.

Layla's words come to mind and maybe, for now, I should hold off on showing her. I should build a relationship with her first.

A relationship built on a strong foundation of trust, stability, care, and love, not whatever her mom told her about the man on the TV.

A part of me also selfishly wants to know that if she likes me, it's for *me*. I need to know I'm making Emmy happy because I'm giving her a joyful home, not an idolized version of myself.

Because I still can't recall her mother. But that doesn't surprise me.

Four years ago, around the time Emmy would have been conceived, I was a mess. Not that anyone ever noticed. I've always been able to function when it feels like I want to die.

My only tell? I find myself between the legs of women…a lot. I'm sure a psychologist would say it's how I could safely find comfort from a woman without being vulnerable or getting hurt, but the why doesn't matter. I was fucked in the head at that time…because I saw *him* at one of my games.

Ice runs down my spine at the memory of seeing his face in the crowd behind the home bench. I vomited nonstop that night, and it took months of throwing myself at women and drowning every night in alcohol for the feelings to fade.

So no, I don't remember Emmy's mom. If I was with a woman at that time, I was closing my eyes and forcing myself to forget.

Maybe I should hire someone to figure out who she was.

Suddenly, I feel eyes on me.

I lift my head from my phone and lock it, silencing Emmy's voice. She's peering up at me from her bed. I still haven't been able to sleep in my own room. She's found me here every morning, but so far, she hasn't given any indication that she doesn't like it.

I tried to leave and let her sleep alone last night but at the reminder of her very first night in this house, when I turned the light off only for her scream to pierce my heart and her room. When the image of her terror filled face as I turned the light back on floods my mind every time I go to leave… I find it impossible to make my feet walk away, even if my bedroom is just one door down.

Emmy's fear of the dark is apparent and I've made sure to never have her in a room without light since.

“Are you hungry?” I ask.

She shakes her head, her hair sticking up in every direction as she clings to the golden retriever teddy. I’m going to have to kidnap Bambi at this point.

“Do you want a bath?”

No again.

Frowning, I wrack my brain for options before Allie and Carlton come over. This is the first day I’ve had her to myself with no plans and no long to-do list.

Our first Saturday together, and I feel like a fish out of water.

What the hell do I do with a three-year-old?

What do other parents do with their kids on the weekends?

Parks?

I can’t help but grimace at the thought of going there with Emmy. What if someone saw me with her and leaked it to the press?

Bunnies would come out of the woodwork then. My body is wracked with a shiver. Fuck that.

My mind drifts to the delivery that arrived yesterday, the stacks of boxes sitting in my backyard waiting for me to open them.

The corner of my mouth lifts into a smile. “Want to help me build something?”

Her eyes widen and I finally get a nod. She scrambles out of bed, her hair appearing as if she was doing gymnastics in her sleep, she runs across the room, still clutching the teddy’s paw.

I scoop her up into my arms. “Let’s get ready to build then.” Tapping her nose, I tease, “You can be my apprentice.”

A water bottle held by two small hands shoots out in front of my face. Wiping the sweat off my brow, I take the bottle. “Thanks, Emmy.”

She nods, waiting patiently while I guzzle before taking the water back and running off to what I deemed “Emmy’s work area” in the yard as I assemble the playground. There were far too many pointy nails for my

liking. Meanwhile, Emmy has decided her job is to make sure I'm hydrated while she plays with her golden retriever plushie she only allows me to call Bambi and the Barbies she smuggled out here.

The longer time goes on, the more her personality shows, and empathy seems to be a large one. I'm a little concerned there's a bit of people pleasing, too. She watches me like a hawk, trying to guess my needs, and that shouldn't be the case. I should be the one focusing on her.

I see far too much of myself in Emmy, stuff that goes beyond genetics. It's psychological. I was a people pleaser in the foster home, and it was a trait I had to hammer out of myself in college.

Just because you take care of others and anticipate their needs and wants doesn't make them love you.

When I was younger, I tried to be perfect. Tried to pay attention in class, tried to be the kindest, tried to be friendly to everyone. Grades, friends, sports—fuck, even brushing my teeth. I received one compliment on how white my teeth were and from that day forward proceeded to brush my teeth for over ten minutes, four times a day.

I was six.

Pearly white teeth never got me adopted. My good behavior never did, either. I thought if I behaved perfectly people would like me. Parents would want me yet they always returned me like the dog I felt like that day my mom dropped me on the side of the road. It always came full circle, me being dumped off at the foster home.

I could never escape that hellhole and the matron made sure I knew it.

When I went to college on a sports scholarship, I had the daunting realization that I never did anything for myself. Everything I did was to make others happy, and I never stopped to ask myself what *I* needed to be happy. After that moment, I swung myself around. People might call me an asshole from time to time, but at least I'm not burying my feelings to prioritize others above mine.

I've also come to realize that the people who call you a selfish asshole are the ones who are pissed off that you aren't bending your own happiness to prioritize theirs.

I've learned to stay far away from those types of people because my feelings matter just as much as theirs. There's nothing wrong or inherently "bad" about taking care of myself first, because you can never pour from an empty cup.

There is kindness in showing up for someone when you are whole. They're not receiving scraps of your attention or pieces of your energy; they're seeing you at your full capacity.

It's a lesson I'll drill into Emmy's mind.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, giving me pause. Placing the hammer between my feet, I pull it out to find it's a notification from my security system.

My lips twitch.

Allie waited until nine on the dot.

Laughing to myself, I buzz them in from my phone before making my way over to Emmy, my steps slow. Her lips are moving ever so softly, talking for her Barbies.

I hold my breath, trying to calm the erratic beat as I attempt to hear her over the pounding of it in my ears, but I can't. I don't think she's even making a sound, she's just mouthing the words.

I'd sell a kidney to hear her play loud and carefree with her dolls.

I don't have long until Allie comes waltzing through those doors, though, so I shake myself out of it.

"Hey Em, want to take a break? I have someone here that's really excited to meet you."

Her dolls slowly lower to the ground as she cocks her head.

"You'll love them, I promise."

Clambering to her feet, Emmy rises, leaving all her toys behind except for one. The golden retriever is clutched firmly in her hand. I scoop her into my arms, making my way up the deck stairs just as I hear my front door open and Allie call out.

"*Hellooo*," she sings. "Where is my beautiful grandbaby?"

Biting my lip at her choice of words, I walk through the back patio doors as they step into the living room, Allie leading Carlton as she all but bounces on the ball of her toes.

"Dear, maybe don't force that word onto him."

She tsks. "He's just as much my son as Grayson and Drew and that makes her my grandchild."

Carlton gazes at her adoringly. "I thought we agreed you would ask him first."

Allie ignores him, her head whipping around, searching, yet not clocking us until I close the door behind me. The click draws Allie's gaze

our way.

Her hands fly to her mouth as she gasps, coming to an abrupt stop and forcing Carlton to follow suit. Although even he looks a bit shell-shocked, and that's saying something—it takes a lot to ruffle Mr. Crawford's feathers.

Carlton is the calm to Allie's frantic energy. They compliment each other well. The only time I've seen Carlton truly affected was when Drew died…along with the silence that ensued thereafter from Grayson.

The fact he's staring at Emmy, his jaw practically unhinged, freaks me out a little.

Tears line Allie's eyes as I move closer, my hold on Emmy tightening. Her fingers twirl in the back of my hair, a nervous habit I've noticed her pick up.

"Emmy," I say softly, keeping my gaze locked on Allie. "This is your grandma."

Allie sucks in a sharp breath at the title I happily hand over.

Grayson is right—they are my family and I want to give Emmy everything that I was robbed of. There's no reason for Emmy to call her anything different. One day I'll tell her that blood doesn't always mean family, and sometimes the family we choose are the best of all.

But for now, with her young mind, I'll tell her what Allie is to me—a mom.

It would be a disservice to call her anything but. She's the only woman in my life who ever deserved the title.

Allie's arms come out, then drop by her sides as if she doesn't know what to do with herself. "Can I hold her?" she chokes out.

Emmy is watching Allie with such intensity. I ask, "Do you want to be held?"

She lifts her eyes to mine and I can see she's unsure.

Allie waves me off. "It's okay. I'll get my hugs in soon when she warms up to me, I'm sure. You were similar. My gosh, you put me through hoops as a young boy, Kieran." She places her bag on the kitchen bench, then turns to Carlton. "Honey, can you give her the presents?"

He shakes his head, snapping out of his stupor as he turns to me. "She looks like you. Like, if we could find a baby photo—" He cuts himself off abruptly at the slip.

I have no baby photos. Not a single documentation of my life before the foster home. My mother left me with nothing but the shabby clothes on my back that day.

Even her face began to fade from my mind when I was eight. Slowly but surely, it got muddled.

At first, it was small.

Were her eyebrows thick or thin? Was her voice raspy and low or was that me remembering a character on TV? Did she have brown hair or black?

The only memories that never faded were the ones I prayed to forget. The ones that would wake me in the middle of the night gasping for air and praying to a God that never once listened to me to take the horrors from my mind.

The happiness faded, but the trauma was burned, ingrained in my mind.

Still to this day I remember it like it was yesterday.

I always wonder why that is, why our minds choose to cling to the worst memories and let the happiest go.

Quickly clearing my throat and trying to eradicate the tightness in my chest, I give Carlton a tight-lipped smile, forcing it to look real at the guilt that's clearly eating away at him.

"It's okay," I say. "I'll take your word for it."

He comes up and pats me on the shoulder. "Sorry, son. I just got swept up in the moment and forgot."

Son.

He's always called me that, so you'd think my heart would stop skipping a beat every time I hear it.

Allie, sensing the lingering tension, spins on her heel and grabs the bags I didn't notice until now sitting at Carlton's feet. She places them on the couch. "I've got lots of goodies for you, honey. Do you want to open them?"

Placing Emmy down, I allow her to decide, while keeping a gentle hand on the back of her head. Now I'm the one playing with her soft hair. She peers up at me and at that look I nod, a real smile stretching my lips this time.

"Go see what you got, Em."

Her little hand lifts in the air between us. Without missing a beat, I clasp it, letting her lead me toward the couch, all of us taking a seat as she climbs up and stares at the presents.

There’s such shock and awe on Emmy’s face I realize with a sudden clarity that I don’t think she’s ever gotten presents before. She’s examining them like she doesn’t know what to do with the wrapping, the bags, and the tissue paper.

I choke on the sudden rush of sadness that hits me. By the fresh tears spilling down Allie’s cheeks that she’s trying to inconspicuously wipe away, she’s noticed it too.

It’s no doubt what I looked like the time Allie bought me my first gift. And like she did that day, she repeats it again, sitting forward and gently showing Emmy how to open gifts.

My chest clenches painfully and before I can lose it over the fact that she’s never received a present before, Carlton wraps an arm around my shoulder. “You’ve got this,” he whispers, his own voice rough.

Nodding, I turn my head toward him and discreetly wipe a tear away before looking back over with a smile. “What did you get, Emmy?”

Her head is shoved into the large bag overflowing with tissue paper. She pulls out teddies of all different shapes and sizes and…

My brows furrow as I lean forward. “Are those marshmallows?”

Allie’s eyes light up. “They’re Jellycats!”

“A Jelly…what?”

Carlton leans into my side, discreetly whispering under his breath, “Pretend you know, otherwise she’ll go on a rampage.”

My eyes widen slightly as I click my fingers. “Oh, you said a Jellycat? Of course, the…the um…”

Carlton coughs into his fist. “Teddy bear company.”

“…Teddy bear company that makes…”

Allie stares at us, unamused. “They make teddies of…well, everything!” She chuckles as Emmy digs through the bag, her dimples making an appearance as she pulls out a pancake stack plushie with three blueberries on top. She squishes it to her chest, her cheeks so puffy with her smile I wonder if it’s hurting her.

“You’ve outdone yourself, dear,” Carlton praises as Emmy tries to hug all the teddies at once. He faces me. “I’d love to say I contributed but I tried picking out a toy and Allie swatted my hand away.”

“You wanted to buy her a drum set.”

“What’s wrong with that? Drum sets are fun! And this one had pink flames.”

“I don’t think Kieran wants us to give Emmy a present that would drive him mad,” she deadpans.

“Thanks, Allie.” I chuckle. “Yeah, the drums…probably a good call not getting them. I have a permanent headache as it is.”

Carlton just winks. “Headphones.”

I laugh at his persistence as I turn my attention back to Emmy, opening another present. This one has her confused, spinning it around. I look around her to see what it is and find a makeup and hair bag for little girls.

“So you can do your hair and makeup,” Allie whispers. “We can play dress-up and princesses.”

Rubbing a hand down my face, I can’t help but laugh again. “Layla is going to take one look at that and convince Emmy to put it on me.”

Allie’s eyes snap to me, her brow quirking. “Layla? Bella’s best friend?”

“That’s the one.”

I clear my throat, trying to move the topic along because Allie is like a dog with a bone; she knows when I’m hiding something and the last thing I need is her meddling. If she finds out I’ve been thinking about her for nearly a year and a half, she won’t stop until I’m confessing my feelings.

“What’s your favorite Jellycat?” I blurt.

Her eyes narrow. “Kieran, do—”

“You should see her collection,” Carlton jumps in for me, and I’m beyond grateful. “She has an entire shelf at home for them, calls them her babies.”

“They are my babies.”

Carlton just smiles. “Of course, dear.” Leaning into me, he whispers, “I’m scared one of them is going to go all Chucky and Annabelle on us and murder us in our sleep.”

Allie rears back. “Honey! They would never! Chucky and Annabelle are atrociously ugly. My Jellycats are adorable.”

“You own one that looks like a mole-rat, dear.”

“Adorable ugly is a thing, Carlton.”

Now that Carlton has taken the heat off me, I peer over Emmy’s shoulder. She’s opened a teddy that’s shaped like a macaron but it has bunny ears and a little white tail. “That one’s cute, Em. What should we name it?”

Carlton and Allie suddenly stop speaking, the lightness in the room evaporating as a heavy weight blankets us.

Emmy just looks up at me, blinking slowly.

I wipe the devastation from my eyes, instead giving her a smile. She doesn't need to know how sad it makes me that she won't talk; she doesn't need the pressure of my emotions. "I think she looks like a Sophie."

Her nose scrunches up into a wrinkle, the adorable move pulling an *aww* from Allie.

"Lucy?"

Another wrinkle of her nose.

Carlton pipes up, "How about Mr. Snuggles?"

Emmy shakes her head, a coy smile dancing along her lips.

"Mrs. Bunny?" Allie offers.

Emmy looks down, pondering, before shaking her head. She points to the white tail, making my brows rise. She's conversing, just not speaking.

I try and guess, "Mrs. Tails?"

Her head nod is so emphatic, so bubbly, I reach a hand out to stop her from toppling off the couch, making us all laugh at how excited she is.

It's small moments like these that make me wonder if, when she's out of her shell, she'll be vivacious. Her head nods are always over the top and full of so much energy I wish I could see her like that all the time.

Slowly but surely, I'll pull her out from whatever hole her mother buried her in.

My head cocks to the side. "Are you sure it goes that way?"

Carlton and I have been trying to figure out where this slab of wood fits for over twenty minutes and once again, it doesn't.

He hangs his head once he sees what I'm seeing. With a huff, he drops the piece, letting it join the other scattered parts. "Did this seriously not come with a manual?" he asks for the hundredth time.

At my look, he lifts his hands in surrender. "Fine, there was no manual. It's just very unusual."

Shrugging, I pick up another slab. “I’m certainly never ordering a playhouse from them again.”

He squeezes my shoulder. “No stress, we’ll figure it out together.” He turns to the absolute carnage of pieces littered everywhere, muttering, “Eventually.”

The sound of the patio door opening has us turning to find Allie, Emmy firmly attached to her hip, and my god, I can’t remember the last time I saw such a spark in her eyes. When Drew passed, it was like she died a little inside, but now, a small part looks like it’s been reignited.

I know how she came into my life wasn’t ideal, but Emmy is a blessing. For not only me, it seems.

“You have a visitor,” Allie calls out.

Grayson steps through the door, wearing activewear and a tool belt around his waist. “Heard you needed an extra hand.” He steps aside with a smirk. “Or maybe a few.”

Irving bursts through the door. “Hello, hello, fuckers!”

With a frown, Grayson clips him across the back of his head. “Watch your language, there’s a kid here!”

Irving winces, rubbing the tender spot. “Shit, Cap—” He smacks his lips, hanging his head. “There’s no hope for me.”

Grayson shakes his head, moving Irving out of the way. Johnson, O’Connor, Mitchel, Lewis, Ellington, and Valenti barrel through the door.

My heart soars, absolutely skyrockets at the sight of my guys—*my family*—here to help me, all of them carrying various tools as if they are my own building crew.

“Oh, thank the heavens,” Carlton says.

I can’t stop my smile from spreading. “Fuck, you guys have no idea how happy I am to see you.”

Mitchel strides over, winking. “Knew you loved my pretty face.”

“Not as much as you love mine,” I taunt as I clap his back.

“How come Kieran can swear and I can’t?” I hear Irving mutter.

Ignoring him, I try to relieve the buzzing of emotions that bombard my chest but I’m too overcome with gratitude and love for the guys showing up for me like this.

Until Johnson opens his grumpy ass mouth. “Did you even start?”

Hands on my hips I give him a look. “Of course I did, fucker. There’s no manual.”

“There has to be a manual. There’s a manual for everything.”

“Not this one apparently,” Carlton murmurs.

“I’m taking Emmy inside before her first word starts a swear jar,” Allie huffs, and I snort at her retreating form.

Irving strides up to us, confidence oozing from the fucker, his pouting apparently long gone. “Don’t worry dude, the Irv builder has arrived!”

“The Irv builder? What the fuck is that?” Mitchel scoffs.

Lewis slings an arm around his best friend. “I happen to like it. Has a nice ring to it.”

“Of course you like it, you twat. You think Irving shoots rainbows out his ass,” Johnson quips.

And suddenly, I’m very thankful that Allie snuck inside with Emmy. Trying to get these guys not to curse is…well, impossible.

“Irv…ing,” he says slowly as if we’re the stupid ones. “It’s my last name shortened. Irv the builder.”

Ellington’s lips twitch. “Yeah, we got that, buddy.”

“Have you ever built anything in your life?” Johnson asks.

Irving puffs out his chest. “Yes, of course I have.”

“Like what?”

“Plenty of things that need building.”

As this is no doubt about to turn into a pissing contest between them, I interrupt with, “Look, it’s meant to be a swing set attached to a playground. It shouldn’t be this complicated.”

I’m actually a fantastic builder, but this set arrived completely dismantled. They didn’t even put holes in for the nails. It’s raw wood, with some pieces still needing to be sanded, unless I want Emmy covered in splinters.

“A playhouse?” Grayson asks as he joins us. “No wonder you didn’t get far. It’s like they sent you a tree and said good luck.”

I point to the box it came in, the only picture we got with the end result. “That’s what it needs to look like.”

Grayson frowns over at it. “And it really has no manual?”

That damn question.

Carlton, already knowing how much he harassed the shit out of me, turns to his son. “Believe it or not, no manual.”

“Can’t we just build a treehouse with the pieces?” Irving asks.

Valenti rolls his eyes. “And what makes you think building a treehouse is going to be any easier?”

“Debby downer,” Lewis mutters, earning a snicker from Irving.

Grayson claps, stepping into his roll as captain, the one rightfully made for him. “All right boys, we got this. Irving, you’re in charge of separating and sorting the nuts and bolts.” He points a finger at him. “Don’t swallow anything.”

Irving throws his hands in the air as everyone laughs. “You swallow a battery by mistake *one* time and are forever marked! It’s ludicrous.”

“Not as ludicrous as swallowing a battery,” I mutter under my breath.

Johnson pinches the bridge of his nose. “I mean, who the fuck mistakes a battery—a *battery*—with a black olive?”

Irving sends a seething glare in his direction. “Very fucking easily when the battery looks identical to the bowl of olives next to it!”

“Mitchel, Johnson, and Lewis, you’re on the building portion with my dad.” Grayson turns to me. “Valenti, Ellington, and Ashford, you’re on cardboard duty. Break up all the pieces and take it to the front and while you do”—he looks over at Valenti—“find a damn manual.”

“*Hey!*”

Ignoring me, Grayson turns to his dad. “Let’s get this done before the sun sets.”

Valenti, Ellington, and I get to work on breaking down the boxes and moving them to the front of the house where I’ve been storing the trash cans. There’s a mountain of boxes already piled up here waiting for collection on Tuesday.

Ellington throws one of the boxes a little harder than necessary, and when I look over, his jaw is clenching and unclenching. Valenti is also quiet but that’s normal; he’s the broody asshole out of the bunch of us. But Ellington’s silence?

Something’s wrong.

“What happened?” I ask, my voice seemingly jarring Ellington out of his thoughts.

“What?” he asks, following me as we go to break down more boxes. In the backyard, the guys have unsurprisingly begun fighting and yelling over which piece to put where.

“Did something happen?” I probe again.

“Nothing,” he mutters, ripping up the boxes, again far too aggressive for what’s needed.

Valenti pauses. “Kieran’s right, you’re…acting like me.” He pulls a face as if he sucked on a lemon. “Why the hell are you acting like me?”

“And how do you act?” Ellington asks, hauling together a pile of boxes.

“Like a moody prick,” he says, making me snort. Valenti turns to me. “Am I wrong?”

“Not at all. I’m very proud to hear you’re self-aware.”

Ellington rolls his eyes as he throws the boxes down and spins to us abruptly. “It’s Evie.”

“Your sister?”

Valenti turns to stone beside me.

Ellington nods. “It’s that pathetic fucking boyfriend of hers.”

A frown furrows my brows. “I didn’t know she had a boyfriend.”

They both roll their eyes at me.

“Fuck, is he *that* bad?” I ask.

Valenti cuts his gaze toward me, the sun shining along his brown skin. “He doesn’t deserve the title of boyfriend, let alone being hers.” That last word is punctuated with a growl, making one of my brows rise. “What did the fucker do this time?” he asks.

“What didn’t he do?” Ellington all but shouts in frustration. Sliding his fingers through his tousled hair, he groans. “They were meant to go on a trip together in six weeks, and guess what this bastard does.”

“No,” Valenti says.

“Oh yes,” Ellington spits through gritted teeth. “She’s been saving for a year, has been planning that damn vacation and telling everyone how excited she is for *months*. Meanwhile, he doesn’t lift a finger like the little manchild he is…” He takes a deep breath to calm himself before going on to explain. “She called me in tears last night and confessed that she has been begging him to confirm that he likes the hotels she picked and every time he’d tell her that they’d talk about it later. Now, six weeks before the trip, that prick drops the bomb that he suddenly can’t afford it and doesn’t think he can go.” His fists clench by his sides. “She told me she even offered to pay for his portion because she’s so excited to go but he refused.”

I frown. “Can he genuinely not afford it?”

Valenti barks out a humorless laugh. “No, he has money. He works in finance, and he *somehow* could afford a last-minute trip to Japan over

Christmas and left her alone over the holidays."

I shake my head to keep up with all this new information and the venom I can evidently hear in Valenti's voice. "Wait, Evie was alone over Christmas break? But didn't he—"

"Promise not to leave her alone during the holidays like he did the year before? Yes, and he broke that promise too."

"He's a prick."

"A huge prick," Valenti growls.

I watch him carefully. Ellington is so consumed with his own anger that I don't think he's noticed the fact that Valenti is a little too angry for his best friend's younger sister.

"The holidays are a big deal to Evie," Ellington whispers, and there's an edge to his voice, a deep sadness, that I rarely hear from him. "But recently she started refusing to come to any family dinners, even Christmas, and I thought it was because she was spending it with that twat of a boyfriend but she confessed last night that he bailed on her."

My mind whirls, utterly consumed with questions, and by the tornado behind Valenti's eyes, so is he. Why has Evie suddenly started refusing to spend time with her family?

What the hell happened?

Shoving my curiosity aside, I focus on the trip and ask, "What is she going to do?"

"Fuck do I know. For some reason the dick has a hold on her and she won't leave. Every now and then she'll get clarity and say she's leaving him but it's always at weird times and then she randomly says she can't because, oh, it's his birthday or Christmas or he's struggling mentally. Honestly I wish I could shake her and make her see that she deserves so much more than this."

"She will," Valenti says, something flashing in his eyes that I can't decipher. "One day she'll see just how amazing she is."

Ellington shakes his head, turning back to the boxes. "Let's hope that day is real fucking soon."

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Chapter 13

Layla

KIERAN

what are you doing?

LAYLA

reading

KIERAN

what are you reading?

LAYLA

you really want to know?

KIERAN

of course I do

LAYLA

it’s a romance book

KIERAN

do they love each other?

LAYLA

very much but they’re not aware of it yet

KIERAN

how do you know they’re in love before the characters do?

LAYLA

the signs

KIERAN

signs?

LAYLA

yearning, Kieran. the man is yearning

KIERAN

I yearn for you

LAYLA

me and every other woman in Colorado

KIERAN

no, just you

only you

That's the eleventh time the receptionist has side-eyed me.

It was obvious she knew who Kieran is, and by the small furrow in her brow, she's wondering how he's connected to Emmy.

I'm not sure how he has been able to keep it under wraps, but the press hasn't gotten wind of Emmy and Kieran's newfound situation. Something tells me, though, that this woman is about to cross a lot of professional lines. By the way her thumbs are flying across her phone's keyboard, I think she already has.

The therapist's door suddenly opens, yanking my thoughts away from the receptionist now craning her neck to get another glimpse of Kieran.

"Layla?" Kieran asks gently, holding Bambi's lead in his hand.

I can feel the receptionist's eyes boring into the back of my skull as I rise and enter the office. The speech therapist is bent low to the right, setting Emmy up in what appears to be a corner of her office where a rainbow of colors and toys has thrown up, catered to the children. The other half of the office is professional and sleek.

Kieran lets go of Bambi's lead the moment I close the door behind me and she immediately rushes for Emmy's side. He gives me a small smile but it's more a grimace than anything else. The sight of it makes me nervous for what I'm about to hear. I take a seat beside him in front of the therapist's desk.

"Thank you so much for waiting," the therapist says as she nods her head in Emmy and Bambi's direction. "Those two have a very special

bond.”

“I’ve never been more grateful for my best friend and his dog.”

“Bambi’s special,” I add on.

She nods along. “Very special. She could have been a service dog. She’s very in tune with Emmy and her emotions.”

Her voice is like honey. Based on that, I’d think she was in her early thirties, but by the gray hair and wrinkles that tell a story of a life well lived, I’m guessing she’s closer to fifty.

She offers me a warm smile as she pushes her black framed reading glasses on the top of her head. “Kieran was telling me that you’ve been a great asset in helping Emmy settle into her home.”

My cheeks flame. “Oh, I wouldn’t—”

“Yes, she has,” Kieran cuts in smoothly.

Dr. Singh’s smile grows. “Well, I’ll take his word for it. Now, Kieran informed me that she spoke with you?”

“She just told me her name. It took a lot of coaxing though.”

“That’s wonderful she offered it though. I’ll get to know Emmy’s personality through our sessions, but until I do, I want those spending time with Emmy to try various exercises and see which ones spark the most improvement.”

“What exactly should we be looking for?” Kieran asks, leaning forward with his arms resting on his knees.

“Music for example, perhaps as you cook or drive in the car. See if you get a reaction, like a foot tap or a head bop, and if you do, dive down that avenue. I’ve always made great progress with children through music and she might surprise you.”

“Music, got it. I’ll try all the genres.”

Dr. Singh’s lips twitch. “I’m very happy to hear how dedicated you are to helping Emmy.”

“I’ll do anything for her.”

I swallow thickly at the vow in his words. “What other exercises should we try?” I ask.

“Reading, make-believe games, puppets… Honestly, anything that is a creative expression in any capacity.” Dr. Singh looks over at Emmy, watching as she plays with two dolls. “She does seem to be drawn to dolls. Perhaps try and talk through them with her, see if she joins you.”

Nodding along, I take a mental note of everything.

“And just…” She sighs before turning her gaze back to us. “Children, whether they speak or not, are aware. You may not think they’re listening but they are, so talk to her like she’s a friend. Treat her as if she *is* speaking.”

“And you’re certain there’s nothing medically stopping her from talking?” Kieran asks.

“After my examinations I’m more than certain there is no physical trauma that has led to Emmy’s silence. It sadly seems to be psychological.” She rises from her chair, making Kieran and me follow her lead.

Rounding the desk, she places her hand on Kieran’s shoulder and lowers her voice. “She has suffered a serious traumatic event, Mr. Ashford, and that’s just the experience we know of. We don’t know the environment or conditions of parenting she was raised in. Give her time to learn that she’s safe with you.”

Kieran seems to have a hard time swallowing those words but nods all the same before squaring his shoulders and extending his hand. “Thank you, Dr. Singh. I’ll see you next week.”

“I’m looking forward to getting to know Emmy more,” she says gently before turning my way. “And please do tell Kieran how the games go so he can pass the information along to me.”

“Of course, I’m more than happy to keep a journal as well. That way, I won’t forget anything.” I laugh nervously. “This is too important to be playing telephone.”

Dr. Singh chuckles at that, the light and airy sound drawing Emmy’s attention. “That’s very true. A journal is a wonderful idea.”

Kieran’s been white-knuckling the steering wheel since he slid into the driver’s seat. He’s also changed radio stations after every song to try every genre as he said he would. Kieran Ashford, a man of his word.

His gaze is constantly flicking from the road to the rearview mirror to check for any signs Emmy enjoys something she hears.

There's a hint of desperation, as if he's praying for something, anything, to let him know which direction to take in order to help her, and I don't blame him. Just knowing that Emmy has *chosen* not to speak… The ideas my mind conjures up are utterly heartbreaking.

What happened to her to make her silent? Will we ever know?

Kieran's thoughts must be diving down the same twisted turns mine have because as he pulls into his driveway and puts the car in park, he just sits there, gazing out the window. Before I know what I'm doing, I'm reaching over and squeezing his bicep. At the flutter that works its way through my heart, I quickly retract my hand and whisper, "I'll bring her inside. Take your time."

He shakes his head as I slide out of the truck. "No, I'm okay—"

"No you're not, and Emmy can probably tell. Take a minute for yourself. I've got her."

Opening the back door, I unbuckle Emmy from her car seat, hugging her extra tight as she wraps her arms around my neck. Bambi jumps out of the car too, and I look across the street, chewing on my bottom lip.

Kieran, observant as always, drawls, "It's okay. I can walk her across the road."

"Are you sure?"

He dips his head.

"Okay," I whisper before turning to Emmy. "Say goodbye to Bambi."

I kneel so she can pat Bambi, and her tongue lolls out as Emmy reaches for her, her small hand stroking her fluffy head and ears. Their love for each other makes it hard to tear the two apart, even though it's only for a night. They'll be attached at the hip again come tomorrow morning.

Kieran's still in the driver seat, his gaze fixed out the window, a faraway look entering his beautiful ocean blue eyes.

Is it bad that I want to hug my boss?

Sighing, I rise, coaxing Bambi in the backseat again to keep Kieran company as he processes the emotions wreaking havoc on his heart. I give him one last look over my shoulder before making my way inside and getting to work on bath time.

Kieran doesn't come inside for forty minutes. His shoulders are looser and there isn't as much tension lining his features as earlier, yet I can't help but note that he still isn't his charismatic self.

With Emmy nestled on the couch, sucking her thumb as she cuddles the golden retriever teddy and watches *Paw Patrol*, I meet Kieran halfway and stop before him. He sighs heavily. "I'm sorry about earlier. My thoughts just… I needed to ground myself a little."

"Don't apologize, please. It's a lot to take in. You need to take care of yourself just as much as Emmy."

He nods, his gaze locked on mine, and I can tell he wants to say something. But why is he holding back?

Our breaths line up, our chests rising and falling in sync as we stand in his living room, utterly silent save for the TV. Kieran's eyes have always been magnetic, have been something I've tried to avoid for the fear of never being able to look away, but as he stands before me with his heart on his sleeve, I find I don't want to.

His voice is as rough as gravel as he asks, "Can you stay? For dinner?" Before I can give him an answer, he seems to shake himself before striding past me, walking deeper into the house and toward the kitchen. "You must be starving!"

I didn't realize there was so much tension crackling between us until he left. Now I feel like a deflated balloon. Trailing after him, I ask, "Are you sure you don't want to spend some alone time with Emmy?"

He pops his head out of the kitchen, that mischievousness returning ever so slowly with his grin. "That little girl adores you. If you go home, you'll make her sad."

I point an accusatory finger at him. "Laying it on thick, are we?"

He winks. "Always when it comes to you."

I bite my lower lip, knowing there's no reason for me to stay and yet a part of me wanting to anyway. "What are you cooking?" I find myself

asking.

“What would convince you to stay?”

Rolling my eyes, I make my way around the corner to find him frowning at the inside of his pantry.

“Do you have enough ingredients to even be offering that?”

He turns his head. “No, but I’ll make it work if it means you’ll stay.”

“You’re being oddly persistent tonight.”

His eyes trail down my body, the slow perusal lining my skin with goosebumps. “I’m persistent every night. Forget the million and one texts I sent?”

I purse my lips to stop a smile from blooming. “Touché.”

Closing the cupboard, he holds out two types of pasta’s. “Gnocchi or fettucine?”

“Surprise me.”

His eyes narrow, contemplating. “I think you’re more of a fettucine girl.”

My eyes spark at that.

Kieran’s smirk grows as he puts the gnocchi away. “And looks like I hit the nail on the head.”

“You always do.”

He moves through the kitchen with such grace it has me pausing. I’ve heard the stories of him and his cereal and how he steals food from Grayson and his other teammates. Even Bella would call me complaining about how Grayson never gets first choice of his own food because Kieran beats him to it every time.

“You can cook,” I state, my voice conveying my shock.

Kieran snorts. “I don’t know if you can call boiling water and creating a sauce cooking.”

“No, no.” I shake my head. “Kieran, you can *cook*. Why the hell do you steal other people’s food?”

I expect him to be cheesy with his answer, flirtatious even, but instead his features grow somber. “Growing up, I never had someone cook for me, not until I met Grayson and Allie made me dinners.” His voice grows so quiet I doubt he wanted me to hear him whisper, “It tastes different when they love you.”

The admission stuns me.

And once again, I want to cry for the little boy Kieran was, the one who desperately wanted and deserved to be loved.

“I had to learn early on how to take care of myself. At the foster home, once you were of ‘age,’” he says with air quotes, “we were expected to cook for ourselves.”

As he passes me in the kitchen, he checks me with his hip. “Come on, don’t lose that spark because of me.” He holds up some parsley with a wide grin. “I’m perfectly fine and healthy. See?”

“Just because you’re fine now doesn’t make what happened to you okay.”

He pauses, slowly lowering the parsley as he stares at me, Emmy’s *Paw Patrol* playing quietly in the background. “You could cook for me.”

“I’d love to, but I never learned how to cook.” I chew on my bottom lip, a little embarrassed. “I was always too sick to stand in a kitchen for hours and learn.” Even twenty minutes had my legs swelling and my head growing dizzy.

Kieran stuns me from my thoughts as he wraps an arm around my shoulders, his heat sending a tingle of energy down my spine. He pulls me toward the cooking area he’s set up on the bench. “You have me now, and I’m more than happy to share my secrets of the kitchen with you.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

I must pull a face because he chuckles, his warmth still making my head spin, and the dizziness for once is not due to lupus.

“Cooking isn’t scary, sunshine.”

“No, it’s not that.”

“Then what is it?”

With my head tilted back to look up at him, he offers me such a warm and inviting smile, his eyes all but sparkling as his thick black lashes frame them and…I can’t stop my heart from melting just a little.

“Why do you want to teach me?”

“Because I’d do anything to spend more time with you.”

I suck in a sharp hiss of air. “Emmy’s in the house. You’re not allowed to flirt with me.”

“You told me no *flirting*. You never said anything about honesty.”

His gaze deepens before he seems to rip himself away from me. “Come on, sunshine, let me show you something I love.”

My eyes squeeze shut right as the pasta hits my cheek, slowly dipping down my skin. “Oh my god. Did you just—I can’t believe you just did that!”

Kieran bursts out laughing and when I finally manage to open my eyes around the tomatoes, I find him doubled over in laughter. “You dared me to do it!”

“I didn’t think you’d actually do it!”

“Never challenge an athlete. Did Bella not teach you anything? We’re cocky, competitive bastards.”

“Well, I didn’t need to be told about the cocky part.”

Kieran snags a dish towel and steps toward me, holding his hands up in surrender as I move to step back. “Let me help you. It’s…” He chuckles. “It seems I got you really good.”

Leaning back against the cabinets, I lift my chin, allowing him to move forward, but what I don’t expect is how close he gets. Kieran doesn’t stop until our hips are aligned, his concentration solely on my face whereas my eyes wander to his arms, his biceps, the bulging veins as he ever so gently cleans my skin.

The softness of the movement steals my breath, and I suddenly can’t breathe, not when he’s this close to me.

Kieran falls silent as he stares, his heart shining in his eyes. The tension between us grows to such a feat it’s shocking that it isn’t a tangible thing I can clasp in my hand. “I adore your freckles,” he says softly, as if it’s a secret he’s been harboring.

“My freckles?”

He nods, his eyes roving my face. “There’s so many of them, and yet they make you who you are. I couldn’t imagine you without them.”

His lips part, his tongue darting out to lick them. Placing the hand towel down behind me, he lifts his hands and flips his hat backwards, allowing

him to move forward ever so slowly. With an arm on either side of me, caging me in, he captures my undivided attention.

His lips are inches from mine—mere *inches*—and I have such a sudden urge to kiss him that I have to physically restrain myself from leaning forward.

His voice, a dark rumble of thunder, rolls through my body. “Tell me something that’s on your life list, sunshine.”

My eyes snap away from his lips. “I’ll share one if you finally tell me why you call me sunshine.”

He gives me a lopsided grin. “It’ll have to be a good one. No holding back on me this time.”

“When have I ever done such a thing?” I tease.

He leans forward a fraction, his chest brushing mine on every deep inhale I force myself to take.

“Tell me something that’s on your list,” he repeats.

I’m not sure why I say it.

Perhaps the gravel of his voice commanded me, the earnest way his eyes implored mine, or maybe it’s because the last time he asked me to share one in exchange for a secret he was so openly vulnerable with me that it felt wrong I shared such a miniscule item in return.

Or maybe it’s just because his cologne is so heady I feel like I’m floating, wholly wrapped up in the atmosphere that is Kieran Ashford. I’m spinning out of control and I never want to get off this Tilt-A-Whirl. I find myself blurting, “It’s a list of all the firsts I want.”

I lick my suddenly dry lips, noting how his eyes drop and stay there.

“What firsts are we talking about?” he drawls.

Sucking in a sharp breath, I push the boundaries of whatever is happening in this moment and lean forward, standing on my toes. Kieran meets me halfway, dropping his head to allow my lips to brush the shell of his ear. “I’ve never…been with anyone,” I confess.

Kieran stops breathing.

He pulls back ever so slowly, opening a fraction of space between us.

I expect to be bombarded with shyness, for that scorching blush to tickle my cheeks, to feel embarrassed that I’m twenty-five and have never been with anyone, but with Kieran’s eyes heating me like an inferno, I feel unequivocally free as those words part my lips.

“Never?” he asks, the timbre of his voice having dropped.

“Never,” I breathe.

Dropping from my tiptoes, I flatten my feet to get some much-needed space from the intensity of his gaze, but he just moves with me.

“And do you…want to?”

“Mm-hmm,” I murmur, nodding.

His swallow is audible. “Layla—”

Placing my hand on his chest, I cut off whatever he was about to say. “Tell me why you call me sunshine.”

His eyes flick back and forth, searching mine, before he grins. “I’ll do you one better.” Lowering his head, he mirrors my earlier movement and places his lips along the shell of my ear. It takes everything in me not to moan at the simple touch.

I get it, I think to myself. *I get what all those girls were talking about on those blogs.*

My hand is still on his chest, and I’m not sure why but I can’t pull it away, can’t force my hand to move from his warmth.

“My confession,” he all but purrs, “is that I haven’t been with anyone in nearly two years.”

That has me snapping out of it.

I push him with all my might, anger flaring in me, swift and fast. I’m not sure why but I feel oddly…betrayed?

“Don’t lie,” I spit. “After what I just told you? Don’t lie, Kieran.”

His eyes are wide and wild. “I’m not lying.”

“Bullshit.”

He moves back toward me, crowding my space. “Call bullshit all you want, Layla,” he says gutturally. “I don’t lie, *especially* not to you.”

Before I can stop myself, I blurt, “The puck bunny sites have endless—”

“Kept tabs on me while you were away, sunshine?”

“Of course I wasn’t. I was just…” My mind whirls for a reason why I was on those sites. I myself don’t even know why I checked them regularly. “Looking out for Bella.”

He barks out a laugh. “Now look who’s lying. Admit it, you were keeping tabs on me.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Absolutely not. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m sorry, love, but the only one being ridiculous is you.” He taps my nose with his finger before sauntering over to the stove to stir the sauce we

neglected. “It’s ridiculous to believe the things people post on those sites.”

“But the girls—”

“Are liars.” He turns to face me. “You shouldn’t believe everything you see written in the press.”

My brows are so deeply furrowed that I feel like reaching up and smoothing them out with my fingers. “But the details they have…”

He shrugs. “I’m not saying I’m innocent. I have slept with women—”

“A lot,” I add for him.

He rolls his eyes. “Fine, yes, a lot. I have a colorful past but they use that and the details already online about me to conjure up new stories.”

Rearing back, I grimace. “Why would anyone do that?”

“Why would any of them post sordid personal details of our sex lives for a second of fame on a puck bunny site?” he deadpans.

“B-but you’re…” Swallowing, I choke out, “Over a year?”

“Don’t look so shocked.”

“Well, I mean you’re…you.”

“Thanks,” he says dryly, turning away from me.

Kicking off from where I was leaning, my body seeks his once I hear the hurt in his voice. “Kieran, I’m sorry, it’s just—”

“It’s fine,” he cuts me off, stirring the sauce.

Guilt is an ugly emotion, one that settles deep within my gut as his shoulders tense. Moving behind him, I gently place my hand on his back and at first, he flinches, that single reaction making the guilt inside me grow to a mountainous height. Yet as I keep my touch on him, he relaxes ever so slowly.

“I’m sorry,” I say, my words thick. “I’m sorry I didn’t believe you.”

Kieran turns his head, his five o’clock stubble grazing his black T-shirt. “I’m not a liar. I’m many things, but I’m not a liar, Layla,” he whispers.

“I’m sorry, I let my shock get the best of me. Can you forgive me?”

He’s quiet for a moment, his eyes trailing down my body, taking in every inch as if he’s committing me asking for forgiveness to memory. He places the wooden spoon down and turns. “Care to make it up to me?” he finally asks.

My lips twitch at that. “What do you have in mind, Ashford?”

“A date.”

My eyes bulge and before I can protest, he lifts his hand up to silence me.

“You called me a liar. I think I deserve a date.”

I scoff. Kieran doesn’t date…never has and never will. Whatever made him do this streak of celibacy doesn’t change the fact that he doesn’t spend more than one night with a woman.

“I’m your nanny,” I say as an answer.

All he does is shrug. “So? Be my nanny *and* go on a date with me.”

Rolling my eyes, I move past him to grab bowls for the pasta. “Taking your flirting game a little too far this time, don’t we think?”

He steps behind me. “Who said it was ever a game?”

“Everything to you is a game,” I whisper.

Maybe I’m trying to protect my heart, maybe the look in his gaze scared the hell out of me, but the second I say it I regret it immediately, especially as something in his eyes shutters and he steps away.

Now I’ve well and truly put my foot in my mouth.

Kieran recovers quickly, pretending nothing is wrong but for the rest of the night he doesn’t flirt with me and I have to keep telling myself it’s because Emmy is with us.

But I can’t get his look of pain out of my mind.

Self-protection comes in many forms and mine just so happened to hurt him in a way I wish I could rewind time and take those words back.

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Chapter 14

Kieran

ICEHAWKS BITCHES

IRVING

SPEECH

SPEECH

SPEECH

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

we're not in the locker room Theo

IRVING

we will be soon

LEWIS

holy shit

Ashford, are you going public with Emmy?

KIERAN

yeah, Layla caught a receptionist taking pics of us. thought I'd get ahead of the press

JOHNSON

fuck that receptionist

ELLINGTON

want us to take care of it?

IRVING

I can butter her up ;)

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

keep all your illegal shit off text messages

LEWIS

I love that I’m not the one getting scolded for once

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

Irving just texted and told me you want to break into her house and steal her phone

LEWIS

screw you Irving!

IRVING

sorry bro

I ain’t going down alone

O’CONNOR

can we wave to Emmy or will it freak her out?

KIERAN

a group of giant hockey players all rushing the boards to wave at a little girl?

yeah totally can’t see that ending in tears

O’CONNOR

we’ll go one at a time

IRVING

shot gun going first!

I’m the favorite uncle

KIERAN

who the hell said you were an uncle?

IRVING

me

duh

Adrenaline courses through my bloodstream the second my skates hit the ice, along with a hum of anticipation as my eyes cut to the group behind

the home bench. Before I know it, the corner of my lip is lifting.

Last night I called Coach Anderson to ask for a favor—a fact which left him speechless because I've never requested one before, not once in my seven years of playing on his team.

And in true Ashford fashion—as he called it—I asked for a large one.

After Layla told me about the receptionist at the therapist's office, I knew it was only a matter of time before my new life and Emmy's horrid story were leaked to the press. I've had such major life events be completely out of my control lately that I didn't want this decision to be taken away from me too.

I want to tell the world on my own timeline, and although the receptionist is certainly hurrying me along, at least I'll know that the tabloids and puck bunnies posting about Emmy and me are because I made the choice to go public first.

My publicist is about to get a hefty pay raise to keep the gruesome details under wraps. No one needs to know how we were reunited, all they get to know is that she's mine and I'm proud and happy that she's in my life. The last thing I want is Emmy to grow up and have her peers be able to Google the worst moment of her life.

Grayson skates up beside me, the number 33 flashing on his jersey next to my 47. "Are you ready for this?"

I blow out a breath, looking over to the home bench again. Layla's holding Emmy, who's decked out in all the gear the guys bought her for the first game of the season. Bella and Cindy flank them, along with Allie and Carlton, as if they're all protecting my daughter, but as an added precaution, I bought out three rows of seats around them so they wouldn't be disturbed.

"Ready as I'll ever be."

"I'm right here beside you. We're all here beside you," Grayson says roughly, flicking his chin at the home bench. "Every step of the way, Ashford."

Nodding, I clasp him on the back in gratitude before skating off toward the home bench. Coach lifts his head, and while I'm beginning to sweat, my nerves getting the better of me, the bastard just smiles as I stop beside him, spraying ice over the boards.

"You feeling all right, Coach?" I ask.

"Better than all right." He claps his hands together, making my brows rise.

I think the last time I saw him this cheerful was when we won the Stanley Cup.

He peers behind the bench before turning back to me, that smile all but glued on his face. “She looks like you.”

I can’t help but mirror his smile, my cheeks heating. *Since when do I blush?* “I’ve been told that a few times.”

“This is a good thing, Kieran. A marvelous thing,” he tells me.

“I believe so too, Coach.”

“Now, are you doing this before the game or after? Do I need to call security to prepare for a frenzy?”

I didn’t even think about that.

I thought about Emmy needing space and earmuffs for the sound. The guys thought about all the adorable little clothes like scarfs and beanies that currently swarm her small frame, all black and white, representing IceHawks. How could I have planned for everything but security? I feel like slapping myself; some of the puck bunnies are borderline psychotic.

I turn to gauge her mood and whether or not this is too much for Emmy, but I’m stunned, my breath catching. Emmy is in Layla’s arms, her little fists up in the air waving frantically, a large smile spread wide as she—

My chest suddenly feels like it was hit by a truck.

Coach is calling my name, but I can’t hear him over the blood rushing in my ears.

Tears burn the back of my eyes as I skate forward, Emmy’s little lips moving a mile a minute.

She’s speaking.

My little girl is *speaking*.

And she’s talking to me.

Usually when I slide this uniform on, all I want to hear are the cheers of the crowd, the buzzing of our goals, and the roar of my teammates. Standing at the plexiglass, the arena fades into the background as the best sound to ever grace my ears reaches me.

“Daddy! That’s my daddy!”

Her large round eyes are locked on me as if I’m the only thing to exist, and it’s then that I remember she knows my jersey number, how her mom must have turned the TV to our games and told her that I was her dad.

My name is Kieran Ashford, I am a hockey player for IceHawks, I wear the jersey number 47, and as I take my helmet off, I stand unashamed as

tears fall freely down my cheeks.

Emmy's eyes widen, taking up half her face.

I'm waiting for disappointment to hit her next, for disgust or hatred, but it never comes. If anything, she squeals louder, screaming "Daddy!" with renewed vigor.

Tears shine in Layla's eyes, the tension from last night long gone in this moment. She's not the only one tearing up. The people surrounding her, my people, my friends and chosen family, don't have any dry eyes.

A laugh bursts free from me, one full of joy as I clutch my chest, hoping I can keep my heart, beating a mile a minute, in its rightful place.

Layla whispers something to Emmy and points above my head, and Emmy and I follow Layla's direction. I find my face exploded across the Jumbotron, my cheeks and nose red, my black hair slicked with sweat. Emmy is shown beside me on the screen, her smile wide and carefree, her baby teeth peeking through. She claps her hands together and continues to point at me, that word mouthed on her lips once again.

Irving skates past me, hooting. "She called you Daddy!"

And before I know it, my team descends on me with hugs, surrounding me in one of the happiest moments of my life.

"Secret's out!" Mitchel calls. "Ashford is officially a daddy!"

"Daddy Ashford!" Irving yells, and soon the entire stadium is chanting along with him.

I find Grayson through the chaos and see him already grinning at me. I can't help but laugh, too. "Looks like you won't be the only 'daddy' to go viral on the IceHawks team," I tease, talking about the video that went viral of him well over a year ago.

He rolls his eyes. "Thank fuck! More than happy to share the title."

Irving cuts through the throes, pouting. "I want to be a viral daddy."

Shaking my head with laughter, I'm shocked that even Irving's stupid remarks can't dampen the mood.

Grayson rallies us together. "Now, who's ready to skate?"

I look back one more time at Layla and Emmy, my smile so wide my cheeks burn. "I'm about to skate the best I've ever fucking played."

Sweat slides down the nape of my neck as I pull my arm back only to bring it forward with a vengeance, slapping the puck to the side, right into Grayson's awaiting stick.

The defense against us try their hardest, their legs pumping to keep up, but Grayson is a weapon on the ice and nothing can stop him as he flicks his wrist and sends the puck soaring into the net. The goalie slaps his fist against the ice, roaring in frustration after letting a third goal sail past him.

The sound of the buzzer blaring across the arena is music to my ears as my team and I skate over to Grayson and crowd him, cheering and hooting in celebration.

"Let's fucking go!" Irving roars.

Grayson shakes his head with a laugh as he skates by me. "Nice set up, Ashford."

I bow low. "My services are always available."

A snort rings out behind me but it's not one of celebration; it drips with sarcasm and loathing.

By the way Grayson's jaw clenches, I know exactly who it belongs to.

My eyes are rolling before I even face Chase Montgomery. "What is it now, Montgomery?" I drawl. "Still have a stick up your ass over IceHawks not wanting your small dick?"

Chase is in front of my face before I can blink, well, as close as he can get. He might act all mighty, but he isn't as tall as me. I've got a good head over the prick, the one who tried to not only take Grayson's spot on this team but also made disgusting comments about Drew.

"Shut your fucking mouth, Ashford."

I can feel the darkness swirling in my eyes as I lean forward ever so slowly. "Or what."

With gritted teeth, he spits, "You'll fucking regret it."

I skate backwards, pointing at him as I smile. "Nah, I like my mouth running just the way it is."

Chase stalks me on the ice, a hard glint in his gaze.

Everyone in the league knows he's dirty on and off the ice but I seem to be the only one that truly notices his evilness. It's dark, soulless, and completely full of rage.

Perhaps I learned it from the foster home, the soulless eyes of young boys who grew up with such hatred in their hearts they went on to spread their misery, having experienced torture from far too many people. It's why it doesn't shock me when he suddenly grins, coming to a stop in front of me and spraying ice across the length of my body. "Got a little one now, Ashy?" He tsks, shaking his head. "You have to be so careful with them, especially when they're at such a young age. Accidents…they seem to be magnets for them." He shrugs as he moves backwards toward my home bench. "Wouldn't want something to happen to her."

My jaw snaps shut so fast I swear I hear a crack.

He's goading you.

He can't hurt her.

He can't touch her.

He wants you to lose your temper.

Grayson skates up beside me. "What the fuck did he say?"

My hands are clenched so tightly I'm worried I'll splinter my stick. "He said I need to be *careful* with Emmy because accidents happen so easily."

Grayson's head snaps up, murder in his gaze, but nothing will come close to the way I look as I watch Chase Montgomery lift his hand and wave to Emmy.

I see red.

Fuck keeping my cool. Fuck a penalty, fuck the sin bin. I'll savor every penny I'll have to pay for the fine I'm about to get.

"Stay the fuck away from her!" I roar before I throw my entire body weight at him and slam the bastard into the plexiglass.

I can hear the arena's collective gasp, the murmurs and the screams girls let out at the sudden violence. The refs blow their whistles but I ignore them.

I yank Montgomery's helmet up. He's smirking up at me, his plan working exactly how he wanted. But this fucker needs to know exactly who he's dealing with.

"If you so much as look toward my daughter I will end you," I growl with such venom his grin begins to fade. I pull him even closer. "Threaten her or use her against me and you'll be leaving here in a body bag from the

accident I make *you* have." My eyes narrow. "And that's a fucking promise."

The black and white stripes of the ref's shirt comes into my peripheral and right as they reach for me, I shove the scum away, raising my hands in surrender as I back off.

The ref blows his whistle right beside me, his face red. "Ashford, penalty box, now!"

I can't hold back my smirk. Damn, even the ref doesn't mind me body slamming him. I hope the league starts to hate him as much as every other player does. Hell, even his own teammates aren't skating over to help the bastard up. They probably know it was deserved.

Chase Montgomery rises, along with his temper. "Are you fucking kidding me? He should be booted out of the game for that bullshit!"

The ref blows his whistle again, silencing him. "I make the calls in this game, Montgomery, not you."

"That's bullshit!" he roars. "I'm not the one with a temper problem!"

I quirk a brow. "Really? Then why are you the only one screaming like a fucking banshee?"

He snaps his head to me. "Don't fucking goad me, Ashford, or I really will stick to my word and make something happen."

Grayson slaps a hand on my chest, holding me back just as I'm about to lunge for the sick fuck.

"Did you just threaten another player's daughter in front of a referee?" Grayson asks, deadly calm.

Chase shrugs. "No threat." He turns to the ref, holding his chest in innocence. "Did you hear a threat come from my lips? I'm just talking about making the team lose."

The tension between us all heightens to such a feat even the arena can feel it. They begin chanting—*demanding* more violence.

"*FIGHT!*"

"*FIGHT!*"

"*FIGHT!*"

"That's bullshit and you know it," I growl.

Grayson shakes his head before turning to the ref. "You need to do something. He's threatening one of my player's family members."

The ref eyes Chase before his shoulders slump in defeat. "Sorry Crawford, but I didn't physically hear him say he would harm a family

member.” His eyes narrow before he points at Montgomery. “But one more bad word out of your mouth and you’re out of the game. Got it?”

Un-fucking-believable.

This is why he’s known for being dirty in the league and yet never gets thrown out. He’s fucking smart with his words.

Fucking prick.

My nostrils flare as he smiles at me.

“Of course, I’ll show the best sportsmanship there is.” He holds out his hand. “Shake on it, Ashford?”

Shrugging off Grayson’s touch, I skate past Chase slowly, like a predator closing in on their prey. “I know your type, Montgomery.” Lowering my voice, I let him hear every drop of animosity I have for him. “And I wouldn’t shake your hand even if it was made of water and I was on fire.”

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Chapter 15

Layla

MOMMA BEAR

how's the game going sweetie?

LAYLA

good! IceHawks are up 3-1

MOMMA BEAR

and how are the girls?

LAYLA

well!

MOMMA BEAR

and you?

are you feeling okay? Not tired or anything?

LAYLA

I'm good Mom

more than good

I promise x

I can't tear my gaze away as Kieran bows his head to whisper something in the rival player's ear, the very one he slammed into the boards in front of us, nearly giving me a heart attack.

The tension radiating off Kieran is like nothing I've ever seen before, the energy so palpable I can sense it from my seat. I know hockey fans love violence, but I can't shake off this horrid feeling in my gut that it's more than just the standard game fights.

Something is wrong.

Bella whistles low. "Fucking Montgomery."

"Who is he?"

Cindy grunts. "The smallest man who ever lived."

Emmy leans forward on my lap, her hands pressed to the glass as if she can't get close enough. She just keeps repeating Daddy, over and over. Her little excited squeals join the cheers of the crowd anytime Kieran moves into her line of sight. And when he sits on the bench, she jumps up and down so much it's a challenge just to hold her.

Watching Kieran in his element has left me stricken. He was born to be a hockey player. Anyone watching could see that. The way he moves is so languid, like skating comes as natural as walking. That's all I could focus on before the altercation.

Bella leans into my side from the left, her hand deep in a popcorn bucket. "That was the player trying to take Grayson's position on the team."

Cindy joins in on my right. "He's as dirty as they come, but he's sneaky about it. Very selective with his words so the refs don't hear his taunts, and his plays are just on the cusp, making it so he technically didn't do anything."

My nose wrinkles as my eyes track him and the death glare he's sending Kieran in the penalty box. "What a creep."

"No wonder he's going after Kieran tonight, he's on fire," Bella notes.

"Maybe it's because he's trying to impress a certain someone tonight," Cindy adds with a wink.

"Yeah." I heft Emmy up higher, letting her stand on my legs despite knowing I'll have bruises from it later. "Emmy."

Bella rolls her eyes as Cindy snorts. "Keep telling yourself that."

Blowing out a breath, I lower my voice so the little ears in front of me don't hear, even though she's not paying me a lick of attention. "I've told you girls he's not interested. He just likes to flirt with me since I'm probably the only woman who's said no to him."

Bella hums under her breath, watching Grayson as he flies down the ice. Cindy smiles to herself. "Whatever you say, Layla."

The sudden gasps filling the arena has my head snapping back to the ice. Kieran's back out, and he's not alone. He and Montogomery are locked together, pushing one another with their helmets.

"What the…" I trail off.

Grayson skates over and O'Connor launches from his spot on the bench, his fists curling in anticipation.

Montgomery pulls back, his eyes sliding to the side and landing on me. Something flashes in them, a knowing look before he turns to Kieran with such a grin full of spite I shiver in disgust.

His lips move, and whatever he says has Kieran's face contorting in fury.

If I thought he looked angry before, it is nothing compared to now.

In a split second, Kieran's gloves are off and he's throwing punch after punch at Montgomery. It's as if a torrent of anger has been unleashed. He's nothing short of *feral*.

The crowd loses their ever-loving minds, their chants rising to a fever height. Bella and Cindy gasp, jumping to their feet, but I'm frozen in my seat until Carlton and Allie spring into action behind me. "Emmy, honey, look at me," Allie coaxes.

Quickly snapping out of my shock, I spin Emmy to face her behind me, keeping my hand on the back of her head. She doesn't need to see this. Hell, even I'm struggling to watch the violence occurring. My stomach won't stop rolling.

My heart is in my throat as Montgomery whips off his helmet and swings back at Kieran, but he's at least faster. He has Montgomery on the ground in the blink of an eye and his fists don't stop swinging.

I should be worried for the other player, we should be asking why Kieran isn't stopping, but what I want to know is if Kieran is okay. I want to know what made him snap, what put the utter devastation on his face as he cries out in pain.

"What the fuck did Chase say to him?" Cindy spits.

"Kieran never loses it like this," Bella murmurs, and all that little tidbit does is make my heart pound furiously.

IceHawks swarm in and Grayson is the one to pry Kieran off Montgomery. The referees get between them, though his gaze stays fixed on Montgomery. Blood slowly pours down his face.

Kieran points at him and roars, “Don’t you ever fucking talk about her again!”

Bella sucks in a breath at the same time I do, our shock in sync at the pure venom in his words and the promise in his gaze to hold to his vow.

Allie’s stunned gasp joins ours. “Oh god, Carlton, what did he say to him?”

“I don’t know, dear.”

“He must have said something. Kieran wouldn’t do this unprovoked.”

I turn, catching Carlton stroking Allie’s hand. “I know, dear, it will be all right. Everything will be all right.”

Allie’s face is ashen, her eyes riveted on her boys. It’s evident that Grayson isn’t her only son skating tonight. She loves Kieran with a fierceness that steals my breath, one that I have to physically tear myself away from.

Kieran lifts his head to me, blood dripping down his chin. His eyes trace me frantically, as if he needs to check that I’m okay.

Why the hell is he worried about me? I’m not the one that just got pummeled.

Cindy’s hand snaps out to clasp my forearm. “Oh my sweet Jesus.”

“I think I know what nerve Montgomery hit,” Bella whispers.

Emmy lifts her head then and at the sight of the blood on Kieran’s face, she screams, for the first time tonight not out of excitement. Her hands cling to my shirt with a death grip, tears pouring from her eyes.

Kieran’s face shatters as he takes in her fear.

The ref skates up behind him and ushers him off the ice, but even after Kieran is gone, she continues to scream.

“Emmy, darling, it’s okay. He’s okay, I promise.”

“Take her to see him,” Allie suggests. “She won’t settle until she sees that he’s all right.”

I’m nodding, our thoughts aligned, but for some reason my tongue won’t spit those words out. It’s a flurry of commotion, Allie packing up her things, her hands shaky until Carlton takes over the task, while Cindy grabs both her bag and mine, Bella wrapping up the coats. Emmy and I are ushered out of the seats, the fans around us watching like a hawk as we make our way out of the arena.

“Come on, we’ll meet him in the medical room,” Bella says, leading my shell-shocked body.

Cindy and Bella must have done this before because when we reach a hallway with a big burly security guard, all he does is roll his eyes and step aside.

"No need for the verbal assault this time, ladies. Go on through."

Cindy grins as she struts past him, patting his shoulder. "Good man, Lenord. Very well trained."

Part of me wants to ask what the hell that was all about and why she and Bella burst into a fit of laughter but Emmy is still clutched in my arms crying her poor little heart out, and I have to admit, my heart isn't faring much better than hers.

I need to know he's okay, physically and emotionally.

"Cindy and I will wait here. It's just through that door," Bella offers, pointing to the door to my left.

"Thank you!" I call over my shoulder as I push my way through after lightly knocking.

Kieran, lying on a makeshift bed, sits up abruptly, the blood that was dripping down his lip and along his chin now dry, but Emmy's tears find a new wave at the sight, making his face crumble.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't get her to settle. I thought maybe she needed to see you were all right."

Kieran shakes his head, waving me off. "No apology necessary." He blows out a breath to steady himself before he tries to move off the bed. "I'm glad you brought her. Hey, Emmy, sweetie."

His voice grows tight, his muscles straining. I quickly make my way over, placing my free hand on his thigh to stop him. Even his pants are wet with sweat. "Don't hurt yourself further," I whisper.

Emmy clutches her hands to her chest, obviously fighting whether to lunge for him or not. Kieran holds out his hands, trying to give her a gentle smile, but it doesn't soften the blood caking his face. "Come on, sweetie,

Daddy's all right." He motions for her to move toward him. "I promise, come on."

Ever so slowly, she tips forward and he jumps at the opportunity, sliding his hands under her arms and gently placing her in his lap. Her eyes stay glued to his face—to the blood.

Peering around the room, my eyes land on a box of Kleenex. I grab a few tissues, flicking on the tap and drowning out Kieran's soft murmurs trying to reassure her.

"You might be believable if I wipe off the blood," I tell him, holding up the wet tissues.

His brow quirks. "You want to play nurse with me, sunshine?"

The hurt feelings and tension from last night seem to have entirely evaporated, and a selfish part of me is feeling endlessly giddy over the fact he's flirting with me again.

Another part is trying to tell me *why* I feel that way, but I'm choosing to ignore it entirely.

I scoff. "Clearly your head is fine if you're still trying to flirt with me."

Kieran places Emmy down beside him gently, her gaze never leaving him as he swings his legs over the bed and parts them, allowing me to move forward.

Now my brow rises.

He winks. "I promise not to bite."

I fight off a laugh, not even bothering to point out that he's not allowed to flirt with me while Emmy is here because if it takes his mind off any pain he's feeling, I'll happily let it slide.

And I missed his teasing, a small voice whispers.

Forcing myself to take a steadying breath, I step forward, trying to rein in the gasp that wants to escape as I stand between Kieran's legs.

The heat of him burns my skin, the hairs along his legs tickling my waist. Biting my lip, I'm surprised I don't draw blood as I physically force myself to not moan or shudder.

Averting Kieran's eyes and the hypnotic nature of them, I concentrate on cleaning the dry blood along his cheeks, chin, and…lips.

With Kieran's arm firmly around Emmy, keeping her tethered to his side, I lift the Kleenex and gently clasp his chin, surprised to find my hands steady as I ask, "Has someone come to take a look at your injuries?"

"What makes you think I'm injured?"

“The blood is a pretty dead giveaway.”

His voice lowers. “Not my blood.”

“Oh.”

The brush of his stubble along my fingers has a shiver wanting to wrack my body. Lifting another Kleenex to his face, I gently wipe away the blood, all the while ignoring the heat that’s pooling in my lower belly.

I’ve never been in this type of position with a guy before. Have never been between their legs, have never had such a strong, masculine man with his undivided attention on me.

I can feel his eyes trailing along my skin, his gaze like a searing touch.

It’s heady.

It’s…fuck, it’s making me light-headed.

Not lupus, I remind myself. *Just a wildly attractive man who I apparently want to kiss.*

Shaking myself out of this stupor, all I have to do is look to Emmy and I remember why I’m here and what I’m doing.

I’m the nanny.

And nothing else.

“How’d I do?”

His rough, gravelly voice has my eyes snapping up to his and, damn, was that a mistake.

Sucking in a sharp breath, my body seems to sway forward on its own, sucked in by his eyes—those damn blue eyes that twinkle down at me as if he knows exactly how he affects me.

“Do with what?” I murmur back. “Pummeling him?”

His mischievousness winks out like a flame doused by water. “Oh, I know I did well with that.” His jaw clenches. “Bastard deserved it.”

We fall silent as something passes over his eyes.

Before I can remind myself of how unprofessional it would be, how it would be crossing another line, one that Kieran loves to dance along, I’m blurting out, “What did he say to you?”

“What makes you think he said anything?” His gaze flicks back and forth, searching mine as I remain caught between his legs. “What makes you think I didn’t do it because that’s just what I do?”

I shake my head. “It’s not in your nature, and I know he said something to you because I saw the look on your face.”

“And what was that?”

“One of pain.”

His Adam’s apple bobs.

“What did he say?” I probe again, too far gone to stop asking.

The question hangs between us as something builds, a current of energy that can’t be ignored, a magnet in both our chests that has us leaning toward each other before Kieran shakes his head and pulls away.

“He said nothing.”

I lick my lips. “Right. Sorry I asked. It was unprofessional,” I whisper, unable to hide the hurt in my voice.

Kieran blows out a breath that’s so full of weight his shoulders slump as I pick up another Kleenex and continue cleaning the blood off him. My eyes slide to Emmy, where she’s sucking her thumb and still staring at her dad.

Me too, girl, me too.

I turn his chin to the left, though his eyes remain on me. “Sorry, it’s just…it was deranged and revolting and…” He swallows suddenly before reaching up to clasp my hand, halting my movements. “He spoke about you.”

The words are guttural, as if he’s struggling to get them out.

“Me?” My head rears back. “Why would he talk about me?”

Kieran’s eyes search mine. “He knew he would hit a nerve.”

Silence stretches across the room, along with tension so thick I’m surprised I can still breathe.

“Why am I a nerve to hit?” I ask slowly, not entirely understanding.

“Because you’re—”

“Daddy,” Emmy says softly.

Our conversation halts, entirely forgotten. Kieran smiles down at Emmy like she just hung the moon. She reaches up, placing a hand on his now clean cheek.

“Yes sweetie, I’m Daddy,” Kieran says with such emotion in his voice I move to step back, to give them privacy, but his hand snaps out, clasping mine.

“Kieran—”

“Stay,” he whispers.

The door behind him bursts open and if the uniform is anything to go by, I’m guessing it’s the team doctor. While Kieran’s distracted, I slip out of his hold, my hand tingling from where he held it.

“Ashford,” the woman tsks, disappointed.

“Don’t even start, Stacy. You know damn well he deserved that beating.”

She looks down at Emmy. “Let me guess, this is the one he talked about to provoke you?”

“Yes,” Kieran whispers, but his eyes aren’t on Emmy. They’re on me.

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Chapter 16

Layla

KIERAN

are you at Totti's?

LAYLA

what are you?

my stalker?

KIERAN

if I say yes would that make you like me more?

is this on the life list?

LAYLA

depends on what type of stalker

KIERAN

oh my god it is

which book inspired this?

LAYLA

over my dead body am I telling you

KIERAN

fine I'll just go and read your book reviews and find it

LAYLA

HOW THE HELL DID YOU FIND THEM?????

HOW DO YOU EVEN KNOW WHERE TO FIND THEM?????

KIERAN

hot stalker, remember? ;)

The bartender places the mocktails Bella and I ordered down on our table while dropping the fruity alcoholic one in front of Cindy. By her slight sway and wobbly smile, she's two sheets to the wind.

Bella bites her lip to stop from laughing while I chuckle behind my glass.

"What?" Cindy pouts.

"We tried to warn you," Bella all but sings.

Cindy points an incredulous finger between us. "I'm not that drunk."

I can't help but snort. "Sure, and I'm not a redhead."

Bella fails at containing her laughter this time.

Cindy narrows her eyes at me. "How's Kieran doing, Layla?"

My giggle dies as Bella glances at me. "Deflection, I love it! Do tell, how is he?"

Placing my mocktail down, I shrug. "He's fine, just a few bruises—"

"That he's getting you to ice personally?" Cindy asks, wiggling her brows.

"No!"

"Really?"

"Really."

"Did he *try* to get you to ice it, though?"

My lips part, my words dying on my tongue. Cindy claps her hands before throwing them up in celebration. "I knew it! That man is smitten, no other way to put it."

Groaning, I put my head in my hands. "Girls, how many times do we have to go over this?"

"Until you realize he likes you," Bella whispers into my side.

Straightening, I look at them and say with utter conviction, "He doesn't like me."

Bella snorts. "I know you don't believe that."

Come on. I'm *this* close to ordering some of the drinks Cindy has been drinking and saying screw it, but I don't want to mess with my medication and deal with the side-effects. I'd be far too anxious later.

Cindy eyes me before smirking. "Okay, if he doesn't like you and you don't feel anything for him, then you'll have no problem flirting with the

guy who's been making eyes at you all night."

My jaw drops.

Before I can say anything, Cindy is waving someone over that's behind me.

"Oh my fucking god, you're crazy."

Bella cackles with manic laughter while Cindy just winks, flipping her bouncy hair behind her shoulder. "In the best way."

I turn to Bella. I expect her to…I don't know, do *something*, but all she does is gently place her finger under my chin, forcing my mouth closed. "He's your usual type," she whispers, lowering her voice. "Cindy's right, if you don't care about Kieran, you'll be excited about this one."

They're *both* crazy.

Maybe the bartender got Cindy and Bella's drinks mixed up, because what the hell is happening right now?

The guy comes to stand beside our table. Bella is right, he is my usual type, but…

He turns to me, his smile wide as he runs his fingers through his shaggy blonde hair. "Hey."

"Hi."

I wait for it, for the rush or zap of electricity to spark my chest, for butterflies to swarm my stomach, for his eyes to mesmerize me.

Nothing happens.

A part of my heart sinks as realization dawns on me that maybe—just maybe—the girls are right, that the flirting is more than just a game. Because why is my perfect type standing before me and I feel utterly nothing? Why do I feel more for fictional characters than this man? And why the hell is Kieran's face coming to mind, his flirty smiles and winks and taunting touches? Why do I want him here right now and not this stranger?

Goddamnit.

Cindy flashes her bright smile and I'm surprised the guy can keep his attention on me. When Cindy sets her charm on you, you *listen*.

"This is Layla. She just moved back to town."

The guy's brows rise. "Where did you go?"

My cheeks flush slightly at the reminder of where I was and why. "Berlin," I manage to get out coolly.

"Wow, how long did you live there?"

My shoulders slump with relief. At least he didn’t ask me why I moved. “Around seventeen months. I just got back two months ago.”

He leans against the table, trying to cut off the girls and almost soak me into his orbit, but the only orbit I’m stuck in seems to be the one hockey player with blue eyes and a cheeky tongue. This guy, as cute as he is, doesn’t look like he could goad me. If anything, he feels…lackluster.

“There’s a restaurant that opened up just down the road a few weeks back. I’d love to take you to it.”

Kieran’s face flashes across my mind again, more specifically the night he leant back, that cocky smirk dancing along his lips as we ate pasta on his couch. The fact I’m even thinking about my boss in this moment has my back straightening.

Didn’t Kieran win a date from me?

Or did he only try?

Why can’t I remember?

Probably because he tries all the damn time.

I’m about to politely decline, my lips parting, but Cindy jumps in before I can. “She’d love to!”

My eyes snap to hers. “What are you doing?” I hiss.

She just winks at me as the guy, without missing a beat, whips out his phone. “What’s your number?”

I guess I can’t really turn him down now, can I? I don’t want to embarrass the guy.

Ten digits given, albeit reluctantly, later, the guy winks at me and walks away, leaving a sour taste in my mouth. I turn my attention to Cindy, my heart a little hurt.

“Why did you do that?”

Bella falls silent, her hand clutching mine under the table. She will push me when it’s needed and I’m always thankful for it but this…I’m not sure how to feel about it.

As if buckets of ice were poured over her, she sobers. “Fuck, Layla, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t—” She sighs and I can practically see the guilt and disappointment in herself swallowing her whole. “I just thought…it’s just…”

Bella swoops in. “We’ve noticed how you and Kieran are around each other and we think you two just…need a little push.”

“If you think we need a push then why push me toward a different guy?” I ask, letting go of Bella’s hand beneath the table and ignoring the flash of hurt in her eyes.

Cindy shrugs but the guilt is still there. “Because I thought that maybe if you went on a date with someone else and noticed how they don’t make you feel alive—”

“Like Kieran does,” Bella adds, “that maybe you would—”

“What, suddenly admit I like Kieran?” I take a shuddering breath, their train of thought hitting far too close to what just happened in my mind. And despite knowing they’re right, I still feel hurt. I feel pushed, forced against what I want, and…I want to make decisions for myself. I’m tired of others doing it for me.

For years I was told what I could and couldn’t do. Even my own body would shackle me with its failure.

I need this part of my life to be on my terms.

This has nothing to do with my medical trauma, but it hit a nerve. Cindy doesn’t know how hard it was for me, how much loss of control I had. She was trying to help and I can see that, but not enough to swallow my pain right now.

“I know I’m attracted to Kieran but I also know that he doesn’t feel anything more than lust for me. What Kieran and I have right now works, okay? So please don’t push any further,” I say, kindly yet stern.

Cindy leans across the table and clasps my hand. “Layla, I’m so sorry. That was too far and I should have seen you didn’t want to be pushed like that.”

The sincerity of her words soothes some of the ache in my chest but not entirely because…because they’re both right, and I hate that they are. Despite me trying to push Kieran away, he’s wriggled into my heart.

“It’s okay,” I whisper, shaking off the desolate feeling. “Let’s do a night restart.” Grinning, I look over at the makeshift stage. “Anyone up for karaoke?”

UNKNOWN NUMBER

Hey Red, was great meeting you last night

when are you free for that date?

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Chapter 17

Kieran

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

please tell me my security camera is lying to me

KIERAN

your security camera is lying to you

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

Kieran you have your own kitchen…and your own groceries… and your own money to buy whatever you please

so tell me why the hell you were at my house stealing my cereal

KIERAN

yours tastes better

I'm cornering her in the kitchen, my arms on either side of her, locking her in my embrace. I brush my lips across the shell of her ear, smiling to myself as she shivers from the mere whisper of a touch.

"One word and I'm yours," I purr.

Her head drops back to my shoulder, her chest rising and falling with her heavy pants. "I want you, Kieran. Always you."

Spinning her, I clutch her face in my hand before trailing the other one down her body, over the swell of her breasts before slipping my hand beneath her skirt. "Only me?" I ask, my voice thick.

“Only you. I only want you to touch me,” she moans.

“Tell me you’ve been waiting for me.”

Her head is nodding frantically, her fingers clutching my shirt. “I have, I —” She gasps, her lips parting and her eyes widening as I slip a finger inside her. I smash my lips to hers as she groans inside my mouth, her hips rocking into my touch—

Gasping awake, with my dick painfully hard, I blink through the morning light spilling into my room.

Figures. The first night I sleep in my own bed I dream of Layla.

I want nothing more than to wrap my hand around my cock and tug but it only takes one look at the clock on my bedside table to know the woman responsible for it being painfully hard is downstairs right now with my daughter.

Ever since I found out Layla is a virgin, it’s been at the forefront of my mind, along with her list. Now that I know it’s all her firsts…

Fuck, this train of thought isn’t helping my dick go down.

Throwing the sheets off, I decide to take an ice-cold shower.

Running my hands through my wet hair, I find Layla in the kitchen with Emmy standing on her helping stool, Layla singing softly to the music playing from the speaker.

Leaning against the kitchen doorframe, I take her in for a moment. My cock begins to twitch as she keeps that plump lower lip between her teeth, concentrating on whatever she’s cooking, and it’s in this moment that I truly realize how far gone I am for her. Clearing my throat, I savor as both my

girls turn toward me. I plant a kiss on the top of Emmy's head before moving to the fridge and grabbing a bottle of water.

"What has you so focused?"

Layla huffs. "Pancakes."

"Pancakes?"

At hearing the humor in my tone, she spins to face me, cocking a hip. "Don't laugh at me. I've never made them before and they keep burning."

Glancing down, my lips twitch. "You have the stove up too high, sunshine."

Her mouth pops open to form an *O*. "Too high?"

I dip my chin. "Too high."

My hands grip the bench behind me, white-knuckling it as images of my dream come back to me. Maybe Layla's right, I am a manwhore, because I'm watching her, the way her cheeks heat, and all I can think about is how in the dream she—

Layla's phone buzzes on the bench beside me. Quickly averting her eyes, she moves back to the stove, turning the heat down. "Can you see what Bella said?" she calls over her shoulder. "I was texting her asking for help."

Fuck, this girl has no idea how cute she is.

Shaking my head, I pick up her phone, only for my smile to drop and my heart to plummet. My skin turns clammy, the phone in my hand slick, and all I can seem to do is blink at it.

"Kieran?"

Layla's voice sounds far away, as if I've started floating on a cloud. I'm no longer in my kitchen, just watching as a spectator.

Layla walks toward me and before I can try and compose myself, before I can get a handle on my emotions, I hand her the phone. "You have a date…Red." It takes everything in me not to spit the nickname out, to not choke on the very thing she wouldn't let me call her.

But she'll let some twat from a bar call her Red.

Why couldn't I?

I don't know why it feels like I've swallowed acid. I don't know why burning hot betrayal slices through my chest.

Layla isn't mine.

She isn't my girlfriend.

She's just my nanny but…why does it feel like she's mine and I'm hers?

Why does this fucking hurt so much?

She takes the phone from me and I get that telltale energy sizzling down my hand from the touch. I want to savor it but it feels wrong now, like I can't feel this way around her. Almost like her touch has burned me, and I rip my hand away as if it has.

My chest starts to restrict, my hands shaking, and I know what's going to come. I know what this feeling means.

I need air.

I need *air*.

I need air.

"I have to go."

"What about the pancakes?" comes her soft voice and that softness shatters my heart and soul. Of course someone as kind, sweet, and caring as her wouldn't be caught dead with a man whose own mother didn't even want him.

"Just lower the stove temperature. Slow and steady wins the race," I hear myself murmur, but my voice sounds detached. I *feel* detached.

This is all wrong.

Wrong, wrong, wrong.

"I have to go."

I can hear her calling my name, can even hear Emmy saying Daddy, but I can't face them, not right now. They both will see the utter devastation of my heart breaking across my face.

Before I know where I'm going, my legs are carrying me across the street with just one thought pounding through my heart.

Why am I never good enough?

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Chapter 18

Kieran

Google Search

Q*: I've tried to not have feelings for someone, but they won't go away. How do I make myself stop liking them?*

A*: Many suggest that unrequited love is a common psychological theme for people and something one will experience at least once in their life. Would you like some exercises to mentally combat these feelings?*

Q*: No, I just need to stop liking them.*

A*: Often, people are attracted to others they aren't compatible with, thus affirming the belief they're not loveable. Would you like some mental exercises to help eliminate this belief?*

Fuck you, Google.

I charge into Grayson's house, my thoughts whirling, but immediately regret it as I come to a screeching halt. Bella screams bloody murder.

I throw my hands up as Grayson chucks a pillow at my head. “Dude! You need to learn to fucking knock!”

“Ew! I’m fucking traumatized! Is this how kids feel walking in on their parents? If so, I really didn’t miss out on much.” I start to gag. “Cover up!”

“Thanks, Kieran,” Bella snarks.

Groaning, I drop down onto the floor, placing my head in my hands. “That’s not what I meant,” I mutter, not having the energy to come up with a funny quip to lighten the mood.

I can hear the rustling of clothes as Grayson and Bella jump off the couch and make themselves decent.

A date.

She’s going on a fucking date.

And he’s calling her Red.

“Kieran, what’s wrong?” Bella asks softly, and it shocks me when that question has my eyes beginning to burn and my throat closing up, not a single word coming out.

I keep my head firmly down so she doesn’t see the silver lining my eyes. “Did you know?”

“Know what?” Grayson asks.

I blink furiously to clear the tears before I lift my head and look pointedly at Bella kneeling in front of me. “Were you there when some twat at the bar asked her out?”

Bella stumbles back a bit, her jaw dropping before she can get control over her features. “Wait, this is over Layla’s date?”

“Oh fuck,” Grayson mutters before heading into the kitchen.

“Did you know?” I repeat again, needing to know.

And by Bella’s audible swallow and the shutter in her eyes, I have my answer. Shaking my head I can’t help but let my disappointment show.

“I’m sorry, Kieran, it was stupid. Cindy and I thought—”

“Cindy was there too?”

Grayson comes padding back toward me with a container. Holding it out, he takes a seat next to me. “Here, this will make you feel better.”

I look down to find Bella’s blueberry muffins sitting inside and… nothing. My stomach doesn’t grumble like it usually does, nor does my mouth water. I end up placing it down behind me. “I’m not hungry,” I murmur.

Grayson's eyes widen as Bella gasps. "Now I know you're really hurt over this."

I throw my hands out. "Of course I'm hurt over this! I told you…I told everyone how I feel about her."

Grayson places his hand on my shoulder. "It's okay buddy, it's just one date."

"It's not just one date. He called her Red!"

Bella's nose wrinkles. "What does that mean?"

"She wouldn't let me call her Red but she lets *him* call her Red?" I shake my head, groaning. "She's fallen for him."

There's a snicker, and my eyes snap up to Bella. "Don't you dare laugh at me right now. You of all people know how I feel about your best friend. I literally hounded you every day for updates about her." I lean forward, emphasizing, "Over a year, Bella!"

Bambi ambles in from outside, her adorable face lighting up when she sees me. "At least you love me," I murmur as I pat her.

"Okay, this is…" Bella blows out a breath before steeling her spine. "Layla doesn't believe you actually like her."

My head rears back before I look at Grayson in shock, but all he does is grimace. "It's true, I've heard a few phone calls."

"Hey! Those are private," she scolds.

"Like the IceHawks chat is private too?"

"Touché."

I wave my hand between them. "Hello, back to what really matters right now."

Sighing, Bella looks to Grayson before going on. "She thinks you flirt with everyone and that it's just…a game."

My eyes practically bug out of my head. I must be pulling a weird face because even Bambi cocks her head at me. "A game? *A game*? Why the fuck does she think my feelings are a game?"

Bella shrugs helplessly before turning to Grayson for help. "Well, have you asked her out?" he offers.

"Many times, and she always says no."

"Does she think you're just…joking though?" Bella asks softly.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I take a steadying breath. "Are you telling me that Layla genuinely thinks I flirt with her because I flirt with… what? Every woman I meet?"

Bella winces. “Well…”

“I don’t flirt with everyone.”

Grayson gives me a pointed look.

“I don’t!” I say defensively, before adding softer, “Anymore.”

Bella clicks her fingers. “That right there.”

“What?”

“Layla doesn’t know you’re not a manwhore anymore,” Grayson supplies.

“Thanks,” I drone sarcastically. “Love being called a manwhore by my best friend.”

“Is there a better term to use?”

My lips purse. “I’m not sure.”

“Slut?”

“Nah that’s gross. Womanizer?”

“Fuckboy?”

“What about—”

Bella groans before clapping her hands together. “Jesus, you two and your tangents. Kieran, do you want help with Layla or not?”

I sit up straighter at that. “Yes, of course I do. I only want her. No one else.”

Her brow quirks.

I hold my hands out in innocence. “It’s true!” Turning to Grayson, I slap his chest, trying not to grimace when I feel the sweat from his…activities. “Tell her. I haven’t slept with anyone since the day I met Layla.”

“First of all, how the fuck would I know that? And secondly”—he lowers his head and voice—“seriously?”

“Yes! And you should know, I haven’t taken any puck bunnies back after games.”

“Well…yeah, but I don’t know about—”

Groaning in frustration, I run my hands through my hair. “I know I was a ladies’ man but why is it so hard to believe that I haven’t been with anyone?”

Bella clears her throat. “Kieran, I love you like a brother. You know that.”

“Yeah, and you’re my sister from another mother.”

She smiles at that. “Yes, and I say this with love, but you are notorious in the league for never getting attached to a woman.” Her eyes cut to

Grayson before sliding back my way. “You’ve never even taken a girl out on a date before.”

I shrug. “Because I haven’t wanted to take anyone out on a date. Layla’s different, though. So how do I make her believe me when I say I only want her?”

Bella eyes me, scrutinizing, before she asks, “You really like her?”

“Yes, how is that not obvious yet?”

“Oh, it’s obvious,” Grayson chimes in.

“I just want to make sure this isn’t because she’s the first girl to say no to you.”

I scoff. “My ego isn’t that fragile.” But something in her expression has me pausing. I gape at her. “Oh my god, that’s what Layla thinks.”

Bella’s hand tips back and forth. “Maybe.”

“That…makes a lot of sense. Actually, I know what I have to do.” Standing, I snatch the container of blueberry muffins and point to my best friends as I run out the door. “I’m taking this as payment for scarring me with your sexcapades. Thank you for the help with Layla!”

“Kieran, wait!” Bella calls, but I’m already on my way.

“What the hell did we just put in his head?” I hear my best friend ask before I close the door.

“I have no idea,” Bella murmurs.

I’m heaving as I storm through my front door after running down Grayson’s long driveway. My entrance wasn’t exactly subtle, and Layla rounds the corner a second later, Emmy sitting on the couch behind her with some Barbies in her lap.

Layla’s hands are wringing together as her eyes, holding a hint of nervousness, lock on me. “Kieran?” She says it as more of a question.

Catching my breath, I point at her. “Kitchen.”

Her eyes widen at the demand but to my utter shock she follows me without complaint. She leans against the kitchen bench, biting her lower lip, and, fuck, that just does something to me.

Pacing the kitchen I have to admit, I didn't think this through. I should take a day to sleep on it, but instead my heart tugs on my tongue and forces me to turn to Layla and blurt, "Don't go on a date with him."

Her lips part as those gorgeous blue eyes widen. "What?"

Pushing off from my spot, I move toward her, peering down at this fiery, soft, and gentle woman that I haven't been able to stop thinking of since the moment I met her.

"Don't go on a date with him," I breathe.

She laughs, but I can tell it's from nerves, not her usual carefree one. Her eyes dart away, as if she can't face me.

"Do you really want to go on a date with him?" I ask as she falls quiet.

She begins to play with the corner of her T-shirt, rolling it tightly. "Honestly…no."

Something in my chest loosens at that and I find it easier to breath until her back straightens. "But I promised myself that when I moved back here, I would start living my life, and part of that is putting myself—"

"No."

Her head rears back. "No?" she asks incredulously.

"Not with him."

My chest begins to restrict again, growing tight with the prickling sensation of anxiety.

Fuck, she really is going to go on a date with him.

Fucking bar twat.

"Kieran, you can't—"

"Let me take you on a date."

Her eyes snap to mine, flicking back and forth. "But I work for you."

"So?"

She laughs, but its more disbelievingly than anything. "Kieran, we can't."

"Why?"

Her lips part, her mouth opening and closing, but no words come out. "W-why do you even want to go on a date with me? Why is it such a big deal if I said yes to a date? Is it because it's with another man?"

Yes, I want to growl, but after learning she thinks I haven't stopped flirting with her because she rejected me, I can't admit that the thought of her going on a date with someone else literally makes me want to crawl out of my skin.

I've wanted her for close to two years.

I've had to wait months, years, for some semblance of a relationship with her, and now that she's in my life, the last thing I want to do is sit by and watch her fall for someone else.

Her lips purse as she studies me, and I see it. The moment a thought enters her mind and settles. It has me holding my breath as she seems to prepare herself. She drags herself to stand up taller, her chin higher.

"Fine, I won't go on a date with him." My smile stretches wide until she clicks her tongue and lifts her finger. "If you…help me."

"With…?"

Her swallow is audible, her cheeks flaming, and whatever she's mustering up the courage to say has me leaning forward with my heart in my throat. "I'll do anything," I whisper.

Taking a shuddering breath, she blurts out quickly, "Help me with my firsts list. Help me experience life and…teach me so I know what I'm doing."

My heart soars, absolutely soars, only to plummet as she says those last few words.

"So you know what you're doing," I say slowly, so very carefully. "With…future partners?"

She nods. "Yes. I mean, you know what you're doing with no-strings-attached relationships and I don't particularly trust most men, but you wouldn't hurt me." Her large innocent eyes look up at me as she whispers, "Could I trust you to teach me?"

You'd think I'd be jumping for joy that Layla Carson is standing in my kitchen, her heart of pure gold, plush pink lips, and smattered freckles asking me to please her, but all it does is make me feel like I've been sucker punched.

Because why am I not good enough to date?

Why am I temporary to everyone?

What's even more pathetic is that I want to say yes. If Layla will give me even just mere scraps, I'll gladly take them. I'll take whatever she gives me, because it's *Layla*.

And I've wanted her since the moment I laid eyes on her.

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Chapter 19

Layla

BELLA
did Kieran go back home?

LAYLA
oh, yes

BELLA
is everything okay?

LAYLA
I think I may have temporarily lost my sanity
either that or I read too many smutty books

BELLA
what's a smutty book?

LAYLA
something that has led me astray

My fingers snap upwards, feeling along my lips as if to confirm that was indeed my own mouth forming the question.

Did I just ask Kieran Ashford, hockey god and ladies' man—a very experienced one at that—if he would *teach* me?

I can't help but berate myself.

I just asked my boss for sex.

Sex!

My god, I need to officially cut myself off from some of my books. They've filled my head with ludicrous confidence and ideas. What the hell have I done?

Kieran's face falters before turning crestfallen. It looks like I slapped him.

"You…" He swallows thickly. "You want me to teach you?"

I nod my head. I've already stuck my foot in my mouth, I may as well commit. "Yes." At his prolonged silence, I drop my head into my hands and groan. "Oh god, I don't know why I asked that."

"It's okay," he murmurs, the sound of Emmy playing in the living room drifting toward us.

"No, it's not. You're my boss. Kieran, I'm so sorry."

He places his hands on my shoulders and the heat of his hands has me jumping.

"Layla, take a deep breath," he instructs slowly, and it isn't until he says those words that I realize I'm hyperventilating. The back of his hand brushes my cheek, making me draw in a deep gasp of air. "It's okay, sunshine, just breathe."

I try to get a hold of myself but my heart is out of control.

I said I wanted to live, to come home and experience life outside the confines of my illness, but this is *insane*.

Kieran runs his finger down my cheek again before placing his arms on either side of me. A spark of energy jumps between us, the current soothing my breaths to a steady pace.

This.

This fluttery feeling in my chest is what was lacking at the bar…and every other date I've been on.

Just a look from Kieran, and I'm swept away.

"Why do you want me to do it?" he asks suddenly.

"Because I trust you," I find myself saying. "And you…you're fun, Kieran. You make me feel alive."

His eyes close at that. "And because I'm experienced?"

"That too," I answer honestly.

If I did this with him, I'd know what I was getting. I'd go in fully aware that he doesn't see me as anything other than one night. Would it shatter me to walk away after that? To have to work with him, to see him hanging out with Grayson and Bella and always being there teasing and flirting? Yes.

Maybe I’m a masochist.

But I would rather experience this, live out the absolute need in the romance books I’ve read and be left heartbroken at the end, than never.

If Kieran knew that he makes me feel things and that I wanted to say no to the man at the bar because he came to mind, he would run. Maybe even fire me, say I was deranged like some of the puck bunnies.

I don’t want to be that in his eyes. I like that he looks at me like I’m different. It makes me feel special. I adore our banter and I don’t want to lose that.

And I’m not ready—don’t think I ever will be—to tell him that I may have developed some type of…crush? That doesn’t seem right, but either way, however I feel about him, I’m not strong enough if he crushed me.

Kieran can never know.

I just want to experience this with him, I want to fall into the feelings he invokes within me.

I would rather crash and burn than to never live at all.

“Not necessarily.” I hedge.

His eyes flash open at that.

With my heart on my sleeve, I confess, “I don’t want to be the twenty-five-year-old virgin anymore. I read about love and sex and intimacy but never experience it. Do you know what it feels like to yearn to be touched?”

His rough voice dances along my skin. “I know all about yearning, Layla.”

“It’s painful,” I whisper.

“Very.”

“I understand if you don’t want to muddy the lines, but you barged in here like a caveman because you hate the fact that I’ve said no to you, so I thought we could satisfy both our cravings—”

His eyes twinkle. “You crave me, sunshine?”

“Be serious for a second.”

“Oh, I am. I believe the topic of you craving me is a very serious one.”

“Why?”

“Because I need to hear that you won’t just be using me,” he says, and the rough admission has my heart leaping into my throat.

“You’re not a foolish man, Kieran,” I whisper hoarsely.

“I need to hear it.”

I bite the inside of my cheek and say, “I want you, Kieran. Any woman would have to be blind not to want you.”

He sucks in a sharp breath, his eyes flaring, before he smirks down at me. “Now…can I take you on that date? To go over the list of firsts you want me to *teach* you.”

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Chapter 20

Kieran

KIERAN

what are some of Layla's favorite books?

SISTER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

why…?

KIERAN

research

SISTER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

what the hell are you up to

KIERAN

I'm going to make her yearn for me

SISTER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

what does that mean?

KIERAN

you would know if you read books

SISTER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

you don't even read books

KIERAN

precisely why I'm asking for Layla's favorites

I spent the entire evening awake, wracking my brain over everything she said to me, going over it in my head along with how I could make her fall for me.

I'm not going to take this "teaching" situation lying down. I will use every opportunity I can to make Layla see me for *me*. Because now after she whispered those words, those words I've been daydreaming about hearing…I want her.

And it seems she wants me, too.

She just thinks I still want everyone else. I need to prove to her that I'm good enough, that this isn't an ego trip because she rejected me. This is solely because I've spent too long watching her from afar, and now that she's in my life, I never want her to leave.

I adore every facet of her that I've learned, not only through Bella but on my own merit. Hence why I'm now standing on her front porch, knocking on her door and praying she doesn't find out.

The famous Momma Bear Carson opens the door.

"Kieran! What a pleasant surprise. What brings you here, sweetie?" She looks past my shoulder. "Bringing that darling daughter of yours for me to finally meet?"

"Sad to say it's just me today."

She waves me off, not the least bit deterred. "Nonsense! You're more than enough!"

Bending down as her arms stretch up, I soak up this tiny woman's small yet mighty hug. I never understood how someone could be known for their hugs until I met her during Trisha Stratford's funeral.

"Would you believe me if I said I was just in the area?"

She clicks her tongue. "Not at all. Come out with it, young man."

Rocking back on my heels, I give her my most charming smile that never seems to fail me. "Is there any chance you'd show me Layla's book collection?"

She returns the smile, yet while mine is trying to persuade, hers is a knowing one. "And why would you want to see that?"

Shrugging, I feign nonchalance. "Just thought I'd look at some of her favorite books. You wouldn't happen to know any of them, would you?"

Charlotte gives me a look. "Do I even want to know why?"

Should I explain that her daughter asked me to fuck her but I secretly think I'm falling so deeply in love with her that I've agreed to a friends-

with-benefits arrangement in the hopes of making her fall for me too, and the best idea I came up with was to read her favorite books to see what she likes?

"Best not to know," I say with a chuckle.

She opens the front door farther. "All right then, come on in. How's Emmy?"

"She seems to be settling in well. She and Layla have a special bond."

"And Bambi I hear too."

"Oh yes, if those two are in the same room you can't tear them apart."

"God bless them," she says with awe.

Charlotte leads me in. To the left sits a warm and welcoming loungeroom, filled to the brim with family photos on every wall. To the right is a staircase, no doubt leading to the bedrooms.

The house emanates a warmth I can't help but feel jealous over, for the childhood Layla experienced. Until I remember that it was tarnished with sickness, and then all I feel is guilty. But if given the choice of the childhood I had, with abuse and the endless houses I was bounced back and forth from until landing at the foster home with the she devil…I would choose to be sick, just to experience the love of someone taking care of me.

Perhaps Emmy isn't the only one who needs therapy.

"You should stop by, come and meet her," I offer.

She turns to me, her hands cupping her mouth as she tries to hide her brimming smile. "Are you sure? I don't want to intrude."

"Emmy would be a very lucky little girl to experience one of your famous hugs."

She all but squeals, and I can see how Layla turned out so soft-spoken and kind. She may talk to me like a firecracker, but that's just for me, everyone else gets the quiet, endlessly kind woman.

I'm more than happy with my firecracker.

"I'd love to meet her," she gushes as she continues up the stairs and down the hall. "I have to be honest, I've been going through Layla's baby boxes in the attic and pulling out bits and bobs."

"That's more than generous. You didn't have to do that."

Charlotte turns, placing her small hand on my forearm and squeezing. "Please, it feels odd not to have someone to take care of."

Her gaze takes on this faraway look and it makes me realize that while she no doubt is happy her little girl doesn't need to be nursed back to health

anymore, she maybe misses having a sense of purpose.

"You know what, Layla and I have some things to talk about—" I stop mid-sentence, stumbling over the fact that I know exactly what we need to go over and her mother certainly should be none the wiser. "Um, scheduling things and all that. Why don't you come to the house and take care of Emmy? Grayson's mom Allie is in town and she's been begging for a night with her as well. You two got on like a house on fire when you met."

Her eyes glow with joy. "I'd love that more than you could imagine."

I dip my chin. "It's settled then. You'd be doing me a favor. It means I can take Layla out…for a business dinner."

Charlotte pauses before a door in the hallway. "A business dinner."

"Mm-hmm."

"And this *dinner* doesn't have anything to do with you wanting to know her favorite books, does it?"

I shrug innocently. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

She all but rolls her eyes as she turns and opens the door, revealing Layla's bedroom.

I can't help but suck in a sharp hiss of air.

"It's extraordinary, isn't it? She's managed to cram a book into every free space available." Charlotte leans over, whispering conspiratorially, "There's another mountain of books in the attic."

"Extraordinary doesn't begin to cover it," I whisper, awe coating my voice as I step inside what feels like a library.

Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves line the walls, a double bed crammed in the middle, but even the bedframe has shelves along the bottom, floating shelves mounted above. The spines are well loved, cracks and creases in almost all of them, and there's small figurines and decorations neatly and precariously placed throughout.

"It's just so evident," I say.

"What is?"

"The love and care she has for her books. I've never been able to articulate the love I have for hockey but if I could, it would be this." My eyes are tracking everything, taking in every miniscule detail. It's all *her*. This is Layla's heart laid bare.

"She's very special," I hear Charlotte whisper.

"Very," I agree.

Feeling eyes on my back, I turn to find Momma Bear Carson leaning against the doorframe, taking me in. I can tell she wants to ask. What boss shows up asking for their employee's favorite books? But she doesn't, and I don't push her to.

"You know, I never said thank you for what you did while she was away."

The seriousness of her expression, the gratitude in her eyes, ones so similar to her daughter's, makes me rip mine away and toward the spines as I try to figure out which one is Layla's most loved book.

"I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"Yes you do." She sighs, with weariness, not frustration. "My husband and I don't know how to repay—"

Turning to Charlotte. "I'm not sure what you're talking about," I repeat, "but if I did, I'd swear on my heart and on Emmy's that you don't need to repay a single cent."

Her lower lip wobbles, her eyes turning glassy. "But it—"

"Helped," I cut in. "An *anonymous* donor helped."

Even Grayson doesn't know what I did.

Doesn't know that one day I overheard Bella pushing Layla for information until she cracked and broke down over the phone that her parents were going to take out a second mortgage on their house to help pay for her treatment in Berlin. That it wasn't just their retirement they were giving up.

I knew in that moment, in that split second of hearing her desperation and heartache over her parents' sacrifice, that I had to do something.

Layla's parents are everything I prayed about having. Every night I'd wish that a lovely couple would come into the foster home, take one look at me, and say, *Him. We love him.*

To hear such adoring, kind-hearted people suffer, to hear them so willingly put themselves at financial risk…it was a shock to me that people like that even existed.

I couldn't let their love ruin them.

It's beautiful, but a secret nonetheless.

"I knew it was you the moment Layla called and said she was selected to receive the funds she did." Her smile is full of warmth and something else—a mother's knowing. "That, and all it took was one call to the university to find out there was never an anonymous donor randomly

selecting those in the treatment to cover their plan.” She laughs. “My sweet daughter is very naïve sometimes, but I am not.”

I shrug, my heart beating wildly. “Again, I don’t—”

“Know what I’m talking about.” She smiles at me, finishing my sentence. “Well, if you did, my husband and I—” She chokes on her words before standing taller and giving me a watery smile. “We’re grateful beyond words and we don’t take their generosity lightly. Whoever they are, they’re very special to have done what they did and not take credit.”

My cheeks heat.

“Sounds like your family has been through enough and deserved a windfall of luck.”

“Windfall it was,” she murmurs before pushing off the doorframe and coming to stand beside me. “Now, what exactly do you need from her books? It may look overwhelming but if one book is even so much as moved an inch she’ll know.”

Relieved that she’s changing the topic, I let my surprise show. “Really?”

“Oh yeah, I can’t even dust in here. Apparently she has a system.”

I snort at that. “Well I won’t touch or take anything then, but I was wondering which are her favorites?”

She walks over to the right side of the bed toward one of the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. The books are all artfully placed, some matching with all the covers facing forward, others with large maps and artwork printed beside them.

“This is what I call her trophy shelf. It’s all the special editions of her favorites.”

“Special editions?”

“Apparently if a book is popular enough, they’ll release a special cover.”

“I never knew this was such a big thing.”

“Neither did I. My husband and I don’t read. I couldn’t tell you where her love of words comes from.”

Something tells me I have a hint as to where it came from.

Perhaps Layla loves to read for the same reasons I used to watch TV shows of happy families.

Spotting a paperback, clearly having been read a hundred times, I step forward to take a closer look. Colored paper sticks out along the edges.

“What’s that?” I ask, pointing, but careful not to touch anything.

“Those are her annotations.”

“Anna…what?”

A small chuckle escapes her as she points to a box with various colored tabs. “Annotations. If she likes a book, she’ll highlight and color code her favorite passages and lines.”

I whistle low before asking, “What’s the chances I can take that copy without her realizing?”

“You want me dead?”

My head throws back on a laugh. “No, not at all. I’ll just take a photo of it.”

“Wise choice, she’ll castrate you if you touch it.”

My lips twitch as I try to stop myself from smiling but it’s useless. I take a photo of the trophy shelf and any book that looks as well loved as the one in the middle.

Later that night, I order a copy of the book and download the audiobook. As I put Emmy to sleep, sitting in her rocking chair, I switch out parenting books for what I’m learning is a dark romance read.

One that, to my utter delight and surprise, has a trigger warning list a mile long at the beginning.

You would never know by looking at Layla, the sweet, adorably sexy woman that’s all smiles.

My sunshine likes it a little dark.

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Chapter 21

Layla

LAYLA

don’t freak out

BELLA

that’s instantly going to make me freak out

LAYLA

sorry

AHHH I don’t know how to say this

BELLA

girl spit it out!!!

LAYLA

I may or may not be going on a date with Kieran tonight

BELLA

shut the fuck up

SHUT THE FUCK UP

WHEN THE HELL DID THIS HAPPEN?

and why am I just now finding out????

HELLO???

you can’t drop a bomb and then not reply!!!

The corner of my lip curves upward as Bella's name flashes across my phone screen. She doesn't even give me a chance to say hello, her scream is so loud.

"What the fuck!"

Pulling the phone away from my ear, I wince. "Ouch, B, my ear is right here."

She curses before lowering her voice. "Sorry, sorry, it's just…I feel like I'm missing a lot of information. Did this happen after he left our place?"

Triple-checking that Kieran's car isn't in the driveway, I take Emmy's hand and walk with her outside to the playground the team built.

Kieran left several hours ago, supposedly to get things organized for our date tonight. His lips were sealed, and he wouldn't budge an inch on telling me what he's planning. All he said was that I had to wear something cute yet comfortable.

Sighing, I relent, "It's actually more complicated than just a date."

"What do you mean?"

I'm not sure how to say this so I just power through. "Um, I may or may not have asked Kieran to be friends with benefits?"

The call falls silent. I pull my phone away to check the line didn't drop.

"B?"

"Sorry, I…did you say friends with benefits?"

"Yes?"

"Is that a statement or a question?"

I groan. "Honestly, I think my brain short-circuited and I blacked out. By the time I came to, Kieran was agreeing to being friends with benefits."

"Kieran agreed to it?" she says, surprise evident in her tone.

"After acting all high and mighty and asking me not to go on the date with the guy from the bar? Yeah, he did."

"Huh."

"Why is that so shocking?"

Rustling comes over the line, and by the clacking I can tell she's starting to bake, whether from me causing her stress or not I'm unsure.

"Why just friends with benefits? Why not make it a real date?"

"Because he doesn't date, and if he did, he'd just get bored with me," I say as if that's self-explanatory.

"But didn't he ask you to go on a date with him?"

That makes me pause. "Well…yes, but—"

The sigh that comes over the line is long and weighty.

“Lil, I adore you, but do you think that maybe you’re reading this wrong?”

“No, this is Kieran we’re talking about.”

“Do you know that for sure?”

I can’t help but laugh. “Yes, I do. What do you think is going to happen? He’s going to want to start something serious at the same time he was just handed a three-year-old to raise? He has enough on his plate, B. He doesn’t need another burden.”

“You’re not a burden, Layla. Why would you think that?”

Her tone has gone soft, wary and gentle like she’s verbally walking through a landmine, and I suppose she is.

Twisting the hem of my shirt, the truth rises to the surface before I can stop it. “Who would want to date someone who’s sick? It’s committing to a lifetime of hospital visits and uncertainty.” Lowering my voice, I mumble, “I wouldn’t want to date the sick girl either.”

“You’re not sick anymore, and even at the peak of your health issues you were never just the *sick girl*. You know I hate that label.”

Her words begin to worm their way through to my heart before I stop them in their tracks. “I’ll always be sick, B. The medication is just a balm.”

She sighs over the line, her heartbreak and opinions made clear with just that one sad sound. Bella wants me to shed the skin and title I gave myself but I don’t think I can. I’ll always be her, deep down.

My lupus isn’t going anywhere—I’m just *managing* it.

I could wake up tomorrow and relapse and everything that I’ve come to love and cherish about my life would crumble. No wonder I have constant anxiety. No wonder my search history looks like I’m putting myself through med school.

I mean, look at Trisha—here one minute, riddled with cancer, and gone in the next breath. The only certainty in life is change.

But unfortunately, my reality holds two certainties.

1. Change is the only constant in life.
2. My lupus is here to stay.

Bella falls quiet for a moment, letting my words hang heavy in the air before she whispers, “I think you’re underestimating him.”

“And I think that us having fun with no-strings-attached is the best option for all parties involved.” I lower my voice so Emmy doesn’t hear me where she’s playing on the swing set. “I’m tired of being a virgin. And I don’t find any of the guys I’ve seen attractive, let alone have felt comfortable enough with them to go all the way. I trust Kieran and he clearly knows what he’s doing.”

“At the end of the day you’re both adults and can do whatever you want, and I’ll support you every step of the way. I’m just worried someone is going to get hurt.”

I’d rather crash and burn than to never live at all, I want to say. But I don’t think she’d understand that. Most people wouldn’t, only those who have had to live a shell of a life for a long period of time, so instead I add, “Hence the no strings.”

“I’m not worried you’re the one who’s going to—”

I don’t hear the rest of what Bella says because suddenly the front door is opening. Snapping upright, I whisper, “He’s back, I have to go. I’ll see you soon?”

“Of course, have fun tonight, Lil. I love you, and be careful.”

“Always,” I say right before ending the call.

Perfect timing too, because Allie Crawford comes barreling into the backyard grinning from ear to ear. “Where’s my gorgeous grandbaby?”

I can’t help but mirror Allie’s smile as Emmy jumps from her spot and runs directly for Grayson’s mom. They collide, Allie scooping her up right, just as Kieran walks outside.

I stop dead in my tracks, my stomach heating. Kieran is wearing a tight-fitted deep navy shirt, the fabric clinging to his frame and accentuating his muscles, and I’m not sure what I should do—hide my blush, swallow my sudden drool, or avert my eyes because I can’t stop staring.

I can’t believe we’re doing this.

As I force my eyes away, I find a lopsided grin playing along Kieran’s face, his own eyes sparkling as our gazes collide and hold. A million words pass between us, the energy suddenly crackling with such intensity I’m worried lightning’s about to strike.

Kieran’s rough voice sends a shiver down my spine.

“Ready, sunshine?”

Climbing the stairs on shaky legs, I blow out a breath and whisper, “As I’ll ever be.”

“My mom texted that she’s on her way over to the house,” I announce, reading the text from the passenger seat of his truck. “Which, by the way, thank you. I can’t remember the last time I saw her so excited.”

Kieran smiles at me, one hand resting on the steering wheel as the other remains on the gear shift, the heat from his hand scorching my thigh despite no contact.

“Are you kidding? I need to thank her. Did you see how happy Emmy was when I showed her the toys your mom gave her? She deserves to be loved on.”

My smile is borderline whimsical. “That she does.”

“Your mom is a sweetheart. I can see where you get your personality from.”

“You think?”

“Oh yeah. Both of you are kind and caring but have this smart attitude with the right people.”

“Right people.” Clicking my tongue, I roll my head to face him. “You seem to be the only person who pushes my buttons enough to see *that* side.”

Kieran’s hand flexes on the wheel before he winks. “And aren’t I lucky for it.”

His lips twitch as he refocuses on the road, allowing me to wipe my clammy hands down my white, blue-flowered dress without him seeing.

“Any chance you’ll tell me where we’re off to now?”

“Nope,” he drawls lazily.

I’ve been asking him where he’s taking me since we left the house and every attempt has ended in failure.

“You’re hellbent on keeping this a secret.”

He flicks on his blinker. “I’m hellbent on making this a night you’ll remember.”

I whistle low. “Trying to ingrain yourself in my brain, Ashford?”

“Seems only fair considering you take up all the space in mine.”

My breath hitches, the air thickening as the car rolls to a stop at a red light. Kieran’s head turns my way, his tongue darting out to wet his lips.

A million thoughts fill his eyes, all of them moving at such lightning speed I can’t reach out and grasp one. I wish I could—I’d love nothing more than to crawl inside that mind of his and find out if he’s telling the truth.

I all but jump out of my skin when the car behind us honks. The light must have switched without us noticing.

Rushing to change the subject, I ask, “How did Emmy’s speech therapy go?”

I am interested. I just haven’t had a chance to ask him. If I’m being honest, when I’ve been around him over the past three days, all I could think about was how Kieran Ashford , the hockey god on ice and in the bedroom said he wanted to help me with my *life* list. Then my thoughts would instantly go to how I will have to tell him about all the things I want to experience and my chest would get that tight tingly sensation.

Because a majority of those *ideas* were inspired by scenes I’ve read in books, and considering I have nothing to compare them to, I have no idea if my ideas should remain fictional.

It’s safe to say I’ve been selfish and completely in my head, although Emmy perhaps wasn’t the topic to move on to. Kieran’s entire frame tenses, his muscles coiling tight around his body like a snake protecting themselves. His grip on the wheel turns his knuckles white.

“Besides saying Daddy when she sees my hockey uniform, the therapist hasn’t gotten another peep out of her.”

“What does her therapist say?”

His sigh seems to come from the depths of his soul with how long and deep it is. “To not give up, to continue trying all the exercises.”

“Well to be fair, she was right about the music. Sometimes I catch her lips moving as if she’s miming the words.”

Kieran’s eyes light up at that. “She does?”

Reaching over, I lay my hand gently on his arm, surprised to feel him relax at the small gesture. “Yeah, just give her time, Kieran. I know how frustrating and worrisome it is, but everyone has their own timeline for these things.”

“You’re very good at that.”

“At what?”

Kieran moves his hand to the gear shift, his muscles bunching in his arms as he does so. Changing a car gear shouldn’t be as attractive as it is, but something about his tan skin and rippling veins has me swallowing thickly and squeezing my thighs together.

I’m so distracted I almost miss when he says, “Soothing people.”

“You think I soothe people?”

He gives me a look as we come to a stop at another red light. “I don’t think, I *know*. You soothe me every day.”

I can’t stop my eye roll. “That’s because you’re easy to please.”

Kieran scoffs as if that offends him. “Am not.”

“Kieran, I could give you a box of cereal and it would soothe you.”

His gravelly laugh fills the truck and I wish I could bottle the sound.

Knowing that we’re going to talk about being intimate has every one of my nerve endings activated. It’s like I’m a live wire and Kieran is the electricity running through my veins, powering me.

“Easy or not, it’s still your superpower. You even do it with Emmy. I’ve seen you stop a toddler tantrum in its tracks and *that* is no easy feat.”

His compliment has my cheeks heating, the flush making its way down my neck and turning my skin the same shade as the hair cascading in curls down my back. Peering at him out of the corner of my eye I bite the inside of my cheek to try and stop the large grin that wants to be set free. “Thank you.”

Kieran winks. “Anytime, sunshine.”

He flicks his blinker on and the next thing I know, we’re pulling into the parking lot of an outdoor shopping center.

Frowning, I turn to him, expecting to see him confused or lost, but he’s the exact opposite. He seems giddy, his smile holding a secret. “Ready for the best date you’ve ever had?”

My brows furrow. He’s taking this life list very seriously. Kieran’s looking at me so intently I don’t have the heart to tell him that I’ve been on dates before. He knows this isn’t my first date, right?

Seeing something in my gaze, he chuckles. “Relax, I’m just saying this is going to top all the other losers who were blessed by the heavens to take you out.”

“Superpower,” I murmur to myself as I turn to get out of the truck.

His hand whips out and clutches mine. “Wait.” Sliding out of the truck, he jogs with a pep in his step around the passenger side and opens my door for me, holding out his hand with a smirk. “After you.”

“Laying the charm on thick tonight, are we?”

He winks. “Always with you.”

After closing the truck door, he holds out his hand and I don’t know why but I falter at the offer.

He moves closer to me, brushing his lips ever so slowly past the shell of my ear. “I know your list is long and explicit so if you want to be a good girl and tick them off, you need to at least take this baby step and hold my hand.”

The deep timbre of his voice, the words pouring from his lips, all I can think about is the way his drawl is a borderline growl, the sound making liquid heat pool in my belly.

I’m really doing this with him.

If I told myself a year and a half ago that I’d be standing here with Kieran, the healthiest I’ve ever been in ten years with him offering his hand as he teases that he’s going to take my virginity…I’d simply pass out.

What has become my life?

I know I made a promise to myself to live when I came back, to soak up every day that I woke up without aches and pain, my body not weighing me down by its horrendous immune system but this goes beyond the limitations of normal everyday life and lands squarely in the astounding category.

My breathing grows labored, my eyes firmly locked on his shirt in front of me. I can feel his lips tug up into a smile against the side of my face.

He’s patient, so incredibly patient.

And something tells me he’s been waiting for something far greater than to hold my hand.

Sliding mine in his, savoring the warmth and hardness of his calluses, I suck in a hiss of air as he gives my hand a squeeze and drawls, “Good girl.”

Dear god, this man is going to have me in the palm of his hand before I even hand over my list.

Kieran leads me along the sidewalk of the outdoor shopping center, tugging me out of my frozen stupor. I take in my surroundings, noting that most of the shops are closed, but that doesn’t surprise me since it’s nearing late evening.

The farther we walk, the deeper my frown grows.

Where is he taking us?

Kieran peers down at me, his gaze flicking between taking in every inch of my face and in the direction we're heading toward. If I didn't know any better, I'd say the slight fidget in his free hand is because he's nervous.

But that can't be. Kieran Ashford doesn't get nervous.

He's cocky, he's arrogant, and my god is he beautiful.

I catch the moment he lifts his head, his gaze snagging on something that turns the nervous tilt of a grin into a full-blown smile, one that's so contagious I suddenly find my lips wanting to mimic his.

I can't look away from him when he's like this.

"Ready?" he asks.

He's so much taller than me I'm beginning to get a kink in my neck.

Nodding, I let him turn me to…a bookstore?

Before I can process what's happening, Kieran is opening the door, ushering me in first before shaking hands with a middle-aged woman who is bouncing on the ball of her toes.

"You have no idea how excited I am to host for you tonight, Mr. Ashford." She looks at him over the top of her square glasses. "As you can imagine, a lot of us book lovers are hockey fans."

Kieran laughs with his full chest, the hearty sound pebbling my skin with goosebumps.

The conversation between him and the owner drowns into a faint buzz as my eyes take in the colorful store. By the artwork and special touches placed all around, I instantly can tell it's independently owned. Indie stores wear their love on their walls, and it shows in this one beautifully.

How have I never been here before? How did I not know about it?

And more importantly, how did Kieran know that I favor indie bookstores?

"Welcome to Lover's Lane," the woman greets, her enthusiasm palpable. "My name is Anne, and believe it or not, you are the very first person to rent out our store."

My eyes widen to the point where I no doubt look like a cartoon character. I turn my gaze to Kieran, but he's already watching me.

"Surprise," he whispers.

"Y-you rented out the store?" I stutter out.

Kieran's chin dips, those ocean blue eyes sucking me into their riptide.

He swallows thickly, the tension between us growing to such a feet Anne's cheeks flush as she stammers, "I-I'll leave y'all to it! Enjoy my store, I've poured my heart and soul into it. You've got three hours. Give me a holler if you need anything!"

She hightails it out of her own store so fast it makes me realize that the thick tension between Kieran and me must truly fill a room.

He rented a bookstore for me.

A bookstore.

My heart is in my throat and on display in my eyes for Kieran to see. "This is the most extravagant, thoughtful thing someone has ever done for me."

"Do you like it?" he asks, a little shyly.

"Like it?" I can't help but laugh. "Kieran, I love it. You're making it impossible for anyone to top this."

His eyes grow dark. "Good."

My lips part, Kieran tracking the movement.

"You know, this happens in my favorite book," I confess.

A coy smile spreads across his lips. "Does it?"

"I've read the book a hundred times, and that's no exaggeration. It's practically falling apart. I've already had to reglue the spine twice."

"Seems I chose well, then."

"Extremely."

Kieran reaches up and tucks a lock of my fiery red hair behind my ear, stealing my breath with his close proximity. His gaze bores into my soul as he whispers, "Show me what you love, Layla."

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Chapter 22

Kieran

ICEHAWKS BITCHES

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

everyone free your Sunday afternoon

from now on we do family Sundays and I'm making it a mandatory attendance

bring your loved ones to mine at 3 along with a dish and we'll spend time together with good food and people

IRVING

aww Daddy wants us to have bonding time!

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

ew, don't call me Daddy

JOHNSON

can I bring alcohol?

VALENTI

did you just ask to take alcohol to Cap's house?

JOHNSON

hence why I'm asking

IRVING

even I'm not that stupid

MITCHEL

dude…read the room

KIERAN

for the love of god, Johnson

I knew Blake hit you too hard last game

we need to get you an MRI to check your head

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

alcohol is all good just leave it outside and take home whatever you bring

IRVING

you sure Cap?

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

of course! keep it family level fun, though. we want the kids to have a great time and be safe

ELLINGTON

I'll be there

VALENTI

me too

O'CONNOR

Looking forward to it Cap!

IRVING

FAMILY SUNDAY HERE WE COME

KIERAN

can Bella make her blueberry muffins?

IRVING

OH YES PLEASE I'M BEGGING

I'LL GET ON MY KNEES FOR THOSE MUFFINS

KIERAN

get your own muffins, they're mine

IRVING

Fuck off and learn how to share

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

if they're anyone's muffins they're mine but yes I'll ask Bella

IRVING

thanks spider monkey ;)

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

no muffins for you

IRVING

NOOOOOO

Layla has no idea.

She's utterly oblivious to how much I've fallen for her.

I've been walking around this bookstore with her for close to an hour and a half, just trailing her as she gushes over books. Her eyes when I asked her to show me what she loves lit up like fireworks on the Fourth of July.

She walks from shelf to shelf, never missing a beat as she points out books, categorizing them by not read, read, loved, forgotten, and hated.

She's absolutely *glowing*.

It's what I imagine I look like when I talk about hockey. To have something in your life that brings you such happiness is a blessing, one we both seem to have been granted.

I'd be lying if I wasn't itching to ask what's on her list, though. I've decided to rename it to her desire list because, let's be honest, it's not just general life firsts.

The more that her cheeks flush, her lips parting to yap about books, the more I want to kiss her. My cock is painfully hard, like I'm talking one brush from Little Miss Sunshine and I'd come in my pants type hard.

Thank fuck my shirt covers my jeans.

"Am I boring you?" she asks suddenly and I realize we've come to a stop and I'm staring at her lips.

Snapping my eyes up to hers, I answer honestly. "You could never bore me."

She bites her lower lip. "We should probably talk about"—she peers around the store, lowering her voice—"our arrangement."

If I wasn't so caught up on the word she's decided to call this, I would have started laughing at her low whisper, considering I bought out the store so we could be alone.

My brow quirks. "Arrangement?"

She waves her hands in the air. "Well, what would you call it?"

“Fucking.”

Her eyes widen and the look she gives me has me doubling over with laughter this time. I hold my hands up as she lifts her purse and whacks my shoulder with it. “I’m sorry, I had to. Your face was priceless.”

Clutching my stomach, I wipe away a tear that escapes. She frowns up at me, crossing her arms and cocking her hip.

“It’s rude to laugh at people, Ashford.”

There’s my little firecracker.

“You’d think with all the dirty books you read that the word wouldn’t have gotten such a reaction.”

She lifts her chin. “Well excuse me for not being so desensitized to sex.”

I reach out and brush my thumb along her cheek, not caring that I don’t have an excuse to touch her, just knowing that I have to in this moment otherwise I won’t be able to breath.

“I’m just messing with you, sunshine. Of course it’s more than just fucking.”

Wrapping an arm around her shoulder, I savor her confused features as I steer us toward the sitting room. “Come on, it’s time I hear about this famous list. I have to say, you’ve got my imagination running wild.”

She just huffs, the sound running down my spine.

Walking through the store, I can’t help but admire how well done it is. The shelves are painted white, allowing the colorful spines of the books to add the pop of color, while decorations fill the gaps. Bookmarks, totes, candles, and even pins are artfully placed throughout. Then finally, the reading corner has a wall stapled with pages from several books, a pink neon sign above it reading *Lover’s Lane*. Which honestly couldn’t be more perfect for the conversation that’s about to take place.

Layla sits on the far end of the couch, her cheeks flushed the same shade of her hair, and as she tucks a lock behind her ear, I can’t help but wonder if I’ve already fucked up as she continues to avoid my gaze. Reaching over, I gently clasp her hand.

“I’m sorry about before. I promise I was joking. This is a big deal, and I want you to know it isn’t nothing to me. I won’t hurt you, Layla, that I can promise you.”

At the sincerity of my words, she finally lifts her eyes to mine, vulnerability shining in them.

She clings to my hand. “Thank you.”

I try to give her a reassuring smile. “I know it’s nerve-wracking, but if this is going to work, communication is key. I’m pretty good at reading your tells but I need to know that if you find something uncomfortable, you’ll speak up and tell me.”

Nodding, she releases her lower lip from between her teeth. “Yes, of course.”

Leaning back on the couch, I spread my legs enough to allow my thigh to brush against hers. “Lay it on me, then, sunshine. What’s on this list?”

She fidgets from side to side, brushing her hands down her dress before picking up the edge of it, rolling the fabric, and playing with it. “W-well…I mean, the obvious one.”

I nod, savoring how nervous she is. She’s absolutely adorable. “Yes, sex.”

Her swallow is audible.

“What else?” I ask.

She flaps her hand in the air. “Things.”

Before I can stop myself a burst of laughter explodes from my chest. She leans forward and whacks my chest again.

“What the hell happened to not laughing at me?”

Chuckling, I bite my fist to stop myself from leaning forward and kissing her. Fuck me, the way she glares at me shouldn’t turn me on as much as it does.

“First of all, there is no reality in which I won’t laugh with you.”

At this, her eyes narrow. “This should be a safe environment.”

“This is a safe environment. You’re always safe with me.” I lean forward, crowding her space, and by the widening of her eyes, she didn’t realize she was also leaning toward me like we’re opposite halves of a magnet. “Now onto my second point, *things* is not descriptive enough. I want to know what you’ve written on the list.”

She sends daggers my way and I can just picture what’s running through her mind right now. “Can I not just write it down?”

“Is it so dirty you can’t even show me the original?”

If I thought I’ve seen Layla blush before it’s nothing compared to now. Scrambling upwards, she lifts her chin. “It’s a sacred list.”

“One which includes the things I need to do to you, and by the way you’re hedging this, it’s so fucking dirty you’re scared to show me.”

“I’m not scared.”

“Then show me.”

“No.”

“Point proven,” I whisper.

She growls deep in her throat. “Why do you even want to see it all?”

“Because I can’t wait to get my fucking hands on you. I thought that was obvious.” My lip twitches. “On second thought, I want to hear you say it.”

“What?” she all but chokes.

“If you want me to do this with you, you need to say it. If you’re not able to ask for it, I won’t do it.”

She’s spluttering now. “You’re not a teacher grading me!”

I tap my lip, dramatically pondering. “If I do recall correctly, you said you were going to use me so I could teach you for other people.”

Now she’s rolling her eyes.

I fucking love it when she rolls her eyes, it’s like foreplay.

“I did *not* say that.”

“What did you say then?”

Her lips part before snapping shut.

“Come on, sunshine,” I all but purr. “Tell me what’s on the list.”

“E-everything,” she blurts, her chest heaving.

“Define everything.”

My voice is so deep and thick it even stuns me, but damn does it feel good to see her eyes heat at the sound.

“I haven’t done…anything. All I’ve ever done is kiss guys and maybe been weirdly groped here and there, but that’s it, and I want to try *everything*.”

My heart stops beating.

I sit up slowly, her eyes never leaving mine as I crowd her personal space. “Nothing?”

“Nothing,” she whispers.

Her eyes snap to her hand clutching the pillow in front of her and suddenly the mood shifts, my firecracker extinguished. Shuffling forward, I lay a gentle finger under her chin and lift until her sad face meets mine.

“Hey,” I whisper.

“Hi.”

“Why the sudden shift?”

Holding my breath, I'm worried she's going to brush me off, say nothing or that everything is fine; most people do. But I don't know why I thought Layla would be like the rest—she's the most special person I've met.

"It's embarrassing. I haven't…lived."

"Yes you have, sunshine. It's just a life you didn't deserve." Her breath hitches and I can tell this could head south quickly. Sliding both my hands up her neck, I cup her jaw, boring into her eyes, hoping she'll believe every word. "I'm grateful, beyond lucky, and have been wondering what I did to deserve this and you in my life. I say we have fun with it." Smiling, I try to lighten the mood. "I don't know if you've heard but there's these puck bunny sites that write blogs about me. Apparently, I'm a pretty good lay."

She bends over, a laugh exploding from her as she pushes me away. "Trust you to try and make me laugh by reminding me how much of a whore you are."

"I prefer the term giver."

Her laughter stops abruptly as she lifts a finger. "I am not touching that one."

Winking, I sit back. "Come on, tell me what you want. I won't judge. Actually, I'm excited about all of this and honored you feel safe enough with me to do it."

That sobers her up. She looks at me then, as if she can find the answers to all her questions just by staring at me.

She makes a sharp point with the fabric of her dress again. "I don't just want things done to me. I want to…experiment…with you."

I stop breathing.

My heart stops beating.

I think I stop existing.

Oh my fucking god.

All those nights I laid in bed thinking about the girl with the sharp tongue, with the fiery red hair and sunshine attitude, and imagining what I'd do to her are coming true.

"Do you know what you want to do?" I manage to get out.

She licks her lips. "Yes. Believe it or not, books can be very…eye-opening in that department."

Oh I know that.

That book she was talking about earlier? The one she's read a hundred times, the one I secretly listened to, the one I took inspiration from for our first date? That was eye opening. It was raunchy. No, more than raunchy—it was *graphic*.

So much so I want to see what she annotated in that book.

I put my arms on my knees purely to hide the bulge in my pants.

"That's…exciting to hear, to say the least." Her chuckle slithers down my back. "That's good that you want that. It means we can take things slow." *Take my time is more like it.* "No one just jumps into sex straight off the bat and I know you're eager to get on with it, but I want your first time to be special."

"Slow."

"Slow," I parrot.

Layla nods, her thoughts right there in her eyes for me to read. "I don't know how to ask for what I want."

Her quiet confession has my heart melting just that little bit more for her.

"That's okay," I reassure her. Moving closer, she's forced to tip her head back as I say, "Just one thing. Tell me one thing you read about that you want to do."

Her eyes close as her chest rises and falls in quick succession. "Talking."

"You like dirty talk, sunshine?"

She blinks at the deep timbre of my voice. "I think so," she murmurs.

Reaching up, I slowly move her hair off her shoulder, my fingers trailing down to her pulse point where it hammers wildly in her neck. "Tell me," I drawl. "How does this make you feel?"

She's all but panting. "G-good."

I cup her jaw gently, my thumb brushing back and forth across her bottom lip as I lower my head, hovering my face an inch from hers. "And how would it make you feel if I told you to part your lips and suck?"

A small noise escapes her, part shock and part moan. Her hand darts out to grip my shirt. I don't think she knows if she should pull me closer or push me away.

She does neither as she holds me where I am.

"More than good," she confesses.

I smile against her ear as I drawl, "Then you like talking, sunshine."

I knew that would be the case, there was far too much dirty talk in that favorite book of hers. And by the way her legs are pressed together, Layla more than enjoys it.

It takes every ounce of self-restraint to pull away from her. Removing my hand is like a punishment straight to my soul, especially as she sits there panting, her eyes heavy-lidded and lips parted.

Her hand is still fisting my shirt.

She wants me.

And fuck does that feel good.

“What else do you want?” I ask.

My question pulls her from her thoughts and she ever so slowly lets go of my shirt. Her eyes flit from mine to the floor to the windows at the front. She’s quiet for a moment, pensive.

“There’s one thing that I seem to enjoy.”

Even talking about sex, she sounds sophisticated and elegant.

Smiling to myself, I ask, “And what is that?”

“I’m not sure what it’s called because I’ve researched both voyeurism and exhibitionist and it doesn’t quite fit.”

Every nerve ending in my body sparks to life.

My blood rushes in my ears, my heart all but leaping from the confines of my rib cage.

Layla and this list are far outweighing any fantasy I ever conjured up.

“Describe it to me.”

She gets this faraway look, her cheeks remaining rosy. “Anything that is public. The sheer thought of getting caught sets my body on fire. I don’t want anyone to actually see me but—”

“You like the idea, the risk behind getting caught and the knowledge that you shouldn’t be doing it.”

Her cheeks flame as she nods.

Now I understand the constant glances behind me. She’s looking at the large windows lining the front wall, the ones that show a clear view of the parking lot.

The very deserted, very dark parking lot.

All the restaurants that are open near here are on the other side of the shopping center, and even though I’m wrapped up in everything Layla is saying, I haven’t spotted anyone walk past. Where we’re sitting is even at

the back of the store, only a sliver of the reading nook visible from the street.

My cock twitches painfully at the idea that comes to mind.

Peering back over my shoulder to make sure no one is outside, I glance down at my watch to see we've still got this place all to ourselves for some time.

Sliding closer, I place my arm over the back of the couch, cocooning Layla into my side.

Her eyes slide to mine, confusion swirling as she asks, "What are you doing?"

Watching her face intently so I can spot if she gives any hint she doesn't like something, I lay my left hand on her knee. I lower my head, sheltering her from the street so if anyone did walk past all they'd see is me sitting on the couch.

Trailing small circles on her knee, I watch as she licks her lips. "What do you feel when I touch you?"

Her eyes widen to saucers, darting behind my shoulder then to my hand on her knee before finally moving back to my face. "Now?" she squeaks.

"Mm-hmm," I murmur.

Her chest rises and falls rapidly, her legs squeezing together.

She's turned on.

She doesn't answer me, her shyness stealing her tongue as I flatten my palm on her knee, gently brushing my rough calloused hand up her leg. The movement steals her breath.

Dropping my head so I'm only an inch away from her lips I ask, "How does it make you feel?"

"Hot," she breathes. "Needy."

Our eyes collide—mine the deepest blue of the ocean, hers the shore of the tropics. My hand drifts just that little bit higher, her dress bunching around my wrist as I tease her thigh.

"Do you want me to touch you?" I ask.

She lifts her chin a fraction, the movement making our lips unexpectedly brush against one another. The spark that races down my spine has me squeezing her thigh as a deep growl hits the back of my throat.

To my utter delight, she parts her legs a fraction, giving me space to climb higher. "Yes," she whispers, her hot breath across my face.

If Layla reached out and stroked me right now, I'd come in my pants.

I've never been so turned on in my life and I haven't touched her, let alone even kissed her yet.

"You're not as innocent as people think, are you, sunshine?"

Layla shakes her head, our lips brushing again as I move my hand higher. She leans forward, urging my hand to continue, but I keep us suspended as I torment and tease her.

"How badly do you want my fingers on your clit?"

Her hand snaps out, gripping my thigh as she squeezes, her breaths growing labored as she moves closer, our lips dancing along each other's and yet not in the way we both want.

"I'm desperate for it," she confesses.

"Beg me."

Her eyes snap up. "Beg?"

I nod, my index finger brushing over her underwear ever so softly. The touch is barely there, but she whimpers all the same. Her other hand reaches out and fists my shirt again as her hips begin to seek out friction.

I tsk, moving my hand away. "Give me what I want, sunshine."

She's panting against my lips as the hand fisting my shirt tugs me closer. "Please, Kieran."

"Please what?"

"Touch me."

No sooner have the words left her lips are my fingers are dipping into her panties and brushing across her swollen clit. Her hips buck off the couch, her eyes closing as she moans into my mouth.

With my thumb on her clit, I slowly slide a finger inside her, feeling how snug she is and savoring the warmth surrounding my fingers.

"You're so beautiful like this. So carefree."

Her head is nodding, our foreheads pressed against each other as I whisper, "How does it make you feel to know that anyone could walk by, that anyone could see me finger fucking you on this couch?" She sucks in a deep breath, her eyes fluttering open to lock on mine as I smirk. "Look at how wet that makes you."

I wasn't lying, she's completely drenched. My hand is soaked, and by the way her muscles are clamping, she's close.

"That's it, baby, ride my hand. Show me how good I make you feel."

A deep moan leaves her lips and those gorgeous eyes squeeze tightly shut again.

Sliding my free hand along her neck and into the back of her hair, I gently grip it, holding her to me as I whisper, “That’s it, Layla. Rock against my hand, come on my fingers, baby, and moan my name as you do.”

She’s groaning into my mouth, her hand fisting my shirt pulling me closer as her hips rock relentlessly against my hand, but I can tell she needs something, just a little push over the cliff.

Reaching forward I dart my tongue across her lower lip and whisper, “You have to be quiet, sunshine, otherwise someone’s going to come walking around the corner to check what’s happening.” My voice is gravelly, my thighs tense as I try my fucking hardest not to come in my pants. “Wouldn’t want a stranger to get turned on seeing you come on my hand.”

Layla throws her head back, exposing her neck on a scream, her core convulsing as she comes. She holds me close to her as she does, her moan long and loud, the sound drawing a smirk from me. I lower my head and pepper kisses along her neck, savoring the way she shivers from my touch. “Good girl, baby,” I murmur. “Look at how radiant you are when you come.”

Fuck me it’s a miracle I didn’t come right along side her, if she so much as touched me though, I would in a heartbeat.

The sound she made will be playing on a loop in my mind for eternity, especially when I go home and wrap my hand around my cock.

Layla’s heaving as she slowly comes back down to earth. As I slide my finger out from between her legs, she examines me with hooded eyes and it gives me immense satisfaction to watch them widen as I bring my fingers to my lips and suck.

A shiver rolls down my back and I have to adjust my jeans, averting my eyes.

I’m seriously a second away from fucking coming.

Especially after tasting her.

I fucking tasted Layla Carson.

Oh my god, I’m going to come.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I think of everything I can to stop my orgasm before I embarrass myself—fucking baseball, cooking shows, muffins, a zebra.

But it’s hard, so fucking hard, because this is Layla.

My Layla.

The Layla I've dreamed about for nearly two years, the one I thought would never give me the time of day, and now look where I am. Sitting on a couch in a bookstore trying not to come.

"Kieran?"

"One sec."

Taking a deep inhale, I open my eyes. She's already smiling down at the very evident tent in my jeans.

"And you keep saying you're like everyone else."

Her head snaps up to me at that. "Am I not?"

"No."

Leaning forward, I place a featherlight kiss against her forehead because…fuck, I don't know why. "How was that?"

She bursts out laughing as she smooths her dress down. "How was that? Jesus, Kieran, that was—was—" She sighs before falling back, not realizing she's all but snuggling into my side. "Amazing doesn't cover it."

"Live up to your fantasy?"

"Better than any fantasy I could have imagined," she whispers.

"Good, because there's more where that came from."

The happy bubble I was in pops as she tilts her head up to look at me and whispers, "We should talk about ground rules."

Ground rules.

Right, because this is an arrangement. Not just *us*.

Locking down my reaction at the reminder that this isn't a real date, I smile at her and say, "I'm all ears."

"Well, we probably should keep this between us."

I frown. "You haven't told Bella?" If she's keeping this from her best friend, is that because she's ashamed to admit she's doing this with me? I can't stop the words from pouring out of my mouth. "What am I? Your dirty secret?"

Layla scrambles to sit up, facing me fully as she places her soft dainty hand against my chest, right above my heart that may as well belong to her. "God no, Kieran," she swears. Her hands move to cup my cheeks, maneuvering my head to face hers. "I promise that's not it. I'm not ashamed of *you*. I'm embarrassed that I'm almost twenty-six and I had to ask a friend to help teach me things."

"Oh."

I should probably say something else but I can't muster up the words. My heart is still beating frantically, pain striking through it that we're going to hide this. But I guess that makes sense, considering she doesn't want to actually date me.

Swallowing bile at the reminder of that, I shake my head, trying to clear my desolate thoughts.

"Can I tell Grayson at least? Not details of course, but I don't like lying to him. He's my family."

She brushes her thumbs across my cheeks, back and forth, the motion so soothing I find my shoulders relaxing. "Of course, and so you know, I already told Bella. I'm sorry, I should have asked you beforehand."

My heartbeat finally picks up at that. Maybe I'm not a dirty secret to her after all.

"It's okay. She's like a sister to me."

Smiling at that, Layla pulls her hands from my face, making my fingers twitch at my sides, begging to move her touch back on my body. "I just don't want to announce to the world that we're friends with benefits," she explains.

"That's fair. Any other rules?"

Chewing on her lip, she plays with the fabric of her dress. "Should we put a time limit on this?"

I frown. "Why would we do that?"

She shrugs. "Well, maybe we should. I've never been intimate with someone but I've heard that it's hard not to get attached once you start having sex. What if we stop when one of us feels like they're catching feelings?"

Too late for that, I want to mutter, but instead I find myself nodding because it really is too late for me. I've fallen for her already and there's no coming back. "Sounds like a plan to me."

"And…and if you meet someone that you want to start seeing, I'll understand. I don't want to hold you back."

A muscle feathers in my jaw. When will she understand that it's only her?

"I'm not interested in anyone else."

"Well, just in case you meet—"

"I won't."

My lips twitch as her eyes flare. “You sound far too absolute about the uncertain.”

“I know what I want.”

“And what’s that?”

“Y—”

“Hello, hello, chickens!”

Layla all but jumps out of her skin as Anne comes barreling back into the store, giving us a wide grin. “Want to check out any books to wrap up your time?”

Layla scrambles away from me, flattening her dress down. “My gosh, you gave me a heart attack!”

“Sorry, love! I did knock a few times, but you two were just so engrossed in each other.”

I snort as I rise from the couch, thankful my dick deflated the moment Layla called me her *friend*. I glance back down at the cushions, wondering what the chances are that I could buy the whole couch and put it in my bedroom. *Probably slim.*

“No books—”

“Plenty of books,” I cut Layla off. Smirking, I round the store and collect all the books she pointed to that she wanted to read. “Let me just grab them.”

Layla’s jaw is practically on the floor as she hurries after me.

“Kieran!” she hisses. “I don’t need you to buy me books.”

“Need and want are two different things.”

“But how do you even remember—”

“I always remember when it comes to you.” Turning to her, I show her the large stack in my hands. “Am I missing any though?” I read the spines again, wracking my brain, and it dawns on me which title I’m missing, but by then, I realize she’s also fallen silent. The look she’s giving me is different, more…weighted.

“What?”

“Bella was right.”

“About?”

She shakes her head before spinning and muttering under her breath, “Underestimated.”

Layla's Life List

~~Have a water fight~~
~~Go to second base~~
~~Have an orgasm in public~~
~~Go on the best date of my life~~

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Chapter 23

Layla

KIERAN

I know it's your day off this Sunday but do you want to come to family day at Grayson's?

Emmy would love for you to come

LAYLA

I'd love to

for Emmy of course

KIERAN

I'm coming to see your sexy face

think you had a typo

Bella continues to blink, her jaw open, all while Cindy stands beside her grinning from ear to ear.

"I-I'm sorry, he did what?" Bella stutters out.

Peering over my shoulder to make sure he's not in earshot, I step forward, lowering my voice to a whisper. "He rented out a bookstore for me, and at the end, he grabbed all the books I said I wanted to read and bought them."

Cindy whistles. "I fucking called it." She cackles wildly. "I knew it!"

"Shh!"

She waves me off. “Oh please, they’re all outside talking about hockey. They won’t hear me. Besides, they’re used to my loud shenanigans.”

Bella turns to Cindy. “And to think this happened because you stuck your nose in their business and forced Layla to give that guy her number.”

“I take full matchmaking credit.” She smiles at me smugly. “I told you, the man is smitten.”

Bella scoffs. “Matchmaking credit, my ass. The two of them met because of *me*.”

“No one is taking matchmaking credit! I told you, it’s an arrangement.”

“Potayto, potahto,” Cindy mutters into her wineglass.

“Was I this annoying when I was in denial about Grayson?” Bella asks.

Blowing out a raspberry, I’m about to harp on them again that he has no real feelings for me, but Allie steps inside with Emmy on her hip.

“This gorgeous girl wants a juice box,” she declares.

Before she can do it herself, and more so to give myself a reprieve from my persistent friends, I grab a juice box out of the fridge, passing it across the countertop.

“Thanks, honey.”

Allie leaves as quickly as she arrived, muttering something about an egg race outside with the other kids. I have to be honest, I thought I knew all the players but I was wrong. There’s twenty-three men in total, and some of them even have kids.

Turning back to Bella, I try to switch topics. “It was sweet of Grayson to come up with the family Sunday idea. Gives Emmy a chance to socialize with no pressure.”

Bella smiles as she looks out the kitchen window, and I can tell the moment she finds Grayson, her face melting with love and awe. “He’s a sweetheart.” Her joy suddenly clouds over. “It’s days like this where I really miss my mom, though.” She sniffles, waving her hand in the air. “Ugh, sorry, I’m ruining the mood.”

“Never,” I say quickly. “It’s understandable, B. We all miss her.”

My heart clenches at the memory of Trisha, the woman that was like my second mom.

“I bet it’s even harder when Grayson’s parents stay in town,” Cindy whispers, and I have to admit, I didn’t even think about how it would make Bella feel. Guilt thunders through me, I should have reached out sooner to see how she was doing.

Sniffling, Bella nods. “I can’t tell them not to stay here, but it’s just… it’s *really* hard sometimes to see him getting love from his mom.” She gives us a wobbly smile. “Allie is amazing, though. She pours all that love toward me too and I adore it but—”

“You wish it was your mom?” I whisper.

Tears fill her eyes before she blinks furiously and puts on a tough exterior. “Anyway! Enough about me. Besides Kieran being absolutely smitten and planning the perfect date for you, how was it?”

Cindy gives me a sad smile behind Bella’s back before giving her shoulder a squeeze and topping up her wineglass. I, however, try to ignore my body betraying me with my flaming cheeks and act nonchalant instead. “It was fun.”

The wine bottle in Cindy’s hand freezes midair, the girls exchanging a knowing look before Cindy smacks the bottle down and squeals. I’m surprised it doesn’t smash.

“We need all the details!”

My nose wrinkles. “Details of what?”

“Oh, come on!” Cindy whines. “Something happened. Look at your cheeks.”

Screw my damn genetics.

Bella’s head rears back. “Oh my god, she’s right. Did something happen between you two?”

My lips part, my mouth opening and closing, and I feel incredibly stupid. Why can’t I be a fabulous liar?

Cindy steps forward and clutches my arm. “That man moves fast. Was it good?”

Bella whacks her shoulder. “She didn’t sleep with him in a bookstore!” Her eyes cut to me. “You didn’t, right?”

“You two aren’t going to drop this, are you?”

“Nope,” they say in unison.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “This is very invasive.”

Bella clicks her tongue. “I do believe you sent me a million texts asking for details about Grayson, and one of them told me to climb him like a tree.”

Cindy snorts as I wince. “I did do that, didn’t I?”

“Oh yeah, baby. Spill the tea.”

I check to make sure everyone's still outside before blurting, "We didn't sleep together, okay?"

"Why not?" Cindy asks.

Bella whacks her shoulder again. "Rude, Cin."

"I recant my statement." She cocks her hip. "What *did* you do, though?"

My heart starts beating wildly. "We, ah… Kieran put his…"

"Girl, spit it out!"

"Kieran made me come on the bookstore's couch and anyone walking by could have seen."

My chest is heaving by the time I'm done blurting it out, and Cindy and Bella's wide eyes just serve to speed up my already frantic heart rate. "Say something!"

"I feel like a proud mom right now." Cindy takes a sip of her wine before chuckling to herself. "Damn, Lil."

"In public?" Bella squeaks.

I nod emphatically, my excitement over it showing.

I've been thinking about it nonstop ever since. Have barely been able to function with it playing repeatedly in my mind. How Kieran made me feel is nothing compared to how I've made myself feel. It was electric and so addicting, I understand why the puck bunnies beg for him.

"It was amazing, really," I breathe.

Cindy rubs her hands together. "I can't wait to see where this goes."

"It's not going anywhere," I say dryly. "This is going to work for us, you'll see."

She hums under her breath. "I suppose we will."

"Trust me, Kieran is more than happy with our agreement."

"Talking about me, sunshine?"

My spine snaps upright, my head swinging behind me. I find Kieran leaning against the open patio doors, his white T-shirt clinging to his body like a second skin as he folds his arms across his chest, his grin smug as hell.

"No!" I blurt at the same time Cindy snorts.

"Sure, sure."

Kieran's dark chuckle does something to my body. My stomach clenches, the hair on my arms standing on end as he pushes off the doorframe, the backwards black hat he's wearing making him even more attractive—if that's possible.

He struts toward me as if he doesn’t have a care in the world until his shoes brush mine. My head tips back, my heart pounding furiously as his arm reaches past me. He pulls back, a grape clutched between his fingers.

“What are you telling them?” he asks, popping it in his mouth.

My cheeks flame. “Nothing.”

Cindy groans. “Jesus, you could cut the sexual tension with a spoon.”

Kieran’s lips tip upwards. “Good to know, Cin.”

“She’s not said much,” Bella whispers in an attempt to help.

It doesn’t. Kieran’s grin turns downright devilish as he drawls, “Perhaps I haven’t given her enough to talk about yet.” Winking down at me he goes on, “I should rectify that.”

I’m utterly mortified as a small sound escapes me, and I can’t tell if it’s a whimper or a squeak.

Thankfully, an even louder squeal takes away from my mortifying noise. Emmy comes barreling into the house, Bambi on her heels, and she doesn’t stop until she smashes into the back of Kieran’s legs.

“Wow,” he says with a laugh. “Hello, little munchkin.” Bending, he scoops her into his arms, his smile wide and full of love. “What are you and Bambi doing running around like chickens with your heads cut off?”

Emmy giggles into her hands before laying her head down on his shoulder. He wraps his free arm around her, laying his cheek atop her head and you can practically feel the air change as all three of us women watch Kieran snuggle his daughter.

“Grayson wanted me to let you know that lunch is ready and off the grill. Everyone’s eating, and considering how many players are down there, I’d hurry to snag food.”

Cindy whose eyes fill with dark clouds seems to shake herself before marching off with another bottle of wine in her hand that she somehow acquired. “I’m going to kill Asher if he didn’t put food aside for me.”

Bella snorts, trailing behind her. “Same with Grayson.”

“Grayson grabbed you a plate. Forced everyone to wait until he had your food.”

Her lips twitch. “Of course he did.”

The girls head outside, leaving me standing in the kitchen with Kieran and my crying ovaries. He’s so cute with Emmy. They’ve grown so close these passing weeks, he’s really flourished as a dad.

Maybe now that I’m healthier I can start daydreaming about a future in which I have my own children. I’ve never allowed myself to imagine that, but…perhaps I should start letting myself.

Kieran turns to me. “I saved you a plate too. I didn’t know what you would want so I got a little of everything.”

And there goes my heart, joining my ovaries and crying right alongside her.

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Chapter 24

Kieran

ICEHAWKS BITCHES

JOHNSON

who the fuck leaked a photo of me from the egg race online?

VALENTI

not me

ELLINGTON

I was cooking on the grill with Grayson

KIERAN

I'm in the photo next to you so I'm ruled out

seems we're both trending

JOHNSON

I'm going to be known as egg guy

KIERAN

it's not that bad

JOHNSON

it looks like I have five yellow nipples

I have multiple yolks dripping down my chest

IRVING

that's what she said ;)

JOHNSON

it was you wasn’t it

IRVING

I don’t kiss and tell

JOHNSON

you sent that to a puck bunny???

IRVING

she was asking where I was

JOHNSON

a simple I’m busy would have sufficed

IRVING

you don’t know much about ladies do you?

they have to be loved and cherished

they deserve communication

VALENTI

I am howling

ELLINGTON

yeah Johnson, gotta brush up on your knowledge of women

JOHNSON

I’m going to throttle you Irving

We’ve managed to seat everyone at a long table comprised of six smaller ones. With several white cloths tying it together, it’s quite a feast. Bambi is in heaven, running up and down along the back of the table begging people for food.

After all, the way to a golden retriever’s heart is their stomach.

Grayson clears his throat from my left where he and Bella sit. Rising, he grabs everyone’s attention. Irving, down at the other end, starts banging on the table like a damn monkey. “Speech! Speech! Speech!” he chants.

“If you shut up maybe he’ll do one,” Johnson snaps.

“Are your feelings still hurt from the egg nipple photo?”

Pinching the bridge of my nose, my shoulders shake with silent laughter as Johnson’s face turns beet red. Layla snickers to my right, the corner of her eyes wrinkling with her smile.

“I just wanted to say thank you to everyone who came today. I appreciate everyone showing up and embracing the community we’ve created within this team.” He clears his throat, the air shifting. “This team means everything to me and I know a lot of you share the same sentiment. We’ve all been through a lot over the years, on and off the ice, and with our families growing I’d love to make this a tradition every Sunday. To come together in support, in the best way we know how for one another.” He lifts his glass full of Coke and smiles. “To us, to family.”

“To family,” everyone cheers.

Emmy wriggles on her seat beside me, her eyes barely reaching the table. Snorting, I heft her onto my lap and begin to cut up the sausages Ellington and Crawford grilled.

“Want some, Emmy?” I ask.

“Yes.”

My fork scrapes the plate, Layla beside me dropping her utensils. Bella and Cindy gasp.

Emmy’s eyes widen, darting around in alarm, and I realize as much of an amazing moment this is, our shocked reactions are ruining it.

Quickly kissing the top of her head, I continue cutting her sausages, her speech therapist’s words barreling down my mind, reminding me not to overreact. This is normal. Speaking has to remain *normal*.

“How many pieces do you want?” I ask, but even I can hear the emotion thickening my throat.

Emmy holds her hand to her mouth, her little brows furrowing as she stares down at the plate.

Layla reaches over, her hand squeezing my knee under the table, and just that one small touch grounds me. I blink away my tears and focus.

Don’t fucking scare her!

“When’s your next game?” Layla asks, trying to get the table talking again, and I could kiss her for it because Emmy leans into me further, her voice a mere whisper as she says, “Six.”

Despite my best efforts to remain normal I can’t, my eyes burn, my throat right along with it. My baby’s talking to me. She’s *talking.*

“Six it is,” I whisper hoarsely, trying my fucking hardest not to cry like a baby.

She spoke.

She spoke to me.

And it's over sausages! Thank you, sausage gods!

I will forever love sausages.

Emmy begins to munch on the said sausages as if she didn't just reach out and clutch my heart in a vise.

Grayson's voice is rough as he says, "Next Saturday."

Bella clears her throat. "You should have Allie look after Emmy and come with us; we're planning to go to the bar after."

"Oh yes!" Cindy says. "Please, Layla, it's so fun. You have to come."

Layla looks up at me, the question dancing in her eyes and, fuck me, she could ask for anything in this moment and I'd hand it to her on a silver platter.

"Of course she'll come." Soaking in the small smile she gives me, I turn to Grayson. "Speaking of Allie and Carlton, how long are they in town for?"

Despite the conversation I'm submerged in I can't stop a single thought from repeating.

She spoke to me, my baby girl spoke to me.

He rubs the nape of his neck. "Well…"

My brows rise. "No shit, are they thinking of moving here?"

Bella laughs. "How you can always tell what someone is thinking is a mystery."

"A superpower," I hear Layla murmur beside me.

My lips twitch at that.

Grayson nods, a spark in his gaze I'm beyond ecstatic to see. "They are. They want to keep their home though, and I agree. I don't want them to get rid of the house Drew and I grew up in."

Bella leans over, clasping his hand. "Grayson is thinking of surprising them," she whispers, keeping her voice low so they don't hear.

I peer halfway down the table where they're fully engrossed in a conversation with Lukas Whitman and his wife, one of the older players on the team.

"*We* are thinking of surprising them," Grayson corrects.

"It's your money."

"*Our* money."

She rolls her eyes. "Stubborn hockey player."

"Stubborn artist," Grayson counters.

Bella glances over at Layla and something passes between them, a silent conversation. Grayson and I share those looks often, too. It happens when you've known someone for as long as we have.

While Emmy continues to eat the sausages, I catch Matteo frowning down at the phone in Ellington's hand, his thumbs flying across the screen.

"Speaking of family, how are things with Evie?" I start.

Ellington lifts his phone as if in answer. "Not good."

A muscle ticks in Valenti's cheek. "What happened now?"

The sudden darkness in his tone has our end of the table falling silent. Bella, Cindy, and Layla pop their heads up, and even Emmy stops chewing.

Ellington looks back down at his phone, shaking his head. "This stupid prick she's dating," he growls in frustration, running his hands through his hair and pulling. "Apparently she picked him up from work and he smelled like his colleague's perfume."

Layla frowns. "Could the bottle maybe have spilled?"

Oh sweet innocent Layla.

Ellington snorts. "Like how his phone accidentally deleted the text thread between them?"

"Oh."

Ellington shakes his head in frustration. "I swear to god, it's like a switch flipped in his head and now he's suddenly a boyfriend that treats his partner like utter garbage."

"I hope you mean soon-to-be ex-boyfriend," Bella mutters under her breath.

"Here's fucking hoping," Valenti growls, his fists clenching around his utensils in a white-knuckle grip.

Cindy leans forward, peering past O'Connor. "Is that why she stopped coming home? Over Christmas, right?"

Ellington sighs. "I have no idea anymore. I think my mom knows, because around that same time she got all weird and cagey."

Valenti's gaze snaps to his best friend. "You didn't tell me this."

"I honestly didn't put it together until recently."

The heaviness of his shoulders has me moving the conversation off the topic; he needs a distraction. "What's up with the whispers in the league? Are there trades happening?"

Ellington sends me a grateful smile before putting his phone face down on the table. Valenti, on the other hand, can't seem to tear his gaze away

from it.

Grayson's chin dips. "Lukas is retiring. This is his last season."

O'Connor whistles. "Fuck, feels like he's been around since the beginning."

"Because he has been," I snort. "He's a dinosaur in the NHL."

Layla elbows me and whisper-hisses, "He's right there."

"He can't hear me."

"She's right, he hasn't publicly announced it yet so let's just keep it between us."

O'Connor chuckles. "Yeah, Ashford, keep your big ass gossipy mouth shut."

I lean back, gasping in mock horror. "Me? Gossip? No such thing." Shaking my head, grinning, I turn to Grayson. "Who are they thinking of bringing in though?"

"Rhodes?" O'Connor asks.

"No better than women," Cindy mutters under her breath.

"And they say we gossip," Bella adds.

The girls fall into another conversation as Grayson chews, pondering. "I'm not sure Rhodes wants to leave San Francisco. He seems happy there."

Ellington frowns. "Patrick?"

"Odare?" Valenti scoffs. "As if IceHawks would offer him a contract. He's a walking nightmare."

Grayson points his fork at Ellington. "Matteo is right. After the headaches I gave the team they won't want to touch anyone with a bad PR rep with a ten-foot pole."

Rubbing my hand along my five o'clock shadow, I muse, "What about Silverton?"

A smile tugs at O'Connor's lips. "Kai Silverton?"

I nod before facing Grayson, finding his brows high. "If IceHawks aren't considering him yet they should. His stats this season so far are off the charts."

"Last year too," Valenti chimes in.

"He's a weapon on the ice."

O'Connor leans back in his chair. "Has he got a family? Any ties to California?"

Grayson shakes his head, laying an arm across the back of Bella's chair and playing with the ends of her hair. "Not that I know of. He's a pretty

private guy though. I barely see anything about him online."

I shrug. "Time will tell but maybe speak to Coach and mention Silverton in case they're not already looking."

"I'll bring it up at practice next week."

Emmy places another bite in her mouth before tipping her head up and looking at me.

I fucking love sausages.

"Hi, pretty girl," I whisper.

Her nose wrinkles as she laughs, returning her gaze to the food.

Feeling eyes on me, the table continues to chat around me and I turn my head to the side. Layla smiles up at me, mouthing, *Sausages*.

I can't help but laugh and mirror back, *Sausages*.

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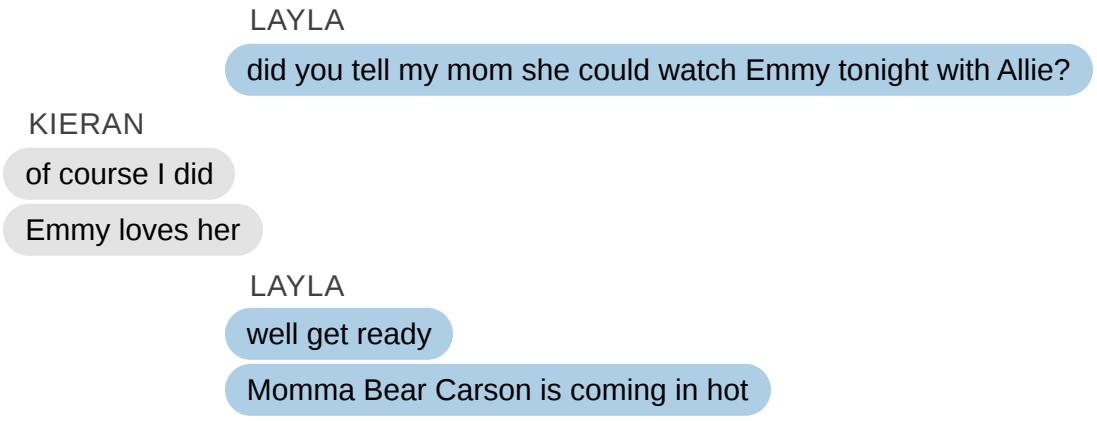
Chapter 25

Layla



My mom doesn't even wait for me to get out of the car. She's got her arms loaded with bags full of clothes and toys and all but bursts through the front door like a hurricane.

"Did she even knock?" I mutter to myself.

My Mom, bless her heart, is very evidently excited. She'll never say it because she's happy I'm well and healthy, but I know it must be hard for her, to have gone from taking care of me every day to suddenly not. It's not only been an adjustment for me but for my parents as well.

We're all trying to find our new normal.

I hurry after her and her loud boisterous voice I can already hear as she coos and awes over Emmy.

I find Kieran standing at the edge of his living room with his hands on his hips, his duffel bag beside him, and that black hat facing backwards on his head. His shoulders shake with silent laughter.

“They’re spoiling her rotten,” I say with a small chuckle, spotting Emmy surrounded by a circle of toys, Allie and my mom kneeling beside her as they go through each toy they got her.

“Yep. Spoiled is the right word.”

His voice is thick with emotion, his eyes holding such joy it makes me smile, too. “She deserves it.”

“That she does.” His eyes cut my way. “What are the chances they’ll even notice us leave?”

“Slim to none.”

Snorting out a laugh, Kieran waves as he picks up his duffel bag. “I’ll see you guys later tonight. Are you sure you’re okay staying here till late?”

Allie doesn’t even lift her head as she sends him off. “Yes honey, off you go. Slap that puck!”

Shaking his head, amused, he ambles over and bends to place a kiss on the top of Emmy’s head. “Have fun, sweet girl. I’ll blow you kisses on TV.” Turning to my mom, he gives her a one-armed hug. “Thanks for helping out, Charlotte.”

“It’s not help when I begged to come and see this little angel.”

“It’ll turn into her begging for you to come over if you keep spoiling her.”

The smile my mom sends Kieran’s way is the widest I’ve seen since I told her about my acceptance into the Berlin trial. “No such thing as too much love.” She rises, shooing Kieran out of his own home. “Now off you go and good luck tonight. Take care of my sweetheart afterward, please.”

“Mom,” I hiss under my breath.

“What? You’re an attractive young girl and there will be drunks at the bar. He needs to keep an eye out for you.”

“Don’t worry, Momma Bear Carson. Both my eyes are *firmly* on your daughter.”

Whacking Kieran’s chest, now I’m the one ushering him out. “Don’t encourage her!”

I place both my hands on his back and push. I know that if he truly put up a fuss I wouldn’t be able to move this giant man an inch but he grins at me over his shoulder, obliging me.

“Have fun, you two!” my mom says sweetly as she slams the door in our faces.

Kieran spins, invading my space as he wriggles his brows. “Whatever shall we do to have fun, Miss Carson?”

“No.”

Walking past him, I hear him huff behind me, his feet slapping the driveway to catch up. “What do you mean no? I’m plenty fun.”

“Oh trust me, I know.”

He’s beside me as we cross the street to Bella and Grayson’s house, Kieran dialing in the front gate code. “I know you’re dying for round two.”

I cough out a spluttering laugh. “Excuse me?”

He shrugs. “It’s okay to admit it. I haven’t stopped thinking about it either.”

“You haven’t?”

He looks down at me, his tongue darting out to lick his lips. “Not for a second.” Lowering his head, he teases, “And I have a plan for tonight that will have you screaming my name.”

My eyes widen, my cheeks flushing as I scramble to follow. Bella opens the door before Kieran can strut inside.

She takes one look at me and then Kieran’s smug grin before narrowing her eyes. “What the hell is going on?”

Kieran winks. “Your best friend’s falling for me, Stratford.”

That snaps me out of it. “I am not!”

He walks inside like he owns the place, dumping his duffel bag as he no doubt goes in search of cereal. “If you aren’t already, you will be by tonight.”

I can hear Grayson cursing him for finding a cereal box, but I can’t move from where I stand in their front doorway, gaping.

“Do I want to know what that was about?” Bella asks.

“Hell, even I don’t know what that was about.”

But a part of me is dying to find out what Kieran has planned to supposedly make me scream.

BOOKISH BITCHES

CINDY

OH MY FUCKING GOD

they just got to the inn

THERE'S ONLY ONE BED!!!!

LAYLA

I told you that you'd love fantasy ;)

BELLA

wait what bed???

girls I feel left out

CINDY

you're definitely missing out B

they hate each other but they're forced to sleep in the same bed

THEIR FINGERS JUST BRUSHED AND HE SHIVERED

you need to start reading Bella

I haven't been able to take my eyes off Kieran on the ice. It's why when the opposition scores and everyone's focused on the other end of the arena, I catch Kieran shaking his head and pointing at an opposing player.

The player spits at Kieran's skates.

The sight makes me gasp. *That's disgusting!*

"What is it?" Bella asks beside me.

"That player just spat at Kieran's feet."

"Ew!" Cindy exclaims.

The player seems to be shouting something at him, his head lifting my way, but that can't be. Why would the opponent be looking at me? Kieran cocks his head slowly, menacingly, as the player continues to run his mouth.

"Oh my god, what the hell is he saying?"

Kieran skates forward so fast I barely have a moment to realize what's happened. In the blink of an eye, the player is on the ground, Kieran pinning him to the ice as he swings his fists, raining down on him.

The arena bursts into an encouraging chant, the energy in the arena suddenly electric.

"*Fight! Fight! Fight!*"

Jumping to my feet, my hand cups my mouth, my other flying out to hold onto Bella for support as I grow light-headed. It isn't until I feel like

I’m swaying that I realize I’m holding my breath.

The rival player manages to get a good hit in and Kieran’s head snaps back, his helmet flying along with his blood. As the red sprays across the ice, I let out a startled scream before I can stop it.

Bella clings to my arm, keeping me steady as I grow light headed.

“Oh my god!”

“Jesus Christ, these stupid men and their fights,” Cindy mutters, utterly unfazed as she remains seated, eating popcorn.

“Cindy!” I scold.

But my words are swallowed whole by the roar of the crowd. The other teammates flock to the fight, O’Connor beating Grayson and pulling Kieran off first. Both referees skate over, giving a penalty to Kieran and sending him to the sin bin.

With my heart in my throat, I don’t take my eyes off his back as he skates to the box. He stumbles into it, taking a seat, and that’s when I see it.

He’s grinning like a fool, blood filling his mouth and staining his teeth. The cameras zero in on him as he lifts his eyes directly to me, winks, and mouths, *That was for you, sunshine.*

Cindy leans back in the red booth we snagged at O’Malley’s, her glass of wine making its way to her lips. “You have the puck bunnies’ panties in a twist, Layla.”

Bella and I, clearly not caring if we’re obvious or not, peer over our shoulders at the group of scantily clad women who are all bickering, their gazes cutting to us every other second with a glare that could kill.

I frown. “Why, though? He just winked at me. He winks at everyone.”

“Well, he hasn’t in a while,” Bella says. “That, and he got in a fight for you.”

“Twice,” Cindy coughs into her fist.

I give the girls a look. “He did not.”

But despite my denial I know he absolutely did and I'm still in shock over it.

Before she can call me out on my bullshit, I quickly go on. "Cindy says they do it all the time."

She purses her lips. "I did say that." Suddenly, her eyes light up. "Fight aside, I heard some bunnies talking in the bathroom tonight at the arena." This girl loves gossip as much as she loves her wine. "Apparently Kieran hasn't been with anyone in a long time."

My cheeks heat because I already knew that. The secret Kieran whispered to me, how he hasn't been with anyone for well over a year. I hurt him that night when I didn't believe him.

The look that overcame him still haunts me sometimes. The last thing I ever want to do is wound someone else, and yet I seem to be doing that a lot with my assumptions.

Cindy leans forward conspiratorially. "I'm wondering if it's since a special charity event he suddenly started turning women away."

Keeping my gaze firmly on the sticky round table, picking up my Coke, I take a long sip. "How interesting," I say slowly.

Cindy snorts. "I can't wait for them to finally go at it. They won't be able to lie about it then. Like fireworks finally exploding."

"My money is on the fireworks when they first kiss." Bella turns to me. "You still haven't kissed, right?"

Cindy's mouth drops open. "You haven't kissed yet?"

My cheeks flush as I finally look up. "No."

Her lip twitches. "Oh, Bella's absolutely right, then."

"No one is catching feelings. This is just"—I glance around, making sure no bunnies are lingering nearby—"friends with benefits. Kieran doesn't do relationships and he sure as hell isn't going to start when he has a three-year-old."

"Single dads date," Cindy points out as if it's obvious.

"Of course they do, but not ones that just randomly have a kid dropped in their lap overnight."

Bella's smile is coy. "So you're saying if his life wasn't just flipped upside down you would have dated him?"

My eyes shutter closed. "No." Pinching the bridge of my nose frustration swells to the point I want to scream.

I know they mean well, truly I do because I know I was probably this annoying with Bella and Grayson but what they don't understand is the amount of baggage I bring. Kieran can have any woman he wants with how they throw themselves at him and he was just handed a child to look after. The last thing the man wants to do is date a chronically ill girl who will come with a lifetime of complications, working medication or not.

He hasn't seen the anxiety that can consume my body, the nightmares that plague me. The ones where I wake up sobbing into my pillow as I curse in fear that my body is failing me again.

My medication isn't certain, and in turn, neither is my future.

I can't subject him to that, Kieran deserves stability after everything he has been dealt in life.

For Christ's sake, I was Googling this morning if bleeding gums are a side-effect of lupus. Newsflash, nearly everything is, and so I spent twenty minutes in the bathroom staring at my gums looking for abnormalities while tears rolled down my cheeks and my hands shook.

Kieran doesn't deserve that type of chaos in his life.

No one does.

Why would he choose me over a perfectly healthy woman with no complications?

Bella's gaze softens as she asks, "What's this really about, Lil?"

I throw my hands up in the air as my emotions bubble to the surface. "Why would I want to do that to someone? Why would I want to add another person to the list that I'll eventually disappoint?" I hold up my hand as Bella's lips part, our age-old argument rising to the surface. "I love you, Bella, so much, but you won't change my mind on this. My illness has not only changed my life but my parents', too. I've watched their world turn on its axis to help me and Kieran needs to focus on Emmy. He doesn't need another burden in his life."

Cindy and Bella exchange a glance and I can tell they want to push the matter but they must see my bone-tiredness because Bella places her hand on my shoulder. "I'm sorry you feel that way because you're not a burden Lil, truly you aren't."

"I've never seen you as a burden, neither has anyone who cares about you," Cindy adds gently.

Pursing my lips I shake my head. "You won't change my mind." Shaking the heaviness off us all, I quickly change the topic, lightening the

mood. “You’re dying to ask questions about us, aren’t you?”

Cindy exchanges a look with Bella the pair choosing to follow my lead, they drop the depressing topic I brought up. Cindy clears her throat before smirking. “Like you wouldn’t believe. I’ve never done friends with benefits. It’s always been O’Connor.”

Bella points with her glass. “That’s adorable.”

“Not as adorable as I bet Kieran is being with Layla. Is he all soft and mushy because it’s your first time or is he commanding?”

Bella snorts as my mouth gapes open.

“What? I’m curious if he’s a big softie behind closed doors.”

A round of laughter behind me has me waving off the girls. “We’ll talk about it later, when there aren’t so many ears close by.”

Cindy’s eyes flick past my shoulder, her nose wrinkling at another obnoxious burst of laughter. I’m all for a good time but we all know when someone’s putting on a fake show.

Her gaze swings back my way. “How’s Emmy? Did she like the toys I dropped off?”

A gasp rings out beside me. “You dropped off toys and didn’t visit me?” Bella interjects.

“You were at the studio.”

“Oh, Emmy’s obsessed.” Playing with one of the coasters on the booth, I explain, “Cindy got her these little golden retriever figurines. She put them on her bedside table.”

Bella mirrors my smile. “God, she’s adorable.”

“Literally the cutest little girl.”

“Identical to Kieran.”

Cindy’s voice drops. “Has she said anything else?”

Bella chokes a little on her drink as she turns in the booth, her full attention on me. “My heart all but melted at Sunday lunch, I can’t believe sausages of all things made her talk!”

“I know, right? Kieran already ordered a sausage Jellycat.”

“How does he even know what a—” Bella stops abruptly, a knowing smile on her lips. “Allie,” she says, as way of explanation.

Cindy smacks a hand over her chest. “My uterus just exploded.”

“Oh trust me, being around him with her…” I whistle. “He wears this backwards black hat majority of the time and it’s just…”

“Gets you going.” Cindy wags her brows.

“Subtle, Cin,” Bella deadpans.

Her shoulders lift in a halfhearted shrug. “Clearly it does, look at her cheeks!”

Before Cindy can go down that rabbit hole again, I jump in. “Sadly, no more words after Sunday.”

“She’ll be running around yapping to everyone in no time.”

“I hope so,” I whisper.

I can tell it’s weighing heavily on Kieran. He’s talking to Emmy even more, giving her open-ended questions, his eyes always holding a hint of hope when he looks at her.

During the times he’s away at practice, I’m making sure I do everything the speech therapist suggested but I’ve not gotten far. She listens though, practically hangs on every word.

“We need another girls’ night at Totti’s. I want to prove I can handle their liquor. Even Asher was asking what I drank when I came home.” She snorts derisively to herself. “I swear, it put me on another planet.”

Bella and I double over with laughter at that when cheers erupt in the bar, and I know the team has arrived. Before long, Kieran is sliding in beside me, his scent invading my senses as he slides an arm over my shoulder. “Hey, sunshine.”

I’m grateful the girls are distracted as Cindy slides out to throw herself into Asher’s arms and Grayson and Bella stare at one another, Grayson looking like he wants to devour her whole.

I try to shrug Kieran’s arm off my shoulder but fail miserably, his arm not budging. He smacks his free hand against his chest in mock hurt. “No celebratory hug? I got two of the winning slapshots.”

Patting his chest, I pull back with a flat smile. “There, there, winner.” Ignoring the tingle of energy that races down my hand is as impossible as ignoring the hard muscle I’m met with.

Kieran laughs. “You really suck at feeding my ego.”

“Sorry, buddy, I do believe I was put on this earth for a purpose other than pleasing you.”

“I’d beg to differ. Just looking at you pleases me.”

Rolling my eyes as he winks at me, I try and shove him off me again. “Go fill your cup elsewhere and take your arm off me before one of your groupies over there decides to corner me in the bathroom and murder me.”

Kieran snorts as he nods his thanks at Asher, who slides a beer his way. Everyone takes a seat in the booth once more, falling into conversation with their respective pairs.

“Trust me, no one will touch you and if they do, *I’ll* fucking murder them.”

I study his features. “You sound serious.”

“I am.”

I deadpan. “Kieran.”

He smiles around his beer bottle. “Sunshine.”

“I’m scaring away the puck bunnies, plus no one can know about this besides friends, remember?” I frown. “I don’t want my first time to be splashed online for women to put me down.”

“Fuck, I didn’t think about that.” Kieran glances over at the bar before smiling back at me. “Good thing the bunnies are trying to hook their claws into the rookies.”

Snapping around, I find he’s right. The only ones around are the drunk guys watching highlights of tonight’s game on the TV.

“Move over, you big eejit,” Ellington declares, Valenti close on his heels.

“You suddenly Irish, Ellington?” Kieran asks.

His cheeks flush. “My cousin came to visit after a year abroad and it stuck. Now move.”

Frowning, I take in the very full booth, wondering how we’re going to fit two more people in. Suddenly, large hands are sliding around my waist and lifting me onto a very solid, very muscular lap.

Kieran’s lap, to be exact.

My eyes widen in horror, my cheeks flaming in an instant and no doubt matching not only my hair but the color of this booth, too. Grayson has done the same with Bella, but while I’m sitting here panicking, she looks like she’s in heaven.

I move to scold him, but he simply places his chin atop my shoulder, his head for once at level with mine. “Much better.”

“Are you a goldfish?”

I can feel his chest rise and fall in quick succession behind my back as he laughs quietly. “No.”

“Are you sure? Because you suddenly forgot the conversation we just had.”

“I believe it was you scolding me for touching you.”

“So you do remember.” I turn my head to the side, sucking in a sharp breath when I find Kieran’s face extremely close to mine. “Care to tell me why I’m on your lap then?”

He shrugs as he wraps his arms around my waist. “Perhaps I like being scolded.” Kieran’s lips brush across the shell of my ear and as always, I shiver.

I can feel his lips tug up. He must have felt it.

“What would you do if I told you it turns me on?”

“What? My shivering?”

“Try again.”

My brows lower, my brain running a mile a minute trying to figure out what the hell he’s talking about, but if I’m being honest, sitting on top of him is making it hard to concentrate.

Kieran helps me out, his voice a raspy drawl in my ear.

“Your sharp tongue, sunshine.” My body stiffens, my core clenching. “Turns me on more than anything in this world.”

He goes on, talking to his teammates and friends as if he didn’t just make my heart trip and stumble for him.

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Chapter 26

Kieran

ICEHAWKS BITCHES

JOHNSON

where the fuck did Irving go?

MITCHEL

I feel like that's pretty obvious on nights like this

O'CONNOR

please don't tell me he's doing a bunny in the bathroom again

LEWIS

is THAT why the line is so long?????

I need her.

I need her so fucking bad I swear my heart stops beating and won't resume until she touches me again.

I've never wanted someone like this before. It's a hunger—a craving that I don't think I can ever satisfy.

Something must be wrong with me because all she's doing is laughing and talking and my cock is as hard as a rock, as if it can come from the sound alone. And my mind is certainly in the gutter—I haven't been able to get it out of there since the moment I placed her on my lap.

Grayson slides out of the booth, holding his hand out to Bella.

“Going already, Cap?”

He offers me a smile. “Yeah, we’re done for the night. Good game boys, let’s keep it up.”

Valenti grunts as Ellington dips his chin. “Thanks, Cap.”

Valenti has barely gotten off his phone, yet I haven’t seen it light up once tonight. Ellington is none the wiser, since his gaze is firmly glued to the group of women that came in here around an hour ago.

“Just go up to them already. You look like a dog with its tongue lolling out.”

Ellington sputters, Valenti finally gracing us with a smile.

The boys jab each other back and forth, Layla saying goodbye to Bella while Cindy and O’Connor are the next to excuse themselves. As the booth empties, she starts to move off my lap, but I tighten my hold on her.

“No, no.”

“No?” she asks incredulously.

“No.”

Ellington shakes his head before tapping Valenti. “I’m out too.” The words have barely left his lips before he’s sauntering over to the table, the sound of feminine laughter following close behind.

Layla gasps. “They’re leaving already.” She looks from me to the space over my shoulder. “He just said hi and cocked his head and she followed him like a puppy.”

“Bunnies,” Valenti grunts, his expression more sour than usual.

Layla slides off my lap and I let her this time as she whispers, “I’ll go get us a drink.”

Giving her a thankful smile for sensing the need to talk to Valenti I wink at her as I take out my wallet and hand my card over. “Thanks, sunshine.”

She looks down at the card before wrinkling her nose. “I can afford two Cokes.”

Spinning on her heel, her fiery red hair brushes my outstretched hand and I can’t help but smile as I watch her walk to the bar that’s slowly beginning to thin out as the evening goes on. I have to rip my eyes away from her, Momma Bear Carson’s words ringing through my mind.

Once I finally do slide my attention to Valenti, he’s already watching me.

“What happened?”

He arches a brow. “Can’t get much past you, can I?”

“Never. Want to talk about it?”

A muscle feathers in his jaw, his gaze flicking over my shoulder to the door Ellington left through.

“Does he know?” I ask as he remains quiet, broody.

That has his eyes piercing me to the spot. “Know what?”

I cock my head. “Come on.”

Running a hand down his face, he sighs heavily. “Fucking psychic.”

I lean back in the booth. “Layla calls it my superpower.”

“She might be on the money with that one. You’re like an emotional sniffer dog.”

Clicking my tongue, I glance at the bar, triple-checking she’s okay before turning back to Valenti. “Which is why I want to know what has you looking so depressed.”

“It’s Evie.”

“Figured as much. Has something else happened?”

Valenti is slow to nod, his hand on the table clenching before he sees that I’ve noticed it and shoves it under the table. “I…found out something that is going to utterly break her.”

The severity of his tone has my spine straightening. “Does Ellington know?”

He shakes his head. “No one but me and—” Valenti cuts himself off abruptly.

“And…?” I probe.

At the slight flush to his cheeks, my stomach turns sour. I’ve never seen Valenti nervous in all my years playing alongside him.

“Shit, dude, what the fuck did you do?”

“I may have…hired a PI.”

My jaw drops. “Y-you what?”

He moves forward, his arms spreading across the table. “I know, okay? I know it’s an invasion of privacy but I had to figure it out. I had a fucking hunch the second that dick turned on her.”

“Is he cheating?”

He nods, pure fury flashing in his brown depths. “I want to fucking kill him.”

“Might join you on that man hunt.” I blow out a breath. “You need to tell her.”

He shakes his head. “She’ll hate me though…for so many reasons.”

“So tell her anonymously.”

He frowns at that. “Anonymously?”

I shrug. “Send her an address where they meet up, send photos—hell I don’t know, but you don’t have to be the messenger. You’re right, she’ll just remember you as the guy who found her partner sneaking around behind her back.” I give him a knowing look. “And I know that would crush you.”

His gaze darts away quickly. Clearing his throat, he dips his chin. “Thanks, Ashford, I owe you one.”

“Nah brother, this is what family is for.”

A thought occurs to me. Before I can think much on it, I’m leaning forward, lowering my voice. “Is the PI good?”

“I’ve used him a few times. Always efficient.”

My lips purse before I wave him off. “I don’t even want to know.”

He snorts at my reaction. “Best you don’t.”

“Can I grab the number?”

His eyes widen, putting the pieces together, before he picks up his phone, firing off a text message to me.

It’s been weeks and I still can’t remember Emmy’s mom. What’s the harm in having someone else look into it for me? I’m desperate for answers at this point.

A buzz in my pocket has me leaning back as Valenti slips his away. “I’ve got you.”

“Thanks, man.”

“Emmy’s mom?” he guesses.

My lips thin as I dip my chin. “Still can’t fucking remember anything and Emmy isn’t opening up about her.” My shoulders rise only to drop with defeat. “I’m desperate for any answers I can gather.”

“I’d be the same, I’m sorry it happened the way it has.”

Blowing out a heavy breath, I mutter, “Thanks.”

Valenti’s gaze slides to the bar, the desolate look he was harboring before now replaced with a frown. “I’m not the only one going to be thinking of murder tonight.”

Following his line of sight, I spot a guy trying to chat Layla up at the bar, and in an instant, red-hot jealousy strikes me.

“Fucker,” I mutter as I slide out of the booth, Valenti and his love problems long forgotten. I stride directly up to Layla, wrap my arm around her chest, and pull her flush against my body.

“Mine,” I growl at the twat in front of me.

Layla stiffens in my arms as the blond douche steps back in horror. “Shit, sorry, Ashford.” He doesn’t even spare a glance at Layla before he hightails it out of the bar.

He might be a fucker but he’s a smart one.

Layla wiggles away, only to spin around and shove *me* in the chest.

“Hey!” I protest only for it to die on my tongue as I see the anger clouding her gaze. I can’t help it, my lips twitch. “Fuck, sunshine, even cloudy you look stunning.”

Her eyes spark, an inferno being ignited.

“What is wrong with you?” she seethes.

“With me?” I point in the direction the guy fled. “He was flirting with you!”

“So?”

My eyes all but bulge out of my head but before I can snap back, she shoves my chest again. “You growled like a fricken caveman! Mine? *Mine*? I’m not a piece of property you own, Ashford!” Layla is heaving, wild with a tornado of anger. “You stupid twat!” She marches right past me and down the hallway.

“Shit,” I mutter.

Taking off after her, I call her name, not caring who’s looking as the woman who has me by the balls pushes through the service entrance and into the staff parking lot at the back of the building.

The door slams behind me and at the sound her tiny frame spins, that fire still burning in her eyes as she strides toward me, pointing an incredulous finger. “How dare you act like you fucking own me!”

I can’t help it, I chuckle.

Growling, she slaps my chest but it’s not hard or intended to hurt. “Why the hell are you laughing at me?”

“I’ve never heard you swear before. You’re usually too nice for it.”

“Well, that clearly goes out the window when it comes to you! God, Kieran, you can be so infuriating!”

Leaning against the building wall, I kick a foot up against it. “Hate to break it to you, love, but all this is doing is turning me on.”

Her chest heaves as she shakes her head. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

She wags a finger at me. “Look at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Your eyes. They’re sparkling.”

My grin turns downright dirty. “You think my eyes sparkle, sunshine?” Pushing off the wall, I stalk toward her, ever so slowly, our gazes hold one another.

She begins to back away until she’s pressed against the adjacent brick wall of the alley.

Ever so slowly I place a hand on either side of her head, caging her in. “I know you like the way I look at you.”

My voice is rough, gravelly, and full of the heat I’ve felt toward this little firecracker tonight. It turns me on exceptionally to know this side only comes out with me. That the world only sees the nice calm side, whereas I see every facet of her.

Cupping her chin so she can’t avoid my gaze, I drawl, “And I know you’d be lying if you said you didn’t love it.”

Her swallow is audible. I trail my finger down her neck, lavishing the way her lips part almost subconsciously.

“Tell me,” I whisper. “On that precious list of yours…does it mention anything about a bar?”

Layla’s icy blue eyes flare.

Trailing my fingers leisurely over her shoulder and down her arm. “Is your blood rushing at the thought of me touching you out here where anyone could walk through that door and catch us?”

The sharp intake of air has a crooked grin spreading across my face.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” I purr.

“I hate you,” she hisses.

“No you don’t. You love the way your belly is heating, and by the way your hips are canting forward and seeking mine, you want this as badly as I do.”

“And what if I said I didn’t want this?”

Stepping back abruptly, my lips tip into a crooked grin as she almost topples forward, a whimper slipping past her lips.

“I’d know you were lying just by the little sound you made.”

Her head tips back to keep eye contact, hers narrowing while mine *sparkle*.

Not sure she’s figured out yet that when they do, it’s because I want to devour her.

“Has anyone told you that hate fucking is extraordinary?”

“I don’t hate you,” she admits.

“No?”

“No, you’re just insufferable.”

“Insufferably good looking?”

“Insufferably cocky.”

“Well, cocky or not, I’m about to keep my promise and make you scream.”

Savoring every second of it I slowly drop to my knees, soaking up the flush along her cheeks, the widening of her eyes, the way her chest rises on a sharp inhale. Placing my hands on her thighs, I sit back on my heels, watching her as I trail my hands up higher and higher until they reach her skirt.

“You’ve fallen quiet, sunshine. Cat got your tongue?”

Her lips part, only to snap closed a second later as I expose her underwear, hook my finger into the waistband, pull down, and lick.

Layla’s head drops back, her knees giving out as I taste her. I quickly catch her, wrapping one of her legs around my shoulder and holding the other with my free hand to stabilize her.

I should be taking this slow, should be torturing her and dragging it out, but I’m a selfish bastard and I can’t stop now that I’ve started.

She’s heaven.

Every little breathy moan and whimper, is making me an addict.

I pull back just long enough to pant out, “Bite your lip, sunshine. I’m about to make good on my promise.”

Lowering my head again, I run my free hand up her center, while I suck on the bundle of nerves pulsing for me. I slide my finger inside of her, crooking it once I get halfway.

It doesn’t take me long to find that spot and make my promise come true.

A surprised scream tumbles from her.

Not letting up on my relenting pace, I go from sucking to licking, flicking my tongue back and forth and fucking *enjoying* every second that she grows wetter.

The thigh around my shoulder and the one pinned beside my head begins to quake, her walls around my finger pulsing, convulsing, and I know she’s close.

So fucking close.

I'm going to dream about this moment until my last breath.

Pulling back, I grin up at Layla. "Pull my hair, baby, and show me how much you want my mouth on you."

Her eyes all but roll in the back of her head but like a good girl she runs both hands through my hair, making me groan as I put my mouth on her again and go to fucking town.

The harder she pulls, the more I moan and the faster I lick.

"That's it, sunshine. Come on my tongue."

My words are her undoing. When I go back and suck she does just that and comes on my face. Her legs shake so hard I have to remove my fingers and hold her steady as she drops, placing all her weight on me, but I gladly eat it up.

I don't take my eyes off her as I continue to suck gently, taking a moment to commit every detail of this moment to memory.

Layla Carson has just ruined me.

Utterly *ruined* me.

And all I'll ever want is her.

My sunshine.

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Chapter 27

Kieran

ALLIE

please send me photos of my grandbaby

don’t make me hound poor Layla

KIERAN

photo attachment

my dumbass thought it would be easy to feed her spaghetti

never again

some spots on my wall are still red from where she threw the food

ALLIE

AWWWWW

that’s it I’m packing my bags and coming back

KIERAN

you left yesterday

ALLIE

exactly

one day too long being away from my grandbaby

A week later, I’m sitting in the locker room, my head hanging in shame, the air thick with it. We’re all but choking on it.

We lost.

Scratch that, we didn't just lose, we were *annihilated*.

I have no fucking idea what went wrong but everything was off. Hell, even Grayson and I were out of sync tonight. The moves we always perform smoothly felt like skating over gravel—wobbly, painful, and frustrating.

The twin devils, as everyone refers to us, were nowhere to be seen.

Irving's frustration explodes with a kick, the sound of his foot connecting with the locker as loud as thunder as it booms throughout the otherwise silent room.

The door swings open to my right and Coach walks in. With his flushed neck, protruding veins, and tight eyes, he's living up to the nickname I gave him my rookie season—the bull.

Fuck, even Olivia Foster, the assistant coach, looks like she sucked on a lemon as she trails behind Coach. They stand beside one another, looking at us like we've not only disappointed them but sacrificed their firstborns with that loss.

Coach blows out a breath, rubbing his hand along his five o'clock shadow. "Well, we all know that game was rubbish."

Irving, sitting on the bench across from me, snorts. "Rubbish is an understatement."

"It was shocking."

"Beyond," Foster mumbles under her breath.

"I have no idea what the fuck that was, but whatever bad juju crawled up your asses, yank it the fuck out," Coach thunders. "I expect you to come to practice next week as if you are NHL players being paid millions to slap a fucking puck and not amateurs." Coach takes a deep breath to get a handle on his emotions. "I'm choosing to chalk this up to a momentary lapse in judgment on all your parts. But if you all play like sloppy two-year-olds in next week's game, I'll hang you by your balls and make you do suicides until you bleed. Understood?"

"Yes, Coach," we collectively murmur.

He dips his chin, spinning on his heel as he shakes his head and leaves. Olivia gives us a final look before she follows.

Irving groans. "What the fuck happened tonight?"

"Bloody beats me. It's been a long time since I've played like that," Grayson admits, grimacing as he no doubt remembers the time where he

was at the bottom of a bottle.

Mitchel rises, narrowing his eyes as he assesses us all. “Who fucked up their pre-game ritual? No one can convince me we weren’t fucking hexed tonight.”

The boys hold up their hands in surrender, all shaking their heads.

Mitchel spins on Irving suddenly. “Did you piss off a bunny again?”

Irving glares back. “What has that got to do with how we played?”

“She could have hexed us,” Johnson points out.

I snort. “Let’s not go down this rabbit hole, boys.”

Grayson rises. “Kieran’s right, let’s just say it was an off night and move on. Focus on how we skate in practice and work on it not happening again. Now go lick your wounds in solitude. I don’t want to see any rowdy shit in the press tomorrow, otherwise another vein is gonna pop up on Coach’s forehead.”

Murmurs of “Yes, Cap” follow suit as everyone, begrudgingly, begins to shower and gets ready to head home.

Grayson shuts his locker. “At least the girls didn’t make the trip out tonight.”

“God, that would have been a waste of time. 0-5? I’m disgusted.” A full body shiver wracks through me. “I feel dirty.”

“Are hexes real, you think?”

“Did you never watch anything spooky or witchy growing up?”

“No, it was always set to the sports channel.” He gives me a look. “Your TV taste is interesting, Ashford.”

I try to brush off the comment by bumping his shoulder and grabbing my towel to head for the showers. “And your TV palette is boring. You have to refine your taste.”

Grayson just laughs with me and the slight tension in my chest loosens.

He’s not wrong, I didn’t watch the typical shows boys my age would growing up. That was only because the girls in the foster home outnumbered the boys, and the show we’d play would always come down to a vote.

There was so much Hannah Montana, I can still sing her songs word for word.

Stepping into the showers, my ears are assaulted by Irving screeching at the top of his lungs. The guys and I all collectively groan.

“Dude!” Johnson snaps from a stall farther down from mine. “We lost, you don’t need to add to our misery with your fucking cat-like screaming.”

“I take personal offense to that! Taylor Swift makes everything better.”

“Fucking Irving,” O’Connor mutters as he moves into the stall next to mine.

No matter how much everyone yells at him, Irving never lets up and that’s why I find myself sighing as I slide into my car, relieved to hear nothing but silence.

The tiredness weighing upon me isn’t just from the game nor the defeat hanging over my head. It’s…*everything*.

My mind is churning, and no matter how many times I try to get off what feels like a Tilt-A-Whirl, I’m thrown into a deeper pit of endless streaming thoughts.

Everything from this past week continues to assault me, one after the other, piling up until it resembles a junkyard.

Emmy hasn’t spoken since the barbeque a week and a half ago. Not another peep. And trust me, I have tried *everything*.

That high I felt with Layla that night at the bar was a comedown like I’ve never experienced before, going from the highest of highs to being smashed by life until I was splattered on the ground unwilling to get up.

As happy as I was that day at the barbeque I feel like I’m back to square one with her. I read books to her every night before bed. I ask her questions instead of just telling her what to do. Fuck, she’s in therapy three times a week, and still nothing.

Every day that goes by and I don’t hear my baby girl speak is another day a splinter cracks my heart.

I’ve never wanted answers to something outside of my control so desperately. No words are uttered in therapy and despite being told that it takes time for trust to build, I’m getting antsy.

I want to know what her mother did to her.

I *need* to know.

Not only so the what-ifs that run through my mind on a loop like a horror movie can stop, but so I can help her heal. I more than understand the ramifications a horrendous parent can have on your mind.

Fuck, I still can't sleep through the night without waking up in a cold sweat after having nightmares of the matron and everything she did to me. Every time I'm reminded my little girl was in her care for two weeks, bile rushes up my throat.

I sent off a message to the private investigator, have already paid the deposit, and despite knowing he said he needed two weeks, I keep checking my phone like a girl waiting for a text from a guy after a first date.

What if Emmy never speaks?

The therapist says the chances of that are low, but it's been nearly two months since she was handed to me, and if she's still not talking, does that mean she doesn't feel safe with me? Her carefree smiles and big round eyes give the impression that she does, but then there's times like tonight where I fall into a hole so deep, I fear I'll never be able to crawl out.

And it makes me wonder, am I doing this right?

Sometimes I feel like the best dad in the world and then sometimes I have no idea what the fuck I'm doing and using Google far too much. Every night I sit in her room for an hour or two flicking between listening to one of Layla's books and a parenting one and trust me the vast difference in them is jarring. Who the fuck was going to tell me that you need to start applying for schools when they're three because the acceptance rate of any decent school is slim to none? Someone commented in the review section of one of my parenting books wishing they had listened to it sooner to help with their son's tantrums because he had one during a school interview and was denied…*denied*!

He's four for fuck's sake and already doomed.

As my chest starts to get that uncomfortable tightness, and the flashes of the foster home berate my mind, I let out a scream of frustration before quickly pulling my car over on the side of the road.

"I can't fucking do this!" I cry as I unbuckle my seat belt and throw myself out of the car.

The crisp night air assaults my body.

Taking a deep breath, I look up and down the road, realizing I'm not that far from my house. Fucking hell, now I'm praying Grayson left before

me so he doesn’t find me on the side of the road trying not to have a panic attack.

Squatting, I put my head between my knees and breath in for four and out for six. Remembering the age old breathing technique Allie taught me when a panic attack would sneak up on me.

It’s been a really long fucking time since I’ve had one.

And yet here I am on the side of the road after a game, my vision spotting, my hands shaking, my chest turning unbearably tight as my imagination conjures up reasons for Emmy’s mutism.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I try to stop the images but all that does is make the silver that was lining my eyes roll down my cheeks. My chest tightens further until I’m wincing in pain, clutching my shirt like I can pull my lungs apart and give myself enough room to breathe.

Am I doing this right?

Will Emmy ever be okay?

What if she never speaks to me again?

How do I heal something that’s a permanent scar?

I don’t know what to do anymore.

I always wanted more for my future children and before I even had a chance to give Emmy the childhood she so rightfully deserves, hers was tainted. I can try and make it up to her, I can love her and care for her and provide a safe home for as long as I live, but I’ll never be able to get those first three years back.

I’ll never be able to fix it.

I will never be able to erase the scars.

The buzz of my phone in the car draws me up. Lifting my head to the sky, I take another set of deep breaths before getting back in. The panic attack has settled, but the buzzing of anxiety in my chest lingers.

People sometimes get confused between the two, but you could be sitting and holding a polite conversation with someone while feeling as if you’re having a heart attack. A panic attack, however? There’s no functioning when it comes knocking on your door. You are utterly at its mercy.

Picking up my phone, I see the time and realize I’ve probably worried Layla.

MY FUTURE WIFE

Hey, are you on your way back?

Seems I was stopped longer than I thought.

Choosing not to respond, I put my car in drive and two minutes later, I pull into the driveway, taking one last deep breath before forcing a smile on my face so neither Layla or Emmy know that I was breaking down just a few minutes before.

With my duffel bag hanging off my shoulder, I slide my key into the lock and walk in. Even to my own ears my steps are heavier than when I left—until the sound of a soft giggle followed by the pitter-patter of small feet stops me.

What is she doing up so late?

Rounding the corner, I come to a standstill.

My heart that hasn't been able to stop beating a mile a minute comes to a screeching stop. I feel the abrupt halt like I'm on a rollercoaster.

My jaw drops, practically unhinges as shock thunders through me.

Emmy and Layla stand in my living room wearing matching Oodies. The former claps her hands wildly, bouncing around on her feet like she's eaten a bucket of sugar, while the latter bites her lip in…

Is Layla nervous?

She looks from my gobsmacked form to the coffee table in front of her.

Rocking back on her heels, she shrugs. "I thought you could do with some cheering up."

The breath I didn't realize I was holding rushes from me. The coffee table is covered with bowls of cereal, not a single square inch free. Then my gaze strays to the TV, the telltale *Gilmore Girls* logo illuminating the room.

Relief, swift and fast, rushes through my blood as the claws that were clutching my heart release their hold at the sight of my girls.

The awe is evident in my voice as I sigh, "You have no idea how much I needed this."

And at that, my darling girl is running for me, her little arms outstretched waiting for me to catch her.

And as I always will, I do.

Because maybe I'm not doing as poor of a job as I thought if she's running for me with a carefree smile.

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Chapter 28

Layla

BOOKISH BITCHES

CINDY

oh my fucking god, is anyone up to chapter twenty-four?

LAYLA

no!!!

don’t spoil please omg I’m dying to read

BELLA

you bitches need to get the audiobook

I’m done

CINDY

ALREADY?

BELLA

pays to be an audio girlie

CINDY

I can practically feel your smugness

BELLA

jealous?

LAYLA

I need to introduce you two to immersive reading

I didn’t realize how nervous I was to surprise Kieran until he stepped through the front door. My heart was hammering as fast as a hummingbird’s wings and it didn’t stop until a smile lit up his face. The tension practically leaked out of his body as he dropped his duffel bag and swept Emmy into his arms.

His gaze lifts to mine and holds. “Thank you,” he whispers, and it’s thick enough to make me pause.

Before I can probe any further as to why his deep ocean eyes seem to be a little heavier tonight, he turns away from me, only to stop once he sees the oversized Oodie lying on the couch.

“Is that…”

“Emmy picked them out.” I can’t help but chuckle. “She saw them and I couldn’t say no to her.”

He picks it up, the golden retriever printed all over it matching the one Emmy and I are wearing.

“She’s making me want to buy her a puppy.”

“You and me both.”

Emmy wriggles from Kieran’s hold and flings herself onto the couch. Kieran takes a seat beside her as he all but commands, “You better be staying.”

I should be going home, should leave them to have some alone time to bond, but for some reason, with the way Kieran is looking at me right now, I find I can’t say no to him.

Sitting on the other side of Emmy, my heart melts into a puddle as she holds her hands out on either side of her, her little fingers making a grabbing motion.

Smiling, I place my hand in hers as I say, “Of course I’ll stay, are you kidding? *Gilmore Girls* plus my favorite person? I can’t resist.”

“Good to know I’m your favorite person.”

“First of all, I was talking about your gorgeous daughter and secondly, don’t forget our rules.”

He frowns, his brows furrowing until he realizes what I mean and gives me a wink, mouthing, *Sorry not sorry.*

Scoffing to myself, I get cozy, snuggling deeper into the couch as Kieran presses play.

Usually if someone put *Gilmore Girls* on and placed food down in front of me, I'd be able to switch my brain off. But this time, all I can feel are Kieran's eyes lingering on my skin.

He's got two bowls of cereal, one on his lap full of Froot Loops and another beside him containing Frosted Flakes. He's making comments as he goes, pointing things out to Emmy as if this is a major rite of passage, and yet through it all I am hyperaware of the quiet moments. The moments where just the sound plays softly through the speakers, where the logs in the fire Kieran lit snap and pop, because I can feel his eyes on me.

His eyes always seem to be on me.

Emmy's soft snores started half an hour ago, halfway through episode two and I knew this would happen. No little girl can truly stay up past eleven o'clock at night, I'm honestly surprised she made it this far, but I'm putting that down to the sugar she inhaled.

So that just leaves me, sitting on my boss's couch, keeping my attention firmly on the TV while I do everything in my power to *not* look at him.

Except, it was completely impossible when Emmy began tossing and turning in her sleep, only to settle the moment Kieran pulled her into the crook of his arm and laid her head on his chest.

Have you ever seen a six-foot-three man with a sharp jawline, dazzling blue eyes, and insane tattoos all up and down both his arms cuddle a little toddler while watching *Gilmore Girls*?

No?

That's unfortunate, because it's the sexiest thing you'll ever see.

What is it with seeing attractive men care for children? Why does it make something in our brains go *ding, ding, ding, rail him!*

I'm choosing to believe this is a common problem for women because if it isn't and I'm singled out, then I'm afraid my medication has just formed a new side-effect.

Not only that, but the sight of it makes my stomach flip, and not in the way when I'm turned on. No, this is different, and it's not a feeling formed by nerves.

Dare I say that Kieran, *this* version of Kieran—the soft, sweet, and gentle side that no one really sees behind his goofy personality—is melting my heart.

I absolutely flatly refuse to allow my heart to turn into a pile of mush for this man because as kind as he is, he doesn't do serious relationships, and I highly doubt that's going to change for the girl who will need a lifetime of care and medical support.

Please heart, I beg. *Please don't fall for him.*

I can swear I hear a little voice whisper, *Too late.*

"I'm going to move Emmy into her bed."

His voice is so deep and intrusive, I flinch. Quickly scrambling to cover it up, I hit pause on the TV, moving to rise off the couch but Kieran's hand snaps out, stopping me.

"Stay."

One word.

One plea.

One moment, and suddenly, the tension that's been brewing snaps.

Our gazes lock and I'm once again swept into the riptide of Kieran Ashford's ocean-blue eyes.

"Please," he whispers.

A beat passes.

Then two.

And then I find my lips parting, and before my self-control can catch up, I'm whispering, "Okay."

The memory of Kieran on his knees for me flashes across my mind, the very image that has plagued me at every waking moment.

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Chapter 29

Kieran

KIERAN

she's officially stolen my heart

picture attachment

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

are those matching golden retriever Oodies?

KIERAN

look past it

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

she did a cereal spread and Gilmore Girls???

how far deep are you in now?

KIERAN

I'm never coming up for air

Trying to move a sleeping toddler into their bed is what I imagine it feels like to move a bomb. One wrong move and those little eyelids will pop open and they'll never go back to sleep.

Yet this time instead of my heart pounding out of nerves, I find that it's full, heavy with love. I've spent the entirety of my time since I stepped through my front door being grateful.

Beyond grateful.

The day I met Layla was the best day of my life and I have no idea what I did to be deserving of her kind heart.

There was a moment on the couch where I was fighting off tears that the thought even so much as crossed her mind to cheer me up. She had no idea that I was suffering tonight, that my thoughts were spiraling down the drain, and now she probably thinks I'm a big mushy idiot. Maybe I am, but tonight was the kindest thing anyone has ever done for me.

Allie was always the one to comfort me through my panic attacks but in the back of my mind, I thought that maybe she felt obligated to, like she would be a bad person if she ignored her son's friend. She'd give me a good scolding if she knew I thought this way.

But I can see Layla did this because that's just who she is. She's practically an angel with how pure her heart is, and it feels good for someone to care about me.

I'm so close, at the homestretch. I just need to get one arm out—

Emmy's eyes flutter open. Those long black lashes lifting as her honey-brown eyes lock on mine. She's slightly disoriented before she peers around her room, the thumb she fell asleep sucking on popping from her mouth as she nestles further into her bed.

Leaning down, I place a small kiss on her forehead. "Goodnight, sweetheart."

I step back but a small, timid voice stops me in my tracks.

"Is Layla my new mom?"

My body freezes, the air thickening, the sounds outside falling eerily quiet as if even the trees and animals in the backyard are listening.

The back of my eyes burn as I slowly take a seat on her bed. I need to talk, need to do fucking *something*, but I'm stunned, sucker punched.

Not only by the sound of her rough and unused voice but the question… My god, the question has knocked the air from my lungs.

A mere two hours ago I was on the side of the road breaking down over Emmy not speaking, but now that she has, instead of feeling happy and grateful, I can feel my face falling, unable to hide my heartbreak.

How do I handle this? What if I say the wrong thing?

A small voice pipes up through my panic, *What would you have wanted to hear when you were little?*

It takes some time to clear my throat. "No, sweetheart, Layla is a close friend, like family," I say, because family is more than blood. Her eyes hold

mine as I gently continue, “But she’s not your mom.”

Her little brows pull down, a frown marring her smooth skin.

My heart stutters as I ask, “D-do you remember your mom?”

She seems to shrink away as she nods her head slowly.

Holy shit. Holy fucking shit.

On the outside I hope I look as composed as I’m forcing myself to act because internally, I’m freaking the fuck out. She hasn’t once acknowledged her mom. This is the first little scrap she’s ever given me.

Do I keep going? Do I keep pushing and ask more questions?

I mean, she brought up the topic, but what if I hit a nerve or say the wrong thing? What if—

Emmy erases that choice as she whispers, so softly I have to lean forward to catch it, “She was a bad mommy.”

My shoulders slump with the dead weight. Taking a steadying breath, the children’s psychology books, podcasts, and videos I’ve been listening to bombard my mind at once, swirling like a tornado with no end in sight.

I can’t fuck this moment up.

Validate her feelings.

Lead with open-ended questions.

Don’t put words in her mouth.

Don’t rush her.

“Emmy, I’m so sorry.” The emotion coating my words thicken my voice. “I wish I could go back and stop her. I wish I could’ve been there. I would have done *anything* to be there and protect you.”

If my dad suddenly came into the picture and saved me from my mom and the foster home, I think again, what would I have wanted to hear?

“Emmy, I need to tell you something very important,” I whisper, noting how she clings to my every word. I say the thing that I wished someone said to me all those years ago. “It’s not your fault you had a bad mommy.”

She frowns at that, clinging to her golden retriever teddy a little tighter. “But she said I was a bad girl.” Tears fill her eyes and her tiny chin quivers, making my heart shatter into a million pieces as her voice fills with emotion. “Bad girls have to be punished.”

The sentence is robotic, memorized—branded in her mind.

I can’t bear this, her little whimpers, the tears in her eyes, the tightness of her words.

I can’t *fucking* bear it.

Scooping her into my arms, I hold her. I hold her because I can't take it back, can't erase the words from her mind, can't erase the experience, her memories. If I could, I would in a heartbeat. I know how much it hurts, how debilitating it can be to know you were hated by the one person in this world biologically programmed to love you.

Emmy lays her head on my chest, her fist clutching my shirt as her tears dampen it.

"No, sweetheart," I say vehemently. "She was the one who was bad, not you." Her hand clings a little tighter as she shakes her head.

"She said I was too loud," she chokes out, her shoulders shaking violently, far too powerful for someone so little. The weight of her emotions and hurt is so deep I fear I'll never be able to fix it.

Too loud.

Is that why she doesn't speak? Because she was told she was too loud? Told repeatedly to be quiet?

The revelation obliterates what small shred of my heart remained.

Sucking in a sharp breath I can't hold back my tears any longer, no matter how hard I try.

Cradling her, I stroke her hair softly, letting her cry in my arms and hating with every fiber of my being that I couldn't protect her from such a monster.

"You are the sweetest, most caring, kind little girl I know." I hope with every piece of my heart she listens to this, that she clings to my words stronger than the vile ones her mother spewed. "You are not bad. The very opposite, Emmy. Your heart is pure. You are never too loud. In fact, I don't think you're loud enough, little one. Do you know I hope every day that you'll talk? Every single day, Emmy. It's my one wish in life, that you'll fill this house with your voice."

"Really?"

"I swear, Emmy. All I want is to hear your voice."

She sniffles, her sobbing slowing enough for her to confess, "I wish Layla was my mommy. Layla is nice."

A knife wound to the chest would hurt less.

"What else did your mommy do, Emmy?"

She burrows her head further into my chest. "She would put me in my cupboard with my dinosaur." A sob escapes her, making me cling to her tighter. "I don't like the dark. Mommy told me to shut up."

Flashes of my own childhood assault me, when my mother shoved me into the trunk at the end of her bed and left me there for hours, having stuck small holes in the top for me to breathe as she got high in the other room. I know exactly how fearful Emmy would have been…and now I know why terror filled her eyes those very first days when I went to turn the light off, my chest physically aches at the revelation.

"She was a bad mommy for that, Emmy. A very bad mommy." Rubbing soothing circles along her back, I whisper, "I won't ever let anyone hurt you again, I promise." Kissing the top of her head I whisper, "I love you, sweet girl."

Sweat trickles along my brow. The small flashlight I keep hidden in my pocket for when she shoves me in here died a while ago, leaving me alone too. Why does everyone leave me?

It's been too long this time.

Far too long.

I haven't heard my mommy's cries in a long time.

The apartment is quiet, so, so, so quiet I'm scared she forgot me.

I've been trying to count sheep—that's what the boy at the playground says he does when he can't sleep. But it's so hot and stuffy in here I'm finding it hard to breathe now.

My stomach grumbles in the trunk, sounding like a dinosaur roar. Mommy never remembers to give me dinner.

The man she says is her friend brings lots of boxes of cereal, though. I love cereal. We always have it in the cupboard, and it's the only yummy thing I can make for myself. The last time I tried to make toast Mommy smacked me so hard across my face I got little bubbles on my skin.

Cereal never lets me go hungry. I can always count on cereal.

Tears fill my eyes.

Cereal can't get me out of here, though.

I want to start kicking my feet and screaming but the last time I did that Mommy got out her belt and even the thought of that happening again

makes my stomach do somersaults.

I can't sit down on my bottom for days and days after Mommy brings out the belt.

I hate the belt.

The latch to the trunk flicks.

I can't help but gasp. I didn't even hear Mommy's click-clack shoes this time.

My lips are lifting into a smile as the rush of fresh air tickles my skin and it feels like I can breathe again—

My smile falls.

It isn't Mommy opening the trunk. It's a man.

Is he one of Mommy's new friends? I don't like his smile. His smile is creepy and his eyes are black. Mommy's eyes go black like that when she hits me.

Before I realize it, I'm shaking my head.

This is a bad man. A bad, bad, bad man.

He reaches in, grabbing my arms. "Come here, boy," he sing-songs.

I'm screaming before I can remind myself of the belt.

"No!" He hefts me into his arms. Kicking and thrashing, I look around the room wildly. "Mom! Mommy! No, please no!"

This is a bad man. I don't want this bad man near me.

My mommy comes rushing in, her brown hair all messed up, her eyes wearing that crazy look she has when she disappears for days and I'm left to watch TV alone.

She coos. "It's okay, baby, this is Mommy's friend. You have to be a good boy for Mommy's friend and do what he says. It'll be fun, I promise."

My heart is beating so fast black spots start to appear and I suddenly can't see as the man takes me into the living room and throws me onto the couch.

"No, no, no!"

"Be a good boy for your mom," he spits.

“Kieran?”

My head snaps up at Layla’s voice, the memory fading.

I’m in my hallway. How long have I been standing here?

“Are you okay?” she asks, her voice timid as she walks toward me slowly. She’s approaching me like I’m a cornered animal.

I nod my head quickly, only to shake it.

My body feels weird, out of sorts and a bit floaty, like I’m suspended in air. With Emmy’s confession sparking my own memories, my hands are tingling by my sides, my brain foggy and I feel so unlike myself I swear I’m not even in my body right now.

“Kieran, should I go?”

I hear Layla ask the question, and if I was in my right mind, I’d realize all her little cues showing me she’s nervous and unsure what to do, but for some reason I can’t act on them.

It’s been years since I’ve remembered that particular friend of my mom’s, the one she would deal with and exchange things for drugs, one of them being me. Those memories…they’ve been buried for a *very* long time.

“I-I’m not sure.” Rubbing a hand down my face, I sigh. “Maybe.”

Her eyes widen, blinking at me rapidly. “Of course, I’m so sorry I intruded. I was just worried when you didn’t come back for so long and—” She shakes herself. “I’m rambling, you want to be left alone. I’m sorry.”

And with that, she spins on her heel and rushes down the stairs.

My hands are trembling slightly. My blinks are slow, and my jaw unhinges on a yawn.

The front door slams shut.

It takes a moment for my brain to process everything. It’s working much slower than usual, so slow in fact that when I look down at my hands again only to feel like I’m looking at someone else’s hands, it takes tremendous effort to blink back into my own perspective.

With sudden clarity, I realize that I dissociated.

The therapist I saw during college said I did that to “survive” my childhood. I was just so young I never remembered it, how floaty and out of control it feels. You can barely think when you dissociate, let alone hold a conversation, it takes every ounce of energy you have to form a singular word. Your brain just shuts down, a barrier of protection so you don’t think, feel, or have to comprehend whatever your mind deems unsafe.

My head snaps up.

“Did I just…”

I’m sprinting down the hallway before I finish the sentence.

Why the fuck would I tell her to leave? What the fuck just happened to me?

Running barefoot out the front of my house, Layla’s lights illuminate the gate she’s about to drive through, and I throw myself in front of her car, holding up my hands to tell her to stop.

Slamming on the brake, her car lurches, just as her front bumper knocks into my thigh.

“What the hell, Kieran?” Layla yells as she rolls down her window. “I could have killed you!”

Rounding the car, I lean my hand against her window, bending so we’re at eye level. The car smells like her and I can’t help but pull in a deep breath, my nerves settling at the scent. “Don’t go, I’m sorry. I just…I wasn’t myself. I usually need a minute alone to process my emotions.”

Layla nods, her eyes slightly wild with fright. “That’s okay, Kieran, I understand. No need to throw yourself in front of my car. I’m leaving.”

“No, you’re not listening. I want you to stay.” I can see the skepticism so I all but beg, “Please. Emmy just ripped my heart out, I don’t need you to run over it too.”

“That’s a bit melodramatic, don’t you think?”

“Emmy just asked if you were her mom and when I said no she was sad because she confessed she had a bad mom and wished *you* were her mom because you’re nice.”

Layla’s lips part, astonishment thundering across her face.

“Will you put the car in park now?”

She nods aimlessly, our roles reversing as she’s now the one shell-shocked.

Leaning over, I put the car in park for her, realizing how close it places me to her face. Her eyes track my every movement as I press the engine button and turn her car off. Pulling out of the window, I open the door, holding out my hand.

“Come inside. Please, sunshine.”

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Chapter 30

Layla

BELLA

did Kieran just throw himself on top of your car???

LAYLA

what the hell??

are you guys watching us?

BELLA

Grayson put a Ring camera on the front gate

he got a notification and checked it

he's been cackling for twenty minutes over the footage

do I even want to know why he threw himself on top of your car?

LAYLA

probably not

BELLA

Grayson is having a field day with it, he's editing the video to make Kieran look like he's wearing a Spiderman costume

LAYLA

HAHAHAHA

he asked if I was her new mom?"

“S The quiet question fills the living room, the same one that just over an hour ago was brimming with laughter and a euphoric lightness. Now it feels so heavy with the implication that I’m struggling to breathe.

Kieran squats before the fire, prodding the logs in an attempt to try and heat our frozen skin but I don’t think I can get warm again, not when my blood has run cold since he told me everything Emmy said.

“I completely froze and I tried, Layla. Fucking hell, I tried to keep it together when she was talking about how she was a bad mommy but you should have seen her sobs. I couldn’t hold myself back from crying.”

Not knowing if I should move closer and comfort Kieran or give him space, I settle on the latter. “I’d be concerned if you *didn’t* get emotional. Kieran…what she admitted is gut-wrenching.”

He nods slowly, his gaze firmly set on the fire. “At least now it makes sense why she stopped speaking.” He laughs, but it’s humorless. “She was locked in a closet…for hours, maybe even days.”

A gasp flies from me. “But Emmy’s afraid of the dark!”

The muscle in Kieran’s jaw bunches. “Apparently she would scream that she was scared and was just told to shut up.”

No wonder I found Kieran in a daze earlier. It was like he was a zombie, his face crestfallen, skin ashen. The haunted gleam hasn’t left his eyes since I found him in the hallway.

My heart is utterly breaking, not only for that sweet innocent girl that deserved far better but for the man beside me, too, who’s crumbling at the revelation.

Moving forward, I squat beside him, physically incapable of not comforting him any longer, but as I gently brush my hand along his arm, he flinches. His head swings my way, eyes widening. I quickly retract my hand.

“Sorry, I just…I can’t say I’m sorry enough. I wish you two weren’t going through this. I wish Emmy never went through that. I wish there was justice.”

Kieran takes a shuddering breath before reaching out. To my surprise, he slides his hand through mine, interlocking our fingers as he lays down, his eyes fixed on the ceiling. “Justice is never served to the right people.”

Sadness seeps from his every pore, and I want to do everything in my power to help him. Even if it means carrying some of the heaviness

weighing him down.

Lying on the living room floor beside him with our interwoven hands, I turn my head to the side, tracing the outline of his profile, the sharp line of his jaw, his surprisingly long lashes, his nose that is relatively straight except for a slight bump, probably from a break. It feels like we've entered a reality in which we're the only occupants.

"I wish that wasn't true," I whisper between us.

"Why do horrible people always get away with it?"

"With what?"

"With…everything." His brows furrow. "Not one person in my life was ever held accountable for what they did." His confession, as quiet as it is, is full of hurt, pain lacing every word. "And trust me, they deserved it. They all deserved it but…not one person, Layla. Not one of them was ever held accountable so why? Why do victims never get justice?" Kieran falls silent for a moment, his words hanging in the air until he whispers, "Even when they tell someone."

He says it so softly I can barely make out the words, my heart skipping a beat when I realize what he said.

"Did you tell someone?"

Kieran's tongue darts out, swiping along his bottom lip before he quickly dips his chin. The movement is short and quick, so subtle in fact that if I wasn't watching him vehemently, I never would have caught it.

"And they didn't do anything?"

A tear rolls down his cheek. He makes no move to wipe it away as he laughs, the sound jarring and blunt. "I was told that good boys need to act like men and not tell lies."

Another tear rolls down his cheek, his heartbreak on full display.

"I put it to rest a long time ago, put those memories in a box and did my best to never look at them. I could accept not getting justice for my pain. I could…stomach it," he says, but the grimace tells me he doesn't believe what he's saying.

Deep down, he's still that little boy wishing someone would hear him.

He takes a shuddering breath. "But Emmy? My sweet girl? Where is her justice? Her mom is dead. She can't be held accountable, can't be punished for the horrific shit she put her through and…what? I'm supposed to just go on with my life and be okay with it all?"

"Never."

He turns to me then, his eyes a storm of rough seas and turbulence. Of such raw pain it steals my breath.

“You keep doing what you are. Keep giving Emmy a voice, a safe home that will combat the memories of her early years, and continue to show her what it means to be loved.” Sighing, I relent, “The justice of it, though… You’re right Kieran you can’t get it for her. You can’t hold her mom responsible, and I’d be lying if I said I think you can get past that. There will probably be days where it eats you alive and others where you’re just grateful you have Emmy with you.”

“I hate that they’re never held responsible…that no one ever listens.”

“I listen.” I squeeze his hand. “I’ll always listen and believe you, Kieran.”

He blinks, surprise flickering there. “I haven’t even told you what happened though.”

“I don’t need to know to believe you. I know who you are, I know what type of man you are, and I know your character. You’d never lie, and whoever told you that you were a liar is despicable.”

“You called me a liar once.”

My eyes shutter close, lips thinning. “And I hate myself for it.”

His rough calloused fingers brush across my cheek, drawing my eyes open. “Hey, you didn’t know, it’s okay.”

“It’s not okay.” I hope he sees the truth in my eyes. “I knew you weren’t a liar, I just—” Biting my lip, I decide to confess, “When Bella started working for Grayson and they were doing the PR relationship, I kept an eye on the bunny sites…”

Kieran’s brows flick up. “That makes sense then.”

“You’re on there a lot, Kieran, and I hate to admit it, but I just believed it all. So when you told me you hadn’t been with anyone…I’m sorry I didn’t trust you. That was wrong.”

Shrugging, he runs his free hand through his hair. “I wouldn’t have believed me either. I promise, it’s fine, Layla.”

“It’s not, though. It hit a nerve that night and now I know why and I’m so sorry.”

The tension lining his shoulders seems to loosen, our hands remaining intertwined as he rubs his thumb back and forth along the back of my hand.

“Thank you for apologizing.” Groaning to himself, he murmurs, “Her therapist is going to have a field day when I call her tomorrow.” Rolling

onto his side to face me fully, he lets go of our hands to brush a stray lock of my hair behind my ear. “Thank you…for staying and for talking through this all with me.” He offers a rueful smile. “Though, I have to be honest, sunshine, I’m feeling raw here. I’ve told you things no one knows. Care to even the playing field?”

Rolling onto my side with a smile stretched taut across my cheeks I tease. “Trying to coax another confession from my list?”

“Always,” he toys.

The heaviness of our conversation still lingers but it isn’t as thick as it was. Kieran has this way about him, this magical quality to turn even the darkest of moments into something light, and I don’t think he’s even aware of how special it is.

“Come on, sunshine, my heart just bled. Give me something to look forward to.”

Biting my bottom lip, I can’t hold back my grin. “I’ll give you something better.” Sitting up, I feel his gaze on me as I locate my phone. I quickly type out the text and hit send. A moment later, Kieran’s phone buzzes from somewhere in the living room.

He stretches his arm behind his head, the move lifting his black shirt, showing a sliver of his lower abdomen and the biceps covered in ink. “You dirty texting me?”

Snorting out a laugh, I whack his shoulder playfully. “You wish.”

“Every day.”

He knocks his knee against my leg, the movement sending a jolt through my body. “Are you going to tell me the confession?”

Quirking a brow I tease, “A bit impatient, are we?”

“With you, always.” He winks. “But I’d still wait a lifetime.”

Rolling my eyes I jab his chest. “I just gave you something far greater than a confession.”

“Is that so?” He holds out his hand. “Pass me my phone.”

I shake my head and chuckle as he pouts playfully. “Not while I’m here. You have to read it alone.”

His eyes glow at the word *read*. “You’re making me want to ask you to leave just so I can find out.”

I throw my head back as a deep belly laugh escapes me. I go to move but he wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me down to the floor with him, the sudden movement startling me, making a shrill squeak escape. “I

said *want*, not that I was going to do it. I might have had a momentary lapse in judgment earlier tonight but that will never happen again."

He holds me against him, his tattooed arms keeping me captive, and I find that I don't want to leave.

Running my fingers along one of his designs, my smile fades and Kieran stiffens as my fingers trace over a raised bump. I pause over the top of it, curiosity getting the better of me before I force my finger to move away but I find another…and another…and another.

With sickening dread, I come to the stark realization that Kieran's tattoos are more than just a beautiful artistic design—they're hiding secrets.

My heart free-falls.

"Kieran—"

"The box, sunshine," he whispers. "Keep the memories in the box."

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Chapter 31

Layla

Layla's Life List

~~Have a water fight~~
~~Go to second base~~
~~Have an orgasm in public~~
~~Go on the best date of my life~~
~~Cuddle by the fire~~
~~Have a man throw themselves at my car~~ (Kieran forced me to write this one)

My nerves are absolutely frayed and despite nothing being wrong no matter how much I tell my brain I'm fine it seems to be freaking out that I'm currently sitting in a doctor's waiting room.

Even the book in my hand has gone unturned. I've read the same page five times now.

Usually books are my comfort, the one thing in my life that never failed me like my body continually did, but I haven't had to go to a doctor's office in nearly three months. I haven't missed the antiseptic smell or the sound of children's snotty sniffles and coughs.

I didn't miss this one bit and sitting in this uncomfortable plastic chair is bringing back horrid memories of the countless visits to doctors growing up and everything I had to miss because of them.

Like my senior prom, because I suddenly became borderline comatose. The water park field trip because I couldn't stop vomiting. Bella's fifteenth birthday. I couldn't put balloons on her locker like I had planned because I physically couldn't walk. My bones wouldn't stop aching, making me feel like I was ninety-eight, not fifteen.

Memory after memory of a childhood filled with exciting plans only to be forced to cancel bombards my mind to the point my chest begins to get uncomfortably tight.

"Layla Carson?" a middle-aged man asks from the end of the hall.

Sighing, I stand, giving him a small smile to indicate that's me.

His lips thin. *I think he's trying to smile?* "Follow me."

He beckons me through to a standard room with an examination table on the left, his corner desk to the right, along with two worn-out leather seats placed in front of it. There's no photo frames on the walls, nothing to indicate a life outside of this windowless room.

"Have a seat, please."

He clicks on his mouse, shaking it from side to side to wake the computer up and types on his keyboard. I sit in the chair, already knowing that he's pulling up my file. I never understand why they don't do this beforehand.

His eyebrows shoot upward.

Yep, he's just seen how long my file is.

He whistles under his breath. "Right, and what brings you in this time?"

My stomach sinks; I apparently didn't luck out today with a good GP. I've seen so many doctors in my life that I know within the first five minutes how an appointment is going to go, and this one is about to be torture.

Goddamnit, why did Dr. Martinez, my preferred GP have to retire while I was in Berlin?

Forcing a strained smile on my lips, I say as sweetly as I can, "I wanted to talk about my contraceptive options."

He frowns. "Right." Sighing, he turns his head back to his computer, typing away. "I'll subscribe the standard birth control—"

"Oh, sorry," I interrupt, only to be frowned at. "I'm not sure if it's in my file but I'm currently on a trial medication. I was in Berlin this past year. I just want to see what would be the best contraceptive fit for my current medical plan."

He lowers his head to look at me over the rim of his glasses. “Yes, and like I was saying before, I will prescribe you—”

“You didn’t even ask about my medication, though. How do you know if it’s compatible?”

His jaw clenches. “Do you know what medication you’re on?”

Do I know what I put inside my body every day to help me function? Yes, yes I do.

Listing the medication off the top of my head, I can tell I’ve surprised him. He reluctantly nods. “Well, if that’s your daily dosage, I would recommend a different brand.”

My left eye twitches.

This is not new to me.

Needing to be firm yet polite to advocate for myself. Dancing the fine line between being placid and yet needing to be stern without the doctor becoming irritated and dismissing you.

It shouldn’t be this way.

You should never have to monitor yourself this way in the medical field, but as someone that has seen more doctors than movies, I can firmly attest that it occurs. And unfortunately, it’s more prevalent for women.

The number of times where my symptoms were dismissed as hormones, a bad period, or anxiety is far too many. I was borderline gaslit that I was fine and look at me now, having to spend over a year in Berlin for treatment.

I was so angry in the beginning, angry and hurt that the person you pay to see to make you feel better never believed me and told me it would go away, only for it to get worse as time went on.

There are good doctors in the world, fantastic ones that are kind and compassionate toward their patients. However, that does not outweigh the horrendous ones that give the medical system a bad name. The horror stories I’ve not only heard but have experienced first hand are atrocious.

It took until I was seventeen to be properly diagnosed, and before that it was years of hospitalizations, emergency runs, and doctor appointments. It flipped my world upside down, and destroyed my parents.

I saw every day how hopeless they were feeling. It wasn’t until one severe emergency visit that it changed. A doctor had just placidly told my mother I could barely move, let alone open my eyes, because I *obviously*

had endometriosis. I wasn't even on my period or at a time in my cycle where I'd be flaring up.

My mother lost it.

All her smiles and positive attitude flew out the window —I also think running on two hours of broken sleep had a hand in this—she screamed. Momma Bear Carson—who wouldn't hurt a fly, who never raised her voice besides to cheer someone on—*screamed*.

That one moment fueled by five years of pain, heartache, dismissal, gaslighting, and unanswered questions was what finally got me answers.

A doctor who was visiting town saw my mother at her breaking point, begging the doctor to do his job and search for what was *really* wrong, and stepped in.

Dr. Montary was my saving grace.

It took her an hour of poring through my file and asking me questions to tell me she thought I had lupus.

One hour.

Despite knowing what it could possibly be, being diagnosed was a different story, an entire new battle for me and my family to face—years upon years of searching for something that would work to manage my symptoms. Years spent on useless hope, disheartened breakdowns, pills that never worked, treatments that did more harm than good. Endless trips around the country only to leave sobbing.

That was my life. Managing doctors and appointments and realizing that to get what I needed, I had to be the perfect mix of sweet and stern.

And I need to do it again with this asshole.

Who the hell recommends a generic birth control that comes with a literal sheet of side-effects the size of the Bible while they're currently taking heavy medication?

It's negligence.

I shouldn't have to do his job for him. If I was unaware and trusted doctors blindly, I'd be screwed.

With anger simmering in my veins, I take a calming breath and smile at the man when what I really want to do is throttle him. Kieran would be proud of me for swearing at him in my head, although something tells me if Kieran were here beside me, he'd be doing more than swearing in his mind.

"That would be great. Are you certain it's safe for me to take beyond the standard long list of side-effects?"

“Side-effects are common with all drugs but yes, Miss Carson, it’s perfectly fine,” he says as if I’ve bored him to death. Whistling as he looks at his computer again, he asks, “So what do you have? Jesus, you’ve got a long rap sheet.”

I’m clenching my teeth so tightly I swear they might snap. “Lupus.”

“Ahh. I’ve not had a patient with lupus before. If you ask me I think it’s too inconsistent to diagnose. Coming and going like that, it’s more likely you just have a weak immune system and you catch a bug too often.”

Did he just…

Snatching the prescription he holds out for me, I keep my hands at my sides so I don’t cause bodily harm. “Thank you for your input but I was diagnosed at seventeen—”

“There’s a large portion of the medical field who don’t believe in the disease.”

“Yes, I’m aware.”

And he is clearly one of them.

He looks at me over the rim of his glasses. “I wish you all the best, Miss Carson, and that you find what works for you to finally settle that weak immune system and fight off those bugs.”

My fists are clenching the wheel so tightly my knuckles have turned white.

I scream.

I scream bloody murder so loud and for so long that my voice cracks, until the anger gives way to what it’s masking—pain.

Sobs wrack my body so thoroughly I’m forced to pull my car over on the side of the road.

It never fails to amaze me when this happens.

A literal doctor diminishing and invalidating the disease I was diagnosed with close to ten years ago. The one that, contrary to his stupid

beliefs, is very real, so real in fact that I participated in a year-long trial run of medication that has thankfully stopped my flare-ups.

But no, this small-minded doctor who no doubt became one over forty years ago doesn't want to learn anything new. There is nothing worse than a doctor unwilling to learn as they age.

And yet my stupid tears won't stop flowing. Usually I'd call Bella but I know Allie and Carlton are back in town again for a few days and she's dealing with her own heavy feelings of not having her mom around.

So I dial the one person I know I can always count on.

"Hi honey, how did it go?" Mom says sweetly, answering after the first ring.

She's always quick to answer. Once I got sick, she made it her personal mission to never miss a phone call again after one of the school nurses tried to call and she missed it. I was sick in the nurse's station for over three hours and had to be hospitalized due to dehydration.

She never forgave herself for it.

Letting out a shuddering breath, my head drops back on the headrest. "Could have gone better."

Some might think it's odd I told my mom I was going to the doctor to be put on birth control, but she's nursed me back to health for so long that she's already seen everything.

"Oh no, what happened?"

I laugh, but it holds no humor. "Would be easier to answer what *didn't* happen. I didn't get a kind or friendly doctor, I didn't see someone who asked what medication I was on, and I didn't see a doctor that thinks lupus is real."

My mom's sudden intake of breath has my eyes closing. "You're kidding me," she hisses over the line.

"I wish I was."

"Did he not see on your file that you were in Berlin getting treatment for the disease?"

"He barely skimmed it. I had to force him to triple-check that I could take the birth control he was giving me with my current medication, and then as I left he said he hopes I figure out how to make my weak immune system better so I don't keep catching 'bugs.'"

"I'm going to strangle the bastard."

"You and me both."

“I can’t believe there’s still doctors who don’t believe…even with all the evidence to prove it.” I can hear the tiredness in her voice, the devastation.

“People are stupid.”

“They’re thick-headed, that’s what they are.”

My gaze flicks to the time on the dash. “Thanks for letting me rant, Mom. I have to get back on the road though.”

“Okay, sweetie, please call if you need me, okay? I’m just one click of a button away.”

Now I smile, a real one this time. “Thanks, Mom.”

Hitting end, I flick my blinker on and pull back onto the road, stealing myself as I drive to not Kieran’s house but my best friends.

Doing this after my doctor’s appointment might not have been the best decision. My stomach is still churning with anger, simmering at his words, when this moment should be special. At least, I want it to be.

I don’t want to feel the lingering anger, but here I am, shaking off the ugly grime and smiling wide as I watch my best friend come to answer the door. Bambi comes barreling in behind her.

“Hey! Best surprise ever, what are you doing here?” she asks.

She opens the door farther, inviting me in, and as I walk through Bambi’s tail wildly thumps the door, the walls, the entryway table, and she’s none the wiser.

“Well, surprise it is, because I have something for you.”

Bella chuckles as she ushers Bambi to the living room where her tail can’t knock anything over. When she turns back to me, I find I’m suddenly nervous.

Peering around, I ask, “Is anyone home? Grayson’s parents are here for a few days again, right?”

She smiles. “Grayson took them out to give me some time to draw.”

“That’s sweet.”

Her cheeks tint. “He’s very attentive.”

Before Bella can ask about the surprise, I pull the teddy bear from behind my back, holding it out for her.

It’s the childhood bear her mom gave her. Its brown body is a little ratty from years of love, the green and black striped shirt it’s wearing desperately needing a wash despite Bella’s refusals.

Her brows furrow as she looks from me to the bear. “Uh, Lil, why do you have Mr. Freckles?”

“I stole it,” I confess, biting my lip.

“How the hell didn’t I notice?”

“Maybe because Grayson is so *attentive*,” I tease.

She snorts, taking the bear from me, inspecting to see if he’s all right. “Thank you for giving it back but I’m sorry, I don’t understand. Why did you take it?”

Before I can lose my nerve, I step forward, pressing the button I had inserted this week and letting it explain for me.

A soft female voice fills the living room.

The moment it does, Bella’s eyes widen, tears pooling instantly.

“Hi, my love! I’m just calling because I miss your gorgeous face. Call me back soon please, I miss you. Talk soon!”

The tears turn into a river as her eyes close, her face shuddering. She falls back onto the couch, clutching the bear to her chest, and breaks, sobs wracking her body.

My own tears begin to fall freely.

After Bella confessed how she was feeling about her mom and how she misses her on the days that Grayson’s family is in town, how hard it’s been to cope, I knew I had to do this for her. I’ve caught her listening to the voicemail she kept from her mom from over two years ago a million times. I just wish I had done it sooner.

Sitting beside my best friend, I wrap my arm around her shoulder. She turns toward me and loses it, her chest heaving, shoulders shaking as she bawls.

“T-thank you,” she heaves through hiccups. “Thank you for giving me this.” She presses the button again and Trisha’s voice fills the room. “Thank you for giving me a piece of her back.”

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Chapter 32

Layla

GRAYSON

thank you

she hasn't stopped pressing the button all day

It's the most precious thing she owns

LAYLA

anything for her <3

GRAYSON

she's special isn't she?

LAYLA

the best person I know

An hour later I have to all but drag myself out of her house and walk across the street to Kieran's. The only way I can leave her is knowing that Grayson, who just arrived, will take care of her.

He always will.

Leaning against my car, I give myself a minute, taking deep breaths to try and shake off the heaviness of the morning. The past twenty-four hours have been both fulfilling and yet emotionally draining.

Lying by the fire with Kieran, hearing his soft confessions and having him pour his heart out to me like that, is a side I've never seen, one that I

don’t think many people, if any, get to experience. The soft, wounded side makes me want to wrap my arms around him and protect him.

I’m not sure what’s happening between us, and despite my rule that we needed to call this quits if someone started developing feelings…I find that I’m not ready yet. I’m not done experiencing things with him, whether that be his heated touches or gentle words.

Who would have figured the first rule I broke would be my own, the one I should have adamantly followed. But I don’t know of any woman who could witness these different sides to Kieran and *not* fall a little for the man who deserves so much more than the cards life has dealt him.

Maybe I should end this before we sleep together. When I agreed I was attracted to him, of course, but my heart wasn’t attached. But now, could I really go forward with this and not end up broken-hearted?

Could I sleep with Kieran and not fall in love?

“Hey, sunshine.”

My head lifts at his deep husky voice.

Think of the devil and he shall appear.

My smile is blooming before I can stop it. Pushing off the car, my steps are slow, measured, as I soak him up. “Hey.” I halt as I realize his arms are laden with boxes and is that…pink paint on his pants? “What are you building now?”

He flashes me a lopsided grin. “It’s a surprise.”

“A surprise? What a day for it. I just surprised Bella.”

The muscles in his arms ripple as he throws the cardboard boxes in the trash. I flit my eyes away just in time as he spins back to face me, and if I didn’t know any better, I’d say he was pouting.

“What about me? Where’s my surprise? I thought you said I was your favorite person.”

I roll my eyes. “You know when I said that I was talking about Emmy.”

With a wink, Kieran throws an arm around my shoulder and drags me through the front door. “Keep telling yourself that.” He stops me at the stairs, taking my purse from my shoulder and gently placing it on the entryway table. Leaning against the wall, Kieran crosses his arms over his chest, smirking. “Hey Emmy, Layla’s here!”

No sooner do the words leave his lips I hear a thud, followed by the sound of her little feet running down the hall. When she emerges at the top of the stairs, I watch her eyes light up like a Christmas tree.

Throwing my arms in the air, I squeal, “Queen Emmy!”

She giggles softly behind her hand as she tries to make her way down the stairs as fast as she can, her free hand holding the banister. I get ready, my hands outstretched, and thank God I do. When she’s three steps away she launches herself at me with no warning. I laugh as I catch her in my arms, spinning us. I soak up the warmth filling my heart as she wraps her arms around my neck and hugs me.

“Hi, sweet girl. I missed you. Have you been annoying your dad for me?”

She pulls back and that’s when I see the pink paint on her face and clothes, too. Frowning, I turn to Kieran. “Okay, now I really need to know what you two have been getting up to.”

I find an emotion clouding his gaze, one I can’t decipher, but it isn’t bad. He always looks at me softly but this is different.

Because if I didn’t know any better, I’d say Kieran Ashford is looking at us like we’re his entire world.

Pushing off the wall his smile is on full display as he reaches over and tickles Emmy. “Ready to show her the surprise, baby girl?”

Emmy nods so strongly it’s a wonder she doesn’t hurt her brain. Chuckling, I put her down as she begins to wiggle. “Lead the way, my queen.”

Her hands are a little sticky as she takes my outstretched hand, but I’ve gotten used to that as part of my job. She gently pulls me along up the stairs, and at my back, I feel warmth. Peering over my shoulder, I see heat filling Kieran’s eyes, his gaze firmly on me.

“Something caught your attention, Ashford?”

I wait for him to feel embarrassed that I caught him ogling but in true Kieran fashion, he just smirks, looking at me through those thick black lashes. “Sunshine, I was caught about two years ago.”

“Don’t feel like releasing yourself?”

“Never.”

I come to a stop, Emmy’s hand dropping from mine at the heated word he all but growled. My lips part, but all thoughts of Kieran leave me as a very small voice whispers my name.

“Layla?”

Before I can stop myself, I gasp. Emmy’s wringing her small hands as she rocks back and forth on her heels, her eyes lowered to the ground as she

tries to make herself as small as possible.

My knees buckle. Dropping to the floor, I try to catch her eye, my cheeks aching from how wide I'm smiling.

"Oh, sweetheart," I breathe. She's so unsure of herself, so quiet and timid, that she has no idea she's just made my day. That the sound of her calling out my name will be playing on a loop in my mind. "What is it, my sweet girl?" I ask around the lump in my throat.

She lifts her eyes quickly before darting them away.

"It's okay, Emmy. Layla loves to hear your voice. Don't you, Layla?"

I nod frantically. "It's my favorite sound," I confess.

She looks at me then and my heart begins to beat a frantic rhythm.

She said my name!

"Can I show you what Daddy and I made?"

With my hand over my chest, I gush, "Of course! Please, please show me!"

Tears bubble up in my eyes, along with such unending warmth I wouldn't be surprised to look in the mirror and see that my cheeks are the same color as my hair. Looking over my shoulder I spot Kieran and by the look on his face, just as much joy is flooding his system.

Emmy grasps my hand and pulls me along, coming to a stop in front of her room. She jumps into a star formation, yelling, "Ta-da!"

I don't know what I want to cry over first—her excitement, or the pink bookshelf mounted to her wall. She runs over to it, pointing at the books filling the shelves. She points to a Lego flower vase, too, her smile coy.

"Like my daddy's," she whispers, suddenly shy and unsure of herself at my quietness.

Shaking myself out of my frozen stupor, I mentally tell myself I can cry later. Right now, Emmy needs all the encouragement to keep talking. I kneel before her, my joy no doubt written stark across my face.

"Did you and Daddy build Legos today?"

She nods empathetically.

Kieran's deep voice dances along my spine. "Emmy has been hard at work today building her Lego while I built the bookshelf."

My eyes lift to the custom project that rises to the ceiling. She has more than enough room to grow over the years.

"It's beautiful," I whisper in awe. "Kieran, you outdid yourself. I've never seen such a beautiful bookshelf before." Looking over my shoulder, I

tease, “What can’t you build?”

His smirk is smug. “There’s no limit when it comes to my girls.”

My girls.

Goosebumps prickle my skin as I turn back.

There are small details in the wood along the base. *Did he carve the small fairies?* My fingers trail over the design, my breath catching. “Kieran, it’s—” A gasp of shocked laughter escapes me. “It’s more than beautiful, it’s art. I’d do despicable things to have this in my room.”

Turning, I find Kieran leaning against the doorway, pink paint smudged all over his clothes as he grins down at me. He shrugs. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing.” To Emmy, I whisper, “You, my little queen, have an amazing dad.”

Her lips move, no sound coming out, and yet I could have sworn she mumbles to herself, “The best.”

Something she said earlier comes back to me suddenly.

Cocking my head, I say to Kieran, “I didn’t know you like to build Legos.”

I haven’t seen a single Lego in the house, and trust me, when you build with Legos, those little bastards show up in places they never should.

Kieran’s lip twitches. “You haven’t given me a juicy enough confession for that secret.”

Quirking my brow in challenge, I lean over and whisper conspiratorially in Emmy’s ear, “Want to show me Daddy’s Legos?”

Her eyes widen as she smacks a hand over her mouth, giggling to herself. Gosh, she’s vocal today, her personality shining. I can’t help myself, tears begin to build, forcing me to blink them away furiously.

Emmy’s small giggles stop suddenly as she leans forward, her voice so low I have to turn my head to the side so she’s whispering right into my ear.

“Daddy made the dark go away.”

Frowning at her cryptic words, I pull back to find her little pointer finger lifted upwards. I follow her finger, peering up at the ceiling. Emmy tips her head back and sighs, a content little smile playing along her lips as her brown hair, in two pigtails, swish along her shoulder blades.

If I thought Kieran was a great dad before, if I thought he had a beautiful soft side to him, it’s nothing compared to now.

Kieran Ashford was born to be a dad.

Covering the ceiling, nearly every inch, are stars.

Glowing stars.

Kieran flicks the light switch off, plunging us into space.

He's placed glow in the dark stars all along the ceiling and the sight is magnificent. "It's like you're in space, Queen Emmy!"

Kieran turns the lights back on, and the glowing stars fade away. "Makes you feel safe, doesn't it, sweetheart?"

In my peripheral, I can see her little head bopping up and down, but I can't take my eyes off her dad. The man that has spent his entire day building not only custom bookshelves for his daughter but sticking what must be a hundred stars to her ceiling.

"Dad-of-the-year award," I say, surprised to hear my voice is husky.

Something heats in his gaze at the sound of my voice, his lips tipping up into a crooked grin. "You like that, sunshine?"

My tongue is moving before I can stop it. "Very much."

Emmy breaks the tension thrumming between her dad and me as she points to the door, reminding me.

"Oh, yes! Show me where your dad hides the Legos, Queen Emmy." Rising, I let her pull me over toward Kieran. "Looks like I don't have to cough up a confession after all," I tease.

"You already did."

I can't help but frown as he follows Emmy and me into the hallway. *What is he talking about?*

Emmy tugs on my arm but I can't drop Kieran's gaze, not even when she comes to a stop at the end of the hallway, past her dad's room and in front of one I haven't ventured into before. She stands on her tiptoes, trying to reach the handle but failing. Kieran keeps piercing me to the spot as he moves forward, his lips all but brushing mine as, with pink-splattered hands, he leans forward and pushes open the door as he whispers huskily, "Welcome to my secret."

My breath hitches, my body wanting nothing more than to sway forward into his, but Kieran's looking at me like he knows exactly what I want and like he will make me beg for it. So instead, I turn to find a room, smaller than Emmy's and yet still twice the size of my bedroom at home.

For the second time today, Kieran steals my breath. Inside, clear floating shelves house dozens, if not hundreds, of Legos.

Emmy twirls into the room, careful not to touch the work bench in the middle. This isn't her first time being in here, if I had to guess. I'd say she's

been given rules by the way she's considerate of her small steps so that she doesn't knock anything over.

Spinning in the doorway, I'm surprised to see that Kieran's cheeks are tinted slightly pink. No, that can't be right. Kieran doesn't get *nervous*. Confidence runs through his veins; it's practically in his blood.

"Kieran Ashford," I whistle low. "Are you a secret nerd?"

The pink on his cheeks blossoms into a full red tint and without warning, a full belly laugh escapes me. Suddenly, warm arms wrap around me, caging my back to his front as he bends his head low to whisper in my ear. "Keep laughing at me and you'll give me a complex."

I can't help it, I can't stop.

"All this time you had a secret nerd cave!"

I squeal as his fingers find my waist and tickle.

"You'll pay for laughing at me, sunshine."

"No!" I cry. "Stop! Ahhh! Kieran!" My screams are tinged with laughter as I wiggle in his hold and yet he doesn't let up, his hold on me secure.

"Take it back. It's a man cave."

"Okay! Okay!" I relent, gasping. "It's a man cave. A very manly…" I chuckle. "Nerd cave."

He growls low and deep, pausing for a moment to let me catch my breath, before starting the assault again and so thoroughly I scream as I drop to my knees, Kieran coming with me. He tackles me to the floor, pinning me down, but not with his full weight.

I'm squirming beneath him, laughing and squealing as he continues to torment me.

"Take it back," he demands, but his voice has a note of cheerfulness in it.

"If it's not a nerd cave then why keep it a secret?" I ask between gasps, my cheeks hurting at how hard I'm smiling.

His blush deepens. "There's nothing wrong with Legos," he mumbles. "Now take it back, sunshine, or I'll make this worse."

He hits a spot on my side and I scream with vigor, probably cracking a window somewhere in his house. "Okay, okay, okay! It's a man cave."

Kieran stops, panting, as he looks down at me. "A very manly cave."

"A very manly, colorful cave."

He rolls his eyes, chuckling. "You're a demon."

"Am not."

“Are too.” He bends low. “Admit it, you didn’t relent earlier because you love my hands on you.”

My eyes flare at the mischief dancing behind his, until the little pitter-patter of feet has both Kieran and I looking to Emmy. She’s standing beside the desk, a giant grin on her face.

Her lips part but snap closed again, and she glances uncertainly at Kieran.

He nods, his smile so encouraging it makes my stomach flip. “Tell me, sweetheart.”

She chuckles softly before whispering, “Do it again.”

Kieran’s smile turns devilish and he shrugs at me. “Sorry, Layla, but what Emmy says goes.”

I scream as his hands come down upon me again, and maybe Kieran was right. Maybe I do love his hands on my body.

Far more than I should.

This entire day has been eye-opening to say the least.

Two things have become crystal clear.

One: Emmy has made me realize how much I crave to have my own family one day.

Two: Kieran is not at all who I thought he was two years ago, and the more I find out, the more I seem to fall for him.

It’s late into the evening. Emmy’s fast asleep as I move to leave for the day but Kieran’s rough hands wrap around my forearm and stop me. A bolt of electricity strikes my body, my stomach flipping as I turn slowly, bracing myself for his riptide eyes.

He’s too handsome for his own good.

Swallowing thickly, I try to put it out of my mind, try to ignore the way my heart is skipping a beat at his touch, but it’s getting harder.

His gaze flicks back and forth between my eyes, searching…probing. And if there's one thing about Kieran, he never misreads people.

"A confession for a secret?" he whispers.

I find, for once, I don't want to tell him something from my list, but a secret of my own.

I think I'm falling for you, Kieran Ashford.

I pull out my phone, ignoring Kieran's confusion as I type out a quick text message. His phone pings from somewhere in the house. "That will tell you everything," I say quietly, my hands trembling slightly. "Your secret?"

Kieran tucks a lock of hair behind my ear, his voice as rough as gravel as he confesses, "You've ruined me for every other girl."

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Chapter 33

Kieran

MY FUTURE WIFE

link to book

chapter 34

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Lying in bed, I can't stop replaying the way Layla's eyes shuttered closed, her black eyelashes fluttering, chest rising on a sharp inhale as if she were savoring my secret.

I've been doing everything to let her figure out on her own who I am, that all I want is her, and tonight for the first time, she looked at me like she was truly *seeing* me. I'd be lying if I said it didn't ignite a little spark of hope in my chest. That perhaps I'm not torturing myself with the scraps she gives me. That maybe, just maybe, Layla could see me as someone worthy of her love.

Who would have thought a five-foot-two redhead would have me smiling to myself in bed? I feel like a teenager, my thoughts wholly consumed by her—*always* her.

Lifting my phone, my smile only widens. I click on the link she sent me and download the audiobook, scrolling all the way to the chapter she texted me.

My eyes widen at what fills my ears.

My chuckle is dark, my blood thrumming through my body as my cock swells.

Layla has just given me a roadmap to her ultimate fantasy.

“Oh, it’s fucking on, sunshine.”

The tent rustles, the howling wind joining the sound of my gasping breaths. He pulls back, slowly peeling my clothes away, his rough voice tickling my skin as he all but groans, “You’re so fucking beautiful, baby.”

A hand slaps down on my shoulder, jostling me from my thoughts.

Shaking my head, trying to get that damn audiobook out of my mind, which has conveniently turned from the book characters into Layla and me in the tent, I look up at Grayson.

“Earth to Ashford, you good?”

I clear my throat, nodding. “Yep, all good.”

“You sure? Because Irving has been boasting about how Layla was looking at him at the recent home—”

“The fuck he has,” I growls.

Irving pales as my upper lip curls back. He raises his hands in surrender. “What the fuck did I do now?”

“You talking about Layla?”

His jaw drops, eyes darting around the locker room. “Who the fuck is lying to Ashford?”

Grayson throws his head back on a laugh, the sound making my anger dissolve.

“Fucking Crawford,” I mutter to myself. Rising, I knock my shoulder with his and grab my towel to dry my hair from the shower I took after practice. “Don’t go stirring shit up, man.”

Grayson doubles over. “Fucking priceless.”

Johnson strolls into the locker room, his lips twitching. “We messing with Irving again?”

O’Connor chuckles. “Ashford and Irving.”

“Two for one, fucking love it.”

Irving flops down onto the bench, pouting. “Why do I always get messed with?”

Johnson reaches over, messing up his blond hair. “Because you’re so fucking easy to mess with.”

“Don’t put your oily fingers through my hair. I just fucking washed it.”

Johnson deadpans. “Case in point, Irving, case in point.”

Valenti’s lip twitches across from me, his shoulders shaking on a silent laugh as his best friends boisterous one makes up for his silence.

Grayson claps his hands together, making us fall silent. Looking around, I note it’s just myself, Grayson, Irving, Johnson, Lewis, O’Connor, Valenti, and Ellington. Was I zoned out when he asked us to stay behind?

What the hell is the time? I really need to stop fantasizing about Layla in the locker room.

“Boys’ night, and before some of you complain, it’s mandatory for you lot.”

“What about the rest of the team?” Irving pipes up. “It will hurt their feelings, Cap. No one likes to be excluded.”

Johnson reaches over and claps Irving on the back of the head before nodding in Grayson’s direction. “Sorted. Go on, Cap.”

I snort, the boys also struggling to not laugh as Irving shoots daggers in Johnson’s direction. Grayson just sighs before going on.

“This one is just close family because”—he turns to me then—“Emmy will be joining us.”

My brow arches. “She will?”

“Yep.”

“Hate to break it to you, Cap, but that’s not a boys’ night then.”

Now I’m the one glaring at Irving.

He blows out a breath before muttering, “I’m going to shut up now.”

“Music to my ears.”

“Hey!”

Johnson shakes his head. “Never lasts long.”

“Stop picking on Irving,” Grayson grumbles. “He’s like an infant.”

“That classifies as picking on me, Cap.”

Grayson ignores him and goes on. “We’re meeting back here at seven o’clock, so cancel all the plans you had.”

Johnson chuckles. “What bunny are you canceling on, Irving?”

He flips him the bird but does pull out his phone. Besides Grayson and me, Valenti is the only other one who doesn’t. He notices me staring and gives me a small shrug.

He and I both know exactly why he doesn’t have plans on a Friday night.

“Go home and freshen up. The girls also have a night planned so no excuse to bail,” Grayson adds, picking up his duffel bag.

“Can I at least know what I’m dragging my beautiful daughter into?”

“Nope,” Grayson calls over his shoulder before pointedly looking at Irving. “Everyone on their best behavior. No cussing.”

“Fucking hell,” Irving grumbles.

All Grayson told me to do was bundle Emmy in warm clothes. He wouldn’t budge on anything else, even when I cornered him in the parking lot. Yet he must’ve told Layla because as I walk inside the house, Emmy runs at me full force, already dressed in a scarf, coat, beanie, and little gloves.

Why are kids’ clothes so cute? Her little mittens fit two of my fingers.

Scooping her into my arms, I hold her to my chest. “Hello, munchkin, how are you doing?”

My only answer is her laying her cheek on my shoulder, her little hands reaching around to play with the back of my hair. Dropping my duffel bag, I soak up the moment. Just two months ago I used to walk into an apartment with no one to greet me and now I have this little bundle in my arms that makes my heart want to explode.

Venturing farther into the house, I lay my head on top of Emmy’s, something in my chest loosening at her warmth. Except my smile slowly begins to fade as Layla steps out of the kitchen and gives me a weary smile.

“Hey, how was practice?” It takes one glance, one fleeting look to know something is wrong. She tries to straighten her spine and give me a full smile but can’t. Even her complexion is pale.

“What’s wrong?” Leaning forward, I place the back of my hand on her forehead. She has a slight fever. “Are you sick? Did Emmy pick something up at the park and give it to you?”

Layla takes Emmy to the park every day, rain or shine. If it’s raining, they wear adorable little rain boots and coats—matching, of course, because Emmy wants to all but morph into Layla.

Those are my favorite photos she sends me. Them two at the park, my daughter admiring Layla as much as I do.

Seems both the Ashfords are enamored with the nanny.

“I’m fine, I promise,” she says, and yet she doesn’t stop leaning against the kitchen archway, as if she doesn’t have enough energy to even stand.

Sliding my hand from her forehead, I gently cup her jaw to tip her chin up, making those icy blue eyes lock on mine. “Don’t lie to me,” I tell her.

Swallowing, she shrugs. “I just feel a bit run down. Perhaps a cold is coming on? It was raining yesterday, maybe I stayed out with Emmy for too long.”

Before I understand what I’m doing and can stop myself, I lean forward and press a kiss to her forehead. “Go lay down on the couch. I’m home now, so you can rest. I’ll make you some chicken noodle soup.”

Pulling back, I realize what I’ve done.

Realized that I’ve crossed a line Layla drew. This isn’t something on her life list. There’s no reason for me to be touching her this way, and yet it feels so utterly *right* I can’t force myself to apologize.

I don’t think she has enough energy to scold me, though, because she just blinks a few times before sighing and dragging herself over to the living room.

“I don’t want to cancel,” I hear her whisper under her breath.

“Cancel what?”

And that certainly wasn’t meant for me to hear by the way she tenses. She pauses, slowly lowering herself to the couch before she all but sags into it. “Girls’ night tonight. I don’t want to cancel.”

“Bella will understand.”

“Of course she would. It’s just…” She bites her lip, a faraway look entering her gaze as she confesses, “It’s been a long time since I’ve had to cancel plans.”

There’s a hint of sadness in her tone, enough to make me straighten. As Emmy pulls her head off my shoulder, I whisper in her ear, “Why don’t you

go upstairs and get Layla a teddy to cheer her up?”

Emmy’s brown eyes widen, my only warning before she’s wiggling to be let down. I place her down gently, only for her to take off like a rocket. There, that’s bought me all of two seconds alone with Layla.

Rounding the couch I kneel in front of her, placing my hand on her ankle. She’s wrapped herself up like a pretzel, hugging her legs to her chest. One look is all it takes for me to spot it—the terror in her eyes.

“I can’t sit here and say I understand what you went through growing up being sick, but I’m guessing when your body feels a little run down you start to maybe…panic a little?”

By the way she swallows thickly, I know I’ve hit the nail on the head.

Letting go of her ankle, I move forward farther, clutching her hand, the one that is twirling the fabric of her shirt—her nervous tell.

“Layla?” I probe.

“Superpower,” she mumbles before taking a deep breath. “I haven’t been sick since being back and yes it…freaks me out a little. What if I have a flare-up? What about Emmy?”

I can’t help but frown. “What about her?”

“I won’t be able to look after her. I won’t have enough energy.”

I can see how much this is eating away at her. Can see the turmoil wreaking havoc, the thousands of thoughts floating through her mind. Squeezing her hand in mine, I bend my head, catching her eye. “I will always want you looking after Emmy, and I understand why you’re scared. So let’s focus on how you feel right now, okay? Settle in to rest, and why don’t I call Bella and have her come over here instead of doing what you had planned?”

Layla stares at me for so long, so inquisitive and questioning, I feel like I’m under a microscope. “Why are you doing this?” she whispers.

“Doing what?”

“Taking care of me.” She throws her hand in the direction of the stairs where Emmy is turning the corner, her golden retriever teddy clutched in her hand. “You have Emmy to take care of. I’m just the nanny—”

“You’re more than just my nanny, Layla.”

You’re so much more, I want to whisper. *You’re everything to me.*

Emmy comes running, barreling for the couch with her teddy outstretched in her arms. Layla closes her mouth, taking back whatever she was about to say as she smiles at Emmy.

“Oh Emmy, you sweet girl. You want me to cuddle her?”

Emmy nods, climbing up onto the couch and nestling into Layla’s side. I pull the thick blanket over the two of them.

Despite my stomach churning at seeing Layla’s body unwell like this, I can’t help but smile as I look down at my girls, cuddling together on the couch.

“I’ll go call Bella and make that chicken noodle soup.”

Turning on my heel, I leave the two girls that have become my world and pointedly ignore the stare searing a hole in the back of my head as one word plays on a loop in my mind like a broken record. Because if I look back over at Layla, I might do something stupid and tell her I’m in love with her.

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Chapter 34

Layla

BELLA

on my way over

you should have told me you weren't feeling well

Cindy's coming down with a cold too and can't make it

it's going around

I bet it's nothing to worry about Lil

LAYLA

I hope so

you aren't scared of getting sick?

BELLA

no, we're due for a best friend night

plus you know me, immune system of steel

LAYLA

wish you could give me some of that

BELLA

I'd give it to you in a heartbeat if I could

Kieran is domesticated.

Emmy is snuggled up beside me, one of her many books in her lap. Trust me, the book lover in me is screaming—I should be reading to her,

should be engaging—but I find I can't take my eyes off Kieran.

He whistles and sings to himself, music softly playing from his phone as he moves around the kitchen like he knows every nook and cranny.

Why is he taking care of me?

This isn't the typical concerned employer—this is more. The man in the kitchen fretting over making me a bowl of chicken noodle soup, the one that gently handed me a steaming mug of honey and lemon tea, is not the playboy I read about on the bunny sites last year.

This is the true Kieran Ashford; this is his heart and soul on display.

I just don't know what I did to be lucky enough to see it.

The front door bangs open, startling Emmy for a moment before a loud bark rings out. Book suddenly forgotten, Emmy launches off the couch, squealing. "Bambi!"

Bella rounds the corner, her jaw practically unhinged at hearing Emmy's voice.

Kieran frowns as he walks over, gently handing me a bowl of chicken noodle soup that smells divine. His fingers brush my hand as he moves away.

"Ever heard of knocking?" Kieran calls out.

Grayson snorts. "Payback time, buddy. I'm going to make your life a living hell with next door to me." He clicks his tongue. "You seem to forget I have cameras. I know you still sneak over and steal Bella's cooking."

I gasp, turning. "Kieran!"

He shrugs sheepishly. "What? They're really good blueberry muffins."

Bella just rolls her eyes, beelining for me as Bambi and Emmy take off upstairs. She sits beside me, careful not to jostle the food in my lap as she wraps an arm around my shoulder. "How are you feeling, Lil?"

Tipping my head side to side, my lips purse. "Not the best." Sighing I confess, "I think it's taking a toll on me emotionally more than physically. I haven't had to cancel plans in so long it scared me that I was relapsing."

More than scared.

I've spent the entire day with my chest so tight I felt on the verge of passing out. My phone was practically glued to my hands, Google open. I'm never letting those searches see the light of day. If Kieran and Bella knew the extent of what runs through my mind when I'm feeling off, they would drag me to see a psychologist and beg them to help me.

When you spend years searching for answers, you learn anything is possible. Your sore throat could actually be an early symptom of cancer. The sudden migraines could be a mass on your brain. The lethargy might actually be a parasite riddling your body.

It's easy to imagine the worst when you've already been dealt something horrific. If something rare happened once, then it could happen again.

Bella tucks a stray lock of hair behind my ear as she gets comfortable beside me. "Well, lucky for you, no plans have been canceled, only altered." She holds up the bag in her hand. "Got all your favorites. Chips, candy, and most importantly…"

Gasping, I snap upright. "Are we watching *The Vampire Diaries*?"

She laughs. "Just one look and you knew! Yes, I'll watch it with you."

I point an accusatory finger at her. "From season two."

"Yes, yes, from season two, where Damon's cockiness is more appreciated."

I sigh dreamily. "I love that man."

"Who do you love?" a deep voice asks behind me.

Kieran appears, frowning down at me as if I just killed his cat. Or ran over his heart.

Bella smirks. "Layla's first love, Damon Salvatore."

That does nothing to alleviate the worry etched across his features. If anything, his frown deepens.

Reaching over, I pat his hand. "He's a fictional man."

"Fictional," Bella snorts.

"What? He is!"

Kieran moves the conversation away as he takes the bag from Bella's side, ignoring her protests as he rifles through it. "All your favorites?" he asks.

I nod, not entirely sure why my blood hums as he seemingly catalogues each item to memory.

"Might not go down too well with that healthy concoction," Bella teases, taking a whiff of the bowl. "Please tell me you have more. It smells amazing."

"There's plenty on the stove."

Kieran barely finishes his sentence before Bella's up and off the couch, heading for the kitchen. "Why the hell are you always stealing my food

when you can cook?" she yells as she serves herself a bowl.

Because he likes food made by his loved ones, I think to myself, our conversation coming to mind. Dropping my head back, I find his eyes already on me. "Why do you hide that you can cook from everyone?" I whisper, quiet enough so no one else hears.

Kieran drops the bag beside me and places his forearms on the back of the couch, bending forward enough to brush his lips across the shell of my ear. "Want that answer, sunshine? You'll have to cough up another one of those spicy books of yours."

My swallow is audible and suddenly I'm extremely grateful that Grayson joined Bella in the kitchen. My cheeks flush. "Y-you read the chapter?"

"Every word."

My breath hitches.

Kieran's warm hand reaches out and cups my jaw, tipping my head back even further so his lips are a hair's breadth from mine. "I know exactly what you want," he whispers.

"And what's that?" I find myself asking, my gaze dropping to his lips as they twitch.

"I think it's better to show you rather than tell."

Kieran's lips brush against mine ever so softly and a zap of electricity passes through me. I gasp. Kieran's just as shocked, yet it only startles him momentarily.

Quickly pulling away, he turns to Grayson and Bella kissing in the kitchen. He whistles. "Pack it up, lover boy."

Grayson comes up with a dopey smile. "Go get Emmy in the car and I'll meet you there. I need to say goodbye to my girl."

Without another word, he spins and resumes kissing Bella like it's the last time he'll taste her. I should be laughing or teasing my best friend but I'm still reeling from my moment with Kieran.

His lips *barely* brushed mine and it felt like I was electrocuted.

Kieran walks past and winks. "Got a bit of drool on your chin, Carson."

That snaps me out of my haze.

Shooting daggers at him, I throw it right back. "Pants looking a bit tight, Ashford."

He stops suddenly, his full attention on me now, and mouths, *Always around you.*

As it turns out, it took a lot longer for the men to leave. Emmy had a complete meltdown about leaving Bambi. I shouldn't find it funny but watching Kieran try and soothe the absolute hurricane that was Emmy, all while the golden just sat there smiling like it was the best day of her life, was hilarious. Bella and I couldn't stop laughing.

Kieran will need the patience of a saint because little Emmy might just be as stubborn as her father.

Thirty minutes later, and more bribes than I could count, they decided to compromise…and when I say compromise, I mean they took Bambi with them.

Emmy has Kieran wrapped around her little finger.

Bella flops beside me, opening a packet of chips. "Looks like it really is just us tonight now."

Nestling into the couch, I feel at ease as she turns on *The Vampire Diaries*, season two.

"How are you feeling, Lil?"

"Better now that you're here."

She's pensive, her lips tightening before she blurts out, "You'd tell me, wouldn't you? If you thought you were relapsing?"

I give her a soft smile. "You'd be the first person I'd call."

Something shifts on her face. Relief, perhaps? The emotion is there and gone before I can decipher it. Sighing suddenly, she returns her gaze to the TV. "I needed this."

"Me too," I say softly. "Are Allie and Carlton still staying at the house?"

What a silly question to ask, though. Allie hasn't been here in a few days and when she's in town, she's here every day, joining Emmy and me on our park adventures or even sometimes just coming in to help with cleaning and laundry.

She is an angel, one that has also roped my mother into a friendship. Those two have begun talking more than I talk to my mother, and that's

saying something. If my mom is laughing, it's because she's on the phone with Allie.

Bella shakes her head as the telltale sound of the intro starts. "They left a couple of days ago." She leans over and takes my hand in hers, squeezing. "That bear, Lil…I can't begin to describe how it's gotten me through those hard moments of missing my mom." She pauses, her voice soft. "It revives me when I feel like I'm drowning."

Squeezing her hand back, I whisper, "I'm glad."

A weighted pause fills the room.

"I miss her," she says finally, her lip quivering.

"I know, B."

"Did you know I still try to call her sometimes?" she confesses, the first tear rolling down her cheek. "Sometimes I forget she's—"

Bella stops abruptly, not able to finish her sentence. Tears spring into my eyes, too, at seeing my best friend's grief.

"I'm sorry, B. I wish I could take your suffering away from you. I wish I could give you more time with her."

She swallows thickly, nodding as she stares off at nothing before seeming to shake herself out of it.

"God, you forced me to watch this so often in middle school."

Letting Bella change the subject, I snort. "I would bribe you with sketchpads and pencils."

Her eyes widen. "Oh my god, you did!" She cackles. "I forgot about that."

Laughing along with her, we fall into a comfortable silence as the TV show plays. I only get halfway through an episode before the fatigue overpowers me, submerging me in sleep.

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Chapter 35

Kieran

ICEHAWKS BITCHES

IRVING

who the fuck uploaded a photo of my ass to the internet?

JOHNSON

one of your many puck bunnies I'm assuming

IRVING

nope, it was taken tonight

Jack Lewis

you're awfully quiet

LEWIS

I'm shocked you would assume I'd commit such a heinous act

O'CONNOR

was totally Lewis

LEWIS

personally offended you all think I'm a liar

KIERAN

I saw him take it when you flashed everyone

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

why were you mooning everyone in the first place?

IRVING

Halloween is coming up

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

how the hell does that answer anything?

LEWIS

he was offering to be a moon for costumes

KIERAN

I think a public mooning on socials was warranted for that garbage offer

IRVING

I was being charitable!

Johnson is howling over the photo Lewis took of Irving grinning over his shoulder as he mooned us in the locker room earlier. Thank God Grayson had the foresight to stay out of the locker room with Bambi and Emmy.

With Emmy in my arms now, I try to contain my laughter while keeping a hold of her. Although I don't think she'd notice me jostling her, she's so laser-focused on Bambi beside us.

O'Connor walks past snickering, flashing me a meme on his phone that's already circulating. A bunny has Photoshopped her face onto the sun, while arms stick out of it, reaching for Irving's moon on the horizon.

Before I can stop myself, laughter explodes from me, echoing through the arena. I can't wait to get back to my phone later and look at what people are posting.

My smile drops as the doors open and Coach Anderson walks in.

"What the hell?" I mutter.

Irving sobers up within a second. "I swear, Coach, I didn't want my ass on the internet. It's Lewis's fault, not mine!"

Coach Anderson, who looked like he actually had a pep in his step for once, comes to a screeching halt, his nose wrinkling as he looks over at Grayson. "Do I want to know what Tweedledee and Tweedledum over there are jabbering on about?"

"No, sir."

Pinching the bridge of his nose coach takes a deep breath as Irving mutters. "Are we in trouble?"

Grayson rolls his eyes. "No, I told you, it's guys' night."

Shaking his head, Coach spins on his heel, striding down the hallway and quickly returning with something black and white in his hands. The IceHawks colors.

Emmy and I watch as Coach unfolds the material to reveal a shirt. A smile stretches across his face, wide and full of joy, as he spreads it out. It's a child-sized jersey with the number 47 printed on it, along with a name on the back.

Mini Ashford.

My heart soars.

Clenching my jaw so none of these fuckers see that I want to cry, I manage a wobbly smile, slapping Coach on the shoulder, my voice gruff as I cough out, "Thanks, Coach."

He wraps both Emmy and me in a hug before he pulls back and hands it to her. "Welcome to the family, little Ashford."

She looks like she doesn't fully comprehend what's happening.

Emmy gazes around, her eyes taking in Grayson filming on his phone, with silver lining his eyes. Peering behind me I spot the guys all watching on with a mixture of tears and awe. Clearing my throat I face coach, unclenching my jaw and allowing the tears to spring into my eyes before croaking out again, "Thank you."

She leans forward slowly, hesitant at first, but eventually she wraps her hands around the T-shirt, holding it to her chest in a hug.

I must be hallucinating. Because it looks like Coach's eyes are glazing over with water, too.

Clearing his throat, he claps his hands together. "Well boys, are we going to teach mini Ashford how to skate or what?"

The boys behind me break out into cheers and Emmy claps along with them, the energy infectious.

An hour later, I'm leaning against the boards, on Bambi duty on the sidelines because we can't have her slipping on the ice and tearing

anything. All the while, my team—my family—teaches Emmy how to skate.

Irving skates backwards, bending low and cheering for Emmy as she holds onto the child frame Coach ordered in. She squeals with such delight I find my cheeks aching.

“She’s a natural,” Grayson says, breaking away from the group. He bends over the boards to pat Bambi, who has tried to sneak onto the ice numerous times.

Snorting I point to my daughter, pride filling my chest. “She’ll be a pro in no time.”

My best friend moves to stand beside me, careful that his blades don’t come in contact with Bambi.

We fall into a comfortable silence, both of us watching our teammates encourage Emmy. Hell, even Coach is out on the ice skating, taking videos on his phone like a proud grandpa.

Fuck, the sight is something I used to dream about as a kid, and the fact I get to watch my little girl experience it means everything to me.

“I know it takes two to tango but fuck me, dude, she is all you.”

“You think?”

“She even has that stubborn furrow you get.”

Chuckling to myself, I look again and spot it. “Well I’ll be damned, she does.”

The private investigator didn’t turn up much beyond a couple of dead social media accounts where she hadn’t uploaded a single post. I suppose it was a long shot, him trying to track down the type of information I wanted. Emmy’s mother, as horrible as she was, never posted about our night together online. I was hoping for once in my life that of all the women who have posted about my private sex life, she was one of them, because if she had perhaps it would have sparked something deep within my memories.

What really perplexes me is why she never contacted me.

Why would someone addicted to drugs not think to reach out to the father of her child and ask for money when he’s well off? But that’s always the way with these things, isn’t it? You want answers, desperately so, and yet no matter how much you do, you will never know because the only person who can give you them isn’t around anymore.

I don’t think I’ll ever be able to swallow that I don’t remember Emmy’s mom, that she was conceived at a time in my life where my mind was so

bleak that I didn't care what I did with my body. But I suppose the saying is right, light does prevail through darkness, because now I have Emmy, the light of my life and the epitome of hope.

Shaking my head, I wave away the thoughts, wave away the disappointment I felt when the PI called informing me all he had was a few photos from when Emmy's mother, Natasha, was a child.

At least one thing was confirmed, everyone is right, Emmy is the spitting image of me.

I wonder what type of life Natasha had that not even a top notch PI could track down information of the life she led or current images of her.

Shaking myself from my desolate thoughts, I focus on the here and now. I focus on my daughter, the beautiful girl that came from something fleeting and dark.

Out the corner of my eye, I can see Grayson staring at me. "See something you like, lover boy?"

"Yeah, I do actually."

"Don't tell Bella, it'll break her heart." He shoves me playfully and I laugh.

"Shut up, Ashford. I just mean…" He tapers off, the seriousness of his tone making me turn to him. "You've grown. I knew that day you told me about Emmy that things would change but…it's like you're who you're meant to be. I've never seen someone step so smoothly into the role of a parent. Bella is even talking about wanting a kid because you make it look so effortless."

"Trust me, it's anything but effortless."

"I don't doubt that at all." He claps his hand over his chest. "But hand to heart, Kieran, that little girl is the luckiest one in the world to have you as her father. Even my own dad made a comment last week about how much the role as a father suits you."

There's nothing but sincerity in his features but I still ask, "You mean that?"

He nods emphatically. "You were born to be a father."

"You think I'm doing a good job?"

"Kieran, you're putting most fathers to shame. You're more than good."

I can't help but sigh with relief, a pent-up tension loosening, one that I didn't realize I was harboring. "All I've been thinking about is that I want to give her the childhood I never had."

He gives me a small, sad smile. “You’re doing that and more, my friend. Trust me when I say she’s happy.” He flicks his chin over to the ice. “Every time she smiles she looks over at you. You’re building that little girl up after her mother destroyed her.”

He takes Bambi’s lead from my hand. “Go, be with her. She keeps looking over here any time she smiles, she wants you there beside her. She wants her dad.”

Pushing off the boards on wobbly legs, I clap my best friend on the shoulder as I lay my heart bare. “I wouldn’t be here today if it weren’t for you. And neither would she…so thank you.”

That’s the second time tonight I’ve stunned someone with a confession.

Before Grayson can ask any questions about that time in my life, before I’m forced to lay my bleeding heart in his palm and confess that he pulled me back from a cliff more times than I can count, I step onto the ice and skate.

Because I never told him about the nights I’d lie awake contemplating ending it, only for his name to flash across my phone screen or his face to come up in my mind moments before I tried to end it all.

Emmy may have rekindled my spirit, may have shown me the role I was always meant to fulfill in my life, but Grayson made my life worth living when all I wanted to do some days was die.

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Chapter 36

Layla

KIERAN
PICTURE OF EMMY
MISSED FACETIME CALL

earth to Layla

Emmy wants to show you the matching costumes she picked out for you two

My eyes are heavy as two gentle hands grasp my shoulders and shake me awake. My mouth feels like it's full of cotton.

"Layla, sweetie."

"Mom?"

She sighs, sinking beside me on the bed. "My god Layla, I thought you were dead."

I'm slow to sit up, my mind a groggy mess, slow to realize my hands ache. "What time is it?"

"Eleven." I look up at my mom, the worry on her face evident. "Layla, you slept through all your alarms."

That has my eyes snapping wide open.

"I—what?"

The last time I slept through my alarms, I was at the peak of a lupus flare-up. That hasn't happened since I left for Berlin, before the trial drugs began to work miracles on my immune system.

She reaches over, feeling my cheeks. “Sweetie, you’re burning up. You have a fever.”

My dad comes into the room then, his ears a supersonic radar for anything medical. “What’s wrong?”

My mom doesn’t let me answer. She turns to him, panic in her voice. “She slept through her alarms and has a fever.”

His brows furrow. “Did you have a late night?”

My mind is a messy fog, but I’m aware enough to realize that it takes me far too long to remember where I was last night. The pieces come back to me one by one. The chicken noodle soup. Kieran and his lingering touches. Bella and *The Vampire Diaries*.

I want to tell my parents I slept in because I was acting like a regular adult, that I stayed up partying or was out watching Kieran play and that we went for celebratory drinks after. That Cindy, Bella, and I went to Totti’s and had a late night, but the answer is no.

My voice is croaky as I whisper, “No, we had an early night. I fell asleep watching TV with Bella.”

My dad stumbles slightly as he reaches out and puts a comforting hand on my mom’s shoulder. Her eyes have taken on a glint of fear that won’t abate no matter how much she tries to blink it away.

She stands quickly. “I’m going to call your specialist and book an appointment.”

I snap my hand out, stopping her. “No! I’m fine. I was out at the park in the rain with Emmy. I think it’s just a regular cold.” I look from my moms stricken face and my dads concerned one as I ask tentatively, needing reassurance so badly in this moment I all but beg as I ask, “I can have regular colds…right?”

My dad gives my mom’s shoulder another squeeze, and his whispered words send a dagger through my heart. “Call the specialist.”

An hour later, Bella pops her head into my bedroom, startling me. Dropping the book I was reading, I sit up in bed, far more awake than I was earlier.

"Hey! What are you—" my words die on my tongue.

Bella holds her hands up in surrender. "Don't be upset with her. She was worried."

Patting the spot beside me, I place a bookmark in my book and set it on my nightstand. "My mom shouldn't have worried you."

Closing the door softly, she kicks off her shoes and sits beside me on the bed. "You promised I'd be the first you'd call if something was wrong."

I blink, biting my lip. "I feel better than I did when I first woke up, but…"

"But…?" Bella probes.

Lifting my head, I say what I was too afraid to tell my parents and what I'm dreading telling my specialist. Even my favorite book couldn't distract me from the tightness and tingling in my chest. "It feels different. This morning, something felt…wrong."

Bella frowns. "Like one of your flare-ups?"

"Even stranger than what those felt like. I know it's been a while but I can tell."

"Did you skip a day of your meds?"

"God no, I'd never forget. I take it religiously at the same time every day." The sound of my mom's sniffling comes from down the hallway. Sighing, I turn to Bella. "Can you come with me to my specialist appointment? I know she wants to but I think we will both just send each other into a spiral."

I'm already on the verge of pulling my hair out. My mind won't stop churning, my body reacting as if a bear is chasing me through the woods.

Panic is my middle name right now.

Bella nods. "Of course, anything you want. Except—" She holds up her index finger. "I'm not going to tell her. You can crush your mother's heart yourself."

"Crush is a bit dramatic."

Bella levels me with a blank stare.

Sighing, I lean back in bed. "Fine, I'll tell her tonight. But B?"

"Hmm?"

"Don't tell Kieran."

She frowns. “Why can’t he know?”

How do I tell my best friend, the one who has supported me for years that, even as much as she loves me, even as much as she’s desensitized to my illness, she still looks at me sometimes with a pitiful expression?

Kieran has never looked at me that way before.

He looks at me like I’m the sexiest woman in the world—as if I hold the key to his heart, as if I hung the moon. I don’t want those cocky smiles, teasing taunts, and flirtatious glances to stop.

Because if they stop, then I really will feel like the sick girl again.

I want to remain as I am in his mind. But I feel like I can’t say any of that, so I settle instead on, “I don’t want him to think I’m incapable of taking care of Emmy. I’m sure I’ll be fine after a good weekend’s worth of rest. Besides, the tests will take a week or two to come back. I won’t know what’s happening for some time.”

Bella nods along as if what I’m saying makes complete and total sense. I’m sure it does, but I’m just too busy feeling relieved that she buys it and moves on to ask, “When is the appointment?”

“My mom begged her to see me this afternoon.”

“On a Saturday?”

“At three.”

She whistles. “Never heard of a specialist agreeing to see someone on the weekend.” At my panicked look, she rushes on to say, “It’ll be all right, Lil, you’ll see.”

“And what if it’s not?” I ask.

“Then I’ll be here, every step of the way.”

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Chapter 37

Kieran

KIERAN

what time are you heading over today?

MY FUTURE WIFE

8:30

like I do every Monday

why…?

should I be scared? I feel like I should be scared

KIERAN

just checking in on the best nanny in the world

you know, just doing my duty as your boss

MY FUTURE WIFE

you despise that you're my boss

KIERAN

do not

MY FUTURE WIFE

you said that verbatim

KIERAN

that was when you were opposed to flirting with your boss ;)

now that I can eat you out and still be your boss I love the title

it's kinky, like one of your books

MY FUTURE WIFE

I’m burning this chat history

KIERAN

come on sunshine

you and I both know you like it when I talk dirty

I’m nervous.

Beyond fucking nervous.

No, it isn’t an eloquent enough word to describe the way my heart’s pounding against my rib cage, screaming at me that I’m an idiot and went too far.

Wiping my sweaty palms on the back of my jeans, I look out the second-floor window—for the millionth time—to check if Layla’s car is in the driveway yet.

“Lil?” Emmy asks beside me.

Her sweet little voice and the nickname she picked up from Bella makes the erratic pounding of my heart cease, just for a beat, and then it resumes its pathetic attempt to eradicate itself from my body.

Nodding, I chew on my thumbnail before ripping it from my mouth. “Yep! Lil is on her way over, munchkin.”

She nods up at me like I just gave the most important order of her life. Running to her bedroom, which has the best view of the driveway, she grabs her retriever and climbs up into the recliner I slept in during her first three weeks here. Her eyes never leave the window, even though I’m pretty sure she’s only tall enough to see the sky.

My lips twitch. “You’re my best friend, you know that, right?” Bending, I place a kiss on her forehead, soaking up the smile she gives me. “Don’t tell Uncle Grayson that though. He’ll have a heart attack.”

She giggles as if I’m the funniest man in the world, even though I don’t think she has a clue what a heart attack is.

Sitting beside her, I wait, not realizing I was holding my breath until it rushes from me as Layla pulls into the driveway. And sure enough, Emmy doesn’t notice because all she can see at best are the tops of the trees.

Snorting to myself, I lift her onto my lap and point. “There’s Layla.”

She gasps. “Lil!”

She wiggles to be let down and the second those little feet hit the carpet she's off, running down the hall to greet the nanny she's fallen head over heels in love with.

The nickname she started saying for Layla only happened this weekend. Surprised the shit out of me, and is probably about to make her cry.

I can hear small squeals and laughter as I make my way down the hall, and as my eyes lock on the room that made me the nervous wreck I am, panic flares in my chest fast and swift, almost toppling me to the floor.

Jesus fucking Christ I'm screwed.

Forcing myself to take a deep breath, I round the top of the landing, finding Emmy in Layla's arms, and sure enough, there are tears rolling down her cheeks.

She lifts those icy blue eyes to me, the ones that haunt my dreams, and whispers, "Have you heard?"

I smile down at them, my two favorite girls. "She's been saying it all weekend."

Layla gasps. "And you didn't tell me?"

"Why ruin the moment?" I shrug. "It's more precious in person."

"You're right, this was the best surprise." Layla squeezes Emmy a little tighter, not letting up until she grunts.

"Don't squish her," I drawl.

"She's just so damn cute."

Emmy points upstairs and something flares in Layla's gaze. Turning back to me, she cocks her hip. "Right, care to tell me what you two got up to this weekend and why you won't walk down the stairs?"

My lip twitches. "Very sassy of you to speak to your boss that way."

Her eye roll is so dramatic I'm fearful they'll get stuck. "Says the man who texts me filthy things."

I shrug. "Just putting the book you sent me to good use." Her cheeks flame crimson, a near match to her hair. I can't help but smile. "Please… don't freak out, okay?"

Her spine straightens. "Well of course I'm going to freak out now." She makes her way up the stairs as she assesses me. "What did you do?"

Rocking back on my heels I take off my hat, my lucky charm I felt I needed to wear today, and run my fingers through my hair before sliding it on backwards. Layla comes to a stop in front of me, sighing.

I grin. "Disappointed already?"

“No.” She flaps her hand in my direction. “You and that damn hat,” she mutters.

“My hat?”

She sighs again, this one long and deep before she takes a step back.

Flicking my gaze back and forth, searching her eyes, that’s when I clock it, the small hint of heat sizzling in her glacial eyes. If I wasn’t so goddamn nervous that she’s about to chew my head off for what I’ve done, I would be jumping on that. And Emmy, ever the watchful girl, is looking between us both, growing impatient.

Waving my hand, I say with a flourish, “After you.”

Her scent envelopes me as she walks past, and like the creep I am, I inhale deeply, savoring the scent that is distinctly *her*. It’s happiness in a bottle, radiant joy sizzling through my veins.

Everything about this woman is pure sunshine.

She’s a beacon, the very thing that lights up my life.

“Where am I going?”

“Stop there.”

Fuck, did my voice just quiver?

By the way Layla snaps her head in my direction, I’m going to take that as a yes.

Get yourself together.

Clearing my throat, I shake my head a little and stand in front of the spare bedroom that has been sitting empty—until now. Not entirely sure what to say or do, I mutter, “Fuck it.”

I turn the doorknob, holding my breath as I push it open and step aside.

This weekend, I truly went and lost my fucking mind and built my nanny, the woman I haven’t been able to stop thinking about for close to two years, a library. In my house.

The second I saw her eyes light up at the bookshelf I built for Emmy, I knew I had to do the same for her, just to see the spark come to life again.

Layla’s gasp echoes throughout the room.

Emmy slides down her body and Layla lets her, not even paying attention to her as she runs into the room, launching herself onto the large round white reading chair I bought. One Google search was all it took to find the most popular one between readers, and one quick thumb tap was all it took to hit purchase.

Layla's hands come up slowly to cover her gaping mouth. She doesn't say a word, and nerves take root in my chest. Before I know it, I'm doing what I never do—pretty sure I've never done it in my life—but Layla is also making me experience a lot of firsts.

I nervous ramble.

"Now, before you start yelling and cursing at me that it's too much, I don't think it is. Emmy adores you and wants to be like you so much. So even if you turn around and say you hate me and never want to work with Emmy and me again, the room will be put to use. But she had so much fun helping me build it this weekend it was absolutely worth it for that reason alone. If you look on the bottom left corner of the far shelf you'll actually find some of her drawings she snuck in while I was distracted."

Layla turns to me, and I'm suddenly very concerned her eyes will remain permanently wide with shock.

Taking off my hat, I feel like pulling my hair out as all she does is continue to gape at me. I step into the room with a shuddering breath.

"It's okay if you don't like it," I whisper, my nerves on full display. "I won't be offended." Hurt beyond measure? Absolutely. "But it was fun. I like building things that aren't just Legos and now you and Emmy will have a room to read together. I saw that you've completely run out of space to put your books at home and thought you could—"

"You've seen my room?" she squeaks out.

My body stiffens, my back to her so she can't see the way I curse myself for being so stupid.

Spinning, I shrug sheepishly. "Yeah…sorry. I dropped by…" I try to lie, but as she stares at me with a mixture of awe and shock, I find I can't. I can't lie on a good day, but I especially can't lie to her.

Never to Layla.

Rubbing the nape of my neck, I avert my gaze, not wanting to see the look on her face as I whisper, "I asked your mom to show me your favorite books."

"Why?"

One word.

One word exhaled on a breath of surprise.

Swallowing thickly, I walk over to one of the floor-to-ceiling shelves I built and pick up the copy I bought of her most beloved book. With my heart in my throat—on display for her to see, for her to take and crush in

her palm—I hold out the copy to her. It's just now I note I'm trembling slightly.

"What's this, Kieran?"

She takes it from me, thumbing through it only to stop at the small writing along the pages.

"D-did you annotate it?"

Nodding, I keep my eyes fixed on the floor as my cheeks heat. "I wanted to know why you love it so much. Your mom explained how you annotate books and I thought you might find it interesting to see my annotations…compare our reactions."

"You read my favorite book and annotated it?"

Lifting my head, I steel myself for what I'm about to find. Tears are not what I expected.

"Fuck," I curse. "I overstepped. I know I did, I'm sorry, but—"

My words are cut off as Layla launches herself at me. She sucks in a heaving breath and chokes out, "This is the most beautiful thing anyone has ever done for me."

Without missing a beat, I wrap my arms around her, lifting her off the floor so she doesn't have to stand on her tiptoes. Burying my face in the crook of her neck I let her warmth soak through to my bones. Nothing has ever felt as right as when she's in my arms. It's similar to how I feel when I hold Emmy, but entirely different. For Emmy, I pour out love, a paternal bond I'll never be able to fully describe.

Holding Layla is terrifying because I know she isn't mine. This bond between us is so fragile that I'm petrified one wrong move will send her running. But it's worth it, the panicked feeling, in exchange for even a drop of the love I have for Layla.

"You don't think I'm a creep?" I ask, my voice muffled by her hair.

A burst of shocked laughter escapes her. "I'm most definitely wondering why you would go to such lengths for me but no, I love it, Kieran. Truly, it's beautiful."

Pulling back, I set her down on her feet, though keeping my arms locked around her. "Why wouldn't I go to lengths for you?" I ask simply.

"Because I'm…me," she breathes.

"Exactly."

Layla swallows thickly, her eyes locked on mine.

Before I lose my nerve, I whisper, “We’re canceling any and all plans we had today.”

“We are?”

“We are.” Forcing myself to step away from Layla is the most painful thing I’ve ever had to do. But I want to see the expression on both of my girls’ faces as I announce, “We’re going to the bookstore.”

I’m not sure what is it—the excitement that both of them are bursting with; the way Layla is so soft-spoken and kind to Emmy, making sure to stop and look at the books she points at; or the fact that Layla is entirely in her element.

But it hits me like a fucking truck.

In between the stacks of romance books.

Some full of tragedy, some full of darkness, and others, like my heart, full of hope. It’s there I realize I’ve fallen *in* love with Layla Carson.

I don’t just *love* her. I am madly, deeply, and undeniably *in* love with Layla.

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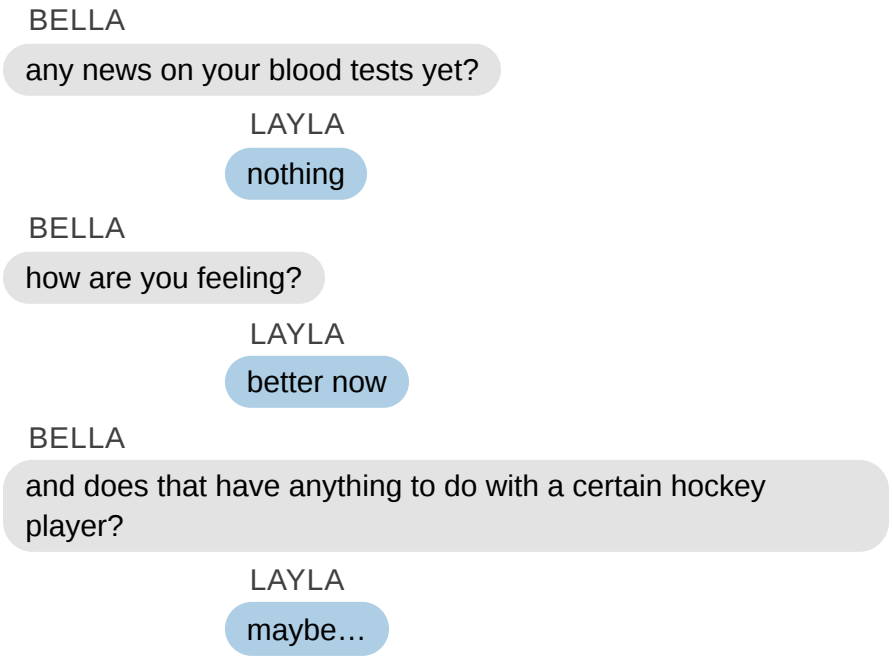
Chapter 38

Layla



Kieran outright refused to let me pay for my books.

So much so he was prepared to kick up a fuss in the store. It's the only reason I even allowed him to swipe his card. He looked at me with a mischievous smile and taunted, "You know I'll do it."

And yeah, I did.

He would have done whatever he could to make sure I didn't pay a single cent on the books he carried around the store for Emmy and me.

He was patient.

Never rushed us for a single moment.

Didn’t go off and sit on his phone.

He stood, he watched, he listened, and he waited for us to hand him books.

I think it’s the most attracted to him I’ve been since I met him. Just that simple interaction in a bookstore. That, paired with the knowledge he spent his weekend building a library for me. I haven’t told anyone because I know they won’t be able to make sense of it. If I can’t, how will others?

How do I explain that my boss, the man who I’m also in an arrangement of friends with benefits with, spent over forty-eight hours building me custom bookshelves?

You can’t and I also can’t explain the feeling of rightness to anyone.

Besides…I’m far too afraid to make sense of it.

Emmy went to bed hours ago, and by the dim lighting in the library room, it’s well into the late evening, yet I’m too afraid to put my book down.

Kieran has been staring at me from the entryway.

Emmy and I were sitting in the reading chair looking through our new books and reading pages here and there. Emmy, now that she’s beginning to talk more, has started reading out loud sometimes. Just a few words, if she likes them.

It must have been hours before Kieran decided to break us apart and take Emmy away for dinner and a bath, insisting that I keep reading. So I did—I don’t have to be told twice.

That was a while ago, though. The second I felt those eyes lock on me, I couldn’t keep reading. I’ve been pretending to read for the past fifteen minutes. His gaze is searing my skin, making my blood hum with anticipation.

His voice sends a shiver down my spine. “How long are you going to keep pretending to read for?”

“However long you keep staring.”

Peering up at Kieran over the book, I see he didn’t escape Emmy’s wrath in the bath. His white shirt is splattered with water, molding to his body like a second skin and making my mouth water.

I’ve never been a girl obsessed over men with muscles but Kieran is different. You can’t *not* notice it. His body is cut to perfection, the hours in

the gym on full display.

Leaning against the doorframe, he folds his arms over his chest, a brow quirking. “When I first came in you were blushing. Care to share what you were reading?”

I snap the book shut. “Absolutely not.”

“Come on, sunshine, share with the class,” he teases.

“It’s not your taste.”

“I can guarantee you that anything you like is my taste.”

Holding out the book, I call his bluff. “Go on, then. Read up on your *taste*.”

Pushing off the door, he strides toward me, every step as assured and confident as the smug grin plastered across his face. He leans forward, crawling onto the large reading chair, electricity sparking between us. “My pleasure.”

Taking the book, he sits in front of me, his back to me, but I can tell the moment he starts reading. The veins in his forearms protrude as he white-knuckles the book. His breathing grows labored, and I find I’m holding my breath as I watch him.

I’m not sure where this burst of confidence comes from, no idea what possesses me, but I’m suddenly moving forward, sliding my hands up Kieran’s back and over his shoulders, relishing in his warmth and heat. I dangle my arms over his chest, peering over his shoulder to see which part he’s at.

For once, I’m the one with my lips against his ear. “Find it to your liking…*boss*?” I purr.

The word snaps all of his self-control. With a groan of pure need, Kieran grips my arm, my waist, and swings me, lifting me up and placing me down on his lap.

He aligns us perfectly. The moment I come into contact with his hips, I gasp at feeling his hardness against my softness.

He slides his hands up my neck and cups the back of my head, holding me to him. “You, my sunshine, are teasing me.”

With this new surge, I lean forward, placing my hand on his chest, savoring the way he seems to stop breathing. “Not teasing if I’m all but begging.”

His brow quirks. “And what is it that you’re begging for?”

“You,” I breathe.

He swallows thickly, his eyes shuttering. “Keep talking like that and I’ll lose all control.”

“Good.” Pressing more of my weight down onto his lap, I roll my hips, a smile tipping the corner of my lips as he moans, his hold on me tightening slightly.

His hands rip from the back of my head, fisting them on either side of him.

“You know…” I say slowly, bending my head so I’m hovering just above him. “You still haven’t kissed me.” My tongue darts out to lick my lips. “You’ve made me come but you haven’t kissed me.”

His eyes flare wide open. “I’m well aware.”

“Is there a reason you’re holding back with me, Ashford?”

“A million and one.”

“I think you need to put your million and one reasons aside and rectify the situation.”

“Do you now?” he asks, his voice thick with heat.

Pulling back, I take in the way his fists are clenched, his breathing labored. “Do you want to kiss me, Kieran?” I ask bluntly.

His response is as quick as lightning. “Like you wouldn’t believe.”

Swallowing thickly I plunge into this rush of confidence and breathe, “Then hurry up and put us both out of our misery and kiss me, Kieran Ashford.”

The words have barely left my lips before his hands are back in my hair and he’s pulling me down to him.

The moment his lips connect with mine, fireworks explode.

Every nerve ending in my body alights and detonates. The electricity coursing between us makes me gasp, and Kieran groans, taking full advantage of the moment handed to him. He dips his tongue inside my mouth.

Passion ignites in me like never before, alongside a need I only ever thought I’d read about.

It’s a hunger that demands to be fed.

A need that demands to be met.

A want that cannot go unanswered.

As if hearing the call as well, Kieran grips me to him like the kiss is his lifeline, as if I am his oxygen and he will simply cease to breathe without my lips on his. I slide forward, our bodies melting together and molding so

there’s not an inch of space left. We align perfectly in every which way, our hearts connected, beating in rhythm.

He cups my thigh and suddenly I’m suspended, gravity joining the party before I crash onto the reading chair, our lips never once leaving each other’s as Kieran moves over the top of me. He aligns our hips again, my back arching, the kiss deepening as we moan into each others mouths.

I’ve dreamed about this, have secretly fantasied what it would feel like to kiss Kieran Ashford, and not once has my imagination ever lived up to reality.

It barely gave him justice.

It’s extraordinary.

Life-changing.

Addicting.

Wrapping my arm around his neck I hold him to me, my hips seem to move of their own accord, seeking out friction. Kieran grunts as I slide my hand through his hair and pull him closer.

I need *more*.

I need everything.

I need him like I need air.

I rip my mouth away just long enough to heave out, “Please.” I go right back to kissing him, the hunger in me not yet satisfied, and by the way Kieran is holding me to him, his hand on my hip borderline bruising, I can tell he isn’t fulfilled yet either.

Perhaps we never will be.

“Kieran,” I gasp between kisses, wanting his lips to remain on mine forever.

“Sunshine.”

I moan at the nickname, whimper at the feeling of his hips gyrating against mine, and groan at the pleasure I’m embarrassed to feel already blooming.

Oh my god.

“Kieran, please,” I plead, needing him to give me all of him.

Suddenly, he rips his mouth away, pulling back. He fists his hand to his mouth, biting it, as if to physically stop himself from kissing me.

I’m heaving, my chest rising and falling rapidly, and I know my eyes are glazed, my cheeks red. The last time I felt like this was in the bookstore and in the parking lot of O’Malley’s.

Until it slowly dies as I look into Kieran's eyes and see pain.

Scrambling to sit up, I place my hands on his cheeks, only to tear them off when he flinches at my touch.

"Kieran?" I ask hoarsely, panic replacing the pleasure that was coursing through my veins.

"I can't." The words seem to physically pain him.

"Can't what?"

"I'm sorry, Layla."

It's like being hit by a truck.

"Oh."

He shakes his head. "No, you don't understand—"

"It's okay, I do. I'm different than what you usually—"

"*No*," he barks, and the word is so harsh you'd think I suggested murdering someone.

My eyes snap to his to find unending pain shining in his gaze.

"I can't do this." He points between us. "I thought I could. I thought I could take what you gave me, I thought I could be grateful for any scraps, but I can't. Not when it feels this way, not when I know it would utterly *destroy* me to have you, only for you to walk away."

Blinking furiously, I stammer, "I-I don't understand."

"Yes, you do. You just don't want to admit it to yourself." He grimaces. "Fuck, Layla, I'm sorry, but I just can't. This isn't just benefits on the side for me, this isn't a learning opportunity. This…this is *everything* to me. And experiencing all these firsts with you so you can *prepare* for someone else makes me want to stab my heart with a million knives because *that* would be less painful than the reality of you with someone else."

"But we…we agreed," I say, because for some reason I can't spit out that the thought of being with anyone else makes me physically ill, too.

I can't say it.

Can't seem to get my tongue to say the words.

I can't god damn speak because despite everything he's saying…he deserves to have someone in his life who doesn't come with the baggage I carry.

He runs his hand through his hair, and my chest physically aches that it's not running through mine.

"I know you have feelings for me. I'm not a fool. You can't have sparks like this with someone and have it be one-sided." He heaves out a laugh but

it holds no humor. “But I can’t keep pretending that you aren’t the thing that makes me excited to get up in the morning. That I don’t count down the hours until I get to see you again. That I don’t seek you out in a room full of people, that I don’t want to touch you every chance I can.”

He swallows, avoiding my eyes as he whispers, “So until the day you make it abundantly clear you feel the same way I do, the day you stop ignoring the spark that courses between us every time we’re near…I can’t be anything more than just a friend.” He lifts his head, and I’m stunned to see silver lining his eyes. “And I know I’ll probably regret this moment for the rest of my life but until you decide that maybe I can be worthy enough for you I can’t keep pretending this means nothing to me when it means everything.” He clutches his chest in pain. “You mean *everything* to me, Layla, and I can’t have you be another person in my life that doesn’t want me back.”

I’m utterly speechless.

My heart has stopped, utterly ceased to exist, to have this kind-hearted man sit before me with pain in his eyes thinking I don’t feel the same way for him.

But my tongue won’t move.

My mind won’t stop reminding me that I’m sick, that I’m waiting for test results, that I could be currently relapsing, that the freedom I found could be taken away.

That he deserves more than fleeting bursts of energy.

He deserves the world.

And that’s why when he stands, looking as if I slapped him, all I can see is how much it would hurt him more to see me wither away day by day.

I can’t be selfish.

So I let Kieran Ashford go.

And the second he leaves the room, coldness seeps into my bones, my blood no longer flows, and my soul… It knows it just lost its other half.

Within mere seconds, I know I’ve just made the most horrendous mistake of my life.

LAYLA

do you still want me to nanny for you?

KIERAN

of course I do

Emmy would murder me if you never came back

I'd never forgive myself if I lost you

so please stay

LAYLA

okay

I'll stay

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THREE WEEKS LATER

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Chapter 39

Kieran

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

want to tell me what has my best friend so depressed?

is this how it felt when I ignored you?

KIERAN

yes

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

it sucks

KIERAN

I know

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

want to talk about it?

KIERAN

I don't think I'd be able to get the words out

Have you ever done something and immediately regretted it? Because I have. I've regretted what I said to Layla every day for the past three weeks.

I've regretted it on the days I come home and find her singing with Emmy in the kitchen, trying and failing not to burn food. I've regretted it in the moments when she's near and my fingers itch to touch her. I've regretted it when I lie awake and want to call her and tell her to come back,

and most importantly, I regret it in the moments where I find her and Emmy curled up in the library room.

Because she belongs here.

At first, I was waiting. Every single charged moment of teasing, banter, and flirting, I would wait with baited breath that the tension would snap between us. That Layla would throw her arms around me and say that she thinks I'm good enough and that she cares for me, but that never happened.

Maybe I'm not good enough after all.

I haven't slept since that night, and if I do, it's plagued by dreams replaying the moment in the library over and over—Layla begging for me and my dumbass pulling back and saying no.

It was that *fucking* kiss.

I avoided kissing her because I knew it would be my ruining, but it felt so good. More than good, it was heaven on earth.

It was everything I ever dreamed about.

It was like coming *home*.

I've never had a loving, stable, safe home before.

And the thought of finding my home, only to lose it…I wouldn't be able to survive that type of loss. I wouldn't be able to survive losing *her*.

Grayson's stare is searing a hole in the side of my head.

I know he's concerned, more than concerned—they all are. A throat clears from the table somewhere but I don't care.

For some reason, the more I drink, the more I can't take my eyes off my phone.

Is it weird that what I miss the most is Layla texting me chapters to read? And no, it's not just about the sex scenes. She has no idea but I'd read the entire book every time. For fuck's sake I read her favorite book and annotated it. I see her staring at the damn thing almost as much as I stare at her.

It showed me what she loved. She would light up from within, her cheeks glowing, her smile wide, when I talked about it with her. Every time I watched the shock flicker across her face when I'd mention something from one of the books was addicting.

I miss feeling close to her.

A balled-up paper napkin hits me square in the forehead. The glare I send Irving has his smile faltering.

"The fuck did you do that for?" I growl.

“You were zoning out.”

Johnson shakes his head. “Let the man be depressed, Irving.”

He looks genuinely hurt. “Why would we ever let him be sad? I don’t want him to be sad.”

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I sigh. “I’m fine, Irving.”

“That’s a lie,” O’Connor mumbles around his beer bottle, his eyes never leaving the TV screen above our heads.

We found a bar to celebrate tonight’s win and yet for some reason, the celebrations are less rowdy than normal. I’m not sure if it’s Seattle, or maybe I really am bringing the mood down, but only half the team seems to be excited.

It’s a testament that Irving is sitting across from me and not in the bathroom stall with a puck bunny.

“Wanna talk about it?” Ellington offers.

I slump back in my chair. “Look guys, I appreciate it, and I get it, I’m not as charming and quick-witted as usual.” That earns a round of chuckles. “But I’m fine. Just need a good night’s sleep.”

Grayson’s brow quirks. “A good night’s sleep?”

“Yes, Cap, a good night’s rest.”

“For three weeks?” Valenti says dryly.

Frowning, all I have to do is raise my brow at him. He of all people shouldn’t be pushing me right now. If he wants me to talk about my woman problems, I’ll have no qualms forcing him to do the same.

He just shakes his head, a twitch in his lips.

Yeah, that’s what I thought, fucker.

Now my grin truly is smug.

O’Connor places his beer bottle down on the table. “Well then, I’m off to call Cindy. I miss my girl.”

Grayson slaps down a wad of bills, covering the table. “Same here, boys, I promised Bella I’d FaceTime her.”

Irving’s jaw unhinges. “You are both so pussy whipped.”

“Fuck yeah I am,” Grayson says like it’s a badge of honor.

O’Connor drops down over the back of the booth. “It’s okay, one day you will be loved.” He pulls back with a smirk before Irving can hit him.

“I am loved by many!” Irving calls to his retreating form, genuine indignation in his tone.

Grayson laughs as he comes to a stop beside me. “You good?” he asks quietly.

A measly thumbs-up is all I can muster. “Promise.”

He slaps my shoulder, squeezing. “Call me if you need anything.”

“And interrupt your FaceTime?” I say slowly, knowingly. I can’t help but shudder. “I was already traumatized walking in, I don’t need to interrupt again.”

Grayson’s cheeks flush all the way down to his neck and he’s quick to make a beeline for the exit, mumbling over his own words.

I’m shaking with laughter as we watch our six foot four captain high-tail it out of the bar.

Ellington leans forward. “What the hell did you say to him?”

“You don’t want to know.”

Blowing out a breath, Ellington looks around the bar. “Where the hell did all the bunnies go?”

At that, Irving’s eyes snap open. “What the fuck?”

Johnson’s grinning like the cat who caught the canary. “The rookies beat your senior asses to it.”

“Senior my ass, old man,” Ellington chides. “You’ve got eight years on me. How’s your creaky knees?”

“Eight years of experience in all areas and I’m proud of it.”

“I don’t think the bunnies like your saggy balls,” Irving says earnestly. “It’s why they flock to me.”

“You get my sloppy seconds.”

“Do not.”

“Do too.”

Ellington throws his hands in the air. “Fuck this, I’m heading to another bar.”

Before he can even stand, Irving is getting up, his chair falling back. “I’m coming too.”

Ellington pulls a face that makes Irving pause and raise his hands in surrender. “I swear it won’t happen again.”

Johnson leans forward, hooked and interested. “What won’t happen again?”

Ellington turns slightly pale as he points an accusatory finger at Irving. “Don’t say a fucking word.”

Valenti sits there, wide-eyed.

“Shit, even you don’t know?” I ask him.

Johnson rubs his hands together. “Ooh, if your little bestie over here doesn’t know it’s got to be good.”

Irving makes a show of smacking his lips closed, pressing hard. But Johnson stares him down, and every second that passes, Irving’s cheeks flush redder, a stark contrast to his mop of blond hair.

He looks like he’s going to explode.

Ellington steps forward. “Irving, I swear to god—”

“We kissed!” he blurts out, his chest heaving with the revelation.

Johnson throws his head back, laughing, as my and Valenti’s jaws unhinge in unison.

Ellington pinches the bridge of his nose in clear frustration. “Fucking Irving.”

“I’m sorry,” Irving mutters. “Did you not see his face? The dude is scary. He does the whole Darth Vadar stare like he’s my dad and will ground me.”

“You’re a grown-ass dude.”

“Who you kissed.”

Ellington snaps his head in Johnson’s direction. “First of all, I know for a fact you’ve been with men so shut your trap. And secondly”—he points an accusatory finger around the table—“there’s nothing wrong with kissing men.”

“Nah, nothing at all,” I say, finally working away the shock from my beer-muddled mind. “It’s just—”

“It’s Irving,” Valenti finishes.

“I know,” Ellington sighs.

“Hey! I’m a great kisser.”

Jack Lewis, with his impeccable timing, swaggers up to the table, already rolling his eyes. “Why the fuck is Irving declaring his sexual prowess again? Who challenged him?”

“Apparently Ellington,” Valenti mutters into his beer bottle. He suddenly chokes on his sip of beer as Ellington clips him on the back of the head, and the table bursts into a round of laughter.

“What the fuck did I miss?” Lewis asks, taking a seat.

“Ellington and Irving kissed,” Johnson pipes up.

Lewis bursts into a coughing fit before getting himself under control, grinning. “I can totally see it.”

“You can’t see shit,” Ellington argues. “It was during a threesome. Both our eyes were closed and we didn’t realize.”

Irving sighs contentedly. “Fuck, she was beautiful.”

Ellington smirks. “Must say, was totally worth kissing this piece of shit to be with her.”

“I am not a piece of shit.”

“You’ve pulled more pranks than goals.”

Irving’s eyes widen. “I fucking have not!”

Johnson whips out his phone. “I can pull up stats of both.”

“Oh, I’m fucking sat for this conversation,” Lewis snorts.

The chatter and banter of the table drown out as my phone vibrates in my hands. I’m ashamed to admit how quickly I pick it up, my heart skipping a beat the second I see Layla’s contact flash across my screen.

MY FUTURE WIFE
PHOTO ATTACHMENT

have one very proud IceHawks cheerleader over here

Biting the inside of my cheek to stop the smile that wants to spread free, I open the photo and immediately download it. It’s a selfie, Layla holding the phone out with Emmy sitting next to her, nestled in bed, her dimples on full display as she beams up at the camera.

Both of them are wearing my jersey.

My girls.

My fucking girls.

My heart aches.

Suddenly, I feel wrong. I’m not in the right city, not in the right state, not in the right place. I should be home, with them.

The ache is a persistent, bone-deep craving that I know I need to answer.

It could be the alcohol coursing through my veins or it could be that it’s been three weeks since I’ve been able to touch Layla but suddenly everything feels wrong and I know there’s only one thing to do to make it right.

I stand, the table falling quiet at my sudden movement. “I’m out. See you guys back in Colorado.”

Valenti only smirks. “See you later, Ashford.”

I don’t stick around to explain anything. I can hear the mumbled questions, but I don’t care.

Pulling out my phone, I order an Uber, and then a flight.

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Chapter 40

Layla

BOOKISH BITCHES

CINDY

I'm sorry but that was the worst thing I've ever read

LAYLA

👀

BELLA

about time you finished it

CINDY

I'm sorry Miss 2.0 Speed

some of us enjoy the scenic route

LAYLA

but not this specific one

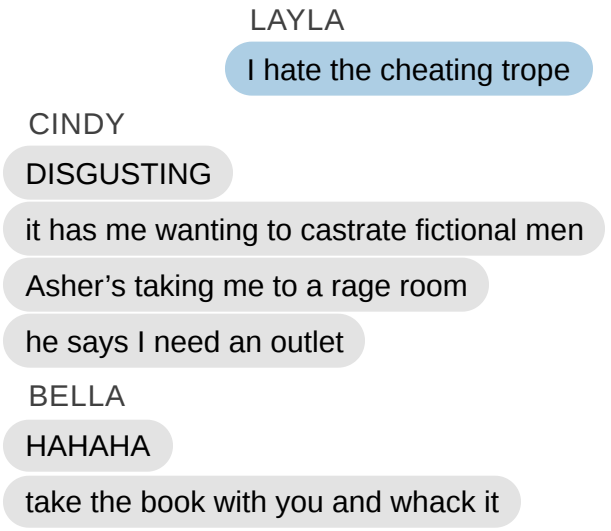
CINDY

my god no

THAT WAS GOD AWFUL

BELLA

the second he followed the woman into the stall I wanted to puke



Light streaks across my face, forcing me awake. It takes a moment to find my bearings, to realize my legs are cramped and my neck stiff because I'm not in my bed at home. Emmy is beside me, out to the world; looks like we both fell asleep reading again.

It's happened the past two nights Kieran's been away. Emmy never complains about me sleeping in her bed but my neck sure does.

Slowly sitting up, I stretch this way and that, cracking my neck to the side—

I all but jump out of my skin when I see a hulking frame sitting in the recliner chair in the corner. Placing my hand on my beating heart, it's a miracle I didn't scream and startle Emmy awake.

I slide out of the bed and tiptoe over to the chair.

What the hell?

I check my watch. It's six in the morning. Kieran wasn't meant to be back until late this evening.

I'm a little concerned I didn't hear him come in. For all I knew, he could have been an intruder, but now that I think about it, maybe my dream last night where he was murmuring things in my ear wasn't a dream after all.

To be frank, I brushed it aside because he's been a starring role in my dreams every night for the past three weeks.

Cocking my head to the side, my heart aches a little.

You'd expect his face to be free of worry in sleep but even now his brows are slightly furrowed. I swear they've been permanently stuck like that since *that* night.

The god-awful night my heart dropped when he walked out of that room, and it hasn't returned to its rightful place since. I think it's still trying to chase after him, beckoning and pleading my mind to go to him.

Kieran doesn't even know how close I've come to giving in.

How many times I've parted my lips to say we can try and date. But every time, as if my body wants to remind me just how ruined it is, I would get obliterated by a wave of tiredness, or like three days ago, a burst of dizziness, black spots dancing across my vision.

My body has been punishing me, reminding me of the very real reason why bringing another person so intimately into my life will destroy theirs.

My parents are still working when they should be looking at retirement. My mom can't have her phone on silent without borderline having a panic attack. My dad freaks out when I get cramps from my period because he thinks I'm relapsing.

Even Bella has my specialist's number on speed dial, the closest hospital route mapped out, and I swear the girl has an emergency hospital bag packed for me in her car. It wouldn't surprise me—my best friend is as type A as they come—but to know she thinks about all this when we go out crushes me.

That's not normal. The people around me shouldn't have to carry my burdens like this.

Then there's my boss.

Kieran, who thinks he can handle it but deserves a life that's full of happiness and not hospitals and colorless waiting rooms. Because the more that time goes on, the more my life is slowly bleeding back into what it used to be.

And I seem to be the only one aware of it.

It's utterly terrifying me what my body is doing at the moment. No one can figure out why my medication has stopped working. My tests are coming back as if I'm okay but my symptoms say otherwise.

I'm not well.

I won't ever be one hundred percent healthy but I was hoping the medication would last longer than *this*.

I was blessed to experience it for a short while but the universe seems to have other plans for me. Maybe my body got used to the medication?

With so many unanswered questions circulating, I'm keeping it a secret, hiding the lack of sleep. Hiding the way my ears ring and my vision blurs

when I stand. Hiding…everything.

The body aches.

The arthritis-like symptoms.

The lethargy.

The nightmares.

The panic.

The nausea.

I'm hiding everything from everyone around me and that is why I never take that step toward Kieran.

Even if it kills me, even if all I want to do is lean forward and smooth the furrow of his brow and kiss him, even as my fingers physically ache from the desire to want to run through his hair…I remain at a distance.

The thing Kieran hasn't realized yet is that as much pain as I can see him suffering, it's killing me more.

Gently shaking him awake, with my heart still lost somewhere in the depths of my stomach, I breathe deeply through my nose to steady myself as those long black lashes flutter, his ocean depths sucking me in.

No amount can steady me though.

"Layla," he whispers, as if I'm a prayer answered.

"What are you doing back early?"

He blinks. "I missed my girls."

Blunt.

Honest.

Direct.

And it utterly breaks me that I can't say that I missed him too. That he takes the joy and warmth from the house with him when he goes.

When he's here my life is full of a radiance I've only ever experienced with him. It's full of energy and such happiness that when he leaves, my world is suddenly gray, as if Kieran is the color of my vision.

But I'm not like Kieran, I can't put my heart on the line. Because I never have. I stopped trusting others the day doctors told me that it was all in my head and my friends dropped like flies because they didn't believe me either.

He smiles but it's not in his usual cocky manner. It's full of sadness and reluctant acceptance.

"It's okay, sunshine."

I close my eyes at the nickname.

That goddamn nickname.

He stands, forcing my hand to drop from his body and my eyes to open as he crowds my space. “I’ll keep waiting,” he whispers.

That’s when I notice what’s in his hands.

He holds it out to me, the pieces of paper I put together last night on a whim when Emmy asked me to read her a bedtime story.

“Did you write this?”

I take the paper from him, averting my eyes. *Oh my god, I’m mortified.* I can *feel* how flushed my cheeks are.

“Y-yes,” I force myself to mutter.

“It’s amazing, Layla.”

The honesty strikes me. Snapping my eyes away from the artistic designs of tattoos on his arms and instead to the soulful depth of his eyes, I find such an encouraging smile on his face it makes my heart skip a beat.

“I didn’t know you wanted to write children’s books.”

I wrote this story for Emmy, one about her and her dad, how he loves her and cares for her, how he was searching for someone to pour his love into and found her. She adored it, especially the moments that were about Kieran, the parts I wrote about his best qualities, all the things I tried desperately to stop myself from falling for.

“Never thought it was something worth mentioning,” I mumble honestly.

“Everything about you is worth mentioning.”

My eyes shutter closed.

“You should ask Bella to illustrate it, help put your work out into the world.”

My eyes snap open at that. “No, it’s just a hobby.” Shrugging I go on. “Besides no one would want to read my words.”

Kieran’s lips suddenly graze my ear. “I want to read your work, don’t stop writing Layla. People deserve to have your light shine in their life too.”

He walks out of the room as if he didn’t just give me the most hope anyone ever has for a dream I’ve kept buried close to my soul.

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Chapter 41

Kieran

ICEHAWKS BITCHES

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

sorry boys, family day is canceled today

IRVING

WHAT

why????

JOHNSON

thank fuck, I'm hungover as hell

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

I think everyone could do with a rest day

team dinner tomorrow night to make up for it though!

LEWIS

it's not the same

IRVING

never will be

LEWIS

petition to bring back Sunday family day

IRVING

HERE HERE!

VALENTI HAS LEFT THE GROUP CHAT.
IRVING HAS ADDED VALENTI TO THE GROUP CHAT.

IRVING

that’s not very team spirit of you

ELLINGTON

I don’t think spirit and Valenti mesh well

sounds good about dinner tomorrow night instead

IRVING

what the fuck am I meant to do today now?

JOHNSON

get a life

LEWIS

I got you covered Irving

O’CONNOR

I’ll be patrolling the news stations today waiting for you two idiots to show up on my screen

KIERAN

send me photos when they do

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

KIERAN

you all good?

why is family day canceled?

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

we’re going shopping today, just you and me. tell Layla it’s for Halloween decorations

KIERAN

FUCK YEAH

I fucking love Halloween

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

we’re not actually Halloween shopping

KIERAN

I’m not coming then

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

Kieran…

KIERAN

Grayson

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

fine we will go Halloween shopping AFTER

KIERAN

FUCK YEAH LET'S GO

"Give me my fucking money, Carol!"

My mom's screams ring through the apartment.

My eyes widen at hearing that man's voice. Springing off my bed, I run into my closet, my heart pounding so loud I'm surprised I can still hear him screaming as I dive under the pile of clothes I've made.

He won't be able to find me here.

He won't be able to see me.

I just need to be very, very quiet.

I flinch as glass shatters somewhere in the apartment, then another and another.

It must be the beer bottles.

I was getting so hungry before I had poked my head out to see if I could leave and get something to eat but when I saw all the beer bottles and heard the giggles I knew I couldn't yet.

"You stupid fucking whore!" he roars. "Where is it, Carol? Where is my money?"

"I-I used it."

*"Used it?" he sneers. "*Used it*?"*

His voice is bellowing and no matter how hard I press my hands against my ears, I can't shut them out.

My mom begins to cry, whimpers and sniffles until she sobs in pain.

"You know the drill. Strip, you fucking bitch."

"No!"

"No one gets free handouts in life and your sorry ass certainly isn't one of them. Fucking strip!"

My mom wails, and I think of going out there to…I don't know, help her? I haven't heard my mommy this scared before.

“No!” she screams and then there’s a loud thud.

“I said fucking strip! If you can’t give me my money then you’ll fucking pay this way you fucking whore.”

“Let the boy pay! Let him do it! Please!” Her strangled words make my eyes fill with tears. “Use Kieran as payment. He’s a good boy.” There’s such a heavy pause I stop breathing. “I know you like him.”

Black spots fill my eyes, my ears ringing as bile burns its way up my throat.

No, no, no.

I hate that man. I hate him. She knows that. She hears me cry and cleans me up afterward.

She knows how much I hate that man’s touches!

The closet door suddenly flings open and before I can let out a scream his hands are shooting into the clothes, wrapping around my arms.

“Come here, boy.”

“No!” I scream until my voice turns raw, but as I’m dragged out into the living room and thrown on the couch, as my eyes lock on my mother whimpering in the corner, rocking back and forth, her eyes big and black, I know that no amount of screaming will save me.

Flinging upwards in bed, my hand clutches my chest as my heart pounds furiously. That fucking memory hounds my dreams every goddamn night.

My back is lined with sweat, my hair slicked with it. I blink furiously around the room to prove to my mind that I’m not in that apartment, that I’m in my bed, in my home, and I’m *safe*.

I’m safe.

I’m safe.

I’m safe.

Emmy and Layla’s giggles downstairs float toward my bedroom, the sound calming my heart.

Flopping back in bed, I can’t help but grimace and throw myself off the mattress. The sheets are drenched; it looks more like I pissed myself rather than had night sweats.

Jesus, these fucking dreams are doing my head in.

I’ve always had nightmares, have always had memories from my childhood plague my dreams, but they were mostly of the matron and everything she inflicted upon me. I thought I kept these memories with my mother buried in a box, locked in the deep depths of my mind.

But after that night with Layla, they resurfaced. It’s not her fault, but the feelings of not being chosen, not being good enough, and not being loved are vengeful.

Allie, Carlton, Grayson, and Drew, as close to family as I’ll ever get, put Band-Aids on those wounds, and this situation with Layla has ripped them clean off.

I don’t know how much longer I can do this for, how much longer I can suffer, because it’s not just during sleep. Every little thing is beginning to remind me of that time, even during waking hours.

And I fucking hate it.

If I were ever honest with someone, if I ever opened up, they would tell me to go to therapy. I’m no fool, I know I need it, but talking about it is fucking painful and traumatizing. I’d have to process the memories and emotions, go through them one by one, and just the thought of doing that has me wanting to sprint into my bathroom and puke.

One day I’ll be strong enough to face the memories, but that time isn’t now.

I thought I had this under control, I thought I made my conscious mind forget but it seems whether I like it or not I’m being forced to deal with it.

Scrubbing a hand down my face, I make a deal with myself—if the nightmares continue for another month…I’ll find someone to talk to about it, regardless of how I feel.

A shudder wracks my body.

What a horrible feeling knowing you’ll have to push yourself to talk about being forced to do something you didn’t want to do. Maybe that’s why I’m so adverse to therapy when it comes to these memories, it feels like another violation.

Picking up my phone, I see the bombardment of texts from Grayson reminding me that we’re going shopping today.

Groaning, I force myself to go through the motions, force my mind to come back to the present, and try to make myself excited, but I'm more nervous than anything that he's going to see right through my bullshit like he always does.

Layla knew something was wrong, and I think she knew it went beyond our arrangement coming to an end. Her eyes, always so inquisitive and soft, so open and endearing, make me feel raw.

Make me feel as if I could lay my head in the crook of her neck, wrap my arms around her, and reveal everything going through my head, and that's dangerous.

So incredibly fucking dangerous.

I've never told a soul about the "friends" my mom had.

Hence why I took one look at her in her adorable sweater, her glacial blue eyes, freckled covered face and kissed Emmy on the head, and hightailed it out of there.

Grayson was meant to pick me up, so he was a little surprised to find me eating a box of cereal on his couch watching *Gilmore Girls* when he came down his stairs. He didn't comment on it, though.

For many, it's a comfort show. For me, it's what I never had—a loving mom. Sometimes when I was younger, I'd daydream that Lorelei was my mom.

"What's going on with you?"

"Hmm?"

Grayson takes his seat belt off, and it's only now that I realize we're parked. *How long have we been sitting here?*

"I've given you your space, man, more than enough. Bella keeps saying I need to let you process your feelings, but this? Dude, you're not yourself. I can't even remember the last time you cracked a joke."

Dropping my head against the headrest, I blow out a breath. "I know, okay? I know, I just—"

“Can’t talk about it,” he finishes for me, knowing what I was already going to say.

“Trust me, if I could I would. I just really fucking can’t.” Physically, I don’t think I’d ever be able to get the words out.

I was raped.

My mother handed me over to my rapist. Then she left me on the side of the road like a dog.

And no one ever loved me after that day.

Grayson falls silent for so long I turn my head to check what he’s doing.

I wish I hadn’t.

His brows are furrowed, concern etched across every line of his face, his eyes searching. I’m worried he will see too much.

“Please, I’ll tell you if I’m ever ready. This thing with Layla stirred up a lot for me, okay?”

“With your mom?” he asks gently.

I dip my chin, my confirmation making him blow out a heavy breath.

“I might sound like a dick for this and god knows I love Layla like a sister, but you’re my best friend, Kieran, and I can see it killing you to be around her and not be *with* her.” He rubs the nape of his neck. “Should you maybe find another nanny?”

“I can’t do that to Emmy.” *Or to myself.* “I’d rather have the relationship we do than never see her.”

Grayson nods as if he understands. “I respect your decision. God knows Bella didn’t make it easy for me those first few months, so when I say I get it, I do. And don’t hate me for asking, I just needed to put you first, okay?”

My lip twitches, trying to smile, but it never fully blooms. “You’re a good friend.”

“Apparently not good enough.” A darkness enters his gaze, his voice so thick with emotion my heart sinks like a rock in the ocean. “What did you mean the other week when you said you wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for me?”

“You’re really trying to make me cry today, aren’t you, Cap?”

“No, I just…did you…?”

“Want to die?” I say bluntly because I know he can’t say the words. “Yes. A lot when I was younger.” I turn to face the parking lot and not the devastation in my friend’s eyes, rip open my heart and whisper, “It was hard in the home growing up…so fucking hard.”

It’s quiet for a long while, until Grayson chokes out, “I’m sorry I never noticed. I’m so sorry, Kieran.”

Leaning over, I clap him on the shoulder, squeezing. “You and your family did more than anyone ever has. You don’t need to apologize, Crawford.”

He nods but the silver lining his eyes begins to spill. “Thank you for not leaving. That would have really fucked with my head.”

I can’t help it, I laugh. “Couldn’t leave my best friend to do life alone.”

He sniffles around a chuckle. “No, you fucking couldn’t. I would have been so pissed at you if you left me.”

My smile is forming now as I look at my best friend and see so evidently how much he cares for me. “Thank you for everything, man,” I say hoarsely before straightening and clapping my hands, desperately needing to lighten the mood. “Now, can you tell me why the hell you dragged me to a store on a Sunday?”

Grayson’s lip twitches, the sudden switch in emotion making me pause.

“You’re not forcing me to buy princess dresses or anything, right? No sex shops, because I swear to fucking god, Grayson—”

“I’m buying a ring,” he blurts out.

I’m flying across the car console and tackling my best friend before he so much as blinks.

“Holy fucking shit!” I punch his arm.

“Ow!”

“Why the fuck didn’t you say sooner, you fucking sad pathetic asshole? You made it all sad with my shit, dude! You’re buying a fucking ring!”

Grayson’s laughing, his eyes darting around the parking lot. “Shh, people know who we are, dipshit. I’d like to propose to Bella before the world knows.” He shoves me off him good-naturedly before letting his megawatt smile shine. “Good to know you’re excited though.”

“Excited? More like ecstatic. Dude, I’m…fuck, I feel like crying.”

Grayson deadpans. “I’m not proposing to *you*. Reel it in, Ashford.”

“No, seriously, this has made my whole day. I think I’m going to cry.”

Grayson shakes with laughter. “Let it out before we leave the parking lot, then. I seriously don’t need someone snapping a picture of me entering the jeweler.”

I try to reel it in but the second I feel a tear roll down my cheek, Grayson leans over and shuts my door, muttering under his breath,

“Fucking hell.”

“You’re getting married, dude. Let me have my moment.”

“You mean *my* moment?”

“I’m losing my best friend,” I cry dramatically, teasingly. I’m so goddamn happy for him.

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Kieran, you’re not losing anyone.”

I point an accusatory finger at him. “I better be the first fucking person you told, fucker.”

“Why are we swearing so much?”

I shrug. “This is a huge moment. Swearing is called for.” Narrowing my eyes, I ask again, “Am I?”

He sighs. “Yes, Kieran, you’re the only one who knows.”

I punch the air. “Fuck yes! I’m the best secret keeper, I swear.”

“You won’t be if you keep yelling. People are looking,” he says, glancing back to the parking lot.

“We need disguises. There’s no way we can go in there without being seen.”

He chews on his bottom lip. “Fuck, you think so?”

“I know so.” Grinning, I waggle my brows. “Leave it to me, Cap. I got this.”

Before he can say anything else I jump out of the truck and head inside, but I swear I hear him mumble something about being scared for his life.

Grayson is shaking his head dramatically. “Hell to the fucking no. I am *not* wearing that.”

“Oh stop being such a pussy and put the damn mask on.”

“Are you kidding? This is going to draw more attention!”

“Yeah, but no one can see our faces so they’ll never know.”

Grayson looks from me to the monkey head and back. “No, absolutely not. I’m not buying”—he looks around the parking lot, lowering his voice—“Bella’s ring wearing a monkey head.”

I roll my eyes. “We’ll take it off inside the store, idiot. It’s just until we’re securely inside.”

With his hands on his hips, he purses his lips, looking like he sucked on a lemon. “You seriously couldn’t come up with a better idea?”

Scoffing, I point to the matching monkey heads. “Better idea? This is a genius one. Nothing could ever top this.”

“You’re an idiot,” he says pointedly.

“Nah, I think this is pure geniusness, should go get my IQ tested after this.”

Grayson side eyes me. “That’s not even a word.”

Waving him off I slide the monkey head on, surprised to feel how quickly it gets hot. “Is it bad I hope someone takes a photo so we have documentation of this?” Jumping, I spin on my heel. “Ooh! Let’s vlog buying it! We can show Bella after.”

Grayson objects, of course, his head shaking, but I ignore him. This is the happiest I’ve felt in weeks.

Who knew I just needed to put a giant monkey head on to feel something?

“How the hell do you even know how to vlog?”

“You don’t watch vlogs?”

“No.”

“Missing out, Cap.”

Whipping out my phone, I set it up on the back of Grayson’s truck, hit record, and give it a thumbs-up. I can barely see out of the two eyes but I can see just enough to grab the matching monkey head and shove it down on Grayson’s head.

“Hey!” He stumbles back from the force, almost falling over.

Turning back to the camera, I give it another thumbs-up and say, “Welcome to the family, B!”

Grayson steps beside me, sighing. “Sorry, he’s a package deal, Blaze.”

Elbowing him in the ribs, the monkey head goes down as Grayson doubles over. “I take offense to that.”

Grayson coughs, about to slide the head off, but I quickly force it back on. “Let’s go buddy, wouldn’t want to draw attention.”

“Yeah,” he grunts out derisively. “Wouldn’t want that.”

Sitting beside Grayson, as he holds the ring he custom designed for Bella in his hands, tears line both our eyes at the future he worked so hard to have.

"I'll give you a moment, sir."

Grayson doesn't even notice the jeweler leave, doesn't notice how happy he is to see his work being admired. His smile is so wide I also laugh with joy. "Goddamn, Cap, I couldn't be happier for you. Truly, you deserve it."

"Who would have thought my darkest days would lead me to her?"

"When are you going to do it?"

He slides his gaze to mine. "I trust you, but I don't trust you with that. I'll let you know the day but I want to keep it all under wraps, private and personal."

"Fair enough, I respect it. You want it to go smoothly."

"I want it to go *perfectly*. She deserves the best."

"That she does."

Grayson knocks his shoulder into mine. "I might be mushy right now because I'm holding the ring I want to give to Bella, but your time will come with Layla."

Grimacing, I murmur, "Let's not dampen the mood."

"No, this is the perfect time. If I wasn't persistent with Bella, if I didn't keep showing up and proving that I loved her, I wouldn't be here right now. I know Layla cares for you and for some reason she's holding back. Just keep trying."

Clapping him on the back, I agree more so to shut him up. This is his moment. It shouldn't be about my fucked-up love life.

He goes back to staring at the ring, awe shining on his face.

I hope I get my happy ending one day too.

An hour later, monkey heads securely covering our faces and the ring clutched in a non-descript bag in Grayson's hand, a kid runs up to me, holding his hand up in the air for a high five.

"Fuck yeah, dude! Getting ready for Fright Night?"

"Yeah, bro!"

Grayson chuckles at my blatant lie but as the kid runs off, my eyes catch on the haunted house posters tacked up around the mall and his words from the jeweler replay in my mind.

Then it hits me.

"Holy shit, I think I know what to do."

"What?"

Pointing at Grayson, I laugh. "You owe me a favor, right?"

"Uh, no? But I can help."

I clasp his shoulders, leading us to the car quickly. "Good, because I'm going to need all the help I can get with this one." Grinning, I slide into Grayson's car, not even bothering to take off the monkey costume as I dial Layla's number.

Grayson immediately rips off his monkey head and frowns at me. "What the hell is going on?"

"Taking your advice," I say as explanation but that only makes his frown deepen.

Layla picks up on the third ring, out of breath. "Hey, is everything okay?"

"Better than okay. Is Bella there?"

There's some rustling on the line before Layla says, "You're on speaker. What's up?"

"Your mom's been hounding you to see Emmy, right?"

Grayson looks as perplexed as Layla sounds. "Um, yes, why?"

"Call her and see if she's free."

"It's a Sunday, she will be. Why, what's happening?"

"Ask her if she wants to look after Emmy."

Bella and Layla snort at the same time.

“Of course she will say yes,” I hear Bella murmur, the sound of her voice making my best friend’s eyes turn all goo-goo.

Rolling mine beneath the monkey mask, I go on. “Good, tell her to watch Emmy and then meet us at the address I text you.”

“What the hell is going on? Why do you sound so muffled, and where is my boyfriend?” Bella calls over the line.

Grayson’s eyes are shining, his cheeks tinting. “Hi, Blaze,” he pipes up.

“Hi, Grayson.” She sounds like she’s smiling.

“Yeah, why are you muffled?” Layla asks suddenly.

I whip off the monkey head. “Jesus, I can breathe now. Thank fuck.”

Grayson slaps my chest.

“Ow!”

“*Shut up!*” he hisses.

Waving him off, I declare, “We’re all going out tonight.”

“We are?” Layla asks hesitantly.

“Yep,” I say, popping the *p*. “Meet us at the store I text, and let me know when you’re leaving mine. Bye!”

I hang up before they can say no. My best friend looks dumbfounded. “What the hell are you doing?”

Smirking at my best friend I drawl, “Getting my girl.”

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Chapter 42

Layla

MOMMA BEAR

oh she is heaven-sent

PHOTO ATTACHMENT

LAYLA

she's the cutest

I'm quickly pulled from the photo my mom texted of Emmy as Bella's car door slams shut. I follow her out.

"Care to explain why the fuck you had me drive thirty minutes to a costume store?"

"Good to see you too, Bella," Kieran teases as Grayson hops out of his truck.

As Bella makes her way over, Kieran strolls toward me. "Cue the make-out session in three, two—"

"One," I finish for him, just as Grayson cups Bella's jaw and kisses her like he hasn't seen her in years.

Kieran sighs, placing his hands on his hips. "Young love. How utterly disgusting."

I bump my hip against his. "You don't mean that."

"Not a single word."

Snorting to myself, I look up at the costume store. "No, seriously, why are we here?"

At my question, Bella pulls herself from Grayson.

Kieran grins down at me, his large frame making me tip my head back. “We’re going to a haunted house tonight.”

A thrill of excitement rushes down my spine. “No way!”

“Oh, this is heaven for Layla,” Bella calls out, leaning against Grayson. “Interactive actors.”

“The whole shebang,” Kieran confirms.

Jumping up and down I can’t contain my excitement. “Oh my god!”

Kieran slings an arm over my shoulder. “Come on, sunshine, we’ve got to pick out a matching costume.”

He starts to lead me toward the store, and I arch a brow. “How far are you willing to go in the costume department?”

Grinning wickedly at me Kieran drawls, “All the way, sunshine.”

“Careful what you commit to.”

Shrugging, Kieran opens the door for me, letting me walk in first. “I’m not the one afraid of commitment.”

Before I can call him out on that little jab, he claps his hands. “Cindy and O’Connor said they have costumes sorted so they’ll meet us there.”

Bella squeals. “A triple date, how cute!”

Glowering at my best friend I hiss under my breath. “Bella.”

“What?” She flaps her hand at Kieran and me. “You’re going to be wearing matching costumes.”

“That does not equate a date.”

Kieran throws his arm around my shoulder. “Before you stab my heart again, let’s go pick out a costume.”

Grayson laughs to himself before pulling my friend away. “Leave them to have their lover’s spat.”

“It is not a lover’s spat!” I protest.

Bella arches a brow at me over her shoulder as Grayson all but drags her down one of the store’s endless aisles of costumes. “The look in your eyes says otherwise.”

She just laughs at me gaping at her before Grayson lifts her into his arms and takes off down the aisle.

Spinning on my heel, I all but stomp my foot and huff. “We are *not* having a lover’s spat.”

Kieran holds his hands up in surrender. “Hey, I wasn’t the one who said it.” Before I can protest further, he smiles, the one that makes his dimples

pop out—identical to Emmy's.

And suddenly, the frustration that was bubbling through my blood dissipates.

Curse him and that gorgeous smile.

"What do you want to go as, sweetheart?"

"Don't *sweetheart* me."

"My apologies, my fine madam," he teases.

"Not that either."

"Fine." He clears his throat dramatically. "What do you want to go as, sunshine?"

I narrow my eyes to try and feign annoyance but in reality, my heart is pounding.

And he knows it.

Superpower.

His brow cocks as he leans against the wall. "Well, well, well, you do like the nickname after all."

Rolling my eyes, I turn and take off, strutting down an aisle to try and give my heart enough space to calm down. "You're insufferable."

His quick steps ring out behind me as he catches up. "We've been over this before. I know that when you say that, you really mean, *Kieran, I adore you so much and I want to suck your face off*."

I gasp, spinning so quickly Kieran runs into me. "That is not what it means!"

He just rolls his eyes before laying his hands on my shoulder. "Of course it does."

"No, it certainly does not!"

I sound like a toddler having a tantrum and yet I can't stop myself. He always knows how to press just the right buttons.

Kieran drops his head so we're at eye level. "Layla, you've come on my tongue screaming my name. It's too late now to pretend otherwise."

My eyes widen so far, I'm worried they'll get stuck.

"You—you—"

"Yes, me?" he teases.

Groaning, I push him off me. "You can't say things like that!"

"And why not?"

Yeah, Layla why not?

Peering around the aisle, I snatch the closest thing I can find, which funnily enough fits exactly what I want to do. Shoving it at Kieran's chest, I demand, "Put that on and shut up!"

Kieran's eyes are sparkling with such heat already, and somehow they glow more as he looks down at what I threw at him. "Fuck me, I knew your books were kinky but this is next level."

Sitting in Kieran's hands is a mask for a Hannibal Lecter costume.

I throw my hands in the air. "I actually can't with you. How the hell do you manage to make every little thing I say dirty?"

His eyes do a very slow perusal of my body, when his gaze finally lifts to mine, they're hooded. "Have you looked in a mirror? It's extremely easy."

"Oh my god, you're intolerable."

"Just admit you want me and we can drop it."

He's pushing, far more than he has in the past three weeks. This is like the old Kieran. The one I have desperately wanted back and yet in equal measures have been terrified to see again, because he's so hard to say no to.

I turn away from him before his superpower can read the thoughts running havoc through my mind, forcing myself to focus on the costumes. One catches my eye, sparking a hint of anticipation in my blood.

Ignoring whatever Kieran is babbling on about now, I stride down the mask aisle and stop a third of the way down. Taking two off the wall, I turn to face Kieran, grinning madly as I lift them.

"How badly do you want to prove that you want me?"

Kieran's strides eat up the aisle, his gaze devouring me. "I'd die for you if it meant you'd take me seriously."

Swallowing thickly, I try to ignore the way his honest words make my belly heat. "Wear this then."

Dropping the Hannibal Lecter mask, he catches the new one I throw him, his lip twitching. "Oh, we're so fucking on."

Surprise flashes through me. "Really? You're going to wear it with me?"

"Sunshine, you could torture me and so long as your hands are on my body I'd be a good boy and scream."

"What a delightful picture."

"Want me to scream for you?"

"Maybe."

He chuckles darkly, then cocks his head at the mask. “You’ve read a book about this, haven’t you?”

Blinking I try to cover my shock. “N-no.”

His lip twitches. “Care to share what scene you’re remembering that’s making your cheeks flush?”

“No!”

“So there *is* a book.”

I quickly shove the mask over my face, hiding my reactions. “Good luck using your superpower on me now, Ashford.”

He steps forward slowly, his eyes eating me up, and if I didn’t know any better, I’d think he could see all the way down to my soul if I weren’t wearing a mask.

I tip my head back, waiting with baited breath as Kieran ever so slowly lifts the matching Ghostface mask and slides it on, cocking his head. The move has a jolt of heat zapping down my core.

Goosebumps pebble my flesh.

“I don’t need to see your face to know when you’re turned on, Layla.” He reaches out, his finger caressing the raised skin of my arm. “You’re my favorite book to read. Even if some chapters are missing I know them by heart.”

Bella comes rushing around the corner. “Layla!”

Jumping apart, I spin in time to see my best friend look at Kieran standing behind me in the Ghostface mask then to me breathing heavily in a matching mask.

She points between us. “My timing is bad, isn’t it?”

“Fucking horrendous,” Kieran drawls dryly.

“Whoopsies.” Shrugging, she wraps an arm around my shoulder. “Well, the moment’s gone now so I’m going to steal you. I found the perfect outfit for you, and it’s absolutely going to match that mask.” Bella lifts her gaze over my shoulder to Kieran. “And will make you not hate me for what I just interrupted.”

He huffs. “I fucking hope so.”

Grayson rounds the corner wearing a white chef’s hat and the goofiest grin on his face I can’t help but laugh. “What the hell are you going as?”

He throws his arms out to his sides. “*Ratatouille*!” he declares.

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Chapter 43

Kieran

Google Search

Q*: How the fuck do I not blow a load when she looks like that?*

I've been sporting a hard-on since the moment Layla stepped out of the dressing room in…that. It takes everything in me not to bite my fist because I need to fucking bite something—preferably her.

I'm in all black, a fitted sleeveless shirt with jeans and of course the Ghostface mask. I'm plain, boring, simple, and I wouldn't have it any other way because that means Layla *shines*.

She's wearing a tight-fitted black corset, along with something I think Bella called fishnets, as well as those garter belts and black boots that make her usually short frame a bit taller. The corset pushes her tits up so high it's hard to know where to look. With the matching Ghostface mask covering her face, I can't look in her eyes. But I'm also wearing a mask, hiding my gaze, and that's why I'm acting like a dog and memorizing *every* inch of her.

I swear she knows, though. The second my eyes linger on the swell of her breasts, she shivers, as if she can feel my gaze like a physical caress.

The difference in our costumes is hilarious. Grayson and Bella have dressed up as the characters from *Ratatouille*. I laughed my ass off when

Grayson appeared in a chef's outfit, only for Bella to round the corner in a skimpy rat costume.

Don't even get me started on how hard Grayson and I laughed to see Cindy and O'Connor step out of their car as Fred and Daphne from *Scooby-Doo*. It wasn't the costumes, though, it was the fact Cindy managed to get O'Connor to carry around a Scooby-Doo teddy under his arm.

Although that man would do anything for her. Always has and always will.

Whereas Layla and I look like we've stepped out of one of her dark romance books, and I could tell the second I said yes to the costume that this is something she has fantasized about before.

Standing in line for the haunted house, as Grayson dips to capture Bella's lips and O'Connor looks like he's two seconds away from devouring Cindy, Layla turns to me, cocking her hip along with her head. I can just picture the fire igniting behind her eyes, the way they only flare for me.

"Yes, my sunshine?" I drawl.

"Do I look like sunshine incarnate right now?"

Leaning against the wall, I cross my arms over my chest, ignoring everyone else in the line. Even I can hear the smirk in my voice as I purr, "I don't know what you are right now, but I'll take it all the same."

She tsks. "Always a flirt."

"Always a tease."

She puts her hands on her hips. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

"Exactly, so I'm giving you a chance to rectify the situation."

"I believe the last time I *rectified* a situation I had you on my lap begging to be fucked."

Her sharp intake of breath has my lips twitching.

This is the first time we've spoken about *that* night and fuck if I wasn't dreaming about being able to see the way her eyes are no doubt on fire right now.

She steps into my space, and even with the heeled boots, she still has to tip her head back.

"And if I remember correctly, you were moaning into my mouth."

"Not ashamed about it. I'd happily do it again." Stepping forward, I spin her by her shoulders as the line moves forward, pulling her flush against my back. We're up. In this position, I let her know just how much she's

affecting me. “Also not ashamed to admit that I’ve been this painfully hard since the moment you slid that costume on.”

Once we get to the attendant, I’m grinning behind my mask, as Layla’s so flustered she can’t speak. I lift my chin in the direction of Bella, Grayson, Cindy, and O’Connor, who are stepping into the House of Terror. “We’re with them,” I say.

Grayson, it seems, is loving his part of the plan. I’m pretty sure he roped O’Connor in on it, too.

Distract the girls. Let me get a chance to be alone with Layla in the house.

The attendant steps aside. “Go on ahead. You’re the last of the group for this session.”

Layla’s walk isn’t as assured as it was before. I bend down to whisper, “Hear that? There’s no one behind us. Careful, sunshine, or I might just start hunting you.”

We walk through the black and red paint smeared door to find we’re utterly alone and that it’s pitch black.

Bending low, I can’t help but tease again, “What do you say, sunshine? Want to play?”

The lights above our heads flicker, illuminating a hallway full of mirrors, all at tilted angles, giving me the perfect view of her beautiful breasts as they rise and fall with her rapid breathing. I know she’s turned on.

The last time she was like this, she was on my lap.

A scream comes from somewhere ahead of us, and before Layla can respond to me, a chainsaw revs behind us. Peering over my shoulder I watch as an actor steps around the corner with a chainsaw, blood dripping down it and his body, their mask sinister.

Layla slides her hand in mine and screams, “*Run*!”

Not needing to be told twice, we take off down the hall, the actor following us as we come up to a dead end. I’m about to go left when Layla pulls me right, ducking my head I keep my hold on her firm as we run through a door and into a room that looks like a cemetery.

Layla’s scream is loud as one of the bodies half popping out of the dirt of a grave jumps up with a knife and grabs her ankle. They’re wearing a terrifying nun costume.

“Fuck!”

Instinct kicks in and I bend, throwing Layla over my shoulder and taking off through the cemetery. We dodge actors left and right as they all jump out from different gravesites with various weapons.

“Kieran!” Layla screeches, whacking my back. “Put me down!”

“Fuck no! What the fuck kind of haunted house is this?”

“An interactive one, so let me be interacted with. Put me the hell down!”

Kicking down a door I find in the back corner, I step inside, slamming the door shut behind me right as an actor tries to charge into it. I put my shoulder against it, Layla sliding down my body, loving the way her figure feels against mine.

She huffs, pointing an accusatory finger in my face. “What the hell was that?”

“Protection. A thank you would be nice.”

Her lips part, but she’s suddenly cut off by a dark chuckle. We both turn slowly to face the room.

I’m not afraid of much, but my god, my heart utterly sinks at the large boiling pot in the middle of the room. Cages line the walls, filled with actors covered in wounds. A mad scientist drenched in blood walks toward us, cleaning a dirty knife.

The actors in the cages begin to scream, banging on their enclosures, pleading to be let out while blood pours from their mouths.

Fake or not, I’m fucking petrified.

“Layla.”

“Yeah?”

“Start running, sweetheart.”

“Oh, right.”

The second the words leave her mouth, the scientist pounces. Layla and I both scream.

“What the fuck, dude?” His hand wraps around the back of my shirt as I try to run, and I quelch every instinct I have to pummel the guy. “Take your hands off me or I swear to god I’ll break your fucking fingers.”

“Kieran!”

“I’m a little indisposed, sweetheart.”

Her little frustrated groan is adorable until she lets out a petrified scream. I remove the scientist’s hands from me in an instant, not sorry at all for the way I go about it. That’s my girl screaming.

I take off, then immediately come to a screeching halt, nearly slipping on fake blood. A woman is bent upside down, running on her hands and feet in a bridge position straight for us.

“No! Fuck no! That is not normal!”

Layla’s hands are at my back, urging me to go.

“Stop shaming her and hurry up and get us out of here!” she calls over the shrieks of the actors in the cages.

“That can’t be natural! She’s like a fucking pretzel!”

“She’s about to turn *us* into a pretzel if we don’t go!”

I ignore Layla and throw her over my shoulder again before taking off down the hallway opposite the crazy *Ring* lady. She keeps whacking my back, relentless, until I let her down.

“You have got to stop picking—” Layla doesn’t finish her sentence before the door behind us slams shut, the lock clicking. “Who the hell just closed the door?”

“Uh, Layla?” I murmur, my eyes never leaving the room we entered.

Her Ghostface mask tips up as she no doubt glares at me behind it. “Yes, Kieran?”

Oh, she’s definitely glaring at me with the amount of sass she just gave me. “You might want to turn around.”

Spinning so fast she almost topples over, I clasp her shoulders to steady her as she faces what can only be described as hell.

The room is lit lowly, with only a few burning candles here and there, but it’s not the dark that scares me, though. It’s what’s in the middle of the room. There’s a round wooden table with a black cloth thrown over it, the old wicker chairs surrounding it rocking back and forth. A Ouija board sits in the middle of the table, the planchette moving.

“No way,” she whispers.

A cackle of laughter echoes throughout the room, followed by a squeaking sound that draws both our gazes to the corner of the room. There, we find a rocking chair moving on its own, occupied by an Annabelle doll.

“Kieran?”

“Yeah, sunshine?”

“Feel free to do that carrying thing again.”

Throwing Layla over my shoulder, something grabs the back of my neck at the same time I try and take off, the long nails scraping my skin under the mask. Layla screams as she pushes herself up.

“What is it?” I call out, running through the room and away from the hand with creepy nails as objects starts to fly around us.

“It’s a fucking moving Annabelle doll!” she screams at the top of her lungs. “Fucking run!”

“I got you, baby, I got it,” I heave while silently swearing to never fucking do a haunted house again. I knew they were interactive, but an Annabelle doll that has creepy-ass nails that grab your neck? How the hell did they pull this off?

I should tell Coach to set up a haunted house on the ice. That will get our asses moving.

The door to the room slams shut behind us, the wind almost making me trip. Quickly putting Layla down, I turn this way and that, seeing we’ve walked into a hallway with four doors.

“Lady’s pick.”

Layla snorts before whacking my chest. “You just want me to walk in first.”

“Yeah, to see your ass, not because I’m a gentleman.”

“At least you’re self-aware.”

“Which one?” I ask again. “And hurry before Annabelle comes after us.”

Layla bounces on the balls of her toes. “Ugh, I don’t know! Why am I choosing?”

That stumps me. “Fuck do I know, actually.” Stepping forward, I open a door, only to slam it shut immediately. “Hell to the fucking no!”

“Why, what was it? Was it horrible?”

I physically shudder. “Dark shower block.”

Layla mirrors my grimace. “Absolutely not.” She steps forward. “What about—”

A high-pitched wail fills the hall. Layla lets out a scream and before I can truly think about what I’m doing, I wrap my hand around hers and pull her through the second door, slamming it shut behind us.

“I’ve been waiting for a sacrifice.”

“Kieran,” Layla whispers, terror in her voice.

“I shouldn’t have picked this room, should I?”

“No.”

Turning, around I find I’ve dragged Layla into a padded white room with words, numbers and symbols drawn in what looks like fake blood as a

woman with oily black hair, blood smeared along her teeth as she smiles at us sits in the corner, rocking back and forth in a straightjacket.

I don't even get a chance to pick her up before Layla takes off to the left. Following her lead, we run through another door and into a fake doctor's office. Multiple doctors lift their heads from a surgery they're performing.

"Doctor, these are our next patients—"

Layla and I don't stop running and she doesn't stop screaming but somewhere along the way, I start laughing, really laughing. Even though I'm terrified, this is the most fun I've ever had in my life—running in a Ghostface mask and cackling like a maniac as the woman I'm in love with runs beside me, screaming.

I'm laughing too hard to realize where she's taking us but suddenly the guy with the chainsaw is back and I'm not laughing anymore as he revs it.

Now I'm the one pulling Layla through endless halls and doors.

Left, then right, a corridor, another hallway. I'm trying to lose the actor when I spot an almost hidden door and decide to pull us through it. I have no idea if it's a large closet or a small room, but either way, I'm just glad I can have a moment to catch my breath.

"I can't—"

I gently place my hand over Layla's mouth, or where I think her mouth is under the mask, as I hear footsteps moving down the hallway. Big heavy boots stomp along the hardwood floors as a chainsaw roars, the low hum a thing of nightmares.

Holding my breath, I don't let go of Layla as he seems to come to a stop outside the doors. My chest begins to burn, my lungs demanding oxygen, and I swear I'm going to pass out, but then the actor revs the chainsaw again and takes off down the hallway.

Dropping my hand from her face, I lean back against the wall and take a deep pull of air.

"What happened to hunting me?" comes Layla's soft voice.

"Looking forward to it, were you?"

"Desperately."

My chuckle is dark and low. "Want me to hunt you now, sunshine?"

Her next words make my heart skip a beat.

"I think you've already captured me."

Swallowing thickly, I move forward in the cramped area, invading Layla's personal space and forcing her head backwards. Her chest begins to rise and fall rapidly, now for another reason entirely than being frightened.

"You liked that, didn't you?"

Her chin tips up. "You were laughing too."

"No, sunshine. I think you liked that in a *different* way," I whisper, placing a hand on her hip and squeezing. A surge of heat races down my body as she sucks in a hiss of air. "How wet are you?"

The words are out of my mouth before I can take them back. I expect her to cuss or slap me—either is appropriate, really—but what she says instead makes me fucking groan. "Profusely."

"Has this lived up to your dark romance fantasies?"

"More than I ever could have dreamed."

The sounds of the horror house fill the space, mingling with our heavy breathing as we listen to the screams of others in the far-off distance.

Ever so slowly, I let my fingers travel up the side of her stomach, inch by inch. Once my hands reach the swell of her breasts, she arches her back, seeking me out.

But not yet. I want her begging.

I need to hear those words.

Moving my hand over her collarbones I slide my wandering hands beneath her mask and pull it off, revealing my sunshine. The woman that has plagued my thoughts for what feels like eternity. Time didn't even begin until she walked into my life.

Her pupils are wide, the icy blue I've come to love nowhere in sight, her cheeks flushed from exertion. She darts her tongue out to lick her lips.

"Are you done?" I ask, my voice shockingly deep.

She blinks. "With?"

"Pretending you don't want me." I push in further; she has nowhere to go with the desk in this room at her back, and it forces our lower bodies to align. I know she can feel me, can feel how turned on I am right now. "Pretending you don't feel for me what I do for you."

She swallows thickly, her eyes all but pleading with me.

Bending low, the warmth of her breath dancing along my mask, I continue. "I thought you said you were captured."

"I am," comes her quick reply.

"Then stop running."

“I never truly could,” she whispers. “Not from you.”

Her chest is heaving so fast I’m worried she’ll grow lightheaded, worried we’ll run out of air in this tight space.

The pounding of feet comes outside in the hallway suddenly, another group of people sprinting, their screams in the air, and that’s when I see it, Layla’s eyes growing hooded.

Cocking my head, I move forward another inch, my mask brushing her jaw. “It turns you on, doesn’t it?” I ask. “The fact that anyone could find us, that there’s people just beyond those doors while you’re standing here panting, dripping for me.”

Layla’s eyes flash, need and heat coursing through her depths.

A shaky breath escapes her before she dips her head, once, yes.

Groaning right as someone beyond the door screams a bloody melody, I drop my forehead to hers, placing my hands on either side of her on the desk, caging her in.

And that’s when she moves.

Her hips roll against mine. Hissing out a breath, one of my hands snaps to her hip and stops the movement.

“I meant what I said. I won’t do this with you unless I can have all of you.”

She’s quiet for a moment and my heart remains suspended, beating so erratically I wonder if I’m having a heart attack.

I can’t handle being rejected by her twice. I knew she’d love this, knew she’d be turned on by the house, and I thought…I thought she wanted to give in a few times these past few weeks, but maybe Layla is the one person in the world I can’t read accurately.

Shaking my head, I push off, only for her hand to snap out and clasp my shirt in a death grip.

My gaze slowly drops to her fisted hand.

“Why do you want me? Are you sure you don’t want me just because you think you can’t have me?”

Ripping my mask off, I let her see the utter sincerity in my eyes are I declare, “Because I fucking love you, that’s why.”

The words hang between us for no more than a second before Layla is throwing herself at me. She jumps, wrapping her arms around my neck, and my hands dart out to catch her just as she lays those gorgeous plush lips on mine.

I moan, all but groaning into her mouth. I don't care what's happening beyond that door, I don't care if we get caught, because Layla is finally—*finally*—fucking kissing me.

As I place her on the desk, she wraps her legs around my hips. I pull her flush against me, not wanting so much as an inch of space separating us. She gasps, the sound music to my ears, as her core aligns perfectly with the bulge in my jeans.

"Say it," I breathe between kisses. "I need to hear you say it."

Clenching my jaw, I wait, her hands running through my hair before she fists it and says the words I've only ever dreamed of hearing.

"You have me, Kieran. Heart and soul, you have me." Fear flashes across her face, a vulnerability I've never seen before, as she whispers, "I love you."

My heart explodes.

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Chapter 44

Layla

BELLA

Lil, where the hell did you and Kieran go?

Cindy is wondering if he kidnapped you

oh my fucking god I hope you finally told him how you feel

EEEEKKKKK

by your silence I'm taking that as a yes

I WANT ALL THE DETAILS!!!

Cindy is bouncing up and down like a kid on a sugar high

Asher had to physically drag her away from the house LOL

My heart has fallen in love with Kieran Ashford slowly, before I could even realize what was happening. Every day Kieran showed me who he was, all the layers of his soul bared to me, and with each layer exposed my heart fell and fell and fell.

I just didn't realize it until I felt like I was stabbed a million times over when he walked away from me in the library.

Nothing has changed.

I'm still sick. I'm still having flare-ups that I haven't told Kieran about, I'm still waking up in a panic anytime I sleep through my alarms, and I'm still utterly terrified that Kieran will hate the baggage I carry, but if I've learned anything from books, it's that you need to take a leap of faith.

And I’m jumping into his arms.

The moment those words leave my lips, Kieran’s control snaps.

It was already holding on by a thread but with those words, the ones he deserves so much, it detonates. He smashes his lips against mine, and the kiss is anything but sweet.

It’s passionate, full of hunger and a need that’s been bursting at the seams between us.

His hands are on my face, holding me to him as mine explore. I keep my legs wrapped firmly around his waist, never wanting him to walk away again, as my hands slide under his shirt. I savor his groan as I splay them across the hard ridges of his stomach.

Feeling greedy and intoxicated by the sight of him, I grab the hem of his shirt and pull. Thankfully, he helps take the shirt off and yanks it over his head.

“Show me,” I breathe between kisses. “Show me how good it can be, Kieran.”

“Are you sure, Layla?” he asks.

“Yes, and that’s the last time you’ll ask me that. Now hurry up and show me how good it can be.” I’m all but squirming as I beg, “Please, Kieran, I don’t want to wait for you any longer.”

Like a rubber band being snapped, Kieran lunges forward, kissing me so hard and passionately I gasp into his mouth, whimpering as he pushes my legs further apart. His hands are fumbling around my corset, trying to untie the ribbons from the back before he growls in frustration and rips his mouth from mine.

“Fuck it.”

In one fluid motion, Kieran grabs the small booty shorts I’m wearing and pulls, ripping them clean off my body before he drops to his knees and places his mouth on me. Falling back onto the table with a thud, I brace each foot on his shoulders, digging my hands into his hair and pulling him closer to my core as he devours me.

It was good last time—fantastic—but with the pent-up energy that’s been brewing between us for weeks, this is perfection.

“More,” I pant, feeling that telltale high looming. “More!”

Kieran does the opposite. Instead, he pulls back and leans over me, his hands shaking as he fumbles with the button on his jeans.

Scrambling upwards, I smack his hand away, giddy to do this for him. Once the button pops and the fly is pulled down, Kieran is standing before me, panting, his abs slicked with sweat and on full display. I take a moment to appreciate the view before sliding my nails into the waistband of his boxers and tugging them off until he springs free.

I can't help myself, I gasp.

The tip of him is purple, dripping precum, and he's *pulsing*.

Reaching up, I trail a finger from the bottom all the way to the top, savoring the sound he makes as his hand slaps out, holding the wall to steady himself as he hisses, his long thick length pulsing against me.

My mouth is watering when I look up and find his hooded gaze on me.

"Keep looking like you want to devour my cock and I'm not going to be able to stop myself from coming."

Arching a brow, I fist him and squeeze. His head drops back with a groan.

"You close to coming, Ashford?"

"When your hands are on me, sunshine? Always."

Giving him another squeeze before slowly stroking him, I eat up every second I spend here, Kieran regarding me like I'm a goddess. I've never felt sexier than I do in this moment.

Reaching forward, he captures my jaw, mere inches from his swelling length.

"If you don't wrap your pretty lips around me, I'm going to have to lay you down and fuck you instead."

Wetness pools between my legs and I ache to squeeze my thighs together.

My core pulses again as he demands, "Lie down, sunshine."

Doing as he says is like breathing—my body moves at his command.

Kieran fists his length and strokes it, moaning as he looks down at my center to see how wet I am. He rubs the tip of his cock along my entrance, making my hips buck.

"You want me?" he asks gutturally as screams ring out somewhere in the house. It shouldn't, but the sound of everyone's terror closing in around us has a tingle racing down my spine.

"Yes!"

Kieran shoves his hand in his pocket and pulls out a condom and I don't care how I sound when I beg, "No, please, please, I'm on the pill. I want to

feel you, Kieran. I want to feel all of you."

If I thought his eyes were dilated before that was nothing compared to the inky black pools they become now. Throwing his wallet to the ground, Kieran hovers above me, placing a hand on either side of my head.

"You want me inside you bare?"

Nodding, because I don't trust myself not to outright plead right now, I bite my lip. Kieran leans forward and licks it, forcing me to let go.

One of his hands disappears but I know where it goes a second later as he lines himself up, his eyes never leaving mine. "Are you ready, sunshine?" he asks.

Still not trusting myself to speak, I wrap my arms around his neck and slide a hand onto his cheek, nodding emphatically. Kieran captures my lips at the same moment he slides inside me slowly.

The books were right.

At first, it hurts. It burns as he stretches me, my body having to accommodate his thick length, but as he holds himself inside me, not moving, kissing me through it, I slowly relax.

My hips move of their own accord and that's all Kieran was waiting for.

Pulling out, he leaves the tip in before thrusting forward, making us both groan. The sensation—my god, the sensation of him moving inside me is like nothing I've ever experienced.

Clinging to him harder, I meet him thrust for thrust, our kiss turning frenzied as his hips pick up the pace. His free hand snakes between us, finding my clit.

"Kieran!"

"That's it, baby, scream my name."

The moment his gravelly voice fills the space, my core clenches. We both feel it, him so more because he drops his head to the crook of my neck and starts cursing like a sailor, cutting it off with a gentle bite.

An electric current zips down my spine as we both pick up the pace, both of us chasing a high that only he can give me.

"My fucking god, Layla, you were made for me."

"Don't stop," I pant.

"I wouldn't fucking dream of ever stopping." Kieran keeps up his relentless pace, adding the swipe of his thumb along my clit, and the combination of it makes me frenzied with need.

Fisting his hair, I pull him down to me, moaning into his mouth as he grunts, his hips slapping against mine.

“Someone’s going to find us if you keep screaming.”

My core spasms.

“You want that though, don’t you, baby? You want someone to open the door and see me bent over fucking you into oblivion. You want them to hear your little whimpers and moans as I fuck you.”

“Oh god, Kieran,” I pant, the desk screeching beneath me.

He uses a free hand to rip the corset down, just enough to make my breast spill free. The air that rushes for my pebbled nipples is so electric my back arches, begging for him. He willingly complies, lowering his head and taking a nipple into his mouth, sucking—hard.

I scream so loud my voice cracks.

“You’re begging to be caught.”

Kieran takes his thumb off my clit and I’m about to protest but the wicked glint in his eyes makes me pause. Smirking down at me Kieran keeps up his thrust as he drawls, “Be a good girl and scream my name while you come around my cock.”

He then sucks a nipple into his mouth again right as he brings his fingers back to my clit and pinches. Fireworks explode behind my eyes and I do just as he demanded of me. I scream his name as I come.

“*Kieran!*”

He goes still above me as my core pulses around his cock, his body tensing as he captures my lips, groaning so deep and long into my mouth I know he’s coming. It’s only confirmed by the liquid heat that enters me.

“Layla,” he moans against my lips, and it’s music to my ears.

I’m not sure how long we stay like that for, Kieran kissing me slowly and whispering my name as if he can’t imagine that this is reality, but it feels like eternity. Yet I know it couldn’t be longer than ten minutes before he starts to slowly pull out of me.

It leaves me feeling hollow and empty, making me want to beg him to come back.

But as he looks down at me, I can’t help but smile. “That was…”

“Everything,” he whispers.

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Chapter 45

Layla

LAYLA

sorry B! We got lost

Kieran wants to go back home to Emmy, so we'll see you this weekend!

BELLA

did you make out in a haunted house?

please tell me you did

I won't stop texting until you tell me

LAYLA

HELLOOO

LAYLA

we did a lot more than make out

BELLA

OH MY FUCKING GOD

Cindy is going to be so proud

Snickering at my phone, I come to an abrupt halt as I crash into a hard chest. Lifting my gaze, I find Kieran, his Ghostface mask long gone, his features soft and full of such tender care I'm momentarily stunned.

"Stay the night," he breathes, with a hint of fear.

Pocketing my phone, I take a step forward, laying a gentle hand on his cheek, savoring the way his eyes flutter closed. “I’m not going to change my mind, Kieran,” I say, lowering my voice. “I meant what I said.”

He lifts his calloused hand to mine and clutches it. “Say it again. I need to hear it.”

“I love you, Kieran Ashford.” I chuckle. “You made it increasingly hard not to.”

His lip twitches before he opens those eyes and sets the ocean upon me, sucking me in as they always do. His voice is so rough it sets my skin on fire. “I knew you couldn’t resist me for long.”

Snorting out a laugh, I shove him playfully as I walk past him to the front door, only to stop and turn with wide eyes.

“What is it?”

“What the hell do I say to my mother?” I whisper-hiss.

Kieran throws his head back with a laugh and I leap forward, smacking my hand over his mouth. Lucky for me, he wraps his arm around my waist and keeps me upright, allowing me to keep my hand there, otherwise I would have just slid down him like a drop of water with the height difference.

I can feel his smirk behind my hand, his eyes twinkling with mischief as the front door opens behind me.

His brow quirks as my mom’s voice rings out. “Layla? What are you two doing?”

“Yeah Layla,” Kieran mumbles, “what are you doing mounting your boss like that?”

“I’m going to kill you,” I whisper.

“And I’ll scream like a good boy,” he says with a wink.

Wiggling like Emmy does, I’m grateful he lets me go, allowing me to drop down on my own two feet. Spinning, I face Momma Bear Carson.

“Hi, Mom!”

My voice is too high-pitched and by the jostling at my back, I think Kieran is laughing silently.

My mom glances between the both of us before she smiles, and I don’t think I’ve seen her smile like this before. It’s part joy, part relief, and for some strange reason, tears fill her eyes.

Stepping forward, I lower my voice, touching her arm. “Mom?”

She takes a steadying breath, blinking away the tears. “I’m just so happy to see you living your life to the fullest, sweetie.” Grabbing her bag from the entryway console, she winks my way. “I’ll see you tomorrow, I presume.”

She leaves me standing in the threshold, gaping at her, as she walks past Kieran and pats him on the shoulder. “Take care of my baby, Kieran!”

“Always will, Momma Bear Carson.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” Unlocking her car, she opens the door, parting with, “Emmy wouldn’t stop singing tonight, by the way, so whatever you’re doing keep it up.”

The sound of my mom’s car leaving is the only thing to fill the otherwise quiet night. Kieran and I stand in the doorway, staring at each other.

I’m the first to break the silence. “Emmy was singing.”

Kieran’s eyes widen. “That’s what has you stumped?”

I frown at him. “Why the hell are you being quiet?”

“Hmm I don’t know, maybe because your mom cried happy tears presuming we’re together but I actually defiled her daughter in a haunted house?”

I nod my head slowly. “Okay yeah, maybe that’s a good reason to be shocked as well.”

Kieran’s eyes trail down my body before lifting to my face once more. “Maybe?” Moving forward, his steps are slow, measured, as if he’s closing in on his prey. “Layla…”

“Kieran,” I murmur as he comes so close I have to tip my head back.

Kicking the front door shut with his foot, he bends his head, his lips tantalizingly close, his warm puff of air dancing along my skin. “We’re alone.”

“Mm-hmm.”

He keeps moving forward until I’m backed into the stair banister.

“And I can’t seem to stop thinking about the sound you made when you came.”

“Which time?” I taunt.

He groans. “Are you going to be able to be quiet?”

I quirk a brow. “Through what?”

He lifts his hand to my chin, brushing his lips against mine. “If you think for one second that *that* was enough to satisfy me…” He tsks. “Oh

Layla, I'll never get enough of you."

My breathing is labored now, my chest brushing his every time I inhale, only adding to the heady sensation of him crowding me. "Then take me."

He moves before I can so much as blink.

He bends, sliding his hands down my thighs and lifting me in one fell swoop. I squeal as he walks us deeper into the living room.

"You know I respect you right, sunshine?"

"Yes," I breathe.

His grin is downright dirty. "Good, because it's about to look like I don't."

Kieran's heartbeat steadies me.

Grounding me like nothing has before. The only time I've ever felt so at peace as I do in this moment—lying on the floor, covered in blankets in front of a fire, my head on Kieran's chest with his arm tracing patterns along my back—is when I would read books.

Although now that I've tasted this, how it feels to be held by someone—cherished—it'll never be enough again. I've never understood what the romance books and movies meant when a character felt physically pained not being with someone, but I get it now.

And I understand why Kieran walked away a few weeks ago, because if I had him like this and was forced to watch him leave me, I don't think I would've recovered from that.

I place my chin on his chest, watching the shadows of the fireplace dance along his face.

"Is it always like this?"

"Is what?" he asks, his voice rough.

"Sex. Is it like this with everyone?"

He's quiet for a moment, a small smile tilting the corner of his lips. "It doesn't even come close, sunshine." He lifts his hand and brushes a lock of

hair behind my ear, his eyes full of sincerity as he whispers, “What we have is…consuming. I’ve never felt this for anyone, ever.”

Swallowing thickly, I hold the words close to my heart, the little girl in me that grew up reading romance books and would dream of the day someone would love her like the stories sighs contentedly.

“This is rare, isn’t it?” I say after a beat.

He leans forward, placing a featherlight kiss against my head, the touch sending a shiver down my spine. “Extremely.”

“Then we have to cherish it.”

He wraps an arm around my waist. “I plan on doing more than just cherishing.”

I quirk a brow. “Care to elaborate?”

He shakes his head slowly. “No, I just plan on loving you every day for the rest of my life.”

“That’s a long commitment,” I murmur after it takes me an ungodly amount of time to find my voice.

“Easy to commit when it’s you.” His features grow serious, grave, making me steel myself as he whispers, “You’re it for me, Layla. I’ve known that for a long time now.” He smirks. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed or not, but I’m slightly obsessed with you.”

I tease, “What could have ever given it away? Perhaps the handmade bookshelf?”

His laugh jostles me. “Cheeky,” he teases.

Laying my head back down on his chest, with his arm around my waist, I begin to trace his tattoos.

Kieran tenses beneath me.

I peer down at the snake tattoo wrapped around his forearm, peppered by small intricate designs, but I stop on the snake’s head, my finger swiping back and forth over the raised bump. “What does this cover up?”

He studies me. “Are you sure you want to know?”

“I want to know every part of you.”

“The bad included?”

“Especially the bad,” I whisper. “I want it all, Kieran. I can handle it, I promise.”

He’s quiet for a moment before he swallows, his Adam apple bobbing as his gaze cuts down to his forearm. “That particular punishment was because the matron caught me sneaking into the kitchen and trying to steal food

after she put me on a food ban.” The temperature in the room plummets. “I hadn’t eaten in over two days at that point. I was in physical pain I was so hungry.”

His words trail off and I don’t realize I’m crying until I see one of my tears land on the head of the snake tattoo.

“She took the knife that I was using to jimmy the lock on the pantry and stabbed it in my forearm.” He blows out a breath. “I needed four stitches.”

“And the hospital never questioned it?” I ask, surprising myself with the vengeance in my tone.

He shakes his head, giving me a sad smile. “The matron is a clinical nurse. She bandaged and stitched us up after her beatings and punishments if they were severe.”

Swiping away another tear, I peer back down at his forearm. My fingers move slowly and catch another scar just two inches away, along the snake’s body, this one round and peppered.

“And this?” I ask, my voice wobbly.

“Her cigarette. Apparently the leaves in the backyard weren’t raked to her liking.”

My throat burns with a sob.

“And this one?” I ask when I find another.

“The whip.”

Another.

“Her belt.”

Another.

“Her heel.”

My breath stutters out of me, my shoulders quaking.

Kieran wraps his arms around me, drawing me into his naked body. “Shh.” He presses a kiss to my temple. “This is why I didn’t want to—”

I pull back from him, imploring him with my gaze to hear me. “I said I can handle it, and I can. I can carry your heaviness, Kieran. I can carry your pain and suffering, but do not ask me not to mourn the childhood that was robbed from you. What you went through is horrible and I want to feel every ounce of hatred and hurt for what that god-awful devil of a woman did to you.” Lifting my hand to his face, I catch a tear that rolls down his cheek with my thumb. “Let me be sad for the little boy that didn’t get the love he deserved.” I’m quiet for a moment, allowing my words to sink before I ask, “Did you ever report her?”

A thousand thoughts fly behind his eyes, his turmoil evident. “No.”

“You could still report her. She shouldn’t be running the foster home, Kieran. Someone like that should never be allowed near children.”

“I know but…” He shrugs. “I always thought if I did, the foster home would be shut down and those children wouldn’t have a home.”

“Why would you think that?” I ask gently.

They’d find a replacement surely, but I’m careful with my words. His knee-jerk reaction, saying no to reporting her, is no doubt from the years of abuse. She probably instilled fear within him that he doesn’t even realize is still there.

He frowns. “Well, because she…because…”

Letting Kieran sit with his thoughts for a moment, I just wait patiently, let my presence comfort him. Allow him to play with the strands of my hair, allow him to gaze into my eyes and see the openness waiting there for him, the willingness to fight for him when no one else did.

He’s kept these secrets close to his chest for so long. I’m not going to push him to do anything he doesn’t want to do, but I will champion him.

Blowing out a breath, Kieran squeezes his eyes shut before forcing them open. “I guess a part of me knew that her abuse wasn’t the worst.”

My brows furrow. “What do you mean?”

His fingers fiddle with my hair, his knee bouncing.

“Kieran?” I probe gently.

“Just that…what she did to me wasn’t the worst thing that happened to me.”

I stop breathing.

“What was?” I hear myself ask, but I’m so fearful of the answer a part of my heart floats away, protecting itself for what I know is about to be a death blow.

Kieran avoids my gaze. “I-I can’t. You won’t be able to look at me the same. It’s not…right.”

Now my heart really is breaking.

“Kieran, I know who you are. You are kind, smart, talented, sweet beyond measure, and have the purest soul I’ve ever seen. Nothing you could ever tell me would change my mind.”

“No, you don’t get it. This…” He swallows and I swear it looks like he’s about to be sick. “It’s wrong, Layla. You’ll think I’m…dirty.”

Sitting up on my knees, I gently cup his cheeks, forcing his eyes to mine. My heart rises in my throat at the silver filling his eyes. “You are not dirty.”

My words are gentle but hold every ounce of conviction I can muster into them because I know. Something deep within me just *knows*. I can’t explain it, but I don’t even need Kieran to say it. It takes everything in me not to vomit right here and now.

“H-he, um…my mom…her friend—” His words cut off as he sits up, suddenly unable to breath. He’s clutching his chest, hand shaking.

The movement exposes him. I quickly lay the blanket back over him, knowing the last thing he needs right now is to be vulnerable while talking about it.

I run my hand through his hair toward the nape of his neck, feeling the sweat glistening on his skin. “In for four, baby. Deep breath, just breathe with me. It’s okay, you’re safe now.”

He shakes his head, blinking furiously, and the horror that’s etched across his face has tears rolling down my cheeks despite me knowing he needs my strength right now.

Clearing my throat, I urge him again. “Through your nose, baby, that’s it. One, two, three, four, and hold it.” I hold it with him, never dropping my gaze from his before I blow it out slowly, Kieran mirroring me.

“H-he—”

I shake my head now, knowing he might never be able to say the words without panic making him choke.

“It’s okay, baby,” I whisper, rubbing soothing circles with my thumb on his nape. “You don’t have to say it, Kieran. I know.” I take a shuddering breath with him, letting Kieran see the utter devastation wracking my body as I repeat. “I know.”

This is why Kieran was so upset about Emmy’s injustice, by the injustice to all victims.

Because they very rarely get it.

Even if they do, the people who are hurt are left like this, paralyzed by their fear and trauma, the heinous crimes irreversibly altering their brain.

No amount of justice will ever erase the act.

Tears pour freely down Kieran’s cheek. He’s nodding his head, imploring with his eyes everything he wants to say and yet physically can’t.

Leaning forward, he rests his forehead against mine and breathes in deeply, clutching my hand instead of his chest now.

“That’s it, Kieran. Keep breathing, baby. I’ve got you.”

It takes thirty minutes for Kieran to speak again.

“Do they happen often?” I ask as I hand him a glass of water. He’s in clothes now, his comfort set. I knew he needed to feel as safe and comfortable as possible the moment he was somewhat breathing normally again.

I’ve never seen someone so grateful to be handed a pair of sweatpants and a hoodie.

“They happened a lot during school. I thought I had a handle on them but they started up again recently.”

“Because of Emmy?”

He cocks his head side to side. “Yes and no. I mean, obviously everything that Emmy went through was triggering, stirred up a lot of my own memories, but it’s been cathartic to give her everything I wanted.” He sighs heavily, avoiding my eye. “If I’m honest, a lot was stirred up because I didn’t feel good enough for you.”

Guilt slams through me. “Kieran, you’re more than good enough. Me pushing you away was never about you. I was terrified because you don’t deserve my baggage.”

“Baggage? Layla, you don’t have baggage.”

“You’re getting to know me during a time when I’m healthier, but that doesn’t mean I don’t still have lupus. I’ll always have it, and to date someone with an illness like mine is a constant rollercoaster. I didn’t want to subject you to that.”

Kieran places his glass down, only to pick up my hands. “Then we ride it together. Every rollercoaster has a free seat beside it.”

Snorting at his analogy, his earnest smile makes me laugh. “Well it’s good to know I have a ride partner.”

“For life.”

My cheeks heat.

Running his fingers through his hair, Kieran sighs. “About the matron… I feel like I should explain why I haven’t reported her. Honestly, the fact I didn’t haunts me every day, because I’m no better than her. I know the abuse continued when I left, and I allowed it to continue.”

“You weren’t the only one to stay silent, Kieran,” I whisper.

He nods, his eyes taking on a faraway look.

“She…” His low voice, the timidness, breaks my heart. “She said everyone would become homeless if I told…if any of us told. She said no one wanted us, that no one loved us, and this was all we had.” He closes his eyes, grimacing. “I locked it away so thoroughly I forgot why I never decided to tell someone.” He shakes his head. “I should have told someone sooner. I should have done something. The amount of children—”

At seeing the panic starting up once again, I gently grab his cheeks. “Baby, look at me.”

His eyes fly open.

“*She* is the abuser. The pain she caused you and others lies fully in her hands.” His lips part, but I cut him off. “You were abused for years, Kieran. That’s a hard thing to shake and stand up to. Most people never confront their abusers, and they shouldn’t have to. The school, other parents—the adults in your life should have seen the signs and helped.”

Leaning forward, I kiss him, my heart aching and needing to soothe his pain. I lay my forehead on his, whispering, “All that matters is what you do moving forward and what’s best for you. Whether that’s talking to someone or not.”

“It would be the right thing to tell someone, though.”

I’m quiet for a moment, not wanting to push him, but I can’t *not* think of those children, of how many others she has hurt over the years and is no doubt still hurting. I imagine she’s older now, but words and emotional manipulation can harm just as strongly, if not more, than physical abuse.

Physical abuse bears the scars; you can see them and watch them heal. But with mental abuse, some of the scars are buried so deep and ingrained so thoroughly in your mind you’ll never find them.

“What’s the worst that could happen if you report her?” I ask.

He chews on his lip. “The foster home would be shut down.”

“Would it, though? Isn’t the state required to replace her?”

“I’m not sure.” Rubbing a hand down his face, he whispers, “Can we maybe take a break from this? I feel…raw.”

“Of course!” Leaning over, I grab the TV remote, instinctively binging up *Gilmore Girls*. “All on your own time, Kieran. I’ll never force you to do or speak about anything.” The intro fills the living room as I snuggle into his side.

A kiss lands on top of my head. “I have no idea what I did to deserve you.”

“You simply exist, Kieran, and that’s more than enough.”

“Speaking of being more than enough.” Turning my head to the side as he pauses, once our gazes lock and hold he continues. “Have you given anymore thought to Bella illustrating one of your children books?”

“Nice change of subject,” I say pointedly.

“Nice deflection.”

Pursing my lips at the stubborn gleam in his eye, I know without a shadow of a doubt he won’t drop the subject.

I turn back to the TV with a shrug. “Writing children’s books are a dream, one so far off I—”

“But it’s not far off, it’s within your grasp Layla.”

“Ooh you called me by my first name, this must mean serious business.”

His fingers tuck a lock of hair behind my ear. “Your dreams are serious. I just don’t know why you don’t consider it.”

Biting my bottom lip I relent. “I will, okay?”

“Are you saying that just to shut me up?”

Peering at him out of the corner of my eye I can’t help but smile. “Maybe?”

Kieran’s sigh is weary as he wraps an arm behind me. “One thing about me that you should know by now sunshine, especially after how many unanswered text messages I sent you, is that once I get an idea in my head I’m like a dog with a bone.”

“Hmm.” I hum. “So I was right when I first met you, you are no better than a dog.”

Kieran leans forward with a smile, his lips brushing mine as his fingers find my waist and begin to tickle. “You’re going to pay for that sunshine,”

he teases.

He muffles my cries with his tongue as he keeps up his relentless tickling, *Gilmore Girls* long forgotten.

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Chapter 46

Kieran

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

why the hell were you in my house again

do you keep forgetting that I have a Ring camera?

KIERAN

this text message is not very neighborly of you

I needed to borrow something

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

you walked out with your hand shoved in a box of my cereal

KIERAN

yeah the thing I'm borrowing was in my pocket

the cereal was just there

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

Bella put it in a locked box, the cereal wasn't just "there"

KIERAN

;) tell her to pick a better code than your birthday then

Tiptoeing into a room without waking someone, I've come to learn, is an art, a form which I feel I can confidently say I've mastered after sneaking into Emmy's room to make sure she's all right. My newly

acquired skill comes in handy this morning as I slowly slide the tray table onto my side of the bed.

When I'm confident it's far enough away that if Layla rolls over she won't knock the tea to the ground, I smile down at her sleeping form.

She's tired, has been for a few weeks now. She thinks I don't notice but I do. I know that she probably thinks if she's honest with me about how she's feeling I'll ask her to take a step back with Emmy, or perhaps it has nothing to do with me at all and she's scared that the medication might not be working anymore.

But I've noticed. I always notice everything about her.

I don't think she's fully flaring but something isn't right. She's more lethargic than normal and I've spotted her rubbing her hands and knees from aches when she thinks I'm not looking.

I've researched enough about lupus to know that her body is showing the signs of arthritis-like symptoms and that the lethargy is "normal." If you ask me, nothing is normal about the disease. I couldn't imagine my own body fighting me, couldn't imagine feeling bone-tired to do the most mundane of tasks.

Layla is the strongest woman I know, and that's why she deserves to sleep in.

I place a featherlight kiss on her forehead before leaving and closing the door, a smile on my lips as I imagine her face when she wakes up to the breakfast I made for her, the tea, and the new book I bought that she recently added to her wishlist. Yes of course I know she has an app to track everything, and I most certainly have notifications on so I get updates of what she wants.

I wrote a letter as well, nothing long but not too short either, just explaining that I'm taking Emmy out for a daddy-daughter morning and that she deserves to sleep. Perhaps I also signed it that I love her as well.

It felt surreal writing that.

I love you, Layla Carson. With everything that I am, I love you.

And she's going to read it and not run from me. She loves me back.

Layla loves me.

Last night still feels like a fever dream. Putting the outstanding, life-altering, mind-shattering sex aside—because yes, it really was that good—to hear her say that she loves me, to hear those words come from the

woman I've dreamed of for nearly two years, fulfilled every fantasy I've ever had.

I love you, Kieran Ashford.

I thought I'd only hear her say that in my fantasies, but I saw the way she looked at me when she said it, she had finally lowered that wall around her heart, had let the vulnerability coursing through her to shine in her eyes, and had laid her heart bare for me.

I've taken the gift she's given me and will savor it, protect it, until my dying breath, and even then I'll stand guard of Layla's heart as a ghost, because I can't see myself ever growing tired of her. She is a soul that I will search for in every lifetime, one that I will cherish and love for eternity because she's special, so incredibly special. I know she's the one.

Opening Emmy's door, I come to a stop as I spot her looking in the mirror, turning this way and that, assessing the clothes she chose for herself. It may be mismatched but it's all her—a pink ballet-like bodysuit with a rainbow tutu, layered with a denim jacket.

She must love what she sees because she smiles at herself. Her dimples, matching my own, pop out as she grins.

I'm about to step forward and praise her, always praising her, but I hold myself back as she leans forward and cups her hand, whispering to herself in the mirror, "Don't worry, Daddy won't scream at you that you're ugly. He's not like Mommy."

The happiness that was coursing though my bloodstream comes to such an abrupt halt I don't think it's circulating to my heart any longer. It certainly isn't beating.

Before I can wipe my horrified expression off my face, Emmy's honey-brown eyes dart up, spotting me in the doorway. She spins, holding her little hand to her chest in panic.

"It's okay, munchkin," I quickly assure her. "I talk to myself too. It's normal."

My words do nothing. Instead, Emmy's lip starts to quiver, tears springing to her eyes.

Rushing forward, I kneel before her, laying my hands gently on her arms. "Oh sweetheart, I promise it's okay. Why are you upset? Did I startle you? I'm sorry, I should start knocking, huh?"

Her tears slide down her cheeks and across her lips, but they still don't move to talk.

“Munchkin, I’m sorry, I really didn’t mean to scare you. I promise it’s okay to talk to yourself. I do it all the time. In fact, we should do it together.”

Her gaze turns assessing, disbelieving.

Lifting her up, I take a seat in front of the mirror, placing her in my lap so we’re staring at each other, her little nose red from crying. Maybe I embarrassed her or perhaps she didn’t want me to know that her mom called her ugly. Whatever it is, I will do anything to put that smile back on her face. I refuse to be the one to make my daughter cry—*ever*.

She might come to me crying about what others have done to her, but never in her life will she go to others crying about what I’ve done to her.

I quickly place a kiss on her head and wrap my arms around her, trying to comfort her.

“Every morning I stand in the mirror and look at myself and say, I am strong, I am kind, I am smart, I am handsome”—her lips twitch—“and I am powerful.” Squeezing her a little, my smile genuine as I spot the tears beginning to dry, I go on. “And now we can do it together, every morning if you want.”

Pointing at her in the mirror, I say gently, “Look at yourself and say it with me, Emmy. I am strong.”

I pause, waiting for her to follow, and my heart skips a beat at her hesitant voice.

“I-I am strong.”

“I am kind,” I coax.

“I am kind.”

My smile spreads at her soft voice. “I am smart.”

“I am smart.

“I am *beautiful*,” I say with a little flourish.

She giggles, her hand cupping her mouth. “I am beautiful.”

I whip my arm out beside me, fist pumping the air. “I am powerful!”

Her little fist springs upwards. “I am powerful!”

Her cheeks are growing rosy from smiling.

“I am good enough,” I all but choke out, my voice thick. Perhaps I need to take my own advice.

Emmy’s smile is infectious. “I am good enough.”

“I am loved.” Her eyes fly to mine, and for some reason, I feel the need to repeat myself. “You are so loved, Emmy.”

Biting her lip, she swings her eyes back to herself in the mirror and whispers, “I am loved.”

“So very loved,” I remind her before kissing her cheek. “So loved, in fact, we’re going out today.”

Her eyes widen as she scrambles off my lap. Even with my butt on the floor and her standing, that only brings us to eye level.

“We’re having a daddy-daughter day,” I declare.

Surprise thunders through me as she rolls her eyes.

Gasping dramatically, I tickle her stomach, her squeals of happiness music to my ears. “Did you just roll your eyes at me, Miss Emmy?”

“Y-yes,” she stutters through her laughter.

“And where did you learn that little move?”

“Layla rolls her eyes at you all the time.”

“She’s going to have a field day when I tell her about this,” I murmur to myself. “Well, what did I do to deserve the eye roll, missy?”

“It’s daddy-daughter day every day!”

And doesn’t that just melt my heart.

“Of course it is, because I love spending time with you. You’re my favorite person to hang out with.”

Her eyes widen, her giggles from the tickles long-forgotten as she whispers, “I am?”

“Of course!”

“What about Layla?”

Leaning forward, I whisper conspiratorially, “I love Layla, but you are my number one girl.”

Her eyes widen even farther before she flings forward, wrapping her arms around my neck.

“What do you say, munchkin? Ready to go shopping?”

“Hell yes!”

Biting my lip to stop myself from laughing, I make a mental note to stop saying *hell* around the house.

Four months ago, if I told myself I'd be driving back from spending the day shopping with Emmy and that she spent the entire time yapping my ear off, I wouldn't have believed myself. For one, I wouldn't have believed she was a talker, and second, I wouldn't have believed that in such a short amount of time she'd come out of her shell like she has, but here we are.

And I'm fucking loving every moment of it.

Just the mere knowledge that Emmy trusts me enough, that I've made her feel comfortable to talk, has my heart melting. It means I'm a good father.

"Daddy?"

I flick my gaze to the rearview mirror, the new Barbie doll I bought sitting clutched in Emmy's hand.

"Yes, munchkin?"

"I like living with you." She's looking out the window like she isn't turning me into a blubbering mess. "I'm not scared anymore."

I sniffle, trying to blink away the emotions. "I'm glad, sweetheart. I never want you to be scared again, not in your home."

She nods along, her eyes watching everything pass by us on the highway.

I quickly wipe away the tear that escapes. "I love that you live with me. It's made me very happy, Emmy."

"It has?" She looks at me now, our eyes locking in the rearview mirror.

I nod, not trusting myself to talk right now without choking on my emotions, and give her a watery smile.

"Layla, too," she adds. "I love Layla."

"Me too, munchkin, me too."

"Why can't Layla be my mommy?"

Fuck me.

Taking a deep breath, I pause to try and think this through. What the hell do I say to that?

"You really want her to be your mommy, don't you?"

She nods emphatically. "She's the bestest."

"She is the best. She's very sweet."

"Nice, too. She plays with me." Her voice grows quiet. "And she doesn't scream at me or lock me in the closet." Her little sniffles make me want to pull the car over. "My mommy wasn't a nice one, was she?"

“No, sweetheart, she wasn’t.”

Some might not agree with me here, that I didn’t try and put a positive spin on her mother; the last thing I want to teach my daughter is that people who love you can sometimes hurt you. If someone loves you—truly loves you—they won’t hurt you, and there is not a reality in which I will ever teach her to accept poor behavior from anyone.

My daughter will know that love is soft, kind, and uplifting. That the one who loves you is never meant to lay a finger on you out of anger. They say kind not hurtful words, they lift you up not tear you down and most importantly, love is not pain.

Arguments can occur of course, different opinions and beliefs, yet she will know that those can be had respectfully.

“Why was she mean?” Emmy suddenly asks me.

Heaving out a breath, I can’t help but shrug. “There are very mean people in the world, Emmy. I wish I could tell you there aren’t but there are, and I’m not sure why.”

Frowning, she says with utter conviction, “I will never be a meanie.”

“No, you’re not capable of it. Your heart is pure.”

“P-pure?” she says, as if tasting the word.

“Pure,” I confirm. “Your heart is very kind, Emmy. You’re a good person, and you would never go out of your way to be mean or hurt someone.”

“I don’t want to make people cry like my mommy made me cry.”

“I know, sweetheart. That’s why you have a good heart.”

“Maybe if I be really good, Layla can be my new mommy.”

My eyes widen, my hand fisting on the wheel. How the fuck do I explain to a near four-year-old that it actually depends on me? That it depends on me being a good enough partner that will make Layla want to continue to date me?

Because trust me, I’ve thought about it. I’ve thought about marrying her, about making it official, about Layla adopting Emmy if she wanted to. I’ve thought about all of it because I want Layla to be a part of our family. I want to be a husband to her.

I want to be *everything* to Layla.

“Emmy, you are already enough, sweetheart.” Flicking my blinker on, I pull over, needing to face her fully for this. I unbuckle my seat belt and turn in my chair. “You don’t need to change anything about yourself. Layla

loves you as you are, and whether you call her Mommy or not, she is your family because she loves you."

"She's family?"

Nodding, I explain, "Uncle Grayson is family. Grandma Allie and Grandpa Carlton are family."

"Auntie Bella!" she squeals.

"Exactly! Even Uncle Irving is family. Family doesn't mean blood, and we don't have to call people titles like Mommy to know that they love us like family."

She's nodding her head as if she understands but I know this concept might be too hard to grasp at her age but all she needs to know is that she is loved dearly by everyone in her life.

Cocking her head, she frowns. "Can I call Lil Auntie?"

My lip twitches at the nickname she picked up from Bella.

Shrugging, I say, "If you want to. It doesn't change how much she already loves you."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

She smiles. "You love me, Daddy?"

Mirroring her smile, our matching dimples shine bright at one another. "With my entire heart."

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Chapter 47

Layla

SEXY BOYFRIEND

hello hello sexy fuckers

BELLA

ew

GRAYSON

don’t call my girlfriend sexy you weirdo

SEXY BOYFRIEND

okay fine you ugly weirdos, listen up and go take your sexting into another text thread

Emmy wants you all to come trick-or-treating with us tonight

GRAYSON

HELL YES

BELLA

YAY! I’ve got a costume for Bambi already

why don’t you all come over here beforehand? I’ll cook us dinner

SEXY BOYFRIEND

will there be muffins?

GRAYSON

for me, her boyfriend, not you, you ugly toad

SEXY BOYFRIEND

first of all, you and I both know I’m not ugly you jealous twat

and second, you can learn to share

GRAYSON

I’m not jealous

Bella thinks I’m sexy and that’s all that matters

BELLA

I made brownies

SEXY BOYFRIEND

FUCK YES

we’ll be there

GRAYSON

put some aside so he doesn’t eat them all

SEXY BOYFRIEND

you know I’ll sniff them out

LAYLA

Like the dog you are

BELLA

HAHAHAHAHA

Rolling my eyes at the apparent name change Kieran no doubt did while I was asleep, I can’t help but chuckle. We haven’t even had a conversation about what we are or labels and he’s gone ahead and decided that. We honestly should talk about it, but it seems we went about things backwards.

I don’t mind it, knowing that he wants labels. He said he loves me, and my god did that make my heart soar, but there is a part of me that wants to feel reassured that he truly wants to commit to me.

I need to hear it.

Although Kieran has certainly been showing how much he cares for me through actions. I’m almost glad he wasn’t here this morning to watch me get teary-eyed over his kindness.

Kieran amazes me, every single time.

When I saw the book I had been eyeing sitting beside me, along with his thoughtful note and delicious waffles under the stainless-steel food cover, my heart melted into a puddle.

And, surprisingly, ached with guilt, because how in the world had I ever thought that Kieran only ever saw me as a challenge?

Sending a photo of what he did to the girls, minus the note because they're nosy enough to zoom in, they squeal right alongside me over how sweet he is. Then I proceed to spend hours reading.

I'm more than halfway through the book he bought me, curled up on his living room sofa, when the front door opens and he comes strutting through. The moment he lays eyes on me, his lips tip up into a grin.

"Fuck do you look good on my couch."

My cheeks flush crimson at the blatant heat in his gaze. I look behind him as he kicks the door shut.

"Where's Emmy?"

"Grayson called me demanding I bring his niece over." His long strides quickly eat up the distance between us. "It's just the two of us for the next couple of hours."

My brow arches. "How lovely."

Bending, he lays his forearms on the back of the couch and leans forward. The book in my hands drops as he welcomes me with a kiss.

A really fucking good kiss.

A kiss that sears my blood, that zaps me with electricity.

I hope that feeling never stops.

Pulling back, his eyes flutter open at the same time mine do.

"Hi," he whispers.

"Hi."

"I missed you."

Swallowing thickly, I admit, "I missed you too."

He juts his chin at the book I dropped. "Any good?"

"It's amazing. I haven't been able to put it down."

"Any guesses?"

I cock my head from side to side. "I think the prince is actually the villain. Nothing's hinted to it, but I have a feeling there's going to be a plot twist and the betrayal is going to hurt."

Tucking a lock of hair behind my ear, he playfully tugs my ponytail. "Can you pry yourself away from it for a little while?"

My smile immediately blooms. “What do you have in mind?”

His chuckle is dark as his eyes seem to blaze. “Fuck, you’re trouble. As much as I want a repeat of last night and trust me, there absolutely will be one, I think we should talk.”

My heart sinks to my stomach and it must show on my face.

Reaching out, Kieran brushes his fingers across my cheek, delicately, as if I’m precious. “Nothing bad, sunshine, I promise. I’ve just had to wade through a tricky conversation with Emmy. I think she’s noticing how close we are.”

I’m afraid to admit to myself how hard my heart is pounding, how much panic filled my body at the thought that Kieran was going to…*I’m so silly*. I was just thinking about how well he’s treating me. I don’t know why I don’t fully trust that he won’t hurt me.

Maybe because as much of a whirlwind it is to fall in love with Kieran Ashford, it’s just as terrifying to know that I’ll never feel this way about anyone else.

How funny that the thing I’ve been trying to push away is now the thing I want to cling on to for dear life and dread ever losing.

Nodding, I place my bookmark in my spot—once I find my page again after dropping it from that kiss—and follow Kieran out onto the back patio.

Instead of taking a seat on the outdoor patio furniture he bought a few weeks ago, he sits down on the stairs leading to the yard. Sitting beside him, Kieran spreads his legs until his knee touches mine, as if he always has to be touching me in some capacity.

Blowing out a breath, Kieran goes on to relay the conversation he had with Emmy in the car. I can’t help but feel equal parts honored and yet sad that Emmy is in the position to be asking for a *nice* mommy.

I look out over the backyard, at the life that Kieran built with his bare hands for Emmy. I can feel his eyes searing a hole into the side of my face.

“I don’t want to hide that I love you,” he says suddenly.

At the gravity of his tone, I turn to him now, finding that I’m unable to look away.

“I don’t want to hide how much I care for you from Emmy, but I’m also terrified that I’m going to fully embrace you into both of our lives and hearts, only for you to leave one day.”

Kieran lays it all bare, fear etched across his face. It sucker punchers me.

“When I said I love you, Kieran, I meant it. I cannot fathom walking away, not from you and certainly not from that little girl.”

“What if I fuck it up, though?”

I decide to lead with honesty, because Kieran deserves that much, especially when he’s holding his heart out to me. “The only thing I’m concerned about is your commitment to me.” At his frown, I plow forward. “I think a part of me is still scared about dragging you into the mess of my health. I, um…haven’t been that transparent about how I’ve been feeling recently.”

Kieran’s lips twitch. “I know.”

“You know?” I ask dubiously.

“Not sure if you’ve noticed but I’m very good at reading people.”

I push his shoulder playfully. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I wanted you to come to me. I didn’t want to push you on this.”

“Well, I’ve been feeling more lethargic than I usually am. They’ve run a lot of tests, and as per usual, no one can tell me what’s wrong.” My bottom lip trembles. “And I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t scared I’m seriously relapsing. You have so much going on in your life, I don’t want to drop my problems in your lap on top of that.”

“But I want you to, Layla. I don’t think you’re aware of how much I love you. It’s practically an obsession.”

I snort.

“I’m serious. You’re the first thing I think about when I wake up and the last thing on my mind before I fall asleep. I constantly wonder about what will make you happy and how I can show you how much I care.” As he runs his fingers through his hair, the tattoos along his forearms ripple with the muscle beneath it. “I’ve never opened up to someone like I have to you. It terrifies me how much I love you.”

“It does?” I breathe.

“I have nightmares that you’ll wake up one day and realize I’m nothing special and leave.”

“That won’t happen,” I promise.

Swallowing thickly, he whispers, “What if it does, though? What if we show Emmy how beautiful love can be, only for it to implode in our faces down the line?”

“I don’t think that will happen.”

“You sound sure of yourself.”

“No, I’m just sure about you,” I say honestly. “You’re too stubborn to let it fail.”

Kieran’s head falls back on a deep belly laugh. It’s so contagious I have to join him. “That, sunshine, is very true.”

Reaching over, I run my fingers through his hair toward the nape of his neck, my thumb brushing along his smooth skin. “I see you, Kieran. I see the gold in your heart, the kindness in your words, the humor in your personality, and even your strength through the struggles life handed you. I see it all, and I love every inch of it. I don’t plan to go anywhere anytime soon.” Giving him a watery smile, I savor the love pouring from his eyes as I whisper honestly, “It would crush me to walk away from you.”

Kieran doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t have to, not as he leans forward, clasping my jaw and capturing my lips, pouring everything into it with such passion it makes my heart skip a beat.

Resting his forehead against mine he rips his lips away as he heaves, “I love you so much it’s hard to breathe sometimes.”

Smiling to myself I lean forward and place another gentle kiss against his lips. He pulls back, though he doesn’t let go of his gentle hold on my cheeks, his thumbs rubbing back and forth. “You’re making me the happiest man on earth.”

Quirking my brow, I tease, “You have to ask me first.”

Standing suddenly, Kieran steps down on the grass, his eyes dancing with mischief, and I’m unsure as to why until he drops to one knee.

Screaming, I launch myself at him, smacking my hand over his mouth as I tackle us to the floor. I knock the wind from him but he bounces back fast, laughing behind my hand.

I smack his shoulder, going to move off him as I scold, “That’s not funny!”

Kieran locks his arms around my middle, keeping me firmly on top of him as he chuckles. “Was extremely funny from where I was kneeling.”

My eyes flash. “You insufferable idiot.”

“An idiot you love.”

“An idiot all the same. That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“I know, sunshine, but you best belief I’ll put a rock on that finger of yours.”

My cheeks heat but my tongue moves on its own. “You have to ask me to be your girlfriend first.”

His brow cocks. “Do I? We’ve done things so out of order, we can do whatever we want now.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Kieran.”

“Layla,” he sings.

Groaning, I try to push off him, only for Kieran’s deep laughter to trickle along my skin as he quickly spins, pinning me to the floor. His smile is so radiant and dashing it steals my breath.

He dips his head, capturing my lips for far too short an amount of time before he pulls back and whispers, “Layla Carson, will you do me the honor of being my girlfriend?”

I couldn’t hold back my smile even if I tried. “Yes.” The word is barely out of mouth before Kieran is kissing me again.

An hour later, along with a few grass stains on various limbs and a christened patch of Kieran’s backyard, we’re lying on our backs, Kieran’s arm beneath my head as I follow the various tattoo designs along his skin and kissing every scar I find.

“Would you ever want to be Emmy’s mom?”

I answer straight from my heart. “It would be an honor.”

“Do you want to have kids of your own?”

I smile. “I never knew if I could have them with how sick I was, and I definitely wouldn’t have been able to take care of a child if nothing improved. I forgot about my dream to have a family a long time ago, but working with Emmy has made me want them so badly.”

“She’s special, isn’t she?” he whispers, smiling to himself.

“Very special. What about you?”

“I want to have a large family, one with a lot of light and laughter in the home.” Turning his head to me, he places a kiss on my cheek. “We should get going. Grayson and Bella are probably wondering where we are.”

As he stands, offering his hand to me, he walks me up the patio steps, his hand resting on my lower back, and I’m not sure what persuades me to

do it but before he can open the back door I stop him, tipping my head up to face him.

“Please don’t break my heart.”

“Never in my wildest dreams, sunshine.” He kisses me, soft and languid, before pulling back. “I’d rather rip out my own heart than ever hurt yours.”

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Chapter 48

Kieran

ICEHAWKS BITCHES

IRVING

umm why the fuck weren't we invited to trick-or-treating?

KIERAN

because you don't have a kid?

IRVING

pfft rude

Grayson and Bella don't have a kid

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

yet

JOHNSON

Irving probably does have one running around out there

IRVING

I WRAP UP THANK YOU VERY MUCH

JOHNSON

so did Ashford and look where he's at

LEWIS

imagine a little Irving

MITCHEL

way to make a man shudder

I’m going to have nightmares now

JOHNSON

HAHAHAHAHA

IRVING

fucking rude

MITCHEL

once you learn to flush your own shit I won’t be terrified

IRVING

THAT WAS ONE TIME

ONE TIME DUDE

LEWIS

he’s got you there Irving

IRVING

so much for being best friends

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

no friendships ending in the group chat

go make up

IRVING

aye aye spider monkey

Wiping my mouth on a napkin, I laugh in unison with Grayson, who’s reading the same text thread I am. Fucking Irving and his shenanigans.

Bella pauses whatever she was saying to Layla and turns to us. “Do I even want to know?”

“Irving,” Grayson says around a laugh.

And that’s certainly enough for Bella to understand. Layla pouts. “I feel left out.”

Grayson’s eyes widen. “You haven’t shown her the IceHawks group chat? Dude, you’re robbing the woman of some serious comedy.”

A teasing smile dances along her lips as she cocks a brow at me. “Yeah Ashford, why haven’t you blessed me with your boys’ chat?”

I arch my brow right back. “How come you haven’t blessed me with your girls’ chat?”

Bella gasps across the table. “That’s sacrilegious.”

Layla doubles down. “You heard her.”

Emmy pops up from where she was sitting with Bambi on the patio and runs down the stairs into Grayson’s backyard, Bambi hot on her heels, as they wind through the trees.

Wrapping a hand around one of Layla’s chair arms, I pull her closer to me, savoring the way her eyes widen. I lean down, brushing my lips across the shell of her ear and whispering, “You’ll have to trade me a life list item for the group chat.”

With one glance across the table, I note Grayson and Bella are too engrossed with each other to see the way Layla’s cheeks flush.

“Deal,” she breathes.

“Make it two.”

“Greedy.”

“Always for you.”

She moves back enough to meet my gaze. “How far back can I go?”

“A year and eleven months.”

“That’s very specific.”

“That’s when I met you.”

Her eyes flash. “Is that so?”

“Mm-hmm. That’s when the obsession started.”

She rolls her eyes. “You were not obsessed.”

“I sent you multiple texts a day for over a year…without a response.”

“He’s absolutely obsessed,” Bella chimes in, apparently not totally engrossed.

Pulling back, I flash her a smile. “Thanks, B.”

She raises her glass of soda. “Yep.”

Grayson claps his hands. “We should get going. The community group page said most trick-or-treating starts at six thirty.”

Bella’s nose wrinkles. “There’s a community page?”

“Yes, Blaze.”

“Huh.”

Layla gasps. “Oh no! I don’t have a costume.” Turning to Bella, she asks, “Do you have a spare somewhere?”

At the gleeful look Bella gives her, Layla's brows pull down into a frown. "What am I missing?"

Bella jerks her chin in my direction. "Lover boy over there has it sorted."

"You love how whipped I am for your best friend, don't you?"

"Absolutely, are you kidding? It's amazing watching you fall all over her."

Sputtering out a laugh, I head down to the yard to grab Emmy, coaxing her away from Bambi with, of course, a bribe. Although she's so excited to wear a matching costume with Layla it really doesn't take all that much convincing. She and Bambi rush into the house like a tornado.

I come to a stop at the back doors, my lips twitching as Layla eyes me cautiously.

"So, where's this supposed costume?"

I'm still pissing myself laughing two hours later as I watch Layla, holding Emmy's hand, walk up the next cobbled driveway. Wiping tears from the corner of my eyes, I open my phone and hit record, just as Emmy's little form, bundled in a white ghost sheet, holds out her orange pumpkin-shaped bucket, Layla singing, "Trick-or-treat!" in a Ghostbusters costume.

Waving in their direction, I grin over at my best friend. "Have you seen a better costume?"

"I may be biased but mine and Bella's was great."

"This far outweighs *Ratatouille*."

Grayson's gaze lifts to Layla and Emmy making their way back over to us. "Yeah, fair point."

Emmy comes running, her adorable little face alight with happiness as she holds the bucket up to me. "Daddy! Daddy! Look at the candy!"

Now my eyes are filling with unshed tears for another reason entirely.

I wrap an arm around her waist, my smile mirroring hers as I take a peek inside. I pull back, gasping dramatically. "No way!" I look from

Emmy to Layla before dropping my head and whispering, “She gave you three chocolate bars?”

Emmy smacks a hand over her lips and giggles before nodding.

Layla places her hands on her hips. “Apparently Mrs. Bryer is a big Ghostbusters fan, isn’t that right, Emmy?”

Her eyes widen. “Yes!” She steps forward, cupping her hand around my ear and adds, “She said she loves ghosts.”

I gasp again. “She loves ghosts?”

I didn’t think it was possible but her eyes widen even more. “Mm-hmm!” Before I know it, she’s jumping up and down on her toes. “More candy, Daddy! More candy!”

Chuckling to myself, I stand, lifting my eyes to Layla’s. “Okay, one more house.”

With her hand in mine, Emmy spins, holding out her free one with the bucket on her wrist to Layla. She doesn’t even hesitate, doesn’t bat an eye; she simply takes Emmy’s hand in hers and walks with me to the next house, Grayson and Bella strolling behind us.

“We make a pretty good team.”

“I suppose we do,” she says.

Wagging my brows, I tease, “And how do you think I did on our first family costume?”

Layla’s smile is infectious. “Ten out of ten, Ashford. I don’t know how you’ll top this next year.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I have a list on my notes app. You’re in for a lifetime of hilarious costumes.” I clear my throat. “Speaking of great ideas, you should go talk to Bella about the children’s book.”

Layla bites her lower lip as we come to a stop at the end of the next house’s driveway. Despite Emmy’s impatient tugs on our hands, I wait for Layla to say something.

Emmy doesn’t have to wait long.

“Do you think?” she asks quietly.

Happiness sparks within me that she’s finally considering it. “I know, sunshine.” Tugging Emmy from Layla, I cock my head at Bella and Grayson behind us. “Go on, I’ve got this house.”

Something flickers in her eyes, a deep emotion I can’t place before it’s gone. Stepping toward me, Layla lays her hand on my chest and lifts onto

the top of her toes, quickly planting a kiss on my cheek. “Thank you, Ashford,” she whispers.

Before I have time to snap myself out of the love haze she put me in, Layla is already walking toward Bella and Grayson is beside me, waving his phone in front of my face with a shit-eating grin.

“You’re so fucking in love it’s almost sickening.”

Squinting at the phone, I see it’s a photo, Layla kissing my cheek while I stand there with the biggest smile on my face, and more importantly, little Emmy looking up at us like we hung the moon for her.

My throat is thick with emotion. “Can you send that to me?”

“Already done,” he says, his grin still firmly in place.

Pulling out my phone, I quickly save it, then make it my phone wallpaper, and hit upload online.

Because I am madly in love and I want the entire world to know that my family is what means the most to me.

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Chapter 49

Kieran

ICEHAWKS BITCHES

MITCHEL

HOLY FUCKING SHIT

Ashford's banging the nanny

IRVING

HE MADE IT INSTAGRAM OFFICIAL

JOHNSON

another soldier down

O'CONNOR

you're well due to fall Johnson

JOHNSON

never

I plan to be a bachelor for the rest of my days

IRVING

plan or forced to be?

JOHNSON

fuck you

VALENTI

fuck yeah Ashford way to go

ELLINGTON

am I the last to know??? Why the fuck did I not notice a romance brewing???

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

pays to pull your head off a bunny's lips from time to time

IRVING

HAHAHAHAHA

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

no idea why you're laughing Irving, you could too

IRVING

I'm good with suffocation from bunnies

KIERAN

happy to announce boys

I'm in love

MITCHEL

does this mean we have another chick to worry about reading these chats?

KIERAN

absolutely

IRVING

I'm creating another one without the pussy-whipped bitches

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

do that and I'll make sure Bella doesn't let you eat another blueberry muffin

IRVING

soldier standing down

Nestling in bed with Layla in my arms, I'm about to kiss the nape of her neck when she makes a small noise, but it's not her sound of pleasure I've committed to memory. No, this sound has me scrambling upwards, the sheets tangling around my legs, my heart pounding a furious beat. Layla is doubled over, her face scrunched up in pain.

"Layla. Oh my god, Layla, what is it, sunshine? Talk to me, tell me what's wrong."

My words are a jumble of heaving breaths and panicked questions, my hands running over her hair and down her body, trying to find what's got her face twisted in agony.

"C-call Bella," she manages to stutter out.

My frown etches deeply between my brows. "I will, but Layla, please, what is it? Do you need your medication? Do I need to call an ambulance?"

Her eyes fly wide open. "No more hospitals." Gritting her teeth, she places her hand flat on the bed and tries to push herself up but gasps, a surprised sharp breath. "It's a flare-up…my bones…"

Jumping from the bed, I snatch up my phone, my thumbs already moving to dial 911, but Layla's voice cuts through the air and it's the only time I've heard such a demand in her tone. "Don't you dare call anyone but Bella. The hospital can do nothing for me. I can't mix heavy drugs with my medication. Please, trust me and call Bella."

Kneeling beside the bed, beside the love of my life, it goes against every instinct within me not to call for an ambulance, but I can see her determination and know that if I go against what she's asked of me, I'll be in for a world of hell.

I haven't lived with her disease. I don't know what works or doesn't, and I have to trust her enough that if she truly needed the hospital, she'd tell me.

But my body is tense, my fingers shaking as I hover over Bella's contact. Every inch of me is screaming to take care of her myself, to step into the role of what she needs right now.

Lifting my eyes to Layla's I find her icy blue's pleading.

"I'll message her, but Layla, please tell me what I can do. Let me take care of you." I reach out and gently lay my hands over hers that are fisting the sheet. "Please, sunshine, let me do this. I can take care of you, I promise."

She bites her bottom lip before nodding. "Okay."

I heave with relief. "They say hot water helps. I'll run a bath and when Bella gets here I'll make a juice blend of everything anti-inflammatory."

I stand so quickly I only just make out her surprise. Running to my ensuite, I turn the tap and begin running a bath. Without her needing to tell me, I bend low under the sink and take out the Epsom salt I use after hard practices or games.

Walking out of the bathroom, I quickly check the baby monitor, relief swallowing me whole when I find Emmy still sound asleep. Then I fire off a quick message to Bella, telling her to come over when she can and to use the key I gave Grayson.

Placing the phone on my nightstand, I come back to Layla, her porcelain skin paler than usual.

"Ready, sunshine?"

She nods but the motion quickly cuts off as she grits her teeth in pain.

Bending, I gently slide my hands under her body, noting how she winces every so often. "Sorry, baby," I murmur.

"It's okay."

Her voice, usually full of snark and sass, is so soft my heart aches. If I did this to her, if the rough sex made her flare up like this, I'll fucking hate myself.

"Breathe in, baby. Take a deep breath," I coax, and once she does, I lift her as slow and controlled as I can, but she still squeezes her eyes shut tightly through a wave of pain. I've never known anyone with arthritis, but if I understand it correctly, then this will be painful regardless of how gently I try to move her.

Standing in the bathroom, I look from Layla to the bath, not sure how I can get her in there without falling or hurting her.

"Fuck it." I step into the bath.

"Kieran!" she scolds.

Ignoring her, I slowly bend until I'm fully submerged in the warm water, gray sweatpants and all, with Layla in my arms. The heat vanishes from her eyes as the warmth of the water soothes her aches. She sighs, laying her head on my chest before removing her arm from around my neck and submerging her hands in the water.

I kiss the top of her head. "That's it, sunshine."

"Did you tell Bella?"

"I sent her a message. I told her to let herself in."

"Thank you," she murmurs, her eyes closing as she soaks in the warm tub.

Keeping my arms around her, I lay my chin on top of her head, not knowing if I can rub her skin or if that will hurt her more.

"Layla, did I…" My words trail off, my throat tightening, and I find I can't ask the question.

“No, not at all, Kieran. This isn’t from…” She clears her throat. “I told you I’ve been feeling off lately. I promise it’s not from yesterday.” Layla begins to sniffle, her shoulders shaking. “I just wanted to be normal. I’m tired of this. I’m so, so tired.”

Tears roll down her cheeks in waves and I wish nothing more than to hold her tighter.

“I know, baby, I’m so sorry. If I could trade places with you I would in a heartbeat.”

Layla’s breathing quickens, shifting from the breaths of someone who’s crying to something entirely different, to a breathing pattern I recognize instantly.

She shakes her head side to side. “I don’t want to do this again. I don’t want to be sick anymore!”

On the last word, the dam erupts within her and my sunshine breaks. Devastation like I’ve never seen before overpowers her, consuming her in a tidal wave of panic and sadness. Her sobs have my own tears rolling down my face.

“I-I don’t want to do this again. I *can’t* do it again.”

“Yes you can, baby. You’re strong, the strongest person I know.”

“I’m not, Kieran,” she hiccups. “I won’t be able to go through it again. I thought I was better.”

I kiss her forehead, trying to coax her through her panic. “If you can’t be strong right now, sunshine, then I’ll be strong for the both of us.” I run a hand down her hair. “I’ve got you, just let it all out, baby.”

And she does.

Gigantic heaving sobs pour from her.

“That’s it, Layla. Breathe through it, sunshine. Breathe.”

Her chest rises on a deep inhale, her first one since the tears began streaming down her freckle-covered cheeks.

“W-what if the medication stopped working? What if I got to taste feeling normal and now I have to go back to being miserable?”

I’d love to promise her that I won’t let that happen, that I’ll throw every cent and penny I have at doctors until they’re able to find something manageable for her lupus, but I know I can’t. I can’t control science.

And I don’t want to begin breaking promises to her now.

I’m saved from having to try to come up with an answer to something impossible when I hear the front door bang open downstairs, the rush of

feet running up the stairs.

“In here!” I call out. “Bella’s here, sunshine,” I whisper in her ear.

No sooner do the words leave my lips, Bella barges into the bathroom, coming to a skidding halt at the sight of us. “What the—”

Shrugging helplessly, I explain, “I didn’t know how to get her in without hurting her.”

Dropping to her knees and ignoring the water she gets on her from that, Bella reaches over and pushes Layla’s hair out of her eyes.

“Hey, B,” Layla whispers.

“Hey, Lil. I take it you’re having—”

“Don’t say it.”

“Okay.” Bella’s gaze lifts to mine before she looks at the two of us entangled in the steaming bath. “You can’t move. I’m going to go get everything I know that can help. I have a kit that I brought over—”

“You have a kit?”

Bella dips her chin. “Anti-inflammatory foods, naturopathic supplements, honestly anything to get the inflammation down and her immune system stronger.”

A look is all it takes—I need to get a kit of my own.

“I’ll also call your specialist and schedule an emergency visit.”

“Thanks, B.”

“Anytime.” Standing, Bella blows out a deep breath, steeling herself for the hours to come. “Keep the temperature high. Don’t let it go lukewarm.”

“I’ve got her, Bella.”

She pauses, her eyes zeroing in on my face, and she must find something she likes because despite the situation, she offers me a small tentative smile. “I know you do.”

Layla, now out of the bath, is somehow managing to stand despite the pain I continue to watch roll over her features.

“I can take care of Emmy,” Bella offers, looking past my shoulder into the living room where she’s cuddling with Bambi on the floor.

“No, Kieran, you should stay with Emmy. Bella can take me,” Layla says softly.

“No.”

Bella swivels to face me incredulously while Layla arches a brow. “No?”

“I want to take you, so please let me help. I’ll go out of my mind if I have to stay here and wait.”

Bella and Layla exchange a glance, a simple look that seems to hold a thousand words and an entire conversation.

“Please, Layla, let me take you,” I say again.

My chest is beginning to get that buzzing sensation, the telltale tightness of panic, and I fear that if I don’t go with her, I’ll be left here to have a panic attack. Every instinct in my body is screaming to take care of her, to help in any way I can.

I’ve never felt so useless before, utterly helpless to stop the pain from destroying her. The least I can do is take her to her specialist.

Biting her lip, Layla whispers, “Are you sure?”

I place a kiss on top of her head and whisper hoarsely, “I’m begging, sunshine. Don’t make me get on my knees and plead.”

Layla peeks behind me at Bella. “Are you sure you’re okay to—”

“I’m overdue for auntie time. I promise it’s okay. Grayson is driving to the airport to pick Allie and Carlton up right now, and the second she gets wind of this, she’ll be over here in a heartbeat.”

“She’s in town again?”

Bella nods. “They’re looking at houses this weekend.”

I go to wrap my arm around Layla but think better of it. “See, Allie will be bulldozing the situation in no time.”

That manages to make her laugh a little. “Okay, fine, let’s go.”

We’ve managed to keep Emmy preoccupied with Bambi but she’s been watching the entire interaction from her spot on the floor, her head resting on Bambi’s belly, and I know she can tell something is wrong.

“Bella, do you mind helping her in my car?” Handing over the keys to my truck, I head over to my little girl.

Her eyes watch me the entire time as I round the couch; they don’t even leave my face when the garage door opens and closes behind us. Sitting in front of her, my hand reaches out and pats Bambi behind her ear, hitting a spot that makes her groan low in her throat, like a purr.

“Auntie Bella is going to take care of you. Is that okay?”

Emmy dips her head slowly.

Blowing out a breath, I decide to go with the truth. That seems to be my parenting go-to—if all else fails, tell the truth. Maybe that can be our thing. As she gets older and no doubt into mischief, our one rule is that we tell the truth, no matter how much it might make me freak out.

“Layla isn’t feeling well right now, so I’m going to take her to the doctor.”

“Is she going to be okay?” Emmy asks as she sits up, Bambi protesting and trying to keep Emmy’s hand where it’s petting her. She does so, but her entire focus is on me.

“I hope so, munchkin. I’ll do everything I can to help her get better.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

Chewing on my lip, I try to think of the best way to explain this. “Layla has an immune system that’s mean to her.”

Emmy scrunches up her little nose. “What’s a *mune tem*?”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Emmy’s butchering of the word makes a small chuckle escape me. “Immune systems are what the body uses to protect us from diseases, like colds or a runny nose. But Layla’s is mean to her and doesn’t work properly.”

Emmy clutches her chest. “Does my *mune tem* work?”

“Yes, sweetheart, yours works and so does Daddy’s.”

A little frown overtakes her features. “But Lil is nice. Why is hers mean?”

Tucking her hair behind her ear, I say truthfully, “I wish I knew, munchkin, but I’ll take her to the doctor and try and help her, okay?”

“Okay, Daddy, you’ll fix it. You make everything good.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

Am I going to cry again?

Coughing to clear the emotion, I choke out a meek, “Thank you, sweetheart. Give me a hug before I go.”

As I wrap my arms around my daughter, I understand why Layla’s parents put themselves in debt and were planning to take out a second mortgage on their home. Because if Emmy were sick, I’d do anything to help her. I’d rip out my own heart and give it to her if I could.

I’d do anything for my girls.

“I love you, munchkin.”

“Love you, Daddy.”

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Chapter 50

Layla

MOMMA BEAR

hi sweetie, how are you doing?

is everything okay? I woke up and couldn't shake this feeling that something wasn't okay

LAYLA

Jesus

are you psychic?

MOMMA BEAR

I hope so

that would be a cooler job than the one I have

what's wrong?

can you call me?

LAYLA

I'll call you when I'm done seeing Dr. Montary

My mom's name flashes across my phone screen.

I knew I couldn't mention Dr. Montary, the woman who diagnosed me and has been my specialist ever since, without my mom freaking out. To be fair, if the roles were reversed, I'd be the same.

Sending Kieran an apologetic smile, I show him my screen, but he just waves me off. “God no, please answer. Otherwise she’ll be going out of her mind.”

Sagging with relief, I lift the phone to my ear, only to wince, my elbow aching.

Goddamnit.

“Hi Mom, you’re on speaker. Kieran is in the car with me.”

“Hi, sweetie! Hi, Kieran!”

“Hey, Momma Bear Carson.”

Her sigh is mixed with equal measures of panic and sadness. Perhaps this is why I’ve put off calling her all morning. Tears spring into my eyes and I turn my head to look out the window, trying to hide my pain from the man beside me that can read me like a book.

His warm hand lands on my leg, comforting me.

“How bad is it?” my mom asks warily. “I take it bad if you can’t hold the phone up.”

Wincing at how well my mom knows me and my illness, I clear my throat—twice. “It’s…it’s bad. I woke up this morning and couldn’t move.”

My mom sucks in a sharp intake of air. “Layla…”

“I know.”

“Oh, sweetie.” Her words taper off, and I doubt I’m the only one crying right now. “Do you want me to meet you there? Or are you okay with Kieran?”

Kieran tries to hide it, tries to hide the way his body tenses, but I swear he stops breathing.

“I’m okay with Kieran. If it’s not good I’ll have him call you, okay?”

“Okay sweetie, but please don’t hesitate. I can be there in a heartbeat if you need me.” She raises her voice, as if shouting to get her words across despite Kieran hearing her perfectly fine before. “Kieran, don’t let them gaslight her! Dr. Montary is amazing but just in case, make sure you speak up for my baby and demand the care she needs.”

“I’ll be her best spokesperson, Momma Bear, I swear on it.”

“Thank you. Keep me updated?” she asks as if I didn’t just promise her that.

She knows me well.

“Absolutely, hand to heart, I’ll keep you informed on everything.”

“Thank you, sweetie. Layla, I love you, and I promise we’ll figure this out.”

“Love you, Mom.”

We both fall silent, both of us hesitant to hang up the phone, but we’re forced to as Kieran flicks his blinker on and pulls into the parking lot. “We’re here, Mom.”

“You’ve got this, Layla. You’re strong. It worked before, it will work again.”

“Okay,” I say, but even to my own ears my voice is meek.

“I love you sweetie.”

“I love you,” I all but choke out.

I know why I’m upset. I know why my hands shake as I hit the end call button. I know why I can’t face Kieran as he parks the car and takes off his seat belt. I am utterly terrified because I can *feel* it—something’s wrong.

I didn’t realize he got out of the car, was in such a daze, until my door is opening and Kieran is reaching over and unbuckling my seat belt for me. He presses such a gentle kiss to my forehead tears spring into my eyes.

“Sunshine?” he probes.

“I’m scared,” I confess, my lip wobbling.

“I know, baby,” he says, just as guttural.

This, I realize is breaking him. Seeing me like this is *breaking* him.

The very thing I wanted to protect him from is happening and I’m in too deep, too far in love with him, to push him away and save him from the misery that I know is coming. The endless questions, needles and tests, the utter confusion and endless unanswered questions.

It’s hell.

People always question if hell and heaven are real, and I feel so confident when I say it’s real because hell for me is my broken body. You don’t have to die to feel its depths.

Kieran slides his hands up my neck and cups my cheeks, lifting my eyes to his. I see my misery mirrored in his depths. “I’m here, Layla. For every moment I will be right beside you.”

“That’s what guts me.”

“Well *un*-gut yourself, Layla Carson, because there isn’t a world in which you can get rid of me, so let’s do this together.” Stepping back, he gives me enough room to slide out of the car, holding out his arm when my knees almost give out.

“Jeez, you’re stubborn.”

“Telling me something I already know, sunshine.”

“And very perky.”

He snorts to himself as he locks the car. “The only time I’m *perky* is when I’m inside you.”

Gasping, I whack his shoulder, wincing when my body berates me for it. “Hey! PG mouth in here, buddy.”

“No such thing, sorry.”

“Insufferable man.”

“Hot man.”

Rolling my eyes, Kieran lets me lean against him as he presses the elevator button.

“How about sexy man?” he asks.

“Very sexy, but a horrendous mouth on you.”

He drops his mouth to my ear. “A horrendous mouth you like to have running in the bedroom.”

The elevator doors open right as my cheeks flush as red as my hair. The elderly couple on the other side take one look at me and my cocky boyfriend grinning like the Cheshire Cat, lower their heads, and hightail it out of the elevator.

“Good on you. You scared the elderly!” I scold as the doors close.

Shrugging, Kieran wraps an arm around my shoulder. “The elderly never like me. I think it’s the tattoos.”

“They probably think you’re in a bikey gang.”

Kieran snorts. “A bikey gang?”

“Yes, a gang.”

“You read far too many dark romances, sunshine.”

“And you don’t read enough.”

“Oh trust me, I’m getting there.” He pauses and I can hear the smile in his voice as he goes on. “Your books are very informative, though. You loved it when I did that twisty thing with my tongue—”

I slap my hand over his mouth right as the elevator dings, opening its doors to the doctor’s office, their chairs at near capacity with waiting patients for various specialists in the building.

“Best behavior,” I hiss under my breath.

“But I know you love me when I’m a bad boy.”

Whipping my head to him, I narrow my eyes. I know what he's doing and I do love him for it. He's managed to distract me from the fear, has managed to somehow make this fun.

His grin is lopsided as he lowers his head. "Fine, if I'm a good boy, will you reward me?"

My smart retort and good mood vanishes the moment a woman behind the receptionist's desks asks, "Hi there, how can I help you today?"

Here goes nothing, stepping into what is about to no doubt be tests, more waiting rooms, and an endless stream of questions, I say, "My name's Layla Carson, and I'm here to see Dr. Montary."

"Layla?"

My head snaps up to Dr. Montary standing there with her weathered, welcoming smile.

"Hi," I say as I slowly rise, needing Kieran's help. My bones feel like they need to be oiled.

Dr. Montary takes one look at me and frowns. Quickly wiping the look off her face, she leads us across the hall into her office. It's a standard one, with a large L-shaped desk in the far-right corner, two chairs that Kieran and I take a seat in, and a bed pushed against the wall. The only difference from most doctors is that her office has a gorgeous floor-to-ceiling window behind her, giving us the view of downtown Colorado.

"As beautiful and sweet as you are, Layla, I was hoping I wouldn't see you for some time."

"You and me both, Dr. Montary." Sighing, I go into detail about everything that has been occurring the past five weeks. Every little thing that I documented on my phone, all the symptoms I hid from everyone around me, the moments I'd paste on a smile and suck it up and pretend I was fine but felt like I was about to drop.

By the stunned expression on Kieran's face, I'd say he's realizing he *didn't* notice everything and is probably kicking himself for it. His hand is in mine and I give it a gentle squeeze, rubbing my thumb back and forth.

By the time I'm finished, Dr. Montary's head is cocked to the side. "And you changed nothing in this time?"

"Nothing. I'm taking the medication at the same time religiously every day, eating the same foods. Nothing has been introduced."

She types furiously on her keyboard, writing notes in my file before she stops.

"Did you have a recent GP visit?" she asks.

I can't hold in my eye roll. "Yes, and he was atrocious. He apparently doesn't believe in lupus."

"Quack," Dr. Montary mutters under her breath, but not quietly enough.

Kieran coughs into his fist to hide his laugh.

"Layla, did he prescribe anything to you?"

My cheeks heat, my palm growing damp in Kieran's as I whisper. "Yes, he gave me birth control…" My words taper off as my eyes widen. "Oh my god, is it the birth control? I completely forgot. I asked him so many times if it was safe to take with my current medication!"

"He prescribed you a birth control pill that's high in estrogen, which likely stimulated your immune system and clashed with your current trial medication, resulting in this flare-up." Shaking her head, Dr. Montary curses under her breath. "I swear to you, Layla, I will be flagging this with the board and reporting that GP. He's put you and your health in harm's way. He had to know that the birth control would do this."

Tears are running down my cheeks freely now.

"I-I asked him so many times, I—"

"Could he have administered it because he doesn't believe in lupus?" Kieran asks, his voice full of restrained anger.

Dr. Montary's eyebrows furrow. "If that's the case you'd have a malpractice lawsuit on your hands." She reaches forward as if to comfort me but stops, the years of her treating me making our relationship feel close. "I'm so sorry, Layla, but good news is if you stop immediately your trial medication from Berlin should hopefully take effect again, though it might be around a month before the side-effects completely wane."

Nodding, I wipe away my tears, looking to Kieran. He's clenching his jaw so tightly I'm surprised his teeth haven't cracked. "Kieran?" I whisper.

“I’m going to sue him into oblivion.”

The ferocity in his tone has my eyes widening.

Clearing his throat, he runs his fingers through his hair, visibly trying to calm himself. “Can we still run some tests today? More bloodwork to make sure it is the birth control and nothing else underlying?”

She dips her head, already standing to put gloves on. “Yes, I would like to also do—”

“Sorry to cut you off but I had blood drawn recently. I haven’t gotten the results back yet though.”

“Here or at another facility?”

“Here.”

“Let me check if they’re in. What did they test for?”

My laugh is humorless. “Everything under the sun.”

Nodding along, she picks up her reading glasses and leaves them perched on the top of her nose. “Ah yes, I can see.” Dr. Montary cocks her head as she continues to read, the silence in the room palpable.

The anger wafting off Kieran is a living breathing thing. Leaning over, I whisper, “Kieran, it’s okay now. It’s fixable.”

“Shouldn’t have happened in the first place, sunshine.”

“Sorry, excuse me a moment. I’ll be back.”

My frown is deep as Dr. Montary steps out, her short heels clicking along the floor, her pencil skirt swishing.

“What the…? She doesn’t usually leave the room.”

Kieran must see the panic on my face because he leans over, placing a kiss on my forehead. “I’m sure she’s just printing out the blood work.”

I point to the printer on her desk.

Pursing his lips, he offers, “Maybe she ran out of paper?”

r. Montary wasn’t out of paper.

Ten minutes later, she steps into the room again, a strained smile on her face as a technician comes in behind her wheeling a portable ultrasound.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Layla." Taking a seat in front of me, she's clinical, talking facts, and I know what that means. I've been in enough doctor offices to know the tone she's using isn't a good sign.

Clinging to Kieran's hand for dear life, I move forward in my seat. "Is everything okay?"

Dr. Montary clasps her hands in her lap and I notice how fragile she seems in this moment, older than she was when I met her. I always thought she was ageless.

"The labs ran everything like you said and along with it, they checked your hormone levels. Unfortunately, they've come back to show your AMH levels are low, along with estradiol, and a high level of FSH."

"What does that mean?" Kieran asks before I can, my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth.

"Layla, I want to do a transvaginal ultrasound today if that's okay?"

"To check what?" I ask, finally finding my voice.

She licks her lips. "With bloodwork like yours, it indicates that your ovaries might not be…functioning as they should. I'd like to do the ultrasound to see what's going on."

Blinking furiously, I lean back as if I was struck. "M-my ovaries?"

"Yes," she answers matter-of-factly.

And suddenly, as good as Kieran's presence is, as comforting and reassuring, all I want is my mom to wrap her arm around me and tell me everything is going to be okay. I want to stop time, I want all the voices to fade, I want to go back to thirty minutes ago when I just thought it was a lupus flare-up.

I don't want to be gently led to the bed, I don't want Kieran's gentle touches and soothing words, I don't want to have to give verbal and written consent to an internal examination of my ovaries. I don't want to be clinging to Kieran's hand for support, him kissing my forehead and telling me I'm doing a good job, as the wand is inserted so high it's painful.

I don't want to be here.

I don't want to be getting this test.

And I don't want to hear what she has to say next. Because nothing and no one can comfort me when I see the look in Dr. Montary's eyes.

Kieran sees it too.

“Please just say it.”

Even to my own ears, I’m shocked at how…broken I sound.

Dead inside.

She removes the wand, taking off her gloves, and with one nod, the technician that was assisting her leaves. She motions for me to sit up but I’m afraid if I do I’ll pass out.

“Please,” I beg. “Just spit it out.”

She lays her hand on my arm, her smile so sad it makes me steel my heart, but nothing could have prepared me.

“Layla, I’m so sorry. There’s tremendous scarring on your ovaries. It looks as if there’s also structural damage and your antral follicle count is…nonexistent.”

“What does that mean?” Kieran demands.

Dr. Montary looks from Kieran to me as she rips out my heart. “Layla I’m sorry but the damage to your ovaries…with no active follicles…your ovaries are not functioning as they should.”

“Say it,” I beg through a gasp.

I need to hear her say it.

“I’m sorry Layla but your tests are showing no remaining ovarian activity. With these results, it would be nearly impossible to conceive naturally.”

My lip is the first to wobble.

Then my hand.

And then my heart.

It teeters over a wall, falling to its death.

The sound that leaves my mouth isn’t human, it’s animalistic.

It’s the sound of my dreams being torn from me.

It’s the sound of the future Kieran and I spoke of vanishing.

It is the sound of me dying.

And it won’t stop.

Dr. Montary says something but I can’t hear anything past the ringing in my ears, nor past my heart beating erratically as it tries to remain in this world after being torn to shreds.

She leaves the room and suddenly through my watery haze I spot Kieran with tears in his eyes. His lips are moving but I can’t hear anything. I can’t feel anything over the utter devastation slamming into my body.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Layla.”

The horror in his voice, the future and hope I just ripped from his hands, is clear.

I can never have children.

“I just got better,” I say, gasping through my sobs. “I just got better! I just started hoping!” I’m all but screaming now. “I just started hoping for a family!”

“I know, baby. I’m so sorry.”

“No,” I heave. “No, no, no!” I’m hysterical, I know I am, but I can’t stop. It hurts so much.

“Sunshine…”

“Make it stop, Kieran,” I beg through my tears. “Make it stop, please. Please make it stop.”

But I know I’m begging for something that he can’t fix.

No one can fix me.

I’m broken.

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ONE WEEK LATER

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Chapter 51

Kieran

MOMMA BEAR CARSON

KIERAN

are you home?

MOMMA BEAR CARSON

yes, is everything okay? Need me to come over?

KIERAN

everything's okay, Layla is with Emmy

can I head over before practice?

MOMMA BEAR CARSON

of course, I'll pop the kettle on

MY FUTURE WIFE

MY FUTURE WIFE
PHOTO OF EMMY

KIERAN

my two beautiful girls

I love you sunshine

MY FUTURE WIFE

I love you too but I don’t feel very radiant

KIERAN

it’s okay love, you just have a few clouds passing through

Devastation doesn’t begin to cover what overcame Layla. Horror is more accurate of a description.

I’ve done everything to try and bring my sunshine back to life. To try and revive the piece of her soul that was so evidently taken that day in the doctor’s office, but nothing I do can ever repair it.

Have you ever had to watch someone you love go through something so utterly devastating that you watch their light leak out of their eyes? It’s not only taken a part of her soul, it’s robbed mine as well, because we are each others halves.

All the while, Layla is trying to act like nothing happened, but it’s like she’s a robot turned to autopilot mode. I can tell she doesn’t want to feel anything, doesn’t want to talk about it, doesn’t want to acknowledge any of it.

But when ads on the TV come on and there’s a baby, her eyes well with tears.

When we took Emmy out for ice cream and a pregnant lady walked in, she began to cry.

Anytime we pass a baby store, her body turns rigid.

Layla is trying to be brave, but she’s not allowing herself to feel the sadness. She’s trying not to burden me, and yet all I want to do is stand in front of her with my arms open wide and beg her to give me her grief.

I don’t know what to do anymore.

Hence why I’m here, knocking on her front door before morning practice.

Charlotte opens the door a moment later. “Come in, sweetie, I’ve got the kettle on.”

“Thank you.”

Her home feels different than the last time I was here, as if Charlotte has been hit by the devastation of this as well and her home is showing the coldness.

“How is she doing?” she asks as she leads me to the kitchen.

Blowing out a breath, I take a seat at the kitchen bench. “I came to see if you had the answer to that.”

Smiling at me sadly over her shoulder, she says, “She’s been avoiding me. I’m afraid I know less than you do.” Turning back to the kettle, she pours two cups. “Although I know that’s on purpose. She knows I’d have a hard time not smothering her.”

“No such thing as smothering.”

She clicks her tongue. “Trust me, sweetie, there is.”

“How are you?”

Her shoulders droop at the question. “Not well, if I’m honest. I’m just —” She chokes on her words, her back stiffening. “She’s gone through so much as it is and this was just the final nail in the coffin. She didn’t deserve lupus, no one does, but to have lupus *and* be infertile?”

“It’s unfair.”

“It’s more than unfair. It feels like someone is wrongfully punishing her.”

“How do you do it?” I ask as she slides my cup of tea across the countertop. “How do you stop feeling so helpless?”

She gives me another sad smile. “You don’t. You just learn to hide it around her.” Putting her mug down, Charlotte goes on. “Layla carries a lot of guilt for those in her life. Misplaced guilt.”

“She think she’s a burden.”

She dips her chin. “I’ve tried to drill it out of her but you know her, once that girl settles on something she’ll do it. I’ve never been able to convince her that everything her father and I did was always a choice and one made out of love. We don’t regret a single decision we’ve ever made. Not a sacrifice, a missed vacation or event, nothing. We’d both do it again in a heartbeat for her.”

“I don’t know how to help her. This seems…”

“Bigger than her chronic illness.”

Taking off my lucky hat, I run my fingers through my hair. “Yes, as awful as it sounds. I know she struggled emotionally with her health, but this is different.”

“It’s robbed her in a different way than lupus ever did.”

“With lupus, it’s like there was always a hope that the flare-up would go away but this won’t disappear. This isn’t manageable.”

“I hate to ask this, and please don’t take offense, but does her diagnosis change your feelings for my daughter?”

I rear back like she slapped me.

“Excuse my language, Charlotte, but fuck no.”

She nods. “I thought so, I just…I had to ask.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“That’s true.”

Taking a sip of her tea, Charlotte places the cup down with a sigh. “I don’t know how to help her this time. It’s kept me up every night since.”

“All we can do I guess is keep showing up and hope that one day it works.”

“Just give her time. It’s a lot to process.”

We fall into silence, both of our minds whirling.

I can’t keep sitting around doing nothing. I feel like I’m constantly hovering over her shoulder waiting for her to say what she needs. Trying to preempt her emotions before she does so I can be ready to catch her when she falls.

My hope that Charlotte would have something up her sleeve to help Layla has left me crestfallen. Driving to the arena, I feel like my body weighs a thousand pounds, my heart sinking with every minute, my mind in disarray.

I don’t think I can help her.

And I’ve never felt so fucking hopeless.

There’s no magic words to say to make her feel better, no trial drug. Her lupus symptoms have slowly faded but her ovaries won’t start magically functioning like they should.

Layla just opened her heart to me, expressing how she felt like she couldn’t wish for a family because of how sick she was, and she finally had hope after years of illness, only for that to be taken from her too.

She’s lost so much, so fucking much, that as I park my car I find I can’t fucking breathe.

It’s overwhelming how cruel life can be. Not only for Layla but for everyone.

Emmy and her horribly abusive mother, her early years that I can never make right.

For my own mother, who whored me out to pay for her drug addiction.

For Layla, my ray of sunshine in a stormy world, who has been beaten down day in and day out. It’s hard to coincide that her body, the very one that contains her beautiful soul, is failing her so thoroughly. That someone so pure and kind-hearted beneath it all is slowly withering.

I can see it’s slowly making her hate herself.

And that’s the thing that is destroying me. How can she hate the most glorious person to exist? How can she hate the person Emmy wishes every night to grow up to be? How can she hate the woman that I’ve fallen so madly in love with?

Suddenly, my chest tightens past the point of breathing and I can’t get in a lungful of air. Can’t manage to breathe in the oxygen surrounding me.

Dark spots dance along my vision. Unbuckling my seat belt, I fling open my door, savoring the rush of air that greets me only for my lungs to not work at all.

I can’t breathe.

Wetness drips over my lips.

When did I start crying?

“Ashford?”

A sudden pounding of steps ring out in rhythm with the pounding of my heart.

I can’t fucking breathe!

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, I got you, buddy. You’re all right.”

I still can’t see past the blur in my vision but the voice is familiar. *O’Connor.* I hear another car door open. Is that mine?

I’m clutching my chest, pounding on it, as if I hit my chest hard enough my lungs will begin to work again.

“You’re all right, buddy. You’re having a panic attack, but I got you.”

His hand is on my shoulder, gently leading me back to my seat, and then it’s on the back of my neck, pushing.

“That’s it, put your head between your knees.”

My shaking hands reach out before I know what I’m doing. O’Connor doesn’t miss a beat. He clasps my hand in his and instructs, “In for four.

Breathe with me, buddy. One, two, three, four."

Following the sound of his voice, I repeat it with him, breathing in for four and out for four, six times over before I'm able to fully blink away the dark spots clouding my vision. I can see my sneakers, black and white, and O'Connor's—white and green New Balances.

"You good?" he asks.

Nodding, I slowly sit up, clutching my chest as I'm finally able to breathe.

O'Connor is leaning against the passenger door of my truck, worry etched deep into his face. "Had me fucking scared you were having a heart attack."

"Can't get rid of me that easily."

The corner of his lip twitches up, then falls. "Can I ask if you're okay?" After I bark out a humorless laugh, he jumps in again. "I mean, I know you're not, I'm just…fuck, I'm worried, dude, okay? You've been off in your own world this last week and Cap told us to give you space, but we're all worried."

"I know, I'm sorry. I just can't share what's happening with everyone. It's unfair."

"Layla?" he guesses.

I blow out a breath. "Yeah."

"Cindy told me. She, um…let's just say Layla's news hit close to home for her. She wouldn't have told me otherwise, but I found her similarly to how I just found you and she blurted it out while crying."

My brows skyrocket at that. "Fuck, dude, I'm so sorry."

"I should be saying that to you. What Layla's going through…" A faraway look enters his gaze. "Let's just say I know the toll it takes on someone you love. I won't lie to you, Ashford, it's ugly, and it's really fucking hard."

Holding out my hands before me, I lay my heart bare. "I don't know how to help her. I feel so *fucking* helpless it's driving me insane."

O'Connor looks like he knows exactly what I mean.

"You have to let her grieve. She's grieving a life she dreamed of, one she'll never be able to obtain on her own, and that's a hard pill to swallow."

"Fuck," I curse, running a hand through my hair. "I really can't help her, can I?"

O’Connor rocks his head side to side. “You be there for her. Support her, welcome her with open arms the moment she needs you, and try to do things that make her happy.” He looks around the parking lot before lowering his voice. “Honestly, when Cindy and I went through our struggles, she found it the hardest to understand that I was okay with our future looking different. She was so devastated that our plans were changing, she said she didn’t feel like a woman and that I should be with someone who could give me everything I want.”

“Holy shit, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

He shakes his head. “No one knows. Cin likes to be fun, loud, and boisterous, but growing up her parents didn’t let her have feelings, so she struggles to be anything other than perfectly happy.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, it was rough for a long time, but we found our way back to each other.” He bites his lower lip, mulling something over before he snaps his eyes back to me. “Just make sure Layla knows it doesn’t change anything for you. Make sure she knows that you’re there for her regardless if she can give you children or not.”

“Of course she knows I’m not going anywhere.”

“I don’t know, man, she’s had the rug pulled out from her. She probably didn’t hear a lot of anything those first few days. I had to drill it into Cindy that I didn’t want to date someone else who could give me a family naturally.”

My eyes all but bug out of my head.

Clapping me on the shoulder, O’Connor doubles down. “Make sure she knows she’s enough.”

“Can I ask how you knew about the breathing technique?”

O’Connor’s lips flatten as he shrugs. “My brother. My mom says he came out anxious.”

“Really? He always seem so…”

“Collected? Yeah, he’s not on the inside, trust me. He’s gotten really good at hiding his anxiety.”

“Does he have any tips?”

O’Connor snorts. “Yeah, really fucking good medication.”

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Chapter 52

Layla

SEXY BOYFRIEND
COORDINATES

LAYLA
should I be afraid?

SEXY BOYFRIEND
never with me sunshine

My driver side door slams shut and I step out into the middle of nowhere—no seriously, I'm in the middle of nowhere up one of the Colorado mountains. I wish I could say I know where I am because I've lived in Colorado my whole life, but I spent the majority of it indoors, either in my room or in a hospital.

I never had time nor the energy to traverse through the mountains, and with the sun setting, the horizon pink like cotton candy, I know it's a damn shame I've never come here before.

"Kieran?" I call out.

My medication has begun to take effect again and I'm nowhere near as lethargic as I was just a week ago, but I'm still tired. A different kind, though—this is weathered by sadness.

Suddenly, he bursts through the trees, a wide grin spreading across his face. "You found it."

“Was hard to miss,” I say, pointing to the cardboard sign he put up that reads, *Park here*. “What are we doing up here?”

Holding out his hand, he intertwines our fingers, lifting mine up to his lips and placing a kiss on the back of it. “I’d rather show you.”

Biting my lip, I let him lead me down a nondescript path that’s been cut through the forest, the trees surrounding us as if welcoming us into their fold.

“How was your day?” he asks, trying to make small talk.

Kieran never makes small talk. Ever.

“Um…okay?”

“Well it’s going to get a whole lot better than just okay.”

“Is that so?”

“Oh baby, that’s a promise.”

Stepping in front of me, Kieran wipes his palms down his black jeans, his tongue darting out to wet his lips.

“Kieran Ashford…are you nervous?”

“Fuck yeah I am.”

For the first time in a week, I laugh, and not just a small chuckle—a deep belly laugh that seems to come from my soul. I’m not at all surprised that Kieran was the one to make me do it.

His eyes spark with life. “I missed that sound.”

“My laugh?”

He dips his chin. “I live for the sound of your joy.” Taking a shuddering breath, he goes on. “I know the past week has been unbearable. I also know there’s nothing I can do to fix this for you, and I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t killing me a little inside. This is a big adjustment for you, something that you shouldn’t have to let go of, and fuck, sunshine, if I could change that for you I would. In a split second. I wouldn’t ask questions on what I’d have to do.”

The back of my eyes begin to burn.

Reaching out, Kieran clasps both my hands in his. “But I would do that for *you*. I love you with my entire heart, and most importantly, I love you as you are.”

My lip trembles, my knees threatening to buckle. “But you told me you wanted a big family. You told me you’ve dreamed of it and the warm and loving home you can make and I can’t give you any of that, Kieran.” My

voice cracks. “I can’t give you the thing you deserve and after the childhood you had, you deserve it. More than deserve it, it’s *owed* to you.”

I try to drop his hands, try to step back, but he won’t let me. Kieran steps with me, never letting go of my hands. If anything, he’s clinging to them for dear life.

“That’s the thing, there is no family without you. You are my family, Layla, you and Emmy. You two are the most important things in the world to me. You are my other half, the person I want to tackle life with through the highs and lows, and if I can’t experience it with you, I don’t know if I could cope. You are the one that brought sunshine into my life when all I had was a dark cloud hanging over my head.” He bends slightly, making our eyes lock. “If you go, you’ll be taking my happiness with you. I don’t want to have you in my life to have babies, I want you because I love *you*.”

He steps closer, our shoes brushing one another as he drops my hands only to cup my cheeks gently, as if I’m the most precious thing to exist. “*You* Layla Carson. I love you and the light you bring with you everywhere you go.”

Shaking my head, my tears fall freely. This is why I didn’t want to have this conversation. This is why I’ve been avoiding it.

“I’m not allowing you to let go of your dream for me, not one as important as a family.”

“You’re not hearing me, baby. You *are* my family.” He leans forward and presses his lips against my forehead. “There would be no family without you, and Emmy can attest to that.” Pulling back, he holds my gaze as he says sincerely, “The thing you’re forgetting to ask is how I want to have a family. I’ve always wanted to adopt, Layla. Always. I knew that if I found the right person, I would want to save children from the same fate I suffered. Family has never meant blood to me. Besides Emmy, my entire family is made up of the people I’ve grown to love and have met through life.”

The air in my lungs is stolen with every word he speaks.

“You would be okay not having any more children of your own?”

“None biologically, you mean? Of course. Whoever I adopt will be my child though, and hopefully if you love me enough, ours.” His thumbs rub back and forth on my cheeks, wiping away my tears. “I want to do this with you, Layla. No one else.”

“Are you sure?”

My heart couldn’t take it if he said all this only to change his mind. I’ve been driving myself mad, having to let go of the dream I had and Kieran’s, too. That is what devastated me the most through all of this.

Kieran deserves to create and build the life he was never given as a child, and the knowledge that I couldn’t give him that? It crushed me, utterly devastated me. So to be standing here, listening to Kieran lay his heart on the line for me, offering the very future I thought was taken from me, makes me begin to hope again.

“Am I sure? Sunshine, I’m prepared to get on my hands and knees and beg you.”

“What if I relapse again?”

“Then I’ll take care of you.”

“You say it like it’s simple.”

“Because it is. I love you so much, Layla, I’d do anything for you. I just want to spend the rest of my life loving you. That’s my one wish.” Kieran kisses me and it’s so passionate, my head begins to spin. “Please, let me love you,” he whispers.

I don’t have to think for even a second.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay.”

Kieran smiles, a lone tear rolling down his cheek. Lifting up on my tiptoes, I wipe the tear away and chuckle. “Is there a reason you brought me out into the middle of the woods to have this conversation? You weren’t going to kidnap me if I said no, were you?”

He winks. “You’ll never know, but something tells me your little dark romance mind wouldn’t have cared if I did.”

“If *you* did, no. Anyone else? I’d be terrified.”

“Good to know stranger danger is still instilled within you.”

Snorting to myself, I cock my hip. “But seriously, why are we out here?”

Kieran just smiles. “Why don’t you come see for yourself?”

Sliding my hand in his outstretched one, Kieran doesn’t have to walk us far for me to understand why he had me meet him halfway up a mountain.

A shocked gasp bursts from me, my hand smacking over my mouth as I gape at what he’s done.

In the middle of a clearing is a pitched tent, fairy lights strung across the clearing, along with two camping chairs positioned around a crackling fire. Off to the side, a table is set up with various foods, including large white and pink marshmallows, graham crackers, and chocolate to make s'mores.

Tears spring into my eyes even though I thought I had no more tears left to cry.

My heart is feeling the whiplash of this past week, the high and low emotions, but this one is glorious.

Kieran leans forward, plucking up a book I hadn't noticed. He holds it out to me, and I notice my hands are shaking as I take it.

It's the copy of my favorite book, the one he annotated.

The realization hits me like a truck. "You recreated my favorite book scene."

Kieran rubs the nape of his neck, sheepish—I repeat, *sheepish*! "I know he did it in the backyard for her but you deserve the beauty of the mountain. Then we can also tick something off your life list." He searches my gaze. "I remember you said you've never been camping and want—"

I don't let him finish his sentence. I throw myself at him, wrapping my arms around his neck. Kieran catches me, as he always seems to do. As I pepper kisses along his cheek, his laughter rings out, making my soul sing.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" I say.

"You like it?" he asks, his vulnerability on display.

I smile at him, finally at eye level as he holds me. "Like it? I love it, Ashford."

His grin finally springs free. "Thank god, it took me hours."

I plant one more kiss on his lips before declaring, "Let's make s'mores!"

I've never made s'mores.

Kieran chuckles at my excitement as he gently puts me down, walking me toward the table of food he brought up here.

"Do we really get to stay here?"

"Of course, we're camping overnight. I had your mom pack a bag for you."

"Who's watching Emmy?"

"Your mom and Allie. Allie is doing the nightshift though."

"They're spoiling her rotten, I take it?"

“Like you wouldn’t believe.” Kieran pulls out his phone and flashes me a photo they sent. It’s of Emmy surrounded by Barbie dolls in her room. “Enough phones though, let’s spend the night, just the two of us.” Waggling his brows, he adds, “And maybe tick off a few things on your life list.”

“We need to come out here with Emmy,” I whisper, watching the stars twinkle alongside the fairy lights. It’s two hours later, our bellies full, the moon hanging high as we sit on a log in front of the fire, a blanket wrapped around us.

“I have no idea if she’d love it or be petrified.”

Because of the dark, is what passes between us.

“If you strung up fairy lights like these I’m sure she’d love it. Maybe we could do a trip with Bella and Grayson, and they can bring Bambi.”

“That’s a brilliant idea. The next break Grayson and I have, we’ll go.”

Kieran falls silent, a sudden tension entering his body. I don’t have to wait long to figure out why. Picking up a poker, Kieran slides a marshmallow on it, absently twisting it in the fire as he casually admits, “I reported the matron.”

My head whips to his face, searching his profile for how he feels, but he’s a locked vault. “How do you feel? What happened? What did they say?”

“That I wasn’t the first to report.”

The heaviness of the situation weighs on my shoulders. “That’s…not surprising.”

“It is to me. She’s still working there.” A muscle ticks in his jaw. “I threw my name around, threatened to go public with my story and shame her until something was done.”

My brows rise. “And what did they say to that?”

Kieran smiles, but it’s dark. “They finally got moving.”

“Bloody wankers.”

Kieran turns to me, humor dancing in his eyes as he gives me a lopsided grin. “You British, love?”

Rolling my eyes, I shove him playfully. “It was in my book I was reading. I like the curse word, sounds better than…”

“Say it.”

I scrunch my nose. “No.”

“Come on, baby, talk dirty to me.”

Bursting into a fit of laughter, I manage to say, “Absolutely not, and stop changing the subject. What happens now?”

“Clever one, you are.” Blowing out a breath, he goes on. “Honestly, I have no idea. They said there will be an investigation into the claims I’ve made and the current state of the home. I expressed my concerns about the foster home shutting down and they assured me that if she’s removed that won’t happen.”

“If?”

“Yeah, I picked up on their choice of wording too.”

“Would you hold to your threat?”

He licks his lips. “It would be the right thing to do.”

Sliding my hand in his, I give it a squeeze. “I hope you’re not forced to do anything you don’t want to. I hope they do their job accordingly and remove her, sentence her too.”

Kieran nods, suddenly changing the subject. “What do you want our life to look like?”

Poking the fire with a stick, I hum to myself, allowing him the reprieve he clearly needs. “To be full of fun and adventures.”

“What type of adventures?”

“Like this. Camping, water fights, trips to the bookstore.” Smiling to myself, I bite my lip. “Kieran, everything you’ve done for me, that’s the life I want to live. The one we’ve already created.”

“It’s a pretty spectacular one, isn’t it?”

“It’s everything I ever dreamed of.”

“But if you could add more?” he asks huskily.

Allowing myself to dream, I whisper, “I want to publish children’s books.”

“You will,” Kieran declares confidently. “It’s not about if, sunshine, it’s about when.”

“Bella said she would love to draw the illustrations for me.”

Kieran's lips twitch. "I knew she would. You watch, she'll be up until the crack of dawn drawing and we'll be getting grumpy texts from Grayson to return his girlfriend to him."

I laugh as the very realistic text messages I'd receive from my best friend's boyfriend come to mind.

"He'd absolutely blame us, wouldn't he?"

"Oh yeah, Bella can do no wrong in his eyes."

Looking at him out of the corner of my eye, he catches me watching him.

"What?" he asks.

"I want to hear what you want. There's a lot of worry about me being happy but I want to make sure you get what you dream of, Kieran."

Kieran stretches his legs out in front of him, the teasing in his tone long gone as he tilts his head back and gazes up at the stars. "I want to adopt children, a lot of children. I want to give them a home. At the foster home I'd pray that someone would adopt me. I want to make a child's dream come true and give them everything they were robbed of. I want our house to be full of children's laughter, to be filled with warmth and happiness." He turns his head to me then, a smile teasing his lips. "And I know we can create that together. You'll be writing books for kids, working with Bella, and I'll be skating and hopefully teaching one of our kids how to on the weekends."

Twisting to face me fully, he whispers, "But before all of that, I want to experience life with you and Emmy. I want to go on adventures and take us all camping. I want to spend our free days in the library, watching my two girls read while I build Legos. I want to come home to you in our bed and wake up to you sleeping on my chest." He snorts to himself. "I even want to come home and smell the food you burn."

I slap his shoulder. "Hey! I'm getting better…sort of."

"It wouldn't matter anyways, because we both know I'll come home and you'll beg me to fix it and cook for you."

"Maybe," I tease.

Kieran leans forward, capturing my lips. "I want all those small moments with you, sunshine, burnt food and all." His features grow serious. "How would you feel if Emmy called you Mom?"

My heart stutters. "I'd be honored." A part of me always knew we had a special bond that went beyond me being her nanny.

He smirks. “Good, because I don’t think I can hold her off for much longer.”

“She’s like her dad.”

“Charmingly persistent?”

“Stubborn beyond measure.” Lowering my voice, I whisper, “But there’s one thing we can agree on.”

“What’s that, sunshine?”

“That I’m madly in love with both of you.”

Kieran’s hand slides up and cups my cheek. “About time you stopped running from the inevitably of us.”

Before he can kiss me, I tease, “I still think you’re the only dog that should be in a kennel.”

“And I still stand by what I said the day we met day.”

“Which part? You talked my ear off, Ashford.”

His blue eyes spark. “That I’m going to marry you.”

LAYLA’S LIFE LIST

~~Have a water fight~~
~~Go to second base~~
~~Have an orgasm in public~~
~~Go on the best date of my life~~
~~Cuddle by the fire~~
~~Have a man throw themselves at my car~~ (Kieran forced me to write this one)
~~Get custom bookshelves built for me~~
~~Make out with a guy wearing a Ghostface mask~~
~~Wear matching costumes~~
~~Lose my virginity~~
~~Have sex in public~~
~~Have someone declare their love for me~~
~~Go camping on a mountain~~
~~Make s’mores~~
~~Fall in love with Kieran Ashford~~ (also written by Kieran)
~~Be happy~~

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Epilogue

Layla

The energy on this side of the arena deflates like a balloon as the final buzzer rings out.

3-1.

IceHawks just lost the Stanley Cup.

The groans around us are so loud I'm surprised Emmy hasn't clocked on. She doesn't understand that we're not celebrating, all she sees is the confetti that explodes across the ice, the cheers coming from San Francisco's team.

Emmy squeals in my arms, clapping her hands. "Mommy, Mommy, look, it's Daddy!"

It doesn't matter that nearly six months have passed since Kieran told Emmy she could call me Mom if she wanted. I'm still not used to it, never will be if I'm honest, because every time it turns my heart into a puddle of absolute goo.

The fact this special angel in my arms likes me enough to want to call me mom?

I wasn't lying to Kieran all those months ago on the mountain when I said it would be an honor. She is the most precious little girl I know, and this precious little girl is happy and excited regardless of the team loss because Kieran is skating over.

His face lights up the second he spots us at the plexiglass, Emmy going wild. With his gloves on he waves, Emmy waving back.

She’s still beyond anxious meeting new people and is very slow to open up, but around her family, she talks everyone’s ears off, Bambi’s the most. Bless her heart, she doesn’t understand that Bambi is deaf.

At least her therapist is finally included in the list of people she trusts. Emmy adores her and thank goodness, because Kieran was growing increasingly worried she didn’t want to share with her. Over time, though, the therapist has been able to make Emmy feel safe and work through all her memories of her mom—the ones she shares anyways. I think the full extent of how her mother treated her will always be a mystery.

I know there’s a lot Kieran struggles to tell me, and I’m okay with him wishing those memories are ones he could forget. But if he ever wants to share, he knows there’s an open heart waiting to listen to his story.

“Daddy!” Emmy squeals, banging her hand against the glass.

Kieran sprays ice, making her chuckle as he puts his hand against hers on the other side. “Hi, munchkin! Did you see me skate?”

“So fast!”

“You think Daddy was fast?” he asks, his eyes wide.

She nods before slapping her chest. “Emmy have a go next!”

“Hell yeah, Em!” Kieran looks up at me. “Hey, sunshine.”

“Hi, Ashford.”

“Want to come onto the ice and commiserate with me?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Kieran winks, following beside us as we walk around the arena until security lets us through and we’re able to walk onto the ice. Kieran holds out his hand. “You like me all sweaty, sunshine?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe.”

Kieran kisses me and like always, it’s so full of tender love he makes my heart skip a beat. Coming up for air, he winks down at me. “Nice jersey.”

“I was told he’s the best in the league.”

“Damn, some poor sucker let you go for the losing team?”

Shrugging, I throw up my free hand in the air. “They did. Guess I should have worn San Francisco colors.”

Kieran scoffs. “Over my dead body. You look sexy in black and white.”

Shaking my head, I hand Emmy over. “Take your daughter skating before you teach her more dirty words.”

“Hey, I think she learned some of the cuss words from you.”

“Absolutely not, Ashford. You’ve doled out two hundred bucks to the swear jar and I’ve had to pay one.”

He sighs contentedly as he lowers Emmy to the ice, holding both her hands as she jumps up and down. “Can I pay you to swear? Hearing you say fuck was like music to my ears.”

“And *I’m* teaching her to swear?”

I shake my head at him, though I can’t help smiling at the man that I continue to fall in love with more and more every day.

It didn’t take him long to ask me to move in with him. He lasted all of a week after the camping trip before blurting it out over dinner. He was a nervous wreck that night, spilling pasta water, dropping sauce on the floor. I’ve come to realize that Kieran does get nervous, but only for two people.

Emmy and me.

Whereas I get anxious if I wake up in a cold sweat or with aches and pains.

I had another flare-up, seven weeks after going off the birth control, but it was nowhere near as bad as the one prior. It was minor and went away so quickly it made me a little less afraid of them…but I know I’ll always carry some medical anxiety.

I’ve accepted that fact about myself.

Although working on writing has helped tremendously, to have a project to throw my entire focus into on days where I can’t switch my brain off.

Kieran was right, the second I mentioned that I was thinking of writing a children’s book the night we went Trick or Treating, Bella pounced, and we’ve been working together ever since. And yes, we get constant messages from Grayson in the middle of the night cursing both me and Kieran for stealing his girlfriend away from him.

But as Bella says, when inspiration strikes, it strikes hard.

I’ve managed to complete a full draft for my first children’s novel, and in Emmy’s honor, I named the main character after her, a fact which made Emmy teary-eyed when Bella and I showed her.

I’ll cherish the memory of that forever. It was the moment I saw Emmy realize she was loved.

“You coming, sunshine, or are you going to make me wallow in my misery alone?”

“You’ll never be alone, Ashford.”

Taking the hand Kieran holds out for me, his other still locked on Emmy's, he pulls his two girls close and whispers in my ear, "I hoped every night when you were in Berlin that you'd say those words to me."

"Your wish came true."

"And it's better than I ever dreamed."

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Author's Note

Gratitude doesn't begin to describe how lucky I feel that the IceHawks series has touched so many hearts. While writing Breaking Point I knew deep within my soul that it was a special book, I'm honoured that so many people thought the same and I hope Fighting Chance lived up to everyone's expectations.

Fighting Chance is such a special story in my heart about second chances because we all deserve one of those at one point in our lives. I was blessed enough to receive two, one in January of 2019 and the other in March 2025, both of which shaped who I am today, helping create the stories I write.

Thank you for reading and loving these characters as much as I do, I see everything and I'm beyond grateful for the love you have all poured into this series alongside me.

I'd love to mention a special thank you to my editor Makenna for always rooting for my characters and their emotional destruction. Thea for our 100+ email chains during the creation of my beautiful cover art and finally, a thank you to myself, for never giving up, younger me would be so proud.

It wouldn't be an author's note if I didn't thank my Lola baby (my fur child) for snoring in the background and woofing at the animals on the balcony while I wrote this book x

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