



for the **FALLING CHARMER**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
S . M . WEST

FALLING FOR THE CHARMER

A SIX LOVES NOVEL

BOOK 5

S.M. WEST

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Also by S.M. West

About the Author

Falling for the Charmer

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Edited: Happily Editing Anns

Cover Design: KiWi Cover Design Co.

Cover Photo: Michelle Lancaster, @langfotograf

Cover Model: Lochie

“We love the things we love for what they are.” – Robert Frost

PLAYLIST

Listen On [Spotify](#).

“transparent soul” – WILLOW, ft. Travis Barker

“If I Fall” – Alicia Moffet

“All is Well” – Hans Williams

“Bad Habit” – Steve Lacy

“I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” – U2

“Seeing Blind” – Niall Horan, Maren Morris

“Run Away to Mars” – TALK

LEIGHTON

I wish I hated my father. If only I did, then all the ways in which he carelessly toys with my heart wouldn't hurt so much. This overbearing crush on my chest or the gut-wrenching spasms in my stomach wouldn't exist.

But, dammit, I love him.

Rupert Price can be a cold, heartless bastard, and I'm still here, forever asking *how can I please you?*

The no-nonsense tone of my father's executive assistant, Lois, cuts through my agonizing thoughts. "Leighton, I've already told you, he can't talk right now."

Two minutes, that's all I need. I'm not asking for much, but I've been put on hold twice for no reason other than Lois is stonewalling and hoping I'll give up.

"I need to talk to him *now*." To ease my raw nerves, I take another gulp of champagne. The effervescent bubbles cause the tickle of a sneeze and my nose twitches.

"He's on a call while on his way to the airport. I can't interrupt, and he doesn't have the time."

He never has time. Not for his daughter. No matter how many times I've heard that familiar refrain in my twenty-four years of life, the prickly point of reality never dulls. I rub at the stabbing ache in my chest.

"Airport?" My picture-perfect reflection glares at me from the bathroom mirror as another reality sets in.

He's abandoning me. Yet again. Why can't I accept that my father lives for his work and nothing else? She expels a prolonged sigh as if talking to me is a chore but offers nothing.

"Lois, where's he going?"

"Home. He has a meeting here in Toronto. First thing tomorrow morning. He can't miss it. I'll get him to call you when he can."

"We're supposed to leave LA tomorrow and drive to Toronto. Together." I slap the empty flute onto the marble countertop, and the fizzy alcohol burns my stomach.

Crack. A tiny fissure spreads along the base of the glass, much like the one widening inside my chest. I'm going to be sick.

"There was no way around it. He needs to be here."

If so, why didn't he tell me?

I spin away from the mirror, disgusted by the pathetic, on-the-brink-of-waterworks girl staring back at me.

Why did I bother with the stylist and makeup crew? They only just left. My entire afternoon was spent primping and priming, and for what? I no longer want to go to this stupid party. I never did. All I want is to crawl into bed and cry.

My lips press together to stifle a sob, and I stomp out of the bathroom. Fallon will be here any minute now.

I shake out my clenched hands. "When did you arrange for his flight?"

Silence, the ever-present third party to our conversation, eats at the dead air hanging between us. She understands the significance of my question. We have a private jet, and this could've been decided at the last minute. That *might* lessen the blow. Though I suspect this flight was planned.

"Lois, you still there?"

"Uh-huh." She smacks her lips followed by another goddamn sigh, and I so wish I could reach my hands through the phone and strangle her. Or more like my father.

“I arranged it”—her clipped professionalism causes the knots in my stomach to tighten—“two days ago. It all happened so fast.”

Two days ago.

The excuses spill from her lying lips. Making excuses for Rupert is her job, and what a drag it must be. He never follows through on his promises, at least not to me.

And there isn't anything she could say to make me understand why my dad didn't tell me about his flight home. Tonight. Especially when we were to leave tomorrow.

What did he say when, in tears, I confessed that I couldn't get on a plane? *“It'll be an adventure, Leighton. A road trip from Los Angeles to Toronto. We'll have all this quality time together.”*

Liar.

“I have to go.” I toss the phone onto the sofa without so much as a goodbye.

I'm nauseous and become more so as I play back last night's dinner.

First of all, dinner was supposed to be only the two of us. But, as usual, it turned into an intimate affair for thirty—us plus his director, the leading stars of his upcoming movie, *Make It So*, and their entourages.

Although we hardly spoke—and in retrospect, that's likely how he planned it—he said nothing about flying back to Toronto.

A hard rap on the hotel door causes the alcohol to bubble up my throat. Time to plaster on a smile. Fallon Kingsley, a former child star and one of Hollywood's up-and-coming actresses, is a close friend and she's here.

When I open the door to my suite, she flings herself at me.

“Oh my God, L.” Her gorgeous blonde hair, heavily scented with hairspray and expensive perfume, smothers my face. “It's been too long.”

I latch on to her, needing the closeness and comfort of another while I fight back the tears. My party-girl persona doesn't want to come out and play.

"It hasn't been that long. We had lunch yesterday." I snicker to cover the croak in my voice and pull away.

My gaze lands on her dress to avoid looking her in the eye. Fallon would rather bathe her wounds in gasoline than let anyone see her hurting. I've got to pull myself together. "Fal, you look to die for."

And she does. Always. Even when drunk off her ass, makeup smudged, and screaming profanities—the press made a killing that night—Fallon's a stunner.

"Are you ready?" She scans me from head to toe, scrutinizing the floral brocade cut-out mini dress I'm wearing. "Cavalli. Nice."

Her shiny, dark-green Bottega Veneta both clings to her body and flows freely in all the right places. Parading into the suite, she immediately spies the champagne and takes a long, healthy swig from the bottle.

The rim rests on her bottom lip as she staggers to the full-length mirror. She's already tipsy, and I gawk, not sure what to say.

For the past few weeks, while in LA, I have had intense therapy sessions to deal with my recent scare, on top of all my other shit, and in the only way I know how to help Fallon, I suggested she give it a try. That got me a massive eye roll before she snorted a line of coke and left me in the bathroom of the restaurant where we were having lunch.

I've had help from a psychologist for nearly two years now. Of course, the sessions in LA were hard for so many reasons, including that my longtime therapist, Doctor Hemming, was in Toronto. But if not for her, I don't know where I'd be. My doctor found someone local to help me deal with recent traumatic events, and when she could, she participated in our sessions virtually.

Movement from Fallon as she stares at her reflection in the full-length mirror brings me back to now. “L, what’s with the pout? We’re going to have fun tonight, no matter what.”

She guzzles more champagne, then slams the bottle onto a nearby table, finger still curled around the bottle. A pale liquid foam bubbles from the bottle and trickles down the side.

Unfazed by her mess—she never is—her glassy gaze nabs mine through the mirror. “Don’t tell me that face has anything to do with Felix...I say fuck ’em.”

Her declaration is less about my so-called boyfriend and more about her on-again, off-again, movie-star boyfriend, Wells Truett. They’ve recently split. Again.

Usually, this is a good thing. When together, their cruel and exhausting mind games inevitably drag anyone orbiting them into their mess.

“Felix has nothing to do with my mood.” Haughtily, I jut out my chin as if it were that easy to erase the disappointment and anger at my father.

Felix is inconsequential even if I’m tired of his self-centered bullshit. I will deal with him tonight.

She flops into an oversized chair, still clutching the bubbly. “Have you talked to him?”

I snort and shake my head. “No. I’ve stopped trying to reach him, but tonight will be different. He won’t be able to ignore me.”

My pulse quickens in anticipation of the face-off with the devilishly handsome dickhead, while Fallon arches a brow, scrutinizing me in a way that makes me twitch.

“But something is wrong. What did the asshole do now?”

“Nothing.” I chew on the inside of my cheek as if that will lessen the need to vent. “It’s my dad. He tossed me aside. Again.”

“No.” She thrashes dramatically from side to side, and I’m grateful for her theatrics.

I quickly swallow back a sob. “He’s flying to Toronto tonight. He won’t be driving with me, and the worst part—I had to hear this from Lois.”

“He did not.”

“Are you really surprised? I don’t even know if I’ll have a car and driver tomorrow. I have to be in Toronto for TIFF.”

For as long as I can remember, I’ve attended Toronto’s International Film Festival. It’s expected of me and a big deal for my father. I have ten days to get there and a day to spare for last-minute details. This is plenty of time to drive from Los Angeles, but that’s if a driver shows up tomorrow. With my father ditching me, everything may have been canceled.

“Why are fathers such dicks?” She stares off into the middle distance, likely stewing about her own absentee father.

“Are you sure you can’t drive back with me?” This isn’t the first time I’ve asked, and while I know the response, I hope something may have changed.

“I can’t. I’ve got the New York press junket.” She smooths down her dress in what feels like a way to avoid my gaze. “L, are you sure you can’t fly home? Take a sleeping pill. It’ll knock you out, and when you wake up, you’ll be there. It’ll be easy peasy. You’ve done it before.”

My heart thunders, battering against my ribs, and beads of sweat gather at the back of my neck. She makes it sound so simple. I have done it before. I hate flying, but things are different now, my fear more intense than ever.

Fallon doesn’t understand. No one does. Everyone thinks I’m making a big deal out of nothing. Being difficult.

My legs shake, and I sink onto the arm of her chair. “Fal, I-I can’t. You were at LAX two weeks ago.”

I shouldn’t have to bring up one of the most paralyzing moments of my life. Fallon dropped me at the airport, she knows. Not even an hour later, I called her to come get me.

No matter how I tried, air wouldn’t fill my lungs. Dark spots filled my vision. I almost passed out. The paramedics

were called, and I shudder at the memory.

Despite all the work I've done with Doctor Hemming, I haven't conquered how to stop the panic from choking me to death.

A soothing hand rubs small circles on my back. "Leighton, you're okay. You don't have to fly home. You're driving." Her assuring tone marshals the bile clawing its way up my throat back down where it belongs.

"That's right." I nod, reminding myself that I don't have to get on a plane. Not now or ever.

She smiles. "Speaking of driving, Tristan will be here any minute now."

Her brother is coming with us tonight, and I'd better finish getting ready. Now on my feet, I walk over to my heels while Fallon sashays over to the mirror once more to apply her ruby-red Dior lipstick.

There's a knock at the door, and Fallon's closest though she doesn't give any indication she'll get it. Lipstick tube in hand, she spins to survey the room. "Where's my wristlet?"

The sparkling thing rests on the table beside her, and I point to it as another bang rattles me. I pause with one foot sliding into a high heel and wonder if I need to answer it.

She riffles through her small purse, and my annoyance bursts free. "Are you going to get that or do I have to?"

Her brow quirks again. Surprised at my challenging tone? Or amused? "Yup." She emphasizes the *p* with a pop and smiles in that way of hers, dripping with tooth-aching sugariness. "It's just Tristan. Relax."

Satisfied, my gaze falls to my shoe situation, but I snap my head in the direction of the door at Fallon's seductive, "Hello."

She grabs a fistful of the white T-shirt hugging a chiseled chest. It isn't Tristan.

A blond guy in board shorts, flip-flops, and though it's well past nine at night, sunglasses on top of his head stands in

the doorway. He points at Fallon, smile growing by the second, and readily allows her to drag him into the suite.

“Hey. Aren’t you from *Wicked Games*?” He points at her.

She eye fucks him, teeth sinking into her bottom lip. “I sure am. Fallon Kingsley.” She thrusts her hand out. “And who are you?”

He guides her hand to his mouth, and I purse my lips in distaste as his lips brush her knuckles. “I’m Tom.”

“Tom, do you wanna come to a party?” Like a flea on a dog, she burrows nearer to him, and her pink fingernail scores a path from his collar down the middle of his defined chest.

In the wake of her touch, his defined pectorals jump. My eyes glue to his hardening nipples and twitching muscles, easily visible through his threadbare shirt.

“Sounds like fun, but I’m working.” His eyes sparkle with mischief when he glances at me, and my cheeks heat. “Are you Leighton Price?”

I stumble forward as my foot settles into my high heel, and he lunges to break my fall. A warm, strong hand wraps around my bicep, and my stomach lurches. Equal parts mortified at my near tumble and puzzled at how he knows my name.

“That’s me.”

Like a shadow, Fallon’s close to him, hands all over him. Undoubtedly staking her claim. “No fair. L, you’ve got Felix. Let me have this one.”

He smirks, unperturbed, possibly even enjoying the attention.

“Who are you?” I pull my arm from his gentle grasp and cross both over my chest.

His gaze dips to my breasts and the not-so-subtle hint of cleavage. Impulsively, I tense and drop my arms to my sides. Heat spreads across my cheeks, and I grit my teeth.

Every once in a while, I enjoy the appreciation of a stranger. Who doesn’t? But I don’t want his attention. Fallon

unapologetically ogled him, leaving no doubt to her intentions —she'd screw him in front of me and get off on it. He might too—I want him gone.

This guy doesn't belong here with us. His blindingly perfect smile, tousled blond surfer hair, and laid-back vibe belongs at Ocean Park, Redondo, or Manhattan Beach.

“Hi, Leighton. I'm Tom Raine.” He extends his hand, and when I don't move to shake it, he shrugs. “I'm with ACE. Your driver to Toronto.”

My stomach pitches. I should be elated that Lois didn't cancel the driver and my plans for tomorrow still stand even with my father's desertion. But for some reason, deep in my bones, I fear nothing good can come of this. As much as I want to get home, I don't want it to be with this guy.

Hell no.

Something about him rankles me. His shaped torso and biceps appear effortless like he's never stepped foot in a gym. Everything about him seems too easy...too attractive in a Ryan Reynolds kind of way.

“L, you're one lucky girl. If I didn't have the press junket, I'd join you. Think of the fun we'd have.” She laughs and grabs his hand.

His smile remains, though thankfully, the wattage dims. Is he bored or bothered by being treated like a piece of meat?

I straighten my spine. “You don't look like a driver. Do you have any proof? A work ID or something?”

“Nothing official. Just an email from Gus, um, August Bradshaw, the owner of ACE.” He pulls from Fallon's grasp. “He asked me to come by tonight and introduce myself, cover the start time and anything else. There was a last-minute change.”

He hands me a generic ACE business card, and next to the main number, scrawled in pen, is a phone number with his name beside it. Eyes back on his phone, he scrolls. “Yeah, it was supposed to be you and, uh, Mr. Rupert Price, but he's no longer going to be with us, right?” His questioning blue eyes

bore into me, and I swallow past the growing lump in my throat.

I nod, unable to form any words. He doesn't seem to notice or care. "Great. What time did you want to hit the road?"

"I'm not functional before ten so—" My voice sounds stiff, not mine, and Fallon cuts me off. "Let's talk about this on the way to the party. You're coming, Tom, right?"

"No." He flashes her a tight smile, then nothing for me. "I'll be here at ten."

Her phone chimes and she pulls it from her wristlet. "Shit. Tristan isn't coming. Apparently, he's not up to it." She mocks a baby voice and rolls her eyes. "L, we don't have a ride." Then she turns to Tom. "You have to take us to the party. And who knows, maybe you'll change your mind and stay."

I want to object, but we need a ride. The sooner, the better.

He rakes a hand through his golden hair. "Not going to the party and I can't—"

I cut him off. "Drive us to the party. There'll be an extra tip in it for you."

Inwardly, I cringe at how demanding I sound, and clearly, he isn't impressed either given how he screws up his face. I've offended him, and that wasn't my intention. Even still, I can't bring myself to say so or at the very least, apologize. My skin heats and twitches in an unsettling way, and all I can attribute it to is this guy. Tom.

He clears his throat. "That won't be necessary. I'll bring the car up front."

"I insist on tipping you. This isn't part of the job." And here I go adding insult to injury. Why can't I shut up?

His blue eyes, now icy, narrow. "Yes, ma'am."

I hate that he calls me "ma'am" and something tells me that's why he did it.

TOM

The women giggle in the back seat of the Bentley Bentayga, just one of the uber-luxurious SUVs among ACE's fleet. My best friend, Gus, owns the private car service Leighton hired, and if nothing else, it's going to be a sweet ride to Toronto.

Fallon finishes the Dom Perignon she insisted on bringing into the car. Short of wrestling her to the ground for the bottle, I tried to stop her but relented before she made a scene outside of the Chateau Marmont.

Leighton, the dark-haired one and my client, never touched the stuff. She was tight-lipped and reserved for the entire ride. Something tells me it'll be a challenge to be stuck with her for the next few days.

While Fallon is a handful, I wonder if Leighton has any clue how to loosen up and have a good time. I'm curious how these two are friends.

The car crawls up the driveway of the Beverly Hills address Fallon rattled off outside the hotel. "Ladies, we're here."

"Yes!" The blonde catapults across her friend's lap to peer out the window at the Spanish-style mansion.

The expansive house and grounds shine like candles on a birthday cake. Every light in the house is on. Music and chatter blast in through the open car windows, along with the sultry California night air.

Two white-gloved, uniformed individuals open the back passenger doors as each car reaches the front of the house. The guests are greeted with their choice of champagne or shots and then ushered into the mansion.

Next up, I advance the car, and Fallon leans forward until her boobs press into my bicep. Curling around me, she places her hand on my chest, and her mouth is only inches from my jaw.

“Tom, you have to stay.” Pupils glassy and dilated from the alcohol, her warm, toasty breath hits my nostrils.

“I got you here. This is where my night ends.”

Not even three weeks ago and for more than a year, I was halfway around the world. Away from a first-world lifestyle, though even this, Fallon and Leighton’s world, isn’t exactly accessible to the everyday person.

And somewhere during that time, I’d forgotten how entitled people can be. So forward, taking whatever they want. This woman can’t keep her hands to herself.

“Aww, I figured you’d be more fun.” She kisses my cheek and lingers, lips hot against my stubble, a little longer than is acceptable. “You’ve been a dream.”

She wants to fuck me and isn’t subtle about it. As tempting as that is—she’s hot and something tells me down for anything—August would kill me if I fucked a client, or even a friend of a client.

I won’t screw over my best friend. But, more importantly, I’m not feeling it. That in itself is funny given I’ve got a healthy sexual appetite at the age of twenty-seven.

Yet, I’ve only had one regular, albeit short, casual hookup in the past thirteen months. It lasted for three months, and when her volunteer stint was up, she went back to France. There hasn’t been anyone since.

I should want to get laid. I *do* want to get laid, but not by Fallon Kingsley. She’s more trouble than she’s worth, not even for the bragging rights.

The rear passenger door closest to the house opens for the ladies to exit. Fallon dips back onto her seat as an attendant offers a warm welcome and a hand to the brunette.

Leighton takes the gloved hand, slips a high-heeled foot onto the pavement, and pauses to catch my eye. “See you in the morning.”

I hesitate, not wanting to stick around but also unsure if she can handle her less than sober friend. “Will you be okay to get back to the hotel?”

The well-put-together, raven-haired beauty offers a terse nod, and as if to reinforce my concern, Fallon stumbles out after her. Hurriedly, I remove my seat belt and grab for the door handle, ready to help. Thankfully, one of the greeters has quick reflexes, and he catches the actress before she falls flat on her face.

Leighton gasps, scrunches her cute nose, and slides an arm around her drunk friend. Someone closes the back door to the SUV, and I no longer have a clear view. It’s just as well. Babysitting two self-entitled socialites isn’t what I agreed to when I offered to help Gus.

On the freeway, cruising to my hotel, I contemplate my decision to get a room in Venice Beach and not closer to the famous Sunset Boulevard hotel where Leighton’s staying. But after the flight, picking up the car, and contacting the client, I wanted to chill on the beach. I only wish it was earlier in the evening.

My phone rings, and the car’s dashboard lights up with my sister’s name.

“Hey, Claire, what’s up?” I glance at the clock and do the quick math. Toronto is three hours ahead, and it’s after one in the morning for her. “You’re up late. Are you at work?”

She’s doing her residency and works crazy hours. “Hi. No, I just left the hospital. On my way home. I can’t wait to snuggle up next to Matt. He’s so big and warm—”

“Enough. I get it.” I groan, not wanting to hear any more about my sister and her fiancé, even if I like the guy.

“Fine.” She giggles, relishing how I squirmed, and this is why she overshares. “It’s just as late for you. What are you doing?”

“Ah, but it’s only after ten where I am.” I switch lanes. “I’m not in Toronto.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m in LA.”

“What? You just got back and you take off again. Why LA?” Claire’s indignation pinches at my chest.

For the past year, I’ve been volunteering in Africa with Project Miranda, a not-for-profit venture to turn salt water into freshwater. Since coming home, only weeks ago, I’ve spent a lot of time with my family. They threw not one, but two welcome home parties, and then we all spent a week at the cottage.

I loved it, but when all was said and done, everyone went back to their lives, their jobs. And me... I didn’t have anything to go back to. That’s why I took this job.

“I’m helping out Gus by driving a client from Los Angeles to Toronto.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were going out of town?”

“Last I checked, you aren’t my mom.”

She huffs and I can almost see her eyes rolling. “Fine, but you didn’t tell her either. Mom thinks you’re at home.”

I grimace. “I’ll call her in the morning.”

“You should or I will, and you know how that’ll go.”

I can’t help but smile. In a weird kind of way, I’ve missed this. My sister busting my balls. Claire’s only a year older—I’m the youngest of four—and while we give each other a hard time, we’re also tight.

“Claire-Bear, was there a reason you called?”

“Nice change of topic. Matt and I wanted to invite you for dinner tomorrow. I’m off for a couple of days, and he’s fine-

tuning the menu for the opening, but now I see you can't if you're in LA."

"Nope. Raincheck?"

Her fiancé is a retired professional quarterback turned occasional sports commentator and aspiring chef/restaurateur. Under the tutelage of Samson Beaulieu, a celebrity chef and close family friend, he's opening his own restaurant in Toronto a little over a week from now. When I told Gus I'd help him out with this drive, I made it clear that I needed to be back in time for Matt's opening.

"Maybe. I'm not so sure you deserve his culinary delights." She laughs at her poor joke. "I don't know; we'll see if we can figure out another time before things get crazy..."

While she trails off, most probably thinking about all that's to come, I figure I've lost my chance at a phenomenal meal. My mouth waters and stomach growls at the thought of Matt's cooking. It has been a few hours since I had my In-N-Out burger.

"Now I want to jump on a plane and be there for tomorrow's meal." I pause to stave off my pangs of hunger. "How's it going with the wedding? Is there a lot to do?"

As soon as the question is out of my mouth, I cringe. *Stupid*. Of course there is. The salty sea air drifts in through the open windows.

"I'm feeling great about the wedding." She releases a long, wistful sigh, and I detect the upward curl to her lips. "It's everything else that's insane, but the planner and Mom are taking care of most of it. I don't care about any of that, only Matt. We could get married in a pigsty and I'd be over the moon."

Barking out a laugh, I slide the car into park and stare at the beachfront hotel. "I get it. He's the one for you. But you've got a lot going on all at once. I mean, the restaurant opening and then your wedding only a couple of weeks later."

"Stop. I know we're insane, but I wouldn't have it any other way. I was tired of waiting. Residency is never-ending,

and with the official restaurant opening two months away, Matt will be even busier than he is now. There's never gonna be a quiet time to get married, so we figured, why not."

She laughs, though it isn't all lighthearted, and I sense a touch of nerves. I can't blame her. Matt and Claire are different in many ways, but both are overachievers. In addition to the soft opening, the official grand opening is a couple of months out from their wedding. Not to mention Matt's catering their wedding, and together, with Claire, they're making the cake and desserts.

"Everything will be perfect, and I'm just glad I'll be there for both restaurant openings and the wedding."

"There was no way I was getting married without you there. You're my best person or did you forget?"

"Never."

"Good. How long will you be gone, and why does Gus need your help?"

"There was a mix-up with a booking and no driver was assigned. If it wasn't for the client making a change to the reservation, Gus wouldn't have found out until it was too late."

"Oh, shoot. Did he freak out?"

"Sort of. You know him, his business is his life. I think what really ticked him off was Brent. He fucked up. He booked the job, even charged the client a hefty price tag, but didn't bother to book a driver."

Brent's his business partner and also our housemate. Weirdly enough, I haven't seen him since my welcome home party, and Gus says that's the new norm.

"Did Brent explain what happened?"

I scoff, get out of the car, and lock it. "He's never at the house. Gus can't get ahold of him."

"Hmmm."

"What?"

“I don’t know. While you were gone, August mentioned how Brent had changed. More of a flake than usual. I just wonder what’s going on with him.”

“Gus can’t complain. I told him it was a bad idea to go into business with Brent.”

“I thought he was your friend.”

“He is, I guess. I met him through Gus, and while we all live together, he’s always taking advantage of people or whatever the situation is, you know.”

“I feel bad for August.”

“Yeah, me too.” I saunter toward the hypnotic sounds of the waves lapping against the shore.

“It was nice of you to help, but are you sure you want to spend a few days behind the wheel? Don’t you have better things to do with your time?”

I can’t help but bristle even if I doubt she meant anything by her question. “My time.” I release a humorless laugh. “Claire, I’m jobless and bored out of my skull. You know, it’s strange. I wanted to come back home; it was time, but...”

“But what?” Her voice is soft and gentle as if she knows what I might say next is something I’m not ready to admit.

If there’s anyone in my family I can say this to, it’s her.

“Do you think it’s possible to go mad from boredom?” I slip off my sandals and dip a foot in the warm sand.

“What do you mean?”

“I took this gig because I’m losing it with nothing to do. When I was in Africa, my days were long and grueling...go, go, go, but also rewarding. I knew I wouldn’t have a job to come home to, but I figured I’d find something. And I know it’s only been three weeks, and these things take time, but I hate it.”

“Being home or not having anything to do?”

“I want to be home. I think. Did you know Paige asked me if I wanted to do another stint?”

Paige is the founder of Project Miranda and my sister Pippa's best friend.

“Really? Do you want to go back?”

“I'm not sure. I missed all of you and the creature comforts, but if I don't find something to give me purpose...” I laugh nervously and drop onto the beach. “I'm not so sure there's a reason for me to stick around.”

Since graduating from university, I have fought the age-old conventions of getting a job, finding a partner, buying a home, and all that other bullshit. That isn't for me, or more, I didn't want to wake up one day miserable and questioning how I got there.

“We'd miss you. We all did while you were gone, and I get it.” The rattle of keys and the closing of a car door on Claire's end of the line echoes the handful of calls we've had over the past year, many miles and time zones apart.

“Tom, you've spent months doing something worthwhile, and now, it isn't so easy to slip back into your old life...your old ways.”

“Yeah.” I can't bring myself to say it out loud but have to. “Before now, I didn't want to take on any real responsibility. I didn't give a shit about anything, and look where it's gotten me.”

My siblings, Finn, Pippa, and Claire, are highly competitive whereas I've been too laid-back. Things came too easily to me. Straight As, a solid all-star athlete, top of my class in university.

“Hey, it isn't too late to change all that.” Claire pauses, and I'm not sure what she expects me to say. If only I knew what I wanted. “Tom, I'm sorry I brought it up, but I truly believe you'll figure it out.”

I grunt and run my free hand through the damp grains of sand while staring out at the dark ocean.

“Hey, before I let you go...” Claire suddenly sounds more upbeat, even playful.

“What?”

“Who chooses to drive from LA to Toronto? If the client’s wealthy, why wouldn’t they fly?”

I hear the smile in her words, and I’m grateful for the shift in our chat. “I dunno. It’s an excellent question and one I’ve been wondering too.”

Leighton, the polished woman from earlier tonight, springs to mind. She doesn’t strike me as one to prolong anything.

“I can’t imagine many people with the means would sign up for a road trip like this.” My sister’s curiosity, something strong and innate in her, is piqued and easily recognizable in the upbeat lilt to her voice.

“You’re right. Gus said it’s rare to get a booking for a long haul. Most people don’t want to give up the time. It’s way faster to fly.”

“Maybe it’s a fear of flying?”

“Maybe.”

“Did you know most people refer to the condition as aerophobia but the technical name is aviophobia, and it’s more common than you’d think. It adversely affects mil—”

“Claire,” I groan. She’s famous for dropping random facts into a conversation no matter if it’s interesting, appropriate, or otherwise.

“What?” She sounds genuinely perplexed and I’m a jerk. She means no harm.

“Thanks for that, but I should go now. I’m tired.” I bite my tongue to keep the smart-ass in me from tacking on, “And I don’t care.”

We say our goodbyes, and I promise to let her know when I’m back in Toronto and that I’ll call Mom.

Then I sit on the beach for close to an hour, trying to figure out what I’ll do once done with this drive for Gus. Paige’s proposition to return to Project Miranda is tempting but also too convenient.

Africa doesn't solve anything.

Wouldn't I be doing what I always do, taking the easy way out and only delaying the inevitable?

It's time for me to grow up and commit to something other than a good time.

With heavy eyelids, I drag my ass to the hotel room, shower, and slip into the bed. My head no sooner hits the pillow than the phone rings.

"Fuck." It's an unknown number, and normally I wouldn't answer it, but since I'm away from home and on a job, I should get it. "Hello."

"Tom? Tim?" A familiar voice stumbles over my name. "This is Leighton Price, and I need you to drive me home."

"What?" I push up on my elbow and flick on the nightstand lamp. "It's past midnight."

"I'm fully aware of what time it is," she snaps. "I don't have a ride. Are you my driver or not?"

"Well, if I'm your driver, it would help if you remembered my name. It's Tom." I pause to give her time to apologize or make light of the mix-up. Nothing.

Rankled, I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Uh, have you ever heard of a taxi, or maybe an Uber or Lyft?" Usually this would be a joke—I can't resist having some fun—but I sound more snarky or annoyed. This isn't like me.

I'm tired.

And this woman.

Even if Leighton Price and I will never be friends—she isn't my kind of person—I believe in letting people be so long as they aren't hurting anyone. Also, she's the client.

Before I can apologize, she orders, "Come get me now or forget driving me tomorrow. I'll find another car service."

Bristling at her clipped tone, I grit my teeth, more ticked off at myself for letting fatigue get the better of me. Gus needs this job.

While his business is doing well, it's still in its infancy, and success is a fine balance. I refuse to be the reason he loses this kind of cash infusion.

My body groans in protest as I swing my legs out of bed. "I'm on my way."

It's going to be a long night.

LEIGHTON

The endless tap, tap, tap of my red-soled heels on the driveway feeds my impatience or is it my regret? I was rude to Tom. I shouldn't have been, although maybe he's making me pay for it by making me wait.

I called him nearly an hour ago, and he still isn't here. Even still, I'm upset with Fallon for ditching me. Everyone in my life seems to have no problem ignoring or abandoning me.

A Hollywood A-lister sways, zigzag-like, from the house toward me, much in the way one's supposed to run from an alligator. Except this guy is slow and sloppy, and my feet tingle with the urge to flee.

I stiffen, increasing the tempo of my shoe against the ground. If only the world could see the once-named sexiest man alive, considered a box-office slam dunk, now.

He makes my skin crawl. At twice my age, he doesn't know how to hold his liquor or keep his hands to himself. I'd sooner eat my puke than let him touch me.

"Not interested, Mitchell. Get lost."

"Oh, so cold." He attempts a mock shiver and nearly topples over. Pity he's able to muster enough control to stay on his feet but not heed my wishes. He reaches for me. "Why you gotta be like that?"

Given his inebriated state, a simple sidestep is all it takes to evade his clutches. Could I deck him without bruising my

hand or chipping a nail? I feed on my irritation and growl at him, if only to bury my fear.

For now, I have the upper hand, but things could just as easily change. So much could go wrong. The attendants from earlier in the evening are gone, and the loud music, laughter, and conversation emanating from the house would easily drown out a cry for help. It's just the two of us out here.

A grabby, drunken, self-entitled asshole and me.

Bright headlights and the soft purr of an engine inject hope into my lungs, but I don't dare tear my gaze from the jerk leering at me. Then there's that voice, his deep rumble as he nears, and my erratic heart rate immediately slows.

"Hey, darling." Tom sidles up to me and wraps an arm around my waist. "Sorry I am late."

What is he doing? I freeze, torn between sinking into him or pushing him away. Before I can react or say anything, his head dips toward mine, and his scruff scrapes at my cheek.

What on earth? His mouth lightly brushes mine. His lips are soft and warm. And then it's over. The kiss is so quick.

Hints of minty freshness, a rainstorm, and an undeniable masculine scent linger and fill my nostrils all at once. It's all too much. The heat of him, his strong, solid body so close and comforting. All of it short circuits my brain.

But the potent stench of whiskey slices through the alluring smells and causes me to snap out of my stupor.

Mr. Hollywood is only a foot from us, listing to one side. "Who's this? Jeff Spicoli?"

I stifle a snort born from equal parts fear-induced adrenaline and relief. Or maybe my bravado and the ability to find the humor in this has something to do with the man holding me?

Even plastered, Mitchell is a master at delivering lines. I steal a glimpse at Tom. Still close, still gripping me. With his board shorts, faded T-shirt, tan, and tousled blond hair, he could be the iconic surfer from *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*.

Tom wears a grim expression, gaze fixed on Mitchell. This is the first time in our short time knowing each other that I've seen him anything but smiling and lighthearted. And it's plain to see that he finds nothing about Mitchell funny.

His fingers dig possessively into my hip. "Is there a problem?"

I think the question is for me, but his glare intensifies. If he could incinerate Mitchell just by looking at him, the man would be ash.

Tom releases his hold on me and walks toward the drunken actor. I internally weep at the growing distance between us though there's no time to dwell on the loss. When he's practically nose to nose with Mitchell, he finally stops.

Mitchell pales and peers at me over Tom's shoulder. I have to admit, scared and cowering looks good on him.

"Look, I was only keeping Leighton company." The jerk stumbles backward, evidently trying to get away, but in his inebriated state, he nearly falls. Neither Tom nor I make a move to help him.

"I didn't know she was with someone." He's waving a hand in my direction but not willing to look at either of us. "Sorry, bro. No harm, no foul." He nervously laughs, feet still inching away.

Tom's fake boyfriend move is working. The human dung beetle scuttles back to whatever hole he climbed out of. Then we're alone, and the ghost of Tom's steady touch around my waist sends a shiver down my spine.

He turns to face me, and our gazes lock as off in the distance, someone—most probably Mitchell—unleashes a loud, disgusting burp.

We both grimace, but Tom quickly recovers. "Are you all right?"

His crystal-blue eyes darken the longer he studies my face. My answer rests on the tip of my tongue, but I can't seem to find the words. I want to act like nothing happened. The kiss,

his arm around me, his body pressing into my back. Erase it from my mind. As if it were that easy.

I should thank him for getting here when he did. But he didn't have to rescue me and make it seem so effortless at that. I had it under control, my jittery hands and wobbly knees aside.

"Leighton, he didn't try anything, did he?" He frowns, voice soft and concerned.

"No." I scurry toward the car, his heavy footsteps close behind. "Let's go."

Once at the car, we stare at each other over the hood, the air thick and loaded. It's as if he wants to say something but thinks better of it. And me? Of all the things I could say, I've chosen to not comment at all.

Just great.

He makes a slow sweep of the area. "Where's Fal... I mean, Ms. Kingsley?"

"Not here." I slip into the back and slam the door.

My friend bailed with a rock star not long after we arrived. And Felix? He was a no-show, or if he was here, he ignored my texts. I should have stayed at the hotel tonight. Jaw tightening, I grind my teeth together as if it were that easy to squash all the jerks who left me tonight.

Except not everyone *left* me. Tom showed up when I called. He even went further than that and stood up for me with Mitchell.

My insides churn, and I'm not sure if it's a giddy euphoria, finally knowing what it feels like to have someone at your back, both figuratively and literally. Or is this nervous indignation? Of all people to be there for me, it's the driver.

Tom takes a few minutes before he finally gets into the car and drives away from the house.

His fingers skip along the steering wheel as he glances at me in the rearview mirror. "Leigh—er, sorry, Ms. Price. I'm

sorry about what happened back there. I was out of line. But when I pulled up, things looked all wrong. That guy—”

I snap my head to the window, unable to look at him and not think about his lips, and stop him from saying any more. “Forget about it.”

My shoulders tense, and I ready for him to ignore me and keep talking. But he doesn't. I steal a glance at him. Blues, oranges, and reds from the night lights outside shade his features.

We sit like that for what feels like forever but might be only seconds. I stare for far too long, teeming with an uneasy sense of gratitude and relief. Usually, I have to take care of myself. No one looks out for me unless there's something in it for them.

My sex throbs and core heats. I rub my thighs together to settle the burgeoning ache and wrestle with the fact that I might be horny. How wrong is that? Tom didn't have to help, and the boyfriend act...

He kissed me, got really close. He could've scared off Mitchell with far less...interaction.

If Tom senses my eyes on him, he gives no indication. His attention remains fixed on the road. I should keep my mouth shut. Let the drive to the hotel pass in silence. But I don't.

My father, Fallon, and even Felix crowd my head, and I can't help but feel pitiful. “It took you long enough to get there.”

“I got here as fast as I could.”

His nonchalant shrug stokes my desire to wage a war, but truth be told, he isn't the one I want to battle. He's conveniently the only one here, and isn't that ironic?

This complete stranger—far too easy on the eyes and too kind for his own good—was the only one who didn't abandon me tonight.

Tom could've refused to pick me up regardless of my threat to find another car service. I was screwing myself over

just as much as him with that one. Who knows if I could get another driver for tomorrow at such short notice?

His roguish gaze snags mine in the rearview mirror. “I’m staying in Venice Beach, and when you called, I was in bed.”

There isn’t a smidge of contrition to his tone and though I should care—want to feed this fight, release all this pent-up frustration and disappointment—I don’t.

“*I was in bed*” runs circles around my head, and flashes of Tom, torso naked and cut, the sheet falling dangerously low across his tapered hips, chase the same loop.

My cheeks burn and fingers prickle with a desire to touch him. I could have touched him when I was in his arms. When he kissed me.

What? No, no, no.

I shake away those naughty thoughts, squeezing my eyes shut, and try to ignore how my core heats. Instead, I focus on the dull throb at my temples, and the promise of a headache springs to the forefront.

Head against the headrest, I focus on the smooth drive, and eventually, it lulls me into relaxation.

When we arrive at the Chateau Marmont, Tom opens my car door, and wordlessly, I slide out, avoiding eye contact. “Good night.”

“Wait, Leighton.” He jogs the few steps to me, and the sudden proximity causes my knees to weaken.

“Leighton?” I stab him with a glare if only to hide my physical reaction to him. “Look, you helped me out tonight and I appreciate it. I really do. But this doesn’t make us friends.”

Before I can say anymore, he cuts me off. “Right. Sorry. Ms. Price.” He scratches at the back of his neck, and I wish he’d scratch my eyes out for my snooty response. What is my problem?

It isn’t his fault I’ve had a shitty night and an even shittier month. It isn’t his fault that my life isn’t mine.

Instead, he smiles softly. “Let me walk you to your room. It’s late.”

A burgeoning knot of guilt pricks at my chest. I dragged him out of bed, have been nothing but irritable and nasty, and he’s being kind to me. Why?

For the first time since he picked me up from the party, I notice the tiny lines of fatigue around his eyes and mouth, and something inside me softens.

“It’s okay. I’ll be fine.” I turn to walk away but stop and force myself to grab his arm.

My fingers curl around his solid forearm. This was a mistake. My cheeks instantly heat at our connection. His skin on mine causes tingles in the palm of my hand, the sensation growing as it spreads through my body. Hot and buzzing.

It’s embarrassing and unwanted, but still, I can’t flee. “Tom, thank you for everything. Taking us to the party, picking me up. Mitchell.” I shake my head, not wanting to give that disgusting man any more brain power. “Have a good night and see you in the morning.”

I reluctantly drop my arm and force my steps to stay at a slow and steady pace even if I want to run as fast as I can just in case he comes to his senses and tells me where to go.

Once again, he surprises me. “Ms. Price, it was my pleasure.”

LEIGHTON

A heavy banging drills into my skull and I groan, flipping my eye mask onto my forehead. What the hell is that racket? The knocking starts again. Someone's at the door to my suite.

Dazedly, I trudge from the bed to the door, only stopping to grab my robe. Half asleep but with it enough, I check the peephole. Damn.

I yank open the door and glower at a freshly shaved and showered Tom. "What?"

His sparkly blue eyes deepen a shade as he peruses me from head to toe. I can only imagine what he must think of my appearance. Linen robe open, barely hiding my silk camisole and lace panties. Eye mask like a bandanna around my head and my face a canvas of last night's makeup, easily replicating a Pollock. Hastily securing my robe with the sash, I finger comb my unruly hair.

"Good morning, Ms. Price. I know we agreed on ten, but I gave you a little more time since you got in late last night. It's almost ten thirty."

"What? I—" My mounting protest fades when he hands me a large coffee.

Our fingers brush, and a blaze of heat and hunger spark within me. Abruptly, I spin on my heel, needing the space, and he follows me into the room. "Just how you like it. Black, right?"

How does he know how I like my coffee?

As if reading my mind, his eyes dip to the drink in my hand. “I asked the hotel.”

Why is he being so nice? No one is this nice.

“I need an hour.”

The smoky aroma of nuts and herbs hit my nostrils as I take my first sip. *Ah, yes.* Nirvana is short-lived as the shrill ringing of my phone causes me to jump and nearly spill the hot beverage over myself.

“Dammit.” I scurry to the bedroom, suddenly tense with anticipation.

It could be my father calling to apologize. Or it could be Felix with an explanation for his terrible behavior, which is less important but still would be appreciated.

The small flicker of hope dies at the name on the screen. It’s Margot, also known as my mother.

Nope. Not answering. The call can go to voicemail.

Stuffing the device in my robe pocket, I whip off my eye mask, take another long sip of the coffee, and amble back to the living room.

Tom’s in the middle of the room, looking around, when my phone rings again. He arches a blond brow, studying me as I waffle on whether to answer it or accept she will continue to call until I eventually pick up.

I shiver at the thought and my surrender is immediate. “Hello.”

“Leighton, where are you?” My mother’s slur douses any hope that she is sober.

Why do I bother to hope for any other outcome? She has been like this for more than half my life.

“At the Marmont. Why?”

“Aren’t you driving home today?”

“Yes. We haven’t left yet. Is everything okay?”

“Your father asked me to call. He’s so busy with one call right after the other since getting in early this morning.”

Calls? Lois said he had a meeting. She made it sound like it was in person. Why else would he fly back last night? He could have taken calls from here, and we could have driven back together like originally planned.

“Was one of those calls the meeting he flew back for?” My nerve endings burn, and my muscles coil tight, anxious for the truth.

Although, truth be told, I already know. I’ve been in this position far too many times before.

A rustling over the line paints an all too familiar picture. Margot in bed, pillows everywhere and a small pharmacy on the table next to her. “Yes. Why does it matter?”

Her answer is a kick to the gut, but I push for more. “He didn’t go to the meeting in person?”

“He’s sorry he couldn’t drive back with you.” She ignores my question more than likely because she knows what I’m getting at. Yet it’s the compassion and maybe even remorse in her voice, so genuine, that causes something in my chest to crack.

I rub at the center of my breastbone and will my heart rate to slow. If she was here right now, she’d wrap her bony arms around me and squeeze tight. Comfort me like she so often did when I was a child.

Like me, we’ve both been left behind by my father, replaced by his work. But then again, maybe her empathy is part of the role she must play. After all, she’s an amazing actress.

I force out a sound. “Uh-huh.”

Even under the influence, she doesn’t miss a thing and huffs at my disbelieving affirmation. “Leighton, your father wants you to get on a plane. Lois can get you home in time for dinner.”

Of course, like Lois, my mother does anything my father asks, even his dirty work. The woman lives for him, though I'm surprised she still has any feelings. Margot hasn't *felt* anything since I was ten.

"No. I'm driving. I'll be home in a few days."

"Leighton, you haven't even decided on a dress for TIFF. You're wasting time with this drive. It's exhausting. Your father said to get on a damn plane and stop this."

"I can't." I slump onto the couch and close my eyes, if only to block out Tom's scrutiny. "He doesn't understand and neither do you."

"You're being completely unreasonable. Difficult. I understand you wanted some time with your father; believe me, I get it. But this isn't the way to go about it."

A solitary tear falls from the corner of my eye, then another, and I open my eyes, ready to face the strange yet attractive man watching me barely keep it together.

My insides roil. Thankfully, he's no longer there. He must be on the balcony, perhaps to give me privacy, and I appreciate the gesture.

"Mom, I have to go. I'll text you once I'm on the road." I end the call and turn off the phone.

Once a famous actress, often called the next Meryl Streep, my mother left the silver screen when I hit double digits in age. At my father's request.

By that time, he was already an award-winning, internationally acclaimed filmmaker, both directing and producing movies. More and more, he was playing a key role in making Canada, principally Toronto and Vancouver, Hollywood North, and insisted he have my mother at his side.

Giving up her passion—she blossomed on the screen—killed something vital in her and yet, as much as it hurt her to do it, she loved my father more. Almost overnight, she went from a tour de force performer to a marionette. Mute and motionless and eventually, she was diagnosed as clinically depressed. Now, she self-medicates. All the time.

“You okay?” Tom now stands only feet from me, and I startle.

When did he come inside?

Angrily, I wipe at my tears. “I need to get ready. My bags are packed. Take them to the car.”

Ashamed that he saw me crying, I stride into the bedroom and slam the door.

In a little over an hour, Tom wipes beads of sweat from his brow after securing my final Louis Vuitton bag in the back of the car.

“Is this it?” He surveys my luggage, packed Jenga-style, with his hands out and ready to catch anything that might fall.

“I have one more.” I hold out my carry-on. “But I’ll keep it with me in the back.”

He closes the back liftgate on the SUV, and I make the mistake of placing my hand on his arm but quickly pull it away. There it is again. A buzzing sensation pulses to life in my fingers as if our connection is electric. A live wire.

Abrupt and exaggerated, I scramble backward, putting some much needed space between us. Expression quizzical, he waits for me to say more.

“I need a picture.” Phone out, I snap a selfie with my belongings crammed into the SUV behind me. A bright, over-the-top smile plasters my face.

Cheeks tight and aching, I seek out a quiet spot for another, more subdued selfie while he moves his displaced bag to the front seat. I upload both shots to my social media accounts. One approved and the other a secret. For the family sanctioned post, I type out:

Road trip! So long LA. Until next time! xo

For my other account, I’ll use some of the time on the drive to type out my thoughts. Tom waits by the back passenger door, clearly amused if his smirk is any indication.

His chin dips toward my phone. “Do you do that often?”

A flush travels up my neck. I'm not sure if it's because I'm tickled that he cares to ask or because I suddenly feel self-conscious. Defensive even.

“Do what? Take selfies or use my phone?” My tone drips with sarcasm.

“I deserved that.” The corners of his mouth twitch, holding back his grin. “Take selfies.”

“So what if I do?” I sniff and toss my long hair over a shoulder, hoping my attitude will shut him up.

He couldn't begin to understand why I do it, and he strikes me as someone who wouldn't care about my four hundred thousand followers on one account, and nearly double on my alias.

I may not be famous in my own right, but over the years, I've cultivated a following based on who my parents are, the people I hang out with, and for what I share. Today, I'm known for my fashion, beauty, and lifestyle content. Well, that's on my Leighton Price account.

At first, it was hard to have my mother and publicist review, edit, and approve everything. Their stifling control and scrutiny, along with an impromptu invite to a life-changing event, led to the creation of my second account that's just for me and my followers. The outlet I need.

He continues to stare, mouth twisted into a wry grin, and it's unnerving. My blood boils. Still, I can't tell if it's due to the unpredictable yet receptive way I react to him or because I itch to balance this playing field and return my own judgement.

I eye him critically. “Is this how you're driving?”

Again with the board shorts, and this time a slate-gray T-shirt that makes his blue eyes bluer, if that's even possible. Surfer all the way. *Gnarly, dude.*

“Yeah. Why?”

“Don't you have a uniform or suit or something more acceptable? What kind of company do you work for?” I drop

my purse and carry-on onto the back seat. “Or more to the point, if I were to complain to your boss, would you get in trouble for not following the dress code?”

His clear eyes widen, the smirk nowhere in sight, and I can’t help but smugly enjoy how I’ve got him. There’s no way he’s allowed to dress carefree and beach-like. No matter how fiendishly good this relaxed, cabana-boy look works for him, not to mention what it does to my heart rate, I won’t stand for it.

“Um, my bad.” Despite his words, his tone and the faint flicker of a smile in his eyes say he isn’t in the least bit apologetic. “It’s a long ride. I wanted to be comfortable, but since you’re uncomfortable, I’ll change.”

Why does his response make me feel unreasonable when I’m not? I straighten my spine, and he unzips the garment bag draped over the seat.

With a lopsided grin, he lifts an arm over his head. A sliver of golden toned skin peeks out from just above the waistband of his shorts as he curls his fingers around the collar at the back of his shirt.

What? No. There’s no way he’s taking off his shirt in front of the Chateau Marmont.

Dazed and tongue-tied, I don’t react when, in one fell swoop, he does exactly that. Tom yanks his shirt up and over his head.

My tongue sticks to the roof of my now dry mouth, and even though it’s inappropriate, my gaze fixes on his sculpted chest. He chuckles at my blatant gawking, and instantly, my cheeks flare.

“What are you doing?” I lower my voice as every muscle in my neck tenses and strains. “Put it back on.”

“I thought you wanted me to change.” He pulls at one side of the black nylon bag. “I’ve got a suit.”

Heart pounding and palms sweaty, I shake my head vigorously just in case my speech isn’t clear. “Forget about changing. Stay like that.”

Still shirtless, he quickly zips up the bag, shuts the car door, and pivots to face me. His cotton T-shirt is balled in his hand, and my stomach somersaults. It's a death-defying feat to tear my gaze away from all his tanned, muscled flesh.

Then it hits me.

An exhilarating shiver skitters down my spine. He thinks I mean stay bare-chested. *Mother of God.*

I swallow hard, once then twice, trying to string the words together in my head let alone speak. "I mean, put your shirt back on. Don't bother with the suit."

A naughty grin tugs at his full lips. "All right, Ms. Price. You're the boss."

TOM

*W*e cross the California-Nevada border in good time, and for most of the drive, Leighton ignores me in favor of her phone. Silence isn't my strong suit, but for now it's for the best.

Since I took off my shirt, she can barely look me in the eye, and I can't deny I got a kick out of unnerving her. Although, I did catch her stealing a glance my way once or twice. If I didn't know better, I'd think she liked what she saw. Weirdly, I don't know why, but I like her eyes on me.

I also liked giving her a quick peck on her lips last night. Lips like candy. I didn't anticipate how sweet she tasted. A mixture of her sugary lip gloss and a hint of alcohol and something utterly alluring and yet undefinable.

She could've decked me, and I did cross a line. But that guy... Hard to believe it was the same guy millions around the world adore. Talk about a predator. He was up to no good. I did what I had to and I'd do it again.

Now I only wish I could stop thinking about her soft mouth and candy tang.

Movement in the back seat pulls me from my inappropriate thoughts. The dark crown of her head is all I see in the rearview mirror. "You hungry?"

She shrugs, but doesn't look up. "Sure."

"There's a place close by that has good reviews." I exit the highway.

This time she offers nothing to indicate she's heard me. This quickly changes when I park in front of a hot dog restaurant.

Leaning forward between the front seats, her dark, intense eyes stare at the neon sign, and I catch a whiff of something subtly sweet and fruity and expensive. Everything about her is exquisite and classy.

Even now, she embodies an aura of beautiful confidence despite how her features twist and tighten. I find it damn sexy even when I know she's about to stick it to me or make my life difficult.

Her gaze flicks to mine briefly, in that dismissive manner of hers. "This is it? Why didn't you keep going to Las Vegas? We're so close."

"I could've, but I hear this place makes a mean dog, and it's been far too long since I've had one." Since I've been abroad for quite some time, I've developed fierce cravings for foods from my childhood or the not-so healthy ones. "Let's go."

She's out of the car before I am, her eyes hidden behind Prada sunglasses and lips painted a ruby red.

There is something between us. A potential for more.

I felt it in our quick kiss. The few times I've caught her looking at me when she thinks I won't notice.

Or those freakin' lips.

In how I've thought far too much about her mouth since last night. How I'd like to kiss her again.

But this time a real kiss. Long and lasting. Consuming.

"I'm not going in there. I'll stretch my legs and eat when we get to the hotel."

"Cool." I shrug, willing my hardening cock to cool down. "What hotel are we staying at?"

"What do you mean?" She lowers her sunglasses, worry swimming in her dark eyes. "Weren't the hotel reservations

pre-arranged along with the drive?”

“Um, I don’t know. The itinerary only has the city stops from LA to Toronto. Nothing about hotels.”

“Seriously?”

“Relax. It’s no big deal. We’re right outside Vegas, and we won’t have a problem finding a place to stay for the night.”

“I’m not staying at just *any* place.” She pulls out her phone, already walking away from me. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Suit yourself.” I mosey inside the restaurant, grateful for a chance to get my libido in check, and order a fully loaded hot dog.

Salivating, I return to the car where on the phone in the back, Leighton names five-star luxury Vegas hotels like a dog barking. After each hotel, she punctuates the name Lois. *Poor Lois.*

I wolf down the hot dog and wipe any lingering grease from my hands with a napkin. At the same time, without so much as a goodbye for Lois, she drops her phone into her lap.

Her scowl is all I see in the rearview mirror as her eyes land on me. “Did you even chew?”

I chuckle, amused at how easily she gets heated. There’s far too much enjoyment from getting any kind of response from her.

In turn, she makes a sickened noise and flicks her gaze to the remnants of my meal. “Yuck.” She looks out the window. “Let’s head to Vegas. By the time we’re there, I’ll have our hotel.”

“Okay. So no hotel reservations were made?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

I open my mouth, not quite sure how to get her to loosen up and relax but willing to try, when her phone rings.

“Hey, Fallon.” Leighton twirls her long, dark hair around a finger. “How are you feeling? How was your night?”

While driving, I listen not because I care but because it's hard not to. Leighton's sugary sweet, her foul mood suddenly forgotten, and I'm perplexed. Who is this woman?

At some point in her rambling, she spares a glimpse in my direction. "He's kind of busy right now. You know, driving."

They're talking about me. Fallon must say something since Leighton quiets, but whatever it is, she doesn't like it, her frown deepening the longer she listens to her friend.

"Fine. One sec." She pulls the phone from her ear, taps at the screen, all the while glowering. "Fallon wants to talk to you. Go ahead, Fal, you're on speaker."

"Tom," the movie star shouts my name like we're at a concert. "Tom, how are you?"

"Hey, Fallon. I'm good. Sorry I missed you last night when I went back to pick up Lei..." I pause and unleash a wide grin at my back seat passenger and articulate her name. "Ms. Price."

The blonde laughs. "Not as sorry as I am. Look, I wanted to apologize for last night." Her voice sobers and my muscles tense. "I was obnoxiously drunk, and I'm embarrassed to admit this, but I don't remember if I did anything inappropriate, and if I did, I'm sorry. You deserve better than that."

I'm caught off guard and surprised by her contrition. Last night seemed to be more her norm, and she's basically admitting she doesn't like it but can't control it.

My chest squeezes, a swell of admiration at her bravery—she's a public figure and I could annihilate her by selling this to the tabloids. I'm also overcome with sadness for someone who appears to have it all and yet, the opposite seems to be true. She doesn't have much at all.

"Hey, Fallon, thank you but no apology needed. It's all good and I hope you're feeling okay today."

Leighton never takes her eyes off me, and a strange expression, more than her usual aloof, flits across her face. I

can't explain it, but something deep within me is compelled to understand, get to know, this deeply guarded woman.

Fallon releases what sounds like a strangled sob but quickly covers with a cough. "Tom, you're such a good guy. Thank you. I'm fine. Well, that's all I wanted to say. Drive safe."

Leighton takes the phone off speaker and puts it to her ear, now speaking in a near whisper. I can only make out the odd word, some sweet and others the usual things friends to say to one another, and then she ends the call.

Within the hour, we're checked into a high-end hotel and Leighton's ushered to a suite. She doesn't spare me so much as a backward glance.

The woman behind the counter hands me a keycard. "Ms. Price has your room number if she wishes to contact you. Enjoy your stay."

Little does this woman know and maybe Leighton forgot, but she called me to pick her up from the party. She may not want me to have her room number, but I can call her anytime I want.

"Thanks."

Of course, Leighton would keep her room number a secret. In the short time since we've known each other, I'm quickly learning most things with her are about control. *Whatever.*

My room is too much, especially compared to how I've been living the past year, but there isn't anything I can do about it. I shower, turn on the TV, and call Gus to check in.

"Hey, Tom. How did the first day go?"

"Why didn't you tell me the client was high maintenance?" I almost add that she's a knockout, too, but that's irrelevant.

Looks are nice and all, but I've never been one to fall for what's on the outside. All the window dressings can spoil real fast. It's what's on the inside that matters to me. Oddly enough, I'm almost certain Leighton's hiding all her best parts underneath her confidence and beauty.

“Ah, you mean the daughter? Leighton Price?”

“Yeah.” I settle against a stack of pillows on the bed. “I’m not sure what her deal is, but she doesn’t like me.” My lips twist at that souring notion. Why does the idea of her not liking me hurt so much?

“What? Everyone likes you.” My best friend’s sincere and if only he knew.

Leighton Price is in a league of her own. I’ve never met a woman like her. Attractive and enticing despite her cold, hard exterior. And the most frustrating part is no matter what I do, I can’t seem to make a dent in her armor.

“Anyway, it’s fine,” I lie and tell him a little about the hotel snafu and where we’re staying tonight.

“Woohoo. Those are some nice digs. At least you’re traveling in luxury.”

“It’s a far cry from what I’m used to...” My hand skims the smooth cotton sheets. “And that’s my biggest problem.”

“How so?”

“It feels wrong.” Though he can’t see me, I wrap my fingers around the thick brocade curtains before glancing around at the plush carpet, glass, wood, and chrome everywhere. “For the past year, I’ve slept on a cot with only a thin blanket and what felt like a sheet of paper for a pillow, and I survived. I may even be better for it.”

“Damn, I can’t imagine. It must be hard to see how much is wasted and taken for granted when there are people all over the world in need of the simple necessities of life.” Gus takes a beat, and his words sink in, heavy and true. “Are you okay?”

August Bradshaw is the best friend I’ve ever had, and his straight up question, concern for how I’m doing, gets to the heart of why. I blow out a harsh breath and shake off my melancholy—this odd annoyance that’s eating at me.

“Yeah, I’m good. Sorry, Gus, I didn’t mean to drag you down. I’m tired, was about to take a shower and crash.”

“All right, I’ll let you go. But Tom, on the accommodation, in case Ms. Price moans about it.” Papers shuffle on his end of the line. “That’s the client’s responsibility. Truthfully, I’ve never had a booking for a drive like this before. Most people fly these days.”

He mutters something about Brent while I wonder, once again, why Leighton didn’t fly.

“Okay. Good to know.” I saunter toward the bathroom.

“Yeah, there’s nothing here about where they planned on staying. There’s only the agreed upon duration of the drive and the stops.” He releases an exasperated moan. “Dammit, I don’t know why Brent still uses paper.”

“I don’t understand him.”

“Me neither. You should go.”

“Hey. Wait. Are you okay?”

It’s midnight in Toronto, and while the late hour isn’t unusual for him, something about his voice seems off. When I first came home and was adjusting to the time difference, no matter what time I woke up during the night, Gus was always awake.

“Yeah, I’m fine. You know.” I almost see his no big deal shrug.

Like those times when we’d run into each other in the middle of the night, he makes light of his sleepless nights. He claimed it was the cost of running your own business. There’s always work to do, and making ACE a resounding success is his sole focus.

I only wish his partner and our friend helped more. “And Brent? Did he ever show up?”

“Um, we finally connected. He’s in New York, apparently drumming up new business.” His skeptical tone is easy to detect.

“Hmmm.” That Brent is a clever guy. He has an answer for everything. “You don’t sound like you believe him.”

Before he responds, a terse voice carries through the phone. It's Elaine, his girlfriend, and while I don't catch her words, it doesn't sound good.

Gus mutters a sheepish apology, though hard to hear, and I guess he's covered the phone. I don't know Elaine all that well. She came into his life while I was in Africa, and the two of us just met at my welcome home party.

She doesn't feel right for him. Eden, a mutual friend, and at one time a consultant for ACE, doesn't like her at all. Well, not for Gus and from the little I witnessed, I'm beginning to understand.

"Tom, sorry about that. I should get going. I, uh..."

"What is it?"

"It feels like everything's falling apart. I broke up with Elaine. She's here packing up her things and then there's Brent. Something's going on with him, and I don't have a good feeling at all."

"Hey, sorry about Elaine."

"It was for the best." He lowers his voice. "She was too controlling."

I chuckle. "Eden said something like that."

"Don't go there. Eden isn't even trying to hide how happy she is about the breakup." Gus doesn't sound choked up or heartbroken, more relieved and amused at our friend's joy over this. "Seriously, don't worry about me. It's all good."

"Okay, but tell me how I can help, and I'm not just talking about Elaine. I can help with Brent. I could call him."

Gus scoffs. "That fucker won't pick up. Don't worry about it. I'm meeting with Eden tomorrow, and I'll get to the bottom of this. Just get some sleep, keep the client happy, and I'll see you in a couple of days."

"All right."

We end the call, and before I realize what I'm doing, I dial Eden's number.

She answers on the first ring. “Tom? What’s wrong?”

“What makes you think something’s wrong?”

“It’s late.” She yawns and I smack my palm against my forehead.

“Shit, Eden, sorry. Did I wake you?”

“No, I was reading, but Walker’s asleep. Give me a sec.” From the rustling and click of what could be a door, it sounds like she’s moving to where she can talk. “Okay, what’s up?”

“I was talking to Gus, and he told me you’re meeting tomorrow to discuss Brent.”

“Yes. That weasel is causing no end of problems, and I have a sinking suspicion he’s up to no good.”

“Tell me how I can help.”

“You can’t right now, but once we know what we’re dealing with...”

“Keep me posted.”

“You got it. Are you still in LA?”

“Did Gus tell you?”

“Yes. That was cool of you to step in like that.”

“I’m not so sure. In some ways, it was selfish. I’m going crazy doing nothing.”

“What? I thought you liked things that way. No commitment, no working the grind, no—”

I cut her off before she goes on this usual teasing jag. “All right, I get the picture and I’ll have you know I’m changing, maybe even growing up.”

“No, don’t do that. I like you just the way you are. But seriously, what do you mean you’re changing?”

“I don’t know. I need a job, but I don’t want *any* job. I want something I’ll enjoy, where I’ll make a difference.”

“Wow. I get it but I’m kind of surprised to hear this from you.”

“Ouch. That hurts.” I rub at the center of my chest as if she’d jabbed me there.

“Sorry. I don’t mean it like that. I kind of envied how you didn’t go the traditional route. You know how to live life, and your work...well, it’s just a way for you to pay the bills.”

“Whoa, don’t get too ahead of yourself. I’m not saying I want to become a workaholic. I’ll never live for my job. Uh-uh, that isn’t me. But I want something more than floating.”

“Sounds like you want roots. If so, why don’t you come work with me?”

“What? I don’t know anything about what you do.” I click off the TV.

“That isn’t true. You’re great at relationships and strategy and”—she pauses and resumes in a more mock-pondering tone—“I think you might be good with numbers.”

I snort at her poor sense of humor. “I’ve got a mathematics degree, Eden.” She already knows this, but it deserves repeating if only for the purpose of her joke. “I’m phenomenal with numbers.”

She giggles. “Tom, I’d love to have you on my team. I need someone I trust and who will tell me like it is.”

Eden runs a small consulting firm, working with mainly young entrepreneurs and start-ups.

“What? You’re already tired of all the ass-kissers that work for you?”

“No, it isn’t like that. I need a second-in-command and you’d be perfect.”

“And have you thought about what Walker would say?” I’m joking because Eden doesn’t ask for permission from anyone, but the question is valid.

“No. Why would I? Besides, he’d agree that it’s a great idea.”

“Oh, sure, he might agree that you need a right-hand person, but I’m not so sure he’d like that person to be me.”

Her fiancé's never hidden his jealousy where I'm concerned despite how we've both told him we're like brother and sister.

"Seriously? He's fine with you."

"I wouldn't go that far. He might slowly be coming around, but he isn't quite there yet. At my homecoming party, he asked me if I was sure I wanted to be back and suggested maybe I should stay away a little longer."

"He was joking." Her tone carries the hint of defensiveness.

"Maybe."

"Forget about Walker. I'll deal with him. I'm serious, what do you say?"

"I don't know. Why are you offering me a job?" My tone sounds more skeptical than I intend.

"I already told you. I think you'd be a great addition to my team. You're in demand, my friend. The world is your oyster."

"All right, enough with the idioms." I roll onto my side. "Let me think about it, but thanks for the offer. I really appreciate it."

"Of course. Take your time."

"Thanks. Right now, I've got to get this difficult client back to Toronto and make sure she raves about ACE." Though I mean to lighten the mood, I cringe a little at my description of Leighton.

Difficult. Am I being too harsh? I believe Leighton is more than her snooty glances and haughty tone. Either way, it isn't like Eden's ever going to meet her.

I end the call and flick off the light. I'm not sure about partnering with Eden, but one thing I know for sure is that I will do everything in my power to get Leighton home on time. And I'll even go so far as to ask her for a rave review. Gus needs this.

LEIGHTON

Brring. Brring. I lift my head from the pillow and reach for my phone. I can't see a thing in the dark, but I left it on the bedside table.

Groggy from sleep and the phone still ringing, I whip off my mask, squinting at the golden rays streaming in through the crack in the hotel curtains.

"Hello." I sit up and grimace at the rasp of my voice.

"Hello, Leighton. It's Everly Simard. How are you?"

My heart leaps and I'm instantly wide awake. "Ev-Everyly, hello. I'm good, thanks. And you?"

It's strange how I still get butterflies when she calls even though we're friends. Or at least, I think we are. Everly has said as much. And stranger still, she isn't famous. Well, not in the showbiz sense, and yet she still makes me more nervous than any A-List actor, director, or producer. She's a successful businesswoman, and I hope to one day work with her.

"I'm great. It sounds like I woke you. Sorry about that."

"No. No. It's okay." It's after ten in the morning, and she's three hours ahead in Toronto. I should've been up hours ago.

"I only wanted to see how you were doing. I saw your post and I was thinking about you." Her voice is warm and gentle. "That was a brave thing you did."

A fizz of warmth zips through me. "I don't know about that. I don't feel brave." A strangled laugh, almost crushed by

my overwhelming emotions, rushes from me. “More like a failure. But I needed to put it out there, you know. I can’t hide from the things I still need to conquer.”

The intense squeeze to my lungs only reinforces how I wish I could have this kind of conversation with my parents or more so, my father. My mother is merely an extension of him. What he wants, she wants. If only they understood my situation or at least tried to.

“Hey, don’t be so hard on yourself. Though it may not feel like it, you’re making progress. And I’m so happy you have your father with you.”

My heart plummets to my toes like a roller coaster nosedive, and on the flipside of that, bile bubbles and burns up the back of my throat.

The last time we talked, I told Everly how thrilled and relieved I was to have my dad driving back with me. Especially with all I’m dealing with.

Why did I say anything?

Because she makes it easy for me to open up. She has been such a big help these past few weeks.

“Uh, no. My dad had to fly back for an important meeting.” I force as much pep and bravado into my voice as possible, even if it feels like a lie.

It shouldn’t be a big deal that Rupert left without me. This is my life. But even still, I kind of hoped this time would be different. He knew I was dealing with more than the usual fear of flying. He knew I needed him.

More to convince myself than anything else, I add, “It’s all good. I’ve got this.”

“Oh, Leighton, that’s a shame. You’re alone.” Disappointment and sympathy lace her words.

My inclination is to mumble an affirmation and move on from this topic, yet Tom, the shameless flirt with his easy smile and kind-hearted ways, flits through my mind. I might

be alone, especially with what I'm dealing with, but I'm not alone on the drive. Not really.

Tom certainly isn't one to respect boundaries, and something tells me he won't let me wallow or flounder if it comes to that.

Everly's concern cuts off my focus on my hot driving companion. "You call me whenever you want. Night or day, okay?"

"Okay, thanks." I need us to move on, and without giving it much thought, I jump to the next topic, another one that I'm failing at. "Everly, I want you to know I haven't forgotten about working with you at the Raven Mission. I'm trying to make it happen."

I wish I had better news. My father isn't budging no matter how much I want this, but I refuse to give up. I have to persuade him.

"No, no. I'm not worried about that, and I don't want you to either. Like I've said before, we want to work with you in any capacity, whenever is best for you. Besides, you're already helping us. In fact..." Her lingering pause causes the butterflies to stir. "I'm sure he won't mind us telling you... We haven't announced yet, but after all, you connected us." Elation carries her next words, and I can almost see her smile. "Malik Fadel is sponsoring the build of our LA office."

"Oh my God, he is? That's fantastic."

Malik is a good friend and a powerhouse for Everly's cause. As a well-known actor and Broadway sensation for his recent portrayal of Danny Zuko in *Grease*, his support will go a long way.

I met him at one Hollywood party or another. We then ran into each other shortly after the suicide of his best friend and Malik's very public meltdown. We grew close, sharing our struggles, including telling him how I was still in therapy to deal with anxiety and the pressures of dealing with my parents. During one of our many chats, I also mentioned how Everly

and her organization have helped me immensely, giving me a purpose.

“It is, and we owe it all to you.”

“Not really. I only introduced the two of you. The Raven Mission speaks for itself.”

“You’re too kind, and I’m glad you think so. We try. Okay, I’ll let you go, but remember, I’m here for you and thinking of you.”

“Thank you.” I swallow past the sob gathering in my throat. “That means a lot.”

A swell of emotion threatens to drown me. Everly’s kindness and concern are immeasurable and, sadly, foreign to me. My father believes Everly wants something from me, to leverage the Price reputation, and while that might be true to some extent, I don’t believe that’s all our relationship is about.

I met Everly during a bout with anxiety and depression. At the time, I didn’t know that’s what I was going through or how to deal with it. All I knew was that something was terribly wrong. I was lost and alone, and like a lighthouse, she guided me ashore.

With the help of her team of medical and psychological specialists, it became clear what precipitated my decline in mental health. My mother’s addiction and depression and my father’s drive to work all the time left me out in the proverbial cold.

For most of my life, I wasn’t their first priority—or more specifically, my father’s—and yet I was always striving to please him, make him *see* me, make him care for me. My mother cared for me, but whatever my father wanted topped everything else.

I blink away my tears and open my secret social media account. My post from yesterday in front of the Chateau Marmont sits on my screen. It’s the very one that prompted Everly to call.

Imjustme: *Driving home. I’m not ready for more.*

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As hard as that is to write, it's the truth. If nothing else, I need to face the truth. Even with all the work I've done these past three weeks, preparing myself to face this fear, I can't do it. I wish I could. For some of you, I am sure this is disappointing news and you may even be disappointed in me. I get that, and while my inclination is to apologize, I simply can't.

This is difficult to admit. It's difficult not to feel like a failure. But I am not a failure. This is only where I am NOW, not FOREVER, and I won't apologize for putting myself first. I won't apologize for admitting I have more work to do. Thank you for all your love and support. If you're struggling, be kind to yourself. It's okay to not be ready.

Nothing has changed since I wrote that post. Then I switch accounts and check my other post. The one I had to send to my mother and publicist before it could go live.

Air rushes from my lungs at a comment that immediately catches my eye.

FelixTOfficial: Safe travels. Miss you already. ☐

Bastard.

Felix has a lot of nerve to ghost me for weeks, since we arrived in LA, and then comment on a public post as if we're going strong and so close.

Fucking bastard.

The dumb kiss emoji makes me want to smash his face. A growl slips past my tight lips, and a fire burns deep inside me. I need to get home. Now.

My father isn't going to like it, but I will no longer be linked to Felix.

I hit the programmed number on my phone, anxious to talk to my dad. Tell him now. Instead, my proverbial balloon pops

when I'm greeted with Lois's sharp harumph even before she utters a word. Of course she would answer his line.

"Leighton, he's busy right now."

"I need to talk to him." I flip back the covers, get out of bed, and grab the clothes I set out on the chair last night.

"I'll tell him you called."

"No. You don't understand." I flick on the bathroom light. "This is urgent. I need to speak to him now."

"Perhaps I can help." She's cold and professional and just an extension of my father.

"No. You. Can't. Please have him call me as soon as possible." I hang up and pull up Tom's number to send a text.

Me: Come to my room. 4503

While I wait—unsure if I want Tom to get here first or for my father to call—I get dressed. The wait is way too long, and by the time there's a knock at the door, I'm livid.

Fuming and ready for a fight, I swing open the door, only to swallow my tongue at the sight of the bright smile and relaxed demeanor of Tom. I wish I didn't notice or care, but everything about him is hard not to like. Once again he's in shorts, cargo this time, and a white, tight-fitting T-shirt.

He holds out a cup of coffee for me like he's done before. "Good morning. I would've been here sooner but stopped for this." His lopsided grin roots me to the spot. "I wondered when you'd contact me. I even thought about calling you several times this morning."

Not waiting for me to step out of the way, Tom slides past me into the room. Our chests graze, our arms brush, and his wicked grin deepens and blue eyes darken. It's as though he knows the storm of sensation his touch causes within me.

Flustered and needing something to do, I shut the door and press my back against it as I sip the warm brew. "Thanks for this." I point to my suitcases. "My bags are packed and I'm ready. I need to be in Toronto in three days."

Incredulous, he barks out a laugh. “Three days? The booking is for five days, and we’re already off schedule today since you slept in.” He shakes his tousled blond head. “It can’t be done.”

It can. The look he gives me says as much. He just doesn’t want to budge.

“Three days.” I hold up the same number of fingers to emphasize my point. But out of curiosity, I ask, “What was the route and stops my father arranged?”

Shaking his head, he pulls out his phone and scrolls. “The first day was LA to Vegas. Today, we’re supposed to drive to Vail, Colorado. It’s nine hours. If we leave now and make no stops, with the hour time difference, we won’t make it to Vail until a little after eleven.”

Head still shaking, he pauses to glance my way. “Day three, we stop in Lincoln, Nebraska. Next, Chicago, then our final day, we drive to Toronto.”

Nodding, I nibble on my lower lip to give him the impression I’m contemplating this, being reasonable when I’m anything but.

“Forget that schedule. I’ll make my own.”

His casual manner wanes. “Leighton, the only way we’re getting to Toronto in three days is if we drive well into the night, every day. It will be pretty much nonstop driving.”

“So?” I shrug, trying on his nonchalance for size. “People do it all the time. Drive all hours of the night to shorten the trip to their final destination.”

“True, but this is a job. I’m responsible for your safety. I won’t be reckless.”

I’m not sure what to say to that. Apart from Everly and my therapist, Doctor Hemming—and it’s kind of in their job description—no one has openly expressed concern for my welfare, least of all a man I’ve only just met.

Not able to acknowledge his declaration, I appeal to his ego. “Come on. Don’t tell me you don’t think you can do it?”

“Nice try. We both know we’re not talking about that. I won’t argue over this when it all comes down to basic math. There are only so many hours in a day, and the distance is what it is.”

“We could make it if you’re willing to put in the work.”

He chuckles wryly. Okay, so it is low to suggest his work ethic has anything to do with shortening the more than twenty-five hundred miles it takes to get to Toronto. But I’m desperate. I need to talk to my father now. End this thing with Felix. Or else...

Or else, I fear I might buckle under the pressure of desperately seeking my father’s approval. I’ve done it before. Have a moment of false bravado, only to cave the longer it takes to get it off my chest.

Tom’s insistence cuts through my fears. “I can’t drive straight through. ACE doesn’t allow their drivers to be on the road for more than ten hours a day. That includes stops. We’re already pushing that limit with today’s drive to Vail. I’m willing to work with you and will give a little on our total daily driving, but what you’re asking isn’t safe. I need to sleep.”

“Look, Tom, I need to be in Toronto as soon as possible. I’m attending TIFF and have a million things to do before then.” My insides shrink at how shallow I appear.

If only I could tell him the truth, but he’s a stranger. It’s bad enough I have to live under my father’s thumb; I’d rather not have to live with the humiliation if Tom were to know about it.

“Then why don’t you fly?” To him, the question may seem obvious and harmless, but to me, it’s a kick in the shin or more like a fist in the stomach.

The ringing of my phone saves me from responding. Finally, it’s my father.

“Dad—”

“No. It’s Lois.” The sound of Lois’s voice makes me cringe. Dammit.

“Lo—”

“Leighton, your dad had to fly back to Los Angeles. He’s on his way to the airport.”

Forget Tom’s gut punch, this news bowls me over, and I drop my ass onto the edge of the bed. Several beats pass while she natters in my ear—none of it makes sense—and I vaguely sense Tom’s gaze on me, likely quizzical and annoyed.

All that exists for me are the words, “your dad had to fly back to Los Angeles.”

“Are you still there?” Her sharp voice slices through my haze.

“Why?”

“Why what?” Her echo only irritates me more.

“Why is he going back to LA?”

“It’s related to *Make It So* and before you ask, no, he can’t drive back with you if you were to wait. He’s going to be there for several days and will fly back the day before TIFF.”

I’ve got no words. Lois is only doing her job, and if I have to talk to her any longer, I’ll say something I regret. I mutter something like “okay” or “fine” and end the call.

Incensed and nauseous, I rush to the bathroom where I vomit the little bit I had of the bitter coffee into the toilet bowl.

While I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, Tom kneels beside me and rests his warm, comforting hand on the center of my back. “Leighton, are you okay?”

Stomach still roiling, I can’t bear the tender way he’s looking at me. I’m pathetic and unworthy of his concern. I need space, and in my haste to get away, I end up pushing him aside on my way to the sink.

Eyes intent on my sudsy hands, I say, “You know what? Forget rushing to get back to Toronto. I want to take my time.” Refusing to look at him, I dry my hands and march back into the room. “We’re staying here one more night.”

“Whoa.” He barrels after me, confused. “What?”

“We’ll leave tomorrow.” I open my room door and tilt my head in the direction of the hallway. “I really want to be alone. Leave.”

“Excuse me.” His eyebrows shoot to his hairline before his eyes narrow on me. If nothing else, that alone is a huge hint that I may have taken things too far. It isn’t his fault that my father is a selfish prick.

I drop my head into my hands and try to gain some composure before straightening to look at him.

“Tom, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have taken out my frustration on you. None of this is your fault.”

His expression softens. “Apology accepted. What are we talking about here? Is it your dad?”

Like an ice-cold shower, his question causes all my muscles to clench. I can’t talk to him about my disaster of a family. How humiliating would it be to have to tell him my father doesn’t deem me worthy or important enough to call me?

I rub at my temple. “It’s nothing. I need to talk to my father, but he’s getting on a plane.”

“Back to LA?”

“Yes. Something like that. Look, I need some down time. Forget what I said about getting to Toronto in three days. Can we take the day off from the car and get back at it tomorrow?”

He slowly nods, and his gaze never wavers from mine. “Okay. Get some rest, and if you need anything, text or call. I’m here.”

I nod, and as if sensing that I am barely holding it together—solitude is all I want—he saunters out of the room and down the hallway.

Finally, I’m alone, and it takes several minutes for me to calm down. Then I open my messages. If I can’t get my father to talk to me, I’ll reach him through the only person he’ll listen to. My mother.

Me: I'm going to take my time coming home. I'll be back for TIFF. You pick my dress. You have final say anyway.

I almost add "thank you" but think better of it. My father's machine, of which my mom is a part of, controls what I wear and how my nails and hair are done, so what's the point of even stressing about it or rushing home to get bossed around.

My phone rings. It's her. I punch mute and then the red button to ignore the call. As expected, her text arrives seconds later.

Margot: Leighton, your father says this is unacceptable. Call me now.

I don't and don't intend to. Not now anyway.

The mini bar beckons me. The bottles of alcohol promise to numb the piercing sting of rejection and how much of a monster I was to Tom.

It would be so easy to lose myself, follow in Margot's footsteps. But I won't. Instead I call the spa and decide to spend a lot of my daddy's money.

TOM

“*T*his is taking too long.” Leighton’s whine jabs at the tension at the base of my skull.

Through the rearview mirror, I watch her raise her sunglasses to the top of her head, then frown at me and jut out her chin. My driving companion isn’t happy, and I practice a breathing technique Claire uses to not react to her or let her foul mood infect me.

In fairness to Leighton, she has reasons to be upset and maybe even hurt. From the little I’ve seen, her father is ignoring her on top of bailing on this road trip, and her mother seems to be giving her a hard time. The call at the Marmont was intense, and now Leighton seems to twitch every time her mother texts her though I’m not sure why.

But worst of all, yesterday, was the anguished look in her eyes when she learned that her father was flying back to LA. It was like someone just ran over her favorite toy. Something is going on there.

She cuts through my thoughts with another childish refrain. “How much longer till we get there?”

Chuckling, I drop my eyes to the speedometer and realize I’m a little over the limit. “I’m going as fast as I can. We’ll get there when we get there.”

My foot lets up on the accelerator, and she drops her shades back onto the bridge of her nose. “Ugh, I hate this.”

“I’m totally confused. I thought you wanted to take your time on the drive back to Toronto?” If our late departure from Las Vegas was any indication, I’d say that’s the point. “Now you want me to speed. Did I miss something? Do you have an appointment in Vail or someplace you have to be by a certain time?”

My outlandish suggestion causes my stomach muscles to clench. We only left Vegas a little over an hour ago. With stops, there is no way we’re making Vail any earlier than late tonight.

“I just want to get there, okay? I hate road trips.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask once more why she didn’t fly, but I hold back. The way she blanched at the suggestion yesterday causes another prickly sensation at the back of my neck. I don’t understand her response but feel awful for bringing it up.

The phone call saved me from her wrath, or from her answering it though I doubt she was going to. Still, I want to know why she won’t fly. I vaguely remember Gus mentioning something about that being noted in the booking. Flying wasn’t an option. It doesn’t make sense though. I wonder if she flew to Los Angeles and if she did, what changed?

My stomach growls and I glance once more at her. “Are you hungry? I know we’ve only just got on the road, but we left late and I haven’t had lunch. I can grab something really quick.”

I could offer to eat and drive but screw that. Despite her wish to leave the hotel this morning at eight, it didn’t happen. Leighton kept me waiting in the lobby for nearly ninety minutes before I broke down and called her.

Of course, she didn’t pick up, nor did she answer when I finally went up to her room. It turns out, she wasn’t even there. She was getting a blowout in the hotel salon—whatever the hell that is—and didn’t tell me the plans had changed.

When she finally appeared in the lobby at a little after noon, she acted like this was the plan all along. I kept my

mouth shut, packed up the car, and hit the road. She's the client.

Now she wants us in Vail in the blink of an eye. Not gonna happen. Above all things, I need food.

"Not really, but if you want to stop, I could stretch my legs."

"Great. We passed a food sign. I'll get off here."

Soon enough, we're seated at a table of a small greasy spoon near the highway. I order a burger and fries. Leighton asks for water which she doesn't even touch. When the food arrives, the waitress is barely gone from the table when Leighton starts to gag.

I stare at her quizzically. "What?"

She turns up her nose like she smells something rotten. "Do you always eat like this?"

"Like what?"

"Like you've made it your life's mission to have a heart attack."

My head tilts back and I belt out a laugh. Despite her haughty ways, she's funny even if she doesn't mean to be.

"Nah. I haven't eaten this kind of stuff in a while, and I don't usually eat like this." The smell of the food makes my mouth water and I dig in.

Quietly, she fixes her gaze on her hands clasped in front of her on the table across from me. It's strange, yet I have the impression that she refuses to so much as glance at me or the food.

After another bite of the burger, I set it on the plate and wipe my hands. "We need to talk about the schedule. What are you thinking in terms of stops and how long until we're back in Toronto?"

I'm not a planner. In fact, the opposite. I'd rather take things as they come, but I'm not missing Matt's restaurant

opening for anything. I need to know what Leighton's got in mind.

While the restaurant opening is a soft launch, that night will kick off the festivities for Claire and Matt's wedding. As my sister's best person, I don't plan on missing anything.

Leighton finally looks at me and arches one dark, perfectly shaped brow. "I'm okay with the stops you mentioned but not at that pace."

"O-okay." That still doesn't answer my question. "I have to be in Toronto by next Thursday afternoon."

I'm willing to push it to the very last minute if that's what Leighton wants. She is the client and I want to make her happy, if only for August's sake. If I have to, I'll drop her off at her home and take the SUV to the restaurant.

"I've already told you, TIFF starts on that Thursday." Her fingers dance in place on top of the table as if this topic makes her uncomfortable. "I was planning on being there... But maybe I won't bother."

"Leighton, I can't do maybe. I have to be in Toronto by Thursday afternoon. Any time after that is too late. But you're the client and you can take all the time you want. If it looks like we're not going to be in Toronto by then, I'll arrange with ACE for another driver to meet us at some point on the road."

Right now, I don't know if this is possible. August most probably doesn't have another driver to spare, but I've got friends. I'll call in a favor.

"Oh." She wrinkles her brow. "Why do you have to get back?"

If not for her dejected tone, I'd think she was surprised that I have a life outside of driving her.

"I have a family event that I will not miss."

"What is it?"

"Nosy much?" I smile to let her know I'm joking, but her gaze remains expectant.

“My soon-to-be brother-in-law, Matt, owns a new restaurant, and it’s opening night. My sister Claire is marrying him in under a month. They’re using that night to test out the kitchen and staff as well as start the wedding celebrations.”

“Oh.” She scrunches her nose, pondering. “All right. I don’t want another driver.” Her eyes flick away from mine as she chews on her bottom lip. “We’ll make it back for Thursday.” Then her gaze dips to my plate. “Are you almost done?”

The burger’s gone but I still have half my fries. “There’s no way I’m leaving these. I’ve had better but they’re crispy and salty.” I slide the plate closer to her. “You want some?”

I wave a golden fry in front of her, sure she won’t be able to resist. She bats it away. “God, no. I’d rather starve.”

“What? You don’t like fries?”

The wrinkle I’m getting used to seeing on the bridge of her nose when she doesn’t like something deepens. “I don’t eat French fries.”

“What? I mean, sure, you shouldn’t eat them all the time, but you must have them once in a while.”

“No. They’re disgusting.”

“C’mon. Try one.”

She pushes back her chair, brow puckered. “No. I’ll pay the bill.”

“Hey, I can pay. You didn’t eat anything.”

Several feet from the table, she glances back at me with a huge grin on her face. “That’s all right. Rupert’s got it.”

Once on the road again, she spends an hour on her phone with her earbuds in. We stop for gas and a bathroom break and our talk is limited. Eventually, she falls asleep and stirs awake about two hours later.

The first thing she does is check her phone, then curses under her breath, followed by a distortion of her facial features. She appears to be a mix of distressed and

disappointed. Is it another snub from her father? Or her mother?

When her eyes clash with mine in the rearview mirror, a flicker of embarrassment quickly followed by what looks like anger sears me, and I snap my attention back to the road.

At some point, Leighton dozes off again, and I'm able to make a good dent in the driving.

"Where are we?" She grumbles and runs a hand through her hair, voice groggy and disoriented.

"Utah. Near Emery."

"We need to stop." There's a pointed urgency to her command.

"Do you have to go to the bathroom?"

It's about seven thirty in the evening, and I'd planned to push through, grabbing a bite on the road within the next couple of hours.

"No. I need out of the car." She tries to slacken her seatbelt, pulling the strap from her body only to do so again as soon as the strap tightens across her torso upon release.

It's hard to watch her frustration, and something more desperate, raw and emotional, rolls off her like a heat wave. Thick and suffocating. It's as if she's trapped and unsure how to break free.

She clenches her teeth, causing the muscles in her jaw and neck to tighten. "I need a hot bath, a warm meal, and bed."

"You're calling it quits? We're only about halfway to Vail."

"I need out of this car. Now." She claws at her throat. "I can't breathe."

Fortunately, the next exit has hotel signs and I pull off. Leighton doesn't say a word or open her eyes when I get out of the car to check us in.

Her head rests on the back of her seat, and she seems to be focused on her breathing. One hand rests on her stomach,

moving up and down with her slow, even breaths. I recognize the grounding and relaxation technique from Claire when she's faced with a panic attack.

I don't want to disturb her and wonder if she's claustrophobic. Was it the car?

When I return, she's still in the car, eyes closed. I quickly and quietly remove her luggage and wheel them to her room, although lugging four suitcases doesn't feel quick or easy.

By the time I'm back, Leighton's outside, frantically pacing. Well, so much for her breathing technique. I wonder if something happened while I was gone. Did she get a call from her parents?

As I approach, she wheels to face me, her face pinched and agitated. "What is this?" Her hand waves at the three-story, brick building.

Though obvious, I indulge her. "Uh, it's a hotel."

"We're not staying here." Head shaking to punctuate her words, she pulls out her phone and starts tapping on the screen.

"Why? What's wrong?"

I wait patiently for her to stop what she's doing and look at me. I'm not willing to accept I'll have to reload the car, cancel the rooms I've just paid for, and endure more time in the car with someone who clearly doesn't like road trips.

She chews on the inside of her cheek. "This isn't a five-star hotel." Her hand tightens its grip on the phone. "This is crazy."

Is she for real? It's got a bed and a bathroom; what more could she possibly need? I release an exasperated sigh as her finger flicks across the screen for what feels like the hundredth time.

She pauses to glance at me. "We could stay here." She shoves the phone at me and points at a listing. "Or here."

Either hotel is easily another two hours from here, but I don't have the energy to argue. I was content to drive through

to Vail or to stay here tonight. And above all else, she's the client.

"Okay. I need to get your luggage, get our money back, and then there's a bit of a drive. It'll take us about—"

"Forget it." She rubs at her temples, and I notice she is pale. "I can't take another minute in the car."

I want to ask about her urgent need to be out of the car. Is she claustrophobic? But given her current state of mind, now isn't the time.

"Hey, this isn't a five-star hotel, but it's clean and they had two rooms. It's only for a night."

"True," she concedes though she's scowling. "Where's my room?"

We walk up to her room, and once inside, she wrinkles her nose and a small sob rushes from her. "This is worse than I thought." She snatches the hotel keycard from my hand. "This is a nightmare."

She tries to close the door without another word, but I'm quick and half expected she'd do something like this given her mood. My hand slaps against the wood, and she startles on a squeak, eyes now wide.

I should feel a small ounce of regret for scaring her—I didn't mean to—but what I'm about to say is overdue.

"We need to get a few things straight or else the drive will be even more unbearable than it's already been." Pinching the bridge of my nose, I internally search for the calm I usually have an abundance of. "I should have said something earlier, but I'd hoped things would sort themselves out. Clearly, I was wrong."

"What does that mean?" Her brows knit, tight and sharp like a V.

"We need to make the best of this. I'm your driver, not your servant or verbal punching bag. I don't mind carrying your bags, opening doors for you, but I'm not someone you can treat less than."

My foot now props the door open, and I drop my hand to my side, preparing to get to what I think is the heart of the matter.

“It’s clear to see that you’ve got stuff going on with your parents. It’s none of my business, but don’t take it out on me.”

Silence follows.

She stares blankly at me, offering no indication she understands for only a second or two before her gaze drops to the floor. I’ve lost her, and this annoys me and causes a strange kick to the center of my chest. I want to help her, but she won’t let me in, and I suppose that makes sense. We are nothing more than a business transaction. Acquaintances. Even if we could be more.

I slide a finger under her chin and tilt her head to look up at me. She gapes, but once again doesn’t utter a word or try to move out of my grip. Transfixed, her gaze locks with mine.

“Let me put it to you this way.” I gently press my two fingers into the soft flesh under her chin. “I understand this is an employment contract and at the very least, we should be civil with one another. But if you want, I can also be a friend.” I pause, allowing this to sink in, but she offers no indication of interest or disdain. “No matter what, for the duration of this ride, I deserve your respect and understanding, as you do mine.”

TOM

Leighton sputters, mouth opening and closing, without emitting any sound. Was I too harsh? Shit, that wasn't my intention.

Cheeks flushed, she eventually mutters, "I'm sorry." It's barely audible, and while I want her to say it again, this isn't a power play.

I nod once and release her chin. "Goodnight, Leighton. I'll text later tonight to figure out what time we're leaving in the morning."

I turn to leave, hoping things will be smoother for us now. Otherwise, I don't want to think of the hours ahead of us, just the two of us on the road.

My room is at the other end of the hall, and while I walk that way, something my mother used to say springs to mind. When someone uses appalling behavior to keep people at a distance, it usually means one of two things.

One, sadly, they may simply be that way. A jerk.

Or something happened to them that makes them act out of fear. They push people away to make sure no one can hurt them, make sure people can't do the same to them. Where Leighton Price is concerned, something tells me it's the latter.

Once in my room, I shower, throw on a pair of shorts, and settle onto the bed. As I search online for take-out dinner options nearby, there's a knock at the door.

Leighton stands in the hallway, expression sheepish. “Sorry to bother you. I just...” Her fingers intertwine as she shifts from one foot to the other. “I feel awful for the way I’ve treated you. Forget about this place.” She holds out a hand to signal the hotel. “I’m the nightmare.”

I laugh. “Nah, you aren’t all that bad. Only sometimes.”

“Wow. Don’t hold back. Tell me what you really think.” She smiles wryly and pauses for a beat. “I really am sorry.”

“Look, there’s no need for you to apologize again. You already did and I accepted. We’re all good.” I lean against the door and hesitate, not sure if I should let things end here or not. “Rather than have this conversation with you in the hallway, why don’t you come in?” Arm outstretched, I motion with my hand for her to enter my room, gesturing that she’s welcome. But she lingers, tentative and unsure. A little coaxing is needed. “I was going to order some food. We could eat together.”

“Um, okay. That would be nice.”

Once we order dinner, Leighton perches on the end of the bed, and I sit at the head, back against the wall.

I tuck a pillow behind my back. “You better eat some of the pizza. That’s why I got all the toppings you said you liked and their biggest pie.”

She snorts. “Sure. You got the largest pizza because of me. You forget I’ve seen you eat.” Smiling ruefully, she nods. “I will have a slice. Promise.”

“A slice? That isn’t going to fill you.”

“I’m having a salad too, and don’t forget about the tiramisu.”

“Ah, yeah. Our little indulgence. I hope it’s good.” I pat my stomach and ignore the hunger pangs.

She shifts to fully face me, expression more serious. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure. Ask away.”

“Why are you so kind?”

“Kind. What do you mean?”

“I haven’t been nice to you and at times...” She gets a far-off look and grimaces. “I’ve been difficult and you”—her gaze swings back my way—“you’ve been nothing but kind and patient. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone like you.”

Something warm and inviting expands inside my chest, and the urge to move propels me to scoot closer. I’m not sure what to do with this unexpected compliment from Leighton of all people.

Now closer to her, I wait until her eyes latch on to mine. “It doesn’t cost me anything to be kind, and hopefully if I’m kind to someone that might be having a crappy day, they may notice and reciprocate. Or it might make a difference to their day.”

“What? Sort of like you’re reaffirming there’s good in the world?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

She blushes and looks away. “I’m more than ashamed to say it’s taken me a while to notice. Or more like, I’ve noticed”—her eyes land on me again—“but didn’t know what to do with it. Like I said, I’m not used to kindness.”

“Well, that’s not something I want to hear.” I rub at my chest, an ache blooming there at the sadness in her voice. It’s hard to imagine the world she lives in where kindness is a rarity, or the kinds of people who surround her. “Hey, the good news is, you eventually got there.”

She tilts her head to one side, brow furrowed. “Got there?”

“You said you didn’t know what to do with the kindness. I’d say your apology tonight was kind and considerate.”

“You’re doing it again.”

“What?”

“I don’t know how to explain it. Kind is the only word that comes to mind. But you’re saying all these nice things about

me when you really have no reason to. Why?”

“Because I believe you’re a good person. I could have it totally wrong, and you can tell me to shut up or mind my own business...”

Her shoulders inch upward and back straightens. I’m unsure if I should go on or change the topic. But the way she stares at me, expectant and fully invested in what I’m saying despite her body language, prompts me to say more.

“If I had to guess, something or someone has hurt you. You’ve been let down, and in turn, you use strong, terse words to keep people at a distance. It’s a defense mechanism to not let anyone in or give anyone the chance to hurt you.”

“Ah, I don’t know what to say. I-I...”

She doesn’t challenge me or tell me I’m wrong or even admit it, but I take the lack of what she says to mean there is some truth to what I’ve observed.

Before I can say any more, she clears her throat. “But I’m not terse”—she pauses to look at me, eyebrow arched, when she uses my word—“to everyone.”

“That’s true. You’re that way with anyone you think has the power to hurt you.”

She tenses again and we stare at each other, both understanding the full implication of what I’ve said. Judging by the way she treats me, I’m assuming I have the power to hurt her.

It’s this attraction between us. Nothing deeper—it can’t be at this point. We barely know each other, but she feels it too.

It’s there in the way she’s holding her breath, hanging on my every word as if I’m speaking her mind.

It’s in the flush of her cheeks or how she looks away if I stare too long.

It’s in my never-ending desire to kiss her. I can’t look at her lips without wanting to plunder her mouth. Taste her.

It's in my inexplicable yearning to peel back her layers, cast aside her fears and doubts, and discover all there is to know about this woman.

As if reading my mind and maybe a little unnerved by it—I get it; it isn't often you can have this visceral connection with another—she jumps to her feet and starts pacing along the edge of the bed.

“It must be hard to stay kind and positive when there's so much negativity everywhere.”

Now the moment, this unspoken tether between us, is lost with her shift in conversation. I shake my head, trying to focus on her comment.

“Sure. It can be, but I learned a long time ago that's a lot of wasted energy. Then it really hit home when I was in Africa.” I fidget, trying to get comfortable on the bed.

“Africa. When were you there?”

“For the last year. I volunteered to help bring drinking water to villages that are miles away from a freshwater source. I'll tell you more about it later if you want.”

She nods and I continue with our current conversation. “Not even a month ago, I was among people who have far less than we do, than some people can even begin to imagine. But even at that, they were far kinder and more generous than a lot of people I've come across before and since coming back.”

She grimaces and shrinks. “You're talking about me, aren't you?”

“Not just you. Me too.” Memories of my time away wash over me. “To think back on my time away, I really learned a lot about myself and about the human spirit. The people were friendly and had a strong sense of community. Every day it was so easy to see the power and good that come from working together.”

“It sounds like you enjoyed your time there.”

“Yeah. But not at first. When I first got there,”—I laugh dryly at those first few weeks—“I thought I'd made a terrible

mistake. Life was *hard*. All the things we didn't have."

"Like what?"

"Some of the camps didn't have electricity or running water. We had to make do with the limited supplies and facilities that were there."

"But you obviously got used to it because you stayed for quite a while."

"Yeah, it felt good to do hard, honest work and to actually see how I was making a difference. Making change. Listen, I don't want to make you think everyone got along and it was some perfect place. It wasn't. I mean, we had our differences among the volunteers, and the community didn't always see eye to eye. But what really stuck out was how they would listen to each other, try to find a common ground. And sometimes, some people were open and respectful enough to be persuaded to the other side. There was mutual respect. No wasting time being angry. It doesn't achieve anything. I just don't see the point."

"I never would've taken you for a Zen master." Her tone is light but gaze intent.

"A Zen master? Hardly. Look, I'm not perfect. I have my off days. I can be grumpy just like the next person. We all have baggage in our lives. Stuff that's hard or sad or downright ugly. And when someone's in a dark or angry place, more times than not, it has nothing to do with you. And most importantly, we don't have to pick up their shit."

"So you kill 'em with kindness?"

"Sometimes. All I'm trying to say is I don't know what you're going through, but I can see you're struggling with something. I don't have to add to it by fighting fire with fire."

My phone pings with a notification, and Leighton spins toward the door like someone's just pulled the fire alarm. "If that's the food, I'll get it."

I finally look down at my phone. "Yeah, it is, but I can—"

Before I can say more, she's out the door.

LEIGHTON

Head pounding, face puffy, and eyes red from the sleeping pill I took the night before, I stumble out of bed and head for the shower. After a nice dinner with Tom, I came back to the room, feeling better despite how awful I'd been to him. It felt good to talk, and I left thinking things would be better between us.

I'd deliberately left my phone in the room, but upon my return, I was faced with several messages and texts from my mother. All on my father's behalf, and each one more threatening than the last. I'm to call her. My father says I need to get home as soon as possible. Truthfully, as much as I didn't want it to, it hurt to think what life would be like if my father would put even a tenth of the effort he consumes in controlling me into understanding me instead.

And my mother. Well, I hate to think it, but she's a lost cause. Nothing but my father matters to her.

I then put my phone on do not disturb and fired off a text to Lois. First, I apologized for my behavior. I'd have preferred to do it in person, and would, but it was late in Toronto, the middle of the night, and waiting would make my apology an afterthought.

Tom's words had sunk in. I didn't need to be rude and thoughtless to Lois even if she was doing my father's bidding. Sure, it felt good to unleash some of my anger and hurt even if she wasn't the person who deserved it, but it was wrong and made me no better than my father.

I also asked Lois to make sure our place in Vail would be ready for my arrival. That's why my father chose that stop. Annually, we visited the upscale ski town where we have a vacation home.

After a brief conversation with Fallon, where I evaded any talk about my life or Tom—the woman is obsessed with him and I don't like it for reasons I don't want to think about—I gave in and took a sleeping pill. I've tried really hard not to use them or depend on them, but last night was one of those nights where my mind raced and I became increasingly agitated.

Although the talk with Tom went well, it also prompted me to replay the countless moments where I'd acted less than kind or respectful of another person. I was dissecting my behavior and coming up short.

Talk about being disgusted with myself. I'm ashamed to think that even though I want to help people, I do this to decent people like Tom. I need to do better. I *can* do better.

Like Doctor Hemming suggested, I then spent some time reflecting on my behavior, using some of the techniques I'd learned in therapy to combat my anxiety, and while I felt better, I ended up taking a sleeping pill to make sure I got the rest I would need.

Now a new day, I make a point of being ready when Tom knocks on my door at a little past nine. During dinner, we'd agreed on when to hit the road. Today's drive is a little more than four hours.

My smile is big and warm, I hope. "Good morning." I thrust a coffee at him. "I wasn't sure how you like it. Sugar, cream, and milk are over there."

His eyes round in surprise. "Uh, thanks and good morning to you."

He saunters over to the dresser and I follow, my insides suddenly teeming with butterflies. "Did you sleep okay?"

I push down on the mattress to expend some of this nervous energy I have at laying eyes on him this morning.

“The bed was actually comfy.”

He pauses in spooning sugar into his coffee to look at me through the mirror over the dresser. “Yeah. I had a good night’s sleep. Are you sure you did?”

He pivots to face me, and it’s evident he has more to say but he doesn’t.

I awkwardly curl a few strands behind my ear, now self-conscious. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but you look tired.” He sips his coffee.

Suddenly my throat parches and my lips feel dry. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“See me.” I lick my bottom lip and swallow past the lump in my throat. “Do you know how much makeup I put on to hide the puffiness under my eyes?” An edgy laugh bursts from me, and I quickly press my lips together to stop any more of this nervous energy from breaking free.

“I’m observant, and while you spend a lot of time hiding yourself, you’re actually very easy to see.” He places his coffee on the dresser and ambles toward the luggage, now closer to me. “Everyone deserves to be seen.” He steps closer still, gaze laser focused on me.

He’s so close I can see the tiniest flecks of gold and green in his ocean-blue eyes. The silence between us is electrifying. He licks his bottom lip and his gaze dips to mine. “Besides, I like what I see.”

Every ounce of my being focuses on his steady breaths, penetrating pupils, and the nearness of him. I bite down on the inside of my cheek, struggling to remember where I was going with this conversation.

Ah, yes. That’s it. I want to come clean, to admit something I rarely say out loud. The urge to do so swells inside me. It’s partly why I wrestled with sleep last night. I could have said so much more when Tom was being real with

me but didn't. Too afraid, I left the room for the food and we never got back to any real talk after that.

I'm still scared now, and I want him to kiss me. But I also need to say what's on my mind. It's now or never. Otherwise, I'll lose my nerve, and if he kisses me, well, forget it. All rational thought will leave my head.

"It's a nasty, knee-jerk reaction that I have." A flush charges up my neck and I shake my head.

His brow knits in confusion. "What is?"

"What you said last night. A defense mechanism...all of it was true." I could tell him about my parents. My father and his controlling ways. Margot's incessant calls and texts, all on his behalf. How my life is managed by other people and how I need professional help, a doctor, to help deal with all of it. But all those things feel like excuses even if none are a lie.

I chose to act as I did. My behavior was unacceptable. It's as embarrassing and as simple as that.

My fingers play with the hem of my black, silk Escada blouse, in a poor attempt to burn off my nerves and nausea. Why is baring my ugly little truths both difficult and humbling?

He closes his hand around mine and squeezes reassuringly. In one swift motion, he's conveyed his understanding of how hard this was for me to say. His support bolsters my nerve to say more.

"In my experience, when I let people in, more times than not, they eventually desert me." Again I can't quite bring myself to talk about my father specifically.

He lets out a strange sound, not quite disbelieving. "Desert you?"

How do I begin to help him understand how overwhelming and messy my life is?

"Yes. I know how it looks. I'm a rich kid who can have anything and everything she could ever want. And while that's

true, and I felt like an absolute asshole when you talked about the villages in Africa last night—”

“Leighton, I didn’t say those things to make you feel bad.” He flips my hand over in his and holds my open palm up to his mouth.

His kiss is tender and sweet. My knees weaken, and tears spring to my eyes.

“Tom, I know, and I’m not saying this for sympathy or, God forbid, pity, but I felt like I held back last night and really appreciate how honest you were.”

With his finger, he traces lines and arcs, back and forth, over the center of my hand. Each sweep of his finger is deliciously slow and searing, and like flower petals opening, I’m bared to him.

I’m emboldened to say more. “I’m alone. A lot. I don’t have many true friends and my parents...” This is harder to get out than anything else I’ve said. But if I’ve learned anything from therapy, nothing good can be gained from hiding the truth.

“Well, let’s just say, my parents—more so my father—don’t have time for me. Not now and certainly not when I was a child. It doesn’t excuse my behavior. I just want you to understand, and if I’m ever rude to you again, call me out like you did last night. That isn’t who I am. Can we start over?”

He fights a smile nestled in one corner of his mouth and nods. “We already have. No pressure here. I sense there’s more, but disclosure also comes with trust. I just want you to know that I’m here, and if or when you’re ready, I’ll listen.”

He releases my hand and leans in to plant a kiss on my forehead, hands grasping my face. I release a long awaited sigh of relief. I feel lighter, glad that’s out of the way, and that it went well.

“Can I ask you a question?” He pulls back.

Smiling, I nod though I’m not so sure I can handle whatever it is he wants to know.

“Fallon. Is she a real friend, or is it like a Hollywood thing and you’re not really friends?”

“Good question.” I laugh. “Some friendships made in Hollywood are only for appearances.” Felix springs to mind, and like a candle, I snuff the thought of him out. “But I’m happy to say, Fallon is a true friend.”

“Cool. Glad to hear it.” He rubs his hands together and glances down at my luggage. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

We’re on the road in good time, and at first we’re silent though as the miles tick by, we venture into small talk and end up discussing Rupert Price and his illustrious career.

Tom taps the pads of his fingers against the steering wheel. “Is that why you were in LA, to see your dad?”

“Yes and no. I’ve spent most of my life shuttled between Toronto and LA, sometimes New York and Vancouver. This last trip was like any other.” I hold my breath, wondering what his next question will be.

There are so many things I’m still not ready to talk about. Who knows if I ever will with him.

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

I exhale my pent-up anxiety, happy to answer his question. “No. I’m an only child. You?”

“The youngest of four.” He chuckles and shakes his head. “Finn’s the oldest, then my two sisters, Pippa and Claire.”

“Wow. Are you close?”

“Too close,” he grumbles, but his wide grin shows how much he adores them. “I knew I’d miss them but never realized how much until I spent over a year away.”

“Tell me more about your time in Africa. It sounds like it was a life-changing experience. What made you want to do it?”

“There wasn’t much else going on in my life when I decided to do it.”

He pauses and rakes a hand through his shaggy blond hair. I'm not sure what he's thinking or how to get him talking. Eventually he looks at me through the rearview mirror before continuing.

"I wasn't one to go with the status quo." He shrugs and I'm not sure what he means. "I didn't have what you'd call a career, or a home, or a partner. I was bored. I mean, my life's good, but there really was nothing keeping me in Toronto. Well, except my family and I knew they'd still be there when I came back. They'd always be there for me."

A sharp pang of longing lances my chest and I flinch, but he doesn't notice, eyes on the road.

It's strange how he can say something like that—his family would always be there for him—so matter of fact while for me, it seems like a near impossible feat. I'd have a better chance of going to Mars.

Tom focuses on the slowing traffic and changing lanes, and I pick through all he's said, all interesting, and struggle to raise any of those things without it causing a sad comparison to my life.

"You didn't have a career?" I don't either but I find it puzzling since he's working for ACE. What does he consider this job to be? "How old are you?"

"Why, Ms. Price, that's rather nosy and rude of you, isn't it?" He grins. "A lady doesn't ask such personal questions."

I roll my eyes. "Come on. That isn't rude. I'm twenty-four. Your turn."

"Twenty-seven, and yes, I'm unconventional no matter how much my father wanted me to get a good job and settle down. After university, I floated from job to job, doing what I liked until I no longer did, then I'd find something else. And I suppose, in hindsight, that eventually got old. Then Paige, my sister's friend—she founded Project Miranda—needed volunteers, and I figured why not? I had a chance to do something with...purpose."

His final word lingers, crackling between us with so much meaning. I so want the same thing. I need to hear more. “And? Did you like it? Did you find a purpose?”

He chuckles, but there’s no soul or heart to it. “Yes and no. Like I said, I questioned my sanity at first, especially when it was grueling, but I loved how I could see the impact of our work. But then it got to a point where I wanted to come home and replicate that sense of accomplishment.”

Every time he pauses, I wonder what’s tripping him up, but I’m also conscious of not wanting to be rude. I’ve already been enough of that. Moreover, I understand how hard it can be to say how you feel or share your wounds.

Despite the fact I dumped my emotional baggage on him this morning, there are still things I don’t want to talk about. Things too hard to give voice to that I’d hate it if someone pushed me to do so.

Even still, I can’t keep quiet. “And what about this job?”

“This isn’t a career. My best friend owns ACE. I’m helping him out, and I guess, in a way, he’s helping me too. I need something to do while I figure out what comes next.”

“Ah, I see.” I can’t resist playing on a line from my mother’s favorite band, U2. “So, Africa was worthwhile, but you still haven’t found what you’re looking for?”

He laughs. “I suppose I could see myself working in Africa long-term.”

I lean forward, a bit surprised. This revelation sparks a nervous energy though I don’t know why. “You could?”

“I mean, I’m used to the lifestyle, and in some ways, it’s so much better than all this materialism and excess. I was good at what I did and left with a big sense of accomplishment. Most of all, the people were amazing. I got to work with people from all over the world, and the people in the villages...well, I told you last night. They don’t get better than that.”

We’ve exited the highway and Tom stops for gas. I use this time to stretch my legs and move to the front seat. My body

fizzes with the notion of sitting next to him. Sure, we were close in the car together, but this, side by side, is different.

Almost immediately on sliding into the front seat, I'm hit with the intoxicating scent of him. The corners of my mouth curl upward, loving his smell. We drive for a while, and I can't help but notice how Tom steals glimpses at my legs.

I like it. A lot. The bare skin of my thighs heats and I squirm in my seat, unsure if I should ignore his attention, flirt, or call him out.

Just then, my phone rings. It's Fallon.

I place the phone to my ear. "Hi. How are things in New York?"

"Insane. If I have to give one more interview, I'll scream. Oh, wait, I've got like six more today." She releases an aggravated scream, and though I believe she pulled the phone from her mouth, it's still loud. So loud, Tom peers at me from the corner of his eye, questioning.

I shake my head and give a face that I hope conveys I have nothing to do with her outburst.

"Better?" I ask dryly.

She snorts. "Kind of. It'll do until I can have a glass of something. How are you? Did you talk to Felix?"

"I'm good." I laugh and study Tom whose eyes are firmly fixed on the road ahead. "And no."

While our call last night was brief, my need to take my mind off Tom and my disgusting behavior prompted me to send her a shot of my post and Felix's comment. I hated giving that man any more airtime but it served its purpose.

Fallon's outrage on my behalf was welcomed though it went on for far too long. It's the actress in her and now, I worry she might be gearing up for round two. "Have you tried to reach him today?"

"No, and I'm not going to. I'm done. What are you up to?"

Not taking the hint, she sticks to the topic of Felix. “Done? Like for good? But what if he reaches out?”

It’s a valid question. He has before, after weeks of doing the very thing he did—ignore me—and foolishly, I fell for his excuses and caved under the pressure from my father. Not this time.

“Doesn’t matter. I’m done for good this time.”

We need a topic change. I don’t want to waste any more breath on Felix, and Tom may not be looking at me, but the arch of his brow suggests he’s intrigued by the conversation. I don’t want an interrogation once I’m off the phone.

“He can be persuasive when he wants something. Girl, you of all people know it.” She snickers and I purse my lips at the memory of Felix’s over-the-top gesture to get me to talk to him last time.

Not touching that. *Uh-uh*. And I’m smarter this time around. Not going to happen. I stare out the window and plant the seeds of our new topic of conversation. “So we’re almost in Vail.”

“Nice. I love your place there.”

“Me too, but we might only stay a day.”

“I wish I could fly in but I can’t. Ugh, I wish I was there with you and your hottie driver.” Her moaning and whining bring a silly smile to my lips despite how she continues to imply she’s lusting after Tom. “Okay, change of topic. You know what I think?”

“I’m almost afraid to ask.”

She lowers her voice and turns on her seductive tone. “You need to have some fun with that sexy driver of yours.”

“What?” Self-conscious and alert, I instantly spin from the window to look at Tom. Did he hear her?

Still staring at the road, hands at ten and two on the wheel, he acts like I’m not even there.

“You need to make a move. I bet he’d be interested. I didn’t want to say this, but he definitely had eyes for you the night we met him.”

I continue looking at Tom, until he eventually casts his gaze, slow and languid, on me. An easy grin coasts his lips.

“What?” I croak on the repeat.

Does he know we’re talking about him?

“I say go for it, and while you’re at it, get a pic of that man. He’s too hot not to admire.”

Heat spreads from the center of my chest outward, both at Tom’s stare and the idea of getting a picture of him. I could look at him whenever I wanted? There’s no harm in that, right?

Suddenly, I can no longer handle his intense gaze on me. Not even a second more, or I might melt. I turn away as if the scenery out the window is the most interesting thing I’ve ever seen.

“Um, ah...” I nibble on my lip, lost with what to say.

Tom’s keenly perceptive, and if he hasn’t already figured it out, it wouldn’t take much for him to guess that we’re talking about him.

“Take a pic and send it to me to prove you did it.” Fallon’s giddy voice ignites a delightful sprint up my spine.

My eyes widen at her ridiculous request even if I wouldn’t mind a picture of Tom. She might be on to something.

“I can’t.” Despite my response, my mind reels with how I might pull off such a stunt.

“Damn, girl, you can and you will.”

“Fal, I can’t.” I lower my voice, but it’s futile. Tom is too close to me.

“Yes, you will or else I’ll call him and ask for a pic,”—she pauses for effect—“and more.”

Suddenly Fallon's fixation on Tom stabs at my chest. "You don't have his number."

It feels good to shoot her down, but she isn't deterred. "I have my ways, darling. Just think, I could call the concierge while you're in Vail and get a message to him."

Finger on the grenade pin, ready to pull, she lets that explosion hang between us. What she's suggesting isn't that far-fetched and damn, she'd do it. She's done far more with less provocation.

"Fine." She wins although I don't *not* like the idea of having a photo of Tom. I just don't like the circumstances.

Now that I've given in and Fallon's no longer challenged, she makes me promise to send proof and hangs up.

But not before adding, "The clock's ticking, Leighton. And before you get all pissed because I think Tom's hot, I'm no longer interested. Wells and I are back together. Besides, I was only making the moves on him to get under your skin. I saw how you couldn't take your eyes off Tom when you first met him. I wanted to make you see what was right in front of your face. Love you. Bye."



As we near my family's private residence, situated in the village within a luxury hotel resort in Vail, Tom fiddles with the GPS on the console. This is my chance. He's preoccupied.

Since talking to Fallon, as crazy as it sounds, I want a picture of him. If only, in some childish way, to claim him as mine when I show it to her. Foolish? Maybe. Worth it? Definitely.

I snap a shot of him. The flash of light and the click of my phone busts me.

Tom stills and slowly swivels to face me. "Did you just take a picture of me?"

His blue eyes sparkle, clearly entertained, but I can't tell if he's tickled to have caught me or because I even care to take his picture. Inch by inch, his lips curl upward as the seconds tick by. What do I say?

He's wearing a full-on grin, and if I didn't know any better, I'd think he's daring me to take his picture again.

"I was trying to take a screenshot and goofed." It's a lie and I can only hope he believes me. "Like, I can't tell you how many times I've taken a picture of my background. Sorry."

I laugh unconvincingly and smile. I may be going overboard with the sorrys today, but if anyone deserves my apology, it's Tom. And in this moment, I feel like I have to apologize for lying to him. Especially since we've been so honest with each other in the past twenty-four hours.

He nods but says nothing, and I don't know if he believes my excuse or not.

We park, take the elevator up to my residence, and once inside, I surreptitiously send his photo to Fallon, if only to shut her up. I'm willing to bet she never thought I'd do it. This is the kind of thing she does.

Tom deposits my suitcase, the only one I asked him to bring up, and glances around the large living and dining room. "Wow, this is a nice place. And your family only uses it a few times a year?"

The condo is impressive, and it probably adds to the evidence that I'm a spoiled brat. He spent the past year in Africa for crying out loud. And all I said earlier about being alone must seem insignificant—my pity party—against the backdrop of this affluence.

In some ways, I can't argue with him, and I don't know what to say. Fortunately, I'm saved from doing so when my phone pings with a text.

Fallon: Gawd I forgot how HOT he is.

Then another one.

Fallon: Blond, tanned, and all kinds of sexy!

I smile at the screen and before I can consider a response, two more texts, one after the other, land on my phone.

Fallon: You better get some of that. Cuz if you don't, I will.

Fallon: Enjoy the RIDE with the hottie. And give Tom a kiss for me.

“What’s got you smiling like that? Does staying at this place really make you that happy?” His tone is light and playful.

If only he knew.

I nod, vowing to never tell him what I just did, and tuck my phone into the pocket of my shorts.

After a quick tour of the place, including showing him his room, we end up back in the living room.

“Do you want something to drink? Eat?” I glide past him toward the kitchen, and he lightly grabs my shoulder. My pulse skips a beat. “What’s wrong?”

“You know, all you had to do was ask.” His gaze slides down the black blouse that clings to my torso, my jean shorts, and black Chanel slingbacks.

His expression is unreadable, and my heart rumbles like a herd of gazelles swiftly racing across the plains of the Serengeti. What is happening to me?

“Ask what?”

“There’s no way you got a good picture with the crappy lighting in the car. If you want a better one...to send your friend...” He walks over to the floor-to-ceiling windows where a warm glow from the fading sun streams in.

The golden beams accentuate his sun-kissed surfer do, boyish yet sexy features, and defined body. I couldn’t have asked for better lighting. My knees buckle and cheeks flame. He heard every word of my conversation with Fallon.

TOM

“*Y*ou should see your face.” I chuckle and shift my body from one provocative pose to another, trying to lessen her embarrassment.

Leighton’s eyes close and her hands cover her cheeks. “Ugh, I must look like a fire truck.”

“Nah, you look fine.” I pull her hand away and drop my voice to erase any hint of teasing. “Lovely, even.”

Her eyes widen and snap to mine. Something unnameable explodes in my chest sort of like fireworks. Hot and bright and effervescent. I’m mesmerized by the jolt and marvel of Leighton.

The usually stern and shuttered features of her classically beautiful face morph into an honest-to-goodness beam of sunshine, or maybe a rainbow is more comparable. Her nose crinkles, dark mahogany eyes sparkle, and her lips split into a huge grin.

“Shut up.” A mortifying flush colors her cheeks, only intensifying her beauty.

From the second she took my picture, I couldn’t resist calling her out, all in fun, of course. We’d made a lot of headway between last night and today though she has a lot of nerve and that’s still eye-opening. I doubt she’s even aware of how easily she treats people like things. She had no problem snapping a picture of me without asking.

She sheepishly shakes her head in disbelief. “I can’t believe I did that. I’ve never done that before.”

“Really? Not even with all the famous people you’ve come across?” I step closer to her. “There wasn’t a single person you wanted a picture of but were too afraid to ask?” Her gaze locks with mine, clearly waiting for me to continue. “So, because you’re *you*, you boldly snapped a picture when they weren’t looking.”

I flaunt what I hope is a devilish grin, reminding her I knew exactly what she did when she did it. The flash and click were dead giveaways, and her sneaky expression didn’t hide anything.

She groans with embarrassment. “No. I’ve never had to sneak a picture before.” Then she purses her lips. “What did you mean by *because I’m me*?”

The energy shifts and crackles between us. Depending on my response, we may have a smooth or bumpy ride while in Vail.

I take the coward’s way out and drop it. “Forget I said anything.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “I don’t want to forget about it.”

To counter the tension rolling off her, I offer a breezy smile. “You’re used to getting what you want.”

She scoffs, steps back, and readies to protest or throw down; I’m not sure which and don’t want to find out.

“Hey, Leighton, I’m not trying to insult you or start an argument. Your actions speak for themselves. Look at what you just did.” I point to her pocket where her phone is. “You took my photo without so much as asking.”

She gapes, probably stunned by my honesty. I hope she isn’t insulted, because I don’t mean it that way. She only took my picture; it isn’t like she hurt me.

Hand to chest, I put on my best mock-shocked face. “I mean, wow, think of how I must feel. Objectified and flattered

all at the same time.”

A slash of red streaks the apples of her cheeks and she relaxes, dropping her arms to her sides. “You heard Fallon on the phone, didn’t you?”

Sparing her further humiliation, I only nod. She chews on the inside of her cheek, clearly hesitating before saying, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“It’s okay. I’m not offended. I was only joking about being objectified...well, kind of.” I chuckle and the upward tug at the corner of her lips is all the gratification I need.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” She pokes at my hard stomach and quickly snatches her hand back as if only now remembering who we are to each other.

Acquaintances, brought together by circumstance. Client and, for the lack of a better word, chauffeur.

She shouldn’t be reaching out and touching me the way she just did.

But I liked it.

Neither should I have held her hand and kissed her palm earlier.

But I did. Couldn’t resist.

My fingers wrap around her wrist, and I tug her close to me. “Aren’t you?”

When she opened up to me, when her voice cracked on the word “deserted,” I felt the fissure in my chest. Even still, I was unable to fully comprehend how that must feel. I’m lucky to have a family who loves me and showers me with what is too much adoration and attention at times.

I don’t want to admonish or push her away because of a silly photo. My arm slides around her slim waist, driven to keep up this easy, flirty conversation and, truthfully, satisfy my desire to have her close. I pull her body flush against mine.

She gasps, hands flat on my chest, and the tips of her fingers dig into my flesh as if she’s going to push away. She

doesn't. "What are you doing?"

"I have an idea." I fish my phone from my pocket and hold it out in front of us. "Let's send Fallon another one."

She opens her mouth, surprised. Her lips are barely inches from mine, her pink tongue teasing me, and the tantalizingly faint smell of strawberries engulfs me.

"Let's send her a selfie. You know, to prove to her that you're actually with me." I'm grasping for a reason and Leighton knows it, rolling her eyes.

As I lean forward to press my cheek against hers, she shifts away, only slightly, wearing a puzzled expression. "Prove to her?"

Why am I disappointed that she isn't as close as she once was?

"Well, for all she knows, you grabbed a picture of a hot guy off the Internet and you're pawing him off as your driver." Garbage spews from my mouth. None of it makes sense, and while inwardly cringing at how much of an idiot I sound like, I'm desperate to take a photo with her. Hold her close.

Laughter bursts from her lips and she tosses her head back. We're so close, her hands still on my chest and hips pressing into my upper thighs. I feel every ounce of her amusement zip through me, and I tighten my grip on her.

"Wow, look at you." In awe, I unabashedly stare at her.

She blinks and stiffens. "What?"

"You can laugh."

Storm clouds darken her expression. "Funny."

"No, seriously. You sparkle when you laugh."

In the few days we've been together, I can't remember a time when she did laugh. Not even with Fallon. It's a shame. She has a great laugh and what it does to her whole demeanor...wow.

Surprisingly, she does it again, but this time it's more a girlish giggle though cut short by the press of her lips. It's almost as if she remembers herself, that she isn't allowed to have fun.

"So what you're saying is, I'm catfishing my best friend?" She's going along with my stupidity and I love it.

"That's your word, not mine." I push into her side to emphasize my words. "I'm not implying you mean any harm if you were to do such a thing. And just so Fallon doesn't think you'd do that, I think we should take a picture together."

"Hmmm." She arches a brow thoughtfully. "I find it hilarious how you've somehow rewritten history. You and Fallon have met. Or maybe you're choosing to conveniently forget that little fact."

I nod and once more angle my head close to hers. "Whatever you think is best."

She giggles and angles away, again. "Hang on a sec. You mentioned the photo was of a *hot* guy. Who exactly are you talking about?" Trouble of another kind twinkles in her gaze.

"Ha. Now look who's being hilarious." Before she can get away or who knows what, I squeeze her side and close the sliver of space between us.

We're cheek to cheek. She's floral and fruity, soft and warm. Damn, she fits perfectly by my side.

"Come on. Take the picture," she grumbles, her voice a touch breathy.

Does she feel it too? The current of electricity buzzing between us.

I snap a few pictures with my phone, and when done, I keep my hold on her and bring the phone closer for us to look at the shots.

We look great together, and she's smiling, glowing even. We both stand like that, almost as one, for a beat or two, and before she breaks this connection, I grapple for something to say.

“Okay, so if you wouldn’t use the word hot, how about sexy or devilishly handsome?”

She giggles some more, and I could seriously listen to her laugh all day. Something tells me this is Leighton unfiltered. Carefree. She’s refreshing and more beautiful than ever.

“Cocky much?” She lightly elbows me in the ribs.

“No. Confident.” I tighten my grasp, liking her where she is far too much. “Okay, if you wouldn’t use any of those words to describe me, what would you say then?”

Suddenly, she fidgets in my arms. All flustered, blushing, and grinning, and the look is adorable as fuck on her.

Then she rolls her eyes but softens the exasperation with a broad smile. “Just a guy.”

“I’m ‘just a guy’?” I’m not offended but pretend to be as she nods emphatically. “I see.”

“I don’t mean it as an insult. I’m just a girl and you’re just a guy. You and me.”

“True. I suppose when you say it like that, it could be a compliment.”

Shaking her head, her expression sobers and my heart somersaults, hoping I haven’t messed this up. I’m liking her without her barricade firmly intact.

“It isn’t *not* a compliment... What I mean is, you’re not famous or used to being the person everyone wants to know. You’re an everyday person and yet...” She mashes her lips together and I can sense the wheels turning in her mind. Is she unsure of what to say or hesitant to say what she wants? “Tom, you’re bigger than life. Dazzling. A bright star.”

I’m caught off guard and kind of speechless at how she describes me. Open and real with her assessment, not because I believe it to be but because she does and she isn’t afraid to say so.

“I know it sounds silly, and I can’t think of a better way to say it.” Cheeks now crimson, she breaks eye contact and dips her head.

But funnily enough, she makes no attempt to get out of my hold. *Damn.*

“Nice. I get it, and you should know.” I slide my finger under her chin and tilt her head up so she has no choice but to look at me. “You try to hide it, but when you let your guard down, you’re pretty dazzling yourself, you know.”

“I don’t think so.” She tries to wriggle free, and I loosen my grip but not enough for her to easily walk away. “Could you, uh, send me those pictures so I can send one to Fallon?”

“Absolutely, but she doesn’t need pictures of us.” I wink and lower my voice. “I’ll send them to you when we’re done here, but we aren’t done.”

She looks up at me. “We aren’t?”

“No. From what you said earlier—”

“Forget I said anything.”

“Not a chance. All I want to say is, just because others don’t see you or make time for you doesn’t mean you aren’t important or special. That you don’t shine.”

Her breath hitches and eyes darken as she leans her head in toward mine. I desperately want to kiss her again, but this time will be different. It will mean something.

None of the uncomfortable moments from our earlier time together are enough of a deterrent. I bend my head and lick my lips in anticipation of her taste. Our lips are a whisper apart, and she surprises me by making the first move.

Leighton brushes her lips against mine so slowly, hands holding my face. Both of us part our lips, the tips of our tongues dueling for the lead, and I moan into her mouth. She echoes the sentiment but pulls back and drops her grip on my head.

Damn, so sweet but not enough. She must know how evil she is right now. Teasing me like this. But if she needs slow, that’s what I’ll give her.

Her breath mingles with mine, and I ready to make the move, to kiss her, when a man’s voice calls from somewhere

near the front door.

“Honey, I’m home.”

Surprised, Leighton springs from my grasp like she’s been burned or caught doing something she shouldn’t.

Before I can ask who’s here or if she’s all right, a dark-haired man confidently prances into the room. Arms wide open, grinning from ear to ear, he looks very familiar. His name is on the tip of my tongue but out of reach.

He rushes to Leighton and sweeps her off her feet. I watch dumbfounded as he twirls her around. She doesn’t laugh but neither does she protest or scream. She clearly knows him.

Unable to stand by silently, I break their moment with a direct question. “Leighton, who is this?”

At the same time, he plants her feet on the ground and crushes his lips to hers. She moans and teeters toward him as one hand clasps his shoulder. What? To keep him close? To deepen the kiss?

What the hell?

Only seconds ago she was kissing me, and now, she’s sucking face with... Who is this guy?

He’s famous, that’s for sure, but I can’t seem to grasp his name. His name doesn’t matter but what does is that, from the looks of things, he’s her boyfriend.

LEIGHTON

Tom's question vaguely registers. I'm too busy trying to break free of this unwanted kiss. My fingernails dig into Felix's muscled shoulder, and I wrestle for space. But he has a strong hold on the nape of my neck, and for every millimeter I gain, he swallows the distance, his lips firmly pressing into mine. *Bastard.*

Desperate, I step on his toe and pull back. "Felix," I growl and wipe his kiss from my lips with the back of my hand. The jerk tried to stab his tongue into my mouth, but I kept my lips firmly sealed.

"I missed you, baby." Felix tries again for another kiss, and I glare while taking two large steps away from him.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I manage to maintain composure, unwilling to show this man any emotion though I want to ice him to the bone.

"Did you miss me? I sure missed you." He attempts again to bring me into his arms, and it's because Tom's here. "I had to see my girl."

The man loves an audience and is always performing. I wonder how this greeting would go if we were alone? I wish we were alone, if only so I couldn't see the look of betrayal and shock on Tom's face. I need to explain to him but not now.

I grit my teeth and force tight, measured words past them. "You could've seen me in LA when I was there for weeks."

“Babe, I know. I wanted to.” He grabs my hands and kisses my knuckles. “But you know how it is. We were finalizing my next picture, the meetings... I feel terrible for not seeing you in LA. So much so, even though we’re going to be together in a few days for TIFF, I couldn’t wait to see you.”

I’ve asked the wrong question and gag on his perfect lies.

“How did you get in?” This is my place, and he waltzed in here like he owns it. He would’ve needed a code or card to get up here in the elevator and the same for the front door.

His slimy movie-star grin lifts the corners of his lips to his ears. “Baby, I have my ways.”

What the hell does that mean?

Felix uses the haze of surprise and anger consuming me to his advantage and slips his arms around my waist before turning us to face Tom. “Who is this?”

At the same time, Tom’s usually relaxed, always sunny manner, has morphed from shocked to dark and cloudy. “You know this guy?”

Ha. I love it. Tom acts like he doesn’t know who Felix is, and maybe he doesn’t, but his question gifts the first moment of brevity since Felix’s arrival.

The actor in question flinches and narrows his gaze on me. Oops. A snicker slips past my lips. I sneer at the jerk but make the mistake of then shifting my gaze to Tom. My throat constricts. We kissed, I wanted to keep kissing him, and now I wish I hadn’t pulled back. Not too long ago I was in his arms, not a breath of air between us. Damn, Felix.

“Ah, sorry. This is—”

I’m cut off when Tom steps forward with his hand outstretched and introduces himself. “Tom Raine.”

“Hi, Tom.” Felix holds his hand tightly and shakes. “And how do you know Leighton?”

“I’m Lei—Ms. Price’s driver.”

Air rushes out of me like a rapidly deflating balloon at how cold and formal he sounds. He must hate me. If only I could take him aside and tell him. But I can't do this in front of Felix.

"Oh." The actor puffs out his chest and beams. "I'm Felix Thorpe, and before you ask, I'd be happy to give you an autograph."

Recognition flashes in Tom's gaze, and his lips twist in what could either be a grin or sneer.

"Hi, Felix. Thanks, but I'm good." He shoves his hands into his pockets. "I really liked *Foreverland*. Great movie."

Felix's jaw drops open, and once again, I stifle the urge to cackle and he sniffs. "I wasn't in *Foreverland*."

He drops Tom's hand like he's been holding garbage, but the fair-haired man doesn't seem the least bit perturbed. He might even be tickled pink at irking the movie star. I certainly am.

I smile at Tom, but he isn't looking at me. He seems to be looking anywhere but at me.

Felix pulls me toward the front door. "I'm starving—craving a big, juicy steak."

I could tell him the kitchen is fully stocked, steak more than likely included, but I'm no cook and not about to try for Felix Thorpe. And he couldn't find his ass from his elbow in a kitchen.

Before I can tell him to go get food alone—that should give me enough time to change the code to the condo—he adds suggestively, "I want to spend some time with my girl."

Uh-uh, no way. He wants an audience so I can't lose it on him in public. Not going to happen.

"I'm not your girl." I pull from his grasp. "Go ahead."

"She's a funny one." Felix hooks a thumb at me. "She's mad at me because I'm busy with my career. This is how she wants to punish me." Before I can utter a word to the contrary,

he barrels on, “Tom, you must be hungry. C’mon, I’ll treat you to a steak.”

“I could eat. Sure.”

What? Why would Tom agree to this?

The men saunter toward the front door, and I don’t want to go but don’t want to leave Tom alone with Felix. I can just imagine the lies.

I scurry after them, hating every second. “I’ll come.”



Except for the blood-red pool on the plate, there isn’t any trace of the rare steak Felix ordered. He ate like a beast, ravenous and sloppy. My stomach sours, and I push away my uneaten bowl of soup.

Upon arrival at the restaurant, we were seated quickly thanks to being in the company of Felix Thorpe, and naturally, we were given the best table in the house.

The service was great as well as the food though I have no appetite. I haven’t had a chance to explain things to Tom, and I wish we were alone, back at my place. And I wish Felix was anywhere but here.

Unfortunately, I haven’t figured out how to get rid of him without having an argument. Felix doesn’t deserve my energy or the oxygen I’d waste talking to him, but we need to have this conversation. It has been a long time coming. I just wish he wasn’t here, intruding on my time with Tom.

A stone sits in the pit of my stomach. I’m prepared for Tom to ask outright what the hell is going on between us, but not for how things will shake out. Felix will deny the truth to his death. That’s who he is. I need to separate these two and talk to Tom alone.

“Weren’t you on that show years ago?” Tom waves around his fork, the final piece of his steak perched on the end. “I

forget the name, but it was about a bunch of high school kids. I think it was set in California.”

The men have been doing all of the talking, and for the most part, I’m only partially listening.

Felix gulps his wine and nods. “*Laguna Beach.*”

“Yes, that’s it. You played a secondary character.”

Felix’s body jerks at what I’m sure he considers an insult, and he frowns. I want to burst out laughing. I’m not sure if Tom’s deliberately trying to get under Felix’s skin or if it’s purely coincidence, but either way, there’s much to love.

“Oh, come on, I stole the fucking show.” Felix slams the table with his fist in what he wants Tom to think is mock indignation. Oh no, he means it.

I haven’t spoken in easily twenty minutes and can no longer keep my mouth shut. “Pfft, hardly. Roman Kingsley was the star. Hands down.”

Felix glares at me and slaps his napkin onto the table. “No fucking way. Roman likes to think so, but you and I both know the success of that series was all on me.”

God, this man’s ego has no end. It amazes me how he can blatantly lie without so much as batting an eye.

I straighten in my seat and smile smugly, loving this opportunity to put him in his place. “Sure, you tell that to yourself and the millions of Roman Kingsley fans.” I turn to look at Tom. “I actually got to play an extra in a couple of episodes. I was a huge fan...” I now look directly at Felix. “A Roman fan and begged my dad to get me on there. I even got to meet him. The sweetest man and oh, so sexy.”

“That’s cool.” Tom’s also looking at Felix and chuckles, clearly catching the volley going on between me and the movie star. “Hey, Felix, for what it’s worth, I thought you were great in that show.”

Oh no, Tom, don’t fall for his bullshit or the unquestionable star factor that makes levelheaded people drunk on Felix Thorpe.

The jerk next to me puffs out his chest, and the stench of his arrogance makes me want to gag.

Fortunately, the topic changes and I tune out the two of them, still pondering how and why Felix is here. I'm pretty sure he called Lois to find out where I was and that was how he probably got the condo door code.

While I wish she'd denied him access to my home, she's only doing her job. Why wouldn't she give Felix the code? He's stayed there before. She thinks we're an item. My father would have told her to treat him like family. *Yuck.*

My stomach roils just thinking about the fallout when this façade comes to an end. It has to end now. I tried to get ahold of my father, to tell him first out of some misguided sense of loyalty, but Felix is here. Ignoring me and treating me like a thing to be used and discarded at his discretion is one thing, but now he's messing with my life.

I can't be discouraged by how my father will react or that I'll no doubt be portrayed as the jackass in the media. Felix won't hear of anything else, and my people, parents included, will back him one hundred percent.

The crunch of Tom chewing breaks my dark musings, and I stare at him. "What is it with you and French fries?"

I don't get his fascination, but clearly he enjoys them, and I'm starting to like that about him. How easily he enjoys life.

Felix pats his stomach with pride and responds as if I was talking to him. "I never touch the stuff."

Not caring to hold back, I snort and ignore Felix. If these two men were to stand side by side, movie-star status aside, there isn't any discernible difference between their physiques though Tom's a couple of inches taller. Both are in great shape regardless of the T-shirt and button-down shirt they wear respectively. And I would know.

I've seen Felix shirtless on more than one occasion, and the guy's a movie star, so photos of him in swim trunks are easily found online. As for Tom, the memory of him shirtless

outside of the Marmont is emblazoned on my brain. That's not something I can easily, if ever, forget.

Undeterred by Felix's comment, Tom munches on another fry, still a little aloof but looser than before. "Now that I'm back, I plan to eat my weight in fries."

He's joking, or at least, I hope he is and I mock gasp, playing up our opposing positions on the French fry debate.

Our young, pretty server sidles up to the table, her heart eyes fixed on Tom. This surprises me and it doesn't. I'm used to women throwing themselves at Felix, and I quickly learned not to care. But Tom...he's a different story.

There's no doubt she finds him a catch, but I don't like the way she bats her eyelashes at him.

"I'd like to see you try." She ignores the rest of us at the table with only eyes for Tom.

Tom belts out a laugh and throws down his napkin. "Challenge accepted. And if I don't succeed, at least I'll be happy in my defeat."

"Or more like a carb coma." Mandy, our server, giggles and leans closer to him to grip his bicep. "I think you've got this."

She winks and Tom laughs. Again. Damn, she's flirting with him and he likes it...or does he like *her*? Or is this his way of getting back at me for kissing him without telling him about Felix?

The little bit of watermelon gazpacho I consumed churns, sickly sweet, in my stomach, pledging to make an appearance. I grimace. I've had enough. Not only of this meal, but this night.

"We'd like the check." I push my bowl toward her and Mandy straightens, features suddenly sliding into professional mode. Finally, she remembers she's on the job.

"Yes, of course." She starts to stack our plates. "Let me get these out of your way, and I'll be right back."

Mandy leaves and Felix grabs at my chair, dragging it next to him so he can drape an arm around me. Tom's jaw clenches and nostrils flare.

Felix leans in close. "I hope you've saved room for dessert, babe."

I vomit a little in my mouth and wrinkle my nose in disgust. I don't like the impression he's giving. Despite putting distance between us, I make the mistake of glancing at Tom. My stomach sinks.

He's tense, demeanor grim. So many questions darken his once clear blue eyes, and I can no longer bear to hold his gaze. He's clearly misinterpreting what's going on. I can't blame him. I know what it looks like.

Felix's Oscar-worthy performance, now clasping my hand in his and playing with a few loose strands of my hair, would make anyone believe we're madly in love or at the very least together.

If only Felix would get lost. That's what I want more than anything right now. But I've played this role for so long I'm unsure how to break character. And if I did, I might cause a scene.

Worse yet, what would my father say? He wouldn't like it. He'd remind me of what's at stake for him. Not me, always him.

I don't know who I am, just who I am supposed to be.

The jarring scrape of Tom's chair as he pushes it back and stands causes me to snap out of my head.

He looks to Felix. "Thanks again for dinner. I'm going to walk off the fries and take a look around town. I'll see you both back at the condo."

Then he's gone without so much as a look my way. Nausea boils in my stomach, seeping from my pores, and the sensation only intensifies as I watch our server amble after Tom.

They stand facing each other at the entrance to the restaurant. Mandy says something to Tom and he laughs. They

continue to chat, and I'm unable to sit still and keep my mouth shut.

“What do you think that's about?” I point at Tom and Mandy.

“You're fucking kidding, right?” Felix stiffens at my side. “Who gives a fuck?”

His vitriol doesn't slow down the unsettling thoughts dominating my brain. “She's flirting with him, isn't she?”

“Big-time and she woulda flirted with me, but I made it clear that I was with you.” He leans in and plants a kiss on my cheek.

The blistering heat of Felix's expectant gaze causes me to sweat, but not in a good way. I ignore him, unable to look away from the two locked in conversation.

Mandy hands him her phone, and Tom laughs but doesn't take it. Her phone hangs between them, and I wish and pray he lets her down easily.

An icky feeling forms in my chest. Tom isn't mine. He has every right to be with whomever he wants. And after what he saw between Felix and me, I wouldn't blame him.

Tom stares at her phone and rubs a hand over his mouth and chin thoughtfully. I can't tell if he's looking at it like it's a bomb or a present. Then he takes the phone from her. Oh no. Bile charges up my throat.

“She's asked for his number, you know that, right?” Felix tilts his head in my view, and his smug smile blocks the two that have held my attention for far too long. “And guess what? Our boy wants some of that.”

Suddenly, Tom, Mandy, and everything fades away. A chill skates up my spine. I could walk out, leave Felix here, but it wouldn't work. He knows the code. He could call my father. It's time to deal with him once and for all. The fallout be damned.

“Why are you really here?” I get up and switch seats so I'm now in the one Tom vacated, across from Felix.

I watch as his Hollywood mask fades, the shine to his dark gaze vanishes, and his features tighten.

“Leighton, come on. Do we really have to do this?” He releases an exhausted sigh. “You must know.”

“I wouldn’t be asking if I did.”

“Your father called me.”

A rush of ice courses through my veins and slows the beat of my heart. My father. He doesn’t have the time nor the desire to call his daughter. The one he dumped for work at the last minute and didn’t have the balls to tell in person. But he called Felix.

This shouldn’t sting the way it does. I’ve been in similar situations before, but it hurts.

I’m such a fool. I should’ve figured it out, should have known that Felix wasn’t here to fix things before TIFF because he was worried I’d ruin things after he snubbed me in Los Angeles.

No. Felix wants the best media coverage for him and for movie sales. What better way to do that than to walk the red carpet of the North American premiere of his latest film with the director’s daughter?

That had been the plan all along, but he fucked up and ghosted me in LA. I figured he was here to smooth things over, make sure I would still be at his side. I mean, come on, the optics are fire.

It’s good press. Everybody wins. That is...everyone but me.

“Rupert called me saying you were blowing off the prep of TIFF, taking your time on this drive. He’s worried. He wants you home and figured I could talk to you.”

Just then, Mandy interrupts with the check, and it’s my chance to leave. When I return to the condo, the first thing I do is look for Tom. He isn’t here.

A dark, savage feeling eats at my insides, and it’s more than just jealousy. We left Mandy still working at the

restaurant so he can't be with her, but where is he? I wish he was here.

My anger at Felix and my dad festers and is ready to break free when the door opens. Tom?

I rush to the front entrance, knees near buckling at the sight of Felix staring down at his phone.

"You can't stay here." I hold up my phone, ready to squash his protest. "I'll call the concierge and get you a room."

"No." With each step toward me, his expression softens—it's all an act. "I'm here because I care about you. Your father invited me; I'm staying. Unless you want me to call him right now?"

I choose to ignore his threat, having no doubt he will do it.

"Care? Is that why you never bothered to call me after what happen on our flight to LA? The emergency landing? Because you care about me?"

My stomach twists in knots at the mention of that horrific flight, the nightmares, the therapy. How my fear of flying became crippling after that night. All of it only adds to why I don't want to be around Felix. It wasn't his fault, but he never helped the situation either.

"Jesus Christ, Leighton, not this again." He rolls his eyes. "Get over it, already. It's old news."

"Get over it? It was an emergency landing." I wave my arms in the air as if the motion will make him hear me better. "Or does nothing faze you because you are too wrapped up in yourself? Do you even remember fucking the stewardess with me only feet away?"

He tenses, skin ashen, and I'm under no illusion that he's suddenly grown a conscience. Felix and I were supposedly dating when he slept with the flight attendant. Up until now, he thought he got away with it. That's probably why he looks like he's going to be sick.

"I don't care that you slept with her. Or the countless other women while we were together. We're done." I step back, not

liking how close we are. “We were never anything anyway, and I’m no longer going to be part of this charade.”

“I care about you.”

My chest spasms at his lie. “Spare me your performance. The only thing you care about is yourself. I let you and my father talk me into thinking otherwise.”

I can’t bring myself to say it out loud—how foolish I’d been to think Felix could care about me and want to be with me. The fake dating had gone on for too long—for years. And every time I’d see another woman with Felix online or a headline saying he was vacationing with some model, heiress, or actress, Dad always had an explanation.

It’s liberating to realize it no longer hurts to think about it. I no longer care about Felix.

“Fuck, Leighton, you’re not walking away from us. I’ve booked a flight to Toronto for the both of us in the morning. Be ready by nine.”

A volcanic rage spills from within me. “I’m not getting on a plane and definitely not with you. Go to hell, Felix.”

TOM

“Please send me your itinerary so we have it on record.” August’s request makes me stop pouring the freshly brewed coffee.

When I woke up this morning to go for a run, the condo was quiet just like it was last night when I got in late. If I didn’t know better, I’d have thought I was alone.

After dinner, I ended up meeting our server, Mandy, and a few of her friends to play pool once her shift was over. She’d been clear she was looking for a hookup. I’d also been clear that I wasn’t interested.

Despite our differing wants, she still wanted to hang out, and I was looking for somewhere else to be. Anywhere but with Leighton and Felix.

There was a strange, unsettling vibe between the two of them, and it only intensified throughout dinner. I didn’t want to believe they were together, not with how Leighton had been with me. Not with our kiss and how we were growing close. But it was hard not to.

I didn’t know what to think. I’m attracted to Leighton and was hoping for more. It was hard seeing her with Felix, his hands and mouth on her, even if I didn’t have a right.

Memories from the night before blister my chest. I tried to play it casual throughout dinner, but I was itching to get out of there. Or what would have been better was to get Leighton alone. To talk to her. But it was clear Felix wouldn’t let that happen.

“Hey, Tom, you still there?” August’s voice carries through the speaker of my phone and snaps me out of my thoughts.

“Uh, yeah, sorry.” I place the carafe on the countertop and shake my head. “I don’t have an itinerary. Leighton’s talked about it in vague terms, but nothing’s set in stone. All I know is, we’ll be back by next Thursday, at the latest.”

“The Film Festival is Thursday, right?”

“Yup.”

“And now you’re calling her Leighton. What changed? Are things better?”

I scan the kitchen, concerned Leighton or Felix could walk in at any minute. Why did I say anything to Gus about her? Sure, we got off to a rocky start, but I didn’t have to paint her in a negative light, even if nothing I said was false.

She can be difficult, but she’s so much more than that, and I’m slowly discovering the many sides to her. Or at least, I was starting to. Who knows now with Felix here.

Ignoring his comment, I ask, “How are things with Brent?”

Gus chuckles, most probably amused by my change of topic. “Fine, be like that. You don’t want to talk about it. I get it. But before we move on, I need you to understand that I’m not trying to be a dick or a stickler. I need the itinerary.”

“Got it, and as soon as I have it, so will you. Now, Brent?”

“Shit, you’re never going to believe this.”

“Believe what?” Suddenly Eden’s voice is in the background. She must have walked into his office.

“Hey, Eden.” There’s a smile to August’s tone. “Tom’s on the line.”

“Tom, how are you?” Her cheery voice elicits another smile from me.

“I’m great. And you?”

“Good. Good.” Sounds of movement filter through the line. “Hey, move over,” she says to Gus before shifting her

focus back to the conversation. “So what are we talking about?”

“Eden, it’s so nice of you to join us.” Gus’s sarcasm makes us all laugh. “Tom wants an update on Brent...”

“Did you tell him?” From the weighted tone of her question, I can imagine the look they share. It sounds like there’s news.

“No, I—”

I can’t take it any longer. “Hey, you two, can we cut to the chase?” I lean my back against the counter, clearly amused with how they carry on like siblings, even if this is taking too long. “You can do your little back and forth once I’m off the line.”

“You’re no fun.” Despite not having her in front of me, I swear I can see her exaggerated pout.

“I cut Brent loose.” August’s tone is devoid of emotion, and the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

“Why?”

“He was skimming from ACE.” Eden’s disdain for the guy rings loud and clear, and this isn’t new. They have history and she’s never liked the guy. “August and I have been slowly combing through the books and Brent’s files, piecing it together.”

Brent’s been Gus’s friend and business partner for a while now. We trusted him. All three of us lived together for years.

“What the fuck?”

She scoffs. “Yeah, and when the asshole finally came back home, August confronted him.”

“No shit. Gus, what did he say?”

“He didn’t deny it, but he didn’t admit it either.” A mixture of defeat and anger weaves through his voice. “I didn’t have to kick him out of the house. He couldn’t get out fast enough. He left half his shit.”

Tension seeps into my body, shoulders climbing to my ears as I clench my fists.

Eden says, “We managed to get the money out of a secondary ACE account Brent had opened secretly. He didn’t know we’d found it, and we closed the account out before he could. But the rest is gone.”

“How much are we talking?”

Gus lets out a long, frustrated exhale, but she’s the one to respond, “Thousands.”

“Fuck. No.” I run a hand down my face, suddenly incensed and wishing I was there. My presence likely wouldn’t make a difference, but if only I could find Brent. The desire to hurt him for what he’s done surges like a wave.

“We’ve got a lawyer, and we’re trying to figure out what recourse we have. If we can find and get back any of the funds.” A phone rings in the background and August pauses. “Uh, Tom, I’ve got to get that.”

“You go,” Eden says to Gus. “I want to talk to Tom.”

Gus and I say our goodbyes and I promise to talk soon. “Is he gone?” I ask Eden.

“Yes.”

“How’s he doing?”

“When we first suspected what Brent was doing, it nearly destroyed him. He’d trusted Brent and let him handle the finances on top of his other duties.”

“Shit. That explains how he got away with it.”

“Yes. Brent doctored the financial files he showed August. All fake. August is having a rough go of it. A lot of self-recrimination and anger, especially when Brent wouldn’t answer his calls. He’s still pissed but, more than anything else, determined to get back whatever he can.”

“And what are the chances of getting back the money?”

“Slim to none.”

My stomach twists. “Dammit. Does Gus know this?”

“Yes.” She softens her tone. “Tom, he’s gonna be okay. I want to invest in ACE.”

“You do?” I’m buoyed by the prospect of Eden teaming up with August.

“Yes, but Gus refuses to hear me out. He thinks it’s charity. It isn’t.”

“Shit, Eden. I feel like I should be there. I could talk some sense into him.”

“No. I’ve got him. You’re helping him by doing this job. But I did want to chat with you about something else.”

Is she going to bring up working with her again? “What?” My indecision jabs at my gut.

“You could partner with him. I’ve always thought you two were a great team. You were always more dialed in to ACE than Brent ever was. I never understood why that douchebag was part of the equation.”

“I don’t have that kind of money.”

“You wouldn’t need it. I’d still invest. I believe in ACE and the two of you.”

“Eden—”

“Listen, think about it. I haven’t said anything to August, and I won’t unless you want me to. Or the offer to work with me still stands.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“What?”

“Throwing jobs at me,” I jest.

“Like I said before. You’ve got options. You said you wanted permanency, roots, and something to give you purpose. To be proud of. Either of these opportunities would give you that, and we’d also benefit from your experience and skill.”

I chuckle at her mini ego boost. “Thanks. I just don’t know...” Lost in thought, I trail off, not sure if either option is

something I want.

“Tom, it’s all good. Take your time.”

“Okay. Thanks. I really mean it. I’m glad you’re there.” I pick up my coffee cup and sip.

“You silly man, no need to thank me. I’d do anything for you guys. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

“And Tom.”

“Yeah?” A sound from the entrance to the kitchen causes me to turn in that direction.

Leighton stands in the doorway in a pink camisole and silky shorts. My heart betrays me and skips a beat. I can’t take my eyes off her, off her bare legs and the way the shimmery fabric clings to her breasts.

“Drive safely. Talk soon.” Eden’s voice slices through my lust, and I croak out, “Yeah. Will do.”

Leighton tentatively smiles. “Good morning. Sorry to interrupt.”

“Morning.” I straighten and thread my fingers through my hair. “You’re not interrupting.”

She chews on the inside of her mouth. “Was that Mandy?”

I pause with the cup on the way to my mouth. “Who?”

I’m stalling to gather myself. I’m easily following her question and also a little surprised that she remembers our server’s name.

“Um, you know, from the restaurant last night.” A curtain of her dark hair covers her face as she dips her head to stare at her toes.

“What about her?” Now I slide on a lopsided grin when she glances up at me. I should be pressing her for details on Felix, and I will, but I can’t say I’m not enjoying this.

“Nothing. Forget about it.”

“That wasn’t Mandy. It was a friend from home.” I walk over to the coffee machine. “You want one?”

“Yes. Please.” She pulls a mug from the cupboard and hands it to me. “What time did you get in last night?”

“I’m not sure. It was late.” I hand her the hot cup. “By the time I showered and crashed, it was a little after three.”

“That’s late. I never heard you come in.”

I’m not sure how to respond. A part of me wants to suggest she was too busy with Felix, but like I told her earlier, anger can be wasted energy. Before I even go there, I need to hear her out.

“I tried to be quiet. Is Felix here?”

She flushes and her expression sobers. “Tom, I need to ex—”

“I sure am.” The man in question strolls into the room in a suit. I bristle at his appearance, and he frowns when he lays eyes on Leighton. “You aren’t dressed.”

Nothing gets past this guy.

Once again, the urge to leave them wraps around me like a vise. I don’t like being around them. Before his arrival, Leighton and I were building something...a friendship. And now, I’m not so sure.

I push from the counter. “I’m going to shower.”

But I only get to the mouth of the hallway when I remember August’s request. He has enough to deal with right now. This is the least I can do to help him.

Turning around is like a gut punch. Felix and Leighton are close, so close that all I can see is his back. I try to banish the clench to my stomach. Jealousy is a bastard.

Something fires deep in my belly when Leighton pushes him away, unaware that I’m there. “Felix, leave.”

The heat and fierce need to do something only grows when he does the opposite and crowds her space. I clear my throat, hackles on alert. “What’s going on here?”

Felix peers over his shoulder at me, hands still gripping Leighton's arms, and it takes everything in me not to rip them off her.

"Tom—" she starts but the man towering over her interjects, "Nothing. This is between us."

I lean to one side to capture her gaze. "Leighton, are you okay?"

She doesn't return the gaze. Eyes narrowed and set on the man in front of her, she pushes his chest. "Felix is leaving. Now."

"I'm not going anywhere without you." He shifts so he can see both of us but doesn't loosen his hold on her.

"Let her go. The lady asked you to leave politely. If you need some help, I'm more than happy to oblige."

He winces. "This isn't any of your business."

"That's where you're wrong. Leighton's my business, and she wants you gone." I step closer to him. "So what's it going to be?"

Immediately, he drops his hold on her and huffs. "Leighton, you'll regret this." Then he lowers his voice, deeper and more menacing, and the next words out of his mouth suggest he's talking about much more than this moment. "If you do this, you'll be all alone. You're making a terrible mistake."

I wedge in next to Leighton, and my intrusion forces Felix to move. My hand wraps around hers. "She isn't alone. She has me."

LEIGHTON

Tom's hold on my hand, strong and reassuring, helps to stop my nerves from sparking and knees from shaking. I didn't know I needed this.

Felix mashes his mouth into a thin line and holds my gaze for a beat but eventually storms out of the room.

Only once the front door shuts do I relax and shift my gaze to Tom. "Why would you do that?"

His knitted brows smooth. "What? Didn't you want him to leave?"

"No. I mean, yes." I pull my hand from his and immediately regret it. "I never wanted him here." I run my hand through my hair for something to do. The loss of his touch burns my palm.

"Then what's wrong?" He's too kind, too caring, and I don't deserve it.

"It's just... No one has ever supported me like that before."

I don't add especially when he doesn't understand things between Felix and me. From where he's standing, I strung him along while I had a boyfriend. Or maybe he doesn't care?

Our gazes collide, coiled with tension and apprehension. He stares at me as if he can't quite comprehend, and it only makes me want to take it all back.

"Really?"

I drop into a chair at the kitchen table and place my cup down, already exhausted and the day hasn't even begun. "Tom, thank you."

"You don't need to thank me." He slips into the chair next to me. "Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"What's going on between you two?"

Shaking my head, I dip my chin to my chest and let out a nauseous kind of laugh. "Oh, that's so not an easy question to answer." My hands cradle the top of my head. "He booked a flight for the two of us to Toronto for this morning."

"Oh." He shifts ever so slightly toward me. "You didn't want to go, right?"

I nod and stare into my coffee. It's time to tell him. Everything. To help him understand. No one else in my life understands. Well, except my therapist but isn't that her job?

"I've asked this before and you didn't answer..." Tom's preamble, building up to a question, causes all my muscles to lock. "You still don't have to, but why are you doing this drive? Why aren't you flying home?"

My skin twitches, tightening over my bones, and the desire to scratch is overwhelming. I curl my fingers into balls. He doesn't realize how intrusive his question is and how vulnerable it makes me feel.

"You likely didn't hear about it although it made the news."

He bends his head to catch my gaze. "Contrary to what you may think, not everyone lives and breathes to follow other people's lives." His tone is light and joking. "I don't know what you're talking about. I don't follow celebrities."

"I'm not a celebrity." I sound snappish even to my own ears and cringe. "I'm going to explain about Felix, but I'll start with what happened several weeks ago. It'll give you context for the past few days."

"Okay."

I sip at my coffee, even as it sours on my tongue, and gather my thoughts. “You know I was in LA for almost a month before you arrived.”

“Yes.”

“I flew from Toronto to LA with Felix at the beginning of August. His private jet.” My insides quiver, heart pounding in my ears like a death march.

I haven’t even told him anything, and it’s as if I’m sitting in that oversized leather seat on the rattling airplane. Beads of sweat bubble on my upper lip, and my hands shake.

Doctor Hemming’s calm and authoritative voice pops into my head. She has spent more than a year with me, addressing my general anxiety and the depression that comes from being abandoned by my parents, and more recently, equipping me with tips on how to prevent and manage my anxiety and fear of flying and the aftermath of what happened.

I’m not on the plane. I’m in the kitchen in our condo in Vail.

I glance around the bright room, cataloging the black granite countertops and the white French country cabinets.

“Leighton, are you okay? You don’t have to—”

“No. I want to. I have to. I just need a minute. I can do this.” I straighten my spine, place my hands flat on the table, and look him in the eye. “The plane had to make an emergency landing. It was an engine malfunction or something like that. I kind of blocked out some of it. The cabin lost pressure.”

With a whoosh, my stomach sinks to my toes at the memory. “We dropped several hundred feet in what felt like the blink of an eye. It all happened so fast.”

“You must have been freaked out.”

“You could say so. I’ve always had a fear of flying. I’m terrible at it, and the irony is, I probably do it at least once a month. My doctor has helped by teaching me relaxation

techniques, but truthfully, I'm used to popping a Xanax to help me relax. On longer flights, I usually take a sleeping pill."

My hands shake and tingle, and I slide them under my thighs. "But this...this was so much worse. I thought we were going to die. It was like somebody's idea of a sick joke. My worst fear coming true."

In fact, in some strange way, I feel better for having told someone else, someone outside of my circle.

"Shit. I don't have a fear of flying, but it would have scared me. I can't imagine..." He runs a hand down his face.

"I wasn't in a good place after. At first, I was in denial despite the nightmares and how the slightest loud noise or anything unstable, rattling...would send me into a panic attack. I was a disaster." My head shakes violently from side to side, every single part of me rejecting the idea, and yet, this is progress.

Only weeks ago, I couldn't even think about a plane, about getting on one, let alone say it.

"About a week after the emergency landing, I tried to get back on a plane and freaked out. I don't remember much of it, but it was embarrassing." I cover my face with my hand, but Tom pulls it away.

"Hey, there's nothing to be embarrassed about. Nothing."

"You know, all I wanted was to go home. I even went so far as LAX, but the closer I got to having to board the plane... I just couldn't."

"This is why we're driving, right?"

I nod and offer a weak smile. "I could've driven home sooner, but my father was in LA for business. When it was obvious that I wasn't going anywhere anytime soon, he said he'd drive home with me if I waited. He'd already planned to be there for several weeks."

My teeth nibble on my bottom lip and I shrug, no longer viewing my father's overture as anything more than what it has turned out to be—an empty offering.

“So I did. I’m not sure if staying helped or not. I didn’t waste any time getting in to see a therapist. My doctor in Toronto helped with that. I had nothing else to do, so I went to daily sessions, including exposure therapy, determined to kick this fear. I’d never dealt with it before. Outside of that, I was alone a lot. My days consisted of lying around the hotel room.”

I want to tell him about Everly and the Raven Mission, but it’s a secret and too sacred to ruin it by telling the wrong person. Tom doesn’t feel like he can’t be trusted, but still...

“Leighton, I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s nothing to say.” I hold his gaze and channel every ounce of conviction into my following words. “I will get over this. In my last session before leaving LA, the Friday before we met, I actually got on a plane.”

I half shiver at the memory of the achievement and half shrug. Maybe if I act like it wasn’t a big deal, I’ll one day believe that it’s no different from putting on your shoes.

A nervous laugh spills from me. “But I also knew that the plane wasn’t going anywhere. It was all part of the exposure therapy.” My fingers curl into a fist and I half-heartedly raise it in the air. “You know, face your fears and all that.”

“Hey, don’t downplay it. That sounds like progress and a big deal.”

“Thanks. If nothing else, I want to get back to where I was before this incident. At least then, I could get on a plane. I’m just not there yet.” I release a sigh and don’t bother to filter my thoughts. “Neither my father nor mother understood. They both think I’m making a big deal out of nothing.”

“A big deal? You experienced a traumatic event.”

An unpleasant yet lively snort springs from me. “Yeah, that’s what my therapist said, but my parents thought I was being unreasonable. Difficult.”

There’s that word again. If I had a dollar for every time Margot used it to describe me, I’d be a millionaire.

Tom fidgets in his chair, uncomfortable, and my bitterness comes out. “Oh my God, you agree with them, don’t you?”

“Uh, no. Not about this. You have every right to take your time with getting back on a plane. And I may not know you that well, but I know you will do it.” His sweet smile and the tender confidence in his voice cause me to relax a little. The knot in my stomach loosens.

“Okay, so if not this, then what?”

“What?”

“Don’t do that.” My finger waggles back and forth in front of him. “I’m not stupid. I saw the way you reacted. You obviously agree in some way that I’m difficult. Explain.”

“Um, I don’t think this is a good idea...” He attempts to slip away from the table, but I anticipate as much and grab his wrist.

He chuckles and slumps back into the chair, cheeks pale pink, and the blush suits him. If even possible, he looks more like a flirty boy than ever before.

“All right. You already know what I think. I told you as much back in Utah.”

I fold my arms over my chest, and when I realize I’m closing myself off, I drop them to my lap. “Fair.”

“Look. I figure you’re used to getting what you want, and when you don’t get it, you can be difficult.” He arches a brow and smiles.

“I don’t always get what I want but understand what you mean. Even now, with this drive, my father wants me on a plane right now. He has my mother hounding me, and that’s why Felix was here. My father got him to come.”

“I see.” He nods, pressing his lips together contemplatively. “You said Felix was on the plane. He must understand. That must help, even a little.”

I huff, still, even all these weeks later, unable to figure Felix out.

“No. He bounced back that same night, acted as if nothing had ever happened. For the remainder of my stay in LA, he ghosted me. The night we flew into LA was the last time I saw him until yesterday. He never answered any of my texts or calls.”

I get up from the table, needing to shake off the overwhelming sense of rejection. “I’m not sure what I expected him to do. Maybe it’s because we shared a horrible experience and I was looking for someone to relate to... I don’t know. He was even supposed to be at that party the night I met you. He never showed up, or if he was there, he made it a point of avoiding me.”

His frown deepens into a scowl. “Now might not be the right time, but I need to know. Are you and Felix in a... relationship?”

“God, you ask tough questions, and all before I’ve barely had any coffee.”

“Finish your coffee.” Though his tone is neutral, the deep lines around his mouth suggest he doesn’t like my need for time.

Does he think I’m stalling? In a way, I am. How am I supposed to explain Felix without looking like an idiot?

He saunters toward the doorway. “I shouldn’t have asked. It’s none of my business. I’ve got to take a shower.”

“Wait. The short answer is no. I’m not with Felix. I never was.” My fingers twist together nervously. “I just need a breather. I promise to explain everything.”

“All right. Can you also text me an itinerary for the drive? Gus needs it for ACE. We need to send him a list of dates and stops so he can track us and also have a record of it.”

“Oh.” I rub my temple, trying to catch up. “Go shower and I’ll text you the plan so you can forward it to Gus. Okay?”

He nods but doesn’t leave. “Then we talk about Felix, right?”

Even if I didn't want to tell Tom about Felix, the look he gives me tells me there isn't a chance in hell I'll get out of spilling the nasty truth.

LEIGHTON

*B*ody tense and muscles aching, I rub at the back of my neck in need of a massage. Since Felix's arrival, I've been nothing but wound tight and on edge.

I took another sleeping pill last night, dreading the idea of another nightmare about the plane. Felix's presence was dredging all of it up, and of course, his arrogant, cavalier attitude didn't help.

Oh, there's an excellent spa in the building. After finishing my coffee, I grab my phone from my room.

Irritated, I groan at the several missed calls and texts from my mother. There's also a text from Felix. He must have called one or both of my parents the second he left the condo. It's the only explanation for how Mom was suddenly silent when Felix was here and now she's at it again. I refuse to look at any of them.

I dial the spa and strike out in getting an appointment. When I stroll into the kitchen, I'm so tangled in frustration that I don't notice Tom drinking a glass of water.

"What's the plan for the day?" He places the empty glass in the dishwasher, hair slightly wet from his shower and brushed back off his forehead.

He's too kind. Instead of picking up where we left off, he seems to be giving me a reprieve from talking about Felix.

In jeans and a T-shirt, he looks comfortable and at home in my place, and the corners of my mouth turn upward into a

smile. I step toward him.

He smells so good. It isn't cologne. Tom doesn't wear any or if he does, it's nothing I recognize. His scent has both a calming and exhilarating effect on me. Or perhaps my excitement comes from being so close to him.

His gaze is still on me, and I haven't answered him. "Um, I was hoping to book a massage at the spa in the hotel. I'm so tense and need one, but they're fully booked." I drop my phone onto the counter and lean back against it. "I'm going to call around to some of the other spas and see if I can get in."

"What has you so tense?" He studies me and I'm suddenly self-conscious, the ache at the base of my skull and shoulders intensifying.

Where do I start? He's got to know. Is he teasing me? Prompting me to talk without calling me out?

My fingers pinch and press at the taut muscles in my neck. "You mean besides the obvious? Felix's unwanted visit, and yes, I'll explain. My mother is blowing up my phone with calls and texts and my dad, well...I still haven't heard from him."

I bite my tongue before adding that I doubt my father will call, so why am I holding out hope?

Because he's my dad. No matter how he hurts or disappoints me, I've always forgiven him. I love him, always will, and sadly, I want his love in return. I'll do almost anything for it.

"Is it your neck or your back?"

I rub at the tight spot. "Both. I have a pain in my neck."

"Hey, that's my line." He winks, and I narrow my gaze though that's fair.

Tom doesn't have to spell out what—or more like who—he's referring to. I have been a pain in his neck. Still, I'm not willing to give it to him that easily.

"You aren't funny." I back up as he approaches.

"Yeah, I am." He motions for me to turn around.

What is he doing? Is he going to give me a massage? At the mere thought of his hands on me, my core floods with heat and my nerve endings tingle.

I don't move. I can't. "Uh."

"Let me try to work out the knots."

My head shakes like a malfunctioning bobblehead. "Um. No."

In my frazzled state, I dive headlong into the one topic I've promised to broach and also dread. "Felix and I were in a relationship, on and off, for the past three years."

He slowly blinks and cocks his head to one side as if a different angle might give him some clarity. "What? But I thought you said that you weren't together."

I shuffle my feet awkwardly and battle the urge to bolt from the room. I haven't even started and I'm bungling this.

"We did have a relationship, but it wasn't what you're thinking. Remember how you asked about Hollywood relationships? Well, ours was for the press."

"The press?"

"It started with a crush. I met him through my parents at a party in LA a few years ago. Well, technically, I met him way before that on the set of *Laguna Beach* but didn't expect him to remember." I guffaw at the improbability of that. "And he didn't. I'd been a lovesick kid at the time. Crushing on both Roman Kingsley and Felix."

It's plain to see Tom's invested in what suddenly feels like a mortifying confession—my pathetic excuse for a love life.

"I flirted with Felix at the party, and he reciprocated." I shrug to emphasize the significance or lack of any. "But it meant nothing. The man could flirt with a door handle. My mistake was doing it in front of my parents." Embarrassment at my one-track mind back then blazes my cheeks. "It was my father who came up with the idea of fake dating."

"Fake dating? That's a thing?"

I nod. “They were about to start filming my father’s movie, and Felix was cast as the lead. It’s the same movie that’s premiering at the Toronto Film Festival. Dad wanted buzz for the film, and he quickly figured out that I liked Felix...and saw how it would be great publicity.”

“Did you want that?”

Why does his question shake me? Because he’s doing it again. Asking me what *I* want. It’s such a simple thing. Natural even. Yet it throws me. Most people don’t ask me about my needs and wants.

My arms wrap around my middle to ground me. “No one asked me what I wanted. And truthfully, at first, I thought it would be fun. I mean, what if Felix fell for me?”

Ridiculous, over-the-top laughter erupts from deep within me, and Tom’s eyes round, startled. I try to rein it in and press my lips together. What the hell is wrong with me? Why can’t I stop talking?

There’s something about Tom, about his laid-back, no-expectations manner that puts me at ease and woefully at a disadvantage.

He screws up his face like he’s tasted something revolting, and I can’t tell if it’s my outburst or the very idea of what my dad did. “Why would your father do that? You’re his daughter.” Tom opens his mouth, likely to spit out more, but hesitates.

I don’t want him to stop or censor himself. “Go on.”

He swallows thickly. “It’s kind of like pimping you out.”

I stiffen, but the urge to defend something not even I can fully comprehend—or more like my father—is so fierce it wins out. “It wasn’t like that. It happens all the time in Hollywood. It’s harmless.”

“So you dated and what?” He shoves his hands into his pockets. “Things became real?”

I roll my eyes. “No, even though I told myself something else. It didn’t take long for Felix to realize I liked him, and

because he's never one to pass up the opportunity to exploit a situation... Ugh." My fingers rake through my hair. "I don't know if that's what happened. I can't speak for Felix. All I know is, he strung me along. Told me he cared for me too and it wasn't just for show."

My face falls into my hands and I groan, unable to look at him. The shame of it all perches on my shoulders, weighing me down like I'm slowly sinking into a pit of quicksand. If only I could be swallowed whole, saved from the misery and humiliation of saying all of this out loud. And not just to anyone. To Tom.

"Hey, don't be too hard on yourself." His soft tone causes me to look at him through a small opening in my cupped hands.

"I'm not innocent in this. I hoped Felix would get to know me and fall madly in love with me." I straighten. "Stupid, I know."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. I kept thinking—hoping—we'd get close. He'd throw me a bone, string me along, but it was all an act. Fortunately, I eventually sensed it was a game to him and I kept a safe distance. He dated others publicly, and even when I knew it was fake, it hurt."

I squeeze my eyes shut as if it were that easy to erase the images online, the media headlines. My stomach knots.

"We were always thinking up stories for the media when they'd catch him with this model or that actress. It became so exhausting and all so hard."

I can't tell him that my head may have known what was going on, but the girl with stars in her eyes wished for more. Held out hope that Felix would one day wake up, look at me, and realize I was the one.

Yeah, never happened.

The battle to keep my head and heart on the same page was constant.

He takes my hand in his. “And now? What’s going on now? Why did he come here?”

“The movie premiere. That’s all he cares about. All my parents care about. They’re worried because I’m taking my time getting back to Toronto that I won’t be there for their big night.”

I pull from his grasp, not deserving of his concern. Most of this is my own doing. I should have done something about Felix months ago, well before the flight and emergency landing.

“Our relationship, the dynamics of my father, Felix, me... it’s all about the optics. The press eats it up, and the fans swoon over the perfect picture of director Rupert Price and his daughter with the big movie star. We’re all happy and in love with each other. It sells movie tickets.”

“And what do you want?”

“Why do you keep asking me that?” Exasperation rings in my every word, and tears sting and gather at the back of my eyes.

What do I want? Damn, if only I knew.

TOM

Leighton finally looks at me, a little lost and confused, eyes glassy. Something sharp stabs at the center of my chest even if I'm also a little relieved to learn everything with the douchebag Felix wasn't real.

Why'd I ask the question? I wasn't trying to be insensitive. In fact, the opposite. I didn't mean to embarrass or stump her, but it's easy to figure from her reaction that she's never considered what she might want.

If I found out the person I was crushing on and who had told me they felt the same way was lying and only using me, I'd have walked away from any kind of agreement. For Leighton, it feels like she didn't get that choice or doesn't know how to fight for what she wants. How to break free.

She clears her throat. "I don't know what I want, but I'm done with Felix and even told him so."

My heart soars, and it's a struggle to keep my silly smile under wraps.

Well, that certainly explains some of his crusty demeanor earlier. I figured he was jealous; maybe Leighton had told him about our kiss or maybe I hoped she had. I'd gotten it all wrong, and in some ways, this is better. They weren't real and had nothing.

Though Felix is a jerk. With Leighton in the kitchen, he acted like a child who had their favorite toy broken. I figured Leighton was the toy, but from the way she describes it, all he

cares about is himself. The proverbial toy in this scenario is his career.

Her facial features contort as she raises a hand above her head and tries to reach a spot somewhere between her shoulder blades.

A massage. That's what she needs.

"Let me try to help you relax."

"Tom." She stands and glances around the kitchen awkwardly. "There's tons of spas around here. I'm sure I can get an appointment somewhere today."

"Maybe. Maybe not." I shrug. "I'm no professional, but I've taken a massage class and gotten my fair share of compliments."

"I bet." She snorts, and yet her sarcasm dies quickly, and given her more sheepish expression, she realizes jabbing at me isn't how you go about getting what you want.

Although I'd give her a massage regardless. My fingers itch to touch her even if this is a bad idea.

She points to her back. "Are you sure? I mean..."

"I'll ease your tension." I inch closer to where she stands and she nods, eager for my aid. "Let's go out there." My head slides in the direction of the living room. "It's more comfortable."

I gently guide her to sit and then I scoot behind the sofa. Her inky hair falls down her back, and I carefully brush it to one side. Silky smooth. She shivers, and I look at her in the mirror across the room.

Our gazes mesh. My hands rest on her shoulders, fingers curling into the tight muscles. Her top teeth bite into her lower lip, and she nods faintly, angling her neck just so. An invitation, or maybe even a plea, to touch her.

With my eyes still on her, my fingers work the taut muscles along the nape of her neck and collarbone. Her eyes nearly roll into the back of her head and she moans.

The sound she makes, a mixture of pleasure with a hint of pain, should be illegal. My balls tighten, cock twitches, and I grapple to focus on something boring as fuck, anything to will my growing erection into nonexistence. But it's useless.

When I press a thumb along the base of her skull, all sense of control over my body goes up in smoke with her reaction.

“Oh my God, yes. This is better than an orgasm.” Her eyes pop open, locking with mine in the mirror.

I laugh and naturally say the only thing I can in this situation. “You say that but I've never made you come.”

She gasps and stiffens and my fingers knead her flesh, wanting to ease the strain that I only just erased from seeping back into her body. Leighton turns to face me, breaking our touch.

Eyes wide and cheeks reddening, she isn't able to hold back her grin. “You didn't just say that?”

“I shouldn't have. I was joking.” My arms hang awkwardly at my sides, fingers burning to touch her once more. “Flirting. It was inappropriate.”

All of this is inappropriate. I shouldn't have kissed her or be thinking about it every time I see her lips. I shouldn't be giving her a massage. My dick shouldn't be this hard, and the thoughts in my head...

Fuck, I can't go there.

“Forget about it.” She waves it away, either not wanting to admit what we're doing is far beyond business or because she isn't as affected as I am by our proximity.

By how touching her makes me want to trace every place my hands have been with my lips and tongue. How my hands want to explore every soft and sweet inch of her sinful body.

With her back to me again, she watches me in the mirror. “Keep doing what you're doing. If this is how you give massages, maybe I want to find out what else your hands can do.”

Holy shit. It's as if she can read my mind, and I close my eyes to block her out. Let me finish this massage and take another shower. This time cold as ice.

I rub hard at the knots in her upper back, and before long, her muscles soften, almost putty-like. She sways with my ministrations and releases the most teasing of moans when I hit a particularly tough spot.

She hums in approval to my slow kneading, and I echo her hum as if we're speaking our own language. With a final squeeze, I drop my hands to my side and walk around to face her, sure to keep a safe space between us.

“Okay. How's that?”

I need distance.

She's too tempting.

I need to step away before I give in to this insatiable desire to explore more of her body. Show her how I could make the rest of her sing.

Her hooded eyes track my every move, and she blinks several times before her expression slides into neutral. “That was great. Thank you.”

“Good. Okay, since we're here for the day, I thought I'd go look around some more. What are your plans?”

“I don't have any. I just didn't want to hop back in the car, not after Felix and all that.”

“That's okay. We have time. Nearly a week until TIFF.”

Nodding, she gets to her feet. “If you don't mind waiting while I shower and get dressed, I could show you around. I know this place pretty well.”

“Uh, sure. That sounds good.”

Leighton returns a little over an hour later in a long, red, summer dress, simple and flowy, though I've no doubt it costs at least six months' rent. She's gorgeous, and I swallow any quips about how long it took her to get ready.

We walk around Vail's European style village with its pedestrian-friendly streets, old-world Bavarian architecture, and unencumbered views of the wilderness in every direction.

Then we take a gondola ride up Vail Mountain to Eagle's Nest where there are not only spectacular views, but an abundance of activities available from ziplining to tubing to mini golf and many restaurants.

After meandering around, we decide to head back down to the town, and she grabs my arm while we walk.

"Tom, I don't feel so well." She sways, her skin pallid and eyes hazy. "I see black spots in front of my eyes."

"Let's get you to..." My words die on my tongue.

She faints. Fortunately, I've got a grip on her elbow and catch her before she falls. I lay her down on a nearby bench and crouch next to her, gently patting her cheek. Tilting my head in close, I check that she's breathing. She is. Thank fuck.

"Leighton?" My knuckles brush her cool cheek, and her eyelashes flutter.

Within seconds, a few people gather around us and someone asks, "Is she okay?" While another says, "Someone should call nine-one-one."

"I'm okay," she rasps, eyes opening as she attempts to sit up.

I gently press her back onto the bench. "Hey, take it easy. Lie down for a little longer."

"It must be the high altitude," a woman says from somewhere behind me.

I glance over my shoulder at the small crowd behind us. "She's okay. You can move along. Thanks."

Some grumble and trudge away, while others linger and stare. I don't care about the audience and turn back to Leighton. "Have you eaten today?"

"Um." She closes her eyes as if trying to process my question. "No. I guess that might be it." She tries to get up

again, and though she shouldn't, I help her to sit upright.

“Wait here. Do not move.”

“Sure. I'm not going anywhere.” Her motions are slow and hesitant, and I dash into the nearest store to get her a juice.

When I return, I hand her a small bottle. “Drink this. It'll help get your blood sugar up.”

The juice is gone in seconds, and within a few minutes, color slowly seeps back into her cheeks.

“Why don't we go back to your place and I'll make you something to eat.” I help her to her feet. “It's well past three. You need something in your stomach. Or if you can't wait or aren't able to go all that way, we can eat up here.”

The kitchen is fully stocked at her place, and I wonder if it's always like that or if it was filled in advance of her arrival. It's a shame to let all that food waste, especially since we're leaving tomorrow, but if the trek is too much, I understand.

“I can make it home.” Her arms wrap around one of mine, and she leans into me as we make our way back to her condo.

Once in her kitchen, I seat her on a stool at the island and take a peek in the cupboards for meal ideas. There's a lot I can do with what's here. When I turn back around, arms loaded with ingredients, she gazes at me with one of the thin straps of her dress slipping off her shoulder.

The fabric gapes in front to reveal a sinful peek at the swell of her perky tits. Help me.

I dump the food onto the counter and angle myself away from her to shove a hand into my shorts to hide my hardening cock. My gaze dips down at her painted purple toes when Leighton calls my name, snapping me out of my frozen state.

“Sorry, what?”

“How long have you been cooking?”

I saunter over to the fridge. “It isn't really something I do much of.”

“Oh, that doesn’t sound promising. Maybe I should’ve opted for one of the restaurants.”

Salmon, green beans, green onions, and garlic are added to the small pile of items on the counter. “I’m not a bad cook.”

She laughs. “And that’s supposed to make me feel better?”

Glad to see she must be feeling better since she’s poking fun at me, I smile. “Are you done? Or is this how it’s going to be while I cook you salmon almondine?”

“Oh, that sounds yummy. All right, I promise to be nice.”

“Good.” With a skillet in hand, I head to the stove. “Are you ready for me to make you dinner or is it called lunch?”

She groans. “Let’s not call it either.”

We chat easily while I cook and not long after, move to the dining room to eat. She stares down at the plate in front of her and then up at me. “Seriously?” She arches a brow. “French fries.”

“You had potatoes.” I slide the napkin onto my lap. “Besides, I’m determined to make you like them. These are baked, not fried, and lightly salted and drizzled in olive oil.”

She picks up her utensils. “Fine. I’ll try them, but I’m not making any promises.”

I chuckle and cut into my salmon filet. “That’s all I can ask for.”

Her pleased moan ricochets inside my chest like the small silver ball ping-ponging around in a pinball machine. My head snaps up and drinks in the sight of her.

The pretty pink flush of her soft skin, the way her dark lashes gather like feathers with her eyes closed, and fuck me, her lips. Full and glistening as she chews slowly.

Her eyelids flash open, and I’m lost to her dark, sensuous brown gaze.

“Tom, you lied. This is delicious. You’re a good cook.”

“Thanks, but I’m really not. Matt and Sam are the chefs.”

“Matt? He’s marrying your sister Claire, right?” I nod and she asks, “And Sam?”

“He’s kind of like an uncle. Definitely family. He’s married to my mom’s best friend, Olivia. A celebrity chef. He’s been helping Matt with his restaurant.”

“So they taught you how to cook?”

“No. I wasn’t taught. Truthfully, being the baby of the family has its perks. Between my mom, two sisters, and a sister-in-law, I’m fed really well. The women in my family spoil me.” I slap at my stomach and smile. “When I was away, I missed many things, but I’m not going to lie. Most of all, I missed my family doting on me with meals. It’s their way of showing they care, and since I’m always hungry, it works out well for me.”

“You spoiled? This doesn’t surprise me.”

“Anyway. I didn’t only eat the food; I also watched them and learned a thing or two. I cook when I absolutely have to. I mean, I live with two other guys...” I pause as Brent springs to mind. He’s now out of the picture. “Well, make that one guy, now. And we don’t cook.”

“One? You don’t know how many roommates you have?” She pokes fun and I release a sigh and place my cutlery on the plate.

“It’s a long story.”

“I like stories.” She’s relaxed and looking much better than before.

While she finishes her salmon and green beans—her fries remain untouched on her plate—I tell her about Brent and Gus, including the disaster at ACE. It’s only when I’m wrapping things up that I realize maybe I said too much. Leighton is a client after all.

“Shit, I want you to know, none of this will impact the service you receive.”

“Tom, I never even thought about that. You’ve been nothing but great, and I feel terrible for your friend Gus. Have

they had any luck in finding Brent or the money?"

"I don't think so. It's too soon to tell." No longer wanting to dwell on things I can't change, I look down at her plate then at her. "You haven't tried the fries."

"Do I have to?" She grimaces and I still can't believe she doesn't like them.

"Yes. They're most probably cold but they're good."

"Fine." She grumbles and pops a fry into her mouth.

Silence fills the space as she slowly chews. "They are tasty, but I still don't get the big fuss about them." She pushes her plate away, clearly signaling she isn't having any more fries.

But I can't complain, since everything else on her plate is gone. I get up to clear the table, and she grabs my hand before I can take her plate. "Tom." Her thumb caresses the top of my hand. "Thank you for the meal. It was lovely."

Before I can say thank you, she places my plate back onto the table and wraps a cool hand around my neck. She angles her head upward and her mouth covers mine.

Holy hell. Yes.

TOM

Tongue hot and salty, Leighton deepens the kiss, and I grab on to her, not wanting her to get any ideas and flee. This is a damn good kiss, and I intend to make it last.

I'm unsure when or even how it happened, but somewhere along the way, I started to want Leighton. Started to think of her as more than just a client or a road trip companion.

The list of reasons why we shouldn't do this is long and there will be a reckoning, of this I have no doubt. I will have to answer to my best friend for what I hope we're about to do—cross a line we can't undo or come back from. But August will come later, and facing his wrath is a risk I'm willing to take. I'll deal with it then. Because right now, all I can think of, see, and need is Leighton.

And it isn't lost on me that she isn't fighting this attraction between us. Hell no. She was the one to make the first move.

Her perpetual shields are nowhere in sight, and her surrender—not to me, but to her desire—is a fucking beautiful thing.

She presses her body into me while breaking our kiss. “I'm sorry...we shouldn't—”

Before she can go too far down the long list of why this shouldn't happen, I stand and say, “Leighton, yes. We should. Now tell me what you want.”

She tilts her head to one side and presses her tits into my chest, and I worry she's going to pull the plug on us. Instead

she smiles and says, “Kiss me.”

With those two little words, there’s no turning back.

Before my lips can devour hers, like before, she’s the one to make the first move. Her mouth crashes onto mine. She kisses with abandon, ripping a hungry growl from deep within me. The kiss is good. Oh, so good. As sweet and sinful as I remember her tasting, but nowhere near satisfying.

I kiss the hell out of her, already knowing this night won’t quench my thirst for her. Mouths attached, hands clawing at each other, I carry her into her bedroom and plant her feet firmly onto the carpet at the end of the bed.

“Are you wet for me, Leighton?” My few words drag out what should be a criminal whimper from her now parted lips.

Her eyes are dark and wild as she nods vigorously, making sure I understand what she can’t seem to find the words to say.

“Let me see.” I lift her dress up and over her head. “Did you know I’ve thought about just how pink and pretty your pussy must be.”

She’s what fantasies are made of.

Her perfect tits strain against her lacy white bra, and her panties hug the place I most want to be.

“Fuck, Leighton.” My blood courses molten lava-like through my veins, cock hard and throbbing against the zipper of my jeans. “I want to spread you wide and taste that sweet pussy. Is that okay with you?”

“God, Tom.” She rubs her thighs together and moans. Her hands skim along her stomach and up to squeeze her breasts. “I want that.”

Jesus Christ. She’s too much. I could watch her touch herself all night, but who am I kidding? Watching isn’t my thing. I’m a doer.

“Get on the bed and lie down for me.” My fingers grasp my throbbing cock through my jeans to lessen the ache.

She removes my shirt before she hooks her fingers into the sides of her panties.

I grip one wrist to stop her. Before she sheds them, I drop to my knees, my head now closer to the juncture of her legs.

Hallelujah.

My lips press a chaste kiss to her sex, and through the fabric, I deeply inhale her musky scent. It isn't enough and more than I dreamed possible. I must taste her. I slowly flick my tongue where my lips just were.

“Jesus Christ. You're dangerous,” I growl into her mound and gently grab hold of her firm, round ass cheeks. “I want to bury my tongue inside you.”

Her fingers dive into my hair, curling and pulling. “Yes, yes.”

I grudgingly pull back and spring to my feet before it gets too hard to leave her sweet heat. A little distance is what I need to stop from coming before we even get started.

Right now, I don't trust myself to keep it together, and I so want to make this good for her. I must take my time. Savor every agonizing clench, swallow every satisfying whimper, and worship every time she screams my name.

Leighton drags her underwear down her legs. Then her hands slide around to unhook her bra. She holds her arms close to her chest as the straps fall off her shoulders and the bra onto the floor.

At first, she seems unsure, almost shy, but she must see something in my expression that she likes because any trepidation from moments before quickly evaporates.

On the bed, she lies on her back, legs open, and fuck me, I've gone to heaven without dying. She's fucking gorgeous.

“I was right. This pussy is pure pink perfection.”

She moans my name when my thumb strokes her clit and scissors her leg around my hand as I slide one finger inside her tight entrance.

I lick my lips and growl, “First, I’m going to fuck you with my hand.”

Arousal evident, she squirms and mewls at my touch. The walls of her pussy clench around my middle finger, and she rocks her hips to the rhythm of my finger pumping in and out of her.

I’ve never been as turned on as I am right now. “Yeah. Just like that. I’m going to make you come.”

When I add another digit, my index finger slides in with a little more resistance. “Damn, you’re so tight.” I slowly push in, giving her time to adjust and coaxing her open. “You feel so fucking good.”

Once deep inside her, my fingers hook and rub at her G-spot. Leighton’s eyes pop open and her back arches off the bed. “Oh. Oh. Yes.”

With each stroke and curl, her pussy gets wetter, her body strung tighter. Her breaths shorten into a pant as do mine in anticipation of her climax. I bring her close, so close, and at the last second, I back off. I want her close but not close enough to get her off. Not yet.

“Tom.” My name’s a curse on her lips as she grabs the sheets in her hands in frustration.

My naughty chuckle slips out as I ravenously drink in her glorious state of arousal. Every inch of her blushes. Skin flush and damp. Nipples hard and sharp as diamonds, chest heavy and lips swollen.

“Look at you.” I trail a finger down the center of her chest.

A growl rips from her parted lips, and she narrows her gaze on me. But the heat emanating from her is of lust not anger. “Tom, why’d you do that? I was so close.”

Normally, I’d say a whine never looks good on anyone but fuck if my cock doesn’t achingly throb at the high pitch to her voice. Needy and pliable.

“I’ve changed my mind. I need to taste this pussy. It’s all I can think about.” Hand still on her pussy, I get down on my

knees in between her legs.

Leighton whimpers, eyes glistening at the sight of me at her mercy. Shit, I'm near tears too with anticipation. She draws her legs together as if to quell the stinging absence of me.

I gently pull her long, lean legs apart and wait for her to make eye contact, to make sure this is what she wants. "I'll make you come like you've never come before."

She nods and bites her bottom lip. "Yes. Please. Yes." Then she drops her head onto the mattress with a relieved sigh.

This time I manage to hold back my laugh. I love seeing this woman like this. At my mercy in the most delicious way possible.

With one sweep of my tongue from her opening to her clit, I have her chanting my name. It's a fucking glorious sound. I've got a healthy ego and am confident enough, but I wouldn't say I'm self-centered.

But when Leighton's barely coherent, only able to say my name over and over again, like a prayer and a curse, it does something to me. I'm on top of the world.

"Fuck, you taste better than any fucking dessert." I stand to loom above her and dip my head to crash my wet mouth onto hers. "Taste yourself. How sweet you are."

She greedily laps at my mouth, arms and legs wrapped around me, seeking every ounce I have to give of her own essence. Her own arousal. It's hard to do, but I eventually pull away and drop down between her legs. Desperate for more of her.

I bury my face in her pussy and she grinds against me, making my cock as hard as stone. I can't get enough of her. I lick, suck, and kiss everywhere. Hips bucking and fingers yanking on my hair, Leighton rides my face. It's fucking splendid and even more so when her pussy draws tight, squeezing, as she screams my name.

Her pleasure explodes onto my tongue. I was wrong before. I'm fucking king of the world when her taste gushes all

over my tongue, spicy, salty, and sinfully honeyed.

LEIGHTON

Tom lifts his head from between my legs to gaze up at me, almost reverently. Something inside me cracks open at how real and raw this moment feels. His warm fingers make tiny, soothing circles on my inner thighs, and as he smiles, he licks his bottom lip.

There isn't enough air in this room for me to breathe. I'm overwhelmed with the sight of him, of how he unraveled me so easily. My arousal covers his face, and he looks thoroughly satisfied. No, it's more like he's conquered something inconceivable.

I don't know what to do with this. I've never...

Never has a man given to me first, made me come so fast and so exquisitely. But the most astounding part is him. I climaxed and yet he looks like he got off on it too. More than got off, he loved it.

All of this is nearly too much.

The back of my skull hits the mattress as I squeeze my eyes shut, reliving the absolute best orgasm of my life, and try to give my lungs time to remember how to breathe.

His voice, low and rough, pulls me from my bliss. "Leighton, you okay?"

"Uh-huh." A smile skates across my lips when I think about his words. The way he spoke to me. "Damn, I don't know why I never figured you for a dirty talker. I should have known."

I was spread wide against his hot, dirty mouth, legs hugging the sides of his face. I'd never felt so alive and wound tight in the best way possible.

Every twirl of his tongue, pant of his breath, and inhale through his nose made me quiver.

His filthy words. No man has ever spoken to me like that before.

My thighs tightened, insides clenched.

His naughty words alone brought me to the brink. Inches from coming apart.

I almost died from the sheer pleasure of it.

“What?” He crawls onto the bed next to me, his blue eyes sparkling with mischief. “You didn't like it when I told you how much I wanted to taste your pretty pussy? Or how much I fucking liked it?”

Like wildfire, a hot flush spreads throughout my body, from the tips of my toes to the crown of my head. I'm burning up.

Until now, I'd have said I wouldn't care much for dirty talk. In fact, I might have said I'd hate it. I mean, I always figured I'd be too self-conscious to enjoy it, to really take in anything said and actually believe it was genuine desire.

But Tom... The man has a way with words.

His smoldering gaze caresses my bare chest, and my nipples tighten to sharp points that could cut glass. His hunger feeds me, and when he unleashes a disarmingly sexy smirk, a wave of something hot and tingly spreads through me like a brush fire.

He bends his head to suck a nipple into his mouth while he thumbs the other. My insides light up. The sharp pinch of his touch and wet pull of his taste draws my body up and off the bed. My response only encourages him to increase his ministrations, and when a whimper escapes me, I feel his smile against my breast.

“Leighton, no one should taste so good.” His lips press against my sternum before he lifts his head to look at me. “So sweet.” He kisses me on the mouth, slow and languid and with a lot of tongue.

Tom’s a great kisser, and while I could lie here and kiss him all night, I don’t like that he’s still fully clothed. When he brings himself over me, knees on either side of my legs, my hand drifts down to the front of his jeans.

The first touch is tentative, more a graze of fingers over his erection than anything else. But judging by the low hum that slips from his mouth, it’s enough. A good start. I can only hope to make him feel half as good as he did me.

My hand grips him through the denim, and I gently squeeze the impressive bulge. Like what he did to me, I want to see him needy, eager, and begging. With our mouths still attached, we fumble to remove his jeans and boxers.

Then I pull back and look down to where my fingers wrap around him. He’s long and thick and he jerks in my grasp, eyes fluttering shut on my name.

“Goddamn, your touch drives me crazy.” His fingers thread my hair as he wraps his hand around the nape of my neck.

There’s a dark, covetous hunger I’ve never seen in his eyes before, and my core clenches in anticipation of having him inside me.

He rests his forehead against mine, breathing shallow and heavy. “Fuck, I don’t have a condom.”

It takes far too long for his words to register. “Oh. Um, I get the shot and haven’t been with anyone in over a year. My last checkup was all good.”

He pulls back. “Over a year?”

“Yeah.” I hold my breath, waiting for him to tell me something similar, though what if he doesn’t?

All this time, we’ve been focused on Felix and our fake relationship, and I never thought to ask him. Suddenly, I’m

cold, exposed, and my stomach churns. Oh my God, what if he's seeing someone else? Even if it's casual, I don't know if I can stomach it. And why didn't I ask him all this before? Before he went down on me.

Apart from the morality of this, I'm being silly. Until only days ago, I didn't know him, and now I'm possessive and needy, part hating this desire to claim him as mine and part reveling in it.

“Was it Felix? Fuck. Don't answer that. It's none of my business.”

Parking my concerns for the moment, I don't even try to stop the smile ghosting my lips as it echoes the blooming warmth inside of me. The fact that Tom cares enough to want to know if anything happened with Felix is endearing. Sure, I told him we didn't have a relationship, but he knows Felix has been in my life for years. I admitted to having a silly and certainly misguided crush on the idiot.

But all that aside, what's even more endearing is that he stopped himself from being *that* guy. A caveman. Though coming from Tom, it is sexy, not overbearing at all.

My fingers trace the line of his jaw as our breaths mingle. “Never with Felix. At most, we kissed, nothing m—”

“Leighton, you don't have to say anymore. I was out of—”

My lips crash onto his, killing whatever apology he was sure to give. While the gesture is sweet, I don't need or want it. But it still doesn't answer my concerns.

I pull away and look up at him. “What about you? Are we good to have sex without a condom?”

As I ask, I wonder if I'm being smart. Never before has a man made me lose all common sense so easily. It's a heady, freeing sensation, and while liberating, it could be dangerous.

He lets out a chuckle. “Oh, yeah. I'm good too. I was tested before coming home. And I haven't been with anyone for nearly a year.”

I have nothing else to go on but his word, and the same goes for him. Tom doesn't strike me as a liar, while some people, like my mother, would say that means nothing. I choose to trust my instincts.

I kiss him quickly and slowly glide my hand up and down his shaft, increasing pressure on my grip. "So where were we?"

"You're going to take my cock hard and fast."

I moan, and in one swift motion, Tom moves from my grip to position me on my back, legs spread apart.

My lips fall open, head pushing into the mattress while I appreciate the sensation of him filling me. Slowly. Slowly. Inch by astonishing inch.

I'm robbed of breath by the way his cock pulses inside me. One hand grips my neck and the other my breast as a sharp, desperate sound tumbles from his mouth. And when he finally settles inside me, fully and completely, a ragged breath sails from my lungs.

We stay like that for what could only be a second or an hour, I don't know. All I know is if he doesn't start moving, I might lose it.

"Leighton, your pussy is so damn tight." He circles his hips, and I bite down on my lip.

Stars burst behind my closed eyes. I'm so full, almost uncomfortable, but every nerve ending inside sparks.

"You feel so good." With words of praise, he strokes in and out of me.

I lift my hips to match his pace before picking up the tempo in an attempt to urge him on. To go faster. The sounds he makes nearly undo me as he thrusts faster and deeper into me.

The sensation, already overwhelming and verging on too much, makes me beg. The single word "please" cascades from my lips like a chant.

“Please what?” Tom sucks on my bottom lip, fingers tightening around the base of my neck.

“I...too good. Oh.” Until now, I’ve never fully admitted to myself how much I’ve wanted him.

His fingers circle my clit, and that’s all it takes to send me flying over the edge. Tom exhales a shaky breath, curses, and throws his head back and comes with me. His hand at my neck slides around to my nape and pulls me toward his chest.

He kisses me as we shake, pant, and come down. That was unlike anything I’ve ever done before. Until now, I’ve liked sex but not like this. I’ve never wanted to go again right away. And this isn’t about sex. This is about Tom.

“You good?” His fingers squeeze the back of my neck as he slowly pulls out of me.

“Mm-hmm.” I smile at the way his fingers trail over parts of my body as he climbs off me.

Like little aftershocks, his touch makes me feel so good. So right. Tom nears the edge of the bed, and before standing, he pauses to stare at me. The air around us shifts and stills. His ocean eyes wander my face, not quite searching but more memorizing me.

Or is it something more?

I’ve never had sex like that before. Never felt like this afterward.

And I’m speechless by the deferential way he looks at me.

No man has ever looked at me like this before.

LEIGHTON

The drive-thru server hands Tom two large paper cups. “Two hot chocolates. Have a nice day.”

He returns the sentiment, places the cups in the holder between us, and drives away.

“Brrr.” I snatch the beverage closest to me and shiver at the welcomed warmth seeping into my freezing hands. “Yes.”

He watches as I take my first sip and smile. The hot liquid slides down my throat, somewhat thawing the block of ice that once was my blood.

“Better?” He turns onto the highway. “I can’t believe you’re still cold. We left the peak hours ago.”

“Yes.” My cheek nuzzles into the side of the cup, needing more of the heat. “I’m still cold and this is perfect.”

We left Vail early this morning at a little past six on our way to Lincoln, Nebraska. Waking up in bed together was surreal and left me feeling all kinds of awkward. But Tom being Tom, he was his same easygoing self, and that made it easier for me to stop fretting over what we did. Or more to the point, I don’t regret it. I only hope he can’t tell that I keep replaying in my head the best sex of my life.

It doesn’t help being stuck in a car with him all day—the drive is over eight hours without stops. Tom is everywhere, and every move he makes, even breathing, sends me hurtling back to last night. His hands, his mouth, his tongue. Gah, I need to forget about last night.

Fortunately, I've had a great distraction this morning. As soon as we left, Tom mentioned we would be driving by Mount Blue Sky, a high-altitude peak in the Rocky Mountains, and he asked if I wanted to check it out. The road up to the peak opened at eight in the morning, and if we left early, we could squeeze in the stop.

I wasn't thrilled with adding more time to the nearly six hundred-mile drive ahead of us, but the idea of experiencing something new with Tom made it easy to say yes. Also, he seemed excited to go, and that too had me agreeing to the slight detour.

"This is good hot chocolate." He glances at me while placing his cup back in the holder. "What did you like best about Mount Blue Sky?"

"Well, definitely not that it was absolutely freezing."

He scoffs, though lightheartedly. I'm sure he's tired of hearing me go on about the chill. "Come on, you're a Canadian. You can handle cold."

"Yes, but not in shorts and a tank top."

"Fine. Aside from the cold, wasn't it worth it?"

"Absolutely. The view was breathtaking though I've never faced wind like that. I could hardly stand upright, and all I had was this to keep me warm." I pull at his hoodie, not in the least bit bashful at taking it from him.

When we reached the summit and quickly realized we weren't dressed for the weather, Tom rummaged through his luggage for warm clothes. Sadly, I didn't have anything appropriate. I'd packed for a warm LA summer, and any winter clothes I might have had were still in the condo in Vail.

His soft, thick hoodie smells like him, and I welcome the reminder of how I was covered in his scent last night. So much so, I didn't want to shower this morning and wash off eau de Tom.

He wears a smirk like I'm such a baby, and I playfully push at his hard shoulder. "Come on. You were cold too. Don't deny it."

“Yeah, it would’ve been better if we’d had coats. We would have lasted longer.” He chuckles and shivers, most probably at the memory of the bone-chilling wind. “But I loved every minute of it. Just think, if we hadn’t gone up there, we’d never have seen the mountain goat and her kid. That was way cool.”

I was first to spot the large all-white animal with black horns and its baby. We snapped a few pictures and watched them clamber over the rocky terrain.

“The goats were cool, but I’d have to say the majestic views above the timberline were my favorite. It’s like what it said online; we could see forever from up there.”

It felt like Tom and I were the only two people on earth, and I can’t say I didn’t like it. If only it could be like that always.

“Almost to the prairies of Kansas?” He echoes a line from one reviewer’s write-up of Mount Blue Sky.

“I don’t know about that, but the mountain ranges went on for miles.”

He nods in agreement and gifts me a big and beautiful smile. And that right there—his smile—warms me more than the drink does. My cheeks heat when our gazes lock, even if only for a beat. I can only imagine the look I’m giving him is something close to adoration.

His lips taunt me. Plump and softer than you’d think. A rush of heat sweeps through me. His mouth had been all over me yesterday. I’d started it, no longer wanting to constantly restrain myself. I wanted Tom and I went for it.

At the time, I hadn’t really thought about where the kiss would lead. Or most probably, I didn’t care what came next or if there would be consequences. Tom made the kiss last and then everything that came after... I wouldn’t regret it or trade it for anything in the world.

Tom’s wistful tone cuts through my thoughts. “Yeah, it was beautiful up there.”

We're closer to the end of our drive today, and with a quickly fading sun at our backs, streaks of orange, pink, and mauve score what once was a clear blue sky.

We make it to a boutique hotel in downtown Lincoln just before seven and check in to our two-bedroom suite and freshen up. Lois tried for separate rooms, but the hotel was booked up for a medical conference. It was the best she could do under such short notice, and that was just fine with me. Though I did pretend to be upset and put up a little fuss because I wasn't about to tell her that I was good with sharing a room with my driver.

Though maybe sharing a room isn't such a good idea. Tom's acting like nothing has changed, and maybe I'm the one overthinking this. Maybe nothing has changed—sex aside.

The concierge recommends a few nearby restaurants and books us in at one just a block down the street. We're seated quickly and our food comes fast.

I gawk at Tom's plate, stunned when I shouldn't be. "French fries? You really meant it when you said you'd eat your weight in potatoes, didn't you?"

He pinches a fry between his thumb and forefinger, holding it midway to his mouth. "I wasn't joking. But not just any potatoes, only French fries."

The golden morsel disappears into his mouth, and I force myself to stop staring at his lips. He chews, and my eyes drop to my plate as I stab at the garden salad.

He inches closer to me and lowers his voice conspiratorially. "I'll let you in on a secret."

"What?"

"While I like fries, I only went on this mission because it revolted you to see me eat them." He chuckles and holds up one only inches from my mouth. "You know, if you ate a plate of fries, I'd abandon this quest. Spare you from having to watch me stuff my face."

"A plate." I wrinkle my nose and swear my eyes bulge out of their sockets. "Are you out of your mind? I don't like

them.”

“Really?” He tilts his head to the side in that far too adorable way of his, and I squash down the yearning sigh that’s pressing against my lips, demanding to be freed.

As if sensing my internal battle, he raises an eyebrow. “I feel a little like Sam-I-Am in *Green Eggs and Ham*. How can you say you don’t like them if you haven’t tried them?”

“I ate the fry you cooked. Don’t you remember?”

“Barely. You had one. You can’t form an opinion or fall in love with something with just one.”

I swallow the lump lodged in my throat and disagree with him about not falling for something, or in my case, someone, after only one time. I’ve had sex with a few men and only once with Tom, but I can easily and undoubtedly say, after Tom, nothing compares.

His voice cuts through my reverie. “Leighton, did you hear me? Have you ever eaten a plate of fries?”

Flushed and discombobulated, I nod, not trusting my voice.

He quickly counters, “When?”

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “When I was, like, six.”

“Doesn’t count.” He folds his arms over his chest, clearly pleased with himself, and leans back into his chair.

“And why not?”

“How can you possibly remember that you don’t like them?” He picks up a fry like I’m somehow clueless about the topic. “Seriously. This is golden, crunchy goodness.” He pops it into his mouth.

“This is silly.” I wave my fork around, more for something to do than because I’m hungry.

“If it’s so silly, then just eat them and I’ll never speak of them again. And better yet, you’ll never have to see another fry. Come on, we’ve got at least three more days. That’s nine meals of fries.”

I groan and roll my eyes despite how amusing he is. Without asking, I snatch one from his plate and take a bite. He holds his breath as if the future of humankind rests on my consumption of potatoes.

Because two can play at his game, once done, I dab at the corners of my mouth with the napkin and sip at my water. His smile grows and eyes widen with every second that ticks by without a word from me.

I quirk a brow and load my fork with a bite of my salad. “Satisfied?”

“Nope. You gotta have a whole plate full. “ He crosses his arms. “But what did you think?”

I lick at the salt lingering on my top lip. The taste reminds me of Tom. Mineral and natural, and I so wish I could kiss him again, run my tongue along his chest, suck at his neck.

Jesus Christ, why am I torturing myself like this?

“Leighton, quit stalling and answer the question.”

“They weren’t bad. I can see why so many people love them.”

“You’re joking, right? I totally expected to have to go all Sam-I-Am on you again.” He looks disappointed, lips turned down at the corners, eyes crinkled in a bothered kind of way.

Suddenly, I have the urge to stuff all his fries in my mouth, only to make him smile or better yet, laugh. Or best of all, for a kiss.

God, what is my problem? Not now or ever will I do something so ludicrous for someone else, especially a man.

“Not going to happen.” I start munching away on my salad, hoping he gets the hint and drops this topic. I never want to talk about fries again.

“Fine. Well done for trying the ones I made and tonight’s. But I’m not even close to being satisfied.” The deep rumble in the back of his throat on the last word causes my eyes to fly to his.

Whether intentional or not, I can't deny that I caught his innuendo. And why does that cause a thrill to race up my spine? I'm not even close to being satisfied either.

LEIGHTON

The rest of our meal goes by in mutual silence, and when our server asks if we want dessert, we both pass. I pay the check and while doing so, I sense Tom's scrutinizing gaze on me.

His watchful eye intensifies as we saunter toward the hotel. "Not to be nosy or anything, but what do you do?"

A snort sails from me before I have a chance to stifle it. "Since when have you cared about what you ask or say?"

"Fair." His long fingers graze my thigh while we walk side by side, and my stomach swoops at the slight contact. Did he do it on purpose?

Clearly oblivious to what he's doing to me, he continues his questioning. "So? What do you do?"

"Do?" I grimace at how much I sound like a parrot. I understand, but I'm stalling, embarrassed to talk about my nonexistent career.

"Yeah, as in a job. What do you do for a living?"

And there it is. My biggest frustration and sadly, I've got many.

"Um, I don't do anything." I flinch at the blunt truth and feel the need to soften it. "I graduated from the University of Toronto with an art history degree."

"Did you want to be a curator or an art dealer? Or something like that?"

“I wasn’t sure, only that I loved art. I suppose growing up around artists, mostly actors but also set and costume designers, some musicians and painters, I was always interested in creating things.”

“Cool.” He nods, encouraging me to go on. I can’t tell if he’s really interested or just being polite.

“I don’t love all this.” My hands circle the space around me as I struggle to find the words.

“What do you mean?” He stops to face me on the sidewalk, only steps from the hotel.

“My life. The spotlight. I didn’t ask for this, and I don’t enjoy the film industry. I don’t want to be an actress. I don’t particularly care for the movie premieres, film festivals, and all of that. I love the art of storytelling and enjoy a good movie but don’t want to be part of the machine.”

Voice patient and calm, Tom’s earnest tone pinches at my heart. “What do you want?”

He always comes back to that—me and what I want—and this throws me every time. I’m not used to someone outside of Fallon asking me what my hopes and needs are. It’s an unsettling thing and also exhilarating. To think that someone else believes I matter. He cares what I think, what I want.

He gently elbows me, waiting for my response.

“I thought I found a way to turn it around. To make something of this life that I’m stuck with.” My arms rise and fall at my sides, only emphasizing the futility of my silly musings.

“And?”

“It wasn’t planned, but when it happened, things clicked, you know. It felt so right.” My hands clasp in front of my chest, and I breathe in deeply, desperately clinging to that feeling.

The rightness of it all. Complete in a strange kind of way.

How it felt to be useful, to make a difference, even if only for one person, one moment. It’s kind of what I get out of my

posts to my secret social media account.

I enter the hotel, Tom close at my side, and I'm unsure if I can tell him. Besides my therapist, Everly, and my parents, I've never shared this with anyone. Even Fallon only knows a part of it. I've never fully told her why it means so much to me though she knows me well enough to figure it out, I'm sure.

"My mother...she suffers from depression and other things." Why can't I tell him about her addiction?

Dr. Hemming and I have explored if it's shame or responsibility that trips me up every time. I suspect it's the latter. I can't deny there were times that I enabled her behavior. But like my doctor always reminds me, I was a child. There isn't much I could have done.

We step into the elevator, and I wedge myself into a corner. Instinctually, my arms wrap around my middle. Once the doors close and we're truly alone, I swallow thickly before continuing.

"Before the whole plane thing that happened in LA, I'd never had a panic attack, but I do suffer from anxiety, and I suppose, for a while, I was depressed. None of this I realized until I got help from a therapist. All before what happened with the plane."

He nods, body leaning against the elevator wall, and just his presence, calm and open, gives me the courage I need to tell him. To trust him.

"About a year ago, I was at a mental health fundraiser at CAMH. You know, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto. It was one of those public obligations. I don't remember why I had to go but anyway, that's where I met Everly Simard."

I pause, wondering if he'll make a connection to the name. Everly's sister was an actress and famous in her own right.

"Simard? Any relation to Raven Simard? She was on *The Right Life*. Do you know who I mean?"

"Yes, they're sisters."

He cocks his head to one side and wrinkles his forehead. “Didn’t Raven die?”

The elevator doors slide open, and my insides are a mess. I lead the way to our room while tonight’s dinner threatens to make another appearance.

It’s hard to believe I’m actually going to tell him. It’s so different to do this in person rather than online, and with someone I’m falling for.

While still nerve-racking to post your innermost thoughts and fears online, there’s also distance from it all. In person is overwhelming.

I tap the keycard against the door and pause to peer at Tom over my shoulder. “Yes. Raven committed suicide.”

“Shit.”

“Everly is her older sister, and she started the Raven Mission in her honor to raise awareness and support for those battling mental health issues. Toronto has the largest facility. There’s another in Vancouver, and she recently opened one in Montreal.”

I kick off my heels and drop down onto the couch. Not one to put space between us, he sits next to me and turns to face me so our knees brush.

“Meeting Everly, it was just so strange. We didn’t know each other until that night and yet, it was easy to talk to her. I suppose some of it had to do with how open and honest she was about her pain and loss.”

I want to add that it’s also surprisingly easy to talk to him, but I’m scared to say that out loud. What if I’m the only one feeling this way? The only one who thinks we have a strong connection.

“Everly inspired me to share my story. Let people know they weren’t alone.” I fiddle with the edge of the belt on my dress, suddenly self-conscious of how willing I am to expose myself.

But to not just anyone. To Tom.

“You mean dealing with anxiety and depression?”

“Yes. You know, it’s slowly changing. More and more people talk about their mental health, and the stigma is less, but it’s a process. Sadly, it still exists. Everly thought—given who I am and the circles I run in—I could be another example for those who are afraid to seek help or share their stories.”

“Yeah, I think she’s right.”

Tom’s agreement, no matter how small, boosts my confidence. “I wasn’t sure how to help, and it wasn’t much—only a series of social media posts.” My response and the corresponding shrug belies how significant and daring that step was for me.

How I bared my soul and posted without my mother’s consent. Tom might never fully understand the drama I unleashed with that single, honest act.

“The outpouring from people who felt the same way, the ‘thank yous’ and relief at knowing they weren’t alone—it was overwhelming and terrifying. Everly was thrilled. She told me I had a voice, a calling. People connected to me, and I could help make change.”

“That’s amazing. I’d love to read the post.”

I slump into the cushion, not caring how defeated I must look to him. “You can’t. I had to delete it.”

“What? Why?”

“My social media account is considered a representation of my father, the Price name, and his business. I can’t simply post whatever I want.” My voice is deliberately cold and robotic in the way it’s been drilled into my head over and over by my father and his people.

“That’s bullshit. You were being real. It isn’t like you were using drugs or posting nudes or whatever. And even at that, it’s your choice.”

My cheeks redden. “Yeah, well, he didn’t see it that way. My posts aside, Everly offered me a job at the Mission. She wanted help in expanding across not only Canada, but all of

North America. I wanted to do it. I wouldn't be the first person to advocate and raise awareness of mental health, and I'm certainly not famous like the actors and actresses that support similar causes—"

"But you've got a voice and people listen."

A flush washes over me. "Dad thought she was using me and that I'd only bring disgrace and shame to my family. They refused to let me take the job with Everly. In fact, he doesn't even want me talking to her."

"And what do you want?"

Water pricks at the back of my eyes, and one lone tear streams down my cheek. He wipes at the wetness and offers soft, caring words. Every time he asks about *my* needs and wants, he undoes me.

My wall of loneliness and dejection starts to crumble, brick by brick. It's sad that I need it—a constant reminder that I count and that what I want matters—but I do, and I can never truly express how much it means to me.

I really like Tom. For this reason and so much more. And this fact terrifies me.

"I wanted the job."

Should I tell him about my secret account?

My little rebellion.

The account and my posts aren't the same as the job Everly offered me, not even close, but it's something. Telling my father and my mother, by extension, was a big mistake, though they would've found out eventually.

"Then do it."

My chest swells at the way he's looking at me. Like I matter. Like he believes in me. Believes I can do anything I put my mind to. The same warm wave spreads from my chest outward like a great big hug. Safe and comforting.

And even with that, I can't. Only a few people know that account belongs to Leighton Price. I have to keep it that way.

As much as I want to tell him, Tom looks at every person, man or woman, this way. This isn't about me.

He treats people with respect, not to mention that he's a shameless flirt. He knows how to make a person feel wanted, special, not in a cruel or manipulative kind of way but sincere. He's an all-around good guy. Exceptional even.

And in turn, I can't deny just how special I feel, mainly the longer his gaze lingers on me, eyes smoldering and lips curving sweetly upward.

Dammit. First I sleep with him and now...now I'm on the verge of falling head over heels for him.

No. No. No.

I need this road trip to end. Now.

Tomorrow we drive to Chicago, and I'd planned to stay for a day, maybe two, before our final stop. Now, we need to keep going.

Why did I think opening up to him would be good for me? We're opposites. He seems to be rarely in one place, traveling and trying to find himself, and I'm shackled to a life that I can't seem to get excited about with no way out. A life he clearly doesn't approve of. And above all else, he's... He's glorious and magical even when doing the mundane.

As attractive as he is...

Nope. Nope. Nope.

Time to get back to my sad and lonely existence.

I need space from Tom. I need to forget about this sunshine man.

TOM

“*N*o. Help.” Leighton’s wounded wails echo, loud and jarring, in my room, as if she’s there and not across the hotel suite. “Oh no.”

Her distressed cries stab the center of my chest over and over, and my hand rubs at the blossoming ache. I stumble from my bed, needing to help her. In the dark, bleary-eyed and freaked the fuck out, I walk right into the back of the couch.

“Fuck.” My toe pulses from where it hit the sofa leg as I limp-run the rest of the way to her room.

It’s the middle of the night in an unfamiliar hotel room, and Leighton needs me. Something is painfully wrong. Did someone get into our suite? Is she being attacked?

Why didn’t I insist on sleeping with her? Oh, because I didn’t want her to think all I wanted from her was sex.

The sounds coming from her are unlike anything I’ve ever heard before. Hollow, chilling, and heartrending. I throw open her bedroom door and falter when I’m hit with more darkness. It’s like a blackout, with not even a sliver of light creeping in from the break in the curtain.

“Leighton.” I gingerly make my way toward her whimpering.

A few blinks later and my eyes adjust to the near tar-like surroundings. I can make out Leighton, prone and thrashing in her bed, weeping and mumbling. She’s having a nightmare.

Once at her side, I'm uncertain if I should wake her up or wait her out, stay close, and make sure she doesn't hurt herself. The decision is taken from me when she bolts upright in the bed.

She stiffens and stares right at me, or at least that's what I think she's doing. I can't fully see her features.

"Tom." My name is more a sob than anything else as her arms shoot out and hook around my neck.

Her slender, trembling frame clings to me wherever possible, every inch of her pressing into me. It feels like she needs me to survive.

"Hey. I'm here." I soothingly stroke the back of her head with one hand, and my other arm snakes around her waist to hold her securely. Reassure her that she's safe. "You're okay."

We stay like that, entwined, for what might only be a couple of minutes, but it feels much longer. Eventually her sobs taper off and her breathing evens out, while my mind whirrs and heart gallops. I'm unsure what she needs or if all she needs is to be held, to know that she isn't alone.

She pulls back but keeps a hand on my arm while with her other hand, she flicks on the bedside lamp. "Tom...I'm sorry about that."

Her voice cracks, and the thought of her broken and scared does something to me. Enrages and terrifies me. I want to help, to take away whatever scared her like that, if only I knew how.

She sniffles and wipes at the tears on her cheeks, her gaze darting anywhere but at me, and I carefully reach for her face. My fingers delicately brush a few damp strands of hair from her forehead.

"Don't apologize. I'm just glad you're okay."

She shudders and dips her head to lean into me. Her arms wrap around me once more, and I relax a little at how easily she seeks comfort from me. Her warm, steady breaths coat the crook of my neck as she settles into my embrace.

My hand runs down her hair. “Was it a nightmare?”

She bobs her head in affirmation, and some of her hair catches on my stubble, but this doesn't stop her from burrowing deeper into my chest.

I can't help but like it. A lot. Even if it feels a tiny bit wrong to be consoled when I should be the one consoling her.

My fingers tighten gently around her waist. “Was it about the plane?”

She pulls back suddenly and scoots several inches away from me. Her gaze drops to the duvet and she nods.

“Hey.” I gently slide a finger under her chin and tilt her head up until her eyes meet mine. “It's okay. Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. It's always the same. I relive it except sometimes... sometimes we crash. There's fire and screaming and...” She gets up from the bed and goes to a bag on the floor. “The doctor prescribed sleeping pills to help with the nightmares.” She stares down at the bottle she took from the bag. “I hate taking them. They make me feel out of it the next morning. Not myself.”

“Would it help if I stayed?”

Her head swings toward me, and she wears a surprised expression. Is it because we'd be crossing another boundary again? First sex followed by sleeping in the same bed and now we're spending a full night together because... because I want to. It almost feels more intimate without the sex. Like I want to be close to her no matter how or why.

I think that's why earlier tonight she made a point of stating where my bed was and that hers was in a separate part of the suite. I didn't have a chance to kiss her, let alone suggest anything else.

Yet I'm the one surprised when she drops the bottle back into the open bag and inches closer. “Would you?”

“Sure.”

We get into the king-size bed in her room, and I pause with my head on the pillow. This isn't how I offer solace with more than a foot of space between us. If this were anyone other than Leighton, I wouldn't be second-guessing myself.

With that thought, I slide closer and wrangle my arm under her neck.

“What are you doing?” She raises her head.

My hand clasps her shoulder, and I pull her into my chest even as she questions. “Tom?”

“Hey. I want you to feel safe. You're not alone.” I tuck her head under my chin and close my eyes, suddenly feeling very tired now that the adrenaline has worn off.

At first, she's tense and wooden in my arms, but around the same time I drift off, her body loosens up. One of her arms drapes over my stomach, and a leg curls around my thighs.



The next morning, Leighton's quiet and limits any kind of contact or communication with me. I figure she's freaked out from her nightmare, maybe a little embarrassed though she has no reason to be, or maybe she didn't sleep as soundly as I did.

We agree to a quick workout, and once showered and packed, we're on the road at a little after nine. More silence envelops the drive, and while I want to talk about last night, it's easy to sense that she doesn't.

That's fine. For now. Our drive is eight hours without stops to Chicago, so we have plenty of time to address the elephant squished in the front seat of the car with us.

For lunch, we grab a sandwich for the road, and we're almost through the state of Iowa when I can no longer take the silence.

I turn off the satellite radio and glance at her. “Did you sleep okay?”

“Uh-huh.” Her tone absent-minded, she’s fixed on her phone. “I’m changing the schedule. Instead of staying in Chicago for a day or two, let’s drive to Toronto tomorrow.”

It takes a few seconds for my brain to make the mental switch in topics and catch up. I’m thinking about her nightmare, and she wants to cut the drive short. Be home tomorrow.

“Why?” It’s all I can think to say, and really, what’s the big deal if she wants to shorten our time together?

Isn’t that what I want too? I’d no longer have to wonder if I’ll make it back in time. Or if I’ll have to find someone else to drive her for the final leg of the trip.

I should be cool with this. But I’m not. I don’t want anyone else driving her. I don’t want our time together cut short.

“What do you mean?” Of all the hours we’ve spent together today, now she finally decides to look at me with an eyebrow arched in that challenging, no-nonsense way of hers.

“I mean, first you weren’t sure if you needed to rush home, and now, all of a sudden, you can’t wait to get back.” I take my eyes off the road to stare at her intently. “What’s going on? I thought we were having a good time. I mean, last night aside.”

She turns away from me, and her shoulders round ever so slightly. “I’m the client. I call the shots. Right?”

Leighton might as well have punched me for the aloof way in which she ignores my allusion to what’s happening between us. Confused and pissed, I don’t bother to respond. She is the client and her point is taken. What else is there to say?

“Fine. We’re set. We’ll be in Toronto tomorrow.”

The shrill ring of my phone cuts through the tension. Eden’s name and number appears on the car console. I’d connected my phone to the Bluetooth. I hit the button to answer, and before I can say a word, Eden’s breathy voice fills the car. “Tom, thank God you picked up. I need you here.”

Leighton gasps, fingers fisting in her lap and spine straightening.

“You all right?” I’m not sure if I’m asking Eden or Leighton.

“Yes. No.” She sighs and lets out a dry laugh. “You know what this is about and how much I don’t want to talk about this.”

Brent. He’s the only one we’ve talked or texted about these last few days. Last we texted, nothing had changed, and as much as I wanted to help, I can’t fix or do anything while driving.

“Eden, I can’t talk right now. Is it urgent or can I call you later?” Raindrops hit the windshield with a light splatter from the graying sky.

“Sorry. You’re working. I shouldn’t have called. I miss you. We all do. Hurry home.”

Leighton squirms in her seat, and I chuckle and can’t resist adding, “I miss you too. I’ll call you in a few hours. Okay?”

I watch the sharp line of my *client’s* back practically stiffen like an ironing board as she awkwardly swivels to look out the window. Maybe it’s childish to want to get a reaction out of her, yet I can’t help but think she wants to be home tomorrow because of how I make her feel. Or more like how we make each other feel. I feel it too.

“Call when you can. Bye.” Eden hangs up, and Leighton keeps her back to me while I try to remember where our conversation left off.

My phone rings again and this time it’s Drew, my brother-in-law. Leighton turns slightly, clearly checking the name on the screen. Relief washes over her as she sinks back into the leather seat.

This time, when I answer, I put earbuds in and take the call off speaker. The rain picks up, thunder splits the sky, and the sun has dipped behind a wall of dense, bluish-gray clouds.

“Hey, Drew, what’s up?”

“Hey, Tom. I’ll keep this short. I’ve got to be in court soon and Pip tells me you’re on a road trip or something. Helping August out?”

“Yep.” I flick on the wipers to keep the fast-falling rain from obscuring too much of my view.

“It’s about Matt’s bachelor party.”

“I thought his sister, Savannah, was planning something.”

Drew snorts. “Nah. I mean, yes, she’s doing a dinner but that’s more for all the families. Very fancy. I’m calling about a surprise for Matt. A couple of days away.”

I tense, my mind suddenly going to the movie *Bachelor Party* though Drew isn’t the type to plan debauchery like that. “What did you have in mind?”

My question comes out more cautious than I intend, and Drew, the astute lawyer he is, readily picks up on it.

“Hey, I invited your sisters and Savvy. Pippa’s coming but that’s all I’ll say. It’s a surprise for everyone. I’ll text you the dates, and you need to pack a bag and leave your phone at home.”

“My phone?” I ease up on the speed as the rain pelts the car and floods the windshield, making it difficult to see even with the wipers on full speed.

“Yeah. We’re focusing on nothing but Matt and a good time. Got it?”

“Okay. Count me in. Who else is going?”

“Most of us. Finn, Zach, maybe Walker. Sam doesn’t think he can make it, but Bas will be there. Your dad and Pippa. My mom couldn’t get away since she’s working on a big redesign for a client and on deadline, and your mom’s too busy with the opening of *The Marriage of Figaro*.”

“Yeah, that’s right. She’s swamped right now. Does Claire know?” I need to start planning something for my sister.

“She does, and she wanted to come but the hospital...she has to work.”

“Okay. I’m looking forward to it and very curious.”

He laughs. “That’s the spirit. Later.”

I remove an earbud, and before I can do the same with the other, the car lurches, suddenly sluggish. The speedometer drops like a feather slowly floating to the ground, and no matter how I press on the accelerator, it’s useless. The vehicle is losing power and fast.

Then the engine cuts out and we’re coasting. Hands white-knuckling the wheel, I steer the car toward the shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” Voice frantic, Leighton clutches the strap of her seat belt.

“We’ve lost power.” I pump the brakes and aim the car as far as possible off the road before it comes to a complete stop.

The engine dies. I slide the car into park and check my phone. Good, I’ve got a signal.

She stares at me and then at the deluge just beyond the car. “What are we going to do?”

“I’m not sure.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Her hand flies into the air. “You’re the driver.”

I clench my jaw and stare out at the fierce stabs of rain slapping against the windshield. I need to look at the engine.

My knowledge of cars is decent, and while I might not have the tools or be familiar with this car, I have an inkling as to what’s wrong, and if that’s the case, we aren’t going anywhere without a tow.

LEIGHTON

“Should I call someone?” My fingers grip my phone as if without it, I might die.

Lightning streaks blinding white across the sky, and a thunderous boom is quick on the heels of a flash. I huddle into the seat and listen to rain hammer the car roof.

This isn't like the plane. This isn't like the plane.

We're going to be okay. Tom has already moved us safely to the side of the road. The car isn't smoking or making any strange noises. We are going to be okay.

These thoughts circle on a merry-go-round through my head, meant to reassure me. My body isn't getting the message. My hands are instantly cold and clammy, and pinpricks of sweat pop on the nape of my neck and in my armpits.

I swallow back my fear as Tom turns to me and runs a hand down his face. “Stay here. I'm going to take a look.”

He jumps out and before he even reaches the front of the car, he's drenched. His thin white T-shirt sticks to his skin, exposing the chiseled outline of his pectorals, tiny, peaked nipples, and the expanse of muscles down to the waistband of his jeans.

For a brief moment, I'm taken back to when I first met him. The way he stood, easy and happy, in the door at the Marmont. His shirt wasn't wet, but I imagined this very image.

Regret mingles with fear, engulfing me. Why did I push him away? Have I ruined things? I don't know what we're doing or if there is even something to ruin.

A clap of thunder slaps me back to the present. The rain relentlessly pounds on Tom's back as he fumbles with the hood of the car. Water falls from his now sopping head of hair onto his forehead and into his eyes.

With the back of his hand, he wipes away the dampness and lifts the hood. I can no longer see him. What if it isn't safe in the car? What if he needs my help? I can't just sit here and do nothing.

I unbuckle my seat belt, exhale all my concerns, and head out into the downpour. Chin tucked into my chest, I try to shield my face from the icy spikes of rain.

Pointless. Wind whips the water in every direction. Within seconds, I'm drenched and my hair is plastered to my face.

"What's wrong?" I stand beside him and raise my voice over the wind.

He doesn't look at me, piercing eyes fixed on the engine with complete focus. "Go back inside. There's no point in both of us getting soaked."

"Should I call for help?" Lois comes to mind because I wouldn't have the first clue who else to call.

He faces me. Raindrops sluice down his face and seep into his eyes. He squints. "Leighton, let me handle this."

His tone echoes my cold and distant one from not too long ago. Before I can stop myself, my fear gets the better of me.

Careless, thoughtless words fly from my mouth in a snarky tone. "So far you're doing a great job."

"Leighton." My name has never sounded so lethal and sexy all at the same time, and I'm equal parts shocked and aroused.

He straightens to his full height, seeming oblivious to the weather around us.

His eyes track every inch of me, and I'm more than conscious of how my clothes, all cotton, cling to me, leaving very little to the imagination.

Something has shifted in Tom, and the easygoing guy I've come to know is nowhere in sight.

"Get in the car. It's dry and safer in there." His searing gaze intensifies with hungry appreciation as he roams my body.

Another deafening crack of thunder causes me to jump, and this breaks whatever is between us. My heart does an anxious flip as our surroundings sharpen in focus. Fear and doubt have me in a vise.

"I'm not useless, you know." My hand rests on my now cocked hip. "Tell me how I can help."

"There isn't much you can do. We'll have to call someone."

I spin on my heel, ready to take care of this. "I can call—"

The earth slips out from under me. I scream and squeeze my eyes shut. In the darkness, the interior of the airplane forms in my mind. Lights dim, everything shaking and rattling as the plane suddenly drops several hundred feet.

"You okay?" Tom's gentle voice snaps me out of the memory and I open my eyes.

He looms over me, half standing, half bent, sort of blocking the rain. His hand is outstretched to help me up. I slipped and am now on my ass, sitting in what looks like a muddy river where the ground used to be.

"Just great." I take his hand, and with one tug, I'm on my feet.

Though covered in mud, I make the mistake of wiping my clothes as if that will make them miraculously clean. And now both my hands are covered in mud.

Clearly amused at my calamity, he releases a small chuckle but quickly schools his features the second I narrow my eyes on him. "This isn't funny."

My hair glues to my face, and without giving it much thought, I pull at the strands, only making more of a mess. Mud smears my face.

His cold, wet fingers brush at the goopy streaks on my cheek though his tone is warm and tender. “Come on, it is kinda funny.”

I shiver even as a surge of warmth rushes through me, and I’m pretty sure it’s Tom’s touch that’s causing this conflict of temperature within me and not the rain seeping into my bones.

“Does anywhere hurt?” He inches closer, eyes searching my form and hand gripping my elbow.

“You mean apart from my ego? No.”

“I told you to stay in the car.” With his grasp, he attempts to steer me back to the front passenger door.

“Really? You’re going to lecture me now?” I pull from his grip and lift my arms out to my sides. “In the middle of a rainstorm.”

“Really?” He mimics me and it makes my blood boil. “I didn’t notice the weather. I thought I’d hang out here all night.”

I don’t care much for his sarcasm, but it’s the bluish tinge to his lips and the way his teeth chatter even as he’s talking that cause my stomach to spasm and my mouth to stop flapping. What the hell am I doing fighting with him?

Tom isn’t Felix. He isn’t self-centered. He isn’t any other man I’ve ever been with. His sole concern is getting us out of this mess and what am I doing? Making this more difficult. God, there’s that word again.

Maybe Margot’s right. I am difficult. I don’t know how to help a situation, only how to make it worse.

My apology is on the tip of my tongue when Tom takes my arm again. “Would you please get in the car, and I’ll be there in a—”

“You need some help?” A heavysset man in a yellow rain slicker stands only a few feet from us.

Why didn't I notice him before? A tow truck with blinding white lights is at his back.

Tom turns to face him. "Yes. Please."

On the short drive into the town of Davenport, Iowa, Alvin, the tow-truck driver, chides us for being out in this weather. All three of us are cozy and tight, sitting along the front bench seat of the tow truck. Tom's in the middle. He insisted.

Alvin chides us on how lucky we are given all the warnings about the storm that is now upon us. "You folks shouldn't have been driving in this."

He exits the highway, and I'm tempted to point out that he's also driving in this but keep my mouth shut. Let him lecture us. He saved our soggy, muddy asses and I'm grateful for that.

"We really appreciate this." Tom's thigh rubs mine and he entwines his fingers with mine.

The innocent enough gesture settles the turbulence within me, and I can't wait until we're alone. I need to apologize.

"Don't mention it. I'm just glad I saw you. No car lights on. Nothing." He scratches at the back of his neck. "Seeing as you folks don't know these parts, I'm taking you to Milford Auto and Repair. Harv's a great guy. In no time, he'll figure out what's wrong and give you a decent price."

The truck slows to turn, and I purse my lips. Out the window I see what I guess is the shop. I'm not in the least bit reassured that we're in good hands. Tom cracks up the second his gaze lands on what has my rapt attention, and then I can't help but snort.

Some of the letters on the sign across the top of the building—o, r, d, and all of 'auto'—are out. The remaining letters shine a bright red against the stormy sky. MILF AND REPAIR.

Tom looks at me and waggles his eyebrows. "Do you think Harv is a woman?" He leans in closer and whispers, suggestively, "An attractive, older woman."

I lightly jab him in his ribs. “You wish.”

“Actually, I don’t.” He slides an arm around me, and nothing in the universe can stop me from melting into him.

Alvin parks the truck and when his body is already half out of the vehicle, he pauses to peer at us over his shoulder.

“I’ll just be a minute.” He points to the single window above the garage where a light is on. “Harvey lives upstairs.”

The rain still comes down hard, and while the inside of the truck is warm, I feel like a wet noodle. Chilled to the bone. The interior of the truck is dark and the storm outside only makes things gloomier.

Tom and I sit close and wet in silence. I don’t know how much time passes. All I do know is that it’s comfortable, and for a small slice of time, I’m not anxious about how things are between us or what Tom’s thinking or about what comes next or anything else.

His phone rings and I watch him struggle to pull it from his damp clothes. The name Paige lights up the screen with a pretty image of a smiling brunette.

“Hi, Paige.”

Muffled sound comes from his phone, but I can’t make out what she’s saying and I really shouldn’t. It isn’t any of my business.

“Yeah, um, now isn’t a good time to talk, but I haven’t forgotten.”

Whoever this Paige is says some more, and this time I don’t hide my curiosity and lean a little closer, hoping to hear the woman on the line. It does no good.

“Yes, I’m seriously considering it. Project Miranda is important to me. Like I said, I can’t talk right now but I promise as soon as I’ve made up my mind, you’ll be the first to know.” His brow furrows as he listens to Paige for another minute before ending the call.

The second the phone is away from his ear, I can hardly contain myself and ask, “Everything okay?”

“Yeah.” He frowns but it’s fleeting and then gone. “I should call Gus.”

He dials his friend’s number, the owner of ACE, and under the faint glow of the streetlights, I take a long look at him, more than curious about that call. Who’s Paige? What is she wanting him to consider?

The signs of exhaustion show in the tight twist of his mouth and the tiny lines around those blue eyes of his. My fingers curl into balls in my lap. It’s hard, but I resist the urge to trace the lines of his face. If I did, fingers swooping over every hard line and dip of his tanned skin, I wouldn’t want to stop.

His call to August is quick, and I shiver at how the still damp clothes stick to my prune-like skin.

His arm slides around my shoulder and he pulls me to him. “You cold?”

“A little, but more wet than anything else. I look like a drowned rat.”

He rests his cheek against the top of my head, and in a low and thoughtful tone, he murmurs, “You’re nothing but beautiful to me.”

All air whooshes from my lungs. I pull from his embrace and look up at him, unsure I heard him correctly. Glancing down at me, eyes heavy and smoldering, he licks his lower lip. In response, I shiver as if his tongue just skirted my bottom lip.

He leans in closer, his nose brushing mine, and everything inside of me seizes, held in suspension, in anticipation of his kiss.

He’s going to kiss me, isn’t he?

I so want him to kiss me.

Just then, Alvin opens the driver door, unaware he’s interrupted or broken the spell. “Let’s go on in. Harv’s coming down.”

Once inside the garage, though warmer and drier, the cloying smell of gasoline hangs thick in the air. Harvey isn't a woman and not in the least bit attractive. His skin is pale, and it has nothing to do with the cold rain. He's stick thin, bald, with glasses as thick as a hockey puck that sit low on his long, pointy nose.

"We're closed for the day, but I'll take a look first thing in the morning." His grease-stained fingernails scratch his shiny head. "From what Alvin tells me, it sounds like it could be an electrical power issue or something to do with the fuel system."

"How long will it take to fix?" I wrap an arm around my middle, wishing I was in anything but these cold, damp clothes.

"Hard to say." He sniffs and rubs his nose with the back of his hand. "Car ain't domestic. Depending on what's wrong and if we need parts—"

Tom nods as if totally okay with this delay. I stare at a framed service guarantee by the register on what was once a white wall, now closer to brown, and grimace.

We guarantee fast service. No matter how long it takes.

My driving companion follows my gaze and chuckles. None of this is funny, and I'm not okay with this delay. Or maybe I'm just cold, wet, and hungry. Not a good combination.

But this realization doesn't stop me from saying, "You need to look at the car first thing tomorrow. We're on a tight schedule."

Sadly, my tone leaves no doubt that I'm demanding not asking. Alvin huffs while Harvey shakes his head, eyes downcast and mouth a firm line.

Tom turns to face me, eyebrows climbing to his hairline. "It'll be okay. Worse case, we'll get another car. I've already texted Gus and told him what happened."

"If we can get another car, let's do it tonight."

“With all due respect, ma’am.” Alvin puffs out his already too big stomach. “Have you seen the weather out there? They’re forecasting this rain won’t let up until the early morning, and with those high-speed winds—”

Probably knowing this conversation might not end well given my state of mind, Tom ends the discussion by butting in. “Alvin, you mentioned a hotel. Would you mind taking us there? A hot shower, dry clothes, and hot food will make all this seem not so bad.”

I hold my tongue and drop my gaze to the dark floor. It looks like we aren’t going anywhere tonight.

“Sure thing.” Alvin waves to Harvey. “Luckily, I called ahead and they’re holding the last available room for me.”



The hotel isn’t a hotel.

The first thing that comes to my mind is the Bates Motel, and the storm doesn’t help quell my nerves as we get checked in. The clerk at the front desk mentions at least a dozen times how lucky we are to get a room. They are fully booked—this I find hard to believe—and lucky us, we got the last room.

The only thing busy around here is the diner attached to the motel. Through a connecting door in the lobby, the hustle and bustle of a hopping establishment filters through to where we are standing. And it’s the only thing keeping my heart rate in check and erasing the fear of being murdered tonight.

Despite my foul mood, I thank Alvin for his help and tip him well. Tom watches the exchange with a strange expression and remains quiet all the way to our room.

Great. The room is subpar at best with the décor and furniture from the sixties. To make matters worse, there’s only one bed and it’s barely a queen.

None of this fazes Tom as he rummages through his bag. “You take a shower first, and once I’m done, we can get

something to eat at the diner.”

Exhausted and upset with not only our situation but also myself, I resist the desire to scream and cry. Instead, I nod curtly and take my bag into the bathroom.

After my shower, Tom wordlessly slips into the bathroom, and I finish putting on my makeup and drying my hair in the bedroom. I run my fingers through my now clean hair when my phone rings. It's Fallon.

With the phone pressed to my ear, I continue to style my hair. “Hi.”

“L, are you okay?”

I'd texted Fallon throughout tonight's ordeal, and upon hearing her voice, I no longer want to rehash the night's events.

“Hey, Fal. I'm okay. I feel a million times better and more myself now that I'm showered and warm.” I toss my handbag onto the bed and pace the dirty carpet.

“What happened?” Her question prompts my unloading of everything.

Until now, I'd held back from telling her that Tom and I had kissed, let alone had sex. But now, in a moment of need or weakness or whatever, I let it all spill out.

From the strange electric connection that has been growing between Tom and me throughout this road trip to sleeping together, Mount Blue Sky, the rainstorm, and I finish with describing the motel from hell.

Fallon's high-pitched squeal grounds me in the present. “Back up a sec. You had sex with Tom in Vail and you're only telling me about it now?” She doesn't even wait for me to respond and charges on. “What the hell, L? Tell me everything. How was it? Has he got a huge cock? I bet that guy's packing. And what do you mean you think he wanted to kiss you?”

“Fallon, shut up.” I hiss and recoil at the snake-like sound of my voice as I regret telling her anything.

The memory of Tom and me alone in the truck and our near kiss fills my head. It wasn't that long ago and yet it feels like I've ruined everything with my foul mood.

"Hey, chill," she coos, not in the least put off by my snappish tone, and this softens my hard edges.

"I'm sorry." I rub at my forehead. "What I mean is I think he might have kissed me if we weren't interrupted." Or at least this is what I hope.

She squeals, and I flinch and yank the phone from my ear before she deafens me. "Oh, no. Don't you go all heart eyes on me. I don't know if Vail was a one-time thing and—"

Behind me, Tom clears his throat, and I twirl around to face him. He saunters from the bathroom. Oh my God. Did he overhear my conversation?

My cheeks burst into flames.

"Uh, Fallon, I gotta go." I don't bother to even say goodbye, and I'm already anticipating the tongue-lashing she'll give me for that.

But right now, all I'm aware of is Tom, bare-chested with a towel slung low on his narrow hips.

"How is Fallon?" Tom dumps his wet clothes on top of his bag.

"She's fine." I shrug, unable to take my eyes off him.

"Are you freaking out, Leighton?" His lopsided grin erases any hint of the fatigue he's been holding all night.

"W-what?" My knees quake and it has nothing to do with fear. And everything to do with want. No, need.

He shuffles closer, and my gaze dips to his bare feet. I don't understand why, but his current state of undress—bare feet, damp chiseled chest, the start of the sinfully muscled V at his sides that disappears beneath the towel—I find all of him sexy as hell.

"I don't want you confused or freaked out." He takes one final step toward me. "I tell you what."

He stands in front of me, not even an inch between us, and for how chilled I felt all night and longed not to be... What I'd do for a little of that right now. I'm about to incinerate with the heat emanating from him.

“Leighton.” He curls my hair behind an ear, and I tremble at his touch. “How about we end the questions and ambiguity?”

“Um.” My tongue feels heavy and dry. “How do you suggest we do that?”

His gaze lasers in on my lips, and before he even speaks, I hope I'm right in what's to come.

Head slowly moving toward mine, his words come out on a naughty smile. “Vail was only the beginning.”

TOM

*M*y lips are a breath away from Leighton's, and I don't want to lose sight of her, but I also want to block everything else out.

Deepen the sensation of our mouths touching. Hot and soft.

Relish any sounds, infinitesimal or otherwise, that she may emit. Pleasured and needy.

Bathe in her unique fruity scent that surrounds us. I've finally figured out what she smells like. Strawberries and cream. It makes me want to lick her all over to find out if every inch of her tastes sweet and juicy, rich and creamy.

I'm greedy for it all and I close my eyes, anticipating our kiss. But like the blast of a bullhorn, she springs away from me. My eyes pop open as the back of her skull hits the hotel room door on a yelp. I wince at how it must hurt and reach for her.

She barges past me, farther into the room, attempting to put as much distance between us as possible in this small space. "Get dressed. I'm starving."

Shocked and suddenly small, it feels like a house has flattened me. What just happened?

Leighton stares at me from several feet away. But she isn't looking into my eyes or at my face. No, her gaze fixes on my body.

All of me, half-dressed, seems to both stun and spark something within her, despite what she just said and the space now between us. She covetously roams my body, pupils darkening with every inch she traverses down to where the towel hangs on my hips.

I'm frustrated and confused but also wholly aware that she's tired and hungry—I'd call her hangry but something tells me it might not go over too well. But this distance between us feels like more than that. Her resolve to stay away from me causes havoc with my mind.

Why is she doing this? All I can come up with is fear. It's been the root cause of all her attempts to keep me out. What's she afraid of?

As much as I want to get to the bottom of this, I am aware that pushing her right now isn't a good idea. I march back into the bathroom and get dressed.



“**S**orry. We're all full up. I don't have any available tables.” This is the third time the hostess has responded to Leighton's insistence on seating us. “I can't miraculously find one for you.”

“Can we order takeout?” My suggestion or the calm way in which I ask does the opposite of placating Leighton.

She growls, curls her hands into fists, and narrows her sharp gaze on me. “I don't want—”

A man not too far from the hostess station cuts off Leighton with his jovial boom. “Hey, Missy, those folks can share our booth.” He slides out of the leather bench to standing and shakily strolls over to us. “That is, if you don't mind sharing.”

Tall and lanky, in a three-piece navy suit, he pushes his black-rimmed glasses up the bridge of his nose. Though easily in his late seventies, the man has a full head of thick, white hair.

We both stand silent, and before I can respond, his twinkling eyes match his smile. “It sure beats going out in this, don’t you think?”

His gaze swings to the wall of windows and the monsoon raging outside.

“That’s very nice of you. We’d really appreciate it. Thank you.” I step forward and take Leighton by her hand as we follow the man to his table.

He introduces himself as Franklin Conroy and then gestures to a petite woman as his wife, Iris.

“Why, hello there.” His wife grins from ear to ear and waves us into the other side of the booth. “This is just so exciting. Who would’ve thought on a horrible night like this, we’d meet new friends.”

Iris clasps her hands together and looks on eagerly, waiting for us to introduce ourselves.

Surprisingly, the woman beside me, thigh pressing into mine, is first to speak.

“I’m Leighton and this is Tom. Thank you for inviting us to eat with you.”

Our server drops off menus and Iris leans forward, pointing a bony finger at an item on the laminated page. “They have the best French fries.”

It takes everything in me not to laugh. Leighton sighs and briefly closes her eyes.

I lean toward Iris conspiratorially. “You don’t say. Leighton loves fries. We’ll have to get some.”

The older lady beams with delight. “Wonderful. You won’t regret it. Franklin and I always share a plate. In fact, that’s how I knew he was the one.”

Her husband chortles while holding a hand to his chest as if he’s barely able to contain himself. “That’s how I knew you were the one too, Iris darling.” Almost reluctantly, he tears his gaze from his wife to glance over at us. “We had our first date

here over fifty years ago, and we come back once a month. This is where we sat then and any time since.”

“Well, not in this booth.” His wife pats the leather cushion. “There were tables and chairs back then but in this exact spot.”

The way they look at each other causes a strange tug at my heart. It’s plain to see they’re deeply in love and enjoy every second together.

Through our meal, the Conroys regale us with tales of buying a house, making a family, and the brood of grandkids they have today.

“Leighton, honey, you haven’t had any fries.” Iris’s frail hand pats hers.

“I’m full and more tired than anything else.” She smiles at the couple across from us, and if I didn’t know better, I’d believe her.

“They are delicious,” I chime in and hold a fry to her mouth.

She rolls her eyes at me and keeps her mouth closed tightly. Not even for this couple will she budge.

Once dinner is done, Leighton snags our server and pays the bill before the Conroys can protest, quickly dismissing their thank yous. At this simple gesture, warmth curls through me.

She’s a complex woman, and while she can be harsh and cold at times, deep down, she is a good person. I’ve seen it when she talks about the Raven Mission and what she hopes to do. And every once in a while, she slips and lets me and others see the real her. The vulnerable, just wants to be seen and loved Leighton Price.

Her quick to snap comments, haughty air, and everything else that comes with them are designed to keep people at a distance. Like she said, when she lets people in, they desert her and worse, they don’t care to understand her.

Most of all she doesn’t want to be abandoned or hurt. Who does? Yes, underneath it all, Leighton is a good person. This I

believe.

With the Conroys ready to leave, I walk them to their car. The rain hasn't let up and I offer to drive them, but they turn me down, insisting their drive home is only a couple of blocks.

When I slip back into the diner, somewhat wet and slightly chilly, my steps falter and I drag in a sharp breath at what unfolds in front of me.

Still in our booth, her profile to me, Leighton hesitates before popping a small fry into her mouth. Although they're only room temperature, her lashes flutter closed and she licks at her lips, satisfied.

As I watch her chew on what I know firsthand is savory goodness—Iris didn't exaggerate; the fries are crispy, salty perfection—my heartbeat races and all I desire is to kiss her.

She takes another fry and another still. In this private moment of hers, I can't help but delight in how she has finally shed the expectation of others. Something I figure isn't easy for her to do. I see it in the way she reacts with shock and awe when I ask her what *she* wants, what *she* thinks—as if those things never occur to her.

As if sensing me, she turns in my direction, pales, shoves the plate with the few remaining fries away, and slides out of the booth.

“I wondered if you were coming back or if you'd gone back to the room without me.” Her clipped steps match her tone, and all I can do is smile.

Of course she's going to lash out. She's deflecting, daring me to mention her indulgence in a French fry but also warning me that if I dare, it won't be pretty. Heaven forbid she fess up to eating a few measly fries and, worst of all, admitting that she liked them.

In overhearing a bit of her call with Fallon, I sense her anxiousness about us. We haven't talked since Vail about what's happening between us, and while I'm not one to talk things to death, Leighton needs some clarity. I get that, and I will give it to her.

We leave the diner, and once in our room, where it's only us, it's the perfect time to put her mind at ease.

I lean back into the door. "Was it good?"

Her purse falls onto the chair and she stares blankly at me. "What are you talking about?"

Snickering, I push off the wood and amble toward her. "Okay. If that's how you want this to go. Fine." Unable to resist, I swipe a finger along her lower lip to wipe away a salt crystal and where some of her pink lipstick has strayed.

A pink flush creeps up her neck. "What are you doing?"

"I'm sorry if I scared or confused you by not saying something sooner, but I'm not sorry for sleeping with you in Vail and for wanting to do it again. Whenever you're ready. I only hope you feel the same."

"Um. You didn't scare me." She juts out her chin, and it's plain to see she's shutting down even if what I say is something she wants. I think she wants what I do.

"You sure?"

"Uh-huh."

"Okay. Maybe scare isn't the right word. What would you say if I asked to kiss you now? To have sex with you?"

Her pupils flare but she doesn't respond. Well, not with words. She bobs her head up and down, eyes never leaving mine.

While we still need to talk, to make sure we're both wanting the same things, the teenage boy in me, my lizard brain, wants what it wants. Leighton. Now.

LEIGHTON

“*L*eighton, I need you to tell me what you want.” Tom glides his warm hand around the nape of my neck and leans in closer.

His soft, full lips are in kissing distance. I could run my tongue along the seam of his mouth and take what I want. But the call of my name pulls me from my lust-drunk state.

Tom stares down at me expectantly, and I nod again before I remember I need to say the words. “Um, yes. I want you to kiss me. I want sex.” My hands latch on to his shoulders, and the rugged strength of him gives me the courage to add, “I want you.”

He kisses me softly at first, but the union of our mouths quickly shifts to something more passionate, more sensual, as if we’re two lovers reconnecting for the first time in years.

I yearn to get closer to him and move in until my breasts push against his chest. He groans and digs his fingers into my neck. My hands slowly slide up his back, feeling every solid ridge and valley up to the broad expanse of his shoulders.

His hands shift from my neck and waist to hold my face as our tongues dance, and a wet, hot desire pools in my core. I want him, and even though I have my doubts, unsure what this is that we’re doing, I’m throwing caution to the wind and putting my needs first.

I want him now, and if this is all I’ll ever have with Tom, so be it. I’ll worry about mending my broken heart later.

My right hand drops to our sides, and I wedge it between us to palm his cock through his jeans.

His fingers dig into the back of my head. “Fuck, Leighton.”

He’s thick and hard, and I’m ready for whatever he wants to give me. I lick my lips and look up into his eyes, silently begging for him to fuck me like he did in Vail, like no man has ever. But before that, there’s something I want to do first. Something I’ve never done and never wanted to until now.

I drop to my knees, unbutton his pants, and unzip him. One hand caresses the side of my face and two fingers pinch my chin to hold my head in place. “Hey, Leighton, you don’t have to.”

“I want to.” My hands make fast work of loosening his jeans and boxers until both are at his ankles.

His cock stands at attention for me. I wrap a hand around his length and bring my lips to his balls, sucking them into my mouth. Tom draws in a breath, fingers threading into my hair as he gives a gentle tug of appreciation.

“That mouth of yours. Damn, it can spew venom and fire but also sucks me so sweet and good.” His legs quiver, and I smile and press soft kisses along his shaft, making my way up to his tip.

Like an ice cream cone, my tongue licks at his swollen crown, and Tom utters a few more expletives.

“Goddamn, woman, you’re killing me. I’m going to fuck your mouth good.”

His promise that comes out more like a warning causes a strange flutter low in my belly and an unbelievable yearning for him to make it so. To fuck my mouth.

Flicking his slit and sucking his tip, I torment him and enjoy every ounce of pleasure I bring him. I want to tease him. To do to him what he did to me. Bring him to the edge, till he’s ready to burst and then I’ll see what’s next. All I know is, I’ll drive him crazy, and he’ll be ready to lose it all for me.

Opening my mouth, I take him down my throat and moan around his huge erection.

“Take me deep, Leighton. Fill that naughty mouth of yours with my cock.” He thrusts deep into my mouth.

With one hand squeezing his balls, I slip the other down the front of my pants and underwear, desperately seeking my clit.

“Uh-uh. No touching yourself. That’s for me to do.”

I startle at his command, and my gaze flits up to his now sharp blue eyes, his cock still filling my throat. I’ve never felt like this before, some would say filthy or defiled, but I feel powerful. Utterly and completely in control.

Whimpering, my lips tremble around him, clit throbbing, and I reluctantly pull my slick fingers from my pants.

Tom leans down toward me. “Give them to me.”

One hand tweaks and teases at my nipple through my shirt while I drive my arousal-smear fingers into his mouth. My muffled moan coats his dick at the hot sensual feel of his tongue wrapping around my digits.

Mirroring him, I suck long and hard on his cock. My core aches for him.

“Mother of Christ.” Tom springs upright and releases his hold on my fingers. “The sweetest pussy I’ve ever tasted. You’re wet and ready for me.”

His coarse, dirty words swirl around me, tease me, and spur me on. I love every second and every inch of sucking his dick. But abruptly, he pulls from my mouth with a groan, almost as if he too regrets the separation. Then in one fell swoop, he hauls me up and onto the bed where he proceeds to take off my clothes.

“I don’t want to come like that...at least not this time.” He drops down onto the mattress and kisses me deeply, plunging his tongue into my mouth.

Then he’s down between my legs, mouth on my sex, and he’s kissing me there. Kissing me like he does my mouth.

Long, open-mouthed sucking, deep languid thrusts of his tongue inside me.

“Oh my God.” My hips fly off the mattress, and his hands grip me firmly to keep me in place.

Tom’s tongue elicits sounds and pleasure from me unlike ever before, like I never thought possible. I’ve never had sex like this, and while I said that the last time, this is more of the same and then some.

Pleasure vibrates through me, my orgasm shocking and thrilling me all at once. Tom keeps his mouth and tongue working me while I come, never letting up. My thighs grip his head, and his fingers knead my hip and thigh.

“Sweet baby Jesus. Okay. Okay.” I don’t know how to tell him to stop, that it’s too much but also the best.

Finally, he lifts his head to look up at me. “You good?”

I nod and pant and don’t even bother for words.

He kisses me between my legs. “Fucking love your pussy, and now I’m going to fuck your pussy.”

I blush and laugh. “I think you already did.”

“Uh-uh. I’ve only just begun.” Tom lines his cock up with my entrance, and I release a long moan when he fills me.

“Yes.” My fingers dig into his back, pulling him closer to me as I focus on how thick and hard he is inside me.

He thrusts long and deep into me, and my orgasm builds as I grind against him, seeking release. Finally, through pants and groans of ecstasy, I scream his name.

After we’ve cleaned up and gotten back into bed, Tom cups my chin and looks down at me. “So we probably should’ve had this talk before having sex...”

I tense, and my stomach sinks like a stone into my toes. Is this where I get the “whatever this is between us is only sex” talk?

“What talk?” The words sound thick and heavy to me, and I hear a strange buzzing in my ears.

“I can’t speak for you, but once we get back to Toronto, I’d like to see you again.” He licks his lips and dons a lopsided grin. “A lot.”

Heart racing, I draw back to study his features for any signs that I heard him wrong. “You would?”

He nods. “That is if you want the same.”

“Um. Uh, yes.”

Laughing, he lightly pinches my chin. “Why did your yes sound like a question?”

“I don’t know. I—”

Putting me out of my misery, his mouth claims mine in a furious rush that leaves me breathless and desperate for more of him. I’ve still got questions and doubts, but Tom wants more of us like I do. For now, that’s all I need to know.

We kiss and kiss, and at some point, we fall asleep.



A phone buzzes. It isn’t the first or second time, more like the fifth time in what feels like a minute but could be an hour. I groan and grudgingly contemplate looking at the wretched thing. But that would mean abandoning the solid warmth of Tom’s body underneath mine. My stomach churns in revolt of that idea.

At some point during the night, I planted myself on top of him, arms and legs wrapping around him like ivy. He didn’t seem to mind. Not when his fingers dug in to my backside and waist, anchoring me to him.

I’m not a cuddler and don’t like sharing a bed with someone. But apparently that applies to everyone *but* Tom.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

The phone—no, not just any phone—*my* phone vibrates. Again.

I don't want to move or face the world. Last night was unlike anything I've ever experienced before, and if it was all a dream, because it was too good to be real, I don't want to ever wake up.

As if reading my thoughts, Tom slides down so his head is almost level with mine. He bends toward me, and his husky voice vibrates against where his soft lips press into my collarbone. "You don't have to get it, you know."

"I don't want to, but whoever it is, they've been trying for almost the past hour." I kiss the top of his blond head and roll toward the side table.

The countless notifications on my phone glare at me like Margot often does. Apparently, I so readily disappoint her. A lot. Or more like my father and she's just the one to deliver the good news.

I scroll through what looks and feels like an assault and pause on a notification for a missed call. The phone number stings like the jab of a knife.

"Who is it?" His hot mouth sucks on a breast, and this yanks all those nasty notifications right out of my head.

I gasp, nearly choking on my breath as his tongue flicks and swirls around my nipple. The phone falls onto the mattress, and my hands rake down his broad, muscled back.

It would be so easy to ignore everything with what Tom's doing to me. So easy...or not. Obligation, or is it guilt, pricks at my gut.

Most probably sensing that I'm wandering, no longer here in this bed with him, he ceases his adoration of my chest and looks up at me.

"Is it Felix? Your father? Mother?"

A disbelieving snort sails past my lips. "You got it. All three."

My lips mash together as his face blurs with the tears gathering in my eyes. I can't bring myself to dwell on the fact that my father chooses *now* to finally reach out to me.

All my messages and texts to him went unanswered, and now, when I'm resigned to being ignored and closer to not giving a fuck, he breaks his silence. There are also numerous texts from my mother and two from Felix. But the missed call—that's my father and he left a message.

I should listen to the voicemail. Call him back. But I won't. I already know what he'll say. He only cares enough to contact me now that I've gone rogue. Or that's the way my parents will see it.

I'm a grown woman, but they treat me like I have no say in attending the Film Festival, who to date, or what job to take.

Soft, solid fingers wipe at my damp cheeks. "You okay?"

Propped on an elbow, staring down at me, Tom combs his fingers through his mussed hair. My body fizzes. It's a ridiculously sexy move, and until now, I never gave much thought to how I enjoy watching him. That's not true. Even stranded on the side of the road in the stupid rainstorm, I admired his form.

"Leighton, talk to me. I'm starting to worry. What did they say?"

"I'm okay." I push up to meet his lips for a quick kiss. "I haven't read any of them. I can guess it's about not coming home with Felix. They're worried."

He exhales, and by the way his shoulders sag in what I figure is relief, I doubt he fully understands this isn't a good thing.

"They aren't worried about me. They're worried that I'm no longer obeying my father."

"Shit. What will he do?"

"I don't know. I've never *not* listened to him before." The revelation hits me like a gust of icy wind and I shudder.

My father must be livid. His message most probably includes at least one threat.

"And how does it feel?" His question causes all the balls of thought floating around in my head to crash to the ground.

“Kinda scary.” I nibble at my bottom lip then smile. “But also freeing.”

“Think how it would feel if you took the job with Everly.”

Unease coils tight in my stomach like a snake. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Hey. Think about it; that’s all I’m saying.”

“Don’t you think I have? Or do you think I’m so easily controlled by my father?” There’s a snap to my voice that’s all wrong, and even so, I can’t seem to stop myself. I’m upset but more so with myself and the truth of the matter. Up until now, I have gone along with my father. Even my hidden social media account isn’t really much of a rebellion.

If only I could disobey him without a paralyzing sense of guilt or the overwhelming fear of losing him and, ultimately, my mother.

“That’s not what I’m saying. At all. I just think—”

“Who’s Eden?” It’s a rash question, and the direction I take causes his eyes to widen.

We sit in silence, staring at each other. The longer we do this, the stronger an amused gleam forms in his eyes.

“Why? You jealous?” His nose nuzzles my cheek, and something inside me thaws, reminds me this is Tom.

“No. It just sounded like you two were close. We’ve slept together and agreed to more when we get home. So I have a right to know what I’m getting into.”

“Well, in case you forgot, I already told you I haven’t been with anyone in nearly a year.”

“Sure, but that doesn’t mean something couldn’t be brewing with someone else even as we do this.” My hand moves back and forth between us.

He takes both my hands in his and unleashes a gentle smile. “Eden’s a friend. A good friend, but nothing more. She was commiserating about the crap Gus is going through and how she wishes I was there to share the burden.”

“Do you wish you were there?” I pull my hands from his, not sure I want him to answer the question.

“Sure. Sort of. Gus is my longest and best friend. But if I wasn’t here, I’d never have met you.” He leans in to whisper in my ear. “And we wouldn’t have done what we did last night. I can still feel your pussy clenching around me. My dick’s hard just thinking about it.”

I drop the sheet, and Tom’s eyes are drawn like a magnet to my bare skin. His desire fuels my determination as I lift a leg to straddle him. “I want you to fuck me.”

The vulgar word is foreign to me, but it also feels natural when I think about his dirty talk and how I love it from Tom.

“I want nothing more.” He pinches a nipple. “But did you think I didn’t notice that you changed the subject?”

My coy smile elicits a laugh from him, and one of his hands grips my hip.

I playfully buck against the ridge of his hardening cock. “Well, what do you want to do? Talk or fuck?”

“Fuck now. Talk later.”

TOM

“*W*hat’s the plan?” I shut the back door of the new SUV with all of Leighton’s luggage packed in there. “Are we driving through to Toronto today?”

We ended up staying an extra day in Davenport. Harvey, the owner of the auto repair shop, promised us he’d get the part yesterday and foolishly, or more like selfishly, we decided to wait for the part. We had the time to spare and spent the day enjoying each other’s company...in bed.

Turns out, today, Harvey’s saying the same thing. He’ll have the part later today. By the time midday rolls around and there is still no word on the part, we decide to leave. Luckily, Gus already secured us another vehicle yesterday.

Now it’s time to decide whether we drive through to Toronto or stop in Chicago. Right now, I’m feeling better about heading home after Leighton and I agreed to see each other after this road trip.

Leighton studies me from where she stands only a few feet away in sand-colored linen shorts and a pink, flowy tank top. The soft, loose material makes her seem fresh and more easygoing than I’m used to. But no less gorgeous and far too put together for a guy like me.

I wait for her to answer me. We could be in Toronto in the early hours of tomorrow morning or we could take a bit more time. If I get a vote, I say let’s go with the latter. Although I’ve got a deadline for reaching Toronto in time for Matt’s

restaurant opening, after two nights and a day with Leighton, I'm not eager to get there today.

It's funny how at the start of this drive, all I wanted was to pass the time and help Gus. Then, I wanted the days to fly by rather than drag, and now I wish time would stop.

To prompt a response from her, I offer up, "We can get to Toronto today. It'll be a longer day at around eleven hours without stops. Gus won't like it, but at least it's only one day of driving over ACE's daily on-the-road limit. We could get there by..." I glance down at my phone and do the mental calculations. "It'd be late, after one in the morning, probably later depending on how many stops we make."

Her hair flares out behind her as she spins on a heel and heads for the front of the car. I'm quick to do the same, both of us hopping into the front seat in unison.

She fastens her seat belt. "I was thinking we stick to the original plan. Head to Chicago." Though it's meant to be a statement, she makes it sound like a question.

Her cheeks flush and she avoids my gaze, dipping her eyes to her lap. I chuckle at how awkward she is in saying—without saying—that like me, she wants to spend more time together.

I put her at ease and grab her hand. "I'm on board with the plan. In fact, I'm not against anything that lets me spend more time with you."

She whips her head up, and an understanding passes between us. Our time together is dwindling. Now that we've had each other, and while we've agreed to no end, neither of us are eager to get home where real life will make other demands on our time and attention.

"Don't use your charm on me."

I want to protest and insist what I said was all true, no charm or flirting intended, but her phone rings.

"Oh, it's Everly. I've got to take this." She hits the screen and puts the phone to her ear.

The first hour passes by fairly quickly. I touch base with Gus to give him an update on our itinerary, the car, and for him to let me know nothing has changed where Brent is concerned. I then call Claire to ask how I can help with her wedding planning and to get hints as to how we can spend a day celebrating her before the big day.

In turn, Leighton texts with Fallon, sharing some comments about me from her friend, before she does some work on her phone.

At some point, halfway through the drive, she giggles at her screen before turning to me. “Would you believe a stupid photo of your plate of French fries is one of my more popular posts this week?”

“Yes. I would. Why do you sound so surprised? You’re the weirdo here. Everyone loves French fries.” Curiosity piqued, I lean over with my eyes still on the road. “What did you post, and how did you get it past your mother and her people?”

She slaps the phone, face down, on her lap. “Um, I didn’t post to that account.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve got two accounts. One my parents are aware of and they get to basically approve anything I put on there. It’s in my name.”

She pauses and releases a long breath, and I wonder if she’s changed her mind and isn’t going to say anymore.

“Okaay.” I drag the word out in the least confrontational way possible. While I want her to explain—anything to understand her more—I don’t want to pressure her or force her to reveal something she isn’t ready for. Far too many people make her do things that aren’t her choice.

“I have another account. One only Fallon and Everly know about. Well, and my therapist.” She glances out the window, her usual confident expression nowhere to be seen. “It all started as an outlet for my thoughts. Why I did it online...I’m not really sure.”

Her voice takes on a faraway, almost melancholy tone, and it feels as if she's talking out loud to herself.

"Maybe because my public account—out there for everyone to read and see—wasn't the real me. I didn't choose those topics or half the words, and truthfully, a lot of it—the clothes, the parties, the people—none of it really mattered to me. The funny thing is, I never meant my secret account to become a sort of public journaling, but it kind of did."

"Public journaling? Like a diary?"

"Yeah. It's stupid when I say it out loud."

"No. Don't do that. It isn't stupid. Explain it to me." The news of her other account now makes a lot of sense with her comments about not choosing the life she has.

"I felt imprisoned and stifled. I didn't know it then but all of that contributed to my sadness and anxiety. Dr. Hemming was the one to suggest writing my feelings down, to get it all out, even if I never said any of those things to another soul. And at first, I thought it was silly and didn't want to do it, but then I did."

She twists to look at me, her back now against the car door. When she bends a leg to rest against the console, her shorts creep up her thigh. More of her long, tanned leg is now exposed, taunting me.

"But the idea of writing in a book didn't feel right, like me. I suppose I wanted to be rebellious, put my thoughts and feelings out there. I was no longer willing to go unnoticed and silenced."

She shrugs and looks off into the far distance ahead. "Dr. Hemming says maybe a part of me wants to get caught...and I can't deny there might be some truth to that."

She shudders, likely at the idea of her father discovering her mutiny. What would he do to her?

"That's how it all started. I created another account and just posted whatever I was feeling. I thought of it as private, you know, until I had a following. The growth was gradual and

then it wasn't. It's hard to believe that I have double the followers of my other account."

Her astonished laughter pours easily from her, although her expression is one of wonder, of not quite accepting something as true. "I don't know how or why, but people were listening, relating, and through this dialogue, I was healing."

She cocks her head to one side, eyes fixed on me. "You know, I didn't really believe I could feel any different, better even, by putting some words down. But it worked for me."

I have so many questions for her. First and foremost, I'm amazed that she didn't simply accept her father's word about no social media posts that could negatively impact the Price name. Instead, she found a solution and never told him. Yet, why am I shocked? Leighton is a fighter, and if I had to guess, that's most probably what's got her connecting to so many people.

"Let me see your post about the fries." I hold out my hand while veering us to the shoulder.

"What? We're close to Chicago. Don't stop now. I can show you when we get there."

I put the car into park and turn on our hazards. "Uh-uh. Hand it over. I want to see it." My fingers curl in a gimme motion, and I half expect her to argue with me.

Instead, she scrolls and hits her screen a few times before handing me her phone. While I stare at the picture of a plate of golden French fries, she folds her arms over her chest in a protective way and stares out the windshield.

Imjustme: *Wanna fry? Sometimes French fries are more than French fries.*

Feeling full of gratitude and hope. What about you?

First, I chuckle at the caption, a slow smile blooming, but grow silent as I read the comments. Numerous comments with similar sentiments or others seeking to find a space of gratitude and hope.

Then I click on her handle and nearly swallow my tongue at the number of followers.

“Holy cow, Leighton, you’ve got quite the following.”

“Mm-hmm. I try not to focus on that or it could become too much. You know what I mean?”

I nod and look down at the phone again. “I think so.”

Her account has several recent posts with pictures from stops and moments on our road trip. The urge to scroll through them, read her words and the comments, is consuming. This is a whole other side to this woman, and I want to know her, understand her. All of her.

But I don’t click on any of her other images, not now.

“It’s hard not to focus on the number and what that means, but I won’t let myself. I remind myself why I started this. That account...”—she points her chin at the phone still in my hand—“it’s another reason why Everly would love to have me on board.”

“And how do you feel about that?”

“I’m fine with it. I’m already doing it, and if I could reach people through the Raven Mission, help others get help, I want to do that.”

“I love that. You’d definitely be good at it.” I hand the phone back to her, taking note of her handle with plans to follow her and read every post.

She drops the device into her bag, and I ponder whether now would be a good time to further explore Everly’s offer. For us to continue our conversation and encourage Leighton to do it, but I don’t want to ruin the moment.

The lights and sounds of the world surround us, but none of it can touch us here. I can’t keep my eyes off her exposed flesh. My fingers itch to touch her. I want to continue my quest from last night to learn the shape of her as well as I know the back of my hand.

I rest my hand on the console, fingers only a breath from her leg. The want is excruciating, but I also cherish how she’s

opened up to me and don't want to ruin this moment with my baser need.

Leighton eyes me and then my hand, and I take it to mean she's granted me permission. My pinky gently rubs the top of her knee. A slow, sexy smirk forms on her plump lips. Her fingers wrap around my hand, and she lifts it until my fingers now graze her bare leg.

Goose bumps pop along her thigh, and I exhale a contented sigh at her smooth skin under the palm of my hand. She nudges my hand higher up her leg, almost to the hem of her shorts.

I pause. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" she challenges with a quirk of a brow.

Not completely oblivious, I glance around where we're parked on the shoulder of the highway on the outskirts of Chicago. The interstate is well traveled; we wouldn't have any privacy in the front despite the tinted windows.

Unless... My gaze slides to the back seat and then to her. "Have you ever had sex in a car?"

She flicks her hair over her shoulder and purses her lips before granting me a response. "What is this? Never have I ever?"

My insides bubble with anticipation, jeans growing tighter with every breath. She is driving me wild.

"It can be whatever you want it to be so long as I get to have my tongue on your pussy and my cock so deep inside you." I lean in close, lips skirting the shell of her ear. "Feel you fucking me dry."

She gasps as her fingernails sink into my shoulders through my shirt. Her grip holds me there, my face buried next to hers and she's everywhere. The sweet intoxicating scent of her. The heat of her warming me from the inside out.

My tongue licks the long column of her neck.

“Yes. Tom.” She tilts her head back, giving me better access, and I take all she’s willing to give.

At some point, a gust of wind carried by a speeding tractor trailer shakes the car and reminds me where we are.

“Are you sure? No one can see in back there, but someone could stop.” I want to kick myself for stating the obvious, but I don’t want to force her to do anything.

“I’m sure.” She tugs me with her to the back seat.

With her back flat on the bench, she stares up at me, hands hooking around my neck. She lifts her head closer to mine, mouth inching toward mine. When they meet, her kiss sears my lips, and I want more of her heat, more of her taste. More and more.

LEIGHTON

J unravel the towel wrapped around my damp hair and drop it onto the floor. Tom lies naked in the king-size bed, arms open and waiting for me.

We checked into the hotel in Chicago just before five in the afternoon. Our hiatus just outside the city set back our arrival, but I wouldn't trade all the time in the world for what we did in that SUV.

Once in the room, we showered together, ordered room service, and crashed, but not for long. Sometime during the night, I woke up to Tom's face between my legs, his tongue strumming my clit as he coaxed the most mind-blowing orgasm from me. After that, we slept until nearly midday.

"You good?" His arm curls around me, and I rest my head on his chest.

"Yes. You?"

"Couldn't be better. I'm full." His large hand pats his flat stomach, and I recall the room service brunch we had about an hour ago. "While you were in the shower, I called Gus and told him we're staying in Chicago today and would be home tomorrow."

I push up onto an elbow and stare down at him. Something strange and heavy sits in my stomach at the idea of being in Toronto in a little over twenty-four hours. Then what?

"Was Gus okay with it?" I don't know why I'm asking or why I even care.

After all, I'm the client and Gus is Tom's best friend. So what if he doesn't like that we're taking an extra day and drawing out this drive. But some part of me does care because Gus matters to Tom.

"Ah, yeah, he's fine with it. He's more preoccupied with his business."

"Any news on Brent?"

"No. Nothing has changed." Deep in thought, his brow furrows.

"You don't have to worry. I promise to leave a rave review."

He forces a smile. "It isn't that. I know you will. I talked to Eden after I finished my call with Gus."

I tense even though I have no reason to be concerned. She's his friend, and he's explained why she's involved in Gus's business. "And?"

"She recently offered me a job with her company."

"Really?" Taking Tom's approach and because I really do care, I ask, "And is this something you want?"

He pushes up to sit and takes me with him. "I'm not sure. The other day she talked about me working for ACE—"

"Did Gus offer you a job too?"

"No...but Eden seems to think he should and that he will. Then there's Paige."

"Paige?" I slant my head to one side, searching for how she's connected to Tom. I've heard the name before. Inside Alvin's truck in Davenport comes to mind. "Isn't she the one who sent you to Africa? Your sister's best friend?"

"Yeah." He scratches at the back of his neck. "She owns Project Miranda."

"What about her?"

"She wants me to go back to Africa."

My skin chills at how he spoke of his time there with such awe and reverence.

I pull out of his arms. “You’d go back to Africa?” He said it before, but I don’t recall there being an actual offer for him to return. Now, with this information, I’d be willing to guess that was what the call was about. “For how long?”

He slowly turns to face me, and for the first time since we started this conversation, he really looks at me. His next career and maybe his future both weigh on his mind. He’s told me as much. I can’t possibly stop him from pursuing whatever it is that he wants. He’d never do that to me.

“Yes. No. Maybe.” He shakes his head and looks away. “I don’t know. But enough about me.” His smile softens. “What about you? I’ve been thinking about your imjustme account and Everly’s job offer.”

My head swims, struggling to keep up with the sudden shift in conversation. Heart still struggling to stay in one piece even with the threat of losing him just after I’ve found him. “What about it?”

“I asked before and you didn’t give it much thought, but I was serious. What if you took the job?”

The question feels like a slap in the face. Or maybe I’m not doing such a good job of keeping my fear and doubts in check. It feels like he hasn’t listened to anything I’ve told him. Things aren’t that simple.

“I can’t.”

“Why not? You did it with social media and look at how that’s turned out.”

“This job is different. What I post online is still very much for me, but the job would be public. I couldn’t hide it from them.”

“What if you didn’t tell your parents until you had to?”

“What does that even mean?”

“I mean take the job, and when things start happening for the good—trust me, I know they will—then you tell them.

You'll have proof to show your father how you're making a difference and that it isn't hurting the Price name."

"It isn't that simple. He doesn't want the Price name associated with mental health even if I'm helping people."

"What if—"

I bolt out of bed and cut him off. "Just stop."

Surprisingly, for a laid-back guy, Tom pushes me in ways no one else ever has. I both marvel at this and loathe it. Though he doesn't mean it, I feel like a coward.

With my back to him, I slide my arms into a hotel terry cloth robe, and when I spin to face him, he waits with a puzzled expression for me to say more.

"And what about you?"

"We aren't talking about me." Now he's somewhat defensive too.

"No, but you're no different. Look at you. You won't make your mind up about a job. What's holding you back?"

"Fuck." He slumps back onto the bed and stares up at the ceiling. "I know I can't sit around all day and do nothing. I don't want that, but I'm not sure what the right move is. At least for you, you know what you want to do, and the chance to do it is within reach."

He rolls onto his side to face me where I stand several feet away, feeling exposed and on edge. I only wish he said the right move was to choose something that would keep me close. But that's a selfish thought.

"I can't fully understand what your father might say or do, but you're a grown woman. When are you going to stop letting him hold you back?"

If only I knew.

TOM

The valet hands me the car keys while another places the luggage into the SUV. No surprise, while in Chicago, she ensured we stayed at a swanky hotel in the heart of the city's downtown.

I've been to Chicago a few times before, but this trip was different. For starters, all those other times, Leighton wasn't with me. Her lifestyle is so different from mine. I don't particularly care for it, especially after where I've been living and working for the better part of the past year.

She doesn't bat an eyelash at the opulence or waste, and while she's accustomed to it, I doubt she'd hate my world. Sure, she'd need to do more for herself, for others, but something tells me she wants that kind of challenge.

While not able to articulate it, she craves being useful and wanted. From what she's told me about her life, people use her. And not just anyone, but those who are supposed to be *her* people. Her most trusted and closest. Her father and mother. I'd never put it to her quite like that, but that's how it sounds to me.

And in reality, while she's needed, it's not for how or what she can give, but how they can take from her. I doubt she knows what it's like to be truly appreciated and cared for.

I slide into the driver's seat, and she takes my hand in hers. A nervous smile skates across her lips. "You ready?"

"Yup. Toronto, here we come."

With the car in drive, we head for the highway. After we got past the awkward conversation about our careers yesterday—nothing was determined for either of us—we settled into a lazy day in the hotel. We didn't speak about how things might work when we get back home. Or if I choose to return to Project Miranda, what that might mean for us.

I didn't say it to her, but I'm not going back. While I'd love it, it doesn't feel like progress to me, and this thing with Leighton... I want to see where it takes us. We both have work to do, and I believe we're good for each other.

When I think about her posts on her *imjustme* account, she puts it all out there, holds nothing back. That's what she's working for in her day-to-day life, and I want to be there when that day comes.

It's hard to read her posts over the past many months and not ache for the scared, lonely, sad, and sometimes angry woman who wrote those words. I wish I'd been there to hug her and reassure her that she wasn't alone. And since I couldn't be but I was here now, that's exactly what I tried to do for the remainder of our day together in Chicago.

The nearly eight-hour drive goes by way too fast, and we're only minutes away from Leighton's house on the Bridle Path when I break the silence.

"I'd like you to come to Matt's opening tonight. Do you think you can make it?"

"Really?" She looks surprised, like despite what I said she figured this was goodbye. "Um, I'm not sure, but I'll try."

"Don't sound too noncommittal; I might start to think you don't want to come." Sarcasm isn't how I want to deal with this, but I had expected a more enthusiastic response.

"No, I do." She places her hand on my forearm resting between us, finger gently twirling in slow, steady circles. "It's just that tonight's the festival opener, and I'm not sure what's planned. But I'll try to slip away if I can."

"Cool." I slow the car and wait for an opening in the oncoming traffic to make the left-hand turn.

In a few short minutes, we're in front of the iron gates to her home, or more like mansion. I press the intercom, Leighton announces we're here, and the gates open.

Her home is huge and sprawling with green manicured lawns, marble statues, and fountains. At the top of the drive, standing at the end of the long walkway to the front door of the house, is an older man, early to midsixties in an expensive suit.

Judging from the way Leighton stiffens at my side and mutters something unintelligible, she isn't happy to see him.

"That's my father." She grabs her purse and unbuckles her seatbelt before I can park the car.

"Wait." Quickly, I hop out and nod a brief greeting to Rupert Price on my way to open his daughter's door.

I was wrong. He isn't in a suit. No, it's a tux and his once black hair is more salt-and-pepper, short on the sides, a little longer on the top, and perfectly coiffed.

Leighton steps onto the driveway with eyes only for her father. It's subtle, but she trembles and plasters on a Daddy's-girl smile. Her chin juts out and there she is, the woman I met at the Chateau Marmont.

I don't like the transformation, especially since I'm guessing this is all for her father. She offers a little wave as she walks to him. "Hi."

The man is cold—not even a twitch upward to the corners of his mouth, shoulders square and his jaw tight.

His sharp glare swings from his expensive watch to me and finally, to his daughter. "You certainly left it to the eleventh hour."

"We actually made good time." I slam the car door to emphasize my point.

It's only a little after five in the afternoon, and from what Leighton's told me, tonight's gala isn't until nine. Plenty of time. I'm not sure what that means for her showing up at the restaurant, but now isn't the time to dwell on that.

With my hand outstretched, I approach Rupert Price. “I’m Tom Raine.”

His smile is plastic and clearly well practiced as he takes my hand in a firm shake and offers a curt nod. “Tom, thank you for getting my daughter safely home.”

Then with a turn toward his daughter, I’ve evidently been dismissed. Leighton doesn’t so much as look my way. It’s as if I’m no longer there as she swings her arms around her father.

Reluctantly, or at least that’s how it appears to me, her father slides his arms around her. He grumbles something sarcastic about how he’s glad she could make it and she’s going to need to get ready quickly. They pull apart, and he steers her toward the house. “Everyone’s inside.”

Leighton hesitates almost as if aware that I’m still here. It’s brief, and if I wasn’t looking, I’d have missed it. But she doesn’t look at me or talk to me, and just as quickly, her uncertainty vanishes.

Together, with her father, she strolls to the front door while I remain transfixed and stunned. A suited man appears out of nowhere and instructs me to leave the bags just inside the front door. Then he’s gone, and I’m alone to wonder if the past eleven days on the road with Leighton Price ever happened.

Once her bags are taken care of, I can’t get out of the house fast enough. Everything is too much. Marble, glass, wood, and way too much gold, or at least that’s what it looks like to me.

Jogging toward the car, I falter midway when Leighton says, “Tom. Wait.” She scurries down the oversized and way too expensive—if I had to guess—pavers toward me. “I’m sorry about that. I just couldn’t deal with my father right now.”

I stuff my hands into my pockets as if to stop myself from doing anything or most of all, saying that what she did—how she ignored me—was okay. It wasn’t.

When the silence stretches between us, she looks frantically back at the front door of the house then to me and repeats.

“Please don’t be upset with me. I really am sorry. I do want them to properly meet you, know you as not just my driver...”

It feels like she has more to say, but the word driver just hangs between us like being held at gunpoint. Without much thought and an urgent need to move, my shoulders start to lift in a pathetic shrug, but fortunately, I come to my senses and stop.

I’m not one to talk anything to death, but now I wish we’d talked more about what we wanted. How this thing between us was going to work or if we were better to just let things stay as an awesome memory after the drive.

“Look, Leighton, if you don’t want to come tonight, you don’t have to. You don’t have to do any of this.”

And what the fuck am I doing? Giving her an easy out?

“You know what?” I rake a hand through my hair. “Fuck that. I’m not going to act like I don’t care if you show up tonight or not. I want you at the restaurant opening.” I step closer so our bodies are less than an inch apart. She sucks in a breath but doesn’t make any attempt to move away.

“Leighton, it’s up to you. This might seem foreign to you, seeing as you’ve been robbed of having a say or the chance to choose. But when it comes to us, whatever it is we have or want to have...you get to decide what you want.”

I tilt my body forward and press my lips to her forehead. It takes every ounce of willpower to end the kiss. To keep my arms at my sides instead of wrapping them around her and holding her tight.

Her dark eyes meet mine, and I gift her what I hope is a warm and reassuring smile. “I’ll text you the address. I hope to see you there.”

Halfheartedly, I step back, fairly certain she doesn’t want me touching her, let alone kissing her. Not here where I’m the *help*.

A twinge of frustration or regret causes an ache in my chest, and I rub at the center, suddenly overwhelmed with a sense of emptiness. Before I can get too far, she grabs my arm

to stop me and pulls me toward her until we're almost chest to chest.

"I'll be there." Her lips softly brush mine before she whirls on her heels and races back to the house.

When I arrive at ACE, after the car is squared away, I saunter toward the building to see if Gus is still there. Of course, he's still here. My phone pings as I pull the handle of the main door open. It's a social media notification. A post on Leighton's main account.

Fuck me.

It's not even been two hours since I left her. She's changed into a black, rhinestone-encrusted evening gown that sculpts her body like a second skin. She's dazzling. But I can barely revel in her beauty when my stomach sours at the company she's keeping.

In the picture, Leighton's in the middle, flanked by her father and, on her other side, none other than Felix Thorpe. His arm wraps protectively around her slender waist, and the three of them smile brightly for the camera.

I'm not a jealous guy and will trust anyone at their word unless they give me a reason not to. But in this instance, my fingers grip my phone like I want to smash it. I finally understand the phrase "seeing red." Felix touching her, so close and cozy, makes me want to roar like a caged animal.



"I've never seen you this nervous." Eden elbows me in the ribs and I grunt, trying hard to block her out along with everyone else.

Matt's restaurant is filled with friends, family, and several culinary industry bigwigs. While this evening is a trial run and an opportunity to celebrate his upcoming nuptials to my sister, it's also about business. Both Matt and Sam, his mentor and world-renowned chef in his own right, are making the rounds and working the room.

“Not nervous. I’m waiting for Leighton.”

“Ah, yes, Leighton.” She sips from her wine glass.

“Leave him alone. We haven’t forgotten what you were like before you and Walker got together.” Gus waggles a finger at our friend and I laugh, appreciating the save.

“No fair.” She pouts. “I thought you were on my side. Why don’t I leave you two alone to bond or catch up or whatever it is you do.” She winks at us and leaves.

Gus stands next to me. “You okay?”

“Sure.” I stare down at my phone, tapping on it to light the screen where Leighton’s text from nearly three hours ago taunts me. It’s now ten o’clock.

Three little words and it was enough to give me hope. To think she might show tonight. And now, I’m not so sure.

Leighton: See you soon.

“Is she coming?” August glances down at my now dark phone.

“Wish I knew. She said she’d try but who knows, maybe it was just a good time.”

“Didn’t sound like it when you talked about her.”

Gus listened to me offload about the trip and Leighton the second I got to his office. I told him everything. Well, the important parts—not how fucking amazing Leighton is in bed. And how I can’t stop thinking about her even though she could be with that asswipe, Felix, right now.

And Gus, the best friend that he is, didn’t once put on his businessman, owner of ACE hat. He could’ve told me how out of line I was to sleep with a client and how I could’ve jeopardized his business—all true. But he didn’t. Instead he commiserated with me and gave me hope.

I snort. “You mean when I complained about how overbearing and difficult she was?”

“Yeah. You don’t waste your time on jerks or let anyone ruin your good time. With Leighton, I could tell she got to

you. You cared what she thought and why she acted the way you said she did.”

I grab two colossal shrimp as a waiter floats by with a tray of appetizers. “Since when did you get so observant?”

“Since my dickhead of an ex-partner swindled me.” He glumly takes the food. “Listen, I know Eden’s mentioned working for her or with me at ACE...” He pauses to gauge my reaction and I only nod, not at all surprised he’s bringing it up.

“I’d really like it if you came on as a partner. From day one, you’ve had an interest in ACE and had some really great ideas.”

“Thanks, but my interest was in you. In helping you make your business a success. I don’t have any money to invest.”

“I’m not asking for an investment. I want a partnership. When Brent and I started out, neither of us had money. I don’t want to force you into something that doesn’t interest you, but from the start of this venture, you’ve had my back and had some amazing ideas that have made ACE the success that it is today. I’d love for us to work together.”

He thrusts out his hand and smiles when I tentatively take it. “You’re the only one I trust,” he continues. “I mean that, but if ACE isn’t what you want, no hard feelings. All I ask is give it some thought.”

I pull Gus in for a one-arm hug and that’s when everything stops. Leighton’s at the entrance to the restaurant. She’s changed into a pink floor-length strapless summer dress. And she’s stunning.

LEIGHTON

“*Y*ou made it.” Restless and fidgety, Tom nears me in black dress pants and a light blue button-down with the sleeves rolled up to mid-forearm.

My stomach flips at the sight of him but not because he’s far too good-looking for his own good. All true, but something is wrong. His usual sunshiny, laid-back demeanor is gone. An awkward, almost frenetic vibe surrounds him. Why? Is he nervous for me to meet his family? Does he think I’ll embarrass him? Or worse, they won’t like me?

“Hey.” He slides a hand around my waist and lets it rest on the middle of my back. Leaning in, he places a quick kiss on the cheek. “You’re stunning.” His whisper in my ear leaves me breathless, and like a pouf of smoke, all worry about how off he seems disappears.

“Hi. And thank you.”

He straightens and his gaze flicks to a blonde couple approaching us. “You two didn’t even give us a second, did you?” He chuckles and turns to me. “Leighton, this is my mom and dad, Tamsin and Colin Raine.”

I force a big smile, determined to make a good first impression, and extend my hand in greeting.

His mother ignores my gesture and leans in for a hug. “Hello, Leighton, please call me Sin.” She pulls back, beautiful and blonde, and instantly, I see Tom in her features, coloring, and spectacularly similar blue eyes. “It’s so lovely to finally meet you.”

“He wouldn’t shut up about you.” His dad moves in to take my hand while also leaning in for a casual one-arm hug. “All good things.”

“Hello. It’s great to meet you too.”

Colin Raine is an inch or two shorter than his youngest son, but the resemblance is undeniable in his chiseled jaw, the sharp angle of his nose, and the twinkle in his eye.

There’s something warm and welcoming about these two, and the familiarity in which they greet me eases some of my dread. The same can be said when I meet his older brother, Finn, and his wife, Cass, as well as his sister Pippa and her husband, Drew. Eventually, I meet Matt, the ex-NFL player, and his other sister, Claire.

They all treat me like an old friend, and pretty soon, they’re talking and laughing about things I have no clue about, but I don’t feel left out. I also get a chance to have a long chat with August Bradshaw, and I immediately understand why he’s Tom’s best friend.

Overall, his friends and family overwhelm, excite, and truthfully, scare me. His parents and siblings adore him, and it’s plain to see he’s the light at the center of their laughter and love.

It’s amusing to watch his sisters, Pippa and Claire, jockey to take playful shots at him, and while Finn might join in, he’s also protective and proud of Tom. The banter among the Raine siblings, including Drew and Paige who aren’t related by blood but might as well be, is infectious.

About an hour or so after I arrive, the group disperses and I find myself alone. Tom and Pippa are off in a corner with Paige, the three of them rambling about Africa. My gut wrenches with a fear unlike any other. What if they’re trying to persuade him to go back? Or what if he’s already decided to go and they’re finalizing things?

After the way things unfolded with my father earlier, I wouldn’t blame him. Right now, I’m not sure what we are or where we can go from here, but I want to find out. Earlier

today, Tom said he felt the same, and I hope this still holds true. But if Tom chooses to go and work for the Miranda Project again, then I guess I'll have my answer.

My heart pinches at the thought and only intensifies when I spy the pretty redhead, Eden, headed toward me. We'd met earlier, in the group, but never had a chance to talk.

She was with the billionaire, Walker Drummond, and they looked happy and very much in love. The sight put me at ease, and all thoughts of the conversation in the car with Tom, her groaning how she missed him, seemed silly and inconsequential.

The determined set to her mouth and the way her gaze never veers from mine makes me feel like a deer caught in headlights. I want to flee, but my legs won't move. I freeze. My flight instinct hovers, bashing against some impassable wall surrounding me, and no matter how much I wish to escape, my will isn't strong enough to get my legs to move.

"Leighton, I'm Eden." She smiles and shakes my hand.

"Hi. I remember." I place my empty glass on a nearby table.

"I wasn't sure if you'd remember since you met the whole bunch tonight." Her laughter is light and twinkly, but her eyes remain keen and scrutinizing.

I smile and nod, not sure what else to say and now wishing I had the glass again. At least then, I'd have something to do with my hands. A foreboding sense hangs between us, and I can't shake the feeling that there's a reason why she came over here to talk to me.

"So you don't seem so difficult." She cocks her head to one side and studies me like a painting in a museum.

"Excuse me?" My muscles tense at that word, the one I'm all too familiar with.

"Sorry. I thought Tom had told you. I mean, I know he doesn't feel that way now." She flushes and my stomach churns.

“Tell me what?”

“Me and my big mouth.” She slaps a hand over her mouth and her cheeks redden. “Forget I said anything. Tom can’t stop talking about you. You really made a good impression on him.” Nervously, she stops a waiter to nab a glass, poised to hand me one. “Champagne?”

I shake my head no and play over our brief encounter. I can’t tell if she’s being coy, trying to cause trouble, or if this is who she is. Impulsive and regretful when she’s made a mess of things.

“Come on, have a drink with me.” She holds out the flute, filled with a golden bubbly liquid. “Tom will kill me, and rightly so, if I’ve offended you. I swear, I didn’t mean to.”

“No, thanks. I’ve already had too much.” My plastic smile hurts my cheeks, and I angle my chin outward. “What did you mean by difficult?”

“Seriously. Forget about that.” Eden puts down the glass and leans in close. Her hand gently clasps my arm. “I’m an overprotective friend. After what happened to August with Brent...” Her lips twist until they resemble barbed wire, and it’s as if she just sucked on a lemon. “Anyway, I only know that Tom likes you.”

This time my insides constrict in a good way at the mention of Tom, of how he might feel about me.

She pauses again, this time staring at me as if expecting or urging me with her silence to say something. Sadly, she’ll be disappointed.

I’m the wrong person to play this game with. A master at waiting people out. It helps that I’ve been surrounded by self-centered assholes who like the sound of their own voices. I could go an entire night without uttering a single word and no one would notice or care.

“Leighton, I really am sorry, and I hope I haven’t given you a reason to hate me.”

“I don’t. How can I? I hardly know you.” I cock a hip and place my hand on my waist. “But it feels like you came over

here to scare me away or provoke me.”

She nods sheepishly. “Kind of a bit of both. Like I said, do you know what happened with Brent?”

“A little.”

“Well, August and Tom let him in. Trusted him and he betrayed them and stole from August. I guess—”

“You think I’ll do the same? Hurt Tom. Betray him.” I narrow my gaze and don my most superior expression.

It might work against me and only prove her right, but I won’t let her get the better of me. And in return, all Eden does is nod, easily admitting that she may have been quick to judge me. She’s now sheepish, and though I don’t know her, I sense she feels like an ass.

I’m kind of in awe of her honesty and can’t help but admire her a bit. “You’re a good friend. But how can you think those things when you don’t even know me?”

“You’re right and I’m sorry.” She covers her face with her hands, staring at me through a sliver between two fingers. Then she drops them and smiles. “It’s just that in all the time I’ve known Tom, he’s never talked about any women. I don’t even know if he’s dated.” She huffs and shakes her head. “But this job...while on the drive and at least a dozen times today, the first day back in town, he couldn’t stop talking about you. I suppose... I just... Tom’s a great guy. He deserves the best.”

Boisterous laughter, not too far from us, draws our attention. Tom, Matt, Drew, and August are gathered in a small circle, laughing so hard that two of them are bent over, shaking and holding their stomachs.

With her eyes on them, Eden adds, “They’re all great guys —”

“And you don’t want to see him get hurt. I get it.”

Eden tears her gaze from the men back to me. “Yes, that’s it. And I’m an idiot to assume you’d do that. I swear, I’d like to get to know you.”

“Don’t worry about it. Tom’s lucky to have a friend like you. So is August.”

We share a quiet moment before Tom sidles up next to me and slides an arm around my waist. “What are you two talking about?”

At the same time, Eden and I say, “You.”

He ducks his head forward and laughs, blond hair falling over his forehead. “Of course you are.” His lips press against my cheek. “You ready to go?”

Eden glances around the restaurant then back to us. “You’re leaving already?”

At the same time, I nod. “Yes, please.”

Tom ignores his friend and cocks a brow at me. “Was it that bad?”

“No, not at all.”

“Well, apart from me attempting and failing to give her the third degree.” Eden places a hand on my shoulder and squeezes. “Please forgive me, and I’m going to leave you both.”

She gives us both a quick hug and vanishes but not before once more whispering “sorry” in my ear.

Tom’s gaze slides from the back of his retreating friend to me. “What was that all about?”

Ignoring him, I square my shoulders and narrow my gaze. “So, I hear you called me difficult.”

He pales and sputters. I mean it in jest—well, sort of—but it still hurts a little to think Tom used that word in describing me, and to his friends of all people.

TOM

“*Y*ou kind of live like a frat boy.” Leighton wrinkles her nose and tentatively picks up one of August’s discarded gym T-shirts. It reeks of body odor.

“Ugh, gimme that.” I shove the offending garment behind a sofa cushion, inwardly cursing my best friend.

She hesitantly continues to prance around the living room, inspecting every dust-covered surface of the house I rent with August. Why did I think bringing her back to my place was a good idea?

I recall how freaked out she was about the three-star—okay, more like two-star—hotel we stayed at that one night in Utah. Even when I dashed in to shower and change for tonight’s party, I bristled at the less than clean house. Why didn’t I remember that when I suggested coming back here?

While I’m not great at keeping this place tidy, Gus is way worse. Especially since he works more than anything else. He hardly has time to eat and sleep let alone clean up after himself.

“Let’s go up to my room.” I hook a thumb over my shoulder in the direction of the staircase.

“Is your room like this?” Her hands swim around the area. “There’s no doubt bachelors live here, but it’s like you’re still in college. The furniture looks like you picked it up from a garage sale or a dumpster. And you should really invest in a cleaning service once a week.”

Chuckling, I steer her toward the stairs. “Yes, it’s a dump. Sorry. Gus isn’t great at keeping house and I’m not much better.”

She grips the railing and sinks into me, at her back, as we ascend the stairs. “I’m not so sure I can stay here.” She peers over her shoulder at me. “After all, I am difficult.”

Groaning, I roll my eyes, regretting that I ever described her as difficult. “You’re never going to let that go, are you?”

When Leighton had put me on the spot in the restaurant, it didn’t take long to figure out that Eden had said something to her. And even at that, I hadn’t called Leighton difficult to Eden; I’d said it to Gus. But those two are like a couple of gossiping biddies. While I fumbled for a way out of it and apologized profusely, her smile grew. She was enjoying my discomfort.

“Uh-uh. I don’t think I will ever let you forget it.” She kisses the tip of my nose and stops on the top step.

At my closed bedroom door she makes a terrified expression, resembling Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*.

“Very funny.” My hand covers her eyes and I open the door.

I nudge her into my tidy bedroom and drop my hand. She breathes a sigh of relief. “Oh, wow. I half expected an unmade futon, milk crates for tables, and clothes everywhere.”

“All right, you’ve had your fun.” I drop down on my made king-sized bed and pat the dark brown duvet cover. “Come here.”

“I’m not so sure I can stay here. I don’t want to catch some communicable disease with how filthy—” Her words catch in her throat as I yank her down beside me.

She giggles and I pounce, hovering above her. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“Is that so?” She arches a brow but settles into the mattress. “And what makes you think I won’t get up and leave right now?”

“Because I want to make you come with my filthy mouth.”

Crimson apples pop onto her cheeks, and she bites down on her lip. Despite how much her expression screams yes, she shifts a little away from me. “Really? Make me come like you did the first time?”

I blink, trying to come out of my lust-induced brain fog. “What?”

“Don’t you remember? You brought me to the brink”—she sits up on an elbow as her head slowly nears me—“you teased me until I couldn’t take it any longer. Merciless until you finally let me come.”

Her teeth graze the warm juncture of my neck and shoulder, and my balls tighten and cock swells.

“Fuck, Leighton. Why do I get the feeling you want to pay me back for that?”

“As tempting as that is, I want you to deliver on your promise.” Her lips cover mine, both our mouths open, but she doesn’t kiss me or slide her tongue inside.

Instead, she speaks into my mouth. “I want you to make me come.” Her teeth nip at my bottom lip. “Make me forget everything but you and your tongue.”

The tip of her tongue strokes mine, and through some strange, kinetic connection, it’s like she’s just stroked my swollen crown. My cock pulses and hardens.

We’re done talking. The next second, we’re kissing and tearing at each other’s clothes in a race to get naked. Before long, I drop my hand to guide her legs wide, but in her eagerness, she beats me to it.

Forget about coaxing her open, her legs are apart like a snow angel, and my head falls between her legs to devour her. We make each other come twice. First with our mouths and then together, with my cock buried deep inside her.

Afterward, we spoon in my bed though I sense she’s getting ready to leave. I’m ready to fall asleep, but the idea of

Leighton falling asleep in my arms, in my bed, causes a tidal wave of emotions within me.

“Stay the night.” I kiss Leighton’s bare shoulder and nuzzle the back of her neck.

“I can’t. I’ve got a fitting first thing in the morning. It’s my dress for tomorrow night. It’s the world premiere of *Make It So*.” She twists to face me, elbow pressing into the mattress. “I’d love it if you’d come. I can have a ticket waiting for you at the box office.”

“You want me to come to your father’s big night?” I slide an arm under my head.

“Uh-huh. I want my parents to meet you.”

“Okay. I’d like that. What about Felix?” It feels wrong to mention that bastard in my bed, but I need to know how he’ll fit in to all of this. The picture of them online still burns in the back of my mind.

“Um.” Her teeth press into her bottom lip as if only now contemplating the presence of Felix.

I never mentioned seeing the picture online. I’ve no doubt it was a publicity stunt and have no reason not to believe her, yet it still sucked to see her with him. Hurts even.

“He will be there. He was at my house when you dropped me off.” Her head flops back onto the pillow, and she stares up at the ceiling. “I can’t get rid of him, as much as I wish I could. He’s the lead actor in the movie. But I’m not going with him to the premiere.”

“Does he know that?” My torso hovers over her and our gazes collide. “Does your father know that?”

She swallows thickly and shakes her head. “No. I have to tell him and I will. I just didn’t want to get into it the second I got home. He was already ticked at me, and I just wanted to apologize and play along.”

She rubs her temples in circles like she has a headache coming on, and guilt claws its way up my spine.

“I get it.” My lips brush the side of her head, and I plop back down beside her. “I just needed to know what we’d be facing.”

“It means a lot to me that you’ll be there. My father isn’t going to like it when I tell him, but I won’t go along with this fake relationship anymore.” She rolls out of bed, and I watch her naked form traipse to where her clothes lie on the floor.

My dick twitches at her gorgeous body.

“You sure you can’t stay? We could set the alarm for early. Give you more than enough time to get to your appointment.”

She pauses, her underwear midway up her thighs. I lie there stunned and thrilled when she peels off the scrap of fabric and dives back into bed with me.



I lean in close to the broad, suit-clad, Rock lookalike security guard and raise my voice over the shouts and screams of adoring fans. “I’m here with Leighton Price.” I point to where she stands, more than a hundred feet away on the red carpet.

There was no problem picking up my ticket to tonight’s premiere or getting here on time despite the traffic. Surprisingly, I scored a tuxedo for tonight even though it meant running around town to find one to rent. The only problem I face is I can’t get anywhere near Leighton.

The bald beast raises one barely there eyebrow at me. “No.”

I stiffen and gape. “No, what?”

A line of celebrities and other film industry bigwigs, some I recognize and most I don’t, wind their way along the red carpet. Most stop for the cameras as they make their way into Roy Thompson Hall, home to Toronto’s Symphony Orchestra and tonight’s venue for the screening.

A barricade runs down along the edge of the curb on Simcoe street. It keeps the crowds on the cordoned-off street and well back from the talent and guests. Even still, chaos reigns. I can barely hear myself think, and the flashing lights and shouts of celebrity names and questions only add to the madness.

“If you’re here with Ms. Price then why aren’t you there?” His head flicks in the direction of Leighton, her father, Felix, and another woman who I assume is Margot Price. She looks a lot like Leighton.

It’s a good question and one I don’t have an answer to, but I still try again. “We came separately. I had to pick up my ticket.” I wave it in front of his stone visage.

The man stands there, expression blank, as if I’ve said nothing. Leighton now moves farther away from where I am, and my breath stills when she hesitates to gather with her father and the others for a group photo.

She scans around her, even glancing over her shoulder in my direction. It’s as if she’s looking for someone. Is she looking for me?

I raise my arm and wave, even call out her name, but nothing. She stares into a sea of people, and I doubt she can see me, let alone hear me. The gigantic man in my way deliberately shifts to my left, blocking Leighton from my view.

“C’mon. I’m her date.” I don’t like the pleading tone to my voice, but I’m desperate and would do pretty much anything to get him to let me pass.

At this, he relents a bit and turns to peer at the Price group. He snorts and shakes his head before moving a little more to my side to ensure we both have a view to the same thing. If nothing else, I feel like a liar.

Felix wraps an arm around her and leans in close. From this angle, I can tell he’s kissing her, but I can’t tell if it’s on the cheek or lips. Godammit. To make matters worse, Leighton doesn’t move away or better yet, hit the asshole.

“Doesn’t look like she’s with you,” the giant taunts beside me.

She’s standing there, all glitz and glam, next to the pompous movie star and her parents. All cozy and happy. But I’m not fooled. When Felix shifts, I get a better look at Leighton’s face. There’s no vibrance, no life in her eyes. Why does she continue to lie to herself?

The security guy nudges me. “You need to leave, buddy, or we’ll remove you.”

My determination withers and my shoulders sag. Leighton and I might want the same things, a chance to be together, but I can’t make her break away from her father’s influence and hold. She’s the only one who can walk away. Stand up for herself.

I spin away from the red carpet, and more specifically, Leighton. I thought my invitation tonight was an indication that she was moving past his wishes and expectations.

Now I’m not so sure why she invited me if she didn’t intend to wait for me or have me escort her into the hall. Or did she think my presence wouldn’t be good enough to get her parents to back off? Did she change her mind? Or was this her way of giving me a slap of reality instead of letting me down face-to-face?

No, Leighton wouldn’t have shied away from that even if it was something she wouldn’t have enjoyed doing. I need only think of all the times during our drive that she stood up to me.

If only she had the nerve to do the same to her father.

LEIGHTON

My father turns to face the doorway and stops when he sees me. A wide, happy smile splits his face, and my knees wobble at the genuine joy in his expression. His arms stretch out wide, and he makes a sweeping motion for me to come near him.

“Honey. Leighton, you’re absolutely beautiful.” His warm, smooth palms glide along my cheeks as he cups my face and plants a kiss on my forehead. “I’m so glad you came.” He says it like I had a choice, and we both know that’s the furthest thing from the truth.

I should be rankled by how he acts as if I’m not doing this against my will. If it were anyone else, I would be livid and would want to set things straight. But this is my father and I only have one.

“Dad, you’re looking pretty suave yourself.” I brush at the lapel of his tux. “You ready for your big night?” He chuckles and settles in beside me, arm around my waist.

I can’t speak my mind. Not right now. I tried earlier today, and even broached the topic of skipping the premiere altogether but failed. Even though I’d invited Tom and meant it when I’d said that I wanted him to meet my parents, I didn’t want to go.

Tonight is about my father and Felix, and even as I think the movie is brilliant and deserves all the praise, I’d be deemed nothing but selfish and difficult if I tried to rock the boat. To get what I want tonight of all nights.

And right now, more importantly, my father is elated at seeing me. Suddenly, the past many days and weeks of neglect and heartache melt away. My wishes and desires no longer feel dire. I can deal with it all later.

Besides, I haven't told him about Tom. Not yet. My plan is to spring it on him that my date is joining us when we get out of the limo at the screening. That way, with a crowd, he is less likely to shout and demand things from me that I don't want to give.

My stomach roils with dread. When I tell him about Tom, about not wanting to carry on this charade with Felix... it's bound to sour his mood.

I want to enjoy his affection while I have it, even if fleeting.

“Thank goodness.” Margot Price waltzes into the room in a black, floor-length, Dior evening gown, one of her white-gloved hands resting at the center of her chest. “Leighton, you're here.”

“Uh-huh. Not sure where else I'd be.”

Her usually beautiful features twist into irritation at my quip. “You said you didn't want to come tonight.”

My father clears his throat and straightens at my side. He clearly doesn't want to rehash our brief, albeit contentious, conversation from this morning. I'd taken that discussion as a bad experience, that once again I had lost the battle.

But my mother's words make me wonder if I got it all wrong. What if I didn't put the dress on and come downstairs to meet my parents at the agreed upon time? They'd have had to go without me. And now, I'm internally kicking myself for figuring this out too late to do anything about it.

The driver clears his throat, and we all turn to face him. “Sir, ladies, the car is ready.”

“Very well, Dennis.” My father nudges my back to guide me forward, and we walk with my mother out to the limo.

The ride to the premiere doesn't take long, and my nerves jangle and spark in apprehension as the seconds tick by until I tell my parents. I pause to look around for Tom the instant we're out.

During the drive over, he had texted he was on his way and that he'd find me. I smile in anticipation of seeing him. I can barely wait to have him at my side. My parents might have a problem with my decisions, maybe even with Tom, but I don't care. I need him. I like him way too much to let him go.

Although, right now, he isn't here. But for now, the knowledge that he will be any second now injects me with the courage to do this.

Once we're on the red carpet, things go sideways. Both my mother and father are pulled in different directions by actors, movie industry types, and their partners.

I stand back, smiling at one or two people who try to get my attention, and regret my silly idea of waiting. It's now or never. Felix will be here any minute now, and I have to tell my father before then.

My hand grabs onto an arm as Rupert greets an up-and-coming Korean director. "So sorry to interrupt."

I push between them, pausing to check once more for Tom. No sign of him.

My dad pulls from my grip and commands, so only I can hear, "Then don't."

"It can't wait." I'm sure to say it loud enough so that the lovely woman smiles and excuses herself with promises of finding my father later.

"Leighton, I'm working. Do you have any idea how long I've waited to talk to—"

Leaning in so only he can hear, I cut him off with a feral need to unload this beast. "I won't pretend to be with Felix. Not tonight. Not anymore."

He pulls back and stares down at me as if only seeing me for the first time and he doesn't like what he sees. As if none

of what I'm saying makes sense. "I beg your pardon? We already agreed—"

"No." The one word cuts like a knife, stinging the tip of my tongue as well as causing my father to flinch.

His lips press together into an angry slash, and his nostrils flare, but he's very aware of where we are. He keeps his composure in check, trying with all his might not to give any indication to someone who might be watching that all is not fine.

I rush on before I lose my nerve or worse, he talks over me. "I never agreed to anything, least of all to fake dating Felix. In the beginning, I'll admit, I foolishly wanted it. Hoped it might turn into something more, but Felix is..." I lean in again and drop my voice to a whisper. I need to get this off my chest, but causing a scene is the last thing I want. "An asshole."

As if waiting for his cue, my father lists to one side, and the asshole in question slides into my line of sight. Felix approaches, the hugest grin on his Ken doll face, and stops next to my father.

Like acting a part, all eyes on him, his gaze never veers from mine. His pupils swim with fake adoration mingled with a strong dose of "go along with this, Leighton." He swoops in before I can react and plants a soft kiss on my lips but not without angling just so in case any photographers are looking.

"Leighton." The raspy, almost secretive way he says my name used to make me blush and quicken my pace along the red carpet, but now I want to vomit. He clutches my waist as if we're long-lost lovers. "Always a vision."

My mother appears out of nowhere to loop her arm around my father's. At the same time, she steers him toward a bank of cameras. For a beat, Rupert Price stares at me, my declaration most probably ringing like an alarm in his ears.

Shaken, his expression seems off-kilter and he blinks a few times, breaking our silent understanding. No, we haven't reached any kind of mutual agreement, not with what he does

next. Like my mother and Felix, Rupert swings toward the cameras with his megawatt smile fixed in place.

Margot keeps her lips rooted upward and tilts her body ever so slightly toward me. “Leighton.” In that single word, her tone brooks no room for discussion or ambiguity. I must fall in line and smile.

In one last attempt, I hesitate and glance around the mass of people, but Tom isn’t here. Or more to the point, if he is here, I can’t possibly find him. Why didn’t I have him meet us at the house?

Oh, yeah, because my father could have kicked him out, refused to let me be seen with Tom Raine.

Sick to my stomach and too defeated to do anything about it, I force my tight lips to curl up at the corners. I won’t cause any discord in front of what seems like a thousand camera bulbs flashing around us.

Reporters shout my father’s and Felix’s names, and some even say mine and my mother’s, many tagging on the customary question, “Who are you wearing?”

Everyone vies for us to look their way.

Rupert Price tears himself from the wall of lights to cast his sharp gaze on Felix and me. “The two of you look simply magical together.”

The image he creates feels too much like a punch in the gut, and my chest constricts. What he’s doing right now reminds me of how he is on set. Always the director, setting the scene and instructing his actors where to stand, how to look, and what to say.

This is what Felix and I have always been to him. People to play with, arrange to suit an image, a narrative. The urge to pull away is compelling, the desire to find Tom fierce, but neither is enough to quiet the lonely little girl inside of me who so desperately wants her father’s approval and love.

This is the first time in days that my dad knows I exist. He beams at me like I hung the moon. And like Hollywood, it’s likely fake, all smoke and mirrors for the show of it. Even still,

how do I shatter that? How do I turn my back on the one thing I've craved all my life?

“Shall we?” He motions for the four of us to keep moving, keep posing.

Felix leans in close, his lips brushing the shell of my ear and I freeze, suddenly very aware of his presence. My skin crawls with how near he is to me.

“Leighton, let's just do this, and after the movie, we can grab a drink and catch up before the after-party.” He pulls back to look me in the eye, all warm and sincere. Shit, he's a good actor. “I've missed you.”

I open my mouth to object, but my father, in his element, calls over a reporter from *Variety*. Rupert pulls us in close, making jokes about how cute Felix and I are, and of course, the reporter, ravenous for anything, laps it up.

When we're inside the hall and the lights dim, my father, Felix, and another leading actor take to the stage. I make a point of taking the aisle seat and tune everything out, mentally devising a plan. My escape route.

The second Tom shows up, we'll leave. My parents might be shocked and angry, but they don't deserve to meet Tom like this nor do I owe them an explanation. Then the movie starts and I fidget in my seat, hoping to see a slash of bright light behind us with an usher leading Tom to our seats. But this never happens.

As the film closes in on the end, my hope and courage wither and all but die. Tom isn't coming. My thumbs tap out a quick text while the audience gets to their feet in a standing ovation.

“Get up.” Mom drags me to my feet and snatches the phone from me. “I'll take this.”

“All right. I'm standing.” I hold out my hand, palm up. “Give me my phone.”

I never had a chance to hit send.

“No.” She drops it into her clutch. “He told me what you said. How could you do this tonight of all nights? You will clap and smile. People are watching. This is your father’s night.”

My father. Of course. He’s the only person she cares about. I’ve no doubt she loves me. Even with her problems, I believe she cares. But the most important person in her life is Rupert Price. How dare I not celebrate him like everyone here so clearly is.

Were it not for my phone—the only way for Tom to contact me—I would have left after the premiere. But my mother refuses to give me the phone. Without it I also have no way of arranging a ride home. Grudgingly, I go to the after-party and keep my distance from my parents and Felix.

There are times during the night where I catch the movie star looking for me, like a lost puppy, and I snicker. I wonder if this is what Felix did to me back in LA. Watched me from afar when I’d show up at whatever function or party, expecting to see him. In those early days after the emergency landing, I’d wanted to talk to him, desperate to connect and commiserate with the only other person who had experienced the same thing.

But he ignored me, and the more isolated I felt, the more I wanted to go home. It was only when I tried to fly home alone that I realized I’d made a grave mistake. I wasn’t ready to face my fear no matter how upset I was with Felix, or how much I wanted to go home.

Oh, how things have changed. Now Felix *needs* me.

He’s at home with this crowd, and for tonight, I am part of his persona. One of Hollywood’s hottest leading men is taken. He loves to see men and women cast dirty looks at me when I stand next to him. It gives him perverse pleasure how others covet him. Well, this time, I’m the one getting pleasure out of our arrangement.

He stands alone. And that’s how it’s going to stay.

At a little before midnight, I meet my parents by the limo, my mother returns my phone, and we remain silent on the drive to our home. But once inside, as my parents turn their backs on me, ready to head to bed, I pull the ripcord on our little charade of life.

“I will no longer go along with fake dating any actor to suit your needs.”

My mother is the first to whirl around on me—the guard dog, desperate for the pet and praise from my father. “Excuse me?”

She heard me. I won’t repeat myself. This is hard enough as it is.

My father folds his arms and narrows his gaze. “What the hell has gotten into you? First you barely make it in time for the festival, then you try to spring the Felix thing on me in public.”

“I’m no longer going to agree to anything that I don’t want to do, and I’m no longer going to get approval to post on social media. Never again. This is my life and I’m an adult. You both raised me, and now you’re going to have to trust me to do what’s right...for me.”

The stunned looks on their faces give me pause. I’d expected a fight or some kind of threat. But their silence? I’m not sure what to do with that, so I keep going.

“Also, I met someone. His name is Tom but he isn’t the reason I’m calling off the Felix lie—that man is an asshole.”

My mother sucks in a breath and my father’s face contorts, clearly not liking me repeating what I said earlier, except this time, there are no cameras. “Leighton, Felix is-”

“Dad, I don’t give a damn what you think of the man. It’s what I think that matters. And where Tom is concerned, he’s very important to me.”

“Tom who?” Dad rubs at his chin as if scouring his brain for a face to match the name.

Mom cocks her head to one side. “Do we know him?”

Now I look to my father. “You met him yesterday. He brought me home from LA.” I can’t bring myself to call him my driver, especially not to my parents.

The job he did doesn’t define him, and to my father, it’ll be bad enough that he isn’t in the moviemaking business.

“The driver?” Dad is now in a constant state of disdain, but I choose to ignore his question.

“I want you both to meet him. You’ll like him.” I smooth down my dress, needing a split second to make the transition onto another topic neither of them are going to like. “And I’m taking the job with Everly Simard.”

“What? You can’t.” Margot’s usually golden hue is suddenly pallid. This topic is a little too close to home for her, and while I feel for her, this isn’t about her.

“I can and I will. I’m not happy doing nothing with my life. I can make a difference with the Raven Mission.”

“You’ll damage the Price name.” Mom inches closer, tears gathering in her eyes, and I feel a pang of guilt or doubt in my chest.

“I’m not out to ruin anything. I can help people. I already am. There’s no shame in admitting you need help.”

She bristles like I’ve raised a hand to slap her and narrows her gaze. “What does that mean?”

My father steps forward and pulls her into his arms. “Margot, honey, there’s nothing wrong with aligning the Price name with raising awareness and providing support for mental health.” Arms still around my mother, he turns to me and continues. “If that’s what you want, do it. But first, we’ll need to discuss the parameters of your job. I’ll get Lois to—”

“No.” While I agree with my father about supporting mental health, I can’t help but cringe a little at how pat his answer is.

It’s the perfect media snippet, and I can already hear what he’ll say when the media asks about what I’m doing. But I’m

not going to let the way my father might use this to his advantage stop me from taking the job.

Dad cocks his head to one side and squints, clearly confused. “No?”

“We’re not talking parameters or anything else. It’s my job, so I’ll do it as I see fit, and you’ll have to trust that I will respect the Price name while doing it. I don’t need your permission for this job, but it would mean a lot to me to have your support.”

Surprisingly, my parents stare at me. Silent. I tap my foot and stiffen my spine, readying for an argument. “Good. We’re agreed I will work at the Raven Mission. And to make it clear because it feels like I need to repeat myself, I will no longer fake date anyone.”

My dad rubs at the spot between his eyebrows. “Leighton, we never meant any harm. I thought you enjoyed playing the part, helping my movies.”

“I do...I mean, I used to until it felt like I couldn’t say no.” My body trembles, vibrating with the adrenaline rushing through my veins.

I hadn’t planned on mentioning the controlling aspect of my father, still unsure I’d have the backbone to lay it all out there, but I’m doing it. I need to be true to myself. It’s long overdue.

If they can’t support me, then it’ll hurt like hell, but I won’t give up my life and my happiness for them. Besides, why would I want them in my life if they don’t care about me and what I want?

“What are you talking about?” My father wrinkles his brow. “You could’ve said no.”

Arching a brow, I purse my lips and deliberately let the silence build some more. Rupert is the first to squirm and look away. Good. His gaslighting isn’t going to work this time. As much as it hurts to ride this prickly wave of guilt—my inherent need to please him still in strong force—standing up to him is a good thing.

“We both know that isn’t true, and I could give examples. Just think about tonight...Felix.” My arms fold over my chest in a need for added protection. “More times than not, I don’t have a choice. And if what I want doesn’t match your vision, you’re disappointed in me.”

My teeth sink into my bottom lip and I war with myself, with whether or not to continue. I’ve already said so much, more than I thought I would. But this is all or nothing. “It feels like you punish me if I don’t go along with what you want... by withholding your attention. Your love.”

Mom gasps, eyes wide and mouth agape, as if I’ve assaulted her. But Dad, he stays still and quiet. His gaze never leaves mine, and I can’t help but think this feels like a game to see who will blink first.

He releases a long, frustrated sigh and blinks, shoulders sagging. “Well, that was never our intention.” He can no longer look at me.

I get it even though I hate it. We both know he isn’t being truthful. He *does* punish me, and by extension, he’s trained Margot so well, she can read his mood and follow along without the two of them ever having a conversation about it.

Oh my God, I shouldn’t want to have anything to do with someone like that, but he’s my father. The only one I’ll ever have.

“If I ever made you feel that way, I’m sorry.” He pulls me into his arms, and I won’t deny that I need this.

He may not like what I’m doing or agree with it, but this hug...it’s a first step. It shows me he’s willing to work with me, and truthfully, that’s all I can ask for.

“Leighton, your father works very hard for what we have.” My mother strokes my hair, and though she means it to be soothing, I tense at her words.

Dad must pick up on my reaction because he stops my mother. “Margot, it’s true that all of this comes at a hefty price. I can see how Leighton might have felt like she didn’t have a say. But honey,”—he takes both my hands in his—“we can

talk things through, always. We'll hear you out even if we might not agree with you."

My hands drop from his. "If I don't agree with you, you make it known in not-so-subtle ways that there will be consequences."

I'm prepared to delve into specific examples if they deny what I'm saying is true. But neither of them say anything. Both look at me like I'm a poor, lost lamb, someone who needs to be saved from herself.

Then it comes to me as clear as the blue sky or Tom's eyes. I can have a relationship with my parents on my terms, but we may never be truly close.

They live in a world of make-believe where image is more important than substance. For this to work, I have to accept that. Likewise, I could mention all the times my father has kept me waiting or never bothered to show up. But, sadly, it would be pointless.

This is who he is. I'm finally resigned to the fact that my father's work is paramount, and my mother's world revolves around what my father wants. His work will always come first. My mom knows that. He does the same to her.

I do believe he loves us in his own way, as much as he is capable of, and there's no point in demanding something from him that he can't give.

It's both heartbreaking and a relief to finally see the bitter truth for what it is. I wish it didn't hurt so much and that things could be different. But I'm an adult and I have to stop wishing for things that aren't possible.

Like my therapist said, it's up to me to create boundaries around this relationship. Figure out what I'm willing to live with and what I won't tolerate. It's for my peace of mind.

The cactus-like truth pricks at my heart, but it doesn't change the facts of the matter. I will no longer bend to their will.

LEIGHTON

*A*fter the countless unread texts sent to Tom between last night and this morning, I might have to face the fact that he's done with me. I'm not sure what I did and if he even showed up last night. When we parted ways yesterday morning, everything seemed fine, good even.

And now, what really bothers me—and only adds to the burgeoning pang in my chest—is why won't he answer my calls or respond to one of my far too many texts?

Tom isn't one to ignore people even if he's upset with them. He's like a rare bird and believes in honesty and communication.

None of this makes sense. I want to fix this, if only I can figure out how.

Before knocking on the door to his house—he isn't home; I'm here to see August—I type out one final text. I shouldn't. The sight of all my unread texts gives me hives. Clearly, he's sending me a message. He doesn't want to talk to me.

And with that thought, I pound the backspace button with my thumb and watch the cursor eat all the words in the text bubble. I'm already pathetic enough. I'm done texting him.

The last text I sent him was eight hours ago, the first thing I did when I woke up at six this morning. Still dazed with sleep, I feverishly lunged for my phone, hoping to find at least one reply from him. Anything to explain last night. I would've even settled for one simple word—sorry.

Instead, nothing.

By this point, I was at my wits' end and called August. I wish I'd thought it through or waited—it was six in the morning after all. But that never crossed my mind. Nope. I was only grateful that August and I had exchanged numbers at the restaurant the other night. Even if, at the time, I never imagined using it.

My call woke up August from a deep sleep. While polite in his half-comatose state, he refused to talk to me right then. He'd only just come in from the office and was beyond exhausted. We agreed to talk at his place that he shares with Tom in the late afternoon.

Beside myself for waking August and also not knowing how I would pass the hours, I decided to focus on my future and called Everly. She was over-the-moon excited when I told her I was accepting her job offer.

Our call lasted hours before she then connected me with someone in human resources. That was an hour-long conversation, and I now am the director of development and partnerships with the Raven Mission.

Even with my future clearer and more mine than ever before, my desperation is at an all-time high. All of this will lose some of its shine if I've lost Tom. I stare down at all my unread texts to him, and a sob forms in my throat at my last message. Three little words and truer than ever.

I miss you.

Tears loom at the back of my eyes, on the verge of breaking free. I've never felt like this before. Nothing has ever hurt like this, not even my father's inventive ways of ignoring and abandoning me. It's like my heart was crudely carved out of my chest, still beating, bloody, and bruised.

Tom is unlike any man I've ever known. He's so kind and caring. No man has ever truly listened to me, cared about what I had to say. Not like Tom. He was so attentive and genuinely invested when I told him about the emergency landing, how I

wanted to work for Everly, and my secret social media account.

I have to talk to him, and with that thought, I ring the doorbell of his home.

Despite inviting me over, August frowns and rakes a hand through his already disheveled brown hair when he catches sight of me on his doorstep.

“You’ve got my boy in knots. Never seen him like this. Usually nothing fazes him... But you.” He points at me like I need help in understanding he’s referring to me and then backs up into his house to make room for me to come in.

“I...” At a loss for words—I wasn’t expecting that kind of greeting given our conversation earlier was brief and discombobulated—I’m uncertain how to proceed. “Hi, August. Thanks for seeing me.”

Shaking his head, he leads the way into the living room. “Leighton, in such a short period of time, you’ve really done a number on Tom.”

“You already said that.” My tone sounds grim and a little edgy. I already feel like shit, and had I known August was going to pile on, I’m not so sure I’d have come. Maybe I should have tried Eden.

He whirls around to face me. “Shit, he’s thinking about going back to Africa.”

My steps falter and stomach clenches. “What? Are you serious?”

Nodding, he plunks down into an armchair, his frown now a full-on scowl, and crosses his arms but says nothing.

Mind reeling, panic seeps into my bones, cold and spiky with the news that Tom might leave. Has he already left? “I’ve made a mess of things. I need to talk to him. That’s why I called you.”

“When you called earlier, you said something about calling him. No luck?”

“I’ve called him several times, but he doesn’t answer, and all my texts are unread.”

“Didn’t you see him at TIFF last night? When I last saw him that’s where he was headed.”

“He never showed. Do you know where he is or how I can reach him?”

August leans forward to rest his elbows on his thighs and steeples his fingers in front of his face. He sits like that as if thinking something over, trying to decide whether he should... what? Talk to me? Tell me to leave?

My jaw clenches in my struggle to keep my mouth shut. Let August think. I can only fix this if he decides to help me.

“I don’t know why he didn’t respond to your texts or calls last night, but I know where he is today. Well—”

“Where?”

“Well, not exactly where, only *who* he’s with and why.”

“And?”

“He’s at Matt’s bachelor party. I was supposed to go but couldn’t with the Brent mess.”

“How can I get ahold of him?”

“I don’t know where they went, and Tom isn’t answering his calls.” August pauses to look up at me. “I tried calling him this morning and it went to voicemail.”

Weirdly, this news makes me feel better. If Tom isn’t picking up calls from his best friend then maybe his silence isn’t about me. Maybe I still have a chance.

The sound of his voice pulls me from my wishes. “Let me make a phone call.”

He’s on the phone for several minutes with Tom’s mother. From his end of the conversation, it sounds like the planning for this bachelor party is quite elaborate.

August drops his phone onto the sofa and turns to me. “All right. Tom went to his parents’ place last night after TIFF.”

“What? He was there?”

“Sounds like it from what his mom says. Anyway, Drew was also there and he took Tom’s phone. This getaway is no phones, so that explains why neither of us have heard from him.”

Relief floods my body, soothing like a warm bath, and I nod for him to keep going.

“Drew got tickets to tonight’s game between the White Sox and Blue Jays.”

“Baseball, right?” My cheeks flush at what must seem like a silly question to him.

He chuckles and nods. “They’re gone for two days.”

“Gone? What do you mean?” I nibble on my bottom lip.

“The game’s in Chicago. They all left on the first flight out this morning.”

“Oh.”

Two days. August might as well have said Tom will be gone for two years. I can’t bear to wait a second longer to talk to him. But he’s in Chicago.

I peer over at August, once more hopeful. “Do you know where they’re staying?”

“Uh-huh.” He smiles and taps at his phone. “I’ll airdrop the details.”

After thanking August, I leave with only one thought racing through my mind. I have to get to Chicago, and driving isn’t an option.

But can I fly?

Fear crushes me like a 747 airplane. I make a quick call to get someone started on packing a bag and then I call my mother.

“Leighton, where are you? Flo says you’re going somewhere.”

Flo is our housekeeper and the sweetest woman I know, but she couldn't keep her mouth shut even if her life depended on it.

"Mom, I'm on my way home now. I'm going to Chicago. That's why I'm calling."

Given I'm headed home, I could have this conversation face-to-face, but I doubt it will go smoothly. My parents are still in the thick of TIFF, and this means Margot won't have much time for anything else.

"Chicago. Why?"

"I need the jet." I can't get into all of this with her right now. "Could you please call Carmine to get everything ready so I can leave as soon as possible?"

Carmine is our pilot, and while I could call him myself, he'd then call my parents to get their approval. I'm trying to skip all that and the inevitable waste of time.

"Leighton, why are you going to Chicago? And what if your father needs it?" Bewilderment blankets her voice though her last question is rhetorical.

We all know if my father needs the plane, he gets it, and that's as it should be given he paid for it. But this scenario doesn't have any legs and she knows it.

"Dad won't need it. He isn't going anywhere with TIFF still on for the next several days."

Margot doesn't say anything though I can hear her breathing on the other end of the line.

"Mom, please do this for me, and I promise to tell you everything when I get back."

"Does this have anything to do with the Raven Mission and Everly Simard?" Her pointed tone pricks at me. Clearly, a night's sleep hasn't lessened her distaste for my career choice.

That's okay. I have confidence we'll get there. Once she gets past her fear of embarrassment, she'll see the good we can do. My mother has a place in this work—I know it—and I hope one day she realizes it too.

“No. Mom, this is personal.”

“Fine. I’ll text you an estimated time of departure once I’ve spoken with Carmine.”

“Thank you. I love you.”

Once I’ve got my bag and I’m on my way to the airport, I make another call to Doctor Hemming. I’d texted her before driving away from August’s home asking to chat. With less than an hour to go before I’m in the air, I need all the help I can get.

Doctor Hemming and I talk right up until I’m seated on the jet. Her calm, supportive words of reassurance give me the courage I need. But once off the phone, the plane taxiing along the runway, I swear I’m going to be sick.

I could take a valium to help me relax. Dr. Hemming says there is no shame in that, but if I take it then I’ll be numb and a little disoriented when I see Tom. I don’t want that. Instead, I focus on my breathing and the grounding techniques the doctor taught me.

As the plane takes off, I pull up a picture of Tom. The same one I took when Fallon goaded me. His image and the anticipation of seeing him somehow stills my heart, steadies my nerves, and gets me through the short plane ride.



*W*indswept and still buzzing from the fear and high of flying, I bolt up from the chair in the hotel lobby alcove on wobbly legs at first sight of the crown of his mussed, golden head, then his casual, confident gait, and oh, his laugh.

He’s deep in conversation with Drew, both animated and smiling. I step onto the marble walkway right in the path of Tom and his family and friends. He’s here, in front me. Finally.

Exhausted and weirdly exhilarated by the day’s roller coaster of emotions, I’d spent the past several hours waiting

for Tom in the hotel lobby. While I knew the game was still on and I wouldn't miss him, I didn't dare leave my spot.

During some of that time, I paced the space in front of the chair in what feels like the equivalent of a half marathon. Eventually, lightheaded and sickly, I sat down and once again, went back to the techniques I'd learned during therapy. Some of it helped, but I never fully settled, not when I anticipated his arrival at any minute.

Now he's here, and a tiny hopeful voice in my head reminds me to squash any past doubts and fears. So what if he isn't thrilled to see me. Or never wants to talk to me again. I have so many things I need to say to him. So many things I need to say for me.

Tom and I stare intently into each other's eyes. Volumes of emotion, an echo of our entire time getting to know each other, pass between us in what feels like an eternity. But in reality, it's more like a blink of an eye.

Shock and wariness are evident in not only the taut square of his shoulders but his words. "Leighton. What are you doing here?"

TOM

“Hi.” Leighton sheepishly waves, and a smile tugs at the corner of her mouth.

“I, uh, had to see you. You weren’t answering my texts or calls and I didn’t know where you were.”

The sight of her softens the jagged edges of the gaping hole in my chest left by the vision of Felix all over her.

I sense her urgent need to talk, but we’re standing in the middle of the lobby. No privacy at all.

“Let’s go to my room.” I lead the way to the elevators.

Silently, we ascend to my floor. I’ve got a thousand questions and can’t seem to focus on only one. I still can’t quite wrap my head around the fact that she is here.

Once inside my room, the second the door clicks shut, she starts and barely pauses to breathe let alone give me a chance to talk. Her words tumble from her mouth like a gushing waterfall, and I can’t keep up or comprehend what she’s saying.

She mentions August, TIFF, her parents, and her flight. Like I’m hit by a bolt of lightning, my whole body jerks. Her flight?

“Wait a sec.” I hold up both my hands in the universal sign for stop. “You flew here?”

Nodding, her eyes shine, and she bites at the corner of her mouth but says no more. For the past several minutes, she’s

rambled nonstop and now, silence.

“You got on a plane?” I sound like I’m having trouble processing or understanding the mechanics of Leighton Price flying to Chicago. I am.

“Yes. I needed to see you.” She steps closer to me.

Awed and a little speechless, I trip over my words. “You do know that I was coming back to Toronto. I was only going to be gone a couple of days. You could’ve waited.”

I’m not sure why I’m making an argument for her not to be here, not to conquer her debilitating fear of flying. I just... I’m stunned.

She blows out a puff of air and shakes her head. “No. I couldn’t. My texts were unread. You weren’t answering my calls. I didn’t know where you were.”

Her frantic tone gives me a taste for how it must have been for her to hear no word from me. What she must have thought.

I awkwardly scratch at the back of my neck. Why didn’t I send her a text before handing over my phone? It might have saved her some of this anguish, though she isn’t wrong. We do need to talk.

“Uh, Drew took our phones. I haven’t seen your texts and didn’t know you called.”

“I know. August told me. That’s how I knew to come here. And about my texts,”—she waves her hand like she’s batting away dust particles—“ignore them.”

“What? Why?”

“I kind of went a little overboard.” Her cheeks burn red. “Some might say I spammed you.” She twists her features into a grimace. “Sorry.”

“Oh, yeah?” Chuckling, I inch closer, unable to keep this distance between us, both literal and metaphorical. “I’ll *definitely* be reading those texts. It sounds like you really wanted to talk to me, huh.”

She drops her head into her hand and groans. “Yes, but please just delete them.”

“Tell me what you wanted to talk to me about.”

Her hands fall to her sides, and she straightens to her full height though her voice is small, a far cry from the confident woman I’ve come to know and admire, and most of all, desire. “I didn’t see you at the premiere. I looked and then I tried calling...”

“I was there.” *His* hands on her waist, *his* fingers in her hair. Vivid, maddening images flash in my mind’s eye. My jaw clenches and fingers curl into fists. “I saw you on the red carpet with your parents...”

She opens her mouth to speak but doesn’t. Perhaps she senses I’m not done or sees something in the way I’m looking at her.

“I saw you with Felix. His fucking hands all over you. Both of you smiling for the camera.”

“Tom, nothing happened. As soon as we got there, I told my father I wasn’t going along with fake dating Felix anymore. He ambushed me.” She reaches for me, fingers curling around my forearm, and I don’t doubt her. “He planted us in front of the cameras, and Felix...”

Again, she pauses on something in my gaze, and like a deflating balloon, the air rushes out of her body. “Felix does what he does and you’ve every right to hate it. I did too, and I should’ve done something about it. I should’ve walked away, but I felt trapped.”

She releases my arm and tries to pull away. I grab hold of her hip and keep her in place.

Her voice drops to a near whisper. “I didn’t want to cause a scene, and I’m so sorry. I’m sorry you had to see that. That I didn’t put a stop to it. Can you ever forgive me?”

I brush a strand of dark hair from her face. “There’s nothing to forgive.”

“No, there is. I really did want you there, and I had every intention of introducing you to my parents. I told them about you.”

“Did you now, and how did that go over?”

Her arms curl around my neck as her chest presses into mine and she leans in for a hug. “They want to meet you.”

“Good.” My arms tighten around her waist. “I want to meet them too.”

Suddenly, she breaks our embrace and steps back to stare up into my eyes. “Are you going back to Africa? Because if you are, I’ll go with you.” Her dark brows knit and before I can say anything, she rushes on, “That is, if you’ll have me.”

Her lips clamp shut, eyes big and fixed on me, and I see the exact moment when she stops breathing, waiting for my response.

I don’t prolong her agony and kiss the tip of her nose. “I’ll always want you.” She exhales and sinks into me for a beat in relief. I rest my chin on the top of her head. “I’m surprised you’d be willing to leave your life and move around the world with me. To live so far from what you’re used to.”

“Tom.” She draws back to look at me. “I...I’ve never felt like this about anyone before. I didn’t even know I was going to say that until I did. But I meant it. I don’t know what love is, but I’m pretty sure I’m falling for you.”

My heart batters around in my chest, and my lips quirk upward into what I hope is my sexiest smile. “I’m falling for you too.” I glide my hand around the back of her neck and kiss her senseless.

Her mouth opens willingly, her tongue hungrily stroking mine, and when her quiet moan slips down my throat, I feel it in my balls.

Leighton breaks away. “When do we leave?”

“I’m not going back to Africa. I considered it for a second, but only as a way to get as far away from you as possible.”

“Me? But you said you weren’t upset with me.”

“I’m not—not really. But seeing you with Felix and your parents...on the red carpet.” I hold her gaze, needing her to hear and understand me. “That isn’t my world. Sure, I can visit it once in a while, but I don’t want to live there. I can’t. It isn’t who I am.”

“I get that. I understand, and it isn’t my world either.” She plays with the collar of my shirt, fingertips sinfully grazing the spot where my collarbones meet.

My hands dig into her waist, and my cock swells with longing for her. As if testing my hold on her, her body sways backward a bit.

A smile slowly curls her lips upward. “Guess what? I took the job with Everly. And I told my father about it and that I’d no longer go along with fake dating anyone.”

I tighten my grip on her, liking everything she has to say. “Good.”

“Besides, I’m with someone.” She smiles seductively. “He’s an awesome guy. I think you’d like him.”

My lips lightly press hers. “He’s one lucky guy. You should be proud of yourself for telling your parents. What did they say to all that?”

“Eventually, they were okay with it. Although I’m sure they might try to bring things back to the way they used to be.”

“How do you feel about that?”

“I’ve got my boundaries. I want a relationship with them, but I won’t ever go back to living my life for them. I hope in time they’ll come around, and if not, it doesn’t matter. I’m doing this. I start my job next week.”

“This is the best news yet. Tell me you’re staying the night and that’ll trump everything.”

The light tinkle of her laughter warms my insides and she nods. “I’m staying.”

“Uh, that reminds me. How did you know where to find me? That I was in Chicago and which hotel?”

She chuckles and presses her lips together like she refuses to say a word, but it's only for a beat. "August told me with a little help from your mom. You know, I can be very persuasive with what I want, and in case you haven't figured it out, I want you."

Her gaze lowers, slowly perusing my body from head to toe. Appreciation gleams in her darkening eyes, and heat burns in my stomach and shoots down to my crotch. The way she looks at me like she wants me for dinner, I could easily get addicted to it.

"Oh yeah?"

Nodding, she licks her bottom lip and toys with the hem of my shirt.

My hands rub up and down her arms. "I still can't believe you're here."

"Well, I am and I'll prove it to you." Her fingers latch on to my belt and she unbuckles while looking up at me. "Tom, if you'll have me...I'm yours."

"Leighton, you're all I want."

TOM

“Oh my goodness.” Leighton pulls my eldest sister, Pippa, in for a hug. “Congratulations. When are you due?”

My whole body twitches and heats with happiness. Life is spectacular. My entire family and closest friends are all here, under one roof at Drew and Pip’s cottage, and I’ve got my girl by my side.

Out by the water’s edge, Claire glows like an angel with heart eyes only for Matt as the two of them dance to James Bay’s “Wild Love.” Less than two hours ago, they tied the knot on the deck, decorated with fairy lights, candles, and white gauzy stuff. They were going for a wintery theme because it was winter at the cottage when they got together.

Pippa fills Leighton in about her pregnancy, and Drew, the proud papa-to-be, beams from ear to ear. Since returning from New York for the wedding, they’ve talked about nothing but the baby and how they’re moving back home after this year’s NFL season is done.

“The little one is going to adore me.” I gently rub at my sister’s barely there bump. “I’ll be his favorite. Just sayin’.”

My mom hip checks me and wraps an arm around Pip. “Not a chance. I’ll definitely be the favorite all-around. Favorite grandmother at least.”

Drew snorts and cocks his head to one side. “Sorry, Sin, my mom’s going to give you a run for your money on the grandma front.”

Dad chuckles as Sam and Olivia—as if her ears were ringing—join us. Before anyone can stop them, our mothers roll up their sleeves and vie for top spot.

“Great, look what you’ve started.” Claire sidles up next to me. “You’re always starting trouble, aren’t you?”

Leighton giggles at my sister’s ribbing, Matt shakes his head at me in mock disappointment, and Drew chimes in with a question directed at me. “Who said we’re having a he?”

Paige pushes into the small gathering with her husband, Zach, behind her. “Oh my God, you’re having a boy?” She glances expectantly at her best friend.

Pippa groans and rolls her eyes at me. “Tom, stop talking.” Then she pulls Paige into her side. “We don’t know the gender and we’re keeping it a surprise like some people we know.” Her singsong “I know something you don’t know” voice stops all the smaller side conversations among us.

Zach narrows his gaze on Pippa. Aunt Olivia nears her daughter as Eden and Walker join our group. What am I missing? Is something going on with Paige?

The woman in question mashes her lips together and dips her gaze to her mom, then Zach before swinging back to Pippa. “I think Tom’s not the only one who needs to stop talking.”

Paige scans our group. “Zach and I are also expecting. I’m only a few weeks ahead of Pip at three months. Our babies are going to be best friends.”

Everyone offers congratulations and other exciting comments while Eden gnaws at her bottom lip, nervous. “Walker and I have been talking about it. I think I’m ready.”

Walker pulls her into him and there’s squeals all around—mostly the women—and I cringe at the high pitch. Leighton smiles at me, then at Pippa and Paige before joining in on some of the chatter.

I wrap an arm around her, so glad she easily fits in with my family. In the month since Chicago, we’ve been inseparable.

She's loving her job at the Raven Mission though she has an upcoming flight to New York that she's anxious about.

While I've offered to go with her, since I can do my work with ACE from anywhere, she wants to do this alone. For the past several weeks, she has undergone intense therapy to face her fears. She even got on her father's jet a few times for flights to Montreal and Ottawa as part of her aversion therapy.

Overcome with the need to have her to myself, I quietly pull Leighton away from the crowd. But not before I catch Matt staring at my sister like he wants to knock her up tonight. I shudder at the thought. I do not need to think about Claire and Matt, or any of my other siblings or friends, in that way.

Leighton takes my hands and glances over her shoulder at the group we just left. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I only wanted to get you away from there before they scared you away with all that baby talk."

She slides in front of me to stop me from walking any farther and wraps her arms around my neck. "Scare me away? You sure you don't mean scare *you*?"

"Me? No way."

She laughs and rests her forehead on my chest briefly. "You're too funny, Tom. Don't think I don't know marriage and baby talk are two things to send a man running for the hills."

My hands latch on to her waist and I hold her tight. "I'm not running anywhere. In case you've forgotten, we're moving in together in two weeks. If that doesn't say commitment, I don't know what does."

Not long after settling into our jobs, Leighton at Raven and me as a partner in ACE, we started looking for rentals but soon decided we wanted to buy. We got lucky and found a place close to Matt and Claire and bought it. The closing is soon, and while Leighton's parents tried to talk her out of it, saying we were moving too fast, they didn't sway her in the least. Like she said, Leighton's set boundaries with her parents, not something she's verbalized to them but more for her sanity.

Her lips press to the tip of my chin, and then she tilts her head farther back to look up at me. “I know you’re committed. I have no doubts. How do you feel about all this baby talk?”

“I think it’s great. My sisters and friends are crazy happy, as they should be. And just think, one day that’ll be us.”

Leighton gapes, eyes rounding in surprise but not in a scared way. More than ever, we’re both sure of this life we’re creating together. “I love thinking about us and kids. But more importantly, I like that you’re thinking like that.”

I kiss the tip of her nose. “And why wouldn’t I be? You’re stuck with me.” Playfully, I pinch her side. “Now, let’s go get a drink. I’m thirsty.”

Leighton

Three months later

“*D*on’t forget about the zinnias,” Mom says for the third time during our ten-minute phone conversation.

“Already taken care of. While we were chatting, I added them to the order.”

“Oh, wonderful.”

“All right, Mom. I have to go. Talk later.” I close my laptop and get up from the desk in our home office. “Say hi to Dad for me.”

“I will. You’re still coming to lunch on Friday?”

“Yes. Will Dad be there?” I no longer hold out hope that my father will be where he says he will when it concerns me. Although to his credit, he is working on it, and his average for showing up is getting better.

“Yes. Okay. Bye, honey.” My mother hangs up and I take out my earbuds and pop the case into my pocket.

Not too long after starting work for the Mission, I went public with my imjstme account. There wasn't any big media splash or anything, but I no longer wanted to hide.

Before any of this happened, I told my parents, and without any context—they hadn't seen the account or my posts—both were upset. They tried to talk me out of it. But I wasn't about to budge.

Then, within hours after our face-to-face conversation, my father surprised me with a phone call. He had looked at every single one of my posts and he was impressed. In fact, even complimentary to the content on my page, humbled by how much I shared and how clueless he was to what I was dealing with. Finally, he said he understood my intentions.

It was a monumental step forward in our relationship, and if nothing else, I will tolerate everything else I don't like about my father because of this. Margot wasn't as easy to come around. Her hesitancy was more about her struggle with depression and fear that her situation might come out. I won't expose her, and I continue to assure her of this. But if the day comes that she wants to share, I'll help her to make it so.

I walk around our home and flick on some lights, anticipating the delivery of dinner. Since my last break from work, which was several hours ago, the sun has long since set and our house is in near darkness.

In some ways, I like it this way. Then I don't have to look at all the rooms that still need decorating. Tom is fine with the slow approach to settle into our home, whereas I wish things were fully decorated with everything in its place. But unfortunately, with both our jobs, we're very busy and have limited time to devote to the house.

My mother offered to handle the decorating as did Drew and Paige's mother, Olivia, but as silly as it sounds, I want to do this with Tom. He couldn't care less what color the dining room walls are painted or if we hang silk dupioni or Italian linen drapes, but he understands my need to make this ours.

Once in the kitchen, I text him to find out when he'll be home and set the table for two. I'm not sure if he'll make

dinner, but here's hoping. Tom has been working crazy hours on a new campaign for ACE, and I just got back from Los Angeles where I spent a wild few days working and getting the gossip from Fallon in my spare time.

When Felix and I parted ways, luckily there was no media fallout. Just a small item on a few entertainment sites. I'm not sure if my father had anything to do with it and I don't really care, but I'm grateful for whatever the reason.

Since then, Felix has hit a patch of bad luck, or more aptly, he got what he deserved. Several young actresses came forward with not so endearing stories about the no longer well sought-after actor. His career is now on life support.

My phone pings with a response from Tom. He's on his way home. Just then, I get a notification for my upcoming flight for work. The airline has changed the departure time again.

With my job, I do a fair bit of traveling, especially as I try to garner support to build facilities in New York and LA. At times, all the pressures of the job pale in comparison to the prospect of flying.

I'll never like to fly. It's a simple fact that I've come to accept, but it's also no longer a crippling fear. I can now get on a plane without fear of a panic attack. And even if I'm anxious and nauseous—because let's face it, some days are harder than others—I have the power to quell those fears or, at the very least, turn down the volume.

The front door opens, and like a giddy teenager hooking up with her boyfriend, I rush to the foyer to greet Tom.

“Hey.” I lunge at him without a care of the cold and damp from his snow jacket. “I missed you. I'm glad you're home in time for dinner.”

I kiss him slow and long, and when I try to break it, Tom holds on tight, only releasing me when he's good and ready.

“Hi. I'm starving but I think dinner can wait. I want you.” He drops his jacket onto the coat tree and drags me toward the staircase.

“Sorry, mister, that’s going to have to wait. I am starving... for food.”

He groans and intensifies his cold grip on my hand. I pull back and take him with me toward the kitchen. “Just think, we need to eat first because we’ll need the energy for what I have in mind for you.”

“Oh, yeah?” Tom pushes into my back, our hands still entwined, and I feel every hard inch of how much he wants me pressing into my lower back.

Before I can do anything about it, my phone buzzes, and we both glance to where it sits face up on the counter. Our meal is here.

“I’ll get it.” He leans down to kiss my neck before releasing me, and he smells like him. Fresh rain, the cold snap of new snow, and all man.

I moan at the loss of him. Why did I say food first? Just then my stomach growls, and Tom saunters back into the kitchen chuckling. “I don’t believe you.”

Spinning on my heel, I face him. “What?”

He holds up the take-out bag from a local burger joint. We don’t order from there often—maybe twice since we’ve moved in—but the burgers are good.

Head down, he peers into the bag. “To think about all the times you gave me grief and now look at you.”

Tom pulls out the two wrapped burgers and then not one or two, but three cartons of French fries. “Three? Are all these for me?” he asks in such a way that he already knows the answer.

My lips mash together, and I’m loath to say it out loud but he’s making me. “I was hungry. One is for you. One for me and I thought maybe, if you’re good, we’ll share the third. But if not, I’ll eat them.

At first he gawks but only for a beat before his head falls back and he belts out a hearty laugh. “I always knew I’d convert you.”

“What can I say?” Smiling slyly, I snag a fry from the box and hold it up between us. “Who can resist this yummy golden goodness?”

“Hey.” With his shaggy blond hair falling over his forehead and ever-present smile firmly in place, Tom moves to stand in front of me. Both his hands cup my elbows, holding me there, as his expression sobers. “You’re talking about me, right? Not the fry.”

*T*hank you for reading *Falling for the Charmer*! Tom’s book concludes the 6ix Loves Series, but if you haven’t read them all, each book is a standalone and are found [here](#).

*M*y next release, [All of You](#), is a small town childhood friends to lovers romance! To get you started with Wren and Oliver’s story, read the prequel, [Close to You](#), for FREE!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA TODAY bestselling and award winning author, S.M. West writes sexy, angsty stories about brave hearts and wild love, including, more times than not, heart-pumping twists and turns.

Apart from her infinite love of books, she's a self-professed wine, chocolate, and travel junkie. When not writing or hanging with her family, she's usually talking to her characters (in her head) or planning her next adventure.

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