



GIVE ME A

Minute

CINDER VALLEY
BOOK THREE

SAYLOR ANN

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A SMALL TOWN FAKE DATING ROMANCE

THE CINDER VALLEY SERIES

BOOK 3

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*To the ones who fear they may never be enough, or may never receive the
love they deserve.
This is for us.*

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Can't Fight The Moonlight- LeAnn Rimes
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Chainsmoking- Jacob Banks
champagne problems- Taylor Swift
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epiphany- Taylor Swift
False God- Taylor Swift
Father- Demi Lovato
Give Me A Minute- Lizzy McAlpine
I'm A Mess- Ed Sheeran
I Think He Knows- Taylor Swift
Lie To Me- Abigail Barlow, Ariza
marjorie- Taylor Swift
Pursuit Of Happiness (Nightmare)- Kid Cudi
Sex- Eden
Soon You'll Get Better- Taylor Swift feat. The Chicks
Two Blue Eyes- Tall Heights
You & I- Colony House
Talk Too Much- Coin
You're On Your Own Kid- Taylor Swift

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1JlTt34FuDmZdghZE8muqN?si=99f39dc69d594e03>

PREFACE

Well, the secret is out. If you've read the my first two books, you know that I wrote a letter to my parents, and any family that may read my books.

My family now knows that I write dirty books for fun, and not only that, a lot of them have read them.

So, if you are one of those family members, friend, coworker, you name it, please for the love of god, do not talk to me about the spice level of this book. I might die of embarrassment.

CONTENT WARNING

Dear Reader,

Give Me A Minute deals with subjects that may be triggering to some, including flashbacks of combat, a scene that depicts the death of a parent by breast cancer, bullying from a step sibling, and feelings of disapproval from a parent/stepparent. There is also a brief mention of an infant death, however it is not shown on page. Please only continue if you feel that you are able to read this book. The last thing I want to do is inadvertently harm someone.

PEYTON

EIGHT YEARS OLD

The rattling sound of my mother's lungs trying to suck in air fills the room, and I know at that moment I'll never unhear it. I'm sitting holding her frail hand in mine, as she works to take even one breath. My Nana sits across from me, tears streaming down her wrinkled face as we watch my mother take her final breaths. I don't know where Dad is. Papa told me he was at work, but that doesn't make sense to me. Why would he be working when Mom is dying?

A hand drops onto my shoulder, rubbing it harshly. I turn around, and see Papa holding on to me, the eyes that match Mom's looking down at her with care. Mom's friends are here too, sitting on the couch in the living room. Only it no longer looks like the living room I know. It's a not-living room. It's been replaced with her hospital bed, equipment and machines, and various other things that look like they came straight from a hospital. The room has a weird smell now, and I overheard one of the nurses that comes to visit say it smells like death. I've never smelt death before, but I guess it would make sense for this not-living room to smell like it since she's dying. Nana tries to cover the smell up with some oils she puts in this weird egg shaped thing that steams, but I just think it makes the smell worse.

I haven't seen my mom's eyes in four days. It looks like she's sleeping really hard, but the way her face is scrunched makes it look like she's hurting. My mom's been hurting for a really long time now, and Nana says that when she finally leaves us, she won't hurt anymore. I think I want her to leave so she doesn't hurt. I don't understand a lot of what's going on, but I don't like it when she hurts.

Nana also says that when she leaves, we are going to get some of the hurt that she had. We are going to hurt because we miss her. I don't want to miss her. I just want her here, smiling, taking me to swim in the river, going out for ice cream, singing with me in the car. And not being sick. Why did she have to get sick?

When Mom got worse, Dad started working a lot. When he's home, he's on the phone the whole time. Mom told me to ignore him, but it made me mad. I don't understand why he doesn't take care of her more. When he was sick with the flu last year, Mom stayed home to take care of him. She brought him medicine and soup and held a cool rag on his head until he felt better. I don't understand why Dad doesn't do these things for Mom now, but I want to help. I help the nurses wash her face every day, and give her sips of water, or food when she wants it. I like taking care of her. It makes me feel better.

Mom takes another deep rattling breath, the pearl necklace at her neck rising with the breath, and exhales slowly. Only this time, she doesn't breathe in again. We wait a long moment, waiting for that next breath, but it never comes. Nana's head falls to the bed, her cries loud in the not-living room. One of the nurses that I like comes rushing in from the kitchen. She steps beside me where I still hold her hand, and lifts slowly, pressing her fingers to Mom's wrist. She holds there for a moment, before taking her heart-listening-thing from her neck, and pressing it over Mom's heart. After a long moment, she pulls it away, and says, "She's gone." Looking at her watch, she writes something on top of her hand, and then steps away.

My mom is gone. Dead. I try to breathe, but no air makes its way in. My whole world has just been ripped out from under me, and I don't know what to do. It felt like she was already gone when she stopped opening her eyes, but now she's really gone. She's not breathing, and this hurts worse than anything I've ever felt.

I try to climb up on the bed next to her to hold her one more time while I can, but an arm wraps around my waist, pulling me off her.

"No!" I scream, thrashing my body against the person taking me from her.

"Peyton, stop that," my dad's voice is suddenly there, loud in my ear, breaking through the pain. His next words do nothing to help the pain though. "You need to stop crying. She's gone. You have to be a big girl now."

I'm suddenly on the front porch and he sets me to my feet. The cool spring air makes me shiver. "Why can't I cry?" I ask. Nana told me it was

okay to cry.

“Because, life is going to move on, and you can’t be stuck crying over someone who is gone.” Dad’s eyes are dark, almost scary-looking. I don’t like what he’s saying and I feel scared and I want to go back to my mom. My mom who is not alive anymore. “Look at me, Peyton.” I shake my head, staring down at the wood floor beneath my sock covered feet. Dad sighs, and I hear the sliding door open behind me.

“Hank, what the hell are you doing?” Mom’s friend asks. Her voice is angry. “Why did you take her out here?”

Dad groans, “Because she needs to start moving on. She’s gone. It’s time for all of us to move on.”

“Oh fuck you, Hank. She’s not even cold yet. Peyton needs more time to grieve the loss of her mother. You know, the person who raised her. Not like you’ve ever done anything to claim that.”

“How dare you,” Dad spits. “She was my wife too, you know.”

“Then why didn’t you act like it? Why didn’t you treat her like the goddamn treasure of a human being that she was?” She’s yelling now, and I drop to my knees, covering my ears. I don’t want to listen anymore, I just want my mommy.

Warm hands reach around me, and I know it’s not my dad, so I cling to her, taking the comfort she’s trying to give me. I can tell when she’s brought me back inside, back to my mom. She sets me down next to her on the bed, and I curl up against her skin, which feels cooler now. I make a hundred promises that if she just comes back alive, back to this not-living room with the weird machines and the hospital bed and the death-smell, that I will be good. I will never do anything bad again like leaving my bedroom messy or not eating the vegetables at dinner, or tracking my dirty footprints onto the rug. I promise to always be good if you just come back. Mommy, come back. My fingers find the pearl hanging from her neck, and I slide it between my fingers, trying to find any sort of connection to her again.

PEYTON

“**W**hy should I go to his wedding? It’s not like he’s ever been nice to me!” I curse into the phone, pulling my short blonde hair into a half ponytail before work. My dad always calls at the worst times. Case in point; it’s six thirty in the morning, and I need to be at work in thirty minutes. He’s trying to convince me to attend the wedding of my stepbrother, Hunter, in a few weeks.

Hunter is five years older than me, and is the definition of a dickwad. When I was younger, he would rip the heads off my Barbies and destroy my crafts. Before I was even in high school, he would spread nasty rumors about me, so when I finally made it there, I was blacklisted. After he graduated and moved out, his bullying morphed into anxiety-inducing pranks and rude comments about my weight or hair whenever he would come home for the weekend from college. I’m not his biggest fan. His mom, my stepmother, isn’t much better. Patricia.

After my mom died, Dad moved us from my hometown of Cinder Valley, to the Twin Cities to live with them. I didn’t fit into the new, picture-perfect family my dad was envisioning. I think he’s also still bitter with me for moving back to Cinder Valley after graduating nursing school. I wanted to be closer to my maternal grandparents and spend more time in the place where my mother grew up. I think I also wanted to feel closer to Mom, a virtual impossibility when Dad was hell-bent on pretending she never existed. Dad wants no reminders of his time here, wants nothing to do with the chapter of his life before Patricia. Sometimes I think that includes me.

“I cannot believe how selfish you are being,” Dad curtly states, calling

me back to his demand that I go to my stepbrother's wedding. "He has always been your biggest supporter, and I know for a fact that he wants you there." I can't help the snort that flies from me.

"Selfish? Are you fucking kidding me?" I seriously cannot comprehend how out of touch with reality he is.

"Don't you swear at me Peyton, I don't have time for this. You will be in attendance, and that is final. Your brother-"

"Step," I interject.

He scoffs. "Fine, your *step*brother has requested you. Your mother would love to see you, it's been months since you've been to visit."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "I'll think about it." That woman is *not* my mother, but I am not in the mood to fight about that subject as well.

"No, you will be there. End of discussion."

"I'm twenty-six years old, Dad. I don't need you to make decisions for me."

He grumbles something under his breath, sending a burst of static through the phone. "I have to finish getting ready for work. I'll talk to you later." I snip, annoyed that I had to start my morning this way.

He hangs up without another word, and I drop my phone onto the bathroom counter, irritated and overwhelmed. My hand unconsciously reaches up to the necklace resting on my collarbone. The gold chain hangs around my neck, a simple pearl in the center. Mom's necklace.

I fiddle with the smooth surface, pulling it between my thumb and forefinger. Watching your mother die a slow and painful death is something that no child should ever have to do. My mind slowly replays the memories that I often try to forget. Her peach fuzz hair that slowly worked to grow back to replace the once-dark luscious waves that fell out after rounds and rounds of chemo, the way her blue eyes appeared sunken into her gaunt face, pale and grayish.

Shaking away the memory, I drop my hand from the pearl, and brush my teeth. My phone buzzes on the counter, an incoming text from my boss, Dr. Ness, lighting up the screen.

Dr. Ness: Good Morning, sunshine! What's your coffee order today? My treat :)

God, I love my boss. She is one of the sweetest people I have ever met, and takes such good care of her employees. My coworker and close friend,

Mallory, had a baby a few months ago, and today is her first day back at work. She and her fiancée, Tyler, are the definition of adorable. They met through mutual friends, and one miscommunication led them to being roommates turned lovers. Mallory moved to Cinder Valley from Colorado after fleeing an abusive relationship. Ironically, I met Mallory on the day that her ex showed up in town, and attacked her. He's now dead, after attempting to flee the cops. Dr. Ness has been a huge advocate and supporter of Mallory through everything. She's the kind of provider and clinic owner you want to see succeed. Not like when I was working at the hospital where nurses are chronically overworked and underappreciated by the company.

The day I met Mallory was also the day she found out she was pregnant with her daughter, Felicity. She and Tyler were surprised, but also extremely excited. I got to know them pretty well throughout her pregnancy, as well as during her maternity leave. Mallory also enfolded me into her friend group. I've been invited to crazy girls' nights in, bonfires in the backyard, and chill evenings out to the bar. I smile and my heart warms with nervous empathy; I want Mallory's first day back after maternity leave to be a good one.

Me: Caramel latte please and thank you!

Dr. Ness: You got it! See you soon!

WALKING in through the sliding doors, I'm greeted by the familiar face of our receptionist, Melissa. "Good morning!" She smiles, her eyes crinkling around the edges. "You are just in time!" She stands, waving me over.

"For what?" I ask.

"Mallory should be here any second," she squeals, clapping her hands. I forget everyone else hasn't seen her as often as I have in her last five months of maternity leave. Dr. Ness opted to give her an extended maternity leave since she is all for Mother/Baby bonding. She even offered her longer, but Mallory decided she was ready to come back to work. Her mom and future mother-in-law are going to be taking turns watching Felicity so she and Tyler can continue to work without a crazy expensive daycare bill.

The familiar *whoosh* of the automatic door sounds, and Mallory strides in, her arms full. She has her teal blue scrubs on, and a backpack on each

shoulder.

Melissa squeals, “Welcome back!” getting up to hug Mallory and relieve her of one of the backpacks. “Where do you want this?”

“The lounge is fine,” Mallory answers. “It’s just my stuff for pumping.”

Dr. Ness and Julia, one of our midwives, come up front to greet Mallory. Dr. Ness hands Mallory a coffee, and her eyes fill with tears. I don’t think the others notice, but as Mallory turns to me for a hug, they about spill over.

“Oh honey,” I say, opening my arms. I know how hard it was for her to leave Felicity, even for a workday. She and Tyler have only really had a few date nights here and there away from her since she was born. Coming back to work full time is a whole new challenge, not to mention the postpartum hormones she’s experiencing.

“I know,” Mallory wails, wiping her tears. “I know she’s in good hands! But they’re not *my* hands.” She snuffles and straightens her scrub top as she pulls away. “It’ll be fine, I’m fine,” she says it like she’s hyping herself up. Mallory’s such a fighter.

As she sips her coffee and settles herself with a deep breath, she meets my eyes for a beat. *You alright?* She mouths, conscious of the other girls lingering nearby.

I shrug, and then give her a little nod. I’ll tell her later about the call with my dad. Once things settle down a bit, we head back to the employee lounge. We always have a brief meeting in the morning to get ready for the day, and do patient chart review.

Mallory flops down onto the plush couch, her small body sinking into the fabric. “God, I missed this couch,” she moans.

“I thought you loved your couch at home?” I giggle, throwing my lunch in the fridge.

“Oh, I do, lots of fun has been had on our couch.” She wiggles her eyebrows suggestively. “But I swear, my lunch break naps during my pregnancy were the best naps of my *life* right here on this couch.”

“Okay, first off, *ew*.” I shudder dramatically. “I have spent a lot of time on your couch. Please tell me you at least disinfect it!”

Mallory shrugs noncommittally. “Ew! Mallory!” I reach over to grab a throw pillow from next to her, then chuck it at her head.

“Hey! Just because you aren’t having sex doesn’t mean you get to be yelling at the people that are. And it’s my couch. I can do whatever I want on it!”

I flop down next to her, resting my head on her shoulder. “Fine, I guess you’re right. Maybe I’m jealous. And I missed you. You can’t have any more babies. I need you,” I sigh into her shoulder.

She tilts her head to rest on mine. “Well I can’t promise no more babies. Tyler seems to think we are going to start trying for number two soon, but I told him my hoo-hah is still trying to heal. But what’s going on? Is everything okay?”

“I don’t know...” I sigh. “My dad called this morning.”

“Ew.” she cringes.

“I know. He told me I was ‘expected to be at my brother’s wedding’ in a few weeks. I pissed him off more when I corrected him and said stepbrother. I just... *argh* I want nothing to do with them. I love my dad, I guess, but Hunter and Patricia? Fuck no. They treat me like shit, and Dad’s always been too blind in love with his new insta-family to see it.”

Mallory rubs her hand over my hair, and it’s soothing me more than I would like to admit. “I’m fine. I could use a drink I think. Can I come over this weekend? I need some baby snuggles and a glass of wine.”

“Of course you can,” Mallory chuckles. “You know you are always welcome at our house. You just might have to deal with my boobs out at some point to feed the little ogre.”

I shrug. “You do remember I saw your vag multiple times throughout your pregnancy, and delivery?”

“I know. Just wanted to warn you,” she smiles, patting my head. “Alright, let’s get going. We’re going to be late to the meeting.” She stands from the couch, holding an arm out to me. “We might as well text Sam and Lainey and see if we could do a girls’ night this weekend, sounds like you might need it.”

I let out a long sigh, letting her pull me off the couch. Pizza, The Princess Diaries, and wine. I think Mallory is right. “Yeah, that might be a good idea.”

“I’ll text the girls.” Mallory pulls her phone out of her scrub pocket as we head to the conference room. She types furiously and my phone vibrates against my leg.

After Mallory and I got to know each other more, she invited me over to one of their traditional girls’ nights. Whenever they have something exciting to celebrate, something heavy to process, or even if someone is on their period, they have one. The girls’ night staples are eating pizza, watching The Princess Diaries, drinking a lot of wine, and overindulging on junk food in general. They’re a total guilty pleasure and loads of fun. But on a deeper

level, I have never felt so welcomed into a group of friends before. Within five minutes of meeting Sam and Lainey, I felt more comfortable in their presence than I ever have with anyone who claimed to be my friend.

Sam and Lainey have known each other since childhood, and they both teach at the elementary school in town. Sam has a huge personality, and it's the best. She's loud, but the most loving person I think I have ever met. She takes care of those she loves with everything she has. She and her fiancé, Owen, live a few houses down from Lainey and Colin. Owen can be a bit of a grump, but his and Sam's personalities balance each other out.

Lainey moved to Cinder Valley almost two years ago now, after she caught her then-boyfriend cheating on her. She moved into a cute little house, with Colin as her neighbor a few houses down. From the sounds of it, they had an instant connection, and were engaged within six months- after a brief but, according to Lainey, necessary breakup.

Mallory introduced me, and Sam indoctrinated me into their group instantaneously. Suddenly, I had gone from one friend, Mallory, to seven, if you include Sam, Lainey, Owen, Colin, Tyler, and Theo. More friends than I've ever had. Most of the time, more than I sometimes think I deserve.

Theo is Sam's older brother, and he got back about a year ago from serving as a Combat Medic in Afghanistan for fifteen months, with another tour before that. I swear, he looks just like Miles Teller, but with blonde hair instead of dark. He's muscular from his time in the army, and he always has a stern look on his face. Appearance-wise, I would say I have a pretty big crush on him. Personality-wise, I'm pretty sure he hates me. Every time we are in the same room, I catch him glaring at me. It's not like our paths cross often, but with the group as tight-knit as it is, we run into each other frequently enough for me to notice. It seems intentional, with the glaring and the avoidance. I've been hanging with this group for over a year, and for the entire time, Theo has consistently steered clear of me.

I mean, I get it. I'm the outsider. I always have been, even in my own family. Although I don't always feel like an outsider when I'm with the girls. They include me in everything, and Sam has even asked me to be a bridesmaid in her wedding this August. Friends have always been hard for me to come by, so I'm thankful for them. And if one person out of seven doesn't want me around, I can live with that.

Unfortunately, I can't say I'm not used to it.

Mallory: Girls' night tomorrow? Peyton has a few things she has to talk about.

Sam: Obvs! It's been a while, and we need to get some wedding stuff done. We can craft!

Lainey: Works for me! Who's hosting?

Mallory: Me! To be honest, I don't feel like dragging my pump everywhere. Felicity might be in attendance too, if that's alright? I don't want Tyler to have to find somewhere to go with her for a few hours.

Sam: Well duh, we have to start her early on the tradition! And I need some snuggle time with my girl.

Me: You guys are the best, I definitely need to vent.

Sam: Oh girl, we are here for you! That's what friends are for!

It's weird to be twenty-six and just learning what having friends is like.

FELICITY BURROWS her soft cheek into my neck, letting out a long sigh. I just finished burping her after Mallory fed her, and she loves snuggling with her Auntie Peyton. We've had a very quiet girls' night. I spent a lot of the evening bitching about my dad. I had told Mallory about my childhood and things my father did, but this was the first time Lainey and Sam had heard about him in more detail. Sam was ready to dial him up and chew his ass out, but luckily I was able to subdue her.

I didn't even tell them the worst of the things there are to know about my family, but maybe I'll save that for another time. Sam tends to go all "mama bear" when protecting people.

I don't know what I'm going to do for Hunter's wedding. The problem is, I don't hate his fiancée, Kelsey. She's genuinely a nice person, and I feel bad that she's marrying such a douche canoe. But, she must love him I guess. It would be easier to go if I had someone to go with me, but I like these girls too much to torture them through an evening of my father's belittling and Hunter's insults.

"Peyton, want to meet at Coffee Talk tomorrow and go over bachelorette party stuff?" Sam asks, popping an m&m into her mouth.

"Sure, what do we need to go over? I thought we had everything pretty

organized?” I rub Felicity’s back in a circular motion, soothing her since my voice startled her a bit. Bubba, Mallory’s beagle/basset hound mix, sits at my feet, watching protectively over his baby. He’s never more than a few feet from Felicity or Mallory, and even though he’s the sweetest dog ever, he’s very protective of them.

“I have a few more ideas I want to run by you.”

“Okay?” I’m a little confused, but oh well. Sometimes it’s best to not ask Sam, and just go with the flow. “What time?”

“Ten?”

“Sure, that works.” I shrug, noticing that Felicity’s eyes have fluttered shut in my arms. I drag my finger over the gentle slope of her nose. “I’ll meet you there.”

“Perfect.” She claps excitedly, whipping her phone out of her back pocket. She types something furiously, then drops her phone to her lap, grinning widely at me. I quirk a brow at her, but she just waves me off. Whatever, she’s weird.

“Alright,” Mallory says, sitting up from the couch, and unhooking her breast pump from her chest. “Time to get the peanut to bed.” She sets all the parts onto the coffee table, and puts the lid on the bottles so they don’t spill. “Gimme the baby, Auntie Peyt.” She stands, holding her arms out for her daughter.

“Do I have to?” I whine, leaning down to sniff her head. Why is baby smell so intoxicating?

“Are you going to be the one to get up with her tonight?”

I shrug noncommittally. “Who’s to say I don’t sleepover? The night is still young.”

“Give me my baby, Peyton,” Mallory laughs.

“Ugh, fine.” I give her one last gentle squeeze, and another little sniff before passing her off to her mother. Mallory cradles her in her arms, cooing at her when she stirs just a little, before bringing her around to say goodnight to her Auntie Lainey and Auntie Sam. I get up from my spot on the couch and scoop up the bottles of Mal’s breast milk from the coffee table, padding into the kitchen to put them away in the refrigerator. While I’m there, I quickly transfer some dishes from the sink into the dishwasher and hit ‘start’.

When I return to the living room, I sink myself deeper into the couch, tugging a blanket over my body. The second Princess Diaries movie plays in the background, and I watch for a few moments before Lainey pulls my

attention from the screen.

“So, are there any guys grabbing your attention lately?” She twirls one of her ringle curls around her finger, her engagement ring glinting in the warm light of the lamp. I can’t help the little laugh that bursts from my lips.

“Hah! Definitely not. No guys have ever been interested in me.” I wave her off.

“What?!” she shrieks. “I don’t believe that for a second. Have you seen yourself? You are gorgeous. Spunky blonde hair, great personality, smart, a killer ass and curves, and honestly you have great tits too.”

I laugh. “Thanks, but sadly, guys don’t seem to think so. I think there is a flashing neon sign over my head or something that screams ‘Daddy Issues.’”

“Oh jeez,” Sam snorts. “Daddy issues shmaddy issues. That’s BS and you know it. You can’t tell me there is no one you have your eye on?”

“No, pinky promise.” I hold out a pinky for her. “I’ve been so focused on work now for a long time that I haven’t even had time to date. I need to get myself figured out before I can look into that. I don’t dare use dating apps either.” I shudder, thinking about the one time I tried. The amount of dick pics that I received is terrifying in itself.

Sam lets out a long guffaw. “Oh my god! Do you remember the first girls’ night we had you at?”

Lainey leans over, smacking me on the arm. “Yes! You had been talking to that guy for a few days, and he sent you a picture of his dick! Totally unsolicited.”

I feel my face heat. “And that is exactly why I want nothing to do with dating. Guys are so immature nowadays. You three got lucky. At this point, I’m not holding out much hope.” I shrug, hoping they drop the subject.

Mallory walks back into the living room, carrying the baby monitor. “What are you guys laughing about?”

“They brought up my first girls’ night and how that guy sent me a dick pic and you three,” I point at them accusingly. “Made me open it in front of you because I had a feeling it was a dick pic.”

“Oh god, that was nasty. It was all shriveled, and the way he was holding it?” Sam shudders. “You could literally see all the dirt under his grimy fingernails.”

“See! That is why I’m not dating. The playing field is a mess.” I take a sip of my warm wine.

“Well, you will find someone, I guarantee.” Sam smiles, a little twinkle in

her blue eyes.

Lainey lets out a long sigh. “Colin just texted. Sounds like the guys are finishing up. Tyler keeps complaining about how tired he is, and Owen is about ready to punch him in the dick,” she chuckles. “He says he wants me home because he has ‘plans for us.’”

Mallory yawns. “Felicity is going through a major sleep regression right now, we are both absolutely exhausted.”

I stand up from the couch. “I guess that’s my cue. I’m going to head home then. Sam, I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?” she asks.

“Well, yeah. You invited me to Coffee Talk?”

“Oh. Duh, yes I’ll be there at ten!” she says spunkily.

“Great. I’ll see you there.” I throw on my light sweater, giving all the girls a quick hug, and heading out into the cool spring night.

THEO

“Theo, what are you drinking?” Tyler calls from the kitchen of Colin’s house. I chuckle, lifting up the bottle of whiskey I brought, knowing the guys would probably only be drinking beer tonight. After my most recent (and longest) deployment of two years, I’d lost touch with a lot of friends. When I got back from overseas, I’d decided to stick around Cinder Valley, that way I would be close to family. AKA, my crazy sister, Sam, her chaotic group of friends, and their partners. I’m thankful for them, and how quickly they took me under their wing with their friendship, especially the guys. You never know if you’re going to get along with a group of people, but somehow I got lucky with these fuckers. In my time as a combat medic, I’ve learned a thing or two about luck.

Tyler, Colin, and Owen were born and raised here in Cinder Valley, and after they went separate ways for college, they all ended up back here. My sister and Owen met each other shortly after she moved here to start her teaching career, and they got engaged about a year and a half ago while I was on my second deployment. All three of them work together at the Cinder Valley Fire Department, though Tyler has started shifting his focus to being a paramedic, as he passed his exams about a year ago.

After I left the military, I was able to get my paramedic certification fairly easily, and now Tyler and I work together for nearly every shift.

“I’ve got it covered,” I say as I toe off my shoes in the entryway.

“Oh, that’s right,” Owen chuckles from the couch. “Theo doesn’t drink our ‘piss tasting beer’.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault I have evolved taste buds. You guys still drink

Busch Light and act like it's a delicacy."

"Bro, have you ever had a Busch Light?" Colin sounds offended.

"Uh, yes. You guys forced me to drink it all last summer on the river, remember?"

"Oh yeah," Colin says with a bewildered look on his face.

I shake my head, striding over to the couch to sit next to my future brother-in-law. My sister, Sam, is a special woman. Being five years older than her, I can be a bit protective, but this grumpy asshole somehow can handle her crazy, and they compliment each other well. "Hey, man." I drop down next to him, popping the top off my whiskey, and pouring the amber liquid into the lowball glass I brought with me.

"Your sister is going to drive me nuts with this wedding planning, man." Owen shakes his head as he takes a pull of his beer. "God, I love her, but I cannot wait for your parents to move here so they can help. It looks like a wedding magazine threw up in our living room."

"And that right there, is exactly why I moved out the first chance I could," I laugh.

"Touché"

I sip my whiskey, reveling in the smoky burn as it slides down my throat. One perk to no longer being deployed, is having access to good liquor. Colin and Tyler join us on the couch, and we throw on a late season hockey game. The Minnesota Blue Herons have a chance to make it to the playoffs this year if they play their luck right, so we're keeping our fingers crossed. We're much more low key on our "guys nights" than the girls are, and we typically end up watching sports or playing video games while we await the inevitable call or drunk text from them.

Sam and her friends typically get up to these chaotic shenanigans about once a month, and they carry on the tradition that my mom started the night that Sam's best friend, Lainey, moved in with us. Lainey had a deadbeat mom, addicted to drugs and alcohol after the death of Lainey's dad.

Being older than them, I wasn't around much after she moved in, but she knows that I consider her my sister. Even while I was deployed, she would send me letters and care packages, and we even FaceTimed a few times.

Now, their little group has grown to include Mallory, Tyler's fiancée, and Peyton, Mallory's coworker. My sister has a habit of becoming friends with everyone, or more so just telling them that they are friends now. I haven't really gotten to know Peyton yet, even though she's been "part of the crew"

for just about a year now. I don't really know much about her, other than she is a nurse at the new birth center in town, and I have been designated to walk down the aisle with her at Sam's wedding this summer.

She's got short blonde hair that she always has styled in a messy half bun or a fancy braid, a soft figure that fills out her scrubs well, and bright blue eyes that you can see from across the room. She's a little difficult to read. Whenever our group gets together I find myself trying to come up with ideas of what I could say to introduce myself and get to know her better. But she seems to be a bit more on the reserved side. She tends to do a lot of listening and supporting of the other girls in the group, from what I've seen.

Okay, so maybe I know a *little* about her.

My phone buzzes against my leg so I pull it out, checking the message.

Sam: You're off tomorrow, right?

Me: Ya... why?

Sam: Meet me at Coffee Talk at 10 please, I want to go over a few things for the wedding, and moving plans for Mom and Dad.

Me: Can't you just text me the information now?

Sam: NO. Don't you want to spend time with your favorite sister?

Me: Lainey is my favorite sister.

Sam: Lies. She is very lovable, but she will never be me. Please? I really miss you since you've moved out.

Me: Fine. But you're buying.

Sam: Deal.

SURPRISINGLY, we didn't get any drunk texts or calls tonight. It must have been a pretty low key evening. Although, now that I think about it, things have settled down a bit since Mallory and Tyler's little girl, Felicity, was born. I'm not biologically related to her, but Tyler and Mallory call me her Uncle Theo, and damn if that doesn't make my heart swell.

She is a cute little girl. Her thick black hair and eyes that are slowly

turning a shade of green capture me whenever we hang out. Out of everyone, I'm her favorite. Whenever Colin or Owen tries to hold her, she screams, but when I hold her? Silence. I even get a gummy little smile out of her every once in a while.

It's barely nine thirty and we're wrapping up our evening. I never thought I would say this, but I'm almost thankful that a majority of my twenties were spent overseas. I'm not much of a partier, and being deployed, I couldn't be. I came back at the perfect time. These guys are chill, and never drink too much or party too hard.

They like to tease me since I'm the oldest at thirty-two, calling me an old man, and mocking my need to be in bed at a decent time. However, in the last year, they have slowly acclimated to my ways, and even praise them.

We all say our goodbyes, and head our separate ways. In a way, I feel disconnected from the group now that I no longer live with Sam and Owen, seeing as both Mallory and Tyler, and Lainey and Colin live just houses down from them. It was kinda nice to take a two minute walk home, rather than a ten minute drive across town. But I have to say, I don't miss walking in the house after a long shift at work, and finding my baby sister getting railed on the couch by my future brother-in-law. *Shudder.*

A thought tickles the back of my mind. I wonder where Peyton lives? Does she have to drive far? Has she been drinking tonight? I can't help but be intrigued by her, and I do want to get to know her better. But ever since I came home from deployment, it's like I don't know how to talk to people. Even in basic conversations, I feel rusty and awkward. I don't know what to do or say in her presence, for fear of saying something wrong and upsetting the dynamic in the group. It's why for a majority of the last year I've ended up ignoring her whenever I do see her, and then feeling like a dick the rest of the day

I shake off the thought. I can't worry about her. But I do resolve, in the back of my mind, to ask Peyton at least one or two questions about herself the next time our group is all hanging out. Just to approach her, to get to know her a little bit, and to break the cycle of ignoring her like an asshole. It's high time to start doing the things that make me feel like a regular civilian again. Besides, if basic training and two tours overseas didn't kill me, asking a pretty girl a few questions about herself certainly won't.

THE SMELL of coffee permeates the air, and the familiar sound of the steamer helps me focus on the book in my hand. Ever since I got home from deployment I've been trying to read more. Nothing too crazy, but I like to stick to mystery, or even non-fiction. It helps me keep my mind off of the inevitable anxiety I feel whenever I have a nightmare, or if something triggers a memory that brings me back to the explosions and screams of pain.

I got to the coffee shop early, figuring it would be good for me to get some time to myself before my crazy sister arrives. She's the best. Crazy, but I can't help but love her.

The little bell on the door chimes, signaling someone walking in. I automatically look up, expecting to see Sam, but am surprised when Peyton walks through the door. She's wearing a copper colored t-shirt that is tied in a knot at her waist, a pair of high waisted jeans covering her stomach. Her short blonde hair is curled, and half of it is pulled up in some weird twist atop her head.

Anxious nerves grip me for a moment. For the briefest of seconds, I think about pretending I don't notice her. But then I remember my resolve last night - if I was ready to engage her in conversation in a group setting, I can approach her now.

She lifts her square sunglasses off her nose and up to rest on her head, blue eyes scanning the room. Her gaze stops when it lands on me, and her brow furrows. *Don't be a coward*, I think to myself as I stand up from my chair.

"Hey, Peyton," I say as I walk toward her. She looks stunned for a moment, like she is not quite sure I am talking to her.

"Um, hey, Theo." She stutters a little over her words. "What's up?" she says, clearing her throat.

"Not much, just waiting for Sam." I shrug. "I guess she wants to go over wedding stuff."

"Wait, you're waiting for Sam too?" Her eyes wander around the room, like she's desperately searching for my sister.

"Yeah... hold up, did you say 'too?'" *Now what the fuck did my sister do?*

"She... she told me that she wanted to meet this morning to plan more bachelorette party stuff."

Understanding dawns on me. "That sneaky little shit," I growl, raising a hand to pull at the back of my neck.

“I’m going to call her.” Peyton reaches into her small crossbody bag to pull out her phone. Within seconds, it’s at her ear, and I can hear the familiar ringing in the background.

Of fucking course she doesn’t answer, because why would she? A grimace crosses Peyton’s face, and she drops the phone from her ear, pressing a button until my sister’s familiar voice plays on speaker. “Hey, you’ve reached Sam Porter. If this is Theo or Peyton, no I will not be attending this morning’s coffee date. This was all a part of my elaborate plan to get you two together. Muahaha!” she chortles through the phone. “I will be checking in later to see how the date went. If I hear from either of you that you didn’t stay and get to know each other, the consequences will be grave. So, it’s up to you. Deal with the consequences, or go on a date with an awesome person.”

There is a brief moment of pause, then, “PS, if this is anyone else, leave a message and I will get back to you when I can!” The beep signals the end of the voicemail greeting.

All the blood leaves Peyton’s face as she hangs up the phone, eyes lifting to meet mine. “Right, um. I’ll go,” she says meekly. She drops her phone into her bag, turning toward the door.

Without realizing it, I reach out, grabbing her arm to stop her. “No, wait.” Her eyes drop to my hand, still gently clasping her small arm in my palm. I drop her arm, and clear my throat. “I mean, you’re here. Might as well get a coffee. We should probably get to know each other anyway, right?”

“I mean... I guess,” she says.

“Great. Why don’t you head upstairs and I will get us some coffee. Do you want a muffin or something? And what’s your drink order?”

“Oh, I can get my own.” She walks toward the counter, but I quickly follow, instinctually resting a hand at the small of her back.

“Peyton, I’ve got it. What would you like?”

She lets out a little squeak, then clears her throat. “Caramel Latte. And a morning bun. Please.”

“You got it,” I say, dropping my hand from her back. I shoo her toward the stairs, and watch as she slowly climbs them, her eyes still full of confusion, like she isn’t quite sure what is going on.

I feel the corner of my mouth lift in a smirk. She’s pretty cute when she’s all flustered. I’m still a little pissed at my sister, not for setting us up, but for being her crazy self. I’d be lying though if I said I wasn’t excited to get to

know her more.

PEYTON

Sitting down at the small table in the bay window of the top level, I pull my phone out of my pocket, ready to write a *strongly* worded message to my lovely friend.

Me: What the actual fuck, Sam????

Me: I cannot believe you did this! I told you, I am not dating! Nor am I going to date your brother! HE HATES ME. Have you never seen the way he glares at me???

Me: I will never forgive you for this.

Me: Your “matchmaking” days are over.

I flip the phone screen down and drop my head into my hands. Letting out a low groan, I try to take a few calming breaths. In reality, I know he isn't going to be a dick, and that's not the type of person he is... but I know he doesn't like me. I'm in for an awkward cup of coffee. I think back to one of the first times I met him. Mallory had invited me over for a bonfire at Sam's place. I remember him sitting in the lawn chair next to mine, looking like he was in physical pain. His eyes were dark, and it looked like he was about to crush the can in his palm.

Even when Sam officially introduced me to Theo, he'd said maybe two words during the whole interaction. Sam tried to tell me later he'd had a bad day, but I still believe it had something to do with me.

I take another deep breath. This isn't news, nothing unprecedented. I'm like a disease, infecting everything I touch, something no one wants around. My Nana tried to tell me otherwise, but when your whole life has been filled

with everyone telling you the opposite, it's hard to alter that mindset. Theo is just another in a long line of people who will never like me, and I've accepted it.

Looking out the window, I'm greeted by the familiar sight of the river. The water is high this spring, thanks to the excessive amount of snow we got this year. The water crashes and rages against the rocks, the current strong. It's an odd thing. The river itself is gorgeous, but also known to be extremely dangerous. When I was a kid, I remember my dad telling me to respect the river, but to never trust it, as if it were a person. I held on to that mantra.

I'm feeling marginally calmer, having accepted that this is just going to be an awkward thing we need to get through, when Theo's heavy footsteps pound up the old wooden stairs. He appears after a moment, carrying two mugs with coffee, and a little paper bag. He smiles softly as he sits down across from me, gently pushing the mug with my coffee toward me. "Thanks," I whisper, lifting it to my lips, taking a small sip.

"I've never had a morning bun before," Theo says, taking one of the cinnamon sugar covered rolls out of the bag, setting it on a napkin, and handing it to me. He does the same with his own, and rips a piece off it, shoving it unceremoniously in his mouth. He lets out a low moan, and a shiver runs down my spine at the sound. *No, Peyton. You will not get all tingly because a man moaned while eating a roll.* "Holy shit," he groans. "This is fucking great."

I don't want to be vulnerable in front of someone I know doesn't like me, but I can't help but laugh at his reaction. "They're the best. Sam is the one who introduced me to them, now when I come here, I have to pray that they aren't out. People go feral over these things."

"I can see why," he mumbles through another bite. A piece of his blonde hair falls into his face, and he lifts his free hand up to shove it off his forehead. The subtle movement sends a flutter of butterflies in my tummy. I ignore it. I have no business suddenly feeling like this about him, all because Sam "set us up." I was honest when I told her I want nothing to do with dating right now. I'm no expert, but I'm pretty sure dates are more successful when the person you've been set up with doesn't hate you.

There's an awkward moment of silence as we both finish our rolls, not sure where to take this. I clear my throat, "I can go." I move to stand, grabbing my cup from the table.

"No, stay," he pleads, holding a hand out. "I really do want to get to know

you. I mean, we're walking down the aisle together at the wedding, we should at least be comfortable around each other."

Slumping back into my chair, I say, "I don't want to make you uncomfortable."

"I'm not, promise." He pauses. "Are you?"

"Well, I'm not exactly comfortable," I scoff. "I should've known something was up with your sister last night."

"I feel the same," he chuckles. "She's very good at getting what she wants."

I nod, cause what else does a person say to that? Theo keeps the conversation going this time. "So, you work with Mallory, right?"

"Yep, I really love my job. It's such a great environment, and it's seriously so cool what we do everyday," I gush. One thing about me, if you get me started talking about women's health and my job, I won't stop. As someone who has dealt with endometriosis, and horrible, irregular periods since I was thirteen, I do my best to be an advocate for my patients.

I suddenly worry I've said too much, annoyed or bored him. But shockingly, Theo replies, "That's great. I give you props. I've dealt with a lot of blood and shit, but I don't think I could ever do... that." He visibly shudders.

"Oh stop." I smile. "It's easier than you think. I'm sure one day you'll have to deliver a baby on a call, and you'll tell me all about how it wasn't as bad as you thought."

"We'll see about that," he jokes. "I'm just crossing my fingers that's something I never have to do."

Ever so cautiously, I decide to try for a question of my own. "Do you like being a paramedic?"

He shrugs. "I do, it feels good to help people, especially since I've dedicated my whole life to it since I was eighteen. Tyler makes a great partner too, so that's a benefit."

"I sense a 'but' coming on.."

"I..." Theo sighs. "I feel like I'm not doing enough anymore. When I was deployed, a lot of my days were filled with life and death scenarios. I spent most of my time in a constant adrenaline rush, so to come home and spend my days driving around in a rig, helping old people off their bathroom floor feels... underwhelming."

He looks down at his now empty cup for a moment. "I probably sound

like a jackass, but I was doing so much more over there. I *don't* want to go back, but I don't feel like I'm doing anything here."

"That's fair," I reply. "I can see how that's a hard adjustment for you."

"Thanks." He gives me a crooked smile. "I actually haven't told anyone that. I have this feeling I can trust you."

I don't know what to say to that, so I level with him. "Look, I know I'm not your favorite person, or someone you would want to spend your Sunday morning with, but you can trust me."

"That's where you're wrong," he says with a smile. "While this is not how I imagined my Sunday going, I'm not mad about it. You're pretty great, Peyton."

"We've been talking for five minutes," I laugh, incredulous.

"You may be right, but I am good at reading people."

If that's the case, why has he spent the last year glaring at me whenever we are in the same room for five minutes?

AN HOUR LATER, Theo and I are leaving Coffee Talk. "Thanks for staying," he says, holding the creaky door open for me.

"Oh, sure." I smile. "It was nice to get to know you a bit more." He nods, shoving his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. "Well, I'll see you later, I guess." I wave, then cross the street toward my Jeep Cherokee. I climb into my car, then watch in the rearview mirror as he gets into his Chevy Colorado. That was... interesting. My mind was all over the place, over analyzing every word out of his mouth, trying to find some hidden meaning or signal. I couldn't decide if he does still hate me and is really good at hiding it, or if he was sincerely being nice.

Then I'd find myself lost in his blue eyes, listening intently as he talked about his parents, and how excited he is for them to move here. I pull my car out onto the street, and head toward my apartment. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Theo pull out at almost the exact same time.

Rolling the windows down and turning the music up, I make my way across town to my apartment complex. Only every time I look in my rearview mirror, Theo's truck is close behind me. What the fuck is he doing?

Is he following me?

Is this some weird alpha military man thing where he has to make sure I get home safely or some bullshit? If that's the case, he's about to get his ass reamed. I am twenty-six years old. I don't need anyone to protect me.

Irritated, I fly into the parking lot of my building, anger rising even more when Theo pulls in behind me. I take a few deep breaths before getting out of my car. He steps out of his truck the same time as I slam the door to my car, walking up to him and stabbing him in the chest with my pointer finger.

"Were you fucking following me?" I spit out. Not giving him a second to respond, and ignoring the shocked look on his face, I continue, shoving his chest so he falls back a step. "You know, I'm a grown-ass adult. I don't need you, or my dad, or *anyone else* to try and take over my life. I can take care of myself. I appreciate it if you were making sure I got home safe, but this is a bit much. Just fucking text me, don't follow me home. It's fucking creepy, Theo." I spin away from him, but his huge hand clasps around my arm.

"Let go of me!" I shriek. He drops my arm like I've burned him.

"Peyton!" He walks behind me as I stalk toward the door. "I wasn't following you. I live here."

I stop dead in my tracks. "You... You live here?" I turn around to face him, and instantly guilt seeps through my body. His eyes are downcast, brows furrowed, an almost embarrassed look on his face. He nods, kicking a rock at his feet.

"I-" I stop. Fuck. I'm a horrible person. "I'm sorry. That was really rude of me. I didn't know you lived here."

He looks at me, eyes glinting a little. "I had no idea you lived here, either. I was about to ask you if you were somehow following me too or something when you started yelling."

I drop my face into my hands, rubbing my forehead. "Fuck, Theo. I'm the worst. Can you forgive me? I had no right to yell at you like that."

"You're forgiven." He smiles, reaching out to wrap an arm around my shoulders in a side hug. I tense at the contact. "Honestly, I'm a little proud of you. You can definitely hold your own if someone actually follows you. I was genuinely scared for a minute there."

"Oh stop, you were in the literal army, and are all muscular and macho. There's no way you were scared of me, a 5 '5" woman." I wave him off, entering the code to let me into the building. He follows close behind.

"That's where you're wrong." He gestures at the stairs. "Which floor you on?"

“Two.”

He quirks his brow, but follows me up the stairs. “While I *was* in the military, and I do have muscles- thanks for the ego boost by the way-” he winks as we reach the second floor. “You definitely have some bite behind your bark.”

I chuckle, now standing in front of my door. “Well, thanks. I think.” I wave my arm at my door. “This is me. What floor are you on?”

He does a double take. “This is your apartment?”

“Um, yes?”

He laughs, stepping away from me down the hall to my neighbors door. “This is mine.”

Yeah, no I’m not buying that. “Oh shut up. No it is not. Really, which floor are you on?”

“I’m serious,” he laughs. “Watch.” He pulls his keys out of his front pocket, showing me as he sticks the key into the door. I hear the click of the lock, and my jaw drops as the door pops open.

“We’re neighbors?!”

“It would appear that way,” he says, closing his door, and walking back to me.

“I always thought it was an old guy or something living next door!”

He dramatically clutches at his chest. “You wound me. The guys are always teasing me for being old, I don’t need it from you either.”

“Wait, how old are you?” I don’t think I’ve ever learned.

“Thirty- two.”

“Oh, that’s not old. I thought you were going to say like thirty-seven or something. Not that that’s that old either, but when you said the guys were teasing you, I just assumed you were like *way* older than us. That’s only six years,” I babble.

Theo quirks his brows. “Nice to know you don’t think I’m old.” His gaze stays locked on me, and the way he looks at me... feels almost appreciative. *What the hell is going on?*

“Right. Well, I’m-uh, I’m going to head inside. I’ll see you later?” I ask.

“Sure. Maybe I’ll need butter or something later,” he says with a wink. “See ya, neighbor.”

“Bye.” I wave awkwardly, sliding into my apartment. I close and lock the door behind me, resting my head against the door. The last few hours have been such a disaster, my brain hasn’t even had time to catch up.

Sam: Soooo, how did it go?

Me: I'm not talking to you.

Sam: Oh stop. You two would be perfect together!

Sam: You can ignore me all you want, but I'm going to keep pressing this.

Me: Did you know we are neighbors?

Sam: WHAT????

Sam: OH THIS IS PERFECT. I AM A GENIUS!

Me: No you aren't! You made an already awkward situation even more awkward! The whole morning was weird! I mean we got along, but I'm pretty sure he still hates me, especially after I almost assaulted him in the parking lot after I thought he followed me home like some crazy stalker! Sam, this is stupid!

Sam: Oh this is so good. I'm telling this story at your wedding.

Me: Did you not listen to a word I just said???? I'm taking a nap.

Sam: Dream of Theo!

ROLLING MY EYES, I flop down onto my bed, flipping my phone over, much more aware now of the fact that it's *Theo* on the other side of my bedroom wall, and not some sweet old man who watches sports really loud. What's with that anyway? He plays it so loud it's like he's pretending he's in the actual stadium.

Just as my eyes fall shut, my phone rings next to me, an incoming call from my Nana. The smile that crosses my face is instant, the happiness I feel when I talk to her easy, and comforting. I slide my finger across the screen, and sit up, putting my phone to my ear.

"Hi Nana," I say, crossing my legs under me.

"Hi sweet pea," Nana's gentle voice croons in my ear. Just hearing her voice soothes me. "How was your weekend?"

"It was good," I answer honestly. "I went over to Mallory's last night for a girls' night, and this morning," I hesitate. Do I tell her I was set up by Sam on what essentially was a blind date, or simply tell her I was out for coffee

with a friend? “Uh, I went out for coffee with a friend.”

Nana doesn't say anything for a moment. “Hmm,” she finally murmurs.

Before she can say anything else, I interject. “It was just one of the midwives from the clinic. We've been meaning to hang out, and it finally worked out this morning. Very last minute.”

“I see,” Nana says. I can practically hear the smile on her face. She totally knows I'm bluffing, but if I tell her I was set up by Sam, she will only question it further, when nothing will ever happen between Theo and I. *Ever*. “Why don't you come over for dinner this evening?” Luckily she changes the subject. “I think I'm going to make some homemade meatballs. Papa has been begging me to make them for weeks, and he's starting to get real ornery. If I make them, he'll probably be in a better mood.”

I can't help but chuckle at that. Papa can be an ornery old man, that's for sure. He's not afraid to say what's on his mind either. The only time I've ever seen him hold his tongue is around my dad, and I'm pretty sure that's for my benefit.

“Sure, Nana, I can come over. I miss you.” And I do. Moving here has been so good for me, in that my time with them no longer has a distinct end time. No Dad looming over me, waiting for the moment he could pick me up and cut off contact until I begged to see them. I moved to Cinder Valley the first chance I could so I could be closer to them. They have been the only constant in my life since Mom died, so moving here made the most sense.

“We miss you, too, sweetie. Now, I better get to rolling those meatballs. Why don't you come around four-thirty?”

“Sounds great. I'll be there. Need me to pick anything up on the way?”

“Not a thing. Just bring your beautiful smile, that's all we need.”

A smile crosses my face at her sentiment. “Okay, well if you change your mind, let me know, okay?”

“Of course, sweet pea. We'll see you soon.”

After exchanging goodbyes, we hang up, and I flop down onto the bed, excited to take a nap, and then spend some time with my favorite people.

THEO

Me: Sam, I seriously cannot believe you did that.

Sam: I have no idea what you're talking about.

Me: Don't try to play that game Sam. I'm not in the mood.

Sam: Ugh, fine. Yes, I set you two up in the hopes that I would be three for three in my secret matchmaking business.

Me: Secret matchmaking business?

Sam: Yes. When Lainey first moved here, I had a feeling that she and Colin would be great together, and lo' and behold, they are. Then, there was this undeniable tension between Mallory and Tyler, and while I can't say I set them up, I can say that I knew they would end up together, just like Lainey and Colin. Therefore, I was hoping you and Peyton would make me three for three on my psychic matchmaking, but if you two are going to be dicks about it, then my streak is ending.

Me: Sweet Jesus. I appreciate you trying to help, but please, Sam. No more meddling in my life, or my love life. I'm still adjusting to civilian life again.

Sam: Okay, I won't. Pinky Promise. I just worry about you. I love you and want you to be happy.

Me: I am happy. Just trying to figure out how to live my life again. Are you ready for Mom and Dad to move here? Then maybe you can spend all your time worrying about them.

Sam: OH MY GOD SO EXCITED! Especially with the wedding coming up, it's going to be SO NICE to have mom around all the time.

Me: You say that now.

Sam: Oh shut it. You're just as excited. You missed us.

Me: Yes, I did.

Sam: Now, get your surly ass in bed. You work a night shift tonight.

Me: How the hell do you know that?

Sam: I have my ways.

Me: That's creepy as hell.

Sam: It's not. You have your schedule hanging on your fridge. I took a picture of it, so I knew when to plan your and Peyton's date.

Me: Ah.

Me: Goodnight, Sam.

Sam: Night big bro. Love you.

Me: Love you too.

The ground crunches beneath me as I shift my legs. Looking to my right, Ethan, a twenty-three year old kid, catches my eye. His face is covered in dirt, and the only recognizable features are his deep brown eyes. He jerks his chin toward the building fifty yards ahead, signaling our advance. He shuffles forward on his belly, and I slowly follow, the rest of the platoon flanked around us. Even though Ethan is young, I trust him completely. The kid's got good instincts.

The night air is slightly cooler than in the daytime, when the hot sun ruthlessly beats down on us, but the darkness makes the raid more precarious. My med kit is strapped to my back, adding to the weight of all the gear on my body.

Once we get the official signal, we start moving toward the building. Sweat beads at my brow, trailing down the dust encrusted on my face, but I ignore it. My mind is focused on the task at hand. Ethan gets off the ground, pressing his body against the wall of the building. He signals for me to

follow. As I stand, something feels off. Ethan notices it too, his eyes frantically turning to mine. He's just about to shout, when a bomb goes off, sending my body ricocheting into a stone wall. Pain flares between my shoulder and down my spine, and I feel hot blood exiting my leg, but I don't have time to focus on my pain.

The ringing in my ears makes it hard to hear, but I can hear the vague shouts of Medic! Medic! As I get to my feet, stumbling toward the voices, I see debris and shrapnel surrounding me. I reach for my bag on my shoulders, trying to tug it around to the front of my body.

Gunfire sounds all around me, the whizzing of bullets adding to the echoed ringing. To my right, I see John, laying on the ground, clutching at his chest. I run to him, ignoring the flashes of pain in my own body, throwing myself to the sand. I look around us for an active threat, and grab his body under his shoulders, dragging him out of the open fire. His heavy body is limp as I drag him, blood seeping out of his right leg, leaving a trail on the ground.

Now out of the line of fire, I drop my bag next to him, unzipping it and grabbing my supplies. One of the other guys follows, dropping to his knee, guarding and watching over us. I start my assessment, utilizing my training and the M.A.R.C.H acronym. Massive Bleeding. Airway Management. Respiration. Circulation. Head Injury, Hypothermia, Hypovolemia.

I tourniquet his leg, quickly, but thoroughly checking the rest of his body step by step. The whole time, he's grunting and groaning, face scrunched in pain. Once he's clear and semi-stable, I stand, following the yelling. To my right, a leg is laying on the ground, detached from the body it once was connected to. I swallow the gag threatening to bubble up my throat, and make my way to the wounded.

Ethan lays on the ground, blood seeping out of his body in multiple different locations. He's clutching his chest, gasping for air.

He won't survive this.

His leg is gone, arm severed to the point where it's hanging by a thread, a huge piece of shrapnel sticking out of his chest. His eyes meet mine, and I know he knows. He nods at me, before sputtering out, "There's a letter-" he sucks in another breath, "Under my mattress. Mail it to my girl." I nod, ready to hold him as he takes his last breaths.

I wake with a start, my heart beating rapidly in my chest. My breath is coming in staccato bursts, much like Ethan's last breaths.

Fuck.

Reaching over to my nightstand, I grab my phone, checking the time. Five thirty. I have to leave for work in an hour, so I might as well get up. I roll out of bed, trying to shake off the nightmare. Only it was a nightmare that actually happened.

I'll never forget going to Ethan's bunk after that raid. I was in the hospital for a while, while they waited for my leg to heal, but as soon as I was cleared, I set off to find the letter. When I pulled it out from under the mattress, the letter slipped out. I couldn't stop myself from reading it.

Just thinking about it makes my eyes well up with tears. I never should have had to send that letter. Ethan was ten feet in front of me, and while I live to see another day, his girlfriend, the mother of his child, grieves the loss of him.

I shake it off, trying to get into the right headspace for work. I don't know if I'll ever be free of these nightmares, but I'll do anything I can to prevent them. They usually occur when I'm exhausted, working a night shift and my sleep schedule is off, or otherwise drained. Sometimes they are random. The random ones are the worst, because I don't expect it. If I know I might get one, I can at least attempt to prepare myself.

I send a message off to the therapist I've been seeing every once in a while since I got home, and hope he can see me soon.

AFTER A LONG SHIFT, Tyler and I head back to the station to do our post shift checks, and finish any last minute charting. I can't wait to get home and into bed. I'm off tonight, then have a three day stretch before the holiday weekend. Both Tyler and I got lucky and got the entire weekend of Memorial Day off. Pretty sure we are going to spend a majority of the time on the river.

Tyler rubs his eyes, and I can see the sheer exhaustion in them. "Get outta here, man," I chuckle. "You need to get some sleep."

"Yeah, I guess. You sure you can finish up without me?" he asks.

"Positive, I just have to restock my bag." I send him on his way, and less than twenty minutes later, I'm climbing into my truck and heading toward home.

I roll down my window, sucking in some of the fresh spring air. The air is

so clean and light here, compared to the foul, polluted air of Afghanistan. Using one of the skills my therapist suggested, I use the coolness of the air to ground myself into the present moment. I have to force myself to stay in the present, not drag myself back to my past. It used to take a ton of work, but it's starting to get easier.

I focus on the dew on the grass, the way town is starting to get busy, the school buses filled with kids heading to the local elementary school where they will more than likely get the pleasure of being taught by my sister, and Lainey.

The parking lot for my apartment complex is nearly empty, a majority of people are off to work for the day already. After "following" Peyton home yesterday, I notice that her vehicle is still here. Interesting. I know she works every day, and is on call a lot, but I wonder why she isn't at work yet?

I hike up the flight of stairs to my apartment, ready to climb into bed and sleep the day away. I pass by Peyton's door, surprised when it opens right as I pass by. A startled scream falls from her mouth, as she clutches her chest in surprise, dropping her bag to the floor. "Woah!" I hold out my hand, grabbing her arm at her side. "Sorry, Peyton, I didn't mean to startle you."

She sucks in a few deep breaths. "No, I'm sorry, Theo, I didn't mean to scream like that. I wasn't expecting you to be at my door when I opened it. It was a long night, so I'm pretty tired."

"Did you get called in?" I ask as I bend down to pick up her bag and the contents that fell out.

She lets out a long yawn. "Yeah, we had a delivery late last night, I got home around four. Dr. Ness told me to come in a little late today because of it."

"You're still going into work?" I ask incredulously, standing up from my squatting position.

I hand her bag back to her as she responds, "Yep. We don't quite have enough staff yet to do a full rotating call schedule. Especially when Mal was out on maternity leave." She shrugs, throwing her bag over her shoulder. "But I'm sure we'll get there someday. I love my job, crazy hours and all." She pauses. "You just got off work, right? How was your shift?"

"Long. Never a dull shift being a paramedic, it seems."

"Well, we will have to swap stories sometime. I've got plenty after working in the ER for a few years."

"Yeah, I'm sure you do." I smirk. "I'll let you get to work. Hopefully

today goes well.” I wave at her, and she passes by me down the hall, waving too.

“See ya, Theo.”

EVER SINCE RUNNING into Peyton the other morning, we have continued to meet in the halls everyday at some point. It’s ironic, especially since we both have lived here for months without ever running into each other, only for our schedules to overlap nonstop this week. It’s usually when one of us is heading to or from work, so the conversations have been brief. But I can’t help but get a little excited every time I leave my apartment now, hoping I’ll see her. While she has warmed up to me since our coffee “date,” she can still be a little standoffish at times. I hope eventually she gets more relaxed, that I get to discover more about her personality, what makes her who she is.

It’s the Friday of Memorial Day weekend, so I ran out to the liquor and grocery stores to get supplies for the weekend. My parents got into town late last night, so we spent a majority of the day moving them into their new townhome. Kinda weird that we somehow all landed here in Cinder Valley, all because of my sister, and Lainey. After I got home from deployment, I just wanted to be close to my family, so starting here felt right. And surprisingly, it grew on me, as only a town like Cinder Valley can. I had been bouncing around the country ever since I was eighteen, so to be somewhere permanent feels good.

I head up the stairs with my arms full of brown liquor store bags containing whiskey, seltzers, and other beverages for the river day - including the disgusting excuse for alcohol that is Busch Lite. I round the corner and am surprised to find Peyton sitting on the floor in front of her front door. Her knees are tucked up to her chest, one arm wrapped around them, the other hidden, her head dropped against her knees. She’s still in her plum purple scrubs and her tennis shoes. “Peyton?” I softly ask.

She tips her head up, brushing her blonde hair from her eyes. One hand is at her neck, turning the pearl on her necklace between her fingers. “Theo?” Her eyes are red, brimming with moisture, and her face is blotchy, no doubt from tears.

“What are you doing?”

“Oh, um. Nothing,” she responds quietly.

“Why are you sitting on the floor outside of your apartment?”

“Um, no reason.”

“You sure?”

“Yep,” she answers, wiping her eyes. “Just needed a minute I guess.”

“Are you going to go inside?” I ask. She had to have locked herself out. There’s no reason for her to be sitting on this nasty floor otherwise.

“Eventually,” she replies softly.

“Did you lock yourself out?” I bend my knees and set down the paper bags, squatting so I’m down to her level, looking at her in her sky blue eyes.

She snuffles, then nods, dropping her head back to her knees. “I forgot to grab my key this morning when I left for work. I was out of my routine since I got called in early, so I was rushing. I didn’t realize until I got home thirty minutes ago.”

“You’ve been sitting here for thirty minutes?”

She nods against her knees. “I needed a minute to process, and then you showed up.”

“Did you call anyone? Housing? Mallory? My sister?” I ask, already trying to think of a plan.

“Housing is closed, and I didn’t want to bother Mallory. We had a... rough shift at work.”

“And Sam?” I ask.

She shakes her head, still not looking at me. “Why the hell not? What were you going to do? Sit out here all night?”

She shrugs her shoulders. “I hadn’t thought that far ahead. I just needed a moment to process.”

Fuck. Whatever is really bothering her is bigger than a lockout, and it must’ve happened at work. I know that feeling all too well. I can’t help but wonder what went so wrong today, but I get the feeling it had to have been really bad. I mean this girl has worked in an ER, where crazy shit happens. She’s almost catatonic right now, so I can’t even bear the thought of what she has gone through.

I tug at the back of my neck, trying to formulate a plan. I could call Sam, see if she can spend the night there, or I could just offer my place. That seems like the most logical option. I mean, it’s right next door. I have extra sweats she can wear, and right away tomorrow we can call the housing director and get her into her place before we get on the river.

Decision made, I grab one of her hands that is wrapped around her legs. “Come on,” I softly say.

She looks up at me, tears now freely streaming down her face. “What?”

“You can stay at my place tonight. I’m not letting you sit out here all night, not when I live right next door and you had such a bad shift. It’s stupid. Let’s go.” I pull her to stand, and she falls into my chest, arms tightly snaking around my torso, heavy sobs falling from her mouth. “Shhh, I’ve got you,” I whisper, letting her cry.

I shift her so that she’s underneath my arm, and walk the ten steps to my door, unlocking it and leading her inside. I set the grocery bags on the counter. Guiding her to the couch, I pull her bag off her shoulder, dropping it to the floor and sitting us down on the couch. She curls up against my chest again, sobs wracking her body. I rub my hand up and down her spine slowly, trying to calm her. I’m not always great with crying women, but right now, she needs this. Needs someone to just hold her and let her cry.

Her cries cease after a few minutes, and she sits up abruptly, like she just realized who was holding her. “I’m so sorry.” She wipes her face aggressively, like the tears are physically hurting her.

“Nothing to be sorry for,” I say, reaching over to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “We’ve all been there. Perks of working in healthcare, right?”

She nods. “Want to talk about it?” I ask.

“I don’t know yet. I need a minute. I can’t stay here, Theo,” she says, eyes wandering around my small apartment. The walls are nearly bare, the only decor a throw pillow on the couch beside her. I’ve been living here for a few months, but the place has no personalized touches.

“Why not?”

“Because,” she whispers. “I’m not going to barge into your place at eight o’clock on a Friday night. I’m the definition of a mess right now.”

“Peyton, where are you going to go?” I quirk a brow, begging her to fight me on this. She’s silent for a long moment. “See, it makes the most sense. That way in the morning, you can call the director, and we can go from there.”

“I don’t have clothes,” she sighs.

“I have clothes.”

“Fine,” she relents. I stand from the couch, stretching my arms above my head. She glances up and down my body, eyes wide.

“I’ll grab you some stuff.” I head to my bedroom, taking a moment to

gather myself. What a weird turn of events the last fifteen minutes have brought. I quickly change myself, throwing on a fresh t-shirt and sweats. I grab a pair of sweats and an old ARMY t-shirt I have for Peyton, and on a second thought, grab a folded towel from the closet.

I get the feeling that Peyton needs someone to look out for her. Sure, she has my sister and their friends, but it almost seems like she holds them at an arm's distance, never wanting to get too close.

When I walk back into the living room, she's kicked off her tennis shoes and is aimlessly wandering around, eyes flitting to every sad corner of the apartment. "Here," I say, offering the clothes to her. "I brought you a towel too, in case you want to shower quick."

"I would love that," she sighs gratefully, shoulders dropping in relief. "Even just to rinse off would be *amazing*."

"Go for it." I gesture to the bathroom down the hall. "Feel free to use whatever, and let me know if you need anything."

"Thank you, Theo. I appreciate this a lot."

"No problem." I shrug. I watch her as she turns, heading down the short hallway to the bathroom. Her hips sway with each step she takes, and for some reason, I can't tear my eyes off her.

She enters the bathroom, closing the door behind her, and I let out a long sigh when I hear the shower turn on. I meant it when I told her it's no problem to let her crash here. Beyond just getting to know her, I want to help her. And I have to admit, this girl is getting under my skin.

PEYTON

The hot water pounds against my tense muscles, relaxing me slightly. God, this day has just been an absolute disaster. It started off so promising. We had a mom laboring, and her progression was going great. Then, when she was pushing, we lost the baby's heartbeat. The baby came out fast enough that we didn't need to do an emergency c-section. We did resuscitation efforts, but we couldn't get the baby back. We've had situations like this before, but we've always been able to get the baby breathing before we send them off to a bigger facility with a NICU.

Hearing the wailing cries of the parents when we told them we weren't able to save their child is a sound I never want to hear again. It brought me right back to the day we lost my mom. My Nana's cries haunt my dreams, my memories, every waking moment of my life. I had to take a moment and try to regain my composure to keep working, but once the shift was done and I got home to find I'd locked myself out, the dam broke. I was overwhelmed, broken, hurting for the baby's parents, and missing my mom.

I let another round of tears fall. I've dealt with this before. Working in the ER, you see a lot, but this feels different. I worked with this patient through her entire pregnancy, every clinic visit, every ultrasound, phone call. It's more personal this time, and I'm not sure how to process it.

I stand under the spray of the water, trying to let the day wash off me. I'd been sitting on the ground, trying to think of something to do when Theo appeared. This isn't the first time I've locked myself out, and usually Mallory or Tyler run over to let me in quickly with the spare key I gave them. But Mallory needed to get home to her family after a day like today. I could have

called Lainey or Sam, but I just needed a moment. Just a moment to figure out this day. My dad is always telling me how irresponsible I am, how forgetful, how I don't think ahead. I was wallowing in self pity when Theo arrived. I didn't want to accept his help, but my options were limited. So, here we are. Standing naked in the shower of one of my best friends' brother's apartment. What a clusterfuck.

I shut the water off with a sigh, not ready to face reality. Reality being the fact that I cannot keep my mind off the man on the other side of the wall. His broody blue eyes have been in my dreams every night this week. And they have been *good* dreams. Dreams where I wake up, frustrated and horny. Theo is so damn nice, so genuine, I have a hard time believing he hates me, but I can't shake that nagging feeling that he still does, that maybe he's only putting on a show for his sister.

Grabbing the plush towel hanging on the hook, I dry myself off in a rush, and throw on the sweats and shirt Theo gave me. My hair is in shambles, strands sticking out everywhere. I quickly twist it into a french braid, using a bobby pin from my bag to secure it to the back of my head. It will have to do for now.

I head out into the living room, where the sounds of a hockey game carry through the small room. Theo is sitting on the couch, eyes focused on the tv, a glass of dark liquor in his hand. "Hey," I quietly say, not wanting to startle him.

He turns toward me, glancing up and down my body. "I'm sure I look like a hobo right now," I joke. "Your clothes are huge. I'm swimming in these sweats."

He chuckles, "I'm sorry I don't have better fitting clothes for you. Maybe I should get a pair of sweats in your size in case this happens again."

"No no." I smile, waving my hands in front of me. I definitely won't let this happen again. I don't want to put myself in this position of needing someone, or inconveniencing them. "I won't let this happen again, I'm already inconveniencing you enough."

Theo stands from the couch, striding over to me. "You aren't inconveniencing me. At all."

I shrug. Regardless of how much I can't stop thinking about this man, I'm sure he still isn't my biggest fan. I mean, he has been nice to me ever since our "date" but I'm pretty sure that is just out of obligation, especially now that we are neighbors who bump into each other like, every other day.

“Peyton, seriously, it’s fine. It’s not like I was about to just walk by you and leave you sitting on the floor all night.”

I shrug again, trying to appear indifferent.

“Well, you have my phone number, right?” he asks, pulling his phone out of his sweats pockets, and *oh my lanta*. How am I just noticing the massive bulge on this man? I mean. Not like I was looking before, but now that I see it, I can’t take my eyes off it. “Peyton?” His voice pulls me from my haze. I shake my head a little.

“Uh- yes, phone number, yes!” I practically cheer. *Take it down a notch, girl. Jeez.* “You’re in the group chat, right? ‘Cause then I do.”

He shakes his head, laughing a little. “Yeah, I’m in there. I have yours, too.”

“Great!” I hold both my hands up in an aggressive double thumbs up. My eyes stray from him, hoping to find something, anything, to draw my attention to. The couch catches my eye, as well as the stack of blankets and pillows on it. “Oh, you didn’t have to do all that, I could have just used the throw pillow and blanket.”

“Oh no.” Theo gestures at the couch. “I’m sleeping out here. I put fresh sheets on my bed for you.” He starts down the hall toward his room, not bothering to see if I’m following.

“Like hell. There is no way I am taking over your apartment, clothes, and bed. I’m sleeping on the couch.” I set my bag and scrubs to the ground, and drop myself onto the couch, crossing my legs.

Theo comes barreling back down the hall. “Peyton, you’re my guest. I want you to be comfortable.”

I retort back, “I promise I will be way more comfortable on the couch.” The thought of sleeping in *his bed*? With his sheets all smelling like him? *Fuck. No.* My little crush is already running haywire, I need to put a lid on this before it goes any further. “Seriously, it’s fine.”

Theo groans, rubbing a hand up and down his face. “Please?”

“Nope. Really, I am just fine out here.”

He sighs. “Fine, but if you pull any funny business and tell my sister or parents I made you sleep on the couch, you will regret it.” He points a finger at me, eyes narrowing.

“Oh what, scared of your sister?” I tease.

“Yes,” he deadpans.

“Fair.” I wave him off. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone. We probably

shouldn't even tell her I had to stay here. I mean, think of the whiplash. She'll gloat for weeks about how she was right."

Theo literally shudders. "Good point."

"Therefore, my lips are sealed." I mimic zipping my lips shut and throwing the key.

"I'm holding you to that." He points at the blankets. "Here, let me help you get those set up."

"Oh gosh, no I'm fine. You can finish your game out here, go to bed later. Don't worry about me. We don't have to be at the river landing until ten, right?"

He nods. "Right, but honestly, I was going to head to bed anyway, unless you want to watch the rest of the game with me?"

I shrug. "Sure, why not?"

We set up the blankets and pillows for me, and Theo sits down on the opposite end of the couch. I tuck my feet underneath me, covering myself with the blanket and clutching one of the pillows to my chest.

The game plays in the background, but I can't get myself to focus on the screen. My mind is racing, eyes continually flicking to my left to Theo. His jaw is clenched, hand fisted on the thigh of his sweatpants.

Fuck, look away Peyton. Don't look at his muscular thighs, or imagine what lies underneath the pants. Something happens in the game, and Theo lets out a low, rumbling groan. "Fuck." He curses through gritted teeth.

Well fuck if that doesn't make my pussy clench.

"I missed it. What happened?"

"Fuckin' Davison, missed an easy shot on goal." He waves a hand at the screen. "You know, they fought so hard to get the kid back here, playing on his home ice, but he can't shoot for shit anymore."

"Oh, that's too bad," I whisper. "I mean, he still seems pretty talented."

"He is," Theo grunts. "Just needs to get his head out of his ass. He's too damn cocky."

Unsure of what else to say, I just nod, turning back to the TV, trying to ignore the way his grumbly voice sent tingles between my thighs.

MY HEAVY EYES flutter open to find Theo carefully draping a blanket over my

shoulders. A garbled noise escapes my mouth as I try to sit up. “Shh, just keep sleeping. You’re good.”

“Wha-”

“It’s Theo, go back to sleep.”

My head falls back to the pillow, and I slowly feel myself fading back to sleep, when a gentle hand softly caresses my cheek.

CLANG!

“Fuck!” A deep voice yells.

I roll off the couch in a panic, legs kicking, arms flailing. I land on the hard floor with a *thunk*. *What the fuck is happening?!* I keep kicking my legs, trying to fend off any attackers. I scream, terrified. Someone’s breaking in! They’re going to kidnap me, or steal all my stuff!

“Peyton!” The low voice from before yells. *How do they know my name?!* The blanket I’ve held over my face is ripped down, and my eyes fly open. Theo is before me, face red, eyes wild, hair disheveled. I stop my kicking, body relaxing into the floor. Theo drops his hands to my shoulders, taking long gasping breaths.

“Oops.” He cringes. “I was trying to be quiet, but I dropped a metal bowl on my foot. I didn’t mean to wake you, or scare the shit out of you for that matter. You’ve got a good set of lungs.”

My heaving breaths slow, and my eyes focus more on the man in front of me. His muscular thighs are straddled around my hips, hands and arms caged around my head. And he’s shirtless.

Shirtless.

This man has muscles that Chris Evans would envy. My eyes drag down his chiseled jaw, to the smooth skin of his chest. “Peyton, are you okay?” I avert my eyes abruptly, looking back at his face.

“Yeah, fine. Sorry. Did I kick you at all?” I ask.

“Nah, you’re good.” He shifts his body off of me, and I swear, the only thing I can think of right now is how good it would feel to be dominated by him. Goosebumps erupt on my skin, and I sit up from the floor. Theo slumps back against the couch, running a hand through his mussed blonde hair. “Fuck, what a way to start the morning.”

“Yeah, sorry.” I cringe.

“Stop saying sorry, Peyton. I’m the one that scared you half to death.”

I shrug. “I would have been scared regardless. I totally forgot where I was.”

He lets out a low chuckle. “Well, either way, I feel bad.” He stands from the floor, holding out a hand to help me up.

Oh sweet Jesus. How didn’t I notice before? The man is wearing boxers. *Only boxers.* He was just straddling me in just his thin pair of black boxer briefs. Dammit all to hell. *Get it together Peyton. This man doesn’t like you. He’s tolerating you because you’re friends with his sister.*

Theo clears his throat, and I realize I’m literally just sitting here gaping at him in his boxers. I fumble over the blankets, taking his outstretched hand. His hands are warm, the skin of his fingers calloused and rough. He pulls me to my feet with ease, then holds my gaze for a moment. “You sure you’re okay? I’m a little worried you’re going into shock.” Theo mutters.

“Nope,” I practically shriek. “All good here, just trying to wake up!”

He eyes me warily before seemingly choosing to ignore my weirdness. “What time is it?” I question.

“Seven thirty,” he answers, picking up the blanket from the ground. I don’t miss the tenseness in his shoulders, or the way he hasn’t fully relaxed. His body is wound up.

“Oh, so pretty early still. Wait, what time did we go to bed? I don’t remember falling asleep.”

“I’m not sure, maybe ten? You passed out while the game was on, so I covered you up and went to bed.” Theo walks toward the kitchen, picking up the discarded bowl on the ground.

“Huh. Interesting,” I say, trying to appear nonchalant. “Well, I’ll call the housing director. I think they open at seven thirty.”

“They do. I checked,” Theo replies.

“Oh, cool.” I dig my phone out of the crevice of the couch, and pull up the number to call. I hold the phone up to my ear, and when a crabby voice answers, I wince.

After five minutes of trying to explain myself and how it was an accident, and that I just need to be let into my place, Earl, the property manager, who is now one of my least favorite people on the planet, agrees to come let me into my place. He did not seem pleased about it, and was kinda ornery about the whole thing. Which like, if he’s a landlord, shouldn’t he expect these kinds of

calls? I mean, he *literally* signed up for this job.

“Was he a dick to you?” Theo asks.

“Yep. Pretty sure I inconvenienced him, even though it’s his job.”

“Yeah, Earl isn’t the nicest guy.”

“I got that vibe. He said he will ‘get here when he gets here.’ Even though I told him I have stuff going on today.”

“I’ll call him. He likes me. We’ll have you in your place in no time. We have a big day ahead of us.” He grins softly, pouring some cereal into a bowl.

“Why does he like you and not me?” I ask, a little dumbfounded.

“He cut himself when he was fixing something down the hall, and I caught him as he was about to run to the ER. Stitched him up quickly, and he’s been nice ever since.” He shrugs, like it’s no big deal.

“Huh, well that’s annoying.” I turn toward the couch, folding up the disheveled sheets, and stacking them in the corner of the couch. I can hear Theo in the background on the phone with Earl, and he laughs exuberantly about something, and then hangs up a moment later.

“He’ll be here in ten,” Theo says, shoveling a spoonful of cereal into his mouth.

“Oh, great.”

“Want some cereal, or something to eat?” he asks.

“Nope, I’m good. I have stuff at home I’ll eat. Thanks though.”

“Anytime.” He shrugs.

Exactly ten minutes later, there is a firm knock on Theo’s front door, so he stands from the table, and opens it to reveal the greasy looking old man. Luckily, I haven’t had to see him since I moved in. He and Theo chat for a few minutes, and Theo’s voice sounds fake and way too enthusiastic. He must be trying to stay on his good side.

Finally, Earl is letting me into my apartment, glaring at me like I’ve inconvenienced his whole day. I apologize profusely, and he doesn’t reply, just turns around and walks away, calling out a goodbye to Theo.

I awkwardly stand in my open doorway while Theo stands before me, rocking on his heels, hands in the pockets of the shorts he changed into before Earl came. “Well, I-uh,” I stumble over my words, unsure of what to say next. “I guess I’ll see you in a bit?” I raise a hand to awkwardly wave. Before I can start to close the door, Theo steps toward me, holding a hand up to stop me.

“Wait,” he says, sounding a little nervous. “Should we ride together? I

mean, we are going to the same place.”

“I mean, sure. I just don’t want to be in your way.”

“What makes you think you would be in my way?”

“Well... I-I don’t know.” The months of glaring, the fact that he’s only been talking to me for the last couple of weeks. Not to mention that he had to deal with me sleeping on his couch and then screaming like a wild animal when I woke up.

“You won’t be. It makes the most sense for us to ride together. I’ll meet you back here in an hour? Does that work?” he asks, quirking a brow.

“Sure.”

He waves goodbye, and I slowly close the door behind him. Letting out an exasperated breath, I stride over to my couch, throwing myself onto the cushion. I’m exhausted. I slept like a rock on Theo’s couch, but it still didn’t help the emotional exhaustion from the previous day. My phone buzzes in my pocket, reminding me that I am still in Theo’s sweats and ARMY shirt. I pull out my phone, reading the messages I must have missed.

THE ONE WHERE THEY HAVE A RIVER DAY

Sam: Alright, gang. Game plan. Owen and I are dropping our truck off at the landing at ten, then Lainey and Colin are picking us up to head to the canoe launch. Mallory and Tyler, Theo and Peyton, you guys all meet us there. Mallory’s mom will meet us at the launch to pick up Felicity, and then meet us back at my parents’ new place for festivities.

Mallory: Sounds good to us, we are just getting everything loaded up.

Theo: Yep, works for me.

Colin: Lainey and I have food, water, drinks, and lots of towels, sunscreen, and life jackets.

Me: Anything I should bring?

Sam: Just your cute self! :)

Me: Well, let me know, I can stop somewhere on the way!

Theo: I’m bringing Peyton, so we can stop if need be.

Theo and I sent that message at the exact same time. Shit. I was hoping to get out of riding with him by telling him I needed to stop somewhere and get something.

Sam: Ooooh, riding together I see? Any reason why? ;)

Theo: Because we are neighbors and it makes sense?

Sam: I will get you two to break, just you wait.

I groan, shoving my head into the couch cushion. I check the time on my phone. It's barely eight-fifteen, so I have plenty of time to take a cat nap before we head out. Hopefully I can come up with a reason not to ride with him by the time we have to leave.

He's being too nice to me, and it's confusing. I've spent the last almost-year thinking he hates me, and I'm still not convinced that he doesn't... Even so, I can't stop the crush on him that is forming.

THEO

After waking up from an intense nightmare this morning, I needed to get out of my room. I'd totally forgotten that Peyton was sleeping on my couch, so when I dropped that bowl in the kitchen, and she'd started screaming, I nearly went into a tailspin. I was instantly on high alert, my body looking for the fight, while also trying to protect Peyton at all costs. I think I blacked out when I climbed on top of her, trying to use my body to protect her like I would have shielded a wounded soldier I'm aiding. I got her calmed down, but the feeling of my body over hers, completely at my mercy, erupted feelings in me that I didn't quite expect.

I haven't quite calmed down, but hopefully spending some time in the sun today will help me shake it off. Sometimes after a nightmare I end up on edge or pissy, but that's not how I want to spend today.

I knock on the door of Peyton's apartment again, waiting for her to open it. I can hear her behind the door, shuffling around, and a second later, she calls out, "Just a minute!"

"Can I at least come in?" I ask. "I know I'm early."

All movement stops, and a second later the door flies open, Peyton behind it, looking scrambled. She huffs out a long breath before stepping aside to let me in. She closes and locks the door behind me. "I overslept. I took a nap, and just woke up when you knocked the first time. My alarm didn't go off."

"It's all good," I promise. "I was ready, so I figured I'd pop over and see if you needed help with anything." I wasn't about to sit around doing nothing, stewing, replaying the nightmare over and over. Taking a look around her

apartment, it mirrors mine exactly. However, where mine is bland and basic, hers is full of cute decor and color, with lots of pictures.

“No, I think I’m okay. I have my bag packed, I just need to change and grab a few last minute things,” she replies, waving her hand around. “Make yourself at home. Do you need water or anything?”

I shake my head. “I’m good.”

“Great, well if you change your mind, help yourself. I’ll be right back.” She turns, darting down the hall toward her room, closing the door with a thud. I’m still in the entryway, so I kick off my sandals, and drop my cooler and backpack onto the ground. I meander into the living room, taking in the photos in frames. Most of them are of Peyton as a young girl, with a woman by her side, who I assume is her mom. Seeing these pictures, I realize I know very little about her family. Almost all of the photos she has displayed are of her and this woman. If it’s her mother, she looks nothing like her. The woman has long raven black hair, a stark contrast to Peyton’s bright blonde. I can’t put my finger on it, but the woman looks vaguely familiar for some reason.

I move over to a desk in the corner, looking at the pictures there. A younger version of Peyton stands in a hideous canary yellow graduation gown, holding her diploma, a cheesy grin on her face. The man next to her has an arm wrapped around her shoulder, a straight look on his face, as if he’s bored or bothered to be there. I get the feeling this is her dad. She looks a lot more like him. Hair that is blonde, but slightly graying, and the same bright blue eyes.

I can’t help but notice there seems to be no pictures of her with friends. The only pictures in the whole living area are old ones of her and the woman I assume to be her mom, and the man I think is her dad. There is a more recent one though, of her with scrubs on and a stethoscope around her neck.

Her dad stands beside her, and a woman, different from the one I think is her mom, stands on her other side, and a young man beside her. No one in the photo looks genuinely happy, least of all Peyton. I briefly wonder if the younger man is or was her boyfriend, and I’m surprised at the overwhelming feelings of jealousy that arise. I pick up the frame, trying to analyze every angle, figure out who this guy is to her.

“What are you looking at?” Peyton’s voice shocks me out of my investigation, and the frame falls to the floor, shattering as it hits the ground.

“Fuck,” I curse under my breath, dropping to the floor, trying to clean up

the glass with my bare hands.

“Theo, stop!” Peyton shouts. “You’re going to cut yourself.” My hands stop their frantic fluttering over the glass as she runs over to me, pulling me off the floor. My back twinges at the fast movement, but I ignore it.

“Fuck, I’m sorry, Peyton. I was just looking at some of your pictures, and you scared the shit out of me.”

“It’s okay, really. I hate that picture anyway.” She shrugs, heading toward the hall closet. She pulls a broom and dustpan out, and walks back over to where I stand.

“Here, I’ll do it,” I say, reaching my hand out to grab them from her, and start sweeping up the broken glass. Once it’s cleaned up, I pick the picture off the floor, and hand it to her before dumping the glass into the trash. When I turn around, my eyes catch Peyton opening a desk drawer, and tossing it in, moving a notebook so it sits underneath it.

“I’m really sorry,” I say, walking toward her.

She waves me off again. “Honestly, Theo. It’s fine. I needed an excuse to get rid of it anyway.”

My eyes are drawn from where she closes the desk drawer to her body. She’s wearing an oversized white linen shirt, and I can just barely see the hem of her black shorts underneath. My gaze wanders up and down her body, lingering on her long legs, and the curves of her hips. Peyton walks away from the desk, and I can’t help but watch her leave, focusing on the way her curves flare out to a perfect ass. I pick my jaw off the floor, and follow her.

“Theo?”

“Huh?” I mumble, pulled from the haze. “Got distracted. What’s up?”

“I was just asking if you were ready to go. Are you okay?” she murmurs.

“Oh, yeah. Fine. Just in my own world. I’m ready if you are.” I head to the entryway, and sling my backpack over my shoulder, reaching down to grab her bag from her.

“I got it,” she insists.

“I know, but I can carry it.” I shrug, grabbing the bag from her, and picking up my cooler off the ground with my free hand. Heading out the door, I make sure she is following behind me, and make sure she grabs her keys as she locks the front door. We walk down the hall in silence, and five minutes later, we are heading outside of town to the river launch.

I pull the truck into a parking spot, taking in the nearly-full parking lot, and people wandering around everywhere. The landing is packed anytime

there's beautiful weather, let alone on a holiday weekend. I spot Mallory and Tyler sitting on a park bench, Felicity in Mallory's arms. I shut the truck off, grabbing our bags from the back, and together, Peyton and I walk toward them.

Mallory lifts her head up when she hears us approaching, a sly smile crossing her face. Tyler is oblivious to our arrival, all his focus on his daughter. Felicity is in a cute little watermelon dress, with a matching hat and sunglasses. She looks fucking adorable.

"Hey guys," Mallory says, standing from the bench. Tyler realizes we are here, and stops fixing Felicity's hat.

Peyton strides over to Mallory, giving her a side hug, and squeezing Felicity's cheeks. She coos sweetly at her, and the way Felicity gives her a huge gummy smile in response makes me smile. Tyler crosses over to me, and slapping a hand down on my shoulder. "Hey, man." He winks. "Anything you need to tell me?"

"No? What do you mean?" I ask.

He juts his chin out toward Peyton. "What's up with you and Peyton?"

I can't help the chortle I let out. "Nothing, honest. Sam tried to set us up, but I think we mutually decided not to go any further. Turns out we are neighbors, so I brought her today. Last night she got locked out of her apartment so she stayed at my place." I try to sound casual and unbothered, but I find myself omitting the few times I've run into her this week in the hallway between work shifts, and the fact that I always check to see if her car is parked in the lot of our apartment complex.

Tyler laughs, "That was a pretty long winded explanation. She stayed at your place last night?"

"Yeah, when I got home from the store, she was locked out of her apartment. And she was crying," I lower my voice as I add on. "Sounds like they had a really rough day at work." I keep my eyes on Peyton as I talk. "She told me she didn't want to call Mal for the spare key, and didn't call anyone else, so I told her to come to my place. She slept on the couch, even though I *told* her to take my bed and *I* would sleep on the couch..." I shake my head as I trail off, smirking as I remember the way she was snoring softly after she fell asleep during the third period of the hockey game last night.

"I'm glad you were there for her. Mallory told me a bit about what happened on their shift, and it was not good," Tyler replies. "Does Sam know any of this?"

“Nope, and we’re going to keep it that way.” I focus back on him, pointing a finger in his direction. “So if she finds out, I’ll know who to blame.”

He holds his hands up. “No problem, I don’t want to feel the wrath of your sister, dude.”

“You’re telling me,” I grumble. “Should we get the canoes from the trucks?” I ask.

“Sure,” Tyler answers. He tells Mallory what we are doing, and we walk off toward the trucks, unload the canoes and oars, and head toward the water.

Peyton and Mallory are sitting on the ground closer to the shoreline, Felicity on the sand between them. I can hear Felicity’s babbles as we walk closer. Tyler reaches down to grab the baby carrier from the diaper bag and puts it on, clicking all the clasps and tightening everything.

“Do you really need to wear her right now? My mom will be here any minute, honey,” Mallory asks.

“Hey, you know how much I love wearing her. Don’t take this away from me,” Tyler answers jokingly, bending down to pick up his daughter. Mallory sighs. Right as she’s about to respond, my sister bounds toward us, kicking up sand as she does, throwing her arms around me in a tight hug.

“Jeez, Sam. You alright?” I ask.

“Yes!” she squeals. “I’m so excited. It’s going to be so fun. First river day of the year!”

I peel her arms off me, and thankfully she doesn’t resist. She’s already running toward the girls anyway, throwing her arms around them, cooing at Felicity on Tyler’s chest.

PEYTON

Who gave Theo the right to look *so fucking hot* in a cropped ARMY tank? I mean, seriously. His biceps are thick, the muscles practically rippling with each movement of his arms. What is it that Lainey calls sexy arms? Arm Porn? I have no idea, but damn, this man has some muscles.

I'm in the middle of staring at Theo when his sister bounces toward us, throwing her arms around him. She squeezes him tightly before running over to Mal and me, hugging us too. She talks to Felicity for a moment, and then hooks her finger at me in a "come here" motion. I follow her over to a bench, sitting down next to her.

"So?" she asks, raising her eyebrows dramatically as soon as my ass hits the seat.

"So, what?" I reply.

"How are things with you and Theo?"

"Fine? Why do you ask?" Shit, she saw me ogling him. *Shit shit shit*, she is never going to let me forget it.

"Because, I can see the way you two look at each other! I mean look, right now, he's looking at you out of the corner of his eye, trying not to watch every move you make."

"Not true. He's probably just making sure you don't hurt me or something. You're crazy." Even so, I chance a glance at Theo, and wince when I see that he is looking in my direction. Only, he's glaring again. Wonderful.

She waves a hand flippantly. "I am, I accept it. But still."

"Either way, we're neighbors and he's just being nice, there is nothing

going on,” I say, trying to drive home my point.

“Suuure.” She gestures over at Mallory and Tyler both fixing Felicity in the carrier, smiling at her. “Those two were ‘just roommates’, and now look at them. Happy as fuck, and a cute little baby to show for it.”

I can’t help but smile at the two of them, because she’s got a point. They are happy as can be, and seeing Tyler with his daughter is the cutest thing. I mean, how can you look at a giant 6’6” man with an infant and not swoon?

“Well whatever you might think, we’re *only* neighbors,” I repeat. “I mean, he...” *Hates me. Thinks I’m a loser and an inconvenience.* “I don’t think he likes me much, Sam. Look at him right now, he’s literally glaring at me.” I subtly point at Theo across the beach, eyes turned downward on me.

“Ohhh no he’s not,” Sam draws. “That’s his ‘hot for you’ look. He used to do that all the time in high school! He would take me and Lainey out bowling and stare at the girl working the counter. I used to tease him about it, but he never made a move on her. I’m the one that told her he had a crush on her, and she just said the same thing, that he hated her because he was always glaring at her.” She cackles at the memory.

My mind is spinning. I’m dumbfounded, trying to evaluate every past interaction I’ve had with Theo through this new and very different lens. If that’s the look he gives a girl he supposedly likes, then he really hasn’t hated me for the last year? According to Sam, that look means he... *likes* me?

Sam is still giggling when Lainey drops down next to me on the bench. “What’s up?” She squeezes my shoulder gently. She glances up to where my eyes are looking at Theo, who is *still* glaring at me. “Oh shit, Theo’s got a crush,” she murmurs.

“What!” I shriek, averting my gaze.

“That’s his signature look,” she giggles. “Am I right, Sam?”

Sam nods. “You sure are, Laines. I just finished telling her that. But she doesn’t believe me. Says he hates her.”

Dropping my head into my hands, I groan. “Stoooppp you guys. I don’t like him, he doesn’t like me. We. Are. Friends. Please, *please* can we drop it? I am not cut out for dating, now, or ever.”

Lainey rubs my back in soothing circles, and Sam grips my hand. “We just want you to be happy,” Sam says.

“I am. I love my job, and I love my friends, I don’t need a boyfriend, I’ve made it this far without one, I can make it,” I reply quickly.

“Have you ever had a boyfriend, Peyton?” Lainey quietly asks.

I let out a long sigh. “No.” It’s embarrassing, but I am what some might consider a “late bloomer.” In high school, I was the outcast, the girl that no one wanted to be friends with. Everyone knew that Hunter was my step-brother, and Hunter was - and still is - the kind of person people either were bullied by, or fell into step with, so as not to become his next victim. Therefore, they hated me for my association with him. I was practically branded with a Scarlet Letter. Dating in high school wasn’t an option, and then when I went to college, I became single-mindedly focused on my studies and graduating from nursing school. I did meet one guy that I really liked. We spent a lot of time together - some may even have considered us dating - but we never talked about it.

At twenty-three, he was my first kiss, and he took my virginity. I’d wanted to get it over with, and I truly cared about him as a person. We were studying one night when it happened. The kiss wasn’t special, no fireworks like I’d dreamed there might be. It was awkward, uncomfortable, and... slobbery. Things progressed, until he asked me if we could have sex. He didn’t pressure me, but I didn’t exactly feel like I could say no.

For the first time in my life since Mom died, I felt wanted.

So, I said yes. He didn’t take care of me at all, just focused on getting his dick inside me. Three pumps later, I laid underneath him, confused and disappointed. After he threw out the condom, he gave me a peck on the cheek, said “thanks” and left.

I knew it wasn’t how sex was supposed to be, but I naively couldn’t get over the feeling that someone wanted me. I texted him the next day to see if we could meet up again to study, craving someone by my side. I didn’t want to have sex, but I enjoyed his friendship.

He’d replied, a simple, “Sorry. Peyton, but I don’t think we should hang anymore.”

After that, I gave up. Gave up on that feeling of ever being wanted. The benefit of closeness just didn’t outweigh the risk of losing what little connection I could foster. I focused on work, and my studies. Graduated with honors, was pinned by my Nana at my nursing graduation, and moved to Cinder Valley the second I could. I lived with my grandparents for a few months until I found a place, and have lived in my apartment since. And it’s been good since moving here. But I sometimes still have the deep-seated fear that my friends are only my friends out of pity, that their true motivations are only that they feel bad for the poor girl with no friends.

It's hard to get rid of the feelings so deeply ingrained inside.

"It's embarrassing." I cringe, shaking my head to ward off the memories and unwanted feelings of vulnerability. I notice that Mallory's mom is here, and is prying Felicity from Tyler's unwilling arms. "I haven't told anyone that, but it's never happened for me. It's like I have the plague. No one wants to be around me."

"That right there is some bullshit," Sam snorts. "We want you. We love you. You are the perfect addition to our little family, and I'm so thankful we found you."

I squeeze her hand. Her words are warm and she delivers them so confidently that I want to believe her. "I appreciate it. And I love you guys too," I say. The nagging voice in the back of my head is subdued. For now.

"Now, let's go have some fun," she says, pulling me off the bench into one of her painfully tight hugs. I squeeze her back, almost feeling a weight lifted from my chest at my admission.

Sam turns her head toward my cheek, and I shove her away from me, straight arming her. "Uh-uh, missy. No face licks today." She's gotten me good before, but I clocked it this time.

She crosses her arms across her chest, pouting. "It's how I show my love!"

"Well, your love is known." I pat her on the head. Just as I turn away to head toward our little group, Sam flings herself at me again, licking the length of my cheek with her slobbery tongue.

"Sam, what the hell!" I push her off me, cringing and wiping my cheek.

"Bleh," she gags. "What the fuck is on your cheek!?" she squeals.

"Sunscreen!" I yell back. "'Cause, you know, we're going to be in the sun all day?!"

Sam shudders. "Gross."

"Maybe that will teach you a lesson," Lainey laughs, walking behind us.

"Nah, I just have to remember what we are doing that day." She shrugs. We walk together over to our group, and make a quick game plan for the day after we say goodbye to Mallory's mom, Shannon, and Felicity.

"Alright, bitches," Sam yells. "Lainey and Colin, you're in the red canoe, Mal and Ty, you're in the blue one, Owen and I are in the green one, and Peyton and Theo, do you guys want to split up and ride with one of us? Or take the black one?"

Right as I'm about to speak up and say I will ride with one of them, Theo

interjects. “We’ll take the black one.” He looks at me from across the small circle we have formed. “Right?”

I clear my throat, anxiety suddenly making it hard to swallow. “Right.” I may not be looking to date, or be with anyone in that way right now. But that doesn’t mean I’m immune to this man, or the growing crush I have on him. And after Sam and Lainey’s encouragement, I’m terrified that it might be mutual.

THEO

I shouldn't have agreed to be in the same canoe as Peyton. I should've dealt with the consequences and gone with my sister and listened to her constant babbling all day. But I was excited to spend some more one on one time with Peyton. Something about her intrigues me. I want to crack her reserved interior.

And because I had to let my emotions get the best of me, I'm stuck staring at her all day, watching the defined muscles in her back flex as she rows and directs the canoe. Her shoulders are starting to get burnt from the late morning sun, and I want to offer to put sunscreen on her, but I'm worried I won't be able to stop myself from pressing my chest against her back, giving her a gentle kiss on the shoulder, then moving up to her neck, her cheek, her lips.

Fuck. Shake it off, Theo.

"So, you grew up here?" I ask, finally deciding to bite the bullet and say something to her. I feel so drawn to her. I genuinely want to get to know her now, not because of a challenge I wanted to overcome within myself, but because I am so interested in *her*. Maybe Sam had something right. We are behind everyone, a good fifteen to twenty feet between each canoe, giving us some semblance of privacy.

Peyton immediately tenses at my voice. "What?" she asks, pivoting in her seat.

"You grew up in Cinder Valley, right?"

She hesitates, her eyes wide behind her round black sunglasses. Clearing her throat, she says, "Yes, I lived here until I was eight."

She turns back around, effectively shutting down any conversation. We are going to be in this canoe together for a good chunk of the day, and I'll be damned if I sit here in silence. "Why did you move?"

She slumps. "We moved after my mom died."

My heart sinks to my gut, and I stop paddling. "Fuck, Peyton, I had no idea."

"How could you? It's not like we've ever really talked until the last two weeks."

I cringe. "Yeah, about that. It's my fault." I decide that she at least deserves to know why. "I've been... in a rough spot since coming back to civilian life. Haven't known how to adjust after spending the last thirteen years devoting my life to serving." Guilt eats me as I watch her deflate in front of me, still facing forward.

"That's understandable. I can't imagine how hard that would be." She pauses for a long moment, shoulders tensing. "I thought you hated me," she admits.

My arm immediately stops paddling, the canoe veering to the right. "You thought I hated you?"

She sputters out an irritated sound, turning to face me, lifting her sunglasses to the top of her head so her blue eyes are boring into mine. "Why *wouldn't* I think you hate me? We've known each other for a year now, and until last week, you've barely said two words to me. When you would speak, it would mainly be grunts or chin tips. And don't even get me *started* on the glares."

"Glares?" I scoff. "I do not glare"

"Oh, you totally do," Peyton snorts, turning her back toward me again, steering the canoe away from a log floating in the water.

"I'm sorry you thought I hated you. That was never the case." My mind is truly blown that she would think that. If anything, I'm surprised she didn't realize that I so clearly have a teenage-esque crush on her. But... "Sometimes, communication can be hard for me. Especially after deployment. I'd already crossed that barrier with everyone after meeting them throughout the years. Even Mallory I'd met through FaceTime, but with you, you were new, and I... I have no excuse. I didn't know how to talk to you." I nod, trying to convey my sorrow. "I really, truly am so sorry. I feel horrible that all this time you thought I hated you. I apparently need to add social skills to my list of skills to work on after deployment."

That makes her chuckle. “Yeah, you probably should.”

“Think you can forgive me?”

“Yeah, I guess so. You might have to do some serious sucking up though. You’re not out of the woods yet, mister.” She points a finger at me dramatically, waving it around.

“Sounds good. Let me know how I can make it up to you, and I’ll do it.”

She chuckles softly, “I’ll think on it.” Her posture looks more relaxed than it has all day as she continues to paddle.

“So, can I ask why you moved back to Cinder Valley?” I hesitantly ask.

“Sure.” She pauses. “Like I said, I was born and raised here until my mom died when I was eight. She had breast cancer. My grandparents, her three best friends, and I stood by her side until the end.” Her voice takes on a hard edge. “Within a week of her death, my dad had moved the two of us an hour away into the cities. He had a huge new house all set up and decorated. At the time, I didn’t think much of it, but now, I realize he had to have been planning it for a while.”

Peyton pauses, rolling some of the tension out of her shoulders. “Within two months, he introduced me to his new girlfriend, Patricia, and her son, Hunter. I was still mourning the loss of my mom and the abrupt change of my life, when he told me that they were going to be moving in. It makes sense now, why he bought the big house, all the fancy new furniture and decor. He was getting it ready for them. Not for me and him, trying to start a new life after the death of my mom. No, he was starting his own life, with me as the tagalong. The leftovers from his previous life.”

My hand grips the paddle tightly, my knuckles white. *That mother fucker.*

Peyton continues, still facing forward, not looking at me. “I know now that he had to have been cheating on my mom for a long time. He wasn’t around much when she was in hospice care. My grandparents told me it was because he had to work, and that was how he coped. I wonder how much they knew? How much did my dying mother know?”

I didn’t expect her to give me this much information, but now that she’s talking, I don’t want her to stop. I want to know everything about her. She continues, “I moved back because I wanted to feel closer to my mom. I only had eight years with her, and my dad refuses to talk about her. I thought that if I came back to where she grew up, where she had me, I would feel more connected to her. I spent a few weeks with my grandparents every summer, and every year they would tell me these awesome stories about her and her

friends. Her childhood, her school years, everything. It never felt like enough though.”

The rest of the gang has slowed so that we are all side by side now, effectively ceasing Peyton’s words. “Sandbar is about a quarter mile away, figure we will stop, eat, swim, then keep going, sound good?” Owen asks, pointing at the river bend just ahead.

“Sure,” Peyton responds, her voice thick with emotion. Tyler and Mallory are on my right side, and they are both eying Peyton suspiciously. I see Mallory shoot Peyton a glance, but since Peyton’s back is to me I can’t see if it’s returned - just the nod of her blonde head. Huh. Tyler glances over at me, a question in his eyes. I shake my head, and shrug. “Peyt, you okay?” he asks, eyes narrowing at me.

“Oh, I’m fine.” She wipes her eyes, smiling at him. “I just need some more sunscreen. I might be getting dehydrated too.” She reaches down, grabbing her water from the belly of the canoe, making a show of taking a long drink. Everyone gives me a weird yet knowing look, before we continue on. Peyton and I let everyone else get a little bit ahead again, and I don’t pressure her, letting her breathe.

She surprises me when she starts talking again, unprompted. “Wanna know what else is funny?” She laughs without any humor. “I don’t even look like my mom. The only thing I got from her was her nose and eye color. Otherwise I look nothing like her. She was so pretty. She had long dark hair with blue eyes. I, of course, look just like my dad. The person who I wish I looked nothing like.”

“I didn’t mean to raise unwanted memories or make you upset. I really just thought I could get to know you more.”

She waves me off, but I can hear the subtle hitch in her voice when she speaks again. “No, it’s okay. It feels kinda good to get some of this off my chest. The girls know my dad sucks, but I didn’t really tell them everything.” She grabs her water, taking another long sip, then letting out a long gust of air. “Okay. I’m good now. Promise. Sorry you had to see that. Now, your turn! Apparently the river is a good place to let it all out. Very freeing. You should try it.”

I clear my throat, suddenly very wary. “I-uh, I’m good.”

She laughs. “Yeah.... You probably didn’t want to know all of that information.”

“No, I did, really. I asked, and I’m glad you felt comfortable enough to

tell me” I reply, truly meaning it. It felt like each time she chose to open up and continue sharing with me, she was giving a piece of her personality, herself, to me. All so I can better understand her. I should have asked her about herself long before now.

“You know, it’s weird how comfortable I feel with you, despite the fact that I was convinced that you hated me until twenty minutes ago.”

“You’re not going to let me live that down, are you?” I laugh.

“Nope.” She pops her lips on the p.

“Awesome.” I shake my head on a low chuckle, and when I look up, I spot the sandbar about fifty yards away. We point our canoe toward it, following the rest of the crew. When we hit sand, I’m grateful that we have time to get out and stretch, but I’m sad to step out of the connection we seemed to have found in the canoe.

PEYTON

I dig my toes into the warm sand, letting the sun beat down on me. A couple of hours of laying on the sandbar while soaking up the Vitamin D has never felt so good. It still surprises me how much I opened up to Theo. I can't help but wonder why I felt, and continue to feel so comfortable with him. Was it the river? The fact that I didn't have to look at him while talking? Whatever it is, I don't get it. I mean, five seconds before, I'd still been convinced he hated me, so why did I let myself open up to him?

The water is still pretty cold, so I don't plan on swimming, but all four of the guys are in the water, throwing a foam football back and forth. They screamed like toddlers when they first got in, and luckily, Laines got it all on video. "Hey, girly," Lainey says as she lays her beach blanket down next to me. "Are you okay?"

My eyes drift over to hers, and I shrug. "Yeah. I think so. For some reason I felt the need to word vomit my entire childhood trauma onto Theo. I'm surprised he didn't abandon canoe."

"Oh hush." She drops a sandy hand to my knee, patting it gently. "He's related to Sam, he's used to word vomit."

"Not this kind of word vomit," I snort.

"Hey, we've all got our shit. That's what friends who are more like your family are here for."

"I guess. I just don't know why I did it. I'm still getting used to having people I can trust." The only people I know who really love me are my Nana and Papa. I was close to Mom's friends when she was sick, and Mom made them promise to look after me after she was gone, but after we moved, I

never heard a peep from them. They had their own kids and families to look after, why would they look after me?

“I get it. Truly. Growing up the way I did, it was hard for me to be able to fully understand that I had a family again, people who loved me regardless of my past, who I was. Renee, Joe, Sam, and even Theo gave that to me. And they’ll be that for you too. We all will.” I reach over and grab Lainey’s hand, squeezing it.

“Thanks.” I reply softly, even though I don’t know if I really believe it. “Are you excited to have your mom and dad closer?”

Lainey smiles, her brown eyes crinkling around the edges. “Absolutely. I think Sam and Theo are more excited than they have let on, too. Theo especially. They all struggled with his deployment, and rightfully so. I was terrified for him too, I mean, I consider him my brother.”

My gaze strays to where Theo stands in the waist deep water, his aviator sunglasses perched on his nose. Water droplets cascade down his sculpted chest, and my mouth nearly waters at the sight.

Holy mother of god.

His right arm flexes, lifting the football up, throwing it in a near perfect spiral to Colin, but rather than following the ball, my eyes stay on Theo. His arms fall to his side, face lighting up in a smile, boisterous laughter falling from his lips.

“Suuuuure,” Lainey giggles, shoving her shoulder into mine. “You don’t like Theo at allll.”

Fuck. I pick my jaw up from where it’s practically laying in the sand, choosing to ignore her sentiment. I clear my throat, and thankfully Mallory comes to my rescue, sitting down next to me. “I’m thinking we should get going here soon. It’s getting close to two, and we want to have enough time to get back to the landing and clean up before dinner, right?”

I shoot up off the sand. “Yes!” I say a little too exuberantly. Lainey snickers under her breath. “I’ll start loading up.” I swipe the grainy sand off my butt and back of my thighs, picking up my towel and shaking the leftover sand from it.

“Woah,” Mallory says. “I didn’t mean like right this instant. We have a little more time.”

“Yeah, I guess. I’m just real excited for the cookout. Y’know, the kickstart to summer and all that!” *Tone it down, girl.* You are way too chipper. “Where’s Sam?” My eyes scan the beach for her. Last I saw, she was

laying face down on her towel, sound asleep.

“She got in the water like ten minutes ago, she’s playing with the guys. You didn’t see her?” Lainey asks, an eyebrow raised dubiously.

“Huh. Must have missed her.” I wave it off, spotting her trying to climb Owen like a monkey on a tree to get to the foam football.

“I think you were distracted by someone else...” Lainey drawls.

I can feel my face immediately heat, and I turn around trying not to draw attention to it. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I mumble, folding my towel up to sit on the seat of the canoe. I grab my shorts from the bottom of the canoe, and shimmy them up my legs and thighs, grateful I thought to wear pants without buttons. Having the buttons dig into my stomach all day sounds like pure torture.

I take a clarifying breath, and head back to the girls. They are standing calf deep in the water, talking to the guys. I wade into the cool water to stand by them, joining the conversation. We’re standing in a weird little circle, and Theo is directly across from me. I avert my eyes to the root beer colored water, doing anything but look at him. I’ll get sucked into staring at every line and muscle of his chest and arms, and I’m pretty sure this time I’ll start drooling. I listen carefully as everyone makes a plan for the remainder of the afternoon, but keep my eyes to anything but the man across from me.

THE CANOES ARE LOADED, all our coolers and bags now organized and placed in their respective boats, and I’m about to slip my sandals back on and throw my white linen cover-up on when a hand gently rests on my forearm.

“Woah, we need to get some sunscreen on you,” Theo’s deep voice says.

I startle, dropping my cover up in the water. “Shit,” I curse, bending down to snatch it before the current takes it away. The soggy piece of fabric is about ten pounds heavier when I pull it from the water.

“Oh shit, I’m sorry, Peyton.” Theo reaches out, grabbing the soaked fabric from my palms, wringing the water out of it. “This actually might be a good thing. We need to get some more sunscreen on you. Your back and shoulders are beet red.”

“Really?” I turn my head, trying to look at my own back, as if I’ll magically be able to see it.

“Yeah,” he says, laying my wrung out cover-up over the side of the canoe. “Here.” He grabs the sunscreen from the bag, squirting some onto his large palms. “May I?” He holds up his white covered hands.

“Well you already have it all over your hands,” I chuckle. “Sure, I guess.” I turn around so I’m facing away from him, and Sam stands two canoes down from me, her eyes glinting in mischief. I shake my head at her, and focus my gaze to my feet. “I didn’t even feel myself burning. I can usually tell.”

Theo’s palm gently rests on my shoulder, rubbing in the lotion. “Yeah, I’m surprised you didn’t either. It’s really red.” I can’t formulate a response with his hands dragging gently down my back between my shoulder blades, so I simply say, “Mhmm.”

His hands work small circles, and it weirdly feels... good. Like a subtle back massage. He clears his throat. “I-uh- I’m going to go under the straps of your suit, is that okay? It looks like it got missed earlier so you’ve got some weird lines.”

“Uh- sure,” I cough out. I feel his hands slide under the band of my suit, and a shudder rolls down my spine. Theo’s hands continue to roam my back, and my heart pounds in my chest, an almost aching feeling, something I can’t say I’ve ever felt before.

All too soon, he’s done, and handing me my wet cover-up. “You should probably wear that for the last part of the trip. The fact that it’s wet will help with the burn, and keep you cool.”

I nod in reply, tugging it over my head. The wet fabric clings to my body, cooling it immediately. “Thanks.”

Everyone gets into their respective canoes and we set off on the second half of our journey. I can feel the tightness of the sunburn of my back, the achy feeling starting to set in.

Theo hooks up his phone to a speaker, playing some Kid Cudi. Not loud enough so that everyone can hear it, but enough so that we have a little bit of sound to fill the comfortable silence. It perfectly fits the vibe of the afternoon, and I find myself softly singing along to *Pursuit Of Happiness*.

“Can I ask you something?” Theo asks a little while later.

“Yes?” Though I can’t imagine what he doesn’t already know from my earlier trauma-dumping.

“Are you close to your step-mom and step-brother?”

“Hah!” I snort. “Absolutely not. I’m pretty sure they resent my existence.”

“What?” Theo sounds shocked.

“Oh yeah, they don’t like me. Hunter especially. He made my life a living hell.” I think back to all the shit he did. I keep my body facing forward so I don’t see his reaction. “He used to destroy my Barbies, rip up my books, and destroy any crafts I made. And that was just when I was eight and he was thirteen. It got worse as we got older.”

“Are you serious?” He sounds utterly disgusted. I can imagine the sneer on his face, but I don’t look still. I don’t want his pity.

“Oh yeah. His friends teased the shit out of me, too.” I don’t delve into the messy details. The rumors they spread around the school are things I still don’t like talking about.

“Did you ever tell your dad?”

“All the time. He thought I was breaking my own stuff to get him in trouble for attention. Hunter called me fat, used my dead mom as ammunition, then fanned the flames once they caught.” I pause, laughing to myself. “Want to know what else sucks?” I continue before he has a chance to respond. “My dad is making me go to his wedding next weekend. Says Hunter ‘wants me there’.”

“Hold up,” Theo says. “He’s *making* you go? How the fuck does that work? Does he not know all the shit he did to you?”

I shrug. “I stopped telling them after a while. You can’t change someone’s mind if they’re dead set on seeing things a certain way. I learned to grin and bear it. He was the perfect child, could do no wrong.”

“You shouldn’t go.”

“I don’t want to. But I feel like I have to.”

“Why the hell do you feel like that?”

With a sigh, I switch my paddle to the other side, the water sloshing with each stroke of the oar. “Because even though they suck, my dad is some of the only family I have. And I honestly like Hunter’s fiancée. If anything I feel bad for her. She’s going to realize in five years what a piece of shit he is. It probably wouldn’t be so unbearable if I had someone to go with, but I don’t want to put anyone through that torture. It’s going to be bad enough for me as it is.” I vaguely start brainstorming ways to leave the wedding early, not attend the reception at all. Car problems, headache, food poisoning, an endometriosis flare up-

“I’ll go with you,” Theo says from the back of the canoe with no hesitation. I whip my body around abruptly, rocking the canoe. “Woah.”

Theo grips the sides, trying to steady us.

“Why the hell would you offer to go with me?” I narrow my eyes at him through the shade of my sunglasses. I can see his brow quirk behind his aviators.

“Because you shouldn’t have to do that alone?” he says as a question. “They sound like utterly fucked up people, and there is no reason for you to have to suffer alone.”

I stop for a moment, thinking about it. It would be a bit more bearable if he were with me... but then everyone would think he’s my boyfriend. “Well, I appreciate the offer, but I’ll be okay. Besides,” I level with him. “Everyone would think you were my boyfriend, and my extended family would probably think it’s even more hilarious. Honestly, they’re probably not even expecting me to show up. I barely exist to any of them.”

“Why would they think it’s funny?” he asks, a genuine look of concern on his face.

“Why wouldn’t they? ‘Look at poor estranged Peyton, she’s finally found someone to love her, someone who can put up with her.’” I mimic the voice of my great aunt, who has made it very known that she thinks I will end up alone... like her. While I want nothing to do with her, I can’t help but feel that maybe she might be right. Time and time again, it’s been proven to me that I’m not wanted, not loved.

Theo is silent for a long moment, so I turn back around, sparing myself the look of pity I know is coming. We paddle in silence for a moment, trying to catch up to the rest of the group who is now even farther ahead of us.

I’m such a wreck. Why did I go into such detail with him? *Way to go, Peyton, yet another person who thinks you’re pathetic.*

His hesitant voice breaks through my racing thoughts. “I could pretend to be your boyfriend.”

I freeze, my hand white knuckling the oar. I’m not sure why, but my second reaction is to laugh. What starts as slow giggles, very quickly turns into almost maniacal laughter. I turn around while laughing, starting at his handsome, confused face. “Are-” *cackle*, “you-” *snort*, “nuts?”

“No?” He looks concerned now. Oh sweet lord, he was serious.

“First off,” I chuckle again. “Why would you offer to go with me to my devil of a step-brother’s wedding in the first place?” I pause, laughing still. “Then, when I tell you how fucked up the family I have is, offer to play the role of my boyfriend? You’re joking, right?”

Theo sighs loudly, resting his oar across his lap, taking his sexy aviators off his face, and running the other hand up his face and through his hair. He looks up at the clear blue sky. “Peyton, why would I joke about that?”

“Because, it’s hysterical!” Someone needs to wake me up. There is no way this is actually real life. I must be hallucinating from sun poisoning or something like that.

“Well, I was serious.” His gaze drops back down to mine, and my laughter stops immediately.

Shit, he really is serious.

“Hold on.” I turn more in my seat so I’m fully facing him. “I’m not trying to be mean, but are you sure I’m not in some weird sort of hallucination from too much sun? You’re really, genuinely offering to play the part of my fake boyfriend for the wedding?”

“Yes, Peyton, I am.” His blue eyes stare deeply into mine.

Are we truly sure that I didn’t just fall into one of Mallory’s romance novels?

“I think my brain just exploded. This morning, I thought you hated me, only to find out you just suck at socializing, to now, you’re offering to be my fake boyfriend?”

“If you keep talking like that, I’m going to rescind my offer,” he pouts.

“Wait!” I reach my hand out to him, even though he’s on the opposite end of the canoe. “I... Can I think about it? Or is it a one time offer?”

Theo smiles, shaking his head. “You can think about it. I just hope you know I’m being completely serious. I want to be there for you, Peyton. If you have to go to that wedding, you shouldn’t have to go alone.”

“Well, um, thanks,” I stutter. Turning back to my seat, my mind whirls like the water as I push my oar through it. “I’ll think on it, and let you know.”

“You do that,” he chuckles.

AFTER MAKING it back to the landing and getting the canoes loaded up, I’m sitting in the passenger seat of Theo’s truck, contemplating life. I’m still shocked that he offered himself up like that. What I really can’t believe is that I’m actually considering it.

Theo climbs into the truck, glancing over at me cautiously. “Ready to

go?” he asks.

“Yep. Are we going back to our apartments first, or straight to your parents’?” I ask in response.

“Apartments, first. I want to shower and change, and figured you might too. Pretty sure there is sand in every crevice of my body.” He shifts uncomfortably in his seat as he backs out of the parking space.

THEO

The shower helped to rid my body of the sweat, sunscreen, and sand from the river, but it did nothing to clear my mind. If anything, it gave me more to think about. Offering to be Peyton's fake boyfriend was a total impulse, but I don't regret it. When she said that if I came with her to the wedding, her family would think I was her boyfriend, something just... made sense. If she agrees, if I go to this wedding as her "boyfriend," I can help her on a level she rarely seems to allow others to see. She's so strong, but she just needs someone by her side to help her see it. I can be that someone.

I check the time on the stove, and grab my phone off the countertop, not looking at it before shoving it into the pocket of my shorts. I told Peyton I would pick her up at three-thirty. She was adamant that she could drive herself, but I didn't let her argue. Just reiterated I would be at her door to get her in an hour.

I head out my apartment door, locking it behind me, then walk the ten feet next door, knocking on Peyton's. I never noticed, but she has a cute little welcome mat that says "Welcome-ish" and below, "Depends on who you are" in an elegant cursive script.

Peyton opens the door in a rush, slinging a bag over her shoulder. "Hey," she says, dropping her head to lock her apartment behind her. Her back is bright red, the earlier sunburn looking extremely painful. When she turns back around, I get a good glimpse of what she's wearing, and *fuck*, does she look good. Her light blue floral sundress hits the middle of her thighs, and it swishes around her legs with every movement. It's being held up by thin spaghetti straps, with little bows on her shoulders. Her sunglasses are perched

on her head again, but her short blonde hair is curled into big loose waves. Her cheeks are flushed, the pink adding to her natural beauty.

“Hey,” I reply. “Ready to go?”

“I can drive myself, Theo. That way you can leave early if you want, or I can leave when I want, it makes sense that way,” she says as we walk down the stairs.

“It makes more sense for us to carpool. Are you going to drink tonight?”

She eyes me suspiciously. “Yes, I was planning on having *one* drink. I don’t drink and drive, if that’s what you’re insinuating.” Her voice takes on a sharp edge.

“I wasn’t insinuating anything. Just wanted you to know I won’t be drinking, so if you did want to let loose a little, the option is there,” I shrug. We’re at the bottom of the stairs, and I hold open the door for her. She tries to dig her keys out of her bag, but I reach my arm out to stop her. “Seriously, Peyton, we can ride together. If you want to leave early, or stay super late, I don’t care. You tell me when you want to leave, and we will. No reason for us not to carpool.”

She huffs out a dejected sigh. “Fine. But if you want to leave before me, just let me know.”

“Deal.” I offer her my hand to seal it, and then we make our way to my truck. She climbs in the passenger side, and I start the truck, pulling out of our small apartment complex. I crank the AC to cool down the vehicle, rolling down the window to get some fresh air into the stifled cab.

Peyton doesn’t say a word as we drive through the busy town, people milling everywhere. The valley is a popular tourist area, especially around the holidays. The huge cliffs are a beautiful sight to see, so it doesn’t surprise me in the least that people travel hours to hike here. It’s even better in the fall, when the leaves are changing, their colors vibrant and proudly on display.

“So, I’ve thought about your proposition.” Peyton’s quiet voice surprises me.

I drop one hand from the steering wheel to rest on my thigh, glancing over at her. She’s staring down at her hands in her lap, fidgeting with the strap of her bag. “And?” I ask.

“I accept your offer,” she bluntly states. “You can play the part of my boyfriend.”

To be honest, I thought she wasn’t going to go through with it, but the giddy excitement that grips my chest is instantaneous. I focus on the road

again, taking a turn onto the small side street that leads to my parents. “Great,” I answer honestly. “Can I ask what changed your mind?”

“My dad called.”

Oh.

“He asked if I’d booked a hotel room yet, as the block is almost full. I told him no, that I still wasn’t sure if I would be in attendance, and he...” she hesitates, looking out the window. “He basically scolded me. So, I told him that I would be there. With my boyfriend. It kinda fell out of my mouth. I don’t know what came over me. He was so surprised he was silent for a long time. Then you know what he said?” She pauses, not long enough for me to answer what I assume is a hypothetical question. “He said, ‘wow, I’m surprised you have a boyfriend’. And not in an excited way. In a judgmental way.”

My hand resting on my thigh grips the fabric of my shorts tightly. I already hate this guy and I’ve never even met him.

“So, I guess this is your last chance, if you want out, or have to work next weekend or something, this is the time to tell me. I’ll tell them we broke up or something.”

“Fuck that,” I blurt without thinking. Her head whips to look at me. “I’m going. I’ve got your back, Peyton. We will need to figure out details, but I’ll be the best damn boyfriend you’ve ever had.” She snickers, eyes filling with tears.

“Oh shit, I didn’t mean to make you cry,” I say, releasing my grip on my pants to rest my hand on her shoulder.

She clasps a hand to her mouth, shoulders shaking. “Fuck, Peyton, I’m sorry. What did I say?” Her other hand waves in front of her.

“I’m laughing!” She drops the hand from her mouth, her twinkling laughter filling the cab of my truck. “It’s still insane to me that you’re even willing to do this. This whole situation is so absurd, but I can’t think of a better way to get through this wedding. I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you. You’re going to run the other way when you meet them, I can already tell.”

“Doubt it,” I chuckle in response. Now that I know she’s not crying, I feel a little better. The whole situation is pretty comical. I mean, who offers to be the fake boyfriend to a girl he barely knows yet but can’t seem to stop thinking about? Me, apparently.

I pull onto my parents’ street and I see that the driveway to their house is already full of cars. Once the truck is parked at the curb, Peyton’s laughter

has finally dwindled. “You good?” I ask.

She uses her finger to wipe underneath her eyes. “I’m good. What do we do now? We are just ‘dating’ for the wedding right? We don’t have to do anything here?”

“Nah, just for the wedding. Pretty sure my sister and mom would go berserk if they found out we were “dating,” even if it was fake. We can work out the gory details later, but for now, let’s go get our barbeque on.”

I EYE Peyton from across the bonfire, nursing the Diet Coke in my hand. She’s sitting next to Mallory and Tyler, the glow from the fire lighting up her fair skin. I try to keep my eyes off her, but I can’t. It’s like they gravitate naturally toward her.

Sam, of course, pulled me aside as soon as we got here, and interrogated me. Then my mom caught wind of it all, and did the same. They both think I should ask her out, but I’ve told them many times, we’re just friends. *Friends that are going to play the part of fake boyfriend and girlfriend*, but I of course left that part out. Now, every time either of them catch me glancing over at her, they share a conspiratory look.

“Do you want a drink, honey?” Mom asks from where her hand is sloshing around in the cooler.

“No, I’m good.” I tip my pop can to show her, and she nods, grabbing a can herself from the cooler.

She sits down next to me, popping the can open with a *hiss*. After taking a sip, she angles her body toward me. “How are you doing, honey?”

“I’m good, Mom.”

She tilts her eyes downward, really looking at me. One thing about my mom is she doesn’t need to use words to get something out of you. One simple look, and she can squeeze any information out of you.

I sigh, taking a sip of the pop. “I... I don’t know.”

“Tell me about it.”

I shrug, not really wanting to delve into things right now. “We can get coffee soon. I don’t want to talk now.”

“Alright, honey. You know I’m a phone call away, right? And now a quick drive.”

“I know,” I reply, standing up from my chair. I bend down to wrap my arms around my mother, giving her a kiss on the cheek. “I promise to call if I need to.”

“Good.” She gives me one of her soft smiles, the wrinkles around her eyes crinkling. I smile in return, and head over to the table where there is still food and snacks available. Owen is grazing, filling his plate with crackers, cheese, and summer sausage.

“Hey man,” I greet, grabbing my own plate and filling it.

“Hey,” he says through a mouthful of food, cracker crumbs falling out of his lips onto his stubble. “What’s up?”

“Not a thing.”

Owen swallows, setting his plate down on the table. “You okay?”

“Yeah, course,” I respond curiously. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, the way you keep eyeing Peyton like she’s a snack, but also look slightly angry at the same time, and the fact that you have been in your own little world for the last two weeks. I just want to make sure things are going okay.”

“Yeah, of course. Things are fine.” I shrug.

Owen doesn’t seem convinced, just like Mom. “Well, if they aren’t...” he drawls.

“You’re just a phone call away, I know. Mom just had the same conversation with me. Promise, I’m good. My mind’s just been elsewhere.”

“Elsewhere...?” He juts his chin over to the girl sitting by the fire, her contagious smile radiating warmth throughout my body. Owen chuckles, drawing my attention back to him. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

A low groan escapes my chest. “It’s not like that. We’re just friends.”

“Alright.” The smirk on his face tells me he doesn’t believe me, but I ignore it, choosing to go sit back down next to my parents.

THE REST of the evening is spent playing lawn games, watching my sisters get happy drunk, and watching Peyton from a comfortable distance. The sun is just starting to set in the distance, and I stifle a yawn. It’s been a busy day.

“Hey, can you hold Felicity for a minute?” Tyler asks, practically dropping his daughter into my arms. “I gotta pee, and I have no idea where

Mallory is.”

“Uh- sure,” I chuckle. Tyler’s already halfway to the house, running like he’s got someone chasing after him. I adjust Felicity in my arms so I can look at her. Her dark black hair is longer than the average baby, and it’s in a little ponytail atop her head. Fucking adorable.

“Hey sweet girl,” I croon, earning a wide drooly smile from her.

I’m grateful for the distraction she provides, as the fireworks starting up across the street are putting me on edge. Before I was deployed, I didn’t think I would ever react to the sound of fireworks. Growing up, they were my favorite thing about summer. Now, I have to fight to stay in the present. The irony isn’t lost on me that we spend Memorial Day shooting off fireworks to memorialize the people who died at the hands of war; and that the sound of fireworks booming brings them right back to the combat zone in their minds. PTSD is a fickle bitch.

Felicity reaches her drool soaked hands to my face, squeezing and pulling at the stubble I need to shave. “Ow. Careful, there. Don’t want to rip out Uncle Theo’s beard.” I chuckle. She doesn’t seem to mind the fireworks, and holding her is weirdly kind of grounding.

“Awww, look at you,” Peyton giggles, skipping over to me from the game of cornhole she was playing.

“Peyton, what the heck?” Colin scolds. “We were winning! You can’t just abandon me.”

She waves him off. “You’re better off without me. Besides, I haven’t gotten to spend much time with my girl all night.” She smiles, booping Felicity on the nose. “Isn’t that right? You missed your Auntie Peyton, didn’t you.”

She coos at her, but thankfully she doesn’t take her from me. I’m man enough to admit that I love this little girl, and I’ll take any amount of time with her that I can. If Peyton thinks she can steal her away from me within a minute of me getting her, she is going to learn real quick that Uncle Theo has a mean streak. I do appreciate Peyton’s presence though as I watch her interact with Felicity. Another helpful distraction. She’s a natural. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think she had kids of her own. “You’re good at this,” I surprise myself by saying.

“What?” She quirks a brow at me.

“Kids. You’re good with them.”

“Well, I have to be. We saw many kids in the ER, and lots of kids come

in with their moms to their appointments.”

“Well, you’re a natural.”

“Thanks,” she says, her cheeks flushing pink. “I’m nowhere near ready for kids though. A loooong way from it,” she laughs.

“Same. Don’t get me wrong, I want kids... I think. But right now, I’m happy to be a good uncle.”

“You’ve got that right. Rile them up, pump them full of sugar, and send them on their way.” Her face lights up, and Felicity fusses, so I adjust her to the other hip, using her bib to wipe away a little bit of drool from the corner of her mouth.

Peyton follows, moving to my other side. “Are you having a good time?” she asks.

“Yeah, are you?”

She smiles. “Yeah, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t tired though. It’s been a long day.” As if to make her point, she lets out a long yawn, spurring a yawn of my own. Felicity burrows her head into my shoulder, letting out a tired sigh. “I think Felicity agrees.” Peyton smiles at her, trailing a finger across her cheek.

I bend my head down, pressing a kiss to her forehead, soaking in a little extra of the baby smell. I’m sure as soon as Tyler comes back, they will pack up and head out, as I’m sure it’s past this little girl’s bed time.

“I think she’s tired,” I say. “We can head out soon, if you want.”

Peyton nods. “Yeah, I think I’m ready.”

I pat Felicity’s back in a repetitive motion, rocking my body as I can feel her drifting toward sleep. “Works for me. How’s your sunburn?”

Peyton cringes. “Not great. It’s really sore. I’m glad I’m off the next few days, or work would be literal hell trying to move around in pain like this.”

I nod, not getting a chance to reply before Tyler is bounding over to us, Felicity’s car seat in tow. “I found Mal,” he chuckles. “She’s passed out cold on the couch. That girl loves her sleep, let me tell you.” His eye catches on his daughter in my arms, now sound asleep as well. “Like mother, like daughter.” His smile is wide, happiness radiating from him. “I should probably get my girls home.”

I gently place Felicity into the carseat, leaving her for Tyler to buckle. I may like holding her and snuggling, but I have no fucking clue how to work a carseat. Tyler says his goodbyes, then heads inside, I assume to wake his fiancée.

“Are you ready?” Peyton asks, rocking back and forth on her heels.

“Yep. Are you?”

“Yeah, I want to go home and take a bath of aloe.” I shake my head, resting my hand at the small of her back without thinking.

“Alright, let’s get outta here.”

We say goodbye to everyone, slipping out quietly, without any fuss. We make our way to the car in silence, listening to the sounds of summer in the background. People talking, music playing, fire crackling. I climb into my truck, Peyton in the passenger seat.

After driving for a few minutes, I break the silence. “Did you have a good time?”

She yawns before answering. “Yeah, I did. I’m exhausted, but it was a really good day.”

“Good, I agree.” Why is conversation suddenly so stiff and awkward? Is it because of the earlier decision we made? Because of my mom, Owen, and Sam all questioning me about whether there’s something going on between us? Either way, this sucks. We both start to speak at the same time, then stop as we realize the other is talking. The back and forth continues for a moment, before Peyton keeps talking.

“Can we get some of the details figured out for next weekend?” She wrings her hands in her lap, twisting and pulling her fingers.

“Of course.” I clear my throat. “I was going to suggest the same.”

“Cool. Okay.” She pauses for a moment, seemingly composing herself. “And just to make sure, you’re off this weekend, right?”

“Yep. I work overnight Thursday, but then I’m off.” I turn into our apartment complex, pulling into a spot, and shifting the truck into park.

“Okay, great. I texted Dr. Ness earlier, and I’m good to be off at noon on Friday. The wedding is in Duluth, and according to my dad, the rehearsal dinner is at some fancy place. You don’t have to come for that. You can just come up on Saturday if you want, and leave right after the wedding.”

“Wait,” I say, stopping her. “You want me to come on Saturday? Why not Friday too?”

“Well...” She hesitates, sucking in a deep breath. I don’t miss the way her chest heaves, or the way her breasts lift with each breath. “I mean, you can, I just don’t want to force you into more if you don’t want to.”

Her apparent nervousness makes me feel brave. I reach over, resting my hand on her fidgeting palms. “Peyton. I told you I was in. That means I’m all

in. I'll be there by your side, every step of the way. Got it?" She nods, blue eyes wide as saucers. I can barely see in the darkness of the night, but I swear there are tears brewing at the corner of her eyes. "Awesome. So we'll leave after you get off work on Friday. I'm going to tell everyone I have a convention to attend in the cities, some recruiting or training thing, that way I'm covered there."

She nods again, dropping her gaze to where my hand still rests on hers. I pull away quickly, startling her. "Right." She clears her throat softly. "I booked a hotel for two nights."

I run a hand down my scruffy beard, itching it, just for something to do with my hands so I don't reach over and touch her again. "Sounds good. Let me know how much it will cost, we can split it."

She waves a hand. "Don't worry about it."

"Peyton." I give her my most convincing glare.

"Theo," she retorts back.

"Peyton..."

"Theo. Don't fight me on this."

Pinching the bridge of my nose between my forefinger and thumb, I let out a low groan. Peyton shimmies in her seat, like she's uncomfortable. "Fine. But I'm driving, and paying for gas." She squeaks, trying to fight me on it, but before I can think, I am placing a finger on her lips, effectively shushing her. "No." My voice drops an octave, the demand falling easily from my lips.

Her face flushes, and she sinks back into her seat, my finger still firmly against her lips. She nods, my finger moving with the tilt of her head, and I drop my finger like she's burned it, my pants growing tight around my hardening cock. *Why am I getting hard right now?*

"Thank you," I huff out. "Should we go in? Might be more comfortable to get our ducks in a row inside." I need to get out of this truck and adjust myself before my hard on becomes even more noticeable.

"Sure," she breathes, opening her door in a rush. "Actually, why don't we meet tomorrow? I can make you breakfast? That way we can figure everything out. I'm pretty tired." She hops out, lifting her arms over her head, stretching and moaning dramatically.

Annd now I'm harder than before. Her arms over her head like that, the moan that just came out of her? The way her tits press together as her arms are held high? *Goddammit Theo. Get your shit together.*

I hop out of the truck, slamming the door behind me, and adjust myself in my shorts quick. Rounding the truck, I meet her on the other side. We walk side by side in silence toward the apartment, my hand falling to the small of her back almost instinctively. Her shoulders tense slightly, but not enough to where she's shrugging away from my touch. By the time we get to her apartment door, she's practically leaning her body into mine. "Thanks," she whispers, turning herself away from my hand to unlock her door. "I'll text you when breakfast is ready, okay?"

"Sure," I grit out, my mouth dry and gritty. She closes the door behind herself, and I stand there, waiting until I hear the click of the lock to leave.

PEYTON

My first waking thought the next morning is that I've officially lost my mind. That's the real reason behind all of this, right? I've gone clinically insane, and that's why I've agreed to Theo being my *fake boyfriend*. My dad is going to see right through me. There is *no way* that I'll be able to pull this off. I need to call it off.

Just as I'm pulling my phone out of the pocket of my leggings to text Theo, there's a knock on the door. "Shit," I curse, dropping my phone to the floor with a clatter. Of course, the phone hits my foot at just the right angle, making me screech. "Just a minute!" I call.

"Are you okay?" His low voice carries through the door. To make matters worse, when I bend over to grab my phone, as I stand up, I whack my head on the kitchen table. "Fucking hell!"

I hobble over to the door, rubbing the top of my head as I fling it open. Theo stands before me, blonde hair mussed and hanging in his face. He's wearing a tight army shirt with black shorts, and slides on his feet. I can't help but notice the dark shadows under his eyes, and the furrow between his brows.

"Hey. Come in." *Be. Calm.* I open the door wider for him, and he slides in, kicking off his shoes, and scanning the room.

"Are you alright?" he asks, eyes scanning my body, a weird sense of panic in him.

"Sure, sure. Just hit my head trying to grab my phone after it tried to amputate my foot. The usual." I wave my arm around, closing the door, and heading into the kitchen. "I made breakfast. Bacon, eggs, waffles, sausage,

toast, I've got a little of everything.”

“Sheesh, I was thinking a bowl of cereal and toast... this is a lot.” He gestures at the display of food.

I shrug, handing him a plate. “Stress cooking.”

“Ah.” He goes through the line, stacking his plate, and I follow. He sits down at my dinky little kitchen table, and I shove my nurse bag, stethoscope, and all my other shit out of the way.

“Got so caught up in cooking that I forgot to move all my stuff.”

“I don't mind,” he says, shoveling a bite of waffle into his mouth.

After we eat in silence for a few minutes, it's like a dam bursts and I can't keep my mouth shut any longer. “So, I know we agreed to this, but I can't do it anymore. My family is going to figure it out. I'm a horrible actress, and they'll ridicule me even more for faking a boyfriend than just coming alone. I appreciate the offer, truly, but you're off the hook.” I let out a long gust of air, and shove a piece of waffle in my mouth to shut me up, all while Theo looks at me, a humorous quirk in his brow, eyes alight. He looks utterly unsurprised by my revelation.

“You done?”

“Mhmm,” I mumble through my mouthful of food.

“I'm going with you.”

I nearly choke on my food.

I try to chew and swallow fast enough before he continues, but it's no use.

“Peyton, I'm going with you to this wedding, whether you like it or not. I made a promise, and I'm not one to back out of a promise. I understand that this is a lot for you, but I'll take care of you. So, tell me about your extended family, who I need to watch for, and let's make a plan, because I'm not feeding you to the wolves. I will feed myself to them before you have to do this alone.”

I swallow the food in my mouth, but it does nothing to curb the lump suddenly in my throat.

“Okay?” he asks, eyes pointedly holding mine. Oh god, this is just like last night when he stuck his finger on my lips to shut me up. I pretty much melted.

I nod, still not saying anything due to the lump in my throat.

“Use your words, Peyton.”

His gentle command stirs something within me, and I find myself

squirming in my seat, heat blooming in my core. That's... unexpected. I nod again, and his eyes narrow. Clearing my throat, I squeak out a whispered, "Yep."

"Good."

"GREAT AUNT JOAN is the one to watch for?" Theo asks.

"Yes," I answer, pointing my finger at the low budget family tree I've made on the notebook in front of us. "You have to remember that I technically am not related to her. She's Patricia's aunt."

"Right, and Patricia Bitch is your step-mom," he says, his brows furrowing as he studies the paper.

"Yes." An hour into tutoring Theo on the ins and outs of my family tree, I accidentally let it slip out that I call my step-mother 'Patricia Bitch' in my head. I thought of it one day, and it stuck. I've never said it to her face or told anyone, until today. Theo had looked at me like I was fucking nuts, then broke out into a bout of laughter that about did both of us in.

"Joan will twist any words you say. She's a manipulator, and she's not used to people setting boundaries with her." Theo nods. I'd like to think he's going to remember everything we've gone over, but there's no way he will.

"Alright, I think my brain is full from the information you've given me," Theo says, standing up from the creaky wooden chair. He stretches his arms above his head, his shirt lifting slightly, giving me just a glimpse of the elastic waistband of his shorts, and his toned stomach, already tan from yesterday's outing.

"Next on the agenda," he says, offering me his hand, pulling me out of my chair. "We need to look like we are dating." He drops my hand, resting both of his on his hips.

My mouth is still watering from seeing the tiniest sliver of his skin, so I don't answer for a moment, until he raises an eyebrow. "Wha- What do you mean?" My voice slightly shakes.

"I mean," he says. "You can't be all jumpy around me anymore. We have to look like we are comfortable with each other, I have to be able to touch you without you tensing up."

"I don't tense up," I cry.

Theo chuckles, raising his arm to rest his hand on my shoulder. I can't help it, I freeze. What should I do? How do I react?

Theo laughs. "That's exactly my point, Peyton. You acted like I was about to body slam you, you got so tense."

"Well I wasn't expecting it," I rebut, trying to prove myself. But I have to admit he has a point. He drops his hand, sighing.

"You can't always expect it. What did your last boyfriend do? Did you panic anytime he touched you? Held your hand?" His face shows sincerity, and I'm so embarrassed, I have no idea what to say to him.

I walk away from him into the living room, throwing myself down on the couch. "I can't do this." I drop my head into my hands, rubbing my temples with my fingers.

I feel the moment Theo sits down next to me. His warm arm wraps around my shoulders, and I can't help it. I tense. He sighs and removes it. "I'm not trying to make you uncomfortable, I swear. We can do whatever you're comfortable with, I just thought..." He trails off.

I rub my face in my hands, trying to figure out my best course of action. Lie? Tell him my last boyfriend wasn't touchy? Or tell him the truth. That I've never been held by a lover, never felt the casual yet loving embrace of someone who wants me before.

"I-I've never done this before."

He chuckles. "Yeah, I've never been in a fake relationship either."

I lift my head from my hands, looking into his fierce blue eyes. "No, I mean," I suck in a deep breath. "I've never been in any sort of relationship before. I have no idea what it's like to be held, or... touched like that."

Theo holds his breath for a moment, pulling his arm from my shoulder and into his lap. After a long moment, he lets out a long sigh. I feel his warm breath, so close I get goosebumps. "Okay."

"That's all you have to say?"

"What else do you want me to say?"

"I don't know, don't you have any questions for me? Or why must I be so undesirable to the male species?"

"You are not undesirable," he growls.

I scoff. "Sure, whatever you say." I don't have the mental capacity to deal with his fake encouragement right now. "Tell me what I need to do to get better at this," I say, using my finger to gesture between us. I drop my hand to my thigh, defeated.

“Okay. Truthfully?” He pauses before slowly reaching out a hand, resting it gently atop mine. “Practice.” I tense, unsure of how he wants me to react. His warm hand encapsulates mine, fingers curving to the inside of my palm, gently flipping it over to intertwine our fingers. “There,” he whispers. “Just breathe.”

I follow his direction, getting used to the feeling of his hand in mine. My heart pounds furiously in my chest, mind running. “How do you feel?” he asks after another moment.

“Fine, a little worried my hand is getting sweaty, to be honest,” I reply, gently tugging my hand from his embrace. I feel the loss almost immediately, my heart slowing, heat in my face fading.

Theo chuckles. “It wasn’t.” He gives me a second to collect myself before holding his hand out again, this time palm-up. An offer. “Again?”

I reach out and gingerly grasp his large, calloused hand. I focus on my breathing, and though it takes me a minute to down-regulate my nervous system again, it already feels a little better. Easier.

“How did I do?”

“Fine,” he says with a small smile. His blue eyes are shining. “We’ll keep practicing. You might get sick of me this week.”

“Why do you say that?” I ask, quirking my brow.

“Because we are going to spend a lot of time together, practicing.”

“Oh, don’t be silly,” I scoff. “I’ll be fine.”

Theo scoots over closer to me, the length of our thighs now touching. I squeak when he suddenly wraps an arm around my shoulder, pressing a kiss to the side of my forehead.

Did my heart just stop? I definitely stopped breathing, that’s for sure.

I hold still, relishing the feel of his lips on my skin. It feels amazing, but I’m also internally flipping shit. When his soft lips pull away from my forehead, he pulls me into his side so my head rests against his chest. I can hear the rapid beating of his heart through his thin shirt, and his arm around my shoulder pulls me in tighter, allowing minimal movement on my part.

Every muscle in my body is tight, screaming at me to relax. But I can’t. Because what in god’s name is happening right now? I mean, really? Did I hit my head too hard earlier, and I’m hallucinating? Because while my family may be batshit crazy, there is *no way* that they would make me cuddle Theo to prove our relationship.

“You good?” His voice is low but surprisingly soft. I nod, still unable to

speak.

I've never been cuddled before, not since I was a kid, and while my body and mind are on the fritz, I have to admit, it feels... nice.

"Relax." He commands, his chest rumbling at my ear from his voice. He reaches over to my side table, grabbing the remote, and switching on the TV.

I can't relax. How can he be so calm? This is weird. I'm cuddling with one of my best friends' older brothers, and I have no idea what to do with myself.

"Peyton. Relax," he orders, and this time, it's like my body melts into his embrace, fully accepting this. I splay my palm on his chest, feeling the warmth emanate from him. I turn my focus to the TV, trying desperately to get my breathing and heart under control.

After a while, I've nearly forgotten that I'm being held by Theo. We laugh along to the sitcom on TV, and I feel comfortable. Still nervous, but not as tense. My body has relaxed, heart slowed, no longer focused on the man beneath me.

STUTTERED breaths pull me from the haze I was sleeping in, and the arms around me tighten slightly. I lean back, pulling myself away, realizing that I had fallen asleep on Theo's chest. The TV plays in the background, and I look around my living room as my eyes adjust to the midday light.

I slide away from Theo, tugging his arms off me. He stirs slightly, a low grumble falling from his lips. I have no idea how I fell asleep in his arms. I know he was trying to make me comfortable, but I apparently was very comfortable.

Theo lets out another moan, this one sounding more aggressive. His brows furrow, forehead creasing. His entire body tenses, hands forming tight fists. Shit, is he okay? Is he having a nightmare? Do I wake him?

My question is answered when Theo's blue eyes fly open, wildly scanning the room. His breaths come heavy and rushed. "Hey," I whisper, reaching out a hand to rest on his shoulder. He jerks at the contact, eyes meeting mine. "Are you alright?"

Theo immediately relaxes, slumping back into the couch. He drags a hand through his hair, sucking in a long breath. "Yeah."

“Do you want to talk about it?” I ask.

He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees, dropping his head to his large palms. He shakes his head no, wordlessly.

“Okay.” I stand up from the couch, heading into the kitchen. I pile up our breakfast dishes, throw the leftovers into containers, and load up the dishwasher. I need to keep my hands busy. Theo sits stalk still on the couch. I let him have his minute, wondering what the hell was going on with him.

Once the kitchen is cleaned up, I head back to the living room, finding Theo in the same spot he was in before. I hesitate, before asking, “Do you need anything?”

He clears his throat. “No, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t,” I say quickly. “I was worried about you, that’s all.”

“I’m alright,” he replies. He lifts his head, blue eyes bloodshot. “I’ve been having some bad dreams recently. It’s nothing to worry about, just a little inconvenient. I’m sorry you had to see that.”

I automatically reach out, resting a hand on his forearm. “There’s nothing to apologize for.”

He nods. “Can you keep this between us? I don’t want to worry my mom, or sister for that matter.”

I jerk out a quick nod. “Of course. We can just be each other’s secret keepers. I mean, you are my fake boyfriend after all. Now that we’ve consummated with cuddles.” I wink dramatically, tilting my head. Theo chuckles, moving my hand from his arm to clasp it in his. I don’t tense up as much as before, but still enough that he raises his brow.

“We gotta work on that,” he says.

I nod, squeezing his palm gently.

PEYTON

Unfortunately for me, the last week has flown by. Not that I want my work weeks to drag on, but when you aren't looking forward to a weekend long event where you are sure to be ridiculed by your "family," and introducing them to your fake boyfriend, you want time to slow down for you.

I've collected all my bags, and they're sitting by the front door as I'm waiting for Theo to pick me up, even though he lives next door. We leave in about an hour, giving him as much time to sleep as possible since he worked overnight last night. My mind strays to the last few days, remembering all the time Theo and I have spent together. He came over every evening after I got off work, and before he went on duty. We've gotten into the routine of having dinner together, talking and laughing into the evening. Each day, he's made a point to subtly touch me, or clasp my hand in his, trying to get me comfortable around him.

It's working. I don't tense up at every touch anymore. If anything, I look forward to the subtle touches he provides, or the warmth his hugs bring.

There is a soft knock on the door, then it swings open, revealing Theo in a pair of khaki shorts, and a light blue shirt that brings out the blue in his own eyes. "Jeez, let yourself in, why don't ya?" I joke, walking over to my front door.

"I texted you that I was going to let myself in." He shrugs, leaning down to lift the handle on my rolling suitcase.

"Ah." I pull my phone out of my back pocket and sure enough, his name is on the top of the screen. On second glance, I see a message from my dad.

Dad: Are you on your way? We're expecting you to be at the venue, dressed appropriately and ready, by four-thirty. Any later is unacceptable. Tell your boyfriend we have high expectations of the two of you. This is a formal event, we will not tolerate anything less.

I let out an irritated sigh, shoving my phone into my pocket. I grab my dress bag from where it's resting over the chair, slinging it over my shoulder carelessly.

"Woah, what just happened?" Theo holds a hand up, stopping me.

"Nothing," I grunt, side stepping him. His arm slides around my waist, pulling me into his body. "Peyton. What. Just. Happened?" His voice is firm, a no nonsense tone. His eyes glare into mine, and I can't help but slink into his touch, feeling the effects of him.

"Nothing important." I try to deflect. "My dad just texted me is all. I'm being dramatic."

"I highly doubt that," he says. "I'll let it go, but don't let him get to you. I know this is going to be a hard weekend, but I'm here to help you."

I nod, my throat suddenly feeling thick. "I know." He rubs my back gently, and I pull out of his embrace, taking a deep breath before grabbing my second bag.

"How much stuff are you bringing?" Theo asks.

I scoff. "Not that much." He quirks his brow, looking down at my suitcase, and the bag in my hands. "Hey! In my defense, this is a very fancy formal wedding, I have to look nice!"

Theo chuckles. "Okay, fair. I just forget how much stuff girls need."

"You have not one, but two-ish sisters, you should know this." I poke him in the chest.

"In my defense, I was off at training when they were going through their figuring out fashion and makeup phase." He holds open the door for me, and I turn, taking one last look around my apartment to make sure I have everything.

"I keep forgetting you're old," I tease, pulling the door shut and locking it.

He groans, "I am *not old*."

I just shrug, heading down the stairs. He follows close behind, dragging my suitcase behind him. I've got my duffel in one arm, the bag with my dresses in the other. When we get to his truck, I toss the bag to the floor of

the backseat, hanging my dresses on the hook next to his suit bag. I climb into the passenger seat, watching as he climbs in as well. He starts the truck, and looks across the small cab cautiously. “Ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” I respond, pulling my seatbelt across my body and clasping it in. “Wait!” I yell as he shifts the truck into gear.

“What?” he shouts back, exasperated.

“What did you tell your family you were doing this weekend?”

“Seriously? You screamed for that?”

“It’s important information.”

He groans, pinching his nose. “I told them I was going to help with a training session in the Twin Cities. I told you that’s what I would tell them last weekend, Peyton.”

“Oh, that makes sense. I remember now.”

“Can we go now?” he asks, irritated.

“I guess. I don’t want anyone to be suspicious. We’re both gone this weekend, what if they find out we are together?”

“They won’t.” He puts the truck in gear again, pulling out of the parking lot.

“But *what if?* I mean, seriously, have you *met* your sister? She’s a fucking mastermind!”

I watch the clench in his jaw as he processes my words.

“Peyton,” he speaks lowly, eyes focused on the road. “I promise, they won’t be suspicious. I do training events like this all the time.”

I huff out a breath, anxiety slowly leaving my body. “Okay, if you really think so, I trust you.”

“I do, and you should trust me. I wouldn’t be doing this otherwise.”

I don’t respond, not knowing what to say. I turn my gaze out the window, watching the scenery change as we drive.

“FUCK,” I curse, trying to get the zipper on my dress to cooperate. A piece of chiffon is lodged in the zipper, and I can’t get it unstuck. I’m trying to get into my rust orange dress that goes down to my mid calf, in waves of light fabric. The top is a corset style, but of course is a zipper rather than a tie. I would much rather take the tie up at this point.

“You good in there?” Theo’s voice calls from outside the bathroom door.

“Fine!” I shout back.

“You sure?” he chuckles. “Doesn’t really sound like it. You keep swearing, Peyt.”

I groan, trying my best not to cry. “I can’t get my dress zipped.”

“Open the door, Peyton.”

“No,” I answer, humiliated. “I’ll get it, it’s fine.”

“Peyton.”

“Theo.”

“Let me help you, it’s going to take two seconds.”

With a sigh, I unlock the bathroom door, and open it slowly, Theo on the other side. He has one arm raised above his head, leaning against the door frame seductively. His eyes are cast downward, and his hair is styled neatly, a crisp white button up tucked into his black dress pants.

He looks delicious.

I hold the dress up to my chest so he doesn’t get a free show, and I can’t help but notice the way his gaze drags up my body slowly, settling on my eyes. He clears his throat while shaking his head out of the daze he is in. “You look stunning.”

I scoff, turning around for him to see my dilemma. “While I appreciate the sentiment, it’s not necessary. I’m pretty sure I look like a tomato right now with how red my face is from trying to get this fucking dress on.”

Theo clears his throat again, and I feel his fingers rest at the base of my spine where the zipper is caught. He swiftly yanks the stuck chiffon, and trails the zipper quickly up the length of the fabric.

His warm fingers cause my skin to break out in goosebumps, a small shudder rustling my body. When the zipper is all the way up, the hook and eye clasped, he steps back from me, saying, “All set. Need another minute?”

I turn to look in the mirror again, adjusting the straps slightly and checking my hair and makeup. “I’m good, just need to get my shoes on.”

I stride back into the main area of our hotel room, sliding on my nude heels, and clasping the straps across my ankles. “Now, I’m ready.” I stand up straight, adjusting the layers of chiffon.

“Wow, Peyton.” Theo stumbles over his words, face growing red. “You look beautiful.”

“I could say the same about you,” I say, waving the hand carrying my clutch toward him. He really does look beautiful.

Theo gives me a slight smile, and offers his arm to me. “Ready?”

“You keep asking me that, but I don’t think I ever will be,” I answer.

“Come on, it can’t be that bad,” he says, closing the door to our hotel room.

Famous last words.

THEO

It is that bad.

Holy fucking shit is it that bad.

“What are you wearing?” Is the first thing out of Peyton’s dad’s mouth when we arrive at the venue. Her dad- Hank- is standing at the front of the elegant ballroom, his hands fisted in the pockets of his dress pants. I rest my hand at the small of Peyton’s back and guide her down the makeshift aisle. Chairs flock us on both sides, vases filled with water and little unlit tea candles floating in them. At the end of the aisle is a huge arch with flowers and greenery draping down to the ground.

Her father is standing next to a man about my age, dressed in a black suit, with a black dress shirt underneath. His dark hair is styled immaculately, beard trimmed closely. I focus my attention on her dad though. I can see the similarities between him and Peyton, same blue eyes, same hair color, though his is starting to become speckled with gray and thinning on the top. The sneer on his face is something I have never seen on Peyton though. The man about my age, who I assume is Hunter, steps away toward a woman in an all white gown, I’m assuming, Kelsey, his bride.

We reach her father, and I offer out my hand to him. He doesn’t look at me, or even acknowledge my hand. Instead, he eyes Peyton’s dress like she’s wearing a burlap sack. “What the hell don’t you understand about formal, Peyton Marjorie Donnely?”

Peyton’s face turns red, and I can see the shine of tears on her eyes. She stutters out a response. “I-I thought this was...”

Hank scoffs then points across the room to a woman in a navy blue gown

that falls all the way to the floor, a silver shawl wrapped around her shoulders, graying hair twisted in a tight updo. “Look at your mother, *that* is formal.”

Peyton nods, and it’s all I can do not to punch this fucker in the face. *Fuck it, I’m going to say something.* “I, for one, think Peyton looks stunning.”

The glare that Hank directs toward me is menacing, but nothing I can’t handle. I was in the military for nearly thirteen years. I can handle a man who probably can’t get it up without the help of a little blue pill. “You must be the boyfriend,” he says with chagrin.

“Yes, sir. Theo Porter.” I offer my hand again, and this time, he takes it, shaking it firmly in a feeble attempt to maintain dominance.

“Hank Donnely,” he says curtly.

“Beautiful set up,” I say, gesturing around the room, before making sure he sees me clasp Peyton’s hand in mine. I squeeze it gently, looking down at her. She looks back with grateful eyes, and I wink at her. One of her hands raises up to fiddle with the small pearl necklace she always wears. The small smile that crosses her lips tells me I’ve made the right decision in playing this part for her. I already knew it was, but after the bullshit I just witnessed with her dad, I’m happier than ever to be here.

“Yes,” Hank says. “We wanted to have an extremely elegant event, so we spared no expense. Only the best for my son, and future daughter-in-law.” I notice the way Peyton subtly stiffens beside me, her fingers tightening around my hand.

The woman Hank pointed out earlier strides over toward us, shrieking in excitement. “Oh, Peyton, honey, it is so good to see you.” She wraps her arms around Peyton, a little awkwardly as I refuse to let go of her palm. “We’ve missed you so much since you moved so far away.” *Far away?* She lives an hour from them if I remember correctly. They traveled farther to get to this wedding venue than it would take to visit her.

When she releases her, the woman must notice me standing next to her. She glances down to our interlocked hands, and pats Peyton on the shoulder. “Oh my. Is this your boyfriend?” Her eyes lock on me, not hiding the intrusive way she drags her eyes up and down my body. She literally bites her lip.

Peyton clears her throat, leaning into me. “Yes, this is my boyfriend, Theo.” Her voice sounds strained, like it’s impossible to force the words out.

“Well, my my,” she croons. “He is a catch.” She offers a manicured hand out to me, and I almost flinch at the length of her fire engine red nails. “I’m Peyton’s mother, Patricia Donnelly.”

I reluctantly let go of Peyton to shake Patricia Bitch’s hand, and throw on my best show winning smile. “Yes, ma’am. I’ve heard lots about Peyton’s *step-mother*.” I put more emphasis on the words *step-mother*, since we all know that she is *not* Peyton’s mother, and never will be.

Patricia drops my hand, her brows furrowing in irritation. “Yes, well, we prefer to drop the step- titles in our family.”

“Mmhmm.” I say with a dismissive nod of my head, clasping Peyton’s hand in mine again. “Should we find our seats?”

She nods, and I direct her away from them. “We’ll see you after rehearsal,” Peyton says with a soft wave. I lead her over to the edge of the room, sitting down in the cushioned chairs. I leave her hand clasped in mine, not caring that we are no longer under the direct scrutiny of her dad and step-mom.

“Well, you weren’t kidding.” I shake my head.

“I told you,” Peyton whispers. “You haven’t even seen the worst of it yet.”

“That’s so unfair, Peyt”

She shrugs, tugging her hand from mine. The loss of her warmth sends a shiver through my body. “I’m here for you,” I say, resting a hand on her leg.

She nods, not looking at me. I sigh, knowing that while she heard me, she probably didn’t *hear* me. I get the feeling that Peyton has had no one to rely on for a very long time.

SITTING NEXT TO PEYTON, I can feel the discomfort rolling off her body. She’s eaten maybe two bites of the pasta that was served to us, but drank two glasses of wine. Her face is pleasantly flushed, and she keeps giggling anytime I touch her. The infamous Great Aunt Joan is sitting to my left, and I swear to god, if she touches my shoulder, or pinches my cheek one more time, I’m going to lose my shit. I keep scooting my chair closer to Peyton, but that seems to spur her on more.

“So, Theodore,” Joan drawls, her breath smelling like stale cigarettes and

vodka. “What is it that you do for a living?”

I clear my throat, and take a small sip of the whiskey in front of me. “I’m a paramedic.”

“Ah, a public servant.” She drops a hand to my shoulder.

“Yes ma’am.”

“How did you two meet?” She rubs her hand across my shoulder, dragging her fingernails across my jacket.

I subtly shrug her off, reaching over and grabbing Peyton’s hand, noting that she is totally engrossed in the crystals dangling from the candelabras. “Peyton?” I ask, squeezing her hand. Her glossy blue eyes swing to meet mine, and she gives me a smile. “Care to tell Joan how we met?”

Peyton snickers, waving off Joan. “Nothing special. We met through mutual friends, and I fell instantly for his grumpy face, and huge military muscles.” She emphasizes her words, pinching my cheek tightly. “He’s so cute, my little Teddy Bear.” *Teddy Bear?* Where the hell did that come from? Has she been drinking more when I’m not looking? I subtly slide the glass of wine away from her as Joan squeals in delight.

“Aw, I love that,” she says, dabbing at the corner of her mouth with a napkin. “Now, if the two of you love birds will excuse me, I’m going to go check on the happy couple. Maybe next we will be planning your wedding,” she says with a wink, sliding out of the chair, and rushing off to the other end of the dining hall.

“Uh- Peyton?” I ask, waving my hand in front of her face, trying to gain her focus. “Are you alright?”

“Give me a kiss and I’ll be fantastic,” she says with a flirty smirk. It looks like she’s trying to wink, but she apparently is struggling because her long eyelashes are just fluttering up and down, her brows scrunched with focus.

I clear my throat, adjusting the tie on my neck that suddenly feels as if it’s choking me, my cock growing hard at the thought of her soft pink lips on mine. “Um-” I stutter, unsure of how to respond.

She guffaws, then snorts, covering her nose with her hand. “You should see your face!” She points at my surely red face. “I’m just fuckin’ with you,” she says, dropping her head down to the table with a *thunk*. “I’m fine, Theo, juuuuust fine,” she drawls.

“Maybe we should head back to our room...” I suggest.

“Nope, can’t.” She lifts her head, and waves her hand toward Hank, who is about to give a speech. “I was told we had to stay all night.”

“You don’t have to listen to him, you know. You are an adult who can make her own decisions.” Her eyes narrow, and I can instantly tell I’ve said the wrong thing.

“Theo, I appreciate you helping, but you have no idea what the fuck you’re talking about.” Her voice is snippy and sharp. She spins around in her chair to better face the front of the room where her dad has asked for everyone’s attention. Reaching across us, she grabs her glass of wine that I’d moved away before, drinking the rest of it down in two long gulps.

Fuck. Now she’s mad at me, and I’m the last person she should be mad at. I’m here to help, and somehow I’ve made it worse. I try to reach down and clasp her hand in mine, needing the contact from her, but she subtly pulls her hand away. Somehow in the midst of everything, Joan made her way back to her chair, and is now staring suspiciously at us, eyes narrowed on the fact that Peyton pulled away from me.

I drop my hands to my thighs, rubbing up and down my dress pants, trying to erase some of my nervous tension.

“As I’m sure you all know, family means everything to Patricia and me, ” Hank says, the microphone squealing with feedback. “That’s why this weekend is so special to us. We are so grateful to have everyone here, celebrating the new addition to our family. Kelsey is the perfect match for our son, and we couldn’t be happier for them. I remember once when Hunter was about thirteen, he came to me, and asked what my favorite thing about love was. I told him that it was the undying and total dedication that his mother and I had to each other, and that nothing in the world would ever change that. I can tell, that is the kind of love that Kelsey and Hunter have for each other.” Hank lifts a hand to swipe a tear from his eye. “Let’s all raise a glass to the happy couple. May you have love just like your mother and mine. The best love I’ve ever experienced.” Hunter stands, embracing Hank in a tight hug.

My jaw clenches, and my heart pounds in my ears. How dare he? He just blatantly disregarded the fact that not only was he married before, but that his previous wife *died*, and he doesn’t seem to care. He barely acknowledged Peyton all evening, only to tell her her dress isn’t appropriate attire. Everyone around us erupts into “oohs” and “awws,” as they hug, and Kelsey and Patricia rise to do the same. I turn my body to wrap an arm around Peyton, provide her some sort of comfort at this moment, but she’s gone.

I whip my head around to look for her, and I catch a glimpse of her dress as she runs out of the room. *Shit*.

I stand abruptly from my chair, and Joan's clawed hands grip my forearm. "Leave her be, she's being dramatic. She does this sort of thing. She wants attention, has since she was a little girl."

I rip my arm from her grasp, sneering back at her. "You clearly know nothing about that girl. She avoids any and all conflict, and she's hurting right now. Her father negated his entire marriage to her *dead* mother. If you'll excuse me, I need to check on my girlfriend."

I turn, ignoring the stares from the surrounding tables, running after my girl.

PEYTON

I can't breathe.

My lungs are sucking in air frantically, but yet I can't seem to catch my breath. I clutch the little pearl hanging from my neck as I run. I don't know where I'm running, but I can't stop.

"Peyton!" A voice calls. It sounds like they're underwater. Everything is muffled. A hand wraps around my shoulder, and I turn, ready to fight off whoever it is. My body slumps when I see Theo's bright blue eyes, acting as the lighthouse to my ship lost at sea. I fall into his chest, wrapping my arms around his torso. He holds me tightly, but yet I still can't breathe. How is it possible for my dad to totally discredit his entire relationship with my mother? They were married for *eleven years*, before she died. Sure, he might not have had the love that he did for her in the end, but he had to have loved her at some point to marry her, right?

I know I was a child, but I was a witness to moments of love between them. There were nights where Dad would get home from work to find my mom making supper, dancing to Breathe by Faith Hill. He would drop his briefcase on the table, and take her in his arms, and together they would dance around the kitchen, holding each other close, whispering to each other about their days. I would sit at the table, totally in awe of their love.

Theo mumbles words against my cheek, but I can't hear a word, I can only feel the warmth of his breath. He pulls me away from his chest, placing both hands against my cheeks. His eyes are glassy, and I can vaguely hear him telling me to breathe. I do my best to follow the movement of his shoulders, modeling his breathing. I'm no longer hyperventilating, but I still

feel out of breath.

When I can breathe a little better, I rest my head against his chest again. He tugs me backwards, and I hear the ding of the elevator before he's pulling me inside and pressing the button up to our floor. I clench my fists, anger bubbling up inside my body as I stew on my father's words. The elevator dings our arrival, and I pull away from Theo, stomping down the hall to our room.

Angry tears stream down my cheeks as I wait for Theo to open the door. Once open, I rush into the room, throwing myself down onto the couch, resting my head in my hands. The buzz that was helping me make it through the evening is now long gone.

The total disregard for a previous love lost is what hurts the most. Then, he barely acknowledged me all evening, which isn't anything new, but felt different tonight. Like with the addition of Kelsey to the family, he has a new daughter and doesn't need me anymore. I was always the leftovers, the forgotten one, and now I feel like I don't have a family at all. I can feel Theo sit down next to me, resting his hand on my back. I tense, shrugging him off, not wanting to feel his comfort right now, which is exactly what he's bringing me. Comfort.

After a few minutes, I can feel my anger simmering so that it's bubbling below the surface. I don't want to cry, I want to curl up in a ball and go to bed. I'm over tonight. I stand up from the couch, smoothing my hands down the rumpled chiffon of my dress. "Sorry," I whisper. Just like that, I've gone numb. All emotion, gone. I've been replaced with an empty shell.

"Why are you sorry?" he asks, standing up from the couch. "That was utterly fucked up, Peyton. He acted like you didn't exist all night, and then to blatantly disregard your mom? Fuck that." He tugs on his tie around his neck, loosening it and unbuttoning the top button on his shirt.

I shrug, wrapping my arms across my body, tucking my head down to hide my face. "Don't do that." Theo steps over to me, using his pointer finger to lift my chin so I'm looking in his eyes.

"Don't do what?" I ask.

"Hide."

"I'm not hiding," I scoff, pulling away from his finger. He tilts his head down, eyes narrowing.

"I beg to differ."

I throw my hands up, turning away from him to my suitcase sitting on one

of the two queen beds. I dig through my bag in search of my sweats and comfy t-shirt, coming up with nothing. “Where the fuck are they?” I ask myself.

“What are you looking for?” Theo asks. I turn my head to see that he has taken his tie all the way off, and is rolling up the sleeves of his dress shirt, exposing his muscular forearms. I fling my eyes away, ignoring the butterflies that threaten to fly up my throat.

“Uh- just my sweats. I can’t find them.” I dig around for another moment, before I realize something else. “Fuck,” I whisper. I left my phone and clutch at the table downstairs. And now I have to go back down to the ballroom to grab it, showing my face to the whole family after they saw me have a meltdown.

“What’s wrong?” Theo appears behind me, resting his hand between my shoulder blades. I can’t help it, I gasp, and shy away from his touch, again. I hear his long sigh, but ignore it. I know he’s sick of me reacting when he touches me.

“I-uh, left my phone and clutch downstairs. I have to go get them.” I wave my hand toward the door. Fuck, I really do not want to deal with everyone’s pity and judgmental looks, least of all, a confrontation with my dad.

“I’ll get them,” Theo says, already heading toward the door. “It’s no problem.”

I can’t help the sigh of relief that falls from my lips. “Really? I-”

“Don’t,” he interrupts me. “It’ll take two minutes.” He opens the door, and leaves without another word, probably knowing I was going to try and fight him on it.

With the room to myself, I sit down on the bed next to my suitcase, dumping the contents out. After another minute of searching, I finally come up with my sweats. *Thank god.*

I run into the bathroom, and slide my sweats up my legs, before trying to reach around and grab the zipper of my dress. Of course, I can’t reach it. *Why the hell did I wear this dress?* I try and reach my arm around again, desperate to reach the zipper. Just as I’m about to reach it, the door to the hotel opens, and Theo stalks in. His face is brimming with irritation.

He stops when he sees me standing in the open doorway of the bathroom, my body contorted like an acrobat with my dress on over my sweats. “What are you doing?” he asks, a smile taking over the previous irritation.

I groan. “Trying to get this fucking straightjacket of a dress off, but apparently I have arms the length of a t-rex’s, so I can’t get it.” I swear it’s like *deja vu* from earlier.

Theo snickers, then crosses the threshold of the bathroom, holding his hands out. “Turn around, I’ll get it.”

I let out a huff of irritation, and follow his command. His fingers are at my back, tugging the zipper down as far as it will go. I hug the front of the dress to my chest, and turn so he can no longer see my bare back.

“Thanks.”

He gives me a chin tip, his jaw clenched, vein in his forehead pulsing. He drops my phone and clutch onto the bathroom counter and turns and walks away. I close the door behind him, and don’t hesitate to drop the dress to the ground, finally freeing myself. The dress falls to the floor in a pile of rust orange tulle and chiffon, and I kick it to the side, grabbing my t-shirt off the counter.

After I’ve gotten myself cleaned up, makeup off, and hair brushed, I pick up my dress and leave the bathroom. Theo has changed himself, his suit hanging up in the closet. He’s sprawled out on his bed, one arm behind his head, while the other rests on his chest scrolling his phone. His legs are crossed, and he’s the perfect definition of nonchalance.

“Did they say anything to you while you were down there?” I ask, avoiding his gaze. I toss my discarded dress into my bag, and throw the bag to the floor.

“Yeah,” he grunts.

“What did they say?” I look up at him as I open the sheets on my bed.

“Nothing.”

“Theo. What did they say?”

“I don’t want to say.”

“Theo, please.”

He lets out a long dejected sigh, before sitting up on the bed, rubbing his hands up and down his face. “When I ran after you, Joan tried to stop me. If I remember right, she said something along the lines of, ‘She’s just being dramatic for attention, she has since she was a young girl.’”

I nod, hoping that’s the end of it, but he continues. “When I went back down, she reiterated her thoughts, telling me I was enabling you.”

I suck in a sharp breath. “Thanks for telling me.” I sit down on the edge of my bed, plugging in my phone, when a message from my dad pops up on

the screen. A bout of nausea sweeps through my body, and I feel all the blood drain from my face. *Great.*

“Hey,” Theo says, coming to sit beside me, wrapping his arm around my shoulder and tucking me into his chest. “I shouldn’t have told you. It’s irrelevant, and they are horrible people.”

I don’t even process the way he’s holding me, and how intimate it feels, until I start to speak. “No, I’m glad you did. Just need to prepare more for tomorrow. I feel like I haven’t said it enough, but thank you for coming with me, dealing with me. I didn’t realize how much I needed someone by my side.”

“I’m here for you,” he says, pressing a subtle kiss to the side of my forehead. A shiver runs through my body at the extra contact, and I have to remind myself again that this is all pretend. It’s fake. He’s just being nice. “I won’t leave your side, we’ll get through this together.” He squeezes me gently, then goes back to his bed.

I nod, still trying to process my thoughts. “Thanks.” I grab my phone again to read my father’s text.

Dad: Don’t think I didn’t notice you sneaking out earlier. I don’t appreciate your need for attention, Peyton. Family pictures start at 1:30 tomorrow. I expect you to be there in more appropriate attire than you were tonight.

I don’t even want to respond, but I know I have to. If I don’t he will probably bust down my hotel room door. Not that I told him what room we are in, but he would find a way to figure it out.

Me: K.

“We have to be ready tomorrow at 1:30. Is that okay?” I ask Theo, who is now tucked under the covers.

“Yep. Like I said, I’ll be at your side, whether you like it or not,” he says with a yawn. “Best damn fake-boyfriend around.” He winks, and I can’t help but blush.

“Thanks.”

“No thanks necessary.”

I nod, and tuck myself in before flicking off the lamp between our beds.

“Goodnight, Peyton,” Theo whispers.

“Night, Theo.”

AFTER WE MADE it through photos, with no less than five rude remarks from my dad, I think Theo was about to burst at the seams with anger. After the third statement about how my baby blue gown was too revealing, I literally had to clasp his hand and step away to stop him from saying anything. Kelsey, on the other hand, raved about my dress, and how perfectly it fit the color scheme that she was going for, so I would say it was a choice well made on my part.

I've gotten used to holding Theo's hand now, and his subtle touches, even the forehead kisses he seems so intent on giving, and I... don't mind it. If anything, I'm starting to crave his presence, to crave his little affirmations and words of praise. He even called me "Darling" earlier in front of my dad and Patricia, and I think my face heated to about a thousand degrees.

Now, we are sitting at our table with Great Aunt Joan, yet again, eating supper. Theo's hand is resting on my right thigh, as if he's scared I'm going to run off again. I can't say I don't want to, but overall things aren't so horrible. Theo looks absolutely stunning in his gray suit, perfectly complimenting my dress, and his hair styled neatly.

His cologne is permeating my senses, but it's not too strong where it's overpowering. It's a smokey, almost spicy, scent, much like the whiskey he always drinks. I keep stealing glances at him, noting the way he savors each sip of his whiskey, like he wants to taste each individual flavor within it. He offered me a sip, and I took it, smelling it beforehand. It smelled absolutely incredible, but the moment the amber liquid hit my taste buds I wanted to vomit. It tasted like pure gasoline that burned the inside of my mouth. I forced myself to swallow it, but it was not pleasant at all.

Theo's eyes glinted with humor as he watched me, like he knew exactly what was coming. Joan gave me a judgmental glare as she witnessed the whole thing, scoffing and shaking her head in displeasure. I wanted to stick my tongue out at her like an adolescent child, but that felt like a bit much.

So instead, I smiled sweetly, then turned my attention back to my fake boyfriend, who was grinning at me like an idiot. When he smiled at me like that, gave me words of encouragement, and praised me for how well I was doing, it made me wonder what it would be like to be in a real relationship. Is this what it's like? Having someone by your side to help you? Encourage you? Theo is amazing at faking it, and he makes me feel wanted, a dangerous

thought for someone like me.

“I’m going to walk around for a bit, want to join me?” Theo asks as we finish eating.

“Sure,” I say with a shrug. He helps pull out my chair, and offers me his hand. I gratefully clasp it in mine. We walk hand in hand, admiring the decor, and fairy lights that are twinkling around the huge ballroom. There are at least four hundred people here, and I know for a fact that if I ever get married- which given my history is unlikely- I am going for a smaller, more intimate vibe.

We aimlessly walk around, until we run into Hunter. He’s standing with a few of his groomsmen, drinking a can of beer, and laughing rambunctiously. Determined to ignore him, I put my head down, and walk past, but to my chagrin, he stops us.

“Peytato Chip!” he calls. *Shit.*

I slow my footsteps to a stop, and turn to face my step-brother. “Hey Hunter,” I say.

“Who’s this?” he says, slurring slightly. Poor Kelsey, they haven’t even had their first dance and he’s halfway tossed.

“This is my boyfriend, Theo,” I reply, as Theo drops my hand and wraps his arm around my shoulders, pulling me into him. He offers his right hand to Hunter, and Hunter tries to show him up, by shaking his hand roughly.

“Nice to meet you, man,” Theo says. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Oh yeah?” Hunter chuckles. “I’ve heard nothing about you. But that’s probably because my little sister here is a little hermit crab, never shows up to family functions.”

Theo’s arm tightens possessively around me, and before he can respond, Hunter’s speaking again. He leans forward, bending down to Theo’s ear like he’s about to whisper in it, but speaks at full volume, loud enough for everyone to hear. “Yo, I bet you get some good mouth action from her. She used to give all sorts of guys blow jobs in the school bathrooms when we were in high school.” His friends, some of whom I recognize from the years of torture I endured, all shout “ooooo” like we are teenagers, and he just “burned me.” I can’t help it, I shrink into my shell, pulling away from Theo’s embrace, embarrassed by the false words spewing from his mouth.

THEO

Oh. Fuck. No.

He did not just say that. “What the fuck did you just say?”

Hunter’s glassy eyes widen at my snarled response. “Yo, man, it was just a joke. We used to tease her in high school, so I thought it’d be funny to bring it up again. She used to think it was hilarious when we were kids.” He stumbles over his words, the obvious anxiety radiating from him.

I look over at Peyton, who is visibly retreating into herself, shrugging my arm off her shoulders. I stalk up to Hunter so he’s backed into the wall, but don’t touch him. “If you ever say a fucking word about my girl again, you’ll regret it. I don’t give a fuck if you were teasing. Look at her. Does that look like someone who participated in the joke?” His scared eyes fly to Peyton behind me, and he shakes his head. “That’s what I fucking thought. I’m not going to fuck you up because you just got married, but I swear to god, if I ever hear another word out of your mouth about her, you’re done. I was in the military for thirteen years as a combat medic. I know how to kill someone and make it look like an accident.”

He nods, and I step back, anger seething through me. All his pussy ass friends stand around me, eyes wide and in shock. I turn around, facing Peyton. She’s a shell of a human, arms wrapped around her body, face pale as a ghost. I stride toward her, taking her into my arms, and pulling us out of the crowded ballroom. Luckily, it doesn’t appear that we caught the attention of too many people, and hopefully this doesn’t come back to haunt Peyton.

When we’ve exited the room, I pull her into a coat closet, desperate to see her bright blue eyes. She’s staring down at the ground, so I rest my hands on

her shoulders, bending my knees down to her level. “Peyton, I know you’re probably pissed at me for making a scene, but I couldn’t just stand by and watch them say that bullshit about you.”

She shakes her head, still not saying a word. She’s practically comatose, like the night I found her locked outside of her apartment. “Peyton, please, say something,” I beg, voice growing frantic with each second that passes.

My hands move up to cup her warm cheeks, and I tilt her head, forcing her eyes to meet mine. I’m replaying the last minute in my head, trying to think of what I could have done better. I slipped and called her ‘my girl’. Had that been too much for her? Did I push her too far? “Please, darling. I’m so sorry.” The term of endearment falls from my lips easily, much like it did earlier in front of her dad. Her eyes are red and tear rimmed, but the girl that I know is still in there.

“Why did you do that?” she whispers. My heart sinks to my stomach. “No one has ever stood up for me like that before.”

“Fuck,” I breathe, resting my forehead against hers. “I just... I couldn’t handle it. The things he was saying? Even if they are true-”

“They’re not, I promise,” she interrupts.

I nod softly against her. “I didn’t think they were. Not for a second. God, he’s such a fucking shitty human. I’m sorry, Peyton.”

She nods. “It’s over now. We just have to survive a few more hours before we can go. Do you think you can do it?”

I take my head from hers, pulling her into a tight hug. “I can, but can you? You’re doing amazing, darling, but I don’t want you to be uncomfortable anymore.”

I can feel her shake her head against my chest. “I can do it. I feel safe with you.”

“You are.”

I hold her tight for another minute, letting our breathing slow until we are in sync, and then she pulls herself away. “Ready?” she asks, face no longer pale, but flushed and bright.

THE REST of the evening went quickly, thankfully with no more interactions from Hunter. I didn’t miss every time he glared at me, and the apologetic

looks we got from Kelsey upon returning to the ballroom. Her dad didn't seem pleased either, but we kept to ourselves before heading back up to our hotel room. Patricia stopped us on our way out the door, oblivious to the earlier events, and reminded us of the family brunch in the morning. Peyton respectfully declined, letting her know we had to be on the road early since she's on call tomorrow evening. She's not, but I think she just wants to get out of here. If I hadn't had more than a few glasses of whiskey, I'd offer to drive us home tonight, but even though I feel fine, it's not worth the risk.

Now, back in the hotel room, I've changed out of my suit, and hung it in the bag. Peyton is in the bathroom changing out of her dress, and even though I offered to help again, she declined, letting me know there weren't any zippers on this dress. Not gonna lie, I was a little bummed. There was something so domesticated and real about helping her with the zippers yesterday. I liked it. *Too much*. The feel of her warm skin under my fingers damn near gave me yet another hard on. I keep getting them around her. It's inconvenient.

When she exits the bathroom, her face is fresh from makeup, hair in a half pony, and she's in the sweats and t-shirt she wore to bed last night. Only tonight, her eyes are red rimmed, and her face is splotchy. Shit, has she been crying? How didn't I hear her?

"Hey..." I climb out of bed, walking over to her. "What's going on? Are you okay?" I reach her, clasping both her hands in mine, and bending to her level again.

She sniffs, and a tear strays down her cheek. "Yeah, just frustrated. I should know when I'm around Hunter he's going to do that shit, but for some reason, I'd hoped tonight would be different."

I let go of one of her hands, and use it to rub up and down her forearm. Her skin breaks out in goosebumps, and she keeps talking. "I know you said you didn't believe what he said, but I wanted you to know it really isn't true. They used to spread rumors about me, before I even got to high school. My first day of freshman year, I had three guys stop me in the hall and try to take me into the nearest bathroom to... you know." She cringes, another set of tears rolling down her red cheeks. "I don't want you to think any less of me. That is not who I am, I've never done anything like that." She lets out a humorless chuckle. "If anything, guys treat me like I have the plague when I tell them I'm not looking for a quick hook up. I mean, I had to enlist you to be my fake boyfriend because I've never had, and never will get a real one."

“Peyton...” I squeeze her hand. “I never, not even for a second, believed him. I know who you are. You’re strong willed, independent, and it sucks that you have to deal with their bullshit.” I pull her into my chest, kissing the top of her head. She wraps her arms around me tightly. “You’re amazing, and any guy would be lucky to have you.” I don’t say what I’ve really been feeling lately, which is that *I* would be lucky to have her. I know that isn’t what she wants.

She scoffs into my chest, and irritated, I pull her away. “Seriously,” I say, moving my hands to clasp her warm cheeks in my hands so that she looks at me without pulling away. “I’m not lying, or saying this just to appease your mind. I’m dead serious, and I don’t know how else to prove it to you.” She tries, unsuccessfully, to move herself from me.

After watching her from afar for a year, I realize now all the things I noticed about her, are things that attracted me to her, intrigued me about her. I’ve played off the growing feelings for her as trying to help her, when really, I think I wanted an excuse to test the waters, see if the things I was feeling were real. A low grumble erupts in my chest, so I do the only thing I can think of to get her to believe me, the thing I’ve silently pined for, wanted for the last year. I slam my lips against hers in a soul sucking kiss, still cradling her head in my hands. She inhales sharply, sucking some of my air as her lips part, allowing me access to her mouth. My tongue moves into her mouth, kissing her with fervor, as her hands fumble up my chest.

Unwillingly, I pull back, removing my lips from hers. Our chests are heaving as we part, trying to catch our breath. I know that kissing her was probably a huge mistake, that I’ve just taken advantage of her, when I know she’s had a rough few days, but all I can think about is being with her, making this real. Peyton’s eyes are heavy lidded as she looks at me. I drop my hands, fisting them at my sides.

“Sorry. I-” Before I can say another word, Peyton is fisting my t-shirt in her hands at the collar, thrusting her mouth onto mine again. I grunt against the sudden movement, but within a second, I’m kissing her right back. Her body presses tightly against mine, and my hands grip her curvy waist, pulling her hips flush against my body. My cock hardens at the feel of her body against me, and all too soon, the kiss is ending, and her mouth is no longer on mine.

“Um, wow, okay,” Peyton says, taking three steps back from me. “I uh- I just needed to test something.”

I clear my throat, trying to shift my weight subtly to hopefully hide my very obvious erection. “Test something?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

“And what did you learn?”

“I-I don’t exactly know.”

I chuckle, running a hand through my hair. “I just needed you to know... where my head’s really at, prove that I want you. I’m sorry if I took advantage of you, that was not my intention.”

“No, really, it’s... okay. Now I know where you’re at. Point proven,” she giggles, color in her cheeks. She smiles sweetly at me. “Thanks, Theo. Should we go to bed?”

“Yeah, I- I just need to go to the bathroom. You can turn the lights off, I’ll be out in a bit, might shower.”

“Sounds good. I’m sorry I kissed you again,” she says softly.

“Nothing to be sorry about.” I wink, heading into the bathroom and locking the door. My hard dick is pressed against my boxers, and I’m thankful I didn’t just free ball it tonight in my sweats. I turn the shower on cold, and after stripping down, I hop in, leaning my forehead against the tile wall, urging my cock to soften.

That was totally and completely unexpected. And I liked it.

PEYTON

I'm currently laying in bed, facing away from Theo, watching the sun peek in through the curtains. I still have no idea what went through my brain last night when I kissed him back. There is still a piece of me that believes he was only kissing me out of pity, and not actually because he wanted to.

I'm trying not to get too far ahead of myself, but it's hard. I've only been kissed once before, and that was... not the same.

Kissing Theo was everything I dreamed a kiss should be. My heart was pounding in my chest, my entire body tingled with sparks from his touch, and I swear, my mind completely shut off, and the only thing I could think of was *how fucking good* it felt to have his lips on mine.

But now, I'm overthinking everything. As I do.

My alarm is going to go off in roughly three minutes and I'm scared. Scared that now things are going to be awkward between us, scared because we blurred the line that we set. Scared, because now, all those little feelings I was having toward him have all amplified after experiencing his lips on mine, experiencing what it would be like to be in a relationship with him. The stray touches, the way he stood up for me, was there for me.

The blaring of my alarm stuns me out of the mild stupor I'm in, and I shoot up in bed so I'm sitting straight up. I turn to look at Theo's bed, and I'm surprised to see it's made and all his things are packed neatly at the foot of the bed.

Where is he?

Maybe he's showering? But he showered last night... and I don't hear the shower running. The bathroom door is open, so I don't know where he could

be. Did he leave me? He probably ran away since I not only blurred the line, but ran straight through it when I kissed him the second time. I took it too far. He was just being nice, literally playing the part, and I took it to the next level. I check my phone to find no missed messages from him, just one from Sam, asking what time I'll be home today.

Seeing her name makes me feel even more guilty. I'm just glad we are done with this now, and we will never have to bring it up again. I never want her to find out I fake dated her brother, or that we kissed.

He wouldn't have left me... would he? His bag is still here, along with his suit. But where did he go?

Well, I might as well make myself busy, because he has to come back at some point. I grab my things and head to the bathroom, jumping into the shower and soaking up the hot water.

Once I'm finished and dried off, I quickly blow dry my hair a bit so I can throw it into a messy set of dutch braids. I'm not going to bother with makeup, so I dress quickly, and head out of the bathroom.

"Jesus!" I shout, when Theo is standing in front of the door with his hand raised as if he was about to knock. He takes a startled step back, nearly dropping the paper cup in his hand. I clutch my hand to my chest, trying to calm my racing heart. "I wasn't expecting you. Where did you go?" I ask when I catch my breath.

He widens his step so I can leave the bathroom, and follows closely behind me as I walk into the bedroom to shove my things into my suitcase. "I ran to get some breakfast before we hit the road," he says with a shrug. "I woke up at about five, and couldn't get back to sleep, so I went for a run, showered, and got some food."

"You got up at five?!" It's nearly eight now, how did he get that much accomplished in such little time? "Why so early? How come I didn't hear you or your alarm?" I sit down on the bed after shoving all my things into my suitcase, and tossing it to the floor.

"I didn't set an alarm." He hands me a coffee cup, and an egg sandwich, sitting next to me on the bed. "I... couldn't sleep." I nod knowingly, wondering if he had another nightmare. "So I went for a run. It was pretty great. Running down by the lift bridge, and along the shoreline of Lake Superior? No better place for a morning run."

I shudder. "I hate running. Maybe a nice stroll down the shore would be fine, but running? No way."

Theo chuckles. “Yeah, well I spent a lot of time running after my military days, so it’s second nature. A good way to clear my head.”

I nod in reply, then say, “Usually, I take a bath, or read. That’s usually how I clear my head.”

He gives me a smile before taking a bite of his sandwich. “Are you about ready to hit the road? I don’t want you to get too far behind on your day.”

I shove my sandwich down my throat, and stand from the bed. “Yep, let’s go.”

“You didn’t have to swallow your sandwich whole, Peyton,” Theo says with a laugh. “I meant after you ate.”

Mouth full, I wave him off, grabbing my suitcase from the floor.

“THANKS FOR DOING THIS. I don’t think I would have been able to do it without you,” I say to Theo as we drive through the town limits, about five minutes from our apartment complex.

“Of course. I really didn’t mind. I’m glad I could be there for you,” he says, dropping a hand from the steering wheel and resting it on my thigh. I’m wearing shorts, so his hand is directly on my skin. His thumb grazes back and forth on the skin of my thigh, and goosebumps break out on my skin.

“I appreciate it. And about the…” I trail off, hoping he doesn’t make me say the words.

“The kiss?” he asks, a gleam in his eyes.

“Yeah. That.”

He squeezes my thigh gently before moving his hand back to the steering wheel. “Doesn’t have to mean anything if you don’t want it to.”

A weight lifts off my chest, but then my heart cracks just slightly. I know his kiss was to reassure me, but the things he said after… it spurred some bigger feelings for me.

“Thanks,” I reply, looking out the window as we pull into the complex parking lot.

“Shit,” Theo says under his breath as he parks his truck in an open spot.

“What?” I ask, looking around to see what the problem is.

“Sam.”

Shit is right.

Sam is sitting on the tailgate of Owen's truck, kicking her legs back and forth, a gleeful smile on her face. Her blonde hair is pulled up into a messy bun, and her sunglasses are perched on her head. When she spots us, she waves frantically, and I spot Owen lumber out of the driver's seat, and head to the back of the truck where his future wife sits.

"We only have about ten seconds before she comes barreling to us and starts the interrogation, so how do you want to play this?" Theo asks, eyes wide and focused on me.

"Um. I-" Sam jumps off the tailgate, heading toward us. "I- How did she find out we were together!?"

Theo grabs my face in his hands, forcing me to look him in the eye. "Peyton. My sister is nuts. How do you want to go about this? Tell her it was fake? Or keep up the charade?"

"I-" Just as I'm about to stutter out a response, Sam knocks on the window, eyes narrowing at the fact that my face is still in Theo's palms.

"Fuck."

"You know I can see you in there," Sam calls through the window. "The tint on your truck isn't the greatest, Theodore."

Theo releases my face, and pinches the bridge of his nose, letting out a deep breath. He turns off the truck and shoos her away from the window before opening the door. "Hello, Samantha," Theo says, full naming her like she did him. He takes her into a side hug, greeting Owen with a wave. "To what do I owe the pleasure of you staking out my apartment on this fine Sunday morning?"

I climb out of the passenger seat, grabbing my water bottle and my purse from the floor. I round the truck, giving Owen a little wave as he walks over to join us. "Hey, Sam," I say.

"Oh, don't you 'Hey, Sam' me, missy," Sam retorts, placing her hands on her hips. "I knew there was something between the two of you. I just had to drag it out of you."

"No, there-" I begin to say, but I'm stopped, as Theo rests his hand around my shoulder, pulling me into him.

"I went along with Peyton to her step-brother's wedding as a support person. We are getting to know each other. The real question is, how did you find out we were together?"

Sam scoffs. "It wasn't that hard to figure out. You replied to a snapchat I sent you, and I could see a dress hanging in the background. I thought 'Huh,

that's weird, why is there a dress with Theo, if he's at a training weekend?' And then, I realized that was the dress I helped Peyton pick a few weeks ago when we were shopping. You didn't really make it that hard. Almost like you wanted me to figure it out."

My jaw nearly drops to the floor. "What the fuck?"

"Sam, you're insane," Theo scoffs. "Yes, I went to the wedding."

"So you're together?" she retorts.

"No—"

"Yes," I say, my mouth speaking faster than my brain.

"*I knew it!*" Sam screeches, jumping up and down, pulling the two of us in a bear hug.

When she releases us, Theo glances down at me with wide eyes. I give him an *I don't know look*, and look back at Sam. "It just... happened," I say, wondering what the fuck I'm doing. "We started off as friends, and he offered to come with me this weekend, and things... progressed?" I phrase it as a question.

"Owen, I did it." Sam flings herself into her fiancée's arms. "I'm three for three. I'm a genius." She releases him and flings invisible hair over her shoulder. "I need to make a Pinterest board for your wedding."

Theo holds out his hand, halting her. "Woah, Sam, take it down a notch. No wedding boards, or Pinterest planning," he stammers. "Or any of that. We are getting to know each other. That's all. Right, Peyton?" He downcasts his eyes to me, lifting a brow.

"Right, what he said. Just getting to know each other."

"Either way, Mom is going to lose her mind, she's going to be so excited! Ah! Can't wait. Well, I guess I'll let you two lovebirds get back to whatever it is you have planned for today," Sam says, twiddling her fingers at us. She gets into the truck, and Owen, who hasn't said a word this whole time, shrugs, and follows her. They drive off, and as soon as their truck is out of view, Theo looks down at me again.

"Peyton, what the hell? I'm so confused right now." He runs a hand through his hair, and I can tell he's on edge.

"I'm so sorry," I babble, "I wasn't thinking, she was so excited and I panicked, I still have no idea why I said that, I don't want to fake date you anymore, you're probably sick of me and want nothing to do with me, right? Oh my god, I just made a mess of things. We could have just played it off and said your training got changed to Duluth or something, and then you came as

a friend to the wedding, oh god, I just messed everything up. I'm so sorry, Theo." The anxiety I worked so hard to fight off last night bubbles immediately to the surface.

My hand clutches the pearl at my sternum, rubbing it between my fingers to try and calm myself. *Why the hell did I do that?*

"Peyton, slow down." Theo turns his body so he's facing me straight on, bending his knees to meet my eyes like he did last night. "I'm not mad. It's going to be okay. Sure, a little bit of a mess, but I promise, it will be okay." He rests his hands on my shoulders, urging me to take deep breaths.

"Come on," he says, "Let's go upstairs and we can figure everything out."

I nod, and he leans down, and even though there's no one around to pretend for, he gives me a quick peck on my left cheek.

BACK IN MY APARTMENT, I let the reality of the situation crash down on me. After I threw all of my stuff into a pile on my bedroom floor, I came out into the living room where I've been pacing for the last ten minutes. Theo said he would come right back so we could figure things out, but now, I'm worried he's fled the country. I mean, it's a logical response. The deal was he would play the part of my fake boyfriend for the weekend. Only the weekend. I had a plan to tell my family in a month or so when they felt the need to contact me that things didn't work out between us and that would be it. Now though? Sam knows. And she's not going to let this go.

There's a rough knock on my front door, and I rush toward it, but Theo lets himself in. He's changed into a pair of basketball shorts, and one of his many army shirts. "Hey," he says, dragging a hand through his hair as he kicks off his shoes.

I stop, raising my hand to wave frantically at him.

"You're freaking out," he states.

"Uh-duh!" I screech. "How are you not? Have you met your sister? She's not going to drop this? God, Theo, I'm such a fucking idiot! Why did I say yes? I just ruined our lives! I'll call her right now, tell her it was a joke, that it's fake." I run toward the couch where my phone is lying, grabbing it and unlocking the screen.

Before my fingers can tap Sam's name, Theo is swatting my phone to the

carpeted floor, where it lands with a thud and a soft bounce. “Hey!” I yell. “You could have broken that!”

Theo spins me around so I’m facing him, grasping my chin in his hand. “Stop. Freaking. Out.”

His words are like magic. Maybe it’s because of all the time we spent this last week touching casually, trying to get comfortable looking like we are together. Maybe it’s something else altogether about his touch. My body frees of all anxiety momentarily, focusing on the grip of his hand and the way his eyes are beaming into mine. His thumb moves slightly, so it drags across my lower lip sensually. I suck in a breath at the unexpected contact, watching the way his eyes burn as they drag down my face to land on my lips.

He frees my face, and takes my hands in his, sitting down on the couch. “I’ve been thinking,” he says, the grip on my hands tight, like he doesn’t want me to run. In his defense, I’ve been running a lot this weekend. “I like you, Peyton.” He sees my eyes widen but he just smiles and keeps talking as he holds my hands. “I like spending time with you. I liked getting to be there for you this weekend. And we’re obviously attracted to each other.”

My face must reflect the disbelief I feel because Theo threatens, “Do I need to prove it to you again?” My face heats up and I shake my head. “What are you most comfortable with, Peyton? What do you want? Do you want to start dating? Do you want to keep fake-dating? Because I’ll do whatever you’re comfortable with. I just want to keep spending time with you.”

I take a moment and run through the options in my head. I’m shocked at how *open* he is. How does this man just say what he feels so easily, like there’s no consequences at all to getting things wrong? I slowly start to respond, starting with what I know I cannot handle. “I... cannot do casual.”

“Okay. So, not casual,” Theo responds, his eyes locked on my face to read the emotion there.

I take a deep breath. “I can’t have a full-blown relationship. I’m...not there.” I see his face fall, just barely, so I quickly say, “It’s not you! It’s just not... I’m just not...” I trail off and I anxiously rub the pearl on my collarbone. I can’t believe he - or anyone - would actually want a real relationship with me. This weekend was just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to how messed up my family is, and by extension, how messed up I am. Theo is so genuine, and I can tell he means it when he says he likes me.

I can also tell that once he gets to know me better, there’s no way he still will.

I don't say these things to him now. He would just fight me on it. Or try to kiss me again. Which, let's face it, wouldn't be unwelcome. So, point to Theo.

Which really leaves just one option.

He's been patiently watching me, still holding my hands as my brain tries to process and form words. "What if we keep going with the whole fake boyfriend thing. At least for a while, right? We can get through Sam's wedding in a few weeks, and then just tell them things fizzled out between us, and no one will be the wiser. What do you think?"

Am I batshit crazy? Probably. But I like spending time with him, too. And the smoothest way forward seems to be the course we are already on.

Theo sighs, squeezing my hands. "If that's what you want to do. It doesn't really matter to me what we're called. If I get to hang out with you, I'm in." His eyes are tight and I almost think he wants to say more, but he doesn't.

"Okay, good. I'm glad you agree," I say. He releases my hands, and I almost let out a soft whimper at the lost contact.

Theo gets a playful smirk before saying, "The only thing is we are going to have to be more touchy, and more often. I mean, we have a lot of events in the next couple weeks where we have to make this seem real. Bachelor and Bachelorette parties, you have the bridal shower, the rehearsal dinner, and the actual wedding. And..." He hesitates. "My mom texted me. Sam already told her, and she wants us to come over for dinner... tomorrow."

My mind processes all the things he's saying, but I'm stuck on one thing. The touching. "Wait, so we are going to have to touch more?"

Theo chuckles. "Yeah, darling. Like, we are probably going to have to kiss a bit, and share a hotel room again during the wedding weekend, but I'll make sure it's two beds like this weekend."

"Sure, okay. I think I can handle this." We get to kiss again? Fake relationship for the win.

"You can. You're amazing. Just... one little request."

"Of course."

"Please don't call me Teddy Bear again. My family will never let me hear the end of it."

"Wait, when did I call you Teddy Bear?"

Oh shit, it's all coming back to me. I called him that in front of Joan, shortly before I said, "Give me a kiss and I'll be fantastic."

“Ohhhh nooooo,” I groan. I drop my head to my hands, rubbing my sore head. “I’ll never call you that again, I promise. I can’t believe I did that.”

“No worries. Knowing Sam, if she heard you call me that, she would run with it and never let it go.”

“You got it, love muffin,” I tease.

Theo cringes. “Maybe we work on the pet names.”

“Ugh, fine.”

THEO

I roll over in bed, stretching my stiff muscles. After running hard, then sitting in the car for a few hours, my body is sore and tired. Thankfully I didn't have a nightmare last night, especially after the one I had at the hotel. The only thing I could think to do without breaking down was run it off. I sprinted a solid three miles before my body was no longer tight with stress, or looking for danger in every possible corner.

My phone buzzes incessantly on my nightstand, so after another slow stretch, I reach over and grab it. I'm assuming the messages are going to be from Sam, interrogating me more about Peyton, My mother, who also has been interrogating me, or Peyton herself, freaking out. When I left last night, she was... weirdly calm. I get the feeling that she's about to burst at the seams.

She has no idea what it's like to be cared for, loved, or taken care of. Even if it's only for a short period of time, I intend to show her what that is like. I care about Peyton. This weekend proved to me that I like her as more than just a friend. I want to be someone for her. Hell, my cock is getting hard just thinking about her beauty, which is just one of her assets. She's so fucking smart.

Childbirth is one of the most horrifying things, and I've never wanted to experience it on a call. But yesterday, she told me this beautiful story of a mother who had struggled with endometriosis, PCOS, infertility, and miscarriages for years, only to get pregnant with her "rainbow baby," as Peyton called it. She was her nurse from the start of her pregnancy all the way to delivery, and throughout her postpartum care. I could have listened to

her talk about the details for hours.

I love how passionate she is about it. She's kind-hearted, empathetic, and so damn incredible. I just wish she would see what everyone else did. That she deserves love, that she deserves a family that actually cares for her. That's my goal for the next month or so that we are together. Show her how much we, her *found family* as Sam and Lainey call it, love her and want her around. She isn't a burden, isn't in the way. She has molded herself into our lives easily, and now that I'm getting to know her, I'm regretting avoiding her for a year.

Unsurprisingly, the messages are from both Sam, and my mom. In a group chat, no less.

Sam: Theo, we are planning for supper at 6:30, but come over at 5, so we can all hang out. We obviously know Peyton, but not as your girlfriend. ;)

Mom: Does Peyton have any allergies, or food preferences, Theo? I want to make her comfortable.

Me: I don't know.

Sam: How don't you know? She's your girlfriend! What if she's deathly allergic to shellfish, and you give her a smooch after unknowingly eating some shrimp, and send her into anaphylactic shock? Then what? You just killed her.

Me: I don't know, because we JUST started dating, and haven't had the "allergy conversation" yet.

Me: I will ask her. But, please, chill out. We are still new, I don't need you scaring her away.

Sam: She knows me. If I haven't scared her away yet, she's sticking around.

Mom: While Sam does have a point, I think Theo is right. It's going to be nerve wracking for her to transition from us being her boyfriend's parents, instead of her friend's parents. It will be okay.

Me: Thanks, Mom. Should I bring anything for supper?

Mom: Just yourselves.

Sam: Bring brownies!

Mom: Apparently bring brownies.

Me: Okay. Store bought it is. I don't have time to make them.

AFTER I CONFIRMED plans- and allergies- with Peyton, I figured I would run a few errands. Even through her few text messages, I can tell she's nervous, and I can't say I blame her. My family can be a lot.

I ran into the family owned grocery store in town, and stocked up on groceries- and brownies for my sister- and as I was leaving, the farmers market across the street was setting up for the day.

Right at the entrance, there was a florist stand with beautiful peonies and tulips in every color. A thought spurred at the back of my mind, and before I could think twice, I was crossing the street and purchasing three large bouquets.

Which is why I now stand in front of Peyton's door, holding an array of colorful, perfumey flowers. I knock on the door, eagerly awaiting her reaction.

"One sec!" I hear through the door. Just a moment later, the door flies open, and Peyton gasps, her hand flying up to her mouth in shock. "Oh my god! What on earth?"

I let out a low chuckle. "I was at the store this afternoon, and saw this flower stand, so I got some for you, my mom, and Sam," I say, for some reason feeling a little shy.

"Theo..." she breathes out a sigh. "They're beautiful. Thank you." She reaches around the flowers to tug me into a side hug as best as she can. I nearly freeze, as this is one of the first times I think she's initiated contact between the two of us. She's graced me with little touches, but never a hug that lingers like this one.

After a moment she pulls away, and I fully get a glimpse of what she's wearing. A light pink tiered dress that flows down to her mid calves brings out the blue in her eyes. The top is ruched, with thick straps that meet at the top of her shoulder to tie in a bow. Her hair is curled into loose waves like normal, but it's in a half pony, with twists on each side, little curls falling out to frame her face.

"You look adorable, darling." The words are out of my mouth without hesitation, and Peyton gives me a sinfully cute smile. Her cheeks pinken, and I can see the tips of her ears turning red as well.

"Thanks, I suppose I should put these in water?" she asks. "I've never had flowers before, so I'm not sure what to do."

“Well lucky for you, I do. Mom taught me in high school. We can just throw them in a vase for now, and I’ll show you everything else later.”

“That sounds like it’s a lot,” she says as I follow her into the apartment. Setting the other bouquets on the counter, I look to the cupboards she can’t reach.

“Is a vase in one of these cupboards?” I ask, already reaching up to open one.

“I uh-,” she pauses, her forehead scrunching as she thinks. “I actually don’t think I have a vase. I’ll have to get one. Will a cup work for now?”

Chuckling, I grab a cup from her cabinet, filling it with water. “Yeah, this will work perfectly. I’m sure my mom has a vase you can have. She’s always had excessive amounts of vases, and I’m sure she kept them all in the moving process.” Grabbing the flowers, I unwrap them from the crinkly paper, and sink the green stems into the water, adjusting them so the weight doesn’t make the glass topple.

Peyton wistfully sighs as she looks at the flowers, gently touching them with her fingers, closing her eyes and leaning forward to sniff them. “Wow, these are... thank you, Theo.”

“Anytime.” I wink, and dry my hands on the table hanging from the stove. “Shall we?” I offer my arm to her like a proper gentleman, and she takes it with a small giggle.

“PEYTON, honey, can you tell me more about what you do at the birth center? I’m so curious. I’ve talked to Mallory about it some, but not in depth,” Mom says, taking a sip of her red wine.

My parents have a small fire pit in their new backyard, so we are all huddled around the fire as we chat. I’m sitting in a canvas lawn chair next to Peyton, my arm around her shoulders. Peyton starts gushing about her job, and I’m pleased to see that she’s comfortable, the smile on her face natural.

My dad, Owen, and I engage in our own separate conversation while the girls chat. I’m only half listening, trying to keep some of my focus on Peyton to make sure she is doing alright, when Owen says my name.

“Huh?” I reply, totally lost to the conversation.

Owen lets out a gruff chuckle. “I was just checking on your plans next

week.”

“Next week?” I ask, wracking my brain for what he might be talking about.

“The bachelor party. We are going up north. Fishing, camping, that sort of thing.”

“Oh, yeah. I’ll be there.”

“Joe, you’re coming, right?” Owen asks, turning his head toward my dad. Dad’s eyes widen, and he quirks his brow.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“To the bachelor party,” Owen repeats. “We need your grilling skills, and probably someone to make sure we don’t get too drunk.”

Dad chuckles. “If you truly want me there, I will be. But don’t invite me cause you feel like you have to.”

“I want you there,” Owen says with fervor.

Dad claps a hand on Owen’s shoulder. “Alright, son. Count me in.”

My attention is brought back to Peyton, and I notice that she’s pulled her legs up onto the chair, her arms wrapped around them tightly. Her lips are pursed like she’s in pain.

I lean over, my arm still around her shoulder. “Hey, you okay?”

“Mhmm,” she replies softly, but she’s anything but okay. Her jaw is tight, teeth clenched, and her entire body is tensed up.

“Peyton, what’s going on?” I scoot closer to her, my lips practically at her ear as I whisper.

“I’m fine, really.” She gives me a curt smile, and goes back to the conversation with my mom and sister.

SOMETHING IS WRONG. I can tell. Peyton hasn’t relaxed in nearly an hour now, and I can see her wincing with each movement. A light sweat has broken on her brow, and she has all but vacated her body. She’s not talking, not reacting, just... existing.

“Okay, it’s time to go,” I whisper in her ear, after she winces once more.

“No, it’s fine, I’m fine,” she says, as if trying to convince herself of the fact.

“Peyton, you aren’t fine. You’ve barely moved in an hour, and you’re

wincing every five seconds. We're leaving." I all but demand, and when I stand, the tightness between her brows softens ever so slightly. "We're heading out," I say to everyone, and offer Peyton my hand.

She gazes at my hand, and slowly unravels her body from itself. Standing slowly, a hand drops to her abdomen, and immediately, I start making a plan to take her to the ER. She could have appendicitis, or a kidney stone.

"Thanks so much for having me over," Peyton says, waving her free hand slowly. My mom crosses the lawn to us, shoving me out of the way.

"Honey, are you okay? Do you need some medicine, anything? What's going on?" her motherly voice croons, hands flitting all over Peyton, looking for the source of her pain.

"No, I'm okay, Renee, I promise. This happens sometimes." She leans into my mother's embrace, and I watch as my mom lovingly holds her, rubbing a hand up and down her back soothingly.

Sam catches my eye from across the fire, concern across her face. *What's going on?* She mouths, eyeing Peyton.

I shrug, which only causes her to throw her hands up in irritation. *How don't you know?* She mouths.

I shake my head, ignoring her. I focus back on Peyton and Mom, watching as Mom pulls away, holding her face in her hands, whispering something to her. Mom presses a kiss to her forehead, like she would any of her children, and tuts, before sidestepping, and wrapping me in a hug.

"Take care of her," she whispers, leaning back and patting me on my chest. She motions for me to bend down so she can kiss my forehead as well, and I oblige.

Clasping Peyton's hand in mine, I say a final goodbye, and lead her out of the backyard. She walks slowly, her hand gripping mine tightly. Once we make it to my truck, I help her get in, watching to make sure she buckles herself up. I round the truck, and pull out of the driveway, my eyes on Peyton as she tips her head to rest on the headrest, eyes falling shut.

"Peyton, do we need to go to the ER?" I quietly ask.

She slowly rocks her head against the seat. "No, I'm okay. This happens."

"What do you mean, this happens? This doesn't exactly seem normal, darling. One minute, you were fine, the next, you're wincing in pain. You can't tell me this is normal."

Letting out an exhausted sigh, she says, "This is normal for me, Theo. I have endometriosis. I haven't had a bad flare up in a long time, but I suppose

it's about due. Dr. Ness has been really good about helping me manage my symptoms, but there is only so much we can do. Sometimes it gets bad."

My mind swirls with the information she's just given me. I've heard of endometriosis before, but naively, I didn't really know what the symptoms are. How much pain is involved. I thought it was a fancy word for bad period cramps. But Peyton can barely move. Her skin is pale, clammy with sweat, and it looks like she could pass out from the pain at any second.

Resting my hand on her thigh, I squeeze gently, and her hand falls to rest atop mine. I drive through town, pulling into our parking lot. I put the car in park, and look over to her. "Are you sure I can't take you to the ER? I feel like this is something that needs to be checked out."

She shakes her head again. "No, really it's okay. They can't do anything anyway. I just need you to help me get inside, and then I'll be okay." I nod, even though her eyes are still shut, and she can't see me.

I turn off the truck, climbing out, and heading to her side. I open the door, and reach across her body to gently unlatch the seat belt. She moves her arms, freeing herself from the belt, and she slowly scoots to the edge of the seat, turning to face me. With every subtle movement, she winces and hisses in pain, and I can barely take it.

Seeing her in this much pain, knowing I can't do anything to help, it sucks. I guide her out of the truck onto the ground, and when her feet are firmly planted on the ground, we walk slowly into the building.

When we get to the stairs, she cringes, taking a deep breath before lifting her foot up.

"Wait." I hold a hand out, stopping her. "Can I carry you? That would be easier, right?"

She nods, but says, "Yeah, but it's okay, you don't have to carry me. I can do it." She takes a determined breath, but before she can take the step, I stop her again, reaching my arms around her shoulders, bending down to put my arm behind her knees.

"Ready?" I ask, not giving her a choice. I'm going to carry her. Her own arm goes around my head to rest on my shoulders, and I count to three before slowly lifting her. The hiss of pain that she releases hurts me deep to my core, but I move carefully, walking up the stairs to her apartment. She digs her key out of her small purse, and I keep my hold on her, lowering slightly so she can slide the key into the door.

Once open, I carry her into her apartment, the flowers still in the cup on

the counter where we left them. “You can put me down, Theo, I can take it from here.”

I shake my head brusquely. “Nope.”

“What do you mean, nope? I can handle this, I’ve done it for the past ten years on my own. I’ve got it.” She tries to slowly extricate herself from my arms, but I don’t let her move.

“Where to? Bathroom? Bedroom? I’m staying. You shouldn’t be alone right now,” I add, heading down the hall toward her bedroom and bathroom.

She sighs, resting her head against my chest. “Bathroom, please.”

I veer to the right, flicking on the light, reluctantly setting her on her feet. She drops her things to the counter, kicking off her shoes. Her hands rest on the ledge, and she drops her head, taking in a long stuttered breath. “I’ve got this, Theo. Really. Please.”

“Peyton, please, just let me help you. I’ll stay out of your way, but right now you can barely move,” I whisper, pushing her hair away from her face, tucking it behind her ear. “Tell me what to do.”

“Can you start the tub?” she asks, and I let out a sigh at her submission, thankful that she’s letting me take care of her.

“Yes. How hot?” I head over to the tub, turning the water on and plugging the drain.

“As hot as it will go. There’s some epsom salts under the sink, can you throw some in?”

“You got it.” I do as she asks, moving around her to dump some into the steaming tub, and watch as she lifts her head, opening the medicine cabinet, and pulling out a bottle of ibuprofen. After she takes some, I grab a towel and place it on the closed toilet seat. Peyton eyes me expectantly.

“Are you going to leave? Or watch me while I lay in the tub?” she says, a small smirk playing at the corner of her lips.

“You don’t need help getting in?” I ask.

“No, I can do it.”

“Do you need me to do anything while you’re in there?”

She shakes her head. “No, you can go home, I’m okay.”

A low grumble makes its way up my chest. “Peyton, I’m not leaving.”

She sighs. “Fine. It was worth another shot. I might be in here for a while though. In other words, don’t come crashing through the door like Shemar Moore on Criminal Minds because you think I’m dying or something.”

I chuckle, eyeing her slowly, trying to make sure she truly is okay. With

one more glance at her pale face, I decide that she knows herself best. “Alright. I promise not to break down your door.” I wink, and say, “If you think of something you need, just holler, or shoot me a text. I’m running next door to change, and I’ll be back. Okay?”

I can see the fight ready to spout from her lips, but I glower at her, and she silently nods. “Good girl.” The praise naturally falls from my mouth, and I tense, waiting for her reaction. I’m surprised to see her cheeks flush, and her breasts rise as she inhales sharply. Without another word, I turn, latching the door behind me.

AN HOUR LATER, Peyton emerges from the bathroom, still moving slowly, but looking better than she did before. “Hey,” I say, as she sits down gingerly next to me on the couch. I’ve been scrolling my phone for the last hour, listening intently to every movement, every splash of water, anything to give me a sign that she was okay.

“Hey,” she says, her body sinking into her comfy sofa.

“How are you feeling?” I ask, leaning back into the couch, crossing my leg over my knee.

“Um, I’ve been better.” Peyton shrugs. “I need to get some sleep.”

“Do you have to work tomorrow?”

She shakes her head. “Not anymore. I texted Dr. Ness to let her know I was having a flare up. She told me not to come in.”

“Good. I’m off tomorrow too, so I’ll stick around.”

Peyton gives me her best side eye, but doesn’t say anything. Good. She’s learning.

“I opened your bed for you, and found a heating pad in the closet. It’s plugged in and waiting for you.” While she was in the tub, I was googling home remedies for endometriosis pain, and that was one of the top suggestions. Some others included pressure to the abdominal area, and drinking lots of water. There was a lot of information about certain doctor interventions too, but I didn’t read too far into them, as it seems like she and Dr. Ness have that part under control. Therefore, I’m doing what I can control.

Peyton’s eyes well up with tears, and my heart drops in my chest. “What

is it? Do we need to go to the hospital?” I stand, hovering over her, clasping her cheeks in both my hands. Her hair is falling out of the bun she tried to put it in, so I push it away so I can better see her face.

“No,” she whimpers. “No one has ever done that for me before, and it’s really sweet,” she cries, her bottom lip quivering. I sigh in relief, instinctively pressing a kiss to her forehead, and resting my forehead on hers.

“Come on, darling. Let’s get you to bed.” I gently lift her into my arms again, despite her vehement disapproval, and walk her back down the hall to her bedroom. I turned off the lights in her room earlier, leaving only the warm glow of the lamp on her bedside table. I set her carefully on her bed, and she gently lays her head on her pillow, slowly adjusting her body until she is comfortable. I flick the heating pad on, and hand it to her, where she lays it to her stomach. I cover her with the mountain of blankets she has on her bed, chuckling as she slowly disappears into the sheets.

“If you need anything else, I’ll be on the couch, okay?” I say, eyeing her. She nods, and so I flick off the lamp, plugging her phone in for her. When I reach the door, I hear her soft voice call out my name.

“Theo?” I stop, my hand resting on the cool metal of the doorknob.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

The smile that takes over my face is instantaneous. “Of course.”

PEYTON

Pain slices through my abdomen as I try to roll over, attempting to get comfortable again. The ibuprofen must be worn off, and the heating pad has automatically turned off, leaving my uterus very, very angry with me.

Nausea roils through me as I nearly black out from the pain. I sit up as quickly as I can, and try to cross the hall without jostling myself too much. I need to get more meds in me, and fast. I flick the light switch on, digging in the cupboard for the medicine.

“Fuck,” I swear. Where the hell is it? I could have sworn I left it in the cupboard. I find the spare bottle, just as the nausea becomes too much, and my mouth is filling with saliva, a sign of impending vomit.

I drop the bottle with a clatter, the contents rattling inside the plastic. I fling open the toilet, and drop to my knees, ignoring the flashes of pain in my abdomen as I gag, eliminating the contents of my stomach into the porcelain bowl.

Heaving, I do my best to hold my hair back. Confusion rattles like a bowling ball in my brain when I hear footsteps rushing down the hall. *Who the fuck is here?*

“Peyton,” a low voice murmurs, suddenly close behind me.

Theo.

I’d forgotten he was here. I reach back, letting my hair drop into my face, trying to shove his body away as he drops to the floor beside me. “Shit, darling,” he says, ignoring my attempts to push his hard muscled chest away. His deft fingers rake through my hair, pulling it out of my face once more.

I retch more into the bowl, more embarrassed than I think I’ve ever been.

Once my stomach is empty, the nausea gone, I rest my head against my arm, taking long, slow breaths. “You’re okay,” Theo says, rubbing my back. A wad of toilet paper is placed in my hand, and I gratefully accept, wiping my mouth in embarrassment.

“Thanks,” I murmur. Sitting up, I turn so I’m resting against the edge of the tub. Theo sits on the ground next to me, wearing only a pair of basketball shorts. His strongly muscled chest heaves in the fluorescent bathroom light, and his lips are pursed as if angry with me.

“Sorry.” I cringe, trying to get off the floor. I need to brush my teeth.

“Peyton,” he states, halting my movement. “Stop saying sorry.”

I nod, automatically saying, “Sorry.”

He groans, narrowing his eyes. He glares at me expectantly, like he’s waiting for me to say it again. It almost physically pains me not to say it again, because I feel bad. Almost like I’ve disappointed him. I slowly stand, gratefully taking Theo’s palm when he offers it, standing before me.

I make quick work of brushing my teeth, and grabbing the discarded bottle of ibuprofen. I take the medicine, and then gratefully head toward my room again. Theo is already there, adjusting my blankets, and heating pad again. A sense of *deja vu* swarms me, since this same scene played out only hours earlier.

“Climb in,” he says, holding the sheets open for me. I willingly do as he says, eager to feel some sort of relief. Only when I lay down, do I notice the large glass of water, and bottle of ibuprofen sitting on my nightstand, next to my clock. When did he do that?

“When did you get that for me?” I ask, curling up against the warmth of the heating pad.

He looks over his shoulder at where my eyes are, and says, “Earlier, before you went to bed the first time. I didn’t want you to get out of bed unless you had to.”

“Oh.” Well I probably could have saved myself the embarrassment of throwing up and nearly blacking out from the pain had I just looked at my table, but what’s done is done. “Thank you.”

“Not necessary.” Theo brushes a hair from my forehead, dragging his calloused finger down my cheek, my jaw, to my lips. He drags his finger across my bottom lip, and it’s all I can do not to open my mouth, and suck on his finger.

Where did that come from?

Theo's eyes blaze as he watches my lips, and then he drops his hand from me, shoving it into his pocket. "I'll let you get some more rest," he chokes out.

As he strides to the door, I realize I don't want him to leave me. I don't want to be alone. I need his touch, his comfort. "Theo," I call, and he stops, turning toward me. "Can you..." I pause, trying to swallow down the words I desperately want to say, and failing. "Can you lay with me?"

Theo visibly swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing. His voice sounds tight, as he says, "Yeah." He crosses the room, rounding to the other side of my queen bed. I fling the covers back, and he slides in beside me. Laying on my back, the heating pad on my stomach, I reach over, tugging him close to me.

"Could you put your arm on my stomach?" I ask, my face heating with anxiety. "S-sometimes pressure helps with the pain, like a weighted blanket."

Theo rolls over so he can see me better, and his eyes are burning with heat, and something else I can't place. He takes a moment to respond, and I start to stutter out, "Actually-" But he stops me, scooting close so our bodies are touching, and he lays his arm across my lower stomach, the heavy weight from his muscled arm relieving a little of the pain, immediately.

A whimpered sigh falls from my lips, "Thank you."

"I'm not hurting you?" he asks, brows furrowed with concern. The warmth of his body, and the feel of his bare chest against my arm feels like heaven.

"No, it feels so good."

He nods, adjusting his head on the extra pillow. "Let me know if you need anything else, okay?" he says, and I don't reply, just look at him.

The urge to kiss him, to feel his lips on mine again is so strong, so unexpected, that I nearly burst into flames. His eyes flutter shut with exhaustion, and I follow suit, needing a reprieve from my pain.

GRITTY EYES GREET me as I slowly wake up, my body stiff and sore all over. The pain in my abdomen is now just a dull ache, compared to the sharp stabbing pains from last night. Theo's arm is still draped around my stomach, his body pressed up close to me. Slowly, I roll out from his arm, doing my best not to wake him. Before I can fully remove myself from him, Theo lets

out a grumble, sucking in a deep breath before his eyes fly open.

“Peyton?” he asks, his voice rasping from sleep. “What’s going on?”

I wince as I shift my body toward him, laying on my side. “Nothing, I just woke up.”

“Are you okay?” His eyes scan my body up and down, like he’s looking for a visible injury.

I nod, the pillow under my head shifting as I move. “Yeah, I’m doing better this morning. Thank you,” I say with sincerity.

Theo reaches a hand out, pushing a piece of hair from my face. Unexpectedly, he presses a kiss to my forehead, his lips lingering there for a moment. When he pulls back, his icy blue eyes are still hazy with sleep. “Of course. That’s what boyfriends are for, right?” He winks, and shifts away from me slightly. I roll out of his arms, my feet hitting the carpeted floor. My abdomen is still tender, but not nearly to the extent that it was last night.

Theo climbs out of bed as well, stretching his arms above his head. His shirt lifts, giving me an exquisite display of the taut muscles of his abdomen, and the deep V that leads to his... you know. A shiver runs down my spine, as my arms break out in goosebumps, imagining what lies beneath his basketball shorts.

Exiting the room before he can see me studying the planes of his body, I rush into the kitchen, starting a pot of coffee. Theo strides into my small kitchen, running a hand through his dirty blonde hair. He drops my phone to the counter in front of me, saying, “Here, it was buzzing like crazy this morning.” He lets out a long yawn, opening cupboard after cupboard looking for, I’m assuming, a coffee cup.

I can’t help but think about how... domestic this is. Waking up next to him holding me in his arms, the way he looks so at home and comfortable in my apartment. “Cups are here.” I point to the cupboard right in front of me, reaching up to open the door. Theo steps up behind me, caging me in, pressing his body against mine as he reaches around me to open the cabinet. His body is warm, and muscled against mine, and when his groin presses into my ass, I can’t help but slightly arch into him, wanting to feel him.

Is he... hard? Sure enough there is a definite... hardness pressed against my butt, and oh my lanta, is it impressive.

Sooner than I want, he pulls back, setting two cups on the counter, grabbing the now full coffee pot from the warmer. He moves around me so casually, like he didn’t just press his morning wood into my back. He pours

us each a cup of piping hot liquid life in the form of coffee, then leans against the counter, taking a sip, scrolling on his phone. Meanwhile, I'm stuck frozen, staring at the steaming cup in front of me, confused as fuck. My phone lights up with a text, so I direct my attention to that.

Dr. Ness: Hey sweetie, how are you doing this morning? I had a cancellation at ten, want to come in and get checked over? We could look at doing another set of injections.

The next message is from Mallory.

Mallory: Hey, girl. Heard you were having a flare up. Need anything? Tyler is off today, so he and Felicity could pick whatever you need up.

And one from Sam.

Sam: Hey.... you okay? What happened last night?

The time on my phone says it's 9:30, so I quickly shoot Dr. Ness a text.

Me: Is it still open? I would love to come in.

Her response is almost instant.

Dr. Ness: Yep, come on in.

Me: Thanks.

“What’s running through that brain of yours?” Theo asks, still leaning against the counter.

“Nothing. Just catching up on my texts. Dr. Ness wants me to come in so she can do an exam. I gotta get ready since she had a cancellation at ten.” I lift my cup to my mouth, taking a quick drink before turning away. “Thanks for all your help last night... Really, I appreciate it. I’m sorry you had to see... all that.” I gesture at my body, and Theo quirks his brow.

“All that?” he questions.

“You know, like throwing up... and... stuff.”

“Peyton, you do realize I saw things a lot worse than that overseas, right? Vomit into a toilet is nothing.”

I guess he has a point. “I guess. Either way. Thanks. I can take it from here, I think.”

“Can I come with you to the doctor?” he asks, unexpectedly. My brain literally does a record scratch.

“I- uh, what?”

“Can I come along? I don’t know much about endometriosis, and I’d like to learn.” Theo shrugs, taking another sip of coffee.

“But... why?” *Why would he want to learn more about it?*

“So I can help you. Even if we aren’t really... together.” He winces. “I’d still like to be here to help.”

Great, now I want to cry. Why the hell is he so damn nice? I let out a stuttered breath, trying to stop the quivering of my lip. “Um, yeah, I guess that is fine. You don’t have to though. I can go alone.”

Theo lets out an exasperated sigh, setting his cup on the counter. He strides over, taking my own cup from my hands to rest on the counter, and wraps me in a hug. “I know you can go alone,” he whispers into my hair. “I’m telling you that you don’t have to.”

I nod into his chest, totally overwhelmed. *This isn’t real. This isn’t real. Don’t let yourself get feelings for this man.* I chant over and over in my head, until Theo pulls away, resting both of his palms on my cheeks. Before I can realize what he is doing, he presses his lips against mine in a soft, sweet kiss. So much different than our kiss at the hotel, not rushed, frantic, it’s leisurely, and I just know, I’m utterly screwed when it comes to this man, because while we are still playing pretend, the feelings are real, and I’ve never felt them before. It’s intoxicating, the subtle feeling of someone caring for you, and I need to get things under control before I get used to it. I can’t get used to this. He will end up leaving, just like everyone else, or find out just how much of a mess I am. I’ll be left behind, forgotten, unwanted. Just like always.

THEO

I t's been a week since I went with Peyton to the doctor, and she's doing much better. They did steroid injections into her abdomen to see if that would help with her pain. The relief will only last about a month, but it helps. Most of her pain was gone within a few days, and she was back to her normal self. I'm pretty positive she's irritated with me because I keep asking her how she's doing, and what her pain level is at, but I don't care. She scared me when she was in that much pain. I felt useless.

I spent thirteen years helping people in pain, so to just stand by and not be able to help much felt wrong.

I've got an hour left of this shift, and then I'm going over to Peyton's apartment. She insisted on making me supper tonight, since I helped her last week. I told her it wasn't necessary, but she glared at me, basically telling me I had no choice.

"What are you up to tonight?" Tyler asks, taking us down a sidestreet in town. Today's shift has been good so far, and I'm crossing my fingers we don't get any crazy calls in the next hour. I'm anxious to get over to Peyton's. I haven't seen her in a few days, as our work schedules were opposite.

Clearing my throat, I say, "Peyton and I have plans."

The shit eating grin that crosses his face is instantaneous. "Oh, do you now? You know, I heard from a little bird that you two were officially together. Tell me, when were you planning to tell everyone else?"

"Was that little bird your fiancée or my sister?"

He hesitates, giving me a smile. "Both."

"Fine, yes. We made it official. We were keeping things quiet, but then

Sam caught wind of it, so here we are. We're still trying to keep things on the down low, but knowing our group, I don't even know why we tried." I look out the window at the river to my right, the current strong and fast today.

"I get that. Sometimes it's nice to stay in your own little bubble," Tyler replies.

"Exactly." I huff out a sigh. It's not like I'm going to tell him it's all fake, but that I'm starting to wonder why we are keeping it fake, because the feelings I'm starting to get are anything *but* fake.

"You guys look good together," Tyler says, just as the radio beeps with a call.

THE LAST CALL of the shift was pretty easy, it was a call out to one of the nursing homes, to assist a resident who had fallen. She more than likely has a broken hip, but she was in good spirits for the ride to the hospital. We got to see Colin's mom, Molly, in passing, and she must have been having a good day, because she recognized Tyler, and gave him a big hug as we wheeled our patient out.

After a quick shower, and changing into comfy clothes, I'm knocking on Peyton's door, eager to see her. The door flies open to reveal a haphazard looking Peyton. She's in a loose fitting tank top, and a pair of leggings that I just know make her ass look fucking phenomenal. Her hair is pulled back, cheeks red. "Hi, um, come in." She opens the door wider, holding an arm out to welcome me in.

"Hey, darling." I quickly give her a peck on the cheek, the nickname coming naturally. "What do you need help with?"

Peyton's eyes flick up and down, and over to the kitchen. "Um, I don't think anything, I just need to finish cleaning, you're earlier than I thought."

"Want me to leave and come back?" I tease.

"No!" she squeals. "I just need to get my shit together."

Setting the bottle of wine I grabbed on my way home on her counter, I take in the mess in front of me. Dishes are scattered everywhere, ingredients all over, a bowl laying upside down on the floor.

"Uh, what happened here?" I cautiously ask.

Peyton lets out a dejected sigh. "I tried to be fancy, that's what

happened.” Her hands fly up before dropping back to her legs with a slap. “At Hunter’s wedding you said you really liked cajun chicken pasta, so I decided to make it. But apparently I was very ill prepared, and it took longer than I thought. I don’t even think it will taste good.”

She looks so mad at herself, but I can’t help the small chortle that falls from my lips. “Great, now you’re laughing at me,” she groans. “I’m never cooking again.”

“No,” I say between a fit of laughter. “I love that you cooked for me, I’m sure it will taste amazing, darling. I just can’t believe this much of a mess is from making pasta.”

“Stop it!” She grabs a damp linen towel, twirling it, and whipping me in the chest.

“Fuck, that hurt!” I clutch my chest where the towel snapped my shirt.

“That’s what you get. I tried to do something nice, and you think it’s funny.”

“I mean, you have to admit, the disaster that is this kitchen is pretty funny.”

Peyton sighs, her head falling into her hands. “Fine, it is. Can you please just go into the living room, and pretend like you never saw this?”

“No can do,” I smile. “I’ll help you, and then we can eat faster. Kay?”

“Fine,” She grumbles.

“PEYTON, THIS IS REALLY FUCKING GOOD,” I moan through a bite of the pasta that she made. The flavors are delectable. The spice is just enough to give it a kick, but not too much that it’s overpowering.

“You’re not just saying that?” she nervously replies, swallowing down her own bite.

“Fuck no.” I shove another bite of pasta into my mouth. “This is incredible. You should cook more often.”

Peyton’s cheeks turn bright red, as she smiles around her fork. Her mouth is full, so she can’t reply. “Seriously darling. I’m obsessed.”

“Thanks,” she says when she’s done chewing.

After we finish eating and cleaning up, Peyton invites me to stay for a movie, and I’m glad that she does, because no way in hell was I ready to

leave. This girl is slowly but surely taking hold of me, and I would do anything for her. Anything to spend more time with her.

Peyton has a small sectional sofa, and she sits in the corner without the attached ottoman. I find myself sitting directly next to her, my feet resting on the floor. “What are you doing?” she asks, confused.

“Sitting next to you?” I reply. I just want to be close to her. “Is that okay?”

“I mean, I guess. I just figured you would want to sit over there.” She gestures to the other side of the couch.

“I’m good here,” I say, winking and wrapping my arm around her shoulder. She stiffens, and I mentally cringe. I thought we had gotten over the me touching her thing.

As the movie plays, Peyton relaxes into my touch, even resting her head on my chest. This position definitely isn’t comfortable, so I decide to switch things up a bit. “Here.” I gently pull her off of me, and scoot into the opposite corner with the ottoman. I open my legs a little, and gesture for her to come lay with me. “Come over here.”

She hesitates, biting her lip in contemplation. Her brows are furrowed, but after a moment, she stands, and sits herself between my legs, resting her back against my chest. Her head rests on me, and I wrap my arms underneath hers, scooting her as close to me as possible. Just having her in my arms feels incredible. Like this is where she is supposed to be. She relaxes into my embrace, so I press a kiss to the side of her head. She inhales sharply at the soft contact.

My fingers graze over her side, caressing her gently, up and down. It’s a subconscious movement, but it feels right. Tilting my head, my lips gently caress her ear. “Is this okay?” I murmur. I can see the goosebumps that break out on her skin, feel the subtle shiver of her body.

“Mhmm,” she practically whimpers. My cock twitches in my jeans at the noise from her lips, and I have to subtly adjust so that she doesn’t feel how hard she is making me.

“What are you doing?” she asks, tilting her head back so she can see my face.

“I was, uh-” I stutter. “Just adjusting.”

“Oh, I can move.” She starts to scoot out of my embrace, but I pull her back abruptly, yanking her into my groin. Peyton gasps when she feels how hard I am against her back. “Oh,” she breathes.

“I want you here,” I mutter. “Will you stay here?”

“It’s not... uncomfortable?” she asks.

A low chuckle escapes me. “No. It’s not.”

“Okay,” she says, relaxing into me again. My fingers aimlessly roam her abdomen, fingering the hem of her shirt.

“Are you having any pain?” I ask cautiously.

She shakes her head. “No. Not at all.”

“Good,” I whisper, my lips trailing down to her neck, pressing gentle kisses there.

“Wh-what are you doing?” Peyton asks breathlessly, her voice giving her away.

“I’m testing something,” I say between kisses. “Kinda like how you tested something at the hotel.” I definitely didn’t plan on this, but now that I have her close like this, in my arms, I can’t stop.

Peyton’s breath hitches as I ask, “Is that okay with you? Can I test something?” She nods.

I lift the hem of her shirt slightly, softly sliding my fingers up and down her soft skin. She’s practically vibrating under my touch, her breaths uneven and rapid. I lift my head up, inhaling deeply. God, she smells so fucking good. Like a sweet vanilla bean.

“I’ve...” she hesitates, her hips moving into my touch. “I don’t have much experience... I don’t know what to do.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No, please don’t,” she breathes. “I just don’t want to do something wrong.”

“How about you just lay there, and feel,” I whisper, nipping the lobe of her ear gently. “Think you can do that?”

Peyton nods, and my pointer finger slides under the fabric of her leggings. She lets out a gasp as I slide my finger under the band of her panties. I give her a moment to say something, tell me to stop, but when she doesn’t I slide my fingers lower, lower, until her warm wetness greets me.

“Look at you, darling, you’re soaked,” I murmur, my left hand dragging up her torso to caress the smooth skin of her neck. Her heartbeat rapidly pounds under my fingertips at her neck as I tease her pussy.

My fingers circle her clit, and her hips shift and buck underneath my touch, pressing her against my erection. “How does it feel?” I ask, my voice low with desire.

“Good,” she whimpers, spreading her legs wider, giving me more access.

I strum her clit, feeling her tense up beneath me, but not with anxiety, with pleasure. Switching things up, I stop my movements on her clit, and she mewls with displeasure.

God, I cannot believe this is happening right now. She’s so fucking incredible.

My fingers prod at her entrance gently, and when she rocks her hips again, I slide into her tight pussy easily. Peyton gasps at the feeling, and I hold there, giving her a moment to breathe.

“Do you want me to move?” I ask, not wanting to push her.

“Yes, god, please.”

I slowly tease her with my fingers, sliding them in and out of her, reveling in how fucking tight she is. “God, baby, you’re so tight. You’re clenching my fingers so good.” I use my left hand to tilt her head so I can taste her lips on mine, and when our lips connect, I swear to god, I feel fucking fireworks.

I swallow her moans, her gasps, still moving inside her, curling my fingers to hit her g-spot at just the right angle as my thumb strokes her clit. I can tell she’s close. Her body tightens more, and her gasps get closer together.

“You’re close, aren’t you,” I tease against her lips, and Peyton nods. I don’t stop what I’m doing, don’t change a fucking thing.

The moment she explodes in my arms is something I’ll never forget. She cries out my name, and I silence her with another bruising kiss. Her pussy clenches so tight around my fingers that I can’t even imagine what it would feel like to have my cock inside her as she comes.

Peyton’s body sinks further into mine, coming down from the high of her orgasm. “Holy shit,” she breathes.

I chuckle, sliding my fingers from her warmth. She shivers at the loss of my touch, and I give her another kiss. I can’t get enough of her. Can’t stop touching her.

“How was that?” I ask.

“I…” She pauses. “I don’t even have words. I think you broke me.”

“A good broken, or a bad one?”

“Good. For sure a good one.”

“You did so good, darling.” The praise falls from my lips, and a burst of pride surges through me watching her cheeks flush from the words.

“Thanks... for that,” she bashfully whispers. Turning herself to snuggle into my chest more, I can tell she thinks she needs to return the favor. I stop her, wrapping my arms around her shoulders.

When she tries to protest, I drop my mouth to her forehead, giving her a firm shake of my head. I don’t say a word, but she listens, relaxing into me.

We watch the rest of the movie in silence, our breathing in sync. I play with her hair, and she drags her fingers up and down my chest. My cock never settles, but how could it after the way Peyton just gave a piece of herself to me like that?

The credits roll, and Peyton sits up, pushing her hair behind her ears. She sits back on her knees, keeping her eyes averted from mine. “Can I ask you something?” her sweet voice whispers. Her body is slightly tense, and she keeps fidgeting with the hand she has in her lap.

“You can ask me anything,” I reply, keeping my voice low, and my eyes on her. “But you have to look at me first.”

Peyton stands abruptly, waving me off muttering to herself. “Nevermind.”

“Peyton. Sit. Down,” I command. Her body slumps to the couch, and she keeps her gaze focused on her hands. “Look at me.”

She adamantly shakes her head. “Peyton. Look. At. Me.” Her head lifts slowly, long black eyelashes fluttering as her bright blue eyes meet mine. “There’s my girl,” I whisper, reaching a hand up to tuck a stray hair behind her ear. I slide my fingers down her jaw, feeling the rapid thrumming of her heart underneath my fingertips. “Ask me.” I need to know.

She can’t say something like that, especially after what we just did, and expect to get away with not asking me.

“I know this is all fake,” her voice is slightly shaky as she gestures between us. I can’t help but wince at her words. She might think this is fake, but I’m trying to figure out a way to convince her that I *want* this to be real. “You *obviously* have some experience in... that department.” She waves her hand again at me. “And I *obviously*... do not.”

I eye her curiously, waiting for her to ask me an actual question. Her soft voice raises an octave when she finally asks her question. “Can you teach me?”

“Teach you?” I warily ask. What on earth is she talking about?

“Yeah. Like... how to... please someone.” Her pale face blazes red, and I can sense her embarrassment.

Oh.

I can't formulate words, can't formulate actions, so I sit in silence for a long moment, trying to process her request. I can't say that it doesn't hurt, her wanting me to teach her things to use with someone else. The thought of her with another guy? Fuck. That.

"Nope, nevermind!" she shrieks, flying off the couch. "Forget I asked!" She tries to walk out of the living room, but no way in hell am I letting her get away. I snake an arm around her waist, yanking her back down onto my lap. She straddles my hips with her thighs, and I run my hands up and down them, trying to soothe her. Feeling her close to me again, I get clarity.

"You want me to teach you, darling?" I grip her chin in my hand so she can't look away. Her blue eyes are burning with heat, flaming with desire. She tries to slip away again, but I grip her hip again, pulling her down so her center is resting on my rock hard erection. Letting her know exactly what she does to me. "I asked you a question," I reiterate.

"Yes," she whimpers.

"Yes, what?" I taunt, a smirk pulling at my lips.

"Yes, I want you to teach me," she breathes.

"Why do you want me to teach you?" I need to know if she feels the things that I'm feeling. If she wants me the way that I want her.

"Because..." She sucks in a deep breath, looking away from me. I let her, knowing that it will be easier for her to get this out if she isn't looking at me. "When this is all said and done, when you aren't my... fake boyfriend anymore, I want to be able to... please someone. I want to make someone feel good."

My hands grip her hips, trying to keep myself calm.

"You see." She focuses her attention on the collar of my gray t-shirt, her fingers fiddling with it. "I've only been with one person. And that was less than stellar. You're only the second person I've ever kissed."

That would explain a lot of her hesitation. I knew she didn't have much experience, but I didn't know it was... this little.

"I feel comfortable with you. I feel safe with you. I don't know if I would feel safe enough to learn with someone else. So that's why I'm asking you." Her eyes soften as she gazes into my eyes again.

Resting my forehead against hers, I try to relax my racing heart. There are so many things running through my mind right now. God, I really like this girl. Fake or not. If I say no, I humiliate her, and risk losing her altogether. If

I say yes, maybe then, I can convince her to stay with me, show her how good things could be between us.

I also feel like the biggest douche alive right now. I practically took advantage of her tonight, shoving my hand down her pants like a pervy seventeen year old.

“I feel like such a dick right now,” I say, clasping the nape of her neck in my hand.

“What? Why?”

“You told me you didn’t have much experience. I shouldn’t have taken advantage of you like that.”

“Theo, no,” she whispers, pressing her soft pink lips to mine. “You didn’t, don’t think that. I don’t know what I’m doing, but god, I wanted that so much. It felt so good.”

God, I hope she’s not lying. “You’re sure?” I ask. I need to make sure that this is really what she wants.

“I’m sure. I wouldn’t be asking if I wasn’t.”

Nodding against her forehead, I hope to god I’m making the right decision. “Okay.”

Her eyes light up. “You’ll teach me?”

I nod again. “I’ll teach you.”

PEYTON

Holy shit, he agreed. I cannot believe he actually agreed. You know what? Scratch that. *I cannot believe I asked him.*

I was going to back out, let it go, but then he made his voice go all deep and commanding like that, and I was putty in his hands. I could practically feel my panties getting wetter by the second. Why is it so hot when he takes control like that? Is that what it's going to be like when he teaches me?

I'm still sitting in Theo's lap, resting my forehead against his, and... I'm frozen. What do I do now? Are we starting? Right now? I'm a mess.

Theo lifts his lips so they meet mine, and a shiver runs down my spine at the contact. We've kissed more than a few times now, but each time is better than the last. His lips slowly move against mine, his tongue teasing mine. "Have you ever had a makeout session before?" he whispers against my lips.

I shake my head, still moving my lips with his. I always thought when making out with someone I would have to put more focus into it, but right now, it's coming so naturally, so easy. Perhaps that's because it's with Theo. I wasn't lying when I told him I feel safe and comfortable with him. He makes me feel desired, even if it's all fake, and for show.

After last week, when he held me while I was in pain, I've been trying hard to separate the reality of our fake relationship, and the feelings starting to stir within me. I know this probably isn't my best idea. I'm going to get hurt in the end, I know.

And yet, I don't care. I don't see myself putting a stop to this.

"Guess I found our first lesson," Theo murmurs against my lips.

"Mhmm," I mutter back. One of his large hands slides up my body,

tangling in the short strands of my hair. The other hand rests on my hip, and he grips it tightly, possessively. A moment ago, he was letting me lead this kiss, and now, he's taken control. I can feel his cock hardening beneath me, and my hips grind against it involuntarily.

The hand on my hip grips me tighter, stopping the movement. A low groan rises up his chest, and he pulls away from my lips, settling on my jaw. "Stop that," he groans.

"Why?" I breathlessly ask. "Isn't that what we're here for?" My hips try to move again, but he drops the hand tangled in my hair to my other hip.

"Yes, but not tonight," Theo grunts, halting me. A wanton whimper escapes me, and I have no idea where that noise came from. Was that really me?

Theo flips me onto my back on the couch, hovering over me. His lips crash into mine again, his stubble rough against the skin of my cheek. His body presses into mine, controlling the movement. His mouth moves back to my jaw, then even further down my neck. One of his hands skates up my ribs, and he cups my breast through my bra and my shirt. I suck in a gasp at the contact, not expecting it.

Theo pulls away, sitting up between my legs. My chest is heaving with my deep breaths, and it looks like he's trying to catch his breath himself. My eyes drift downward from his swollen lips, muscular chest, and then, to the tent in his jeans. Arousal pools in my belly from the sight, and I've felt it on more than one occasion now, but right now, I want nothing more than to see it, to feel it inside me.

I sit up, reaching for him, but he stops me, taking my wrists in one of his hands. "Not right now," he groans. "If we do anything else now, I'll get carried away, and we need to take this slow."

"Why?" I whine. "I don't want to go slow."

"Because I said so."

"Jeez, when did you turn into a surly grump?" I pout, trying to pull my hands from his grasp.

"When you appointed me as your teacher."

"Fair."

He quirks his brow, and releases my hands. "Now, tell me, what would you like to learn?"

"I-" I stutter. I haven't thought about that. I just knew I wanted him to be the one to do it. "I didn't think about that."

“You didn’t?” he asks curiously.

Shaking my head, I scoot back, my cheeks flaming. “I didn’t get that far.”

“How do you want to do this?” I’m trying to keep my eyes off his obvious erection and failing. Theo clears his throat. “Do you want to make a list or something?”

“Yes, a list!” I exclaim. *I like lists. A list I can do.* “I’ll make a list, and you can too. That way it’s fair.” I run into my kitchen, searching for the little pad I keep for my grocery list. And to think, now that is going to be used to write down my dirtiest desires. Let’s just hope I take the right list to the grocery store tomorrow.

Once I find it, I grab a pen from the drawer, heading back to where Theo’s lounging on the couch. I plop down next to him, crossing my legs underneath me. Only... With him sitting there, watching me, there is no way I can write this out. I don’t want to be near him when he reads it. I can’t handle seeing his reactions.

Nope, nope, nope.

“On second thought...” I drawl. “What if I write the list, and then I can send it to you?”

Theo smirks, his blue eyes alight with humor. “Sure, darling. That’s fine.” He takes his phone from his pocket, checking the time. “I need to head out, I work an early shift tomorrow. The bachelorette party is this weekend, right?” He stands from the couch, tucking his hands into his front pockets.

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Yep. Apparently we’re going bar hopping.”

Theo must sense my slight anxiety, as he leans forward, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “Don’t worry. My mom will be there, and she won’t let anything happen. I also wouldn’t be surprised if the guys end up with you all at some point. You know how protective those three are of their girls”

I giggle a little at that. “Yeah, I guess that’s true.”

I stand as Theo heads toward the door. “Text me if you need me. I’ll be waiting for your list.” He winks, then swiftly kisses me on the lips before opening the door to our hall. I step out, watching him walk the twenty some feet down to his door, and wave as he turns to give me another soft smile before entering his own apartment.

WRINGING MY HANDS TOGETHER, I look down at the list I've made, trying to justify each and every want I listed. I surprised myself with some of them, but the more I think about each item, the more hot and bothered I get. I snap a quick picture on my phone, before sending it off to Theo, trying hard not to overthink it. The notification that he's read the message pops up almost immediately, and I fight back the urge to vomit.

I turn do not disturb on my phone, not wanting to see his message when it comes through. Nope, I need to prepare myself more. Glancing down at the list again, I read it in full.

Peyton and Theo's To Do list (In no particular order)

Oral. Giving and receiving.

Normal sex.

Sexting.

Bondage.

Spanking.

Car sex.

Shower/ bath sex

Butt plug/anal

I'm sure my face is the color of a tomato right now, reading the list again. All week I'd been thinking about things to add, or remembering scenes from books that Mallory made me read, and would add something else to the list. And now, I have to get ready for his *sister's bachelorette party*, moments after sending her brother a list of all the dirty things I want to do with him.

I head into my bedroom from the kitchen, donning my attire for this evening's party. Sam wanted us all to wear something "cute and sexy" and then got sashes for each of us to wear. I have yet to see what my sash says, but knowing Sam, there is a perfect reasoning for why we get the sash we get. I throw on my pair of black jean shorts and a low cut black satin tank with lace edges tucked in on top. I grab a pair of comfy black boots from my

closet, and tug them on and lace them up.

Since my hair is so short, there isn't much to do with it, so I re-curl a few chunks that have fallen flat since this morning, and twist the top back. I apply some makeup, going for a dark sultry look, paired with a bright red lip.

I don't think I'll drink too much, seeing as I hate the consequences the next morning, but I do have to admit that letting loose tonight does seem fun. When I look at myself in the mirror one last time before I leave, I barely recognize myself. Normally, I go for looks that aren't quite as bold, but I figured tonight was the night to go all out.

I grab my overnight bag from where it's packed on the bed, and grab my phone on the counter- still not checking the message from Theo- before heading out the front door.

Theo: I didn't expect half the things on this list, but I love it. I can't wait to teach you. We are going to have lots of fun. ;)

Theo: Have fun tonight, darling.

YEAH, I shouldn't have read those texts right now. We are currently at one of the dive bars about twenty minutes from Cinder Valley, a small place called Sweeney's. There are people everywhere, bodies pressed up against each other as they try to get up to the bar counter. Sitting at a small table with Renee, Sam, Mallory, Lainey, and a few of their teacher friends from work, my face heats to a thousand degrees, and I reach out, grabbing my vodka cranberry from the table, taking a long sip.

Holy shit. My thighs are clenching at the possibilities of his words. To be honest, I had thought he was going to back out once he saw some of the shit I put on that list.

"Ooooooh, I know that look," Lainey leans over, whispering in my ear.

Play. Dumb.

"What look?" I curiously reply.

"You just got a sexy text." She wraps her arm around me, squeezing gently. My eyes fly up to make sure Sam and Renee aren't watching, and thankfully, their attention is currently directed to Mallory's phone as she swipes through pictures of Felicity.

"What?" I hiss. "No I did not."

“Colin sends me dirty texts alllll the time. It’s one of our favorite things. He’s such a good dirty talker.” Lainey winks, a stray curl from her mane of brown curls falling into her face. She’s already slightly tipsy, and honestly, I’m not far behind her.

“It’s... nothing, really.” I squirm a little in my seat, thinking about all the *nothing* that I want to do with Theo.

“Whatever you say,” she snickers, taking a sip of her fruity drink, playing with the paper umbrella. “But if it is a dirty text, it’s not something to be ashamed of. They are the best.”

Before I can reply, feedback from the stereo system squeals, piercing our ears. “Shit,” I curse under my breath.

“Hellooooo, Wisconsin!” A male voice booms over the loudspeaker.

“Wait, we’re in Wisconsin?” I lean over to ask Lainey. “Since when?”

“Since we crossed the border?” she teases. Huh. Shows how much I paid attention on the drive here. My mind was a little occupied. I finish the last of my drink, and Renee is quick to head back to the bar to get everyone but herself another round.

We each have our black sashes with gold writing on, each saying a different thing. Renee’s says *Trophy Wife*, with *Mother Of The Bride* written beneath in gold sharpie. Sam’s is the classic *Bride to Be*, while Lainey’s reads, *Maid Of Dishonor*. Mallory’s says, *Hot Mama*, and mine... mine says *Dancing Diva*. I tried to switch with one of the other girls that I don’t know well, but they didn’t have great choices either. I’m not much of a dancer, but according to Sam, one girls’ night last summer, I danced on her coffee table. I don’t remember that, but I had gotten quite drunk. My dad had called me earlier that day, and spent an hour berating me on my life’s choices. I wanted to forget.

Not the healthiest coping mechanism, I know. But it doesn't happen often.

The voice booms over the speaker once more. I can’t even see where the man is standing, since it’s so packed in here, but we can definitely hear him just fine. “Who’s ready for karaoke?” he shouts.

The crowd erupts in cheers, and Sam stands from her chair, running to the front of the room where the guy apparently is. “I’m signing us up!” she yells as her short frame disappears in the crowd.

Mallory and I share a glance, groaning. Lainey chuckles, “You should have known she would sign us all up. She *loves* karaoke.”

Renee brings us back another round of drinks, and I quickly chug down

half of it. If we're going to be doing karaoke, I need the liquid courage.

"You alright, honey?" Renee sits down next to me, rubbing her warm hand between my shoulder blades.

I gulp down the lump in my throat. "Yeah, just... not a karaoke fan."

"Sam won't make you go up there unless you really want to. I promise. She knows everyone has their limits." Renee squeezes me into a hug. Her motherly embrace sends an emotion through me I haven't felt in a long time. My eyes sting with tears, and I swallow the emotion from my throat.

"Okay," I whisper back.

OH MY GOD. Who knew karaoke could be so much fun?! I certainly didn't. Sam and I are currently standing on the small plywood stage, belting out *Goodbye Earl*, by The Chicks. I wasn't forced, or coerced into coming up here, but apparently if you get a few tequila shots in me, I'm on the stage within minutes.

We finish the song, messing up all of the words, but the crowd cheers us on like we've just sung the closing number to a sold out stadium show. Sam slings an arm around me, leading us off the stage, as the next song starts up. Renee walks toward us, a happy grin on her face, as she helps guide us back to our table. I flop down on my seat next to Lainey, and pull my phone out of my back pocket as it buzzes.

Theo: How's it going, darling? Are you having fun?

Theo: Peyton... can you text me back? No one is answering their phones. I want to make sure you're okay.

The messages were sent about fifteen minutes apart, with one coming right as I'm about to reply.

Theo: My mom just sent me a video of you and Sam performing *Goodbye Earl*... I wouldn't put it past my sister to kill a man for hurting her friends. I mean, she was ready to kill Mallory's ex last year. Let me know if you need anything, have fun.

Aw. He was worried about me! My heart flutters in my chest, before I shut it down quickly. No, Peyton. He's your *fake boyfriend*. No feelings. Bad girl.

“Lainey!” I squeal, pulling her into a hug. I hold my phone up, aiming the camera for a selfie. “Selfieeee!” I kiss her cheek as I snap the picture, capturing her giggling and trying to push me off. I send the picture off to Theo, with no attached message, then call Mallory and Sam over for pictures as well.

After sending them off, Sam heads back up for another round of karaoke, this time with Lainey. The crowd cheers when they see Sam heading back to the stage. She has such a magnetic personality, and makes friends everywhere she goes. They sing *Man! I Feel Like A Woman!* And the crowd sings right along with them.

“So, how are things with you and Theo?” Renee asks, as I sit between her and Mallory, watching Sam dance on the makeshift stage.

I have to bite my lip to stop myself from saying, “*Things are great! He’s going to teach me how to have sex, and if I’m lucky, tie me up too!*” Instead, I smile sweetly, and rest my head on her shoulder. “Things are good.”

“Good.” She squeezes me softly. “You’re good for him. He’s been so... secluded since he got back from this deployment, despite living in the same town as his sister. I’ve been worried about him.”

My forehead scrunches. “Why?”

Renee winces slightly, like she’s realizing she’s not supposed to have told me this. “I just worry about him, I think he might have some PTSD,” she drags on, and my mouth opens before I realize what I’m about to say.

“He has nightmares sometimes too, I think.”

Renee’s head turns to look at me, eyes wide. “He told you about his nightmares?”

“Well-I-uh-” I stutter. “I wouldn’t say he *told* me...”

“Oh, honey.” She squeezes me tightly. “How are *you* doing with it all?”

“Me?” I scoff, “I’m just fine! You know me!” I cheerily reply, sipping my drink to get myself to shut up.

Renee eyes me warily, but thankfully drops it. I need to put my foot in my mouth. Theo probably didn’t want me basically admitting to his mom that I’ve witnessed his nightmares.

I’m hit with a pang of longing for him, which is weird. I’ve never had this sort of feeling before. I excuse myself from the table, needing some fresh air. I sneak through the sea of people to the cool outside air. There are people standing around, some leaning against the building smoking cigarettes, or laughing boisterously. I find an open picnic table, and drop myself into one of

the rickety plastic chairs.

I grab my phone from my pocket, and see another text from Theo, this time in response to the pictures I sent him.

Theo: Haha, looks like you're having a good time!

My fingers attempt to fumble over the keyboard in their drunken state to reply, but I get frustrated when I drop my phone for the third time, and decide, fuck it, I'll call him.

The line rings and rings and I put it on speakerphone, setting it on the table so I don't drop my phone again. "Hello? Peyton?" Theo answers.

"Heyyy, Teddy Bear," I drawl. Huh, maybe I'm thinker than I drunk I am.

Theo's resounding chuckle sends a shot of arousal low in my belly. "What's up, darling?"

"Ohhhh ya know," I giggle like a schoolgirl. "Your mom and I were just talking about you, y'know, *since I'm your girlfriend*," I snort. "She told me I'm good for you."

Theo sighs heavily. "Did she now?"

"Yep. I'm about to be the best girlfriend you've ever had," I say with determination. Theo laughs, but I don't let him talk. "Did you look at my list?" I ask.

His voice drops an octave. "I did."

"What did you think?" I singsong, twirling a piece of hair around my finger.

"Well..." he starts. "I can't say I expected some of the things from you on that list. Do you have a hidden dirty mind, Peyton?"

A giggle bursts up my chest. "Mayyyybe!" A piece of my hair flies into my mouth when I open it to say more, so I start to sputter and spit to try and get it out.

"Uh, Peyton? Are you okay?"

"Fine," I spit. "Hair in the mouth." A woman leaning against the wall near me strides over, noticing my struggle. She is probably about my age and height, with long sandy blonde hair that falls to nearly her waist in long waves. She is the definition of adorable. Her full figured curves are on display in the cute sundress she has on.

"Here, hon." She offers me a bobby pin from her purse, and even fixes my hair so she can pin it back.

“Thank you,” I gush, my eyes filling with tears. She is so sweet. I don’t even know her name, but I want to be friends.

“Of course,” she says, smiling sweetly.

I can vaguely hear my name being said through the phone, so I turn my attention back to it after my new friend walks away. “Yes, Teddy?” I slur. *Wow, when did my words get so slurred?*

“I thought we agreed on you not calling me Teddy,” he groans. “Nevermind.” I can practically see him running his hands through his blonde hair, or pinching the bridge of his nose like he does when he gets irritated. “Anyway, are you having fun?”

“Yes!” I shriek. “I drunk way more than I think I knew.” *Was that a sentence?* “But Sam and I sang, and everyone loved us, and then I got to hug your mom, and I just *love* your mom. You’re so lucky she’s your mom. Maybe she can be my mom too.” A memory of my own mom’s face tugs at my heartstrings, and my eyes well with tears. I don’t want to think of her right now, I’m happy. That is, until I think about the last time I hugged her, the last time she hugged me back, her bony arms holding me tightly, as if she was afraid I would disappear out of her grasp, when she’s the one who disappeared from mine.

“She already considers you an adopted daughter, Peyton, much like she considers Mallory and Lainey one,” Theo says softly, somehow sensing my shift in mood.

A tear streams down my cheek, no doubt trailing a line of mascara with it. “She’s just so nice. I miss my mom,” I whimper.

“I know, darling. I’m sorry. Why don’t you go inside, and find the girls?” His soft voice makes my heart hurt even more. My eyes fall closed, and the tears fall harder. A hand falls to my back, and starts rubbing soothing circles.

“Are you okay?” The voice asks. When I peel my eyes open, I see it’s my new friend from minutes ago. I shrug, and she gives me a sad look. “Do you need a hug?” she asks, her blue eyes inviting. I nod without a word, and her arms wrap around me, holding me tightly.

She holds me for a long time, letting me get all my tears out, and I hear Theo say my name again over the phone. When I pull away from her embrace, I reach for my phone, and reply a shaky, “Hi.”

“Hi, darling. Do you need me to come get you?” Theo asks.

“No,” I nearly screech. “I am having fun, I just thought about my mom. But I’m better now. I had help.”

“Did my mom come out there?”

“No, it was my new friend...” I trail off, looking over at her. I don’t even know her name.

“Who is it?” Theo asks, and if I was more sober, I might swear I hear a hint of jealousy in his voice.

My friend pipes up, her voice sweet and calming still. “My name's Grace, I’m here with some friends. I saw her and it looked like she could use a hug.”

“See, I have Grace,” I say with probably some unnecessary sass.

“Okay, well why don’t you go in, and find the girls, they might be looking for you,” Theo cautiously says, like he doesn’t want to make me mad.

“Oh my god, I need to introduce you to my friends!” I’m standing up from the plastic chair in a rush, knocking it to the ground in my haste. I press the button to end the call without another word to Theo, grabbing Grace’s hand and dragging her inside with me.

THEO

Well, that was... interesting. I swipe out of the call that Peyton just abruptly ended, and open the messages I sent to my Mom and Lainey while on the phone with a teary Peyton. I had wanted them to run out quick and check on her since I couldn't. Note to future self; Peyton can get emotional-rightfully so- when drunk. I've been sitting on the couch for the last few hours, watching the hockey playoffs, trying my damndest to keep my mind off Peyton. I've kept my phone close, waiting for her to respond, waiting for anything.

I definitely shouldn't be as attached to her as I am, especially since she's still so insistent on keeping things fake. That doesn't seem to stop the feelings that I have for her. Especially since I kissed her the night of her step-brother's wedding, I can't seem to keep my mind, or hands off her. It's like I need to be touching her any chance I can, kissing her soft lips, or her rosy cheeks.

My mom has of course responded now, with a picture of a red faced Peyton, her arm wrapped around her "new friend," Grace.

Mom: She's good now, sorry I didn't see the message earlier.

Me: Thanks. Keep an eye on her, would you?

Mom: You know I will.

As I'm about to set my phone back on the side table, it buzzes with another message, this time from Owen.

Owen: Anyone want to crash the bachelorette party? Sam just texted me, said she really wants me to. I confirmed with Renee, and Lainey, and they both said she was serious.

Tyler: I have Felicity. But please send pictures, I need to see this.

Colin: I'm in.

Me: Sure, why the hell not. Peyton worried me a bit earlier so I'd like to check in on her.

Owen: I'll pick you up in ten.

THE DRIVE to the dive bar, Sweeney's, takes longer than I had thought, but maybe it's because of the anticipation of seeing Peyton. I'm still a little worried after our call earlier, and want to make sure she's holding up okay. I can't even imagine what she's been through, losing her mom at such a young age, and having her whole life turned upside down by her dad.

Colin and Owen are chatting back and forth about the bachelor party coming up, but I'm not paying much attention. The neon sign to the bar is lit up, signaling our arrival. Anxious thoughts run through my mind. What if she gets mad because I showed up? What if she ends it all, before we even have a chance to start?

The gravel crunches beneath the truck as Owen pulls into one of the few empty spots. People wander around outside, some stumbling more than others. After we get out of the truck, it's hard for me not to rush inside, but I hang back, waiting for Owen and Colin's leisurely pace. I shove my hands in the front pockets of my jeans, getting impatient.

"You good, Theo?" Owen chuckles. "Looks like you're chomping at the bit to get inside."

I shrug. "Can't I be excited to see my girl?"

"You can," Colin chuckles. "You just look like you're about to break into a sprint, and your body is wound up like a spring." Thankfully with all their talking, we've arrived at the front door, loud music, and boisterous yelling infiltrating my ears before we even open the door.

I yank the door open, and the first thing I see when my eyes adjust to the lights and chaos in front of me, is Peyton.

Standing atop the bar, looking utterly delectable, wearing a pair of black high waisted shorts, a silky v cut shirt and fire engine red lips, is my girl. Whether our relationship is real or not, *she's my girl*. A half full drink in a plastic cup in one hand, a microphone in the other, she's singing at the top of her lungs the iconic song from *Coyote Ugly*. The black sash crossing her body fits the scenario. In bright shiny gold lettering, reads, *Dancing Diva*.

It suddenly makes more sense as to why she's dancing on the bar counter if she has that sash. She's lost in her own world, singing all the words, but looking happy as fuck, and more carefree than I've ever seen her. She's utterly shitfaced, but it might just be what she needed.

Mallory spots us standing by the door, and waves us over to their table, where empty plastic cups are scattered. When my sister spots her fiancée, she drops from the bar stool, running through people to fling herself into the grumpy giant's arms. He burrows his face into her neck, like he hasn't seen her in weeks, rather than the few hours it's been.

After we make it to the table, I focus my attention back on Peyton as the song ends. She sways her hips dramatically, her ass in those black shorts catching the eyes of all the men in the bar. A flame of jealousy carries me over to the counter, where I spot who I think is Grace, standing at Peyton's feet, watching her cautiously, like she is ready to catch her if she falls.

Tilting my head up, I watch Peyton carefully. She's still oblivious, tipping back her plastic cup to her mouth, but instead of swallowing, the liquid pours down her neck, soaking her shirt. She lets out a whine that makes my dick twitch in my jeans, and I reach out, placing a gentle hand around one of her ankles, trying to get her attention.

"Peyton," I call. "Let's get down. I don't want you to fall." Her glassy blue eyes drop to my hand at her ankle, then slowly drag her eyes up my arm to my face. Those shiny blue eyes light up when she lands on my face, her cheeks erupting into a huge smile. The microphone in her hand goes to her mouth, as she shrieks, "*My boyfriend is here!*" The bar erupts in cheers and laughter, and she turns, handing the microphone to the bartender behind her. She sinks to her knees on the sticky bar counter, and wraps her arms around my shoulders, squeezing me tightly. I pull her off the bar, and her thighs wrap around my waist.

"Hey, darling. How are you?" I ask, humor lacing my tone as our noses nearly touch.

"S'good," she slurs, the smell of her fruity drink on her lips.

“Good,” I chuckle, carrying her back to the table.

“Theo,” she cries. “This is Gracie, she’s my new friend!” She points behind me, but I’m still holding her in my arms, so I can’t see who she’s pointing at.

“That’s great, darling.”

“You didn’t even see her,” she pouts. “She’s behind you.”

“That’s why I can’t see her, Peyton,” I laugh. Depositing her on an empty stool at the table, I turn around to the girl who was following behind us. Her curly blonde hair is long as hell, nearly down to her waist. “Hey, you must be Grace?” I ask, offering her a hand.

She smiles genuinely, her eyes lighting up. “Theo?” She questions, clasping my hand and shaking it firmly.

“That’s me,” I say with a laugh. “Thanks for taking care of her earlier.”

“Of course,” she says, waving me off. She steps to Peyton, wrapping an arm around her shoulder. “She’s a sweetie, and I’m an empath, and a hugger,” she giggles. Peyton slinks into her, smiling happily.

She seems like a nice girl. Knowing my sister, she has already adopted Grace into our group, so I’m sure we will be seeing more of her. Taking a seat next to Peyton, I drop my hand to her thigh, and say hello to the rest of the crew here. My mom switches spots so she can sit next to me, and when she does, she pecks me on the cheek.

“What was that for?” I ask.

“I’m happy for you,” she says with a shrug.

“Oookay?”

“Peyton is good for you. You two have a special sort of bond, one that I can see lasting.”

Guilt eats through my chest, and I nearly tell her it’s all fake, but I bite my tongue. I hate lying to my mom. “Thanks,” I bite out. “She’s great. We are still getting to know each other though.”

“I know, but sometimes a mom knows these things.”

I hold back the groan I want to let out, because yeah, I want more with Peyton, but my mom saying that we are good together, is making me fantasize about all the *more* I could be with her.

When I was on active duty, I wasn’t looking for someone. I didn’t want to leave someone behind if anything were to happen to me, and I didn’t want to be left without my person for an unknown length of time. That left me with meaningless hookups to get relief, curb the ache. Since I’ve been home, I’ve

been on a few dates, had a few hookups, but nothing that seemed to make me want more. Until Peyton.

The girl in question leans her head on my shoulder, and I automatically pull her in closer, cradling her into my chest. She sighs, succumbing to my touch.

PEYTON

My brain is throbbing behind my temples, and I can barely formulate a thought other than, *ow, ow, ow*. My unwilling eyes pry open, and thankfully the room I'm in is pitch black, only a small amount of light peeking through the curtains hanging against the window.

The night before runs through my brain in scattered flashbacks. Calling Theo, crying on the patio, meeting Grace, karaoke with Sam.... karaoke by myself. Oh god, did I really stand on the bar and sing *Can't Fight The Moonlight* like one of the girls in *Coyote Ugly*?

Kill me now.

Hold on... Why do I vaguely remember seeing Theo last night? The memory assaults me like a freight train. The guys came to the bar last night. Theo witnessed me dancing on the bar. I announced to the whole bar that he was my boyfriend, and then practically launched myself into his arms.

Oh. My. God.

I let out a groan, rubbing my fingers over my forehead, trying to rid myself of the embarrassment I feel. And where the heck am I? After looking around for a moment, I realize I must be in Sam's guest room. Slowly sitting up, I make sure I have clothes on, then slide out of bed gingerly.

Following the sounds of chattering and the smell of food, I head into the living room and kitchen area, to find Mallory, Sam, Lainey, and Renee sitting around the kitchen island. Owen is working in the kitchen, flipping pancakes and bacon.

"Hey," I say through a yawn.

"There she is," Sam snickers. "How's our dancing diva this morning?"

Groaning, I sit down next to her. My head slumps onto the cool marble countertop. “Coffee,” I moan.

Owen is quick to set a full mug in front of my face, gently patting my back. “I take it you’re not feeling well this morning?” he chuckles. “Someone better text Theo, let him know his girl is alive. He didn’t want to leave you last night.”

Sam shows Owen her phone. “Already did.” She flashes her screen to me, showing a picture of me walking down the hall toward them. My blonde hair is disheveled, sticking out like a haystack all around my head. I don’t recognize the shirt I’m wearing in the photo, and I look down to see I somehow ended up in one of Theo’s dark green ARMY shirts.

“What happened?” I smell the coffee in front of me, and it helps perk me up slightly.

“Well after the guys got there, we did another round of shots, and that seemed to be your blackout point,” Lainey chuckles, her curly mop in a knot on top of her head.

“Theo had to hold you back from getting back on the bar to sing again,” Mallory replies.

“No...” I groan, rubbing my palm over my face. “I’m sorry you guys. I shouldn’t have gotten that drunk, it’s unacceptable.”

“Oh shut up.” Sam waves her arm at me, dismissing my concerns. “You were the life of the party. Everyone loved you! It’s good for you to let loose.”

I don’t have time to reply, as Owen is dropping plate after plate of food in front of us, and despite my painful hangover, the food in front of me makes my mouth water.

We dish up, eating the delightfully greasy bacon, and carb loaded pancakes, chugging down coffee one pot at a time. Renee sits by me, swiping on her phone to show me pictures and videos of last night.

She swipes to one of Theo, with me tucked into his broad chest, his arm cradling me protectively. My eyes are closed, and my lipstick is smeared, but Theo is pressing a kiss to the top of my head, looking at me sweetly. In that picture, it almost looks as if we are really together, which I suppose is a good thing.

“Can you send that to me?” I ask her.

“Of course, dear.” Renee sends it to me right away, and my phone buzzes on the table next to me, lighting up with varying notifications.

“When did my phone get there?” I grab it from the table, scrolling

through the notifications.

“Oh, Owen had it. He put it there when you were looking at pictures with mom.” Sam smiles, shoving a huge bite of pancake in her mouth, reminding me of the time her brother did the same with the waffles I made.

“Thanks,” I smile softly at Owen, who tips his chin in response. As well as a text from Theo, there’s a missed call, and text from my dad, as well as Patricia Bitch. I ignore it, opening the thread of messages in the group chat, now titled, *The One Where Peyton Dances On The Bar*. Pictures and videos of last night are attached in the thread, each one of something that I vaguely remember.

A text from an unknown number buzzes in my hand, and I open it instead of reliving my embarrassment.

Unknown: Hey Peyton! This is Grace. We met at the bar last night! You gave me your number, but you were pretty wasted, so hopefully I’m texting the right person. I just wanted to say it was so nice to meet you and chat, and would love to hangout sometime if you’re interested!

Oh my gosh, I don’t even remember giving her my number. She was such a sweetheart.

Me: Yes! This is Peyton, and I would love to meet up. We will have to coordinate something! It was so nice to meet you. Thanks again for your kindness when I was a mess.

Grace: Of course!

Ignoring the text from my dad and Patricia, I look at the text from Theo.

Theo: Good morning, darling. Hope you are feeling okay, you were pretty drunk last night, lol. Call me when you can. :)

My heart pounds in my chest as I remember the list I sent him yesterday, and the brief conversation we had about it when I was on the patio. Does that mean he wants to start today? Oh my. I need to get home if that’s the case. I need to shower, eliminate the smell of booze leaking from my pores, shave... everywhere, and try to make myself look like a human instead of the disaster he witnessed last night.

I look up from my phone to four sets of curious eyes staring me down. “What?” I ask, flustered.

“Your face just went through five different emotions in the span of thirty seconds.” Lainey points at my -I’m sure- red face. “First you were irritated, then your face got super red, then embarrassed, then you lit up like a Christmas tree, and now, well, now you look downright terrified.”

She’s right, I’m downright terrified. I’m probably going to be having sex with my fake boyfriend sometime today, and I’m sitting in between his mother and sister *right now*, as I think about all the ways I want to do it with him! Talk about a mess.

“Oh, uh. Just the pictures in the group message is all.” I swallow the lump in my throat. “And I got a text from my dad that I’m ignoring.”

“Ew,” Sam grimaces. “What the hell could he want?”

“No idea, and I don’t care.” I shrug. I shove a piece of toast in my mouth to avoid further questions.

“Nice shirt by the way,” Sam says with a wink. “I bet your boyfriend likes when you wear that.”

I nearly choke on my toast, inhaling a crumb at her sentiment. Renee smiles as she pats me on the back. “My daughter is a menace,” she grumbles.

When I can finally breathe again, I stand and say, “Well, that was fun. But I think I’m going to go home. I’m exhausted.” I bring my plate to the sink, and rinse it off before putting it in their stainless steel dishwasher.

Sam stands from her chair, crossing over to give me a tight hug. “Thank you for last night; it was good to see you let loose a little.” She winks, and releases me. Lainey, Mallory and Renee follow, hugging me, and then I’m grabbing my things, and heading out the door into the already steamy summer morning.

It’s one of those days where you don’t go outside unless absolutely necessary. The humidity is like breathing in water, and I’m desperate to get the AC running in my car. Once the air is no longer blowing hotter than the Savanna, I plug my phone in, and pull up Theo’s contact, listening to the phone ring as I back out of Sam and Owen’s driveway.

“Good morning,” Theo’s raspy voice carries through my phone speakers.

“Hi,” I answer timidly.

“How are you feeling?” he asks, and I can practically hear his smile.

I sigh, turning my car toward home. “I’ve been better. I’m pretty sure vodka is leaking out of my pores.”

Theo chuckles. “Yeah, you had a lot of fun, that’s for sure. What do you have planned for the rest of the day?”

“Not much. I need a nap, and a shower, that much I know.”

“Why don’t you come over this afternoon?”

“Uh, sure.” I stutter. “What time?”

“Whenever you wake up.”

“Okay. Should I bring anything?”

“Just yourself. I have everything covered.”

He has everything covered... does he mean like, condoms and stuff? Oh god, what am I getting myself into here?

“Great!” I squeak. “I’ll text you.”

“Sounds great. Sleep well, darling.”

I say goodbye, and the line beeps off, just as I pull into the apartment complex.

AFTER A SHOWER, and a two hour nap, I’m feeling refreshed... and nervous as hell. I want to do this. God, do I want to, yet I can’t help but feel anxious. What if I do something wrong? My first time was painful, uncomfortable, and over before it barely began. Is it going to hurt again? My brain is running all over the place that I don’t realize I’m standing outside Theo’s apartment until my hand is knocking on the wood door.

He opens the door within moments, and I’m standing before him, dumbstruck. He’s shirtless, his muscled chest the first thing I see. The only other thing he has on is a pair of low riding sweatpants. *Gray sweatpants.*

My eyes can’t seem to avert themselves from the bulge in his pants, until he chuckles. “Come on in.”

I snap my eyes to his, and he’s opening the door wide, allowing me in.

“So you had fun last night?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I answer. “This morning wasn’t as fun though.”

He smirks. “I’m sure not.” His eyes scan up and down my body, taking it in. Leaning forward, he presses a gentle kiss to my lips, and reaches down, clasping my hand in his. “Want to watch a movie or something?”

I follow his lead, sitting down on his deep gray linen couch. “Sure.” He sits next to me, immediately pulling me into his embrace, and I can’t help but relax into him. I’ve never felt so comfortable with another person. I suppose

that's why I sent him a literal list of all the things I want him to teach me. "Should we... talk?" I ask, figuring I may as well bite the bullet.

"About what?" he replies, his brows furrowing.

"The..." I wave my hands around in a dramatic circle, hoping he gets the point.

"What about it?" He looks confused. "I told you to tell me what you wanted, and you did. We don't have to do anything if you don't want to. I didn't invite you over today on the premise of doing anything, I just wanted to spend more time with you."

"Oh," I reply.

"Not saying that I don't want to do anything, but I don't want you to feel pressured, like you have to."

"I want to," I interrupt. "I want to."

Theo squeezes me tightly against him again. "Okay, darling." He pulls up a streaming service, and puts on a movie. "Can I ask you something?"

"You can ask me anything."

"We've talked about your inexperience, but just how... inexperienced are you?"

I should have known he would want a little more information, and rightfully so. "I had my first kiss when I was twenty-three. It was with a boy I really liked. We had a few classes together in college, and we spent a lot of time together, studying, or just hanging out. I had a crush on him, and I thought he liked me too. One night when we were studying, he leaned over, and kissed me. Things progressed from there, and he asked if we could have sex. I said yes, and five minutes later it was over. That is the extent of my experience. I didn't do anything, there was barely any foreplay, and... it hurt."

Theo's jaw clenches at my words, and I can practically hear his teeth grinding. He doesn't say a word, so I keep talking. "The next day, I asked if he wanted to hang again, not really wanting to have sex, but just someone to spend time with, and he told me he didn't want to see me anymore." I shrug, trying to offer a sense of nonchalance. "I'm used to people not wanting me."

Theo's pissed, his nostrils flared, cheeks red, jaw tight. I try to scoot away from him, maybe give him some space. His arms tighten around my body, and before I can tell him it's fine, his mouth is crashing down on mine, intertwining our lips in a harsh, possessive kiss. Before I know it, my back is against the couch, and Theo is hovering over me, his hands cascading all over

my body. I don't know where to put my hands, so I intertwine one in his mussed hair, gripping the skin of his back with the other. One of his hands slides up between my breasts, and I moan appreciatively at the touch. When his hand collars my throat, not squeezing, just resting there, I gasp.

Theo moves from my lips, pressing kisses all over my face, and jawline. His hand is still around my throat, never tightening, just there, like he's trying to keep me. A deep rumble breaks from his lips as he says, "If you *ever* say that you aren't wanted or loved in front of me again, I will spend hours, days, however long it takes, showing you how truly wanted you are. I want you." His mouth drops to mine again, softer this time, and I tilt my hips to meet his, feeling his hard erection through the softness of his sweats.

I want to believe his words, that he wants me, but there will always be that niggling fear in the back of my mind, telling me that I'm not wanted. My whole life since my mom died, has been proof of that. As if he senses that I'm not fully with him anymore, he grinds his hips into me.

"Theo-" I gasp against his lips. My pussy clenches and is already drenched with arousal, just from his touch.

"Feel that?" he groans. "I. Want. You."

"Mhmm," I mumble. His hand moves from my throat, down to grip my hip, pulling me as close to him as possible.

"You ready for number one?" Theo grunts.

"Number one?" I breathlessly ask.

"On your list. Oral." He pulls away, leaning back on his knees between my legs.

Am I ready? God, I don't even know. I scoot up so I'm sitting against the arm of the couch, and Theo stays between my legs. His cock is hard in his sweats, and I can clearly see just how big he is.

"We don't have to, Peyton." Theo reaches over, brushing my hair from my face. God, I love when he does it. It's the subtle touches that drive me wild.

"I want to. What should I do?" I ask, eyeing him. I gesture at his groin, and my mouth nearly waters just thinking of his cock in my mouth. I'm ready to dive head first, when Theo pushes me back down to a lying position, his fingers grazing the hem of my shorts. Goosebumps break out on my skin, and I look into his blazing blue eyes, waiting for his next move.

"You just get to stay there, and let me make you feel good. Tell me, Peyton. Do you touch yourself?" His voice is low, and dominating every

fiber of my being.

I nod maniacally, desperate to feel his fingers there again.

“How?” he grunts, toying with my shorts.

My brain short circuits, and I can’t process words. “Huh? How, what?”

Theo bends down so his lips are at my ear. “How do you touch yourself, darling?” I shiver at the gruffness of his voice, his masculine scent invading my every thought.

“With, uh-” I stammer. “With my fingers, or sometimes,” I pause as Theo slides my shorts down my legs to reveal the black cotton thong I put on, just in case something like this happened.

“Or?” he murmurs, bending to press his lips to the skin of my stomach.

“Or with my toy.”

“What kind of toy?” His mouth drags down between my thighs, pressing soft kisses to my legs.

How can he expect me to think, let alone carry a conversation when he’s down there? It’s like a weird form of torture. “A clit sucker,” I blurt, not really knowing what it’s called.

“Does it feel good when you use it?” he asks, still teasing me.

“Uh huh,” I breathe.

“I wonder if I can make you feel better,” Theo gloats, his fingers dragging down my still covered pussy. “You’re so wet, darling. I can feel it through your panties.” He lifts up, kissing me deeply again. When he pulls back, his finger hooks on my panties, a question in his eyes. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” I whimper, needing to feel him everywhere.

With my consent, he drags my panties down my legs, tugging my shorts the rest of the way off. He takes the black lace panties, and pulls them up to his nose, inhaling deeply. “You smell so fucking good,” he moans. He takes my panties, shoving them into the pocket of his sweats, where I can see his bulge has grown considerably. Theo’s eyes drop hungrily down to my bared pussy, an almost awestruck look on his face. “Fuck,” he groans, rubbing his hands up and down his covered thighs. He hooks his arms around my legs, and his head falls to the apex of my thighs, and I can feel the heat of his breath against the wetness of my skin.

His tongue makes contact with my skin, parting my folds, sliding up from my entrance to my clit where he flicks and plays with the sensitive nerves there.

Holy fucking shit. Nothing has ever felt like this. His mouth is magic on

my clit, my body trembling and fighting against an orgasm, desperately wanting to prolong this moment, this feeling. One of his thick fingers prods at my entrance, and I shift slightly, allowing him to slide deep inside me.

“Theo!” I gasp, the fullness of just one finger pumping in and out of me nearly sending me over the edge. When he adds a second finger, I’m done for. My orgasm overwhelms me. My thighs clench against Theo’s head, and I reach down, gripping his hair tightly in my hands. He doesn’t stop, continuing his assault on my clit and pussy, sending me into a tailspin. My legs shake, and I nearly blackout with pleasure. It’s too much. I shove his head off me, and with a chuckle, Theo releases my clit from his mouth, sliding his fingers from within me.

I can’t seem to catch my breath, but my eyes are taking in the smiling man before me. His chin is wet with my arousal, the knowing glint in his eyes burning my soul. “Holy shit,” I murmur. Theo laughs, laying his body across mine to kiss me deeply.

“How do you feel?” he asks.

“So good,” I mutter against his lips. “I... don’t know what just happened to be honest. Is that normal?”

Theo laughs, burrowing his head into my neck, kissing and sucking. “Oh, god,” I sigh. My arms wrap around him, holding him close, preventing him from moving from this position.

“Come here.” Theo wraps his arms around me, and pulls me up from the couch before I can protest. My bottom half is still bare, and when I wrap my legs around him, I nearly weep at the feel of his body against mine. Theo strides down the hall with me in tow, and unceremoniously drops me to his bed.

Looking up at him, I’m stunned by just how attractive he is. I mean, I knew he was attractive, I’ve been having sex dreams about him for weeks, and I’ve been staring at him for the last year. But the fact that he’s here, in front of me, *with me*, after just giving me the best orgasm of my whole life, is overwhelming. Knowing that the wetness on his chin, the erection in his pants, and the devilish look on his face is all for me, is enough to send a full body shiver down my body.

Theo smiles, climbing on the bed, and over my body. “Can I take this off?” He tugs at my shirt, and I nod, lifting my arms up for him. He eagerly takes my top off, eyes falling to my breasts in my lace bralette immediately. Stifling a groan, he slides the straps down my arms, and I sit up, letting him

unhook the bra. My breasts fall out of the bra, spilling into his waiting hand. He growls, literally fucking *growls*, before gently pushing me back down onto the bed, and then he proceeds to use his mouth to flick and play with my nipple with his mouth, his hand giving the other attention.

“Theo,” I whisper, reaching down to palm his hardness. “I want-”

He stops me. “Tell me what you want, darling, and it’s yours.”

My voice disappears into my throat, and I can’t speak. Theo quirks his brow, waiting for me. “Use your words, Peyton,” he commands.

“I want to put you in my mouth,” I squeak, and god, how fucking unsexy can I be? *I want to put you in my mouth?* Why couldn’t I have said something hot like I want to suck your cock?

Theo’s eyes light up. “You want my cock in your mouth?”

I nod, unable to tear my eyes from his. He grips my chin in his hand, not allowing me to move, even if I wanted to. “Words,” he demands.

“I want your cock in my mouth.”

“Your wish is my command, darling.” He releases my chin, and climbs off my body, shoving his sweatpants off, releasing his cock. My mouth waters at the sight of him, fully naked and erect in front of me, erect, *because* of me. His cock is big, but not huge like you might see in porn. If anything, it’s the perfect size. I have to stop myself from lunging for him, I want to feel him so bad.

Theo moves to stand at the edge of the bed, his hand stroking himself. “What do I do?” I ask, scooting up to sit on my knees.

“Whatever you want. I can tell you what feels good,” he murmurs, looking down at me with adoration. He pushes my hair back, pressing a kiss to my forehead. I’m not in a good spot to take him in my mouth, but I want to get... acquainted with him first. I take him in my palm, feeling the soft warmth there. A bead of moisture leaks from the tip, so I use my thumb to swipe it off, lifting it to my lips to taste it. As I do, I tilt my head to look at Theo, loving the way his eyes widen slightly as I lick my thumb. The salty flavor hits my taste buds, and surprisingly, I don’t hate it. I’m not in love with it, but if anything, it spurs me on to taste him more.

Still holding him in my hand, I slide off the bed and to my knees, watching Theo as I open my mouth. My tongue darts out, teasing the head of his cock, circling around it as I work his shaft with my palm. I truly have no idea what the fuck I’m doing, but the grunt that falls from Theo’s lips, and the way his hand threads through my hair seems to be a good sign.

Feeling more confident, I take him all the way into my mouth, working him hard with my tongue, sucking and playing. When it hits the back of my throat, I gag, pulling off of him.

“Oops,” I whisper, my face heating. Moving back to his cock, I use the extra saliva to slide up and down his cock again with my hand. When I’ve composed myself a little, I take him back into my mouth, not as deep as before, but enough to still make him moan.

“Fuck, Peyton. You’re good at this,” he groans, tugging at the strands of my hair. His gentle praise spurs me on, so I take him deep again. When I gag once more, Theo pulls me off his cock, lifting me up to stand.

“Enough,” he growls, kissing my wet lips. “I don’t want to come in your mouth tonight.”

“Where do you want to come?” I cheekily respond. His hand drops to the bare skin of my ass, smacking it lightly. “Ah!” I squeal at the unexpected feeling. My pussy clenches, and I swear I nearly drip. I’m so wet.

Apparently I like a little spanking.

Noted.

“I think you can guess where I want to come.” Theo moves to his nightstand, opening the drawer and pulling out a little foil packet. “On the bed,” he orders. “Are you ready for lesson two?”

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I watch as he opens the packet, and rolls the condom down his length. I scoot back so I’m in the middle of the bed, my head resting on his pillows. A nervous excitement bubbles inside me as Theo climbs back onto the bed, hovering over me. His fingers trail down to my pussy, feeling the wetness there. “You’re so wet, darling. Just for me. Do you still want this?”

I hesitate for just a moment, not because I don’t want it, but just because I still don’t quite believe that he wants me. When Theo sees my hesitation, he takes my face in his hand again. “Peyton, we don’t have to do this. Not unless you want to.”

Vehemently shaking my head, I say, “I want you, please. I need you inside me.” My voice doesn’t sound like my own, and I’m surprised that it came from me.

“If you want to stop, at any time, just tell me.”

“Yes,” I whisper. Theo’s body rests against mine, and just feeling his naked body against mine almost makes me come again. He kisses me deeply, his hand sliding down my body. I can feel the moment when his hard cock

rests against me, waiting to press inside. I tense, waiting for what I'm sure is going to be painful. If it's anything like my first time, this isn't going to be enjoyable.

"Relax," Theo says, his hand moving his dick up and down my slit, wetting the tip with my arousal.

I shake my head. "I can't."

"You have to, or this is going to hurt." Theo notches the head at my entrance, waiting for me to relax. I tense further, anticipating the pain. "Breathe, babe," he coaches as he sinks inside.

I suck in a deep breath, waiting for the pain, but all it is is a slight pinch, then a delicious burn as his cock fills me. His lips find mine as I wrap my arms around his neck, holding him to me. My legs wrap around his waist, hooking together as he seats himself inside.

I gasp into his mouth, our breath mingling as he stays there, letting me adjust to him. "How does it feel?" he murmurs.

"Full, tight, but so good," I whimper. "Move, please."

Theo chuckles against my lips, but listens, using his hips to move himself in and out at a slow, timed pace. With each inward thrust, I gasp, savoring this feeling. This is on a whole other planet compared to my first time. The brief sting of pain is gone, replaced only by burning pleasure.

"You're taking me so well, darling," Theo grunts, a bead of sweat breaking out on his brow as he moves. I can tell he is holding back, restraining himself from pounding into me, but right now, I want it rough. I need more. I need every bit of him.

"Harder, Theo," I cry, my fingernails scratching at his back. He heeds my desires, his cock slamming harder into me, his pace increasing. I can feel the buildup of another orgasm, but I need more still, more him, more *everything*. "Yes, yes," I whisper, trying to contain my sounds of pleasure.

"Let me hear you, Peyton." Theo's hips slam into me again, and a loud cry escapes me, and I'm thankful that we share a wall, because we surely would be getting a noise complaint with the way his headboard is slamming into the wall, and my no longer contained moaning.

I can't stop them, and I feel like maybe I should be embarrassed, but I can't, I can't stop. "I'm almost there," Theo groans loudly.

"Me too," I shout.

"Get there. Touch your clit."

My hand falls between us to strum my fingers over my clit, and at the

first bit of contact, I'm coming, my orgasm barreling through me, my pussy clenching around his cock repeatedly as I roll through the waves of pleasure. I can't stop the scream that escapes my mouth. Theo drops his head between my neck and shoulder as his hips rock harder and harder until he stills, his cock twitching inside me as he releases into the condom. He moans loudly into my ear, and the sound is enough to make me crave more.

My body sinks into the mattress, relaxing as he lays against me. We stay there, catching our breath until he slides out of me, and I wince at the loss of him. "Was that too hard?" Theo asks, rolling off of me onto his side. "Did I hurt you?"

I'm shaking my head before he can finish. "No, you didn't, god, that was... insane," I giggle, high on the endorphins.

"Yeah, that was fucking insane." Theo kisses the tip of my nose, standing up to rid himself of the condom. He heads across the hall, coming back with a wet washcloth. He cleans me quickly, then pecks me on the lips. "Go to the bathroom," he says.

"I don't need to, and I don't think I can move," I reply. The stare he gives me is enough to make me sit up quickly.

"Peyton, you're a nurse. You should know you need to go to the bathroom after sex, unless you want a UTI."

"I know, I was just so comfy."

"Well, go to the bathroom, and we can get comfy again." He points to the door, and I can't help but obey.

After I've taken care of business, Theo is laying back in bed, covered with his blankets. This is... awkward. What do I do now? Do I get dressed and go home? I move to grab my shirt from the floor, and Theo sits up.

"What are you doing?" His jaw clenches.

"Well, I wasn't sure if you wanted me to stay, so I figured I would just--"

"Stop."

I do as he says, staring at him like a deer in headlights, standing totally naked before him.

"Get back in bed." He points to the empty spot next to him, opening the sheets.

"Are you sure? I can leave." I point my thumb to the open door.

"Get. Over. Here."

Without a second thought, I'm climbing under the covers, laying my head on the pillow next to him. "Good girl." He presses a kiss to my forehead,

pulling me into his embrace.

“So you’re a cuddler after sex?” I tease.

“Nope.”

“But-”

“You’re different.”

“How am I different?” *What does he mean by that?*

“You’re thinking too much,” Theo whispers against my cheek.

“You didn’t answer my question,” I retort, getting irritated. I try to pull away, but he doesn’t let me, just snuggles himself into me, breathing deeply through his nose.

“I didn’t answer your question because it’s irrelevant. You’re different. I’ve never wanted to cuddle after sex. It was always a means to an end. This is different,” he sighs.

My mind races with all the things his words could mean. I don’t get how this is different. We aren’t in a real relationship. He knows that, I know that. This is just him, helping me be more confident, so I can know how to please someone in the future.

Right?

THEO

The heart monitor beeps behind me, a constant reminder that I'm someone's burden, rather than the one helping. It should be the other way around. I'm the medic, I'm the one who should be watching heart rhythms and oxygen levels. Not stuck in this bed, IVs and tubes sticking out all over my body. The pain radiating in my leg and back is nothing compared to the pain of not being able to save Ethan. He asked me to do one thing for him, which I fully intend to do once they get me out of here.

I've had losses before, it comes with the job out here, but for some reason, this one hurts more. Maybe because I was five feet from him. It should have been me instead. He has a girlfriend, and a kid. Yeah, I have family too, but now, his son has to grow up without a father. The guilt threatens to eat me alive as I lay in this bed, waiting on a medical discharge, or clearance to go back to duty. At this point, I could give two fucks about what happens. If I stay, I stay. If I go, I go. I've talked to my parents a few times on the phone, so they know I was injured, but I asked them not to tell Sam or Lainey. Sam just got engaged, and Lainey was in a pretty bad accident a few weeks ago. I don't want to stress them out right now.

John, the other guy who was injured that day, was shipped home the other day to continue treatment. He was medically discharged due to the extent of his injuries. Last I heard, they were still trying to save his leg, but the prognosis isn't good.

Somehow, I got lucky. My only injuries being some burns, a concussion, lacerations to my right leg, and some back pain.

"Hey, Doc." One of the other medics strides into the room, his eyes cast

downward.

“Doc,” I greet, trying to sit up in bed, wincing slightly. “What’s the news?”

“You’re being discharged from the hospital.” He sits down on the edge of my bed, watching my reaction.

“Wait, really?”

“Yep. As soon as we get the final paperwork figured out you can head back to the barracks. We’ve done all we can for you here. You’ve refused any pain medication for a few days now, and your lac is healing well. You’ll see our physical therapist for a while before we can make an educated decision on your status. In the meantime, you’re on desk duty. You’ll see inpatient and outpatient soldiers, and take care of yourself.” He stands to leave, without a second glance. I appreciate it, because right now, I don’t know what I would say.

Once I’m officially released, I grab the few things I have, and head to the barracks. I have one thing on my mind, and that is Ethan’s letter.

His room is across from mine, so I let myself in. The room is cleaned out, the only items remaining a sheet crumpled up on the bed, and a wrapper on the nightstand. All his things are gone. I lift up the thin mattress, and sure enough the letter is still there. It’s a folded piece of notebook paper, an addressed envelope next to it, and my heart pounds in my chest. It’s crumpled and worn, like it’s been read hundreds of times. A photo falls out as I lift the letter from its spot.

Ethan stands next to his girlfriend, holding his newborn son. He was born three months before we were deployed, so Ethan barely got to know him. I can’t help it, but my eyes stray to the words.

Sophie,

If you’re reading this, I’m sorry. You probably already know, but I didn’t make it. The thing we feared most happened. I’ve asked one of my buddies to mail you this letter.

I love you so much, Soph. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me, you, and our son. I wish

we had more time, but for now, this is all we have.

I could go on and on about the things we should have done when we had the chance, the things I wish I could see, but for now, this will have to suffice.

Before I can read any further, I close the letter, sliding the photo back into the folded paper. I slide it into the envelope, and leave his room, shutting the door behind me.

I wake with a start, my heart pounding. I can't seem to catch my breath, the weight on my chest so startling. I sent the letter. I never read anything more, and I have no idea where Sophie is now. I don't think I could ever bear to face her, or her son, knowing that I couldn't save Ethan. I only had a few months left on my deployment, and when I was done, I was done. My contract was up, and I didn't sign again. I don't know that they would have signed me again anyway, but thirteen years was enough.

My breath comes hard and fast as I try to calm myself. Though it wasn't the worst nightmare that I have - most of them are filled with explosions, blood and gore - this one, for some reason, hurts most.

Peyton is curled up into my side, her bare leg hooked around my torso. I have to stop myself from squeezing her too tightly, out of fear of hurting her. I've never slept next to someone when having a dream, and I can't say I'm not worried about it. I've heard the horror stories of guys inadvertently hurting their significant others, or sleepwalking and hurting themselves. I don't want to get that bad, but I don't know what else to do. I've been seeing a therapist once a month, but nothing helps. Nothing we do, or talk about makes any difference. I let myself relax and catch my breath, focusing on the girl in my arms.

Memories from this afternoon slam into me, one after the other. Cuddling on the couch, eating her out, her giving me the most insane blowjob, and finally, sliding into her tight, soaking wet pussy. My cock twitches hungrily as I think about all the things left on that list of hers. I can only hope she doesn't bring up her reasoning for all of this, or the fact that we are "fake." I don't think I can take it. I need to figure out a way to make her see that we could be good together. For real.

I may be a mess of a man right now, but I know that with her, for her, I

would do anything. Including playing along with this fake relationship for as long as I can.

Peyton wakes up with a start, her body flying from mine like I've shocked her. "Woah." I reach an arm over to grab her arm, stopping her from rolling off the bed.

Peyton's eyes are hazy and confused as she looks around, placing her surroundings. "What the hell?" she mutters under her breath. "Definitely thought that was a dream."

A low chuckle makes its way up my chest. "No, not a dream." I pull her in closer to me so I can press her lips to mine. Her naked body presses against mine, her tits against my warm skin. The feeling of holding her is heaven personified. Her body succumbs to me, relaxing into the embrace. "How was your nap?"

"Uh, it was fine," she whispers, her fingers trailing up and down my chest gently. "I didn't mean to fall asleep."

"I don't care," I answer. "I liked it."

"What happens now?"

"What do you mean?" I ask. She tucks her head into my chest, surely avoiding eye contact.

"With us, do you..." she pauses. "Do you want to keep... doing it?"

"Do you want to?" I counter.

She sucks in a deep breath, holding it for a moment before slowly breathing out. "Yeah, I do. That was... fun." I can't see her face as it's tucked into my chest, but I imagine it's a nice shade of red.

"Then we can keep going." I kiss the top of her head, letting her take a minute to recoup. "Are you sore?"

She nods into my chest. "Yeah. I didn't think I would be, but I am."

"That's probably normal. I might have gone a bit too hard."

"No," she urges. "It was perfect. I liked it... rough."

"Did you now?" My mind runs astray when I think about just how rough things could be. I've always liked rougher sex, especially since I tend to have more of a dominant side. She nods into my chest again. "Well, we may be able to have fun with that."

"Now?" she asks. I don't miss the eagerness in her voice.

"Not now," I chuckle. "You just told me you were sore."

"I'm fine, really. It's a good kind of sore." Her face pulls away from my chest, eyes alight and eager. "Please, can we do more?" Her innocent face

nearly makes me combust right on the spot, and my cock grows slightly hard between us. Her eyebrows raise. “It seems like he is ready to go again...” she drawls, dragging her hand down between us.

“Not now,” I reiterate. “We have some things to talk about.” I roll away from her, picking my discarded sweats off the floor and sliding them on.

“What do we have to talk about?” Peyton follows, throwing on the shirt that I so carelessly peeled off her body earlier. I groan a little as she does, instantly missing the easy access to her perfect tits. Just the right size, a nice palmful with rosy pink nipples. A perfect contrast to her cool skin tone.

“You’ll see,” I throw her a wink, and head out into the living room, listening to her quick footsteps as she follows close behind me.

PEYTON RESTS between my legs on the couch as I fiddle with her hair. This comfort is something I’ve craved for a long time. We’ve been dancing around the subject of the list, and how Sam’s wedding is only a week away, signaling a potential end to this short term arrangement.

“I got us a room for the wedding,” I tell her. “It’s two beds.” I’m keeping my fingers crossed that she won’t stay in the separate bed, but I didn’t want to take the option away from her and make her uncomfortable.

“Okay,” she murmurs. “How much do I owe you?”

“Nothing,” I answer. “You paid for the last one. Don’t fight me on this,” I mimic her tone and the words she’d jeered at me over paying for the hotel for her step-brother's wedding.

She turns her body around, a scowl on her face. “You’re annoying.”

I chortle, bending down to kiss her cheek. “I know. We leave for the bachelor party tomorrow. I’m not sure how much service we’ll have.” What I don’t say is that I’m anxious about the thought of not being able to reach her at the drop of a hat. What if she needs me? What if she has another endometriosis flare up and is all alone?

“Okay,” Peyton meekly says, tucking herself back into my body. She goes quiet, watching the tv screen in front of her. I tug her close, squeezing.

“You gonna be okay without me?” I taunt, hoping she actually says yes.

“I’ll be just fine,” she scoffs. Luckily it doesn't sound like an irritated scoff, more of a chuckle. “The real question is, are you going to be able to

make it in the woods with those crazy boys?”

“Ha,” I laugh. “Pretty sure I’m more equipped to make it in the woods than any of them. You forget I did missions in the middle of the desert.”

“I suppose that’s true,” she says, leaning back to look at me, her blue eyes alight with humor. “You could probably take on a bear and win.”

“Doubt it,” I reply with a laugh.

“So what is it that you wanted to discuss earlier?” Peyton asks, her face flushing. “You never did elaborate like I asked.”

A heavy sigh falls from my chest. “You’re going to hate me, but we need to talk about your boundaries. There are some things that you put on that list that require an in depth conversation.”

Her brow quirks. “Really? We can’t just.... Go with the flow?”

“With ‘normal’ sex,” I make quotations with my fingers. “We can. But for other things on the list like bondage... anal? It definitely needs to be a prior conversation.”

“Oh. I see.” Peyton bites her lower lip in contemplation, then continues. “Have you ever... done those things before?” Her eyes catch mine, and within a second, she’s darting them away in embarrassment, wringing her hands together in her lap. I shift slightly, resting my hands on her hips, adjusting her so that she is straddling my thighs. Her hands fall to my shoulders, a gasp of surprise falling from her lips. I reach my hand around to grip the nape of her neck, kissing her with intensity. When I pull back, she’s breathless, her eyes wide and a blush creeps up her chest and neck.

“To answer your question, yes. I have done them. I’ll spare you the details, but yes.”

She avoids looking at me when she asks, “And you... liked it?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of boundaries would we need?”

“Things like a safe word.” She cringes, and I say, “You might think it’s cringy, but it’s necessary. Things like this can be dangerous if you aren’t prepared. I need to know where you’re at, if you’re enjoying it. ‘Cause if you aren’t, then it all stops.”

She nods. “I guess that makes sense. So what, we have a stupid word we use if I want to stop?”

I chuckle softly. “I was thinking more along the lines of a color, but sure, we can do whatever you want.”

She contemplates for a long moment, fiddling with the pearl hanging

from her neck. She never takes it off, and I'm starting to wonder if it means something more to her than just a necklace she likes. "No, we can just do a color. I can't think of anything else." She finally looks at me. "What color?"

"Well typically the one people use is red."

"Red is so harsh," she sighs. "Can't we do something like Maroon? That way it's still a version of red, just not... red."

I try to stifle a laugh at her reasoning. "Sure, darling. Maroon it is."

PEYTON

After discussing boundaries and a safe word with Theo, I went home. I drag myself to work early the next morning, and while I was utterly exhausted, even after the nap, I couldn't sleep. I tossed and turned in my bed, contemplating every interaction and word between Theo and I.

We had sex. We had sex, and I've never been more satisfied in my life. Sure, you can take care of things yourself, but the way Theo touched me was different in a way I never imagined.

He left today for the camping trip, and then next weekend is the wedding. We've kinda been living in our own little bubble, only hanging out with our friends once or twice since we've started this whole fake dating thing.

"Peyton, do you know where the doppler went?" Mallory asks, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Um, I think Dr. Ness had it in exam four for our last patient, but knowing her, it's probably in the pocket of her lab coat." My fingers click on the keyboard, charting on the patient we just saw.

"Good point," Mallory says, walking down the hall to Dr. Ness' office, her scrub pants swishing as she does. I can hear their muffled conversation from the office, then the swish of Mallory's pants again. When she comes around the corner, she has the doppler in hand, a smile on her face.

"What's that look for?" I ask, quirking a brow at her.

"I just got a text from Tyler," she snickers, showing me her phone. On the screen, is a photo of Theo, his body tense, the muscles in his jaw clenched, vein in his forehead sticking out, and hands on his hips as he overlooks Colin and Owen trying to put the tent up. The message from Tyler reads,

Tyler: Theo's crabby because Owen didn't listen to his advice about putting the tent up, and now they've been working on it for forty five minutes, and Owen still won't let him help. Joe and I have been sitting here laughing at them for thirty minutes, drinking our beer.

I can't help but chuckle at the scowl taking over Theo's handsome face in the picture, his irritation obvious. "Why won't they let him help?"

"Who knows. Owen and Colin are stubborn, so knowing them, they probably said something stupid, and now have to prove themselves," Mallory laughs.

"I'll have to text Theo," I laugh.

"Speaking of..." Mallory drops down in the computer chair next to me, scooting herself closer. "How are things going?" She eyes me, and I don't miss the concern in her eyes.

"Things are great," I answer honestly. "Why do you give me that look?"

"I'm worried about you." She winces. "Not with Theo, necessarily, I just want to make sure you're happy. You're one of my best friends, and I really want you to be happy. Theo's a great guy, and it really seems like you two are a great fit, but my maternal instincts can't help but worry about you."

A tear springs into my eye at her heartfelt sentiment. "You have nothing to worry about, really. Theo's great." The look Mallory gives me tells me that she doesn't quite believe me, but really, what am I supposed to tell her?

Luckily she drops it, and my phone buzzes with a text.

Nana: Hello, sweet pea! How are you? We haven't seen you in a while. Are you free for supper tomorrow night?

My heart swells as I read her text. I feel horrible. I haven't gone to see them in so long, or even talked to them on the phone. I've been stuck in this bubble with Theo, and it's causing me to neglect the only two people in my life that I know actually love me. Surprisingly, my Nana is fairly tech savvy, and picked up how to text and call on her smart phone a lot quicker than most people her age.

Me: Yes! I would love to. I'm sorry, I've been so busy.

Nana: No worries, honey. We just want to see you! Is there someone special you might be bringing?

Me: No....? Why? Did you hear something?

Nana: Maybe. Your stepmother actually called me the other day.

Me: She what????

Nana: They asked me to tell you to pick up your phone and call them back. Something about your behavior, and your unruly boyfriend...

Nana: I figured any behavior was justified. But it made me curious about this boy. Bring him tomorrow if you can, we'd like to meet him.

I've been ignoring the calls and texts from my dad and Patricia Bitch for weeks now, but never in my life did I think they would reach out to Nana to essentially scold me. I had never intended on telling Nana about Theo, but now I might have to. After being distanced from my grandparents my entire childhood after Mom's death, it's been nice to have them around again.

Me: I'll have to check in with him, I don't know if he's available.

Nana: Good. Either way, we are so excited to see you, we've missed you, sweet pea.

Me: I know. I won't let it happen again.

Nana: Don't say things like that, we know you're a busy adult with a life, we just miss you! Nothing to be upset about.

Me: Okay, well I'm excited to see you guys. Love you, Nana.

Nana: Love you, sweetie.

I slide my phone back in my pocket, turning my focus back to Mallory. She's still sitting next to me, doing her own charting. "How's Felicity?" I ask.

The beaming smile that takes over Mallory's face is instantaneous. "She's perfect. I know everyone says that about their baby, but she really is. Ever since her sleep regression a few weeks ago, she's been sleeping like a champ, not even waking up to eat anymore. My tits are huge every morning, but honestly, the sleep I'm getting makes it worth it."

I chuckle. "I miss her."

"It's been like a week since you saw her," Mallory teases.

"I know but I can still miss her! Is she ready for her duties next weekend?"

“What, being carried down the aisle, then going to sit in my mom’s lap?” Mallory chuckles. “She’s going to be the star of the show. That is until Sam walks down the aisle.”

“True,” I laugh.

“Have you seen the dress we ordered for her?”

I shake my head, and Mallory opens her phone to show me a picture. Felicity is laying on her changing table, with the bottom half of her body enveloped in rust orange tulle, the top a white tank top with little lace embellishments. Her black hair is in a single ponytail atop her head, with a matching bow. The little smile she’s giving the camera is about the cutest thing I’ve ever seen. “Oh my god, Mallory, how did you make such a perfect baby?” I gush, snatching her phone from her.

“I know, right?” Mallory stares down at her phone adoringly. “She looks so much like Tyler, it boggles my mind.”

I shake my head. “Nope, it’s all you,” I swear, handing her phone back to her.

She laughs. “Thanks. God, it’s so crazy to think of what my life was like, just a year ago.” She closes her eyes for a long moment. “I don’t know what I would have done if I didn’t meet those crazy people. I know we didn’t meet right away, but I’m so glad we did. Working together has been one of my favorite things, and I’m so glad that my daughter gets to grow up with an auntie like you.” Her eyes well up with tears, and I can’t help but reach for her, swallowing her up in a long hug.

“Don’t cry,” I chuckle, rubbing her back up and down through her knit cardigan covering her scrub top. “I’m glad I met you too. I’ve never had a friend like you. Or a friend…” I laugh into her shoulder.

Mallory pulls back, swiping the tears from her eyes and swatting me gently. “You’ve had friends.”

I shrug. “Not really, but I’m glad I have you guys. Really, you’ve shown me what it’s like to have true friends. It’s taken a lot of getting used to, but maybe someday I’ll get there.”

“Well, even if you try and get rid of us, we’re pretty sticky. I mean, have you met Sam? She will follow you anywhere.”

“That’s a good point.” Dr. Ness comes swishing down the hall in a hurry, calling Mallory away from our brief heart-to-heart to head into an exam room.

My phone buzzes in my pocket again, and when I pull it out, Theo’s

name lights up the screen. I slide my finger across the screen to answer it.

“Hey,” I say, unable to hide the smile that crosses my face.

“Peyton, I don’t know if I’m going to make it,” he huffs. “Tyler keeps throwing sticks at me, and Colin and Owen have been trying to put the fucking tent up for two hours. I told them to let me help, but they are determined to do it on their own. My dad has been laughing at me non-stop. I swear, I’m about to lose my shit and hike home.”

“That would be a very long hike,” I snort. My mind strays back to the conversation with Nana just minutes ago, and I figure now is a better time than any to ask. “Hey, what time are you guys getting home tomorrow?”

“Not sure. Probably before evening. We’re doing a short hike in the morning then will probably head out from there. What’s up?”

“Well…” I hesitate.

“Well?”

“My Nana invited us over for dinner tomorrow. But if you’re busy, you don’t have to come, it’s fine,” I babble.

“I’ll make sure I’m there,” he responds with no hesitation.

“Really? Cause, you don’t have to, Nana texted me asking me to come over, and I guess my stepmom called her to ‘discuss my behavior,’” I imitate Patricia’s snooty voice. “At the wedding, and she mentioned to Nana that I had a boyfriend, and I know we didn’t discuss this and it’s probably way out of line to ask you, but they really want to meet you and-”

“Peyton,” Theo interrupts. “I’ll be there. Of course I’ll go with you. I’ve been meaning to ask about them anyway.”

The sigh of relief that falls from my lips is immediate. “Thank you,” I reply. Having him go with me will be easier in the long run... I think. If I go alone, the whole time I’m there will be spent asking endless questions about him, our relationship, you name it. But with him there, he’ll almost be a sort of buffer. Except now, I’m thinking about what I’m going to do, what I’ll have to tell them when we inevitably break up. I know Theo’s said he likes me, but it’s only a matter of time now before he sees the truth. He has a servant’s heart, and I’m something for him to try and fix.

“Peyton? Are you still there?” Theo’s voice pulls me from my heavy thoughts.

“Yeah, what did you say?”

“I asked if we should bring anything.”

“Oh, um. I guess I didn’t ask. I’ll let you know.” Theo’s name is being

called repeatedly in the background, so I figure our time is up. “Go, have fun,” I say.

“Okay, I will,” he hesitates. “Call me if you need anything, darling.” He sounds so sincere, and almost... concerned, it makes me pause.

“Is everything okay?” I start to get worried, overthinking, as I do. I overstepped asking him to come to Nana and Papa’s. I knew it.

“Everything’s fine,” he breathes. “I... I worry about you.”

I can’t help the immediate scoff I let out. “Me? Why?”

“Well, with your endometriosis, I get worried that you’ll have a flare up, and I won’t be there to help you.” His voice is timid. Scared. He’s going to make my heart crack into a million pieces if he keeps being this sweet. I don’t deserve it.

“Theo...” I pause, unsure of what to say. “Thank you. I promise I’ll be okay, though. I made it through ten plus years of this on my own, I can make it. And if it gets really bad, I’ll call Mallory, or your mom. I promise.”

“Pinky promise?” he asks with a sense of urgency.

“Well I can’t exactly pinky promise through the phone, but yes. Pinky promise.”

“Thank you.” He sounds relieved.

“Go have fun. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bye, Peyt.”

“OKAY, ANY LAST MINUTE QUESTIONS?” I ask Theo as we pull into the driveway of my grandparents’ small townhome on the opposite side of town.

Theo drops a hand to my thigh, sliding it underneath the hem of my floral sundress. “No, Peyton, I’ve got this. Marjorie and Harvey. They’re your mom’s parents. Your middle name is after Nana, and Papa will probably try to scare me, until he learns that I was a military man, then he won’t shut up about his time in Vietnam. Nana will force feed me cookies and pudding until I puke, or pass out. I’ve got this. Do we need to take another loop around so I can relax you?” he asks, a devilish grin on his face.

“Relax me?” I stutter. “I’m fine! Besides, they’re probably sitting at the door waiting for us. They’d see us drive away and then it would be twenty questions from there. And I don’t think another drive around the loop would

be enough to relax me,” I laugh.

“We would be doing more than driving, darling.” Theo’s hand slides up between my thighs to the thin fabric of my panties.

“Oh...” I breathe. “No, we don't have time.” I smack his hand away, and almost immediately regret it. His version of getting me to relax does sound nice, and it would tick off another item on the list, but we really don’t have time. As if to drive home my point, the curtain of the front window is pulled to the side, and Papa’s white hair shines in the sun. “See.” I point. “No time.” Theo chuckles when he sees Papa, and turns off his truck, taking the keys from the ignition. He slides from the truck, grabbing the flowers from the backseat that he insisted on buying. I unbuckle and open my door as Theo circles the front, his eyes cast downward in irritation.

“What’s that face for?” I slide out of the truck, landing on my feet. He wraps his arm around my waist, and pulls me in close to kiss me softly.

“I was going to get your door for you, you know, like a gentleman,” he sighs dejectedly. He slides his arm from my waist, down to my hand, and clasps it tightly in his.

As we walk to the front door, I reply, “Oh, I guess I’ll know for next time.” I sheepishly shrug, and Theo shakes his head. Before we can reach the cement front steps, the door flies open, Nana standing behind it, a grin a mile wide taking over her face.

“Sweet pea,” she chimes, her twinkling voice instantly alleviating my nerves. I drop Theo’s palm, and rush into her open arms, squeezing her tightly.

“Hi, Nana,” I sigh into her embrace. “I’ve missed you.”

“We’ve missed you too, sweet pea.”

I feel Theo’s hand on the small of my back, so I reluctantly pull away. “Nana, this is Theo, my...” I pause.

“Her boyfriend,” Theo says, offering his hand out to Nana. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Lewis.” Nana takes his strong hand in hers, and I can sense her amusement immediately.

“Please, call me Marjorie, I’ve always hated when people called me Mrs. It feels too formal.” After they shake hands, Nana urges us inside to where Papa is sitting in his chair again, acting nonchalant as if we didn’t see him staring at us out the window.

“Hi, Papa,” I say, walking over to the faded green reclining chair he’s had since I was a kid.

“There’s my favorite granddaughter.” He smiles, standing up to hug me.

“I’m your only granddaughter,” I laugh into his chest, soaking in the familiar smell that comes with hugging him. He’s always smelt like wood and varnish after years of carpentry, and now in his retirement, wood carving.

“True, but that doesn’t mean you aren’t my favorite.” He grins. I shift away from his embrace, opening up so Theo can introduce himself.

“Mr. Lewis, it’s a pleasure.” Theo offers up his hand to him like he did Nana, only Papa stands there, staring him up and down, like he’s sizing him up.

“Oh for heavens’ sake, Harvey, shake the boy's damn hand,” Nana exclaims.

With a laugh, Papa takes his hand in his, and not only does he shake his hand, he pulls him in for a tight hug. “It’s nice to meet you, son.” When he releases him, I let out a long breath. We survived the initial introductions, but I can only imagine the interrogation to come.

I WAS RIGHT. Throughout the entire meal, Nana and Papa barely gave Theo time to eat, asking him question after question. They asked about his childhood, his time in the military, his family, you name it. I tried to get them to take it down a notch more than once, but he silenced me, setting his hand on my thigh and squeezing gently. He’d give me that look, the one that makes me weak in the knees, willing to do whatever he says, and I’d stop, allowing him to answer yet another question.

Papa took him into the garage, aka his workshop, to show him his most recent project, and I’m sure to interrogate him further. Nana took me into her “sitting room” as she calls it, which is really just a fancy word for their living room. Sitting next to her on the old pink floral couch that has no give to it, I have her weathered hand in mine, and we’ve been talking for what feels like a long time.

“So, tell me about Hunter’s wedding,” Nana prompts, her gaze focused intently on mine.

I groan, not wanting to relive the uncomfortable weekend. “Did Patricia really call you?”

“She did.”

“What did she say?” Nana winces, and I know it’s not good. “Nana, tell me.”

With a sigh, she seemingly unwillingly tells me. “Long story short, she told me that you were an embarrassment to the family the entire weekend, and that your boyfriend was out of control with rage.” I can’t help but laugh. “Based on what I’ve seen this evening, I’d wager that they’re being dramatic.”

“You could say that,” I snark. “Drama is their specialty, would you expect anything less?”

“No, I wouldn’t. I’m surprised you went,” Nana says.

“Dad wouldn’t take no for an answer. He made me feel like a child,” I murmur. I can feel the embarrassment rising up in my chest, so I try to tamp it down. “Theo is the only reason I made it through the weekend. He... Well, he protected me, for lack of better words.”

Nana urges me on, squeezing my palm gently. “Friday night, Dad told me multiple times that my dress was not appropriate, but it was fine, it was that kind of burnt orange chiffon dress I’d sent you a picture of,” I say, watching Nana nod as she follows. “Then, during the dinner, he was giving a speech.” I hesitate, trying to swallow down the thick lump in my throat. “He was talking about love, and how he’d never experienced a love like the one he had with Patricia.” A tear slides down my cheek, and Nana uses her finger to swipe it away. “I left before he was done. I couldn’t stand to hear another word, hear about how his new wife was so much better than my mom. He kept talking about how important family was, but couldn’t seem to care less about me, only the new family he made after Mom. I’m the leftovers.”

“Honey, you know that’s not true, he loves you,” Nana urges, yet it sounds like she’s trying to convince herself too.

“Is it though?” I ask, really wanting to hear her thoughts. When she stays silent, I fear I know the answer. Sure, he may love me, because I’m his daughter, but it’s almost out of obligation.

“Anyway, of course my dress for the ceremony was totally indecent, yet the bridesmaid dresses were more revealing than my dress. Hell, Kelsey’s dress was more revealing, and she was the bride. At the reception, Theo and I were walking around, and Hunter stopped us. He said some pretty nasty things about me. Things he used to tease me with when we were kids, rumors he’d spread, and Theo... stood up for me.”

Nana releases a hand, wrapping her arm around my shoulders. “He didn’t

touch him, just... made sure he knew not to mess with me anymore. We didn't stay long after, but that's probably the unruliness Patricia is referring to. They've called me so many times in the last few weeks, but I've ignored them. I'm not in the mood to talk about it with them, when I know they will just berate me and turn it around so everything is my fault, when Hunter's the jackass."

"Language, sweet pea," Nana whispers, wiping another tear.

"It's true though," I murmur.

"Yes, it is true," Nana answers. "He's a jackass. I never liked him. And I know you haven't told me everything he'd done, but if your father had a part in raising him, I'm sure he's trouble."

"Technically my dad raised me too... am I trouble?"

"No," Nana says softly, her voice trembling. "You aren't trouble because you will always be your mother's daughter. You are nothing like your father, and never will be. You were given your mother's kind and caring heart, and for that, I will always be thankful."

At her words, my tears fall in a steady stream now. Nana pulls my head to rest on her shoulder, hugging me as we both cry. "I miss her," I whimper into her tear soaked shirt.

"Oh, sweet pea, I miss her too. She loved you with everything she had. She would love Theo, too, I'm sure of it."

I nod into her chest, not able to speak. It feels wrong to lie, to not tell her that everything is fake, that our relationship is just pretend, when it feels so real, so right.

I hear Papa's low voice before I see him, and when I lift my head, Theo is standing before us, brow pinched together, eyes wide. "Hey, what's going on, darling? Are you okay?" His eyes flit between Nana and me as he sits next to me on the couch, pulling me into his embrace.

I don't have words, just instantaneous comfort from his warmth. I nod into his chest, and I can hear a whispered conversation between him and Nana, as she alleviates his concerns. I hold him tight, not wanting to let go, yet still not knowing how I'll ever be able to keep him.

Papa interrupts our moment when he flops down on Theo's other side, squishing us all together on the small uncomfortable couch. "Here, I thought Theo might want to see some embarrassing pictures from when our little girl was young," Papa chuckles, thrusting a photo book into Theo's eager palms.

Theo looks down at me, eyes wide and excited, but waiting for me to give

him to go ahead. That's something I will always appreciate about him, even after he's done with me. He always checks to make sure I'm okay with something. I nod, ready for the embarrassment.

When he opens the album, the first picture is one of me, when I was probably six or seven. My blonde hair is wet, and cut into an atrocious bob, with thick bangs across my forehead. I've got a goofy grin on my face, both front teeth, as well as a few others missing. I'm in my favorite pink flowered swimsuit, with bright blue goggles covering my eyes. The lenses are all fogged up with condensation. Theo chuckles, whipping out his phone and opening the camera app.

"Hey!" I try to swipe his phone from him, but he's too fast. "That's against the rules," I cry.

"Any rules became moot when I saw this picture." He grins, taking a picture of the picture, and setting it as his lock screen immediately. My heart pounds and butterflies fly up my throat. He flips the page to a photo of my dad and I. We're down at the river landing, and he's throwing me in the water as he stands waist deep. I remember that day. Mom picked me up from the lady who watched me during the day, and when we met dad down at the river, we swam until I could barely move. I was so tired.

Theo flips through to the next photo, and when I see one of my favorite photos of my mom and me, my heart stutters slightly. Theo silently peruses the rest of the photos, taking time to look at each one, listening to Nana and Papa telling the story behind each one, and skipping over any that include my dad. He stares at the ones of my mom and me the longest, even taking more pictures of them.

When we get to the last photo, my heart stops. It's a photo I don't think I've ever seen before. Mom's hair is short, cut into a bob like I have mine, instead of the dark waist long locs that she used to have. We're sitting in a hammock, and I'm looking up at her, smiling widely as she swings us, a melancholy look on her face. She looks thin, like she did when she started her treatments again. The pearl necklace rests on her gaunt collarbone, and out of instinct I reach up to take the same necklace that is now on my neck between my fingers. I don't miss Theo's gaze up to where my fingers play with the necklace, then back to the picture where he spots it on Mom. Looking at this picture, it's like losing her all over again. When Theo snaps a picture of it and closes the book, I stand from the couch.

"Well, I think it's about time we head out." I urge Theo off the couch,

watching as he hands the album back to Papa.

Nana follows me to the door, watching me slide my shoes on. “Sweet pea, are you okay?”

I shrug, and she pulls me into a hug. “It’s okay not to be okay. It’s okay to miss her.” I nod into her chest, trying to hold back another round of tears. After she lets me go, Theo is at the door, taking my Nana into a long hug where I’m sure they are whispering things about me. Papa gives me another long hug, and then Theo is guiding me out the door, taking my palm in his.

We ride silently in the car for a while, until Theo breaks the silence. “Thanks for letting me look through those photos, Peyt. I loved seeing that part of your life.”

“Yeah, those were good times,” I answer. Theo drops his hand from the steering wheel, reaching over to grab mine again. “Thank you for tonight, I really appreciate you. You didn’t have to do all that.”

“I know I didn’t, but I enjoyed myself. It was fun to meet them, and I’m excited to see them again. Your Papa seemed interested in showing me how to whittle. We talked about some stuff in the garage, and I think I’d like to hang out with him... if that’s okay?” he asks, almost warily.

“You want to hang out with my Papa?” I ask incredulously.

“I really do. He... He asked me how I was doing. After being overseas. It felt easy to talk to him. About the nightmares. He told me about how he struggles with them too, even after all this time.”

“Wow. I’ve never heard him talk about nightmares before.”

“Yeah. Would it be okay if I spent some time with him?”

“Of course,” I say. “Just as long as you promise not to look at any more pictures of me when I’m not there.”

“Deal,” he chuckles. “I feel like your Mom looks so familiar to me for some reason. When I saw pictures of her at your place I felt like I’d seen her before, and then again tonight. I can’t place it though.”

“Huh, I guess I’m not sure. I mean, it’s not like I look like her,” I grumble.

Theo’s eyes grow sad as he looks over to me briefly, squeezing my hand in his.

THEO

When Peyton asked me if I would go with to her grandparents house for dinner, I hadn't felt entirely sure what to expect.. Knowing Peyton, I felt prepared for how they might take on the role of protector for a newcomer being introduced to the family. It's what Peyton would have done.

I never imagined I would feel as comfortable or welcomed as I did. Sure, they asked the hard questions, and made sure I was right for Peyton, but rather than feeling evaluated or ridiculed like I might have with her dad's side of the family, I appreciated their attentiveness.

When Harvey took me into the garage to show me his work, he sat me down on a beautiful wood bench he'd made a few years prior, and asked me how I was really doing. Of course, I tried to play it off, feign not knowing what he was talking about, but the old man saw right through me.

He slowly worked up to the topic of returning to civilian life following active combat. I was honest but vague with my answers, until he straight up asked me how I'm dealing with the nightmares, and I couldn't help but tell him. Sure, I could be doing a lot worse, but PTSD is not something I would wish on anyone. It was great to have someone to listen, especially someone who has been through it himself.

The early summer sun has started to set, casting the valley in a warm glow of light. The last few days have been chaotic, with the bachelorette party, having sex with Peyton and immediately craving more, camping overnight for the bachelor party, and this evening's enjoyable dinner with Peyton's grandparents. The evening sun sends rays of light through the windows of my truck, glinting off the necklace hanging from Peyton's neck.

I've noticed in the time I've known her that she always wears it, except on river days. She fiddles with it when she's nervous. After looking through the photos today, it clicked for me that the necklace was her mom's. It's no wonder why she wears it all the time, and clutches it when she's scared or anxious.

"Where are we going?" Peyton asks as I turn my truck in the opposite direction of our apartment complex.

"I figured it might be time for another lesson." I wink, turning the car toward the place I have in mind. "Number six, to be specific." I watch her reaction, thrilled when she sucks in a fortifying breath, the skin of her chest and face glowing pink. "Is that okay?"

She nods, a smile twitching at the corner of her mouth. I squeeze her hand in mine, unable to stop the smile on my face, too. It was a little weird spending the evening with her grandparents, knowing I had a plan to fuck her after we left, but oh well. The winding roads lead us to a secluded area along the river, the perfect place to watch the sunset.

One of the older paramedics I work with owns the land, and he's given me permission to come here anytime. I've spent a lot of time out here, even in the winter. It's become a safe haven for me, a place to be alone in my thoughts, to reset when I've had a bad nightmare or flashback. I've never told anyone besides Tyler, and Paul, the paramedic who owns the land, that I come out here. I've also never seen another soul out here anytime I've come out, so it feels like the perfect place to bring Peyton.

Pulling into the wooded area, I back the truck in so the bed faces the river, and shift into park. Peyton's eyes are wide, taking in the scenery around us. We are surrounded by tall trees, grass that probably reaches to my knees, and various wildflowers growing. "Stay here for a minute," I tell her, leaning across the center console to give her a kiss on the cheek. She nods, and I climb out of the truck, and open the back door to grab the duffle bags I keep in here. In the winter, they're full of jackets, gloves, and extra layers as a winter emergency kit. Tonight, they're full of blankets, and a couple pillows.

I open the bed of the truck, and hop up, dropping the bags to the metal floor. I work quickly, unzipping and laying out the blankets and pillows, trying to make it as comfortable as possible. Once it's ready, I hop down, heading to the passenger side to get Peyton. I open the door, offering my hand to her. She takes it, and I don't miss the slight shake in her hand.

“You alright?” I ask as we walk toward the back.

“Excited,” she answers, squeezing my hand. When she sees the blankets and pillows laying in the bed, she giggles, climbing up immediately. She kicks her sandals off, and lays her head down on one of the pillows. I follow her up, kicking my shoes off as well, cuddling up next to her on a pillow. “This is amazing, Theo.”

“Yeah, I love it out here.”

“How did you find it?”

“Paul, one of the paramedics I work with told me about it. He bought this plot of land a few years ago with intentions to build on it, but never did. He told me I could come here anytime. It’s been really helpful when I have a bad nightmare, or need to reset.” I wrap my arm around her, tugging her in close to me. My fingers find the bare skin of her shoulder, trailing up and down. Her skin breaks out in goosebumps, and she burrows her head into my chest.

“It’s beautiful,” she says. Her eyes are still flitting around, and it seems as if she’s trying to see every branch. We can hear the rushing water from the river just fifty yards away, and there are still a few people canoeing, though with dusk nearing, it won’t be long before they are all gone. The cliffs in the distance have shadows casted over them, the sun bouncing off the trees that grow off the cliff edges. I’ve never lived in a more beautiful place. There is beauty at every corner in the form of beautiful landscape, trees, water, and... people. Peyton shines brightly beside me, the most beautiful thing in any direction for miles.

“You’re beautiful,” I whisper, pressing a kiss to Peyton’s forehead. She shivers, and I can’t help but worry for a moment. “Are you cold?”

“No,” she chuckles. “Just... you.”

“What about me?” I raise my brow.

“Nothing,” she says, burrowing her head further into my chest.

“Darling...” I warn.

“I’m not used to this,” she whispers. “I’m still so surprised you were willing to be my fake boyfriend, and then to help me with this crazy list? It doesn’t make sense to me.”

“If you spew some shit about not being wanted or being loved, I will lose my shit, darling,” I clip.

She tightens a fist around my cotton shirt, tilting her head to look up at me with her beautiful blue eyes. “I know better than to say that to you,” she says, a guilty look on her face.

“But you still think it,” I confirm.

She presses her mouth in a hard line, and doesn't have to say anything for me to know what she's thinking.

“How can I get you to see what I see?” I drag my pointer finger down the soft skin of her jaw, holding her attention. “See that you have so many people who love you, who want to be around you, and genuinely care.”

She lifts her mouth to mine, kissing me deeply, and I know she's only doing it to get me to stop talking. I try to stop her, to pull back and reiterate my point, but she takes over, rolling me so I'm on my back, and within seconds, she's straddling my hips, her legs on both sides, with her dress bunching up to her thighs. Her hands drop to my chest, fisting the cotton there, and bending to meet our lips together again.

“Peyton,” I mumble against her lips. I want to talk to her about this, I don't want it to go unsaid.

“Show me,” she whimpers, grinding her hips slightly, which in turn causes my cock to harden rapidly. “Show me what it feels like to be wanted, I want to feel it.”

“Fuck,” I groan, my hands going to her thighs, pushing her flowy dress farther up her thighs. The metal of the truck bed digs into my back, but I can't find it in me to care. Peyton's mouth moves to my neck, and I love that she's taking control. I love that she's finding confidence in herself to take what she wants. And what she wants right now, is me. If only she could see, outside of sex, just how much I want her.

“Theo,” she sighs into my neck, her hands threading in my hair. I grip her hips tightly, sliding underneath the fabric of her dress. Thankfully, it's not a form fitting dress, so I'm able to reach all the way up to her tits, covered by her lace bra. She stops kissing my neck, sitting back so her ass is resting on my thighs. She crosses her arms grabbing her dress and dragging it up over her body in one fast movement, revealing a see through lace bra underneath.

My mouth waters, teased by her puckered nipples under the fabric. I sit up, wrapping my arms around her, latching my mouth onto one rosy nipple. Her back arches, pressing her breasts into my mouth further. Fuck, she's so goddamn perfect.

My hands try to find the clasp on the back of the bra to get it off her, but my fingers find nothing. Peyton pushes against my shoulder lightly so I pull back, and with a soft giggle, she pulls it up and over her head, baring herself before me. “It's a bralette, there's no clasps.”

“Oh,” I murmur, no longer interested in her bra, but on her tits again. I swirl my tongue around each nipple, sucking, squeezing, doing anything I can to appreciate them. When she pushes my shoulder again, I reluctantly lay back. She reaches down, underneath the hem of my shirt to lift it off my skin. I help her guide it off, and as soon as it’s gone, she pushes me so I’m laying on the pillow, bending down to press her lips down the ridges of muscle on my chest, and stomach. A shiver runs through my body, and I’m desperate to touch her, but I want her to be in control, to know what she’s doing to me.

She’s setting me on fire.

The sun is gone now, twilight replacing the warm glow of earlier. Everything goes quiet around us. I can’t hear the river anymore, or even the distant sound of the wind in the trees. All my focus is on her, and every touch, every caress of her skin on mine. She reaches the waistband of my jeans, and unhooks my belt, pulling it through the loops and tossing it aside. Unbuttoning them and sliding the zipper down the track, I lift my hips to let her pull them down, and I’m surprised when she takes my boxer briefs with, setting my cock free in her haste.

I kick my pants and boxers away and her gaze falls to my rock hard cock. She licks her lips, and slides herself between my legs, her hands going to rest on my thighs. Her eyes lift to mine, a silent question in them. I jerk my chin in a rough nod, eager to see what she does next. She bends down, taking the base of my dick in one of her hands, the other still resting on my thigh. When her head falls toward my dick, I’m pretty sure I black out in anticipation. Her hair falls into her face, so I collect it in my hands, creating a makeshift pony for her. I want to see her every move.

She doesn’t move for a moment, almost as if she’s planning her next steps. She opens her mouth slightly, letting a bead of spit drop onto the head of my cock. She uses her fingers to catch it, now sliding her hand easily up and down my length, using the spit as a lubricant.

I can’t stop the groan that rumbles in my chest when her mouth opens and she takes the tip of my cock in.

Bliss.

That’s the immediate feeling coursing through my body as she slides her tongue up and down my cock, sucking me so perfectly, I have no idea how this is only her second time doing it. “Fucking hell, darling,” I groan, gripping the strands of her hair tighter in my hand.

She works me like a queen, knowing how deep to go so she doesn’t gag,

but also getting right to the edge, teasing me with it.

“Peyton, you gotta stop, I don’t want to come yet,” I plead, pulling lightly on her hair to get her to stop. Thankfully she listens, and when she pops her mouth off my cock, I sit up, swiping the spit from her mouth and chin with my thumb, and pressing my thumb into her mouth. She sucks greedily at my thumb, taking every bit of saliva from it. She frees my thumb, and I immediately take her lips in mine, not caring that her mouth was just all over my cock, if anything, it turns me on even more, knowing what she just did.

I slowly lay down with our lips still connected and say, “Your turn.” She quirks a brow, so I point to my face, and urge her higher. “I want to eat your pussy like this,” I groan, and point to the truck. “Hold onto the top of the truck if you can.”

She adjusts her body so her pussy is right over my face, and I can’t help but breathe in her scent. Fucking incredible. Her hips hover over me, so I reach up, tugging her down so I can get that pussy on my mouth. At the first taste, I feel a bead of precum escape my cock, and I groan against her delectable pussy, flicking at her clit, feeling her writhing at my touch. Her hips grind down hard against my face, and I know she needs more. I take one of my hands from her hip, and slide it into her tight wetness. Her walls clench around me, squeezing my fingers as I move them inside her. Her pants come closer together, and I can feel her getting close. I continue my movements against her clit, desperate to feel her come around my fingers, when a devilish idea pops into my head.

I collect some of the wetness from her pussy, and slide backward to her other hole, probing a finger gently at the entrance, waiting for any sort of sign that she doesn’t want this. “Fuck, Theo, yes,” she screams, and I know that I’m in the clear. My finger presses into the tightness of her ass, breaching the ring of muscle. I pump slowly, giving her time to adjust to the sensation, and she grinds herself hard against my face, and after a moment, I feel her explode over me. Peyton’s body shakes as she uses me to get herself off, taking every ounce of pleasure I’m providing her.

When her orgasm subsides, she slides down my body again, eyes searching the bed of the truck. “Condom?” she breathes.

“Pocket of my jeans,” I grit out, anxious to get inside her. She digs for my jeans, and comes out a moment later with the condom, ripping the packet open urgently. She slides it over my cock, fumbling only slightly as she does. I’m ready to have her lay on her back so I can take her, but she surprises me

when she straddles my hips again, notching the head of my cock at her soaking wet entrance.

When she slides down onto me, I have to think about every unsexy thing I've ever thought, just to keep myself from coming too fast. She feels too good, too deep, too fucking tight. Fuck, I swear she's tighter than she was only two days ago, and I don't even know how that's possible. Peyton slides as deep as she can, her body flush with mine as she drops down to lay her head on my chest. We fit like the last two pieces of a puzzle, just waiting to be locked together. She lifts her hips and moves, taking herself to the next level as she rides me.

"Theo, oh my god, how-" she whimpers into my neck.

"So fucking good, darling," I groan, gripping her hips in my hands, hard enough to leave bruises.

"How does this feel so good," she cries, her fingernails digging into my shoulders. She can barely move, so I start to pump my hips upward into hers, bringing both of us closer to the pleasure we are seeking.

When a spark hits the base of my spine, threatening to push me off the edge, I grunt, "I'm close, baby are you close?"

"Yes. Come, please!"

Her cries of pleasure are all it takes to make me come, my cock throbbing with pleasure as I spill every ounce I have into the condom, suddenly wishing there wasn't this barrier between us, wanting to feel her wetness bare. "Fuck, Peyt," I groan, thrusting harder into her as the last bit of my orgasm comes to a head.

Her pussy is fluttering around my cock, as the aftershocks of her own orgasm leave her body, sending her into a slumped mess on my chest. We both lay there for a long moment, my cock slowly softening inside her as we catch our breath. Sliding out of her, I roll her onto her back, making sure her head is on a pillow. I tie off the condom, and put it near my jeans so I can make sure it doesn't get left behind.

Taking Peyton into my arms, I cover us with a blanket so she doesn't get cold. Her even breaths and closed eyes are an easy giveaway that she's drifted to sleep, so I decide to give her a little nap, before we head back to our apartments, hopefully for round two.

PEYTON

The last week has been crazy busy, so Theo and I have barely had any time to see each other, let alone fool around or work on the list. It's a little nerve wracking, as tonight is Sam and Owen's rehearsal dinner, and tomorrow is the wedding. When it's just the two of us, I feel comfortable. But when we are out, surrounded by people, it's like the pressure is on to maintain the fact that we are in a relationship. A *fake* relationship where the line is getting more and more blurred everyday.

The wedding venue is over an hour away, and Theo and I are riding there, and back together. The sky is gloomy, clouds looking like they're about to burst open and drop gallons of water to the earth at any moment. Originally, we had planned to spend tonight in a room together, but Sam insisted that all her bridesmaids stay with her in a bridal suite. We're having a traditional girls night, Princess Diaries and all. Though we might not get as wine drunk as we have in the past.

Theo and I have been making small talk the entire drive, almost like we're avoiding any hard conversations. The other night in the bed of his truck, I was more brazen, confident, and sexual than I have ever been in my entire life. He did what I asked though. In that moment, I felt wanted. Almost... loved. It's a hard pill to swallow, but I don't know how I'm going to go back to normal once all is said and done. How I'm going to go back to Theo just being a friend.

He's told me he wants more. He told me that when we decided to continue this charade, but I... can't. I can't burden him with my shit, with *myself*.

Can I?

I've already asked too much of him. I introduced him to my grandparents for heaven's sake. I shouldn't have done that. I'm the one who has been blurring the line. I'm the one who asked for more... sexually. And then I went and introduced him to the two most important people in my life, who immediately loved him.

Nana called me the next day, and gushed about how much she liked Theo, and how we should try and schedule weekly family dinners. Papa even called me too, and he hates phones. He couldn't stop talking about how impressed he was with him.

That made me feel so guilty I got nauseous. How am I ever going to tell them we broke up? Or that we were never real in the first place? My mind whirs with all the unknown scenarios, panic rising in my chest as I think.

Could I do this for real?

"What's got you in your head over there?" Theo jeers, squeezing my thigh. My attention is drawn immediately to his warm, heavy hand, and it's like all my manic thoughts vaporize into thin air.

"Nothing," I mumble.

"Doesn't seem like nothing." His eyes narrow, glancing over at me briefly before turning his attention back to the road.

I cover his hand that rests on my thigh with mine, intertwining our fingers together. "It's nothing, really. Trying to remember if I packed everything I needed for this weekend. That's all."

He squeezes my hand gently. I can tell he doesn't quite believe me, but he drops it, muttering, "Okay."

We pull into the hotel, which is also where the wedding venue is, and Theo runs inside to check us into the room, leaving me in the truck. The earlier gloomy sky turns into a downpour, pelting the windshield with huge drops. Of course, Theo couldn't pull into the covered turn around area, he had to pull into a parking spot, saying, "I don't mind the walk."

Well Theo, I do mind, I grumble internally. My hair is already done, and it took me far longer than I care to admit to get it to look right for tonight. I've got it all pulled up in the back, twisted intricately with a little bit of volume so it doesn't fall flat by the end of the night. Apparently it isn't even going to make it to the event, because I'll look like a drowned rat by the time I get into the building.

After letting myself stew for a minute, I remind myself that I'm being

dramatic. It's hair. Sam isn't going to care what my hair looks like. I'm just overwhelmed with everything and the unknown with Theo and I, and for some reason, rain, which I usually love, and hair, which I don't usually stress about, are the things that are about to send me into a tailspin.

Theo opens the driver's side door, soaked to the bone, his white t-shirt clinging to his taut muscles. The grin on his face is enough to get me smiling again, laughing at the childlike happiness exuding from him. "This is crazy," he laughs, causing me to laugh at him as well.

"You're crazy." I smile. "Do you have an umbrella?"

"Nope," he says, shaking his head like a dog, water droplets flying off the strands of hair, hitting my legs and face.

"Theo!" I shriek, holding my hands out to block the water.

"It's just water, darling," he snorts. "Don't worry, I'll pull under the porte cochere so we don't ruin your hair, it's beautiful." He climbs in, starting the truck.

"Thank you," I murmur, leaning across the console to kiss his wet cheek. "I don't mean to seem high maintenance, but this took a lot of trial and error this morning."

"It's all good, darling." He pulls the car under the security of the roof, and climbs out, immediately opening the back door to grab our things. I follow suit, grabbing my dress bags and his suit bag. Theo drops our bags onto a cart that a member of the hotel staff brought out for us, and I hang the bags on one of the hooks. After loading the last few items on the cart, Theo pulls it behind him into the beautiful hotel. It's fancy, but not overtly so, like Hunter and Kelsey's wedding. It doesn't ooze wealth and uptightness from its walls. Instead, the lobby is welcoming, a floral scent emanating from the various arrangements scattered around the room.

Theo strides toward the front desk, pulling his wallet from his back pocket. I hear him talking, but I'm not listening to his words, only taking in the room before me. In the corner, a gold bordered mirror, with words scrawled in a fancy script. I gaze at it for a long moment, before reading the words.

*Welcome to the Wedding of
Samantha Porter
&*

Owen Coleman

My heart skips a beat in excitement for my friends, and I give myself a moment to appreciate that all of the planning we've done in the last year is about to come into fruition. Theo comes up behind me, the gold cart dragging behind him. He rests a hand at the small of my back, pressing a gentle kiss to my cheek. I don't miss the slight furrow to his brow, as if he's nervous.

"What's up?" I turn, feeling his arm trail from my back to my stomach.

"Sooo," he drawls. "I have good news, and I have bad news."

My heart sinks into my stomach as anxiety creeps in, my body flushing immediately. I don't say a word, waiting for him to continue, to break whatever news he has.

"They upgraded our room." He pauses. "But there's only one bed."

I wait patiently for him to continue, to tell me what the bad news is. When I don't speak, Theo starts to ramble. "I'm sorry darling, I should have tried harder to get switched back to the original room. I can sleep on the couch tomorrow night, I know tonight you'll be in the bridal suite so it's fine, but they wouldn't let me switch it back... apparently with the wedding they are completely booked up," he babbles, pinching the bridge of his nose in anxiety.

"Theo," I say, resting my hand on his chest. His mouth snaps shut at the contact of my hand on his firm chest. "It's okay. It's one night. We've slept in the same bed before when we took that nap, and I mean..." I blush. "We can make it one night." Theo lets out a long exhale, calmed by my words. Am I going to mind sharing a bed with Theo? No way. If anything, I'm glad. I was a little surprised, and I'll admit, bummed when he told me he would get us a room with two beds. I know he did it to make me feel more comfortable, but I'm starting to learn that I feel most comfortable in his arms. In his presence.

"Are you sure?" he questions, always the gentleman.

"Yes, Theo. I'm sure." I promise. He pulls me into his chest, hugging me close, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

"Okay. I'm going to park the truck. Do you want to find the room, or wait here?" He pulls back from me, looking outside at the still pouring rain.

"I can wait here," I answer, flopping down on one of the deep couches.

"I'll be right back," he says, nearly running out the doors. Within a

minute he is making his way through the sliding doors again, water cascading down his body to the floor. His hair is drenched, hanging over his eyes as he tries to wipe it from his face. When he finds me sitting exactly where I was before, he gives me a panty melting grin, and I immediately think of an item we haven't had a chance to complete on the list yet... Shower sex. Seeing him soaked to his very core, sends my mind into a tailspin of images of him, and me, together, in a huge walk in shower, our hands wandering each other's bodies. The smirk on his face as he approaches makes me wonder if he knows just what I'm thinking about.

He guides me to the elevator, dragging the cart behind us. The elevator arrives with a ding, and he allows me to enter first before following. He presses the button marked seven, and the doors close, the elevator slowly ascending. I'm standing next to Theo, and I can't help but feel a rising tension between us. A good tension. The kind of tension I've never experienced in real life, only read about in books, or seen in movies.

To my dismay, the elevator door opens, the bell ding with our arrival. Theo sighs heavily and offers his arm to allow me to exit first. He tells me the room number, and I follow the signs directing us to it. When we reach the doorway, I step aside, allowing Theo to hold the keycard in front of the lock, watching it turn from red to green.

Anticipation thrums through my veins as he opens the door, allowing me to walk through. I catch my first glimpses of our upgraded room, and I'm surprised to see it looks identical to the pictures Sam showed me of the honeymoon suite she booked for her and Owen.

My mouth drops open as I take in the room before me. There's a huge king sized bed in the middle of the side wall, the far wall taken up entirely by floor to ceiling windows. To my immediate right, there is a deep jacuzzi tub, and the doorway to the bathroom, where a huge, tiled, walk in shower greets me.

"Hooooly shit," I murmur. "Are you sure you didn't accidentally get Sam's room, Theo?" I turn to look at him, taking in the room. His eyes widen as he realizes just what kind of upgrade we have gotten. This room is obviously a honeymoon suite.

"I swear I checked three times, but their room is booked under Owen's name, not Sam's."

"Well, I guess you got lucky then." I smirk, walking farther into the room. On the bed sits towels arranged in a heart, with a note in the middle. In

handwriting I immediately recognize as Sam's, I pick up the postcard sized cardstock, with the hotel's emblem at the top. It reads,

Dearest Theo and Peyton,

I hope you are able to enjoy this room, maybe even make use of the huge shower and tub. I want you two to enjoy this weekend as well, not just because it's Owen and my wedding weekend. Consider this my gift to you. I love you both so very much, and want to celebrate your relationship, as well as my own.

Enjoy,

Sam (and Owen I guess.)

A chuckle falls from my lips as I read the note, unable to feel even slightly irritated at the way she somehow managed to put us in this romantic room together, and on the evening of *her* wedding.

"What is it?" Theo asks, coming up behind me, reading the note over my shoulder. He snorts a low laugh. I turn my face to look at him while he speaks. "You know, I shouldn't even be surprised that she's behind this. Well, even though you'll be in the bridal suite tonight, maybe we can put the room to good use tomorrow," he says, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

I turn around, swatting him playfully on his chest. "We'll see," I chuckle. Theo tucks his head into my neck, wiggling his head so the scruff on his chin tickles my neck. "Stop that!" I squeal, tugging out of his grip. He moans in irritation, and he turns away, heading to unload the cart.

Once we've got our things unloaded, Theo leaves me to explore the room while he brings the cart back downstairs. I've wandered around the room now a few times, taking in the beauty of it all. From the windows, you can see a perfect view of the cityscape in the distance, skyscrapers stretching up toward the clouds.

My dad and Patricia actually live not too far from this hotel, still in the house Dad bought after Mom's death. I have yet to talk to either of them since Hunter's wedding, but I know I'll have to soon.

The door opens with a click, Theo striding into the room with purpose. His eyes are lit up in humor, and a smirk crosses his lips. “What’s that look for?” I ask with a chuckle.

“I saw the happy couple themselves downstairs,” he snickers. “Sam wanted to remind us that we have to be downstairs at four-thirty... sharp. No exceptions.”

“Why would we be late?” I ask, realizing a second too late what she was insinuating. “Ohh...” I feel the tips of my ears get red.

Theo offers me a wink, coming closer and wrapping his arms around my waist. “You know... we could knock another item off that list of yours.” He bends down to press his lips to mine, but I press against his chest ignoring the pout on his face.

“No,” I say with a laugh. “I’m not risking my hair, remember? And there is no way I can go downstairs and face your whole family, after... You know!”

Theo rests his forehead against mine, letting out a long sigh. “Fine,” he grumbles, stealing a kiss. “But tomorrow...” He winks, dropping his arms from my waist.

“Tomorrow,” I answer.

WEARING the deep orange chiffon and tulle dress I wore for Hunter’s rehearsal dinner, I’m holding my hand in Theo’s as he walks me into the event center of the hotel. He squeezes tightly when he feels me tense at the amount of people here. Sure, I know our friends, and Theo’s parents, but there’s also aunts and uncles, cousins, you name it, here. For some reason, I totally forgot about this aspect of the wedding. And not only am I attending the wedding as a friend, but also as Theo’s girlfriend, which adds a whole other layer of anxiety.

Suddenly, it’s too much. I skid my heels to stop us, and pull on Theo’s arm, tugging him into a coat closet right by the entrance. Being that it’s the middle of summer, all the hangers are empty on the rack. I slam the door shut behind us, breathing heavily as I panic.

“Woah, what’s going on, darling?” Theo asks, brows pinched in concern.

“I’m meeting your family,” I whisper, all the blood draining from my

face.

“You know my family,” he answers, dumbfounded.

“Sure, I know your mom, dad, and sister, but what about all those... extra people out there!” I fling my arm toward the other room, nearly hitting Theo. He steps back at the perfect moment, avoiding my flailing extremity.

“Peyton, try and take a deep breath,” Theo says, resting his hand on my shoulders.

“No,” I cry. “Do you have a mean Aunt Joan I need to watch for? Or a conniving stepmother I need to know anything about?” I slap a palm to my forehead, squeezing my head. My breath comes in short staccato puffs, and I don’t understand where this panic came from. If Theo’s extended family is anything like him, I’ll have nothing to worry about. But my understanding of a ‘normal’ family dynamic is so fucked, I’m having trouble fighting off the overwhelming dread.

With a long sigh, Theo pries my hand from my forehead, clasping my cheeks in his warm hands. His insightful blue eyes lock on mine as he keeps me from looking away. When I don’t do as he says and breathe, he slams his lips on mine, forcing my mind to focus on the way his tongue is slipping into my mouth, and the way his lips feel so right against mine, no longer foreign and new like the first time he kissed me. No, his lips feel like home. Comfort.

My panicked breathing slows, only to be replaced by a vain attempt to catch my breath when Theo releases my cheeks, taking his lips from mine. “Better?” he cautiously asks, still resting his forehead on mine. I nod against him, leaning back. “Good,” he says. “My family... I’m not trying to brag, but they’re amazing. There isn’t anyone I need to warn you about. Although my grandma might talk your ear off about the boxes of handmade baby clothes that she’s upset she has no use for yet.”

A soft chuckle escapes me, and I drop my eyes to the floor. That kiss was like a reset, and I’m suddenly embarrassed that I ever thought his family would be anything like mine. Theo’s pointer finger drags across my cheekbone, down my jaw, to underneath my chin, tilting my head up so I am looking at him. “Peyton, I’m sorry. I didn’t think to give you any heads up about my family. Tell you their names, even. I won’t leave your side tonight, and I’ll make sure to do all the talking if you want.” I nod against his finger, and he kisses me softly.

“Now, for Owen’s family...” he slowly says, “I know next to nothing about them, so we’re both flying blind there.”

I lift my arms to wrap around the nape of his neck, tangling my fingers in his short hair. I pull him down to kiss me again, and he does so, willingly. “Thank you,” I mumble against his lips.

When I finally release him, I take a deep breath, and offer my hand to him. “Ready?” I ask.

“Ready.” He takes my hand, and with another squeeze, leads me back into the rehearsal.

After listening to Sam try and coordinate everyone for about thirty minutes with no luck, Owen’s mom, Mary, takes over. I’ve never met her, but she has a calming maternal presence about her. It almost reminds me of my mom. Her hair is brown like Owen’s, with a few gray hairs mixing in the roots. Her hair is curled in loose waves that frame her face, and she’s wearing a gorgeous knee length floral dress. She and Renee have been directing us now for the last few minutes, and things are already running smoother.

The minister is standing at the front of the venue, and the chairs are lined up on either side of the makeshift aisle, with boxes filled with vases, lights, and other decorative items. Mary directs us to the back door where we will all be waiting to enter, and lines us up, one by one. Theo and I first, then Mallory and Tyler, then Lainey and Colin. Joe will be walking Sam down the aisle as planned. Mary goes through step by step how Owen will walk his parents down, followed by both sets of grandparents, and then Renee. While she speaks, she keeps giving me these sideways glances, and I don’t quite know why. I quickly check over my dress, making sure I don’t have a random stain that I missed or a tit hanging out, but I come up with nothing out of place.

We run through the ceremony twice, and then head to the restaurant connected to the event center. The bridal party is to be seated at the front of the room, and our names are listed on placards. All the girls sit to the right of Sam, and all the men to the left of Owen.

True to his word, Theo never left my side, introducing me to his- as promised- very nice family. His grandma is the cutest little lady, and she reminds me a lot of Sam. A lot of Sam’s personality makes sense when you put her next to her grandma.

Theo sighs when he sees the seating arrangements. “I guess I lied to you earlier.”

I squeeze his hand in mine to reassure him. “It’s fine, I’ll be sitting by Lainey and Mal. It’s not like they’re going to bite me.” I loop my arm in his,

resting my head against his bicep. Even though I've just told him I'll be fine, I don't quite want to be away from him yet.

"I don't know..." Theo mutters. "Lainey can be pretty scary..." he drawls, a shit eating grin on his face.

"Oh, stop." I swat his chest. "Be nice to your sister."

With a chuckle, he steps away from me, heading over to his spot across the long table. I take my seat next to Mallory, and I immediately notice her cheeks are flushed, her wine glass already empty. "I see you're taking advantage of the night away from Felicity?" I ask with a laugh.

"You know it," she hiccups. "I asked Sam, and she told me to get happy drunk tonight. So, I'm going to. I am baby free for the next sixteenish hours, and I'm going to pump and dump." The grin on her face is adorable. "My parents are bringing Felicity just before the ceremony starts, and then taking her home after dinner. Is it sad that I already miss her?" she babbles, trying to take a sip from her empty wine glass. She frowns when she gets nothing but a drop out, and her eyes scan the room for the waitress. It doesn't take more than a second of her eyes hunting before Tyler drops a full glass in front of her, kissing the tip of her red nose.

"Here you go, Peanut," he says sweetly. "Don't drink too much though. You'll regret it tomorrow."

Mallory sighs in delight. "My hero." She tilts her head back, granting him easier access to her mouth. They kiss for a long moment, and I can't help but feel envious of them and their certainty. They went through a lot, especially with an unexpected pregnancy at a pivotal point in their relationship, but they have taken everything in stride. I know they've worked hard to be where they are now, Mallory having disclosed that they've spent lots of time in therapy, and it shows just how strong they are. I'm surprised that they haven't gotten married yet, but then again, they've only been engaged for a couple months.

I wouldn't be surprised if they went off and eloped, just the two of them. Well, three, if you include Felicity. It seems fitting for them. I can't see them wanting a huge celebration, just something small to celebrate their love.

After Tyler leaves us, Mallory slows her sips of wine, waiting for the food to arrive. I can't see Theo except for when he leans forward every few minutes, his eyes searching for mine. It's honestly... adorable. When the food arrives, and everyone is through eating, Sam and Owen each speak briefly, thanking everyone for being here, and what to expect come tomorrow. Conversations arise all around us as people start to mingle, some

immediately heading out to get some rest before the big day tomorrow.

My phone is resting on the table next to my empty plate, and the screen lights up with a text. From... Theo. Confused, I look up to find him looking at me intently. He jerks his chin at me, a silent gesture for me to look at the message.

Theo: You up for something fun?

My eyes lift from the screen, and Theo points down at his phone, and starts typing. The dancing bubbles appear on my own phone, and I nearly gasp when I read his message.

Theo: I think now might be a good time for another lesson.

Theo: Number three, to be specific.

My brain whirs, trying to picture the list in my mind, to remember what number three is. I mean... he's not going to tie me up and fuck me right now in front of everyone, which leaves one option.

Sexting.

The bubbles pop up again, and I wait in anticipation for his next message. I immediately swipe my phone screen brightness down to the lowest setting I can read.

Theo: Tell me, darling. What do you have underneath that gorgeous dress of yours?

My thighs clench at the insinuation behind his words, and I try to control my face. The only problem is, I can't think of anything sexy to reply with. Theo knows what's under my dress. He had to zip it again. He knows there's a pair of nude shapewear holding it all together under there.

Me: Ummm. You know what's under there?

Theo: Do I though?

Me: I mean... you zipped me up.

Theo: Are you sure you don't have some sexy underwear under there?

Oh, maybe he wants me to play along?

Me: I have a black lace thong underneath... And no bra.

Theo: You're killing me, darling.

Theo: I want you back in that coat closet.

Be. Sexy. Peyton. Don't overthink this.

Me: And what might you do to me there?

Theo: First, I'd take those beautiful lips and kiss you hard. Hard enough that you know exactly who you belong to.

Me: Who do I belong to?

I bite the inside of my cheek, curious to see his response. We are playing with fire, because while I don't really belong to him... I want to.

Theo: Me.

Theo: You're mine. That pussy, it's mine. Your mind, body, and soul, it's all mine.

I can't help the gasp that flies from my lips. I look up to Theo, trying to get a read on him, to see some sort of truth in his face, but his face is downcast on his phone in his lap, a shadow of light blocking my view.

Me: What would you do next?

Theo: I'd worship you. I'd sink down to my knees, slide my hands up those soft legs, and pull down that black lace thong.

Theo: Then, I'd make sure to take care of my girl. I'll make you come all over my face, just like you did in the truck. I want you to come so hard you have to hold back your screams. No one can know what we are doing in there. You have to be as quiet as possible.

Me: Fuck, Theo.

Theo: I'm just getting started, darling.

I glance around me, hoping that nobody reads the messages over my shoulder, or sees what I'm sure is an obvious look of need on my face. I can feel my panties getting wetter with each second, and for a brief moment I'm thankful that when I walk out of here, I won't have to try to hide an erection. My arousal is easily concealed.

My eyes catch Theo's, and he's finally not looking at his phone. He graces me with a sly wink, then tilts his head back down.

Theo: You like the thought of that, don't you? You're soaked right now, aren't you, darling?

Theo: You're lucky I'm sitting, because my cock is so fucking hard just thinking about that sweet pussy of yours.

Me: I'm so wet right now, I can't think about anything else but your thick cock inside me.

I hit send before I can second guess myself, and instantly, a wave of panic flushes inside my body. Oh god. That was too much.

The bubbles appear and disappear a few times, before a new message comes through.

Theo: Jesus, are you trying to kill me?

Theo: Because I swear, my heart just stopped.

Me: Well I don't know! I've never done this! I don't know what to say, Theo.

Theo: Do you want that?

Me: Want what?

Theo: My cock inside you.

Me: Obviously.

Theo: I regret this, this was a bad idea.

My anxiety rushes right back to me, and I start to panic again, fear rattling my bones.

Theo: Because now, I don't get to fuck you for at least another twenty four hours, and all I can think about is how good you feel around my cock. Your mouth, your pussy. Everything.

Me: Well, I guess you shouldn't have played with fire.

Theo: Now, don't get all snarky on me. You're just as uncomfortable with want right now as I am.

Me: Oh really? And just how do you know that?

Theo: You've been squirming in your chair for the last five minutes, and biting your lip for the last three. Your cheeks and chest are flushed pink, just like they were the first time I was inside you.

Theo: Face it, I know your tells. You're just as turned on as I am... maybe more.

"Who are you texting?" A voice pops up from behind me, and I shriek, dropping my phone to the table with a clatter.

"No one!"

Sam drops into the chair next to me, a sly grin on her face, much like the one her brother is wearing right now as he smirks at me from the other side of the table. I glare at him, wishing I could inflict pain right now through my mind.

"I'm going to take one guess, that it's my brother, and things were getting hot," Sam laughs. "I'm not going to say anything else, but I'm happy for you. Who knows, maybe it's because I'm getting married tomorrow, and weddings have been on my mind for well over a year now, but maybe someday, we will be planning your wedding. And maybe that wedding will be to my brother," Sam sighs wistfully. "Maybe we'll be sisters someday."

All hints of arousal are gone as she gushes, and my gut twists at her words, guilt eating me from within. I nod tersely, not sure I trust my voice right now.

"Come on," Sam says, tugging at my arm. "It's time for girls' night."

As she pulls me away from the table, I look back at Theo, who is already looking at me, a wary look on his face. I offer him a thumbs up, but I can't help the guilt that is threatening to swallow me whole.

This whole charade, which... I don't even think it's a charade anymore, it will hurt more than just me and Theo when it ends. Our lives are too intertwined. The earlier panic that seized me in the car, in the coat closet, suddenly returns in full force.

And I realize that I've made a mess out of everything, and the worst thing I did was fall for Theo.

Upon that thought, my heart nearly stops, and I don't know how to process anything else. I can't believe I've been so stupid to want him so badly in such a real way. I know he's said he's wanted me. He knows I want to believe him. To believe that every word, kiss, and touch was real, but god, my perception is so fucked. So ingrained with all the shit that has been drilled

into my mind since I was eight.

Even if he could, however temporarily, be with me, what would he do when he realizes I'm terrified? Is trying, allowing myself to be loved, wanted, is it worth the pain I know is coming when he leaves?

PEYTON

The bridal suite looks exactly like the honeymoon suite that Sam booked for Theo and me, just bigger. There's a separate sitting room, where the five of us women have congregated. Sam is sitting on the couch, her legs crossed underneath her, her hair pulled up atop her head, with a "rejuvenating" face mask on. She's wearing a pair of white silk pajama set, shorts and a tank top. Laying over the side of the couch is a white robe with lace edges with the word *bride* written in glitter on the back.

Lainey, Mallory and I, are in matching pajamas and robes, the same color as our dresses tomorrow. A rust orange, with *bridesmaid* written in the same glitter lettering that is on Sam's. Mallory and I sit on the floor next to Renee, eating Oreos with peanut butter and other junk food.

"So, how do you feel?" Lainey asks, slathering a green face mask all over her cheeks. "Are you ready?"

Sam snickers, rolling her eyes. "Of course I'm ready. I knew Owen was the one for me within a week of us meeting. I mean... The man saved me from a burning building, of course I was going to fall in love with him."

"You're so fucking dramatic," Lainey laughs. "You started an oven fire trying to make Christmas cookies, and the fire was out by the time the fire department got there."

"I like my version better," Sam pouts, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Wait," I interject. "*That's* how you met?" How could I not have known this? Sam and Owen just seem to have always been together, have been such a constant in all our lives. I would have thought they were high school sweethearts or something similar.

Sam nods, and Renee snorts. "It's really quite the story."

With a long sigh, Sam tells me the long version of their meeting, which led to their eventual love story.

"Well, if he fell for you after knowing you can't bake for shit, I'd say you're meant to be," I laugh, lifting another Oreo covered in peanut butter to my lips.

"Hey." Sam steals my cookie from my hand, ignoring my squeal of displeasure, shoving it in her mouth. "I can cook," she mumbles through her mouthful. "I just can't bake. There's a difference."

"Surrre," Mallory teases.

Sam reaches down, smacking the back of Mallory's head. Mallory gasps, holding the back of her head in shock. She's about to say something, when Renee stops them, holding her arm between them. "Now, I know it's all in good fun, but no hitting each other, we don't need bruises for pictures tomorrow, girls."

Sam harrumphs, but listens to her mom. I stand from where I'm sitting on the floor, heading over to the fridge to get another glass of sparkling water. We all stopped drinking an hour ago, not that we were drinking heavily, but we collectively decided we'd rather not have wine headaches tomorrow. There's a knock on the door just as I open the small fridge, so I shut the door, and head over to see who it is. When I open the heavy door, Mary, Owen's mom, stands behind it.

"Hi, Mary," I greet, opening the door wider to allow her in.

She offers me a soft smile. "Thank you, dear." She peers into my eyes for a few seconds longer than necessary, much like she did earlier at the rehearsal, and once again, I'm at a loss as to why she's staring at me like that.

I know I'm new to the group and all, but it's weird. Sam cheers when she spots Mary, flying off the couch to give her future mother-in-law a huge hug. Mary laughs, hugging her back. I close the door behind me, and get my sparkling water before sitting back down on the floor with everyone. Mary and Sam talk animatedly, excited for the big day to come. Renee gets up from her seat and meets my gaze, giving me a sudden wink.

"While she's distracted," Renee whispers to me, jerking her chin toward her daughter and gesturing for me to follow. Curious, I set down my sparkling water and rise from my place on the floor. A quick glance around the room tells me that only Lainey has noticed us get up. She cocks an eyebrow at me and I throw her a wordless shrug as I follow Renee to the

adjoined bedroom.

In the bedroom, Renee strides quickly towards one of the duffle bags in the corner. She unzips the front pocket, pulling out a long velvet box.

I'm still confused as to why we are sneaking around in here. "What...?" But as she opens the box and I glimpse the stunning piece of jewelry inside, I understand.

Inside the box is a beautiful pearl necklace, differing from my own, the string of pearls connected together, rather than my single pearl on a gold strand.

My fingers automatically fly to my own pearl. "It's beautiful," I breathe. "She's going to love it."

Renee nods. "It was my mother's. She wore it on her wedding day, and gifted it to me on the day Joe and I got married. I'm going to surprise Sam with it tomorrow morning." A small smile graces her lips, and her whisper is almost a soft squeal. "I just couldn't wait any longer. I had to show someone!" Renee is rarely giddy, but her excitement as she gazes down at the necklace makes her more animated than I've ever seen her.

I nod in agreement, my own emotion creating slight moisture in my eyes. "She is going to love it." Sam's grandmother's necklace, gifted to her by her own mom...

"I hope so." Renee smiles at me, glancing at my fingers, still locked on my own pearl in an absentminded grasp. "They have a way of staying with us, you know."

"Pearls?"

"Moms."

I freeze. Of course Renee would make the connection that the pearls for her daughter would remind me of the one I wear from my own mother. And of course she would pull me aside for this moment, giving me the space to feel whatever emotions that connection would elicit. "Thanks Renee," I whisper, clearing my throat. "Sam is lucky to have you. *I'm* lucky to have you, Sam, and everyone here..." *Including Theo.*

"Of course, sweetheart," Renee says. "I'm happy for Sam. That she's found such a good partner in Owen. I just want to see her happy, healthy, loved." She pauses for the slightest beat. "It's what every mother wants for her daughter."

And with a gentle smile on her face, Renee closes the lid on the jewelry box, slides it back into the pocket of the duffel bag, and zips it up.

And exits the room.

Leaving me with a thousand thoughts running through my head.

I think of Sam's pearls as I fiddle with my own. Sam, who has welcomed me into her life and her friend group and labeled me 'family.' The pearls, which belonged to her grandmother, just as my mom's necklace was once Nana's.

Sam will wear her pearls tomorrow as she marries the love of her life. My jaw clenches, and the familiar feeling of anxiety stirs in my gut. Only it's not anxiety, I realize. It's sorrow, and as my fingers graze my pearl, I am overwhelmed with memories of the woman who gave it to me.

Images flash through my mind, disjointed recollections of my mom's blue eyes, crinkled at the edges with laughter. Her dark, pre-cancer hair tickling my face as she leaned down to kiss me on the cheek at bedtime. My mom, throwing her head back as she laughed at my face, smudged with flour from baking Christmas cookies.

Her arms tight around me, squeezing me in a crushing hug as I climbed down the steps of the school bus. Mom clapping and whistling obnoxiously, the loudest person in the room as she cheered for me after my first grade piano recital.

Memories of her overwhelm me, until I am drowning in the thousands of scents and sounds and songs and images I have to remember her by, including the pearl. All of these memories, these gifts that she gave me.

It's what every mother wants for her daughter.

A fleeting thought crosses my mind, and I wonder what my wedding day could have looked like if my own mom was here. Renee's words are still ringing in my ears. Where I normally would have shut the thoughts down, I let myself dream for a moment.

I dream of my own wedding. My mother gifting me the pearl that I wear now, the one that she would have worn until the day I got married, instead of the day she died. She would have been the one to walk me down the aisle. The one helping with my hair. The one hugging me, spending girls' night with my friends and their mothers.

I let the fantasy play on repeat, the interactions between my mother and I feeling so real, it nearly makes my heart burst. Tears stream down my cheeks as the pain of losing her hits again.

What every mother wants...

And I realize with a violent certainty that my mother would want me to

believe in love, despite everything.

I have discovered new ways to miss her for the last eighteen years, and I will wish she was with me every day for forever. But this new, different understanding of who my mother was, what she would want for me suddenly shakes me to my core.

My mother would not want me to embody the messages I have been getting from my dad; the toxicity and rejection and dismissiveness. That certainly wasn't who she was. And, I realize, as my tears pour down in earnest, it wasn't who she would want me to be.

My mom was filled with warmth, grace, and openness. She would have wanted me to hope for the best, despite the fact that my dad didn't give that to her.

She would want me to believe that I am wanted. And to accept the love that the people in my life are trying to show me.

I take a deep breath, letting this epiphany flood my entire being. I allow the dream of Mom on my wedding day to continue. She's walking me down the aisle, her hands warm and soothing as we walk arm in arm. Sam, Lainey, and Mallory stand at the front of the room in plum-purple bridesmaid gowns. And at the altar...

The thought hits me out of nowhere. Who is the person I think of, without question, meeting me at the end of the aisle? I can almost see him as if he's standing in front of me. He's offering a hand to my mother, kissing her gently on the cheek, before promising to love and care for me always.

Theo.

The image of him in a suit, waiting for me at the end of an aisle is enough. Enough for me to know that what I have with him isn't fake for me anymore. Hell, maybe it never was for him.

Immediately following the recognition of the person my mom would want me to be, is the realization that Theo is showing me the kind of love my mom would want me to accept. He has been, this entire time. I know that if he were to ask me again to make this real, that I would wholeheartedly agree.

I know that he might never ask, may never go there. Maybe I've made him doubt me for too long, convinced him too wholly that I couldn't accept the care and affection that he was trying to give. But I know without a doubt that if he wanted to try, I would. I would try to go for something real. For him, for me, and for my mom.

To accept the love she would want for her daughter.

SAM LOOKS ABSOLUTELY stunning in her lace fit and flare gown. Her hair is in a delicate updo, blonde locs curled to perfection, a few hanging down to frame her face. The necklace Renee gave her this morning is delicately hanging from her neck, resting on her collarbones, accentuating the neckline of her dress. The huge bouquet in her arms is filled with gorgeous orange wildflowers, with deep green accents.

Everything has gone according to plan today. We were able to get Sam out of bed on time for her hair and makeup appointment, which was a surprise in itself. According to Lainey, she's usually a bear to get out of bed. We all got dressed and ready on time, and are currently waiting in the lobby to walk down the aisle. Pictures are after the ceremony, so Owen hasn't seen Sam yet, and we haven't seen any of the guys. Theo's texted me a few times, mainly to check in, but we haven't talked much otherwise.

My stomach is filled with butterflies in nervous anticipation, eager for the ceremony to begin so that I can see Theo. I'm feeling better today. I know all my previous anxiety will melt away as soon as I see him. I woke up this morning feeling more confident and content than I have in ages, ready to take on a potential new chapter in my life. Hopefully one that includes Theo. The wedding coordinator is starting the process of getting us organized, sending Renee into the main room to have Owen escort her to her seat, as well as Mary, and Owen's dad, Miller.

"Seriously, where the hell are the guys?" Mallory asks, shifting Felicity higher on her hip. Felicity looks utterly adorable in her tulle dress, the bow in her hair around the tiny stick straight pony.

Sam waves her off. "They'll be here soon, I'm sure." Just as she finishes speaking, the doors open, and the three men stride through, looking handsome as hell in their gray tuxedos with rust orange ties to match our dresses. I'm standing off to the side, so Theo doesn't spot me at first. He stops, hugging his sister tightly. I can see him whispering something in her ear, and they both hold each other tight for a long moment, until they part, and he kisses her cheek.

From here, I can see the moisture glistening in his eyes, a few stray tears on his cheeks. The sight of the familial love they have for each other makes my own eyes fill with tears, and I swallow hard, trying to rid myself of the hard lump in my throat. Just seeing him is continuing to put things into

perspective for me. For us.

Theo scans the room, blue eyes shining brighter through his tears. His blonde hair is styled perfectly, and I can't help but want to thread my fingers through his hair, muss it up a little. When his eyes connect with mine, he stalks purposefully toward me. I stay in my spot, not quite sure what to do. My bouquet is in my hand, and I drop my arm to my side as he approaches me, his eyes no longer wet, but filled with a carnal desire.

His hands roughly cup my face, and his mouth attacks mine in a harsh, intense kiss. If I didn't know his different kisses by now, I might think he was angered, but no. This is his kiss of desire. The look he gave me, so similar to the glares he directed toward me all those months, I see them in a different light now. Sam and Lainey were right. They were looks of want.

His lips move against mine, and as much as I want to continue, I press my hand against his chest, pushing him away. "You're going to get my lipstick all over you," I murmur, opening my eyes to meet him. The smile that breaks out on his face is addictive.

"I'm not worried about a little lipstick, darling," he answers, pressing another kiss to my lips. "You look utterly incredible. God, you're so fucking beautiful." He drags his eyes up and down my body again, taking in my deep rust colored dress that flows down to the floor from my hips with a deep v neckline, accentuating what little cleavage I have.

I giggle, pressing hard against him. "Thank you," I mumble. My cheeks heat, and I turn away from him to find the mirror I remember hanging on the wall. I get to work fixing my lipstick, and Theo comes up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist, resting his head in the crook of my neck. He ignores my attempts to shrug him off, only holding me tighter.

A wolf whistle sounds behind us, and I immediately step from him to find all of our friends staring at us, wide smiles on their faces. "Uh, sorry," I stutter, clutching my bouquet to my chest as if it's going to protect me.

"Nope, no apologizing," Sam says, coming over to give me a giant hug. "You've watched us all for the last year, happy and in love. Now, it's your turn." When she pulls away, she pats Theo's cheek, and they have a sort of weird silent conversation between siblings. Theo's arm slides around my waist pulling me close to him, and for a moment, I forget this is technically... fake.

Joe strides in, interrupting the moment, a nervous smile on his face. "Time to go."

The wedding coordinator herds us all toward the entrance to the event room, and then, it's go time. Sam and Joe stand off to the side, and Mallory hands Felicity off to one of the ushers, Nate. Another guy who's in the fire department with Owen. Felicity of course gives him a drooly smile, because she loves everyone. Nate turns her in his arms so she's facing the guests, and with his other hand, he digs into the pocket of his pants, pulling out orange flower petals. He walks down the aisle with her, tossing the petals to the floor dramatically. Of course, everyone eats it up, giggling and awwing at how cute Felicity is.

When he reaches the end of the aisle, he passes Felicity off to Mallory's mom, Shannon. She heads back to her seat, and then it's our turn. The music changes, playing a beautiful instrumental of a Taylor Swift song. Theo loops his arm through mine, and smiles down at me. With shaky steps, we walk down the aisle, arm in arm, and I have to try my hardest to remember that this isn't our wedding. Owen graces us with a warm smile as we catch his eye, but his eyes flick back up toward the door we emerged from. Waiting for his bride.

When we part at the end of the aisle, Theo squeezes my arm gently. I make my way to my designated spot, making sure to keep a small smile on my face. Mallory and Tyler follow. Their height difference is still comical, even though Mallory insisted on wearing three inch heels. Odds are by the end of the ceremony they will be ditched in favor of her flats.

Following Mal and Ty, Lainey and Colin glide down the aisle, Lainey's own engagement ring glinting on her hand. I know Colin was bummed that his mom wasn't able to make it today to see his best friend get married, but his dad tried. She wasn't having a good day.

The music changes, and then Sam and Joe round the corner to enter the room. My eyes watch Owen, and almost immediately, his eyes well up with tears. He's trying to play it cool, to keep himself contained, but as she walks down the aisle, they stream down his cheeks. Colin claps a hand to his shoulder, in support, and Owen smiles, bigger than I think I've ever seen.

Sam is practically running down the aisle, her dad holding her back by her arm. Joe passes her to Owen, but not before Owen can grip Joe in a tight, long hug. Those two seem to have a special bond.

Together, Owen and Sam stand, and the minister starts the ceremony. He tells their story, eliciting laughter from the crowd, and a groan from Sam. He boasts about their personalities, how even though they are so different, they

fit together so well.

Then, when it's time for the vows, Owen pulls a crumpled piece of paper from his suit. He begins reading, his low, gravelly voice thick with emotion.

“Samantha, you are the love of my life. My best friend. You are the person I want to wake up next to every morning, and go to bed with every evening. The person I want to have a family with, create my life with. I promise to love you unconditionally, through thick and thin, through sickness and health, and through your incessant need to become friends with everyone you meet. But in all honesty, I love that about you. I love how hard you love your friends and your family, how dedicated you are to them, just like I know you are to me. I will always put you first, and give you everything I have, until death do us part.”

Unable to stop the tears streaming down my face at his vows to her, I discreetly turn my head, wiping the tears from my eyes, as Lainey hands Sam her phone from the pocket of her dress. We tried to get her to write it down, but she was too worried about losing it. Theo leans slightly over so that he catches my eye, and when he does, he winks, and mouths, *you're adorable, darling.*

I don't have time to react before Sam is speaking.

“Owen, I always thought it would be difficult to find someone that loves me for who I am. I'm a million puzzle pieces scattered around, but never complete. Not until I met you. You complete me and the puzzle that we make together. I love you so much, and I don't think I could have found someone better for me if I tried.” Sam pauses, taking a deep breath. Only, she doesn't keep talking. She laughs. I see Owen's brow quirk in confusion, and Sam turns to the audience. “Really, Uncle Steve? You had to text me now?” she laughs. “You're doing great, sweetie,” she imitates her uncle's voice.

Laughter breaks out in the audience, interrupting the sweet moment, but to be honest, I wouldn't expect anything less from Sam or her crazy family. It fits perfectly.

With a deep breath, Sam finishes her vows. “Owen, I love you, and I cannot wait to love you every single day, through thick and thin, sickness and health, till death parts us.”

The minister continues with the exchange of the rings, and then with a tone of excitement, says, “I now pronounce you man and wife. You may now kiss the bride.”

We all erupt in cheers as Owen takes his wife, and kisses her deeply,

thrusting a fist into the air in celebration.

THEO

Now that the ceremony, pictures, and dinner are done, I can't stop bringing Peyton around, introducing her to everyone in sight as my girlfriend. Is it childish of me to hope that if I say it enough, maybe she will actually give us a real chance? Maybe not, but I don't care. It doesn't hurt to try. I'm falling in love with this girl, whether she believes me or not.

It's a little surreal that my baby sister is married, but she couldn't have picked a better guy. Owen is the perfect man for her, despite his perpetual grumpiness. I'm ready for the fun to begin, especially after the chaos that was family pictures.

Sam insisted that the photographer take photos of just Peyton and I, and I can't wait to see the results that come from it. Peyton was hesitant, as expected, but with a little encouragement, she willingly posed with me for a few sets of photos. Sam also insisted Peyton be included in all the family photos, despite Peyton's vehement disagreement that it should be only family. Sam, of course, yelled at her that she is family, but a compromise was made, and two pictures were taken; with, and without Peyton.

I'm glad Peyton was included in the family pictures.

Peyton and I are sitting at the head table, watching everyone dance together to a boppy pop song. My arm is wrapped around her shoulder holding her as close to me as possible. She looks like perfection in her deep v neckline dress, reminding me of the baby blue one she wore to Hunter's wedding all those weeks ago. This dress doesn't have a slit up the leg like the other, but it fits her like a dream. Hugging her curves, and accentuating her tits just perfectly.

“Do you want to dance?” Peyton asks as a slow, Ed Sheeran song plays.

I chuckle lowly. “Yeah, darling I do. But watch your feet. There’s no guarantee they’ll come out unscathed.” I stand, offering her my palm. She takes it with a smile, and I lead her to the dance floor. As I sway with her in my arms, I can’t help but ask her what has been in the back of my mind for weeks now.

“Can I ask you something?”

Her head tilts back to look at me, brows furrowed at my question. “Of course,” she warily replies, reaching a hand up to straighten the tie around my neck.

“This,” I say, “Us.” I take a deep breath. “I want this to be real.”

“That wasn’t a question,” she retorts, a smile twitching at the corner of her lip. To my surprise, she isn’t as immediately skittish as I expected her to be at the introduction of this topic.

“Fine,” I rephrase. “Peyton, will you be my *real* girlfriend?”

She’s silent for a long moment, avoiding my eyes. Her head drops to my chest, leaving me to stare down at her beautiful blonde hair.

Fuck, I just ruined everything, didn’t I? I shouldn’t have done this here, now. All my hope is fading fast, until I feel her nodding against my chest. I stop my swaying motion, pulling her back so she’s not on my chest anymore. Bending my knees slightly to meet her eye level, I stare into the glazed over blue eyes, filled with... something. I can’t tell if she’s happy, sad... distraught?

“Were you nodding?” I ask, trying to make sure I wasn’t imagining things. Her arms drop from around my waist, one of her hands coming to her chest to clutch the pearl she always wears between her fingers.

“Yes,” she whispers, so quiet I can barely hear her over the loud music, which has now switched to a dance beat. Pulling her off the dance floor, I take her hand and lead us into a quiet hall. The booming music still can be heard, but at least now, I can hear my own thoughts.

“Does that mean...?” I hesitate.

“Yes,” she whispers again. “I’ll be your real girlfriend.” Her voice is quiet, but steady. I take a few more seconds to read her expression. She’s filled with an... ease. Almost like a weight has been lifted from her chest. She smiles up at me with a perfectly contented look on her face.

And I realize she means it. She really wants to do this, for real. A loud whoop falls from my lips, right before I bend down, wrapping my arms

around her waist and spinning her in a circle. “Fuck, you have no idea how happy you make me, Peyton.”

She giggles. “I think I have an idea.”

“I want you to know,” I say, putting her down in front of me. “This isn’t a game to me. This isn’t a ‘lesson’ or anything. This is real. I want you. Fuck, I’ve wanted you from the day I met you, I was just too chickenshit to say anything.” I rest my forehead against hers. “If I have to spend every day proving it to you, I will.” I take her lips roughly, sliding my tongue into her mouth, loving the way she submits herself to me, letting me show her just how much she means to me. I try to convey every single one of my emotions in one short kiss, but there’s no way I can get it all out there. Breathless, we pull away, and I nip her bottom lip gently, eliciting a gasp from her.

“I’ve wanted this to be real since the day after Hunter’s wedding. I was ready to ask you that day to be my girlfriend, but I knew I needed to take things at your pace,” I whisper against her lips.

Peyton nods, the smile growing on her lips as she steps back. “Holy shit,” she whispers. “This is real, like we’re real. You’re my boyfriend.”

“I’m your boyfriend.” I smile down at her.

“This... is crazy,” she murmurs, eyes wide in disbelief. “I...”

“Don’t you dare say you can’t believe it.” I grip her chin in my fingers, forcing her eyes on me.

She breathes out, “How did you know that’s what I was going to say?”

I chuckle darkly, “Because, I know you, darling.”

“So, what now?” she asks. “We’re just... together?”

“Well, I mean, we already were, now it’s just... real... labeled.” I speak slowly, still trying not to freak her out.

“Okay,” she says with a smile. “Do we have to tell everyone it was fake before?”

“Not unless you want to.” She shakes her head abruptly. “Okay, our little secret then.” I kiss her again, simply unable to not be touching her somehow right now.

The music changes in the main room, and Peyton’s excitement only grows. “Oh my god, I love this song,” she yells. “Can we dance again?”

“Errrr,” I hesitate. “I’m not much of an actual dancer. Didn’t you notice earlier that I was only swaying?”

“I don’t care!” She grabs my hand, pulling me out of the dim hall we were in. The lights are flashing blue, purple, and yellow, illuminating the

makeshift dance floor in the middle of the room. I spot my sister, Owen, and the rest of the crew in the middle, bouncing up and down in excitement to the beat of the song. When we reach the edge of the dance floor, I halt, unwillingly dropping Peyton's hand.

She turns back to me, a pouting look on her face. "Please?" she asks, sticking out her bottom lip.

"Peyton, I really... I can't dance."

"I don't care! I want you to be out there with me... I mean, you are my boyfriend after all."

A groan rumbles in my chest, and before I realize it, Peyton is grabbing my tie, wrapping it around her wrist, and yanking me onto the dance floor by my neck. *Not exactly how I wanted to see my tie wrapped around her wrist for the first time, but oh well.*

When we reach the middle group of people, everyone cheers when they see us, and Owen hands me a bottle of fireball. I unwillingly take a small sip, figuring I could maybe use the help.

I bounce my body to the beat, resting my hands on Peyton's hips as she stands in front of me. She is a much better dancer than I, her hips naturally swaying to the beat as she takes a swig out of the shared bottle of fireball. She presses her ass against my groin, and I can't help but shift back, trying to avoid the grinding contact.

Peyton tilts her head back, eyeing me curiously. "Why'd you move?"

"You know exactly why I moved, darling," I groan, bending down to kiss her cinnamon whiskey flavored lips. Peyton giggles against my lips, then passes the bottle to Mallory standing next to her. I hold her against my chest, doing my best to keep my groin from feeling the friction her hips are providing. Under the glow of the multicolored lights, surrounded by my girlfriend, my sister and her new husband, and all our family and friends, I can honestly say I'm the happiest I've ever been.

The song changes to another bouncing pop song, and everyone shrieks in excitement when they recognize the song. This time, I can't stop from pulling Peyton's hips to mine as she grinds against me to the music. Her body relaxes into mine, and I tilt my head down, eager to be close to her. Her arm snakes up my chest to the nape of my neck, pulling me down to her lips.

Tasting her as she grinds against my hardening cock is almost too much to handle. When she pulls back from me, I look down at the watch on my wrist to check the time. Eleven-thirty. The dancing ends at midnight. Is it too

soon to leave? I glance around me, and notice that people are slowly leaving, gathering their things and stumbling out the double doors. I graze my mouth along the shell of Peyton's ear, whispering, "Are you ready to go?"

Her eyes are wide as she turns around, lust burning in her irises. She silently nods, and I squeeze her hips, before stepping back. With a quick goodbye and wave to the rest of our friends, I pull Peyton from the dance floor, and together we run to the hotel elevator, the hot, sweet tension only growing hotter with each step.

PEYTON

“I need you,” Theo growls as he slams the door to our hotel room shut.

“Yes, please,” I whimper, kicking off my heels, and going to slide the straps of my dress off my shoulders. Theo’s hands stop me, before I can bare myself before him though.

“I want to do that,” he says. Slowly, too slowly, he turns me, unzipping the short zipper before turning me back to face him. He slides the straps down my shoulders, down my arms, revealing my naked breasts to him.

The growl that breaks free from his chest is almost feral, and I love it. I love that I can cause such a reaction in him. He lets my dress fall to the floor in a sunset colored heap, and he rakes his eyes up and down my body appreciatively. “I see you skipped the shapewear, darling.”

I nod, my mouth feeling like it’s full of cotton.

“That’s my girl,” he moans, running his hands up and down the sides of my stomach. My skin breaks out in goosebumps at his gentle, yet demanding touch. “Fuck, I can’t believe you’re mine,” he says.

I nod again, still not capable of the power of speech. Still not quite believing that this is real, that we are real.

“Use your words, darling.”

“You’re mine,” I respond, my voice cracking.

“I’m all yours.”

With that, he takes what he wants, thrusting his fingers into my hair, kissing me with everything he has. I can feel his erection through his suit pants, somehow harder than he was when we were dancing, not even five minutes ago. Theo drags me into the huge bathroom, and only breaks apart

for a moment to turn the shower on. He kicks his dress shoes off, flinging them to the opposite end of the bathroom, and shrugging off his suit jacket, carelessly dropping it to the floor.

“Wait,” I croak, holding up my hand to his chest. I want to be the one to peel off the rest of the layers of clothing, to bare him to me. Without saying it, Theo knows exactly what I want. He drops his arms, allowing me to loosen his tie, and lift it from his neck. I drop it to the floor, then slowly work on the buttons leading down his chest. One by one, I slide the buttons from the holes, when what I really want to do is rip it apart like they do in the movies.

Once every last button is undone, Theo shrugs the shirt off his shoulders, leaving him now in his white undershirt, and pants. Unable to take it slow anymore, I unbuckle his belt buckle, yanking it aggressively from the loops. I chuck it to the side, and unbutton his pants, shoving them down his legs. Theo’s already taking his undershirt off, so I drop to my knees, palming his cock through his black boxer briefs. I look up at him, and I can feel the desire rippling from his body.

I rest my hands on my thighs, looking up at him, waiting for what he wants next. I know what I want, but I want to make sure it’s what he wants.

He looks down at me, and his pointer finger slides underneath my chin, tilting it even more to look up at him. In this position, I feel like I’m everything to him. His focus is entirely on me, and I soak up every bit of the attention.

“Such a pretty girl on your knees for me,” he growls. His hand moves from my chin to delicately wrap around my neck, squeezing slightly, but not cutting off any supply of air. “But right now, I want your legs wrapped around my head.” He gently guides me to stand by my neck, and I do, waiting patiently for anything he wants from me.

He’s let this slightly dominant side out before, and I love it. I love when he tells me what to do. It helps slow my mind, especially when it runs rampant.

His arm drops from my neck, and cups the nape of my neck, his fingers sliding up to twine in my hair, still in a braided updo. His other arm wraps around my body, palming the bare skin of my ass, squeezing it tightly. He groans into my ear, before moving to yank my thong down. I kick it free from my legs, and then he’s dragging me into the steamy shower.

Water cascades around us as he kisses me senseless, my only focus is on the feeling of him against me. My breasts are pressed up against his chest, my

nipples peaked and stiffening with each caress of his skin on mine. My hand slides down his chest to his boxers, soaked against his skin. I work to peel them off him, and when his cock is free, I immediately take it into my grasp, pumping it slowly and tightly in my hand. Theo grunts against my mouth, his hips jerking in time with my movements.

“No more,” he moans into my mouth, and I stop my hand, dropping it from his cock. “Sit on the bench,” he orders, directing me to the tile bench behind me. I sit down, shrieking at the cold temperature of the tile along my ass, and wait for his next movement.

He drops to his knees in front of me, blue eyes wicked and mischievous. “Put your legs on my shoulders, baby,” he says, motioning at his broad muscular shoulders.

I do as he asks, and without warning, his mouth dives down to my pussy, his tongue attacking my clit. I can’t stop the loud cry that falls from my lips, or the way my hands tangle in his hair, yanking slightly at the ends. One of Theo’s hands slide up my stomach to pinch my exposed nipple, cold from air. He flattens his tongue on my clit, moaning his pleasure into my cunt. The vibration tickles, but also makes the pleasure heighten that much more. One of his thick fingers prods at my entrance, and I nearly slide off the tile bench when it slides inside me, thrusting in time with his tongue. I can feel my climax building, the heat of pleasure slowly rising, higher and higher with each movement of Theo’s mouth. All the other orgasms he’s given me have come on hard and fast, but this... This is a slow burn.

He takes his time, bringing me all the way to the tip of my orgasm, then easing off. I cry out in anticipation each time, desperate to feel the wave of pleasure I know is coming. Theo alternates his fingers from each nipple, squeezing, pinching, twisting each one, and when he slides a second finger inside me, twisting his fingers against my g spot, the slow burn turns into an inferno of pleasure, burning me from the inside out.

“Theo!” I cry, pulling at his hair as my body writhes and jerks, my legs tightening around his neck as wave after intense wave of pleasure burns through me. The white hot pleasure is unlike any other orgasm I’ve ever experienced, and my body immediately sinks into a heap against the cool tile.

Theo slides his fingers from me, and my hands drop from his hair, my legs from his shoulders. “Come on, darling.” He lifts my nearly lifeless body to stand, and he holds me against his chest as he starts to pull the bobby pins and elastics from my hair. His cock is still hard, jutting up against my

stomach, and so I reach for it, slowly jerking it with my hands as he takes care of me. He shampoos and conditions my hair, washing every inch of my body with the eucalyptus scented soap. When I'm clean, I take the wash from his hands, and do the same. He bends down so I can shampoo his hair, and then I pay attention to every part of him, washing him with care. This time, when I get down to my knees, he lets me stay there, lets the water run down my body, as I open my mouth, and let him slide his cock between my lips.

I work him slow and easy, just like he did with me, and I can feel the moment his body tenses. "Gonna come," he grunts, and I peel my mouth from his cock, just in time for the warm jets of his come to land on my chest, marking me with him.

With a chuckle, Theo pulls me to stand again after he's caught his breath. "I guess I have to wash you up again." And he does.

After the water runs cold, Theo wraps me in a fluffy towel, even toweling off my hair so it's not dripping wet. He leads my exhausted body into the main room, making me drink a bottle of water before he digs through his bag to grab a shirt. He helps me dress, sliding my arms through his large shirt, and sliding his own boxers on.

He pulls the covers down, and I flop into the bed, immediately reaching my arm out for him, needing to feel his touch, have him hold me. He climbs in next to me, immediately pulling me against him. I turn my body so my face is in his chest, and I lift my leg to hook around his hip.

"Goodnight," I sigh, sleep already taking me.

"Goodnight, darling." I hear, along with the steady beating of Theo's heart.

THEO

Peyton's body is wrapped around mine, her legs entwined around me like a vine. I've been laying awake now for about an hour, holding my girl. She's stirred a few times, but not enough to fully wake. I've been scrolling my phone with one hand, holding her with the other. The group text has been buzzing all morning, plans being made for the rest of the day.

THE ONE WHERE SAM AND OWEN GOT MARRIED

Lainey: Alright, gang. Game plan. We're all probably hungover as fuck, but we're meeting for brunch at ten, then cleaning up the venue. After that, I don't give a fuck what you do. I'm going home to take a nap.

Tyler: Where are we going to brunch?

Mallory: Ignore him. He was thinking too hard.

Colin: The hotel restaurant, dumbass.

Tyler: Sorry, it's not my fault that SOMEONE kept shoving fireball in my face.

Sam: Hey, no one said you had to drink it. For all you know, I just wanted you to hold it for me.

Tyler: Yes, because you shouting, "Tyler, drink up! Shots!" was you asking me to hold it. Clearly.

Mallory: Either way, we'll be there at ten. Sam, are you guys joining us or are you hitting the road right away?

Sam: Oh stop being a wuss. Owen and I will be there.

Lainey: Has anyone heard from Theo and Peyton? Are they alive? Or are they... busy?

A low chuckle falls from my mouth when I read Lainey's message. As if we were the only ones "busy" last night... and probably this morning.

Me: Peyton's still asleep, but we'll be there.

My laughter must wake her, because Peyton stirs, her blonde hair sticking out all over her head, and tickling my chest as she moves.

"Morning, darling," I whisper, kissing her forehead.

A moan falls from her soft lips as she stretches, reaching her arms above her head, untangling her limbs from mine. She nuzzles her head back into my chest when she's done. "Morning," she mumbles through a yawn. Her blue eyes fall closed again, and her breathing slows. "You look like a blonde Miles Teller," she whispers. "He's so hot..."

Slightly jealous and also a little flattered, I chuckle, needing to stop her from falling asleep again. "As much as I want to lay here with you all day, we should probably get moving..." I kiss her pouty lips as her forehead scrunches.

She groans in irritation, then flops onto her back. "My body hurts," she whimpers.

Immediately I worry. "Are you having a flare up again?" I rest my hand on her abdomen gently, trying to soothe pain that's invisible to the eye. "What's going on?"

She giggles softly, and my anxiety slowly wanes. "I'm fine, Theo. It was a long day of being on my feet yesterday, and my heels weren't the most comfortable." I can't help but sigh in relief.

"Well, maybe we can get a late checkout, and take a nice hot bath before we go home," I say.

"That sounds good," Peyton breathily says. Her eyes immediately heat, and I can feel her desire growing. I slide out of bed before I get carried away in her.

"We need to get downstairs, or I guarantee my sister will be knocking on our door when we don't show."

Peyton's eyes widen, and she sits up immediately, rolling out of the bed and striding toward her suitcase, flinging it open and digging through the contents. I chuckle softly at her immediate rush, heading into the bathroom to relieve myself and clean up for the day.

MY ARM IS WRAPPED around the back of Peyton's chair in the hotel restaurant as we all sit in near silence, eating our breakfasts. I think out of the eight of us, Peyton and I got the least drunk last night, and are therefore the least hungover. Seems that Owen and Sam are doing pretty well themselves, only looking slightly uncomfortable. Sam's chugging water like crazy, but overall, they seem to be faring much better than Colin, Lainey, and definitely Tyler. Mallory seems to be doing well, the only indication of how she's feeling is the slight dark circles under her eyes.

I trace small patterns and circles around Peyton's bare shoulder, loving each time she shivers and breaks out in goosebumps from my touch. God, I can't believe she's finally, truly, mine. I won't lie and say I'm still not a little worried about her, but I'll just have to prove to her over and over, how much I want her, how much I... love her. And I do. I love her. It's probably way too fast, but I love this stubborn, beautiful, independent woman.

My thoughts are interrupted when my parents appear at the table, grinning from ear to ear. "Good morning, my children," Mom says, walking around the table giving each and every one of us a kiss on the cheek.

We all echo a groaning "Good morning." in return, and Dad laughs. "How are you all feeling this morning?"

Tyler is the first to respond, "Like I'm not twenty-one anymore." He lowers his head into his hands with a low moan. Mallory rubs his back affectionately, trying to hold back her laughter.

"He had a rough night... Well, morning." She smiles.

"I'm fine," he grumbles unconvincingly.

"Well, since you're all here, I figure it's easier instead of texting in a crazy group message," Mom says, drawing all of our attention back to her. Peyton shifts in her chair next to me, and I pull her slightly closer, feeling like she's not quite close enough.

"Your father and I are going to be hosting a Fourth of July barbeque next weekend!" She cheers. "You don't need to bring a thing, just yourselves. Invite whoever, bring whoever, all are welcome." Mom smiles, her excitement radiating from her small body. My dad shakes his head, clearly not surprised by her excited outburst.

Tyler offers a thumbs up from where his head now rests on the table, not caring that it's probably dirty or sticky with syrup. "We'll be there."

The rest of the group offers up their agreement, already talking about a potential plan, and maybe spending the morning on the river. Peyton is quiet though, listening to the conversation intently and biting her lip.

“What’s up?” I ask, running my thumb over her bottom lip to stop her biting.

“Do you think I could invite Nana and Papa?” she tentatively asks.

“Of course,” I say with no hesitation. “My parents would love to meet them.”

Peyton’s eyes light up in excitement as she smiles. “I think they’d love to meet everyone.”

“We’ll have to call them on the way home.” I don’t miss the way her nose scrunches and her eyes gleam when I say ‘we’.

THANKFULLY, clean up was easy, as well as checkout. I tried to pay Sam and Owen the difference for the room upgrade but they would hear none of it. It’s still early, just about noon, and it’s raining again, the pavement slick with water. Peyton is curled up in the passenger seat, her pillow tucked under her head as she snores lightly. As soon as we got in the car, she pretty much passed right out. I don’t mind, especially not with what I have planned for when we get home.

Time to check off another item on the list.

As we get closer to home, I accidentally hit a bump a little too hard, and Peyton stirs, eyes roaming around, trying to make sense of her surroundings. “How was your nap?” I ask.

She nods, eyes still closed halfway. She leans over the center console to rest her head on my shoulder, yawning loudly. “It was good. I had a weird dream though,” she says.

“What happened in it?”

I watch her face slowly get red as she thinks about her dream. “Nothing, really.”

“Oh really?” I smirk.

“Yep, nothing of consequence.”

“Suuure,” I drawl.

“Anyway, should we call my grandparents?” she asks, slyly changing the

subject.

“Yep,” I answer, resting my hand on her thigh when she straightens from my shoulder. She digs around for her phone, and after a moment she has her Nana’s name pulled up, and the phone is on speaker, ringing.

“Hello, sweet pea,” Marjorie’s soft voice croons.

“Hi, Nana,” Peyton says. “What are you and Papa doing for the fourth?”

“Hmmm,” she thinks. “Probably sit out on the front porch and watch the parade, otherwise nothing. Why?”

“Well...” she hesitates for a short moment. “Theo’s parents are having a barbeque, and I was wondering if you two wanted to come over, and... meet them?”

“Why of course we would, sweet pea. You tell us a time and place, and we’ll be there. Probably not too late, as you know how grouchy Papa gets past his bedtime, but you can plan on us being there.”

Peyton visibly relaxes, like she was worried they’d say no. She chuckles softly. “Yeah, he does turn into a bear if he’s not in bed on time. I’ll ask Renee, Theo’s mom, to send me the details.”

“Wonderful,” Marjorie says. “Now, how was that wedding? Did you get any pictures of you and that husky man of yours?”

“Nana!” Peyton shrieks, turning the phone off speaker. “He heard that!”

I can vaguely hear laughter carry through the line, and the small smile on Peyton’s face tells me she really isn’t upset. They talk for a few more minutes, Peyton giving her all the information on the wedding, and letting her know she’ll send her a few pictures. I’ll have to get Marjorie’s phone number, as I have a few pictures as well that she might like to see.

I made sure to take a selfie of the two of us shortly after the ceremony. In the photo, I’m kissing Peyton’s cheek, and her eyes are squeezed shut as she smiles at the phone directed at us. I immediately made the photo my lock screen, replacing the one of her as a kid, and everytime I look at it, I can’t help but smile.

Peyton puts the phone back on speaker so I can say hello, and goodbye to her grandparents, and then we are hanging up, and pulling up to our apartment building.

My mind strays, thinking about the day, hopefully soon, that we can share an apartment, or maybe even a house together, instead of just sharing a wall. Don’t get me wrong, I love having the shared wall, knowing that she’s safe right on the other side. But it might be nice to have her in my arms every

night.

I shift my truck into park, and look over at Peyton. *My girl*. Fuck, it feels good to know that she's officially mine. That we aren't a facade.

She's biting her lip again, wringing her hands together in her lap, and I can tell something else is up. "What's wrong?" I ask, anxiety creeping in.

"I was thinking..." Her tone is hard to interpret.

"That doesn't sound good," I say. "Are you second guessing things? Us?"

"No!" She immediately shifts over so she's looking at me, eyes wild with fear. "Definitely not, I promise. I want this. I want us." She rests her palm flat against my chest, and I'm sure she can feel my racing heart.

I nod, the anxiety slowly melting away. "So what were you thinking, then?"

"Well, I'm wondering if I should extend an olive branch to my dad and Patricia, so to speak," she says quickly, not looking at me.

I take a deep breath, because while I know she wants to have a relationship, I'm worried she's only going to get hurt in the end. "This isn't me saying you should or shouldn't, I'm just curious. What spurred this on?"

"Well, yesterday at the wedding, I got to thinking. Even though he's an asshole, he's still my dad. I want him to be at my wedding, maybe walk me down the aisle." She shrugs, like she's not sure.

"Darling, if you want to try and repair the relationship that you have with him, then I will stand by you and help you along the way. And if you say fuck it, and never want to see him again, I'll stand by you too. I'm here for you. If you want to invite them, you are more than welcome to. My parents would welcome them with open arms too. You know that."

Peyton tucks her head into my chest, nodding slowly. "Okay, I'll think about it. Maybe I'll talk to him tomorrow after work."

"That's a good plan," I agree, hoping deep down that she doesn't invite him, because in all honesty, I can't see it going well.

PEYTON

“Is it sad that I could already go for another nap?” I say, dropping down onto my couch. Theo flops down next to me, eyes already closing. We didn’t bother dropping his stuff at his apartment, just brought it right into mine, where we now are.

“Nope, as long as I get to cuddle you, I’m down.” His arms reach out, flailing around in search of me. I chuckle, then deposit myself onto his chest, where he almost immediately starts snoring.

Now that I’m laying here, I’m not really sure I’ll be able to fall asleep again, but I do love snuggling with this man, so I’ll happily stay where I am. My mind strays, reminiscing on the last month and a half that I’ve been with Theo, and all the things he’s taught me. Not even sexually, but about myself.

I’ll admit, when he officially asked me to be his girlfriend, I hesitated. I had to shut down that nagging voice in the back of my mind. The one that continues to tell me I’m not wanted. Not loved. It’s a broken record, only now, I’m not believing it as much. The revelation I had the night before the wedding about my mom, is still so strong. The conviction that she would want me to have confidence in the love that the people and relationships in my life have to offer, stays with me. It’s almost as if her voice has taken over, the things she taught me about who I am are playing over that record, drowning out any remaining negativity, ready to combat any thoughts of unworthiness that arise.

I cuddle in closer to Theo, reveling in the way his arms instinctively squeeze me tighter. My fingers trace patterns down his shirt covered chest, roving over each and every ridge and sinew of muscle. Is this reality? This

man is mine. He chose me. He wants me, and I want him. Fuck, do I want him. I think back to the dream I had earlier while napping in the car. He'd tied me down to the bed, using his fingers, his mouth, and his cock to make me come as many times as possible, all while telling me what a good girl I was. Then, we'd hit a bump or something, and I'd been jostled awake, disoriented, and with wet panties.

The smile on Theo's face when I'd talked to Nana was adorable. He even blushed a little when Nana called him a hunk of a man. To be fair, she is totally right. I was a little worried about Theo's reaction when I told him I wanted to invite my dad and Patricia to the barbecue, and I can understand why.

They haven't been good to me, at all. But despite all that, he's still my dad. I want to try and repair the relationship I have with him, maybe try to create one with Patricia. Perhaps I'm being naive, but the little girl inside me is still fighting to earn his respect and attention.

I want to prove to him I'm not who he thinks I am. That I'm a strong, independent, woman who has made it in life. And, if I'm being honest, a part of me wants him to see that I've done it with no help from him... More than anything, though, I want him to be proud of me. To see the friends I've made, the life that I've created for myself. To show them that my boyfriend stands up for me, and takes care of me, and makes me believe in myself, makes me feel wanted, loved. I can finally see that my mom would have wanted that for me. It makes me wonder if my dad will see it, too.

That's why I want to invite him. That's why I want to try and mend the relationship that we do have.

While my mind is on it, I pull up the text thread that I've been avoiding, scrolling through the many messages from the two of them, ignoring the horrible words they've said.

Me: Hi, hope you two are well. Theo's parents are hosting a Fourth of July barbeque this weekend, and I'd love it if you guys could attend. Then you could meet Theo's family and our friends. I'll text you the information when I know more.

The message sits unread for a few minutes, but then I'm surprised when Patricia's name lights up the screen.

Patricia: We have an event at the supper club that evening, but I suppose we can try to stop by.

Me: That would be great.

A message from my dad appears shortly after, and surprise surprise, he's scolding me.

Dad: Don't think that an invitation to a party is an explanation, or an apology for your behavior at your brother's wedding. Or his. It was inappropriate and uncalled for. We will discuss this in person. Like we've been trying to do for the last few weeks. Arrange a place for us to have a private discussion at your party. Without your boyfriend.

My hands shake slightly as I read his message, nearly reverting back to my childhood ways of agreeing and taking the blame, but not anymore. I can do this.

Me: Yes, we can discuss the events of Hunter's wedding. It's a conversation to be had in person.

Dad: Send us the details.

With the finality of the message, I turn my phone off, and slide it on the coffee table, cuddling up to Theo again. My brain quiets after a few minutes, and I can slowly feel myself being pulled into sleep.

A WEIRD GURGLING noise vibrates under my ear, pulling me from my dreams. I try to ignore it, but when it happens again, I pry my eyes open to try and figure out where the noise is coming from.

Awareness hits, and I realize I'm resting on Theo, his chest, and stomach right underneath my ear. I tilt my head up to look at him, where he is sheepishly grinning at me. "I'm kinda hungry. Didn't mean to have my stomach be a wake up call for you." He pushes my hair out of my eyes, tucking a piece behind my ear.

"What time is it?" I ask, still a little groggy. I scoot off him, sitting up against the back of the couch. Theo does the same, but pulls me into his arms, squeezing me close.

"After four," he says, checking his phone to confirm. "I woke up about fifteen minutes ago, but you were sleeping so hard, I didn't want to wake

you.”

“But your stomach did anyway,” I tease, shoving him on the shoulder playfully. “I’ll go see what I have to make for dinner.”

I stand from the couch and Theo follows, perusing the old wooden cupboards as I stare into the fridge and freezer, willing something to appear for me to make. With a frown, I turn to find Theo holding up a can of cream of chicken soup, and a box of minute rice. “This is all I could find. Think we can make something out of this?”

I hold back the gag threatening it’s way up my throat, and reply with a laugh. “You’re joking, right? There’s no way.”

He laughs, and says, “Fine, let’s go out. I have somewhere I want to bring you anyway.”

“Where?” I ask curiously. Theo puts the rice and soup away, then strides over to me, kissing me sweetly.

“It’s a surprise, one I think you’ll like.”

“Oookay?” I question.

“Come on, let’s find somewhere to eat.”

THEO BRINGS me to Wade’s Drive In, where we both scarfed down an amazing burger each, and shared some cheese curds with fried green beans. We both got a root beer float- made with the absolutely delicious root beer they make in house- and are now completely stuffed.

Theo’s driving us out of town, heading onto the freeway. “Where are we going?” I ask, trying to piece together any potential hints.

“You’ll see,” he responds, reaching across the center console to squeeze my thigh, then gently slide up. “You’re off tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah, Dr. Ness gave both Mallory and I the day off so we had extra time to recover after the wedding.”

“Great.”

“Why?” I hesitantly ask.

He shrugs, glancing over at me quickly before averting his eyes back to the road. “No reason.”

“Are you off tomorrow?” I ask in return.

“Sure am.”

After another twenty minutes of driving, I'm surprised when we pull up to a discreet building, with minimal signage out front. "Uhhh, what is this?"

"Trust me," Theo laughs. He climbs out of the car, and I follow. He offers his hand to me, and I gratefully take it, soaking in his warmth and the protection he offers.

"Theo, this place looks creepy." It's in a strip of other stores, yet they all have names and lights on their doors and marquee's. This only has a light up sign above the door that reads, *Little Vixen*. The windows are heavily tinted so you can barely see what's inside, but as we get closer, mannequins, clad only in lingerie, start to appear.

"*Theo*," I hiss, tugging on his arm. "Did you bring me to a *sex store*?" His answering grin is enough. "I can't go in there!"

"Why not?" he chuckles, his eyebrows raising with humor.

"B-because, it's... a sex store!"

"And?"

"And, I've never been in one! What do I do? Why are we here?" I have so many questions. The first one being, *how* could he have possibly underestimated how awkward I am?

"We are here to purchase items for the last few things on your list. Do you want to go in?" he asks, waiting for my answer. When I nod, Theo opens the door, and I'm stunned silent by the large room. The lights are warm, with lamps in each corner, and beautiful hanging lights from the ceiling, promoting a safe, non-clinical environment. The music that's playing softly is calming, an almost hypnotic beat.

A young woman greets us, her hair a soft purple color, curled into beautiful waves. Her arms are covered in tattoos, and she has a gold septum piercing that looks absolutely stunning on her. Her voice is loud, yet inviting as she greets us. "Hi, friends, I'm Callie. Is there anything specific I can help you find?"

Theo wraps his arm around me, and I snuggle into his embrace. I'm not as uncomfortable as I thought I would be, but my eyes don't stop wandering the room, taking in the wide assortment of toys, lubes, lingerie, you name it. It seems that anything you could possibly want is in here, including a large, purple tentacle dildo. I can't say I've ever considered the possibility of something like that, but I'm also new to sex.

Theo and Callie talk intently, and she leads us to the back of the store, hidden by black curtains. "Before we go in, I do need to check your IDs," she

says, smiling softly. We offer her our driver's licenses, and within a minute, she's opening the curtain to a back room. The decor is the same as the front of the store, only there is much more packed into the area. There are separate displays for vibrators, dildos, anal plugs, and when I see the direction we are heading in, it clicks for me.

Callie brings us to the farthest corner, and starts gesturing at the display. The display contains ropes, handcuffs, blindfolds, whips, floggers, and paddles. Immediately I'm overwhelmed, the blood rushing in my ears as Callie explains things to us, pointing out which ties might be best for beginners, and having us feel the silkiness of the ropes.

Theo must notice my panic, because he looks down at me, then tugs me under his arm again. "I think we might need a minute to browse," he tells Callie.

"No problem," she says with a warm smile. "Give me a holler if you need anything, or want a demonstration."

She leaves us be, heading to the little desk in the middle of the room that I somehow didn't notice when we entered the sectioned off area. "Hey," Theo says, pulling me around so that I'm facing him. "You alright? Do you want to leave?" His blue eyes hold mine, and I feel safe.

"No," I whisper. "It's... a lot, that's all. I wasn't exactly expecting it, either," I tease, offering him a smile.

He shrugs, eyes still on me. "I thought it might be better that way, so you didn't have time to stress or overthink it."

"Honestly, you're probably right," I concede. Turning my focus back to the ropes in front of me, I take one in hand, sliding the ties between my fingers. "Please tell me you were listening to her," I plead. "Because I didn't hear a word she said after she welcomed us. I was too busy taking it all in."

"I noticed," Theo laughs. "I listened, and I have some ideas on what we might want to start with." He points out a set of black rope that appears to be long. "If we wanted to start with something like this, we could. It can be used in multiple ways..." His voice deepens as he plucks the rope from the display.

"It can be used with some basic knots, and we can tie your hands and feet." He pauses for a moment, then tips his head to whisper in my ear, his low baritone sending a shiver down my spine and straight to my pussy. "There are lots of things we can do with just this string of rope," he promises, dragging the silky rope across my opened palms.

I swear, electricity is humming through my body as I imagine what it might feel like to be bound by him, to feel this rope tight around my wrists and ankles. My fingers automatically wrap around my wrist, tracing the skin there. “Yes,” I whisper.

Theo chuckles, and tucks the rope under his arm, continuing his perusal, like he didn’t just send my body into a flaming inferno. He grabs a box with a black blindfold inside it, and reads the back quickly. “Hey, Callie?” he asks casually. “Do you have a basket or something I can put this stuff in?”

My face heats and I fight the urge to burrow myself into his chest. “Oh, of course!” Callie strides over to us, handing Theo a black basket like the kind found at a grocery store. Theo drops our stuff into it, and hooks the basket on his elbow.

“Now, is there anything else here that might be catching your eye?” Theo asks with a smirk adorning his face.

“Uh-” I croak, then clear my throat to try and relieve the frog that’s suddenly made its home there. My eyes scan the rest of the section, overwhelmed, yet intrigued by all the toys it has to offer. I shake my head in an aggressive no, and Theo nods in agreement, leading me to the next section over, his hand possessively resting on the small of my back. When he stops, my eyes widen yet again at the display. This time... it’s butt plugs. Don’t get me wrong, the thought of a butt plug turns me on, but I kinda forgot about the fact that we’d have to buy one. In my mind it was just... there. No thoughts about how it came to be there or anything.

Theo eyes every item, like he’s carefully calculating every option. “Is this still something you want to do?”

“Yes,” I whisper again, because apparently whispering or sounding like a strangled frog are my only two decibels at the moment. Theo points to a set of plugs that range in size, from small to... very large. The box is labeled as an anal training kit, and my mind runs with the possibilities.

Do I still want to do that? My mind is screaming no, until I think about that night in the bed of Theo’s truck when he slid his finger into my hole, and instantly I’m burning up again with desire.

Theo studies the box carefully, absorbing all the information. He looks over at me in question. I nod, again not trusting my voice. Theo’s face heats, and I can tell by the slight shift in his stance that he’s trying to prevent an erection. He turns away from the display, and whispers softly, “Is there anything else you want to look at, explore at all? We’re here, so we can take

all the time you want.”

“No.” I shake my head, whispering breathlessly, “I want to go home. I’m ready.”

Theo’s hand balls into a fist at the small of my back. In a rush, he stalks us over to the desk Callie is at, emptying the basket onto the counter in a rush. He spots the display filled with various lubes, and reaches for one, before I’m shaking my head.

“What?” He asks, surprised by my input.

I clear my throat. “Get one that’s water-based.” When he still looks confused, I point a finger at myself. “Nurse, remember?” I’ve seen *too* many patients come into the clinic with horrible yeast infections from synthetic or flavored lube.

“Ah,” Theo replies. He finds one that is specifically for anal, checks the label, and drops it into the pile.

“Find everything you need?” Callie asks, the definition of nonchalance. I suppose with the job she has, she has to be.

“Sure did,” I surprise myself by answering with a grin.

“Great,” she says, sliding our items into a discreet black bag, telling us the total price. I dig into my purse, ready to pull out my wallet, but Theo beats me to it, a sly look on his face.

“I got it,” he says, offering up his card. She slides it through the machine, finishing the transaction, and before I know it, Theo and I are hand in hand, heading out the front door. When we get into the car, I erupt in a fit of giggles that I didn’t expect.

“What are you laughing for?” Theo chuckles, starting the truck.

“I have no idea!”

Theo leans over the console, cupping my face with his palms, kissing me deeply, roughly, ceasing my laughter immediately, turning it into a flaming need for him. Now.

“We need to go home,” I say against his lips.

“Mhmm,” he answers, reluctantly pulling away.

THEO MIRACULOUSLY MADE the drive home fly by, all without speeding. Though that probably had to do with the fact that he kept teasing me,

dragging his long fingers up and down my body, between my legs, or under my shirt to caress my hardened nipples.

Now, we're rushing up the stairs to our apartments, laughing as we trip over the stairs and each other in our frenzy. We reach my front door, and I fumble for my keys, trying desperately to unlock the door so we can get inside. Theo's not helping the matter, as he's got his arms wrapped around my waist, tugging me against the steel erection in his pants, kissing my neck, sure to leave marks.

I giggle, shoving him off me for a short moment so I can focus enough to get the door open. When the lock clicks, I swing the door roughly, not even caring that it slams into the wall, probably denting it. I'm already turning around as Theo wraps his arms around my waist, hoisting me into his arms.

He walks through the door with me wrapped around his body, kicking the door shut behind us. The discreet black bag is still in his hand, and my body hums with a nervous excitement at the thought of what is to come.

"Fuck, I need you," Theo moans, his mouth seeking mine.

"Uh-huh," I gasp into his mouth as he takes my lips in a bruising kiss. Before I can realize it, he's carried me down the hall to my bedroom, and I hear the bag clatter to the floor. Theo lays me down gently on the bed, his body still hovering over me as my legs stay locked over my waist.

My hands entangle into the short hair at the nape of his neck, and I try to yank him closer to me still. The scruff on his face scratches at my neck as he travels down, kissing me until he runs out of bared skin. His hands slide down my body until he reaches the hem of my shirt, yanking it up and over my head, revealing my breasts in the basic black bra I wore today for comfort, not sex appeal.

My legs fall from his waist, and he grinds into me, his hard cock pressing against my center through our clothes. Theo's mouth presses kisses down my sternum, even pausing to kiss the pearl that hangs from my neck. His touch has turned gentle, no longer kissing me like he's starved for me, but rather, savoring me. His hands slowly move up my stomach to cup my breast through the bra, squeezing gently. "Are you sure you want to do this?" he asks between kisses.

"Yes," I answer. "I'm ready." Theo nods against my body before reluctantly pulling away, lifting us both so we are standing at the edge of my bed. He drops down to his knees, looking up at me with pure carnal lust burning in his blue eyes. His fingers find the button at my pants, and he

slowly slides the button out, and drags my pants down my legs, meticulously, enjoying every moment. He taps my ankle, gesturing for me to lift it, and remove the pants from each leg.

When they are off, he eyes my light purple cotton underwear. “God, Peyton,” he groans, hooking his finger around the waistband. “You drive me fucking wild.” From the most simple of touches, my blood is pumping furiously through my body, my pussy pulsing with need for him. He tugs my panties down, and I don’t miss the large wet spot already on the inside of them. Theo grins as he spots it, and I blush, and try to hide my face in embarrassment. “No,” Theo grits out. “You will not be embarrassed by your arousal. That means I’m doing my job, and I’ve barely even touched you. You got that?” He asks.

“Yeah,” I answer, looking down at him again. He’s removing his shirt, tossing it across the room. He rifles through the bag at my feet, pulling out the silky black rope. He rips it from the packaging, still on his knees as he unravels the rope.

My heart is pounding in my chest, watching as this sexy man organizes the rope at my feet. He separates each rope into a pile, leaving four piles in front of him. I’m standing still, naked other than my bra, watching as he pulls the blindfold box from the box too.

Theo looks up at me once more, before saying, “If at any time it becomes too much, tell me to stop, and we will. No questions asked.”

Unable to help myself, I cheekily respond, “What, you don’t want me to use my safe word?”

Theo’s eyes narrow. “No, I want you to use your safe word, but I also want you to know that if you say stop, it stops.”

“Okay,” I answer. “Just... how much are we going to do tonight?” I ask, honestly not sure if I’m totally ready for a dick in my ass tonight.

“How much do you want to do?”

“Um...”

“Here, let me lay it out,” he offers. “I was thinking I’ll tie you up, tease you a bit, maybe spank you.”

“Will you make me come?”

Theo gives me a look of muted irritation. “Yes, of course I’ll make you come. More than once,” he says with a wink.

“Can we...” I hesitate. “Can we try the small butt plug?”

“If you think you’re ready for it, absolutely,” he answers. “But I’m not

just going to stick it in there. I'll check in with you multiple times, make sure you're doing okay before we even get to that point, Peyton."

His reassurance instantly makes me feel better. "Okay, yes, I'm ready." Theo rises from his feet briefly, taking the smallest black plug out of the box, before crossing the hall to the bathroom. The water runs for a few moments, and when Theo comes back, it's shining with water droplets.

"Just wanted to clean it before we got too in the moment." He shrugs, dropping down to his knees again. "I'm going to tie the rope around your ankles," he instructs, picking up the rope, and maneuvering it around the base of my right ankle. "This is called a bula bula knot, it's a fancy word for an easy knot," he chuckles, moving onto the other ankle with a second rope. The rope is tight around my ankles, but not tight enough where it's causing any pain or discomfort, just a knowing reminder that it's there. Theo rises from his knees, holding the blindfold in his hands.

His blue eyes lock on me, searching my face for something. "Once I put this on, you're going to be at my mercy." I nod, but he stops me from speaking. "I will never do anything to hurt you intentionally, I want to make you feel good. I'll be communicating the whole time. That's the only way this will work, and be enjoyable for both of us, if we both have an open line of communication. Okay?" His pleading gaze is everything I need to know. I feel safe.

"Yes," I answer after a moment. "Put it on." I cradle his head in my hands for a moment, pressing a long kiss to his lips. When I pull away, Theo slides the blindfold over my head, covering my eyes, bathing the world in immediate darkness.

The fabric is soft, almost fleece. It's a comforting feeling, one that helps draw from the short moment of panic I felt when I lose the sense of sight. Now, everything is heightened as I stand here, anticipating every touch and movement.

I shiver when Theo's hands wrap around my back, unhooking my bra and dropping it to the floor with a soft thud. My nipples pebble under the cool air, and I let out a surprised gasp when Theo's mouth is suddenly on them, his hands squeezing, mouth teasing each one individually.

When his teasing stops, I feel him gently grip my waist, guiding me a few steps back so the back of my legs hit the bed. His voice whispers into the darkness, "I'm going to pick you up." His arms lift me from my shoulders and under my knees, and then he's carefully laying me on the soft comforter

of my bed. My head rests on my pillows, and my only thought is how grateful I am that I made my bed before we left for the wedding.

Theo's hands skim down my body, until they reach my right ankle. I can vaguely hear some tugging and arranging, and then my leg is shifted out, and I feel the moment the rope tightens, preventing any more than a little movement from me. Theo moves to the other side, doing the same, baring my soaked pussy for him to see. Like he can't bear to wait another moment, I feel the moment Theo drops his head between my thighs, his tongue swiping up my wet slit, flicking at my clit. "Shit!" I gasp, my hands reaching down to fist his hair.

Theo chuckles against my sensitive skin, "Ah, ah, ah," he tsks. "Guess we need to do something about those hands." His large hand wraps around both of my wrists, and he adjusts himself so he can raise them above my head. "Keep them right there while I get the rope," he orders, sliding off my body.

I can't stop squirming, my hips and body searching for some sort of friction. Theo's low chuckle is right by my ear, and I let out a gasp of shock at his sudden closeness. "Oh," I gasp. His hands come back to my wrists, wrapping the rope around them.

"I'm doing the same type of knot," he whispers, his fingers working the rope deftly. "Your hands are going to be up above your head, tied to the headboard."

I nod, trusting him completely. He finishes with the knot, and my entire body tingles with the knowledge that I'm unable to move. "Does that feel okay?" he asks, and I reply a breathy yes, eager to experience this with him. "Good."

With my hands and legs bound, my sight gone, I wait for what might happen next. Theo's mouth drops to mine in a harsh, soul sucking kiss. His teeth nip at my bottom lip, causing me to cry out, pulling against the ties. "Oh my god," I whimper.

His hands roam my body, each touch erupting goosebumps all over my sensitive skin. The bed dips as he slides lower, and when his mouth settles on my clit, my arms pull on the ropes again, cutting into the skin of my wrist. For a moment, I panic, not liking the feeling of being so helpless, but then Theo squeezes my thigh, grounding me, letting me know he's got me. I let myself fall back into appreciating the way he already seems to know my body, better than I do.

His tongue assaults my clit, sending my pleasure to new heights, taking

me all the way to the edge, before backing off, letting my orgasm drift away as fast as he got me to the brink.

“Theo!” I cry, desperate to touch him. My legs try to yank from the ropes, but of course it’s no use.

“Do you need me to stop?” his husky voice murmurs, all touching ceased.

“No, don’t stop,” I breathe. “I need to come.”

“You’ll come when I’m ready for you to come, baby.” His mouth begins teasing again, instantly bringing me higher and higher again. His fingers prod at my entrance, sliding in easily through the wetness. His fingers pump in and out of me slowly. My orgasm starts to burn again, slowly building higher and higher until it rips through me like a white hot fire. I can’t stop the scream that flies from my mouth, my body writhing with pleasure, unable to move with the ropes.

“You’re incredible, Peyton,” Theo praises, the bed dipping again as he moves up to kiss my lips. I breathe his scent in, both of us breathing heavily from the exertion and pleasure. His body shuffles around, and I can vaguely hear him searching for something in the bag. “Do you still want to try the plug, baby?” he gently asks.

“Yes, please,” I murmur, my body shifting again.

It’s quiet for a long moment, before the tension around one of my ankles loosens, and the tie comes completely off. The tie on the other side is removed as well, and Theo’s hands come up to grip my hips. “I’m going to flip you around,” Theo says, and before I have time to process, my body is being flipped, my knees automatically coming up to hold me. My head drops to the mattress, my arms still tied above my head, the rope twisting when he turns me. Theo scoots me forward so my shoulders are no longer screaming in discomfort, and I think he’s untying the rope from the headboard, but my arms shift downward so they are laying on the bed, the tension tightened again. He must have moved the tie so I can be in a more comfortable, almost downward dog style position.

“How’s that, Peyton?” Theo asks, his fingers trailing down each vertebrae of my spine, before caressing the globes of my ass.

“Good,” I answer, still trying to catch my breath from the intensity of my orgasm.

I hear the subtle click of a cap, and then something cool drips onto my backside. Lube. Theo’s thumb circles the entrance, prodding gently, relaxing the muscle. I can’t help but moan at the feel of it, desperately aching for more

than just his fingertip. “More,” I plead, trying to press my hips into him.

“You’re a greedy girl, aren’t you?” Theo taunts, slowly pressing his finger inside.

“Yes,” I moan.

“Good girls get what they want,” he says. “Have you been good?”

“Yes!”

“I don’t know...” he drawls, pumping his finger in and out.

“Please!”

“Atta girl,” he whispers. He removes his thumb, and in its place is the cool, smooth tip of the butt plug. “If you use your manners, you’ll get what you need,” he praises.

The tip of the plug presses against me, and I instantly tense, the feeling so foreign and new. “Fuck,” I moan.

“Relax, baby,” Theo says. “You’re doing so well. Just a bit more.”

I feel myself relax from his words and the soothing caress of his palm on my ass cheek. The plug slides the rest of the way in, the flared base resting at the crease of my ass. “Oh god,” I whimper, slumping even further into the bed.

“Jesus, Peyton,” Theo whispers. His hand drops from the skin of my butt, and I hear it before I feel it.

Smack! His palm lands directly on my ass, and I jump in response, squealing at the new sensation. He smooths his hand over the tender skin, a tingling feeling seeping its way through me. “How was that?” he asks, still rubbing.

“So good,” I moan. “Please, I need more.”

“Such a good girl, asking so nicely.” He swats the other cheek, this time harder than before, and my body drops, my knees giving out. I swear to god, my pussy is dripping onto the bed, I’m so wet. The plug shifts in my ass with each swat and movement, heightening my pleasure tenfold.

Theo grunts, pulling me back onto my knees before I can relax. “I didn’t say you could lay down, baby, did I?”

“No,” I grunt, eager for what’s next.

“You must need another reminder then.” I hear the whoosh of his palm before I feel the connecting slap, my body alight with every movement. God, who knew something like this could feel so good? With each additional swat, my moans and cries grow louder, my breath coming in heavy pants.

Theo’s hand rubs the tender skin after each painful yet pleasurable

moment, and after a moment of nothing, I feel the bed rise as Theo slides off, the drawer to my nightstand opening and closing, and the sounds of a condom ripping open. I say a silent thanks to myself for having the smart sense to put a box of condoms in here after Theo and I had sex the first time.

The bed dips again as Theo comes behind me. His cock slides up and down the slick wetness of my slit, and sits at my entrance. “Do you want to keep the plug in?” Theo gently asks.

“Fuck, yes.”

Theo slides home in one swift movement, his hips resting against my ass as his cock is fully sheathed inside me. I feel so much fuller than I ever have. My ass tightens around the plug, and Theo’s cock deep inside me.

“Jesus,” Theo moans, sliding his cock out before thrusting hard into me again. My head drops to the mattress, the blindfold still covering my eyes, keeping me in this moment, feeling every ounce of pleasure, pain, need, want... love.

Theo slows his thrusts, his body draping over my back, cupping my breasts in his hands. His purposeful movements spur another orgasm, this one fast and deep, the plug creating yet another new sensation.

“Fuck,” I cry, my voice thick with emotion. Theo’s kissing my back, his tender kisses showing me just how much he cares for me, and in this moment, I feel more love than I ever have. In each kiss I feel like a silent promise is being passed between us. A promise to care for me, to love me, to hold me, to be my rock. A single tear escapes my eye, catching in the soft blindfold, as my realizations wrack my body and soul.

God, nothing has ever felt like this, and when Theo grunts out his release, spilling into the condom, I feel better than I ever have. I shift my head, and the blindfold slides from my eyes, Theo coming into view as I blink hard, trying to take in my surroundings.

More tears escape, and Theo instantly is on edge. He pulls out, sliding the butt plug out and quickly untying my wrists, whispering words of affirmation with each step. “You’re so perfect, baby, I’m so sorry. Just a minute, I’m right here.”

When I’m free, I’m huddled into his embrace, his arms tight around me while I cry. “I’m so sorry, I was too rough,” he says, his voice tight and pained.

“No,” I practically shout into his chest. My hand rests against the spot where I can feel his heart pounding wildly, surely anxious. “It was incredible.

I have never felt so alive.” I continue, pressing kiss after kiss against his chest. “Never felt so wanted.” *Kiss*. “So beautiful.” *Kiss*. “So perfect.” *Kiss*.

Theo squeezes me tighter. “Why are you crying then?”

“I don’t know,” I laugh, tears still flowing. “I think it was just so overwhelming, everything hit me at once. All the stress and fear from the last two months, the fear of not being enough for you, being someone you could want, it just, hit me, and then vanished in a second, because I know. *I know* that you want me. I believe you. I want you, too.”

“Fuck, darling.” Theo presses a kiss to my forehead, lingering there for a long moment. “If I would have known this would break that barrier so you believed what I’ve been saying for the last month, I would have tied you up a long time ago,” he teases.

I laugh at him, swatting at him playfully. “Thank you,” I say sincerely. “I never knew how much I needed you.”

THEO

I haven't been to my apartment at all this week, except to pick up some clothes, and shower once. Peyton and I were both on days this week, so we woke up together, got ready together, and even made use of her small shower together. That was fun.

Just being in her presence is something I'll never tire of. The lazy nights on the couch, watching movies, and just... talking, have been incredible. Easy. I've never felt comfortable like this with someone before, definitely not any of the girlfriends I had before.

Like now. Laying on the couch, Peyton between my legs, her head resting on my chest, I'm playing with a loc of her hair while we watch a movie. Peyton's eyes have been locked on the screen, but she hasn't taken her fingers from her necklace, constantly fiddling with it. I can tell something is on her mind.

"What's wrong?" I ask, finally unable to hold back.

"Hmm?" She turns her head so she can see me.

"What's wrong?" I ask again. "You haven't taken your hand off your necklace, that's usually a tell that something is wrong, or you're nervous."

"Oh," she giggles softly. "Half the time, I don't even realize I'm doing it." She drops her hand, resting it on my thigh, squeezing gently. "I'm overthinking, that's all."

I tilt my head down to get closer to her. "What are you overthinking?"

"Inviting my dad and Patricia."

"Ah," I say. I'll admit, I was surprised when she told me she'd wanted to invite them, but I promised her that I would stand by her, no matter what she

chose to do.

“I feel like maybe I jumped the gun.” Peyton bites her lip, her brow furrowing. “I wanted to extend an olive branch, hopefully create a fresh start for us, but with the way Dad sounded in those texts, I’m worried it’s going to be the exact opposite.”

“You know that whatever happens, you have people on your side, right?” Peyton turns so she’s resting her chin on my chest, her hands underneath.

“I know, and while I’m not used to it, or accepting the help, it feels good to know you guys are there for me.” She’s been so good at verbally reframing these once-negative thoughts lately.

“Always,” I whisper, bending to kiss her soft lips. “We’ve got you. We are your family now.”

“I know.” She snuggles into me further, like she can’t get close enough. “I’m getting used to it.”

“Good. Hey, do you remember telling me I looked like Miles Teller the other day?”

Peyton’s face turns red. “Umm, vaguely.” She winces.

“I figured maybe I could shave my beard into a mustache for you,” I say, running my hands down the scruff I have growing.

Peyton laughs immediately. “Oh, god, please don’t.”

“What? Why not?” I’m slightly offended.

“Not that I don’t love the scruff, or you clean shaven, but I... I don’t think you could pull off the mustache.”

“Maybe I’ll have to prove you wrong,” I tease, rubbing my scruff into her cheek. She laughs, then grows serious.

“I have this weird feeling, like tomorrow something is going to change,” she whispers, avoiding eye contact.

“How so?”

“I don’t know how to explain it... I don’t know. I’m overthinking,” she says.

“Well, maybe I can help you get your mind off it?” I suggest, wiggling my brows at her suggestively.

“Hmmm, that does sound like a good idea,” she laughs, already sliding down my body to my quickly hardening cock.

I KNOCK on Peyton's door, ready to head over to my parent's place for the Fourth of July celebration. I ran to my apartment for a few hours so I could shower, and create a little surprise for her.

The door opens, and Peyton immediately bursts out into a fit of laughter when she sees my face. "You didn't," she laughs.

"What do you mean?" I smile, running my hand over my newly shaved Top Gun style mustache. "You don't think this is a good look?" I tease.

"Not exactly..." she slowly replies, and I can tell she's trying not to hurt my feelings. "It looks kinda porn-stachey, on you."

I clutch my chest, feigning harm. "That hurt."

"I'm sorry," she says, stepping onto her tiptoes to kiss my cheek. "If it makes you feel better, I don't really like mustaches on anyone..."

"But you do on Miles Teller?"

"Well that's different," she says.

"How?"

"He's... I don't know. But he's the exception to the rule."

"You're lucky I like you so much," I laugh, pulling her into a hug.

"Now, go shave that caterpillar before we leave." She shoves me back through the doorway, then shrieks, "Wait! First, I need to take a picture."

Before I can say no, she's pointing her phone at me, so I figure I may as well smile for the camera. Once she's done, I head back to my apartment to shave, again.

I didn't really think she'd encourage me to keep the stache, I just wanted to see her reaction. I'll do anything to make her laugh.

Worth it.

THE SUN IS HOT, beating down on us as Peyton and I head into the backyard at my parent's place. There was talk about a potential river day before the festivities this afternoon, but we decided against it.

"What time are your Nana and Papa coming?" I ask as we walk through the back gate.

"I think around two," she says, looking down at her phone to check her messages. "Dad and Patricia said they would be here a little later. Is it bad that I'm crossing my fingers that the two don't have to interact?" She looks

up at me, hope in her eyes.

“I don’t think that’s bad at all,” I answer honestly. “Did you tell them there was a chance they might see each other?”

“Yeah, I did. Nana said it would be fine. That they’re adults. Dad didn’t answer.”

“Figures,” I scoff. I give Peyton’s hand a squeeze before we are bombarded by our family and friends.

“Peyton!” My sister squeals from across the lawn as soon as she sees our arrival. She runs over, throwing herself into Peyton’s waiting arms, totally disregarding the fact that I’m also here. “Ready to party?”

“Sure, Sam,” Peyton laughs, following as Sam drags us through the yard. There aren’t many people here yet, just Mom and Dad, Sam, Owen, Mallory, Tyler, and Felicity. Felicity is sitting in a kiddie pool with about an inch of water in it, smiling and splashing as her parent’s ooh and aww over her. She looks fucking adorable in her red, white, and blue swimsuit, with a red sparkly bow around her head.

Suddenly I can’t stop the direction my mind runs to. Thoughts of more kids in the kiddie pool, all playing with their siblings and cousins. My mind sticks on the fact that maybe someday Peyton and I might have kids too. Little blonde haired, blue eyed babies, with lots of cousins and siblings to play with.

Mallory catches me watching Felicity play, and smiles at me like she knows what I was thinking. Everyone is dressed in some form of red, white, and blue, except for me. I guess I’m technically wearing a white shirt, but it’s not festive in any way. Peyton has on a cute red romper, with a blue headband in her hair, and white sunglasses. Although it’s nothing compared to the outfit Sam has on. She’s decked out in neon blue shorts, a red tank top, and an American flag cover up. Her hair is in two braids, with red and blue sparkly stuff tangled in the braids, as well as frilly red and blue ponytails to tie the ends.

Not that I’m surprised, she always goes all out for the holiday. Surprisingly, Owen is festive too. He’s got on a pair of navy board shorts, and a flag shirt. Mom calls Sam and Peyton over, so I reluctantly let go of her hand, and watch her as she heads over to where Mom stands at the back door. Owen saunters over to me, already chowing down on a hotdog. “You love her,” he states, not really asking.

“Is that a question?” I chuckle. “Or are you telling me?”

“I guess I’m making sure you know yourself.”

“I do,” I answer honestly. “I know I do.”

“Have you told her?”

“Nope.” I shake my head, shoving my hands in my pockets. “She’s not ready for that yet. She’s working out some fucked up things that she believes, but we’ll get there.”

“Don’t take too long,” Owen says. “Don’t want her to get away.”

I chuckle. “No chance of that. I think she’s stuck with me.”

“Good deal,” Owen says, giving me an encouraging smack on the back. “I look forward to having her as a sister then. She’s already part of the family, but you know what I mean.”

Looking down at my feet, I shake my head. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

PEYTON’S GRANDPARENTS got here about an hour ago, and it’s been fun getting to chat with them again. I’m currently sitting in the shade with Harvey, exchanging war stories, but my attention hasn’t been fully focused on him for the last few minutes. Peyton is across the lawn, smiling brightly as she talks with Marjorie, and the rest of the girls. They’ve been showing each other their phones, I’m assuming showing pictures from the wedding last weekend.

“Stop staring at my granddaughter like you’re going to eat her,” Harvey teases, smacking the back of my head.

“I’m not!” I laugh, rubbing the back of my head. “That hurt, you know.”

“Oh shut your trap, you’re fine. You’ve been making googly eyes at my girl over there for the last five minutes. If I didn’t know you were in love with her, I’d kick your ass.”

That gets my attention. I turn toward the old man, my focus no longer on Peyton. His eyes are crinkled at the edges as he smiles in humor at me. “I knew that’d get you to listen to me,” he jokes.

“How do you know I’m in love with her?” I ask. I’m not going to deny it, but I’m curious how he knew. With Owen, he’s seen us interact, way more than Harvey has.

“It’s the way you look at her, son. You look at her the same way I look at

my wife. You'd do anything for her, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," I reply, no hesitation. "I haven't told her I love her yet though."

"That's okay. When the time comes, you'll know. She loves you too, y'know?"

"Does she?" I want to believe she does, but that she just doesn't quite recognize the feeling.

"Of course. I knew she did the day you came over for dinner. Now, she's never brought a boy home to us, so I already knew you were different."

Even though that's something I already knew, it doesn't stop my heart from swelling at the knowledge that she's never introduced, or brought anyone home to these two family members she loves more than anything. "Thanks, Harvey. I appreciate you saying that."

"Just don't fuck it up, and we'll be just fine."

I choke on my spit, hearing the crass words fall from his mouth. I'm a little surprised, but then again, not.

"Marjie!" Harvey calls, catching the attention of his wife across the lawn. She of course can't hear him. "Damn woman, didn't put her hearing aids in today," he grumbles, slowly standing from the lawn chair to head over to her.

I'm left behind, watching as Harvey makes his way across the lawn. Peyton greets him warmly, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. He smiles, pressing a kiss to her cheek. I know Peyton is having a great time, introducing them to everyone. I also haven't seen her smile quite like this before. She's so content, so happy to have them here. Of course, my mom and Marjorie hit it off right away, and are even in talks of starting a book club that is also a knitting club. It was pretty adorable seeing the fast friendship form between them, especially as Marjorie could be old enough to be my mother's mom.

I can't help but make my way over to them, wrapping my arms around Peyton's waist, holding her from behind. She relaxes into my arms, her head falling back to my chest. I press a gentle kiss to the top of her head, loving how she turns around to look at me with a smile.

"Hi," she whispers.

"Hi, darling. How are you?"

"So good," she says, her nose wrinkling as she smiles.

"Good."

"Marjie, I think it's time to go home," Harvey announces. "It's too damn hot, and I'm going to start getting ornery here soon."

With a sigh, Marjorie reluctantly agrees, and after they say their goodbyes and thanks, Peyton and I walk with them to their car.

PEYTON

I'm thankful my grandparents left when they did, because shortly after, more and more people arrived, including Tyler's parents and sisters, Owen's parents, Colin's dad, Jeff, and even his mom, Molly. I guess Molly is having a really good day, so Jeff felt like it was a good time to bring her out, even if only for a little while. Not that I didn't want them to meet everyone, but I worry they would get too overwhelmed, especially Papa. He doesn't always do well in big groups of people.

Tyler's sisters, whose names I don't think I've ever learned, have been fighting over Felicity ever since they got here. Felicity is loving the attention, giggling and laughing at her young aunts.

"Peyton!" Lainey calls from where she sits next to Molly on the porch. She waves me over.

"What's up?" I ask curiously.

"I just wanted to introduce you to Molly," she says, wrapping an arm around her future mother-in-law. "Molly, this is my friend, Peyton."

I offer my hand to the slightly graying woman, who looks to be perfectly healthy, despite the fact that her mind has betrayed her. "Nice to meet you, Molly." She takes it, giving it a squeeze.

"It's so nice to meet you, too, dear." It's crazy to me how much Colin looks like his parents. Last weekend, I could have sworn he was a spitting image of his dad, but now, I see just as much of his mom in him too. "Lily has told me so much about you," she pats Lainey's hand, and Lainey's eyes grow slightly sad.

"All good things, I hope," I laugh.

“Oh yes, of course!” Molly smiles.

I sit with Lainey and Molly for a long time, listening to her talk about Colin’s childhood, and how Colin, Tyler and Owen were inseparable. Her mind seems so sharp at times, and then a moment later, she can’t remember the name of something, or completely loses track of her thoughts. It’s hard to witness, so I can’t imagine how hard it must be for Colin and Lainey to go through. She might not ever remember her potential grandkids, or when she even becomes a grandma.

As I think about that, I realize that my kids will never know their grandmother either, my mom. My heart stutters at that realization, and I can’t help the tears that threaten to spill over. As much as I want kids someday, there is also a high chance that I will struggle to conceive with my endometriosis. Because of the tissue that grows wherever it wants to, inside and out of my uterus, the environment isn’t the most suitable to grow a baby.

It’s a conversation I need to have with Theo, because he deserves to know things might be harder for me. Who knows though, Theo might not want to be with me forever anyway.

I stop myself before I let that thought run too far. I’ve been working hard this week on shutting down the negative thoughts that appear in regards to our relationship and the demons I’ve been carrying so long. The ones my so-called family instilled in me.

Speaking of, I spot Dad and Patricia walk through the back gate, dressed in their hoity toity country club outfits, Patricia looking like she’s already halfway out the door. I excuse myself, then head over to say hi.

“Hey guys,” I say, offering my dad a hug, which he doesn’t take.

“Peyton,” he greets, his eyes warily scanning the backyard as everyone starts to line up for food. “Have your grandparents left?”

“Yeah,” I say. “They left about an hour or so ago.”

“That’s too bad,” Patricia says, sarcasm dripping from her nasally tone. “I so would have liked to see them.”

“Sure,” I say, trying to hide my grimace. I feel Theo behind me before I see him. His hand rests on the small of my back as he pulls me in close.

“Hank,” he says, offering his hand. I look up at my man, looking fine as hell in the aviator sunglasses I love, grateful he came over to me. My father takes his hand, shaking it roughly. When he releases it, Theo does the same to Patricia, offering her a welcome. “Should we introduce you to everyone?” he asks, already turning toward the rest of the party.

“No,” Dad says abruptly, looking extremely uncomfortable suddenly. “We’re only here to talk with our daughter in private, and then we will be on our way. If you’ll excuse us.” I blink, somewhat shocked he’s starting this so immediately, without even an attempt at civility.

Dad tries to pull me away from Theo, but Theo doesn’t let him.

“Anything you need to discuss with her, can be said in front of me, right?” Theo looks down at me. How he always knows exactly what I need, I’ll never know, but I’ll never take it for granted.

I nod in agreement. “Right, he can stay.”

“Absolutely not,” Dad says, his temper starting to burn. “This is a family matter.”

“Theo is my family,” I nearly shout. At this point, I know we will have caught the attention of everyone in the backyard, but I don’t have it in me to care.

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” Dad says in rebuttal.

I scoff, stepping closer to Theo. “What exactly are you going to do about it? I’m a full grown adult, who lives on my own. I can choose who I want to be with, who I want to love, and who I want to be my family.” I nearly stop breathing at the mention of who I love. “If you can’t accept that, then I think it’s best if we agree to go our separate ways and not pretend anymore.” My heart pounds furiously in my chest, blood rushing in my ears.

Dad’s face burns red, and Patricia stands next to him in shock, her hand up to her chest like I’ve broken her heart. “No daughter of mine will speak to me in such a manner,” Dad says. “If you don’t see that this scum is no good for you, we will have to do it for you. You will regret this, Peyton Marjorie. When this fuck up breaks your heart, don’t come crying to your mother and me, because we won’t be there. I will gladly be the one to say, ‘I told you so.’”

“Oh fuck off,” I snort. “Like you’ve been there for me before? And she’s not my mother.”

“Language,” Dad scorns.

“Hank?” An angry voice shouts from behind me. I turn around to see Mary, Owen’s mom, and Lisa, Tyler’s mom, standing side by side, anger rattling between them.

“Wha-?” I start to question how they know him, before Mary darts over to us.

“You motherfucker!” she shouts, stabbing her finger into Dad’s chest.

“How *dare* you show up here, after all these years?” My eyes fly to my dad who quite literally seems to be shrinking into himself. He looks as if he’s seeing a ghost. Mary looks over me with sweetness in her gaze. “I knew it. From the moment I met you at the wedding last week, I knew you were Caroline’s daughter.”

My heart stops.

My world spins.

Everything changes in a matter of seconds.

Lisa stands on my other side, her eyes watery with unshed tears. “God, I can’t believe it’s you,” she cries. “After Caroline died, we tried for months, years to see you, but your father never allowed us, and we didn’t know where he’d taken you.”

Realization finally hits as memories slam into me, one after the next. Mary, Lisa, and Molly. My mom’s three best friends. The people who I’d thought abandoned me after she died. They’re here. Standing right in front of me. They didn’t want to leave me.

“Oh my god,” I whisper, unable to say anything else.

Mary is ripping my dad a new one. “You took her from us! Caroline asked us to make sure Peyton was okay after she died, and you did everything you could to keep her from us.” She’s stepping closer to him now, and it’s honestly crazy to see how such a small woman could be so daunting. “Fuck you, Hank. You really thought it was a good idea to show your face in this town with the woman you had an affair with for years? While your goddamn wife was in chemo? Fighting for her life, fighting to be here for her daughter, whom she loved more than life itself.”

Air is barely making its way into my lungs, and it’s like I’m watching the scene play out below me, watching it on a screen.

“You kept me from them?” I grit out, my eyes burning with tears. I stare into my father’s dead eyes, feeling more betrayed by him than I ever have in my life. “They didn’t abandon me?”

Lisa is cupping my face in hers. “Honey, we would never abandon you. We wanted to take care of you, show you how much we loved you. You were the only little girl in our group of friends, and god, we loved you more than anything. You’re our little piece of her.” Lisa’s breath catches when she sees my hand clutching the pearl necklace.

She cries, her arms flying around me tightly. “You’re home,” she whispers over and over in my ear. The tears I’ve been holding back for nearly

twenty years break through, and everything I thought I knew changes. When Lisa releases me, I turn to my father.

“Leave,” I grind out between clenched teeth. I’ve never seen him look so small, so without power. Now, I know. He has nothing over me. I have a new family, one I always had but never knew. I feel Theo’s silent, yet strong presence behind me, allowing me to do this on my own, but knowing he’s there for me.

“Peyton, we have things to discuss,” my dad says with a shaky voice. Patricia is clutching at his arm, her eyes flying between us as she shakes.

“No, we really don’t. I have things to discuss with my mother’s best friends. Who you kept me from for years. I want nothing to do with you.”

Defeated, my father glares at me with heavy eyes as he exits the backyard.

As they leave, all the adrenaline that was coursing through my body moments ago leaves in a rush. Suddenly, I’m sinking to the ground, falling to my knees. I can vaguely hear myself whisper, “Give me a minute.” Then my head falls into my hands as the last five minutes hit me. Hands rub my back, my hair, my arms, but I can’t move, can’t breathe. I need time. Time for what, I don’t really know.

No one forces me to speak, or move. They simply let me be, their presence enough.

Every single bad thought I had about these women, the people who I loved so deeply at such a vulnerable time in my life, eats me alive. Of course they would never leave me on purpose.

I can’t believe my brain shut out every memory of their names, who they really were, and replaced it with the pain of their supposed betrayal. My hands reach, searching for someone, anyone, and I know instantly when Theo’s the one who takes me into his arms. My eyes squeeze shut as he carries me.

I can vaguely hear shouting voices, but I can’t process anything besides my name, and my mothers, over and over. I clutch Theo’s shirt, feeling the vibration of his voice under my palms.

An abrupt change from the hot summer sun, to a cool, dark room stuns me, my body shivering instinctively with the change. “I’ve got you, darling. You’re safe. I’m here.” Words finally start to make sense, and I pry my eyes open.

“There you are,” Theo says, his eyes wet with his own tears. “Fuck,

darling.”

I try to sit up, to see where we are, but Theo adjusts us so I’m sitting on the bed next to him. “Where are we?” I croak, my voice rough.

“My parent’s guest room.” Theo runs a hand through his hair, leaning back against the headboard of the bed. I lay back, resting my head on his chest. “I knew I needed to get you out of there, give you time to process things. I think you’re in shock, darling. I got so worried you were going to overheat, I practically clawed my way through everyone to get you out of there.”

“What the fuck just happened,” I blurt, still in a haze. “Mary, Lisa, and Molly... They were my mom’s best friends...”

Theo’s silent, letting me process this. “I... always thought they were glad when my mom died, so they wouldn’t have to deal with me. I... thought I was the burden, the reminder they didn’t want of her.”

“Baby, no,” Theo croons, tucking his head into my neck, holding me close as another round of tears fall.

The realization hits me again, full force. “I don’t know what to think, Theo. I’m so confused. They wanted me? They tried to find me?”

“Yeah, they did, darling,” Theo agrees, rubbing my back. “While you were kinda out of it, they couldn’t stop talking about how hard they tried to get time with you. They even looked into getting a lawyer, but they had no grounds for it. No real documentation from your mother that she’d asked them to watch over you, spend time with you.”

My heart cracks into a million pieces. They fought for me. My dad, he’s the whole reason I’ve never felt worthy, wanted, loved. I could have had a completely different life if he would have gotten over his enormous ego, and let the people who loved me in. He tried to keep me from Nana and Papa too, monitoring their visits, making them take me other places than Cinder Valley. The puzzle pieces are all clicking into place now.

“Can you...” I pause, taking a deep breath. “Can you get them for me?”

“Of course,” Theo says. “Are you sure you’re ready?”

“Yeah, I am. I need to talk to them.”

“Okay.” Theo presses a kiss to my lips, before extricating himself from me, leaving me alone in the dark room for only a minute.

The door cracks open, a sliver of light seeping in with the door, as Lisa and Mary slowly enter, both their faces tear stained, eyes red rimmed.

“Oh sweet girl,” Mary sighs, climbing onto the bed where I’m sitting,

pulling me into her arms. Lisa joins in on the other side, embracing us both in a long hug.

“I’m sorry,” I cry, my tears soaking Mary’s bright blue shirt.

“Stop that,” Mary scolds, pulling back for a moment. “You have nothing to be sorry for. We should have fought harder. Been there for you.”

Lisa nods, and we pull apart. I shake my head. “I feel bad for all the horrible things I’ve thought about you over the years. I hated you. I hated that you abandoned me. I thought you never wanted me, never loved me. I’ve been so fucked up for years, never accepting any sort of love. Until I met your sons, and their friends. I was so lost in my own pain and grief that I couldn’t even remember your names. When I moved here, I had full intentions of finding you, confronting you to tell you how much I hated you, but...” I shake my head. “It’s like my brain blocked out every piece of identifying information.”

“Honey, no,” Lisa says, brushing my hair from my eyes. “You had every right to hate us, to hate who you thought we were. Things could have been so different, but there is no sense in fighting the past anymore.”

“Oh my god,” I say with realization. “Molly thinks Mallory is my mom...”

Mary nods, her eyes widening. “She does.”

“I can’t believe this,” I cry, lolling my head onto Lisa’s shoulder. They both hold me again as I cry, and then, they start to tell me stories.

Stories of how I used to play with Colin, Tyler, and Owen as a kid, but since they were over a year older than me, they were snotty boys, and tried to ignore me. They even have pictures of us as kids, sitting together, eating popsicles on my parent’s front porch.

They promise to find all the pictures they have, and bring them to me, so I can have copies of all of them.

It’s weird to think that I was such a staple in their lives -as much as Felicity is to my group of friends- and I can’t remember a single part of it. Like my brain blocked out every good memory with them, refusing to see them as the amazing people they really are.

What feels like hours later, the three of us make our way outside, where it’s now dark, and everyone is sitting around a crackling bonfire. Felicity is sound asleep in Mallory’s arms, and now, I’m seeing Mallory in a new light.

She really does look like my mom. She has the same black hair, especially with how long it used to be in pictures I’ve seen. She has the same

bone structure, the same high cheekbones. No wonder Molly thinks she's my mom.

Theo stands as soon as he sees us coming, striding over to me, and I can see just how much he's trying to hold back. "How are you doing?" he asks when he reaches us.

I shrug. "Alright, I think."

"Do you want to leave?"

"Not yet, I want to hang out for a little while, but probably not long, since I'm exhausted."

"Whatever you want. We can leave whenever."

I take his hand in mine. "Thank you." I sit down next to him at the fire, taking in the sight of my family around me. "Sorry things got a little crazy there." I gesture to the general area where everything happened.

"Nothing to be sorry about," Colin says, holding Lainey's hand in his as he gives me a soft smile. "It's all sort of surreal really. I don't remember much about your mom, but we've all heard stories over the years."

I nod, trying hard not to start crying again. "Is your mom okay? I hope the drama didn't stress her out."

Colin winces slightly. "Dad took her home right away. She surprisingly recognized your dad, and the only way we were able to get her out was with Mallory's help. It's honestly useful that she looks so much like your mom." Colin smiles warmly at Mallory, wrapping an arm around her for a quick hug.

We all sit and talk about the evening's events, and after another hour, I'm ready to go. I was officially introduced to Tyler's twin sisters, Colleen and Caroline, which of course sent me into another bout of tears, knowing that Lisa named one of her children after my mother. After being passed around the whole group, getting more hugs than I ever thought I'd want, Theo and I are finally in the car heading home.

"How do you feel?" he asks, rubbing his hand up and down my thigh soothingly.

"Like a wrung out rag," I offer, laughing at the comparison.

"That is... oddly specific," Theo laughs. "Really though, are you doing okay? Tonight was a lot. But fuck, darling. I'm so proud of you. You stood up to your dad tonight, more than once."

"I did, didn't I?" I say, a smile creeping on my lips. "God, with everything else that happened, I almost forgot about that."

"Yeah, you did." Theo looks over at me, and in the glow of the

streetlamps as we pass under him, I see the look of pride on his face. “You’re so amazing.”

I can’t help but blush. “I’m really not. I’m a basket case,” I laugh. “I just cut off my dad, and found my mom’s long lost best friends, all in one night. I’m a little overwhelmed.” I’m reminded of the moment I told my dad I can choose who I want to love, and the realization does nothing to calm my still racing heart. I knew I was falling for Theo, but tonight has helped put everything into perspective.

Through it all, he’s been there for me. He’s taught me how to see value in myself again, how to feel loved, wanted, all without question. The voices in my head telling me that I’m nothing, have faded into nothing because of him, and tonight, with everything that happened, I can’t go another minute without telling him.

“I love you,” I blurt as we pull into the parking lot.

Theo puts the truck in park, not saying anything for a long minute. Panicking, I start to babble, as I do. “I know it’s probably crazy fast, I mean you just asked me to be your real girlfriend, like, four days ago, but you’ve turned me into a new person, Theo. I love you, and I love who you have helped me to become. You don’t have to say it back yet, fuck, you probably think I’m psycho, I mean you are my first boyfriend after all-”

I’m cut off by Theo’s lips crushing into mine, his hands cradling my face gently, contrasting the rough movements of his lips. “Stop talking,” he groans. As he pulls away, I try to catch my breath. His eyes are boring into mine, heat, desire, love, all fighting for the front seat.

“I love you, Peyton. Fuck, do I love you.” He shakes his head. “I think I’ve loved you from that first kiss in the hotel room. Every fucking day, I’ve fallen more and more in love with you, and I don’t think I’ll ever stop.”

I’m unbuckling and throwing myself across the center console and into his lap the moment he finishes speaking.

My lips connect with his, and everything is right. I’m free, no longer under the judgmental gaze of my father every moment of the day. I have a family. One that I’m not related to by blood, but one I know will be there for me forever.

I have a love. A real one.

THEO

“**Y**ou know what’s crazy?” Peyton asks as she strides into her living room, wearing only a pair of panties and her sports bra. She’s brushing her teeth, so the words are all garbled, but somehow, I understand them. “Mary and I worked at the same hospital for over a year. In a small town! Like yeah, we were in different shift pools, but I just don’t get how we never ran into each other.”

“Sometimes it’s crazy how things work out,” I reply, standing from her couch to meet her across the room. “What are you doing today?”

Peyton heads back down the hall to the bathroom, spitting her toothpaste into the sink. “I’m not sure, I guess. Mary and Lisa wanted me to come over and see some photos. Would you like to join?”

“If you want me there, I will be.” Once she’s finished rinsing her mouth, she stands on her tiptoes, arms raising to wrap around my neck.

“I want you there,” she whispers. “Before we go... Can I talk to you about something?”

“Of course, you can talk to me about anything.” My brows furrow slightly as I start to run through possible things she might want to ask me. She leads us into her room, throwing on a sweatshirt. She guides me down onto the bed, where I lay flat on my back, with her resting on my chest. My hand automatically plays with her hair while I wait for the inevitable question.

She takes a deep breath as if to hype herself up, and finally says, “You mentioned a while back that you have nightmares, and I’ve witnessed a few of them. Are those about your time overseas?”

I close my eyes, trying to take a moment to prepare myself. I knew she would ask sooner or later, and honestly, I'm glad she did. I want to tell her, I want her to know these things about me. I need to be open with her if I want us to work. "Yeah, they are." I let out a breath, opening my eyes again. Peyton isn't looking at me, giving me the space to get my thoughts together. She's still in my arms, but by her not looking at me, it's almost easier.

"Will you tell me about it?" she questions softly.

"If you want me to, I will."

"I don't want to push you," she whispers.

"You aren't." I tilt down, grasping her chin in my fingers. I take her lips with mine, kissing her gently. "I'll tell you." She sighs into the kiss, her lips parting. When I pull apart from her, she rests her head against my chest. I fiddle with her hair a bit more while I think of where to start. "Being a combat medic, I was witness to a lot of horrible things. I mean, you've seen some shit too, I'm sure." Peyton nods hesitantly. "I was always able to compartmentalize the things I'd seen and done, but toward the end of my second deployment, it got harder."

I settle into the couch, trying to keep Peyton close, hoping the smell of her floral shampoo will ground me. "One of the soldiers...my friend, Ethan. He and I were out on a raid, when an IED went off in front of us. The blast shocked me, sent me flying. I was okay, just some minor burns, deep cuts, and a fucked up back." I take a deep breath. I've never told anyone this story outside of my parents and my therapist. "Once I caught my bearings, I was running toward the shouts for me. I was able to help one of the guys, but the other..." I pause again. "Ethan..."

Peyton sucks in an abrupt gasp. "Oh, Theo."

I don't let her words get to me, even as my eyes sting with tears. "The blast destroyed his body. It was scattered in pieces, blood everywhere." The memory replays in my mind like a film. "He had a girl back home, and a new baby. Just before he died, he asked me to send a letter he had stashed under his bed. As soon as I got out of the hospital, that's the first thing I did. Reading that letter... Fuck, Peyton. I've never felt such guilt or pain like what I feel when I think about how he should be the one living, teaching his son how to ride a bike, or kiss his girlfriend when he gets home from work. I couldn't save him. It should have been me. I was standing right by him. I should've been the one blasted to death."

Peyton turns herself, lifting up from where she rested on my chest, and

straddles my thighs. My arms automatically wrap around her hips, holding her close. Her small hands cup my face, and her blue eyes stare deeply into mine. “Theo, you have to know you couldn’t have saved him either way... I know you have a servant’s heart, but sometimes we can only do so much. You’re right, he shouldn’t have died, it’s not fair, but sometimes that’s just how the dice roll. You can’t say that you should have been the one to die, because you deserve a life too. A life to fall in love, become an uncle, watch your sister get married, become a parent yourself. *You deserve a life too*, and it’s not selfish to think like that. And,” she hesitates. “I didn’t know him, but I think Ethan would tell you the same thing.” Her grip on my cheeks tighten slightly as she talks.

I nod, trying to keep the tears from sliding down my cheeks. “It just fucking sucks. I see a PTSD therapist often but the nightmares still happen, no matter what. I see their faces, Ethan, and every other soldier I couldn’t save.”

“Do you remember the night you found me crying outside my apartment?” Peyton asks.

The unexpected switch in conversation makes me pause. “Yeah? Why?” The memory of Peyton slumped over, eyes red and absent, the pure pain written all over her face springs into my brain. I can’t help but squeeze her, wanting to comfort her now, even though it’s been weeks since that night.

“We lost a baby that day. The delivery was going perfectly. Then the baby started having heart decels, and it was too late to do a crash c-section since the baby was coming so fast. During the last push, we lost the heart beat. We worked on him for an hour before we had to declare it. The parents’ screams will haunt me forever. Sure, I saw and went through some heavy shit working in the ER, but that will probably be one of the worst things I’ve ever experienced. That, and watching my mom die. I think the only reason I didn’t spiral worse that night was because of you.”

My hands roam her back as we let our exposed vulnerabilities out. I watch as her face slowly falls, and another wave of grief seems to rock through her. She tips her head down so that her forehead rests against mine. “Thank you for telling me,” she whispers. “I know how hard that must be.”

I nod against her forehead, ready to move on from the subject. My body is tense, ready to fight, like I’m waiting for danger to appear at any moment. We stay like that, holding each other for a long time.

PEYTON

“Come in, come in,” Lisa holds the door open with a smile, greeting us both with long hugs and kisses to Theo and my cheeks. “Mallory and Felicity are here too,” she says, leading us through the house.

When we enter the living room, Mallory is sitting on the couch, Felicity tucked under her nursing blanket, breastfeeding. “Hey, Mal,” I greet, walking across the room to sit by her. She holds her arm up, and I lean into her, giving her a long hug.

“How are you holding up?” she whispers in my ear. I shrug, because honestly? I really don’t know. Things are a bit of a mess, and my dad won’t stop calling me. I can’t even call my grandparents and tell them everything, because anytime I try, I get choked up, with no idea what to say.

“I’m here,” I answer finally. At the sound of my voice, Felicity flails, her little body squirming as she tries to free herself from under the blanket.

“Ah, you want your auntie, huh?” Mallory chuckles, adjusting her shirt and pulling her out. As soon as she sees me, she gives me a gummy smile, drool and milk seeping out the corner of her mouth. She reaches for me, so I take her into my arms, giving her a gentle hug.

“Hi, sweet girl,” I croon. She nuzzles her head into my chest, squawking and babbling. Theo sits down next to me, and she of course reaches for him immediately. I unwillingly pass her over to him, and he talks to her in the sweetest baby voice I’ve ever heard, smiling and cooing as she squeezes his cheeks hard. Mallory nudges my shoulder when she catches me smiling at Theo, and she winks knowingly.

Of course I start to blush, and I turn my face down, stupidly embarrassed.

I'm allowed to ogle my boyfriend while he cuddles my niece, right? My thoughts are interrupted when both Mary and Lisa stride into the living room, with large boxes in their arms.

"Now, I haven't gone through any of these yet, so there are probably all sorts of random pictures in here. But, I have pictures from when we were kids, all the way up to..." Mary trails off, her voice growing sad.

"Her death," I answer for her. They both nod, sitting down on the floor next to the wooden coffee table. I sink to the ground, scooting over to sit between them. One by one, they wrap an arm around my shoulder, hugging me close.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Lisa asks, her eyes tearing.

"Yeah, I am."

"Okay," she answers, opening the first box. Theo gets off the couch, sitting down across from me at the coffee table, Felicity resting in his lap. Mallory sits next to her future mother-in-law, and together we sift through years of pictures.

HOURS LATER, I have stacks and stacks of pictures of my mother and me. Pictures I'd never known existed. I've asked about a thousand times if it's okay for me to take them, and they won't hear any of my objections, adding picture after picture to the pile.

I can't help but feel utterly overwhelmed. I had thought that last night I had all my emotions figured out, but today, it's like the wound is open and infected now, all the nerves exposed, the pain radiating throughout my body. Throw in the heart to heart Theo and I had this morning, and I'm a bit of a mess.

I catch a few shared glances between Mallory and Theo, and after the third one, I'm about ready to flip the fuck out on them. I'm not a child they need to look after, or protect. I appreciate them, truly, I do. But right now, I can't help but feel like they are hovering over me.

I'm sick of people asking me if I'm okay. No, I'm not okay. I found out less than twenty-four hours ago that a good chunk of my life could have been extremely different. Had it been different, maybe then I wouldn't have had all these fucked up feelings inside. Maybe then I wouldn't be second guessing

my feelings for the only man I've ever known to make me feel alive and wanted, *loved*, mere hours after confessing my love for him.

I stand up abruptly from the ground, stepping around scattered photos organized by year, and say, "I think I need to go home."

Theo's quick to stand, clearing his throat. "I'm ready when you are," he says.

I offer my goodbyes to Mary, Lisa, and Mallory, taking the pictures they've shoved at me, and putting them in a sealed bag to try and protect them until I can find a safe place for them.

Theo tries to strike up easy conversation on the way home, but I don't have it in me to talk. Luckily, he gets the hint, and stops trying. After we climb the stairs to the second floor, Theo follows me into my apartment, and for some reason, that's my breaking point.

"Would you please stop fucking hovering?" I screech, dropping my purse onto the floor, kicking my shoes off, watching them hit the wall with a thud.

The door closes, and I hear Theo's footsteps behind me as I stalk down the hall to my bedroom. I don't know why I'm mad, I don't know what I need, or what I want right now. I'm spiraling.

"Darling, what's going on?" Theo asks, stepping up behind me as my internal walls crumble.

"I don't know," I cry. "I don't know what to feel. One minute I'm angry, the next I'm sad, the next I'm happy. I don't know what the fuck is going on in my brain, and I don't know what to do." I spin around, pounding my fists on his chest as I try to process these emotions.

"It's okay," Theo murmurs into my hair. "Let it out, I've got you. I love you."

"Do you, though?" I pull back, asking him the question I know the answer to, but can't stop myself from asking.

Theo's eyes narrow. "You know I do."

"I thought I knew a lot of things, Theo," I scoff, tugging at the roots of my hair. "I can't think. It's too much." I walk in a circle around the room, unable to sit still, unable to even breathe. Theo follows, his arms wrapping around me tightly, holding me still.

I thrash against him immediately. I can't stop moving. If I stop moving, I think more, and if I think more, I'm afraid I'll ruin everything. I've already questioned his love for me, my love for him, and at this point, I'm a ticking time bomb. "Let me go!" I scream. "Please," I cry. Grateful when he releases

me from his loving embrace. “I need to be alone,” I whisper.

“No,” Theo sternly states, taking a step toward me. I step back immediately, my heart breaking. “I’m not leaving you. You can be alone in your room, but I’m not leaving this apartment.”

“Please,” I whisper. “I need some time to think.”

“Peyton, you can think all you want, but with me in the other room.”

Defeated, I nod, turning away from him. I hear his sigh of relief, and when I hear the door click behind him, I drop to my knees, wailing cries falling from my lips.

To his credit, Theo doesn’t come back in. He gives me the time that I need. Eventually, I move from the floor to my bed, laying atop the comforter, clutching the extra pillow that smells of Theo.

I don’t know how long I cry, how long I mourn the life that I could have had. Day turns to night behind the curtains, but I stay, my body aching as I wait for the tears to stop.

When I hear the click of the door opening, and footsteps on the soft carpet, I turn my body slightly, figuring it’s Theo. But my heart cracks again when Nana walks through the door, her eyes red and teary. “Sweet pea,” she murmurs, coming over to the bed. I hold out an arm for her, heavy tears falling again as she climbs into the bed behind me, cradling my body in hers.

She whispers words into my ear, but I’m crying too hard to understand. Having her here is the closest thing I will ever have to my mom, so I hold her tight, turning over so I’m crying into her chest. Breathing in the familiar floral perfume she always wears, I’m lulled into a needed sleep.

I WAKE to the sun shining through the curtains, and the sounds of people filtering in and out of my living room. I cross the hall quietly, trying to get to the bathroom without anyone noticing my presence. The previous day comes back to me in flashes as I start the shower, climbing into the hot pounding water, relieving some of the tension my body is holding. Theo telling me about his nightmares, meeting with Mary and Lisa, my embarrassing breakdown... Nana.

I finish the rest of my shower quickly, needing to see if Nana is still here, or if that was a weird hallucination. After I dry myself off, I change into a

pair of sweats and a shirt that I'm pretty sure are Theo's, I just grabbed them from my room quickly.

I look in the mirror quickly, spotting my puffy red eyes that look almost hollow. Lovely. Walking down the short hall, I hear two familiar voices, and when they come into view, both voices stop as they see me. Theo and Nana are sitting at my small table, both of them with plates of food in front of them.

"Well, good morning, sweet pea," Nana sweetly says, her eyes lighting up as she sees me. "Come sit down. We have breakfast waiting for you."

Theo stands from the creaky chair, plating pancakes, bacon, and hashbrowns onto a plate for me. I sit down in the chair next to Nana, across from Theo, and watch as he sets the plate down in front of me, his stony blue eyes watching me carefully, like he's waiting for me to break down again. I can't say that I blame him. I don't miss the deep shadows under his eyes, and I worry that he stayed up all night... for me.

Sleep didn't make all the thoughts I've been having go away, but it did help put some into perspective.

I love Theo. I do. Not only do I love him, but I'm *in love* with him. That won't change, just because my stupid messed up brain tries to sabotage me every second of the day.

"So," Nana starts. "Care to tell me what happened after we left the party?"

"Um," I croak, my voice raw and sore from crying. I clear my throat and speak again. "After you left, the rest of the families came, their parents included. Then Dad and Patricia got there." I hesitate before continuing, and Nana stares me down, waiting for me to continue. I'm sure Theo gave her all the information, but she wants to hear it from me.

"Dad tried to get me to talk to him alone, but I said Theo could be there, and he got mad. Then, Mary, Owen's mom, and Lisa, Tyler's mom, recognized him. They... they started yelling at him."

"Good," Nana scoffs.

"I started putting the pieces together, realizing who they were... and I kinda broke. I yelled at dad, kicked him out, and then broke down. Things were fine after I talked with Mary and Lisa, and then yesterday, I went over to Lisa's and we went through pictures and talked for hours, and I just... I don't even know."

Nana takes a sip of her coffee. "I knew it would be a matter of time

before you found them. Truthfully, I haven't seen them in years. I didn't think you remembered them, and if you did, maybe you would ask. Perhaps I should have talked with you about them sooner."

"No, it's okay, Nana, really." I reach out, resting a hand over her cold wrinkled one. "I... I'm not doing well, processing everything. I spent my whole life after her death, thinking I did something wrong for them to abandon me, to hate me, never see me. It messed me up, more than I care to admit. It's affected every friendship, every aspect of my life, but now, I know it was my dad and Patricia. They did everything they could to erase any memory of this life. He told me they didn't want to see me, and eventually, I stopped asking." My eyes burn with tears again, though I'd thought I'd shed every tear possible. "I thought no one wanted me," I cry, the tears streaming freely now. "I was his leftovers, and Hunter and Patricia were the new insta-family he wanted."

"Oh sweet pea." Nana scoots her chair over to me, pulling me into her arms, letting me cry into her chest again. Luckily, the tears don't last long this time, but my heart still hurts, still feels the sting of pain. "You have always felt everything so deeply, and I mean that in a good way. You take on others' pain. It's why you are incredible at what you do. But you need to take care of yourself. Let yourself feel your pain. Don't shove it down, or let it fester anymore. You have a wonderful support group of people who love you," she pointedly looks at Theo. "And want to be there for you. Am I right, Theo?" She looks over to Theo, lifting me off her chest.

Theo nods, his face forlorn and pained.

Nana continues, "You are so loved, my sweet pea." I nod as she cups my cheeks, swiping the tears away. "Now, I better get home before your Papa calls, wondering where we keep the bread," she laughs. "You'd think after keeping it in the same place for twenty plus years, he'd learn, but no." I stand with her, taking her offered hug, letting her hold me tightly for a moment. She rounds the table, making Theo stand. She gives him a hug as well, and I notice them whispering back and forth. She pats him on the back, and he gives her a half smile, but it doesn't reach his eyes.

With one last goodbye, she's out the door, leaving Theo and me alone. I turn around, and for what feels like the first time this morning, our eyes lock. The words out of Theo's mouth however, surprise me. "Why don't you eat, you don't want your pancakes to get cold. I'm going to take a shower, if that's okay?" he asks. I nod, words not coming to me.

He bends down, pressing a kiss to my cheek, then striding down the hall to my bathroom, where the water starts running. I shovel food down my throat, not really tasting it, just eating it because I know I need to get something in my stomach. While I eat, my mind, of course, runs haywire. Why has Theo been so quiet? Did I question his love, his desire for me, one too many times? Have I ruined it all?

Theo strides out of the bathroom a few minutes later, a pair of low riding sweats hanging from his hips, while he dries his hair with a towel, rubbing his blonde strands aggressively. He sits down in the chair Nana had occupied, and pulls it close to me. Without words, he takes my fork from my palm, setting it down on the table next to my plate, and pulling me off the chair into his lap. As soon as our bodies touch, I'm falling in a heap into his chest, my head falling to the crook in his neck.

"I'm so sorry," I cry. "I never should have doubted you, ever, not from the first time you told me you wanted me. Not last night when I doubted your love," I hiccup, trying to catch my breath.

"No," Theo growls. "Don't apologize, please." He pulls my face away, his hands coming to my neck, resting our foreheads together. "I love you," he whispers vehemently. "I do, and I'll tell you all the time. I'm yours, no matter what. Just don't shut me out again, please." His lips press against mine as he keeps talking. "It hurt me to my very being, sitting outside your door last night, listening to you crying, knowing you didn't want me in there. You can't do that to me. I felt helpless, Peyton."

"I just felt... lost, out of control, and the only thing I could control was you. I never should have made you leave."

"After listening to you for an hour, I called Papa. He gave me his phone number after dinner that night, and I knew the only person who could comfort you was Nana. I was ready to beg her to come over, but as soon as Papa handed the phone to her, she didn't even wait for an explanation, just said she was on her way. I didn't say a word. Somehow, she knew you needed her."

I nod against his forehead. "I did. I didn't know it, but I did. I should have called her right away after dad left that night, but I was scared. Then, going through all those photos, I kept thinking about what my life could have been, but then if I'd had that life, then maybe I wouldn't have met you. My life has been one fucked up thing after the next, but I would go through it all again if I got to have you."

“I guess it’s a good thing you’re never getting rid of me,” Theo whispers, his lips pressing against mine, and just like that, things slowly feel right again.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“You have nothing to thank me for.”

“Yes, I do. I have you to thank, for everything. For giving me the space I thought I needed, for calling my Nana. For being you, for loving me. And letting me love you,” I whisper, kissing him, letting myself give in to the feelings surrounding me.

“I love you so much,” Theo says.

“I can’t wait for our life.” I pause, feeling slightly nervous. “Maybe that was a little presumptuous.”

“Nope, no take backs,” he teases. “I can’t wait for our life, either.”

THEO

I don't think I've ever felt as helpless as I did last night. Not even during the war, not when I couldn't save Ethan, not when Peyton had her endometriosis flare up. Nothing compared to the pain of what she went through last night. I sat outside her door, listening to her pained cries.

After her Nana got there, I was able to give her a brief explanation of what had happened, and then, I sat outside her door all night, just in case they needed me. I don't think I slept for more than twenty minutes, but I just couldn't risk it. Now, though, things are okay.

Peyton needed to get those feelings out. She'd been letting them out, little by little over the last month or so with me, but she needed to feel the pain, let it hurt, like Nana said. Sitting with her here in my lap, I finally feel like everything is out. Her pain, mine, the pain we both share, it's out, and god, does it feel good.

"Can we take a nap?" Peyton asks, nuzzling her head into my chest.

"Absolutely. You have no idea how bad I need one."

"I suppose it's a good thing the holiday fell on a Friday so we got these extra few days. Going back to work tomorrow is probably going to be a brutal awakening," she says. I slide my hands under her ass, standing from her table, carrying her to the bedroom.

"That's for sure." I toss her onto the bed, throw our phones on the nightstand, climb under the covers, and pull her into my chest. "Goodnight," I whisper, relishing the feel of her.

"I love you," she answers.

God, that will never get old. "I love you, too, darling." As soon as I feel

myself drifting toward my first sleep in roughly twenty-four hours, both Peyton and my phones buzz where I dropped them on the nightstand. The groan that rumbles from my chest is nearly feral. “I swear to god, if that’s my sister, we’re disowning her,” I grumble, reaching over to grab our phones, handing her hers. Sure enough, it’s Sam in the group message.

THE ONE WHERE LAINEY AND COLIN HAVE NEWS

Sam: Ummmm did anyone else see the name change?!?!?!? I NEED ANSWERS.

Sam: WHY IS NO ONE ANSWERING.

Sam: HELLO?

Colin: Took you long enough to see it.

Lainey: *laughing face emoji*

Sam: Don’t tease me right now, Colin. I’m calling an impromptu family meeting. RIGHT NOW. Everyone get your asses over here. We got wedding pictures back anyway.

Mallory: We just laid the baby down...

Tyler: Yeah, it’s sexy nap time.

Mallory: TYLER!

Tyler: You JUST said we could have sexy nap time!

Mallory: Not anymore.

Me: Peyton and I are taking a nap. Not the sexy kind. A real nap.

Sam: Fine. You are lucky I love you all. Meet at my house in two hours, OR ELSE.

Peyton: Or else what?

Sam: You really shouldn’t have said that.

Peyton: Why? Cause now you have to think of something?
laughing face emoji

Owen: Ooooh, good one Peyton. You’re right, she’s totally trying to think of something.

Me: Goodnight.

THICK HEAT BURNS my lungs as I suck in a deep gust of air, the dust circling around me flying into my lungs as I breathe. I can't stop coughing as my body tries to expel the contaminant. Looking to my right, a familiar face runs over to me, her beautiful skin covered in dust, blood covering her hands. Her bright blue eyes shine with recognition as she sees me, and I try to run to her, to get her out of this war zone, but I can't move. My legs are frozen, stuck to the dirt ground.

"Peyton!" I yell, waving my arms. "Get out of here!"

"I can't," she cries. She moves closer to me, and drops to her knees, hovering over a body. "We need to save him." Her bloodied hands begin to work on the body, trying to stop the gushing blood from limbs, but every time she stops one active bleed, another starts. "Theo, help me!" she screams. "I can't do it myself!"

I drop to my knees and reach for her, trying to shove her away, to get her out of here. When my hands finally make contact with her, her hands reach up, clasping my face. The blood on her hands drips down my cheeks, and I look down to the patient between us.

Ethan's nearly lifeless frame is before me, his eyes wide and scared as I try to work on him, to save him, even though I know the effort will fall to waste. I've lived this nightmare.

"Peyton, leave," I command, my body ramped with tension, desperately needing her out of here. Bullets are still flying around us, and I can't think of anything but saving her. She can't see this. Can't see me fail to save him.

Ethan's breath is coming in shorter, faster beats, and I know it's only a matter of time before he dies. Ethan's breathless voice croaks, "There's a letter under my mattress. Mail it to my girl." He stops breathing.

My hands search his body, desperate to save him this time. I shout his name, press my hands over the blood pooling from him, trying to stop it. Peyton's shouting my name, her hands grabbing at my shoulders, shaking me, trying to get my frantic movements to stop.

"Theo!" Peyton's voice breaks through the haze, and I wake with a start. My heart is pounding in my chest, and I can feel the sweat on my brow. Peyton's hovering over me, her hands pressed against my shoulders, her eyes wide as she takes in my panic. "You're okay," she murmurs over and over as she moves her hands soothingly over my chest.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, pulling her into my chest, holding her close. I need to feel her, hear the steady beating of her heart, hold her while she

breathes. My arms cradle her around me.

When my heart slows, and my breath evens out, I slowly release Peyton out of my grasp, even though I don't want to let her go. Only she doesn't move off my chest. She stays entwined with me, the weight of her body like a human weighted blanket, keeping me steady and calm. I allow myself a moment to think back to the dream. Do I dare try to analyze why it was different? Why was Peyton there? As if reading my thoughts, Peyton mumbles into my neck, "It was different this time, wasn't it?"

I nod silently.

"Do you need to talk about it?" she gently asks, still not moving off my body.

"I..." I breathe. "It was the same dream, Ethan's death, not being able to save him, but..." I hesitate. Peyton stays silent, allowing me the time I need. "You were there. You were trying to help me save him. We couldn't save him, and I needed to protect you, to get you out of there, but you wouldn't leave. There were bullets flying everywhere," I choke out. My shaky fingers tighten around her waist, feeling her living, breathing atop me.

"I'm here. We're okay." Peyton holds me close. "I would never leave you."

"I wanted to keep you safe," I whisper, my eyes burning with tears as I think about not being able to protect her in that moment, and in real life.

"You keep me safe. I feel more safe, more protected than I have in my entire life. Every moment I spend with you, I'm reminded of that." She pauses for a moment. "Theo, we're a team. I'm here to protect you, just as much as you're protecting me."

I nod, rolling to my side so that I can look at her. "Thank you," I murmur, kissing her cheek. Peyton gives me another squeeze before rolling further from me.

"What do you need from me? Do you need time to yourself, or do you want me to stay? I can call Sam too, and let her know we won't make it this afternoon." Peyton's quick to grab her phone off the side table, swiping it open.

"No," I say, grabbing her phone. "I'm okay. Honestly. Having you here was all I needed. Knowing that you're here, safe, and staying with me helped. It grounded me to reality faster than normal."

Her eyes well up with tears, and she kisses me, her hands cupping my cheeks. Her tongue presses against my lips, and I open for her, sinking into

the kiss, tasting her and loving her. When she pulls away, I'm breathless, my heart pounding again, but for a different reason.

"We've had a crazy emotional few days," Peyton says. "Are you sure you don't want to take a little breather, stay home?"

"I'm okay, really. Are you?" I poke her in the side. "Are you just trying to avoid my sister?" I tease.

"No," she giggles, squirming away from me. "I had other things on my mind..."

"You little shit," I smile, reaching for her as she climbs out of bed, squealing as she runs across the hall to her bathroom.

I CLASP PEYTON'S hand in mine as we walk up the drive to Sam's front door. We must be the last to arrive, as literally everyone's cars are here. And I mean, everyone. My parents', Mal and Ty, Tyler's family, Colin's dad's truck, and Owen's parents. The only car I don't see is Lainey's but that's probably because she and Colin walked the two houses down. I get why Mal and Ty didn't do that though, with the baby.

"You ready for whatever craziness this might bring?" I ask Peyton just before I knock on the front door.

"Is anyone ever ready for your crazy sister?"

"Good point," I laugh. Before I can knock on the door, it flies open, Sam standing behind it, her blonde hair in a messy knot atop her head.

"What the fuck are you doing out here?" she snarls.

"Umm, knocking?" I say in question.

"Why? We don't knock, we enter." She turns around, no other greeting, letting us walk in and shut the door behind ourselves. We follow her through the crowded living room, where she stalks right up to where Lainey sits next to Colin on the couch, smiling at something Mallory said. "Alright, everyone's here, now spill." She drops to the couch next to her best friend and sister by choice, grabbing her hand from Colin. "Did you pick a wedding date?"

Lainey snickers, shaking her head. Colin smirks, wrapping his arm around his finance's shoulders, twirling a curl in his fingers. He looks positively giddy, and it makes me wonder...

“We’re pregnant,” Lainey blurts, her face turning bright red. The room around us erupts into cheers and laughter, excitement abounding. Everyone takes their turns hugging the two of them, while my sister sits on the couch, her brows furrowed and confused.

“Sam, aren’t you going to congratulate your best friend?” I ask, feeling a little irritated by her lack of reaction. Peyton elbows me before she hugs Lainey, and then it’s my turn. I wrap my chosen sister in my arms, squeezing her tight. “Congratulations, Laines. I’m happy for you two. You’re going to be an incredible mother,” I whisper before pulling away.

Sam has finally seemingly awoken from her stupor. “How far along are you?” she asks.

“Around eight weeks. I found out a few days after your bachelorette party when I couldn’t stop puking. I thought it was the world’s worst hangover,” she laughs.

“You bitch!” Sam screeches. “You drank at my wedding! I watched you take a shot of fireball!”

Lainey shakes her head. “There’s this thing called not actually taking a swig, Sam. I didn’t even taste it. I wiped it off my lips.”

“Well, what about champagne?” Sam refutes.

“Colin made sure to switch mine out. We had a very solid plan,” she smiles, proud of herself.

“Well, fuck,” Sam laughs. “You should be an actress, because you play a great drunk!” Sam pulls Lainey into a hug, tears now streaming down her cheeks. “You’re pregnant!”

“I’m pregnant!” Lainey squeals. The two of them are now in their own little world, laughing and sharing their excitement.

Once things have settled down, we all sit down in the living room, turning our attention to the TV, so Owen can connect his phone and show the pictures they’ve gotten. I’m sitting on the floor, Peyton next to me, leaning into my body as my arm wraps around her back.

Of course, there’s the typical ooing and awwing over the pictures, varying from a few of the families, the ceremony, and individual pictures. I’m struck silent though when one of Peyton and I pops onto the screen. One I didn’t even know was taken.

Peyton and I are dancing, and I’m looking down at her, and if I didn’t know any better, I’d think this was the moment I asked her to be my real girlfriend. Her eyes are turned up at me, almost shimmering under the lights

of the dance floor. I have a sheepish grin on my face, and it looks like I'm holding her so tight, afraid to let go.

Peyton leans over slightly, whispering in my ear, "Is that...?"

"Yeah," I chuckle. "I think it is."

"I had no idea someone was taking our picture," she says, bewildered. The picture stays on the screen for a while, everyone looking at the moment I asked her to be my real girlfriend, but for all they knew, we had already been together for about a month.

"Hmmm," My mom says from behind us. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you two are next up to get married..."

My grip on Peyton tightens, resentment immediately freezing my body like ice. The last thing I want right now is to scare Peyton, but I'd walk down that aisle right now if I knew she was ready for it.

Peyton surprises me by laughing, turning around to slap my mother on the knee. "Good one, Renee," she says. "I'm pretty sure you have two other sets of kids who are way ahead of us on that."

"You may be right, but they have other things on their mind besides a wedding," Mom drawls.

"Oh, hush, Renee," Dad interjects. "They'll get married when they are good and ready."

With a sigh, she concedes. "Fine, but I want a copy of that picture. It's going on my mantle."

"You got it," Owen's low voice chimes in, before moving onto the next photo. Ironically, it's a photo of Colin, posing for the photographer, holding a bottle of sparkling cider, and a positive pregnancy test, a gleaming glint in his eyes, as he holds a finger up to his mouth in a shushing gesture.

"You little shit!" Sam shrieks, smacking him with a pillow. "No wonder the photographer said we had to wait to open the pictures until everyone was with us!"

Colin laughs, "Yeah, I made her promise to send that one with the sneak peak, whether it was edited or not. I even gave her twenty bucks."

"Niice," Tyler laughs, offering him a high five. Their hands connect with a smack, and we move onto the next photos.

THE THOUGHTS that have been swirling in my mind ever since we left my sister's, finally burst out of my mouth. "I know we've mentioned this, but it was before we were even fake dating." My hand taps on the steering wheel nervously. "But, do you want kids?"

It's a long moment before Peyton answers. To be quite honest, if she doesn't it isn't the end of the world. Don't get me wrong, I love kids, but I would be happy being the cool uncle. Her voice is soft when she speaks. "I think so. It's not like I had a good parent model after Mom died." She looks out the window longingly, watching the river scenery as we drive toward home. "The thing is, with endometriosis, it can be hard to get pregnant. It can also be hard to... stay pregnant." She takes a deep breath. "And that scares me. I want kids. But I think... if it doesn't happen I would be okay, too."

I drop my hand from the steering wheel, reaching over to rest my hand over hers. "I'm good with that too," I say, squeezing her hand. "If it doesn't happen that's fine. We can be the cool aunt and uncle, right?"

"Right," she says with a laugh, a single tear sliding down her cheek. "I still want to try. But I don't know if I want to go through all sorts of procedures, and potential failures. If it happens, it happens."

"That sounds perfect."

She nods to herself as we pull into our apartment, and I hold her hand as we walk into the building. I meant what I said, and it is her body. She knows it best, especially with how long she has been dealing with her endometriosis. I want to be there for her no matter what, and if she changes her mind, and never wants to try, or wants to give it her all and try everything, I'll be there then. I'm hers.

Exhaustion creeps over my body as we make our way into her apartment. "Fuck, I'm ready for bed," I say, flopping down onto her comfortable couch.

"Really?" Peyton asks, a playful pout crossing her features. "I had thought maybe..." She crosses the room, straddling my hips, dragging her finger down my chest. The movement alone has my skin breaking out in goosebumps, and my dick twitching in my pants.

"You thought..." I urge her on.

"I thought maybe we could... y'know." She shrugs.

Immediately, my demeanor flips. Yeah, I know what she wants. No, what she needs. "Use your words, darling," I taunt.

The little vixen bites her lip, teasing me as she pulls her tank top over her head, revealing her perky tits in a black bra. "Fuck, darling," I groan my dick

getting harder by the second. “Those weren’t words.”

“No,” she giggles. “But I think you got the point.”

I snatch her hands before they can tangle in my hair, clasping both of her wrists in one hand. Without warning, I wrap my arm around her waist, flipping her around so her back is on the couch, and I hover over her. She pants in surprise, and I give her a wicked grin. “There’s my good girl,” I croon, pressing a kiss to her panting lips. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” she breathes.

Then, I show her just how much.

PEYTON

The familiar sounds of the coffee shop help ease some of the anxiety that is threatening to burst. I didn't tell Theo I was doing this. It's something I need to do on my own. I take a sip of the tea I ordered, hoping the warmth will soothe my aching soul.

The creaky wooden door opens and my dad walks through, running a hand through his graying hair. His work clothes of course are perfectly pressed, not a wrinkle in sight. His suit jacket is draped over his arm. He scans the room quickly, looking for me. When he sees me in the corner, he strides over, his shoes clicking on the wood floors.

"Peyton," he greets. "Thank you for agreeing to meet."

I hold back my scoff. *Yes, because me ignoring calls and messages until you wore me down was me agreeing.* "Sure."

"I'm going to get something to drink." He drapes his jacket over the back of the chair, and heads over to the counter, and orders some fancy sounding drink, rocking back on his heels impatiently as he waits.

When he gets back, I notice that his coffee is in a to-go cup, rather than a mug they offer for people who plan to stay here. He sits down in front of me, clasping his hands around the cup.

I don't wait for him to start his guilt-trip, starting in on him before he has a second to breathe. "You're an asshole, you know that, right?"

He scoffs, shaking his head. "Nice to know those three already have you brainwashed. They never liked me, not for a minute."

"Seems they had good reason," I spit.

"We have other things to talk about, this is not why I asked you here."

“Enlighten me, then. Because to me, it seems like you got caught in an eighteen year lie, and now you’re scrambling.”

Dad pinches the bridge of his nose, clearly irritated with me. “Fine, we need to talk about your boyfriend.”

I scoff, outloud this time. “What about him?”

“His behavior at your brother’s wedding was completely unacceptable, and uncalled for.”

“Tell me. What was uncalled for?” I hold my hand out, ready to tick off numbers on my fingers. “Was it when he ran after me, after *you* gave a speech, insulting me, and my mother’s memory?” I hold up a finger. “Or, was it when he defended my dress?” Another finger. “Or, was it when the man who you call my brother, brought up a rumor *he* started, that I offered blow jobs in the school bathrooms, which was never true, and my boyfriend defended me, without laying a finger on him?”

Dad’s face reddens, clearly not knowing why Theo threatened Hunter. “I-” he stammers.

“Don’t bother,” I say, dropping my hands to the table. “Theo has protected me more than you ever did. I spent years trying to get you to listen to me, to be my father, but you could not have cared less.” I blink away the tears starting to form. I will not cry today.

“I never knew,” Dad whispers. For once, he’s actually listening, processing what I’m saying.

“No, you never cared.” Dad nods regretfully, avoiding eye contact. While I have him, I decide to really hash it all out. I gesture between us. “I’m not going to fight for your attention anymore. I’m done trying.” Dad holds up a hand, but I stop him. “You were not a good father. When mom was alive, sure. As soon as she got sick, you checked out. You gave up.”

“This conversation is not getting us anywhere,” Dad sighs, clearly irritated.

“Why is that?” I snort. “Because you’re finally getting called out on all your bullshit? Because the daughter you seemingly don’t care about is standing up for herself?” He’s completely silent, letting me scold him in this small coffee shop.

“For what it’s worth,” he says. “I am sorry.”

“Your apology is not worth much,” I say, taking a long sip of my tea.

He nods. “That still doesn’t solve why I asked you here.”

“Fine, the floor is yours.”

“Your boyfriend is not allowed at family events. Hunter has stated that he does not feel safe in his presence, and if he is at events, Hunter has made it known that he will not be.” Dad sits back in his chair, some of his normal sternness returning after he says his piece.

Honestly, this does not surprise me in the least. Hunter is, and always will be a whiny bitch, who always gets what he wants. My abrupt laughter does nothing to appease my father though.

“This is not a laughing matter,” he scolds. “He threatened Hunter, on his wedding night. Regardless of his reasoning, it is uncalled for, and I will not stand for it. He is not welcome in our family.”

“Because I am?” I ask through tears of laughter.

“You’re my daughter.” My laughter turns almost hysterical, until Dad slaps the table, catching everyone in the room's attention. “Peyton Marjorie Donnelly, that is enough,” he barks.

My laughter ceases, and I stare into his cold blue eyes. “Fine, Theo will not be in attendance at any future family events.”

“Thank you,” he starts to say something more, but I interrupt him.

“Nor will I.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he scoffs.

“I’m not. In fact, I think I’m being completely appropriate. I will not be attending any family events, because over the last eighteen years, you have made it abundantly clear that I am not family. Therefore, I am eliminating myself from the equation.” I sip the last of my tea. “Please feel free to invite me, but I will respectfully decline. If, and only if, you realize the errors of your ways, then maybe we can work it out. Until that day, I wish you well. I’ll be sure to send you a Christmas card.”

With that, I stand from my chair, collecting my bag and my cup. I leave my stunned dad, dropping my cup off in the dish tub, and walking out the door. Once my dad catches his wits, I hear him call my name, but I ignore him, walking out into the cool summer afternoon. In my rush to leave, I run into someone walking up the steps.

“Excuse me,” I murmur. “I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“Woah, darling,” Theo’s low voice startles me. His hands rest on my shoulders, steadying me.

“Theo,” I breathe. “What are you doing here?”

His blue eyes are covered by his sunglasses, and he’s decked out in his paramedic gear, looking fine as hell in his uniform. He lifts his glasses up

onto his head, smirking down at me. “Tyler and I are in need of a little coffee.” He gestures to the ambulance on the street, Tyler waving at me through the window. “What are you doing here?” he asks.

“Ummm,” I’m about to explain myself when my dad exits the front door, meeting us on the small porch. He stops when he sees Theo, and ducks his head down, completely ignoring us as he rapidly walks down the stairs to his fancy sports car parked on the street.

“What was he doing here?” Theo asks, his eyes following my dad, watching as he drives away.

“He- uh,” I stutter. “He wouldn’t stop calling and texting me, and I was fed up. So I decided to come and hear what he had to say... while also giving him a piece of my mind.”

“Oh really?” Theo’s eyes glint with humor. “And how did that go?”

“Well, uh,” I avert my gaze. “You aren’t invited to family events, because Hunter is scared of you.” Theo chortles, scrubbing a hand down his face. “I told him that I wouldn’t be either. That he was free to invite me, but I won’t be there.”

“Peyton...” Theo starts, and I can see the guilt starting to mar his beautiful face.

“No,” I stop, resting my hand on his chest. “I don’t want to go anywhere that you aren’t invited. I told him off, telling him the things Hunter said at the wedding, why you stood up for me on multiple occasions.”

“I don’t want to come between you and your family,” he says, though I can tell, he’s just saying it because it’s what he thinks he should say.

“You’re my family. You and your parents, Sam, Owen, everyone. I don’t care about them, this is the family that I want. You guys chose me, and I’ve never felt more loved in my life. And I’m choosing you back.”

Theo’s arms wrap around me, and his forehead rests on mine. “You’re a part of our crazy, messy, chaotic, loving family whether you like it or not.” he chuckles, pressing his lips to mine. “I love you.”

“I love you,” I answer.

“I’m so proud of you,” he whispers. “You are so fucking strong, you know that, right?”

“I’m starting to.” I pull away, running my hands through my hair. “God, that felt so fucking good,” I chuckle. “I think I’m coming down from another adrenaline high. He was so shocked, stunned silent that I was standing up for myself, for you. He had no idea what to do!” I laugh, sounding slightly

maniacal.

“You did it,” Theo chuckles.

“I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“I wasn’t even there. It was all you.”

“No,” I shake my head. “You’ve helped me become a better person, stronger, confident, you’ve helped me in more ways than you know.”

Theo looks up to the sky, taking a deep breath. “While I appreciate your thanks, it’s not necessary. You, you did all the hard work. You’re the one who went through the pain of becoming stronger.”

His words send tears to my eyes, and I jump into his arms, my legs flying around his waist as I hug him tightly. Just then, Tyler honks the horn of the ambulance, and I slide down Theo’s body.

“Shit, we must be getting a call,” Theo says, looking back to Tyler, who is waving his arm at him. “I gotta go, darling. I’ll see you tonight?”

“Yeah, come over when you get off.” I wave as he blows me a kiss, running down the stairs to the ambulance. Tyler turns the sirens and lights on, and they are flying down the road in seconds.

THEO

Fuck, I am so fucking proud of her.

As I walk up the stairs to her apartment, I'm still radiating with joy from the earlier interaction with Peyton. She has no idea how incredible she really is. I knock on her door, looking down at my feet to see the weathered welcome mat. I haven't knocked on her door for weeks now, but I wanted to throw her off a bit.

"Just a sec!" she calls. I can hear her shuffling behind the door, and footsteps running down the hall and then closer as they reach the front door. The door flings open, and Peyton stands in front of me, her hair curled and pinned, makeup done up, with siren red lipstick on her lips, reminding me of the night of Sam's bachelorette party.

She's wearing a silky baby pink robe, her eyes wide when she sees that it's me at the door. "Why the hell did you knock?"

I don't answer, instead bursting through the door, one hand cupping the back of her head, slamming my lips into hers. The other hand falls to her hip, fisting the silky material there. I kick the door shut behind me, not caring about the fact that I'm probably covered in red lipstick. Her wanton moans into my mouth send all the blood in my body rushing to my cock, my hips pressing against hers as I walk her back into the entryway wall, trying to get as close to her as I can.

I pull back reluctantly, and Peyton's eyes are still wide, this time with a lustful haze to them. "Well, hello to you too," she giggles. "Why did you knock?"

"I wanted the element of surprise," I answer. "Clearly, it worked." My

hand drops from her hair to the silky robe. My fingers toy with the hem, dragging it down between her cleavage. “What’s underneath this?” I question.

Peyton lifts up onto her tiptoes, kissing up my neck to whisper in my ear. “Nothing...”

“Fuckkk,” I groan, the hand at her hip gripping the fabric tighter.

“I was going to surprise you, too, but I couldn’t answer the door naked,” she giggles.

I practically growl at the thought of someone else seeing my girl naked. “No, we can’t have that.” I tilt my head down, kissing up her jawline, nipping at her ear. “Tell me, darling. What did you have planned?”

Peyton sighs, her body sagging into mine as she relaxes into my touch. She mumbles something, her brain obviously focused on other things. “Words, darling. Use them.”

“I-” she melts. “I was going to be laying on the couch, waiting for you.”

“Naked?”

“Mhmm,” she moans. “I want you.”

“I want you more,” I say, leading her down the hall to her bedroom. She stumbles slightly, giggling when I pick her up so she doesn’t fall. I toss her onto the bed, and she bounces, her hair fanning around her head. Her thighs automatically part, giving me the perfect view of her already glistening pussy. “Fuckk, Peyton, you’re killing me.”

She shrugs. “I was excited for you to get home.” She tugs at the tie around her waist, and the robe falls open, revealing her perfect breasts, complete with her pink rosy nipples, already peaked. My mouth practically waters as she lays there, practically offering herself to me. An idea forms in the back of my mind when her hand grips the tie, swinging it around playfully.

Kicking my boots off, I quickly peel off my uniform, stripping down to my boxers and undershirt. I hover over the edge of the bed, my hips resting between her warm thighs. My hand swipes the tie from her fingers, sliding it out from under her. “I think we might use this instead of our ropes tonight,” I whisper, leaning back to reach over to the nightstand to grab her blindfold and a condom. I toss the two items to the bed, climbing over her and straddling her hips. I slide the robe off her, and she rolls slightly so I can pull it out from under her, tossing it to the floor behind me.

“Hands,” I order. She complies immediately, falling into her submissive

role so easily. I use the silky fabric to tie her hands together, and raise them up above her head. “Keep them there.” She nods eagerly. “Do you want the blindfold tonight?”

“No, I want to see you,” she whispers.

“Good,” I answer. “I want that too.”

I toss the blindfold aside, and begin my perusal of her body, kissing her everywhere, getting her nice and ready for me. She’s so responsive, gasping and crying out with each touch and flick of my tongue as I move down her body. When I reach the apex of her thighs, I change it up, sliding my finger deep into her soaked pussy, and she immediately clenches around me as I pump in and out of her.

“Feel good?” I coax, listening to her cries of pleasure as I add another finger, using the thumb of my other hand to strum her clit.

“Yes,” she cries out, her hips writhing against mine, searching for more pleasure.

“Need more?”

“Yes,” she answers. I chuckle at her eagerness, withdrawing my fingers from her. “What? No!” she cries, her hands leaving where I’d placed them above her head to grip my hair.

“I thought I told you to keep your hands there, darling.” I tsk.

“I’m sorry,” she whimpers.

“Luckily for you, I’m still going to make you come.” I stand up, peeling my shirt and boxers off, before I open the drawer of her nightstand again, pulling out the light pink clit stimulator I’ve seen, but never used on her. I look to her, asking for her approval. “Can I?”

“Yes,” she breathes, her face lighting up with anticipation.

“Good girl. Hands above your head.” When she does as I say, I press the button down, waiting for the vibrator to turn on. When the soft humming starts, I press it to her clit, and she immediately tries to jerk away, her hips jumping as she tries to scoot back.

“Ah!” she cries. “It’s too much.” She squirms again, her hips writhing.

With one hand, I press a palm flat against her stomach to hold her down, and with my other hand, slide two fingers into her slick heat. “You can take it,” I croon. “Give it to me, darling.” I pump my fingers methodically inside her, focusing on her g spot, waiting for her to give in to her orgasm.

“Fuck!” she screams as her body trembles, her pussy clenching rhythmically around my fingers. When her orgasm ends, I toss the vibrator

aside, and slide my fingers from her, sucking my fingers off like a lollipop. Peyton's eyes widen, "Oh my fuck," she curses under her breath.

I tear open the foil packet, sliding the condom down my painfully hard cock, and when she looks down at where our bodies will connect, and nods, I slide deep inside her roughly, my pelvis connecting with hers. "Shit," I hiss as she tightens her legs around my waist. I lean down, taking her banded hands from above her head, and sliding them over mine so she can hold onto my neck. I thrust in and out of her, loving the intimate connection between us, her eyes on me as we move.

I can already feel my climax building at the base of my spine, my nerves tingling in anticipation. "One more," I grit out through clenched teeth. She shakes her head as I pound into her. "You're going to give me one more, darling." I slide my hand down to her clit, teasing it.

Almost immediately, I feel her second orgasm building up, heightening and climbing, and when she falls over the edge, it triggers my own, the waves of my pleasure intertwining with hers. I collapse onto her as my cock fills the condom, our breaths heavy and in sync. "God, you're amazing." I take her hands from around my neck, untying the tie around them, swiping a hair from her eyes.

Her fire engine red lipstick is smeared all over her lips and cheeks, and I can only imagine my face looks about the same as hers. As if reading my mind, she giggles, her thumb swiping at my lips. "Oops, I got lipstick all over you."

"I could give two shits," I answer, kissing her again, rubbing my face all over hers, further smearing the lipstick.

"Red is a good look on you," Peyton says with a giggle.

I slide my cock out of her, and dispose of the condom. "Come on, let's clean up, and watch a movie." I offer my hand to her, tugging her up off the disheveled bed.

PEYTON

THREE MONTHS LATER

“Sam, get off the table!” Lainey yells as Sam scream sings on top of the coffee table, her wine bottle acting as a microphone.

“Never!” Sam screams.

It’s girls’ night, the first one since Sam’s wedding, and Lainey announcing her pregnancy. We haven’t had one since Sam’s bachelorette party, so it’s long overdue. Of course, Lainey can’t drink, so Sam declared that she would drink for her, which is why she’s been singing on the coffee table for the last five minutes.

The boys are at Sweeney's having a drink. Apparently, there was some hotshot hockey player spotted locally on an off weekend from travel, with word that he recently bought a property on the lake, so they are on a “stake out,” as they called it.

I told Theo he was fangirling, and he scoffed. I earned a nice swat on the butt for that, which only made me want another. That ended up being fun.

Mallory and I are sitting on the couch, sipping our wine, teetering on the edge of tipsy, heading straight towards drunk, and watching this whole event go down. Felicity is at home with Mal’s mom, so she’s baby free for the night.

The front door opens, and Renee, Lisa, and Mary walk in, each carrying a plastic bag filled with snacks. “Hiiii!” I screech, throwing myself off the couch and into their arms.

In the time since the Fourth of July, I’ve spent as much time with Mary and Lisa, as I have with Theo, and my friends. We’ve gone out for coffee, shared more stories, shed lots and lots of tears, but I feel as though I’m closer

to my mom than ever before. Nana has joined a few times as well, and has loved reconnecting with them.

I squeeze Mary and Lisa tightly, before moving onto Renee, her soft smile something I will never tire of. Her arms wrap around me tightly, and when she pulls back, she spots her daughter dancing on the coffee table. “You know,” she murmurs, tucking me into the crook of her arm. I lean into her embrace, feeling the comfort she unknowingly brings. “I thought when she was in high school she was crazy, but now... married Sam gives sixteen-year-old Sam a run for her money.”

“Mom!” Lainey yells, holding her hands up to try and prevent Sam from falling, her small baby bump visible in the deep orange jumpsuit she’s wearing. “Can you help, please? I’m running out of ideas.”

Renee laughs, shaking her head, before seemingly putting on her best Mom voice. “Samantha Porter, get down right now before you crack your head open!”

To my utter surprise, Sam stops, and hops off the table immediately, crossing her arms, and dropping to the couch with a pout. “That’s not my name,” she grumbles. “It’s Samantha Coleman.”

Renee sighs dejectedly, walking over and sitting next to her, wrapping her in a side hug. “Fine, Samantha Coleman.”

“Thank you,” Sam says with a giddy grin. “Did you bring snacks?”

“Of course we did,” Renee answers, waving over Mary and Lisa, who dump the contents of their bags to the coffee tables. We all dig in, eating our weight in junk food, laughing and enjoying the presence of each other.

These people are the best family I’ve ever been given, and I’ll never stop being thankful for them. I’m still processing a lot of grief, and every once in a while struggle with insecurity over feeling wanted, but of course, Theo is there to help me every step of the way. I’ve leaned on my friends and found family more than ever.

As we settle down for the evening, everyone’s phones start to buzz in sync. We each open the messages sent in the group message, to find a picture of Theo, Joe, Owen, Colin, and Tyler standing with some random dude, all looking giddy as fuck to be there.

“Oh my god!” Sam screeches. “They actually met him!”

“Who is it?” I ask, still looking at the picture.

“It’s that professional hockey player! The one that bought a mansion on Willow Lake!” Sam smacks her forehead, then rubs it, like she’s trying to

force a memory out. “What the hell is his name?”

“Adam Davison!” Lainey cheers.

“Yes! I can’t believe they actually met him.” Sam’s staring at the picture again.

I do my own looking again, noting that the hockey player looks like he’s genuinely happy to be there. He doesn’t look like a professional hockey player, he looks like a regular guy. But then again, he is in a small town bar. I zoom into the picture again, focusing on the person standing off to the side, staring wistfully at Adam. It’s a young woman, probably about my age. She has long wavy blonde hair, with thick curves. I feel like I know her for some reason.

“It’s Grace!” I realize.

“Huh?” Mallory asks, leaning over to see my phone where I’ve zoomed in on the picture. “Holy crap, it is! It’s Grace, the girl we met at your bachelorette party, Sam.”

“Awww, she was so sweet,” Sam croons. “Peyton, didn’t you get her number?”

“Yeah, I did. Things have been so crazy I forgot to text her and see if she wanted to meet up. I should do that.”

“Didn’t she say she was a teacher?” Lainey asks, brows raised.

“No...” I think back to that night, trying to sift through my drunken memories. “I think she’s a guidance counselor.”

“Yes, that’s it!”

My phone buzzes with another text, this one from only Theo, not in the group message. It’s a picture, a selfie, with Grace.

Theo: Look who I found! She wants you to text her, says she’d love to meet up.

Me: We were just talking about her! We saw her in the picture of you with the hockey player. Tell her I will text her right now.

Theo: I think there’s something between Grace and Adam. I can’t quite place it, but it’s something.

Me: Ooooh a little flirtationship?!

Theo: Darling, I have no idea what that means.

Me: I’ll tell you later.

Me: Miss you.

Theo: I'll pick you up in an hour.

Me: I'm a little tipsy.

Me: I love youuuuu

Me: Sooooo much

Me: Especially when you tie me up, and

"Peyton!" Mallory covers my phone with her hand, hissing in my ear. "Your future mother in law is sitting right next to you, do you really want to be texting that right now?"

"Oops," I say, hiccuping. "Maybe I'm a little more than tipsy."

"I think so."

AS PROMISED, Theo picks me up an hour later. After taking an additional hour to show everyone the pictures the boys took with Adam, we are finally headed home.

"Did you have a fun night?" Theo asks after we're settled on my living room couch watching a rerun of some late night show.

"I did," I say, burrowing my head into his chest.

"I was thinking..." Theo drawls.

"Well that's never good," I tease. Theo laughs, his chest rumbling under my head. His fingers tickle my armpit, making me shriek and flail.

"I'm being serious," Theo says.

"Okay, fine." I gesture between us. "The floor is yours."

"I was wondering if you wanted to move in together," he says. "I mean, it makes sense. I spend most of my time here anyway, I keep clothes here," he babbles, his cheeks burning red. "I mean, not saying we have to live here, we could go to my place, or even someplace new. It makes sense."

My own cheeks flush, whether it be from the wine, or his words, probably both, and a giddy smile breaks out on my face. Theo looks over at me, staring at me for a long moment.

"Uh.." He waves a finger in my direction. "What's that face? Is that a no? It's too soon, isn't it. Crap, I overstepped, forget I said anything."

I reach out, resting my palm on his chest, halting him. "No, it's a yes," I whisper, kissing him quickly. "It's an absolutely, yes, please!"

“Really?”

“Of course! I’ve been thinking about it too, but I wasn’t sure how to ask. I mean, really, when was the last time you slept at your place?”

“Probably the night before Sam’s rehearsal dinner,” he answers.

“Exactly. It makes sense.”

“So, we’re moving in together?” His voice is so cute, and full of hope.

“Yes, we are.” I kiss him sweetly. “Look at us making all these big adult decisions.” Theo laughs as he kisses me back.

“I’m so excited for our life. It’s you and me, darling.”

“You and me,” I whisper, ready to start the next chapter.

EPILOGUE

PEYTON-TWO YEARS LATER

There's a loud clatter as something falls, and I hear Theo curse under his breath. "Darling, where's the broom?" Theo calls from the bedroom of our new house.

"In my hands," I call back with a laugh. Theo strides into the kitchen where I'm sweeping a pile of cinnamon up after I dropped it taking it out of the moving box. "Why?" Theo grumbles something under his breath. "What was that?" I tease.

"I dropped a picture, and the frame shattered." He sounds genuinely upset.

"Which one?"

"The one from Sam and Owen's wedding."

"Well, is the picture okay?"

"Yeah," he says.

"Then it's no biggie, we'll get another frame." I sweep up the remnants of cinnamon, and hand over the broom to him.

Theo and I have officially been together for two years now, and that picture is my daily reminder of just how much I love him. He's been there for me, through every endometriosis flare up, every weak moment, every tear of sadness, or tear of joy.

Just like I've been there for him, through every nightmare, every back spasm, or PTSD episode. He's still going to therapy, some months more often than others. Even if he never fully gets rid of them, it's nice to know that he's trying to stay on top of them, and take care of his mental health.

We lived in my small apartment until we bought this house, ironically just

a few houses down from Sam and Owen. When we started looking at houses, we both said we wanted to look for something not right next to everyone else, but when this one came on the market, we couldn't help but fall in love. It's old, but it has a historical charm that I love. The floors are creaky, but it has beautiful character. Despite being old, it's updated nicely, and even has central air conditioning, and a dishwasher, my two necessities. It's a three bed, two bath, with a fenced in backyard. Theo's determined to get a dog in the next week, but I've tried to convince him to wait at least until there aren't boxes everywhere.

"Surprise!" The front door opens, and I'm not surprised to see Sam and Owen heading into our house. Sam waddles toward me with a bouquet of flowers in her hand, and embraces me in a tight hug, which is hard to do with her huge, eight-months-pregnant belly. "I come bearing flowers."

"I see that," I chuckle. "Hey, Owen," I give him a quick side hug before heading into the kitchen to find a vase for the flowers.

After the very first night Theo bought me flowers, back before we were even officially dating, he made sure to buy me a vase. Granted, it was a cheap plastic one, but I love it all the same. More so, I love the memory along with it.

"How's my nephew?" I ask, filling the vase with water, nodding to Sam's belly.

"Ugh, the little asshole won't stop kicking my bladder." She presses down gently on her stomach. "Hear that, kid? Knock it off."

"I don't know whether to be scared, or excited that the kid is probably going to be just like you," I tease.

"Oh no, you should be very afraid. He's going to be a heathen, I guarantee it."

Theo comes back through the living room, carrying the broom, and dust pan, full of glass. "What happened?" Sam cries.

"Broke a picture frame." Theo grumbles, dumping the glass into the trash. He greets Owen, and kisses Sam on the cheek. "I'll be back in a few. Owen, want to help me with something, quick?"

"Sure thing," Owen says, following Theo.

"I wonder what's gotten into him," I say. "He's really bummed he accidentally broke that picture frame. I mean, it's just a frame, we can replace it."

Sam shrugs. "No idea. Hey, have you heard from your dad at all lately?"

I shake my head. “Nope, outside of the obligatory birthday text a few weeks ago, nothing.”

“Wow,” she murmurs.

“I’m okay with it, really.” And I am. After our fallout at Coffee Talk almost two years ago, he didn’t contact me for six months, and I was fine with it. Sure, it hurt a little, but it didn’t hurt as much as the pain he caused any time I saw him. He texts me every holiday, offering an invite to a party or event, and every time, I ask if Theo can come with, as we are a package deal. The answer is always no. So therefore, my answer is no, too.

They haven’t tried to get to know him, or see how incredible of a person he is, and that’s what hurts the most.

“Peyton, can you come here please?” Theo’s voice calls from what sounds like our bedroom.

“One sec!” I reply. “Be right back,” I say to Sam, who offers me a thumbs up, a sly smile creeping on her face. I pass Owen as I walk down the hall, and he offers me a broad smile, which is... unlike him.

When I enter our bedroom, I’m surprised to see Theo, kneeling on the floor, with pictures of us throughout the two years of our relationship scattered all around the floor, with flower petals placed delicately around them.

And suddenly, I think I realize what’s happening.

“What are you doing?” I ask anyway, my heart pounding rapidly in my chest. Theo looks at me, his blue eyes shining brightly, his hand shaking as he holds it out to me.

“Come here,” he whispers. I notice that next to him is the picture of us at Sam and Owen’s wedding, laying on the floor without the frame. So that’s why he was so upset about the frame breaking. When I reach him, he takes my hand in his, his warm hand instantly comforting me the way it always has.

“Peyton, we’ve come a long way from me offering to be your fake boyfriend,” he begins. “I love you so much, and I love the life that we have made for ourselves. Things aren’t always easy, but I know that you are the one I’m meant to be with. I love our easy nights at home, and our crazy nights out with friends. I love learning new things about you every day, and I look forward to loving you, wanting you, and teaching you, every day for the rest of our lives. Peyton, darling, will you marry me?”

The tears that flood my eyes are blocking my sight of this beautiful,

amazing man, so I do my best to blink them away, still in shock of the moment before me. I swipe at my eyes with my free hand, nodding frantically.

“Use your words, darling,” Theo chuckles. Of course, him saying that makes me weak in the knees, he knows that.

“Yes,” I cry. “Yes, I’ll marry you.” I lean down to him, kissing his cheeks, his lips, his nose, everywhere. “I love you, I love you.”

Theo slides the ring on my finger, a simple white diamond on a twisted gold band, glittering in the sunlight streaming through our bedroom window. He stands, lifting me into his arms, my legs flying around his waist. He spins me around in a circle, letting out a whoop, so similar to the night I agreed to be his girlfriend for real. Things are really coming full circle today, and I’m so in love, so happy with how my life has turned out.

The door flies open behind us, revealing Sam and Owen, as well as the rest of our friends and family. Everyone cheers, offering us hugs, kisses, and congratulations.

Later, once things have calmed down, Sam pulls me aside. “So quick question. When Theo proposed, what did he mean when he said he offered to be your fake boyfriend?”

I can’t help but laugh, and catch my fiancée’s eye across the room. “It’s... kind of a long story, but you know most of it.”

And there will be plenty of time to tell that story, should we decide to.

Theo blows me a kiss, and my heart flutters like it did the first time I saw him.

Want more Cinder Valley? [Click here to get a glimpse seven years into the future!](#)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Well, here we are. Book Three of the Cinder Valley series is officially done.

This book was hard. Peyton was a very emotional character for me to write, and I don't think I really realized how complex their story was going to be until I started writing it. They really threw me for a loop. I knew all along that Peyton was going to be Caroline's daughter, but I had no idea how I was going to tie it all in. When I wrote their outline, Peyton was close to her dad and step-family. Then, when I started writing, like literally writing the first page, I knew, that the story was going to be different. They strayed from the outline more times than I can count, and looking back at my original notes is honestly pretty comical at how different their story ended up being.

With all that being said, there is no way I could have written this without the support of so many people.

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My parents: Thank you for understanding, and not being mad at me like I thought you might be when I told you I write spicy books. I didn't realize I needed your support on this journey, but I do. I love you. ~Pie

ALSO BY SAYLOR ANN

Cinder Valley Series

Tip Of My Tongue-Lainey & Colin

How Do I Tell You? -Mallory & Tyler

Give Me A Minute- Theo & Peyton

Minnesota Blue Herons Hockey Series

TBA- Grace and Adam

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Saylor Ann is a born and raised Minnesotan who loves to write books based on the small town she grew up in. Her books are sweet, heartfelt, and sexy, with relatable characters.

As a child, she was an avid fiction reader, which evolved into a deep love for romance novels and the community surrounding them. She recently discovered a passion for putting her ideas into writing and decided to pursue her childhood dream of becoming an author.

She spends time with her family and friends when she's not writing, especially on the lakes or outdoors in the summer.

Follow Saylor Ann on Facebook, Instagram, and Goodreads for book updates, teasers, and future releases!

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