

Wherever We Go Series

Just
YOU
& ME

Y. V. LARSON

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WHEREVER WE GO

Y.V. LARSON



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Trigger Warnings

I'm so thrilled you're here!

Please check your triggers. Your mental health is important to me.

This book is intended for a mature audience of 18+.

Sexual content (including under the influence of alcohol), references to domestic violence (including flashbacks), PTSD, trauma responses (mother & daughter), nightmares, estranged familial relations, references to childhood emotional neglect, references to childhood abuse, references to teen pregnancy, violence, and gun violence.

I'll add a few more details in the Author's Note.

If you need a more detailed list, don't hesitate to reach out via email or social media!

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Author's Note

POSSIBLE SPOILERS

If you are still with me, then there are a few details I would like to add! This is an M MMMF romance, meaning everyone is together. This entire series will be since it's my favorite trope, so heads up! *wink wink*

This is standalone but will be **heavily** interconnected with the following books. Each family gets their HEA, and I promise you will get to see them live it in the following books.

Rylee's story is one filled with the struggles of being a single mom on the run from an abusive relationship.

Rylee is also a young author who battles through some negative aspects of being a writer. Rylee's emotions over negative reviews and self-confidence in her work are something I feel should be mentioned as a sensitive subject. This might be uncomfortable as a reader and a fellow author, so please keep this in mind. Rylee's thoughts and feelings during these scenes are my own, meaning they are *real* for me. Other authors may feel a different way, and that is okay! Just be kind, everyone.

In the trigger warnings, I mentioned the daughter in the story will have trauma responses. Layla is a five-year-old girl who witnessed her mom being abused for as long as she can remember. While she was not abused herself, Layla has reservations when it comes to men and people upsetting her mom. Layla defends Rylee more than she hides from what scares her. Please keep this sensitive topic in mind before you begin reading, as Layla is a child living her trauma responses on the page.

Last thing! I added sexual content under the influence in the trigger warnings as well. This may also be a sensitive topic, so please beware that while both parties are adults and very kind to each other during this single encounter, they are under the influence of alcohol.

As always, remember that everyone is different and responds to life in unique and individual ways. Happy reading!

Dedicated To...

The strength it takes each and every individual to survive.

Chapter One

RYLEE



“We there yet?”

I don’t fight the smile that spreads across my lips. “You’re in luck, Little Bug. *This* time, yes, we are almost there.” Layla’s answering squeal makes my ears cringe.

“When we swim in the big lake?” My eyes flit to the rearview mirror to see her nose plastered up against the window.

My eyes warm in tune with my heart. “Ocean, say ocean.” A giggle bubbles beneath my ribcage when my five-year-old butchers her pronunciation. “We will go swimming in the ocean soon.” If she keeps hearing the word, hopefully, it will help her learn how to say it. “Let’s go home first. What do you think?”

All the airy joy I was feeling plummets when I catch sight of her furrowed brows above her crystal blue eyes. A mirror of my own.

“Not Daddy.” Layla’s little voice is firm and absolutely not a question.

Fighting back the tears that threaten to distract me from the busy roads of Charleston, I try to be grateful for how mature my daughter is. It sucks how aware she was during her first years of life. Maybe I’m a terrible person for being relieved that my little girl wants nothing to do with her dad, but her feelings are valid.

“No Daddy. I promise, Bug. We are going to our new home, kind of like the last one. With this one, we can go to the

big ocean whenever you want!” My voice is as cheerful as the smile I flash at her.

It’s a weak attempt to keep the guilt from eating at me. It’s always there. Just below the surface, festering on any sign of weakness I show it. But I can’t. Layla has seen enough of my tears to last a lifetime. We left so she would never have to watch her mommy cower and cry ever again.

“Yeah! Beach!”

Just like that, she has me huffing a laugh once again, her speech sounding more like *bitch*.

Cranking the volume on the *Moana* soundtrack, I hum along to the beat, enjoying the salty breeze dancing with my freshly colored locks. White curls tickle the edge of my vision, Layla jamming to her favorite songs in her car seat. Eyes wide, she takes in the winding streets of our new neighborhood in South Carolina.

Excitement and giddiness brighten her teeny features when I park. Our new little townhome is just outside of the heart of Charleston. A quiver in my chin forces me to take a deep breath. She amazes me every day with how accepting she is.

We have moved every few months for a little over a year now, and each time, she’s welcomed the change with open arms and high pitch appreciation. Unfortunately, we can’t keep going like this much longer.

I have *maybe* enough left of the money my Nanna left me to get us by for two more moves unless this next release does well. *God, I hope my readers really love this one. We need it.*

“Mommy, look! Pink hair!”

Releasing a sigh of tension, I tuck my copper flyaways behind my ear and unbuckle my seatbelt. Out of the car, my shoulders relax as a woman approaches us. Pink bob bouncing, sundress swaying, she skips over to the car with a lanyard of keys swinging from her fingers.

I open the back door, ducking to unstrap Layla before setting her down beside me in the driveway. Her thrilled

chatter at meeting someone new is background noise to my assessment of the stranger approaching us.

“Hi!” The woman thrusts a dainty hand out. “I’m Gabby Harper; you must be the new tenants.”

Giving her hand a quick shake, I nod and take a step further away without making it obvious that I don’t like her so close to us. “Yes, I’m Rylee.” I smile down at my bouncing girl holding onto the hem of my dress. “This is my daughter, Layla.”

My hand gives an involuntary twitch when the woman suddenly bends at the waist with her hands on her knees. “Hi, Layla! It’s so wonderful to meet you, sweetie!”

Thankfully, Layla doesn’t seem to dislike Gabby, which is made evident when she rambles about the drive from Mississippi. The woman bursts into a fit of laughter when my sweet girl butchers the tongue twister. Twining my fingers with Bug’s, I allow my eyes to trail away from her and take in the cream-colored townhome. White shutters are framed with pink flowers in the late morning sunlight, the lawn freshly cut and bright green.

This was a decision I made after Layla went to bed one night. Alone with my thoughts of wanting to give her everything this life has to offer; I decided the East Coast would be perfect.

So, I splurged wanting Layla to swim in the ocean and come home coated in sand to a comfortable, fancy home. We haven’t been staying in dumps, luckily. Nanna’s money has been used for more than just an escape. Layla has had the adventure of a lifetime this past year.

“Would you like a tour?” Gabby’s twinkly voice snaps me out of my thoughts.

“No, thank you. We will just take the keys.”

I swear her entire five-foot-two frame turns into a representation of confusion and concern. I would feel bad for being so curt, but I can’t deal with someone in my new home right away.

“Okay.” I will admit that her muted tone does grate on my nerves, since I’m the one who dimmed her spirit. “Here you go!” Bright smile back in place, if not a little tight, she hands the keys over.

“Thank you, Gabby. Do I need to sign anything?”

Bright hair sways with a shake of her head. “Nope. You took care of all of that online, and we have all the paperwork I need. Also, your ID matches your face, so all set!” Bending at the waist, she wiggles her fingers. “See you later, sweetheart.”

Then she’s gone in a flash. I wouldn’t have been surprised if she left fairy dust and rainbows in her wake.

Shit. I’m being way too bitchy even for my own mind to deal with. The prospect of unpacking and settling in is already exhausting me.

“Gosta pee, Mommy.”

It’s like a sparkle of light breaks through my dark aura, brightening my smile until it becomes achingly real. “Let’s go, Bug!” Dropping to a knee, I snag her little arm and loop it around the front of my neck. “Oof! You are getting so big,” I tease when her little body hops up onto my back with a giggle of joy.

“YAH!” A snort slips free when her sandaled foot gently nudges my side, urging me on like a steed. “Make the noise, Mommy.”

“Neigh!” I giddy up with a skip to the door before unlocking it. My sweet girl barely holds her bladder in check as I rush her through the home in search of a toilet for her to do her business.

With her tiny arms wrapped gently around my neck and silly antics, my heart swells with glee. Even if we don’t stay long, we will make the best memories.

With Layla by my side, elation is an easy feeling to melt into.



Sweat. So much sweat.

My savior comes hustling into the living room, donning a polka-dotted green one-piece suit and goggles. “Swimming!” I tilt my head, taking in my precious little blondie, and cringe when a drop of sweat stings my eye.

Hopping to my feet, I boop her nose. “What a good idea. Are you hungry?” Layla bats my hand away and scrunches her face up in indignation. Trusting that I won’t poke her again, she tilts her head just like I do, truly thinking about my question.

“A little.” Her furrowed brows tell me she’s worried I will cancel beach plans. I drop a kiss on her head and hold out my hand for hers.

“Let’s try to pee, then we can stop for a snack.” Her owl eyes light up, making me rush the reminder out, “Pee first!”

Once I’ve nudged her into my ensuite, I scramble through one of my bags of clothes, trying to find a swimsuit. Only finding a two-piece, my tummy cramps with anxiety. *I really wish I could find something with more coverage.*

Gripping the tiny coral fabric in my hands, I quickly change and throw a white dress over it that isn’t drenched in sweat. Just as I walk out of my closet, Bug exits the bathroom and points to the toilet.

“I peed. Come look.” I give her a soft smile and check to make sure that she did, in fact, use the potty.

“Good job, baby! Go ahead and flush.”

After she accomplishes her task, she rises on her stepstool to look into the mirror with me. “Can we match?” A contemplative look crosses her features as she tugs on her shoulder-length curls.

“Space buns?”

My heart skips a beat when her feet lift off the step stool in a thrilled jump. “Yes! Space buns, please.”

“Layla, be careful, please.” My words are soft but firm. I won’t hesitate to guide her when she is endangering herself. For a five-year-old, she is very independent and trustworthy, making being a single mom much easier. But she’s still so fragile, with so much to learn.

“Sorry.” Her sheepish look and apology stabs at the guilt inside of me before I give her cheek a raspberry.

A short time later, I lock up behind us with a beach bag slung over my shoulder. We’re both rockin’ a pair of space buns on top of our heads, and we even found Layla her own white dress to go over her swimsuit.

Time to see what our new city has to offer.

Chapter Two

LEO



Muscles bunch beneath the tight fabric, followed by a huff of laughter. *He's caught me staring.* Stifling a groan, I shuffle in my booth seat, trying to alleviate the tightness in my shorts.

“Naughty!” Marcus gasps with a wicked smirk. “At work of all places, Leo. So dirty.” I purse my lips, trying to hold back my own smirk when he tsks at me for checking him out. Nobody can blame me either; he has women and men ogling his toned, tanned body everywhere he goes. Short black hair, dark eyes, broad shoulders, and a shit-eating grin. The world never stood a chance against my boyfriend.

I narrow my eyes, gearing up to sass him back, yet I’m robbed of my comeback when one of my baristas places my order in front of me. “Here you go, Mr. Lewis.” The cheery voice and ponytail of blonde hair that slap me across the face is enough to make me lean away.

The obvious caress on my forearm has Marcus snapping to attention. “Thanks, that will be all.” With a huff and an irritated glance at the imposing man opposite me, Candice flaunts her way back behind the espresso bar. “Ugh, she couldn’t even be classy about it. You were obviously uncomfortable. I hate how people ignore—”

“Marcus, it’s okay. Thank you for shooin’ her away, though.” Soothing him while trying to get my thundering heart under control is tough, but I’m thankful he picked up on how I was feeling.

“Yeah, I don’t appreciate how all these sorority and frat boys drool all over you when you come in.” Same, but that’s what being the owner is good for; I don’t have to be here unless absolutely necessary.

I truly cannot hold my snort in, causing my iced coffee to bubble out my nose. Wincing at the sting, I wipe away my mess. “That’s rich! I swear, babe, you have hordes of people tripping over themselves whenever you walk by.”

“Fine, I’ll trip them into the puddle of drool that follows you around. Deal?”

“Deal.” I reach for a kiss across the table, my heart fluttering when Marc meets me halfway. Just as my back hits the cushion behind me, the door alerts my staff about the arrival of new customers. It’s the twin set of giggles that draws my undivided attention, though.

Both of our heads twist to the woman walking through the coffee shop with a little girl skipping up to the display of pastries at the same time. The little blonde can’t stop bouncing around, an aura of happiness radiating from her almost four-foot height.

The woman, though. *I have never seen a more beautiful smile in my entire fucking life.* Cherry red lips, high cheekbones, and the grin she aims at the little one is so wide I can’t help but mimic it with my own. My lips curl, wanting to smile right along with this breathtaking human whose focus never diverts from the bouncing little girl.

“Mommy, look!”

My throat closes, and my chest heats like the weight of a warm blanket is wrapped around me. I can’t take my eyes off the little ball of joy pointing at all the treats in the case. I hardly hear the strangled noise Marcus makes when the copper-haired beauty bends to get a better look at all the treats.

“Who’s that?” His gravelly voice does not help the liquid fire racing through my veins. “Leo?”

“Wha—” A cough splitters out. “What?”

His eyes are still locked on the matching duo waiting at the pick-up counter. “Have they ever been in here before?”

“No. I’ve never seen them before.”

I cannot describe the sense of relief that rushes through my system when they take a seat in the corner to enjoy their goodies. Clearing my throat, I drag my gaze away from the little one munching on her croissant.

Why do I suddenly feel so protective of those two? I would do anything to keep them smiling and happy. Are they alone?

God, I sound like a creep.

“What was that?” I hiss at Marcus once his attention is back on me.

Eyes wide, he shakes his head as if to clear it. “I don’t know, babe. Should we introduce ourselves?”

My heart fucking stutters in my chest. *Is this really happening?*

Years ago, we agreed we would only open our relationship to another who spoke to us on a molecular level. We love each other. Marc is my best friend and every dream I can think of. Yet, we choose to keep communication open. As bisexual men, it’s hard to fulfill everything you could ever want. We both desire someone to hold between us that might offer something the other couldn’t.

He is mine. I am his.

We just have more love to give and receive, and that’s okay.

The first woman we have ever thought about this way comes with the cutest little girl—I’m not mad about it whatsoever.

The sound of a chair scraping on the tiles has me shooting to my feet and scrambling to keep up with Marcus. I don’t know whether I want to stop him, censor him, or beat him to the chase.

Marc's long strides make their way to their table of crumbs and laughter, only for it to fall silent when he's within a few feet. The woman's back goes ramrod straight when she spots us. The little girl shifts towards her mom, a small tremor working its way through her tiny arms.

I frown. I've never had kids react like that to us. They are usually so excited to meet new people.

I catch the hesitation in Marc's step, but he continues and rounds the table so he's not crowding the little one who moved between the woman and us.

"Bug—"

"Hi, are you new here? My name is Marcus, and this is Leo." He gestures to me as I slink my way to his side as smoothly as I can, so I don't spook either of the ladies.

"Hello. I'm Rylee." The release of her shoulders doesn't make me feel better. Rylee's voice is so curt, and her wide smile is nowhere to be seen. "This is Layla."

My eyes narrow on the beach bag hanging from her chair and the thin straps of her dress kissing her collarbone. *Are they going to the beach alone? Fuck. If they really are alone... I hope not. Maybe they are just coming back from the beach.*

A flash of fear runs through their eyes when Marcus kneels. "Hi, Layla, I love your hair." Confusion is a weak word to describe how I feel when the girl looks at Marcus with a frown of mistrust.

Not allowing him to push her, I step in as he stands beside me. "It's nice to see some new faces. I own this coffee shop." I go for a smile but am completely lost when Rylee also narrows her eyes at me.

"Oh. Is there a problem?"

"What? No! Why would you think that? I'm so sorry. We just wanted to introduce ourselves. Your happiness when you came in was infectious." I think that's the most I've spoken to anyone besides Marcus in years. I can't have her thinking anything negative about this interaction.

“Oh.” Rylee’s eyes dart down to Layla while gently stroking her back in comfort. Comforting her daughter because we upset her. “Well, it’s nice to meet you.” The smile she gives us is a polite one, nowhere near the soul-splitting one she had when they walked in.

Running a hand through my platinum locks, I clear my throat. “It was good to meet you too, Rylee and Layla.” I hate taking the dismissal for what it is, but we are making them ridiculously uncomfortable.

Snagging Marc’s arm, I drag him away as he mumbles his goodbyes, clearly befuddled by their reaction to us.

The ding of the door has my attention flying to the beautiful woman and her little girl walking around the corner of the building. Turning to Marc in complete confusion, I ask what’s on both of our minds. “What the hell just happened?”

His frown bothers the shit out of me. “I have no idea... but they both—”

“They were scared of us.”

Even if they hid it very well under their masks of determination and coldness, the fear was clear to pick up on to anyone who paid close attention. Marcus and I? Our attention was dialed into Rylee’s wary blue eyes and tense shoulders enough to spot a protective momma bear from afar. Little Layla, though? That’s a hard pill to swallow.

What happened to those girls?

Chapter Three

RYLEE



“M ommy, look!”

Seeing she has my undivided attention; Layla’s arms go above her head before plopping her booty into the few inches of water. Peals of laughter reach my ears when the water splashes her cheeks.

“Oh my goodness!” Making a split-second decision, I do the same, causing a much larger splash beside Layla.

“Ahh!” Tumbling to her side, she crawls away from me. I snort and splash her again just as she stands and stumbles her way to our set of towels.

With a little pout, she crosses her arms, taking in my shoulders shaking with humor. I sit down beside her and raise one eyebrow in her direction. I watch as her lips twitch, our stare down coming to a close when her sun-screened cheeks widen and her eyes sparkle.

I tickle Bug’s side, content to enjoy this playful afternoon with my daughter on the East Coast.

“No more splashes.” Nibbling on her lower lip, she lifts her own eyebrows, a silent demand for me to listen.

I release a loud sigh and tip my head skyward. “No more splashes,” I agree, pleased when my dramatics pull more joyful snickers from my little one.

Sipping on my coffee, I watch Layla build sandcastles while chatting away about her plans for the princesses. Princesses, who, in fact, do not need a prince, in her opinion.

This was everything I hoped for when I saw the listing to take over the last portion of someone's lease. A home filled with furniture in a safe neighborhood, the ocean within a twenty-minute drive, and a whole lot of people to disappear into.

Unfortunately, that's not what happened when we stopped at that coffee shop on the way here. I never once thought two men like that would approach us if I'm being honest. It hasn't happened before. I literally go nowhere without Layla, and most guys aren't keen on a woman with a kid.

I've noticed how Layla doesn't care for men, but we haven't really tested it out. Swallowing back emotion, I recall the way she shuffled her way closer to my side while also putting herself between me and the approaching guys.

I wonder if it was a conscious decision to do that. I would hate it if she really felt like she needed to protect me. Layla's *five*. Never once did she step between Mason and me when he was getting violent.

"Here!" She shoves a stick into my palm, forcing away the wayward thoughts. "You be a princess, okay?"

"Okay, and who are you, Bug?" Her tiny first displays a rock, and by the gleam in her eyes, she's pretty proud of her find too.

"A queen!" She nods to herself before dragging the tip of her rock in between each sandcastle she made.

I follow her lead in delivering treasure to other princesses in the neighborhood and bite my tongue when she scolds me for doing something wrong. It's Layla's game; she makes the rules, and to hell with technicality.

Five-year-old minds are fascinating when you aren't trying to shove them into a box you think makes sense.

My stomach rumbles a short time later, and a check of the time tells me we have been here for a few hours. I take a relaxing breath before broaching the subject of leaving.

"Mom, I'm hungry." *Oh, that makes this easier.*

I swipe a dusting of sand off her shoulder. “Me too. Let’s get home and have a pizza. We will come back again soon, promise.” Her response is a yawn and a shuffle to put her dress back on. “Did you have fun at the ocean, sweetie?”

Layla’s features brighten. “I did! I really loved the water.” She frowns. “The waves were a little scary, though. I don’t want to go out too far, okay?”

Hoisting our stuff over my shoulder, I grab her outstretched hand and begin our trek back to the car. “Yeah, we won’t go out far. Good plan.” She beams at the praise and recognition. “I’m so glad you had fun. You were perfect today, Layla. I’m so proud of you.”

I never hesitate to reinforce her wonderful behavior. No child of mine will ever have to wonder how I feel about them. I will never hold back positivity and love from Layla.

“Can I skip?”

I nod. “Stay close, okay? Can you tell me the rules?” I crouch and boop her nose, waiting for her to show me she remembers what to do when she’s not right next to me.

Since this is a new city, especially after a day of fun, I need the reassurance.

The nod and wide-eyed look she gives me is pure focus. “You say yellow; I come closer. When you say red, I come grab your hand. Oh! And always stay where you can see me!”

I offer her a proud nod and a smooch on the cheek. “Exactly. Go skip. I’ll follow.”

With a hoot, she kicks up sand in her wake of clumsy half skips-half jogs. I take a moment to dust off my knees and scan the area around us. A couple lying on the beach quite a ways away doesn’t send any red flags through my mind.

Neither does the surfer about ten yards away from me. His dirty blonde hair and tanned muscles threaten to ensnare my attention, but I shake it off and attempt a graceful walk through the sand behind Layla.

“She’s adorable!”

“Ah!” I jerk away from the voice that is way too close for comfort. I drop my beach bag and pray that Bug didn’t hear my shout. Hand clutched to my heaving chest, I whirl on the surfer, who I deemed safe not a moment before.

“Oh shit! I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you!” A six-pack of abs and a head graced with shaggy beach waves stand in front of me, handing over my bag that I dropped.

He’s jacked.

I’m fucked.

“It’s fine. We were just leaving.” Be a bitch, and the Adonis will walk away. It worked at the coffee shop; it will work again.

“Is that your little girl?” Golden brown eyes twinkle with humor as they track Layla. Caution skidders down my spine, eyes settling on her when she crouches and drags her fingers through the sand.

“Yes.” I nod, narrowing my eyes on him and angling my body so I can keep Layla in my peripheral.

The frown he gives me is there one moment and gone the next, replaced with a warm look of understanding. And... heat? Goosebumps follow as his gaze travels the length of my body.

Just as I go to step away, his large hand shoots out for a shake. “I’m Jude, and you are? You know, besides stunning.”

Ah, I see. He’s a playboy.

“Rylee, nice to meet you. Have a good night.” With those parting words, I twist on my heel and hustle over to Layla.

“What do you want to listen to in the car, baby?”

And just like that, she’s up and stoked to control the music. Me? I’m stuck wondering why the hell three men have approached me today who not only realized I was a mom, but actively made a nice comment about my sweet girl.

Probably just a fluke.

Nobody likes baggage.



As gently as I can, I run the comb through Layla's wet hair. Between my legs on the couch, she snuggles further into her blue blanket. The one she never sleeps without.

"Do you want braids so your hair is wavy tomorrow, Little Bug?" I catch sight of her droopy eyelids that flicker each time the bristles of the brush tickle her scalp.

"Yes, please." Her voice is soft with sleepiness and comfort.

A new *Disney* movie is playing quietly in front of us, lulling her into an early night of sleep. Usually, she would be up for at least another hour, but it's been a long day of moving and beach fun. Sorting the strands into three sets, I weave them into a French Braid flat enough it won't bother her to sleep on it. A soft snore greets my ears by the time I tie the end.

I take a deep lungful of her strawberry shampoo and run my fingers across her forehead. It's moments like these that remind me why I fought so hard to stay strong. It's all for her.

No child should ever watch their mother shatter at the hands of their dad. Layla did, though.

Leaning down, I brush my lips across her soft forehead. "I love you so much, Layla Reese Parker." Choking back the emotions that want to slip free, I shimmy so I can scoop her up.

Moving around the couch, I walk past the kitchen and up the stairs to her bedroom. Nudging her door, I dodge toys and clothes before I make it to her bed. Tomorrow we will organize. For tonight, we have sheets and a beautiful home to shield us from the world.

Unable to help myself, I drop another kiss on her brow and take one more inhale of her signature fruity scent. “Sleep well, baby.” Flicking the switch to her nightlight, I leave the door cracked and tiptoe my way down the stairs.

Air-conditioned air sends a chill down my chest when I reach the main level. Tucking my cardigan closer to my body, I scowl at the mess that is our home. Boxes and a wide array of items are strewn about.

“Tomorrow,” I murmur into the dim, warm light and sweep a blanket off a chair. Snatching my laptop off the island, I leave one light on and make my way down the hallway to my bedroom.

Settled under the covers, I crack my knuckles, my mind ready to take me away into a world of creation. My tummy twirls, the usual nerves that come with the life of being an author.

I just want to do my characters justice. To hell with what readers think. This is for me. It’s my escape before it becomes theirs.

And I’m damn proud.

Chapter Four

JUDE



Ding.
My head rolls along the back of the couch until my gaze lingers on the bright screen of my phone.

Ding.

“You going to answer that?” Raising my arm, I flip Jackson off in response. “What’s your deal, man? It’s Friday. Shouldn’t you be out?”

I groan loud and long. “That’s the problem.” *Damn, I sound like a petulant child.* The cushions dip beside me, and silence follows, his way of waiting me out. “I got turned down.”

Jack snorts and chokes on his spit. I ignore him. “She was so damn sexy. Wanna know her response to my pickup line?” My head rolls back to face him. “She told me it was nice to meet me. Then walked away.”

His scruffy, angular face twitches in an attempt to hold back his laughter. “So, you’re pouting?” I huff, closing my eyes. “I’m sure there are plenty of other women or men out there who wouldn’t run screaming from you.”

Ding.

“Ugh.” Snatching the phone off the seat beside me, I drag myself out of my dark hole of inadequacy.

Marcusss: Hey.

Marcusss: You busy?

Marcusss: Come over.

I wet my lips and type out a quick response as I get to my feet, readying to head over. Blood pumping, heat licking up my spine, my shoes are on in a flash.

“Where are you going?” Jackson’s voice is much closer, having followed me to the door.

“Marcus and Leo’s.” I pause with my hand on the doorknob. Hope sparks in my throat, pushing my next words out, “Want to join?”

All humor and curiosity drain from his toned body. “No.” Before I can muster up a plea for his company, he’s striding away and slamming a door off in the distance.

A sigh of disappointment tumbles from my lips before I can shake off the rejection. I lock the door to our home behind me and slide into my black Jeep.

Yeah, a surfer with a jeep. I know.

The drive to the guys’ house takes less than seven minutes, enough for all my fantasies to play out in my head. *Both of them.*

Slamming the car into park, I can’t get their front door unlocked fast enough. A haze of need has clouded my vision. Tossing the lock in place behind me, I shove my shoes to the side and run up the stairs.

“Marcus!” I hear Leo’s gasp down the hall.

When I reach their bedroom door, I’m pleased to see that they left the door wide open for me. Both are already naked and locked in a tight embrace that sends a wave of envy through me.

“Guess who’s here?” Marc’s scratchy voice pulls me back to the display of skin before me. I watch in fascination as he bites Leo’s pale neck in correction when his blonde boyfriend doesn’t respond.

“Wh-who?” I swear I hear a hint of hopefulness in his tone, causing my heart to take a joyful leap in my chest.

Shedding my shirt, I stride to the bed and allow my fingers to trail up his calf, muscles bunching in my wake.

“Hello, Dirty Boy,” I purr, easily slipping into the familiarity of their presence. Blue eyes land on my smirking face and immediately spark with lust and delight. My stomach twists uncomfortably at their immediate acceptance.

Dropping a kiss to his parted lips, I snatch a handful of Marcus’s dark hair and drag him down to our bubble of panting breaths. “Hi, Trouble,” I whisper, before nipping at his kiss-swollen lips.

“Jude,” he breathes, eyes completely blown.

Standing back, I grin at their eyes following the zipper of my shorts with rapt attention. “What has you so worked up?” It’s a rumble, barely audible, but they are so tuned in on me they understand.

Marc coughs and drops his forehead to Leo’s chest. “A woman today...” he trails off. I raise a brow, shucking the final pieces of clothing away and kneeling beside their hot bodies.

A split second later, Leo has my cock clutched in his grasp. A groan tumbles out of me as he strokes me just the way I like. “A woman?”

Marc’s tongue swipes my nipple with a sound of agreement. Leaning back, his eyes soften in a way that makes me want to fucking flee. “And you? You got here in record time for a Friday.”

“A woman,” I grunt back, not wanting to hash out the disappointment that had me wallowing earlier. Sensing they don’t want to talk about it either, I grip his firm ass and drag him until we are chest to chest and fucking devour his hot mouth.

He melts into my body, completely trusting me with the love of his life and his own pleasure.

“Shit,” I hiss, dragging my mouth away and look down to find Leo’s lips wrapped around the head of my cock with a wicked gleam in his eye. “You thirsty, Dirty Boy?” He nods, bobbing and swirling his tongue.

Absolutely riveted to the sight of him taking my dick into the back of his throat, I’m caught off guard by the vibrations of his own pleasure zapping up my spine. Chiseled, scruffy jaw spread wide, Marcus swallows around the base of Leo’s throbbing cock too.

Fuck, that’s sexy.

Nudging Leo, he releases me with a pop and watery eyes. “Hi, Jude.” His deep voice is a damn whisper that makes me yearn to stay here forever and bask in the affection they radiate whenever they invite me into their bedroom.

Instead of responding, I lie down beside him. I pepper his racing pulse with kisses and tweak his nipples in time with each jerk of his hips. The deep sawing of breath in and out of his lungs tells me he’s about to teeter off the edge.

With a final kiss and tug of his platinum locks, I make my way behind Marc, admiring the view of his tight ass high in the air. Fingers slicked with lube, I probe his puckered hole. “You’re going to take me here while Dirty Boy takes his boyfriend’s thick cock.” On the final word, I press in. His muscles spasming around my first two digits.

“Yes, please,” Leo murmurs, bright eyes flicking back and forth between us. Marc moans, thrusting his hips back into me, demanding more.

“Shh, I got you, Trouble.”

I ignore the way Leo frowns, and Marcus stalls for a beat when the sound of my condom wrapper ripping reaches their ears. I’m clean, but that’s not a step I’m willing to take. With anyone.

Snaking my hand around Marc’s throat, I pull his back to my front and slowly sink into his tight ass. “Oh fuck, you feel so good wrapped around me.” I release him and follow his

body down as his angry, hard cock seeks the warm hole of his partner.

My dick twitches at Leo's gasp of pleasure. I moan when his nails dig into my ass, pulling the three of us flush together in one hard thrust.

"Fuck us, Jude. *Please.*"

How could I say no to this blissed-out begging man beneath us?

"Jude, please!" All self-control I might have had snaps when Marcus pleads too. The man who can make me laugh like no other is asking for me to fuck him with a voice so deep it sends shivers skittering across my skin.

And so, I do.

I fuck my best friend into his boyfriend. The two people I couldn't live without and yet force myself to live apart from.

I ignore the connection flowing through our bodies and focus on the pleasure their bodies are giving me in place of a hookup I might have found at a bar.

"Leo! Marc!" I come with their names ripping from my soul. Not far behind me, they clutch onto each other, bodies convulsing with each pulse of bliss. Mumbles of love and praise pass between them. And for the first time since I got here, I feel like an outsider.

Clenching my jaw, I slip free and back away from the bed as quietly as I can. They are having a romantic moment, and I shouldn't be here for it. I swallow the lump forming in my throat, only for it to linger. Running a hand through my waves, I try to settle my racing heartbeat as I search for my clothes.

"Jude?" I ignore the concerned lilt of Leo's voice.

I have to go. I'm intruding now.

Boxers on and shorts buttoned, I reach for my T-shirt lying haphazardly by the door. A hand grabs my wrist, halting my pursuit of escape. I skip over the hard planes of Marc's chest and barely hold in my cringe at the soft look he's giving me.

“Stay?”

“That’s okay, thanks though.”

Moving away, I grab my shirt and close the bedroom door behind me. Not before I see the pure look of sadness dripping from Leo’s face.

I’m a bastard.

But they don’t really want me there, anyway. I’m doing them a favor.

Nobody wants a fuckboy to spend the night.

Chapter Five

RYLEE



The sun is shining, birds are chirping, and the promise of a fun Saturday lingers. So, what does that mean? My spawn won't sit still.

"Layla. A few more times, then we can go outside, okay?" I try to keep the frustration out of my voice. She huffs and throws herself against the back of her chair in annoyance. Her glare is fierce as she stares down the alphabet.

My never-ending pit of guilt gurgles to life in the pit of my stomach. Bug turned five a few weeks ago and should be starting preschool next month at the end of the summer with other kids her age. She could have started last year too. Instead, I'm dragging her from state to state and telling myself that I'm giving her the experience of a lifetime. When, in reality, I'm running and dragging her right along with me.

"One more time, then I promise we can have some fun. Deal?" I hold my breath, really hoping the compromise can end our morning battle of wills.

I watch as she draws in a deep breath, only to be interrupted by a knock at the front door. With matching frowns in place, Layla and I both turn to stare.

Who the hell is at my door at ten o'clock on a Saturday?

A beat of silence almost convinces me that whoever it was, has left. The doorbell ringing shocks me enough to jostle a high-pitched squeak out of me.

Bug's snort of laughter lightens the foreboding feelings creeping up on me. I shoot her a wink, hoping to convince

myself that I do, in fact, enjoy random strangers knocking on my door a day after moving in.

Deep breaths, Rylee.

“Stay here, please.” I keep my tone light so as not to frighten Layla before I make my way to the door. She is well-versed in listening to requests like that. Just more to add to the list of things to be mad about.

I check the peephole, uncertain of what I will find. What I see has me releasing a sigh of relief and mild annoyance before opening the door wide with a small smile.

“Good morning! Happy first weekend in your new home!”

“Gabby!” Layla yells, scrambling from her chair to get to the pink pixie standing on my doorstep.

“Hi, Layla! I bring goodies!”

Before I can say anything, my daughter snags Gabby’s dress and yanks her into our home. I would pinch the bridge of my nose, but that would be an obvious sign of my distaste. Shutting the door behind me, I turn, and my eyes immediately latch onto the mess still scattered throughout the living room, hallway, and kitchen.

I just wanted Layla to do her learning activities; then I wanted to soak in some D. *Vitamin D*. I could go for the other kind, but my single mom status and bitch armor don’t make that an option.

“Mommy! Look, it’s the snack I had yesterday.”

Nothing like the sound of my kid’s voice to dredge my mind out of the gutter. Moseying my way to the island, I see Layla shoving a chocolate croissant into her mouth. The iced coffee being dangled in front of my face has the logo of the place we went to yesterday. *Yum.*

“Thank you, Gabby. I’m sorry, we weren’t expecting you. We are still trying to get the mess organized.” I cringe and inhale whatever caffeinated goodness she brought me.

“No worries, babe. I’m just so excited to have you girls living here. I couldn’t wait to hang out.” Her pink hair is up in

a high bun today, with curly wisps tickling her cheeks.

That was very forward... but the coffee is helping, I suppose.

“It was very sweet of you to bring us treats. I will make sure to pay you back.” I won’t be indebted to anyone.

A manicured hand waves me off. “Just buy me a drink when we go out.”

Very presumptuous. I hum, running a paper towel under the faucet, not actually agreeing to get drinks with her. *Who would watch Layla?*

“Do you live close by?” I wipe at the leftover chocolate on Bug’s squishy cheeks.

“I live just a few blocks over in a studio apartment.” Gabby’s wide smile nudges something inside of me. A want to be as carefree with someone else besides my little girl.

“That must be a short walk then,” I say, extending an offer of conversation and maybe even friendship. It would be so easy to give in to my anxiety, but I fight it this time. Nothing about this woman sends alarm bells blaring in my mind. I get no weird vibes either, even though my introverted self cringes away from her energy.

“Yeah, it’s only a couple of minutes. I’m sorry if I’m intruding.” Again, I hate that I’m the reason this happy woman is frowning. “My family tells me I know no boundaries.”

“You aren’t intruding!” I rush to say, shocking the shit out of myself. Gabby is like this bright light that I desperately hope rubs off on me. I can be a ray of sunshine for Layla, and she is mine, but I could use a friend. “We were just about to head outside. Do you fancy bubbles and sidewalk chalk?”

“Oo, yes! Please, Gabby?” Layla pleads, bouncing on the balls of her feet. Her hair is wavy but a bit wild after sleeping in her braid all night. She looks absolutely adorable in her dark blue sundress.

“Sure, sweetheart! I’d love to stay.” The beaming smile Gabby sends my way makes me grin right back. A real one.

And I find myself glad that she will hang around for a bit.

Maybe I can take my mask off for a while.



Gabby had to leave after a few hours to get some errands done, but we made plans for her to come back after dinner. She asked if I wanted to go out this weekend, which I swiftly turned down. Which is why we are now sitting on the living room floor, handing a bottle of wine back and forth like a couple of teenagers.

“Okay, okay! Tell me something about you that nobody knows.”

Making a friend has been harder than I thought it would be. Especially when they genuinely want to get to know the skeletons in my closet. I’ve skirted so many questions about my baby daddy, why we moved here, and all the other gritty details I don’t feel comfortable rehashing right now.

I haven’t outright lied, but shying away from the truth is becoming harder the longer we sit together. It’s been a long time since I’ve laughed or smiled this much. And damn, does it feel good.

The wine doesn’t help my shadiness, either. It shines a fucking light on all my crap. I’ve only had a few sips; there is no way I would ever get drunk with Layla in the house. But for someone who doesn’t drink, those few sips have loosened the shackles I have had wrapped around my heart.

“I miss my brother.”

Fuck.

Now my pixie friend is frowning again. I didn’t mean to bring up my family, but that’s one thing absolutely nobody knows.

“Do you want to talk about it, Ry?”

Ah, hell. Her response was perfect.

Sighing, I lean my weight onto my palms. “My parents disowned me when they found out I was pregnant with Layla. I was seventeen. They were prestigious. The blow to the family image would have been preposterous.” I roll my eyes and decline the offer of another sip. “Tate was too young to really understand what was happening. I’m sure from his perspective, his older sister ran away after a fight with our parents.”

“I’m so sorry. Have you spoken to him since?”

“No. It’s been six years. He would be eighteen now.” I wonder where life has taken him. The largest thing he was striving for the last time I saw him was to be popular. *Is he going to college? Did his first date go well? Has he had his first kiss? Does he hate me?*

The sound of Gabby’s phone ringing pulls me out of some questions I have never allowed myself to ponder before.

“Hey, woah. Calm down. What’s your problem?” Whoever is on the other line has her scowling harder than I thought possible.

I can’t hear exactly what the other person is saying, but their raised voice is enough to tell me they are pissed. Pursing my lips, I debate whether or not we are close enough for me to snatch her phone and tell whoever has my new friend’s face twisting in anger to go fuck themselves.

All the fight drains from her face, making me even more curious. “I’m sorry I scared you, JJ. I’m at my friend’s house.” She waits a moment, and a sigh slips out, pinching the bridge of her nose.

A clear sign of her displeasure, see?

“It was only a couple blocks, but yes, I walked.” Making eye contact with me, she rolls her eyes and smirks. “Yes, I’m drinking, and no, I didn’t just roll my eyes.” I slap my hand over my mouth to cover the shout of laughter that wants to escape.

I'm becoming more and more curious about who she's on the phone with by the minute.

Another sigh escapes after a big gulp of wine. "Fine, pick me up in..." She sloshes the wine, giving it a critical eye. "An hour." Throwing my hair up in a bun, I wrap the blanket further around my body, invested in figuring out if this is a boyfriend. "Love you too. Kay, bye."

"Spill!"

Tossing her phone in between us with a groan, she flops onto her back beside me. "There's nothing to tell. That was one of my brothers."

"Boo, not a possessive boyfriend, or girlfriend... or both?" Yeah, sue me; I read and write smut. Something about spending the majority of the day with Gabby has loosened me up enough to let the fun version of myself out.

"Nope. He is protective as hell, though. He hates it when I don't check in for a few days. Add that to the fact that I walked here at night and plan to walk home after drinking alone."

Now I feel like a shitty friend because that absolutely does not sound okay. I didn't think about how she was getting here or back home. I was so focused on getting Layla down for the night.

She must be able to read the concern on my face. "Don't worry. He's picking me up."

"No boyfriend or girlfriend?"

"Why? You offering?" She shoots me a mischievous wink.

"Nope. Just a single mom who would love a dick to sit on, not a pussy to eat. Sorry, Gabs. I accept all dirty deets, though. Lord knows I got nothing going on."

Her laugh is so loud I have to clamp a hand over her mouth lest we wake up my Bug. Her words are little more than puffs of laughter when she responds, "Jesus, where have you been all my life?" Swiping a dainty finger under her eye, she

continues, “Nothing serious for me right now, no. Just some fun.”

There is more to that story, but I don’t think she wants to get into it right now. The ring of her cell phone again halts any probing I might have done.

“Oh my god, what?” Gabby answers without looking at the caller ID. Panic grips me when her eyes go wide, just before a loud knock on my front door startles the living daylights out of me. “Damn you, JJ!” Her hiss and stomping to the door do little to calm the fear coursing through my veins.

Her eyes never flick my way, even when I scramble my way to my feet and around the couch to place myself in between the staircase and the door. I don’t know when she finished off the wine, but when she swings the door wide, all I can think is, I’m a fucking fool.

Chapter Six

JACKSON



“Let’s go,” I growl and grip the back of Jude’s shirt, hauling his ass off the couch. I don’t know why he’s home again on a Saturday night, but at least I have backup.

“Fuck! What are you doing? Let go, man.” Releasing him, I shove my feet into my tennis shoes.

“Gab is at a *friend’s* house that she *walked* to. She’s been drinking and planned on walking home alone. In the dark.” I clench my jaw in agitation. *What the hell is she thinking?*

“What the hell? Is she with a guy?” Sliding into the passenger seat of my BMW, I make out his concerned frown in the dim light.

“She didn’t say, but she really enjoyed pushing my damn buttons, though.”

He sighs. “She’s going to be pissed. Wait, how do you know where to go?”

I tell him about the conversation I had with her and her agreeing to me picking her up, so she sent me the address. Imagine my surprise when it’s one of my properties.

“Oh, someone moved into the end unit?”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, Jude. You were the one who ran the background check and got the new tenant all set up. So, let me ask you, who moved in? Because if it’s a bunch of fucking frat boys, I’m going to kick your ass.”

I swear, he doesn’t take his job seriously whatsoever. “Uh, I don’t remember.” My grip on the steering wheel turns deadly.

“What the fuck, Jude? It’s literally your job!” I was annoyed before, but now I’m livid with absolutely no information to go off of.

“Shit, sorry, man. They are all the same, you know? They checked out, so I handed them over to Gabby to get settled in.” Eyes downcast, he runs a hand through his hair.

Part of Gabby’s job is to get our tenants settled in and meet them, and that is exactly why Jude’s job is so damn important. That woman is like a little sister to us, and he’s not paying enough attention to the people he’s sending her way.

“We will be discussing this later,” I grit out, and slam the car into park in the driveway of one of my townhouses. Whipping out my phone, I call Gabs trying to rein in my anger.

I can’t fucking stand the idea of her being in danger or vulnerable. And what did she do? All the above.

“Get outside. We’re leaving.” She screeches out her confusion, which I ignore in favor of banging on the door. A door that I own but cannot open.

“Damn you, JJ!”

I hang up the phone and listen to the scuffling on the other side of the wood. I dismiss Jude’s sigh as he sidles up next to me and leans on the door frame. His nonchalant attitude is at odds with the tension radiating from his pretty boy face.

Slipping on my indifferent mask, I step closer when the door is thrown wide, not sure what to expect. *Maybe a pissed-off man that wanted to get laid?*

It’s not a guy who opens the door fuming; it’s Gabby. Something I was correct about, though, is the empty bottle of wine hanging from my foster sister’s fingers. Standing tall with her chin jutting out, she scowls at us.

“Come on, let’s get you home.” My monotone voice makes her lips purse even more.

“No.”

“Sunshine,” Jude says with a soft one, “it’s time to go.” No longer leaning, he stands and reaches for her, only for his hands to be batted away.

“I said to pick me up in an hour, JJ. Yet here you are, not fifteen minutes later, with cavalry!”

I raise a brow, taking in her flushed cheeks. “An hour to do what, though?” My words are suggestive as I take my eyes off her to find the asshole that deserves my wrath.

I don’t find any guys. The kitchen off to the left is empty, and the living room has blankets and snacks sprawled out. I frown and finally find the person I am looking for. Yet, she’s not what I was expecting.

I feel my shoulders slacken, and my chest expands with a deep inhale of shock. A woman stands with her arms wrapped around her middle, hyperventilating and looking like she’s about five seconds away from either running or breaking the fuck down.

“Shit,” Jude hisses beside me, his shoulder bumping into mine when we both try to step inside.

The redhead’s large eyes widen even more when we attempt to step foot in her home. Her red lips are plump and quivering, making me want to kick my own ass for scaring her this way.

“Oh god. Guys, you need to leave.” Gabby puts a hand on each of our chests and nudges us back.

I don’t take my eyes away from the shaking woman, who’s inching her way closer to the staircase. Her body may radiate fear, but her eyes and jutted out chin show me she’s strong.

“Jackson, let’s go!” Gabby hisses.

As soon as my feet hit the concrete once more, the woman releases her stomach and clenches her fists. Fear lingers but is overshadowed by a whole lot of fucking power.

Once Gabby has Jude and me outside, she turns her back on us to address her friend. “I’m so sorry, Rylee.”

Jude chokes, drawing my attention to his once-tanned face turned pale. *What the hell is his deal?*

“I didn’t know they were coming like this. I swear.” Gabby’s shoulders relax when Rylee, *what a beautiful name*, gives her a small nod. “I’ll text you. Good night.” Gabby’s voice wobbles a little before she closes the door behind her with her flip-flops in hand.

Stuck on the other side of the door with two of the most important people in my life, the events of the last few minutes finally slam into me. “Damn it!” I rage.

“Let’s go.”

I’ve never seen my foster sister quite this pissed off and shaken. I think that makes three of us, because Jude looks like he is about to plop his ass down on her doorstep and never leave. Me? I feel absolutely fucking sick to my stomach that I made a woman so fearful she shook and stepped away from me.

The car is silent as I reverse out of the driveway, each of us lost in our thoughts. I replay the way she inched towards the stairs in my mind.

“I’m sorry, Gabby. I didn’t mean to scare your friend, but at least her husband was upstairs, right?” *Why else would she have been itching to get to the second level?*

“You’re an idiot. She doesn’t have a husband, wife, girlfriend or boyfriend.” No matter what I say, I just keep pissing her off. Damn it. “Also, how ‘bout you apologize for thinking the worst of me?”

“We are sorry, Sunshine. I think we were both just really worried the worst might happen.”

“Wait, back up. The woman, Rylee, she lives alone?” I can feel a vein in my neck throbbing with an awful amount of stress. This night has not gone as planned. I was ready for my little sister to be mad at me, not this.

Beside me, Gabby glares daggers at the side of my face as we pull into the parking lot of her apartment complex. “I don’t see how it’s any of your business, but no, she doesn’t live

alone.” With that, she’s up and out of my car in a flash. Without a backward glance, she slams the door and stomps into the building.

The car jostles as Jude gets out of the back and into the passenger seat. My phone dings with a text from Gabby, letting me know she is safe inside her studio.

“What the hell does she mean she doesn’t live alone? A roommate maybe?” Also, why the fuck do I care? Plenty of women live alone. Gabby, for example. I just can’t scrub the image of her terrified face out of my mind. Someone drilled that fear into Rylee, and I want to burn the fucking world down until I figure out who did it.

Just as I go to drive away, a strangled noise comes from Jude. His tongue is never tied, and tonight I have seen him speechless too many times for comfort.

“What?” My muscles bunch to prepare for whatever he’s about to say.

Clicking his phone off, he clears his throat. “Remember the woman I told you about yesterday? The one who turned me down?”

I frown, annoyance flaring in my chest. “Yes, but what does that have to—”

“Her name was Rylee, and the woman tonight was the same one I met at the beach.” I go to speak, but he continues, “She has a little girl.”

I wait for him to elaborate. I’m so confused.

His eyes turn wistful. “I bet she was like five years old. Her blonde curls were going crazy in the wind. She had these cute little buns that didn’t hold all her hair back. They looked like something out of a fucking movie, Jackson.” He looks me in the eye. “I thought maybe she turned me down because she was taken, and with an adorable little girl like that, she probably had a happy little family.”

I don’t understand the way my gut sinks.

“I just looked over her application and information again for the townhouse. She’s a single mom, living alone with her daughter.”

This should not be a big deal. Like at all. But...

“Rylee was afraid of us, Jack.” Jude’s voice is a whisper, his eyes crinkling like he, too, is having a hard time comprehending what he’s feeling.

“Fuck.”

He nods his head, focus drifting out the windows. On the drive home, I try to wrangle myself in a bit. I can’t stop thinking about the shit fest we created. My sister was making a friend, and we stormed in like some macho-bullshitting hurricanes, ready to haul her over our shoulders and lock Gabby in her room. Our *twenty-five-year-old* foster sister.

The blue eyes of the red-haired woman were pained, inciting the rageful beast inside of me that wanted to protect her. The stubborn glint in them, though, intrigued me like no other. I want to know what battle she was fighting under her radiant skin. The need to know what made Rylee so fearful makes my skin itch. I have to know how she built herself back up again.

Something happened to those girls, and I’m powerless to hold back my curiosity and concern.

I will find out what demons are haunting my beautiful tenant, and I will crush them.

Chapter Seven

RYLEE



My neck is trying to rip my shoulder off, I swear. It's punishing me for sleeping on the floor all night. I just couldn't bring myself to leave Layla's side. My anxiety swarmed all rational thought, leaving me to my baser instincts, so there was no way in hell I could let my baby sleep alone.

I woke to her snarled hair dangling in my face and a big, stinky smile shining down on me. Thankfully, she hasn't outgrown sleepovers with her momma yet, setting us up for a day filled with light laughter and easy plans.

She's upstairs cleaning up her bedroom while I tackle the final remnants of the kitchen and living room. I have almost everything cleaned up and put away, except for my bedroom and bathroom.

We don't have much since we can't necessarily drag around an entire home in my SUV. Bug's stuff takes up most of the room, as do our kitchen supplies. I've managed to move us into furnished homes, and they usually come with basic kitchen things too. I couldn't imagine having to drag around an entire damn kitchen and furniture.

I can hear Layla humming upstairs, hopefully not talking to ghosts. I shudder at the thought and run my hand through my fresh curls. Lord knows I needed a pick-me-up after last night. And sometimes, that can only come in the form of wearing my best shorts, curling my hair, putting some mascara on, and flaunting a little cleavage. I may just be hanging out at home with my little one, but feeling good goes a long way.

Loading the dishwasher, my ears pick up the sound of Layla bounding down the stairs. “Mommy, can we go swimming?” I lean my butt against the counter and hold in my smile at her puppy-dog eyes.

“Did you finish your room?”

Her head bobs furiously. “Yes, promise!” Tugging on my hand, I let her pull me up to her bedroom as I listen to all her plans for the beach. In her own pair of shorts and an *Elsa* T-shirt, she gives me a twirl in the center of her room. “See?”

I smile and take in the almost bare floors, kind of made bed, and dirty laundry basket with a few articles of clothing around it. She’s five, so this is more than I expected when I asked her to clean her room.

“Good job, Bug. Let’s go eat, and then maybe we can go to the beach, okay?” What’s really nice about being a full-time author is working whenever I want. The amount of effort I put into it is what influences my pay.

A ball of stress gets lodged in my throat when I realize I didn’t write anything last night. *Damn it. I write every day, no matter how little I can do. My anxiety really got the best of me, I guess.*

When Layla shoves me out of her room, I tell myself I better get used to it because my little Bug is growing up really freaking fast. I just hope we stay friends even when she’s hormonal and has people her own age. I swallow the nausea at the concept of her having a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Sandwiches ready, I turn down the hallway to my room when a knock at the door startles me. What I didn’t realize, though, was Layla stepping off the last step.

“Gabby!” she squeals and runs to open the door.

“Fuck!” I hiss and run after her, hoping to stop her before she gets there. Heart thundering in my chest, I pray she remembers the rules before she opens the damn door.

“Layla—” My breath gets lodged in my throat as I tear around the corner of the hallway just as her dainty hand throws the door wide. Her giddy smile drops, and she shrinks away

from the door before I even get the chance to take in whoever the hell is scaring my little girl.

“You aren’t Gabby.” Her voice is small and shaky, making my chest constrict with pain and my tummy swirl with dread.

My eyes fly up to the stranger just as I scoop Bug into my arms and wrap a firm hand on the door, readying to slam it shut.

“Mommy?” I hush her, my hip cocked with her weight resting on it. Swallowing my fears and anxiety, since I refuse for Layla to see it, I take in the man in front of us.

My eyes catch on his bulging biceps and wide shoulders first, making my heart pitter-patter behind the cage of my breastbones. Probably six-five, he’s an embodiment of tall, dark, and handsome. Long, messy black hair makes my fingers twitch for an entirely different reason than a protective reflex. His firm jaw has a few days of scruff shadowing his plump lips. I scan over the wings tattooed on his forearm, paying it no mind while I watch his mouth part and eyes widen in... awe? Confusion? I don’t know, but he’s big and beautiful.

Bad Rylee.

I cough, hiking Layla up again in an attempt to hold her longer. Something in the widening of his green eyes is familiar, but I ignore the niggling thought.

“Hello, can I help you?” I would palm my face in embarrassment and exasperation if Bug wasn’t in my arms and if it wouldn’t be obnoxious. I don’t know how long I’ve been ogling this specimen on my doorstep, but I’m positive it was way too long to be normal.

He clears his throat, and damn if I don’t notice how deep those vocal cords can go. “Hi. Rylee, is it?” I narrow my eyes and give him a single nod. “My name is Jackson Jones. I own this property, but that’s not why I’m here.”

Unable to hold Layla up anymore, I drop her down behind my leg, feeling much better when she latches onto the belt loop of my shorts. I look down and see her eyes narrowed on the man as well. She doesn’t seem afraid, though, just wary

and maybe a little miffed that it wasn't Gabby here to play again.

Looking back at Jackson, I can't help the tilt of my head when his face softens as he looks at Layla. His throat works a swallow. "I came to apologize. I was one of the guys who picked up Gabby last night."

At the reference of our new friend, Layla perks up. "Pixie Gabby?" My cheeks flush. I referred to the woman as a pixie *once*, and now she's never going to let it go.

He smirks, and I fight like hell to keep my jaw off the ground. I swear I hear the devil laughing at the sin he just threw my way.

Jackson crouches, and damn if I don't picture him on his knees instead. When he gives my daughter a wide smile, I about melt.

"Hmm, pink hair and acts like sunshine?" Hands clasped in front of him, he addresses Layla with his question.

My stomach swoops with displeasure when she releases my shorts and comes to stand beside me. "I don't know about the sun, but she has the coolest pink hair."

I'm stumped between being really fucking glad that she's not cowering in the face of an imposing man and trying not to show how absolutely terrified I am over how easily she stepped towards him.

He nods with a smile still in place. "Yeah. She's my sister. I came and picked her up last night with my friend."

"That's so cool. Is she here?" Dismissing the man, she goes up onto her tippytoes to look over his shoulder. "I don't see her."

The chuckle that rumbles out of him has me a little weak in the knees. "No, little Miss. I didn't bring your pixie. I think I upset your momma last night, so I'm here to say sorry. Is that okay?"

All curiosity burns from her dainty little features. "You made Mommy sad?" I watch his smile falter in the face of

Layla's distrust and anger.

"Hey, Bug." I pull her away a few steps and kneel in front of her. "Why don't you go pick out what swimsuit you want to wear to the beach, and I'll come get you when it's time to eat, okay?" At some point, Jackson must have stood up, because Layla's gaze flickers to the top of the doorway.

Her little nose scrunches up even as her body angles away from the stranger. "Are you sad?"

The whispered words make my eyes burn with how considerate and protective she is, but she'll learn that it was never her job to protect me. It's mine to protect her, even from my own negative emotions.

"I'm not sad, I promise. Jackson came to be nice. Now you go find a swimsuit, so we can go." I give her a sloppy kiss on the cheek, absolutely relieved when she giggles and runs up to her room.

I attempt to make my shuddering breaths unnoticeable and ignore the fact that I utterly fail. Hands on my thighs, I stand and face the man who's making my panties damp, and my hands moisten with anxiety.

"Why are you here, Mr. Jones?"

Chapter Eight

JACKSON



“Why are you here, Mr. Jones?”

I barely contain the groan that fights to escape when she addresses me so formally. At the same time, my chest aches at the distance she is clearly trying to put between us. I then scold myself internally for being so hurt by the action when I have literally only heard her speak to me twice now.

What the hell is wrong with me?

I literally have no idea what is going on. I came here to apologize, and the blonde cutie who opened the door completely took me aback. My attention was immediately snatched by the stunning woman who swooped the little one up in her arms with a fierce look that threatened to castrate me if I made one wrong move.

I don't want to say Rylee is different in the light of day since I don't know her, but with her daughter involved, she is not a shaking, fearful woman. No. Rylee is a ferocious momma ready to rip the head off of any predator who upsets her little girl.

Her daughter was the same. Unnervingly protective of the woman who gave her life. The questions and fear of what happened to this beautiful duo pound at the forefront of my mind.

“I'm here to apologize for scaring you, Rylee.” My jeans tighten when she raises an eyebrow at me, waiting for me to

get on with it. “I’m so sorry. I came to get Gabby because I was worried she was with some random guy.”

“And if she was?”

I stutter, “W-what?”

“What does it matter if she was with some random guy? Pixie is clearly an adult and can make her own decisions.” I go to interrupt, but she continues with a wave of her hand. “You’re lucky she wasn’t with someone who was in love with her. If I was someone’s partner and their so-called brother swooped in and did that; I would have laid them on their ass.”

Wait. So, she’s not mad about me frightening her. She’s mad on behalf of Gabby?

“Careful, Mr. Jones. Siblings can be fleeting, too. And I personally wouldn’t want to miss out on a sister like Gabby.”

What the actual fuck? This is not the woman I saw yesterday.

“Anything else?” Her hand grips the door again, clearly ready to boot me from her rental.

“I uh...” That about sums it up. Panic surges when the door starts to close. I don’t think before I shove my foot in the way. “Rylee—”

Fuck. Her nostrils flare, and her shoulders shove back. “Mr. Jones, I would also suggest respecting the boundaries that people set. You may own this building, but I’m asking you to leave.”

“You were shaking!” Okay, clearly, this woman has me twisted up inside because I can’t control anything coming out of my mouth. “I came to pick up my sister, and there you were, afraid and inching away from me.”

She scowls, drawing my attention to a sparkly nose ring in her right nostril. “Are you even listening to me? I said to respect people’s space, and you stepped foot into my home, radiating alpha douchebag vibes. Excuse me for being concerned about the men shoving their way into my living room after yelling at the woman they supposedly care about.”

The door begins to close again, making me rush out the only words I have. “You’re right. Fuck, Rylee, you’re right, okay?” Releasing the door at last, she crosses her arms, and I fight like hell not to stare at the soft roundness of her breasts. “I’m sorry, and I plan on apologizing to Gabby as well. Jude too. We were wrong to react like that, and I never want to make anyone feel as uncomfortable as I did you.”

A frown creases her blonde brows at the mention of Jude, but I ignore it. She’s probably wondering why the name sounds familiar. He begged to come with me, but I told him it might overwhelm Rylee. He reluctantly agreed and let me go after deciding he would apologize to her later.

“Alright, thank you for your apology. I promise not to cause any trouble and will look out for Gabby for the few months we are here.”

What?

“Few months?”

The look she shoots me makes me feel really fucking stupid. “I thought you owned this property? Yeah, a few months. I’ve picked up the final few months of the previous tenant’s lease.” It’s a statement, but the lilt at the end suggests my naivety is confusing her.

“I-Yeah. I own multiple properties, but I have people running the details.” I have never felt more fucking ridiculous in my life. “You won’t renew at the end of the previous lease?” My tone is low key pleading, and if Marcus was here, he would be bent over laughing.

“No.”

“Where are you moving to?”

“Who knows? Maybe Texas or Rhode Island.” Her vague response instantly makes my blood boil.

“What?” I barely contain my snap of emotion. “Why?”

“Well, Mr. Jones, that is none of your business, now is it?” Rylee’s tone is sickly sweet, and the twist of her lips promises a lashing if I continue my prodding.

“Mommy, are you okay?” I didn’t notice the little one crouching on the stairs behind her until she spoke up.

Rylee’s back snaps straight, and her vicious smile turns tense at the sound of her daughter’s voice.

“It was good to meet you. Have a good day, Mr. Jones.”

“Please call me—” I’m cut off by the door slamming in my face. Not long after, multiple locks clank.

It’s hard to keep my head held high after that interaction. I definitely fucked up.

Ding.

Pretty Boy: Done yet?

Marc: Oo, with what?

Pretty Boy: A woman ;)

Leo (nardo): You’re lying.

Marc: OHMIGAWD, deets NOW.

Me: Nothing.

Slamming my car door behind me, I sigh when my phone continues to blow up with our group chat.

Pretty Boy: I have snacks! Dirty Duo has the beers. Get your ass home, JJ. FOOTBALL PRE-SEASON BABY.

Throwing my car into reverse, I make it home before I even realize I put the car in drive. *That conversation has got me really fucked up, damn it.*

The sounds of the guys laughing and fucking around reach me immediately as I open the front door. Heaving a sigh, I toss my keys onto the dining room table and find them making a mess of the living room.

“Hey, Jack.” Leo’s soft voice makes my stomach swoop too fast for me to stop. Sitting on my leather sofa, the man has his toned arm hung on the back and his platinum blonde locks ruffled. I wonder if the three of them fucked before I got here. *No.* I don’t want to know why my lithe best friend looks freshly fucked and completely divine, resting on my couch.

Fighting the urge to touch him, I snag a beer and plop my ass down beside him with a foot of space between us. “Hey, how are you, man?”

“Fine.” Still quiet, his eyes trail over me, from my crossed legs, over my crotch, and up my tight t-shirt. *Son of a bitch.* “You okay? You look tense.”

“He always looks like that, Leo.” Jude snorts. “Seriously though, how’d it go?”

“How did what go?” Marcus, in a pair of sweats and wife beater, lays his palm precariously high on Leo’s thigh. His short dark hair looks messier than usual, too, and I swear he has a scruff rash on his collarbone.

I have to keep reminding myself that they aren’t mine.

Jude jumps into his dramatic retelling. “So, remember that woman I was telling you about?” They nod, Marc looking like a fucking diva excited about some gossip. “Turns out she is subleasing one of our townhouse properties with her daughter. When we went to pick Gabby up over there last night, you can imagine my shock when the woman who turned me down was hanging out with our sister!”

Okay, so he missed a lot of context.

“And?” Leo prods gently, picking up on the shitty depiction of what actually happened. I fight the smirk that wants to emerge at his cleverness.

“Oh, well, JJ was going all brotherly asshole and scared Rylee.”

“You scared her too, asshole,” I snap, because there is no way he wasn’t part of the damn problem.

I barely notice the straightening of Marc and Leo beside me. They exchange a glance and mutual frowns.

Jude rolls his eyes at me from his spot on the floor. “Yeah, well, when I recognized her, I wanted to go to her and calm her down.” All humor drains away when his eyes drop to his lap. “She started shaking harder and seemed really panicked that we were there. Gabs kicked us out, and we drove her home. I looked back in some of the paperwork and confirmed that it was the same woman and kid that moved in.”

“I went to apologize.”

“What did you say the woman’s name was?” Leaning forward, Marcus rests his elbows on his knees, looking between us.

“Rylee and her daughter’s name is Layla.” Smile back in place, Jude looks up at us with a twinkle in his eye.

Sputtering on his beer, Leo chokes, sending my heart through the fucking roof. I don’t hesitate to scoot into his space and pat his back. “Shit, bab—Shit, Leo, breathe.” My trip over the pet name I instinctively wanted to call him almost made me choke right alongside him.

“I’m okay, Jack,” he croaks, dropping a pale hand on my knee and giving it a gentle squeeze of reassurance. Which absolutely doesn’t help the thundering in my chest or the heat creeping into every place we touch.

Clearing his throat, my eyes shoot to Marcus as I shuffle away from his man. I avoid thinking about the smirk he melts me with. With a lingering look at me, he turns his attention back to Jude. “Remember the woman we told you about too?”

Jude sits up straight with a little frown between his brows. He nods.

“The woman had copper hair, and her name was Rylee. The little girl’s name was Layla, and she had the cutest blonde hair in piggie-buns.”

The way Jude’s eyes widen at Marc’s words would be comical if mine weren’t doing the same fucking thing.

“Wait, when did you meet the girls?” I’m missing their side of the story and I really want to know how all four of us met the same woman at separate times.

“Our girls,” Jude and Marcus murmur at the same time, causing Leo’s cheeks to flame a pretty shade of pink.

What? Today has been one crazy conversation after another. I’m exhausted, and it’s not even one in the afternoon.

“They came into my coffee shop on Friday afternoon. Both looked so happy, we couldn’t help but introduce ourselves.” Leo nods to himself like he needs to hype himself up to share.

“How did she react to you guys?” I need to know if it was only me that made her so standoffish and afraid.

Marcus sputters out a breath before leaning back, defeated. “Little Layla did not trust anything about us, even when I kneeled at her height. She actually scooted closer to her mom between us.”

“Yeah, I met Layla this morning. She went from afraid to excited when she thought I brought Gabby, but as soon as she found out I upset her mom, she turned colder than I ever thought a little girl could. She took a step back from me, and it was like distrust and fear flooded all other emotions.”

Marc’s head bobs and points at me. “Yeah, like that! It was really fucking unsettling, man. When Leo told them he owned the cafe, Rylee immediately asked if there was a problem. As if two guys would never take an interest in a beautiful woman and a cute little girl. They literally radiated joy, and when they noticed us, they both shuttered all thoughts and emotions besides fear, distrust, and caution.”

It’s silent for a moment, all of us thinking over what we know of the girls who just moved to town. The four of us and Gabby being drawn into the orbit of Rylee and her daughter is strange. But I challenge any person with a heart not to be swept up in their matching blue eyes and haunted expressions where only happiness and joy should be.

“What happened to them?” Jude whispers with a shuddering breath, probably reliving the distressing moment of

seeing Rylee panic.

“I’m going to apologize tomorrow, I think,” Jude mumbles, eyes on the football game on the TV.

That perks Marcus up. “Oh! Can I come?”

Chapter Nine

MARCUS



“You are a fucking genius,” I gush in the passenger seat of Jude’s jeep. My dick twitches at the bright smile he sends my way before his eyes turn back to Gabby’s apartment complex.

Jackson told me I couldn’t go see Rylee and Layla, but as soon as he left to pick up groceries after the game, Jude slapped me on the shoulder and told me it was time to go. Leo gave me a soft kiss and told me he would see me at home.

The back door opens, then slams closed to the sound of Gab’s grumbled cursing. “I swear, if you fuck up my new friendship, I am going to beat your ass. And also...” She glares at my wide smile. “I didn’t fucking say Marc could come.”

“Shush, Sunshine. Every little thing is gonna be alright,” he coos and cranks the music, effectively drowning out the shouts in the backseat.

Turning down the road where the cute townhouses are lined up, I about shit my pants when I see a familiar redhead and cheerful girl twirling around in the driveway.

“Shit,” Gabby hisses. “I had hoped I could talk to her before she saw you guys. Kay, well, here goes. Don’t be dicks.”

Noting the artwork on the driveway, Jude parks on the street in front of the house, eyes alight with excitement. Gab is up and out of the car before it even stops moving, running

forward with arms spread wide. Scooping up the little one, she spins, laughter peeling from their lips.

Making my way around the vehicle, I stand beside Jude and nudge his shoulder. He's stopped moving, eyes drawn to Rylee, whose disapproving gaze makes my balls want to shrivel up and avoid her wrath.

"Jude. Go," I whisper. I was so wrapped up in the excitement of getting to see her again, and I think Jude was too. But now that we are here, I think the reality of the situation has finally settled in. "Go apologize, man."

Clearing his throat, he starts up the driveway, with me following close behind him. I'm now suddenly very unsure of what to do with myself. I'm saved from my awkwardness by Gabby when she walks over with the blonde.

"Layla, this is one of my friends, his name is Marcus!"

I crouch, getting down to her level, and offer her a small smile. "Hi, Layla." She frowns, and it's like a punch to my gut.

Without saying a word to me, she looks up at Gabs. "Why is he here? Did he make my mommy sad, too?"

Jesus, fuck. It's like she just shoved her tiny, chalk-stained fist into my chest, snatched my heart, and squeezed it with all her might.

Gabby fights the shock, but her eyes flick up to mine, and I know her well enough to know she's holding back all the questions she wants to ask. "No, darling. Marcus didn't upset your mommy."

I try not to be hurt that Layla doesn't recognize me. But I suppose her concern for safety is more important, anyway.

"What about that man?" Almost poking my eye out, she points her accusing finger at where Jude is hunched over, trying to look into Rylee's averted eyes.

"Um...." I trail off. Gabby's look is pleading with me to fix this, but before I can, Layla stomps past me. With a look as fierce as her momma shot us earlier, she latches onto Rylee's jean shorts and scowls up at Jude.

“You guys shouldn’t be here.”

I stand at the sadness in Gab’s voice. I was so excited to see these girls again, but I’ve been here less than five damn minutes, and my heart has broken multiple times already.

“Gabby, where did they come from? And why does that five-year-old have the eyes of someone who has seen unspeakable things?”

Dropping her head onto my shoulder, she lets out a sigh. “I don’t know...” she trails off, lost in thought, watching the scene unfold in front of us.

I’m not sure what has me picking up a piece of chalk and planting my ass on the driveway, but I know for a fact that I won’t leave until I get a smile out of them.



Rylee and Gabby couldn’t urge Layla away from the adult conversation happening by the house, but I am really freaking grateful for the little one’s determination. Why? Because here the five of us sit in a circle in the driveway, each with our own pieces of chalk.

It’s silent except for the speaker playing a Disney playlist and, of course, Jude and I can’t help but sing along. Gabby is just as bad. We are the trio that Leo and Jackson dread putting together. They say we are childish and immature. We say we are fucking hilarious.

And let me tell you, little Layla thinks so too. “Again, again!”

“Bug.” Rylee gives her a small smile. “It’s about time for dinner. Why don’t we say goodbye to our guests now?”

I have yet to actually speak with Rylee, so I’m uncertain if she actually remembers me. “Rylee, do you mind showing me

to the bathroom? I need to wash up before we head home.” I give her my best smirk, but all I do is make her wary of me.

I watch as she shoots a look at Gabby, who gives her a reassuring nod. Whether it’s saying she will watch Layla or that she is safe to be alone with me, I don’t know. All I can focus on is finally getting a second alone with this beautiful woman. Shooting looks over her shoulder at me on our way to the door; she opens it and encourages me to go first.

“I see. Quite the dig there. You calling me a lady?” The joke doesn’t land.

“I-What?” She sputters, closing the door behind her and inching around me, careful to keep space between us.

“You ushered me forward. Ladies first, you know. You stole my chivalry.” I wink, hoping to ease the tension.

Her little snort sends small zaps of victory through my body. “Huh, and here I thought chivalry was dead. The bathroom is this way.” Her cherry-red smile doesn’t slip from her face as she leads me down the hallway. It takes all my might not to holler from the rooftop that I made her smile.

Stepping into the doorway she motions to, our eyes lock. “You have a smile that makes a man willing to do anything just to see it one more time.” With that, I close the door between us and will my beating heart to settle.

Not before I see the blooming pink tinging her cheeks, though, and fuck if I wouldn’t do anything to see that again too.

I can’t wait to tell Leo all about her blush and sparkling, stunned eyes.

Chapter Ten

RYLEE



*M*y smile? Nobody has ever told me they liked my smile. In fact, Mason used to tell me I looked like a cartoon when I smiled. Apparently, it's abnormally wide and too big for my face.

Walking out of the hallway, I think about how similar Layla's smile is to mine. When she gives you her genuine smile, she gives it with her entire heart and soul. It's larger than life and something I cherish. I haven't thought about my own in a long time.

Was Marc just messing with me? I feel my lips dip into a frown, thinking over the past hour of my afternoon. It's been weird, to say the least. Pixie was as amazing as yesterday, even though I am a bit annoyed she brought Jude and Marcus with her without asking me. I haven't had the chance to talk to Marcus, and I can't pinpoint why he looks familiar.

Jude, on the other hand, is a shameless flirt who clearly struggles with apologies. I recognized him from the beach, and I think he sees me as a challenge since I turned him down.

That's not to say he didn't seem sincere when he apologized. But as soon as I let him off the hook, he went back to telling me how beautiful I am and asking when we could get a drink.

If I'm getting a drink with anyone, it's going to be Gabby.

Grumbling to myself, I miss the hard body planted in my kitchen. "Oof!" I bounce off a large chest, rubbing my nose in annoyance.

“You okay?” Jude latches onto my shoulders when I go stumbling backward. The pain in my face keeps my mind off the fact that his hands are on me. For a moment. Then the heat of his wide palms seep into my bare shoulders, chasing away the chill of my air conditioning.

“Mhmm,” I mumble, eyes closed, not wanting to give away just how good his touch feels.

I almost whimper at the loss of one of his hands until fingers trail up my neck and lift my chin gently. My eyes flutter open of their own accord taking in his scrunched-up nose and worried gaze. I admire the sharpness of his jaw and tender brown eyes. Sharing the same breath, my heartbeat travels to my throat.

“You aren’t bleeding. You should be okay. Maybe ice, okay?” I’m lost in the way his lips move around each word, like he fucking owns the English language. “Rylee?”

“What? Oh, yeah. Ice. I’m fine.” *Jesus, I need to get laid.* His lips kick up in a smirk, and I soak in his fuck me vibes like a bitch in heat.

“Mommy, I’m hungry!”

Ah, good, my little bucket of ice water to the rescue.

Tearing my gaze away from Jude shouldn’t be as hard as it is, but I’ve been through worse—they wouldn’t know what to do with my past wounds. “Me too. Whatcha in the mood for?”

I swear I hear Jude murmur “You,” but it’s too quiet and gone before I can convince myself he actually said it.

Sitting on the counter with Gabby in front of her, I avoid the spark of interest in Pixie’s gaze as she looks between her brother and me.

“Chicken nuggies!”

A huff of laughter draws my attention to Marcus leaning against the wall beside Jude. “There’s a really yummy diner down the road that Jude, Leo, and I were going to. Want to come? I’m sure we would all love to have you three ladies join.”

Jude's frown of confusion is wiped away when the guys lock eyes, but it was enough to tell me that Marcus pulled that out of his ass. Their chemistry has me really damn curious. They seem more... what's the word? Cozy. Intimate.

"Yeah!" Layla claps her hands and reaches her arms out to be let down from the counter. But it's not me or Gabby she's looking at. No, she's staring right at the surfer boy in my kitchen.

I watch with rapt attention as Jude swoops Bug off the counter, airplane noises making her squeal in the air. My heart pitters away in my chest at the sight, and my tummy swoops when his shirt lifts, showcasing golden skin that needs my tongue on it ASAP.

How complicated would it be if I slept with Gab's brother? I'll be gone soon, so what does it matter if I leave a little mess behind? Not like anyone will follow. Especially not Jude. He's a player through and through.

As soon as her feet touch the ground, she runs to me and tugs on my dress. "Please, Mommy? Can we go out to eat with my friends?"

Ah hell. There go my heartstrings.

"I don't know, Bug. We wouldn't want to intrude..." I trail off, eyes flicking to the three basically strangers in my home. My anxiety has been dormant since we all sat down to color outside. The only flare I've gotten is insecurity, but that's my problem.

"Please, oh please!" Bouncing now, I can't help but feel my happiness swell at how happy she is. I've been worried for so long that she would struggle to trust new people, but these three passed her tests with flying colors with chalk and *Disney* karaoke.

If I'm being honest with myself, they wiggled past some of my barriers as well. When Marcus sat down on the cement and picked up a stick of chalk without any prompting, something inside of me softened toward the man who started drawing rainbows and Lucky Charms on my driveway. Some of my

distrust for Jude faded when he followed my little girl onto the ground and taught her all the different ways she could make a smiley face.

“Alright, Gabby, do you want to ride with us?” I extend the offer, hoping that nobody will ask us to ride with them. If something goes wrong, Layla and I need a separate escape option.

“Sure!” She claps her hands much like Layla does when she’s excited.

“Rylee? Can we invite Jackson?” Jude rubs the back of his neck, clearly uncertain of how I will respond.

“Um, sure.”

What am I supposed to say when they were the ones who invited us out with them? This is going to be so weird.

Any trepidation clinging to my decision dims at the happiness radiating off Bug. I worry how she will respond to Jackson, but we will just sit on the opposite sides of the table.

In the ten minutes it takes Bug and me to get ready, I keep trying to convince myself that having friends is a good thing. That Layla socializing is a good thing. This is a good thing. It’s just food.

With Bug strapped into her car seat and us following the guys’ jeep through the neighborhood, I wait for Gabby to speak. She’s been staring holes in the side of my head for the past few minutes.

“So,” she drawls with a shit-eating grin next to me. “Jude, huh?”

“Don’t worry. I won’t go after your brother Gabby.” Even though every atom in my body is screaming for the release he can provide.

“Oh, he’s not my real brother. He and Jackson are my foster brothers. I’ve known them since I was fourteen and they have always looked after me. Even after they moved out.” A shadow passes through her eyes; a sign that there is more beneath her bubbly exterior.

I don't say anything for a moment, trying to think of a response and give her time to work through whatever memory that's haunting her.

"They went to college close by. I spent more time at the house they lived in with Marc and Leo than I ever did at my foster family home. As soon as I turned eighteen with my high school degree, I went to their university and got a dorm room of my own."

"Do all four of them still live together?" I'm curious about the dynamics happening in this little family. Jude and Marcus seem really close. Maybe they're in a relationship? But that has me confused because I'm pretty sure they were both flirting with me.

Her hand cuts through the air. "JJ and Jude moved out when Leo and Marc established their relationship and became serious."

"Wait, so Marcus is in a relationship with Leo? I thought Jude and Marc..." I hesitate to finish my sentence, not wanting to offend or assume. Although it's too late for that.

Stopped at a stoplight, I take the opportunity to look at my friend. With a small smile in place, she watches me with a hesitancy that looks out of place in her eyes. "Caught that, did you? I don't know much about the dynamic between the guys, but I think all four of them might have something going on. I'm not sure what, though."

The light turns green in the middle of her musings, and it gives me a really good excuse to hide the fierce blush trying to burn my eyebrows off. What a fucking picture she's painted in my head. And it's one that has me holding back the panting hussy that's clawing her way to the surface.

"What? Omg, please don't judge them. It would kill me if you wrote them off because of their preferences and their relationships. I also don't know for sure! Please tell me what you're thinking. I can't have you coming to dinner with us if you're going to look at them in disgust."

“Gabby!” I look in the rearview mirror, happy to see Layla still has her headphones on with her little gaming pad. “I am in no way disgusted or judging, I promise you that.”

“Oh. Then why do you look like that?” Leaning in closer to my scorching face, she takes a good look at the lust leaking from my pores. “Oh!” She giggles, pointing at me as I pull into the diner parking lot a few spaces away from the jeep.

Turning to her, I glare. “Shush, Pixie.” I point right back. “You painted the picture.”

“Omg, this is going to be amazing! I have no qualms with you and the guys getting together in any way. Just please don’t hurt them.” Her wide eyes are pleading, but before I can respond, there’s a knock on my window.

Marcus quirks a brow at me through the glass before opening my door. Jude moves to get Bug out of the car before I can protest. Her big grin and giggles as she wraps her arms around his neck halt my fussing. With a chattering Layla on his hip, Jude nods along, their blonde hair waving in the wind as they cross the parking lot.

Rushing after them, I tune out Gabby’s giggles, keeping my focus on my daughter being carried away by a man. They both simultaneously tip their heads back and laugh. And I swear the sun chooses that moment to shine down on them, creating a scene that showcases a life I can never have.

This is just temporary. I’ll keep reminding myself of that until it sticks because right now, I really want this to become my reality.

Chapter Eleven

LEO



“Babe, you’re about one breath away from drooling.”
Marc’s deep chuckle makes me snap my mouth shut.

“What am I looking at here?” I murmur.

Gabby hums beside us, having hung back too. “Yeah, you know, Jude and Layla have really hit it off. I think he’s replacing me as her favorite.” Her pout deepens when the little girl and Jude toss their heads back in a fit of laughter.

I watch, transfixed, as Rylee catches up to them and murmurs to her daughter. Layla shakes her head and clings tighter to Jude, much to Rylee’s shock. She doesn’t move far from them, though, keeping a watchful eye on the man holding her little one.

“What are you guys doing?”

“Ah!” I jump, hand to my chest, and whirl around on Jackson standing behind us. Marc chuckles, running his knuckles down my left arm, eliciting a scattering of shivers.

“Sorry, babe.” The endearment is out of JJ’s mouth before he can stop it. A flush creeps up his neck, embarrassment heating his stubbled jaw. “Um. Are we going to head in or just stand out here all night?”

Gabby, Marc, and I look back at the restaurant, seeing that the other three aren’t there anymore. I fight the smirk that wants out, remembering Marc telling all of us he wasn’t telling JJ about the girls. Gabby chuckles and begins her strut towards the building.

“Guys, I was going to make dinner at home. What was the emergency for the family meeting?”

I stay silent, enjoying the tension between him and Marcus.

Marcus slides in close to me and drops a kiss to my neck that is so sensual that I can't hold back my groan. “Always so responsive.” His voice is a rumble that sends heat rippling down my spine.

I know what game he's playing at, and fuck, I hope we win. For a few months now, we have been noticing the lingering looks Jack gives us and Jude, but he's fighting it. We can't do anything for him and Jude, but we want them. So, we nudge, we push, and we play. Most importantly, we play for the fucking trophy.

“Marcus!” JJ snaps, jaw clenched and eyes swirling with an array of frustration and lust.

“What, *babe*?” Stepping away from me, Marc steps into Jackson's chest. Both are the same height; they stand eye to eye... or mouth to mouth.

Grunting, JJ slams his shoulder into him and stomps his way to the diner. Shoulders slumped, Marc slowly turns to me with a disappointed look. My jokester may have won that round, but not without casualties. Rejection sucks. Especially from someone you love. Someone you know in your soul is meant to be yours. The four of us, we are beyond a family of friends. We are more, and sometimes it really fucking hurts to be the only ones fighting for it rather than against it. We may have Jude physically, but the battle he fights every time he yearns to stay overnight is one that will forever break my heart.

I want to know what's going on in his mind. Jude exudes confidence and sexuality. Not intimacy though. He's afraid. Afraid he doesn't deserve to be loved. Our surfer boy is afraid to spend the night after fucking his best friends, because the what ifs are really damn heavy.

“I know, Love. I know.” There’s nothing else I can say, but what I can do is kiss him. Tugging on his pinky, I pull him to me and swipe my tongue across the seam of his lips. He opens, and we both sink into the embrace.

He pulls away first, grinning at me when I try to capture his mouth again. “Let’s go have dinner with our girls.”

“That’s the second time you have referred to them as ours,” I hedge, wanting to know about the developments of today. Just as he opens the diner door for me, he finishes telling me about his time at Rylee’s house. If I’m honest, I really wish I would have been there. Maybe after this dinner, I can start spending time with the girls too.

Seeing our group off to the back, we make our way to the table seeing two seats open by Gabby, one at the head of the table. Marcus takes the seat by Gabby, leaving me to take the one at the head between him and Jude. Eyeing the seating arrangements, I see Rylee directly across from me, between JJ and an empty chair next to Gabs.

“Bug, come sit down, please.” Rylee’s voice is clipped while holding eye contact with Jackson and attempting to drag Layla out from in between their stare down.

“No.” She stamps her little foot, eyes glaring daggers at JJ, too. “He made you sad.”

If I looked at the other four, I’m sure they would have matching frowns. Watching a little girl stand up for her mom is very unsettling. Let alone standing between her and a perceived threat.

“Come here, sweetheart. Maybe we can share a milkshake.”

Layla’s attention diverts to Gabby for a split second before it’s back on Jackson, who looks really damn pale and scared.

Rylee’s gaze flicks to Gabby, then Jude, before she drops to whisper in her daughter’s ear, too quiet for anyone on this side of the table to hear. I swear we all release a collective sigh of relief when Layla huffs and marches back to her seat. Gabby and Layla start discussing milkshake options, and even

though Layla's gaze returns to JJ every minute, I feel better with her focused on sugar.

Hushed whispers reach our side, and I'm honestly really damn shocked by the look of remorse on Jackson's face when he says Gabby's name.

"Yeah?" She looks up, confused at the seriousness he's aiming her way.

Clearing his throat, he looks one more time at the stern expression on Rylee's face. "I want to apologize for how I acted last night."

I would laugh at the gasps that come out of Jude, Marc, and me if this weren't a monumental moment. *Mark the calendars! Jackson Brooks Jones just apologized!*

"You didn't deserve to be treated like a teen acting out. I promise to work on my protectiveness towards you. I hope you know I do think of you as a mature adult and that I really do trust you. It's just with ev-everything we have been through, it's hard to let go."

Holy shit.

"Holy shit," Jude and Marcus mimic my thoughts.

Tears track down Gabby's face as she throws herself out of her chair, around the table, and into Jackson's chest. If I'm not mistaken, his eyes seem a little sparkly as well before he closes them and murmurs into her pink hair.

My focus trails over to a wistful-looking Rylee, who I bet is the one who chastised JJ for his behavior. Gabby nods furiously into his neck. We're all moved by the scene before us. I'm so distracted I don't even notice Layla beside me until she pokes my arm.

Her head tilts, a curious look in her eye. I look to Rylee to see if she knows where her daughter is and find her eyes already lasered in on us. She's very attentive and aware. A good mom.

"Are you the man who owns the coffee?" Oh my, her voice is so tiny and sweet. I think she just swept me off my feet with

one simple question.

“Hi, Layla. Yes, I own the coffee shop. We met a few days ago. Do you remember?” I twist in my chair a bit to face her and keep my voice soft, afraid I’ll spook her.

“Are you nice?”

My eyes flit up to Marcus, who is absolutely beaming at us. “I’m nice, I promise.” *God, I hope she believes me. I don’t ever want her to look at me like she did JJ.*

“You look like me. Why?”

Curious little thing, but I suppose she’s right. We both have basically white hair and bright blue eyes. “Hm, I don’t know, sweetheart.”

“You aren’t my daddy.” I freeze. She frowns. *What do I say to that?* Just as I go to turn my panicked stare at Marc, she continues, “I wish you were my Daddy.”

“How about friends?” I battle all the questions rising to the surface and focus on getting her to trust me.

A weight lifts off my shoulders at the beaming smile she gives me. “Oo, yes, please! Mommy!” She turns back to me suddenly. “Wait, what’s your name, mister?” Rylee is eyeing us, waiting for her daughter to finish her sentence.

“Leo. Or you can call me Mister if you want.” She gives me a mischievous grin, and I can’t help but mimic it with a twist of my lips.

“Mommy, Mister is my friend now too!” Her little arm plants itself on the table, the other on my leg, and then there’s suddenly a puff of curls up my nose.

“Little Bug, you need to ask if you want to sit on someone’s lap.” Rylee’s voice is much closer. In the moments it took for Layla to hop up onto my lap, her mom rounded the table and crouched beside me and Jude, whose eyes have heated significantly.

Layla twists to face me, her lips downturned. “May I sit on you, Lee?”

Chuckles can be heard around the table; everyone is focused on us. I catch Jack looking mighty jealous, and it makes my chest puff out just a bit. *The little miss likes me. And she gave me another nickname!*

“If it’s okay with your beautiful Momma.” Rylee blushes something fierce. I may be the quiet one, but that doesn’t mean I’m shy. And she is absolutely stunning.

“For a minute. Gabby vetted you I suppose.” She still looks a little concerned but shoots me a small smile. Be still my beating heart. “I’m Rylee. You look familiar.” Still kneeling beside me, she holds out her hand, and I take it gently, worried I might hurt her.

Layla’s playing a game with Marcus, no longer paying attention to her mom. She snuggles onto my lap, content with the perch she has made me into. I’m content, too, actually. I feel important, like Layla’s giving me a gift not many have received.

“Yeah.” I keep hold of her hand and twist so I can rub my thumb along her wrist. I bite my lip at the sight of her throat bobbing. “I’m Leo. We met at my coffee shop.”

“Oh yes! That’s why Marcus looks so familiar.” Her eyes light with recognition. The sound of his name draws Marc’s attention to Rylee with a questioning quirk of his eyebrow. “Oh, sorry. I’ve been wondering why you looked so familiar all night. Leo just put the pieces together.”

I love my name on her lips.

Marc huffs a laugh. “It’s okay, sweetheart. We haven’t really had the chance to talk. I know you already met him, but this is my boyfriend, Leo.” He gives me a soft look before training his attention back on Rylee, who is now standing.

My heart bottoms out at the contemplative look she gives us. I didn’t realize what it might do to tell her we were in a relationship. *Fuck.*

“It’s wonderful to meet you guys. Bug, your milkshake is here. Let’s leave Leo and Marcus to their meal.”

I attempt to control the sinking disappointment when it's clear that she's distancing herself from us now. My chest aches when Layla hops off my lap and gives me a wave with her teeny palm before skipping over to Gabby.

“Huh.” Jude’s contemplative tone irks me.

“I think that is the longest you have ever gone without speaking.” My words are harsh, but he brushes them off just like I knew he would.

“I was interested in how that would play out. Looks like I have competition for favorite, though. Pretty sure I was Layla’s until she caught sight of your damn hair,” he grumbles, arms crossed in an adorable pout.

Leaning an elbow on the table, I run my left palm up his bare knee and slightly into his shorts. “I’ll make it up to you.” My promise is husky and good lord does he respond.

“You better.”

Chapter Twelve

RYLEE



I hate how I can't help myself. It's like no matter how many times I tell myself not to look, I do anyway. I've gotten better with it after the first few releases, but I still have weak moments.

My weak moment came about five minutes ago when I couldn't help but look at a negative review. Of course, my books aren't for everyone, I *know* that. That doesn't mean it hurts any less.

I've spent my life shouldering mean comments from my family and Mason, so why do I feel the need to torture myself by reading insensitive reviews? I'm not perfect, nor are my stories.

They say to be an author, you need to have tough skin. My skin is riddled with emotional scars that sometimes make me tough as fuck, but other times are my undoing.

Sniffing, I slam my laptop shut. The blanket that covered my lap is tossed to the floor on my way to the kitchen. Or, more importantly, the wine.

It's Tuesday night, a little past nine. I got almost a thousand words into my new novel when I got distracted by statistics, which led me down the path of one-star ratings and tears.

Layla's been asleep for about an hour now, so at least she won't see me like this. With a glass of chardonnay in hand, I plop my butt back on the couch and glare daggers at my laptop.

As I drink half the glass, I try to hype myself back up. Readers can be cruel. It's a damn good thing I'm completely devoted to my dream and am not easily swayed by the opinions of one person.

Anymore.

“Goddamnit!” I hiss at myself and scratch my forehead, refusing to go down the rabbit hole that is my abusive ex. As I drink the second half of the wine in my glass, I try to yank myself out of the tunnel of nightmares that's pulling me by my ankles.

Feeling a slight buzz, I head back for another glass, telling myself that this will be the last one. Crackers tucked into my elbow, I snatch my phone off the coffee table and drop into the cushions again.

Boop.

I giggle at my text-tone. That shit is so hilariously cute. I'm shocked to see a text from Jude on my home screen. After we went our separate ways after dinner on Sunday, I was happy to say I really think I found a great group of people.

Even Jackson, but that was after he apologized to Gabby. Brother or not, nobody should be forced around by the whims of others. I could tell he really heard me and seemed taken aback by an outsider's perspective.

I admit I got choked up when they wrapped each other in a hug. *God, I miss Tate.* Nope, not going there either.

Jude: Hey you. I was hoping you might want to go out for a drink on Friday. Sunshine said she could watch Layla.

I spend the first half of my second glass of wine psyching myself up to respond. The liquid courage clearly does its job, since giddy excitement makes me bounce on the couch at the prospect of a date. I'm not stupid enough to think it really means anything, but damn, do I really want to go out with Jude. *Time to test out those flirting skills I haven't used in years.*

This all feels like it's going really fast. *But isn't this what some adults do? Hook up? I don't want a relationship; I want to get laid.* My anxiety isn't telling me to fear Jude, but I know I'll need to work hard to keep my walls in place. Maybe this can be about sex. They can have bitchy Rylee. That's all.

No emotion. No cuddles. No sleepovers. Just fun. I can do that. It's all I have to offer, anyway.

Me: Oh wow, is the infamous Jude asking me on a date?

Jude: It truly is an honor ;) One you would be crazy to pass up.

Me: Let me just fall all over myself to accept.

Jude: Baby girl, I can't tell if you're joking. Put my poor heart to rest and accept the honor of accompanying me this Friday. <3

Me: What time are you picking me up?

Jude: Good girl. I'll pick you up at eight on Friday and drop Sunshine off at the same time. <3

Oh fuck, time for bed!



The rest of the week goes by way too slow. The number of times I second-guessed getting a drink with Jude is ridiculous. I said yes to him when I had some wine in me and sober me started overthinking everything. It's exhausting.

Bug got through one of her preschool prep books that I got for her a while back. Much to her annoyance. Ever since that girl saw the beach here, she's been obsessed. So obviously we have been going every day. Perks of working on my own schedule.

I've finally put our house together enough for the next two months, and I've flooded my camera roll with pictures of all the fun things we have been doing this week. Gabby has stopped by with coffee a few mornings before her day started, and let me tell you, Layla is so excited to spend tonight with her pixie.

Boop.

Jude: One hour, baby girl.

Each hour today, he has sent me an update on the time left until he picks me up. The 'baby girl' has me really fucking ready for whatever happens tonight. He's been flirting all week, riling me up and making me absolutely antsy for the clock to run out. The wine I've been sipping while getting ready has settled my nerves and racing thoughts.

Time to get some.

Me: I'm ready!

Jude: Good girl.

Fuuuuuck.

"Mommy, when will Pixie be here?" Cozied up on my bed, Layla's eyes stay glued to the TV on the dresser.

"Jude and Gabs will be here soon, sweetie."

I run some oil through my copper locks one more time and take a final twirl in the mirror, feeling pretty pleased with the final look.

I decided to go with my mini black dress, straight hair down to my waist, dark eyes, and just a smidge of red lipstick. The black dress comes about mid-thigh, and the spaghetti straps dip into my cleavage just a bit. My long hair covers me up enough that I feel comfortable wearing this.

"Oh wow, Mommy!" Bug's eyes are wide as she takes me in, short pumps and all. I suppose she's never seen me like

this. “You look pretty!” she gushes, coming over to tug on my hair a little and dance around me.

“Thank you, sweetie.” I smile, running a hand over her head.

She frowns. “Where are you going?” I think she finally realized what me going out and Gabby coming to babysit means. This is unfamiliar territory for both of us.

Sitting on the edge of my bed, I tug her towards me. “Mommy is going to hang out with Jude, remember him?” She nods, a wide grin pulling at her lips. Yeah, Jude won her over. “I will be gone for a little bit. That’s why Gabby will be here. To keep you safe and tuck you in.”

“Oh, okay! What are you and Jude going to do?”

“I think we are going to dance!”

“Fun! I want to dance...” she trails off, a pout tinging her words.

“Maybe—” I’m cut off by a knock on my door at the same time my phone goes off.

Boop.

Jude: Change of plans... I couldn't wait. Open up! ;)

I snort. “Pixie’s here. Let’s go let them in!” I trail after my jammie-clad girl as she bolts to the front door. This time she waits for me to be close before she opens it wide.

And holy mother of hell.

Gabby swoops in fast and twirls Bug into the living room while I drink in the sight that is Jude. Veiny forearms displaying an array of leather bracelets. His black dress shirt is rolled up and tucked into black pants that seem to dance the line between dressy and casual. His blonde beach waves lay haphazardly over his ears and forehead, as usual, making me want to run my nails through the strands. A chain dangles around his neck, topping off his delicious vibes.

“Jesus.”

“Damn.”

I giggle, having voiced our shock at the same time. Locking eyes, I sway forward a tad at the heat I see raging in his brown irises.

“You look absolutely stunning, baby girl,” he growls. It’s enough to make me contemplate packing an extra set of panties.

“Thank you, Jude,” I force the acceptance out. I’m working on accepting compliments, and that one was easy to brush off when I’m still stuck somewhere between his dirty smirk and bulging pecs.

He lifts flowers into my line of sight, and I give him a light smile, attempting to conceal my frown. *Why does he have flowers? Isn’t this just a hookup?*

“I got these for the little Nugget.” His smile is huge as he peers around my shoulder, looking for Layla.

Oh shit. He got Layla flowers?

Oh fuck!

I snatch them out of his grasp quickly before he can do anything. “Thank you, Jude, that was very sweet of you, but you really shouldn’t have.” This is a disaster. No hookup starts with the sex on a stick, getting your child a gift.

Not to mention, Layla won’t cope with this well. At all.

I avoid his questioning gaze. “Uh, of course.” Hustling away, I quickly put them in a vase by the sink.

“Layla, I’m leaving!”

“Love you, Mommy!” She tosses a hand up, not once looking at me. I laugh at how distracted she already is by her friend.

“Love you too, Bug. Be good! Thank you, Gabby. I owe you one.” With that, I close the front door behind me, nudging Jude away from the entrance.

“Come on, your limited time to show me what all the fuss is about has begun. Hope you can make it worth my while.” I

shoot him a wink, gripping his hand, and drag him out to his Jeep.

He stutters for a beat, and I think I have caught him off guard until I'm twirled around and pressed against the warm hood of the car. "Careful, Rylee," he rumbles and nudges his nose into the ticklish spot behind my ear. "I'll take care of that ache between your legs, I promise. But you have to be a good girl first, understand?"

I try to stay firm and in control, but the whimper that slips free and the wiggle of my knees tell me I would drop for him any day. "Just one thing," I whisper, needing to clear the air before I give in completely. "No strings."

The sudden intake of breath sends goosebumps down my heavy breasts. I wonder what just went through his head to make him stall. "No strings," he concedes. *Why does it sound tense? Maybe he's just a bit wound up.*

A smirk tips my lips before I take a nip of his jaw. "I'll be good, but you mentioned something about a drink?"

Chapter Thirteen

JUDE



“Damn, do you see that sexy redhead? How much you want a bet I can bring her home tonight?”

I’m getting really fucking sick of all the drunk bastards eyeing up my girl like a piece of ass they want to fuck. *Wait. Isn’t that my plan too?* I saw her fine ass walking on the beach and immediately knew I wanted her splayed out before me like the sweet treat I know she will be.

I can’t fault her for all the attention she attracts, but I will most likely throw a punch by the end of the night. I’m regretting leaving her alone on the outside of the dancefloor now. I can see her... but she’s *mine*. And that’s not what every man with eyes sees when they watch her gyrating and dragging her palms over her heaving chest and down her hips.

“Watch this, bro.” One of the dipshits turns away from the bar, and before I even realize what’s happening, I’m dragging him away from Rylee by the scruff of his neck and snarling, “She’s mine,” right in his fucking face.

Rylee doesn’t even notice the scuffle, still lost to the thumping beat of the speakers. Sidling up behind her, I trail my fingers up her soft bare thigh while my other hand splays across her stomach.

“Mmmm,” she moans in my ear, having tipped her head back to lean on my chest. Grunting, I grind my cock into her ass, really wishing there were fewer layers between us. “Jude,” she gasps, and holy hell, does that do something to my insides. I’m all twisted up over this woman, and I’m not sure what to

do with the swirly pleasure in my chest and groin. Normally just one of them works. Earlier, when she told me that there would be no strings attached, I swear something lodged itself in my throat, keeping me from agreeing to the easy and desirable terms. Never have I ever had a woman utter those words to me. Normally, I have to fight women off me when they ask for a second date.

A warm, wet heat tickles my collarbone, her tongue coming out to play. “I want more,” she whimpers, hips pushing back into me.

“Come home with me, baby girl.” Rylee nods like the good girl she promised she would be. “Let’s go.” My throat vibrates with how deep my voice drops. Everything about this woman is turning me into a possessive caveman from those books I rea—study. *Not me enjoying good ole smut. Nope.*



I’m a fucking genius.

Never once did I tell Rylee that we were going to *my* home. I’m barely through the door before I’m being shoved into Marc and Leo’s kitchen.

“Are you feeling needy?” I pluck her little hands off me and plop her on the island counter, distracting her from the guys looking over the couch with shocked faces.

“Mmm.” She paws at my shirt, fumbling with the buttons. I splay my hands over her thighs and spread them wide, pleased when the fabric of her dress bunches to her hips. Frustrated and pissy. She tears my shirt down the middle, buttons flying every which way.

“That was naughty, baby girl.”

She freezes, concern splashing through her lust-filled haze. I’m beginning to think this woman hasn’t been touched in a

really long time.

“When’s the last time someone worshipped you, Ry?” My question makes her head tilt, confusion pulling on her brows. I bury my face in her exposed neck and sweep my fingers across her damp panties. “When’s the last time someone touched you here?”

A shocked gasp flies past her lips at the same time her hips tilt into my palm. Yet she doesn’t answer. Nibbling on her earlobe and making eye contact with Leo, I press the pad of my thumb into her throbbing clit.

“Tell me, or you won’t get your release.”

“I—” she chokes when I push her panties aside and plunge two fingers into her slick warmth. “A really, really long time.” Her tone turns emotional, my cue to let it go. She answered. She listened. She’s my good girl.

“I’ll take away your ache, baby girl. Do you trust me?” Gripping her chin, I pull back and force our eyes to meet. Pupils dilated and flushed cheeks; she is damn edible.

“I trust you,” she breathes, eyes clearing enough to give me an honest answer.

Why does that mean so much to me?

With that, I play her like my favorite fucking tune. Thumb strumming her clit, and fingers stroking that sweet spot inside her, she comes on my fingers with a cry of pleasure. My name isn’t on her lips yet. I’ll have to fix that.

“Next time you come, it’s going to be on my cock, and you are going to scream my name, aren’t you?”

“Ye-yes,” she draws out the word on her next exhale. Deliberately making sure she can see me, I suck my fingers into my mouth and groan at the sweet, tart taste I will forever crave. *Next time she’ll come on my face.*

“Lie back, Ry.” She does as she’s told and watches as I slip her panties off her legs and over her heels. “So, tell me, have you thought about Marcus and Leo when you touch yourself at night?”

“What?” She’s shocked at the turn of events, but she trusts me, so it will work out just fine. If she doesn’t want this, I won’t force it.

“Answer me, or your panties go back on.”

She frowns, probably trying to figure out if it’s a trick question. Resolve hardens her features. “Yes. I do.”

“Do you wish they were here with us?” I reward her with a featherlight touch over her swollen entrance. “Answer,” I snap. I’m getting really uncomfortable in my pants, my cock needing to be inside her.

“Yes. I wish they were here!”

“Tell me about the fantasy,” I demand, ready to give her everything she desires.

A teeny frown pulls her lush lips down before she bites down on her bottom lip, seeming to think it over. “First of all, you would finally pull your damn pants down and fuck me like your life depended on it.” I flick her clit at her sassy tone, enjoying the gasp she releases. “Leo would give my tits attention while Marcus fucks my mouth. I would swallow his cum, Leo would paint my body while you roar out my name as my pussy claims your cock.”

All I can do is stare at her in shock for a long ass moment. *That was one of the hottest things I’ve ever heard come out of someone’s mouth.* A strangled grunt from the living room and the guys standing snap me out of my stupor.

“Your wish has been granted, baby girl.” Unbuckling my pants and shoving the rest of my clothing off, I distract her with the tip of my cock sliding through her folds.

“What?”

“Hello, Beauty,” Leo says softly, stunning her when he trails a long finger up her cheek.

“Sweetheart,” Marcus greets, sliding me a condom across the island. “Do you want us?”

“I-you-what?”

I chuckle, the condom wrapped around my cock now. “Yes or no, baby girl? You want all of us, just like you imagined?”

Eyes darting between the three of us, Rylee takes in the pale ridges of Leo’s chest and Marc’s tented sweatpants. I nudge her entrance and quirk an eyebrow at her in question.

Whatever she wants, she gets.

Chapter Fourteen

RYLEE



A m I really doing this?

Also, what the actual fuck is going on? I can't say I'm upset with the turn of events, but I am completely blindsided, leaving me feeling out of control. Yet, they haven't moved, waiting for my decision.

Maybe I do have control over these three men.

Subtly gulping, I swallow the embarrassment of what they just witnessed because they are looking at me with nothing but desire and want. I also catch them giving each other similar looks.

I try to sit up, but Jude slips his cock inside me just a little, making me fall back on the counter with a moan. Between the feel of him and the alcohol buzzing through my veins, I give in just a little more. I have questions that need to be answered, though. Shooting Jude a warning look, I eye the other two standing above my head.

"I thought you two were in a relationship?" This is the weirdest way to have a conversation.

"We are, sweetheart." Marcus' face softens, his fingers twirling the locks of my hair splayed out around me. "But we are a family."

"What does that mean?"

Leo moves from his spot beside Marc and plants himself in Jude's space between my legs. I watch in complete fascination as Jude grabs Leo by the jaw and kisses him with abandon.

The pale-haired man fucking whimpers and melts under Jude's command.

"JJ and Jude might not realize it yet." I gasp at Marc's whispered words in my ear. "But the four of us are meant to be together. And what better addition than a willful woman we all desire?"

I have no words. Except *what the fuck?* I write why-choose romances and find guy-on-guy content to be absolutely arousing, but this? It's making me question how much I've had to drink.

And that right there tells me I need to slow this down.

"Maybe..." My thoughts stall when Leo's hand slides down Jude's abs to play with the base of his cock. "Just Jude tonight. But um... I wouldn't mind watching you guys." I wave my hand between a grinning Marcus and a panting Leo.

A cry splits my lips at the rough handling of Jude slamming his cock into my dripping core. Delirium has my vision foggy with tears of pain and relief. It's been so long since I've been stretched so good and have had someone focus on my pleasure, too. Years, in fact.

Clearing my vision, I toss the negative thoughts aside and focus on the drag of Jude's teeth on my calf that he has hiked up on his shoulders. A gasp next to me draws my attention, and I can't help but respond with an answering moan.

On his knees before Leo, Marcus has shed both their pants with his mouth wrapped around Leo's cock. My breath stutters when Marc locks eyes with me and gives me a wink, his hand furiously pumping himself in tune with Jude's tempo.

"Aren't they fucking glorious, baby girl? You going to let them have this tight pussy next time?" I whimper out a noncommittal response. "You going to come on my cock, Rylee?"

"Yes!" I push the words out and nudge his palms away when he tries to lift my dress further up my stomach. Nobody wants to see that. I squeeze my walls around him tighter,

hoping to distract him from his task of seeing more of my skin. It works like a charm.

He's absolutely powerful and admirable, his muscles rippling with each roll of his pelvis. Beside me, Leo's telling Marcus he's about to come with his hand gripping the dark locks of his partner. The sight makes my muscles spasm, my release approaches fast with all the eye candy surrounding me. Just as Leo roars, and Marcus moans, Jude rubs my clit with his thumb, making me hurtle off the edge of bliss. And like the fucking queen I am, I take him with me.

We take a few minutes to breathe through the aftershocks. My body feels boneless in a way I have been craving for way too long. *I really owe Gabby.* Then Jude speaks, and reality comes crashing in.

“Stay there, baby girl. I'll get you cleaned up.”

“No, thank you. I'll just use the restroom, and then you can drive me home.” He points toward the bathroom, a hurt look dimming his expression. Aftercare is the opposite of no strings. I feel bad, only because of his reaction. They'll see I'm doing them a favor. I'll be gone soon; no need to make this into anything that won't last.

I admit, I'm a bit taken aback by the hurt puppy look on Marc and Leo's faces, too, but I continue to the bathroom with my head held high. After doing my business, I fix myself up in the mirror and make myself presentable for Layla.

Admiring the black trim and the grey walls, I take a minute to appreciate how beautiful this house is. The large entryway spills into a long hallway and a staircase leading upstairs. To the left, when you walk in, is the kitchen that flows into a living room. The hallway I'm walking down accesses the living room beside the staircase. I never would have expected something so respectable and mature for Jude's home. Unless he doesn't actually live here.

“Damn it.” I shake my head, ready to get home to Layla. Plus, I'm sure the guys want me gone. It was just a hookup.

The hushed whispers in the kitchen die off when I walk in. I give them a small smile before saying my piece. “I hope this doesn’t change our friendship, guys. I told Jude no strings attached, so don’t worry about me getting clingy. Can you bring me home now, please?”

It’s silent for so long I think about grabbing his keys off the counter and hightailing it out of the tense situation. I repeat, *what the hell?*

“Kay, well, this was great. Let’s do it again sometime. I’ll just call an Uber.” I’ve barely made it one step before Jude is rushing towards me with his keys in hand.

He opens the front door for me, tossing a goodbye over his shoulder. I wave when they tell me to say hi to Layla for them. They are just being friendly. At least, that’s what I’ll keep telling my heart that’s begging for snuggles.

Jude scowls at me when I try to open my car door and does it for me instead when I toss my hands up in surrender. *Where has the playful, flirty Jude gone? I bet he’s ready to get me home, too.*

With my window rolled down, I take the drive home to cool my heated skin and enjoy the wind whooshing through my ears and canceling out any kind of conversation.

Once parked, he looks me over with a frown, and I take the opportunity to open my door and say, “Thanks for the fun night. See ya later!” Slamming the door behind me, I strut my way across the driveway.

I’m pleased when I find my front door locked. I was anxious about Gabby watching Bug tonight since I don’t really know her. But damn, most parents meet a babysitter once and call it good before leaving. At least the first time I leave Layla for the night, it’s with someone I have come to view as a friend. My only friend.

Damn, it’s going to be hard to leave. Quietly closing the door behind me, I leave it unlocked since Gabby needs to head out and catch her ride with Jude.

“Hey girl,” she says, wrapping me in a hug after tossing the remote on the cushion beside her. “Ugh, you smell like my brother.”

I giggle, pulling away and steer away from that can of beans. “Was she okay for you?”

Her eyes narrow playfully, but she lets it slide. “She was wonderful. Tired herself right out and went to bed like an hour after you left.”

“Oh good! Thank you, Pixie.” I give her another hug. “I’ll buy you lunch and a few drinks sometime. I really owe you. I needed that.”

“Well, good but gross. Maybe no details for me when it comes to Jude.”

“What about Marcus and Leo?” I wink and saunter away, letting her stew on that slice of information. Clearly, I’m still not thinking straight.

“Oh my God!” she whisper-yells and follows me into the kitchen. “Tell me everything!”

“How about tomorrow?” I tilt my head to her vibrating phone on the counter, displaying Jude’s contact.

She huffs at my smirk. “Fine, you hussy. Love ya, bye!” And then she’s gone, leaving a trail of imaginary rainbows and glitter behind her. *I swear the kiss she blew me sparkled.*

Gabby’s words finally register. *She said she loves me.* I frown, placing my hand on my forehead. Layla is the only one who says that to me. Mason never did, and neither did my parents.

Tate used to.

I sigh. It’s time for a shower and some much-needed sleep.

Chapter Fifteen

JACKSON



“You did what?!” My exasperated hiss has nothing on the flames I keep attempting to douse with water. I’m telling myself it’s not flames of jealousy. No, it’s rage for their stupidity. They have no idea the effect this could have on our relationship with Gabby.

The vein in my temple throbs when Marcus and Jude bump knuckles. I’m equally annoyed with the smirking Leo slightly behind them. *God damn it. I’m so curious, but I refuse to be dragged into whatever game they are playing at.*

“This better just be a fucking fling,” I snarl. I don’t want to see them hurt when she leaves next month. My stomach bottoms out at the realization that we are already down one week with her living in our town. Then I scoff quietly at the sadness rushing through me at the thought. *She’s just a damn tenant.*

All three of them have matching frowns and pursed lips, making my chest constrict with worry. *They better not really think this could last.*

Jude recovers first. “Yeah, man. Just a fling.” He avoids the scowl on Marc’s face as he trudges into the pantry. The shrill sound of his phone echoes as he walks back out with a bag of chips in hand.

“Hey, Sunshine!” Slowly his usual bright demeanor lightens his tan features, helping me breathe a little easier. “Yeah. We will see you in a bit. Love you.”

We?

“Where are we going?” Leo responds softly, passing me on his way around the counter. I shiver at the gentle graze of his fingers dragging along my waist.

“Beach day, meet at the usual spot in an hour!” It’s not a question, and nobody tries to dissuade him. A beach day as a family sounds nice; it’s been too long.

A lump forms in my throat when Jude leans in to kiss Leo, but quickly diverts to a shoulder slap. The shimmer in Leo’s eyes breaks my fucking heart. *Is that how he feels when I reject the connection between us?*

I watch Leo’s shoulder slump as Jude bustles his way upstairs to get ready. Marcus is stiff beside me, both of us watching as Leo slowly pulls himself together and walks out the front door, ready to get going.

“There are only so many times I can watch his heart break because of you two fucking idiots. I’ll be having this conversation with Jude, too.” Marcus faces me, and I try not to shy away from the fierce waves of contempt rolling off him. “You will love him the way your heart desires, or you will move on. I’m done. We are done. Both of you are hurting us more than you know. We love you. But we love ourselves enough to know we are being treated fucking horribly. There will be no more push and pull because, at the end of the day, you are *ruining* us.”

I’m stunned. Never has this been discussed so blatantly. My heart fissures at the ultimatum.

“You’re the problem, Jackson. You and Jude. Not Leo. Not me. It took us a long time to realize that maybe it wasn’t us. It’s not. I see the want and love in both of you and Jude’s eyes when you look at us. We are beyond friends. Draw the line or erase it. If you don’t make the move, you will lose us in every way.”

With that, he storms out my front door, my heart clenched in his fist.

Fighting back the roar that wants to escape me, I turn with my jaw clenched harder than it’s ever been. I find Jude on the

staircase with tears lingering precariously on his lashes. We lock eyes, and for once in my fucking life, I don't look away when I feel the familiar hum of pleasure his focus ignites in me. If I focus hard enough, I swear I can see a thread of love trying to weave itself together before we can rip it apart with a shrug and scoff.

“JJ?” he breathes, one tear making a path down his cheek. Jude never cries. He's the pretty boy. The one who laughs and fucks like a playboy, never giving a shit about anything but what trouble he can get up to.

My own eyes burn, and I don't know what to say. Marcus was right about him and Leo, but he was also hinting at my feelings for Jude.

I need to think, but Jude makes it so much harder to get my head on straight when he walks down the stairs. When he's a foot in front of me, I can't get any words out, swallowing furiously.

Instead, I brush a wild curl off his forehead and allow my hand to trail along his jaw. I nod, and he offers me a watery smile. He steps back gently, my hand falling between us. The loss of his touch makes my fists clench.

“Don't make us late,” he murmurs before brushing by me softly with a small smirk in place.

Every. Single. Dynamic. Just blew the fuck up. I don't know what's going to happen, and my controlling side is clawing at my insides. The only thing I know for sure is I will do anything to keep the men I love in my life.

No matter how fucking terrifying it is to pick up the damn pencil.

Now, to draw or erase?



“Oh my Christ, no way!”

I thought the beach might be awkward after everything that went down a bit ago, but between Jude’s yell and Marc’s cackles, I think we’re fine for now. What really draws my attention is Leo’s sucked-in breath, followed by a choke. You can always tell when that man is shocked by something.

I follow their line of sight, telling myself to keep low today since I got my ass handed to me. “Shit.” Holding her little girl in her arms, Rylee is swimming circles around Gabby. All three of them have wide smiles on their faces, and I just fucking know that when Rylee sees us, her grin will evaporate.

“Did you know our girls would be here?” Marcus nudges Jude with a grin. There he goes again, claiming them like we have any right.

“I actually didn’t. Gabby just said family time at the beach.”

“Think Rylee knows?” Leo asks, a contemplative look on his face as he gazes out at them in the water.

“Let’s find out!” Just like that, Jude’s shirt is being thrown into Marc’s face and he’s sprinting into the water. The ripple of his back draws my attention, and I wonder if he remembered to put sunscreen on.

A smile graces my lips at the sound of Layla’s squeal of joy when she sees Pretty Boy splashing towards them. Without hesitation, she reaches for him, and he swings her around in his arms with her toes skimming the surface.

Rylee’s laughter reaches my ears and gives me pause. *She’s not mad?* With my shirt off, I plop into Gabby’s bright pink chair and study the surprise lighting up Ry’s face.

“I don’t think she knew,” Leo murmurs, dropping onto his beach towel a foot away from me. Marcus is next to bound into the ocean, splashing Gabby without remorse. We both sit in silence for a few minutes, enjoying the view of the five of them laughing and splashing around in the Saturday sun.

“I don’t think she’s mad about it, though,” I murmur. I’m entranced by the beautiful sight of the little miss clinging to

Jude with her momma chasing them through the shallow end. “She seems happy.” It’s an observation that warms my heart.

I’ve seen Rylee as many things already. Terrified and shaky. Annoyed and dismissive. Protective and demanding. Even during dinner last weekend, she had fortified her walls, and dodged each question we asked her. Fuck, I don’t even know what she does for a living.

Now though, Rylee is... free.

I feel like this is the closest we have gotten to the real Rylee, and that terrifies me. It scares me enough to ask about last night. “What was she like last night, Leo?”

He doesn’t look at me like I do him. A frown tugs at his pointy features. “She was in control. Not controlling, but I don’t think she truly let go. I heard her tell Jude she trusted him.” He tilts his head, thinking about what to say next. “When Jude went to clean her up, she said, ‘no thanks’ and went to the bathroom instead, then said she was ready to go home.”

“Really?” *That’s fucking shocking.*

He huffs a humorless laugh, still watching them play. “I think Jude was hurt. Us too. It was such a nonchalant dismissal. Like we didn’t matter.”

“Are you supposed to matter to a fling?” I hate upsetting him, but I think they are striving for something that won’t happen. “Jude said she said no strings, so what’s the problem?”

A high-pitched scream makes me whip my head back toward the water. I find Marcus with her over his shoulder and diving further out. Closer to us, Layla is being twirled around Jude’s legs by his hands.

“That, JJ, is not a fling.”

Chapter Sixteen

MARCUS



“U h uh! Stay back!”

Each huff of breath from Rylee is coated with laughter, and it makes my chest puff up with pride. She came out of her first dunk looking mighty fine, dripping in salt water. I was worried she would be one of those girls that didn't play. Not my Rylee, though. She looks so damn giddy being tossed around in the water.

“Marc, don't do it.” Her warning tone only has my grin widening as I prowl closer. I enjoy watching her fight her own smile, but she keeps losing the battle.

“Giddy-up, Judy! Save my mommy!”

“As you wish, Ms. Nugget!”

Just as Rylee's mouth twists into a devilish smirk, I'm fucking air born. As I sputter and heave water out of my lungs, I hear loud laughter and high-pitched giggles from little Layla.

“How was that?” My vision finally clears in time to watch Jude pick Layla up and twirl her around again.

“Perfect! You saved Mommy!” Her wet curls bob around her face as she bounces in Jude's arms. Beside them, Rylee's laughter has quieted, leaving behind a contemplative wistfulness.

“I will always save your mom,” Jude says it in a silly manner, but the serious look he shoots Rylee has her smile dropping altogether.

“Even after we leave?”

“Let’s go get some more sunscreen on you!” Rylee chimes in, reaching for her daughter. Her shoulders are tense as she carries Layla to their towels.

“What did she mean, Jude?” The water is up to my knees now as I stand in front of him. His brows are pulled together, and his eyes track them like he never wants them out of his sight ever again.

“They are subleasing that unit for the final two months. I don’t know what Layla meant.” His chocolate eyes lock on mine, and I’m shocked to find an entire world of emotion swirling in them. “Where do you think they are moving to?”

Unable to resist comforting him in some way, I hook my finger into one of his many bracelets. “I don’t know, but I hope she stays close.” I sigh. “Jude, we need to talk.”

He doesn’t pull his wrist away from me, but his eyes immediately cool. “I heard you with JJ. I get it, and I—” All the emotion he tried to lock away comes flooding back to the surface. “Marcus, I’m sorry.”

I swear my heart falls out of my ass. *What the hell is he sorry for? Is this it? Is this when he turns us away forever?* I know I gave the ultimatum, but now that I’m faced with the consequences of my actions, I feel like I could keel over and vomit. I don’t want to lose JJ and Jude. We love them, and they love us. We are more than friends. It’s up to them, though, because I am done watching the love of my life get hurt over and over again by a couple of grown men who don’t understand their own feelings.

I get that their childhood was horrible for them and Gabby, while Leo and I had fairly normal lives. Except for the fact that my dad is a dick, but I’m positive almost everyone has daddy issues. Not just women. So, I understand that Jude and Jackson have had different upbringings that caused lasting scars. But I refuse to stand by and allow them to scar us. There are only so many times I can handle my heart being stabbed by their rejection.

I step away, waiting for his final blow. “What are you sorry for, Jude?” My words are a plea.

Jude gulps. “I’m sorry for all the damage I have caused. You’re right; it’s time for us to figure our shit out and stop dragging you through it. Can I just... can I have a little time?”

Oh, thank fuck.

“One week, Jude. We are done hurting.” I hate giving him a timeline, but we need to get this sorted out before it becomes a fucking mess. “Tell JJ, too. You have one week. You’re either with us, or we are just friends.”

His nod shakes some of his dripping curls onto his forehead, and I fight like hell not to reach out and brush them aside. “One week,” he agrees quietly. “Let’s go hang out with our girls, huh?” With a smirk back in place and a twinkle in his eye, he bolts from the water, shoving me out of the way. I give chase, annoyed he got the upper hand so damn fast.

Cursing under my breath, I arrive just short of him as he gives Rylee a big hug from behind.

One week and we will finally know where the four of us stand. Then maybe we should start figuring out where these wonderful ladies fit into our lives, too. Because what I’m seeing right now; Rylee fits perfectly in each dip and groove of Jude while Layla snuggles deeper into Leo’s side.

They fit. But will they stay?



I’m not thrilled with how much pleading we had to do in order to have dinner with the girls again. It was actually Layla that convinced Rylee to come over for dinner. I haven’t been able to kick the way her reluctance to hang out with us soured my appetite.

After another hour at the beach this past weekend, we all went our separate ways. Rylee devoted her attention to her daughter and Gabby for the rest of the time. It was like she

completely shut us out, only offering small smiles and a nod here and there.

What's worse is Layla picked up on her mood change and kept her distance from us after Rylee peeled Jude's arms off her. Jackson looked ready to pry the secrets out of their heads. We literally know nothing about these two girls, and Gabby is tight-lipped as fuck. I think our desperation for them to have dinner with us was so we could finally learn more about them.

Like, what does Rylee do for a living? I'm sure it's in one of their files somewhere, but we want them to talk to us. Not just play and fuck. It's the shallowest friends-with-benefits I have ever heard of. And it's us that are clinging, not her. Which is super sexist, but I'm shocked.

I can't tell what's going on with Jude and JJ. I mean, hell, Jude fucks men and women as often as he can. Jackson, I have no idea what his sex life is like or if he even has one.

A knock at the door jerks me from my thoughts, but it's Jude's holler of excitement that startles the beer to go down the wrong tube. Leo snickers and pats me on the back as I try not to die right here on Jackson's fucking couch.

We decided to have dinner at their place since they have such a large open concept on their main floor. We thought it might be easiest for Rylee to keep an eye on the little miss.

Can five-year-olds be alone? Does Rylee ever relax, or is she run ragged, watching over her daughter? It's questions like this that I need answers to. What the hell is their life actually like?

"Sunshine!"

Gabby comes bounding into the house, dipping under Jude's outstretched arms. When JJ snorts, I almost choke again. I love seeing him laugh and smile more and more lately.

"Nugget! You will give me a hug, won't you?"

Leo and I stand at the same time to greet the ladies and watch as Layla gives Jude a big grin and wraps her arms around his neck when he crouches. If I had ovaries, they would be screaming. Jude would make a wonderful father.

Rylee passes them, and I about trip over my feet at the sight of her. Copper red hair is clean and straightened down her back, and she has on a white sundress that matches Layla's. I can't help the green monster raging under my skin at the thought of other men seeing her like this today.

What has she been up to all day? It's Wednesday, did she work or run errands? Why do I know nothing?!

Her long locks swish over her shoulders when she kicks off her sandals and guides her daughter further into the house.

"Mister!"

As soon as Layla's eyes land on Leo, she's bolting across the hardwood floors and wrapping around his legs. I love how excited she is to see us every damn time. I can't wait for her to react to me the same way she does with Jude and Leo.

"Hi, little one."

If I'm swooning over the way he kisses the top of her head, I can't imagine what Ry feels because, damn, those two blonds are adorable together. When I try to figure out what Rylee is thinking, I catch her eyeing the space. Straight from the door, on her right, is the large kitchen with an island. Directly in front of her is the dining room, and on the left is the sunken living room, where we are still standing.

Why nobody has greeted Rylee is probably due to how fucking stunning she looks right now. All eyes are zeroed in on her stiff form, but I will say she doesn't seem worried about Layla, which means she trusts us somewhat.

Now it's time to figure out what makes her hands twitch with anxiety, where they are moving to, what she does for work, and why her eyes flash with pain and caution when Layla isn't watching. I want to know everything about the woman who has wiggled her way into our lives and figure out how we can make it permanent.

Chapter Seventeen

RYLEE



I can't shake the feeling that this night won't go in my favor at all. I know Layla will have a good time. She twisted my arm to get us here with her damn puppy dog eyes.

Standing in the center of their main level with all eyes on me, it feels like an intervention. I hoped that when I agreed to eat dinner with them, we would go out and I could avoid all the questions. Maybe even go to a restaurant with an arcade.

I need distractions, and the TV isn't even on right now. Maybe I should have brought board games because the only option right now is to talk. Thankfully, someone had the hindsight to turn some music on in the background. Also, thank all that is good and holy for Pixie coming tonight.

"You look beautiful, sweetheart." Marc's voice is husky when he pops up beside me with a kiss on my cheek.

I fight the blush that wants to make itself known. "Thank you, Marcus." I've gotten more compliments from these people in the past week than I have in years.

"Hi, Beauty."

Shit. Leo's nickname for me reminds me of the last time he called me that while I was sprawled out on his counter. I give him a small smile. "Hi."

"Would you like a glass of wine, Rylee?" Relief washes through me when Jackson uses my name, but disappointment is hot on its heels. *That's okay. I don't need nicknames.*

“Already got some!” Pixie pushes through the wall of men in front of me and thrusts a glass of white wine into my hand.

“Thank you, babe. Where is little Bug?” Angling my body out of the path she created through the muscle, I finally break into testosterone-free air.

Gabby’s pink bob is curled tonight, and the cozy-looking red dress she’s wearing is absolutely fabulous. Her cherry red smirk is aimed towards the kitchen, where I find Layla sitting on the counter with a charcuterie board splayed out in front of her.

“Try this,” Jude murmurs, offering her a new concoction of meat, cheese, and crackers.

“That one looks funny.” Her nose crinkles as she eyes the food in his fingers. She accepts it anyway, gives it a little sniff, and takes a small bite of it.

Now a few feet away, I see the moment Bug’s eyes light up in delight. With a happy dance, she pops the rest in her mouth and munches while Jude thinks of a new way to test her taste buds. He looks really damn focused and proud of himself for each new thing she tries.

“If that was anyone but my brother, I would be half in love by now,” Gabby murmurs into her glass, snorting when I jab her in the side with my elbow. “What’s for dinner?”

Jude startles at the sound of Gabby’s voice. I sip my wine, enjoying him being caught off guard for once. “Uh...” Marcus cuts his nervousness off, flaunting his way into the kitchen.

“I heard about something called a Girl Dinner, where you just eat snacks and drink wine or juice.” He nods to Layla when pointing out the alternative.

“Oh my god!” Gabby and I hit each other at the same time. Our wide eyes lock on each other and immediately lose it. There is no way Pixie or I could have held in our laughter at his proud declaration and our mutual reaction. You know when you are so damn happy and can’t contain the laughter ripping your insides to shreds, so you and your friend trade blows? That’s how hard we laugh. And damn, it feels good.

When Jude blanches a sickly shade of white, I chortle out the most unladylike snort. “Dam—dang it, Marcus! I told you it wasn’t a good idea!”

Taking a deep breath, I attempt to control myself when I see them looking genuinely upset. “No, it’s not.” I giggle. “It’s perfect. Sorry.” Another huff slips free when Gabby shoves me a little again in an attempt to rein herself back in.

“Why are you laughing?” Marcus pouts, shifting back and forth, uncertain what to do with himself.

“I don’t think they are laughing at you,” my child says haughtily, like she can’t imagine how they didn’t notice that Gabby and I set *each other* off, not them. “Pixie and Mommy are laughing at each other.”

“Wait, what?” Jude’s confusion makes him even cuter.

“Good lord, they got so excited about Girl Dinner, they hit each other.”

“What he said.” I toss my thumb over my shoulder where Jackson’s voice comes from.

“Oh, so snacks and wine are okay?” Marc still looks afraid, so I give him a peck on the cheek before snatching a piece of salami that Layla offers me.

“Mommy loves snacks!” Layla’s larger-than-life smile makes my chest squeeze with joy.

“Yes, Girl Dinner is perfect, thank you, guys.” He seems stunned at my closeness, so I wander away and ask, “Are there any games we can play?” My tummy drops when the guys trade glances, and I know I’m going to hate the answer.

The silence is relieved by the sweet one. “We were hoping we could all get to know each other.” Fuck. Of course, Leo would be the one to drop the bomb.

So, this is an intervention.

“Alright, what’s your favorite color?” Hopefully, I can steer the conversation if I start first. I take a seat at the table while Jackson and Jude bring out plates of random bite-sized things.

I'm only mildly distracted by Leo depositing Bug on his lap across from me, but I still catch Marc's response, "Green, how about you, little miss?" He boops Layla on the nose before giving Leo a kiss on the temple. The whole scene is really damn attractive. For another woman.

"I like blue because my eyes and Mommy's are the same. Lee's too! My daddy has black eyes, so I really love Mommy's, and I'm happy I have the same ones."

Where's the wine?

"My favorite color is blue, too, Nugget!" I could kiss Jude for avoiding the baggage that just spewed out of my child. "Rylee, what's your favorite color?"

"Pink."

"What?! Really?" Jude's jaw is on the table.

I'm startled by his outburst, but his wide eyes are quite amusing. I tilt my head, my long hair tickling my bare arms. "Why is that so shocking to you, Jude?"

Finally closing his mouth, his cheeks flush my most favorite color. "Uh, you just don't seem like a pink kind of girl."

"Mom loves pink," Bug mumbles over a bite of cheesy fries. "We have pink-fit-jammie nights!"

"I want to come to the next one!" Gabby basically shouts, topping off my wine. *Have I thanked her yet for being amazing?*

"Okay, I'll let you know. All undergarments have to be pink, too. We watch movies and eat chocolate." I give her a wink, reaching for the buffalo wings and my own mini cup of ranch.

"Yay! My favorite color is purple, so we pair well together." She sends me a wink of her own before moaning around the taco dip.

"What do you guys do for a living?"

Leo perks up, sending the butterflies in my tummy into overdrive. His bright blue eyes sparkle with excitement. “You already know what I do. I own the coffee shop where we first met!” Layla nods her head beneath his chin.

I could eat him. “What made you decide to own a coffee shop?”

He looks thoughtful for a moment. “My mom used to own a few when I was younger, so I spent a lot of time hanging out and people-watching while I was supposed to be doing homework.” I slow my chewing down when he shifts in his seat uncomfortably. “Being the youngest out of five siblings, I guess it became my favorite thing to do, and being at work with her were the main one-on-one moments I got to spend with her.”

Marcus slips his hand on top of Leo’s in comfort. I feel like I am finally understanding more about why he is so quiet. I wonder how often they listened to or noticed him in a house full of older children. My heart aches for the little boy he used to be.

“So, you find comfort in your coffee shop?”

Leo beams at me, his teeth shining brightly. “Yes, I love it there. My mom has helped me a lot over the years, and my crew fangirl over her so hard.”

“That’s amazing. I’m so happy for you. It really is a beautiful shop.” I can’t help but want to meet the woman who raised this man. Dangerous thoughts.

“Thank you, Beauty.” I offer him a soft smile, our eyes lingering on each other a little longer than normal.

Jackson clears his throat. “I own a few rental properties, but I’m at the point where I don’t have to do much. I have a great team, two of them being Jude and Gabby.”

“Yeah, I go through applications, technical stuff, and a lot of things that our big boss man is too good to do himself.” Jude snorts at the same time JJ growls at him in annoyance.

Pixie intervenes before they can start bickering. “I run the people side of things and help out where I can. It’s a temp job

while I figure out where I want to go from here.” She shrugs, appreciation for her brother lingering in her gaze.

“That’s great! I love that you all work together. What do you do, Marcus?” The loyalty and support these people offer each other is truly awe-inspiring. I swallow down the emotion that is fighting to ruin the evening. I just can’t help but wonder what it would be like to have so many people in your corner. This is what I want, sure, but I will make it my life’s fucking mission to make sure Layla has this kind of support when she gets older.

“I’m an accountant for them, and I have a few other clients as well,” he shrugs, a small grin on his face as he looks around the table.

The feeling of being out of place is getting heavier as I learn how their lives are so intertwined. The sheer love and admiration coming from Gabby is far different from the vibes wafting off the men. Their gazes are filled with pride, longing, and tenderness, no matter which of them they look at. Gabby was right. These four men are in love with each other.

“My mommy is a writer!” All focus snaps to me at the declaration my daughter just made. Damn it, I was doing so well at keeping the attention off myself.

“You what?” Jude’s mouth is open again in shock. For real, who does he think I am? I must scowl at him because his sheepish look flares with guilt. “I’m sorry, you are just very closed off, and I’m just now realizing I truly don’t know anything about you at all. I’d like to hear about your writing, baby girl.”

My eyes burn at his words. I suppose they don’t know me at all, and for some unknown reason, I fucking hate it. *Wasn’t that the point of leading this conversation? So, they wouldn’t know me? Now here I am, weepy over the fact that Jude wants to know me.*

“I uh. Yeah, I am an author. I’ve written about nine books now. I’m self-published, and yeah, I guess it’s become my career.” Shrugging, I grab the bowl of chocolate-covered almonds in front of me.

“That’s amazing, Rylee!” I’m surprised it’s Jackson who looks so amazed. “What do you write? Where can I find your work?”

This is new territory for me. The only other person who knows I’m an author besides Layla is my ex. And he was not supportive at all. In fact, I’m pretty sure he called it childish and stupid, amongst plenty of other horrible things.

“Oh, thanks. I write psychological mystery romance. You won’t be able to find me. I write under a pen name.” No way in hell am I telling them I write stories about traumatized women who fall in love with multiple men. That would open up a whole tirade of questions that I refuse to answer.

Gabby beams at me before taking another sip of her wine. She’s like a fucking vault by how she’s keeping my secrets. Not that she knows more than anything past what I do, and that Layla and I need to keep moving.

“I must know more!” Marcus is practically bouncing in his seat with excitement. Jude’s jaw is on the table again, and JJ doesn’t look far off from exploding.

I give Leo a questioning look, hoping he will clue me into their excitement. He chuckles, offering Bug another cracker with hummus. “Jackson is a book worm so his response is not all that out of character. And Jude and Marc are excited because it’s a really amazing career to have, Rylee. Be proud of your work, and if you can make a living for yourself and your daughter, you must do great work. We are amazed, Beauty, don’t look so shocked.”

“I—” *Fuck, don’t cry.* “Nobody has ever reacted this way, I’m sorry. Thank you, guys.”

Their raised eyebrows drop at the extra slice of information I dropped. Shit. Jackson’s immediate thunderous gaze has shivers dancing up my spine. The change in the atmosphere doesn’t go unnoticed by Layla, causing a nervous sweat to break out on my back.

“Where are you from, Rylee?” Jackson’s voice is like gravel, but thank hell for my little one who loves to attempt

the word Mississippi.

“You’re from Mississippi?” I don’t like the sharp look on JJ’s face. It’s setting me on edge.

I nod. “Are you all from South Carolina?” I can still lead this conversation as long as they pick up on social cues. It’s obvious that I am uncomfortable, and while the word Mississippi may have distracted Layla, her focus keeps returning to me, concern evident in the way she watches my every move.

“Yeah, we all went to college here. That’s where we all met, aside from me, JJ, and Sunshine, of course.” Jude waves a fry around the table with a small, tight smile on his face. I want to know what memory is playing in his mind right now, but that’s outside of our relationship boundaries.

“Where are you moving after the lease is up?” Marcus feigns nonchalance, but I see the way he leans into the table like he’s hanging on to my every word.

Jackson’s eyes narrow on Marcus before they flash to mine. “Have you decided on Texas or Rhode Island?” I’m not crazy. There’s definitely a coating of irritation lingering in his sharp gaze.

I glare. “Thinking Minnesota now.” My appetite is diminishing quickly, and the wine has done nothing to calm my nerves. If this keeps up, I won’t be finishing my second glass. I’ll need to drive us home sooner than planned.

“What? No, you can’t move!” I’m shocked that it’s Leo who protests. Everyone else looks stricken, and Gabby is pointedly looking anywhere else but at the guys staring us down. Yes, Pixie knew all along, which, unfortunately, might put her right in between her family and me.

All I do is shrug. It’s none of their business, which is why we are moving somewhere other than those three options.

“Why are you moving?” A ball forms in my throat at Leo’s sad voice coming from above Layla’s head. She had been fairly quiet until her personal chair started participating again.

“Can they come with us, Mommy? Jude said he would keep you safe. Remember?”

I will not cry.

Gabby’s hand landing on my knee beneath the table does nothing to curb the sob climbing up my throat.

“They can’t come with us, little Bug. I’m sorry.” I try, but don’t do a good job of concealing the crack in my whispered voice.

Her chin quivers. Sadness coats her eyes in tears, making me feel like the worst kind of mother. “But-but Jude said...” She takes a shuddering breath.

“Come here, sweetheart. Let’s go get you a blanket and a movie, okay?” Gabby doesn’t wait for Layla to respond and plucks her right off Leo’s lap to bring her to the living room.

The eyes that watched Layla being carried away are now attempting to rip the skin off my bones and release my darkest secrets.

“Rylee, what’s going on?”

“Nothing, Jackson. Seriously, don’t worry about it.” I wave JJ off, hoping like fuck they will let it go. *I knew I should have brought some damn games.*

“Where’s your family?”

I sigh, shoving my plate away. “Right there on your couch.” JJ’s eyes narrow even further before asking me to elaborate. “My family is Layla, and we are traveling the US before she needs to start school.” The lie comes out of me easily, but my heart batters itself against my ribcage, begging me to open up to these men. After everything I have learned tonight, though, there is no way I am dumping my bullshit into their laps.

“You’re just traveling?” Marc draws the words out like they don’t feel quite right rolling off his tongue.

“Yeah, mother-daughter road trip.” I attempt a smile, but I don’t think I pull it off if the tightening around Jude’s eyes is any indication.

“Where’s Layla’s father, Rylee?”

Nope. Fuck that noise.

My spine snaps straight as I stand. “That is none of your business, Jackson.”

He growls and stands in one swift movement, forcing a ripple effect around the table. The TV volume rises in the living room at the same time the rest of the chairs screech back, their owners rising to their feet.

“Jackson, calm down.” Marc’s voice is firm. His usual silliness gone, leaving behind a cautious man flexing his fingers.

“I will not calm down.” My hands twitch under the imposing man’s rage. “She’s not telling us the truth! Something is wrong, Marcus. Can’t you tell?” If he doesn’t quiet down, Bug is going to come over here.

A tear scorches my cheek, and my shake has traveled up my forearms. The muscle spasms started after the first few times Mason hit me. Now it feels like a trauma response or like my muscles are preparing for the fight.

I don’t think they will hurt me, but the force of their rage and dominance is beating all my nerves into a frenzy. Their voices turn muffled while I move away from the table, trying not to draw attention to myself.

A cool touch to my shoulder has me sucking in a harsh breath and jumping away. “It’s just me, babe.” At the sound of Gabby’s soft tone, my tears run freely.

“Mom?” Layla’s small hand tugs on my dress, but it’s her small, steely voice that has me swallowing back all my fears. It’s time to go.

“Do you want me to drive you home?” The guys are still arguing around the table, not noticing Gabby guiding me to the front door. I decline Pixie’s offer, pick my little girl up in my arms, and scramble for my keys. “Text me when you’re home. I’m so sorry they are acting like this. I’ll talk to them. Love you.”

Before the front door closes behind me, I lose myself in the ocean-blue depths of an understanding gaze. Leo gives me a solemn nod, and another tear is released from my lashes when I turn my back and leave with my daughter in my arms.

Chapter Eighteen

LEO



“I will not calm down,” JJ hisses.

Knowing Marcus and Jude are focused on Jackson, I allow the subtle shift of Rylee’s body to take my attention.

“She’s not telling us the truth! Something is wrong, Marcus. Can’t you tell?”

Rylee’s hands twitch and contract while her forearms twist and flex. The response to Jack’s rage makes me want to pummel him, but I want to soothe her more. Marc will kick his ass, and unfortunately, that’s the energy that my copper-haired beauty is currently inching away from. Tears track down her cheeks, making my chest thunder with the need to make it all better.

I drown out their arguing that is bordering on yelling, flinching in time with Rylee when her friend touches her. Gabby’s words are too quiet for me to hear, but I make out Layla’s, “Mom?” I have never heard Layla call her mom that, and her strong tone of voice makes me cringe.

Whatever happened to them in the past, the sweet girl knows her mother’s exact tells of when her trauma is getting the best of her. Layla’s frown when her eyes flick over to the table makes her look far older than she is. My insides fizzle and twist uncomfortably.

The girls are standing in front of the door faster than I can blink. The red-rimmed eyes of Rylee and the accusing glare of her little one are the final stab to my heart before the door closes.

“Jackson, do you even hear yourself? Shut up!” That’s Jude, his annoyance huffing out of his chest as he runs his hands down his face. How they have not noticed the girls leaving is beyond me.

“You are all idiots!” Gabby’s screech of outrage makes us jump in shock and turn to see her fists placed on her hips. A stormy look of complete disdain distorts her dainty features.

Having been snapped out of the argument, Marcus finally looks around the room. His dark eyebrows furrow in confusion when he doesn’t see what he’s looking for. “Wait, where did they go?”

Gabby tosses her hands in the air. “They left! You freaked Rylee out so much she was crying and shaking. Not to mention, Layla was about to go full Hulk mode if her mom didn’t get a hold of herself!”

“What?” Jude looks like he’s not comprehending shit right now. I love my men, I really do, but this is fucking ridiculous.

“They. Left. Because you alpha-assholes are dipshits. Jackson, are you so out of touch with humanity that you can’t read any kind of signal? She was shaking before you even stood up, and what did you do? You snapped and towered over her like a dominating douchebag!”

True.

“You, Marcus—”

“What about me? I was trying to get him to calm down!” For those who don’t know Marcus, he seems similar to Jude in that he is our family jokester. But he is the most protective man I have ever met. It’s not often those two fight for real, but when they do, it’s explosive.

Gabby sees red. “All you did was egg him on! You and Jude helped absolutely nobody. Instead, the three of you kept raising your voices and making everything so much worse.”

I grunt. Fair.

She rounds on me, pink bob and red dress swishing around her. “And seriously, Leo? You watched Rylee the entire time

and did absolutely nothing to help her. I don't care if the rest of them were fighting. You could have at least been her lifeline. And I *know* you noticed her tears and quivering arms. You. Did. Nothing."

With that, Gabby turns on her heel, snatches her keys, and slams the front door behind her. What she leaves in her wake is a whole fuck load of guilt, shock, and anger.

It's silent for a few moments, each of us still standing around the table. I feel properly chastised, my gut protesting our dinner and swirling with dread. Normally, being the quiet one keeps me out of trouble. I did not participate in the fight, yet it feels so much worse to be the one that didn't do *anything*. Gabby is right. I saw Rylee's anguish, and all I did was watch it happen.

I did nothing. Why didn't I go to her?

"You son of a bitch, this is your fault!" Marcus has rounded the table before I know what's happening. I watch in shock when his hands grab the front of Jackson's shirt as leverage before shoving him into the wall.

Jude and I trade a wide-eyed glance. "Do we do something?" His question is filled with bewilderment.

I sigh. "No, this has been a long time coming. Want a beer?" I don't wait for his response, grabbing two from the fridge, anyway. "Couch?" Titling my head, I hand over his beer just as Jackson shoves at Marc's chest.

"Yeah." Exhaustion permeates Jude's sigh as he follows me into the living room. My gut swoops with pleasure and nervousness when he sits close enough to press his thigh against mine. I suck in a sharp breath when I feel his arm rest on the back of the couch behind me.

"You scared her, Jackson!" This time when I take in their positions, Jackson has his forearm holding Marcus against the wall by his throat. Jude hums in the back of his throat, a thoughtful look on his face as he watches them.

"She's running from something, Marcus! How are we supposed to protect her if she won't stop lying to us?!"

“You want to protect her?” Marcus stops fighting the hold JJ has him in.

“Of course I do! Both of them! How can you not want to?” Jackson seems flabbergasted at the assumption Marc doesn’t want to be in their lives. “How can you not want to dig deeper and figure out who hurt those beautiful girls? They have nobody!”

This is it. Jackson’s heart is showing. Sure, we can read him like only family can. We know him inside and out, but he’s finally expressing his emotions.

With his hands on Jack’s hips now, Marcus murmurs, “I want that too, Jackson. We all do, but you weren’t paying attention to her. She was crying and moving away from you. I only meant to make you see reason before you sent her into a full-blown panic attack.”

“I-You, what?” Jackson’s hold loosens, his voice softening.

Their misunderstanding and miscommunication would be hilarious if I couldn’t feel my world warping and changing. I hold my breath, refusing to say anything and ruin the progression I think is about to happen.

My boyfriend’s gaze turns tender. “Leo and I want Rylee and Layla to be a part of our lives, Jackson. We want you and Jude. We want to be a family finally, and those two girls have wormed their way into our hearts. Of course, I would do anything for Rylee and Layla, even if that means kicking your ass for upsetting them. I would pummel you even though I love you just as I love Leo. Even if my soul is wilting as it waits for you to decide whether or not you want me. I would sock your handsome face if you hurt them.”

Marc gulps, and I just know he is about to ask the question that will change the course of our lives. I stiffen at the same time Jude does. “What do you want, Jackson?”

Shit on a stick.

“I-You-What-” I take the fact that Jackson isn’t moving away as a good sign. The silence is so deafening my ears ring, with only Jude’s gulp breaking through the space between us.

My heart lodges itself in my throat when Marc's eyes find my own before he releases his hold on JJ. His eyes fill with sadness. "Time's up, guys. What do you want?"

The longer both Jude and Jackson are silent, the more my chest aches. Without saying a word or even looking up from my lap, I stand and move away from the men breaking my heart.

"Leo..." All I hear is fucking pity in my golden boy's voice. Nope. Not mine.

Tears spring to my eyes, and I can't help but silently plead for Marcus to take me home. Rage and sorrow fight for dominance in his eyes when he hears my choked whimper.

"Leo—"

"Enough!" Marc's arms snap out, shoving Jackson out of his space and rounding on Jude. "We are leaving. The silence was enough."

"Marcus—" JJ steps forward, fear written in his wide-eyed expression.

"No! Both of you, just stop!" A tear leaks from Marc's lashes, but just as his fingers brush my arm to take me out of here, he's ripped away.

Jackson has him pressed against the wall once again, his hands framing the stubbly, tear-streaked cheeks of my man. "Just fucking listen, damn it! My choice? What I want? I want all three of you to have everything you want in the whole damn world. I love each of you with every fucking fiber of my being, and I'm so scared I will ruin what we could be. You're asking me what I want. I want to be yours." His pleading eyes find Jude and me before returning to Marc. "I want to be all of yours if you will have me as I am. I'm not perfect. You have seen my scars inside and out. I'm a fucking asshole, and I will piss you off, but I will give you everything I have. If you will have me?"

Marc is looking at him like he hung the damn moon while I'm still warding off Jude, who's trying to get closer to me. I can barely enjoy the speech from Jackson that I've been

waiting for, for years. I don't want to see the look of rejection from the fourth member of our family.

I whimper again. The stress and anxiety of everything is battering against every fiber of my being, sending me into a tailspin I'm too overwhelmed to correct.

I can't do this.

Chapter Nineteen

JUDE



*S*hit, shit, shit. I can't get him to listen to me. Hell, even Jackson spewing love at all of us did nothing to calm our sweet man. Fuck. It's been a long ass time since he's gotten this overwhelmed. Leo being the quiet one, goes far beyond just being an observer. It wasn't just a learned trait of being the youngest in such a large family, where his voice wasn't heard as much as his louder, older siblings.

They bullied Leo far more than he will ever let on. His bright white hair, pale skin, and bright blue eyes weren't the only things that made him stand out. A growth spurt at such an early age made him the tallest and lankiest of his class. That's not all. Leo is all sharp angles. Not that he doesn't have muscle, he absolutely does. His bone structure is just so beautifully prominent, making him even more ethereal.

As a full-grown adult, Leo is an enchanting kind of handsome. The kind you will rarely ever find in your life. But growing up so beautifully different? My sweet Leo learned to keep quiet and avoid any and all attention he could.

I've always noticed and appreciated his beauty, but it was his story, and the man he has grown into that entranced me. Since Marc gave me a timeline last week, I've been trying to picture myself without him and Leo in my arms forever.

I can't. As horrifyingly permanent and scary as this is, I am theirs, just like JJ said. *I suppose both of us are dumbasses, huh?*

Another whimper from him almost sends me to my knees. Before he can crumple to the ground or run away from our attempt to corral him, I snatch the back of his neck. “I love you, Leo. Do you hear me, Dirty Boy?” I pull out the nickname I gave him for the bedroom, hoping to reach the baser parts of him. His shallow breathing turns a bit heavier as his eyes follow the movement of my lips. *Good. My good boy heard me.* “I love you. I am yours. And theirs. I’m so fucking sorry it took me this long, but please believe me. I love you.”

He says nothing, still staring at my lips. Just as I start to panic, Leo’s lips slam into my own, his tongue forcing its way into my mouth. Groaning into his hot mouth, I immediately step into him, my cock lining up perfectly with his.

Heat at my back has me tearing my lips away before I completely lose myself in Leo. “You mean it?” Marc’s voice is wary, as it should be.

Unlike Jackson, I have given in to my desires physically, but I always leave, never allowing myself to feel more than the pleasure they could give me. They need to know I am all in, and I don’t think it will happen with just one conversation. I’m a fuck boy, after all.

Twisting in their hold, I hold back my groan at Leo’s touch gliding across my body. I gaze into Marc’s guarded brown gaze. “I mean it.” I kiss him and try to pour everything I’m feeling into it. I can’t do a big speech because I know it won’t mean anything. I’ve left their bedroom and brushed off their loving touches too many times for them to take me at my word.

Tilting my forehead to his, I ask him to give me a moment while I talk to Jackson. Marcus gives me a small smile and allows me to move past him. Jackson has always been my family. Foster brother, to best friend, to roommate, to crush. Did I ever think we would be together? Fuck no.

“Jude,” he breathes.

“Shut up and kiss me.” It’s a demand, and I’m shocked when he listens. He may be a domineering dick, but maybe in

the bedroom, he will follow fucking orders. I don't shove him up against the wall, nor do I grab him by his neck.

Instead, his wide hand grips my jaw, a look of wonder twinkles in his eyes just as I wrap my arms around my neck. I don't wait for him to make the move. I dive right into his mouth, moaning around the battle of our tongues.

A rumble sounds from my chest when he pulls back, his eyes trailing all over my face. "Fuck, Jude..." he trails off, but I don't allow him to put space between us.

At just barely an inch taller than me, he tilts my jaw the way he wants so he can have the upper ground. I allow him to lead as he slowly walks me backward. Warmth surrounds me again, hands slipping beneath my shirt from behind. The cool fingers trail along the waistband of my jeans, making me gasp for air, placing my head on JJ's shoulder.

Since when was I put in the middle? I'm never the one being taken care of. Is this what my life will be like now? Can I let go too?

Opening my eyes slowly, I find Marc and Jackson sipping from each other's lips. Nothing like the explosive kiss I thought they would share. As they explore one another, I pepper kisses and nibbles on Jackson's neck.

"Ah!" Marc's hands finally dip into my pants, stroking my cock teasingly. "Fuck," I hum, allowing myself to lean into Jackson even more. It's a weird sensation knowing you can trust the people around you to take care of you. When I said I would give them my all. This is it. My shoulders are relaxed, and I'm resting against them. This is me being vulnerable.

"Come here, Leo." I lift my head at JJ's raspy voice to see Leo's eyes flare with heat as he steps into our orbit. "I'm sorry." Without any warning, Jackson yanks our white-haired man into his side and fucks his mouth with his tongue.

Holy. Mother. Fucking. Shit. That is the sexiest thing I have ever seen. Leo's hands dive into his dark hair as Jackson bends him backward. I don't mind when the hold and attention JJ has on me disappears because I could watch this all night long.

Gripping Marc's wrist, I pull him out of my pants and twist us until his back is flush against my front. My cock bounces in my boxers, begging to be rubbed against his ass. Adjusting him in my hold, I grip his throat in one hand while the other snakes around his hips.

I chuckle in his ear when he bucks and grinds against my cock. "Mmm, careful, Trouble." He hums, swirling his ass around my cock. "What do you want, Marcus?"

Meanwhile, Jackson is acting like he's going to eat Leo alive. And I am so here for it. It's about time he let himself loose, and what better way than to give Leo his beast?

"Come on, Jude." I think he's trying to make his voice strong, but the airiness of his tone makes me smirk while biting down on his earlobe. I may have given them some control when Jackson had me, but my Trouble knows who's in charge.

"Tell me what you want," I growl, flexing my hand on his throat. JJ has his and Leo's shirt off now. Judging by the complete ecstasy written across the blonde man's face, Jack is absolutely worshipping Leo as he gets to his knees.

Jackson on his knees before Leo is exactly where he was meant to be.

"I want to ride you." I threaten him again with a squeeze. "Please," he gasps. I hum in approval.

"Strip."

While Marc rushes to do as he's told, I run to get the lube I hid in the bathroom for emergencies. My heart thunders in my chest like it's celebrating this monumental shift in our lives.

Back in the living room, I find Marc naked and panting while watching a naked Jackson teasing the pale planes of Leo's abs as he wiggles his boxers off. I pause for a beat to enjoy the sheer bliss coming off those two. Quickly shucking off my clothes, I sit my bare ass down on the couch and tug Marc toward me.

"Stand still and watch our Dirty Boy get swallowed." I trail my hand up Marc's spine, admiring the pebbling of his

tan skin beneath my fingertips. He jolts at the sound of the lube bottle opening, but sighs when I breach his entrance with a wet digit.

“So good at letting me play, aren’t you?” My cock twitches in my lap. I slap his ass when I get no response.

“Yes, yes!” I smirk and kiss away the sting. I add another finger, scissoring them in his tight channel. His muscles ripple and convulse, making me take in the scene in front of him.

Fuck.

Jackson is fucking deep-throating Leo while he tugs on his own length.

“Is Daddy making you feel good, Dirty Boy?” I can’t hold back holding the teasing lilt back from my voice. Marcus snorts, strangling my fingers, and Jackson fucking *gags*.

Leo looks startled before we both burst out laughing. JJ tosses me the middle finger over his shoulder just as he doubles his efforts to get Leo to shut up. The sight makes my dick weep.

Once I prep my cock, I grip Marc’s hips and guide him down my shaft slowly. “Jesus.” We both moan in unison. Fully seated on my cock, he tilts his head back and rests against my shoulder.

“No condom?” he asks, vulnerability and shock coating his words.

“No, Trouble. No more barriers. Just you and me.”

The tenderness of this moment has my heart beating double. Tears burn my eyes when he whispers, “I love you.”

“I love you too.” I sniffle. “Now ride me, Marcus. I’m going to come so far up your ass my cum will mark your insides as mine for always.”

With a guttural groan, my partner in crime lifts and slams down, his muscles clamping down on me, making my fingernails dig into his hips. I grit my teeth and snake my hand around to the part of him that’s begging to be touched.

As he works, I fuck his cock with my hand, both of our eyes trained on Leo as his cum shoots down Jackson's throat. Not long after, Jack's release paints the floor between his legs.

"J-Jude!" Without warning, Marc thrashes and comes in my hand, strangling the release right out of my own body. A lick of fire shoots down my spine, and my hips lift, burrowing into him as far as I can as I roar out my pleasure.

"Holy fuck," I murmur into his sweat slicked shoulder blade.

Marcus huffs a laugh. "I second that."

"Third."

"Fourth."

A relaxed smile pulls on my cheeks. "Will you stay the night, please?" It's the same plea they have used on me for a long time.

Leo's surprised half-lidded eyes ensnare mine. "Really?"

"Please." I nod, my stomach churning with anxiety even as I cuddle his boyfriend to my chest.

Wait. Is he *my* boyfriend now, too?

"Okay, we'll stay," Leo says, giving me a smile as JJ nuzzles into his neck.

All my anxiety fizzles away when Marc kisses my cheek and pulls me up. "Let's go shower and figure out what to do about the girls, yeah?"

Shit. We may have solved one big problem in our lives tonight, but the two ladies who should be here right now may never want to see us again.

I repeat, *shit*.

Chapter Twenty

RYLEE



“Where is she, you stupid bitch?!”

I despise the way I flinch away from Mason’s roar of rage. My own anger bubbles to the surface, but the only outward expression of it is in the twitch of my hands.

“She’s sleeping.” I try to keep my voice soft. Every atom in my body is itching to fight the bastard, but I learned the hard way never to show my feelings. Placating this monster gets us past his tantrums sooner.

His meaty hand grabs a fistful of my hair, forcing my body to bend and contort to avoid the pain. “Why are you keeping my daughter from me, Rylee?!” My name on Mason’s lips is atrocious with the way he laces it with disgust.

“Mason, please, that hurts!” The phantom pains of my past broken wrist and bruises throb in tune with the stinging of my scalp.

“You know what else hurts?” I hiss, knowing damn well he just yanked a patch of hair out. “Having my child turned against me!”

“I would never intentionally keep you from her, I swear.” Lie. “Layla has to sleep by eight. She’s still growing, I promise.” I barely get the words out before a loud slap rings out, followed by the heating of my cheek and my body collapsing on the hard floors of the kitchen.

“Mommy?”

No, no, no, no!

Dread fills me as my gaze lands on the sickly wide smile Mason shoots at my little Bug. "You're awake! Your mom fell, but no need to worry, darling. I got you a gift."

Shit.

The beautiful teddy bear he pulls out of his bag would be a wonderful surprise for my sweet girl if she weren't so damn smart.

"Don't hurt Mommy!" Her big blue eyes widen with fear even as she shuffles her little body towards me.

"What have you been telling my child, Rylee?" Mason doesn't need to yell or change his facial expression to instill fear. I see the promise of pain in his dark eyes. The same orbs of hell that my almost-four-year-old watches with mistrust.

"Nothing, I swear." Finally on my feet, I don't even have to nudge Layla away from him. She clutches onto the back of my pajama pants like her life depends on it.

A knock on my bedroom door almost makes me throw up and scream, I swear. With a hand to my chest, sweat sliding down my back, I stare at the door with barely concealed fear.

"Mommy?" Bug peeks her head in through the crack, her hair a wild mess of white curls. And just like that, tears spring to my eyes. "Cuddle?"

I nod, swallowing down my sobs. "Yes, please, baby." Covers in hand after latching the door behind her, Layla burrows into my side. "I love you. I got you now."

A small puff of a content sigh on my collarbone settles my racing heart. "Love you. I got you, Mommy."

I allow the tears to fall once I click off my lamp. Someday I hope my little one learns she doesn't need to protect me; it's my job to protect her.

The drive home was silent from the guys' house earlier. Layla didn't ask any questions from her spot in the car seat, and I threw all my attention on getting us home. By the time

we had our shoes off, it was far later than normal for Bug to go to bed. So, sleep was next on our checklists.

In companionable silence, we brushed our teeth together and read a book of her choice. It's moments like tonight that make my heart clench, and my mind wander to all that we have been through. For a five-year-old, Layla has seen too much and understands far more than normal.

My little girl *knows* my trauma, and that's not something I can take back. She has her own, and we will always have to work through it. Maybe when we settle down, just her and I, we can see a therapist. I have no doubt that Bug will grow into an amazing woman. I just hope she learns to harness her past and knowledge rather than letting it drown her.

I'm trying not to drown. For her. Without Layla, I don't know what would have become of me. *Would my parents still love me? Better question, did they ever love me? Would I be going to galas and have turned into the worst kind of rich girl?*

I stifle a sigh, trying not to wake my sweet girl on my chest. She went to sleep in her own bed over an hour ago, but my mind hasn't been able to stop. Old wounds are throbbing and demanding my attention.

What-ifs and guilt wreak havoc on my muscles. I would live a thousand lives of abuse and neglect to have Layla. My regret in life is not getting her out of his clutches sooner.

My sweet girl won't ever be able to look at a gift from a man the same again. *Will she always be fiercely protective of me? What does that mean for when she starts dating? Will she learn to trust again? Would Tate have made a good role model and male figure in her life?*

On and on, my mind swirls with chaos and half-cocked ideas. I fight like hell to keep the guys out of my thoughts. Yet when their faces flash through my mind, my body settles even if they are the cause of my despair tonight.

Even if I can never have them, at least they brought me comfort on this fitful night.



I will never not hate the sound of someone knocking on my door. Oh, the anxiety of being an anxious loner.

A more persistent knock at my door makes me roll my eyes, especially when I hear the hushed grumbling of Jude and Jackson through the wood.

Sighing, I close my eyes and whip the door open like ripping off a band-aid just in time to see JJ shove the golden boy away from him. Leo is smothering a smirk behind his coffee, and Marc looks like he's planning to push Jackson, too. I smile and lean against the frame while I wait for them to focus on me.

I clear my throat just as Jack lunges for Jude. The smiles on their faces make me feel like something definitely happened after I left. And damn, do I wish I could have been a fly on the wall for that.

I don't conceal the giggle that huffs out of me at their shocked expressions. Leo swoops in immediately with a soft smile and kisses my cheek. "Hey, Beauty. Mind if we come in?"

I raise a brow at his forwardness. "Why?" The playfulness of their moment before is gone now, but I don't feel all that bad about it. It's two in the afternoon. Shouldn't they be at work?

"We need to apologize for our behavior. Will you hear us out?"

Dammit. Leo is like a Xanax, making me all gooey and calm. Kicking off from my perch, I move out of the way so they can come in. Once all four of their imposing bodies are hovering awkwardly between the kitchen and the living room,

I finally notice the two bouquets of flowers Jude has clutched in his hands.

“Why don’t we sit in the living room?” I don’t wait for them to agree. Instead, I tuck my legs under me on my favorite reading chair. My tummy cramps with anxiety as they make themselves comfortable on the furniture.

Jude breaks the tense silence. “I got these for you and Nugget.” He gives me a hesitant smile, laying the flowers down on the ottoman. My lips tug up, and I hope like hell it looks more like a smile than the cringe I’m trying to stifle.

“Where is the little one?” Jackson’s concern warms me when I detect no anger below the surface.

“Napping. She was up pretty late last night.” *Thank God.* I just hope she stays asleep long enough for them to say their peace and leave so I can throw out the flowers.

JJ nods, looking a little constipated. “Rylee, I am so sorry for my behavior last night.” *Ah, he must not apologize very often because, damn, does he look uncomfortable.* “I should never have been so aggressive around you and Layla. It was highly inappropriate and uncalled for. Honestly, I have no excuse except I want with all my heart to protect you. I went about it horribly, and for that, I will keep trying to show you I am not a man who would ever aim my aggression at you or your daughter.”

Wow, that was...

“Please give us another chance.”

For what?

“Beauty, I am so sorry I stood by while you were upset. I should have been there for you instead of watching everything play out.”

Marc picks up where Leo left off. “I made things worse. I thought I could make it better, but I let my anger at Jackson get in the way of what really mattered; you and Layla. I’m sorry.”

“Me too, to all of that. So how ‘bout it, baby girl? Another chance?” Jude brings out his puppy dog eyes that would make me melt if I weren’t so completely taken aback.

I just... What? Literally nobody, ever, has apologized for treating me a certain way except Layla, but that doesn't count. Also, what do they expect this other chance to be?

“Rylee?” Jackson leans forward from his spot on the couch closest to me. I try not to notice the way his forearms bunch when they lean on his knees. “Ry? Say something.”

“I-what?”

Jude snorts loudly. “We broke her.” JJ smacks him in the arm, their bromance showing for everyone to see.

“Sorry.” I can feel a fierce blush threatening to embarrass me further. Pulling my legs further beneath my butt, I try to compose myself. “You just took me by surprise, is all.”

“What do you mean?” Jackson jumps on the small bit of information I offered like a starving beast. “Our behavior was unacceptable last night, so of course we would apologize to you.”

I ache to smooth his frown. “Thank you. I just... Nobody has ever apologized for their behavior like you just did.”

“What?”

I wave away JJ’s rumble. “I appreciate the apologies, but you need to know that you cannot act like that around my daughter. She deserves more than your anger and aggressive macho bullshit.” My surprise has diminished, allowing my earlier hesitancy and protective momma bear instincts to surface. “It’s one thing to behave like cavemen when I’m around, but never around Layla. Do you understand me?”

A chorus of agreements and declarations of promises ring through the living room, making me feel far better about them. I’ve had my fair share of volatile men who don’t see issues with their behavior. But this? This was really damn mature, and I’m impressed.

“So, you will give us another chance?”

I sigh again. “Jude, I don’t even know what that means. Yeah, we will still hang out, but we start packing again in a few weeks. I’m not quite sure what you are expecting from me.”

Eyeing Jackson and Marc’s whitening knuckles, I brace myself to kick them out of my life for good.

Just as they each begin to speak, I snap, “I said no strings.” It’s not a yell, but it’s stern. “You have my friendship—”

“With benefits?” Jude mumbles. I respond with a glare.

“We are leaving in less than six weeks, no matter what you say. Leave it be, or whatever this is”—my hand points between all of us—“is over.”

This time their response is silent, their heads nodding even if they hate every moment of it.

“Lee?”

Shit.

“Oh! Hi, little miss!” Leo’s face lights up as Layla bounds her way down the stairs and around the couch.

Bright blonde hair in disarray, Bug rocks on her feet, excitement and hesitancy fighting for dominance in her little mind. Her wide blue eyes dart around the room, taking in each man in our home before landing on me.

“Hi, sweetie.” I give her a nod, knowing she wants to snuggle with Leo. With a whoosh of a sleepy exhale, she crawls up onto his lap. Something in my chest warms at the sight of her rubbing her eyeballs and each of the guys looking at her like she is the cutest thing they have ever seen.

I’m so busy watching their responses to Layla that I miss when she notices the flowers on the table. “Did they get you flowers, Mommy?” Her teeny frown would be adorable if I weren’t freaking the fuck out. I do understand why she would be confused about the flowers. I don’t get nice things from anyone.

“And for you, Nugget!”

Chapter Twenty-One

JACKSON



I *know nothing.*

It's a humbling experience.

Yet, I am so lost and really freaking terrified.

"Layla..." Rylee begins, but Layla's gasp of horror as she shoves her way out of Leo's hold will haunt me forever.

"No, please don't!" Scrambling over to her mom, Layla begins breathing heavily as she places herself between us and the chair Rylee is in.

I look to Jude, hoping he fixes whatever this is. It was his idea to bring them both flowers. "I-Don't what, sweetheart?" His hands are up in surrender, a wide-eyed look only aiding the panic of the situation.

"Layla, it's okay." Rylee's attempt at soothing her daughter goes unnoticed by the trembling girl trying to shield her mom.

"No! Please don't hurt my mommy!"

I freeze.

Everything freezes.

My bodily functions stutter and gag on their life force.

Please don't hurt my mommy.

"I—" Jude's voice sounds choked, making my throat close up with emotion. I lean into him. Whether it's to offer him support or seek out his warmth, I have no idea. "Layla, I would never hurt your mom. I promise."

Whatever she must see in Jude's face has her hesitating, giving me the confidence to step in. "We would never ever hurt Rylee. I promise you, Layla, your mom will forever be safe with us. We will even make her happy if she allows it."

Her teeny eyebrows furrow before she shoots a look over her shoulder at Ry. "They won't hurt me, Bug. It's okay. Jude just wanted to give you flowers to be nice." Rylee's cheeks are moist with fresh tears, even as she attempts a smile for her little one.

Pride and awe make my chest puff out. I want to be as inspiring as these two girls in front of me. Not only is a five-year-old fierce enough to stand between her mom and perceived danger; but the woman who raised her fights her demons every moment of every day and still manages to offer her child love and light.

"You are okay?" Layla's voice quivers with nerves even while she stands tall in defiance.

Rylee doesn't hesitate to scoop her daughter up and tuck her head under her chin. "I am wonderful. Do you want to smell your flowers now? Then the guys will leave so we can decorate with them. How does that sound?"

I'm not offended that she is going to kick us out. This seems like it might be a big deal in the process of getting our little one to trust us.

Our?

With an unwavering stare at us, Layla nods her head against her mom's chest. Hesitantly, Jude grabs a bouquet and nudges me to hand them over. Turning to grab them from him, I lock eyes with Leo, seeing the fear and concern pouring out of his deep eyes.

Marcus holds his emotions a bit better, but when I catch his eye, I see horror and shock staring back at me. Jude has yet to look away from the cuddly duo, seemingly afraid if he takes his eyes off them, they might disappear into whatever hell they are running from.

“Here you go,” I murmur, keeping my voice low so as not to startle them. Their sniffles are so damn loud in the space between us, making me fucking itch to fix all their aches and pains.

“Thank you, guys. Um, I’ll text you, okay?”

“Okay,” Jude whispers, each of us standing at her gentle dismissal.

“Jude.” Layla’s little voice has him turning around in astonishment. I admit that my eyes water when she drops out of Rylee’s lap and approaches us slowly. Keeping her mom in eyesight, she shuffles closer and peeks up at me, then Jude, before saying, “Thank you. I-I really love them.” My heart about fucking shatters when her chin quivers.

Nudging me out of the way, Jude kneels a few feet away from her. “Of course, Nugget. May I have a hug?” Looking to Rylee again, Layla waits for her mother’s nod of approval before stepping into Jude’s wide chest.

My heart warms. Jude is going to be such a wonderful dad someday. As his arms wrap around the teeny blonde, I get even more attached. *What would it be like to have a future with Ry and Layla?*

“Go decorate with your momma, okay? Keep her smiling while I’m not here. Can you do that for me?” He drops a kiss on Layla’s head before pulling back and wiping her tears.

“I can make Mommy happy while you’re gone, I promise!” With a task to look forward to, Layla smiles widely at the surfer boy holding her close. “I miss you?” I think she meant to say those words as a statement, but they come out as a question. Almost like the concept of missing someone is foreign, or she just doesn’t quite understand why she would miss Jude.

“I’ll miss you too, Nugget.” Standing to his full height, Jude picks Layla up and swings her around in a circle before depositing her on Rylee’s lap. “See you soon. Remember what to do?”

“Yes!”

“Good job!” An intake of breath behind me punctuates the kiss Jude plops on Ry’s cheek. A blush pinkens her neck, making me want to find all the ways I can turn her my new favorite color.

Fuck. I want to stay forever.

I want them to stay forever.



Marcus is first to break the tense silence. “Are we going to talk about the absolute fuckery that we just caused?”

I smirk when Leo sighs in tune with me. We took an enormous leap in our relationship last night, but Marcus and Jude still drive me ass over tits. Is that the saying? Either way, they poke every last nerve. And not just the good ones.

“I didn’t know...” Jude tails off, guilt and shame hushing his words. From his spot beside Marc in the back, I catch his eyes in the rearview mirror. “I brought Layla flowers when I took Rylee on that date last week, and I just brushed off Rylee’s weird behavior, I guess. It was weird. She seemed mad, so of course I didn’t question it.”

In the passenger seat, Leo rolls his eyes, smothering a scoff behind a lip bite. I wonder what he’s thinking. I can only imagine what that woman would look like sprawled out on the counter. I bet her red hair would frame her glowing cheeks like a fucking goddess. A sly look would twist her plump lips, and her eyes wouldn’t look at me as she chased her own pleasure. Because if I know anything about her, Rylee doesn’t do anything for anyone else. No. Everything she does is either for herself or her little girl. And that’s not to say she’s selfish; Jude told us her conditions. I think that amazing woman is finally taking what she deserves from the world.

I wouldn't be mad to be the opportunity she grasps and uses for her own ministrations. The problem, though? I think as soon as I kiss her creamy skin I won't be able to let her go. And she has mentioned far too many times for my liking that she has to leave.

I'm just as far gone as the guys, yet I haven't touched her once. What does that mean for me if I do? Will I ever be able to let her go?

Pulling the car into the driveway, I allow myself a moment to remember the delighted surprise when we showed up at her doorstep. I may have been fucking around with Jude, but as soon as she opened that door, every atom in my body was hyper-focused on the way her lips parted in laughter.

From the outside, I bet it looked like I was pushing him around because he annoyed me, but what she didn't see was that Jude was panicking worse than I have ever seen. Between commitment and fixing a fuck-up with the woman he really likes and the little girl who has his heart, Jude was struggling. *Hard.*

So, yeah.

I hope Rylee keeps me around long enough to realize I'm not just an asshole.

Chapter Twenty-Two

RYLEE



“Are you shitting me?!”

Cringing away from the screeching banshee, I shush her, hoping like hell Bug didn't hear. “It's fine, Gabby. I promise.”

“No, it's not fine. I hate seeing you cry, let alone that little fairy over there. Also, are we sure she's human, by the way?”

I roll my eyes at her side question. Layla's dainty features, big eyes, and smile, along with her bright blonde hair, do resemble a fairy, I suppose. A good idea for Halloween.

“Anyway, they did not deserve your forgiveness. I can't believe you didn't make them grovel! Don't you write these kinds of books?!”

I rub my eyes, attempting to get my thoughts together. “It's fine, Gabby. They gave me space for the weekend, and honestly? I barely know them, so I guess it doesn't matter that much. Sure, they were dicks, but I mean... same!”

“I don't know if you are literally the worst female or the best.” Her frown makes me snort. “Seriously though, are you going on a date with all four of them this weekend?”

All my energy goes to keeping my poker face in check and not choking on my coffee. Gabby has become my breakfast buddy while Layla works hard on her home studies before she can play with our friend. Almost every morning, like clockwork, she calls me at eight-thirty, demanding I help her carry our goodies in.

“I never agreed to anything, nor have they asked me.” Jude may have given my number to the other three guys, but they have only used it to check on me and wish me a good day.

I’m actually quite pleased they gave me almost a week of space and didn’t show up at my door. If I’m being honest, the time apart from them was a good thing just as much as it sucked not to have them around. I feel like my head is on straight again. Things with them seemed to be moving into a territory I was uncomfortable with. *Why would I make a few people I will never see again grovel?*

“Then why is Marcus telling me I have to watch your little fairy this weekend?” One of her eyebrows raises in question, her lips pulling more sugary coffee into her mouth.

I don’t have the answer. “Uh—”

Boop.

I can’t help my laughter when Gabby snorts at my text-tone. “That never gets old,” she huffs between laughs.

Marcus: Good morning, sweetheart! How are you?

I melt a little. They have all been so sweet with their messages, and for someone who isn’t used to so much kindness, I’m soaking it up.

Me: I’m good. How are you?

Marcus: I miss you, but other than that I’m good. Do you want to hang out with us guys on Saturday?

“Let me guess, Marc just asked?”

The dopey smile I’m sure is plastered on my face doesn’t fade even when I try to wipe it away. “Yeah, he asked if I would hang out with them this Saturday.”

“I will watch Layla.” Gabby smiles warmly at me.

Such a normal offer shouldn’t bring tears to my eyes, yet it does. I’ve just never done things for myself, I guess. I mean, sure I’m happy, but me going out two weekends ago was the

first time I've enjoyed time out. Maybe I should have opened myself up to friends sooner, but I really don't think any other person would have worked.

I could say it was the guys who broke me down brick by brick, but it wasn't. It was the bright pink haired pixie sipping on straight sweetener in front of me with her blinding sunshine and nonexistent boundaries who weakened my walls. She's my first friend in far too long.

"Okay," I whisper and before I talk myself out of it, I wrap Gabby up in a hug big enough to make her choke on her coffee. "Thank you, Gabby. I just-Yeah." Literally, the only person who I open up to is my child. Only because she is ridiculously emotionally competent.

"Of course, babe. What are you guys going to do?" She wags her eyebrows suggestively.

Boop.

Jude: Don't make me come over there, baby girl.

Me: Or what? ;)

Jude: SHE FLIRTS! Respond to my man, or else...

Me: Or else what? Really Jude, your threats are weak. Wait... YOUR man?!?!?!?

Jude: Maybe if you didn't shun us from your presence for basically a year, you could have had some fun with all of us. ;)

Gaping at my phone, I silently thank my child for dragging Gabby away before she can demand dirty deets.

Jude: So you coming to hang out with us this weekend, baby girl?

I nibble on my lip, debating my options. We start planning our next move soon, and I'm worried about how much I enjoy these people.

Marcus: Don't make me cry.

Me: No tears... I'll be there.

The dramatics of these two rival my five-year-old.

Me: Same rules apply.

Jude: Are you sure...?

Me: Yeah. What's the plan?



“You better not have invited me over to watch some old men sport.” Bowl of popcorn on my lap, I glare at the black TV screen.

“What?”

“I don't sport,” I defend, narrowing my eyes on a frowning Jackson standing by the kitchen table. “Please don't make me watch it.”

My sweatpants tug when Marcus plops his ass onto the cushion beside me, but I don't divert my attention from a genuinely confused Jackson. “Aren't you an author for a living? I feel like that is grammatically incorrect. Or I'm just stupid.”

“Probably the latter!” Jude's holler from the pantry makes me laugh.

Goosebumps pebble across my skin, Leo's gentle fingers trailing across the back of my neck, making me shiver. “He's not stupid, and Beauty is just being silly.”

“I am not!” I toss a piece of popcorn at him as he rounds the couch. “All my grammatical energy goes into my books.

So don't be surprised if I stumble over words and don't make any sense sometimes."

"Samesies," Marc says proudly, leaning his head on my shoulder. "But no, sweetheart, we aren't going to make you watch sports tonight."

The smirk on Jude's face when he waltzes his way into the living room doesn't bode well. "Video games, baby girl!"

"Oh, sweet!"

"Wait really?" In front of me, with grey sweatpants in my line of sight, Jude halts all movement.

"Yeah, I used to love watching my brother play video games when he got old enough for them. It was our time together, and he even let me play a few times." My chest warms at the memories filtering through my mind, even as my shoulders feel weighed down by sadness.

"What's your brother's name?" Jude kneels before me and places a heavy palm on my knee.

I gulp, hoping to swallow the emotion trying to make itself known. "His name is Tate. He's eighteen now." The tender look in Jude's eyes makes mine burn uncomfortably. "I haven't seen him since he was twelve."

"What, why?" Jackson's rumbly voice causes my spine to stiffen. "Sorry. How old are you, Rylee?" Taking the love seat on the other side of the living room, I feel better with him not hovering over me.

"I'm twenty-three," I murmur.

Jackson looks lost in thought, and I just know he's calculating and trying to figure out why I haven't seen my baby brother since I was seventeen. "How old is Layla again?"

Ah, yep. He's piecing my past together one piece of information at a time. "Bug is five." Jude's hand gives my thigh a final squeeze before he makes his way to the empty spot beside JJ.

"What was your favorite video game?" I could kiss Marcus for changing the topic, but that is far too intimate. I'm

struggling enough with his body pressed up against mine and Leo's arm stretching across the couch and tickling the sensitive skin behind my ear.

Swallowing my hum of contentment, I say, "I could kick your ass in Crash Bandicoot." A shocked laugh comes from each of them. "What? He was too young to be playing violent games."

"Alright. Babe, do we have Crash Bandicoot?" For a moment, I think Jackson is talking to me, but Leo is the one to confirm that they do, in fact, have the game.

Standing and making his way to the gaming consoles, I about burst into flames when JJ grips Leo's thigh and tugs him between his legs. I watch in fascination as Leo's eyes widen in shock, but he doesn't make a move to do anything else. Waiting for one of them to do something, I don't expect Jude to take control.

"Don't be naughty. You know what he wants."

At Jude's calm reminder, Leo finally snaps out of his trance and bends to press his lips against Jack's. It's far sweeter than I would have assumed for a man like JJ. A quiet groan from one of them has me shifting in my seat and moving the blanket off me a bit.

Fuck, is it hot in here?

The move exposes a sliver of skin on my side that Marcus takes full advantage of. My shocked gasp of air when his cool fingers trail along my exposed waist draws the attention of the other three.

Leo's face is flushed, but before he can stand, Jude's hand flies out and grips him by the jaw. My chest heaves in rhythm with Leo's. *Just what the actual fuck am I watching right now? This might be the hottest thing I have ever seen.*

"You *are* a naughty boy, aren't you?" Jude doesn't wait for a response. Instead, he slams Leo's lips down on his, demanding he open for the ministrations I know that tongue can do.

I whimper at the sight, causing heat to skitter up my neck and to my hairline. Marc leans in further, his breath fanning along my overheated throat. “You like watching our boys?”

It’s like his words shoved me out of my ridiculous lust-filled haze. They are not mine, so there is no *our*. I clear my throat, effectively making everyone break apart. Marcus is last to move, the dip in his eyebrows making my stomach swirl with guilt and unease.

“Ready to have your ass kicked, baby girl?”

Jude’s taunt makes me snort. “Let’s see what you got, surfer boy.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

RYLEE



A wild amount of cursing out *Mario Kart* and too much wine later, I'm attempting not to doze off on their couch. If I were a normal twenty-three-year-old woman, I would have probably fallen asleep on lots of guys' couches. I have to get home to Layla, though. Even if Gabby offered to spend the night with her, I would have declined the offer.

I prefer eating breakfast with Bug, thank you very much. The only sleepovers on my agenda include a whole lot of pink and a ton of *Disney*.

"Rylee." Jackson's soothing voice threatens to coax me further into the blanket. "Do you want to go home?"

Grumbling a noncommittal response, I crack an eye open, and my heart flutters happily in my chest when he smiles. "Is that a yes, gorgeous?"

I nod, not caring that I am definitely pouting and probably making a fool of myself. Standing from his crouch, JJ attempts to tug the blanket off me, making me snarl in retaliation. This time he huffs a laugh and allows me to have the blanket. A high-pitched squeak slipping past my lips when his thick arms scoop me into his chest in one swift movement cuts off my victory.

"I got you," he murmurs into my wild head of hair. "I'm going to bring Rylee home, guys. Be right back."

Shuffling behind us on our walk to the door draws my attention. JJ drops me gently to my feet so he can slide his

shoes on. With my flip-flops in hand, I blink up at the other three, who have apparently come to see me off.

Jude steps forward first, a soft look in his eyes that thaws some of the ice around my walls. “Sleep tight, baby girl.” His lips brush across the corner of my mouth, the tingly feeling making my lips kick up in a happy smile.

“Good night, Beauty.” Leo drops a kiss on my forehead, his nimble fingers running up my arms as he lingers for a moment longer.

Marcus replaces the two blondes and surprises me when he wraps me in one of the best hugs I think I have ever had. “Text me when you’re safe, okay?” The thoughtful request stuns me for a moment, having not expected such sweetness from one of the jokesters.

With one of their blankets still wrapped around me, I grip the edges in my fingers and return the hug, enveloping him in my cozy warmth. I hum. “Okay.” He pulls away all too soon, a serious look in his gaze that I’m too sleepy to understand. Snuggling back into the blanket like my daughter has done a million times, I smile and pad my way out of their home with Jackson’s hand against the small of my back.

He holds the car door open for me and waits for me to get situated in my seat before closing it. Tucking my feet under me, I watch as he adjusts the heat for me and turns on the seat warmer.

“Thank you for tonight and driving me home,” I say once we pull out of the driveway.

Lights from other cars and streetlamps help me see when he glances over at me. “Of course, Rylee. Thank you for coming over.”

What an odd thing to thank me for.

“Why is that odd?”

Oops, I said that out loud. Yeah, the wine I had tonight, on top of being sleepy, is making me far more relaxed than I normally am.

I look away from him, not wanting to see the pity. “Oh, well, nobody has ever wanted me around.”

He stays silent and damn him for learning from his mistakes. If he were to demand answers and start beating his chest like an alphahole, I wouldn't tell him jack shit. The comfortable, companionable silence of two people who spent the better half of six hours together playing games, laughing, talking, and getting to know each other on an easy level? That's what makes me weak.

“My parents never really cared about me either way. I was never that kid who acted out to get attention.” I sigh, feeling my chest loosen with each admission. “I aced as many assignments and classes as I could, just so I could tell my mom and dad about it.”

Looking out the window, I wipe a few tears away with the blanket. A warm weight settles on my leg. Jackson's silent support urges me on. “I just wanted them to smile at me, you know? Like a *real* smile. Their fake ones were only supposed to be meant for all the rich assholes they surrounded themselves with. I guess I just always assumed that at some point I would start seeing their love, and maybe they were just really busy.”

“I got you,” Jackson repeats the words he told me earlier while he held me. His fingers flex on my thigh, and I can't tell where the extra heat is coming from anymore.

No longer feeling like I want to avoid his face, I catalog his messy black hair and scruffy jaw. Even in pajamas, he looks regal and clean-cut. “It wasn't until they found out I started seeing one of the sons of their business buddies that I felt connected to my parents.” I scoff, annoyed all over again. “Turns out they could have made really good business deals with them, but when I told them Mason knocked me up, we were both shunned like dirty fucking secrets.”

“Both of you?” His voice is gravelly, suppressed anger scratching at his throat.

“Yeah. Mason was twenty-one at the time. So, could you imagine what would happen to both our family images if they

found out he got a minor pregnant? I mean, hell, it would have been really bad, but all they did was shove me into the arms of a monster.”

Just as the last word slips from my babbling mouth, we pull into my driveway, thankfully shutting me up before I get to the truly horrible parts of my life.

“Thank you for the ride, Jackson.” I’m out of the car in a flash and shuffling my way towards my front door before he can even utter a word.

“Rylee, wait!”

Damn, maybe the sky will start dumping rain on us, like in the movies.

I turn to watch his wide body jog over to stand in front of me. Neither of us says a thing, but I see Jack warring with his protective instincts. Instead of commenting on my trauma dump, his wide hand grabs the back of my neck while the other grips my jaw. My face and head now under his command.

“Thank you, Rylee. For coming over *and* sharing some of the uncomfortable shit with me. I—” he stutters. “Just thank you.” I want to ask what he was thinking about saying, but his lips claim mine when they split to speak.

Jackson’s tongue sweeps through my mouth in exploration twice before he nips at my bottom lip, making me clench my fists in the blanket. Pulling back, he gifts me with a feather-light kiss to my jaw and whispers in my ear, “Sleep well. And don’t forget to be a good girl and text Marcus.”

Just then, my front door opens wide, and out comes a skipping pixie with a shit-eating grin on her face that reminds me of her brothers. “I couldn’t figure out how to flicker the lights.”

Both Jackson and I laugh, his deep rumble overpowering mine, and I can’t help but be excited to hear that sound again.



“Mommy, when can I see Lee and Jude?”

From her spot sitting on the floor with her giant sheet of paper and colors, she looks at me beneath her long lashes. I dry my hands on the dishrag and turn the faucet off, finally having scrubbed the pan of cheese.

“I don’t know, baby.” I knew she liked the guys, but maybe us leaving will be harder on her than I thought. She hasn’t seen them since they brought us flowers and apologized for their behavior.

They were all busy with work this week, so I haven’t seen them since last weekend for our video game night. Each of them has been messaging me, even calling me sometimes to “hear my voice” they say.

“Can I call Mister?” Her head tilts to the side at the same time mine does. The early Sunday light makes her hair look like a halo. I giggle and pull my phone out of my back pocket.

“Sure, here you go!” I click the icon to Facetime Leo and place it in her colorful fingers.

The familiar sound of the call being answered has the dormant butterflies in my tummy jumping for joy.

“Mister Lee!” Layla’s up and walking circles around the kitchen, allowing me to see Leo’s face every pass she makes in front of me.

His smile is so big when he realizes it’s my daughter on the phone, and damn if that doesn’t make him sexier. “Hi, little one!”

Don’t swoon.

“Where’s your pretty momma?”

I’m swooning.

Twirling back around, she shoves the front of the camera toward me. “Here she is!” I barely get to wave at him before she’s back to pacing. “Can you come over?”

“Layla—” My scold is cut off by her rushed reasoning.

“I just miss you and want to hang out. Maybe you can bring pizza!”

I have no words. My child is a genius. Not only did she use her sweet voice to say something so nice, but she also asked for food.

“Oh! Bring, Judey, Marc, and JJ!”

Well, shit.

LAYLA



Mommy is... different. Sometimes it’s good, but she cries a lot here. She doesn’t want me to know. But her eyes are puffy and red, and I see her wipe her cheeks a lot.

“Are we staying here?” My chest thumps, and I rock back and forth. Maybe that will relieve the jitters.

A weird feeling in my tummy makes me uncomfortable when her eyebrows try to touch. “We can’t, Bug.”

I don’t want to look at her. The burning in my eyes is making my throat heavy. “Daddy’s coming?”

“Hopefully not—”

A knock on the door makes Mommy stop talking. She glances down at her phone, eyebrows pulling on her skin again. “Stay here, little Bug.”

A bubbling in my chest and toes has me ignoring Mom and running to the door myself. “It’s Lee!”

“Layla, don’t!” I already have the door cracked, and I can hardly hear her over my excitement. “Bug, stop!”

Mommy’s voice is closer, and just as I see the man on our doorstep, I’m swung up and onto Mom’s hip.

The blonde man’s eyes widen in shock. He’s kind of pale, too, but maybe some soup could help him. “Rylee?” He sounds sad.

A square car pulls into the driveway, and I can’t help but wiggle in Mommy’s arms. Jackson jumps out of the car first, but he doesn’t come closer.

“Layla, listen to me,” Mom whispers in my ear. “When I set you down, I need you to run to JJ, okay?” I nod. I don’t like the way this man is looking at us, and I really want my friends.

My feet touch the ground, and my eyes are burning again. I feel strange leaving my momma behind, like I want to bring her with me.

“Go, Layla.” Her heavy hand on my shoulder nudges me forward, and she even takes a few steps with me around the tall man. I feel cold and scared when she lets go and turns her back to me.

Mommy’s voice wobbles like mine does when I’m scared or sad. “Hello, Tate.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

TATE



6 weeks ago

Fed up with my questions, Mother snaps, “Tate, please!”
“Eat your food, Son.”

My teeth are due to turn to dust within the next few dinners I have with my parents. *I moved out last year, so why the fuck am I still letting them demand things of me?* The way my father calls me son is demeaning, but I honestly just hate the reminder that he’s related to me.

Mother’s face is twisted in a sneer as she watches the kitchen staff fill her next glass of wine. Spearing a piece of steak with my fork, I prepare myself to defend the poor people doomed to work in this god-forsaken house.

Smothering my satisfaction at how absolutely mouth-watering dinner is, I savor the perfection that is our chef’s skills. I refuse to give my parents any power over me, even if it is just a bite of their food. I’ll tell Ben later how fucking magnificent dinner was, even if the company at the empty *family* table makes me nauseous.

Ignoring the scotch beside my plate, I take a sip of my water. Nobody should ever be inebriated around these people. The only sounds to be heard between the three of us are my mother’s scoffs and the clanking of silverware.

“Do you have a woman yet?”

I open my mouth to snap at his invasive question but am interrupted by a commotion and yelling coming from the hall

leading to the entryway.

“IS SHE HERE?!”

I don't recognize the voice, nor do I have any context, but my stomach bottoms out when I thrust my chair back to stand.

Mother and Father each stand with furrowed brows. Mother hardly gets a word out before an absolutely terrifying man storms into the formal dining room. His hair is buzzed with neatly trimmed facial hair. What has me moving one foot forward and bending my knees into a defensive stance is the way his wide shoulders and buff chest heave with each enraged breath he takes.

“WHERE IS SHE, ARTHUR?!” Spittle flies out of his mouth and onto the disgustingly clean floors.

“Mason, what are you doing here?” I thought my dad disliked me, but whoever our guest is, has him tipping his nose up in disgust.

The slam of the huge man's fist on the table draws a shrill screech from Mother. “Cut the shit, Arthur! Where is your fucking daughter?”

“The fuck did you just say?” My lip curls at the mention of my sister. *How the hell does this asshole know her, and how did she ever get caught up with the likes of him?*

“Tate, not now.” My piece of shit sperm donor doesn't even look fazed at the outburst or the fact that his wife looks terrified. “Rylee is not my problem, nor is she welcome here. Get out of my house, Mason. You are not welcome either.”

This is the closest I've gotten to getting answers about why my sister disappeared. One day, years ago, my most favorite human in the world disappeared. Since then, they have leached all the happiness out of this house. Her name was never to be spoken, nor was she mentioned at any events. My best friend ceased to exist, no matter how many times I demanded answers. There was a time when I thought she might have died, and nobody wanted to upset me, but it just didn't feel right. The rage and immediate dismissal of my sibling gave them away. They did something to Rylee.

That's why I'm here every damn Friday for dinner. These people haven't been my family since I was twelve. They do have information, though. I just haven't found the right way to peel it from their gold-digging, self-centered minds.

This asshole, Mason, knows something. From the way violence and threats flash through his eyes, I don't think I will like what he has to say.

"That bitch took my brainwashed daughter!"

"Excuse me?!" My fists clench as I start bouncing on my toes, really wanting to throw hands. "KID?"

Dad's hand slamming down on the table rattles the dishes. "Shut the fuck up, Tate!"

I almost smirk at the thought of how Zach would react if he heard him speaking to me like that. Every training I've drilled into my body flashes through my mind, ready to put both of these wretched men on their fucking asses.

"What does it matter, Mason? Honestly, you should have kicked Rylee to the curb when she was pregnant."

I have no words. Literally none. Every atom in my body is screaming at me to kill them for the way they are talking about my big sister and, *apparently*, my fucking niece!

Mason's face turns an epic shade of purple. It's probably the equivalent of how he wants my father to look as he strangles him to death. Blood coats my tongue as I hold myself back and wishing like fuck the guys were here as backup. I can't kill both of them when I can tell I'm clearly outnumbered.

My hands weren't meant for bloody flesh; they were meant for the cold metal grip of a firearm.

"It's only a matter of time before I find what's mine anyway," Mason growls. Before I can confront him or even let out a stuttering breath, he's storming down the hallway and out the front door.

Mother's fearful, wide eyes around her fake cheekbones don't stir any form of pity in me. Dad is glaring at the

doorway, and all I want is to bury him in a shallow grave.

Out of the guys and me, I am the least violent because of my moral compass. That's not to say Zach, Wyatt, and Julian don't have morals, but their life has left their directions a little damaged.

I can feel the webbing cracks in the glass - the irrevocable shattering of my principles.

My voice is deadly calm. "From here on out, you are no longer my parents. If spoken to or about, you are only the people who gave me life. And don't go thinking you deserve something from me for having sex. I owe you nothing. You are, from now on, Penelope, the nasty woman who shunned her daughter and left her to an abusive man." I whirl on my father, my voice monotone. "And you are just Arthur. The father who didn't protect his little girl."

They both start talking, making my rage boil under my skin. I snap. "Am I wrong? Or did your daughter not get pregnant by that asshole, and you kicked her to the curb because you are rich assholes who care more about image than your own children?!"

The silence isn't one of remorse. No. The silence means they feel they don't need to defend themselves.

I allow the fury in my eyes to trail over them before I grab my dinner jacket in my white-knuckled grip. "Consider yourselves disowned."

Just like my big sister was.



I'm not sure how long I sit on the wooden steps of the guys' front porch. It's long enough for the crickets to become background noise to the inner torment of my mind.

I thought about busting down their door in my fit of rage and confusion. They don't need that, though. So here I am, trying to calm myself down before going inside. I don't want to taint their home with my rage. Or, I suppose it's my home now, too.

"Tate?" Julian's gentle voice runs over my skin like a balm to my fiery anger. "What are you doing out here?"

I admit that I didn't hear him open the front door, but I don't care. This is one of the few places we can let our guard down. "Thinking."

His toned body settles beside me, our legs and arms pressed together, further settling my nerves. "What happened?"

I snort a humorless laugh. "Where do I even begin?"

"How 'bout the most important part?" My muscles loosen when his hand grips mine and drops a kiss to my knuckles.

Sighing, I rest my head on his shoulder. "I know what happened to my sister." My voice might as well be a whisper.

Beside me, Julian jolts out a gasp. "What?" he breathes out. Shock, excitement, and fear for what I might say are clear in the way he holds me tighter. Each of them knows how important finding Rylee has been to me since long before we met.

I close my eyes. "Ry was pregnant, and my parents kicked her out."

"No..." The trembling voice comes from behind me. Both Julian and I look back to see Zachary and Wyatt watching us with matching looks of horror.

Shifting, I keep Julian's hand in mine as I lean my back against the railing in order to see each of my guys.

"Based on the abusive ex that looks almost old enough to be thirty, she left before she was eighteen. Which probably means that Mason knocked up a fucking minor. My parents admitted they kicked her out, and she was never welcome home again. Bad for their image."

“Wait, back up! You said her ex and baby-daddy’s name is Mason?” I didn’t think Wyatt’s eyes could have gotten any larger, but he’s looking at me like I could blow up the entire world.

“Yeah. Big guy, buzzed head, clean beard, anger issues for fucking days. Why?” My heart thunders in my chest when Zach sucks in a sharp breath as well.

Steeling himself, Wyatt offers me a hand, which I take without hesitation. “You have to come see this.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

MARCUS



“**S**he asked for all of us?” My smile is wide as I look expectantly at Leo in the passenger seat up front.

Leo nods without looking back at me, his cheeks tinted pink. Jackson’s soft lips are tilted up in a smirk in the driver’s seat, and Jude is about to bounce out of the car. I think it’s safe to say we are so freaking excited that our little Layla invited us over. I hope her momma isn’t salty about it.

“Are we there yet?” I can’t contain myself.

Neither can Jude. “What he said!”

Jackson scoffs at the same time Leo huffs a quiet laugh. “Look out the window, dumbass.”

I do as he says and see that we are literally pulling into the driveway. Narrowing my eyes at Jude, I say, “He meant you, dumbass.” He flips me off before deep throating his finger. *Fuck.*

“Whose car is that?” The strain in Jackson’s voice sends a chill down my spine. In the driveway is a blacked-out fucking Bentley GT parked in front of us.

JJ is out of the car in a flash, making my pulse skitter with anxiety. I’m suddenly wishing I had insisted on riding shotgun because I can’t see the problem from the back.

Just as I’m out of the car and moving to stand beside Jackson, Layla comes stumbling towards us. Every atom in my body stands at attention at the tears coursing down her cheeks.

“JJ!” Layla sobs, throwing herself into his waiting arms.

He immediately tucks her head into his shoulder. “Hey, shhh. What’s wrong, sweetie?”

It’s definitely not the right moment to be swooning over the tall, dark, and douchebag man holding a little girl, but fuck, is it a sight to see.

Hiccups burp out of Layla’s mouth, but she manages to allow a few words to escape. “We don’t know that-that man.”

Wondering where Leo and Jude got off to, I lowkey jump when I find them hovering behind me. All my attention is on the sweet little one. Jackson coos at her for a few more moments, his body shifting toward us.

“Okay, sweetie. Leo is going to take you—”

“NO!” Layla shouts and clings to his neck, making my heart constrict and heat all at once. “Mommy said to run to you! I stay with you!”

“Shh. Okay, you will stay with me. I promise.” Wonder shines in JJ’s sparkly eyes while he hugs Layla to his chest like he never wants to let her go. “I need you guys to go check on Rylee, please.” The rumble of his voice is soft as to keep a sense of calm and comfort running from him to the koala bear clinging to his chest.

I nod, trailing my eyes across the yard to find Rylee crying and stepping back from the young man. He looks to be younger than twenty, with dirty blonde hair, a clean, sharp jaw, and a lean, toned body. His eyes and mouth look more prominent than any man I’ve ever seen. The boy almost looks like my girl. My thoughts come to a screeching halt when he takes a step toward Rylee with an outreached hand.

I run.

Thundering footsteps behind me let me know I have backup. I bypass Rylee, knowing Leo or Jude will help her. I catch a faint whiff of her cocoa butter scent right before my hand fists into the trespasser’s shirt. I have him against the side of the house in a flash, my raging protectiveness something fierce.

“You don’t touch her!” I roar in his face. I don’t care that his hands are up in surrender. All I give a shit about is that he made my woman fucking cry.

“Marc, stop,” Rylee pleads somewhere behind me. I hear the guys trying to get her attention and keep her calm, but it doesn’t matter when I see this fucking asshole clench his fists.

Not so innocent now, are we?

“Get your hands off me.” The boy’s voice is steady, but I pick up on a subtle hint of crazy under there.

“Who are you?” I spit, grinding my first even harder into his chest.

Rylee’s voice interrupts our battle of wills. “Jude, let me go!” The man in my grasp lunges toward me, but I shove him back. “Leo, stop! Please, just let me go!”

The fist that flies at my face happens faster than I can duck. My jaw cracks, and my cheekbone protests with a dull throb as I stumble back.

“I’m pretty fucking sure my sister told you to stop!”

I manage to snatch the boy by his bicep just as the words sink in. *Sister?* The guy is smaller than I am, but he’s really damn good on his feet. Swinging him around by his arm, I throw him away from Rylee. Practically dancing on his toes, he stays upright and lunges at me with a snarl.

A blur of copper hair and flailing arms stops me from meeting the bastard halfway.

“Marcus, please. Stop.” Rylee’s chin quivers, forcing teardrops to meet the grass. “He’s my brother.” She sounds so broken as she pleads with me to understand.

“He made you cry, though, sweetheart.” My reasoning is weak, yet she huffs a laugh, anyway. To my absolute shock, she buries herself into my chest, dainty arms wrapped around my waist. I’m completely entranced with the way she fits against my body. I dig a hand into her hair like Jackson did with Layla. My other arm wraps around her waist as she takes deep, shuddering breaths against my Henley.

Sniffing, Rylee pulls away. “Don’t hurt him unless I say so, okay?” With a wink, she kisses the corner of my mouth and grabs hold of my hand.

“Why don’t we all go inside? Go take a seat and a glass of water. Jude, you know where the glasses are.” Without waiting for anyone to respond, she points at the front door and waits until Jude, Leo, and Tate are making their way toward it.

We don’t move.

“Rylee, are you okay?” I murmur, tugging on her gently while she zones out.

Her watery laugh hurts my soul. “No. I’m not okay, Marcus.” Turning, she looks me in the eye and allows me to see her exhaustion. “My baby brother just showed up on my doorstep, and all I could do was cry and panic. Where is Layla?”

Now that her rant is complete, she starts frantically scanning the area around her.

“LAYLA!”

“Mommy!” The driver-side door of Jude’s black Jeep flies open and out-tumbles Jackson with a wiggly Layla. As soon as her little feet hit the ground, she’s sprinting to her momma like they had been separated for years. Rylee kneels just in time to scoop her up.

Jackson isn’t far behind the little one, but he runs straight to me and grips my jaw gently in one hand. “Shit, babe. Are you okay? We need to get some ice on that!”

“I bet sitting on the sidelines was hard for you, huh?” I smirk, hoping to ease his worry. Scoffing, he lays his lips on mine for a moment. When he releases my face, the arm around my hips stays even as he walks us closer to the girls.

“JJ...” Rylee breathes, Layla sitting on her cocked hip. “Thank you for protecting her. I didn’t know what was happening, and I knew you would... I just... thank you for keeping my little girl safe.” No more tears fall, but Rylee’s lip quivers, and her voice wobbles.

Without missing a beat, Jackson wraps the four of us in a hug. It feels so right. A ball of emotion gets lodged in my throat when Layla rests her head against my shoulder.

“I’ll always keep you both safe, I promise.” JJ drops a kiss on Layla’s forehead when we pull away. “Now, can someone tell me who the fu-fudge is in your house?”

Rylee sighs, her eyes going distant. “That’s my younger brother, Tate. The one I haven’t seen in six years.”

“Shit.”

“JJ! Language!” Layla pushes his chest from her perch on Rylee’s waist.

Jackson looks down with a sheepish smile. “Sorry, sweetie.” He plucks her from Ry, looking mighty pleased with himself when Layla twirls his black hair around in her fingers.

Sparing a glance at Rylee, she looks just as I feel.

Completely fucking wooed.

Chapter Twenty-Six

RYLEE



*S*undays aren't meant to be like this.

I should still be sipping coffee and watching my child do whatever she wants to do for the day. Layla wanted the guys to come over. What we were going to do? I have no idea, but I was excited.

The festering guilt in my soul spits at me.

I should be thrilled to see my brother, and here I am thinking about all the ways this just fucked up my Sunday with my daughter and my guys. *My?*

Seeing Tate on my doorstep at first didn't make sense. All I saw was a stranger who was staring at me and Layla way too hard for me to feel comfortable. So, I did the only thing I could think of. I told my daughter to run to the men I trust, and I put myself in between her and potential harm.

As soon as I saw Layla in Jackson's arms, the man in front of me finally registered. He's grown up now. But his blue eyes are the same as mine. As Layla's. Tate had a very thin face growing up, and it seems he still has fairly fair features. Although, he's made it clear we shouldn't underestimate him. Underneath his high cheekbones, blonde hair, and sharp jaw, my little brother can hold his own. Thinking about it, his bone structure reminds me a lot of Leo.

Seeing Tate brought on an entire fucking tsunami of memories. Not the good ones. The pool of guilt swallows more of my sparkle.

I should look at my brother and remember the good times. Chasing each other around the yard, having water fights, making shadow puppets, watching him play video games, trying not to laugh at the dinner table together. Instead, when I faced my little brother after six years, a torrent of my worst memories since I was ripped away from him drowned me in tears and sorrow.

Looking at the young man he has become, all I feel is loss. I missed out on so much. I could blame our parents, but I question if there was a way we could have connected sooner. *Should I have tried to stay in his life? Even after being forcibly removed from his life.*

My heart fractures remembering the aggressive hands that dragged me out of study the night I told my parents I was pregnant.

I swear my heart grew arms and is trying to claw its way out of my throat. A mutant organ born from anxiety.

The light in Father's study shines down the long, dark hallway. The break in the darkness should be a relief, and yet all I crave is the shadows to swallow me whole.

I'm afraid.

I'm not naïve enough to think my parents will be accepting and kind. I'm not stupid enough to think me and my... baby... will come out of this happy and unharmed. Each step I take makes my tummy threaten to grow arms of its own and run away.

Wait.

I snort, realizing how accurate that really was. I wonder when my little one will start growing arms. Will I start having morning sickness before then?

Who will answer my questions?

Mother probably won't for a long time. I just hope she will come around soon after I tell them. I have no idea what I'm doing.

“Come in, Rylee.” My father’s cold voice makes me jump. I didn’t knock, but I suppose my self-induced chuckling and panicked breathing were enough to give me away.

Slipping inside as quietly as I can, I take in my father, downing the rest of the scotch in his glass. Beside him, my mother is staring into a mirror and fixing her makeup.

Are they going somewhere?

Hopefully, they don’t leave too soon and see Mason outside. If things got bad, he promised to let me stay with him for a bit.

“Rylee, your father is speaking to you. Don’t be rude.” Mother’s flippant tone tells me she couldn’t care less about my presence.

A scowl twists Dad’s features, threatening my resolve to wither away. “Speak, Rylee.”

“I-Uh.” Fuck, how do I tell them I’m pregnant? There should be tips on condom boxes or something.

“We do not stutter!”

Jolting, a bead of sweat rolls down my spine at Father’s harsh shout. “Please don’t be mad.” Silence. “I’m pregnant! Mason is the dad!” I rush the words out and squeeze my eyes shut.

I beg anything that’s listening to flash me to the future where I’m holding my baby in my arms with the wide smiles of my parents surrounding us. Tate would be curled up beside me, stroking my child’s cheek. And Mason would be watching over the bundle with a proud gleam in his misty eyes.

Please, please, please!

“Ah!” My yelp accompanies the searing pain along my scalp. My knees burn soon after as I’m dragged away from my screeching mom. Kicking my legs out, I try to gain purchase on the hardwood floors, but Father is moving too fast for me to get my feet under me.

“Dad, stop! Please!”

I whimper when his hand tightens. “You are no longer a part of this family. You are a disgrace. Damaged. And a fucking police report rolled into one pathetic package.”

“What?” I whimper just as the cool air of the night rushes across my heated cheeks and down my collarbones.

“Never come back.”

Before I can catch myself, I’m being shoved through the front door. I’m barely able to catch myself on my bare elbows before my face hits the concrete. A sob bursts from my chest at the same time the doors slam closed.

Tate.

I have to go back to him.

A fiery grip on my bicep is all I feel before I’m hauled to my feet and dragged down the stairs.

“Mason, no. I have to go back,” I plead.

He jerks the passenger door open and shoves me inside, not caring that he bashed my head on the roof of the car. Hell, I don’t even care. I just need to say goodbye to Tate.

“Mason—”

“Shut up! We have to go before your fucking dad calls the cops and gets me arrested!”

My body goes numb at the choice presented to me. Get my boyfriend arrested for getting a minor pregnant or say goodbye to my baby brother and probably upset him?

I choose to save Tate the tears and fear of me leaving. He doesn’t need to know that our parents shunned me. Maybe he can have a better life with them.

Without me.

Sniffling, my eyes hold on to Tate’s window for as long as I can manage.

I choose hope. For my baby and for my brother.

May they both have love and family.

“Mommy.” I’m snapped back to the present when Bug taps my shoulder. “Who is that man?” Her wide blue eyes are drying up, thankfully, but her gaze keeps flicking to the front door where the other guys are. I can tell she’s trying to be strong, but her little arms grip JJ even tighter.

“Come here, baby.” I hold my arms out to her, needing to hold my daughter close. Jackson gives Layla a kiss on the cheek before settling her on my hipbone. I don’t look at either him or Marcus, not wanting to see their own thoughts and opinions shining in their eyes.

Instead, I drop my forehead to Layla’s and close my eyes while I take a deep breath. “That’s my little brother, Tate. He’s your uncle, Bug.”

A million emotions flash across her face, but the excitement followed by caution has me wanting to squash all her negative thoughts.

“Is he nice?”

My heart breaks a little. “I think so. I’m going inside to talk to him. Would you like to come?” She nods, some of her excitement bubbling back up. “I need you to stay next to Jackson the whole time unless I say so, okay?”

A fierce expression hardens Layla’s eyebrows and purses her lips. “Promise.”

The look of wonder on JJ’s face when I hand her over to him is priceless. One of the main reasons I trust him to protect her is because he looks at her like she’s the light of his life. A lump forms in my throat when his eyes lock on mine. Pure awe and maybe shock?

I give him a small smile and can’t help but lean in to kiss his cheek. “You kept her safe, JJ,” I murmur with my hand on his forearm. “Layla first, always.” I give his arm another squeeze and move to the front door before he can respond.

It might seem weird to someone without kids that I feel so moved by the fact that JJ chose to protect Layla rather than

coming to my rescue. I was worried all four of them would run to my side, but Jackson stayed out of it to keep my daughter safe.

Layla comes first.



The testosterone in my house is threatening a sneeze. Surprisingly, Layla seems content between Leo and JJ on the couch. Bug is casually sipping on a juice box that one of the guys procured while sneaking peeks at Tate in his own chair. Marcus is sitting in front of her, and Jude is hovering by me, pacing in front of the TV.

Nibbling on my lip, I fight not to break the tense silence before I find the right words to say. My eyes dart through the living room, stifling a groan at all the glaring happening between my brother and my guys.

“So, you’re my uncle?”

That’s one way to break the silence. Layla’s voice is light, if not a bit hesitant, but it makes Tate startle enough to make me smirk.

“I—” He looks at me in concern. I nod, that yes, she is my kid. “Yeah, darling. I’m your uncle Tate.”

“Where have you been?” Bug’s eyes are furrowed, like she can’t imagine why her uncle wasn’t a part of our lives.

Ouch. We all flinch.

Tate looks pained as he runs his hand through his messy blonde hair. “I’m so sorry.” He looks between us, and I know the apology isn’t just meant for the little one who called him out. “I just found out a little over a month ago what happened and why you left.”

I snort. “*Left?*” What fucking story was he told because I did not leave of my own free will.

Another flinch from my brother, and he goes to stand before each of the guys tense. Their movements draw my attention. A reminder that they are all here and about to listen to the gory details.

Actually... Shit! They know nothing about this.

“I know you didn’t leave. That was the wrong word. I’m sorry! For so long I didn’t know why you were gone... I actually thought you died for a while there. I—” Tate chokes. “You didn’t say goodbye, Ry. I didn’t know why I couldn’t say your name anymore. Or why I didn’t have my best friend to hang out with. Ry... You were just gone. You left me with Mother and Father. They—”

My baby brother *shatters*.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

LEO



I can't be the only one that feels completely lost.

From the moment we pulled into Rylee's driveway, I've been confused, protective, and downright misplaced. It's a strange word to use to name a feeling. I just feel like we are intruding on something really fucking big. At the same time, though, there is no way in hell we are leaving our girls with this stranger.

Brother or not, they're ours.

Plus, this asshole made her cry. Enough said.

As the boy, Tate, curls over his knees in agony, I wonder if I should take the little one somewhere else. This seems way too deep for tiny ears. Even though I really want to hear what goes down out here, Layla comes first.

"Rylee," I say, hoping to get her attention. Her wide, pleading eyes meet mine, making me feel a little better that I'm not the only one feeling shaken. "Should I take Layla somewhere else?" I really don't want to step on her toes and make decisions about her kid.

"Um. Yeah. Thank y—"

Before Rylee can complete her whispered request, Layla shimmies her way off the couch and deposits her juice pouch on Jackson's lap. He looks like she just gave him a damn gift.

I'm so focused on my amusement at Jackson's reaction to the little girl's trash that I completely miss where she's headed.

“Nugget,” Jude’s stern voice doesn’t faze her. He doesn’t grab her, nor does he say anything else, clearly on the same page with respecting Rylee’s choices as mom.

Rylee’s brows are pulled together, and tears waver on her eyelashes. Yet she doesn’t make Layla stop.

With a teeny arm outstretched, Layla bridges the gap between her and her uncle. “Uncle Tate?”

Tate’s shocked choke is immediate when her palm touches his cheek. His head shoots up in wonder, but anguish is still clear to see. I swear his soul is bleeding out of his eyes at this point. I have never felt so much pain radiating from another human being before. Except for Rylee. She just knows how to hide it better than her little brother.

“Hi,” he whispers. Layla seems to have him wrapped around her finger already. Just like the rest of us. If Rylee allows any of us poor assholes to be in their lives, her daughter is going to be spoiled rotten.

Layla lets her hand drop, but she doesn’t step away from him once she has his attention. Honestly, I’m a little jealous. Both girls were so standoffish when we first met.

What does Layla see in this guy?

I feel ridiculous. Thinking back on the time she saw Leo again at the restaurant, she immediately took to him because he looks like he could be her dad. The resemblance between the five-year-old and her uncle is uncanny, honestly. It makes me wonder if copper is Rylee’s real hair color.

“You didn’t make Mommy sad on purpose?”

Tate shakes his head vehemently. “No! I didn’t, I promise. If I had known I had a niece, I would have been with you. No matter what. For always, darling. I’m so sorry.”

Layla nods like it makes perfect sense, even without knowing the details. “Okay. You stay now? For always?”

A snuffle sounds from Rylee, where she’s wrapped in Jude’s strong arms. Tate looks at her, then back to the little blonde hanging onto his every word. “I have a family of my

own that can't wait to meet you. No matter where I am, I will love you and always be here for you. For always."

Layla grips his offered pinky in a binding promise between niece and uncle.

"Layla, baby. Can you go color or play in your room while we have a boring adult conversation?" Rylee kneels and keeps Jude's hand in her own. "I'll come get you so you can hang out with our guys in a bit, okay?"

A round of gasps and chokes sound through the room.

"Did you just claim us, baby girl?" Leave it to Jude to call it like he sees it.

Rylee blushes a hot shade of red while Layla beams at all of us before giving Tate a little hug. She makes him promise one more time that he won't leave her, then goes through the group, giving us mini hugs. I watch as she bounds up the stairs, a bright smile in place the whole time.

"Did Layla just claim us, too?" Marcus stares at the stairs in wonder for a beat longer.

"Shush," Rylee scolds him, still looking mighty pink where she sits crisscrossed on the carpet in front of Jude and Tate. "How did you find me, Tate?"

I don't think the boy hears her, though. Yes, *boy*. In our late twenties or early thirties in JJ's case, eighteen seems like fucking ages ago. Marcus shuffles around the couch and sits beside Jackson, a bag of peas pressed to his jaw. Anger and annoyance flood my system. I hate that Tate hurt my man.

"I'm sorry. What? Are you guys all together?" Tate seems baffled.

"Yes," Jude says.

It's Rylee who offers a strangled noise this time. She swats Jude with a look of disbelief. "Uh, absolutely not!"

"Really, Ry? 'Cus you all seem pretty cozy?" Tate looks pointedly at all of us lounging around her living room.

“Really. No. I am not with them. We are just friends.” She huffs and crosses her arms.

JJ rolls his eyes, clearly not enjoying this conversation. “All four of us are together. We are still working on the one on the floor.” He gestures to a gaping Rylee.

Only able to huff again, she gets us back on track even if some of us are fighting to hide our laughter. “Anyway. Tate, I seriously need to know how you found me.”

I straighten at her stern tone, which holds a hint of fear. Tate eyes us with uncertainty. “Do they know? Should they be here for this?”

“Do *you* know?” My woman’s defensiveness makes me hard. “They stay.”

Well, fuck. I guess we finally get to know what happened to these sweet girls.

Tate starts with a bomb. “Is Mason my niece’s father?” All remnants of sadness die, leaving a stone-cold, pissed-off brother.

Rylee freezes, all the blood drains from her face. She nods. I can tell she’s barely keeping herself contained.

Tate jerks his head in a nod. “He showed up last month at the house, demanding to know your whereabouts. Penelope and Arthur kicked him out. I put the pieces together.” He eyes her hard like he knows something, making my skin fucking itch. “He hired my family to track you.”

“WHAT?!” On her feet, Rylee can barely get in a gasp of air. Before we can reach her in our panic to soothe her, Tate is there. Much to my dis-fucking-may.

“My guys didn’t know! I swear they told me immediately. Mason is off on a ‘lead’ in California right now. I swear to you! That abusive fuck is as far away from you as we could manage without being suspicious.”

Rylee stops fighting her brother’s hold when Jude runs a large palm over the top of her head to soothe her anxiety.

I can tell the rest of us are about to burst into flames at what we just learned. Layla's father was abusive.

What does that mean? Who did he hurt? Rylee? Layla? Both of them?

I can't even compute what sick fuck would hurt these amazing girls. If they were mine, I would cherish the ground they walk on.

"Someone better start fucking talking," Jackson growls.

"Oh my god. How long do I have, Tate? Do I need to leave now?" Removing herself from his grip, Rylee paces again. "I have four weeks left on this lease. How long until he gets here? Do you know? TATE! HE CAN'T HAVE HER!"

"Rylee—" Jude steps forward only to be brushed off.

Rylee's eyes are frantic as she yanks on her hair. "Fuck. Maybe I should leave and draw him away from Layla. He won't stop coming for her," she mumbles under her breath.

A lump forms in my throat at the idea of them leaving. "Beauty—"

She cuts me off. "I can't leave her behind, though. Fuck!" With her shout, her fist lashes out and hits the wall.

Rylee's harsh yelp and buckling knees have me surging forward before she can land. "Hey, hey! It's okay. Let me see," I say soothingly.

Shuffling her body across my lap, I lean against the wall with her straddling me. With her left hand, she cradles the other wrist she bashed into the wall. My heart thunders in my chest, needing to fix whatever hurts. I hate that so much of my woman's pain isn't visible, but maybe I can help this time.

Marc, JJ, and Jude kneel beside me while Tate hovers by the TV with a pale, shocked expression. The boy may know more about her past, but he doesn't know who she is now. We do. Not with so many words or a story to tell. No. We know Rylee, my copper-haired beauty, by the twinkle in her gaze when she fights a laugh. We see the wonderful mother she is to Layla in everything she would give to her daughter. Sure, we

don't know her through words, but we *see* her. We crumble with her when sorrow flickers across her bright features and leaves exhaustion in its wake. I see the guilt that eats away at her when nobody is watching.

Rylee is not her past. She's the mom crying in my arms who would do anything to keep her daughter safe and happy. Rylee is a woman who survived unspeakable things and still smiles every single day.

"Shh, baby girl. Show us what hurts," Jude murmurs, petting her head once again. She settles against me and lifts her tear-streaked cheeks from my shoulder.

Sniffling, Rylee doesn't lift her gaze from her hands. "It's not something you can see," she whispers. "Mason, he-he broke my wrist a few years ago."

Silence descends for a beat. "It still hurts you, sweetheart?" Marcus sounds like he's trying really damn hard to hold his emotions in check.

Her hesitant nod breaks my fucking heart. The wrist in question twitches between us. I realize just as the other three do. Rylee's hand twitches whenever she's overwhelmed, sad, or feeling anything negative or threatening. This is why.

"Let me see it." Jackson tries to smooth out his demand with a soft tone. Surprisingly, Rylee doesn't even bat an eye at his bossiness. Instead, she offers him her right arm as her bottom lip trembles.

Sometimes I forget how young Rylee really is. She's always so strong and put-together. Not right now, though.

Beauty's vulnerable side makes my soul crack.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

JUDE



“Nugget?” I tap my knuckles on Layla’s door quietly so as not to startle her. Soft shuffling on the other side reaches my ears.

A head of white curls pops out of the doorframe, making me smile. “Jude! Want to see my room?” Before I can utter a word, she grips my pointer and middle finger in her small hand. “Look! Oh, my bed is my most favorite!”

Jackson’s properties are always very basic colors, and the tenants aren’t allowed to paint the white walls. But I admit, Layla really has made this room her own.

Nugget’s bedspread is definitely the highlight of her space, though. On a white background spans a bright pink daisy across most of the bed.

Wait.

Whipping my phone out, I snap a picture and send it off to Gabby with a wink emoji. One thing I will never tell the guys is that Gabs and I have our own little book club.

Sunshine: Omg. WHAT!? I NEED THAT NOW! Steal it, Jude. I don’t care that it belongs to a child. When she’s older, I will tell her all about my favorite author.

Sunshine: UGH. The grovel. Let’s do a reread!

Sunshine: You best not fuck it up with my girl like those guys did.

Sunshine: #whychoose bitch

Sunshine: Did you stash it in the Jeep yet?

Snorting at the abundance of texts blowing up my phone, I shove it into my back pocket. I know what to buy Gabby for Christmas.

“I love your room! Where did you get your bedspread?” *I will take notes if I must.*

She scrunches her nose up and tilts her head. “It was Mommy’s. She said it reminded her of a book she read.”

No fucking way. Why does this make me so ridiculously giddy?

Another thought barrels into me, making me curse. *Is Rylee on board with a why choose lifestyle? Because that would be fucking perfect.*

“No bad words in my room!” Layla huffs and pokes my leg. I must have cursed under my breath without realizing it.

Without a second thought, I scoop her up in my arms and spin her around, careful of anything that might be in the way. “Sorry, Nug.” I prop her on my hip and make my way to the door. “Want to come hang out with us?”

“Yes, please!” She clutches onto me tighter, making my heart squeeze. I hesitate at the top of the stairs at the realization that could bring me to my knees.

I love this little girl.

Layla’s hopeful question snaps me out of my thoughts. “Is Uncle Tate still here?”

“Yeah, honey. Look.” Now at the bottom of the stairs, Layla can see Tate, Marcus, and Leo bustling around in the kitchen. Nugget’s shoulders loosen, a big smile stretching her lips. Her brows furrow when she catches sight of her mom resting in Jackson’s lap on the couch, though.

“Mommy, are you sad?” I pause at the back of the couch, letting the girls talk before I feed Layla.

“I’m okay, baby.” Her mom’s reassurance does nothing if the clenching of her little fist against my arm is anything to go by.

“You cried.” Layla pales. “Mommy, who hurt your hand?” Her eyes dart around the entire room, lingering on each of us before staring holes into Rylee’s face.

“Nobody hurt me. I’m okay. I just hit it on the wall, I promise.” Rylee reaches her good hand forward to cup her daughter’s cheek over the back of the couch. “Why don’t you go hang out with your uncle while they make us dinner?”

Layla is silent for a beat, calculating the truth of her mom’s words. What she wasn’t here for was the complete breakdown that Rylee had a bit ago. Once Leo and Jackson were able to soothe her and put ice on her rapidly bruising wrist, she finally sat down. Tate assured her they would keep Mason on the other side of the country, but if he left, they would still have eyes on his whereabouts. Her brother even offered her proof that their tech guy sent over of the douchebag in California.

While Rylee wasn’t thrilled with any part of the conversation, she still listened and ultimately decided to stay for her final weeks of the lease here. Tate is also going to stay. Where he is staying, I’m not sure. I just hope that when he tells his sister that he wants to get to know them and be a part of their lives, he means it.

I bend, keeping a tight hold on Layla, and give Rylee a kiss on the forehead. Her breath catches, and I swear I feel her lean into me a bit.

With Layla on the counter beside me, we snack on another charcuterie board and watch Marc fuck around with Tate. Nugget giggles every time Leo rolls his eyes and complains they aren’t helping with dinner.

I’m honestly not quite sure what they are making; too focused on watching Layla’s eyes light up while she munches on some salami. I love making this sweet girl laugh. She and Rylee deserve all the smiles they can get.

Peering over my shoulder, I catch Jack's warm eyes. Rylee is curled up against his chest with a blanket and is quietly snoozing away on his lap. The look he gives me is of pure adoration and love. His soft smile is for me, making me realize that the contentment and affection radiating from him isn't just for the sleeping woman in his arms.

Jackson loves me too.



“Sunshine! To what do we owe the pleasure?”

Gabby doesn't knock when she comes over, so seeing her slam the front door behind her with a huff and shove of her foot is normal. Pink bob in curls, she bounds her way to the kitchen with a tray of coffees in hand.

I reach for one, only to be swatted and hissed at. “That one is for Rylee! Here, this is yours.” She hands me a cold brew and slides one over to Jackson as well.

Just as she goes to speak, Leo and Marcus come stumbling down the staircase looking sleep ruffled and really damn satisfied. I glare at JJ. Damn him for making me wake up early to go into the office today. I feel better seeing the hurt puppy look on his face, though.

Yeah, asshole. We could be just rolling out of bed with our guys.

“I-Oh! I didn't think I would see you guys here today,” Gabby's voice lilts like a question at the end.

They sleep over more often than not since we made things official a month ago. *Holy shit!* It's been an entire month! After all the drama of that night and trying to win the girls' trust back, time hasn't been working right, I swear.

Tate showing up kind of threw a wrench into Rylee's free time. I'm trying not to be annoyed about the guy, but I just

want to soak up all my girl time. I suppose the positive side of that is our free time has been spent platonically with Ry and Layla, leaving us four to come home and keep building our own relationship. We ordered a big bed that should be delivered today. We have been swapping around beds and attending to each singular relationship.

The nights when Leo and Marcus go home to do some laundry and pack more clothes are the worst. There have only been a few, but our home seems so empty without them.

“Um, hello?” Gabby tosses her hands in the air. Her exasperation makes me realize that each of us ignored her. I bet if we were a cartoon, our eyes would have hearts in them.

“That’s okay, Sunshine. I can share.” I wink, uncertain if we are telling her yet.

Right as I’m about to overthink it, Marcus sidles up behind me at the island and wraps a hand around my waist. “Good morning. We missed you,” he breathes. My pulse jumps when his lips press against the crook of my neck.

Marc is gone before I can settle myself, only to be replaced by a sleepy Leo. “Good morning,” he murmurs hesitantly. Looking at him, I see his cheeks are pink, making me wonder what kind of hello Jackson just gave him while Marcus distracted me.

I grip the back of his neck and pull Leo in for a sweet kiss. Groaning when I taste him, images of what the two sleepy heads got up to before they came down flash through my mind.

“Can someone please tell me how long you assholes have been keeping this from me?”

Shit. Leo and I pull away at the same time, gasping for air. An innocent kiss with any of them can turn passionate in a fucking flash. A slap followed by a warning rumble makes me smirk. Leo and Marcus move to the fridge together to make their breakfasts. I eye Jackson and smirk at him when I see the wicked gleam in his eye.

“I’m going to start throwing hands!”

Marcus snorts and points a butter knife in her direction. “Nobody says that anymore, Gabs.”

She stomps her foot. “I will end you.”

I snort and go to tease her, but JJ cuts me off. “We became official about a month ago, Gabby. I’m sorry we didn’t tell you. I think we have just been trying to figure it out ourselves, you know?”

She softens, giving me my opening. “Yeah, Sunshine. Like Daddy JJ-Ow! Hey!” My bicep bunches in annoyance from the blow Jackson just landed.

“Oh, shush. I barely hit you,” he scoffs.

Rubbing the tender spot, I pout. “Yeah, but you hit a weird spot. My muscle is fucking tweaking.”

He’s on his feet and grasping my arm before I can continue to explain how my arm is twitching. “Shit, Jude. I’m so sorry. I didn’t actually mean to hurt you.” Twisting my arm left and right, Jackson tries to find the source of my pain. “What can I do?”

“It’s calming down now, but I wouldn’t mind a kiss?” JJ descends on my mouth like it’s the only proper way to apologize. And damn, do I forgive him. I break away, breathless once again. “And a massage?”

My batting eyelashes droop into pleasure when he nips my bottom lip. “I’ll give you a massage tonight. No need to pout.”

“Jesus,” Marc breathes out, holding a cracked egg over the frying pan. Leo grips the spatula like a fucking promise.

“Kay. Wow. Well, I came here for a reason, so can we move on?”

Leo clears his throat, sprinkling cheese into their eggs. “What’s up, Gabby?”

Her bob sways with her dramatic fall into the chair beside me. “I need you guys to take Rylee out and get her a drink or something.” I straighten in my chair at her tired sigh. “I feel like she’s closing herself off again. I know you guys have been giving her space to reconnect with her brother, and that’s great,

but I think she's using the time apart to lock her shield in place. You know, before she leaves in a couple weeks."

JJ rumbles against my back, sending shivers down my arms. "What do you mean she's closing herself off?"

"I mean, JJ, that she reminds me of the cold Rylee that we first met. Her smiles are dimming, and she hardly talks to me anymore. Layla has been clingier than ever with me. I think the poor girl is holding on as tight as she can so she doesn't have to leave."

"Why didn't you say anything sooner?" Leo sounds half frantic, half pissed.

Taking a sip of her coffee, Gabby shoots him a glare. "I thought she might just be putting all of her energy into Tate and Layla. But the little miss told me yesterday that her mommy is sad, and it about ripped my fucking heart out. Can you please take her out and woo my girl or something? Maybe add incentives to make her stay?"

We were fools to give Rylee space.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

RYLEE



I ‘m doing it again. Tormenting myself with people’s opinions. I’m all for freedom of speech, but these reviews are just mean. A lump of anxiety forms in my throat, and I don’t even know why. It’s not like I can convince anyone to like my work, nor can I change the plot line around one personal preference. I wouldn’t even know how to begin because one person loves an aspect that another hates and vice versa.

“Mommy! I think Gabby’s here!”

Quickly swiping my tears, I stand and make my way to the front door. She wanted to come over for a glass of wine tonight, and honestly, I felt like shit enough to say yes.

I’ve been trying to distance myself from her since we are leaving in two weeks. The guys made it easy when they started giving me space to hang out with my brother. It was sweet, yet it also gave me an easy excuse to say we’re drifting apart.

I unlock the door when I see Gabby passing the window and move to the kitchen to pour us each a glass of wine. Bug will be going to bed soon.

I feel numb.

I’ve been really enjoying getting to know Tate again, but catching up and swapping stories makes my soul feel like it’s suffocating. Almost like it’s turning into its own beast that thrives off my issues and negativity. Which is probably why I couldn’t help but look at the one-star reviews on my latest release.

I love my brother. But seeing him again has brought the worst moments of my life to the forefront of my mind. For Layla and my baby brother, I will smile. I know Bug has been picking up on my depressed state. I just... I don't know. Life is a checklist again.

We need to start packing.

I need to come up with the next plot line.

We need to run.

It's almost time to say goodbye.

Swallowing a sip of wine, I take a deep breath before turning to the pixie that just entered my home and is squealing with Layla. I hate that the sight exhausts me.

I hear Jude's voice behind me. "Hey, baby girl."

I choke.

"Shit, gorgeous! You okay?" Jackson runs around the island and gently pats me on the back.

Clearing the wine that tried to drown my lungs, I move to take a sip of water out of the tap. I wipe my cheeks and turn to eye the group of guys eyeing me like they want to wrap me up in a blanket and feed me chocolate.

I tilt my head. *That sounds really nice, actually.* If I weren't leaving.

"Why are you guys here?" I go for my dismissive bitch voice. Instead, I sound fucking desperate.

Leo's face softens as he approaches me. He trails his finger across my collar bone popping out of my loose t-shirt. "Gabby is babysitting, and you are coming with us."

"So go get ready, sweetheart!" I don't know when Marcus slipped in beside me, but he taps me on the butt and shoos me out of the kitchen.

"But I—"

A sexy Jude thwarts my attempt to stop and talk to Gabby. "Nope. We are going out. Go get ready, baby girl."

He ushers me into my room. In a pair of ripped jeans and a black Henley rolled up to his elbows, he looks like fucking sin. Leo shuffles into the room silently and pauses by Jude. My two blondes side by side. Jude's dirty blonde hair is messy where it brushes his jaw. I see a strand resting on an eyelash, and don't hesitate to brush it away.

A harsh intake of air draws my attention to Leo again. His black jeans hug his thighs, and his white button-up is partially unbuttoned, making me want to tug the rest free. Platinum hair is slicked away from his forehead, giving me the perfect view of his beautiful face. Leo's anxiety shows in the way his white teeth nibble on his lip.

My core tightens and heats, making me shift. The movement brings me closer to Leo, and without a second thought, I tug his plump lips away from the abuse of his teeth. His pink, hot tongue swipes at the tip of my thumb, making me gasp.

"Baby girl," Jude's voice is like gravel. "You are playing with fire. Don't test me when Layla is just through the hall."

Cue the living bucket of ice water.

"Sorry," I murmur.

Leo's hand snatches my jaw between his fingers faster than I can run away. "What were you thinking about, Beauty?"

I fight to keep my tongue in my mouth. I whisper, "I wasn't. I was just feeling." It's the truth. For once in the past few weeks, it felt like my mind was at peace, being surrounded by their irresistible bodies.

"Mm, and what were you feeling?" Leo tugs me closer.

Something in my tummy swoops. "Needy," I breathe out.

"Good girl," Jude growls. He sounds mildly unhinged, and I wish I could feel his heat against me like I can feel Leo's. "Now go get ready before Leo devours you."

I whimper. I absolutely *whimper*.

"But—"

“Leo is my naughty boy, Rylee. I thought you were my good girl?”

I have no words.

A squeal from the living room snaps me out of my hussy haze, and I rush for the bathroom. Husky chuckles follow me as I slam the door closed.



The sweat is unreal. Grinding and writhing between each of the guys, I feel like I am about one touch away from completely melting onto the nasty dance floor. Jackson grabs my empty cup from me before I even realize I finished it. My bladder screams at me when Marcus holds my tummy tighter and thrusts his ass against me.

I wiggle out of his hold and yell out that I’m going to the bathroom. I get four sets of concerned gazes, but roll my eyes and give them a smile. “I’m good! Just need to pee!”

JJ leans in to swipe a kiss against the corner of my mouth and guides me out of the crowd with a hand on my back. Dodging stumbling girls and sloppy guys, we finally make it to the back hallway. The lighting is dark back here without all the flashing lights, but at least there isn’t a line.

“I’m going to the bathroom, too. Meet me right here when you’re done, okay?”

Jackson’s breath against my ear makes me want to drag him into a dark corner somewhere. My bladder protests when my clit pulses. “Okay,” I say and rush to the women’s restroom.

Scooching around the women reapplying their makeup and laughing together, I relieve myself and wash my hands.

“You’re here with Jude, aren’t you?”

I startle when a tall, blonde girl addresses me. “Uh, what?” She is so damn thin, with the most petite face I have ever seen. *Jesus, is this Jude’s type?* I don’t live up to her flat stomach and perky boobs. Having a baby and breastfeeding took that away.

“Jude.” She rolls her green eyes at me. “I saw you dancing with him out there. Just be careful. You might be the flavor of the month, but his tastebuds are wicked enough to give anyone whiplash.”

With that, she storms out of the room with a huff. I attempt to swallow the wave of emotion that chokes me. I hate to admit it, but she got to me. If anything, I should feel relieved that the guys will have no problem moving on when I leave. Yet, something in my chest stutters and weeps.

Feeling some of my anxiety surface again, I stomp out of the bathroom, hoping to get another drink. I’m so stuck in my own head, I don’t see the janitor’s closet being thrown open until my shoulder slams right into it.

“Shit!” I gasp, my shoulder flaring with pain and making me stumble into a wall.

“Oh, sorry!” A twinkly voice trails down the hall as a chuckling man follows her and closes the closet behind them.

“Fucking dicks,” I rumble, gripping my throbbing arm.

The wall at my back vibrates, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end in warning. My breath gets lodged in my throat as I turn around to find that it was not a damn wall I fell into.

A tall, wide man stands there, but when a strobe light flashes down the hallway, everything inside of me dies. A jaw that grinds with annoyance. Buzzed head. Arms thick enough to kill me. Hands that have broken me before. Eyes of the very monster I have been running from glare down at me with a promise far darker than before.

He wants me dead.

The strobe light is gone in a flash, and so am I, running away from the horror seizing my entire body. I slam into

another hard body, and I can't help the scream that rushes past my lips.

“Hey! Baby, it's okay. It's me, I got you. What's wrong?” Jackson's hands run down my arms, over my sides, across my forehead, and land on my cheeks. “Are you hurt? Rylee, what the fuck happened?”

I can't get a word out. It's all too much. My eyesight tunnels on Jackson's terrified face.

Mason found me.

Chapter Thirty

JACKSON



A flurry of copper hair hits my face before the air rushes out of my lungs. Rylee runs into me fucking *hard*. Her high-pitched scream stalls my blood flow.

“Hey! Baby, it’s okay. It’s me, I got you. What’s wrong?” *Jesus fucking Christ*. She trembles in my arms as I scan for any injuries. “Are you hurt? Rylee, what the fuck happened?”

My patience dwindles the longer she hyperventilates in my arms. I glance behind her, only to see a group of girls walking into the bathroom. “Rylee!” I snap, but it’s like she can’t hear me anymore. There’s no warning before her eyes roll into the back of her head, and her neck lulls. Just as her knees give out, I catch her, my harsh breath blowing her long hair off her face.

“Baby! Rylee!” She doesn’t respond as I shake her. Scooping her into my arms, I hustle around the crowds and out the main door. It might have seemed easier to opt for a side door to avoid curious eyes, but I’m going to trust that whatever had my woman so scared might be lingering around in the back alleys.

The bouncers eye me like I’m a fucking predator until one of them recognizes me. “Hey, Jackson. Is everything okay?” Luke comes over to me with his dark brows furrowed in concern. He rents out one of my properties, thank fuck, because if he didn’t know me, he might think I did something to my girl.

“Fuck, Luke. I don’t know. Can you grab my phone out of my back pocket, please?” He does as I ask and hands it to me

when I plop my ass against the side of the building.

With Rylee's pale cheek resting against my chest, I find Leo's contact in my phone and hit the call button. My heart pounds so hard that I worry it might disturb her.

"I'll cover you," Luke murmurs and turns his back to shield us from all the people milling about.

"Where are you guys?" Leo shouts into the phone.

"Get outside. Now. Please," I beg. I don't know what to do or what the hell happened back there. I hang up before he can say anything else. Not soon after, Luke moves aside and clasps Jude on the shoulder when he passes.

"Rylee! Oh my God, what happened?" Marcus gasps just as he slams to the ground beside me.

"I..." I choke, emotion welling in my throat and eyes. "I don't know. She came running down the hallway in a panic and passed out once I had her!"

"Okay, let me grab her from you so you can stand. Let's get home, yeah?" Jude carcasses my cheek, settling my rapidly growing anxiety at being separated from her.

"Don't drop her, please," I say urgently as I hand her over. I relax slightly when his large hand tucks her head into the crook of his neck. I about keel over when her arm hangs limp, dangling in the air.

"Hey, Jackson. Look at me," Leo says. His hand twines in my hair and draws my attention away from Marcus helping Jude get Rylee comfortable for the walk back to the car.

Leo looks blurry when I finally turn to him. "Huh?"

His hand grips the back of my neck and forces my forehead to his. "You did good, Jackson. You got there in time. You didn't let her fall." Leo cuts off my protest with a kiss that makes me weak in the knees. "No more arguing. You did perfect, I promise. We are all so fucking grateful you were with her."

I nod mutely, lost in his baby blues. "Let's get her to your place. I don't think Layla should see her like this. I'll call

Gabby on the walk to the car.” Gripping my palm in one hand and his phone in the other, we hustle behind Marc and Jude.

I tune out Leo’s hushed conversation with Gabby. The couple-minute walk to the car is a blur of Rylee’s bare legs swaying with each step Jude makes. It makes me sick.

Every time I close my eyes, I see her pale complexion and horrified gaze. I should have been there sooner. Faster. Nothing should ever put that kind of fear into my girls.



It’s almost eleven in the fucking morning. Rylee has been unconscious for ten fucking hours.

“Maybe we should call a doctor?” Jude sounds timid where he sits on the staircase.

“Is she just tired? Does anyone know if she has been sleeping bad or something?” Marcus asks a few steps below our surfer boy.

Leo rests against my chest where I lean on the banister. I tighten my grip around his waist, needing the comfort just as much as he does. Nobody slept in Jude’s room with Rylee last night out of respect for her comfort and boundaries.

We all camped out in the living room downstairs, but I’m pretty sure we all sat outside her door at one point or another. I’m starving, but we figured we would make breakfast when Rylee woke up. That was three hours ago.

Jude coughs and runs his hand through his hair anxiously. “Did anyone notice how swollen and red her eyes were yesterday when we got there?” Leo nods, and I feel like a dick for not noticing. “She didn’t look okay, guys. I think she was crying.”

“Fuck,” I hiss. It would have been a shout if not for the man in my arms soothing my battered feelings.

“Let’s start breakfast,” Leo murmurs. “Once she smells bacon, I doubt she will be able to resist.” Shifting, he kisses my jaw and drags me to the kitchen by my belt loop.

I follow with zero resistance, needing more of his attention and feeling hopeful about the bacon. Placed on a stool, Leo hands me a cup of coffee. I am not ashamed that I like it sweeter than any broody asshole ever has. He slides a few packets of sweetener to me and some creamer, allowing me to make up whatever kind of sugar I want for the day.

For once, Marc and Jude don’t poke fun at my coffee choices, too lost in their own thoughts. Jude migrates back to the stairs with his own cup in hand, but Marc stays by my side.

I feel bad. Normally, I’m the one that’s put together. Or at least that’s what I think. All I know is I want my family to be happy, and right now, there’s a throbbing pain stabbing my chest when I look at them. Rylee isn’t okay, which means we aren’t either. If I had any doubts that we were quickly becoming attached to the girls, they are sure as fuck gone now.

The aroma of bacon drags me from my inner turmoil, giving me hope it will carry up to Rylee. Marcus shifts beside me, moving towards the plate of cooked bacon. I watch on with caution and amusement as his hand slowly reaches for a piece.

Leo stiffens. Marc jerks, his hand snatching out faster than I have ever seen. He dips his head to latch onto the piece of bacon with his teeth just as Leo swats his hand with the spatula.

Marcus squeals and darts around to my side of the island. Pulling the bacon out of his mouth, he huffs. “I was just getting some for Daddy JJ. Look how sad he is.”

It’s my turn to huff and spear him with a glare that rivals Leo. *I’m going to get Jude back one day for starting that fucking shit.*

I may be broody, but I like my coffee sweet as sugar. I may be the oldest, but I am no daddy.

“Don’t lie, Marcus!” Jude hollers from the staircase.

“I wasn’t lying!” Before I know it, Marc’s teeth hold the slice of bacon, and he dips to meet my lips.

I don’t hesitate; I open and take the bite he’s offering. He munches on the other half while staring into my eyes with heat. Swallowing, I lick my lips, grab his shirt, and pull him back to me.

There’s no gentle way to say this. We fuck each other’s mouths with our tongues. Growling, I grip his throat and almost cum in my pants when he whimpers and gives me control.

I absolutely devour this man. *My man.*

Chapter Thirty-One

RYLEE



“You have got to be shitting me!” Glass shatters. “Are you capable of anything? How do you expect to be a mother, Rylee?!” Spit hits my cheek.

Holding my belly, I shift away from Mason. “I’m sorry,” I whisper, trying not to aggravate him even more. “I was just thinking of Tate... I—”

He sneers. “You cry all the damn time! What? Am I not good enough for you? Is our baby not good enough for you?” I cower when he steps into my space, moving my round stomach out of his rageful path. “Are you keeping my daughter away from me, you selfish bitch!?”

I brace myself for the strike I know will hit my cheek. Air wooshes across my face, and suddenly, I’m being spun around by the force of the breeze. My hunched position makes me unbalanced, forcing me to my knees.

My cheek doesn’t sting, nor is Mason hovering over me.

My father is.

“Father?”

His eyes are black, and his body is trembling. No emotion crosses his face. He just stands there, terrifying me. “You are a disgrace.”

Suddenly I’m a little girl again. No baby growing in my stomach or boyfriend to beat me into being perfect. A hole opens inside of me. A place where a daughter should have her parents.

Droplets hit my hands sprawled out beneath me. “Daddy,” I sob. “I don’t feel so good.” I reach for him, only to find the tears that hit my skin are bright red. My stomach twists, making me gasp.

Yet, my father stands there with no reaction.

My chest spasms, feeling like there’s a gaping wound trying to rip me apart. “Daddy, please!” Between bloody tears, Mother materializes at his side. “Mommy! Help me!”

“Pathetic,” she murmurs. Her eyes are black, just like Dad’s.

I don’t know what part of my body seizes, but my sternum and stomach squeeze in agony, forcing my body to contract. Landing hard on my jaw and shoulder, I cry out, my arms gripping at my torso like I can pluck the emptiness out.

“Why—” I choke, blood splattering on the white marble beneath me. “Why don’t you love me?!”

My eyes catch sight of the blood pooling around me. I look down, only to see holes in my body. Beneath the blood is nothing. These holes that should have been filled... they never were.

“Why would we love you?” Father’s voice comes from above me, yet they do not crouch.

I sob, hoping to anything listening that they might fill the holes inside of me. “I love you, though!” My throat starts to close and stutter. “I did... nothing... wrong.”

Before my vision blacks out, I see them glance at the pieces of me they never nurtured with indifference. “You are what’s wrong.”

Mother’s clicking of her heels walking away is the perfect representation of my hope. The childish hope that no matter how harsh my parents treated me, they never loved me anyway. And so, with my mom and dad, my hope walks away with them. My hope bleeds out of the wounds they never healed.

“Don’t lie, Marcus!”

Like a fucking horror movie, I shoot upright in bed. My hair slaps me in the face, my eyelashes fight to stick to my skin, and my lips are trying to turn to dust. The worst part, besides my throbbing head and anxious shakes? The saliva that pools in my jaw.

Shoving back the covers, I bolt for the door that I hope like hell is a bathroom. I hardly notice the counters or the shower and bolt for the thing that looks like I could throw up in. There is no time to hope it’s a damn toilet. My eyes are watering so much I can barely make out anything around me.

Retching whatever I had in my stomach, I let the tears burn tracks down my cheeks. “Fuck,” I groan. I don’t do puke. I don’t do snakes, either. My two biggest fears. And I’m just now realizing my third.

My face twists into one of disgust when I realize the seat was already up. I gag and shiver. Throwing myself away from the nasty ass toilet, I drag myself up and into the sink. I scrub my arms and face furiously after tossing my hair up into the pony stashed on my wrist.

“Pee in my hair. Pee on my arms. Pee on my face.” My skin turns red. I don’t know whose bathroom this is, and I don’t care how sexy they are; I guarantee their toilets are horrible for skin-to-skin contact.

“Mother fu—” *Is that bacon?*

Stumbling out of the bathroom and yanking down my tiny silver dress from last night, I find my way out of the messy bedroom. I allow my nose to take me to the heavenly aroma, since my brain is throbbing too hard to work for me.

Making my way down the hall, I find the staircase that descends to Jackson and Jude’s main level. I wonder which nasty ass leaves their seat up.

The stairs don’t creak or give away my position. Shuffling down a few steps, I find one of the blondes sitting near the bottom. Jude’s lips are parted, and I swear I can make out drool forming in a corner.

Confused about what has him salivating besides the bacon, my eyes snag on two of the guys eating each other alive against the island. Leo looks on behind them, yet he hasn't noticed me either.

I'm in the middle of debating whether or not I should let this play out and get a free show or make myself known for the plate of greasy goodness when JJ lifts Marcus up onto the counter. A strangled noise escapes me because, holy fucking shit, they are sexy.

Leo's head whips up, eyes locking on mine in shock. From the corner of my eye, I hear Jude choke and slip down a step or two with a thud. Smirking at surfer boy's pink cheeks, I continue down the stairs.

"Let's not turn this into a fuck fest before Leo is done making breakfast, please. I'm fucking starving and unwell." I do my best to strut past JJ and Marc, who are still wrapped around each other, without making it a big deal.

I will my shaky legs to obey my command and get me to the coffeepot. I beg my hands to steady when the precious fluid sloshes in my cup. My stomach growls, and my eyes fucking ache from all my tears and the awful night's sleep. At least they can't see how my throat burns or hear how hard my head is pounding.

"Unwell?" Lost in my body's turmoil, I don't notice Jude coming up behind me. He sweeps my ratted hair off my shoulder and drops a kiss to my neck. I shiver, making my skin protest. My body feels overloaded with sensations, and my mind is too busy screaming at me for me to enjoy his gentle caress.

I shift away, ignoring the vicious protest my heart makes. "Why am I here, guys? Who is with Layla?"

They share a look, and Marcus hops off the counter. "Gabby stayed the night. They are watching a movie right now. She texted a few minutes ago." Some of the tension releases from my muscles.

Jackson takes the lead but stays where he is. “Do you remember what happened last night, Rylee?”

I allow my sight to lose focus, trying to remember what happened and why I might have ended up here and not at home with my daughter. “We were dancing. Then I went to the bathroom with Jackson.” My headache is pissed at how hard I’m pushing it. “There was this pretty blonde girl with big tits who I guess was one of Jude’s conquests. She warned me off, saying I’m just a flavor of the month.” *Ugh, bitch.* My temples agree, jumping with rage. We aren’t in high school anymore.

“What the fuck?!” Jude snarls. It takes me by surprise, and my already fried nerves jolt in shock, mimicking a flinch.

Leo eyes me. “Jude. Calm down, man.” His voice is soft, setting me at ease even if he points his chin at me, trying to be discreet.

Guilt flashes across Jude’s features, but the anger is still there. “Jude, it’s fine. She was just a bit annoying but left once she gave me her childish warning.”

“You are *not* a fucking flavor of the month, Rylee. We—”

I cut him off with a wave of my hand. “Can we not do this right now, Jude? It’s fine. We had an agreement, and it was only one time.” I lift my bare shoulder, even if the action rips my heart down the middle.

It takes everything in me not to react to his hurt. My eyes burn for a completely new reason now. My mind is too busy to convince my heart that this is what’s right. I take a deep breath. “Why am I here?”

“What happened after the woman left the bathroom?” JJ’s no-nonsense attitude is welcome right now.

I cringe, the shoulder still covered with my thick hair heats. The pain is enough to make my eyes widen and move to investigate. Tuning out the pissed off male energy around the room, I hiss when I see the black and blue bruise spanning the front of my shoulder.

“Who the fuck did this to you!?” Jackson roars, rounding the island.

Leo hustles to the freezer to grab an ice pack. Marcus stares at the ugly flesh, his complexion slowly draining. Jude snatches my wrist, but his fingers become gentle when they twist and turn my arm around, trying to get a better look.

“Rylee! Who touched you!?”

Marcus snaps out of his haze and slams his hand down on Jackson’s chest, forcing the pissed off hulk to stop his steps toward me. “Jackson,” Marc warns.

“Get your hands off me,” JJ growls, his raging eyes locked on my shoulder.

My heart thunders. My body and my mind aren’t working together to really understand where all this anxiety is coming from. “Jackson. It was an accident. A couple was stumbling out of a closet, and I was just there at the wrong time.” His jaw unclenches a fraction. Which is swiftly rectified at my curse when Leo places the ice pack on the overheated bruise.

“Rylee. What happened after the door hit you?”

My knees tremble.

My wrist twitches.

Saliva pools in my jaw for the second time this morning.

Fight, flight or freeze...

It's time to fucking run.

Chapter Thirty-Two

MARCUS



I don't know how to describe the change that overcomes Rylee, but it's enough to make my stomach drop and my heart stutter. My hand on Jackson's chest goes numb and falls to my side. It feels like the entire world comes to a halt.

Her once-heated cheeks drain of all color. Her shoulders stiffen, the injured one jerking away from the ice pack in Leo's hold. Rylee's damaged wrist fucking twitches, and that's my cue.

"Rylee," I begin, only to be cut off by Jude. He grips her chin and forces her gaze to his. I cringe at the hardened gaze he levels my girl with.

"Tell me. Now," Jude snaps, his dominating side taking hold of the situation. Rylee's glazed eyes flare with the jolt back to reality, but she doesn't relax in his hold. Nor does she pull away, though, so that's a good sign, right?

"I-I need to get home. Now," she declares, clearing her throat of emotion. Jude and Leo nod, yet JJ and I tense, hating that plan.

"You tell me what is going on, and I swear I'll bring you home. No matter what you say. Be a good girl and tell us." Jude's voice vibrates through the kitchen, making me shiver and want to throw up at the same time. I definitely don't want to take her the fuck home.

A deep breath inflates Rylee's sternum, giving us the illusion of calm. We all see the shake of her hands and the

tremors rippling up her forearm from her previously broken wrist.

Fuck. I watch as she retreats inside her body. Everything that is the lively, fierce, protective woman we have come to care for fades away. Except for the twitching. She's in there somewhere beneath the mask, and she is fucking traumatized.

"He's come for us." A ripple of growls sound through the kitchen. JJ's pacing and yanking on his hair. "Mason is here."

"Where did you see him? You're sure it was him?" Jackson asks, a deadly lilt to his words.

Rylee frowns, and Jude allows her head to turn. "In the hallway. It was dark. His eyes were black. I-I think it was him." Her eyes water as she wraps her arms around her stomach, looking far more fragile than she did a minute ago.

"Let's get you home. We need to talk to Tate. I'll call him on the way to your place," Leo says before Rylee can break down or Jack can freak the fuck out. "Let's go!" He yells, striding for the door. Breakfast forgotten.

Rylee is like a damn zombie when she walks out our front door behind Leo and Jude. Barefoot with her purse and heels clutched in her quivering hands, I slip my sandals on beside a muttering JJ.

"I wasn't there," he hisses.

I tug on a lock of his dark hair. "Hey," I whisper. "You *were* there. You got her to safety. Hopefully, it wasn't actually Mason, but we need to be there for her right now, okay? Don't go down the guilt trip right now. I promise I'll fuck it out of you later." Slamming my lips to his and pulling away almost as fast, I yank him out the door with me. The sound of it locking behind us is loud in our silence.

The drive to Rylee's house is tense. I swear I can hear teeth grinding and nails being picked all around me. Thankfully, when we pull into the driveway, Tate is just jumping out of his car with a solemn look on his face.

"Tate!" Rylee screams, running into the arms of her brother as last night's heels clatter to the ground.

Scooping to reach her discarded pumps, I catch the sounds of sniffing and Tate's hushed whispers. "Shh, it's okay. It wasn't him, Ry. Everything is okay. My guys have eyes on him just outside of California, okay? I can show you." She doesn't let go even as he shuffles her around and yanks his phone out of his back pocket.

She whimpers against his shoulder when she sees what's on the screen. I hold out my hand, asking to see it without breaking their moment. I incline my head in thanks and show the rest of the guys the email a guy by the name of Wyatt sent over.

"Who is Wyatt?" I don't know who this person is and don't fucking trust them.

"One of my partners," Tate murmurs, running his hand through Rylee's ratted hair. "I trust him with my life."

JJ grunts, still staring down at the cell phone. Rylee places a kiss on her brother's cheek and detangles herself from his arms. She glances at us before making her way to the front door, where she slips inside and closes it behind her.

Tate eyes us with worry, like we might freak out that he has multiple partners. "Bro, you're good. We already told you we are all together." He relaxes and leans against his nice ass car. "You got a woman?" I ask. Leo's elbow rams into my stomach. "OOF!" Wheezing, I double over, trying to suck air into my lungs. "Fuck, babe. Why?" I cry once I feel like I'm not dying.

With an eye roll, Leo huffs. "You can't ask someone that, Marc."

I purse my lips. Jude leans in and whispers in my ear. "Don't worry. We can punish him together later." Except it wasn't a whisper at all if Tate's choke and Leo's heated eyes are anything to go by.

"Uh, no. The four of us don't have a girl," Tate says awkwardly.

"Four of you, huh? Just like us. You don't have to worry about judgment here, man. As long as you're happy," Jude

soothes, giving him a warm smile and sliding his hand into mine.

“Is Ry going to be okay?”

Sometimes I forget how young Tate is. He can hold his own and obviously has a family already. He’s smart, controlled, and seems crazy put together for an eighteen-year-old. But when he’s vulnerable like this, it’s a swift elbow in the gut - I curse Leo again. The reminder of how much Tate has been through and how he lost his sister makes me want to wrap him in a hug while simultaneously begging him to teach me everything he knows.

“Um.” I scratch my head. This is usually where the love interests ask the brother if their girl will be okay. “I don’t know.”

“I’m worried,” JJ murmurs, eyes on the front door like he wants to bust it down. Leo and Jude nod and hum their agreement.

“I thought—” Tate cuts himself off before he finishes the statement.

I sigh, gripping Jude’s hand a little harder. “I know what you thought. You thought we had some great insight into your sister.”

A weight settles onto the back of my jeans, Leo’s silent presence grounding me via my belt loop. JJ picks up where I left off. “Rylee is a closed book most of the time, Tate. Unless she’s extra sleepy or has had a few drinks. We have tried for almost two months to get her to open up.”

I slip my free hand behind me, above Leo’s arm, hoping JJ will hold on to me. I ache at his dejected tone. Tingles shoot up my spine when his fingers trail up my palm, finally connecting the four of us.

Tate stares at the ground. “I wish I knew her now. I know we are working on our relationship, but she still hasn’t told me what that monster really did to her. All she tells me about is her and Layla’s adventures. Which, don’t get me wrong, is

great. But I want to *know* her.” We nod a mutual understanding.

“Tate.” I wait for him to look up at my words. “She ran to you when she saw you. Even if she hasn’t told you everything, which I promise is far more than she told us, your sister trusts you. She might have a lot still hiding underneath her hard exterior, but she still ran into your arms when she was vulnerable.” I gulp, swallowing the envy I have for this boy.

We watch as he collects himself, standing a bit taller with a look of determination hardening his sharp features. The change reminds me a lot of Leo when he comes out of a low state too.

Before he can say anything, Gabby opens the front door and stands there with tears in her eyes. “Sunshine, what’s wrong?” Jude steps forward and rushes to her. Every time Gabby cries is fucking awful.

Hustling up the driveway, we catch what she whimpers to her foster brother. “Um, well, Layla’s taking a nap. Rylee is pulling out the boxes they used to move in with.” Gabby’s pink bun wobbles with her hiccup. “She said they need to leave. That he’s coming. She’s on the phone with a realtor in Maine.”

My throat closes, and my eyes burn at Gabby’s news. Jude lurches forward to cradle her to his chest while she whimpers about her best friend being scared and running. Her pain and fear leach any sense of serenity at having our copper-haired woman so close when we woke up this morning.

Leo latches onto my forearm, anxiety making his nails create crescent moons in my skin. I don’t stop Jackson from shoving his way between the group and rushing through the door. I can’t see how Tate is feeling; my eyes locked on Rylee as she paces through the main level with her phone clutched between her ear and her *bruised* fucking shoulder. She hauls a flat box onto the counter and yanks packing tape out of a drawer.

She’s really leaving. Just her and Layla. They are leaving us.

Chapter Thirty-Three

RYLEE



“I’ll call you back, Ms. Parker.”

Grumbling, I end the call and let it clatter to the counter. I fumble with the large box until I finally manage to get the tape wrapped around it. My attempt at staying quiet is only going to work if I start packing up my room first. I don’t want Layla waking up to the chaos that I have become.

That might not have been Mason last night, but Tate’s phone was proof enough that he’s on his way. Mason left California. It’s time to go. I will not allow him to find my daughter.

My shoulder twinges as I haul the box down the hallway towards my bedroom. I toss it onto the floor and start with the things I need the least.

“What’s the plan, Rylee?”

I don’t let Jackson’s accusing tone distract me from my task. “None of your business.” Entering the closet, I find my small stack of jeans and sweatshirts, knowing I won’t need them in the next few days. I leave one sweatshirt out just in case, though.

“Bullshit,” JJ snaps, kicking my box out of the way when I toss my clothes towards it. “Whoever this asshole is that you are running from isn’t even here!”

Grinding my teeth, I snag the box and place it on my bed. Refolding the clothes that scatted across the ground, I do my best to ignore the pissed-off fumes coming from the man in

my bedroom. All he's fucking doing is making me even more anxious.

“What did he do to you, Rylee? What has you so fucking scared that you are dragging your child from state to state? You ever going to settle down? You ever going to do something about the fact that this Mason guy is after you? This is not safe.”

“Who are you to tell me how to live my life or keep my daughter safe?!” I can't control the anger that shatters my silence. “He won't stop till he has her! We have to keep moving!”

“Running is not the answer! Layla should be starting school. What are you going to do about that if you are constantly on the road? And what happens when he does catch up to you, huh? This isn't the fucking answer!”

I push past the ball in my throat, praying like hell my voice comes out calm and collected. “Please leave, Jackson.” He doesn't leave. He takes a step closer. I'm not scared of him, but the alpha energy is making my chest feel tight and my tongue loose.

“I'm not leaving, and neither are you. Should Mason be in jail for what he did?” JJ's tone calms a bit, but his fists are still firmly clenched.

“Yes,” I grit out. “He should be rotting in hell.” I can't help but give him the truth. Exhaustion and weariness are setting in hard. I just have to leave.

“Why?” He waits for an answer I don't want to give him. “Dammit, Rylee! Why should Layla's father be rotting in hell?”

Maybe if I told him, he would finally let it go and see that this is the best option for my daughter and me. Nobody in their right mind would suggest waiting for an abusive asshole to show up on your doorstep and take your child away. Maybe it's best he finally knows.

Before I say can begin my tragic tale, Jude pops his shaggy head of blonde hair around my doorframe. “Hey, guys. Uh,

Layla woke up because of all the shouting.” My stomach twists uncomfortably, hating that she heard us.

He steps into the room, Marcus and Leo following close behind. Marcus says, “Gabby and Tate took her outside so she wouldn’t be able to hear.” My eyes blur with tears, the four of them standing in a line. Staring me down. Judging me.

“I see all of you judging me. I’m not a bad mom.” Each of them begins to protest, but I cut them off, not wanting to be placated. “I’ll tell you why we have to keep moving. Maybe then you will finally understand why this is absolutely necessary. I’m not just doing this because I think it’s fun to drag my five-year-old around the country. Never giving her a home or allowing her to be comfortable in a place for too long. There is a reason I need to start packing.”

I’m not surprised when Jackson crosses his arms over his chest and probably bites his tongue. I am surprised when Leo comes to stand beside me and gently encourages me to sit on my bed. He settles himself beside me, but thankfully, nobody takes the other open spot. Marcus sits between Leo’s legs on the floor. Jude settles himself a few feet in front of me on the carpet as well, and Jackson takes up his post, leaning against the wall across from me. It feels like actual story time in school.

“I want no interruptions. And when I’m done talking, I need to continue packing. We aren’t leaving today since I don’t have a place set up quite yet, but as soon as I have a legitimate plan, we have to go.”

I wait for their nods of understanding. Leo is solemn, and it looks like he’s struggling with something. Hopefully, Marc can help him since I am incapable right now. Marc and Jude nod with no expression whatsoever, and Jackson jerks his chin with a look of fury.

Good enough.

“I’ll just start at the beginning, I guess. Layla’s father, Mason, and I started dating when we were teenagers. He’s almost five years older than me, but my parents didn’t care when I was still a minor, and he was a legal adult. His parents

were even richer than us. We were in love. I remember thinking it was the greatest thing for my parents to support us. I'm not even going to get into my family life. I'm sure you can imagine rich, neglectful parents."

I focus on my lap, just now realizing I'm still in my silver dress from last night. "Anyway, Mason and I were great. I had Tate, my parents took notice of my life and loved that I might marry into a well-established family. When I was seventeen, I found out I was pregnant. Mason had his own house by then, and I figured that since my parents supported us, things would be fine. I was dragged out of the house that night and disowned. So was Mason. Turns out a getting knocked up by a twenty-one-year-old would bring bad press." I shrug, feeling numb and refusing to look into their eyes.

I sigh and ignore the rumble coming from Jackson and the snuffle beside me. "Things changed when I moved in with him. I couldn't do anything right. When he scared me, I would shift my baby bump away from him."

"He fucking hurt you while you were pregnant?!" If Marcus seemed calm before, he absolutely is not now. I shoot him a glare.

"That's when he started getting the idea that I was keeping my baby away from him. Um, what else? I guess, yeah, he started hurting me early on. After I gave birth, it got worse." I wave to my damaged wrist, not wanting to get into the nasty details. "He got home late most of the time, so Layla would already be asleep. Or if he was there, she was bonded and attached to me already, so I guess that looked bad."

Jude stiffens at my mention of Layla. His broken voice hurts my soul. "Mason didn't hurt her, did he?"

I fight the urge to lean forward and console him. "No. The opposite. At first, he wouldn't hurt me in front of her, but as she got older, Bug would come to see what was happening. She would try to stop him. Cue the gifts. He would beat me and give her everything a little girl would ever want."

"Son of a fucking bitch!" JJ hisses and slams his hand against the bathroom door.

“Uh, yeah. She never took well to seeing him hurt me. I guess she learned gifts mean something bad happens to me. So no, he never hurt her. He just failed to win her over. Which unfortunately made him even angrier with me.” *This sucks.* “My Nana passed last year and left a huge chunk of money to me. I used the gift, grabbed my child, and ran as far and fast as we could.”

Leo’s leg brushes against mine, and it’s the first time I realize that he’s fucking quivering. My chest squeezes, uncertainty and fear instantly making me go on high alert. “Leo? Hey, what’s wrong?” I go to reach out and cup his cheek, but think better of it and flick my eyes to Marc, hoping he will do something.

“Shit!” Marcus is up and leaning against my headboard in a flash. Shuffling Leo around, he has him curled against his chest and soothing him before I can offer to help. “Shh, baby. It’s okay Ry, you can continue.”

I eye Leo, yearning to go to him. My eyes burn, and my throat closes. “Oh, okay,” I whisper. “So, you see now. We have to leave.” All my anger and fierce determination fade away in a wave of bone-deep exhaustion. Seeing Leo so vulnerable cracks me open, making it hard to hide my hurt behind a wall of bitchiness and annoyance.

The tears fall. I don’t use my little energy to lift my hand and swipe them away. Instead, someone else’s fingers collect them and suddenly, I’m being picked up. A sob breaks free from my tattered heart that aches to stay in Jackson’s arms forever.

Chapter Thirty-Four

JACKSON



She will never change her mind. Rylee is in flight mode. She was frozen for too long with no way out and has learned that running is the option that works the best. Fighting this monster that beat a pregnant woman and beat the mother of his child in front of his daughter is not an option that Rylee has in her mind. She wasn't able to fight back for so long. My girls have only ever been safe because they ran.

How am I supposed to compete with her fear and learned patterns? I may be falling in love with her, but I am still just a man she met almost two months ago. I don't have the power to change her mind. And that is a hard fucking pill to swallow when our girls are preparing to move to another state. Especially after hearing what Mason did to them.

We can't fix her trauma with a few well-placed words. We would just push her further away, and she would go willingly.

She's light as a damn feather in my arms as I walk around to the other side of the bed. Sitting beside Marcus against the headboard, I shift her so she's straddling my legs and crying against my shoulder. Leo reaches a shaky palm out and rests it against her bare leg. I'm really damn worried about him. His anxiety is bad right now, and the only way to soothe him is by offering comfort. He knows we aren't going anywhere, but Rylee and Layla leaving have him ready to hyperventilate.

"I have you, Rylee." I run my hand through her hair. The touch seems to make her sob harder, her lips and tears tickling my neck.

Jude's eyes are watery where he sits crisscross at the foot of the bed. His focus bounces between Leo and Rylee, uncertain who to go to. He shuffles closer and places himself between mine and Marc's knees. Seeing Leo has a hand on Rylee, Jude rubs Leo's thigh in return.

"Rylee, honey. We understand." Her hiccup breaks my fucking heart. "You have a little less than two weeks on this lease. Why don't you use this time to come up with a plan and give Layla time to get ready for the move?" Marcus and Jude look at me, shocked.

"B-But," Rylee stutters, keeping her head tucked into my neck. "He's coming. We-we have to leave."

"I know, baby. You have time and a brother who is keeping tabs on him. Use the opportunity to plan, okay?" We need time to come up with a plan to keep Rylee here and remove the shit stain that is her ex from their lives.

We really need to talk to Tate. I'm not sure if Mason is actually on his way here. He was off on a lead Tate's family gave him. How long till Mason finds out they are tricking him?

"Okay," Rylee whimpers.

The breath I was holding releases with a puff against her bare, injured shoulder. Her chest rises with a gasp. Unable to control myself, I pepper her black and blue skin with soft kisses. Where Rylee's chest is pressed against mine, our hearts beat faster with the rising tension in the room.

She shifts, her dress riding further up her thigh. What has my cock hardening even further is the path Leo's hand is making. Her breath stutters just as she lifts her head and looks down with pink cheeks. Blue eyes follow Leo's arm to where he's curled up on his side between Marc's thighs.

"Leo," she whimpers. In response, his pink lips pop open in awe at her breathy plea. Marc wiggles, drawing my attention to him. His pupils are blown as he watches our most vulnerable two interact. Jude moans quietly, which to my utter fucking pleasure, Rylee mimics.

“Rylee,” I rumble. Her hooded eyes lazily move to mine. “Are you feeling needy, my love?” *Oh shit.* Thankfully, she doesn’t react to my slip of the L word. Marc, on the other hand, chokes quietly and lays a hand on my hip. Her red locks tumble over her shoulders with her enthusiastic nod. “Out loud.”

“I-Yes. I’m needy,” she whimpers, and it absolutely undoes me. “But... Layla?”

Marcus shuffles, looking down at his other side. A moment passes before he offers Rylee a soft smile. “She’s good. Gabby said they’re going with Tate to pick up lunch. Is that okay, honey? Mason is across the country still, plus your brother knows how to kick some ass.” He winks and rubs his jaw where Tate punched him.

She nibbles on her lip and nods. “Make me forget for just a little, please?”

“Do you think Leo needs some soothing, too?” Marc’s voice is deeper than I have ever heard, and now I’m positive Rylee can feel my hard cock between her thighs. She grinds on it a moment later, causing my hips to jolt.

Leo moans when Jude’s hand dips beneath his waistline. “Should I help him relax, baby girl?” Jude eyes them both like he wants to eat them for every meal.

“Yes!” Rylee gasps, answering Jude’s question at the same time my thumb tweaks her nipple. “Please!”

Fucking hell.

I go to pull her dress off, but she goes stiff as a board. “What’s wrong?” The lust still sparks in her eyes. I have no clue why she looks so scared.

“I, um.” She fiddles with the fabric. “I have stretch marks from my pregnancy. They aren’t very sexy.”

Snarling, I yank it up and over her head, not allowing one more moment for her to hide her beautiful fucking body from us. Her bare, ample breasts heave in my face, making my mouth water, and the little white lines on her stomach make her subtle hourglass shape far more tempting. “You are

absolutely fucking perfect, Rylee. I want to run my tongue over every inch of your body until you realize how delectable you are. Do you understand?”

Her eyes are sparkling the same way her nose ring is in the light. “I understand.” *Damn, she is beautiful.* “Can you touch me now, though? Please?”

I laugh, Jude snorts, and the other two huff their own giggle. “Yeah, baby. We will make you both feel good now.”

Rylee’s head tilts on her shoulders with a sigh of relief when Leo’s hand dips into her underwear. He pauses for a beat, making her wiggle in demand of more friction. While Jude relieves Leo of his pants, I press my thumb against her clit and soak in the pleased little sigh she gives me.

“Shit, Jude. That’s so fucking hot,” Marcus groans, watching Jude suck Leo into the back of his throat. “Fuck. Is he making you feel good, baby?” Leo nods against Marc’s thigh, his finger inching to Rylee’s opening.

I dip my thumb into her panties and feel Leo pumping into her with long strokes. I match his rhythm against her clit. Mewling, she catches sight of Jude sucking our platinum man off and starts bucking against our ministrations.

“Fuck, you are so sexy. Do you like watching one of your men suck the other off? Do you miss Jude’s tongue on you, my love?”

“Yes!” Rylee’s focus stays on Jude as he bobs up and down. The fucker has a little smirk on his face even as he grinds his dick into the bed. My cock weeps between Rylee’s legs, and I curse the layers between us. But this isn’t about me. This is about taking care of our woman. “Mm, more!”

Leo’s fingers stutter when Jude licks his fingers. His hand disappears beneath his chin, fingering Leo’s ass and swallowing his cock. “Leo,” Rylee pouts, looking so damn cute and sexy all at once.

“Fuck,” he moans, doubling his efforts. Increasing my speed, I tear my eyes away from the sexiness around me and swirl my tongue around one of her perky nipples.

Rylee cries out, gripping my head with both hands to hold me against her chest. My wrist cramps, but I refuse to deny her an orgasm. I suck her nipple into my mouth and pinch her clit at the same time.

“Oh fuck, Beauty! Shit, you’re tight!” Leo’s angle adjusts, and she goes off like a fucking bomb in my lap. Arching into our touch and yanking on my hair, I almost make a fool of myself and come in my pants. Leo shouts out his own release, making Jude moan around a mouth full of cum and cock. The bed shifts slightly when Jude thrusts against the comforter. His body shakes, and his eyes roll into the back of his head when he pops off Leo.

I eye Marcus, both of us feeling fucking delirious with need. I yank him in for a kiss while Rylee snuggles into my chest. “Mm,” she moans, watching us make out. “So hot.”

I snort, pulling away from my man. “You like that, my love?” Her eyes flare and I worry she will run from the word now that she’s coming down from her high. Instead, she snuggles further, gives me a sleepy smile, and nods. Dipping my head, I capture her lips with mine. I fucking preen when she opens up without protest.

She screeches suddenly, causing me to jump. Leo and Marcus laugh. I hadn’t realized Jude got up to get a wet rag to clean her up with. “Did you have to make it fucking freezing?!” Rylee’s voice is high pitched as she gives him an incredulous look over her shoulder.

He rushes off to the bathroom with a cringe. “Sorry, baby girl!”

“Coward!” Marcus shouts after him, making us all chuckle.

Leo rolls off the bed, fully dressed and looking blissed the fuck out. Rylee watches the closet door he disappears into curiously. He comes out holding a baggy T-shirt and asks her to lift her arms. She does with a little pout on her lips. When her eyebrows dip into a frown, I kiss her gently and soothe away the lines.

“We know, gorgeous.” I don’t want to hear the words she was about to say. We know her well enough in this aspect to know she was about to put up a boundary again. “Let’s get some water and start your planning while we wait for lunch to get here.”

Damn it.

Her eyes start watering, but when she leans forward and kisses my cheek, I fall further in love with this woman. “Thank you,” Rylee whispers and pulls off my lap.

Yeah. We need to talk to Tate and come up with our own fucking plan to keep our girls with us and safe.

Chapter Thirty-Five

RYLEE



“Mommy?” Bug looks at me with concern and I just know I fucked up. “Are you okay?”

I settle her on the counter, trying really damn hard not to show how much that hurt. “Of course I’m okay.” *God, how many moms use that lie?* My eyes burn with unshed tears. Layla is my kryptonite; she has the power to make or break me. And right now, her little hands gripping my arm and her sincere worry is shattering the walls I rebuilt around my floodgates.

“You don’t look happy, Mommy. And you seemed to hurt when you picked me up.” She tugs on my shirt and twists it with worry. The move adjusts my shirt enough for the bruise on my shoulder to show. “Mom!” Bug gasps, tears instantly forming.

“Shh, it’s okay. I’m okay. It was just an accident,” I urge her to hear my honesty.

“Like a Daddy accident?”

My heart shrivels up and dies.

A tear escapes, my misery and pain clear to see in front of my daughter. “No, baby. Not Daddy. A door hit me when I came out of the bathroom when I was out dancing with the guys. It was just a whoopsie.” I fight like hell to keep my voice from quivering worse than it already is. My throat aches at the attempt to conceal more emotion.

I feel like I’m drowning, and I don’t know what to do because Jackson was right. This plan won’t work forever.

Layla needs to start school. Plus, I won't be able to maintain our lifestyle for much longer. Nanna's money is running out, and I'm not getting books out fast enough to keep moving.

"Momma?" Bug's voice is small, making me feel even worse. She should be loud, excited, and happy. Not worrying about her adult mother and uncertain of the future. "Are we moving?"

"Yes, baby." My answer makes her instantly burst into tears. "I started packing yesterday since we can't be in this house after next Friday."

"I don't want to leave!" She tugs her hands away from me like she can't stand to even touch me. Moving in the past has never had her acting like this.

"Layla, it will be awesome! We're moving to Maine. It will be so pretty, you'll see!" I actually have no clue, because I don't have a fucking plan.

"I don't want another home!"

I frown, not liking the way she's yelling and shifting away from me. "I'll find us an even better house, I swear."

"It's not about the house! I want my friends. I love them, Mommy! Please don't take me away from them!"

Openly crying now, I reach for her. "Bug I—"

"No!" she screams and jumps from the counter all on her own.

"Layla! You can't do that!" Her leap made her and my damn heart stumble.

"And you can't take me away! We love them, Mom, I know it!"

I go silent. My child just told me I love the guys. I can't even fucking deny it. Bug runs off to her room, sobbing and probably cursing me for taking her away from the best family I could have ever given her.



I run oil through the ends of my curled hair, trying really damn hard not to cry again. Glancing in the mirror, my eyes are still red and puffy, but I can't put makeup on my eyeballs. I *can* attempt not to let my makeup wash away in another fit of emotions. I went light with the mascara just in case, though, because my bitch face seems to be malfunctioning lately.

Sigh.

Nights are becoming colder and colder, so for dinner at the guys' house tonight, I chose my favorite pair of ripped jeans and a simple tight black T-shirt. I don't have the energy for much else anyway. Fuzzy socks are a must. Some part of me should be happy.

Fluffing my hair around my shoulders, I eye the bright blonde roots coming in and sigh again. My bedroom is bare when I trudge through and grab my booties. I hate it. I hate the fact that I'm taking us away from the best place we have ever lived. Like Layla said, though; it's not the house. It's our people.

My eyes start burning again. "Shit," I hiss and slam my shoes into the light switch. Darkness behind me and silence ahead, just like my damn life. Running from my past with absolutely no idea or hint of what's coming next.

Layla isn't speaking to me for the first time ever. It's supposed to be Bug and me against the world, yet it seems like it's Bug and the world against me now. I *really* don't know what to do.

I'm surprised to see Layla ready to go and sitting on the couch with her shoes on. "You ready to go, Layla?" All I get is a nod in response before she wanders over to the front door. "Okay," I whisper, and grab my keys.

Thankfully, she lets me strap her into her car seat, but I can't even get her eyes to look my way. I feel like the worst mother, but also like this is the only option. Maybe one day she will understand why I'm ruining the only life we have wanted to live.

Fuck. Even the *Moana* soundtrack on the way to Jude and JJ's house doesn't shake her out of her silence. I know for a fact that as soon as we get there, Layla will finally open up and enjoy her time with the guys and Gabby.

They have been wildly supportive since my breakdown last Saturday. Whatever they heard in my voice during my story had them finally realizing they wouldn't be able to convince me to stay. There is nothing in this world I wouldn't give up to keep my daughter safe. I'm just really struggling with the fact that it seems to be her sacrifice, too.

I'm basically forcing her to say goodbye to her found family. And if I'm being honest, my found family too. Because no matter how many times I try to freeze my heart, my guys melt any frost I manage to chill it with.

They have all been around the past few days in between their own lives to help us pack and try to bridge the gap between Layla and me. I've been thankful every time they make my little one smile. It still breaks my heart that I can't, though. I have also stopped avoiding their loving touches and kisses. Something about them *hearing* me and truly understanding me and my reasoning blew past all my excuses to stay away.

I love them. I love them so much.

I won't say that I'm one of those fictional girls who feels like they need to leave to keep her men safe. I'm not. It's just... Layla comes first. And I know they won't be able to keep her safe.

I choose a broken heart over a monster taking my baby away.

They understand now. We have to go. And it's the final thing that made me fall in love with Jude, Jackson, Marcus,

and Leo. They *know* now. They *understand*. Running is the only option that will work.

Pulling into their driveway, I'm confused as to why Tate's car is here. I hop out at the same time Jude steps out of the front door. "Hey, baby girl!"

He swoops in, bends me back, and consumes my lips. Jude tastes like whisky and chocolate. Standing me upright, I blush and tease, "Did you eat dessert already?"

"Oh baby. I hardly got the taste I needed for my dessert." He winks, his dirty blonde hair hanging across his forehead. My clit pulses. *Goddamn*. "Go inside and have JJ get you some wine. I'll grab Nugget." With a tap on my ass, he shoos me away.

"Judy!"

Layla's joyous squeal makes my chest clench painfully. All I can do is grit my teeth and walk inside, though. I'm immediately swarmed with a hard, yummy chest against my cheek. From the cologne and simple white shirt, I know it's Leo. I wrap my arms around him and will my tears to go away.

Leo has been struggling since Saturday. He seems more attached to me and whenever I catch his eye, he tries to wipe the pain from his face. "Hi, Lee," I murmur into his shirt.

"Hi, Beauty. How are you?" He doesn't let me go. At my sigh, he holds me tighter.

I shrug, one tear tracking down my cheek. "I don't know. I'm happy to be here, though." Lying to Leo is the hardest thing in the damn world. He's just so quiet, sweet, and kind. With his heart on his sleeve, I feel like I can do the same.

"Come on. Let's get you a glass of wine," he urges, and keeps one arm around my waist.

Smirking up at the platinum god, I warn, "I was told Daddy Jackson was supposed to get me a glass."

Something clatters in the kitchen, drawing my attention to a red-faced JJ. "Dammit, Jude!"

“That’s a bad word!” Layla shouts from the entryway where she’s perched on Jude’s back.

Leo laughs, and it might as well be a balm to my battered soul. Giggling, I take the offered glass of white wine from JJ. “Thank you. Daddy,” I whisper and bound away before he can retaliate.

“Isn’t Rylee a boy’s name?!” Jackson shouts.

Gabby enters behind Jude with a stern look at a perturbed JJ. “Hey! Don’t talk to my bestie like that!” I smirk into my glass when she flips him off and steals the bottle of wine from his hand.

“It was just a joke. Why is everyone ganging up on me?” Jackson’s pout draws Leo in like a moth to a flame. He gives his man a soothing kiss and a gentle rub on JJ’s dark stubble. Soothed by his boyfriend, Jack turns back to the stove.

“Where is Marc?” Gabby asks, but that reminds me.

“Why is my brother here?”

“Ouch, Ry!” Tate waltzes down the stairs with Marcus, a look of mock hurt on his face. “Am I not allowed at family dinner?”

I gulp, remembering how this was labeled one of our last family dinners. Tate is planning on leaving at the same time Layla and I do, but I’m not quite sure what his plan is. He’s been spending a lot of time with the guys, but whenever I ask what they have been up to, it’s like they all forget how to act. They are hiding something, yet all of them have been making my life a lot easier since last weekend, and I’m too damn tired to figure out what they are keeping from me.

“Uncle Tate!” Bug wiggles out of Jude’s hold and runs to my brother. He scoops her up with a kiss and a big smile. “Are you staying for dinner?”

“If that’s okay with you and your mom, then I would love to!” Layla nods enthusiastically. Of course, I want him to stay. I nod, giving him a kiss on the cheek once he’s made it past the couch.

“Yay!” Layla hoots and reaches for Gabby, who obliges and props Bug on her hip. “Hi, Auntie!”

Fuck me.

Gabby gasps. Her eyes immediately begin to water. “What did you just say, honey?”

Layla smiles. “I love you, so you are my auntie.”

“Excuse me,” I murmur, unable to hear the rest. I can’t. My tears start before I make it to the bathroom down the hall. Closing the door quietly behind me, I sink to the floor and try to control myself.

What am I supposed to do?! Take my child away from the people she loves and keep her safe, or stay and risk Mason finding her? A sob gets lodged in my throat, and when a knock at the door startles me, it slips free.

“Rylee? Can I come in, sweetheart?” Marc’s voice threatens to draw out more of my cries. Instead of saying anything, I shift so my back is against the wall and turn the handle so it cracks open. He shimmies inside, and his eyes immediately widen when he sees me huddled on the tiles. “Oh, sweetheart. Come here.”

Scooped in his arms, I feel my walls begin to fade even further. “I’m a terrible mother, aren’t I?” He sets me on the counter and steps between my thighs. Marcus wipes my snot and moist lips with a tissue silently. “I’ve ruined everything.”

His brown eyes harden. “You have done no such thing. You are the most amazing woman I have ever met. Rylee, you’ve been on your own for far too long, and yet you’ve raised the most amazing little girl. She loves you beyond words. Layla will understand someday.”

“You don’t understand. She’s so *angry* with me. I’m taking her away from the people she cares about. The *only* people she loves, Marcus. This is absolutely horrifying! I have no idea what to do anymore! Mason can’t have her. I don’t even want to know what he would do to my little girl!”

“Shh. Stop that now.” His short hair is a little messy tonight. I can’t help but wonder which of the guys ran their

hands through it. “That monster is never getting his hands on either of you. You have proven to love Layla above all else. She’s a smart girl, so I’m positive she knows this. Layla’s just a little scared and a little sad. If you have to leave us, she will still always have us. No matter how far away, we are *always with you*. Sweetheart, you may be running, but it’s not from us. I lo—”

A knock sounds on the door. “Guys, dinner is ready!”

I don’t want to guess what Marc was about to say, so I hop down and give his hand a squeeze. “Let’s go eat,” I suggest and give him a watery smile.

JJ said dinner is ready, and that is a statement I am prepared to deal with right now.

Chapter Thirty-Six

LEO



The only thing that works to calm my anxiety is either the woman across the table fighting to hold back her tears or the five-year-old snuggling on my lap.

“So, Rylee!” Gabby’s enthusiasm startles my woman out of her thoughts. “I was wondering if we could have a girl’s night out this Friday. You know, before next week. I would really love to spend some time with you, since my brothers have been hogging all your dancing time.”

Rylee frowns, looking around the table. “I don’t know who would watch her, though. You’re the only one who is comfortable with that.”

Layla is happily munching on a breadstick, trying to avoid looking at her mom. “We will watch Nugget!” Jude exclaims as he wiggles with excitement.

“Really?” Both Layla and Rylee ask at the same time. It would be cute if they weren’t at odds with each other.

“Of course,” I say with a nod and kiss the crazy white curls under my chin.

Jackson nods, a soft smile on his face as he offers a plan. “Yeah, we will pick the little miss up and hang out here while you have a girl’s night.”

“Oh, yay! This is going to be so much fun!” Layla bounces on my lap with excitement. She turns to me with a larger-than-life smile, and my heart about bursts with love. She throws her tiny arms around my neck in the next moment. Layla squeals the words that cement her as mine. “I love you, Mister Lee!”

Eyes wide, I find Tate's beside me. *We really need to solidify a plan to keep them here and safe.*



I feel sick.

“You okay?” Marc’s voice is tinged with worry. The hand he rests on my thigh settles some of my anxiety. “You’re shaking, babe. How much coffee have you had today?”

Yeah, okay, so I should really start cutting back on the caffeine intake. “I’m just so tired,” I whisper, hoping JJ and Jude didn’t hear my admission in the front seats. Ever since we went out with Rylee a week ago and shit hit the fan, I haven’t been able to settle my mind. Running on only a couple hours of rest a night, caffeine has been the only thing to keep me going. Which fucking sucks because it’s unsettling my body now.

Marcus pulls my abused lip from between my teeth. “I noticed. Is there anything we can do?” I shake my head, causing him to sigh. “They know too, but we aren’t sure what to do, Leo.”

Looking out the window, I can’t help but demand, “Make our girls stay. Please.” The car stays tense and silent after my plea. The only thing that lifts my mood is the fact that we get our sweet girl for the night.

Parked at Rylee’s, we all take a collective deep breath; our nerves making themselves known. We have never taken care of a child on our own before. Which sounds ridiculous. There are literally four of us.

“Hey!” Gabby bounds over to us when we let ourselves into the house. We look ridiculous in our sweatpants and sweatshirts next to what she’s wearing.

Gabby is in a violet skin-tight mini dress that makes JJ tense a little. I'm amazed he doesn't tell her to put a jacket on. Growth!

The rumble that comes from him doesn't take me by surprise when Rylee comes into view, though. She's wearing leather pants that fit her like a second skin and a black leather corset-looking thing. Her copper hair is something out of a wet fucking dream. Her curls seem purposefully frizzed and wild tonight.

Jude's jaw is on the ground, and Marc looks like he's about to drop to his knees and kiss her black leather pumps. Me? I think I just came in my pants. Jackson takes a step forward and tries to dig an early grave. "Absolutely no—"

"JJ!" Layla comes bounding down the stairs in a matching blue set of sweatpants and a long-sleeve shirt. Dropping her backpack on the floor, she flings herself at our broody bastard.

"Hey, you! Ready to go?" It takes effort to bite his tongue, but Layla is the perfect distraction from the sexy as fuck vixen.

"Yes!" She wiggles in his hold until JJ sets her down. The little miss gives us each a big smile and snags her backpack again. With her flip-flops on, she hustles to the door.

"Layla, be good for the guys tonight. Please?" Rylee watches as her daughter completely ignores her. "I love you, Bug."

When Layla passes Marc and me, we see her roll her eyes. Marc stiffens. "Layla," he snaps. It's not a yell nor a shout, but it's stern enough that the little miss pauses. She seems confused as to why one of us would ever be upset with her. "You do not ignore your mother, and you don't roll your eyes. Mommy told you she loves you. What do you say?"

Clutching her backpack to her chest, Layla's bottom lip trembles. Still, she turns around and says, "Love you, Mommy." Turning quickly, she almost runs into Marc where he kneeled when she wasn't looking.

“You are done ignoring Rylee, you hear me? I know you are mad and sad, and all the scary things are overwhelming, but she is the best mom you could ever ask for.” He tucks a wayward curl behind her ear. “I love you, Layla. I’ll tell you the same thing I told your mom. No matter where you go next, you will always have me, okay?”

The little one nods, trying hard to jut her chin up in determination. “Love you too, Marc,” she whispers and swipes a tear off her cheek.

Giving her a swift hug, he kisses the top of her head. “Go give Mommy a hug. She misses you and loves you very much.” Layla does as she’s told.

I curl myself into Marcus’ side, feeling amazed and a little turned on. We watch as Rylee clutches her daughter to her chest. With watery eyes, she mouths the words ‘thank you’ in our direction. We have all seen how much it affects Rylee when her Bug shuts her out, and I’m so damn glad one of us finally did something about it. It’s obvious our woman is feeling lost and uncertain about where to go with their struggles, since she’s doing what she knows is best for them.

Fuck. I just really need them to stay.

Rounds of kisses begin with some hushed compliments on how sexy she looks. Especially with her stomach showing. I admit I eavesdropped when JJ spoke to her, since he seemed to fight against telling her to go change. What he said had me blushing a fiery shade of red and shuffling out to the car uncomfortably. Little Layla and all her questions got my mind out of the gutter really damn fast, though.

Halfway home with Layla strapped into her car seat, Tate calls, his voice moving through the speakers of the car.

“Hey, man. You following them, yeah?”

Tate responds to Jackson’s clarification, “Hey. Yeah. They just hopped in the Uber. I’ll keep an eye on them tonight. You just give my niece a kiss for me!”

Tate’s family lost contact with Mason two days ago, so we’ve been ridiculously on edge. They assume the douchebag

figured out Tate is involved and realized they sent him on a wild goose chase. What's even worse is they can't figure out his location. It's far-fetched to think Mason actually figured out Rylee's location since he hasn't been able to for an entire year, but Tate guarding the girls tonight is a good call.

"Oh! Uncle Tate!" The little miss stares at the dashboard with love and happiness at hearing her uncle's voice.

"Hi, sweetie! You be good for your guys tonight, okay?" She nods her head even though he can't see her. In the rearview mirror, JJ catches my eye with a small smile. "Yeah! We are going to have so much fun. I promise I'll be good for my guys!"

My heart swells at the five-year-old claiming me. I feel like she's my little girl at this point, and I can't stand the idea that this might be the only night we get to spend eating garbage and making forts with her.

"Good! Love you, Layla. For always."

"For always, Uncle Tate!"

Tate chuckles down the line and promises to keep us updated before hanging up. I settle into the next tale Layla spins beside me, feeling at ease knowing Tate is keeping an eye on Rylee and Gabby.

They deserve a night out, and I'm going to soak up all the Layla time I can get.



What makes babysitting easier is knowing that the kid you're watching will eat literally anything. Jude had her eating a new cheese he found at the store. Marc encouraged her to try brussel sprouts, which she gobbled up, much to my disgust. It was fucking hilarious watching Jackson go green.

I don't know much about children, none of us do, but I think we are all feeling pretty proud as she polishes off the last of her cheesecake. Layla ate damn well tonight. It was honestly a meal fit for a fancy date, and I'm not quite sure why we chose to feed a five-year-old any of this, but she loved it.

"Do not drool on me, Missy," Jackson scolds when her eyes droop. Snuggled in his lap with Marc and Jude leaning against him, I watch as she giggles and trails her fingers over JJ's tattoo.

On his forearm is a set of fallen angel wings. Layla traces the feathers in awe, but when her eyes pop open, my stomach twists, knowing what she found.

"What are the bumps?" Sitting straight, she pulls his arm closer to her and stares down at his scars.

Jackson gulps, and I think for a moment he doesn't know how to tell a child about the abuse he endured in foster care. How his foster dad used to put cigarettes out on little JJ's arm. Yet, he surprises us with the gentle truth. "They are scars from when I was little."

"How did you get them?" Layla doesn't seem upset, but her eyes are furrowed in concern. Looking back at the large man holding her, she asks, "Do they hurt?"

JJ shakes his head. "No, they don't hurt anymore. You see, I don't have a mom and dad. I would jump between houses and had different adults take care of me. Some weren't very nice."

She gasps, pain etched into her features, making Jude and Marcus sit up as well. "Oh, did they hurt you?"

Jackson looks at each of us, now uncertain what to say, but we have no idea either. Hell, we fed a five-year-old brussel sprouts as a snack. Realizing he's getting no help from us, he traces his scars, too. "Yeah, honey. They hurt me sometimes, but they don't hurt anymore."

Nibbling on her lip, she eyes his arm. "Daddy hurt Mommy all the time, but she doesn't have any bumpy things."

Jude hums. “I met JJ in the same house. The adults there hurt me too, but I don’t have any bumps either. Sometimes people can hurt you in a lot of different ways.”

Layla’s mouth opens, and she nods in understanding. “My Daddy hurt me too. I never had any purple colors or scratches. But he made me sad.” Her eyes narrow at Jackson’s arm again. “I felt-I felt mad when he got me nice things. Mommy was crying every time. Sometimes she wouldn’t get up off the floor. I just wanted her to get up. I didn’t want any toys or treats.”

Mother fucking son of a bitch.

“Yeah. Like that, Nugget. That’s why we’re nice to people even if we don’t know them. Sometimes their bumps and bruises are on the inside.”

Layla nods like everything Jude said makes sense. I suppose with what she has seen in her short life, this little girl might actually understand some of this deep conversation. Honestly, she seems to be grappling these concepts better than most adults.

What happens next will forever be engrained in my memory.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

LAYLA



When I feel sad, or something hurts, Mommy kisses the pain away. JJ said his bumps don't hurt anymore, but Jude said sometimes people hurt inside. Like how Daddy used to make me feel. But when Mom would kiss my forehead, I felt better. She would always smile and tell me she loved me once she got off the floor. *Maybe that will help them too?*

I lift JJ's heavy arm and kiss one of the bumps. I twist and give him a big smile. "I love you, JJ." My head tilts when his eyes seem to sparkle. Mommy's eyes do that a lot, too.

"I love you too, honey." His large arms squeeze me tight, but my chest feels like it's flying. This feels really nice. I try to push away, done with the hug, and fall onto Jude's lap when he lets me go.

Sitting on my knees, I feel confused. I can't kiss any bumps or icky colors, but maybe I can help the way Mommy does. Reaching forward, I push out some air until he follows how I want him to move. I kiss his forehead and smile. "I love you, Judy."

My tummy swirls. I feel weird when he doesn't say it back. *You are always supposed to say it back!*

"I love you too, Nugget." He kisses my forehead too, making my smile come back. He doesn't give me a hug, so I hop down and skip to Marc. My happy feelings make me want to do my most favorite walk.

He leans forward and smiles. His smile looks a little sad, though. “Are you hurt, Marc?” He didn’t say somebody hurt him, but Jude said sometimes I won’t be able to know.

His mouth opens and closes. “No, I’m not hurt, little one. Sometimes I get sad about my dad, though. He says mean things sometimes.” I nod and try not to giggle when my hair tickles my neck.

“Okay.” I kiss his forehead. When I’m sad, I hurt too, so I’ll make it go away for Marc. “Love you,” I say and smile as big as I can. Someday I hope my smile is as pretty as Mommy’s. He says it back, so I skip to Lee on his own couch.

His eyes are shiny too, and it makes me want to hug it away. “You get sad too, Mister. I’ll make it better.” I kiss his head. “I love you, Lee.” I know he loves me. He said it a few days ago.

I skip away, happy that I made everyone feel better. But my chest feels... big. And my tummy kind of hurts. I want something, but I don’t know how to say it. *What if they say no? Mommy said we have to leave, so maybe they have to say no.*

“Layla, honey. What’s wrong?” JJ kneels in front of me. He’s a little blurry, but I don’t want to see his face when I ask. I watch my blue shirt as I try to twist it in a pretty pattern. “Layla. Tell me what you’re thinking about, please.”

Dark circles change my shirt color. “I was wondering...” Tugging on my shirt some more, I wipe off the wet drops on my hand. I don’t like crying. I don’t like it when Mommy cries, either. So maybe this will make us both feel better.

“Can all of you be my daddy? I don’t-I don’t love my daddy. He hurts me and Mom. And you don’t. I love you, and I know Mommy does, too. Please be my dad?” When I look at all of them, they are so blurry I don’t know what they look like anymore.

“Will you be my daddies?”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

RYLEE



Why did I think this outfit was a good idea?

“Stop fussing. You look like you’re picking a damn camel toe when you do that,” Gabby hisses and swats my hand away from my thigh.

“Ugh! It’s just so freaking hot in here. I’m dying.”

Rolling her eyes, she takes one of my hands and pulls me to the bar. “Let’s get you a few shots, and you will forget all about your clothes. Which, by the way, are sexy as sin.” Ordering us a few lemon drops, she turns to me with a conspiratorial look. “So, tell me about you and my brothers.”

I feel my cheeks heat even further and move to pick my hair up off my neck. Gabby stops the move, grumbling about messing it up. Throwing my hands in the air, I pout. “I have no idea! I’m leaving next week, so nothing can really happen.”

“Would you consider long distance?”

The mini glasses slide over the bar, which we toss back greedily. “Long distance, Pixie? We aren’t even in a relationship.”

Her flirtatious look with the bartender ends with her scoff. “It sure looks like a relationship from where I’m standing. Stop lying to yourself, Ry. Tell me what you’re actually feeling.”

“I...” *Fuck.* I have no idea what to say. Bless the hunk behind the bar because he hands me another shot with an encouraging nod. I swear Gabby swoons. Slamming the lemon

drop, I finally decide to confide in the only friend I have ever had. “It’s hard to admit because I’m leaving, but I think I’m falling in love with them.”

“All four, right?” Gabby screeches and bounces in front of me. At least someone’s excited and not stuck on the fact that it will literally never work. I nod. “OMFG! Okay, so what do you think would happen if you wouldn’t have to leave?”

“Let’s not play fairytale, please.”

“No, I’m serious, Rylee. Just answer the question,” she encourages.

The shots warm my throat, allowing the words to slip through with far more ease than I would have liked. “Well, Layla told me she loves them. I know she wants us to stay with them. I mean, hell, she accused me of loving them too. I guess I would give it a shot. But Layla always comes first, so if that’s not what she wanted, then I would deal with my broken pieces.”

Gabby eyes me, her pink hair wild around her cheeks. “Kind of like you are right now?” I huff in response. She knows she’s right, and I don’t want to talk about it anymore. “Alright! Let’s go dance!”

The switch in topic is much appreciated. Trailing behind her, I hold on tight to her hand. She’s so damn small I would easily lose her in this crowd. Pink hair and purple dress are of no use if the one wearing them is teeny as fuck.

I’d say the worst part about having a girl’s night out is the number of men who think it’s a free pass. When I went out with the guys or just Jude, I swear no man came near me. Whether it was them keeping the randos away or not, I appreciated the hell out of it. I’m fine acting like Pixie is my girlfriend when I need to, but I just want to let loose. All the stares and unwelcome touches are making me fucking itchy.

Gabby, on the other hand, is loving the attention she’s getting from one of the bartender’s friends. She had been pushing people away from us all night, but this guy walked up and introduced himself. Pretty sure Pixie fell in love at first

sight. His blonde hair has streaks of blue through it. They look so damn cute together. I hope they see each other again after tonight.

My mood instantly sours when a cold splash coats my arm. “Ah! Son of a bitch!” Mother fucker!

“Oh my god! I’m so sorry!”

I turn my glare on a group of girls, one of them with a tiara that has the number twenty-one on it. Fucking birthday bitches. Annoyed, I get Gabby’s attention and shout that I need to go clean my sticky arm. She nods, concerned, but I give my friend a thumbs up and a wink. Pixie settles back into the man’s chest and loses herself to the music once again.

Grumbling, I shove myself through the grinding bodies. The bass thumping against my chest lessens when I finally stumble out of the crowd of grabby hands and giggling girls. Shaking off some of my frustration, I strut to the bathroom on a mission to get my good mood back.

Peeing quickly and cleaning my arm, I take a moment to look in the mirror. Some of my anxiety about being alone rises, but Tate has eyes on Mason, so I should be fine. I’m an adult. I should be able to go to the bathroom alone.

Another group of girls come into the bathroom, shouting and laughing without a care in the world. I should be like that too. Yet here I am, trying not to panic about my asshole of an ex. Taking a deep sigh, I relax and try to soak in some of their free-spirited energy. I offer them a smile when I slip by and out the bathroom door.

A group of frat-looking boys rush down the hallway, hooting and hollering. *Don’t be annoyed. Don’t be annoyed.* They are probably with the group of girls that just walked into the bathroom too. I shuffle back and to the side, so they don’t run into me or stomp on my toes. Then, I try not to be mad that most of them linger in the hallway ahead of me while the rest go do their business. At least they are all sticking together. Hopefully, they keep an eye on their girlfriends tonight, too.

I'm distracted by my thoughts of how wonderful it would be to have such a great group of friends to look after you. So, I don't notice one of their guys moving around the back of the group with a hoodie covering his head and most of his face. I decide it's probably time for me to get out of this back corner and hope one of the rowdy boys doesn't shove me by accident.

My first attempt at pushing through them is cut short.

A rough hand clamps over my mouth, and an arm grabs my waist in a bruising hold. Before I can let out a scream of horror, I'm immediately twirled away from the group of frat boys who never once fucking noticed me in the dark hallway.

The sweaty palm over my mouth slips and slides across my cheeks as he forces me out the back door. The cool night air does nothing to help my overheated skin when I finally catch a whiff of Mason's nasty Axe cologne. Working through my options, I attempt to kick out at his shins, but I'm tossed to the ground before I can even fight back.

"Where the fuck is my daughter?!" A kick to my gut forces my body to curl in on itself. Déjà vu makes my vision tilt. The cold cement wavers from the alleyway to the hard kitchen floor of Mason's house. "Answer me, you selfish bitch!"

I *can't*. With the wind knocked out of me, all I can do is wheeze and whimper. Each inhale feels like mini stab wounds. The pain in my stomach doubles when his meaty fist bashes into my side, most likely fracturing a rib. Spit leaks from my mouth during my silent scream.

"Layla isn't at your piece of shit house. So let me ask you again, who has my fucking kid?!" The scream that rips out of me is yanked free from the fiery pain in my scalp. I wouldn't be able to stand if it weren't for the fierce grip he has on my hair.

I catch sight of him for the first time in over a year. His hair is still buzzed, beard still neatly kept, and his muscles make him double my width. Mason is still the monster I remember. The difference, though?

The world spins, and the next thing I feel is a vicious scrape against my left cheek. Shoved against the brick wall of a building, my torso screams at the weight of Mason pressed against me.

The difference this time? I'm not so sure Mason won't kill me.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

TATE



Why is it so hot in here? And why did I think wearing a long sleeve was a good idea?

This is not my scene at all. I only got inside because Leo let me use his ID. Even when I do turn twenty-one, I don't think I will go clubbing. This is gross, and all the girls eyeing me make me feel like cattle. *Jesus, I miss my guys.*

I watch, only mildly amused, when Ry's face goes thunderous. I lose sight of her when a group of girls swarm them. Kicking off the wall, I try to get a better angle. By the time the birthday party moves, Rylee is gone. Gabby seems to be enjoying herself with the blue-haired guy, but I take a picture of the man just in case. She knows I'm here, so I'm assuming she felt it was safe for Ry to go off on her own. Unfortunately, I fucking *lost* her.

Deciding the bathroom is likely my best bet, I make my way over to the hallway. I fight my urge to shove these idiots out of my way, needing to get eyes on my sister. *Why the fuck would she go off on her own? She doesn't know I'm here. Fuck. She also doesn't know Mason is MIA.*

Finally making it to the damn bathroom area, I see a group of women coming out of the bathroom together and moving toward a bunch of young guys. It feels like a fucking fire hazard to have so many people cramped in such a small space.

Thankfully, the women's bathroom is closest. I nudge it open a bit and shout, "Rylee! You in here?" My anxiety makes me say fuck it to being an invisible eye tonight. My sister

slipped my damn protection. Maybe it was a bad idea to keep her in the dark.

Once the girls finally join the guys, they all bustle out to the cramped hallway. Honestly, I'm impressed with how they waited till everyone was together to head back out. Once the last duo is out of sight, the hall shows no other signs of life. Frustrated, I pull my phone out to call Gabby and see if she made it back to her yet. Maybe I just missed her.

Just as the first ring starts, a cool breeze tickles my neck. I turn to the emergency exit, my stomach twisting itself into knots. My adrenaline skyrockets just before a scream breaks through the thumping bass of the club.

I immediately replace my phone with the gun I kept in the back of my pants. I don't wait for another scream to tell me my sister is through that door. I calm myself enough to stay quiet as I slip through the heavy door. I lift the barrel towards the large body against the brick building. I can't see Rylee, but I recognize Mason. The high pitch whimpering tells me I need to be really fucking careful where I shoot the bastard.

The muffled cries turn more frantic as Mason's body shuffles around. Needing him off my sister, I aim for his meaty calf and let the bullet fly. Roaring, he shoves away from the wall and lands on his ass. All my rage boils up and over when Rylee's limp body crashes to the ground beside him. Blood is trickling from her neck.

"Rylee!" I lurch forward to help her, but the bastard stabs me in the thigh on my way past. I shove the pain away, whirl on him, and punch him in the goddamn face.

Spitting blood at me, he smirks. "Too late for that one." His chin juts out, indicating to my sister currently bleeding on the ground.

A red haze covers my vision and rage like nothing I have ever felt has me lifting my gun. I smirk when his face drains of color, and something uncoils inside of me. "Too late for you, too." Straight through the skull, I relish the way his eyes widen before all life drains from his beady eyes.

I'm jolted out of my murderous rage by the sharp pain in my thigh. Shuffling, I land on my ass, trying not to move the knife. I know better than to yank that shit out.

"Ry?" My hands shake when I reach out to her. "Please. Please wake up." The bleeding has slowed from her neck, showing me an inch-long cut that doesn't seem too deep. But her cheek is slowly producing blood drops from a long scrape across her cheekbone and to her jaw. I don't breathe, a sob strangling all the air from my lungs. It bursts free when my blood-soaked fingers finally find a steady pulse. Yet, she still isn't waking up.

"What do I do? Rylee, please tell me what to do!" Warmth tickles my cheeks. Seeing my sister lifeless on the ground in front of me, my adrenaline crashes, leaving me weak and scared. My fight fading into freeze.

Julian... I need Julian.

Keeping my hand over the wound on Rylee's neck just in case, I dial the one person who can help me enough so I can help my sister. *I don't know what to do!* Everything feels so muddled and confusing. My mind is buzzing, but no real thoughts are coming through.

"Hey, baby! How's it going?" My tears come faster, hearing my boyfriend's soothing voice. "Tate?"

"Julian," I gasp, the pain in my thigh becoming a bit too much to ignore. "Julian, please help me."

"Hey, hey! What's going on? Are you hurt?!" I put him on speakerphone and drop it to my side, unable to hold it up any longer. "TATE! Answer right the fuck now!" Zach's demand jolts me out of my head.

"Ry won't wake up. I don't know what to do." I feel so useless. My brain isn't functioning.

I just killed a man.

My big sister won't wake up.

There's a knife sticking out of my leg.

“Wyatt is calling Jackson. Just hold on for a little longer. Keep talking to us. Talk to Rylee.” Julian’s soothing voice is back.

I murmur my agreement, staring at the scrapes and abused flesh on Ry’s stomach. “You never have to run again, Ry. So please wake up. Now you can stay. You have to stay with me first, though.”

“Good boy, Tate. Keep talking to your sister,” Zach encourages. The praise warming me a bit. “Jackson and Marcus are on their way. Wyatt tapped into your location. Police on their way, okay?”

“Okay,” I whisper. Sirens sound in the distance, and when the flashing lights give me a better view of Rylee, I choke. She’s already turning black and blue. The deep scrape on her cheek has dirt in it; blood coats her neck, shoulder, and chest. Her exposed stomach is an angry shade of purple. “Oh my god. Rylee!” I shift to my knees and cry out when the movement moves the fucking knife.

Arms are around me in the next instant, pulling me away from my sister. Shouting from my phone on the ground is drowned out by my own screams. “Let me go! Please! That’s my sister!”

I hardly notice Jackson and Marcus running down the alleyway before Ry is rushed into an ambulance beside the one I’m being dragged into. “RYLEE!” The door slamming closed behind me cuts their shouts off.

Black dots dance across my vision, and the only thing I can think to say before everything goes dark is, “Please, help my sister.” Someone else needs to because I... I *failed*.

Chapter Forty

JUDE



Five hours.

Five fucking hours since Jackson and Marcus ran out the front door in a burst of rage and fear. All they said was to call Wyatt, and no matter what, we had to stay home with Layla. Thankfully, Layla was snoozing on the couch when shit hit the fan, so she still doesn't know her mom is in the hospital.

Leo and I immediately called Wyatt in a panic to figure out what had the other two rushing out the door. My chest immediately clenched when he relayed what was going on. Since the call, Leo hasn't been able to stop shaking. Nor has he worn himself out enough to crash.

So here we sit across from Layla while she sleeps the night away. For five *hours*. Shaking, nauseous, and scared out of our minds. Marc called a few hours ago and said they were running tests and wouldn't be allowed to see Rylee until visiting hours.

What are we supposed to tell Layla when she wakes up and realizes she should be in her own bed?

"Mason is really dead," Leo whispers, his head in my lap. "Do you think they will stay now?"

My eyes water at how scared he looks. I wish we knew more about what happened and what injuries Rylee sustained. "I hope so," I murmur and run my hand through his platinum locks. I suppose the one good thing we can take away from this is their monster is finally gone. Rotting in hell.

They don't have to run anymore. But will our girls choose to stay?



“Is Mommy awake?”

Nugget's eyes are puffy and red, but she's done her best to stay strong for her momma. After a morning of tears and a lot of questions, JJ finally gave in and told us we could bring Layla to see her.

“Yeah, Nug. She's awake and so excited to see you.” I squeeze her just a bit tighter in my arms as we come to Rylee's room. “You have to be gentle though, okay? Mommy has some bruises we have to be careful with.”

Layla frowns at me, but then her attention catches on Leo shaking beside us. “Lee? You hold me?” She holds her arms out for him, and as soon as he has her, the tremors lessen.

I open the door and suck in a huge breath when I see our woman fighting the sleep that wants to claim her. Rylee's copper hair fans out on the pillow where she lays flat. Her arms are above the blankets, allowing me to see the bandage covering her neck and cheek. Big blue eyes shoot to mine, looking so much like her daughter's with red puffiness.

“Jude,” she whispers, a small smile tilting her pale lips.

“Hi, baby girl,” I whisper back, worried about breaking this moment if I speak too loudly. Suddenly her eyes widen, and a pained look accompanies her gasp.

“Mommy?” Leo walks to Rylee's side with a crying Layla. Leo must whisper a reminder to be gentle because she nods, her wild white hair bouncing. “Can I sit with you, Mom?” Beside them, my heart cracks when her little lip trembles.

“Of course, Bug. Come here.” Rylee's own lip quivers as she reaches for her little girl. Leo helps settle the little miss

into Ry's side and sneaks a kiss to her cheek. I don't know what he whispers to them, but their eyelids droop, exhaustion and safety pulling them into slumber.

Jackson and Marcus get up from the couch on the other side of the room. I completely missed it when we walked in here. Meeting them halfway, I throw myself into Jack's arms with a quiet sob.

"Shh, I have you now. Everything will be okay, Jude." He settles me on his lap, Marc doing something similar with Leo beside us. "She has a few bruised ribs that will need to be wrapped. We will have to keep an eye on her concussion. The cut on her neck wasn't deep enough to do much damage besides making her lose some blood. Her cheek might scar, though."

I nod, unable to get words out. I'm so fucking glad she will be able to heal from this. If she lets us, maybe we can heal her heart and give her the family and the life she deserves.

Mason is dead. Our girls are free.

Chapter Forty-One

RYLEE



Waking up in a stiff bed without my daughter in my arms has got to be the most terrifying fucking thing. My body doesn't let me lurch into a sitting position, forcing me to hiss in pain when my torso collapses back against the bed.

“Shit, Ry! You can't do that!”

To my right sits my brother in a chair. His brows are furrowed, and there's a set of crutches leaning against the wall beside him. Tears immediately wet my cheeks, having already been told what happened by JJ and Marcus earlier.

“Tate, you saved me!” God, I wish I could wrap my arms around him. “Thank you. I can't, I don't—” My words are cut off by another choked sob.

“Shh. Hey, please stop crying.” He looks frantic, and it's enough to make me huff a laugh. Tate's eyes water in return, but he doesn't laugh with me. “Rylee, I failed you. I wasn't fast enough. I fucking lost you! He hurt you before I could—”

“Stop it, Tate. Listen to me when I tell you that you got there just in time. Focus on that part. I will say I'm mad at all of you for keeping me out of the loop because we could've avoided this had I stayed where you could see me. But, I mean, shit! Because of you...” My voice wobbles a bit. “Because of you, Layla and I are safe. You freed us. That will be something I will thank you for, for the rest of my life. I love you, Tate.”

I watch as he takes a shuddering breath, but am relieved when a look of understanding and determination settles over his features. “I love you too, Ry. I’m so glad I found you.”

“I’m really glad you found me too, little brother.”

The door creaks open, a head of red curls popping in. The smile on the man’s face is warm when his eyes settle on my brother. “Hey, baby. The nurse is looking for you.” His thin lips pull into an even wider smile when he looks at me. “Hi, Rylee. I’m Julian. I can’t wait to meet you properly, but my man needs to get his stitches checked.”

I smile, ignoring the strain on my cheek. “It’s nice to meet you too, Julian. I’ll see you guys soon?” With a promise of a family dinner soon and a kiss on the head, Tate shuffles his way out of my hospital room. I giggle when Julian twinkles his fingers at me.

Less than a few minutes later, Gabby comes bustling in with my guys and Layla following along. I cut my friend off when her eyes water. “Nope. No apologizing, Pixie!” She snuffles and nods before telling me she loves me. I say it back and enjoy the way my soul settles at having everyone I love around me.

“Rylee, you don’t have to run anymore.” I think Jackson means to say it as a statement, but his insecurity makes it come out as a question.

“We don’t?” Bug gasps, turning to me with wide eyes. “No more Dad?”

I don’t overthink it. “No more Dad, Layla. JJ is right. We don’t have to run anymore.”

Leo shifts from side to side at the foot of my bed. “So, where will you go?”

“Home.” The one-word answer is immediate.

“And where is home?” Marcus asks, his feelings slowly shuttering in fear of what I might say.

I smile and grip his hand. “Home is with you. All of you.”

Smiles light up the room, as do Layla's squeals of excitement. She tugs on Jude to lift her into his arms. "Does this mean you will be my daddies now?!"

The question should take me by surprise, yet all I feel is settled. We are finally settling into a life where I can relax and *feel*. I didn't realize until I met these wonderful people that happiness could mean more than just Layla and me.

"It's no longer just you and me, Bug."

Epilogue

RYLEE



4 Months Later

Blowing out a breath, I adjust the push-up bra beneath my robe. My matching red lace underwear set is iconic, if I'm being honest. I don't even mind the long white line across my cheek. My guys have put in a lot of work to help me appreciate *all* my scars.

What is *not* working for me are my sweaty palms. "It will be fine," I whisper, wiping my hands on the towel beside me. Strapping the sparkly birthday hat to my head, I tip it to the side and smirk. "It will be fine!" The smile helped, as do the sexy bitch panties hugging my butt.

My eyes trail down to the wrapped rectangle on the counter. I huff at myself. I'm being ridiculous. No matter what, I'm sure the outcome will be a positive one. I *am* hoping this leads to something *explosive*, though. Which is why Layla is at a sleepover with her auntie Gabby tonight.

"Baby giiiiiiiiirl!" Jude pouts on the other side of the door.

"Jude!" Marcus snaps, making me giggle. "Leave her be! Your surprise will come faster if you go sit down."

"Coming!" *Ugh, I better be after all this anxiety.*

Floofing my hair one final time, I allow my black, silky robe to slip off one shoulder. The gift in my hand feels heavy as I open the door and step into our bedroom. I snort when I find Marcus straddling the birthday boy's waist while Jack nibbles his throat with his birthday hat angled towards me. Leo licks a path up our newly turned twenty-eight-year-old.

Jude groans. “This is the best birthday EVER!” The husky chuckles that surround him have a whimper trying to claw its way out of my chest. I intentionally squeeze my thighs together with each step I take to the bed.

JJ’s eyes find me first before he nudges the other two away from Jude. His pout is as adorable as his chest is drool-worthy. “A gift?” Jude’s grabby hands make me laugh even as my tummy swoops with nerves.

Slowly, I place the present in his waiting hands and twist mine in front of me. None of them knows what I have planned, which is probably why Leo looks like he wants to reach out to me. I won’t sit yet. I need to see how this plays out first.

Jude frowns at me, seeing my anxiety. Thankfully, he doesn’t say anything while he peels the wrapping paper away from the object that holds my pride. One strip of paper becomes four so fast I barely see a peek of the cover.

“NO. FUCKING. WAY. This has been you all along?!” I worry Jude’s eyes are about to fall out of his head with how wide they are. He looks from me to my newest release so rapidly that I can’t get a gauge on how he feels.

“What is it?” Jackson leans over Jude’s shoulder while the Marc and Leo stare at my book in awe. “Holy shit, baby! Are you finally giving us your pen name?!” I wasn’t prepared for the excitement Jack shouts out me, making me jump a little. His smile eases my nerves. “Sorry. This is amazing, Rylee. Thank you for sharing this piece of you.”

“I’ve been waiting so damn long for this book! I can’t believe you are *HER!*” I blush at Jude’s admiration.

Before my giggle can fully come out, I’m thrown to the bed and they remove my robe in record time. “Happy birthday, Jude,” I breathe out. His face softens, love shining in his eyes, then his mouth is on mine.

Breaking away, his eyes glisten with emotion. “I love you, baby girl.” Jude drops a kiss to my throat. “I’m your *biggest* fan.” His hips swivel against my center, the innuendo clear when his cock twitches between us.

Jude breaks away from me, leaning back on his heels. I don't see Marcus and Leo until their mouths are pulling my bra down by their teeth. "Shit," I hiss, throwing my head back in bliss.

"How do you want us, birthday boy?" Jackson's husky voice comes from behind Jude. Nipping at his neck, JJ waits for a response while he plays with our man. "Anything you want, and it's yours."

Jude eyes the two men licking their way down my stomach while I fist their hair. One hand clutching black, the other clutching white. Their tongues follow the grooves of my stretch marks, making my eyes water once again. I'll never get enough of the pure love they show me.

My gaze flicks up at Jude's throaty groan. "I want to watch while Trouble and Dirty Boy fuck my Baby Girl. And you Daddy JJ..." Jackson bites Jude's earlobe in warning. "Jackson, please fuck me while I watch our men make our woman feel good."

Only JJ can bring Jude to heel, and nothing is sexier than when our cocky surfer boy pleads with our brooding, sugar-loving *Daddy*. Marcus and Leo cut my internal giggle off, slipping my panties down my thighs.

Nothing is sexier than these two tangling their tongues together as they devour my pussy. Their experience with each other, after only being with each other for so long, will forever be something that turns me on. They work like soul mates who have never been separated, tipping me over the edge of my first orgasm for the evening.

"I love you," I whimper to each of my men. Those are the only words I can come up with right now. What I really want to say is that *I see them* just as *they see me*. I love them as the family we are just as much as I love them individually.

What I say with my body and those three words is simply, *I am theirs, and they are mine*. I bask in their responses of love and promises, feeling completely at ease and comforted by the life we are building together.

Not just Layla and me.

Marcus, Jude, Leo, Jackson, Layla and me.

A life I will live with a healed heart and a happy little girl.

The End

FOR NOW...

Rylee, Layla, and their guys got their happily ever after, yet we didn't get to see them live it. If you love these characters as much as I do, you will be thrilled to hear that they play large roles in book 2.

If you want to see this wonderful family four years later, they will be in Tate's story that's coming soon!

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Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I need to say thank you to my husband for being my biggest cheerleader! When I started this journey a few months ago, I never would have thought I'd be here, yet he never once doubted me. Sometimes he has even been far more excited about my accomplishments than me! I'm so thankful for his support and encouragement.

When I first started writing, I was worried about how my friends and family would react to my genre of choice. All the people supporting me and cheering me on have pleasantly surprised me. Many of my family members have even read some of my work *blush*. Thank you to my parents and in-laws for not judging me or frowning at my work. It means the world to me that I can share my dream with the people I love the most.

I feel like I need to single another person out, as she has been beyond thrilled about my journey as an author. Like my husband, her excitement and emotion surpassed my own when I reached my goals. Shelby, your tears and loving words mean more to me than you will ever know. Thank you for giving me the confidence to be loud about my passion.

ALPHAS! Angelica... Patricia... you both got me through some moments of uncertainty. The hype you ladies have given me has been beyond my wildest dreams! Your kind words and helpful critiques left me feeling proud of my work. Thank you from the bottom of my heart!

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READERS! You all blow my mind. Thank you for all the kind words you have given and for taking the time to allow my stories to take up a little portion of your day. I write what I love to read, and I’m so honored to have a space in your libraries.

Author Bio

I've seen many ways authors go about making this page, but I'm going to make mine casual. I don't like writing about myself, nor do I want to do it in a formal way. I have to do that in my graduate program WAY too often. That being said, you get the real me for this.

I haven't had writers block up until this moment.

For starters, I love to read (crazy right?). When I was a pre-teen, I read constantly (YA Fantasy). It was a way for me to float off into another universe and avoid real life. I stopped reading at some point until COVID happened. That's when my obsession with reading began again. Reverse Harems came later, though. It just happened to be a coincidence that I picked one up. Now, I can't get enough!

As for writing, I have always loved to write and have taken as many creative writing classes as possible. Since I was that pre-teen sucked into stories about men with wings (and abs), I knew I wanted to be an author.

I turned to my husband a few months ago and said, "I can't wait to write a book someday." I was probably swooning over how amazing Kerry Taylor is. His response was, "Why not now?"

I messaged Kerry the next day, completely fangirling over my phone when she responded. And so, I began my debut with the support of my mentor, my husband, and my entire family.

I have poured my heart and soul into this fictional family; they truly are an extension of me. I can't wait to continue my

path of being an author... I don't think it's something I'll ever give up.

When giving your reviews, please be gentle. While I welcome constructive criticism, please be kind.

Thank you!