



PROFESSOR

TNK

AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR
F L O R A F E R R A R I

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PROFESSOR INK

INKED BY LOVE, 9

FLORA FERRARI

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

PROFESSOR INK

He's going to put me in detention if I keep drooling over him. Max Stellar is no ordinary professor.

Something caused me to run from the West Coast. It makes it difficult to trust. That's why I'm suspicious when Max Stellar offers to tattoo me.

I know it's inappropriate, but I like his professorial, bossy tone. I like the hunger in his eyes.

But does he really want me? I'm half his age and a virgin. Surely, he's out of my league.

I can't stop thinking about his dark ink showing through his shirt under the lecture hall lights. I go to him for my tattoo, and everything changes. It's steamy, intimate, possessive. Just when I think we might be able to make this work, he drops a bombshell on me.

He's tattooed himself on my heart, but I know I can never be with him. I can't kiss him. I can't even think about it. He lied to me, and he's not the only one.

** Professor Ink is an insta-everything standalone romance with a HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger.*

NEWSLETTER

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CHAPTER ONE

Ellie

I shouldn't feel like it's the first day of high school as I stand outside the lecture hall. I hold my books, feeling like a dork while trying to seem completely relaxed. Everybody around me is talking in small clusters, or that's what it looks like.

Reminding myself I'm not a kid anymore, I force my gaze to scan the large entrance hall. There are around forty people in here. *Most* of them are already talking to people, but a few, like me, are hovering on the edges. Maybe they feel the same gnawing, whispering dread at the prospect of putting themselves out there.

None of them can know about *the incident*, as I've come to think of it. The evil, crazy thing that happened to me. Or maybe I caused it. I don't know. I've never been able to decide whether I should take some of the blame for myself.

A woman catches my eye and smiles with the same shakiness I recognize. It's like I can *feel* the shape of her smile on my lips and all the uncertainty that comes with it.

I'd call that artsy-fartsy pretentious bull crap, but this is English Lit. Somehow, I think artsy-fartsy, pretentious bull crap flies here. That's a private joke just for me. There's no way I'd say it out loud and offend somebody before the academic year even begins.

The woman is blond, tall, and on the leaner side. It's like somebody has drawn a picture of my exact opposite. She shoulders her book bag, a green satchel with pins dotted all over it, and walks over to me.

"Uh, hey," I say, annoyed at myself for the *uh*.

She raises her voice over the surrounding chatter. "I was standing over there thinking, well, here it is, my first year at college, and I'm alone, a real loser. Then I saw you looking. I thought, hey, maybe we can be losers together."

She smiles tightly, then goes on, "That was a joke. My uncle said I should try to make a joke. Too blunt, right?"

I laugh, hoping I put her at ease a little. "Not too blunt at all. It's nice to talk to somebody."

"I'm way too blunt sometimes."

I shake my head. "Seriously, it's fine. I'm Ellie."

She sticks her hand out. She has jittery energy, almost bobbing on the spot. I wonder if it's her anxiety bubbling up in her, whereas mine folds inwards, disappears inside, and buries itself.

"I'm Chloe."

We shake hands, and she leans against the wall beside me. "Have you heard about Max Stellar? *Professor* Stellar, I should say."

"The man who's keeping us waiting?" I say, glancing at the clock.

She grins. "That eager to get started, are you?"

"Honestly, yeah. I've been building this up in my head all summer. The first class and all the ways it could go wrong."

"Jeez, sounds like being in my head. We really are two peas in a pod, Ellie."

I laugh when she playfully nudges my shoulder, feeling lucky she walked over, lucky this conversation feels so easy. It's far more effortless than my first conversations with people usually are.

"Have you heard, though?" she goes on. "He's a real hunk, apparently. I've

never been much of a Casanovia. You know, the female version of Casanova.”

“Did you just make that up?”

She beams. “Maybe, but the point is, be on your guard. Supposedly, he makes people *swoon*.”

I’m about to say I don’t believe her. I’m about to say it doesn’t matter because I’m here to learn and nothing else. I had too much drama before when everything went wrong, and all the bull crap stacked up and fell on my head.

Then I see it: women—and some men—swooning over Professor Stellar. I don’t see *him* at first, just the effect he’s having. Several women nudge their friends and nod over at him, blushing like they’re ashamed of how hot he is.

“I’m going to screw him by the end of the year,” I hear a woman say. Then she and her friend laugh loudly. She has a cheerleader look about her. Maybe she’s right. Maybe she will.

I turn, following their gazes, and then I know none of them can ever touch him. None of them get to stroke their hands up his large, muscular arms. His tattoos are just about visible beneath his white shirt. His broad chest and the lines in his abs are visible too. Or is that my imagination, my hunger?

He’s got black hair with flecks of silver, swept to the side and kept there with some product. His dark ink flashes through his shirt when he strides through the path of the overhead light.

He pauses. I swear, for a second, nobody else exists. He’s looking *right* at me. He’s staring into my soul like he wants a piece. I can hardly believe he’s doing this in front of everybody, just staring. I don’t understand why. He just looks at me, like he’s locked in place, and then quickly walks toward the door.

“Do you know him?” Chloe asks.

“No,” I murmur, my heart pounding too hard for no reason.

“He was really eyeing you up.”

“He wasn’t,” I say, blatantly lying, even to myself.

“Let’s get started, ladies and gentlemen,” Professor Stellar calls across the room.

He pushes the door open and walks toward the lectern like he has a vendetta against it. Chloe and I file in, my instincts guiding me toward the back of the class. That way, I can shrink into my seat, slump down, and try not to think about those clear, blue eyes staring *into* me. Then Chloe takes my arm and leads me to the front.

“I want to hear everything,” she says.

“Okay. Fine. Cool.”

My mouth is too dry, considering I drank about ten thousand gallons of water this morning. My lips stick together. When I move my tongue over them, Professor Stellar looks at me again. He towers over the lectern. When he grabs it, I’m sure I can hear the wood straining. His inked forearms are almost bulging out of his shirt.

“Let’s get settled down,” he says, his voice booming even when he doesn’t raise it.

There’s no mic. It’s just how he speaks, with confidence and power.

Finally, everybody is quiet. Professor Stellar leans against the lectern, looking over the classroom. I get the sense he looks at every student except me, but that’s probably just paranoia.

“What is love?” he says. “And, please, nobody say, *baby, don’t hurt me.*”

A few of us laugh—those who recognize the song he’s referring to. There’s something almost hypnotic about him when he speaks, keeping my gaze fixed firmly. I can sense Chloe glancing at *me* as if she can tell the effect he’s having.

Everything is getting hot. My body tingles, and my thighs ache. I push them together, ignoring the deeper ache, the shiver moving through me.

“That’s a question we must ask ourselves when studying the Shakespearean sonnets,” he says. “The nature and the shape of love. ‘My mistress’ eyes are

nothing like the sun.’ That’s not a compliment, but... Well, let me ask you—those who did the reading—what does *that* say about love?”

In typical first-class-of-the-year fashion, everybody looks around the classroom. There’s an atmosphere of not wanting to answer, a vague sense of judgment coming along with it, and the fear of *being a nerd*.

Max smiles, but his blue eyes stay cold. Or maybe that’s more imagining. “Anybody? There are no wrong answers. Well, some, but I’ll let you all believe you’re perfect for a few weeks.”

I laugh... way too loud, it turns out. Everybody turns to me for a moment. Ah, crap.

Max’s smile changes shape. It becomes something of a smirk. Is he making fun of me?

“Do you have any ideas...” he trails off, looking directly at me.

“Ellie,” I say, filling it in for him.

“Ellie?”

I swallow, my throat feeling raw. Talking in front of forty people is not a small thing, especially when I still have those high school holdups clinging to me. But high school is over, and it’s time to move on and be the person I want to be.

“The sun is unattainable,” I say softly.

Max nods. “Yes...”

“Especially to Shakespeare. He knew so little about it, historically speaking. It’s this impossible, magical thing. It can’t be possessed or controlled. Shakespeare is specifically saying his love is *real*. It’s so real that it has *nothing* to do with the fake, the impossible. It’s the complete opposite.”

I lick my lips. My heartbeat has picked up even more. It’s like my body thinks I’m running flat out from a mugger.

“Excellent,” Max says, voice quiet, eyes locked on me.

CHAPTER TWO

Max

The entire lecture hall has shrunk to one point—just one spotlight of attention.

Of all the thirty-seven students in here, I can't look away from her—Ellie. She sits in the front row wearing tights and a modest black skirt, still showing hints of those thick legs, the shape of her body, her wide hips, and her round, juicy tits.

Her face, cheeks flushed, is broad, beautiful, and so innocent I want to roar. *She's too young.* I try to repeat that in my head. She must be nineteen, maybe even just eighteen. I'm thirty-eight. Even if the age gap was smaller, she's my goddamn student. Thank God this lectern is here. My balls are aching. The tip of my dick hurts.

My heartbeat shivers when I look into her soft, loving eyes. It took a lot for her to put herself out there like that. I could hear it in her voice, but her answer was perfect, well-articulated. She's clever and sexy and beautiful.

Fuck. I want her. I need her, but I have to keep it together. A professor can't, under any circumstances, fall for his student. What am I, a cliché? I've been teaching for seven years and have never felt like this.

There's something else. The first moment I saw her, when she was waiting outside the classroom, it was like seeing a ghost. I thought I recognized her

for a second, but then her beauty stampeded over any other concerns.

“That’s it exactly,” I say, realizing I’ve spent far too long just standing here, thinking. “The love Shakespeare is talking about is precisely what Ellie said. Real. And he goes out of his way to say that.”

“But what about the totality of his work?” a student says from the second row. He’s a young man, leaning back confidently, with pale yellow hair grown long around his shoulders. When I gesture at him, he continues, “Shakespeare wrote... how many sonnets? One hundred and fifty?”

One hundred fifty-four, but only a douchebag professor would correct him there.

“That’s not real, that level of devotion, of idolization. That turns the love into something *surreal*.”

“But we don’t necessarily have to judge them all as one, do we?” Ellie responds.

Something tugs at my heart when I hear her voice, the confidence mixed with the shyness. There’s something within her trying not to let her speak, but she’s pushing past it.

“If our argument is about how Shakespeare viewed love,” the man continues, “I think we have to.”

“I disagree.” Ellie glances at me, but her gaze is low, so she looks through her eyelashes. It makes her look so young, shy, and off-limits that it hurts. I can’t have her, but she belongs to me. “I think we can judge each sonnet as a self-contained piece of art.”

“Hmm,” the man says.

I *really* need to get a grip now. When the man—the student—brushes his hair with his hand, then sneers at Ellie, I want to charge into the sea of students and clock his cocky little face. There’s something unacceptable about him looking at my woman that way or even *thinking* of looking at her that way.

Nobody gets to... Wait, what the hell?

My woman? When did she become *my woman*? The first moment I saw her,

honestly.

“We’ll have time for longer discussions in the seminar sessions,” I say. “For now, you’ll have to sit back and let me drone on for a while. Those were good contributions, though.” I force myself to say the next bit. “Both of you.”

For the rest of the session, I go into autopilot. It’s the only way I’m going to survive this. I also try not to look at Ellie for any meaningful length of time. Each time I glance at her, my mind catches alight, flames hissing with everything I’d do to her. Pull her to her feet, wrap my arms around her, and lean *down* to kiss her since I’m six-three and she can’t be any taller than five-five. Then I’d slide my hands down her body, grab her hips, and tear off her clothes.

I’d reveal her pale, flushed skin and then kiss every goddamn inch. Up her inner thigh, as I get closer to her heat, smelling her, getting drunk on her pheromones, her scent. My cock is rock hard. I’m in class, and my dick is hard. Jesus Christ.

I push my mind away, focusing on the poems, but that doesn’t help much. We’re talking about love. This whole module is about love. Obviously, I can’t say I love this woman, but I can’t describe my feelings as *nothing*, either. Something significant is happening here. I feel bonded to her, somehow, already.

Loyal to her. Protective *over* her. Already.

How? How the *fuck*?

Sitting in my office, I look over the quad. The afternoon sun shines down on the greenery. Students walk back and forth between the redbrick buildings, and more sit on the grass or benches. At the front of the quad, I spot a few non-students. There’s a café with outdoor seating right at the front, where people congregate when meeting students.

Even from where I’m sitting, I know it’s her from how she paces back and forth. It’s the shape and rhythm of her movements, and her clothes, too—the dark jacket and jeans despite the sun. It’s Vanessa. Oh, hell, is that why I recognized Ellie? Please, God, no.

Without thinking, I stand from my desk and hurry across my office, rolling down my sleeves. The college is okay about my tats if I keep them covered. I walk across the quad, my heartbeat drumming heavily again. It's done more heavy beating today than it has in years. The closer I get, the more confident I am.

Vanessa turns. She's short like her daughter. Her face crumples when she sees me. She looks behind her, then back at me, as if she wishes somebody was here so they could acknowledge the craziness too.

"Vee," I say.

She winces. "My name's Vanessa."

"My bad. You used to go by..." I trail off. It doesn't matter. "How are you, anyway?"

Do you have a daughter named Ellie? Is that why I recognized her?

She smiles tightly. "I'm fine. I moved out East a couple of years ago after... I'm fine. How are you? Are you a professor now?"

"English Literature."

"You always wanted to be a writer. Or a tattoo artist, right?"

I shrug. There's no point explaining all of it. "I always wanted to teach too."

"*After* you were a successful writer. Or you had your own studio."

I wonder if she's trying to hurt me. I wonder if I could blame her after everything. It was a long time ago, and what I did, fine, was bad, but it doesn't make me the devil. It wasn't goddamn evil. Was it? Is that just something I'm telling myself?

"That's life, I guess," I go on. "What about you? Still in the accountancy game?"

"I've got my own business. I'm doing well, thank you."

"I'm glad."

"Are you going to ask about Jane?"

I wince, which is probably the response Vanessa wanted. “How is she? It’s been a long time.”

“Yes, it has, but she’s a sensitive person. She’s never really gotten over it if you want the truth. Are you teaching my daughter, then? About my height, brunette. Her name’s Ellie.”

I guess she doesn’t want to talk about it from the way Vanessa breezes past the Jane stuff. She just wanted to let me know her sister has never recovered. Is that fair? Is that my fault?

My stomach tightens when I hear Ellie’s name.

“I am, yeah,” I say. “I had her this morning.”

I *had her*, sure, but not in the way I wanted. I didn’t tear off her modest skirt to feast on her beautifully thick, curvy body. I didn’t softly bite her inner thigh, then move higher until I could taste her, own her. I didn’t drive my hard dick deep into her.

Even now, I can’t stop when I’m talking to her mom. That either makes me a psychopath or means Ellie is as special as I think she is—as I *know* she is.

“It’s probably best if we pretend we don’t know each other,” Vanessa says after a pause. “We probably shouldn’t be talking. It means I won’t have to lie if she asks why we were speaking, okay? Can you do that, Max? Can you sort of just leave me the *fuck* alone?”

I step back, stunned at the viciousness in her tone. She’s talking to me like I’m unforgivable.

“Sure, Vee,” I say, turning away.

“My name is...”

But then I’m out of earshot. Or maybe it’s just the rushing in my ears. I can’t think about anything except the past. I was emotionally dead once, a husk, barely even a man. Honestly, I never knew I could feel deeply until earlier today when I saw Ellie for the first time. She broke me open, just by being there, by being her.

CHAPTER THREE

Ellie

“You didn’t have to pick me up,” I say, sitting in the passenger seat as Mom drives, the ocean glistening all around us, a wonderful summer’s day. It almost reminds me of the West Coast. “But thank you.”

Mom was a goth when she was younger. She’s got the same energy now with her all-black work clothes, and her demeanor is pretty dark today too. Her tone seems distracted. “I wanted to see how it went. I’m proud of you.”

“It went really well, thanks. It was a good day. I’m actually excited to go to work later too. Waiting tables feels good if I know I’m contributing to my education. Do you get what I mean?”

Mom nods, barely listening. I was wondering if she was annoyed and distant because of money. I think that’s my holdup, memories of the early years after Dad passed away and Mom struggling. She owns her own business now, a large accountancy firm. She’s doing well, but I’m still determined to help.

“Did you get on well with your teachers?” Mom asks a moment later.

“Oh, sure. It was great. I had two classes today. There was this professor. Max Stellar. He’s...”

“What?” Mom says, her voice tight.

“I don’t know. Interesting, I guess.” Her tone has put me off. “He was good

at his job. Very charismatic, but not in a showoff way.”

“And you liked him?” Mom says.

“Well, yeah, isn’t that a good thing?”

“No, Ellie,” she replies. “I mean, did you *like* him, like him?”

“You sound like a teenager.”

“Very well, madam,” she says, with a hint of her usual sarcastic self. “By any chance, did you feel any stirring of attraction to this man?”

“Mom, he’s my professor.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Why are you even asking that?” I say, closing my legs together again.

I’ve been doing that all day, ever since I first saw him. It’s like my body is trying to betray me every chance it gets. I can’t focus on anything except for him. I can’t think about anything except for Max Stellar, with the flecks of silver in his dark hair and his ink blazing through his shirt.

“Your voice changed,” Mom says, “when you spoke about him.”

I swallow, staring stubbornly out the window. It’s better than the view from our house was a few times before we moved. The mobs of people and once, there was even a *sign*. Somebody went to the effort to write it all down like it deserved the ink.

“Ellie,” Mom says sharply.

“What? I didn’t say anything. I just described what sort of professor he is.”

“It’s not an intelligent idea, falling for somebody like Professor Stellar.”

“What do you mean, somebody like him? You don’t even know what he’s like.”

“Neither do you,” she snaps. “You’ve had one class with him, and you’re already getting all lovey-dovey in your voice. Do *not* get a crush on your professor. It will never end well.”

I fold my arms tightly and keep staring. Something deep inside me throbs as if telling Mom no, she's wrong. It'll end perfectly. Unlike most books I'm studying this year, it will be happily ever after. It's going to be the best, brightest thing in my life. *Our* lives, mine and Max's. A future together. Amid the sun-bright vignette, I see a tiny silhouette and hear a soft baby's cry. My soul is hurting. I'm not even sure I believe in souls, yet mine's hurting.

"I didn't get lovey-dovey. I was just talking." I stare, stare, stare.

"Okay. Keep it that way. He'd lose his job, you know."

I turn to her. That's something I couldn't do. I couldn't hurt him. He clearly loves his job. He spoke so passionately about love, gesturing from behind the lectern, occasionally glancing at me with those intense blue eyes. "Really?"

"Yes. It's against the rules. It would probably be considered gross misconduct. Immediate dismissal."

"It's a good thing that A, I don't have a crush, and B, even if I did, he wouldn't want me anyway. So everything's fine."

"Any man would be lucky to have you, Ellie," Mom says softly. "But it would be better for everybody if that man wasn't over twice your age, not to mention your professor. Don't you agree?"

"Of course, I agree," I say. "I'm not going to do anything. There's nothing to do, anyway."

"Because you haven't got a crush on him."

"What are you, twelve?"

"You should've seen me at twelve," Mom says, laughing. "I was a little lunatic. I didn't care about boys. All I cared about was causing trouble. You were such a better kid than me, Ellie."

"Thanks, Mom."

"I just want you to be happy."

I sigh. "I get that, but it's my life."

“I’d have something to say if you *ever* did anything with a professor.”

“You’ve made that clear.” I turn to the window again. “I was right, anyway. He’d never want me.”

“You’re a beautiful young woman. You’re smart. You’re kind. You’re modest and hardworking. One day, you’ll find a man. I know you want a family. You’ll get one. I promise, but it won’t be somebody who’s in a position of power over you, in age, experience, and—”

“You’re beating the hell out of a dead horse right now, Mom. I get it. I’ve said I get it.”

We say nothing for a while, then she reaches over and squeezes my hand. “I’m only looking out for you.”

I give her hand a squeeze in return. “I know you are. I love you.”

Later, I’m waitressing at the local restaurant. It’s a busy evening. I’m helping the busboy carry trays to the kitchen when Lacy approaches me. Her eyes are red. She’s holding her cell phone in both hands, almost like she wants to snap it. She’s been waiting to hear about some adoption news. She’s been on edge all week. “Can you cover my tables? I’m sorry, but...”

“Is it...” I swallow.

She doesn’t need me to finish, nodding, almost bursting into tears. “They just called. It’s not good. I want to call my husband.”

“It’s okay. I can do it. Sure.”

“Thanks, Ellie.”

She almost runs toward the hallway to the staff room. My legs ache, my feet hurt, and my head is full of caffeine, literature, and work. It’s my fourth hour here. I scan her tables, then approach one. The closer I get, the tighter my throat becomes. My legs start to shake.

It’s him—his same bright hair, white, gleaming teeth, broad shoulders, and nasty muscles. It’s an insane thing to think, but that’s how I used to describe them to myself—nasty muscles.

He looks up at me, and his eyes narrow. That hurts, the moment he takes to remember me. After everything that happened, I'd expect him to know who the hell I am. He's sitting opposite a beautiful blond woman around our age, who I don't recognize. At least, that's something.

That doesn't mean he hasn't told her who I am. How long has he been here? Why *would* he tell her? We're not high schoolers anymore. It doesn't make me look bad. Does it? A pinball is bouncing around my head, and I can't control it.

I smile tightly. "Good evening, sir. Could I start you off with some drinks?"

This is his chance to go along with my play. We can pretend we don't know each other. We don't have to dredge any of it up, but instead, he runs a hand through his hair. I remember that gesture so well. He smirks, but it's not a Max-style smirk. It's an ugly, Cillian smirk.

"While I live and breathe. Ellie Rey. What a coincidence."

"I guess the world's like that sometimes," I say, feeling like there's a ball of fluff in my mouth, making it difficult to speak.

"I guess it is." Cillian looks at his date. "Ellie and I want to high school together, but she transferred..."

"Senior year," I say.

"How unusual," the woman mutters.

I shrug. "Yes, well... Would you like some drinks?"

Cillian drums his fingers against the table. "I hope you're not offering me alcohol, Ellie Rey. I'm underage."

The woman laughs like this is the funniest thing in the world. Right then—and this is cruel—I wish I could scratch Cillian's face over and over. I wish I could make him bloody, gruesome, and not attractive to this woman. Then she'd see he's *not* funny, and he's *not* cool, and he's *not* interesting. He just has the right bone structure, making people think he is attractive.

"You're too upstanding for that, aren't you, Ellie Rey?"

“Were you friends?” the woman asks like she can’t see how subtly intimidating and rude he’s being, but that’s one of his specialties. He can seem charming and disarming to everybody except the person he’s making fun of.

“Yes,” I tell her.

“Best friends, really,” Cillian says a moment later.

The woman scowls. I get it. She thinks the hitch in Cillian’s voice is because of some past relationship. It’s hilarious. By reading her face, it’s really what she thinks. She waves a hand at me like I’m a pesky fly.

“Then yes, we’d like some soda. Thank you.” She rolls her eyes at Cillian as if I’ve already left. “Did you two *date*?”

I turn away, not asking what kind of soda they want. This night sucks.

“Is something wrong?” Lacy asks when I walk to the counter.

“I thought you were speaking to your husband.”

“He didn’t answer. You look upset.”

I shake my head. How annoying. I’m close to crying, to breaking down, which is an involuntary response. It’s not something I *want* to happen or even approve of. When Lacy tries to touch my arm, I step away. “I’m fine. I can’t think about it right now. It’s no big deal compared to the stuff you’re going through. Don’t worry about me.”

“Honestly, I could do with a distraction.”

I shrug. “I know that guy from high school. That’s all.”

“Did he bully you?”

“Something like that.”

I won’t—can’t—say anything else. Otherwise, I’ll lose it. As I serve other tables, I realize I’ve only dealt with this by shoving it deep inside me and pretending that the East and West Coasts don’t exist in the same universe.

Crazily, I wish Max was here.

CHAPTER FOUR

Max

“Jesus, Ben,” I say, sitting behind the wheel of my car.

Ben sits next to me. I’ve known him since before I became a professor. He’s inked up, wearing a tank to show off the various tattoos, with no rhyme or reason, colorful displays right next to Viking runes or tribal swirls. Ben gets tattoos impulsively, and somehow, it suits him.

We became friends when I briefly worked at a studio. He’d come in often, and we’d shoot the shit. When I left, he couldn’t believe I was becoming a professor. He joked I’d get bored and return to inking folks like him.

“I know.” He leans against the dashboard, looking across the street at the crack den with boarded-up windows and the door hanging off the hinges. There’s graffiti, cinderblock, and needles strewn across the concrete. “My little girl could be in there.”

Ben rubs his tatted hands together, groaning. “A goddamn gymnast, Max. She tore her ACL. So what do they give her? Nirvana, oblivion. She never has to think. Not about her injury. Not about her mom’s death. And then, just like that...” He snaps his fingers. “They take it away. Now the streets have her. A man said that to me at a bar. *The streets have her*. I knocked his goddamn teeth out.”

“You’ll get her back,” I say.

“She promised me she’d go to rehab.”

I close my eyes momentarily, hating the pain in my friend’s voice. Weirdly—or maybe it would only seem weird to other people—I think of my and Ellie’s future children. I imagine what it would feel like if *our* daughter was there, but I have to remember Vanessa and Jane. I can’t get involved in that mess again.

“Let’s go check,” I say, pushing the door open.

“Are you sure? Maybe we should call her boyfriend. He’s the one who gave me this address.”

“We can handle it. If he’s a junkie too, you want to keep him away from her.”

Ben sighs. “Fair point, but do you think we can?”

“You can wait here if you want,” I tell him. “I honestly don’t mind.”

“We’re not all ten feet tall,” Ben grins shakily, “but we’ll go together.”

We step from the car and walk across the dark street. The lamps are broken around here. Again, as I approach the open doorway, I imagine my and Ellie’s daughter, the evil images I’d conjure if she were my blood. Music pumps from inside, pounding from deeper within the house.

“K-Kelly?” Ben calls. “You in there?”

“Let’s just look,” I grunt.

Ben takes a step back. “This place is goddamn terrifying.”

“Wait here,” I tell him, clapping him on the arm. “Keep guard.”

I walk into the hallway before he can respond. I want to make it seem like I gave him no choice, so he can still look at himself in the mirror later. Just because he’s scared, it doesn’t mean he doesn’t deserve to have pride.

Following the music, I carefully move down the hallway, checking rooms as I go. Most are empty and depressing. Dirty mattresses on the floor, grime all over the walls, needles everywhere. It reeks of piss, sweat, booze, weed, and a thousand other things. I arrive at what would’ve once been the living room.

There she is—Kelly. I knew her when she was just a little girl, a bright-eyed, excited thing flitting about the place. She was always practicing her flips and jumps. She’s passed out on a scraggly couch, wearing just her underwear, her hair across her face. Her chest is moving, at least.

Five men sit on a floor couch, but four hardly look like men. They’re skeletons with sunken cheeks. They’re husks. I feel bad for them, and I hate the fifth man. He looks well-fed and human, broad at the shoulders, with a bald head and a healthy red hue to his cheeks. The music is pumping so loudly that they don’t spot me at first.

I’m wondering what to do—sucker punch the prick?—when the actual human-looking one leans forward and reaches under a coffee table. I think it’s glass, but it’s covered in bottles, tobacco, needles, and powder, so I can’t be sure.

“Where are you?” the man grunts. “Come here. Don’t play games with me.”

Suddenly, I hear a *yap*—a dog’s yap. It cuts right through the music.

I rush into the room and stand over the man. He looks up, snatches his hand from under the table, and goes for my throat. I dart my hand out, grab his arm, and *really* squeeze. I squeeze with the strength of a man whose forearm curls eighty pounds regularly.

“What the *fuck* were you going to do to the dog?” I roar in his face. “And what the *fuck* have you done to the girl?”

The man reels back and tries to headbutt me while going for my throat with his other hand. I grab his other wrist, squeeze it, and crush it again.

Motherfucker. That was a dog’s bark. I hear it and look at the state of Kelly.

The man gasps. My vision wavers and I realize his headbutt connected. I’ve got his arms now, and I’m gripping him firmly. The other four just sit there. One is slowly turning as if trying with all his might to look at us, but it’s taking forever.

“Tell me.”

“Who the fuck are you?”

“Tell. Me.”

He whines when I apply more pressure. I’m bursting from the inside like a busted geyser. I’m struggling not to hurt this man seriously.

“Was going to have a little wrestle. Same thing with the bitch. She likes to wrestle too.”

He laughs, flashing a gold tooth. He’s younger than me. Physically, we’re on similar ground, but that doesn’t make what I do fair in the traditional sense. I’ve already got him beat.

He was going to hurt the dog. He probably already hurt my friend’s daughter. I drag him from the couch and throw him to the ground. He yells and tries to spring up, but then I kick him in the gut. Hard. I do it again. Three times, and then he rolls onto his side and starts wheezing.

Leaning down, I look under the table. My heart breaks. My mind flashes. Guilt stabs at me. The poor beast is only a tiny dog. I think it looks like a Chihuahua. I never dealt with them very much. Its fur is patchy and bald in places. It bares its teeth, snarling at me. I reach under, but the dog snaps, leaping away. Dammit.

Standing, I go to Kelly. She moans softly as I drape my jacket over her and gently lift her into my arms. Ben is walking down the hallway as I emerge. It’s only been a minute or so, maybe not even that. Clearly, he couldn’t just stand out there.

“Oh, Kelly,” Ben moans. “Oh, God. My poor baby.”

I carry her out to the car. Ben opens the back seat, and I lay her down softly.

“D-Daddy?” Kelly murmurs, struggling to sit up. Her eyes are half-closed, but she’s awake, alert, and alive.

“Where are you going?” Ben asks me.

“I won’t be long.”

When I return to the living room, the four men are in the same place, but the fifth is on his feet. He has the dog in his hand, held to his chest. The dog growls and trembles, its tiny, patchy-furred legs shaking.

“You ain’t taking my dog,” the man says. “You already took my girl. Not my dog too.”

He’s an idiot. He’s struggling even to hold the animal. His wrists are so messed up from where I grabbed him.

“Put the dog down.”

“You’ve got no right...”

“You’re mistreating that animal.”

“Look at him. Does he *seem* unhappy?”

I almost laugh. The question is downright insane. But maybe you’d have to be insane to function in a place like this and get used to ignoring reality. He’s creating his reality. I see four skeletal men and a mistreated dog. He sees four friends and a happy pooch.

The dog finally snaps. He latches onto the man’s finger, growling in wild desperation. The man yells and raises his other hand like he’s about to bring it down toward the dog, but I’m there first. I slam the man against the wall, curling my hand around his throat, and grab the dog simultaneously. The dog panics and bites down, but luckily only grabs a mouthful of my shirt.

I squeeze the man’s throat. I stare into his eyes as they bulge and turn red. I remember the other men, but not one of them is brave enough to help their friend.

Finally, he passes out. I let him fall to the floor like the sack of shit he is.

I carry the dog outside, supporting his fragile bottom as he holds my shirt tightly. After a few steps, he stops growling but keeps his teeth locked on the fabric. My heart aches as I imagine a future child doing the same with their little hand, right against my heart, with Ellie’s eyes looking up at me.

“P-Petey,” Kelly murmurs.

“You know this dog?” I ask her.

She nods, clearly still intoxicated. Her eyes are hazy, and her movements are sluggish, but when she gestures at me, Petey squirms as if he wants to be in

her arms.

“Okay, then.” I hand the dog over, then climb into the driver’s seat. “I’m taking you all to my place. I’ll call my private doctor and get an in-call for Petey. You’re all staying as long as you need.”

From the back seat, Ben says, “Are you sure?”

“No arguments. Kelly needs a stable place right now.”

Ben nods and smiles at me in the rearview. He’s one of the few people who know how I made my money and why I live on an enormous property outside the city. There are fences, security, and all the privacy a person could want. He understands how I can afford that luxury.

“Your place?” Kelly says as she gently strokes Petey in her lap. “Not... in the... city?”

Ben frowns. “I’m going to be there every step of the way.”

Kelly laughs, but it somehow sounds sad. “I’m going to hate you tomorrow. Can you believe that?” She laughs sadly again. “I’m going to hate you for getting me out of that shithole.”

I start the engine and drive away.

There’s a flicker in the dark at the side of the road. Somehow, it looks like Ellie. It has her shape. It’s like she’s walking toward the crack den, but my mind is trying to taunt me. If Ellie had been lying in Kelly’s place, I would’ve killed that prick.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ellie

“It wasn’t *that* bad,” I say, sitting with Chloe in the cafeteria.

After our first lesson, we exchanged numbers and agreed to meet before our next English Lit class. I’m so relieved, honestly, because I get way too stressed about stuff like waiting alone. Now it’s even worse because I know I’ll see Max.

“Running into your high school bully at work?” Chloe frowns, shivering like she’s covered in bugs. “That sounds like hell. Did it get worse?”

“He was mostly friendly because he was trying to impress his date, but it was how he looked at me. It’s like he was trying to make me that person again.”

“You can be whoever you want to be. That sounds like the world’s biggest cliché, but it’s true. Like with me, you can be anybody. If you make a joke, I won’t say, *Whoa, you don’t usually make jokes* or whatever. However you want to be, I’ll accept it.”

“What if I want to be a serial killer?”

“Whoa, you don’t usually make jokes.”

We both laugh. Chloe tugs on her long sleeves. I spot some ink as she adjusts her hoodie.

“I’m sorry,” I say when she catches me looking. “I thought I saw a tattoo.”

She grins and rolls her eyes. “On holiday. A peacock. I thought I wanted a freaking *peacock* on my arm because they were so pretty.”

I laugh. “How old were you?”

“Seventeen, but it was legal over there. Have you got any ink?”

I shake my head. “I’ve been thinking about getting something myself.”

“Oh yeah? What?”

I swallow. At least I swerved from talking too deeply about Cillian and the West Coast and all that stuff he dragged up. It’s like being punched in the face with the past. Only I can’t punch back.

“I’m not sure, exactly,” I say. “Something for my dad. He-he’s not here. I mean, he passed when I was eight. The big C. You know how it is. Bad luck. That sort of thing.”

I’m babbling now. It’s like my lips are moving without my permission. I wonder if I’ve sounded callous, but then Chloe catches my eye and smiles as if she understands me. “I’m sorry. What would you get?”

I shrug. “I’ve got no idea. I’m not very... visually talented?”

“Maybe the tattoo artist could give you some advice,” Chloe says, and then she erupts into a big, beaming grin as she looks over my shoulder.

I turn, following her gaze. My insides twist in lust. My heart starts its predictable yet distracting pounding. A fine layer of sweat instantly covers me.

It’s Professor Stellar. Only today, he looks hellishly dark and focused. His eyes are narrowed, and he seems tense all over. It’s like he’s ready for a fight or ready to claim somebody fiercely. Or maybe he did last night, had some primal steamy time, and that’s why he looks like that. I’m torturing myself.

“Why don’t we ask Professor Stellar?” Chloe says. “He’s got ink. I bet he could help.”

I turn quickly to Chloe. “No, please. Don’t say anything.”

“Professor—”

“Chloe.”

She stops, flashing me a look of apology. I think she got too excited, but it's too late. Professor Stellar has come to a stop next to our table. He looks so massive as he stands over us, staring down with red eyes as if he hasn't slept. His hands are tight fists at his sides.

“Yes?” he says.

“Uh...” Chloe looks at me, eyes wide. “I wanted to ask...”

My cheeks are burning. I try to remember what Mom said about professors. She's right. Up close, with his steaminess so near, I can see how mismatched we are or would be, but that doesn't stop my body from pulsing. My body is longing for his.

“About tattoos,” I say because the tension is too much. “I'm thinking of getting one.”

A smirk briefly touches his lips, but his blue eyes are steady and blue. “What sort?”

Is that funny? I want to ask. Me getting a tattoo?

“I'm not sure. Something to honor my dad. He passed when I was eight.”

Luckily, this time, I manage to hold back the babbling.

“I could've helped you once,” he says, laughing in a reminiscent way.

“*You* were a tattoo artist?” Chloe says, and I wonder if she's flirting with him, and the thought makes me sick.

“Once,” Professor Stellar nods.

“What happened?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Life, I suppose. I found other passions. I can get you some recommendations.”

“Thank you, Professor.”

He tightens his fists when I say *professor*. It's like a reverberation moves through his whole body, and I wonder if he likes it, hearing that word on my lips. Does he want me to say it in other contexts and under different circumstances? I wonder if it makes him ache all over, like thinking of it, all this, *him*, makes me ache.

"Sure," he says, turning away.

"What climbed up his ass and died?" Chloe says once he's gone.

"He definitely seemed angry."

"Yeah, I'll say. No, thank you. I don't need some grumpy man in *my* life."

She laughs, and I smile. Not because it's funny but because it means she's not interested, as if that has any bearing on my life, whether or not Chloe wants him. It shouldn't matter, but I'm relieved.

"Think about love in a technical sense," Professor Stellar says, pacing up and down in front of the lectern. His black shirt hugs his biceps each time he gestures with his hands. "It's fairly modern, the general idea we have of it: the songs and the Hollywood stuff. Love was more like duty once. In many sonnets, Shakespeare argues they can be the same. Love and duty. You can experience the primal passion *while* knowing you'd never fail in your duty."

He stops, and I swear, for a second, he looks right at me. A tingle travels from my lower half, up over my belly, and to my breasts. My clit rubs against my underwear. My lips feel warm and swollen. I distance myself from it, viewing it biologically, because it's so damn inappropriate. He's making me burn here in class.

"You might argue, for example, that a Shakespearean view of love is being willing to live *and* die for somebody, to combine the romanticism of Romeo with the blunt reality of *My Mistress' Eyes*."

Is he saying *our* love will be like that? We'll have the passion and the fire and the heat, and we'll also have the unquestionable knowledge that we belong together. We'll fight to stay together, no matter what the world throws at us.

A student raises their hand and offers a new perspective, but I'm stuck on Professor Stellar's words. I can't stop thinking about those words, my body responding to them, my core getting so hot, burning. No, not here. I can't think like that.

I spend the rest of the class staring down at my notes. I don't speak because I'm not sure I'll be able to. That talk about love and duty has triggered too much in me. Soon, it's the end of the class. We all start filing out, but then Professor Stellar approaches me.

"Ellie," he says, "would you mind waiting behind?"

Chloe shoots me a look, and I shrug. I wonder if any of the other students are looking too. The cheerleader-type girls aren't here today, but I bet they'd be giving me evil looks if they were.

Soon, it's just me and Professor Stellar. The door closes, making the room seem bigger but also impossibly small. It's as if there's not enough space for us as he stands in front of the lectern, and I stand a few feet away. He glances at the door, then walks right up to me. I have to crane my neck to look up at him. He stares right into my eyes.

"Is everything okay, Professor?" I whisper, hardly able to force the words out.

He opens his mouth, then laughs at a joke only he knows, but it's not in a secret, mocking way.

"There's something I have to tell you," he says after a pause, quickly getting intensely serious.

"Yeah?" I murmur, wondering if this is it.

CHAPTER SIX

Max

She looks up at me, her lips slightly parted as if expecting a kiss. She's wearing a white shirt buttoned up to the top. It highlights the shape of her perfect, juicy tits and shows the outline of her bra too.

I've been rock-fucking-solid during this whole lesson, my member jerking when I take in the sight of her thick legs in those black pants. I think about hugging them and what it would be like to massage her possessively.

I've got to stop myself, and this is my plan. Tell her the truth. Tell her what I did to her Aunt Jane, give her both sides and let her side with her family. It's the right thing to do, but the longer we stare at each other, I realize that's bullshit.

I can't tell her. It's not my place. I just wanted her to stay behind so I could look at and be close to her. I'm doing what every goddamn pervert professor has ever done. Is it better because I want to be with her forever? Need to?

"P-professor?" she murmurs. "What is it you want to tell me?"

I take another step forward, aware I need to stop. I'm getting far too close. This is Jane's *niece*. Sure, Vanessa hadn't even met Ellie's dad when we all knew each other, but that connection is too strange, especially with how we left things.

I'm so close now that I can smell her shampoo. I'm staring right down into

her wide, green eyes.

“Your... contributions to the class,” I say, struggling to find my voice.
“They’ve been excellent. All of them.”

“I didn’t say anything today, sir.”

Sir. That makes my shaft blaze, the base almost hurting with the tension. Something in those wide eyes almost turns me into a beast. I’m too primed from last night, pissed at the administrators for booking two classes in this module two days in a row.

“Still,” I say weakly. “Excellent work.”

She lowers her gaze. Oh, fuck, is she doing this on purpose? She bites her lip, giving her the cutest, sexiest look. I almost reach down and start rubbing my hard dick to release some tension.

I’m shaking. I need to fuck her. Get her tits nice and slippery with oil or precome or spit, then slot my dick between them, grind against her as she moans and begs for my seed. She’ll want it in her tight, young, fertile womb.

She’ll want me to explode in her, so much it spills out of her. Then I’ll finger her hard, driving my seed deep, and make her come. That will get me hard again, the sight, feel, taste, and smell of her creaming for me.

I’ll fuck her again, relentlessly, hard. I’ll bend her over and claim her like the primal animal she makes me. I’ll grab her childbearing hips and slam into her while staring at her thick ass rippling for me.

“Thank you, sir.”

I almost groan when she repeats it. My balls are swelling.

“Are you still thinking of getting that tattoo?”

She smiles a little shakily. For a second, I don’t think she’s going to respond. Then she gets sassy and says, “I haven’t changed my mind in the last two hours, no.”

I smirk. “You never know with your generation.”

That turns her pouty, which gets my cock swelling even more. “We’re not

completely different generations...”

“Newsflash, Ellie. I’m thirty-eight. You’re barely out of high school.”

“I’m nineteen,” she says, as if offended. When she stands up even straighter, her breasts sway subtly, causing my finger to twitch. “And anyway, I believe maturity is more important.”

I’m so close to leaning forward, touching and grabbing her. I’d submerge my hands into her hips, feel her curviness, then drive my manhood forward and let her feel how hard she makes me. My tip is leaking hot precome. Thank God I’m wearing black pants.

“Were you really a tattoo artist, Professor?”

“Yes,” I say breathily, thinking of her naked skin, a needle gently pressed against it, my woman moaning like it’s making her sappy hole wetter.

“That’s cool. Do you think you could...”

This is where her bravery fails her. She stops herself from going the rest of the way. I could change the subject here and get her talking about something else. I could tell her I’ve got a meeting. I could say anything. I *know* this is a bad idea.

“I could still ink somebody up,” I say, smirking. “I’ve even got a kit. I’ve done a couple for my friend, Ben.”

I think of Ben at home, Kelly detoxing, and Petey dosed up on meds from the vet.

“Hmm...” She raises her eyebrow, a playful smile touching her lips simultaneously.

“Are you trying to drop a hint, Ellie?”

“It wouldn’t be... inappropriate, would it?”

I swallow. We’re crossing a line. “There’s no reason anybody has to know.”

That, right there, is the point of no return. What I just said. It’s *my* place to know better. Even if she wants to be alone with me, I should stop it, but I want it too damn bad. That’s the blunt truth.

“That’s true,” she murmurs. “Maybe... I don’t know. We’ll arrange something?”

“If I give you my cell number, can I trust you not to spread it around?” I ask.

“I promise, sir.”

My balls go tight. My head swims. I’m sure she did that last *sir* on purpose. I think she knows the effect she’s having on me.

“Okay, thank you,” she says.

I watch her go, staring at her thick ass. Then she glances over her shoulder, and we smile at each other. I can imagine telling our grandchildren about that smile.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ellie

I walk up the driveway, knowing something's up when I see Aunt Jane's car. She stayed on the West Coast. She has a job out there, a fiancé, a life. It didn't make sense for her to move just because her niece's world became unbearable. We still talk often.

I'd know if she was planning on visiting. The tidings get hella worse when I walk into the hallway and hear the sound of her crying. This isn't just crying. This is *wailing*. This is like all the agony in the world is spilling out of her.

I rush into the living room to find Aunt Jane sprawled out on the couch, her face red, her eyes swollen. She looks possessed. It makes me feel guilty, but my first reaction is fear.

Mom sits on the edge of the couch, holding her shoulders and talking quickly, but nothing's getting through. Aunt Jane screams at the ceiling.

"What's wrong?" I say, standing near them. "Aunt Jane?"

"He... he found somebody else. This whole time. With somebody else. And he chose her. I didn't even know she existed, and he chose her."

She lets out another horrible wail. I kneel next to her, placing my hand in hers.

"I'm so, so sorry. I don't know what to say."

Aunt Jane sits up, glancing at Mom. It's like my presence has calmed her down a little. Or maybe it's because she's always tried to seem strong in front of me. She's more willing to lose control with her sister, Mom.

"He cried when he told me. He said it was the hardest thing he'd ever done, but she was pregnant, and he wanted to *do the right thing*. Can you believe that? That's what he said. We were together for four years. We were going to get married. He told me he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me."

I squeeze her hand, not sure what else to do.

"So I got in my car, drove across the country, and here I am."

"She hasn't slept," Mom says softly.

"This has *nothing* to do with my sleep schedule."

"It does," Mom says, blunt now. "You need rest, but you've chugged too many caffeine drinks."

"I suppose if I'd consumed less caffeine, he wouldn't have left me."

"Jane."

"At least it wasn't at the altar."

"Do you want a drink, Aunt Jane?" I ask. "Water? Hot cocoa? I'll make it how you used to make mine, with the marshmallows."

"Sure, kid," Jane says, slumping on the couch. "That would be aces."

It's something she used to say, and it makes me smile. Preparing the cocoa, I try to work this out—Aunt Jane and her love life from hell. Mom will never give me the details, but I know Aunt Jane has had it tough, even before I was born. There's an event hinted at a few times but never outright acknowledged.

I've never asked either of them about it. I'm not sure what I'd say. *You got this look in your eyes once, making me sure something was going on*. They'd probably think I was crazy.

When I return with the cocoa, Jane seems a little less frazzled. She's tied up her hair and rolled up the sleeves of her hoodie. She sits with her knees to her

chest, arms wrapped around them.

“Do you mind if I stay here a while, kiddo?” Aunt Jane says.

I glance at Mom. Clearly, they’ve been talking about it. Mom seems tense. She’s never liked Aunt Jane staying with us. Like classic sisters, they always bother each other with petty arguments that sometimes spiral. But these seem like special circumstances.

Mom nods, basically telling me the choice is mine.

“I don’t mind,” I say.

Jane smiles. If I was more suspicious, I might say her smile seems a little broad and carefree for somebody who’s just lost the love of their life to another woman.

“Anyway, what’s new?” Aunt Jane asks. “How’s college?”

“It’s fine,” I say, remembering how that conversation went *last* time.

“Anything else?”

“I’m thinking of getting a tattoo.”

Jane beams. “*Now* we’re talking.”

“To honor Dad.”

“Whoa, buzzkill.”

“*Jane*,” Mom hisses.

“I’m only kidding.”

“It’s fine,” I say again, wondering if that’s normal, how blunt she’s being, but she’s been through a lot. She hasn’t slept.

“What sort of tattoo?” Jane asks.

“I’m not sure. He loved classic cars. Maybe a car with *Dad* on the license plate or something like that. I don’t know. Maybe it’s driving off into the sunset, representing him going to a better place.”

“Are you religious now?” Jane asks.

I shrug. “It’s just an idea.”

Mom shoots Jane a look. “I think that’s a wonderful idea, Ellie.”

“Thanks, Mom. I’ve got some studying to do.”

The truth is, I don’t want to be around Jane. I can’t stand her tone, but I get why she might be on edge. I don’t want to snap at her accidentally. I feel guilty for even getting annoyed with her.

Upstairs, I think about that idea. I think about Max Stellar guiding the needle over my skin, outlining the car and the sun. Then I think about *us* riding into the sunset together—he and I and all that tension. I wasn’t imagining it, was I? Every time I said *sir*, it was almost as if he liked it. It was almost as if he wanted me to keep saying it over and over and over.

I sit at my desk, looking over my notes, ignoring his number written in the top corner of my book. I still haven’t added it to my phone, as if that will somehow stop me from going through with this.

After he gave me his number, I said I could text him so he’d have mine. He said I didn’t have to, not yet. “You can do it later.” He was trembling all over unless my mind was playing tricks on me. It’s like there was an earthquake deep inside of him, thrumming, and he was going to grab me. He was going to make me his in every sense of the word. He was going to own me.

I shouldn’t want that. I shouldn’t think like that. It’s an insane way to think, to classify oneself as being *owned*, but what if I want it? Is it really so bad? Does it make me a terrible person?

I want to be his woman. I want him to get jealous. Not crazy, but jealous like he cares, like he knows no other man ever gets to touch me. Just like no other woman ever gets to touch *him*.

Pushing away from the desk, I breathe heavily. I’m getting lost in the most ridiculous thoughts. It’s selfish of me to be so consumed with myself when Aunt Jane is going through the worst time in her life downstairs, and all I can think about is Professor Stellar.

Quickly, I type the number into my phone. I compose a text.

Hello, Professor Stellar. It's Ellie from English Lit, Shakespearean Sonnets. I was wondering if you are still okay with possibly tattooing me. Thanks so much, x

I remove the kiss and then send it, waiting for his reply. *My heart, my heart, my heart*, a voice taunts in my head, taking on the tone and tenor of a bully. *My heart...* It's all I think about. How quickly it picks up sometimes, like it's all happening again, Cillian and the rest of it, the panic attacks and the pain. Like every time anything good happens, there's always something vicious waiting right in its shadow.

Three dots appear on the text thread—he's typing a message—and then nothing. No message. The dots go away.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Max

I sit on the back porch with Petey in my lap. The patchy-furred dog is far friendlier than he was last night. Or maybe it's all the medicine the vet has given him, making him quiet and affectionate.

He's so tiny, far smaller than other Chihuahuas. It's enough to make a man cry, holding my hand against his chest, feeling his little heart beating against my palm. It's enough to make a man savage, thinking about other tiny hearts beating, other lives, and the future.

Now, my woman has texted me. I started writing a response but didn't know what to say.

My large back garden glistens in the setting sun, the shadows getting long. The sprinklers kiss the air. It's serene, or it should be—enough for any man to settle down and be happy. But alone? I never knew I could think about the future before seeing her yesterday. I'm losing my fucking mind. It's almost like I want to go crazy, then I don't have to face the cold fact of what I'm doing.

I hear Kelly crying in the house behind me, and Ben's voice raised. They're arguing about something that happened when she was still in school. Something about prom, but Kelly's been chipping at him all day. It's not her fault. It's the filth leaking out of her system.

I scoop Petey up, cradling him softly to my chest, and walk barefoot through the garden. The lawn is cool against my feet. Petey whines gently, and I put him down. He quickly does his business, then walks tiredly over to me, whining again.

“I’m sorry for whatever they did to you, boy,” I say, scooping him up, thinking of the man I left on the floor last night. I’ve got no clue how badly I hurt him.

I look at my phone again, chewing the inside of my cheek. It’s a bad habit that takes me back to those dark days, the fights, the teeth, and the wrongness.

I call her.

“H-hello?” she murmurs, a hitch in her voice.

“It’s Pro... Max,” I say. What use does the *professor* title have now? “I got your text,” I go on, “about the tattoo.”

“Oh, yeah. Cool.”

There’s a pause. The whole time, I’m thinking about how I need to stop, but I can’t.

“Did you have any ideas?” I ask.

“I did earlier. Dad really loved cars. I was thinking of a car driving into the sunset. Maybe with *Dad* on the license plate?”

“That’s a great idea,” I tell her. “I could do that. Where...” My mouth gets dry, my balls swell, and my cock gets hard immediately. “Where on your body would you want it?”

Her *body*. My mind goes to every part of her body, her voluptuous tits and wide hips.

“On my upper shoulder, I think. That way, I can hide it if I want to, like you do.”

“I can take care of that, no problem,” I say.

“Where? When?”

She gets breathless toward the end. The crazy part is I don't think she's doing it on purpose. I don't think that excitable hitch in her voice is staged. It's just Ellie being who she is.

"You shouldn't rush into a tattoo," I tell her. It hurts me to say it.

"I know. I just... You're right."

"I've got everything I need at my house."

Are students supposed to go to their professor's houses? I almost want her to say, but it's unfair for me to put the responsibility on her. I'm supposed to know better. She's a warm-blooded, sexy-as-hell woman, but she's still a student.

Do I know she wants me? Even if she does, she won't want me in the same way I want her.

Behind me, Kelly yells. I turn, wondering if I should change the venue, but my house is the safest spot—less chance of anybody seeing us. Ben and Kelly won't say anything.

"Where do you live?" she asks. "I don't have my license. I'm getting it, but... Driving makes me nervous. I *am* getting it, though."

"I believe you. I know you can do it."

She laughs softly. "How can you know that, sir?"

I bite down. My shaft gets hard again, the tip burning warmly. "I just do. You're a strong person. I can tell."

"I like to think so, but it doesn't always feel that way."

You're going to make an incredible mother, I almost say, which is the most absurd thing I could say.

"What about tomorrow?" I say. "Around seven p.m.?"

"Uh, yeah," she replies. "Oh my God, yes. I'm doing this. I've wanted to for a while. Are you sure?"

"Are you sure, Ellie?" I growl. "Really think about it."

“I am, Professor,” she whispers in the sexiest, most breathy voice.

“I can pick you up or send a car for you.”

She sighs softly. “I suppose it’s better if we’re not seen together, right? We both know you’re just doing me a favor, but other people might not see it that way.”

“I’m just doing you a favor,” I say, nodding. I get it. The game we’re playing. “I can send a car.”

“Maybe I’ll get a ride. I’ll let you know. Text me your address.”

“I will. See you tomorrow, Ellie.”

I hang up, walking quickly around the garden. There’s no excuse for this. There would be no excuse even if she weren’t Vanessa’s daughter. There would be no way to justify it but add the Jane connection...

At least she’s not in the equation. At least it’s just Vanessa. She always seemed like a reasonable person, though that was years ago. I know I’m a much different man from the one I was then. Most people change as they grow older.

So I should focus on *that*, then. Ellie’s age. The fact she’s not mature enough to choose to spend the rest of her life with me. That’s what it will come to eventually. That’s what I’ll need from her.

I return to the porch. Ben and Kelly are sitting side by side. They’re holding hands, Kelly’s eyes red, her body shuddering as sweat pours from her. “I said sorry.” She smiles hazily at me. “I said some awful stuff, but I said sorry. It just hurts so bad.”

“You’re almost over the worst of it now,” Ben says, looking almost desperately at me like he wants me to make it true somehow.

“You’re strong, Kelly,” I tell her. “You’ve always been strong.”

“Not since I hurt my knee.”

“Even after that. Some people would’ve completely lost hope, but you keep trying.”

She blinks, tears sliding down her cheeks. “Thanks, Max.”

Petey whines, and I carry him onto the porch, placing him in Kelly’s lap. He curls into a ball and starts snoring softly.

“He always loved me. No matter how bad it got in there.”

“Did they...” Ben cuts himself off. “I’m sorry.”

“I...” Kelly swallows, shudders all over. “It was payment for the pills. The medicine.”

Ben scowls. “It wasn’t medicine. It’s fucking poison.”

“I know, Dad.”

I leave them to it, ignoring an ugly voice inside of me. It’s so cruel. Ben’s wife died. Kelly got injured. Now there’s a voice inside my head that wasn’t there before, one of fatherhood, one intent on doing the right thing. Ben should’ve stopped her from ever going down this road. He should’ve held her prisoner if that’s what it took, but that’s not fair. I’ve never been a father.

Well, sort of. Once. A long time ago. I’m not sure it counts. It was the only thing before Ellie that brought me true hope. A shred of light that told me I might be something, someone significant. I might feel something. Still, I’m not sure it counts. I don’t know what that says about me.

Later, I’m lying in bed, my body nice and sore from a workout. Petey is curled in a ball next to my feet. Every time I move, he grumbles and peels one eye open, staring at me to remain in place. The little guy’s becoming attached to me quickly. I need to decide about keeping him soon. It would already be cruel if I gave him away. Could I do that now that I’ve spent time with him? I don’t think so. Maybe I’m not a heartless prick after all. Of course, Kelly might want to keep him, but I’m not sure she’s in any state to take care of the little pup.

My phone vibrates. It’s Ellie. *Are you having a good evening, Professor?* I smirk—knowing it’s wrong, always knowing that—and grab my phone. I call her again.

“Don’t you know how to text?” she says, with a teasing, sassy note in her

voice.

“I told you. We’re different generations.”

She sighs, seeming really not to like it when I point out the difference in our ages. “Maybe I don’t like my generation or many members of it. Maybe I think many of us are herd-minded fuckwits who are, frankly, cruel and hollow.”

I chuckle. “That’s quite the indictment.”

“I’m not joking, either.”

I sit up at the sharpness in her voice. “Are you okay, Ellie?”

“I’m... yeah, fine, fine. You know. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have texted. Maybe it’s me being *immature*.”

“Are you going to sulk on me?”

“You’re so good at teasing.”

“If something’s wrong, you can tell me.”

I mean it, though it’s the last thing I should say, the last thing which should be *true*, talking with a student like this.

“It’s nothing, except I moved from the West Coast a while ago. Somebody from the West Coast came to the restaurant where I work last night.”

“I take it you weren’t happy to see him?”

I sit up, causing Petey to turn and glare at me. There’s an edge to my voice as I think about somebody intimidating my Ellie or making her life worse in any way possible.

“He was a bully. I guess you could call him that. I don’t know. I never talk about this.”

“You don’t have to,” I tell her, “but you can.”

She sighs, then laughs. “You know how crazy this is, right? Us talking like this, Professor?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t talk with students like this all the time, do you?”

I could wriggle out of this. I could gaslight her and state that I’m supporting her in an academic capacity, nothing more. I’m giving her the emotional guidance the college prides itself on, some bullshit like that, but she deserves the truth.

“No, Ellie, I don’t. I’ve never given a student my phone number.”

I wait for her to ask why *her*. I’m not sure I’d have it in me to lie to her if she did. Instead, she pauses and waits. “Do you really want to know?” she says after the pause.

“I want to learn more about you,” I say, and she’s got no clue how true that is.

She lets out a long breath. “Basically, in school, I was always shy and bookish. I didn’t really mind, except I was a kid. I was still susceptible to the things other kids were. Wanting to be popular, all that stuff. I wasn’t thinking clearly. I had such little experience talking to people. All I did was read books.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” I say.

“You *would* say that, an English Lit professor.”

I chuckle. “Still, I didn’t speak to people much growing up.”

“What? Really? Why?”

I smirk. “You sound surprised.”

“You just seem so confident.”

“If I am, that came later. As a kid, I’d sometimes go weeks without speaking to anybody. My parents passed when I was young. My uncle—the man who took me in for a while—was an evil man. He ran a dog fighting ring. He forced me to care for the dogs.”

I softly stroke Petey with my foot, and he whines and rolls onto his side.

“Then I ran away. I got sent into the system instead. It was bad in many ways, but at least I didn’t have to see those dogs get hurt. I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m telling you this.”

“It’s okay, Max,” she says, pausing on my name as though testing it. “That’s awful. I’m so, so sorry. Thank you for telling me. I know it’s hard.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“Still, those poor dogs.”

I swallow. “Sometimes, I hear them. A few years later, as a teenager, I ran into one man who often visited the fights. He recognized me and laughed about it. I broke his nose, Ellie. I seriously hurt him badly.”

My voice is dead. I’m not bragging. Sometimes, looking back on the more violent parts of my life, I’m shocked at how fierce I can be.

“Seriously, thank you for sharing that,” she murmurs.

I never meant to, but talking to her is far easier than it has any right to be.

“What were you saying? I derailed you.”

She pauses and breathes softly. “It was nothing as terrible as that. I almost feel silly explaining it now.”

“You don’t have to downplay your emotions,” I say fiercely. “You don’t have to pretend to be somebody you’re not or doubt yourself. Not with me.”

Again, she could ask what the hell I’m talking about. We haven’t touched. We haven’t even kissed, but I’m speaking as though we have some deep, unbreakable bond.

“This jock called Cillian asked me to the junior prom. He asked me in front of the whole cafeteria, and I was stunned. I didn’t even really like him. That’s *my* fault, saying yes to somebody just for the... the... I don’t even know now! The social side of it.”

“I understand. Every teenager wants to fit in and be popular.”

“That’s all it was,” she sighs. “It seems so silly now. Anyway, I show up at prom. He takes me into a closet because he has a *surprise*. He says it’s a

special outfit. He blindfolds me. Then he puts a pig's snout and ears on me, leading me out of the closet. All his buddies are there, snapping photos, making noises, and laughing."

My hand tightens around the phone. I imagine it's this prick's throat—this *Cillian*. I envision I'm squeezing until all the life drains from him.

"He had no right to do that," I snarl. "The pathetic mongrel."

"That wasn't even the worst part," she says, laughing darkly. "I wish it had just been that night—a horrible prank and some stupid laughs. The photos and the videos went around our school, then to every school in the county and *state*. I was a meme—a joke. People laughed just because I was there. I'd walk down the hallway, and everybody, every single person, would laugh. Some would do worse."

I'm trembling all over. I'm thinking of this bastard, this *Cillian*, of seriously hurting him.

"And he was the one at the restaurant?" I say.

"Yeah," she laughs again, but there's no humor in it. "He didn't make a big deal out of it, but I could see it in his eyes. I don't know what to do if he comes back."

"You can call me if that happens," I growl.

"Really?"

"Really. You can call me."

"Thank you, Max. I might do that."

We both know how ridiculous this is. Why would she call me, a stranger?

"I should get going," I tell her. "See you tomorrow."

After saying goodbye, I carry Petey to the end of the hallway, to Ben's room, and knock on the door. Once Ben has agreed to take him, I go into the gym.

I think of *Cillian*, and I beat the punching bag so hard my knuckles bleed.

CHAPTER NINE

Ellie

“This is a *tattoo* studio?” Aunt Jane says, driving us down the forest road toward Professor... toward *Max*’s house.

“It’s a, uh, private session,” I murmur.

I should’ve taken Max up on his offer for a ride, but I wasn’t thinking clearly. It’s hard to keep my thoughts straight when speaking to him.

I can’t believe I told him about the Cillian stuff, the *incident*. Talking to him is way easier than it should be. We haven’t said anything outright romantic, but last night, it felt like we had the potential to go there. It was in the way he spoke, borderline possessive, commanding, and now, *sir* is going to ink my skin.

“How are you feeling today?” I ask, which typically knocks Jane off course.

She rants about her no-good ex-fiancé. I say all the right things, but I’m so nervous, butterflies dashing around my belly the closer we get to his house. When I see it, I almost gasp—no clue how he can afford this on a professor’s salary. Is he some kind of criminal? Or does he have an inheritance?

It’s a large estate surrounded by a metal fence. Through the slats in the fence, I can see a long gravel pathway winding up to the front door: stone steps, gargoyles, and a three-story property.

“A tattoo studio,” Aunt Jane mutters, killing the engine. “And what’s the name of this esteemed tattooist?”

“It’s... Ryan,” I say. “James Ryan.”

“James Ryan. He must win the prize for the most generic name imaginable.”

She stops talking, staring at the house. Her mouth falls open as Max walks across the lawn, wearing a casual T-shirt that shows off his tatted, muscled arms. His hair glistens in the setting sun. He stops at the fence and stares.

Jane is outright gaping at him. She’s never been subtle with men, but this is something else. She looks like she’s on the verge of jumping from the car and running at him. It’s like she’s going to jump his bones. She’s going to spring into ultra-seductive Aunt Jane mode. Mom always says that about her baby sister. She knows how to make people like her. Sometimes, Mom says it like it’s a bad thing.

Aunt Jane’s shock turns into a slow, coy smile. Her eyes glimmer as she turns to me. “*He’s* your tattoo artist, Ellie?”

“Uh, yeah,” I murmur, hating the flush in her cheeks and the excitement in her voice. I hate myself just as much because it’s unfair of me to judge her for being attracted to him.

She doesn’t know I want to scream at her for even thinking about it. She doesn’t know how desperately I long to feel those strong, tatted arms wrapped around me.

Max waves, then turns, walking back to the house. The gate starts to open.

“Not very friendly, is he?” Jane murmurs.

I swallow, reaching for the door handle. I can’t tell her the real reason he probably looks so pissed, why he turned and fled to the house like that. He doesn’t want anybody to know about us, much less for anybody to know we’ve spent time together. That’s why he offered to send me a car.

“I think he’s busy today. Lots of bookings.”

“Hmm,” Aunt Jane says. “You’ll want a ride home, I suppose?”

“No. I’ve got a friend picking me up.”

I tell the lie quickly, not even thinking about it. I’d rather not worry about how to get home right now as long as Jane gets out of here and I don’t have to think about them being together, Jane getting her claws in. Her fiancé left her recently, but already, she’s gaping at men. Am I being hella judgmental?

“Good for you, making friends,” Jane says. “I know that’s been hard for you.”

I look at her, wanting to say something mean and snap. Is she making fun of me? But her smile seems genuine, and her eyes are even a little hurt, as if she’s wondering why my reaction is so over the top. She must be able to read the reflexive pain in my face. “Yeah, it has been, but it’s better now.”

“Ah, that’s good.”

I climb from the car, walking through the big metal gate. As I cross it, it begins to close with a soft electronic whine behind me. I can feel Jane watching me with each step, and I wonder if she somehow has guessed that he’s not a tattoo artist. Maybe she’s thinking he’s an older boyfriend? But that look was like *she* wanted him.

When I reach the porch, Jane finally drives away. I raise my hand in a wave, but I’m not sure she sees. From inside the house, soft barking gets louder when Max pushes the door open. My heart shatters into a million tiny pieces when I see the Chihuahua, white fur patchy, baring its teeth. It has one missing in the middle. It creeps to the edge of the porch.

“Sorry about him,” Max says, his tone dark, not looking at me when he speaks.

He seems even bigger standing on the porch, his muscles rippling like he’s mad.

“I should’ve taken you up on the offer,” I say, “for a car. I know it could seem...”

“It’s fine,” he cuts in. “Petey, be nice. He’s been through a lot.”

It doesn’t *seem* fine, but he clearly doesn’t want to discuss it. Leaning

forward, I slowly raise my hand toward Petey, keeping my voice low as I call him a good boy. I keep talking, moving closer, and the growling stops. Then he creeps forward and nervously paws at my hand. I let him do it a few times until he turns, looking at me.

When I stroke him, he whines. I snatch my hand away.

“That’s a noise he makes sometimes,” Max says. “I think it means he likes it.”

“Oh.”

As if to prove this, Petey backs up to the edge of the porch, glaring at me as if to say, *Why did you stop?* I stroke him for a while, laughing as he whines, then Max chuckles, but it doesn’t sound real. He might not come right out and say it, but he’s annoyed about Jane dropping me off.

“Shall we get started?” he says, gesturing to the house.

I look up at the property. “This place is amazing.”

“I inherited it,” he says bluntly, then walks into the house, his broad shoulders squared, his hands tightly fisted at his sides.

I think about what he told me, his childhood with the dogs, as Petey turns and follows him into the house.

So there it is. The explanation is an inheritance, but for some reason, I don’t believe it.

Framed books line the hallways. I stop to gaze in awe at a few of them. There’s a first edition of *The Great Gatsby* and several others, some old Victorian ones. Max watches me from the end of the hallway, his hands in his pockets.

I wonder if he’s studying me as intently as I study him. I notice every twitching muscle in his forearms, his eyes narrowed and focused, and a vein in his neck pulsing, like he’s holding a lot back.

“This place is incredible,” I tell him.

Petey whines up at me as if I’m taking too long. We walk through a large,

lobby-style area with a vaulted ceiling and down another hallway through a big oak door. We walk into a room filled with mirrors and light and a foam chair in the middle. On the metal counters, tattoo stuff gleams.

“Wait here,” Max says, then leans down to scoop up Petey.

“Will he be okay on his own? He looks...”

“I found him two days ago in a crack den. I’ve got friends staying here. They’ll watch over him.”

In a *crack den*? Is he kidding? Before I can ask, he leaves the room. I look around at the tools on the counter, my reflection, my strappy dress—more accessible for him to get to my shoulder—and my legs on display. Suddenly, it seems too much, like I’m trying too hard.

I shouldn’t want him this badly—not my professor—but I can’t stop myself. I’m not that scared piggy anymore. That’s what they called me, and they were wrong. They were always wrong.

A minute later, he returns, closing the door behind him. His jaw is pulsing. It’s like he’s on the verge of doing something, grabbing me, kissing me. It’s like he’s constantly on the edge. Or maybe it’s the ride thing. I should probably drop it.

“Do you think I could get a ride home after?” I say quietly. “It doesn’t have to be with you. Or maybe I can call a cab.”

“Won’t your friend be picking you up?” he asks, not seeming angry, more curious.

“I told her I would handle it. I kind of... Well, I messed up coming with her, didn’t I? She’s my aunt, not my friend. I mean, I guess she’s my friend too.”

Max walks over to the tools, his back to me. They rattle in the metal tray as he arranges them. Are his hands shaking?

“Your aunt,” he repeats.

“Aunt Jane, yeah. She just split up with her fiancé. He cheated on her, apparently.”

“Apparently? You don’t believe her?”

I place my handbag down, shrugging. “I don’t know. It’s just something people say.”

He turns to me. His icy blues are cold. “But when you spoke just now, maybe I’m crazy, but it sounded like you didn’t believe her.”

“Sometimes, she gives me... vibes, okay? I don’t know why you’re so interested.”

He shrugs and turns back to the tools. I want to stride across the room and bury my hands in his back, feel the strength, the firmness, all thirty-eight years of steaminess right there for me. I’m longing for it more and more each second, struggling to believe how badly I want it, want him.

“Sometimes, I think she’s just a little weird,” I go on. “That’s all. Don’t tell anybody I said this.”

“I won’t.”

“She just split with her fiancé, but she’s acting so upbeat sometimes. Then she’ll be mean and then upbeat again. Then, when it suits her, like when Mom asked her to clean up the coffee table this morning, she was suddenly upset about her fiancé again. I don’t know.”

“It sounds like you do know, Ellie,” he says. “It sounds like you’re far more perceptive than I was at your age.”

“You’re saying I’m more mature than you, huh?”

I don’t know where this tone comes from, but it feels good to be playful with him. It feels good when he turns, a smirk on his face, his eyes flitting up and down like he can’t help himself from checking me out.

“You’ll need to get on the chair,” he says huskily. “I’m going to prepare the tattoo area.”

“Um, sure,” I reply.

“I used to ask what people did for a living during this part,” he says as I awkwardly climb onto the chair. He maneuvers a few parts of it so I can lean

against it sideways, sitting upright, but he can access my shoulder. “But I already know what you do.”

“Yes, I’m just one of the many young people wasting their lives studying English Literature.”

“You’re not wasting your life. I see how passionate you are. How much you love it. What do you want to do after?”

“I haven’t decided. Maybe a teacher. The more I think about it, the more I think I’d like that.”

“You’d be amazing with the kids,” he says, sending a thrill through me.

He takes a package of sterile wipes from the counter and tears off the packaging. I realize he put on plastic gloves at the counter too. He’s not going to touch me, not really.

“Would you lower your straps?” he says, his voice getting deeper.

I wonder if I imagined the tremor toward the end. Another sign he’s on edge. Another sign he’s going to lose it. Some indication he’s as hungry for me as I am for him. I never knew how badly I could *want* and need to be desired.

And then what? I won’t know how to respond, but I can do my best to please him. I’m breathing quicker, lowering my dress straps down.

“Are you ready?” he says. “I’m going to apply the gel.”

CHAPTER TEN

Max

My head's spinning as I stare at Ellie on the chair. She's turned sideways, her hair neatly tied up, her bare skin on display as she lowers her straps. I can see her bra too. I imagine unclasping it, reaching around, toying with her nipples, and then massaging her big, beautiful tits.

My head's spinning for other reasons, too—the person who drove Ellie here today. Jesus Christ, a phantom from the past, and Ellie knows. She guessed what sort of person Jane was. That was the worst mistake I ever made.

Ellie's right. She *is* more mature than me. Far more.

I almost groan when I smooth the gel over her skin. My balls flooded the second I laid eyes on her, but they got far fuller when she showed me her body. Her legs are folded, her thick thighs pressed together.

I should focus on the tattoo or what the hell I'm going to do about Jane. I definitely shouldn't be obsessing over the soft moaning sound Ellie makes as I run the gel in circular motions. It's almost impossible not to tear these gloves off to feel her sweet body with my bare hands. To grind my palm up between her legs and then...

She turns, her eyebrows raised, lips pursed. She looks so damn cute and kissable that I almost explode right here. Seed is pushing right against my tip, the end pulsing with the tension.

“Is everything okay?” she asks.

I realized I’ve stopped, and now, I do something very foolish. I’ve just *seen* Jane. I know she’s here on the East Coast, but that doesn’t stop me. The whole professor thing seems like a joke. Nothing could stop me as I walk around the chair to face her.

When I kneel down, we’re still the same height. She even looks up at me slightly, but we’re close enough. Then I move forward, knowing I can’t stop, not when I feel her breath moving over my face. She gasps when I let out a growl, tearing off my gloves and throwing them to the floor.

Our lips touch. I groan as she nervously opens her mouth, our tongues finding each other. My hand magnetizes to her thigh. I’m not even in control as I smooth it up her leg, feeling her full, sexy-as-fuck thighs. She whimpers and closes her legs when I’m just about to reach my prize.

Right. I need to slow down. Slow down? Stop is more like it, but I can’t. I won’t.

In my mind, Jane screams, “*Look what you made me do. Look what you made me do.*”

I bury it deep, focusing on the moment, on the way Ellie moans through the tight press of our mouths. I massage her leg, and then she whimpers, grabbing onto my arm and squeezing down.

There’s a wave that moves through her the tighter her hand gets. She moans like she’s delighted and likes what she feels. Her whole body shakes. Maybe she’s not ready for me to claim her tight, little pussy, but her instincts are trying to guide her. Her instincts are telling her she can take every inch of me.

With a snarl, I push my hand the rest of the way. She opens her legs. I end the kiss briefly, staring into her eyes.

“Sir,” she whispers. “Sir, sir, sir...”

“I knew you were doing that on purpose,” I say, smirking.

“Did it...”

“What? Turn me on?”

She nods, her cheeks flushing.

“You’re damn right it did,” I say fiercely, then kiss her again.

Her moans get even more perfect when I start rubbing the outside of her underwear, feeling her excitement, her clit through the material. Her legs tremble when I rub up and down, up and down, lost in the feeling of her body.

She’s *wet*. She’s beyond fucking wet. She’s soaked for me, her fertile hole sopping with all the pleasure. She said it, the *sir* thing. She knew she was turning me on. If her soaked pussy is any indication, we’ve been doing the same dance together.

“This pussy belongs to me,” I snarl between kisses.

She leans back, her eyes wide, her lips twisted sideways. There’s a flicker of something in her expression. I pause my hand. “Are you teasing me?”

“No, Ellie,” I say.

“So... is it, like, dirty talk, then? Your thing?”

I don’t want her to think I have a *thing*, but unleashing all that right now isn’t the best idea.

“Do you like it?” I groan.

“I’ve never done dirty talk before,” she whispers. “Yeah, I like it.”

“Good,” I say, my voice getting even fiercer. “Because your hot, wet pussy *belongs* to me. No other man ever gets to touch it. I fucking own you.”

“Oh, Jesus,” she whimpers.

Her hips shift like she’s urging me on. I rub her pussy faster over the outside of her underwear, but I can’t take it anymore. I grab her underwear, keeping my eyes on her the whole time, then roughly pull them down. She gasps and pouts, looking so naturally sexy.

I bring my hand to her folds, gently stroking my fingers up and down, coming near her clit but not quite touching her. She’s rewarding me with so much sweet moaning, her eyes glistening, her hand getting tighter on my

shoulder, fingernails digging in. She's urging me to touch her clit without saying it.

"I could watch you all damn day," I tell her. "The way you moan. The way you shiver for me, *only* for me. Say it. Say it like a good student, and I might touch your horny little clit."

Her eyes snap open wide. She looks at me in shock, but it's the hottest thing. It's like she's surprised by how good it feels, my hand on her *and* my words. It's just a game for her, but I mean it. She only ever does this for me, nobody else.

"Just you, *sir*," she moans. "J-j-just..."

She can't go on when I push down on her little bud. Not hard, but with enough pressure to send a shiver running through her. Her body shakes as I rub her faster, harder.

I lean back to watch her shivering on the end of my finger. My mind flashes, and she's sitting in the classroom, looking up at me, mouth slightly open. Then we're back here, and she's giving herself to me, getting into it, almost creaming right now.

"If you come from this," I growl, "your pussy will be good and wet. I can finger your tight-as-fuck hole. Or I can fuck you. Fuck you hard. Fuck you until you have no choice but to cream all over my dick again."

"S-s-*sir*..."

She can't say anything else because I'm rubbing harder. I'm lost in the game, the so-called dirty talk. As I rub her clit, I think over and over, *Come for me. Come for me, just for me.*

Her moans get louder. She lets go of my arm and falls against the chair, her moans higher in pitch as she shakes all over. Her pussy gets even creamier as she comes, her eyelids flitting open and closed. Then she groans, staring up at me. I lean down and kiss her again. She returns the kiss, stroking my hand, almost like she can't decide whether she wants to calm me down or keep me going.

Unfairly—or maybe it's the fairest thing in the world—Jane bursts into my

mind again. She has that scowl on her face and wild hate in her eyes, aimed nowhere and everywhere.

I push the thought away and focus on kissing my woman. I don't realize I've said it out loud until she whispers it against my face. "*Your* woman? So we're still doing the dirty talk, huh?"

I smirk. "Did you think we were done? I promised to finger that horny hole, but I'll have to break my promise."

"Why?" she whispers.

I brush the hair from her face, kissing her forehead. "Has anybody ever licked your pussy before? You said you've never done dirty talk, so..."

She sits up and takes a breath. "Do you want the truth, truth?"

"Always."

"I haven't done *anything* except kiss a few boys. I've done none of this. What we're doing."

Fuck. I stand up. I turn away. I'm shaking all over.

"I'm sorry," she says.

I spin toward her. "Don't apologize for that."

"Well, you sort of seemed mad."

She folds her legs. Her thighs glisten in the bright overhead lights, showing her creaminess. "No, I-I stood up because I was going to fucking *maul* you, Ellie."

"Huh? Do you like it? Is this part of the dirty talk?"

I nod, wishing I could tell her the truth, knowing I probably should, but it would scare her away. Returning to the chair, I kneel down, grabbing her thighs and pushing them apart. I stare in awe at her pussy, her pink hole fluttering, her folds swollen with lust. Her clit looks engorged and juicy, ready for more. She's perfect.

"Your horny, wet, *virgin* pussy belongs to me. Can you say that for me?"

“Yes, sir. I can say anything for you.”

I smirk, looking up at her. She smiles back, beaming, and I know this connection means something. I know that, despite everything, the impossibility, we can make this work. Somehow, I’m sure of it.

“Say it,” I moan.

“My horny, w-wet, v-virgin pussy belongs to you, s-sir.”

She stutters as I kiss up her thigh, tasting her sweat, her skin, just *her*. I’m getting more addicted to her the closer I get to her core, feeling her wetness. My mouth is watering by the time I’ve reached her pussy.

I kiss the edge of her entrance. Her folds quiver, and I lick her, then brush against her clit, savoring every motion of her body, every moan that tells me she likes it. I circle her hole with my finger, massaging her heat and wetness. I’m about to push my finger inside her when there’s a heavy knock on the door.

“What is it?” I almost roar.

“Sorry, Max.” It’s Ben, sounding sheepish.

“Is Petey okay?”

I’m sure I feel Ellie smiling down at me. It’s a good feeling, my woman’s approval aimed at me, her love. Her *love*? Is that really what I think I’m feeling? She’s just happy I’m concerned about the cute little dog, that’s all.

“It’s not him. There’s a lady at the gate. Somebody called Jane. She wants to speak to Ellie.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ellie

I'm almost running down the long path, my breath struggling to catch up. My body's still on fire from what Professor Stellar and I did, the kiss, the rest of it, his tongue on my body, and all that dirty talk. He *owns* me. I'm *his* virgin. It's so hot, turning that point of anxiety into a good thing.

Maybe it's just talk, but I like it. However, now, lo and behold, Aunt Jane has to get involved. I know being with my professor is wrong or against the rules. Fine, I get that, but it's not as if I'm some dumb kid who's making a blind decision. I know what I want and *who* I want. It's not fair.

Jane is standing on the other side of the gate, her phone in her hand, on loudspeaker. I can hear Mom's voice. I know it's bad when I see the tears streaming down Jane's face, her eyes bright red. "She's here now."

"Ellie? Ellie?" Mom yells.

I glance back at the house. Nobody has come outside, not Max or his friends. It's just me and Jane and Mom shouting down the phone.

"I'm here."

"Oh, God, what are you doing with that man?"

I stay silent, glaring at Jane. She shoots me a look, and through the tears, I'm sure I see a glint of victory like she's gloating. Then again, I could just be

seeing the worst. I can still taste Max on my lips.

“Why are you at Max Stellar’s house, Ellie?” Mom snaps.

“How did you know who he was?” I say, looking at Jane.

She lets out a long, bawling cry. It’s a horrible noise. It sends jagged spears of guilt into my belly, forever thinking she could be faking it. “He was my *fiancé*,” Jane moans.

“What? Your fiancé lives on the West Coast.”

“My *first* fiancé,” Jane hisses, grabbing the fence railing with her free hand. “Before you were born, Ellie. We met. We fell in love. It was like something out of a fairytale, the most perfect relationship you can imagine. It was pure... pure *joy*, and what would make it even better?”

“Oh, Jane,” Mom says down the phone, which seals it—the genuine emotion in *Mom’s* voice. The pain she feels for her sister.

“A baby,” Jane whispers, leaning against the railing. “I got pregnant while we were planning the wedding. Four months, but then I... Oh God, Ellie, I lost the baby.”

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper, struggling to believe any of this and accept it, but Mom doesn’t deny it.

“Max didn’t want me after that,” Jane says. “He was so cruel. He told me I’d killed his child. He said it was *my* fault. My body was rotten. I was broken. He said he couldn’t even stand to look at me, and once... he... *he* hit me.”

“What?” I yell, my voice cracking. “What the *fuck* are you talking about?”

“He’s already got his hooks into you,” Jane sobs. “Hasn’t he? He can be so charming.”

“Mom,” I say. “Is it true?”

“They were engaged. He left her...”

“Say it, Vee,” Jane spits.

“At the altar,” Mom finishes.

“But he *hit* you, Aunt Jane?”

She looks at me. Her lips tremble. It’s like she hesitates. “Y-yes.”

I want to ask Mom, *Did you see that?* But then I might as well just come right out and call Jane a liar. I can’t imagine him doing that, hitting a woman, hitting his fiancée who’d just lost her child.

“Didn’t he, Vee?” Jane says, and that’s when she goes too far.

Mom sighs. “I wasn’t there, Jane.”

“But you saw the bruise.”

“Yes, I saw the bruise.”

My belly cramps. Suddenly, I turn, duck my head, and start running. Tears are in my eyes, making the world blurry, and I wish I could keep going. Get away from everything and everybody. Then I won’t have to think about any of this.

I burst into the kitchen. Max is waiting for me, his hand resting on the counter. For a second, I’m sure I’m going to kiss him. I won’t be able to stop myself, even if Jane might see us through the window.

“Is it true?” I whisper.

“It depends on what you’re asking.”

“Were you engaged?” I snap.

He clenches his jaw and nods. “Yeah.”

“And you got her pregnant?”

“Yes.”

“She lost the baby, and then you left her at the altar?”

He tilts his head, taking a moment. “I don’t want to come between you and your family.”

“That’s not a fucking answer, Max!” I yell.

“I left her at the altar.”

“And then you fought... and you hit her?”

He takes a step forward, then another one. There isn't a single piece of me that thinks he'd ever hurt me, even when he stands up tall, every muscle swelling, his hands trembling into tight fists. “Is that what you think? That I beat the shit out of her?”

“She said you hit her.”

“So her story is, she loses the baby, I leave her at the altar, then drag her to a goddamn MMA cage and go ten full rounds with her. What sort of... Do you think I'd do that, Ellie?”

Suddenly, the door to my left opens. A thin woman stands there in a baggy T-shirt and denim shorts. She's got tattoos winding up her leg. Her hair looks messy but in a cool, sexy way. She's wearing a choker necklace. She looks like she just got out of Max's bed. That's what she looks like, which is all too damn much. It's like everything's closing in around me.

“I don't know *what* you're capable of,” I scream and run.

I'm not sure I even mean it. I'm not sure what I even mean, except now I'm thinking of Jane and Max together, and this woman and Max.

He said he *owned* me, but that was just talk.

I walk to the fence. Jane is pacing up and down. “Well? Did he admit it?”

“We're going home.” I look over my shoulder, wondering, maybe partly hoping he's following me, but he's standing at the window. The woman is at his side. It's too far away to tell if they're touching. “Now, Jane.”

“Oh, God, did he hurt you?” Jane asks.

“He didn't fucking hurt me!” I shout. “God, I just want to leave.”

I walk to the gate and press the release button. It starts to open with a metal whining noise. I press my face against the window in the back of Jane's car. The world is getting blurry again. I watch the trees and the countryside, struggling to believe this is happening. It wasn't that long ago we were

kissing, me and the man of my dreams.

He was just my professor. A little naughty, a little taboo, fine, but just my professor. Now, I have to think of him and Jane and his baby inside her. He didn't deny that bit.

"You should thank me," Jane says after around twenty minutes.

"Leave it."

"I'm just saying..." Jane glares at me in the rearview. "You *should*. I know you seem to doubt my story if your bitchy expression is anything to go by, but I got you away from that man. I did what a good aunt is supposed to do."

"I don't want to talk about it. I'll talk to Mom when I get home."

"The world's a funny place, isn't it?" Jane says, as if I haven't spoken. "What are the chances you'd fall for *him*? Like aunt, like niece, huh?"

"It was just a tattoo," I whisper.

Jane winks at me in the rearview mirror. "Oh, I'm sure that's all it was."

"I'm not quitting college," I say.

Mom glances at the door before she replies. She asked Aunt Jane to give us some time alone together. Jane stormed from the room, shutting the door with a huff. I wonder if Mom's thinking about her eavesdropping.

"I didn't say that, but you must maintain a professional distance from Professor Stellar. Otherwise, I'll be forced to contact the college myself."

I rub my hands together, staring at the floor, to stop crying again. I'm still waiting to wake up on his tattoo chair. This can't be real.

"Why was a *professor* tattooing you, Ellie? Hmm? Is that really all he wanted?"

"Maybe I wanted it, too," I whisper.

"What did you say?" Mom asks sharply.

I look up at her. She's got a soft, loving expression on her face. I've never

had to question if she genuinely cares for me. Every signal comes from a good place. I want to listen to her desperately. She's never led me astray, but with this, it just feels wrong.

Professor Stellar feels right.

"Nothing."

"You should keep it that way," Mom says. "There's far too much baggage involved."

I lean forward and lower my voice. "Do you really think he *hit* Aunt Jane?"

"Whether or not he hit her, he left her at the altar. He broke her heart. She had a miscarriage, and he left. That makes him bad in my book."

"Maybe he was young, scared, and immature. He must've only been my age."

"Are *you* immature?" Mom asks.

"Well, no, but we're not the same person."

"The only good thing that came from that wedding was meeting your father."

"*That's* the wedding where he swept you off your feet?"

She smiles. "Yes. I fell. He swept."

"But Mom," I go on, "if Jane said he hit her, and he didn't, it's not good that Jane's saying that."

"She was bruised after she rushed home and found him packing his things. They argued, and she had a bruise. That's all I know."

"If you believe that about him, you should call the police."

Mom sighs. "It was a long time ago. Look, Ellie, fate has thrown you in his path. You need to do the *mature* thing and just be a student. Go to class. Do your best. Keep things professional. If he oversteps the line, you tell me. Okay? Deal? Please?"

Her tone gets desperate. I hate to hear her like this. She's looking at me like

she did after Dad's death when she said, "*We're in this together, right, kiddo?*"

"Yeah, Mom," I say. "I'll keep my distance."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Max

It's the first class since the fallout, and Ellie is sitting in the front row again. Ever since the argument, ever since all that bullshit, about me hitting a woman... Ever since then, I've tried to shut down the feelings. It's been several days, long enough to lock it all away.

But when I see her again, legs crossed, hair free and wavy to her shoulders, an unsure smile on her shy lips, I know I'll never be able to lock it away. So I'll have to exist with it, accept it, but somehow ignore it. Somehow not act on it.

I stand behind the lectern, waiting for everybody to take their seats. I can't look at her for more than half a second without feeling as if I must *keep* looking at her, only her, nobody else. Stare at her and remember the kiss, relive it like I have a thousand times since we did it. I can still taste her. I'm hungry for her.

"More love talk today," I tell the class once they settle in. "So let's start with the first couple of lines. I'm sure you've all devoured the sonnet. I'm sure you've spent several long hours in deep contemplation."

That gets a collective laugh from the students, but Ellie doesn't join in. My woman's eyes are shiny, like she's struggling to hold herself back. Her friend glances at her.

Too late, I realize I should've chosen a different poem, but I've got to keep pushing on. For the first time in several years, I feel nerves washing over me as I stand here silently.

Clearing my throat, I go on. "‘Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds or bends with the remover to remove.’ Does anybody have any thoughts about these opening lines?"

Ellie's hand flies up, almost like a reflex.

"Yes?"

"It's a lie," Ellie says. "That's one of the fundamental things I'm starting to realize about Shakespeare. He spoke a lot of bull crap."

Everybody laughs, and Ellie grins up at me like it's a challenge. I almost grin. She sees me almost grin, and her smile gets wider. She's reading me. We can't be together, but here we can. We can forget. Is that what's happening?

"The next line explains it. It's an 'ever-fixed mark.'" I pace up and down in front of the room. "Love doesn't change, Shakespeare tells us, with hours or weeks."

I feel Ellie watching me closely, but I don't look at her again for the rest of the lecture. I can't because I'll lose control. Her taste will overwhelm my memory, and I won't be able to think about anything else. I won't be able to contemplate anything else, just her, just us, just what we did and the things we could do.

When class is over, I finally look at her again. She makes a point of standing from her chair and turning her head away from me. As she leaves class, I can't help myself. I study her hips, swaying from side to side, her round, perfect ass. I examine her thick legs in her black pants. I want her to stop, look over her shoulder, and show me those wide, beautiful eyes.

I try to remind myself she believed I'd hit a woman. She believed that *shit*. It doesn't make me want her any less. She saw Kelly, assumed something, and lashed out. Like I'd ever be attracted to my best friend's daughter. The only woman I ever want or can even *think* about wanting won't even look at me.

“What the *fuck* are you doing here?” I growl the second I push my office door open.

Jane unfolds her legs and sits up. She was resting them on my desk. She’s wearing a bright red one-piece suit. She’s just the sort of person who’d be proud if their outfit caused a car crash. She rests her elbows on my desk.

“You’ve done very well for yourself, Professor.”

I intentionally keep the door open, then stand in front of my desk.

“What’s the matter?” She grins up at me. “Don’t think you’ll be able to resist me?”

I shake my head. “I never should’ve left you at the altar, Jane. That was a terrible thing to do, but, with respect, fuck off.”

“I forgot you prefer them younger.”

“I don’t *prefer* anything. I…” I quickly stop myself. I was about to start talking about how unique Ellie is, about how she’s the only person, regardless of age, who’s ever made me feel this way. But that would mean giving Jane ammunition. “Why are you here?”

“I tried to convince Vee to drag Piggy out of class.”

I step forward, fist clenched, a reflex at hearing that evil nickname.

Jane grins. That was a victory for her. She wanted to see if I cared. “I’m sorry. That’s how I refer to her sometimes. She said I could. It was a term her bullies used, as she’s clearly told you. You’re close, obviously, but with me, it’s just a joke.”

“Sure it is.”

“Vee won’t pull *Ellie* out of class,” Jane says, “so I wanted to make sure you weren’t going to do anything foolish.”

“Like tell her the truth,” I say.

“The truth.” She waves a hand. “What is the truth? Maybe I lied to you back then. Maybe I’m telling the *truth* now. How can you know?”

“Were you lying back then?” I snap.

She laughs. “Listen, I don’t want you upsetting my niece more than you already have. She told her mother about that little slut you had in your house. It’s obviously a pattern of behavior for you.”

I’m not biting. Sarcastically, I say, “You know me, Jane. I fuck twenty students a night before beating them all up.”

She frowns. It’s not the response she wanted. She feeds on emotion, but I’m not some immature young man anymore. I’ve got silver in my hair now. I’ve lived too long to fall for her crap.

“I can pay you,” Jane goes on. “I know you don’t need cash, but I can *pay* you, Max. All men have sick, twisted fantasies, right? All men have things they wish they could do to a woman but know they can’t because it would be too much, too violent, right?”

She leans over my desk, attempting to show me her cleavage. I turn away.

“I’m only joking.” She laughs shakily. “As if I’d do that.”

“Ellie and I have silently agreed to return to being professor and student,” I say. “It’s more than you deserve.”

“She’s doing it for her mom, not for me. I don’t think she likes me very much.”

“That’s because she’s smart and perceptive.”

“Ooh, you sound like you love her.”

“Jane.” I look at her again, right in the eye. “The truth is, I was raised in a cold, cold way. I had nobody who ever loved me. I thought I was emotionally dead for many parts of my life. The ink, Jane, and this is important. The ink was the only thing I felt for a long time, and then I met you.”

“Yes?” she whispers with a sick grin.

“And I still felt nothing,” I continue, knowing it’s callous but not giving a damn. She said I hit her, for fuck’s sake. “I tried to fake it. I figured, well, maybe that’s just how I’m built. I don’t have feelings like other people. Then

you got pregnant, and I knew I had to do the right thing. I'd go my entire life never feeling what other people felt."

But then I met Ellie, I almost say, but I hold that part back.

"After the baby, leaving wasn't difficult. The only hard part was choosing *how* to leave. I wanted to hurt and embarrass you as much as possible because that shit you said to me, the way you *laughed*... It was inhuman."

"So you and Ellie are done, then?" Jane says, as if I haven't spoken.

"Get out."

She stands and walks to the door. I take a wide step to the other side of the room, making it clear I don't want to touch her.

"I could tell the school about you and Ellie," Jane says. "Just remember that. It wouldn't be difficult. Maybe somebody saw you do something they shouldn't have."

"Nobody saw anything. You can't hang that over my head."

"Maybe somebody saw something, but they won't remember until I remind them."

I close the door behind Jane, resting my forehead against it. I can't believe I was ever with her. It goes deeper than that. I wish I'd never touched her or touched any woman. I wish I could've known I would meet Ellie one day.

It's not like I was some playboy, just a regular man trying to feel something. Lately, ever since I became a professor, I've let that part of my life die. Trying felt pointless. It doesn't anymore.

A few minutes later, my cell phone rings. It's Ben.

"Kelly's run away," he says. "Goddamn it, Max. I don't know where she is."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ellie

“Are you okay?” Chloe asks, shifting in her seat, then wrapping her arms around her middle. “Ellie?”

“Are *you* okay?” I counter, leaning forward and lowering my voice so we don’t annoy the librarian.

“In class,” she whispers. “You and Professor Stellar... It was like you were mad at him or something. Did it have something to do with last week when he asked you to stay behind?”

“*You’ve* been jumping around like you’ve got ants in your pants. Is something up?”

She tilts her head and sticks her lips out. All the while, she’s fidgeting. “Yup, you’re determined to avoid the question. I got the timing on my meds wrong. I use medication for my lack of attention, ADD. You’ve probably heard of it.”

“Yes, of course. Are you all out?”

“Just a couple of days.” Chloe grins shakily. “A mistake. Clerical error or something. No big deal. I’ve always found it difficult to sit still. Am I being unacceptably annoying?”

“Not *unacceptably*,” I say, grinning. “Don’t feel bad or self-conscious or

anything. I'm sorry. I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Not sure if that's the world. Does the world feel, simultaneously, intensely slow and intimidatingly fast to you?"

"You should write a poem about this," I say.

She beams. "Come on..."

"No, really. That phrase. Intensely slow, impossibly fast... I like it. I can connect with it, and isn't that what this is all about?"

"Were you thinking of a certain professor just then?" she asks with a knowing smile. "Sorry. I'm prying. Tell me to back off, please. Put me out of my misery."

I lower my voice. "It's nothing, really. Nothing. I..." What I should do is *shut up*. I really like Chloe, but we only met last week. I can't risk telling anybody about this.

Then she places her hand on mine. "I'll take anything you say to the grave. Morbid, I know, but I mean it. I swear."

"Okay, well... I went to Max's for a tattoo. Some craziness happened. Then more craziness happened. It feels weird to tell the entire story here."

She squeezes my hand. "Come on. Let's go to the café. My treat."

We find a quiet corner of the café, and then I tell Chloe the story. It's bad, but I feel better as I talk, explaining about the tattoo and hinting at the steaminess. I don't mention the dirty talk, but I explain about Aunt Jane, except I leave out her allegation. I won't tell *anybody* that until I know it's true. It can't be true, though, can it?

"You don't know who that woman was," Chloe says when I finish, "at his house. He had a friend over, you said. What if she was the friend's girlfriend or something? You can't jump to conclusions there."

I let out a trembling breath. During these past five days, this dark period, I haven't been able to even think about Max and me in a good light. I've only thought of the dark shades Jane has painted it in and Mom forbidding me. But Chloe gives me something I shouldn't even want. Hope.

“Do you think so?” I ask.

“Who knows? But it’s a scary situation.”

“How so?”

“Well, in one scenario, he’s a lying sociopath who uses his students. In the other, your aunt’s a liar.”

I nod, letting out a shaky breath. “When you put it like that…”

Chloe reaches over and places her hand on my shoulder. I can feel her trembling, her body refusing to stay still. She meets my eye with a warm smile. “I know we haven’t been friends long, but I’m here for you.”

Later, I’m at the restaurant, almost unprofessionally groaning right in this man’s face when he asks me to repeat the specials again. I think he and his wife fought during the car ride over. He’s dressed sharply with neat gray hair. That’s funny. Max’s hair has some silver, but this man’s is gray. His wife wears a stylish dress, holds her handbag, and looks vaguely off to the side.

“So the lobster is boiled, is it?”

“Don’t pretend you care how the lobster is cooked,” the wife says. “He’s trying to seem sophisticated. Just order a steak, and let’s get home.”

“Boiled lobster,” the man says. “That sounds lovely.”

“Yes, and let’s take out another loan.”

“Darling…”

“I’ll give you a moment.”

I retreat from the table, wondering if that’s what love and relationships really are. I’m letting the initial rush sweep me up and carry me away, but maybe the future looks like that—arguments in front of waitresses. That’s how I can live with this, kissing him only once, being with him just once.

For the rest of my shift, I’m on autopilot. I only snap back to reality because Cillian is in the parking lot when I leave, leaning against a car and smoking a cigarette. A woman sits on the hood of the car, wearing fishnet stockings. I

lean forward.

Is it... She has tattoos on her leg, just like the woman from Max's kitchen. As I watch, Cillian flicks the cigarette away and turns around, wrapping his arms around and kissing her. She kisses him back, and I almost cheer. They weren't together. Or, if they were, she's moved on. No, they must not have been together. That's what I want to believe. It's more than dirty talk.

"Getting a good look?" Lacy teases, moving up beside me. She's been happier lately, at least, since she and her husband are making another push on the adoption front.

I laugh awkwardly. "No, I..."

Cillian turns and raises his voice. "Coming to join us, Piggy?"

It's like being slapped in the face. There's so much attached to that, so many memories swirling hatefully around my mind. They rush through me, one after the other, but I don't let it turn me into a mess. I don't let it break me. I don't let it shatter me in two.

Not anymore. "Ha, fucking, *ha*, Cillian," I snap.

He turns and walks over. The woman from Max's house looks like she's on something. She follows but struggles to make it across the parking lot. I rush forward and put my arm around her.

"Oh, uh, hey, thanks."

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"Just feeling a bit... uh, yeah."

Lacy joins us. "Shall we get you inside, sweetheart? Would you like some water?"

"Whoa, what's this?" Cillian hounds us, reminding me of how tall he is. His eyes are as wide as saucers. That's a cliché, fine, but two big, angry saucers are staring right at me. "This is my lady, ladies. You should step away."

"What did you give her?" Lacy snaps.

"Sorry, darling. I don't fuck cougars."

“Cillian, she’s high. You’re high.”

“Why do you think I’m here, baby?” Cillian laughs loudly. “I’m going to change this town. You’ll see. Everybody will be under my spell, even you, Piggy. You’ll do whatever I say when I say it because I’ve got the potions.”

“So you’re a drug dealer. Well done, Cillian. What an achievement.”

He raises his hand and pulls his fist back. My vision flashes in fear, and he laughs erratically and lowers his fist. “I think I’d like to come in for a drink since my lady is.”

“My shift’s over. Do what you want.”

“Oh, you’re leaving? Maybe I’ll stay out here a while then.”

He grins, stepping closer, then reaches out and tries to touch my shoulder. I take a step back, spinning away, take the woman’s other arm, and, with Lacy, help her toward the entrance.

“I’m right behind you, ladies,” Cillian says, laughing, and there’s nothing we can do. He’s threatened me, though, hasn’t he, his hand in my face?

Cillian marches to the bar and hammers it with his fist. “Good man! A drink!”

After we’ve helped the woman sit down, I take out my phone. I wonder if I’m using this as an excuse, but I call him anyway. Maybe it was just dirty talk, but I know who my protector is, who my *man* is. He won’t let anything happen to me.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Max

I'm starting to feel like I'm in a Charles Dickens novel, experiencing one of those "ubiquitous and troubling coincidences." This is too much: first, Jane's relation to Ellie, and now Kelly is with her high school bully. It's like some force, some impulse in the universe, wants to challenge us to see if we'll fight for our love.

Ben drums his fingers against the dashboard as I pull into the restaurant's parking lot. With his other hand, Ben holds Petey, but he's shaking him because he's so nervous. My body feels primed, just like in the crack den. The rage triggered in me the second I heard the concern in Ellie's voice.

"You're scaring the dog," I tell him.

"This is my fault. It's in the blood. I was an addict once. Remember?"

"You got clean."

"It's my fault."

I groan, bringing the car to a stop. There's nothing I can say to him. Taking Petey from him, I cradle the dog to my chest as I walk across the parking lot. I slip into the restaurant.

It's quiet, the lighting soft red, the ceilings low. A family sits in a corner booth, and two men sit alone at the bar. Cillian, the bully and ringleader, is on

the other end of the bar. My blood boils as I walk around the bar, purposefully avoiding him for now.

I approach Ellie, Kelly, and Ellie's colleague. Ellie smiles tightly at me, looking like anything other than a goddamn *pig* in her waitress' uniform. The tight black skirt shows off her figure, and that's crazy that I'm thinking of *that* now.

"Take Petey," I say, handing her the dog.

"Oh, Kelly," Ben moans beside me, rushing to his daughter. "What have you done?"

"I'm sorry, Daddy," she says, then starts crying.

"Sorry?" Cillian says, laughing, as I turn around. "Sorry for what?"

He's a big man, young, with gleaming white teeth and bright hair. He's either on steroids or works out like a madman, with how buff he looks. He meets my eye and grins. "Why is she apologizing for having a good time?"

"She's trying to get clean."

"She's trying to get clean, so she walked into an establishment well-known for dealing drugs *annnnnnnd* bought some?"

His shit-eating grin gets bigger on the elongated *annnnnd*. "She's an addict. It's hard. There are setbacks. That doesn't absolve you for selling them to her."

"Hey, man." He raises his hands. "I never said I *sold* anything. So let's take it easy with that sort of talk."

I take a step forward, looking him in the eye, slightly down, really. Just a couple of inches, but he's probably not used to it. He tries to keep the douchebag grin fixed on his face, but his eyes widen slightly, hinting at something not so tough.

"We all make mistakes in high school," I say. "What about you, Cillian? What about that stuff you did to Ellie—the undeserved, downright sadistic campaign of bullying and the herd-mentality hate war you started? Do you regret that? Do you wish you could take it back?"

He tries to laugh, but I'm staring at him now, really staring at him, like I used to stare at the men who took the dogs to the pits. It's how I stared at the gambler who recognized me and the dealer in the crack den. He knows there's fire in me. He knows I was cold, once, too cold, before Ellie began to melt me.

"Take it easy, man," he says.

"Do you regret it?" I snap.

"It was a joke. Just a joke."

"There's nothing funny about it, though. Unless you want to explain the joke to me."

"Well, she's..."

I take another step forward. We're almost touching. The man behind the bar tenses up. "She's what?"

He lowers his head, then shakes it. "Come on, bro."

"I'm not your bro, you frat fuck. You need to leave."

"I haven't finished my—"

"You need to leave."

He tries to laugh again, but he can't hide it. The little prick is scared. "I've got somewhere to be anyway."

"If I ever see you with my friend's daughter again..."

"Don't worry. I've got options, bro. *Options.*"

He turns and starts walking away. I feel the restaurant let out a collective sigh. This drunk asshole was just about to leave, no harm done, but I can't stop thinking about what he did: dragging my woman into that closet, blindfolding her, the outfit.

"Wait," I growl.

He turns slowly and stares at me. "What now, old man?"

“You need to apologize to Ellie.”

But he wins, somehow. It’s the way he laughs, the casual gesture of his hand. It’s the sarcasm in his voice. “Sure, yeah, I’m so sorry.”

He leaves the restaurant, and I focus on not going after him. What can I do, realistically? Run out there and assault him? Maybe he’d win. Maybe I would, but nothing good would come out of it. Not in public, anyway, unless the little worm hit me first.

I return to Ellie and the others. Ellie smiles tightly at me, her hands folded across her middle.

“I’m hungry, Dad,” Kelly murmurs, her face buried in Ben’s chest.

“How were you going to get home?” I ask Ellie.

“The bus.”

“Want a ride?” I say, knowing it’s wrong and also tired of thinking that. *Knowing it’s wrong.* I’ve known it this entire time. She should say no if she believes what her aunt said. “I can take you home. You and Kelly can eat, Ben, and then when I swing back, I can take us home.”

Ellie smiles. “Sounds like a plan.”

I sit in the car next to her. It’s just us. When we left them. Petey was on Ben’s lap. Kelly was slowly tucking a napkin into the top of her shirt. Now, it’s just me and Ellie. She has her arms across her middle, pushing her breasts up, drawing attention to them, but that’s not fair. She’s just sitting there, and that’s where my attention goes because she’s perfect. She looks so beautiful with her hair across her cheek, the corner of her ear poking out.

“Thanks for standing up for me,” she murmurs.

“The jerk needs to apologize for real.”

“It really meant a lot.”

I start the engine and pull out of the lot. The restaurant connects to the suburbs by a road through a small forest, more like a sprinkling of trees. The second I get under the trees, my savage nature kicks in. Pulling up at the side

of the road, I drive deeper into the shadow. The sun has almost set. We're in the dark.

"Please say you're stopping to kiss me," she whispers.

"You shouldn't want that," I growl, turning to her.

She nods. "I know."

I lean over and kiss her. Hard. I kiss her with five days' worth of passion stowed up inside of me. I kiss her with all the heat of knowing we belong together and she's the only one. She's the only woman I *ever* want, ever need, and I almost say it.

Then she breaks the kiss off and puts her hand on my chest. She squeezes hard. "Wait, Max."

"Do you know what I was thinking on the way here? We're living in a Dickensian world now, Ellie."

She laughs curiously. "How's that?"

"The coincidences."

"Yes, they are rather ubiquitous. Aren't they?" she says in a funny British accent.

I chuckle, then brush her hair behind her ear. I love doing that with her. "If you choose to become a teacher, I meant what I said. You're going to be so, so good with the kids."

And *our* kids, I almost add.

"I have to know the truth," she says. "We can't kiss. We can't be together. Not if I don't know."

I run a hand through my hair, sitting back. "I'd never want to come between you and your family."

"What choice is there now? You don't want me to believe what she said."

"Do you, Ellie?"

Could you?

“No,” she says after a pause. “Honestly, I don’t, but you left her at the altar after she lost the baby. You did *that*.”

I push the car door open and walk deeper into the trees, my hands in my pockets. A moment later, my woman is beside me, laughing softly. “I guess we’re going for a walk.”

“I just needed some air.” I lean against a tree. “I never had a family. Just my uncle, and he wasn’t a good person. I was never adopted. I was alone. So when I met Jane, I tried to do what *real people* did. That’s how it felt. That’s how I saw others.”

She places her hand on my arm and squeezes. Her compassion means so much.

“So I went through the motions. I didn’t feel anything but never did, so I didn’t think I *could*. Then she got pregnant, so I proposed.”

“She said you proposed because you were in love.”

“Yeah, she liked to say that. She said she had to *tell it* that way because otherwise, it would seem like we were getting married for the baby.”

“Oh,” Ellie mutters.

“You can believe me or not, but the sad truth is, I wouldn’t have proposed if it wasn’t for the kid. I didn’t have parents, but if I ever become one, I will be there for them.”

“That’s admirable,” Ellie says fiercely. “That matters, Max, especially considering everything you’ve been through.”

“Jane knew what I’d been through too. She got jealous when I spoke about the baby. She said I only sounded in love when I spoke about our unborn child.”

“Jesus,” Ellie whispers. “It’s awful, but I can see that. It isn’t *that* shocking to me.”

“One night, she came home. She screamed at me. She or the baby, if I had to

choose. She *made* me choose. So I told the truth. If I had to, it would be the baby. She left for two days. When she finally returned, she told me she'd gotten an abortion. She laughed about it. She rubbed it in my face. So I got mad. I got petty. I got immature."

"You left her at the altar," Ellie says with awe in her voice.

"I'm not proud of that."

"It's understandable."

"I'm still not proud of it."

"This is just awful," she says. "It's just... I *believe* you. That's the crazy part. I'm not doubting a single thing you've told me. I can see Aunt Jane doing all of that. I can *see* it, literally, in my head. I can hear her yelling."

"I never wanted to hurt her," I say. "After the altar thing, I regretted it. I just wanted to move on, and then I saw you, and..."

"And?" she whispers.

The sun has almost completely gone now. The stars are starting to come out, and the moon is appearing.

"For the first time in my life..." I take her hips in my hands and squeeze her possessively. "I felt something. I felt like I'd found the person I'd been waiting for without knowing I was waiting. I finally understood what all those sonnets meant when I saw you, Ellie."

I lean down, kissing her again. There's nothing else I can do. I feel drawn to her so strongly I almost don't understand it, but I do. I'm through questioning it. Fate and love and lust, all of it... I'm hungry.

We belong together—just me and her. I can barely think. All I want to do is melt into my Ellie.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ellie

I push against him, feeling his heart almost thundering out of his chest. His hands get tighter on my hips, sending tingles all over my body. My sex aches as it does in class when I push my legs together and like when he licked and kissed my pussy in the tattoo studio.

I force myself to stop, grab his arms, and look up at him. I need to focus on something, and maybe that can be us. Me and him, what it means. Not Jane, her lies...

“Wait,” I say. “Wait... the bruise, Jane’s bruise. Does that mean she...”

“During our argument, when I was leaving, she punched herself in the face. She bragged that she’d tell everyone I hit her.”

I grab his chest, more tears springing to my eyes. I thought I would’ve cried myself out by now. “You have to be telling the truth. Don’t lie to me. Not after what you just said. You can’t mean it.”

“You’re the only person who’s ever made me feel a goddamn thing,” he says passionately, claiming my lips again.

I should demand that he tell me it’s true again. It’s not a trick or a game, but all I can think about is the warm pressure of his lips, the heat fusing us closer and closer together.

“What does that mean?” I gasp between kisses.

He breathes hot, shivering over my face. Much of my family life is dying right here from this exchange—from trusting him over my aunt. If I turn out to be wrong... But it all makes much more sense. I can’t imagine my man hurting somebody like that, but what if I *am* wrong? What if I turn up on some Netflix documentary as some unsuspecting victim of this master con man? That almost makes me laugh. I can’t believe it.

“It means exactly what I said.” He pushes against me, his manhood firm and long and hard against my hip. “I was cold. I lost myself in tattoos, then books. Then I saw you, and I stopped being cold. I’ve been reading the sonnets recently, and I finally understand them. It’s not about romance. It’s not even about choice. It’s about knowing that someone belongs to you the second you see them.”

“M-Max,” I whisper, trying to push the tears away.

“What does it *mean*?” he says passionately. “It means when I saw you, I saw a house filled with happy, laughing children. It means I immediately imagined us getting married. It means being with you is the only thing I want. It means knowing you’re mine, not just dirty talk, Ellie, but really *mine*.”

His words shower down on me, powerful and persuasive. I want so badly for them to be true. I want so badly to believe.

“What?” he says, tickling my face when he brushes my hair behind my ear. I love it when he does that.

“It’s a bit... unrealistic, isn’t it?” I say, ignoring his wounded expression. “I mean, you *saw* me, knew nothing about me, not even my name, and wanted a whole life together?”

“It’s unrealistic. It’s surreal, and it’s *true*.” He tightens his hands on my hips as though claiming me repeatedly. “I own you. It’s a primal impulse. I don’t understand it. It’s beyond reason. It’s poetry, Ellie. That’s what it is. I own you.”

“And I own you?” I whisper, touching his hand.

He nods. “Just us. Me and you. Together. Then, when you’re ready, we’ll

bring children into this world. I know I sound like a caveman, but that's what I felt the second I saw you. No, not felt, *knew*. I knew it."

I touch his hand. "You know that sounds crazy, right? Or maybe..."

"Say it, Ellie, anything. I've put it all out there. I want the truth. That's all."

"Or maybe it's a line a professor says to students. He thinks they're gullible, naïve, and stupid. He tells them he wants them forever, but later, he ditches them. Does that seem like a crazy scenario to you?"

"I've seen scenarios like that," Max says, "but that isn't this. It's not us. You're my woman. I'm going to ma—"

I spring toward him and cut him off with a kiss. He growls in that unique way, like he's struggling to hold back his lust, his hunger. He pushes against the small of my back, grinding our bodies closer together.

"You can't say that," I whisper between the kisses. "Not if you don't mean it."

"I *do* mean it," he growls.

"We've hardly spent any time together."

"It's not about time. It's an 'ever-fixed mark.'" His voice gets huskier as he quotes the sonnet. "That's what this is. It's primal."

"Promise you mean it," I whisper. "Promise it's not a game. Promise you're telling the truth about all of it."

"Look at me now," he says firmly, taking both my hands and staring into my eyes. "I swear on Petey's life, Ellie, on that precious dog's life, I have told you the truth. I'll never lie to you. I'll never trick you. All I want to do is protect you."

"Please mean it," I moan, collapsing against his chest. "Because I want the same..."

I garble the second half, my voice shaking.

"What?" he says. "Ellie? What?"

“I want the same,” I repeat.

“You want... a marriage? Kids? A family?”

“Yes,” I yell, my voice echoing through the trees. “But how can it ever work?”

He kisses me, and we disappear into the kiss. We purposefully keep it going, steamy, hot minutes, letting our instincts take complete control. He pushes even more firmly against me, his moans deep and passionate.

“It’s enough to know you want it,” he says when we finally stop, breathing heavily.

“My mom doesn’t know the truth,” I murmur.

“I don’t know the truth,” Max replies. “Jane came to see me earlier at my office.”

“What? Really?”

He nods, sighing. “She wanted to make sure I didn’t say anything to you. Then she said she was lying before about the abortion. Maybe she was, but I remember the argument. I remember her laughing. I remember her throwing it in my face.”

“She thinks that makes her look better?” I say in disbelief. “I’m not sure Mom will believe it. She’s always sided with Jane. Sometimes, I sense Mom doesn’t trust her. She didn’t seem too upset about leaving her on the West Coast, but I’ve never heard her say a bad word about her.”

“Family is important,” he says, squeezing me, making me think of our future family. “Loyalty is important. That’s why your mom protects Jane. I understand it. I wish there were a way out of this where nobody gets hurt.”

“I wish I knew how,” I whisper.

“Tell *me* you mean it,” he says fiercely.

“I do, Max,” I say. “Really. I want it all. I’ve been thinking about it. It feels different. It’s like you said. It’s not even a feeling. It’s *knowing*, but what do we do with any of that? I need to tell Mom about Aunt Jane, don’t I?”

“That’s your decision,” he tells me.

“But if we’re going to be together…”

He sighs. “I’d like to be on good terms with your family, especially if we’re going to give her grandchildren.”

“There’s no *if* about it,” I say daringly, a thrill running through me.

He grabs my hips again, pulling me to him. “You’re so hot.”

“I wish time could stand still. I wish I didn’t have to decide right away.”

“You don’t,” he says. “We’re talking about family, a future, all that. I haven’t even taken you out on a date. Let’s start there.”

“Maybe you could ink me, huh?”

He smirks. “I’m not sure a new tattoo is very subtle.”

That’s right. We’re sneaking around, after all. We don’t want Mom or Jane to know for now. “You’re probably right. A date *could* be fun.”

“How about tomorrow evening? I can cook for us if you like.”

“Maybe we could go somewhere?” I ask. “It’s just if we’re alone… Maybe we should wait until Mom and Jane know.”

If this were a line, what he said to me about the claiming stuff, surely he’d be pushy now. Surely he’d angrily tell me I had to give him what he wanted. Maybe he’d play on the primal angle and wear me down that way, but he nods, leans down, and kisses me softly.

“Maybe somewhere out of town,” I mutter. “I know we can’t put this off forever. I’m just unsure how to tell my mom that her sister is a liar.”

“It’s a horrible situation,” Max sighs. “I wish I had a goddamn solution. It would be easier for your mom if I were lying.”

“Yeah, it would,” I say, “but you’re not. I know you’re not.”

“I will *never* lie to you again,” he says fiercely.

“When did you lie?” I ask.

“I didn’t tell you I knew your mom, your aunt...”

“That’s not a lie,” I say. “You just didn’t mention it.”

“But still.” He holds me close. “We’re going to be together forever. You deserve the truth always. You deserve the world.”

I love you, I almost say, but I have to hold it back.

“What now?” I ask.

He chuckles. “I guess I take you home, and you get ready for our date tomorrow.”

“You know about Jane,” I say once we’re back in the car. “If she never admits what she said to you, it will always be her word against yours.”

“I know,” he says, starting the engine. “It’s not ideal.”

“Tell me something else, then another secret,” I say wildly.

He laughs. That’s significant, how we can laugh despite all the pain. “I didn’t inherit my house.”

“How did you buy it, then?”

“I’m a bestselling writer, Ellie, but I use a pen name. Nobody knows it’s me.”

“Are you serious?” I gasp.

He smirks and nods. “I’ve only ever told my best friend that. I feel comfortable telling you because I know we’ll be together forever.”

“Why do you use a pen name?”

“I started writing when I became a professor. My stories are thrillers. Gory. Low-brow, some unenlightened people might call them. They are from my time with the dogs and tattooing, the people you meet there... The fact is, the faculty looks down on stuff like this. Then my pen name went viral for a while, and people tried to figure out who I was. It added to the mystique. Now, it actually helps me.”

“That’s bull crap,” I say. “It’s your work. Your talent.”

“People all over the world get to read and enjoy it.”

“I think you should tell people. You deserve recognition. It’s not like somebody hired you, or you signed an NDA or anything like that. This is *your* work.”

“The only recognition I need is yours,” he says, leaning over, finding my lips.

“Go on then,” I say after we kiss. “Give me your pen name.”

He grins. “This is how you know I’m serious.”

He gives me the name. I search it online, gasping to see that several of his novels have over five thousand reviews. As somebody who has spent a fair amount of time on Kindle, I *know* that’s legit. Then I see the whopper, the first in a series of eight, with *ninety thousand* reviews.

“Is that the one that paid for the house?” I ask.

He chuckles, shooting me a wink. For a brief, precious moment, all the other ugliness doesn’t exist.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Max

I cradle the small of her back, guiding her through the restaurant. She's wearing a dark dress. The material is soft, hugging her curves. We're twenty miles outside the city, and this restaurant is quiet.

Even if we were at the college, I'm not sure I could stop touching her. She's too addictive—her smell, her everything. I could barely sleep last night thinking about her, remembering the kiss and what she said. The bond we formed.

"It's a good thing we're in public," she says, smiling vivaciously.

"Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"It's just... Well, never mind."

I smirk, reaching over and touching her hand. She flinches as though she's going to tell me to stop, as though she's going to say *no, professor*. Then she curls her hand around mine, clasping it tightly.

"I was thinking about you-know-what. The fact I'm a you-know-what."

When she laughs, I grin in delight. There's something so infectiously perfect about her. It makes me feel less weighed down by the past and lighter. Maybe that's the love pumping through my veins.

“I love that you’re a virgin,” I say, leaning forward, lowering my voice so only she can hear.

“Why?” she whispers.

“It’s what I said during your failed tattoo attempt.”

“I *haven’t* forgotten about that, by the way.”

I laugh. “I know you’ll hold me to it. It wasn’t just talk. It means you’re completely mine. Nobody else ever gets to touch you, to be with you. You belong to me.”

“Can I get you some drinks to start?” the waitress says, smiling as she approaches the table.

We order some sodas, then spend some time looking over the menu.

“So you were just going to go your whole life alone, huh?” Ellie asks.

“I’d resigned myself to it,” I tell her. “After what happened with...”

“It’s okay,” she murmurs. “We can’t pretend forever.”

“I knew I couldn’t just do something for the sake of it. I would’ve stayed for the kid. I really would have, but from then on, I knew if I was going to have a family, I needed to be crazy about the mother.”

“And that never happened?”

I shake my head.

“It was *years* ago,” she says.

“I’ve dated, but honestly, I’ve never felt anything. All the dates I’ve ever had don’t compare to that first second I saw you. Before I knew who you were and remembered to feel guilty since you were a student. Just you, so beautiful, so shy, so confident at the same time. So *you*, Ellie.”

She slides her hand across the table, taking my hand. “That moment was so perfect. I remember it too. Everybody was swooning over you. I looked over, thinking, *yeah, right*, but then I saw you, and I knew why they were swooning.”

I chuckle. “Swooning? Really?”

“You can’t tell me you don’t notice.”

“I’ve never paid attention. Before you, the idea of even looking at one of my students like that seemed ridiculous.”

The waitress brings our drinks.

“What are you thinking food-wise?” she says. “I’ve heard boiled lobster is the best,” she smiles.

“Why are you smiling like that, hmm?”

She grins wider. “Like what?”

“Like you’ve got a secret.”

“It’s just some of the funny things that happen at the restaurant. The people you get to watch.”

“You sound like a writer,” I say.

“Is that what you do? Watch people?”

“I’ve always felt distant from those around me. Closer to dogs, honestly. I can hang back, watch, and study, but before you, I never thought I’d really be a person. I know that makes me sound like a sociopath. I’ve got a close group of friends. I just never felt romantic, and now I know why. I was waiting for you.”

“I don’t think an *actual* sociopath would admit any of this, anyway.”

I smirk. “Or maybe I’m just a very clever one, eh? Have you thought of that?”

She laughs, knowing I’m joking, even if she should question it. She shouldn’t be on Team Max so quickly, but maybe she’s on team *us*.

“You’ve gotten too used to being in the shadows,” she says. “That’s why you won’t tell the world who you are.”

“Does it mean that much to you?”

“I’m proud of you.” She beams at me. “Aren’t I allowed to be proud of my man?”

“I love it when you say that.”

“What, that I’m your woman, and *you’re* my man?”

I nod, eyes fixed on her, her beauty reminding me why we met in public. We can’t do anything until we’ve sorted this stuff out with Jane.

“Let’s choose something before the waitress plots to murder us,” I chuckle.

“Fair enough. Will you judge me if I... I... pig out?”

She laughs, but I can’t.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

“You shouldn’t say that. You’re the furthest thing from that.”

“I’m only kidding. Sometimes, I almost prefer to joke about it.”

“I understand, but it’s just plain wrong.”

“Well...”

My body tenses up as if that asshole Cillian is here. I lean forward, looking down at my woman, the fabric hugging her curvy body. “You’re perfect, Ellie—every part of you. There’s nothing *not* perfect about you. I can’t think of you like that, even as a joke. I love how curvy you are. End of story.”

“So you’re saying you *don’t* mind?” she says, touching my arm.

“Order whatever you want,” I tell her. “I’ll never judge you.”

We cut into our steaks at the same time.

“I can’t believe you got yours well done,” I say.

She beams over at me, so playful and young and gorgeous. Every part of her floods me with an everlasting mark of *love*. It’s love. God, I need to say it, to tell her just how much she means to me.

“Everybody says that,” she replies.

“Oh, Ellie, you wound me. I thought I’d come up with something original.”

“Listen, I like my steak well done *and* pineapple on my pizza. Are we going to have a problem, Mr. No Judgment?”

I laugh when she points her fork at me, holding my hands up.

She grins and returns to her food. We eat in silence for a while. It’s like we’re married already, and we don’t feel the need to speak. We can simply be together. It’s just one of the things that constantly amazes me about her.

“Are you going to keep Petey?” she asks.

“That decision is half yours,” I tell her.

“It is?”

“We’re going to be together. I don’t think he’s very old. It’s hard to tell, but apart from his poor treatment, he seems well enough. He’ll be around for a while. So yes, it is.”

“I love it when you say we’re going to be together.”

She lingers on the word *love*, and I wonder if she’s doing it on purpose. I wonder if she’s hinting at what she wants *me* to say. I could do it and cross that line. Hell, it’s not like we haven’t crossed a bunch already. At least she knows the truth about Jane, about all of it. I meant what I said. I’d never lie to her.

“I think we should keep Petey,” she says, nodding slowly, then quicker, smiling. “We can make a little den for him in the first baby’s room when they come along.”

“We’ll have to be careful, though. He’s got quite the growl on him.” I smirk. “If he gets protective over the little bundle, we’ll never be allowed to see them.”

“I’ll have to practice my karate moves,” she says, putting her cutlery down and waving her hands like she’s in a kung fu movie.

I can’t help but laugh. We lock eyes the whole time, one more bright moment to stack on top of everything else. “On a poor little dog?”

“Kidding, obviously. That would be hella cruel.”

“Hella,” I say, a teasing note in my voice. “I’ve never heard that before.”

“Hella? It’s something the librarian used to say back on the West Coast. She’s the only person in the whole school who didn’t look at me like I was different or deficient after that prank. Or maybe I was just so caught up in it that I couldn’t imagine anybody *not* judging me. I guess I just took it on.”

I reach over and touch her hand. The food is delicious. I researched this place beforehand, wanting to make it special. Nothing is sweeter than being with my woman—touching her and pretending it will all work out.

That’s what we’ve been doing—pretending. I realize this when I see Jane and Vanessa walking into the restaurant together. Jane’s got Vanessa’s hand in hers, almost guiding her toward us, dragging us into a confrontation. Jane’s eyes are glassy, I see, as she gets closer. They’re red too. She looks like Kelly. Like the filth that seems to be infecting this corner of the East Coast has somehow found its way into her veins.

“What is it?” Ellie says, beginning to turn.

I keep my hand on hers for a second longer, hovering in this moment before it all blows up.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ellie

“I told you they’d be together,” Jane snaps the second we’re in the parking lot.

When I saw them, I stood up and strode from the restaurant. Jane has a weird, erratic energy. She’s typically dressed stylishly, with extra care like she wants to impress, but now she’s in a short leather skirt and a strappy leopard-print top. She’s wearing heels, and her hair is a mess. She looks like she’s been clubbing.

“I *told* you,” she says, waving a hand at us. “You didn’t believe me. Said I was ‘paranoid.’” She does air quotes. “Just because she promises you something, Vee, doesn’t mean she’s telling the truth. Your daughter lied to you.”

“Take it easy,” Mom hisses, glaring at Jane.

Jane holds her hands up and laughs in a way I don’t like. Low and mean. She steps toward us and reaches out as if to touch Max. Max immediately slides away, his eyes flashing angrily, his mouth shaping in disgust.

“What the hell are you doing?” I snap. “Leave him alone.”

“Oh, I should leave *him* alone?” Jane says. “Are we forgetting what this... this *specimen* did to me?”

Mom wrings her hands together. Right now, I can see her as a young girl, unsure of what to do, except knowing she has to take care of her sister. “Jane, just...”

“He *hit* me, Vee. You saw the bruise.”

“You’re high,” Mom says weakly.

“Forget *high*, Mom,” I say. “She punched herself in the fucking face to make it look like Max hit her!”

It all comes out in a long rush, an explosion of words. I wish I could take it back the second it’s out there—not the content, maybe, but the lack of control. The pain in my voice, the anger. Mom must know how badly I hate Jane for that lie.

“Is that what he told you?” Jane whispers, and, like clockwork, am I wrong? Am I being cruel? Tears appear in her eyes and flow down her cheeks in thick, almost ludicrous lines that glimmer in the moonlight.

Max steps forward, hands behind his back, as though he wants to clarify that he’s nowhere near reaching for her. “I don’t want anything bad to happen to you, Jane, but we both know what happened. I think you should tell your sister the truth.”

Jane glares up at him, then continues crying. It almost stopped there for a second. Then she remembered to keep going. Or maybe I’m that woman you hear about in documentaries, standing by her man despite what he did, although he’s a monster, but he’s *not*. The man I love isn’t a monster. He can’t be.

Jane looks at Mom, then back to Max, shaking her head slowly. “You’d really stand there and keep the lie going after all you did. I lost your baby an ___”

“Vanessa is a good sister. She’s clearly one hell of a mother. If you tell the truth, she’ll forgive you. You can get help,” Max says.

“Why would *I* need help?” Jane snaps, not crying anymore, wiping her cheeks briskly.

“I’ve said you could talk to someone before,” Mom says quietly.

Jane wheels on her. “This isn’t *about* me, Vee. Don’t you see what they’re doing? We’ve caught them red-handed. They said they’d stop, and they haven’t. We need to call the police.”

Mom narrows her eyes. “The police? Why? Ellie’s a grown woman.”

“Yes, but, but... Ellie doesn’t *want* to be here, does she?” Jane laughs weirdly. Her eyes seem to get glassier. “You can make her say that, can’t you?”

“I can’t and won’t *make* her say anything,” Mom snaps. “Jane, you’re doing it again. I’ve told you before. Sometimes, you talk about her like she’s a toy or a tool.”

This is true, but it hurts to hear it out loud. I’ve ignored it for so long that I feel like a coward when somebody acknowledges it.

Jane laughs meanly. “Oh, don’t cry, Vee.”

Wasn’t *Jane* just crying?

“What’s the truth, then?” Mom says, turning to Max. “What’s your side of the story?”

Max keeps looking at Jane. Despite everything, there’s a glint of humanity in his eyes. He appears like he genuinely wants to help her end this peacefully. “Just tell her. It was a long time ago. You were young. I don’t want to take it any further, but the four of us here need to know the truth.”

“Why?” Jane says and then looks like she’s going to yell, but a couple exits the restaurant. She lowers her voice as we move off to the side into the shadows. “It’s because you want Ellie to think you’re Mr. Nice Guy. That’s all this is.”

“I’d prefer if she didn’t think I’d assaulted a woman and left her at the altar for no damn reason.”

“Oh, you had a reason, then?”

“I regret how cruel and immature I was, but yeah, I had a reason.”

I raise my hand, almost touching his arm. Mom looks at me sharply, reminding me I'm supposed to feel guilty about my loyalty to Max and my belief in him.

"So let's say it was true. Let's say I got an abortion and—"

"Wait, what?" Mom cuts in.

"That's what *he* says." Jane points aggressively at Max. "*He* says I got an abortion because he wouldn't stop talking about the baby. The baby, this. The baby, that." Her tone gets mocking, and I hate her. I hate myself for hating her, but it's the truth. She's my family. "It was relentless, to be frank, but to tell such a vicious lie..."

"I don't know how you grew up," Max says, looking at Mom, "but it seems like Jane always needs to be seen in the best possible light. If this means stealing, gaslighting, or manipulating, she'll do it. That's my assessment."

"Ooh, the English Literature professor's *assessment*. You're not a psychologist."

"All fiction is psychological to some degree, Aunt Jane," I say. "They're all about people, how they work, and what makes them tick, just seen through different lenses."

"Is this the *shit* you're paying for?" Jane laughs right in my face.

"Stop it, Jane." Mom steps in her path, raising her hand. "I never should've agreed to this. It wasn't fair, violating Ellie's privacy like that."

Jane steps back, looking in disbelief at Mom as if she can't accept that she's standing up for me. The tears are gone. Somehow, it's me, Mom, and Max standing on one side and Jane on the other.

"But you did it," Jane snaps. "Mother of the Year, over here. You logged into FindMyPhone because you knew I was right. You knew this pervert, woman-beating professor would be with her."

"You're a liar," I yell. "Look at you. You change moods every two seconds. Smiling, mocking, then crying. It's all a pantomime, Aunt Jane. I bet you lied about why you left the West Coast too."

It comes out in anger, but then Aunt Jane flinches. “Wh-what?”

Something fierce flares in me. It’s the same feeling I can imagine having if somebody threatened our children. A similar instinct I’d have to devastate anything or anybody who would ever try that.

“With your fiancé. You said he left you for somebody else. Call him, then. Call him and let him speak first. If he left you, he’ll answer differently, but if you *left* him, he’ll sound hopeful. If you stay silent, he might say something. I don’t know. *Come back to me* or whatever. That’s a way to prove it.”

Jane scowls. “I don’t need to prove *anything* to you, you fucking pig!”

Mom shouts so loud it hurts my eardrums. “*How dare you talk to my daughter like that!*”

She rushes forward as if she’s going to hit Aunt Jane. My hands fly over my mouth. Tears spring to my eyes. Distantly, I note how hypocritical that is, accusing Jane of faking tears when mine come and go just as quickly. It’s as if time slows down as I watch Max rush forward, putting his body between them.

Mom pulls up short and leans around Max. “You’re high, Jane. You need to get out of here.”

“I could call him right now,” Jane yells, her words directed at me as she paces around Max, trying to find an angle to stare. “He’d beg for me, kiddo. Don’t worry about that. Even if I left the little bitch in a puddle of his own tears and come, he’d beg.”

“Just get *away* from us,” Mom screams.

Jane turns and walks awkwardly into the parking lot, taking her cell phone from her bra. She leans against the sign of the restaurant, arms crossed.

“I’m so sorry she said that,” Mom says, wrapping her arm around me. “Being high is no excuse. I don’t know what’s wrong with her. I’ve never... never known what’s wrong with her.”

Mom breaks down. I hold her tightly as she cries against my chest. Max leans against the wall, his hands folded across his middle. We all turn when a car

pulls up at the restaurant's sign.

"She was texting on the way here," Mom murmurs. "I wonder if it was him. He must've been close by."

I recognize the car and the driver's easy smile as an interior light switches on. He grins over at Jane as she stumbles toward the car. Cillian leans down and helps her into the passenger seat.

"Mom, do you know who that is?"

"Wait..." She leans forward. "Is it..."

"It's Cillian."

Mom says what we're all thinking. "What the hell is Jane doing with him?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Max

The three of us sit in a corner of the restaurant, drinking coffee. There's an uneasy truce. A sense that we're not going to repeat what happened outside, though the tension is by no means gone.

Vanessa moves her finger around the rim of her mug almost obsessively. "Can you explain this?" she says after a pause.

"It's love at first sight," I tell her.

Ellie gasps and looks at me with her glistening eyes. Her hair is messy in a perfect, beautiful way. This was supposed to be our first big date, and now look at my woman. She deserves so much more.

"That's the best way to explain it," I go on. "We saw each other. We knew, but you probably want to hear how your daughter feels."

Vanessa nods, looking at Ellie. She takes a breath. A flush floods into her cheeks, her eyes wide and excited. "It felt that way for me, too—love at first sight. I saw him, and I knew. I just knew I wanted to be with him forever. I knew I wanted to have a family with him."

Vanessa groans, resting her head in her hands. "I can't make sense of any of this. I wish Jane would just tell the truth."

"The truth?" Ellie murmurs.

“About what happened. The bruise. All of it. I always...”

“It’s okay, Mom.”

“I always thought she was lying. She gets this look. Like when we were kids, she’d blame me for things. I saw it as my duty to be the loyal big sister, so sometimes I’d take the blame. When she told me what you did, Max, she had that same look, but I buried it and ignored it. I couldn’t let myself think about it.”

“I understand,” Max says softly.

Mom laughs in disbelief. “How can you?”

“When I was a kid, I was raised by my uncle for a while. He did some bad things, but sometimes I was with him when I could ignore them. I could purposefully forget, and we’d have a decent enough time together.”

“That’s what it is. *Purposefully forget*,” she sighs, “but I’m not saying I believe you. I need to *know*.”

“Mom,” Ellie snaps, a fierce chord in her voice, just like out there when she stood off against Jane. “If you thought Max was a woman beater, you wouldn’t sit here with him. You wouldn’t let *me* sit here with him.”

“You sounded so happy,” Mom whispers. “Just now, when you were talking about love at first sight... I *believed* you, Ellie. I like to think I’m a pretty good judge of character.”

“Yeah, Mom, especially when it comes to your own daughter.” Ellie takes her hand. “I know it’s wild, but it’s true. I can’t explain it. It just... is. It’s what we want. It’s how we feel.”

“What about your job?” Vanessa says, looking at me. “You’d risk it all for her?”

“I’d quit my job for her,” I say. “Without a doubt.”

“How would you support her?”

Ellie laughs softly, then raises her eyebrow. “I think you need to tell her.”

I shrug, then quickly give her the rundown about my writing.

“Oh, wow,” Vanessa says. “Well done.”

I smile and nod. “Thank you. Anyway, I don’t think I’d have to leave my job. There are policies against dating students, but they can’t do anything if we’re married.”

“Wait... *what?*” Vanessa’s voice quivers, and she looks around as though only just waking up. I can see the thoughts clattering in her head. *Why have I let it go this far? He can’t marry my daughter.*

She stands up.

“Mom, what are you doing?”

“Marriage... after a couple of weeks?” Vanessa says. “Are you listening to yourselves?”

“What else do you think *love at first sight* means?” Ellie says, passion in her voice.

“Don’t yell at me, young lady,” Vanessa snaps.

“I wasn’t yelling.”

“You’re not even twenty. Max, how old are you?”

“Thirty-eight.”

“Does that seem right to you?” she demands.

“All I know is that I want to provide for your daughter. Protect her. Protect and provide for our children. All I know is—”

“Come on, Ellie. We’re going home.”

I stand, ready to walk them to the car. I won’t be able to kiss Ellie goodbye, but just a few more precious seconds with her. I’d never want to cause damage to her and her mom’s relationship.

Ellie stays seated and shakes her head. “I’m staying here.”

“*Ellie.*”

“Mom, I’ve made my choice. I love you. I’m not choosing him over you, but

right now, for tonight, I want to stay with Max. I think that's fair. You can't order me to come home."

Vanessa glares at me. "Do you realize I could call the college tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"And you're okay with that?" she asks Max.

"Like I said, I'd sacrifice my job for your daughter. I'd sacrifice everything for her. I made a mistake with your sister, Vanessa. I tried to be somebody I wasn't. But with Ellie, I never have to question who I am. She gives me a role. She is my purpose."

Vanessa throws her hands up. "I need to lie down and put a cold compress over my head. That's *my* purpose. This is all too much. You and Ellie and J-Jane... What *is* she doing with that douchebag, Ellie?"

"I have no idea, but Mom, let me hug you before you go, please?"

Vanessa nods, then Ellie stands, and the two women embrace. As they hold each other, Vanessa looks at me. "Just because I'm leaving her here, don't think that means I approve."

"But Mom—"

"I understand," I quickly say before Ellie can go on.

Vanessa needs her pride. She needs to be able to tell herself she took a stand before she left. She put me in my place. I get that. I wouldn't take that from her. It's a mother's right to know in her soul that she's done the best for her child.

"Text me in an hour," Vanessa says, kissing Ellie on the forehead. "Okay?"

"Yes, Mom."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Miraculously, Vanessa leaves. It's not a miracle in the sense it's the outcome I was hoping for, but it's far better than how this could've gone. We sit again.

“Now what?” Ellie asks, her voice shaking. “When they showed up, I thought it would be Armageddon. I don’t want the night to end now. All that arguing, Jane, *Cillian*... I feel wired.”

“Me too,” I reply.

“Did you mean what you said? *Love* at first sight?”

I reach over, take both her hands, and squeeze. I look deeply into her eyes. Then—like a movie—my focus pulls, and I see her mom standing at the restaurant doorway, looking sternly at me.

“We had to make her understand,” I say vaguely, weakly, knowing I’ll have to make this right.

She smiles, though her eyes register a moment of hurt that stabs me in the chest. “Yeah, you’re right. Hopefully, she did.”

“It would be easier if Jane just told the truth.”

“Maybe she will one day.”

I nod, but I’m not holding out much hope. After a few far-too-morose moments, I take Ellie’s hand again, squeezing it. “I’ve got somewhere we can go. I think you’ll like it.”

She smiles, a little nervous now. There are a thousand shades of her, each more perfect than the last.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ellie

“Is this allowed?” I say as we walk onto the college campus from the back entrance, which seems like a service entrance. His hand is warm against my arm as he softly guides me through. “I don’t want to get expelled.”

He smirks. “Don’t worry. I used to do this all the time. When I first started, I’d bring my dog to campus at night. He was a night owl—a night Doberman, I guess you’d say.”

“You had a dog?”

He nods, taking my hand as we walk across the moonlit lawn toward a cluster of lecture hall buildings. The housing isn’t onsite, which is why it’s so quiet. There’s a twenty-four-hour library on the other side of the campus. It’s a separate area with no security—just students swiping for entry with caffeine in their veins and assignments on their minds.

“I’ve had three. Petey will be the fourth. We’ll be safe here.”

“What are we going to do?” I ask, hearing the giddy thrill in my voice as though it’s coming from somebody else.

I shouldn’t feel this excited, ready for an adventure, not after everything that’s happened, but Mom *left* me with him. Sure, she had her stern face on. Sure, it’s difficult, and there are problems, but she left me. Doesn’t that mean something?

Or is this my excuse-ready mind throwing up more make-believe?

“Forget,” he says, wrapping his arm around my shoulder and kissing me on the head. “Forget about Jane and Cillian and... No, we can’t forget about your mom. Your relationship with her matters.”

I cuddle closer to him, my shoes tip-tapping on the ground when we transition from the grass to the concrete. He turns me away from the main path.

“My dog and I explored this place,” he goes on. “I learned how to avoid the cameras.”

I laugh. “Thanks for saying that about Mom. I wish there were a way for you two to be friends. Earlier, when you were talking, I almost thought you might be. It was like—I don’t know—she saw it. Saw us.”

“I pushed it too far by mentioning marriage.”

We already mentioned love, I almost say, but then I remember the restaurant and what he said. *Love at first sight* was just a helpful phrase, a shorthand, so Mom would understand.

“But she wouldn’t have left,” I say, “not if she thought... Oh, God, *Jane*. I still love her, Max. I hate her, and I love her.”

“I don’t hate her,” he says softly.

“You *don’t*?”

“I hate what she said and the lies she told. The more I think about it, the more I think she needs help.”

“Maybe not everybody can be saved.”

He sighs, stopping under the shadow of a large tree. We wait here, just like before, when he picked me up from work. Under the tree, in the shadows, as if anything we do is hidden, but we don’t want to sneak around forever.

“I don’t want to save her either,” he replies. “She’s your family. I just want everything to be okay.”

“She was on drugs. Cillian picked her up, and he basically admitted to

dealing drugs. He said that's why he was *here*. Then Jane disappears with him, and she just so happens to be from the same part of the West Coast as us. *And* she got all suspicious when I brought up her fiancé."

I stop, realizing he's smiling warmly down at me.

"What?" I ask.

"I just like watching you work. Keep going."

"Well, what if the timing had something to do with Cillian being here? What if it's not a coincidence?"

"So we're *not* living inside a Dickens novel?"

I grab his shirt and pull myself toward him. This sudden rush of intimacy is like a jolt of pure pleasure to the brain. When our lips touch, I *do* forget, even about Mom. Maybe that makes me a bad daughter, but it's the truth.

All I can think about is kissing him, my hands gliding down his arms, clinging to his strength. I squeeze passionately. No, *possessively*. I squeeze so he has to know I'm claiming him as much as he's claiming me, every moment, just by us being together.

He groans and moves his hands from my hips around to my ass.

"Not here," he growls, breaking off the kiss.

We shouldn't, I try to make myself say. *Not until Mom gives her blessing... Not until I know...*

But I *do* know what sort of man he is. Jane's the liar, not him. She has to be. My body is pulsing with the need to be closer to him without clothes separating us. Maybe some nerves are whispering deep down, like a scared little girl's voice in a closet as the bully puts a pig's ears and nose on her. Perhaps just a tiny amount.

Mostly, I'm ready to put that person behind me, that version of me. I feel brand new with Max, my future husband and the love of my life.

Max shakes all over. I can feel the passion in how his hands shift against my ass. It sends warm shivers between my thighs, teasing at my sex, my core

feeling warm against my panties. Suddenly, there's so much friction down there, an ache that demands attention.

Max looks around and smirks. "Come on. I know somewhere we can go."

He leads me by the hand toward the back of the lecture hall, then reaches into his pocket for a set of keys. Unlocking it, he winces, fists clenched, then lets out a low laugh.

"What's funny?" I ask.

"Didn't know if the alarm would go off."

"You're risking a lot for me, Professor."

He groans, looping his arm around my waist and pulling me against him. We kiss in the doorway, his touch sinking deeper and with more possession into my hips, his tongue owning mine as he swirls it around my mouth.

I grab onto his back, tugging at his clothes. I don't even mean to do it. It's like the hunger inside of me guides my movements. It's the urgency deep in my belly, like... This is nuts, but it's as if my *womb* is telling me what to do. The future is beckoning us.

"You're a horny, sexy-as-fuck, beautiful, curvy, *perfect* virgin," he growls. "Every single part of you, Ellie. I love you. I love you so damn much."

I gasp, pressing a hand against his chest, feeling his heartbeat slamming. "R-really?"

"I love you," he snarls. "I wasn't going to say it until your Mom gave her blessing, but I can't let you think I don't. I loved you the first moment I saw you. I loved you before knowing we could tear our lives apart by being together. I. Love. You."

"I love you too," I say, my vision getting blurry. He kisses the tears from my cheeks. My ecstatic mind turns gentle for the time being.

"There's something else I could say now. Something I *need* to say. A question I need to ask you. I want to do it, Ellie. So badly."

I press my lips against his. We melt into the kiss. We both know what

question he means. It's the one that comes with wedding bells, children's laughter, and warm sunsets on the back porch.

"Don't," I whisper. "We love each other. That's enough for now."

"But just *know*," he says roughly, "I'm ready."

"So am I."

He guides me down the hallway, dark except for slices of moonlight coming in through the windows set high on the wall. It feels eerie walking down here at night. The shapes are the same, but the dark changes them. With Max's arm around me, there's no fear, no anxiety, just heat.

We walk into the lecture hall. It's almost completely dark, but then Max walks to the edge of the room and pulls on the blinds. These windows are set high within the walls too, but there are more of them, and the room's bigger. Moonlight spills in, shining in his hair, picking up the hints of silver. He returns to me, brushing hair from my face.

"I love when you do that," I whisper.

"I love doing it," he says passionately. "I love everything about you."

He kisses me hard, and a small, mean voice suddenly springs to my mind. It says that if I'm wrong about him and he is who Jane says he is, I'll never get over it, but that's only for a second.

Then all I can feel is his mouth. Our future. The hope. The steaminess. All I can feel are his firm muscles as I drag my fingernails across his back. I moan when he slips his hand up my leg, massaging my thigh and getting closer to my aching core.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Max

“Put your hands against the lectern,” I tell her, my voice shaking. “I need to finish eating your hot, young pussy.”

“Oh, sir,” she whispers, batting her eyelashes at me. “You’re making me crazy.”

We tear at each other’s clothes in a flurry of heat. I snarl as I move her into position. She’s wearing only her underwear now. The moonlight shimmers against her body as she leans over the lectern, propping her hands against it. It shines blue against her full legs and the curve of her back.

With another growl—she’s turning me into an animal—I kneel in my boxer briefs behind her. My dick has pushed the buttons apart, springing free, precome leaking hotly from my tip.

“You’re so perfect,” I groan, sliding my hands up her legs from behind, then grabbing her panties and pulling them down. “Stand a little wider. Let me see your wet pussy.”

“Like this, sir?” she whispers, shifting her feet apart.

I keep my hands buried in her delicious-as-fuck thighs as I stare at her pussy. Her hole winks in the moonlight. Her wetness seeps down her thighs.

“You’re so fucking sexy,” I say. “You’re going to cream for me, Ellie. Get

your pussy even wetter. Then I'm claiming your hole with my dick. You'll take every fucking inch in your virgin slit."

She shivers all over, causing her flawless curviness to shimmer for me—*just* for me.

I lean forward, kissing her inner thigh, tasting the soppiness that trails down her skin. She moans the closer I get to her center, her scent beckoning me as much as her feel, her warmth, her everything.

When I reach her horny pussy, she lets out the sexiest moan she has yet. It has a hint of gorgeous surprise, like she can hardly believe how good it feels and how *right* to be almost naked together.

I start licking her clit, slowly slipping my finger in and out of her wet hole. She tightens around me at the knuckle each time, her walls squeezing me tightly. The base of my dick aches each time I feel her squeezing tighter. She pushes her hips back against me, her ass pushing against my face. I rub her ass with my free hand, greedily sinking my fingers into her fullness. Her moans get louder, sweeter, and more filled with adorable shock.

Suddenly, she can't moan anymore. They come out breathy, as though she can't find the air, her hands clawing at the lectern. I can hear her fingernails rasping against the wood.

Her pussy gets tighter around my finger, then opens gorgeously, flowing with creaminess down her thighs. I snarl and move my finger to her clit, putting my tongue and lips against her instead. I rub her clit and taste her sweet creaminess flowing over my mouth and tongue.

I groan as I rise to my feet, dropping my boxers, stroking my hand up and down my length, and spreading her wetness to my cock. She looks at me over her shoulder, hair across her face, her body sweaty, misted, and excited. Then her eyes move down to my dick, and she shudders.

"Do you think..." she trails off.

My savage nature vibrates. An inner voice roars at me to get my seed inside my woman, shouting it's the only place it belongs. It tells me to drive my dick into her hole and stare down as her ass presses against my abs.

“Say it, Ellie,” I tell her.

“Could we do it with me lying down, maybe?”

I almost let out a sigh of relief. “I’ll claim you in any damn position you want.”

Grabbing my shirt, I lay it on the floor. She lies on her back, spreading her legs, looking up at me. I kneel over, slowly spreading her wetness from my tip to my base.

“Show me those big, full tits,” I growl.

She moves her hand to her bra and pulls it down, her breasts wedging curvaceously above it. It’s even hotter than if she took her bra off. The position highlights how perfectly sized she is.

“Oh, fuck,” I snarl.

I move beside her, palm her pussy with one hand, supporting myself with the other as I lean down and take her nipple in my mouth. I swirl my tongue around it, smearing her wetness all over her pussy, then slipping two fingers into her virgin slit. When her hips move in time with my fingers, I know I can’t take it anymore.

I climb atop her, holding myself up with my hands pressed against the floor. She looks so beautiful when she tilts her head, a challenge gleaming in her eyes, almost like she’s saying, *What next, huh?*

Smirking, I reach down, grab my dick, and guide my tip to her entrance. Seed surges up my shaft when I feel her slit kissing the end of my dick, her folds slowly spreading. The hottest part is her face, the delight and shock in her eyes, her mouth twisting in pleasure.

She moans and grabs my arms as I glide deeper, pushing and telling myself not to explode or let my seed erupt too soon. I’m a human goddamn volcano. She’s driving me feral.

I almost roar when I push all the way inside of her. I lean up to look at her in the moonlight, her cheeks fuck-me red, her lips pursed. She meets my eye, nods, and her smile gets naughty.

“Sir,” she whispers, then hesitates.

With my dick buried in her and her walls pulsing around my base, I say, “Go on, Ellie. Say it.”

“Sir, fuck me, sir. Fuck me.”

Now, I *do* roar. Let’s just hope it’s not loud enough for anybody to hear me at the library. I don’t stop to think about the fact we’re on the lecture hall floor. Or that she’s my student. Or Jane or Vanessa or any of it. Just my woman grinding on my cock as I pull out, then hammer back into her. She moans captivately, nodding at me to go on.

I lean down, resting my body against hers, feeling her breasts against my chest and her breath against my neck. She wraps her arms around me as we melt into our rhythm like we’ve melted into kisses. We’re inking our future right here, just like a tattoo. Making it permanent as we... Fuck, I almost lose it again when she starts pumping her hips.

“Yeah? Yeah?” she moans.

“Ellie, Ellie,” I groan, moving quicker, our bodies slick and sweaty as we pump faster and more urgently. Her walls wrap tighter and tighter around my dick, the head buzzing with heat, electricity, and so much pressure I can hardly take it.

“Come on my cock,” I growl, leaning back again.

One of her breasts has become completely free from her bra, bouncing up and down as I fuck her harder. I start hammering her fertile body, hypnotized by her bouncing tit, her nipple gleaming from where I sucked her.

“I am, I am,” she whispers.

I look at her face. There’s no way I’ll miss this, the pleasure twisting her features as her pussy grabs onto my dick *hard*. Her orgasm makes her inexperienced hole somehow tighter, and then I stare down, lost in the sight of my dick hammering into her and sliding out. I’m covered in *her* come. She’s squirting all over my dick. She’s making me glisten as I slide into her.

“A-a-and you, s-sir,” she screams.

“Say it,” I roar.

“Come in me, sir.”

I go into overdrive, losing my mind, losing control. All I can do is keep fucking my horny girl as the heat burns up my shaft, concentrating on my end. I grunt almost in disbelief as it pulses out of me, more pleasure than I’ve ever felt. I empty myself into the woman I love, savoring every twitching moment. Her pussy begins to pulse slower, as though coaxing the seed out of me.

When her walls have milked me dry, I pull out. I stroke her with my fingers for a few more seconds when I see she’s still experiencing aftershocks of the orgasm, little tremors that start making me hard again.

“I’m so glad I waited for you,” she whispers. “I mean, I didn’t know it would be you. But for the first time, I can’t imagine it being better than that. More magical.”

I lean over and kiss her on the lips. “I love you.”

Neither of us mentions the obvious. This isn’t over yet. It could all still go wrong. It could blow up in at least three different ways. My job. Vanessa. Jane.

“Whatever happens,” I tell her, “we’re in this together. Whatever happens, we face it together.”

“Together,” she whispers, moving in for another kiss.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Ellie

“She said she’s still not ready to talk,” I say, struggling to keep my hands off Max.

We’re standing in the lecture hall alone. Unlike the last time we were here—that magical night—we’re fully clothed, and it’s daytime. It’s been almost a week since the standoff in the restaurant. Jane hasn’t come home. Mom doesn’t know where she is. I think that’s the holdup.

“We can’t keep sneaking around,” Max says as he runs a hand through his hair, his inked arms showing through his white shirt. Glancing at the door, I reach over and touch his arm. He smirks. “Careful, Ellie.”

“You never should’ve taken my virginity, sir,” I whisper, making my voice breathy. Just how he likes it. “You’ve turned me crazy.”

“But only for me,” he snarls, moving close as though he’s going to kiss me. Then he stops and takes a big step back, his hands shaking. “You’ve got no idea how difficult it is not to touch you.”

I *do* have an idea, though. We’ve made love several times since that first night, at his place, even in his *car*, because we couldn’t wait to get home. He always loses it. He treats me like I’m the hottest woman alive. Then after, I lie in his arms. Once, he recited some sonnets, the words heating me up all over again.

“I don’t like it, Ellie,” he says, sighing darkly. “Knowing that any day, your mom could tell us to stop. Then I’d be coming between a daughter and her mother.”

“That would be her choice,” I whisper. “I know it sounds bad, but we’re not hurting her by being together. I think it’s Jane, honestly.”

Max’s shoulders sag. He drops his head. He grits his teeth, then lets out a breath. “I’m always going to live in the shadow of that, aren’t I? No matter how obvious it might seem, without proof, there’s always that thought in people’s heads. Did he do it? Would he do it? Then, if I get angry, it’s a sign—evidence. It’s bull crap.”

“Hey, I’ve got you saying *bull crap* now,” I say, trying for a lighter tone.

He meets my eye and forces a smile. “I’m being morbid.”

“It’s a lot. I get that.” I step forward and touch his hand, just the fingertips, because otherwise, we’ll both get carried away. “She’ll come around. Maybe when Aunt Jane finally decides to show her face. See you later?”

We’re going to his place after my last class. Mom knows I’m spending a lot of time elsewhere. She knows who I’m with, but it’s become this unacknowledged, ignored thing.

He smiles, then does the cute thing he’s started. He holds his hand out, then grabs his wrist and pulls it back like he’s stopping himself from touching me. It’s hella goofy and makes us both laugh so much we don’t even care.

As I leave the lecture hall, I make sure my expression isn’t too happy or upbeat. I don’t want to seem like I’ve got too much to smile about. I need to keep this relationship buried for now so nobody guesses and gets the school involved, complicating things even *more*.

“Hey, Ellie.”

I turn at the voice. This side of the hall is empty. Most people use the central entrance, but I like to walk this way, beneath the trees. It’s the same path Max and I took the night we came here—the night everything changed.

It’s Chloe. She looks more jittery than the last time I saw her. Her hair is

messy, and she has dark bags under her eyes. I walk over to her quickly, putting my hand on her shoulder. “Chloe, jeez. Are you okay? I didn’t think you were in today.”

“Something weird happened,” she says. “I had a bad reaction to my meds. They still don’t know why. It made me sick and sent me into a panic spiral. It was horrible.”

“It sounds it.”

“Then something really weird happened. I was at the chemist, you know, sorting my meds. When I was leaving, these people approached me. They tell me they will help me get what I want and make me feel better, but first, I have to help *them*.”

I swallow. “What people, Chloe?”

“A woman called Jane and a douche called Cillian. Here’s the thing. I went along with it for a little while. Just long enough to work out what was going on. It’s like opening a new book, peeling back the pages, devouring the plot. Get it?”

I give her arm a comforting squeeze. She seems really on edge. “Yeah, I get it.”

“So I played their game. They said they were going to get me some meds for free. Whatever, I think they were both on something. Then they said I need to lure you out to the parking lot today after class. They said they’ll get me the meds if I lure you out there, like I’d ever do that.”

“Why do they want to lure me out there?” I ask.

Chloe bites down and shakes her head. “I don’t know, but I don’t think it’s good. I heard them talking. Cillian is working with some drug pushers on the West Coast. Jane is his accomplice. Or maybe she’s in charge. It’s hard to tell. They talk to each other real, real mean.”

“I knew they were working together,” I whisper, struggling to stay calm when all I want to do is scream. “That’s why Aunt Jane is—”

“Aunt Jane?” Chloe says.

“Yeah, I know. It’s messed up.” I think about what Max said about them needing help. “Will you come with me, Chloe? We need to tell Max about this.”

“Oh, yes. Are you two still...”

“He’s everything I knew he’d be,” I whisper, “and more. We’re going to be a couple.”

She beams, taking my hand. “That’s just awesome. I know it’s true.” We walk down the hallway together. Chloe lowers her voice. “I can’t believe they thought I’d do that to you.”

“It was a fair assumption,” I say.

Chloe stops and looks at me, wounded. “Wow.”

“No, I’m sorry. I mean to them. We only met recently. They couldn’t guess you’d be so loyal.”

“Loyalty matters,” Chloe says firmly.

I touch her arm. “I’d do the same for you.”

“Do you think Professor Stellar will want to call the cops?” Chloe asks.

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“I just hope they don’t think I was involved.”

“What? No way. I’ll tell them you came to me and warned me. There’s no way they could think you’re involved. Max... Professor Stellar will say the same too.”

Chloe nods as if summoning her courage. “Okay, good. Okay, yeah. Let’s do this. Okay.”

We keep walking down the hallway together, approaching the entrance to the lecture hall. This doorway means so much to me now. It means secret lovemaking, secret looks, and all the beauty of the sonnets wrapped up in a poem of my own.

As bizarre as it is, happiness flows through me the closer I get to the door. I

went from a life dictated by bullies, with no friends except the librarian, mourning my dad, Mom the best, but busy... There was a lot of loneliness. Now I have friends: Lacy at work and Chloe at school. I have love and loyalty.

It's almost enough to make me well up, and that gets me thinking about a baby. I keep wondering if we did it during that first time. Were we lucky and blessed enough already to be bringing a life into this world?

Chloe walks ahead of me. She knocks on the door. "Hello? Professor Stellar?"

A voice hisses from behind. "*Say it.*" I think that's what the person says, though I can't be sure. It's a low, snapping tone. It definitely isn't my Max. I could recognize his voice as a whisper.

"Don't come in here," Max yells. "They've got wea—"

He grunts, and the door springs open, causing Chloe to fall back. A man rushes out. He's huge, probably as tall as Max, and wide. He's got a bald head, and when he laughs, a gold tooth flashes. His face is covered in faded cuts and bruises, like he's recovering from a beating. He grabs Chloe quickly, wraps his arm around her, and grins at me. Behind him, I can see Max on the floor. Cillian has what looks like a hammer pushed against his neck. Jane sits on the desk, her legs folded, casually smoking a cigarette.

"Don't make me hurt her," the bald man says, glaring at me. "In now. Before anybody wanders by."

They're lucky. No lectures are scheduled. This isn't a busy part of the campus, but I could still run, scream, and get help. Chloe whimpers as the man tightens his grip. I can't leave her. What if they seriously hurt her?

Then I feel it. The puke rushes up my neck. I fall to the floor, really playing it up. I'm not faking it. I think about pregnancy again as the vomit burns up my throat. It's not *fake*, but I'm exaggerating how bad it is. It gives me time to reach into my pocket and grab the device. It looks like a tube of lipstick.

I haven't told anybody I bought it, not even Max. I wasn't sure how he'd react. It might be useful now as long as we get out of here alive.

“Disgusting,” the bald man grunts. “Get up. Now.”

I climb to my feet and walk toward the lecture hall, wiping my mouth with my sleeve.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Max

This is the worst thing that ever could've happened.

My woman is in physical danger when I can already see the glow of pregnancy emanating from her. It's in every flush, every glance, and I don't give a damn about the science. It wouldn't show up on a test yet, but she's carrying my baby. I feel it in my bones.

Now, the bald man forces her to sit in the front row, shoving Chloe beside her. That Cillian prick has the claw end of a hammer pushed right up against the back of my neck. My mouth pulses from where Jane slapped me when I tried to warn Ellie and her friend.

Jane titters, crossing and uncrossing her legs. She wants to draw attention to them, wearing a short skirt.

"You should put that out," Cillian says from behind me. "We don't want to set off the alarms."

"Boring," Jane says, then stubs the cigarette out on my desk. "Right, so what's the plan, gentlemen?"

"I don't fucking know," Cillian snaps. "This was the big man's idea."

"Oh, this is just perfect." Jane pushes from the desk, prances across the room, and stops in front of Ellie. Ellie glares up at her defiantly, despite the big

goon looming. “Fate has brought us together. It brought Max to that crack den, and it just so happens we already know the big, handsome gentleman who runs said establishment.”

The big man laughs gruffly. “Stop flattering me, doll.”

Jane giggles manically. She sounds unhinged as she lays her hand on his shoulder. I can feel Cillian junkie-shaking from the hammer point driving over and over against the back of my neck.

“But it’s good luck,” Jane goes on. “We all have beef with the same man. *This* toad. Mr. High and Mighty. On his golden pedestal in his ivory tower.”

“Is that why you got an abortion?” Ellie spits, looking brave and capable despite the vomit clinging to her chin. “To *spite* him?”

“Oh, Jesus Christ, Ellie, you’re soft, and I don’t just mean physically.” She cackles at her own cruel joke. “I’ve done a lot...”

Ellie pushes on when she stops. Apparently, even her drug-addled mind doesn’t want to incriminate itself. “I’m not scared of you, Aunt Jane.”

“Do you think I need you to be?”

“I’ve seen you crying like a baby,” Ellie says, her voice taking on a vicious, *Jane*-like tone. I know she’s doing it intentionally. I just don’t know why. “I’ve seen you at your lowest, covered in snot, as you wailed for your fiancé.”

“My fiancé,” Jane giggles. “You really are a stupid fucking piggy, aren’t you?”

I roar, my instincts trying to send me to my feet, but then Cillian pushes with even more pressure against my neck. “Stop making so much noise.”

He’s got it buried in there. I feel blood dripping over my shoulders. If I turn, it will mean twisting myself up. “Stop moving and shut up.”

“Ooh, you’re so scary,” Ellie says, laughing. “You’re a joke, Aunt Jane.”

“This joke ruined your life,” Jane snaps, waving her hand in her niece’s face, but Ellie doesn’t flinch. “This *joke* turned your little prank into a

phenomenon. An event.”

“Jane,” Cillian mutters.

“What? It’s the truth. You put the nose on her. You made the *oink* noises, but I saw the potential, just like I saw the potential in you, jock boy. *I’m* in charge, nobody else. *I’m* the one who calls the goddamn shots. I can make all the teenagers in an entire county turn on one person. I can hang with men, *men* in the streets. I’m aces, me, better than you’ll ever be, kiddo. *Remember* that.”

Ellie blinks. Tears are in her eyes, but I can tell she’s trying not to let them dominate her. She sits up. “Is that true? Were you really behind it?”

“*I’m* behind everything. Nothing happens to me without *me* deciding it. That’s better than being in control. It’s called being God. Cillian... He’s my puppet.”

“What about you, big man?” I stare up at the bald, gold-toothed man. “Are you her puppet too?”

“I’m nobody’s puppet,” he grunts.

I need to get him away from the women. If I suddenly lie flat, it will relieve the pressure from the hammer, but then I’ll be lying on my front. So I’ll have to attack like a dog, spring up, and do the most vicious and violent thing possible to end the fight.

My heart is pounding so hard, but not as hard as it did the first time I told my woman I loved her. Not as hard as it does when I think about the future, our children.

“So I guess you *did* give yourself that bruise,” Ellie says.

Jane laughs madly. “Oh, Christ. You’re still talking about *that*? I already said whatever happens to me, *I* choose. I could’ve killed Max if I wanted to. You should’ve seen him cry when I told him about his precious baby.”

“So you *did* it,” Ellie screams.

Jane yells, spins, and glares. “I did *all* of it, you little bitch. I’m the female Pablo Escobar. I could have you killed. Do you think it was a *coincidence*

that Cillian turned up where you work? Are you that dense? I'm a mastermind."

"Easy, honey," the big man says. "You're useful, but you talk too much."

"We're here for you," Jane snaps. "There he is. Go on. Do what you need to do."

When she gestures at me, the big man nods. He meets my eye with a new intensity. "You remember what you did, Professor?"

I bare my teeth at him. Let him see the fight in me, just like those dogs. Just like Petey and Kelly, too, fighting her addiction, doing better this time. I'm showing him I'm not scared. "I remember you dropping like a sack of shit."

He laughs, nodding. "I can tell by looking at you that you're not a man afraid of a physical altercation."

"You're goddamn right."

"So, what about this?" When he turns toward Ellie, my vision wavers and turns red like blood sliding down my eyes. I'm raging inside. That's my woman, *mine*. "Come here, sweetie. I won't hurt you."

Whatever he has planned, it has to stop. I don't have time to see if he will taunt me with a threat or seriously hurt my woman. All I can think about is the well-being of my partner. This is savage survival now. This is out-in-the-wild stuff. Ten thousand years ago, I would've had to respond the same around the campfire to keep my woman safe.

Suddenly, I lie flat, moving away from the hammer point. That gives me maybe half a second to roll onto my side. Cillian yells and brings the hammer down, hits the floor, and I grab his wrist. I squeeze and pull as hard as I can. He screams and lets the hammer go. I grab it and jump to my feet. The big man is rushing at me.

With a roar, I spin. The hammer catches him in the side of the mouth. Time slows as his gold tooth flips end over end, winking in the sunlight. I hit him again, hard, in the gut. He keels over, and then I turn on Cillian, kneeling him in the head when he tries to tackle me to the ground.

“*Run!*” I roar at Ellie and her friend. “*Now!*”

They jump up and make for the door. Ellie stops. I glare at her friend. “*Get her out of here!*”

I don’t have time to watch her go. When I turn back, Cillian is on the floor, rubbing his head and groaning. The big man stands a foot away, hunched over but with his hands raised in a boxing stance. Jane lingers over to the side, not even seeming annoyed the women have gotten away. She watches with hazy-eyed curiosity.

“The campus police will be here soon,” I tell the big man. “Your only choice now is how messed up you will be when they arrive.”

I move the hammer from one hand to the other. The big man grins. He can barely even close his hands into fists. I wonder if it’s from the last time we met when I crushed his wrists.

“Tough guy with a hammer.”

“You’re bleeding from your mouth.”

“You sucker punched me, stole my girl, and stole my dog.”

“You were abusing that dog and the girl.”

The man yells and runs at me. It’s the stupidest thing he could’ve done. I leap to the side. I bring the hammer around in a sideways arc, the heavy head crushing into his gut. He grunts and throws himself atop me, but he’s winded. I turn into him as we fall. I crush him, catch my balance, and end up on top. Then I headbutt him so damn hard *I* see stars.

Quickly, I jump to my feet, drive my foot into his gut, and hold it there until his hands go limp at his sides. Cillian is still groaning, cradling his head.

Jane sighs when she hears the sirens. “This hasn’t gone at all to plan.”

“I thought you needed help,” I growl, “but you’re broken, Jane. Ellie deserves better than you. Vanessa deserves better.”

Cillian suddenly springs up, rushing at me. I can’t take my foot off the big man, but I don’t need to. I spin, catching him with my fist right across the

mouth. He yelps and falls to the floor.

I gesture with the hammer. “Are you sorry now?” I roar. “Are you fucking sorry?”

“Yes, yes,” he wails, raising his hands. “Please. Stop. I’m s-sorry.”

“Ooh, yes,” Jane says, tittering louder, almost like she wants to drown out the sirens. “*I’m* sorry too. I’m sorry I killed our little brat, and you got your panties in a twist.”

“Don’t forget about punching yourself in the face,” I say, laughing grimly, knowing she’ll never repeat this. Nobody else will ever hear her say it.

“Oh, that,” she beams. “I’m sorry about my incredible makeup skills,” she adds. Then, when we hear footsteps outside, she changes her face. She starts to cry. “H-help!”

“So that’s your plan,” I say, almost laughing again. “You were a victim in all this?”

“Help me!”

“Okay, Jane. Okay.”

The door opens, and campus police rush in with Ellie close behind them. Jane is in the corner of the room now, wailing, apparently having a mental breakdown. Ellie walks over to where she was sitting, leans down, and picks something up.

“What’s that?” I ask as the cops approach me, their hands raised.

She smiles. Her eyes have a new, fresh brightness, almost like a flare of victory. She turns to Jane, her smile growing wider. “Oh, I just dropped my lipstick.”

CHAPTER

TWENTY-THREE

Ellie

Two days after the fallout, Max, Mom, and I sit around the table in our living room. Mom rests her elbows on her knees with her fingers interlaced, her knuckles turning white as she squeezes her hands together.

Max sits beside me, his bandage just about showing above his collar from where Cillian held him hostage with the hammer. He turns to me, smiling softly, but there's still that fierceness in his icy blue eyes. It's the warrior I saw in the lecture hall when he saved me, saved *us*.

Mom knows what's on the recording. I used the lipstick device I bought just in case I ran into Aunt Jane again. I've told her, and the fact that Jane, Cillian, and that horrible gold-toothed man are in jail confirms it. Well, I guess that man doesn't have a gold tooth anymore.

Mom finally said she was ready to talk and hear the recording for herself. As it plays, she hears Jane admit to being a drug dealer, contributing to my bullying, and bringing Cillian back into my life. Mom crumples and begins to sob. I move to the couch with her, wrapping my arm around her.

At the end, when Jane does her freaky transformation, Mom reaches forward and closes the laptop. "I've seen that before from her, how she can switch. I always told myself she wasn't *that* bad. I always told myself that, but this is unforgivable. *She* was behind all that mess on the West Coast."

“It’s awful,” I whisper. “All of it.”

“But we can move on together,” Mom says firmly, kissing me on the forehead. “We’ll put *her* behind us. From the sounds of it, she will be in prison for a long time.”

I was right about her fiancé. He didn’t leave her. She left him after driving recklessly through the neighborhood on a rampage. Then she transported drugs across the entire country. There’s the kidnapping, the conspiracy to deal drugs... She’s looking at ten years, maybe more.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” I say.

“Hush. What do *you* have to be sorry about?”

“You’ve lost your sister.”

“She was never the sister I thought she was, anyway,” Mom says.

“That’s what you’ve lost,” I tell her. “That’s why I’m sorry. You were able to have a relationship with her. Maybe you still can one day.”

“No,” Mom says, shaking her head. “She did things when we were kids, things I’ve forgiven her for. And later, borrowing money, that sort of thing, but *this*... going out of her way to hurt you? You’re my baby, Ellie. You’re my responsibility. I’d never let her anywhere near me or you again. I think I’m finally ready to say it.”

“Say what, Mom?”

“My sister is a narcissist.” Mom shudders as if an enormous weight has been lifted from her. “I’ve never wanted to put it into those words, but I can’t run from it anymore. That’s what she is. *Who* she is.”

Mom slowly looks at Max. I’m trying *not* to look at him because the emotion will become too much. When Mom’s expression softens, I have to turn to see the effect it’s having on Max. He frowns at us, his eyes hard, his body ready for anything.

“You already knew that,” Mom says after a pause. “You could’ve told me, Max. Told the world the truth.”

“I was just glad it was over. She didn’t take her crazy shit to the police. I wanted nothing to do with her.”

Mom laughs sadly. “You’re going to be a reminder of Jane by being there. A reminder of everything that happened.”

“He’s a reminder of what we overcame,” I say fiercely. “We’ll remind each other daily of what we’ve been through to be together. I don’t think that’s a bad thing, Mom. I think it’s beautiful, honestly.”

“You said Ellie was your purpose,” Mom says, eyeing Max fiercely. “At the restaurant, you said that. Did you mean it?”

“All I care about, all I can think about, is her, our family, protecting her, providing for her.”

“Now I know the truth,” Mom says. “You’re a good man. You tried to argue for Jane even though you knew what she’d done to you.”

“I thought she deserved a second chance.”

“And now?” Mom says, almost aggressively, as if it’s a test. “Now you’ve heard what she did to Ellie. Do you still think she deserves a second chance?”

Max leans forward and stays silent for a few seconds. It’s like there’s a storm clashing behind his baby blues. I want to kiss him hella badly. “She might learn her lesson in prison. She might find God or find herself. I won’t begrudge her that, but she better stay away from my family.”

Mom nods. “That’s the answer I wanted. It means we’re on the same page.”

“Mom, what are you saying?” I whisper.

She strokes my hair from my face again. She’s wearing the same expression she wore after Dad died. The one that tells me she’s thinking of what’s best for me, for the future. “This isn’t a usual situation, but I know you. I can see how determined you are to be with Max. I can see how certain you are.”

“We’re both certain,” I say passionately.

“I’ve never been surer about anything in my life,” Max says fiercely.

“Then you have my blessing,” Mom says. “Both of you. I won’t stand in your

way. I'll be there for you every step of the way. Wedding planning. Designing my... oh, my *grandchildren's* bedroom."

She starts crying again. I hold her tightly.

"Excuse me," she says after a few minutes. "I need to use the bathroom."

When she leaves, I rush to Max and throw my arms around him. "Did you hear? We can be together, Max. Really be together."

"I love you so much," he says huskily, sweeping me into a kiss.

We sink into it, as we always do, but with added heat, added fire. "We're going to have to hold off on your tattoo," he says, his breath caressing me, "if we're trying for a baby."

I laugh softly, a pleasant shiver coiling around my neck, warm tingles claiming every part. "Are we *ever* going to get this tattoo done?"

"Be patient, Ellie," he says, kissing me again. Then, in a soft, somehow urgent, warm, and passionate whisper, "We've got all the time in the world."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Max

“What is this place?” Ellie says as I drive her into the parking lot of a lumber mill, out in the countryside, several hundred miles from our house.

It is *our* house, even though she’s only been officially staying there a day. She moved in last night after Vanessa gave her blessing. I already think of it as our home, just like I think of everything as *ours*: the future, a family, love, all of it.

“Now, it’s a lumber mill, but years ago, it was an abandoned warehouse. This is where I grew up.”

I sit back, taking a long breath. Ellie reaches over and places her hand on mine. Warmth immediately fires between us, nothing dragging it down now or threatening it. She’s wearing a loose-fitting summer dress that settles against the shape of her perfect, fertile body. Her hair is stylishly messy. She’s beautiful, every inch. Her eyes show understanding. “Whatever it is, you can tell me.”

I swallow. It’s like whiplash, going from having no feelings to all the feelings. That’s just part of the journey with my woman, and I will be here for every moment.

“This is where my uncle brought me when they held the fights. I used to have nightmares about this place, and then, nothing. I stopped feeling, but then I

met you. Hell, I saw you, and everything changed. The second I laid eyes on you, you were tattooed on me, inked into me. Part of me. We fused right then.”

She leans toward me. I turn, meeting her lips, pressing passionately against her. As we kiss, our problems flash through my mind. Just one. Just the college. They don't know about our relationship. As far as they're concerned, I fought off three psychos. The police haven't needed to share the contents of the recording. Maybe they won't have to. But if they do? I love the job, but I love my woman much more.

“I love you,” she whispers urgently, “so much.”

“I love you, Ellie. Come with me.”

I climb from the car, then walk around to her side. When she takes my hand, I can't help but pull her to her feet, pull her close so she's right up against me. I groan when her body gets warm against mine, the telltale sign my girl is ready for me. Then I gently push her away and take her hand. I've got to do this first.

“I guess we're going for a walk,” she says, a callback to the first standoff with Cillian when I finally told her how much she means to me.

But there isn't any pain in my gut this time. Only joy as I lead her away from the parking lot through the trees. Her hands fly to her mouth when I lead her into the clearing, the ground suddenly covered with thousands of red rose petals. The sun comes down at the perfect angle, making them glisten.

“Oh my God,” she whispers, her eyes moving over the tapestry.

It's suspended between two tall beams, each corner secured to it, flapping in the wind. The design is visible. It's a classic car, driving off into the sunset, just like her tattoo idea, but there's a difference.

She walks forward, gazing at the tapestry. I walk up behind her, enveloping her in my arms and whispering in her ear. Our bodies naturally shift against each other, my manhood pressing against her back.

“I know you're getting impatient about your tattoo. We have to wait until after the baby. So I thought I'd draw up a design. It's slightly different from

the one I'll ink on your perfect body, Ellie, but it's the same basic design."

She spins in my embrace, throws her arms around me, and ends up with her hands desperately clinging to my neck. She holds me passionately, her eyes glistening. "Do you mean it?"

I smirk. "Do you even have to ask me that?"

The license plate reads, *Will you marry me?*

I step back, lowering myself to one knee. I wanted to surprise her with my design and the rose petals, but that doesn't mean I won't do this properly.

"Ellie Rey," I say, reaching into my pocket and taking out the ring box. "You're the smartest, kindest, fiercest, most beautiful, most perfect person I've ever met. You're sexy, sassy, funny, and hell, you're enough to make an English Lit professor run out of words."

She laughs and happily sobs simultaneously, then lets out an excited squeal when I open the ring box, showing her the enormous diamond with the elegant band.

"Ellie Rey, you're the love of my life. Will you marry me?"

"Yes," she yells. "Oh my God, yes, yes."

I slide the ring onto her finger, then jump to my feet and pull her into my arms. We kiss like it's the first time, with all the passion in the world, kiss like nothing could ever break us, kiss like we've been through fire, and it's only made us closer. We kiss like only we can, Ellie and Max, a man who's finally found the only woman he'll ever want.

"I love you," I gasp, unable to contain all the passion bubbling inside me. "So, so much."

"I... love... you."

We kiss between each word of her reply, disappearing for longer each time.

"Thank you for doing this here," she says, falling into my arms. "I know it must've been hard for you, but I think I understand. This is where you thought your life ended, but now, it's where *our* lives can begin, right,

Professor Ink?”

I smile, kiss her on the forehead, then inhale her hair. I inhale all of her. “Top marks.”

She laughs, and it’s the best sound in the world.

EPILOGUE

TWO WEEKS LATER

Ellie

“He’s the goofiest dog in the world,” Kelly says, laughing when Petey runs around the yard after his ball, leaps on it, then stares up at the porch, growling. He repeats this over and over. “But I love him. He was my best bud, back in the... you know, the bad place.”

“The bad place,” Chloe repeats, blowing on her hot cocoa, shivering, but only because there’s a slight chill in the air this afternoon. She isn’t jittery anymore. “I get you. Thanks for telling us about that.”

I never guessed this would happen. Chloe, Kelly, and I became a trio of friends. Now I know nothing happened between Kelly and Max, obviously. I feel silly for how I freaked out in front of her.

“I need to stop running from it. I hurt my leg. I took some pills. It’s time to move on.”

Chloe reaches across the table, touching her hand. “You’re doing great. Two and a half weeks. That’s *great*.”

“It is, Kelly,” I say warmly.

Petey grumbles as he carries his ball to the bottom of the stairs. He drops it there, then yaps up at us. The little prince cannot carry it up here himself.

“Okay, my lord,” I say, and the other two laugh.

I lean down and suddenly feel bile rise in my throat. I place my hand over my mouth and take a moment.

“Are you okay?” Kelly asks.

“I just...” My heart starts pounding. Oh my God, I’m only a day late, but...
“I need to use the bathroom.”

I run through the house, smiling, hoping it’s true, praying. My thoughts flash to the last two weeks with Jane, Cillian, and their goon getting sentenced and the quick but beautiful wedding Max and I had here. He’s my husband already.

We wanted it fast. Now, the college can’t do anything. We’re husband and wife. It’s official. We made vows, and we meant them. Sure, I had to switch classes because I can’t take the same class my husband teaches, but at least they didn’t make a big deal out of it. Surprisingly, the dean was very understanding. Something having to do with her college professor husband being her teacher at one point. It’s funny how the world works.

I use the pregnancy test I’ve kept in the bathroom, just in case. A few minutes later, I run onto the porch, cheering and waving it around. You’d think it was a stick covered in gold, not pee, the way I’m handling it. Petey even starts yapping the happy bark he does when playing.

Then the gate starts to open. I run for Max’s car and slam my hand on the window. I’m yelling, tears in my eyes, my soul bursting with all the love in the world. Max jumps from the car and sweeps me into his arms, holding me tightly. His body bulges warmly against mine.

“Ellie, what is it? Is something wrong?”

“No, no, it’s good. It’s the best thing ever.”

“Tell me,” he says fiercely.

“I’m pregnant. I was feeling sick, I did a test, and I am. *We’re* going to have a baby!”

He cheers and spins me in a circle, then cradles me gently to his chest. My husband holds me like he never wants to let go, and I know he never will.

EPILOGUE

THIRTEEN MONTHS LATER

Max

“How’s he doing, Mom?” Ellie says into her phone. It’s on the counter, on speakerphone.

I smile as I gently move the needle across my wife’s skin, making the indentations that will fill with ink. I’m slowly bringing the sunset scene to life since our little bundle of joy, Sebastian, is already in the world.

“He’s sleeping, the little angel,” Vanessa says. “I’ll bring him to say hello when he wakes up.”

“Am I crazy for checking?” Ellie says once she ends the call, looking at me over her shoulder.

She’s so beautiful, her hair tied up, partly tamed. She’s even curvier, more perfect since giving birth. Every time she flushes now, I remember her after the birth, Seb cradled in her arms, the love beaming out of her cheeks.

“I know they’re in the house,” she says, as if taking my silence as a *yes*.

“You’re an amazing mother,” I say fiercely, but focusing on keeping my hand steady. “The fact you want to check, even though he’s in the house, shows you are an incredible mother. I’m blessed I get to see it.”

“I wish *he* got to see it,” Ellie whispers.

She's talking about her dad, I know, the reason for this tattoo. I've brought the top half to life, the sun bleeding into the horizon, the upper part of the car.

"But we've got so much to be happy about," Ellie says.

My wife's like that. She can be glum for a moment, a breath, and then remember she can open her heart and let all the brightness of her life wash in. Then she completely lights up, vibrant and magnetic.

"Okay, so I never got to finish the sonnets."

"That was a sour compromise," I say, "but I understand why the school thinks I might be biased. At least I still get to teach. At least you still get to study."

"But apart from that, Jane isn't going to get out for *sixteen* years. Cillian and that other awful man got longer. Mom is babysitting our beautiful child. When this first started, could you imagine any of this?"

"That's the thing, Ellie," I say, gently guiding the needle across her skin, inking her forever. "I could. All of it. The first time I held Seb was like meeting an old friend."

"I know what you mean," she says. "Like finding a piece of ourselves."

"*Ourselves*," I repeat. "Yeah, that's it. He's the best little boy ever, isn't he?"

She beams. "Only because he's got your eyes."

"He has your hair."

She giggles. "He doesn't even *have* hair yet."

"Hey, that's not true. He's got a few wisps, and they're brown, just like yours."

She smiles. "Do you think we should get to work giving him a brother or sister once the tattoo's healed?"

I lean over and kiss her on the cheek. Even now, I've still got to be careful not to push too hard or let myself go. There's always a danger of losing control with my wife.

“Is that even a question?” I say, and she laughs.

EPILOGUE

NINE YEARS LATER

Vanessa

“Happy birthday to you,” I sing. My heart floods with joy as I look around my daughter and son-in-law’s large dining room, with tall ceilings and two glistening chandeliers. *“Happy birthday to you.”* All around the room, there’s love and happiness.

There’s Chloe, the friend Ellie met in college, with her arm around her girlfriend’s waist. There’s Kelly and her husband, Kelly’s belly showing her bump, with Ben standing next to them, his tatted arms on display. There’s Lacy, Ellie’s old friend from her restaurant job, holding the hand of her adopted daughter.

Ben sees me looking and raises an eyebrow, a small smile on his face. Max’s best friend. Kelly’s dad.

“Happy birthday to Seeeeeeeb!” we all sing.

Ellie stands behind her son, my daughter, with her hand resting on her pregnant belly. My other grandchild, Jennifer, stands beside me, holding my hand. I try not to squeeze too tight, but it’s difficult with all the love bubbling up inside of me.

“Happy birthday to youuuuu!”

Sebastian grins and blows his candles out, his brown locks bouncing around his face. Everybody cheers and claps their hands, and Max starts cutting the

cake.

Many people know Max by his pen name now. Max's work has reached a new level since my talented daughter graduated. She used her persuasive writing skills to transition to marketing. With Ellie's support, he got a movie deal when he revealed his name. My grandchildren will never have to want for anything.

"Do you think they saw me looking?" Benny asks a few minutes later when everybody is mingling and partying. The kids are in the yard, having fun in the bouncy castle, with a few playing in the pool.

"I feel like a teenager, sneaking around," I say, shivering when he takes my hand and leans in.

Then he stops. "Uh oh."

"What?" I say.

He nods off to the side. I follow his gaze. Max and Ellie are standing at the window, looking directly into the hallway.

"Grandma, Grandma," Jennifer sings, running over to me. "Can you bounce?"

"In a sec, sweetie. I need to talk to your daddy first."

"Okey-dokey."

My heart breaks every time she says that. It's too cute.

Ben and I go into the garden together and walk over to Max. He's standing in a cluster with Kelly and Ellie. Ellie and Max are holding hands. It's funny to me how odd that sight would've seemed once.

Ellie smiles warmly. "Mom, we already know."

I gasp. "You do?"

Kelly grins. "Yeah, you two aren't exactly subtle. I figured I'd let you tell us in your own time."

"We're *happy* for you both," Max says, smiling at Ben.

“We thought it might be awkward,” Ben says quietly.

Max wraps his arm around Ellie. “We understand love can come from unlikely places. Believe me.”

Ellie smiles at him, then lays her hand on his chest, her wedding and engagement rings glistening.

“You really don’t mind?” I ask.

Ellie beams. “Not even a *little* bit, Mom!”

From behind us, Sebastian’s voice rises. “Daddy! Daddy! Let’s wrestle!”

Max smiles and jogs toward his son. He’s truly an incredible father. “I’m coming to get ya!”

Petey yaps happily, chasing after Max, his full, healthy fur glistening in the sun.

THE END

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Turn the page to get a sneak peek of
Kidnapped by My Best Friend's Dad>

KIDNAPPED BY MY BEST FRIEND'S DAD

CHAPTER ONE

Emma

I watch the East Coast buildings flit by the window, much grayer and bleaker than the West Coast. Maybe that's just my mood, and I can't brand the *entire* East Coast this way.

I'm sitting in the back of a chauffeured car sent by my bestie, Rosa. She was the one who held me tight as I cried so hard I thought my chest was going to bust open eighteen months ago when Mom died. Then it was life on the West Coast with my stepdad.

Now? He's found another woman, and I don't enjoy hanging around the house when I can tell they don't want me there. It's nothing they've said explicitly, more a general mood. It's a look my stepdad gets in his eyes sometimes as if he's silently saying, *When can I start my new life?* Honestly, I get it. I'm a reminder of everything he's lost, and it's not like we were ever super close.

We stop at a red light, the midday sun shining down on a construction site. I wonder if Rosa's dad, Leo Esposito, is involved in the project. He's been a top construction manager in the city ever since I was a kid, hence the car and the big townhouse it's taking me to.

I was seventeen when I left, but as the car carries me closer to the house, I feel like I've aged more than eighteen months. It's like I left seeing the city through childish eyes, everything big and imposing, but now it's shrunk down and nowhere near as impressive. Maybe that's grief, still clinging,

dulling everything. Whatever, at least the sun's shining. I can't let myself fall into self-pitying crap.

Soon, we arrive at the townhouse. "Thank you, Francesco," I say.

He turns and smiles. His bushy gray mustache and the shocks of hair forming a crescent around his head bring me back to childhood. He's been the Esposito driver for as long as I can remember.

"Of course, miss. I can't call you *little lady* anymore, can I?"

This might seem suggestive coming from somebody else, but Francesco is a good man and happily married. Anyway, nobody ever *suggests* much to me, not that I'm looking.

I walk up the long stairs to the townhouse, immaculately swept, the door twice my height. After pressing the doorbell, I remind myself I'm *not* here to ogle Rosa's dad, Leo. I never had a crush on him, but I did look from time to time. It was impossible not to.

Luckily, I didn't see him much growing up. Sometimes, he'd say a quick hello, but that was it. It gave me the space I needed not to let this feeling grow, whatever it was, the small ball of potential light inside me. It's a good thing, and I plan on keeping it that way. Just because Leo makes me ache in a way I don't fully understand, it doesn't mean I have to feed those feelings. Just like the feelings of grief, too. There's no need to throw wood on *those* fires.

I almost cry when Rosa throws the door open. It's how she reacts, her face crumpling in emotion, her hands flying up to cover her mouth as if shocked at my presence. She's tall and thin, wears an artsy top and torn jeans, and has her deep brown hair cut into a confident fringe.

"I'm so happy to see you." She hugs me tightly. "I feel like it's been forever."

I hug her just as tight. "That's because it has. I'm still angry at you for not visiting."

I mean it as a joke, but then her grip on me tightens.

“Hey, I’m just kidding. I knew you had school.”

She’s studying English literature and poetry, which suits her perfectly. I’m going to be an accountant one day, lost in the boring world of profits and sums and the clean sense of the numerical world.

As she leads me into the house, I don’t mention that she refused to visit even during the holidays, and when I mentioned coming here, she became awkward. I’ve wondered why, but I can’t figure it out. Sometimes, I feel like I’m missing something obvious.

“Look who’s back, Mom,” Rosa says, stopping in front of the shrine to pay her respects.

This is another reason I can’t ever think about Leo Esposito. I can’t let my mind stray to his height. He must be at least six and a half feet, a giant compared to most men. I can’t think about his hair, mostly silver but with flecks of obsidian here and there, or his intense eyes, which seemed to consume me the few times I saw him as a kid. They fascinated me, too, one stark blue and the other brown. I can’t think about trailing my hand down his arm, feeling his muscles, strength, and how his confident smirk shapes his lips.

I stop in front of the shrine. It sits beneath the double staircase, photos of Angelica, Rosa’s mother, filling it, flickering in the light of the lit candles. She died in a gas explosion when Rosa was fourteen, a few years before I lost *my* mom.

So much tragedy. Oh, God, this is bad. For a second, a shameful one, I feel almost jealous of this woman. She got to kiss Leo, hold him, and be with him.

“Emma?” Rosa says, jolting me out of the fantasy.

No, not fantasy. Not *that*.

“Yes?”

“Hungry?”

“Hey, I’ll have you know poets can make fortunes, some in the tens of dollars.” Rosa grins as she gestures with her toast, much happier in the

rooftop garden. “Oh, to wish I had a dish, maybe with some *fish*... Are you hearing this? I’m going to be talked about for generations.”

I laugh at her sarcastic tone, then take a bite of my toast.

“Anyway,” she says amidst the scent of the flowers and the warm sunshine. “How are you feeling?”

I shrug. “It is what it is.”

“That’s not much of a description.”

“Feelings have always been more your thing,” I say, trying for a bantering tone, but it sounds wrong and way too real. “How are *you*?”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“You’ve seemed tense on Skype.”

She flinches, and she’s right. I *am* changing the subject because I have to. Talking about one feeling could lead to *all* feelings.

“I have?”

“Yes,” I say, “and there’s the stuff about not being able to visit each other. I feel like something’s going on. I didn’t want to say anything until we met in person.”

She drops her toast, tears off a piece, then picks up the original section. Then she puts it down again.

“Everything’s fine.”

“Hmm.”

“What’s *hmm*? You’re not Sherlock Holmes.”

“I don’t need to be. You don’t have to talk about anything you don’t want to. I don’t mean to pry.”

She glances at the doors, her features tight.

“I read some stories about construction in the city. Apparently, there have been union strikes. I heard it’s getting ugly. Threats and stuff like that.”

Since Mom died, Rosa has been reluctant to share her problems with me. I get why. She'd prefer if I unloaded on her, but that's never been our dynamic since we were kids.

I'm always the listener. I like that.

"Oh, yeah," Rosa says. "That."

"Does it have anything to do with—"

We both jump to our feet when the doors burst open. I step back, knowing the fumes of this city have to be worse than the West Coast. I'm hallucinating. A half-naked man emerges into the garden, a streak of blood down his face. He's panting, scrawny, with shell-shocked eyes and a large chunk torn from his hair.

A second later, one of Rosa's staff members appears. Like most Italians, he wears a slick suit, and his earpiece and sunglasses tell me he's security.

The half-naked man turns and spreads his arms. "You can't do this."

"Get over here."

The man leaps, grabs a vase, and throws it. The guard tries to approach, but after the vase shatters—Rosa gasps, grabs my arm, and I stare dumbfounded—the man grabs a shard. He squeezes, not caring it causes him to bleed, and waves it at the guard.

"I'll cut you to pieces." The man's accent is heavy, maybe Russian. "I'll slice you up good."

Soon, more guards join the first four. They fan out around the half-naked man and then close in. One takes a slice to the forearm, grunting in pain, but soon they've got him pressed against the floor with a knee in his back and a blade to his throat.

Deep in the back of my mind, past the shock, a small voice whispers, *So, this is what I've been missing.*

It seems so obvious now.

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