



Revenge
WITH MY

EX'S DAD

FLORA FERRARI

REVENGE WITH MY EX'S DAD

AN AGE GAP, CURVY GIRL ROMANCE

A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS, 334

FLORA FERRARI

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

REVENGE WITH MY EX'S DAD

Revenge is a dish best served steamy.

When I break things off with my boyfriend, I hope it will be peaceful. The truth is, I've been crushing on his dad ever since our so-called *relationship* began—not that I've told anybody.

Ryan gets vicious and cruel with me when I end things. He tears down my self-esteem like he enjoys it. So when I'm out with my bestie, and we see his dad, Duke Harrow, we have an idea.

Date him for revenge. Try to seduce him. It seems ridiculous at first. I'm half his age, inexperienced, on the curvier side. Seduction? Heck, I'm a virgin.

He screams *out of my league*. I'm shocked when he seems interested in me—more than interested: obsessed, jealous, possessive.

The problem is, he doesn't know who I am. I haven't told him I'm his son's ex. When he finds out, he's going to hate me. And the longer I leave it, the worse it's going to get.

What happens when Duke learns the truth? Will he choose me over his son? And even if we somehow make it work, can I really be around my ex-boyfriend for the rest of my life?

* *Revenge With My Ex's Dad is an insta-everything standalone romance with a HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger.*

NEWSLETTER

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CHAPTER ONE

Molly

“So you’re saying you never had any feelings for me,” Ryan says, glaring at me over the video chat. Even through the laptop, I feel a tickle of fear, way more than I should while talking to my boyfriend. His lips are twisted in disgust. Ryan has a way of looking at people that shrinks them, making them feel meaningless and pathetic. It hurts, and I’m sick of it. “Molly, how are we supposed to have a conversation if you’re ignoring me?”

I take a deep breath, glancing behind the laptop, where Rachael sits on the beanbag in my college dorm. She’s leaning forward, staring at me firmly, giving me the support I need.

“I’m not trying to ignore you,” I say, “but this isn’t a conversation. We’re breaking up.”

He’s already shaking his head before I finish speaking. “Okay, could I be so *bold* as to ask why?”

I can only tell him part of the truth here. I won’t mention the feelings that flurried into me when he showed me family photos last week. He, his dad, and his uncles were on a fishing trip, with his dad standing over six feet tall, shirtless, sunlight glistening in his silver hair and down his ripped body. I won’t talk about the fantasies swelling in my mind and body, tempting me.

“I’m leaving for South Korea in a month,” I tell him. I’m going to teach English as a foreign language for my final summer break before my last year in college.

“Are you saying that’s the reason?” he asks, with that condescending smirk on his lips.

Nothing like his dad’s smirk in the photo... No, I can’t let myself go there.

“Hello? Molly?”

Behind the laptop, Rachael stands from the beanbag. We agreed she was here for moral support only, but I can tell she wants to get involved. She paces up and down, shaking her head in anger.

“You don’t have to keep talking to me like I’m your pet,” I snap. “Listen,

Ryan—”

“No, why don’t *you* listen?” he laughs cruelly. “Do you really think you’ll get somebody better than me?”

I sit up, trying not to let his tone hurt me. After we began dating four months ago, I noticed this tone creeping into his nice-guy routine. It slithered into his voice. Or there would be a nasty glint in his eyes when he looked at me. Plus, he started to pressure me, not that I can blame him there. We barely even kissed.

“Because you won’t,” he goes on. “Would you like to hear the reasons why?”

Rachael walks toward the camera, but I raise my hand, letting her know I can handle this alone, even if it hurts.

“One, you’re overweight. Two, you’re pathetically shy and withdrawn. Three, you’re not funny, interesting, or unique in any way—”

“Then why the *hell* would you want to be with me?” I yell, breaking the promise I made to myself that I wouldn’t lose my cool. “If you believe all that, I should be beneath you, right? So why, Ryan?”

I sit forward, squeezing the laptop, tempted to snap it clean in half. “I’ve got an idea,” I hiss.

“Oh, yeah?” He’s trying to maintain his douchebag smirk, but I can see a flicker of uncertainty. “Enlighten me, *please*. English lit majors always have the most profound insights.”

This is something else he likes to do: subtly put down my major or ridicule the fact I want to be a teacher. *Those who can’t do, teach*—one of his favorite sayings.

“You want me,” I say fiercely, “because it makes you feel big and tough having somebody you feel is *beneath* you. You’re so insecure that the only way you can feel like you’re worth something is to put me down. If we stayed together, you’d turn into even more of an abusive freak. So whatever, Ryan. Call me names if you want. We’re over.”

“So you’re going to run away because things have gotten tough.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. It’s more a noise of disbelief than anything containing any real humor. “You’re talking like we’re a married couple or something. Newsflash, Ryan, I only agreed to go out with you because I’m twenty-one, and I’ve never dated. I thought it was the *done thing*, but now you’ve put me off dating for life. Goodbye.”

“Pathetic,” he says as I drag the cursor toward the big red *End Call* button. Of course, my laptop chooses now to start chugging along slowly, giving Ryan a few more seconds to be a douchebag. “You absolute pig. You loser. I don’t give a f—”

I end the call.

“Asshole,” Rachael snaps, kicking the beanbag. “What a worm. What a little rat. What a freak. Jesus, he’s a loser. The biggest loser I’ve ever seen in my entire life.”

She stops, adjusting her hair. Her dyed red ponytail has come loose. She ties it back up, then shivers, causing the pins and pendants on her jacket to shake metallicly.

“No arguments here,” I say dryly.

“Don’t listen to anything he says,” Rachael replies. “He’s wrong. You’ve got so much going for you.”

I smile. “Thanks, Rach.”

Rachael and I have been friends since our freshmen year. Now, going into senior year, I easily consider her my best friend. We bonded over poetry and silliness and that, in high school, we were both a little too awkward to have real friends. It’s like we were waiting for each other.

“I wish there was a way to get revenge on that asshat.”

I laugh, more real this time. “Asshat?”

“Yes, the idiot is so much of an idiot, he’d wear an ass for a hat. *Ass.*”

She drops onto the beanbag.

“Are you done?” I ask, grinning.

“I’m sorry for encouraging you to date that douche,” she says.

“Hey, it’s not your fault. I was the one who wanted to try my luck in the dating world. I wanted to be normal. It turns out normal isn’t as all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Let’s go out tonight,” Rachael says. She must see my face because she rushes to add, “I’m not saying we get blackout drunk. We don’t even have to *drink*. Let’s just forget about Ryan and college and everything, yeah? You can be my wing-woman.”

I’m not exactly in the mood, but my latest assignment is already done. If I stay here, I’ll spend way too much time going over and over all the cruel things Ryan ever said to me, which is a lot.

“Okay, let’s do it,” I say, “but no drinking.”

Rachael frowns for a moment. I can see the message in her eyes. It reminds me of something she said when I turned twenty-one. *You know you can have one or two drinks, right? I promise you’ll be okay.*

But it’s a promise she can’t make. Either way, at least the club will have music and mayhem, enough to drown out the sound

of Ryan's belittling voice.

We sit in a corner of the bar, Rachael attempting to balance several beer mats on top of each other. She laughs when her creation tumbles to the table again. "This looked way easier in the video."

I laugh, sipping my soda. The bar is quiet. It's only eight p.m. I know we'll move to a club soon, but it won't be a late one for me. The smell of alcohol... I wouldn't say it *triggers* me, exactly, but I don't like it.

"God, I wish we could hurt that prick," Rachael says.

"Maybe you should challenge him to a fight."

"Oh, yeah, one-hundred-pound me against that big bulky bag of douchebaggery."

"I think you're making up words now."

She grins. "There's a lot worse I could say."

She goes on, but it's difficult to hear anything else. At first, I think somebody has turned the music up, but no, it's the rushing in my ears. It's the sound of my heartbeat thudding through me.

"Molly?" Rachael says. "You good?"

"Uh... that's Ryan's dad." I nod across the bar.

I don't know his name, but I recognize his tall, muscular body. He's wearing a sharp blue suit and a silver wristwatch. Every single woman in here turns to look at him. I sense it. He wears the suit well, highlighting his powerful shoulders, thick arms, and chest. My heart is drumming way too fast, but I can't help it.

Rachael beams at me and leans forward, an excited glint in her eye. "I've got an idea. A way we can get revenge on that douche."

When Rachael tells me her plan, I'm tempted to say no. I'm going to embarrass myself, but the truth is, I want to speak to him. I want to learn more about him. Heck, I just want to be *near* him. It's like this strange, hungry pull inside me, telling me to be with him.

"Can you imagine?" Rachael goes on. "If you managed to get a date with him? Ryan would freak. It would definitely wipe the douche smirk off his ass-hat face. Or I can try if you want."

"No," I say quickly, harshly. The idea of Rachael touching him makes me sick. "I'll..." I almost shudder. Am I seriously going to do this? "I'll talk to him."

Before I can chicken out, I stand up.

CHAPTER TWO

Duke

I sit at the far end of the bar, swiping on my cell phone, glancing up at the TV every so often as the prelims to an MMA event get started. My body is sore from a long day at the gym, teaching classes, and then sparring with a few of the boys. *Boys*. They're all in their mid-twenties, but at forty-two, I can feel the difference. I'm still quicker and stronger. My skills make up for their relative youth, but it's one hell of a workout.

Sipping my neat whiskey, I swipe on my phone some more. I wonder if it's normal to feel this numb. The dating app shows me so-called beautiful woman after so-called beautiful woman. Some of them wear bikinis in their photos, but I feel nothing. I don't care. Maybe there's a hole in me—a shotgun blast of don't-give-a-shit where my heart should be.

I turn when the woman approaches the bar. Then, quickly, I lock my phone screen. For some reason, I don't want her to see the dating app. I don't want her to imagine me with anybody else. I can't imagine *her* with anybody else.

She's on the shorter side, with shoulder-length brown hair, full, flowing. She wears jeans and a sparkly top, showing just a hint of cleavage, her breasts full, her figure fuller with wide hips. Man, I'm getting hard just sitting next to her. I'd savage her. I'd take her over and over if I let myself. She's mine.

I need to relax, big time. I look at the TV and try to get my breathing under control. I want to kiss her. Hold her. Bend her over and fuck her like the ruthless beast she's turning me into.

"Have you bet money on the fight?" she says quietly. She sounds shy. It makes her even cuter.

I look at her and shake my head. It's difficult to look *right* at her. There's too much hunger in me trying to bust out. My balls swell as if telling me that the only mission in my life now is to drive deep inside her. Explode into her. Fill her body with my seed.

"Oh," she says after a pause. "I'll... uh, leave you to it."

No. She can't go. I don't care if she's far younger than me. "I don't usually bet on fights. I watch them for the technique and the entertainment."

"Are you a fighter, then?" she asks.

"Once upon a time," I tell her. "I was a pro for years. Now, I have my own gym."

"That's awesome."

"I'm Duke, by the way," I tell her, offering my hand.

She swallows and offers *her* hand. She really does seem so adorably nervous. "I'm Molly."

When I take her hand, I almost lose it right there. Her warmth, the pressure in her touch, the way she looks up at me with that subtle dark makeup around her eyes, highlighting her bright, eager green eyes. I hold her hand longer than I probably need to.

Finally, I let her go. It feels like losing something. Some vital connection. What the hell is happening to me?

"What do you do, Molly?" I ask.

"I'm in college," she murmurs. "Next year will be my last. I'm going to South Korea this summer and teaching English as a foreign language. Sorry. You didn't ask for my whole life story."

When she turns away, I almost reach over, gently touch her face, and guide her gaze back to mine. The embarrassment she feels is damn wrong. She never has to be embarrassed or ashamed. Not with me. “I’m interested. What are you studying?”

The world *college* hammers into my mind. I’m at least twice her age. Yet when she tells me she’s studying English literature and starts excitedly talking about her latest assignment, I realize I don’t care. I don’t care if people are looking. If they think I’m a creep. I only care about Molly.

“It sounds boring,” she goes on. “A line-by-line dissection of an epic poem, but it was a *lot* of work. I’m glad it’s over but sort of sad, too.”

“Sad, how?” I ask.

Her cheeks are a deep shade of red. She keeps glancing at the bar, behind it, or the TV, anywhere but in my eyes. Meanwhile, I’m staring at her like I want to learn everything about her. Like I want to decode her entire personality.

“I don’t know...” She bites her lip. Am I making her that nervous? “There’s a special feeling that comes with working on a project. It’s like everything else stops mattering for a while.”

I nod. “The world gets more manageable. That reminds me of a fight camp. For six weeks, eight, twelve, nothing else exists. Just the fight. Just the next training session, the next meal, and then after...”

“The world comes rushing back in,” she says eagerly, nodding, “and things get more complicated.”

“What’s complicating life for you, then?” I ask.

“I... uh...” She seems like she’s panicking for some reason. “I recently went through a breakup. Today, actually. I broke up with my boyfriend.”

I have to stop myself forcibly from smiling or showing any sign of how this makes me feel. This is another reason I need to be the mature one here. She’s not only younger than me. She’s emotionally vulnerable from the breakup.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “Breakups can be tough.”

“No.” Her reply comes sharply as if she’s pissed at me for thinking the breakup could’ve been bad. “I mean, they *can* be, but this one wasn’t tough. Honestly, it was way overdue. I’m glad it’s over.”

Then she goes back to staring at the bar. She doesn’t know how badly I want to stroke my hand across her face, cradle her cheek, and hold her gently. The warmth of her hand is still pulsing through me, the heat making me think of all the other steaminess we could share.

“You’re young,” I say. “You’ve got plenty of time to find the right person.”

“I’m not *that* young,” she replies.

I laugh dryly. “A junior in college? That’s young in my book, Molly.”

“Well, yeah, maybe.” She looks at me again, a stubborn quality to how she purses her lips. “I guess I’ve spent too much time reading old books. I’m used to reading about Victorian ladies getting married at nineteen without ever having *met* their husbands. I don’t really feel young.”

She holds my gaze for a few moments. I’m tense all over, warning myself repeatedly that, despite what she says, she’s *just* broken up with her boyfriend. She might not think she’s vulnerable, but she is.

“I don’t feel old until I look in the mirror,” I joke.

“You look mature. Experienced, not old.”

I smirk. I can’t help it. “Is that a compliment?”

“Maybe it is.” That brave pout on her lips is so damn cute. “Is that okay?”

“From a beautiful young woman like you, I’ll take compliments all day long.” I lean forward, resting my elbow against the bar, but then she leans back and looks at my whiskey glass. It’s not like I was going to kiss her or anything, but a weirdly strong sense of rejection slams into me.

Is it weird, considering how badly I want to hold this woman? I want to pull her into my lap, grind myself against her, and let her feel all the hunger building inside me.

I take a sip of whiskey, just a small one, and see her wince a little.

“A bar’s an odd place to be if you hate drinking,” I say.

She glares. She’s fierce, shy, confident, and withdrawn all at once. She’s so gorgeously complicated. Maybe everybody is this complicated, but I don’t care enough to pay attention to them. Only my woman. *My woman*. Damn, that feels natural. It feels true. She’s *mine*.

“Who said I hate drinking?” she snaps.

“You didn’t need to,” I say, just as fiercely. Maybe it’s my overactive imagination. Perhaps it’s the tension in my balls, the seed rushing up my shaft. I’m sure we’re getting angry because we both feel this passion and connection. “I can tell.”

“I don’t hate it,” she says quietly, just about loud enough for me to hear over the music. “I just... don’t especially like it, but I’m not judging you. Anyway, you clearly don’t have a drinking problem.”

“Oh, really?” I say jokingly. “Maybe I’m on two bottles a day, and I just hide it well.”

“No. *I* can tell this, Duke. You’d look way, way less healthy. Your face would be all red. It’s a sad thing to say, but it’s true. A lot of the time, you can tell. Look at me, Miss Bring Down the Mood.”

I chuckle. “I was in a far worse mood before you walked over here, Molly.” I lean forward again, but not too much, not wanting her to recoil away from me. “Speaking of which, the barman has passed us several times, and you haven’t looked at him once. Did you come here to get a drink or to talk to me, eh?”

CHAPTER THREE

Molly

He smirks down at me, but it's nothing like the mocking curve Ryan's lips would often take. There's no implication in it, no mocking shine. Duke seems to be enjoying this conversation, even seeming a little *flirty*. I'm shocked at how easy it is to speak to him. I thought I'd be mumbling every other word. There's something about him. Heck, it just relaxes me.

"I can buy you a drink, and that's a serious offer." He leans closer, but it's like he's purposefully keeping some distance between us. Maybe it's because I flinched at the booze smell, an instinct I regret. I don't want him to think I'm uninterested. "I haven't made an offer like that in years."

I roll my eyes. "That's a line, right? That *has* to be a line."

He grins and laughs. "Hand on my heart." He places his hand on his chest. His top two shirt buttons are undone, showing *just* a glimpse of his hard chest. "I don't do this often. I only come to this bar because it shows the fights, and I know the owners. I'm not here to pick up... At least, I wasn't."

When Ryan showed me the photo, and I saw Duke's shirtless, strong, taut body glistening, I never imagined he'd look at me like this. It's with complete captivation. It's like I said before, about working on my assignment. Nothing else exists. Nothing else matters.

“I don’t think you could pick me up,” I say, trying to make it a joke. I’m not sure how to deal with *real* flirting. Ryan and I never really flirted. It was always stilted and awkward.

Duke nods, his intense eyes serious. “Oh, I could, Molly. It wouldn’t be a challenge. We can try if you want.”

I look around the bar. It’s still not super busy, but a group of college guys have just entered. I quickly scan them for Ryan. Duke wouldn’t be saying any of this if he knew I’d just dumped his son, would he? I need to slow down. “Maybe I will take you up on that drink,” I say. “But no wrestling, okay?”

“Raincheck,” he says, his voice husky. “What’s your poison?”

“A diet coke is fine, thank you.”

“Sounds good to me. I’m glad you’re not drinking.”

“Why?”

“It means you were sober when you approached this sad old man at the bar.”

He speaks in a self-deprecating tone, but it still annoys me that he keeps referencing his age. It’s like he thinks I’m so immature I must be reminded every few seconds. “You’re not an *old man*.”

“Relax,” he says. “I was only kidding.”

“Please don’t tell me to relax.”

I *really* need to relax, but Ryan would often do that. He’d jab at me, niggle, and then, when I finally responded, he’d tell me to relax and react as if I was acting like a madwoman when I never thought I was.

“Fair enough, Molly,” Duke says, narrowing his eyes as if trying to read me. I can’t lie. I love how intimately he’s staring. Like he truly, truly cares. “I won’t say it again... unless you *really* need to relax. Deal?”

“No, I’m sorry,” I reply. “I guess that word pisses me off way too easily.”

“That’s just...” He trails off, reaching into his pocket. “Sorry, this is my son. Do you mind?”

I swallow. This is so messed up.

Somehow, I manage to shake my head, but I can’t bring myself to talk and *tell* him I don’t mind. I keep picturing Ryan’s face if he ever saw me with his dad, the anger, the viciousness. Once, when Ryan was drunk, I thought he was going to hit me. It was so terrifying. I should’ve left him right then. Luckily, he didn’t hit me, but he wanted to.

“Hello to you too,” Duke says, his tone suddenly way more serious. “No, Ryan, slow down, bud. What do you need a *grand* for? No. No. Hey, stop for a second. The answer’s no. I’m not giving you a thousand dollars for some bullshit trip to Vegas because that’s not how life works. You’ve missed your last three shifts at the gym. You don’t get rewarded for that. I ___”

Duke groans and places his phone on the counter. He massages his forehead. “Sorry about that.”

“Uh...” I hesitate. “It’s fine.” I really need to tell him the truth as soon as I can. This is already spinning out of control way too fast. The idea of doing this—talking, flirting, bonding—for revenge already seems gross. “Is everything okay?”

“It’s...” Duke sighs, “my son. I split with his mom when he was five. She did her best to keep me out of his life. I know what you’re thinking.”

I highly doubt that, I almost say, but I keep it to myself.

“I wish I’d been there for him,” Duke says. It’s like he’s talking to himself more than me. “I could’ve taught him some hard truths about the world, but my ex and his stepdad babied him. Then, when he turned nineteen, they decided to screw off to Spain and leave him here. Leave him for me to *raise* when he was already raised. They’d already done their damage.”

He pushes his whiskey glass away and sits up.

“I’m going to go and make sure he doesn’t get into any trouble tonight,” Duke says. “Listen, Molly, I mean this. It’s not a line.

I don't do this often, but I wouldn't forgive myself if I didn't ask. I'm taking you on a date."

A pleasant shiver tickles up my spine and tingles all around my body. "That wasn't really *asking*," I say, and I can't help but smile despite the fact he just finished speaking to my ex. I smile widely. "But my answer's yes."

He grins, seeming almost boyish for a moment. "Then let's exchange numbers. Here, put yours in."

When he hands me his phone, I almost push it back into his hands so I don't have to look at the well-known dating app on his homepage. There's a notification at the top of the screen, too, from the same app. He's probably matched with someone.

I try to harden myself and remind myself this is all about revenge, not true romance. If this is just another notch for him—if he was lying when he said he doesn't do this—then fine. I'll go back to Plan A: date him, get revenge, and piss Ryan off.

Or maybe I'm just *that* keen to see Duke again. I open his contacts, enter my number, and hand him his phone. Our fingers brush, sending another warm shiver through me, another tempting tingle.

He stands. "Wait, I forgot your drink."

I wave a hand. "It's okay... raincheck?"

He smirks. It's what he said about picking me up. "Raincheck sounds good," he replies. "I'll call you soon."

He leaves the bar, drawing the gazes of all the women again. He walks with the casual confidence of a man who knows what he wants. Ryan never mentioned his dad was an ex-MMA fighter. Now that I think about it, he never mentioned much—mostly little digs at me. That's all.

Rachael sits next to me. "That looked like it went *very* well."

"He's..." I have to pause, hardly believing it. "He's going to call me. We're going to go on a date."

Rachael claps her hands together. "That's *excellent*."

In my mind, I don't want it to be for revenge. I don't say that part. Instead, I remember the dating app I saw. I remember every single time Ryan made me feel small and pathetic. Anyway, once Duke learns who I really am, he won't want to take this any further. He will probably be pissed at me for not being upfront unless I *keep* lying, claiming I had no idea who he was when I approached him.

My head swims. I feel wrong, like I'm breaking a rule and betraying Duke.

"Yeah," I say. "It's crazy, isn't it?"

Rachael nudges me playfully. She never takes things as seriously as I do. Maybe I take them *too* seriously sometimes. "So, how are we going to serve it then, huh? Ryan's revenge? Ice-cold or boiling hot?"

She laughs. I laugh, but I secretly wish Duke wasn't Ryan's dad. I wish we didn't have to date. I wish we could go straight to the wedding bells part, which pretty much makes me as crazy as a person can be.

CHAPTER FOUR

Duke

I park outside the frat house. Music pumps from it so loudly it's a miracle it doesn't come crashing down. It's a bad thing, being pissed at my own son, but I can't ignore the aching in my gut throughout my whole body. It's like some deep instinct is trying to drag me back to the bar, to Molly.

She became withdrawn toward the end when she saw my phone. I hope she didn't see that stupid dating app. It doesn't mean anything. Other men might think, *She doesn't have the right to be pissed about that*, but not me. I want her to feel like she has a claim on me, just like I have on her.

Taking out my cell phone, I text Ryan again, *Get your ass out here, or I'm going to embarrass you by coming in there and dragging you out.*

I didn't want to get into it with Molly about Susan's reasons for keeping my own goddamn son away from me and how she twisted it all to her advantage. People hear a man was kept away from his child, and they assume the worst. I learned a long time ago to let people make their assumptions.

Still, I'm doing my best now to undo all Susan's bullshit, her overindulgence, never telling him no. Now, Ryan thinks the world owes him. I love him. It breaks my heart to see him so lost.

Finally, he stumbles from the house. He's got glowing ink all over his face and neck, and his shirt is torn. He laughs annoyingly as he climbs into the passenger seat, drops down, and takes out his phone without saying hello.

I grab his phone out of his hand and stuff it into my pocket. "You're pissing me off tonight, kid."

"Jesus, Dad, don't be so serious all the time."

"First, you say you're going to Vegas tonight. Then, when I tell you no, you ask for a ride. I drive over here, and you leave me waiting for almost thirty goddamn minutes."

He laughs again, and it drives me nuts. This could've been corrected years ago when he was a kid, the first time he pushed too far. A stern warning, an easy lesson, but Susan and Joel would rather baby him, create a little monster, or a not-so-little monster now since he's pushing six feet.

"What do you want me to do, just throw away the game?"

"What game?"

He shifts awkwardly. "Beer pong."

I groan and start the car. I can't even look at him, my own son. He reminds me of my failures. I should've found a way to be in his life more, even if it ended up with me in jail.

"Ryan," I say in the calmest tone I can. "Surely you understand how rude it is to leave somebody waiting thirty minutes just to play beer pong."

He scowls at me. "You saying you never kept anybody waiting your whole life, Dad?"

When we come to a red light, I reach over, clapping my hand on his shoulder. Emotion tries to strangle me when I think about all the moments I missed, the times we could've bonded. I remember when he was little, before the split, taking him to the gym with me. He had such a big, carefree grin on his face as he watched me hit the pads.

"It's not about keeping me waiting. It's the attitude. If you'd told me what you were doing and said you were sorry, then I wouldn't care, but this entitlement... It's not good."

Ryan folds his arms and stares out the window. “Yeah, well.”

“You’re a twenty-one-year-old man,” I snap. “Not a child.”

“Maybe I’ll move to Spain soon anyway.”

“I’d rather you stayed here.”

He looks at me sharply. “Oh, really? So we can keep our great father-son relationship intact?”

I grind my teeth. Last week, I was almost tempted to take Ryan to the gym, throw some gloves on him, a mouthpiece, and go for a few rounds. Nothing crazy—I’m not going to hurt my own son—but enough to show him what hard work really is. “I want you here because you’re doing better.”

“Better how?” he says.

“Believe it or not, you’re less bratty and entitled than when your mother left, and that’s saying something.”

Ryan softens just a tiny bit. I can see the boy he was trying to press through his expression. I know he’s still in there before that chip was placed on his shoulder. “I’m not moving to Spain. Anyway, cut me some slack. I had to dump my girlfriend today.”

“I didn’t know you had a girlfriend,” I murmur.

“Yeah, maybe that’s because you try to knock my head off every time I open my mouth.”

I ignore the dramatics, driving calmly. The one whiskey has already faded, but I still pay keen attention to the road. “Well, tell me what happened.”

Ryan groans. “It’s no big deal. Honestly, she was getting needy and a little desperate—kind of pathetic. So I had to cut her loose, but it still sucks. I liked having a girlfriend. It’s so difficult to get one.”

There’s lots I could say here, not that I’m some Casanova. Ryan’s a handsome young man. If he fixed a few flaws in his personality, he wouldn’t have any problems with the opposite sex. I’m sure of it, but what would I know? I rarely date, and

now that I've met my Molly, there's only one person I'm even capable of thinking about.

"I'm sorry you're going through a hard time, son," I tell him, "but it will get better if *you* get better."

"Are you saying it's my fault?" he snaps.

"I don't know enough about the situation," I reply. "All I know is life's a hell of a lot easier when you're not constantly looking for a fight."

"Says the three-time world champion."

I laugh gruffly. "That's exactly why you should listen to me. Real fighters know what happens when the violence starts, and the mayhem takes hold. We know that bad things happen when you lose your cool."

"I'm not looking for a fight, anyway."

"You're always angry, son," I say. "Every time I see you. Every time we speak. You're always so angry, even when listening to music or playing video games, and you don't know I'm watching."

"Maybe I've got a lot to be angry about."

I sigh, nodding. I can't argue with him there, but parents divorce all the time. Sure, he's had it tough, but it's nothing compared to... No, I won't go there. I won't play the comparison game. All that matters is I'm here for my son.

We drive in silence for a while, and then Ryan murmurs, "I'm sorry, Dad, for everything. I'm sorry."

"Me too," I tell him.

That's all we need to say for now. There's too much to delve into, what with his mom and the split. Then his mother decided to move, despite Ryan wanting to stay and attend college here. He was nineteen but not mature. She coddled and then deserted him—a vicious combination.

I drive us home to the four-bedroom in the suburbs and pull into the garage. When Ryan said he wanted to attend a college near me, I felt so privileged. We were going to make up for

lost time, and we have, to some degree, but it's not like I imagined. It's as if he's holding onto this ball of anger, refusing to let go, almost like it's comforting.

"Thanks for the ride," he says, climbing from the car.

I go into the house, take my prepared meal from the fridge, set it to the side, and then heat the oven. Ryan's already upstairs. It's not too late, but I know he's very drunk, hence the idea to take a crazed trip to Vegas. As the food warms up, my mind goes to earlier in the night, to Molly.

My base aches, and my tip gets hard when she enters my mind. My instincts tell me to find her, grab her, and massage her thick, wide hips. Glide my hands up her body to her breasts, massage them too, look into her eyes, and see that spark of lust, of excitement. Fuck. I'm getting *rock-hard* now.

Standing, I return to the kitchen, feeling like a teenager with all this testosterone flooding through me. Dammit, if she were here right now, I'd take her so hard. I'd lose control. I'd grab a bunch of her hair, hold her in place, and crush her lips with mine. I'd turn her around, bend her over the counter, pull down her jeans, and indulge in her round, big, beautiful ass. Maybe I'd spank her a couple of times and watch her curvy body shake for me.

My hand twitches toward my crotch. What the fuck am I doing? Am I going to jerk off here in the kitchen?

Squeezing the counter, I take a few slow breaths, just like in a fight when I need to remind myself to focus. This is life or death. Maybe that's dramatic as hell, but it feels true. The only way I can truly live is to be with her. Otherwise, it will be a cold, dark, miserable death.

I want her so badly. My balls are hurting. I've never felt this before. It's like destiny has punched me right in the face.

CHAPTER FIVE

Molly

“What are you doing up so late, hmm?” Mom says, smiling at me over video chat.

I’m lying in bed with the lamp on. I’ve replayed the conversation with Duke, imagining what I could’ve said differently and been braver and more confident. Heck, I shouldn’t be *too* hard on myself. I managed not to stumble over my words, at least.

Anyway, this is about *revenge*. He’s on that dating app. He’s probably with one of his matches right now. I’m just one in a long line. That depresses me so, so much.

“Did you call me just to stare into space, sweetness?” Mom says in her classic bantering tone.

She’s on the West Coast, where I’m from. Mom joked that I purposefully moved to the farthest possible point on the other side of the country for college, and maybe she’s right in a way.

“Sorry.” I cover my mouth as I yawn. “Just wanted to check in.”

“I’m kidding,” she smiles. People say we have the same eyes. I see it, though I think hers must be more beautiful. They make her look younger than her forty-nine years. “I’d happily watch you staring off into space for the entire call, believe me.”

I smile, though there's a touch of sadness. There always is when I speak with Mom. I can't blame her for what happened to Dad. I don't, not anymore, but I wasted a lot of time being mad at her. A lot of useless years. "I broke up with Ryan today."

"Thank *God*," Mom says. "That's excellent news. I'm really happy about that, Molly. I wish you'd done it sooner, but it's over now. How did he take it?"

"Not well," I reply, "and you're right. I should've done it the first time he belittled me. He showed his true colors, but I was scared. He's so cruel sometimes."

"But he never..."

"No, no," I say quickly. "He didn't touch me... like that."

Or in many other ways, but I don't add that part. We held hands. We sometimes kissed, but it always felt cold, clinical, and distant. Whenever he tried to push it further, I always stopped him. His dad, on the other hand...

"You deserve somebody who appreciates you," Mom says. "I know you've always found *that* side of life difficult."

I almost shoot back, *That makes two of us*, but I know she's coming from a kind place. My instinct to get snappy and defensive immediately is something I don't like about myself. It's something I've been trying to fix with Mom, especially after she cried and apologized about Dad.

"I met somebody tonight, actually," I murmur.

"Oh, really?" Mom brightens up. "Do tell..."

I swallow. "Well, he was really funny. We got on so well. I didn't feel awkward like I usually do, but he's forty-two."

Mom blinks and readjusts the camera. "Did you say *forty-two*?"

"Yeah," I nod. "I know. It's a bit of an age gap."

"A *bit*," Mom repeats. "He's twice your age. Exactly twice your age. If there were two of you and you added them together, that's him."

“I know what *twice* means,” I say, back to the same old sarcastic routine.

Mom bites down, then sighs. “I’m not going to tell you how to live your life, but you need to be very careful here. In my experience, there’s only one reason a man that old is interested in a younger woman, and it’s not for roses and romance.”

I almost tell her she’s wrong. I almost snap at her to mind her own business, but I offered this up. She’s allowed to have an opinion. “I know. I’ll be careful. I promise.”

After the video call, I lie in bed, eyes closed, trying to sleep. I can’t stop thinking about today. My body is flooded with adrenaline from the breakup and then meeting Duke. I wonder what Mom would’ve said if I told her my forty-two-year-old man is also Ryan’s dad.

I think of Duke at the bar, looking so strong and sharp in his suit. I think about the glint in his eyes when he looked down at me, the hunger making his muscles swell. Or maybe that’s just how he is in my fantasy.

It doesn’t matter. I can’t stop the fantasy now. We’re still in the bar, but nobody else is there. Nobody else can see us. He leans down, brings his lips to mine, and pushes against me. At the same time, he glides his hand up my leg and presses down on my sex over my pants.

I moan quietly, pushing my hand into my underwear, rubbing my clit as I imagine the texture of Duke’s lips. I imagine his breath getting husky and obsessed when he rubs me, quicker, harder, his breath hot on my neck as he kisses down my body.

In the fantasy, he starts sucking and kissing my nipples, massaging my breasts. “*You’re the only woman I ever want. The only woman I’ll ever need. You and me, Molly. You and me...*”

The fantasy flits and changes scene as the lust crashes into me. I’ve never felt my clit get this warm and tingly. It’s like the desire is bursting through my body. I rub faster, imagining Duke on top of me, his muscular body naked, his manhood

gliding deep inside. There's no discomfort, no nervousness, not in the fantasy.

He leans back, showing me his muscular chest, sweat dripping down his body as he pushes deeper and harder. I'm rubbing my clit so freaking fast now. My head is getting light. Everything burns in the best way. I'm shrouded in steam.

I love you, Duke says right at the end as the orgasm thunders through me. I bite down to stop myself from screaming, stunned at the force of the pleasure, and then immediately deflate when I remember I'm in bed alone. In reality, Duke is never going to say those words to me.

I shouldn't want him to because of Ryan, and we only met tonight. Am I going completely insane? Maybe so, but I can't stop it. I'm not even sure if I want to.

I check my phone, but still nothing from Duke. A moment later, I realize something. He made a point of asking *me* to enter my number into his phone. Maybe that's because he has no intention of calling me. Then why ask for my number to begin with?

I close my eyes and force myself to lie still. I'm getting way too ahead of myself. Plus, this isn't about real connection. It's definitely not about love. It's about getting close to Duke long enough for Ryan to see us together. It's about punishing that douchebag for every bad thing he's ever done to me.

Still, as sleep finally takes me, I can't forget the words, imagined or not.

I love you.

I can lie to myself all I want, but as nuts as it is, I wish he was saying that for real.

CHAPTER SIX

Duke

“Morning, Dad,” Ryan says, joining me at the dining room table. He looks hungover as hell, with big pits under his eyes and a groggy look on his face. He gestures toward the bacon. “Can I have some, please?”

“Of course.” I nod to the plate. “That’s why I laid out extra. Help yourself.”

We eat quietly for a while, and then he mutters, “I’m sorry about last night, and thanks... for not giving up on me.”

“You’re talking as if you’re some lost cause,” I reply. “You’re a smart boy. No, a smart man. You’ll be an engineer one day if you keep your mind on your studies and learn some humility and...” I stop myself and then try to laugh it off. “A lecture’s probably the last thing you want right now, huh?”

He smiles, looking just like the little boy I remember. “Yeah, but I get it. I know I need to do better. I need to stop drinking, I think.”

“Stop altogether?” I ask. “That’s a mature decision, especially from a college student.”

He stares down at his plate of bacon, chewing the inside of his cheek. “I’ve been drinking too much. Sometimes, I’ll even have a few drinks in the middle of the day for no reason, just because I feel like it or maybe because it’s easier than being sober. I don’t know.”

Reaching across the table, I lay my hand on his arm. “Thanks for telling me this. We can work on it together. We can get you help.” He winces, and I push on. “Or I can keep an eye on you. We’ll create an alcohol diary, just like I used to have when I was fighting for food and reps and all the rest of it. At the end of every day, no matter what, you must fill out the diary honestly or the next morning if you were too drunk the night before to do it. It doesn’t matter if you drink so much that it makes you ashamed. You *have* to fill it out. That’s the best place to start.”

He nods, looking determined, giving me a flare of hope. “Okay, Dad. Yeah, I can do that.”

“Pinkie promise?” I say.

He rolls his eyes, but he’s laughing. He sounds so much younger when he laughs. Sadly, it’s not something I hear often. “Okay, yeah, why not? Pinkie swear.”

We lock our pinky fingers together, and then he tucks into his bacon. I feel we’ve made some real progress for the first time in weeks. I knew he was drinking too much. I’d found the beer cans. I’d noticed his behavior, sometimes as early as one or two p.m., but this is a start. It’s progress. I’ll take it.

After a workout at the gym, I walk into the parking lot, calling Molly on my cell phone. Part of me wonders if she will find it strange that I’m calling instead of texting. Maybe it will make me seem older, but I’m not going to become some texting addict suddenly, and I want to hear her voice. I need to.

“Hello?” she says, answering, sounding breathless.

For a moment, I imagine her in bed with another man. My free hand curls into a fist, tension bubbling through my body and leg as if I’m getting ready for a kick. I’d kill any bastard who touches her, which isn’t right. It’s deranged. I don’t own her. Not yet, at least.

“Hello?” she repeats.

“It’s me,” I say. “Duke.”

“Oh, yeah, uh, hey.” She pauses, laughing nervously. “It’s good to hear from you.”

“What are you doing tonight?” I ask, those fierce feelings of ownership gripping me tightly. “I owe you a date, remember?”

“I’m free tonight,” she replies. “What did you have in mind?”

I realize I’ve got no idea. I haven’t planned anything. I’ve never been much of a dater. “Dinner,” I tell her, sticking with the basics, “and maybe we could take a walk after.”

I wonder if this sounds lame as hell, especially to a younger woman. When she speaks, I’m sure she’s smiling. It’s like I can hear it in her voice. I can imagine the curve of her lips and the light in her eyes. “Yeah, that’d be great. Awesome.”

“I’ll pick you up,” I tell her, then chuckle. “In my car, I mean. Remember, I still have to prove it to you, Molly. The fact I could pick you up *with ease*.”

Her laugh is so sweet, so welcome. It makes the world a better place. “I think you’re overestimating your abilities.” There’s a pause, and then she gets serious. “Uh, Duke, I need to tell you something.”

“Okay...”

Another pause. I wonder what she’s hinting at. Maybe she’s still in a relationship. Perhaps she wants to wait until marriage. If it were the second one, I wouldn’t give a damn. I’m ready to marry her right now. I can’t say this aloud. Maybe I’ve taken too many hits to the head, but it’s true. I’d get down on one knee in a heartbeat.

“I’m not a fan of seafood,” she says, and I know it’s a lie. She was going to say something else. *She* doesn’t even sound like she believes it.

However, I’m not going to push her too fast. “Fair enough. Text me your address. I’ll pick you up at seven.”

After hanging up, I lean against the car, smiling like a man with no cares in the world. Despite what Ryan and I discussed

earlier, that's how I feel. On the way home, I call Ryan on speaker.

"Hey, Dad," he says. "Two secs. I'm just in the library. I'll go outside."

He sounds a lot more positive than he did this morning. Maybe this is the day I'll look back on, marking *now* as the moment everything finally began to make sense. Ryan got on the right path. I had my first date with the woman of my dreams. Everything slipped into its proper place.

"Just checking in," I reply. "How's school today?"

"Oh, yeah. All good. How was the gym?"

"I'm not as fast as I once was."

"But still faster than most," Ryan finishes for me, and I chuckle. "I know, Dad. You'll be seventy and still running circles around us."

"I won't be in this evening," I tell him. "I've got a date."

"A *date*?" Ryan says. "I don't think I heard you correctly."

My grin can't stop getting wider. This is getting better and better. It's like the old Ryan is crawling out of the pit his mom and Joel built for him with all those compromises and easy roads.

"A bona fide date," I tell him, "but..." My tone darkens. "Well, there's an issue."

"Is she a blowup doll or something?" he jokes.

"Ha, ha, ha," I say sarcastically. "No, well, I'm just going to say it. She's twenty-one. She's your age."

"Is that *it*, Dad?" Ryan asks. "That's no biggie."

"Some people might disagree," I say, gently guiding the car around a corner.

"I don't care what *some people* would say. You don't date, and I can hear how excited you are. If you've got chemistry, you should go for it."

Who are you, and what have you done with my son? I almost say that as a joke, but it might make Ryan self-conscious about this newfound attitude. Maybe it really came down to the booze. If that's the case, the question is, can he keep off it?

"How's your diary going today, anyway?" I ask.

This is my polite way of asking if he's consumed any alcohol by two p.m.

"All good, Dad," he replies, "and it's going to stay that way."

"Good man. I love you, son."

"I love you too, Dad."

After hanging up, I've got that same smile on my face. I feel like nothing could break this mood. I wonder if my grappling partner secretly dosed me with something. I feel high, floating in the goddamn air. I haven't smiled like this since the day Ryan was born.

This is it. I just know it. I will look back on this day and remember this is where it all started: an improved relationship with Ryan and a new relationship with Molly—the start of the rest of our lives. Soon, I'll tell her who she belongs to. I'll tell her she's going to give me a family. I'll tell her that her young, curvy body is mine and mine alone.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Molly

I smooth my hands over my belly, my stomach rumbling, but not out of hunger. I'm dressed for the date. It's nothing too crazy, just a dress that hugs a little tightly at the waist. Rachael thinks it shows off my figure. I've never been sure if that's good or bad, but I can't think about it right now. All I can think about is how wrong this is.

"I almost told him on the phone earlier," I say.

"What?" Rachael says, adjusting her hair in the mirror. She has a date tonight, too. "Why?"

"What do you mean, *why*?" I snap. "Because it's *cruel*."

"There's nothing cruel about it," she replies. "It's not like he's in love with you."

I swear, I almost throw something. I have to remind myself quickly that, from her point of view, it would seem extremely weird for me to get angry about this. We've met once, spoken once, and that's it. I shouldn't even be thinking about the L-word, let alone ready to go to war for it.

"Just don't get too deep," Rachael goes on.

"I think I'll handle this myself," I tell her.

She turns, looking at me closely. "Okay, sorry. I didn't mean to..."

“No, it’s fine,” I tell her. “I’m just nervous. He’s so much older than me. When I typed my number into his phone, I saw he had a dating app open. I bet he goes on several dates a week.”

Rachael shrugs. “You’re funnier, smarter, kinder, and more beautiful than all his other dates.”

“You literally have no idea if that’s true.”

“I *know* it’s true,” she counters, smiling magnetically, “and I don’t want to hear any arguments about it, okay?”

I roll my eyes, but I’m smiling. Not just because of her compliment but because I know what I’m going to do—the right thing. I’m going to tell Duke the truth. As soon as I make this decision, it’s like this nasty monster finally lets me go. I’m not cut out for revenge, hot or cold, even if Ryan deserves it.



I’m shaky as I leave the college dorm and walk toward the street to meet Duke. After Rachael left for her date, I was alone with my thoughts for a little while, giving me plenty of time to think about Ryan, revenge, and these fierce feelings gripping me every time I think of Duke.

Duke is waiting by his car. It’s a dark, long vehicle—I’ve never been great with cars—with tinted windows. It has a somehow ominous air, as if capable of as much violence as its owner. Duke walks over to me, looking dashing in his blue shirt, with no suit jacket to hide the hard outline of his muscles.

He reaches out and takes my hand. Buzzing electricity flutters up my arm. I’m used to the feeling of my heart trying to bust out of my chest, but that’s usually nerves, the awkwardness that comes before reading aloud in class. This is something else. This is pure desire trying to make me do something reckless.

“It’s good to see you,” he says, his voice husky like my fantasy.

Tell him now. Instead, I say, “And you, Duke.” We’re still holding hands. “I’ve been looking forward to this all day.”

He smirks, letting my hand go and opening the passenger-side door. “I’ve been looking forward to this since before we met.”

I laugh, but only because he says it in a joking tone. I don’t actually find it funny. In fact, it hits me like a good piece of poetry, right in the feels. It slams into me so hard I almost throw myself at him, kiss him passionately, then tell him I feel the same. I *really* feel the same, and not just as some throwaway comment.

Once I’m in the car, he closes the door and walks around to the driver’s side. I love how he moves like a lion, slow and easy but ready to spring into ferocious action.

“Have you had a good day?” he asks, starting the car.

You could tell him right now, a voice notes distantly. I’m letting this go way too far. “Yeah,” I reply. “It was quite exciting, actually. I was watching some MMA fights.”

He glances at me with that captivating smirk, then watches the road. “Did you see the one where I was knocked out?”

“Yeah, and I also saw where you knocked *him* out in the next fight.”

“That’s my only loss,” he says ruefully. “I avenged it. That means something, but it still stings.”

I think about the version of Duke I watched online: his hair black instead of streaked with silver, his body leaner, less experienced. I prefer him now. Maybe that says something about me. I don’t care. I love the silver hair and the seasoned strength.

“Were you scared?” I ask.

“For which fight?”

“All of them.”

He casually glides the steering wheel around, taking the question seriously. “I was never scared of getting hurt, but I was worried I’d lose everything I worked for. I’d invested all

this time in fighting, and nothing would come of it. That was my biggest fear. Not being able to provide for my son.”

I swallow. This is the *best* time to tell him. Maybe there’s a chance he’ll still want to go on the date. Yet the moment keeps passing me by, or perhaps I’m letting it.

It would be natural for me to ask some follow-up questions here. Is he close with his son? Is he on good terms with the mother? Whatever, but I can’t bring myself to do it.

“Are you okay?” he says after a minute or two of silence.

“Yeah, just...” *Tell him.* “Sorry. Am I quieter than your other dates?”

He scowls. For a second, he looks *so* much like Ryan. I almost expect him to start berating me or to throw a critical comment my way. He doesn’t smell of booze like Ryan often did, though. Like Dad often did, too. Or maybe the word I’m looking for is *always*.

“I don’t have other dates,” he says shortly.

Well, that’s just a lie. I could play this subtly, but I don’t. “I saw the app, Duke. It’s fine. People date. It’s—”

“Bullshit,” he cuts in fiercely. “I downloaded that app because a buddy at the gym suggested it. He thinks I need some fun in my life. I matched with some women, but I felt nothing. I didn’t message any of them. I didn’t even try. It doesn’t feel real, but this... this feels real.”

If he’s lying, he’s saying all the right things. His words light me up and make me believe I’m different and special. Maybe he wants me as badly as I want him. Even if that’s true, it’s not *good*. It’ll just make the crash that much more painful.

“I’m telling the truth,” he says gruffly as if reading my mind.

“Okay, so when was your last date?” I ask.

He gets that pondering look again, giving my words serious weight. “Roughly four years ago.”

“Four years ago,” I say doubtfully.

“You don’t believe me,” he chuckles. “Is it that hard to believe?”

“Have you *seen* yourself, Duke? Women must be clamoring to get their hands on you. I bet if we brought up all your matches on that dating app and compared them to me...”

He comes to an abrupt stop, causing me to jolt forward slightly. Quick as a viper, he puts his arm out, bracing me, though I’m wearing a seatbelt.

“Sorry,” he mutters, nodding ahead. “Asshole.”

A big truck has stopped in front of us. Duke watches it with the cool calm of a predator and then nods shortly when the car pulls away.

“I take it you don’t have road rage,” I point out.

“Road rage is useless. *Most* rage is useless. It can help if you’re untrained to get angry enough so you don’t feel the blows coming. Overall, staying calm is always best.” He pauses. “And comparing *you* to *them*...” He shakes his head. “I wouldn’t want to do that. It wouldn’t be fair to them.”

I feel my cheeks blushing red when he winks at me, a cocky smirk on his face. This would about be the best date imaginable if it weren’t for the giant Ryan-sized elephant waiting to stampede over everything.

“Yeah, right,” I say sarcastically.

“I mean it,” he grunts. “A beautiful woman like you, Molly... You need to have more confidence.”

“So, how did the other date go?” I ask. *Four years ago*. I’m still not sure if that’s true. A silly voice inside tells me he’d never lie to me, but I can’t know that. Just because I feel it and *want* to believe it doesn’t make it true.

“Not well,” he says. “None of my dates have. That’s why I stopped trying.”

“Why?” I ask. He seems way too cool, comfortable, and at ease with me for me to accept he’d turn into some stumbling mess with other women.

“Maybe it was my lack of interest. I’ve been called cold more than once.”

“You don’t seem cold to me.”

Every time he glances at me with a smirk, it’s enough to heat me up inside. It’s enough to send my mind into the future, spinning into all the impossible scenarios, wedding bells and long lazy Sundays with the kids, an entire life... with *Ryan* as my *stepson*.

He glides into the parking lot of an Italian restaurant. It looks like an upscale place just from the exterior of the building, clean and well-maintained, with a long red carpet out front and two doormen standing on either side of the door.

He’s about to reach for the car door when his cell phone rings. He takes it out of his pocket and sighs. “Sorry, it’s my son. He’s going through a hard time right now.”

I swallow. Yeah, of course he is. His girlfriend—I—just broke up with him. “I understand.”

Even now, I’m thinking about the passion in his voice and the fact this makes him a good father. He’ll be a good dad to *our* kids, too.

He answers the phone. “Ryan? Wait. Christ. Send me a pin. Now. Right now, son.” He puts the phone on the dash, starting the car.

“What’s wrong?” I ask as he pulls out of the parking spot quickly.

“Ryan’s drunk. Maybe on drugs. Apparently, he got into it with a few criminal types. They’ve locked him in the bathroom.”

“Shouldn’t he call the cops?” I say.

“He said he can’t. He said they’d kill him. For *fuck’s* sake.” He slams his hand against the steering wheel, then stops the car, takes a moment, eyes closed, breathing slowly.

I reach out and touch his hand gently. There’s a strong urge in me to take some of his pain and always be there for him. “It’s

going to be okay. You can handle this. If you stay calm, you can handle anything.”

He opens his eyes, his lip twitching. Then he leans over. It feels so natural. I can't help but lean toward him, magnetized by the intimacy, the primal pulsing deep within, ordering me to get as close to him as I can, to *stay* close.

He groans softly as our lips meet. I push against him, tasting him, savoring the texture of his mouth. His hand touches my knee and glides higher, but then he holds it there, squeezing me gently. Then harder. He groans with more passion. I can feel the heat emanating from him. I claw onto his arms. They're so big, so hard. My fingernails bend against his muscles.

Then he pulls away, shuddering all over. His eyes are wild and wide. “You've got no idea how badly I want to do that again,” he snarls, “but...”

“I understand,” I murmur. “Your son needs you.”

My lips tingle just like every part of me does when I make contact with him. There's a voice deep within screaming at me to leap into his lap and kiss him again.

He looks stubbornly at the road as if he can't even glance at me, or he'll lose control. Maybe that's the only way to stop this disaster. Kiss him, distract him, and leave Ryan trapped with the criminals.

I smooth my hands over my belly, nerves twisting through me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Duke

It's so difficult not to kiss Molly again. When I pull up outside the grimy bar in a bad part of town, I turn to look at her. She's breathing fast as if being in this sort of neighborhood sends jolts of anxiety through her. That makes me feel like a bad man, bringing her here, but there's no time to waste.

I've wasted enough already with the kiss, but no, *hell* no. I can't consider kissing her as a waste, no matter the circumstances. She looks up at me, biting her lip.

"Lock the doors," I tell her. "If I'm not out in five minutes, drive away and call the cops. I'll leave the keys."

"Be careful," she whispers.

Other men, especially world champion fighters, might get cocky here. They might try to pretend nothing can threaten them, but I've heard too many stories about fighters getting shot, stabbed, or taken five-on-one.

I can't help it, even if the clock is ticking. I lean forward and kiss her briefly, taking her passion and turning it into strength and determination. There's no way I'll abandon my woman out here alone. I need to get this done fast.

Quickly ending the kiss—otherwise, I won't be able to stop—I climb from the car. My manhood is stiff from the closeness, but I settle down as I approach the bar. My heart is beating

way too quickly. This isn't an organized fight. They're probably armed.

I won't leave my son in there, even if he's brought this on himself. Why is he in a place like this? And why is he so, so drunk?

The bar is a dusty room under stark electric lights. Several men sit around a poker table, whiskey glasses on display. Two more stand at what must be the bathroom door. They're all covered in tattoos, wearing leather or denim. They don't see me at first.

One of the men at the door, tall, with a shaggy mane of yellow hair and a goatee, laughs gruffly. "Want me to huff and puff, kid? Is that it?"

The other man laughs.

I walk farther into the room. A big man rises at the poker table. He's almost my size. He has his hand behind his back, leaving me no doubt he's got a weapon of some sort. If it's a gun, it doesn't matter how many thousands of hours I have training and sparring.

"Can I help you?" the man says, flashing a grin. He has a flat nose, as if it's been broken before.

"You've got my son locked in the bathroom," I tell him.

"Ah, that's your kid, is it?" The man shakes his head almost sadly. "You should've taught him better, buddy. Taught him only to bet what he was willing to lose."

I suppress a groan and any reaction at all. I just stare coldly at the man.

"Bad idea, friend, looking at me like that."

"How much does he owe?" I ask.

"Fifty Gs."

I grind my teeth. *Fuck*. My son's driving me insane. The sense of failure crashes into me all over again. He's gambling fifty thousand in some lowlife bar when he has no business being here to begin with. "I should be able to make that right."

I don't want to come across as too eager since that might give them the bright idea to shake me down for more cash.

"He didn't call the cops," I go on. "He called me."

"Yes, the great Duke Harrow," the man says, smiling thinly. "I know who you are. I'd never seen a heavyweight move like you, but it won't make any difference if you decide to make this ugly."

I grit my teeth, nodding, hating his tone, hating the way he holds his hand at his back, hating the rats at the poker table and the rats at the door. None of them would last even a couple of rounds with the teenagers at my gym, but here, they're the hardest men in the world.

"I can pay what he owes," I snap. "Now, let him out."

"*Now?*" The man chuckles. "You're giving orders, are you, Mr. Harrow?"

I grind my teeth. Staying calm is always the name of the game, but nobody can be a true fighter if they don't have a switch deep inside of them. Maybe it's a switch that a person is born with. Or maybe seeing violence at a young age forces it into somebody. It doesn't matter. It's there, and I'm so tempted to flip it.

Then what? He pulls out his gun, shoots me, kills Ryan, and maybe goes outside and kills Molly, too. My blood turns cold at that. Whatever else happens, whatever chaotic course this takes, Molly is off-limits.

"Do you have the cash?" the man says.

"Not on me," I snap, "but I can get it."

"Then you better go get it."

I shake my head. My fists are clenched. My legs are twitching as if getting ready to throw kicks. My hips feel primed as if preparing my balance for grappling. There's a war drum deep inside, beating, getting prepared.

"I'm not leaving without my son."

Please, Molly, do what I told you. She needs to get out of here. I shouldn't have even brought her. I can still taste her on my lips, intimacy as I've never experienced, a closeness I want to share again.

The man winces. "Does that seem like an intelligent thing to say?"

Behind me, I hear another man enter. I turn. My stomach sinks. This is bad. Anger thunders through me. I feel more rage at seeing Molly in this grimy place than knowing my son is trapped here. I have a protective desire. I'll do anything to keep her safe, anything.

The man has something pressed against her back, maybe a knife or a gun. I can't see. His hand's out of view. She looks so beautiful in her dress, the hugging at the hips highlighting her shape. Her makeup is so subtle and gorgeous. She doesn't deserve this.

"I'm sorry," she says, her voice torn with fear as she looks at me. "He said he'd shoot me if I didn't—"

"Quiet, bitch," the man grunts, looking at me with a vicious sense of victory. He's a wiry bastard, wearing a wife beater and showing off skinny arms plastered in tattoos.

I change my position so I can keep all of them in view. Far too many for me to fight. I need to *think*.

"Or I'll *make* you be quiet."

When the man shoves my woman, and Molly makes a pained groaning noise, I lose the ability to think. What I do next is very stupid. It could get everybody killed, but I'm reacting now in fight mode, senses heightened. I'm not thinking.

It's not even like *I* do it. It's my instincts surging up through me. Even with my son trapped in that bathroom, my only mission is to keep Molly safe, to get that creep away from her. I can't let anybody hurt her. Ever.

CHAPTER NINE

Molly

I've screwed up badly, but I panicked when I saw the lean man striding across the street. I fumbled with the keys in the ignition. I messed up when I tried to slide into the driver's seat. I should've already *been* in the driver's seat. Duke's expression became savage when he saw me.

And now...

It all happens so fast. I register it slowly. Duke leaps across the bar toward the man and me. Before the man can react—it must be less than a second—Duke kicks him in the stomach. Then he's got his arms wrapped around him, one hand on his wrist. The man screams when Duke snaps his wrist. The gun drops to the floor.

My mouth is dry. My heart hurts, but my man needs my help. This could be it, the end for us. The *end*, full stop.

I lean down and pick up the gun. My hands are shaking. The world is turning blurry as sweat slides into my eyes. I manage to raise it and point it at the men at the table.

They're all on their feet but stop when they see me with the gun. Then, gently, Duke takes the gun from my hand. The man he kicked is on the floor, his hand bent at an unnatural angle, wincing as he tries to sit up. Duke aims the gun with purpose, panning it over the men.

“Let him out. Now. We're leaving.”

“What about the money?” The man who speaks has a flat, broken nose. I realize he’s got a gun in his hand, but I must’ve stopped him from aiming it when I quickly pointed mine at them.

“We’re leaving *now*,” Duke roars, stepping forward. “Or I’ll shoot you in the fucking head.”

“You’re a fighter, my friend, not a killer.”

“You’re wrong,” he snarls. “I beat my own father to death with my bare hands. What do you think I’d do to you? Last chance.”

I gasp, wondering if I heard him right or if the violence is giving me crazy hallucinations. He killed his own *dad*?

“Fine, fine,” the man says, sighing like this is all beneath him. “Let the kid out.”

One of the men opens the door to the bathroom. A moment later, Ryan walks out, though *walks* isn’t exactly correct. He weaves from side to side, clearly completely drunk. I’ve seen him like this many times. It was always when he got the most vicious.

“Come here,” Duke snaps angrily.

Ryan looks around the room, eyes narrowed. When he finally sees me, he pauses, shaking his head as if I’m a phantom of his imagination and he wants to get rid of me.

“We’re leaving,” Duke snarls when Ryan is standing at his side, the other side to me, meaning we don’t have to stare at each other. There’s too much happening now for him to give a damn I’m here, but what about when the chaos stops?

“If you want to start a gunfight, you’ll win,” Duke says. “I’m sure more of you are armed, but a few will die. Is it worth it, fellas? To die here?”

“What sort of man beats his own father to death?” the man with the broken nose snaps. “What sort of *coward* does a thing like that?”

Duke clenches his jaws. His temples pulse. I can feel the rage emanating from him, but it’s nothing compared to when the

man dragged me into the bar, and Duke turned and saw us. It was like the world would end if he didn't do something.

Slowly, Duke backs toward the door, reaching out with one hand and putting it across my body. Ryan stumbles along with us. "You two go first," Duke says when he's at the door. "Molly, you may need to help—"

"I'm fine," Ryan snaps, stumbling through the door.

I follow him. A moment later, Duke bursts onto the street. He yells at me and Ryan to get to the car while aiming the gun at the door. I run quickly, throw the door open, and then grab the keys from the foot well where I dropped them.

Ryan climbs into the backseat, groaning. Our eyes meet in the rearview. He frowns at me, a complicated look in his eyes. It's like part of him wants to snap at me and call me names, but the other... I don't know. Maybe he wants to apologize, but then his lip curls. It's classic Ryan. He opens his mouth to speak and closes it when Duke jumps into the car. He throws the gun on the ground and slams the door, speeding away.

"Is everybody okay?" he says, the tires screeching as he takes a corner and heads for the highway.

"I'm going to be sick," Ryan grunts.

"If you puke in my car after pulling this shit, I swear to God, I'll disown you," Duke roars, then takes a long, slow breath, glancing at me. It's like I can read the message in his intense eyes. *I couldn't let them hurt you. I'll never let anybody hurt you*, but that's probably just wishful thinking on my part.

Ryan groans and leans against the door, putting his hands over his face.

"Fifty thousand." Duke goes on. "What the *fuck* were you doing there?"

"I don't know, Dad. I was at a bar. They said it was a friendly game. I think someone spiked my drink."

"You weren't supposed to be drinking today," Duke says.

Does Ryan have a drinking problem? I've never thought about it in those terms, but I know he drinks a lot. I always just

figured it's college. It's what people do. Rachael probably drinks too much, too, though I wouldn't say anything. Most of my classmates drink *loads*.

"I know," Ryan mutters, then shudders.

"You could've gotten yourself killed. You could've gotten me killed. Worse, you could've gotten *Molly* killed. How would that feel, getting an innocent woman murdered? Getting your own dad murdered?"

"Dad, I'm s—"

"I don't want to fucking hear it!" he snarls. "Goddamn it. We're getting you help. I don't care what you say. I don't care if you don't think it's that serious. We all could've died tonight. It's that easy." Duke snaps his fingers. "Just like a fight. One moment, one hesitation. Except we're talking bullets here, son, not fists. Not kicks. *Bullets*."

Duke bites down, shaking his head. He looks disgusted that he even has to say any of this. I remember what he said yesterday about Ryan's mom leaving, about not being in Ryan's life when he was a kid. I bet if he had been, Ryan would be different now. When Duke has another chance, another family, I know he will be the best dad our kids could ask for.

Even if he killed his *own* dad...

"Molly, I'm going to have to take you home," Duke says. "I need to handle this. Sober Ryan up. Look into rehabs. And who's to say this is over? They know who I am. They know who you are, Ryan, but they don't know your name, Molly. They don't know where your dorm is. They don't know..." He trails off, shuddering. "But if they found out, I wouldn't forgive myself if something happened to you."

He stares furiously at the road while his words bounce warmly around me. He wouldn't forgive himself if somebody hurt me. His own son is lying in the backseat, but he didn't say that about him—only me. Maybe I'm not the only one who feels this connection, this burning, this fire.

"Dad, I really don't feel well."

“I could drop him off on the way,” Duke says, glancing at me. “Get him some rest. We could have some time then. It’s not much of a date, though.”

“I think it’s safe to say this date has been more eventful than most,” I comment.

He laughs drily. “Yeah, no arguments there. You good with that?”

I nod. “Whatever you think is best.”

Truthfully, this is a bad idea. I should get away from them as quickly as possible, but my adrenaline is still surging. I don’t like the idea of being alone in my dorm. The longer I can spend with Duke, the better, even if, any second, Ryan could tell him the truth.

CHAPTER TEN

Duke

I help Ryan into his bedroom, hold his arm, and lower him into bed. He stares up at me drunkenly, his eyes wide and red. “Dad,” he moans. “Dad, I’m sorry.”

I stand up, the anger starting to settle down now. I’ve been in countless fights, but it’s different when guns are involved. I’ve only ever held one at the range, and it’s not like I do that often.

“We’re getting you some help,” I tell him. “First thing in the morning. I’m going to need to get some cash ready, too. If those jackals come calling, I’ll need to pay off your debt. I don’t want any issues with them.”

“Was it true?” Ryan asks. “Did you kill your dad?”

I bite down, remembering the bar. I threw it out there viciously to let them know I was serious. I would’ve pulled that trigger to keep my woman safe. I would’ve executed every man in there to save her. It’s my primary responsibility in life.

“Go to sleep,” I tell him. When he rolls onto his back, eyes closing, I reach forward, take his shoulder, and softly maneuver him so he’s on his side. “Stay like this. I’ll check on you to make sure you’re okay.”

“Dad...” Ryan opens his eyes with effort, staring at me. “Do you know who she is?”

“Do I know who *who* is?” I ask.

“Molly.”

I’m not sure how to respond to this. She’s the woman of my dreams. She’s the future mother of my children. She’s *mine*. That’s who she is and who she always will be—just mine, always mine. Nobody else touches her. Nobody threatens her. Nobody ever gets to hurt her.

“She’s my date,” I tell him. “The one I told you about.”

Ryan laughs, but there’s sadness in it. “She’s my ex, Dad. My ex-girlfriend. The one who broke up with me yesterday.”

Ryan told me he broke up with her, which was clearly just to protect himself. At first, I’m unsure if I’ve heard him right, but I don’t ask him to repeat it. I let the words settle in my mind, settle in my chest, deep in my belly.

She’s his *ex*. They’ve kissed and been intimate. They’ve been *together*. The woman I want, need to spend the rest of my life with. The woman who’s going to give Ryan brothers and sisters one day. Oh, dammit, the woman who will be his *stepmom* one day.

Stumbling backward, my head spinning, I know I have to make sure I heard him correctly. Maybe this is some vicious trick, but Ryan seems sad and defeated, not like he’s trying to get some weird dig in. “Molly is your ex-girlfriend.”

“Yeah, Dad.” Ryan lets his eyes close. “I don’t know why she’d date you, but yeah, I’m sorry.”

I walk from the bedroom, leaving the door cracked. As I descend the stairs, I realize I’m taking them slowly, as if I can put this off. I’ll have to ask her, or I can pretend I didn’t hear what Ryan said.

Molly is standing at the living room window, peering around the curtain. I pause in the doorway, studying her. My adrenaline turns into white-hot desire as I drink in her wide hips, thick, perfect legs, and curviness. Despite the standoff, despite Ryan’s revelation, my manhood is still getting hard. My dick is still pushing against my pants.

She turns, her cheeks flushed red. “Is he okay?” she asks quietly.

I wonder if that's concern in her voice. I wonder if the only reason she's with me is because she wants to be closer to Ryan. But at the bar, did she know?

"He's sleeping," I say, walking over to her and taking her hands. I can't help it. The physical contact is too addictive with Molly. "I..."

I need to know why you agreed to go on a date with me. Did you know I was Ryan's dad?

I know when I say this, I'll shatter the moment. She doesn't seem surprised to see Ryan. Maybe he *was* lying. Or perhaps I just wish he was.

"Duke?" she whispers.

I let go of her hands and take hold of her hips. I don't have to think when I sink my touch passionately into her body. She makes the cutest moaning noise. It's like I can hear the relief in it. *We don't have to be scared. We don't even have to think. We can just be together.* I'm sure that's what's going through her head, too, as fiercely as it goes through mine.

Pressing my lips against hers, I indulge in her hips. Every moment, a sick thought tries to come between us. Ryan has kissed this woman, *my* woman. My own son has kissed my future wife. Goddamn, this is messed up, but she feels too good. There's too much relief in us both, the sheer fact we're alive. We made it.

Now, it's like my body is roaring at me to pump her full of seed as quickly as possible, flood her young body with my come. It's a primal impulse. We don't know when we'll be safe again. We have to do it now. Our bodies hunger for it.

She whimpers when I tuck my arm under her knees, bracing her back with my other hand, then lift her off her feet. "Told you it'd be easy," I groan, carrying her toward the couch.

"Duke..." She grabs onto my neck, passionately digging her fingernails in. "I... I'm..."

I put her on the couch and kneel beside it so she's lying down, ready to give her body to me. When I squeeze onto her thigh, my dick pulses, my shaft aching with seed. She moans, and

then I kiss her hard. I kiss her so she can't tell me the truth. She can't confirm she really is Ryan's ex. I'm a goddamn devil. I want to live in the lie.

She gasps through the kiss as I glide my hand up her leg, getting closer and closer to her core, the heat between her legs. I feel lightheaded from everything that's happened in such a short time.

Her mouth opens in a moan of pure desire when I push my hand down between her legs, over her underwear. I can feel her wetness through the fabric. I lean back, letting me watch her as I begin rubbing her through her panties.

She rocks with me, her legs shaking, staring at me wide-eyed. "I'm a virgin," she says, like she's forcing the words out. "Just so you know..."

Oh, fuck. My balls feel like they could explode. She's never felt a dick in her perfect, inexperienced pussy. She's never been filled up. She's never felt her man gliding deep, knowing that when he—*I*—erupt, I will come in her deep and hard. I'm going to fill her body with our future.

"I won't push you," I growl, "but I need to see you come for me. I need to feel your pussy get even wetter. You're already so slick for me."

She nods, biting her lip. Her eyes flicker like there's something else she wants to say. I know what it is, obviously. Maybe a better man than me would stop, but right now, as I push her underwear aside, I don't care. I can't care. All I give a damn about is how hot she is, how ready.

She closes her eyes when I bring my hand to her naked clit, pushing my finger greedily against it.

"Look at me," I snarl. "Don't be shy."

She opens her eyes, her cheeks turning a captivating shade of red. In my mind, I imagine Ryan walking down here, catching us. Maybe he still has feelings for Molly. They only broke up *yesterday*.

I move my finger down to her entrance and circle it, spreading her wetness. She claws onto my shoulders, staring at me.

“You’re going to soak my hand with your release,” I snarl.
“You’re going to fucking *drench* me with your honey. Understand?”

“Y-y...”

“*Understand?*” I snap gruffly.

“Yes, Duke. Yes.” She moans, rocking against me.

I slide my finger into her slowly, knowing it’s wrong and there’s a decent chance I’ll regret this. I’d never regret the intimacy or being close to her, but I know nothing about her and Ryan’s relationship. I don’t know how or why it ended. Hell, this could even be some warped plan on Molly’s part, some twisted revenge, but I can’t believe that. My Molly wouldn’t do that.

She shifts against me so damn sexily as I slide my finger deeper, past my first knuckle, then go all the way. I push against her clit while I gently move my other finger in a small circle inside her hot, tight hole. She grips me so damn eagerly, making my dick ache as I imagine how she’ll feel wrapped around my shaft.

I move my finger faster, feeling so connected to her that I almost propose right now. My head’s doing some insane things this evening. I’m blaming it on the adrenaline, the fear, the anger. Or maybe it’s just the simple fact of her hot, needy pussy quivering around my finger, her body telling me she’s getting closer.

She’s a virgin. She’s *my* virgin. She’s never touched another man. No, she’s touched another man. She’s touched my son. She just didn’t have sex with him. Does that make it better? What if she’s lying? But why would she?

I lean down, press my lips against her neck, taste her body, her sweat, just her. I open my mouth and bite onto her skin softly. Maybe this is my way of claiming her. A bite to the throat, like I’m a goddamn vampire feeding on my son’s ex.

She moans and shivers against me, then suddenly, she stops. It’s like she’s taking a moment to gather all her pleasure. I can

feel the tension about to snap in her. She whimpers, making the sexiest noise yet.

I have to lean back again to look at her, watching the lust burst through her young, perfect body. She shivers on the couch, her intense, passionate blush creeping down her neck. I moan and start massaging her breasts as her hole tightens around my finger like she's holding onto me and never wants to let go.

Finally, she falls over the edge and lets go. I slide my fingers from her. She shuffles up on the couch and then looks at me guiltily. I know what she's going to say. I wish there were a way to stop it. I can't keep making her come every time she veers close to the truth, even if that would feel so, so good.

She adjusts her dress and sighs. "There's something else, Duke," she murmurs.

Goddamn, this is it. It must say a lot about my feelings for Molly that, after everything we've experienced tonight, this frightens me the most. It's the end of us before we've even had a chance to begin.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Molly

I can't believe we just did that. It's not only the act itself, his finger pushing into me hotly. It's not just the kissing and the fact that when I told him I was a virgin, he seemed to get *more* intense and crazier with desire. The orgasm was the most intense experience of my life. I don't give a damn if my poetry professors would chide me for hyperbole.

I'm still aching, the passion pulsing, but I have to do this now. He risked his life for me. He *saved* my life. Pathetically, tears try to sting my eyes and slide down my cheeks. I quickly rub my face.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

He leans over, gently brushing his thumb along my cheek. "I already know," he says, his voice grim. "Ryan told me. Just now. Before I came down here."

I lean away from him. "He told you, and you..."

He laughs ruefully, but it's dark, with an edge to it. It's like he has to laugh, or he'll roar to release some of the tension. He stands up, hands on his hips, looking down at me with a strange mixture of anger and resignation. "I couldn't help myself. You're too damn sexy. Or maybe it's the fact we could've died tonight."

That last statement might be confusing to somebody else. Why would *that* make him want to get steamy? But I understand

exactly what he means. As soon as we got to safety, there was this burning deep within, this urgent ache as though a deep desire was telling me I had to get his seed *now*. I had to be with him while I had the chance.

He bites down. It's like he doesn't want to say the next part, but he has to. "When you approached me at the bar, did you know who I was?"

I almost close my eyes, remembering when I did it before, during the steaminess. He snapped at me to look at him, saying it was important and he *needed* me to. "Yes," I say after a pause, then swallow. "It started as a joke—a sick game, I guess you could say. I was with my friend. We saw you, and then I..."

He sits on the armchair, the coffee table between us. His eyes are hard. "Go on," he says bluntly.

"We came up with an idea to get revenge on Ryan."

Duke shows no reaction. He keeps staring at me. I think I see one of his eyes twitch, but I'm unsure. It's like he's shutting himself down completely. "Revenge," he says after a pause. "But you broke up with him, right?"

"It doesn't matter," I reply.

After everything that has happened—my underwear is still sticky from our steaminess—I don't want to heap this on him, too. Maybe he'll call me a liar.

"It *does* matter," he snaps. "Why would you want revenge on him?"

I can't look at Duke anymore. As I answer, I look at the window and the closed curtains. They're open just a sliver, showing the street. "We didn't have a very good relationship. He..." I pause, wondering how to phrase this. "He could be nasty. Very nasty. He'd call me names. He'd belittle me. He'd bully me."

Duke watches with that infuriating impassivity. "In what way?" he asks.

“He’d call me *fat*, for example. Or he’d laugh if I said I wanted to write a poetry book. He’d say I didn’t have the talent for it. It was little comments like that all the time, but they stacked up. They hurt. Sometimes, he looked at me like he *hated* me.”

Duke stands abruptly. He turns toward the hallway with that same look on his face I saw in the bar before he viciously and efficiently beat up the man holding the gun to me. The *gun*. I almost cry again. My mind is sluggishly catching up to the ferocious reality of what we experienced.

“My son said all of that to you,” Duke murmurs.

“Yeah,” I reply.

“I wasn’t asking,” he grunts. “The worst part is, I believe it. I can imagine Ryan saying all that. He can get real, real nasty sometimes. Real spoiled.” He frowns down at me. “But...”

He leaves the *but* hanging there for way too long. I know what he’s going to say. He *has* to say it. This is just too strange. The age gap, and now this... Most people would agree we should end things here.

“But?” I say when he doesn’t go on. I can’t stand the tension for much longer.

“We can’t do this.” It’s like saying this is causing him pain. Veins bulge in his neck. “I have to try to get him on the right path, but you need to know something, Molly. The things he said to you—my son—were wrong. You didn’t deserve it, and I have to know...”

He trails off and sits down, resting his head in his hands. I want to go to him, place my hand on his shoulder, and squeeze supportively, but he just said we can’t do this. Whatever we were building here, it’s over. I was right at the start of the date when I thought that telling him would be the end.

Finally, he looks up at me. He’s got that familiar fierceness in his eyes. He’s ready for more fighting, more pain. “Did he ever lay a hand on you?”

“No,” I tell him. “Sometimes, he’d look at me, but no.”

“Look at you, how?” Duke asks sharply.

“Like maybe he *wanted* to, but he never did.”

“How is the world so goddamn unfair?” he snaps, speaking more to himself than to me. “Jesus *Christ*, I have to fix this. I have to fix *him*. It’s time I did something drastic.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“You heard what I said in the bar about killing my dad, right?”

I swallow. His tone has become frighteningly cold and determined. “Yeah, I thought maybe you were bluffing.”

This is a lie. It felt true when he said it, but his intensity is freaking me out. He stares at me coldly. “No, I did it. I beat my own father to death. He was a drunk asshole. He’d beat on my mom every chance he got. Then, just after my fourteenth birthday, I went out with my buddies and got way too wasted. I was wild back then. I’d just started training.”

I can’t take the pain in his voice, but when I stand up, he shakes his head at me. *Stay there*. The message in his eyes is unmistakable. I sit down, feeling like I’ve overstepped, but this entire thing has been one giant overstep.

“When I got home,” he continues, “my dad was on top of my mom—the same old bullshit. I pulled him off her. I hit him once. Then again. Then I kept going, and he fell. He hit his head on the floor. He died right then. The sick part was I was happy about it. I enjoyed it. There’s something wrong with me. There’s a darkness in me few people understand.”

I understand, I want to say, but it’s clear he doesn’t want me to be there for him. He doesn’t want me at all.

“I’m so sorry you had to do that,” I murmur.

“It’s what drove me to become a fighter. When the police ruled it self-defense, I threw myself into training. It was the only thing that mattered to me. It was the only thing I could truly focus on without disappearing into the darkness. Ryan never had that kind of motivation. He’s had it way, way too fucking easy.”

He looks up at me, his expression deadly serious. I think I can see some regret in his intense eyes, but I'm not sure. Maybe I've been misreading signals since this began, but why did he say he'd never forgive himself if something happened to me? I was *sure* there was real, raw, primal emotion in his voice.

"We're going to have to end this here," he says miserably.

"After..."

"After what?" he asks.

"It doesn't matter."

"After *what*?" he says, firmer.

"I said it doesn't matter," I reply just as firmly. "I was going to say something, and then I changed my mind. Okay? God."

He stares at me, triggering something inside me, a response of pure anger. Maybe it's pent-up pressure from, well, everything. Or perhaps it comes from those hungry signals deep inside, telling me I belong with this man I tricked and lied to. This man I'm clearly never going to be with.

"I was going to say after you kissed me and got all steamy, *then* you tell me you want nothing to do with me."

"I know," he sighs heavily. "I never said I didn't want to be with you, but how can we, Molly? We can't. Not if we look at it objectively. It's too strange. It'll never work."

I almost argue, telling him I don't care if it's strange, telling him I don't care if he *thinks* it will never work. I'm not going to beg for this. It was a mistake to begin with.

Quickly standing, I walk toward the door, but Duke is there fast, blocking my way with his broad build. "Let me give you a ride home."

"No," I snap, almost on the verge of tears again. "I can get a cab or something. Just... please."

"It might not be safe," he grunts. "If those men—"

"You said it yourself. They don't even know who I am. They don't even know my name."

“I think I used it back there,” Duke says.

“You didn’t use my *last* name, though, right? There must be thousands of Mollys in this city. I’m fine, okay? Please.”

Here they come, the tears streaking down my cheeks, feeling way hotter, stinging far more fiercely than they have any right to. When he doesn’t move, I push my hand against his chest, trying to shove him out of the way. He reaches up and takes my wrist.

I’m unsure who initiates the kiss that will probably be our *final* kiss. We collapse together, losing ourselves in the passion. He slides his hand to my hip, and I step away, shaking my head. “No, Duke. *No*. You said it yourself. We can’t do this. Let me go.”

He lowers his hands slowly, all tense like it’s one of the hardest things he’s ever done.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Duke

Letting her go is one of the hardest things I've ever done, but it's not as if I'll keep her here against her will. Maybe I should, but she's right. *I'm* the one who said we can't do this, even if every instinct in me is roaring to bring her back here, claim her for life.

Taking out my phone, I text her. *Let me know when you're home safe. I mean it.*

Fine, she replies, *but then we're done.*

I can still taste her tears from when we were kissing, and they slid down her cheeks. I stand at the bottom of the stairs, looking up, thinking of my son. My son mentally abused the woman I want to marry. If Ryan were anybody else, I'd go up there and drag him out of bed. I'd...

I can't think like this. He's my baby boy. The same boy I held in my arms when he was born, so small and full of potential, already with a cheeky grin on his face. My own *son*. I wipe angrily at my face. Goddamn. Now isn't the time to shed even a single tear.

I wait to receive Molly's text telling me she's home safe.

I'm home, she texts me roughly an hour later.

Then I call up one of my buddies from my gym. His name's Ethan, and he's a police detective. Sitting on the couch, I explain the situation, the standoff, and the narrow escape.

"Hang on a second," Ethan replies. "Do you have the address?"

"Uh, let me think." I go back in my mind, remembering the neighborhood. I give him the rough address. "The bar was called Thunder or Lightning or something like that. It had a lightning bolt on the door, I think. It was all hectic."

"I bet, bro," Ethan replies. "I know them. They're affiliated with a biker gang. Small-time in terms of criminal organizations, but not small-time for regular folks."

"What should I do?" I ask. "I pieced one of them up pretty badly, and Ryan's into them for fifty Gs. I was going to pay the pricks, too, but they had to act tough."

"Listen, Duke. I think you need to come into the station and file a report. They imprisoned your son. They threatened you. Those firearms were probably illegal."

I sense some hesitation in his voice. Ethan's a good man. We've trained together for six years, and he's become an animal. He's learned countless skills that make him an effective fighter. Between rounds, we've talked enough for me to tell that something else is going on here.

"What's the problem, then?" I ask.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't bullshit me. You're holding something back. It's like when you try that high kick feint on me. I can read you, man."

Ethan sighs. "It's just... Well, we've dealt with these assholes before. They're known to intimidate witnesses. In one case, they tooled up a witness badly."

I grit my teeth, thinking of Molly and Ryan. I wonder if that order should be reversed. "I can't have that. Have you prosecuted *any* successful cases against them?"

After a pause, Ethan says, "No. Between me and you, and I *mean* that, Duke. This can't go anywhere."

“I swear,” I tell him.

“I think the club they’re affiliated with has a couple of guys on the unit. I’ve had my suspicions for a while.”

“Then that seals it. I can’t go to the cops. It’s not like they’ll be able to find where I live.”

“Maybe. Maybe not, but if I’m right...”

“Ah, I get it. Yeah. Of course.”

If he’s right, the thugs can use their police buddies to find my home address.

“When I was a fighter, we had security,” I tell him. “One of them used to talk about his contract work, mercenary-type stuff. Would it be possible to hire somebody like that to watch over a couple of people for me? Just until this shit blows over.”

If it *does* blow over.

“Yeah, it’s possible.” Ethan sounds defeated. I don’t envy his job, trying to clean up the streets when the dirt stacks so quickly and so high it’s impossible to imagine life without it. I have to think about my woman and my son first.

No, not *my* woman. She’s my son’s ex. She’s the woman I could’ve easily fallen in love with. Hell, maybe I did the second I saw her, but now I have to be ice, just like I was when the dad nightmares would come. Like when I was in the cage or the ring, every instinct told me to run, but I had to fight. I had to be strong.

“I’ve got some numbers I can send you,” Ethan says. “Good, solid, honest guys.”

“Thank you,” I reply. “That means a lot. I’m sorry the world’s such a shitty place.”

“Yeah, me too.”

After hanging up, he texts me some phone numbers. I spend the rest of the evening liaising with a private security team. I wonder how Molly will feel if I tell her what I’m doing. It

turns out that security can follow at a distance and only intervene if something bad happens.

I'm almost certain it won't. They have no way of finding her. Even if they find or *watch* me, they won't see me with Molly. They're not going to lay a single goddamn finger on her. A dark part of me almost wishes I'd unloaded the gun in the bar and ended it there to remove the chance anybody would ever threaten my woman.

It's late when I get to bed, but I feel restless. There's this incomplete feeling inside of me. I should be lying here with Molly. I should be holding her tightly, whispering that everything will be okay. I should be protecting the future mother of my children. Instead, I set my alarm for five a.m. Ryan doesn't know it yet, but he's got an early start tomorrow.

When I finally sleep, it's as if my alarm goes off one minute later. I wake feeling groggy. Last night seems like a dream. Then I sit up and walk quickly into the en-suite, splash cold water in my face, and march into Ryan's room. I kick the door open, causing him to leap out of bed, yelling and putting his hands in the air.

"Sneakers, now!" I roar, clapping my hands together.

"Wh-what time is it?" he says.

I walk right up to him. I let him feel the anger bubbling up inside of me. There's so much confused pain cutting right to my middle. This man bullied my woman. This man, my *son*, hurt my woman. If he'd hit her... Yet what he did was bad enough.

"Sneakers," I growl. "Now."

"Dad..."

"No," I snap. "There's no whining now. There aren't any excuses left. Either you do exactly what I fucking tell you, or I swear to God, you'll be on the street. Or you can fuck off to Spain and consider us quits. I love you, son. I'll never stop loving you, but this is enough. You either get your sneakers or get out of my house."

There are tears in his eyes. I almost soften, but that's what led us here: years and years of softness, years and years of no discipline, years and years of never once being punched in the face or experiencing any suffering.

"I'll get my sneakers," he says quietly.

"Good. We're running ten miles."

"Ten..."

"Ten miles. I don't care if your ankles snap. I don't care if you vomit blood. It's time to go."

Soon, I'm driving slowly down the street, Ryan running awkwardly at the side of the road. There's no pleasure in this for me. If he weren't my son, I'd enjoy it. I'd enjoy making the prick who hurt my woman suffer. Now, all I feel is numb and focused. This is what I have to do. This is the man I have to be. Cold, detached, not thinking about myself, what I want, or *who* I want. That's part of the issue right there. I don't want her. I *need* her.

"D-Dad." Ryan gasps, looking over at me as he stumbles forward, taking big, heaving breaths. "How far?"

"Two miles," I tell him. "Keep running."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Molly

I wake to somebody knocking on my door. I try to bury deeper into the dream. I was nuzzled into Duke's back, my arm wrapped around him, my hand resting against his hard abs as he breathed softly. None of the nastiness last night happened. No revelations. Nothing about Ryan or his dad.

"Molly?" It's Rachael. "*Hellloooo?*"

I stand, rubbing sleep from my eyes, then walk across the room. There's this buzzing at my core, a general hum of anxiety as if my instincts still expect an armed man to appear and force me to go with him suddenly. Rachael is beaming at me when I open the door, still wearing her clothes from last night, her mascara streaked.

"I have just done the walk of *pride*," she says, laughing as she strides into the room, still amped up from her hookup last night.

"The date went well, then?" I ask, closing the door behind her.

"It was magical. It was so much fun. We're getting dinner together later." She sits on the beanbag, grinning up at me. "How was your..." Her grin falters when I burst into tears.

It's like I've been waiting to see my friend to let all this out. When I rode the cab back last night, I felt so numb. It was like a survival mechanism, closing off my feelings so I wouldn't

have to face them. Now, Rachael jumps from the beanbag and rushes over, pulling me into her arms.

We end up sitting on the bed. I haven't cried like this in years. It's just everything. I can't even explain it. It's like life is stamping on my neck. I bury my face in her chest, hoping I'll be all cried out soon, but the tears keep coming.

"What did he do to you?" she whispers, stroking my hair.

"It's... it's... it's..."

Oh, dammit. I can't keep it together long enough to finish my freaking sentence. I cry some more, maybe as long as five minutes, just lost in it, gulping sobs, eyes stinging, skin all puffy and itchy from the tears. Finally, I lie on the bed and stare up at the ceiling.

Rachael lies next to me, our shoulders touching. "We can talk if you want," she says. "Or we can just stay like this. Whatever you want."

I take a long breath and force myself to sit up. "It's a long story," I explain, "and it's pretty nuts. You might not believe it."

She takes my hand. "Try me."

When I finish explaining, Rachael stares at me with her mouth open. "All of that in *one night*? What happened to those thugs? What did the cops say?"

"I don't know," I murmur. "We just got out of there fast. We didn't call the cops."

She narrows her eyes. "You probably should have."

"I know," I groan, "but Duke didn't say anything about it. Maybe he doesn't want Ryan to get into trouble."

"Oh yeah, got to protect the precious prince."

"He's still Duke's son," I say.

Rachael tilts her head, confused. “I don’t care if he’s the president’s son. The way he treated you was unacceptable.”

“I know *that*,” I reply, “but maybe he can change. He’s still young.”

“He’s our age, Molly. He’s not some little kid who doesn’t know any better.”

“Yeah, but I had to grow up fast. You know, because of Dad. You had to grow up fast, too.”

Another reason Rachael and I bonded so well in college—and probably a reason we both had a hard time making friends in high school—is that we both had difficult home lives, and that’s putting it mildly.

Yet it was nothing compared to what Duke had to endure, what he had to *do* to save his mom. I didn’t even ask how his mom’s doing now or if she’s still around. We won’t get a chance to have that or any conversation now. *We can’t do this...*

“Ryan didn’t,” I reply. “It’s like you said. He’s a prince. Completely spoiled.”

“So what now?” Rachael asks. “Are you going to wait for him to go to the cops or—”

“I don’t care about that,” I cut in. “I don’t care about the cops or those men or... I only care about *him*.”

Rachael leans back. She has an uncanny ability to look so deeply at me as if she’s peering directly into my thoughts. After a pause, she says, “You really like him. Duke. This wasn’t just about revenge, was it? This was... real.”

I swallow, smoothing my hands over my belly. I realize I’ve been doing this far more often since I first saw Duke. It’s like there’s already a baby inside me, *his* baby. That baby will have Ryan as a big brother. My *ex* will be my baby’s big brother.

“Yeah,” I say. “I think so. I’m not sure. It’s not like I’ve got any experience, but if anything is real, it’s this. That’s why I didn’t tell him at first. I didn’t want to ruin it. Now it’s ruined. There’s no chance it can work. Go on, Rach. Tell me I’m wrong. Tell me there’s a way we can be together.”

I say it as a challenge, knowing there's no possible positive response. Even so, deep down, I long for her to say some magic words to make this all okay. I long for her to reshape circumstances and the world so Duke and I can be a couple.

"I don't know," she says after a way-too-long pause.

"Be honest," I tell her. "Imagine we're not talking about me. Take my feelings out of the equation."

"I..." She bites down, then looks at me steadily. "Okay, Molly. I don't think this can work. That's just my honest opinion."

I swallow, nod, and try not to let her see how her words affect me. It's like she's running a truck directly into my dreams, but I can't blame her. I asked her to be honest, and she's right. How could this ever work?

"I don't enjoy saying that," she says after a moment. "I've never seen you like this before. You clearly care about him."

"My crush started while Ryan and I were still together," I tell her. "Ryan showed me a photo, and I liked him. I more than liked him. I wanted to be with him. I wanted to have a family with him. I wanted to marry him."

With each declaration, Rachael leans slightly away. It's like she thinks my insanity is contagious. "Whoa," she says. "I... whoa."

"Yeah, I know. Nuts, right?"

"No, I wouldn't say *nuts*."

"So you think I'm *sane* for wanting all that after seeing a photo when I knew he was my then-boyfriend's dad?"

"I don't know," she says. "I've never experienced anything like that. I don't know what to say. I want to support you, but..."

"But," I say forcefully when she trails off.

"I'm not sure how I *can* support you," she says, "because thinking like this will not lead to anywhere good, not if it's already over. If you want my advice..."

“I do,” I say. Then I’m punched hard in the mind with a powerful image of Duke smiling down at me, our hands linked, the words *I do* coming from his lips, that captivating smirk touching the corner of his mouth.

“I think you should try to let him go,” she says. “It will be for the best. You’ll find somebody else, somebody closer in age, somebody who isn’t your ex’s dad. Somebody who wants to be with you.”

That last one stings, but she says it in a kind tone. I know she wants the best for me. I know she’s saying all this to help me, but it doesn’t change the fact that my initial instinct is to scream at her. My initial reflex is to tell her she doesn’t know what she’s talking about.

I fight that response, nodding, knowing she’s right. No, not knowing, but *thinking* logically, she has to be right. Looking at it from the outside like I asked her to do, there’s no way this can work.

“Yeah,” I say, nodding. “Anyway, I’ll be in Korea soon. Maybe I’ll find someone there.”

Before Duke, the Korea trip filled me with excitement and hope for the future. Now, the idea of leaving feels so wrong. I can’t leave the future father of my children.

Maybe I’ll have to let Rachael do the thinking for me. Or, every time I think about Duke, I’ll have to step outside myself and try to view the situation as if I’m looking at somebody else. I don’t *want* to do this. I’d rather hold on to the impossible lie that we will be together long term. I’d rather believe we can somehow make this work.

But how? The man I want—need—said we *couldn’t* do this. He told me this *couldn’t* work. What exactly do I think I’m going to do, convince him? Even if I thought I could, I don’t want our relationship to be something I have to persuade him to want.

Rachael smiles after a pause. “You’ll find the man of your dreams in Korea, and none of this will seem as important.”

Again, I remind myself that Rachael wants the best for me. Even when she encouraged me to return some of Ryan's attention, she thought he was a good guy. When I finally told her about his belittling comments, she tried to get me to leave him immediately.

When she tells me I'll find somebody else, I can't help it. A small part of me hates her. There *is* nobody else. Just Duke. Just our future.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Duke

I let out a short breath as I kick Ryan in the side of the leg. Ryan winces, stepping back, his hands raised, mouth open, showing his mouthguard as he limps backward across the mat.

“It hurts,” he wheezes.

“Hit me back then,” I growl, thinking about my ex’s partner, Joel, the weak, overindulging little worm. My son doesn’t even know how to fight. Who’s fault is that? I should’ve been there. I was too reckless when I was younger. Too—

Ryan steps in with a pretty decent jab. My instinct is to dodge it, but I let him knock me on the chin, then nod, lifting my hands. “Good. Again.”

He steps in and ducks his head. I catch him with an uppercut, thrown at maybe ten percent power. It catches him lightly in the chin, and he stumbles backward. For a sick second, I almost swarm him, just like I would in a real fight. Run in—maybe a flying knee to create chaos—and then I’d clinch up, drive him against the cage, beat him up in the clinch, and sweep the leg.

But he’s my son, despite what he did to my woman. No, not *my woman*.

The round timer sounds. Ryan leans against the wall, his hands on his knees, gasping hard. I walk across the matted room and take my towel from the windowsill, wiping myself down.

Looking out the window, I see a couple walking by on the street. My gym overlooks a local park. It's almost like fate or destiny has put the couple there. The man is probably around my age, with silver hair and tall, with his hand resting on the lower back of a woman younger than him. Probably Molly's age. He says something, and she laughs, looking up at him with so much love in her eyes. Can I really tell that from here?

It's been three days since I last saw Molly, three days since I told her we had to end it before we even had a chance to give us a try. I've spent that time ruthlessly training my son, watching him day and night, making sure he doesn't sneak off and get a drink. To his credit, he's putting in hard work.

Every second I'm with him, I must force myself to forget what Molly told me. Ryan and I haven't spoken about it. We haven't spoken about Molly at all. The only time I mention her name is when the security firm calls me at the end of every day to inform me there have been no incidents.

"Are you okay, Dad?" Ryan asks, walking over and sitting on the windowsill.

I turn away from the park—from the temptation of the couple, the future I'll never be able to have—and look at my son. He's drenched with sweat, hair across his forehead. It makes him look younger somehow. "I'm fine."

He nods, looking at the floor. Ever since the morning I woke him up for the ten-mile run—he collapsed at mile seven, but he gave it everything he had—he's looked at me differently. It's like part of him is scared. It pains me, but it's necessary. He's really trying. Sure, I'm watching him twenty-four-seven, but he's putting the work in.

Ryan turns and looks out the window. "Do you know them?" he asks.

I realize I've gone back to staring at the couple. There's this ache in my chest that won't quit. It's worse at night, lying alone, imagining Molly beside me, her curvy, perfect body pressed against me. Sometimes, my fantasies get so steamy I can hardly take it. Other times, I imagine holding her, kissing

her gently, listening to her breath change quality as she falls asleep.

“No,” I say after a long pause.

Ryan nods again, glancing at me with that hint of fear. “Were you thinking about...” He swallows. “Molly?”

I curl my hands into fists. Hearing her name from him triggers far too many dangerous impulses inside me. I remember how distraught Molly looked when she told me about Ryan’s bullying.

“Why do you ask?”

“You seemed so excited when you told me about your date. I’d never heard you like that before, and now...”

“Now,” I snap, “I’m trying to help you. Unless you forgot about almost getting us all killed?”

He wraps his arms around himself, nodding. “That’s fair.”

I almost reach out, put my hand on his shoulder, and apologize for snapping. I have to stop myself from doing that every single time. I have to be tough for the foreseeable future, even if he hates me.

“But still,” he goes on quietly. “It was good to see you happy.”

“What are you saying? I should date Molly again? Your ex-girlfriend? A woman you’ve kissed. A woman you’ve...”

I can’t finish the sentence. Molly told me she’s a virgin, so they didn’t have sex. They did *things*, I’m sure, stuff I can’t let into my head, or I’ll go insane. There’s something wrong with me. Even after I knew about their relationship, even after the near gunfight, I *still* couldn’t stop myself from claiming her young body.

“It’s weird, isn’t it?” Ryan says.

I sit next to him. “Yeah, son, it’s strange.”

We sit silently for a while, and then he says, “Did Molly say anything about me... about us?”

I'm unsure if that's hope in his voice, as if he *wants* her to have said something. I've been trying to lock away that in the deepest, darkest part of my mind, too. What if Ryan loves her? What if he's struggling to let her go?

I can't lie to him. "She told me some things, son, and I wasn't too happy to hear them."

I'm not looking at him, but I can feel his discomfort. It's almost like a scent. He's shifting, too, awkwardly moving on the spot as if he thinks I'll tell him it's time to spar again.

"It wasn't a good relationship," he says weakly.

"Was it a bad relationship, or did *you* behave badly?"

"I think..." He stands up, turns to me, and raises his hands. "I want to go again, Dad, but don't hold back this time."

I shake my head. "I'd kill you if I didn't hold back. You're not trained to defend yourself properly yet."

He slips his mouthguard into his mouth. "How hard were you going before?"

"Maybe ten percent."

Ryan flinches. "Really?"

I nod. "It's a skill, Ryan. I've been training for twenty-eight years."

"Go fifteen percent this time." He looks at me with glistening eyes, and I hope he's thinking about everything he said to Molly. Maybe this is his way of punishing himself. "I can take it. I'll try the parry and slip you taught me. I *can* be better, Dad."

It's taken a lot to wake him up, but at least he's trying now. He clearly doesn't want to talk about Molly, which is good. I shouldn't—*don't*—want to talk about her, either.

"If you're sure," I say.

"I am." He raises his gloves, sweat streaking down his face. "Let's do it."

I turn to set the timer, looking out the window again at the man and his woman. They're holding hands, standing at the edge of the pond. Maybe some people think age gaps are gross, but they don't look gross. They don't look weird and wrong. They look happy, but I'm sure his son, if he has one, was never in a relationship with his woman. That's the difference. That's why this will never work.

The timer sounds. I raise my hands. "Let's work."

Ryan weaves to the side. I time a jab and catch him stiffly in the chin. He nods eagerly, wildly, and I'm sure of it now. He won't talk about it yet, but he wants to suffer for the hurt he inflicted on Molly. He wants to taste just a bit of that pain for himself.

Maybe one day, I'll sit him down and tell him what Molly said. I'll force him to admit he was in the wrong. If I brought it up now, with the taste of Molly's lips still so fresh in my memory, with the feel of her body, with the hope I had at the beginning of the date, I'd be going much harder than fifteen percent. I have to wait until I forget her. Goddamn, that's funny.

Forget Molly? That's never going to—

Ryan sticks me with a clean right, snapping my head back a little.

Then he raises his hands. "Oh, sorry, Dad."

I laugh gruffly, circling him. "Don't apologize. That's the point, but for that, we're on sixteen percent now."

He laughs, eyes bright, reminding me of the little boy he was. Maybe we can make up for lost time and heal the wounds of the past. Just as long as I can let Molly go.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Molly

“Somebody’s following me,” I tell Rachael over the phone as I head toward the shopping mall.

“Wait... what?” Rachael says, her voice tight. “Do you think it’s them?”

She doesn’t have to explain what she means by *them*. Since the stuff in the bar, I’ve been waiting for those criminals to return. “I’m not sure,” I reply. “I noticed it when I was in the library. The same black car parks outside. Then, when I leave, the car leaves. It’s hard to keep track of it now. I’m going to try to lose them in the mall.”

Rachael doesn’t say anything for a few moments. Ever since I told her about my instant desire for Duke, she’s looked at me differently. Like I’m unhinged, and maybe I am.

“Are you sure?” she asks.

I almost snap at her, but that’s not saying anything new. I’m always on the edge of snapping these days. “Yes,” I say. “I... I think so, at least. Listen, I have to go.”

“If you think somebody’s following—”

I hang up. It’s a shitty thing to do to a friend, but I can’t take that tone anymore. I can’t take anything lately. Even sitting in class feels muted, as if all the life and excitement has been sucked out of my day-to-day existence. The melodrama hurts

and makes me feel small, but I can't help it. Or maybe I could if I really tried, but this is my pathetic lifeline to Duke, my way of staying close to him.

I walk into a clothing store, pretending to browse the aisles, and then I spot him, a man in a black suit, dark hair slicked back and shiny. I saw him two days ago at the convenience store. He was pretending to look at the booze. I remember noticing how shiny his hair was. I'm sure of it. As soon as I left, so did he.

Hurrying past the aisles of clothes, I go to the changing rooms and find a stall. Panic is trying to wrap around my throat, tightening like a snake intent on the kill.

I take out my phone, not letting myself think about what I'm doing. Doesn't Duke need to know if those men are following me? I doubt they will do anything to me here in public. Or maybe they will. Maybe they don't give a damn.

Duke answers after just a couple of rings. "Molly?" His voice is urgent. "Are you okay?"

He knows I wouldn't call him unless there was a good reason. We haven't spoken since I stormed from his house. "Somebody's following me."

"Explain," he says shortly. I quickly tell him about the car, noticing the guy in the store. "I... Wait there. I'll come to you. I'll explain."

"Explain what?"

"You're safe. This isn't what you think. Just wait there for me, okay? I won't be long."

"I don't understand."

"I have to tell you something," he replies, his voice getting passionate. "Please."

Hearing the desperation in his *please* pulls a reply out of me. I should tell him to explain right now, but the idea of seeing him in person sends wave after wave of desire through me. It's not even desire. It's more like *completion*, as if seeing him means

slotting into my proper place. It feels right. “Okay, I’ll wait here.”

“You don’t have to stay in the clothing store. The food court... I can meet you there.” He pauses, almost like he doesn’t want to say the next bit. “We can finally have our date.”

Talk about screwing with my head. He hangs up before I can reply. Maybe he wanted to hang up quickly because he thought I would try to start a fight with him for his hot-and-cold routine. He can’t be making *date* comments after everything we’ve been through.

I leave the changing room cautiously. Duke said this isn’t what I think. Then what the heck is it? His confidence is enough for me to go to the food court without freaking out. The man in the suit is gone, leaving me to wonder if he was the same one. How would Duke know anything about it?

Sitting in the corner, I wait. Duke was right when he said he wouldn’t be long. Twenty minutes later, he walks in wearing a tank and shorts. It looks like he’s been at the gym. Every woman looks at him, as they always do, and a couple of guys go over and take photos with him.

As I watch him smile for a photo, I smooth down my hair. I’m suddenly conscious of my frumpy dress and my unwashed hair. It’s messy in the extreme. I’m attempting to tame it when Duke strolls over, looking down at me, chest rising and falling with an intensity that doesn’t match the surroundings.

“Can I sit?” he says with a smirk.

“Isn’t that what people do on *dates*?” I shoot right back at him. I’m trying to be sassy and confident, but the emphasis on *dates* sounds desperate more than anything.

He sits, placing his hand on the table near mine. I think he’s going to hold my hand. I want it so badly that I almost snatch onto his and hold on tightly. Instead, I put my hands under the table to not embarrass myself.

“Well?” I ask. “What did you mean when you said this isn’t what I think? Do you know why I’m being followed? Did you cut a deal with those thugs or something?”

“A deal to...” He narrows those intense eyes. He’s got a light silver beard as if he’s found it as difficult to shave as I have to wash my hair. “To have those men follow you?”

I shrug and stick my bottom lip out, trying to look tough. I’m trying to look like I didn’t almost shatter when he said it was over because Rachael is right. This is weird and insane. “Yeah, why’s that so crazy? Maybe you offered me up to them or something.”

He clenches his fists. When he trembles, the table shakes. It’s like he’s going to flip it. Veins push against his neck like he’s struggling to hold himself back, his shoulders tensing like giant boulders in his shirt.

“I’d never do that,” he says, his voice as shaky as his body. “I’d never put you at risk. That’s just sick. The men following you... I hired them just in case those thugs returned and found you. I wanted to make sure you were safe.”

He reaches even farther across the table as if waiting for me to take his hand. I can’t because then I’ll let hope back into my heart. Heck, who am I kidding? I already *have* hope in my heart, but I can’t let it expand anymore.

When I don’t hold his hand, he pulls it away, squeezing the table’s edge. “They’re my men, so you don’t have to worry.”

“So you hired people to follow me without telling me I was being followed,” I say. “Just so we’re clear.”

He winces as if hearing it laid out like that is borderline painful to him. “Yeah, I guess that’s exactly what I did.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? You could’ve texted, *Hey, Molly, just so you know, you’ll be seeing suspicious men and cars everywhere you go.* You know, so I didn’t think *those* men were coming to hurt me.”

“I know,” he says, “but I thought it’d be easier if we didn’t talk.”

“Easier, how?” I ask.

He leans forward again and looks at me with his intense gaze. Despite knowing better, I feel myself getting drawn in, lost in

his eyes. My lit teachers always call that a cliché, getting lost in somebody's eyes, but maybe they haven't ever experienced it. They've never felt this magnetism, this deep need to lean close, to kiss him.

I force my hands to stay under the table and sit still. This man is having me *followed*. Sure, he saved my life, but I should be way angrier at him, shouldn't I? The truth is, the main emotion rising within me is gratitude.

"How?" I press when he doesn't respond.

"You stormed out. I didn't think you'd want to he—"

"You're lying," I say, almost certain I'm right by how his eyes flit all over the place. He stared at me like I was the only person who existed before. "Tell me, Duke. I deserve that much."

He leans even closer. His hands move right to the edge of the table. It's almost like he's pleading with me to take them. I try to resist a moment longer, but there's too much desire deep inside, screaming at me to stop fighting him.

When I finally take his hands, that familiar spark sizzles between us. It shivers up my arms and through my body. It's like finding safety after days of roaming alone, lost in the dark. The warm tingle spreads all around me like a blanket of pure relief. I know better not to trust him, but I can't help but lean into the feeling.

"So?" I say when he keeps staring at me with that hard-to-read expression on his face.

He swallows and squeezes my hands tightly.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Duke

She wants to know why I chose her. She said she deserves the truth, and she's right. However, the idea of saying the words aloud scares the shit out of me. It'll mean nothing can ever happen between us again. My young, inexperienced virgin will recoil from me like she's slipping a punch.

She squeezes my hands. "Why wouldn't you just *call*?"

I swallow. I almost say it. I almost tell her it's because I knew if I saw her again, I'd feel exactly how I'm feeling now. All the desire, the certainty, would burst out of me. I couldn't hold myself back, and I have to do that for Ryan.

"R-Ryan," I say, stuttering for the first time in who knows how long.

She pulls her hands away from me. "Ah."

"I *want* you, Molly."

"But," she says. "Go on. I know there's a *but* in there."

"I have to put my son first. I have to..." I stop, my voice getting louder, looking around the crowded food court. "Shall we go someplace else?"

She bites her lip, reminding me of how she looked when my hand was between her legs. I'm so high and mighty, talking about doing the best by my son, but I touched her sweet, hot pussy *after* I learned the truth. Now, I want to do it again.

I can read the message in her eyes. *Why do you want to be alone?*

She bites her lip as if she doesn't know how it affects me, and maybe she doesn't. Perhaps she has no clue how attractive she is. Even after her relationship with my son, Ryan didn't show her the attention she deserved. Sentiments like that remind me of how messed up this is, but now I'm here with her in person. I can't stop. I don't *want* to stop.

"We could go to a quieter café or something," she says. "Or maybe the parking lot. Somewhere like that."

Somewhere public. Somewhere I won't be able to put my hands on her curvy body. I want to touch her right here, but the idea of anybody else seeing my virgin filled with lust chews me up inside.

"Let's find a café," I say, standing up. She follows suit.

We walk together through the mall. My instincts keep me close to her. I almost reach out and place my hand on her back to hold her gently. Any second, one of Ryan's friends could see us, a college professor, somebody who knows that Molly and he were in a relationship. The world is such a goddamn joke.

Leaving the mall, I guide her to my car. "I can bring you back to get yours," I say.

The look in her eyes is heartbreaking. It's like she thinks I'm some on-the-edge animal, not in a good way, but she nods and follows me.

I open the passenger-side door for her. She brushes past me. Her body touches mine, just for a second. Hunger grips me, my manhood stiffening. My head swims with all the things I want and need to do with her, *to* her.

Sitting beside her, I don't start the engine right away. I watch as a family walks across the lot. The dad has his daughter on his shoulders, the son toddling next to them, holding the mother's hands.

"Are you thinking about..." she trails off. I know what she's asking, though. *Ryan*.

“No,” I tell her honestly. “I was thinking about what it would be like to have more children.”

She gasps quietly. I know this is wrong. I should stop. Every step I’ve taken has been wrong. “You want more?” she asks.

I nod and glance at her. She’s looking up at me with those wide, beautiful eyes. “I always wanted more than one child, but things with Ryan’s mom weren’t easy.”

“Relationships are hard,” Molly says. “Not that I have much experience. In fact, Ryan was my first real boyfriend.”

She emphasizes Ryan’s name, leaning forward slightly as she says it like a challenge. She wants me to know she won’t let me forget that I told her this can’t work. Whatever I say, I can’t take those words back. I meant them. No, I *should* have meant them.

“Your first boyfriend,” I say, “and he treated you like that. It must’ve given you a pretty shitty idea of relationships.”

My fist is clenched against my thigh. It’s like being torn down the middle, knowing I’d do anything to protect my woman from the darkness of this world, killing any man who hurt her, and knowing that my *son*, my only child, is the one who did it.

“How’s he doing, anyway?” she asks.

“Why do you care?” I reply, sounding petty and pathetic, even to myself.

“I don’t, honestly,” she says.

I smirk. I can’t help it. Her tone is getting that sassy twinge despite everything. “Then why ask?”

“I guess I need to remind you...”

I get it. It’s just what I thought. Maybe that’s a good thing. Otherwise, I’ll forget and kiss her, hold her. It hurts how badly I want to touch my woman.

“I know. I need to be a good boy, don’t I?” I smirk again, but she turns away and looks at the parking lot.

“Do you think they’re happy?” she says, nodding to the family. They’re waiting in line to pay for their parking.

“They look happy,” I reply. “Having a wife you really love. Having a family who never has to experience what it’s like to go through the *real* darkness. Children should have adversity and challenges they can manage, but it’s a parent’s job to keep them away from the sickness in this world.”

“I agree,” she says, her voice cracking, emotion entering it.

I can’t stop. Or maybe I could if I really tried. I can’t even *try* when her voice has so much sadness. Reaching over, I place my hand on hers. She lets out a cute, short breath. For a second, she tenses up like she’s going to pull her hand away, but then she holds onto mine.

“What were you thinking just then?” I ask.

“You still haven’t told me what the *but* is,” she counters. “That’s the reason we came somewhere private, remember? You said you want me, but...”

“Isn’t it obvious?” I say.

“Yeah, Ryan. So why did we need to be someplace private for that?”

“Maybe I just wanted to get you alone.”

Her hand tightens on mine like a reflex. She looks at me almost angrily. “Are you purposefully trying to mess with my head? I hate it when people do that. I’m over it. I promised myself I’d never let it happen again, and then it did with *your* son. I can’t have it from you, too.”

“No,” I say fiercely, leaning forward, knowing I shouldn’t, not giving a damn, at least now, at this moment. She’s right. What if I come to my senses and tell her to back off again? It’s not fair. Even so, I get closer and closer. “Tell me what happened to you, Molly.”

She purses her lips. I imagine our daughter with the same defiant expression, ready to face whatever life brings her way bravely.

“When I was talking about childhood darkness, you felt something. I heard it in your voice.”

“We’ve had like three conversations,” she snaps. “Do you think you can read me *that* well?”

She tries to pull her hand away, but I hold her in place. I’m giving her an unfair number of mixed signals. It’s true. I’m an ass, but I need her badly, and that’s the truest thing of all.

“You know what I did,” I say fiercely.

“What you *had* to do,” she snaps. “What was your other option? Let your dad hurt her? Let him keep hurting her? Anyway, my thing is nothing compared to that.”

“Your feelings are not nothing,” I growl. “They matter. *You* matter.”

She pulls her hand more forcefully, but I won’t let her go. She stops fighting, tears glistening in her eyes. “Please,” she says.

“Please, what?” I ask.

“Just... I never talk about this.”

I lean even closer, almost near enough to kiss now. I can feel her breath on my face as it picks up pace, her frantic lust. “But you want to. Maybe you need to.”

“Y-yeah,” she whispers. “But...”

“But what?”

Finally, she roughly pulls her hands free and leans back so violently she almost bumps her head against the window. “I can’t talk about *anything* with you if it’s all just going to fall apart. I know. Go on. Call me a crazy psycho for talking like this. *Fall apart*. We haven’t even been on *one* date, but newsflash, I... I...”

“What, Molly?” I ask.

“I care about you,” she says, “which makes me the biggest idiot who’s ever lived.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Molly

It's so difficult not to let the tears come. It's the sheer fact that we're together again. It's being close to him. It's the hints he made toward my past, my childhood, telling me I matter. I feel this connection burning deep within, screaming out for my man's touch, the closeness, the intimacy, the *love*.

"I care about you, too," he says after a pause, looking completely serious, those intense eyes fixated on me.

He takes my hand again. I know I should fight him, but I don't. Instead, I hold tightly, almost desperately. "We don't even know each other," I say, my voice weak.

"We've been through more in a few days than most couples have in months," he snaps. "Anyway, I don't give a damn about convention. If we went by that, I'm nothing but a sad old pervert praying on a young woman, and you're nothing but a gold digger. That's what the world would see when they look at us."

He's talking as if we're a team, a couple. I want it so badly. For a moment, I let myself forget about Ryan. "Fuck the world," I snap.

He laughs, leaning closer. *No, no*. This is my chance to stop it, but I don't.

When his lips crash against mine, it feels like he's claiming me and marking me as *his*. I can't think about anything else—just

the taste of him, the texture, the hunger in his groan. I push against him passionately, grabbing onto his arm. He moans as our tongues clash together. He tastes so perfect, like we were made for each other. It's so much better than kissing his son. Ew, no. I can't think about stuff like that. I lean away. His eyes have an unhinged look to them.

"Did you still want to know why I got all emotional?" I ask, changing the subject because that thought has seriously grossed me out. Are thoughts like that always going to pop up in my mind?

He leans back. I see the restrained hunger in his expression, as if he's struggling to hold himself back, but he nods. "Of course I do."

"It's like I said, nothing compared to what you went—"

"That's the last time you devalue your feelings in front of me," he snarls, his tone one of complete command.

I nod. Rachael says that's a bad habit of mine, too. "Well, my dad was an alcoholic. My mom enabled him. He died when I was fourteen. There. Nice and simple. A classic cliché—"

"It's a tragedy," he snaps. "It's horrible that you had to experience that. No child should have to go through that. I'm sorry, Molly. Really. I'm so, so sorry."

He says it with so much empathy. This time, when the tears come, I can't fight them. They burst out of me. He wraps his arms around me and pulls me close to him. I press my face against his chest, crying fiercely, remembering all the moments, the sick smiles Mom would sometimes aim at Dad as she brought him a beer. *It makes him happy, Molly. It's no big deal.*

"Parents should keep each other on track," he says, stroking my back with surprising gentleness. "They should always ensure that both are doing the best for the child. That's what tears me up so much about..."

"It's okay," I tell him. "About Ryan."

He leans back, swallows, and nods. "I tried to tell my ex that Ryan needed more challenges. On the weekends I had him, I

noticed how spoiled and entitled he was becoming. I could've done more."

"But it's hard when you don't have him with you every day," I say.

"Which is *my* fault," he sighs, sitting back. "I didn't love his mother. That's the cold truth. Ryan wasn't planned. I love him, but he wasn't planned. I tried to stay with her for his sake, but eventually, it got too damn hard. She wanted me to *feel*, to *love*. I couldn't fake it. I told her I just wanted to stay together for our son, and then that was it. She filed for divorce. I'd only married her because my parents weren't married. I thought I could fix the past. I was wrong."

You still can, I almost scream, but just because we've shared some personal stuff about our pasts doesn't mean everything is miraculously fixed.

"During the divorce proceedings, I did something very stupid. I got into a street fight with these three assholes who spotted me in a bar and fancied their chances with the heavyweight champ."

"People really do that?" I ask.

He nods. "People are stupid, but I was the idiot who let them goad me. It was easy for my ex to use that in the divorce. My traveling, too, for work... She knew I had no case. I just wish she'd listened to some of my goddamn advice. The man she married after me is a toad. Barely even a man at all. No sort of role model."

He pauses, then lays his hand gently on my knee. There's always a subtle undertone of desire whenever we touch, but the pressure has just as much support in it. "When you have kids, Molly, you'll be an incredible mother. I can see how badly you want it."

"You can?" I ask, surprised.

"I think you want to fix the past, too."

"When I have children, they'll never see me falling over my feet because I'm so wasted. They won't see me enabling their

dad, either. I want a man who's a parenting teammate, you know?"

He stares at me with that familiar level of attention. I almost expect him to tell me he's ready to start a family together now. "I know," he says fiercely. "If I have kids again, I'm going to be upfront about what I want and need from the mother."

"I'm going to be upfront with the father," I say. "Then they'll never have to be scared. That's the worst part about being a kid and seeing all that stuff—the fear it puts in you. Even when it's over, it's still there, a low hum of anxiety. It's like constantly waiting for something to go wrong."

"I know the feeling," he says. "I could only ever get rid of it through training. That's an idea." He smirks, a playful spark in his eyes as if we can forget the ugliness and complications. "What were your plans for the rest of the day?"

"Nothing, really," I say honestly. The truth is, I've been moping around, thinking about him, dreaming about him, but I won't tell him that. "Why?"

"Let me take you to the gym," I reply.

"Won't it be awkward if people see us?"

"The gym's closed to the public right now," he replies. "Anyway, I don't give a damn what people think."

"What about one person, then?"

He swallows and nods. Ryan is the exception. I wonder if the awkwardness will ever fade. Even if we get married and have kids, that wedge will be between us.

He was dropping some heavy hints just now. Or maybe I'm misreading this whole thing.

"Like I said, the gym's closed to the public. It'll just be me and you."

No, I should say. You're just trying to mess with my head again. Or maybe it's about sex. Maybe this is all a pickup line. Maybe you don't really care at all.

Instead, I say, "Okay, Duke. Let's do it."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Duke

“No, I’m fine,” Molly says into her cell phone. We’re sitting in the parking lot in the gym. Molly drove back to her dorm to get some workout clothes, and then I drove her here. She’s on the phone with her friend Rachael. “I’m fine. Uh, no, nobody was following me. Yeah. Okay. Talk soon.”

Molly hangs up, glancing at me with her cheeks flushing that gorgeous shade of red. She’s tied her hair up, and she’s wearing a tank top that shows the outline of her bra. Her yoga pants are tight, too, showing me the shapeliness of her thick legs. My dick is rock-hard against my underwear already. I’m going to need to control myself.

“I didn’t want to explain about the security,” she murmurs. “She’d probably think it’s another red flag.”

“She sounds like a good friend,” I say. “It sounds like she looks out for you.”

“She does,” Molly replies, “but I don’t want her to look out for me about this. She’d tell me to stop. She’d tell me you already had your chance.”

There isn’t just a *chance* for us. It feels like a certainty. It feels like we were made for each other, but I don’t let any of this out, not yet, not until... until what? Until I can build a time machine and make it so Ryan and Molly were never in a relationship?

“Let’s go inside,” I say.

We head into the gym together. She walks ahead of me on the stairs, giving me the perfect view of her full ass shifting back and forth. My hands twitch, telling me to reach up, squeeze, massage, own. Leading her into the padded room, I gesture to the corner.

“Find some gloves that fit you.”

She looks at me over her shoulder vivaciously, her eyes alert. “I always thought about doing a self-defense class, but I felt too silly.”

“Silly, how?” I ask.

“Well...” She glances down at the floor.

I look at the floor and look at her. She’s staring at me as if to say, *Isn’t it obvious?*

“I’m clearly missing something,” I say.

“My size, Duke.”

“Your *size?*” I move quickly across the room, bring my hands to her hips, squeeze, and feel her fullness. My balls ache. My manhood gets even stiffer. “What the *fuck* does that mean?”

“What do you *think* it means?” she counters. “My weight, Duke. I’m not exactly thin, am I?”

“You’re perfect,” I growl, pulling her against me, letting her feel my dick against her stomach. “You’re curvy. You’re full-figured. You’re... you’re...” *Mine*, I almost say. “I wouldn’t change anything about you. Your thick, wide hips. Your big beautiful ass. Your full breasts. Never, ever fucking criticize your figure in front of me.”

I’m shaking like in the bar when the shit went down. Or maybe this is even worse. I can’t stand the idea of my woman believing this about herself.

I press my lips against hers, smoothing my hand around to her ass, massaging it over her yoga leggings. She makes her cute-as-hell moaning noises as I press against her with more

pressure. Distantly, I think of Ryan, hoping he's at home, working on his studies like he said he'd be.

"Go put some gloves on before I show you how sexy you are," I groan, gently nudging her away.

She's a virgin. I doubt she wants her first time to be in a matted room in a gym. She deserves so much more than that, but if I keep kissing her, that's exactly what she'll get. I will tear off her clothes, lie her back to look into her eyes, then claim her sweet, tight hole.

She walks over to the gloves, finds a pair, then pulls one on. After, she looks at me with a grin. "Uh, how the heck do you guys do this alone?"

I chuckle, joining her. "Don't worry. You don't need to do it by yourself."

She'll never need to handle anything by herself again. Yet, like so many things, I don't let myself say it.

When the buzzer goes off, Molly stumbles to the edge of the room, slumping against the wall. "Oh... my... God," she gasps, sitting with her legs sprawled in front of her. "That was *so* tiring."

I smile, standing over her. We did a thirty-minute beginner's session, including pad work and basic slipping and parrying. I could tell Molly was feeling it, but she pushed through, biting down, even when her arms began weakening.

"How do you feel?" I ask.

She smiles with that almost high look people get during intense exercise. I've seen it countless times in the gym. "Good. Sort of relieved. Like, right now, the world makes sense."

"I couldn't have put it better myself," I tell her. "That's exactly how I feel, too."

She's covered in sweat, her clothes sticking to her, making her look even sexier.

"But we're not done yet," I tell her. "That was just the striking session. Now, I'll teach you what to do if some madman tries to attack you." I offer her my hands. She reaches up and takes them. When I pull her to her feet, the momentum carries her into my arms.

I catch her and kiss her again. She's so difficult to resist. I grab her hips, obsessed with them, obsessed with *her*. I can't believe she'd ever think her curviness is a bad thing. It makes me feral. It makes me hungry. I push her against the padded wall, grinding my dick against her, slipping my hands down to her ass. She moans, shivering against me.

"I'm all sweaty," she murmurs between kisses.

"I don't give a *damn*," I tell her, kissing her more passionately.

"Is this the lesson?" she says, a note of seductive sassiness in her voice. "Are you the madman, Duke? Is that an *attack*?"

I smirk, slipping my hand around her belly, in between her legs. "Does it feel like an attack?"

She leans against the wall, moaning so damn sexily. Wide-eyed, she stares at me as I slip my hand down her yoga pants. She grabs my wrists and shakes her head like she's going to stop me. Then it's like the lust explodes inside her, and she can't help it. She nods instead and lets my hand go.

I groan fiercely when I feel the wetness in her underwear, her hot pussy, her folds. Rubbing up and down, I know I'll die before I ever touch another woman. Molly is too perfect, her tight, young pussy too receptive for me. *Just* for me. She shivers as I pay attention to her needy clit.

"I need to taste you," I snarl. "I need to feast on your pussy."

"But... I'm a virgin..."

"We don't have to go all the way," I tell her.

"Don't you want to?" she asks.

I laugh savagely. “I *need* to. I need to tear off those pants to slide my dick into your heat. I’m going to spread your tight virgin slit. I’m going to fuck you until you cream for me and cover my dick with your release.”

That same near-scared expression takes hold of her features, but then she pushes it away. A sense of daring, adventure, and *youth* washes over me when she looks at me like that. “I want that, too,” she whispers.

I can hear her nerves, but I can also hear the desire beneath.

“This is called a double-leg takedown,” I say.

“Huh?”

She squeals in delight when I wrap my arms around her, lift her off the floor, and gently lay her on her back. I lean back as she wraps her legs around me. “This is full guard,” I say, grinning, completely caught up in the moment.

She flushes. Her smile is a mirror of mine. I know that, on some level, we’re both detached from this moment. We’re both thinking about the expiration date, the impossibility. I also know, at this moment, neither of us cares. All that matters is *now*.

I grab her yoga pants and pull them down, revealing her perfect curviness inch by inch. Tossing them aside, I stare at her underwear, all twisted from the activity. Her lips are swollen as if filled with lust.

Kneeling down, I slide my hands up her legs, kissing her calves, the inside of her knees, then her thighs, tasting her sweat, tasting *her*. My cock is so hard I can hardly take it, but I need to feel her pussy creaming into my mouth, her juices telling me how badly she needs this.

Pulling down her underwear, I stare at her perfect pussy for a moment. Her pink hole glimmers with wetness. She’s so damn ready for this. I almost howl like a wild beast with the desire.

She nods, even if she still has that look in her eyes, half nerves, half excitement. I can tell she was honest when she said she’s a virgin. All of this is clearly new to her.

Fuck. I can't think, not when I kiss up her thigh again, getting close to her center. I can smell her lust, a tempting scent of desire that draws me in. Placing my hands on her thighs, I bring my mouth to her pussy, indulging in her taste, running my tongue from her clit to her hole all over her folds. I groan as her lust washes over my tongue. There's disbelief in her moans, and I know she's never done *this* either. My perfect woman can't believe how good it feels.

I bring my finger to her entrance as I tongue her clit. I could listen to her moans all day long, the lust shivering in her voice, the tension like at any second she could melt for me. She implied she wants to go all the way.

It's not ideal, but I'll give her the silk sheets and the luxury later. For now, all I care about is her quivering around my finger, the taste of her clit in my mouth as I suck on it and push my tongue against her hard. Her hips shift against me as she twitches up and down as if chasing more and more of the pleasure.

I sink my hands deeper into her thighs, obsessed with her curviness and the lust bursting out of her. When we're deep into the pleasure of sharing this passion, all the other concerns seem ridiculous.

Who gives a damn if she's my son's ex? Who gives a damn if, every time Ryan looks at his future stepmom, he has to confront all the evil and twisted stuff he said?

I don't. I can't care. All that matters is my woman, the feel of her eager pussy, her hole getting even wetter as I flick my tongue against her clit repeatedly. I push my finger deeper, attacking her horny clit and making small circle patterns inside her.

She grinds her hips up and down, and then her moaning gets even more urgent. I want to lean back to look at her, but nothing can pull me away from her, especially when she starts to pulse around my finger. I swear I can feel her clit getting bigger in my mouth, too. She pulses with her release, moaning loudly, squeezing her fingernails against the matted floor. I

fuck her tight, horny hole with my finger. I own her clit. I claim it with each tongue stroke.

Finally, she stops shivering, her breath coming fast. I lean back and climb onto my knees, my hand already going for the waistband of my shorts. My balls are so full, roaring at me to claim her, to take her hard right now. To drive deep and explode inside her so that her perfect virgin body *has* to get pregnant.

“Molly,” I say passionately. “When I fuck you, I’m cl—”

Claiming you for life, I was about to say, but then there’s a crash and shattering glass. I leap to my feet and raise my hands instinctively. Whatever’s happening, it would take an army to get close to my woman. I’ll die. I’ll *kill* before that happens.

One of the windows on the far side of the room is smashed. Car tires screech away. There’s a brick on the floor with a piece of paper stuck to it. I walk over, ignore the glass, pick it up, and stare at the paper. My stomach cramps. My heart tightens. It feels like a fist squeezing harder and harder in my chest. This is more than confusion. This is more than being torn down the middle. This is like an earthquake shattering me in half.

“What is it?” Molly says from behind me. I can hear her getting dressed.

I swallow and turn. My tone is dark. My thoughts are darker. “Nothing good.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Molly

I sit on the other side of the workout room, my head spinning as my mind tries to catch up to everything that has happened. First, there was the workout, making eyes at each other the whole time, and then the steaminess. My body is still sore from it. My heart is sore, too, from all the family talk and hints at the future.

I was going to go all the way with him. Even when the nerves tried to make me tell him I needed time, I was going to do it. Now Duke's on the other side of the room, speaking to his cop friend, Ethan.

Walking to the counter, I look at the brick with the note taped to it. There's a photo of Ryan in a poorly lit room, but it's definitely him. I've never seen him look so scared. I almost think, *Good, it's what you deserve*. This whole thing began as revenge, after all.

However, seeing the fear in his eyes and the trapped panic, I can't. The blood dripping down his face doesn't help either. He was a verbal bully, fine. He drank too much. He reminded me of my dad with his pettiness. I never loved him, didn't even really like him, but he doesn't deserve this. Even if I thought he did, the pain in Duke's voice is too much to handle.

"I'll just pay them," Duke snaps down the phone. I imagine how passionate he'd be if one of *our* kids were in danger. Every muscle is roaring like he's ready for action. His

shoulders, arms, and legs are tense. He stares out the window. “Why? What the fuck do you mean, they want something else? How do *you* know that?”

Duke lowers the phone and puts his hand over it. “Get ready to leave, Molly.”

I look around for my sneakers. We took them off for training. My underwear is sticky from the workout and what we did after. In an alternate universe, we’re still lying on the padded floor, Duke’s manhood gliding inside me. He looked *massive* in the shorts, the outline of his cock so big it was intimidating.

I pull on my sneakers, lace them up, and wait as Duke finishes his phone call. When he’s done, he walks over and glances at the photo. I reach out to touch him, and my heart breaks a little. Maybe that’s melodramatic. I don’t care. It does when he steps away, drenched in tension. It’s like he regrets everything we’ve done. Can I blame him?

He flips over the note as if he wants to read the writing again. *Midnight. Come alone. If you tell the cops, we’ll hear about it. We have a special surprise for you.*

“Some fucking use that security was,” Duke snarls. “Goddamn it. They could be doing anything to him. They could be torturing him right this second, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Trying to remember this isn’t about me—or *us*—I ask, “What did your cop friend say?”

“Ethan’s going to meet me at my place. We’re going to strategize there. Apparently, the gang has some of the cops on their payroll. Ethan’s heard word on the grapevine that these bastards have a special surprise for me. In the meantime, they’ve got my boy, my child. I remember when he was tiny, Molly. I remember when he couldn’t even talk.”

Duke clears his throat, his eyes getting glassy. I want to reach out and offer some comfort, but I remember how he moved away before. Maybe it’s pathetic, but I’m not sure I can handle that again.

“It’s going to be okay,” I say weakly.

He looks at me like he wants to snap, *If you have nothing useful to say, don't speak*. Maybe that's just my imagination cruelly taunting. "Thanks, Molly," he says.

"I can get a cab ho—"

"You're not going home," he snaps. "You're staying with me until this is over. I left Ryan on his own, and they got him. I can't risk the same happening to you. I'd never forgive myself."

It's what he said before, and it hits me with the same passion. He looks at me like he truly cares, like it goes way deeper than any of this current drama ever could. He's looking at me as if he feels the same way I do, like we've been waiting for each other. It's as though we were made for each other, and if it weren't for Ryan, we'd slot into place without any problems.

Duke steps close to me and reaches out. There's a moment of hesitation where I think he'll move away again. Then he takes my hand, leans down, and kisses me gently on the cheek. His urgency is gone, or perhaps he's holding it back. He must be feeling so guilty right now.

"I mean it," he goes on. "I'm never letting anybody hurt you. Never."

He leads me toward the stairs. I wrap my hands around his arm, holding tightly, hoping he can feel my support.

I sit on the armchair, freshly showered, wearing jeans and a T-shirt. Duke quickly swung by the dorm before coming here. Now, we're waiting for his cop buddy to arrive. Duke went crazy at the security team on the phone, ranting at them until his neck turned red. When he ended the call, he looked ready to kill somebody.

He paces up and down now, rolling his shoulders and moving his neck from side to side. I wish there were something I could say, some way I could untangle all this craziness. When his

cell phone rings, he checks it, his expression darkening. “It’s Susan. Ryan’s mom.”

“It’s going to be okay,” I tell him, feeling like a stuck and pretty useless record. “I promise.”

He smiles shortly, nodding. When I stand, he says, “It’s fine, Molly. You can stay here. I’ve got nothing to hide from you.”

Despite the circumstances, his words cause me a slight flare of relief. Duke sits on the couch, bringing the phone to his ear.

“Yeah, it’s true,” he says. “I know. Susan, I know.” He grits his teeth, looking at me. I offer what I hope is an expression of support. “I’m working on it now. They’ll find out. No, listen. They’ll find out if I call the cops. They might hurt him. They might...” He shakes his head, moving the phone from his ear. I can hear her yelling. I want to snatch the phone and shout at her for yelling at him, but it’s not my place.

“Yeah,” he says finally. “I’ll keep you in the loop.”

He hangs up, putting the phone down.

“Are you okay?” I ask. “Or is that a stupid question?”

“It’s just Susan being Susan,” he says. “This is all my fault. I’m a terrible father. Maybe she’s right.”

“No,” I snap. “She’s not. She’s wrong. You’re a good dad. You’re doing your best. You wanted to be in your son’s life. That’s more than some fathers. My dad was closer to the fucking bottle than he was with me. You’re a good dad and a good person. Okay?”

“Yeah,” he says, clearly not believing it.

I join him on the couch, ignoring the voice of doubt that tells me I’m part of the problem. He’s reminded of another fatherly failure whenever he looks at me, but he needs support right now. He needs his woman. I take one of his hands in both of mine and look into his eyes.

“You *are*,” I say. “It’s not like you wanted this to happen. Ryan went to that bar. You walked in and saved his and *my* life without even thinking about it. You hired security. You did your best.”

“It’s just like fighting, Molly. Sometimes, your best isn’t good enough.”

“Whatever happens, we’ll get through it together,” I say, wondering if I’ve gone too far.

Then he nods thoughtfully, puts his arm around me, and hugs me. When he kisses the top of my head, it feels so couple-like. I realize it’s the first time in my life I’ve experienced that. There were moments with Ryan that, from the outside, people would see us as a couple, but I never felt it.

“I can feel you smiling,” he says.

I laugh, then quickly stop myself. Now isn’t the time for laughing. “Can you? I didn’t know people could *feel* smiles.”

“Must be a magic power. Am I right?”

“Maybe.”

“It’s not a bad thing. When Ethan gets here, life’s going to get pretty damn grim. I don’t know what’s going to happen, but it’s not going to be good. If you’re smiling, I’d like to know the reason.”

“A bit of light before the darkness? That kind of deal?”

“Exactly,” he says.

I swallow, then tell him. “I’ve never felt like part of a couple before, but just now, that’s what it was like when you kissed me on the head. I know it’s silly.”

“It’s not,” he growls. “Not even a little bit. It’s the truth. We are a couple. You’re mine.”

I swallow. “I’m *yours*? Like... your girlfriend?”

I probably sound so immature to him. This is the worst time for us to have a conversation like this, when his son’s, my ex’s, life is on the line. Maybe something about this room makes us forget what we’re supposed to focus on. This is where we first got steamy, after all.

“You’re mine,” he says firmly. “Never forget that.”

I get the sense he doesn't want to speak anymore. It's the way he rests his cheek against the top of my head. I want to ask him exactly what he means by *his*, but it's enough to sit here with him in the calm before the storm.

I know one thing for sure. I don't want revenge anymore. I just want my man to be okay.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Duke

“Nice to meet you,” Ethan says, shaking Molly’s hand.

It says some messed up things about me that, even now, with my son’s life at risk, I hate the sight of Molly touching another man. I’m going to have to get used to that. But if anybody ever oversteps the line, I’ll ruthlessly tear them to pieces. She asked if she was my girlfriend. I told her she was *mine*, and I meant it. She belongs to me. I would’ve gone further, but what if Ryan doesn’t make it? Can I live with that on my conscience?

We’re in the living room. Ethan is wearing a leather jacket, his bald head showing a zigzagging scar from a home invasion call from his time on patrol. He stands behind the chair, squeezing it, letting out a tired sigh. His eyes flit to Molly, then to me. It’s like he’s asking if he can speak freely in front of her. I nod.

“So, it turns out the man you fucked up was the son of the head honcho, some little toe rag called Jackson.”

“I pieced him up because he was holding a gun to my woman,” I snarl.

Ethan flinches. Molly lets out a gasp. I know I should try to rein in this part of myself until my son’s safe, but if it weren’t for that brick in the window, I would’ve taken Molly’s virginity right there, in the gym. I would’ve told her exactly

what she means to me. I would've explained that I own her and always will.

"They don't see that as a good excuse," Ethan says once he's over the obvious shock. "They actually want to talk."

"Good. I'm ready."

Ethan runs a hand over his head as though tracing the scar. He does it often during training, especially in between sparring rounds. It's like he's reminding himself how bad things can go and how quickly. "I'm risking my ass by being here. If the brass finds out I didn't report this..."

"If you report it, will these wannabe gangsters find out?"

Ethan swallows. "Yeah, most likely."

"Then what will they do to Ryan?"

"You'd probably never see him again."

"Then let me talk with the bastards," I snap.

"Goddamn corruption," Ethan goes on. "It was worse when I started, but it's still bad. The worst part is if I said anything about it, they'd find a way to get rid of me. Right now, I'm on the borderline. People talk way too freely around me. They've gotten way too comfortable."

I let him vent, then ask, "How do I speak with them, then? I'm supposed to meet them in..." I glance at the clock. "Seven hours. Apparently, they have a surprise."

Ethan reaches into his leather jacket, takes out the note, and slides it across the coffee table. I snatch it up and immediately take out my cell phone.

"No," Ethan says, reaching into his pocket again. "Use this one. It's a burner. There won't be a record of you talking with them."

"Why does that matter?" I ask.

"If you end up seriously hurting one of them to get Ryan back, the fewer links between you, the better."

I take the burner cell. Molly is biting her lip, twirling a piece of hair around her finger over and over. I can't believe I ever went even an hour without seeing her. With her taste still on my lips, with her so close, I can't imagine being apart. A sick part of me wonders if the hair twirling is because she's worried about Ryan.

That wouldn't be a bad thing, would it? But what if all of this is still about revenge? What if she really cares about Ryan, and I'm just a way to get to him?

No, I can't believe that. I can't think about it. I quickly type in the cell phone number. It rings for a long time, but finally, a man answers. "Hello, superstar. I was waiting for your call."

"Let's settle this," I growl.

"Easy, easy," the man says, laughing. "And for the record, I don't know what you're referring to."

"How much cash will it take?" I snap, hating the idea of paying these lowlifes but seeing no other choice.

"Not everything in life is about money, my friend. It's like we told you. We have a surprise for you."

"Then why make sure I got this cell phone number?" I snap.

"Because there's another option. You see, I got to thinking about the little scene in the bar. You were angry when we had your son, but you were *feral* when you saw that young lady in danger. You were unhinged." This man sounds like the big one, the leader of the sad little group. "I asked Ryan if my hunch was correct, and he ever-so-kindly confirmed that it was. You're dating her. Your son's ex-girlfriend."

I clench my fists, almost crushing the phone. The muscles in my forearm tighten as if getting me ready for a power punch.

"Hello?" the man says.

"I'm here."

"Is it true, or is your son a liar?"

I swallow. I can't say, oh, yeah, my son's a liar. Go punish him for leading you astray.

“It’s true,” I say.

“Duke Harrow,” the man laughs. “That’s some seriously crazy shit right there, my guy. You’re tunnel brothers with your son.”

I cringe, almost roaring. I almost defend myself by saying, *She’s a virgin. It’s not as bad as you think*, but there’s no point. Let them believe what they want.

“What’s option B?” I snap.

“Ah, yes, but can’t you guess? Option B is very simple. If you give us the girl, we’ll release your son. A fair trade. The market for men isn’t as ripe as for young women.”

The *market*. I get cold all over. In my mind, I see Molly standing in lingerie in the middle of some sick auction, perverted men bidding on her, fear making her quiver all over.

“I can’t trust you. No deal.”

“Ha, *can’t trust you*,” he laughs again. “Something tells me that’s not the real reason for your hesitation. Something tells me the truth is you care more about the little girl than your own son.”

“You’re a fucking criminal,” I growl. “You kidnapped my son. Why would I think you’d make a fair trade?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I see right through you. The little girl is—”

“She’s my *woman*,” I cut in.

“Oh, sorry, my friend.” He’s loving this, and I’m going to love driving my elbow into his orbital bone with all the power in my body when I get the chance. “Have I offended you? It’s just, well, she is *very* young.”

I’m about to snap at him again, but then I realize there’s no point. He’s getting what he wants, goading me. “No deal,” I say in a calmer tone. It was much easier to stay calm before I had Molly in my life, bashing my emotional walls down. “What happens at midnight?”

“Nah-uh,” the man says. “No deal means no deal. Come at midnight. Come alone. Or, I swear to God, Ryan is *done*.”

He hangs up. I place the phone on the table and sit back, tension shuddering inside of me, through me. I'm going to snap, roar, or break something, but I let the anger fold inward.

"What did they say?" Ethan asks.

"He wanted me to trade Molly for Ryan," I say. "It was a stupid thing to suggest. Like I'd ever do that. I'll have to go at midnight and see what this surprise is."

"No." Molly stands up quickly, shaking her head, covered in pain and worry. "They'll kill you. It's a trap. It has to be."

I stand, too. If Ethan weren't here, I'd walk around the coffee table and pull her into my arms. I'd hold her tightly, whispering that she's mine. I'd tell her that every single part of her belongs to me, her womb most of all.

"Tell him." Molly turns to Ethan. "He can't go."

Ethan bites down, tracing his scar again. "You can't go alone. I know that much."

"He can't go at *all*," Molly says. "There must be a way for the police to help."

"What if the wrong cops find out?" I snap. "Then Ryan is *dead*."

I remember holding him for the first time, his tiny hand curling around my finger, telling myself his love would make life with my ex worth it. I would've stuck it out for my son, even if we didn't love each other.

"Neither of us wants that, do we?" I say.

"Obviously not," she snaps, glaring at me. "But I don't want you to die, either."

"I have to go," I say. "Alone."

"Not alone," Ethan replies firmly. "I'll be there. I've got a couple of cop buddies, too. I know they're solid. We'll be nearby. We'll be ready."

"But if you're too close, if they see you—"

"I'll be there, too," Molly says.

“No,” I almost shout. Walking around the table, I stare down at her and yell, “You’re not going anywhere near them!” I remember the bar and the fury that flooded into me. I could’ve killed every bastard in there for even thinking about making my woman suffer. “You need to be safe. Always.”

She flinches on the *always*. I’m dropping so many unsubtle hints about my true feelings for her. “Nobody is *always* safe,” she says after a pause. “You can’t protec—”

“I can,” I interrupt. “I *will*. If you’re anywhere near me when this shit goes down, I won’t be able to focus. I’ll be thinking about you. That could get me *and* Ryan killed.”

“But you don’t even know what they have planned,” she protests. “What if you meet them, and then, *bam*, they take you out, just like that? Then what?”

If that happens, I’ll never be able to marry Molly. I’ll never be able to fill her young, perfect body with my seed. I’ll never be at her side as she brings our first child into this world, flushed and beautiful with the effort.

“He’s my son,” I tell her. “There’s nothing else to consider, Molly. They’re going to hurt my child. I’ve failed him enough. I can’t let this happen. I won’t. I’m going.”

She steps forward, staring up at me, her eyes glistening. “Please.”

I turn away. If I don’t, there’s a chance the pain in her expression will weaken me. I’ll let her persuade me that it’s better if I don’t go, and then, when Ryan turns up dead, I’ll go insane with guilt. *When we have kids, Molly, I’d do the same for them*. Maybe I’d say that if Ethan wasn’t here.

“I’m going to gather my buddies,” Ethan says, standing. “It’s better if I go in person. I can make sure they’re alone. If the wrong people hear...”

He doesn’t have to say it. Ryan will be dead.

“Okay, thank you.” Walking around the other side of the table, purposefully avoiding Molly, I offer my hand. “You’re a good man.”

“Your gym saved my life,” Ethan says, shaking my hand vigorously. “It’s only right I return the favor.”

I walk Ethan to the door, then return to the living room to find Molly with her face buried in her hands. She’s crying softly, breaking my damn heart. She doesn’t deserve any of this. I sit beside her and wrap my arm around her shoulder, but she breaks my heart again, moving away from me.

Sitting back, I place my hands in my lap, looking at the clock. Not long now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Molly

Crying feels so useless. I try to stop myself several times. That's why I moved away from Duke when he put his arm around me. It reminded me that, soon, I might never see him again. I'll never feel his warmth. I'll never see his smirk or the hungry glint in his eyes.

Finally, I get myself under control. Without saying anything and without looking at him, I stand and walk to the bathroom. My entire face is red from crying. My eyes are bloodshot. I splash myself with cold water and then return to the living room. Duke is still sitting on the couch, resting his elbows on his knees. He looks up at me, his mouth pitched into a tight frown. "Come here, Molly."

His tone is different than usual, more commanding. I walk over to him. He reaches up and pulls me firmly into his lap. I splay my legs to one side and wrap my arms around him, wishing I could hold him here forever. We haven't even been on a proper date unless I count the gym, but the idea of losing him feels like losing somebody I've known and loved my whole life.

"I think we should make the next few hours as special as we can," he says softly, kissing my cheek. "Whatever's going to happen later, I'll need energy. Why don't I cook us up some steaks?"

I can hear the hope in his voice. For a little while, he wants to forget. I know that when the time comes, he'll be completely focused, ready to do whatever it takes to rescue his child. If Ryan were our son, which is a weird thought, I'd want him to do the same.

"Okay, Duke," I say.

He kisses my cheek again, getting closer to my lips. I'm trying to keep my face turned away. Then I won't have to think about what I'm losing, but it's too hard to resist him.

We kiss deeply, passionately, and differently than we have yet. There's an undertone of lust. I think there always will be with us, but there's something else here, too. It's more like comfort, more like belonging. We slow the kiss down, and instead of grabbing my hips with his usual urgency, he holds me softly.

"So... I've got an important question for you." He tries to smile, but I can see the tension. He's trying, so I try, too.

"Hmm, yeah?"

"How do you like your steak?"

We sit in the dining room together. Duke is wearing a shirt with a couple of buttons undone as if to make this feel more date-like. The only sign that something is wrong is the cell phone sitting on the table, and he glances at the window every so often as if expecting Ethan to arrive any second.

"Bloody enough for you?" Duke says, attempting to smile.

I return the attempt. If I can put everything else in a box deep in my mind, maybe I can enjoy this for what it is—the date I desperately wanted the first time I saw a photo of this man.

"I'm not *that* much of an animal," I say, grinning as I cut into the steak. "Yours is basically uncooked."

He smirks. Sure, there's still some darkness in his eyes. There's some darkness in my voice, too, but the fact we're both trying means something. We're looking for light in the

dark. “That’s because I *am* that much of an animal,” he counters, then laughs and suddenly stops his laughter.

I don’t have to ask if he’s thinking about Ryan, probably imagining all the twisted scenarios his son is currently suffering through. Then he begins to cut into his steak, the dark mood leaving him for now.

“What are you going to do after school?” I ask.

“Well, there’s the Korea trip.”

He registers confusion, then nods. “Oh yeah, I remember. You mentioned it before. How long are you going to be there?”

“A month,” I tell him, stunned at the fierceness of my desire to stay here and be with him, but can I put all my dreams on hold? Well, if he’s the man of my *dreams*, maybe so. “After that, I’m going to become a teacher.”

I remember Ryan’s face twisted up viciously whenever I’d say that. Mocking me for wanting to teach because, apparently, it means I can’t do anything else.

“You’ll be an incredible teacher,” Duke says after a mouthful of steak.

“How do you know that?” I counter, grinning again. It feels more natural, less forced this time. “Maybe I’ll be a complete mess. That’s why I’m going to Korea. I’m going to teach English as a foreign language for the experience. I... I have my dad to thank for that.”

I stare down at my plate.

“I know you’re going to be incredible,” he says, “because I can see how passionate you are. You’re patient, charismatic, funny, and interesting. You could do anything you wanted, Molly.”

“Even play in the NBA, huh?”

He chuckles. It sounds more natural and less forced, just like mine. “Within reason, then.”

I look up and see him staring at me intensely. My thoughts return to the gym, the padded floor. My sex still aches from

what we did, his tongue licking up and down, and then the nerves that slammed into me when I chose to go all the way with him.

“What did you mean you have your dad to thank for it?”

“Dad had a good job,” Molly replies. “He worked in advertising as an executive. It was one reason he drank so much and maybe one reason Mom was so forgiving of it. When he passed, he left us a lot of money. Enough for college. Enough for trips like this.”

“You don’t have to be ashamed because you started life with money,” Duke says, reading me like an essay.

“It’s difficult,” I admit. “Being in college, knowing everybody else is eyeballs-deep in debt or working several jobs.”

“If you gave them a choice between the cash and their parent, they’d all choose their parent. Life is never as simple as it seems.”

“Oh, I know that,” I say, giving him a look.

I love how easily he can read me. He knows I’m talking about us and the strange path our desire has taken, bringing us together despite all the viciousness with Ryan.

We eat without talking for a while, and then Duke says, “How long until you leave for Korea?”

“Just over three weeks.”

He swallows and looks out the window, but it’s not like he’s searching for Ethan this time. It’s more like he’s searching for an answer. Warmth whelms in me when he faces me again, pain in his eyes.

“I had a proposal in South Korea a few months ago, a business opportunity to open a gym there. It was a good proposal. I rejected it because I needed to be here for Ryan.”

Hope tries to flare in me, but then Duke sighs and shakes his head. “But we shouldn’t talk about the future,” he says. “Who knows what’s going to happen?”

I swallow. “Yeah, but...”

“Go on,” he says, leaning forward.

“I’ll miss you,” I say.

“Of course you will. I’ll miss you more.” He smiles, but there’s a tinge of sadness to it. It’s like he’s holding off on being happy until he knows his son will be okay. Since we’re going to have children together one day—I hope, I dream—I respect him for this. I’d want the same for our son. “You’re my woman.”

“What does that mean, huh? Being *your* woman?”

“It means nobody else touches you or kisses you. It means nobody else is intimate with you in any way. It means we’re together.”

“Even if...” I bite down. I can’t say it. *Even if things don’t work out with Ryan...*

“You’re mine,” he says gruffly.

“That means you’re mine, too,” I reply. “Doesn’t it? Or is this a one-way deal? Are you going to date other women?”

“No,” he says firmly. “I’ve got no interest in anybody else. Only you.”

Forever, I wait for him to add, but then he turns back to his steak. After a minute, I ask, “When does Ryan’s mom get here, anyway?”

He narrows his eyes at me. “Susan? She’s not coming.”

“*What?*” I almost yell. “I don’t understand. She knows Ryan has been kidnapped, right?”

Duke nods. “She knows everything but said there’s no reason for her to be here. She’s not a cop or a hostage rescuer. She said it’ll all be over by the time she arrives.”

“I don’t understand that,” I say. “If that was my son... Heck, I’d *swim* across the ocean if I had to.”

Duke reaches across the table and takes my hand. “I know you would,” he says warmly. “That’s why you’re going to be the perfect mother. You’re always going to put them first.”

“Always,” I say fiercely, squeezing his hand. Our eye contact is so steamy and full of meaning that I think he must be talking about us. There’s no way, with all this children talk, it’s just some theoretical conversation.

“How long have you wanted children?” he asks.

“Ever since I was one,” I tell him. “I think it was watching Mom and Dad. I want to do better.”

“I wanted to do better, too,” he replies.

“It’s never too late.” Nerves try to turn my gaze away from him when I say this, but I don’t let them. “You can always find somebody else—”

“There’s nobody *else*,” he cuts in, seeming angry at the very idea of it. “There’s only you.”

I try to tell myself he doesn’t mean this in the way I wish he did, but he’s looking at me with so much passion and meaning, with so much *love*? Commitment?

I decide to be sassy. I can always play it off as a joke afterward. “What, you’re saying you want kids with me?” I force my lips into the shape of a smile.

He’s not smiling anymore. He takes my hand and holds it tightly. It’s like—no, not *like*—he never wants to let go, and I don’t want to either. I need to be close to him. What if something terrible happens later? What if he dies? What if I never see him again?

“Yes,” he growls. “I need to have a family with you. I need to have a future with you. I need *you*, Molly. Forever.”

Forever. The word bounces around my mind, taunting and seeming borderline impossible. I’m sure I must’ve misheard him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Duke

I hold her hand tightly, never wanting to let go. I shouldn't have told her I wanted a family with her, but she asked. The idea of lying made me sick. I can't lie to my woman even if I should, even if, when this is all over, I might wish I had. If Ryan doesn't make it out alive...

"Are you serious?" she whispers, an uneasy smile on her face like she half expects this to be a joke. "I mean, if there's a punchline, go ahead. Lay it on me."

I shake my head, my throat getting tight. "I mean it. You're going to think I'm a madman."

"Maybe I *already* think that."

"Come here, Molly." I let her hand go and push my chair out. "I need to be close with you."

She stands, looking so unbelievably beautiful in her hoodie and jeans, her hair tied up, highlighting her features. She slides into my lap. Guilt drives into me as my cock gets hard, but it's like my body is urging me to unload my seed into her as quickly as possible. I might die tonight, but at least I'll live on inside my woman. Wrapping my arms around her, I hold her tightly, savoring her warmth.

"What did you mean I'd think you're a madman? About what?"

I think she knows what. Is that hope I see in her youthful eyes? I don't have the luxury of holding this back anymore. When midnight comes, if it's the worst-case scenario, I'll regret not telling her the truth. Or maybe I'll regret being honest, leaving her with this burden before I go. It doesn't matter, anyway. I can't stop myself now. Kissing her gently on the lips, I stay close to her. I can feel her breath, her heat.

"When you approached me in that bar," I say, "I knew right away I wanted you. I knew right away I wanted a family with you. I knew I had to have you. I didn't know who you were. I didn't know about you and Ryan. I saw you, and hell, Molly, you were mine already. In my mind, you already belonged to me. See? How crazy is that?"

She kisses me, making a cute, breathy noise as her hands glide up my arms and press firmly against my shoulders. My manhood does unfair things, flooding with more tension, the base solid, and the shaft aching with hot seed as the kiss gets deeper. This must be a good sign, though. She's not running. She's not laughing.

"Is this real?" she says, gasping, breaking off the kiss.

"I meant every word," I say fiercely. "Every. Single. One."

"If you're a madman, I'm a madwoman," she murmurs. "I felt the same."

I squeeze my hands into her hips, addicted to her thickness. It's like my claiming impulse controls my movements, keeping her here, never letting her go. She's mine and always will be. Forever.

"Explain," I tell her.

She leans back, trusting me to brace her. I smooth one hand from her hip and hold her steady, looking deeply into her emotion-filled eyes. All the while, there's a voice in the back of my head calling me the worst father imaginable, calling me a failure, but I can't stop.

"I..." She turns away and swallows.

I touch her chin and turn her back to me. "Explain," I repeat, firmer this time.

“When I was... When Ryan and I were...”

“I understand,” I say, knowing this will always provoke a jolt of regret in me. Will I ever get used to the fact my woman was with my son?

“He showed me a photo of you and him on a fishing trip.”

“I remember that trip.”

“I looked at it, and I *knew*.” She coughs as if fighting away tears. “I knew right away that I wanted you. I fell for you right then. It’s crazy. Even my best friend Rachael thinks I’m nuts, but I can’t help it. I tried to pretend these feelings weren’t happening, but then I saw you in the bar. I told myself it was for revenge. That was my excuse, but truthfully, I just wanted to be near you.”

I lean in, kissing her passionately and hard so I don’t have to think about the guilt, doubt, or pain. Just this moment, not midnight, not my son. Just my woman and all the affection bursting out of her.

When the kiss starts to get steamy, I know I won’t be able to stop. If I let it go much longer, even a few more seconds, I won’t be able to hold myself back. My balls are full of seed, desperate to surge up my shaft and erupt inside her, claiming her body, future, and life together. When I gently push her off my lap, she frowns.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, gripping the table’s edge. “It’s just...”

“I know,” she replies, nodding. “It’s okay. I understand.”

“Do you think the guilt will ever stop?” I ask.

She shrugs. “This is all new to me. I’ve never felt this way about anybody. I’m not even sure *anybody* feels like this, honestly. I saw a photo, and I knew.”

“I saw you once in a bar, and *I* knew. I don’t care if other people never experience this. If anything, it makes it more special for us.”

She smiles briefly, then returns to her chair, sitting opposite.

“So you really want a family together?”

“Did you think I was lying?” I counter.

“No, but I have to be sure before I let myself hope. This is just so surreal. I thought... I don’t know. Maybe I was losing my mind. Or maybe I was a late bloomer, and this was a crush, but it never felt like a crush. It always felt more serious than that.”

“That’s because it is,” I growl. “I meant what I said. You’re *mine*. Your body. Your future. Your womb. Everything. *Mine*.”

“And you’re mine too, right?”

I nod, but I don’t reach across the table. I stop myself from touching her because then I’ll snap, lose control, glide my hands all over her body, and take complete control of her. I won’t be able to stop myself, but that has to come later when we have Ryan’s blessing.

“Duke?” she says when I don’t answer.

“I’m yours,” I tell her fiercely. “I don’t want anybody else. I’ve never wanted anybody else. Hell, Molly, I feel like I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Me too,” she replies. “Maybe that’s why I was never interested in boys. Maybe that’s why I had to force myself to be with...”

She trails off. She doesn’t need to say his name for me to know she’s talking about my son. My son, who could be tortured or killed as I experience the most intimate moment of my life.

I focus on my plate, cutting my food, wishing this moment could be *just* good with no hint of shame or dread.

After dinner, we sit on the couch, no TV, waiting for Ethan to reach out. Four hours until I’m due to meet the goons. I wrap my arm over her shoulder, holding her gently, trying to ignore the savage impulses pumping inside me.

Now I know she wants the same. It’s so difficult to hold back, even when I know I’ll be going to battle soon, whatever shape

it takes. Soon, it'll be time for the gang's *surprise*, whatever the hell that means. Maybe I'll regret not taking my woman when I had the chance. But if I claim her fully and take her virginity, which is *mine* to take, and Ryan finds out... Or worse, something happens to him, and I never get his blessing...

"Are you okay?" she whispers, looking up at me.

I kiss her forehead, holding her more intimately. "Yeah. Just thinking about later and..." She stares wide-eyed, waiting for me to go on. "And you," I growl. "I can't stop thinking about that little thing we have to do if we're going to have a family."

Any time I reference our need, it's like I'm waiting for her to tell me she was joking or I somehow got it wrong. The worst would be if she revealed that even this aspect of *us* was part of her revenge plan. Instead, she leans up and finds my lips. She kisses me so damn hotly, moaning as if she's letting go, shivering against me.

I groan, grabbing her leg and feeling her thickness, but then I end the kiss.

"What's wrong?" she asks, then frowns. "Sorry, silly question."

"We can't go all the way until..." I swallow. It will never feel normal to reference my son while being intimate with my woman, referencing her *ex*. "Ryan is safe. Until he knows that we're long term, and he accepts it."

She swallows. "And what if he doesn't?"

I'm not sure how to respond to this. The idea of Ryan flatly telling us, no, we can't be together and making me choose between them makes me sick. It makes me realize that, even if I'm confident I'll be the best dad I possibly can for my and Molly's children, I'm not the best dad for Ryan. I can't definitively say I'd choose my son.

"It's okay," she says, reading me. "We don't have to talk about that now."

"I want you so badly," I tell her. "Every part of you, but..."

“I get it,” she murmurs. “I just wish there was some way I could make you feel better. Even for a little while.”

When her voice gets breathy, it’s difficult to keep my cool. I press my hand down on her thigh, squeezing, my manhood pushing against my pants like it’s trying to escape. My end bulges and leaks hot precome, a shallow preview of what exploding inside her tight, warm hole will feel like.

“Is there?” she asks, looking up at me with those seductive eyes. It’s not like she’s purposefully trying to be seductive. It’s her natural lust bursting out of her, her natural beauty.

I swallow. “Don’t tempt me, Molly.”

She grabs my chest, her fingernails pressing through my clothes. “I know we can’t go all the way,” she whispers, “but you’re leaving soon. Before that, I want to help you like you’ve helped me.”

Despite everything, I smirk. “Don’t give me ideas.”

“Maybe I *want* to give you ideas.” She bites her lip, looking so damn sexy I almost erupt in my pants. “But you’ll have to tell me what to do.”

“You’ve never...” I can’t go any further. It’ll mean referencing Ryan.

“Before you, I only ever kissed boys,” she says. “Going further never felt right, but I want to make you happy.”

She’s pushing bravely past her nerves, letting her lust-filled and sassy side emerge. I almost lose it when she puts her hand on my knee and then glides it up my thigh toward my manhood. Hot tension rushes up my shaft as she gets closer. Soon, I won’t be able to tell her to stop. Yet if we don’t go all the way, maybe I’m just giving myself an excuse.

I groan when she reaches my manhood. She makes the hottest gasping noise as she tightens her hand around my dick. “You’re so hard,” she whispers.

“It’s because you’re so perfect,” I snarl.

“Tell me what you want.” She bites her lip again as if the nerves are trying to steal the words from her. “Tell me what to

do.”

I shudder as she begins stroking up and down slowly, her eyes on me the whole time, cheeks red with excitement, nerves, and conflicted emotion.

“First, we need to get somewhere private,” I snarl, ignoring the pulse of guilt deep inside me.

Standing up, I reach down, scooping her into my arms. She moans as I hold her to my chest, one arm under her knees, the other bracing her back. I carry her through a doorway, making me think of carrying her across the threshold on our wedding day.

Carrying her up the stairs, I ignore another flare of guilt as we pass Ryan’s room. I suppose it’s a sign of how casual they were, considering I never met or heard of Molly until after it was all over. Nudging my bedroom door open, I carry my woman to the bed and gently lay her down.

She sits up, staring. “Duke...”

“Get those big, perfect tits out,” I groan, knowing Ethan could call my cell or knock on the door any second. Then it’ll be go time. “And get your beautiful mouth ready for my dick.”

“I’ve never done that before,” she murmurs, pulling at her hoodie.

“My dick was made for you,” I groan. “Your pussy. Your mouth. *You*.”

She unclips her bra, causing more burning precome to leak from my dick. Her big breasts bounce free, so full and captivating. Her nipples are big and look juicy as *fuck*. I can’t stop myself from kneeling down, massaging her tits, pushing them together so I can suck on one of her eager nipples and then the other.

She moans, pulling on my clothes. “This is about you.”

I smirk. “This is *for* me.” I suck even harder, tasting her perfect nipple.

Then I stand, shuddering all over. “Go on, Molly. Get my dick out. Suck my tip. Rub your hand up and down my shaft. Do it.

Now.”

Before the guilt and the shame become too much.

She grabs my belt, loosens it, and then busies her hands with my button. The moment she pulls my pants and underwear down and grabs the base of my cock, I can't feel guilty anymore. Every part of me is focused on the moment, just like in a fight.

She sits up, causing those big breasts to shift around for me. Her hand strokes up and down.

“That’s it,” I moan, hardly able to speak. “Now open your perfect mouth and suck my end.”

Her tongue strokes around the tip of my dick. Her eyes are nervous at first, but when she hears my groaning noise, this look of *power* enters them, this look of pure control. She starts bobbing her head up and down, keeping her eyes on me the entire time as if she wants to see how obsessed with her I am. How in *charge* she is at this moment. She moves her hand quicker, following her instincts.

“Play... with... your... pussy...”

I can hardly get the words out as her hand smooths up and down, her hot mouth making my tip bulge and come rush up my shaft. She slips her hand down her pants, shifting it around. I stare down at her curvy, perfect body, her breasts bouncing the quicker she gets.

“Ah, ah,” I grunt, almost losing it.

Reaching down, I gently take her head with both hands, slowly moving back and forth, slipping my tip across her tongue. Her hand is moving so quickly on my shaft now, setting my desire on fire, pushing me closer and closer to the edge.

“I’m going to...” I bite down. “Do you want it in your pretty mouth or... or...”

She lets my cock go for a moment, moaning, nodding up at me. “Whatever you want. Wherever you want.”

She starts sucking me again. I drive my tip deeper into her mouth, but not aggressively. She moans, muffled by my dick,

as I get quicker, harder.

Oh, *fuck*.

Her eyes are so wide. Nobody has ever had this much power over me. At the end, she nods as she sucks, urging me on. I pump my dick in and out, and then heat explodes through me. Seed rushes up my shaft. My tip tingles intensely as my come shoots into her mouth. Her neck shifts as she swallows, her hand still moving around in her pants, and then *she* starts shuddering.

I know she's coming, too. My head is hazy. Fuck, *fuck*. Time feels like it stretches, as though this is lasting forever.

Finally, I stumble back, my cock going limp. She removes her hand from her underwear, staring up at me with her lips glistening from my release. Her eyes have a wild, hungry look that tells me when the time comes, she will take every goddamn inch.

"Was that okay?" she asks.

I smile widely. It's the last thing I should do right now, but I can't help it. I feel drunk on my woman, our future—the future that might be stolen from us tonight.

"You're perfect," I say. "The most perfect woman a man could ask for."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Molly

The time has come far too quickly. Twenty minutes after the steaminess in the bedroom, we're back in the living room, Ethan leaning over the table, gesturing to a map. "The meet is here." I stand just behind the couch, not wanting to get in the way, as Ethan, his two cops friends, and my man strategize for the meeting. The trap. The end of everything. "We'll be over here."

Ethan moves his finger from a collection of warehouses on the waterfront, gesturing to the sea. "Tim's got a boat. We'll be idling, ready to provide backup if needed. You'll need to wear a wire, Du—"

"No," Duke says shortly. "That's way too damn risky. They'll search me, find the wire, and then kill Ryan *and* me. That's a flat no. If I need backup, I'll find a way to make some noise. I'll steal a gun and fire it into the air or steal a cell phone and call you. I'm not wearing the wire."

He speaks confidently and firmly. It's how I imagine him talking to Ethan in class. The other two men, Tim and Jeff, both nod, giving me the impression they agree with Duke. Tim leans forward, a slight man with a short-back-and-sides haircut and a chunky silver ring. "Just shouting across the water will be enough. I gotta say, Ethan, I think this is the best course of action. Even if one of their guys spots us, we're just three off-

duty officers who happen to be enjoying some time on their boat.”

Jeff is almost the exact opposite of Tim, tall and wide and on the thicker side. “Tim’s right.”

“It also means there’ll be nothing tying Duke to the cops. No police wires. Nothing that, if this went wrong, would lead back to us.” Ethan stares at Jeff, then Tim. “Let’s not pretend this is just for tactical reasons.”

“And let’s not pretend we’re not putting our careers on the line here,” Jeff shoots back. “I owe you, Ethan. You know that, but there are limits.”

“Anyway,” Duke says, “only two of you will be on the boat. I need one of you to stay here with Molly.”

They all turn to me. I can see the questioning look in their eyes as if they’re wondering what somebody like Duke is doing with a woman like me. They might as well come right out and say we’re an awkward, strange match from how they stare.

“I’ll be fine,” I say, feeling awkward under their gazes.

Duke shakes his head firmly. “I thought Ryan would be fine, too, with the security, but they dropped the goddamn ball. I need men who really know what they’re doing.” Duke looks at Tim and Jeff. “Which one of you is a better fighter?”

Jeff nods at Tim. “He’s better hand-to-hand. I’m the better shot.”

Duke considers this, then says, “Presumably, you’d be reluctant to use your firearm.”

Jeff nods again. “Out on the water, if we hear some commotion and go check it out and find some shit going down, we’re well within our rights to get involved. We have an alibi, a reason for us being there, but unloading it here looks like we’re doing private work. Or doing exactly what we are doing—police work off the clock.”

“Okay then,” Duke says. “Tim, you stay here. I’ll head to the meet. Jeff, Ethan, you’ll help me if I need it. Hopefully, I won’t. Maybe this is a scare tactic. They want money. Or

maybe they just want to take a finger or two, some sick punishment for beating their little rat friend.”

I try to keep my exterior calm and not let him see how his words affect me. *A finger or two...* He says it as if nothing could ever shock him. He says it like it wouldn't even be a big deal, these creeps maiming him.

“I still don't like it,” Ethan says.

“Let's go to your superiors, then,” Duke replies. “Let the whole station find out. How long until these criminal *fucks* get wind of that and decide to take it out on my son?”

When he says *son*, there's so much passion in his voice. Like every other time, I think of the future when we have a child together, the passion he'll feel, the love, dedication, and protective instinct. My hands are smoothing across my belly, holding tightly.

“Point taken,” Ethan says, “but that doesn't mean I have to like it.”

“It'll be time to get moving soon,” Duke says, standing. “Molly, I'll show you where you can stay.”

He walks toward the hallway. I follow him into the next room. He leads me into the dining room, closes the door so we're alone, and pulls me passionately into his arms. I collapse against him, wrapping my arms around his solid body and feeling his hard chest against my cheek.

“Your heart is nearly beating out of your chest,” I whisper.

“It always does that before a fight,” Duke replies, moving his fingers through my hair. I'm not sure if he's trying to comfort me or himself. “Even if I don't feel nervous and ready, the heartbeat is the same. This isn't exactly a normal fight.”

“It could be anything,” I whisper, desperately clutching his sides tightly. I don't want him to go. “You could walk in there and...” I can't even say it, but my mind isn't as reluctant as my mouth. My mind shows me a vivid image of Duke walking into the meet, only for a bullet to tear through his head immediately.

“I wish you could st—”

“*Don't,*” he growls, almost roaring. He pushes his hand down on the small of my back. “If you ask me to stay, I just might. Do you think I want to go? I wish I could be here and stay with you forever, but a man takes on a duty when he has a child. He always has to do his best, whatever shape that takes. It'll be the same for our children. I know Ryan isn't perfect, but...”

“He doesn't deserve this,” I say.

Duke leans closer, his lips near mine, his eyes tempting me to get lost in them. Damn the cliché. “Do you really mean that?” he asks.

I swallow. I can tell he needs me to mean it. Perhaps it will make this easier for him, knowing we have the same goal and desire, but I don't want to lie to him either. “Ryan wasn't kind to me. He was cruel, honestly, but I don't think he's irredeemable. I don't think he's *evil*. I think, one day, he could be a good person. A good brother to our children, even if that sounds insane.”

“Insane, us?” Duke smiles sadly, kissing my cheek. “I can't wait to have a family with you. I can't wait for that future.”

If you come home... If they don't kill you...

“I'll be back before you know it,” he says, kissing me again. “Then the rest of our life can begin.”

I pull myself into a proper kiss, standing on my tiptoes and throwing my arms around his shoulders. I make it count, committing every steamy moment to memory, etching the pressure of his solid muscles into my mind, his presence, *him*. As the kiss deepens, I try to convince myself it won't be our last.

“I'm sorry, Rach. I can't explain,” I tell her, sitting on the edge of Duke's bed. “I wish I could.”

“But you’re with Duke?” she presses.

“Uh, sort of,” I say. Duke left ten minutes ago. It’s eleven p.m. now. Soon, he’ll be at the meeting, awaiting whatever *surprise* these kidnapping asses have in store for him.

“But you’re safe? You can tell me that, at least, right?”

I think of Tim downstairs. He’s a police officer with twenty years’ experience, and after some questioning from Duke, he revealed he was an experienced martial artist, too. But really, what good will that do if they attack us now? Duke wouldn’t have left me if he didn’t think I’d be safe, but *he’s* not safe.

I don’t enjoy lying to Rachael, but I say, “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“Do you have somebody looking out for you?”

Rachael doesn’t know about the brick through the window or the meetup. This is a weird question for her to ask. “I’m fine, Rach,” I tell her. “Really.”

“You’re alone?” she presses. “Or is somebody there with you?”

I listen more closely to her tone of voice. I should’ve heard it initially, but all my thoughts are on Duke, vicious imagery filling my thoughts when I think about all the things that could happen to him tonight.

“Rach, are you okay?”

“Just answer the question,” she snaps, then tries to laugh it off. “I mean, sorry for being concerned for my *bestie*. There’s no reason to... *Get out of there, Molly. Get out of there now!*” she yells. It sounds like she’s been hit.

“Rach?” I yell down the phone. “Rach?”

There’s no reply for a moment, and then Rachael’s voice is torn with tension. It’s like she’s choking on something. “Back... yard... two... minutes... alone... or... they... will... kill... me...”

The call ends. A moment later, Tim bangs on the door. “Molly? Why were you yelling?”

I should tell him right here, but if they've got Rachael, and if I don't go alone... My chest hurts, tightening. My belly twists with even more anxiety. Everything feels as if it's falling apart, and that's because it is.

"Sorry, yeah," I reply. "I'm talking to my friend on the phone. Her boyfriend cheated on her. She said she was going to do something drastic, but I think she's calming down a little now."

"Okay then," Tim replies. "I'm downstairs if you need anything."

I wait until he's gone, forcibly slowing my breathing down. Duke's voice is in my head, telling me to stay, telling me I can't risk our future, but Rachael isn't part of this. If she gets hurt, it will be because she's *my* friend, and that's it. There's no other reason for them to target her.

Creeping to the door, I open it and walk down the stairs as quietly as possible. The entire time, it's like Duke is watching me, telling me to turn back and tell Tim what's happening, but I can't let them hurt Rachael. I should've guessed they might go for her to get to me and through me, to get to Duke.

Turning away from the living room, I walk to the backyard. My breath catches when I spot the two men standing on the other side of the fence, their shoulders and heads visible. Both of them are wearing masks. One of them gestures at me, waving a leather-gloved hand as if telling me to hurry up.

I swallow and turn back to the house. This is my chance to tell Tim, but then I think about Rachael's voice, the choking, the fear. Opening the back door, I move toward the men.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Duke

I stand in the center of a cage. Not a cage like I used to fight in, but an actual cage. It's big enough to move around, bright lights glaring at me from above. As soon as I arrived at the warehouse, several masked men emerged, aiming guns at me. I barely had time to react. Anyway, there was nothing I could do before they shoved a black bag over my head.

I'm not sure how long I've been waiting here. I can't hear anybody else, but it seems clear that they want to put on some sick show. Maybe if I play along, but that could be wishful thinking on my part. There may be no *playing along* with these men. Maybe Ethan was right. I should've worn a wire or even brought a gun.

Finally, the lights dim, all but one. A spotlight shines on the other side of the room beyond the cage. My throat gets tight as I see my son standing in the light, fear streaking his features, a patch of blood on his neck. For a second, the light distorts, and it's my five-year-old Ryan standing there, blood in the same spot, the same fear in his eyes. I rub my face and focus.

"Are you ready, Dad?" Ryan calls over. The words sound strange. It's not how he usually talks. He's been forced to say this. "You acted like a real big shot back at the bar with your pathetic little sucker-punching b-bullshit." He stutters at the end, like an actor forgetting his lines. "Now you've got a choice to make. For each person you sacrifice, you get to keep

a hand free, but if you want to keep us alive, you'll have to sacrifice both hands.”

I turn around, looking into the darkness of the warehouse. It's pitch black, impossible to make out. No, I see the end of a cigarette, an orange glow in the dark. I wonder if there are more men out there. There must be.

“Which one of you am I fighting, then?” I roar, slamming my hand against my chest.

“Dad,” Ryan says. “Please listen. You have to choose. Are you going to sacrifice me? Or are you going to sacrifice Molly?”

“M-Molly?” I clench my hands into fists, my chest heaving, staring at my son, trying to figure this out. “Molly isn't...”

“Ah, right on cue,” a voice says from the darkness with a cruel, mocking twinge.

Two masked men appear in the spotlight beside Ryan and, between them, fear making her eyes wide, stands Molly. My woman. The moment I see her, my instincts kick in. I spring toward the wall of the cage and leap into the air. It's like how I'd sometimes celebrate fights, sitting in the cage.

I've clambered to the top when one of the men pushes a gun against Molly's head. The other man presses the barrel of his pistol against Ryan's head.

“Climb down, big man,” the voice says, the same one from the phone, the leader who stood up at the poker table. The fucking *coward*.

With no other choice, I climb from the cage. The leader steps into the light, blocking my view of my son and my woman, the onetime couple, but not anymore. I don't care how strange it is. I don't care if we're not the *typical* couple. When I get out of here, I'm marrying her and being the best dad to Ryan I possibly can be. Those things aren't mutually exclusive.

“The choice is simple,” the leader says, shrugging off his denim jacket as if to display the colorful tattoos crawling over his shoulder and neck. “Kill Ryan, and you get to use one hand. Kill them both, and you get to use two. Otherwise, we'll tie both behind your back. Important people are watching this

via a video feed. Either way, they're going to get a show. So, which will it be?"

I spit on the dirty floor, stepping away from the cage. "You're not hurting either one of them," I growl. "Tie my hands behind my goddamn back."

The man laughs, shaking his head like I'm a fool who doesn't know any better. "This isn't some pay-per-view production, my friend. It won't be some one-on-one waste of time. This is going to be a *real* fight."

"My answer's the same," I growl. "Let's get on with it."

There's nothing to stop them all from killing us right here. Far too late, I realize this was a mistake, but what other choice was there? Tell the cops and risk the kidnappers finding out and killing Ryan? Now Molly is at risk, too.

Fuck.

"You heard the man," the leader said. "Somebody cuff him. Oh, and Duke, if you try anything now..." He mimes shooting a gun. "Bang, bang. You know what I'm talking about."

Of course, I do. The prick isn't exactly being subtle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Molly

I stand shoulder to shoulder with Ryan, relieved that the gunmen have stopped pushing their weapons against our heads. I can feel them standing just behind us, hearing their breath. I can hear Ryan's, too, coming as quick and terrified as mine as we stare into the cage.

Duke lets two masked men walk into the cage, turning and offering his hands so they can cuff him. As the men leave, he stares over at us. They've turned off the lights, so I don't think he can see us. I can see the determination on his face, though.

"Dad," Ryan whispers.

"It's going to be okay," I say, though I'm not sure if I believe it. I don't even know where Rachael is. Did the men kill her after they took me?

"Molly, I'm sorry. I have to say this. I'm so, so—"

"Shut the fuck up," a man grunts from behind us.

"Well?" Duke roars, pacing up and down the cage with his hands tied behind his back. "What now, you fucking cowards?"

He's not letting his fear show because that's the sort of man he is. It's who he was in the cage during his fighting days and who he is now. His muscles surge even more than I've ever

seen them, like he's getting ready to explode out of his body. I wonder if he could break those cuffs.

"Now," the leader says, echoing across the darkness. "We make a deal. It's a very generous one, in my view. If you'd like your son and your little lady to leave here in one piece, you'll have to defeat ten of my men in groups of two, and I'll warn you, some of them are very dirty fighters. If you're okay with my guests losing a few fingers as part of a reasonable punishment, you only have to face five men."

"Dad, pick five!" Ryan yells. "Five—ah, ah."

Ryan grunts, falling to the floor. I'm assuming one of the men hit him. I want to yell something, too, words of support, but there's nothing I can say. I've never felt so freaking useless. I can feel the man close behind me, hear him wheezing, smell his sweat. It's like he's getting ready to hit me.

"Well?" the leader snaps.

"Ten," Duke says without hesitation, his voice cold now. Even his muscles have stopped bulging. He makes a conscious effort to breathe slowly as if conserving his energy.

My mind spins over and over as I try to figure out how to help. There must be something I can do. Which hand is the man holding his gun in? It's impossible for me to tell. They haven't tied us up. Maybe they think we're not a threat. I'm not even sure how many men are out here. I remember what Duke said to Ethan, Tim, and Jeff. He'd find a gun and fire it. That's all it would take, but what if they kill us all as the backup makes its way toward us?

"Very brave," the leader says, laughing. "Okay, challengers, you're up."

A masked man opens the door at the side of the cage. Duke backs all the way to the other side, standing in a fighting stance even with his hands behind his back. Two men enter, tall, lean, shirtless, and covered in tattoos. When they raise their fists, I'm sure I can see blood and scabs all over them. They're clearly used to fighting.

"Ding, ding," the leader yells, laughing.

The two men walk across the cage, spreading out so they corner Duke against the wall. They're going to hurt the future father of my children and my future husband. So soon after learning that he feels the same, they will end it all.

I swallow, wondering if I have what it takes. Turn, leap at the man, and use surprise and the darkness to my advantage. I don't know if I have that in me, but the alternative is to let ten men beat the hell out of my man and let them *kill* him. The world is a grotesquely unfair place sometimes. We've just learned how much we mean to each other, and now it will all be taken away.

I try to will myself to act. They didn't cuff us. They obviously don't think we're anything to worry about, but I'll have to be fast. I push against the fear in my body, screaming silently at myself to do it. Act now! *Go, go, go*, but I feel frozen, paralyzed as I stare into the cage at my man backed against the wall.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Duke

I was hoping the men would approach me arrogantly. With my hands behind my back, I hoped they'd get overconfident and rush in, but they walk forward slowly with their hands raised. Their stances are awkward. They're holding their hands more like street fighters than trained strikers, but this is still dangerous.

I use the cage, sidestepping as they close in around me. Suddenly, one of them lunges. I dodge out of the way, plant my feet, and then kick him so hard in the stomach he coughs and stumbles backward. It's awkward without my arms for balance. I can't kick him as ruthlessly as I'd like, but it's enough to wake the bastard up.

Soon, the other one is running at me clumsily. I circle out and kick the inside of his knee. He buckles sideways. I rush in, steeling myself—this will hurt—and contort my torso into a vicious arc, aiming my forehead at his nose. He roars when I make contact, his nose erupting, blood spewing down his face. When he raises his hands, probably scared to get hit again, I knee him in the stomach, feeling the connection.

He grunts and starts wheezing. Sometimes, there's a delay that happens with body shots. It's like the person doesn't feel it right away. He looks like he's going to come in for more but then stumbles, takes a knee, and falls to his side.

The other man rushes in. I do my best to evade, but I catch a couple on the chin, rolling with them. Distantly, past my battle haze, I hear my woman and son gasp with each blow. I don't let myself focus on it. This is war.

I'm going to take a few, but the idiot is getting overconfident. I weave out of the way, then lean back while driving my knee forward. It crushes into his gut, and then I sweep his legs. I kick him in the stomach the second he's on the floor. He's a criminal, a lowlife, a scumbag, part of the gang that wants to hurt my woman. Yet it still feels bad, opposite to years and years of training, kicking a man while he's down. I kick him again, then turn as the body-shot man stumbles to his feet.

"You're fucking done," I tell him as his friend groans and whimpers on the floor.

He grits his teeth and walks awkwardly forward.

My body feels a little tired but nowhere near as exhausted as this man looks. Some people let their conditioning go when they retire from MMA. I never have. Before I met Molly, training was my drug.

He steps forward. *Bam*, I drill a sidekick right into his gut. He folds up, walking backward momentarily, then stupidly decides to come forward. Goddammit. I dance out of range, focusing with everything I have. It's like playing a video game on *hard mode*, my wrists aching from the cuffs.

He chases me, and I raise my leg, getting him to drop his hands. He doesn't want to be hit in the gut again, but that's a mistake. Like a cobra, I dart my leg out and catch him in the head. His head jolts backward, and he lands on the floor with a *thud*. It's a hard floor, not padded. For a second, I think I've killed him. Then he sits up, looking around, confused with that dazed look in his eyes people get when they've been choked out.

"You done?" I roar, marching over to him.

He raises his hands, whining. I turn to the other man. He doesn't want to go any longer, either.

“Get them out of there,” the leader grunts from the darkness.
“Send in the next three.”

My stomach cramps. Two against one is ridiculous enough. If even one of them had had a basic level of fighting training, I would’ve been screwed, and now *three*? There’s no point in arguing. I’d fight one hundred of them at the same time if it gave my woman and my son a chance to get out of here. Even if it means giving my own life, I’ll do it.

The two men limp from the cage. A moment later, three much larger men enter. All of them are built like me: tall, wide, and strong. One of them moves like a Muay Thai fighter, light on his front leg, picking it up and feinting, so I can’t tell what kind of strike he will throw. The other two are street fighters, but their size is a problem.

One of them is covered in colorful tattoos on his arms and neck. He rushes ahead, and as soon as I turn to deal with him, the other street fighter runs right at me. He *sprints*. This is a downside to being a trained fighter. I’m not ready for people to do insane shit like this.

He crashes into me, driving me against the cage. It’d be different if I had my hands, but I don’t. *Stop thinking like that*. He lands several blows on my face. My bell gets rung, and my head is hazy, giving him time to land a decent uppercut against my face. Then the trained fighter is at my side, kicking my leg.

Dammit. I throw myself to one side. Turning my back, a sin in fighting, I’m forced to run to the other side of the cage. Suddenly, I stop and turn. I spin with all the force I can generate and kick the tattooed guy right in the throat, driving my heel hard. He gasps, wheezing, clawing at his neck.

I don’t have time to celebrate. The trained fighter starts kicking my leg. I swing my leg out to take some of the impact. He grins and kicks me again. Then, the remaining street fighter starts bobbing and weaving amateurishly on the other side, but it doesn’t matter how amateurish this is. My leg is starting to hurt. There are five men after these two if these assholes keep to their deal.

I feint a kick, then throw a real one, driving my foot into the street fighter's gut. It's successful but allows the trained fighter to launch a flurry at my head. My forearms strain as my instincts try to make me raise my hands. My coach is my mind, yelling at me for keeping my hands low.

After more punches to the face, the trained fighter launches in and aims an elbow at my face. I just about manage to veer back. I almost throw another headbutt, but he reads me, raising his elbow in a guard. He'll shatter my goddamn face. I dance away out of range. The tattooed street fighter is still on the floor, but the other one is walking toward me.

"It doesn't matter how good you are," my first coach once told me. "It doesn't matter how many hours you've trained. Sometimes, you zig when you should've zagged. So always keep your hands up, kid. Always."

The street fighter runs at me and throws a wild right hand. I manage to dodge and swipe his legs out from under him, taking him out. The move cost me by bringing me right into the shin of the trained fighter. *Fuck*. It knocks me backward, my head spinning. My legs threaten to give out from underneath me, my knees wobbling. A famous fighter once called this the *chicken dance*.

I weave away. *Fuck*, another kick. I duck it, then spring at the trained fighter, kneeing him so hard in the balls that he coughs and keels over. That gives me a chance to drive my knee into his head. He takes the shot well. It keeps him in range. I knee him twice more, thinking of my woman, our future, the life these bastards are trying to steal from us. Finally, he falls to the floor. I kick him hard in the gut.

Retreating to the cage wall, I feel blood dripping down my face, probably from my forehead. My head is hazy. My body is beginning to get tired. Moving like this is so alien to me. It's taxing my system way too much.

"Get them out of there!" the leader yells from the dark. "Send in the rest!"

I take slow breaths as masked men enter the cage and escort the men. Then five men enter, five tough and violent men.

Even if I had use of my hands, I don't think I could take them.
I don't think anybody could, honestly, not in a cage. Maybe if
I had space to dance around and evade them, but I don't. Fuck.
What now?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Molly

Do something, a voice in my head screams as five men enter the cage.

It's insane that Duke could stand off against all those other men. It was like watching a crazy dance of violence, Duke leaping between techniques I didn't understand. It was like visual poetry, but now they'll get him. Five against one, hands behind his back. There isn't a person alive who could handle this.

My insides ache, tightening as if my womb is telling me I have to act now. If I don't, we're not going to share a future. The fact that Ryan is my ex seems so insignificant now, so petty. We could all die here. Who cares about *that*? Maybe if we escape here alive, we'll have time to worry about it, but not now.

Three of the men charge at Duke. He kicks one. Another leaps on his leg. Another jumps right at his body. Duke misses a headbutt, and then they drag him to the floor. One runs right at his head as if getting ready to kick him.

"D-Dad," Ryan whimpers. "No, Dad!"

I close my eyes for a split second, summoning my courage. If I die here, so be it. That's the only way I will be able to do this. I have to accept that it could be the end. It *could* be, probably *will* be, but it's better than just waiting for them to finish him.

Turning suddenly, I leap at the guard behind me. He yells in shock. Moving fast, I grab his hand. Luckily, it's the one holding the gun. I can tell by how he pulls it up, trying to aim it at me. Leaning down, I bite down on his hand. I bite hard. I chew and *tear*, pulling away, hating every second—the taste of his sweat, the fact I'm doing this.

He drops the gun. Leaping to the ground, I grab it and fire it into the air twice—*bang, bang*. The shots ring through my ears, my vision blinding with the flare. It lights up the surrounding darkness momentarily, revealing around ten men. Already, they're moving toward us.

I can hear Ryan wrestling with another man. I run toward the darkness, gun in hand, no clue what's happening in the cage or if our backup heard anything. Running like a trapped rodent, I end up in a corridor, aiming the gun in my hand at the entrance.

More gunshots come from deeper into the warehouse. I fight the urge to close my eyes and pretend this isn't happening, just like I did so many times as a kid. If I'm going to be helpful, I have to be *here*, present, ready to fight, and prepared to die.

Suddenly, a man appears at the head of the corridor. He's got a gun in his hand. He aims at me and fires. The bullet hits the wall so close to my head that I feel plasterboard and brick spray against the back of my neck. Instinct drives me to the floor. It's a stupid thing to do. I regret it right away.

"Stupid slut," the man grunts, taking two steps forward, aiming the gun right at me. This is it, then. This is where all the angst and uncertainty end. I wish I could turn back time, make every moment with Duke last, letting go of the guilt, the shame, any of it.

I close my eyes, knowing one thing for sure. I love Duke. I don't care about the timeframe or the complications. I love him. I'll always love him. If there's a place after this, heaven or anywhere else, I will wait for him there, and if there isn't, I'll die knowing the truth. We belong to each other. We always will.

A gunshot goes off.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Duke

The second the bullets start flying, I leap out of the cage. It must be the highest I've ever jumped over in my life. Without my hands to pull me up, I somehow hook my leg over and jump down into the darkness. Adrenaline, desire for the future, and protective instinct for my woman all drive me on.

Then I run, looking for my son and Molly, but there's too much mayhem, people firing shots all over the damn place. I see flashes of violent men with each gunshot, but I can't see my son or my woman. Are they dead? Fucking hell, then I'd just let these bastards shoot me right here. Without Molly, I've got nothing to live for.

Now, I'm pinning a man against the wall with the bulk of my body. He hammers my gut with his fist, trying to aim his pistol at me. He can't because my knee is pushed against his forearm, trapping it. Sooner or later, somebody's going to...

A loud *bang* goes off, then another, sounding different from a gunshot. A grenade? This is getting surreal. My vision suddenly explodes with blistering white light, my equilibrium thrown off as I attempt to recenter myself. I hear more gunshots, quicker this time, maybe automatic weapons.

One of the warehouse doors is open. Two men are running in with rifles, shooting into the dark. Holy shit. It's Ethan and Jeff, but where are Molly and my son?

The man I had pinned against the wall groans. I quickly reapply the pressure, kneeling him in the gut repeatedly. I keep roaring with each strike, knowing my woman and son could be dead. I take out the pain on this piece of shit. I hear his ribs crack. Finally, he slumps to the floor.

“Molly?” I roar, kicking his gun away. *“Ryan? Molly?”*

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Molly

I still can't believe Ryan did it. He shot my attacker. When the gunshot went off, I was sure it was the end. I was sure I would never see my mom, my friends, or my man again. Then I opened my eyes to find Ryan walking down the hallway under the flickering light, blood streaking his clothes and face, his eyes pits of terror.

Now, we're hiding at the end of the hallway. There's no way out from back here. It's an office with the windows bricked up. Ryan is on one knee, aiming his gun at the door. I kneel beside him, holding the gun the man Ryan killed dropped. The corpse is blocking the doorway.

Beyond the door, I hear gunshots and something that goes off with an even louder *bang*. Maybe a bomb of some sort.

"I'm s-sorry, Molly," Ryan says. I can tell how troubled he is by what he had to do. "I was awful to you. Just awful."

I swallow. "It's okay."

"No," he snaps. "We might d-d-d..." I'm relieved when he can't finish the word. The last thing I want to think about is us dying. "You have to know, it was *not* okay. I was a bully. I was a real piece of shit. You're a good person."

"You were drinking a lot."

“No,” he snaps, sounding like his dad for a moment. “That’s no excuse. I called you names. I belittled you. I swear to God, if we get out of here, I will be a better person.”

“Why did you do it?” I ask, hand trembling as I stare at the door, my finger on the trigger, wondering if I’ll have what it takes when the time comes.

“It’s funny. I didn’t even know why, exactly, until they took me. Until I thought I was going to die. It’s like everything became clear then.”

“Yeah?”

“My mom l-left me,” he whispers, almost breaking down in tears. The gunshots have stopped now, but nobody is charging the doorway. “She just up and left and abandoned me. She didn’t give a damn that I wanted to stay here. All my life, she’d been keeping me away from my dad. Then, when it was convenient for her, she just *left* like it was no big deal. Like my opinion didn’t even matter.”

“So you were taking it out on me because you couldn’t take it out on your mom?”

“Pathetic, right?” he says. “Fucking *sad*, but yeah, I think that’s it. Or maybe that’s just me giving myself an excuse. Whatever it is, you didn’t deserve it. No boyfriend should treat his girlfriend like that.”

When his voice gets emotional toward the end, an alarm bell rings inside me. What if he has feelings for me? That’s going to make things even more complicated.

“We weren’t really a couple,” I murmur.

“You’re right,” he says. “No offense, but I wasn’t even...”

“It’s okay. You can say it.”

“Attracted to you,” he goes on. “I was a bully and a predator. I saw you and thought I could use you as my goddamn verbal punching bag. I’ll never stop hating myself for that. What sort of person does that make me?”

“A bad one,” I tell him, “but that doesn’t mean you can’t grow. It doesn’t mean you can’t change. It doesn’t mean you can’t be

better. It doesn't mean, from this moment on, you can't be a *good* person."

"That's what I'm going to do," he says fiercely, "if we get out of here."

The *if* bounces around my mind. I can hear yelling, but it's difficult to make out the words. Then the voice gets closer. My heart flutters in my chest like it's going to grow wings and fly away. It's Duke, his voice husky. "Molly! Ryan! Molly!"

I'm about to yell when Ryan whispers urgently, "Don't, Molly, it could be a trick."

He stands, creeping across the room. I can tell from his body language that he doesn't want to be anywhere near the corpse. He forces himself forward anyway, inch by inch. Finally, he walks out the door. I bite down, chest getting tight, breath catching. If it is a trick and they get their hands on Ryan, how long until...

I drop the gun and let out a cry of pure relief and love when I see Duke in the doorway. He's not wearing handcuffs anymore. He's got blood all over his face, his body covered in bruises, but he's alive. He's smiling. I spring to my feet and rush toward him.

He catches me in a hug, holding me tightly. I'm scared of hurting him even more than they have, but I can't stop holding tightly onto his body, digging my nails in as if to keep him here and stop those bastards from taking him away.

Tears burst out of me, sobs making my body shudder. He holds me tightly. I think he's crying, too, but it's difficult to tell. The emotion is so overwhelming. I'm crushed by it. No, *shrouded* by it, wrapped in its warm embrace, cocooned in the heat of my man.

"It's okay," he says, gently running his hands through my hair. "It's over. You don't have to be afraid anymore. You never have to be afraid again. I'm here. I'm going to take care of you. Forever."

I clutch onto him even tighter, pressing my cheek against his chest, feeling his hard muscles and heartbeat thundering

against me. He braces my shoulders and pulls me closer as if he wants as little space between us as possible.

“Forever,” I repeat.

“It’s you and me now.” He tenderly kisses my forehead, then my cheek, kissing away my tears. “One day, I’ll kiss you just like this.” He kisses my cheek again. “But these will be happy tears. You’ll see.”

“I believe you,” I say, leaning up, gently pressing my lips against his. He returns the kiss with more pressure despite his injuries.

“Where are the men?” I ask.

“The criminals? A lot of them are dead. The remaining three are zip-tied. Ethan’s called it in. The cops will be here soon. What were you doing here, Molly?”

“They got Rachael,” I murmur. “I don’t even know where she —”

“There was a woman locked in a closet in a storage room,” Duke tells me. “It’s her. It’s Rachael.”

“Where is she?”

“Waiting out front. I’ll take you to her, but first, close your eyes.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want you to see any more of those.” He nods at the corpse.

I swallow, closing my eyes. A moment later, he lifts me off my feet, carrying me with ease despite the beating he took. As he carries me through the warehouse, the lights on now, I remember when this all started, joking about how he’d never be able to carry me.

When I feel the wind on my face, I start crying again. Duke puts me down. I open my eyes and run over to Rachael. She’s crying, too. We clutch onto each other tightly. Over her shoulder, I see Duke holding his son. We share a smile, a

moment of victory. We made it. Despite the odds, we did it. Together.

“Good news,” Ethan says the next morning, his finger idly tracing the scar on his head. We’re sitting in Duke’s living room, Duke with a small bandage on his forehead from all the headbutting. Ryan sits opposite his father, and I sit beside Duke, our legs touching, *almost* holding hands.

Last night feels like a crazy nightmare, but the shootout is all over the news. Rachael sits on my other side, fiddling with the end of her ponytail.

“An official case is open,” Ethan says. “The story goes that Jeff and I happened to be on the boat nearby. We heard the commotion and came running. My superior doesn’t believe me.”

“How is that good news?” Ryan asks softly.

He seems far meeker than the person he was when he was my “boyfriend.” After what we shared in the corridor when we thought we might die, I worried he’d return to his old ways. So far, at least, it seems this humility is for good, though it’s only been ten or so hours.

“He’s agreed to believe my story because he wants to launch an investigation anyway. They’ve already tracked the video feed to a high-level biker gangster. He’s got several outstanding charges. The headline is this, folks. Anybody who wanted to hurt you is either dead or in jail.”

It feels strange to smile so widely at the concept of somebody dying or going to prison, but let’s face it. They deserve far, far worse. They were perfectly willing to let five men beat my future husband to death with his hands tied behind his back.

“What about the officers who were working with them?” Duke asks.

He speaks with heavy authority, his voice getting just a little husky. Last night, after the police station, we stayed here. I

laid in his arms and held onto him tightly because a crazy part of me thought he would turn to mist the moment I let go. Or we'd wake up back in the madness.

"One of them has decided to take a long holiday. The other three are acting shifty as hell. They know it's only a matter of time. Either way, they've got no reason to bother you. The people paying them are gone, and they no longer have any leverage."

"No hostages, you mean," Rachael snaps. "God, I wish I could kill every one of those creeps again. They don't deserve any respect, not even the tiniest amount. They're pathetic worms."

"Agreed," Ethan says, nodding. "I'm handling it, don't worry. In a fucked-up way, this is the best thing that could've happened to the unit. Now, the brass is going to be forced to act."

"I'd much rather none of this happened," Ryan says in a small voice.

Duke places his hand on his son's. "You did what you had to do. You... you saved Molly's life."

Last night, as Duke and I held each other, I told him what Ryan did. I also told him what Ryan said afterward, apologizing and explaining that he was never attracted to me. When I mentioned the mom angle and that Ryan was taking out that pain on *me*, Duke held me even closer.

"It's going to be so different for our children," he whispered. *"They'll never have to wonder if their parents love them. They'll never have to doubt us, and we'll never abandon them or each other."*

"I just hope I never have to do something like that again," Ryan whispers. "Anyway, Molly saved us all. She was the one who went for a gun first. She wrestled the guy, and that gave me the courage. Once she started, I *had* to act."

Duke turns to me, staring down with those intense eyes. "You didn't mention that last night," he says.

I shrug. "I didn't see the point."

“The point is, you *saved* us,” Rachael says. “You’re a hero.”

I turn and offer her a smile. “You never would’ve been in danger if it wasn’t for me.”

“We’d all still be in danger if it wasn’t for you,” Duke says fiercely.

“He’s right,” Ethan says. “If those shots had come any later, God knows what those cowards would’ve done. You did the right thing.”

“I just couldn’t watch them hurt Duke anymore,” I whisper.

Ethan laughs gruffly. “Duke hurt them plenty, too. It’s already becoming a legend. Duke Harrow, hands behind his back... You could write a book about this and make millions.”

Duke looks at Ryan, then turns to me with that subtle smile, the corner of his lip twitching. “I’ve got everything I need right here.”

“What now?” Ryan asks. “What do we do?”

“Try to return to regular life. You’ll have police escorts for the time being until everything is finalized, but you did it. We did it. These bastards will think twice before making moves in this city again.”

Ethan seems far happier than the rest of us. That’s probably because he sees this purely from a cop’s perspective. All the civilians escaped, and the criminals are either dead or in jail. Plus, he’s not getting in trouble with his boss. That’s a win for him.

“Call me if you need anything,” Ethan says before he leaves.

Duke walks him to the door, leaving Rachael, Ryan, and me in the living room together. Rachael stands up, pacing as she often does. She glances at Ryan, at me, then looks at Ryan steadily when she stops walking.

“I hated you when you two were together. You know that, right?”

“Rach...”

“No, it’s okay,” Ryan says. “Yeah, I know that, Rachael, and I can’t blame you. I was a real piece of shit. I’ve got some issues to work through, but it’s no excuse.”

“He saved my life,” I remind Rachael, “and I’ve forgiven him.”

Ryan turns to me sharply. It still feels so weird that we were ever in a relationship together. It’s doubly strange because, at certain angles, I can see a younger version of Duke. In his eyes, the same determination to do better, *be* better. “You have?”

“Yes,” I say firmly. “All I want is to go on with my life. All I want is to be with Duke and be happy.”

“Be with... Dad?” Ryan swallows.

Uh oh. Don’t tell me he’s not going to give us his blessing. After everything, I just assumed that he would. I didn’t even ask him.

“Yes,” I say firmly. “I want to be with him.” I hesitate, wondering if I should go all the way, but I have to. “Forever,” I go on. “You might as well know that we’re in this for the long term, Ryan. We’re going to have a family together. I think—I hope—we’ll get married one day.”

“We *are*,” Duke says passionately from the doorway, looking dashing in his shirt, the top buttons undone, sleeves rolled up. Only the bandage on his head and the tiredness in his eyes show any sign of what happened. “We’re the real thing, Molly.”

Ryan stands, looks at me, then looks at his dad.

“What is it, son?” Duke asks.

“Just...” Ryan swallows. “Every time I look at her and *you*, Molly, it reminds me of the person I was. The asshole I was—the bully. I’m not sure I can get over that, but maybe I deserve to be reminded of it daily.” He shudders. “I’m sorry. I need to be alone.”

“Ryan—”

He cuts Duke off, walking quickly toward the door. “Please, Dad. Please, just leave me alone.”

“Wait,” Duke says.

Ryan stops and sighs. “What?”

“I need to know you’ll stay in the house.”

Ryan nods, seeming to understand. “I promise, Dad. I need some alone time, that’s all. I’m not going to do anything stupid.”

“Swear?”

“I swear, Dad.”

Duke nods. “Okay then. I’m trusting you.”

Ryan leaves the room. Duke watches him go, his expression tight, clenching his jaw. He looks at me with a heartbreaking quality in his eyes. There’s disappointment and a little anger mixed in there as if he’s wondering if this will ever end.

I stand up, walk over to him, wrap my arms around his body, and press against him. I hope he can feel every piece of comfort and support bubbling up inside me with all the certainty that this *will* work. After a pause, he wraps his arms around me.

Rachael stands and clears her throat. “I should get going.”

Letting Duke go, I quickly turn to her. “What? No way. Stay here, Rach. At least for today and tonight.”

Rachael glances at Duke. “I’m not sure...”

I look at Duke, giving him what I think of as the *wife eyes*. Looking at each other like this may be a small thing, but it makes me feel wildly intimate. It makes me feel like, one day, we’ll be so close we won’t even have to talk, bonded forever. Our intimacy will make it like we’re reading each other’s minds to other people.

Duke smiles at Rachael. Despite everything, it seems genuine, as if he’s pushing away the darkness and the pain. “Please, Rachael,” Duke says. “It’s no trouble at all, and selfishly, I’d like my woman to have her friend with her.”

My skin tingles when he says *my woman*, just like it did the first time we touched, just like it always will when we share any steamiess or love. Rachael smiles at me. She's always wanted me to find somebody and be happy, and now I am. Now, I never have to doubt how significant this is—how significant *we* are.

“Please, Rach?” I say.

She smiles and nods. “Yeah, sure. Only if you don't mind. The idea of being alone right now doesn't exactly thrill me.”

“It's no trouble *at all*,” Duke repeats, with more emphasis this time.

“Thank you,” Rachael says.

“So,” I say, “what should we do today? I don't know about everybody else, but I could fall asleep right now.”

“I was just thinking the same,” Duke replies. “I'm exhausted, and not just physically.”

“That makes three of us,” Rachael says. “Do you think it is safe?”

Duke nods. “It's all out in the open now. The cops know who these idiots are or were, for the ones who didn't make it.” His voice is merciless when he adds this last bit. He has no pity for the monsters who tried to take everything from us. “The dirty cops are on the run. I think, finally, we can relax.”

He curls his hand around my hip and pulls me to him. His hand tightens. Despite everything, I'm sure I can feel some lust in his touch, some urgency. Are we really going to sleep, or will our fierce desire overwhelm us? But what about Ryan? What if he can't accept it?

CHAPTER THIRTY

Duke

The curtains are drawn, and the door is locked as I lie with my woman in my arms. She has her back to me, her thick, perfect ass pressed against my groin. We said we were coming up here to sleep, but it's been at least thirty minutes, and rest seems very far away.

She shifts against me, her ass rubbing against my swollen tip. After all the violence, the fear, the pain, it's like my instincts are roaring at me that the time to claim her is *now*. Yet Ryan has left so much up in the air. He could *still* make our lives difficult.

"Are you asleep?" she whispers.

I smile and kiss the back of her neck, smelling her hair, smelling *her*. "I think you know the answer to that question."

She shifts against me again, making my manhood get even harder. My balls are full of tension, lust, and heat. I push firmer against her ass, savoring her curviness, my hand resting on her hip.

"We shouldn't..." She moans seductively when I drive even harder against her. "Should we?"

"I don't know," I growl.

"But Ryan..."

“You told me he said he was never attracted to you. He never wanted you. It was all tied up with his mom, with abandonment.”

“Yeah, that’s what he told me.”

“Then this isn’t a betrayal. I see his point about being reminded of the person he was, but he’ll have to learn to deal with that. I don’t mean to sound callous, but...”

“Go on,” she whispers, her voice getting breathy in a way that has my shaft swelling with even more heat.

“Almost losing my life in that place has brought a lot of things into perspective. I can’t let you go. I can’t even think about letting you go. You gave me the strength to fight those assholes. It was like I turned into some prehistoric man,” I laugh gruffly. “I know how weird that sounds.”

“Weird... us?” She turns over, looking into my eyes, an entrancing smile on her lips. “I could *never* believe that.”

I chuckle, playfully tickling her side, stunned at how easily we can forget everything that has happened. When she laughs, a guilty note thrums inside of me. Ryan might be able to hear her. My woman must be able to read my expression. She bites down.

“Sorry,” she whispers.

“Never apologize for laughing,” I say passionately. “Especially now. Especially after everything you’ve been through.”

“After everything *we’ve* been through,” she murmurs, gliding her hand up my arm and gently holding onto my shoulder. Then her grip gets tighter. It’s the way she held me last night, as if she thought I would disappear. “I’m just so happy you made it out of there. When they tied your hands behind your back...” She shudders.

I lean forward, kiss her cheek, then kiss her again, close to her lips. The tip of my manhood is pushing firmly against my pants, urging me to claim her. “You don’t have to worry about that ever again,” I tell her. “I’m going to protect you just like you protected me.”

She smiles, and then she gets this somehow dangerous look in her eyes. She's filled with excitement, a thrill that's hard to quantify. Lust. Heat. Steam. When she kisses me, I can taste the difference in the shape of her lips. She opens her mouth, finding my tongue.

I try to think of Ryan. I try to tell myself to hold off until I know for sure he'll be okay.

Yet the moment I touch her hip and she moans through the kiss, I know I'm lost. I know there's no fighting this. I push against her, sliding my hand from her hip to her ass, feeling her thickness through her PJ leggings. She moans even more urgently when I massage her ass, indulging in her thickness, letting my mind turn blank for everything except her.

She gasps when I glide my hand over her hip, between her legs this time. Pushing my hands down her pants, I start rubbing her clit gently. She whimpers and places her hand on my groin, stroking up and down. My memories return to, damn, *yesterday*. It feels so much longer.

My mind floods with the image of her sucking my dick, stroking her hand up and down, her juicy tits bouncing for me.

"I need to fuck you," I say in a low, urgent whisper, breaking off the kiss, smoothing my hand lower in her pants, finding her heat, her wetness. "I need to spread your virgin slit, fuck you deep, Molly, and explode inside you. I want to make your perfect curvy body pregnant."

She nods, biting her lip. "I was nervous before," she says, her voice just as low and urgent.

"Not anymore?" I ask, circling her entrance with my finger.

"No, I still am," she whispers, "but who knows what tomorrow will bring? We can't wait. We can't keep doubting."

I smirk, kissing her lips while sliding my finger into her tight, warm heat. "I stopped doubting the moment I saw you. Right then, life and the world all made sense."

We kiss passionately as I slip my finger in and out of her. She clings onto me tightly, causing my dick to ache when I think

about driving deep, but I can't just *think* about it anymore. Ending the kiss, I stand up, staring down at her.

"Is something wrong?" she asks, her cheeks flushed, every inch of her so beautiful I can hardly believe it.

"I need to see you," I groan. "Naked. Now. I need your young, curvy body. I need *you*. Our future. Your virginity."

She stands up on the other side of the bed, shooting me a playful look. "Well, right back at ya."

I start stripping my clothes away. She does the same, her hands moving busily until we're both naked. My cock is hard, my tip bulging, soaked with precome. I get even harder when I take in the sight of my woman.

Her large breasts, her curvy build ready to carry our children, her pretty-as-fuck pussy, her thick thighs. I'm shaking as I walk around the bed, lean down, and kiss her as I press my naked body against hers. She moans so sexily when I start palming her juicy, eager pussy.

It's hard for me to think when she strokes my dick. We rub each other urgently, the heat rising inside of me, everything I have focused on this moment. My cock burns with the heat, the pleasure. I try to kiss her, but the passion is too much.

I gently nudge her back onto the bed. She lies down, gazing up at me with her legs open, her slit already wet for me, glistening with her lust. She's got that same half-scared look in her eyes, but then she nods at me, moaning softly, temptingly.

It would take a man with far more self-control than I have to resist my angel. I climb onto the bed, the tip of my cock gliding up her inner thigh. She shivers seductively, causing her juicy breasts to shake for me. Holding myself up with one hand, I grab my dick, stroking up and down, spreading my precome, making myself slick for her.

"You're going to take every. Fucking. Inch." I glide my dick around her slit. Her moans tell me this drives her just as crazy as she makes me. "When I come in you, your needy, perfect body will get pregnant. Okay?"

She smiles playfully, a soft laugh escaping her. After everything, hearing her laughter is like a prize. Hell, it always feels that way. “I don’t know if I have any control over tha... *that*.”

She whimpers with pure lust as I push my dick into her, spreading her tight walls apart. She rocks in time with me thrusting up, bravely taking inch after inch. I can feel how tight she is, squeezing around my base. Her cheeks blaze red. Her fingernails dig urgently into my arms.

“Oh... oh... oh...” She shivers, moaning, as I glide deeper, and then her perfect, tight slit is hugging onto my base.

I lower myself atop her, feeling her nipples brushing against my chest. Her body is so warm, desire burning through her. Finding her lips, I kiss her as gently as I can while every instinct inside of me roars to hammer her hard, to fuck her deep, to slide out slowly, and then drive in firmly. She drags her nails up and down my back, returning my kiss with more pressure, more urgency.

“Oh, fuck,” she whispers. “That feels... Oh my God.”

I can hear how new this is to her. I can hear the urgency and the heat in her voice. I can hear how badly she wants me to keep going, just as badly as I want, *need*, to keep going.

Leaning up to get a better look at my horny woman, I slide out of her, my tip kissing her entrance. Her moans change quality. They’re more needy now, like she’s urging me to slide back in.

I push in harder this time, the mattress whining, her walls squeezing my base like she wants to keep me inside her. Her breasts bounce so perfectly that I have to slide out and push in again to watch them bounce over and over. I can feel her opening for me, accepting every inch in every steamy moment.

She meets my eye, smiles sassily, and then pushes her tits together. She nods as if to say, *This is what you want, huh?* If it weren’t for the need to be quiet, I’d roar when I see her hands buried in her thick tits, her nipples turning red.

We find a rhythm when I slide out again, savoring how her hole kisses my tip and tightens like she’s urging me to glide

back in. I move quicker, captivated by the lust-filled twist in her lips, by the bounciness of her thick, curvy breasts.

I think I will explode right now when she shifts down in time with my thrust. The pressure is goddamn addictive. She bounces up and down, clenching her teeth as if fighting the urge to make too much noise.

I'm making animal-like noises as I try to hold back my roar. Her heat is getting wetter with each thrust. She starts to pulsate around my dick, and I know she's close. I don't know how long we've been doing this. Time loses meaning, just like in a fight, but a thousand times more intense.

She lets her tits go, letting them bounce with each thrust. Grabbing my shoulders, she nods repeatedly, silently telling me to come.

I smirk and try to speak. *Not until I feel you creaming for me*, but I can't talk.

Even if my life depended on it, I couldn't speak now. Come is rushing up my dick, pushing right against my tip, trying to explode. I grit my teeth and fuck her harder, deeper, addicted to how her walls flutter around my thickness. She turns her head and bites down on the pillow, looking so hot I almost lose it.

Almost, but then she moans into the pillow, her pussy getting even tighter as the orgasm surges through her. There's nothing that could stop me now. Even if Ryan started hammering on the door, even if a hundred armed men stormed the house, I'm completely lost to this moment, lost to my woman.

She gasps, clawing my shoulders so hard I'm surprised she doesn't draw blood. Then she lets the pillow go, her walls fluttering, coaxing.

I collapse atop her as my entire length burns hotly, the seed bursting out of me. I find her neck, kiss, and bite as softly as I can when our bodies are pressed so close it's like we're melting into each other. She shifts up and down faster, taking every drop of my seed.

After, I collapse atop her. She wraps her arms around me and kisses my cheek as my cock begins to wilt inside of her.

“I love you,” I growl.

The best part about her reply is she doesn’t even seem shocked. It’s like it’s obvious, the love we share with each other. She kisses my cheek. “I love you too, Duke.”

Rolling to the side, I pull her into my arms. I hold her tight, knowing I’ll never let her go. Whatever the world throws at us, we’ll fight, struggle, and win together. For our future children. For our future life.

“I loved you the first moment I saw you,” I say fiercely.

“I feel the same,” she whispers. “It should be impossible. Just a photo, and I felt it. The love. The connection.”

“Let’s not worry about what *should* be,” I tell her. “I shouldn’t be with my son’s ex. You shouldn’t be with your ex’s dad. We shouldn’t want each other this badly when so many years separate us.”

“Should, should, should,” she says, laughing, sounding drunk on life, drunk on *us*. “You’re right. Who cares about that word? I don’t. Never again.”

As we sink into a comfortable quiet, I try not to think that Ryan might try to stop us. It’s going to be tough for him. I know that, but I hope and pray he gives us his blessing. The truth is, if he makes me choose...

I can’t think about it, but I know for a fact I’m never letting Molly go.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Molly

I must fall asleep. I wake to Duke gently shaking me by the shoulders. Opening my eyes, I see he's got a big smile on his face. It's the most genuine, carefree expression I've ever seen him wear. My body is still sore, but in the best possible way.

When he glided up inside of me, it was like heaven. No, it *was* heaven. It was everything I dreamed being with my man would be. The nerves drifted away the moment we started. There was simply no room for them in the intimacy.

"What time is it?" I ask.

"Seven p.m."

I rub my face, feeling groggy. "Whoa! I've been asleep for hours."

"You needed it." He kneels by the edge of the bed, holding my hands, leaning over, and laying a soft kiss against my cheek. "I've got good news."

"Yeah?"

"Ryan finally came out of his room. He asked to talk to me. He wanted to know how serious we were about each other."

I sit up, keeping my hands in his. "Me and you? I'd say we're about as serious as two people can get."

"That's what I told him. I told him I'd die for you. I told him I want and need to be with you for the rest of my life. I told him

I'd always feel incomplete without you."

"What did he say?" I ask, nerves trying to cramp in my gut. I can't believe we've come this far and endured so much, just for everything to come crashing down now.

"He doesn't want to stand in our way." Duke's smile gets even wider. "He wants us to be happy. The only thing holding him back is that he's reminded of how vicious he was when he looks at you. How cruel."

"That's the past," I say firmly. "We're going to be family one day. I'm not holding a grudge."

Duke nods. "I told him we've all behaved in ways we're not proud of, but he saved your life. He knows how wrong he was. He's got time to keep improving and become a better person. He said we should go for it. Be together. Forever."

I swallow, emotion making my throat tight when I hear the shift in his voice, the huskiness. "I want that so badly," I whisper.

"Let's say a man wanted to ask his woman a very serious question in their bedroom after she's just awakened from a nap. Would that be the most romantic time?"

I shake my head fiercely, wondering if I'm reading this right. Or if I'll wake up next to Duke, still sweaty from our sex, or even earlier, before we met. Would I trade all the blood, violence, and fear for this moment? No. Without a doubt, *hell* no.

"It feels pretty freaking romantic to me," I tell him.

"That's good because I may or may not have gone for a drive while you were asleep." He stands up, lifting me to my feet. I feel like I'm floating on air as I stand, bracing my hands against his chest, feeling his heart pounding as heavily as mine is. "I love you so, so, *so* much."

"I love you too," I murmur. There are tears in my eyes. I can't believe this is happening, yet it feels so right. It feels like exactly what *should* be happening.

“I’m never letting you go,” he goes on. “I’m never going to let anybody hurt you. You’re mine, Molly, and I’m yours. Always.”

“Always,” I repeat, getting choked up.

“Molly...” He stops and laughs, shaking his head. “People would say we’re moving fast. Help me out here, Molly.”

I get the point. Jeez. Maybe this is a sign we’re moving too quickly. Perhaps the rest of the world would think we’re insane for being so ready to begin our lives together when he doesn’t know my last name.

“Lewis,” I tell him.

“Don’t worry,” he smirks. “You won’t be needing that name for much longer.”

I can feel the tears sliding hotly down my cheeks, cutting passionate lines as I struggle to keep myself together.

Duke lowers himself to one knee, reaching into his pocket. He takes out a ring box. “Molly Lewis,” he says, then opens the box. The diamond is big, glistening, and beautiful. “I know it’s been... hell, less than a week?” We both laugh together. His eyes are glistening, too. “But I could’ve asked you this after an hour, a minute, a second. I knew you were, are, and always will be, *mine* the second I saw you. Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” I yell, too excited to speak quietly, too filled with love and certainty.

He smiles, sliding the ring onto my finger.

EPILOGUE

ONE MONTH LATER

Duke

“Just go meet her, Dad,” Ryan says with a smile, glancing up from the stack of paperwork. From the window behind him, I can hear the activity of Seoul, South Korea. Ryan looks healthy, happy, and recovering from what he was forced to do in the warehouse, with a resilience that fills me with pride.

“There’s too much work...”

Ryan winks. “That’s what you’re paying me for. I don’t want you making me redundant any time soon.”

We decided to come to Korea to look into opening a new gym here. When I asked Ryan if he’d go with me as my righthand man, and he said yes, I knew it would bring us closer. I never guessed we’d be *this* close—closer than ever before. His support for my and Molly’s engagement has never wavered, not even once.

“You’re never going to be redundant to me, son,” I say, walking over to his desk and clapping him on the arm.

He grins, then waves at the door. “Go on. I know you’ll go insane if you don’t spend lunch with her. Make sure to hurry back, okay? It’s hard building an empire alone.”

I chuckle, so proud of my boy. He hasn’t touched alcohol since the mayhem. He’s spent every day trying to become a better person, and I couldn’t be happier.

Leaving the office, I walk a short distance across the bustling city to Yeouido Park. The cherry blossoms aren't in season, but it's still a beautiful place with a beautiful woman sitting on a bench, not spotting me yet. She's reading her textbook, that gorgeous look of concentration on her face.

As I approach, her smile is a gift. She's recovered from the mayhem just as quickly as Ryan has. I thought things would be awkward between the three of us, but after I proposed, it was like the world finally made sense. We've all agreed to forget the strange time my fiancée and son were in a relationship and how this started as a ploy for revenge. A revenge that turned out to be the best thing ever to happen in my life.

Molly stands, seeming more energetic than usual, moving from foot to foot. By the time I'm close enough to pull her into a hug, she's almost bursting.

"Is something up?" I ask.

"Oh, yeah, Hubby," she says, making me smile at the nickname. We're not officially married yet, but she's already calling me that, and I love it and *her* so much. "Our lives, our future, everything is going *up*."

She leans back in my embrace, flushed and beautiful.

"I'm pregnant," she says after a pause. "We're going to have a baby!"

Happiness floods into me. I cheer, sweep her off her feet, and swing her around and around as the South Koreans probably watch us, wondering what those crazy Americans are so happy about.

EPILOGUE

TWO YEARS LATER

R yan

I hit the heavy bag, Dad holding it as I rotate my body and try to generate as much power as possible. Despite being older than when we first started training together, Dad *seems* younger. It's the light in his eyes, the smile always on his lips. Even now, as I hammer the bag, he's got a subtle smile on his face.

When the timer goes off, I step back, rolling my shoulders and jabbing the air.

"Your technique is lethal, son," Dad says, tossing a towel at me.

I chuckle as I try to catch it with the gloves. "Are you ever going to tire of that one, Dad?"

"Watching you move like that, hell no."

After wiping myself down, it's time for another round. Once that's done, I take off the gloves, sitting at the side of the ring and rolling my neck from side to side. When I hear the door buzzer go, I can't help but smile.

It's my stepmom, Molly, with my brother, Ollie, visiting us between training sessions. It doesn't feel even a tiny bit awkward as Molly and Dad kiss hello. Initially, it hurt me to be around her, but only because it reminded me of how goddamn *wrong* I was—twisted up in the head. Nasty for the sake of it.

Sure, maybe the booze played its part, but it was me, too. The nastiness came from within. I should've known better than to be so cruel. Looking back, the person I was two years ago before I held my baby brother in my arms for the first time and was Dad's best man at the wedding, seems like a stranger.

When Molly puts Ollie down, he toddles toward me, his arms out. Everybody says he has my smile, but I see Dad each time I look at him. "Ree-an!" he sings. "Ree-an!"

I grin, jogging over to him and scooping him into my arms. "Hey, little man," I say, giving him a peck on the cheek. "Did you miss me?"

Molly smiles, holding Dad's hand. There will always be a small jolt of guilt deep within me when we spend time together, but each day, it fades a little more. "He *always* misses his big bro."

"B-b-best bro!" Ollie sings, laying his cheek against my chest. I hold him close, feeling so grateful to be surrounded by all this love.

EPILOGUE

NINE YEARS LATER

Molly

“Who would’ve thought it, huh?” Rachael says, leaning against the kitchen counter. The windows let sunlight spill into the room, showing a view of the backyard, Duke and Ryan chasing around Ollie and our other rugrats: little Lacy with her sarcastic pout and her funny voices; the twins, Jake and Micah, trying their best to keep up with them with their little legs.

Mom smiles out the window, watching them. She was shocked when I finally told her everything that happened—meeting Duke, the criminals, the showdown. When she saw how happy I was, she was happy for me.

“Look at this.” Rachael gestures to the spacious kitchen, but I know what she’s doing. Gesturing to our entire life. “It’s incredible.”

“You know we’ve lived here for two years, right?” I banter.

She laughs. “Excuse *me*, but getting engaged sort of brings this into perspective.”

I smile and touch her arm. “I’m only kidding, and thank you. I think it’s pretty freaking incredible, too.”

All those years ago, when Ryan was a completely different person, I never would’ve guessed that Duke and I would be here, savoring life in our happily ever after, experiencing all this happiness. I never would’ve dreamed it, but now, I’m a

teacher with the man of my dreams, four perfect children, a closer relationship with my mom, and a bestie I get to see every day. Duke is a family man with a gym franchise and a smile on his face that never leaves.

“You’ll have it soon,” I tell her.

“Mommy, Mommy!” I turn to Lacy, bobbing up and down on the spot. “Can we do the monster game?”

My heart grows lighter when I see the excitement in her eyes. We’ve played the *monster game* so many times, me chasing my girl around while I make the funniest, weirdest noises I can think of, but she never tires of it.

“Sure,” I tell her, spreading my arms, “but beware, there are *three* monsters now!”

“Oh no, Mommy!” Lacy giggles, turning and running back the way she came.

I nudge Rachael and Mom. “Come on. We can’t let her get away!”

They both laugh, following me into the yard, the sunlight, the joy.

THE END

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Turn the page to get a sneak peek of

[Riding My Brother's Best Friend](#)>

RIDING MY BROTHER'S BEST
FRIEND

CHAPTER ONE

Kayla

“You *knew* he was sick?”

My voice is torn with agony and disbelief.

Ryan stands at the window of our kitchen. It’s the same one Mom used to bake apple pies in, the room smelling so homely. It’s the same place we’ve had countless family scenes and so much happiness. We never worried that Mom would die in a bus crash and Dad, a few years later, would get an incurable illness—the big C. I hate even thinking of its name.

Since I was sixteen, it’s just been me and Ryan, and now he won’t look at me, gazing out over the dusty hill that leads to our small corner of California. He’s wearing his Titan’s MC jacket, the motorcycle club my dad started.

Ryan glances at me, his mop of black hair falling over his eyes. I’m nineteen. He’s thirty-two. He’s always been just as much of a father figure to me as Dad, and that was doubly true when Dad passed.

“Talk to me,” I snap, hurrying across the room.

Ryan sighs and stuffs his hands in his pockets. He’s tall and lean, with sharp cheekbones. He has Mom’s eyes. It always makes me sad when I think about that.

He’s watching the hill as if expecting an army of motorbikes to surge over it any second. He’s been tense lately, maybe because he recently split with his girlfriend, or perhaps it’s something else. He won’t talk to me.

I grab his arm, spin him roughly, and force him to look at me.
“Did you know Dad was sick?”

Dad hid his illness for a year, spending most of his time at the motorcycle club, not telling me and, I thought, Ryan.

“I thought we were *both* in the dark, but you knew?”

He swallows and nods shortly. “I’m sorry. He told me soon after they diagnosed him.”

“Did he make you promise not to tell?” I demand.

This could be the saving grace. If Dad, dying, had *begged* Ryan not to tell me, then I can understand. I can forgive him.

“No,” Ryan says. “I made that decision myself.”

I take a step back, shaking my head.

“It’s the anniversary tomorrow.” What an upbeat word for what it is the day my dad died. “I’m ready, and you drop this on me *now*?”

Ryan’s eyes flit to my duffle bag. We have a tradition of camping on the peak that overlooks our small town. It’s where Dad used to take us when we were kids. Just me and Ryan, remembering the good times. This will be our third year. Or it *would’ve* been if Ryan hadn’t thrown this news at me.

“I don’t understand why you didn’t tell me. We’ve always told each other *everything*.”

“There’s no excuse,” he says darkly.

“Aren’t you going to defend yourself, at least?”

“I don’t think I can.”

“Jesus, Ryan.”

He bows his head and nods, his teeth gritted. “I never wanted to lie to you, but you must know.”

“You have to give me a reason.”

He folds his arms, turning fully to me now. A thousand versions of him flutter across my memory. My wannabe poet’s mind starts composing some probably terrible lines.

*A titan, staring,
But I'm not lost.
The ocean glaring
And now we sail together.
Just us, only us,
We can do it.
We can do anything.*

God, how dramatic, and now I'm almost crying. I feel so immature as I walk across the room and grab the kitchen towel, roughly pawing at my cheeks. Memories of Dad attack me: bobbing up and down on his knee, his voice as he read bedtime stories to me.

But *that* leads me to the other man who used to read me stories: his husky voice and dark eyes. The calm concealed a world of fire, heat, and potential violence—

Kai. I won't think about him. He's been gone for two years. When I was seventeen, he left to work with the European branch of the Titans. I sometimes hear him and Ryan talking on the phone, my entire body tingling at Kai's voice, but I lock that away. I lock it down deep.

Ryan and Kai have been best friends for as long as I can remember. Hell, when Kai *started* reading stories to me, we were both kids. I was four, and he was seventeen. Mom and Dad loved Kai so much and treated him like family, which helped because he never had one of his own.

"I'm going to stay at the apartment," I say, not looking at Ryan. I'm not sure if that comes from guilt or rage.

The apartment is the two-bedroom Ryan bought in town a couple of years ago. Sometimes, he'll stay there when handling business, or I'll stay there if I'm spending time with friends or working late at the diner.

I've taken some holiday time, just like last year when working at the diner as a summer job. Now, there's no more high

school, just the diner and the wild, weird dreams of being a poet—the most unsustainable and unlikely profession.

“I understand,” Ryan says, walking over and wrapping his arms around me. I almost yell at him to take his hands off, but the feeling is too familiar. Falling into his arms, holding him, and letting him hold me. “I love you.”

There are more tears in my eyes. “I have to go.”

“Kay—”

He’s about to say *Kayla*, but I only hear the first part. It’s almost like he says *Kai*, and that reminds me of when I was a kid, writing *Kai & Kay* in notebooks, knowing I could never act on these feelings. It would’ve been a betrayal, just like Ryan betrayed me.

I leave the room and almost run down the hallway. I’ve got my sneakers on, so I push the door open and walk down the windy, dusty road leading to town. I could’ve taken the pickup, but the keys are on a hook in the kitchen. Anyway, I want to walk. Maybe the motion will clear my head, though I’ve never been the biggest fan of exercise.

I walk with my head raised. If I stare at the ground, my thoughts will collapse inward like a sinkhole. I won’t be able to do anything except think about all the moments I missed. Ryan supported Dad, caring for him, but I didn’t even know anything was wrong.

Only toward the end, when he collapsed, I finally saw past what I expected him to be to what he had become—shrunk, half of the man he was. I hated myself for not noticing sooner. Maybe I still do. How could I miss that?

After five minutes of walking, the town is in sight, lying in a natural dip in the terrain. Everything is tinted yellow. As the midday sun blazes, I hear a bike engine roaring behind me. I turn to find a cloud of dust swirling in the air, so I can only see Ryan’s silhouette. He must want to talk about what just happened, though I don’t know if I can, don’t know if I’ve got any more words in me. Maybe some bad poetry. Maybe some lines of pain.

I turn and walk quicker, though obviously, that's a fool's game. It's not like I've got bionic legs. I'm not outrunning him. The bike gets closer, and I clench my fists. The sound of bikes usually brings a smile to my face. It means my brother or his friends, who are all friendly and respectful to me, are here. It means comradery and warmth.

Once, it even meant Kai. *That* didn't make me smile. That rumbling made my insides quiver and my soul hurt. It made me think of a life where this huge, handsome, hot-as-hell man and I could be together.

The bike pulls around in front of me. The driver comes to a clean stop. He handles the bike even better than Ryan, which says a lot. It's not my brother. I bite down, stepping back, wondering if I've got a heatstroke. A light layer of sweat covers my body, so maybe that's what's happening here. Perhaps I'm losing my mind.

Kai steps off the bike. I know it's him even before he takes his helmet off and lays it on the ground. He's the same age as Kai, thirty-two, with dark black hair grown a little wild, swept to the side to keep it out of his eyes. A few specks of silver glisten in the sun, giving him a more mature look than the last time I saw him.

He wears his leather, which outlines his broad shoulders and muscular arms. His face is perfect from every angle. I should know. I studied it a *lot* growing up. His eyes are bright green. Maybe that's it, but the green becomes a raging fire in other lights—ready for violence and prepared to do what has to be done for the club. He's not just Kai's best friend. He's his right-hand man.

If I acted on these feelings, I'd ruin a friendship *and* put the club at risk. It's a good thing he'd never want me.

[>One-click Riding My Brother's Best Friend<](#)

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