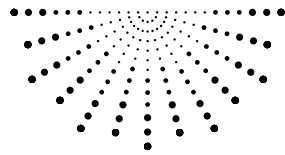


*Secret  
Baby* for  
my  
PROTECTOR

OLIVIA JADE

SECRET BABY FOR MY PROTECTOR  
A BROTHER'S BEST FRIEND, BILLIONAIRE ROMANCE



OLIVIA JADE

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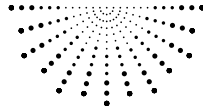
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## MIA



THE CRACK OF THE PUCK HAS MY HEART SINKING IN MY STOMACH.

*It's going to go in the net.* I've watched this game enough to know that there's no one close enough to guard the puck or prevent it from skidding into the net, particularly at that angle. Even for professionals, it'd be difficult to stop the puck. But for nine to twelve-year-olds, it's going to be impossible.

*He* knows it too, from the look on his face, as he silently surveys his team. His tall, muscular frame is encased in basketball shorts and a tank top, despite the chill in the room. Then again former hockey legend Luke Hardy has been at home on the rink since he was practically in diapers.

Luke is a lot of things now – billionaire, philanthropist, perpetual thorn in my side - but above all, he's the man who won Hart Memorial Trophy and then retired from hockey the year later. He's a man who knows the entire world is ready to kiss his ass and he's not afraid to take advantage of it.

He's a man I would've preferred to never meet again.

Unfortunately, he's also my brother's best friend and because of that, he's near impossible to avoid. As the coach of my son's rival little league team, Luke's been the bane of my existence.

I'm proven right when the puck flies past the goal line, barely skimming the inside edge of the goal frame. The team in red roars out their victory, and they skate around high-fiving each other. The team in blue lets out several groans and a few of them hang their heads in defeat. One red-haired kid tosses his hockey stick on the ice and stalks off the ice declaring, "I'm sick of this!"

His father sighs beside me. He has identical curly hair to his son and it's sticking up at ends from how much he ran his hands through it. This entire

game has been a nail-biter, to say the least. I put a hand to his shoulder sympathetically but he's watching his son head toward the changing room.

"Brandon, the game's not over," he calls out weakly, but the boy ignores him and walks through the doors, letting them slam closed behind him.

James Harwell, Brandon's dad, sends me an apologetic look but I shake my head. I understand Brandon's feelings. We all feel the same way, watching the extremely unbalanced game that's happening before our eyes. To be honest it's a surprise that more of the kids haven't walked off the pitch yet.

"I'll go get him," James says.

"Why bother?" Arthur, another parent, counters in a tone trembling with anger. "Even with a fully functional team, there's no way they're catching up to the scores now."

"It's not over yet," I say. "We still have some time." And while fifteen minutes isn't a lot of time, it's enough to hope that we can somehow pull a win in this and turn things around. Because if the kids don't win this, it's going to be an uphill battle and damn near impossible for them to qualify for the finals.

"You think *he's* going to let that happen?" Arthur says sardonically, and I know exactly who he's talking about. I peek his way.

Luke seems to sense my perusal because he glances up and our eyes meet. Awareness skitters over my skin at his dark gaze, and I hate the little smirk that pushes up the corner of his lips. I especially hate the way it makes me feel, that tremble deep in the pit of my belly. I tell myself that it's only loathing and annoyance I feel for him, but I'm not delusional enough to convince myself that it's true.

"Look at him," Arthur continues in a bitter tone. "He's so smug about it. He knows he has us by the balls."

"We should report him," Jill, the only other mother in attendance today says with a sniff. "He can't keep getting away with what he's doing. It's damn near criminal."

"Don't you think you guys are taking this a little too seriously?" This is from Rodney Gomez, the owner of the grocery store next to my bakery shop. He waves at his son on the ice before he continues. "It's a little league game. As long as the kids have fun, who cares?"

"But they're not having fun," Arthur points out. "They work so hard for that championship and they're playing their asses off today, but they don't

stand a chance because that damn cheat won't honor the damn code of ethics."

The code of ethics is the set of rules established by the district to keep things fair. You see, our district is kind of a mix of everything. There are low-income and high-income neighborhoods, and everything in between, but these kids aren't supposed to know that. We wanted these games to be as fair as possible so, long ago, the parents signed a petition that brought a code of ethics in to maintain equity in the games. The kids had to use the same kind of equipment and environment so that no one team had an unfair advantage. The training times also had to be similar. The coach of each team had to be a parent, not a pro coach or anything like that.

Even though he's an ex-pro hockey player, technically Luke is also a parent of another boy on his team so he can be a coach. He also blatantly and shamelessly bought all the members of his team new uniforms, new skates, and new gear, which seems to have drastically improved their performance.

No one has complained because Luke presumably has people on the board willing to back him and no one is willing to take on the repercussions against a man that powerful. Plus, some of the parents on Luke's team have more or less subtly threatened to make life very difficult for us if we do.

Which means that we're stuck with this.

I can understand the rest of the parent's frustration, but I don't want it to become the focus of the games. As a coach, I don't want the kids to see us losing hope, so I say, "Come on guys. It's not over yet. Let's just keep encouraging the boys, okay?"

"You think our kids are stupid, coach?" Arthur sneers. "You think they don't see what's going on?"

"That's enough," James shoots back. "No need to be snarky. She's just trying to help."

I shoot James a thankful smile and he returns it. James is the only other single parent on the team, apart from me, and as such, we have something of a friendship. Well, maybe not the kind of friends that call each other often or hang out, but we do talk every time we're together. I know that he still loves and misses his wife terribly, even after she's been gone for years.

It's so sweet to think about. Sometimes, I imagine what it would be like to experience a love like that.

"I have to go after Brandon," he says. "We have to at least finish the game."



“That’s not necessary,” I tell him. “I think he needs a few minutes alone. He’s just a kid after all.”

"Regardless. I think this is supposed to be a teaching moment for him. Yes, things are unfair and things don't always work out how you want them to but that doesn't mean you can throw a tantrum and walk off. You can call a time-out while I go get him."

“Ok. Let me know if you need anything,” I tell him, and he nods as he heads around the rink to the break room.

The game is still ongoing even with one player down, but nothing has been scored yet. I gesture to Luke, making a time-out sign and he cocks an eyebrow and mouths, *why would I?*

I roll my eyes. Of course, he would make even this difficult.

I wonder if that’s why he started coaching his team in the first place. Just to mess with me. I wouldn’t put it past him. While most billionaires seem content with traveling the world and enjoying exclusive experiences Luke seems to draw the most pleasure from making me mad.

I refuse to entertain him today and just call out, "Time out guys. Let’s take a breather."

The boys on my team stop immediately but the other team is still playing, skating with the puck. They look back to Luke for confirmation and only start moving toward the bleachers when he nods.

Chase, my son, head straight to me. He’s wearing the same morose expression on his face as all the other boys, but I paste a smile on mine for him. “How are you doing, champ?”

“Feel like a loser,” he mutters, and it breaks my heart because he’s so far from that. I feel the same intense anger that Arthur has. Chase has worked so hard for this, and Luke, with his cheating ways, is taking it away from him.

“You're not a loser baby,” I tell him. “Never.”

“Well, we *are* losing, and my feet hurt.” He gestures to his skates and guilt pounds through me. I was supposed to get him new skates. He grows out of them so fast, and money’s been tight lately.

“Alright,” I tell him. “We’ll buy new skates after this is done.” I’ll find the money somehow.

“It won’t help unless they’re like those,” he gestures to the other team’s shiny skates, courtesy of their coach.

"The game's not over yet" I tell him. “Just do your best, ok?”

My son sighs but he doesn't tear his eyes away from the other team for a

long minute. They're gathered around Luke listening intently to his every word.

"You think we can still turn this around?" he asks.

"Of course," I say, and he risks a tiny smile.

Sometimes hope is the best and worst thing you can give someone. Even after the game resumes when Brandon comes back, it's still tough. The boys manage to eke out 1 more goal, but the other team levels it out with two.

My nerves are in my throat, the more I watch and pray for a miracle. There are only a few minutes left in the game, and I want to stick it out, but my famously finicky bladder doesn't let me. I leave my co-coach, James, in charge, and hurry around the rink, down the hallway searching for a bathroom.

"Looking for something?"

I spin around. Luke is standing behind me. He's so large his frame blocks the light from behind him and I have to crane my neck as he walks closer.

"I'm just going to the bathroom," I say.

"Oh," he responds, voice as silky as his gaze. "And here I thought you were up to something more interesting, like a planned rendezvous with your lover."

"A what?"

"Don't think I didn't notice the way the two of you were making googly eyes at each other the entire game," he says smirking. "I gotta say I'm a little disappointed. I thought Billy meant more to you than that."

I bite back a sharp response as the full weight of his insinuation floods me with anger. My lover? Is he talking about James? Does he think something is going on between the two of us?

Where on earth did he get that idea?

And about Billy...well, that's simpler to explain. Luke thinks I'm still together with my ex. I haven't corrected that assumption because for now, it's better for me to let him believe that.

Better for me *and* Chase.

"Maybe if you focused more your team will be better off," Luke adds.

My rage spikes. "My team would be better off if your team would play fair. If *you* would play fair." I amend the last part because I can't blame his team for it. They're only kids.

It's Luke who's to blame.

"I always play fair," he says, and I notice he's closer than I would like. I

try to take a step back, but then my feet trip over some stray gear laying in the middle of the floor.

I yelp a little, but Luke catches me in time, bringing me close to his chest.

"Easy there," he murmurs, and his voice does unspeakable things to my insides, running right to my pussy.

*Why on earth am I still attracted to this asshole?*

My heart races from his proximity. He's so close. His eyes run down my face, pausing at my lips. They darken.

Lust pulses through me. I should put a stop to this, push him away but I can't.

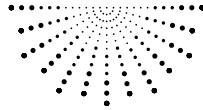
"He's dating other people," Luke tells me.

"Who?" I answered dumbly.

"The moron you were talking to," he says. "I just thought you should know."

And then he's gone.

## LUKE



THE FINAL WHISTLE SOUNDS AND THERE'S A LOT OF ELATION.

At least on my side of the court. The parents are all excited about the win and the boys doubly so. They drop their hockey sticks and run for me, ecstatic sounds falling from their mouth as they all try to hug me at the same time.

"Alright, alright, settle down," I say loud enough to be heard over their chatter. "Hey, no shoving. And you all smell worse than sweaty pigs, by the way."

They all giggle rather than take offense. They chorus, "Thank you, Coach Hardy!"

"Luke," I correct. "Coach Hardy was my dad."

But I don't think they hear me much with the rush of sounds and pre-pubescent chatter. I smile at their excitement. Before I took over the team, I was told that they were one of the worst in the district. They were coached by another parent who was all about team sports and giving every damn person a participation trophy. Plus, they had horrible gear.

But in less than a year, everything has pretty much turned around. I guess by winning this game, they're now the favorite to win the championship.

And even though a little league hockey championship isn't much in the grand scheme of things, I can't help but be happy for them and pleased that I helped them achieve this.

Plus, a little guilty because I didn't intend to make them the best team in the district. Initially, I didn't even care about making them all that good. I became a coach for the team for one reason and one reason only.

I glance up to see my son, Mikey, trailing behind the rest of the kids. He

stops a little before the throng and even though his expression doesn't change much, I can tell he's not sure what to do next. He wants to approach me, but he doesn't like crowds especially squealing messy crowds like the children currently crawling all over me.

He holds his hockey stick in one hand and scratches his ear with another. Even though I'm looking right at him, he doesn't make eye contact, instead focusing his gaze somewhere just beyond my shoulder. But I know by the slight curl of his lip that he wants to talk to me.

"Alright, break it up," I say, clapping my hands loudly enough so that the kids rear back and cover their ears. "Go see your parents. I'm pretty sure they'll appreciate your sweaty hugs a lot more than I do."

"See you later Coach Hardy!" A couple of them call out as they run for the bleachers.

"Luke," I correct offhandedly approaching my son. I squat down a little, but he still doesn't look into my eyes when I ask, "You doing okay, Buddy?"

He nods. Tamara, his aunt, told me that Mikey said his first word when he was nearly two years old. He said his second nearly two months later. It's been several years since then and my son still isn't much of a talker.

He tries to get his point across in as few words as possible.

Like now, he gestures to me with his hockey stick, and I take it from him. Then he takes my hand but only for a moment. I thank God anyway, for that little mercy. It's only been recently, after several rounds of therapy, that Mikey can initiate touch in a way that's comfortable for him.

"Wanna go home?" I ask because I know that's what he intends to say, by taking my hand.

He nods again.

"You sure you don't want to stick around for a little bit, maybe say goodbye to your friends?"

He doesn't smile but I have a feeling that he thinks I've said a joke as much as it breaks my heart to think about what the joke is. The whole idea of me coaching this team in the first place is because I thought it would be a good opportunity for Mikey to make friends. His therapist suggested it in the first place, and I thought it made sense because sports has always been how I made the majority of my friends.

And a young boy needs friends. Even one who is as prone to solitude as Mikey.

I know most of the time, he enjoys his alone time, and spending time with

just me. But sometimes, I see him look at other kids walking together and playing, and I can just sense the loneliness in his eyes. I can feel that he wants that, but he's just not sure how to get it.

And what better way to form camaraderie between two people than to put them on the same team?

I thought it would be as simple as that.

So far though, my plans have been falling far short of genius.

Because so far, Mikey is still zero for zero on the friendship score. I think I'll have to try something different but that's a problem for another day.

"Alright," I say. "Let's get home." I stand and he lets his hand take mine again. As we walk, I catch a glance at the other side of the court where the other team is leaving. Mia and her son are standing and talking but she looks up suddenly and our eyes meet.

For a charged moment, I remember back in the hallway, with her body against mine. I almost felt the whisper of her lips underneath mine. I almost kissed her. *Man, why the fuck did I even do that?*

Mia and I have a complicated relationship to say the least. There are so many layers to it, but the chief of those layers is that she's my best friend's sister. Liam made it abundantly clear to me that she was off-limits. That was years ago when Mia was blossoming into the beautiful woman she is today. Still, I know that any attempt to get with Mia would mean forgoing my friendship with her brother and I'm not willing to lose Liam over a good time.

Even though I've already betrayed him once.

I shake the thought off, but it's not as easy to shake off the memory of the feel of her lips under mine. Even though she didn't kiss me back this time, I still recall how her kisses felt like a heated aphrodisiac; how her taste sent me through the roof.

The thought is quickly replaced by the memory of her talking to that man, smiling at him during the game. I told myself it was none of my business, but I still couldn't stop myself from approaching her and clarifying the nature of their relationship.

My phone rings the minute I get to the car, and I check the caller ID.

Speak of the devil...

"Yo," I answer as I climb into the car. I hear Mikey get in on the other side and I switch the phone to Bluetooth mode so that the sounds come through in the speaker. "What's going on?"

“Not much. What’s going on with you buddy? How are things?” Liam is his usual cheerful self and I know he wouldn't be if he knew the directions of my thoughts towards his sister.

“Not much either. Just finished the Little League game. We won, obviously.”

Liam snickers. “That’s a great buddy. But it’s just ironic to me that you of all people, who swore never to go back to hockey, ended up exactly like your old man, teaching little league.”

“Shut up,” I tell him. I’m only doing this temporarily. At least until Mikey finds a solid group of friends. “Anyway, today we played your sister’s team.”

“Oh? That’s who you won against? No doubt I’ll be hearing all about that today.”

I chuckle. “I bet.” Liam knows all about his sister’s and my animosity. We’ve done our best to get on each other's nerves ever since we found out we live next to each other, and played a lot of pranks through the years. Liam has always pretended not to like our little squabbles but I think a part of him gets a kick out of our fights.

And the best thing is that despite her innocent blue eyes and sunshine appearance, the little spitfire gives as good as she gets.

“Speaking of my sister how is she? She doing ok?” he asks.

“You know you could just ask her, right?” I say wryly, shifting the car into drive.

“I mean I could, but I don’t know that she’ll tell me the truth. You know how she is with her pride and her independence insisting she can take care of herself.”

Yeah, that sounds like Mia alright. “Well, we didn’t exactly have a heart to heart but she looked fine to me.” I remember once more the way she smiled up at that man, the intimate way she touched his arm. “Would probably be better if that military man of hers came back though.”

“Who, Billy?”

“Yeah.” I recall his name because they dated throughout high school. The two were practically so attached at the hip that it was confusing to everyone when they broke up. Of course, the break-up was only brief, and they got back together sometime after he left for the military. “He is the father of her child. At least he should come back and see the boy once in a while.” In my opinion, even the military was no excuse for being a deadbeat.

"Yeah, you're right. I've tried telling her the same thing, but she won't hear it from me. Luckily, I think his enlistment should be over soon."

"Good," I remark, even though I'm not entirely sure how I feel about that news.

"But in the meantime, watch out for her. Make sure no other asshole gets his claws in her. You know how softhearted she can be."

"Aye aye captain," I tell him even though truly, the claw he has to worry about may be mine.

After I get home, Mikey wordlessly heads to the bathroom to wash up and I head to my study to read my emails.

Most of them are from my accountants and there are a few business matters to take care of. But the one that draws my attention. It's short and to the point and from a Hotmail account of all things.

*Mr. Hardy,*

*Thanks for the offer. But no thanks.*

*Regards,*

*Victor Thames.*

I sigh at the email, annoyance crinkling my eyebrows.

Another rejection. Damn.

I've been trying to get a meeting with Victor Thames for a week now, but the old geezer doesn't so much as want to talk on the phone. He runs a charity, Bleeding Hands, that helps rehabilitate injured and homeless vets in the area. It's a charity that has been struggling to get donations for a while because they have an imperfect and outdated system that frustrates anyone who even attempts to donate.

Of course, I could solve their problem easily. If only the old bastard agreed to meet me.

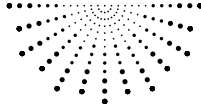
"What the fuck is his problem?" I mutter. Does he not want to be helped?

I sigh. So many problems, so little time.

Hopefully, a session in my gym can help me sort out my thoughts.

And forget the feeling of Mia's lips under mine.





“HE’S CHEATING, LIAM,” I TELL MY BROTHER OVER THE PHONE WHILE stirring agitatedly. “Blatantly. And everyone’s just letting him get away with it.”

“Settle down,” Liam’s amused tone sounds in my ears, “or you’re in for the saddest chocolate chip cookies you’ve ever seen in your life.”

I pause and then ask, “How do you know what I’m baking?”

“Um...because I lived with you for eighteen years,” he says in a 'duh' voice. “And I know that whenever you get super mad you start baking up a storm.”

“I mean, yeah,” I say glancing down at dough in the bowl. He’s not wrong. “But how did you know they were specifically chocolate chip?”

“Oh. Lucky guess.” I can almost hear the shrug in his voice. “I figure you would be making something to cheer the kids up and nothing cheers them up quite like chocolate chip cookies.”

I sigh. Yeah, it’s also Chase’s favorite dessert. Although to be honest, I’m not sure even chocolate chip cookies can cheer my son up today. He didn’t say more than two words to me the entire car ride and the second we got home, he went up to his room and locked the door. I’m trying to give him some space to process what just happened, but I just want to get in there and hold him tight. My heart is breaking for him.

I almost wish I didn’t introduce him to this damn sport in the first place. He loves hockey so much but seeing him like this is destroying me.

But no. The sport isn’t the problem. Because I know that Chase isn’t actually upset about the loss. His team has lost before, and my son is always a good sport about it because he knows that he lost to a better team.

But losing to last year's worst team in the district must be a blow. And Chase is a pretty smart kid. He must know that the only reason why he's losing is because the other team has superior gear which I can't afford.

I can't imagine how heartbreaking it must be to know that you tried your absolute best and it still wasn't enough. It still will never be enough.

Before I called Liam, I looked up the cost of the new hockey blades he talked about. Just one pair will be over two hundred bucks and I'll need to buy them again, next season, because of how quickly he outgrows them. And a better performing stick is nearly two-hundred dollars. It's criminal.

For kids! How on earth does anyone expect any average parent, in this economy, to afford that?

*Any parent that isn't Luke Hardy that is.*

That's probably why he bought it for his team. Because he knew it would be difficult for any other parent to catch up.

*Why did that damn bastard have to move back into town? And why has he stayed so long?*

Typically, Luke is the kind of person who can't stay in one place for too long. Even after he retired from hockey, he kept on traveling from place to place, never staying anywhere for more than six months, according to Liam.

But then this year, he moved back to Redwood California, and started renovating his parent's house next door, causing a giant inconvenience to the rest of the street might I add. He turned his folk's cute, idyllic cottage into a several-story, ultra-modern monstrosity that sucked out all charm in the neighborhood. Not to mention, it ruined my view of the ocean.

And yes, we complained to the city board and the homeowner's association, but it did nothing because Luke probably shut them up with money or his connections.

I tolerated it because I figured he would move soon. He can never stay in a place for more than a few months. But it's been a year already. How much longer must I tolerate the infuriating billionaire next door?

Maybe my brother will know.

"When's he leaving town?" I ask Liam.

"What makes you think he's leaving?" Liam asks still sounding amused by the entire thing.

"Because he always leaves," I say. "He's usually just in town for a few months and then he's jet-setting to one of his other houses. I mean don't get me wrong I love Redwood but there isn't much to do here, and it's not close

enough to San Diego to make it feel like a real city. Doesn't he want to go somewhere like New York or LA..." *Or to the other end of the earth?*

"I don't know, Mia. I think you'd probably have to ask him about his travel plans yourself. Or maybe he wants to settle down. Maybe he's tired of moving so much."

"A leopard never changes its stripes," I tell him, and Liam chuckles.

Then I'm distracted by the sound of movement from upstairs. Chase.

"You ok sweetie?" I call from downstairs. "You need something?"

There's no answer, and my heart feels like it's cracking from the inside out. I feel so helpless to aid my son right now in what he's going through. I can only talk and give him words of encouragement as always, but I think he's tired of them.

"Hey, he'll be fine," Liam says as though he can sense the direction of my thoughts. "If he's serious about hockey, then this isn't going to be his last loss. He needs to learn how to deal with it."

"Yeah, but it's just about the unfairness of it all," I sigh, and then a thought occurs to me. A thought that I haven't let myself dwell on in the past, but with my son's pain aching in the air, I want to give it a chance. "Hey, you don't by any chance know any of your former hockey buddies who live close by, who aren't?"

"Why?" Liam feigns ignorance but I can tell he knows exactly what I'm about to ask, even as it chafes me to ask it.

"I just..." I shrug. "Maybe it would help Chase...and the team if they got some tips from actual hockey players."

Liam gasps dramatically. "But that's cheating. Doesn't that go against the code of ethics?"

I roll my eyes. "Come on, Liam, it's not like I'm asking you to get them a session with pros. Maybe just former high school hockey players, those who didn't go pro. And they don't have to help me coach or anything, but one session talking to the boys might help."

I talk a good game but none of my excuses assuage the guilt I'm feeling for even asking that.

"Hmm," my brother remarks.

"Come on Liam, we need to level the playing field. Otherwise, the boys won't stand a chance at the championships."

"Yes, but isn't that the same thing you're angry at Luke for doing?"

"No, it's different," I say.

“I agree. Because he’s not bringing in external forces to train the kids like you’re asking me to. Something that’s strictly against your code of ethics.”

“He’s buying them superior equipment!”

“Oh my Gosh, really? Start the witch hunt then.”

I giggle a little, despite everything. “You’re an ass sometimes, Liam.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard. Listen, you sleep on it and if you still want me to call someone tomorrow, I’ll see what I can do. Although, I didn’t keep in touch with most of the people in high school and I wasn’t exactly the favorite on the team either. You’d probably be better off asking Luke for those contacts.”

“Never,” I say. *Even if he was the last hockey player on earth.*

“I thought you might say that,” Liam chuckles. “Anyway, I gotta go. Think about what I said. And tell my nephew that I was far suckier at hockey than he is, and look how well my life turned out.” Liam is now working as an investment banker in New York and enjoys his job a lot.

“I won’t tell him that,” I say. “He thinks you work one of the most boring jobs in the world. That would only depress him more.”

“Brat,” he says.

“Ass,” I say affectionately, and then we hang up. That’s typical for my brother and me. We never really say hellos or goodbyes. We simply end the conversation when one of us is ready to.

As I leave the dough to chill, I creep upstairs and knock on the door tentatively.

“Chase,” I say. “Baby, are you ok?”

“I’m fine,” he says shortly.

“Are you sure? I’m making some chocolate chip cookies if you want -”

“I don’t want anything. I just need to be alone for a little.”

My heart cracks a little more and sudden anger shoots through me. This isn’t fair. It’s not fair that my son is hurting and I’m tired of standing back.

Something needs to be done about this.

Without thinking, I head downstairs and throw open the front door. Liam was right. I can’t flout the rules like Luke does, or it would make me just as bad as him. But I don’t intend to let him keep doing what he’s doing. He’s going to stop. Or else.

I pause, examining a note that’s sitting on my front porch. I reach down and pick up the paper.

*Warning,* it reads.

*Who left this here? Luke? Is this another of his stupid pranks?*

*I'm so sick of him!*

I watch his imposing mansion and storm toward it. I glare at the row of cars in his driveway including the large Aston Martin glittering in the sun. Who on earth gets a car like that in this neighborhood? Who does he think he's showing off for?

The house is silent when I walk in, and I take a moment to survey the large open-concept living room, beige with royal blue accents. It looks like the ultimate bachelor pad with several gaming stations in front of a large TV and I shake my head in disgust.

I hear grunting sounds coming from below, and I recall him mentioning that he has a basement gym. That's probably where he is.

"Luke?" I call.

No answer.

I sigh and begin down the spiral stairs that allow me into a spacious gym, decked out with all the latest equipment and what seems like dozens of different types of weights.

Luke's jogging on the treadmill, shirtless, with headphones over his ears.

I freeze and nearly swallow my tongue. My eyes run over the smooth skin, gleaming with a light mist of sweat. He's built like a demigod, wide in the shoulders with lean sculpted muscles covering all six feet, four inches of him. Abs are cut and trail down to the V that disappears into his shorts.

And those shorts, hanging low on his hips give more than a hint of what could be beneath.

But before I can fantasize too much, I hear Luke say, "Mia?"

I instantly snap straight, meeting his amused eyes as he takes off his headphones. The treadmill rolls to a stop, and he steps off, walking to me. I take a step back. His scent, his aura is overwhelming – I don't trust myself right now.

"Like what you see?" he teases in that low voice of his.

I feel myself blush. "Hardly. I came to talk to you about something important."

"So, talk." He leans against the wall and smirks in that irritating way of his.

"You need to stop what you're doing, or I'm going to report you."

"What is it that I'm doing exactly?"

"With the team," I say. "You're violating the code of ethics."

"The what?"

*Does he really not know?* "The code of ethics? You know those rules they tell you when you become coach, the protocol that keeps everything fair for the kids? I mean you're buying your kids high-grade equipment and skates that the other parents just can't afford. Luke, you can't think that's fair."

"Life isn't fair," he shrugs. "I don't know why my kids should suffer, just because other people can't get nice things."

Oh, the asshole. "Fine. Then I guess you leave me no choice but to report you to the district."

"Do what you want. But you know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think you didn't actually come here to threaten me." He takes another step closer, deep in my personal space, but I don't step back. I don't want to cower before him.

"Oh?" I raise an eyebrow, mockingly. "What, you think I came here for your sparkling personality?"

"I think you enjoy my personality a lot more than you want to," he whispers, and his face is even closer. Dangerously close, eyes glittering with that dark desire again.

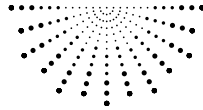
*Leave.*

I should step back now. Retreat.

I don't.

His lips turn up at the corners and his arm wraps around my waist, pulling me into a kiss.

## LUKE



I TASTE THE SURPRISE ON MIA'S LIPS FIRST, AS HER HANDS FLY UP TO MY chest.

I think she's going to push me away - and I'm ready to let her go when she does - but she just rests her hands there, no pressure applied. There's a single thought as to why she doesn't reject my kiss, but it vanishes as I'm occupied with the sensation of her lips under mine.

*God, it's been so long.*

Warning bells sound at the back of my mind, ordering me to get a hold of myself, but it's impossible as her taste spreads through my system. Kissing her is so wrong but damn if I can bring myself to care right now. Not with her lips soft, underneath mine, her scent like spring on a rainy day. Not with the way she makes a little sound, her hand fluttering and fanning out to my chest.

And then just like that her lips part in an invitation that I cannot resist. I moan into her mouth as my tongue pushes forward, delving deeper into her taste. Sweet. Innocent.

Fuck, I want more.

I lick her tongue, teasing it into a sensual dance, swallowing more of her lusty sounds in my mouth. My heart thunders in my ears, as the kiss becomes more passionate, more desperate, blocking out the cries of common sense. My hand wraps around her waist and I pull her closer, one hand burying in her hair to keep her still as I plunder her lips. Fuck she tastes so good. Better than anything I've ever tasted before in my life.

And though I know this was supposed to just be a kiss, her little gasps spur me on harder, to do more.

*Stop.*

The warning goes unheeded as I my lips travel to her neck. I taste her skin, dewy, and sweaty, and draw pleasure from the way her pulse thunders under my lips.

*She's feeling the same hunger that I've felt for the past year. She wants this too.*

"Oh my God," Mia gasps again and her hand flies to my shoulder gripping it as I suckle hard on the skin of her neck. I haven't given a girl a hickey in a long time, and I'm not entirely sure if that's what I intend to do here, or if it just happened. There's little rhyme or reason to my actions right now. My mind is currently a mass of lust and it's hard to think much besides how good she tastes all over.

And how much I want to keep kissing her until the two of us can't breathe.

"Stop." Mia's strained voice comes between breaths. "We have to stop."

I don't know how but by some herculean feat of strength, I pull back. It takes me a minute to figure out why. She said no. But her eyes are still glazed with desire, her face flushed, and her mouth pursed and begging for my lips again. She's still subtly trying to bring me closer.

I want to kiss her again, but I hold it there.

Something's wrong. I can't do this. Not with Mikey upstairs and not with her.

As much as it kills me to, I hold her gaze, stiffening all my muscles to keep from pulling her close again. But I can't let her go just yet. I don't have it in me.

She's the one who ends up breaking the contact.

I see the second the awareness slams into her and she gasps and bolts out of my arms nearing falling over in the effort the get away from me. I chuckle as she stumbles a few feet away and then glances back at me in horror.

"What did you do?"

"What did I do?" I raise an eyebrow. "Last I checked, you were kissing me the same way I was kissing you."

"Yes but...oh my God." She gapes at me and horror enters her gaze. "You did that to distract me, didn't you? So, I wouldn't call the district on you?"

No, I kissed her because she looked so sexy when she was mad and I couldn't stand it, but I don't say it. Giving word to the desire between us



might only make things worse. And if she stays here any longer, I'm pretty sure I'll kiss her again, my vow to Liam be damned.

She needs to leave.

"Think whatever you want." I give her one of those smirks that seem to irritate her so much. "But unless you want us to fuck right here on the floor, you should probably head back home."

Annoyance flashes in her eyes and I nearly groan at the memory of those eyes flashing with passion again. Staying in place, right now, is about to get the better of me if she doesn't leave.

But then she shakes her head and says, "You'll pay for everything. I won't let this go that easily. I swear."

Then she spins around and heads back up the stairs. A few seconds later, I hear the front door close.

Only then do I release the breath I'm holding.

Fuck I can still smell her. Her spring scent is still in my nose and it's urging me to go after her, so that we can continue what we started.

It's only after a full minute that I finally move.

I spot a white piece of paper on the floor, the one she stormed in here with. I pick it up examining the word on it. *Warning*.

Did she write that for me?

I toss it in the trash can, and head back to the treadmill, harder than I've ever been in my life.

Tough shit, I tell myself. You're just going to have to run her out of your system because kissing Mia is a mistake that I can't afford to make again.

\* \* \*

I'M ON THE ICE A WEEK LATER WHEN I GET THE CALL.

It's odd because even in high school, I was never the type to think that hockey was my entire life. It was a sport I was good at, and at the time, it didn't distract me from my other hobbies, so I went along with it. Plus, my dad was the hockey coach at our high school so it only made sense for his son to be the star of the team.

And then when I went pro, hockey made me a lot of money, and enabled me to travel, which I loved.

But even early on, I knew I wasn't going to do it for very long. Not

because I thought I'd get injured, but because I knew I'd get bored of it eventually. I'm the type to lose interest in things easily, and hitting pucks eventually got old. Still, I stuck it out until I made enough money to comfortably attempt other investments.

Everyone thought I was crazy because I retired at the height of my career, when they were offering me tens of millions of dollars to stay.

But now, having made over ten times that in the last few years, I knew I was right to leave. After all, I wouldn't have built and patented a successful design if I hadn't.

Regardless, even though hockey isn't my life, I do miss it occasionally. Which is why a few of the guys from high school, who happen to be in town, and I, gather on the ice and play a friendly game for a few hours.

A game I'm currently winning.

That is until the goalie, Jason, yells, "Luke! Phone!"

I nod my assent and glide over to where my clothes are, ruffling into my pocket to find my phone. I frown at the unknown number and almost decide to let it go to voicemail but then slowly answer it.

"Hello?"

"Hello. Mr. Hardy? This is Grace Jones, from the head of the Little League Pomona district."

"Yeah?" I hold the phone with my shoulder as I take off my gloves. "How can I help you?"

"We've received word that there have been several violations from your team when it comes to the code of ethics."

*Wait, that's a real thing? I halfway thought Mia just made that up.* "Is that so?"

"Yes. I'm afraid that we will have to investigate the matter and I'm just calling to inform you of that and apologize in advance for any inconvenience caused."

"No that's cool," I say. "But just out of curiosity, what happens after you investigate?"

"Well, depending on the severity of the violations, you're looking at either a fine, suspension, or ban, if it's found that you've repeatedly and knowingly gone against the code of ethics."

"Right." Fuck. I thought this whole thing was a joke at first, but it actually sounds serious.

*Can they do that?*

That was the last thing I wanted. Not because I'm so enamored with coaching the team, but because if I lose the team, I don't know how Mikey will interact with kids his age.

And I also don't want the other kids to lose out on playing the game either. I remember their happy shouts as they won the last game. And now, I might have ruined it for them.

*"You'll pay for this."*

The memory of Mia's warning reverberates in my mind. She did this. She fucking reported me and then *this* happened.

"You can meet with me during the week to discuss anything else," Grace says. "Any questions?"

"Not right now. Thanks for calling though."

"No problem."

I hang up and feel anger spiraling through me. Without thinking, I take off my skates and slide into my shoes, storming out and ignoring the calls of my friends behind me.

I walk, rather than drive, since Mia's bakery is just around the corner from the ice rink. The boys were even talking about going there after our game.

The bakery is relatively empty as I storm in. Mia is behind the counter, frowning down at an iPad. She glances up and her eyes instantly trail down my chest, heat flushing her face. Oh, that's right, I forgot to put on my shirt. I skate shirtless most of the time, because I naturally run hot, and it seems that Mia's having a hard time looking away.

I draw satisfaction from that, at least, and ignore the desire that punches through me as she swallows.

Instead, I watch her and wait until she manages to drag her eyes back to mine.

"You're not allowed in here," she says. "Remember? I banned you last year after you pulled that little prank last time."

I frown at her description of the event. That wasn't a prank. I came in after one of my games, with the guys, to have some dessert. Then a few die-hard puck bunnies stalked me here, flashed me their tits, and then ran off giggling. A few other people were in the bakery at the time, and they were outraged, of course. But I found the whole thing hilarious. There were no kids around, so I didn't understand why anyone would get their panties in a wad.

Of course, Mia had no sense of humor about the whole thing and banned

me from her bakery. I should talk to her about that actually, but right now, I'm not in the mood to reminisce.

"Did you really report me to the head of the district?"

"Yes," she says unrepentantly. "I told you I would, didn't I?"

"Yeah?" I lean over the counter, with my elbows on it. "Well, the district head just called me and now she's talking about shutting down the team entirely."

Surprise flashes across her expression but she sticks her chin up. "Well, that wasn't my intention, but you should've known that could happen with what you were doing. You were blatantly cheating, or at the very least flouting the rules, even after I warned you what could happen."

"Cheating?" I say as the anger builds inside me. "How the fuck did I cheat?"

"You bought your team gear that wasn't on the approved list. They're far better than anything any other team can afford and give an unfair advantage so your team can win."

"I didn't buy anyone something so they could win," I say, exasperated. "I bought it so the other parents would let my child on the team."

"Ah, so nepotism makes it okay then?"

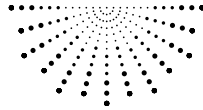
"Oh, get off your fucking high horse. It's little league."

Her eyes flash too. "It's not just little league. Some of those kids work their ass off to get where they are. What kind of lesson are we teaching them by allowing this kind of blatant disregard for the rules?"

"Jesus, I didn't do this as a whole conspiracy to win, damn it! I just want my kid to have friends."

There's a beat of silence and her eyes soften a little. "Oh. I didn't know."

"Yeah. And thanks to you, everyone on the team is going to hate his guts."



I TRY NOT TO FEEL IT, BUT THE GUILT SLAMS INTO ME ANYWAY, AT HIS statement.

Truthfully, I meant what I said, that I never meant for it to go this far, when I made the report. I hoped a warning would be enough to stop Luke from what he was doing, and then the kids could start competing on an even playing field again.

But I should've known that this was a possibility and should've considered the children on the other team before I did it.

God, is Luke's team really going to be shut down because of me?

No, I tell myself. It's only a first offense. They never do anything that extreme for a first offense.

Luke blows out a breath, running his hand through his hair in a way that causes it to tussle around his face, in an almost boyish way. Even though he and my brother are 36, eight years older than me, he always looked younger. Especially right now, with the hint of vulnerability behind the frustration in his eyes.

I've never seen him like this. Probably because this isn't just about him. He's thinking about his son, the same way I made the decision thinking about mine.

"Did they say they're shutting down the team for good?" I ask, feeling my heart ache. Part of me wishes I'd never made the report in the first place.

He doesn't look at me, still staring thoughtfully into the air. At first, I don't think he's going to reply but then he shakes his head. "No. But they're running an investigation and if it concludes that my violation is bad enough, then they just might."

“I don’t think they will,” I say. “It’s a first violation. You’ll probably just be let off with a warning and may just have to pay a fine.”

“Hopefully. Because if the team gets shut down, it’s going to affect Mikey more than anything.”

I remember the sweet-faced, quiet little boy and feel my heart prick. “Does he love hockey that much?”

Luke meets my eyes and considers it for a little bit then shrugs. “He likes it about as much as he likes anything else. But it’s the one social activity he has and I’m afraid if he loses it - ”

Worry reflects in his eyes.

I walk around the counter. I don’t know what I mean to do, but I want to comfort him. It’s such a strange thing because I’ve never thought in terms of comforting this man before but here we are.

I stop when I get close though. Hugging him seems out of the question so I awkwardly pat his back.

The minute our skin touches, I nearly gasp. It’s like a sizzle goes through the atmosphere, running through my body, reminding me that he’s shirtless and sweaty and distractingly sexy.

Luke gives me a weak smirk as though he can tell what I’m thinking.

“Mikey’s autistic,” he explains. “The therapist suggested that he join some kind of organized social activity because he needs to learn to interact with kids his age.”

“Ah.” I suspected from my brief observation of the boy, that he was autistic. I remember it was a few months ago when I took the cupcakes to his class for a reading event. Mikey was the very last one to come forward and take a cupcake, when he did, he hesitated off to the side.

“Do you want some?” I asked, gesturing to him. He uncomfortably glanced between somewhere in the center of my body and the cupcake box, seeming to not know if it was ok to take one. I handed him a cupcake with extra icing and smiled as he headed back to his desk, feeling something tug at my heartstrings towards the adorable little boy.

“It’s not easy for him to interact with people but I was hoping with the team, that he’d eventually make friends.”

“I’m sorry,” I tell him. “I didn’t mean for all of this to happen.”

Luke sighs and runs his hand through his hair again, muscles flexing in that effortlessly, alluring way.

“Is there a way you can retract the complaint?” he asks, and I pull myself

back from the brink of lust.

"I don't think so," I say. "But I can try. However, I don't think I'm the only one who complained. All the parents on the team were pretty up in arms at the last game too."

"Would it make it better if I bought them all gear too?"

The selfish part of me wants to say yes but I shake my head. "I don't think so. We'd just be kicking the bucket down the road, and it would only be a matter of time before another team in the district complained. Besides, it wouldn't be the right thing to do." I pull my hand back from his shoulder because I find myself liking the feel of his naked skin way too much. *Those memories are better left buried.*

"Don't stress. I'm sure it's just going to be a warning."

"I hope so," he says, and our gazes meet. They cling. And suddenly, it's not about Mikey and the team anymore.

Suddenly all that fills my memories is the fact that we kissed a few days ago.

I immediately retract my arm but Luke doesn't stop staring at me. Instead, he leans down until he's close enough that his lips would be on mine if I didn't back up at that exact second.

"Well played," he says. "For the report that is. But remember that *payback's a bitch.*"

And with that, he finally leaves my store and the air rushes back into my lungs.

\* \* \*

I DON'T UNDERSTAND THE MEANING BEHIND LUKE'S WORDS UNTIL TWO DAYS later.

After I drop off a still-subdued Chase at school, I walk to my bakery. I'm opening the shop alone today, but I'm expecting help from my intern in the afternoon.

I start seeing signs of a commotion a few miles away.

There are cars lined up on both sides of the street leading to the bakery, and there are a few in the lot of the grocery store next door. The cars are surrounded by hoses that are in various stages of being attached by large, bare-chested muscular men.

“Oh, what fresh hell is this??” I mutter to myself as I get closer and realize that there is a car wash going on right next to my bakery. And then I see the thing that makes me freeze mid-step.

It’s not just any carwash.

It’s a car wash led by Luke himself, looking slicked and shirtless as usual. I tell myself not to admire the way the sun caresses his skin and the ridges of his abs as he stands talking to another bare-chested man. Instead, I let anger lead as I storm to him.

He spots me as I approach.

“Oh, hey Mia,” Luke says in an unnaturally high, innocent-sounding voice. “I was wondering when you would show up.”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“I think that I’m pulling off a charity carwash with my hockey buddies over here.” He gestures behind him to a few of the boys, one of whom waves at me. I recognize him from high school and I call out, “Hi Chet.”

“Hey, Mia. How’s it going?”

“Not great seeing as how you guys are blocking off the street.”

“No, we’re not,” Luke says moving to block my view of Chet. He then gestures to the street. “Look. Plenty of space for cars to get around.”

I sigh. So, this is what he meant when he said ‘payback’s a bitch’. “You can’t do this.”

“I can,” Luke says. “We got permission from Rodney that says we can use his grocery lot for our carwash. The city supports it too since it’s a charity. Isn’t that amazing?”

Anger rises and rolls over inside me.

And here I was thinking that we were having a good moment yesterday, that we could call a truce on all this nonsense. Meanwhile, he was over here planning this.

Luke appears very pleased at my reaction. I know that he’s waiting for me to blow up and he’s going to have a snappy retort for anything I say. *So why even bother?*

I protest with my silence, spinning around and storming away.

“Hey, do you think we could get a few donuts, Mia? You know, for charity?” Chet calls out.

“No one is eating at Mia’s today,” Luke answers before I can. “Not us or our customers. Oh, we should even make a sign that says ‘no free carwash for anyone who eats at Kreamy Cupcakes’.”



*Oh, he's infuriating!*

I ignore both of them and the teasing, ribbing, from the rest of the guys, as I open my shop, resisting the urge to slam the door. And the minute I'm inside, I call up my brother.

"Yes?" he answers, sounding like he just woke up.

"I'm going to kill him."

"Kill who?"

"Who else would I be talking about? Do you even know what your so-called best friend has been up to?"

"Oh him." I hear rustling as if Liam is sitting up in bed. "What did he do now?"

"He's holding a carwash! Right outside my bakery. It's going to block the street and prevent my customers from coming in. Not only that, but he's also apparently going to hold up a sign telling people not to eat here."

"Oh, is he?"

"Oh my God, Liam, this isn't funny anymore. He's insane! Why the hell did he move back into town? I thought you said he never wanted to come back here after he left."

"Well, I also thought you both would have outgrown your childish games by now, too, so I guess I was wrong twice."

Childish? Me? "How is any of this my fault?"

"Maybe not this one," Liam says. "But I seem to remember that you played just as many pranks on him as he did you."

"I never played pranks on him. I only defended myself. Liam, you have to talk to him before he gives me a heart attack."

"No can do. I know better than to get in the middle of your war."

"Ugh!" I let out a sound of frustration and hang up knowing that my brother likely won't be of any use to me.

I take a few deep breaths to calm down. It's fine. It's just for today. *Just bear it for today and then that's it.*

For the rest of the day, I try to ignore Luke and his antics but it's difficult. Despite his sign, we do get quite a few customers. More than a few if I'm being honest, but most of them are women who sit at the window tables and watch the spectacle outside while giggling and whispering among themselves.

Even my assistant, Jane, can't seem to resist watching them work.

"Jane." I snap my fingers in front of her face for the fifth time that day.

"Are you even listening to me?"

"Sorry, boss." She at least gives me a chagrined look. "But I can't help it. It's hard to focus with those beefcakes right outside.

Irritation trails my gut. "Well, try."

But I don't want to admit that my eyes wander a few times too. Mostly to Luke, who seems to be having the time of his life washing cars getting his picture taken and flirting with throngs of women who seem to be surrounding him at all times.

And the worst part is that, at the end of the day, the bastard has the nerve to come in and gloat.

"Enjoy the view?" he says walking in.

I ignore him, continuing to clean up. Jane had a class, so I let her off early. It's just me in here.

"Oh, come on," I sense him coming closer, smell his masculine cologne that surrounds me as he leans on the table I'm wiping. "You have to admit it was a good one."

I straighten, cross my hands over my chest, and glare at him. "Fine. You got your revenge. You happy?"

"Yes," he says without any runaround. "So happy."

He's so infuriating. "I did what I did without knowing how it would affect you. I only wanted things to be fair with the teams. But what you did today was needlessly cruel.

"How so?"

"Blocking the street? Deliberately driving business away from me?"

"The street wasn't blocked off and our sign wasn't enough to drive customers away. If anything, it attracted more people to come eat here because it drives curiosity. Trended on social media too, I'm pretty sure. Free advertising."

I pause, feeling a little confused. Did he do that on purpose?

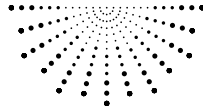
"What's unnecessarily cruel," he says getting closer. "Is the fact that you banned me from one of the best bakeries in the state."

I blink at first not knowing what he's talking about.

But before I can ask, he brushes my lips with his and walks away while I gasp.

In outrage, of course.

## LUKE



I END THE DAY FEELING LESS SATISFIED THAN I THOUGHT I WOULD BE.

I mean sure it was fun pulling off a charity event and getting under Mia's skin, especially on such short notice. But there are still tendrils of hunger running through me at that kiss that never should've happened.

*What the hell is wrong with me?* I kissed her again and I never intended to. It was an overwhelming feeling inside me that I could almost not control. Seeing her like that, with the sunset descending behind her...heck, I almost took it a step further.

I've never felt like that about any other woman, and I don't know if it's the whole 'forbidden fruit' thing that's doing this. Maybe it's just the fact that I can't have her, that makes me want her all the more.

Maybe that's what makes her special.

Whatever it is, it just seems that ever since that kiss in the basement it's been even harder to control myself around her. But I need to get a hold of myself and get over it, because nothing can ever happen between me and Mia.

*She's not for you, remember, I tell myself. Apart from the fact that she's Liam's sister, she doesn't want you. She's just waiting on her military man.*

A wave of jealousy douses me, but I refuse to dwell on it, instead focusing on Chet who hung around to help me clean up.

"I would say it was a success," he mentions, dragging the last two trash bags into the huge trash disposal we rented.

I fist-bump him as I reach him.

"Yeah," I answer. "Thanks, man, for helping me pull this off on short notice."

"No problem," he says shrugging. "You know I always love getting half-naked for charity."

"Yeah, I know." Chet, despite his frat boy looks, is super into volunteering and had all the contacts needed to make this easy. He's also the one who told me about Bleeding Hands in the first place.

"Taking off?"

"Maybe. Except if Mia needs a ride home then I'm willing to stick around for a minute." He wags his brow suggestively and every trace of gratitude I felt towards Chet instantly disappears, flooded out by pure, unadulterated rage.

I'm about to deck my best friend for the insinuation alone.

I'm aware that my hands are clenched into fists, but I restrain myself.

"If you're thinking of anything with her, then forget about it," I tell him. "She's with someone."

"Really?" he frowns. "That's not what she told me."

"You talk?"

"Not really, but I asked her last time and she told me she was single."

I cock my head. *Did she break up with Billy? What's going on?*

I recall the first talk we had right around the time that I came back to town. I went to her house to check in on her. She was shocked to see me the same way, I was shocked all those years ago when Liam told me she had a child. He told me the child was from her ex, Billy, and the two had resumed dating.

*"Billy must be very proud of his son," I told her that day, after we caught up. "Right?"*

*Her face had flashed with confusion at first, but it was my subtle way of asking if Billy really was the father. She didn't answer, staring at me. I wondered if I'd offended her with the question, by assuming it could be anyone else's.*

*"Yeah," she said but her voice sounded off. Odd. "Yeah, he's proud."*

*I nodded wondering at the emotions that swirled through me at the time. "You guys got back together?"*

*Her lips tightened and again, that emotion flashed in her eyes. It took me a second to identify it as hurt.*

*"Not exactly," she said. "He's still in the military."*

*"Ah," I responded, instantly understanding. She was probably heartbroken that her love and the father of her son had been away for so*

*long. And it was painful waiting for someone like that.*

*“How long is he serving?”*

*“Ten years,” she said.*

*Damn. It would be painful to wait for someone for ten years without knowing when exactly he’s going to come. Is it really worth it, to wait around for him?*

*But I didn't ask. I knew how much she loved her ex and Billy wasn't a bad guy from what I know of him, so I held back everything else I wanted to say.*

*She glanced away, a clear sign she didn't want to talk about this anymore.*

*I nodded and changed the subject.*

*But now she’s going around telling people she’s single? Is she not waiting for Billy anymore? I know it’s not unusual for couples to go on a break when they’re apart for so long just so it’s not as painful. So, they’re both allowed to see other people but they know that at the end of the ten years, they’ll be together in the end. I mean of course that's what's going on. Mia is a very passionate woman and there is no way she can just wait around for ten years with no sex. I can’t judge her for it either.*

*But she’s not going to do it with Chet. Not only is he a bonehead, he’s the entirely wrong guy for Mia.*

*“She’s with someone,” I tell him. “A big mean dude who spends all day shooting AR-fifteens. And it’s a long, messy situation you should steer clear of.”*

*Chet nods while gazing at the bakery but I’m not sure it entirely gets rid of the interest in his eyes.*

*“I’m serious Chet,” I tell him, and he glances back at me.*

*“Wait how do you know all this?” he asks suspiciously. “You guys used to...”*

*"No," I say. “She’s my best friend's sister.”*

*"Ah,” Chet nods. “Bro code. I got it. I’ll steer clear.” I have no clue what Chet’s thinking now but since he’s agreed to stay away from Mia, I nod.*

*“I’ll see you around,” I say and start heading home. I would wait for Mia so I can drive her home, but the babysitter is taking off soon, and besides, the bakery isn’t too far from her house. The only reason I drove here in the first place was to get a free car wash.*

*I get in my Aston Martin, and drive off, stopping only to pick up Mikey’s favorite burger from his favorite burger place. I get out of the car and head to*

the kitchen while they cook, making sure they cut the pickles exactly how he likes and use only a dab of mayo. He's going to throw it out if it's not exactly how he wants, due to sensory sensitivities. They know Mikey well, by now, and are happy to make the accommodation. Of course, I tip them extra for the service.

Then I head back home, burgers in hand.

"I'm home," I announce, opening the door.

"Hi, Luke."

"Hi, Fiona." I sigh as I walk in. I've been meaning to talk to the babysitting agency about replacing Fiona with another babysitter, but I keep forgetting. She's a great babysitter for my son, but her crush on me makes me feel uncomfortable, especially since I'm probably old enough to be her dad.

"Everything went well," she says twirling her hair as she speaks. "I was just helping Mikey with some of his homework."

At the sound of his name, Mikey looks up from his spot, seated on the floor.

"Hi, buddy." I go to him holding up the bag. "I have a burger from Frank's for you."

Mikey nods and then goes back to the book.

"Thanks for staying," I tell her and she blushes. "How much am I owing you?"

"Oh, just a fifty,"

I hand her over a hundred-dollar bill. "Keep the change."

"Oh, I can't possibly..."

"No, I insist," I say, feeling guilty because I'm pretty sure I'm going to fire her after today.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" she asks, her voice husky. Once again, discomfort fills me. I mean technically, she's of legal age...she's in college. But that's still far younger than I'm comfortable with.

*Yup, she definitely has got to go.*

"No, thank you." I walk to the door and hold it open for her, trying to soften the abruptness with a smile. Her face falls a little and reddens. She nods silently and walks through the door.

"See you later," I call out waving as she leaves. Then I shut the door, and head back to Mikey who is tentatively taking his burger out of his bag.

"Hey Mikey," I say as I slide into the spot next to him. "Do you mind terribly if we change your babysitter?"

He shrugs. Which means he doesn't mind.

"Good." I ruffle his hair then sigh. Getting a new babysitter is always hard. I need to vet them thoroughly to make sure they've worked with kids like Mikey before, and understand his unique needs, and modes of communication. Additionally, I also need to make sure that none of them have any strong scents or peculiarities that could upset him.

But getting a new babysitter is the least of my problems with my son.

I observe Mikey methodically eating his burger in little bites and wonder what I'm going to do about him. If the team gets shut down, I need to find him a new social hobby that he wouldn't find objectionable. One where he can still meet people and be able to interact with them, even if indirectly.

*But even if I do, what's the guarantee that any of that's going to work? Frustration lines my gut. What if he still doesn't make friends? What if he simply chooses never to try?*

*What if you're failing as a father? A dark sardonic voice slithers through my mind. Because that's the real question you want to ask right? That's how you feel.*

I rub my hand over my face. It's an old insecurity that keeps me awake sometimes.

I never thought I was cut out for fatherhood, sincerely. Not that I necessarily didn't want kids, but I simply didn't think I would be any good at it. I might pretend to be an arrogant ass most of the time, but I'm fully aware of my flaws. In general, I'm flighty, irresponsible, and impatient – all horrible traits to have as a father.

So, I was careful over the years to keep all my sexual encounters consequence-free.

One of them though, got away from me.

Mikey's mom was a one-night stand with a groupie, who I met at one of my games. Now I normally didn't entertain groupies, but she was different from most. She was funny and interesting to talk to in addition to being beautiful. Plus, there was no overt hero-worship that'd make me uncomfortable.

Or at least I thought so at the time.

The night we hooked up she assured me she was on the pill. Still, I insisted on using a condom as I normally do.

We hung out a few more times and I left town on good terms.

I didn't hear much from her again, until eight years later when her sister

showed up with Mikey.

"Tara's dead," her sister, Tamara, said in that deadpan way of hers, even though her eyes were grieving. "Committed suicide a few weeks ago. She left you this."

And then she handed me a letter that explained everything. From Tara's struggle with mental illness to the fact that she'd poked holes in my condom that night, after I went to the bathroom. She saw it as a miracle when she conceived and didn't tell me, because she thought I would tell her to get rid of the baby.

*I didn't want your money, the letter said. I only wanted to keep a little piece of you with me when you were gone.*

"You can get a DNA test if you want," Tamara said. She must've seen the turmoil in my face, but I shook my head. I didn't need a DNA test. One look at Mikey's eyes told me he was mine.

And as furious as I was about what Tara did, and the fact that she'd hidden him for so long, I loved the boy instantly, more than life itself.

And ever since then, I've been terrified of failing him.

I want to be a good father, but what if I just don't have it in me? What if I mess up without even knowing?

Restlessness has me rising, ruffling Mikey's hair again before I head to the porch. My eyes naturally fall on Mia's charming little house, and I smirk once again, remembering the first time we met. I was on my porch, and she was on hers and it was pretty much hate at first sight.

Suddenly, I spot a motion in the backyard that has me squinting. What was that?? It looked like a human being. Is Mia back? Why are all her lights still off?

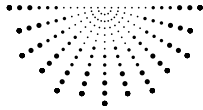
Instinctively, I know something is off.

"Hey Mikey, I'll be right back. I need to check something."

My son doesn't respond to my call as I step out of the house and head to Mia's. She keeps her spare key in the second flowerpot and I fish it out immediately, slipping it into the lock and turning it.

I open the door and meet chaos.





BONE-TIRED DOESN'T EVEN BEGIN TO DESCRIBE HOW I'M FEELING. I FEEL LIKE the day was both too long and too short at the same time, and I was in constant motion through all of it. My muscle ache and I could probably do with a good massage, but that's out of the question. I couldn't afford massages before, and I especially can't afford them now that I'm saving up for new skates for Chase.

So, I guess I'll just have to settle for stretching my muscles with a nice walk home.

Luckily, the weather is just perfect for a walk. A cool breeze rustles the trees and the sunset casts a romantic haze over everything, including a few couples walking their dogs. At least, Luke and his boys had the decency to clean up after their commotion and all seems right with the neighborhood.

That is until Luke plans another disruptive activity.

And naturally, with the thought, my mind rests on thinking about Luke again. It's irritating how much brain space that man has taken up in the past few weeks, but I can't help it. It seems no matter what I do, my life is intertwined with his and I can't escape from him.

And it seems like too much for it all to just be a coincidence. He's my brother's best friend. Our children go to the same school and are both in Pee Wee Hockey. We live next to each other. Heck, we practically work next to each other too since the hockey rink is just around the corner from my bakery.

It's like someone designed our lives to make Luke Hardy a perpetual thorn in my side.

Some would probably call that fate.

But I'm not one of those people. I don't believe in fate, especially not cursed ones like this.

I sigh and stretch my neck. Right now, I don't need to be thinking about Luke. I need to be thinking about two things: my son and my business. I started the cupcake shop five years ago, and while it's been successful so far, we're just about starting to turn a significant profit. I do little advertising at this point, as we've become a staple in the area.

But the issue is that a new cupcake shop just opened right near downtown, and it might pose a problem for me in the future. I visited the place once, and it has Kreamy in the name, beat me with a prime location, price, and overall ambiance of the space. It looks a little more upscale than my shack and there are a lot more employees. Plus, to my surprise, the cupcakes tasted pretty good. They could probably serve as significant competition for me in the future, if I'm not careful. So, I need to figure out how to set myself and my offerings apart.

*You banned me from one of the best damn bakeries in the state.*

I blush at the memory of Luke's words. Did he mean that? He couldn't have because that would mean that he was complimenting me. And Luke doesn't give me compliments, at least not without significant strings attached.

So, what does he want now? What game is he playing this time?

Or did he mean what he said?

I release a breath as exhaustion rolls through me. My house is a short distance away and I trudge tiredly till I get there.

I pause in my driveway, noting that my door seems to be unlocked, left slightly ajar.

*Did I somehow manage not to fully close it today? Let alone lock it? How could that've happened?*

Oh God, I hope no one saw it open. That would be embarrassing.

It's a pretty safe neighborhood, so I'm not particularly scared of a break-in. Heck, you could practically leave your door wide open with a sign that says, 'I have money in the safe!' and still, no one would come in. That's how safe the neighborhood is. And with Chase at a sleepover tonight, I'm not necessarily concerned anything has happened to him either.

I'm more concerned that Luke's seen my open door. This is the exact type of thing that he would take advantage of by...I don't know, making a mess in my home or jumping out at me when I get to the door or something.

But when I push open the door, I gape at what I find, stomach dropping.

'Mess' is too mild a word for it. So is 'ransacked'. The entire house has been turned upside down.

Broken picture frames are scattered on the ground next to shards of glass. The side tables have been upturned, couches torn. The TV is hanging by a wire, and someone seems to have taken a baseball to the wall because it has a giant dent in it.

My favorite flower vase is in tatters on the ground

And in the middle of the chaos, is the man responsible for it all.

He turns around when I walk in and I turn my horrified eyes to him.

“Are you kidding me?” My voice is way too mild, way too tame for the storm ripping apart inside of me. “Are you insane?!”

He winces a little at the screech in my statement and holds his hands up. “Now calm down. Let me explain—”

“Explain? Explain! What the fuck are you going to explain to me, Luke?”

“Now Mia—”

“This is way beyond the limits of a simple prank! I mean I thought you were an ass before, but I never thought you were psychotic!” Or heartless. Tears push behind my eyes as I survey the damage. Oh my God, this is going to cost me thousands of dollars to fix. “Why would you do this to me?”

I hate that he can hear the tears in my voice and despise that it makes his expression go soft.

“Mia—”

“No.” I shake my head. “I don’t want to hear it. I don’t care about your excuse. Just get out.”

“Mia—”

“Leave Luke! You got what you want, now leave me the fuck alone once and for all!”

“I’m not leaving until you let me talk,” he says, sounding frustrated.

“Mia, I didn’t do this.”

“I can’t believe this.” My eyes dart to the vase again. My mother’s vase. “Especially the vase Luke. I mean everything else can be replaced, but you know how much that meant to me—”

“MIA!” The sharp bark silences me and has me turning to him again. His eyes glow with meaning as he enunciates, “I. Didn’t. Do. This.”

I shake my head, mind scrambling to make meaning of his words. “What?”

He sighs and runs his hand over his face. “I came over here, because I

thought I saw something in your backyard. Or someone. I thought I would come to check it out, but whoever it was was long gone by the time I got here. And your house, well..." he gestures around, "was like this when I got here."

I blink at him. "You're not messing with me?"

"No," he says, and I can sense I've disappointed him by asking. "I know you don't think much of me, but I have my limits. And I would never commit a crime just to pull a prank." He walks toward me and his thumb swipes at my cheek. When he pulls back, there is moisture on his thumb which means a tear escaped.

"I also would never break your mother's vase," he murmurs.

I glance up and see the sincerity glowing from his eyes. My mind is running wild with too many things to focus so I say nothing.

"The police are on their way," he continues. "It doesn't look like the person managed to make it upstairs, but you should probably check and see if there are any valuables missing."

"Wait." It suddenly slams into me. "You're saying someone broke into my house?"

His expression is grim, and he nods. "Yes."

"But why?" I blink more in shock than anything else. "We live in a safe neighborhood."

"Even safe neighborhoods experience break-ins," he says.

"Yes, but we've never had a break-in," I say feeling hysteria threaten. "Ever. Not even when Ms. Clara's son moved in across the street. why would they break into my house?"

"Mia." His hands are suddenly on my shoulders, his eyes intense on mine. "Relax. Breathe."

That's when I realize how close I was to hyperventilating. I nod and take his advice, breathing in slowly, then letting it out.

"Listen to me carefully," he says. "I know all this is a lot for you to take in right now, but I really need you to check and make sure that nothing is missing. I need to know why this fucker broke in and what he was looking for. Ok?"

What could he possibly be looking for? *I don't really have any valuables* I want to say, but I nod instead. I start looking around the room trying not to mourn about the TV and couch. Those will be expensive to replace but at least they are replaceable.

I can't say the same for the vase.

While I'm checking, the police finally arrive. Luke gives them his brief statement and while I'm talking to them, he heads back to his house, presumably to tuck Mikey in for the night. Thank God, Chase is at a sleepover and won't be witness to this chaos. I want to keep him away from this entirely. Hopefully, I can clean up before he gets back in the morning.

Luke has other ideas though, which he informs me of when he gets back.

"You're staying at my place tonight," he says in a voice that leaves no room for debate. "It's final, so don't bother arguing. I already made up a room for you."

I shake my head. "I can't do that Luke. I have to clean up before Chase gets back."

He shakes his head. "I'll get people to do that. First thing tomorrow morning. But if you think I'm leaving you here by yourself, you're insane. By fire or force, you're coming with me."

I open my mouth to protest but I'm too tired for an argument right now. Plus, I truly don't want to be by myself either with the fear running through me.

So, I nod and give him a small smile. "Thanks."

A tender look crosses his face as he tucks my hair behind my ear. "Come on. Let's get you home."

The walk to his home is silent and when we enter, I head straight for the couch sitting down. He brings me a cup of coffee and I smile my thanks, weakly.

"Thanks," I tell him. "Seriously. For everything." I don't know if I would've had the presence of mind to take care of everything without him.

Rather than look pleased, Luke shakes his head. "I don't know if I should feel happy or insulted by your gratitude."

"Why would you feel insulted?"

"Because you shouldn't be feeling thankful that I'm acting like a decent human being in a situation like this. It should be a given. And the fact that you're so grateful means you really don't think much of me."

I remember his insulted look when I accused him of breaking in. I feel a little embarrassed now, in hindsight.

"I don't think you're a bastard," I admit. "I think you can be a jerk sometimes, but underneath, I think you're a good guy. And a great father."

A pause hangs in the air.

I lift my fingers to his face, intending the gesture to only be thankful. But then his eyes heat the minute I do.

And before I can think, his lips are on mine again.

His kiss releases something inside me, something savage and needy and full of feral emotion bursting forth. This time, my surprise is only short-lived, drowned out by a sea of desire that's been building since God knows when. My lust jumps out of me, and this time I'm the aggressor of the kiss, hands grabbing his hair as I suck at his lips, moaning wantonly as his tongue enters my mouth.

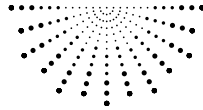
I climb in his lap, straddling him, as a shameless need pounds in my lower belly.

"Fuck," he bites out in between breaths, before I kiss him again. I'm so horny that I'm shaking with it, and I don't know where this came from, or what to do about it. But I don't want to think.

I just want to feel.

"Stop."

## LUKE



*STOP.*

I'm not sure where the word comes from. It sounds like my voice, but I don't have any recollection of actually saying it.

Of course, it's hard to have recollection of anything when your cock is throbbing so hard it's physically aching - when desire slams into you with the force of an avalanche and you think you're going to die if you don't fulfill it.

When a sweet woman is writhing in your arms, practically begging for you to take her.

With a groan, my control snaps and I pull her closer, mesh her body against mine, and devour her lips.

Stopping is the last thing on my mind.

Yet I said it anyway. Why?

The thought occurs distantly and disappears altogether, when Mia moans, shifting in my lap. Her movement nudges my cock and I jerk involuntarily, as desire, hot and heavy, arcs through. Fuck. I grab her hair with one hand and her waist with the other, grinding her against my cock. We both moan at the same time, lust lashing through the both of us. My cock leaks precum and a warmth shoots through me.

Mia throws her hair back and grinds down again, her hand clutching my shoulders. Her eyes are glazed with desire and have desperation in them.

A desperation I'm eager to satiate.

*Stop.*

It sounds in my mind again, but it disappears when her heated lips travel to my neck. This time, it's her sucking at my skin.

"Oh fuck." Pleasure trembles out from the spot her lips touch. I arch

underneath her, and my eyes roll back.

My brain is fried. My hands shake with desire, the strongest I've ever felt and she's barely done anything. She's going to be the death of me. I don't think I'm going to survive this.

But something's wrong. Even as her wicked little tongue trails to my collarbone, and sparks untold sensations, I remember that this isn't supposed to be happening. This isn't like her.

She's a passionate woman but she wouldn't be attacking me on the couch for no reason.

*It's the break-in.* A shred of rational thought hanging on by a thread has me gripping her arms and pushing her away.

I draw air through my lungs, and it takes me a while for rationality to return.

"We can't," I tell her, even as her hands fight to reach for me.

"Mia," I say again, shaking her a little, til some of the haze recedes from her vision. "Stop."

"Why?" she asks, breathing hard.

"Because..." Shit, what reason do I have? Why can't we do this? Oh, that's right. She just suffered something traumatic and is probably vulnerable right now. She's not in her right mind. That's why she's all over me. "Because this isn't you."

She frowns at me.

"You're just very emotional right now," I say. "You're not thinking straight."

She blinks at me for a few seconds, as though she can't quite understand what I'm saying. And then slowly, awareness appears in her eyes.

"Oh my gosh." She scrambles to get off my lap and stares at me, horrified. "I'm so sorry."

"It's fine."

"No, it's not. Oh my gosh, I just attacked you."

"You didn't." I have to laugh at the consternation on her face. "I kissed you first, remember?"

She blinks. "You did?"

"Do you not remember?"

"No, it's kind of a blur." She sighs rubbing her hand over her face. "I should probably call and check in on Chase. "See if his sleepover is going well."



I nod. "Come on. I'll show you your room."

I rise and her eyes immediately travel to the front of my pants. Her mouth falls open and she stares for a long several seconds before her eyes flicker back up to mine.

I smile wryly. "Yeah."

"Sorry," she says immediately.

"Don't apologize for that."

"Not for that," she says. "For ogling you."

I shake my head and chuckle, turning and heading up. I hear her following me. I take a second to peek into Mikey 's room and see he's still fast asleep, thank God. Then I head to the room next to it. There are about four bedrooms on this floor, but I put her in the one next to mine.

"Here you go," opening the door. Her eyes widen as she takes in the large room with a tasseled chandelier, and ceiling-to-floor windows, leading to a balcony. "This is...nice."

"Thanks. I keep it clean just in case." A quick glance around the room proves that it's clean, but I fail to see the charm I once saw the first time. I guess I've gotten too used to luxury.

"Try and get some sleep," I tell her, and she nods. Not having anything else to say, I hightail it to my room as quickly as possible before I do something I regret.

*Like forgetting about honor and throwing her on that bed and eating her out till I can't feel my tongue.* That would be a bad idea indeed.

But even as I lie in bed, I can't sleep. It's not the sexual thoughts that torment me. It's everything else that happened in the last hour. Someone broke into Mia's house and ransacked it. I nearly caught them and that more than anything, makes me scowl.

I should have caught the fucker.

What were they looking for, anyway? Did they know Mia wasn't home? Christ, what if she'd been home when it happened? Would they have attacked her too?

My heart races in the silence and my body breaks into a sweat at the thought. Leftover adrenaline runs through me. *No one is touching Mia, I assure myself. They'd have to kill me first before I'd let anything happen to her.*

Despite those comforting thoughts, I can't convince myself to sleep until it's damn near dawn.

Mia on the other hand, seems to be well-rested and almost cheery in the morning. It's like the last twenty-four hours never happened and her house wasn't broken into.

"Heya," she says, shooting me a smile as I climb down the steps. She's already up and dressed by the time I head down, which means she was likely up at sunrise. Meanwhile, I don't think I got even a full two hours of sleep. "I'm going to go pick up Chase from his sleepover."

I nod, trying to dust the cobwebs from my brain so early in the morning. "Give me a second to get dressed. I'll drive you."

"No need," she says, but I shake my head.

"You're not going anywhere by yourself. At least not in the meantime."

"I didn't know I needed a babysitter."

"I'm serious Mia." Her smile falls off her lips at the look on my face. "We don't know what this bastard wants from you. Maybe he's a stalker and he's waiting for the perfect time to attack."

"I'm sure it's not that," she says, a flicker of fear flashing across her face. She waves her hand as though she's trying to convince herself more than me. "It's probably just a random break-in."

"Either way," I say, "we can't be too careful."

"You don't really intend to follow me everywhere, do you?" she raises an eyebrow. "Don't you have important things to do?"

"Nope." I grin at her. "The beauty of being a billionaire is that you have a surprising amount of free time on your hands."

"Must be nice," she says sardonically, but I see the amusement in her gaze.

"It's either me or I hire a bodyguard for you."

"No, please, anything but that. I don't want Chase to know anything is wrong." She sighs and then shrugs. "Well, fine. I guess you can come with me to see Chase. He'll be happy, anyway. He loves you."

"Oh?" I wiggle my eyebrows and she shakes her head, before checking her watch.

"But we gotta go now. Mrs. Warner has work in the morning, and she made it clear that all of the kids had to be picked up by then."

"Ok. Let me get dressed and then we'll take one of my cars."

"One of? How many cars do you have?"

"Not enough," I answer simply and smirk at her disgusted look. She looks even more disgusted when I take her to the garage later, showing her my

impressive collection.

"Wait these are all yours?" She gapes.

"Of course." I spread my hands wide. "Take your pick. Which one do you want to take today?"

"This is excessive." She shakes her head and then points at the smallest car, an Audi GT. "That one doesn't look like a death trap, so I guess we can go in that."

"None of my cars are death traps. I drive carefully," I assure her. "Trust me, I'm not in any hurry to die. I have a son to take care of."

"Good to know," she says and heads to the passenger side. I beat her there and open the door for her. She shoots me a surprised look followed by a hesitant smile.

"Thanks."

Mrs. Warner lives in a suburb about fifteen minutes away. By the time we park in front of the house, Chase is already waiting outside.

He doesn't look up when we drive up, because he's probably not expecting his mom to arrive driving in a car like this. But when I get out, his eyes widen.

"Hey Chase," Mia says getting out of her side. "Did Mrs. Warner leave already?"

"Uh, no she's putting on her shoes..." There's confusion in his face as he rises and approaches us. "Why...what's going on?"

"Uh..." I can see Mia trying to think of an excuse.

"Your mom's getting some stuff fixed at your house," I tell him. "So, you'll be staying with us for a few weeks."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

Excitement takes over his expression. "Neat! So, we get to drive in your car?"

"Yeah, unless you plan on flying."

He smiles even wider, at my joke, and heads to the backseat.

"I'm a huge fan of yours by the way," he says as he climbs in.

"You're not so bad yourself," I smile at the boy, getting in too. On the way home, Chase continues chattering in a way that reminds me of his mom when she's excited, except for the fact that he keeps talking about hockey. He seems to know a lot for a kid his age – about different plays and a lot of historical moves. I promise him a training session when we get home and he's

over the moon.

He's even more gob smacked when he enters my home.

"Woah." His eyes practically bug out of his head. "You live here?"

"I guess." I laugh as his eyes practically roll around in their orbit, trying to absorb it all. "Feel free to look around."

"I will!" he says, and immediately runs upstairs.

Mia watches her son with a mixture of worry and amusement.

"Chase don't touch anything!" she yells up the steps.

"Nah. Everything can be replaced," I tell her. "By the way, don't you need to get to work?"

She sighs, her expression falling. "Maybe. I don't know if I should bother, though."

"What do you mean?"

"What, you haven't noticed?" she attempts a smile but it falls flat. "We've been steadily losing customers for the past several weeks, now. We only had a single customer yesterday. Except for the day of your carwash, it's been like that since the new bakery opened up downtown. I went there and the place was amazing." She shakes her head. "I don't know if I should quit while I'm ahead and find something else to do."

"Now, that's defeatist talk. I thought you were making a good profit," I say, annoyed to hear her putting herself down. "Also, I doubt that place makes better cupcakes than you."

"We are. And maybe not, but their place is bigger and nicer. Service is faster."

"Well, all that can be fixed with proper marketing."

"Marketing?" she raises an eyebrow.

"Yeah," I say smiling. "There's a lot you can do with marketing. And I can show you how to do it. Consider me your new business manager."

She rolls her eyes laughing. "Right. Well, I better go show Chase where he's going to be staying, before he accidentally goes into Mikey's room unannounced."

"Yeah. It's the room next to Mikey's."

She nods and starts up the stairs. I'm about to go up with her but my phone rings, and I hesitate at the bottom of the stairs.

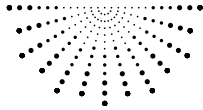
"Hello?"

"Hi, Mr. Hardy." I recognize the district chief's voice. "Do you have a moment to talk?"

"Sure," I ask and dread settles in my stomach. I head into the living room for some privacy. Somehow, I just know this isn't good news.

And I'm proven right a few seconds later when she sighs. "Look, there's no easy way to say this so I'm just going to be straight with you. A lot of parents complained about you and, due to the severity of the offense, we'll have to dissolve your team."

## MIA



I INSTANTLY KNOW SOMETHING'S WRONG THE MINUTE I GO INTO THE LIVING room.

Luke's expression is tense, his shoulders raised as though he's trying to physically keep the world from dropping around him. Annoyance ruffles his eyebrows as he shoots his hand through his hair.

"Is that your final decision?" he says to whoever is on the phone. The other individual's response is short and to the point.

"Nothing can be done?" he asks again, and once again, the answer frustrates him. He tears his hand through his hair once more.

"Alright. Guess that's it then."

The other person says something else and then Luke says, "Yeah. I understand. Thanks for calling." Then he hangs up.

I have a heavy pit in my stomach as I approach him. "What happened?"

He doesn't look at me at first, staring down at his phone. "That was the head of the PeeWee district."

"And?" I try not to let my anxiety leak into my voice but it's there anyway. So is the recurring thought haunting me. *What have I done?*

He glances up and I see the answer in his eyes before he even says the words. "They're disbanding the team."

"Oh no." My hand flies over my mouth as the bomb drops, the shards cutting through my conscience. "Luke...I'm so sorry." Sorry doesn't even begin to cut it. I made a mess of everything, and I wish I could go back in time to before I ever made the report.

"Don't be," he says, with a sardonic smile. "You were right. The other parents on the other teams were enraged about the whole thing. There were

too many reports.”

"But it's a first offense," I say. "It's supposed to end with a warning and a fine."

"Apparently, due to the 'severity of my offense', they have to disband the team or the other parents are threatening to start talking to the press. The head of the district is an elected official and with elections coming up, he can't afford to tarnish his reputation." He releases a breath. "I can't say I don't understand the man, and I appreciate that he had a hard choice to make. Difficult decision. It just sucks because it's the kids who are going to suffer for it."

And it's my fault. I could try and preach all day about how I only wanted things to be fair, but the truth is that a part of me only made that report because I was upset that my son lost a game. And I felt like I lost too, to Luke. And now because of my hasty actions, I've ruined it for a bunch of innocent children who haven't done anything wrong.

"Don't be upset," he says, smiling weakly. It's as if he can read my mind and he reaches out and ruffles my hair a little, the way he used to when I was a teenager. The move used to annoy me so much because I felt infantilized. Yes, I was sixteen at the time, but he was only twenty-four. I hated the fact that he saw me as a kid when that was exactly what I was.

I brush off the thoughts and say, "So then there's really nothing that can be done?"

"Doesn't sound like there is," he responds. "It's my fault anyway. I shamelessly flouted the rules, as you so eloquently put it. I should have known this was coming."

Yes, but he did that so that his child could be on a team, so Mikey could make friends. He didn't do it to rub it in anyone's face, as I initially thought.

He releases a breath. "Now comes the hard part. Telling Mikey and all the other parents about the decision."

"What will they do?" I ask.

"I don't know," he says. "After cussing me out, they'll probably try to get their kids on other teams if there are openings, or they'll form a brand-new team without me. Who knows? I'm not really sure how disbandment works. But it'll be difficult for Mikey to get on a new team."

I can see how much he hates to admit it but I know he's right. I recall watching Mikey's few minutes of play at the last game, with the awkward uncoordinated way he skated and handled the puck. He wasn't terrible, but he

wasn't good either.

"Dad." A calm voice comes from the door and we both spin around to see Mikey standing there. It's the first time I've heard the boy speak and I'm a little in shock but then Luke is instantly in motion moving to his son.

"What's up Mikey?" he asks, kneeling as he gives him his full attention. "Do you need something?"

Mikey's eyes trail the path that Luke walked. He seems to want to say something else, but he's finding trouble getting it out.

But Luke instantly seems to understand what Mikey wants to say. "You overheard what we were talking about didn't you?"

Mikey nods.

"I'm sorry buddy. This is my fault. I never should've pushed my luck."

"No, it's my fault," I say, not willing to let Luke take all the fall for it. I feel so bad because he's been helping me out the whole day, and here I've just ruined his son's favorite pastime.

I don't approach because I have a feeling Mikey wouldn't be comfortable with that, but I do squat as I say. "I'm sorry Mikey. I was the one who made the report, but I swear I didn't mean to get the team shut down. I only wanted everything to be fair." The excuse feels hollow, and so I add. "And I suppose a part of me was jealous about your win last time. I'm sorry."

Mikey doesn't say anything, but there's a little shrug on his left shoulder. I suppose that means I'm forgiven. But I still keep going, "But I swear I'll make it up to you. I'll try and find a way to get you guys back on the team if I have to talk to the district head myself."

Mikey's expression doesn't change, and I get the strange sense that he's not as happy about that as he could be.

Maybe he senses how hopeless the whole thing is.

\* \* \*

THE CALL TO THE DISTRICT HEAD DOESN'T WORK.

She's confused as to why I'm calling in the first place. "Aren't you the one who made the report?"

"Yes but...I truly think a disbandment is too extreme a punishment for the crime."

"You yourself said that you and other parents observed blatant cheating?"



Grace Jones says.

“Yes, but that’s because...” *Well because I didn’t think you’d take me seriously.* I was mad and the other parents were mad too, because we believed that Luke had bought off the district head or at least had someone over there willing to overlook all his crimes. That was a lot of where the initial anger was from; we thought we were being taken for a ride. We also felt unable to stop Luke, inadequate in comparison to him. Like he's better than us.

And so, we wanted to prove a point and get a sick satisfaction from taking him down.

Except I don't feel satisfied right now. Just sick.

“...I just truly think he and those kids deserve another shot,” I say. “It’s only the first offense. I think he truly didn't know about the rules. Believe me, he even called me and apologized after you let him know, and he was super embarrassed about the whole thing.”

She sighs. “Yes, I understand that, but unfortunately my hands are tied here. Ignorance of the rules is not an excuse. He was their coach. And believe me, no one feels more sympathy than I do for the other children, but it might comfort you to know that quite a few of them are about to age out of it anyway. At least they get to end on a high note with their last win.”

Yes. I know about the aging out process. Pee Wee league is only from the ages nine to twelve. A few members of my team are also aging out this year and that's part of the reason we're trying so hard to do well.

Suddenly, a thought occurs to me.

“Hang on, the ban doesn’t prevent the kids from joining other teams, does it?”

"Of course not," Grace says. “The children aren’t to blame here, the coach is. And the parents of course to a lesser extent. Luke won’t be able to coach again, but the children are free to join other teams if they wish.”

“Alright, understood.” I hang up after thanking her for talking to me, as the idea formulates in my head. It’ll be risky and need a lot of work, for it to even have any hope of working out.

But it’s worth a shot.

I call James first, to discuss it with him. I explain to him, very briefly, what I plan to do and although he’s reluctant at first, I work to convince him.

“Those kids aren’t at fault James,” I say.

“I know it’s just...” I can hear both the guilt and caution in James' voice

too. "This could break up our team too. I don't see this working out well in the long run.

"It will," I assure him. "I'll make sure of it."

"I'll need to think about it," he says, and I nod. He asks me to give him the evening to mull it over and I agree.

In the meantime, I feel restless, so I get started cooking dinner. I decide to also make a batch of chocolate chip cookies for dessert, to ease our sudden transition into staying here for a little. Not that I really need to ease it over. Chase is having the time of his life and hasn't left Luke alone for more than a second since we got here.

Even now, I can see them outside. Luke is teaching Chase a hockey stance, carefully adjusting his body to the correct shape.

Something resembling guilt pricks in my heart when I see them together, but I brush it away before the thought can formulate.

As I get started on the baking, I hear a sound behind me. I turn around to see Mikey standing there, hesitating at the door.

"Hey precious," I say kneeling. "Did you need something? Water?"

He hesitates and then shakes his head.

"Are you hungry?"

Another shake.

"Um..ok? Did you want me to get your dad.?"

A line of frustration appears in his head with another shake, and I giggle.

"You know this would be a little easier if you could show me what you want instead of letting me guess."

He glances up briefly, not at my eyes but maybe at my forehead, and then shuffles forward. Then he stands beside me glancing to the countertop.

I blink at him, the thought slow to enter. "Wait, you want to help me?"

He goes right to the sink and starts washing his hands. I guess that means he wants to help, then.

"Um ok sure," I stare, bewildered at him. Chase used to sometimes help me bake, when he was young, but it was mostly because he liked to swipe some batter when I wasn't looking.

But Mikey...I'm not sure what this is.

"That would be lovely, thanks."

He retrieves a stool from the corner of the kitchen, and steps on it, carefully, as I set out the ingredients I got at the store, earlier today. "Here, let's get started on the dough." I start explaining the process, chattering on

and on, when he starts lining up the measuring cups. He then grabs the bag of sugar and holds it, as if waiting for instructions.

“Oh, you want to measure the sugar? We’ll need a cup and a half.”

Mikey meticulously measures the sugar and dumps it in the bowl with the butter I’ve already put in there.

“Nice! You’re a pro!”

Next, he grabs the flour, waiting for a measurement.

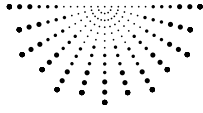
“Oh! Here, I’ll write a list for you.” I write down each ingredient, with their measurements, smiling as I note Mikey’s attention to the page.

He studies it closely for a minute, then gets to work measuring out the rest of the wet ingredients, then the dry, as I cream the butter and sugar.

I let Mikey finish mixing and then balling the dough onto the cookie sheet. I can’t believe how natural he is at it. He’s like a little pro. And I can’t help but notice the little hint of a smile as he works.



## LUKE



“ALRIGHT,” I SAY, STANDING AT THE MAKE-SHIFT GOALPOST IN THE FRONT lawn. It's really just two stones I placed to indicate both ends of it. I turn to Mia's son, blonde and blue-eyed like her, and gesture. “Try to get past me with the puck.”

The ‘puck’ is an old baseball from the garage, and I have him holding one of my old hockey sticks. The boy ruffles his eyes confused. “You want us to play on grass?”

“Yup. Not like there's any ice around for us to play on.” The rink is a short car ride away, but I don't want to leave Mikey alone.

“Yeah but...” Chase scratches his head and then shrugs. “I mean, I guess we can try this.”

I lean forward on my knees and give him a 'come on' gesture. He instantly straightens and I can see his blue eyes shrewdly trying to calculate the best route to get the ball into the goal. Well, the first thing he's going to have to do is get me out of the goalpost. Probably, he's going to try and go wide, favoring his left side, in an attempt to lure me. And then he's going to fake me out with a tackle and the minute I try to go for it, he's going to spin around and shoot straight for the net.

I see it coming a mile away. And as predicted, he starts by taking the ball to the wide left.

I play along, trailing him, attempting to take the ball. And then when he gets close, he does a feigned spike. I pretend to fall for it, but as he pivots to shoot, I swipe the ball from him sliding it through his legs and into his goalpost.

“Point for me,” I tell him.

He laughs. "Lucky shot."

"Let's go again then. And this time, make sure to twist at your waist when shooting, the way I showed you. And steady yourself. It'll add a lot more power to your shot. Make you harder to stop."

He nods again and heads back to his position. This time, as he charges at me he tries a different tactic. The minute I move from my spot, he doesn't waste time, rearing back and shooting the ball straight for the net. It's a powerful strike and were I anyone else, I might have had trouble countering it.

Unfortunately for him though, I catch the shot just as it's about to skid past me.

Chase sighs his disappointment, but I spot the grin in his eyes.

"Better," I say and he smiles for real this time. "Let's try it again."

His next shot is even better, as he combines what I told him. As he works and tries to outsmart me, he comes close to scoring several times. Yet, I manage to stop every one of his shots. I don't believe in letting kids win just because they're kids. At least not kids in whom I see real potential and whom I know can handle it, mentally.

Each time, Chase expresses brief disappointment but then he gets right back on the horse. He's always ready to go, never ready to quit. I like that. The kid has spirit, intelligence, and skill. He'll be a great player one day if he ever decides to go pro.

I tell him as much and he beams at me like I just hung the moon. "Really?"

"I wouldn't say it if it weren't true." I laugh as his fists shoot into the air. "Now come on. It's getting dark so let's go back in. I think your mom's cooking something good. You go up and shower and I'll set the table."

"Alright coach," he calls out and he runs inside. He pauses and turns. "Just so you know, if we were on ice instead of grass, I would have smoked your ass."

"In your dreams," I say, trying not to smile as he runs up. Cheeky kid. He reminds me of myself when I was younger. Although he has far more passion for hockey than I ever did. As Chase goes up the stairs, his eyes shoot around the house, marveling like when he first got here.

I'm about to head to Mikey's room but I hear a pleasant, tinkling laugh coming from the kitchen. Curious, I head there and meet an unexpected sight.

"Nice one Mikey," Mia is saying to my son who's standing on a stool at

the counter, his hands meticulously placing dollops of dough on a baking sheet. “You’ve got that technique down!”

She reaches out to brush his hair and I jerk forward to stop her and remind her that Mikey doesn’t like to be touched. But then her hands touch him before I can and my son doesn’t jerk back or run up to his room. Instead, he does something unexpected.

He smiles. My son actually smiles when she touches him, and I notice his head leans into her touch just a little.

“Alright,” she continues, though she doesn’t know how monumental an occasion this is. “So, when you’re done putting all the dough on the baking sheet, we’ll need to wash everything.”

Mikey nods. I watch, stunned. This is the most positive and productive interaction he’s had with a stranger, besides his teachers. He also has a focused look on his face, taking her instructions carefully.

I watch as they work together, moving the final baking sheet to the oven and then running an assembly line at the sink, Mia running commentary the entire time. Mikey typically hates when people talk a lot but he doesn't seem to mind now. Because it's Mia? What on earth is going on?

And why is it making me feel like this?

There's a low thrum of heat spreading through my body, as I watch her interact with my son, her hands gently brushing through his hair as he works.

So loving. So motherly.

While I know Mia is a mother, I don’t think I conceptualized it until today. In some parts of my mind, she was still the snotty, gangly teenager who used to trade barbs with me, or the passionate woman whose eyes I missed when I was gone. But seeing her like this.... all grown up and caring for my son...

Fuck, I want to drag her into my arms and do the nastiest things to her. The masculine need to possess pounds through me and somehow, it's even harder to resist now.

I tear back before they can see me with that throbbing hunger in my eyes. And then I head upstairs to take a cold shower.

\* \* \*

DINNER’S QUIET, BUT SURPRISINGLY NOT AWKWARD, JUST COMFORTABLE.

Most of it's filled with Chase telling us about his hockey game, with brief inputs and questions from either me or Mia. Mikey is quiet but he's paying attention, especially when Mia talks.

But every time I look at Mia, I still have to suppress those thoughts of her. And when our eyes meet, it throbs between us.

I know she can sense it too.

After the kids head up to their respective rooms, I tell her, "You go up. I'll clean up."

"No let me, Luke" she urges, but I shake my head.

"No, you already cooked and baked. I'll clean."

She looks like she's going to argue but then nods. "Alright, thank you. Then I'll go and check if Chase is brushing his teeth because sometimes, he forgets."

"Yeah." I turn away from her and from the hunger aching in my bones. I can hear it in the gruffness of my words.

After I go up to my room, I lean against the door and draw deep breaths. Fuck, I'm hard as hell just being around her. A pained groan rumbles through me. I don't know if I should take another shower again.

I've always known Mia was hot but why does her maternal side make me hot as hell? Why does it arouse the caveman in me?

Before I can answer the question, there's a knock on the door. I instinctively know that it's Mia.

"Hey, can I come in?" she asks, tentatively. No. That should've been the answer. I'm too close to the edge and having her so close to a bed is an absolutely bad idea.

But I open the door anyway.

She smiles at me. "I just wanted to let you know that I had a lot of fun baking the cookies with Mikey, today. I think he enjoyed it. I hope you don't mind us doing it some more. "

We stare into each other's eyes, with lust singing through my blood. I remember the way she moved on my lap, and how desperate she was at the time. I wonder if she's still as desperate.

"I don't mind," I say in a guttural voice. She cocks her head, probably at my tone. She seems to have something else to say but before she can get it out, I kiss her.

And all hell breaks loose.

I'm not entirely sure what happens next. But all of a sudden, she's in my



arms, and her mouth is under mine, so hot and sweet that I don't know what to do. I push her closer, devouring her lips, wanting to inhale her gentleness, her beauty, her softness into me. Fuck I need her. It's a craving in my blood. One that I can't control. I don't just want her. *I need her.*

And I don't think I can let her go.

I'm suddenly impatient, tearing off her dress. Her bra quickly follows. And then, it's soft pliable flesh. Mia's hands fly to my hair at my touch, her body shaking, biting her lips as her eyes slide shut.

"Mia." Her name whispers from my lips as I tear back, breathing heavily. She's panting too, her blue eyes stormy with the desire thundering through me.

I want to say more, but nothing else comes to mind. My mind is awash with need, my body alive with sensation. I kiss her again, filling my hand with her breast. She's more than a handful. My thumb skitters over the engorged point.

Mia moans into my mouth, the sexy sound tearing through my sanity. I pluck her nipple again, savoring the clear evidence of her desire.

Now, it's her turn to rip her lips from mine, gasping and arcing under the sensual torment. Her body trembles as she pushes closer, as if demanding more. I'm going to give it to her. *I need to give it to her.*

"Please." The sound is guttural. "I need more."

That's all she needs to say.

She gasps as I swing her into my arms, sideways, and toss her on the raised bed, then dragging her to the edge. I need to taste her and have her skin under my tongue. Need to get even closer to her and be burned up by her heat.

Her legs open wide and I step between them, pressing my still clothed cock against her center.

"Damn," I mutter hoarsely. Crazy, I bend toward her, kissing down her neck, desperate for more of her taste. Her engorged nipple is on my lips. While I continue plucking the left one, I suck the right into my mouth, lashing it with my tongue, alternating between little nips and long draws.

"Oh my God." I look up in time to see her eyes roll back. "It feels so good, I think I'm going to die."

I give her just a little nip with my teeth and her nails dig into my back. "Oh my gosh, Luke."

"That's right say my name." I love hearing it from her, especially in that

breathless voice. Drives me wild.

"Suck me," she says, and desire lashes through me with surprising eagerness.

I remember her dirty talk during sex. "Fuck, I love when you talk like that."

"I bet you'll love being inside me even more." She whispers in my ear, and I have to shut my eyes and pray for strength not to blow my load right there.

*God, who the hell stole Mia and replaced her with this maddening, seductive temptress?* The one that has me about to lose my mind. But then again, Mia has always been dynamic. Innocent girl, hot passionate woman, loving mother all in one. So many sides of her that I can't think straight.

And before I know what's happening, she's sliding down my zipper, her hand wrapping around my cock. And just like that it's game over.

My mind shuts down completely, my body taking over. I have some thought of going slow, but it zaps away as I push into her scorching wet heat.

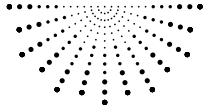
"Oh God," she cries out as I thrust into her, releasing a loud groan. The beast is unleashed and I can barely control myself, hand on her breast, desperation robbing me of coordination as I pump into her again and again spurred by her desperate sounds.

It's quick and messy and the best thing I've ever felt in my entire life. Heaven and hell.

We come together in a flash of blinding light, and I feel alive in a way I haven't felt for a long time.



## MIA



A NIGHT BIRD CALLS OUTSIDE THE WINDOW, REVERBERATING THROUGH THE air. The only other sound that can be heard in the room is restless vicious panting as the haze of furious desire finally recedes. Luke's cock sits still inside me, but I can feel it throbbing.

In its wake, I finally have to confront my own thoughts.

*Oh God, what've I done?*

I don't have the strength, physically or mentally, to push back from Luke right now and look him in the face. So, I remain in his arms that still hang loosely around me. His palm is still on my breast, and I remember the furious pushing and passion exploding inside me.

I also remind myself that the last time I made a mistake like this, it changed the trajectory of my life, forever. It was another stupid night like this, but at least that night, I had the excuse of alcohol to somehow vindicate the fact that I hooked up with Luke.

But now I don't even have that. I have no excuse.

I have to face the fact that I soberly and very enthusiastically, fucked Luke Hardy again.

"Shit." Luke sighs and I can tell that it's also hitting him at the same time. His hand lets go of my breast and he pulls back, finally looking down at my face.

"That was..." *A mistake.* That's what he wants to say but he doesn't complete the sentence, staring into my eyes instead.

"Yeah," I agree with the unuttered sentiment. *What do I do now? Do I apologize? Is he going to apologize? Where do we go from here?*

The phone rings and shatters the atmosphere immediately. Luke sighs and

slowly pulls out of me. His dick rubs against my nerve endings on its way out and I moan at the delicious friction. He groans too and has to lean his head against mine, taking several shaky breaths before he moves again.

Then he drags himself away to the bedside table where the phone is, glancing at the caller ID.

When his eyes flick up, there's something tense in them.

"It's Liam," he says, and shock douses me. *My brother, calling at this hour? What are the odds of my brother calling right after I finished sleeping with his best friend?*

Oh my God, does he know? Irrational fear flits around my mind. Does he know what we were up to? Is he here? My brother likes to show up out of the blue, sometimes.

Oh God, please don't let this be one of those times.

Luke's panic shows in the slight tightening of his jaw. Then he brings the phone up to his ear and sounds distinctly normal when he says, "Hey buddy."

I turn my face away when they have their conversation, guilt eating me up. If Liam ever found out I slept with Luke—twice—he would freak out. He never explicitly warned me away from Luke, but it was there in his eyes every time Luke and I squabbled. He was amused by it but at the same time, his gaze warned me not to take this further.

Liam would kill me. Or Luke. Or both.

"Yeah, I'm sure she's fine," Luke says, suddenly cluing me back into the conversation. She? Who are they talking about? Me?

"Maybe she just left her phone somewhere and is busy baking or something. You know how she is." Luke holds my gaze as he speaks, and I ascertain the nature of the conversation. Liam probably called me while I was up here with Luke—having sex—and I didn't answer. My brother tends to jump to the worst possible conclusion when I don't answer my phone and now he's freaking out.

I put my rubbery legs down on the floor, taking stock of my body. Shaky, but stable. I almost take the phone from Luke to tell Liam I'm fine, but Luke gives me a warning look as though he can guess my intention. And then I realize, if I say anything, Liam will wonder why the heck I'm with Luke so late in the night.

"Yeah, sure," Luke says. "I'll go out and check in on her, but I'm sure she's probably asleep by now anyway."

Liam says something else and Luke nods. "No problem buddy. Anytime."

And then he hangs up.

The two of us stare at each other for several beats, none of us wanting to be the first to break the silence.

"That was –" Luke starts.

"A mistake," I conclude already reading it in his eyes. "Tonight was a huge mistake."

He nods carefully. "It was...It was just the result of a lot of pent-up sexual tension that was all. But now we got it out of our systems."

"Exactly," I agree, and I wonder why it sounds like we're both trying to convince ourselves rather than each other.

"Don't get me wrong," Luke keeps talking, even though I already agreed with him. "I still think you're just about the hottest thing since sliced bread."

*You do?* Desire slices through me again but he continues, "But with Liam and with the kids..." he rubs his hand over his face. "It complicates everything even more. And you already know I don't do relationships."

"I agree," I say. "Which is why we can't do this again."

Even though they're the expected words, for some reason the sentence lands as unwelcome as a splash of cold water. I can see from Luke's gaze that he feels the same.

"Mia..." he says, and opens his mouth to say something but doesn't complete the sentence. And then he closes his mouth sighs and nods again.

"Yeah," he says. "We can't do this again."

\* \* \*

THE NEXT DAY, I REALIZE THAT I NEVER GOT AROUND TO TELLING LUKE WHAT I came to his room for, last night.

I decide to bring it up after we dropped the boys off at school, on our way to the cupcake shop. Luke insists on following me around and ignores my protests once again.

"I'm your business manager?" he says wagging his eyebrows. "Remember?"

"I can't believe you're serious about this," I say.

"I am. So, get used to it."

When we arrive, I finally say, "Oh by the way, there was something I wanted to talk to you about last night. About the team."

He nods as he opens the car for me, showing an unexpected gentlemanliness. "I'm listening."

"I spoke to James last night," I say, and Luke's face tightens for whatever reason. I go on, ignoring it. "Anyway, he's my co-coach for the Mountain Goats and I wanted to run it by him first, to make sure he had no opposition before I tell you what it is."

"What is it?"

"I think we can combine the teams."

Luke doesn't say anything, although one eyebrow climbs into his forehead.

"I got the idea when I called the district head yesterday. She let me know that it was possible. Half your team is aging out of Pee Wee, and so is a significant number of mine. So, it only makes sense that we combine our teams."

"I don't think your team parents are going to agree with that," he says. "Especially not after that last game."

"Yes, but they have to understand that it's not the kids' fault. And as for their children, well, kids are adaptable. They'll get used to it as long as the adults are all on board and help them transition."

"I don't think anyone else will see it like that." Luke sighs. "But it's worth a shot."

Then he shoots me a smile that has my heart clenching involuntarily. I look away instantly because I don't want to awaken any type of new feeling. Luckily, his phone dings, taking his attention off me. The rest of the car ride, he focuses on his phone, typing out responses and answering important emails, I assume.

He's still on his phone as I open up shop, but I notice that when a customer comes in he immediately analyzes them. He watches every interaction I have, as though searching for "the stalker" who ransacked my house.

God, the idea still gives me chills.

I try not to think about it, but the image of my home ransacked is still etched in my mind. And even though Luke's crew did a good job of cleaning it up, I know that I'm still going to have nightmares when this is all over.

But I put it out of my mind now, focusing on work. A few hours in, I take a heated muffin and an Americano to Luke, who's still frowning at his phone.

"What the fuck is his problem?" he mutters at it when I approach.

"Whose problem?"

He looks up, his eyebrows furrowed in annoyance. "The damn old man."

I raise an eyebrow. "That doesn't narrow it down."

He sighs and explains the situation to me briefly, telling me of the charity he wants to help and how the founder refuses to meet with him.

"He's driving me up a wall. I wonder if I should just buy him out and do what I want anyway."

"You mean to stage a hostile takeover for a charity?" I smirk.

"Yeah," he says, looking stubborn. "Why not? Since he wants to be childish about the whole thing."

*He's not the only one being childish.*

I shake my head and smile. "You can't bulldoze your way into helping someone you have to be more diplomatic."

"There's no diplomacy in that stubborn goat's body."

I laugh. "Did you stop to think about why he doesn't want to work with you? Maybe he's heard something unsavory about you."

"Impossible. All my philanthropy is top notch."

"Yes, but could there be someone somewhere, trying to make it seem like that's not the case?"

He frowns, thoughtfully. I know he has someone in mind. "Possibly."

"Exactly." I nod. "So, the first trick is to put his mind at ease."

"How do I do that?"

I sigh, slip into the seat, and gesture for his phone. After he doubtfully hands it over, I type out an email, softer, requesting a chance to change his mind about me.

When I hand it back to Luke, I think he's going to oppose my urging tone, but he smiles instead.

"You're good at this. Maybe I should hire you as my diplomacy manager."

I roll my eyes. "Well, those of us who didn't grow up with people kissing our ass all the time have to learn other ways to get what we want."

"Yeah. Yeah. You should teach me. Or better yet, there's a charity gala coming up and there are a few people I want to talk into a partnership. You should come with me."

I shrug. "Sure. If I have time."

He freezes, as though he didn't quite expect that answer. And then, a

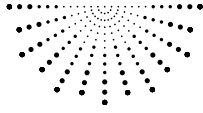


smile spreads across his face. One that has my heart racing so fast I almost snatch my words back.

"It's a date," he says.



## LUKE



A SUDDEN OUTBURST OF OUTRAGE REVERBERATES THROUGHOUT THE SMALL crowd of preteens standing in the middle of the rink. Mia flinches. I'm sure she expected the dissent but didn't quite think it would be so loud and chaotic.

"Ok, guys settle down." She claps and practically yells but she's barely heard over the noise. "Come on guys, let me talk.'

"I can't believe this!" The red-haired kid who walked off during the last game, says. His voice is loudest, and his face is the angriest. "You want their team to join ours?"

"We don't play with those cheaters," another blonde boy yells in a weedy voice. Meanwhile, my team, who initially had neutral expressions on their faces coming in, are also growing increasingly agitated.

"Yeah," one of them yells. "Well, we don't want to work with you either."

Mia sighs and glances over to where I'm lounging in one of the seats in the bleachers. I shrug. I warned her that this would happen. As grateful as I am that she's trying to help out, it's not going to be easy merging two opposing teams.

She rolls her eyes at me and I try not to smile at her annoyed expression. She'll probably think I'm gloating.

She turns back to the kids and tries to calm them down, but she can't even get a word in, edgewise. Even her co-coach is having some trouble calming them down, but at least he doesn't seem surprised at all, by this turn of events. Mia told me that while he agreed to give it a chance, he also warned her that the kids wouldn't like it.

"Yes, well you have to learn to like it," she continued in what I call her stern-mom voice. "This is the way things are, now. I'm not asking your permission."

But maybe she should have because the kids look outraged. Both teams are full-on arguing with each other and any attempts to calm down the ruckus fall on deaf ears.

I sigh, put two fingers up to my lips, and let out a loud, piercing whistle. Instantly, everything falls silent.

They turn in unison, to the bleachers. My team looks at me expectantly, but I don't say anything, only nod to Mia to continue. She shoots me a grateful look, and I wish I could do more to help her out. But the district coach was clear. To prevent another possible disbandment, I can't have any input in coaching the team. That's why I'm sitting so far away, only observing.

"Alright," Mia says, turning back to the kids. "Now, I know you guys aren't too happy about the turn of events. Both teams. It's sudden and y'all don't like each other. I get it. But I want you to give this a chance and see this as a new opportunity for both of you."

"A chance for what? More cheating?" the red-haired boy asks.

"Brandon—" James sighs.

"No, that's a fair question, James," Mia says holding up her hands. "First of all, let's clarify one thing. The Honey Badgers didn't cheat. It was a misunderstanding because their coach wasn't aware of the uniform code. He's been punished and fired as coach, but it's not fair for the team to be punished too, because they have no control over what their coach did. I mean how would you guys like it if I messed up and you guys got blamed for it?"

"You wouldn't do that Ms. Mia," one quiet voice parrots out, and she smiles fondly at the boy.

"No, I wouldn't. But if I did, I wouldn't want you guys to lose out on playing hockey because of me. And I don't want the same for the Honey Badgers, either."

A grumbling echoes over Mia's team's side but it was a distinct improvement over the earlier yelling.

"Alright, guys. I'm not saying you all have to get along immediately. But this is actually a good opportunity for both of you. For the Mountain Goats, we get another chance at the championship. And the Honey Badgers get to keep playing hockey."

"You mean cheating at hockey," Brandon says again, and another line of grumbling.

"We never cheated," Harry says from the Badger's side. "We won fair and square, right coach?" He turns to me.

"I'm not your coach anymore Harry," I call out and his face falls. The kids were upset when I told them I couldn't be their coach anymore. I felt a tinge of sadness too, but there's nothing to be done about it.

"Enough with the talk about cheating," Mia says again, in a commanding tone. "I've already explained it. This is how it's going to be."

*Bossy, I think. But her bossiness is surprisingly sexy.*

"But there's too many people on the team Ms. Mia," the quiet boy says again.

A rumble goes out through the group again, but James cuts it short with a "Quiet guys."

Mia shoots him a grateful look, one that has my stomach tightening once again, and turns back to the children. She then proceeds to explain to them how the teams will be split, adding that each game will alternate between teams. The kids don't look convinced, but at the same time, the vast majority appear bored with this conversation. Most are just eager to get back to the game they love.

I whistle at Mia and when she looks at me, I mouth to her. *Get it going. Just let them play everything else will work itself out, in time.*

She nods, instantly catching my meaning and says, "Ok guys. Let's start with arranging the teams!"

As she calls out the names of each sub-team and sets them to play against each other, I restrain myself from making commentary. Instead, I turn my gaze to Mia and James. They talk every once in a while, interacting naturally, like they've been doing it for years. I wonder about their relationship. Is it just friendship or is there more to their affection?

*Fuck.* Jealousy tightens my gut. I shouldn't feel like this. I don't have any rights over Mia but neither does that asshole. At least I'm going to have her, though. Tonight.

And I can't lie that I'm looking forward to it, possibly more than I should be.

I asked her to accompany me to the gala on impulse, not thinking she would say yes. But now that she did, I couldn't stop thinking about it.

*It's not a date, I tell myself. She's just going as your companion, to help*

*you out.*

But it feels too much like a date. And I'm far too excited about it. That's the problem.

After the hour-long training, we head home with Mikey and Chase in the backseat.

Mia is quietly thoughtful, and then she asks almost in a whisper, so as to not let the boys hear, "Do you think it's going to get better?"

"Doubt it," Chase replies from the backseat, clearly having heard his mom's low voice. "I think we're always going to hate the Badgers, no matter what you say, Mom."

"Gee, thanks Chase," Mia says sarcastically, and her son smiles mischievously. I suppose the boy enjoys riling his mother up a little bit. Another thing we share.

"It'll work itself out," I say. "Kids don't tend to hold grudges for very long. By their first game, they're going to have to learn to work with each other. Or lose. And I don't think they'll pick the latter."

Mia sighs. "I hope you're right."

"I usually am," I inform her, and she rolls her eyes again but a smile tickles the corner of her lips.

When we get home, Chase and Mikey head up to their respective rooms and Mia heads up too, to get ready for the gala. I told her we'd need to leave by five, even though the gala starts at nine. My reason is a surprise.

By the time the babysitter gets here, Mia comes down in a black mid-dress that hugs her curves in all the right places, showing off the grace of her movements.

She's attaching an earring as she descends. "Alright. I already talked to Chase and everything, ran by the rules." She grins at the babysitter who waves back.

"I don't need to remind Mikey of the rules," I tell her.

"Ok. Then I'm ready to go."

"Perfect." I offer her my arm and she takes it. For a second, our eyes meet. Mia's so beautiful, although relatable and girl-next-door looking, but those glowing eyes, that hair over cascading over one shoulder, and those lips.

"What?" She says self-consciously. "Do I look weird?"

I shake my head. *You look beautiful.* But voicing that would lead down a dangerous path. Instead, I clear my throat. "Alright, let's go."

As usual, when I get to the garage, I gesture to the cars. "Take your pick."

She shudders a little. "They all look like black death traps."

I laugh. Most women like my cars because they're a symbol of wealth and status. Some even pretend to understand my love for cars and rattle off stats to impress me. But Mia shows her disgust plainly.

I wonder what she's going to say when she sees my surprise.

"Where's the gala at by the way?" she asks as we drive. "I'm guessing at one of the large conference halls in the city? McGivey?"

"You'll see," is all I say, and she glances at me suspiciously.

"I don't like that answer."

"You don't like any of my answers."

"Yes, but I don't like that one, especially."

I fight not to grin like an idiot. "I'm not leading you to your doom if that's what you're wondering."

"Then why does it feel like it?" she asks, sounding curious and irritated at the same time. "I swear, if this is one of your elaborate schemes, I'm never going to forgive you."

"It's not," I say. "Trust me."

"Hah," she scoffs, but then she rests back against the seat, not asking any more questions.

In fact, she doesn't say anything else, until we get off the highway, turning to an exit with a large distinct sign.

"The sign says airport," she points out.

I don't say anything.

"We're going to the airport?"

"Yup."

Her eyes turn horrified. "Are we flying somewhere?"

My non-answer confirms it for her.

"What?" she cries out. "I can't fly. I... I don't even have my full purse!"

"You'll be fine with what you have."

"But I can't leave Chase without warning."

"We'll be back tonight," Luke said. "I promise you."

Her face shows that she's not sure she can trust me but doesn't have a choice, short of jumping out of a moving car. She gives an annoyed sound.

But I don't park at the airport parking lot either. I drive around it, going down a winding pathway to the back of the airport.

I don't stop the car until we're on the airfield, near the tarmac of a sleek black aircraft. A simple A is swirled on the side of the aircraft in shiny silver.

Eager to get out of the car, she opens the door before I can get to it and steps out of the car herself. I can see her face, trying to make sense of the series of events.

"We're flying on a private jet?" she asks.

"Yup."

"Why?"

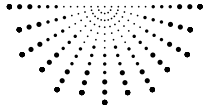
*Never been asked that before.*

"Why not?" I ask. "It's mine. Might as well use it every once in a while."





## MIA



I'VE NEVER EVEN DREAMED OF SEEING A PRIVATE PLANE IN REAL LIFE, LET alone flying on one.

But as I enter the chill interior, greeted with warm polite flight attendants, it all feels so surreal. And I don't know if it's the plane, but I'm shaky on my feet too.

Luke must have sensed it because his hand creeps around my waist and even though logically, I know I should be throwing it off, I welcome it like a lifeline.

I also welcome the delicious thrill that dances over my skin, at his touch. Instead of focusing on that, I distract myself by glancing around at the plush leather seats and the elegant hued lights on each side. Luxury oozes from every corner of this private plane. Heck, even the hostess uniforms look expensive. And I feel very out of place.

Luke, of course, seems to be enjoying my dishevelment very much. I shoot him an annoyed glance as we sit down. "You could've warned me."

He raises an amused eyebrow. "If I'd told you that I wanted to fly us out on a private jet to Portland for a night, would you have agreed to come with me?"

Probably not. But I don't want to give him the satisfaction of proving him right. "Admit it. You just wanted to knock me off kilter."

"I can't lie, watching your eyes bug out of your head was pretty funny," he says and laughs when I pick up a pillow by my chair and throw it at him. He doesn't even flinch.

"Miss," the hostess distracts me from my thoughts of revenge. "Sorry. I just wanted to ask if you wanted any wine. We have a fine selection."

"No, thank you." I need all my wits together to keep up with whatever schemes Luke plans next.

The hostess nods politely and turns to Luke who raises two fingers. "Cabernet. Two glasses, please."

"Excellent choice, Sir." The woman nods and smiles as she walks away.

"Two glasses? I'm not drinking anything," I tell him firmly.

"Just taste the wine first," he urges, assuredly. "If you don't want to drink any more than that, then it's fine."

And to his credit, the wine does taste delicious, but I don't let myself have more than a couple of sips. He smirks at me, like he can tell exactly what I'm thinking and why I'm holding back but I don't rise to the bait.

As the aircraft begins its ascent, my stomach tightens.

"Yeah, small planes feel a little different than the big jetliners," he says. "It'll pass."

"You fly private often?" I ask, mostly to distract myself from the unpleasant feeling.

"Yeah. I love traveling but I hate the hassles at the airport, and this makes it easier. Money well spent."

*Huh. Spending probably millions of dollars on a minor inconvenience of a few hours at the airport, plus putting extra exhaust into the atmosphere.*

But who am I to judge?

I've never actually conceptualized how rich Luke was, before. I mean, I understand he lives in a near-mansion now, and drives luxury cars, but it's hard to see him as truly wealthy. A part of me thinks he's still Luke from next door, the man who annoys me worse than my own brother.

But now I'm finally seeing him like this, casually drinking thousand-dollar wine in his private jet is more than a little disconcerting.

Or maybe it's the feeling in my stomach.

"You ok?" Luke asks. "Excuse me, could we get an ice water?" he requests from the stewardess.

"I think. Sorry, I guess I haven't been on a plane in a while, let alone a small one."

"You're a little pale. Here, drink this," he says, taking the glass from the stewardess and handing it to me.

I take a sip then set it down, clenching the arm rests, trying not to show my nervousness.

Luke leans out of his seat to shut the window shade next to me. "Don't

look out the window, it'll make it worse. Just look at me.”

My eyes catch his as he sits back down, and something sparks. He then gets back up, pulling the small door closed, leaving us in privacy.

I trail his gaze as he walks back toward me and leans over, landing a juicy, sensual kiss on my lips.

I kiss him back, reaching a hand up to the nape of his neck.

The plane jolts a little, breaking my concentration, knocking me back to a hint of anxiety.

“What about this?” Luke runs a hand over my thighs and trails a finger between them.

My legs instinctively open as I look back to him with a wanting expression.

He leans in for another kiss as I feel his hand move under my dress and lightly rub outside my panties, making me start to pool.

“Slide down a little,” he instructs, quietly.

I slide my butt down, in the seat, giving him better access.

His hand immediately slips in through the top of my panties, his strong, warm fingers delving between my lips, spreading my moisture around.

“Mmm,” I let out a moan.

“Shh,” he whispers in a laugh, “that door’s pretty thin.”

I bite my lip to keep myself quiet, as his fingers work on my pussy. They make small circles on my clit, then big circles on the whole area, then back to my clit. *That feels so incredibly good, I wish his fingers could stay there forever.*

Then, without warning, he slips what feels like two fingers deep inside me.

I gasp, then covering my mouth at my volume.

My whole body warms as Luke sucks on my neck, one hand occasionally groping inside my bra, the other pumping my sweet spot.

When I start to tremble, he pumps harder, using his thumb to simultaneously circle my clit.

And that’s it, I’m done. Electricity runs through me and I grasp at his forearm, digging my nails in, head and eyes rolling back.

As I come down from the high, he continues to rub me, making me jerk in pleasure. He gives me one more deep kiss then heads to the bathroom to wash his hands.

I’m still panting when he comes back, an amused and proud look on his

face.

“So, how’s the plane ride?”

“Huh? What plane ride?”

“Yeah... I did good,” he boasts with a smirk.

My eyes focus on their surroundings and I realize what he just did.

“Damn, you did do good.”

I get up to wash myself in the restroom and give him a peck on the cheek on the way.

The rest of the flight, he’s on his phone most of the time and I know he’s working. I used to think before, that Luke had nothing better to do than torment me but now, I know it’s far from the truth. He’s just very good at doing work while pretending to be doing nothing at all.

*It’d be hard for him to have made this much money without working his ass off.*

"You going to stare at me all night like that Ms. Mia?" he teases without looking up.

“Just how rich are you?" I blurt out and then blush. That makes it sound like I’m interested in his money. “I mean this..." I wave around.

"This seems excessive."

"Yeah." He looks a little embarrassed to admit it. "I have a stupid amount of money. More money than I will probably spend in several lifetimes." He doesn’t say it like it’s a good thing.

“How does it feel?" I ask, genuinely curious.

Surprise flashes in his eyes at my question and then he does his trademark smirk.

"Is this the part where I give you the poor little rich boy story, and tell you I'm so burdened by all his wealth, so I became a secret vigilante like Batman?"

I giggle. "Well to be fair, Batman had the whole dead parents’ thing to worry about meanwhile your parents are alive and well."

"Precisely," he says. "And to answer your question, it feels good to have this money. I can do whatever the fuck I want, help whoever I want. If I want to start a hundred charities I can."

"Is that why they’re honoring you today? For starting a hundred charities?" He mentioned off-handedly yesterday, that he was something of a guest of honor for the event tonight. It was why I'd taken great care with my outfit today, wearing a dress I got from Coach.

"Not a hundred." He smiles. "But yeah, something like that."

"Ah," I nod.

"Yeah. So, I'm pretty happy for the most part. Lonely sometimes," he adds and then ducks back into his phone as though he didn't mean to express that. I want to dig in some more, but I decide to relax and let him get some work done.

We land in less than an hour, and a limo awaits us on the airport tarmac. I try not to marvel at it, although Luke probably catches the look in my eyes. I'm probably oozing country bumpkin in the big-city vibes, but I can't help it. All this is so new to me, and even Luke's amused look isn't enough to stop my marvel.

The limo is accented with brown leather and a bottle of champagne awaits us in an ice bucket at the back. The driver is a friendly, older man who glances at me and whistles as I come in.

"Wow, she's prettier than the last one," he comments, and I blush.

"Mind your business, Montfort," Luke says eye glittering fondly. "This one's special."

And just like that, my stomach bottoms out as desire flashes across his expression. I look away denying him, denying myself.

To my surprise, we don't head straight to the gala. Instead, Luke takes me to a tall glass building, with golden metal trim that extends to the sky. The building looks like a cross between something you would find in old Parisian streets and the Hunger Games.

"Bardaeux Atelier?" I inquire glancing at the sign.

"Designer, dressmaker," Luke answers easily. A valet immediately jogs up to open our door, and Luke goes to take my hand instantly.

I'm grateful for it. I would feel lost in this environment if he wasn't here.

I try to match his confident stride, as the doors open to allow us into the elaborately decorated boutique. The staff spring into action, chorusing, "Welcome, Mr. Hardy."

"Hey," he says simply, returning their smile.

They then smile at me too, in association, and treat me with the same admiration because I'm with him. Before I knew what was happening measuring tapes were being draped over my body and fabrics were matched to my skin. Then suddenly, a bunch of dresses are picked out, and narrowed down and I'm in the dressing room being told to try on the most beautiful silk dress I've ever seen in my life. It's shining silver and glides along my whole

body, its backless design adding an easy sensuality, and the color makes my eyes even more blue.

I've never looked better in my entire life.

I walk out nervously, feeling a little like an imposter wearing a princess dress.

But the look in Luke's eyes banishes that thought completely.

He's talking to a designer when I walk out. The moment he spots me, his expression turns from stunned, to reverence, to burying desire in a single moment.

His jaw tightens.

And he looks pretty good himself, changed into a black, fitted suit that fits him like a glove. Butterflies expound in my stomach and get worse the more he stares at me. God, he's the most handsome man ever and he stares at me like that...

"Mia," he says in a husky voice, striding to me. For a second, I think he's going to kiss me, passionately in front of all these people.

But then he stops a few feet away, warring with himself.

Finally, he offers his hand. "Shall we?"

I swallow and pray for strength. "Let's do it."

The gala isn't as intimidating as I thought it would be. Sure, there are a lot of rich people floating around in designer fare but everyone I meet is nice enough and doesn't look at me like a gutter rat.

Of course, that just might be because the man of the night has his arm around me the whole time. He has the most commanding presence, so controlled and uncaring of what anyone else thinks. And there are so many eyes on us. Women and men. Everywhere we look, people are trying to talk to him but after a few seconds, he always steers us away from them. A beautiful woman even comes up to him, blatantly flirting, but he sidesteps her after a few seconds. He even looks irritated about the whole thing, shooting me an apologetic look.

"Am I your shield?" I joke, as we sidestep yet another person trying to talk to him. "I thought you wanted to talk to someone about a partnership."

"I changed my mind," he says. "I don't like anyone interrupting my alone time with you."

And just like that, my heart starts racing all over again.

The night is a whirlwind and although we're only at the gala for an hour or two, it feels like a lifetime. By the time we're on the private jet back home,

I'm exhausted.

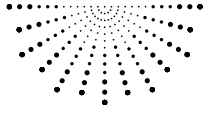
But reality hits me as we stare at each other, silently, across the table.

And I feel a little like Cinderella waiting for the clock to strike midnight.





## LUKE



“NO LEADS?”

The poor police officer who had the misfortune of attending to me today shakes his head, eyeing me carefully. I understand why. My irritation and worry are probably stamped on my face.

"Well, what the hell have you guys been doing for a week now, twiddling your thumbs?"

The man sighs as redness spreads across his face. "We're doing our best, but we can't complete an investigation in a week."

"Yes, but I at least thought you would've something. What about any surveillance footage? Isn't there any? There are cameras in the streetlight."

"The person came through a blind spot," he says. "Whoever they were, they were smart, or they knew the layout of the area well."

I curse. So, we're not dealing with an idiot here. Great.

"And we're also considering the chance that this could've been a random break-in."

I cock my eyebrow at the man. A random break-in where they destroyed everything, took nothing, and only left a vague threatening note?

"We've talked to Ms. Stone and everyone who knows her. She doesn't have any enemies, not one."

I run my hand through my hair, even though I know he's right.

"What about lovers?" I ask. "Exes?"

"She doesn't date," the officer surprised me by saying. "No significant love interests and no obsessive exes either."

Even though I draw unreasonable joy at the fact that she hasn't dated anyone seriously, I'm annoyed by the lack of leads. On my end too. I've been

following Mia every day to work now, and haven't seen anyone who remotely fits the profile of a stalker.

This means we still have no clue what happened that day and who broke into her house. Damn. I'm seriously considering hiring a bodyguard for her, but I know she'll turn down the idea, flat. Besides, I don't want the criminal to be on alert. I want this fucker to make a mistake, so I can nab him.

"Look, these things happen," the detective says ruffling some papers. "Random break-in. Sometimes, kids play pranks just to cause a public disturbance. Sometimes, they get the house wrong. Or maybe it's a robber who intended to steal but didn't get the chance to because you spooked him. But I assure you that the police are doing our very best to solve the case. And we're working as fast as budget allows us."

I blow out a breath, letting out my frustration. It won't do any good to take it out on them. It's not like they're intentionally withholding information.

"Alright officer," I say, and stand, holding out a hand. "Thanks for your help anyway."

He nods and shakes my hand. "And if you need anything else Mr. Hardy just let us know."

"Alright. Thanks."

I head out, unsatisfied and vaguely anxious. I check my watch on the way out. Mia should be at work now, so I decide to drive over there. My phone dings on the way, and as the car slows at a traffic light, I check my message. Then smile.

At least, I get some good news today.

I'm even more eager to see Mia now, and tell her all about it, which is a thought that should make me pause. I shouldn't be thinking of Mia as someone I should share important news with. She's a friend and that's all she can be, not only because of Liam but because I know that at best, she's attracted to me. I still feel like I might be a placeholder for her military man, who's due to come back soon.

And when he does, I'm sure I'll be out of the picture.

That was a fact I accepted weeks ago. But today, for some reason, the thought makes my hands tighten on the wheel of my car, and has anger spiraling through me.

I drive into the Creamy's lot, noting that there are more cars here than usual. For the past week, she's been taking my advice and increasing her

online advertising. Apparently, it's working, because there's a line when I walk in.

Both Mia and her assistant are happily serving the customers. I hesitate by the door and take a few moments to drink in Mia's smile. It's so beautiful, and warm, and makes me feel like I'm floating in a cloud.

I cut the dangerous thought short.

Fuck I shouldn't be thinking like that. It's okay for me to desire her, and want to fuck her, but I can't be thinking such sappy romantic nonsense about her. I'm not the kind of guy who does romance and even if I were, it wouldn't be with her.

I wait for her until she catches sight of me, and she smiles.

That smile does something to my insides, but I ignore it. She says something to her assistant and then takes off her gloves, walking to me.

"Hey," she says.

"Hey." I can't help my lips curling in response to her happiness. It makes me want to sing, too.

"Business looks like it's going good," I comment.

"It is. Thanks to you." She beams at me and my heart clenches again.

"Nah. I would thank your cupcakes for that. I just helped it fall into the right people's hands."

She grins and blushes.

Anyway, I have some more good news," I tell her.

"What?"

"Well, it seems like your email worked and the old man has agreed to meet with me."

"Seriously?" she says clapping her hands in delight.

"Seriously."

She stands on her toes and hugs me. I hold her closer for a few seconds, as the entire world vanishes. I forget the cupcake shop and the people standing in line, who would very well be watching us. I forget about Billy, and Liam, and my promise to him. I'm pretty sure I forget my own name too.

All I can think about is her and her warmth and how good she feels in my arms.

I don't know which of us breaks apart first, but I know we're both reluctant to let go.

"I'm so happy for you," she says in a raspy voice, face flushed. "I guess we both have reason to celebrate."

“We do. What do you say we do it tonight? Just go out for a few hours for dinner. I know a place that has amazing catfish.”

She opens her mouth, denial on her face but I stop her with a hand.

"Not a date I promise," I tell her. "Just two friends having dinner and catching up."

She chews her lips reluctantly and then shrugs. "Sure."

\* \* \*

MIA GLANCES AROUND THE SKY BAR AND I ENJOY HER LOOK OF WONDER. I love how her eyes sparkle at every new luxury I show her. She's like a kid in a new toy store, curious and disbelieving.

Truthfully, I've grown bored with luxury. I've had everything at the tip of my fingers for so long that nothing excites me anymore. But she excites me. I love her smile and seeing how polite she is with the waitresses, how much she loves great wine, and how she laughs when the waiters do a little dance for the table next to us.

"How sweet," she says. "It's their birthday."

I don't say anything, her face dazzling me. I wish it was her birthday, so I could do the same for her. I want to do more, to see more of those beautiful expressions.

*Isn't that why you were showing off last time? With the private jet and the atelier? You wanted to see her like this.*

I can't deny the truth. It's there in my mind and in my heart.

*She's not yours,* a voice creeps into my mind, a cruel reminder. *Don't get used to her. She can't be yours.*

“Tell me about Billy.” I burst out suddenly. Mia's eyes widen and her forkful of lobster freezes on its way to her open mouth.

“What?” she asks.

I understand her surprise. So far, we've only been having friendly conversations about nothing. But I can't do it anymore. I need to know about the man who may be the love of her life.

"The two of you," I continue. "Your relationship. What's it like? What's the arrangement?"

I mean, I have my suspicion, but a part of me hopes I'm wrong. A huge part of me wants her and Billy to be broken up for good. *Tell me that you*

*don't love him anymore.*

But instead, she withdraws. It's like a curtain falling over her expression.

"I don't want to talk about that," she says.

I should respect her decision, but I'm not satisfied with that answer.

I'm done lying to myself and her.

"I don't want to be sleeping with another man's girl, " I say, and her eyes widen. "I left that behind me eons ago. I need to know what's going on between you two."

Her eyes glitter in anger. "I'm not Billy's girl. We broke up."

I pause, trying not to show my elation. Especially because I'm not sure if the breakup is a good thing or a bad thing. "But he's your son's father. And you love him."

She ducks her head and hides her expression, the way she always does when she doesn't want to answer a question, or when she's lying.

*So, she's in love with him.* Pain squeezes through me.

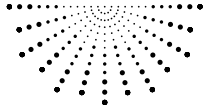
"Just give me time," she says, in a whisper. Her eyes flicker back up to me and there's apprehension in their depths. "I just need a week. And then I'll explain everything to you."

*Explain it now,* I want to demand, but I don't want to drive her away even more. I don't want to scare her with depths of emotions I don't even understand yet.

I simply nod. "Fine. A week."



## MIA



I'M NOT ENTIRELY SURE WHEN THE LIE STARTED, OR HOW IT FLEW OUT OF control.

But I think it started with my brother. When I got pregnant, he was the first person I told. I was in panic mode and despite our fights growing up, Liam was always the first person I turned to whenever I panicked. In some ways, he was more of a rock than our parents, who, while loving, were not really the responsible type.

But Liam has always been solid in times of crisis.

I called Liam, longing for his calming voice expecting he would know what I should do next.

*"Are you serious?" he asked after I broke the news, and I heard the shock in his voice.*

*"Yes," I respond. "I just took three pregnancy tests to confirm. Oh God, Liam, I'm pregnant."*

*"Well, shit." Liam still sounds dumbfounded. "I would've thought Billy knew well enough how to wrap up."*

*"No, it's not..." It's not Billy's. I scramble to say the words, but they don't quite make it out of my mouth. Admitting that the child isn't Billy's will bring more questions. It isn't Billy's? Who's the father? A one-night stand? How could you be so careless?*

*How could you lose everything you stand for?*

*My breath is biting in my chest. I just can't say it. Liam would kill me.*

*"Billy and I broke up." It's not a lie, just not the full truth. "Before he left. We didn't want to do the long-distance thing and figured it'd be best to go our separate ways."*



*"Well, then he should have thought about that before he got you pregnant. Jesus." Frustration lines his tone. "So, what now? Tell me, do you want to keep the baby?"*

*"I...I don't know." The idea has hardly had time to sink in since I found out a few minutes ago. I'm not really in the best position to have a kid. I'm not even done with college yet and only have a part-time job. Everything is still happening all at once.*

*But every time I even think about getting rid of the child, my chest clenches, and I feel slightly nauseous. "I don't know what I'm going to do."*

*Liam sighs. "Alright. How far along are you?"*

*"Um...I think just five weeks?" The anxiety of a missed period last week was what caused me to check.*

*"Ok. In that case, you still have some time to decide. Think about it, long and hard because having a kid is no joke. Especially when you're as young as you are."*

*"Alright. I will."*

*"And Mia... whatever decision you make, I'm going to be here for you."*

*My eyes widen. "Really?"*

*"Of course, really. I'm your big brother." He sounds almost insulted by the question. "What on earth do you take me for?"*

*Despite the chaos, I can't help but smile. "I know. But I just...I expected a lot more yelling with the support."*

*He snorts. "Oh, trust me. The yelling's coming after the shock goes away. It's not just going to be directed at you, either."*

*I feel guilty. "Don't go after Billy, Liam. He didn't know, either."*

*"Well, then he's going to hear it from me."*

*"No!" I blurt out. "I mean...I'm going to tell him myself. I need to. If I plan on keeping the baby that is."*

*Liam's quiet for a few minutes. "Fine. But for now, try and get some sleep. It's almost midnight. We'll worry about everything else in the morning."*

*"Thanks, Liam. And I love you." It's not a phrase that's said a lot between us. It's not because we don't love each other. It's just that it's so understood that we often don't need to say it at all.*

*"Yeah yeah, love you too."*

*It took me a few days to decide I was keeping the pregnancy. And then after that, I told Liam that Billy and I got back together and decided to make*

long-distance work. I felt guilty about the lie, especially since Billy didn't even know I was pregnant, but without it, Liam would've tracked Billy down and dragged him back himself. The Billy lie continued from then on, and now it seems to have gotten out of hand.

I thought I would have more time.

But now I see I don't. The lie has me in its chokehold and I need to set myself free. For me and for Chase.

And for Luke too.

Luke hasn't broached the topic again, ever since I asked for the time to get my feelings and my head in order. The truth though, is that I don't need to get my head in order. There's nothing between Billy and me, not since we broke up. But revealing that lie is a coverup to a bigger lie, one that is going to splinter both of our lives entirely.

And I'm not ready for it. I need time. A week, just a week to prepare myself, and then I'll do it.

And he's going to hate me for it.

I hear the coughing as I walk down the hall, heading to Chase's room. I pause in my step, then take two steps back, heading to Mikey's room. I knock briefly on the door before pushing it open. "Mikey. Honey, are you ok?"

Mikey looks up at me and nods. He's currently perched on his bed, hunched over an iPad. At my appearance, he slips off the bed and heads to me, stopping when he's standing in front of me. Eyes averted, he hands me the iPad.

On the screen are the instructions to make yoghurt-filled donuts. I smile.

"You want to make those?" I ask and he nods and coughs again. This time it sounds throatier and slightly wetter. I frown and I hold out my hand, moving slowly, so as not to startle him. Mikey doesn't move away until I press the back of my hand to his forehead, feeling the heat underneath.

"You're warm," I tell him. "I think you're getting sick."

He shakes his head fervently, eyes on the iPad, gesturing to it.

I smile, understanding. He doesn't want to be sick. No kid does. Because being sick would mean staying in bed and not being able to make donuts.

"We can make the donuts another time," I say. "Right now, I think you're coming down with the flu. Here, let me give you something for the fever. Does your dad have a first-aid kit around? Or a medicine cabinet?"

Mikey looks away refusing to answer, lips pursed stubbornly.

"Oh, come on Mikey. Tell me where it is, or I'm going to have to walk all

the way back to my house to get an ibuprofen."

Mikey makes an expression of disgust and then I realize. Of course, a boy with a sweet tooth like he does, probably hates medicine more than anything.

"Yeah, I know it's gross." I brush his hair gently. "But how about we make a deal? You take the medicine without a fuss and I'll make you your favorite dessert today. And you can have two." I hold up two fingers. "How does that sound?"

His face shows that he's mulling it over. Then he slowly nods. I smile.

"Ok. Now where's the medicine?"

He surprises me by taking my hand and leading me out of the room. I follow him, folding my hand around the small soft hand in mine. How adorable. After we retrieve the cold medicine, I watch him take it with a grimace. Then he held my hand again as we return to his room, too.

"Ok now you have to get in bed," I say. "You're about to feel sleepy in a little bit."

"Stay here."

At first, I think I'm hearing things. I blink at him, unable to believe it even though I can still see his lips form around the words. It's the first time I've heard him talk. I never actually asked Luke about the specifics of Mikey's condition but assumed his mutism was selective. Still, hearing that shy voice, rusty from lack of use, makes me want to weep for joy.

I can't deny him anything.

"Ok darlin'," I tell him. "I'll stay."

I get in bed, and he climbs in next to me, cuddling close. I cradle him against my body, rubbing his hair as he slowly dozes off. It feels so natural, and a protective instinct rises inside me as his eyes drop closed.

*What a precious boy. I wonder what happened to his mother.*

I think about asking Luke, as my eyelids get heavy too. Then when I'm about to doze off, I hear footsteps heading towards us.

And then, "Mom?"

I open my eyes to see Chase standing in the doorway, with a concerned expression on his face.

He starts to walk in the room. "What's wrong? Is Mikey - "

I hold up a hand to pause anything he's about to say, so he doesn't wake Mikey.

Then I extract myself from a sleeping Mikey and creep out with Chase, closing the door behind us.

"Is Mikey ok?" he continues.

"Yep, he's fine, just a little under the weather. I don't want you getting sick, too."

"You're kinda acting like his mom lately. Where's Luke?"

"Luke's at a meeting. Mikey seems to feel comfortable with me and I think me being with him helps him come out of his shell."

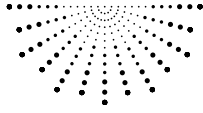
I brush his hair and pull him into a hug kissing his cheek. For the first time in a long time, my son doesn't pull back or say "Ew, Mom that's too much." Instead, his hands hesitantly go around my waist.

"I'll always be your mom, Chase," I tell him, emotion choking my throat. "I'll always love you more than anything else in the world. My relationship with Luke or Mikey isn't going to change that. Ok?"

He's quiet for a bit and I have a feeling he wants me to say more. But he just says "I understand."



## LUKE



VICTOR THAMES IS EVEN MORE ECCENTRIC IN REAL LIFE THAN HE IS OVER THE phone.

I stare at him from across the table, waiting as he visually inspects me. His eyes are narrowed, his expression extremely focused. He hasn't said more than two words since I sat down in his dusty corner office, in a building that is smack dab between a 7/11 and a prison. I'm pretty sure a man got shot last week a few blocks away, and as I drove in, I noticed a few shady people with a few shady items switching hands. It's probably a bad idea to drive my car in this neighborhood.

But I do it anyway.

I knew if I suggested we meet anywhere else, Thames would simply refuse to meet with me. Part of the reason he picked this place, apart from the fact that it's probably his office, is because he wants to test me. Or maybe to scare me off.

Unfortunately for him, I don't scare easily.

So, I just sit there, smiling pleasantly, while he tries to crawl into my head and find whatever he's looking for.

Finally, after what feels like an hour, he leans back in his seat and crosses his arms over his chest.

"Happy?" I ask, mildly.

"Hardly," he says. "You're surprisingly difficult to read."

"Coming from you, I'm going to take that as a compliment." Thames is a former vet and rumor has it that he was an interrogator in the field.

"But I doubt that it's due to any particular skill of mine," I continue. "The truth is that I'm just not hiding anything. Everything I've told you has been

the truth. I want to help you.”

“Oh yeah? And why is that?”

I shrug. “Because it’s what I do.”

“Oh, I know all about what you do, Luke Hardy.” A sneer flitters across his lips. “Big-time hockey star turned playboy billionaire who goes around throwing his money like it’s candy, and goes through women like they’re condoms.”

I smile at the assessment. It’s not too far off, at least from how I used to live.

“You break all the hearts, but the women still love you. Even my daughter tells me she has a crush on you.” He adds the last part grudgingly, and that more than anything exposes his unwillingness to work with me.

“I’m flattered,” I say, unable to hide my amusement that the curmudgeonly old man doesn’t want to work with me because of his daughter. “I’d be happy to sign something for her if you want.”

“Nah,” he says. “She doesn’t know I’m taking this meeting. For her sake, I don’t want you anywhere near her.”

“Ah,” I say.

He frowns at me, deeply. “You won’t meet her either.”

“Alright.”

“Aren’t you going to ask why?”

“I’m sure you have your reasons.”

That only makes him frown more. “Because I don’t like the way you deal with women. You treat them like they’re disposable. New face every month. You lack discipline in your love life. How the hell am I supposed to believe you have discipline in business?”

I shake my head, wondering just how many tabloids this man has paid attention to over the years.

“First things first,” I tap the table. “You shouldn’t believe in everything you read. Because a lot of it is just smoke and mirrors.”

He raises an eyebrow in disbelief.

“I’m serious. All the billionaire playboy stuff. It’s an act.” It didn’t used to be. It’s an act born out of a real history. I used to be the kind of guy who went through women faster than I could blink, but all that stopped after college. By that point, I was surrounded by mostly groupies and I lost my taste for women who were so hungry for my fame and my prestige.

The few one-night stands I did indulge in, stopped when I took custody of

Mikey. Since then, it's been lowkey, consistent hook-ups.

My priority was giving my son a stable life and not having different women coming in and out of it.

"So, you're telling me that you've been celibate this entire time?" Victor says sharply.

"That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying that I'm not who you think I am. A lot of what you heard about me has been constructed."

"By who?"

"By me."

His eyebrows furrow in confusion. "But why?"

"Because I needed people to care." I lean forward, leveling with him. "Let's be frank here. Your organization is suffering. And apart from the obvious problems with your absolutely frustrating systems, it's clear that you have a real problem connecting with donors. You have a problem getting them to care."

His lips tighten but he doesn't say anything as I continue.

"People want two things. They want you to entertain them, even when you're pulling at their heartstrings. Above all, they want a good story. That's why I fed into all those rumors about me because it fed curiosity, it entertained, it gave me a face and story to attach to all my brands. So far, you're not doing any of that. You're the man sitting at the corner of the road, no sign, no story, and expecting people to hand over hard-earned cash."

"We're not beggars," he bites out

"I'm not saying you should be," I say. "I'm saying you should be mature enough to know when you're not good at something and let someone else take over."

"And that would be you?"

"I don't see that you have other offers."

"And why do you care? Why help us ignorant low lives?"

I cock my head thinking about it. There is a very good reason I'm in this business, but the old man wouldn't believe me, anyway.

"Like I said, it's what I do."

By the end of the meeting, we've come to an agreement. I'll make an initial investment of a million dollars, to cover the system revamp, and an additional million for advertising. We're also going through a rebrand, though I know he'll fight me tooth and nail on what that's going to be. I can tell he's still mistrustful of me but hopefully, trust will come with time. The important



thing is that we've laid the groundwork and we can finally get started.

I heave a sigh and tap my wheel as I drive, impatient to get back home. I want to say it's just because of my son, but I know there's more to it than that. I'm eager to see Mia and heck, even Chase. I enjoy spending time with the small family we've created, and I'm getting far too used to it. It's probably a dangerous thing.

Because I've given Mia an ultimatum. That's essentially what it was when she asked for a week and I couldn't help the impatience gnawing at me at the time. *A week for what? To decide that she was still in love with her ex? Why would she need a week?*

On the other hand, common sense reminds me that she's been with Billy her entire life. She likely doesn't know what it's like to be in love with anyone else. Maybe she's trying to figure out if she still loves Billy or if she's just used to him.

So, I have to wait.

The week is almost up and then we'll know for sure. But until then, I need to find something to do to get my mind off her.

Or just enjoy what little time we do have together.

I arrive home and sigh as I head to the living room. I pause at the door at the sight that slams into me and seizes my breath.

Mia's on the couch with Mikey tucked to her side. His eyes are closed and he has an ice pack on his head, hands curled into her. Chase is on her other side with a bowl of popcorn in his lap, watching at the TV.

Warmth crawls through my body at the sight and I feel it in my bones. This is a family. My family.

When I move, Chase looks over first and his whole face brightens. "You're back!"

Mia glances over. She gives me a shy smile but there's a bit of anxiety in her eyes, as though she's not sure if she's doing something she's not supposed to.

"I didn't have time for dinner. Mikey has a little flu so I've been with him."

"He likes my mom," Chase says helpfully. "So, I'll let him borrow her for now."

Mia smiles and rolls her eyes at her son, ruffling his hair.

"That's very nice of you Chase," I say, and head to the couch. "What do you say we order a pizza while we finish the movie?"

"I love Pizza!" Chase announces and Mikey's eyes flutter open. When he sees me, he sits up and rubs his eyes.

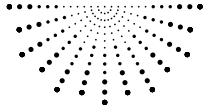
"You doing ok buddy?" I ask, as I fit myself to his other side.

He nods, but then almost immediately tucks his body into mine. Mia smiles at the two of us, her eyes misty.

And just like that, I feel like I'm home.



## MIA



THE NEXT FEW DAYS ARE SIMULTANEOUSLY SOME OF THE BEST AND WORST I've ever had.

On the one hand, everything should be perfect. Business is doing well, better than it ever has been. I have to grudgingly admit it's all thanks to Luke. The man is a genius at marketing. A part of me thought that at least most of his business success was because he already was pretty well known. I figured his fame for hockey carried over.

Now I know how wrong I was.

Because in just a short time, he's managed to pretty much triple my regular clientele and help me gain a significant following online. He listed out all the deficiencies in my business and then put me in contact with the marketing manager for one of his companies. Then, I simply told the guy my goals.

He outlined a marketing plan for me, and with just a few well-placed ads, we're now getting more customers than ever before. I can't thank him enough for it.

"It's easy to market when the products are good," he jokes, whenever I try to express my gratitude, which for some reason, makes Luke uncomfortable. Whenever I try to tell him thanks for everything, he always brushes it off with a joke or intentionally tries to piss me off so I don't talk about it anymore. Or he turns it sexual.

And in our case, it's very easy to turn it sexual. The tension between us sizzles every moment we spend together, ever since our hot night.

Almost every evening I dream about it. That night we spent together, all those years ago, merging with the recent one, too. The memories meld

together in a passionate haze until I can't breathe without thinking about it until I feel it all around me.

And I know Luke is fighting the same lust I feel. I see it in his eyes, along with a question that I can't answer yet. I try to ignore it and it's easier when we're around the kids, doing activities, or our pretend-family routine. Usually, Luke and Chase are outside practicing, and Mikey and I are baking up a storm. And then we get together for a nice dinner. I can sometimes ignore the desire, then.

But at the same time, I have to remind myself often that this isn't real. It's so easy to forget that once this is over and some time has passed, I'll return home and our 'family dinners' will no longer be a thing. Of course, I hope Luke still allows Mikey to come over and bake with me once in a while, but I'm not holding out any hope for it.

Because I know pretty soon, when this is all over, Luke might hate me.

And he would be right too.

And that's the reason for the guilt that's been weighing me down lately, overcasting every small moment of happiness. I can hear time ticking away if I listen closely enough, and know that pretty soon I'll need to fess up - and lose everything.

Just thinking about it makes me nauseous, so I try as much as possible not to. I push it to the back of my mind, smiling at customers and doing my job. And at night, I refuse to let myself be moody.

The deadline I gave myself is coming soon. I refuse to dwell on it before I have to.

As the bakery door jingles again, I'm almost relieved to be having another customer to take my mind off things.

It's a tall, stately woman who walks in. She has a piercing look on her face as she glances around the store. Her arms are crossed over her chest and she nods distantly, but her face squeezes into a frown.

"Hey, welcome to Creamy," I tell her. "What can I get you?"

"You're still open?" The words are said in a snobby tone I don't understand. "You're not supposed to be open."

*Then why are you here?* But I don't ask the question on the tip of my tongue. I maintain my welcoming smile, saying, "Well you came in just around closing time, but no worries. We still have a bunch of treats available. Samples too, if you want to try them."

"No thanks," she says. "I came to talk to the owner. I'm assuming that's

you.”

“That’s correct,” I answer, and it takes everything in me for my smile not to slip, as the woman’s gaze crawls down my body, in a very insulting way. It’s like she finds me lacking. “And you are?”

“My name is Mona King. I’m the owner of the New Moon Bakery.”

“Ah.” Now suddenly her haughty attitude makes a little more sense. “Nice to meet you.”

She doesn’t answer ‘likewise’, as would be the polite thing to do. She just continues to stare at me with that gaze that I’m sure is meant to make me shut down. But I’m not the ‘shutdown’ type, so I simply raise an eyebrow and wait with a friendly smile, still plastered on my face. As my mom always used to say. Kill them with kindness.

At the same time, I try to figure out what she’s doing here. I assume it’s something like what I did weeks ago, when I went to her bakery to scope out the competition. The only difference is that I did it during working hours and I didn’t make my presence known or throw my weight around. I simply observed how they did things and saw what I could improve on. Never would I, in a million years, have thought of eyeballing the owner the ways she’s doing to me.

Although we’re rivals, I never considered us enemies.

But from her look, she clearly doesn’t like me much.

“This is cute,” she says rolling her finger around the room.

“Thanks,” I reply and her lips tighten as though she didn’t mean it as a compliment. I can see that my ‘niceness’ is starting to frustrate her, much to my satisfaction.

“But it’s not going to last for long,” she says. “I hope you know that.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that if I were you I would quit while I was ahead. We’re opening a new branch right here in Redwood. And it’s going to be hard for you to compete. I just wanted to give you a fair warning so you had time to figure out a plan B. You know, woman-to-woman.”

“Thanks for your consideration.” My smile feels brittle around the corners, now. I really don’t like this woman.

“You’re welcome,” she shrugs. “I can be very nice and considerate. When I want to be.”

The warning is clear in her voice and her eyes.

“Look, I’ll even leave my number in case you want to work for me after

this place closes down," she says, reaching into her bag for a notepad and a pen. "Perhaps you can learn something. Maybe about interior decorating and how not to make your bakery look like a relic from the fifties."

I bite my lip to keep from saying something back. After she's done writing, she rips off the paper and places it on the counter.

"See you," she beams and then turns and leaves.

"Bitch," I mutter under my breath when she does.

After that, I figure I might as well close up before anything worse happens. I try not to think about what she said, but I can't deny the worry at the back of my mind. She's opening a new branch in town? Why? Sure, the restaurant is doing fine right now but what about when she moves to town? Will we be able to stand against them? And she looks like the type to play dirty.

*Relax. I hear Luke's voice leaking into my impatient mind. I hate when you're so down on yourself and worry over nothing. You have the best cupcakes in the fucking city. No way you're losing that to anybody.*

I smile at the phrase but then my sadness returns. Luke won't always be around to help. He might not even like me by that point. I sigh.

After I'm done locking up, I get a call from my mom.

"Hey mom."

"Hey sweeties," she says. "Guess what?"

"What?"

"We're in town!"

"What?" My parents have been in Boca Raton for a long time but they're pretty spontaneous and like Liam, they like to show up out of the blue.

"Where are you?" I ask.

"We're sitting at La Fuente's, close to your bakery. You want to have dinner with us?"

"Uh, sure."

"And bring my grandson too."

"Um..." I'm not sure I can drag Chase away from his hockey game with Luke but I can't tell them that. "Chase has hockey. So, I don't know if he can make it. But I can stop by for a few minutes." It'd give me a good distraction for the next few minutes. Besides, I miss my parents.

"And my vase?"

I feel guilt in my stomach. The vase is the last thing my grandma gave my mom before she died. It always held sentimental value in our family, and

mom saw it as a good luck charm. "I'm sorry Mom. The vase is gone. I had a little home invasion situation..."

"Hang on, a home invasion?" I hear my dad in the background.

I sigh. "I can't do this over the phone. I'm on my way. I'll tell you the whole story when I get there."

I pull out my phone to let Luke know I'll be home late then lock up and head down the street.

The restaurant's only a few blocks away, a little Mexican place with traditional Mexican art and the best horchata.

It's empty when I get there, apart from my parents who sit at a table towards the back. When I get to them, they shower me with kisses and hugs and I feel almost at home.

My dad is a little shorter than me and my mom is a little taller, and their relationship has always been ideal in my eyes. My dad may not have been the best looking to most but my mom always made it clear how sexy she found him even after he lost his leg in an accident. Dad never let any insecurities get to him.

"How long are you guys in town?"

"Oh, just today," Dad says. "We're driving down to a show in Seattle, tonight."

"Now what's this about a break-in?" my mom urges, before I can ask what the show is.

"Oh, it's not that bad," I say. I give them a brief rundown of what happened and then add, "The police think it was probably someone playing a prank. Anyway, they broke your vase and I'm so sorry. I have the pieces stored away but I doubt you could put it back together."

"I couldn't give a damn about the vase," my mom says waving her hand impatiently. "How are you and my grandson? Don't tell me you still live there?"

"Well, it's difficult to just move, seeing as how it's our home. But we're not staying there currently. While the police conduct their investigation, I'm staying next door with Luke, Liam's friend. You remember him, right?"

"Of course," my dad grumbles, and mom rolls her eyes. They've never been hockey fans but I don't doubt they know how popular Luke is.

"Yes, we remember Luke," she says. "Is he just as handsome as before?"

"Yes," I admit and then close my eyes feeling a pressure building up. I've woven a web of lies for years, but it's time to start untangling it. "Mom, I



have to tell you something....something I've been hiding for a long time but I think it's finally time you know."

"Tell us, Sweetie." Her voice is very serious now.

I sigh, try a million different phrases in my head, and then decide to just rip off the band aid. "Chase...isn't Billy's child. He's Luke's."

Silence. Shocked silence reverberates through the room and it lasts for what feels like minutes.

"What?" my mom whispers first.

I sigh and explain the entire thing from the beginning. The story comes pouring out of me, and my parents don't interrupt once. By the time I'm done, the shock isn't lessened but it's now tinged with disappointment.

"Mia..."

"I know," I say looking away from my mom, unable to bear it. "I messed up."

"Yes, but I'm more upset that you never told us," Mom says. "You know we wouldn't have cared who the father was."

"Yes, but I didn't want you to think less of me." My voice breaks on the final word and my mother gets up from her seat, wrapping her arms around me. My father, after a brief moment of hesitation, joins in.

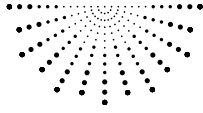
"We could never be embarrassed of you," he says. "We may not like your choices but our job is to be here for you when you make them."

"But you have to be honest with Luke, Sweetie," my mom adds.

"I know." The dread sinks in but I nod firmly anyway. "I'll tell him tonight."



## LUKE



“ARE YOU SURE WE CAN EAT THAT?” CHASE FROWNS DOUBTFULLY AT THE simmering pot.

“Of course,” I say. “It’s bean stew. My mother’s recipe.”

“Looks gross,” Chase says, wrinkling his nose.

“May look gross but it tastes amazing. Right, Mikey?”

Mikey, who’s at my other side, works hard on his 3D puzzle. But something tells me the lack of eye contact has less to do with hyper-focus and more to do with him not wanting to answer the question.

“Mom’s bean stew doesn’t look like that,” Chase says, heaving a heavy sigh. “Are you sure we shouldn’t just wait for her to come back?”

“No. Your mom has been working all day. It doesn’t make sense for her to come back and cook for us too.”

“Why not? She does it for me all the time.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t make things right. Besides, I told her that I’d take care of the two of you and that includes making sure you’re fed.” Although to be honest, I’ve never been the domestic type and Mikey eats far more takeout than he should. But staying with Mia has shown me the beauty and importance of a nice home-cooked meal, and I’m determined to follow in her footsteps.

Sure, I haven’t made this stew in probably years now, and I’m not entirely sure that’s how it’s supposed to look. But it can’t be that bad, can it?

As Chase continues to frown at the pot, I scoop a big spoonful.

“Let me give it a taste,” I tell him and sip at the spoon. I can’t quite hide my grimace at the taste.

Chase sees it and his hands go up defensively. “That’s it. I’m not eating

that and you can't make me."

Mikey was also staring at it in disgust and shakes his head at me, backing away from the pot too. I sigh and throw in the towel, chalking this up as a failed experiment.

"Alright, let's just call this one. How 'bout we order Frank's burgers for tonight?"

"Yay," Chase says and even Mikey smiles his approval. I know Mia probably won't be a fan, but I'll explain to her that I have zero kitchen skills, much to my embarrassment. Ironically, I've always looked down on men, including my dad, who left all the house chores to their wives. It especially irked me, before their divorce, when I would see my mom exhausted at the end of the day, while dad was chilling on the couch with a beer. I'm determined not to be that type of guy. Maybe I can have her leave me a recipe next time.

Hey, The bean stew was kind of a wreck, so I'm getting the kids burgers for tonight. I promise it'll be the last time.

It's fine. I'm stopping somewhere before I go home.

I frown. Where? I still don't feel comfortable leaving her alone, and only did it today because the babysitter couldn't make it at the last minute, and it was too late to find a replacement that Mikey would be comfortable with.

What? Where are you going?

Relax. I'm just going to see my parents. They're at La Fuente's down the street. Then I'll come straight home. I promise.

Hmmm

It still makes me a little uncomfortable. Maybe I should get her a car so she doesn't have to walk or rely on Uber. I told her she could take any of mine but she absolutely refuses to drive one of my 'deathtraps'.

*"I love walking," she told me before. "It's one of the few moments in the day I get to clear my head."*

But I still don't think it's safe enough for her to be walking just yet.

"Can I have the double cheese?" Chase says, interrupting my thoughts. "Mikey wants the one with pickles."

Pickles are Mikey's favorite but that's not public knowledge.

"How do you know?" I ask Chase.

"Because he told me," Chase answers offhandedly and then runs for the stairs before I can say anything else. "I'll get washed up first."

Mikey continues on his puzzle, avoiding my confused gaze, then heads upstairs too.

The burgers are quick to arrive, and after indulging, the kids are quick to pass out. I wake them up and guide them up to their rooms, before returning to switch off the TV.

That's when the door handle turns and Mia finally lets herself in.

"Finally," I murmur, feeling the anxiety, that's been with me the entire night, ease just a little. Then I catch sight of her expression. She looks drained.

"What happened?" I ask. "Are your folks ok?"

"Yeah they're fine," she sighs. "We just had a very long talk."

"About what?"

She shakes her head. "It's not important. Are the kids asleep?"

I nod.

She sighs again. "Then I guess it's time for us to have our talk, isn't it?"

"We don't have to do it today," I tell her, grabbing her hand and pulling her into me. As curious as I am about her reasoning and as much as the answer torments me, I don't want to push her when she's already feeling this tired.

I feel her head shake against my chest. "I need to tell you," she says, and leans back to stare at me. Her eyes are misty and her pulse is thundering. "I need to say it before I lose my nerve entirely."

I shake my head. "Later. We can do it later."

"But-"

"Shh."

But the woman is more stubborn than I expected.

"You know I don't love Billy, right?" she starts. "I haven't for a long time. Not since you and I..." Her face heats and her eyes darken with the memory. I know she's remembering the night we first hooked up. It was at a house party in college and I was trying to get her to leave, sick of keeping the animals away from her all night. I told myself that I was doing it for Liam because I didn't want to see his sister get taken advantage of. But in hindsight, I know how sick with jealousy I was. It wasn't about Liam. It was

about her and how much I wanted her.

I don't think it hit me as hard as that night. I wanted my best friend's sister, the one woman I couldn't have.

And she called me out on it. I don't know how she knew, or maybe she was only trying to provoke me. She was nineteen, young but so beautiful, and before I knew it we were making out in the bathroom. Making out led to more things and messy sex.

We never even locked the door.

It was a miracle we weren't caught.

I saw her home and made sure she got to bed safely. We never spoke about it again. Sometimes, I wondered if she even remembered it.

Sometimes, I wondered if someone did see us, and if they told Liam. He would hunt me down.

But now here I am, Liam be damned.

"I think I'm falling in love with you." The words whisper out of me, rioting in the silence. They're foreign in that it's the first time I've ever said anything like that. I've never told any other woman that I love them, before.

In my thirty-eight years of life, this is the first time I'm falling in love. It would be laughable if it wasn't so sad.

Her eyes are wide and I lean down and kiss her. Her taste explodes in my senses, lips so sweet and soft. More passionate words are thumping in my chest, but I can't think straight.

My hand wraps around the back of her neck, pulling her closer, trying to inhale her. I want everything from her. Her body, her heart, her energy...I want it all so bad.

I taste the surprise on her lips for a second, before she pulls back.

"No," she says, and her eyes are dusky from fighting the desire inside them. "Wait, I have more to say—"

"Later," I tell her. When we're thinking straight we can go back to the discussion. But now, having confirmation that she wants me is enough.

I swing her up into my arms and carry her upstairs to my room. She's quiet for most of it but her breath comes out in little pants, along my neck. I lay her back against the bed, admiring the way the light falls across her face. She looks so beautiful my heart aches.

I take her lips in mine again, enjoying it as she tries to pull me to her. I pull back, not wanting to rush this. I want to savor it. I start kissing down her neck, to the mound between her legs. Pushing up her skirt, I admire her

Barbie pink, satin thong.

"Luke." Her panting is loud now, and desire thunders in my ears but I take my time, staring at her.

"You look so pretty in pink," I tell her as I pull her thong to the side, hand brushing against her sensitive skin, as I do. She squirms and I groan at the moisture that already slicks her smooth skin. "But you would look even better out of it."

"Luke, I can't..." Her eyes squeeze shut as I part her folds, mapping her clit with my hand. Her neck seems to lengthen when I gently strum her clit, before drifting down to her aching opening, marveling at the mess she makes around my fingers.

"Can't what?" I tease. "Can't finish a sentence?"

I push a little bit of my finger inside her and she moans, deep and throaty. Her knees bend, feet on the bed, pushing up to meet my hands. I give her a little bit more and her head thrashes, vying for my finger to plunge deeper.

I keep her on the edge as long as possible, so fucking turned on by her helpless cries.

"You have no idea how good you look like this," I tell her. "So fucking passionate. So sweet."

I lean in and kiss her, allowing desire to whip through me and fray my mind. It steals my senses and I lose time, until I feel her hands at my buckle, shoving down my jeans, desperate to pull me on top of her.

Trying to stave myself off, I pull her skirt down, admiring her beautiful round ass that's revealed as her hips twist to assist me.

I give it a little slap and she half yelps, half moans.

It makes me even more desperate for her. I want to feel her around me. Nothing feels as good as her wet, hot, pussy sucking at my cock.

The first touch is heaven, which has my head whipping back, restraining the urge to shout. As she moves impatiently under me, I steady her with one hand on her belly, using the other to hold myself up.

Her soft hand wraps around my cock and I bite my lip to keep from coming in her hands. She aligns me to her entrance and slowly, I descend, trying to have patience and make this good for her.

Because it feels too damn good for me.

"I think I love you." The words choke out of me again. I close my eyes, feeling her warm, juicy, pussy suck at my throbbing cock. Not like I have a choice.

"Oh God, Luke," she gasps, eyes mindless and lost in a sexual haze. "You feel so good."

I attempt to move slowly, but lose the war and thrust back hastily, much to her gasped delight. My head falls close to her ear and I murmur the last words I remember.

"I really *really* think I love you."

\* \* \*

THE CHAOS BEGINS NEARLY AN HOUR AFTER WE DROP THE BOYS OFF AT school.

I'm sitting in Creamy's, watching Mia work while pretending to be working, myself. She's assisting a customer when suddenly she jerks and then holds a finger up, as she reaches into her backpack pulling out a phone. She's about to automatically end the call, but then she frowns. She hesitates for a split second, before she answers, calling her assistant to attend to the customer in front of her.

She drifts to the side of the counter and her expression grows even tenser. She shakes her head, speaking rapidly. Her lips press together.

And then she meets my eyes from across the room.

Trouble is brewing.

"What's wrong?" I ask as she hustles across the floor toward me.

"It's Chase and Mikey," she says hurriedly. "That was the principal calling. They were in a fight."

We don't need to say anything else. We're both so in sync that we act at nearly the same moment. While I pack up my laptop, Mia grabs her bag and distantly calls her assistant to cover.

The drive to school is quick and we try to piece together what happened, from what the principal told Mia.

"What started the fight?" I ask and she shakes her head.

"I don't know. According to Principal Givens, Mikey started it and then Chase jumped in."

"Mikey started a fight?" I frown. "Doesn't sound like him."

"I know, that's what I said. We'll figure out the rest of the story once we get there."

Even in the principal's stuffy office, it's hard to piece together exactly



what happened.

But Chase is happy enough to give us a rundown.

"It's not our fault," he says, standing indignantly and gesturing in agitation. "This kid Logan, from the Bears team, was talking smack about my mom, saying that she's a horrible coach and should probably give up and spend that time trying to find a husband. I was about to tell him to shut up but Mikey beat me to it. Came out of nowhere and decked the kid. And then he almost got his butt beaten so I had to step in."

Mikey nods from his seat, although he doesn't have a single scratch on him to corroborate the story.

"He doesn't look beat," Principal Givens says dryly.

"That's cause I jumped in," Chase insists, "and kicked Logan's butt."

"Ah. So, it was Logan getting his butt beaten."

"Well, it's not like I just wailed on him. He hit me too. Look."

He raises his shirt to show a tiny bruise forming on his abdomen. I only see it for a second before something else immediately snags my attention.

A few inches under his armpit lays a faint brown mark, that looks like a circle, with uneven borders, and a whitish dot in the center.

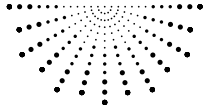
Shock douses me.

It's a pretty unusual birthmark, one I've only seen twice. On myself, and on the childhood shirtless pictures of my dad, back when he would vacation in the Keys, and hold up the fish he caught in every photo. The mark tends to fade with age, but that's not the thing reverberating in my mind right now.

*Why the hell does Chase have our family birthmark?*



## MIA



LUKE'S BODY GOES RIGID BESIDE ME.

I glance at him, expecting to see that he's pissed that Mikey was apparently trying to defend my honor, but notice his eyes are transfixed on Chase whose shirt is still lifted to show us the bruise.

And then I figure he's mad that Chase got hurt.

I'm mad too, but I don't sound off like I want to. Someone needs to maintain rationality here, or this could all go left pretty quickly.

I do note Luke's silence though. He's quiet for so long it's like his mind is far away. And then when his eyes turn to me they're an inferno of confusion and questions that I can't answer.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hardy." I glance back at Principal Givens who is calmly sitting at the head of the table, expression telling us she's already tired of us. "I'd like to settle this as quickly as possible, if that's alright with you."

"Oh no," I tell her holding my hand up. "We're not married."

"Oh. Apologies for the mistake. I assume since they're brothers -"

"They're not brothers!" I squeak out a little too loudly and then clear my throat. "I mean. They're just friends."

Givens looks bored with my explanation. "Excuse my mistake, again. Anyway, the point is that we're looking at a possible suspension for both boys."

"For what?" Luke suddenly speaks up again and his voice is a growl. "They were attacked and they defended themselves. I don't see why they're the only ones getting suspended."

"They were attacked with words, and your son chose to use his fists instead of talking it out. We try to discourage the kids from doing that as

much as possible. Besides, Logan looks far worse than they do, and he's getting suspended too."

"I doubt it," Chase says, and I shoot him a look that instantly silences him.

"Logan is suspended," Givens says firmly. "And so are the two of you. That's fair."

"No." I hold out my hands. "No one needs to be suspended. Look, kids fight, that's normal. I get that it's wrong, but I think in this case, especially since it's the first time, we can just give a warning. Maybe extra homework, or detention, or something like that."

She sighs. "I'm sorry. We have a zero-tolerance policy for fights, and it triggers an immediate suspension. What we can do, however, is make sure it doesn't go on his permanent record. As long as both parties agree to apologize to each other."

"Over my dead body," Chase says, and Mikey's face is set in a similar mulish expression.

"They'll do it," I say immediately, and send both boys a stifling look when it looks like they're going to protest.

"I'll set it up with the other family," the principal says, and I nod. "Thanks for that. And again, I'm sorry for the trouble."

As we head out, I resist the urge to scold the boys. I don't want Mikey to feel worse than he already is and I understand why Chase felt like he had to jump in, but I want them to understand that fighting is not the answer.

"Fist fighting is wrong," I say as walk. "You get that right, Chase?"

Chase releases a frustrated breath. "Like I said, I was only defending Mikey. Of course, you would blame me for this rather than him."

"I'm not blaming anyone, Chase. I understand why you both did what you did, and I appreciate that you thought you were sticking up for a friend. But fist fighting in school is wrong. Period."

Chase doesn't like that. And as usual, when I say something, he doesn't like, he avoids my gaze but says nothing. Instead, he turns to Luke, who has been suspiciously quiet throughout this whole thing.

Luke's face is a harsh mask and unreadable. His gaze is fixed forward. He seems to be very upset about something and like a boiling cauldron as though one wrong move is going to make him explode. And I don't want to be the wrong move.

So, I let him have his space, wondering at the few times that his eyes

flicker toward Chase. His face holds such intensity during those moments as though he's trying to figure out everything there is to figure out about the boy. And then, when we get to the car, his eyes finally meet mine and there's an accusation in them.

It's undoubtable. He's pissed at me. But why? Is it because of what happened here? Or because I scolded the boys? Is he mad that Mikey got in trouble defending me? What's the look about?

After what feels like an hour, but is probably minutes of a silent ride, a familiar voice speaks out.

"Chase."

My eyes shoot open when I hear it because it's only the second time I've heard Mikey talk. And from the expression on Luke's face, he's stunned too.

But no one seems more confused than Chase himself. "Uh...yeah?"

"Sorry," he says.

Chase gets over his surprise and shrugs. "Nah it's fine. It's what friends do."

"Friends?"

"Yup," Chase says. "We're friends."

Mikey nods and gives a little smile to the center of Chase's chest. Chase smiles back and holds out his fist. Mikey bumps it with a fist of his own and they both relax back in the backseat.

And just like that, something monumental has happened and the whole atmosphere's changed.

"At last something good came out of this," I comment but Luke doesn't reply. He shoots me a quelling look and then turns back to driving.

\* \* \*

"WE HAVE TO TALK," I TELL LUKE WHEN WE GET HOME, BUT HE IGNORES ME. The boys jog upstairs, probably sick of being with us, although I remind Chase, I need to look at his bruise. I'll probably check in on Mikey too, to make sure he isn't banged up somewhere we can't see. But for now, I need to talk to Luke.

I know he hears my request, but he doesn't respond.

"Luke," I say again to his back. "We need to talk."

Luke heads up too as though I didn't say a word.

Anger immediately bubbles through me. *Why is he treating me like this, as if this whole fiasco is my fault?*

The indignation rides me and I take a few seconds to calm down, before following him, throwing open the door of his study. I know we can't avoid the conversation anymore and I refuse to have more secrets between us. It all has to come out today, including everything about Chase.

I'm sick of holding it in.

"We need to talk."

"So talk." He leans back in his seat and shoots me a look that would disintegrate steel. Under different circumstances, I would find his appearance a tad sexy. But right now, I'm too pissed to care.

Or at least that's what I tell myself.

Instead, I take a deep breath. "We didn't finish our talk yesterday. There's more I have to tell you about Billy...and Chase."

He stiffens and his eyes are flat as I continue.

"Billy isn't..." The words choke on their way out of my throat. "He isn't-

"He's not Chase's real father," he says.

I raise my eyes toward him, shocked. There's no surprise in his tone, only disappointment.

"I'm Chase's dad," he says much to my horror. "Aren't I?"

And then a single horrific thought hits me. *Has he known all along? Was he just stringing me along in some sick bid for revenge? Or was he playing me?*

*Was I wrong about him, again?*

"How..how long have you known?"

"I just figured it out today, when Chase raised his shirt. I had the same birthmark under my arm. It faded with time." He crosses his hands over his chest, and suddenly his earlier reaction makes sense, the anger seething out of him. He knew when he saw Chase's birthmark.

"Oh," I say lamely. I don't know what else to say next. He's furious and even an apology won't do much for him right now.

Still, I feel the need to say it. "I'm sorry. You probably won't believe that I didn't set out to deceive you."

"You're right." He smiles with no humor. "I don't believe you. I don't believe a word you say."

The deeper meaning strikes in my chest and I nod, accepting it.

"I'm sorry," I say and my voice sounds so weak and lifeless. Pathetic, like

all my excuses. "I'm sorry about hiding it from you. But let me explain the whole story-"

"I don't fucking care about the whole story." He doesn't yell but his tone cuts through the atmosphere anyway. "You knew. This whole time you knew Chase was my son and you kept it from me."

"Yes but-"

"I don't give a fuck about anything else." He leans forward. "But if you think I'm going to let you keep my son from me for much longer then you're going to have another thing coming."

"I wouldn't dream of that." My voice shakes, but I clutch my hands together to keep from crying. This is exactly my worst nightmare. Tears stuck in my throat. I expected this to happen but that doesn't make it any less painful. Maybe because somewhere along the line, I started to believe that everything would be ok. That I would get to explain and maybe just maybe, he would understand why I did what I did.

I wasn't trying to hurt anybody in all this. I thought I was doing the right thing.

But his eyes are sharp. He won't listen to a single word I have to say.

And I deserve his contempt.

"I'm sorry Luke," I say, and to my embarrassment, a stray tear rolls down my cheek. "I'll leave."

I close the door behind me.

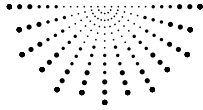
I head up to my room drained. Luckily, I can cry alone and silently but I don't let myself break down just yet. One more person to tell. I debate whether or not to tell Liam at first, but he'll find out anyway. Better it be from me, so he could take out all his anger for me.

I pick up the phone, wipe my eyes, and call my brother.





## LUKE



MIA HAS A WOUNDED LOOK BEFORE SHE TURNS AWAY BUT I HARDEN MYSELF against it. I tell myself not to feel anything but anger. She doesn't deserve my sympathy. Not after what she did.

As the door closes behind her, I let the fury overtake my thoughts again. At the center of that is betrayal. *How could she do this to me? Fuck, how could this happen to me again?*

When I found out about Mikey, I'd been mad. Not mad that I was tricked into having a kid, but more furious that his mother had kept him from me all this time. My son grew up for the first seven years of his life, without a father. I was a deadbeat by default, without a choice. I couldn't be there for him in his formative years. Heck maybe if I had, my boy wouldn't be so tentative with people, always on the edge of rejection. Maybe he would know how to make friends by now. She robbed me of a chance to do that for my son and even though she was dead, I didn't think I could forgive her for it.

But eventually, I was able to let it go. The truth was that I didn't know much about his mother, and the woman clearly had mental issues that were far beyond anything I could've helped her with. It was partially my fault, for sleeping around with women I barely knew. She didn't owe me rationality or even loyalty.

With Mia, the anger is more because the betrayal cuts deeper.

Never in a million years would I have expected this from Mia. Mia, who is honest to a fault and always aims to do what's fair. She always tries to do the right thing even when it's difficult. No.

The image shatters. That Mia would've never tried to pass my son off as another man's child.

The truth pierces through me and I welcome the pain to keep me from delusion.

*Why? Why did she never tell me? Was she going to keep it a secret forever? If I never found out was she simply never going to tell me?*

*Or was that what she wanted to tell me all along? What she was going to tell me yesterday but I stopped her?*

That last question now haunts me more than anything else.

I lean back in my seat and run my hand over my face, wanting to scream. I want to hit something until the boiling anger leaves me, but remain seated. Thoughts flash through my mind. I picture Chase as I saw him during practice. He looks like his mother but now that I think about it, we share a lot of things in common. The way his eyebrows arc over his eyes when he says something sarcastic...And there's that little smirk he does every time he scores a goal past me. Those are all mine. He's my son.

Heck, he even looks a little like Mikey. The resemblance...the principal saw it before I did. Was I that blind? Or I just simply trusted what Mia said to me? I was blind to her.

A part of me thought I was probably tripping when I saw the birthmark under Chase's arm. I thought maybe I was just seeing things or at the very least, that it was a random coincidence. But upon closer inspection, it was uncanny. The birthmark looked exactly like mine before it faded. My dad told me he had the same birthmark too. What were the odds that the kid would have the same birthmark, our family heirloom, in the same spot? And then there were other things. His personality. His love for hockey. His attitude. Little mannerisms. All that is me.

But still, I held out hope that maybe I was deceiving myself. Because Mia wouldn't lie to me like that. She would tell me if I had a son.

And then I confronted her and saw that guilt pass over her face. She didn't even try to deny it. And that's when I knew for sure.

*He was my son.*

"God, I can't do this." I immediately rise, restless and feeling trapped by four walls and my thoughts. I'm also distinctly aware of Mia's room a few doors over. She left here crying. I don't want her to cry. Despite my fury, I want to go and comfort her and pull her against my body and tell her everything will be fine. But I won't let myself. That ship's sailed and I won't let myself feel anything for her anymore.

Ha.

*As if you have a choice.*

My phone rings to end the thought. Liam's caller ID flickers on my screen and I hesitate to answer. Did Liam know about this too? Or is he as in the dark as I am? I don't know which answer I would prefer.

But there's only one way to find out.

"You lying, traitorous asshole." His voice is low and furious, practically trembling across the airwaves.

"I guess that answers my question," I say too tired to respond in any other way. "You didn't know either."

"Didn't know what? That you were fucking my sister this whole time?"

"Liam -"

"I told you!" His voice is furious, the most furious I've ever heard. "I told you to stay away from her. This whole time, you were..."

"I wasn't," I tell him. "I did stay away from her for the most part. I made a mistake once." The lie stings my conscience, but I don't think it would help things to tell Liam that Mia and I slept together again. It's funny because that's what I expected my next conversation with Liam to be about. I knew that once Mia agreed to date me for real, I'd have to talk to Liam. But I assumed that it would be me calling him and explaining the entire timeline of our relationship, calming his fears by telling him that I'm serious about his sister.

Now I don't know if I can ever have anything honest with Mia again, not after the way she betrayed me. So, I don't see the point in telling Liam about our recent hookup.

"So what?" Liam says. "I'm supposed to applaud you because you just made a mistake? Because you got her pregnant and abandoned her?" Liam says, his voice a snarl.

"I didn't even fucking know she was pregnant, Liam." His anger calls to an answering heat within me. "I didn't know any of this was happening. Fuck Liam, she hid my son from me for years."

Liam's silent for a few seconds and then when he speaks, his voice is harsh. "Well, at least now you know how it feels to have a secret kept from you for years."

"It's not the same thing, Liam, and you know it."

"Oh, spare me. You were probably laughing to yourself this whole time, and every time I asked you to watch out for her." Liam asked. "Turns out you were the thing she needed protection from."

“That’s not how it is and you know it,” I say. “We were both in college party mode and it was a mistake. But nothing’s happened between us since, if that makes you feel any better,” kicking myself internally, for another lie. I figure we have to get over this hump first, then, if Mia and I ever get over this and become a real couple, a real family, we can open up to Liam about it. But he doesn’t need to know, for now.

“Oh, sure, it makes me feel a lot better.” Sarcasm drips from his tone. “You know what buddy? Lose my number. I’m sick of this.”

I sigh. "Liam-"

But the line goes dead in my ear. Great. I've lost my best friend too. My heart is heavy in my chest, and though I expected this would happen, I didn't know it would hurt this much.

I'll keep trying to get Liam to forgive me but I know it'll take time. Just like it'll take time for the kids to adjust to the change when we tell them.

Before breakfast the next day, I stop by Mia's room and say shortly, "We're not telling the kids anything yet. "

She stares up at me with wide, reddened eyes, and I think she's going to ask me a question but she merely nods.

I leave before I give in to the urge to say something else. Or hug her.

When we all sit at the table, the kids probably feel the tension between us. It's a quiet breakfast and the tension's throbbing in the air. Not even Chase says anything, as he stabs at his plate sullenly. Mikey's even more withdrawn than usual.

At practice later that day, I stay in the bleachers and watch them. Mia pointedly refuses to glance at me, but that may be because the teams take all her attention. They're messing up more than usual, and bickering too. Mia is less patient at dealing with it than usual, and snaps a few times. All this ends up in an almost-fight that ends when I whistle.

The game ends quickly, then, as James halts the whole thing, eyeing Mia carefully. He says something to her, but she shakes her head and follows Chase and Mikey off the court.

After that, we head home in silence again, and I notice Mikey and Chase avoid looking at each other. At home, Chase says nothing to me and brushes off my offer for a game, before dinner.

"They can feel something shifted," she says, coming up behind me as Chase walks away. "Chase thinks that you're mad at me, and so he's mad at you, and blames Mikey for the whole thing. He can be pretty protective when

he wants to."

I was protective of my mom too. When she divorced my dad, I wanted to go stay with her but she refused, assuring me that I would be better off with dad.

*"He needs you," she whispered to me as she rubbed my hair.*

"I think Chase and I should go back to our home," Mia says now, and I shake my head before she can finish her sentence.

"You're not going anywhere. Not with a maniac still after you."

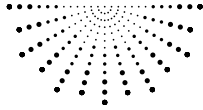
"I doubt it. The police haven't found anything to show that someone's after me. It was probably just a random break-in."

I shake my head and she gives a frustrated sigh. "It's not like you want me here. Just let me go home."

"You don't know shit about what I want," I say, as emotions rush through me. Anger and lust churn in a volatile mixture and before I know what's happening, I'm dragging her into me and kissing her.



## MIA



THE KISS EXPLODES THROUGH ME, ALL HEAT AND FURY. IN A WAY, IT'S punishing. His lips meld mine, without giving me an option either way, his tongue skimming my lips. His arms are like iron around my waist, pulling me to his body as my head swims with the unexpected invasion. I can't do much more than grasp his shoulders and for an instant, I want to push him away. I should push him away. I shouldn't welcome this embrace, all forceful and commanding. I should be mad about the way he's kissing me.

But behind the pressure of the kiss, I feel the desperation. The same need and devastation that crawls through me. He doesn't just want me. He needs me. He doesn't need me, but he needs me just as much as I need him.

The realization swims through me and gives me my power back. I wrap my arms around his neck, running my fingers into his luscious curls, and pull him closer, tongues battling. Almost instantly, he softens before me, and the kiss gentles, more savoring than conquering. My heart takes flight and I feel like I'm on a cloud. It's like a storm followed by a cool spring. It's strange how he can make me feel such opposing things with ease. He's such an enigma.

I love him.

The thought should terrify me, but I still hold on, with my arms around his neck, kissing him back, even though I know it will probably end in disaster.

I don't know how, but one of us pulls back first. His eyes open and there's an avalanche of desire in his gaze. There's also a battle he's raging with himself. He's as much under the spell of this passion between us, as I am. It probably bothers him that he feels this strongly about me, despite my

betrayal. And I'm not sure if I'm hurt by that, or satisfied that at least he's suffering the same thing I am.

Neither, I decide. Because my suffering is self-inflicted. I did this to myself and to him. I don't deserve his forgiveness and I don't want him to suffer anymore.

So, I pull back. I extract my arms from around his head and put them on his chest pushing.

He doesn't let me go easily.

"You're not going anywhere," he whispers against my lips. His eyes meet mine, forceful in their frenzy. "You'll stay here until I decide it's safe. Got it?"

Usually, his bossiness would annoy me and I'd comment on it. But I don't think I should push him today, so I merely nod. And then when I nod, he finally turns and walks back upstairs, leaving me shaking with need and guilt.

*Then again, I remind myself, it's what I deserve.*

A few seconds later, I go in to check on Chase. I detect thumping sounds as I approach and when I pull up the door, he's sitting on the bed and throwing a baseball against the wall.

"Don't do that," I say automatically. "You might put a dent in the wall."

"Wouldn't want to put a dent in his precious wall," he mutters, but then he holds the baseball in his hand and I walk to him. My heart warms knowing that my son is defensive, because of me, but I hate that I caused this rift between him and his father.

I sigh and sit next to him on the bed, waiting until he turns to me. "You're mad," I say.

"I am. So when can we go home? They're done with whatever right? I don't think I want to stay here anymore."

"Soon," I tell him. I'm going to try and convince Luke later, that we can go home. They finished cleaning up the house weeks ago, and I don't genuinely think anyone is after me. I would feel it if they were. "Sorry it's taking so long."

He shrugs. "It wasn't so bad staying here at first. I actually kinda liked it, but I can't stand the fact that Luke's clearly looking down on my mom."

"He's not looking down on me," I tell him. "That's not the situation at all."

"Oh yeah? Then why has he been treating you like dirt for the past few days."



“Chase, Luke and I argued, yes, but it’s not what you think. He’s not a bad person at all, and he’s not looking down on me. In fact, the fight is my fault.”

“Is it because of Mikey's fight at school?” he asks quietly. "It's not your fault that Mikey thinks you're the bee's knees. I think you're cool too."

Emotion overwhelms me. I shake my head, pulling my son into a hug, and this time, he doesn’t try to remove himself.

“No,” I tell him. “We argued about something else. I kept a secret from him, a very important secret. And now he’s found out, so he’s angry at me.”

"What secret?" he asks, and I shake my head, tweaking his nose. "It's called a secret for a reason."

Chase frowns, barely accepting that. "But you’ll tell me eventually, right? When I get a little older?"

"I'll tell you sooner than that." I know Chase is going to be mad at me too, when he finds out, but it needs to be done. Either way, I can’t let him be mad at Luke. "I’ll tell you. But for now, I want you to calm your attitude, ok? Luke didn't do anything wrong to me. Mikey didn’t do anything wrong either."

“Except starting a fight he couldn’t finish," Chase says under his breath and I shoot him a look. He shrugs.

“Mikey’s alright,” he says and I nod. Then I head to Mikey’s room but the boy is fast asleep, holding on to a threadbare stuffed animal dog. I approach him, and run my hand over his forehead. He curls into my touch a little bit. My heart aches. I’m going to miss him. I don’t think Luke will let us have a relationship now, but I can only hope that one day if he forgives me, he'll let me bake with Mikey again.

Then I head outside for a walk. The house is too stifling and I can’t breathe. I start down the path to my house ,curious to see what it looks like now that the repairs have been made, and furniture replaced. The vase is unsalvageable but hopefully, they found a good replacement for everything else. And then I see the note tucked in the corner of the door.

Dread fills my stomach as I kneel to retrieve the note.

*I warned you. Close down your shop and leave town.*

My heart starts racing in my chest and it catches in my throat. I thought it was a fluke. I almost had myself convinced that the first note was nothing.

And now this note is calling me a liar.

Someone wants to hurt me

Panic races down my throat as I whip out my phone to dial the detective.

"I found another note," I say the moment he answers. "This one asks me to close my shop and leave town."

"Damn," the detective says and he sounds exhausted. I'm exhausted too. I don't blame him. I know he, like me was hoping this was just a fluke. "This seems personal now. And you have no idea who left it?"

"No."

"The handwriting doesn't look familiar?"

I'm about to parrot another denial but then I look closely at the note, again. A thread of recognition weaves itself around my brain, tugging at a memory buried there.

On second thought, the handwriting does look very familiar. So do the words.

*Close down your shop. Move out of town.*

It seems like such an insane idea but I say it anyway. "I think I know who's doing this."

The detective arrives in about ten minutes and I wait at the doorstep for him. I stew on the idea as we drive in the police car, heading downtown. I didn't tell Luke where I was going but left a note at home, that I'd be gone for some time. If I told Luke what I was actually doing, he'd insist on coming with me, and I don't want the kids left alone, or to be witness to this whole thing. Besides, I have a detective with me. That should be enough protection for whatever she's planned.

I stare out the window, nerves bouncing in my stomach. I might be crazy for assuming things, but I can't let this go.

In no time at all, we reach the New Moon bakery.

It's about closing time and workers spring around, cleaning up. Mona's standing in the middle of it all. I keep my eyes on her as I walk in. Her eyes flash with apprehension, when she sees me coming, but she covers it up with snobby dislike.

Yeah. It's her.

"Nice try," I tell her.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about the fact that you're so clearly threatened by me that you want to run my bakery out of town. Why is that by the way? Because it's not like there's not enough room for both of us in this business."

Her lips tighten and she recovers quickly. She's not a very good liar. She

turns to the detective and says, "I don't have a single clue what she's talking about."

"I recognize your handwriting," holding the note out to her and her eyes flash with fear. "Ransacking my house? Really?"

"Wait." She holds out her hands. "I didn't do that."

"But you did leave the note?" the detective asks. "I recommend you don't lie right now. We have an expert analyzing the handwriting as we speak."

Her eyes flicker between the two of us, and she can see that she's trapped. "Ok fine. Yes, I left the note, but I didn't do anything else, I swear."

I almost don't believe it. The detective and I share a look at how easily Mona took the bait.

She's the culprit.

"No," she shakes her head boldly. "I didn't. I was delivering donuts to the station and overheard them talking about your break-in. So, I thought maybe if I left a note...but I swear, I didn't do anything else." Tears glint in her eyes now, and it's so odd to see such a tough woman fold like that. I share another look with the detective, who nods and says,

"You're going to have to come with us to the station. You can give your statement there."

"Am I under arrest?"

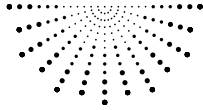
"Yes effectively."

I take a deep breath as he walks her out, curious eyes following them. And just like that I'm free to return home.

I'm not as happy about that as I thought I'd be.



## LUKE



I PACE BACK AND FORTH, NEARLY READY TO RIP MY OWN HAIR OUT. AN HOUR. She's been gone for an hour with nothing more than a stupid note to show for it.

*I'll be back soon. There's something I need to take care of.*

That's it. That's all she gave me. If I wasn't completely certain that it was her handwriting I would've thought she'd gotten kidnapped already. Or that something equally heinous had happened to her. And even worse, she's answering my texts with these little non-answers.

Where are you?

I'll be back

Huh? But where are you?

I'll tell you when I get back.

It's just about driving me up a wall, and I wonder what other secrets she's hiding. Or perhaps she simply doesn't understand how I feel about her. She can be mad at me all she wants but she can't just disappear without telling me. I go crazy with worry. And I'm going to tell her that the minute she gets home.

I already checked on the kids, who were doing fine. Chase had no clue where his mom went, either, but he probably wouldn't tell me even if he did. He's still pissed at me, and even though I should be annoyed at being misunderstood, I appreciate that he's so protective of his mother.

I just wish the woman was as protective over herself, and didn't do stupid things like disappear without telling anyone. I try to call again but as usual, it goes straight to voicemail.

*Oh, you're going to pay for this one Mia.* I'm already planning a retribution, in my mind, because it's the only thing that can distract me from the worry. *What do I do this time? Fill her bakery with strippers? Paint her house hot pink? Buy a Ferrari in her name and make her drive it?* So many possibilities. I occupy myself with crazy thoughts until I finally hear the door open. I'm on my feet and in front of the door before she even completely steps in.

She jerks when she sees me there.

"Where have you been?" I hiss in a whisper, not wanting the kids to hear.

She recovers from her shock quickly and a little smile dances at the corner of her lips. "Were you worried about me?"

Yes, but I don't want to admit it. "You don't just disappear without telling me where you're going. You could've been taken, or kidnapped, or worse." I've been trying so hard not to think about that for the past hour. Too many horrors reverberated through my mind; all the horrible things that could've happened to her.

Her amusement falls off and a gentle look enters her eyes, instead. She brings up her hand, touching my cheek and just then, it feels like coming home once again.

"I'm fine. I was with the detective. We solved the break-in case."

"What do you mean?"

She shakes her head. "I don't want one of the kids to walk in on us talking. Let's go to your room, instead."

*My room. Where we had sex last time.* Desire trembles through me but I tell myself that's not what she means. She just wants to talk.

*Fine,* a treacherous voice whispers in my mind. *We can talk. But after...*

When I shut the bedroom door behind me, I brace myself to keep from reaching for her, reminding me of the task at hand. "What do you mean?"

"We caught the culprit. I went home today and found another note waiting for me. This time I recognized the handwriting and realized it was Mona King."

"Who?" The name draws a blank, although she says it like I should know who that is.

"She's the owner of the bakery. The one downtown I told you about. She came to visit me the other day and wrote down her number for me. Anyway, there's a weird way she writes her O's and I recognized it."

"Wait." I'm trying to wrap my head around what she's saying but I'm still stuck on one part. "You went back to your house? Alone?"

"Yes." She says unrepentantly. I'm about to lose my shit as she continues, sighing as if I'm overreacting. "I thought I might as well get used to what it looks like, now. I can't stay here forever. We both know that."

There's a storm raging within me. I say nothing as she finally completes her story.

"Anyway, I went with the detective to confront Mona. She admitted it and they've taken her in for questioning."

"She admitted it?"

"Yeah. Or at least she admitted to leaving the note, but it's only a matter of time before she confesses the rest." She rubs her hand over her face and releases a tired sound. "I'm just glad it's over."

"Me too," I lie. I should be glad it's over but the truth is I'm not.

Because now, I no longer have an excuse to keep her here, with me.

Except maybe Chase.

I tell myself I only want her around so I can spend time with my son, but I don't even buy that lie myself. Yes, I want Chase here, but I want Mia too. I want to wake up and see her eyes flutter open, smelling her delicious cupcakes as I'm coming down the stairs. I want to come home to her laughter.

Even after all this, I still want her.

She stands there with a question in her eyes. She won't approach me, scared I might reject her. But I won't. And I can't fight this anymore.

I take her in my arms. She's ready for my kiss this time but I don't give her the harsh rush of desire, like before. I kiss her, molding her lips under mine, savoring her taste. It feels like a long time since we've been together, and urgency beats at the back of my brain. But I want this to be slow and steady, gentle. I want to take my time and taste her, savor everything she is. If only because it might be the last time we get the chance.

I run my lips along her neck, savoring the pulse thundering underneath my tongue. Then, kiss her right over her heartbeat, sucking at her skin, almost instinctively. She shivers. I remember the hickey I placed there and I want to place another one, as proof that she belongs to me. She's mine.

Her knees give way but I sweep her up in my arms before she can fall, laying her on the bed. I don't know where to start. Having her spread out before me like a delicious feast, I want to indulge bit by bit. I start by unbuttoning the row along her shirt, my fingers shaking. I could've lost her.

All my anxiety from waiting this afternoon, lets me know just how weak my anger is, in the grand scheme of things. It's nothing compared to whatever else I feel for her. Nothing, not her betrayal, not even Liam can override what I feel for her.

Her misty blue eyes stare up at me as I shift her bra up, wrapping one hand around her breast. I admire the puckered pink point, seeing it grow underneath my gaze. And then I lick it.

She gasps, her hand clutching the bed sheets. I lick it again as she trembles before me. Her eyes slide shut. I lap her nipple, then nip it, then suck it into my mouth. I love the way she tastes faintly of cookie dough, and the way she smells like a dream. I love the way she trembles under me. *I love her.* My brain spits out the words effortlessly, again, especially considering I've never loved anyone before. I didn't think I was capable of love but the feelings she fires up in me can't be explained anyway else.

"Luke..."

I release her nipple from my mouth with a pop, my hand shaking as it skims down her body. I draw faint circles over her belly, enjoying the goosebumps that break out over my touch. I drift downwards, drawn by the call of her body, her gasps urging me on.

"Luke..."

"Yes?" I whisper, my lips hovering over her thong. Purple satin, today. I pull it aside, inhaling her sweet scent, hunger rumbling through me.

"Don't hurt me." I know she doesn't mean physically. She means inside, where no one else can see. She's confessing that I have the power to truly hurt her.

"Never," I tell her, and spread her folds open in front of me, giving a long lick in between. She moans loudly and I do it again. Her gasps spur me on, her taste on my tongue, the best thing I've ever had. I flick at the underside of her clit, enjoying her cries, losing myself in her. Her thighs tremble as they clamp down around my ears, and she throws a pillow over her face to muffle the sounds.

But I don't care. Nothing else is in my mind right now, except her release, and I keep going until she comes, writhing her hips on my face.



I stand up and begin undressing, watching her as she continues to come down. Between her pants and moans, a hand reaches between her legs and the movement of her arm pushes her breasts together. My dick twitches at the sight. I catch her eye, watching me watching her, watching me. She uses her other hand to rub her breast, putting on a little show for me.

“You’re really something else, you know that?”

She gives a little giggle and continues to move her body, subtly, on the bed. *She’s so fucking sexy.*

Once my clothes are off, I urge her the rest of the way out of her top and bra and climb on top. Hovering just above her, my cock brushing her pelvis, I wrap her head in my arms and give her a long, deep kiss. She cups my face, kissing me back, again subtly moving her hips under me. The movement massages my cock, causing me to moan into her mouth.

“Mmm Mia. You’re so fucking sexy when you move like that.”

“Mm hm,” she lets out a sexy little chuckle. “You like that?” She moves more intentionally, now. Tilting my head to one side, she kisses and sucks at a sensitive spot on my neck, while rolling her hips and rubbing her pelvis against my hardon. It makes me shiver with pleasure.

I return the favor, kissing and sucking at her neck, as I align my cock just over her mound. Now she starts moaning. I can feel her wetness on my cock and I know she’s trying to pleasure herself on it. I help her, rubbing my cock between her pussy lips, slowly up and down the soaked area.

Then, with one swift movement, I slide in. The unexpectedness makes her yelp, then let out a long moan. She wraps her legs around my waist as I slowly pump into her. God, I could hold her like this forever. Can we just stay like this forever?

Eventually, the sensation is too much and I begin to pump faster, allowing myself to climax. She holds on tight as I do.

When I’m done, I fall on the bed beside her, bringing her into my side. She cuddles up and becomes teary.

After a few minutes, I ask, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Mia looks up at me, dabbing an eye. “What?”

“About Chase. Did you think I wouldn’t believe you?”

That’s been a question that tormented me for some time. Did she think that I would’ve tossed her aside, or something? That I wouldn’t have gotten down on my knees that second and proposed, if only to give our child a good life.

Although, her eyes blink in a way that suggests she's not sure why I'm asking. "Or are you that scared of Liam?"

She smiles, then shakes her head.

"Then what is it? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I did. Or at least, I thought I did."

I frown as she continues talking. "I found out I was pregnant around the time you were in Canada, playing for the Canucks. Your old number didn't work and I didn't know how to ask Liam for your new number, without telling him why I needed it. So, I attempted to contact you on social media, instead."

"You did?" I barely control my social media. All that had been in the hands of a dozen marketing gurus and my manager, at the time.

"Yeah. You posted pretty often so I figured I could get to you there. I asked to meet with you. Told you that the night we had, had brought unexpected consequences. Hinted at the fact that I was pregnant. But you never agreed to meet, and kept saying that it had nothing to do with you."

"What?" I never saw any messages but I don't doubt her honesty. I assume it was my manager she was unknowingly talking to, and he probably thought he was protecting me from some crazed groupie or something. But now, I want to kick the guy's ass for making that assumption for me. For brushing her off. For hurting her. And for ultimately keeping me from my family.

The brief hurt that flashes across her expression makes me feel even worse. I touch her cheek, regret spiraling through me.

"I didn't know," I tell her softly. She nods.

"I thought you did. I thought you knew but you didn't want the kid and so I settled to just raise Chase on my own."

"Never. I would've come to you if I knew."

She nods, but I detect some doubt on her face and it pains me. But I haven't given her much reason to trust me, especially back then.

"When you came back to town and started asking questions about Chase's dad, I thought you were mocking me. I thought you knew but wanted to rub it in, so I responded sarcastically about Chase being Billy's son. It wasn't until much later, recently, that I figured out that you didn't know, and that I probably wasn't even texting with you."

"At the time, I had a lot of girls claiming I got them pregnant," I tell her, a little embarrassed to admit. "It was like an internet trend or something. I

wasn't exactly discriminatory with my behavior at first, and even with groupies..." I shake my head. "Anyway, the first few times it happened, we took it seriously. Investigated, then found out it was all bullshit to get my attention. After the first few times it happened, Brody, my manager, I guess he started brushing it off. Boy cries wolf, and all."

"Oh, that makes sense."

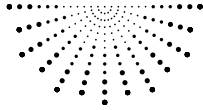
"But I swear," she looks up and I hope she sees the intensity in my gaze as I say, "If I had known, I would've come back. I would've taken care of you."

She hesitates, then nods slowly with a deep-in-thought expression. "And now?"

"Now?" I repeat, grinning slowly at her. "Now, you're mine."



## MIA



“I CANNOT BELIEVE WE’RE DOING THIS.”

Chase seems about to burst out of his skin with excitement. His blue eyes glitter over everything in the plane, and his neck spins like he’s trying to take it all in at once. “We’re on a private jet, Mom!”

“I noticed bud,” laughing at his reaction. Mikey, who’s sitting next to me, seems a lot more chill about the whole thing so I figure this isn’t a new experience for him. He’s currently on his iPad, scrolling through YouTube videos while Chase, opposite me, wiggles around, excitedly.

I proposed the seating arrangement, today. Chase is sitting next to Luke, who seems amused. But Luke also stares at him with a hungry look in his eyes, like he’s trying to absorb everything about his son. He looks a little too obvious about his fascination, but I don’t have the heart to tell him. He loves his son, even though Chase has no clue about it.

We still haven’t told Chase that Luke is his dad. Luke insists they need to spend more time together first, so Chase gets used to him and doesn’t completely reject him when he finds out. I don’t think Chase will reject his father either way. He idolizes Luke already.

But time and a family trip to Disney Land won’t hurt.

“Hey, Mr. Luke, Mikey.” The stewardess from before appears with a notepad and shoots me a pleasant smile. “Nice to see you again. And who is this gentleman?”

“This is Chase,” Luke replies, before I can. “You’ll be seeing a lot more of him.”

“Hiya,” Chase says, with a friendly wave.

“Hi yourself.” The woman beams. “Now tell me, what can I get for

everyone? We have the finest wines and juice boxes, stocked per your order.”

“Mikey will take the usual. Chase, what would you like?”

“Hmm, may I have a Coke, please?”

Luke shoots me an impressed look. Yes, I know, I’ve taught my son well.

“And the two of us will share the wine from last time,” he turns back to the stewardess.

I raise an eyebrow and Luke winks before turning back to her again. “This time maybe she’ll take more than a sip.”

“Very good sir. I’ll get right on that.”

“Thank you, Monica.”

Monica blushes a little and retreats.

I shake my head at Luke, as the efficient clicking of her heels gets farther away. “You’re hopeless.”

“And I never said otherwise,” he sings, smiling.

“Ok, this is amazing,” Chase says, as the airplane vibrates a little, in preparation for lift-off.

“Wait till we’re in Disney Land,” Luke says. “It’s ten-times cooler.”

Chase nods. “I’m glad I didn’t make you make us go home, now.”

Luke and I share a look. After the night we made peace, Chase still insisted on going home. However, the night before, Luke asked me to stay a little longer. It was one of the few times he requested something from me, rather than just ordering me around. I couldn’t say no, especially since I knew he wanted to take the opportunity to get to know his son. We still haven’t discussed custody arrangements, or anything like that, but I do want Luke and Chase to get closer to each other.

Of course, it was difficult at first, with Chase still being mad at Luke. For the first few days, Chase gave his dad the silent treatment. He was coolly polite, but turned down any offer to practice hockey. I hated myself for causing the rift between them but Luke told me not to worry.

*“I know just the thing to make it right,” he said.*

Chase has never been to Disney Land and Luke brought up the trip as a bribe. I had to hand it to him, it worked spectacularly, the curiosity overcoming Chase’s sulking. And now, he was completely at ease around Luke again.

I suppose, seeing Luke and I get along didn’t hurt either.

Mikey nudges my arm a little, to get my attention, and I glance at him. He points down to a video on his iPad, where a woman is making honey-glazed

donuts.

I nod at his silent question, “Yes, we can make those when we get home.” He grins and then turns back to his iPad.

As we take off, Chase excitedly points out the glittering lights, and the fact that there’s even a shower in the airplane. It’s his first time flying anywhere, so I understand his enthusiasm, despite the early morning. I love seeing my son so happy. Luke watches him with that same fond look in his eyes, while Mikey keeps studying more and more recipes. I made sure to take some anti-nausea and anti-anxiety medication this time, since I can’t expect the same kind of distraction Luke gave me the first time.

When we finally land, five hours later, the same limo from before, picks us up, and Chase is even more ecstatic.

But it’s nothing compared to when we arrive at Disney’s Hollywood Studios.

“Oh. My. God!” His eyes are saucers as he takes in the sprawling crowds, the large rides, the people dressed up as cartoon characters. “It’s even better than I thought!”

“Yeah, it’s pretty neat,” Luke says, smiling. “And we have unlimited fast passes, so you can go on as many rides as you want. Any ride you don’t go on, we can go next week.”

“We can come back?” Chase’s head swings to Luke in disbelief.

“As many times as you want.”

I shake my head. “Within reason.” I understand Luke wants to make up for lost time, but I don’t want him spoiling our son too much.

Luke gives me a knowing look. “Within reason.”

“Thanks Luke!” Chase explains. “You’re the best!”

“I try,” he comments, and then Chase turns to Mikey.

“What’s your favorite Mikey? We can go on that one first.”

Mikey shakes his head, adjusting his ear plugs for loud spaces. We expected that the rides would be too much for him but there’s so much else to do and see, it won’t matter.

“Alright. Then I’ll just go and you can watch. I want to go on Tower of Terror, first! I love that one. But let’s get ice-cream from over there, first.”

Mikey nods and follows Chase. Chase makes sure to walk around the crowd, along the edge of the walkway. I think he knows that Mikey’s following him, and knows that Mikey won’t like getting tangled in the people. He occasionally looks back to check on Mikey, never babying him,

just keeping an eye. Gosh, I love my son so much. He's so mature and perceptive. How did I get so lucky?

Luke and I follow them at a slower pace, watching them as we walk.

"This your first time?" he asks, and I shake my head.

"No. I came a few times with my family, but it was never really my thing. You?"

"Nah," he shrugs. "My dad asked me to go once but I turned him down."

"Why?"

He shrugs, and a cynical look enters his eyes. "It was right after my mom divorced him. I guess he was trying to get me over to his side, and I wanted to make it clear that I was firmly on my mom's side."

"Oh." I didn't know much about Luke's family even though they'd lived next-door to us for years. Our parents never interacted much, but I did know that Luke's dad was a divorce lawyer whose wife ended up divorcing him too. The few times I spotted his dad, he always seemed like a man who didn't do much but work and sleep.

"You don't really talk about them," I say, nearly regretting my words when his face immediately tenses.

"Not much to say. My dad is retired in New York, and my mom is out travelling the world. She sends me postcards from every country she's in, and we call once a week."

"And your dad?"

He says nothing for a few seconds, and then admits. "We talk when we can."

"Why don't you like your dad?"

Luke looks surprised. "Who says I don't like him?"

"It sounds like you don't."

Luke is quiet. At first, I don't think he's going to answer but then he shrugs. "I guess we were never all that close, growing up. I was closer to my mom, and then after the divorce, I got even more distanced from my dad."

"Why? Did he do something - to cause the divorce?"

He smiles a little. "He didn't cheat on her if that's what you mean. At least not to my knowledge. But there's a million ways to hurt a person that doesn't involve infidelity." He takes a deep breath.

"He was just...almost never present. He gave everything he had to his work, and then when he was home, he shut down. He never helped her. He barely interacted with me. He didn't pay attention to her unhappiness for a



long time.

I never understood it. I mean, I saw how unhappy my mom was and I was a kid. How could he not see it? Did he not care?"

His eyes look far away as he shakes his head.

"My mom's travel blog...it initially started as a hobby. Just something to take her mind off things. She's always wanted to travel but my dad kept telling her no and putting it off. Barely took any vacations, maybe once every two years and it wasn't because we couldn't afford it. He just hated missing work. Anyway, so she started the travel blog, and it began getting pretty popular. She was so proud of it and went to show it to him. He just stared at her, blankly, and asked when dinner would be ready."

I see the loathing in his eyes as he shakes his head. "That's when I knew the marriage was over. It took her another month to file for divorce, but I saw the look in her eyes that day. He crushed her. And she was done."

I don't know what to say when he's done with his story. It gives me a little more insight into him, I guess, and why he used to live like he did. Not giving his heart out to anyone.

He saw his mom do it and get hurt repeatedly. It's enough to make anyone relationship avoidant.

"Did you ever talk to your dad about this?"

He shakes his head as we stop in front of the ice-cream cart. Chase and Mikey grab the menu, too engrossed in picking flavors to pay attention to our conversation.

"No. He tried to apologize later, saying he understood why I was mad but I just...I didn't want to talk to him. Mom thought I'd be better off with him, 'cause she was travelling mostly full-time at that point, but I didn't *want* to stay with him. I made sure he knew it, every day." He sighs. "Sometimes I regret that. I think...I don't know. I'm a dad now, and maybe it was more complicated than I realized. Maybe he just showed his love in other ways, by buying us everything we ever needed. He never said no when I wanted something, sent me to a good school, paid for all my hockey gear. He even helped coach my team, occasionally. Maybe that's how he knew how to show love."

"You should talk to your dad about this."

"Why? It's in the past."

"Maybe it might help."

He thinks about it for a little bit and says, "Maybe."

We spend the rest of the day following the kids around the rides, watching them, and talking about everything. I tell him about my family vacations, and how we went to Mykonos once, and it ended up being the best vacation of my life. I tell him how I've always wanted to take Chase, but I could never afford it.

He nods and watches me the whole time, with a strange, little glint in his eyes.

Hours later, when we finally make it home, the kids are exhausted but somehow still buzzing with energy.

Luke and I link hands, after exiting his BMW, and head up to the house, the kids on either side of us.

We pause when we see the large man standing in front of it.

When he turns around, recognition slams into me.

"Billy?" I gape. "Billy Priest?"

The man only looks like Billy, facially. His body is another story. He's far larger and much more muscular than Billy ever was.

When he smiles at me, I know I've gotten it right.

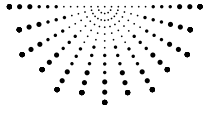
"Hey," he says with a little wave. "You weren't home and one of the neighbors told me you'd be here. So, I was just waiting."

"What are you..." *What was he doing in town?*

But before I can voice the question, Chase shocks us all by voicing, "Dad?"



## LUKE



MIA GOES STIFF BESIDE ME, HER HAND IN MINE TURNING TO ICE. HER EYES wide as saucers, mouth gaping open.

It would be funny if it wasn't so tragic.

"Dad?" Chase says as he walks forward, much to Mia's horror. "You're Billy, right? My dad?"

Billy, for his part, is a portrait of confusion. His eyes glance from Mia, to me, to Chase, and any answer he formulates only confuses him even more.

"Um.... I guess?" he says, weakly but that doesn't deter Chase. In a move very uncharacteristic of the boy, he beams and then throws his arm around Billy's waist. "Awesome. I'm glad you're back."

I take in the whole scene, but I'm not too distracted to feel Mikey's hand squeeze mine. He's watching the pair with tension in his face, the same tension I'm feeling.

Watching your son calling another man dad is certainly something. Gut-wrenching feels like the word but even that isn't enough to fully illustrate just how terrible it feels.

When Mia finally comes back to herself, she turns to me with an apologetic look. I don't know what to say, so I half nod, half shrug. I'm not even sure. Multiple emotions are probably stamped all over my face and there's probably anger mixed up in there too. I don't blame Mia for this. I understand now, why she didn't tell me about Chase, but that doesn't make the situation any less difficult.

"Um...hey Mia." Both of us turn our attention back to Billy who is patting Chase, awkwardly, on the back. "I didn't know..." *I didn't know you had a son.* That's probably what he meant to say but he seems to reconsider,

looking down at the kid, who believes that he's his dad.

Chase pulls back, tucking his hand in his pocket, and then glances back to Mia. "Mom thinks I don't know you're my dad. I guess she didn't want it to hurt me, that you were gone so long, but I get it. You're a soldier, so you had to save the world and stuff." He shrugs. "I've read the entire GI Joe comics, so I know how it is."

Billy shares another bewildered look with us, but then nods down at Chase. "Well, I'm glad you're so understanding about it."

"Chase, he's not your dad," Mia finally says breathing out as she moves toward them. "I don't know where you got that idea from but it's not true."

"But..." Chase furrows his eyebrows. "Uncle Liam..."

Mia shakes her head and mutters something under her breath that sounds like *I'm going to kill him*. "Uncle Liam was wrong and even wronger for having this conversation with you without asking me." She squats and brushes her son's hair. Then she says firmly, "He's not your dad, Chase, I promise you." She peers up at Billy. "I'm sorry Billy. I think he just had the wrong idea, that's all."

"Uh, it's fine," Billy gives her a weak smile back and looks like he's quickly adjusting to the situation. Chase, on the other hand, appears disheartened. But his sadness only lasts for a second, before he nods, as though coming to a realization.

"Fine. He's not my dad," he says the second sentence like it's supposed to have air-quotes around it. "Can he still teach me how to fight bad guys too? That's what they do in the comics when the heroes come home."

"Uh.." Billy falters again. "That would depend on your mom."

"Chase," Mia speaks up, sounding a little exasperated. "Can you and Mikey go in for a little bit? I need to talk to Billy."

"Sure," Chase says, and beckons Mikey over. Mikey tugs my hand to get my attention first, and gives me a brief but meaningful nod before he lets go of my hand. He shuffles to Chase, who pats his shoulders as he speaks.

"This is Mikey. He's my new friend, and we both play hockey together. And that's Luke," Chase turns to point at me. "He used to be a coach. He also used to be the best hockey player in the world, but now he's just Mikey's dad."

"Gee, thanks for the intro buddy," I quip, and Billy glances up at me. He nods in acknowledgment, and I nod back. We never really interacted much, but on the few times we've met, he always struck me as a cool dude, if a little

withdrawn. He looks a little different from when I last saw him, more filled out, but I guess ten years of serving will do that to a man.

“Chase,” Mia calls in warning.

“Yeah Mom, I’m going,” Chase responds and then turns to jog into the house. Mikey walks at a slower pace and glances back at Billy, before stepping inside.

Mia waits a few beats after the door closes, before speaking.

“Oh Billy, I’m so sorry.” She stands, her hands wringing. “This is a huge misunderstanding.”

“Oh, thank God.” A flash of relief hits his expression, as he bends slightly, reaching for his chest. “So, he’s not my kid that you hid from me for the past nine years?”

“No. I would never...I mean I would, I did, but not to you.”

“She would to me though,” I say, and do a little half salute, which only confuses Billy more. Mia shoots me a look, then shuts her eyes and sighs.

“Billy, Chase isn’t your son. My brother thought he was. And I let him think that because it was easier than telling him that he’s Luke’s, because Liam didn’t even know Luke and I had hooked up.”

“Neither did I,” Billy says, but he looks more amused than bothered by it.

“We didn’t do anything while you and I were still dating, if that’s what you’re thinking.” Mia waves a hand, impatiently, like it’s beside the point. “It was after we broke up. Luke and I hooked up and I got pregnant, and I didn’t tell him about my son till about a week ago.”

“Jesus, Mia.”

“I know, I know. I had my reasons at the time, but it was the wrong thing to do. We’ve already been over that.” She finally stops, taking a deep breath. “But I never told Chase that you were his dad, ever.”

“I get that. But the real question is,” Billy moves around her in an almost protective stance, and pins me with a look. “Why doesn’t Chase know *you’re* his dad, since you know, *you’re* his dad?”

Something about his tone bothers me and I meet it with a raised eyebrow. “I don’t see how that’s any of your business, since *you’re* not part of the equation.”

Mia comes to his rescue. “Luke literally just found out about Chase a couple of weeks ago. We haven’t had time to work out how exactly we’re going to break it to either of the boys yet.”

“A boy would know his father,” Billy says, still staring at me.

"I agree," I respond staring right back.

Mia releases an exasperated sound. "Ok, let's take the testosterone down a notch. We have more important things to figure out." She lays a hand on Billy as though to move him out of the way, but then frowns as she hesitates. "Wait, Billy, you got huge."

Billy smiles down at her. "Thanks."

Jealousy burns in my gut. Before I can think about what I'm going to do, I take Mia's wrist off him, drawing her closer to me. Her eyes widen but I don't apologize.

I don't care if it makes me a caveman, I don't want her touching another man.

While Billy is bigger than before, he's still not my height and not quite my mass. And typically, I'm not the type of guy to enjoy throwing my weight around, but in this instance, it seems necessary - with this man who my son thinks is his father.

*And Mia, apparently, likes his muscles.*

"What do we do now?" Mia asks, and turns to me with a worried look in her eyes. "About Chase? Because I'm not sure if he believes me."

"Why not just tell him who his dad is?" Billy says once again, looking right at me.

Mia turns to me, as though letting it be my decision. And while I've wanted nothing more than to tell Chase the truth this whole time, I balk.

I don't know how he'll react. What if he's disappointed by the reveal? What if he'd rather Billy be his dad?

I need more time, more time to let him get to know me.

"We've already lied to him," I say. "A lie by omission is still a lie. So at least when we're telling the truth, let's do it with a little more care for his feelings, and when the boys didn't just have a huge event."

Guilt flashes in her expression, again. Mia doubtfully chews her lip, eyeing me below her lids. She turns to Billy.

"We just got back from a big trip to Disney. The boys have had a ton of stimulation and are exhausted. Luke's right. It's really bad timing. We can't tell him tonight, or even tomorrow. I'm not going to break that kind of information in the morning, before school. And, he has a big planets project he needs to finish this week, every night after school. And we have hockey practice! Damn!"

I place my hand on Mia's shoulder, hoping to calm her. "It's ok, we'll

wait until the weekend, when things have calmed down and when we can spend time with the boys, relax, and let them, let Chase, process it. It's not ideal but -"

"You don't mind him obsessing over another man who he may or may not still think is his father?"

I hate the idea more than almost anything, but this isn't about me. It's about what's best for Chase. Right now, our relationship is still tentative. I tell him I'm his dad....I don't know how he'll react. "No! Of course not. We continue to assure him Bill's not. But otherwise, I'm just saying we continue as is, for now."

Mia looks doubtful but then releases a breath, and nods slowly, almost painfully. "Alright. If you say so."

"Ok, now that that's settled." I turn to Billy. "Why are you here?"

Billy's face freezes a little, thrown off by the question.

"As far as I see it, no one here was expecting you. You kinda just showed up out of the blue."

"Yeah," Mia pipes up. "I mean, last we wrote, you told me you'd be in for at least five more years."

Billy looks between the two of us and shrugs. "I took a leave of absence."

"You can just do that?" Mia asks.

"Sure. If you've worked up enough days, as I have."

I'm not sure that's how the military works, but I say nothing, watching him.

"And I'm actually here because I needed another favor," he says, with a sheepish look. "I'm only in town for a couple days, taking care of some stuff, and you know, hotels can be pretty expensive. Cash is tight for now." His face reddens slightly, at the admission, and Mia immediately jumps into action.

"Sure, of course you can stay with me! Except...erm..." She glances at me. "I'm not really at home right now. Like you heard, I'm staying with Luke."

"Great." He seems happy about this and turns to me. "Got room for one more?"

*Wouldn't it be better for him to stay at Mia's? Alone?*

"Ok," I say. *Better to keep an eye on him.*

Later, as we head in, Chase immediately pounces on his not-dad, with questions about where he's been, his work, and everything about him. Billy



seems a little overwhelmed, but he tries to answer vaguely, telling him military tales that seem a little too heroic and smooth. I watch him closely as they interact, something pinging in the back of my mind.

There's something off about him, and his story.

Mia and Mikey are in the kitchen making dinner. Then Mia walks toward the foyer, heading for the door. "I left my bag in the car."

Billy immediately springs to his feet. "I'll go with you."

"I can get it," I say, narrowing my eyes at him.

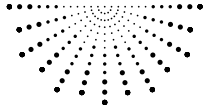
"Even better," he says, smiling.

I frown.

Something is definitely up with this guy and I'm going to find out what.



## MIA



BILLY'S ARRIVAL THROWS EVERYTHING A LITTLE OUT OF WHACK.

It's not just that Chase still clearly thinks that Billy is his dad. He insists on talking mostly to Billy, at the dinner table, or asking Billy to help him with his planets project. Although, I can tell that this, in particular, hurts Luke. Every time it happens, I see the tightening of Luke's features. Maybe a part of him hoped that Chase would lose his initial interest for Billy, but the two only seem to be getting closer.

Billy also adapts well to his pseudo-paternal role, not wanting to break Chase's spirit, since he seems to look up to him. He listens attentively, to all of Chase's stories, and Chase is determined to tell him everything that's happened in his life for the past nine years. At the same time, Billy's also generous with stories of his own. He tells Chase almost fantastical stories of his time in the marines, and Chase hangs on to his every word, like he's God.

I don't know how I feel about the stories, because I don't necessarily want my son to be exposed to such violence, so young.

"Do you know for sure that he actually served in the military?" Luke asks me one night, as we're lying together. "The stories Billy tells are too outlandish. He might as well have read it from a book."

"How would you know?"

Luke glances at me. "I know a bunch of people who served. None of them describe it like that."

"Hmm," is all I say. I'm still not convinced, and I tell Billy to tone down the stories, in the meantime, or not tell them at all. He agrees, but it doesn't stop Chase from putting him on a pedestal, cutting into his hockey time with Luke.

“Don’t you want to go play with Luke,” I ask him once, as he and Chase chill on the couch, watching Star Trek. That used to be Billy’s favorite TV show. Chase shakes his head a little.

"I have school tomorrow," he says.

“But the championship is coming up,” I remind him. “And you want to be ready.” Though we’ve won the last game, the next one determines whether we’re going to the finals.

“It’ll be fine Mom. Hockey isn’t everything. Right, Da-I mean Billy?” He glances at Billy.

I sigh. It’s not the first time Chase almost slipped up calling Billy ‘Dad’, and I got tired of correcting him.

Billy looks at me, bewildered.

I shoot him a wide-eyed, head-jutting out look back, silently urging him to do the responsible thing.

He looks back to Chase. “Hey Buddy, I want you to remember that I’m not your Dad, ok? But I can be your friend.”

“Yeah, ok,” Chase says passively, staring at the TV.

“And also, it’s a good thing to honor prior commitments.”

“But you’re only in town for a couple of weeks,” Chase tells Billy, and it's my turn to be surprised. I didn’t know that Billy was going to be in town for a few weeks. He only said a few days and he hasn't even told me what he's here for.

All his details so far, have been kinda vague and nonspecific. I’m trying not to pry too much into it. Mostly because I'm concerned. He has trauma from the military, and I don't want to unlock it.

Although he seems comfortable enough talking about his military escapades with my son.

“Alright.” I cave. "You can hang out for tonight, but tomorrow, you’re gonna train for an hour with Luke. Deal?"

“Deal,” he says grinning. I shake my head and start towards the kitchen, which also happens to be in the direction of the front door. Billy instantly asks. "Where are you going?"

I turn back to him. “To the kitchen. Why?”

He shakes his head. “No reason.”

I frown. It’s not the first time he’s asked me that question. He seems to like to tag along with me even when it's just going to pick up mail or something. And the fact that he's here with us, even after I told him he could

stay at my house...

"I'll move back, when you move," he said, and that was that. It was odd. Maybe he had something about staying in a house by himself. I've heard that sometimes traumatized soldiers do have those types of hang-ups.

But that doesn't explain why he insists on escorting me everywhere. Except when Luke is with me. Then he backs off.

I shake my head, as I head to the kitchen to get some water. It's strange. I know that Billy isn't in love with me, or anything like that. We broke up mutually and parted amicably. We knew we were together more out of habit, than any real passion for each other. We were more friends than anything else, by the end.

So why is he back now, staying with me? What does he want and why does he want to follow me everywhere?

When I come back, Billy and Chase are still engrossed in the movie, so I head upstairs. I first check on Mikey, who's taking a pre-dinner nap, after finishing his homework. Then I head to Luke's office. He's on the phone when I get there but he beckons me in, anyway.

"That's not a good idea," he says, to whoever is on the phone. "It messes up our entire strategy."

I slow as I reach him. He gives me a signal to come closer, but I recognize the look on his face. He's on the phone with Thames and he's getting exasperated with the man's stubbornness. Thames is probably trying to oppose the marketing strategy again.

I don't go closer because I don't want to interrupt, but before I know it, Luke swings his chair to me and snags me around the waist, pulling me into his lap. I try not to squeal as I fall with a thud. I think I hurt him, but he doesn't even flinch when my entire weight lands on his leg.

"Yeah, I hear you," he continues, without missing a beat, all the while his finger is running circles on my waist. "But once again, the thing is to make sure that we're staying on brand, and it's reflected in our statement. So, you have Eric look it over one more time and then send it over."

"You're not the boss of me," I'm close enough to hear Thames's surly voice on the other end of the call.

"Unfortunately for both of us, I am." Luke hangs up and a smile tickles my lip.

"Sounds like the two of you are getting along."

He shrugs easily. "He's not so bad once you get him to listen," He runs

his gaze down my body in appreciation. "You look good."

"I'm wearing a baggy t-shirt and shorts."

"So? You always look good."

I shake my head, a blush crawling up my cheek, and my heart beating faster. Between all that's been going on, we haven't had time to be together. I tuck my hair behind my ears, blushing as I look around. "Anyway, I hope the sound from downstairs didn't disturb your call. Chase and Billy are watching a movie. Chase will train with you tomorrow."

"Did he suggest that himself or did you have to drag it out of him?"

Luke sounds amused but I can see that trace of something darker there.

Once again, regret slams into me. "I'm sorry." I place my hand on his cheek, over the stubble. "This is my fault."

"It's at least partially my fault too, for not telling Chase who his dad is, sooner." He shrugs and sighs. "But at least Billy won't be here forever."

"Only a few weeks according to Chase," I add.

Luke doesn't look pleased by the revelation, but he nods. "Fine, but I'm thinking we tell Chase before Billy leaves. That way Billy can corroborate the story."

I nod. "Yeah, that sounds good."

"In the meantime..." his eyes darken rapidly as his eyes run over my back. Shivers run through my body, as he nuzzles into my neck.

"The door's not locked," I whisper.

"No one will come in," he says running his nose up my neck until our lips are aligned. He waits for a second, eyes flicking up to mine. I see the desire intense, swimming in them.

It calls to the flame in me. It doesn't matter how many times we have sex. I want him just as ferociously, every day.

With a groan, he takes my lips in his, again. I lose my head, the way I always do, whenever he kisses me. It's like swimming in the ocean, with no life jacket. I run my hand through his hair, holding on as he ravages my mouth, his kiss commanding and coaxing at the same time. He strums my lips, unhurriedly, but that doesn't make the urgency inside me, any less. Desire spikes quickly, and I feel his warm hand on my leg, moving under my skirt, slowly.

I open my legs for him, and he groans into my mouth. His hand finds my center and I moan as he traces a finger down the slit. I stop him, shaking my head.

“My turn.” I grin and slip off his lap. I’m so turned on, it’s almost physically painful to remove myself from his head, but I do it anyway. He always makes me feel good and tries to make our encounters all about me. This time, I want to return the favor.

I get on my knees and unbuckle his jeans, enjoying looking up at him. A dark heat passes over his face as I tug them, along with his briefs, down, exposing him. His cock immediately rises over the pants, and I swallow hard. He looks majestic.

It sounds ridiculous to even think that way but there's no other way to describe it. He stands tall, probably close to ten inches. Broad at the base with a smooth mushroom tip, and dark purple veins running through the length.

I lean forward and lick his tip, then take his whole head in my mouth, slowly pulling my mouth off, while squeezing my lips together.

"Fuuuck." His head falls back, and the groan tears out of him.

I taste the precum, and admire the now glistening tip, as hunger tears through me. I crave to drive him as wild as he's driven me. I want to feel his hand grabbing my hair, his thigh shaking. I want to drive him to the edge.

And I do. I trail my tongue along his length, before taking him fully into my mouth. He bites off a curse and his hands fly to my hair, grasping on. I feel the imperceptible shift of his hips, as he thrusts into my mouth. I focus on breathing and sucking, pulsing and twisting, now feeling my own desire start to pool in my panties, as well.

"Fuck I'm going to come," Luke groans, but the sound is interrupted by the door opening.

I jolt back, under the table. Luke freezes too, and the only sound in the room is breathing for a second.

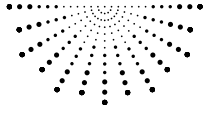
“Oh, I’m sorry,” Billy says with a little laugh and the door instantly shuts.

"I'm going to kill him," Luke mutters, and while I don't think Billy deserves to die, the sentiment echoes through me, too.





## LUKE



TENSION RADIATES THROUGH THE AUDITORIUM AS THE SPECTATORS WATCH THE mother of all stalemates.

The game has been like this for the past thirty minutes already, with one team eeking out a point, and the other team tying, almost instantly. This is the qualifying game against the Panthers and Chase is currently on the ice. I can see him trying his best, his face slicked with sweat. His feet are new district-approved skates I bought him, and he slides through two of the opposing team members, aiming for the net. But he doesn't make it before the other team manages to sweep the puck from his stick.

I watch the frustration enter his face, and he skates as fast as he can, to them. He nudges one of his teammates, Archer, who's supposed to be playing defense. The boy was formerly on my team and while he's a good player, he gets distracted easily. I only use him for games that aren't tense, otherwise he benches.

Archer shakes his head at whatever Chase says and I can see the two are arguing. I resist the urge to tell them to call it off. I can't do anything for them now. They both need to learn to work together or they're going to lose this game.

Mia is a ball of tension, beside me. I can feel her radiating with it, and I wrap my hand around her shoulder squeezing it. She gives me a grateful smile back, leaning against me. I know she's tense because of how much this means to Chase. It means a lot to me too. But we can't do anything but watch and be there for him in case this all goes left.

"Oh my God, they're going to score." This is from James who is also biting his lips, his hair sticking up at all the ends, from running his hands

through it the entire game. True to his word the other team closed the gap and spiked the puck into the net.

It enters.

The crowd on the other side of the auditorium cheers and James groans.

"They're good," I comment mildly and James nods.

"Yeah. Rumor has it they have a former pro player coaching the kids."

"I thought that wasn't allowed."

"It's not but it's a well-kept secret." He smirks at me. "Not everyone is as open about their cheating as you were."

I shrug, not taking offense. Now that I've gotten to know him, James is a pretty cool guy and if I had a sister, I'd want to introduce them to him. He doesn't have feelings for Mia as far as I can tell. Although he does seem to really like her, I only detect friendship between them.

Despite trying to date, the man is still madly in love with his dead wife, which is the saddest, sweetest thing I've ever heard.

I glance at Mia. I can understand his sentiment. If I lost Mia too...I don't finish the sentence. Just thinking about it makes my chest tighten.

"Call a time-out," I say, and James nods.

The referee blows the whistle a few seconds later and Chase skates straight for his mother. His face is frustrated, and he says, before anyone else can talk, "I keep messing up my defense."

"That's because you're not using your instinct, or paying attention to your surroundings," I tell him. "You're distracted." He's been that way for the whole game, and I can pretty much figure out why, even though I don't mention it.

Chase mentions it anyway, glancing around, "Where's Billy?"

"He's coming," Mia says. "He had something to take care of, but he should be here soon."

"Chase." I draw his attention, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Remember what you told me the last time you lost to me?"

He frowns. "Not sure which time you're talking about. Also, I say a lot of things when I lose."

I smile a little. "Yeah, but the last time. You said you were getting close to beating me. And you're right. You *were* close."

"I was?" His eyes widen.

"Yes. You've gotten a lot better. You've made three great plays, already, even though you're in your head and not paying attention. I need you to get

out of your head. Trust your instinct and trust that you know what you're doing. Ok?"

He stares at me. "Yeah. Ok, I can do that."

"You've got this." I smile at him, and he grins back. He stops and then almost on impulse, hugs me. "Thanks, Luke. You're the best."

Emotion sparks in my chest.

I ruffle his hair. "Alright, kid. Go out there and get it done."

The whistle interrupts the embrace and Chase whizzes back to the ice. The competition is still stiff, but this time, Chase seems far more prepared. He skates around with more confidence and clarity, letting himself take more risks. He weaves through the opponents, almost from one side to the other, unstoppable and unpassed. He fakes left, the goalie jumps out, but the puck spikes into the net.

It's a goal.

"Yes!" Mia cries out clapping her hands together. "You go, Chase!"

"Yeah," Mikey echoes, uncharacteristically loud. We both look down at him as he yells, "Go, Chase!"

The crowd behind shouts too, and Chase grins at us but then gets back to the game. The other team attempts to even up the score but it's too late. Chase is an unstoppable force, and he seems to pump energy into his teammates as well. They all play their best. The other team tries to match, but the gap widens, regardless.

They win the game with one point ahead and it's a moment of joy and chaos.

Chase immediately skates off the ice and we meet him at the bottom of the bleacher the steps. He jumps straight into my arms. I laugh hugging him and holding him up as he shouts. You would've thought we won the championship.

Mia's shouting too, and I can see the excitement on her face. She's the second person to hug Chase. James then pats him on the shoulder and says, "That was an amazing job, Chase," before he heads off to find his son.

Chase sits to tear off his skates. "Did you see that?"

"Yes, baby, you did amazing." A ding interrupts us and Mia glances down at her phone. "Oh, Billy just texted. He says he's outside."

Chase's smile widens. "I'll go get him."

"Wait, Chase," Mia calls, but he's already running off in his giant skate socks.

She shoots me an apologetic look, but I shrug. Honestly, I don't mind that Chase and Billy have a relationship. Ok, maybe I do, but it's mostly jealousy on my part. I just wish he knew I was his dad.

"It's fine," I tell her, and she nods. Mia then goes to talk to the other kids, with Mikey, congratulating them on their win. They're all too excited to pay attention, so she keeps it short and sweet, looking so happy she could cry.

Billy comes in, while she's talking, and glances around.

"Sorry, I'm late. Got held up by traffic. His eyes look a little strange. "Where's Chase?"

"He went off to look for you," I volunteer, pissed that he missed the game. He knew it was important to the kid .

His eyes widen in horror. "What?"

"Yeah. He left a few minutes ago. I'm surprised you didn't see him coming in."

"A few minutes? Why the fuck would you let him leave?" Billy explodes and silence is instantly in the room. Everyone is quiet and the kids are watching us.

I take Billy's arm and pull him to the side. "What's wrong with you? Why would you shout like that?"

"I'm sorry," he says. "But we have to go find Chase now."

"Billy!" Chase says, and he appears behind us. Before he can reach us Billy storms forward and grabs him by his arm.

"Where did you go? Why were you gone so long?"

"What are you talking about?" Chase's face is furrowed in confusion. "There was an old lady I had to help her get in her car."

"You were talking to strangers? You're not supposed to do that."

Billy stops when I lay a heavy hand on his shoulder. "Let him go."

"I need to—"

"Let. Him. Go." I don't care who Billy thinks he is, or what the fuck he's so freaked out about. Nobody reprimands and grabs my son and gets away with it.

Billy takes a deep breath and Chase shrugs his hold off, looking upset. He takes a step back and I can see he's hurt. First, by Billy not bothering to show up for the game and now, for him acting weird and angry all of a sudden.

I place a protective hand on Chase's shoulder, and he leans against me. No one is touching him again.

"What's going on?" Mia asks, finally approaching us with Mikey. The

other kids have filed out and the auditorium is now a few people thin.

"I have to go to the bathroom," Chase says, then shoots Billy a sour look. "Is that okay with you?" He then storms off.

Mikey hesitates, then follows him.

Billy watches after him as though he wants to follow them, but he doesn't. That tightness hasn't left his face.

"No seriously, what's going on with you?" Mia crosses her hand over her head, and she has the protective mom stance. "What did you do to Chase?"

"He came in here yelling at him. You're not going to do that again, by the way." I level him with a look, and he has the decency to look embarrassed.

"I'm sorry," he says. "It's not what it looks like. It's just that I have some PTSD from, you know, the military."

"Bullshit," I say. "You've probably never even been in active duty. Have you?"

Billy's eyes widen, showing me that I have him pegged right.

I don't care about that discussion though, so I let it go. "Why on earth did you blow up on my son? What gives you the right to do that?"

"I just wanted him to do the right thing."

"That's not your job," I tell him, "He's not your son. He's mine and Mia's. You're only here to, well, we still don't even really know why you're here and we're going to tell him the truth, that I'm his Dad, before you leave, anyway."

He nods and regret passes over his expression. "I'm sorry. You're right, I messed up."

"Why?" Mia asks and she sounds as furious as I am. "Why did you yell at Chase?"

"I don't know I just..."

"Why are you back?" she asks again when he doesn't complete the thought. "Tell us the truth this time."

"Dad."

We turn around and Mikey is standing there, a few feet away. He turns around, pointing behind him. As I look through the rink room windows, to the front of the building, I see Chase running out the front door.

My stomach drops and I realize how loud we were. Chase heard us.

"Shit."

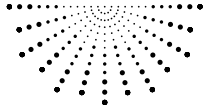
"Oh no," Mia looks at me with her eyes wide. "My poor baby!" She covers her face in her hands, bending over in distress. Then, just as Mia starts

to run to Chase, Billy speaks up.

"It doesn't matter," Billy says urgently. "We have to go get him, now. Chase might be in danger."



## MIA



“WHAT DO YOU MEAN CHASE IS IN DANGER!?” HIS WORDS STOP ME IN MY tracks and I take a few steps back to them. What a crazy thing to say! I’m in disbelief yet my stomach starts to knot at the potential. Instinctively, my hand reaches out for Luke before I’ve even formulated the words. Luckily, his hold is right there waiting for me, grasping mine and bathing me in a strength that I don’t have.

“You better start talking, Priest,” Luke says, walking forward. Billy seems to have retreated into himself, his eyes haunted, and frustration locking his features. He looks just about ready to tear out his hair when Luke speaks again, in a lower, even more deadly tone. “Now!”

I almost gape at him. I’ve never heard his voice like that before - dark and murderous. His eyes are fixed intensely on Billy, like he wants to tear the man apart.

I’ve always had a feeling that there was more to Luke than his happy-go-lucky, mischievous side, or his caretaker side. Now I see that I was right.

A ferocious being lies under the surface, and is now just about ready to attack. He was already pissed at Billy, from yelling at Chase, before I even walked up. I’m mad at Billy too, honestly, but I hope that I don’t have to pull Luke off Billy, because this isn’t the time for it.

Luckily, Billy catches sight of Luke’s face and a look of resignation crashes into his features.

“I didn’t tell you two everything,” he says and for the first time, he doesn’t look at me when he talks. His shoulders sag and he actively avoids my gaze. “I didn’t tell you the truth about why I’m in town. Or why I left.”

“Oh gee, really?” Luke’s sarcastic tone rings out and I resist the urge to



nudge him in the stomach. I understand his frustration, but this isn't the time. We need to find out how my son could possibly be in danger.

"We already know you're a liar, Priest," Luke comments cynically, impatience in his tone. "Now get to the point."

Billy shakes his head sorrowfully. "I know, and I'm sorry for being so shady but.... we don't have time to get into it. I promise I'll tell you the truth later, but we *really* need to go get Chase right now."

I'm torn. On one hand, I want to go find my son right now and comfort him, after he just heard life-changing news. On the other hand, I need to know what we're protecting him from. I don't even really believe Billy because that's a crazy thing to say but if it's true, I need to know what danger Billy, and I by association, have put Chase in. The guilt is tearing me up inside, and the fact that I don't even know what's going on has anxiety spiraling through me. Ultimately, my maternal instinct kicks in and I want to go be with him.

"I'm going to go get my son," I interject, then jog to the front of the building.

I push out of the front doors and look to the right, then to the left, expecting to see Chase against the building wall, on the sidewalk. He's not there. I run to our car to see if he's standing by it. He's not. My heart starts to pound. I run back in and check the bathroom. He's not there.

I've heard of fight or flight, but I've never had this knee-locking, bone-tingling fear before. My son is in danger? A danger I don't even understand yet. I need to know what's happening.

I run back to the boys.

"He's not out there! He's not in the bathroom! Where could he have gone?"

"Let's walk and talk," Luke says, in an urgent tone. "You can tell us what we need to know as we look," turning to Billy.

"It might be faster if we search individually," Billy says.

"Maybe, but hell if I'm leaving Mia or Mikey alone. And I think it'll be faster if we know what the hell is going on!"

Billy looks like he wants to argue but then again, Luke's words leave no room for refusal. Luke doesn't even wait for an answer, leaning down and swinging Mikey up in his arms. The poor boy looks freaked out by our conversation, and I wish I could protect him from all this.

Luke presses a kiss to his son's hair and murmurs something to him.

Mikey nods and leans his head on his shoulder and Luke immediately starts in a stride, taking my hand as he moves. "Come on. We're wasting time." I know that the last part was for Billy's benefit, so he immediately falls in step with us.

Mikey typically doesn't like being touched but I give his hand a reassuring squeeze, and he squeezes back.

"Chase is fine," I say as confidently as I can. "He probably just took a walk."

Mikey nods slowly, but he doesn't look as convinced.

"Chase," Luke calls as we get outside. The parking lot is pretty much deserted by now and there's no answer but the nippy wind. He tries again. "Chase, come on man. Your mother is worried out of her mind. If you're hiding somewhere, come on out. You can punish us later, but we need to make sure you're safe."

I glance at him. Luke seems to be more terrified than I am. He hides his terror pretty well, but the tension is rolling off him.

"You gonna start talking any time soon, Billy boy, or am I going to have to hit you first?"

We continue to walk toward the back of the building, where a thicket of bushes leads into a small, narrow, wooded area.

"I'll start talking," he says. "It's just, I don't even know where to start. It's not exactly an easy story to tell."

"Start at the beginning."

Billy meets my eyes for a brief second, then looks away again. "Alright. The beginning. Well... I fell in love with someone."

That's the last thing we both expect him to say. Luke pauses in step to stare at him.

"What?"

Billy cringes. "Ok yeah, wrong starting point. Ok, how about this - You know back when I said I was leaving to go to the military?"

We start walking again, and I visually scan the shrubbery, calling Chase's name as we round out the building. "Yeah?"

"Well, it wasn't exactly the military," he says. "It's an organization *like* the military, though. But sort of more like a private security firm that protects the rich and powerful and sometimes occasionally takes out anyone who opposes them."

That nearly makes me pause again, but Luke doesn't even flinch. We

reach the trash bins at the back of the building and Luke circles around them, yelling, "Chase are you here?"

"Wait I'm confused when you say 'take out'." My mind is torn between my son and the story. "What does that mean? Like, kill?"

"Not all the time," Billy rushes to say. "But at least some of the time."

"Mercenaries," Luke says as he strides out from behind the trash bins. "That's who you worked for?"

"Well, we don't exactly call them that. We call them agents, but yeah, something like that."

Luke grunts and says nothing else. I don't know why I'm the only one shocked by the reveal.

"You killed people? For money?"

Billy looks a little embarrassed but still shoots back defensively. "You preferred it when you thought I was killing people for the United States Military? News flash, they pay money too."

"Yes but..." I'm struggling to wrap my head around the whole thing. Billy had always been so quiet, back when we dated, a little soft-spoken and shy. He could barely raise his voice and he'd never seemed like the type for violence. It was hard enough to understand him choosing to join the military rather than go to Caltech, like everyone thought he would. He was an IT whiz, it would've been easy for him to get in. But no, he chose to join the military. I thought maybe it was because he wanted to serve his country, or maybe needed them to pay for his college education.

Either way, that had been a lot easier to swallow than this.

A mercenary.

"I'm sorry," I say even though I'm not sure I should be apologizing. "I don't mean to judge you, it's just a lot to take in. "

Billy looks uncomfortable with the apology too, scratching his head as he nods. "Yeah, don't worry about it. I understand. But to be fair, they offered a lot of money to join them. More money than I'd ever seen in my life, especially since I was recruited right out of high school. And I don't do any of the killing people part, at least not directly. I do more intel and find people's weaknesses. You know, putting my computer skills to use."

"Then what's with the muscles?" I ask stupidly and a little growl escapes Luke. I know it's his jealousy talking but I don't mean it that way. I'm just curious and eager to get to the part where he mentions how he's endangered Chase.

"That's just for aesthetics," he says sheepishly. "I started hitting the gym and you know..."

"Yeah okay."

"Chase isn't here," Luke announces, as we've circled the whole building. We then head toward the bushes.

"Chase!" I call out when I see a bush rustle, like something dashed through. There's no answer. I almost follow but Luke restrains me. It's not him. Anxiety is building in my chest.

"Ok, skip to the end of the story," I tell Billy finally running out of patience. "Why is my son in danger?"

Billy sighs. "The answer to that and your previous question is the same. Because I fell in love. With a coworker. Her name is Teairra, Tea for short."

"I don't care what her name is," I tell him testily. "What does she have to do with the danger?"

"She *is* the danger," he says. "Tea is another agent. She's one of our best, actually. Well, *was* one of the best, until she left. Anyway, I'm not exactly telling the story in chronological order but essentially, we had a wild, hot affair. She got pretty obsessed with me, more so than I was with her. She got obsessed with you too, because you're the only other woman I've been in a relationship with. She said she was going to track you down. I thought she was joking until she sent me a picture of your house a week ago."

I blink at him, unable to believe what he's saying.

"The entire thing sounds like a bad action flick," Luke comments, darkly.

"I wish it was," Billy replies.

"Women's perfume," I suddenly mutter, as a memory hits me. When I entered my apartment the first time the note was dropped, I thought I smelled women's perfume, but I didn't think much of it. "I thought it was Mona, but it smelled like—"

"Lilac," Billy completes. "That's Tea's signature scent. And the only reason you smelled it is because she wanted you to know she was there."

My heart grows cold. "So, a crazy, murderous, mercenary is after me and you didn't think to report it to the police?"

"I didn't know she was after you until she told me," he says. "She wanted to torment you first. To spook you. And then she wanted to get my attention."

"Oh, God." I turn and face the woods, dashing in, oblivious to Luke's shouts. "Chase! Chase baby, where are you?" Even I can hear the desperation and fear shattering through my voice. "Chase!"

"Jeez Mom, I'm right here." I spin around to see my son emerging from the corner of the bushes. He looks put out at having been caught, but I don't care. I don't think about anything else, don't care about anything else. I simply run to him and wrap him in my arms, holding him tight

"Oh my God." My voice is still shaking. "Don't you ever disappear like that again."

"I don't know why you're freaking out. I'm the one who should be mad at you." His body's stiff in my arms and he doesn't hug me back. I deserve it.

I lean back, composing myself enough to say, "I know we have a lot to talk about and I owe you an explanation. But for now, please just...I need to know you're ok."

I touch his face, running my hand over his skin so I can make sure everything is intact. With the biggest sense of relief, I finally know that he's ok.

Chase glances away, and he crosses his arms over his chest. "Yeah. I guess I'm fine."

But he doesn't say anything else.

I deserve that too.

"We should go home," I say, rain quickly starting to fall. I know there's a conversation waiting for me when we get there, but I'm ready for it. I rise and Luke nods. Mikey's eyes are wide, and his arms are tight around his dad's neck.

God. We just had a conversation about murdering mercenaries in front of an eight-year-old.

But I'll comfort Mikey later. When we're all indoors and away from danger.

I notice Chase doesn't look at Luke as we walk to the car and Luke seems to be giving him his space. We'll resolve that later, too. Right now, my thoughts are swimming with what Billy just told me. I just want to keep my family safe.

Chase is quiet during the stormy car ride. I watch him in the backseat, through the passenger side mirror, shooting glares out of the corner of his eyes every few seconds, brows furrowed.

When we get home, he already has his buckle off before I'm even fully in the garage. He heads right up to his room. I follow him, letting Luke get Mikey situated.

The minute I enter Chase's room, he gets right to it. "Is Luke really my

dad?"

I nod, leaning against the dresser. "Yes."

"Why didn't you just tell me?" Anger and hurt mix in his voice. I have no defense.

"I'm sorry." I don't avert my eyes, bearing his rage as openly as I can. "When I had you, Luke and I weren't together. I tried to tell him, but he was in Canada, playing hockey, and his manager kept responding for him, telling me he didn't want kids. I thought he was doing that because Luke asked him to, and so I never bothered to tell him when he moved back to town. I lied to Liam, and everyone, too."

I walk to him, kneeling in front of him. "I'm so sorry, baby."

His anger is still there, but it's receding. Chase can never stay mad for long.

"I probably should have just told you who your real dad was, but Luke thought maybe you needed time before he told you the truth."

"Why?" he snarls. "Doesn't he want to be my dad?"

The hurt in his voice breaks my heart.

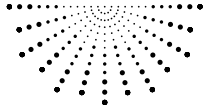
"Of course, he does sweetie." I caress his cheeks, counting a little victory when he doesn't move away. "He wants you more than anything. I think he's scared you won't want to be his son."

Chase is silent for a few seconds, some more of the anger draining from his expression. "Really?"

"Really." I sit on the floor. "Look, you can ask me anything, and I'll answer it honestly. And you can be mad at me too honey, since this is all my fault. But it's not Luke's. And I don't think you should punish him for something I did."



## LUKE



MIA COMES DOWN THE STAIRS, LOOKING SUITABLY EXHAUSTED, BUT SHE GIVES me a weak smile as she descends.

When she's on the last step, I take her hand and draw her closer, wrapping her in my arms.

“How is he?” I ask.

She shrugs a little tiredly, resting against me. “As well as can be expected I guess. He’s taking it better than I thought.”

“Can I talk to him, now?”

Her eyes widen as though she never expected me to ask permission to see my son. But I never want to do anything to hurt Chase, even accidentally, and I would never presume that I know him better than his mom.

“Of course.” She’s about to say something else but then catches sight of Billy, who’s standing at the corner of the room, peeping out the windows. He’s been doing that since we got back. Part of me thinks he’s only doing it to avoid my stare and the very difficult conversation I want to have with him.

A conversation that may or may not involve fists. I'm not usually the violent type but Billy put my family in danger. That's a call for violence within any man.

Mia gives me a look that seems to suggest her surprise that Billy's still here. I shrug in response. I'm mad at the guy for bringing danger right to my doorstep and threatening the three most important people in my life. But if I throw him out, we might never get to the bottom of what the hell’s going on.

“The police are on their way,” I tell Mia. “Try to stay on alert for now. When they get here, we'll unpack everything.”



She takes a deep breath and nods. I give her a brief kiss on the forehead and Billy glances over. I shoot Billy a warning look and he instantly looks away, red-faced.

I start heading upstairs. Mikey's up in his room. He's probably distracting himself with his iPad, but I can tell he's tense. I regret that we had that conversation in front of him, but there was no other way.

I'll check in on him after my talk with Chase.

I think of telling Mia to go stay with Mikey, but I know she wants to talk to Billy right now. And despite finding out that he's a mercenary, or a mercenary IT guy, I know Billy wouldn't hurt her. He seems genuinely freaked out at the idea of his ex-girlfriend going after her

If anything, it might be Mia who ends up offing him because of how pissed off she was with him today.

I smile at the thought of Billy cowering for Mia, who is half his size, but the smile falls off as I approach Chase's room. I hesitate, hand on doorknob, and finally admit to myself, the feelings churning within.

I'm scared. Scared that Chase won't want me to be his father. I will always be his dad regardless, but a rejection would hurt, especially since he probably feels abandoned, and lied to by me.

I know what it feels like to be the kid in that scenario.

As much as it shames me to say, I treated my dad like dirt after my parent's divorce. I took my mom's side and didn't respond to any of my dad's attempts to reach me. In my eyes, he ruined our family. He neglected my mom and made her feel like shit. He deserved my perpetual scorn.

It wasn't until I grew up that I realized how ridiculous I was being. And while I know that my dad played a role in the divorce, it was probably more complicated than my pre-teen mind could comprehend.

Now I'm scared that Chase'll do the same to me, and make me pay for my absence for the rest of my life.

I take a deep breath and soldier on. Nothing to do but take it on the neck. He can hate me if he wants but I'll always be his dad. That means being around and taking care of him, whether he wants me to or not.

When I open the door, I'm surprised to find that Chase doesn't look mad, as I expect. He looks nearly as apprehensive as I feel. There's fear in his eyes as well.

I smile. "Hi, Buddy."

"Hey," he says, and shifts uncomfortably, looking around.

I walk forward. "Can I hug you?"

He looks surprised and then nods tentatively. "Sure."

I go on one knee and wrap my hands around him, drawing him into me. His body is stiff and awkward in the hug, but one hand goes to pat my back the same way that I've seen him do with Mia before. And it warms my heart that he's trying.

I lean back and look at him. "You scared the hell out of me today, you know that?"

He shrugs. "I didn't mean to. I just...I didn't know what to do. You know, about the fact that I just found out you were my dad."

"Yeah. I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but I thought I needed to give you time to get used to me, before I told you the truth."

Chase doesn't seem to know what to say about that, so he shrugs.

"How do you feel about the fact that I'm your dad?" I wait with bated breath.

Another shoulder shrug. "I dunno. How do *you* feel about it?"

"Honestly? Great!"

His eyes scan the room before coming back to mine. "Really?"

"Really. I mean, I already thought you were a pretty cool kid, from the beginning. Looking back, there were tons of hints that you were my son. We're just so similar in a lot of things."

"Like hockey," he offers a small smile.

"Yeah. Hockey and other things. And even though I didn't know you were my son, I thought you were amazing and thought you would make a great brother for Mikey." I've already witnessed how protective Chase is of Mikey and it makes my heart crack wide open.

"Yeah," Chase smiles and ducks his head, flushed after all the compliments. I wonder if he feels the same awkwardness I do, with compliments. "I guess this means Mikey and I are brothers now."

"Yeah. I guess so." I grin at my son, picking a stray curl that falls over his forehead. "You think he's put two and two together yet? Figured out you're his brother?"

Chase smiles a little. "I dunno, maybe. Can I go tell him?"

Mikey's one of the most intuitive kids I've ever met. But I do think this whole thing may be confusing him more than he's let on. "Of course! I think he'll love to have you as his brother. But the situation might be a little confusing and he might have some questions."

"Oh. Maybe we could go talk to him together." Chase suggested. "And see how he takes the news."

I ruffle his hair. "How on earth did I get two amazing kids all at once? I swear, I lucked out."

Chase gives me a cheeky smile in response. "You're not so bad yourself. You know, at the dad thing." He shuffles from foot to foot. "And yeah, I guess I don't mind you being my dad."

I smirk, clearly seeing his discomfort with showing his emotions. I want to hug him again but restrain myself, not wanting to overwhelm him.

"Alright," I say, cutting him some slack. "Now that that's settled. Let's go talk to Mikey."

We head to Mikey's room. He's not asleep. As expected, he's tucked in and watching a video on his iPad.

Chase stands beside Mikey and I stay a few feet back, in the doorway, giving them space. He waves in front of Mikey, signaling that he has something to say. Mikey takes his headphones off.

"Hey Mikey. Can I tell you something? I have some news for you."

Mikey pauses his iPad and looks in Chase's direction.

"We're brothers now." Chase says matter-of-factly, with the mannerisms of a drill sergeant. "Luke is my dad, too, so that means we're step-brothers. Is that ok?"

Mikey nods and then smiles brightly. "Got it, Brother. Yes, it's ok."

"Great. And I'm older, so that means I'll always look out for you, even if we get in a fight."

This is one of the most beautiful things I've ever heard and chokes me up a little. Watching the two interact, grinning at each other like they already have their own secrets... it's such a sweet moment. I know Mia would probably be bawling her eyes out if she were here to see it."

I guess I should go get her, so she can be a part of this moment. "Well, while you guys get the rules sorted out, I'm going to get your Mom."

"Ok... Dad." Chase says the last word hesitantly like he's trying to taste it on his tongue.

"Yeah, Ok, Dad," Mikey parrots.

*Damn you, don't cry. It'll get awkward if you cry.*

I hold back my emotions and head downstairs to find the living room empty. I frown and glance around the downstairs floor. I head to the top of the basement stairs, calling down.

"Mia!" I call out, but no one answers. There's a flush, and then Billy emerges from the bathroom. He looks confused when he sees me.

"Why are you calling for Mia?" he asks.

"Because she's not here." Tension instantly snaps through me. "She didn't tell you if she was leaving? Is it still raining?"

"No, she was right here." Billy freezes, face suddenly tense. "Shit!"

Without a word, we instantly split up, zipping through the house, trying to find Mia as quickly as possible, without making noise, so as not to scare the kids.

We reconvene in the living room, empty-handed. My apprehension turns into full-blown panic, intrusive thoughts being intrusive.

The police were supposed to be here by now. They're too late. That crazy girl's taken Mia!

"Stay here," I order Billy. "Make sure the kids are safe, and explain every fucking thing you know, to the police. And if anything happens to her or my children, I'll hunt you down and kill you myself."

Without waiting for an answer, I run out and search. I've only been with Chase a few minutes so she couldn't have gotten far.

I step out the front door, feeling a chill after the rain. Her car's not in the driveway. She must've walked off somewhere? Her house again?

"Oh Jesus, Mia. Where are you?" I say to distract myself from the fear pumping through me. Once I get to Mia's house and see it dark inside, I creep to the side, heading around back. I take out my phone flash light to see if I see anything out of place. That's when I notice what I assume to be footsteps, in the soggy post-rain grass. They trek behind the homes in the cul-de-sac, leading to the surrounding woods.

I follow the tracks, keeping to the shadows, and trying to remain silent.

That's when I see Mia in the distance. And she's not alone. My heart catches.

There's a tall woman who has a gun out on Mia.

The moon clearly shows the glint of metal. Mia is talking rapidly with her, but her hands are firm on the gun. She looks like she's going to shoot.

My heart seizes in my chest.

I need to distract her.

Immediately, I start charging toward them, every thought flying out of my head.

Mia and the woman both turn to me.

"Mia, get down!" I yell as the woman's gun swivels toward me. She shoots once but I manage to avoid it.

Mia starts running back to me, screaming something, moving into the field of the gun.

*What is she doing? She's going to get hurt.*

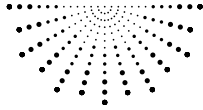
Fuck.

I run faster than I've ever run in my life

I just about grab her wrist when the gun explodes.



## MIA



“WHERE ARE YOU TAKING ME?” I ASK THE WOMAN WHO CURRENTLY HAS A gun to my back and a finger digging into my shoulder.

It’s a stupid question to ask. It’s not exactly like the woman who has me firmly in her grasp is going to reveal all her plans. And if she does, then it’s almost certainly because she doesn’t plan on me making this out alive.

So, I guess I’m a little relieved when she doesn’t answer. Then again, she has been tight-lipped during this whole endeavor. Apart from telling me to walk, she doesn't say much. All my questions have gone unanswered.

I think I'm handling being kidnapped particularly well, though. Mostly because part of it hasn't sunk in yet. It all happened so fast. After Billy went to the bathroom, I sat by myself with my thoughts for a few seconds, before the anxiety started to get to me. I decided to make myself useful by picking up some of the mail on the porch. Because we went in through the garage, I hadn’t grabbed it on the way in.

I opened the door and took three steps out, bending to pick up the mail. Three steps. That was all it took.

I didn't hear her coming. Didn't smell the lilacs, this time.

Cold metal pressed against the back of my head.

I jerked, and instinctively opened my mouth to scream, but she whispered, in a surprisingly calm voice, "You say a word and you’ll never say any words ever again. Understand?"

The scream instantly got trapped in my throat.

"Good girl," she said. "Now don't move."

I obeyed, partially because I was frozen in fear. I heard her shut the door silently and then another quiet order, "Get up."

I straightened, leaving the mail still on the ground.

"Walk," she said next, and again, I obeyed. That was the last word she said to me. We've been walking for what feels like an hour but has probably only been a few minutes. Silence has been her only response to my questions or pleas.

However, sometimes when I annoy her, she digs her hand in my shoulder and it touches a nerve that makes me wince. Then she chuckles a little, clearly enjoying my pain.

She shoves me forward, into the dark, thicketed woods, leading out of the cul de sac. We passed by my house a couple houses ago, and I can still see my garden in the distance. For a second, I thought we were going there, or at least I hoped we were. Maybe then I could've managed to figure out an escape route, since I know the area more than she does.

*How laughable. My mind mocks. You think you know the area? She's managed to avoid detection for months, broke into your house, and left no evidence. She's a trained assassin. You probably don't have any chance of making it out of this alive.*

Hope flags, but determination still thumps through me. I have a child to take care of. Two, because right now I consider Mikey my son, too. I have a family who love and care about me. I have a thriving business. And I have Luke.

I love Luke.

I can't die, now that I just gotten everything I've ever wanted.

"Keep moving," the woman, 'Tea', says suddenly. Her voice shocks me out of my fantasy. We take a few steps forward, before she talks again. "You should thank me you know."

"Thank you for what?"

"I could've killed you at any point before this," she says in that same conversational tone. Her voice is light and breathy, which completely belies her tall, muscular frame. "You know, for someone who was under threat, you really don't watch your back. Like zero situational awareness or sixth sense or whatever people want to call it. At any point, I could've pulled the trigger. But I gave you time. I wanted to see what kind of person you were. Curiosity, I guess."

Oh God. Terror clenches tight in my stomach. So, she's been following me all this time. All this time I didn't know. I thought Luke was overreacting with his overprotectiveness, thought I knew better than him.



Turns out I know nothing,

"Please," I tell her, my voice cracking. It should be humiliating but I don't care. I'm ready to beg on my knees if that's what it takes. "Look, I don't know what's going on between you and Billy but trust me I'm not a threat to you. At all. I've barely even spoken to him in the past few years and when we dated... let's just say it wasn't the whirlwind romance of the century. We weren't in love with each other, but since we were good enough friends, we figured it would be ok to try dating and then we just got used to being together."

She says nothing for a while. I keep going.

"And my son isn't his," I say, in case she watched Billy and Chase interact. "That was a lie."

"Oh, I know that," she says, while continuing her dogged push forward. "They look nothing alike."

"Yeah. So, you see? You can let me go." I retain a little bit of yearning when she doesn't answer immediately, hoping she's thinking about it.

But that hope is stamped out when she laughs. "After you've seen my face? That's like rule number one at my job. Witnesses don't get to live."

*Oh my God. She really is going to kill me.*

"But I won't tell anyone," I assure her. "You and Billy can ride out into the sunset, and no one will know I even saw you."

"I doubt Billy will want to ride off in the sunset with me after what I did," she says, casually, but I can detect the hurt in her voice. "He chose you over me, you know? We were drinking and talking, one of those hypotheticals where you ask someone, 'if you had to shoot one person, me or your ex, who would you shoot'. And you know his answer?" She laughs. "He got super serious, stared me dead in the eyes, and said 'Don't hurt Mia. I'm serious Tea.' " She cackles too loud and grating to be true humor. "Like really? That wasn't even the question, but he still chose you. While he was in bed with me! Can you believe it?"

*And that's why you want to kill me? Over a stupid drinking game?* I want to scream, but I don't. This woman is seriously unhinged but I have to figure out a way to get to her. "He didn't mean it. Trust me. He doesn't love me."

"You don't know that," she responds sharply. "I don't know that either, but unfortunately for you, I don't like to share."

"But I'm telling you the truth!" I say, desperately. "After he left, Billy and I barely talked. And even before that, I've never seen him talk about me or

anyone else the way he speaks about you."

This causes her to pause, just briefly. "Really?"

"Yes," I answer. "You should've seen him when he told us your name. His eyes went all misty and his face got flushed just by saying it. We thought he was psychotic because he was clearly in love with a dangerous woman."

She's silent for a few seconds, and I can feel the gun less prominently against my back. I wonder if I could manage to get away or twist the gun out of her grasp, but I immediately abandon the idea.

"He came to rescue you," she speaks almost as if to herself. "The minute he thought you were in danger he came right over. That was the final test to see how he felt."

"Because we're friends. That's what friends do." I feel like ripping my hair out. "And even though he knew there was a chance you might kill me, he still didn't call the cops on you. Doesn't that mean something?"

She hesitates and I can feel that I'm getting through to her.

I turn around slowly, and she doesn't stop me. I stare her in her grey eyes, like a wolf in the night.

"Please don't do this," I tell her. "He won't forgive you for this."

I think maybe she won't shoot.

But then a branch snaps in the distance and someone is running for us.

The person distracts us, and we both swing toward the sound, in unison.

*Luke.*

Tea points the gun at him.

My eyes widen in horror.

"Mia, Get down!" He yells, as Tea shoots. He swerves expertly, and the bullet rackets past him, into the air. I start running to him, probably having an out of body experience. This is not happening. I can't lose him.

"Luke, Stop!" I know my body is now in the path of the gun, but I don't care. I need to get him away.

I scream the minute I hear the shot but it's not from pain.

It's from shock, as a hand wraps around my wrist and yanks me down to the ground. I hear a bitten-out swear word, as a heavy body covers me, for a second. As quickly as we're down, Luke rolls off me, with the groan of a linebacker. In this case, a hockey champion. He gets right back up, now even more determined than before.

"No," I whisper, feeling an existential dread envelop me. It's all happening at top speed, but my mind plays it out in slow motion. Luke

barrels toward the woman, with a gun focused on him. He may have 100 pounds on her but he's not going to beat a gun.

She shoots again, and again. I think each shot hits him, but he doesn't stop.

He plows into the woman, taking her to the ground, but Tea has a surprising amount of strength. She wraps her hand around his throat and gets him in a chokehold which he manages to pull out of. She weaves around him, climbing on top of him and I can see she's trying to get the gun in position to shoot his head.

Suddenly, furious anger fills me

"Get off him, you bitch!" I scream, running to them. I glance around for a weapon, spotting a large rock to the side.

Tea doesn't see me coming. She's too occupied with fighting Luke, trying to kill him.

Before she can turn around to spot me, I bash the rock on her head.

She releases a cry before her body slumps, falling on Luke's. I use the last of my strength to shove her off him.

"Jesus," Luke groans, squeezing his eyes, and taking a deep breath that only seems to hurt him more. "She really must be some kind of special ops. That was an absolute nightmare."

"You idiot!" I cry, falling to my knees before him, my hands frantically trying to put pressure on his bleeding wounds. "Why would you run in front of the gun?" I take off my shirt and tie it around the wound on his leg, using his own shirt to try to plug the wounds somewhere on his torso. They immediately bleed through.

"It was either I take the bullet, or let it go through you." He groans again as he talks, but this groan isn't as strong as the last one - almost as if the last of the fight is going out of him.

Or maybe his life.

That last thought has my heart seizing in my chest and has me screaming. "Help! Someone, help us!"

"The police are coming." His words are slurred, his lids are hanging low over his eyes. It strikes fear into my chest. *I need you, Luke.*

"No. Don't fall asleep." I hold his cheeks and stare, trying to pry his eyes open. "Stay awake, Luke. Stay with me."

"Can't. Too tired. His eyes roll, and he turns his head to the side. I finally let my eyes look down. It's dark, with the trees shielding against the

moonlight, but even with that, I know the dark liquid staining the ground is blood.

A lot of blood.

"Help!"

"Mia!" It's Billy's voice, right before he bursts into the clearing.

"Oh God. Billy. Help him. She shot him and he's bleeding out. I can't stop it!"

Despite my frantic voice, Billy spares Tea's body a brief but meaningful glance, before turning to Luke. He whips off his jacket.

"I'll try to stop the bleeding," he says, ripping off pieces of cloth. "The ambulance is on its way."

I nod, but then suddenly, a separate thought hits me. "Oh my God. The kids."

"It's fine. They're with the cops and Liam."

"Liam?" I ask.

"Yes. He just arrived a few minutes ago. According to him, he wanted to check in on you."

"Oh God." My brain wants to conceptualize what it's like for my brother to fly into this chaos, but I can't think about that right now. My entire being is on Luke.

His eyes are closed now, and he looks so pale against the dark ground.

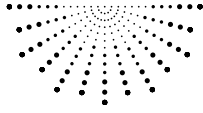
I lean my head against his cool face, closing my eyes, and holding onto sanity by a thread.

"He'll be ok," Billy tells me.

"He has to be," I whisper. "He has to be."



## LUKE



I COME AWAKE IN FLASHES.

The first time, I hear crying - a piercing sound, in a voice that sounds like heartbreak. Whoever is crying, must have had their entire world shattered with the way they're carrying on. For some reason, the voice rips at my heartstrings. Her pain is causing me pain and I want to go and comfort her.

But I can't. I can't move.

"Luke," she says, in that same haunting tone that tugs at a vital piece of my memory. "Please hold on. Please, you have to hold on for me."

Somewhere in the recesses of my mind, I know she's talking to me, but I can't put the words together in any way that makes sense. Even just thinking about it exhausts me, and I let the urge to fade again, take me.

The next time I come to, there's a chatter of different voices. They're talking in hurried tones, shooting rapid-fire words that mean nothing to me.

"Shit. We're losing him."

"Blood pressure dropping rapidly."

"We need to work quickly."

Accompanying those voices are the incessant beeping of monitors, the sound slowly rising louder and louder over everything else. I want to tell someone to turn the damn noise off because I'm trying to sleep. But once again, I can't move my body or open my mouth. So, I just listen to the words and keep breathing, even though my chest gets tighter, and my head gets lighter. I hold on, because the woman before, told me to. I hold on for her, for as long as possible until I drift again.

The next time I have consciousness, I can feel my body, again. My mouth is dry as sand, and my whole-body aches, radiating from my stomach

and leg. The areas feel pierced and heavy. And I can't really feel my other limbs, but I can feel my hands. In particular, I can feel the hand in mine, grasping tightly like the person never wants to let go. I hold it tightly too, holding on to something I don't even know.

I try to squeeze the hand, but I don't quite manage. What I do manage to do though, is pull my eyes open, trying not to groan at the light that instantly floods them.

There's a single fluorescent light over me and it competes with the light pouring in from the wide ceiling-to-floor windows. A machine is by my bedside, wires, and tubes running from it, into me.

It takes little deductive reasoning to figure out that I'm in a hospital.

Mia is right here with me, holding my hand tightly, like she never wants to let go.

She's asleep, her head beside me on the bed, while her body sits on a chair. She's resting her face on her hands and I can hear a light snore escape her as she sleeps. Once we argued about whether she snores or not. She insists she doesn't, and I eventually agree to placate her. But the truth is she does snore a little, and it's the most adorable thing in the world.

I watched her for so long, drawing in her simple, unfathomable beauty. I can just make out her eyelashes over her hands, but it's more than just her features. It's like there's a glow about her, which affects everything she touches.

I piece together what happened as I admire her, thanking God that I'm alive. If I was dead, I wouldn't get to watch her like this anymore, looking so beautiful as she rests beside me.

I don't know if Mia feels my gaze, but her brows furrow suddenly, her eyes fluttering open. She stares off into space for a few seconds, but she always does that when she gets up. She tells me that her brain needs time to boot back up after a nap. Once again, adorable.

When she finally decides she understands the world again, she slowly straightens, and her face shows all the stress and worry of the past few hours. That is, until her gaze catches mine.

She jerks when she realizes I'm awake and her mouth falls open.

"Hey," I say smiling, wanting to kiss her but not strong enough yet, to reach for her.

"You're awake." Her voice trembles, then finally a smile lights up her face. It's like the clouds parting for dawn.

I grin, teasingly. "Am I not supposed to be? Because I gotta tell you, it takes a lot more than three gunshot wounds to get rid of me."

"Oh my God!" She exclaims and leaps into my arms, but that presses her weight over my abdomen. Pain shoots throughout my whole body and I can't stop the groan that escapes me.

"Oh sorry. I'm sorry." She retreats instantly, hands fluttering over my body apologetically. "I didn't mean to. But...I'm so happy you're awake." Her eyes are teary, her voice watery.

"I'm happy I'm awake too," I say smiling and needing to kiss her, but not being able to move much. "Now can you give me a kiss for my trouble?"

She nodded tearfully and pressed a watery kiss on my lips. I feel it all, her love for me, her fear, every emotion she's gone through for the past few hours.

And I try to return the favor, showing her my love, and how happy I am that she wasn't hurt in any of this.

"Thank you," she whispers against my lips. "Thank you for holding on."

"It was alright. I didn't do much. Mostly just laid there."

She giggles and rolls her eyes.

I only have a few seconds with her before there's a knock on the door. Liam pulls open the door and then grins when he sees me.

"I thought I heard sounds," he says, grinning, as he walks to us. He looks different from when I last saw him, slightly taller with longer hair. It now curls over his forehead, kind of like how Chase's does. Liam tucks his hand in his jeans. "I'm glad to see you up. You gave us a scare last night."

"Really? That's why you flew into town, for little old me?" I bat my eyelashes at him. "I'm glad you love me so much, Liam."

"Oh please, don't flatter yourself. I was already in town." Liam moves closer and it's impossible to deny the care in his eyes. "Wanted to see how you were taking care of my sister."

"I do my best."

"You *are* the best," Mia corrects, and I smile. I manage to pick up my hand to run it over hers, which is still on the bed. She turns hers over to hold me.

"Yeah," Liam says, and to my surprise, he smiles warmly at the two of us. "I mean I still don't think you deserve my sister, but taking a bullet for her is something else."

"It's what I do."



"Yeah, but try not to take any more bullets," he adds, wryly. "For a second there we thought we were going to lose you. I thought I was going to have to have the hardest conversation with your kids."

"Yeah, I'll try not to get shot by a crazed mercenary, next time, Liam. Thanks."

Liam laughs at the tone and I shake my head. "Where are the kids, anyway? "

"They're with me. They were too nervous to come in at first, so Chase is giving Mikey a pep talk in the hallway. I came in to make sure you weren't dead, so they wouldn't see you like that."

"Liam," Mia warns her brother about his flippant tone, but I'm grateful for his actions. And he's right too. I don't want to freak my kids out any more than they already are.

"Sorry, Mia. But you should've seen them when the ambulance drove past the house and they realized you two were in it."

My heart twists. I hate that my kids went through that. Mikey already lost a parent and Chase just found out I was his dad. I couldn't imagine what they could be going through, thinking they would lose me too.

And Mia... the dark circles under her eyes are a testament to her worry.

I can still hear that crying noise if I shut my eyes.

I know she's probably had to hold it together for the kids, and only cried like that when we were alone. I know she's probably still not over what happened. But once I get out of this hospital bed, I'll make it my job to help her heal.

"I'm ready to see the kids, now," I tell Liam.

Liam nods. "I'll grab them." He pats me on the shoulder before he goes. "And I'm glad you're alive buddy."

I smile. I'm glad I'm alive, too.

Liam must've told them I'm okay because the kids charge in here with all the speed and energy in the world.

"Wait, don't jump on him! He's still a little hur-" Mia can barely get the words out before they both attach themselves to me, hugging tightly on each side. I inhale the groan as I hug them back.

"Dad!"

"Daddy!"

Mikey's inspecting up and down my body, noting the bandages and tubes. Chase's crying and babbling at the same time and I laugh, telling him to go

slower because I can barely hear what he's saying.

"I'm good, guys," I assure them. "Really. I just hurt a little."

"I don't want you to be a hero, anymore," Chase says firmly, his eyes teary and wide. "You could've died Dad."

Mikey looks at me, concern in his eyes.

I grin at both of them. "But I didn't. You know the heroes never die, right?"

Chase wipes his eyes. "But—"

"But nothing," I manage to wrap both hands around them as they hug me tighter. "Your dad is here, guys. He's alive and well. And he's not going anywhere, anytime soon."

\* \* \*

AFTER ABOUT TWO DAYS, I'M READY TO LEAVE THE HOSPITAL. BUT THE doctor insists that I need to be there for at least a couple of weeks, for observation.

"It was touch and go there, a couple of times," the pleasant-faced man insists. "We need to make sure there are no complications from the bullet wound and the surgery."

I open my mouth to argue but Mia glares at me. Mia is here almost all the time and I know she's tired of my complaining, but she takes it like a champ. However, any time I try to flout the doctor's orders, she glares at me just like that.

"Alright," I say, resigned. "I'll stay."

It's not all bad staying at the hospital for a few days. The food is horrible, but Mia brings me her treats from home. And she's not the only one who brings food. I get a ton of visitors, way more than I expected.

At first, it's just the guys I know from hockey, or kids I coached with their parents. But then reporters start showing up. Apparently, the story of a former hockey star taking a bullet for his girlfriend, made the news, and everyone wants the inside scoop.

I refuse to talk to any of them. I didn't like the press, back when I was a player, and I definitely don't like them now. They're persistent and I have to eventually hire security to keep them away.

Billy doesn't visit me. News has it that he left town, already, to deal with

the fallout at his 'organization.'

Two visits surprise me. The first is from Victor Thames, who shows up with his daughter, of all things. I guess, after the news reached him, he's now convinced I'm not just a player who uses women. So, it's safe to introduce me to his precious daughter.

The girl is very sweet, if a little shy. She comes over with a casserole and I sign a jersey for her while I talk to her dad.

"You need to get off your ass and get back to work," Thames says, gruffly.

"Oh, so you're finally ready to let me work?"

He shrugs. "It wasn't so bad having you on the team. And your ideas aren't all terrible."

I figure, that's his way of telling me he's glad I'm alive.

The other visit that surprises me is my dad. I don't see it coming – literally.

I wake up and he's there.

"Dad?"

"Hey." A tentative smile crosses the corner of his lip. "I heard you took a bullet for someone. Came to see if you were still in one piece."

"I am, surprisingly."

My dad and I share very similar features, except he's a little smaller than I am, and obviously older. He looks a little more worn since I last saw him. I feel guilty because I know part of that is from me.

"Sorry."

"Sorry?" He raises an eyebrow. "For being a hero?"

"No, for everything else... how I treated you..." I take a deep breath, grateful that it no longer hurts to breathe. "I have two sons now. I understand how much it must've hurt when I sided with Mom during the divorce."

My dad looks surprised. Then he smiles. "I never held that against you. You were a child. And you weren't wrong. I was probably a horrible husband to your mom."

"But it was more complicated than that. Wasn't it?"

He looks thoughtful and then nods. "Yeah, it was."

My dad leaves before Mia comes back. I tell her about the meeting, and she beams at me.

"I'm glad you made up with your dad," Mia says, running her hand through my hair. I shut my eyes, savoring her touch.

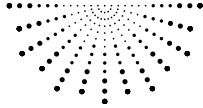
"I'll be glad when I'm out of here and have you under me again."

Her eyes flare open and her face heats. A giggle escapes her as she shakes her head. "What am I going to do with you?"

"You could always marry me."

She reacts surprised by that. But then recovers with a smile. "Yeah. I guess I could."

## 31. EPILOGUE



MIA

*Two Years Later*

THE STADIUM IS MORE ALIVE THAN IT'S BEEN IN MONTHS.

In the past few weeks, games were suspended by the threat of a snowstorm and there was talk of canceling the championship altogether, because of it. But luckily, the storms held off enough to allow the last game of the season to be played in style.

The championship.

"That's right," I hear Luke mutter from beside me. "All net, my boy. All net."

I know he's talking to Chase who's currently weaving like a beast on the ice. He has the puck in his possession and expertly avoids everyone who gets in his way, his eyes focused on the net and the net alone. It's like the other players are mere flies to him, distracting him from his goal. He overcomes their tactics like he has eyes at the back of his head.

"Your left," Luke mutters again, and just as if he heard him, Chase slides to the left, narrowly avoiding a stick that tries to take out his leg.

"Those little shits," James says, in a voice that is so uncharacteristic of him that Luke and I both glance at him.

"What?" he asks defensively.

"Nothing," Luke says, and a smile tickles the corner of his lips. "Just didn't know you were such a potty mouth."

James rolls his eyes with a smile, and then turns back to the game. I notice thought that as he does, he catches the gaze of Tracy Senet, a parent on

the opposing team. Their gazes linger on each other for a bit. Then James tears his eyes away, looking vaguely guilty.

I quickly evaluate what I just saw. My match-making senses are tingling really hard right now.

We turn our attention back to the game, in time to see Chase face off against the goalie. He fakes to the left, his signature move. Or at least that's what the goalie expects, but this time Chase isn't faking. So, when the goalie stays in place, Chase spikes the puck and it slips right past the goalie, into the net.

The crowd goes wild, the building peppered with chants. I'm sure some of the parents on the other team are cheering too. It's hard not to, watching a game like this.

More people show up for the games now, in part due to Luke's new notoriety, after saving my life. But the reason they stay, is that Chase has begun making a name for himself, due to his skill. I mean, he's been practicing a lot and it shows, but some of that is just pure unadulterated skill.

The boy genius of ice. That's what they call him.

And we all know where he gets it from.

Luke is still watching the game and I can see the absolute pride on his face as the crowd cheers for his son. Chase waves at him before skating back into the game. While Luke never made a formal announcement, it seems everyone now knows Chase is his son. They don't ask, but when they see the three of us together, it's the conclusion they draw.

And it's clear in the way that Luke interacts with his boys, that he loves them more than anything. They're his passion.

And so am I.

Today, Chase plays better than he's ever played before. It's his last game in Pee Wee and he has something to prove. The high school scouts came to the game today and even a coach from the University of Washington.

It's exciting but at the same time, Chase's potential scares me.

"He'll be fine," Luke says, grinning at me, as though he can tell what I'm thinking. Then again, my new husband seems to have the uncanny knack of reading my mind.

At that point, Mikey comes to us with a tray full of cookies. He quit the hockey team to focus on baking, and now at every game, he hands out cookies he calls 'Mikey's treats'. They're a hit with the parents and Luke couldn't be prouder.

"We have a young entrepreneur on our hands," he says to Mikey, who smiles back. Luke snags a cookie from the tray, bites in, and moans. "Damn. These are good. I can't believe my son is going to be the next Gordon Ramsey."

Mikey blushes, pleased. "Thanks. But Gordon Ramsey doesn't bake."

"That he doesn't," Mikey ruffles his hair. "Which makes you better."

Mikey doesn't say anything but I know he enjoys the compliment.

He's still not the most vocal kid in the world but he's talking more than before. Chase's influence. And Mikey has his own group of friends now, including a young chatty girl, named Emma, who helps him bake and follows him practically everywhere.

Mikey returns to her and I watch the two head off with their heads together, talking about who knows what.

After he goes, Luke leans into me to whisper. "Did I mention, by the way, how good you look in that dress?"

I smile at him. "Once or twice."

"Good, because you look amazing in that dress."

I roll my eyes. "Hard to look amazing when you're as pregnant as I am."

I rub my hand over my swollen belly, and Luke's eyes flare, his smile widening. He always loves it when I refer to our incoming bundle of joy, and he beams the same way he did when I told him about the pregnancy.

Mikey and Chase are also looking forward to the new baby—the doctor tells us it's a girl. They've already listed out all the things they're going to teach her.

Personally, I'm a little terrified of going through childbirth again. Chase was not an easy pregnancy. But luckily, Luke's here every step of the way.

He wraps his arm around me pulling me closer. "You look as beautiful as the day I married you. Remember that?"

"I remember." Our wedding had been a tasteful, exclusive ceremony held in Mykonos. All our guests had been flown in, and Luke also had a designer flown in from France, to help me with my dress.

*Something delicate and beautiful for my princess* he said

The ceremony wasn't as over the top as the magazines predicted it would be, but it was so beautiful I could still cry. Truly the perfect day.

And I've loved him every day since, and of course a bunch of days before.

When I see the way he interacts with our kids and the way he loves me, I

love him even more. Sometimes I see the scars on his body and remember he took three bullets for me. And then I remember the fear of almost losing him. But it's getting easier to deal with the trauma, especially since the culprit is now serving a life sentence and Billy is also gone. I haven't heard from him since the incident. Sometimes I wonder if he's doing ok and have the urge to reach out to him but I don't. I'm scared of putting my family in danger again. As selfish as it is, my family comes first.

"Did I ever tell you how handsome you are?" Luke shakes his head with a smile.

"Yes, but you can tell me again, tonight after our son wins the game."

"Don't you mean if?"

"No, I mean when."

And when the whistle blows signaling Chase's win, Luke sweeps me into his arms and lays a kiss on my lips, in front of everyone.

The End. →

Thank you for reading **Secret Baby for My Protector!**

If you enjoyed this book, you'll LOVE

[My Grumpy Billionaire Daddy!](#)

~ It's an Age Gap, Single Dad, Fake-Date, Stand-Alone. ~

Continue to the next page to read Chapter 1 of My Grumpy Billionaire Daddy

→

☆☆☆☆☆ "Rip Roaring! - A beautifully written book with so much emotion and feeling it left me breathless. Well thought out characters and a fast-moving storyline keep you hooked from start to finish. You have to read this book!!"

☆☆☆☆☆ "BRILLIANT - FANTASTIC BOOK , I WAS HOOKED FROM START to end i loved every page , i cant wait to read more books by this author! "

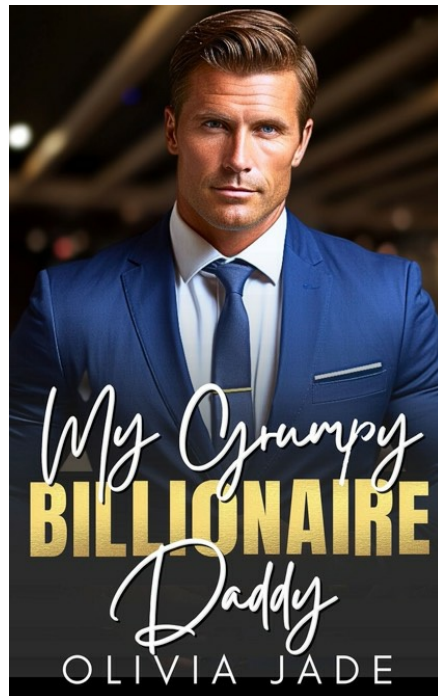


☆☆☆☆☆ “ROMANCE GOLD”

☆☆☆☆☆ “A WONDERFUL STORY - MY GRUMPY BILLIONAIRE Daddy, has drama, suspense, relationship issues & of course romance. This book instantly draws you right in & it is a page turner & the suspense was like OH WOW!!! I could not stop reading it or put it down for a minute. All these characters were so amazingly great. I enjoyed it & I hope you will also. I loved reading this book. Was this a forbidden love or will they end up together or not? If you love an Age Gap story line, this book is for you, you will not be disappointed.”

☆☆☆☆☆ “BRILLIANTLY SWEET”

**My Grumpy Billionaire Daddy** SNEAK PEEK Next Page: →



**RULE #1: NEVER FALL IN LOVE WITH YOUR SINGLE-DAD, BILLIONAIRE**

## **fake date.**

My solution to overcoming heartbreak was to swear off love and join a fake dating app.

The goal: have fun without commitment and *without* letting anyone past my panties.

All I had to do was hang out with a billionaire restaurateur, almost twice my age, for 1 night... for a massive payout.

It seemed like the perfect no strings attached arrangement.

But this Sugar Daddy has a lot more to offer than I expected.

Now, things are getting confusing.

I'm supposed to be his pretend girlfriend but we can't keep our hands off each other, and it's starting to feel real.

And that's when I panic...

On top of that, this man's got baggage and it's coming after *me*.

**Everything's so complicated and I'm wondering if the risk was worth the payout.**

## CHAPTER 1

### AVA

"I'M DONE, RITA. I'M DONE WITH MEN," I SAY, LOOKING THROUGH THE window.

We're sitting in the corner of a restaurant, and our position offers a good view of the outside - people walking and holding hands as if they somehow know what we're talking about and are determined to show me how being a couple is not outdated. I chuckle at the thought of them knowing exactly what we're talking about.

Rita bites into her burger, and I watch the cheese roll down the side of her mouth, which she wipes with a napkin. It reminds me of when my tongue used to be a napkin for someone else. I would watch the cheese roll down, then lean over and lick it off. One of the many stupid things I did in the name of love.

"I don't blame you for that," she says, taking a guilty look around as if someone was going jump out from their table and shout "Aha! Caught you. You're such a messy eater."

“I’ve been unlucky in relationships,” I say. “I think what I want now is what you have. Just flow with anybody and nobody. Have some fun without commitment. They can do whatever the hell they like, and so can I.”

After my last very painful breakup, it’s a burden off my shoulder, the prospect of having fun without commitment. But maybe I wouldn’t stretch it to the limit where I would be letting anyone past my panties. I think they should probably stop before they get there.

“I don’t know, Ava,” Rita says. “Maybe you should stay off completely. Focus on your dancing.”

*My dancing*, I think. My dancing has given me confidence the last couple of years. On the dance floor, I’m lost in everything—the technique, the rhythm of the music, feeling my body, leaning on a masculine body. But outside the studio, I just feel like someone ordinary.

“That would mean no social life, and you know how that worked out the last time,” I point out.

We both love to go out, and I love meeting new people, but I can be pretty naïve for a 26-year-old. Rita isn’t. She knows everything there is to know about men and she has no illusions about them. Whereas I fell in love with one, and, as Rita expected, he left me crying in the dust of his departure. But she picked me up again and nursed me back to life.

That wasn’t the first time. I’m starting to wonder whether all men are horrendous, as Rita insists, or if I just get the worst of them.

Anyway, hiding out in our apartment isn’t for me. I like to doll up and have a good time, but now I want to make sure there are no complications to the “having a good time.”

I wonder how she does it, maintain relationships with a lot of men without falling for any. *You just have to open your eyes and see the cracks, then you won’t fall for it.* It sounds so...pessimistic, but if it works for her, then I’m willing to bet on it.

“Rita?” I call out to her a little loud, as if she wasn’t right in front of me.

“Yes?” she replies in a rather low tone.

“Is it wrong to be excited about seeing someone you haven’t seen in a few days? Or is it wrong to be intimate with someone you want, or to have deep conversations with them, share the same life views, and connect with them on a deeper level? Is that too much to ask?”

I wait for her to finish the piece of burger she’s been chewing. She swallows and takes a sip of her Coke before speaking.

“There’s nothing wrong with that, hun. What’s wrong is falling in love and letting them reach the deeper parts of yourself that no one should touch. You won’t stop hurting like you are now until you learn how to lock your heart and throw away the key,” she explains.

I wasn’t expecting such a long speech from her. I was expecting her to throw a self-help quote at me and let me guess the rest, like she normally does. But everything she’s saying makes sense, and it’s exactly what I need to do.

“Okay. I’m ready,” I say suddenly. Rita’s eyebrows shot up.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course, I am,” I say with a slight frown, a little insulted she doesn’t believe me.

“Okay, but if you’re gonna do this, then you should listen to me,” she says with a warning tone. “My lifestyle isn’t for everyone.”

I look away from the window and fixate on the black bean burger and sweet potato fries I’ve been ignoring. I grab the burger and take a huge bite. God damn, that’s good.

\* \* \*

LATER THAT NIGHT, I STAND OUT ON MY BALCONY. THE NIGHT IS DARK AND emotionless. There are no stars or moon to look up to. Maybe it’s a sign telling me to stop dreaming of a magical love.

The wind is a little too strong and it blows the silky night robe I have on, almost stripping me down to my bralette and underwear. I stay there for a little while before walking back into my bedroom.

The first thing I see is my open laptop sitting on the dressing table, across from my bed. The screen is still lit up, but dim.

I had looked up ways to meet men with no strings attached – no relationship expected, and found an app called Fake Date Me. I already researched it thoroughly and it seems safe. It’s not the typical full escort service where sex is expected and paid for. “Dates” do get paid, but it’s just for the company for a day or an event. I’d put off signing up, but tonight’s the night. My heart has led me astray for too long. It’s time to do the opposite of what it suggested. I’m in control of my heart now!

I sit down and begin creating my profile. There it is, the Fake Date Me

app, staring right back at me. I'm a little anxious, but I click on the icon that says "Join." Gradually, the anxiety melts away, replaced by giddy excitement. This would be fun, and I could make a little extra money. Besides, what could go wrong?

A few men should be interested. I'm still young, pretty, and charming, if I do say so myself. Or at least, so I'm told.

It's late when I finish my profile with a bio and several pictures, and I'm sleepy. I close the laptop and flop back on the bed, wondering what will happen now that I'm on the app. How long will it take for me to get a hit on the app? I'm not sure when I fall asleep.

The next day, I wake up early and energized. I desperately want to check the app, but I'm meeting Rita at the gym for our usual morning workout and chat.

"Hey, Ava. You look bright and energetic this morning," Rita says when I arrive much perkier than usual.

I start running on the treadmill and don't respond right away. That's something I like doing to her, especially when we're working out at the gym. I need to encourage her to start running, otherwise, she'll talk us into going home and doing absolutely nothing.

"You did it, didn't you?" she teases me.

I bite the inside of my cheek and continue ignoring her.

"Oh, you definitely did it. You're blushing," she continues.

That's where she gets me. I can no longer hold in the laugh that's been building up.

"Get out of here. Go do something. Pick up some dumbbells," I order.

She laughs, nods, and walks away.

We spend about an hour in the gym, and when we leave, Rita complains—as always—about how sore she'll be tomorrow. I remind her that she needs the exercise with her desk job. She simply sighs, and I laugh.

When I get home, I rush to my laptop and open it. No shower, no breakfast. I can't wait any longer. I already used all my willpower not to download the app to my phone, and not to open my laptop before going to the gym.

I click on the app, and scan eagerly through my notifications. A good number of people looked at my page, mostly douchey-looking men, and some of them reached out. They go on and on about how beautiful I am and how they'd love to tote me around like arm candy. I know some girls are into that,

but I've never liked guys who are so unapologetically creepy.  
But then, one catches my attention.

Hello. Care for a chat?

That's all he left in my DM. No lewd comments, no dick pics.  
I scroll through his profile. His name is Lex. He's forty-five years old and owns a chain of restaurants. A mature businessman. Nice.

I click on his photos. God damn, he's sexy. He looks tall and has clear blue eyes that contrast sharply with his dark hair. He's wearing a suit in most of the pictures and looking more like he's on a professional website than a dating app.

I like how he looks in those suits.

He isn't playing a part or pretending to be fun or outgoing or holding a large fish he supposedly caught, like an annoying number of profiles. And the formality of the photos makes me think he's a real man who knows how to treat a woman...in general *and* in bed; not some man-child, like what've I've experienced recently.

I shake my head, trying to push the thought out. Not supposed to be thinking about that right now. *Not letting anyone in my panties, remember?* I try to remind myself.

I continue through his profile, but there isn't much more info about him in his bio, and that makes him even more interesting.

Hey, sure.

He replies almost immediately.

How are you?

I'm good. How are you?

I'm fine. Ava, 26. Is that your real name and age?

It is. Why wouldn't it be?

You'd be surprised how many women fake things on their profile. I'm looking for someone sweet and authentic.

How refreshing. We chat for a bit about simple things: jobs, books,

music. I wonder if he's ever going to tell me what he wants from me. The curiosity and anticipation grows in my stomach. I'm on an app where expectations are made clear from the get-go. We're both here for a reason, and I wonder what *his* is.

Instead of waiting around, I leave the laptop and head into the shower. After that, I go to the kitchen. My curiosity gnaws at me, but I force myself to make a smoothie and a quinoa salad for breakfast. I eat in record time, and when I look at the laptop again, there it is.

You must be wondering what I want from you.

Yep.

Are you free this weekend?

Depends. 😊

I'm not going to commit to anything until I know what it is.

I have to attend a charity event this weekend. I wish I could skip it, but I can't. I'd love it if you'd accompany me..

What's the event about?

It's the annual charity event for the Children's Hospital. It's held at the Primrose. There will be dinner, music, maybe some dancing.

The Primrose? That was a five-star hotel, the fanciest one in town. I'd never been farther in than the lobby. Dinner and dancing there? Yes, please! But I was going to play this cool.

Alright, I can do that.

It's a black-tie event. If you don't have anything appropriate to wear, I can include that in the payment.

That's fine. I have a cocktail dress.

Perfect. How does \$500 sound for the evening?

My eyes nearly pop out of my skull. Five hundred bucks? For an

*evening?* I should...

Keep reading “My Grumpy Billionaire Daddy” NOW!

## CHAPTER 2

### LEX

I’m going to this charity event that, given my current state of mind, I have absolutely no desire being a part of, but I still have to show up. No one makes as much money as I do—and has as many investments as I have—without being forced to attend at least one or two functions that he doesn’t want to attend. I, for one, am no exception. I try to remind myself that this is for a good cause. I’m not even at the event yet, and I already want to leave.

While I wait for Ava outside the Primrose, I’m busy on my phone, dealing with work as usual. When I’m not working, I’m home with my twelve-year-old son, Duke. I have one night stands every now and then but nothing serious for a long time. I’ve been seriously burnt before. I’m fine with how things are, but Duke has been pushing me to go out more and suggested I find someone to join me on these functions. At least I’ll come back less bored and exasperated than usual, and I might have some fun, he says. Also, it isn’t a bad look for me to be accompanied. I think it makes people focus less on my sour mood.

I hear heels clicking up the sidewalk towards me, and I turn to see if it is Ava. And it sure is. For a moment, I forget to breathe. I knew from her pictures that she was beautiful, but I wasn’t prepared for how stunning she’d look in black tie. Her black halter-top dress is a sensible choice, and it hugs her body from her chest to her calves, revealing all of her curves and edges. I’m surprised by the sudden urge to explore them, charity event be damned. She clutches a tiny gold purse that matches the color of the heels she has on. She is breathtakingly beautiful, but I take a deep breath and force my arousal down. In my experience, beautiful women are dangerous and only after my money. Hiring a fake date is the best way for me to make sure I don’t end up in trouble the way I have before. We both know what we’re here for. Ava is being paid, and I have a date with no strings attached.

She stands in front of me on heels that add at least three inches to her height. Her eyes, green with some golden flecks, hold me spellbound for a



minute—a long time, actually, considering that nothing has really held my interest since I turned forty-five and realized that life had become monotonous.

“Hi Lex,” she says, offering the most infectious smile.

“Hello, there, Ava. You make quite an entrance,” I say, trying to get my wits back. “You look beautiful tonight.”

“Thank you,” she says with a shy smile and tucks a lock of rich red hair behind her ear, bringing more attention to those deep green eyes.

It’s unusual for me to fidget in front of anyone. I’m usually the one eliciting that reaction from other people. That’s part of the routine I hate about my life: never having anyone be genuine with me because of my money. They either bend over backward to please me or stay away from me and my sour mood. I probably got my wealth too early because I’ve been thinking of giving it all away lately. I want something different, something new in my life. I want to be excited and challenged the way I was when I was building my wealth, but it keeps eluding me. Could she be it?

*Don’t be deceived, Lex*, I think, looking at the girl again. For a moment, we share a look that lasts so long it seems to promise delicious things to come, something foolish, like love at first sight. But I know that she’s playing her part as my fake date. It’s her duty to be likable, though not this much. It’s the combination of her unassuming nature and the innocence in her look that’s messing with my head.

“Shall we?” I say, putting my hand on her lower back and guiding her toward the door. I try not to think about the warmth of her skin radiating through the satiny fabric of her dress.

A pair of doormen fling the doors open for us, and I wonder how many people around Manhattan who know me, keep track of how many girls I take back to a hotel room. I always make sure Duke has a babysitter on those nights. He complains because he says he’s old enough to stay at home alone for a night, but I don’t listen. In my eyes, he’ll always be a chubby-cheeked toddler spilling apple juice on my new Armani suit. Besides, there hasn’t been much to gossip about lately regarding my one-night stands. But here I am with a lovely young woman on my arm at a function. That’s going to have them talking for a while.

I make sure the table I’m given is somewhere tucked away where I won’t easily be spotted. This event is packed, and there are always people who want to pitch their new ventures in the hopes I’ll invest. All I want is to be left

alone, to stay for a maximum of two hours, and then be done with it. Ava is here to make this moment more bearable if possible and to prevent me from being bothered by people I don't know. In a way, she is my shield for the night. I chuckle at the thought. I nod to a few people but don't stop for any chitchat.

One of the ushers directs us to our secluded table. I tipped that particular usher the minute I got in. Without any doubts, I know she'll make sure we have a good time. That's one good thing about money.

I wave the usher off and pull Ava's chair out for her myself. My mother made sure I know how to treat a lady properly. I sit in the corner next to her, rather than across from her. The seat keeps me more out of sight and gives me a great view of her. Being close to her has its benefits too. The floral perfume she's wearing is about to drive me wild. Her beauty is like the sea—pretty, but complex. She's like a mystery to unfold. If she's really just playing a role for the sake of getting paid, she's doing a great job.

She looks around the venue and smiles. It is a beautiful place, and she fits right into the setting. I order some Champagne to start the evening off right and help her relax a bit. She told me during one of our nightly conversations that this is her first time acting as a date. I've been very clear that I don't expect anything sexual and that I'm just looking for company for a tedious event, but I can see how this whole situation could be intimidating for a young woman.

We gaze at each other while we wait for the Champagne to arrive, and she actually flutters her lashes. But it's not flirtatious. There's something so natural about the motion, about all of her. It's as if she's on a regular date and just wants to have a nice time. The Champagne arrives, and we toast to our meeting and take a sip. Dom Pérignon. A luxury option fitting to the environment, but a bit cliché.

“Do you like the Champagne?” I ask her.

“It's the best I've ever tasted,” she says, genuine amazement sparkling in her green eyes.

I smile. She might be a fake date for an event I'd rather not be attending, but it's fun knowing that I'm giving her a glimpse of a world she's clearly never seen. I suppose money can have its benefits. We start making small talk like we have on our phone calls. I'm genuinely interested in what she has to say, and I want to know her better. I chose her on the app not only because she's young and attractive, but also because her profile didn't look as tailored

and formatted as the others. She's new to this, and it's refreshing to speak casually with a woman and not expect endless mind games.

I glance away from her for a second and notice that Marcus has his eyes glued to my table. Marcus is an acquaintance and a rival at the same time. He's a fellow restaurant owner. His are among the finest in the city, but mine are better known and better visited than his. And that makes him see me as competition, even though I don't view him that way. Our restaurants are in different niches. Why is he so interested in my table? Is it me, Ava, or the curiosity of what the two of us might be? Marcus is well known as a petty gossip. He's probably just looking for news to spread.

I refocus my attention on the ravishingly beautiful woman in front of me. While she talks, she puts her hand on my arm and smiles at me. Even through the rich wool of my tuxedo jacket, her touch makes my skin tingle. Maybe it's because her gesture doesn't feel calculated. She seems to be at ease and having a good time. She's a lively and outgoing person, I can tell. She's tactile and probably calls others "darling" in a genuine way. I'm not particularly tactile myself, but I don't mind with her. I guess it depends on the person.

The jazz band strikes up, and the music makes it hard to hear each other, so she bends towards me. She tickles me with her breath when she whispers in my ear. I'm not sure what she says, but her warm breath on my skin sends shivers down my spine. I look at her intensely for a second, and I think she reads my reaction. She leans back with a small smile twitching at the corners of her mouth. I get a grip on myself and smile.

The band begins to a slow, sensual number, which sounds familiar, but I can't quite place it. Ava looks at me and smiles. She wants us to dance. Slowly, she stands up and draws close to me. My eyes are glued to her the entire time. Seeing those curves and long legs of hers, I can't say no. I take her hand and lead her to the dance floor. She puts my hand around her waist and takes my other hand in hers. I immediately start to lead, and I think she's surprised to discover that I actually know how to dance. I'm not an amazing dancer but I know how to follow a beat and how to lead my partner. She is a great dancer, though, and I can feel it.

"You didn't mention you knew how to dance, Lex."

"I can send you my resumé if you want," I say, surprising myself. When was the last time I made a joke? Must be the Dom Pérignon.

"I like surprises, and this is a nice surprise." Her eyes twinkle at me when

she speaks.

I can't help but inject a little innuendo into my reply. "I'm full of surprises. We'll see if you like all of them, though."

She chuckles and continues to follow the beat. I feel her body respond to the music and fall into harmony with it. I'm supposed to lead, but I find myself following her sensual moves with the music. She draws closer just to pull back in a sudden twirl before pressing close to me again. I don't like mind games, but I sure don't mind these types of games on a dance floor...or in more private settings...

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