

Wherever We Go Series

Simply
YOU
& ME

Y.V. LARSON

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WHEREVER WE GO

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Trigger Warnings

I'm so thrilled you're here!

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

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

Sexual content (including under the influence of alcohol), self-harm, references to past rape, references to domestic violence (of a side character), PTSD, trauma responses, nightmares, estranged familial relations, references to childhood emotional neglect, references to a miscarriage (of a side character), pregnancy, kidnapping, torture, violence, and gun violence.

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

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

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Author's Note

Possible spoilers

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

Adelyn's story is one filled with the struggles of being a single mom in love with men on the run.

If you did not read book one, *Just You & Me*, you will still be able to understand and follow along with this one. These two books are heavily connected though, so if you haven't read book one and want the full experience, I suggest you start there!

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

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

Dedicated to

*Those who need a reminder to live.
Go scootering. The errands can wait.*

Prologue



Tate

I should be pissed. Anxious and afraid, actually. My nerves *should* be vibrating. My fists clench, trying to fight back the rising negativity. What's that saying? *With the bad comes the good.* My life in a nutshell right now.

With my niece's words still ringing in my ear, the battle to focus on the positive outcome of this fucked up shit show isn't hard. "Love you, Uncle Tate. For always."

The promise of moving across the country and living in the same city as my sister and her family; the bad gets put on the back burner. The mess we made, the bad decisions, and the mistakes won't matter anymore. This will be good.

Excitement and giddiness tug my mind into the wonderful future. A future I have dreamed of since I was a twelve-year-old boy. The twelve-year-old me who wanted nothing more than for his sister to come home and wrap him in her protective grasp. To shield me from the world with her wider-than-life smile. I begged the universe for Rylee to come home and tell me it was all a misunderstanding and that she would never leave me again.

Now I don't have to worry. I never have to worry about being separated from my sister and niece again. Seeing them a few times a year isn't enough. I want to shove my sister into the waves of South Carolina while little Layla hoots and hollers from one of her dads' shoulders.

“Tate!” Zach’s wild snap of annoyance drags me out of my daydreaming.

“What?” I scowl, annoyed with his tone.

We’re all stressed, but just because our world is turning against us doesn’t mean we should also turn against each other. Quite the fucking opposite, actually.

“What did they say?” The look Zach gives me screams insecurity and panic. I know this is hard for him—letting go of his control and relying on someone else to help us.

I stifle a snort when Wyatt rolls his eyes at our pseudo-leader. “Zach. Fuck off.” He turns to me, his dark eyes making me shiver in all the right ways. “What’s the plan, T?”

My pulse spikes in joy again, even though we’re technically hauling ass out of Washington. “Pack your bags. We’re getting the hell out of here.”

Chapter One



Adelyn

The gasp that comes out of my mouth is borderline demonic.

The chef on the other side of the counter gapes at me. “Shit, Addie! Was that you?!”

I don’t have the capacity to respond to him. I have to get these plates out, lest I lose my tip. I’m almost positive my fingerprints won’t be able to identify me ever again. The offensive food steaming in my face makes my stomach gurgle and cramp. At least my internal clock still works. *Almost time for me to go home if my rumbling tummy is correct.* After being burned to hell by the smallest slice of steak I have ever seen, I can feel my mood declining rapidly.

It’s fine. I’m fine. Almost done. Keep moving. Smile, give these fancy people their fancy food. Ask them if they need anything else. Smile again. Done. Good. Turn around and make myself scarce. Wash my hands in the backroom and—

“West!”

Fuck.

“Yeah?” I turn to my boss, barely managing to hold back my cringe. His salt and pepper eyebrows are furrowed, and his massive body dominates the kitchen around him. I can never tell if he’s mad at me or just life in general. Either way, his pissed-off energy makes my anxiety rear its horrific head.

Stomping by me without so much of a glance my way, he declares, “You’re off. Finish your last table, then get out of here.”

I feel the muscles in my neck loosen a fraction. “Yes, sir. Thank you. Have a good night.” His grunt barely reaches my ears before he’s off to scare his next staff member.

Sighing, I move through the motions once again. I *know* this job. I’m good at it if I can keep to my regime. Life serving a bunch of pompous people is ridiculously intimidating. Add on the normal waitress duties of running around and dodging everyone else, and this job can easily devolve into a panic attack, which I’m constantly on the verge of.

At least their fashion sense is usually on point. What I wouldn’t give for the pairs of high heels that strut their way to my section. Not to mention, the purses might have me gaping sometimes.

Settling their bill, I wish them a good evening and release a stuttering breath when I see their large tip. The number might not mean much to them, but this simple gesture of appreciation will make my next few weeks much easier.

Finally finished with my tasks, I hustle my ass out the back door. The ten-minute walk to my apartment is filled with frustration.

Why didn’t I drive? The walk isn’t clearing my head like planned.

It’s almost eight at night, and I still have so much to do. A flash of the dishes in the sink and the dirty laundry piled in Rory’s room tumble through my exhausted brain. I won’t have time to do it tomorrow since I’m working brunch and promised to take my kid shopping after school.

My kid. The claim still brings a wave of emotion up my throat. Even six years later, it’s still overwhelming. Logic wars with my heart. Aurora isn’t technically my child, but she became my daughter the day she called me mommy.

Shuffling my bag around, I unlock my apartment just as squealing giggles echo through the door. With the door locked

behind me, I smile at the sight before me. The entryway flows right into the dining room between the kitchen on the right and the living room to the left.

Sprawled out on the floor in a scattered pile of popcorn, Rory chortles and tugs on our friend's pink hair. I don't think either of them notices me while they continue to roll around and toss more food at each other. Bypassing the food fight with a shake of my head, I continue down the back hallway, really damn ready to shower and get into some pajamas.

Closing my bedroom door behind me, I drop my bag by my dresser and immediately begin stripping on the way to my ensuite. I fling the sports bra as far away from me as possible, not wanting it anywhere near me. My boobs may be tiny but strapping them down is still restrictive as fuck. Avoiding the mirror, I drag my feet to the shower and crank the heat. I don't close the bathroom door, enjoying the way the steam meets the cool air of my bedroom.

As gingerly as possible, I tug the dress pants over my thighs while fighting the hiss of pain that wants to escape. I scowl at the fabric that ripped away one of my scabs, annoyed that I had no control over it. Little beads of blood rise to the surface, entrancing me enough that I don't hear my friend entering my bedroom till she calls out my name.

Jolting, I rush into the shower so she can't see my bare body. Red-hot fire sears the damaged flesh of my thighs. By sheer fucking luck, I keep my scream silent as I keel over and away from the boiling water. With a hand clasped over my mouth and tears rolling down my cheeks, I watch Gabby hoist herself onto the counter through the distorted glass of the shower doors.

"Hey, babe. You okay?" Her bubbly voice makes me stand taller, not wanting to take away her joy.

"Hey." My voice wobbles a smidge, but I wipe away my distress of the past two minutes as best as I can. Reaching around the spray, I turn the water down to a bearable level as I respond to her. "I'm okay. Tired. Work was a lot again."

I see her pink hair sway before I tip my head back. “You have tomorrow night off, though? Right? You need to rest.”

“Yeah. Rory and I are going shopping for the birthday party this weekend, though.” Digging my fingers into my scalp makes my eyelids droop. *Shit, I’m sleepy.*

“Oh! Speaking of! I’m so freaking happy you will be there this year! It’s going to be the best one yet,” Gabby squeals, pulling me out of my thoughts concerning my pillows.

I frown, my nerves jolting at the prospect of something crazy happening at this party. “Why? What’s going on this year?”

For the past few years, since Rory met her best friend, Layla, I’ve just dropped her off and left. Layla’s mom and I have gotten much closer this year since the girls are finally in the same class. Meaning my attendance at Layla’s ninth birthday party is required. That’s what Rylee said, anyway.

“You know Rylee’s brother, Tate?”

I hum, focused on cleaning my legs. I’ve heard of Tate, and I think I’ve seen him around a few times over the years, but we’ve never met. I think he lives in Washington or something. I don’t know. I’m too busy to keep track of more than my immediate friends.

Gabby continues, “Well, they just moved into Leo and Marc’s old house! That’s why they pushed the party off for a month. Layla wanted her uncle there.”

I hum again, following along. I knew Layla’s birthday was in the summer, but I hadn’t asked why they waited for the big party. The school year started a few weeks ago, so I guess Layla had even more friends to invite this way, too. Now according to Gabby, Rylee’s brother moved into a house that two of her husbands used to live in.

“Tate and his guys are all here to stay. I’m so freaking happy. He and Ry struggled with being separated again, you know? Anyway, so all four of them will be at the party!”

I sputter, water shooting from my lips. “You’re telling me we’ll be outnumbered *double* the usual amount?!”

I swear to hell. Hanging out with Ry and her *four* guys is enough for me. The amount of personality in that home is enough to exhaust me for a damn week. I love them all; I really do. I just don't know how our friend keeps up with all the bodies bustling around her home. So, I'll be subjecting myself to *eight* men on top of a bunch of wild children partying their little hearts out. The future chaos is enough to leave me feeling scrambled already.

I swear I can feel her eyes roll. "It will be fine. Rylee's house is huge. It's not like you'll be cramped in a corner of muscle and rancid cologne." Now it's my turn to roll my eyes. "It will be fine, babe. I promise."

Shutting off the water, I slip my hand through the crack of the shower door. "Can you hand me my towel, please?"

The blur of her pink hair whooshing through the air catches my attention before she thrusts my towel into my waiting hand. Gabby huffs before waltzing out of the bathroom to give me privacy.

"You're the only chick who won't change around her friends, I swear!" Wrapping the towel around myself and throwing my hair into the other, I wait to make sure she's actually gone before stepping out. "Rory! Help me clean up your mess before your mom gets out of the shower!"

"My mess?!"

I laugh, allowing their banter to chase away the negativity threatening to feed on my energy. *Too much to do. I don't have time to dawdle.*

Chapter Two



Adelyn

“Mom, do you think she will *actually* like it?” In the backseat, Rory eyes the gift bag like it could make or break their friendship.

I smile at her through the rearview mirror, caught up in how absolutely adorable she is today. In a long-sleeved, ribbed purple shirt and a white pair of shorts, Rory has her hair down in natural brown waves. Our hair is fairly similar, except hers is a few inches longer. She impressed me when she came out of her room dressed in something so cute. I will say that sometimes her outfits hurt my little fashion soul, but it’s fine. She needs to figure out her own style. I’m just ridiculously happy she made a good match on her own today.

Her gaze flits up to meet mine, then immediately narrows when she sees me watching her probably with hearts in my eyes.

“Mom,” she scolds.

Smirking, I take the turn into Rylee’s neighborhood. “You’re just so pretty, Aurora May,” I tease, completely serious, but wanting to poke her. *She’s just so damn sassy lately.*

Grumbling under her breath, she complains about my use of her middle name.

“Layla will love your gift. She can never turn down fuzzy socks or leather bracelets. I think it’s perfect, but if she doesn’t

like them, then we can get her something else.”

Her dramatic sigh makes me chuckle. I feel like she’s a freaking teenager rather than an eight-year-old these days.

Parking behind a small gathering of cars, I hop out and smooth out my dark purple romper. It’s the coziest, nicest thing I own, and I was already feeling uncomfortable about coming today, so it was a must. Tugging on the bottom, I subtly check that the tops of my thighs are covered. Hidden from view, the hemline gives me a few extra inches of leeway before anyone would see.

I let my hair dry naturally, allowing it to decide whether the dark brown strands wanted to be straight or wavy. It chose a mixture of both today, covering my flat chest in their curtain. I can’t have cleavage even if I wanted to, so the V neckline just highlights my necklaces.

“Come on!” Rory grabs my hand and drags me up the driveway.

The move effectively rips me out of my demure thoughts of my body, which looks like a teenage boy’s. I’m sure if I ate more or had the time to stuff my face, I would fill out a little. But, alas, I’m a single mother working every chance I get and making sure my kid has everything she needs. My needs fall to the bottom of my list of to-dos.

Unsurprisingly, Rory doesn’t knock, tossing the front door open with a squeal on her lips. She shoves the gift we brought into my empty arms, making me realize I forgot the bottle of wine I got in the car.

Layla sprints out of the kitchen, screaming Aurora’s nickname. “ROAR!! You’re here!” Her head of long white-blond hair mixes with Rory’s chocolate brown locks as they tackle each other in a hug. You wouldn’t think these girls saw each other every day with their display.

Avoiding the rest of the bodies in the house, I quickly duck back out, having left the gift bag on the entryway table. My sandal catches on the door frame, making me stumble away from the door that’s rapidly closing in on me.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Trying my best to right myself, I feel my body going horizontal way too fast. My vision darkens, making me think I’m about to pass out. Just as blackness steals all color from the world around me, I’m wrenched away from my impending doom and swung around.

Warmth meets my ear. “Woah! You okay, Doll?”

The thumping in my chest doubles at the husky voice trying to steal my clothes. A solid body behind me grips me close, settling some of my constant jitters. I know for a fact that I couldn’t break out of his hold if I tried, and instead of feeling trapped, my mind quiets.

The wind whips my hair away from my eyes, finally allowing me to see. A pair of black eyes, framed by messy midnight black hair, stuns me silent. The second guy is so damn tall he has to bend over to look me in the eye. The man holding me must be at least the same height to cradle my body so completely. Whatever the guy in front of me sees makes his lips kick up in a pointy smirk around the unlit clove dangling between us. I’m not quite sure what to call the rumble coming from him, but damn, does it make me tremble. His sharp features give his bad-boy persona something edgier that I never realized could be real.

Before I can pry my tongue from the roof of my mouth, the man with the clove is shoved away, only to be replaced by a big smile and twinkling green eyes. The arms around me tighten, almost possessively as a third guy comes into view. This man leans down just like his friend. I scowl, attempting to ignore how pretty his clean, curly red hair is. *I want to take a bite out of his amazingly high cheekbones.*

“I’m not so short you need to bend over,” I huff, yet he still doesn’t move. Instead, he raises one eyebrow and lets his gaze trail down my body, focusing on my tingling knees. “No?” he taunts.

Frowning, I look at my legs, finding them bent, giving the phrase weak in the knees a whole new meaning. Forcing my feet against the ground, I stand straight, only for the giant behind me to laugh against my neck.

“I leave you three for one minute, and you’re already holding someone hostage?” The fourth voice comes from behind the ginger man. “Zach, let her go. This looks bad.”

Does it? It doesn't feel bad.

I catch sight of the fourth and final guy, barely able to hold in my gasp at how edible Tate looks up close. Sure, I’ve seen him from afar a few times, but that had nothing on his ethereal features and short, dirty blonde hair. Even if I didn’t know he was related to the girls inside, you could’ve deduced this by their same eyes and wide-as-hell smiles.

Tate’s eyes narrow over my shoulder. “Zachary. What the fuck?!”

“What?” The chest against my back vibrates.

Coughing, I shift out of his embrace. As his arms loosen around me, I feel my racing thoughts and constant buzzing energy rising once again.

I have to get the wine, then I have to say hello to my friends. Maybe help them with food or something. I'm sure I can be of use somehow. Rylee would probably appreciate it if I helped pick up trash throughout the party. I could—

“Where are you going?!”

Tate’s shout is much farther away than I thought it would be, since he was just right in front of me. Looking around, I see I’m already halfway to my car, and the guys are watching me walk away.

Shit. Well, that was rude of me.

“Sorry!” I wave, trying not to get caught staring at the man who held me.

His brown hair is slicked back, and his tan muscles are trying their best to bust the buttons of his white shirt. *Jesus.* His beard is a little past the point of stubble. He stands a few inches over the others, and I swear just his attention has me settling again.

“I forgot something in my car. Be right back!”

Turning around once again, my mind kick starts, and my body vibrates with the tasks I need to complete.

How strange. I've never known the quiet and the ease of living until I was surrounded by those four.

Chapter Three



Julian

“Come on, guys. I want to see my niece!” Tate shoves his way past us like he wasn’t also hyper-focused on the pretty brunette that quite literally fell into our laps.

It takes a ridiculous amount of effort to drag my attention away from the woman scurrying down the road. When I finally manage it, though, I can’t contain my snort of laughter at Wyatt’s hungry look. “You can’t eat her, man.”

Slowly, he turns his gaze to me. The eerie tilt of his head makes his black hair fall into his eyes. “I guess you’ll just have to help curb my appetite, then.” I lick my lips with my suddenly parched tongue. Whenever he gets this worked up, shit gets *hot*.

“Later,” Zach groans, adjusting himself, effectively moistening my tongue. He looks at me, too, and smirks. “Let’s go get you something to quench your thirst, huh?”

I almost whine. Even though I don’t let it slip out, Zach and Wyatt’s eyes blow wide, sensing how their combined attention makes me far more pliable than I would ever be if it were just one of them. These two, our bad boy and our leader, are like a live fucking wire. Tate and I are far more balanced and in touch with reality more often than they are. The soles of my feet itch to run while my throat bobs, readying to take them however they see fit. I don’t blame the woman for running like her life was on the line. Wyatt and Zachary are intense as fuck. I probably didn’t help, though.

“Um, excuse me.”

The soft voice soothes the charged energy in our three-person huddle. Turning, I find the brunette clutching a bottle of wine to her chest and avoiding any and all eye contact.

“Here, let me help with that,” I offer and reach for the bottle, feeling a little bad when I notice her shuffling. I wonder if her feet itch to bolt, too. I can’t help but be surprised at the shocked look she shoots me. “What?”

Her eyebrows droop over her blue eyes. “Uh. Nothing. No thanks. I’m fine. I just need you to move.” I raise an eyebrow in return, mildly enjoying her flustered words. “Excuse me.”

“You heard the pretty girl; move your sexy ass, Zach,” I taunt with a grin.

She chokes, and fuck if I won’t dream of that sound for weeks to come. Like the smug ass he is, Zach moves *maybe* an inch. I catch the quiet huff from her and can’t hold back my chuckle when she bolts through the small space available to her.

“Christ, she’s thin. Did she even touch you?” I ask Zach, shocked that she actually got by without pushing him.

Concern settles across his stern features. “Barely.” Before I can get a response out, he’s shoving the front door open, mumbling about making sure she eats something.

I don’t need to be prompted to follow; already excited to see her again and hang out with Tate’s family. With his hands shoved into his black jeans, Wyatt trails after me. The sound of high-pitched laughter and pounding feet announces the stampede of third graders coming at us from all directions. There are probably six of them chasing after Layla, Tate’s niece, as she barrels into Zach’s legs.

“Uncle Zach! You’re here!”

Scooping the bubbly blonde into his thick arms, he swings her side to side, making her giggle even more. He kisses the top of her head, then she turns her attention to me.

“Uncle Julie!”

The beaded necklace she always wears bounces with each excited skip my way. I kneel with a big grin and enjoy the way her little arms snake around my neck. When she pulls away, I say, “Your collection is getting bigger! Just like you, old lady.”

Layla scowls at me for a beat before smiling down at her leather bracelets. Before she can defend her interesting fashion sense, one of her dads comes into view. “Don’t let him bother you, Nugget. Our bracelets are badass!”

“Yeah! They’re *badass*, Julie. Don’t be jealous.”

Shit, did Layla turn into a teenager while we were gone?

“LANGUAGE!” shouts a feminine voice.

I watch, humor bubbling in my throat, as Jude’s cheeks pale. His body stills and slowly turns, giving me my first look at Rylee since last Christmas. She stamps her foot, somehow managing not to bother the little bundle cradled in her arms.

“Bug, I miss when you used to scold your daddies for their bad words.”

“Sorry, Mom!” Layla gives Jude a fist bump behind his back while his other hand drags through his shaggy blonde hair, looking sheepishly at his wife. Wyatt comes forward and gives the birthday girl a first bump too, much to Rylee’s dismay.

Clapping Jude on the back, I greet Ry with a kiss on her cheek. “How’s the little man doing? Is he growling like Daddy yet?”

“NO! Absolutely not!”

I snicker, hiding my face while whispering to their six-month-old, “You must get your good looks from your momma, Ollie.”

Baby Oliver. I’ll never forget the day Tate found out they named the baby after him. Rylee gave her baby boy Tate’s middle name, and it was one of the most beautiful moments I have ever witnessed.

Pink hair enters my vision. “Careful. Daddy JJ might rip you a new one if he hears you flirting with their woman.”

Dishes clatter in the kitchen at Gabby's tease, deep laughter echoing throughout the house.

A flurry of purple skitters from the living room to the kitchen, catching my attention. I find Zach sitting at the dining room table, holding a beer and watching the chaos around him. Tate sips on his own beer, leaning against the wall, eyes focused on the ridiculous amount of people in the kitchen.

"Addie, go sit down. We got this." Marcus, Ry's third husband, tries shooing away the woman that has us all a little flustered.

Addie... I wonder what that's short for.

Her head whips from side to side before dashing around Marc. "That's okay! I can help." Before I know it, she's offering me a beer in one hand and a bottle of water in the other. I grab the beer, confused, but before I can thank her, she's gone again.

Locking eyes with Zach, I arch a brow. He shakes his head and kicks out a chair beside him. I sit, feeling like I'm in the way of all the little rug rats running around with streamers and balloons.

Gabby ducks into the kitchen, popping out not a second later with a reluctant Addie. The pink-haired friend basically shoves the woman into a chair of her own on the other side of the table. "Stay."

Gabby is gone in a flash and back just as quick with a beer for the pretty girl. Gone again, Tate, Zach, and I are left alone with the girl.

Woman? Fuck, I don't know. She's normal height, sure, but she's like... super teeny.

I lean forward, eager to actually talk to her. "Hi, I'm Julian." Hopefully, my smile is enough to coax her into a conversation. Gingerly sipping on her beer, she fidgets, her eyes hardly staying in one spot for more than a second.

Zach clears his throat, finally gaining her wide-eyed attention. "I'm Zachary. And you are?" I internally cringe at

how gruff he's being with her, but I swear her body relaxes a fraction when he demands her focus.

Taking a gulp of her beer, she rushes out, "Adelyn. Nice to meet you." Tate steps forward, readying to introduce himself. She waves him away, low key seemingly impatient. "You're Rylee's brother. Tate. I know."

I cannot figure this girl out for the life of me. Addie's not rude, necessarily. It just seems like she's got better things to do than sit here with us.

"Hi, Adelyn. It's nice to meet you." Tate dips his chin with a small smile on his face. I don't know if Adelyn catches it, but his head cocks much like his sister and niece when they are thinking hard about something. It seems I'm not the only one confused.

The silence is awkward. I can literally feel her buzzing. "So how do you know—"

"Mom, look! I made a new friend!" I almost brush off the child's voice, assuming Layla is yelling for Rylee until I see Addie react. Now I'm even more confused by the young woman sliding her drink away from her.

Beer fizzes out of my nose, seeing Wyatt being dragged by his wrist. A little girl yanks him forward and shoves him towards Addie with a big smile.

Wait... mom?! Looking at the little brunette, she looks like a mini version of Addie. But she's Layla's age. And Adelyn looks, well, I don't know.

"Mom, watch what Wyatt can do!"

Wyatt eyes the kid with a look of intrigue and plucks the clove from between his lips. We all watch, transfixed, as he twirls the dark cigarette thing between his fingers faster than the eye can follow.

Addie's mini-me bounces on the balls of her feet, making Wyatt smirk before shoving the stick back between his teeth. I've watched him perfect that trick since fucking high school. It's cool, but we just don't notice it much anymore. It looks like he's eating up the attention, though.

“That’s cool.” Addie nods, looking between them.

“Yeah! He’s my friend now. Can I keep him? He has the *coolest* tattoo on his neck, too! The tree branches are sooo pretty.”

Oh, my fuck. That was the cutest fucking thing I have ever heard. Can we keep her?!

Chapter Four



Adelyn

The barks of laughter around the table drive away some of my embarrassment at my kid claiming a stranger. Honestly, I'm not surprised with this development; Rory has always been super outgoing and extroverted. What does halt the breath in my lungs is the fact that she chose the sexiest man I think I have ever seen in my life.

"Aurora May..." I start, unable to hold back my laughter. The twinkle in her eyes dims when she narrows them at me, annoyed with my use of her middle name. "You can't *keep* him. If he wants to be your friend, that's fine. But he's not a pet." More snorts sound around me.

She peeks up at him with a hopeful look. Settling himself in the chair next to me, he gives her a nod. "I'll be your friend. Don't worry, Aurora May."

"Not you, too," she groans, her head rolling on her shoulders like her middle name is so horrible. I narrow my gaze, my silent way of telling her to be polite. Stepping into me, she bats her thick lashes. "Can I have some soda, please?"

I almost release a sigh of relief at having something to do. My head immediately nods, fine with letting her have some Sprite. "Sure, I'll get you a cup." I'm halfway out of my chair when a large hand clamps down on my shoulder.

"I'll get it, Doll. You just relax." The big one, Zach, I think, pushes me back into my seat. My sight clouds as Rory

follows him to the kitchen. Once the heat of his palm cools and I can no longer feel the vibrations of his voice, my need to do something surfaces again.

“Pretty sure he told you to relax.” This time, a heavy palm landing on my bare thigh keeps me seated. Wyatt, if I remember correctly, doesn’t remove his touch, and if I’m being honest, I don’t want him to take it away.

Nibbling on my lip, I shift, mildly uncomfortable with how close his fingers are to my cuts. “I’m sorry about Rory. She gets very excited about meeting new people.”

He’s silent for so long, I feel like I didn’t say anything at all. “It was nice. No need to apologize.” Wyatt’s fingers flex, making me shiver.

“Eat.” A plate is placed in front of me, distracting me from the midnight gaze of this beautiful man next to me. Seeing two slices of pizza and a stack of cheesy bread, my eyes widen into saucers. Zach stares me down and leans against the wall by Tate, and I find myself confused by what he’s asking. Obviously, this isn’t all for me.

“Um,” I hesitate, but ultimately decide to slide it over to Wyatt. “Here, I think this is for you.” He pushes it back to me with a blank expression.

“Ah-ah. That’s for *you*, Doll. Eat.”

I frown and eye Julian across from me. His shit-eating grin throws me off even more. Tate just watches on with curiosity. Wyatt proved to be no help.

Eyeing Zach, I say, “No, thank you.”

His gaze hardens, making my heart skip a beat. “Uh oh,” Wyatt mumbles under his breath and removes his hand, leaving me cold. The sense of loneliness that overcomes me is unwelcome.

“I’m not hungry.” I push the plate away and grab my beer instead.

Zach stalks forward, his expression like fucking stone. One hand grips the back of my chair and the other plants across the

tender flesh underneath the fabric of the romper. I can't help the pained gasp that slips free, nor can I control the jolt at feeling one of my scabs rip. The burn of tears makes my lip quiver. Biting the inside of my cheek, I hope like hell he didn't notice. I don't think I'm so lucky, though. He backs away immediately just as Tate steps forward, and Julian leans in. I feel the air shift where Wyatt is, and I just fucking *know* they saw every single sign of hurt.

Hovering a foot away, Zach stares into my damn soul like he's trying to pry my secrets from my bones. "Just this once. You will eat next time." I take his words as permission to leave, so I excuse myself and duck into the back hall.

Cursing under my breath when I see the bathroom door is closed, I look around frantically, trying to find a way to clean up discreetly. The universe laughs in my face by offering me a witness.

Rylee pauses at the front of the hallway. "Addie? You okay?"

"Um." My voice wobbles at my friend's concern. "I—"

She looks behind me, seeing what has me flustered. "You can use my bathroom. Come on." Her whispered words make my first tear grace my cheek.

I take her outstretched palm, keeping my head ducked as she guides me up the stairs behind her. The sound of her nudging open a door draws me out of my fog. Stepping into her bedroom feels weird, but I'm grateful for the reprieve.

Before I can close the bathroom door on her, Rylee puts her hand against the door. "Addie. What's wrong?" Just as I shake my head, readying to deny the obvious, she continues, "I know that look. I'm not going to force you to tell me what demons are yanking on you right now, but I need you to tell me if I need to kick someone's ass."

"No. This is just me, I swear. I'll be down in a minute. Thank you, Rylee." This time, she allows me to close the bathroom door. Not before I see the soft look of concern on her face, though.

The tears fall faster at the reality of not being able to share my darkest issues with one of my best friends. She and Gabby have their own monsters. I just don't want them to see me differently. My way of coping isn't one that is easy to understand, and I don't think I have it in me to explain.

Tugging the purple fabric away, a sob gets lodged in my throat when I see the progress that's been ruined. This one was new, and here it is damaged. All signs of healing ripped away. I cry as I wipe the tears off my flesh.

"It's okay," I whisper, hoping to calm myself as well as the bleeding. "I'm okay." The weak attempt at consoling myself doesn't work.

It's irrational. I know this. It doesn't make sense. But it's the *one* thing I can actually control in my life. It's also the one thing that my body can take care of without thought. I can heal my own hurt. A hurt that I command. It's a heady feeling. And to have it *literally* ripped away...

I love my life. I love my little sister, the one who calls me Mom. I've done well for us. Life is good. Rory is happy. I'm okay. I'm loved. But the future I dreamed of and the version of me I was excited to grow into was torn away when my parents were murdered. A mugging gone wrong. A touch gone wrong. Now, here I sit, bleeding and crying. Another thing taken from me.

Chapter Five



Tate

“Oh shit. Scatter!”

At Julian’s dramatics, I look back to the staircase where Addie disappeared a few minutes ago with my sister. It’s not Addie, though; it’s Rylee that Julian’s scared of. The look on her face is accusatory, making me shift away.

I catch Leo’s gaze, but instead of Ry’s fourth husband coming to our rescue, he whistles a tune and glides away without a backward glance. *Coward.*

“Sit down,” she growls, with her hands on her hips. Normally, I think her red hair is pretty, but right now, it heightens the way she’s fuming. Julian huffs and falls into his chair. The drama rivals the third graders playing tag in the backyard. “Someone want to tell me why one of my best friends is crying in my bathroom right now?”

Seamlessly, we look at Zach. To be fair, he *was* the one that upset her. Staring hard at his feet, he keeps his arms crossed defensively. “I’m not sure,” he says like a question.

“Well, why don’t you tell me what happened before I saw her basically running from you then, Zach?”

He shuffles under her hardening glare. “I tried to get her to eat, but she wouldn’t.”

“You tried to get her to eat, but she wouldn’t?” Rylee repeats his words slowly, like she misunderstood the

description of his caveman behavior.

“Yeah. So, I leaned in, but as soon as I touched her, Addie gasped. Then her lip wobbled. Uh,” he trails off, rubbing the back of his neck.

“You hurt her.”

I flinch. Zach’s head whips up. Wyatt straightens and Julian jerks. He would never. Zach might be gruff and domineering as fuck, but he would never hurt a woman. “No, I would never do that!” he protests, looking stricken.

Rylee sighs, double checking the kids are still outside. “You might not have meant to Zach, but I think you might have. Where did you touch her? Also, what the hell are you doing trying to force someone to eat?!”

“He put some weight on her thigh,” I respond when Zach starts pacing. “And, come on Ry. You have to see a gust of wind could blow her over. Seriously, is she okay? I swear she acts like we are about to hurt her.”

A deep exhale from the kitchen startles me. I hadn’t noticed Leo on the other side of the island until now. I thought everyone went outside. His white-blond hair shines in the light as he leans his forearms against the tile. On the outside, he looks bored. But since I’ve known him for a little over four years, I’ve come to realize how much is beneath the surface.

“Addie’s not scared of you. She just doesn’t know how to sit still.”

“Leo,” Rylee cautions him, not wanting him to spill their friends’ secrets.

He smiles at her and nods, understanding the warning. “Adelyn is a single mom who works her ass off to take care of Rory. No matter what it costs her.”

Oh... oh.

Ry sighs. “What you saw is just who she is. It has nothing to do with you. Addie just has a lot going on, and it’s hard to get her to relax.”

“But I hurt her? I didn’t put much weight on her leg, I swear.” Zach seems frantic now, making my anxiety rise.

Leo shrugs, not answering the question. Even Rylee eyes him like he knows something she doesn’t. “Maybe you just landed on a muscle, funny. Who knows, man? Just apologize.” With that, Leo shuts down and moves to the fridge.

“Where’s my mom?” Just as the soft voice reaches my ears, a door closes upstairs. Rory turns to see her mom gliding down the stairs and smiles. Beside her, though, Layla stiffens.

Oh no.

“Auntie Addie? Are you okay?” I hate the way my niece’s voice wobbles. My back breaks out in a cold sweat in answer to her trauma response, knowing what’s about to happen. “Did someone hurt you?”

Rylee gasps, seeing her daughter’s cheeks rapidly losing color. My fists clench, feeling the cool metal of my gun like it was just yesterday I killed their monster. Just as Leo kneels in front of his little girl, Julian’s beside me in a flash. Rory watches on with concern, not quite understanding her friend’s rapidly rising panic.

“Tate, baby. Look at me.”

“Julian,” I gasp, the pain in my thigh becoming a bit too much to ignore. “Julian, please help me.”

“Hey, hey! What’s going on? Are you hurt?!” I put him on speakerphone and drop it to my side, unable to hold it up any longer. “TATE! Answer right the fuck now!” Zach’s demand jolts me out of my head.

“Ry won’t wake up. I don’t know what to do.” I feel so useless. My brain isn’t functioning.

I just killed a man.

My big sister won’t wake up.

There’s a knife sticking out of my leg.

A hard weight against my lips snaps me out of my flashback. “Hey, there you are. Stay with me.” Julian’s soothing aura

settles against me like a warm blanket. I fall into the green depths of his gaze and feel relief knowing he will always catch me.

“I’m okay,” I croak, looking around to make sure everyone else is okay. Jesus. The ripple effect of our traumas came out of nowhere. Had I realized Layla was inside before she saw Adelyn, I could have controlled my reaction.

“Why don’t you sit?” Julian suggests with his hand on my lower back. I follow his instruction, too shaken to shrug him off.

“Tate?” Startled, my eyes latch onto Adelyn, kneeling beside my chair. “Take a sip of water, please.”

Her puffy red eyes make my chest clench with guilt and discomfort. Looking around, I finally find Ry and Leo outside with Layla and Rory, who seem to have brushed off the distress faster than I have.

My shaking hand wraps around hers when she lifts the bottle of water to my lips. The warmth of her soft skin melts the ice around my nerves. “Shh, go slow. Everyone’s okay,” Addie soothes. Pairing this woman with Julian is like snuggling a puppy mixed with a Xanax.

She moves to stand, but instead of letting her leave, I snake an arm around her waist and tug her onto my lap. The gasp Addie lets out tickles my neck. I enjoy her touch, even if she’s wiggling her little body to get away.

“Just give me a minute, please?” I whisper while relaxing my hold on her, hoping she chooses to stay. As her body relaxes, I rest my head on her shoulder and take deep lungfuls of her vanilla scent.

“You okay, T?” Wyatt’s words bring me back to reality.

Lifting my head, I release a shuddering breath and task myself with finding four things I see.

One. Wyatt’s winding tattoo up the left side of his neck that resembles multiple vines intertwined.

Two. The subtle, constant indents of Zach’s dimples.

Three. Julian's swirling curls that rival the beauty of any sunset.

Four. The fluttering pulse jumping in Adelyn's dainty throat. I watch in fascination as the thumping vein increases in tempo the longer I stare. I don't ignore the urge to touch it. I press a kiss to the beat of her heart and murmur, "Thank you, Addie."

Her throat bobs, and I can feel the vibrations of her voice through my entire body. "Y—You're welcome." I relax my hold, regretting it almost immediately when she slips off my lap. Tugging on her romper, she clears her throat and gives us a strained smile. "I'm going to go check on Rory."

Then she's gone, zipping out the sliding door without a backward glance.

Chapter Six



Zachary

My jaw clenches again for the eighth time in the last thirty seconds.

This damn woman is bad for my fucking teeth. I don't think I've seen her sit down in the full hour we have been hanging out in the backyard.

Rylee and her guys have an amazing setup out here. It's a larger version of the house we just moved into a few streets over. It's obvious a few of the guys lived there, too. Their setup here consists of a large gazebo decked out in twinkly lights with a fire pit directly in the center. The patio stretches the span of the large house and up to the back door, but the kids have more than enough grass to run around in. Julian is currently testing out the monkey bars of the playground that take up a large portion at the back of the lot.

The privacy fence around the yard is perfect to keep all the kids contained and safe, which is pretty nice. We will need a similar setup like this when we have kids. It's a dangerous thing to hope for something so life-changing, but I want kids so badly. At thirty years old, I'm not getting any younger. I just hope our past stays where we left it so we can move on to our next chapter.

The guys and I haven't talked about a family yet. Julian and Wyatt are twenty-nine, so I wonder if they feel the desire to settle down, too. These past few years have been hard on us. Tate is a natural with kids, which makes my chest clench every

time I see him playing with his niece. He's only twenty-two, though. I wonder if he's ready. I can't imagine him leaving us, though, especially now that we live close to his sister.

I watch him being tackled to the ground by a bunch of little girls, acting out his defeat in a way that makes the twinkling laughter rise to a new crescendo. I smile from my position beside the fire. *Yeah*. Tate's a family man like Julian. They're pretty open about their love and have no issue showing their sensitive sides. They balance Wyatt and me out nicely.

"Adelyn May!"

Rylee's shout alerts me to her position, sitting on a blanket in the grass. Wiggling and cooing, Ollie makes grabby hands at the sky.

"Ooo, Mom! You got middle-named!" A round of chuckles responds to Rory's taunting tone.

Rolling her eyes, Addie bypasses her kid and kneels beside Rylee. I'm too far away to hear their conversation, but Rylee stands as soon as Adelyn nods and relaxes on her side next to the happy baby. Something inside of me uncoils, at peace now that the flitty brunette has stopped moving for once.

"Nice trick, gorgeous," Jackson praises, laughing into his beer can. Rylee sighs and plops herself on his lap while running her hands through his inky black hair that's hanging a bit longer these days.

"It's the only way to get her to sit the hell down." Jackson nods in response to his wife's exasperation. He drops a kiss on her bare shoulder after brushing her long red hair away. Behind the cozy loveseat, Marcus nips at Jackson's neck before cackling and running away. Ry soothes the sting with a kiss of her own.

"So, she's always like this?" I ask while watching Addie point to the clouds with Oliver. Her lips move, making me wonder what story she's weaving for the baby boy.

My gut swirls with eagerness, wanting that to be my future. The only difference would be the baby being mine or

one of my guys. A flash of a pregnant Adelyn stuns the breath out of me for a second. *Fuck*. I adjust my hardening cock, feeling far too possessive for someone who just met the woman.

Rylee's hum reminds me of the question I asked. "Mm-hmm." Stealing a sip of Jackson's beer, her gaze lingers on her friend and baby with a thoughtful look. "She's really amazing. I just wish she would take some time for herself, you know?"

Rory skips over to the blanket with her long hair dancing behind her. Addie sits up, noticing her daughter coming to see her. The smile and laugh that comes out of Adelyn when Rory drapes herself against her back and around her neck steals my future.



"I'm beat."

I feel the same exhaustion Julian expresses. My bones feel heavy, and my eyelids droop. Shuffling my way into our new home, I take in the boxes lined up in the hallway. The entryway leads straight into a long hallway that leads to the back of the house where an extra bathroom, office, basement door, and patio door reside. To the right, the stairwell leads up to the five bedrooms and an office. Not that they have been taken advantage of; we share beds more often than not. Left of the large entryway, the kitchen, dining room, and living room all flow together, concealed by the hallway wall.

It's cozy. Intimate. *Safe*.

"God, I can't look at that fucking island counter without gagging." Tate sighs, his features twisted in a grimace.

I huff a laugh, remembering when Rylee and her guys helped us move in. Jude and she eyed the marble with heated eyes like lovers reminiscing their first time together. I shudder. They're our family, too; Rylee is like a sister. She may be twenty-seven now, and her guys my age, but that's *gross*.

Blood rushes to my cock, seeing Wyatt press himself up against Tate's backside and grinding against his ass. "Maybe we should make some memories of our own, T."

Julian groans, resting his elbows on the other side of the island, his copper locks flopping over his forehead. I lean my hip against the cool surface, watching Tate's face relax in pleasure. My shorts tighten when his head lolls on his shoulders, allowing Wyatt full access to his throat.

Pocketing his clove, Wyatt drags his tongue along our blonde's thundering vein to his earlobe. "You doing okay, T?" Tate nods, and a rush of breath deflates his lungs.

God, they look fucking sexy. One light hair goodness, the other dark-haired baddy. It's a sight I will never get enough of.

Julian snatches Tate's hands and yanks him until his chest is flush against the counter. I give Jules an approving, heated look and run my hand along Tate's ass, slipping his waistband down as I go.

The youngest of us has always been a bit more sensitive. We took him under our wing and shielded him from as much as we could when we found his fucking parents slapping him around at a gala we were working. That was years ago. He was sixteen, and I still can't get the look of his tear-stained cheeks out of my mind.

We did our best to protect him, but it was his decision to protect his sister on his own. Yes, he was young when he killed Layla's dad four years ago, but it was a path he chose for himself. To protect his long-lost sister and niece he never knew; we had to let him go. Even if it went against every protective instinct I have for our boy, I respected him more. We taught him everything he needed to know, just as he teaches us every day. Tate is our compassion, our love, and our moral compass. Julian may be our light and laughter, but Tate is our guide to the future.

"Julian, hold our boy tight while Wyatt helps him relax," I demand, my voice feeling choked with emotion and devotion. Boxers join the pile on the floor. I soak in his relieved sigh at the grip I have on his cock.

Watching Tate succumb to his PTSD when Layla did earlier broke my fucking heart. He's made so much progress from the shaky, jumpy, and terrified eighteen-year-old he came back as after he killed Rylee's abuser. Shooting someone, even if they are a monster, even if it's in self-defense, is one thing. But he had to witness his sister battered and bruised, bleeding in an alleyway, unresponsive. Rylee never once reacted to her little brother's pleas to wake up.

"Mmm," Wyatt moans as he slips a lubed finger into Tate's tight ass. "So tense, T. Come on, loosen up for me like a good boy."

When Wyatt's jaw slackens in awe, I know Tate did as he said, allowing him access to add another finger. Wyatt and I, even Julian sometimes, can be rough in the bedroom, but never with Tate. He's our boy. The piece of us who deserves care and a gentle touch.

Tate may have taken to self-defense like a natural and knows his way around a firearm better than any of us, but he will forever be our boy. He can put on a good poker face, but beneath the surface, he's a man suffering from restless nights, nightmares, flashbacks, and the occasional panic attack. Like today. We each have our own demons, but Tate needs to be taken care of with love and tenderness. For him, I can do that. I may be a gruff asshole, but for my sweet boy, I will be as soft as he needs.

"Calm, babe. Let him in and focus on Zach's warm hand."

Julian's coaxing brings me out of my thoughts. Gathering the precum on Tate's cock, I use it as a lubricant to slide up and down. A garbled gasp from Tate has my mouth watering, especially when his hips kick forward to fuck my hand.

"Ah, ah. You heard your man. Be a good little boy, and we will make you feel so good." My heart constricts when he angles his face towards me while resting on the cool counter. "Let us love you," I plead, knowing the effect it will have.

He nods with watery eyes, making my stomach swoop at the trust he's giving us just as Wyatt's wet cock bottoms out. We don't use the L word often, nor are we sweet in public.

They are mine, and I am theirs. That's all that matters. We are each other's. Our bond is deep enough that we don't need words. Cuddles are unnecessary a lot of the time, but we are no less a family.

“Oh fuck!”

I bite the inside of my cheek as Wyatt goes fucking feral. His wild thrusts have his thighs slapping against Tate's like a man possessed. Dark, sweaty strands tickle Wyatt's cheek, his dark eyes blowing wide just as Tate's cock jerks in my hand. I lock eyes with Julian, and my lips tingle, needing to claim him. Exhaustion fades, and all I can see are my needy men. My family.

It's going to be a long night.

Chapter Seven



Adelyn

I have so many regrets, and they all stem from the freaking birthday party last weekend. I should have used that time to catch up on everything I needed to get done. Things I *still* need to get done.

Tears burn my eyes as I stare down at the full sink and cluttered counters. I worked a day shift, which was nice since Thursdays aren't as busy. I prefer the lunch rush to the dinner ones. Most people at the Posh Palate during the daytime are there on business, so they don't pay much attention to me. I can breathe a little easier when my tables are focused on their important lives.

"Mom, can I have a piece of banana bread, please?"

"Sure, honey. Do you want some milk with it?" Rory nods and goes back to doing homework at the dining room table.

I busy myself cutting, buttering, and heating the slice. I drop the plate and glass of milk in front of her gently so as not to disturb her. Eyeing the math page she's working on, I grimace, knowing that if she asks for help, I won't be of much use.

"Thank you." She shoots me a little smile, the prominent freckle above her top lip on the left stretching to accommodate her appreciation.

Swallowing back more tears, I kiss the top of her head. "Of course, honey. You doing okay?"

She nods, nibbling on her bread and frowning down at the math problems. I leave her to it, hoping I won't have to get dragged into mathematics. If she wanted fashion advice, I'd be all over that.

With heavy shoulders and a heavier heart, I get started on hand-washing the dishes that have been piling up all week. Our apartment complex is nice, and I have no complaints except for the fact that there's no dishwasher. I've thought about getting one of those mini ones for the counter, but I have no idea where I would fit it. I'm scattered enough as it is, and having an eight-year-old who loves leaving things around doesn't help.

My fingers are beginning to prune when Rory tells me she's done with her homework. When she asks if she can watch a movie, I say yes, but only after she takes a bath. With only mild grumbling, she does as I ask and gets herself ready for a cozy evening.

I'm draining the sink a short while later when Gabby's shout rings through the apartment, scaring the shit out of me. "Knock, knock!"

"Dammit, Gabby," I gasp, gripping the counter tight. "I regret ever giving you a key!"

Sashaying her way into my space, she plops a kiss on my cheek. "Happy to see you too, babe. So, I've been thinking!" Cue my groan. "We should have a girl's night tomorrow with Rylee!"

Not happening.

"I know what you're going to say, and I decline your excuse. I'll help you get some stuff done this weekend. Just please come hang out and get a drink." Her pink bun bobs when she tilts her head at me. "I'm worried about you. You are going to run yourself into exhaustion if you don't take some time to just... you know... be a twenty-four-year-old, sexy as fuck woman."

I sigh, move around her, and walk to my bedroom. She follows on my heels like I knew she would. This woman

doesn't know anything about personal space. Being my neighbor makes the boundaries almost nonexistent. She might as well tear down the walls separating our units.

“Please! Rylee said her guys can take Rory for the night, and she can have a sleepover with Layla.”

“Oo! Yes! Please, Mom. Can I, can I, can I?!” Rory bounds her way into my room. She looks freaking adorable with her wet waves and matching blue pajama set.

I glare at Gabby. “You knew she could hear you.” The sheepish grin my pink-haired friend gives me makes me sigh. “Fine. But you have to help me this weekend. I'm already behind after last weekend.”

Both she and my kid squeal like a bunch of girls gossiping about the latest drama.

Just a couple of drinks, then I'll come home and get a good night's rest before I get some shit done.



“Here, drink this.”

“Where the hell did you get that?” I eye the mini bottle with a mixture of revulsion and shock.

Gabby beams and shoves the vodka into my reluctant palm. “Oh, my dress has pockets!”

“No fucking way!” Rylee gasps from the front passenger seat.

I toss the shot back, spluttering and cursing my burning throat. Honestly, I'm pretty impressed, too. Gabby's in a tight, dark burgundy mini dress. Where it hides pockets, I have no idea.

Beside Ry, our sober designated driver Tate, chuckles and rolls his eyes. “I don't know what's so cool about pockets for women.”

As one, three sets of glares laser into him. The warmth of the hellish vodka swirls in my chest and loosens my tongue.

“Of course, you wouldn’t understand. Men are blessed with an unnatural amount of storage space. Meanwhile, we have to drag around fucking purses and stuff shit into our bras, hoping like hell we don’t get cancer from our phones. Not to mention, where the hell am I supposed to put my money and keys when I don’t have a safe spot to put my shit?”

The car is silent in the aftermath of my rant. My cheeks heat with embarrassment when I see Gabby’s wide-eyed shock aimed my way. “Damn, girl. If that’s what one shot does to you, I can’t wait to get a couple more in there.”

Soft laughter fills the car, making me feel better. When I see Tate smirking at me in the rearview mirror, my entire body flushes. His wink sends lightning licking through my veins.

I don’t remember the last time I had anything but a few sips of beer, and I’m starting to think I’m a lightweight. I suppose since I have the body of a twelve-year-old boy, there isn’t much to soak up the poison. The car slows, and my nerves kick in. Another bottle of UV Blue pokes me in the arm, and I toss it back, gratefully, enjoying the way it takes away some of my overbearing thoughts.

“Alright, ladies.” Rylee stiffens slightly at Tate’s incoming goodbye. “Rylee, you sure you don’t want me to come with?”

She shakes her head, battling the demons left behind from her dead ex. “No,” she whispers. “He’s gone, and it’s not the same place. Just, you know...” Rylee trails off, twisting her high ponytail in her fingers.

Tate’s eyes soften. “I know, sis. Text or call me if you need anything, okay? I’ll be awake and will keep my phone on me, I promise.”

After a few thank yous and safety reminders, Tate leaves us on the sidewalk. The thumping of the bass and moist air makes me cringe a little. It’s stifling and all kinds of uncomfortable in my lacy, black teddy lingerie and skin-tight

jeans. I didn't necessarily want to wear the jeans, but I felt more comfortable covering my legs.

“BAR!” Gabby shouts, latching onto my wrist and dragging me along with her. Rylee slaps my ass and follows behind, making my shout of laughter loosen my tense muscles.

I'm on a mission to enjoy my night with my best friends.

Chapter Eight



Julian

“You know what’s crazy?” Wyatt murmurs, staring up at the spinning ceiling. Or at least it’s spinning for me.

“You!” I shout, immediately knowing the answer to his question.

“Fuck off!” He slurs, lifting his head off my stomach, only to bash it into my gut. “Not me. Well, maybe, but no. Fuck. Now I forgot what I was going to say, jackass.”

I could think of all kinds of crazy things. “How ‘bout the ocean? That shit’s fucked. Who really knows what’s down there? I mean, if you think about it, the creatures in there look like aliens,” I muse, shuddering and swallowing some nausea.

“Christ, Julian. I hate that.” Zach groans from his spot upside down on the couch. His pajama-clad legs are thrown over the back of the couch, and his neck is hanging from the cushions over the edge.

All of a sudden, a realization hits me. “OMFG! Do you think all the supposed UFO sightings have been dropping aliens in the ocean, and that’s why there are more species being found?”

Wyatt nods, his black hair tickling my bare abs. I run my hands through it absentmindedly while Zach gapes at me. I huff a laugh at his red fucking face. Another thought hits me. “How long can someone hang upside down until they die?”

Zach writhes around, cursing me for freaking him out. With an oomph and a large thud, he sprawls out beside me with heaving breaths. “Fuck,” he hisses. “I’m too old to be moving like that. My turn.”

Smirking, I hand over the lit blunt and watch as his chest rises with a large hit. I lick my suddenly dry lips, really wanting a taste of my Zachary. He winks and guides the straw of my vodka sprite into my mouth. I sigh, enjoying the buzz with my guys. We haven’t done this in a long ass time.

“So, are the Great Lakes *really* lakes at this point? They all connect to the ocean; anything could swim inland. And don’t get me started on the Mississippi River. Anything with an impressive fin span could slither their way up.”

Wyatt and Zach both groan, shivering in disgust. I’m waiting for their protests when the door bursts open and a flurry of bare skin tumbles into the kitchen. The three of us don’t move, too blissed out from the weed and booze. *Honestly, I think I’m pretty twisted right now.*

“Oh my god, I loooove this counter.”

“Rylee!” Tate’s voice snaps. “Do not start with that shit. *Please!*”

At the riot of feminine laughter, my interest finally is piqued and so are Wyatt’s and Zach’s. Clambering to our feet, I stumble a bit, barely managing to miss my cup on the ground.

“Oh fuck,” Wyatt gapes and slaps my arm.

Lifting my gaze, my jaw drops seeing Adelyn bouncing on her toes in the kitchen in the sexiest lacy top I’ve ever fucking seen. Her wide smile and twinkling laughter have my heart stuttering. The moist strands of her brown hair look almost black, and her eyeliner is smudged around her glittery blue eyes. She’s a fucking wet dream.

“Pizza rolls?” My gaze finds Gabby pouting on the floor and looking up at Tate, batting her eyelashes. He rolls his eyes but makes his way to the oven, nonetheless. “And a seltzer?” Gabby asks sweetly.

“Oh! Me too, please!” Addie turns her big grin on Tate, and I can’t fucking help myself anymore. *I want her to look at me like that.*

“I’ll get it!” I shout, stumbling into the kitchen and shoving Tate away from the fridge. “Mine!” I growl and snatch the two seltzers. He eyes me like I’m about to break something. *Soon, he will realize my genius ways.*

I bend over and roll one of the cans to Gabby, who squeals and snatches it. Training my sights on my treat, Addie’s head tilts mischievously like she knows I’m up to something. Before she can run, I snatch her around the waist and plop her on the counter. Without skipping a beat, I nestle my hips between her spread thighs.

“Here you go, Sweetness.” With a flourish, I crack the can and press the moist tip to her lips. I tip the can and watch in fascination when her eyes dilate, and her jaw goes slack.

A strangled groan sounds from over her shoulder, causing her cheeks to heat in a yummy shade of pink. Her eyes widening is my only warning before she’s snatched and slid across the counter.

“My turn to play with my dolly,” Zach snarls at me like a fucking ape. Lifting the blunt, he presses the tip to her lips in offering. His smile softens while he watches her take the tiniest puff.

“Neanderthals!” Tate grumbles and makes his way around the island. He shoves Zach into Wyatt and takes his place between her legs. “Don’t let them push you around. They’re clearly acting like fucking children tonight.” His glare pierces each of us like he can’t believe we’re actually loosening up.

My gaze shoots to Adelyn when her shoulders lift in a shrug. “I kind of like it. It’s okay. Plus, I have my girls here. I’m good.”

“She’s soooo good! Here’s a tip: the checklists vanish when you give her drinks,” Gabby states, and I worry Addie might be offended.

I'm proven right when her dark brows furrow. Hating the sight, I pluck her off the counter and sling my arm around her shoulders. "What brings you ladies here?" I'm not mad about them crashing our little party whatsoever.

Tate sighs while dumping some snacks onto the cooking sheet. "I told them I was coming home to get drunk with you guys. They didn't want the night to end, so here we are." His smirk lands on the woman in my arms.

The bones of her shoulders nudge my arms, making me want to shove some food down her throat. Or something other than food. My cock hardens, and I fight like hell not to twist and grind it against her.

"Want to play a game?" Zach asks his heated gaze also on Addie. If she's uncomfortable with all the attention, she's not showing it. Her wide blue eyes dart around the room like she's analyzing the space for anything of importance.

"Oh! The ping-pong table is still downstairs, yes?" Rylee asks, tugging on her brother's hand.

At his nod, we gather everything we want to bring down, and Tate sets a timer for the oven. The basement door is at the back of the house, leading down to a man cave.

With two seltzers clutched to her chest, I watch Addie catalog the ping-pong table set over by the pool table. The far wall has a dart board set up, too. The right side of the large basement is set up with leather couches and dim, sexy red lighting, creating a perfect lounge space.

"Whose ass wants a good beating?!" I holler, excited to fuck around and have a good time. Addie squeaks, drawing my attention to her rapidly heating cheeks. *Mmm, seems my little treat wants her ass spanked.* A husky chuckle rumbles from Wyatt as she plops herself down on the other side of the sectional he's on. Instead of keeping his distance, he slides across the cushions until he's pressed up against her. With Wyatt's hard body touching her, Adelyn's blush creeps down her chest.

What I wouldn't give to see just how far it goes.



After multiple wins and humbling losses, I finally see Addie has peeled herself away from the comfort of the couch and is playing a round of darts with Rylee. Gabby watches me approach with a smirk on her face.

A hushed curse falls from Adelyn's lips when the dart she threw only skims her target. *Is it possible to feel your eyes dilate? Fuck, I don't know.* I waste no time and press myself against the heat of her back. My hand latches onto her wrist mid-toss before she can throw another miss. The subtle arch of her hips between mine punctuates her gasp.

I have to bend quite a bit to scratch my scruff against the side of her neck. "Like this, Sweetness." My husky whisper makes her skin pebble. A few motions later, I jerk her wrist and demand, "Release!"

It's not a bullseye, but it's damn close. Addie's arm drops, yet I don't let go, especially when her little hand grips the front of my thigh. My other hand grips her hipbone, and my heart about thumps out of my chest when her fingers twine with mine.

The alcohol swirling through me chooses to ignore everyone else in the room when Adelyn's waist rolls in a seductive grind. All thought stutters to a fucking halt until all I can feel is this dainty woman melting in my arms.

I'm going to make her fucking mine.

Chapter Nine



Adelyn

He's warm and gentle. My tummy is a giddy storm of butterflies and nerves, yet Julian soothes every single one. Each shuddering breath my anxiety pushes out, Julian cradles and savors with an acceptance that makes my eyes burn.

I can't help but grind into him with each thumping bass of their home speaker. This is far better than the club earlier. My head tilts, loving the way his stubbly cheeks scratch my soft skin. A subtle shift out of the corner of my eye snaps me back into reality. Gabby and Rylee have migrated away from us and are locked in a messy game of ping-pong with Tate and Zach.

"I need to pee," I whimper, not knowing how else to end this little slice of heaven. Julian kisses my neck, lingering long enough to drench my panties.

"Wyatt is using the bathroom down here. I'll show you where the other one is, Sweetness." Before I can respond, his palm is in mine, and I'm following him up the stairs. I sway slightly, my veins vibrating, making me giggle. "What's so funny? You aren't laughing at me, are you?"

I go to protest, not wanting him to be upset, but the world flips. Blinking back my rising confusion, I realize it's *me* who has flipped. "Hey!" I giggle and swat his ass where I hang over his shoulder.

“Careful, Addie, or I’ll finally give your ass that spanking you were panting over earlier.” Julian’s words slur, yet his strides are sure as we pass a bathroom. As if sensing my thoughts, he says, “Toilet isn’t working in that one.”

I stay silent even though I’m almost positive he’s lying about the toilet. I want to see where this goes so badly, I don’t even care how much this position is hurting my thighs. My jagged edges don’t hurt so much with Julian around.

He sets me down before we climb the next staircase. My itty bitty sober thoughts tell me it’s a good idea since we are both pretty drunk. But the horny side of me pouts at not being wrapped around him. I follow silently, nibbling on my lip as we pass a few cracked doorways. The one at the end of the hall is wide open, and he’s steering me through the bedroom and to the ensuite without turning the lights on.

“Go. I’ll wait here,” he whispers, nudging me toward the bathroom. A nervous giggle slips free, not quite sure what to do. “Sweetness. You going to tell me why you’re laughing at me again?”

The light from the hallway allows me to see his naughty smirk, helping my hussy side rise to his challenge. *Fuck, it’s been so long.*

“I lied too, Julian. I don’t need to use the bathroom.”

“And what did I lie about?” His hand wraps around the edge of his bedroom door, the shadows sharpening his cheekbones.

I gulp, swallowing back unwanted thoughts. “The toilet downstairs isn’t broken, is it?” My voice is breathy and thick with want. Just as my accusation fades, he slams the door hard enough to rattle my teeth. Surrounded in darkness and the scent of his detergent, my mind quiets, and my body sparks to life.

The heat of Julian’s fingers trails from my collarbone and around my back as his body molds to mine. A groan from his chest vibrates my ribs when I grind my ass into his hardening cock behind me.

“What are you insinuating, Adelyn? That I lured you into my bedroom so I could finally have a taste of your sweetness? Do you believe I brought you in here so I could eat the tastiest treat I’ve ever laid eyes on?” Julian nips my neck, startling a shocked moan from my lips. “You’d be right, Addie.”

I can smell the vodka on his breath, heightening the heat in my chest from all the drinks I’ve had tonight. “Please,” I whimper, his teeth nibbling on my earlobe.

“Please, what, sweetie? Use your words.”

My shoulders relax as I all but melt into him. Julian’s fingers trail along the waistband of my jeans, and my clit pulses, begging for his touch. “M-make me feel good, Julian. Please!” I gasp, my hips lurching forward into the hand now cupping my core.

“So warm, so needy, hmm?” I nod in response. “You want me to fuck you, Addie?” I nod again, crying out when he pinches my nipple.

The harsh pain turns to molten fucking lava. My tummy swoops in anticipation. “Yes, f-fuck me, please, Julian!”

“As you wish, sweetie.” The nickname is so at odds with the way he’s touching me. His sweet words, combined with the rough way Julian flicks open the button of my pants and shoves them down, have my mind short-circuiting. “Bend over so I can have my treat.”

Holy fuckity, fuck. I do as instructed, the booze stronger than any sane thought. Ass in the air and jeans wrapped around my ankles, I place my palms on the bed in front of me.

I am keen when I feel his thick fingers between my thighs right before the bottoms of my lacy bodysuit snap open. The cool air of the room against my heated core has me fucking shivering.

“Mm, that’s convenient,” Julian’s rumble of appreciation chases away the cold air.

My response turns into a cry of pleasure and shock when his hot tongue swipes through my folds. “Julian!”

Thankfully, when he grabs my thighs to steady me, he holds the backs—my cuts untouched. I swear I can feel his smirk against my heated flesh, but when his lips latch onto my clit, he sucks hard enough I'm throttled into another fucking universe. Just as I feel his fingers thrust into me, I'm. Gone.

“So tasty, Addie. You did so good, sweetie. You're gonna come on my cock next.” My legs wobble when the head of his dick nudges me. “You want more, Addie? Use your words.”

I don't even try to lift my upper body off the sheets, too blissed out to move. “More. Yes, please. M-more!” I'm ready for him to shove his way inside my greedy pussy, yet when he grips my hips, Julian bends and trails his lips along my spine. His praises bring a gentle smile to my lips as I close my eyes to savor the sensation of his body.

“So good, Sweetness. I'll be good to you, I promise.”

I don't doubt him. The stretch burns so good; he's bigger than I've had before. The aftershocks of my orgasm ripple around him, forcing him further, deeper. When his thighs meet mine, we shudder simultaneously.

“Hold on tight, Adelyn.”

That's the only warning I get before he goes fucking feral, pounding into me with no restraint. And I'm off to another universe again, riding his cock straight through space. Fuck stars. Julian makes me see supernovas and black holes as my vision wavers.

I don't know who's pulsing, grunting, or moaning anymore. Julian molds us together. We are one just as our shared pleasure blends and ripples. A guttural roar makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention, the electricity of his orgasm becoming my own.

Lost in my own bliss, I hardly notice his heavy body collapsing against mine. Rolling off me and taking his heated touch with him, Julian moans and clutches a pillow to his chest. I frown when his breathing deepens even further, and I hear sounds of subtle snoring.

Huh. Incapable of any other thought, I wipe the stickiness between my thighs on the rumpled sheets and tug up my pants. Fumbling with the button, I quickly become overwhelmed and call it quits as I stumble my way out of his bedroom. Mildly cognizant of the sleeping man, I gently let his bedroom door snick shut behind me.

“Ugh,” I groan, seeing just how many stairs it took to get to heaven. The banister is my saving grace for my wobbly decline. I’m sagging. I truly feel like my bones are trying to drag me to the ground. The couch in the living room is calling my name, and I’m too woozy to decline its offer of cozy goodness.

Chapter Ten



Wyatt

I'm about to draw blood. My own and that fucking jackass still asleep upstairs. "I'm going to kick his fucking ass," I grit out, my nails testing how far they can push the skin of my palm before the tender flesh breaks. Julian's spot at the table sits out like the reddest of flags.

Tate's silent, but I'm no fool. There's a raging ass storm in there that's about to explode. Zach might as well be vibrating the whole table with his emotions.

We may have all been pretty fucked up last night, but we weren't the ones fucking Rylee's friend. I mean, HELL! We haven't been here for two damn weeks, and Julian has already fucked shit up. Rylee's family took us in and let us stay at one of their places, and that idiot is already screwing around in the friend group. And he's up there getting his beauty sleep while we nurse our hangovers and hope like hell Jackson doesn't come back and beat us to death.

I've never been afraid of Rylee's guys until she called and asked Jackson to come get her and the girls. Walking upstairs to find Addie passed out in the living room with her pants undone and tussled top felt like we just walked into a fucking frat party.

Almost fucking thirty, and we let one of the women in our house get to that state. Adelyn didn't even crack a fucking eye when Jackson scooped her into his arms and marched her out to the car.

I'm not an idiot. Adelyn is an adult and can make her own choices. But seeing her like that without Julian around and clearly hadn't been taken care of afterward is unacceptable.

My chair scratches across the floor with an ear-piercing screech. *He's about to get a face full of my fucking wrath.* I find the biggest pitcher I can find and fill it with cold water and ice.

Tate stands and eyes me with intrigue and a flare of excitement. "What are you doing?" Zach isn't far behind him as they follow me up the stairs.

"Julian wants to act like a child, then he can wake like one."

I push through his door without hesitation and march my way to his bare ass sprawled horizontally across the bed. Instead of dumping the water on his face and the T-shirt he wore yesterday, I soak his soft cock and firm ass in freezing cold water.

"AHHH! WHAT THE FUCK!?" Julian's shouting is short-lived. Hitting the ground with a slam, he grips his head and groans. "Fuck," he curses his hangover.

I wish I had brought a second fucking bucket of ice water just so I could see him suffer a little more.

We don't treat women like Julian did, not even when we're hammered. Never. Absolutely disrespectful and gross.

Zachary storms by me and hauls Julian off the ground by his bicep. I smirk as he drags the jackass into the bathroom. Tate and I share a dark smile and fuck if it doesn't turn me on when our boy shows his dark side. He winks and pulls me behind him into Julian's ensuite just in time to see Zach turn the shower on. Cold water beats down on Julian as we enjoy his shrill screams of outrage.

"Good thinking," I murmur to Zach when he leans beside me against the counter. He grunts and nods. "Can I punch him now?"

"No punching!" Julian shouts, clambering to his feet. He seethes, his ginger hair dripping around his high cheekbones.

He slams the water off in the next second, and it almost looks like his horrific hangover isn't bothering him anymore. *I'll have to fix that.* "What the actual fuck is wrong with you assholes?"

My responding chuckle is demonic. "Care to hazard a guess? Might have something to do with your bare cock and yesterday's T-shirt."

Julian eyes his bare legs and soaked shirt with confusion. I thought I would enjoy the moment he realized he was in deep shit, but all it does is twist my insides. Julian isn't a bad guy, far from it. He's kind, calm, considerate, funny, and soothing beyond all measures. So, when his eyes widen and his face drains of all color, my fists unclench. I don't want to hurt him. Jules is going to beat himself up all on his own.

"No..." Julian trails off, seemingly at a loss. "Fuck! What happened?"

Tate's exasperation cuts my responding quip off. "What happened?! You mean before Jackson carried her out of our home and my sister glared me half to death? Or before we all found Addie passed out on the couch downstairs with her pants undone? 'Cuz that's all I got, Julian! A whole ton of where the fuck were you?!"

"Is Addie okay?" Julian's frantic as he runs out of the bathroom, peeling his shirt off as he goes. The soggy lump slaps the wall in his haste to find a new pair of sweatpants.

"Were you listening?! She was so out of it she didn't wake up when Jackson carried her out to his car. Julian—" Zach's words cut off as he rounds Julian's rumpled bed. I watch in confusion when his head dips and his features twist in confusion, rage, and horror. "YOU MADE HER BLEED?! That kind of play should end with aftercare, Julian!"

Zach's shouting now, and all I can do is stare in shock at the smears of blood he found at the foot of the bed. I hear Tate curse beside me, but I can't turn my gaze from the comforter.

"I-what?! No! I didn't fucking hurt her, Zach. I swear! You know I would never do that. I'm not into that kind of stuff."

Gripping his wet hair, Julian paces. With each frantic stride he takes, Tate stiffens further.

“T, come on. Let’s get some fresh air.” Without waiting for a response, I grab his hand and pull him out of the room with me. Just as we reach the patio door, his body begins to tremble. I rush to the small gazebo and take a seat in one of the cushioned chairs. Without missing a beat, I tug Tate onto my lap, so he straddles my thighs. “Breathe, T. I’m here. It’s just you and me.”

Tate’s frantic gaze focuses on my lips and nostrils, diligently following my breathing patterns. He’s still shaking like a leaf, but his lungs are finally getting some damn air. “There’s my boy. Tell me four things you can see,” I guide.

Blowing out another breath, he gulps. “I-I see the swirls of the vine on your neck.” I nod, encouraging Tate to continue with his grounding exercise. “Your eyes. They’re so dark, they m-might as well be black. Your jaw keeps clenching, and now you’re smirking because you love the attention.”

The bark of laughter that explodes from my mouth is unexpected. I nip at the finger he’s using to trail along my lips. “You know I love your eyes on me, T.” His eyes flare. “You okay now?”

At my serious question, he deflates against my bare chest. “Yeah, I just—”

“I know. I know,” I soothe. Tate came back home four years ago with quite a few triggers. The trauma of killing a man and seeing his sister bleeding and being carted away from him left lasting wounds that need to be handled with care. Blood is one of them.

Resting his head on my shoulder, his dirty blond hair tickles my neck. “You don’t think he hurt her, do you?”

I hum, gathering my thoughts before I allow them to sway Tate’s feelings on the matter. “I don’t think he hurt her on purpose, no. There’s also the possibility that she was a virgin.”

Tate frowns. “She’s a mom.”

“There are many ways to become a mom. Maybe her kid is adopted or something.” I shrug, not willing to ignore the possibility.

Tate groans long and loud. “Oh my god. I don’t know what’s worse. Julian accidentally hurting her or him taking her virginity and passing out. I mean, Christ Wyatt, I’m almost positive he didn’t help her afterward. You saw her jeans.”

Yeah, I did. And it was unsettling.

“Fuck. Rylee was so mad last night. You think she’ll talk to me?”

Tate’s anxiety over his sister being angry with him hurts my soul. He spent so long without Rylee, never knowing if he would ever see her again. The insecurity over losing his sister again is ruling his emotions right now, and there’s nothing I can do.

“She shouldn’t be mad at *you*, T. You did nothing wrong. We can call her together if you’d like?”

Eyeing me, he checks for sincerity and immediately calms, knowing I’ll be with him the whole time. “Yes, please,” he breathes.

I don’t hesitate. I press my lips to his in a loving kiss. We may not be an overly loving household, but I love Tate and the others. We are a family. I will do anything for my family.

Chapter Eleven



Adelyn

Noooo. Fuck. I hate myself. My head throbs in agreement. My retinas burn, and I haven't even opened my damn eyes. My throat feels like it's crawling with stirrings of vomit, and my jaw tingles with nausea.

The throbbing rage between my temples threatens everything I have to do today. Meanwhile, my bladder is screaming at me to get on with it. Everything from my shoulders up is demanding retribution for my horrible choices.

“Wanna talk about it?”

“AHH! Fuck!” Wiggling away from the body lying in my bed, I finally pry my eyes open to find Gabby staring at me in amusement. Obviously, my brain revolts at the movement and noises, but what the actual fuck? “What the hell, Gabby!?”

She snorts and tucks her hand beneath her head. “I feel like shit too, babe.” The pink hair around her head is a tangled mess, but my focus narrows on her batting eyelashes. “So... how was it?”

“How was what?” I ask absentmindedly while I figure my shit out. Apparently, I slept in my jeans and lace body suit. *How did we get home?*

“Seriously? You and Julian. Tell me, is he as sweet in the bedroom as he is outside of it? He's not my type, but even I can see the appeal of the cute ginger.”

Gabby continues to talk, but I'm thrown into the swirling abyss of last night's drunk sexapades. "Oh my god! I fucked Julian!" My squeak of shock is accompanied by the sore ache in my pussy that was blissfully absent until now.

Gabs snorts. "Yeah, babe! It was pretty obvious when we saw you crashed on the couch with your fly open and sex hair everywhere. I'm bordering on really damn proud of you for letting loose and being pissed that Julian was passed out in bed."

The scream building in my chest lets loose in my sweaty palms. With that release, I keep my hands over my face and mumble, "He immediately fell asleep. I didn't want to wake him, so I made my way downstairs."

"What the fuck are you saying? He came and immediately clonked out?!" I'm shocked by Gabby's outrage and her reddening cheeks.

"What? It's fine," I defend. "He was better than most one-night stands, from what I can remember."

"Did he at least make you come? Please tell me he did something right!" Her dramatic plea makes me chuckle.

"Yeah." I giggle again and stand. Dizziness threatens to drag me back to bed.

Groaning at the ceiling, Gabby continues, "Ugh, I'm going to lose you to a bunch of men just like Rylee, aren't I?"

My shuffled steps halt on the way to the bathroom. "What do you mean?"

"Oh! You didn't know? Wyatt, Zach, Tate, and Julian are together. Like Rylee's guys. They have been panting over you since Layla's birthday. If I didn't see them as family, I would be jealous. And I'm a little annoyed with Julian's shitty follow-through. Speaking of, are you okay?"

I nod and wave her off. *A simple fuck just got way more fucking complicated.*



As the day progresses, the more I feel like I made a huge mistake last night. The headache has retreated into a dull throb that makes me want to keel over and never see the light of day ever again.

Not to mention, my thighs have been on fire since I peeled my wretched jeans off from last night. Thankfully, the blood had dried, and there wasn't so much that it bled through the fabric. My cuts, though? Those are still horribly pink with irritation, and the scabs that were once healing my skin have been ripped clean off.

And *also*, the sight that greeted me when I pulled my panties off made me feel ill for a whole new reason. Julian and I didn't use a fucking condom. During the night, his cum had soaked my underwear. It's not the end of the world. I'm on the pill. But still, that was so stupid.

So... yeah.

My tummy twists uncomfortably as I park my car in Rylee's driveway. *God, I hope she isn't too mad at me.* I need to pick up Rory, apologize for fucking her brother's boyfriend, and thank Jackson for getting me home safely. Getting Gabby's side of the story this morning about last night's events wasn't fun. But life doesn't stop. Gotta keep moving—too much shit to do. At least Gabby's getting groceries for me like she promised.

I'm in the middle of running through my mental checklist of what I need to get done with my day off today and walking up the driveway when the worst thing happens.

“Addie?”

Shit. “Hi, Tate.” My face is on fucking fire as he approaches me in front of the garage.

He eyes me like I might bite, which is funny since I'd sooner run than attack. “Are you okay?”

Where's my kid?

"I'm great, thanks. How are you?"

Could this be any more awkward? I hate this. This is why I keep to myself and only hang out with a few people.

"Um. I'm fine. Listen..." *Here it comes.* "I want to apologize for last night."

What? I was expecting him to be angry with me for having sex with Julian or scold me for being sloppy.

Tate's eyes scream vulnerability that sucks me right in. "Julian should have taken care of you. Instead, the idiot fell asleep and left you alone."

What's going on? "I'm confused. Tate, it's fine. I should be apologizing for having sex with one of your partners. Gabby told me this morning, and I feel terrible."

He waves me off with a hand, taking a step forward. "No need to apologize for that. Our relationship isn't completely like Rylee's guys. We are less... how can I say this?" He scratches the blond scruff in thought. "We love each other, and we're a family. But I guess you can say we are less mushy."

"Less mushy?"

Tate nods and smiles like this conversation makes him happier than ever. "We've always wanted a woman to treat and cuddle. To love. We just aren't very mushy with each other."

"Okay." I nod, uncertain of what he wants from me. I'm glad that Julian and I didn't cross any boundaries in their relationship dynamic.

"Addie," he whispers, and grabs hold of my jittery hands. "I'm so sorry Julian hurt you."

"What? He didn't hurt me!"

Tate frowns and looks down at our intertwined fingers. "We saw the blood. If he didn't hurt you, then I apologize for how he treated you during your first time."

I pull my hands away, baffled by the man in front of me. "The hell are you talking about? That wasn't my first

anything. Tate, I have no idea what you are talking about. Seriously, I'm not mad or upset with Julian. Also, I don't think it's any of your business to begin with." The panic over the blood has me running my damn mouth more than usual.

"But the blood," he says, but it comes out like a question.

"Mom! Look, my friend is here!" Rory comes bustling out the front door in her black sweatpants and grey sweatshirt. Trailing behind her, Wyatt walks out of the house, looking like a damn model with her duffel bag.

Thank hell for Aurora interrupting this very uncomfortable conversation. I need to get out of here before I combust into a pile of anxiety and deflection.

"Hello, Wyatt. Good to see you. Come on, Rory, Gabby needs help unloading the groceries." *Lie.* "See you later, Tate." I grab the bag from Wyatt's grasp and avoid his eyes that I know are trying to see into my soul.

I watch as Rory tugs on Wyatt's shirt sleeve and hold back my swoon at the soft way he looks at her. He kneels and pulls on one of Rory's braids, making my daughter beam at him before giving him a big hug. To my surprise, the black-haired man with a neck tattoo and a clove hanging out of his mouth hugs my eight-year-old back. *Sweet hell.*

It only gets worse, too. Tate crouches and swings his arms wide. "What about me, Dino?"

Rory rolls her eyes but throws her arms around Tate's neck, anyway. "I'm not a dinosaur, no matter what Layla calls me."

"Roar reminds me of a dinosaur, so you are Dino. And that's what friends do; they give each other nicknames." Tate boops her nose and stands beside Wyatt.

I wave as Rory tells them goodbye. She fills the drive home with stories of how Wyatt and Tate came over a few hours ago and played with the girls.

"Mom, when can I see them again? They are really, really nice. Plus, they said they would love to see you, too!"

The hard part about having an outgoing, energetic daughter? I can't always say no or give her an excuse why I'm not there. I may biologically be Aurora's sister, but I am her mother.

Being an anxious homebody paired with a kid who loves people and making friends, I have to pull on my people panties sometimes. Which *sucks*.

Chapter Twelve



Tate

“O kay, that’s enough! Get your asses inside NOW!”

I collapse at the sound of Zach’s shout across the backyard. Julian isn’t far behind me, hitting the ground with a thud and a curse. My heaving breaths feel like I’m being stabbed in the throat and lungs at the same time. Coughing, I attempt to lift my arm to swipe away some of the sweat tickling my temple. The attempt is a failure. My limbs feel like they are sinking into the earth beneath me and refuse to be corralled back to the land of the living.

“Fuck. How long have we been out here, man? The sun is setting.” Julian huffs beside me.

No shit. The sun really is setting. We must have been sparring for the last two hours. “I can’t move,” I groan.

Julian’s incoherent mumbles are the only response I get. We went way too hard for way too long. After a few more minutes of catching our breath and relaxing our battered muscles, Julian shifts and stands.

“Come on, babe, before Zach drags us in like children.” Jules holds out a hand in offering, which I take without hesitation. “Think we can get out of talking?”

I snort, following him into the house. “No chance in hell. I bet he’ll sit us down as a family with a whole speech planned out.” Locking the door behind me, I chuckle when Julian groans.

“Get in here. Now. Family meeting!”

Julian stops and turns to me, wide-eyed. As his lips slowly curl, I can't hold back my laughter. His rambunctious laughter sets me off again, shoving each other all the way to the living room.

“Care to share?” Zachary's voice is deep and menacing. He stands with his arms crossed between the dining room and the couches.

“Not really, no,” Julian says through puffs of laughter. I cover my smirk, not wanting to set Zach off even more.

“Too bad. We're about to do a lot of fucking sharing. Sit your asses down,” Zach demands.

Obliging him, I take a seat on the couch above where Julian plops his ass on the floor. Laughing with him released some much-needed tension after the shit show of the past twenty-four hours.

Wyatt waltzes in without a care in the world and takes the leather recliner. His teeth and tongue fiddle with the unlit clove in his mouth, betraying his calm exterior. It's his nervous tick. The clove is like a security blanket when he's not smoking them.

Zach eyes the three of us, and I can almost imagine the shutter he has on his emotions. The expressionless way he looks at us sets my anxiety off. I don't realize I'm bouncing my knee until Julian rests his head against it, soothing me and letting me know I'm not alone. Zach watches the move and instantly softens.

“What were you two doing, sparring like a bunch of rabid animals for the last few hours? You could have gotten seriously fucking hurt,” Zach says, and emphasizes his last few words.

Julian and I both hesitate. Honestly, we didn't talk when Wyatt and I got back home from Rylee's house. I know why Jules needed to work some steam off, but he didn't question me when I asked to spar.

“Tate!” Zach snaps.

I throw my head back against the cushions and groan. “I made things worse with Addie.”

“Is that why she basically ran from us when I brought Rory outside?” Wyatt asks calmly. We didn’t talk on the ride home either.

“Yeah. Fuck! I apologized for...” I hesitate. “Julian’s behavior. She seemed confused as to why. I explained how he should have taken better care of her, but she apologized instead for sleeping with my partner. I told her that wasn’t an issue and explained a bit of our dynamic.”

“And?” Julian murmurs, nudging my leg when I trail off.

“I apologized for you hurting her,” I whisper. “Which she immediately shut down and said you did no such thing, Jules.”

“And?” Zach rumbles. I cringe, knowing this next part isn’t going to go well.

“Fuck, guys. I apologized for how her first time ended.”

“TATE!”

“What the fuck!?”

“How did that seem like an acceptable thing to say?!”

Their shouts merge together in one pissed-off storm of shock. “I know! I *know!* She already put me in my place after she told me it was, in fact, *not* her first time. I already know I fucked up, ‘kay? I just didn’t know what to say to make it better!” I plead with them to understand where I’m coming from.

“And you thought bringing up her virginity in Rylee’s driveway would make it better?” Wyatt taunts, lifting a dark brow at me.

I snap. “Rylee told me I had to apologize! You were there, asshole!”

“That’s not what she meant, Tate!” Wyatt shouts back.

Zach curses and paces around, grumbling under his breath about idiots and big mouths. “So, where the hell did the blood come from then?”

The silence in the room is horrible. Not knowing how that sweet woman got hurt in our home is killing us. Yet, she defended Julian like there was no way he did that. Addie definitely deflected the reasoning behind the blood, though, so I have no idea.

Zach groans again. “On another note... Do we want to pursue her?”

Wyatt snorts, shocking each of us. “I’m pretty sure our boy over there was gearing up to ask her on a date before he fucked the conversation up.”

All I can do is nod because, yeah, that’s exactly where I was hoping the conversation would lead to. We’ve shared women from time to time and don’t mind the others exploring the other gender. The only rule is we be open and honest about what’s going on and who we bring into our beds. Like I said to Addie, we love each other, but we know there’s something missing. That missing piece sits like a divide in our family. I know, we all do, that a woman would bring us closer together and finally give us the bond of life partners. Kind of like my sister’s guys, except we need a center. The four of us need someone to ground us, someone to come home to and encourage loving gestures.

Sure, Rylee could argue that she is the center of their world by default because she is the only woman. But anyone who truly sees how their family functions knows that their center ebbs and flows. Their love for each other separately is so wonderfully equal.

Wyatt, Zachary, Julian, and I, we love each other, but we won’t ever be as close as Ry’s four guys are without a woman to bring us together. It might not make sense, and words will never be able to describe our chemistry and relationship, but it is what it is.

I find my voice, knowing Zach needs to hear our thoughts; Wyatt will stay silent until necessary, and Julian is being suffocated by guilt. “I want to pursue her... under one condition.” As one, they each lift an eyebrow. “We *all* have to pursue her. If one doesn’t want Addie, then we don’t try. She

has a kid and a life, you know? I just think if we do this, we should be serious about it because I have a feeling this woman doesn't appreciate deviating from her status quo."

One head nod.

Two head nods and a smirk.

A third, hesitant head nod from Julian.

And a smile from me. "So, how do we start?" How do we convince Addie to date all of us?

"With an apology," Zach says, eyes narrowed on Julian, who nods with a grimace.

"Or two," Wyatt adds. He aims his glare at me, and just like my ginger partner, I nod.

God, I hope she gives us sorry bastards another chance.

Chapter Thirteen



Adelyn

I want to quit my job. I don't want to make dinner tonight. I feel like I need a month off of everything. I want to sleep, cuddle Rory, eat an entire pizza, and have the laundry magically clean itself.

Alas, single mom status means my feet are trying to rip themselves in half, and my head is a complete mess. Thank hell my chaotic self works well for being a waitress. I might want a desk job, but my anxious self would not allow me to sit still for long.

“Can I get you anything else?” My smile is fake as shit. I'm burnt out, and my back hurts.

“Just the check, please.”

At least this last table said please. I don't know what it is about Wednesdays that have people so crabby, but this lunch rush is annoying me beyond belief. I low key want to cry.

Trudging through my final tasks of the day, I release a sigh of relief when I remember I drove to work today. If I were to walk home in this heat, I think I'd keel over and never get up.

My heels protest, and my boobs rage to be let out of their prison. Unlocking my cute 2014 Tiguan, I cringe, knowing I'll have an indent from the damn wire of my bra. Wasting no time, I unsnap it and whip it out of my sleeves.

“Demon,” I hiss at the offensive piece of fabric and toss it into the backseat. The drive to Rory’s school is calm, with the windows down and nothing coming from the radio. Forgoing the music gives me space to work through the rampant thoughts that are trying to consume me.

I jolt, my care ringtone scaring the ever-loving shit out of me. I smile when I see the caller ID, and don’t hesitate to answer.

“Hey, Uncle Don! How are you?”

Soft shuffling down the line greets my ears. “Hey, kiddo! I’m good. Just checking in. How are you and the little shit?”

I laugh, happy to hear his teasing voice. “The little shit is great. Just picking her up now.”

“Oh, I’ll let you go then. Be careful in that damn parking lot. Kids don’t look both ways, and parents are impatient as hell.”

“Yes, officer,” I tease. “I’ll talk to you later. We miss you. Dinner soon?”

“I’d love that! Love you, kiddo, talk soon.”

“Love you too, Don!”

I sigh, nestling further into my seat. Uncle Don was my dad’s best friend and partner in the force.

I’m so damn glad he’s still in our lives. I wish I had more time with him. And energy. Is there such thing as too many friends? ‘Cuz I’m exhausted. Layla’s birthday party a few weeks ago, going out last weekend... I’m feeling done.

The struggle of weaving through cars and waiting in line at Rory’s elementary school is the last straw.

I’m taking a damn nap when we get home.



“Daddy? Mommy?”

I knock on their door, my chest bubbling with excitement. When I hear their voices telling me to come in, I give the door a mighty push and throw myself into their waiting arms.

“Merry Christmas, Linnie!” I giggle at their matching words. I snuggle into Daddy’s sleep shirt and try to wrap my arms all the way around him. “So close,” he says as I pout.

I’m still not big enough.

“Linnie, do you want one of your gifts now?” Mommy asks, and I can feel my forehead scrunch. The bubbly feeling returns to my chest, and I squeal.

Pushing off Daddy, I bounce between them on my knees. I giggle, seeing how messy Mommy’s chocolate-colored hair is and Daddy’s black hair is standing tall. Patting the crazy strands down, I look at my pretty mommy again. “I can have a gift now?”

I watch as they look at each other. Sometimes, when I catch them doing this, my body feels all warm and cozy. I think the word is called love. That’s what Mommy and Daddy feel when they look at each other and when they look at me. I smile, enjoying the gentle weight of their love warming me.

Mommy looks at me again with a big smile. Her eyes sparkle, too, making me lean in. “You’re going to be a big sister, Linnie.”

“Your little sister will be here so soon. Isn’t that exciting?!” Daddy hoots.

“Where is she?” I bounce, smiling. My tummy flutters, and I’m feeling a little lost.

Mommy grabs my hand and puts it on her belly, where there’s a weird bump. “She’s in here, honey. Are you okay?”

I nod quickly and eye the bump with wonder. I lean in, being careful with my new baby sister. “Hi there. You are the bestest Christmas gift ever. I am going to love you like Mommy and Daddy love me. I promise.”

“Mom?” A soft voice nestles against my vulnerable consciousness. “Mom, please wake up.”

My eyes stay closed, not allowing me access to reality. I want to stay with my parents for just one more second. It felt so *real*. It *was* real. Except, the ending of that joyous morning came to a halt a few weeks later when they sat me down and told me my little sister wouldn't be coming home.

Hushed whispers surround me, and as my blanket shifts, my tears cool, bringing shivers to my overheated skin.

“Adelyn. Come on, Dolly, open your eyes.”

The deep, husky voice threatens the inner turmoil, wreaking havoc on my nerves.

I can't. I'm so tired. So... sad.

A tickle on my forehead makes me scrunch my nose and move away from the touch. “You can and you will. Open those pretty eyes for me, Doll.”

The command in the rich tone has my eyelids fluttering open without a second thought. More tears fall from my cheeks when I see Zachary sitting beside me. His dark brows are furrowed, and the shadows of my apartment highlight the indents of his dimples. The absence of his smile makes my bottom lip quiver.

“Hey, shh,” Zach soothes, reaching for me as I lift my arms to him. A sob bursts from my scratchy throat once I'm tucked against his chest. “I have you now,” he hums, his lips brushing against my forehead.

It hurts. Everything hurts so much. I promised my first sibling that I would love her, but I never got the chance. I cry for the baby my mom lost mid-pregnancy and the sibling Rory and I will never get to meet. My heart shatters and rips my organs apart for the parents we lost.

I miss my dad. I want my mom. What would they think of me now? Would they tell me I need to do better? Be better?

I promised one sibling I would love her as our parents did, and I failed. I won't fail Aurora. I never meant the promise to be so literal the first time I made it, but the second time, I truly do love Rory as my mom and dad did.

I'm her mom now. I just wish I had one too.

“Rory, come help me do the dishes, please?” Gabby’s voice shocks me out of my breakdown.

“Will Mommy be okay?”

My heaving breaths stutter to a halt, and I immediately swallow the ball of ugly emotion in my throat. I haven’t heard Rory’s voice so small in *years. I’m scaring her.*

“You aren’t scaring her,” a soft voice murmurs below me. My attention shifts, making me peel my wet face from Zach’s large chest. I find Julian kneeling on the floor beside me with watery, worried eyes. “She just loves you very much, sweetie.”

I hiccup and reach for him. Julian’s reaction is immediate, sliding me from the couch and onto his lap. Zach grumbles but wraps the blanket around my shoulders since it fell from my drop to the ground.

My tears start anew when Julian cups my jaw and forces my gaze to his. “Addie, what’s wrong?”

“I—” I choke on another sob, unable to get the words out. Seeing Mom and Dad’s faces so bright and happy... feeling their love... it’s too much. Loneliness strangles me until the only sounds that come out are my ragged breaths.

I don’t know how long I cry into Julian’s neck, but my body has begun to buzz with the need to take back some control. “What time is it?” I croak.

“Almost seven, sweetheart,” Julian tucks a strand of hair behind my ear.

Shit. I have to make dinner. I was just going to take a little rest while Rory watched her movie, but I must have clonked out harder than intended. I still feel like I could sleep another twelve hours.

“Why are you here?” I sit straight but stay in Julian’s arms. “Do I have to ground my kid for opening the door by herself?”

“No grounding, Doll. Gabby called you when we got here to see if you wanted to hang out with us, but your mini-me answered the phone instead.” Zach’s voice is strained as he

recounts the events. “Rory let Gabby in because she was worried about you crying in your sleep. We followed.”

I sigh, feeling my cheeks pinken with embarrassment. “I’m sorry for scaring everyone. And for crying all over you guys.” I eye Julian’s wet throat and grimace. Wiping it away with the edge of the blanket, I ignore his soft chuckling. I stand with the blanket and dab at the wet spot I left on Zach’s chest, too. God, *I’m a mess*.

Zach huffs a laugh, his dimples coming out to play. “Dolly,” he growls playfully. “I quite like your tear-streaked claim on me. I don’t mind your little hands petting me, either. First, though, I need you to tell me what’s wrong.”

The change in his voice is fast, and all the joy I felt from seeing his dimples and having him tease me vanishes. “I was dreaming. I’m okay now.”

“Nightmare?” Zach presses.

I shake my head. “No, it was beautiful, actually.” If I sink into myself deep enough, I can smell my dad’s shampoo. I can almost hear my mom’s honey-smooth voice.

“I’m confused. Why were you crying then?” Julian tilts his head in confusion and stands beside me.

Fidgeting with my sweatpants string, I whisper, “Sometimes the most wonderful memories hurt the most. Remembering those who were your entire world is a gift, and a curse.” Closing my eyes, I say the last bit. “My parent’s faces were exactly as I remember them. Their love was spot on, too. I miss them more than anything.”

My greatest moments bring the heaviest ache. There’s nothing I can do to bring them back. I took on the role of mother and father right as I lost my own. A hole of depression and utter loneliness threatens to swallow me whole every day. Sometimes I really want it to. Sometimes it’s hard to hold the creeping darkness at bay when I feel out of control. But I promised, and I won’t let Rory down. I won’t allow Aurora to lose another mom.

“Swee—”

“Excuse me, I need to use the bathroom.” I turn on my heel, needing to get myself under control. *There’s only one way to do that.*

Chapter Fourteen



Zachary

Adelyn's hair whips with the force of her body rushing away from Julian and I. Something about the look in her eye and the way her body was vibrating sends a chill down my spine. I'm not sure what to do with this niggling feeling in the back of my mind when I don't really know Addie that well. Yet, this incessant need to follow her retreating footsteps and force her to allow me into her personal space is overwhelming.

I want to demand she look me in the eye and tell me what she's thinking. The desire to pluck her off her feet and sit her on her bed is ratcheting higher and higher the longer she is out of my space. If I could wash her little body, feed her and brush her hair, I would finally calm. I *need* Adelyn to let me treat her like my own little treasure. My little dolly. Maybe once I've pampered and praised her for being so good and pliable, I would get to play with my doll.

"Do you feel weird right now, too?" Julian whispers, staring down the empty hallway.

I don't let my gaze stray to him for long, his also focused on where she disappeared. "I don't like it," I grumble. "I'm going to get her."

"No!" Gabby's shout stops me in my tracks. From where I'm standing, it looks like she and the little peanut have been playing with the bubbles rather than cleaning dishes. "Addie

likes her privacy, Zach. She will be back soon; just give her space, please.”

I eye her, mildly amused at her wild pink curls and soapy forehead. Sighing, I relent and park myself on the bar stool in front of them. Rory’s long brown hair is in two braids coated in bubbles, wetting her black T-shirt.

“You got any friends?”

A bark of laughter comes from directly behind me, where Julian’s hunched over. He soon begins to wheeze, unable to control his laughter, and I become even more confused. Swiveling on my stool, I find Rory looking at me expectantly with an eyebrow raised, Gabby chuckling beside her.

“What?” I ask, uncertain if the question was meant for me. Or just what’s going on in general.

“I asked if you had any friends. So do you?”

I feel like this eight-year-old is scrutinizing me, and I’m not quite sure how I feel about it. “Yeah,” I drawl. “I have friends.”

Rory’s eyes narrow like she doesn’t believe me. “Besides your family, Z.”

I’m about to respond in defense when Julian hoots even fucking louder. Shoving him, I glare. On the inside, though, I’m thrilled he’s so relaxed right now. It’s been a weird few days since the party night fiasco.

A throat clears, reminding me of the little peanut waiting for my response. “Um, not many, no,” I say, offering the truth.

I was ready for Rory to tease me or look at me like I’m crazy for not having any friends, but her actual response is not what I was expecting. Her already large blue eyes widen, and her lips spread into the biggest damn smile I’ve ever seen. My heart fucking pauses to watch this little girl.

“YAY! I’ll be your friend! Wyatt’s my best friend, though, but I can be yours!” Screeching with joy, Rory races around the counter and jumps up and down in front of me. Her glee is like a lightning bolt right to my broody heart. “I promise I’ll

be the most amazing friend. Will you be my friend? Please, Z?”

Speaking of my heart, the fucker dances with joy, immediately accepting this eight-year-old girl as someone important. “I would love that, Peanut.”

Her dainty nose scrunches. “You and Tate have to work on your nicknames.”

I chuckle, readying to tease her. “Oh, and Z is so creative?” I actually love that she gave me the nickname. It’s sweet and makes me feel important.

Rory bobs her head, but her attention snaps over my shoulder in the next beat. Her furrowed brow halts the humor of our moment. “Are you okay, Mom?”

I immediately stand and turn to find a very pale and shaky Addie shuffling into the kitchen. She didn’t look this fucking bad when she walked out of the living room a bit ago. I want to know what the hell happened in the time she spent in her fucking bedroom.

“I’m fine, honey,” Adelyn murmurs.

Bullshit. Brushing by Julian, I ignore his worry. Without hesitation, I swoop Addie off her feet and into the cradle of my arms. I take a second to appreciate the squeak she lets loose before she settles. I swear I see her wince, but it’s gone before I can truly see it. Unwilling to let her go, I take a seat at the dining room table.

“Julian, get me some crackers or something,” I grit out, attempting to control my raging concern and need to take care of this little woman. *Why is she so damn small?*

Rummaging in the kitchen is background noise to Adelyn’s soft puff of air against my shirt. Her eyelids droop a little when I run my pointer finger along the arch of her nose.

“That’s nice,” she whispers.

“No sleeping, Addie. You need to eat something.”

Her lips purse, and the little slits of her eyes that I can see narrow. “You could say please.”

Julian and Gabby chuckle in the kitchen while I smirk down at the beautiful woman attempting to snooze in my arms. “Where would the fun be in that?” I drop my head, directing my low, husky voice into the shell of her ear where only she can hear. “My little dolly is going to eat what I give her, isn’t that right?”

Allowing space between our faces again, I see her wide eyes dilate with lust and hesitate with a smidge of confusion. I briefly wonder if she would allow this any other time. Would this beautiful woman let me hold her if she was feeling better? Before she can say anything, Julian sets down a plate of crackers, raspberries, cheese, Gatorade, and water. *Nice.*

My doll’s hand lifts, but I’m quick to snatch it and nestle it on her lap. “Relax, Addie. Let me take care of you.” She frowns again and looks to where her daughter and friend are messing around in the kitchen and ignoring us.

Using her mild distraction to my advantage, I grab a berry and swipe the tip across Addie’s plump lips. She jolts in shock, her mouth making an ‘O’ shape. Dropping the raspberry in her mouth, she immediately closes her lips, surprised at the intrusion. Her reaction puts her in a new predicament; my thumb and pointer fingers are now trapped between her lips.

Her eyes flare, and I’m almost positive she’s now aware of my hardening cock against her pert little ass. To my complete and utter fucking shock, her hot tongue swirls around each finger before releasing me.

“Fuck,” Julian whispers, breaking the spell my dolly put me under.

Swallowing roughly, I watch her throat work the raspberry down. I continue feeding Addie until she won’t open up for me any longer.

“I’m fine now, Zach. Thank you,” she says, squirming to stand.

I reluctantly allow her to leave and watch like a fucking stalker as she walks into the kitchen. Rory turns to her mom and smiles when Addie bends to give her a hug with

whispered words. Even from the dining room, I can feel the little girl's tension release when she's snuggled in her momma's arms.

“So.” Julian clears his throat. “What the hell was that, man?”

I narrow my eyes at him and do my best to ignore how sexy he is with that damn smirk that drives me crazy. “That was me taking care of our woman.” Feeling defensive, I add, “Aren't you here to apologize?”

Julian's expression dims a smidge. “Yeah, I was going to, but I think we should head out soon. Rory and Addie look exhausted and like they need some alone time.” His eyes soften. “Zach, I wasn't judging you. It's just not something I ever thought I'd see from you. And if she is happy to give you that role in her life, then I'm thrilled for you both.”

I'm stunned silent by his acceptance, which gives him the opening to place a gentle kiss on my lips. Snatching the back of his neck, I whisper, “Thank you.”

Julian nods and gives me a small smile. “Now, let's get out of here and let our girls have some space, yeah?”

I hate it, but he's right. I'll just have to settle for seeing my peanut and dolly another time.

Chapter Fifteen



Julian

Why the hell am I so nervous?

“You good, man?”

Startled, I drop my phone. The familiar *whoosh* of a text being sent makes me nauseous. “Damn it, Tate!” Scrambling for the phone, I pray like hell my message doesn’t sound stupid.

Me: Hey, sweetheart! It’s Julian. I was wondering if you want to get a coffee with me tomorrow morning.
xoxo

I hate that it’s only Friday. The antsiness of not having any work set up after a month of being here is getting to all of us. Addie isn’t only a perfect distraction from our issues. I just feel like I need more of her. More of her shy smiles and gentle touches. Since we all decided we want to truly date her, I’m getting mighty impatient, especially after seeing her so distraught the other night.

Am I the reason she’s struggling?

Tate chuckles. “Why are you so jumpy? It’s just Addie. She’s so sweet. I don’t see her laughing and turning you down.” He nips at my neck and rounds the couch.

When we went to see her on Wednesday, I was prepared for her to scoff and shout at me for treating her poorly last weekend. Zach was my moral support, or so he says. I think he

just wanted to see Addie. Gabby was on board with helping me talk to Adelyn, which was a relief. We don't know Addie well yet, so showing up on her doorstep without Gabby would have been odd.

"Julian. You kick people's asses for a living; what has you scared?" Tate sounds baffled by the nerves I'm showing.

I frown, elbowing him in the side where he leans against me. "I don't kick people's asses for a living, Tate. I'm a bodyguard. There's a big difference."

Tate rolls his eyes playfully. "With a big gun," he purrs, his hand inching up my thigh. The subtle scent of coffee tickles my nose when he nuzzles and peppers kisses along my neck.

A moan rumbles in my chest. "Does my boy need some attention this morning?"

"Yes, please," he whispers, nibbling on my earlobe.

Ting! I gasp when my phone vibrates against my hardening cock. *Oh shit, she responded!*

Sweetness: Hey, Julian! Yeah, tell me when and where. I don't work until four tomorrow night.

Fumbling, I rush to respond. To make matters worse, Tate teases the waistband of my sweatpants. Dropping to his knees between my thighs, my attention splits between the man about to worship my cock and texting the woman I haven't been able to stop thinking about.

"Reply to our woman, Julian."

I narrow my eyes at Tate. I may be the silly one in our family, but I won't hesitate to spank his ass. His cheeks heat, eyes dilating at my silent warning. Tapping the send button, excitement bubbles in my chest. *I'm taking our girl on a date!* But for now, I'll focus on the way my boy's scruff scratches my thighs and his hot tongue heats the underside of my shaft.

"That's it, baby," I moan. I can't take my eyes off the way his lips stretch around me and his eyes water. *Mm, so fucking good.*



“This place is so cute,” Addie says in awe. Her wide eyes take in the coffee shop around her, seemingly relaxed.

Clearing my throat, I realize I haven’t said anything yet. She’s just so damn mesmerizing to watch. “Leo has a knack for cozy places.” Her head whips around so fast that I chuckle. I guess she didn’t know one of Rylee’s husbands owned a coffee shop. “He owns this place. Did you not know that?”

Her cheeks redden. “I didn’t know which one exactly.” She bounces in her seat excitedly. “Oh my, this is awesome! He’s so talented!”

Swiveling in her seat again, she takes the warm environment with new eyes. *I wonder how long she has been friends with them.* Rylee and her guys treat Addie like she’s family, which is interesting to watch because the woman in front of me seems to hold everyone at arm’s length.

Taking a deep breath, I gather the courage to bring out why I asked her to meet me today. “Addie, I need to apolog—”

“Here’s your latte, s-sir,” a small, hesitant voice says. Looking up, I see a young girl who refuses to make eye contact with me. With her head down, she places my cup in front of me. “Here you go, ma’am,” the barista sets Addie’s drink in front of her as well.

“Thank you,” I murmur, worried about scaring the young teenager. Addie adds her appreciation, also eyeing the girl with concern.

With the barista scurried away and back behind the espresso bar, I turn to her, my nerves sizzling with apprehension. “Adelyn, I’m sorry for my behavior last weekend.”

“Julian,” she drawls, but I cut her off. I need to say my piece before she makes her own conclusions.

“No, please.” I reach across the table and grip her warm, dainty hands. I’m shocked by the calluses I feel on them. “We were both really drunk, and it probably shouldn’t have happened that way. But I don’t regret it whatsoever. I need you to know that, Addie. I remember everything, and I can’t stop thinking about you. Nor can I curb this awful feeling, knowing that I fell asleep right after and left you on your own. I should have...” I trail off, uncertain how much to say.

“You should have what, Julian?” Her blue eyes are soft while she waits for me to gather my thoughts.

I swallow. “What I should have done and what I *will* do if given another chance is take care of you. Sweetness, I should have cradled you to my chest and kept you warm while we cleaned up. I would have offered you my favorite pillow and a snuggle if you would have taken me up on the offer of sleeping over.”

The subtle garbled sound coming from Addie’s throat tells me I’ve affected her with my words. Resting my elbows on the table, I trail my thumbs along her pulse points. “I would pepper kisses along your jaw as you burrow into my sheets. My hands would hold you close, and I would tell you how absolutely stunning you are.”

“Julian,” Addie breathes. “I just... what? That was—” She bites her lip, holding her thoughts in.

“That was *what*, sweetheart?”

Her dark brown hair sways as she tucks a few locks behind her ear. My fingers twitch to do it themselves. “This is embarrassing.” She sighs and finally looks me in the eye again. “That was the best one-night stand I’ve ever had. So, there’s no reason to apologize, Julian. I promise. And no, you didn’t hurt me. Can we move past it now?”

I sit gaping at her. For how long? No fucking clue. *Um, what?!* “Addie, I was a shit lay. How was that the best you’ve had? Actually, no, don’t answer that. Will you go on a date with me, please?”

“I—what?!”

Fuck. I'm not doing a good job with this. I drop my head to the table, only mildly wincing at how hard I hit it. "I suck at this," I groan. I lift my head when I feel fingers tangle in my red curls. "Can I take you on a date, Addie? I want the opportunity to treat you right this time. Please give me a second chance."

Nibbling on her lip, Adelyn looks me over. "This isn't some kind of bruised ego thing, is it?"

"What?! No!" I'm fucking shocked. This beautiful woman thinks I would only ask her out on a date to make myself feel better? "Sweetheart, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you. I'm just hoping like hell that I didn't blow my chances with you for *real*."

"I don't know, Julian. I have a daughter. I haven't been on a date since high school. I don't know if I can make a fling work."

"Not a fling," I interject. "We talked about it. I promise we're serious."

"We!?"

Double fuck. Why can't I say anything right? "Uh, so, my guys and me. We, um, we all want to date you."

I didn't think it would be possible, but her eyes widen even further. "What?" she hisses, looking around her like someone is about to jump out at her.

"Shit, Addie. How 'bout we just hang out for now, yeah? See what happens? I didn't mean to overwhelm you, nor was I supposed to tell you that. Fuck, I just... I'm not normally this incapable of talking to people. You just have me a little nervous, and I think you're fucking gorgeous. Plus, I can't stop craving the sweet taste of you and—"

"Julian," she murmurs gently. Her teeny hand grips my wrist where I'm covering my face. Freeing my heated cheeks, she says, "We can all hang out. I'd like that. The whole dating thing with all of you, though... I can't... I don't... I'm not sure how that would work. I mean, I have a child, which usually equals baggage for hunks like you guys."

“Hunks?” I smirk, flexing my forearm beneath her palm. “You find me sexy, sweetness?” I can’t help but tease her. I didn’t really get what I set out for, but this seems better in a way. I fucking suck at keeping secrets, and if Addie wants to see where this goes with all of us rather than just assume she is dating only me, then that’s a huge win for my family.

A sly look sparks her eyes and tilts her lips. “I find you very sexy, Julian.” It takes sheer force to keep my dick from reacting to her hot-as-hell tease. The little vixen is smothered as her lips twist in uncertainty. “I have to run a couple of errands down the road before my shift tonight. Would you like to join?”

Her tentative offer hangs in the space between us for a moment while my happiness reaches new heights. “I would love to, sweetheart.”

Chapter Sixteen



Adelyn

I fiddle with the pop socket on the back of my phone, somehow forgetting how to walk. I wish I hadn't drunk my coffee so fast. *What the hell do I do with my hands?!*

"Where do you work?"

Julian's voice breaks through some of my panic, but I can't stop the anxious fumbling of my phone. "I'm a waitress," I say quietly, feeling a bit embarrassed. "I've worked at The Posh Palate for a little over a year now."

"What's The Posh Palate?"

I don't sense any judgment in his tone, but I still don't look at him. "It's a fine dining restaurant. Very high-end, businessy vibes."

"Ah, so the jackasses of our community."

"What?!" I snort. In my shock, my phone clatters to the ground a few feet in front of me. I bend quickly and snatch it before someone breaks it. In my haste, I don't see the group of girls bustling out of the boutique. "Shoot, sorr—"

My attempt to get out of their way is futile. I'm not short necessarily, but I'm more skin and bones than the beautiful woman who checks my shoulder. The force of her body hitting mine sends me to my ass, automatically making my tailbone ache.

"Addie!" Julian shouts, but the damage has been done.

“Oops, I’m so sorry!” The high-pitched voice is sugary sweet.

The group of girls is gone before I brush the hair from my eyes. Tears gather in my lashes for no damn reason. *I’m fine.* In the next beat, large hands grip me under the armpits and haul me to my feet.

Julian’s high cheekbones and red, curly hair blur in front of me. “Hey, sweetheart. Are you okay?” I nod, worried my voice will come out wobbly. “Shit, Addie. Your tears hurt my heart. Come here.” His fresh, minty scent invades my nose, instantly soothing me when he tucks me against his chest.

“I’m okay. I’m so sorry. I’m not normally this emotional, I swear.”

God, I’ve cried on this man twice this week. He must think I’m a drama queen.

Julian’s hand spans across my lower back, making me feel small. His lips pressing against the top of my head make me feel treasured. “No apologizing, sweetie. You hit the ground pretty hard. Tell me what hurts, please.”

I sigh and grip him tighter. “My tailbone will probably bruise, but at least I won’t have to buy a new phone.” My soft chuckle doesn’t hit the mark I intended. I had hoped to lighten the mood, feeling horrible for bringing this bubbly man down once again.

Pulling away from me slightly, he holds my cheek and encourages my head to tip back. Head all the way back, I finally meet his stern eyes. “No apologizing, Addie. Your tears might make me panic, but only because I prefer you smiling and happy.”

Swoon. I didn’t think I was capable or had the time to feel this woozy or one-sighted over a man. But... *wow.* The burn of my tears recedes as my focus narrows on Julian’s plump lips. “Okay,” I whisper, but it comes out like a whimper.

“Why don’t we get you some ice, and I’ll help you run errands tomorrow, okay? Tailbone injuries hurt like a bitch. Is that okay, or what do you want to do?”

“I want to kiss you,” I murmur, resting my cheek further into his palm. I freeze. *Did I just fucking say that?!* “Or... never mind! I’m sorry, forget I said anything!”

Being around Julian makes everything fade away. I’m just not so sure it’s a good—

“Shh, Sweetness.” Then his lips are on mine in the most gentle kiss I’ve ever had. In the middle of Charleston’s busy sidewalks, Julian takes his time sweeping his tongue across the seam of my lips. One hand on my cheek and the other gripping my hip like he’s afraid I’ll disappear.

Giving me a final, sweet kiss, Julian pulls away with a small smile that shows off his dimples. “Let me take care of you, please. I’ll get you some ice at my place and make you lunch, okay?”

Still wrapped in the easy aura that is Julian, I agree to follow him to his place. Only he has the power to convince me to use my time off from work to relax. With the help of Rylee and her family, Rory is always invited for sleepovers with Layla.

I suppose having friends isn’t such a bad thing because even though it stresses me out not to get my shit done; I think I’m finally figuring out who I am beyond my never-ending lists.



My tailbone is pissed. Not to mention, my anxiety has reared its ugly head. The few-minute drive to Julian’s house allowed all my rampant thoughts to jostle my brain.

“Come on, sweetie! Let’s get you some ice and snacks!” Julian has my car door open and me on my feet in a flash.

As soon as his hand grips mine, I settle, allowing him to tug me through the front door. I’m not sure what I was expecting to find when we walked into his house, but the other three guys hovered over their kitchen table wasn’t it. Multiple

laptops are open, making random noises. Also scattered on the large table are sheets of paper stacked and strewn about.

Their faces, though, that's what gives me pause. Zach looks like he's about to burn the world down, Wyatt's face is scrunched in concentration as he taps away, and Tate looks like he's about to puke.

Julian halts, his posture becoming rigid. He clears his throat and addresses the room. "We have company." His voice is cold, freaking me out even more. The warmth of his hand keeps me grounded, though.

It's almost comical the way the other guys snap their heads in our direction. Wyatt's concentrated frown turns into one of confusion when he sees me. Zach shudders all emotion from his face, and Tate pales even further.

"Uh, maybe I should go," I mumble, already trying to back away.

"No!" Julian turns to me, tugging me into his side. "Guys, let's put work away for a bit, yeah?"

I can tell Julian wants to know what they're doing, but without needing to be told twice, the other three gather their things and stack them on Wyatt's pile of laptops. My feet shuffle uncomfortably behind Julian as he drags me to the living room. Plopping myself on the couch, I hold in my cringe and shimmy under the blanket Julian drapes around me.

With the open floor plan, I watch as Julian, Zach, and Tate have a hushed conversation. Distracted by the tension radiating from the kitchen, I don't see Wyatt until he's sitting next to me, blocking my view.

"Hey, baby. I thought you guys were getting a coffee."

Wyatt is in a tight pair of black jeans today with a black shirt that looks like it's painted on. My mouth waters. His black hair hangs around his sharp cheekbones, and his usual clove flies through his fingers in a dance I can't follow. *Is it nervous tick?*

"We did." I smile, happy to talk with Wyatt some more. "We were going to run some of my errands together, but I fell

and hurt my tailbone pretty bad. So, he suggested ice and snacks.”

Wyatt’s cool fingers that were tracing patterns on my bare forearm stop. “You’re hurt?” My spine tingles at the deep octave of his voice.

“I’m okay.” My blush gets so much worse when Julian walks over with a bag of peas and asks me to lean forward. “Thanks,” I mumble, embarrassed to be sitting on one of their damn side dishes.

“Anything for you, Sweetness,” Julian says with a smirk. To my utter shock, he drops a kiss on my lips.

In front of Wyatt! Fuck, I don’t think I could burn any hotter than I am right now.

With a shit-eating grin, Julian winks at Wyatt and struts his firm ass back to the kitchen.

I giggle when I find I’m not the only one watching him walk away. Wyatt’s attention snaps to me. “What? He’s sexy. Don’t act like you didn’t check him out just now, too.” The grin and the subtle hint of smoke coming off Wyatt makes me want to bury my nose in his neck.

No sniffing friends.

“What do you guys do for work?” I ask, curious about their level of seriousness for a Saturday.

The look he gives me is complex. It’s like he’s trying to figure out how much to tell me. “We run security details.” *That’s so cool!* “I’m the tech guy. Comms and such. Julian and Zachary are the muscle. Bodyguards, I guess you could call them. And Tate, he—”

“I make sure you fuckers aren’t being dumb,” Tate interrupts. On the couch opposite Wyatt and me, Tate has a gleam in his eye that looks like an attempt at humor. Yet, the firm set of his jaw tells another story.

Color me intrigued.

Chapter Seventeen



Wyatt

How much does Adelyn know already? She's friends with Rylee, but how much has Rylee shared?

Tate looks completely uncomfortable, and honestly, I'm not feeling much better about this. Zach finds his own seat in the living room, looking lost in thought. Maybe he can take over the conversation.

I'm not cut out for this. How do we tell the girl we like we made a living by protecting really horrible fucking people? I'd rather shove my face back into my laptop and figure out who the fuck is digging into our shit than navigate this conversation. Not that I don't want to hang out with Addie. I really do. We just have a ton of shit to figure out before our clean slate is shit on by a bunch of shady, rich criminals. Fuck!

The self-loathing is real. The blind eye we turned to the fucked up shit that was happening around us makes me sick. I can't believe we helped people like Mason, Rylee's abusive ex.

"What do you do, Doll?"

Thank fuck for Zach diverting the question into better territory. Most people would make small talk about their job. I can't wait for the day when our career can be discussed in an easy manner without guilt nipping at my vocal cords and my body vibrating with rage.

“Oh, I’m just a waitress.” Addie shifts on her bag of frozen vegetables, twirling her hair bashfully.

Julian scoffs, seating himself on her other side. “Don’t say it like that, sweetheart. She waitresses for The Posh Palate. Fancy as hell!” he informs us with a wide smile. He may be talking to us, but his eyes are all for the blushing brunette between us.

“What made you decide to be a waitress?” Tate asks, curiosity alight in his eyes. Leaning forward, he braces his toned arms on his thighs, clearly engaged in learning more about Addie.

“Uh. It’s an easy job to get without a degree, I guess.” She nibbles on her lip like she might share something more. We don’t have to wait long before she decides. “My mom owned a restaurant, so I feel comfortable in the fast-paced environment.”

Zach hums thoughtfully. It’s Julian who voices his curiosity, though. “What does your mom do now?”

“Um,” Addie mumbles, her eyes dropping to her lap. “She’s dead.”

Ugh. I close my eyes and hang my head. I hear a choking sound, probably coming from one of the guys. The room is silent in the aftermath of her confession until Zach offers his condolences, which we all reiterate as well.

I settle my gaze on Addie just as she gives us a watery smile. “Thank you. It’s been six years since I lost them.”

“Them?” I blurt against better judgment. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Zach staring me down, most likely cursing me for not thinking before speaking. By the way her face pales and her hands tremble slightly, I regret my question.

“My mom and dad died the same night.”

“What, how?!” Tate’s tone is exasperated, voicing our collective shock and turmoil for the young girl who lost her parents.

“Tate!” Zach snaps. “I’m sorry, Adelyn. You don’t have to answer that.”

Addie shuffles on her cushion again, her butt probably frozen. “It’s okay,” she whispers. She doesn’t look up as she says, “It was an accident. A mugging gone wrong, I suppose. My dad was a cop, so he was always carrying a gun. When he tried to restrain the guy attempting to take my mom’s purse, somehow, the guy got ahold of my dad’s gun. So...” she trails off. “Instead of taking my mom’s purse, he took both their lives.”

The tears Adelyn was trying to restrain finally fall. I move just a bit faster than Julian, scooping her into my arms and sitting her across my lap. With her legs straddling my thighs, Addie’s eyes widen and my chest aches at the bright red tinge in the whites of her eyes.

“I’m so fucking sorry, sweetheart. For your loss and for bringing it up.” Julian’s voice and face are pleading with her to understand he didn’t mean to cause her distress. Scooting closer to us, he looks like he wants to reach out to her.

Her smile is soft as she grips his clenched hand. “It’s okay, Julian. I miss them, and they aren’t far from my mind all the time. Just maybe don’t bring them up around Rory.”

“Why?”

“Julian!” Zach barks. I’m honestly feeling really fucking annoyed with our loose lips today, too. If I didn’t have my baby girl in my lap, I’d hit him.

Dragging my glare from the family ginger, I find Addie frowning at him. “Um, because she’s biologically my sister?”

Um... WHAT?!

Twisting in my lap to see Zach and Tate, she says, “Did you not know this?” Her question is directed at Tate, confusion evident in her tone.

“No. How would I know that?” Tate seems baffled, his face even more pale than earlier.

“Because Rylee knows.”

Oh fuck. I know for a fact that's going to sting.

Addie doesn't mean it like that, but Tate struggles with the relationship he has with his sister. It's been four years since they reunited, and their relationship still isn't as close as he would like.

She continues. "When our parents died, I was eighteen and Aurora was two. I wouldn't allow us to be separated. So, I sold our childhood home, moved us into a two-bedroom apartment and... yeah."

What the actual fuck. This woman is far more complex than we ever thought. She is strength personified, and the admiration I feel for her makes my fingers clench on her hips.

Tucking the long strands behind her ear, I murmur, "You're so amazing, baby. Truly, and utterly *fucking* amazing." The rumble of my chest makes her eyes flutter.

"Nobody's ever said that to me," she whispers, her breath catching when I trail my thumb across her bottom lip. "Thank you."

Tears gather in her lashes again and I do the only thing I can think of to make them go away. She doesn't fight me when I use my grip on her jaw to tip her head back and angle her just how I like. As soon as my lips brush hers, tingles zap across my skin and suddenly all I can think of is giving this woman everything she wants. When my tongue brushes hers, I realize just how different kissing Addie is than my guys. She's soft and fragile beneath my touch and doesn't fight me for dominance. Her gentle, feminine moan makes me groan and wrap my other arm around her waist, tugging her body against mine.

Just as I take a nip of her bottom lip, a throat clears, breaking through our first kiss far too soon. To my utter delight, instead of flying off me, my baby girl snuggles further into me and hides her face in my throat.

"No need to be embarrassed, sweetheart," Julian soothes.

A jolt of Addie's body confuses me until I find that Julian tugged on her hand where they are still holding hands.

Knowing they were grasping onto each other during our moment makes my heart flutter in a foreign sensation. A feeling of rightness and contentment settles like a warm blanket around me. With my woman on my lap and my guys surrounding us, I smile. Not a smirk or a teasing grin; *a real smile.*

Chapter Eighteen



Adelyn

I just kissed Wyatt while holding Julian's hand. I kissed two men today.

My body fizzles with the urge to do more, but my mind is trying to break free from Wyatt's controlled presence. Like with Julian, my racing thoughts slow, but for different reasons. In Wyatt's arms, I feel seen and like this man will always have my back; like I can count on him.

I don't know these guys, but I have never felt so at peace before. When Zach held me through my breakdown this past week, I felt like I could truly just exist. His power and all-encompassing attention allowed me to do nothing, to, for once, *be* nothing.

I'm uncertain about Tate. The time we have spent together has been stilted and awkward, but my thoughts shift around him. He doesn't necessarily calm me. He challenges me like maybe there's more to life than my lists.

Are they still strangers? Maybe not. I mean, I partied with them. Hell, I've been snuggling a few of them, kissed two, and fucked one. Maybe they aren't strangers anymore.

Forcing myself to shove my embarrassment away, I shift off Wyatt's lap and settle myself on the bag of frozen veggies again. Julian steals my hand back, and Wyatt presses his thigh up against mine. It's easy, like we've always done this. My

brain attempts to freak the fuck out, but in the presence of the guys, I can just sit.

“So, you promised snacks,” I tease, hoping to eliminate the silence. Julian snorts and gives me a peck on the cheek before making his way to the kitchen. I miss his hand almost instantly. “How did you guys meet?”

Beside me, Wyatt stiffens, but Zach is quick to draw my attention. “Julian and I met in elementary school and immediately became friends.”

“The original duo! I balanced his cranky ass out with my jokes.” Julian shouts from the kitchen with a cheeky grin. I can’t help my giggle.

Zach smiles at him over his shoulder. “Yup. Julian and I were inseparable, even though he got on my nerves. We met Wyatt in middle school when—”

Wyatt clears his throat, cutting Zach off. Turning to him, I see his jaw clenched tight, but he releases it with a sigh. “My dad got a promotion, so we moved to Seattle from North Dakota.” He shrugs, and I can’t help but feel like there’s far more to their stories.

I leave it be and ask my next question instead, “What about you, Tate?” I swear everybody freezes for a beat.

“Um,” Tate murmurs, twisting his hands in his lap. “Zach and Julian were someone’s security detail at a gala I was at with my parents in high school.”

Julian drops a few plates of crackers, meat, and cheese on the coffee table in front of me. The bottle of water he gives me wobbles with the tremble in his hand. “Wait, how old are you guys?” I ask between bites. *I feel like I’m missing so much.*

Zachary takes the lead again. “I’m thirty. Wyatt and Julian are twenty-nine. And Tate’s twenty-two.”

My eyes widen, really fucking intrigued about the age gap. “I’m older than Wyatt,” Julian mock-whispers in my ear. A huff of laughter puffs out of me when Wyatt shoves his shoulder behind me.

“Is being older a good thing at your old age?”

A shocked laugh bursts from my lips, completely taken by surprise at Tate’s joke. Zach narrows his eyes at the dirty blonde reclining on the couch. Tate’s shit-eating grin makes my giggles persist in their attack. Wyatt’s shoulders bounce, puffs of air signaling his humor.

“Hey! At least I’m not thirty!” Julian retorts, a pout gracing his lips. His mouth tips up into a grin when Zach reacts with a scoff.

“We both know I can kick your ass, Jules. Even from all the way up here at thirty years old.” My body heats at the threat Zach gives Julian.

“Ugh. Not this again,” Wyatt groans. “We get it, ‘kay? You’re both old, and you work out. Baby girl, tell them to keep their dicks in their pants, please? I’m sick of their grandpa pissing contests.”

I smirk at the dark-haired God sprawled out beside me. “Hm, I don’t know. Keeping their dicks in their pants seems like a crime.”

Wyatt’s black eyes darken with lust, making me shiver from head to toe. Tate’s hands fly to his mouth in an attempt to keep his bark of laughter at bay. Zach’s eyes widen, but his dimples are out to play with a big smile bunching his scruffy cheeks. Julian gasps and whispers, “I think I just fell in love.”

My jaw drops before I dissolve into a fit of glee. I check my phone, still smiling, while they continue to rib each other. A pang of sadness settles in my tummy when I see the time. “Hey, I have to leave for work now. Thank you for having me over.”

Standing, I offer Julian the moist bag of frozen veggies and make my way to the front door. Snagging my keys and slipping my sandals on, I jolt when I see all four of them have followed me to the entryway.

Julian uses my surprise and his place closest to me to lean in. I shudder as his thumb and forefinger grip my chin. He

gives me a moment to say no, which I don't. Julian makes me want to enjoy life, and right now, his lips sound wonderful.

Our kiss is gentle, not more than a swift touch of our tongues that makes me melt and yearn for more. Julian's quickly replaced by Wyatt, who bypasses my lips and nuzzles beside my ear. "See you soon, baby." The kiss he drops to my sensitive skin scorches my insides.

While attempting to blink away the lusty haze these two put me under, Zach presses a full bottle of water into my empty hand. I so badly want to drag my nails through his scruff and mess up his perfectly slicked-back brown hair. "Drink this entire bottle during your shift, Dolly."

"I'll walk you out," Tate says, interrupting my thoughts on making Zach say please.

I'm out the door in a flash with Tate's hand on my lower back. Facing him once we get to my car, I see concern and wariness dragging on his features. "Hey, what's wrong, Tate?" Stuffing my bottle of water under my arm, I grab hold of his forearm that isn't dragging through his hair.

Gulping, he shuffles on his feet. "I need to apologize for how I spoke to you last weekend. I was disrespectful and very presumptuous. Honestly, I had planned on asking you out and completely ruined it. I'm sorry."

I frown, taken aback at yet another apology today. "It's okay. Don't worry about it."

"It's not okay, Addie. I just... I made a mess of things. I'm sorry." Tate's free hand goes to the chain around his neck, fiddling with the charm I have yet to see up close. "Can I take you on a date, Lynn timer? Please let me make it up to you."

The burn of tears is immediate, and it takes a tremendous amount of effort to swallow the lump of emotion in my throat. Maybe it's the genuine look on this sweet man's face or his use of the nickname my parents used to call me, but he has me. Right here and now, Tate steals my breath, and I say yes.



I'm never leaving my bed. *Ever*. My right foot brushes over a cool spot on the sheets, dragging me further into my pillow. *So good.*

"Mom!" Rory's whisper shouts through the crack of my bedroom door, *almost* making me groan. I hold it in for the sake that I don't want my kid to think she's a nuisance. I'm happy she's home, and I owe Gabby a drink for picking her up at Rylee's for me.

"What, honey?" I murmur into the sheets, my eyes popping out from the comforter. In blue sweatpants and a matching T-shirt, Rory pads her way towards me. Once she's in range, I snatch her shirt and tug her into the lump that is my nest of blankets and pillows.

"MOM!"

I smile at her twinkly laughter, enjoying an easy Sunday morning with my daughter. "You're home early," I muse as she wiggles around beside me.

Finally, in a seated position, she gives me a half-hearted glare that looks so damn cute with her small smile. "It's like 10:30!"

"What?" I gasp. My attempt at clawing my way out from beneath my covers makes Rory laugh again. Some of the guilt and panic over sleeping in so late eases at her easy joy.

"Gabby and I got home a few minutes ago. She told me to tell you she has coffee and muscle."

"I—what?!"

Gabby chooses that moment to waltz herself into my bedroom. Dressed in a simple pair of shorts and a t-shirt with her pink hair in a bun, she looks ready to tackle the day. "What's taking so long in here?!" she accuses, cocking her hip with an attitude I hope like hell doesn't brush off on Rory.

“Move before you hurt yourself!” A deep voice from my living room has me shooting out of bed in one uncoordinated movement.

“Gabby!” I hiss. “Is that Zach?!”

“OW!” another manly voice shouts.

Gabby wipes the cringe from her face and gives me a big grin. “And Wyatt. Julian and Tate, too!”

“And why are they here on a Sunday morning?” I grit through my teeth, trying like hell to remember if anything weird is lying around out there.

“It’s basically afternoon. Since when do you sleep this late, by the way? I texted you like an hour ago.” Gabby picks at her nails like she isn’t crossing boundaries right now. Rory snorts and winces, mumbling about needing to pee before rushing into my bathroom.

“Gabby, for real?” Swallowing my annoyance, I ask, “What are they doing here?”

“Oh!” My pink-haired friend bounces on her toes. “They brought the most adorable bookshelves to build for you!”

“Why?” I ask again, confusion and frustration weighing down the light tone I had intended to use. Gabby means well. She really does, but she doesn’t understand boundaries sometimes. Rylee and I are used to her making herself at home in our space, but sometimes it’s rough on my nerves.

Gabby pouts and frowns at me. “You’ve had your piles of books on the floor for far too long, babe. Let the sexy men build you a nice bookshelf while we watch and drink our coffees.”

Well... when she says it like that...

A short ten minutes later, with brushed hair and teeth, I’m dressed in cozy shorts and my dad’s old sweatshirt.

“Good morning, sweetheart!” Julian greets loudly as I pad my way into the living room.

Gabby hands me my coffee and coffee cake when I slump beside her on the couch. “Good morning, everyone,” I murmur, a little embarrassed, and hide my face behind my straw.

Rory sits with Wyatt on the floor, a large as hell directions sheet lying in front of them. They’re talking quietly and pointing at different things and making Tate and Zach organize all the pieces.

“That’s a cool sweatshirt, Linnie,” Tate says, smiling softly at me and greeting me with a kiss, having snuck away from the building team.

I blush. “Thank you. It was my dad’s,” I whisper, running a finger down the battered sleeve.

“Did he graduate from USC?” Tate’s head tilts, his curiosity making my tummy flutter. I feel like he really wants to know me. I nod. “Do you plan on going there too someday?”

It’s too early for hard questions. Especially when all eyes are on me. I shrug, trying to play my disappointment off like it doesn’t matter. “No. My dream was New York. Fashion degree. Expensive tiny apartment.”

I keep it short and simple, hoping they’ll just leave it at that. I really don’t want to talk about lost dreams with Rory in the room. She may not quite understand or even be listening to me as she moves the bookshelf pieces around, but I never want her to feel blamed for the future that I couldn’t have. It’s nobody’s fault besides the man that killed our parents.

Tate frowns. I internally curse, knowing he’s not going to let it go. “Was?”

I nod, biting my lip, uncertain what to say right now. Gabby saves me, kicking her foot into Tate’s hip and lifting a brow, her gaze darting to Rory.

Tate pales slightly, looking from my kid to me. Before he can apologize, I smile and shake my head before saying, “I think they need your help.”

Zach, Julian, and Wyatt heard our conversation, but they're choosing to stick with their task and not dredge up any more painful memories for me. I appreciate it almost as much as I appreciate Wyatt in a ripped black tank. He looks like an emo wet dream bent over those wooden boards and panels.

I sip my coffee and watch the chaos unfold. My living room might be totally destroyed by the time the four of them and Rory are done with the bookshelf, but it's going to be absolutely entertaining.

Chapter Nineteen



Tate

“Fuck!” Wyatt spits, furiously tapping away on his laptop. “I don’t know how much longer I can keep them out. Whoever this is, is really fucking good. Why can’t they just let us go?!”

Zach watches on with a pinched look, which I should definitely be mimicking, but I have my own dilemma. *Where the hell am I going to take Adelyn on our date?* Halting my spinning phone on the table, I stand, make my way upstairs, and dial the only person I trust to help.

“Hey, what’s up?” Rylee’s cheerful voice settles some of my nerves. Ollie giggling in the background makes me smile.

“Hey, sis,” I respond and close my bedroom door behind me. “I need your advice.” Looking around my space, I realize I should probably clean it up just in case Lynn timer comes home with me. Which is presumptuous as fuck, but better clean than sloppy.

I hear shuffling down the line before the background noise cuts off. “Whatcha need?”

My lips purse, embarrassment making it hard to get the words out. With a sigh, I tip my head back and stare at the ceiling. “Where should I take Adelyn for a date?”

“OMG!” she squeals. “When are you taking her out?! This is so amazing!”

Glancing at the alarm clock on my nightstand, I cringe. “I’m picking her up in an hour.”

Rylee chokes. “AN HOUR?! Tate, what the hell? ‘Kay, here’s what we’re gonna do...”



“Electric scooters?!” Adelyn bounces on the balls of her feet, her head whipping from me to the two scooters. I would be worried that it’s a stupid idea, but her blue eyes are sparkling more than the ocean behind her. “On the boardwalk?!”

Nibbling my lip, I hope her wide smile is one of excitement. “Is that okay?” The wind whips my dirty blond hair in my eyes, blinding me of the woman throwing herself in my arms.

“Are you kidding?! This is amazing!” Plopping a kiss on the corner of my mouth, she skips away.

My throat bobs. Something about the way her tiny body fits against mine hits me right in the soul. I’m used to being the smallest among the guys, and it’s never been an issue. I’m their boy, and I fucking love it. But this, *this* is what I—we’ve been missing. A woman to hold and cherish.

When Rylee told me to take Adelyn scootering on the boardwalk, I thought she was fucking with me. She deserves the best, like high-end wine and any fancy shit. My big sister told me that what Adelyn deserves is *fun*. I almost laughed, confused, but realized Ry was right. Adelyn spends her time taking care of everyone and everything else around her.

So, while we fly along the beach, the other three guys are at home grilling and waiting for us to come home for a fire. Simple, relaxing, and fun.

“Not so fast, Linnie,” I tease when she places one foot on the scooter deck. My stomach drops when her brows furrow and the twinkle in her eyes shudder and warps with moisture. Before my concern can truly freak me out, her strange reaction

melts into warmth and something else I can't quite name. I hold out one of the helmets tucked beside the scooters. "Zach would kill me if he found out you weren't being safe."

She tosses her brown ponytail over her shoulder with a huff. Linnie might play the bratty act fairly well, but when she snatches the helmet out of my hand, the small smile that tilts her lips gives away her enjoyment.

Strapping on my helmet, I breathe in the salty air of South Carolina. *God, I'm so happy we moved here.* The thundering claps of the waves crashing against the shore lull me into a trance. A hazy image clouds my vision; one where my family and I spend holidays with my sister. My future kids shouting for me to toss them around in the water. A future better than my past.

"WOOHOO!"

The feminine shout snaps me out of my wayward thoughts. Neck pinching, I swivel my head, trying to find my date. "Fuck!" I curse and thrust back the kickstand.

Linnie shrinks the further down the boardwalk she gets, making my heart thump uncomfortably in my chest. Going fuck knows how fast, my girl is racing away from me and cackling her head off.

Shit, shit, shit. If she gets hurt, I'll never forgive myself. Or my sister. *Take her scooting,* she said. *It would be fun,* she said.

After finally catching up to Adelyn, we spend the better half of two hours chasing seagulls and dodging hyper children. I don't regret the many times I almost shit myself wobbling on the damn scooter because I couldn't look away from my girl. I spend far more time memorizing the laugh lines around her mouth and the furrow of her brow when she's focused on staying upright.

The Linnie I have come to know these past five weeks since Layla's birthday party has always been a buzz of energy. If Adelyn had a background noise, it would be the buzzing of a bee. I swear she goes a million miles per hour, but seeing her

use her energy for fun on our date makes my chest puff with pride. I don't remember the last time I smiled so much, either. There's a swirling storm of darkness that laps at the shores of her ice-blue eyes, but the shine that keeps her nightmares at bay? That's all her.

"Let's get you some dinner," I murmur into her tussled hair. With my arm around her shoulders, a shudder tingles my spine as she wraps her arm around my waist. Without a second thought, Adelyn leans into my side and grins up at me.

Reaching for the handle of my car, my breath stutters to a halt as Linnie twists in my grip and presses her chest against me. "I had the *best* day. Thank you so much, Tate." Thick eyelashes fluttering, she tips her head back.

"Linnie," I whisper. Her chest hitches at the same time as her pink lips pop open. Tucking a loose strand of her wind-blown hair behind her ear, I say, "You are so beautiful."

A teeny whimper flees from her parted lips. Then we're one, fused together by our attraction and desire. The tendons in my hand flex and grip the back of her neck, hauling her into me. For once, I'm the bigger one. The man whose hand spans the entirety of her back and controls each caress of our tongues.

This woman makes me feel like a man.

Chapter Twenty



Adelyn

I'm on cloud fucking nine. My anxieties are muted, and I'm pleasantly full. Although, much to Zach's dismay, I only ate half my burger. *Eye roll.* I *could* point out how much his dress socks, black sweatpants, and off-black t-shirt bother me, but I won't. *I'll hold on to my ammo for now.* The chips, though, my fingers haven't been empty since the bag landed on the cushion beside me. The crackling of the fire matches the guys' laughter, making me feel warm and gooey on the inside.

Tate and I got here a few hours ago, and honestly, the night has been easy. Normally, to feel this relaxed, I'd have to drink a little, but I've been too content with my hot cocoa to change it up. Speaking of my campfire beverage, I need another. Tipping the bag of chips in the other direction, I stifle a laugh when Julian's hand immediately finds the opening. The blanket on my lap is hard to part with, but I leave it in my seat to keep it warm.

Twinkly lights brighten the space enough to give it a warm, cozy glow. It's like a damn Xanax to my senses, I swear. I round the couch Julian and I are sharing, and his head tips back. The smile he gives me draws me in like a moth to a flame. The energy of each man keeps my worries of multiple relationships at bay. I pepper his lips with a couple of kisses and pad my way through their backdoor.

I don't think we're just friends anymore. And honestly, I'm really damn giddy about it.

Feeling like air, I make another hot chocolate and glide my way back down the hallway. My attempt at keeping the bugs from entering is a struggle while carrying a bowl of chocolate-covered almonds in one hand and my drink in the other. Cocking a hip, I grip the bowl under my arm and shift out the door, tugging it quickly behind me.

Shattering glass and a high-pitched keen reach my ears. Confusion muddles my brain before searing hot pain registers. My right thigh burns like a lighter is being held up to it in an attempt to fuse my ripped skin back together.

“ADDIE!”

Folding in half, the nausea burning my throat threatens my attempt at gathering myself. I whimper, swallowing bile. My knees wobble, and I stumble towards the doorframe again. My movements are jerky with the need to check my thigh. *I need... I need...*

A touch on my bicep, a breath of air tickling my neck. Gentle words. “Baby girl, look at me.” Wyatt prodding the racing pulse on my shaky wrist. His voice turns to thunder. “Zach!”

I need to... I need to fix it. It's all wrong. I have to take my pain back. It's mine. I need...

Shifting air and charged energy. A hand on my wrist forcing my grip from the doorframe. Thick words. “Doll?” I'm airborne. My body shifts and bunches against a solid body.

It's mine. My pain. My healing. Why am I hurting? A tickle on my cheek. Hushed voices follow my descent into madness. Claws rip my throat into ribbons and force out painful cries.

MINE! My pain... my healing. I need...

Chapter Twenty-One



Zachary

“Is she spending the night?”

Looking up from the dancing flames, I see Julian’s soft gaze latched on the door. I assume he’s directing his question at Tate, since tonight is technically his date.

Tate hums. “I don’t think so. She said Gabby was watching Dino until she got home.” I smile at his use of Rory’s nickname. “I’ll have to drive her home, so I’m not drinking.”

In content silence, our eyes shift to the door when it squeaks open. I smother a laugh at her balancing act and stand to help the poor girl. Any previous humor fizzles out in a douse of dread. What I see doesn’t make sense. The pieces don’t add up.

Addie’s fumbling with the door causes her right thigh to scrape against the metal latch. I’m too far away. Lurching forward, I move to help, only to be stunned in place by the high-pitched cry that rips from her parted lips.

“ADDIE!” Julian shouts.

Her stumble sends the coffee mug and bowl clattering to the ground, the shattering sound shocking her into silence. It’s too dark to see her thoughts playing out on her face, but I don’t need a front-row seat to her facial expressions when I see my sweet girl’s body fold in half.

Addie's whimper is like a stab to my gut as she flips around to latch onto the doorframe. The sounds of her labored breathing snap me out of my stupor just as Wyatt reaches her. His gentle cooing drips with worry and emotion until it overflows with a shout of my name.

I can't move fucking fast enough. My doll needs me, and I was just standing there like a damn fool. Passing Wyatt in my haste, I catch distress in his wild black eyes—feeling just as useless as I do.

“Doll?” My attempt at softness comes out thick with my turmoil. No response.

I have no idea what the hell is happening, and if I don't know what's wrong, how the hell am I supposed to help my girl?!

Adelyn screws her eyes shut, tears popping through with every frantic breath she takes. She shakes her head like she's trying to dislodge something unwanted from her mind. Her brown ponytail doesn't allow her to hide from me, and what I see on her face makes me snap. My baser instincts kick in. I bend, tucking my arm behind her knees, and scoop her off the ground.

A soul rattling sob makes my ears ring, and my mind goes blank aside from the necessities. Her pure torment wraps around us suffocatingly.

Make sure Addie's comfortable. Check to see if she's hurt. Wrap her in a blanket. Make my dolly drink water.

Behind me, Julian begs for answers while Wyatt follows, hot on my heels. Tate's been quiet, and a sudden need to make sure he's okay is tacked onto my list.

Make sure Tate's okay. Check to see if he's triggered. Wrap Wyatt around him. Make my boy focus on his five senses.

Addie's breath wooshes across my neck as I set her on the kitchen island. The couch will come soon, but I need light and space to check her over first. “I need...” Her broken plea trails off with a wobble of her bottom lip.

“What do you need, Doll? Tell me what’s wrong.” I can feel my body vibrating between her spread legs, but it’s nothing on the way her body trembles beneath me.

Gripping her chin when she doesn’t respond to me, her eyes finally pop open with a wild look that punches me in the chest. Ripping out of my hold, her head whips back and forth like she’s trying to find something. Looking around us as well, I see Wyatt staring on with wide eyes, Tate’s shaking and looks like he’s on the verge of tears, while Julian has his hands up in surrender and whispering words my ears are drowning out.

Since she’s not actively trying to get off the counter or push me away, I listen to her broken ramblings and start my pursuit for injuries. My hands shake as I trail my fingers across her neck and down her shoulders, taking in every minor detail. Random jerks of her dainty body set me on edge, but I don’t stop. If I can just find a—

“Addie...” I breathe, shock strangling my throat. The shaking of my hands increases as I hover over the rapidly growing blood stain on her jeans. My panic reaches hers at an unfathomable height. “Addie,” I try again. *My dolly is fucking hurt!*

Wiggling on the counter, my hands grip her hips in a firm hold. My earlier worries about touching her are completely gone. She whimpers again, making Wyatt step forward. “What is it?” His voice wobbles with uncertainty and fear.

From how I’m crowding her, it’s no wonder the guys haven’t noticed the blood between us. “Wyatt, get the first aid kit. NOW!”

Blood drains from his face, yet he still questions me. “What do you—”

“NOW!” My loud command scares the shit out of the woman in my arms, so much so that she shoves me away. The combined torrent of emotions in the kitchen is ripping my nerves to fucking shreds.

“Wha-what are you doing?” Her voice is soft and vulnerable as her lips wobble and tears drip from her jaw. My shout must have pulled her out of whatever hell she was trapped in. Shadows blacken her eyes still, telling me that even though she’s snapped out of it, my dolly is fucking suffering still.

I step into her space once again, a hand set to my jaw. The fear and horror of seeing so much blood on her thigh is hard to bottle up, but the need to fix it overrides my emotions. *My woman is hurt and bleeding in my home... again.*

“Addie, I need you to take your pants off.”

Julian chokes. “Zach, what the fuck!?”

I point to her thigh. “She’s fucking bleeding!” I snap and ignore the gasps around me. Addie’s body stiffens, so I soften my voice for her. “Please, Dolly. Pants off. I need to see how bad it is.”

She’s shaking her head like it’s an option. “No. I-I’m okay. It’s j-just a scratch.” Her teeth chatter around her hesitant words.

“Here.” Wyatt drops the first aid kit on the counter beside her hip and halts in his tracks before stepping away again. “Holy fuck,” he whispers, eyes on her leg.

I growl. “Last chance, Doll. You either take them off, or I will.” I don’t fucking care if I sound like a heartless bastard. She’s bleeding far too much for *anyone* to ignore.

I reach for the buttons of her jeans, but she quickly bats my hands away. “No! Stop, Zach. P-please.” I growl, but she’s quick to drown me out. “I can do it. I’ll go to the bathroom and clean up, I p-promise. I’m fine.”

Opening my mouth to unleash my argument, I’m caught off guard when Tate takes control. “Please, Lynn timer. You’re safe with us, remember?”

“But you’ll be mad at me!” Addie gulps, her shoulders curl in on herself. There’s no way in fuck I’m letting this go. She’s bled in my home before, and we let it go. Not this time.

“Please, don’t make me,” she whispers, pleading with Tate to hear her.

I watch as Tate’s watery gaze flicks to her thigh before returning to the safety of her face. He swallows and closes the space between them. “Look at me, Linnie.” A tear falls from his lashes as he allows this woman to see his trauma. “I’m scared too, but I’m still here. I’m safe, just like you are, and I know my guys will take care of me. I need you to let them care for you now, too. You aren’t alone in your fear. Look at them.”

Releasing a shaky breath, she studies each of us. Julian doesn’t hide his labored breathing or the frown marring his features. Wyatt allows her to see his wild black eyes and parted lips. When her gaze trails over my body, I don’t unclench my fists or mask the burning need to help her.

Tate swipes a tear off her cheek. “See? We’re all scared. You aren’t alone, Linnie. Helping you will help us. You’re safe,” he repeats.

With a shuddering puff of air, Dolly gulps and averts eye contact. “O-okay. Just... please don’t...” she trails off, her poor lip chapping with each nibble she takes.

“Don’t what?” Tate murmurs, and it takes a considerable amount of effort not to go to him too. His eyes are rimmed red, and he looks like he might throw up.

Addie’s eyes soften at the soothing cadence of his voice. “Don’t judge me,” she chokes out on a watery sob.

“Never,” Tate says with a determined nod. He gives her hand a squeeze before gripping my shirt and tugging me away from Addie.

Every instinct in my body roars at the distance between us. My muscles bunch, and my tennis shoes skid across the tile of the kitchen floor with reluctance.

Gingerly, Addie shifts her weight around and drops off the counter. We each take a collective step toward her when she cringes, holding in her gasp of pain.

Fuck. Was there a fucking nail sticking out of the damn doorway?! If something had cut her, wouldn’t there have been

a hole in her jeans?

My thoughts jumble as we watch Addie's trembling form work the buttons and zipper of her jeans. Her soft cries and jerking shoulders make my chest ache, like each jolt of her body squeezes my heart tighter.

"Baby girl?" Wyatt says, worry through his tone.

With her thumbs in the waistband of her jeans, she pauses and decides to rip my heart to fucking shreds with her plea. "Please don't hate me." Her eyes don't lift from the ground as her hands shift the fabric down. With each inch, a breathy wail escapes her chest.

Her jeans hit the floor.

Chapter Twenty-Two



Julian

As the fabric pools at Addie's feet, the world stops spinning on its axis. My body reacts like Bella's did when she turned into a vampire. Minus the broken back. It feels like seeing the marred flesh of Addie's thighs has completely rewritten the composition of my blood, muscles, and bones.

My heart stops and restarts like it needs to take a beat to gather itself before facing life again. Tingles race across my skin as my entire being reboots and updates. The numbness that threatened to drag me to the floor skitters away, leaving tingles in its wake.

Silence. Sniffles. A whimper. A gasp.

"I-I'm sorry," Addie breaks the shocked silence.

Her trembling body breaks me out of my horrified daze. "Come on, sweetheart." Kneeling in front of her, I help her feet out of the stained jeans. Wavering slightly when I stand, I take her hand in mine and pull her from the kitchen.

"Wyatt, help Tate, please," Zach murmurs in our wake. The crack in his husky voice makes me ache to comfort everyone. I didn't see how everyone reacted to the marks on Addie's thighs, but I know my guys enough to guess their reactions. Wyatt will distract himself by grounding Tate, and Zach won't be too far behind us.

Turning on the main level bathroom light, I fight the burn of my eyes as I listen to her snuffle. I grip her hips and set her on the counter. “Sorry,” I murmur when she gasps at the cool tile against her bare skin.

“Jules?” she whispers, grabbing my arm before I can pull away. “Are you... are you mad at me?”

Fuck. Immediately whipping my gaze to hers, I find roaring depths of fear and uncertainty looking back at me. “Of course not, Addie! Fuck, sweetheart. I’m terrified,” I breathe.

Her mouth makes an ‘O’ as Zach shuffles through the door. He looks shell-shocked but determined as fuck as he glares down at Addie’s thighs. The first aid kit clanks against the counter, making her jolt as she eyes the big guy with worry.

Grabbing a few washcloths, I wet one in the sink while Zach gathers what we need from the kit of bandages and ointments. Tears threaten again as my hand nears the bloody flesh of my sweetheart’s thigh. With each swipe of blood, more raised skin is uncovered. Some are bright red and scabbed, while others are pink or white. Fresh cuts, healing cuts, and scarred cuts. Both upper thighs match; a map of crisscrossing turmoil. A battle ground where she fights her demons.

“Sorry, sweetness,” I murmur in response to her hissed whimper. Zach stands back, gripping the bottle of disinfectant hard enough I worry he’ll break it. With the blood gone, I finally see the slice that was bleeding.

“No, no, no, no!” Addie’s hands slam against the sides of her thigh, making more droplets of blood rise to the surface.

“Sweetheart,” I start, but her choked sob and shaking head cut me off.

“No! It was healing! It was supposed to be okay!”

Panicked when the red droplets start dripping down her leg again, I grip her wrists and yank them away before she does any more damage. “Addie, stop. I need to clean this.” The

puckered skin around the cut looks like it was attached to a pretty big scab, and I really don't want it to get infected.

“NO!”

Addie's shout scares the shit out of me, but I don't let go of her arms, afraid she'll hurt herself even more. I mean *fuck!* She's been intentionally hurting herself for a long time. This sweet, beautiful woman has been self-harming for longer than I can stomach. There are so many white lines crisscrossed with new, colorful ones. *I can't. I just can't.* I need her to stop. I can't handle my wisp of a woman doing this any longer.

“DOLLY!”

Addie and I both jump at Zach's shout. Her eyes widen, and her body stalls all movement. With her attention focused on Zach, I release her wrists and clean her up.

“You will sit still like a good doll while Julian cleans your leg. You will take deep breaths with me, and you won't fucking move. Do you understand me?” I look up to see her nod, and am shocked to shit to see Zach's hand wrapped lightly around her throat. “That's my good doll. You sit so pretty for me.”

Zach's praise settles some of the shakes in Adelyn's limbs, and I shit you not, she melts for him. Her reaction seems to relax him too, but I know my man is strung really damn tight. Zachary might be letting his questions go for now so we can get her patched up, but there's no way in fuck he's allowing this to be swept under the rug.

Addie's thighs were the reason she bled on my bed. Son of a bitch! Fuck. It was in front of us all along, yet we ignored the signs. Like when Zach touched her thigh at Layla's birthday party. Oh my god. When she ran to her room the night of her nightmare and came back ashen and sick-looking.

Before I know it, I have her fresh cut coated in ointment and bandaged up. “There you go, sweetheart. Now it can heal in peace.” I step back, swallowing the ball of emotion in my throat. Looking at her face again, I see some color has returned.

She gasps, eyeing the bandage and running her fingers over it gently. A small smile lights up her face. “Thank you, Jules.” Her voice is small, but her tears have dried, and she truly looks happy with my work.

“Baby girl?” Wyatt pops his head into the bathroom and keeps his eyes trained on her face, not allowing his gaze to drop to her legs. “I have some sweatpants for you.”

“Thanks,” she whispers. Addie eyes him with a hesitancy that draws Wyatt in like he needs to wipe the look away.

I lean against the wall, impressed when Wyatt’s hands grip her bare knees and spreads them enough to stand between her legs. “You are so beautiful, baby. This changes nothing, you hear me? Now stop looking at me like that. You have me.”

“Okay,” she whispers, pupils dilating as he leans in. They share a gentle kiss before he leaves the bathroom.

“Time to get dressed, Dolly. We need to talk.” With a soft caress, Zach runs his hands down her calves and props one of her feet on his thigh. He’s fucking intense as he works the grey sweatpants up her legs and over her hips once she stands in front of him. Addie gulps at the same time I do. Zach’s tolerance for holding back has run out.

Chapter Twenty-Three



Adelyn

The world feels like it can't hold me. Like I'm the pebbles of sand falling through its fingertips. I can't get a grip on my surroundings. My vision wavers from blurry smudges of color to tunneled shadows.

"We are so disappointed in you, Linnie."

"They are disgusted with you."

I'm so out of it that I swear the taunting voices sound like Mom and Daddy. I hold on to the deep cadence of my dad's voice, like it's the only thing that can tether me to this reality.

"What did we ever do to deserve a daughter so damaged?"

Color blinds me momentarily, making me wish for the darkness to swallow me whole, but... "Mommy?" The figures in front of me waver and blur before I find my parents looking at me like I'm nothing but shit on their shoes.

"What's wrong with you, Linnie? Is this for attention?" Mom's hand shoots out, pointing to my legs.

Confused, I frown and look down, but what I see isn't shocking. My thighs are a mess, like they have been since my parents died. What is shocking is the way the two people I love the most in the world are looking at me.

"For attention?" I don't hide my cuts and scars; they've seen them now. "W-what are you talking about?"

Mom scoffs, her brown hair whipping around her as she turns on her heels and walks away from me. I turn to Daddy, not ready for what he has to say. “Those men. They won’t love you after this.”

“Love me?” I feel like my mind is moving ten syllables behind.

Dad scowls. “No, they don’t love you, Adelyn.” My heart slams against my rib cage painfully. His words don’t hurt as bad as his use of my full name. “Nobody could love someone who does that.” He grunts, his lips twisting in a sneer as his hand waves at my legs.

“I—” I choke when he spins around and stomps away. “What do you mean, Daddy? I-I’m sorry. I just... it makes me feel better. It’s the only thing in the world I can control. I hurt so much, Dad!” I shout, my panic rising at rapid speed the further he gets from me. “Losing you and Mom hurts so, so much. This way, I can control my pain... don’t you see? This makes me better! You have to understand! I’m a better mom because of it!”

But he’s gone. My daddy left me because I’m a disappointment. I’m disgusting... like Mom said. Who could love someone like me?

“Nobody.”

Startled, I whip around, only to find four sets of backs moving away from me as well. “Guys?! Julian!”

Yet, my silly ginger doesn’t make a move to show he heard me. “Tate! Wyatt, please!” Nothing. Not even a twitch or a hesitation. “ZACH! I swear I’ll stop! PLEASE COME BACK!”

Zach stops walking. My heart lurches, reaching out for his understanding and guidance. I need him like I need air. He can help me. Zach will help me be better. I swear I’ll be better. I just need him. I need them.

His scruffy jaw angles until it’s visible over his shoulder. There’s not a smile in sight, just a cold mask that makes me splinter. “Nobody plays with broken dolls.”

I shatter. My jagged pieces hit the ground. My porcelain skin clatters and detonates into tiny pieces that can never be recovered. I am what Zach said... A broken doll.

Fire licking up my throat and scorching my eyeballs has nothing on the offensive alarm blaring from my bedside table.

“Oh fuck!” I hiss, kicking the blankets off my sweaty limbs. Clambering off the bed, saliva pools in my mouth and I barely make it to the toilet before I vomit out the meager contents of my tummy. “Fuuuuck,” I groan, tears streaming down my face.

My bare knees flare painfully, telling me I hit the tiles too hard. My body convulses like it’s demanding my damn attention. I heave until nothing but spit drips from my mouth. Grunting, I fall back against the cupboards and listen to the soothing sounds of the toilet flushing. Yes, soothing. It’s better than the garbled sounds that were coming from me and my raging alarm from the other room.

My bare ass protests as I scooch around to rummage through my drawers for some mouthwash. In a pair of my coziest panties and, looking down, I see I’m wearing the black shirt Zach had on last night. It smells faintly of fire and his usual sandalwood scent.

Ignoring the strange attire, I crack the bottle and swish around some much-needed mouthwash. I gag a bit at the strong taste and spit it out in the toilet beside me.

I hang my head, catching sight of my bandaged leg. *Fuck, last night was a lot.* Bits of my nightmare assault my mind so much that my lip wobbles, even if it wasn’t true. The guys didn’t react like that in the slightest, and I know Mom and Dad would never think of me like that. *I think.*

More tears tickle my cheeks as I remember how the conversation with the guys truly went after they cleaned me up.

Tate was quiet on Wyatt’s lap. I felt horrible, I still do, about how I triggered him. Wyatt looked at both Tate and me with a look so soft I didn’t realize he was capable of it. Julian

continued being the calming presence, even though I could literally see him vibrating. Yet, his thumb rubbed soothing circles on my palm while Zach stared me down.

Multiple times, Zach's mouth opened and closed like he wasn't sure what to say. Finally, he rasped out, "*You can't do this to yourself anymore, Doll. I-I can't take it. Fuck, I'm so scared.*"

I sat there in silence, confused and really fucking exhausted. When I looked around at all the guys, their terror and sadness were vivid enough for anyone to see. We sat in silence while I tried to gather my thoughts. Their emotions and stares were absolutely fucking suffocating. It was an intervention and one I didn't think would ever change anything.

"Please, Linnie."

It was Tate who reached me, though. I didn't promise anything, nor did I say a word. I gazed into Tate's red-rimmed eyes from across the room and saw the torment I was causing him. There was no judgment in his bright blue eyes, only concern, care, and fear.

Instead, I gave Tate a gentle nod and allowed my body to sink against Julian. It wasn't an agreement, it was simply '*I hear you*'. Sleep must have claimed me because the only thing I remember after that is the damn nightmare and vomiting my guts up.

Distantly, I realize my alarm is off now. A rumbly voice punctuates a soft noise from my bedroom. "Knock, knock."

I gasp a little, but other than that, I have zero fucking energy to care that Zach is somehow in my apartment. My head lulls against the cupboards until I'm facing the doorway where a shirtless Zachary stands. I'm stuck on his firm pecks and deep V pointing into his low-slung black sweatpants when he moves into the bathroom. His abs are subtle, but I think I love it. I don't need someone completely ripped and showcasing each muscle at every moment. I mean, hell, Zach might as well take up every inch of my bathroom with his dominant energy and thick body.

My view of his body folds in on itself when he crouches beside the toilet. His furrowed brow and pinched pink lips enter my vision. Lust fades away, replaced by a ball of emotion filling my throat until all that comes out is a whimper.

The pathetic sound sends Zach into motion, and before I can even blink, he's the one on the cold tile while my butt is firmly placed on his warm thigh. "Shh, Dolly. What's wrong? You not feeling so good, huh?"

I shake my head, more tears falling loose. "I lost all my food," I whine. "And the ho-hot cocoa wasn't so good on the way back out." His soft chuckle soothes me, the vibrations of his chest almost like a purr.

"Want to shower?" he asks, running a large hand down my spine. I nod slightly, Zach's question making me realize how gross I feel with layers of dried sweat coating my chilled skin.

In one swift movement, Zach stands and swings me around so my butt plops on the counter. My squeak of shock at the movement and cold countertop makes him chuckle again. It's a sound I could get used to. I watch as he slides open the shower door and cranks the heat, waiting till he's satisfied with the temperature.

"I brought you home after you fell asleep on the couch last night. I couldn't bring myself to leave, so I crashed on the couch. Gabby and Peanut had a sleepover at her place last night, so it's just us for a little while," Zach tells me. "Let's get you warmed up."

My breath catches when he reaches for the hem of my shirt—*his* shirt. "What are you doing?" I question hesitantly.

His hands stall, and he quirks a dark eyebrow at me. "Helping my dolly shower."

My protests die on my lip as his hot fingertips graze my sides, slowly lifting the T-shirt. Zach gives me time to stop him, but instead, I lift my arms and fight down the urge to cover my small breasts.

"Beautiful," he breathes once he tosses the fabric away.

I snort. “I have the body of a twelve-year-old boy, Zach.” My cheeks heat at my admission, yet I hold his stare, not shying away when his gaze turns thunderous. *Oops*.

Before I can react, his meaty hand is gripping my throat. “You. Are. Beautiful.” Zach punctuates each word by gripping my throat tight enough to make my panties a little damp. I can still breathe, but the pressure causes my next exhale to sound like a moan.

His voice dips so low I can feel the rumble in my center as he steps between my parted legs. “Feel what your feminine body does to me.” A gasp flies from my parted lips, his hard cock grinding against my center. “Now, my doll doesn’t say things like that anymore. Let’s shower,” he grunts, stepping back and slipping his sweatpants down.

Wooziness assaults my senses at his actions and the sudden departure from where I want him the most. My breaths are shallow, watching him discard his pants. His fucking boxers don’t hide anything from the imagination, and this time when saliva pools in my mouth, it’s not from nausea; no, I’m *starving*. I hop off the counter, feeling needy and touch starved.

Zach doesn’t reach to remove the last bit of fabric from his body. Instead, he looks me in the eye and slowly slides my panties down, careful with my thighs. Such strong hands shouldn’t be capable of the gentle way he removes the bandage on my thigh. I feel like I *should* protest, but when I rack my brain for a reason, I don’t find one. Like every other time I’m wrapped in Zach’s aura, my mind is blissfully quiet.

My body is pliant as he moves me under the steaming spray of the shower head. As soon as the pain from my thigh abates, I melt under the water. I groan, tipping my head back, shocked when it lands against his chest. I hadn’t realized he would be joining me, I guess.

I open my mouth to say something, but my words die before they can form. Zach’s large palms twist my naked body around to face him. Without preamble, he tips my head back

under the spray. My eyes flutter closed as he shampoos and conditions my hair, massaging my scalp like a fucking pro.

I'm putty in his hold while he drags my soapy loofa along my skin. It's absolute heaven. No thoughts enter my mind; I'm blissfully... *nothing*. In this shower stall with Zach, I can simply just *exist*. My tummy no longer swirls with ickiness, only butterflies and excitement.

Lost in my haze of relaxation, I jerk with a whimper when the roughness of the loofa brushes my clit. "Zach," I gasp, unable to control the way my hips tilt toward him.

Opening my eyes for the first time in a while, I find Zach staring me down with a heated gaze that makes me lean into him even more. "What do you want, Doll?" The tension in his jaw shows me how hard he's working to hold himself back from devouring me whole, and that effort inflates my trust in him even more.

He rubs the loofa across my sensitive flesh a bit harder when I don't respond. I whisper, "Y-you." I usually feel uncomfortable being so forward, but Zach makes me feel like it's okay to want things. Like my desires are valued. "I want you to touch me, please."

He dips toward me, his chest pressing against mine. "Are you sure, Dolly? You want to stand there and let me take care of you?"

"Yes! Please," I moan, and almost combust when the loofa splashes against my feet. Zach's hand swiftly replaces it, gripping my core like he fucking owns it. I swear he growls out a possessive 'mine', but his lips descend on mine in the next beat. Stealing the exhale of my gasp, he tangles his tongue with mine instantly.

My hips do an involuntary roll as the pad of his thumb rubs my clit, just as two fingers dive between my folds. Without skipping a stroke of his thumb, he plunges two fingers inside of me. I moan, mewl, whimper, and grunt, but Zach's there to swallow every sound that slips from my lips to his.

At once, his fingers curl inside of me, and his thumb pushes against my throbbing nub harder. Bliss shatters me, white spots stealing my vision of the man holding me in his arms.

“Such a good dolly,” he groans against my lips, slowly sliding his fingers out of my sensitive core. My vision wavers slightly as I pull away from his mouth with a teeny smile. I curl into his chest, enjoying the cooling water rinsing away our activities.

“My perfect girl. So beautiful,” Zach murmurs against the top of my head. His subtle rocking and post orgasmic sleepies soothe some of my fractured edges from last night.

I hum in response, feeling *safe and accepted*.

Chapter Twenty-Four



Wyatt

“**W**hat are you working on?”

Shit! I slam the laptop closed, panicked at hearing Addie’s soft voice over my shoulder. “Nothing,” I add quickly. This is one of those moments where I would absolutely fucking facepalm because my reaction was far too suspicious.

Turning in my seat at the island, I curse myself for putting my back to the living room. I was so wrapped up in trying to figure out who was hacking into my shit and reciprocating the invasion that I didn’t hear Adelyn’s approach.

“Oh, sorry,” Addie mumbles, her face falling with disappointment. She’s tense as she walks away and sits beside Rory on the floor.

Fuck. Clenching my teeth on the unlit clove in my mouth, I catch Julian scowling at me. I don’t have to wait long before he abandons his seat beside Tate and stalks towards me.

“What the hell, man? I swear we all heard your laptop crack from the living room,” Julian hisses.

“Shit, I don’t know. I panicked.” I toss my arms in the air and swivel to face my laptop again. I don’t see any cracks in the screen. Yet. I might fucking throw it across the room if I don’t figure out who’s trying to track us down.

Julian sighs, leaning against the counter beside me. “Find anything?”

“Working on it,” I grunt. “I mean shit, Jules. We jumped through so many damn hoops to cover our tracks out here. Whoever is trying to track us down wants blood.”

“Do we need to leave?” he murmurs, peeking over his shoulder at a laughing Tate. This move has been the best thing that’s ever happened to our boy. There’s no way in fuck we are dragging him away from his home.

“No,” I growl. “This is our home now. I’ll keep us hidden.”

Julian nods, still looking at the group in the living room. Addie and Rory came over for the football game today, along with Rylee and a couple of her guys. I should be lounging in the living room, eating snacks and goofing around with my family, but our safety is at risk. Jackson and Marcus, two of Rylee’s husbands, shout at the TV, making Rory wave her dainty fist and holler, too.

“Do we tell Addie?” Julian whispers, his lips turned down in displeasure.

“No.” The stern response comes from Zachary as he places a plate of grilled burgers on the island. “There’s no need to worry her.”

Julian frowns, looking between us. His copper hair is messy from running around with Rory and the other guys outside. “She’s already worried, though. I don’t like the idea of keeping secrets in our relationship.”

“It’s for the best. Plus, what would we say? That our past security details were for rich pricks who steal from the poor at best and murder at worst? No. We aren’t those people anymore. New leaf. New life.” Zach’s eyes settle on the rowdy family in the other room, too.

Turning as well, I watch Tate drop a kiss on Rory’s head and give Addie a gentle peck on the lips when she tilts her head back onto his knees. Changing the subject, I ask, “Are we actually in a relationship, though?”

“Wyatt!” Julian whisper yells. His face twists in anger, scaring me just a bit. Fuck, he’s a badass and could easily kick

my ass if provoked. “Of course we are, asshole! Why would you ask that?”

I offer him a blank stare. “Um, ‘cus nobody has actually asked Addie to make this official.” I watch as Julian’s cheeks redden, embarrassment making him sheepish. Smirking, I nudge him. “We’ll ask her tonight.”

“Hopefully you didn’t fuck things up for us with your shadiness, though.” Julian looks thoughtful, and if I’m being honest, I hate the dejected look I put on her face.

Thankfully, Zach wasn’t in earshot to hear Julian’s accusation, because he would have kicked my ass too. *Ugh. I can’t mess things up before they’ve truly begun.*



“Did it hurt? Wait, it doesn’t still hurt, does it?” Rory pokes the tattoo on my neck, inspecting it like it’s alive.

I chuckle. “No, it doesn’t hurt. Yes, it hurt when I got it. But more like an annoying scratching sensation.”

Her big blue eyes light up. “Oh! Can I get one? I promise I can handle the scratches!”

Tugging on one of her pigtails, I say, “You’ll have to ask your mom, bestie. I’m not your dad, so I can’t make that decision.”

The sparkle in Rory’s eyes dim, making my stomach bottom out. *Fuck, how did I mess up with her too?!* Addie’s been distant with me for the past few hours, but I have no idea what to say if I can’t tell her the truth. Speaking of the beautiful woman who’s curled up and snoozing on Zach’s lap for the past hour, I feel her attention on us. Hesitantly, I look over to see her droopy eyes watching Rory and me with a small pout. My baby girl looks fucking adorable, even if she’s only focusing on her daughter’s rapidly dropping mood.

Beside me on the couch, Rory's knees bump into my thigh where she faces me. She nibbles on her lip. I wait her out, uncertain of what to say since I clearly upset this sweet eight-year-old.

"I wish I had a dad," Rory whispers, picking at some lint on her socks. "Layla has four. She's so lucky. I don't even have *one*."

"I—" *Hell, what do I even say to that?!* "Anyone would be lucky to be your dad, Rory."

Her lip wobbles, and in my peripheral, I notice Addie sitting up. "Then why don't I have one? S-sometimes I think I remember my daddy and first mommy, but then I forget again."

"Rory..." Addie whispers, her own eyes glistening with tears.

The little girl doesn't listen, though, as she grips my arm and pleads with me to understand her. To *hear* her. "Addie doesn't have a daddy either. I have a sister and a mommy, but she doesn't have a mom. Wouldn't someone be lucky to be her mom, too?"

I'm fucking glad Rylee and her two guys left already because, fuck, this is hurting my heart. Around us, the room is silent, save for the soft hum of another football game and the girls' ragged breathing.

I'm so focused on the sweet girl crying in front of me, I don't notice Addie kneeling in front of us. "Honey, we *do* have a mom and a dad. They just aren't with us anymore. And I *do* have a sister. I'm just so lucky to call her my daughter, too."

I fight like hell not to scoop the two of them into the biggest hug I can manage. Tate looks like he's on the verge of tears, Julian watches with watery eyes, and Zach's jaw is about to shatter with how hard he's clenching it.

"So if... if Layla can have four daddies, does that mean I can have another?" Rory's wobbly question lilts with a tinge of hope.

Addie nods, holding her kid's hands. "Someday, maybe. For now, though, we have wonderful friends who love you so much."

Rory's gaze trails across the room, studying each of us like she's testing the truth of her mom's words. Finally, her big blue eyes find mine. "So," she snuffles, running her nose on the sleeve of Julian's sweatshirt he gave her. "You love me?"

Son of a bitch. I think this little girl just claimed my heart and gave it a big fucking hug. Do I love this girl who demanded I be her best friend? Is that weird? I don't have nieces or nephews. I mean, honestly, my whole family can go fuck themselves. But for Rory, I would do anything to keep her happy and safe. I love her like I love Tate's niece.

I pull on her pigtail again, hoping to alleviate some of the emotion. "Of course, I love you, Rory. You're not only my best friend, but you're family, and I would do anything for you. You *and* your mom, if that's okay with you?"

Addie's head whips up, her eyes wide and red from emotion. I chuckle and kiss her forehead. "What, baby girl? You didn't think we would want to make it official?"

"Nice move asking Dino first, though. Brownie points," Tate praises, nodding thoughtfully. "So, what do you say Rory, can Zach, Julian, Wyatt, and I date your momma?"

Rory's head tilts, her tears drying *thank fuck*. "Like Layla's mom and dads?"

"Yeah, Peanut. Not as serious, though, not yet. That means hanging out with us more and us spoiling you and your mom." Her eyes light up at Zach's easy description of what a relationship would mean.

"Why is nobody including me in this conversation?" Addie huffs, crossing her arms.

"In a minute," Julian shushes her and trains his gaze on Rory. "What do you think, little angel?"

Oh, that's a cute fuckin' nickname. I wish I had thought of it first.

“Sure! That would be so awesome. I love hanging out with you guys, and Mommy seems happier, too.” Rory bounces in her seat, excitement bubbling out of her.

“So now that we have your daughter’s permission...” Addie blushes at the intense attention on her now. “Can we officially call you our girlfriend?” My tone is mildly teasing because I can’t help but feel worried about the way she’s fidgeting on the ground beneath me.

Zach stands and kneels in front of her. Gripping her chin, he demands softly, “Answer Wyatt, Doll. Can we be yours, and you be ours?”

I watch, fascinated and a little sweaty, as she gulps. Locked in Zachary’s hold, she whispers, “Just us though, right? Nobody else? No other... no other women?”

I would laugh if I didn’t think it would put me back in hot water. The idea that we would want another woman is unacceptable. This just means we will have to prove our devotion and adoration to my baby girl.

“Just us,” Zach growls, tightening his hold on her chin.

“Say yes, Mom!”

My bark of laughter is immediate, and I can’t help but snatch Rory from beside me and wrap her in a bear hug. Her giggling draws a soft smile from Addie, and her tense frame finally relaxes in Zach’s hold.

“I’d like that,” she says with a big-ass smile.

Julian whoops and scrambles across the living room to steal her from Zach’s hungry gaze. He smothers her cheeks in kisses before Tate shoves him away and wraps her in his arms. I’m too far away to hear what he murmurs into her thick brown hair, but I don’t care as long as I can hear her laugh again.

Tossing Rory over my shoulder, I grin at her squeals and approach Addie. Tate grips her waist and hoists her to her feet. Attempting to angle myself so Rory doesn’t kick her mom, I drop a kiss on her lips, enjoying the stretch of her smile against mine.

“Ewww!” Rory groans with her hands pushing off against my back. I chuckle as Julian snags my bestie off my shoulder.

Yeah... this is what our family has been missing.

Chapter Twenty-Five



Adelyn

“Are you okay, Mom?”

No. I'm not okay. Like at all. But I can't say that to Rory. “I'm fine, honey.” I gag again, shoving my nose into the crook of my T-shirt. *God, have tacos always smelled this bad?!*

“You don't look okay,” Rory says hesitantly where she sits, watching me stir the taco seasoning into the beef. Narrowing my eyes at her, I raise a brow. “I didn't mean it like that. I'm sorry. You just look like you might... you know... puke.”

Even the word makes me shudder. It's times like this where the awful reminder that I'm truly not mother material tries to beat me down. Hell, Rory takes one look at me and knows something's wrong or different all the time. Sometimes, I swear she knows what's going on with me before I do.

I just... she deserves better. She deserves her real mom and dad, the ones who were wrapped around her little finger from the moment she tried to scream the hospital down.

I will never fault my parents for being distracted during Rory's first two years of life. Babies take a lot of attention, and I suppose they already had a kid who could take care of herself.

No. I'll never blame them for what happened in high school. They didn't know, and I never told them. Plus, I figured out how to cope on my own. My thigh throbs in

reminder. I couldn't tell my parents what happened to me, but I learned to release and control my pain by myself.

“Mom?”

Jolting, my shirt falls from my nose, forcing the rancid smell into my nose. “Ugh!” Hidden away once more, I turn stiffly to Rory. “Sorry, I zoned out. I'm okay. Does this smell weird to you?”

The front door is thrown wide. The first thing coming through is a mop of ginger curls. “Wow! It smells so damn good in here!”

“Watch it,” Zach grumbles, smacking Julian upside the head. “Peanut ears in the room.” The big guy softens his gaze when he sees us and shoots Rory a wink as Julian gasps in mock pain.

Before Zach can swoop in on my kid, Tate's there giving her a little snuggle. “Hey, Dino. How are you? I've missed you girls.” Skirting around the counter quick, he gives me a gentle kiss and settles himself beside Rory while she tells him about school.

The distraction from the taco smell is beyond welcome. “Smells good, Dolly.” Zach's body heat at my back warms me until I feel gooey and sleepy. “Thank you for making us dinner. How has your week been?”

I chuckle as he shuffles with me to cut the tomatoes. “It's been two days. You guys act like it's been ages since we saw you.”

“Yeah, but you're mine, Doll. For three days now. I want nothing more than to sweep you off your feet and learn every inch of you.”

The scruff of Zach's beard and his throaty voice in my ear make shivers pebble my bare arms. “I missed you too, Zach,” I whisper and attempt to ignore my heated cheeks.

He hums, sending delicious warmth to my panties. “Good Dolly.”

“Share,” a gravelly voice enters my quiet haze of lust and coziness. Zach moves an inch, then Wyatt’s there filling the minuscule offering. “Hi, baby girl. Would you like some wine?”

My stomach absolutely revolts. I feel my face twist in disgust. It’s not that I don’t appreciate the offer, but I don’t think I can handle something so potent.

“Woah, okay. No wine, then. Can I get you something else, baby?” Wyatt asks, concern tinging his words to match Zach’s frown.

Swallowing, I offer them a smile. “Maybe just a glass of ginger ale and ice, please? My tummy is a bit upset, I think.”

Zach’s grip on my hips tightens, his voice dropping a few octaves at the same time. “Go sit down, Doll.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m almost—”

“Go sit down. Be a good Dolly and let me take care of you.”

Wyatt grips my wrist and pulls me from between the counter and the dominating alpha-male in my kitchen. I huff, but Wyatt speaks his mind first as he settles me at the kitchen table. “That was so hot.”

I laugh, watching Wyatt discreetly adjust himself. With a wink, he’s off to the fridge, and I’m left to watch those two bustle around my kitchen. A bark of laughter draws my attention to the living room where Rory has her backpack spilled out and her English homework spread out in front of Tate and Julian.

“Dude, that’s *not* a noun. It’s an adjective,” Tate says, chuckling and pushing Julian around like he can’t control the humor rolling off of him. The move reminds me of Rylee when something cracks her up, too.

“Shut up,” Jules grumbles.

Rory watches them with a teeny frown. It’s freaking adorable seeing the three of them sitting crisscross on my living room floor.

“Um,” Rory interjects, “that’s actually an adverb.”

Julian rears back. “What the hell is an adverb?!” His eyes are wild; the unknown freaking him out.

“PEANUT EARS!”

I snort quietly at Zach’s disgruntled shout. The chaos surrounding me is wonderful. It feels normal and something out of a dream. Eighteen-year-old me, coming home early from New York, wouldn’t believe we would be making Taco Tuesday traditions. No, that young woman was devastated when she learned her parents were shot, leaving her and two-year-old Rory orphans. Dreams of getting a fashion degree with my friends faded away when my parents did. Yeah, eighteen-year-old me wouldn’t be able to pick her jaw up off the ground right now.

Julian shoots me an apologetic cringe, and I just smile in response.

Tate coughs, looking a bit pink in the cheeks. “What’s an adverb?”

I tune out Rory’s explanation when a bag of Doritos hits the table. *Now that smells damn good.*



“So, what made you guys start your own security business?”

Gathered around my living room, I wait to learn more about these men who seem to be becoming permanent fixtures in my life. Gabby took Rory out to see a movie so we could have some alone time.

“Julian and I both started training at our local gym and kind of fell in love with martial arts,” Zach says with a faraway look in his eyes.

Julian’s fingers tickle my neck where I’m tucked into his side. “The gym we went to is actually where I worked all throughout high school. We hadn’t thought of starting

something with our skills, but my manager asked us to help out at one of the galas. They needed extra muscle stationed around the building, so that's where the idea began."

"Wow, you guys. That's amazing! Wyatt, how did you become their tech guy?" These men amaze me. The way they built something out of nothing is admirable.

Their easy grins slip from their faces, and Tate shuffles anxiously on my other side. The couch suddenly feels too tight, but I stay, knowing whatever they have to tell me makes them uncomfortable. I don't take it back, though. Wyatt can tell me however much he wants. They know a lot of the monsters in my closet.

Beside Zach on the loveseat, Wyatt clears his throat. "Uh, so I told you we moved to Seattle because my dad got a big promotion at his firm." I nod, and he gulps, his eyes dropping to his lap. "Well, my mom and dad were never around, so I had all the time in the world with my electronics."

"Wyatt, I'm so—"

He cuts my apology short. "It's okay. No need to apologize, baby girl." Sighing, Wyatt braces his arms on his knees while his clove twists and whirls between his fingers. "I was a nerd and the new kid. So, I'm sure you can imagine how kids treated me. That's actually how I met Julian and Zach; they did their best to keep the bullies at bay. I was either lost in computers, or the three of us were at Julian's house."

Peeling myself away from Julian and Tate, I don't hesitate to crawl into Wyatt's lap. His black jeans and black T-shirt prove to be snuggly, even all dark and broody. I can't take his pain away, nor can I change the past. What I can do is comfort him and offer my man a piece of myself in return.

"I'm sorry that was your childhood. I was bullied too, Wy, and nobody should be treated that way."

Chapter Twenty-Six



Tate

“I ‘m sorry that was your childhood. I was bullied too, Wy, and nobody should be treated that way.”

You could hear a fucking pin drop. How in the hell was this sweet woman bullied? Actually, scratch that. Whoever bullied our girl is going to die. I just know it.

“Excuse me? What did you just say?” Julian asks, leaning forward with an intense look on his face.

Yep, someone’s gonna die. My stomach twists uncomfortably, some of my trauma nudging my heart into a gallop. I would kill for Addie and for my guys, but my experience with defending my loved ones left lasting scars.

“Uh, I was bullied too. But I’m so glad you had the guys, Wyatt. Even though I know nothing will ever quite heal those moments.” Addie turns back to Wyatt and attempts to smooth his frown with her thumb.

It would be adorable if the four of us weren’t about to freak the fuck out. How she isn’t aware of the tension surrounding her, I have no idea.

“Lynn timer,” I hedge. “Why were you bullied?”

The hand petting Wyatt pauses. “W-what kind of question is that?” I see some fire burning in her eyes but a whole heap of hesitancy, too.

There's something there, and I want to know what it is. Zach looks like he's about to pummel the wall, too.

"What happened, sweetie?" Julian whispers.

"Nothing happened," she states, but her eyes water.

Beneath my girl, Wyatt tenses further at the wobble of her tone. "What aren't you telling us, baby girl? Please, you know you can trust us."

"I-I've never told anyone before. Really, it's nothing. There wasn't really a reason. Just stupid rumors that my boyfriend made up. Or I guess he was my ex when it started. It doesn't matter. We were talking about Wyatt, anyway." Panic laces each word with an unnerving amount of insistency.

"Lynn timer," I murmur, some of my violent thoughts muting at seeing her all flighty. "You don't have to tell us if you really don't want to. We would never judge you. We want to protect and care for you, and this is part of that."

I despise how far away from her I am right now, but by the way she wilts into Wyatt, I know he has her covered. I know from experience how good he is at soothing our frayed edges. Addie will always be able to count on Wyatt.

"It wasn't too bad," she trails off when four sets of eyes narrow on her. "Well, um. Johnny t-took my virginity and broke up with me the next day. After that, everyone started calling me names and stuff."

"What names?" Zach rumbles, hands fisted on his knees.

Addie hesitates, but it's enough to guess. One thing stood out to me, though. "What do you mean he *took* your virginity, Lynn timer?"

Julian jerks and looks at me with wide eyes. Zach grunts a noncommittal sound as he gets to his feet to pace the living room. A whimper sounds from Addie, Wyatt having squeezed her too tight if his ticking jaw is anything to go by.

Her bottom lip trembles, making my insides twist and riot for me to go to her. She's already shrinking away from the room, and more of us in her space wouldn't do her any good.

As Julian goes to stand, I grip his knee and shake my head, never taking my eyes off her.

Wyatt whispers something in her ear and kisses the column of her throat. “I-I mean, he took it,” Linnie says, some strength hardening her words again.

“Did he rape you?”

She flinches at Zachary’s harsh tone. Internally, I cringe, but I totally get it. *Fuck!* This is fucked.

With a gulp, Addie nods. “Yes, he did.”

“And he spread rumors about you? People bullied *you* after your boyfriend *raped* you?” Julian’s tone is incredulous, and borderline panicked too.

“Yeah,” she whispers, a tear dropping from her thick eyelashes. “He was captain of the football team, and I was just... me.” Addie’s shrug feels like a fucking punch to the gut.

Zach stops pacing. With a hard look, he places himself in front of Addie and grips her jaw with his whole hand. “Just. You? Listen to me right fucking now. You will never say that about yourself ever again. As for your piece of shit ex, he has a special place waiting for him in hell. Which is exactly where he’s fucking headed once I get my hands on him.”

In the wake of Zach’s declaration, the living room is silent, save for his heaving breaths and Addie’s hitched breathing.

There’s something else I want to ask. I’ve learned over the past six weeks that she says *a lot* with close to nothing. Many people might not realize the sprinkles of information she offers without ever truly saying it. I listen, though. This sweet woman just needs to be heard.

“You never told anyone?” She shakes her head once Zach releases her to wear another path in the carpet. “Why not? Not even your parents?”

In response to my final question, more tears track down her rosy cheeks again. “N-no, I didn’t tell them. I tried a few times, but Rory was still just a baby. With Mom still running

her restaurant and Dad keeping weird hours as a cop, they were pretty distracted. But I survived. I stayed under the radar, and my close group of friends knew the truth.”

She *survived*. I hate that.

“Honestly, guys. Please let it go. It wasn’t horrific or anything—”

“You being raped wasn’t horrific?! Addie, I’m fucking horrified hearing this happened to you!”

I agree with Julian. Not even Linnie’s glare drying up her tears will make me feel any better about what happened to her. The fire and annoyance burning in her eyes, though; that makes me feel better.

Leveling Julian with a narrowed gaze, Addie continues. “As I was saying. Johnny didn’t beat me or anything. He just didn’t listen, and it only makes me a little sick to think about now. So can we drop it?”

Zach opens his mouth, but Wyatt beats him to it. “We can drop it, baby girl. Just know that we are pissed as fuck that that happened to you.”

Her shoulders, which were drooped and shaking, finally lift and settle. In no way do I think we will ever be able to let this go, but for Addie, we won’t pry anymore.

“Thank you,” she whispers and presses her lips against his.

I’m not sure what I was expecting, but their kiss turning fevered was not it. With a groan, Wyatt’s hand grips a handful of brown hair at the base of her skull. I don’t know how to describe the noise she makes, but *holy fuck*. Julian responds to them with a soft grunt as he shifts his weight around beside me. Zach settles himself against the wall by her new bookshelf and watches the pair with hooded eyes.

Gripping Linnie by her hips, Wyatt has her legs spread wide across his lap. Jesus. The way her leggings hug her ass in the straddled position sends blood rushing to my cock.

“Wyatt,” she whimpers as he grips her ass tightly. A little miffed about the change in the view, I huff and rub my hand

over the tightness of my jeans.

“What do you want, baby girl?” Wyatt dips his head into the crook of her neck.

Addie’s tiny body jolts and starts grinding down on Wyatt. “I—” Her words are cut off with a shocked choke and cry of pleasure.

“Holy fuck,” Julian whispers.

Did she just come?

Wyatt grunts but runs a hand up and down her back in a soothing gesture. “Oh, baby. You were so needy. Why didn’t you say anything before?” His voice is gentle, yet I bet the deep vibrations of his chest are lulling her into a doze.

To my surprise, she wiggles her firm little ass and giggles at Wyatt’s gasp. “Can I—um.” She hesitates, finally looking over her shoulder to find us staring. Her cheeks turn a deep shade of red, and I can’t help but offer her a shit-eating grin.

“Don’t stop on our account, Dolly.” Zach’s husky voice sends fucking shivers down my spine.

Normally, I would jump at him, but this feels like a monumental moment for our relationship with Addie. Allowing her control for the first time we are all together is important.

Nibbling on her lip, she eyes us once again and turns back to the man beneath her. “Can I taste you?”

Fuck me sideways.

“Oh my god,” Julian whisper groans, and Zach’s head thunks against the wall.

The breathiness of Wyatt’s encouragement makes my balls ache. “Take anything you want, baby girl.”

One final look around the room, then Addie’s sliding off his lap and taking his dark jeans with her. Settled on her knees, she places Wyatt’s pants and boxers beside him on the couch. From where I’m sitting, I can’t see her face, but I admire the way her head tilts as she caresses the thick head of his cock.

Wyatt all but pouts when she takes her touch away, but it's only for a moment as she gathers her hair and offers the strands for him to hold. I want to touch myself so badly or swallow Julian down while we watch this play out. This is Addie's moment, though. A moment to test the trust and safety we offer her. It doesn't help that I can clearly fucking see the outline of Zach's cock pointing at me, though.

With a look of complete and utter fascination and tenderness, Wyatt wraps her hair around his fist. Almost like she's trying to tease us, her tongue darts out and runs up the length of Wyatt's throbbing dick. The whites of his knuckles strain to bury his cock in her throat.

Without any hesitation, she swallows him fucking whole. Like the entire thing. The long black strands of Wyatt's hair fall over his cheekbones, making my mouth water.

Confusion fills me when Wyatt drags her lips off of him. Then he speaks, sending my own lust higher. "Did you need more, baby? Your thighs are rubbing together like you need something. Tell us."

"I—" she breathes, and I notice her legs twisting for the first time. "I want—"

"What do you want?" I ask, my voice throaty. She's struggling to ask for what she wants. She needs a push.

I slide to my knees and crawl to her, enjoying the groans from the men behind me. I may be more dominant with Addie, but I'm still their boy, and I know how much they love it when I crawl.

Reaching my girl, I lean back on my haunches and slide my hands up her inner thighs till my thumbs press into her most sensitive spot. "What do you need, Linnie? You have to ask for it."

I spank her, hoping to snap her out of her head when all she does is whine at me. She's still in control here. If she tells me no, I won't touch her. Asking her to speak is me forcing her to take control in my mind.

“Y-you,” she breathes, nibbling on her lip when I push my thump against her clit.

“Me what?” I eye Wyatt, hoping he’ll help me out. He does, gripping her hair a little harder. His cock bobbing in front of us makes my mouth water.

Her eyes narrow at him, but she pouts at me. “Please, fuck me.”

“Good Doll,” Zach rumbles somewhere behind me. “Take her pants off.”

Fuck. Doing as I’m told, I peel the layers off my girl and do the same to myself without needing guidance. I need to feel her. I try not to scowl at the condom I slide on, but it’s difficult. What I wouldn’t give to feel her skin on mine.

“Good boy,” Julian praises this time as I dip my fingers between her legs.

She’s fucking soaked. I gather her release and coat my cock in the best fucking lube.

“Fuck her,” Wyatt says through gritted teeth. I was so focused on her pretty pussy that I didn’t realize she was back to bobbing on him.

I do as he says, slowly sliding my cock into her slick center. She flutters around me as she moans around Wyatt. Between us, she lets go, allowing me to rub her little clit and pound her pussy and giving Wyatt control over her mouth. It feels like seconds, and maybe it is, but when Wyatt’s hips snap to meet her pretty lips, he detonates. Lightning zips across my skin from the force of his sexiness and my girl’s eagerness to swallow everything he gives.

She shatters beneath me, popping off his dick to release her cry of pleasure. I ache to give her another orgasm, but the way her pussy grips me sends me over the edge with her. Pressure releases, and my eyes roll into the back of my head. Spurt after spurt for the condom separating us, but her aftershocks milk me into the longest orgasm of my life.

Completely zenned the fuck out, Wyatt melts into the couch. Addie leans back and smiles appreciatively at our man

just as Zach scoops her off the floor and demands to clean her up.

Her tinkling giggle echoes down the hall, settling the anxious energy our conversation dredged up. I catch Julian's soft smile, too, and my heart does a little leap for him.

My happiness isn't for one or the other. It's for all of us, together and individually. For the family we are building here in South Carolina with Adelyn and Aurora; with my sister, my niece, and her family.

I just hope like hell our past stays where it belongs. *Far the fuck away.*

Chapter Twenty-Seven



Adelyn

Something's going on with the guys, and nobody will tell me what it is. And I don't mean like they are keeping a surprise from me or something. No. This has been going on for a week and a half. It happened gradually after they came over for Taco Tuesday last week, but they are barely giving me the light of day.

Hanging out with them last weekend wreaked absolute havoc on my nerves. Something was clearly distracting them. Their laptops were going haywire, and they left me alone in the living room more than once. They canceled dinner that night. Our first official date out ended up just me sitting on their couch as they continuously disappeared.

Their texts have become stilted. They didn't come over this Tuesday, and my phone calls are being sent to voicemail. What's confusing me even more is at least one of them makes the effort to do something sweet each day. Like this morning, Tate dropped off an iced coffee and a muffin before giving me a swift kiss on the cheek and leaving once again. Their sweet gestures never come in the form of quality time or conversation. Just little snacks or random gifts. It would be super sweet if they would talk to me and actually give me the time of day.

I even resorted to asking Rylee and Gabby if they knew about something going on. Neither of them nor Rylee's guys knew what was happening. My anxious brain is telling me that

the guys are being normal and happy with Gabby, Rylee, and her husbands but are trying to break it off with me without having to actually do it.

I feel like I'm going crazy. One moment I'm pissed, the next, I'm crying or pacing, trying to figure out what I did wrong. I really don't think I did anything wrong. Unless they don't think of me the same way after hearing about what Johnny did to me.

Or maybe it's the cutting. When Zach cleaned me up after my activities with Wyatt and Tate, he saw a few of my fresh cuts. They were far more shallow than I've ever done. Maybe he didn't believe me when I said I was trying. Maybe Zach told the guys, and they just can't deal with me.

I don't know if I'm overreacting, and maybe they're getting reestablished here, but if this is how it's going to be, then I don't think it's going to work. Running myself ragged at work isn't helping, since every time I have a moment, I fucking cry. Rory seems fine, but she's been asking about the guys, too.

Fuck, it feels like we broke up.

Clasping my bra, I curse my tits for how badly they ache. Actually... *why are they spilling out so much?* Checking the straps, I don't see anything wrong. *'Kay, I guess it's a sports bra kind of night.*

Chuckling the bra back into its drawer, I find the white padded one I wear during my periods for work. It hides behind my white blouse and keeps me comfortable for—

Wait. No, no, no, no, no!

Clutching the bra to my thundering chest, I reach for my packet of birth control pills resting on my dresser. With shaky hands, I grab it, already knowing what I'll find.

Weeks' worth of little white pills snug in their packaging. Pills that should have been swallowed each morning. Mornings I spent hurling my guts up. Or Gabby bringing the guys over with Rory. And one morning, I woke up horrifically hungover with wet panties.

Weeks of pills mock me as I crumple to the floor. Am I truly so fucking scattered that I didn't pick up on the morning sickness, the exhaustion, and nausea? Not to mention how emotionally overwhelmed I've been.

How could I let this happen?!

I've always been a bit forgetful with them, but there has never been cause to worry. *Until Julian.* Honestly, I didn't believe I was fertile. Seeing my mom struggle all those years to have another baby left me feeling like it wasn't something I could ever have.

I'm having a baby. I'm having Julian's baby. The guy who has been basically MIA for a week and a half. Maybe they're slowly trying to hint that they don't want me anymore. Oh my god. They'll think I trapped them. I can't tell them. Not yet. Not until I know what's going on. Whether or not they want me, who knows if they want a kid? Fuck, I think I've ruined their lives.

"Mom! Someone's at the door!"

"Shit, shit, shit!" I hiss, quickly wiping my tears and shoving my bra over my head.

Speak of the devil; Julian's here to pick up Rory. Last week, they said they would bring her to their place while I worked my dinner shift tonight. Gabby had a date lined up, and Rylee had plans, too.

By the time I have my white blouse tucked into my black dress pants, my hair in a high ponytail, and my shiny black shoes on, I'm numb. With my keys in hand and my phone pocketed, I leave my bedroom and approach the apartment door.

Swallowing back every feeling I have, I twist the lock and allow the father of my baby into my fucking house.

What a mess! I need to take a pregnancy test. Like weeks ago.

Julian immediately swoops in and kisses my cheek. "Hey, sweetie. Ready to go?"

“Rory, time to go!” I shout, moving away from his yummy, minty scent. I snatch an apple from the bowl on the counter and grab a water bottle, too.

“Addie, what’s wrong?” Julian steps into my space as I round the island.

An uneasy lump forms in my throat, but I shove it down. I’m not telling him shit right now. I have to get to work, and they haven’t been communicating with me at all for the past ten days.

“Change of plans. I’m driving myself to work. I’ll pick Rory up at ten; thank you for watching her.”

“Wha—”

Rory saves me from having to explain myself. “Julian! I missed you!” Tugging on his hand, she drags him to the front door. “Love you, Mom! Have a good night at work!”

The concerned look Julian shoots me before the door closes behind them makes my chin tremble.

“Shit, no crying. Work, then we can cry, okay, Bean?” Tears flow at the realization that I’m already giving my baby nicknames and talking to her. Or him.

Oh god, what if it’s twins? Nope. Not right now. I have a shift to get through without gagging at the smell of fish.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



Zachary

“Has anyone talked to Lynn timer today?”

At Tate’s question, we each look around, waiting for someone to say something. “Didn’t you go over there this morning?” I ask, confused.

Tate frowns. “Yeah, but just long enough to bring her a coffee and a muffin. I left right after to get back here.” He waves his hand at the mess littering the dining room table.

“Is she okay?”

The scoff Tate lets loose grates on my fucking nerves. “That’s why I’m asking if anyone has heard from her. I wouldn’t know. I’ve had my face shoved in this damn computer all fucking day trying to make sense of this shit.”

“T,” Wyatt murmurs, eyeing him with caution. “Breathe. Zach wasn’t accusing you of anything. And no, I haven’t talked to her today. She sent me a text earlier, but I’ve been busy.”

Dragging my phone out of my pocket, I check to see if she messaged me at all. The thread makes my stomach swirl with guilt.

Dolly: Hey. I don’t know where you all ran off to, but I think I might head home.

Fuck, that one was from last weekend when she came over since we couldn't take her out on a date.

Dolly: We missed you tonight. Taco Tuesdays are too quiet without you guys.

I didn't respond to that one either. Shit started spiraling last weekend. One of our friends back in Seattle reached out to warn us something was going down, and it included us. Tuesday, Wyatt's security walls were blown wide, leaking our location, plans, and everything else important.

Sophia has been keeping an ear on the ground for us since we left. Because of her, after four years, we collected enough evidence to take down three of the five families who deserved far more than lifetime prison sentences.

I don't think we would have ever gotten out of that life without Sophia. We've been friends with her for years, her dad having moved them out there while she was in high school. She didn't go to the same school as us, but she was one of our first security gigs, actually. Being the niece of one of the main rich douchebags, she's required to attend a few of the functions as her dad tries to weasel his way into their group.

Unfortunately, Sophia's dad and uncle were too tight-lipped around her in order for us to take them down as well. It still feels like a kick to the balls that we couldn't get Mason's parents arrested, too. The people who raised Rylee's abuser deserve nothing less than a cold cell to rot in. I hate thinking of Sophia as Mason's cousin.

My phone vibrates with another update from Sophia, but for the first time in a week and a half, I ignore her in favor of responding to my girlfriend. *Fuck, my girlfriend, who I haven't responded to since last week.*

"Son of a bitch!" Julian roars, scaring the shit out of me as his chair clatters to the floor. "I'm going to be late!"

My anxiety spikes. "For what?"

"I have to pick up Rory! We told Addie we would babysit tonight since she has a late shift. Fuck!"

Julian's out the door in a flash, cursing himself for being awful.

Honestly, I feel like the worst kind of person right now, too. I'm the worst fucking boyfriend ever.

"Shit," Wyatt whispers, drawing my attention. With his phone in his hand, I watch his finger scroll. "I forgot to respond to her the other day. I haven't fucking talked to her in days."

"I'm sure it will be fine," I murmur, not believing my own words.

"Are we going to tell her what's going on?" Tate frowns at me. "Because I don't think anything but honesty will smooth this over."

The sandwich on my plate loses its appeal. "We can't tell her, Tate."

"Why the fuck not?!"

"T," Wyatt warns, but it doesn't deter him.

Tate's hands slam on the table. "No, this is bullshit! We aren't fucking safe, and neither is she. How can we protect her when people are coming after us if she isn't aware?!"

"By leaving her out of it!" I snap. "I don't know who to tell her to look out for, and nobody will target us if we keep a distance."

Disappointment flashes in Tate's eyes, making my stomach swirl with unease. "We're going to lose her if we do this your way. I thought we came here to be better. Instead, we're smothering our relationship with the woman we're falling in love with because you're too fucking scared to show your true colors!"

Shoving to my feet, I roar, "The fuck you say?!" My skin itches with rage; a feeling that makes me feel too big for my body.

Tate throws his chair back and stares me down from across the table. "I said you're going to ruin the best thing that's ever fucking happened to us because you're *afraid!*"

“I’m not afraid,” I grit through my teeth. My jaw grinds painfully, but it’s enough to ground me and keep me from lashing out at my boy.

“Like hell you’re not! You’re terrified of what Addie will think when we tell her who we worked for. Who we fucking laid our lives on the line for. Tell me, Zach. What do you think Addie will say when you tell her your security business catered to abusers, rapists, killers, *kidnappers*!? Does nobody remember what happened to Rylee?! I kept her in the dark and look at what happened to her. You’re being fucking stupid!”

“ENOUGH!” Wyatt’s fists pound into the table. “Tate, go cool off. Zach, sit down. Rory will be here soon, and there’s no way in hell you want her to see you like this.”

With a scoff, Tate stomps his way upstairs. Just as my ass hits the chair again, his bedroom door slams closed. Sighing, I close my eyes and drop my head into my palms. Wyatt stays quiet, his incessant typing starting right where it left off. My blood feels like it’s boiling; my skin tightening and trying to melt off.

Wyatt interrupts my silent meltdown. “He’s right, you know?” Lifting my head, I fight like hell not to glare or get defensive because, yeah, Tate *is* right. “I’m scared of how she might look at me, too, Zach.”

“Wyatt,” I start, only for him to wave me off.

“No need to make me feel better, Zach. I ignored so many fucked up things for *years*. The shit we saw. Everything we turned a blind eye to. Fuck, I mean, you’re the only one with a good reason.”

My mom. I never had a dad, or one that I knew of, anyway. It was always mom and me against the world. I tried so hard to bear the weight of our lives. I had to grow up fast.

Mom worked so damn much I missed her every day. We had money to survive, sure, but nothing extra. Since I was little, I decided I would always take care of her. I would do anything for my mom. I wanted to give her the life she

deserved, and the only way I managed it was by ignoring the crimes of the people I worked for.

I succeeded. Mom lived comfortably from the time I turned eighteen until she died a few years ago. Heart attack. For too long, Mom couldn't afford to eat healthy, and having hereditary health issues, her body just couldn't keep going.

But I gave her everything she deserved for as long as I could. She was happy. Had she known how I was making my money, she would have kicked my ass. She'd have been so disappointed. Then she was just... gone. Gone before we could get out of there. Two years into collecting evidence and figuring out what to do, she died. I lost my mom, just like I lost my morals.

Tate was my only good deed. I couldn't stand by watching a young sixteen-year-old boy get smacked around. Why my heart chose him to beat for, I don't know; I had seen worse.

For two years, we questioned what we were doing. But Rylee was our tipping point. Not caring what job we took, we almost led her abusive baby daddy right to her.

I could say it was Tate we made the change for, but honestly, hearing Tate sobbing over the phone the night he killed Mason will forever haunt me. Fuck, he was terrified. And *hurt*. I would never forgive myself if something happened to my family. I wasn't worried about clearing his name or the fact that he was carrying a gun and too young to be at the nightclub that night. No, I was horrified my boy was ever in that position. A position we were all in because of the people we worked for.

"I don't have any reason or excuse, Zach," Wyatt murmurs, a faraway look in his eyes. "God, I just didn't want to lose you guys. For so long, I didn't belong anywhere, and my skills were never useful. Finally, fucking *finally*, I was needed and loved. How pathetic is that? I overlooked years of horrific acts because I wanted the love and family I had to go home to. You guys. I should have been *better*."

There's nothing I can say to take away his guilt. Hell, I feel sick with guilt every damn day, thinking of all the people we

should have protected. Instead, I lay my palm on his thigh and murmur, “I know, Wyatt. I love you so damn much, and our fucked up decisions will never change that. We’re a family, and you will forever be ours, okay?”

Wyatt uncrosses his arms and relaxes a smidge. He nods. “Love you too, in spite of all the fuckery.”

I just hope Addie can, too.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



Adelyn

I'm exhausted, which seems to be a theme lately. This time, not only am I physically wanting to sleep forever, but I'm emotionally just done. Work hasn't done me any good tonight, either. I should be out getting pregnancy tests and working through the fact that I missed my period *weeks* ago. Swallowing back bile at each waft of shrimp should *not* be how I'm spending my Friday night.

"West!" *Shit*. "Clock out, you're done!"

Thank hell. Waving goodbye to a couple of the other waitresses, I grab my keys and make my way to the back. Employees aren't allowed to use the front door or the front lot. It's almost 9:30, which gives me plenty of time to pick Rory up at the guys' house. Maybe I can have a quick breakdown in my car.

Snagging the heavy door before it can slam closed, I gently snick it shut and dig my phone out of my pocket. This past week, being forced to keep it in my locker at work has been just what I needed. Waiting for the guys to talk to me like a teenager isn't healthy. Neither has been the overwhelming disappointment over receiving no messages while I've been at work.

Heaving a quick sigh, I release the hope weighing on me as I click my phone on. The immediate brightness of the screen makes me cringe in the dimly lit parking lot.

You know, for such a nice ass restaurant, you'd think they'd care about their employees, especially the night shift.

Blinking at my phone, my feet stop moving. Multiple messages stare at me, shocking me still. *Shit, did Aurora say something about how upset I've been?*

Julian: Missing you, Sweetness. xoxo

Attached is a picture of Rory and Zach kicking a soccer ball around in the backyard. I don't see the other guys, but it's nice to see they didn't just sit her in front of the TV and ignore her like they did with me.

Wyatt: Hope work is going good, baby girl!

Zach: Can't wait to see you, Doll.

Tate: I'm so sorry, Linnie. Please, let me explain?

I wasn't annoyed with the sweet messages until Tate made me realize that he's the only one who's not acting like they haven't been treating me like an annoyance. Now, the loving messages from the other three feel fake. Like their words don't hold any weight. If Tate wants to explain, then fine, but that doesn't mean he gets my understanding.

I don't respond, shoving my phone in my back pocket once again. My foot feels heavy as I lift it to take another step toward my car. Grumbling down at the puddle that submerged my foot, I don't see the gloved hand peeking around my vision until it's too late.

Pain flares in my neck as I'm roughly yanked into a solid chest. My lungs burn with the scream being smothered by the leather-clad palm. Absently, I hear my keys clang to the ground, making my chest heave in panic. My escape literally slipping through my fingertips. Flailing and clawing at the arms holding me too tight, I barely notice the man in a mask in front of me.

A throaty chuckle makes my tummy roil. “She’s a dainty little thing. Shouldn’t be hard to break her. Let’s go.”

Break me?

With those words lingering between us, the tall man walks past us. Panic has another scream and sob lurching up my burning throat. *No, no, no, no, no.* My tiptoes scrape along the ground as I’m hauled further and further away from my car; away from freedom.

Oh my god. A black SUV comes into view, hidden in the shadows of the employee parking lot. *This can’t be happening to me. This can’t be happening to my baby.* I wasn’t overjoyed when I realized I was pregnant earlier, but the closer I’m dragged to the waiting car, the more I realize I would do anything to keep the life growing inside of me safe.

But how can I do that?! There are at least two big guys, and the more I fight, the more I hurt myself and my baby.

Slowly, I allow my limbs to sag even as my adrenaline flares with rage and horror.

A hot breath wafts across my ear. “Giving up already, Adelyn?” He wields my name like a weapon even as he sneers the taunt. *How do they know my name?! What the hell is going on?!*

Am I giving up, or is this self-preservation? Unable to control the movement, I buck in his arms when they slacken marginally.

“Fucking, bitch.” Using my momentum, the man holding me shoves me to the ground beside the SUV, my head bashing into the open door. White hot pain flares through my skull. My cry is nothing but a hoarse breath of air. A boot connects with my hip as I go to wipe away the blood dripping into my eyes. My ponytail splashes into the puddle of water first, my body following immediately after. The kick to my hip already throbs with a promise of a bruise, just as the other side scrapes on the gravel beneath me.

Before I can reorient myself, I’m hauled to my feet by a harsh grip on my upper arm. I hiss and cry as I stumble and

fall into the waiting SUV.

“Not here, Brock. We’ll have a little fun before we dump her, promise,” a man says before the door is slammed behind me.

Filing away the name for later, if there is a later, I swipe the falling blood from my eye.

Fuck, it’s bad. This is really, really bad. Like really bad. Oh my god.

Finally able to see without blood dripping into my eyes, I try to look around the car. Doors slam, and more voices fill the space, but the only light comes from the dash. A deep chuckle sounds beside me, making me jump and scurry until my back hits the door. My hands tremble as I feel around for the handle while keeping the shadowed figure in my sight. His large body leans forward ever so slightly, making my breath hitch. The thick smell of smoke chokes me, and subconsciously, I worry what the exposure to cigarettes might do to my baby.

“P-please! Let me go!” I huff, my voice wobbly and achy.

A snort. “Let me guess, you won’t tell anyone?” I nod my head frantically, only for him to laugh harder. “Oh Add. You still beg the same.”

The man’s use of my high school nicknames makes my blood run cold. *I still beg the same.* The only person I ever pleaded with to spare me was Johnny. But that can’t be right. There’s no way. “J-Johnny?”

“Wow, I’m impressed. You know, this was already a sweet deal. But finding out it was *you* with them? Icing on the fucking cake.” He hums thoughtfully as he fidgets. Squinting, I beg for any way to see him, to know what I’m dealing with. The car pulls off onto the main road just as Johnny suddenly closes the space between us. “No more chit-chat. Nap time, Add.”

A sweaty rag covers my nose and mouth, but my heavy arms are too slow to push him away. Whatever I inhaled with my gasp of shock has my eyelids drooping and my vision blurring at the edges.

“We’re going to have so much fun together.” Johnny’s voice is warbled and far away.

My last thoughts before I let darkness claim me are for my babies. The one I’m growing and the one waiting for me to pick her up. *How can I endure this to be a mother another day?*

Chapter Thirty



Julian

“You want a treat, Dino?”

Wyatt snorts. “T, she’s not a dog.”

Narrowing his eyes, Tate says, “Obviously, that’s not what I meant. Rory, do you want dessert or something?”

Zach eyes the little angel beside me. “Is she even allowed to have dessert so late?”

I watch on with humor as Rory becomes more and more frustrated with being talked over at every turn.

Zachary poses a good question, though. How do we not know what our girlfriend’s kid can eat? Or when she goes to sleep?

Rory huffs and stands, making her way to the kitchen while the other three bicker. Making her way back into the living room, she plops back into her spot beside me with a bowl of chocolate-covered almonds.

Maybe we should hold off on chocolate since it’s late? Fuck, I know nothing.

“These are my mom’s favorite treat,” Rory says with a small smile.

Silence follows her comment. Each of us wanting to hear more about Addie. Of course, we knew she was a chocolate-covered almond fiend, which is why we had some in the first place.

“How ‘bout you, Angel? What’s your favorite treat?” I nudge her with a grin of my own.

“Chocolate-covered raisins!” she replies.

What nine-year-old likes raisins?

“What? Why?” Wyatt scowls at the mere mention of a wrinkly grape.

Rory munches on her bite, all while glaring at the dark-haired man. “Because,” she mumbles around a mouthful.

“Because why?” Wyatt pushes.

Zach groans, tipping his head to the ceiling. “Can we not do this again, please? Both of you are right. I swear you *do* bicker like best friends.”

Rory giggles happily when Wyatt tosses a chip at her from across the room. “I like these too, though. Mom hasn’t been eating them lately, so I get extra.” Her statement contradicts her facial expression. A little girl happy to have more chocolate should be smiling, not frowning.

“What’s wrong, Peanut?” Zach picks up on the same odd reaction she had, too. I don’t like it when Rory doesn’t smile. At her silence, Zach leans forward. “Rory.”

Slowly, her eyes leave her bowl and rise to look at Zach. “Mom’s just been different lately.”

“Different, how?” I ask immediately.

Sighing, Rory fiddles with the blanket on her lap. “She’s been sick. Like every morning, and she’s always so sleepy. I think she’s going to puke whenever her face gets all white. It’s scary. And Mom’s been crying a lot since you aren’t seeing her anymore.”

“Aren’t seeing her anymore? Did she say that?” Tate asks, worry lacing his tone, making my heartbeat skyrocket.

Rory shrugs like she isn’t freaking us all the fuck out. “No, she didn’t say anything. I just hear her puking every morning. And her eyes have dark things under them. You just stopped

coming over, so we haven't been seeing you." Hesitantly, she looks around at each of us. "Do you not like us anymore?"

"WHAT!?" Zach stands to pace.

Wyatt looks heartbroken. "You're my best friend."

"Of course we love you!" I grab her hand in mine, hoping to keep her close. Forever. I may not know what to feed her or when she goes to bed, but *goddamnit*, she already feels like a piece of my soul.

"Rory," Tate whispers last. "I'm so sorry we haven't been around. There's been some stuff going on that we had to fix. We love you and your momma so much, I *promise*. And I promise we will be better from now on, okay?"

"Okay," Rory murmurs, gently pulling her hand away and tossing another almond into her mouth. "When will Mom be here?"

Tapping my phone, I frown, seeing it's already 10:15 *Maybe her shift ran long?* "Has anyone heard from Addie?" I ask the room.

Three nos respond. Frowns mar each of our faces as we stare down at our cells. "When did she say she would be here?" Zach asks from where he leans against the back of Wyatt and Tate's couch.

"Ten," I respond, biting my nail.

A tiny hand pulls my fingers away from my mouth. "Don't bite your nails. Mom says it's gross, and there are a ton of germies that live in there. You'll get sick." Patting my hand like I'm a child, Rory focuses back on the TV.

"Thanks, Angel. Gross, but good to know. We'll be in the kitchen, okay?" At her nod, I drop a kiss on the crown of her head. With a jerk of my chin, Wyatt, Tate, and Zach follow me to the kitchen.

"I'm calling her," Tate murmurs, rocking on his heels. Huddled around the island, we watch as Tate's brows draw even closer. No answer. "Somebody else try."

Wyatt rings her next. When his call goes to voicemail, Zach tries. I'm next when he slams his phone on the counter. No answer.

"Do you think she's okay?" Tate asks. Vulnerability shines in the whites of his eyes. This has got to be really damn hard for him. His abandonment issues after his sister disappeared when he was a boy are flaring. Then, with all bullshit going on with work? Our boy is at wits' end.

"Maybe her shift ran late," Wyatt says it like a statement, but the lilt at the end sounds like a question.

Closing my eyes, I hang my head. "Her shift ended at nine, but she told me she'd be here by ten as a just-in-case scenario. It's going on 10:20, and she's not answering. What do we do now?"

"I can track her, but it will take a bit." Wyatt's already walking away to grab his laptop.

"Let's call Gabby and Rylee. See if they've heard from her. Fuck knows we've been terrible the past week and a half, so maybe she checked in with them instead."

My call to Gabby goes to voicemail, but her immediate text saying she's on a date eases my worry for her as well. When I ask if she's heard from Addie, she replies with a negative.

Frustrated, I look to Zach, whose eyes widen when Rylee's voice sounds through the phone. Quickly, he puts her on speaker, not too loud so Rory can't hear.

"Hey! Can't talk for long, everything okay?" Rylee's cheerfulness is a touch soothing. I feel bad bothering her tonight since she's out with her men celebrating her newest book release, but we need her help. Plus, Tate visibly relaxes from hearing his sister's voice.

"Hi, Ry. I'm so sorry to bother you on your celebration night, but have you heard from Do—Adelyn?" Zach stutters, opting not to use his sexy nickname for our woman.

"Uh, no. What's going on?" Rylee's voice loses some of its airy happiness.

Zach relays what's going on and how we have been watching Rory for the night. When he gets to the part about how Addie is over thirty minutes late now, any joy at hearing Rylee's voice slips from Tate's posture.

The silence on her end of the line is fucking horrible. When Ry breaks it, though, it's even worse. "Addie's never late," her voice trails off, making my stomach sink with dread.

"Rory said Addie's been puking a lot and sleeping more than usual. Do you think we should be worried? Like, is that normal for like a time of the month or something?" My words tumble over each other, making my response worse and worse. Tate's gaze snaps to mine with bewilderment as Zach shoves my shoulder with a growl.

"The hell, Julian? No, puking is not *normal* every month. What exactly did Rory say?" Rylee's voice is incredulous, like she can't believe how stupid we are.

To be fair, we didn't grow up with girls, so I have no idea what a woman's cycle is supposed to be like. How the hell am I supposed to know if they don't puke? I know periods usually equal not feeling good.

Zach gulps, looking over his shoulder where Rory sits snuggled on our couch. "Peanut said she's been puking every morning and stopped eating her favorite snack. I guess Addie has been extra tired too and, um... crying a lot."

"Oh my god," Rylee breathes on the other line. The swearing that follows makes me feel ill. "Oh fuck. Shit. Okay. Guys, for real? How did you not know she's been feeling like this?!"

Zach goes to respond, but Tate cuts him off. "Because we haven't been around. Shit's been going on at home, and things aren't good, sis. We've distanced ourselves to make sure things are safe, but we fucked up."

Wyatt walks in with two laptops in hand. One is closed while the other sits on top, wide open as he taps away with one hand. His attention snaps to the phone call happening on the

counter, hope lighting up his features. I shake my head and mouth *Rylee* to him. I despise the way his face falls.

Rylee absolutely explodes, her voice fucking with the speakers on Zach's phone. "Are you telling me you haven't been around for your *pregnant* fucking girlfriend for over a week and a half?! AND you brought *danger* to her doorstep?!"

Just like when we found out she was self-harming, my world stops. *Pregnant. Addie's pregnant.* The question I have doesn't come out of my mouth, but when I look at all three of my men and they shake their heads, life centers itself once again.

Adelyn is pregnant with my baby.

We put my baby and my girl in danger.

Addie's in trouble.

My baby is in trouble.

Chapter Thirty-One



Adelyn

Stars flash in the darkness I was forced into. The sickening smell of cigarettes and mold assault my abused throat and nose. I burn. Everything burns. First, it's my eyes, then it's my lungs. The fire in my hips turns into a stabbing throb, as do my hands and knees.

The black abyss cocooning me swirls with a milky whiteness that I don't want any part of. I don't need my memories to flash through my mind to tell me my ex-boyfriend and *rapist* kidnapped me. Not before they beat my bony body up pretty badly. If I had some meat on me, I doubt I would be hurting this badly.

"Wakey, wakey."

The white bursts make my eyes water become more apparent the further into consciousness I'm forced.

"The sooner you wake up, the sooner you go home, Add." Johnny's sickly, sweet voice turns bitter and harsh in the same breath. "So, I suggest you be a good little bitch and wake the fuck up."

It's hard to hold back my groan of discomfort as I reorient myself on the cold cement floor, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction. I take a moment to look around the cell, because that is absolutely what this horrific room is. The walls are stained with hell knows what. The ground has nothing but scatterings of dirt and small puddles of water. No bed, no sink,

no nothing. Just Johnny and I. Him on a wooden chair, me on the cold, hard ground.

“There she is. You gonna beg so pretty now?”

I hate to do it, but I study the man who ruined high school for me. He’s grown up. Five o’clock shadow, sharp nose, and cheekbones, perfect brown hair. Johnny’s buffed up a bit, but he’s still tall and lean. I would say he’s handsome if not for the nasty gleam in his eyes.

“Why would I beg? You already said you’d let me go.” I know it’s stupid to taunt him, but years of pent-up anger and resentment for the monster before me overshadows my common sense.

He hums, tilting his head like a predator hunting his prey. “Right, but next time will be worse, I promise.”

“Next time?” I croak. My head swims as I claw my upper half into a sitting position. *What the hell did he give me?*

Johnny barks a laugh, forcing a flinch out of my jittery limbs. “Oh, Add. This won’t be the last of our time together.”

“Why are you doing this?” *It can’t actually be because of high school. Can it? I did nothing wrong. What was it he said in the car?*

Leaning forward, he braces his arms on his knees. “Good question! Those men you’re whoring yourself out to, they’re going to suffer. It just so happens that the perfect way to do that is through my high school plaything.”

Without an ounce of warning, he’s out of his chair. I recoil, lifting my arms to cover my face, but his hand sneaks through before I can cover myself. Johnny’s icy fingers latch around my throat, cutting off my air and the startled scream demanding release. My grip on his wrist does nothing as I’m lifted so high my tiptoes barely brush the floor.

Gasping breaths scorch my chest and throat. Flailing, I swing my legs every which way in hopes of knocking him off balance. All my effort gains me is more pain, though. Tutting at me, Johnny’s free hand snatches a chunk of my hair and rips

my head back so the only thing I can see as my vision darkens is his wicked smirk.

Slamming to the forefront of my traumatized mind is a memory of Wyatt's grin. What I wouldn't give to be staring into his smiling face right now instead of Johnny's. Choked cries bubble around his flexing fingers, and I know I'm not going to be able to stay awake much longer.

"See you soon, Add." His voice warbles as my body slackens its fight. The last thing I hear before I'm ripped away from this world again is his teasing warning. "Oh, and make sure those assholes know this is a warning for them. Nobody fucks with the Heads and lives a happy life."



Flashing white lights. Car horns. Traffic.

I wait a beat as I wake, trying to figure out if there's anyone around. I thought my throat had burned before, but it has nothing on this new feeling of hell wreaking havoc with each swallow.

Not hearing anyone around the thick traffic and bright lights, I crack a watery eye open. Looking around and ignoring the torment my body is in, I find myself lying in tall grass. Between the blades, cars flash by. The cool, moist night air of South Carolina settles some of my uncertainty.

Stars wink at me from above, making me irrationally angry. *Why me?* I'm literally nobody. I work as a waitress. I'm a low-class citizen just trying to make it through each day. I don't have enemies, yet my battered skin and muscles beg to fucking differ.

The guys have enemies. And they just happened to drag me right into the middle. Pregnant with a kid waiting for me at home.

Gathering my anger and courage to sit up, my left hand pushes into the ground while my right one clenches around

something solid. Panicking for a beat, I worry I almost shot myself or something, but look over to see it's a phone. Not just any phone, but *mine*.

I hold the power button down, praying like hell it isn't broken. The screen lights up like it's happy to see me and show me all the missed calls and messages. Wyatt, Zach, Tate, and Julian have each called me many times, but the name I click on instead of theirs makes my eyes water.

The guys have Rory, and there's no way I'm letting her see me like this. I refuse to scare her. And I really don't want to see the guys. They may not have done this to me, nor thought this would ever happen, but it can never happen again. I have a baby and a daughter to think about. And this is no life for them or *me*.

Terror floods my veins as I curl in on myself with my phone clutched to my ear. I tune out the familiar sounds of the call, waiting for the only person I trust to answer me.

“ADDIE! WHERE ARE YOU?!”

Rylee's scream down the line hurts my head like a bitch, but relief washes over me in the same beat. “R-Rylee.” My voice is nothing but a scratchy whisper.

“Babe, where are you??” She sounds terrified, making my heart thunder just a touch harder. Exhaustion wiggles its way into my heavy limbs.

Behind Ry's frantic voice, a male voice shouts, “I FOUND HER!”

“Shit, okay, Addie. Hold on just a little longer. Wyatt has your location. They're coming for you!”

My eyes shoot open, panic flaring in my chest and bypassing my damaged throat. “NO!”

“What? Why? Addie, what's going on? You're scaring me!”

“N-not them. P-please,” I whimper, hoping my best friend won't ask me any questions right now. It hurts so bad to talk.

It's silent for a moment, making me think she muted herself. Sound floods back in. "Can JJ and Marc come get you? Julian and Zach have to come for safety reasons, but my guys will be there too, okay?"

Shivering, I burrow further into the ground. Forgetting she can't see me, I nod. When she says my name, I whisper, "O-okay." Because what choice do I actually have? Rylee's guys may be fairly decent with guns and their fists after what happened to Rylee four years ago, but I would never forgive myself if something happened to them because I'm too angry to see the guys.

"Rory?" I mumble, grass tickling my cheek with each movement. *I don't think the guys would ever hurt me or my daughter, but—*

"I'm here with her. She's sleeping in Tate's room with Layla right now. I promise I'll stay and keep an eye on her."

"Thank you." I don't know if the words actually come out; I'm fading fast. *Tonight was too much. Time for a little rest.*

Chapter Thirty-Two



Zachary

“**S**he doesn’t want us,” Julian whispers beside me in the passenger seat.

My knuckles whiten against the steering wheel.

Following Jackson and Marcus to the location Wyatt sent us is not how this should be happening. Fuck! They shouldn’t be here at all!

The traffic lights become few and far between the further out of the city we get. I have never felt so sick to my stomach before.

I mean, shit! I lead this family because I can control myself and my emotions better than the other three. But, not knowing where Addie was or what was happening to her and our baby? Nothing in the world will ever compare to the fear and torment ripping apart my insides and mind.

It’s almost two in the morning. Wyatt spent hours trying to get a hit on her phone, but whoever had her knew to turn her phone off and remove the SIM card. I know it’s someone after us from Seattle, but I don’t know who, and it’s driving me crazy.

I can’t protect anyone if I don’t know anything! The only way we will figure it out is if Addie saw them or if Sophia finally pinpoints who the Heads sent after us. Us. Not Addie. Not our damn baby.

“Why did Addie say no, Zach?”

My throat thickens with emotion at the heartbreak in Julian’s voice. I don’t have a response, just like I don’t have an answer.

Fuck knows this is our fault. It’s our fault Addie was barely conscious to speak to Rylee. She called Rylee. That was the first hint that she knew this was our problem. A dangerous fucking problem we dumped at her feet.

I hear Julian inhale a shaky breath like he wants to ask me something else, but he doesn’t get the chance as Jackson turns the hazards of his vehicle on and pulls into the shoulder lane.

There’s absolutely nothing out here. I don’t waste time checking the location. Instead, I shove my way out of my car, ready to get my woman.

“Addie!” Julian shouts, urging my nerves into a frenzy.

I have to get to her. My dolly is hurt and pregnant, lying out here somewhere in the overgrown weeds off the highway. How could I let this happen? What boyfriend... what father... allows this to fucking happen?!

“Found her!” Marc’s voice shouts from the tall grass.

Rushing forward, a harsh grunt is forced out of my mouth when Jackson stops me with a firm hand to my chest. “Get out of my way!” I roar, needing eyes on my woman. Ready to rip one of Rylee’s husbands to pieces, I notice he has Julian’s arm in a punishing grip, too.

“Stop, Zach. Remember, she requested us to get her, not you.” Jackson shoves me a bit, dragging a stiff Julian along with us.

I can’t do this. Adelyn is in a fucking ditch! “Like hell! Get off me, right the fuck now.”

Jackson clenches his jaw, pushing me once again. “No. Addie said no. I don’t know what the fuck’s going on here, but my friend *specifically* asked NOT to see you. So, I suggest you back the fuck up before she realizes you aren’t respecting her goddamn wishes.”

“Zach,” Julian breathes, drawing my attention.

Halting my retort, I look to see what has his face paling. There, pushing through the tall weeds, is Marcus, holding a swaying bundle to his chest. *Dolly*.

“Hospital. NOW!” Marcus roars, the panic, and force staining his usual teasing voice has me ready to put a bullet in anyone who so much as looks at Adelyn wrong.

I lurch forward, needing her in my arms, only to be stopped once again. “She. Said. No.” Jackson’s pissed, but so am I.

Stepping into JJ’s space, I clench my fist and shift my weight. Red hazes my vision, and all I can see are obstacles between me and the woman I love. My veins sizzle with fire; a burning rage demanding I vanquish anything in my path.

A touch on my bicep has my fist flying toward the opponent without thought. I brace myself for the pain to come, but my punch only meets air, tossing my balance off kilter. Suspended for a beat too long leaves my body vulnerable to the attack coming. Without a preamble, my back slams into the hard surface of my truck, forcing precious air from my lungs.

“Enough, Z.”

The use of Rory’s nickname for me clears my tunneled vision. Julian wavers in and out of focus until a hot grip surrounds my throat.

“Come back to me,” he murmurs, flexing his fingers enough to steal all my attention. “There you are.”

“Julian,” I croak, unable to contain the wave of fear, sorrow, and desperation from my voice.

His forehead drops to mine. “I know. But JJ’s right. She didn’t want us here. We have to go now, okay? She’s unconscious. We have to get to the hospital.”

When he pulls away, I finally notice Jackson’s car is gone, and with it, so are Addie and our baby. The absence of them kicks me in the ass, leaving me itching to speed after them.

Dragging Julian in for a hard kiss, I thank him for keeping me in line.

Jackson was right, but it doesn't matter. I need to get to my Dolly.

Chapter Thirty-Three



Wyatt

What good am I if it takes me hours to track down my woman? Fucking hours. It doesn't matter that whoever had her was smart enough to deactivate her phone. I should have been able to find her. Fuck!

Sure, I was able to hack into the footage of the restaurant's back parking lot, but for such a fancy fucking place, they sure treat their workers like shit. Their parking lot might as well have been a dark alley, begging for someone to get kidnapped.

Just like Addie and our baby. I know I didn't get her pregnant, but if one of us has a kid, then it's all of ours. We're a family. A unit. Inseparable. That baby is going to be so damn loved.

Scrubbing a hand down my face, I wish I could bleach the shadowed images of Addie being dragged around and pushed to her knees out of my mind. We were able to see the man raise his boot, but what it connected with, I don't know. Darkness had swallowed her and their vehicle whole.

“Care to share just what the fuck is going on? We've been here for hours, and still, none of you have come clean.”

I swallow my groan, knowing Jude has every fucking right to berate and yell at me. Instead of making my displeasure known, I say something worse. “We have it handled.”

Leo, Rylee's quietest husband, steps on the trash can lever so hard the lid crashes into the wall, denting it in the process. "Did you really just say that?" he growls, glaring at me like he's about to burn me alive.

"Leo," Rylee prods hesitantly, like she's shocked, too.

He offers her a soft look. Ry settles a bit, but then Leo turns his anger on me again. "One of our best friends was thrown in a ditch after god knows what. I really, *really* don't think you have jack shit handled. As far as I'm concerned, the four of you fucked up before you got her kidnapped."

Leo's voice is sharp yet steady. On the surface, his pale complexion and white hair show no hint of distress. But beneath that, my friend is completely and utterly disgusted with us.

"Adelyn, your girlfriend for all of two weeks, is already pregnant, neglected, and was fucking kidnapped. Not to mention, she's already run ragged being the best mom she can possibly be while trying to maintain a life for herself. Which, I will add, she rarely does, but you four are helping her not only live but *enjoy* living. Then you go and fuck off, leaving that amazing woman stranded and vulnerable." With those parting words, Leo storms off.

Jude watches him go, his surfer vibes hardening. He doesn't even look at Tate and me as he says, "You endangered my family. We should be out celebrating our wife's new book, yet you could very well have put us in danger by not warning us."

Jude's chocolate eyes trail over to us, none of his easy humor showing. "Did you ever think that Rylee's past, Tate's—all of yours could be connected? This doesn't just involve you anymore. Rylee, our *kids*, could be targeted too. Shit, man, your *baby*. I understand you might not have the answers, and we love you all, but this isn't being *handled*, Wyatt. Whether you like it or not, we aren't going to turn a blind eye to this. *Especially* with Addie not wanting to see you."

Rylee sighs and slumps against the counter after Jude drops a kiss on her head and makes his way upstairs. Her red

hair is high on her head in a messy bun, and she looks ready to pass out where she sits. With the baby monitor gripped in her hand, she sniffles. Baby Oliver finally went to sleep a bit ago in the crib they keep here, just in case. I just hate that the just in case scenario is because of us. We endangered the whole family. Without knowing who's after us, Rylee's family is on high alert after what happened with her ex.

"Rylee, go lay down," Tate whispers, having been silent throughout the whole ordeal. I can practically feel his anxiety vibrating off him, setting me even further on edge.

Ry doesn't even lift her head from where she's watching her phone and the baby monitor. I hear quiet shuffling from the speakers. Jude or Leo probably checking on Ollie in the guest room.

"No," she murmurs. "They'll call soon."

My stomach clenches uncomfortably at the unknown.

Will they call with bad news? That maybe Addie isn't where I tracked her phone to, and whoever had us is leading us on a wild goose chase?

The shrill sound of Rylee's phone ringing snaps me out of my racing thoughts, only to send me into a full fucking freak out when I hear the shouts down the line. The word hospital comes through loud and clear before the call ends. Suddenly, Rylee bolts across the kitchen and into Tate's arms, where he stands frozen. His chest is heaving, and his eyes are wide. Much like my own reaction.

How can I help my boy when I am just as scared as he is? What good am I when I am partially at fault for the fact that our girl and child are being rushed to the hospital?

Tate's chest muffles Rylee's sobs. When I search his face, I see no tears, just emptiness. He's lost in his trauma. Rylee's attack and his first kill. *Only* kill. Fuck. The questioning he had to go through and the strings we had to pull would have been enough to scar anyone. Tate is not a murderer. He's the opposite. He cares deeply, and I can't believe we allowed another person he loves to get hurt.

We damaged our future before tonight. It's not like Addie just got pregnant when she went to work tonight. No, she's been pregnant for *weeks*. Weeks we started slipping away from her. The warnings and our concerns are no excuse. I don't think we intentionally decided to keep her out of it, but work, our safety, and fear came first. Never fear for our relationship with Addie. Why? How was that never a concern?

Tate thought of Addie the whole time, though.

Tate blinks, his stiff form softening around his older sister. His soft murmurs and gentle caresses on her back break something inside of me. I didn't think I could break. The clove in my mouth snaps, leaving a horrid taste in my mouth. A perfect representation of my heart. We broke something with our decisions.

I just hope whatever tonight brought to Addie didn't break her as well. I would rather she hate me forever than for the light to dim in her eyes. I need her to be okay. To smile and laugh. I want her to keep flitting around and doing everything in the world to make Rory happy. I want Addie to stay the way she is. And if something in her shattered tonight, I'll never forgive myself.

Chapter Thirty-Four



Aurora

“Aurora May. Time to wake up, sweetie.”

A tickle on my cheek bothers me. Shoving my face into the fluffy pillow, I don't open my eyes. I try not to listen to the shuffling around the room, but when someone else's voice comes near, I frown into the sheets.

“Come on, Dino. Wake up. Layla's waiting for you to eat pancakes.”

Why is Tate in my room? Wait, Layla's here too? Lifting my head releases a smell from the bed around me. This doesn't smell like my bed. When the blanket is tugged from my face, I let it go.

My chest feels like someone's pounding on it. From the inside, though, it's like something needs to get out. Mom calls it... what does she call it? Ansety? Anxiety! Where is Mom?

The room isn't bright when I open my eyes. Not like my room is. My purple curtains are thin, which kind of sucks sometimes. This room is still dark, though. I wonder how early it is.

“There she is!”

I don't sit up; too cozy to move. Tate sits next to me on the edge of the bed. His smile is small, just like Aunty Rylee's is behind him. They look the same. More so than usual today.

With the glow of the hallway from the door, I see they are both in sweatpants and T-shirts.

Their bright blue eyes look kind of sleepy? Sad? I don't know. Their smiles are the same. They don't look very happy, though. If Tate had red hair, they would look like twins! That would be cool.

“You're in my room, Dino. Everyone had a big sleepover here last night! Layla even snuggled with you after you fell asleep.” Tate pokes my nose. *Oh yeah! I remember now. Mom was working late.*

I watch the hallway for a second, waiting for Mom to walk in with a big smile. Every day, the first thing she does when she sees me is smile so wide. Kind of like Aunty Ry when Layla's around. *Where's my smile?*

“Where's my mom?”

Tate shifts on the bed. He looks at his lap. “Your mom—”

Rylee pushes him a little and lifts me out of bed. “Come on, sweetie! Let's get you some breakfast, then we'll see your mommy, I promise!” I giggle, wrapping my arms around her neck. She's so strong. She sticks her tongue out and stops moving. “First, go brush your teeth, stinky.”

I lock my mouth shut and wiggle my way down to the floor. *Nobody likes smelly breath. Sometimes, Mom's reactions are funny, though.* My smile curls around the toothbrush Rylee gives me in Tate's bathroom. It's connected like Mom's is. There's a door in his bedroom that leads to the bathroom. *I wish I had one of these.*

Spitting, I spin around and show Rylee my teeth. “TEEFS!” I shout.

“Teefs?” Rylee laughs, grabbing my hand and walking downstairs with me.

Looking around for Mom, I respond happily, “Yeah, you know, like teeth! It's my most favorite word. Mom usually yells it back. It's silly.”

Rylee looks sad again when she looks down at me, but a blueberry hits me in the head, making her narrow her eyes into the kitchen. “No throwing food, Bug. Who taught you that?”

Skipping to Layla, I hop into the chair beside her. “Daddy Marc and Daddy Jude throw things at each other.”

Across from me, Jude chokes, and his cheeks get so red I can’t help but laugh at him. Layla giggles, too, smiling big at her dad. My throat feels like I can’t quite swallow.

I want a dad. Layla’s so lucky she has four. I thought maybe I would have four, but I don’t know anymore. Mom is sad, and they don’t hang out with us anymore.

Layla bounces in her seat, so I do the same when a plate of pancakes is set in front of me. “Thank you!” *I don’t want to be sad. Mom needs me to be happy for her.*

“You’re welcome, bestie,” Wyatt says above me. My tummy leaps with joy when he kisses the top of my head. *Maybe they still like me and Mom?*



“Where are we going?” Buildings and cars flash by my window, making me a little dizzy. I realized a bit ago that we weren’t going home, but nobody said anything. Layla and Ollie went with Uncle Leo and Jude. *I wonder what they’re doing today while Aunty Ry is with me.*

Wyatt stops us at a stoplight and looks at Tate next to him. They do that a lot. Just look at each other without saying anything. Like they can read each other’s minds.

“Rory,” Rylee whispers. Her hand grabs mine, and when I look up at her, she’s staring down at our fingers. The car starts forward again. “Addie got hurt last night, so JJ, Marc, Zach, and Julian brought her to the doctor.”

I feel my brows bunch. *Hurt? Doctor?* “Is she going to be okay? How did she get hurt? What do you mean?” My hold on

her hand tightens, almost like if I squeeze hard enough, the answers will come pouring out of her.

Aunty Ry finally looks at me as the car starts moving. “Your mom is going to be okay, and she’s so excited to see you, sweetie.”

“But what happened?” I’m glad Mom’s going to be okay, but she’s hurt. “Mommy *never* gets hurt. She’s always good and happy. Mom is *always* smiling. Will she be smiling when I get there? Who will make Mom dinner if she can’t? Will she be able to help me with my homework? Who will clean for us? Will we have food at home? Can I hug her still?”

My hand slips from Rylee’s, but then she’s tucking my hair behind my ear. “Rory, take a deep breath. We’re here, and you’ll get to see her in just a few minutes. I promise you and your mom are going to be taken care of, no matter what. First, we need to calm down a bit, okay?”

She’s right. Wyatt isn’t driving the big car anymore. Instead, he’s turned around and looking at me. Tate’s watching me too, but he looks the most worried. *Is it for me or Mom?* My chest rises. At the same time, the corner of Tate’s lips lift. I breathe out and take another big inhale, giddy when Tate’s smile grows.

“Good job, Dino. Should we go see your momma now?” I nod, then he’s out of the car, opening my door, unbuckling me, and whipping me around onto his back. I squeal a high-pitched noise and snuggle my arms around his neck. The chain Layla got for him sparkles in the sun, keeping my focus as we walk through the big sliding doors.

It’s so bright and busy when we walk in, so I tuck my head into Tate’s back and try to ignore all the noise and people. “It smells funny in here.” My muffled complaint makes Tate’s back shake with a laugh.

The elevator ride makes my tummy swirl weird. When the door dings open, I hear familiar voices. I perk up and look around. Tate’s arms, holding my legs, clench a bit tighter, but it doesn’t bother me.

“She doesn’t want to see you, Zach. I don’t know what to tell you. Rory will be here soon. Let her have some time to process.” That’s JJ, Layla’s biggest dad. His hair is so dark I can see some white in it from here.

I smile, wondering if we’re going to sneak up on them since they haven’t seen us yet. *Zach and Julian stand close to each other with their backs to us, so maybe we can for sure scare them!*

“Fuck, Jackson!” I jump a little on Tate’s back at Z’s loud voice. Tate stops moving. “I know it’s our fault. I feel absolutely *terrible!* If we hadn’t kept this from everyone, Addie and our baby wouldn’t be lying in that hospital bed. It’s our fault they’re hurt, and I have no idea how to fix it if she won’t let me see her!”

W-what? Mom’s hurt because of them? “You hurt my mommy?” The question pops from my mouth so fast I startle myself with my own voice. *I don’t know what’s happening.* “Whose baby are you talking about?”

JJ’s eyes widen, looking from me to Tate, Wyatt, and Rylee. Julian and Zach do the same when they turn around.

They don’t look so good. They have dark splotches under their eyes like Mom has lately. Maybe they don’t feel so good, either. But Zach just said they don’t feel good because they’re the reason my mom is hurt. That can’t be right.

“You told me you loved us, so why would you hurt my mom?” My voice wobbles, and it feels like I can hardly push the words out.

“Rory,” Julian whispers, and I swear his eyes are sparkling.

He looks like he’s in pain. So, does Z. I feel bad and want to hug them... but if they hurt my mom...

“Come here, Rory. Let’s go see Addie,” Rylee says, her voice kind of rough. She plucks me off Tate’s back and places me on my feet. Walking by all the big guys, I feel nervous. Normally, I love being around them. So why does it feel like things have changed?

I just want my mom.

Chapter Thirty-Five



Adelyn

“You doin’ okay?”

I grimace at Marc’s throaty voice. He isn’t being loud, but damn, am I feeling sensitive. Listening to the officers talk and forcing my voice to give my statement has me feeling raw in so many ways.

Don wasn’t the one to take my statement, thank fuck. But still, being surrounded by the people my dad used to work with hurts my heart. I miss him so much. He never would have let anything happen to me. Uncle Don has been blowing up my phone, but I have no idea what to tell him. I’d rather he just read the police reports, so I don’t have to rehash the horrors of last night with my only parent figure.

I swallow, gripping the sheets over my stomach. “Fine,” I whisper. Marcus watches me as he reclines on the couch, keeping an eye on me. He’s worried. It’s nice.

My baby is okay, the doctor said. It’s hard to believe. When they took my vitals and blood, they came back, and I heard for the first time that I was pregnant. The confirmation made my heart and mind riot with happiness and nerves. I cried until I was numb after they told me everything was okay. I’ll need an ultrasound to tell me how far along I truly am, though.

I made them show me the results, but I wasn’t prepared for the onslaught of emotions to come barreling down on me.

Guilt and disbelief war with excitement and nervousness. I can't believe I let my baby be put in that position, yet it's hard to fathom that I am *actually* pregnant. I'm excited for the life growing inside of me and to be a mom, but the nerves rolling through my muscles are because of all the uncertainty of the future. I don't even know how long I've been pregnant, let alone how to deal with the baby's dad.

Life feels too messy and wobbly for me to feel confident in my calculations. My last period was six weeks ago, but does that mean I'm six weeks along? Or do they calculate by when I conceived, which, if I'm remembering correctly, was like four weeks ago? I have no idea how any of this works, and it's freaking me the fuck out. So, I booked my first ultrasound. An appointment I will probably have to go to alone. The two people I really want to come with are dead. My mom won't be here to meet her grandbaby. My dad will never have the chance to hold another baby in his arms.

A miracle baby. Just like Rory. I never thought I would be able to have kids after watching my mom struggle for years to conceive after losing my first sibling. I hated her tears and the never-ending hope that *this* would be the time. A baby was something I never considered would be possible for me. Yet it was so easy. A drunken night and too many scattered weeks.

Now here I am, holding my tummy in hopes I won't cry like my mom did. Here I am, hoping like hell I'll have a healthy pregnancy and meet this little bean someday. I already want to take another pregnancy test. Something solid to hold on to of my baby.

Sighing, the voices outside the door become louder. It's late morning, and since I woke up not long after being carried into the hospital, Zach and Julian have stopped at nothing to see me. JJ running interference has been a blessing. I don't want to be any more of a mess when Rory gets here.

Ry texted me a little while ago, saying they were on their way. She, Rory, Tate, and Wyatt. All four guys will be hovering outside my door now. I'm too tired to see them. I know I have to talk to them, but I have nothing to give. No words to make them feel better, no forgiveness to offer. I

didn't know where we stood yesterday morning, and there's no way in hell I know where we stand twenty-four hours later. An awful, complicated twenty-four hours.

Rylee told me that everyone knows about the baby except the kids. My symptoms were fairly obvious to her. When she asked about the results today, she was overjoyed to hear that the baby was okay. Since it's still early enough, Bean is tucked in pretty well behind my pubic bone. Safe. Unharmed.

Me, not so much. I didn't have a line of defense saving me from the kicks, rough handling, and strangling. The trauma I experienced, I know, will affect my baby in some way. The doctors said that whatever they used to get me to pass out might have some side effects for me, like headaches and dizziness, but for Bean, we will just have to keep a closer eye on my pregnancy for a while.

My hips are pretty banged up on both sides; scrapes and bruises that are turning purple as we speak. My throat has a ring of blue fingerprints around it. Every time I think of them, I feel Johnny's hot skin stealing the air from my lungs. I remember how absolutely useless I was in keeping me and my baby safe.

As were the guys. The thought is horribly harsh, but fucking hell! They brought this here. Johnny was here for them, not me. It's such a sick twist of fate that one of the men after my guys is my ex. The ex who raped me, ruined high school, and an array of friendships. Did they know? I told them what happened. What Johnny did to me. Were they so furious because they knew him?

"Fuck, Jackson!" I huff at Zach's shout through the door. "I know it's our fault. I feel absolutely *terrible!* If we hadn't kept this from everyone, Addie and our baby wouldn't be lying in that hospital bed. It's our fault they're hurt, and I have no idea how to fix it if she won't let me see her!"

I'm ready for someone else's voice to overpower his in return, but it never comes. Instead, muted shuffling and muffled words barely reach me. *Who shut Zach down that fast?*

“Knock, knock!” Rylee doesn’t wait for me to say anything before she cracks the door open and slipping inside with Rory.

“Mommy!” Rory cries, shattering my fragile heart with one broken word. Behind her, Marc swoops in on his wife, but soon I can’t see them as a curtain of dark hair flies across my face. “Are you okay, Mom? Aunty Rylee and Tate said you were hurt, and the guys out there said it was their fault. I thought they liked us, but they hurt you?! I thought they were my friends!”

Rory’s arms around my neck shake with each hiccupping sob she drenches my hospital gown in. I shush her, rubbing her dainty back as she tries to burrow further into me. I hold back my hiss of pain when her bony knee bashes against my bruised hip. The need to comfort my daughter is much stronger than any physical pain I’m enduring.

“I’m okay, honey. I’m okay, I promise.” I keep my eyes closed in hopes of holding back my own tears. My sweet girl doesn’t need to see me hurting any more than I already am.

“B-but they hurt you!” At her yell in my ear, I pop my eyes open in time to see Rylee and Marc leaving the room.

“Honey, they didn’t hurt me.” Rory pulls away, cataloging every bruise around my neck as she goes. I hold her hands as I say, “Zach, Wyatt, Julian, and Tate *do* love you, sweetie. They didn’t do this to me. Someone they know did, okay? They were with you the whole time, remember?”

It breaks my heart to think that the guys might have fallen from Rory’s pedestals too. She sees a lot for such a young girl, and I know she’s been watching me for the past week and a half. I’m sad because of the guys and she knows it. Now she knows they played a role in what happened last night, too. My heart hurts for my little girl who wants a daddy so badly.

She sniffles, her eyes ping-ponging from mine to my neck. “It’s their f-fault, though.”

What is protocol here? Any moms out there? I would love some fucking advice. What the hell do you say to your eight-

year-old when the men you've been seeing have been keeping some dangerous shit from you and suddenly, you're in the middle of it? What do you say when your daughter's trust is faltering in the men who love her like their own? What the hell does a mother say when she also no longer trusts those same men, but doesn't want to break her daughter's heart? I don't want Rory to be as comfortable with them because I feel like I don't know who they truly are anymore. But I don't want her to lose them either. What do I say?!

I tuck a strand of her long, straight hair behind her ear and admire the fascinating way her blue eyes sparkle with each tear she forces back down. *My strong girl.* Small bits of honesty are what I decide on. "They didn't tell me some stuff; it's true. If they had been honest, I would have been more careful. So, yeah, honey, they hold some fault here."

I hate it. So much. My understanding would be higher for them if I didn't have a daughter and another baby on the way. It's unfair for me to blame them for putting the baby in danger, but they *did* put her in danger. It's not just me they should have been thinking about. They should have been thinking of my daughter.

I wonder when they found out shit was going to go down. Was that why they have been MIA for a week and a half? Because they knew someone was coming for them? They should have warned me. If they knew longer, why would they pursue me? They have always known about Rory. If they knew before we started dating, then they knowingly put my daughter in the line of fire.

And that's not something I can forgive.

Chapter Thirty-Six



Zachary

“Take a seat.”

Fuck. If we were back home in Washington, there would be no way we would be suspects. We’ve been working with the police and have become friends with many detectives over the years. We are an ally in taking the nasty fuckers from home down. Now isn’t any different. Yet here I sit on a cold metal chair with two cops staring me down like I might spew some incriminating evidence.

I don’t say anything, even though I’m itching to get my hands on the files laid out in front of us. I know Addie gave her statement already, and it hurts like fuck that it landed me in the accusatory sights of the law.

“Where were you last night around 9:30?” The cop with greying hair sneers at me while awaiting my answer.

I frown. “I was at home with my family and Adelyn’s daughter, Aurora.”

“And why was Ms. West’s daughter in your home?”

They know the answer to this, I’m sure of it, so it’s only pissing me off that we’re wasting time going over unnecessary information. “We were watching Rory while Adelyn worked a late-night shift. I’m in a relationship with Adelyn.”

“How kind of you,” the older man huffs, crossing his arms like I’ve pissed him off.

I'm shocked when the youngest of the two scolds him. "Don, please." With a sigh, the dark-haired man grabs a file, flips it open, and spins it around. "Do you recognize this man?"

Like a man starved for answers, I take in every fucking blemish on my rival's face. *Johnathan Cadell*. "Yes, I recognize him. His name is Johnathan Cadell." I grit out.

Both cops watch me without blinking. "And how do you know him?"

I want to swallow my tongue. Is Johnathan the one who took Addie? If he was, I am *truly* the reason my dolly was hurt and thrown in a ditch. "He and his team are our competitors back home in Washington. We used to fight over who got the best gigs."

"Gigs?" the older one, Don, asks.

I nod. "Yeah, we both have our own teams who ran security back home for some rich people."

Don's cheek flexes as he clenches his jaw. Whatever he's about to say, I don't think I'm ready for. "Since you're in a relationship with Ms. West, are you aware of the connection between Mr. Cadell and her?"

What? "Connection? I don't think I'm following." What fucking connection does my arch nemesis have to my fucking girlfriend?!

The young officer shifts and looks to his superior. Don clears his throat. "I don't like you, Zachary. I am aware of the cases you have helped with back in your hometown, but you put my niece in danger."

"Niece?" *What the hell is going on right now? I thought I was a suspect, but now it feels like I'm being interrogated by fucking family members.*

Don leans back in his chair, his muscles flexing with each inhale he takes. *For an older man, he's fucking buff.* "Addie and Rory's dad was my best friend. Joseph was my partner before he died. We spent every day together. I knew the girls well."

Okay, and? What the hell does this have to do with what just fucking happened? I don't really give a shit that this guy is Addie's family friend. I need to be out there hunting Cadell down.

“Johnathan went by the name Johnny in high school. He grew up here and dated Addie. I wasn't aware of what happened to her in high school until we got her statement yesterday. It turns out that the same man who's after you also *raped* my niece in high school and made her life a living hell.”

I'm stunned silent.

Johnathan is the Johnny Addie told us about? That's impossible. How could two horrid pieces of both our pasts be connected? How could they both collide in such a fucked up form of fate?

“That c-can't be right,” I mumble, my eyes pleading with them to take it back.

Don leans forward once again with his arms braced along the metal table. “It is. Tell me, how long did you know someone was coming for you?”

I internally cringe, trying to hold my hard exterior in the face of this judgmental, protective fucking prick. “A week and a half.”

Don's hand slams into the table, making the young officer jump in surprise. “Get the fuck out.”

“But—” I start, only for Don to wave me off.

“We'll have squads stationed outside of her apartment as well as her friend's house, Mrs. Parker, and yours. We will find this asshole, but until then, I expect complete cooperation from you and the other guys. You find out anything, you tell us. I swear to Christ, if you don't and put my nieces in more danger, I will find a way to end you.”

The young cop chokes, startled by the threat Don just threw at me. My stomach pinches with unease and sinks; guilt threatening to bring me to my knees.

How could we have been so wrong? How could I have been so wrong?



Addie went home today. Watching her being wheeled out of the hospital was like a kick to my gut. The way she held her stomach will forever be ingrained in my mind. I hope someday I'll get to feel and hold our baby like she does.

“What’s going on, Zach? I have shit to do.” Wyatt’s on edge, itching to get back to his laptops and figure out who’s behind all of this.

I swallow and stand from my chair at the kitchen table. I can’t sit while I share the news. My blood feels like it’s boiling, and I’m trying so hard not to drown under the torment that is my mind and emotions.

Pacing around the island, I can’t force away the thickness of my voice. “Johnathan Cadell. He’s the one who took Dolly. Him and his fucking team.”

“WHAT?!” Wyatt roars, his chair clattering to the ground behind him. “The fuck—how did you—I WOULD HAVE KNOWN!”

He’s losing his cool, his own guilt coming to a tipping point as he realizes just how close this was for us. We’ve been neck and neck with Cadell’s team for years, always fighting to be the best. And it fucking *stings* that they bested us when it mattered most.

“That’s not all,” I say, clenching my jaw, knowing this is about to get ten times worse than the heaving chests around the table. “When I went to the station for questioning last night, I met Addie’s family friend or uncle, I guess. Johnathan grew up here. He used to go by the name of Johnny.”

I let that sink in and watch the devastation tear through the hearts of the three men in front of me. The moment in clicks for Julian physically hurts me as his eyes widen and he mouths

the word *no* over and over again. Wyatt's next, his fist immediately clenching and ramming itself into the wall, creating a hole similar to the one my soul aches with without Addie here. Tate jumps at the loud noise and cracking plaster, and I long to go to him. To soothe his anxieties and impending panic attack.

"T," I start, only for him to gasp. When his attention shifts to me, his eyes are pleading with me to tell him it's not true. That the person who's after us also has a fucked up past with our woman. Giving Johnathan the perfect target to fulfill his twisted desires on.

Shock doesn't quite cover what I feel when I see Tate's eyes cloud over. I'm worried he's shutting down on us, but instead of retreating to his room when he stands, he wraps his arms around Wyatt's waist. Wyatt's shoulders immediately drop, as do a few droplets of blood from his knuckles.

"I'll get the first aid kit," Julian murmurs, rising from his chair too.

When I see him go to the closet, I say, "It's still in the bathroom." It's like a wave of misery settles on each of us as we remember *why* the first aid kit is still in the bathroom. The realization that I haven't checked on Addie and her self-harm in over a week makes me fucking sick.

I see the same look on the other three as well. We have been horrible. Not at just being boyfriends, but at being human beings. *Fuck.*

We're so fucking low right now; the only way to go is up. I just hope Adelyn and Rory allow us to try.

Chapter Thirty-Seven



Tate

Addie's home now. Has been for a few days. I haven't spoken to her or even seen her since we watched her being wheeled out of the hospital. That's not to say we haven't been near her. There's no fucking way we would leave her unprotected after everything. Even with the constant squad car keeping watch outside of everyone's homes, we still need to keep her safe ourselves.

Wyatt has barely slept since Friday night. Now that Addie's home and tucked away in her apartment on bed rest, he's been watching the cameras in and outside of her apartment building. We aren't taking any chances.

Julian and Zach have swapped in and out, keeping watch outside too. Not trusting one cop to keep our girls safe. Gabby's spent each night with Rory and Addie, helping with anything she can. So now, as I knock on the door with Tuesday tacos in hand for lunch and a bleeding heart in my chest, I'm not surprised when it's Gabby who opens the door.

We've discussed endlessly who should come today, but she has already refused Wyatt, Zach, and Julian. We're hoping she'll see me since I was the one most adamantly against keeping this shit from her.

Gabby looks pissed to see me, which is new. Rylee has a similar look in her eye when she looks at us lately, too, but I still see the love she has for me. Gabby is cold when she opens

the door, but her anxious energy gives her away. She's tired, worried for her friend, and at a loss.

"Let me help, please," I beg, lifting the bag of tacos and giving her my best earnest look.

Gabby shakes her head, pink hair falling loose from her high bun. "I don't think that's a good idea, Tate." Sadness swallows any and all anger from her red-rimmed eyes. The look of defeat on our bubbliest friend freaks me the fuck out.

"Please, Gabby." I don't try to explain myself to her. She's in full protective mode. Just as I'm sure I'll officially be dismissed; a little hand grips the door by Gabby's hip and pulls it open.

"Can I talk to Tate, Pixie? Please?" Rory looks unsure, and it breaks my soul. She's always so sure of everything.

Addie took her out of school a few days early before Thanksgiving break starts later this week. I'm so fucking glad she made that decision. I don't know how I could handle either of them being out on their own like that right now. Not until we end this shit.

The way she won't look at me longer than a second makes my heart want to shrivel up and die. *What did we do!?* The answer is obvious. We broke an eight-year-old's trust. An eight-year-old who has loved us from day one and demanded we be her friends. Now, she hovers feet away from me, twiddling her fingers. The lack of hugs and high-pitched happiness makes me want to rage and throw something.

I've cried and had a panic attack already. Now I'm determined and angry. At myself, the guys, and Cadell's group. How they are invisible in this town is beyond me. *Better than us*, a nasty voice whispers in my mind.

No, they can't be better than us because to be less would mean the safety of Addie, our baby, and the little girl in front of me.

Adelyn saw them, and we know she made a statement to the police, yet she won't tell us anything about what happened to her. I can guess based on her injuries, but it's not the same

as living it. Someone knowing I was stabbed in the leg isn't the same as me telling them I was stabbed in the leg while trying to get to my unconscious sister as her abusive ex taunted me, telling me she was dead.

Hell, I won't even ask her anything about that night until she understands my feelings for her, and I make sure she's okay. I wouldn't ever force her to tell me what happened until she was ready.

"Rory," Gabby starts, only for the little one to widen her eyes and push her bottom lip out. Gabby sighs. "Fine, only for a couple minutes, and I'm telling your mom." She eyes me, a warning in her steely gaze, and I nod, taking a step into the apartment.

Rory grumbles something about Gabby being a tattletale, but I hide my chuckle in a cough, not wanting to offend the only person in this apartment that wants to talk to me.

I follow Rory into the living room and take a seat on the same couch as her, making sure to leave enough space between us. The distance makes my stomach squeeze uncomfortably.

"Rory..." My throat is thick with emotion and fear.

"I'm going to be a big sister. Did you know that? Mom told me about Baby Bean. Did she tell you?" Rory twists her fingers in her lap as she shares her news. Her eyes shoot from her lap to me and back down again, seemingly uneasy with my presence.

I swallow. "Yeah, Dino. I did know your momma was having a baby." I want to reach out to her so badly, but the divide between us is heavy with regret, sadness, and confusion.

I see the uncertainty in Rory's eyes, like she doesn't truly understand how she feels or maybe why she's feeling what she is. But I'm damn proud of her. We didn't do right by her or her mom, so she *should* be wary of the man in her safe space. Even if it fucking kills me that I'm the one she is scared of.

She eyes the bag of tacos with a tiny frown, making me wonder what she's thinking about. "It's Tuesday," she mumbles. "You came."

"Of course I came for Taco Tuesday." I try to keep the hurt out of my voice at Rory's surprise, but shit, why the hell wouldn't I be here?

"You didn't last week," she whispers, tucking her feet beneath her thighs. I don't know what to say, so I stay quiet, hoping something will come to me. Before I can come up with something, Rory breaks my soul into tiny little pieces. "Will Bean have a daddy? Mom said Julian is the baby's dad, but he's not here, just like my dad."

I open my mouth to respond, but Rory continues her quiet ramble. "Bean would be okay without one, just like me, because Mom is the best one ever. But sometimes I get sad just like Mom does, and I don't want my baby sibling to ever be sad. I hope I'm a good enough big sister like Addie is. She's such a good sister she became my mom. I hope I can be half as awesome as she is."

"Rory, look at me please," I beg, my hand reaching across the cushions but not touching her. "Bean will have a dad no matter what. Julian might be the biological dad, but me, Wyatt and Zach will be here too. I swear." I hope she understands what I'm saying. Sometimes I forget that she's just nine and I don't really know how to communicate at her level.

She eyes me, flaying my pale skin with her piercing gaze. "Why would you be here? Just for the baby, you mean?"

My heart thumps painfully at her words and the hopeful opening I see to gain her trust back. "No, not just for the baby, Dino. For you and for your momma. We love you both so much."

Rory frowns. "So, why did you get my mom hurt?"

I stutter out a breath, breaking eye contact and trying to control my racing pulse.

How do I tell a young girl about how astronomically we fucked up. How much I fucked up. Maybe the truth? With less

swearing, of course.

“I messed up, Rory, and there aren’t enough words for me to express how sorry I am. The other guys, too, but they will have to talk to you themselves.”

Movement behind Rory’s dainty shoulder draws my attention. I about choke on my next breath when I see Linnie leaning against the wall in a black tank top and grey sweatpants. Both arms are wrapped around her stomach, her hair cascades around her shoulders and the peaks of her breasts, but her eyes are what really capture my attention. She isn’t meek or shy in the way she holds my stare. No, my woman is angry, and she’s not afraid to make it known. Addie raises an eyebrow like she’s waiting for me to continue. I don’t keep her waiting.

I settle my eyes back on Rory, but knowing that Addie is listening, I make my apology for the both of them. “I am so sorry. I know that doesn’t mean much because of how bad I f—messed up, so I’ll spend the rest of my days proving it to you with actions.”

“Actions speak louder than words,” Rory murmurs, like she’s repeating something her mom once said to her. Looking up, I see Addie smiling at her daughter, a proud gleam in her eye.

“Exactly. I love you both so much, and if you’ll have me, I’ll prove it to you. I’ll never keep secrets ever again, and you can ask me anything you want. From here on out, I am an open book and will do everything in my power to keep you and your mom safe.”

Rory’s eyes water as she eyes the hand I keep between us, palm up and waiting for her to meet me halfway. If she doesn’t, I’ll understand even if it hurts to accept that the damage I’ve caused is far deeper than I thought.

I don’t let my eyes trail to Linnie. I keep my focus solely on the little girl I love like my own kid. My chest pounds uncomfortably and my stomach twists as I wait for her to make a move. With a hesitant lift of her hand, Rory slowly settles her palm in mine and I fucking soar.

“Can I have a taco?”

I chuckle, grabbing the bag to feed her. With Rory happily munching on her taco beside me with a smile, I can't help but feel like the divide between us has shrunk and is ready for healing. I just hope I can make the same progress with Linnie.

Chapter Thirty-Eight



Adelyn

Tate's words ping-pong around in my head while I watch Rory reach for her second taco. *I could fuck with a taco.*

Seems like it's the only thing this baby actually *wants* to eat. Everything else has been a struggle. Shit, the pregnancy has been a struggle these past few days. I don't know if it's just the healing, the leftover effects from the drugs I inhaled, or growing an entire human, but I haven't felt well *at all*. I'm fucking exhausted when I'm not throwing up. But it's not like a normal tired, it's like a fucking *sick* tired.

"Lynnie," Tate whispers, now standing in front of me. "Talk to me, baby," he pleads.

I shrug, not knowing what to say to him. He's as handsome as ever, his blond hair in disarray, tight black T-shirt and jeans. His bright blue eyes catalog everything I give him.

"How are you feeling?" His eyes dip to my tummy, making me hold myself a bit tighter.

I shrug again. "Like shit, but we're fine." He frowns and takes another step forward, but before he can say anything, I cut him off. "What are you doing here, Tate?"

He huffs, rubbing the back of his neck for a second. His eyes are firm but filled with emotions when he trains them back on me. "You know why I'm here, Lynnie. You know why the other guys have been begging to see you, too. We love

you, and I know it's hard to hear right now, but it's true, and we are going to keep being here to prove it to you."

My eyes burn and my hands tremble. "You should go," I whisper, dragging my gaze away from his.

"No," Tate states firmly. The growl lacing his tone has me shooting my head up in shock. Tate's the sweet, quiet one. This is new. "I'm not leaving until you tell me you hear me."

I glare, taken aback by his demand. "I hear you," I say, making sure to sound a little extra shitty. *Fuck him for trying to demand my attention when that's all I've wanted from them for almost two weeks.*

The heat coming off his body makes me shiver as he steps into my space. "No, you don't. I can be just as growly as the others when it comes to people I care about. Just ask Marcus how I kicked his ass years ago. So, let's try this again. I love you and I am *not* leaving until I see you understand me."

I hear murmuring coming from the living room and catch Rory and Gabby slipping out of the apartment just in time. Knowing I have the space to myself, my rage and hurt explode from me like I can truly let loose without my daughter in the crossfire.

Shoving at Tate's chest, I huff when he barely moves. "No, *you* listen to *me*! You demand my attention while you all threw me to the curb weeks ago. None of you were there while I worried about what I could have done to push you away. Not even through *text*. So no, Tate, I don't fucking hear you because you haven't cared to hear me when I was aching for you!"

I take sick satisfaction in the way his eyes widen and keep shoving him back step by step. "I was throwing my guts up for *weeks*, and you weren't there! I was left sitting alone on a cold couch while you guys were off doing fuck knows what."

I shake my head, not realizing just how much resentment I have for them going quiet. My voice quivers as my shouts die down. "I could have gotten past that, but you and the guys put me in danger. *Again*, I could have forgiven that, but you

brought danger to my daughter's life, Tate. I could have forgiven that too, if only you had been honest with me. If I had known, I would have put us in lock down because believe it or not, I'm not fucking stupid, and safety means more than my independence. I can't say the same for you guys though, and that's a deal breaker. I don't care if you're hotshots back home, you fucked up and put the people you *love* in danger!"

Shoving him one last time, I find I've pushed him all the way to the door. "Lynnie," he whispers brokenly.

I drop my chin to my chest and wrap my arms around my tummy once more, trying to hold myself together. "Please leave, Tate."

He's silent for a moment, making my anxiety rise with each beat of my aching heart. "I'll go for now, but I'll be back. I will *always* come back for you, Lynnie." Just as his hand grips the doorknob, he whispers, "I hear you."

The door opens, revealing a sight that makes a sob slip past my lips. Wyatt, Julian, and Zach are all standing outside my door with varying expressions of hurt and anger. My cry has Tate hesitating to leave, but with one final longing look, he's out the door and I'm slamming it shut behind him.

My knees wobble like I want to crumple to the ground at their feet just beyond the door, but I rush away, not needing them to hear any more of my torment. Just as I make it to the bathroom, another anguished cry slips free as I kneel over my knees and allow my ass to land on the vanity rug.

Without thinking, I peel my sweatpants down my legs and find the hidden razor in the cabinets behind me. I just need to feel something else. Anything besides the betrayal and hurt they caused. I need to feel something other than the pain caused by the men I've been falling in love with.

Except that's not completely true, is it? My hand pauses its reach to my thigh, the blade reflecting the bathroom lights into my eye. Johnny is the one who inflicted my bruising and the trauma I endured. *Johnny's* the reason I feared for the life growing inside of me and Rory's safety.

The guys would never lay a hand on me. *But they kept secrets. Secrets that are life and death.*

Tate told me they loved me, and even though I wanted to brush it away, I still heard him. I listened. I heard his apology and his words of affection. Hearing those things makes everything so much more confusing. Like if they truly loved me, why would they keep something so monumental from me and put me and Aurora at risk?

Nausea threatens to scald my throat, reminding me of Bean. My vision wavers in and out as I focus on my bare thighs. White and pink lines cross and zigzag through each other. Few are redder than the others, but they're healed. No vulnerable scabs in sight.

The sight makes me shiver uncomfortably. I hate not seeing a fresh cut healing itself and it makes me itch to make a new one so that I can control *something*.

Nausea makes my jaw tingle again, causing me to drop the blade and inch toward the toilet. Nothing comes up, but the icky feeling stays, keeping me far away from the razor I left a few feet away.

“Okay,” I whisper into the silent bathroom, tears streaming down my face as I settle my shaking hand on my bloated tummy. “I hear you, Bean. I hear you.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine



Julian

I feel like I need to make a list of all the fuckery going on in my life right now. My mind is a mess and I have no idea what to focus on or what should have my full attention. Hunched over the island in our kitchen, I twirl a pen around on the counter. *I'll write Addie a letter, too.*

Finding two sheets of paper, I start with my list.

Fuckery:

1. I'm going to be a dad.
2. I'm in love with Addie.
3. Addie won't speak to me.
4. I haven't talked to her since picking up Rory last week.
5. Johnathan's after us and is the same asshole Addie told us about.
6. Addie's in danger.
7. Rory doesn't trust me anymore.

8.

My pen hovers over the eighth thing I want to write down. What needs to be added makes my chest hurt so badly. It's not a heavy weight, it's emptiness.

8. *I'm lonely...*

"Hey," Wyatt greets, striding into the kitchen. His usual tight T-shirt is white today with black ripped jeans. His black hair hangs over his forehead and eyes, dripping like he just got out of the shower.

The loneliness plaguing me has my shoulders sagging when he bypasses me and heads for the fridge. It's not like things have drastically changed between the four of us. We go through busy fazes where we don't see each other as much, but I feel like I'm fizzling away without them. Without Addie and Rory. My baby. My throat tightens.

Clenching my jaw, I force the wateriness of my eyes away as I stare at the eighth line on my list. *Yeah, I'm really damn lonely.*

"What's that?"

I jolt, not having noticed Wyatt sneaking up beside me. Settling myself in the next second, I find it's too late to shield what I wrote. Instead of crumpling the sad list into a ball, I avoid looking at Wyatt and move to the pantry to find something to snack on. *Or I'm hiding. Either is a possibility.*

"Jules..." Wyatt's voice sounds pained. I flinch, hating that I've put another thing on his shoulders that he's going to stress out about. I don't want pity attention; I just want *them*.

Coming out with a bag of SunChips, I peek at Wyatt, finding him where I left him. His face is pinched with concern. I wrack my brain for a joke to lighten the mood, but nothing comes to mind. I offer him a smile as I make my way to the living room, snatching the pen and paper as I go.

Settling into the cushions, I think through how to begin my letter to Addie. It turns out that ignoring Wyatt doesn't make

him go away, and glaring at the paper doesn't make words magically appear. *I guess we're doing this the hard way. With emotions and fuckery.*

Wyatt sits next to me, his thigh pressing into mine. Shifting slightly, he faces me and pleads, "Talk to me, Jules."

I snort. "You sound like Tate." Ugh, hearing their raised voices through the doors two days ago was awful. Hearing Addie speak her mind and lay it all out there is still painful, almost as much as Rory shuffling away from us as fast as possible when she and Gabby walked out. We agreed on just letting Tate see her on Tuesday, but we couldn't help our worry for him or smother the need to be near Addie.

A firm grip on my thigh pulls me out of my thoughts, and I allow my eyes to peel themselves away from the blank white sheet. "Julian," Wyatt begins his scolding. "What's wrong? I need you to talk to me."

I sigh, knowing he's not going to let this go. Nibbling my lip, I wrestle with what to say. I settle for something simple. "I miss you. All of you." I watch as he plucks the clove out of his mouth, readying a response, but I beat him to it. "I know we have a lot of shit going on, so I'm not blaming anyone. But yeah, I'm lonely. I feel like I haven't been touched in ages, nor has anyone looked at me with an ounce of affection or warmth. I'm starting to feel empty."

Fuck, I sound stupid. We're all happy with our dynamic. Being less lovey with each other but shit, I miss getting my ass slapped, or a rough kiss here and there. We rarely say it, but I miss the looks that say I love you.

My thigh pulses, making me realize Wyatt has been gripping it harder for longer than I noticed. The clearing of his throat makes me anxious. "I understand, Julian. I miss you all." He sighs like he's gearing up to admit something. "I feel a little empty, too. Lonely."

"You do?" I ask, surprised because I hadn't stopped to think the others might be feeling the same way. Feeling like shit, I murmur, "I'm so sorry, I should have known. If I had—"

His mouth ensnares mine in a punishing kiss, cutting off my words. My body ignites at the contact, fire licking up my spine at his touch. Wyatt ends the kiss abruptly but keeps his firm hold on my throat.

“No,” he grumbles. “No apologizing. We’re here now, and I *promise* not to leave you alone in this, my love. I’m so sorry.”

I huff, leaning my forehead against his. “You can say you’re sorry, but I can’t?”

“Don’t be a brat,” he warns, flexing his fingers against the sides of my neck. “I love you.”

The puff of his breath against my lips has me chasing him, needing to feel closer to him. With a grunt, Wyatt’s devouring my mouth and hauling me onto his lap. Grinding down in my straddled position, I moan at the friction the action causes. I put up a good fight trying to dominate his wicked tongue, but I soon melt into his tight hold on my hip and throat.

“Mm, so good for me,” he growls against my lips, making me desperate for more. Fuck, I love when he dominates me. Wyatt and Zach have bigger dominant streaks than Tate and I do, and goddamn, it’s sexy. I’d give myself to him in a heartbeat if my stomach hadn’t just rumbled, creating an obvious vibration between us.

Wyatt chuckles, sending shivers down my spine at the huskiness. “I’ll make us lunch. You finish what you were doing.” His chin lifts, indicating my forgotten pen and paper.

Peeling myself off his lap is easier knowing he’s going to make me food. Just as Wyatt stands, Tate enters the kitchen looking like death. *Has he slept at all?!*

With a smile at me and a nod, Wyatt walks right into Tate’s personal space and drops a tender kiss on his lips. “My boy. Go sit with Jules while I make us lunch, okay?”

My chest warms, loving the dazed look in T’s eyes as he touches his fingertips to his lips. I lift an arm and beckon him over, needing his touch and warmth like I need air. He pads his way into the living room, shirtless. The grey sweatpants he’s

rocking leave nothing to the imagination. Wyatt having worked him up enough with a single kiss.

Tate eyes the cozy position I'm offering him with so much relief it makes me ache. *God, have we all been starved for each other? No longer.* Without preamble, Tate snuggles into my side and closes his eyes. It's not long until his head shifts to my lap, and he lets out a quiet snore.

I chuckle silently as I run my fingers through his blond locks. While he snoozes on my lap and Wyatt hums in the kitchen, I finally feel settled enough for words to pour out of me and onto the paper. It's not enough, but it's a start.

Julian's Letter

Addie... Sweetheart,

I miss you. So much. Your voice. The content smile you give us when you're cozy. I miss your laugh and the snorts you try to hide. Your soft skin has been on my mind. I just want to hold you. I would be happy with just your hand in mine. But in reality, I want, I need, to wrap you in my arms and never let you go. To squeeze you until you feel how my heart beats for you. You and our baby. For Rory. My heart beats for our future. You, me, the kids, and our guys. No matter what Adelyn, we WLL be in your future. Even if you hate us, never speak to us, or look in our direction, you three hold our happiness, devotion, and love. You are our future, no matter what, because we love you, and you three are everything.

I hate that the first time I'm going to say this to you is in a letter, but... I love you, Adelyn May West. I love our baby, and I love Rory like my own, too. I understand why this may be my only form of communication with you for a while, but that doesn't mean I'm not wishing I could whisper this in your ear while we cry.

I don't say this to blame you or make you feel guilty... this is just me truly being vulnerable. No jokes. No laughs. Sweetheart, I hurt without you. I fucking ache, and nothing feels okay anymore. I love our guys with my whole soul, but you are my heart. You are the heart of this family, and without you, without our vital organ, we are lost. We are nothing but a husk without you, Rory, and now our baby. I realized how lonely I am today. Wyatt found out, and it turns out we're all struggling. We've distanced ourselves from each other too, so we have some work to do at home. I miss them, too. This sucks, and I am so sorry to dump my feelings on you like this. I just can't seem to stop myself from feeling. Feeling everything all

at once. I'm overwhelmed, and sad, and lonely.

I can only imagine what you're feeling. Hell, you're growing a whole human. Just know that even when you can't see us or hear us, we're there. Right outside, watching over you and wishing you a good night's sleep and a comfortable day. We're here. You're not alone, even when you might feel like it, and we aren't going anywhere.

It's not enough, and I know that. I have so many things I want to say to you Sweetness, but none of it will ever be enough. No matter how many words I say or how pretty they may sound, they won't erase the hurt on their own. I'll show you any chance I get. I'll never block you out again. I will give you everything I am. I promise.

I love you,

Julian

Chapter Forty



Adelyn

My hands tremble, but I fight like hell not to damage the paper. While I was making breakfast this morning, Rory handed me the folded letter and said it was on the floor in front of the door. My name was on it, so the sweet angel didn't even peek, even though I'm sure her curiosity was riding her hard.

Thankfully, Rory's at Rylee's house today, so she doesn't have to witness another meltdown. When she asked to hang out with Layla, I balked, hating the idea of her leaving the house when Johnny's out there waiting somewhere. Rylee and her guys swore up and down they would be home all day with the kids and that there's been an officer outside their home at all times. It's Saturday, so I believe her when she says they won't leave.

I still didn't like it, but Ry said that Tate had offered to come help keep watch, too. Something inside of me settled at the offer. I agreed. Witnessing their conversation the other day and how my daughter handled him like a pro, I can say I trust him to watch out for her, and I trust *Rory* to hold him accountable. *Actions speak louder than words*. I was a damn proud momma when she recited those words perfectly.

So here I sit on my kitchen floor with a spoonful of chocolate frosting, four hours after seeing the letter, shaking and attempting to hold back my tears. *Attempting* because this baby has my hormones completely out of wack. Not to

mention, everything edible in my house sounds absolutely disgusting. I crumpled to the ground when I looked at the banana on the counter because I couldn't stand the thought of eating it. Revulsion has become a constant companion these past few weeks. Therefore, frosting it is until Bean decides we despise that, too.

The burning of my eyes lessens when a tear pops through my lashes and drips from my face. The soft *plop* of it landing on Julian's letter has my eyes shooting open in terror. My heart pounds as I frantically search for the spot I ruined. I huff a delirious laugh when I see the words '*whole human*' smudged with my tear. Ironic when the thing making me so damn emotional *is* the whole human growing inside of me.

Laying the letter flat on the floor in front of me, I lick my spoon, cross my bare legs, and lean over to read through it again. And again. And again, until I'm sobbing and almost out of frosting.

I'm drowning in a furious storm of feelings and words. Julian called the words pretty, yet all they did was tear out my heart. In tiny little pieces, my heart and soul lay beside Julian's letter, confused as to how they fit together again. His words are rewriting my own, and I can't deal with it.

My shout of frustration barrels past my lips with no warning as I fling my shiny, clean spoon across the room. *Fuck!* How dare he?! Why can't they take the hint and leave me the fuck alone?!

"ADDIE!"

My back slams against the cupboards behind me just as my door crashes into the wall. The sounds of Zach's frantic shouts muffle my scared whimper. "ADDIE!" I can't see him where I'm curled up on the kitchen floor, but I would know his voice anywhere. My chest thunders as I hold my breath, hoping like hell he'll leave. *Why is he here?*

"ADELYN! Where are you?!" More stomping and slamming come from my bedroom, and I'm starting to freak the fuck out about why he's acting like this. Zach's scaring me, and that's never something I thought I would feel for him.

“Please, Doll. Please, please, please. Fuck, where is she? Fuck, fuck. My fault.”

I frown, listening to his panicked pleas. My breath saws in and out, each breath coming faster and faster as his mumblings sound closer and closer.

“Addie, *Dolly*, please be here,” Zach whispers, stepping into the kitchen. Almost immediately, his attention snaps to me, the intensity of his gaze rocking me to my core. “Thank FUCK!”

With my knees curled to my chest, I don’t know what to expect, but this big strong dominant man dropping to his knees and scrambling across my kitchen to me isn’t it.

Running his hands over my arms, across my shoulders and tilting my head every which way, I watch every flicker of emotion cross his features. Beneath his dark stubble and frowning eyebrows, Zach looks afraid and relieved all at once. I don’t move, not giving him an inch, confused and lost in his powerful aura.

Just as he seems to settle, I relax, thinking he’ll back away, but instead, I’m airborne and clutched to his chest in a bridal carry.

“Wh-what are you doing?!” I gasp out, my breath catching in my throat at his proximity. He’s so freaking warm and having been sitting on the hardwood floors in my sleep shorts and baggy T-shirt, Zach’s body pressed against mine chases the chill away.

“What are *you* doing?” he grows, not looking at me. I hardly sway as he stomps us into my bedroom.

“What?” I ask, glaring at him. His tone is not appreciated, nor is his presence in my bedroom. I expect him to toss me on my bed when it’s within reach, but he doesn’t throw me around like the doll he calls me.

Settled against my pillows, I try to stifle the pitter-pattering of butterflies in my tummy when he drags my blanket up to my chin. Just nausea. Swallowing the lie is easier when he sits beside my hip with a scowl on his face.

He doesn't say anything, frustrating me beyond belief. *I haven't fucking spoken to him in weeks, yet here he is, sitting on my damn bed and looking at me like I'm the one that fucked up.* Huffing, I shove the blankets down and shimmy my ass toward the headboard. I refuse to be any smaller than I have to be in front of Zach.

"Doll," he growls, eyeing my position like I've personally offended him. "Why were you shivering on the kitchen floor?"

"Why are you in my home?" I counter, mentally high fiving myself when my voice comes out strong.

"Why the hell were you crying and shouting from the cold, hard floor, Adelyn?"

"How did you get into my apartment without a key?" I would take satisfaction in the way his jaw clenches, but my tummy sours at his use of my real name.

He stands swiftly with his hands clenched at his sides. I swear he rumbles like a damn wolf as he paces the length of my room. I eye my bathroom door, wondering if I can run and lock myself in there. I don't get the chance, though.

Zach's pacing ends abruptly, but before he can sit on my bed again, I shove my feet off the side.

"Why are you here, Zach?" Standing, he still towers over me. I sigh and brush past him, knowing he's not going to let his own questions go.

"You were crying and shouting. Doll, why were you on the ground?" I swear he leaves no space between us as I slowly pad my way into the kitchen.

Walking takes effort these days, so when I have to bend to pick up my spoon, I want to scream. I'm just *so* exhausted. The spoon is fucking feet away from the letter too. I refuse to bend down and grab it again. Pointing my spoon at the sheet of paper, I hop onto the counter with a breath of relief. I need a nap.

"I was reading Julian's letter and eating frosting." I look at the discarded tub of frosting, also on the floor in sorrow.

“Why weren’t you doing that in bed?” Zach bends, showing off his tight ass in his dark jeans. Snagging the letter and my trash, he doesn’t pay them any mind as he sets them on the counter for me. I wonder if he’s already read Julian’s words.

His words finally register, heating the annoyance bubbling beneath the surface. “Why do I need to be in my bed? This is my house, and I can do whatever I fucking want.”

His jaw grinds. “You’re pregnant.”

The audacity!

“You should be resting, eating, and drinking water. Where are your vitamins? You should be bundled up, not traipsing around in nothing. You’re cold. I can see it from here.”

Wow. I have no words.

Without waiting for a response, Zach’s meaty fucking paws are ripping open my cupboards, and he’s sticking his neck into my fridge. I would punch him in the throat if I had the energy.

I don’t know what to do. He’s bulldozing his way through my shit and mumbling to himself. When he takes out leftover lasagna, I draw the line.

“Put that back!” I shout and jump from the counter. The dish clatters to the counter, Zach having left it in the dust to be by my side.

“Are you okay?!” Again, his hands run over me like I might be broken. When he bends to pick up my feet, I squeal and kick him away.

“The fuck are you doing, Zach?! Leave!”

“Don’t jump from so high!” He shouts back, standing above me once again.

“I didn’t fucking sky dive! I was a foot above the ground!”

Zach’s eyes are wide, like he can’t understand why I’m putting up a fight. “You’re like two feet tall, Adelyn, which makes the counter way too high!”

Oh, I'm about to lose my mother-f'ing mind. “WHY DO YOU CARE?!”

“BECAUSE I LOVE YOU! AND YOU’RE FUCKING PREGNANT!”

Crickets.

Everything stops. My heart climbs its way out of my chest and breaks itself into tiny shards on the floor again, my soul following close behind. My mind whirls with panic. How do I mold my pieces back again? With another new development and more words, I don't know which piece fits where. My brain scrambles to console my heart and explain what's happening just as it tries to sweep the pieces of my soul back into place.

With each new word, these men rewrite the way my heart beats, the way my soul flies, and the way my brain thinks. It's a power they don't deserve but yield, anyway. How do I take it back?

Chapter Forty-One



Zachary

*S*hit, I shouldn't have yelled at her. The tears building between her lashes tell me all I have to know. I fucked up. Again. And I don't know how to fix it. Can't she see I'm only trying to take care of her?

She was crying and shaking when I got here. That's absolutely not okay. How could she think that's okay? Then she got out of bed and didn't put any more clothes on. I can't act like I don't see each damn goosebump pebbling her pale skin.

"Doll," I start, needing to apologize for yelling at her. Maybe for telling her I loved her too. I shouldn't have said it like that. I should have waited for a romantic moment. Yet, I chose to scream it at her in bewilderment and frustration.

"How did you get in here, Zach?"

I don't want to answer that question, knowing it will only make this worse. I do anyway, because someone has to, and it should be me. "We copied the key you gave Gabby."

I wait for her to demand I leave and give it back, but the explosion never comes. "Why?"

That's easy. "Because we needed to. Julian and I have been guarding your door, and we needed it in case of emergency."

Her jaw about hits the floor. "You've been WHAT?!"

There's the explosion I was waiting for. Crossing my arms, I refuse to budge on the topic. If she tells us to stop, that's not going to happen. "Julian and I have been taking shifts, so one of us is always at your door. The patrol only stays in his car, so this way we have eyes on the inside, too. Wyatt has all cameras in the building open at home, so he can watch every available angle. They won't touch you ever again."

Addie's head starts shaking and her fingers rub circles on her temple. "No. No, you can't do that. That's crazy. Wh—no. Just no."

I smirk, unable to hide my amusement. "Too bad. It's happening, and it's going to keep happening. What's *not* going to happen is you freezing yourself and only eating fucking frosting. I'm heating you up some lasagna."

"NO! No lasagna. Please, please put it back."

I eye the almost full pan of layered goodness, trying to figure out what her reaction is for. *Is it bad?* Cracking open the lid, I take a sniff, finding nothing but yumminess. Peeking inside doesn't yield any results either.

"What's wrong with it, Doll?" I ask over my shoulder.

"Put it away," she says, her voice muffled and coming from further away.

I turn, confused and a little worried. I would have assumed she would be putting up a bigger fight about me being in her apartment, but she's more worried about the lasagna. In the living room, Addie has her T-shirt hiked over her nose. The front of her shirt lifts to her mid-thigh, and I can't help but appreciate the view while simultaneously wondering what's beneath the rest of the fabric. I want to peek and make sure she hasn't been hurting herself anymore, but I also feel the urge to throw some sweatpants on her to keep her warm.

Damn it. This is hard. I have no idea what to do or what to say. Running on my instincts to care for my dolly is all I have.

Like a dumbass, I *finally* fucking listen to her and put the lasagna away. *Why didn't I do that the first time she said no to it?*

Studying the contents of the fridge, I decide to leave everything in there for now. Closing the fridge, I turn my back on making her something and make my way to where she's now curled up in the far corner of her couch. The ache to sit beside her is fierce, but I don't deserve to, just like I absolutely should not have sat on her bed. Adelyn is above me, so that's where I keep her. Kneeling at her feet, I tug a blanket around her.

With sleepy eyes, she watches my every move with her chin resting on her palm. *She's so damn beautiful.*

“What's wrong with lasagna, Doll?”

She sighs, her breath puffing a few strands of hair away from her face. “It's gross.” Addie huffs, her eyes rolling before they settle on me again. “Actually, it's fucking delicious and a huge waste of food, since Rory will be the only one eating it.”

This woman is so confusing. “It's delicious *and* gross?”

Her eyes flutter shut like she just can't deal with the world. “Yeah,” my doll whines. “Everything I make is good *once*, but this baby refuses to eat anything besides like four damn things.”

I chuckle silently. “What are those four things?” My voice feels strained as I hold back more laughter. *She's just so damn cute when she's pouty.*

Addie's face relaxes further, like she's dreaming of all her cravings. “Tacos in any form, corn pops, apples, and fancy toast.”

I snort this time, unable to control myself. Her eyes shoot open with a glare, but I distract her by asking, “What's fancy toast, Doll?”

“Buttered toast with sugar and cinnamon sprinkled on it.”

My mom used to make me that growing up. It was an easy, cheap, yummy breakfast that I haven't had since I was little. “Can I make you any of those things?”

Like she can't hold herself up any longer, she shifts on the couch till she's lying on her side with her hands tucked under

her cheek. “No. I ate the last of the bread this morning, and the corn pops ran out last night. I don’t have stuff to make tacos, and Rory took the last apple with her to Rylee’s. And…” she trails off.

The look she gives me is wary, like she doesn’t know if she can open up to me beyond the baby’s food groups. I don’t push her this time, knowing that if I do, I would be asking for more than something basic. And shit, the way she fought me with the easiest questions proves how she feels about talking to me.

Addie’s eyes close again. She whispers, “I’m afraid to leave.”

Fuck. I close my own eyes and hang my head, shame attempting to shove my forehead to the floor and beg for forgiveness. I gulp, regrouping in the face of those four heart-wrenching words.

My doll should never be afraid to leave her house. She should have full reign over the world. Yet it mainly seems like she’s upset she can’t get herself the damn cereal and tacos she needs.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I lift my head with an apology on my lips. A soft puff of air tickling the scruff on my cheeks stuns me silent. With her lips slightly parted and her face relaxed in the most serene expression, Addie sleeps curled on the couch in front of me. The lump of emotion reforms in my throat with a vengeance.

Addie might not want me anywhere near her, but she still trusts me enough to nap while I kneel in front of her.

On my knees, I whisper, “I’m so, *so* fucking sorry, Adelyn.” This won’t be the last time I kneel and bare my battered soul to her. I’m a dominant dick, but I will fucking crawl for her.

Chapter Forty-Two



Adelyn

The past two days have been a mind fuck since Zach barged into my apartment and demanded to take care of me. Take right now, for example; Zach has Rory settled on the kitchen counter while he and Tate show her how to make tacos.

Rory and I spent the day watching movies and working on some exercises for school. She's had an entire week off at this point, with one more week to go. Thanksgiving is on Thursday, and I can only fucking hope the guys' mess gets cleared up so she can go back to school next Monday.

Squeezing my wet hair into my towel, I pad into the dining room and watch the scene unfold in front of me. Rory giggles when she throws a chip at Tate, who catches it in his mouth with a whoop and a fist pump. Zach notices me first, comes around the island, picks me up, and sets me on a stool. *Not* the counter because that's too dangerous for a two-foot pregnant lady.

Without saying a word and commenting on my blush, he slides a sliced apple across the counter with a water. I mumble my thanks and nibble on the crisp goodness. Bean settles now that we're sitting, wrapped in a black matching set of sweats, and supplied with fruit.

I snuggle further into my chair and look up, only to catch Tate's eye. The depth of his gaze is vast. He holds nothing back as he openly stares into my soul. I see every word he

wants to say and feel each emotion he freely offers me. My bottom lip wobbles as my eyes burn. I look away quickly at the sound of Zach's voice.

"Peanut, try this." Zach offers Rory a bite of, I want to say nachos, but it looks like crunched-up chips, meat, and every condiment stirred in a bowl. Rory takes the fork Zach offers her, and her eyes immediately light up at the concoction he made.

"Mom, you have to try this!" Thankfully, she swallowed her big bite before shouting.

I laugh quietly and make grabby hands for the bowl. Without making me wait, Zach moves to me but doesn't offer the bowl. Instead, he lifts a filled fork to my lips, and I have no choice but to open, lest it spill everywhere.

Flavor explodes over my tongue, a welcomed flavor that's hard to come by these days. I bounce happily in my seat and reach for the bowl, excited about the taco salad.

The bowl is pulled out of my reach, and a fork prods my lips. I open, mildly indignant about being fed this way by him *again*, but I want the food more. Bean has been taking away my fight with him these past few days. Since he busted into my apartment and demanded to know why I was cold and not eating perfectly good food, he's been here each day, helping me.

Nothing more. Zach hasn't demanded a thing besides, dare I say it, my submission. Bean makes it easy to be cared for since doing it myself is exhausting. I'm just so damn tired. Tired of thinking, of second-guessing. I'm sick of feeling like shit and falling asleep whenever a moment presents itself. I'm sick of them in my space, but even worse; I'm sick of how damn helpful Zach is.

Not to mention, I am absolutely sick of Tate's incessant need to make me feel things. I just want to hang out with my kid, eat tacos and cereal, and keep my head in the sand until this all blows over. Yet, for days now, the blond-haired younger man approaches me with his heart on his sleeve and

forces me to hear him. The way he watches me and checks on me tells me he's hearing me too, and I hate it.

I wish they would be dicks and leave me alone. Rory is thick as thieves with Tate again, so that doesn't help anything. Zach wiggled his way in there too, and now he has Rory begging for him to hang out with her.

I haven't seen Julian, but I've heard his voice outside my door a couple of times. He's out there, keeping watch most nights. Looking out for us and keeping us safe when he should be home and sleeping. Yet he chooses to be here, alone in a dank hallway, for hours on end.

I've gotten one more letter and a dozen drawings since the first sheet of paper that broke my heart. I have yet to read the second one because the sketches he's drawn have made me cry enough. With gentle lines, he sketches me and the guys. He's even given me some of Rylee and each of her men. Gabby is in the pile too, with Rory as well. He hasn't drawn one of Bean, but he's given me the nickname drawn in calligraphy.

I have a sketch of everyone that matters to me. I'm half tempted to slide a picture of my mom, dad through the cracks of the door to see if he can recreate them as well. I don't, though. I worry that as soon as I make contact with Julian, I'll finally crumble. Each brick I've erected against them will come tumbling down if I'm face to face with the most emotional and thoughtful man I have ever met. His sketches and written words are breaking me enough as it is.

Wyatt hasn't been around at all. I've been home from the hospital for a week, and I still haven't heard anything from or about him since I saw him on my doorstep last Tuesday after yelling at Tate. It shouldn't hurt, but I feel like he's left me all over again. Like he's letting the other three grovel for him.

I'm not stupid or have my head in the sand so deep I'm not aware of what's happening. Julian, Zach, and Tate are groveling. Each in their own way, every damn day. I didn't expect them to react this way when I booted them from my life. I figured they would take care of the threat, maybe help with the baby, and leave it at that. Not cook me food, feed me

by hand, clean my house, write me letters, sketch my loved ones, show me their bleeding hearts and secrets in their souls. I didn't expect the emotional dump from four of the toughest men I have ever met.

Tate, the bright young one who seems innocent, has surprised me with his determination to make me *see* him... to *feel* him. Through his openness and vulnerability, I have found his truths, and the only thing that scares me about them is how much I care, too.

Zach, the grumpy leader of their family. I knew he had a kink for hand feeding me and taking care of me, but this devotion to my health, happiness, and safety is far more than I can comprehend or push away. I need the help. I need *him*. He's making everything bearable even while my life is flipped upside down and tossed every which way.

Julian, the jokester who never stops smiling. I miss it. His laughter and joy. He's shocked me the most with the anguish and sorrow he's written in his letter. I'm sure when I read the second one, it will be just as heart-wrenching. His sketches, the thoughtfulness and emotion; it's been jarring but beautiful.

They're groveling and I don't know what to do with it. Do I stop it? Do I yell and rage at their audacity to smooth over such an awful fucking thing that happened to me? That they had a hand in causing. Yet they aren't smoothing over it. In their own way, I know they are giving me space while also challenging me to face it. But I don't want to face it.

I don't want to think about the young boy who raped me and who is now hell bent on ruining the guys' lives through my own. Because I matter to them. I matter so much to these men that I've become a target that could bring them to their knees. What do I do with that terrifying power? What do I do with all the food, kindness, and vulnerability?

Dust drops from a quake hitting the walls I've built as Zach makes Rory her own bowl of taco salad. A crack shatters another brick when I catch Tate watching me while I'm lost in my thoughts. Two bricks fall when one more sketch is slid beneath my door.

The two people I miss the most in the entire world. Julian drew my mom and daddy.

Julian's Sketch



Chapter Forty-Three



Wyatt

The women here look at me like I might kill them or fuck them. Their husbands eye me like I'm going to steal their money and their wives. I want to laugh, to wink and to taunt, but the reason I'm here is no reason to smile.

Addie's too afraid to leave her apartment to get herself groceries. I don't blame her, nor do I want her out in public until everything is settled and Cadell is six feet in the ground.

My finger dents the apple in my hand; my frustration getting the best of me. It's not as simple as killing Cadell and his team, though. There's more going on and I have no idea what the fuck it is. I have theories and ideas, but those aren't facts that will help me keep my girls and family safe.

Sighing, I put the apple in the plastic bag and grab some more. She must be eating two a day since I just went grocery shopping for them on Saturday. Zach was furious when he called and explained to me what was happening. God forbid a pregnant woman eats some chocolate frosting.

Last night when Zach called, he gave me another list of groceries to pick up. He knew it was the perfect job for me, seeing as I can't bring myself to be around Addie. I want to see her, to hold her so badly. I want to rip my bleeding heart out of my chest and gift it to her. That's why I haven't been to see her and force my way into her space like Zach and Tate have been doing. These feelings, they're more than I thought I could ever feel. They're overwhelming. Guilt, rage, and self-

loathing war with love, hurt, and need. Need to make sure she's taken care of, to provide for her and ensure she wants for nothing.

Pausing in the hair care aisle, I swipe through my phone to find the picture of Addie's conditioner that Zach sent me. Honestly, how he hasn't been kicked out and thrown to the curb is beyond me. He's being so fucking invasive; I can only imagine the backlash he's receiving. I'm not sure what the dynamic is over there, but if I know my baby girl like I think I do, there's no way in hell she's asking for these things. The big fucker is for sure snooping through her shit every day to see if something's empty or needs to be restocked. He even sent me a picture of the razor in her fucking shower, saying he couldn't find any more unused ones.

My cart makes me look like a family man, and I don't mind one bit. This is me *doing* something. Something she needs that nobody else is doing. So as the checkout kid scans each item, I don't feel embarrassed by the girly razors or bright yellow conditioner bottle that he scans. Nor do I feel silly for the tub of vanilla ice cream and chocolate frosting that Zach is going to throw a fit over. The obscene amount of taco ingredients makes it look like I'm feeding a small army, and I might as well be if Tate and Zach are going to stay after they make the girls enchiladas for Taco Tuesday tonight. This cartful of taco ingredients is to restock after their fancy ass meal tonight so Addie never runs out of the things she wants to eat. Either way, Addie won't go hungry and if she needs something else tomorrow, then I'll gladly run out for more.

Tucking the bags in the back of our family SUV, I run through everything I needed to get and mentally pat myself on the back when I think I got everything in one trip. We don't normally go grocery shopping, we usually get it delivered, but we can't risk it right now, which leaves me to fumble my way through the grocery store looking like I've never shopped before in my life. Well, okay, I haven't for a *really* long time. Probably not since I was a lonely teen with parents who were never home. I figured out how to take care of myself real damn fast.

Slamming the trunk on the groceries and those thoughts, I round the car, only to be shoved back a step. The air whooshes out of my mouth as my body doubles over, finally registering the pain in my stomach. I grunt, my abs contracting to force my body upright again. Just as I lock eyes with the man we've been looking for, his meaty fist collides with my jaw, the crack sounding through my head makes my ears ring. The force of the blow sends me crashing to my ass and elbow. The scrape and tear of my skin is minor compared to the throbbing from my chin to my fucking temple.

Groaning, my palm pushes against the concrete to stand a second too late. Hands grip me under the armpits and drag me around my SUV and the blacked-out truck next to it. *Fuck*, parked in the back of the lot. Nobody will see a goddamn thing unless I scream, and I refuse to bring another innocent human being into this.

"You've gone stupid, Moody," Johnathan taunts, kneeling and digging his knee into the soft center of my hip.

I buck, but one of his lackeys shoves my shoulders into the ground, making my shoulder blades grind into the sharp concrete. The other fucktard snags my legs in his tree trunk arms and holds me down. *Fuck, this really isn't good*. I'm not full of muscle like Zach is, or fast and lethal like Julian. I don't have half of Tate's cunning. I'm just the fucking computer guy who can throw down a bit and shoot a gun.

"Really, Moody?" He lifts an eyebrow. His use of my last name *again* has me snapping my teeth at him like an animal. "Calm down, I'm not going to kill you."

Shifting his weight, I clench my jaw to hold in my shout of pain when his knee increases its pressure between my hip bone and groin.

His pretty boy face twists in a smirk at the agony he must see in my eyes. *Fuck, fuck, fuck*. It feels like he's going to push straight through my muscle and into the ground.

"I have something so much better planned for you. Honestly, nobody gives a shit if you live or die, any of you. They just ordered us to make your life a living hell." He leans

forward, narrowing his eyes into beady little slits that I wouldn't mind ripping the eyeballs out of. "I know just how to ruin you. Say, how is my little slut?"

"Fuck you!" I spit. Uncontrollable rage dims the pain in my skull and hip, my inner monster rearing its ugly head in vengeance for our woman.

Johnathan tsks me as his fuck buddies chuckle. "Wyatt, come on man, her pussy ain't that good." I roar and writhe beneath him, red coating my vision in a haze of murder. "Christ, you're a sad piece of shit, you know that? The old you wouldn't be panting over used pussy. You'd be demanding answers from me."

I still at his words, but my body vibrates with the need to kill him, kill all three of them. My hip spasms, something moving out of the way of his boney knee as he twists and digs it further.

Cadell sighs like I'm a petulant child, shaking his head and eyeing me with disappointment. "Pathetic," he murmurs, leaning back, making my hip scream in protest. "Tell Ads how excited I am to see her again."

Just as I thrash and kick out with everything I have, he uppercuts me, my nose exploding in fiery pain and blood. The blow stuns me for precious minutes. Stars dancing between my eyelids and vomit threatening to drown me as I lay prone on my back. Screeching tires and dark laughter close out the soundtrack of my failure.

I failed Addie, Rory, and my guys. Again.

Chapter Forty-Four



Adelyn

If I admit how fucking fire these enchiladas are, does that make me weak? Does it mean I'm giving in too easily? Fuck, does having them make me the most amazing food every damn day make me weak?

I feel weak physically. Growing a human is hard. And honestly, all my focus has been on Bean and Rory. Tate and Zach are helping with that. *I swear I've never spent this much time with Rory. Ever.*

My moan of appreciation decides for me, though. Tate and Zach's head whip up from cleaning in the kitchen. My cheeks flame, but I can't look away from their heated stares, nor can I not put another bite in my mouth. This time. I close my eyes to savor the flavor and not moan like a fucking porn star.

When I open my eyes again, I find Zach hunched over Tate as he does the dishes. Whatever Zach whispers in Tate's ear has the blond man leaning back into his chest and exposing his throat. *Jesus.* The enchiladas aren't that spicy and I'm a little cold, so the flush that runs through my body is complete lust.

"Mom?"

Clearing my throat quietly, I turn to Rory, who sits beside me at the kitchen counter. "Yeah?"

She shuffles closer to me with her lips twisted, like she's thinking really hard about something. Her bright blue eyes shift from me to the guys a few times before she whispers,

“Do they love each other like they love you, or like they love Layla’s dads?”

If the ground could swallow me whole so I don’t have to answer the question of my curious eight-year-old, that would be great.

I whisper back, “What do you mean, honey?”

Rory huffs, her voice a little louder, like she’s forgotten she has an audience. “I mean, are Z and Tate in love, or are they just friends?”

Avoiding answering her question, I ask, “What does that have to do with me or Layla’s dads?”

Her attitude peeks out again with a mini eye roll that irks me just a little. “They’re in love with you, and they’re only friends with Layla’s dads. I was using examples, Mom.”

Soft chuckling and choking fill the silence that I was too afraid to break.

Is this how all parents feel? How the hell does she know to ask these questions?

I shoot a glare at Tate who’s hacking up a lung, and Zach, who’s gently patting his back while grinning at me.

I don’t know what the hell they want me to say. Is this my area or theirs? It’s their relationship, so shouldn’t that mean they answer?

Zach lifts a brow like he’s waiting for me to decide. I shrug, nod, and wave my hand at him to take the floor. I don’t keep secrets from Rory unless necessary. I try to be open and honest with her so that when she’s older, she knows she can talk to me about anything.

I never want her to go through what I did with Johnny and the bullying, but I want my sweet girl to know she can ask or tell me *anything*. Even now that there will be a younger sibling in the house, I want Rory to know that she’s my best friend and I’ll never judge her or shush her.

I just didn’t know how hard it would be when your kid is so open at such a young age, though. I want to tell her everything

all the time because she's my little soul mate, but she's only eight. How do I balance that?

And also, did I really just trust the guys enough to handle such a delicate topic?! What the fuck is wrong with me?! Two bites of orgasmic enchiladas and I'm like 'whatever'!

Too late.

Zach braces his forearms on the counter in front of us and gives us both a soft smile. "Yes Peanut, I love Tate, just like I love your mom."

Fuck. There goes my heart. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!

My eyes burn, but this time I don't shove them down; I hold Zach's gaze. I read him seeing the truth in his gaze. *He loves me.*

"What about Jules and Wyatt?" Rory cocks her head.

This time Zach nods his head at me like he's asking me to take over. This feels like a dual parenting moment suddenly. Swallowing, I pry my gaze away from the two men in my kitchen and focus on Rory.

"Rory, you know that relationships and love come in all shapes and sizes, right?"

"Right." She nods. "Because some kids at school only have one dad and one mom. Some have two moms or two dads. Layla has four dads and one mom. And Z, Tate, Jules, and Wyatt love you, so Bean is going to have four dads. Right?"

Oh, fuck me. This is too much.

I'm thankful that Zach and Tate don't step in and make their own comments because even though they have been taking care of us for a week, we haven't had any more serious conversations. That should happen soon, though. *Ugh.*

"You're very right about all the different kinds of families," I praise, not commenting on Bean having four dads. "Well, Tate, Zach, Wyatt and Julian, all love each other too."

She nods like it makes total sense. “Just like they love you.”

“Yes,” Zach and Tate chime in before I can figure out how to bypass that statement.

My cheeks heat again, feeling overwhelmed by the heavy emotions they’re directing at me. Rory doesn’t seem to notice as she digs back into her enchiladas. I do the same, avoiding their gazes once again until a phone rings.

Zach pulls his out of his back pocket and throws the damp hand towel over his shoulder. *Why is that so sexy?* His face doesn’t show anything as he answers the call. While he greets whoever it is, I munch away on the best meal I’ve ever had.

“Julian, slow down, man. What’s going on?”

Zach’s concerned tone has me zeroing in on him once again. I can hear muted shouting down the line, and immediately the food in my tummy sours.

What’s happening? Is someone hurt? Was it Johnny? Oh my god.

Zach grunts out a few more words, his jaw ticking like he’s holding back far more than one-syllable words. *This isn’t good.* He gulps, his eyes shooting to Tate with enough fear that I start to tremble. As quickly as the phone call began, it’s over and Zach is grabbing Rory’s empty plate.

“Peanut, why don’t you go pack a bag for a sleepover at our place?”

Frantic and confused, my jaw drops and my eyes widen. Rory hoots her excitement and does exactly what he asked without even checking with me first to see if it’s okay.

“Zach,” I admonish. “You can’t do that! I’m her mother, I make the choices and there’s no way in hell she’s having a sleepover with you guys. Why the hell would you—”

“Wyatt’s hurt,” Zach whispers, cutting off my angry ramble. “Johnathan’s escalating. You and Rory need to stay with us for a while.”

Shock, fear, rage, sadness, and an overwhelming amount of concern barrel into me, coming out as a loud shout. “WHAT?! Is he going to be okay?! What happened? How bad is it? Is he at home?”

Zach’s fists clench against the counter, but he won’t look at me. Behind him, Tate’s eyes are wide and worried, making my tummy clench and my eyes burn. “Please tell me if he’s okay! He will be okay, right? He has to—”

“Lynn timer,” Tate stops me this time with a firm, yet soft tone. “Go pack.”

I guffaw. “We can’t move in with you guys! We haven’t even figured out what’s going on between all of us and don’t fucking forget how much you messed up! This is—”

“Adelyn!” Tate barks, shocking me into silence. “We fucked up, but this is us trying *not* to fuck up again. So, listen to us when we tell you that you, the baby, and Rory aren’t safe here anymore if Cadell is escalating. Go pack a damn bag so you can see for yourself if Wyatt’s okay.”

Tate grabs Zach’s fists and rubs his thumbs over them as Zach slowly comes back to us. He nods at Tate, clearing his throat and shaking his shoulder a bit. Tate looks seconds away from snapping, but I’m not sure which way he will fall.

I gulp, fighting the urge to run to my room and pack, while also feeling like I still need to be strong and mad at them. “But —” I stutter, not knowing what argument I have.

If it’s safer for us to be with them, then that’s what I should do, right? I’ve proven to myself so many times this past week that I still trust them. Hell, I swear these two spend more time in my apartment than at their house.

“Doll, you can still be angry if you’re staying at our house. Yell, scream, whatever you want, you will do it there because that is what’s safest.” Zach’s tone is understanding with a heavy dose of command.

My first step back is hesitant, like I don’t want to give in. Like I’m giving up too easily and allowing them to be forgiven. Except I’m not forgiving them, I’m protecting my

babies. My second step is faster, determination to do the right thing settling my nerves. By the fifth step, I'm pissed off.

I'll pack, but this isn't over. They will keep us safe, but I won't roll the fuck over and ignore this shit anymore. Things are about to fucking change.

Chapter Forty-Five



Tate

“Where is he?” Adelyn’s breathless, having finally dropped her bags and settled Rory on the couch with a treat and a movie. The sweet girl is none the wiser as she happily munches on a bowl of chocolate-covered raisins.

Zach immediately went to find Julian and Wyatt, having no patience to hold off checking on him. Me too honestly, but the intensity that’s been coming off Lynn timer since she rushed out of her bedroom with bags in hand has been all-consuming. We couldn’t both abandon her as soon as we were home. She needs to settle back into our space, not only because she hasn’t been here in a while, but she was fucking terrified to leave her apartment. She did a good job of hiding it and breathing through some of her panic, but I saw those fears like they were my own.

She’s so fucking strong, though. Especially now as she faces off with me, hands on her hip and a slight bump peeking through her leggings and crop top.

Fuck, she’s beautiful. What I wouldn’t give to wrap her in my arms and coo into her rounding stomach.

“Tate!” Lynn timer snaps, stomping her dainty little foot.

“Sit still, fucker!” Julian’s shout upstairs has my laughter dying.

“Peanut ears!” Zach yells, something clattering amidst the grunts.

Another voice that’s like music to my ears rumbles through the halls of the house. “Get off, I’m fine!”

A shuffle and a gasp draw my attention back to Addie. “Wyatt!” she breathes and fucking *books* it up the stairs.

“Shit,” I hiss, checking on Rory before I bolt after her. The little one seems fine, happily snuggled on the couch and sipping on a Capri Sun.

Skipping two steps at a time, I reach Wyatt’s office just as Addie stumbles her way towards him where he’s standing beside all his computers. Wyatt’s eyes are so wide I’d laugh if this were any other time, but Linnie breaks my heart with a choked sob before she flings herself into his arms.

I cringe as Wyatt grits his teeth, biting back a grunt of pain. His face is fucked with bruises and a pissed off nose. Looks like one of them already set it straight, but that shit hurts for *a while*. Smothering the urge to drag him into my own arms, I promise myself I’ll check him over for other injuries soon.

Confused and worried black eyes meet mine before looking down at our girl in his arms again. *Don’t cry*, I chant over and over again as I watch their reunion.

Reverently, Wyatt strokes a large hand down her hair, soothing her cries and mumbled gibberish. He leans against his desk, some of the pain receding from his features at the shift in weight and position.

“I’m okay, baby girl. I’m okay. You’re okay,” he coos, continuing to rock her until her watery sobs turn into sniffles and hiccups. “I think your ice cream melted, though. These assholes wouldn’t let me bring in your groceries from the car.”

Slowly, Linnie tilts her head back to look at him clearly. “W-what?” she hiccups.

Another pet on her silky brown hair and she melts a little further into Wyatt’s wide chest. “Your groceries, baby. I think some of the meat but most importantly, the ice cream is bad

now. I'll get you some more, promise. I'll stock everything you need. Just give me a list."

Still, Addie frowns up at him. "M-my groceries?"

"Doll," Zach snags her attention when it's clear those two are just going to walk in circles with each other. "Wyatt's been running errands for your apartment and making sure we have everything you need to make the things you like. Plus, random things here and there like soaps. He also got work squared away for you with a leave of absence until everything is back to normal."

My heart lurches into my throat as she peels herself out of Wyatt's embrace. "I didn't know," she whispers, sounding sad and accusatory at the same time.

I clear my throat. "Lynnie, we didn't want to communicate for you two. We left it up to you both to communicate, which is why you're only hearing about it now. Wyatt's been taking care of you in the background, my love." I offer her a small, hesitant smile, unsure of how she's going to react.

Wyatt seems uncertain while he watches her study him. It's fucking intense, just like she's been all night now.

He's been her background support for over a week, and she had no idea. Did she think he just wasn't around or cared? Fuck, I bet that's absolutely what she thought.

She takes Wyatt in again like she's seeing him for the first time. "Thank you," she whispers.

Her wilted stance shifts in the next second, then she's moving away from us. With her back to the wall and feet of space separating her from us, her eyes harden. The intensity of her gaze increases tenfold, and my dick takes notice. If it could cringe, it just did.

"I want answers. Now." Her voice is steely, none of the emotional torment present as she demands our truth.

"Adelyn," Zach begins, shaking his head.

"No, Zach. Now. I need to know. This is ridiculous. You're feeding me, you're in my life more than I asked for, I'm living

here for the foreseeable future, and I have no idea who you truly are! My *kids* are in your home, so tell me everything you know, right the fuck now.”

This is the moment I’ve been waiting for. The moment Zach and Wyatt have feared. This conversation has the power to change how she views us. Therefore, I take control of it.

Zach will attempt to harbor all blame and guilt like it’s only his story to tell. Wyatt won’t know what to say, or how to explain that this family means *everything* to him, so when push comes to shove, he will *always* stay with us. Julian, he won’t know how to balance the facts and his feelings.

It has to be me. “My parents aren’t good people, Addie. I’m sure you know that from Rylee’s story. They aren’t the only ones. There are five families who we used to work for. Protected at events like the one the guys found me at.”

She nods, and I continue. “Part of that job was turning a blind eye to the workings of the Heads. At best, they scammed the poor of their money. At worst, they were murderers. Rapists and human traffickers.”

Lynn timer gasps, breaking my heart. I swallow back the torment trying to steal my voice. “We each had our own reasons. For me, Zach, Julian, and Wyatt saved me. I stayed out of their business and tried to keep them levelheaded when they went on jobs. I knew some of what happened in the families, but I ignored it in favor of having a family finally care about me.”

Zach clears his throat. “My mom struggled throughout my entire childhood. She was a single parent. Things weren’t the best. When the first protection detail landed in my lap, I had to take it. We needed the money. I gave my mom the life she always deserved. Then she got sick, but she had an amazing final few years.”

Wyatt grips the back of his neck, staring at the floor. “I wanted to be included in something. I wanted to matter. And for once in my life, I was needed. Julian and Zach, they were my whole world. I would have done anything to stay with them.”

Julian's gulp is like a damn gunshot going off in the room. He's struggling. "I just wanted to stay with the guys. We were a team."

Addie's crying now with her hands clutched to her chest. I hold myself tall, needing to get through the end.

"Things changed when Rylee came back into my life. Mason was the son of one of the Heads. We took a job from one of the people in the society who was worried about their girlfriend. That was Rylee. We almost helped my sister's abusive ex find her and Layla."

She snuffles, and I have to fight my own urge to cry, too. "We have a friend, Sophia, who's also Mason's cousin. She was our inside person. Being the niece of one of the Heads was an invaluable leg up in sending everyone to prison. For four years, Linnie, we've been collecting evidence to send each and every one of those bastards to hell."

She whimpers. "But?"

I sigh, failure weighing heavy on my shoulders. "My parents and Mason's avoided the prison sentence. We didn't have enough on them. Three families went down, and we left, thinking it was over and we could move on."

Adelyn scoffs, shocking me a bit. "But?"

"But someone hired Johnathan to come after us. Which Head, we don't know," I say, anger bleeding into my tone. "Sophia's the one who warned us something was going down, and it included us. She's still in Seattle, keeping an ear to the ground and working on her own plans for her uncle."

"How long?" She grits out, her cheeks splotchy and red. "How long have you known you were in danger? Did you know when you asked Rory and I to be a part of your lives? Did you knowingly put my daughter in danger?!"

I gape, horrified that she would think that. But we also haven't told her *anything*. *God, we're fucking stupid*. "No, Linnie! We would never, *ever* do that. I swear. We found out the weekend of our first Taco Tuesday. The day we were supposed to have our first date."

Goddamnit. I don't know how anyone else is feeling. I'm too focused on watching my woman frowning at the ground like she's trying to piece things together, but this is horrible. "Lynnie, we never should have kept this from you. We thought we were doing the right thing keeping you out of it. We are so, so sorry."

"No more secrets," she grits out, staring each of us down. Her fire and resilience are admirable, and I fall further in love with her the more she stands up for herself.

I nod, the others nod too. "No more secrets," the four of us say at once, like it was scripted.

"Thank you," she whispers brokenly before turning on her heel and padding her way to the office door. Before she walks out, she turns slightly and says, "Let them help you, Wy. Sit still for a bit, please. We're fine, and here now. Good night."

My breath whooshes out of me, as does my anguished chuckle. "You heard her, sit down." I gesture to the couch by the window.

Sighing, Wyatt does as he's told, gingerly lowering himself into the cushions. I finally catch a look at Julian, just now realizing this was the first time he's been in the same room with her since before she was attacked.

Our usual joking ginger looks like he's seen a ghost. His pale complexion worries me, especially since I can't read his mind.

How bad was Wyatt before we got here? Was it seeing him beaten and bloody that rattled Julian or the woman who just left the room?

The combination of both is most likely what has his deep breaths stuttering and his hands shaking.

"Hey," I whisper, grabbing his wrist before he follows Zach and Wyatt. I lay my palm against his cheek. "Are you okay?"

Green eyes bounce between mine as they fill with tears. Julian squeezes them shut, forcing a tear to trickle onto my finger. I wipe it away and match his forced deep breaths.

Synching our bodies always helps me feel less alone, so I settle one of his large hands on my chest and use my free hand and place my hand on his chest, too. While still cradling his cheek, he nuzzles into me as we breathe together. Julian finally opens his eyes and gives me a gentle nod. At a few inches taller than me, he has to drop his head a bit to give me his kiss of thanks and reassurance.

“Take them off or I will,” Zach’s demanding voice draws our attention to the couch. Wyatt’s shirtless and grumbling as he unbuttons his jeans. He hisses with each shift of his hips, and I just can’t fucking take it anymore.

“Stop, let me,” I rasp, kneeling between his feet. He gives me a nod and moves his hands out of the way. Gripping the denim, I pull straight down so he doesn’t need to wiggle. With a soft yank, I toss them away and trail my eyes up his legs, looking for injuries. Just when I think there’s nothing external, I find the beginnings of purple and blue blooming above the hem of his boxers.

“Wyatt,” I breathe, pulling the fabric down. Grunts and cursing sound through the room as we get a good look at the damage. Between his hip bone and groin, a bruise the size of my hand is already fucking forming.

“Nothing’s broken,” Wyatt murmurs, head tilted to the ceiling.

Julian scoffs. “That’s supposed to make me feel better?”

Wyatt shrugs, effectively pissing off Zach now too. “Wyatt, what the hell? What happened?”

Wyatt stiffens. “I fucked up. That’s happened. I wasn’t aware of my surroundings. I got taken down, taunted, and completely lost myself.”

“What do you mean?” I ask gently, not wanting him to raise his walls.

His fists clench in his lap. “He was saying shit. Shit about Addie, and I couldn’t *think*. I was just so fucking mad. After I snarled and wiggled around like an angry fish between him and his two guys, he fucking laughed at me. Told me I should

have been asking questions. Gaining information while he was there. Fucking laughed at me for being blinded by love so much that I failed her again. Told me to tell her he's excited to see her again, then busted my face and left while I was reorienting myself."

"Wyatt," I start, only for his head to whip forward and slam his tormented glare into me.

"I FAILED HER!"

Without warning, Zach's hand whips out, latches onto Wyatt's throat, and draws him into an angry kiss. Kiss isn't the right word; they are fucking battling. It's a mess of teeth and snarling, but, as usual, Zach gains the upper hand, pressing Wyatt's head back into the couch.

Ripping his lips away from a panting Wyatt, Zach growls, "We all failed. Not just you, so don't take shit away from us." Wyatt opens his mouth, only for Zach to flex his fingers in warning. "*We* failed her. Not only that, but we also failed *each other!*"

Still on my knees between Wyatt's legs, I swallow repeatedly, hoping to stuff the emotion back down. On Wyatt's other side, Julian sits, fiddling with the hem of his shirt and looking like he's about to shatter. *Do we all look like that?*

Zach leans back, using the space to look at each of us. "I'm sorry," he croaks. "I'm sorry I haven't been here for you guys. I know this hasn't been easy on any of us and while we should have banded together and taken comfort in each other, I feel like I haven't been with you in this. No longer. This needs to change if we want to come out the other side in one piece. As one *family*. I love you," he whispers, his soul opening for us to see and feel.

"I'm sorry, too. I love you," Julian says, his voice cracking slightly as he meets our gazes.

"I love you," I whisper back, soaking them in, knowing that our words are meant for the four of us. "I'm sorry. No more. I'm here, with you."

Wyatt's thighs clench beneath my palms, his throat thick with all the words he wants to say. "I miss you, and I love you. I'm sorry."

As one, as a family, we wipe away the dried blood on Wyatt's chest and apply ointment to his bruising skin. As a family, we take care of each other. As a family, we will get through this and move forward. We may have failed in many ways, individually and as a group, but we're back and stronger than ever. With love and vulnerability shining through our eyes, we solidify our bond, rebuilding into something impenetrable. Our family bonds harden into a fucking fortress, ready to defend our woman and children.

We're ready. With each other, we will keep them safe. Keep each other safe.

Chapter Forty-Six



Adelyn

Stuffing, turkey, ham, and green bean casserole. Those are the things that make me want to keel over and throw up right now. The mashed potatoes and gravy with dinner rolls, though? Yum.

The oven beeps at me, but I pay it no mind. I'm not ready quite yet. This turkey that Julian and Tate picked up yesterday is fat as fuck. Wyatt's on house rest, much to his dismay when I asked for Thanksgiving ingredients. And no, I don't feel bad for asking them for things. My kid deserves a fabulous Thanksgiving, and that's exactly what I'm going to do.

My wrists ache as I knead the homemade dough for dinner rolls. The smell is nice, an easy segue into the stifling aroma that will try to suffocate me in a few hours.

With the dough rising, and the turkey ready to cook for a year, I lift and heave the bird into the oven. *Gross. Hopefully Bean will let me eat it later when it doesn't smell like skin.* Sometime after scrubbing the floors and prepping the green bean casserole, the guys trickle down. The clock tells me it's a little after eight in the morning. I've been up since five thirty. Thanksgiving won't make itself magical. That's the mom's job.

I couldn't sleep last night. The information, the horror, and shock of their story broke me a little. I was angry, so angry. With them and myself. I hate how much I understand where each of them is coming from. It's so much to process and I

don't think I'll ever *not* be processing their lives before South Carolina. So, I cook and clean. I move forward. Because, while it feels like everything has changed, nothing has. I'm still here, trusting them and making myself at home in their kitchen.

Talk about a mind fuck.

"It smells like heaven down here," Tate moans, dragging his sleep ruffled self onto the stool at the island.

I give him a small smile and start on pancakes, now that everyone will be getting up soon. Half chocolate chip, half regular, and a dash of their chocolate protein powder. Bacon too, of course. Nibbling on my piece, I turn my back on Tate again, too lost in the zone for chit chat.

"What's going on in here?" Zach's scratchy voice sends shivers down my spine. The sound of a kiss being shared behind me has my cheeks burning.

In a black pair of sweats and a matching cropped black zip up, I can almost blame the warmth on the clothes. Almost.

"Good morning, sweetheart," Julian murmurs, kissing my cheek on the way to the coffeepot.

"Good morning," I say back, definitely *not* keeping track of all the bare chests now hovering around me.

"Doll, what are you doing?" Zach asks, now hovering over my shoulder.

I frown over my shoulder, getting warmer by the second. "Making pancakes."

Tate snorts behind the wall of muscle glowering down at me. Said wall of muscle huffs and rumbles, "Smart ass. Why are you making all the Thanksgiving shit, and why do the floors look like a damn mirror?"

"You're welcome?" I say, tilting my words like a question just to sass him. *I swear if he gets mad—*

"Adelyn, you should be resting," he snaps quietly and tries to pry the spatula from my fingers.

“Zach, come on,” Julian mumbles, looking like he’s still half asleep.

The force he uses to shove Zach out of the kitchen though suggests he might be a bit more awake than I initially thought. Or maybe he can kick ass while sleeping. From what they said last night, they must be the best of the best to land in such a powerful community.

With them out of my way and grumbling from the living room, I finish breakfast. As I move to set the table, cool fingers take the pancake platter from my hands. Wyatt smiles down at me and helps me get everything on the table without a word. It’s nice.

“Mom?” My bleary-eyed child pads her way into the kitchen in her matching green pajama set. “I’m hungry.”

“Perfect timing, bestie. Momma just finished breakfast. What do you want to drink?” Wyatt asks her, scooping her into his arms and setting her in a seat at the table beside him.

“OJ, please,” she says around a yawn. Wy smiles at her and pours her some in a plastic cup. *Be still my beating heart.*

“Come eat, Sweetness,” Julian encourages softly, pulling out a chair for me. He still doesn’t look very awake. *I wonder if he’s been sleeping okay.*

Taking one more look around the kitchen, I realize there’s nothing else I need to do for a bit. I sit even though I feel antsy.

The faster I eat, the faster I can get the dishes done, then move onto prepping dessert. Maybe I should do that now? I’ll have to get those done and in the fridge, then check on the turkey, start marinating the ham and—

“Eat,” Zach cuts off my manic mental checklist with a plate of food. Four pancakes and six pieces of bacon stack my plate beside a cup of orange juice, a water, and my prenatal vitamin.

I won’t finish the plate, no matter how much he scowls at my teeny bites. Breakfast is hard some days. Bean is a finicky little thing. I can’t risk puking today. There’s too much to do.

“Your ultrasound is on Monday with Dr. Hart.”

My head snaps up at Zach’s statement. “What? No. My appointment is on Tuesday with Dr. Miller.”

Julian and Tate duck their heads, not meeting my questioning stare. Wyatt and Zach, however, trade a look that has my hackles rising.

“Not anymore. Dr. Hart is the best around, so she will be your doctor through the pregnancy. Plus, her office is thirty minutes out of town, which separates you from the...” Zach eyes Rory, who’s happily munching away and watching the TV. “It’s not in town, meaning you won’t be as accessible to Cadell.”

I toss my fork down, pissed. “You can’t change my appointments. How could you even do that without me authorizing or confirming it?”

Wyatt and Zach share that damn look again, and Julian and Tate shuffle uncomfortably. Wyatt clears his throat, gaining the full attention of my annoyance. “I changed it.”

“You’re telling me you used your skills to switch my ultrasound around without my knowledge?” My voice sounds detached even from my own ears.

“I asked him to,” Zach informs me like it makes it better. “Doll, what’s the issue? She’s the best.”

Officially losing my appetite, I push my plate away and hiss out, “The problem is you managing my life like I’m a child. This is so not okay.”

Zach’s eyes harden, causing my spine to straighten. “You are going to Dr. Hart, because you are only allowed to have the best care. You’re going to her office because it’s the safest option and gets you away from Cadell. We will all be going with you, and that’s the end of it.”

Oh, fuck no!

Seeing Rory has finished her plate, I sweeten my voice. “Rory, go brush your teeth and get ready, okay? I have some fun Thanksgiving stuff for us to do today.”

With a squeal and a rushed thank you for breakfast, she's up the stairs in a flash, leaving me with the table full of idiots. There's one statement that Zach said that isn't going to fly.

"I'll go to Hart, but you are not coming with me." I raise my hand when four sets of mouths open to protest. "Julian can come if he wants to. But the rest of you are staying here with Rory. That's final. I don't care if you have to spy on us through cameras, but you three will protect my baby girl."

"Doll," Zach rumbles, his jaw popping.

"No!" I slam my fist down. "I've had enough of your demands. I'm living in your damn house. I'm going to your fancy doctor 'cus frankly, I'm too tired to argue about anything more than the safety of my daughter. You will fucking stay here while Julian and I go to the appointment. Do whatever you have to do from here to keep us secure, but I'm *done*."

Shoving myself away from the table, I breathe through my teeth, trying to calm myself down. Snatching my full plate of food, I tack on, "Oh, and nobody's allowed in my damn kitchen today. Today is for Rory, and I'm giving her the Thanksgiving she deserves, so stay out of my way. You can help, but there will be *no* more telling me what to do. Got it? Good. Enjoy breakfast."

I leave them in stunned silence, a smirk forming at the corner of my lips as I begin the next phase of cleaning and cooking. It's Rory's day, so it's *my* kitchen today. *Mine*.



"Damn, that was good," Wyatt moans around his final bite of pumpkin pie. His relaxation is disturbed by a swift hit to the back of his head from Zach. "Ow, what the fuck?"

Zach's mouth drops open like he can't believe him. "Peanut ears, Wyatt. WTF?"

Rory's voice enters the conversation in the best way possible. "What does WTF mean?" Her head's cocked, looking so sweetly confused I can't help but laugh at Zach's horrified look. He looks like a gaping fish as chuckles fill the quiet around the table.

I take pity on him. "It's short for bad words too, Rory May. Sorry, can't say that one for a few years still."

She huffs, tucking back into her mashed potatoes like I told her she couldn't have ice cream ever again. I hide my smile, not wanting Rory to think I'm mocking her.

Today ended up being a pretty relaxing day after the failure that breakfast was. Only one guy was in my space at a time, probably deciding to take shifts in who braved the land of a cooking mom. They stayed silent as they helped me cook and clean. When I didn't have anything for them to do, they would sit with Rory and help her with Thanksgiving crafts. They all helped make a garland of paper turkeys to hang on the wall by the dining room table. At one point, Rory challenged Wyatt to a game of catch outside, which gave me some quiet time to shower and get ready for dinner after a day of sweating.

Gabby and Rylee texted me quite a bit today, checking in and demanding I be honest with how I'm feeling. They are both still on my side of this whole shit show, which is amazing. Their questions and words of affirmation make me feel so much better. I'm not alone with these guys, nor will my friends ever let me make stupid choices. I miss them, but everyone's staying close to home after hearing about Wyatt. They are so thankful the guys took Rory and me into their home, which is surprising. Their lack of judgement and support has done wonders for my mood today.

Today has been very wonderful.

I could tell there were many words on the tip of everyone's tongue, but they held them in just like I asked. I truly just wanted a normal day to give my daughter a good holiday. Well, as normal as it can be with four hunks walking around and dropping fruit into your mouth as they walk past.

I think they were making a game out of it, actually. Who could feed me the most fruit before dinner? I wonder who won? I know it wasn't Zach, since I ignored him the most while he was helping out. He's just so damn infuriating with his bossiness. Don't get me wrong, sometimes it's nice and maybe even sexy, but he crossed a line today with the way he was demanding things from me.

"Sweetheart, can Zach and I clean up? You outdid yourself today, so please let us thank you." Julian seems hesitant, but it quickly blooms into a smile when I offer him a thankful nod. Zach's shoulders sag before he begins clearing away the empty dishes.

Both men drop a kiss on the top of mine and Rory's heads as they make their way around. Rory asks Tate to play a game with her, to which he immediately smiles and agrees. My chest clenches, seeing them sit facing each other on the couch with a stack of cards between them.

Today was... perfect.

"Baby girl, I have something for you," Wyatt says, gently drawing my attention with a soft touch on my hand.

I tilt my head, taking in his fidgety fingers and frown. "You didn't have to get me anything, Wyatt."

He clears his throat and brushes a few of his black strands out of his eye, like I was itching to do. Leaning to the left, his right hand disappears beneath the table. My heart thumps when a small black box comes into view. *What the ever-loving shit is that?*

"You said we could do anything we needed from here to keep you safe. This came in a few days ago, and I made all the adjustments you'll need," Wyatt says, popping the velvet box open.

I gasp, momentarily blinded by the beautiful diamonds winking at me in the dining room light. "Wyatt, these are so beautiful," I breathe, my hand reaching for them but stopping. My hands are too dirty to touch those.

Wyatt gulps, his gaze watching my every move. “They are tracking devices, Addie. As long as you have one of them on, I’ll be able to find you no matter where you go.”

My eyes shoot to his, stunned by the knowledge of how precious these earrings are. His eyes move back and forth between mine, like he’s searching for something. All he’ll find is awe, excitement, and appreciation, though.

“That’s not all,” he murmurs, biting his lip. He takes one out, the diamond stud looking utterly fucking tiny in his fingers. “When you push the diamond in, they will begin recording audio to my software here.”

“What?” I gasp, completely stunned and amazed.

Wyatt bites his lip again, then demonstrates. Using his thumb and forefinger, he clicks the diamond into place, before pulling his phone out and opening some kind of app. “So now, the earring will record audio, and I’ll have access to it here and on my computers.” His voice echoes through the speakers of his phone, the audio picking up his voice immediately.

“Wyatt,” I whisper as he shows me how to twist the diamond to turn it off. The diamond sits like a normal stud, and you’d never notice the minuscule button it actually is. It won’t accidentally click off once it’s on, which is fucking genius.

“Now I can always find you if something happens. And if in the horrible chance that something happens, you won’t be powerless. This is your weapon, baby. Information can be your weapon to take these bastards down if, god forbid, you’re ever close enough to use it.”

Wyatt eyes me like he’s waiting for me to snap. He drops the earrings into the case again and slides them toward me.

“Addie, please wear these at all times. Even asleep. Just for now, please. I don’t know what I would do if—”

I shut him up with a soft kiss. It’s just a brush of our lips, but tingles race from my lips to my fingertips where I hold his jaw. Pulling away is harder than I thought it would be, so I stay in his space, our eyes locked on each other.

“Thank you, Wy. I promise I’ll keep them in. Thank you,” I whisper, not hiding the tears in my eyes or the smile lifting my cheeks.

He shudders, his eyes closing for a beat. When he opens them, pure fucking love shines back. “Thank you, baby girl.”

I can’t help but give him another featherlight kiss. The sheer thoughtfulness and care that went into this gift blows my mind and sends my heart soaring. Wyatt’s taking care of me, and I’d be damned if more of my walls didn’t just shatter.

At this rate, there won’t be a barrier left. It will just be us and a whole lot of trust.

Julian's 2nd Letter

Sweetheart,

I had a dream last night. It was the same as my daydreams, but I finally got to see it play out. It was beautiful. So beautiful I either didn't want to wake up or I knew I had to fight like hell to make it real.

I woke up. I woke up so I could live it. With you, our guys, our kids. I woke up to fight for our future, and now I want to share it with you because, sweetheart...this is what I see.

The day I met you, Rory was hugging you over your shoulders while you sat with Baby Ollie. Do you remember that? I do... every day. That's when this dream started to form.

We're older in our future, and Rory's a sassy teen, of course. Our baby's there, running around on wobbly legs as he chases Tate around the yard. He's going to make such a wonderful father, Addie, don't you think?

I'm almost positive he will have to start wearing glasses at this point because his head is always stuffed in one of his medical textbooks. He's so close to his own personal dreams and conquering his demons, sweetheart. It warms my heart.

In this dream, Zach has his head resting in my lap. Crazy right? With us, he can relax, knowing we're safe and happy. Warm and fed too of course. The grill beside us is where he rules the world. You will never get away from his towering plates, so get used to it sweetie, 'cus that man feeds everything he loves.

Wyatt, our house nerd. You'll never believe this, but he steals Rory to his tech side! Rory's hanging off you while talking computers and some nano-shit with her, still, best friend. Those two are worse than Tate with his textbooks I swear... Just a

heads up, Rory's gonna need glasses too I bet.

Me? I watch you smile as you take in your family around you. I know for a fact you're tuning out Rory and Wyatt's nerd talk. Your eyes trail our little boy and Tate as they run around the yard, and bite your lip when Tate's shirt rides up his abs. Your hands absentmindedly stroke Rory's arm and hold your stomach. You're thinking about our family and the future beyond this one. Or maybe you're thinking of the past...remembering how your incredible body carried our beautiful boy. A soft smile graces your lips when you find Zach snoozing on my lap, then your eyes snag mine. And I fall. I fall into your beautiful green eyes, and I never want to leave.

The dream ends with you smiling, sweetheart.

I miss your smile. I miss you.

I'll never stop fighting for this future. Dreams do come true, and I'll make it so for you.

I love you,

Julian ✓

Chapter Forty-Seven



Julian

I can't stop looking at her when I should be paying attention to the road. She's just so damn beautiful. And she's *here*. Within two feet of me, my girl is here, in my space, breathing the same air as me.

I don't even care that she hasn't said anything to me besides a quiet "good morning" before tucking herself into my passenger seat. With her hands cradled around her little bump, she picks at her nails. Something's on her mind, but I'm not sure if I should ask. A few weeks ago, I wouldn't have hesitated to check in with her. I'd also have my hand on her thigh, but things are different now. We're rebuilding and unfortunately, that means taking a couple of steps back.

"Do you think Bean's okay?"

Her quiet voice makes me jolt a little, having settled further into the silence than I thought. "What do you mean, sweetheart?" *Is she worried about the baby? How do I not know this?*

Peeking at her again, I see her frowning down at her tummy. "I just... Do you think the baby's okay? I haven't had an appointment yet. Bean doesn't feel real. And after Johnny... I really hope our baby is okay."

Addie's small sniff breaks my heart and makes my stomach clench with nerves. *Fuck, should I be worried too?* Something else she said stood out, she said *our*. I know the

baby is ours but hearing her offer me the claim is a fucking beautiful thing that makes me want to cry.

“Jules? Are you okay?” she asks, her tiny hand grasping my forearm.

I huff. It’s a nervous sound. “Shit, I don’t know. I hadn’t thought of anything being wrong with our baby. Now I—”

“Jules—”

My words come faster, each worry fighting for breath and space in my throat. “I had no idea you were struggling with this. Fuck, I should have been right there with you and the worries. Now I’m scared. I’ve been so focused on the future and making our lives better. I never even thought to prepare myself for this!”

“Julian, breathe,” she coos. Just her voice soothes some of my panic, the white-knuckle grip I have on the steering wheel relaxing a smidge. “It’s normal to worry. I’m sorry I scared you. There haven’t been any negative signs, I promise. I just really want to see him.”

“Him?” I gasp, my eyes widening as I pull into a parking space at the clinic. With the car in gear, I twist so I can finally have the perfect view of her.

A blush pinkens her cheeks as she peeks at me from beneath her lashes. “Yeah, him. Bean feels like a boy, right? You were who convinced me, you know?”

I blink at her at a loss for words. “Your future. *Our* future, Jules. The one you wrote to me about. Bean *does* feel like a boy.”

Holy fuck. She read my letters. Of course, she did. I literally wrote them for her to read. So she could feel me, and my love for her, even when I wasn’t strong enough to face her.

“Thank you, Julian. The letters, the drawings, they were beautiful.” She leans across the center console and kisses my cheek. “I can’t wait for you to draw our baby, too.”

I melt. I melt like all the women in Jude and Gabby’s books. I melt like the women Rylee writes about when they

fall more in love. That's what happens when Addie offers me this lifeline. This *hope*. Hope and a request for the future, which means she's striving towards one that I'm in.

I'll draw her all the pictures she wants.



The first whooshing helicopter sound on the monitor changes me.

I don't care if I can hardly pick out what all the black and grey are or the strange sounds. That's my baby. That's my fucking baby!

"There he is," the lady says, pointing at the screen. "Everything looks good, Ms. West."

My eyes are locked on the screen, completely entranced by the little life we finally get to see.

My baby boy. Did you know nowadays you can find out the sex of the baby through a blood test? Wild. And just as we thought, we're having a boy!

"I'll give you two a minute," Dr. Hart murmurs, offering us a small smile.

I hardly notice her leaving the room. I don't notice much else until Addie's grip on my hand starts to make my bones creak. Looking down, I choke, fear gripping me at the number of tears dripping off her chin and her wobbly lip.

"Sweetheart, what's wrong?" I try to keep the panic from my voice, but I have no idea what's happening or how to help. I have all the same information she does, and it was good. Our little boy is happy and healthy.

"He's real!" She finally gasps out, her fingers pulling the computer closer to her. I study her face, trying to read her so I can make her stop fuckin' crying. "He's real, Julian," Addie whispers.

The look of awe on her face has me relaxing a bit. “So, you’re okay?” I ask hesitantly.

Her head whips to mine, a big ass smile on her face. “I’m amazing. The baby is okay! We’re having a baby! A boy, just like you dreamed!”

Holy fuck. The sheer joy on her face sends me to my knees. I tuck her hand against my lips as I bow against the exam bed she’s in. My eyes water, and I find myself unable to stop them as they tickle her wrist.

“Jules?”

I choke out a little laugh and look up at her. From my spot on the floor, the light above her makes me her look angelic, beautiful.

“I love you, Addie May. So much. Please forgive me,” I plead. At this moment, I can’t hold back anymore. I am in love with this woman and we’re having a baby boy together. A family. I need to know she feels this connection just as deeply as I do.

Her eyes blink rapidly, more tears gracing her pale cheeks. That damn plush lip wobbles again, yanking on my heart each time. A whimper breaks free, then she’s pulling me off the ground and forcing my body to lean over her teeny form.

She grips my cheeks in her dainty palms and looks me in the eye. It’s not shallow. No. Addie sees *everything*. And I let her because *she* is everything.

“I forgive you, Julian,” she murmurs, pressing her forehead to mine. The touch feels like our souls are truly intertwining. Like we are becoming one. Then she says the words that irrevocably connect our futures. “I love you. So much.”

Chapter Forty-Eight



Adelyn

Seeing our baby for the first time changed things. Blank and grey smudges with a heartbeat to match. My baby boy rewrote me. I thought the guys were affecting my heart, mind and soul, but Bean *changed* me. He put things into perspective, just like his dad did when Julian crumpled to the ground and bared his soul to me.

Everything's changed, and yet, nothing has. We're driving back to the guys' house and still have shit to deal with. Now though, I find myself excited to get back and share the news while also dreading the day Rory and I have to move back into our apartment.

Julian's hand squeezes my thigh, almost like he knew my mood shifted without me having to say anything. He reads me like he's known me forever, not like he's known me for almost three months.

God, three months, and we're having a baby together. I should be royally freaked out, but seeing our baby today settled something inside of me.

This is happening, my family is growing, and I found out I truly *can* forgive these men. I know from the bottom of my heart that they love me and would do anything for me. Of course, we still have a ton to work through and entire lives to figure out, but I think everything's going to be okay now.

Seeing Wyatt hurting threw me off completely. If Tate and Zach helping out for a week softened me a bit, then Wyatt getting hurt was like a slap in the face. My body screamed at me to run to him, while my heart shouted its love with every anxious beat. All I could think about was making sure he was okay. Then Julian; my sweet, vulnerable Julian. I thought Tate might be the most emotional one, and he is in some ways, but this whole ordeal showed me a whole other side of Tate that I can't help but love him for even more. *He's going to be such an amazing dad. They all are, and I can't wait to tell them!*

Twining my fingers between Julian's, I admire the sharp lines of his jaw and cheekbones. He's a work of art, and when he smiles at me like he's doing right now, it feels like I'm the center of his world.

It happens in slow motion. His crinkled, laughing eyes widen at something over my shoulder as his smile morphs into a devastating scream. I have no reaction, his own confusing me into frozen fear. His hand on the steering wheel whitens and yanks to the left too fast for me to register why. Then I'm wheezing and coughing, the hands we were holding having bashed against my chest to keep me from flying forward.

Time morphs into something I don't want to understand. Our future was right there, ready for us at home. And now my head rips in a circle as Julian's strong forearm bands me to the seat. How he's holding me still as the car spins out on the quiet road is a miracle. A scream rips from my throat when my head bangs on the cushioned frame of my door just as the crunching metal and loud BANG of the car dropping into the steep ditch rattle my bones.

Groaning, I try not to shift too much, the seat belt now putting pressure below my bump and across my chest. My chest thumps, but my lungs release a panicked cry when I don't feel Julian's hand in mine anymore.

Frantically, I shove my hair out of my face, needing to see if he's okay.

He has to be okay! If he was able to keep me controlled and relatively unharmed, he had to have been able to do the

same for himself, right? RIGHT?!

“Julian,” I croak, twisting my head and stifling the pained whimper that wants to escape at the whiplash my neck suffered.

Slumped in his seat, I first notice his beautiful orange hair covering his face, obscuring my view. He’s not awake if his posture and limp shoulders are anything to go off of.

“Shit, shit, shit!” I’m gasping for breath, trying to figure out if I should risk touching him. Needing to know, needing to *see* him, I lift his hair and find a steadily bleeding gash on his forehead.

“Julian!” I cry. The urge to shake him is so fucking strong, but I have no idea what could be wrong with him. *Why isn’t he waking up?!* “Julian, baby, please!” I beg and beg, gripping the arm that saved me.

The car nose-dived into the ditch, leaving us at an odd angle just enough to put a strain on my chest and taking away solid ground for my feet. “What do I do? What do I do? What do I do?” It’s midday. Somebody will be driving by soon, I’m sure. It’s not a busy road, but someone *has* to come. My phone is fuck knows where, and I’m too scared to move. Worry for my baby keeping me in a position I know I can deal with for a little longer.

Flashes of the last ditch I was in threaten to disarm me and leave me powerless. *You won’t be powerless. This is your weapon, baby.* Wyatt’s voice whispers through my mind. Gasping, I fumble for my earlobes while trying to keep the weight off my bump.

Wyatt can track me! He can hear me! He meant for them to be for if Johnny got me, but I can use them to ask for help.

The diamonds click into place on each side, immediately helping me breathe easier. “Wyatt!” I cry into the eerie silence of the car. God, I wish I knew if he was listening. “Wyatt, please! W-we crashed. Julian won’t wake up! Please, please, please help. I’m scared.”

Glass crunches in the near distance, and my throat immediately closes. I don't know what has my body halting all movements, but something about the shuffling outside the car has the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

“Wyatt, is-is that you?” I whisper, thinking if it's him, he'll call out to me since he can hear me on his phone. “Wy—”

“There she is! I've missed you, Add!”

I jump, screaming until my throat turns raw. *This can't be happening. No, no, no, no!*

“NO! WYATT, HELP! JULIAN!”

Chapter Forty-Nine



Wyatt

“They’re leaving now with good news!” Tate exclaims excitedly, throwing himself down onto the cushion beside me.

“What’s the news?” Zach looks like he’s fucking itching to go get them himself, but the little miss beside him holds him steady.

Tate glowers at his phone even with a small smile still twinkling in his eyes. “It’s a surprise they said. We’ll just have to wait.”

I huff, antsy to see them back home in one piece. One *happy* piece, preferably. I wonder if they found out the sex of the baby and that’s the surprise. Ten minutes in to watching Rory dominate Mario Kart, Tate nudges me.

“How much longer till they’re here?”

I roll my eyes but have been secretly wanting to check their location, too. Both of Addie’s earrings ping about fifteen minutes away, but they don’t move. They stay in one spot for a whole fifteen fucking seconds before I stand and rush to my office. Not wanting to scare Rory, I keep my steps measured, but as soon as I make it to the stairs, I’m fucking sprinting.

Why aren’t they moving? Something happened.

“What happened?” Zach’s deep timber rumbles around the space of my office just as Tate’s anxious breaths ratchet my

anxiety higher. Firing up my computers, a dead weight settles in my gut.

“Addie’s location hasn’t moved in I don’t know how long. It’s just off the road, here,” I point to the red dots that signal where my woman is.

“Let’s go!” Zach grits out, his hands shaking and his fear barely in check.

“Vests!” I shout, needing them to be prepared.

“You’re staying,” Zach growls out, demanding my submission. Too bad for him, I already knew that.

“I am.” I nod, not picking a fight. “I’ll watch cams and guide you. Rory will be safe with me. But put the damn vests on. They have their own tech.” Trackers and a camera more specifically.

They’re suited up and out the door faster than I can blink. There’s no time for kisses or words. They need to get to her. Fast.

My phone rings within the next minute, and Zach’s voice booms from down the line. “Sending you her location,” I say without pausing as they speed her way.

“Rory’s in the living room still. Don’t forget to keep an eye on her,” Tate says breathlessly through the phone.

I nod, readying to respond, when the speakers in my office crackle to life.

“Wyatt!” Addie’s voice come’s through the surround sound not hiding a hint of her obvious fear and terror.

My heart cracks and slams against my ribcage. *She turned them on. Why would she turn them on if she wasn’t in trouble?*

“Wyatt, please! W-we crashed. Julian won’t wake up! Please, please, please help. I’m scared.”

“FUCK!” Zach roars, threatening to burst the speakers on my phone.

“Wyatt, what’s happening?” Tate asks, his own voice rising with panic.

Fuck, oh my hell. “I don’t know,” I croak. I can’t see her. I can only hear her, and her location hasn’t changed. “You know just as much as me.”

“We’re almost there,” Tate murmurs, sounding pained. Zach must smash something because something cracks and groans on their side. “Careful! We can’t get there if you break the damn car, Z!” Tate snaps.

I wonder if Rory’s nickname for Zach calmed him at all. Glancing at the security footage of the living room, I see Rory still playing her games. Safe.

“Wyatt, is-is that you?” Addie’s voice whispers through the speakers.

What? Realization sets in. “Fuck someone’s there! GO, GO, GO!”

“Wy—”

The monster we’ve been searching for cuts off her beautiful voice.

“There she is! I’ve missed you, Add!”

“HURRY! She’s still there!” I shout into my phone, hoping like hell they make it to save her before Cadell snags her right out from under us. This can’t be happening.

A shrill scream stops my blood flow and freezes my bones.

“NO! WYATT, HELP! JULIAN!”

The word stops at the sound of my love crying out for my help.

Chapter Fifty



Adelyn

“Wake up, would you?”

I groan, already annoyed by the thumping in my head and the voice that’s rattling around inside it.

“I didn’t even touch you, and you passed out. You’ve always been lame, but damn, Add, that was embarrassing.”

God, what adult talks like that?

Taking stock of myself, I feel the dull ache in my chest where our hands slammed into me, where Julian protected me. My head aches and pounds, and my neck feels like it never wants to move again. But otherwise, I think I’m okay. I think my baby is okay. That’s more than I can say for the last time I was on a cold cement floor at Johnny’s feet. Lucky for me, I passed out. And it is lucky because I would rather that than be drugged again.

I expect a hit to make me open my eyes, but the fucker tickles my foot. I jolt, unable to help my annoyed growl, but what has me stalling is the state he has me in. My socks and shoes are gone, as are my leggings. *How did I miss that when I woke up?* I thought I had been here long enough for the chill in my bones to set in, but I’m bare to the harsh conditions instead. In panties and a T-shirt, Johnny leers at me from the same wooden chair as the last time. I’m back in the same damn cell.

“I would wonder why the world hates you so much when you’re helpless in front of me *again* for the third time in your life, wouldn’t you? Pretty, sad, helpless, *damaged*, Addie May.” His eyes bore into the scars of my thighs, but I let him see. Maybe he won’t touch me if he’s repulsed.

Another word stood out, though. I’m not helpless. Rubbing my ear to my shoulder, I feel the familiar prick of the stud on my skin.

My weapon. Even if I die here, maybe I can get Wyatt enough information to take this bastard down once and for all.

“I’m not the only thing that’s sad here though, am I, Johnny? You’re so jealous of what they’ve built that you came after them. *Really?*” I’m taunting him. I know it, and it puts me and the baby at risk, but I am *not* powerless.

Faster than I can track, his hand has my ankle snatched in his tight grip. A faint touch brings my attention to the knife poised to shred my foot apart. “Listen, bitch! They fucked up. I have all the cred here. Why do you think they hired *me* to go after your little bitch boys?”

“Who? Your mom?” I don’t hide my little smirk. He always hated it when I’d poke his buttons. And he had *many*.

A sharp sting in the arch of my foot makes me hiss, but at least he keeps talking. “Your little blond boyfriend and his slut of a sister made some people *really* mad. Some important people.”

“That makes you their bitch.” I state, knowing he’s trying to prove himself as important, too. I’ll just keep taking him down a peg until I can’t.

A traitorous whine slips out when the knife drags further across my foot. “No, it makes me the *best*. The *Carters* want me so bad they’ll pay me more money than you’ve ever seen in your tiny, pathetic life.”

“Why would anyone want you?” Another rip in my skin, but worth it.

“Why wouldn’t they?!” He roars, spit hitting me in the cheek. “That scrawny boy killed their fucking kid, and I’m the

only one they trust to break him.”

Fuck, I know this. The pieces click together. Tate killed Mason, Rylee’s abusive ex, four years ago. *I didn’t realize Mason’s parents were a problem, though. Maybe nobody did. Fuck. Okay.*

“That just means you expendable, Johnny,” I tsk, egging him on even as the burn in my foot increases.

“I AM NOT! The Davises hired me too, you slut! Your blond little gay boy is a fuckup! They trust me to *ruin* their son. Nobody disrespects us and gets away with it.”

I’m trembling now. The full force of his rage aimed at me is too much, but I keep pushing. Keep poking. Keep fighting even with a knife slowly skinning my foot. “You aren’t one of *them*, Johnny. That’s what makes you sad. You’re the lackey. The expendable one. The one they send to do their dirty work and I bet they don’t even care if you die.”

I don’t see the slap coming until my cheekbone is throbbing in protest and he’s straddling my waist. *Fuck, he moves fast.*

“THEY ALL WANT ME! Your gay boy band sent the wrong people to prison, and now they. Want. ME! Every single one of the fuckers hired *me*! Because they want ME!”

I have a moment to feel bad for the little boy this man used to be. The little boy who probably just needed to feel wanted and loved. He never talked about his family much, but this is enough.

The moment’s gone in a blur of limbs and a shiny blade whipping past my face. My left shoulder protests at the angle he splays my arm at as my right forearm screams in agony as his knee holds it down. Then the blade is there, teasing circles across my left, vulnerable forearm. The sight makes me nauseous. My body already telling me what I refuse to acknowledge.

“How anybody wants your fucked up flesh is beyond me, Add.” He sighs my name like he’s disappointed while staring

reverently at my arm. “How ironic would it be if you died the same way you lived? Slashed and bleeding.”

It’s not slow and torturous. Johnny just stabs and drags. Vertically. Ripping through my most precious artery.

Screaming. So much screaming. Shouts and bangs. So much blood. Too much blood. Stars and shadows, bursts of flames. Then a tunnel. There was so much blood. Then darkness.

Chapter Fifty-One



Zachary

“Oh my god,” Tate groans. “Why is she fucking acting like that? She could get hurt!”

Listening in on Adelyn’s conversation with Cadell is a new form of torture I didn’t think could exist. Nor was finding Julian waking up in his busted fucking car with Addie nowhere in sight.

“That just means you expendable, Johnny.” Addie’s voice filters through the SUV speakers, Cadell’s roar right on its heels.

I grit my teeth, slamming my foot to the floor. “Zach, go fucking faster!” Wyatt yells through the speakers, too.

“I AM!” I can’t hold in my rage and fear any longer. The SUV careens around a corner, the GPS telling me we’re two minutes out. “Julian, vest, now. Comms!” We each put our earpieces in to connect us to Wyatt.

Blood coats Julian’s face, a nasty bruise already forming. He said nothing else was hurt and demanded he help us. I’m pretty fucking sure he has a concussion, but I won’t hold him back from getting our woman back. He’s strapped into his own black gear in under a second while we all listen to Johnathan lose his absolute shit at our woman. Our sassy, fiery woman who’s going to get a damn spanking for her risky fucking behavior.

“THEY ALL WANT ME! Your gay boy band sent the wrong people to prison, and now they. Want. ME! Every single one of the fuckers hired *me*! Because they want ME!”

“Fuck,” Tate whispers, eyes wide as he stares at me from the seat beside me. “Is he—”

Crashing and grunts through the audio have me taking the final turn way too fast to be safe, but I can’t take it anymore. We have to get to her. Her tracker brought us to an abandoned fucking warehouse in the woods.

I’m out of the car in a flash, refusing to wait a second longer to ensure my doll is safe. My gun is up and aimed at the two fuckwads scrambling from their perches on the ground. I don’t hesitate. I shoot. Twice. Before they hit the ground, I’m busting through the rusted door just as the worst sound to ever fucking exist pierces my eardrum.

My love and fear burst from me in an uncontrollable detonation. “ADDIE!”

Chapter Fifty-Two



Julian

Guilt aches worse than the blow to my head. First for allowing Addie to get into an accident, then for not protecting her when she needed me the most. And now, for my slow limbs keeping me behind and unable to take the burden of one death. Zach took them both, unwavering in his vengeance and need to get our girl.

“Fuck, I don’t have eyes. The place is too old. No cameras, I just have yours.” Wyatt’s voice is a distant murmur in my ear.

I fight back the wooziness threatening to keep me from Addie as Zach shoves the shitty metal door open. Tate files in behind him, and I take the rear. Tate shouldn’t be here. At all. He may have skills, but he can’t fucking do this. I don’t know what it would do to him to take another life or fuck, see another person he loves in pain.

Mold and dirt assault my senses until a scream sends me stumbling into the wet concrete wall. *Addie*. Shoving aside my concussion and the pain her screams send shooting through my skull, I throw myself down the hall behind the other two.

“Julian, careful,” Wyatt cautions, knowing I’m likely more hurt than I’m letting on. But there’s no time.

Zach’s foot and Tate’s shoulder ram into the final metal door in the long, dank hallway, releasing Addie’s screams and mingling with male shouts. Dragging behind, I’m last to raise

my gun and aim at the fucker who's sitting on my girl. Tate and Zach already fanned out, giving me the space to do what I need to do.

Cadell raises his own gun, a bloody knife hanging limp at his side. Addie isn't moving, but first, he needs to die.

I see Tate twitch and Zach stiffen, both ready to take the life of another human being. I'm faster. I'll take this one for them. For us. There's only so much wrong we can do until it ruins us, and Zach just got two steps closer outside. These may be evil men, but we aren't. We're better.

I pull the trigger, feeling my soul blacken a little more as Johnathan Cadell falls away from our girl. I shoot again. One in the chest, one in the head.

Time suspends again; my ears ringing and my throat burning with bile. I am *not* evil, but I will do anything for my family. I am *not* a bad man. Not anymore. I'm better. We're better.

I took a man's life, and I'll have to live with that stain on my soul for all eternity, but right now? That concern ceases to exist when I come to, seeing Tate wrapped around Addie.

Blood, so much blood.

Chapter Fifty-Three



Tate

This can't be happening. Not again. Not again!

As soon as Cadell's weight is off Addie, I'm flying toward her. I barely register the second bullet flying through the air and splattering the bastard's brains. I don't care; it doesn't matter. Because there's *so much blood*.

"LYNNIE!" I have her in my arms the moment I'm close enough to grab her. Zach isn't far behind, but I pay no mind. "Hey, hey. We're here now. You're okay. Open your eyes, Linnie. You're safe now. You can wake up."

Zach chokes, but still I keep my eyes focused on her face. She's pale. But she's always pale. "Please, Linnie. He's gone. Nobody will ever hurt you again. I promise. Just look at me," I beg.

I fucking plead until Zach's flailing arms draw my attention. His vest is thrown to the side and his shirt's off. Then he's pressing it to her arm. *That's where the blood is*, my mind supplies, trying to force together the information we see lying right in front of us.

"Give me your shirt," Zach demands, but his voice is hardly a croak. His shouting and yelling have ceased. All that rage has morphed into unbridled shock and terror.

Using one arm, I rip my vest off and yank my shirt over my head, not releasing her for a damn second. Zach lifts his

blood-soaked shirt, and I finally see why my girl won't wake up.

"She's bleeding out," I whimper, hugging her closer to my chest.

"SHE'S NOT!" Zach's animalistic roars are back.

"Sweetheart?"

Julian's here now. He's touching her. Talking to her. He's crying.

"Ambulance is one minute out. Don't. Fuck." Wyatt's voice cracks in my ear, but he sounds so far away.

It's happening again.

And I couldn't do anything to stop it this time.

I trace one of her eyebrows. I think I'm telling her how beautiful she is.

Please, Linnie. You're safe now, I promise. You can wake up. Please wake up.

Chapter Fifty-Four



Wyatt

Fifteen minutes. Maybe ten. Maybe twenty. Did you know that how long it takes for someone to bleed out and die from a cut to an artery in your arm? Depends on how deep. Addie's was deep.

I watched it all, counted the seconds.

Calculated how much time she had left.

I watched. Through the fucking screen of my computer. Thank hell for Julian keeping his vest on so I could watch through his body cam. From one angle, I saw Addie bleeding out between three of the men who love her. Tate's pale, disassociated expression flashed across the screen with each twist of Julian's body. Julian would shift and I'd see Zach watching the life flow from Addie and our baby. The pure anguish and tears that mingled with her blood will forever be engrained in my memory.

Johnathan won. Tate and Rylee's parents, Mason's parents, those we sent to prison... they won. They broke us. Ruined us. And I watched from the warmth of my office.

I bet Addie's skin was cold to the touch even with the trails of blood coating her beautiful, soft skin.

All I could do was watch.

I had a job too, though, to keep Rory safe. I didn't do it for Adelyn. Rory is just as much my little girl as she is hers. I

stayed behind to keep our kid safe, and I don't regret it. I regret not holding Addie while she swam in the darkness between this world and the next. I wasn't there for her in the end. When all of this came to a close, I wasn't there to hold her hand and beg her to hold on.

They kneeled in the puddle of her blood and begged for her to stay. To open her eyes, to just *wake up*. The cops and ambulance didn't drive as fast as Zach. They were slow. So slow I died a little every second I counted.

Zach did everything he could. He kept pressure on the wound and never let up. Julian rubbed warmth into her arms and bare fucking legs, while begging to see her pretty green eyes. Tate whispered sweet words in her ear, telling her how beautiful she was. How much he loved her. How excited he was to meet our baby.

Then the paramedics stormed in, Don hot on their heels, frantically looking for his niece. Five minutes and thirty-two seconds from the moment I heard her scream. It felt like longer with Addie's life hanging in the balance.

Zach stood and moved with her, keeping pressure as they wheeled her out. Tate didn't put up a fight, numb to the world, his sole focus on the woman we love. Julian shoved a few police out of the way to keep his hands on her, but I wouldn't expect anything less. If I got to be with her in those precious moments, I wouldn't let anything separate us. Not even death.

“Daddy?”

I hit send. Every final piece of evidence, every extra video and audio, sent. Everything I could dig up to keep the Heads buried deep in their life sentences, sent to the feds so they can deal with the shit show that's back in Washington.

“Yeah, honey?”

“You done yet? Dad Z's doing it again.” The little sigh behind me makes me smirk, drawing me out of my swirling darkness of my thoughts.

Spinning around, I turn my back on months of work. Facing my little girl, I smile. I'll never forget the day she

asked to be ours. It was the only thing she asked for on her ninth birthday. It took a few months after everything came crashing down around us, but yeah, I'm her dad now. "Yeah, Bestie. I'm done."

It's finally over.

Chapter Fifty-Five



Aurora

Daddy Wy said if his door is unlocked, then I can come in, but if it's locked, then I can't. So, I don't knock. I turn the handle, hoping it will let me in. It does!

"Daddy?" I step inside, not going too close because he says sometimes there are adult things on there. *That's okay though, I'm not here to peek.*

"Yeah, honey?" The clicking stops.

"You done yet? Dad Z's doing it again." Air puffs out of my lips and I look at the ceiling. Sometimes I can't believe *I'm* the kid in this family. The *adults* act silly more often than I do.

Wy spins with a big smile on his face. It's the brightest one I've seen on his face in a while. "Yeah, bestie. I'm done."

"Oh good! Come on!" I can't fit my fingers all the way around his wrist, but he still stands and follows me when I tug. "You going to come to our rescue?"

Daddy Wy laughs. It's kind of throaty, but it's nice. "I'll always rescue you from the food monster. Don't you worry."

A few steps from the bottom, I bend my knees, but I don't get far when I jump. "Hey!" I squeal, trying to act annoyed by him ruining my plans.

Wyatt's smile is back and bigger than ever when he plops me on his hip. "No jumping from the stairs like that." He boops my nose.

“Papa Jules lets me,” I whine.

“Aurora May! How dare you tattle on me!” Julian’s pouting too, but it makes me giggle.

Wy sets me down, and I point at Zach, who looks like he smelled something bad, so I tell him. “Maybe if you hadn’t made stinky sprouts, you wouldn’t look like that.”

Daddy Tate chokes and sputters on his drink, and I laugh right along with him. “Oh, my hell, Zach. She got you good!”

Z looks like he’s about to chase Tate down. I tip toe my way over to Jules and tug on his shirt. “Can you get rid of them?” I whisper.

His lips twist and I have to pinch mine to keep my laugh in. “I already tried,” he mumbles through his duck lips.

“Julian, sit down and eat. Stop teaching the peanut your ways.” I stick my bottom lip out, but all Z does is lift an eyebrow.

Like every night, Dad Z dishes my plate but when he goes to do the second, he’s stopped before the sprouts can the plate.

“Those make me nauseous, Zach. I’ll just have the potatoes and chicken please,” Mom says. Her voice sounds sweeter than usual, and I just *know* she doesn’t want to eat the stinky sprouts!

I open my mouth, but while rubbing her very round tummy she says, “Ice cream and cereal for dessert tonight, Rory?” *Oh, she’s sneaky, but I’ll play her game. She doesn’t have to eat Dad’s Brussel sprouts, but I get Corn Pops and ice cream in return.*

I nod, Mom nods, Tate snorts, Wyatt smiles again, Julian covers his giggle and Dad Z rolls his eyes, but he’s happy. I’m happy too. Mommy’s happy, *and* I have four dads. Oh, and a baby brother coming soon.

It’s everything I ever dreamed. Papa Jules says that a lot too, and I hope he’ll draw me a picture of his dream someday.

A picture that isn’t just simply Mom and me. But all of us. A family.

Z, Wy, Tate, Jules, Mom, Bean and I.

A dream come true.

Epilogue



Adelyn

6 years later

“No, Dad, not *that* one.” I can practically feel Rory’s eye roll where she’s resting her cheek on the top of my head. “No, that’s the old version. I promise this one will work better—”

I tune her and Wyatt out, not having the capability to follow along with their tech stuff. Don’t get me wrong, it’s amazing and I love that they have each other to talk to about that stuff, but it all goes over my head. And makes me snooze. *Oops.*

“You’ll never catch me!”

Tate’s playful yell draws my attention to where he runs at the slowest pace possible. Behind him, Joey runs at his version of breakneck speed, stumbling like a baby deer after his dad.

“Noooooo,” Tate draws out the word when our five-year-old grabs hold of his sweatpants with a battle cry. Slowly, oh so damn slowly, my blond husband falls to the ground, laughing as Joey climbs him like his own personal jungle gym.

I giggle. Apparently, the movement was too much for my fifteen-year-old to handle, because she huffs and sits down beside me rather than hanging around my shoulders. I lock eyes with Wyatt for a beat, enjoying the sparkle he gets when arguing over tech shit with our daughter.

Julian was right. They're still best friends.

Oh, my hell.

It's happening. It's here. The future my ginger haired husband hoped and dreamed for.

Needing to see him, I whip my head around to find him sitting on one of the patio couches, already watching me. I blush, my eyes heating with moisture. Happy emotions.

I was holding my tummy in his letter and holding Rory's arm in his dream. Instead, I'm trailing my fingers over the scar on my left forearm and instead of Zach taking a nap, he is, in fact, ruling over the grill. A fat fucking stack of burgers sits beside him like we're having people over, which we are *not*.

Zach closes the lid, and to my relief, plops down beside Julian and rests his head on his shoulders. A head with a few more grey hairs in them nowadays, but I love it. Just as I love all their laugh lines around their eyes.

He's not napping, and I'm not reminiscing about giving birth to Joseph or thinking of the future.

I am smiling, though. And I'm so beyond happy.

I'm feeling and thinking about how truly immeasurable my gratefulness for this life I'm living is. Just a few minutes longer, and I wouldn't have made it. I wouldn't be studying fashion online. I wouldn't be witnessing Julian and Zach running their own gym or Tate follow his dreams of becoming a doctor. Wyatt helps wherever he's needed, which is everywhere, for everyone, especially for Rory. He's her tutor, teacher, and guide all in one. They are truly inseparable. Just one wrong turn and Joey Bean wouldn't be here.

But we are.

Five minutes and thirty-two seconds.

Each of them saved me.

Zach's immovable pressure.

Julian's warmth.

Tate's sweet words.

Wyatt's focused strength.

They saved us both.

And now, we're living the dream we fought so hard for.

It's no longer simply Rory and me.

Wherever we go, they go too.

Wyatt, Zach, Tate, and Julian, they'll follow Rory, Joey,
and I to the ends of time.

We're a family, forever and always.

The End

For now...

Addie, Rory, and their guys got their happily ever after, yet we didn't get to see them live it. If you love these characters as much as I do, you will be thrilled to hear that they play a part in book 3.

If you want to see this wonderful family years later, they will be in Sophia's story!

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Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I need to say thank you to my husband for being my biggest cheerleader! When I started this journey a few months ago, I never would have thought I'd be here, yet he never once doubted me. Sometimes he has even been far more excited about my accomplishments than me! I'm so thankful for his support and encouragement.

When I first started writing, I was worried about how my friends and family would react to my genre of choice. All the people supporting me and cheering me on have pleasantly surprised me. Many of my family members have even read some of my work *blush*. Thank you to my parents and in-laws for not judging me or frowning at my work. It means the world to me that I can share my dream with the people I love the most.

ALPHAS! Angelica... Patricia... you both got me through some moments of uncertainty. The hype you ladies have given me has been beyond my wildest dreams! Your kind words and helpful critiques left me feeling proud of my work. Thank you from the bottom of my heart!

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PA! Kassandra... I feel like most messages I send you say "thank you" lol. You do so much more than I ever thought I might need. You make my life so much easier and my socials freaking fabulous! Thank you... I'm keeping you forever!

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READERS! You all blow my mind. Thank you for all the kind words you have given and for taking the time to allow my stories to take up a little portion of your day. I write what I love to read, and I'm so honored to have a space in your libraries.

Author Bio

I've seen many ways authors go about making this page, but I'm going to make mine casual. I don't like writing about myself, nor do I want to do it in a formal way. I have to do that in my graduate program WAY too often. That being said, you get the real me for this.

I haven't had writers block up until this moment.

For starters, I love to read (crazy right?). When I was a pre-teen, I read constantly (YA Fantasy). It was a way for me to float off into another universe and avoid real life. I stopped reading at some point until COVID happened. That's when my obsession with reading began again. Reverse Harems came later, though. It just happened to be a coincidence that I picked one up. Now, I can't get enough!

As for writing, I have always loved to write and have taken as many creative writing classes as possible. Since I was that pre-teen sucked into stories about men with wings (and abs), I knew I wanted to be an author.

I turned to my husband a few months ago and said, "I can't wait to write a book someday." I was probably swooning over how amazing Kerry Taylor is. His response was, "Why not now?"

I messaged Kerry the next day, completely fangirling over my phone when she responded. And so, I began my debut with the support of my mentor, my husband, and my entire family.

I have poured my heart and soul into this fictional family; they truly are an extension of me. I can't wait to continue my path of being an author... I don't think it's something I'll ever give up.

When giving your reviews, please be gentle. While I welcome constructive criticism, please be kind.

Thank you!