

MALIA ROSE



THE ORDEAL
OF BEING KNOWN

The Ordeal of Being Known

Malia Rose

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*To every hopeless romantic with a lonely heart.
I hope you find the perfect fairy tale love you've always read about.*

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Note:](#)

[Playlist](#)

[prologue](#)

[chapter 1](#)

[chapter 2](#)

[chapter 3](#)

[chapter 4](#)

[chapter 5](#)

[chapter 6](#)

[chapter 7](#)

[chapter 8](#)

[chapter 9](#)

[chapter 10](#)

[chapter 11](#)

[chapter 12](#)

[chapter 13](#)

[chapter 14](#)

[chapter 15](#)

[chapter 16](#)

[chapter 17](#)

[chapter 18](#)

[chapter 19](#)

[chapter 20](#)

[chapter 21](#)

[chapter 22](#)

[chapter 23](#)

[chapter 24](#)

[chapter 25](#)

[chapter 26](#)

[chapter 27](#)

[chapter 28](#)

[chapter 29](#)

[chapter 30](#)

[chapter 31](#)

[chapter 32](#)

[epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

Note:

The characters in this book break the fourth wall just because I think it's fun and I've always wanted to do it.

Content warnings

Child abuse

Anxiety attacks

Mention of school shooting

Author's note

After my grandparents and their kids immigrated from Palestine, they moved to a neighborhood filled with other immigrants from all over and a lot of them ended up getting married, which resulted in us growing up with so many different cultures around us. It was always an eye opener, and this book was a way to create something where everyone can find something to relate to.

Playlist

Mirrorball – Taylor Swift

Ceilings – Lizzy McAlpine

Someone to stay – Vancouver Sleep Clinic

Family line – Conan Gray

A little death – The Neighborhood

Mess it up – Gracie Abrams

From Eden – Hozier

I wanna be yours – Arctic Monkey

prologue

Layla

The first curl of resentment between a mother and a daughter can start when the doctor announces, ‘It’s a girl’.

She wanted a boy. She had been told that boys are easier.

The second one can happen after she gives birth, but this one isn’t fleeting, she can’t brush it off because it happens over and over again until she can’t part with it and it becomes a part of the lens that she views you with.

Layla’s mother is a beautiful woman who’s used to getting attention. Her first pregnancy with Layla’s brother was exciting, but this one took a toll on her. Her body took longer to recover and ‘get back in shape’ and she couldn’t find anyone other than her daughter to blame.

‘You look so beautiful’ turned into ‘She’s so beautiful’. People visited, and they fixated on the baby girl. This could be a happy moment, like the happy ones in her first pregnancy, but the first one didn’t harbor the feeling of competition that she felt.

She had taken something from her.

Then it grew bigger when the girl got older. When she became a child looking for a hobby, and it just so happened that she’s a natural. Teachers called to tell Layla’s mother about how talented her child was, but it didn’t make her happy; instead, it fueled her jealousy.

After that, she watched her daughter become a young girl. But it’s different; her boobs were a bit bigger, she grew taller, and she was not a little girl anymore in her mother’s eyes. She was not a child. Layla was a woman, never a girl.

One day, Layla opened up about the feelings of discomfort she gets from her mother’s family when the men stare at her and make weird comments. Sharon blamed her daughter; twelve-year-old Layla was being provocative in her opinion.

She screamed and hit Layla, who absorbed the force of it all, hoping that it will help lessen her mother's anger.

It doesn't.

Sharon refused to let her take another thing from her. Layla had a dreadful moment of realizing that her mother was not her protector. She was hardly a mother and she will never stand by her side. Instead, she makes rules; she kept her daughter punished at all times and watched every breath she took, like a viper waiting to strike.

When Sharon got pregnant again, Layla's panic attacks increased. It happened at an age when things keep getting worse, where she unraveled so many hidden layers of hatred in her mother's heart until she can't take it anymore, until her own heart becomes bared down and it crushes the illusion of childhood she had.

Sharon's third and final pregnancy was different. Layla took care of her so that she didn't feel like this pregnancy exhausted her. She convinced her mother to keep the gender a surprise. When another girl came, she had her mother's eyes. It softened something inside Sharon. Layla didn't think her mother had much room left in her heart to resent another child.

Samira had softer features, and she was luckily the kind of girl that drew tenderness from people. People praised Sharon for how quiet and polite Samira was, and she took credit for it, but it was Layla who raised her. Layla who took care of her, Layla who taught her everything she knows.

Layla to the audience: Now, let's fast forward a bit to my fourteen-year-old self.

She didn't think she deserves to be here. She knew it. She wished her family knew it as well.

Layla's brother and parents ignored the invitation again. She and her sister, Samira, insisted on going. Samira has always loved coming here. Layla knows this is the only place her little sister feels like she has an actual family.

It was the first day of Eid; their mother didn't let them visit a lot, but Ramadan and Eid are the only times when their

father manages to change her mind. Their brother never liked coming; he is his mother's son. Layla, on the other hand, insisted on going even before her sister was born.

The first time she went, she was six, and she remembered feeling ashamed; she had rarely spoken to her father's family because it upset her mama. She didn't have the best relationship with them. The first time she brought it up, she had gotten a slap on the face. At the time, she wasn't allowed to go anywhere, and she wasn't allowed to play with most kids because her mother didn't approve of them, so Layla was bored, and because she knew her father had a big family, she asked again.

Layla had tried to look for ways to excuse her mama's control issues. She'd say, 'she was just making sure I was safe', or 'she just doesn't want anyone to corrupt me'. She says it's hard to raise girls, so she had to be extra careful.

Layla to the audience: It's all just misogyny.

Her father's guilt eventually made him agree, and he dropped her off and left quickly. She didn't understand why at the time. This neighborhood in Houston was known mostly to have Arab residents, and because it was Eid it was decorated accordingly. There were lights everywhere, the smell of bakhour flooded the streets.

Layla's father left as soon as her little feet hit the pavement. She stood there staring at the kids playing in the backyard until her feet hurt.

A woman wearing a hijab came out of the house and walked slowly, like she was approaching a wild cat. She looked at the girl like she knew her. Layla didn't like that.

"You're Layla," the woman said in disbelief.

Layla nodded and looked around.

"You're here alone?" she asked. Layla nodded again. The woman gave a hollow laugh. "Your baba wouldn't bother to say hi? Or let anyone know that we're allowed to see you now?" It looked like she was talking to herself. She wasn't looking at Layla.

“How do you know me?” Layla asked. The woman finally looked down at her. Her expression softened. Again Layla disliked it; she wasn’t used to it.

“You look so much like mama,” the woman whispered. “Baba is going to love you.”

Layla pursed her lips with doubt. She knew she wasn’t someone who was easy to love.

The woman’s hands reached out to Layla. She flinched back, her heart started beating fast like it usually did when a hand was raised in her direction. The woman frowned down at her.

“I don’t like touching. Don’t touch me. You have to tell everyone not to touch me or I won’t be back here again,” the little girl said sternly, in a very mature manner.

“Okay,” the woman drawled. “My name is Sara. I’m your aunt.”

Layla thought that made sense. Sara had the same olive skin tone as her dad; the same dark brown curls.

When they went inside, Sara asked Layla to stay in the dining room for a few minutes. She heard whispers; the kids who were outside were all inside now.

About fifteen minutes later, a couple walked in. She had never seen them before, but the older woman looked exactly like her. She had Layla’s olive skin, and her deep black hair; they shared same light brown eyes.

Layla’s grandfather cleared his throat and sat down.

The only thing she knew about them were their names and where they were from. Her grandfather’s name was Ahmad, and her grandmother’s name was Salma, and they were both from Palestine.

“You look happy to see me,” she had remarked, confused again.

“Of course we are! I named you based on one of my favorite stories. Qais and Layla.” He smiled warmly at her. He had kind features and smile lines; she liked that.

“Why didn’t you visit us then?” she asked. Her aunt came back then, and Layla found herself with three sets of confused eyes.

This was the first time an adult sat next to her and had an honest conversation with her.

Layla’s grandparents moved all of their kids here because her father and Aunt Sara wanted to study abroad. When her father met his now wife, Sharon, things had taken a turn. Sharon was the kind of woman who only accepted being the center of someone’s universe. He started ignoring all family events in favor of spending time with his wife’s family. He used to be somewhat of black sheep—had low self-esteem—he was so happy when a woman who was as beautiful as Sharon liked him.

He did everything to make her happy, including pushing his family away.

Layla’s father later ghosted his own family after the wedding. He called about a year later to tell them that his wife was six months pregnant with Layla’s brother. Out of guilt, he convinced his wife to let his father name the next baby. The visit to congratulate and name Layla over a year later would be the last visit for years.

Throughout the whole conversation, Layla noticed her grandparents spoke in a matter-of-fact manner. They never showed anger towards their son; they said family members make mistakes all the time.

They asked her so many questions—many she didn’t answer. She was angrier than ever; it was too much anger for such a young soul.

Layla’s grandparents were fond of her. They felt so bad, and they were always gentle with her. She was a cold, angry child. Her eyes—ones she shared with her grandmother—didn’t have any of the older woman’s warmth. They were carefully vacant.

Layla never played when she visited. Instead, she only watched the other kids. She loved going. Truly. But only she knew what happened when she got back home. Cruel words

and hits awaited her, and she couldn't bring herself to enjoy anything when she knew it was temporary. The hits were always there, never too hard to leave bruises, so that it wouldn't be noticeable, but they were there.

She started taking her newborn sister with her. It was up to her to make sure her sister was showered with the love she couldn't bring herself to accept. They were all very affectionate, but never to her. It was hard to allow it; too dangerous.

She couldn't afford to get used to gentle touches.

It's best if I don't know what they feel like, she thought.

When Samira turned ten, her Arabic was already better than Layla's because she had so many people to talk to.

It was Eid again, and everyone was in the kitchen helping out. The smell of her grandmother's famous maskhan filled the place. Fairuz's unmistakable voice was loud, but everyone singing to her songs was louder.

"Layla, come here!"

She followed her grandfather out and sat in front of him; there was a wrapped book on the table. He pointed at it, and she reminded him that he had already given her eidie.

"Just open it," he said.

It was a book of his favorite Arabic poetry. He had bound and annotated it himself.

Layla stared at the book. His hands were shaking due to his age, hers were shaking for another reason. He knew she liked to read; she'd mentioned once that she never read poetry.

"You'll change your mind once you read poetry by Mahmoud Darwish," he had told her.

Now, she stared at him; she felt mad. Tenderness often felt like a cruel mocking to her; the safest reaction was always anger.

"Why?"

"Can I hug you?" he asked.

Samira was hovering outside, watching the exchange.

“No,” the girl replied too quickly. She could feel the sting of tears under his gaze. She chose to look down at the book instead.

I will not cry, she thought.

“Oh Baba, you are so cruel to yourself. How old are you? Sixteen? And yet, you look like you’ve lived twice as long. It’s always been that way, hasn’t it? So much anger here.” He pointed at her heart. “You shouldn’t have to carry so much alone. It’s been ten years of me waiting for you to trust me.” Her panic was increasing. This was too vulnerable; she didn’t want his pity. “Maybe this is my fault. Maybe I should have pushed for more answers.”

They weren’t too involved with her. She never let them. In all her visits, she only talked to her grandparents, and they were never going to get answers from her father.

Samira was looking at her, eyes pleading for her to speak.

That was the last time Layla went. After that, she drove her little sister and watched from afar.

Layla to the audience: Now, just a flashback from fourteen-year-old me.

“Mama, can I go see Jedo again soon?”

Layla truly thought time had stopped. For a second, she couldn’t draw her breath. There was only the sound of her sister calling her mama.

She had turned to look at her, so small, eyes so wide when she looked up.

“Mama?” she said again.

“No!” she snapped. It was harsher than intended, and she instantly regretted it. “I’m not mama. I’m your sister.” She shook. Samira’s lips wobbled. She never treated her with anything other than tenderness.

The rational part of her brain understood why Samira would call her mom. It was Layla who made her food. It was Layla

who bathed her. Layla took care of her when she was sick. Layla helped her with schoolwork, but there was no room for rationality when she could feel her panic rising, choking her.

“Please go to the bedroom, Samira,” she said, panting. “I didn’t mean to.”

Samira nods; she ran to the room and closes the door.

Layla slid down the floor of the miserable colorless living room. She tried to catch her breath; she tried to find an anchor, but she had nothing. Her thoughts spiral. She wanted to leave this house as soon as she turned eighteen, but what happens to her sister? What would happen when her mama started seeing Samira as a woman who was nothing more than an extension and not a human being? What would happen when she punished her for existing?

She couldn’t leave; she couldn’t stay.

She passed out on the floor for a couple of hours that night. When she woke up, the house was still empty. She ran to the room, a little dizzy, but found Samira sleeping in her bed.

Layla to the audience: Now, nineteen-year-old me.

Layla stayed.

A couple of weeks before Layla turned twenty, Samira came to her and said, “I’m going to ask you for something and I don’t want you to say no.”

Layla wasn’t in the habit of refusing anything her sister wanted, so she nodded.

“I need you to leave, Layla.”

“What?”

“I need you to go, okay? I need you to go and live.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Did mom say something to you?”

“No. I—”

“I swear that woman—”

“Listen to me!” she yelled. “You can’t stay here because of me! You’re so sad. You don’t laugh anymore. I can’t remember the last time I saw you smile. I love you more than I love anyone in the world, but I’ve been losing so many pieces of you and I need you to go before I lose my sister,” she cried. “Please. I miss you.”

“I’m right here,” she whispered, tugging Samira closer to her on the bed. Her heart felt too heavy; she didn’t know what to do, how to leave her sister there.

“You’re not. Not really. I know how to avoid mama’s anger now. Her anger is directed at you because she thinks you’re too defiant. I can manage. I learned all your tricks, and mama is getting older. You stayed for almost two years, but that’s enough. You can leave and know that I won’t be alone. And it’s not like we won’t be sisters anymore. It’s only a couple of years before I can move with you. Until then, you’ll build a better life for both of our sakes, right?”

Layla to the audience: Okay, last jump to my twenty-year-old self.

Layla wished to leave in peace, but she should have known better. There was rarely a moment of it in that house. She was supposed to disappear quietly and Samira would pretend she knew nothing of where and when she left.

Getting slapped was not really a rare occurrence, but she had tried avoiding it more than usual recently. She did not want her sister to wake up to the sound of her crying in the bathroom again. Layla tried to continue with avoidance, but Sharon was easy to rile up. It hardly took anything for her to feel rage at her daughter.

She’d turned twenty. She never expected to stay for this long. It was causing her soul to rot, but she tried looking at silver lining; working a part-time job plus working on commission had helped her save a lot of money for her departure. One of the downsides was that it gave her parents something to hold over her. Something to bully her over. Layla never went to college like their beloved son did. She was their

failure. Their biggest disappointment and they never bothered to ask if she had other plans, which she did.

Layla could barely remember what the fight was about. She blocked so much of it out, but she always remembered how it felt to be humiliated when someone raised their hand to her. She didn't fight. She was leaving. Let her mother slap and scratch over and over again, because if she fought back, the problem would double in size.

She was so tired, she just wanted to leave.

The door opened, Layla was on the couch with her mother's hands grabbing her hair. Samira ran to get her mother off her sister. She was already crying. Her older brother decided to help with a frown on his face.

Sharon hitting her used to be easier for the whole family when Layla was younger. It was under the illusion of discipline. After that, it was obvious Sharon wasn't a good mother to her. Her father and her brother let it happen, and sometimes, even though their guilt meant absolutely nothing to her, she could see it.

They both tried to make excuses to make themselves feel better about being cowards. They told her it was her fault for talking back. To them, the act of fighting back or hating your abuser was a bigger crime than abusing someone.

"I am done!" Layla snapped. She looked at her father in the eye. She saw a flash of fear before he shook his head with disapproval. He could see that she'd had enough.

"We'll talk later," he said. He spoke calmly, just in case she lost her temper. It would give him a pass to call her too emotional, to say that she couldn't think rationally like him.

She ran upstairs and Samira followed; they didn't bother to look back. This was where they 'contained' her mother's anger. This is where they acted like they were going to protect Layla.

They never had. She went to them hundreds of times to try to fix things, to try to get them to understand. They always said things like 'she's still your mom' or 'what do you want us

to do? We can't change your mom' or 'You just need to be calmer when you talk to her'.

She heard yelling from downstairs. Her father grumbled a few words in Arabic that no one other than Layla and Samira could understand.

She remembered him being angry at them when he thought that none his children spoke Arabic, but he left out that he was absent for most of their childhood. His job used to take a lot of time and he traveled a lot.

Layla had taught herself just to surprise him when she was younger, but he never really paid attention to her.

Her bags were packed and hidden. She sat with Samira on the bed; she forced herself to remain calm. She didn't want her little sister to worry. Layla put on a brave mask and waited. She waited until Samira fell asleep, until she heard no voices coming from downstairs.

Layla stared at her sister, then at her own hands. There was a burn on her hand from when she taught Samira how to cook. Her hoodie was too worn because it was Samira's favorite one to steal. Every memory flooded her mind. She didn't want to leave her sister in that house.

She got up to place a kiss on Samira's forehead and then she head to the window to sneak out. Her bags were hidden outside. The only thing she had on her was her plane ticket to Los Angeles and her favorite pencil to sketch with.

Layla snuck out and waited for her Uber. She arrived hours early to the airport and then she could only wait. She boarded and then more waiting till the plane landed. It took hours, but they felt like seconds in her head. The chaos of the day was already so far away.

This is so odd, she thought.

She had waited for years to leave, to finally be on her own, and she expected to feel...more? The only things circling her head were questions.

Is it really over? What is it going to be like? When am I going to see my sister again? What if she needs me next to

her? Please, just let it be over.

chapter 1

the lonely artist



Layla

one year later

L

ayla,” a familiar voice called out gently.

It was still strange hearing her name spoken with anything but anger or weariness.

She had been on her own for a year now. Her skin was covered with little tattoos, mostly on her hips and back, tattoos that she tatted herself because she always wanted to learn. Her hair was no longer black, instead a dark red. She had always wanted to dye it that color but was never allowed, just like she was never allowed to have tattoos before.

Mateo came into view and gave her a quick hug, careful not to linger. His skin was a few shades darker than Layla’s, his black curls drew her attention and she reached out to mess them; he let her. It happened to be one of her favorite parts about him because it reminded her of Samira’s hair.

A couple of years ago, Layla had started posting her art online. She never had doubts about her talents. It was the only thing she loved and spent time on. Once she started posting, it got her a lot of attention. When she started, she did all kinds of arts. Her social media presence was a mess. She did book covers, logos, commissions, but her main passion was animation design.

Mateo was one of the first commissions she ever got. He wanted her to make a logo for his website and after she did, he recommended her to many other athletes. After that, she got to design logos for hockey players, basketball players and even models since he had done a couple of modeling gigs.

They became friends after that; he was her first friend, and she was his closest. They'd met for the first time in her studio apartment when he came to pick up a painting that he had commissioned; he'd asked if he could take a look at her other work and she'd said yes. Mateo looked around where he found the place to be very colorful. He found canvases, brushes, and colors everywhere. He found a camera and camera equipment.

"How many hobbies do you have?" he asked in a very curious way, his eyes wide.

"A lot," she told him. He started fidgeting, still looking around.

"Does it keep your mind busy? Does it take a good amount of time?"

She nodded.

She showed him the tattoos she'd done on herself and he asked her to tattoo him. He didn't seem to care that she wasn't really a tattoo artist.

It was a long session, and they ended up talking for hours about so many things. The reason she accepted was because she could use the money, but also because she craved the company so badly. She didn't warm up to people easily, but something about him had tugged on her to try. She was never one to ignore her intuition.

"Does art interest you? Because I could help you learn if you want."

"I need new habits. Healthier ones," he confessed. Layla had always thought confessing things to a stranger was a bit easier than to a loved one.

He stared at her for a long moment. She got the feeling that he was looking for any signs of judgment or maybe positive

advice, but Layla didn't have those, so she just stared back at him with a blank expression until he relaxed.

After that, they met all the time at his place. She taught him everything she knew about art. Later, she learned more about his self-destructive habits. His fears became hers, her art became his. His family became hers, her dry humor became his. It was the kind of friendship she always dreamed of having.

Mateo's sister, Cecilia, followed him. The diner was actually supposed to be *their spot*—just the girls—but Mateo had said that since he introduced them, he should be the allowed to be here.

Celia had obviously come from one of her interviews. She was one of the best talk show hosts in the US. People from all over the world watched her show, and A-list celebrities reached out to her all the time for a chance to be on the show to 'tell their side of the story'.

The thing about Celia's show was that she refused to have an audience unless she hosted multiple people. When it was one on one, it was personal, vulnerable, human, and cozy. Just the way she liked.

They took their seats around the table. The waiter knew Mateo's order, so he brought it a couple of minutes after he sat—he was a big basketball fan, and he adored Mateo.

"You guys should come see me play at the first game of the season," Mateo said. It was the off-season, but he liked to have an early schedule of when the girls planned on attending. He also forced them to go to the gym with him when he was bored. Layla questioned her love for him every second during those days.

"No," Celia replied.

"You should be nicer to me; I'm your older brother."

"I would rather die than be caught cheering for an athlete," she said, shuddering in disgust, even though they all knew she'd be the first one there supporting him.

The siblings bickered for a minute; they switched from Spanish to English, but eventually Celia ignored Mateo so she

could eat her food.

“So, I have a favor to ask,” Mateo said.

“What’s up?” Layla asked.

“One of my teammates wants to commission you—” Layla tried to speak, but Mateo covered her mouth with his hand. “I know you have a lot of commissions to work on, but I promise he’s not picky and he’ll be the best client ever! You’ll love him. I told him to meet you here tomorrow. He wants to see some of your work in real life. Like me, remember?”

Layla hit Mateo with a spoon and he winced. “What is wrong with you?”

“Look, I’m sorry! I couldn’t say no to him; he has a really affective sad puppy look, okay?”

Celia giggled.

“You’re so annoying,” she told him. He looked thoughtful for a second.

“I bet if I had his puppy eyes, no one would ever call me annoying.”

Layla had just finished a commission today with a difficult client. She was looking forward to a little ‘me-time’, but she knew Mateo would make it up to her. Maybe with another vintage Versace dress. She was grateful he always made sure anyone he sent her way treated her with respect. He almost always sent her the easiest clients.

They spent a little over an hour talking before Mateo had to leave for the gym. He gave her the guy’s number and the name on his phone caught her eyes.

Jess (pretty puppy eyes)

She chuckled. Mateo could be exaggerating; they couldn’t be that pretty.

I guess I’ll have to wait and see for myself, she thought.

chapter 2

control



Jess

Jess was going through what he liked to call ‘a care burnout’.

This, as a concept in his head, made sense. A care burnout was when he spent a lot of time taking care of other people only to realize that not only did no one do the same for him, but that even if they tried, he wouldn’t let them.

He remembered the moment of realization he had when he was sixteen, months after what happened at school. His parents had gotten the flu at the same time. He had spent the whole day taking care of them; he made them soup, checked their temperature, tucked them in and got them medicine. It was the first time in months where they hadn’t looked at him like something horrible had happened.

They had looked at him like he was their beautiful boy again.

It was like he could breathe again. He realized how much power people gave to those who took care of them and he wanted that, so he took it.

He didn’t like to think about the walls that he had accidentally built over the years because of it. He didn’t like to think about how much anxiety it gave him to accept help, to let someone else see him in a position of vulnerability.

He had some of his team members over at his apartment the day before. Some of them were traveling, so it was quieter and more relaxed with it being the off-season. Kione, the team captain who happened to be his best friend, spent the night analyzing other teams because it always helped ease everyone’s

nerves to know competition well, to voice out loud their thoughts and fears about the next season.

Kione was dressed casually in black—the only color on him was the pink durag he was wearing—his posture was rigid and Jess had a feeling there was a lot going through his mind. He'd known him since they were kids; he seemed more reserved than usual.

It was Kione's dad, a former basketball legend, who taught them how to play. Kione was bigger and taller than Jess, which used to make Jess envious. So envious, he would spend the whole day being the most annoying opponent in the world, and he wouldn't stop until Kione's deep brown skin was shining with sweat and he was out of breath and calling for a break.

“You look distracted. Let me handle everything tonight,” Jess signed. Kione looked so relieved. When he opened his mouth, Jess knew he was going to lie, so he settled for glaring at his best friend, who nodded. Jess left him in the kitchen and went to talk to the rest of the team.

The whole team had learned sign language when Jess joined. He never expected them to. When they surprised him, his parents cried like babies. He still felt emotional thinking about it.

At the end of the gathering, when everyone left, he found it so hard to go to bed, knowing it was empty. He was feeling loneliness in bigger waves these days. He wished he had someone who could see right through him and sometimes, he hated himself a little for it. It felt like a weakness.

Jess to the audience: *sheepishly* My dating history isn't the best.

Dating when you're getting a lot of media attention in general is not easy. When he made the team, he avoided the attention as much as he could. People had taken to calling him a charity case, saying he got in with daddy's money, which isn't true at all.

Jess to the audience: Everyone knows my mom is the rich one.

He had to work a lot to prove them wrong, which was fine by him. But they still came up with insane rumors that affected whoever he was dating at the time. Rumors about his sex life, rumors about him being an alcoholic.

Unfortunately, almost all of his former love interests followed online rumors too closely. Whenever he tried to defend himself, they would simply turn their back on him and close their phone. It would end the conversation because, in doing so, they'd take his way of communication.

He remembered how he didn't really understand it the first time it happened, that the girl had meant to shut him up. It was, and still is, a humiliation that he had to deal with a lot.

He learned how to read body language pretty well. He could always tell how someone was reacting to him. He could almost always tell when someone was going to turn their back on him. When they decide to cut off eye contact so that they didn't have to look at him anymore, when they realized that they would always have more power in the conversation.

It's safe to say he hasn't dated in a while.

He decided to end the pity party because he had reached Amir's diner. As soon as he walked in, he spotted a head of red hair tucked in the corner. It was empty, so it was hard to miss her.

He typed his order on his phone to show it to the waiter, then made his way to the booth. When he sat down, she looked startled at first, then she relaxed.

"I'm Layla," she said.

He already knew this. Jess assumed she knew his name, so he gave a small nod. He took a moment to look at her. Mateo talked about Layla a lot since she was basically family to him.

Layla wasn't really involved in sports, so he knew for a fact her knowledge about the Lakers was limited. Mateo had mentioned she stopped going online unless it was to post her work. The media had a label for her. She was their "mean girl". There were many elements that fed the media's narrative about her. Matteo, being the gossip king, had told us all about using a presentation on presentation night. He went into a lot of details

about how anyone who disliked his best friend disliked her because of sexism.

At the same time, it was the same people who hated on her online that ate hungrily at any crumbs they got from her. They analyzed every piece she worked on; they hung onto every word out of her mouth.

A couple of months ago, Layla had released an animated short film that she designed, following the story of queer people who lived in countries where being LGBTQ was forbidden by law.

It was right after some popular director and an animation supervisor had announced that they had plans to work with her, then they made statements calling her mean, demanding, and full of herself, and went as far as to say she had ruined the project.

People believed them. Despite being called terrible names online for months, Layla did not comment. Then she released a short film on YouTube. She had worked on almost everything on her own. The voice actors were herself, some of Jess's teammates, Matteo's family and friends. Celia's team somehow got a famous K-pop idol to write two songs just for the film.

The film was sad, beautiful, and emotional. It almost reached a billion views and earned her a shit-ton of money, along with so many new opportunities.

At the end it said: *Thank you to everyone who made this happen and helped me. I hope this proves to certain people that projects about queer stories are worth telling and that we need to remain respectful when we're telling these stories.*

It was leaked then, that the script that was given to her a while ago was very offensive, which was why she refused to work on it, and the director told her she was never going to be successful.

People talked about it often. She has many projects announced that she wants to release over the course of four years. That project was her first one as an animator and it put her on the map.

Her hair was tied up, a blush tainted her olive skin, along with red on her lips. Jess knew it was her favorite because he was one of her million followers and an admirer. She had brown eyes—he had a soft spot for big brown eyes—they were the kind that had the power to make a person’s heart melt. Her posture was tense and stiff; she was also frowning.

He realized he’d been staring at her for a while when she cleared her throat. She looks annoyed.

“I asked you a question.”

Jess to audience: Did she?

He took his phone to type down what he wanted to say, and he fumbled a little bit. He had no idea why he felt so nervous.

She had stood up to leave. He quickly wrote down that he didn’t mean to arrive late. He gently took her wrist and shook his head. She tensed at the contact; he pointed at her phone when it lit up with a text.

‘I didn’t mean to be late. My gym was a little crowded today. Don’t leave. I’ll make it quick.’

“I’m not leaving, I only just got here myself,” she said, and then she rolled her eyes. Her body lost some of the tension as soon as he let go of her hand. He noticed some scars on her hand that looked a lot like scratch marks.

Maybe she had a cat, he thought. But they look bigger than what a cat would cause.

She noticed him staring and put her hands on her lap. She looked uncomfortable.

“I just wanted to place my order. Do you prefer I text you or talk out loud?” she asked as the waiter brought his order with a pink milkshake for Layla.

‘I would prefer it if you spoke.’

“Mateo didn’t mention what kind of commission you wanted.”

He explained to her that his mom was one of her biggest fans. Jess liked her art; he always thought her concept ideas were

fascinating. Jess's mother had bought a number of her works and had them displayed all over the house.

'I want you to paint my parents together; maybe have them stargazing? I don't know, really. You could do whatever you want and she'll love it. It's for her birthday.'

"Do you have a picture of them together?" she asked.

He showed her one of his favorite pictures—one he took himself when they thought he was sleeping. He had been going downstairs to grab a cup of water and saw them dancing in the living room. No music on, but his father was humming out loud. They were both laughing.

"This is really them?" she asked. There was a sad look in her eyes, but it was gone with a blink of an eye.

He nodded, and she stared at the picture for a little longer.

"You took this?"

Again, he nodded.

'Her birthday is in three months,' he wrote in his notebook.

"What's it like having parents so obviously in love?" she asked, her eyes still on the screen.

'They're disgusting actually (affectionately) I've caught them making out in the most inappropriate places,' he writes, but he's unable to hold back his grin. Layla's eyes soften.

They don't talk a lot beyond the commission. She explained a couple of ideas she had and said she'd show him a sketch later; that he could change anything he didn't like.

The way Mateo talked about Layla was very different from what Jess had seen. Her body was tense, and she startled if there was any loud noise in the diner. He noted this because he, too, would startle at the noise. But they had different reasons for that reaction, he guessed.

He wondered what it would be like to not be considered a stranger by her, to be let into her circle.

Layla scrolled through her iPad. Jess stared at the sketch she had been working on before he arrived.

“What’s this?” he asked her.

“It’s just a scene from the book I’m reading.”

“What book?”

“*Carmilla*.”

Jess to the audience: Coincidentally, I had a special edition of Carmilla in my bag that day. I think a part of me took it as a sign.

Layla opened her mouth to say something—probably to say goodbye—but she was interrupted by the sound of her phone ringing. Not a second later, a text lit up Jess’s phone. Her face paled, and he knew she’d received the same news as him.

Mateo was in the hospital.

chapter 3

observations



Jess

Jess and Layla arrived at the hospital at the same time. There were paparazzi nearby, and she insisted on avoiding them. The media always had a huge obsession with the Garcia siblings. People constantly talked about them online. There was no doubt that paparazzi were going to be there. Still, there was a startling amount of them near the hospital. Jess looked at them with too much distaste.

They snuck inside without being noticed.

There were a good number of people in the waiting room. He stopped before anyone noticed, and Layla did the same thing. She looked around at every single person, assessing the same way he did.

They took in the scene. First, Celia and Mateo's mom biting on her nails, with members of their team and the coach sitting around the waiting room. His eyes landed on two people who he wasn't expecting. A pinch of worry curled in his chest at the thought of people he didn't know or trust around his loved ones.

Jess to the audience: I had to quickly analyze the situation.

First is Elio, the one and only famous fashion designer. Mateo and Elio weren't really friends, mainly because he didn't do friendships. He was known to be indifferent to pretty much everything. The media was constantly frustrated with his lack of social appearances. They latched on to his dating habits and, most importantly, his well-known rivalry with another designer.

The media constantly compared them to the point where neither of them was mentioned without the other.

Elio's dark black hair was messy, his blue eyes had a very cold look to them. He was sitting with Jess's friend, Onika.

'The universal sweetheart' as the media liked to call her. Onika was the most sought out super model in the world, the highest paid one as well. Very close to Mateo and she was the reason he modeled for a while; they did many shoots together. She wasn't smiling like she always does, instead she looked sick with worry.

It made the reason for Elio being there clear. There were always rumors about them online, but they had never been photographed together and she had never spoken about him. He was standing to her right. Not too close and not too far. They seemed to be unable to look at each other.

Jess could see his eyes flicker toward her with worry every once in a while. Suddenly, he didn't seem so indifferent anymore.

The other person was hiding in a corner, but they spotted her. She was wearing sunglasses and a cap that hid most of her features. He thought for a moment that someone snuck in to get some news, but Layla made her way to her.

"Is she okay?" the stranger asked. Layla stood in front of her, but she may as well have been invisible. The stranger was staring right through her, right at Celia, with so much fondness, like she desperately wanted to reach out and hold her hand through everything.

"I haven't spoken to anyone yet, but I can text you and update you later," Layla answered. The other woman nodded; she watched Celia before leaving, making a sneaky escape, keeping her face covered. It occurred to him that she might be hiding from the paparazzi as well.

Layla ran over to give the girls a hug. Jess headed over to his teammates.

It turned out Mateo had gotten into a fight. The details were vague, but he had a couple of broken ribs and a swollen eye. It was a good thing it was the off season because he'd have time to

recover without missing anything. Everyone relaxed after the doctor assured them he'd be fine.

A couple of hours later, most of them were gone. It was just Jess, Layla, and Mateo's mom, who went to drink some coffee. They had convinced Celia to go get some sleep in her apartment.

"Open your eyes, Matty. I know you're not asleep," Layla said.

Slowly he did, but he was tense. He looked like he'd been caught in a trap. "You should be gentle with me; I'm injured," he told her.

"And how did this happen?" she asked, coldly.

"It was just a fight."

Layla looked like she would have slapped him if she could.

"Don't insult us," Jess signed for the first time. Mateo looked at him like he forgot he was there.

"I feel so betrayed right now. You only met today and you're already teaming up on me," he said, so unbothered by both of them, so unaware that they were both running out of patience.

"Mat—"

"I told you it was just a fight," he said.

"You're saying you fought back then?" Jess asked him.

"Of course."

"How?" Layla raised an eyebrow. Mateo looked like he'd been cornered.

"What do you mean, *how*?"

"Your hands are fine, your knuckles are fine. It doesn't look like you fought back at all," Jess told him. Mateo didn't reply. He stared at his hands, realizing his mistake.

"What happened, Matty?" Layla asked. He watched her falter, her voice shaking a little. After watching her calm demeanor with almost everyone that day, there was a crack.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he said, with no trace of his usual charm.

“But—”

“Please, just let it go,” he pleaded.

Layla took a deep breath. Jess only noticed because he already had his eyes on her, that she did this thing with her hand, where she turned her wrist around and locked her finger in a grip. Matty seen it as well; it looked like an anxious sign that he recognized.

“I’ll talk about it, but when I’m ready, I promise,” he told her. She relaxed, but she still glared at him.

“Fine. I am staying with you for most of the recovery to take care of you.” He seemed eager to accept.

“I’m staying too,” Jess signed. He had already decided he was going to stay with his friend. Mateo’s apartment had three bedrooms, so Jess didn’t think there would be an issue.

“He’s saying he’ll stay as well,” Mateo told Layla, pointing at Jess.

“No.” Her eyes were on Jess. They were even colder than when she was looking at Mateo, but he had to admit they were very pretty.

Jess to the audience: I may have a soft spot for big brown eyes.

“I don’t want you there; you’re a stranger,” she said, angrily.

“He’s my friend.”

“It’s a bad idea.”

“I’m staying. There’s nothing you can do about it.”

“He’s staying. There’s nothing you can do.”

“Matty, I hate your friend.”

“What’s new? You hate a lot of things.”

Their minds were made up. Celia was too busy at the moment to be able to stay with him, and his mom was supposed to go to visit her sister in Mexico next week.

Jess and Layla would be staying in Mateo's apartment for the next four to six weeks.

Layla didn't like having to stay in an apartment with a stranger, but she had a feeling Mateo was hiding something and she wanted to be there for him, the same way he had been there for her, even when he had no idea what was upsetting her.

He had never needed her to tell him what was bothering her. He always offered his shoulder, and Layla could only do the same for him.

chapter 4

paintings and coffee



Layla

Later, in the hospital, Jess's agent informed him that people were talking about their friend group, which he was a little confused about. Almost everyone who was there the night before was photographed, including K-pop idol Nabi, who tried to hide her identity as she left, and Elio. It got people talking online because what could possibly bring all these people together if they weren't friends?

Two days later, they were in Mateo's apartment. It was a luxury apartment in a fancy building that had every amenity that you could think of. It could not have been clearer that a single man lived there. Mateo wasn't the biggest fan of accessories; the place was a bit bland, a little too white—white furniture, white walls, white marble kitchen counter.

Layla hated it. She was many things: opinionated, bitter, but most importantly, a minimalist hater.

Her cat, Salem, seemed to hate the space just as much, but that wasn't really out of the ordinary. Salem hated anyone other than her. The cat was very displeased at the change of scenery, but Layla couldn't just leave him alone in her apartment.

Layla also felt sort of lost outside her small apartment. She had spent months decorating it. She'd always wanted to decorate her space with a 'whimsigoth' aesthetic, yet at the same time she couldn't help but find comfort in the idea of having roommates.

She'd rented a small apartment and filled it with so many things to make up for the emptiness of human company.

She'd left. She was so grateful she left that house. It held nothing but anger and hate, but sometimes it felt like the universe was punishing her for it, making her more lonely on her own than when she was living with the very people who had crushed her soul to pieces.

Her first month in the city was just a huge moment of realization that she hadn't been living at all, that she was lying to herself every time she thought it could be worse.

Layla had lost the feeling of being alive. The loss of it was so gradual, it was barely noticeable. At first it was the big things like birthdays, gatherings, weddings and accomplishments. She had thought herself simply indifferent; it wasn't rare for people to be indifferent, but it affected small things. The only things she was allowed to enjoy, the smell of rain and a calm cloudy day, the feeling of pure bliss after she finished screaming out the lyrics to her favorite sad songs and the feeling of contempt when she listened to Samira's laugh.

She realized that years had passed since she registered any feelings at all. She was filled with thoughts and analysis; she knew the whys and hows of the feelings, but it never made its way from her brain to her heart.

The world had become so grey in her eyes. It used to be red most of time, and then when it faded, when she couldn't hold on to it anymore, there was an emptiness that she didn't know how to explain. Layla never liked it, but its absence was very unsettling.

The sound of furniture moving in Mateo's room jolted her thoughts. He spent most of the time in his room to avoid talking. Something was going on with him, and it sat heavily with both Jess and Layla. They could only wait for him to feel ready to talk or ask for help if he needed it.

Layla and Jess were essentially strangers. She didn't know what to say to him, but she thought he felt familiar sometimes; perhaps it was because he was friends with her friends. They didn't really talk to each other, but she knew he itched to break the barrier so that it was not awkward.

□

Jess

On the second day, Jess sat in the kitchen and watched her for a little bit while she painted in the living room. There was a good amount of space between them, but she still looked annoyed. When she started huffing, Jess decided to cease fire and head to his room.

On the third day, he stayed for a little longer. She glared at him for a few seconds, and it sent a strange thrill down his spine. He ran away before she saw the huge smirk on his face.

She was just so easy to rile up. He didn't usually get that kind of reaction from people.

On the fourth day, she took a bite out of the food he made for Mateo. He waited for an expression, but her face remained carefully blank.

The itch was growing more intense; he wanted a reaction out of her because *what the fuck?*

Jess to audience: I am an amazing cook! If she has something to say about my cooking, then she needs to say it.

Out of spite, when she started to paint again, he stared at her for twenty minutes, just to see an expression other than that annoyingly blank stare. He did not like it. He might even prefer the glare.

She was smart, though; she didn't glare. Instead, there was a spark of amusement in her eyes while she ignored him.

On the fifth day, she didn't look at him like she wanted to kill him at all.

On the sixth day, there was a disturbance in what he thought to be a forming routine. Layla was on the floor with colors all around her and a painting on her lap. She looked so disoriented; she had multiple coffee mugs around her and a frown on her face.

When she reached to take another cup, he beat her to it.

“That's mine,” she informed him.

“Can we share? I don’t want to make another batch,” he wrote down and handed it to her.

“Fine,” came her very short, distracted reply.

He took the huge cup of coffee in his hand—there was a lip stain on it—without a second thought. He placed his lips right above it, and he drank.

Layla wasn’t sketching anymore. She was looking at the shades of colors that she had mixed.

She was painting an iris; they were hazel, and Jess could vaguely recognize them.

“Are those Matty’s?” He asked her. He was aware that he might be bothering her, but she looked so peaceful when she painted that it was hard to look away.

“Yes. I’ve always wanted eyes like his. Mine are—”

“Pretty. You’re pretty.” He scratched the back of his head. “Your eyes, I mean. Pretty like Claude Monet lilies, you know?”

Jess didn’t know Claude was one of her favorite artists. He didn’t know that she thought his lilies were so soft and pretty.

Layla’s heart gave a violent thud; it felt like a warning.

“I can help clean those brushes,” he wrote, and, before she could protest, he took them. He couldn’t think of another way to get her to stop painting, but she had bags under her eyes, and he couldn’t let her stay like that. He pointed at the coffee and then nodded towards the sink. She grabbed the coffee and went to follow, cup in one hand, notebook and pen in the other.

Layla didn’t speak sign language, but it didn’t escape his notice that she bought so many notebooks and put them at every corner in the apartment while also carrying one with her whenever he was around.

“I made a rule for us,” he wrote. She was cleaning the brushes with water and he was drying them.

“Why do we need rules?” she asked, pushing the coffee mug towards him.

“We don’t. But don’t you think it’s better we know a little more about each other? Just so that we don’t step on each other’s toes while we’re here?”

“That makes sense.” She nodded after reading. “My rule is: don’t bother me.”

He grinned. “That’s not how it works, sweetheart.”

She took the pen and scratched out the word ‘sweetheart’.

“Don’t use pet names on me,” she scolded.

“The rule is, we each ask one question a day, and we have to answer honestly.”

“How does that keep you from bothering me?”

“It does. For example, if I ask you what allergies you have, I can avoid killing you.”

He couldn’t help but notice that Layla was very patient while he wrote down his replies. He was worried that he took too much time to write down a single reply, but she never made him feel rushed, and he appreciated that more than he could express. Sometimes, when Mateo and Jess signed, she watched carefully. It made him a little nervous, but he didn’t hate the attention.

“I would never let you be the cause of my death,” she said.

“Wow, I’m already learning so much about you.”

“Shut up, love,” she said, mockingly using a pet name on him.

He liked it.

“And you’re already giving me a pet name; I feel closer to you.”

He wished they were close enough for him to be able to ask if she was okay and have her answer honestly. She huffed and took the coffee.

They heard Mateo’s footsteps, but he didn’t come out. She stared daggers at his closed door.

On the seventh day, Layla looked at him nine times, but she didn’t glare, not once.

chapter 5

haunted



Layla

Layla never had to go grocery shopping that many times in her whole life. With not one but two athletes in the apartment—which was already lacking much in kitchen supplies—she made a couple of trips, and so did Jess.

She had a couple of things she need for a new recipe—she got an insane craving for sugar when it was her time of the month, so she needed the supplies.

“Mommy, will you help me?” a little girl’s voice said. The girl looked about six years old and she was jumping up and down.

She had this annoying thing, where she felt frozen whenever she saw a mother and daughter in public. The mother sighed fondly. She had been watching the girl organize everything in their cart and when the mom tried to help, the girl insisted that she did not need any help.

“Just this once, mommy.” The girl giggled because she couldn’t reach up. Her mother helped.

She felt nauseous. She was taken back to memories she didn’t want to remember; she tried to bottle it down, to put it way back in her head and to close the drawer, but it was too late.



Fourteen-year-old Layla.

Even though she refused to admit this out loud, Layla was sick. She did not have room for sickness. She couldn’t miss a

day of school because her mama wouldn't be pleased if she was behind. She also needed to help her sister with her homework and she needed to prepare her lunch box.

Layla was dizzy, nauseous, and her throat was sore. She made some lemon and honey because she remembered her grandmother saying it was good for a sore throat.

Layla was taking too long to prepare things, her moves were too slow. She looked at the time and found that she could spare a few minutes to rest her head. A few minutes were all she needed. Her body was heating, and she was sweating. She grabbed the blanket; it gave the illusion of arms around her.

A few minutes later, she heard her mama's footsteps; she woke up sometimes in the middle of the night and Layla could recognize the sound of her footsteps, mainly because it raised the alarms in her brain.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I was making Samira's lunchbox."

"You mean you were just resting on the couch," she corrected, looking annoyed.

"I was feeling a little nauseous, so I just wanted to sit down for a minute, okay?"

"Watch your tone," she snapped.

Her hand was close to Layla's head; she wanted to ask her to check her forehead.

Layla saw parents check their children's temperature in movies like that all the time. She wanted to ask, but Sharon was already turning her back on her.

"Mama?" She stiffened. Layla didn't call her often. "Mama, will you help me? Just this once? I'm not feeling well," she said, lips trembling. She didn't know what she was asking for. When she stood, the blanket fell, and she stared at it, unable to pick it up.

"Please, mommy." Please mama, just for a few minutes.

"You smell bad, Layla. You smell like sweat. Make your sister's food and go take a shower."



When Layla returned to the apartment, she took out her art supplies and got to work. She ached for a distraction.

The sound of the door opening was like a granted wish. Jess found her on the floor. She looked up and then down again; he was very hard to ignore, no matter how she pretended otherwise.

She didn't really know how to interact with him. She had seen him play a couple of times, and those times he played a little roughly. Mateo told her sometimes people said nasty things to him, so it made him mad. She was a little wary of him at first, but it dissolved right away.

Whenever she was in the same room as him, he made gentle eye contact and spoke in a soft-spoken manner with extreme politeness and a small smile on his face.

Layla to the audience: Looking back at it now, I really should have known he'd be my weakness one day.

He observed and observed and observed.

Layla didn't like feeling like she was on display but, she could admit, she did not try to hide from him.

For some reason, she went back to learning sign language. She had already learned a good amount while Celia and Matty were learning it a couple of months ago, due to her spending a lot of time with them. She found herself watching the guys sign all the time to make sure she got them right.

Jess helped her with her brushes, and he drank coffee with her. When he said they should ask each other questions, she didn't put up much of a fight.

Later that night, when she couldn't sleep, she heard the door next to hers opening, then closing. She heard it every night and every time she opened the door to peek; she found him.

The hallway that led to the rooms was spacious, and she had a direct view to the kitchen. She always found Jess there; she took notice of the sweat on his chest, the way he breathed heavily, but she wasn't brave enough to ask what troubled him.

"Do you want some lavender tea? It's good for the nerves," she told him, trying to take advantage of her question. It was he

who proposed they asked each other questions in the first place.

Jess stared at her for a while before nodding, then he watched every step while she made the tea for both of them.

“Enjoy watching me yesterday?” he wrote down.

“I was n—”

“And the day before that, and the day before that,” he continued, smiling. It didn’t reach his eyes.

“I can say the same thing about you,” she told him.

“Yes, you can,” he wrote, nodding with a very matter-of-fact expression on his face.

Layla felt a small flutter in her stomach at the response. She didn’t like it at all.

chapter 6

shouldn't



Jess

Layla suddenly started cleaning the kitchen; he could quite literally see wheels turning in her head. She gave him her back in order to get to the sink and wash the cups, even though there was a dishwasher.

His hand shot up and before he could process the movement, it grabbed Layla's ponytail. Her hair wasn't so long, but it was enough to wrap once around his fist.

Oh no. Why did I just do that? he thought.

Jess to the audience: It looked soft. That's why I did it, I think.

"Did you just pull her hair?" Mateo asked, suddenly appearing. His voice was sleepy, and he stared at them like they'd grown two heads.

Layla's cat meowed angrily. Jess thought he really should get that thing to like him—it kept staring with murder in its eyes.

He didn't let go. Layla looked at him; her neck and cheeks were flushed. That was the first time he saw her blush, and he felt one rising on his own cheeks to match hers.

"It was an accident." He let go to sign.

"An accident? Did your fist just magically wrap around her hair?" he asked, his lips tilting up.

Jess hated him so much at that moment. Usually Mateo wouldn't wake up even if a truck fell on him, but today he chose

to be a light sleeper?

“It was instinct,” he signed.

Jess to the audience: Oh no, that came out wrong.

He shook his head at Mateo, begging him not to say the word out loud.

“Instinct?” He ran his tongue over his teeth. “Kinky.”

Layla ran her hand through her hair with a frown. “Did you need anything?” she asked. “I didn’t mean to turn my back on you.”

There was a noise in his head and he realized that it was his own heartbeat. He knew she didn’t mean to; it hadn’t crossed his mind, actually.

“I was just going to say you can go work your art and I’ll cleanup,” he signed and Mateo repeated out loud.

Suddenly, Layla’s demeanor shifted. She narrowed her eyes at their friend. “Is that your jogging track suit?”

Layla was holding a knife in her hand—she was just on her way to put the knife in the dishwasher. Mateo looked down with a guilty look in his eyes.

“Were you going to sneak out to jog?” Jess asked, feeling like a parent scolding his very stupid, very annoying child.

“I am going to kill you! The doctor said no doing any activities that require pushing, pulling, or stretching, including crunches and pull-ups, or engaging in high-impact activities, such as running and other things I can’t remember,” she recited, pointing the knife at him the way you would point your finger at someone.

He wasn’t very proud of himself over what happened for the next few moments, especially because it was not the time for such things, but the sight of Layla scolding while holding a knife did something to him. He felt his body heat a little bit—he scrambled to get his head to focus on the conversation, and he adjusted his pants discreetly.

“I’m fine! It’s just a jog and I feel better,” Matty said.

“Matty, I love you, but you have this constant urge to torture yourself and you always lean into it. I’m not just staying here for six weeks to coddle you. I’m staying here because I’m scared for you and you can’t even look me in the eye and tell me I’m wrong for it.”

For a moment, it looked like he was going to ignore both of them and go for it, but he seen Layla making that gesture again—the one she made when they were at the hospital and he seemed like he didn’t want to bother her, so he sighed and went back to his room.

Sometimes, Jess got the feeling Mateo loved and hated how Layla knew him so well. *Too well.*

“Do you want us to leave?” Jess asked him.

“No! I Googled it. A broken rib takes four to six weeks to heal, and you guys said you would stay until it healed,” he said while also signing very quickly.

“I was just making sure.”

“I didn’t expect both of you to stay but...” he took a deep breath. “I just don’t want to be alone right now.”

“You know I love that about you—that you never hesitate to ask your friends for help, but I also hate the fact that you won’t tell us why you need help.”

“I just don’t want to be alone,” he repeated.

Celia called him more than once a day when she couldn’t visit him. Her list of guests got bigger each day, and it seemed like everyone wanted a chance to go on her show. Celia had this thing where she took her guests on dates. It was different for each guest, but the purpose of it was also to help small business owners get more exposure through the show, while making the guests more comfortable to talk about whatever it was that they wanted to talk about. At that moment, she was choosing a list of places for the new season, which meant she was a bit more busy than usual.

Eventually, because none of them could sleep and none of them wanted to be alone, they decided to watch the movie *10 Things I Hate About You*. It was a horrible movie in their

opinions, but they opted for a hate-watch because it's always more fun.

Halfway through, Jess decided he wanted to bother Layla again. "She's starting to accept him, just like Layla is accepting me," he signed. Mateo repeated the words out loud.

"I am not. I'm living with you for a couple of weeks, so I will tolerate you."

He grabbed a paper and wrote very big. "I THINK SHE'S FALLING IN LOVE WITH ME."

Matteo wrote an even bigger "YOU WISH!" and circled it while stuffing his mouth with popcorn.

Layla nodded. "I find him very annoying," she said to their friend, "but I will admit, you have miskeen eyes so I can understand why some people tolerate you."

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"None of your business."

"I can just Google it, you know."

"Be my guest."

"Matty, do you know how to spell miskeen?"

"No idea."

Matty to the audience: I was lying for fun. I knew how to spell it.

"I think you're starting to like me."

She looked at the paper and shook her head. "I am not."

For some reason, it sounds like a challenge. He met her eyes and found an amused yet determined look that said 'I refuse to like you'.

He shrugged, smiling at her; he was very likeable, and he was going to prove it to her.

She ignored him and then facetimed Celia. She placed the phone next to her so that Celia could watch the movie as well.

They ended up falling asleep on the couch that night, all four of them.

□

“My beautiful brave boy,” she whispered, “why didn’t you hide like all the other kids?”

What if, what if, what if?

I’m awake, mom, he wanted to say.

I’m fine, I’m not broken, he wanted to shout.

He wanted to open his mouth, to speak, but he couldn’t. He was stuck.

Everything hurt. He was stuck. He didn’t want to be there anymore.

□

With a gasp, he woke up, clutching his throat. He felt so lost, so confused at where he was; this was the third night of the same dream.

The past couple of days had been terrible. The lack of sleep was messing with his head—this happened from time to time, days where he could barely get three hours of sleep and his dreams turned into nightmares.

He looked at the time. 3:33 a.m. He got up, his chest warmed with the certainty of knowing someone was going to be outside, expecting him.

Sometimes he woke up and found her there; sometimes he woke up and waited for her. The day before, she was painting his parents and she let him sit next to her and watch.

It was a very relaxing experience.

He found her in the kitchen. Her head was looking inside the fridge; there was a steaming cup of lavender tea that sat waiting for him on the counter.

Layla didn’t have to turn around to know that he was there.

“I was thinking,” she said. He took notice of his yogurt in her hand.

“Stealing my yogurt is not wise. I spit in that.” She rolled her eyes before taking a spoonful and moaning in an attempt to provoke him. He narrowed his eyes at her.

“I’ll tell you what I was thinking.” She stuffed the spoon in his mouth this time. “See how generous I am?”

“It’s literally my yogurt.”

“Anyway, I have always wanted to go to the museum of modern arts in New York. I don’t know why I keep putting it off.” This was a rare moment in which Layla shared something on her mind. He liked when she did that, but sometimes after she said it, she would change the topic really quickly and the moment would slip. He would be left there aching for it and feeling like he had let something go when he should have run after it.

“I’ll take you,” he wrote. She rolled her eyes, and she had a look that said ‘I’m serious’. So he wrote, “My parents are in New York and I go whenever I can. Come with me; let me take you.”

He really needed to see his parents. They were closer than most families; he was their only child, and they were the coolest parents in the world. He’d never met anyone who didn’t adore them.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Will you think about it?” he wrote. He really wanted to take her to the museum. He had never seen Layla smile before, and he wondered if she would smile there. He realized how much he wanted to see that smile, to earn it.

Jess to the audience: I might be in trouble.

“I’ll think about it.”

Layla left, but Salem stayed on the counter. This was a good chance for him. He ran to his room and picked out one of the treats that he’d bought—he bought thirty brands to test them out and get the satanic cat to like him. Jess didn’t want to give him the exact one Layla gave him. He wanted Salem to be able to point him out as the human who gave him the other kind of treat.

He opened the treats and put one in front of Salem. Satan blinked at him. No reaction.

“Do you know sign language? You really need to start liking me, because if you start to like me, then your mom will follow your lead. I’m getting the feeling you’re the boss here. Am I right?” Jess chuckled. The cat said nothing.

“Please, Satan, stop being so mean to me.”

The cat stole the treat and went to hide.

Jess to the audience: It’s fine. I’ll get there eventually. He can’t resist my charms.

chapter 7

it's okay



Layla

Samira was showing Layla the new clothes she got from a modest clothing brand. It was only a matter of time before her sister wore the hijab. She already loved it so much.

“I like how colorful they are,” Layla told her.

Samira had turned sixteen recently, and while Layla didn't get the chance to see her the day of her birthday, they spent hours video chatting the next day and she showed her all the gifts she got.

“Are they treating you well?” Layla asked her.

“Our brother is angrier, but other than that, he's the same. I told you about how Baba decided he didn't want to lose another daughter, so he promised he's going to be better at this whole dad thing. I didn't think he was serious, but he's been great and he's really trying, you know?”

She did not know. She never had a parent who wanted to do better for her. She had only allowed herself to think of worst-case scenarios when she left. Layla had cried for hours when Samira told her everything was okay. She was so relieved. She didn't realize how much guilt she carried over leaving.

“Mom is the same, but it's all so different. You were the person she threw her anger at, but now she mostly just fights with her mama. It gets really bad sometimes, but she mostly locks herself in her room when it does.”

Layla had asked her sister not to spare any details, but it was a little hard to be reminded of how she was the subject of her mother's anger. She never really tried to ease things, either. She yelled back, she held grudges, and she was just as angry, which was never good. She couldn't help but feel so envious. She wanted to ask why her baba never tried for her.

She heard him call out to Samira. It was muffled. He laughed at something Samira said. Layla had to sit down because of how nauseous she felt. She had never heard him laugh so easily before.

When Samira hung up, Layla started pacing in her room. She didn't want to be alone; she wanted to be held so bad her heart ached with the desire.

When she was younger, Layla used to cry in her room for hours, waiting and hoping for anyone to check up on her, to ask if she was okay. No one ever came. She didn't want to experience what it would feel like if she asked for help and one came through again.

She never told anyone how she struggled with anxiety, how she was plagued with panic all the time, and how much she tried to hide it. Mateo knew. She never told him, but he had the unfortunate luck of seeing her have panic attacks over things that wouldn't cause anyone else to panic.

She sat down on the edge of the bed, and then she heard a knock.

"Are you okay?" It was written on the paper. She guessed he saw a shadow of her feet pace through the little space in the door.

Layla didn't have to cry. She hadn't asked him for help but he was there, he was there and he was checking up on her.

"Why do you ask?" she asked, the words soft in a way that was foreign to her ears.

"You were pacing and then I walked in and you had a look on your face," he wrote and then shrugged.

She wouldn't explain why she was upset. She had never allowed herself that much, but she did contemplate asking for

something. The thought felt like a chain around her neck. She swallowed and laid down on the bed.

Maybe it would be okay, she thought.

“Will you play with my hair? Just for a few minutes?” She kept her eyes closed. The room was quiet. She heard footsteps, and then I felt the bed dip.

It was the closest they’d ever been to one another.

She wondered if he was confused or if he could tell that she was a temporary mess and felt pity for her. She didn’t have the guts to find out, so she kept her eyes closed.

She felt his hand—it felt good, and it made her really want to cry. She needed this so badly, and she hated her needs.

I’m not helpless anymore. I got out. I’m okay, she chanted in her head.

“Okay, please leave now,” she whispered. He removed his hand.

No, please put it back, she thought.

It wasn’t until she heard the click of the door that she realized she had been signing every word she said.

□

When she woke up the next day, she tried to avoid Jess as much as she could. She wanted to avoid eye contact altogether but, she couldn’t do that. They did a lot of talking with their eyes. Intense eye contact with someone she barely knew was not something she thought she’d be doing.

It felt like they had their own language sometimes. She liked it.

Layla scoffed at herself. It wasn’t their own language, it was just how he communicated.

Jess waved when she came out of her room. He gave a small smile.

“You like me?” he signed. He had a stupid smile on his face. She took notice of how he slowed his movement to make sure he was not going too fast for her.

“I really don’t.”

“I feel so special.”

“You shouldn’t. I hate everything about you.”

“So now that I know you like me, does this mean you’ll let me take you to New York?”

It would be nice to have someone to talk to on the flight, and it wouldn’t be too bad to have someone who knew the city well.

“Don’t take this as a declaration of love or anything, but I think I’m going to allow this.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“You’re really desperate for me, aren’t you?” Layla threw the sliced tomato at him and glared. He could be so annoying. “You’re so good at hiding it, but I’m just intuitive, you know? There’s nothing you could have done differently, but I really think I should let you know we can’t ever be together.”

“Oh, really?” She threw another tomato, but he dodged, and it fell on the floor. They both looked up when they heard the sound of the door opening.

“I have to say, Matty, your friend is a dirty little liar. She gave us a long lecture about keeping the place spotless and what did we do? We kept the place spotless. And what did she do? She threw tomatoes at your floor,” he tsked. Layla was going to bite him. He stared at her, his eyes drifted over her entire face and then stretched into a pleased smile.

She realized suddenly that she had completely forgotten about the night before, about the slight embarrassment she felt over being caught learning sign language for him. It was a bit clear that Jess was intentionally distracting her from whatever was making her sad, even though she hadn’t confided in him.

Layla felt another pair of eyes on her. Mateo and Kione were staring at the pair, but Jess didn’t notice because he was looking at her curiously.

“There are too many men here for me today, so I’m going to spend the rest of day with Celia and Mia,” she announced.

Jess's eyes flashed at the name, but he didn't say anything. Kione kept looking at her strangely. He was very close to Jess. Every time he spoke about Kione, he would say 'My brother and I' even though he was an only child.

She really needed to leave the apartment for a while. Celia had just gotten back from Mexico, so it was a good time for girls' night.

□

Jess

Jess went to the kitchen. Kione followed as quiet as a cat, when Jess turned around he startled. He'd always wondered how the hell someone so big could move so soundlessly. He decided smacking Kione on the head would be the best course of action.

"You're finally attending to your wild needs! Good for you."

"What?"

Kione pointed outside and winked.

"Do you mean Mateo?"

Instead of whispering like they had the hottest gossip in the world, Jess and Kione signed aggressively and frantically whenever the topic was hot as tea.

"Mateo? No, don't be ridiculous, he's not even your type. You don't think I know your type? I meant the redhead."

"Her name is Layla."

"Whatever her name is."

"It's Layla."

They paused, Kione waited.

"I'm not sexually active, Kione."

"You could just say you haven't fucked."

"I will not."

"So unnecessarily proper." Kione paced a little. "I picked up on the energy; I could feel something. You shared the look."

“What’s the look?”

“Haven’t you ever looked at two people, saw them sharing the look, and immediately knew they were fucking? Or in your case, they want to real bad?”

“I can’t say I have. I think, I just—”

“Yes?” Kione asked impatiently.

“She makes me tea sometimes.”

“Then what happens?” Kione asked, jumping up and down. When he noticed Jess not sharing his enthusiasm, he paused. “That’s it?”

“You don’t get it,” Jess huffed, and left a very confused-looking Kione in the kitchen.

chapter 8

don't act too desperate



Layla

Layla thought about the fact that there were only two weeks left of the agreed six weeks, while she waited for her friends. She never anticipated that she might like having roommates that much.

Layla to the audience: Yes, I liked having roommates, but do I constantly wish they weren't men? Also, yes.

Amir's diner was less crowded than usual, so she took the opportunity to go behind the counter and help. Amir didn't question it. He handed her the apron and let her help, knowing she needed to keep herself moving while she sank into the depth of her thoughts.

She thought about the day she found her apartment; how happy she was that she was going to decorate the place however she pleased. She was content for a while but then her life became too quiet. She realized suddenly on a random Monday, when it rained, she didn't love it as much as she did when she was younger.

She realized how every color in the world had dulled, how it has been dull for such a long time and she couldn't remember the last time she felt anything positive.

The sunset wasn't as pretty as it used to be, but she was in denial, so she painted it hundreds of times to convince herself that she could still feel its beauty.

So much indifference, so much emptiness.

When she chose her apartment, Layla made sure it was not very big, and then she filled it with so many things. She always disliked minimalism, so she was pleased with the result, the colors, the fullness of the room, but still nothing could have prepared her for how monstrous the loneliness would be.

The first rainy night when she ate dinner in bed with only silence for her company, or the many other days when the place was so quiet, she kept the TV on to have some form of noise in her space.

“Hello.”

Layla was taken back to reality—taken back to her trembling hands—as Celia called her name. A petite form behind her waved; she left the apron and went to them.

Mia Miller looked like an icon from the seventies; she was a couple of months younger than Layla. Mia had been acting since she was a child, and the media had a very strange obsession with trying to make sure she stayed a child.

She was shorter than Layla. Her blond hair, as usual, had a lot of volume, which made her look a bit taller. She’d done a movie a couple of months ago that had a brief make out scene that caused people to say nasty things about her team. They were outraged that an ‘innocent girl’ could be put in a role like that. Layla personally loved the character; she was sexy and funny.

Mia expressed how crushed she was to get those reactions when she was so desperate to play a mature, complex woman. She looked so desperate not to be seen as a helpless child anymore.

Layla met her when she had been working on a couple of commissions for a known club. The commissions were mostly nude. Mia was photographed going out of it the same day she was photographed leaving. She had randomly found her DMs filled with people cursing her and calling her a bad influence. Mia reached out to her to apologize, and they ended up agreeing to meet.

Layla liked her very much; she was like a breath of fresh air. She felt a bit bad for her, though. Mia seemed so used to having shallow relationships with people to the point where she would

be genuinely surprised when Layla asked her questions about herself and listened.

Despite her attraction to the other girl, Layla never dared to make the first move. She knew why; the little voice in her head was a bit hard to ignore.

Don't act too desperate, Layla.

When Layla was in high school, she didn't have friends. It wasn't something she thought about, really. One day, instead of taking the bus home, Sharon came early to pick her up.

Layla was talking to a girl—her name was Tahani. She was one of the popular cheerleaders, and one of the few people Layla didn't actually dislike. She could remember laughing at something Tahani said. She remembered wanting to touch her hand, and just moments after, she felt a burning gaze on her.

In the car, Sharon was quiet in a way that made the hair on her neck stand. It was loaded silence. Layla had avoided making friends or dating in general because she knew her mother would use it against her, that they would soon turn into her punishment instead.

“Who was that girl?” she had asked tightly.

“Just someone in my class; we're lab partners.”

“Oh?” she said. A pause, then, “You were looking at her in a certain way. Your whole face changed.”

She had, unfortunately, a very expressive face.

“It's unattractive to act like that, you know. It makes people uncomfortable. I don't think a girl like that would want anything to do with you. You aren't really charming or welcoming.”

“I—”

“Don't act so desperate,” she snapped, backhanding Layla on the mouth. “I saw you reaching for her.”

She didn't flinch. She learned that staying still was best when it got physical. If she moved, Sharon became more agitated. If she tried to get away, Sharon became more agitated. She just wanted it to be over, so she stayed still. Whenever she was in close distance to her mama, her body became more alert than

usual. It took a toll, but compartmentalizing helped, most of the time.

She says the word multiple times, to make sure it stuck.

Desperate.

When Mia kissed her months ago, it was her first time with anyone. She was stiff when their lips touched; she had been so lonely.

Layla kept most of her clothes on. She asked Mia not to explore her skin too much. She was so scared Mia would tell her to just fuck off. She could never thank Mia enough for giving her that moment. She made sure Layla was comfortable—it felt so strange to be touched by someone else. So real, but so good.

When they were finished, Layla asked, “Do you want to piss some people off?” and Mia grinned.

She opened the balcony of the hotel and kissed her outside. Layla was wearing a big shirt, and Mia had the sheet wrapped around her. It was simple but effective, and they both knew the pictures would look nice.

A few hours later, they were trending, and Layla was being called a bad influence again. It was funny in her opinion.

“I’m thinking of getting a new place. Something bigger,” she told them.

There was a pause, then a shared sigh. “Thank god,” they both said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked.

“Honey, that place is so cramped, and you need some more space,” Mia said gently.

“I like it that way,” she replied defensively.

“We know,” Celia said, “but some more space wouldn’t kill you, and you’d be able to have people over now that you actually have friends.”

Mia giggled; Layla didn’t find it funny.

“Would either of you consider living with me? Staying with Matty made me think about it, but I don’t want to live with a

man.”

“I don’t like having roommates,” Mia said.

“I’m in!” Celia exclaimed. “Oh! You could fill the apartment with so much artwork, and we could have mom over—she loves your work—and it would be easier to have Matty over. Yes, it would be so fun.”

Celia went on and on about how great it would be. She couldn’t wait to start looking for apartments. The girls talked a lot, and when they finished their food, Mia insisted they go shopping, because this was her chance to get honest opinions. By the time Layla made it back to Mateo’s, she was insanely sleepy.

She found Jess, Kione, and Mateo on the couch, with iced tea in their hands, watching the Real Housewives. As soon as she walked in, Jess’s head turned and their eyes met. She said hello to everyone and made her way to her room. She was barely in when he pushed his way in and threw himself on her bed.

“Can I help you?” she asked. Jess nodded with a very serious look on his face.

“How was your date?”

“I wasn’t on a date,” she told him.

“No?”

“No,” she said.

When it was apparent that she wasn’t going to say anything else, Jess signed, “You said you were with Mia, though.”

“And Celia. I said Mia and Celia—and Mia and I are just friends.”

“Oh, I must have missed that.”

“Mhmm.” She expected him to leave, but he just rolled around in her bed.

“So you were never dating?” he asked.

“We tried, but it was never really serious.”

“That’s very unfortunate,” he signed, beaming at her. “Anyway, when are we going to New York?”

She stared at him.

I prefer writing as a form of communication, she thought.

She didn't realize how intense his stare was until then.

“This weekend would work for me.”

chapter 9

New York



Jess

Layla and Jess had a five-hour flight from LA to New York. He wanted to book first-class tickets for both of them, but he ended up booking two standard seats because they were closer to each other. It was going to be a bit uncomfortable because he really needed the leg space.

Jess to the audience: Sometimes, we have to make sacrifices.

Jess wore a comfortable hoodie and some sweats with a cap and sunglasses to make sure he was a little covered.

Layla was obviously excited. She kept texting her sister, and she couldn't sit still. She wore a Meghan kilt skirt from Vivienne Westwood, matched with a simple burgundy top with long sleeves. The shade of burgundy matched the single button on the skirt.

She seemed pleased at the seats. She was a little annoyed that he paid for both, but he assured her he didn't go overboard. Layla was unfortunately uncomfortable with people doing things for her.

"What?" she asked once she noticed how he was staring at her. To be fair, it felt like his eyes were constantly looking for her, without giving him a choice.

"I like your outfit," he signed. He also liked that she wore so many rings all the time. For some reason, he liked how talented she was at doing her makeup; he seemed to like a lot of things these days.

“Thank you. Yours is alright, I guess,” she said, and he chuckled.

Layla was the kind of person who felt most comfortable when she was dressed well. She preferred colorful, bold pieces, hence her love for Vivienne Westwood.

□

Layla

Whenever Layla got on a plane, she remembered the time she went to Palestine as a kid. It was one of the few times something good had happened to her. Somehow, her aunt convinced her father to let her go with them. They went during the olive picking season. Layla had never felt so much comfort and happiness. Her grandparents took her to every little corner and gave her long lessons about the history of the land, the architecture, the food, the thobes and their different patterns, and so much more.

She was quiet as usual, but she listened earnestly. At first, she feared they would stop interacting with her because of it, but she found it didn't bother them at all. It was a small miracle. She thought about it often with gratitude in her heart; they were the only adults in her life who didn't punish her for who she was.

It was a special kind of memory. Sharing an educational day with your elders was an intimate experience. It had bonded them in a way that she didn't anticipate.

As their flight took off, she kept picturing herself going to Gaza again and taking Jess with her. She wanted so badly for him to see the beauty of it, he would love it. He would love the graffiti and poetry on the walls, and he would love the little hidden stores.

She started telling him a bit about the olive picking season. She told him how peaceful it was. She wanted to give him a list of all the places she would like him to see, but she felt that she couldn't list them. Everything in Palestine was worth it. Every corner was a dime that needed to be studied.

“Look at you, thinking about me when you think of your homeland. Isn't that romantic?”

“Oh, shut up.”

“What else do you want to show me?”

“Mahmoud Dariwish’s museum in Ramallah. You would love that.”

Later, they agreed to watch a movie first. Layla, Mateo, and Celia took it as a personal offence when he mentioned he didn’t watch most of the old rom-coms and feel good movies they loved. The last movie he was forced to watch was *She’s The Man*. When he mentioned he never saw *The Devil Wears Prada*, he got a smack on the head from Layla.

“It’s Anne Hathaway and Meryl Streep in a movie about fashion!” She scowled at him.

“So?” she asked when the movie ended.

“I get it now.”

She nodded approvingly at him, which really shouldn’t have an effect on him, but it did.

After a few minutes of silence and him shifting, she asked, “Are you uncomfortable?”

“A little, but it’s fine.”

“I’ll make it up for you; dinner is on me.”

“Are you asking me out on a pity date?”

“I think so.”

“If I had some more room in the seat, I would swoon.”

“I’ve always had that effect on men and women.” She nodded.

“I can tell.” Their eyes connected for a moment. Layla searched his face, his eyes landed on her red painted lips.

“Do not flirt with me.”

“You’re the one who’s begging me to go on a date.”

“I did not!”

“You want to take me out and pay for my food and shit.”

“Ugh, I take that back.”

“You can’t.”

“I dislike you.”

“That’s a lie.”

They talked back and forth for the rest of the flight. When they landed, they decided to grab some coffee. They both had small bags that Jess insisted on carrying. They wouldn’t be staying for more than two days, so they didn’t need anything bigger.

They landed around noon and stopped by the hotel first. Their rooms were next to each other, and there was a door that opened to her room. Usually, he didn’t stay at hotels when he was in New York, but he didn’t mind—in fact, the change of scenery felt needed deep in his soul.

It wasn’t long before they were heading to the museum.

It took almost three hours of wandering around before Layla was willing to leave. He had never heard her say so many words in one day. Though sometimes she got quiet; he waited eagerly for her to grace the day with a smile, but there was only a small tilt of her lips upward and, even that was enough to send a tremor through his body.

The place was huge, and they went through piece after piece. She asked him what he thought, and she listened intently.

Jess to the audience: She asked for my thoughts. It’s so sweet, right?

Layla explained a lot of stuff about the art and the artists. It felt impossible that she had all this information just hanging in that brilliant head of hers.

Whenever she was done looking at a piece, she just grabbed whatever part of his body was closest to her—he was so fine with that. At first, she grabbed his sleeve, then his arm. She seemed too distracted to notice. Layla wasn’t very physically affectionate. As far as he could tell, he thought it was a good thing that at least she seemed to feel comfortable around him.

Then she grabbed the waistband of his jeans, her fingers brushed his skin lightly—unintentionally—and it felt like fireworks erupting.

He frequently glanced down at where her hand was, as if checking to make sure it was still there.

He followed her to the next piece, his eyes fixed on her hand.

He liked her, he realized with a small jolt. He had anticipated it, truth be told, but he didn't think he would enjoy her that much.

He thought about how he wanted to be the one who took her to see the museum for the first time, how pleased he was to see how her brown eyes shined with love, and he wanted to see her reaction to everything. Jess wanted to watch Layla's features as she watched what she felt most passionate about.

"So what got you into the arts?" he signed, just to keep himself from dwelling on other things.

"Pinterest, I think."

"Explain."

"Well, a quote on Pinterest, to be more specific." A pause. She sat on the stairs, where a lot of people were taking breaks. "The conception of a picture, that is, the idea, is not visible in the picture. An idea cannot be seen with the eyes. What is represented in a picture is what is visible to the eyes—it is the thing or things that must have been ideated. It's about an old painting called 'Empire of Light'.

"I was around eleven, I think. I always loved drawing and coloring but I barely understood the sentence, so I wrote it down and I waited until I saw my grandfather and then I asked him to explain it to me. After that, whenever I had an idea of something or a feeling, I'd think about the quote again, so I started learning. I saw hundreds of tutorials on YouTube and then, I saw hundreds of videos about famous art, videos that discussed them, what's special about them and the style used and what made them popular. I started trying to draw something that represented how I was feeling because I had no one to talk to, and I felt like I couldn't use my words.

Sometimes I would think about painting something that represented loneliness. I know how it looks like in my head and I know how I want people to feel when they look at it but what does loneliness look like? What does sadness look like? Sorry,

I'm rambling; that's never good." She tsked, seeming a little annoyed with herself, and he couldn't understand why.

"I kind of like your rambling."

They stopped in front of a painting. Layla stared at the painting for quite a long time.

"If you liked naked bodies that much, you could have just asked your very fit roommate to take his clothes off. I work out all the time, you know."

"I'll ask Matty, my other temporary roommate."

"I hate you."

"That's my line."

"There's nothing special about the painting."

"She has boobs; you don't."

"But I'm blessed in other ways. I have thick creamy thighs." Jess stood in front of the painting, blocking her view. "Are you hungry? Where should we go eat? Or we could go to my parents if you want for a home cooked meal."

Layla paled, the pleased expression on her face instantly evaporating.

"Parents don't usually like me," she said.

She said it jokingly, but it sounded so wrong—too dry. He felt his stomach sink a bit. He wanted to see his folks but was not done spending time with her.

"I could wait for you. I'm feeling inspired, so I'll go work on something on my iPad and then when you get back, we'll order something to eat," she suggested.

He nodded; that would work.

They walked side to side—there were still many barriers between them—they stood as close as they could manage without actually touching. But they wanted to, they really wanted to.

chapter 10

the writer



Jess

Jess came back to the hotel a couple of hours later, just when her stomach started rumbling and her eyes burned from focusing on her iPad for too long. He had a stack of books in his hands that

looked old and well loved.

“What are those?” she asked.

“Some of my old books. We have a little library in the house, so I was looking through some things.”

“What do you need them for?” There were two copies of *Frankenstein*, one of *Little Women*, and two of *Dorian Grey*. All of them were neatly annotated. “Did you annotate all of these?”

He hesitated. “Yes, of course. We’re constantly growing and so I used to revisit books every year to re annotate them, to see if the way I looked at things was different.” He searched her face, a vulnerable look in his eyes.

Sometimes when Jess looked at her, she felt a little resentment towards her face. Voices filtered through her head, Sharon’s mostly, telling her how no one approached her at school because she had an unkind face, because she looked like she carried hatred in her features. She didn’t want Jess to feel that way, not when it felt like he didn’t want to be judged for what he was saying. Not when he was being so hesitant, and especially not after he tolerated her the whole day without complaint.

She felt her heart race. A familiar feeling of panic spiked and she blurted, “My grandfather does the same thing with poetry, but he refuses to buy new copies.”

Jess smiled. She knew he smiled often, but that one felt rewarding. It felt like she said the right thing.

“When I was younger, I used to dream about publishing a book so good it would become a ‘modern classic’. I dreamed about writing books that were so good they debated about them at schools.”

“That sounds right, you know. It suits you. A writer,” she said. “When did you start writing?”

“I wrote fan fiction when I was 14,” he signs proudly.

“Who did you write about?”

“That’s one secret I’ll never tell.” He winked. “I thought I could retire and write books later, but I haven’t written anything in ages and I lose interest in anything I start after a while.”

“So, you needed to see books that inspired you in the past,” she guessed. He nodded. “Can I take one of your copies of *Dorian Grey*? I’d love to see your annotations.”

“I’ll tell you what, take one and read it and then when you’re done, tell what copy you think you got. The older one or the newest one.”

“Deal.”

“Okay, we should order dinner now. I’m starving.”

They ended up ordering pizza. Their flight was early in the morning and they were a little tired. When they finished, she thought Jess might leave, but he sat on the sofa and started looking through the books. Layla opened her iPad and continued her digital art.

It was peaceful until both of their phones started buzzing and ringing. Jess paused. She picked up her phone to see Mateo’s face.

“NEW YORK? YOU’RE IN NEW YORK?”

“LOWER YOUR VOICE.”

“Stop yelling at me!” he yelled. “And where is he?”

Jess walked over, his phone still buzzing.

“What’s up?”

“Why the hell are you in New York?”

“I told you we were going out.”

“I thought you meant going to the grocery store or something.”

“Well, that’s your problem, isn’t it?” Layla told him.

“Your pictures are all over the internet, and they’re saying Jess gave you a promise ring.”

“Why the fuck would he do that? We barely know each other.”

“There were already rumors that Jess was secretly dating someone. Some thought it was Onika, but then you guys go on a date.”

“Not a date,” she said. Jess signed the same thing.

“And you’re wearing rings,” he told Layla.

“I always wear rings.”

“They only care that you were wearing one on your ring finger, and then they learned that you’re staying at the same hotel.”

“It’s not even an engagement ring!”

Jess opened his phone and opened an article titled “Secret Relationship?”

“We look good together.” He nodded at the picture of them; she took a look at the picture. It was just when they left. She was telling him about something, and he was looking down at her with a pleased smile.

Layla to the audience: We do look good, but that’s irrelevant because I always look good.

Jess closed her phone, ignoring Mateo’s protest. “Sorry about this.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“It’s kind of funny,” he said.

“Is it?”

“It could be.” There was a glint of mischief and his eyes.

□

Jess and Layla both had some provoking planned. When they landed in LA, there were a good number of paparazzi and Lakers fans. Jess was next to her, keeping a hand on her lower back. There was a lot of shouting.

“Is that the promise ring?” the paparazzo shouted at Jess. There was a click, but they couldn’t get a clear shot. It was, in fact, a promise ring that they had left the hotel early to buy. Layla hid her hand and slid the ring off.

One of them got really close to her. Jess tightened his hand. The guy was pushing everyone, trying to get a close shot of her hands. Jess used his body to shove him lightly, farther away from her.

When they got back home, the photos were already circling around. Jess really disliked the paparazzi, so messing with them seemed to put him in a good mood.

On the way to the apartment, she made sure to post the digital art she was working on. It was a recreation of a beautiful old painting called *Dancing Fairies* by August Malmstrom. It was made in 1866. Instead of the shades of brown and beige, she had used shades of pink and purple and blue. It was part of a series of old paintings that Layla was recreating, but making them more... well... pink. It seemed to piss off a lot of silly men for some reason, but no one could actually deny how talented she was.

The painting depicted the morning mist turning into fairies, which were all in shades of pink in Layla’s version. The sky was in shades of pink and purple, and the grass was also purple.

Jess and Layla were still trending and, as they always say, any publicity is good publicity, so they took advantage of it. They were both gaining huge amounts of followers and shares, and he took the chance to post some stuff about a charity event coming soon.

Jess went up before her while she answered Samira's call. After she finished, she found Kione, Mateo, and Celia already there. She could hear giggling as she opened the door, and she just knew they were reading comments and laughing about them.

When Jess looked up, she felt something stir in her stomach. She had a slight urge to sit in front of the sink and wait until she started throwing up. She thought about what she ate earlier and what could have possibly made her feel so sick.

"Hello future wife," Jess signed. He stood up quickly; his hair was a blond mess, and he was beaming.

She had a horrible, horrific realization—that Jess was making her nervous.

Layla to the audience: Are those butterflies?

Oh.

Oh, absolutely not.

"You're not marrying my sister," Mateo said.

"Why the fuck not?"

"You didn't ask for my blessing; that's just disrespect. Besides, Layla doesn't even date."

Jess's eyes turned to him, his eyebrows raised like he was saying, 'she doesn't?' but Mateo didn't notice his confusion.

"She doesn't need your blessing. She's a grown woman."

"I don't approve of this union either," Kione added. "She didn't ask for my blessing."

"Why would I want your blessing? We've never even had a conversation before," she told him.

"We're literally in a conversation right now. And you have to ask for my blessing because Jess won't marry anyone without it. Right, Jess?"

Jess stared at them, and then he got on one knee and signed really quickly, "If you want me, I'll have you right now; fuck all the blessings." Then he brought his hands together and mouthed the word *please*.

“Wow.”

“I feel so betrayed right now.”

“I don’t know enough about you to say yes,” Layla answered him.

“That’s not a no.” Celia beamed as she pulled Layla to sit next to her. They were supposed to go apartment hunting the next day, and she couldn’t wait.

While she was talking to Celia, she felt his eyes on her. It was searing, and she couldn’t help but shiver. She looked up, and he had a strange look on his face. His head was tilted.

“What are you thinking?” she signed discreetly.

“I’ll tell you later,” he said, then tapped Kione’s shoulder. They headed to his room, leaving her with the siblings to talk about apartment hunting.

chapter 11

a best friend's support



Jess

As soon as they sat down on the bed, Jess started telling Kione about wanting to write in the future. He was aware he hadn't written anything in a long time, but seeing Layla work on her art for the past couple of weeks and then, seeing her passion for art the day before, seeing how inspired she felt, inspired him as well. He wanted to finally tell his best friend. Jess had no doubt in his mind that he had his support, but he still needed him to say it.

Kione sat quietly, reading what Jess showed him. It was an old project, just to show him an example of something that he'd created. After a few minutes, Kione looked tense, and a little concerned, which was a look only a few people were allowed to see on him.

"I have a question," he signed and spoke the words out loud.

"Go on."

"Would you have pursued basketball if I didn't push you? Because this is obviously your dream."

Push him was a little too far, and dramatic. Jess was aware of his very misplaced guilt because they talked about it so many times, but Kione was a man that worried a lot about the people he loved, and he needed to be reassured. When they were kids, training for basketball was everything he wanted to do. Jess loved it too, but no one loved it as much as Kione did.

Jess let silence fill the room, only to torture him, his annoying best friend. Then he grabbed Kione's face and planted an

obnoxious, sloppy, wet kiss on his forehead.

“Stop man; I’m being serious! And you need to stop with that disgusting kiss.”

“I love that we play together. I’ve always known we were meant to be on the same team, and just because I have room in my heart to love something else, doesn’t mean I love basketball any less, okay? But I’ve always been honest with you that I don’t want to do this for too long.” He relaxed a bit and then his smile stretched. He had big full lips and blinding perfect teeth, so when he smiled you couldn’t help but smile with him.

“You’re the most talented motherfucker I know, okay?” Kione said, lunging at Jess, which cause them to fall on the floor “I’m proud of you,” he yelled. They were rolling on the floor when the door opened and Mateo walked in.

“It’s not cool to treat me like an outsider in my own home.”

There was a lot of tackling after that. Too many limbs and screaming. In the middle of it, he thought he heard Celia’s distant voice say, “Now I get why you want to leave this place.”

□

Layla didn’t come out of her room that night. Then, the next morning, she avoided his eyes.

“Sleep well yesterday?” he asked her. She was ready to go out, packing lipstick and perfume in her mini bag. “I didn’t; I couldn’t find the lavender.”

“It’s right here.” She rolled her eyes and pointed at the huge jar on the counter.

Jess to the audience: Alright, I really didn’t think that one through.

“Well, I couldn’t find it.”

“Mhmm.”

“I have cruel roommates; did you know that? They just leave me here, looking for some lavender tea all on my own.”

“Yes, that must have been traumatic for you.”

“I’m so glad you agree.” She didn’t look him in the eye, she only looked at his hands. He felt an itch rise in his chest.

Hello? Look at me. Look at me, he thought.

He didn’t know what to do. He couldn’t stop himself from teasing her, trying to provoke her, and trying to get her to smile. He could handle a crush, he hoped, but he feared it would be a lot deeper than that.

Layla is the kind of person you can easily fall for, he thought.

Layla left to look for a new apartment with Celia. It was a reminder that soon they’d both go back to their own space. Jess burst into Mateo’s room. “I need someone to rebound for me.”

He hadn’t been doing a lot of activities and he avoided going anywhere near basketball courts. It felt a little like he was punishing himself, but every time Jess or Layla tried talking to him, he shut them out.

“I don’t want to.”

“Please” He didn’t know what Mateo saw in his eyes, but it made him get up. This has always been a habit of Jess—whenever he felt disoriented or out of control, he would head to wherever he could play basketball. Usually, it was the indoor court in Kione’s house.

When they get there, Jess noticed how Mateo avoided looking around—how ashamed he looked. He had a little program to help him recover; it focused mostly on improving core strength, breathing exercises, stretching and massaging tight muscles, so he was healing well.

Mateo took the spot under the net, and then passed the ball, nailing it in Jess’s shooter’s pocket.

“Are you getting along with Layla?” he asked, acting all innocent.

“I guess.”

“It looks okay; she hasn’t bitten your head off.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I just thought it might be difficult for her to be in close proximity to a stranger, even if you’re my friend and I trust

you.” He hesitated. “I do think it would be cool if you guys were friends.”

“Why?”

“When I first met Layla, she was like a scared cat. It was like she’d never had friends before; she never talked about any family besides her sister. She was so easily startled and she had some marks on her face and hand. It took such a long time to get her to trust me and she still would hide some things. I know she talks about how much I’m a pain in the ass sometimes, but she worries me, just as much as I worry her. Maybe she’ll open up to you. If anyone can do it, it’s you.” He looked hopeful.

“What kind of marks?”

“She said a cat scratched her, but it looked like a big scratch. I don’t know, maybe it really was just a big cat. If I asked too much questions, she would get annoyed or just disappear for days.

I want to earn her trust, he thought. He wanted to know everything.

“I was thinking I could stay,” he signed after the shot sank.

“Stay?” Mateo signed back, his brows furrowed.

“You know how Celia and Layla are moving together? I thought we could do the same thing.”

“If you’re doing this because you’re worried about me, I’m fine.”

“It’s not that. It’s nice, you know? Not coming back to an empty place.” *I don’t want to be alone either*. He didn’t voice that particular thought out loud.

“It is.” Jess liked the apartment; it was in a fancy building, the area was safe, and the doorman was funny—even though they could afford to have their own place, considering the amount of money they both made. “Okay. If that’s what you want.”

chapter 12

home



Layla

Celia and Layla spent days looking at apartments. It made it easier to spend less time with Jess. By the time she got back home, she had time just for a quick, fun little panic attack before she fell asleep. She had been getting them every night for the past couple of days.

She was freaking out. She absolutely could not tolerate this feeling in her stomach; it felt too much like something she couldn't control. That night, they came back, and she ended up panting on the bathroom floor; sometimes it was too easy to trigger her anxiety.

I don't have room in me to want him, she thought, but I want. I want to touch him just to find out what it feels like; I want to talk to him. I want, and I want, and I want.

She got the urge to call her grandparents, just to vent, to talk about anything, but she didn't get to leave and go back into their lives whenever she felt like it. It was unfair to them.

Sometimes when her brain was acting too harsh on her, she liked to pretend that the idea of love was going to be her downfall; that it was going to be hell incarnate. However, at the end of the day when was alone, and the bed was too cold, she dreamed about a love so desperate, so breathtaking, it made her breathless. She dreamed of a partner, and she wished. She was not religious, but she prayed to whoever was listening for a love that felt like it was opening the gates of paradise.

Perhaps she only liked Jess because she was kind of lonely.

It doesn't mean anything. It'll go away, eventually.

“Are you okay?” Celia snaps her finger at her.

“Yeah, why?”

“We parked ten minutes ago and you haven't been answering me.”

“Oh. I'm fine,” she said as she stepped out of the car.

She knew as soon as they walked in that it was the one. She couldn't find anything she disliked about it. Mudejar architecture, inspired by Al-Andalus, combining Islamic aesthetics with Iberian structures. Stained glass, tons of natural light, beautiful arches. It was cozy, with two rooms downstairs and one upstairs, along with a beautiful backyard.

“You like this one,” Celia stated.

“How'd you know?”

“You got all quiet, like you were picturing a life here,” she said. “Also, it's the only one you didn't tear down with your words.”

“The other ones were terrible! They deserved it.” A pause. “I know I've been a pain in the ass about this and I know the others were okay, but I just wanted something I love, something that clicked. I wanted-”

“A home,” she guessed, a warm soft smile on her face. Layla loved that smile; everyone did.

“My sister and my grandparents would love this,” Layla told her, hoping someday she would get to show it to them.

Rent was a little pricy, but it was worth every penny.

□

Mateo was helping her pack her clothes. Most of her things were at her studio. They were going to head there the next day to empty everything out.

“Jess and I also decided that he would move here and we would stay roommates,” he said.

Relief coursed through her body in waves. She let out a breath, thankful for Jess.

“I think that’s a great idea.” She smiled.

“I’m fine, you know.” He didn’t sound very convincing. “I know I made you worry, and I know I have to talk about it, but I need a little more time,” he said quickly. He always spoke so quickly when something was bothering him.

“Whenever you’re ready, then?”

He dropped the clothes in his hand and his arms came around her. She hugged him back.

“I’ll miss having you here all the time,” he mumbled, his voice muffled.

“I think I’ll be fine; Celia is my favorite, anyway.”

“I hate you,” he said, tightening his arms around her.

“Oh, by the way, I got more lavender tea for you guys when I went grocery shopping, so don’t buy more.”

“Why? We won’t need it anymore if you’re not here.”

“It’s for Jess,” she said, folding more of her clothes.

“Why would you do that? Jess hates lavender tea.”

She dropped the shirt and turned to face him again. “No, he doesn’t.”

“I think I would know. I tried to give it to him a while ago and he said he couldn’t even stand the smell.”

Oh.

Layla to the audience: That’s interesting, I guess. Is it hot in here?

□

Layla took out the three notebooks filled with conversations she and Jess had when they first moved in. She flipped through pages for a while; Jess found it so fascinating that she was an artist. It always felt like something he was in awe of, so sometimes he would write down stuff like:

Draw some Halloween doodles here, you’re only allowed one color.

Who’s your favorite marvel hero? Draw it here.

Draw my favorite Disney princess (Tiana) here.

For some reason, she always did what he asked. It was silly and fun.

A knock at the door pulled her back. She kept staring at the notebooks and then she felt the bed dip. She hadn't looked at him all day. Her eyes scanned him like they couldn't help but seek him out.

"I liked it when we wrote to each other," she signed.

She enjoyed their conversations too much. Avoiding him the whole day had an effect she couldn't deny; she didn't like avoiding him.

"Really?"

"Yes. I used to be obsessed with historical romance when I was younger and I loved it when they wrote each other letters. When we wrote to each other, it felt like we were writing letters. I've always wanted someone to write me letters."

"We can write letters if you want." He smiled. It was smug and horrifying; she'd never been more annoyed with anyone in her whole life.

She wanted to taste it.

Later, the guys helped move the heavy stuff from her apartment. When they came the first day, Layla had looked out of the window when Mateo's car arrived. Jess had felt eyes on him and looked up. Somehow, she knew he would, and she felt her mouth tug slightly upward.

He stumbled at the sight of it, almost falling because of her smile.

"Since when are you so clumsy?" Mateo asked Jess loudly.

"He's not clumsy; he's the most well-balanced person I know," Kione said, looking personally offended.

Jess wasn't paying attention; it was sinking deeper into his skin—her effect on him was not something he could describe with words.

They started writing letters. They got creative with it after she moved out. When Jess was helping her pack, he would leave

letters everywhere without telling her about the whereabouts. At night before she went to sleep those last few nights in Mateo's place, he'd put one in front of her bedroom door like someone delivered them. Sometimes she would leave one under his pillow; sometimes she would put one in his gym bag.

Sometimes the letter would hold single sentence like:

"I can't wait for the season to start. Will you be coming to watch me?"

Sometimes she wrote prompts for him like:

"Write an intimate scene where the characters don't say a word to each other."

Sometimes he would leave them with Amir and he would give it to Layla, and she would write a reply and he would give it to Jess.

One time he wrote:

How did people end their letters before?

To which she replied:

Like this

Yours, Layla.

After that, he started writing things like:

Are you still mine? Or Do I have you still?

Ardently yours, Jess.

It's a beautiful idea, belonging. I'd love to hear your thoughts about it. Alas, I do not belong to anyone.

Yours, Layla.

chapter 13

home



Layla

Layla loved living with Celia; she loved that her family called every family night, and she loved that they talked fondly about their childhood memories. She loved how her whole family acted personally offended when she and Celia went to the salon. She touched up her red roots and her friend got a haircut.

“You have beautiful black hair. Why would you want red? And you, Celia, why would you cut it like this when it was so long?” her mother said. Layla could see heads bobbing in agreement in the back.

She liked how close she felt to Celia. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, Celia snuck into her room, and they spent hours talking under the covers. Sometimes she could tell her friend was not feeling well because of how she took her hand and held it tight.

“Do you think it’s best if I stay away from her?” she asked one night.

The ‘her’ in question was one of the hardest people to read. Everything she did felt practiced; she was almost always expressionless, and when she wasn’t, it felt like a mask.

“You’re one of the few people who know what she’s actually like. I think you should give it some time, see how it turns out.”

One night, Layla heard movement in the living room. She got up and found Celia rushing out.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, slightly panicking. Celia was hurriedly looking for her other shoe, still in her PJ’s, and her hair was a mess. “Is your mom okay? And Matty?”

“Yes, sorry! They’re fine. I didn’t mean to startle you. It’s Onika, she and her boyfriend broke up. They were out when they started fighting and someone took a video of them and posted it online, so Jess and Matty are on their way and we’re gonna go make sure she’s fine.”

“Oh.” Onika was close to Mateo. Layla was a big fun of hers; she was an amazing model. She also knew Onika had never been single; even so, the most famous bachelors are always looking for a drop of her attention. They were always attending her shows and talking about their crush in interviews. “Let me know if you need anything.”

A couple of hours later, the sound of the doorbell woke her. She looked through the window first because Celia texted her that she was sleeping at Onika’s. She found Jess standing awkwardly in front of her door.

“I had an invitation to deliver,” he signed when she opened the door. His moves were slow and his pupils were dilated; the smell of alcohol hit her and she frowned. Jess wasn’t the biggest fan of alcohol.

“What invitation?” she asked as he pushed his way in and held up his phone.

Layla to the audience: The invitation is digital.

“To the charity event. It’s hosted by my mom and you can give her the painting at the end.”

“Why are you drunk? Don’t you have practice tomorrow?”

“Because I’m upset.” He looked confused that she was asking. She thought about the rumors about him and Onika. Was that why he was so upset? He got drunk after leaving her place?

He walked slowly to the sofa, pausing every few seconds to see if she would help him.

She didn’t. He threw himself on the new sofa and it squeaked under his weight.

“Why won’t you touch me?” he signed, not looking at her. He stared at the big window and it felt like she was not the one he wanted to talk to.

“We touch sometimes,” she still answered. She wanted to so badly to be the person he craved to touch.

“Not on purpose.”

Maybe the rumors were true—he was drunk and upset right after seeing Onika heartbroken over another man. Maybe she imagined their connection, glorified it and made it into something it was not because she’d been so deprived of romantic connections.

She had let the loneliness fester inside her. It was so vast and so ugly, and there was barely any piece of her that wasn’t entangled with it.

She sat down a few inches close to him on the sofa. His eyes were closed. She let her hand hover near his. He was so beautiful, it was unfair.

She stayed with him until his breath evened. When it did, she closed her bedroom door and stayed awake all night.

chapter 14

champagne and sunshine



Layla

The charity event snuck up on them faster than she expected. She had finished the painting of Jess's parents a while back; his mother's birthday happened to be on the same day.

A couple of months before, the Vivienne Westwood team sent Layla a PR package. She had been drawing some of her favorite characters in vintage Vivienne Westwood dresses, along with the fact that she had been photographed with Mateo and Celia a couple of times wearing it. The package had a couple of custom pieces for her, along with her favorite bag, a couple of dresses, and a pair of heels.

She was going to wear one of those dresses to the event. It was a replica of the black corset dress from the spring/summer 1997 *Viva la Bagatelle* collection. The best thing about the dress was that it made her boobs look ten times better. She paired it with a pearl necklace, red lipstick, and a smoky makeup look.

The event was hosted at some fancy hotel. There were paparazzi outside; Celia and Layla arrived together. The venue was huge, high ceiling, marble floors, waiters handing out champagne glasses, and so many well-known people—so many athletes, models, singers.

She didn't mind the event as much as she thought she would. She heard interesting stories, met a lot of gorgeous looking people which her artist brain could take lots of inspiration from.

Layla to the audience: As expected, the dress gets a lot of compliments.

Some men try to approach her, but for some reason they act like she's going to bite their head off. She got more than a few 'has anyone told you you're intimidating?' that she met with utter disdain.

She wasn't expecting Onika to be there. Celia had said that she wasn't feeling okay. *Good for her*, Layla thought. That man did not deserve to be the reason she stayed home and missed out.

She was beautiful, so beautiful it hurt to look at her, just as much as the decision to look away hurt. When she smiled at you, it felt like the sun had particularly blessed you during golden hour, and when she opened her mouth, people stepped closer to eat out of the palm of her hand.

Onika was tall, her dark skin was glistening with glitter, she had a wide nose graced with a golden ring around it. Big full lips with brown lip liner was topped with gloss to give them a glazed look. Long goddess braids were half tied up; she had clips on them that looked like golden butterflies, and she was wearing the Dior green transparent dress from the spring/summer couture 2017 collection.

Other than the donations, the women had started a habit of wearing iconic pieces of clothing and then auctioning them off right after the event, after it was all posted online. The money from the auction of those desired clothing items would also go to different charities. It was Jess's mom who started it. She thought it would bring a whole new audience to the event. Fashion lovers.

She and Jess were talking, laughing. He tipped his head back and laughed—it was an easy laugh—then he put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed in a friendly manner. People stared at them, admired them. Then, when Jess's eyes landed on her, she startled at being caught staring, and his face fell. She scrambled to move, to get a minute with herself.

She had barely stepped foot in the gazebo when Jess's footsteps followed.

"You didn't get my letters?" he asked, frowning, a touch of vulnerability in his eyes. She had gotten them—he had left a

couple of them in front of her door—but like a coward, she thought ignoring them would help with her internal freak out.

“You know, it would make a lot of sense that you would like someone like her.”

“I don’t like Onika that way.”

“You should.”

“Is this your way of telling me to fuck off because there’s something here? Or was it in my head? Because I know I felt something and I thought,” he gestured between them. Cold dread passed through her body; she stood still, so still, to make sure she was not shaking. “You know, you have to know it’s you, Layla.”

“I know.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because nothing can come from it.”

“Nothing?”

“I just think that you shouldn’t go for someone so lost. Someone who’s not easy. Feelings are hard for me. Sometimes, I’ll need to be alone and I’ll always be scared. Sometimes I hate being touched. Someone like you won’t be happy with me in the long run. But Onika? When people see you together, they’ll envy you, they’ll think that you’re lucky. But if they look at us, they’ll only wonder how you put up with someone like me. She’s charming and flirty, not mean. She doesn’t make people uncomfortable; she’s lovely in every way.”

He took a step forward, frustration evident in his face, but Celia barged into the gazebo, ending the conversation.

“There you are! I forgot my lipstick, so I need yours and oh…” she stopped when she noticed Jess and the tension in the gazebo. “Everything okay?”

They both nodded. *He doesn’t look like he wants to look at me right now*, she thought. She gave Celia the lipstick and followed her out.

She went to look for a drink and, just when she thought she was in desperate need of something else to focus on, she saw a

face she'd been seeing online all day. Onika's ex. His eyes were dead set on someone, and Layla didn't have to turn around to know that she was standing behind her. Without thought, she blocked his way and spilled the glass on his very expensive but rather trash looking suit.

"Excuse me!"

"What the fuck?" The man's eyes took three seconds before they drop to Layla's boobs, bunched up and looking amazing. She took his momentary lust to make a quick escape. She heard him mumble something, but the place was crowded and he lost her in the crowd.

Layla to the audience: I don't think he'll be able to find me. He never looked at my face.

Both Celia and Onika were making their way to her, giggling.

"Thank you," Onika told her.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she replied.

"I should have mentioned this: gratitude makes Layla uncomfortable, Sunny," Celia said. A nickname Mateo mentioned; he said it was used by family members and close friends of Onika's. Sunny as in 'sunshine.'

Just then, a blond girl appeared. She looked drunk; she gasped and stumbled; Layla held her up.

"Is your name Sunny?" she asked Layla.

"No."

"Oh, that's too bad. I thought I found a piece of the puzzle." She giggled again.

"What puzzle?" Onika asked.

The girl leaned in and whispered, "Elio's." Onika's eyes flashed at the known fashion designer's name.

"What about him?"

"He said that name a couple of times when we were hooking up. I thought it was a fantasy thing, so I went along with it." The girl skipped away. Layla made sure she made it to the arms of

her girlfriends before she allowed herself to absorb what she said.

Layla to the audience: How scandalous.

The silence after was a bit awkward.

“Do you guys think if we go grab dinner from Amir’s the awkwardness will go away?” Onika asked them.

“I heard Amir’s name,” Kione said, seemingly out of nowhere.

“Didn’t you eat before you came here?” Onika muttered in annoyance.

“Are you fat shaming me? I’m a big guy and I can’t say no to Amir; he makes the best egusi soup with assorted meat and some fufu. I already called him and asked him to make it tonight.”

The annoyance flickered out of Onika’s eyes and she started nodding. Even Celia looked like her mouth was watering.

“Are we talking about dinner? Because I’m ready to get out of here.” Mateo and Jess were the last addition to the group. Jess was unusually reserved. He agreed that they should all grab dinner, and then he took the painting bag and went to give it to his mom while they all headed to their cars.

She felt a slight disappointment. She had tried not to look at the couples who danced; she wanted so desperately to dance with Jess, but she had ruined it.

Amir’s diner was, as usual, crowded. Lots of known celebrities frequented there; the place had a calming interior. It was mostly sage green but had bits of pink, like the flower shaped lamps along with a couple of pink love seats placed in the nooks. It created more intimate seating arrangements.

Amir and his wife were known for their love of different cultural food. They didn’t have a menu as they cooked according to their mood and whatever new food they wanted to try to cook. But they did have a couple of specials which were mostly their best dishes and were frequently requested.

Layla noticed the waiter looking a bit tired as they walked in. Amir was nowhere in sight. “You okay?” She stopped him.

“Yeah, just a bit tired.”

“Where is Amir?”

“In the kitchen. We’re a bit understaffed; almost everyone caught the flu and his wife is sick so he keeps checking up on her.”

“Oh, I can help,” she offered.

“Please.” He nodded.

Kione, who had arrived here before them, was seated at the table next to a guy with black hair. The man was also in a suit.

“Look who I found.” He grinned. “Elio!”

Onika stared at Elio with a sad sort of look, while he avoided looking directly at her.

“We are going to help Amir; he’s understaffed,” Layla said. Kione was a spontaneous kind of guy, so he just nodded.

“Wait, what? I did not start the day with the intention of being a decent human being.”

“You just donated a shit ton of money to charity,” Onika reminded him.

“I was only doing that for praise.”

“A kink of yours?” Elio asked him. His Italian accent was faint, but it was still there.

“People usually buy me dinner before they ask about my kinks.”

“Cassini is not very polite, so I wouldn’t expect decency from him,” Onika tells them, using his last name.

“You shouldn’t comment on my manners, considering I’m the one who has to constantly tell you to behave,” Elio said, his eyes fixed on Onika for a few seconds before he clenched his jaw and broke contact.

“Really? Dinner? For me, they ask even before the drink is served.” Jess gave a slight pout as he got up, but Layla recognized him attempting to cut the tension.

“That’s just rude,” Matty told him as they made their way in. Layla, Jess, and Celia went to the kitchen. Onika and Elio were at the counter taking orders and dealing with the cash, and Mateo and Kione were waiters.

They worked for a couple of hours before Matty barged into the kitchen, asking about all kinds of interesting things that happened in the event while he wasn’t paying attention. Celia could not lie at all, so he could quickly tell.

“I don’t want to gossip,” she said.

“Why not? It’s literally your major,” Layla told her, referring to the fact that she’s studying journalism. “Also, if it makes you feel any better, everyone in this diner is a worse gossip than you.”

Not three seconds later, Kione showed up. “Who are we talking about?” He leaned on the counter. Behind him, she could see Amir pretending to charge his phone, but he was obviously listening.

“You tell them,” she told Layla.

Layla turns to face her best friend. “Girl, guess what?”

“What, bro?”

Celia couldn’t help but chime in about the Sunny incident. Naturally, they stared at the girls in silence for a while. Layla looked at Jess mostly; she wanted to see if she could find traces of jealousy in his eyes but he just looked shocked.

“Is everything okay?” a silky voice asked. They all turned around. Onika was standing at the door, Elio followed behind her, his eyes narrow at them when they continued to stare at them.

“I’ll be upset if you guys are sharing gossip without me,” Onika declared.

Amir told them all that they should get back to work, and an hour later, the crowds started to leave. They closed while he cooked the last meal of the day—on the house for them.

They all ended up getting the egusi soup with assorted meat and fufu; he made some salads and rice as well, to make sure they got full. The meal was quiet. They were all exhausted.

Layla to the audience: The next morning, we all find that our pictures, taken from outside, were trending for hours that night.

There were a couple of comments asking about Nabi, the K-pop idol.. She was there at the hospital that night, and people thought she was a friend of the siblings. Celia got red in the face when she saw the comments. She was supposed to have Nabi on her talk show, but she said there was a silly misunderstanding. Layla knew she went to one of Nabi's concerts a while back, but Celia was being cagey about the details, so she let it go.

It was only a matter of time before she shared the details of it.

chapter 15

dance lesson



Jess

Jess followed Layla to the kitchen. It wasn't a huge mess; Amir hated having a messy kitchen, so he cleaned as he cooked. The kitchen is beautiful and spacious; it's bohemian style, filled with colors on every corner. He got his wife to decorate it because it was the place he loved the most and he wanted it to be filled with her.

Layla was unloading the dishwasher. He helped her for a few minutes; he didn't get the chance to tell her just how breathtaking she looked. He wished he could say it out loud, just once. He couldn't help but envy anyone who got to say the words to her that night.

"You look so beautiful," he signed. "So beautiful, Layla."

"So do you," she signed. "I hate it."

"I wanted to dance with you tonight. I feel like I barely got glimpses of you." It was all the truth. He had seen her when he was standing with Onika. He caught sight of her as she left and immediately knew that she had been standing there for a while. He spent the whole event being pulled by his folks from one person to another. It was safe to say he did a lot of staring from across the room.

He was pleased that she couldn't keep her eyes away from him as well. It felt like they were equally screwed.

"Oh, trust me, you don't want to dance with me. I never learned how to dance, so I'm really horrible."

“Really? What about prom and stuff?”

“I never went to prom,” she said in a cold, detached manner, different from the rest of her soft replies, so he got the sense that he shouldn’t ask prod any further.

“I can teach you.” He offered his hand. She winced a little, so he rushed. “I’ll teach you the easiest one, and we’ll keep our hands on fabric so it doesn’t touch any skin. Does that make you more comfortable?”

She hesitated, and then nodded. He placed his hands on her waist, touching the fabric of her corset. They weren’t terribly close, but the proximity still sent a flutter to his heart. She placed her hands on his shoulders. Jess taught her a simple swing. They had no music, and she was very timid. She kept looking at her feet and then she watched his features, as if expecting him to tell her she’s doing a horrible job.

“See? It’s not hard.” He signed, and then placed his hands back, and they kept going. Layla was humming a song he didn’t recognize. “What are you humming? It sounds nice.”

She scoffed. “It’s Fairouz. It’s more than nice.”

He had no idea who Fairouz was, and he had a feeling that if he asked, he would sound uncultured. He made a note in his head to annoy her until she agreed to send him a full playlist.

“I’m honestly upset about our conversation tonight.”

She looked up at him. “Tell me why?”

“I don’t like Onika. I don’t care what people might think about us. I don’t think you’re lost. I think you’re guarded and I don’t say that in a bad way because how can I judge you for that when I’m also guarded? Feelings aren’t easy for me either. I’m also scared. I fear myself just as much as I fear the feeling I get when you look me in the eye.”

“You don’t even know me, Jess.”

“Layla, Layla, I watched you every day for weeks. I can tell you things and habits I know about you in vivid detail.”

“Please don’t,” she whispered.

“I wasn’t going to tell you because I don’t think you want to hear it, but I hope you’ll let me someday. Today, I learned that you don’t like touching sometimes and that feelings are hard for you. I don’t know a lot of things, but I want the chance to know more.”

Layla turned her head away, she looked angry but not at him, he honestly didn’t know what he was doing there. He just knew how it felt, he knew the craving he feel, the longing for what they could feel if they let themselves, and the need for more from her. He knew the comfort and safety of the hours they spent together.

He was nowhere near perfect and he had a lot to work on, but should that mean he had to hold back on pursuing someone his soul was so familiar with? Was that fair?

Timidly, she opened her palms. He moved his hands and placed them above hers; they weren’t touching but their hands were hovering near each other. He thought back to the one night she let him touch her, when she asked him to play with her hair, how small she sounded when she asked, how vulnerable she seemed.

“What’s taking so long?” Mateo’s voice calls, he sighed aggressively because the siblings were bothering him that day with their interruptions.

“Just think about it, okay? Please consider letting me take you on a date.” Their hands were still hovering, and he brought them a bit closer, close enough to get his skin to tingle with the idea of her touching him.

□

Jess went to visit his parents in their hotel room the next day. They usually got drunk after events, so he expected his mom opening the door looking like she had the worst hangover in the world.

Silently, he made them breakfast. His father watched him. Jess knew he had something he wanted to ask. There were very few things that made Andrew look away from his wife.

“So, are you finally ready to tell us about the girl?” His mom signed.

“Stop acting like you’re psychic, mom.”

“I’m not psychic. I’m just a woman.”

Andrew clapped his hands like she said something poetic. Jess rolled his eyes.

Anne always said that living with men (Jess and his dad) for so long taught her that men have no sense of intuition.

“You guys look good together. She’s beautiful.” His dad praised.

“And talented.”

Of course, they know. It’s Layla, he thought.

“Did you guys know that you loved each other early on?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Anne said, looking fondly at her husband.

“We were a bit difficult I think.”

“He means he was, him and his stupid pride.” Andrew was homeless when he first met his wife. At the time, he thought all she felt was pity for him. People used to talk behind their backs, say he was using her for money. None of it mattered in the end. They loved each other. That was always what mattered the most.

“Were you scared? I don’t think you’re supposed to be scared of the person you love, right?” He asked them.

“Oh honey. It’s impossible not to feel scared when you care for someone so deeply. You’ll be scared of losing them, you’ll be scared of losing yourself, you’ll be scared of hurting them and them hurting you, there’s so much to fear and the truth is sometimes even when you do everything right, even when they do everything right the feeling might creep in sometimes.”

“Trust and safety take a lot of time and effort.”

He nods, his parents ask their usual questions about his health, they ask about his sleeping habits, he continues the lie and says it’s been great and, they don’t question it because the thought of their son pretending with them doesn’t cross their minds, they trust him.

When he left their hotel room, he decided to do some more wandering, he didn't want to go back home, he didn't want to think about anything, he falls back into his habit of pouring his frustration into taking care of others, he headed over to Onika's.

When he got there, Onika looked nothing like the woman who had put on a brave bright smile at the event. Dark circles surround her eyes and she looked so drained. She lets him in then threw herself on the large couch. He started cleaning around her and she watched for a few minutes.

"Couldn't find anyone to take care of?" she asked.

"Fuck off."

"You're like our mother."

"Whatever."

"Did you know people are annoyed at us?"

"What did we do now?"

"They think we've been keeping the friend group a secret and they're annoyed because they want more pictures of all of us together," she said.

Usually Kione was the one who loved taking fun pictures and videos to post them, Jess did a quick scroll through his best friend's account to find a lot of comments asking him when he was going to post a video with his new group of friends.

"I mean, I get it. We're all stunning."

"Right?" A pause, then she sat up with a more serious expression on her face. "I'm going to do it this time."

Onika was rarely single for a long time; she had a deep fear of being alone. He could understand it, especially after what she'd been through with her mom and sister after grief tore through their family.

Recently, fixing things with her mom had massively helped her. He also knew that was how her ex, who she has been dating for two years, justified cheating. He said she was spending too much time with her mom now and that she was changing and getting new ideas.

It was complete bullshit.

Jess believed in her. This time was different. He was so proud of her; he was so glad her mom was in a better place and was making amends for all the time they lost. Onika deserved that.

“I’m proud of you.” He squeezed her shoulder. They talked until he had to go to the gym. On the way, he couldn’t help himself from texting Layla.

“I know you have a hard time sleeping sometimes, so I wanted to suggest that when you have a hard time sleeping, you could give me a call?”

She texted back a few minutes later with a simple ‘alright’.

chapter 16

not crying for help



Layla

The season was looking good, her friends were hopeful, her home was perfect, her sister was okay, her artistic career was doing great, and everything was pretty good.

Until the unfortunate arrival of her time of the month, the day before, along with the first and second day, were just horrible for Layla. Another unfortunate fact is that the universe seemed to conspire against her because she also had food poisoning.

She started the day pretending she didn't want to curl up and die, which was an amazing start in itself. When Celia proposed they go shopping, Layla thought it would be good to move instead of sitting around all day. They were in need of some essentials for Celia's room along with candles, pillows and lamps.

Celia did not mention that Jess and Mateo were coming, Layla hadn't spoken to Jess for a few days, she was usually just a bit more sensitive on the days leading up to her period and he overwhelmed her senses a lot so she thought it would be best to wait for a bit.

She tried not to think about when they danced, how he treated her with so much tenderness and patience. She tried not to think about how when he turned to leave she saw goosebumps on his skin. Watching him intently was turning into a habit, when he wasn't signing, his eyes spoke, his body spoke, his hands spoke and she had to listen, she needed to, a part of her felt like she was missing out on fairness when she wasn't watching him.

Layla to the audience: I'm an artist, I have to look at him. It's for research purposes.

When she had set her eyes on his hand, she had seen it flex, Layla wondered if he felt the same, if he felt that touching her, even through fabric had left a trail, if he felt the ghost of her hands, resting on his shoulder the way she felt like she could still feel the weight of his on her waist. She didn't flex her hand, but she did stare at it for a few minutes before she felt that she was ready to let the world spin again.

As they shopped, she was quiet; it wasn't out of character for her, but she had someone who kept a close eye on her, who took note of her slowed movements.

The thing about growing up with shitty parents is that it felt like you weren't allowed to feel anything. When Layla wasn't feeling well, she had to calm herself and always hold back tears. When she was fourteen, she came up with a trick. She just thought about what horrible names her mother would call her if she started crying, and that helped hold everything back.

If it wasn't already humiliating that she desperately wanted someone to take care of her, that she was simply ignoring how tired she felt, pretending like she didn't want to have a breakdown. Having someone watch her closely and notice that she was occasionally calming herself while holding back tears was worse. She had never felt so exposed before.

They continued to browse while Layla went to the tiny supermarket in front of the store. She grabbed some yogurt because she hadn't eaten anything. It was a bit overpriced, and the place looked sketchy on the inside, but she didn't give it much thought before opening it and taking a few bites.

She started feeling unwell an hour later.

"I need to go back. I have some paintings to work on," she said in a hurry.

"You're sure you don't want to come with us to Onika's? She would love to have you over." Layla waved them off. She drove back and barely made it through the door before she started throwing up.

The next few hours were hell. She realized that it was the yogurt, and she realized she had food poisoning. She already had cramps from her period, but the vomit and nausea gave clues to something else.

Layla curled up on the sofa. She wanted to scream at herself. She should have told Celia she wasn't feeling well. It would have been okay to ask for help.

She heard the sound of someone's car, then knock at the door. Jess looked very displeased when she opened the door.

"What were you thinking?" he signed as soon as he saw the state she was in. "I've been texting you nonstop. I was so worried."

"Shut up. I'm fine." She avoided looking in the mirror on her slow way back to the sofa.

"Let's go to the hospital."

"It's just my time of the month."

"And?"

"And I have food poisoning." He looked so mad at her. She didn't like it when people look at her with anger, so she just closed her eyes.

She heard the fridge open. He was cutting some fruit for her; he brought a glass of water and made sure she drank. His frown was still in place, but he didn't look so angry anymore.

"You can ask for help, you know."

"Says you," she sneered at him, and he sighed.

"Come here, drink it, sweetheart," he signed, and then he held the cup near her mouth. "Chin up, there you go."

Layla to the audience: I really hate Jess.

"I want you to leave," she whispered. "Please." She hugged the pillow, waiting for the cramp to pass.

"Why?" He signed as soon as she sat up. For Jess, every time he felt like he was a burden resurfaced at the request. Every moment he felt like he was someone who was too easy to shut

out, the sting was spreading to his chest. He wanted to collapse on the floor, to clutch her and plead.

Please, not you, Layla. Anyone but you, he thought.

“Because it’s not real.” She was looking up at him with tears in her eyes. He wished she would let him hold her. The desire to hold her hand felt so overwhelming. He shook with starvation for it.

“Why is it not real?” his hands were shaking, but he didn’t bother hiding.

“Because it’s just how your brain works,” she says, simply.

“How my brain works?”

“You don’t like losing control. Your brain is wired that way. You take care of the people around you, you stand by their side when they’re making hard decisions and you protect them. You like to be needed. So when someone comes along and you find out they’ve never been cared for or protected, you can’t help but fixate on them. It’s just who you are.” She took a deep breath. “I’m just so lonely. Even if I’m aware that it’s not real, I can’t help it. I’ve been so cold and your hands are warm and I’m too hungry for warmth to pull away. I don’t know how to defend myself against this feeling.”

They really chose a horrible time to have this conversation, because next thing he knew, she was running to the sink to throw up again.

Jess waited for her, but she didn’t come out. He left a note to tell her that he would go get some food for her. It took longer than planned. There was a lot of traffic and Amir’s was really crowded which meant it took him a bit longer to make her meal.

His phone vibrated on his way back, but he ignored it. Celia was going to sleep at Onika’s today, so he didn’t worry about her being home as he parked.

chapter 17

relief



Layla

When Layla came out of the bathroom, she felt like she was on fire. Her temperature kept rising and she could barely stand for a couple of minutes without feeling dizzy.

She couldn't find Jess outside. She couldn't find his car, either. She felt that she deserved to be left like this, but it still stung a bit. She was glad it was her time of the month; she was all too eager to blame all her feelings on that.

She let the tears finally run down her face. She hadn't cried in a while, but the combination of physical and mental exhaustion really took a toll on her.

She looked for her phone. She made a mistake; she was rude to him and he was just trying to help. She just needed to thank him. She called him but there was no answer.

About an hour later, the door unlocked. She saw her keys in his hands. He must have taken them when she was in the bathroom. He had two bags of Amir's food in his hands, which made her want to continue crying because it was so nice of him.

"Jess." She choked out. She wanted to say 'will you hold me?' she needed to say it out loud, but the words were clogged in her throat. Just then a miracle happened, a miracle she used to dream about, where someone knows what she needs without her having to ask. He was stumbling over to her, dropping the bags. She reached out her hand. Her vision was blurry and suddenly was enveloped in his arms. He was so warm.

He still made sure there was no skin to skin touching.

He kissed her hair, over and over again, and she realized that he was shaking. She lifted her head to look at him. He raised shaky hands, and he signed, “You called and I was driving.”

His eyes were filled with relief. All day, she misread him. He wasn’t angry with her; he was concerned.

“I’m sorry,” she told him over and over again and he shook his head.

He made her drink lots of water. She kept going to the bathroom, but she stopped vomiting. There was barely anything solid in my stomach.

“I’m sorry, I’m being difficult, I’m sorry. I was just being stubborn. I’ll be better,” she said, deliriously, as he tucked her in.

She wanted to get these thoughts out of her head. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw her mother staring at her with disapproval etched into her features. She wanted to beg, get out of my head mama, I am not so terribly unlovable, am I? Am I?

“There’s nothing to be sorry for, and you’re pretty breathtaking just the way you are.”

She had always been someone who felt their emotions too strongly, and this aching loneliness had picked her soul apart. She’d always needed a specific kind of intimacy, one that you usually designed for a partner. She’d held too many parts of her close in the hope that one day she’ll trust someone enough to give it to them, but as she came face to face with someone who was asking her for these parts, her hands trembled with fear.

She tried not to lose herself in him; she tried not to disturb the boundaries she carefully set, but it wasn’t working. Jess was an ongoing attack on her heart. She wasn’t strong enough to fight and win.

□

About two days later, she felt a lot better. Celia was worried when she got back but Layla brushed her off. She went on a simple errand just to get some fresh air.

She ran into Kione while she was shopping at Sephora.

When he saw her, he double checked before coming over. She did the sensible thing, ignoring him, and continued shopping while he trailed behind her. She did not know Kione; he was there occasionally when she hung out with Celia and Mateo, but that was it.

Kione was a bit taller and broader than Jess. He was a big guy and she could see how that worked for his advantage as captain; he looked pretty intimidating.

“We should talk, you and I,” he said. Sometimes when he spoke, he signed, even when he wasn’t talking to Jess. It just seemed like a reflex, as he did it so much because he talked to Jess more than anyone else.

Layla to the audience: The observation warmed my heart, but that’s irrelevant.

“About what?” she asked, trying out the different shades of red on her hand.

“You and Jess,” he said.

She wondered what Jess said about her. She was pretty sure only Kione was aware of the predicament they had gotten themselves into. Layla hadn’t said anything about the nature of her feelings to Celia or Mateo. Talking about feelings was never a part of her life. It was always something that had to be hidden, something that needed protection.

“Go away, Kione.”

“First of all, we’re not on a first name basis.”

“I literally don’t know what your last name is. What would I call you?”

“Really?” He seemed offended she didn’t know his last name.

“Go away.”

“He’s been miserable, you know,” he said.

That made her pause. Layla had a habit of filing away details she noticed about people she saw often. One thing she filed about the Lakers captain was something that Mateo had said: Kione could be a bit dramatic sometimes. She narrowed her

eyes at him and he rolled his eyes, but smiled sheepishly like he got caught.

“Okay, not miserable but distracted, and a bit sad. He’s usually a lot more energetic and outgoing.”

“You should comfort him then.” She told him dryly, she didn’t like strangers being in her business, and Kione looked at her like she was unpredictable, like he was always wary of her, which is not a look she wanted to see on people’s faces anymore.

When she turned around, he caught her elbow.

“Hold on,” he said, looking a bit more serious. “Look, I don’t know you that well, but I know what I’ve seen. Jess loves going to all these events. He’s always the life of any gathering we have. The wives, the husbands, and the kids adore him; he’s all over the place. It’s a lot sometimes, but he loves how much these people love him. He likes being needed. Even the press can’t get enough of him. If this progresses, these people are going to want to meet you, talk to you and get to know you, and that can be a lot.”

It was a lot for her, someone who might at any moment have an anxiety attack, someone who was paranoid and hardly ever warms up to people, this issue had crossed her mind, it was the main reason she thought him and Onika would be good together.

He liked to be needed. She would need him, but would she allow herself to show it? What if her parents were right, and she was truly an unlovable partner? What would happen to her need then? Did Kione realize this situation could break her as well? Is that how everyone would look at them, with a certainty that she would be the villain?

“I’m not trying to get you to stay away from him.” His eyes softened. “But I saw how he looked at you, and I know my brother. If you don’t think you can do this, I need you to stay away from him because I know him well enough to know he won’t survive you.”

Layla glimpsed a flash behind Kione. A girl was taking a picture of them. After a beat of silence, she heard her ask her

friend with a hint of distaste, “Wasn’t she dating his best friend?” Kione glared at them until they left.

“You know, I remember the first I saw Jess. In vivid detail.”

There was a thought that constantly hovered in her mind, that whatever this is started way before she could intervene, that there was this invisible string pulling the pair of them a bit closer over time, in small steps.

“I was bored. I barely knew Mateo at the time, but I was curious because everyone was talking about how well you guys were playing, so I thought I’d see what the fuss was about, even though I know nothing about basketball. When you came out, Jess was a few minutes late, but he came after you. His whole face lit up with so much joy, and I was just forced to notice his smile. It was pretty and then his hair, it was messy and it was impossible not to notice how you made him feel comfortable. He had the brightest smile in the room. I was so envious, and I wanted to be the cause of so much joy for someone. Just once I want to see the love pour out of their eyes and I want to have the chance to show my love in return.”

Kione tilted his head, and she stopped shopping for a moment. She didn’t know if she could be a good partner. She’d never been in a relationship, but she would try. Fuck, she would put every ounce of effort into making him feel loved.

“I don’t care if you don’t approve of me, but you will never talk like you know me or what I would do for Jess again, okay?”

“I—”

“Never again,” she told him.

“Okay.” He raised his hands in surrender. As she made her exit, she caught sight of a mischievous grin on his face, like he’d just gotten exactly what he wanted.

□

Layla tossed and turned for hours before she made the choice to send a simple “hi” to Jess.

“Do you want to go get milkshakes?”

“It’s 3 am.”

“I know a place. It’s LA.”

“Ugh fine. Come pick me up.”

He picked her up in his Mercedes, which she loved even though she wasn’t really interested in cars. They parked in front of what looked like a coffee shop; she recognized the place as one of the places Celia did an interview in one time. They were open twenty-four hours a day, and were famous for having a quiet area where students could study. They had amazing milkshakes. Jess ordered one strawberry milk shake for both of them to share.

“What were you doing with Kione today?” he asked.

“I just ran into him while I was shopping and he said hi.” Jess looked unconvinced. There was always more to it when it came to Kione, who was always plotting for something. “Why don’t you ask him?”

“I did. He tried to convince me that you were begging him to go on a date with you. ”

“That’s just not true. I only asked him for a one-night stand.”

“That’s not funny.”

“It’s the truth.”

“Don’t be mean.” He had a whiny look in his eyes that she really liked. He took the milkshake away. “Tell me you’re a dirty little liar.”

“Put the milkshake back.”

“Say it.”

“No.”

“Alright then, answer this instead. Are you going to push me away again, darling?”

“Probably. Are you going to keep trying?”

“Absolutely.”

“Why?”

“I’ll keep trying and then one day you’re going to let me take care of you.” He didn’t touch her, but he let his hand hover near

hers. He was trying. He'd been trying to make her more comfortable with physical affection. She'd never had someone treat her with so much patience before, and it was making her want to scream at him and hide.

"I won't. I'll fight you each step of the way," she told him.

"I know you will," he signed. His gaze was fond. "Why did you want to see me?"

"I want you to tell me, to explain how you think you know me so well."

"I had predicted as much." He took out papers and pens and started writing. Her heart warmed. They hadn't sent any letters to each other for a couple of days. He gave her a pen, and then got to writing.

"I'm pretty sure blue is your favorite color. All of your paintings have some shade of blue in them, but I think your favorite is ocean blue. You hate bright lights and you lose your temper more if the lights are bright because they irritate you. You hate loud noise. You have a very specific mood for baking. If you're feeling patient, then you'll try to bake. You also think people who don't like cats are creepy, you have different coffee drinks for different mood swings and you cringe every time someone uses a pet name to call you. You have a very specific list of people who are allowed to make skin to skin contact with you and you pace when you have a new idea for a painting.

"I think I knew the moment you caught my eyes was the moment you let me watch you paint, I don't think I've ever noticed before that even though I'm surrounded with people who love what they do, people who make millions of dollars from something that they adore, no one loves it the way you do. There's always a frown on your face when you look at people, but when you paint? It softens your edges. You look different. The look in your eye caught me off guard."

Layla to the audience: I did the one thing that made sense in my mind, which was all frozen because of him. I reached out and pinched his shoulder.

"What is wrong with you?" she asked.

“What’s wrong with me? You’re the one who’s being violent right now.”

“Stop watching me! You aren’t supposed to know these things.”

“But I do and I’ll do whatever I want.”

“I’m going to kill you.”

“Stop flirting with me.”

“You are literally just perfect on paper. There has to be something wrong with you and—”

Jess cleared his throat and adjusted his pants. A slight blush tinted his cheeks. “I should warn you not to be too mean to me, it’ll have a certain inappropriate reaction.”

The laugh slips out of her before she could hold it back and Jess’s eyes light up in a way she’d never seen before.

chapter 18

the lonely writer



Jess

Oh. Oh.

He'd just made Layla laugh.

There was no coming back from this.

It's like these few moments of realizing that you were going to drown, that the water was going to fill your body soon and there's nothing you could do about it. Perhaps he could also say it was like standing face to face with a foe and knowing before the tip of the sword reached its target that you were going to be struck down.

That's what happened that night. He didn't know if Layla realized the power behind her form of weapon but as soon as she smiled at him, as soon as he heard the echo of her laugh, it hit him right in the chest and, he immediately fell.

He feared that he could understand Icarus more and more every day. *I, too, am flying too close to the sun. I, too, know I will burn soon*, he thought. It only took one smile from her to get him to consider willingly getting burned.

“So when you say you hate touching, is it completely off limits or is it something that requires time and baby steps?”

“Time and baby steps was how it was okay for me to touch Matty and Celia.”

“Right.” Hope was really a dangerous thing.

Layla became quiet when she noticed him staring at her. “We should probably get going,” she whispered. Jess needed to be up early, but he didn’t feel like he had a sufficient dose of her.

“Could we stay for a little longer? I’m not done flirting with you yet.” She rolled her eyes and pulled him to the car.

That night, Jess had the worst nightmare he’d had in a long time. It felt like it was happening all over again. He woke up shivering and ready to vomit with his heart pounding. It was a sign, he thought. He needed to go to the graveyard tomorrow.

He didn’t like to think about that day. He felt guilty and ungrateful whenever he did.

It was strange how fast something as life changing as this could happen. Eight years ago, a shooting happened at their school. Shootings were something he’d always heard about, but you never expect it to happen to you. Especially for a sixteen-year-old year old.

He remembered the sound of that first gunshot all too well. While everyone scrambled to hide, Jess took advantage of the teacher trying to calm everyone down, and snuck out. He knew it was stupid, but his first instinct was to go find Kione. If he could make sure Kione was safe, that was all he wanted.

He knew it was stupid. His feet had mindlessly carried him and he had that horrible feeling in his chest screaming at him to go hide, but he could not stand the idea of anything happening to Kione, there was no world where Jess existed without him, there was no point in staying safe if Kione wasn’t.

The hallway had been empty. Jess walked a few steps when he saw the blood. He knew the girl; she was in Kione’s class, one of the smartest girls and as soon as he saw her knew who the shooter was. He remembered hearing her complain about how a teacher had dismissed her when the girl told her that the John had been making her uncomfortable.

She wasn’t dead, though. Jess had knelt down and put pressure on the blood. It was something he remembered his dad telling him about.

Jess looked around frantically, and his eyes met with John’s when he looked up.

Everything after that was a blur. He remembered being aware of the pain in his throat; it was sudden and horrible and he thought that he was going to die right there, on the floor of the school.

I want my mom, he thought. He felt like he was fading.

When he woke up, he tried to call out to his mom, and she burst into tears when nothing came out. That's when he knew something was wrong.

He learned that his vocal cords had suffered significant damage during the shooting and there were complications during surgery that ensured he would never speak again. Jess asked about the girl, about Kione.

The girl had survived, Kione was fine, and six people were dead. Including John. He had shot himself in panic when the police arrived. John was seventeen, and the gun belonged to his father.

Jess had gotten two more visits that he thought about all the time: one from Kione and his family, the other was from the shooter's mother.

Jess constantly visited the graves of those who passed away to ask for forgiveness that they can't give him. He couldn't help but feel guilty for surviving.

Later, he drove back in time for team dinner. He really did not have it in him to be his usual outgoing self. He felt like the last couple of months had knocked him off his feet.

Kione's gaze kept finding his. He tried to avoid it; he could see right through Jess. It took him one look at Jess and Layla to know they had a 'thing' as he described it.

He decided to leave early, sneaking out before Kione could corner him.

He still had a few hours with nothing to do, he didn't want to go home, Jess headed to a place where he could be alone but, where his loneliness would turn into something that's not really taking up too much space in his chest.

Jess had always been someone who was driven by his emotions. He was loneliest when his emotional needs were not

being met, but at the same time, he hadn't been letting anyone attend to those needs.

He walked into the library.

He picked up some of his favorite YA books: *Legendborn*, *An Ember in the Ashes*, *The Hunger Games*, and *The Sun and the Star*. He started analyzing the structure of each book, the writing style, what made them so loved. He looked at some of the reviews, the good and bad ones. He took notes.

He called his parents next. They used to 'force' themselves to read some of the books he read so that they could bond and talk about all the characters and themes they loved. Jess and his father used to act like the time spent discussing the books was a chore and they teased her about it all the time, but they were the ones who got an attitude if she was too busy to have their book meetings.

"I think I'm going to start writing again in my free time," he told them when they answered. They had never seen his writing before, but they were aware of his love for it. "At some point, I want to write about things I felt back then," he said, hesitantly. Jess didn't like to remind his parents of what had happened, they were so happy it felt cruel to keep reminding them of it but he thought he should at least vaguely mention what kind of things he wanted to write about and how much it made him feel better to write it down.

"Oh, honey, that's a great idea," his mom told him. She opened her mouth to speak, but he beat her to it.

"I was just wondering, as elderly people who still love reading YA books," that's followed with a "hey!!" And a stern "Watch your mouth, young man." from his dad.

"Anyway, what things didn't you like about all the books we read?"

Anne was more of a vibes reader. She read purely for escapism, so she was never one to fixate on negativity. Andrew was more of an intellectual reader. He annotated everything and pointed out symbolism, parallels, and stuff, so he talked for a while. Anne listened with a smitten look on her face.

He wrote down some of the things his father said, then because he could tell they really wanted to kiss, he hung up and set a word count on his Laptop.

Today's goal: write until I get a headache.

He had a project that he'd thought about for years. Jess had many works in progress, but he kept going back to that one; it was a *Treasure Hunt X Hunger Games*-inspired story where a huge, deadly arena appears every couple of years with a magic artifact hidden inside. The artifact renews the people's magic so they need to send people in to find it. It was a tale filled with twists, danger, and forbidden romance.

He sat on the floor of the bookstore, hidden in a corner, and he wrote until his eyes burned.

When he went to bed, he felt a little better about himself.

chapter 19

portraits



Layla

Samira won some contest at school. She always said she wanted to be a woman in STEM. When she called Layla, she asked her to come to dinner; she said she wanted them to pick her up from school to go have dinner at a nice restaurant like a family.

Layla couldn't say no to her. It was a simple request, dinner with her family, but it meant she had to see her mother soon.

Layla to the audience: I decide that the most reasonable thing to do was push it to the back of my head and not to think about it at all.

She spent the whole day drawing sketches and portraits of Jess. She specifically drew him multiple times in his pink suit from the charity gala. When she realized it, she sketched a couple of other people to act like what she had just spent the last couple of hours doing was completely normal.

Layla to the audience: don't look at me like that. It is normal. I'm an artist.

Celia attempted to open the locked door; Layla jumped. She was not letting anyone in, so she spoke through the door.

“Do you have someone in there?” Celia teased.

“No, why?”

“You haven't left the room all day.”

“I’m working on commissions.” Celia left but, an hour later, she knocked again. Layla opened it, ready to tell her to leave her alone when she came face to face with her muse, Jess.

“Are you feeling okay?” he signed, pushing his way in. Layla pushed him out.

“Wait, wait.” She closed the door forcefully and ran around the room to hide all the art she’d made of him, shoving them all into a folder.

She only kept the drawings of the other people. Jess was confused when she opened the door, but his eyes held delight when they land on one of the sketches of Kione from that night.

“Oh, look how pretty!” She fully expected him to pick up Celia or Onika’s portraits since they were the ones she put a lot of effort into but, he kept admiring the paper with his best friend’s face. Layla rolled her eyes.

She took the chance to stare at his lips. She tightened her hold on the brush in her hands; she had just been painting those lips. She wanted to be brave enough to kiss him or just to reach and touch.

Jess noticed her staring at his lips and inhaled sharply. He took a step closer, followed by another, until there was barely any room between them. His hands were clenched. She wanted to thank him for being so careful, so considerate of all the silly little things she made him do. For the longest time, she only knew what it was like to be touched when the intention was to harm and humiliate. She was still coming to terms with the fact that anyone would ever want to touch her because they wanted to show love, not resentment and anger.

She put her hands on his chest. His shirt was soft and she could feel his heart beating so fast.

“So what about me?”

“What about you?”

“I don’t get a painting?”

“I don’t have the color palette for your complexion,” she said. It’s not really a lie. Layla had run out of the colors she would need to paint him because she’d been using them all day.

“How convenient,” he replied. She was wearing a long sleeve crop top. He carefully placed his hands on her wrist to make sure her hands stayed on his chest. His eyes scanned her face, searching.

“This is okay,” she whispered. He nodded; his pupils were dilated.

They stayed like that for a few seconds before she stepped back. He sat on the edge of the bed, and she headed over to the desk chair. Jess started telling her about all these cool scenes he had planned. He explained the plot and the world building. Layla had her iPad out and she was sketching as he spoke.

After that, he opened his laptop and went into full writing mode on her bed; she made a note to sketch him in that exact position later.

She ended up drawing two black and white scenes from his book; they weren't too detailed, but she liked them. She noted that time seemed to run away from her when she was with him.

“What were you sketching?” he asked her.

She should have lied. She was a great liar most of the time, but a very ill-timed blush crept up on her.

“It's nothing.”

“Liar. Let me see.”

“No.”

“Please? I'll be good to you and I'll shower you with compliments.”

She handed him the iPad. Well, it was more like she slapped it on his chest, but he didn't seem to mind.

“It's just a simple sketch, but I liked how you described the scene.” He was so quiet, just staring at the screen. Layla was confident in her work, but she didn't want him to hate it. Maybe it was out of line that she just started sketching his unfinished project without asking first. “It's just how I pictured what you described, so obviously it's not perfect or anything. I should have asked first.”

“Silly girl.” He pulled her closer, looking down at her in a very fond way. She loved that look more than anything. It felt like it was designed for her. He ran his fingers through the strands of her hair, then took a step forward and she stepped back until she was cornered against the wall. Jess placed his hands on the wall.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Why do always try to corner me?”

“I don’t know. It feels like you’re always running and I need to do something about it.” She chuckled, then tried to lightly push him away. He gently grabbed her hand and she tried to use the other one, but he grabbed it and pinned them both above her head using just one hand.

“I do not. Stop cornering me,” she told him. She wanted to attempt to tickle him but he had her pinned with an amused look in his eyes.

“It just happens, okay?” he signed with one hand.

“Like when you pulled my hair?”

He blushes then nodded. “Can I put them in my book?”

“No.” Yes.

“Why not?”

“You’re not even finished with the first draft yet. What if you change the scenes of something?”

“I’ll hire you to remake them.”

“I am not taking money from you.”

“Yes, you are. You’re literally the best artist I know.”

“I’m also the only artist you know. I am not taking money from you. It sounds so weird. What’s wrong with you?”

“Just shut up and take my money.”

“Reyes, no.”

“I’m a client. Why are you discriminating against me?”

“Just because.”

“If you don’t take my money, I swear to god, I’m going to kiss you.”

“Why?” she asked him.

“Why?”

“Yes, why?” Why do you want to kiss me, she wanted to say.

“Because I’ve been imagining it for a while and I want to know what it’s really like.”

“I haven’t been kissed in a while,” she blurted.

“Ok. Can I touch your cheeks?”

“Yes. I’m nervous,” she said.

“I like that.”

“You like that I’m nervous?”

“I like that I make you nervous. It means my plan to charm you is working.” he smiled. She hated his perfect smile.

“I may have lost my kissing skills.”

“I’ll have to test them for you” he carefully cupped her cheeks. Her eyes were wide open. Jess was staring at her. There was a soft flush to his cheeks. His chest heaved as his breathing matched hers, leaving him in quick, short pants. His thumb swept across her bottom lip as he searched her face, her eyes. “Pretty, pretty eyes,” he murmured.

“Thanks, yours are alright,” she said, breathing too fast.

He started by placing soft, small kisses on her jaw. The feel of his lips on her skin was something she’d never stop thinking about. She would try later to paint something that felt similar to how she felt as his forehead rests on hers, as their heartbeats matched each other’s. He placed a quick kiss on her mouth; she made an annoyed noise, and he chuckled as he brought his mouth forward for a proper kiss.

The second time, he kissed like he wanted to bruise her lips. He kissed her with rough affection, her lips swelling beneath his. He tugged her hair to expose her neck; he sucked on her neck and she pulled his hair to get him to come back to kiss her because she wasn’t finished.

Their kisses were desperate. Something about them would always be desperate. There was no escaping it, no denying it.

“Jess.” A whimper crawled up her throat when his tongue swept into her mouth. She didn’t realize how tight she’d twisted her fingers in Jess’s fluffy hair until he bit her lower lip in warning and groaned.

“Jess,” she whispered again.

“I know, I know,” he signed. They were grinding against each other. She had no intention of stopping, but he had gripped her waist to stop her. He picked her up to place her on the desk. When she placed her hands on his cheeks, he took her finger into his mouth. His eyes were still on hers. Her lips parted, breath caught in her throat as he playfully sucked her fingers. He seemed to be willing to put his mouth anywhere she asked him to, like he was just waiting for the chance to. She pulled away to press her face into his neck. The intimacy of the kiss was stealing away all of her senses.

She pulled back, which made him step away. They were both breathing heavily; she wanted to let this go further, but she felt so disoriented and out of control. Layla thought it was just a crush, but evidently, it was bigger than that. The kiss confirmed it; it was a feeling unlike anything she had ever experienced.

“I should go,” he told her.

“Okay.”

“Training camp starts soon. It’s usually a very busy time. I won’t have a lot of free time, but I just wanted to ask if we could write more letters? I think it’ll relax me.”

“How long until the camp ends?”

“About three weeks.”

“I’ll write every day.”

When he left, she paced in her room. Salem came in and she picked him up. He was used to being picked up whenever she needed emotional support.

“Don’t think I didn’t see you getting pets from him. You looked like you enjoyed it,” she told the cat, and he blinked. “Do you think I shouldn’t have stopped it?”

Growing up in a house with no love shaped her in a way that was so hard to describe. It felt like there was a wall between her and the people who had been loved before. They experienced closeness and intimacy in a way she could never understand.

To Layla, love felt overwhelming, disorienting, and maybe even unbearable. *Who could ever look at me and feel like the sun shined more brightly when I smiled? Who could ever feel a healthy love towards me if my own parents couldn't stand the sight of me?* she asked herself.

She feared the touch of someone's hand almost as much as she craved it. She had allowed this loneliness to fester inside her; it was so big and so ugly, there was barely any piece of her that wasn't entangled in it. There's barely any piece of her that wasn't so starved.

It was so hard to connect her thoughts and what she had been told her whole life to the image of a very kind, considerate Jess.

She didn't want to fight it, but there were things he didn't know about her and, she couldn't help but think, would he still be interested if he knew just how weak she was?



chapter 20

training camp



Jess

Jess left for camp a couple of days after the kiss. He left a couple of letters with Amir's wife, Noor. She had smiled, a sort of knowing smile. Noor happened to be his mother's best friend. Her truest friend, as Anne didn't grow up surrounded with honest or loyal people.

He'd decided that he wanted the first letter to be a little dramatic, only a little, just to make her smile. He could see it in his mind's eye, the very specific fond smile with an eye roll, so he wrote...

Day 1: agony.

My dear Layla,

It has been a thousand years since the last time I laid eyes on you. My teammates are horrifyingly ugly in comparison to your fairness (please don't tell anyone I've said this, my best friend is the captain and I will be seen as a traitor) please write to me as soon as you can to ease this torture.

Most ardently,

Jess

He couldn't help his thoughts wandering to that kiss. He couldn't help but wonder at Layla giving him permission to touch her.

She had kissed in a way that made him wonder and ache; it made him think, in the middle of smiling into her soft lips, that he could never go back, that this itching feeling in his chest was

right and that their particles will only ever belong in close proximity to each other. He had looked into her eyes and he knew it; it confirmed everything he'd been aching for and dreading.

Layla. Layla was the true north of his heart's compass. A feeling like this only existed in his thoughts. It was never something that was within reach.

He felt bruised over a kiss that they should have never shared; he was stuck with one of his most vulnerable moments repeating in his head, but vulnerability has never looked so wondrous.

"It's so good to be back," Mateo mumbled quietly by his side. "Right?" he nudged.

Jess always loved training camps, even though they made him a little nervous. The pressure set in when camp started. It was a time when people started to watch them so that they could start setting their expectations. *They should have the highest expectations for a team like ours*, Jess thought.

Jess heard from staff members and his coach that the team chemistry became a lot better once Kione became captain. Kione was one of the youngest captains. When Jess made the team coach hold a vote, the players voted his best friend as captain. It was the right decision. Kione's dad was a living Lakers legend. He had also been captain, so it felt like the title belonged to him.

He was just the right man for the job because he knew how to bring out the best in people, the same way his dad did. He was also somewhat of a mastermind. He watched and schemed to get everyone going in the right direction.

"My mother is a therapist. I can't help if I can analyze human behavior in the most correct way. I can't help it if I know better than most." Those were his usual words whenever someone mentioned his scheming.

The Camp usually took place in the team's practice facility. It boasted state-of-the-art training facilities, including top-notch courts, weight rooms, and recovery areas. It held a significant role in preparing the team for the upcoming NBA season. It was

an important period where players, coaches, and staff come together to lay the groundwork for a successful season.

It was intense. The players had a detailed schedule created for them, outlining the various activities, practice sessions, and team-building exercises. The planning included rest days, meal arrangements, and transportation logistics. They basically took care of everything just to make sure that the player could focus on the game and the team.

The only things the players had to worry about was honing their skills, refining their techniques, and building a cohesive team that operates seamlessly on the court.

There was also a faint worry about the media as the camp generated significant media coverage from various outlets, including local and national newspapers, sports websites, television networks, and social media platforms.

Journalists and reporters closely follow the camp, interviews with players, providing daily updates, insights, and analysis on the team's progress, player performances, and strategic developments. There were also open practice sessions and fan meet and greets.

Jess hated and loved that part. He hated feeling so scrutinized, but he loved how families who supported the team and its legacy for years, whose families supported the team even before that showed up. It was a special kind of bond.

He managed to stay focused, to do exactly whatever is needed of him. It wasn't so hard with Kione around; it was not so hard because basketball had always been something like a reflex to Jess, courtesy of being taught by the best at such a young age.

At the end of the day, it felt like a reward when he opened a letter or got a text. Sometimes, they face timed, and she showed him her work. He had wanted to ask more than once why she seemed to paint everyone they knew, but not one painting was of him.

Jess to the audience: It sounds stupid, but it feels like a part of her that they're all getting and I'm being isolated from.

He didn't say anything, but he was so hungry to know more about her so he started telling her more things about himself in

the hope that she'd do the same. For the most part she did. There was only one topic she has avoided like the plague.

Her parents.

One night when they were talking, the conversation led to talking about family and she asked if his mom liked the painting; he recalled the happy tears she got when she saw it.

“My parents, they're the coolest people I know. They're so in love with each other. I used to watch them all the time. I used to think I'll never have something like that because we can't all be that lucky. They really fought for each other, you know? And they're just so warm. They say they're boring now all the time, not in a mean way, but they were so adventurous when they were younger, so they just love being the boring couple who kiss all the time. I don't see it that way. I think they're peaceful and safe and I love it.”

“Did you want siblings?”

“I had Kio.”

“How did you guys meet?”

A pause, then, “You have to promise not to laugh.”

“I'll do whatever I want.”

“Okay, so, he just came out of nowhere at school and he tried to punch me, so I defended myself. We were wrestling when another boy came and asked what was going on and I said that I had no idea, then Kione, who looked really sheepish, said...

“‘I thought you were another blond guy who made a really mean comment to my lunch friend, Lizzy.’ He pointed at his friend and I remember she looked really sad and on the verge of crying. ‘But then when you turned I realized it wasn't you, but you were panicking and hitting me back, so I just kept going. Nice reflex, by the way.’

“I ended up helping him find the boy who bothered her, and we were mean to him, but in a chivalrous way. He later found me and said I'm tall enough to consider basketball and that he had chosen me to be honored and to train alongside him. I was at his house the next day. I was ten. We've been glued at the hip since then.”

Layla had been chuckling quietly this whole time. “This actually makes a lot of sense.”

Jess to the audience: We get that a lot.

“What about your sister? Are you close?”

“Yes,” she said fondly. “She was my only sense of comfort.”

“How come?”

“I wasn’t a happy kid I guess, but Samira has that effect where she knows how to make your day better, how to calm people. She’s so good at school. She’s my source of pride.”

□

“So, did you like our kiss?”

“It was alright.”

“Alright? Excuse me, but I literally had to restrain your hips from grinding on me. It was a little better than alright.”

Layla and Jess talked every day until camp ended but, they never talked about their kiss which was a source of great frustration for Jess.

Camp ended in late September, and October came in a quick blur. Kione had had it with Jess’s attitude, so he decided to give the lovebirds a push in the right direction.

Unfortunately, he didn’t cross paths with Layla except on the day of the Lakers’ first game.

chapter 21

first game



Layla

On the day of the game, Layla decided to wear the Lakers leather jacket 90's. She paired it with a basic purple top and some shorts with black heels.

Mateo got the girls court side tickets. Onika came to Celia's and Layla's place early and dumped her makeup and clothes on Celia's bed. They got ready together; it was not an unpleasant time.

The girls drove there together. There was lot of traffic and a lot of people heading there. When they arrived, it was crowded and a lot of people started taking pictures of Onika, who wasn't even slightly fazed by the amount of phones pointed at her.

The girls sat for a while before the players came out; the arena filled up quickly. The players started their pregame workout about an hour before the game. Jess and Kione mirror each other step by step in the way that people who learned everything together did.

They start with dribbling drills on their handles, then one legged free throws where Mateo joined them, then the three start to really show off to the point where everyone is worked up and cheering them on. They shoot threes from every area in court. Mateo posed for multiple pictures, and then they do full court shots. Mateo and Kione end up dancing to *Gasolina* while Jess shoots his shot. They try to get Jess to join, but he blushed and shyly shook his head. They still danced around him and he shook his head, his smile bright.

They do a lot more things that she couldn't name; she knew the previous steps because Jess had explained the routine to her in his attempt to convince her to let him teach her to play. Those were the ones that stuck.

Celia and Onika went to get drinks and nachos. The next thing Layla knew, a ball landed right in front of her, like someone kicked it there. Kione made his way in front of her and sat down to tie his shoes. He looked up; they were close enough that she could hear him speak.

“So, have you seen him naked yet?”

“What?”

“Jess, have you ever seen him naked?”

“No,” she said, confused.

“I have. Lots of times.” He finished tying his shoes, but he was still on his knees.

“Good for you?”

“I heard you were painting people, so I thought you should know if you want to paint him I think nude would be best.”

“I—”

“He gets flushed pretty easily, you know? So when he comes out of the shower, he's pink all over. You would have to use that.”

“Use what?” she asked, aware of the blush tainting her cheeks, aware of the way her body quickly started to heat.

“Pink. For the color palette. Keep up, Mubarak.”

“Oh, okay.” She nodded. This was the wrong place for the thoughts that filled her head, and she desperately needed a cold shower.

When Layla looked up, she found Jess glaring at his best friend. Kione laughed and Jess stepped away from him, shoving him out of the way. Kione was still chuckling.

Throughout the game, she tried to keep up. Onika filled her in when she didn't understand something, but she mostly watched Jess. He played center and, at some point when he scored, he

didn't just slam it in past defense; he played the two defenders on him with such finesse they were still wondering where the ball went for a few seconds after.

The Lakers win against the warriors that day. She was surprised to find that she enjoyed the atmosphere, and would have enjoyed it more if it wasn't for stupid Kione with his stupid words.

Layla received a good amount of creepy DMs the next day.

Layla to the audience: I know it doesn't look good. First, I'm photographed with Jess with a ring on my finger and in a very date-like setting, then I'm photographed with Kione and it looked like he took me shopping because I kept making him hold my things. Take into account that there were already rumors a while back about me and Matty because it's not like platonic relationships exist, right? So now I'm at their game again and Kione comes up and starts talking to me and I'm blushing and then the two players who are never not grinning when they're together are shown and one of them looks so pissed at the other.

□

After the game, Layla met Jess near his car. He had asked her to wait for him and he found that he really liked that this woman sat through the whole game just to watch him, even though she doesn't know a lot about the game, that she matched her clothes to his team, and that she waited for him.

"Kione and I were talking about you," she blurted as they got in the car. Jess tilted his head to the side.

"Inappropriate things. We said inappropriate things," she said. The full picture became a lot less blurry and he was reminded that his best friend was a sneaky fucker.

"What did you say?" he asked, smiling.

"He said he's seen you naked." Layla wouldn't look him in the eye.

"That's true."

"And that you get flushed and turn pink when you leave the shower. I just thought you should be aware of what we said

because if you don't, it's weird."

"It's fine, Layla. I hope you liked the picture he painted."

"You're both very annoying," she informed him curtly.

Jess to the reader: we get that a lot, for some reason.

"So I was thinking," he signed.

"God save us."

"You're not even religious," he reminded her.

"I keep forgetting."

"So anyway, I wanted to teach you a couple of things about basketball and then you and I could have a little competition of who can get more shots and I could win and hold it over you for the rest of eternity."

□

There were about two or three days between each game the team played, accompanied by traveling and all that mess. Layla knew he didn't have a lot of time, but he would sneak in whatever he could. She watched all of their games when they weren't in LA.

As soon as he got some free time, they installed a basket in her yard. Layla sat and watched him install it. There was a small debate in her head of whether she should tell him she missed him terribly, but the nice words wouldn't leave her mouth.

Layla to the audience: speaking of my mouth...

She thought about the kiss all the time. She had a feeling he had left the ball in her court and she was panicking over what to do with it and where it should go now.

"Ok, the first thing is you need to make sure your form is correct." He started moving her around, adjusting her 'form'. "Tilt your feet because you want your dominant side shoulder to be almost facing the basket."

Layla had a small suspicion that Jess was holding back on tricks and secrets to master basketball, and yes, maybe she wasn't listening to everything he said and instead opted to watch

his biceps move but still she could feel his smug soul holding back so that he could win.

She got zero out of thirty shots. Jess was trying and failing to hold back from laughing.

Layla to the reader: looking back at the situation, I think I may have taken it a bit too seriously, but in my defense I prefer the feeling of winning as I think I've lost enough.

Layla decided to call the one person she didn't want to call, the person who was taught alongside Jess.

His best friend.

chapter 22

captain



Layla

To her surprise, Kione took it quite seriously. He even gave her virtual advice while they were traveling. Sometimes she would hang up early on Jess just to call Kione and show him how she made the shot.

She didn't think she could actually beat Jess; he had set the bar pretty low. Whoever gets all thirty shots wins. She could win if she mixed a little bit of seduction along with her new small knowledge of basketball.

Kione to the audience : looking back at it, I still don't understand why he was mad. I thought Layla and I really bonded during that time.

“HAVE YOU THOUGHT THAT MAYBE YOU'RE JUST A HORRIBLE TEACHER???” she yelled.

“OH I'M THE PROBLEM NOW?”

“YES.”

“I GAVE YOU CLEAR INSTRUCTIONS.”

“STOP YELLING AT ME.”

“YOU STOP FIRST.” He crossed his arms, waiting for a more gentle tone. She had hung up on him.

The next time Jess tried to play with her, she had gotten all the shots. He was confused and annoyed. While Layla was in the bathroom, he grabbed his phone and sent a dozen texts to Mateo to ask him if he was sure that he never taught Layla how

to shoot. Matty was with Kione so he got a call from his best friend as soon as he sent the texts.

“I thought you were teaching her,” his friend signed.

“I wasn’t. I mean, I was and I wasn’t. I was holding back so I could win. How do you think she learned? Youtube?”

“Unlikely, it was probably someone else.”

“But who?”

“Now that you mention it, I did see her eyeing that Chris guy from the Warriors during the game. Maybe she asked him.”

“Chris? No, she doesn’t know him.”

“Hold on, let me check something.” After a pause, he said, “Oh, there it is. He follows her on Instagram.”

“No!”

Kione’s fun little game did not last long. When Layla came back, he’d asked her to walk him through how she learned, and he recognized Kio’s words through her mouth. He decided he needed a new best friend as the one he got only gave him headaches.

He sat on the bench when he realized Layla hadn’t actually had her eyes on Chris. He sighed, his whole body relaxing. He had spent an hour trying to come up with a way to address the situation, and she told him he was acting strange.

“What had gotten into you today?” she asked him, looking down at where he was sitting. He explained Kione’s stupid prank, and she laughed.

“This isn’t funny. I was going to burst into fire.”

“You’re fine.”

“No, nono, I think we should be just friends,” he said dramatically, clutching his heart.

“Just friends?”

“Yes, I don’t think I’m built for these kinds of things. I was too stressed out today. I think my heart gave out. Is it possible to have a heart attack at twenty-four?” He started pacing. Layla rolled her eyes.

Layla to the audience: I've always thought men were very dramatic.

Layla walked to him and pushed him to sit down. He made no protest.

She sat between his spread legs on the floor and started unzipping his jacket.

Jess's mind was too stunned. He kept staring at her fingers. Layla moved closer, slowly, just in case he wanted to push her away.

He didn't.

She started kissing down his neck. He drew in a sharp breath. Layla's hands were exploring his body, but they were never where he wanted them to most.

She abruptly stopped and pulled back. Jess scrambled out of his dazed state to pull her back in. He really liked how she kissed him, how she touched him.

"I dare you to tell me we're just friends again," she told him., "You wouldn't be so hard and whiny for me if we were just friends."

She had to set the record straight. She may have a lot of issues, but she wanted him and, after all this, she was going to have him. Friend was not a word she wanted to use.

"Alright, not friends," he swallowed. "Pending statues."

To both his dismay and delight, Layla won that night because she got all the shots and he lost because she had flashed him and he lost his focus.

Jess to the audience: she has a small tattoo on the side of her left boob, and I was only trying to figure out what it is. I'm just a curious man, okay?

In early December, the Lakers had ten days with no games in schedule. Jess's parents had decided to visit him and he'd asked Layla to meet them. She surprised him by saying yes. The day of the dinner, the house would be empty save for Jess, his parents, and Layla.

His parents were excited. He had never brought someone he was interested in romantically to meet them. His mom was a ball of energy, making various dishes, cleaning every inch of the house, and then running to get ready.

Layla showed up on time, with a little cake in her hand. She wore a long-sleeved midi, light blue dress that made her hair brighter. When he took the cake, he noted that her hands were shaking, and that she was constantly wiping them on her dress.

“You don’t have to be nervous.”

“Oh! Oh, thank you, that helps.” She glared at him.

His parents decided they couldn’t wait any longer and made their way to welcome their guest. There was a lot of polite hand shaking.

“What were you whispering about?” his father asked them both.

“Layla was shaking, and I was reassuring her.”

“I was shaking with annoyance. Your son will not stop bothering me, and he was also very impolite as he did not mention how nice I looked, sir.”

“Jess! That’s not how I raised you. You always shower a woman with compliments when you know she took the time to look good for you,” his father scolded. Jess glared back at Layla.

“You look stunning,” his mother added.

“I was getting to it.”

Layla looked at his parents in awe. She was puzzled by how present his father was, how easily they joked with each other. He knew so much about his son; he spoke of his son, asked question but avoided speaking about himself.

Layla was very charmed by Anne, both father and son noted with fond eyes. Anne was elegant and kind, and she was an attentive mother. When she spoke of how much she admired Layla’s art, she pretended to look for her phone while blinking rapidly.

Layla reacted to Anne's kindness with restraint. She was too still, too quiet. Anne had no problems filling the silence, talking about art, what she made for dinner, and talking about her son.

When Anne went to set the table, everyone helped. Layla dropped a plate, a fancy one, and it broke. She panicked, apologizing profoundly over and over again

"Sorry, I'll clean it up." She knelt. Anne took Layla's hands.

"Darling, your hands, you need to be careful."

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, don't be silly. I really hate that plate. It's part of a set and we got it as a gift from this woman who we later found out was talking shit behind our backs. I keep forgetting to donate them."

That plate was from Anne's favorite set, but Layla didn't need to know that. Jess couldn't be more grateful to his mom.

Layla leaned into Anne's affection like a frightened cat would.

"I simply must get you something for your birthday, as a thank you for the amazing job you did for the painting. When is it?"

"Oh, that's okay. I don't really celebrate birthdays, ma'am."

"Just Anne. How come?"

"I don't know. It wasn't an important celebration when I was growing up."

Anne stared at her. They shared what Jess liked to call the 'understanding sisterhood' look. Then she slowly reached out and gently squeezed Layla's hand.

Anne had seen and dealt with those who acted like frightened cats whenever they were offered affection. She'd had married one, so she was a bit more familiar with the subtle signs and so was her son. She'd told him almost every detail about the journey with his father.

Jess had seen that look on the girl's faces and eyes countless times, when they talked without really using words, when they

understand a lot about the situation with having to explain it in painful detail.

“Will you let me bake a cake for you when it’s time? I’m really good at baking,” his father told her.

“That’s true.”

Andrew was a lot more reserved than Anne. He was polite and mostly opted to observe Layla’s interactions with his family. He was the kind of man whose affection you had to win slowly over time.

The sound of her phone ringing broke through the conversation. It was Celia. Layla texted her that she’d be home soon.

“I should go back. I need to get up early tomorrow.” She hastily said her goodbyes. Jess followed. It was starting to rain. They got wet as soon as they left the house.

“Do you think I did okay? I should have talked a little more. Do you think the cake was too much? My grandmother said it’s impolite to go empty-handed the first time you’re invited to someone’s home.”

“Sweetheart, take a few breaths, yeah?” She did, but she was still pacing. Jess grabbed her gently and pulled her towards him. Her back met his chest, and he tightened his hands. He marveled for a second at the trust given to him to be able to hold her in his arms. “They adored you.”

Her hand came up to stifle a small sob. She’d been nervous all day. She had to change of her first choice because she soaked the dress in sweat; he didn’t realize just how important this was to her, just how sore her heart was when it came to this. He kissed her head with all the tenderness he could offer.

“I’m sorry I didn’t realize how frail my nerves are today. I really wanted them to like me.”

“They do.”

“Do they change their mind often?”

“Not that I know of.”

“That’s good.”

“You could spend the night if you want. I’d really like you to.”

“I have a painting to work on. It’s really special, so I’d like to finish it soon.” She saw the hope disappear from his eyes.

“I’m going to pick you up tomorrow for breakfast. I want us to talk about something but I don’t feel like now is the time. I’ll let you have your break down in peace tonight.”

“Chivalry is alive and well.”

“I also want the excuse to see you again as soon as possible.”

“I’ll allow it then,” she sniffed.

chapter 23

favorite flower



Layla

True to his word, Jess picked her up early in the morning for breakfast. She had been awake for ten minutes when she got a text saying he was ten minutes away. When she met him at the front door, he told her he'd decided he wanted to take her to try a new breakfast place that was known for their amazing waffles.

"I thought we were going to Amir's diner."

He'd stood with his hand on his hip and quite an attitude. "I'm not just going to take you to the same place every time. Give me some credit." He rolled his eyes, too. She could not believe she had feelings for such a sassy man.

The food was really good so she excused him, but she didn't like the interior.

Layla to the audience: it was industrial. There's no need to describe such an ugly setting and traumatize everyone else.

"Don't you think we can actually give this a try?" Jess asked.

"Give what a try?"

"This. Us."

"What do you mean?"

"Layla, I want this to be serious. I don't like not knowing what we're doing, not knowing what to do next. I think we should give the relationship a try."

"A relationship? We can't be in relationship."

“Why not? I’ve been taking what I can get but I can’t deny I want more every day and I know you might have some fears, but I’m really easy to please and I know we can make it work, I can get you to trust me and everything will be—”

“Don’t act like I’m the only problem here,” she said defensively. Neither of them liked this. The mood had soured in seconds.

“I didn’t mean for it to sound like that. I just thought after last night.” He thought they could work things out the way his parents had. He can’t help it. He’d watched their love his whole life. It affected the way he looked at relationships. He’d always been too much of a hopeless romantic.

She laughed. It sounds a little cruel. “You know, there’s a difference between being easy to please and being used to neglect.”

“I am not neglected,” he said, getting just as defensive.

“Jess,” she said his name in frustration. “Jess, you convinced everyone around you that you’re this big, tough guy who’s going to take care of them. You never ask for help because you think people will look at you differently if they think you need them to take care of you, too. You’re scared of being a burden. Look me in eye and tell me you don’t think this affected all of your friendships and relationships. Don’t you think we should be at a better place mentally before trying whatever it is that you want?”

There was only the sound of them calming their breath.

“You know, wanting to be with someone, wanting something serious with someone you feel so strongly about, is not just reserved for those who are mentally healthy all the time. Perfect people. That’s not how it works. It’s also not fair.”

He stayed quiet for a while after that, jaw clenched. Her words clawed at a raw wound inside him, one that he had bandaged and hidden. He needed to stir the conversation away to something lighthearted, sometimes that didn’t make him want to pluck his hair out.

“Is this our first argument? Can I send you your favorite flower after this?”

Was it an argument? They were flawed, both of them, but the only arguments she'd ever witnessed were much worse than this. As for Jess, his parents had always shielded him from the bad parts of everything. Layla had never thought that feeling safe was possible at times of disagreements.

"Shut up," she chuckled. She let him get away with it this time. He let her get away with many unanswered questions. She decided to run her feet over his thigh, teasing, torturing.

Jess grabbed her foot and squeezed. Layla tried to take it back, but he was unwilling to part with it. He squeezed her feet between his thighs.

"Give me back my foot."

"I politely decline."

"Jess," she said, wiggling.

"Layla," he mouthed, wiggling and not letting go

"You're squeezing too much. I'm in terrible pain."

"Liar. Say please."

"Please."

"What is your favorite flower?"

"I don't have one."

"Answer and I'll free you."

"I really don't have one. I've never gotten flowers before, so I guess I'm impartial."

"Oh, okay."

When she got back home, there were so many flower bouquets all over the place: one of every kind, a couple that were mixed and colorful. The bouquets were ridiculously huge. She could barely carry them.

"Who are these from?" Celia screamed, jumping up and down, "They said it was for you, but it didn't have a name. Is it a girl?" Then she gasped with a horrified look on her face. "Is it a man?"

But she was too busy looking at each of the flowers. The bouquets were so big it would be easy to hide letters in them.

There was card hidden in one.

Now you can choose your favorite flower. Please let me know when you decide.

Ardently yours,

Jess

Layla realized with horror that she was falling in love with him. She also decided she liked too many flowers to choose just one. Her choice was a colorful bouquet that mixed multiple kinds.

Layla to the audience: at this moment, I wanted to suck him off so hard he'd start to cry.

chapter 24

intimacy



Layla

Two days pass with no contact. It has been a long process of realization for Jess and Layla; however, this was the first time where he did the avoiding. Kione texted her more than once, asking her what she did. She didn't answer, and Jess didn't reply to her texts.

She decided to go to his apartment. She still had the key.

Mateo was nowhere in sight. She missed him as well and wanted to see him.

The door to Jess's room was open, and it smelled like sweat. It caused an alarm in her mind, as he was the spotlessly clean kind of man and wouldn't like his room to smell like anything other than vanilla.

Jess was lying on the bed, in his workout clothes, sweat drenching his hair. His bed wasn't made and he hadn't even taken his shoes off.

"Jess?"

Nothing. He didn't even lift his head. He was just staring at the ceiling. "Shouldn't you be taking a shower?"

He sat up, his eyes looked redder than she'd ever seen them, he probably had a bad night, a small stab of pain went through her chest at the thought that he could have talked to her but didn't, this was how Jess acted when he was sad, retreating into a shell.

"You were right."

“About?”

“I was having a hard time sleeping yesterday, and I decided to ask for help. Simple, just ask one of my friends if they could just come over and stay the night and just be here, I guess.”

“And?”

“I couldn’t do it. It just wouldn’t come out, so now I’m tired and I need to shower, but I’m too tired.”

“Get up ,” she told him.

“No. You got your breakdown. It’s my turn now.”

“Get up, Jess,” she repeated, making the gesture with her hands before grabbing him and pulling. He was terribly heavy, and she made a show of grunting and struggling.

He huffed and stood up. “My heart is too good. I couldn’t let you struggle.”

Layla pulled him using the waistband of his shorts. Once they were in the bathroom, she closed the door. Jess was just staring at her with a confused expression.

She pointed at his shoes. He took them off along with his socks.

Layla stepped closer, slowly and then timidly reached for his shirt. She lifted it. Jess was having a hard time processing what was going on.

Then she tugged at the band of his pants again. “Can I? Is that okay?” Jess swallowed and nodded.

□

Jess

She pulled them down. He searched her face for any reaction, but it wasn’t really there. She wasn’t really looking at his body; he thought she should look in case she ever wanted to draw him nude, but he felt that this wasn’t the time for that particular train of thought.

He was completely naked. She pointed at the shower and he walked in. Again, he wondered if she would look at his butt; it was nicely built.

Layla was still in clothes. She wouldn't take them off, but she took her shoes off and she tied her hair back before walking in with him. She turned the water on. "Do you like it cold or hot?"

"Cold."

"That's horrifying, but okay."

She reached for the shampoo and started running it through his hair, lathering it over his scalp and massaging his head. There was a little distance between them, but it felt so good. He leaned his head back on the wall and shut his eyes. He always felt like he was floating around her, but this was on another level.

He loved her, he realized. It was in the way he no longer felt like his heart belonged to him; it was in the way he wanted to tell her every beautiful thing he laid eyes on reminded him of her. It was in his starvation for her touch, in the smell of rain, in the sweet taste of hot chocolate, in every intimate act he witnessed. It was everywhere; it had started spilling over everything. He wanted all of her.

She wouldn't have believed him if he told her that night that he loved her. She'd been told too many times that she was unlovable, that anyone who loved her would have to have rot in their brain in order to feel that way. She never even realized some part of her believed it.

He wanted her to touch him all the time. He'd always been the person initiating physical touch with others, but he still remembered that small window of vulnerability when she'd asked him to play with her hair. He liked that she'd asked; he wanted her to want him to touch her all the time.

It was infecting every part of him, his want, all of him ached, wanting more and more of her.

Then her hands were on him, on his skin, and he felt like he was on fire. He felt so dizzy; she used her hands to spread it all over, and rinsed him clean, running her fingers through his hair and spending a good five minutes just rinsing his hair, he opened his eyes, her hands was shaking slightly, her hair and clothes were wet and she was the most beautiful being he'd laid his eyes on.

She kissed his chest, then turned him around and kissed his back. Jess intertwined their fingers, his back to her chest. He kissed her hands, her palm.

“You know, I bet the stars would be very pleased to know that they created someone as bright as you,” he signed. “Do I always need to be sad to be touched by you, Layla?”

□

Layla

“I’m sorry,” she said. She’d made a mistake. She’d been unfair. She thought she would have to wait. She had to go see her parents soon. She didn’t know what would happen then and if anything happened, how she would react? She didn’t know what she would need to ground herself after the visit. She had to tell him if she wanted to be in a relationship with him and she’d never told a soul before.

Would he think differently of her? Layla had heard stories of women who had been abused formally opening up to people and then having others use it against them. It was unfair to think of Jess like that. He wouldn’t, but the fear was there, regardless of how she felt about him, regardless of his nature.

“Alright, how about this? If you’re sad or if you need anything, you tell me. You don’t pull away and retreat and deal with it on your own and I’ll do the same. What do you think?” She asked.

“You want to give it a try?”

“More than anything. I know I might not show it, but I do. I really do and I’m trying. Every day I try, but sometimes my attempts are really small, so small you might not see them, but you have to know in your heart that they’re there, okay?”

“Will you stay here? Just until I fall asleep?” he asked. She agreed. He snuggled in and gestured for her to follow, so she did.

“You painted everyone.”

“I did.”

“But not me.”

Something like pain flashed through her eyes. She sat for a few seconds before reaching for her phone.

There was an album in the photos app specifically of all times she drew him, painted him, digitally or in real life.

Jess snatched the phone and rolled around in bed. He kicked his feet as he scrolled through and he complimented himself every five seconds.

“I knew you were obsessed with me.”

“I knew this was a mistake.” She tried to take the phone away but Jess laid on top of her, putting his whole weight on her so that’s she couldn’t move.

“You really captured the way my hair falls in a perfect way, you know? It’s like I’m straight out of heaven.”

“I can’t breathe.”

“You’re fine.” A pause. “Right?”

“I guess it’s alright.”

Jess reached one of the pictures where Layla drew a tattoo on his lower stomach.

“Oh, what’s this? A fantasy perhaps?”

“I just thought it looks cool.”

Layla’s look was more than a ‘it looks cool’ kind of look. It was more of an ‘it’s so fucking attractive’ kind of thing.

“So you like tatted men, then?”

“I like tattoos in general. Before I moved away from my parents’ house, I worked at a tattoo shop, then I had to quit and I worked at a pet store next.”

“You can tattoo me if you want, just like the picture.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“What? I’m serious.”

He was serious; nevertheless, she did not tattoo him that night, since they couldn’t figure out what to tattoo and he kept suggesting that she tattoo her eyes on him.

She stayed long after he fell asleep. She locked the door so that Mateo wouldn't walk in and see her. She texted Kione to let him know everything was alright, and then she was left with her thoughts. She was going to build up the courage to ask him to go with her. She wouldn't have him in the same room as her parents, but if he could stay at a hotel nearby? She'd feel safer.

□

The next day, Celia decided she wanted to have everyone for dinner. Layla helped with dinner. It was intimate, just Celia, Onika, Kione, Mateo, and Jess.

When they sat at the table, Celia mentioned they should do this often, maybe do a barbecue next time, invite Amir, Noor, and her mom as well.

“Why don't you invite your parents?” Mateo asked Layla. His eyebrows were raised.

A silence fell on the table. Layla gave him a look filled with so much loathing he almost flinched.

It was an unspoken rule that no one asked about her parents, even though she'd never said anything about them. It was obvious that there was something there in the way she always mentioned a sister but not a parent, in the way she once mentioned she had a brother when no one knew she had more than one sibling. It was in the way she would stiffen and change the direction of conversation whenever anyone asked. Mateo knew that better than anyone.

She knew a part of him felt almost betrayed; he thought that because he hadn't explained whatever happened when he went to the hospital, Layla had been holding a secret back from him on purpose to punish him. Mateo had gone through some 'mysterious incidents' where he refused to talk about what happens, but other than that, there's not a single thing he didn't share with Layla. He tells her everything.

Celia glared at him. Girls have a different kind of closeness. Their intuition made their intimacy a lot bigger because a lot of the time they don't need to use words to know something was wrong. Celia was the kind of person who just always knew. She felt whatever the other person wasn't saying. Like her mom.

The siblings started fighting in Spanish. Layla didn't say anything. Her face was devoid of any emotion.

"Are you okay?" Jess asked.

"It's probably just his abandonment issues." She sounded like a robot analyzing a situation. He didn't like it. She played around with her food.

Layla did that gesture with her hands, and Mateo noticed. He stopped fighting with his sister and muttered, "Sorry, okay?"

Layla put her hands back down and went back to eating.

"I have to go to Houston to see my sister. You could come meet her," Layla offered.

Mateo was quiet, contemplating.

"Oh, what if we all take a trip? Make a day out of it?"

"A trip? To Houston, of all places?" Kione asked.

"You don't have to come," Onika told him.

"You won't get rid of me that easily."

"Sure," Layla mumbled. This could be good, having a distraction there just in case, something to put her mind into.

chapter 25

home again



Layla

Their flight landed in the early afternoon. Samira welcomed them and they ended up ordering room service to the hotel room to eat and rest a little before going out to the antique store Onika wanted to visit.

Samira naturally got along with everyone. She was a huge fan of Onika's. Mateo was in a better mood already. Layla couldn't be happier to see her little sister.

When everyone went to take a nap, Jess stayed. Layla headed to the bathroom, and Samira turned to Jess with a very excited smile. Samira loved love.

"You're Layla's," she said to him.

"YES," Jess wrote in big letters with a proud look in his eyes.

"I suppose you're alright. I wouldn't have recommended going for a blond man, but what can we do?" Jess grinned at her.

"Are you happy for her?" he wrote down. The question was general; the girl stared at it for a while.

"My sister lost her smile. Did you know that?"

"She did?"

"Yes, but she's always smiling in her pictures with you guys." She gestured around.

"She smiles at me, for me, not them. Really, she would never smile because of Kione and Matty makes her mad all the time.

Alright, she might smile at Celia, but otherwise not.”

Samira rolled her eyes. “Yes, yes she smiles at you.” She pointed at her eyes. “And her eyes, they aren’t so sad anymore.”

Samira’s friends and their parents, who all adored her, decided they wanted to celebrate her. She had perfect grades, she was her teachers’ favorite student, and she had won the science fair at her school. Everyone was happy because it was important to Samira. Her joy was contagious.

Layla had left early the next day to help Samira prepare the house for guests. It was the first time she’d seen her mother in over a year. When she opened the door, she watched Layla like a hawk.

“So, do you hate yourself yet, Layla?” her mother asked smugly. She looked at her expectantly, like she was so sure Layla had been so miserable after leaving home.

“Only when I think of you, mama.” Layla smiled. She said the last word mockingly, like it was a joke. Her mother’s eyes flashed with that familiar anger.

Ah, normalcy.

Throughout the night, Layla spent most of the time observing and listening to people praise Samira. She felt so proud she was close to bursting.

Jess, sweet Jess, had texted random words, some she didn’t know the meaning of, and told her to guess what they meant. He constantly asked if she was okay or if she needed something.

Layla wondered if that’s what it was like having a support system. She never had anyone who checked on her when she was stressing in her mom’s presence.

Layla to the audience: I would have turned out to be much more likable if I had this.

At the end of it, Layla was anxious to leave. She’d already texted everyone to come pick her up so that they could go grab some dinner.

“Oh! Before you leave, I have something for you.” Samira ran upstairs. When she came down, she had a horrible looking

handmade card in her hand. Layla couldn't help the chuckle that escaped her.

“What's this?”

“I know it not pretty okay? I've held onto it since Mother's Day because I wanted to see your face when I gave it to you.”

Every Mother's Day, Samira would buy their mother a pretty card and then attempt to make Layla's, caught up in the moment the sisters both forgot to take into consideration that their mother never knew about Samira giving her sister a gift meant for mothers.

“Why would you give her a Mother's Day card?” she asked. Immediately, Layla's body was alert. Samira hadn't noticed anything yet, but Layla would recognize that awful tone anywhere.

“I do it every year because Layla loves art.” Samira smiled. She looked up and noticed her mother's crazed look.

The effect was instant. Samira's smile disappeared in a second, her bright eyes dimmed and she flinched.

“I'm sorry,” she said quickly. She fumbled with the paper, and it fell. “I'm sorry, mama, it's just a silly thing I do every year. I didn't mean to upset anyone.” Their mother had never laid hands on Samira, but nothing could stop her from being emotionally abusive. Samira was a people pleaser. She would always try to fix everything.

Layla slowly stepped in front of her sister.

“It's alright.” Their mother laughed loudly. It was high pitched and forced.

Hearing the familiar high-pitched sound from his office, her father called out to Samira, claiming he needed help with something. He hadn't looked in Layla's direction all night; he acted like she didn't exist.

Samira looked at her, and Layla gave a slight nod. Her sister left the living room and Layla heard the sound of the office door clicking shut, leaving her on the opposite side of her mother's anger.

It was like she'd never gotten out.

Layla started cleaning around a little, ignoring the woman who stood as still as a statue, her mouth twisting in displeasure.

Layla checked her phone again and again, waiting for Jess to text her that he was outside.

“Why would she give you a Mother’s Day card? As a joke? What kind of nonsense did you fill her head with? Do you think being a mother is a joke? You would never understand the kind of respect we had for our mothers. Even at their worst, we stood by their side. No matter what they did, they were still honored and loved.”

“Oh, fuck off, will you?” Layla said, lightly slapping her mother’s finger away from her face. It felt good to say that out loud.

“How dare you speak to me that way? How dare you lay your hands on me?” her mother screamed. “I am your mother!”

“You’re not a mother.” Layla said calmly, then because she had never spoken her mind to her mother, she decided it was about time. “Your life won’t amount to anything, you have no accomplishments, your husband is a loser, your mother hates you, your family is a bunch of adultering hypocrites, and Samira will never forget the terror you caused in her home. You will always be second to me in her heart, do you understand? You are nothing.”

Everything happened so quickly. Layla could hear the sound of a car door closing, the sound of footsteps before her mother shrieked. She was prepared to push her away. Her mother had never left a mark on her. It was the smart decision on her behalf, so Layla’s brain wasn’t prepared when Sharon grabbed the cup of tea nearby and hurled the contents on her just as the door was broken. The hot tea landed on her hand, and some around her neck. Layla didn’t realize her mother was lunging at her again before someone pushed her away. She looked up in time to see Onika, of all people, pushing Sharon.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Onika asked.

The office door opened again. Layla hoped her dad had the brains to tell Samira to stay inside.

“My sister can’t see this,” Layla said. Jess looked at her with so much pain. Mateo moved to the hallway and luckily, a few minutes later, her dad was the only one staring at them. “She had a good day. I don’t want to ruin it.”

Layla was still standing in the same spot. Her arms were hurting a little. She should put some cold water on them.

She was being led out of the house. She turned her head to see her father reaching for Sharon, who had a hand on her heart. She felt a little giggle escape her at the sight.

Layla to the audience: I need to get Onika the best present in the world.

“Wait, what about my sister?”

“Your brother was in there as well. I told him to take your sister and let her sleep at her grandparents’ house for a couple of days, and he agreed.”

The car ride was pure chaos, everyone asking if she was okay, asking if they should go to the hospital. Layla guessed there was no convincing Jess not to take her to the hospital. She knew the burns were likely first-degree burns since the tea wasn’t boiling hot, but it still hurt and her skin was red. Jess kept looking at it, his jaw clenched. He was gripping the wheel so hard his hands were white.

There was a red light.

“How are you so calm?” Mateo exploded at her.

Jess turned around and gave him a chilling glare. “You’ll keep your mouth shut,” he signed, and the look of warning in his eyes made everyone stay quiet for the rest of the ride.

“It’s okay. It’s probably superficial,” she mumbled. She didn’t have to look at the mirror to see the sad look they were giving her.

At the hospital, the nurse said it was first-degree burns, so the treatment was quite simple. Layla just needed to be alone for a few minutes. She needed the safety of isolation, of knowing no one could see her fall.

The hospital visit was quick, but even a quick visit could not have shielded the highest paid model in the world, three Lakers

players, a well-known artist and one of the most successful talk show hosts from someone's phone. In a few minutes, the video was everywhere. Their phones started blowing up, and Layla closed her eyes. She had never had the urge to cry with so many people around.

Back at the hotel, Layla hesitated in front of her room. Jess was looking at her desperately. She ignored everyone else's looks and handed him her room key. Jess opened it and she followed, leaving everyone else outside.

Layla felt her legs give out as soon as the door closed. He rushed and carried her over to the bed as gently as possible.

"It hurts."

"I know, sweetheart, let me make better." He applied some more petroleum jelly on the areas where it hurt and kissed her forehead.

"I should have known something was up," he said. "You looked so scared to be back here. I should have paid more attention."

"Stop. It's okay."

"It's not okay. You keep trying to make it sound like it's not a big deal, and it's breaking my heart, Layla, sweetheart you get to be upset over this, you get to be angry about it."

"Many people had it worse."

"That doesn't take away from how horrible they treated you."

"You don't understand. So what if my mother hit me a couple of times? So what if my father hates my existence? Other women end up in hospitals. What's a couple of slaps and scratches compared to that? It wasn't that bad for me."

"You think you had to end up in a hospital beaten half to death for it to be called abuse?"

She felt the question press against her chest; she had told herself that she was lucky. That other people had it worse. That at least she could survive.

"Yes," she whispered. Jess turned away, but she could see him wipe away his tears as fast as he could. She climbed in and

made room for him.

She let him hold her; she slept in his arms for a few hours. There were no nightmares, nothing. She roused to the sensation of his finger playing with her hair. She looked up and found him studying her. She arched into his touch and pulled his hand closer to her heart and pressed a kiss over it before falling asleep again.

When she woke again, Jess was asleep. She went to the bathroom to freshen up.

Layla to the audience: I miss my cat.

After only a few seconds, she heard the commotion of someone sprinting out of bed before he pushed open the bathroom door. Layla was brushing her teeth. Jess walked in with his hair messed up, his eyes barely open when he spotted her.

“You weren’t in bed,” he signed before walking behind her to hold her.

“You were sleeping” She paused. “How do you sleep in jeans?”

“It wasn’t thinking about my comfort, sweetheart.”

“Stop with the pet name.”

“How do you feel?”

“I’m fine.”

Layla took out his toothbrush. Jess picked her up easily. She kind of liked being picked up like she weighed nothing. He set her down and kissed her palm.

“Open,” she told him. Jess held on to her waist and closed his eyes while she brushed his teeth.

When she finished, they went back to bed. This time, when he laid her down, she pulled him in and kissed him. Jess gently returned the kiss. It held nothing of the passion of their first kiss.

She tried to deepen the kiss, but he pulled back.

“No?”

“Don’t you think it’s bad timing?” he asked.

“I need one good memory in this stupid town,” she told him. It was simple. He couldn’t help but give it to her. He’d give her whatever she asked for.

Jess kissed her again and again. She was so dizzy with lust she almost forgot there was more to it. He took her clothes off, one piece at a time until she was naked and he was fully clothed. She did not expect to like that, but she did.

When he pulled back to stare at her, she let him. She’d always loved her body, and she wanted to see the look in his eyes that revealed just how much he liked looking at her. He was the only one who made her want to constantly be looked at and adored.

She tried to take his clothes but he wouldn’t let her, instead he pressed feather light kisses all over her thighs. Layla flipped them over and got on top of him. She squeezed his neck lightly.

“I’ll kill you,” she huffed. “Stop teasing me.”

“I have never been threatened before sex before. I have to ask you to stop because I might finish in my very expensive Ralph Lauren pants.”

“You’ll fuck me then?”

“Only if you admit you want me really, really bad. Preferably using vulgar words.”

“I don’t want anything from you,” she said, kissing his neck, sucking the skin into her mouth, leaving her mark. He had always wanted to be devoured, and she had been fantasizing about sinking her teeth into him and keeping a part of him inside her. If she were to consume him, he’d always be part of her.

Jess flipped them over and started kissing down her body. He reached her thigh, kissing, biting, teasing, but never where she wanted him to.

Layla was clinging to his shoulders. Whenever she got frantic and demanding, he would pull back and look at her. She was beautiful like this; it felt very private, something no one else ggotet to see. Her hair was sprawled out on the bed, her mouth looked thoroughly kissed. She pulled his hair in an attempt to get him to kiss her again, but it was easy to distract her. Her

neck was her most sensitive spot, another thing that felt private and intimate, knowledge that was his alone.

When she attempted to pull away to kiss his neck, he chased her mouth. She could barely breathe without smelling his cologne. He was everywhere, and she loved it a little too much.

When she bucked her hips, he signed, chuckling, “Have you always been a liar?”

When he let her take his clothes off, she couldn't help but touch him everywhere. He was so beautiful, and he was hers. Layla's head was pounding in disbelief. He was hers. It was written in the way he kept looking at her.

Layla to the audience: Having a real penis inside me is strange. The real things... pulsed, like it was living, and the thought isn't particularly nice to think about.

Jess fucked her gently at first. He held her too close, like she might slip through his finger, then with a bit more desperation as he stared at her, he kept edging her, watching her, waiting for her praise. He wanted every noise, every reaction. He picked her up to fuck her in different corners of the room.

He stopped only when she was a mess in his arms, when he had to hold her upright because her legs were shaking.



chapter 26

another group picture



Layla

When everyone gathered in her room, Celia showed her the poll that was gaining rapid attention and a lot of votes on Twitter.

It was asking why do you think they keep ending up in the hospital?

1 - one of them is a secret drug addict.

2- they're looking for a medical way to get Jess to speak again.

3- one or all of them are involved in something shady and scary.

4- Celia or Layla is pregnant.

A lot of people were replying and saying that the tweet was disgusting, but those replies were also helping it reach a wider range of people.

Kione was not looking Jess in the eye. Jess had mentioned that Kione had always felt guilty over what happened that day, after all. Jess had gotten shot while he was frantically looking for his best friend.

Layla wanted to scream at every one of them, the details of the shooting were not a secret but when Jess got recruited to the team, and when people learned of his inability to speak they had done some digging, then refocused the light back on that horrible day. Paparazzi harassed Jess for weeks after, trying to get him to talk about it.

Jess looked like the whole week had drained him. Layla moved closer to his seat. She was wearing a jacket, so she took his hand in hers and intertwined them and hid it inside the pocket of her jacket. His eyes softened.

“Well, it’s safe to say people aren’t very nice, but at least I’m not the reason for the controversy this time?” Mateo said.

In seconds, a good number of pillows were thrown at him.

Nabi chuckled. She and Celia were supposed to have been ‘talking business’ when Celia had gotten the call and saw the picture and was flooded with concern. Layla held back from pointing out that Celia was supposed to host Nabi months ago but, the K-pop idol had refused for some reason.

She sensed that this whole thing was going to be a late night topic for their next girl meeting.

Nabi had insisted she come with Celia, and it was coincidentally similar to what had happened the first time they were all in the hospital.

They end up spending a pleasant time together. Layla liked Nabi. She was a calming presence, easy to talk to.

The flight was a few hours later, but Layla had one more thing to do. It was something she should have done a long time ago.

“I want to go visit my grandparents. Will you come with me?” Seeing a protective gleam spark in his eyes, she rushed to their defense. “They’re not like my mom. In fact, I think I’m the one who messed up here. I should have visited them, talked to them. They were always so kind. I could have had a good parental figure if I wasn’t too wary to trust them. I wasted so much time.”

His eyes softened. She loved his eyes, loved how different the look in his eyes was when it was set on her.

The drive was fast. Layla had texted and let them know she’ll be coming with a friend and she knew the house would be empty.

She held on to Jess’s hands the whole way there. Everyone had already gone to the airport, so she couldn’t stay for long.

When they got there, they didn't have to knock. Her grandfather was already opening the door. Layla rushed to him. It was something she wished she'd done so many years ago.

"*Alsalam aleikom,*" he said, laughing while she held on to him. She looked up. Her grandmother had a bowl resting on one hip and her hand on the other.

"I," she replied, letting him go. She was a little taller than him now, her grandmother's height. It was strange. Everything seemed so much smaller.

Her grandfather stared at Jess with an attempt at distaste, but he was a huge fan of the Lakers. "You've been amazing this season," he reluctantly admitted.

His wife rolled her eyes. "I made food, let's eat."

The table was set, Layla missed her grandmother's fatoush more than anyone could ever imagine, so she dived right in. Jess loved the food as well. Nothing made a middle-eastern grandmother happier than kids with a big appetite. The more they fed you, the more pleased they were.

Her grandfather chattered happily. He talked about her art while his wife watched the redness on Layla's skin with so much anger. She was always the more reserved one. Layla had never seen anger on her face.

"What happened?" she asked. Layla cleaned the table while she spoke. She explained many things about the mistreatment, about her mother's abuse and her father letting things happen, about how she pretty much raised Samira, about how she left home. It had always been hard to talk about. She forced the words out of her. She was done hiding how horrible they'd been. She just needed to let everything out, to let it go and move on. She planned to have another talk with Celia and Mateo, but now she needed to tell the people who waited for her and the person she wanted to be with.

"He is no son of mine," her grandmother said quietly, with a determined look in her eyes. "I thought he'd find his way back, but I was wrong. I promise you, I'll try to keep Samira away from them until she goes for college."

Feeling a little overwhelmed, Layla excused herself to the bathroom. They had to leave in a few minutes, but she had promised to visit more often and they had promised to visit her and meet the rest of her friends; she wasn't very happy about her grandfather being so eager to meet Kione, but she couldn't do much about it.

As soon as Layla left, her grandfather turned to Jess with a serious look and asked, "How well do you know my granddaughter?"

"Well enough to know she's going to be my wife someday," Jess wrote down. "Ever since I laid eyes on her, I could not see a future where I didn't love her, need her. Her trust is the most important thing to me. It's been a long process gaining it. I won't risk losing it, I promise you this."

Layla's grandfather stared at the paper. He looked up at his wife with a smirk; he wiggled his eyebrows at her and she laughed lightly.

"See how poetry is everywhere? Layla got herself a modern Qais, Layla's got herself a majnun," he laughed. It was warm.

"We have to get going," Layla said, walking back in.

"Who is Qais?" Jess signed. Layla rolled her eyes and stared at her grandfather.

"You haven't changed," she said fondly.

"Go, I suspect you have a story to tell to your Qais."

"Don't bring bad luck to the kids. Layla and Qais have a tragic story."

Layla spent the ride back telling Jess about the story of the lovers who could not be together. When they arrived a crowd had formed to take pictures of their friends. By the time they got on the plane, Jess had decided what he wanted Layla to tattoo him.

"How much do I owe you for the plane ticket?" Layla suddenly remembered to ask. They had business tickets, and Jess had taken care of it without telling her.

"Nothing."

“Come on, Jess.”

“Shut up, Layla.”

“Just tell me.”

“I won’t. You’re not supposed to spend your own money. You’re supposed to spend mine.” She opened her mouth, but he pointed at the figure standing.

Jess got up to give Mateo his seat. They obviously needed to talk, so he gladly switched for the duration of the conversation. Mateo sat and cleared his throat.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, gesturing at her neck and arms.

“I’m o—”

“I’m sorry if I ever made you feel like you couldn’t tell me,” he blurted. “I know I haven’t been the best these last few months, but I never want you to feel like you can’t talk to me.”

“Oh Matty, that’s not what happened. I convinced myself I didn’t have to tell anyone. I just wanted to forget it, but then I met you guys and then Jess, even Kione and Onika, and I kept thinking about how I felt like I was hiding something, you know? At times, I felt like I wanted to vent about so many things, but I didn’t want to feel like I was holding on to a horrible time of my life. I thought ignoring it is how I let it go. I wanted to be honest, but I was scared you would feel only pity for me.”

“We would never. You can vent and maybe during Halloween we can put a spell on your mom.”

“Why Halloween?” she laughed “We can do it when we get back.”

“Pfft! Everyone knows Halloween is the perfect night for something like that.”

“Alright then, I guess we have a plan for Halloween.”

“Yea, Trick or Treating, finding a calm party, nothing too crazy, and then going back home and placing a curse on your parents. Deal?”

“Deal.”

chapter 27

panic attacks



Layla

The ten days quickly flew past them, and she found herself attending another game. She was alone this time. Celia and Onika were too busy to attend. She didn't mind.

Jess had asked her to come early. Layla liked that he asked her to. She liked how it felt to be needed like this. She went pretty early before the game because Jess had forgotten his phone in his haste to go before traffic got worse.

Layla had stopped at their apartment and she was almost there. Kione gave her a lot of directions and said that they'll just know to let her through. She didn't know who *they* were, but she was there and he was right, no one stopped her. There was some noise from outside, a few people preferred to be there early, there were also a few people trying out fireworks for later.

She bumped into a tall figure. It was Kione. His teammates were behind him. They looked like they had just gone out of the locker room, but she couldn't find Jess anywhere. Someone let out a long whistle. Kione threw the ball with a little force at him.

"You need to work on those wandering eyes," he told him. He was actively hiding her with his bigger frame.

"Where is Jess?" she asked him. The team went to wherever they were heading.

"He's still in the locker room. He was showering when we left."

“Shouldn’t he be with the rest of the team?”

“He should, but he told coach he was feeling a little anxious, so he needed to do some breathing exercises so he’s been excused from hearing my amazing speech.”

“Where do I put his phone?”

“Just go to the locker room. I think he’s probably done by now.”

He gave her directions. She followed them and knocked on the door. There was no answer. She opened the door.

“Jess?” She could hear running water. She called out a little louder again to get him to come out, but he didn’t. Her heartbeat spiked up as she contemplated taking a step forward and checking on him.

He was naked there. Despite already seeing him in that state she hesitated.

“Jess. I’m coming closer. If you don’t want me to, turn the water off.”

The water didn’t stop. She walked forward and saw a figure sitting on the floor, hunched over with his hand on his ears. He was swaying back and forth.

“Jess?” He didn’t look up. Jess would never avoid looking at her like this. Her heart dropped so fast. She knew something was wrong. She turned the water off and knelt.

“Hey, hey what happened?” She tried to hide how much her voice was shaking, but it didn’t work and even her fear didn’t make him look up at her.

She slowly touched his hand. She stopped him from swaying.

“Jess, do you want to write instead?” she asked desperately to get him to say anything. She didn’t know what to do. Jess wouldn’t sign, he wouldn’t write. She thought about calling Kione, but they had just been together. Could Jess have purposely held back from looking too stressed in front of his friend?

Layla wrapped her arms around his neck and brought her body closer to his. Jess’s arms didn’t wrap around her. Instead,

they stayed at his sides. She tightened her arms, but he started panting, taking fast breaths.

She tried to think of a way to distract him, to help him calm his breathing. She took out her phone, remembering the time Jess told her that he had a list he called ‘word of the day’ words and their meanings. He sent her the list when he was telling her how sometimes he used the words when he wasn’t feeling creative just to be able to write at least something. He would use it to build a random scene and he would find a way to use the word in a poetic way, as he said.

“Okay, okay. You don’t have to sign or talk to me, but listen. I’m going to show you a word, I’ll hide the meaning and then I’ll show the meanings separately and you have to match them, okay? Just point at what you think is the right answer,” she said quickly.

The first word was gheegle. Layla showed him multiple meanings, and he slowly pointed at the right one.

Next was serein. Again, he pointed at the right meaning; he had a good memory. His breathing was starting to slow. He didn’t look so yellow, so Layla kept going quickly.

The last one was wonderwall.

Jess didn’t wait for her to show him, he just pointed at her.

Wonderwall: someone you find yourself thinking about all the time, a person you are completely infatuated with.

Layla let out a shaky laugh. Jess paused, looking at her phone screen. When he saw the time, Jess sprinted up to get dressed, but his hands were still shaking. He wouldn’t talk. Layla stood there for a while after he ran out of the room. She was pretty sure she shouldn’t be there.

She went to take her seat. Her jeans had gotten wet, but she couldn’t care less. Her nerves were frayed, and they stayed like that the whole time she waited for the game to start.

That ended up being the worst performance in his career. Not only was he distracted by constantly looking around the court with a panicked expression, he had put Kione and Mateo off

their game as well; they were visibly concerned and looked over at him every few minutes and it had distracted them.

It also ended up being their first loss. Layla had looked at the comments people left after. Despite performing remarkably in all their past games, the names that people called him were just so horrible she had Kione turn all of his comments off.

When the coach was done lecturing all three of them, she told Jess to follow her; he was still refusing to sign or write, so he gave a quick nod and got in his car. When they got to her place, it was dark, Jess took most of his clothes off and waited for her, when she got close to the bed, he pulled her down and wrapped his hands around her waist; he laid his head on her chest and went immediately to sleep.

Layla didn't get any sleep that night.

A few hours later, when he woke, Layla was still lying on the bed. He looked even more exhausted now than when he did before he rested.

He wouldn't meet her eyes. Her heart cracked a bit more at the slight embarrassment edged into his features.

"I was so worried," she whispered. "I felt like I had no way to reach you, even your eyes. It's like you weren't here. I couldn't read them. I can always read your eyes."

"I'm sorry," he signed. "There were fireworks earlier than usual. I heard them and I was caught off guard. I thought it was a gun. I should have expected it. Don't worry about me. I'm fine now."

She stared at him, affection so evident in her eyes.

He was constantly showing his affection. He spoke of his love very often; he took care of his people. He gave special gifts, even handmade ones sometimes. He was always around, always there to catch whoever fell, he was always pulling the people he loved into the comfort of his arms, and yet when he needed the comfort he so easily gave to other people, he sharply turned away and hid in an isolated corner until his terrified heart had no choice but to calm itself.

“I love you,” she told him as she touched him. She felt instant relief as the words left her. There was endless longing pouring out of the tips of her fingers. She had left a mark on him. She had kissed him back. It bared her to him in an unfamiliar manner, and she was so terrified. “It won’t pass. I know myself and you need to know that you would always be safe to react however you want to when you experience something like this, okay? You shouldn’t feel like you need to be perfect. I don’t need that. I don’t want it, okay? Please, Jess.”

He took her face in his hand and pulled her in for a much needed kiss, he did not want to tell Layla he loved her the same night he scared her so much she couldn’t sleep, he wanted her to have the memory of his love associated with a happier day.

“Tell you what.” He pulled back from her mouth, then kissed her forehead, her eyes, and her cheeks. “I’ll be your own personal canvas. I’ll let you paint on me right now, tattoo me. Whatever you want to do with my body, you have the green light.”

“This sounds really dirty,” she told him.

“I hope so.”

“Do not try to flirt your way out of serious discussions, Jess Reyes.”

“Unfortunately, I cannot function unless I do that.”

“I won’t refuse your offer,” she told him sternly. “Call your friends. Kione texted me fifty times, and he called me a witch and said I stole you to cast a spell.”

“I’m beginning to think you might have at some point.”

Jess had chosen the tattoo. She thought it was absolutely ridiculous, but Jess said he had never gotten the chance to do silly things like this when he was younger. He was too busy being traumatized so he thought it was only fair that he did something that some people might consider a bad idea.

She had a desire to say yes to everything he wanted.

She got the equipment out and sterilized them. Layla was fairly new to tattooing, but she liked the process. It was calming; she had learned it while she was working a part-time

job when she was younger and she loved seeing her art style on skin.

Once she put her gloves on and held the tattoo machine, Jess was lying on his back. His shirt was off and he was staring at her with so much lust, it sent a thrill down her spine.

“Is it weird I’m feeling hot and bothered right now?” he asked. Layla laughed, which pleased him very much. He always considered getting her to smile or laugh an accomplishment. *I was never the funny one*, he thought, *but that doesn’t matter anymore*. He was capable of making her laugh. That was enough.

Layla gave him a quick kiss on his mouth.

“You need to stop moving,” she told him, because for some reason he wiggled whenever she touched him.

“I’d feel better if you used a pet name on me right now. I’m in a lot of pain.”

“I haven’t even started yet.” When she did start, he kept trying to stop her to get a kiss.

“You are impossible.” She kissed him and then she started. The sound of buzzing was relaxing.

“Just one more,” he said for the seventh time. “It helps. It hurts. I need a kiss. Hurry before I pass out.”

“I just kissed you.”

“Every sting you cause me is worth five kisses, and it goes up every three minutes or so because of inflation.”

“Right. That makes sense.”

Layla finished it quickly. It was a simple tattoo. The skin was red when she was done; she took a step back and found herself loving how it looked.

Jess was beaming. He stood in front of the mirror; he seemed like the events of today were out of his mind for now. He grabbed her and kissed her senseless until she lost her breath.

chapter 28

the stray



Layla

Let me in!! I have a surprise.”

“I am also here,” Kione called out.

There was a sound of the door opening and then Celia’s squeaking followed by a bark.

Both Layla and Jess left the room and went out to be welcomed with the sight of a golden retriever wagging its tail happily at the attention it was getting.

“Good, you’re here! I got us a dog.” Mateo gestured at the dog.

“I can see that, where did you find him?”

“He was a stray. Can you believe that? I found him and took him to the vet and then they cleaned him up and look at him now. He’s so cute.”

Layla’s cat had made her way out of her hiding place and was watching the dog with clear distaste, when Layla reached out to pet the dog her cat sprinted for the dog, hissing at him, Celia immediately picked the cat up and then with the experience of someone who had worked with dogs before—Layla remembered handling easily scared dogs—she took the collar and made a very familiar gesture with her hand that resulted in pulling the dog back from trying to make a run for the cat.

Jess and Mateo both stood, their brains taking a few more seconds to connect the dots.

Mateo to the audience: wait a fucking minute.

Jess to the audience in a very sheepish way: I think it's a little sexy.

Mateo gasped. "You! You were... this is what you do? This?"

"What is going on?" Celia looked between her brother and friend with a little confusion.

"Layla has been mentally pulling our leashes all this time, and we had no idea." Jess signed. He was grinning. He explained the whole thing to Celia and Kione. Kione spent quite some time howling with laughter at Mateo's apparent annoyance.

"So as soon as she made that gesture, both of you did whatever she wanted?" Kione asked, still laughing.

"I thought it was like something she did when she was triggered or her anxiety was too high. I was being a good friend, okay?"

"In my defense, it was advised to me during therapy a few years back to find a way to imagine holding control in my hands. I would picture it to calm my nerves. The only thing on my mind at the time was that gesture because I handled dogs all the time, so in my head I was picturing holding back my wild nervousness, you know?"

Layla was smiling. It was the first time she smiled with no hesitation in front of more than one person. Kione stopped his laughing to stare at her. She was beautiful. He could picture the exact moment Jess fell in love with her was probably a moment where she had smiled at him. It really made her face glow.

Kione looked across the room at Jess to find him staring back. They shared a look of understanding; it was a look that told Jess his best friend knew that woman is the one for him, that she'll always be a part of their lives. Jess had known for quite some time and he didn't need to say to words for Kione. Now it was time for Jess's smile to turn binding.

"That makes a lot of sense actually," Celia said.

“Are we allowed pets in the building?” Jess asked, petting the dog. “What will we name him?”

“Yes, and I was thinking maybe Kyle?”

“You’re not giving the dog a frat boy’s name.”

“Esteban?”

“No,” Layla and Celia said in union.

“You aren’t allowed to pipe in. You girls have a black cat called Salem. Do you even know how basic that is?”

“I got it! We play True Americans and whoever wins gets to name the dog.”

“Oh, yes, yes.”

“I’ll make some snacks,” Jess said. “Set the place up, call Onika, and tell her to get lots of beer on her way.”

During the game—which Layla was not sure any of them understood it the same way as the others since it was never really explained to the new girl—sometimes they mirrored scenes and then mixed their personalities in with made up rules. There was usually a lot of yelling. Somehow Onika won. She decided to name the dog Blondie, which made Mateo fume.

While everyone was cleaning up, Jess lifted his arm to reach an empty beer can that had somehow made its way to the top of the bookshelf. His shirt rode up a little and then Onika gasped like she hadn’t been breathing this whole time.

When everyone stopped what they’re doing to look at her, she pointed at Jess again and then gasped again.

“What?” Layla asked. Jess also looked confused by the way everyone is staring at them.

“Alright everyone, hand over the money.” Kione puts his hand out.

They had glimpsed Jess’s tattoo. It was really reckless, Layla had told him, but he was happy with it, so happy he kept offering his body for her to tattoo again.

Layla’s majnun, that’s what it said.

Everyone was handing the money to Kione, he was mumbling something about Amir also being involved and owing him money.

“You bet on what exactly?” Jess asked.

“How many months it’ll take for you guys to head into something serious,” Kione replied, counting the money.

“I thought it was just sex,” Mateo said.

“You could not be more wrong. Celia already calls them mom and dad,” Onika told him. They were talking like Jess and Layla weren’t there, setting up the dinner table.

“Is that why you were groaning out loud yesterday?”

“Yea, what did you think it was?”

“Not this.”

Layla to the audience: I really thought we did a good job hiding it.

“Okay, but Kione knew from the beginning, so why does he get the money? Jess told him months ago,” Layla said as she sat next to Jess and began to eat.

Onika to the audience: I always had a feeling he was cheating us, justice will always come through.

“This is why I don’t like you.” Kione pointed at her with a fork. “You’re just a—”

“Watch your mouth,” Jess warned.

“A brother stealer,” he continued, ignoring Jess’s glare.

“I think the money should go to me now that we know Kio is a filthy cheater.” Celia snatched the money pile.

“It wasn’t that obvious!” Layla defended.

“It was. You guys grew a little co-dependent, if I’m being honest,” Kione told them.

“That’s not true.”

“You’ve been eating with one hand and holding each other’s other hand under the table.”

Layla to the audience: oh.

chapter 29

spotted



Layla

When Layla woke the next day, she had a dreadful feeling in her chest. In fact, as soon as she woke up, she got up and reached for the door. It was too quiet. Normally, she could hear movement from the kitchen where Celia would be making breakfast.

She could hear someone whispering, and then it suddenly stopped. Celia cleared her throat and called out her name.

“What happened?” she asked.

Celia turned the phone screen to show her what she had been looking at, Layla’s brain took a few moments to process what she was looking at.

It was her and Jess. Kissing.

Her stomach twisted. The picture was taken just yesterday. It was late. She and Celia had decided, for some reason, to walk everyone to their cars. Jess’s car was parked the furthest. Layla had felt at peace. She felt so normal, so happy, and it was a weight off her shoulders that her friends knew about her and Jess and were happy for her.

She had kissed Jess in front of the car; he was pushed against the door, smiling as he pressed his lips to hers and running his hand through her hair, the first time in her life where she felt comfortable enough to show affection in front of others and someone had taken a picture of it.

Someone had taken it and sold it for an insane amount. The picture was everywhere by the time they found out.

In the few posts where her comments weren't turned off on her art account, it was flooded with horrible comments, then the comment started flooding her personal account and then they were all over Jess's account. Most of the ones on his account were telling him to stay away from her because she was a gold digger who had tried her luck on both Mateo and Kione, and it didn't work. That he deserved better, and so on.

Layla wouldn't have cared if it wasn't for the fact that Jess had gone completely MIA after the picture went out. She texted him over and over again but had no response. Even Kione wasn't responding. Layla was trying not to panic, not to think that maybe he thought this kind of attention on him every time they were seen in public was not something he was interested in.

A couple of hours went by with no text or call. She had stopped looking through the comments in Jess's posts, his comments were still turned on. Later when an unannounced visit rang the doorbell, she expected it to be Jess, but it wasn't.

It was Anne Reyes.

"Are you busy, dear?" Anne asked gently.

"Umm, no?"

"Good, get dressed. We're going shopping," she told her, like it was completely normal for her to be in LA.

"Shopping?"

"Yes. I'm supposed to get my second Birkin today," she explained.

"Oh, okay." Layla changed her clothes in silence, kissed her cat, and got in the car with Anne.

There was a lot of traffic, so she spent a lot of time speaking to Anne. She jumped from one topic to the other, but she didn't say anything about Jess or the pictures. When they arrived, Anne kept taking her opinion and pulling her into conversation, walking her through the process of getting a Birkin. Layla had no choice but to get distracted.

Later, when they settled in the restaurant Anne chose, Layla cleared her throat, resisting the urge to check her phone.

“Okay, you can stop trying to distract me,” Layla said.

“Distract you?” she asked, a very familiar glint of amusement entered her green eyes.

“Yes. It’s okay. We were reckless. I get it.”

“I’m not here to distract you, dear. I don’t think you’re reckless at all.”

“Then why did you fly all the way here?”

“I thought you might need the company, especially when my son had to fly out to his next game.”

Layla to the audience: the game!

In the midst of all of this, the fact that the Lakers had to fly to their next game had slipped her mind

She shuddered. She didn’t realize how tense she was for all these hours; she was still not used to feeling like her soul was so connected to his, to how it affected her.

Jess was the only thought she could not compartmentalize. Because of that, these past few months had taken a toll on her. She had this fear that she was still undeniably unloveable. It constantly hovered over her. She kept thinking, what if he found more things to hate than to love?

He hadn’t said he loved her back; she tried not to think about it. It was a step forward for her to express her vulnerability without panicking; she refused to let her mind ruin it.

What hurt her the most was all her fears were a result of her thoughts. He wasn’t doing anything to hurt her; she was the one hurting herself.

“I forgot about the game,” she whispered. “He was having a hard time during the last one. I should have been there. How could I forget?”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. He said he wanted to get his head back in the game before inviting friends and family to see him again. There’s nothing to worry about. Besides, he’s never really alone. Little Kio is always by his side.”

“I don’t know how to deal with this fear,” she confessed.

“My husband used to struggle to accept how peaceful our life felt whenever we were together. It takes a lot of time, a lot of reassurance, and a lot of good company, but you get there, eventually.”

“You know, when Jess was younger, he’d always ask me ‘how did you know dad was the one?’ He had a romantic heart and high expectations for love. I told him repeatedly, when you know, you know. I don’t believe in love at first sight and neither does he, but I told him sometimes there’s a certainty in our hearts that lets us know we’ll love this person on purpose. One day, a couple of months ago, he called me and said ‘mom, I know’ and wouldn’t explain it any further. He can be really dramatic like that, but then when I saw you at that event, I saw his eyes when he looked at you. It looked like the wind was knocked out of his chest, and I knew.”

Gratitude coursed through her. She thought it was pretty clear where Jess got his calming presence from. At the end of the day, Anne dropped her off at home and then went to stay at Noor’s house.

She spent a while working on a new collection she wanted to sell. She was so focused she didn’t hear the sound of her phone, signaling that a new text had arrived, until the noise came again and again.

She picked up the phone and saw a text about thirty minutes ago; it was Jess telling her that the comments were a lot more positive now that she was photographed with his mom, who was adored by the public.

Layla didn’t know anyone had taken a picture of them, but she had a feeling Anne had a hand in it.

The other text was Jess telling her to face time him so he could explain what he was doing and failing to do all day.

Layla remembered months ago, when Jess told her he prided himself on being a ‘chill’ and ‘nonchalant’ kind of guy, so imagine her surprise when she saw the multiple texts with barely a few minutes between them.

you must be with the other guy you're dating

Layla to audience: sometimes, the best thing that can happen to you is falling in love with an idiot.

what position does he have you in now?

it's actually a woman

An older woman. A single mom who's very career driven

just my type

oh ok

how long did she last?

she's grooming you btw

age gaps are not okay

I'm sick to my stomach

chapter 30

I love you



Jess

Finally, after having about four games out of LA, the team was heading back. It could not have come at a worse time. It had caused a delay in his plan. Normally, that would have been fine, but Layla was an anxious woman and he could not imagine what was going through her head.

They were doing remarkably well this season. Other than the one he ruined, the whole season was smooth as butter.

It did not help that after his teammates had seen the pictures; he was constantly getting teased in the locker room. They had so much fun talking about his tattoo, which he really didn't mind.

As soon as they landed, Jess texted Layla to meet him at the diner.

She wore a brown cardigan with a long beige fitted skirt and her hair was down.

It was a little awkward. He didn't know if he should just go for the kiss, but god he missed her so much; he kept contemplating buying the musk she wore all the time and ditching his own cologne.

Layla hesitated for a moment before wrapping her arms around his waist. It gave him the opportunity to wrap her in a bear hug.

"I missed you so much," he signed. It seemed to mean a lot to her. That word, I missed you.

She smiled softly at the word every time.

“Where are we going?” she asked him.

“I’m taking you on a date. We haven’t been going out on enough dates, you know?” He took the milkshakes to go and then they headed over to his car.

The destination was close to the diner, so it was best that they go from there.

On their way there, he stopped to get some ice-cream. When he got back in the car again, she noticed the ice-cream in the cup was shaped like a flower.

“Flowers?” she asked, her eyes sparkling.

“You said you’ve never gotten flowers before, so I figured I should find ways to constantly give them to you. To make up for all the times you didn’t get them.”

Once they arrived at the movie set, Layla’s brow furrowed slightly, but she stayed quiet.

Jess led her inside. It was huge. He paid a good amount of money for the transformation. The movie set was divided into separate sections. Each section was made into a replica of a room from a tv show, movie or book from Layla’s favorites.

One room was made into a replica of Luke’s diner from *Gilmore Girls*. *That’s where we’ll sit and have our milkshakes*, he thought.

Another section, a slightly bigger one was made to replicate a few rooms from the *Adam’s Family* movie set.

And lastly, there was a small section that was meant to be Camp Half-Blood from the Percy Jackson books.

Layla stood at the door, staring at everything with her mouth open.

“What is this?”

“It’s our date.” He tugged on her hand. “It was hard to narrow it down to these three since you love so many, but I thought you would feel delighted by these the most.”

It was one of the first things that she mentioned after he found out about her mom. She told him she used to consume so much media in order to escape whatever she was feeling.

“But why?” she asked him. Jess didn’t mention the hitch in her voice. His Layla was sensitive, despite pretending she wasn’t.

“I fucked up a little bit unintentionally. You told me you loved me and I didn’t say it back because I didn’t think it was the right time.”

“It wasn’t?” she asked.

“I stressed you out the whole day. You were up for hours and I gave you a scare.” He gestured at the sets. “I didn’t want to tell you I love you that day because of that. I wanted you to be able to associate the day with better feelings. I didn’t want the memory to be tainted with anxiety. So I thought I would recreate places from media that made you feel comfortable.”

“Oh,” she whispered, looking around.

Layla to the audience: he’s just so...

First she explored the *Addams Family* set. Jess made out with her on every surface of the set. He told her it’s what Morticia and Gomez would have wanted and she agreed.

Then they had their milkshakes and burgers in Luke’s diner, where he pretended to take her order, cook it, serve it, and then sat down and shared a meal with her. He made her pancakes as well; she ate everything because it was only appropriate.

Layla finished before he did. She went exploring a bit on her own; she disappeared for a bit and then bumped into Jess on her way back to the fake diner.

“I was looking for you,” he signed.

“Oh, what did you need?”

“I haven’t had desert yet, it’s about time.”

Layla couldn’t look away from the heated look in his eyes. She laughed.

“That was a little corny, wasn’t it?” she said, running her hands on his biceps.

“It was, but I really would like us to fuck on this counter later, it that’s alright with you?”

“Won’t it break?”

“I guess we’ll have to find out.”

After that in Camp Half-Blood, she looked around each camp; it was a lot smaller than what the actual camp would be like. They felt like giants. There were wooden swords on the ground, which she picked up and started poking at his stomach. Jess ignored it at first, but then when the pokes increased in strength, he grabbed her jaw and started attempting to pamper her with kisses.

“You must be too scared to fight back,” she told him, somehow managing to look down her nose at him.

“Precisely.”

“Coward.”

“Whatever you say, sweetheart.”

Her attempts failed. He was strolling through the camp while she tried to attack him like she wasn’t even there. When she gave up and threw the sword, Jess picked her up and easily turned her upside down.

“Cheater,” she screeched. “Put me down!” Jess walked over to the table and laid her down. He made some space for himself between her legs and pinned her in place.

“When I first met you, do you know what I thought about you?”

“What?”

“You’re so full of life.” She laughed like it was ridiculous.

“That’s not really a word I would use to describe me, Jess.”

“You are,” he insisted. “I saw your work, your paintings, all that beauty, all that sadness and life that you made with your hands. It comes from you. It’s how you look at things, you’re so full of life, and you can shine a light on it and paint it in a unique way.

“I—”

“And I thought you’re too full of life to be half loved by someone. I hoped that someday you would let me love you in

full force, and I do. I love you so much. Every day, I wake up and I choose to love you even more. I've never felt like this before. I know it will never feel like this again. My heart knows what it's like to have the wind knocked out of me because of you."

"You should. I'm stunningly attractive," she joked because she didn't know how to respond.

"You should tell me you love me now."

"I already said it."

"It was an emotional day. It doesn't count." There was a look of embarrassment in his eyes that made her think he spent a long time thinking that her confession was the result of worry, something she said to distract him, not that she actually meant it.

"I love you," she told him. "You are the only man I've ever loved."

Jess to the audience: I'm not going to lie, that last line did wonder to my ego.

Layla to the audience: I regret the last line sometimes.

"You love me," he said, shaking his shoulders and doing a little dance.

"You are annoying!"

"Oh, this is so good. How the mighty have fallen. Is that the right term for this moment? When did you realize it? Was it the perfect moment when the sun was shining on my hair or when I walked out of the bathroom after a shower and the towel was low on my waist and—"

"Shut up, shut up, *shut up*," she said, hitting his chest.

Nevertheless, she spent the rest of the day repeating it to him, as per his request. She got bored with repeating the words, eventually. She started kissing down his body, testing to see what spot made him speechless.

chapter 31

kittens



Layla

The next day, Layla called her grandparents. Somehow, her grandfather had convinced Sharon to let Samira sleep at the family house most days of the week. Layla didn't know how, but she got a vague sense there was some form of threatening involved.

"You're turning twenty-one, right? She's turning seventeen, so she's going to be a senior soon and we didn't want her to be constantly stressed."

"But what's the catch? How did she agree to this?" The silence that followed made her stomach turn. She knew her mother would not let her anger over that night go. She had to have something up her sleeve, another slap in the face.

"Baba, I know we agreed for you to visit her more often and spend time with us and Samira, but your mother's condition was that Samira doesn't interact with you." That made sense. She thought about how her sister wasn't able to call her unless she was out of the house, how she avoided answering questions these past couple of days.

"It's temporary, I promise. Maybe we can manage a few trips to you just until she turns eighteen then she'll be free to do whatever she wants."

Layla had been too optimistic when she left their home. She thought perhaps now that the truth was out she could visit them more often, laugh with, spend time enjoying the family house. She never got the chance to do that before. She wanted to

experience the sleepovers there; she wanted everything she missed.

“I would love to have you guys over,” she told him, clearing her throat. Her heart felt too heavy.

When she hung up, she received a text from Jess. Her first thought was that she should hide her sadness. He didn’t deserve to be with someone who was constantly sad, constantly panicking. Surely at some point it would be too much?

But she didn’t want to hide from him. She wanted to feel comfortable sharing these things with him. As soon as she picked up her phone, the doorbell rang. She frowned, heading to the window, expecting to see Mateo.

It was Onika. Crying and holding three kittens in her arms.

Layla squeaked as she opened the door.

“Kittens!” she took all three of them in her arms. They were a little dirty but seemed to be in good shape. “Sorry, why are you crying? Are you okay?”

“I was in my car listening to sad music and I had the window down and then I hear their tiny little meows and they were separated so I spent an hour looking for each of them and I couldn’t find the mom and... and...”

“Okay, okay, take a deep breath. They look like they were dumped, their nails are cut. You did the right thing. They probably wouldn’t have survived. It’s the cat distribution system.”

“The what?”

“The cat distribution system. You were chosen.” Onika’s tears dried.

“That’s a thing?”

“Yes. It’s like Santa, but for cat lovers, you know?”

“Oh, that makes a lot of sense, actually. But I don’t know how to take care of them.”

“It’s honestly easy. Let’s give them a bath first.”

Layla explained to Onika everything she would need while she showered the three-month-old kittens. Salem, who liked kittens, came in after they were dried and started licking them. Onika looked so overwhelmed, but after the kittens ate, two of them fell asleep purring in her lap and she looked eager to take them home with her.

Layla held the last one to her chest, the purring made the ache in her chest feel a little less heavy.

“Why were you crying?” Layla asked. “Do you want me to call someone?”

Onika looked surprised that Layla was initiating a conversation at all. They’d never been alone before and out of all of them, she was sure she and Onika were the only ones who barely knew each other.

“I called my sister today. The call wasn’t very light on the heart,” she murmured, stroking the kittens.

Layla paused for a moment. She thought about how in the past year if the Garcia siblings hadn’t forced their presence in her life, she would have been completely isolated, and then Jess, who was so patient and gentle as he made some space for himself in her life. She was grateful for them, but it was undeniable proof she had let her fears stop her from making connections.

She decided it was about time to get over it, to reach out a hand and see how it goes.

“I could make some food and you could tell me about it if you want?” she asked timidly. “I would love to talk about my sister as well. I think we might be in the same boat today.”

Onika smiled her usual bright smile, and Layla’s anxiousness started to melt away.

“I’d like that.”

They spent hours in that kitchen. They climbed on the kitchen counter and sat facing each other and then when they were done the plates were forgotten around them; they listened to each other, and it felt too good to vent.

Layla used to crave being someone's priority so much, she craved the importance of it, to know that she was needed and wanted in someone's life, and she had thought for the longest time that the only way she could be someone's priority was if she ever found a way to get someone to fall in love with her.

"I wanted to be your friend as soon as I met you," Onika admitted sheepishly. "I feel like as I grow older I lose some of my skills to make friends. It gets a little harder."

"I thought you were so cool," Layla told her.

Layla excused herself to the bathroom. She took out her phone to see what he texted before Onika got there.

can you send me your opinion on the book I sent you a while ago? I want to hear your voice

I wish you were here right now

baby

is everything okay?

For the first time ever, Layla didn't lie or hesitate to answer truthfully. She didn't feel burdened to share.

horrible pet name

not really

but I want to tell you about it so we'll talk when I see you

chapter 32

his girlfriend



Jess

After the game, Jess and Kione sat down after each of them showered.

“Is your girlfriend not texting you back?” Kione asked when he noticed Jess staring too long at his screen.

“My what?”

“Your girlfriend.”

“What?”

“Your girlfriend,” Kione huffed. He turned to look at his best friend, who had a smug smile on his face.

“My girlfriend.” He mouthed the words, then nodded, seemingly pleased.

Jess stared at his feet for a few seconds before saying. “I’m thinking of starting therapy again.”

“Oh?” Kione froze.

Jess was quiet for a while. He’d stopped going to therapy as soon as he became an adult. His parents couldn’t make him go at that point. He had gone to please them, because they were so worried and he didn’t know what to do.

He never really liked it. He started immediately it after the shooting, but it was still too raw for him. All he wanted to do was avoid thinking about it. He had mostly evaded talking about the things that mattered to him., When he turned eighteen, he stopped going altogether and had opted to push it back and

occasionally have panic attacks about it or push it back until he was alone in bed with nothing to distract him. But at this point, he wanted to not have to ignore his mental health in order to feel some semblance of peace. He was tired of his thoughts and he wanted to be better for her. He wanted her to be the one thing occupying his head. Nothing else. She deserved to be taking up every corner of space in his mind.

“Is it just because of her? You have to go because you want to get better, not for anyone else.”

“It’s not just for her; it’s partly because of her, but that night when I had a panic attack before the game? Kione, I wouldn’t have asked for help if she hadn’t been there. It was a coincidence that she was there in time, but I wouldn’t have asked for help otherwise and it terrifies me to think about how deep I would have sunk that day. It was so suffocating. I have to do this for both of us, you know? I want to.”

Flights back to LA used to fly faster when Jess didn’t have anyone waiting for him. He missed her all the time now. Sometimes, he barely felt human and on most days, he felt like his heart string was too loose. Somehow, she had wrapped it around her finger. Every time she smiled at him, there was a tug, a flutter, and it reminded him how undeniably human he was.

When they landed, they had plans for the day. Layla and Jess were going to their first gathering as a couple. This was not the usual gathering with just friends. Jess’s coach and his husband were hosting to celebrate ten years of marriage and they had invited a good number of people from different teams along with the whole Lakers team. Of course, husbands and wives and some parents were there, including Jess’s parents and Kione’s.

Kione didn’t lie when he said Jess was all over the place. He spoke to everyone, proposed a toast and gave a small speech. He made sure she was always close to him, he held her hand for most of the time.

One of his teammates jokingly teased him about it.

“No one is going to steal her from you,” he’d said.

Jess didn’t seem convinced.

Layla to the audience: I didn't hate every minute of it. Which is a good sign.

At some point, a woman came up to her and teased her about Jess being a little shy, which wasn't usual for him.

"I think it's adorable. It's like he's so flustered by you."

She didn't think people would look at it that way. She had thought of the worst-case scenario, but those people were actually pretty kind to her and, most importantly they really did care for Jess.

When she wasn't with Jess, she stayed close to his father, who had found her when she was looking for the bathroom.

"Oh. I thought you wanted to hide. I wanted to go with you."

Andrew was a little harder to get close to, unlike Anne, who welcomed her into her inner circle immediately, but Layla didn't mind. They were bonding very slowly.

"Coach was saying you looked nervous. He hopes you'll feel more comfortable around them." He told her once they got to her apartment later. He was so ready to cuddle in bed.

"I'm sorry."

"How come you always apologize like this? Like you've caused an inconvenience."

"I just—"

"Because you're not. You're the woman I love. The woman I'll marry someday, if you'll have me. Reassuring you and loving you will never be an inconvenience."

"Okay."

"You're my favorite walking pile of panic attacks."

"That was unnecessary."

"Even madly in love couples have to disagree sometimes."

"Why do you keep talking about marriage?" She circled back, rolling her eyes when he smirked down at her.

"It's best not to forget I know how wet you get when I do."

“Oh, I really don’t like at all.” He kissed her. He knew the exact spot she liked.

“Is it okay if I’m not gentle tonight, baby?” he asked as she undressed him. “Please?”

She nodded. Later, when they were finished, he dozed off for a few hours. When he woke, he found the bed empty, which made him frown. There was no noise from the bathroom and he was too lazy to get up, so he texted her.

“Come to bed, sweetheart. I miss you.” When there was no answer, he huffed as he got up.

“Yes, I can’t wait! I’m really glad we got a spot in the class.” Layla was on the phone. “It’s a date.”

Jess bumped into her walking so fast to the kitchen. “Who were you talking to?”

“Your mom,” she said, holding her phone for him.

“You guys are making plans together?” Jess asked her, smiling.

“Yes, we’re going to a pottery class.”

“Oh, sign me up.”

“No. it’s a girl’s day.” Jess pouted. Layla smiled up at him, and he knew he wouldn’t argue with her any further. She knew it as well.

“You know, I don’t even believe in god, but sometimes when you smile at me like that, like you know what you’re doing I feel certain divinity does exist.” He paused. “That was a good line. Let me write it down.”

They started cleaning the apartment. Everyone else would be coming to have dinner later and Celia was out grocery shopping.

“So in regards to the pet name issue.”

“It’s not an issue.”

“You’re sure you hate all pet names? You don’t even want to give them a try?”

“I hate them all.”

To test the statement, Jess decided to throw a pet name her way once in a while to see how she reacts.

“Love” every morning when he has to leave, when he grabs her to cuddle with her for five more minutes, or when he knows he’s being annoying.

“Sweetheart” most of the time, always to remind her that she’s the sweetest thing he’s ever tasted.

“Layla” or “my Layla” always *his* Layla.

“Mrs. Reyes” when he’s so beaming with pride as he looks at her work.

“Darling” when he’s in pain, or when he’s drowning in pleasure from her touch, when his orgasm is close, and the way he says it makes her think maybe she doesn’t hate it all the time, maybe she had exceptions.

Jess turned on some music and pulled her into his arms. It wasn’t very loud. Salem was quietly observing them. That day, he had willingly cuddled with Jess, which was a huge step in their relationship.

“Thank you. For what you’re doing for my mom.”

Layla brushed it off, but she didn’t know how much it meant to him. Anne’s real friends could be counted on one hand, and the ones she was close with didn’t live in New York, where her job needed her the most. The first five-star hotel she ever owned was there. New York was the place she fell in love. She loved it too much to leave.

Layla had been making an effort to spend time with her, to visit often and make sure she took time to herself.

He felt so content. He never expected to feel peace so deeply in his chest. When he sank back into his fears, he had someone to pull him back up. When her thoughts overwhelmed her, he loved being able to calm her mind and soul. Everything he ever wanted was there in his arms with her head on his chest as she hummed along the song.

The ordeal of being known wasn’t so horrifying after all.

epilogue

Layla

four months later

Everyone decided the guys deserved a night of celebrating their efforts so far. They weren't really finished; it was the middle of April, which meant it was time for the NBA playoffs with the NBA play-in tournament, which determines the seven and eight seeds. Then, the top eight teams from each conference compete for the NBA title.

Layla made her way into the bathroom where Jess stood. She saw him sign, "Those jeans do wonders to your ass."

They were directed at his best friend.

"Really? I was feeling insecure about my ass today," she heard Kione say. She had no idea how they both fit in the bathroom. It wasn't very spacious.

"No, it looks very firm and nice," Jess told him, unaware that she was watching them.

She cleared her throat.

"Everyone is waiting for you guys," she told them.

"Okay habibi," Jess signed. He was learning Arabic and had already formed an attachment to the word.

"You seem to be very interested in his ass," she said.

"Don't be jealous, habibi. You know, I used to think of you as my heart's true north."

"And now?"

"Now you're the sultan of my heart."

"Your Arabic is getting better, but you need to stop with the insane number of nicknames."

"I politely decline."

They scrambled out. It was food competition day, which meant that everyone, including them, had prepared a dish by themselves. The dishes were spread out on the table and waiting for evaluation. Whoever got the most votes won, and who made each dish was kept anonymous. They had bought matching containers to make the process easier.

Later, when they announced Layla's food as the winner, she was in the open kitchen when Mateo snuck up on her.

"You cheated," he accused.

"Who cheated on who?" Onika yelled out from her position on the couch.

"Layla cheated."

"What?" everyone exclaimed.

"I meant for the competition! She definitely told Jess," Mateo said.

Layla to the audience: I didn't cheat.

"Everyone was here hours early and Jess just got here and you have my phone."

It wasn't strange for any of them to get there early whenever they were gathering. They had the food competition a couple of times. A few times it came down to Jess's vote to the best dish, and he always chose Layla's. Mateo, despite being told he's a horrible cook, was convinced that if Jess hadn't voted for her, he would have had a chance at winning.

She never told Jess which dish was hers, but he could always tell.

"She's not going to leave you if you vote for another dish," he told Jess.

"She's my future wife. Whatever she makes is best. And she didn't have to tell me. I always know when something is hers."

"She's not your wife yet," Celia said, paused. "Right?" She narrowed her eyes.

They had a ridiculous fear that we were just going to elope without telling anyone.

“We’re not even engaged.”

“Yet,” Kione said.

“Can you come here?” Layla called out to Jess. She was having trouble reaching for the shelf near the dining table.

“Jesus, not on the dining table. What’s wrong with you?” Kione exclaimed.

“Who’s coming on the dining table?”

“Someone’s came on my dining table?” Celia asked.

“No one is coming on the dining table,” Layla told them. “We prefer the kitchen counter.”

There was a knock at the door. Kione was the one who went to open it. He had mentioned he invited someone to join them.

Layla had her back to the door. She didn’t see who walked in, but she could see Celia’s face pale in front of her. When she turned, she came face to face with Nabi.

Nabi and Kione had become close friends over the last couple of months. Layla narrowed her eyes at him while the others welcomed the newcomer.

“Do you know something I don’t?” she asked him.

“I know a lot of things,” he told her in a mock wise tone. Layla ran over to Jess to whisper in his ear.

“We’re not talking to Kione for the rest of the night,” she told him.

“Yes, ma’am.” When she moved to sit in the chair next to him, his legs hooked at the bottom of her chair to pull her closer. They were never very far away these days.

Layla and Jess had become so intertwined, you couldn’t look at Jess and not see the effect of Layla edged into everything he did and, in turn, you could never look at Layla and not see the effect Jess’s love had on her. She had smile lines now, he’d carved happy lines near her mouth. It was the greatest accomplishment he would ever achieve.

Layla looked around, there were some loose ends, some stuff that always came back to her mind, unsolved things, whatever MateoMateo was still hiding was always there, but there was also Celia, for the past couple of weeks, Celia had been sleeping in Layla's room which she only did when she was upset about something.

She could only wait until they felt ready to share whatever burdened them.

When everyone else left, Jess stayed. He was going to sleepover, and they were going through their skincare routine. He had told her they should look for apartments together, but Layla wasn't ready to leave Celia and their apartment yet. She loved the place so much.

□

Jess

"You haven't told me you loved me today," Jess told her when they got in bed, which was a lie. She had told him.

"I love you," she signed. "You're the only man I've ever loved."

He asked her to repeat it. Sometimes he held her hand while she signed. He would just stare at every inch of her face in fascination, like it was his first time seeing her. He would gently hold her wrists, brushing over them, and when she finished, he'd sign 'can you repeat that I didn't catch it' and he would get to look at her longer.

She was a lot happier now, about a month before she had managed to see her sister, and she was already planning the next time.

The subject of her mother was still a little sore. She had gotten a lot better mentally, but it still hurt her.

She says she made peace with it, but whenever they came across a mother with her daughter, he saw her looking at them with unbearable grief over the girl she could have been. Sometimes she goes into this faraway spot in her head where he wasn't allowed, where he could only hold on to her from

the other side, waiting for her to eventually bury her face in his chest, waiting for the gut-wrenching sound of her quiet sobs. It will always be the hardest thing he'd ever had to accept, that there are wounds inside the people we love that we can never tend to, no matter how much we want to.

Sometimes when they spent time with his mother, he would notice Layla being too careful with her words, too careful with the way she acts, too careful to be the woman he fell in love with. She made a joke once and then spent the rest of the night looking at my mom, checking to see if the way she interacted with her changed.

“What are you thinking about?” Her voice cut through his thoughts.

“You. It's always you.” She rolled her eyes at him, but she was smiling and, like usual, it rendered him speechless.

At first he was scared she might think his love was too much for her. He was obsessed with showing her love through big and small gestures, and she always met him halfway through with her own ways like it was some sort of competition.

It was usually the smaller gestures that made her so flustered, when he leaned over to buckle her seat belt, when he zipped her jacket up and kissed her forehead, when he insisted that she holds his hand when they cross the road, when he sat down to watch her apply her makeup and get ready.

“Am I treating you right, then?”

“Yes, Ms. Reyes.”

Layla to the audience: that's a wrap for us. I think we'll see you guys again when it's Celia's turn.

“Celia? I thought it was Onika's turn given the mess,” Jess asked her, coming up from behind her and wrapping his arms around her.

“Oh right. I guess we'll see how it plays out.”

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