

JANIAH BENITEZ

the
Plan



the
Plan

The Hale Series
Janiah Benitez

Copyright © 2024 by Janiah Benitez

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without prior written permission from the author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

The story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this production are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased) is intended or should be inferred.

Contents

[Trigger Warnings](#)

[Dedication](#)

[1. Chapter One](#)

[2. Chapter Two](#)

[3. Chapter Three](#)

[4. Chapter Four](#)

[5. Chapter Five](#)

[6. Chapter Six](#)

[7. Chapter Seven](#)

- [8. Chapter Eight](#)
- [9. Chapter Nine](#)
- [10. Chapter Ten](#)
- [11. Chapter Eleven](#)
- [12. Chapter Twelve](#)
- [13. Chapter Thirteen](#)
- [14. Chapter Fourteen](#)
- [15. Chapter Fifteen](#)
- [16. Chapter Sixteen](#)
- [17. Chapter Seventeen](#)
- [18. Chapter Eighteen](#)
- [19. Chapter Nineteen](#)
- [20. Chapter Twenty.](#)
- [21. Chapter Twenty-One](#)
- [22. Chapter Twenty-Two](#)
- [23. Chapter Twenty-Three](#)
- [24. Chapter Twenty-Four](#)
- [25. Chapter Twenty-Five](#)
- [26. Chapter Twenty-Six](#)
- [27. Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)
- [28. Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)
- [29. Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)
- [30. Chapter Thirty.](#)
- [31. Chapter Thirty-One](#)
- [32. Chapter Thirty-Two](#)
- [33. Chapter Thirty-Three](#)
- [34. Chapter Thirty-Four](#)
- [35. Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

- [36. Chapter Thirty-Six](#)
- [37. Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)
- [38. Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)
- [39. Epilogue](#)
- [40. Extend Epilogue](#)
- [42. Acknowledgments](#)
- [43. About The Author](#)

Trigger Warnings

Some of these are spoilers—so warning!

Overdose

Child Abuse

Domestic Violence

Mention of Self-harm

Child Loss (Miscarriage)

Alcohol and Drug Addiction

Sexual Assault (Please note, it goes no
further than attempted rape)

Some Sexual Scenes (If we're related, this is your
warning, just skip. Thank you!)

To everyone who's been here since the beginning,
I hope this is an *okay* book.

Chapter One

SIRE

OUR FIRST GAME IS SOON.”

I let out a sigh at the reminder and turn to August. “Yeah, I know.” I run a hand down my face, trying to calm my nerves. I should be fine. I have a month until our first game. I should be cleared by then... Hopefully.

I feel August’s eyes on me, waiting for me to say more, but I don’t. “How many more physical therapy sessions do you have?” He sounds like he’s treading lightly on a hard topic, and in a way, he is.

I was fine the entire last year, and then two months before the season starts, my dumb ass fucks up my already-fucked-up arm. I made a full recovery last time, so I’m hoping for the same this time. The team needs me.

“Just a month left. My last session is the week before our first game.” August nods, but he looks like he wants to say something, and I feel my brows furrow. “What is it?”

He looks over at me, his eyes revealing a nervousness in them. He scratches the back of his head, then toys with one of his box braids, and I feel myself growing impatient.

“What is it, August?” I say a bit more firmly.

“Nothing,” he spits out a bit too quickly but recovers just as fast. “How do you like it?”

What? God, he’s so weird.

“How do I like physical therapy?” I shake my head at him. “I don’t.” I don’t like doctors or being told what the fuck to do. “I don’t even need this last month of therapy, and I don’t want to go anymore.” I just need the damn doctor to clear me, but for some reason, a part of me is nervous he won’t.

I need to be one hundred percent to play this season to avoid permanent damage to my arm. Everyone thinks it’s better to take a year off rather than fucking up my arm for good, and I agree. That’s the only reason I agreed to PT, but I’m fine now. Sort of...

“Wait, you don’t want to go?” There’s a hint of shock in his voice. I’ve complained about this to him before, but I guess he never assumed I wanted to quit PT. It’s my career on the line here. That’s why I didn’t quit and just pushed through, but with the season nearing, I’m getting antsy.

“Why would I?” At this point, I’m just wasting my time there... Besides the slight pain, I feel fine. I can handle the pain; it’s just a bit sore. I want to play. I *can* play.

“Hmm,” August hums, clearly lost in his thoughts.

“Hmm, what?” He steals a glance at me but shakes his head. “Spit it out, August.” He brushes me off and picks up his phone, pretending to be busy, but considering I’ve known him more than half his life, I know him better than that.

“August?” I deadpan.

“Jesus, it’s nothing. You’re gonna be late for your appointment, and you’ll find out later.” I glance at the time, and he’s right. I’m gonna be late if I don’t leave right now, but then I compute the last bit of his sentence that he mumbled.

“I’m going to find out what later?”

As if on command, his phone rings, and he gets up, waving me off to answer. “August.” He disappears into the hallway leading to his room, and I roll my eyes at his dismissal.



I'M FIVE MINUTES LATE WHEN I walk into the team's private doctor's office. Something feels off, but I ignore it and head straight for the front desk. I notice there's a new receptionist, and she looks up from her computer to greet me with a smile.

"Good morning. What can I help you with today?"

Someone's perky. "I have an appointment with Dr. Miller."

She looks back at her computer and starts typing. "Can I get your name?" I give her my name, and her eyes shoot back up to me. *Great.*

"Wait—you're *the* Sire Griffin? Like, the star player on the LA Dodgers, Sire Griffin?" I nod, confirming, and she just stares, starstruck. I usually don't mind when I bump into fans, but I already don't want to be in this stupid doctor's office, and she's kind of slowing down my process to get the fuck out of here.

I muster a fake smile, trying not to be rude. "So, Dr. Miller? Can you notify him that I'm here?" I keep my tone light, and she shoots up from her seat as soon as she registers my words.

"Right, of course. I'll get right to that, Mr. Griffin." She's halfway to the back door when she stops and turns back around. It'll be highly inappropriate if she asks me for a fucking autograph right now. "Sorry, I just remembered... Dr. Miller isn't here."

How is he not here? I'm only five minutes late. I'm starting to get annoyed, and I'm convinced it's this building—something about it is just off today.

"When will he be back?" I try not to be harsh, but she looks at me nervously, likely picking up on my attitude anyway.

"Um... he won't. He no longer works here." What kind of fucking doctor just leaves and doesn't at least give their patients a heads up? Did he seriously not feel the need to bring this up last week when he scheduled my follow-up?

I let out an annoyed breath and started texting my agent. He's forcing me to be here; he can fix this bullshit. Not looking up from my phone, I hear her start to apologize.

"I am so sorry for the inconvenience, Mr. Griffin, but on the bright side, we have a new doctor. I've heard she's the best and is taking over all of Dr. Miller's patients, so I'll just let her know that—"

Looking up from my phone, I cut her off. "I don't need a new doctor. Thank you for your help." I turn to leave but stop when Jackson replies.

Agent Jackson Jones:

Yes, I was aware your doctor was leaving. I told him not to tell you last week since I knew you wouldn't go to your next appointment.

Since you're already there, you may as well see the new doctor. She's the best in the country so don't scare her away like you did the last 4 doctors.

Fucking asshole. I let out a sigh, and I turn back around. "Where's her office?" I follow the receptionist to the room at the end of the hall, and my phone dings with another message.

Also, I told you to stop picking up Isabelle early from school. Do you have trouble comprehending? I'm about to take you off her blue card.

He's bluffing. There's no way he's taking me off of his daughter's blue card. I met Jackson in college, and when my baseball career first took off about four years ago, it was a no-brainer to make him my agent. Isa was only about a few months old, and I say she's my niece, considering she calls me her uncle. That being said, I'm never getting taken off her blue card.

I walk into the new doctor's room, taking it all in. At least this one is bigger than Dr. Miller's. The walls are an ugly yellow, and a huge floor-to-ceiling window is taking up most of the back wall.

I look back down at my phone and start typing a *very* opinionated reply to Jackson. A whiff of a familiar vanilla scent hits my nose as someone walks in, and I stop typing.

I feel my entire body tense and look up. She has her back to me, but even then, I recognize her. Her hair is a bit lighter, with highlights of chestnut brown instead of just her natural darker color. It's still as curly as I remember, but it's a lot longer and now falls to the middle of her back.

Even from behind and with her small changes, I still know exactly who she is. "Vid?"

She spins around at the sound of my voice, and both of our demeanors quickly change. I knew something was different about the building as soon as I walked in.

She rolls her eyes and throws my chart aside. "This feels familiar." Her tone is just as bored as she looks, and I feel my teeth grinding against each other. Ugh, the more I look at her, the more pissed off I get.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Vidia?"

She looks just as mad as I feel, but I honestly couldn't care less about her feelings right now, or at all for that matter.

"You're in a doctor's office, and I'm in a white lab coat. Are you that dense?" she replies with a smart-ass comment I should've seen coming. *Little shit.*

It's obvious she works here, but that's not what I meant, and she knows that. "What are you doing *here*, in LA?" I say more firmly.

She opens her mouth to reply but shuts it before starting again. "I don't have to explain anything to you that is unrelated to your medical care."

I roll my eyes at her obnoxious "professional" voice. "Don't play with me right now, Vidia. Just answer the damn

question.” She crosses her arms, standing her ground. Whatever. “Fine. I don’t give a shit anyway.”

She rolls her eyes and leans against her computer desk. “When did you hurt your arm?” She knows I hurt it back in college since she was there, so she means when did I hurt it the *second* time.

I walk over to the bed and lean against it instead of sitting. “About a month ago during practice. You would’ve known that if you read my chart.” We both shoot glares at each other as I remind her of the way she just tossed my chart aside like it was trash.

“I did. It’s called talking to the patient to better understand their injuries.”

I give her a bored expression but don’t respond. She didn’t look surprised to see me, so I assume she knew I was her new patient. The question is, why did she agree to see me?

I watch her watch me, and I swear I can see her annoyance growing by the second. She finally snaps and lets out a scoff. “You should’ve just listened to me in college when I said—”

And just like that, we’re done here. I’m not going to sit here and listen to her say she told me so. I start to walk out, but she gets in my way. “Move.” I don’t bother to look down as I address her.

“Where are you going? Our session didn’t even start.”

I let out a scoff. She’s delusional if she thinks I’m seriously going to continue seeing her as my doctor. “It’s not going to start today or ever. I’m quitting physical therapy. Now *move*.” I look down at her just as she shoots me a glare.

“I highly advise that you don’t quit PT.” I also have some advice for her, starting with getting the fuck out of my way and ending with getting the fuck out of Los Angeles.

“Trust me, Sire. I despise you, too, but I would’ve thought you’d be a bit more mature about this, considering this is your career on the line.” If never seeing her again also means I might not be able to play anymore, that’s a chance I’m willing to take.

She must've read my mind somehow because she scoffs and moves to the side. Just as I'm nearing the exit, I hear her voice again. "I have to inform you that you're leaving and quitting physical therapy against my medical opinion."

"Good thing your medical opinion doesn't mean shit to me anymore." A small part of me wishes I wouldn't leave, the part that wants to play in a few weeks, but I leave and slam the door on my way out.

Speeding down the highway, I get the rush of adrenaline I need that I can't get from something else. I don't know why I let her get me like this. Why is she even here? The speedometer hits ninety miles per hour. Of all places, she just had to work in LA. *One hundred, one hundred and ten.*

"Ugh, that little shit!" I slow down and call August on speaker. I think he isn't going to answer, but after the fifth ring, he does.

"Hey, what's up?" Immediately, I start ranting, but he interrupts me. "I'm just kidding, man. This is my voicemail. Don't bother calling back. I didn't answer for a reason." He laughs, and I aggressively end the call. I always fall for that stupid shit.

Getting out on my exit, I call back. "Hey, what's up?" I don't answer him right away this time. "Hello?" Okay, it's really him.

"You knew." I'm kicking his ass for not telling me as soon as I see him.

"I know a lot of things, Sire. You gotta be more specific than that." He sounds so fucking happy, and that's about to change. This is not the time for him to be playing games with me.

"You knew she was back," I say through gritted teeth.

He's quiet for a few seconds, and then a soft sigh sounds through the speaker. "Okay, to be fair, I only found out last night when Hazel said—"

I hang up on him and speed home. I pull into our garage a few minutes later, and then I'm in the elevator. With every floor I climb, I can feel my blood boiling more and more.

I step out of the elevator and make a beeline for his door. With it being unlocked like always, I walk right in. As soon as he sees me, his hands go up, surrendering, and he starts backing up. “I was going to tell you... It just slipped my mind. I—” My fist connects with his jaw.

I hold my arm and suck in a breath from the pain. I shouldn’t be punching faces as hard as his if I plan on quitting physical therapy, but I don’t care. “Bullshit! You remembered this morning and still didn’t tell me.” He grabs his jaw and moves it a bit but doesn’t make a move to retaliate, so I push his chest, and he just takes it.

“I’m not going to hit you, Sire.” His voice is so faint, and it pisses me off even more how calm he is. I push him again, needing to release all this built-up anger, but he just stands there, stumbling back maybe an inch.

“Fuck you, August!” I turn around and storm out.



“YOU NEED TO GO BACK.” I don’t need to do shit, and I’m not going back there. Ever.

“Stop telling me what to do.” I keep doing my laps around the field, and Jackson follows behind me. He seriously needs to fuck off because I’m having a good workout, and he’s ruining it.

“I’m your agent—that’s my job.” No, it isn’t. I reach the dugout and grab my water bottle while taking a sip. I look down at Jackson when he leans over, out of breath. He only followed me for three laps. You would think he’s in good shape from his body, but he clearly isn’t.

“Your job is to manage, and do other agent things, not treat me like I’m Isabelle.”

He wipes a bead of sweat from his forehead and holds his hand out, I’m assuming for a sip of my water. I hold my water bottle out to him, but I squirt a bit in his face before he can grab it.

“You looked hot, but that was because you also knew she was back and booked my appointment with her anyway.” He wipes his face but doesn’t deny it. Jackson went to college with us, and while he doesn’t know why Vidia and I broke things off, he knows I can’t stand her.

He opens his mouth to say something, but I beat him to it. “Fuck off, I’m not going back.”

He chuckles as he shakes his head. “My daughter is more mature than you, so I guess I do have to treat you like you’re her,” he replies to my previous comment on Isabelle, but I highly disagree, considering she’s four and threw apple sauce on me last week. I may have thrown some back, but that’s not the point. Besides, she started it.

“You’ve missed two appointments, Sire.” How could I forget? He called me the night before and the morning of both appointments. I grab my bag and walk out of the dugout.

“First of all, stop rescheduling. I told you I’m not doing PT anymore. I don’t even need it.”

He follows me out and walks beside me as I walk off the field. “You do need it, considering your arm isn’t one hundred percent healed, and your first game is in a month. Unless you want to sit out, grow up and go to physical therapy.” His attitude is not needed. He’s being dramatic.

“You’re not even my coach, Jackson. Plus, I’m the team captain and the lead pitcher. There’s no way in hell I’m sitting out our first game.” I sound like I’m trying to convince both him and myself, but I shake the feeling off. I’m playing our first game.

I reach my car and throw my bag into my trunk, but he unfortunately decides to continue harassing me. “Get your head out of your arrogant ass. Your coach is not going to let you play if a doctor doesn’t sign off on it whether you’re the star player for the Los Angeles Dodgers or not.” *I am not arrogant.*

I almost ignore his comment but then turn to him. “So all I need is for a doctor to sign off?”

He eyes me, and then realization crosses his face. “Yes, but don’t get any ideas.”

“Have a great day, Jackson.” I give him an innocent smile and get into my car, but he stops me from closing my door.

“This is your career on the line, Sire.” I roll my eyes at him but stay quiet. *Doesn’t he think I know that?* “I’m harassing you for your sake, not for kicks.” He takes a step back, letting me close the door, then taps my car twice before walking off. I don’t immediately drive off and sit in thought.

Maybe I should go bac—

No. I’ll figure something out, and I’ll be able to play.

Chapter Two

SIRE

THERE'S MY FAVORITE PERSON!"

August looks around the room, and when he realizes that it's just us and I'm clearly talking about him, the biggest smile grows on his face. I smile at the way his eyes light up. I swear, his eyes are so green that they practically shine against his dark skin. He gets up from his couch, closing the distance between us.

"Me?!" Before I can even reply, he throws his arms around me, bringing me in for a hug. I let him hold me for a second before I tap his back twice and pull away.

A look of relief flashes across his face when I break our hug, and I'm confused for a second before I remember we haven't talked much since I sort of punched him in the face earlier this week. "No, I'm not mad at you anymore. Don't make it a big deal. It was just a hug."

I don't give him a chance to reply and quickly walk off to his couch. He'll make this all sentimental if I let him, so I don't. He walks over and sits next to me, but I scoot over because he's too close.

When he moves over to get closer, I let out a sigh but stay put. He's so fucking clingy. "I missed you." *See what I mean?*

“August. It’s been three days, and we spoke all of those days because you wouldn’t fuck off.”

His laughter fills the room, and I roll my eyes at him before letting out a laugh of my own at the sound of his. I swear he has the same little laugh from when he was nine. When his laugh sobers, he turns to me with a thoughtful look. “You’ve been mean the last few days, so yes, I missed you.”

I let out a sigh at his soft tone. He always does find a way to make me feel guilty for being a dick. “I’m sorry I punched you.” He turns his head to the side, like a puppy who’s expecting more. “And for not coming over or letting you in next door the last three days,” I mumble, and another one of his smiles covers his face.

August and I are neighbors since, like I said, he’s clingy as fuck. When he came to see my condo and noticed the only other condo on this floor was empty, he, of course, moved in, but we may as well still live under the same roof with how much I’m over here or he’s next door at my place.

I was heated that he didn’t tell me a certain someone was back, but I was a bit extra for hitting him and felt bad.

“All is good.” He stretches his arm around me as he rests his legs on the huge bean bag in front of us. While most people, normal people, have coffee tables in front of the couches in their living rooms, August has a huge orange bean bag.

He claims he couldn’t pick between a couch or a giant bean bag, so, of course, he got both. I’m about to throw his arm off of me, but I let him leave it there so he can get enough of me since he claims he “missed me.”

“Do you remember when you would forge signatures for people whose parents forgot to sign their permission slips?”

“Yeah.” He smiles at the memory. “Easiest money I’ve ever made.” It was also the longest time he’d been grounded, but I don’t mention that bit.

“You still any good at it?”

A small smile grows on his face, and he reaches for the random paper beside him and a pen on the floor. He writes

something, and when he shows me, my jaw gapes as I stare at *my* signature.

I shake my head and smirk as I take the paper from him, studying it. “You have talent, kid,” I project in an old man’s voice, and he throws his head back with a laugh. “No, all jokes aside, this is so cool.” And I am so glad he can still do this.

I pull the paper from my back pocket and hand it to him. “Try Vidia’s.” I keep my voice casual, but a crease grows in his brows when he looks down at the paper. He unfolds it, and I don’t even bother to stop him because he’s already reading it.

“This says you’re cleared to play.” His face lights up, and he looks over at me, but I can see the exact moment when the realization hits. His eyes go dull, and he looks so... betrayed.

“August...”

“You’re an asshole, man.” He tosses the paper onto my lap and scoots down all the way to the other end of the couch, crossing his arms. I let out a sigh, but when I open my mouth to respond, he beats me to it. “Am I even your favorite person?”

“What?!”

He shakes his head like what he just said was ridiculous because it was.

“August, of course you are. Please don’t be dramatic right now.” I didn’t say that when I walked in here just so he could sign this bullshit for me. I genuinely felt bad for the last few days and knew he would feel better hearing me say it. Besides, it’s true. August has been my... everything since we were kids. He knows that. He’s just dramatic and needs constant reassurance.

“You’re just using me.” He says it in disbelief, like he’s just had an epiphany, but that’s bullshit.

“No, the fuck I’m not. Seriously, cut it out.” God, I can already tell he isn’t going to let this go. I should’ve never even asked him. He shakes his head and stares at me like he can’t believe whatever bullshit he’s making up in his head.

“That’s the only reason you came over today. That’s why you were all nice and let me hug you *and* put my arm around you for more than two seconds.” I look up to the ceiling, contemplating my entire idea. I don’t have time for this.

“That’s not true. I—” I cut myself off, deciding I’m not debating this with him. “Just shut the fuck up, will you? Come on.” I get up from the couch, and he gets up, following me out with a smile.

“Where are we going?” He sounds like his joyful self again, like the last two minutes didn’t happen, and he’s just happy to follow me like a lost puppy. This is why I don’t bother to waste my time arguing with him. Half the time, he isn’t even really upset and just wants the damn attention. *Attention whore.*

“Doctor’s office.” I let him know where we are heading and skip the elevator, going for the stairs.

“Do you have physical therapy today?” Not if I can help it. I let August drive my car after he guilt trips me, and he ends up speeding the entire way there, so we make it twice as fast.

When the receptionist from earlier this week notices us, she, not so discreetly, fixes her hair, and I give her a little smile that makes her cheeks redden. As I make my way over to her, she rises from her seat, fixing her tight pencil skirt.

“Hi, Mr. Griffin.” She turns to August, and I swear she almost passes out. “August Hale.” She nods once and just stares for a beat. I would’ve thought she would be less prone to being starstruck, considering she’s working in a private office *for* our baseball team. Other people come here, but it’s mainly athletes, so her shock genuinely shocks me. Then again, she is new here.

“Hey,” August leans in a bit to read her name tag, and I bite back a laugh as I catch her holding her breath, “Vicky.” He stands straight again and gives her his boyish grin. I am so glad I brought him.

I notice a Dodger hat on the corner of her desk and turn to August with a smile. “Why don’t you give her your

autograph? Rumor has it she's a huge supporter." I send her a wink, and her chest falls and rises a bit quicker.

August gets to signing the hat, but she steals a few glances at me, clearly building the courage to speak up. As August hands the hat back, he looks over at the side of her desk and notices a jersey. "Hey, that's your jersey number."

I glance at Vicky, and her cheeks redden a bit more.

"Do you mind?" She asks shyly, and I smile at her, honestly so glad she asked.

"Not at all." I take the jersey and slide the paper from my back pocket. "Why don't we trade autographs?" I hold eye contact with her as I place the pen in her hand, and she barely looks down as she puts the pen on the paper.

"Is this an autograph signing or a doctor's office?"

Vicky is pulled out of her haze, and I grind my teeth together. *I almost had it.*

I keep my eyes on Vicky as Dr. Annoying makes her way over to us. From the corner of my eye, I notice August hugging her before she can reach us, giving me more time. I slide the paper closer to Vicky with a smile, but she glances down and reads it. *Great.*

"Oh, I'm not a doctor, but Dr. Gomez can sign that for you."

Yes, Vicky, I'm aware of that. I technically don't need Vidia's signature. I know my coach is barely going to look at the damn signature, and I'd sign the shit myself, but Jackson's pain-in-the-ass self would notice my handwriting.

I tried getting another doctor to sign yesterday, but they wanted an evaluation, and apparently, my arm is only eighty-four percent healed, not enough to play in the damn major leagues.

"What's this?" Vidia finally reaches us, but I quickly snatch the form from the desk and ignore her as I sign Vicky's jersey. She thanks me shyly as I hand it back to her and turn to Vidia.

I stare at her for a second, then decide there's no point in asking and put the form in my back pocket again.

“Does your arm hurt?” She knows I’ve missed four appointments, and since I’ve still been practicing, yeah, it fucking hurts.

Not wanting her to know she’s right, I bend my left elbow up and down while trying to conceal the pain in my face. “Feels great.” My voice comes out a bit strained, and she smirks.

“You still have a horrible poker face, Sire.”

August chooses that exact second to put his two senses in. “Didn’t you cut practice short yesterday because your arm was hurting?”

I glare at him and see Vidia cross her arms and stand proudly. “You know you have a UCL tear in your elbow, Sire. Do you want to get surgery again?”

I cross my arms as I stare down at her. “Fuck no.” There’s no way in hell I’m getting surgery again—those months were fucking *hell*. I don’t think I can go through that again. Plus, my injury isn’t even that severe.

She turns her head, challenging me, and her curly ponytail swings to the side. “So did you grow up and decide to continue your last month of physical therapy?”

See, I was thinking about being mature, but she just had to go ahead with her smart mouth. “I’m still weighing the pros and cons of being in your presence, and there aren’t any pros, so no.”

“Here’s one—your career.” She always has a smart fucking response. It pisses me off but not as much as her thinking she’s always right.

“My career will be fine,” I tell her, and she doesn’t miss a beat as she replies.

“You must be a fucking rock because you’re going to end up never playing again if your arm doesn’t heal properly.” She still has a smug smile on her face. As if the thought of me not being able to play ball again is appealing to her. I bet it fucking is. Little shit.

“You must be a fucking rock if you think I—”

“Just shut the fuck up, Sire,” she interrupts.

“You shut the fuck up.” My voice is cold as I take a step toward her, but when she flinches, I immediately take a step back. It was small, so small I doubt August or anyone noticed, but I did. She takes a step forward when she realizes, putting us inches apart again.

“Or what?” she challenges, her voice somehow colder, and I smirk down at her but take another step back. I can see her grow angrier with that one action. That I noticed and that no matter what, I still know her. I hate that she still has that habit of flinching, but I like that she also still puts up this front. We hold eye contact as she waits for my response, but I don’t give her one.

I roll my eyes and look away from her annoying ass. I was expecting a bunch of eyes on us, but I realize it’s empty in here besides us. That makes sense as to why she’s talking to me like this at her job. She’s always been professional when it comes to work.

When I look back down at her, she scoffs and rolls her eyes. She goes to walk away, but August stops her. “He was joking, V. He changed his mind.” No, I wasn’t, and no, I didn’t, so he needs to shut up.

She turns back around, looking at me. “I think I want to hear you say it, Gryffindor.”

I falter at her nickname for me. *I haven’t heard that name in four years.* I stare at her and actually weigh the pros and cons. I can’t get cleared to play next month without her, and she isn’t going to sign the form if I don’t continue physical therapy. I also got confirmation that I’m not one hundred percent healed, and while I can see someone else, she’s unfortunately the best, so...

“Fine.” I immediately regret my words when a smug smile spreads across her lips.

Chapter Three

SIRE

SOMEONE IS IN MY APARTMENT. The sound of glass shattering fills the silence just as I hop out of bed. *Why the hell didn't my alarm go off?* Walking over to my closet, I grab a bat and go in search of the idiot who chose the wrong apartment.

Tip-toeing around the corner, I see someone in all black picking something off my floor. As I get closer, my stupid floor creeks, and he gets up and turns around.

Without giving him a chance to attack first, I pick up the bat and take a swing at him, but he ducks. As soon as he gets up again, I hit him in the knee, and he falls back. "AH! What the fuck, Sire!" Shit, I thought someone actually broke in.

August gets back up, holding his knee in pain. "I'm going to sue you if my knee is broken." He was the one who broke in, so I highly doubt he's going to win that court case, but I ignore him.

Rolling my eyes, I set the bat down and walk to my kitchen, flicking the lights on. "How the hell did you even get in here?" Opening the freezer, I pull out some waffles. With my open floor plan, I can still see August in my living room. He's holding his knee, staring at me like I was the one who just broke into his house.

“You’re not even going to apologize?” I’ll apologize if his knee is actually broken, but I didn’t even hit him that hard. He’s just a dramatic bitch.

“Did you make a copy of my keys again?” I make my waffles and rest my elbows on the kitchen counter. August makes his way over to me, limping. My eyes drop to his knee, and a ball of nerves settles in my stomach. We have a game soon, so I’m starting to feel bad if he’s actually hurt.

“Maybe, but that’s on you for leaving your keys lying around.”

“Did you also break my alarm again?”

“Stop saying it like I broke it on purpose. It scared me, and no, your code has been **0614** for, what, four years now?” I don’t answer him, and he thankfully doesn’t press why that’s still my code.

The toaster pops my waffles, and I serve them before taking a seat next to him. He reaches for one of my waffles, and I roll my eyes, handing him a fork. I knew he was going to do this, which is why I made two extra ones.

Before I can take a bite of my food, there’s a knock on the door. We both say, “Not it,” but he was a second quicker than me, so I get up to answer it. The person knocks again, then rings the bell twice impatiently. I finally reach the door, and when I open it, she jumps on me.

“Bonus brother! I missed you.” I hug her back and spin her like I always did when we were kids. I put her back down on her feet and close the door after she hands me a cup of coffee.

“What the hell are you wearing, Sage?”

She looks down at her bright green bikini top and matching skirt, then looks back up at August. “A hot outfit?”

I laugh at how casual she puts it when she’s literally in a bathing suit, and I know for a fact she has no plans of swimming today. We walk back to where I was sitting, but she takes my seat before I do.

“Okay, and where’s the rest of it?” August takes off his hoodie and pulls it over her head, and I almost spit my coffee out, laughing at how aggressive he is with her. She goes to pull it off, but I shove it down again, and when her head pops out, August pulls the hood over her head. He and I just laugh at how she sits there in defeat like an angry toddler in time-out.

I take another sip of coffee, but then Sage snatches it out of my hand. “I forgot to take a pic.” She takes a few pictures of our cups of coffee, then makes me hold mine so she can do a boomerang or some shit.

Sage is a model and social media influencer with a bunch of followers who watch her... post her coffee, I guess? I don’t know. I’ve learned to stop asking questions about her social media life.

Once she’s done trying to get the right picture, she lets me have my coffee. After a beat, though, August looks around the counter, confused. “Wait, why didn’t you bring me a coffee?” When he looks back at me, I stick my tongue out at him since he didn’t get one, and he flips me off.

Sage pulls the hood off her head before responding. “The uglier twins don’t get coffee.” I throw my head back laughing, then give her a high five, but August clearly doesn’t think it’s funny.

“But the adopted kid can get one? He’s not even really your brother. I’m your whole twin.” I’m still laughing at how butt-hurt he is over a coffee, but Sage stops and turns to August, holding her heart. I swear if she cries over this again, I’m kicking August’s ass.

“Don’t say that, August. He’s my brother just as much as you are.” Her voice cracks, and I roll my eyes, pulling her in for a hug.

“He knows that, Sage. He was only joking. Stop getting so upset about it.” I honestly find it funny when August jokes about it, considering he was the one who got Mom to adopt me. She looks up at me, and I give her a smile before kissing the top of her head.

“Dramatic as always,” he mumbles under his breath, but he should not be talking about drama. I turn around and throw my cup at him for making her feel bad.

“There you go, since you wanted some so bad.”

He goes still in shock, then gets up, looking down at his white shirt that’s now covered in coffee. Sage is dying of laughter and quickly captures a few pictures of him, and I feel better now that she does.

She gets up and walks over to my couch, but when she gasps, we both turn our heads to her. “Who broke Mom’s lamp?”

I point at August, and when I look over at him, he’s pointing at me. Fucking liar.

Sage shakes her head and then freezes. “Woah. I just got the weirdest feeling of déjà vu.”

I think for a second, then remember when we were younger, Sage was the one who broke the lamp, but August and I pointed at each other, not wanting to snitch on her. I smile at the memory and grab the broom and dustpan to clean August’s mess. He limps to leave, most likely to get a change of clothes from next door. I throw out the lamp and start cleaning the coffee.

When I’m done, I walk over to Sage and take a seat next to her on the couch.

“Sooo”—she looks over at me innocently—“how are you?” She wants to know something more than “how I’m doing.” I just know it.

“I’m doing great, Sage. That’s not what you drove all the way over here to ask me, so just say whatever it is.” I hate when people beat around the bush.

She leans back and throws her legs over my lap. She goes to say something but pauses and looks down at her legs on my lap. “My legs aren’t too heavy, are they?” she asks, shyly almost, but I shake my head and rest my hand over her legs. She always makes comments like that, but I don’t know why she thinks she is so much heavier than she is. She’s way too

hard on herself. I can't help but feel like it's because of her social media platform.

"Why can't I be checking on my brothers without you thinking I have an ulterior motive?" She snaps me out of my thoughts and brings us back to my question. The answer is that she's nosy as fuck.

I give her a knowing look, and when she just smiles back at me innocently, all I can see in her smile is August. I know she just jokes when she calls him the "ugly twin," but she really does look like a girl version of him. And yes, I know that's literally what twins are, but still, it's weird how much they look alike.

Their emerald eyes that I'll never understand how they're *that* green and their practically perfect dark skin, a few shades darker than mine. Then there's their height, and they're both pretty tall. Sage is just a few inches shorter than August, so I can see why she went into modeling.

While she makes subtle comments about her weight, Sage is a literal model, and when it isn't just her close family and friends around, she radiates a confidence everyone needs.

Sage has a tighter curl pattern than August, but they could be the same person besides those slight differences. Again, I know that's how twins work, but genetics are weird to me. I know I'm not the only one who thinks it's weird that someone can just have a replica of themselves.

"I heard you punched August last week." Sage pulls me out of my thoughts. "You know you shouldn't hit someone you love, but I'm not going to tell you that again because there's something else we should talk about." That's her way of saying she knows the little shit is back. I take her legs off of me, but she puts them back before I can stand to leave.

When I look over at her, she gives me a soft look. "Why don't you ever talk about what happened between you and V?"

I feel my jaw clench at the mention of her name. I know she's asking because she cares, but I don't have the energy to talk about it. I rest my head on the back of the couch and turn

to look at her. “Can you just drop it?” I know she isn’t going to since she’s been asking the same question for the last four years. It is still worth a try, apparently.

I know me and Vidia breaking things off the way we did hurt her a bit. She lost a friend, and although I’m sure Vidia didn’t cut her off on purpose or probably even still talks to Sage a bit, if I was her, I’d cut my siblings off, so I can’t blame her if she did.

Sage gives me a sympathetic look, and I’m reminded of another reason why I don’t talk about Vidia. I don’t need anyone’s sympathy. “Come on, Sire. You used to talk about her like she was the love of your life, and from one day to another, you just hate each other? Seriously, what happened?”

I let out a breath while I run a hand through my hair, and I think about how I lost everything that night. I feel Sage staring at me like she’s trying to read my mind. “Did she cheat on you or something?” I smile at her assumption. God, I wish it was something that simple. It’d probably hurt a lot less than this.

She starts playing with the bottom of her braids as she thinks out loud. “That girl looked at you like you rose the sun and moon simply for her, so I doubt it.” I think back to our college years, trying to remember the way she looked at me, but all of the good memories are tarnished.

I’m still watching Sage as she goes completely still. “Shoot, did *you* cheat on *her*?”

Rolling my eyes, I shake my head at the dumbest thing she could’ve guessed. “You know damn well I’d rather cut my balls off before I cheat on anyone.” I don’t get why people do that shit. Just break up with them.

She nods thoughtfully while she taps her chin. She opens her mouth to spit out another guess, but my door opens again. We both turn our heads to see August holding his leg. “I think I need to get my knee checked.” Shit. I give August a look to stop talking, and Sage looks between us, confused.

“What happened to your knee?” She hates when we hit each other, and I don’t feel like hearing her rant about how we don’t

hit those we love since I just got out of that talk.

We both reply at the same time, saying he fell. She takes that as her opening. “Yes! Go get it checked. As a matter of fact, Sire can go with you and see...” She hesitates, not wanting to say her name. “And see his physical therapist.” She smiles, and I do not.

I get up, rolling my eyes. I should’ve just said I hit him and let her talk our ears off. “He knows how to get to the doctor’s office, but if you’re afraid he’ll get lost, I’m sure he’ll love your company.” I don’t even have physical therapy today. I have it tomorrow and this weekend. I don’t feel like seeing my doctor three times in one week.

I hear her following me to my room. “If you love me, you’ll go.” She always pulls this card, and it isn’t going to work this time.

“Stop being manipulative, Sage.”



“AUGUST HALE, THE DOCTOR WILL see you now.” I swear this is the last time I’m letting Sage get her way. August looks over at me to go in with him, and I roll my eyes, slouching into my seat. He can go by him-damn-self.

“Dude, don’t let me go in there alone.” I’m not going.

“If you love Sage, you’ll come in with me.” Manipulative asshole. I’m not going in there with him. “Come on, Sire. You did this to me.”

I snap at how annoying he’s starting to sound. “Fine, just shut up already.”

He’s smiling like an idiot, and I get up and follow him to the room all the way in the back. Are there seriously no other doctors in this place? The room looks completely different. The bed was moved to the wall to the left, and there’s a lot more PT equipment, a treadmill, those big yoga ball things. The main difference is the walls. She had them painted a pastel

blue. A small smile I was fighting breaks through, and I shake my head. *Stupid pastel blue.*

I hear the door open but keep my eyes looking out the floor-to-ceiling window. “I heard you specifically asked to see me.” Of course he did. That dickhead. I turn around and see August walk over to her; he isn’t even limping anymore. That fucking liar.

He goes in to hug her, and I feel my jaw tick. “Of course I did, V. I’ve missed you.” Does he seriously need to hug her for this long?

They finally pull away when Vid says, “How did you miss me? You hung out with Hazel, Sage, and I the other day.” Those fucking traitors. Sage bringing up Vidia earlier makes a lot more sense since they were just together. Where can I get new siblings?

I know I usually call August dramatic when he gets upset about anyone hanging out without him, but I actually feel some type of way that they were all together without me. I wouldn’t have gone, but they could have invited me...

I clear my throat, and when they turn to look at me, I keep my eyes on August. He gives me a worried look and fake limps to the bed.

I fold my arms across my chest and lean against the window. “You can drop the act already.”

Vidia walks over to him and pulls up his sweatpants, revealing a swollen knee, and I push myself from the window. Shit, I didn’t think I hit him that hard. She checks it out for a minute and gets something in the cabinet behind her. “It’s not broken or anything. Just keep it elevated and ice it every hour.”

He lets out a relieved breath, and now I really do feel bad. He tries to extend it all the way but flinches and sucks in a breath. “Can I play at our game in a few weeks?”

When she nods, I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. She rubs some sort of cream on his knee and then hands it to him. “You can apply some of that the night before

and the day of your game if it still hurts.” He thanks her, and then she turns to me. “Are you two incapable of being separated?”

I roll my eyes at her and glance at the other end of the room. “August apparently is.” She knows that, though. She just likes to annoy me. I avoid her gaze as my eyes cut to August. “He moved in next door to me because he can’t stand being apart from me.”

A smile grows on his face, and he shakes his head. “Oh, shut up. You know you love living next door to me.” I do. I’d never admit it, though. When I steal a glance at Vidia, she has the tiniest hint of a smile on her face, but it’s gone so fast I think I imagined it.

She looks over at me with a fire in her eyes, and now I’m sure I imagined it. “Let’s just get your session out of the way since you’re here. I don’t have any other patients right now.”

I almost object, simply because it’ll be easier for her to see me today, but it’ll be harder for me if I object, so I don’t say anything and give her a nod.

August asks if he can stay, and I immediately say no, but then Vidia looks over at me. “Of course you can, August,” she says, still holding my gaze.

“Little shit,” I mumble, and she flips me off before walking over to the other side of the room. She ties a thera-band up high to one of the equipment machines, then picks up a baseball.

She looks at me like I’m an idiot, and I wait for her to say something because I know it’s coming. “Well, am I the one who needs therapy, or you? Get over here.” *Oh, I think I know who of the two of us needs a therapist.* I open my mouth to respond, but August stops me, clearing his throat as he shakes his head.

I bite my tongue and let out a huff before walking over to her. She puts the ball in the band, and I take it from her, holding the ball while keeping it in the thera-band. She tells

me what I need to do, but I don't start and just stare at her instead.

"Is there a problem?" She crosses her arms like she *wants* there to be a problem.

"I've already done this."

She stares at me like she doesn't understand.

"With Dr. Miller... During my first month of PT?" It's pointless that she's making me do this again. I only have a month before the game, and there isn't time for this.

"Do I look like Dr. Miller?"

"Unfortunately not." I give her a smile, and she returns it with a bored look before walking over to her desk. She writes something down, then rips the paper from the notepad and walks back over to hand it to me.

"What is this?" It looks like a phone number and address, but the zip code looks like North Carolina.

"That's Dr. Miller's information since you would rather see him as your doctor." She walks away, and I almost don't stop her until August sends me an urging look.

"Wait, Vidia." I let out a breath, and she turns back to me. I don't say anything else, and I definitely don't apologize. Instead, I do the pointless exercise she asked me to waste my time with.

Once I'm done with that, we move on to a different exercise, one I haven't done, and it actually feels a bit challenging. After about forty-five minutes of biting my tongue to not reply to her comments, we're finally done.

"Remember, all of this would be for nothing if you don't decrease your stress."

I let out a scoff. "So spend less time with you. Got it."

She squints her eyes at me, and I falter at how familiar she still feels. I find myself unable to pull my gaze from her. *I haven't seen her do that in so long.* I look between her honey-brown eyes, and it's like no time has passed. I can't believe

she still does that. I feel my smile grow at her little fake angry face.

“Less stress on your injury, asshole.” And just like that, the moment is gone as she snaps me out of my thoughts. *Not a fake angry face—got it.*

“Stress on my injury, stress to my fucking brain, all the same, isn’t it?”

“I can give you a brain injury, and it’ll all be the same.” She closes the distance between us, and a smirk grows on my face at her spitfire.

“Oh, yeah?” I take a step toward her, and even with her heels on, she only *just* passes my shoulders. I lean over for her so we’re at eye level, and she still doesn’t back down. We’re so close that I can feel her cool breath against me as we hold each other’s gaze, both too stubborn to pull apart.

I look between her eyes, golden brown as ever, and she doesn’t even blink, not wanting to lose whatever game we’re in. “I’m getting a weird sense of *déjà vu*, Vid.” I feel a smirk playing on my lips as I keep my voice just above a whisper, and I take another step forward, right between her legs.

She falters slightly with my leg between hers and takes a small step back. The distance quickly stops our lips from grazing, and I feel her suck in a breath in surprise.

August quickly makes his way to us and pushes me away from her. “Okay,” he says, as chirpy as ever as he breaks us apart, but neither Vid nor I break eye contact. “It was a great session. I think we can leave before you two kill each other.”

“I’d like to see him try.” She somehow glares at me harder, and I chuckle at how seriously she says that.

“I think you forget you’re a 5 ‘5, one-hundred-and-twenty-pound *girl*.” I can bench three of her, yet she stands here and confidently thinks she can kill me. Vidia couldn’t kill a fly even if she was twice my size.

Before she can respond, August is escorting us out. “It was great seeing you, V. Enjoy the rest of your day. Tell Hazel I love her.” We’re out of her office in a few steps, and I shake

her off. I'm not letting her get to me. *What happens here stays here. Don't let her ruin your day.*

“Nice to see you two are still madly in love.” I stop in my tracks and turn to August. He sees the look on my face and then nods a few times before shutting up and walking ahead of me.

These next few weeks are going to be a field day. Yay.

Chapter Four

VIDIA

Four Years Earlier

WE HEARD ABOUT THE COMPLAINT, and I wanted to apologize in person about the harassment, Vidia.” What the hell is this woman talking about right now? I never made a complaint since I haven’t been harassed.

“I’m sorry, Dean Montgomery, but my memory may be off. What complaint are you referring to?” I watch her pull her glasses down off the top of her red hair and read something off her phone.

“Here it is. It was more of a suggestion, but I filed it under complaints for your safety.” *My safety?* Okay, now I’m really lost. I listen closely as she continues.

“Student A made a call to the nurse, trying to get a hold of you, and the receptionist gave him your number. He thought it wasn’t safe that just anyone could call and get your number.”

I work with the baseball team as a sports medicine intern, and I told the front desk any of Jen’s patients can have my number if they ask for me, so who is this *he* she’s referring to?

Before I can ask her, the baseball team walks in, filling the cafeteria with their loud presence.

I quickly notice Sire looking between the Dean and me, and then he makes a weird face. You've got to be kidding me. "Thank you, Dean Montgomery." I sign her sheet, confirming I'm aware of the complaint, and walk across the cafeteria to see who's behind this.

He meets me halfway, smiling. "How's your day going, beautiful?"

I cross my arms, not letting him distract me from this. "It was going great until I learned I was being harassed." I give him a knowing look, and he crosses his arms, mocking me.

"My stitches haven't fallen out yet." He points to his nose. "I'm pretty sure you did them wrong."

Excuse me? I did them perfectly. How dare he? I didn't even —

I shake my head from my thoughts. "Stop trying to distract me, Sire. Why are you making complaints on my behalf about harassment? That isn't something that's just okay to lie about."

He unfolds his arms, throws an arm over me, and starts walking. What is he doing? "First of all, I didn't lie. Someone could've potentially harassed you." What the hell is he even saying right now? I stop walking and throw his arm off me.

He lets out a sigh and turns to me. "Okay, look, I called that number you gave me last week when you stitched me up. By the way, you could've mentioned it was the nurse's office and not *your* number. All of this could've been avoided, but anyway. When I asked the receptionist for your number, he said he had it *memorized*."

He says 'memorized' like it's a crime. "What's your point?"

He looks at me like I'm the crazy one for not seeing an issue with this. "Are you a rock, Vid? People are obviously calling for your number so often that he memorized it." He almost sounds... jealous.

"He has a photogenic memory, you rock."

He looks around like he feels dumb.

“You feel dumb now, don’t you?”

He quickly tries to play it off and shrugs his shoulders as he puts his hands inside the pocket of his hoodie. “No... It was more of a suggestion to the Dean, anyway,” he mumbles. Sure it was.

“Even if people have been asking for my number, technically, that still isn’t harassment.” I don’t think it is? God, this boy is giving me a headache. “Never mind. Why do you even care?”

He just shrugs, looking down at me. “Can I not care about your safety?” *Lying ass.*

“You have a bad poker face, too.”

He laughs, and I, of course, join. He looks down at my nails and takes my hand in his, smiling. “You actually painted them pastel blue, as I suggested.” I was already going to do this color since it’s my favorite, but I let him think he picked it because he sounded excited. Why do boys always pick pastel blue?

I hear a group of people behind me, and when I turn, I see it’s the baseball team. A few of the players wave at me with warm smiles, and then they go back to talking amongst each other. “This is definitely going to work,” one of them mumbles, and a few look over at me again, but I don’t give it much thought.

Turning back around, Sire looks at his team weirdly, almost annoyed.

“What?” I go to look back, but he stops me.

“Nothing. Are you hungry?” He throws his arm over my shoulder again and guides us out. Why does he keep doing that?

I throw his arm off me again, and he looks down at me, confused. “I’m going to file an actual complaint if you keep putting your arm over me like you’re my boyfriend or

something.” He laughs beside me. I was only half joking, but it wasn’t that funny.

“Why do you say boyfriend like me being your boyfriend would be the most disgusting thing ever?” I roll my eyes in response. Cherries are definitely the most disgusting thing ever, and I didn’t say it the way I say cherry.

When we get to the parking lot, he walks to his car and opens the passenger door for me, but I don’t get in and keep walking for my car. “Can’t. I need to be somewhere right now.”

I climb in my Jeep, and Sire stands between the door, keeping me from closing it. “Can I see you before the game this weekend?” I hope that isn’t his way of asking me out again.

I turn my car on and steal a glance at him. “The game is in two days. I’m sure you’ll see me around campus, Sire.”

He rolls his eyes at my response, but I don’t miss the smile he tries to hold back. “Where do you have to be right now?”

“The aquarium on Peterson Ave for about an hour.”

He nods thoughtfully, like he’s trying to make sure he remembers. He closes my door for me and taps the hood of my car before walking off.



“I’M TELLING YOU, HAZEL, THIS is my hoodie.” I know this is mine because I just bought it yesterday. She was literally with me.

“Okay, well, then I must have the exact black hoodie. Either way, those jeans are definitely mine.” Okay, these ripped jeans are hers, but I don’t admit it.

Hazel looks up from her phone like she just remembered something. “Guess what bullshit happened today.” She sends me a bored look. I try to think for a second, but knowing her, this can range from her having to work this Friday to her

literally punching one of her coworkers. It's happened, and I have no idea how she still has her job here.

"Did you 'lose' a seal again?" I still can't comprehend how she managed to do that. She called me with pure panic in her voice. I was in the middle of a very relaxing shower and ran out of the house with the conditioner still in my hair. I thought she was going to get arrested or something.

"No, God, please don't remind me of that horrible day." She rolls her eyes as she shakes her head at the thoughts of that day.

I can't help but laugh at the thought of it. There wasn't even a missing seal. She just miscounted and had us searching for three hours. I swear the bleach is getting to her brain. "What happened then?" She rolls up her sleeves to show me her arm is bandaged up, but when she pulls the bandages down, my eyes immediately widen at the sight.

"Hazel, what the fuck happened?" Grabbing her arm, I look at her wounds. It looks like a damn vampire attacked her.

"One of the baby otters bit me. I'm fine, really. She didn't mean to." She really does have a high pain tolerance because that bite looks like that baby otter meant it.

"Well, did they give you a shot at the hospital?" I'm assuming she went to the hospital since she is bandaged pretty well. When she nods in response, I feel a bit relieved.

Both of our phones start ringing simultaneously, and without looking down, I already know it's our moms. Half of the time they call us, it's at the same time. We both answer, and in sync, we say, "Hello?"

"Hola, mi vida."

Hazel and I both reply with, "Cion, Mami."

"Dios te bendiga, mi vida," my mom says on the other end, her voice soft and motherly. The conversation goes on for a few minutes, and then they both ask to speak to the other, so we switch phones.

They ask the same questions as always. “How are you? What’s new? How’s my other baby?” Our moms have been best friends since high school, and they both got pregnant with us at the same time, so we grew up together.

They let us hang up after a few minutes, and I put my phone face down on the table, but when my phone buzzes again, I turn it over to see who it is.

Gryffindor:

u still at the aquarium right?

I pick up my phone and reply, letting him know I’m still here, and he replies before I can put my phone back down.

yeah why?

because i don’t see you, this place is huge

where the hell are you?

“Why are you smiling at your phone like that?” I wipe the smile I didn’t know I had off my face and slide my phone over to Hazel, showing her the text. “You two friends now?” She says it like there’s a hidden meaning behind the word friends.

I take my phone back before her nosy ass slides up, not that I mind, but she’s just going to say the texts are flirty, and they’re not.

“I mean, I guess so.”

She eyes me suspiciously.

“He wants to take me out on a date,” I regrettably add, and she stares at me with a knowing look.

“Told you.” She shrugs and takes a sip of her drink as I go to reply to Sire, but he says he sees me.

“Told me what?” She told me a lot, and unfortunately, she’s been right lately.

“He wants to sleep with you,” she says like it’s a no-brainer, and as soon as that leaves her mouth, she slightly smirks at someone above me.

“Who wants to sleep with you?” Of course, Sire is behind me, and of course, he heard that. I turn around, and he looks between the both of us, waiting for a response.

“Apparently, you do.” I watch as a smirk grows on his face, and I smile before shaking my head at him.

“I like how you don’t beat around the bush.” He nods, more to himself.

I squint my eyes at him, and his smirk grows into a smile. “You didn’t answer the question.”

“You didn’t ask one.” Touché. He takes a seat in the chair behind me, then turns my chair so I’m facing forward instead of facing Hazel with my back to him.

“What are you doing here?” He pops one of my fries in his mouth, then lays back in his seat, spreading his legs a bit. *God, he’s so hot it hurts.* Now I never denied he was attractive because, I mean, come on, that’d just be a lie. I only said I wouldn’t date him.

“I came to see you, duh.” See me?

“But why? You just saw me less than an hour ago.” He goes to take another fry, and I smack his hand away. He didn’t even ask, rude.

He cracks a small smile at me, then takes the fry anyway. “Maybe I want to sleep with you.” I fake a gag, and he bursts into a laugh. As soon as the sound reaches my ears, I can’t look away. I watch him with a small smile as he leans his head back and dies of laughter.

How can his laugh sound like that? There is nothing boyish about Sire. He’s a full-grown *man*, yet he laughs like a little boy. It’s the sweetest thing ever. It even sounds sweet. Like if his laugh could be a taste, it’d be cavity-earning sweet.

His laugh sobers, and he turns to me, his eyes still shining. “Oh, come on, I’m not that bad in bed.” I roll my eyes at him and open my mouth, but he beats me to it. “It’s not arrogance—it’s confidence.”

Yeah, and he has too much of it. He shakes his head at me as if he can read my mind, and then he turns to Hazel. “Will you tell your best friend to give me a chance?”

“In bed or on a date?” I laugh at her, but I feel my body heat a bit. Luckily, he doesn’t get a chance to answer as she goes on. “Because she doesn’t do boyfriends, thanks to her dumb rule, but she’s totally down for sleeping with you.” I go completely still at her bluntness, but she only sits there like she just did me a huge favor.

Sire looks between us before his eyes land on me, and it surprisingly doesn’t grow awkward between us. “Noted.” He smirks at me, and I try to play it cool and eat a few fries to stop myself from smiling.

“Unfortunately, though, I’m not sleeping with you unless you’re mine.” He shrugs, and I squint my eyes at him.

“Unfortunately?” I tease, and he clearly bites back a smile. I shrug. “Well, I don’t date, so let me know if you change your mind, and maybe I’ll still be down to get with you.”

He laughs beside me and leans forward, suddenly dangerously close. “So are you not letting me take you out because of this rule, or is it something else?”

I shrug before saying, “Maybe I don’t like you.” He breaks into a hysterical laugh beside me, and I only lightly laugh since it wasn’t that funny.

His laugh sobers after a few beats, and he looks down at me with a smile. “Oh, come on, beautiful, we’ve been going on these double dates for months. I highly think that’s not true.”

“They were *not* double dates.” August and Hazel have been inviting us out with them, but I don’t get why they all keep calling them dates?!

“Right.”

I look away but feel him watching me, and I try with everything in me to keep my eyes away from him.

“Either way, everyone likes me.” He says it so... confidently that I laugh at him this time. He’s ridiculous.

“That’s your problem, Griffin.” I look over at him, and his brows have a crease in them. “You’re arrogant.” He looks offended but quickly recovers.

“No, I’m not.” He adds, “And don’t call me Griffin.” I feel my brows furrow a bit at his last part and steal a glance at him, only to catch him already watching me.

“Everyone calls you Griffin.”

“You’re not everyone,” he answers too quickly, knocking me off course. I’m not everyone? Whatever that means.

Needing to change the topic, I swiftly do so. “Remember when we first met?”

“Of course, I do.” I feel a smile tug at my lips, but he keeps talking. “Are you going to confess that you instantly fell for me?”

I break into a laugh before shaking my head at him. “Your replies are not really supporting the case that you’re not arrogant.”

He shakes his head with a smile and leans back in his seat. “It’s called a joke.” *Right.*

“Was it also a joke when I tried giving you tips during practice, and you told me, and I quote, ‘I know what I’m doing, babe,’ as you were literally throwing slower than a turtle?” I remind him of the first time we met, and he sits up in his seat, clearly offended.

“I was the fastest pitcher on the team, and I still am.”

I grin at his pride. Sure, he was the fastest on the team, but I knew he wasn’t throwing as fast as *he* could, and my tip could’ve helped him improve. I think I, of all people, can notice something a baseball player is doing wrong, considering I’ve watched my mom correct professional players’ techniques for half of my life.

I guess his coach corrected him or he learned over time because he throws a hell of a lot faster, but he could have improved sooner if he listened to me.

“That’s why you push me away? Because of something I said *three* years ago?” That’s not why. I didn’t care in that moment, although it rubbed me the wrong way. When I don’t respond, he stretches his arms behind his head. “You should let go of this petty grudge *and* your rule. Let me take you out.”

“You should admit you were wrong, and maybe I will.” I won’t, but I want to hear him say it. He watches me carefully before his eyes cut down to my lips, and I feel my entire body heat with the way he watches me.

Hazel curses, pulling us apart. “Shit, my phone died. What time is it?” I look at my phone and gasp at the time.

“It’s my birthday.” Hazel, of course, knows what I mean and starts packing her things, but Sire sits up in his seat again.

“Shit, is today your birthday?” I wish. I love birthdays.

I shake my head and reassure him. “No, I meant the time reads my birthday, 06:14 p.m. June fourteenth.” I love it when I notice it in numbers like that.

Hazel gets up, grabbing her tray. “My lunch break is over. I should go. I’ll see you at home, V. Bye, Sire.” I get up to hug her goodbye, and she whispers in my ear before I can pull away. “Do yourself the biggest favor ever and bend your rule for him.”

I roll my eyes and sit back down. Sire speaks up before she walks off. “Bye, Hazel. Oh, August said to call him, by the way.”

Hazel turns to him with a bored expression. “You literally just heard me say my phone was dead.” I stifle a laugh, and Sire doesn’t say anything about her smart response. When she walks off, he turns my chair again and pulls me a bit closer.

“She’s kind of mean.” I throw my head back, laughing at how he whispers it, but he isn’t wrong. “August is like a bubble, and he’s into her?” He says it like he’s so confused, but I don’t blame him.

From the times we all hung out together, I picked up on how bubbly and chipper August is while Hazel is kind of... well, not. "Opposites attract, right? Besides, they're cute." He only shrugs in response.

"Please stop crying." We both turn our heads to see a little girl about three or four throwing a tantrum. She throws herself on the floor and starts screaming about wanting to see the lions. Obviously, that's an issue because this is an aquarium. Ugh, kids.

I turn back around, cringing at the sounds of her screaming bloody murder. "And that's my reminder to take my birth control." Sire tries not to laugh, and the little girl starts screaming about how he's laughing at her. He turns back to me, hiding his face from the little girl, and I can't help but laugh.

"Do you want kids?" He can't be serious.

I point behind my shoulder with my thumb. "Did you not just see that little brat?" He kicks my leg under the table, and his eyes widen in warning because they're still behind us, but I highly doubt anyone heard me over her screeches.

He gets up to throw away my tray and grabs my hand.

"What are you doing? I was still eating that." I get up, grab my piña colada, and follow him out of the food court, where it's a lot quieter.

"No, you weren't, and I don't think you wanted to keep hearing her wailing. Plus, I want to see a beaver or something." They don't have beavers here, but I'll let him walk around looking for them.

As I take a sip of my piña colada, I look down at it in disgust. "Yuck." Sire turns to see what's wrong. "I told them I didn't want cherries." I can't stop the disappointment my voice is laced in as I lift my drink up to him.

"You don't like cherries?" I hate them. I make a face at the thought of them, and he laughs. "Gimme." He picks the cherry out from the stem and then pops it in his mouth. "Problem

solved.” I give him a small smile, but when he sends me a wink, I roll my eyes and walk ahead, hiding my smile.

We keep walking before he speaks up again. “Do you really not want kids?” I think about his question for a second. I know some people who couldn’t see themselves *not* being a parent. I’m in the middle; I don’t really care for them.

“I wouldn’t mind having kids. They’re cute, and I think my pregnant belly would be cute. Childbirth is scary, though, so maybe adoption is the path I’ll take.” I look over at him, and he’s staring at me, smiling like I just said the right answer. “What?”

He hesitates and shakes his head like he doesn’t want to say whatever it is. Hmm. Walking into the tunnel section of the aquarium, I look up at the school of fish swimming above us. They are so pretty; I can see why Hazel works here.

When I turn to look at Sire, he never followed me into the tunnel. “Come on, this is the best part.” He shakes his head and kicks his feet. What is he doing?

I pull his hand and drag him in, but he abruptly stops, and when I look over at him, he looks nervous. “Sire—”

“I don’t want to be trapped under the water.”

I lightly laugh but grow a little concerned when I see his chest falling and rising faster by the second. “Sire, you are not going to be trapped. Are you claustrophobic?” It’s not even small in here; if anything, it’s the opposite. He starts panicking more and keeps his eyes up at the water like he’s actually trapped. He suddenly looks like he can’t breathe.

“Sire, breathe. You’re fine.” He struggles to pull in a breath, and I realize this is not going to get better unless I get him out of the tunnel. I pull his hand, and he struggles to walk at first but then follows me back out.

Once we aren’t under the water, the fear in his eyes disappears. He bends over to rest his hands on his knees, catching his breath. “Are you okay? What was that abo—”

“I’m fine. It was nothing.” It did not look like *nothing*.

“I think you were having a panic attack...” His eyes meet mine but when he glances over my shoulder, it’s as if his biggest fear is standing behind me. He looks frozen in place again and I grab a hold of his hand, putting more distance between ourselves and the tunnel.

“You’re fine.”

He looks down at me and I give him a small smile but his eyes cut down to the ground like he’s... ashamed. I tug his hand again and this time my smile is more teasing. “The hot shot Sire Griffin, our star captain, is *afraid* of something?” I fake my shock and he shakes with a soft laugh, clearly grateful for the lighter mood.

“Asshole,” He mumbles and shoves me softly. Before I can recover he’s pulling me in with his arm around my shoulder as he smiles down at me. “Thanks.” I nod in response and decide not to ask any questions since he clearly doesn’t want to talk about it.

When we turn the corner, my eyes land on Jackson. He graduated the year before us. I think Sire and him are close, but I only had one class with him and he’s pretty cool.

Sire daps him up and a pretty girl with short black hair comes up to us, pushing a stroller, and kisses Jackson. He introduces her as Sire takes a peek into the stroller.

“Hold the fuck up. Did you two have a *baby*?” Jackson and his girlfriend laugh at how surprised Sire sounds and nods.

“Yeah, I didn’t tell many people, but this is Isabelle.” He pulls out his daughter. She looks about a few months old and has little blonde curls and gray eyes, matching her dad.

“Congrats, dude. What the fuck?!” They laugh, and Sire hugs him.

I give their baby a little wave, and she smiles, showing one tiny tooth. “She’s beautiful, que Dios la bendiga.”

Jackson smiles as he kisses his daughter’s head. “Thank you, V.” He looks between Sire and me now. “Are you two...” He gestures between the two of us.

“Not yet.” *Yet?* I look over at Sire, and he winks at me. I fight a smile and roll my eyes at him again as I turn back to Jackson, who’s watching us with a small smile.



SIRE AND I WALK INTO the stingray section. They’re my favorite, and the water isn’t above us like earlier, so hopefully, Sire will be okay here. I want to ask him about his panic attack, but I decide against it.

“What was it you said earlier?” I turn to him, confused. “You said Jackson’s baby was beautiful, then you said something in, I don’t know, was that Spanish?”

“Oh yeah, I just said God bless her,” I say casually, and he nods as he leans against the glass of the tank.

“Your Spanish is really good, though.”

I smile proudly because that’s hands down my favorite compliment, besides people telling me I smell good. “Yeah, it was my first language.”

He looks down at me like I just threw him off guard. “Wait, really? Where is your family from?”

“The Dominican Republic.” Sire nods again, and a small smile creeps on his face. “What?”

He shakes his head like it was nothing. “I thought you were black.” He shrugs like he’s trying not to be offensive, and I chuckle because everyone says that, but I don’t blame them.

“I am, I’m Afro-Latina.” He nods like that makes more sense. He goes to say something, but I beat him to it. “That doesn’t mean one of my parents is black and the other is Latina.” He closes his mouth and looks confused again, and I can’t help but laugh.

Almost every time I tell someone I’m Afro-Latina, that’s what they assume and proceed to ask me which one of my parents is black, as if that would further explain my darker complexion and “pajon,” but I honestly find the confusion funny and just educate them when I can.

“It means I’m Latina with African descent,” I explain, and he nods in thought.

“Well, you should teach me how to say something in Spanish.” I feel myself smiling as I think about what to teach him. When a huge manta ray swims by, I’m mesmerized by it like always. “These rays are hermosa.”

He looks like he’s trying to figure out what I said, so I translate for him and then turn back to the rays. “Hermosa.” His voice comes out soft, and when I look at him, he’s already staring at me like his eyes never left me. We gaze into each other for a beat, and he gives me a small smile before I look back at the glass.

“Where’s your family from?” I ask, bringing our attention back to his initial question. He doesn’t answer me right away, and when I look over at him, he’s watching the rays in front of us.

“I was adopted.” *Huh?* I think he’s joking for a quick second, but I look at him again, and I don’t think he is.

“If you don’t mind me asking—”

“I don’t.” He doesn’t even know what I’m going to ask. I feel myself smiling but immediately bite it back.

“Were you in the system or adopted at birth?” I know how horrible the foster care system can be, so I hope he says he was adopted at birth.

“Neither.” Oh... okay. I just nod my head. I don’t want to make him feel pressured to continue, but he goes on anyway, and I’m glad he does.

“During my sophomore year of high school, my birth mother lost her parental rights because of—” He pauses and takes a deep breath before continuing. I want him to be able to open up to me about whatever he was about to say about his mom, but I also don’t want to push him, so I don’t.

“Anyways, I would’ve gone into the system, but August literally begged on his knees for Mom to adopt me, and, well, you can guess the rest.” He looks back at the tank when a stingray shuffles across the sand and smiles in thought.

There's a ping in my heart at the bond August and he has. "Awe. So you two are technically brothers."

He nods, smiling. "Yeah, we've known each other since I was seven. He was nine but still in the second grade because his dumb ass got held back twice. I was always with his family a lot since..." He trails off again like he's trying to find the right words, then continues. "Uh, due to things at home, so the adoption never felt like one. It was more of a formality."

We're watching two more huge rays swim by when I ask, "What about your bio dad?"

Sire leans against the glass and pulls the strings of my hood, so I have to take a step closer to him. "I have no idea. Never met the guy, so I guess he's a shitty parent too."

I start playing with his red hood strings. "Diddo." He turns his head, asking a silent question. "My dad was shitty too. He was barely around, or maybe I just can't remember when he was. Either way, the things I do remember aren't good."

I remember reading somewhere that your mind blocks off certain memories as a trauma response. Maybe that's why I can't remember most of the beginning of my childhood, who knows...

I wonder if I should continue, if I should talk about how my shitty excuse of a dad used his fist to solve his problems. I shake my head at the memories and decide against it. "Anyways, he finally put us out of our misery and left my mom when I was eight or nine, and I haven't seen him since."

He rests his arms on my shoulders and runs his finger through my curls to massage the bottom of my head. "His lost." I give him a small smile. Looking up at him, I glance at his nose, and my mind goes to how he didn't want medication when I did his stitches.

When I glance up at him, he's looking at me like he just read my mind, and I feel bad now. *Change the topic, V.* I look around and see two boys crawling out of a hole that says "penguins" over it. Grabbing his hand, I head in that direction.

"There's no way we're going to fit in there."

“Yeah, we are. It looks small on the outside, but Hazel and I are in here all the time.” It’s our hiding spot when we need to get away from our problems.

When we crawl in, he looks around, clearly shocked. “Wait, it’s huge in here.” I look around with him, and the water isn’t around us like the tunnel. Instead, there’s just one big circle window, so I doubt he’ll have another panic attack in here.

We sit in silence for a bit and just watch the penguins swim in circles around each other. I turn to look at him, but he’s already staring at me thoughtfully.

“I never thanked you for that.” I don’t immediately say anything, and he goes on. “When you did my stitches, and I told you not to use medication. I appreciate the way you didn’t question my addiction or push me to explain.” Well, I wasn’t a hundred percent sure if he had an addiction, and I didn’t want to assume.

“How long have you been sober?” I hope that wasn’t invasive of me to ask.

He’s still staring at me in thought when he answers. “Ever since I watched August beg our mom for me the way he did. He showed me I had people to get clean for.” I smile at his answer, and my heart aches for him.

I try doing the math. He said he was in tenth grade, so—God, he was just a baby. Okay, we’re in our senior year of college, so that’s... “I make six years on the twenty-seventh,” he says, clearly noticing I was trying to figure out the math. April twenty-seventh, okay. That’s next week. I can remember that.

I nod thoughtfully as one of the penguins comes up to the glass, and it kind of looks like it’s waving at me. We both put our hands on the glass at the same time, and it spins twice before swimming away.

“So, what’s this rule of yours?”

I take a sip of my piña colada before putting it down in the middle of us. “No boyfriends until I’m twenty-five.” He looks at me like he’s very confused, so I take a breath before

continuing. “I watched the person that was supposed to be my role model of what a good man is, hurt the woman he was supposed to love.” His brows furrow, but then there’s clarity in his eyes when he realizes I’m talking about my parents.

I pull my eyes from his and look at the penguins again. A full minute goes by before he says anything. “Did he hurt you too?” His voice is soft, and it sends a comforting feeling over me.

I think about that for a few seconds, trying to decide what falls under his definition of hurt. “Not the way he hurt my mom.” When I look over at him, he doesn’t say anything more, but I can tell he understands. “She says she was young and dumb, so—”

“You don’t get abused because you’re young and dumb. That had nothing to do with her and everything to do with him.”

I look between his eyes, realizing he’s probably the first person to tell me that. The first person to tell me that my mom wasn’t on the receiving end of my father’s anger because she was dumb enough to marry him as young as she did. It wasn’t because she decided to have a kid and get married all before twenty-five.

Even with knowing this, I can’t help but fear I’ll end up where she did because this world is filled with liars and people who hurt those they love. When I look back at Sire, he’s watching me with the softest eyes. He looks so pure.

“It’s probably going to take you a while, not that I care because I’ll wait, but you’re going to have to break this rule of yours.” *Uh no.*

“Why would I do that?”

He picks up my piña colada and takes a sip. “Because I like you, and I now know you’re not still holding that grudge against me, so you can stop acting like you don’t like me.” He has a smile on his face that screams, “*Everybody likes me, and I know it.*”

“Whatever, Mr. Arrogant.” He smiles at me, and I roll my eyes and bite back a smile, but then I pause when I realize I’ve been fighting back smiles around him all day. *Great.*

Chapter Five

VIDIA

Four Years Earlier

I 'VE BEEN GOOGLING, "WHAT ARE good sobriety gifts?" every day since Sire told me he makes six years sober today. A bunch of key chains popped up, and there's no way I am getting him a key chain. He probably already has five of those.

I don't think I know him well enough to get him a meaningful gift, but I know him enough to know how much he lives, laughs, loves baseball, so I'm sure he'll love this. I hope he does.

I turn his gift in my hands and then walk out of the nursing tent. The game is over, so I head toward Hazel at the bleachers. I didn't see any players today, but Jen kind of made it a lecture day and gave me a lot of great tips and techniques. I swear I learn more from her than from my actual classes.

I still haven't got to see Sire, but I look over, and he doesn't look too happy from where Hazel and I are sitting on the bleachers. He's talking to August and a girl wearing both August's and his jersey numbers. I can't see her face because she has her back to us, but I don't think she goes to our school.

“Why is she hugging August like that? He better not have a fucking girlfriend.” That isn’t a girlfriend hug, but I look over at Hazel, and she looks like she could kill August, but there’s no way he has a girlfriend. Although they haven’t made it official, I know they’re sleeping together. August sleeps around, from what I’ve heard, but he is not a cheater.

The girl finally turns around, and holy shit, she— “Woah, she looks just like August.” Hazel literally takes the words out of my mouth. They *have* to be related. That would explain why she wore both of the boys’ jersey numbers to their game.

I look back at Hazel to calm her down. “There’s no way they’re dating. That would be really weird.” They could be twins. Sire and I make eye contact, and he starts to make his way over to us as August and his doppelganger follow behind him, shoving each other. Yeah, they’re definitely siblings.

We climb off the bleachers as they walk up to us. “Hi, beautiful.” Eight times. That’s the eighth time he’s called me that since last week. Four times when we’ve seen each other and four times over text. Not that I’m keeping track or anything...

I close the distance between us and get on my tippy toes, wrapping my arms around his neck to hug him. He wraps both of his arms around my waist, and I hold on to him a little longer than usual because of what today is.

“Is no one going to introduce me?” We pull away as August’s doppelganger speaks up. She’s very pretty, literally has August’s face, just... girly? I’m not sure how to explain it, but their emerald eyes and dark skin are the major similarities. She has longer lashes than August, and her Fulani braids are at her boobs with those wood beads in them.

She’s taller than me and a lot taller than Hazel. She’s also curvier than both of us, probably a plus size. Thick thighs and arms with a cute round face. She is just overall drop-dead *gorgeous*, like stunning.

August shakes his head and then introduces her with a smile. “This is our sister, Sage. Sage, this is Hazel and Vidia.” He points at each of us when he says our names, and Sage

pulls Hazel in for a hug. I'm surprised Hazel actually hugs her back.

"You are way prettier than August gave you credit for." Hazel thanks her when she lets her go, but I don't miss the way her cheeks blush. Sage pulls me in and gives me a welcoming squeeze. She holds me for a second, and I smile at how great her hug feels. I like her already.

Hazel and I just stare between Sage and August, and then I finally speak up. "This is probably such a dumb question, but are you two..." Sage starts nodding her head.

"Yes, we're twins. He's the uglier one, and it's okay to bully him about it. We can't all be hot." I chuckle between them, and Hazel only cracks the smallest smile, but I notice the way her eyes light up. She isn't usually all lovey-dovey, but seeing her fall for August is cute.

The three of them start talking about something when I pull Sire to the side. He's looking down at me, and I can't put my finger on it, but he still seems upset about something.

"Are you okay?" He just nods and then forces a smile. Hmm... I decide to brush it off, not forcing him to talk about whatever it is. "I got you something." I smile up at him, hoping to lighten his mood, and it does a bit.

"You didn't have to get me anything," he says softly, but of course I did. I take his gift out of my bag and hand it to him. It's a baseball signed by his favorite baseball player.

My mom is the coach for the Tampa Bay Rays, so I had her ask him to sign it and write, "I'm proud of you, Sire." He turns the ball in his hand in utter shock. Does he like it? Shit, I hope he doesn't think I told anyone about his addiction.

"Don't worry, I didn't tell him anything you told me. I promise I would never do that. I wasn't sure if you wanted him to know what today was, so I just asked him to write that." Wait. That just sounds like him being proud is meaningless. "I'm sure he still means it. I just meant—"

He cuts me off before I can finish and pulls me in for a hug. I freeze for a second, then wrap my arms around him. We've

hugged before, but something about this one feels different. More special. It feels like he really needed this hug. I look up at him as he stares into my eyes. “I’m proud of you, Sire.”

He leans in a bit to softly plant a kiss on my forehead. I smile to myself, and he pulls me in again before he whispers into my hair. “Thank you, Vidia.” I guess I do know him well enough to get him a meaningful gift. We stay holding on to each other, and after about a minute, we pull away.

He leans against the gate of the field, and he’s looking at me like I’m the only person in this park. He lightly shakes his head at whatever he’s thinking and looks past me, but he seems distant again.

His new thoughts don’t seem as pleasant as the ones he just had, and I really hope this isn’t pushing it, but I want to know what’s wrong, so I ask. “What are you thinking about?”

He zones back in and just shakes his head. “Nothing,” he mumbles and looks past me again.

“It’s clearly not nothing. If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine, but say that,” I say as softly as possible because I don’t want him to think I’m upset at him for not telling me, but I really do hate when people say they’re fine when they’re not. I get not wanting to talk, but don’t lie to me.

Ever since our aquarium date—he’s calling it a date, not me—I’ve kind of let my guard down. Just a few bits, and only because he seems to be making an effort to get to know me, and a part of me wants to do the same.

“I’m sorry.”

I nod that it’s okay, but before I can say anything, the others make their way over to us.

“Holy shit, is your ball signed by the God himself?” August goes to reach for the ball, but Sire shoves it into his pocket, and they fight for it.

Sage looks between the ball and me, and I can see her connecting the dots. “Wait, you’re the one with that famous baseball coach mom, right?” I honestly hate when people recognize who my mom is because they ask for favors, not

that I mind, but they just find a way to become friends with me for the simple fact of who my mom is. Sage and the boys don't seem like the type to do that, so I don't hide it and confirm with a nod.

"How was it growing up? She's sort of a celebrity, right?" I laugh at Sage, but she isn't wrong. My mom is pretty well known, especially in the baseball community, but even people who don't know baseball know her. She trained a lot of the people who are going to be in the Hall of Fame someday. Some already are.

"Sage, *you're* sort of a celebrity." Sage waves August off but goes on to explain how social media is her job, and she's getting into modeling. She has Hazel and I follow all of her platforms, and August was right. With her hundreds of thousands of followers, she may as well be a celebrity. Plus, she's literally verified.

Most of her posts are of her in the cutest outfits ever. A few of them are brands that sponsor her and talk videos about different topics that she uses her platform to spread awareness on.

"So, what are y'all doing today?" I close out Sage's profile, and she's the first to answer me. I've only known her for a couple of minutes, but something tells me she's the most talkative and energetic one of the three of them, although her twin is definitely a close second for sunshiney.

"We were supposed to go out to celebrate, but Sire is very against it, like always." She looks at Sire accusingly and crosses her arms.

When I look over at him, he's rolling his eyes at Sage. "I already told you I'm tired, Sage. Sorry you had to drive down here, but maybe you should call in advance next time." Is this what he was upset about? He and Sage seemed close, so I'm doubting it.

"You never care when I come unannounced, so don't be like that." Sire doesn't say anything, and Sage nudges his arm with a smile like she's trying to make him feel better but fails.

“Are you going to at least do something with our bonus sister? Because it’s okay if you just don’t want to hang out with us.” She says it like she’s trying not to feel bad, but obviously does. I didn’t know Sire had another sister, so I turn to him, a bit confused. Then again, I didn’t know he and August were brothers until last week and that August had a twin until a few minutes ago.

August decides to chime in. “I’m going to be highly offended if you say you’re going to hang out with Lisette because I get that you knew her first, and you two are closer, but—” He stops talking because Sire is walking away to his car. Sage calls out to him, letting him know they’ll go out without him, but he doesn’t seem to care as he waves her off.

I make sure Hazel will be okay alone with the twins, and when she says she will, I say goodbye to them and follow after Sire.

He throws his game bag into the trunk of his gray Audi and leans against it as I walk up to him. “I really am tired, Vid. Please don’t try to convince me to go out with them.” Okay, plan A goes out the window.

“I wasn’t.” I play it off. “Are you going home?” He nods, so I just nod back and then turn to walk away. I kind of wanted to hang out with him today, but if he doesn’t want to, then whatever.

“Wait, where are you going?” *No offense, but I don’t want to go out if Sire isn’t going to be there.* Today’s supposed to be about him.

“Home, I’m also kind of tired. I hate when you guys have such early games.” Today’s game was at eight this morning, so I had to wake up earlier than usual, and it isn’t even twelve yet, so I’m definitely going to take a nap.

He walks over to his passenger door and opens it. “Okay, so come over. We can just chill at my place or something.” Uhh... I don’t know. I’m not sure what his definition of chill is, and I really am tired.

“There are no expectations, Vid, you know that. We really can just hang out.” I study him for a second but quickly give in. I walk into his car, and he drives us to his place. On the way, I think back to what Sage said and turn to Sire.

“How many siblings do you have?”

He taps the steering wheels and steals a quick glance at me. “Technically, it’s just the twins.” I nod slowly as he goes on. “But there’s also Lisette. I say she’s my sister because neither blood nor an adoption paper could make us closer. I knew her before I knew the twins. I think my earliest memories are with her. That’s what they were talking about earlier.”

“They’re convinced I favor her, but I don’t. They’re all annoying. Especially Lis.” I fill the car with my laughter, and when I turn to him, he has a smile on his face. His mood is clearly a lot lighter than before.

I remember him saying he met the twins when he was seven, so if he knew Lisette before that, it makes sense why he considers her his other sister. I feel another smile grow on my face. I love that he doesn’t see family as only blood.

Besides Hazel, I don’t have anyone I could consider family who isn’t blood. As if he senses my thoughts, he steals another glance at me. “How about you?”

“I’m an only child.”

He nods and taps the steering wheel again. “You and Hazel grew up together, right?”

I nod with a smile. I didn’t tell him that, so August must talk to him about Hazel. “Yeah, our moms have been best friends for, like, hundreds of years and had us at the same time.”

Sire nods again, a small smile playing on his lips. “She’s Dominican, too, right?” I nod again, adding that she’s also Puerto Rican. Hazel is lighter than us, probably because of her Puerto Rican side, but with her hair and features, at least to me, it’s clear she’s mixed.

“She’s been teaching August Spanish, and he won’t shut up about it.”

I break into a laugh at how he puts it, but I think August and Hazel are cute together.

On the rest of the drive, I'm on aux, and after one Spanish song plays, Sire says he wants to hear my entire Spanish playlist. It's too long for one drive, but I let a few songs play anyway.

"Oh! This is my favorite one." He laughs at my excitement, and I raise the volume as "Promise" by Romeo Santos starts.

"You said that about the last two." I shush him as I put the music up more. It starts off slow before the beat picks up like every perfect Spanish song.

"I like this one." Sire nods his head to the music, and I laugh at him because I know he's only saying he likes this one because parts of it are in English.

I turn to him, studying the side of his face and his perfect smile as I sing over the music. "Quiero ser tuyo enterito pero tengo miedo." His head snaps in my direction, and his smile grows.

"God, I love your accent." He looks between my eyes and nods slowly. "You should only speak Spanish." I tilt my head back with a laugh.

"You wouldn't understand anything I said."

He shrugs like he couldn't care less. "I'd learn."

I smile at him, and he holds my gaze before turning back to the road. After another few minutes, he pulls into the front of what I'm assuming is his apartment.

"You and August live together, right?" He nods in return as we walk into the living room. From what I can see, their apartment is only a bit smaller than Hazel's and mine. There's a small balcony on the left, and you can see into the kitchen to the right. There are three closed doors down the hall straight ahead, which I'm assuming are their bedrooms and the bathroom.

I turn back to him, and he's in the kitchen looking inside the fridge. "Are you hungry or want anything to drink?" His fridge

is way more full than mine, and I'm tempted to see what they have, so I walk over.

I take a look, and they have literally every juice I've ever seen. "How much do you guys drink?" Seriously, that is a lot of juice.

He chuckles and rolls his eyes. "August is very indecisive, so he insists we get everything." He seems that extra.

"I'll take some chinola juice." He hesitates, then I tell him it's the passion fruit one, and he repeats the word, trying the foreign language on his tongue before he grabs it and pours me a cup.

After I thank him, he says, "I'm gonna take a quick shower and change out of this uniform. You can just chill here or wait in my room." I nod in response and decide to wait for him on the couch as he goes to one of the rooms down the hall. As soon as I sit, I get a text from Hazel, so I text her for the next fifteen minutes Sire is gone.

Hazelnut:

Bitch... Sage just said she loves me

HAHAH what did you say?!

I don't remember what I said for her to say she loves me but I obviously had to say it back

She seems like the type to say she loves everyone tho... it's weird to me.

Being nice in general is weird to her.

okay wait but is August flirting with you?!

Yup, I thought he wouldn't in front of his sister but I don't think she's even noticing lmaoo

Can we talk about how HOT she is though ?!!

I WAS GOING TO SAY THAT

Bi panic over here

lmao i bet you are! where are ya?

The restaurant across from the aquarium, with the good fries

ugh i'm jealousss, they have the BEST piña coladas

Wait are u still with your bf or did u go home?

I roll my eyes at what she refers to Sire as.

he's not my bf, but i'm at his apartment...

AND HES THERE???

HAHAH NO SHIT HAZEL

OMG ARE YA GONNA LIKE.. YK????

STOP NO

i'm down if he's down tho...

AHHBDIFHAONANASDAADS

I chuckle as I imagine her typing that because although she seems excited, she one hundred percent sent this with the straightest face.

I'M JOKING LMAO

no fr tho, he wouldn't wanna... yk w/o wanting to be my bf :/

Sire doesn't sleep around without being official, at least not anymore, or maybe it's just me he wants to be official with before messing around for whatever reason.

Yeah no he made that clear at the aquarium, ugh drop this 25 rule alr

No.

Whatever.

Ok ok bye, I'm starting to feel ruder than usual with this much texting

Lmk if ya fuck

HAHA i will if we do but we aren't gonna :,)

A few minutes go by, and Sire walks back in—and *woah*. My eyes fall to his chest... his shirtless chest. He's only in basketball shorts, and he is very fit. I mean six packs and cut-up arms.

I remember seeing he had a tattoo when we did those body shots a few weeks ago, but now that I really look at it, I can see it's an eagle with a person in its talons. It looks like it's lifting the person out of the water.

A smile grows on my face when I also recognize the three words from the serenity prayer: Serenity, Courage, and Wisdom. He has them tattooed in a symbol that looks familiar. It's a square in a circle, but I'm assuming it has to do with addiction because of the serenity prayer. I'm almost positive it's the narcotic sobriety symbol.

He has it tattooed on his shoulder, with some pretty cool shading, while the eagle and the person in its talons are on the side of his ribs.

He has a light tan, most likely from playing in the sun all day, so his face and arms are a bit bronzer than the rest of his caramel complexion, but it somehow blends well.

He brushes his hands through his short hair, and it's a bit curly, not as tight as mine or Hazel's curls. Maybe 2C if we're using a curl chart. His hair is damp now from his shower, but it's fluffy when it dries. Like he only puts conditioner in his curls.

He flops on the couch next to me, a bit closer than I thought he was going to, but I definitely don't mind. "What do you want to watch?" Only one show comes to mind.

"Do you have Hulu?"

"Of course I do. It's way better than Netflix." He grabs the control and puts Hulu on.

"Exactly!" Hazel and I have been fighting about this for months, but I'm clearly right. "Okay, have you seen *Prison Break*?" He shakes his head that he hasn't, and what the heck?

"Oh my God, put it on right now. I swear it's the best show ever." He smirks as he searches for the show in the search bar.

"It's probably not even that good." He just wants me to argue back, but I don't give him the satisfaction. This show is the best to ever be made, and time will tell.

A few minutes go by, and I decide to bother him a bit, so when the main character comes back on the screen, I start fawning over him. "Ugh, he's literally *so* hot." He actually is, but he also looks the complete opposite of Sire. White, buzz cut, blue eyes.

I see him from the corner of my eye as he looks between the TV and me. "That's why you wanted to watch this? No, I'm taking this bullshit off."

I laugh as I grab the controller before he does. "Don't be jealous, Sire. It's like Sage says, we can't all be hot." He starts laughing when he notices I was joking. We keep watching, and when the main character drops his infamous line, Sire turns to me.

"Wait, did he purposely go to jail to break out his brother?"

I smile at how excited he sounds about it. I look over at him, and he's sunk into the couch, his arms crossed and legs spread. "I told you it's good." He looks over at me and just... watches me.

"What?" I laugh softly, and his smile grows.

"You're so beautiful." I smile up at him, and it's like I physically cannot pull my gaze from his eyes. His hand

reaches over to my face, but then he freezes.

“What?”

He has a weird look on his face, and then he pulls his hand away. “Why’d you flinch like that?” I feel myself go still at his words as I try to remember if I really did flinch, but I must’ve since he’s looking at me with so much concern.

I never really thought much of it, but Hazel pointed out to me a few weeks ago that I always flinch when she moves too closely too quickly. Or when she drops something, or even when she starts arguing with someone at her job.

I know those things unsettle me. I’ve always felt my heart beat a bit faster, but I didn’t know I flinched. According to Hazel, I’ve done that for a while, and sometimes it’s hard flinches.

Sire is watching me carefully like he just read my entire mind, and I feel myself shrink under his concerned gaze. “Vidia...”

“It’s nothing, Sire.” I quickly try to brush it off, not wanting to talk about how fucked my shitty dad left me, but he doesn’t let me off that easy.

“It’s not nothing,” he says softly yet sternly at the same time. Forcing me to understand. “If that’s why you don’t want a boyfriend, let me make myself as clear as glass.”

My eyes cut to the ground, and he reaches for my face, but this time, I feel it when I flinch. He lets out a sigh and then tries again, a lot slower. He lifts my chin so my eyes meet his as he continues.

“I would *never* put my hands on you, Vidia.” His words are soft and sincere, but his eyes have a fire in them, like he’s angry he even has to make that clear to me. “I promise,” he adds, just above a whisper, as he cups my face with one hand, and I melt into his touch.

“You got that?” I nod softly. As slowly as ever, probably so I won’t flinch again like a weirdo, he leans in and taps the softest kiss on my forehead.

He doesn't say anything else, and I'm grateful for it. We watch the first two episodes with Sire asking me questions the entire time; after the third one, I start ignoring him because I hate spoiling. He stopped asking a while ago now. Somewhere along the two hours we've been here, he put his arm around me, so now I'm leaning my head against him, but his breathing sounds different. More evened out.

I look up at him, and he's sleeping. He looks so tired I don't want to wake him, but I feel weird if I stay while he's sleeping.

With how close we are, I just lightly shrug my shoulders in an effort to wake him, "Sire... Sire, I'm going to leave, okay?"

He blinks slowly but closes his eyes again. "Please don't leave." He sounds like he hasn't slept in days. I lightly shake him again. He opens his eyes a bit more this time, but he still looks half asleep. "Can you just lay with me for a while?" He's definitely sleep-talking. He goes to lie on his side, taking a pillow with him.

I watch him get comfortable, then he taps the pillow and opens his arms to me. Is he for real? "Sire, just get some rest. I'll see you later, okay?"

He tugs on my shirt a bit. I mean... this couch is super comfortable. I let him pull me down and wrap his arm around me. We're facing each other, and he moves to fix us so my head is lying on his chest instead of the pillow, and he's on his back. His body heat is radiating off him, and he's actually warm despite being shirtless.

I rest one of my arms on his chest, and I feel his heart rate pick up a bit. I look up at him, and he has a slight smile. God, he's so pretty, even when he's sleeping. It hurts my heart a bit. I lay my head back on him and decide to just stop fighting sleep and close my eyes. Only for a little while, I tell myself, as I let my tiredness cloud me.



IT IS SUPER HOT HERE, and I can barely breathe. I slowly open my eyes but can't see much since Sire's entire body is over

me. I move him a bit, but he's twice my size, maybe more, so I'm struggling. Plus, I don't want to wake him just yet.

He must've finally felt me because he turns us on our sides, letting me out from under him. I notice someone threw a blanket over us, and I fix it so it's covering him a bit more. I reach my arm over him to get my phone and then lay back on his chest.

I look at the time, and it's almost five. Hmm, it does not feel like we slept for almost three hours. That doesn't seem like a lot, but it's enough for me. I look up at Sire. He's snoring, and I can't help but smile at him.

I scroll through my phone and check my missed messages.

Birthgiver:

Hey, did your "not boyfriend" love the gift??

She also thinks he's my boyfriend after I told her he isn't countless times, thanks to Hazel.

I let her know that he did and thank her before opening the messages Hazel spammed me with.

Hazelnut:

Hey, we just got done eating, do you and Sire want to meet us at the arcade?

You're taking long to reply and we're about to leave.

I check the time between the messages, and it'd been five minutes.

Omgg if you don't reply I'm going to assume ya are fucking

Out of all things, this is her assumption?

ITS BEEN 30 MIN I FUCKING KNEW IT

I softly laugh at her dramatic text but choose to reply to her later. I sit up, lean my back on the couch, and look down at Sire.

He looks so peaceful. From this angle, I can see his lashes are so long. Why do boys always have such nice lashes? I reach over to move his hair out of his face. It's dry now and fluffed up a bit.

The sunlight from the balcony is shining on him, and I notice his hair is pitch black. So dark you would assume he dyed it.

I go completely still when he moves to itch his nose. It has a bit of a curve to it, like it's been broken once or twice, and I can see his faint scar from where his stitches were. I honestly thought it'd look worse than that, but I guess my suture techniques are better than I thought.

My eyes travel back down and end up on his lips. They're perfectly full, but the top one is a bit smaller. I'm not sure how I'm just realizing, but he has two beauty marks on the right side of his top lip. They're side by side, and one is just a bit bigger than the other.

I give him one last sweep; I really can't get over how pretty he is.

"Have you been here this whole time?" I jump a bit at whoever just said that. What the fuck?! I turn my head to the side and see Sage sitting at the other end of the couch.

She's smiling sheepishly like she didn't mean to scare me, but she definitely fucking did. How did I not hear her? "Hi, and yeah, I have..."

She nods and looks between Sire and me. "Sorry if I scared you. He was lying on his stomach, or I guess on you, when I walked in earlier, and I didn't even see you when I came in."

I just give her a shy smile. I guess she's who gave us the blanket. I would have appreciated it if Hazel warned me Sage

was on her way back here. Now I'm glad we were just sleeping.

I'm still looking in her direction, but she's looking down at Sire with a sad look in her eyes. I look back over at him, but I don't see what she does because nothing about him makes me sad. If not, it's the exact opposite, and the thought of that scares me too much to admit out loud.

I turn back to her, confused. "What's wrong?"

She looks up at me and gives me a sad smile, shaking her head. "How much has he told you about what today is?"

I feel like she wants to tell me what's wrong but doesn't want to say anything Sire hasn't told me.

"Just that he makes six years sober. A bit about the adoption and his bio parents." As soon as I say that last part, my heart stops when I see her eyes widen, and she turns to me completely. Shit. Oh my God, did she not know any of that?

She looks normal again, so I think she already knew. *Please tell me you already knew.* "Okay, I'm only telling you this because you clearly care about him, and he trusts you a lot because you're the only other person besides Lisette, August, our parents, and I who knows all of that about him." *I am?* According to her, I'm one of six, so I feel pretty special right now.

I take all that in for a second, and then she continues. "Every year, a few weeks before and after his soberversary, he doesn't sleep. Maybe at most two hours, but most of the time, it's none at all. He's always had trouble sleeping while we were growing up, but I thought it got better."

I think about that for a second, and it sounds familiar. "Are you sure he doesn't just have insomnia?" I'm not a doctor, not yet, at least, but I think this is what it is.

She shakes her head like she's sure I'm wrong. "No, that's not it." She hesitates, then looks down at Sire and continues. "It might be PTSD. He gets horrible night terrors. I remember the first time he slept over, we were about eight or nine, and he

woke up screaming so loud the neighbors came to check if everything was okay.”

I notice her eyes start to water at the memory, and I turn my head and look at Sire instead because I know I’ll cry if I see her break down right now. He’s still sound asleep with his arms wrapped around my waist.

As I’m looking at him, a sad feeling washes over me as I think about what could’ve been so horrible that it haunts him after all these years. So bad that he had to turn to drugs to cope.

Hearing Sage’s sniffles, I feel my throat close and my eyes sting. I try to quickly blink away my tears, but it’s too late, and a few fall. I wipe them before Sage notices, but she does.

“I don’t want to make you cry more, but I’m pretty sure he only fell asleep because you were in his arms, Vidia.” I turn to look back over to her when I feel her getting off the couch. “You’re, of course, not obligated to, but as his sister, I’d really appreciate it if you take more naps with him. Just so he can at least get a bit of sleep.”

Yeah, I was already planning on it.

Chapter Six

SIRE

The Present

DO IT. YOU KNOW YOU want to. DO IT!

“Fuck!” I tilt my head up to the ceiling and keep my eyes off the bottle of Oxycodone that’s sitting on the sink. I was fine yesterday. I was fine the day before. Why the fuck is today so hard? Resting my hands on the edge of the sink, I look back down at the bottle of pills and whisper to myself. “One won’t hurt.” Yes, it will.

No, it won’t. Take one.

“Fuck it.” Snatching the bottle, I snap it open. A minute goes by. Then another. “Just one.” I tilt the bottle, but two fall into my hand. “Okay, just two.”

“*Call me if you need me, okay?*” Okay. I put the bottle down and set the pills next to it, then pull out my phone. It doesn’t take long to find her number because she’s still on the top of my favorites list.

I’m about to click her name but pause. She probably blocked my number; there’s no point in even calling. “*I mean*

it, Sire. Call me if you ever need me.” Letting out a sigh, I click her contact and raise the phone to my ear. As I assumed, it goes straight to voicemail, but I listen anyway.

I listen to her voice in hopes it’ll ground me. Closing my eyes, I listen to our laughter and recall the memory of that day, how pretty she looked in her pastel blue, how happy she was.

The beep rings too soon, and I hang up before it records my voicemail. I put my phone back in my pocket and pick up one pill. Of course, she has me blocked. Why did I even try? Slowly, I put it to my mouth, but when I see my reflection in the mirror in front of me, I quickly turn around and shut my eyes.

Do it quickly, go.

Opening my mouth, I freeze when someone rings the doorbell, and I let out a relieved breath. “Fuck.” I’m not expecting anyone, so I just walk out of the bathroom to dismiss whoever it is.

Before I reach the door, they ring the bell twice, and I know exactly who it is because only one person actually rings my bell instead of knocking.

Opening the door, she immediately pulls me into her embrace. “How’s my favorite doing?” The twins would pitch a fit if they heard her call me that.

“I’m good, Ma.” I step aside so she can come in, and she enters with the biggest smile on her face. She loves it when I call her Mom, and I’m not sure why she still gets so happy. I’ve been calling her that since I was eight.

I mean, she does look like she could be my bio mom more than the twin’s mom. Her light brown complexion matches mine instead of the darker skin August and Sage have.

Her eyes also match my brown ones rather than the emerald eyes that captivate you when looking at my idiot siblings, and her hair is wavy instead of the twins’ curls, those they get from Dad.

At the reminder, I ask her about him. She walks over to the couch and sets her bag down. “He’s good, busy as always.

Hotshot FBI agent and all.” I give her a small smile. I’m definitely closer to her than him, but it isn’t his fault he’s so busy. I’m actually surprised she makes so much time for us, considering she’s the district attorney.

I plop down on my couch and tap the space next to me, letting her know to sit. “I have to use the bathroom, be right back.” She walks out, and I slouch onto the couch, sighing.

I am so damn exhausted, and everything fucking hurts. She’s probably going to try to drag me to brunch or something, and I hate saying no to her, but I don’t feel like faking a smile today.

Running a hand through my hair, I sit up when I hear her coming back. *That was fast.* I force a smile, but it drops when I see the oxy bottle in her hands. Fuck, I forgot I didn’t put those away.

I curl back into the couch, mentally preparing for a “talk.” If she was anyone else, I’d walk right the fuck out right now. She sits on the coffee table in front of me instead of beside me on the couch.

I keep my eyes on the ceiling, not wanting her to see me. “Did you relapse?” I shake my head no, even though I know that isn’t a good enough answer for her.

I hear her set the bottle aside before she speaks up again. “Look at me and say it, Sire.” Her voice comes out so soft it could break, and I feel a weight in my chest, one that hasn’t gone away all day.

I lean my head down and let my eyes meet hers. “I didn’t. You can drug test me if you want. I—”

“I don’t want to. If you say you didn’t, then you didn’t. I trust you, Sire.” She has no idea how much that means to me. Even after seeing the open bottle... she trusts me. She takes my hand in hers, but I slowly pull away, and she falters only for a beat before looking back up at me. “Where’d you get them?”

I let out a sigh at her question. “That doesn’t matter, Mom.” My leg starts to shake at the aggravation that’s beginning to set

in, and she puts both her hands on my knee.

“When was the last time you went to a meeting?”

A few days before Vid came back. It’s not her fault, but I don’t want to talk about her, and that’s what I’ll end up talking about if I go to a meeting.

I look away from her again and shrug my shoulders. “I don’t know.”

She makes a ticking sound that she usually makes when she knows I’m lying. “Well, since you don’t know, maybe you should go to one.”

Rubbing my temples, I start wishing I could just rub a damn genie bottle and wish today away. “Can’t. I have physical therapy today.” That was a shit excuse, and I know she knows that.

She’s quiet for a while, and I open my eyes to check what she’s doing, but she’s just sitting there, staring at me like she’s trying to figure out a puzzle. “Is that why you were going to use again? Because you have PT and have to go see Viddy?”

I can’t believe she still calls her that. I have no idea if they’ve spoken in the last four years. I mean, I doubt it, but she still calls her Viddy for whatever reason.

“No. I’ve seen her multiple times, including at our session on Saturday, and I was fine.” She gives me an unsure look, but I *was* fine. Sure, we fought the whole damn time, but that’s becoming routine for us.

“This has nothing to do with her, Mom.”

“I disagree.” Of course she does.

“Well, then we’re agreeing to disagree.”

She nods once, and I rest my head on the back of the couch, looking up again.

“Is it because of what today is?” When I don’t answer her, she lets out a sigh. “I know you would have been ten years sober today, and yes, the last four years have been hard, but that’s a part of this, honey.”

It wouldn't be this hard if that night didn't happen four years ago. I haven't been able to make a *year* sober. I started using liquor as a substitute for pills a few years ago, and although I've tried stopping, I always end up drinking. It's starting to feel like a never-ending fucking cycle.

"It's one day at a time, Sire."

"Don't you think I know that, Mom? I do, but each day is so much fucking harder than the one before." Having to avoid liquor on top of pills is still new to me, and it's fucking hard.

I let out a sigh at how harsh that came out and run a hand down my face. "I'm sorry for my tone. It's just frustrating. Making it six years sober did not feel this hard, and now I can't even make it to one damn year." I only used oxy once since I relapsed four years ago, but I just can't stay away from a fucking bottle.

She nods in understanding. "I think we both know why that is." I huff in annoyance, my patience running thin.

"If you say it's because I need to make amends, I—" I cut myself off because I know I'm not going to do shit if that's what she's going to say.

"It's a part of getting clean but also *staying* clean. You know you need to make amends with not only Viddy but Lis, too." I close my eyes at the sound of both their names.

Lisette was not only my old sponsor but also my rock. I've known her my entire life, and she's a sister to me. We were neighbors growing up, and when I met the twins and started to stay over at their place more often, naturally, she came over, too.

She even moved in with us for a while once I got adopted just so she could save up for her own place, which she did. She is as much of a sister to me as Sage is, and an adoption couldn't have made us closer.

I haven't really spoken to her much since I relapsed and said all that fucked up shit to her. Which was four fucking years ago. Of course, we've spoken and hung out here and there, but it hasn't been the same.

I open my eyes again and look at one of the few people I didn't fuck up with. I think I could commit murder, and she'd stand by me, maybe even hide the damn body and represent my innocence in court.

"You'll make it there, but you have to put in the work, Sire. Go to meetings, reach out to your sponsor, stop being so stubborn, and ask for help." We sit in silence for a few minutes, but I can't handle being here anymore.

"I have to leave soon or Vidia's going to be pissed that I'm late again. You can stay here if you want, but I think August and Hazel are next door." We both stand at the same time, and my eyes land on the pill bottle.

She follows my eyes and then hands me the bottle. "I'm not going to force you to get rid of them. You have to want to do it yourself." I know that, but I don't *want* to get rid of them, and that's the fucking problem.

I don't take the bottle from her and hope she gets rid of them for me. I walk into my room to change into an all-black sweatsuit and get my things to leave.

When I walk back into the living room, she's sitting on the couch doing something on her phone. "I'm ordering food. Do you have to leave this second, or can you eat a quick lunch with me?"

I look down at my watch, and I have about fifteen minutes to spare, but I need to get out of this house. "Can't, sorry. I'll see you later, okay?" She gives me a reassuring smile, and I grab my keys, walking out.



"NICE OF YOU FOR BEING on time for once." I let out a sigh as Vidia walks in, but I don't respond. I watch as she types something on her computer before turning to me. "You look like shit."

I give her a bored expression. *Yeah, I feel like shit.* "Not today. Okay, Vidia?" My voice comes out just as tired as I feel, and she crosses her arms as she studies me. She must sense

I'm really not in the mood because she doesn't fuck with me anymore.

There's a knock at the door, and when she tells them to come in, some blonde kid enters. "Your phone finally turned back on. Here you go." Her phone was dead? Is that why she didn't answer, or does she just have me blocked?

He walks over to her, even though she's already making her way to him, and nods toward me. "What's up, bro." I ignore him because I fucking feel like it. He's not my *bro*, and either way, he gives me a weird vibe. He turns back to Vid and watches her for too long before walking out.

She quickly scans through her screen and then looks up at me. "Why'd you call me earlier?" *She got the call?* She doesn't have me blocked.

She waits for me to answer, so I quickly make up a lie. "Um, I was calling to let you know I was going to be late."

"But you got here on time?" *Shit. Right, uh...*

"Yeah, well, I thought I was going to be late. Traffic cleared up."

She gives me an unsure look but doesn't question me again. Walking over to the middle of the room where the therapy balls are, she throws me the miniature blue one, and I catch it with ease.

"Start on this wall." I walk over and start my reps. She gives a few different exercises, and that's how the rest of our session goes. We surprisingly don't fight or talk much at all.

We're putting the therapy balls in a bucket, and when I feel her staring at me, I crack a smirk. "It's not polite to stare, Vid." She turns more serious, like she's trying to figure something out. "What?"

"What was the real reason you called this morning?" I shrug and look away, but she notices like always. She notices everything. "Just say it, Sire." She waits for me to answer, but when I don't, she shakes her head and begins to walk out.

"You think you could—" *No, don't ask that of her.*

She stops in her tracks and turns back around. “Can I do what, Sire?”

“I’ll always be here if you need me. All you have to do is say the words.”

I run my hand through my hair and just spit it out. “Can you come to a meeting with me?” She looks confused, and I immediately regret asking. “Never mind, I’m sure you have other patients. Sorry, I asked.” I quickly make my way out of the room but stop when she calls out to me.

“Sire, wait. I’ll go with you.”

“You don’t have to, Vid. It—”

“I want to.” I stare into her eyes, and she seems completely genuine. She wants to. She takes her white lab coat off, hangs it on a chair, and then tells me to meet her in the waiting room. I give her a quick nod and make my way out.

After a little under five minutes, she’s walking toward the receptionist. “Reschedule all of my appointments. A family emergency came up.” Family? I shake it off before my brain thinks too much of it. Whatever, it’s probably the only excuse that’ll let her leave.

She makes her way to me, but I notice her car keys in her hand. “Let’s take my car. I need to keep myself busy.” She gives me an understanding nod, and we make our way to a meeting.

The entire drive, we don’t speak, but we don’t sit in an awkward silence either. It’s almost like we’re comfortable around each other, but that’s ridiculous, considering we can’t go a day without fighting.

As we pull up to the meeting, I turn the car off, but Vidia hesitates to take off her seatbelt. *I knew I shouldn’t have asked her to come.* I go to tell her to forget it, but she speaks before I do.

“Are outsiders allowed in?” She looks like she doesn’t want to intrude, and my lip twitches a bit, knowing she’s still that thoughtful person I remember.

“Yeah, Vid, it’s an open meeting today.” I double-checked to make sure. I wouldn’t have asked her if it wasn’t. She nods, then unbuckles her seatbelt and hops out of my car, and I take a deep breath before following her in.

The meeting starts a little differently since it’s an open meeting. A few people share who came with them today, but then it gets to me, and I almost don’t share until I remember what my mom told me. I need to put in the work.

“I’m Sire.” Everyone says hi to me, and I keep my eyes on the ground as I fiddle with the string of my hoodie. I take a few beats to add more, so our facilitator helps.

“I saw you walk in with someone, Sire. Would you like to share who came with you today?” I steal a quick glance at Vid before my eyes cut back to the ground.

“This is Vidia.” Everyone says hi to her, but when I’m asked what her relationship is to me, I can’t come up with an answer. We’re definitely not friends. I could say she’s my ex because she is, but that’ll be awkward for everyone.

“I’m his doctor,” Vidia speaks up from beside me when I take too long to answer.

“And why did you come with Sire today?” This time, I look over at her because I want to know that, too. Vidia looks at me and chuckles, almost nervously. My eyes cut down to her hands, and when I notice she’s spinning her ring, I realize she’s uncomfortable.

“Because he asked me to?”

“And why did you come? I’m sure you didn’t have to,” our facilitator pushes, saying exactly what I’m thinking, and Vid looks around the room, taking a few beats to respond.

“Because I care.” I go completely still. I swear I might be holding my breath. “I definitely shouldn’t, everything considered, but I do because even with what happened between us, I don’t have the heart to let that get in the way of his sobriety. Not again.” She adds the last part so softly. Almost like she only wanted me to hear it.

I'm still watching her when she looks over at me. I look between her eyes, a soft look in them I haven't seen in a while. It's a nice change, but then she looks away, and it's like her guard goes up again.

I let out a soft sigh, and then I'm asked about how I'm doing, and I immediately want to leave. When I take more than five seconds to reply, Vid's impatient ass kicks my shoe. "If I had to share, so do you," she says, low enough just so I can hear.

I give her a small smile, and when she urges me with her eyes, I share what happened this morning and how I would've relapsed if Mom didn't knock when she did. *There she goes, saving me again.*

The entire time I share, I feel Vid's eyes on me, but not her usual glare I've gotten used to. She watches me like she cares.

"Thanks for that. I really appreciate you being there with me." I'm surprised the meeting went as smoothly as it did. Then again, I'm also surprised she came with me.

She keeps her eyes out her window as she replies. "You're welcome." We sit in comfortable silence until we reach the parking lot of the doctor's office. I pull up beside her car, but she doesn't get out as soon as I thought she would.

She turns to me and goes to say something, then shakes her head like whatever it is is dumb. "Hm?" I hum, and her eyes meet mine as she tries again.

"This doesn't mean we're cool because I still can't stand you."

I let out a scoff and turn forward. And here I thought we were getting somewhere.

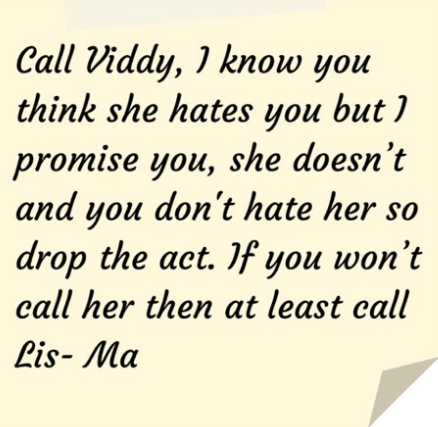
"But I meant it when I said..." I turn to her again at the softness in her voice. "I'll always be here when it comes to this." She looks in between my eyes, and she sounds so genuine that the weight in my chest finally lifts at her words. "Call me again if you need me. I'll make sure my phone isn't dead."

Before I can reply, she's already out of my car and opening the door to hers.

I let out a sigh and head home. Walking through my apartment door, I kick my shoes off and lay on the couch. When I go to rest my feet on the coffee table, I knock over the pill bottle that's still sitting there.

I wasn't expecting her to get rid of them, but I'm glad she didn't. I stand and grab the bottle, then head to the bathroom. Opening the bottle, I pour the pills into the toilet and watch them disappear as I flush the toilet.

"I'm staying clean because I want to." As I turn to leave, I stop when I notice a sticky note on my mirror.



Call Viddy, I know you think she hates you but I promise you, she doesn't and you don't hate her so drop the act. If you won't call her then at least call Lis- Ma

I realized today that I definitely don't hate Vid. I'm just not sure if she still hates me. Walking out of the bathroom, I decide to call my sister. My mom is right; I need to talk to her and mend things.

It's been a few weeks since we spoke, and when we did, it was short. Obviously, we've always been really close, but after everything that happened those few years ago, there's been a strain between us, and I need to stop being a dick and fix it.

She answers my Facetime call almost immediately, and a smile lights up her face. "And here I thought you were dead or something." I break into a laugh and flop onto the couch.

"You of all people should know I'm not easy to kill."

She throws her head back with a laugh at the memories of her waking me up from every nap by suffocating me. I'm not sure why she found that funny as a kid—she's disturbed.

"How have you been?" I ask, and her laugh sobers. She lets out a sigh as she sets her phone up against something.

"Are you asking because you really want to know or because you're being nice?"

"I'm just being nice," I say without missing a beat, and I watch her go still.

"Fuck you." She snatches her phone and hangs up, and I break into another laugh. Not even a full minute passes before she calls me back. "Let's try that again."

I chuckle but then turn more serious. "I asked because I care, Lis. Always." A small smile stretches across her face, and she tucks her golden hair behind her ear. She looks like she's thinking for a beat, and then her piercing blue eyes meet mine.

"Not great, you?"

"If I say 'same,' are you going to ramble about how we're connected or some bullshit?" Lis and I somehow seem to relapse or go through rough patches around the same time, and I think they're just weird coincidences, but her spiritual ass doesn't believe in coincidence and is convinced we're somehow connected. I let her believe what she wants at this point.

"Pick a number, Sire."

"Absolutely not, Lisette." She breaks into a laugh at the way I sound so fed up with her. "Seven," I say, just to see if she'll lose her shit, and she literally tosses her phone across her damn bed.

"I swear I was thinking of seven!" I break into a laugh and just stare at the phone for a beat, grateful as fuck that no matter how long we go without talking, and although I said all that shit to her four years ago, we can still get on the phone and pretend it all never happened.

But then I remember it *did*, and I should apologize to her any second now, but I hate awkward situations, and she said she isn't doing so well, so I'll save it for another day... again.

Chapter Seven

SIRE

YOU TWO ARE REAL MATURE .” That gets Vidia’s attention, and she turns to me, shooting me a glare. I hold her gaze, but she doesn’t say anything—her best friend does instead.

“Haven’t you heard of Dr. Gomez’s new policy?” I turn to her at the smug tone of her voice. “All patients more than ten minutes late will not be seen by her and will need to reschedule their appointments.” She sounds happy, which is weird for her, but I know it’s only because this bullshit policy is an inconvenience to me.

“Too bad for her other patients.”

“Too bad for *you*,” Hazel says like she’s correcting me, and Vidia stifles a laugh from the other side of the room.

“Don’t you have turtles who are choking on plastic that you need to save?” She gives me a bored look, but I’m not wrong. She works at the mammal rehabilitation center downtown, so I’m pretty sure something along those lines fits her job description.

She rolls her eyes and sits up from the bed. “Don’t you have backs you need to stab?” We hold each other’s stares before I flip her off. I don’t know who’s more annoying. Her or her little shit best friend. Both of them together are unbearable.

Ever since Vidia and I had our falling out, Hazel's taken her side without knowing the full story, and she's just a menace. I can't wait for the day August breaks up with her ass, but with the way he looks at her, I don't see that happening. Hasn't he gotten tired of her sometime in the five fucking years they've been together?

As if on cue, the menace's keeper walks in with the biggest smile to see his *sweet girl*. "Hey, gorgeous." He greets her, and Hazel smiles innocently at me before leaning in to kiss August. I fake a gag, which makes August actually gag as she tries to kiss him because of his weird reflex.

Hazel shoots me a glare, and I smile innocently at her. "Why are you two here? Is this not a place of business?" Seriously, I don't have time for this.

"Yes, this is a place of business." Vidia turns to me accusingly. "A place where time should be respected."

I let out a sigh and roll my eyes at her. I'm only ten minutes late; she's dramatic as fuck.

"Don't roll your eyes at her."

I roll them again at Hazel this time more dramatically.

"August, why did your family adopt this backstabbing traitor?" She keeps her dark eyes on me, and August just stands there smiling. Like he finds this all amusing, and we're just one big happy family.

"August," I say, keeping my eyes on his menace, "why are you still with this b—"

"Sire." From the corner of my eyes, I can see August's smile drop as he cuts me off. "Watch your next words," he says warningly, and Hazel smirks at me as she raises her eyebrows, challenging. *Bitch. Both of them are.* I bite my tongue and let out a sigh. Whatever.

"Can we just get this session over with?" I turn to Vidia now, who's still working on her computer and still ignoring me.

“No,” someone whom I obviously wasn’t talking to answers. “I already informed you of her new policy. I’m sure —”

“Alright, enough, Hazel.” August chuckles as he tries to put a muzzle on her, but she won’t quit.

“I don’t get how you’re always late,” she goes on.

August closes the distance between them and steps in front of her so she can’t shoot glares into my skull anymore. “What’d I say?” His voice is low, and I expect Hazel to keep harassing me or push him out of her way, but she does neither. That’s a new one. A small smile creeps on my face at the way he can somehow do that.

I roll my eyes and look away from them when August snakes his hand around her throat and leans over to kiss her. *Ugh*. They’re so happy and in love. It’s gross. Hazel hops down from the bed and looks at me with a smirk, most likely at the disgust on my face from their interaction.

She hugs my brother’s arm, and I glare at both of them. August is a whole foot, maybe a bit more, taller than Hazel, so she looks like a doll next to him. A mean, semi-scary doll... who’s my neighbor. Fun. August gives me a smile, but I roll my eyes at him and turn back to Vidia.

“You.” She stops typing for a second, knowing I’m talking to her. “Get off your ass and tell me what exercises to do. I don’t have time for this shit anymore. I have places to be.”

August and Hazel leave the room without another word, and Vidia gets up from her seat, finally turning to me. “Hazel wasn’t joking about my new policy. I already rescheduled your appointment. I’ll see you on Wednesday.”

“What?” That’s not an option. She can’t be serious right now.

“Do you need a hearing aid because we’re actually working on getting an Otolaryngologist in the office?”

I let out a scoff at the sharpness in her voice. I won’t be surprised if her words can cut. “Nice to see we’re back to fighting. Silly of me to think we had a moment the other day.”

It's the first time we've seen each other since she came to my NA meeting with me, and our switch is giving me whiplash.

Her eyes soften, but just a bit. She's still a little spitfire. "Are you having a hard day?" She gets up from her seat but leans against her desk instead of closing the distance.

"Will you be nice to me and not make me reschedule if I tell you I wanted to use drugs today?" My words come out hopeful as I turn my head and give her a smile dripped with sarcasm. She rolls her eyes at me, but I answer her because of the sincerity of her question.

"I've been fine. I—"

"Good to hear. I'll see you Wednesday." Just like that, the wall is up between us again. I run my hand through my hair, feeling a headache coming. I cannot start my mornings like this. I think I might die.

"Come on, Vidia. Our game is in two weeks, and I won't be able to play if we push back even one appointment." With the way my physical therapy sessions are scheduled, my last session is the day before our first game instead of the week before because my stubborn ass missed those first four appointments with her.

"You should consider that when you show up late to every appointment. Seriously, Sire, you being late pushes back my entire day, and I've let it slide, but I'm not anymore. I'm behind on work, and I'm new to this office. How do you think ___"

"Okay." I cut her off from her rambling. "I won't be late anymore," I plead.

"Good." A small beam of hope grows, but she snatches it away. "I'll see you extra early on Wednesday. "

"Vidia," I sigh in defeat and look up at the ceiling. "Please." My eyes meet hers, and she looks like she's thinking about it.

"I'll bring you a piña colada for all of my next sessions." It's only about six more, but those are six of her favorite drinks. "Without the cherries on top," I add, noticing her lip twitching, but her guard doesn't come down.

“I don’t need your bribes.” She rolls her eyes and starts walking across the room. “Let’s just get started so my day isn’t fully wasted.” She sounds annoyed, so I don’t say anything else and walk over to her, fighting back a smile.

She has an attitude the entire session, so I bite my tongue not to piss her off more.

When Wednesday rolls around, I make sure I’m ten minutes early, which means I have to sit in the waiting room. I hate every second of it, but whatever.

When I’m called, I walk to the end of the hall, and Vidia is setting up some new equipment. She turns around at the sound of the door shutting behind me, and I close the distance between us, handing her the piña colada I promised.

“I already told you I don’t need your bribes.”

I ignore her and hold the drink out closer to her. “Well, I already bought it, so just take it.”

“I don’t want it,” she fires back, and I feel myself growing annoyed. Why does she always have to be so difficult?

“What’d you eat today?” A crease grows in her brows, and she asks me why I care with her usual attitude. “Because you rarely eat breakfast, and you’re probably on an empty stomach.” I pull out the slice of tres leche and hand it to her.

She looks down at the combination of her two favorite things on this planet, but she doesn’t move to take either of them. “Stop making this hard for me, Vidia. I’m trying not to be an asshole to you today.”

“Knowing how much of a backstabbing liar you are, it’s probably poisoned.” She gives me a bored look, like me going out of my way to get this for her doesn’t impress her, but from the way her eyes keep cutting to them, I know she is at least a bit satisfied and wants the piña colada.

“Take it.” I ignore her comment and shove them at her, but she takes a step back.

“I had a big breakfast. I don’t want it.” I study her and can’t fight back the smirk that creeps onto my face. “What?” she

asks so harshly I laugh but cover it with a cough because she somehow glares at me harder.

“You still have a bad poker face.”

She falters for a brief second but recovers just as fast and rolls her eyes. I decide there’s no point in fighting with her. I walk over to her desk and place both the piña colada and slice of cake down before walking over to the equipment. She has me doing a new exercise today, and our session goes for an hour instead of our usual thirty to forty-five minutes.

Although I was seeing my old doctor for a month, I’m starting to feel a major improvement now that I’ve been working with her. I’m relieved as fuck because our game is around the corner, and the team has been asking if I’m going to make it. I, of course, told them yes, not because I think I’m going to but because I don’t need them to be nervous right before the game.



WHEN I WALK INTO MY apartment, I hang up my keys, and my eyes land on the sticky note my sponsor made me write. He gave me *homework*. I’ve been to a few more meetings, but since I’m almost a year sober and struggling, he says I need to make amends, so that’s my homework this week before I go to my next meeting.

I haven’t spoken to Lis since last week, but I decided to stop putting this off and send her a text before heading back out.

I honestly shouldn’t be this nervous to see her, but I am. I look down at the menu for the fifth time when the bell of the diner rings. I look up, and I notice Lisette making her way toward me.

“Hey.” I get up to hug her before we both sit back down. “Do you feel as shit as you look?” She breaks into a laugh, and I’m relieved as fuck for it. I figured this would be awkward, but I’m starting to think otherwise.

We haven’t hung out in person in maybe two months, mainly because of me, and it’s been weird between us. I’ve

been taking so damn long to apologize, and she's too good to me to bring it up.

"Yeah, I do. You could've lied and said I look good, though."

"Would we even be considered siblings anymore if I did that?"

She flips me off, and I chuckle in response, but when I see the tired look in her eyes, I feel a weight in my chest. Lis relapsed a little after I did four years ago. We both started taking pills together in high school, and she swears we're connected, so we always joked about how if one of us went down, so would the other.

"You look like you're doing better than the last time we spoke, though." I give a small smile and shrug. I do feel a bit better after these last few meetings I've been to.

"I didn't ask to meet you here to talk about me."

"Why did you call me? And if you say you need a favor, I'm leaving."

I throw my head back with a laugh, and she rolls her eyes at me with a smile. She tucks her blonde hair behind her ear as she waits for me to reply. The couple in the booth next to us gets up to leave, and I let out a breath now that we're able to talk without listening ears.

"I'm going to make a year sober soon." That's all I say, and she takes a sip of her water, then taps the rim of the cup like she's trying to decide what to say.

"I don't mean to downplay your achievements when I say this because you know I of all people am proud of you, but only *almost* one year? The twins told me you were struggling, but I wish you would've."

I nod slowly, feeling guilty for that. I know Lis would've helped, even if she was still mad at me, but I felt I didn't deserve her forgiveness. That's why I didn't reach out when I was struggling and avoided talking to her about it.

“I’m missing a step in my road to recovery, so I never really stayed sober for long.”

She nods in understanding. “So you called me to...” She leaves it in the air. Obviously wanting me to say it, not making this easy for me.

“To make amends. To apologize.” It’s annoying as fuck that I’ve been given “homework,” but here I am. Deep down, I know I need to make amends, and there’s no way I’m starting with Vidia, so I’m working it out with Lisette first.

“You were trying to help when I relapsed. You were being a good sister, and in return, I was a dick and threw your struggles in your face. It was fucked up, and so was not making an effort to apologize after I came home from rehab.”

After my life went to shit four years ago, I was supposed to get it all together with Lis since she’s the only one in my family that understands my addiction, but instead, I said I didn’t need her and was a bit of an asshole to basically everyone. While I apologized to everyone else, I never made much effort to really say sorry to Lis. Mainly because out of everyone, I knew I didn’t deserve her forgiveness.

She spins her straw in her cup but stays silent. I don’t talk about my addiction with anyone, and neither does she. Sure, I can talk to August or my mom and of course Sage, and now apparently Vid... I think. Either way, it’s different when you’re talking to someone who really gets it.

We’re all the other has, and I feel like shit for just leaving her all alone. Especially since she’s my fucking sister.

“I shouldn’t have treated you like you were the bad guy for trying to help me, but in all honestly, I wasn’t ready for help.” At the time, I still blamed myself for what happened to Vidia in that accident. I felt like I didn’t deserve to be saved, so I pushed away everyone who I knew would save me.

But then Vid came back to LA and went to that meeting with me. I knew it was weird for her, but she did it, so I could do the same and have a hard conversation with Lis. Hopefully,

we can go back to how it was, especially since I promised I'd be her rock.

"You're really good at apologizing without actually saying sorry." She lightly laughs, and I give her a small smile. It isn't funny, but she's just laughing through her pain, as always.

"I'm sorry, Lisette—"

"My full name? Wow, you must really mean it." She pouts her lip, and I roll my eyes at her dumbass.

"Shut up so I can get this over with." She laughs again, and I continue. "The day I found out I was going to get adopted, we promised each other to get sober and to stick together." She gives me a sad smile at the memory.

We were only fifteen when we stood in front of a toilet and watched a bunch of pills swirl away as we made that promise.

"I'm sorry I broke that promise. Don't tell the twins, but... I think I care about you more than them, at least when it comes to this, so believe me when I say I felt like shit that I treated you like that. You don't have to forgive me right now, but—"

"I do." My eyes cut to hers, and when I see the sincerity in her face, I smile at her, relieved as fuck that she does. "Only because I really missed your dumbass." I break into a laugh and throw the paper from my straw at her.

"Oh, by the way, I'm definitely telling August and Sage you love me more than them." I kick her under the table, and she returns the blow harder.

"I said I *care* about you more than them and only about this. I never said I loved your annoying ass." She throws her head back, laughing, and kicks me under the table again.

"You should not be talking about annoying." Before I can give her a reply, the waiter comes up to us, asking for our order.

Lis keeps the conversation flowing, talking about her new pet. I bully her about being lonely enough to buy a turtle, and she kicks me from under the table so hard I'm sure I'm bruised.

We both know what's coming, but I wait until our food gets here before asking. "Progress check?"

She avoids my eyes and moves her food with her fork. I take a few spoonfuls of my mashed potatoes while waiting for her response. After a few minutes, she looks at her watch and then says, "Forty-seven hours sober." I go still. *Shit*. I knew she seemed off, but I wanted to believe she was doing better than that.

I'm suddenly not hungry anymore and put my spoon down, wiping my mouth with my napkin. Before I can say anything to her, she says, "I'm on the struggle bus, Sire."

"Lis—"

"No, that's an understatement. The bus I'm on is in the middle of the ocean, and I'm sinking."

"You—"

"And the engine is about to blow, so now it's just going to go up in flames and then sink like the Titanic." She chuckles, and I briefly close my eyes. She's spiraling, and it's clear she's going to hit rock bottom soon. *I should've reached out sooner.*

I open my eyes and shake my head at the guilty thoughts. There's no point in blaming myself right now. "Do you want to go to rehab? I can—"

"No," she says firmly. "I want to do this on my own. I need to." I nod because I get that. Not wanting professional help. The need to know you can get sober on your own is sometimes greater than the need to drink or use drugs.

"Start working out with me."

"Are you calling me fat?" She holds her heart like a dramatic ass.

"Yes." She laughs, and I can't help but join her. We both know I'm not calling her fat, but even if she was, who cares? Working out with me is just a distraction, one she needs right now.

"I'll think about it."

“You should. You need it.” I look at her, faking my disgust, and she laughs again, but I know she knows what I meant. She gives me a grateful smile and nods before we finish our meal.

I pay for the both of us, and as we make our way out, I say, “I have a question.” I look over at her, and she has a huge smile on her face.

“The moment I’ve been waiting for.” She looks up to the ceiling and then over at me. “My answer is no, I will not.”

“You asshole.” I shove her, and she starts laughing. “Never mind then. Forget it.” I shake my head as we walk out of the diner.

“Uh, uh, go ahead.” Her smile is a bit smaller, but I can tell she’s excited for me to ask.

“Will you be my sponsor again?” I know I already have one. One who gives me homework, so yes, I want a new one.

“Ehh... I’ll think about—” I shove her again, and she almost loses her balance, but I don’t try to catch her. Asshole. “Jeez, nice to see you still can’t take a joke.”

I roll my eyes at her as I flip her off. “My offer is standing for the next three seconds or—”

“Of course I will, Sire.” I look over at her with a smile, but she turns more serious as we keep walking. “But I told you I’m not in a good place right now, so—”

“I don’t mind. I know you won’t bail on me.” Having a sponsor who isn’t stable isn’t the smartest idea, but I think I’m stable enough for the both of us, and if not, I still have my other sponsor who gives fucking homework.

Lis needs me. I’m sure that’s why she forgave me so easily. So even if she isn’t the best choice of a sponsor at the moment, I don’t care. She just needs the responsibility right now.

She gives me another grateful smile. “I actually think I need *you* to be *my* sponsor.” I stop walking and turn to her in a bit of shock.

“Wait, you’re being serious?”

She avoids my eyes like she's... ashamed. "I feel rock bottom is close, and you're honestly all I have. You don't have to—"

"I want to." She looks up at me with a warm smile. "But I've never been anyone's sponsor, so if I suck at this, don't blame me." I put my hands up in defense, and she laughs.

"There isn't really much to it. Just harass me here and there." I give her a nod. Okay, I can definitely do this. It feels weird having her entire sobriety in my hands, but I'm honored she chose me.



WHEN FRIDAY ROLLS AROUND, I wake up early and head down to buy Vidia's piña colada. I doubt she'll take it, but I said I'll get her one for all of my next sessions since she didn't make me reschedule, so that's what I'm going to do.

When I walk in, her eyes land on the drink, and she looks bored to death of me. "You're wasting your money."

"Don't worry, I have a lot of it," I smirk over at her.

She shakes her head with a small smile, and I'm sure in her head she called me every nickname with arrogant in it. She throws a baseball at me, but I miss it, trying to balance her drink in one hand and my phone in the other.

"I thought you were the LA Dodgers' best?" She teases me for missing the ball, and I crack a smile. "Maybe you shouldn't waste your money on piña coladas, who knows? Maybe you won't make a full recovery." My smile drops at her bad attempt at a joke.

"Not funny," I say dryly, and an uneasiness settles in the pit of my stomach at the thought. She starts setting up for what I have to work on today, but I stay put until she looks over her shoulder at me. "What are my chances?"

"What?"

"How healed will I be at the end of this?" We only have next week of therapy left, and I feel one hundred percent fine, but

she's the doctor here, and I don't know if it's because she likes bothering me, but she hasn't told me if I'm getting better or how much better I'll get.

She fully turns to me and toys with one of the thera-bands, stretching it in her hands. "You're going to make a full recovery." I let out the biggest sigh of relief at her words because I really needed to hear that.

"Why do you look so surprised? Your injury wasn't that bad this time around—plus, I'm the best." She whips around, her curls bouncing after her, and I smirk at her.

"Whatever you say, Mrs. Arrogant." She freezes for a quick second at my nickname for her, and I do, too. I said it so easily that I completely forgot we used to tease each other with that once upon a time.

Playing it off, I hand her the piña colada I'm still holding, but she doesn't even glance at it. Stubborn as always. "Just take it. A promise is a promise." She lets out a scoff and turns away to the equipment.

"Don't worry, I won't be surprised if you don't bring me one next week and break this promise too. I'm used to you making empty promises." I go still for a second, and although I can't see her, I can hear the hurt in her voice.

I suck in a breath and let my hand fall since she obviously isn't going to just take the damn drink. "I wasn't the only one who broke promises, Vidia." She goes still and turns her head over her shoulder but keeps her eyes on the floor. I roll my eyes at her and walk over to her desk, setting her stupid drink down.

"What are we doing today besides throwing shit in each other's faces?" She doesn't respond but points me in the direction of a new machine, and I get this over with.

Chapter Eight

VIDIA

Four Years Earlier

I DIDN'T THINK YOU'D TAKE it literally."

I watch my mom on the Facetime call as she applies her mascara. When she tells me something, I always take it literally, so why did she think it'd be different when she had me make my twenty-five rule?

When I got my first boyfriend and my first heartbreak, she told me to pick an age, and until I reach that age, I'll have fun and start taking boys seriously at twenty-five. It's been working perfectly so far, and I haven't been heartbroken since.

"Well, I did. So, once again, no, Sire isn't my boyfriend." She pokes her eye for the third time in the last five minutes we've been talking. "Mom, you're putting it way too close to your eye." She completely ignores me and pokes her eye again.

She angrily shoves the mascara stick into the bottle but misses. "This stupid shit." I point the screen to the roof of Sire's car so she can't see me laughing. Once I bring it down

to my face again, I watch her tying her hair in a high ponytail matching mine. “So he’s not your boyfriend, and you haven’t had sex with him, but you just go out on dates with him and casually take naps together?”

How does she even know about the naps?! The only logical explanation is that Hazel is a chismosa. “First of all, we do not go on dates.”

She grabs her phone and walks out of her bathroom. “Going to the aquarium and the movies every Friday *and* mini golf are all dates, V.” No, they aren’t. We’re just hanging out.

I’m tired of holding my phone, so I stand it on the dashboard. As I stand my phone up, I glance at the coffee shop in the distance and start to wonder why Sire is taking so long with our drinks.

“Okay, I was already at the aquarium with Hazel, and he showed up—”

“And the second time you two went?” Oh, Hazel is a dead girl walking. We went that second time to work on his fear of the tunnel, but I decide to play dumb because these are starting to sound like dates, like Sire and Hazel also claim them to be, and I don’t want either of them to be right.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Anyways, we don’t go to the movies *every* Friday.” That’s only half true. We’ve only gone the last two Fridays, but that’s because two new movies came out.

“Right, so he’s not your boyfriend.” She sounds like she is being sarcastic, and I squint my eyes at her. “Aye come on, mi vida. You obviously like him. Don’t lie to me.” I fight the urge not to roll my eyes.

“I’m serious,” I say, and she gives me a knowing look. “Okay, maybe I like him a little, but I swear he isn’t my boyfriend.”

“And why not?” I think about her question for a second, trying to come up with a good reason, and it doesn’t take me long to think of one.

“I just don’t want a relationship right now.” I shrug, but my voice doesn’t come out as certain as I want it to, and I know she doesn’t believe me. It’s not like I was lying. I *don’t* want a relationship right now.

“Mhm.” She eyes me, and I feel myself growing uncomfortable under her knowing motherly gaze. “I think it’s because of something else.” I feel my brows furrow in confusion. She doesn’t explain right away, letting me figure it out, but I don’t.

“Not every man is like your father.” A weird feeling washes over me at the mention of him. I know every man isn’t like him... Maybe it’s just hard to get the image of him hurting her out of my head and the fear of being hurt like that. Trapped in something like that.

“That’s not why I don’t want a relationship.” I look away from the phone.

“Maybe not consciously.” I think about that for a second, trying to figure out if, unconsciously, that’s why I won’t let Sire fully in. What I had to grow up with. The way I had to watch my mom fall victim to the man she loved... Maybe she’s right.

Before I can respond, Sire opens the driver’s side door and slides in, handing me my coffee. “Here you go, beautiful. My bad, I took so long. Everyone kept stopping me to ask about tonight’s party.” It’s the twins’ birthday, so they’re having a party at the boys’ house later tonight.

I thank him and then take a sip of my coffee and close my eyes, sighing at the perfect taste. “Turn the camera so I can see your not-boyfriend.” My mom conveniently switches to English, and my eyes shoot open before I snatch my phone from the dashboard.

“I’m not wearing my headphones, Ma.” I sneak a glance at Sire, and he’s pulling his seatbelt on, but it’s clear he totally heard her.

“Oops, *déjame ver.*”

I roll my eyes, then hold the phone up so both Sire and I are in the frame. He smiles and waves at her, but I quickly put the camera down before either of them can start a conversation with the other. “I barely got to see him!”

“You saw him just fine. Bye, Ma.”

“No me cuelgues!” I don’t hang up on her since I don’t feel like hearing her give me a boche about it later and wait for her to go on. “He plays baseball?”

Sire’s in his uniform since he has a game in about half an hour. He’s been picking me up the last few games so we can go together. “Yes, and if we’re late, his coach and Jen are going to kill us.”

Sire starts the car, and I watch my mom as she walks out of her apartment. “Okay, fine. I love you. Tell Hazelnut I said I love her y llámame más tarde.” I tell her I love her and promise to tell Hazel, and then she lets me hang up.

After about twenty minutes, we pull into the parking lot of the other school. I don’t see the team’s bus, so we must’ve gotten here first. Right on cue, my phone buzzes with a text from Jen to meet her at the front of the parking lot, so I quickly tell Sire I’ll see him after the game.



“If I KNEW THE NURSES were this hot, I would’ve stood in front of the batter a long time ago.” I fake a laugh but don’t reply. The UC Davis players have been flirting with Jen and me since we walked in, and it was cute at first, but now it’s getting old.

I finish taking a look at his shoulder, then walk over to the drawer and get a pink slip to sign. “Give this to your coach. You’re good to continue playing.”

He takes it from me as he slips his jersey back on. “You should write down your number.” I glance up at him, and he’s cute, but he’s also the enemy, so I don’t think about it twice.

Walking over to the entrance of the tent, I open one side for him. “I shouldn’t. You should get back to the game, though. My school’s whooping your ass out there.” I deliberately add that I attend the other school, and he picks up on it and leaves without another word.

Jen and I see four more players, all from the opposing team, and I’m starting to think our guys are intentionally injuring them. I have no idea what the rivalry between us is about. I doubt they know either, but they make their hatred for each other very clear every chance they get, so a fight is bound to happen before either team leaves this campus.

The game ends, and we win nine to zero. Since it isn’t our school, Jen and I don’t have to pack anything up, so I leave the tent the way it is and text Sire that I’m heading to the bathroom.

I ask someone for directions, but I think I take one too many left turns, and now I’m lost. Not wanting to be stuck in this place, I decide to just use the bathroom once I get home and head back the way I came.

Just as I grab the door to the exit, someone pulls it open, pulling me along, and I bump right into them. Before I can stumble back, their arm comes around me. “Careful there, sweetheart.” At the glance of the opposing team colors on his jersey, I take a step back because UC Davis men are known to be pigs.

“Thanks,” I say for not letting me fall on my ass, but when I try to take a step around him, he gets in my way.

“You look lost. Where you heading?” I look up at him and realize he’s the one who asked for my number in the tent earlier. Before I can respond, one of his teammates makes his way to us from behind him.

“Leave her alone, Cole.” A smile grows on Cole’s face, but he doesn’t look like he plans on leaving me alone, and I feel my hands ball at my side.

“You’re my captain on the field, not out here, Liam.” Liam chuckles from behind him, but his face alone tells me

everyone listens to him whether they're on the field or not. I look at Cole, and when I try to leave, he gets in my way again.

"Fuck off, Cole. She's Griffin's girl, and I don't feel like kicking his ass for you again." How do they know I'm "his girl"? At the last part of his sentence, I look back over at Liam, and I realize he and Sire fought at the beginning of the semester, but he didn't beat Sire's ass. I watched the video, and if anything, it was a tie, but if there needed to be a winner, it wasn't him.

"I don't give a shit about Griffin."

"You should."

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding at the sound of Sire's voice. "Let her pass." His words are ice, sending a chill down my spine. Liam is between Sire and the asshole in front of me, so he needs to go through both of them to get to me, and although Liam was on my side a few seconds ago, I'm not sure anymore.

"Get your mut, Walker." Sire is talking to Liam now, and I know it's his last name since it's also on his jersey.

"Come on, Griffin. Let us borrow her, man. Sharing is caring," Cole says, his eyes still on me like I'm a piece of meat. Ugh, they're so disgusting.

"Well, I don't fucking care. I also don't share what's mine, so fuck off. I'm not gonna repeat myself." Sire doesn't look at me once as he challenges both of them.

"Let her pass, Cole." Liam finally speaks up, keeping his eyes on Sire. The asshole lets out a disappointed sigh and then moves over just a bit, forcing me to squeeze past him, but I push my way past instead.

Just as I do, I'm shown he doesn't like being pushed as he grabs my arm and pulls me back to him. "Someone should teach you some manners."

"Get the fuck off of me." I pull my arm away, but his grip tightens, and in a flash, Sire passes Liam and is in front of us.

He grabs the arm that Cole is holding me with. “If you want to keep playing ball, I suggest you let go before I break your fucking arm.” He winces. I’m assuming Sire is tightening his grip as Cole loosens on me, but his ego doesn’t let him let go.

“Don’t be an idiot, Cole. Get off of her,” Liam speaks up again, and I’m surprised he’s even on our side. Cole finally lets me go, and Sire pushes him into the door behind him, and when Cole takes a step toward him, he pushes him again, harder.

“You’re outnumbered and on our territory. You can’t be that dumb, Griffin,” Cole says but doesn’t step forward again. Given that Liam hasn’t said much to defend him, I don’t think Sire is very outnumbered.

“Let’s even the playing field then.” Sire keeps his eyes on him, but I turn my head at the sound of August’s voice and spot him making his way toward us. He nods for me to leave, but I’m not going anywhere.

August stands beside Sire, and Cole looks over at Liam for help, which he doesn’t get. “With the way you’re acting, you may as well transfer to their school.” UC Faye is an HBCU, so I doubt Liam will be transferring anytime soon, but I don’t say anything and let the scene play out in front of me.

“You know I’m not cool with messing with girls. When are you going to get that through your head?” Liam crosses his arms and shakes his head like he’s had this conversation with him before, which is pathetic.

“It’s fun.” Cole shrugs and looks over at me, but Sire takes a step to the side, blocking his view of me.

“Go to the car, Vidia.” I don’t make a move to leave, but with Sire’s back to me, he doesn’t know that. “You’re gonna wish you never looked her way.” I watch as Sire’s fist ball at his side, and he takes a step forward, but Liam stops him.

“Your girl’s watching, Griffin,” he says more daringly, like he wants to see if Sire will beat up his teammate in front of me. I wait for something to happen, but nothing does.

I watch as Sire takes in a breath and then turns to the side, just a bit though, so Cole has to squeeze past him, and he does, not daring to push his way past like I did.

“I’ll catch you another time, hot stuff,” he says as he backs away into the school.

I roll my eyes at him. “Shut the fuck up, pussy.” Cole looks at me but keeps walking at whatever look Sire gives him, and August lets out a laugh.

Sire and August stand their ground as they turn to Liam, who only chuckles at them, not a care in the world. “You should keep a closer eye on your girl when she’s on our turf.” He says it like he’s joking and just wants to piss off Sire, and it seems to be working.

“In case you haven’t noticed, she can walk on anyone’s turf untouched. Rival school or not.”

Liam smirks and looks between Sire and me. “In case you haven’t noticed, that wouldn’t have ended pretty if I wasn’t here. You should be thanking me, Griffin.” His voice is teasing again, and now it’s clear he only wants to mess with Sire. I know our schools hate each other, but something between them tells me their dislike for each other is personal.

Sire turns his head to the side a bit, and I can’t see his face with his back to me, but I can tell he’s smirking at him. “It wouldn’t have been pretty for *your* friend, so as I said, keep your mutts in line.”

Liam rolls his eyes, his playful expression gone. “Leave before I change my mind about not making a show in front of your girl.” What is up with him calling me Sire’s girl? Liam takes a step forward, his patience clearly gone. Sire stays in place, but August takes a step forward instead, and a smirk grows on Liam’s face before he slowly turns to August.

“What happened to keeping the playing field leveled, Hale?” Liam refers to what August said when he showed up, and August chuckles in response.

“That was when your sorry excuse of a pitcher was thinking of jumping my brother.” Liam rolls his eyes. “Now it’s either

you let Sire beat your ass, or you get jumped.”

They size each other up, and I can't tell if Liam is putting up a front or if he genuinely doesn't give a fuck. “You guys never did play by the rules.” My brows furrow at his words.

“When it comes to him, there are no rules,” August says. Liam rolls his eyes and walks back into the school, unfazed as ever.

August turns around first and looks down at me. “You good, V?” I tell him I'm fine, and Sire grabs my hand, dragging me to his car.

He speaks up as soon as his door closes, his foul mood from a second ago still present. “When I say go to the car, I expect you to fucking do so.” He *expects* me?

“Who do you think you are? Don't talk to me like I'm a child.”

“A child can follow instructions better than you. Dammit, Vidia. They could've done something to you. Cole is known for fucking with girls.” I lean in my seat as I think of the possibilities had Sire not shown up.

“That Cole guy is clearly all talk, and Liam was defending me far before you showed up.” He shakes his head and lets out a breath as he pulls his hat off and runs his fingers through his hair.

“Liam is not to be trusted,” he says more to himself.

“What's up with you two?” Their beef is clearly personal. He rolls his eyes, and after a few seconds of silence, he pushes the button that starts his car, but I press it again to turn it off. “Seriously, what's your problem? Because if you're going to be rude the rest of the drive, I'll gladly catch a ride with someone else.”

He doesn't even acknowledge me as he starts his car again. I am not about to deal with him, so I storm out of his car before he can drive off. I hear him getting out as I go in search of Jen's car, remembering she offered me a drive back to campus.

“Get in the car, Vidia.”

I ignore him as he did to me and text Jen that I'll take her up on her offer. She replies immediately, and I climb into her car as she pulls up beside me, refusing to deal with his shit.



I THROW MY HEAD BACK, drinking another shot. “Omg! I love your outfit, V.” I look down at my pastel blue two-piece and pull my skirt down a bit.

“Thanks, Sage.” After a lot of convincing, I decided to still come to the twins’ party even though Sire and I haven’t spoken since this morning in the parking lot.

I pull Sage in for a hug and wish her a happy birthday. “It’s actually only August’s birthday today.” How? They’re twins?

Sage smiles as if she read my mind and answers my unspoken question. “I was stubborn as always and popped out five minutes after twelve, so—”

“So her birthday is actually tomorrow.” Hmm, I’ve never met twins with separate birthdays. Well, I’ve never met twins at all, but still. I turn around at who just finished her sentence, and a very pretty blonde walks up to Sage and hugs her as Sage squeals.

I watch them for a beat, and I can’t get myself to look away from their eyes. Sage’s are emerald as ever, but the blonde next to her has these blue eyes that rival the damn sky on a clear morning.

My eyes aren’t dark brown; they’re lighter, more of honey or bourbon, but damn would I want to have blue or green eyes right now. Sage looks back over at me and lights up like she remembers something.

“Oh, V, this our sister Lisette, who Sire favors.”

Lisette laughs and nudges Sage. “Please, okay, how many times do we have to tell you that those two short years don’t have shit on you? You guys adopted him, for fuck’s sake, Sage.” I laugh at them, picking on some sort of inside joke.

Lisette looks over at me, and I give her a small smile. “Don’t tell Sire since he’ll suffocate me in my sleep, but he talks a lot about you.” She winks at me, and I feel my entire body heat.

“I bet he does.” Hazel walks in, and Sage reintroduces Lisette. Hazel hands Sage a gift, and when I tell her about the twins’ separate birthdays, she doesn’t believe me.

Sage takes a sip from her water bottle while nodding. “Yup, he was born today, May tenth, and I’m on the eleventh. I’m actually so glad for the separate birthdays. Double the parties.” We all start laughing. I don’t know why, but I really like that I’m getting along with Sire’s sisters. Even if he’s been an ass today.

“Well, happy early birthday. I love your dress, by the way.” Sage starts talking about how it belongs to some celebrity. She’s an influencer or model, both, I think, but she apparently has a huge dress collection that I’m sort of dying to see.

When I see Sire from across the room, I roll my eyes but immediately wish I didn’t when Lisette notices. “He being an ass?” I nod. No point in hiding it now. Lisette reaches behind her for the fruit bowl on the counter and grabs an apple.

Without warning, she beams it at Sire, but to no one’s surprise, he catches it. He looks in our direction, and when he notices it was his sister who threw it, he looks back down at the apple in his hand before they both burst into a laugh, literally hysterical, and I’m certain there’s definitely an inside joke here.

I turn around, but once their laugh sobers, Sire makes his way into the kitchen, so I start to make my way out. Just as I pass him, he snakes his arm around me and leans me against the wall. Before I can get out of his arms, he puts his hand near my head, caging me in. “Were you planning on avoiding me the entire night?”

Well, this is his house, so I was expecting to bump into him sooner or later, but *me* avoiding *him*? He didn’t say anything to me when I first walked in, so I assumed he was still mad for whatever reason.

I fold my arms across my chest and look into the living room, ignoring him. “The silent treatment. Cute.” I look over at him, and my breath gets caught in my throat. I was *not* expecting him to be this close. Gazing between his eyes, the bit of green in them pops more with the matching green shirt he’s wearing.

A rush of heat runs down my spine as he rubs my bare skin on my side. “You look really good in blue.” I watch him as his eyes cast down to my lips. It is getting way too hot in here.

I put a hand on his chest to move him, but I never push away. I don’t think I want to. “I’m still mad at you, so move.” With the way my voice came out, I definitely don’t sound like I’m still mad, but I am. He was so rude to me earlier for no reason.

His eyes sweep down the rest of my figure, then back up to my eyes. “I’m still mad at you, too, but we can go to my room and make up right now if you want.” Is he implying we—

He pulls my hips closer to him so that we rub against each other. He’s totally implying what I thought he was. “No, thanks. I’m good with us fighting a bit longer.” I push him aside and walk away. We’re not a couple. Makeup sex is not needed.



“SHE WAS DEFINITELY FLIRTING WITH you,” I tell Hazel, and she rolls her eyes. Everyone left the party a while ago, so it’s just us, Sire, and his siblings here talking shit. I hop up on the counter as Hazel responds.

“Well, even if she was, too bad for her. She was a shitty girlfriend, so there’s no way I’m taking her back. Plus, I—” She cuts herself off when August comes stumbling into the kitchen, clearly drunk.

He leans against the fridge and then turns his head, keeping his eyes trained on Hazel. “You’re into girls?”

Hazel nods her head. “And guys.” I’m sure August knew that already. I smile proudly at Hazel, though. She’s never hid

the fact that she's bi, and I love that about her.

A smile also grows on August's face. "Are you more into one or..." He trails off, and I look over at Hazel, expecting her to blush at his flirty tone, but she surprisingly doesn't.

"Definitely more into guys," she says confidently.

"Mentirosa," I say under my breath. Hazel looks over at me from the corner of her eye but doesn't respond. She's been with way more girls than guys, but I guess she's really into August.

"Nice to know," August replies. I don't say anything and just look away because they're giving each other fuck me eyes. Before it starts to get too awkward, Sage walks in with two plates of cake as she kicks off her heels.

I can't believe she kept those on the entire night. She goes to hand Lisette one, but she's sleeping against the table, so she puts it in front of her and hands me the other one. I thank her while taking a spoonful.

"You guys are staying over, right?" I shake my head, and I rest my head back on the cabinet as Sire walks in.

"Yes, you are." God, he is so demanding today.

I pull my phone out from my bra and look at the time. 4:56 am. Shit. It was just one like twenty minutes ago. "Well, Lis and I can take the couch, and the couples can share the rooms." I go still, and we all stare at Sage.

She looks between the four of us and then shrugs. "What?"

"We're not dating," I say, and Sire looks at me, but I can't tell why. He holds my gaze, and he looks annoyed by what I said, but he doesn't comment on it. Instead, he walks over to Lisette, who's still sleeping at the table, and picks her up like she weighs nothing and literally drops her onto the couch.

She wakes up and swings her hand back, punching him in the stomach. I laugh as they hit each other a few more times, but I feel my head starting to hurt, so I pull my hair tie off, letting my hair loose, then hop off the counter and grab my water bottle.

“Okay, well, then the boys can share a room, and Hazel and V can share another. Either way, I call the couch.” The couch *is* really comfortable. Damn, I should have called it.

Walking out of the kitchen, I trip over one of Sage’s heels, and an arm loops around my hip to steady me. When I look up, my eyes lock with Sire’s. “Come on.” Too tired to argue, I follow him into his room and fall on my back onto his bed.

“Wow. Your bed is a lot more comfortable than the couch.” I think for a second, then add, “Why don’t we ever nap in here?”

I hear his dresser opening, and then clothes fall on my face. “Because you never want to sleep in here.” True, but that’s because taking naps in his bed seems much more intimate than on the couch. Don’t question my logic. It makes sense.

I move his shirt from my face so he can hear me as I talk. “Since I’m super tired, we can finish arguing tomorrow.” I’m looking up at his ceiling when I hear him reply.

“I don’t want to argue tomorrow.”

“Well, I don’t want to argue right now, so apologize, or you can sleep on the couch with your sisters.” When I hear him laughing, I lean on my elbows so he can see my face. Once he does, his laugh is cut short.

“I’m sorry.” That’s it? I give him a look, and he turns more sincere. “I really am sorry, Vid. I shouldn’t have spoken to you like that. I was just worried, but I won’t do it again.” I roll my eyes, and he lets out a sigh in defeat.

“Vid...”

I look back over at him again and everything in me is telling me not to bring this up. Not to talk about it, but I’m genuinely exhausted, and I don’t want this fight to drag out. Most of all, I need him to understand this.

“Don’t ever tell me what to do then say you *expect* me to listen. It’s controlling as fuck, and I refuse to deal with that. Not after I had to grow up seeing my dad control when my mom did the simplest shit. I won’t tolerate that, Sire.”

He immediately closes the distance and kneels in front of me so we're at eye level. "I didn't mean it in a controlling way, but I'm sorry that I made it come out that way. I heard so much fucked up shit the UC Davis guys do and—" He shakes his head. "I would never control anything in your life, Vid."

I only give him a nod, and he leans forward to kiss my forehead. "It won't happen again," he whispers against my hair.

"Promise?"

He pulls away and holds out his pinky. "Promise." I intertwine my pinky in his, and then we both kiss our thumbs and press them together, locking in the promise.

I sit up against the headboard of the bed, and Sire lays on his stomach next to me. He leans up on his elbow, moving to slowly trace my ribs. "Serenity." I look down to where he's rubbing on my red tattoo.

My eyes fall on the tattoo on his arm, and I spot the same word. *Serenity*. I reach over and trace over the other two words he has in a narcotics sobriety symbol: *Courage and Wisdom*.

"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. Courage to change the things I can." He joins me on the last line, "And the wisdom to know the difference." Our eyes lock, and we give each other a smile that doesn't reach either of our eyes.

He's still running his thumb along my tattoo when he asks when I got it. "Hazel's eighteenth birthday, we went to get it together. We've always wanted matching tattoos, and this was the perfect one to get." I feel a weight settle in my chest at the memory.

I slouch down in the bed so we're at eye level with one another. He turns to me and studies my face. "Does it have the same meaning as mine?" His tattoo is the serenity prayer we just recited; he's asking if it has to do with addiction.

"In a way, yes. It has a double meaning to it." He waits for me to explain, and I think for a second if I should tell him the meaning. "That was her name, Serenity."

He looks between my eyes, trying to figure something out. “Was?”

I let out a soft sigh. I never know what to say or do when people pick up on the use of past tense when I talk about her. I usually settle for the simple, *she passed away*, but something about lying here with Sire makes me want to share more.

I take a deep breath before continuing, “She overdosed. The three of us were inseparable, Serenity, Hazel, and I. Until death parted us,” I add quietly. “Seventeen years old and... She overdosed on heroin.” Everyone always says trios never work, and I get it now.

He gives me a soft look and then wraps his arm around me, pulling me closer. I look past him, not wanting to meet his eyes as I continue, “I was the one that found her. She was so pale, just laying there in a pool of her own vomit, and her eyes... God, her eyes.”

I choke up a bit at the memory. “The spark that was usually there was just gone. Nothing in them. She was staring at me, and she looked like herself but wasn’t.” A shiver runs down my spine as I recall how cold her eyes looked, how cold she felt.

I feel his warm fingers wipe the tears from my cheek. “I tried to save her. I swear I did. I kept pushing down on her chest, but I didn’t know how to perform CPR.” I hear my voice crack, and I swallow the lump in my throat as the words keep spitting out. “I would’ve... I would’ve known if I hadn’t skipped my first aid class all the time.”

Sire pulls my chin so my eyes will meet his, “You can’t blame yourself for that.” I do, though.

“I shouldn’t have skipped that class. She always told me it was an important class, but I didn’t listen. Why would I ever need to know how to perform CPR? That’s what I always told her. It’s my fault she’s gone. I—”

He gives my chin a firm squeeze. “Don’t say that. It wasn’t your fault, do you hear me?”

I move my chin from his grasp. “It was, Sire.”

“It wasn’t, Vidia. She was already gone. You’re in pre-med—you know that unless you had naloxone to reverse the overdose, you couldn’t have saved her whether you knew CPR or not, so say it. It wasn’t your fault.”

I feel a few more tears trickle down my cheek as I repeat after him. “It wasn’t my fault.” *It wasn’t*. A few minutes go by, and we sit in a comfortable silence. I put one hand under the pillow and run the other along his ribs, where his tattoo of the eagle is holding the person. Now that I’m this close, I can see it looks like a small child in its talons.

“Does it mean anything?” He takes a while to respond, so I look up at him to check if he fell asleep, but he hasn’t; he’s staring down at me.

He has one hand under his head and is rubbing my temple with the other. I wonder if he can feel it throbbing. “She tried to kill me.” I go still, and I feel my eyebrows crease. Who tried to kill him?

He closes his eyes, and I think he’s going to sleep, but then he opens them and explains his previous statement. “My psychotic ass bio mom tried killing me, and I dream about it every damn night.” I tense at his raw confession. So *that’s* what his nightmares are about. He says it like he is trying the words on his tongue. Is this his first time saying it out loud?

He keeps his eyes on mine, and he looks like he’s using them to keep him grounded. “She told me we were going for a drive. We were home a lot, so I loved car rides.” I keep my eyes locked on him as he continues. “She kept swerving the entire time, and I didn’t know it then since I was only eight, but she was high as a damn kite like always.” Like always? She must’ve been an addict too.

“She started speeding, and I put my window down to feel the cool air on my face, only I didn’t feel the cool air. I felt freezing cold water instead. When I looked over to the driver seat, she wasn’t there anymore.” My brows furrow, but then my breath is caught in my throat at his next sentence.

“That bitch drove into a lake and jumped out before we even hit the water.” I look between his eyes in disbelief. What kind

of mother would even think to do that to their own child?

Sire is still holding my gaze, but his mind is somewhere else, and there's a resentment in them as he recalls his horrid memory. "The water was filling the car so damn fast. I couldn't see much, and my seatbelt was stuck. I just kept calling for her because what kid wouldn't call for their mom when they're about to drown?"

I feel the back of my eyes sting, but I quickly blink my tears away. I want him to finish telling me, and he's looking at me like he's about to lose it. One of us needs to stay strong, and it doesn't need to be him right now.

"By some miracle, the seatbelt finally gave out, but the car was already completely filled with water. I pulled myself out from the window and tried swimming up, but it felt like I was being dragged under."

His eyes begin to water, but he quickly closes them and rests his forehead on mine. "I kept looking up to the surface. It looked so fucking far, Vid." He sounds like he's in actual pain, and I just want to take all of it away. The pain, the memory. Everything.

"I started panicking, and I let out a scream, but no one could hear you when you're being pulled to the bottom of a lake." I feel a tear fall on my cheek, but it isn't mine. I remember his panic attack in the aquarium, and it makes so much sense now. Sage was right—he does have PTSD.

Reaching up to his cheek, I wipe his tears as he opens his eyes, holding my hand as if he'll lose me forever if he lets go. "The doctors say I was hallucinating due to the lack of air, and maybe I was, but I saw a huge bird under there with me. It pulled me to the surface."

"It was your guardian angel."

He gives me the saddest smile ever. "It was Halloween night. The twins and our mom rushed to the hospital when they heard what happened. As soon as I saw her, I broke down crying." His voice breaks, and I give him a minute. "She was wearing an eagle costume."

My tears finally seep through as he goes on, “I kept thanking her for saving me, but she was an hour away when it happened, so I don’t know, maybe it was all in my head, but that’s the meaning behind my tattoo.”

We wipe each other’s tears, and I look down at his tattoo one more time and trace the eagle pulling the little boy from out the water. In a way, she did save him, whether she was there or not.

Sire lightly pulls my chin up so our eyes meet, and I get lost in the way he’s looking at me. Like my eyes are windows to an entirely different universe, and I feel like time is freezing.

His eyes dart down to my mouth, and he brushes my bottom lip with his thumb, “Can I?” He doesn’t sound like he’s in pain anymore, but I still want to take it all away.

I give him a small smile while nodding as he leans into me. Our lips connect like two puzzle pieces perfectly. In this moment, with our mouths moving in perfect sync, all the pain from the dark meaning of our tattoos floats away.

Chapter Nine

VIDIA

Four Years Earlier

YOU'RE WITH YOUR *BOYFRIEND*," SIRE corrects me, but I don't give him a reaction and finish off my phone call. As soon as I hang up, he turns to me like he's waiting for me to explain something to him. "Why'd you say you're studying with a friend?" He sounds so offended, and I let out a sigh.

"Because we're studying?"

"Well I'm not one of your little friends, so stop saying that shit."

I hold back a laugh at how pressed he is. "You sound like my mother."

"You mean the mom who thinks I'm your boyfriend?" He heard Mami call him my "not boyfriend" and won't let go of the fact that she knows we're dating, so I may as well call him my boyfriend, his words, not mine.

"I already told her we're just—" Did he just throw a damn pillow at me? I throw it back, but he catches it without even looking up. Stupid reflexes.

“Vid, we kissed. Your lips touched mine—you’re mine.” His? I don’t think so. It was one kiss anyway... One really good kiss, but that’s all it was, and it could be more, but he’s still stuck on us being official first.

I look back down at my computer, but I feel him watching me. I wait for a few beats because I know he’s going to say something any second now.

“Have I ever made you feel unsafe?”

I’m confused for a quick second until I realize where this is going. “No.” My eyes cut from his, and I close my computer and start to pack my things. “I should start heading home.”

“We’re in the middle of a conversation, Vidia.” We’re more so at the start of one, but I don’t want to talk about this with him. I go to grab my bag, but he gets it before I can and puts it on the other side of him. “We’re talking,” he says a bit more sternly, and I let out a sigh before sitting back in my seat, but I face forward instead of facing him.

“Maybe you don’t want to admit it to yourself yet, or maybe you don’t even know it, but it’s obvious you don’t want a relationship because you’re scared of getting hurt. Whether that be emotionally or physically.” I keep my eyes down on my hands as I play with my fingers.

He’s wrong about both of those things. I already knew that, and I already admitted it to myself. I’m fine with not dating until I get over this stupid fear of ending up like my parents. Whether that be when I’m twenty-five or later.

I feel the couch dip as Sire scooches closer to me, but I don’t look over at him. He places his hand over mine, stopping me from spinning my matching best friend ring Hazel got us a few years ago.

Slowly, he moves his hand to my chin and lightly grips it before turning my head so I’m looking at him. “I said it once and I’ll say it a million more times. I wouldn’t hurt you, Vid.”

I move my head to the side so I’m out of his grasp. “I know that, Sire.” I don’t know what he looks like when he’s mad; sure, we had that stupid fight at UC Davis last week, but I’m

sure he can get angrier than that. Either way, I really don't think he'll put his hands on me. It's not about him but more so about me.

"I don't want to date you." He looks offended at first, but then I blink, and he narrows his eyes as he studies me.

"You and I both know you want me, Vidia. Just admit it." I shake my head at how cocky he sounds. I lean over him for my bag, but then his hands are on my waist, and he pulls me on top of him.

"What are you doing?" I look down at his hands on my hips, then back up at him, and he's just staring at me like he's trying to figure out what he wants to do.

"So you don't want to date?" I let out a sigh, and I guess that's enough of an answer for him since he goes on. "But you're down for us messing around?"

I'm confused, and I'm sure my face shows it. He said it himself: he doesn't want to do that unless we're official or whatever. I study him for a beat before nodding.

He nods once, then his eyes travel down my body, and I feel each part of my skin that his eyes land on heat, like lasers are coming out of his eyes. He grabs my waist a bit tighter as he slides down in his seat and spreads his legs more so I'm sitting on him better. I feel my breath caught in my throat as I watch him watch me.

"So what does messing around entail?" he asks but doesn't give me a chance to answer as he leans forward a bit. "I'd get to kiss you?"

He leans closer, and I give him a weak nod. "I'd get to touch you?" When I nod again, he snakes a hand in my shirt as the other travels down to my ass. A shiver passes over me at his touch.

"And we'd sleep together?" I go still for a beat and look between his eyes. He's looking at me the same way he was in the car the other day. Like he's a starved man, and I'm the only thing he wants to taste.

“We already sleep together,” I say breathlessly, referring to our naps, but only because I want to hear how it sounds when he says what he means. A smirk grows on his face, and his eyes cut to my lips before meeting my eyes again.

“Us messing around means I’d fuck you.” A gasp escapes my lips, and his smirk grows. “Right?”

I lick my lips before nodding and leaning in to close the distance between us, but just as my lips graze his, he leans back a bit.

“Would we still go on our dates?”

I pull away to look at him. “They’re not dates.”

“Right.” He nods. “I mean, we’d hang out at the aquarium or the movies, mini golf, maybe even go on picnics.” He lists all the things we’ve done these past few weeks, all besides picnics.

When I nod again, he nods slowly and then leans back in so our faces are inches apart. I let out another soft sigh as his hand cups my ass, and he moves me, so I grind against him. “Move your hair for me, my love.” His voice is low and soft, and God, he sounds so good saying that.

I turn my head to the side and move my curls, giving him access to my neck. I’m still grinding against him as he leans into my neck. He rubs his nose against me first, and a shiver runs down my spine at the contact.

Slowly, he leaves a path of kisses, pausing a few times to suck lightly as he makes his way to my ear. “Those are all things you do when you date someone,” he whispers. In a quick move, he pushes me off of him and onto my ass, where I was sitting a few minutes ago. What the fuck?

“You can leave.” My jaw drops. No way he just said that. He looks over at me with a bored expression. “You just said you don’t want to date me, and all of those things are what you do when you date someone, so you can’t get a kiss, and I won’t be touching you or fucking you, and we definitely won’t be hanging out in any setting that couples go to.” *What the hell is this?*

“You can say goodbye to our naps, too. With the way you be all up on me, it isn’t very friendly.” *He’s* the one who wants to nap with *me!*?

I turn my head, confused. “Fine.”

He shrugs his shoulders and starts typing on his iPad. Whatever. I lean over him for my bag again, but he pushes me back. “Please don’t try to flirt with me. We’re just friends.”

I break into a laugh, and my jaw drops again. He’s being ridiculous. “I wasn’t flirting with you. I was getting my—”

He pulls my bag over and plants it in front of me. Oh, he is being so dramatic right now. I roll my eyes at him and grab the last of my things before standing from the couch. When he doesn’t get up after me, I turn to him, but he’s writing something from his textbook into his iPad.

“I’m ready to go?”

“Bye.” *What?!*

“Um... can you walk me to my car? You know... like you always do?”

“I don’t walk my other friends who are girls to their car.” What other friends who are girls? He’s very popular but only ever hangs out with his baseball team or me.

“Well, that’s a rude hypothetical, but you don’t have any other friends who are girls.”

“It isn’t a hypothetical. I have quite a few girl friends, actually, but you’re not my *girlfriend*, so you don’t need to worry about them.” Asshole. He’s full of shit. I stand in front of him and wait for him to get up, but he doesn’t.

“Whatever. Get up so you can at least walk me to the door.” He doesn’t move a muscle. “It’s rude not to walk people out of your home, Sire.” He better at least give me a damn hug.

August walks into the living room, and Sire turns to him. “Brother, be a lad and show our guest out. Will you?” *What?* August looks at him with a mix of confusion and disgust.

“What type of weird role-play is going on here?” What?! Ignoring him, I turn back to the child on the couch.

“You are being very petty and dramatic right now.”

He throws his iPad aside and crosses his arms on his chest. “Do not invalidate my feelings, Vidia.” Vidia? What happened to Vid?

“Oh, please, okay. Just get up so you can walk me to my car. I have places to be.”

“So go be there.” Am I the one being dramatic here? Is he... What is he doing? He always walks me out, and he doesn't even seem like he's actually mad.

“Sire, why are you being rude to her?!” August says like he's in complete shock and this is the most absurd thing ever, and that's because it is.

“Yeah, Sire, why are you being rude to me?”

“Don't bring him into this.” He shakes his head warningly, but it's because he knows August won't quit bothering him once he's involved. He's persistent.

“You can bring me in all you need, V.” August sounds so hopeful to be of help, and I crack a smile, although Sire and I are still holding each other's gaze.

“Forget him. I'll walk you to your car.” August comes up beside me and nudges my arms. I hold eye contact with Sire for a few more beats as I wait for his jealous ass to object.

“She's a big girl. She can walk herself to her car.” Wow. Okay.

“Thanks, August.” I leave their apartment without another word, and he lets me as August walks me to my car.



“HE DIDN'T EVEN GIVE YOU a hug?”

“Not even a fucking hug.” I still can't believe Sire was such a dick last night. He didn't even text or call to make sure I got

home safe. Hazel told me that August texted her asking if I got here okay, but it's obvious Sire told him to text her.

I told her to tell him I never made it home, but that's apparently "manipulative," according to both Hazel and her mom, so whatever.

I take a spoonful of my cereal as I watch Hazel cut her fruit. "I'm sorry, V, but honestly, what did you expect?" I expected him to act like an adult when I rejected him. I roll my eyes at her for being on his side.

"Don't give me that look, and don't make this about sides because you know I'll choose you even when you're wrong." That's true, but whatever. She shouldn't defend him.

"I didn't expect him to treat me like I'm a piece of gum under his shoe." Okay, maybe that was a stretch. She picks up her bowl and takes a seat next to me at the kitchen counter.

"He wants to make it official, and I don't see why you don't. You guys are practically dating."

"We're not *dating*." I drop my spoon in the bowl, and a bit of milk splashes.

"That sounded defensive, and the hickey on your neck says otherwise," Hazel mumbles from beside me, and I let out a sigh before getting up to put my bowl in the sink and move my hair to cover my neck. I didn't think he left a mark, but after I got out of the shower yesterday, I noticed he did.

He knew what he was doing when he left behind this hickey. He wanted to leave me a reminder of what I can have and more. I'm not going to lie... It worked. I was thinking about him all night, and I was hot and bothered, but I refuse to fold first.

I finish washing my dishes and make my way to the living room. "Ugh, I need to get laid." I get turned on all over again whenever I think about the stunt he pulled because his stupid game was hot, but he isn't going to win. I fall onto the couch, and my phone lands right next to me. No one is calling, so I look at Hazel to see why she threw it.

She's looking at me with a smirk and raised eyebrows. "I'm sure someone will be glad to assist you." If she was there last night, she would know that he wouldn't. He is stubborn as fuck and it's annoying.

I roll my eyes and scroll through my phone; he hasn't texted me all day. We're not dating, so I don't care, but as a friend, I was expecting at least a "wyd" text.

"Screw him."

"Yeah, isn't that what you want to do?" I look over my phone at her, and she quickly turns around, hiding a laugh. "Get ready, we're going out."

"Where?" Please say there's a party. She walks out of the living room, saying exactly what I was hoping for, and I hop off the couch to search for the sluttiest outfit I have.



"YOU LOOK LIKE A WHORE."

I smile in response and kiss Nyssa on the cheek. "Thanks, babe."

Nyssa is one of those friends we only hang out with in party settings. She's cool outside this setting, sure—we just don't have enough in common with her to chill whenever drinking isn't involved.

I'm our driver tonight, so Hazel and Nyssa take their shots. Hazel takes an extra one for me since I'm not drinking. "Poker Face" starts playing, and Nyssa grabs both of our hands, dragging us to the dance floor.

The three of us dance in a circle, feeling the beat on the floor beneath our feet while singing the lyrics to each other. I feel hands around my waist, and a smile grows on my face as I turn around. I wasn't expecting a certain someone, but my smile doesn't falter when I see it's Jayden, the basketball captain. *Perfect.*

I snake my hands up his chest and around his neck as I keep my hips swaying to the music. He pulls me in closer, and I feel

the side of my face burning. I know who's shooting lasers at me, but I turn anyway, and my eyes lock with a *very* angry Sire.

I turn my head back, and since I know he's still watching, I give a bit of a show. I inch my face so close to Jayden's that I'm sure from where he's standing, it looks like we're kissing.

I place my hands over his and guide them up and down my hips. The beat drops again, and I turn around so my back is against his front, and low and behold, Sire is still watching.

I'm still swaying to the music while Jayden bends down so his head is in the crease of my neck with his hands still on my waist. I run my hands through his hair as my eyes lock on Sire's again.

He watches us carefully, and when I see his leg shaking, I send him a wink. He looks like he chuckles but at his own joke. Slowly, his eyes travel down to where another man's hands are inching toward my thighs.

When Jayden grinds himself against my ass, a fire grows in Sire's eyes, and he makes a beeline for us. I feel my heart skip a beat and quickly move off of Jayden, practically running away from him.

When I reach Hazel, I grab her hands as we dance, but then I feel another pair of hands around me, and these feel way more familiar. I give Hazel a look for help, but she lets go of my hands anyway. *Traitor.*

Sire quickly turns me around, and let's just say he's looked happier than right now. I go on my tippy toes so he can hear me say, "Hello, my dear *friend*, how are you?"

When I come back down, I stay close to his face, and we hold eye contact for a bit, waiting for the other to make a move. He pulls away first and grabs my hand, pulling me into the kitchen, where it's a lot quieter.

I get a rush of *déjà vu* from being in here with him again. "Remember the last time we were in here?"

He slowly nods his head. "Body shots."

I give him a smile, and he does not return it. “Want to recreate the scene?” I know I’m our driver tonight, but I will gladly put us all in a forty-dollar cab to take one body shot with him.

He shakes his head like a loser, and I give him a teasing shrug. “Boringgg.” When I look over at him, he’s staring at me. More so my revealing outfit.

I give him a smirk while saying, “It isn’t polite to stare, Gryffindor.”

He gives my body a slow sweep, and I feel my entire soul catch fire. “Careful, Vidia, if you wore just a bit more clothing, you’d actually be covering something.”

I smile at his comment, then hop on top of the island counter. Just as I do, he takes a step forward and puts his arms on the side of the counter, caging me in while he leans in. Very closely.

“Do yourself a favor and stop shaking your ass on everyone’s dick.”

I break into a laugh, not only at his words but at how mad he sounds. Jealous even. That’s not very friendly. I look between his eyes, and I sense he doesn’t have the patience for me tonight, so I decide to test how long his patience takes to run thin.

“I didn’t know Jayden was everyone.” He gives me a bored look, and my smile grows. “Is it because he’s a basketball player? I’ll find a baseball player’s dick to shake my ass on.”

I try to hop off the counter, but he somehow leans even closer. “You’re looking at one.”

I bite back a smile. “That wouldn’t be *friendly*.”

His jaw clenches, and it takes everything in me not to laugh at him. “Don’t make me ruin this party with a fight, Vidia.”

I look between his eyes and then lean back a bit. “Violence is never the answer, Sire,” I tease, but he doesn’t even crack a smile. Tough crowd.

“It is when you’re letting guys touch you like that.”

“So girls are fair game?” I bite back a smile when he lets out an annoyed breath.

“Only *I’m* fair game.”

I want to remind him, once again, that isn’t friendly, but with the way he watches me, I can only seem to nod slowly and wait for his next move. His eyes cut down to my skirt, and he turns his head to the side to get a better look.

My skirt is laced on both sides, and I’m sure he’s trying to figure out if I’m wearing underwear or not. I am; they have clear straps, but with the way he’s looking at me, I know he doesn’t know that.

“You’re not looking at me very friendly right now, Sire.” His eyes dart up to mine, and when he clenches his jaw, I bite back a smile.

“Neither are you, my love.” A warm feeling bubbles in the pit of my stomach at his nickname for me. *His* love. He called me that last night, too, and I’m still trying to get used to it.

I feel a smirk grow on my face as I look between his eyes but go completely still as he leans all the way in until our lips are inches apart. What is he doing? We’re so close it wouldn’t take much effort for me to close the distance; all I have to do is move my head forward a *tiny* bit.

“My eyes are up here, Vidia.” *But your lips are down here, Sire.* He grabs my chin and tilts my head up to meet his eyes but leans back just a bit so our lips don’t meet. Jerk.

“What are you thinking about, Vidia?” My eyes flick back to his lips. *I’m thinking about you, how your lips will feel on mine, and how your hands will feel in a lot of other places.*

He smirks as if he just read my mind, then tugs my chin up to look at him. “Hm?”

“You.” My voice comes out just above a whisper, and I don’t even know if he heard me, but his next question tells me he heard me just fine.

“What about me are you thinking about?” What’s up with him and all the questions? I lean forward to close the distance,

and he grabs my chin a bit firmer, stopping me. “I asked you a question, Vidia.” This is starting to frustrate me, so I tell him what I want.

“Your hands on me.”

He moves his other arm from where it is on the counter at my side and places it on my knee, and I am so glad I’m wearing this skirt because his touch feels so warm on me right now. “Right here?”

I slightly shake my head, and he moves his hand further up my inner thigh. We’re holding each other’s gaze when he reaches the bottom of my skirt. “Here?” I shake my head no again, and he smirks while he puts his hand up my skirt.

He’s almost where I want him when he stops again. “Did you change your mind?” For a quick second, I thought he meant if I wanted him to stop, but that’s not what he meant. “Are we official or not, Vidia?”

This again? Ugh. I hate this game of his and don’t feel like playing anymore, so I ignore him. He moves his hand up just a bit and very lightly brushes his thumb over my heat. He slowly inches a bit closer so our lips are practically touching, but then moves his head to my ear.

“Answer me.” I don’t. If I do, he won’t like my answer and he’ll stop, and that’s the last thing I want right now. In an effort to distract him, I snake my hands inside his shirt and kiss his neck, but when I do, he moves his thumb from my pussy and puts his hand around my neck, lightly pushing me off.

“Yes or no, Vidia.” He’s so damn stubborn; this will never work in my favor. He moves from my ear so he can look at me again as he keeps his hand around my throat.

“You already know my answer, Sire, but—”

“Yes or—”

“No.” As soon as my answer leaves my mouth, he pulls away completely and takes a step back. I somehow feel cold without him being so close. I let out a frustrated sigh, and he bites back a smile. Fine, if that’s how he wants to play it.

“You got me all worked up. Are you sure you don’t want to finish what you started?” He gives my body a slow sweep like he’s actually considering it.

When his eyes meet mine again, he asks, “Has your answer changed?” Asshole.

“No.”

“Then you can finish what I started yourself.”

I smirk and hop off the counter. “I’m sure you’d like to watch.”

He pokes his inner cheek with his tongue while scoffing. “I’m sure you want me to, and I will.” He pauses, then adds, “Once you’re mine.”

Or he can stop being stubborn and just watch now. “Well, I’m not, but I’m sure there’s someone here who would love to finish what you started.” I watch all the playfulness leave his eyes as I go to walk away.

I don’t get too far because he steps in my way. I look up at him, and he’s dead serious. “I dare you.” There’s a coldness in his voice that sends a chill up my spine. I can’t help but try him either way.

“I think you should take that back. You know I don’t back down from dares, Gryffindor.”

“Play with me if you want, Vidia.” He immediately fires back. Oh, I definitely want to. I give him a wink and exit the kitchen. As I’m leaving, a few of his teammates start talking to him, giving me the chance to escape.

“I gotta give it to you, bro. This shit is working a bit too well.” I look back, and it’s Brent.

“I already told you that’s not what I’m doing.”

I feel my brows furrow at whatever they’re talking about, but I keep walking. Sire sounds annoyed, but I can’t tell if it’s from whatever Brent is talking about or the conversation he and I just had.

When I turn back around, I bump right into someone. “You okay there, pretty girl?” I look up, and it’s Jayden again. I give him a smile as he helps me steady myself.

“I’m good, babe, thanks.”

He doesn’t respond and is staring at the laces that are keeping my skirt together. “One pull and these come undone, huh?” He sounds like he’s just thinking out loud, and I bite back a smile, knowing Sire is most likely watching me.

I place my hand on his chest and tippy-toe up to his ear. “They look pretty cool when you unravel them. Wanna see?” His eyes lock on mine, and I know I got him. He takes my hand and guides me up the stairs. *Easy ass.*

We walk into the bathroom, and I make sure the door isn’t locked, then hop on the counter of the sink. He starts pulling the string that’s keeping my skirt together, but I stop him, knowing we have less than a minute left in here.

“You first,” I say, and he smirks, undoing his belt. He moves to his button, then his zipper, and as soon as he starts pulling his pants down, the door flies open. Dammit, this would have been a lot more fun if he caught us with his dick out.

“Yo, bro—”

“Get the fuck out.” His tone sends a chill down my spine. I try my hardest not to physically shiver. Jayden looks between us once, then leaves without protesting against it.

Sire slams the door shut way too aggressively, and I feel the entire bathroom shake. “You don’t pay bills here. Don’t slam doors.”

“I can do whatever the *fuck* I want.” Yikes.

“Anyone ever told you you’re a cock blocker?” My eyes widen just as the words slip past my lips because I didn’t mean to say that out loud, and he looks like he’s about to pull a big bad wolf and blow the damn house down.

“How drunk are you, Vidia?”

I burst into a laugh at his assumption. “I’m actually very sober.”

“So you’re not drunk and dumb. You *want* me to fuck someone up tonight.”

“You can fuck me up.” I shrug, and his anger quickly fades as he studies every inch of my body.

He takes a step between my legs and puts his arm on the wall behind me. Slowly, he leans in and looks into my eyes. “Did you let him touch you?” It’s so entertaining seeing how jealous he is.

“Today or ever?”

He immediately takes a step back, and I don’t think that was the right answer. “You’re going home. Get up.”

I break into a laugh at how done with me he sounds. “I’m joking, Sire. I don’t sleep with basketball players.” I pull his shirt so he’s close again. “Baseball players are more my type, remember?”

He looks into my eyes and leans in but stops right before our lips meet. “Did he touch you or not, Vidia?” Okay, I’m done with this.

“No. He didn’t, coño.” I pull him all the way in before he can stop again, and our lips finally meet. This kiss is way too rushed, but I don’t make any effort to slow it down. Gliding my tongue against his lips, he gets the hint and allows me entrance.

He fidgets with the strings keeping my skirt in one piece, trying to undo them. I pull away just a bit. “Don’t, just move them aside.” Quickly connecting the kiss again, I guide one of his hands between my legs.

While I work the belt off his pants, I feel him smiling, and he pulls back. “You’re impatient.”

“And this isn’t friendly.”

He grunts and leans in again, kissing me harder than before. I’m struggling with his stupid belt and don’t want to break the kiss again, so I rub his erection over his pants. He groans into my mouth, and then he swallows my moan as he moves my underwear to the side and enters me with two fingers.

I finally get his belt off and slide my hand into his pants. I'm only able to stroke him once when he grabs my hand, stopping me. "Uh uh." Fine. Riding his fingers, I work my hands in his shirt, wanting to feel some part of him.

There's a knock at the door, but neither of us stops. He rubs circles on my clit, then breaks the kiss just as I let out a moan. "Shh." He kisses his way from my jaw to my neck and begins to suck.

This time, whoever's at the door knocks a little bit harder. "Is everything all right in there?"

Sire rubs me again, adding more pressure, and I let out a louder moan. "Speak. Tell her you'll be out in a minute." I look at him with hazed eyes. How the fuck does he want me to do that while he's getting me off?

He looks at me and starts to slow down as I gain the courage to speak up. "I'll be right—" Oh my god. He adds another finger, and I bite down on my lip to muffle my moan.

With the hand that isn't three fingers deep in me, he pulls my bottom lip from between my teeth and kisses me as he pulls my top to the side.

He pulls away from the kiss to get a good look, and when he does, another grunt escapes him. I rock harder against his hand, and he leans forward, taking my nipple between his teeth.

Taking one hand from out his shirt, I run my fingers through his hair and pull his head up, kissing his neck, marking him like he did me. He picks up the pace as he fingers me, and I bite down on him to muffle my sounds.

"Fuck, Vid." At the familiar feeling in my stomach, I tilt my head back and squeeze my eyes shut, and I really hope that girl walked away from the door because I don't think I can hold in my moans anymore.

"Don't stop." He goes harder and rubs his thumb against my clit. I let out a gasp, and he leans in, planting one slow, soft kiss on my lips, then does the exact opposite of what I just said and pulls away, leaving me empty.

“I didn’t—”

“I know you didn’t finish. You’re not my girlfriend, so do it yourself.” Is he fucking serious right now? I let out a frustrated sigh and fix my top as he looks down at the fingers he just had in me and watches them glisten. “Clean it.” He holds out his finger to me, but there is no way I’m giving him the satisfaction of licking them.

“You clean it.” Without hesitation, he glides his tongue along his fingers. My body betrays me, and I let out a whimper. He smirks at me, and I’m debating on kicking him right in his dick because if he doesn’t have blue balls right now, he’ll have bruised ones.

“If you want to finish, don’t let me stop you.” He leans against the wall and crosses his arms. I slowly slide my hand up my skirt, but when his eyes flick down, I stop.

“I would let you watch, but you already said you won’t unless I’m yours, and I’m not so…” I nod my head toward the door while placing my hand on the counter, and he scoffs. “You can leave.” I can tell by his expression he knows I’m mimicking him from last night.

He fixes his pants and walks to the door but holds it open instead of just leaving. “You’re not coming unless I make you or watch, so let’s go.”

I don’t miss a beat as I fire back, “Well, you could be making me come, but you’d rather be a dick about it.” He doesn’t reply and has a smug smile on his face. If he wants to be a stubborn pain in the ass, then I’ll be one too.

With the door still wide open, I start to slowly slide my hand down my breast to the top of my skirt, his eyes watching me the entire time.

“Stop, Vid.” I don’t. I only go lower and start to slide my hand up my skirt. I let out a soft moan as I look him in the eyes, and he watches me for a few beats, but then his eyes dart to the door still wide open.

I moan a bit louder and watch as his jaw clenches, and he turns back to me. “Vidia,” he says warningly, but I don’t stop

and lean my head back a bit, grinding against my own fingers. His eyes snap down between my legs and then back to the doorway.

“Just close the door and help me finish, Sire.” My voice comes out softly, but in a quick move, he’s grabbing my arm and yanking me off the sink. As soon as I can steady myself, four of his teammates show up in front of the bathroom.

I freeze for a second since I didn’t even hear them, then I play it off and turn to the sink to wash my hands, trying to play it cool.

“There you are. We thought you left.” They look between the two of us, then Brent taps the other two and says, “She’s who I was talking about.” Why was he talking about me?

“What was that?” Brent turns to me, surprised that I heard him over the music, but before he can answer me, his friend with a buzz cut speaks up for him.

“You’re the daughter of a famous coach. Sire screws you and—” he slurs, and Brent elbows him before he can finish.

What the hell is he talking about? He seems very drunk, but before I can question them, Sire pulls us out of the bathroom.

“I’m leaving now. I’ll see ya at practice tomorrow. Don’t be late.” He turns to Brent before adding, “And get that shit out of your head. I’m not doing it.” Without another word, he takes us downstairs.

As we reach the bottom of the steps, I see Hazel. I go to tell her I’m leaving, but Sire doesn’t let me stop. She looks down at our intertwined hands and gives me a thumbs-up while smirking.

As soon as we stepped on the front porch, a perfect breeze hit my face. “What was that guy talking about, the one with the buzz cut?”

He scratches the back of his neck and avoids my eyes. “He’s really drunk. I couldn’t even understand him.”

He walks down the steps, and I follow behind him. “It sounded like he meant I’m the daughter of a famous coach and

that you're screwing me." I'm kicking his ass if he told those idiots that we slept together, not because he lied but because he won't even let me come.

He turns around and looks a bit worried, "That's not what he said. Forget it, Vid." I feel my eyebrows crease, and then realization rushes through me.

He gives me a soft look. "Vid, I—"

"Please do not tell me I'm on that list." He looks completely confused, so I elaborate. "That list that ranks girls, and if you sleep with girls higher on the list, the more points you get."

I would hate to be on that shit, but with my mom's "celebrity" status, I can see why I'd be high on it. I can't put my finger on it, but it almost looks like he's relieved. "No, Vidia. You are not on any list as far as I'm aware, I promise. Plus, only the lacrosse team does that disgusting shit."

True, that's the exact reason no one likes those pigs. "Buzz doesn't even know what he's talking about, and he isn't going to remember anything about tonight. He always gets shit-faced and says weird shit."

"Do ya call him Buzz because he has a buzz cut?" Sire nods, and I shake my head. That's not very creative, but now that I think about it, he was definitely yelling about penguins needing to learn how to fly at the last party.

I shake my head at what he said earlier. Whatever. We walk a few feet, and I notice Sire's car is parked in front of the house when he opens the passenger door for me.

I give him a sly smirk as I slide in. "Are we going back to your place?"

"No. I'm taking you home, then I'm going back to my place—alone." With that, he shuts the door and walks around to the driver's side.

Chapter Ten

VIDIA



Four years earlier

THE PROS AND CONS LIST I make in my head for dating Sire has a lot more pros than I expected. I still have no regrets from the party, but ever since then, Sire's new game is back to randomly bringing up that we're dating instead of trying to seduce me into admitting that dating and messing around is the same. They're not.

I've been ignoring him every time he says it, and I can see him get annoyed, but he doesn't quit. There's a very hard knock on my door, pulling me out of my thoughts. When I open it, Sire is standing in front of me. He's sweaty in his baseball uniform and does not look happy.

He walks in without invitation—well, more like storms in. “We lost today’s game because of you.” What does his losing have anything to do with me?

I turn around after closing the door, and he’s leaning on the back of the couch with his arms crossed. “How is it my fault if I wasn’t even—”

“Because you weren’t there, Vid. We’ve won every game you’ve been at. You’re our lucky charm.” I feel a smile creep on my face because it’s cute that he thinks so, but it isn’t true. The team is amazing, maybe the best in the country, so I doubt they lost because I wasn’t there.

He’s looking at me like he’s waiting for an explanation, and when I don’t give him one, he says, “What was more important than being there?” I tell him I need to study, and he rolls his eyes in response.

His phone buzzes in his pocket, and when he looks up at me, he looks angry all over again. “You’re going on a date with Jayden?” That’s *not* true but who the hell told him that? I try to look at his phone, but he pulls it away from my sight.

“He asked me out.” I shrug, and he looks like he could kill someone. “I told him I don’t date, though, but that was all after he asked if we were dating. Why does everyone think we are?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because we’re constantly together and are practically dating.”

“We’re not—” He doesn’t let me finish and scoffs while shaking his head. He makes his way past me to the door, but I stop him. “Sire, wait. Don’t be like that.”

He spins back around on his heels with a fire in his eyes. “Don’t be like what, Vidia? Like I’m your boyfriend or something?” I don’t miss that he’s quoting my exact words, and he keeps going. “God, we’ve been going back and forth about this for weeks now. I’ve made it very clear that I want to be with you, and all you keep doing is pushing me away.”

I cross my arms across my chest. “I am not pushing you away. We’ve been hanging out just the same.” We *have*...

Besides me completely ignoring him when he brings up being my boyfriend.

He looks up to the ceiling, shaking his head, then meets my eyes again. "I'm willing to fight for you, Vidia, but not if you're going to be with other people in the meantime." At that, I snap with an attitude of my own.

"Oh, please. Like you haven't been with anyone."

"I haven't," he counters.

"I'm not sure if you think I'm an idiot, but it's hard to believe you haven't been sleeping with anyone in the past few months we've been hanging out." He's a *man* for fucks sake. I doubt he hasn't been with anyone within the last few months, let alone weeks.

He smirks and tilts his head to the side a bit. "*I haven't* been sleeping with anyone, but you sound jealous." This asshole. I walk to the door and swing it open.

"I'm not jealous, but since you think it's so damn funny, leave."

He rolls his eyes and leans against the back of the couch again. "I'm not leaving. We're talking."

I shut the door and walk to my room because I frankly don't want to talk to him anymore.

"Don't walk away from me, Vidia." He was ready to walk away a minute ago, but I can't?

"You're such a hypocrite," I mumble. "Leave me alone." I make sure to say that part loud enough for him to hear. He follows behind me, and when I reach my room, I throw the door shut behind me, but the sound of it closing never comes because he stops it. I start reorganizing my desk, trying to distract myself.

He closes the door and then leans against it, most likely to keep me from walking away again. "Why is your bed undone?" I turn around to look at my bed, then over to Sire, and he's giving me an accusing look.

“Because I didn’t make it this morning. What the hell are you implying, Sire?” I see his jaw clench as he rolls his eyes.

“Why was I informed that Jayden was here?” Who the fuck told him?!

“He bumped into me at the store and walked back with me to ask about us. Once I told him we weren’t dating, he asked me out, and I then politely rejected him.” He looks like he doesn’t believe me, which only makes me more upset. “Believe what you want, Sire, and get out.”

He pushes off the door and walks over to me. “What exactly did he say to you?”

“It’s none of your business.” My tone is dismissing, and he lets out a sigh before raising his hand but freezes as concern covers his face.

“Why’d you just flinch?” He takes two steps back and studies me, and his features soften as he looks between my eyes.

“What?”

“I picked my hand up to move my hair, and you flinched.” His voice is softer than before, and I feel myself growing confused as I try to remember the last minute, but I don’t remember flinching.

“No, I didn’t.”

He studies me for a few more seconds, but he still looks concerned. “Yes, you did.” He sounds certain of it, but I turn to the side without answering him and start making my bed. “If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine, but we should.”

I don’t answer him and fold the quilt over my bed. I hear him let out a sigh from beside me when I don’t give him a reply. “You said it wasn’t my business, and after I sighed, I was going to move the hair from my face—you flinched the second my hand was raised.”

I let out a sigh and turn to him. “I flinch all the time, you know that. It’s not a big deal.”

“It is, though,” he quickly counters. I fluff my pillows instead of answering him. “Do you always clean this aggressively or just when you’re mad and trying to avoid people?”

“Do you always have to be so persistent and in my business?” He doesn’t answer right away, and when I steal a glance at him, he only shakes his head.

“You’re making this into an argument, and it doesn’t need to be one, Vidia. You don’t have to push me away when you don’t want to talk about tough topics.”

“No, you’re the one who made this into an argument when you assumed I slept with Jayden, and it isn’t a tough topic. Leave it alone.” I finish making my bed and look around for anything else I can clean, but my room is already completely clean.

When I turn to Sire, his chest grows as he takes in a deep breath. “Anyone ever tell you that you lack the ability to communicate like an adult?” *Excuse me?* I quickly go to counter, but my alarm goes off, distracting me.

He lets out a sigh and opens my bedroom door. “Let me drive you to class and we can talk after. Really talk.” I roll my eyes and grab my bag from my desk.

“I don’t want to drive with you.” I walk to the door but stop in front of him. “And I’m great at communicating. Thank you very much.” He smirks down at me, and I squint my eyes at him.

“Right.” I nod once, but he adds more. “Just not about anything that bothers you or your scary past and trauma or—”

“I’m going to be late to class.” I quickly cut him off and walk past him, but before I can reach the door, he stops me.

“That was your first alarm. Your class isn’t for another twenty minutes.” I roll my eyes at him for remembering my schedule. When I turn back to him, he’s watching me softly, and I let out a sigh as we settle on the couch.

“So,” he starts, and I force myself not to roll my eyes because maybe he was right, and not wanting to talk means

I'm bad at communicating. "For starters, I shouldn't have assumed you and the basketball player did anything that could have gotten his ass beat."

I throw my head back laughing, mainly at how his words come out strained. Like he's struggling to admit he was wrong for that. "His name is Jayden."

"That's great. Stop trying to change the subject." I bite the inside of my cheek, and he slides down the couch so he's sitting next to me. "You flinched." His voice is soft again, and I slowly turn to him.

"So you keep saying." He looks down at my hands after a beat and covers his in mine.

"Why do you do that?" He looks back up at me. "You twist that ring on your finger, then completely close off. You do it when we're ordering food and when Jen is asking you hard questions at work."

I look down at the friendship ring Hazel and I wear. I didn't even notice I was turning it just a second ago. "You're nervous." He says it like he just connected the dots. I let out a sigh and shrug my shoulders in response.

"What's it going to take to prove to you that I'm not going to hurt you?" I think about it for a second but can't come up with anything because I don't think he'd ever hit me. I just can't get over that voice in the back of my head.

"How about this..." I look over at Sire as he starts again. "If we're ever arguing, we can do it across the room."

I chuckle softly at his suggestion and look between his eyes, internally fighting with myself to just give up and let him in. "Elaborate idea. You're a genius."

He chuckles, and when he thanks me, I let out a soft laugh of my own.

"I do think you should talk about your childhood and why you flinch or get so nervous." When I avoid his eyes, he gives my hand a squeeze, and I turn back to him. "It doesn't have to be right now or with me." I think about his words for a beat, then give him a nod.

“Great talk.” I get up, but he pulls my hand back down.

“Nice try. A for effort.” I let out a sigh, but I should have seen that coming. “I wasn’t lying when I said I haven’t slept with anyone. In my head, we’ve practically been together ever since I planned that date for us to go bowling with my brother and Hazel.” That was... four months ago. I falter for a second, then shake my head.

“What do you mean you planned it? August invited us. That wasn’t a date, and we certainly haven’t been together since then.”

He smiles, and I swear it’s like he’s proud. “I knew you didn’t date, so I had August act like he was inviting us out all the time so I could go out with you without you thinking it was a date.” I stare at him and then burst into a laugh.

“So when August said it was a double date, that was because ___”

“Because I planned them to be double dates, yup.”

I laugh again at how far he went. We were going on those “double dates” almost every other week since that first time they went bowling in January from the time we went roller skating at the beginning of March... For three months, he planned these secret dates before actually asking me out, but in his head, he was already going on dates with me?! I laugh again because he’s delusional.

When I turn to him, he’s watching me with a soft look, and I can’t believe he was willing to do all that for months.

“I said I’d fight for you, Vid, yet you dance on guys and drag them to bathrooms while ignoring me every time I say I want to be with you. I will *never* put my hands on you like that, Vid, so what’s it going to be? Because I’ll wait a hundred years and a hundred days for you, but not if you’re going to continue like this.”

I look into his eyes, and I don’t like this feeling. Like I’m cornered. I think about his words for a second, and although I was joking when I teased him at the party, I can admit it was wrong, and he *has* been fighting for me. Chasing me even.

“Fine.” I turn to him, and a small smile creeps on his face. “But I’m telling you now, if you hurt me, you won’t ever see this side of me.”

“She can be a raging bitch.” We both turn to Hazel, who’s climbing the kitchen counter for something.

“Do you need help reaching that?” Sire offers, and she waves him off. He shrugs before turning back to me. “It’s not going to happen. Promise.” He holds his pinky out, and I eye it for a beat, but I don’t let my thoughts win this time. I ignore the weird feeling in my gut and interlock our pinkies before kissing my thumb, pressing them together so the promise is locked in.

I smile up at him, and when he looks down into my eyes, he says, “So, can I be your boyfriend now?” God, he’s so persistent. I want to fuck with him and say no, but I can’t when he’s looking at me the way he is. Like his world will fall apart if I say no.

“Before I answer, is there anything else we need to clear the air about?” He hesitates and looks off to the side. I can’t tell if he’s thinking or if there’s actually something else we need to talk about.

He shakes his head, and I let out a small relieved breath. “Then yes, Sire. You can be my boyfriend now.” He smiles so big his one dimple pops.

“Thank fuck. I’ve been dying to do this.” He pulls me in, and as soon as our lips meet, all the thoughts telling me not to let him in disappear; in this moment, nothing feels more right.

Chapter Eleven

SIRE

The Present

STOP SMILING LIKE THAT. YOU look stupid.” I smile at Vidia’s tone, but nothing she can say right now can falter my mood. Today is our last physical therapy session, and I’m heading straight for the airport after this to fly to New York for our first game against the Yankees.

The season officially starts tomorrow. My arm is healed, I’m going to play tomorrow, and we’re going to have a great season. Nothing can burst my bubble.

I push the piña colada closer to Vidia with a smile. She still hasn’t taken any of the ones I bought her, but when I came back in after our last session after I left my phone, I caught her taking a sip of it.

She sighs in defeat, then takes the piña colada from my hand, and my smile grows. I speed through the session, and she tells me to slow down multiple times, but I feel great.

By the time the session is over, I walk over to her desk and grab a pen for her before handing her my form, stating I’m

clear to play. “Someone’s eager,” she mumbles as she takes the form and pen.

I watch her carefully as she reads over the form, but she pauses before signing it and looks up at me. “I’m clearing you on one condition, Sire.” I hesitate for a minute, but I’ll agree to anything to play.

“You need to ease back into it the first few weeks, if not the first month.” She must sense I don’t know what she means by that because she goes on. “I don’t want you to pitch as much.” Remember when I said I’d do anything to play? Yeah, scratch that. I’d do anything but that.

“Funny. Sign the paper.” I know I said I was in a good mood, but I don’t feel like joking about this right now.

“I’m being serious, Sire.”

“No, you’re not,” I fire back, and I feel like I don’t answer quickly enough. “You can’t be serious because I’m a *pitcher*. The team’s starter pitcher, so you can’t be serious when you tell me you don’t want me to pitch, Vidia.” My voice grows louder with each word.

She lets out a sigh like she knew this would be my reaction, and it hits me that she isn’t joking. “Please don’t do this.” I shake my head and look between her eyes in a slight panic.

“I’m not doing this because I hate you, Sire.”

I let out a scoff. “Sure you’re not.”

She squints her eyes at me.

“Just sign the paper, Vidia.”

“I will if you agree to my terms.” Her terms? She really does hate me. She’s never going to get over what happened four fucking years ago, and she’s gonna make my life a living hell for as long as she possibly can.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You’re a monster,” I blurt out, and she breaks into a laugh, but I couldn’t be more serious.

“God, you are so dramatic.”

I stare at her in disbelief and shake my head.

“Sire, if you don’t want to regress, I highly suggest that you ease back into playing. You and I both know how fast you throw. Aren’t you like, what, the third fastest pitcher in the world?”

“Second,” I mumble, and I swear I catch her lip twitch, almost like she’s proud. “But I can be the first after this season. I practiced so hard for this, Vidia. Please don’t make me slow down. I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not fine, Sire. You’re great. You made a full recovery, and you can be the fastest pitcher of *all time* one day, but I promise on my *life* that you won’t ever throw a ball if you injure your arm again.”

I look between her eyes as I take that in, but she’s wrong. I won’t injure myself again. “I’ll pitch with my right arm.” I’m ambidextrous. I can do a lot better with my right at full speed than slowing down with my left.

“You said that last time.” She reminds me of what I said the last time I injured my arm, but I don’t need a fucking reminder. I need her to sign this paper.

“If I promise to slow down with my left and mainly pitch with my right hand, will you sign it?”

“Yes, if you promise to also only pitch one inning for the first month.”

“Absolutely not,” I immediately say, and she shakes her head as I run my hand through my hair. “Vidia, do you know how many games we play in a month?” She has to be insane. Maybe she has a brain tumor. Maybe if I can get her deemed incompetent, I can get someone else to evaluate me and sign this damn paper.

“Stop scheming whatever’s in that big head of yours. You look like a crazy person. It’s not that serious.”

“Not that serious? We won’t stand a chance of making it to the playoffs if we lose the entire first month of the season.” She breaks into a laugh again, and I pull my hoodie off because I’m so mad that I’m getting hot.

“What the fuck is so funny?!”

Her laugh sobers quickly, and she turns to me. “You really are full of yourself if you think your team will lose *every* game for the month that you take it easy. You guys have like ten other pitchers, and everyone on the team wouldn’t be on the team if they weren’t at least half as good as you think you are.”

I give her a bored expression, but I’m still shaking with anger. “Sign. The. Paper.” She stares at me for a beat, then turns to the paper and writes something. I think she’s signing it, but she’s taking too long, and when I look down, I notice she’s writing her terms in the comment box.

She cannot be serious right now. She signs next to the X after writing my name next to the patient, and then she hands me the form. “Screw you, Vidia.” I don’t bother taking the bullshit in her hand and storm out.



I PULL UP IN FRONT of the runway at the airport but freeze when I notice a familiar head of curly hair. You’ve got to be kidding me. If she’s getting on this jet with us, I’m turning back around and flying public.

I step out of the car and watch in disbelief as she climbs the stairs and boards the jet. *My* private jet. Absolutely not. I turn around to get back in the car, but August stops me.

“I was going to tell you.” He takes a step back when he sees me clench my fist. “If you hit me again, I’m calling Sage.” How about *I* call her because I’m sure she’ll be on my side on this.

“Seriously, August, this isn’t even funny anymore. Why is she here?”

“Connect the dots, Sire. Hazel came with me. Vidia is Hazel’s best friend. Plus, she needed to come anyway since she’s the team’s sports physician, so why not just fly with us?” Um, I don’t know, maybe because *I’m* flying with us.

Wait. She's the team's what? "What do you mean she's our physician? I thought she was just a physical therapist at our team's doctor's office?" He's looking at me as if he thought I already knew this, but I didn't, or I would've asked to be traded to literally any other fucking team.

"She's both. I told you this." Overachiever little shit. And no, he didn't tell me this. The main reason I didn't want to continue physical therapy was to avoid her. Now that I finally finished my sessions, I have to see her at every game, too?

"Okay, well, have a not-so-safe trip." I turn back around to leave, but he pulls me again.

"First of all, don't joke about plane crashes. You know how I feel about that, and second, where the hell are you going? You hate flying economy. That's why we bought a private jet."

"Yeah, August, *we* bought this jet. You could at least let me know when other people, especially your little menace and her little shit best friend, are flying with us." Today looks like a great day to go skydiving. Without the damn parachute.

"Can you just grow up and get on the damn plane?" No way.

"We're going to be late! Get on the plane, August! V and I already voted on leaving Sire behind. We don't want a traitor on board!" Of course, they voted on leaving me off of *my* damn jet. I grab my bag and walk over just to spite the two brats on board.

I make sure to sit as far away from Vidia as possible. I swear I would've sat in the bathroom if the toilet was just a bit more comfortable. "Why'd you even come?" She can not be for real.

"I know you aren't talking."

"I definitely am. Did you come to support August? Because you aren't playing in tomorrow's game if you don't agree with what we talked about." She says it like she's happy about it. I swear she better be bluffing because if I have to be on a plane with her for five hours for no reason, someone is getting punched.

“Just shut up, Vidia.” She’s going to talk for the next five hours just because I told her not to.

“Come over here and make me.” My eyes dart to hers, and we hold eye contact for a while. She used to say that all the time, but I highly doubt she means it the same anymore.

“You don’t want me to do that, beautiful.” I give her a smirk but immediately falter at what I just called her, simply out of habit. She rolls her eyes and then opens her computer.

“Asshole,” she mumbles, just loud enough for me to hear.

“Watch your mouth.”

“Go to hell, dickhead.”

“Fuck you!” She flips me off, keeping her eyes on her computer. “Stick it up your—”

“Okay, both of ya need to shut the fuck up,” Hazel interrupts, and I almost tell her to jump off the plane, but I look over at August instead. I should punch him for even letting both of their annoying asses come. I flip him off even though he has his back to me, then turn to the window.



“SIRE!” I GASP AS I jump out of my sleep. My shirt clings to my chest from the sweat, and I try to catch my breath, looking around, a bit disoriented. When my eyes land on Vidia, she’s still across the plane, but she has a worried look on her face, and August is standing over me.

“Bro, what the hell were you dreaming about?” *Same dream I always have.* I look away from him and search the plane, trying to ground myself and take in deep breaths.

August rests his hand on my back, but I shrug him off. “I’m fine, August.” He doesn’t look convinced, but I tell him to leave it alone, so he does. I pick up my phone to check the time. How has it only been one hour?

After a while, Hazel and August get up together and go to the back somewhere.

“Since when have your nightmares been back?” Since that night four years ago. That’s what I want to say. It’s the truth, but I don’t want her to feel bad. Not about this.

“Why do you care, Vidia? You hate me, remember.” And it’s easier to hate her back.

“We could pretend I don’t if you want to talk about it for a minute.” There’s a softness to her voice that I haven’t heard in a while. I want to pretend she doesn’t hate me, but then we’ll go back to our new normal, and I’d rather not give myself that sliver of hope just to have it snatched away. I got a taste of that after my NA meeting with her, and there’s still a bitter taste in my mouth from the way we just flipped the switch between us.

“I’m fine.” I’m not. She knows I’m not, but the minute is up, so she just shakes her head and goes back to her computer. I get up, needing to be out of my seat for a while. I walk past her toward the front of the plane where the pilot is.

“Hey, Mr. Griffin. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, just bored, and I told you to call me Sire.” Brandon has been flying our plane since we bought it two years ago, mainly because August has trust issues when it comes to planes but also because Brandon is super cool and lets me sit up here with him.

At the thought of August, a great idea comes to mind. “Brandon, I need you to do me a huge favor.”

He looks over at me with a worried look. “Please don’t try to bribe me to let you fly the plane.” I do that every time we’re flying somewhere, and his scared ass always says no. He makes it look so easy, and I’m confident I can do it. I actually did do it once. Okay, he left it on autopilot, but it felt like I was doing it so that counts for something.

“Another time, but no. I need you to make an announcement and let them know we’re having some difficulties and need to make an emergency landing.” He starts looking around at all the buttons in a slight panic.

Jeez, I didn’t even touch anything this time. “Brandon, I didn’t do anything. August has been pissing me off for a

while, and I feel like getting back.”

He stares at me like I’m actually insane for a concerning amount of time. “Eyes on the sky, buddy. Watch out before you hit a bird or something. Are you going to make the announcement or not?”

He shakes his head while grabbing the speaker thing. “I’m going to lose my job because of you one day... Attention all passengers, this is your pilot speaking. I regret to inform you all that we are unfortunately having some difficulties with the plane right now—”

The plane chooses that exact moment to have some turbulence, and I get a bit nervous. August is going to be pissed; no going back now.

“I ask you all to please stay seated and fasten your seatbelts. We are preparing for an emergency landing. I’m going to try my best to get us out of here, but it isn’t looking good. May God be with us all.”

The plane has some turbulence again, and I grab onto my seat. “Wait, is something actually wrong with the plane?”

He looks at me like I’m speaking a different language. “Of course not. You told me to be dramatic?” Shit. Well, this plane is a paid actor because talk about good timing. I get up to go see the actual show. When I walk past the curtains, August and Hazel are back in their seats, and he’s hugging her like he’ll fall out of the plane if he lets go.

He’s saying a prayer, and Hazel is taking in deep breaths with her eyes closed. As soon as August sees me, he starts yelling. “SIRE! SIT DOWN, HURRY!!”

I almost burst out laughing at the panic in his voice, but Vidia’s head shoots up in my direction from between her legs, and she looks like she’s crying. *Fuck*. This was only meant to scare August, not her.

I walk over and sit in the seat next to her, and she immediately hugs me. I can’t help but hug her back out of reflex. She’s holding me so tight. I feel so bad for this. “We’re

going to die, Sire.” Fuck, this is making me feel like shit. Seeing her cry is like a punch to the fucking gut.

“We’re not going to die, my love. I promise.” She hugs me tighter and sobs in my arms. I can’t take this shit. “We’re not going to crash. The pilot was joking. I was trying to scare August. Please stop crying, Vid.” She looks up at me, confused. I wipe her tears away and hold her face while my words set in.

She looks between my eyes, and a part of me wishes I could hold her for a few more minutes. But then I see the realization set in her eyes, and any second now, our moment will pass. I quickly lean forward and plant a kiss on her forehead.

“We’re not going to crash?” I shake my head, and after a few seconds, she pulls away, taking my heart with her. She pushes my chest and wipes her tears. “You’re such a fucking dick. What about that is funny to you?”

August starts yelling again from behind us, causing our attention to break from each other. “Sire, I love you so much! I was the one that crashed your car senior year in high school. I’m so sorry, and I’m also sorry about turning your favorite white hoodie pink back in eighth grade. It was also me who washed it with Sage’s red blanket.” I fucking knew it.

Hazel starts with her apologies next. “Vidia! I love you, babe. I’m also sorry, but I totally read your diary in ninth grade. I know it was a complete violation of your privacy, and I carry that guilt with me every day.” Wow, I guess the fear of death really does make people confess.

“I fucking knew it!”

I turn to Vidia, and we both laugh at the same time. “Should we let them keep confessing?” She thinks about it for a second, and we look back at them. I could be wrong, but I think August is actually crying. “August!” His eyes shoot to me, and they’re bloodshot red. No fucking way. I throw my head back, laughing, and I hear Vid laughing beside me.

We finally calm down, and I look over at August, and he looks beyond pissed. “I left a voicemail to Sage, you fucking

asshole.” I immediately shoot up from my seat in panic. This idiot.

“August, tell me you’re lying.” I can’t tell if he’s joking or not, so I look for his phone to check, and he’s called her three times.

“You bitch! She is gonna call Mom crying about our deaths as soon as she hears these.” The last time he told her I died, she bought a casket, and she didn’t sleep until she saw me in person. That was for three whole days. I’m going to give her something to cry about and kill this idiot.

“Good. Maybe Mom will yell at you for joking about something like this.” Okay, bad joke. I get it, but he didn’t have to be a bitch about it and call our sister.

I flick his head on the way to my seat. “You better call her as soon as we land because I promise you, I’m kicking your ass if she cries, and if she bought a casket again, we’re putting it to use this time.”

He looks back at me like what I just said confuses him. “You better not be mad right now. If anything, you’re the one going in the casket for this pathetic excuse for a joke. It’s not my fault I wanted to say goodbye to my twin before I died, you dickhead.”

I’m not mad. I just hate seeing only two people in this entire world cry: one of them is this idiot’s twin and the other is on this plane.



“NOAH, YOU’RE OUR OPENING PITCHER. Get on the field.” This can’t be my life. Noah gives me an apologetic look, and the rest of my team runs out on the field as I walk over to our coach.

“Coach, let me open the game.” He finishes writing something on his clipboard and then turns to me. He looks pissed, but I’m about to be more pissed if I don’t play today.

“You can pitch when I swap out Noah.” Like hell I can.

“Just put me in now.”

“Am I the coach or you?” He gives me a warning look, but I don’t give a shit. “I was informed that you need to take it easy, so this is me helping you do so since we both know you’re too stubborn to put your health before the game. You’re welcome.” He turns to leave but stops short at my words.

“No, thank you.” He turns to me and holds his clipboard against his chest. “I’m in perfect health and have made a one hundred percent recovery. I can open the game.”

“You made a full recovery and need to take it easy,” he corrects me, and I grind my teeth together. “You can pitch a bit slower with your injured arm or with your right arm at whatever speed you want *when* I swap you in for Noah.” He walks away from me toward the field, and that just pisses me off more. I hate when people walk away from me.

“Coach!” He ignores me and keeps walking. You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. I storm out of the dugout and quickly make my way down the steps. As soon as I spot Vidia’s curly hair in the physician’s room, I make my way straight for her. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

She gives me a confused look, but as soon as she hears the announcement that the game is starting soon, she smiles. Little shit. “Did you get injured before the game even started?” She knows I’m not here for an injury.

Rolling my eyes, I take a step closer to her. “Stop playing dumb, Vidia. You are so fucking immature for telling my coach on me like we’re kids or something.”

She rolls her eyes like this is just a minor inconvenience in her day. “I didn’t tell your coach.” She goes to walk away, but I take a step to the side, blocking her from leaving.

“Do not fucking walk away from me.”

She scoffs and takes a step closer. “Or what, Sire? Hmm?” Holding eye contact, we challenge each other, and when I don’t say anything, she walks away again.

“I shouldn’t even be surprised since this is routine for you.” She stops in her tracks and turns back around. I can see on her

face that she knows exactly what I'm talking about.

"I already told you I didn't say shit to your coach."

"This time." With the distance between us, it feels like we're screaming at each other. Maybe we are, but I couldn't care less.

"There wasn't betrayal involved *this time*, so no. I didn't tell your coach. Now get the fuck out before you end up with a medical reason to be here." She walks to the cart and starts angrily organizing things.

"Fuck you, Vidia."

"I'm sure you want to!"

"Go to hell!"

"You first, dickhead!!"

Storming out, someone bumps into me. "Get out of my way." My voice is low, and when I look down, it's some guy wearing the same white lab coat as the little shit in the room, but then I realize he works back at the team's doctor's office with her.

"I am so sorry. I heard yelling and wanted to make sure Vidia was okay." Why the fuck does he care? Not bothering to ask, I walk past him and go back to the dugout before the game starts.

I can't believe her. Actually... I can. It's always been her way or no way, so of course she told my coach I needed to take it easy. I don't need shit. I kick a random ball before sitting on the bench. This is torture.

I get up as the game starts, and Noah throws some warm-up pitches, all looking good. Once one of the players comes to the plate, though, he starts fucking up his pitch left and right.

Our coach takes his hat off and rubs his head as Noah walks two people. "Fred, he's nervous as fuck out there. This is our first game, an away one at that, plus we're against the fucking Yankees. Just put me in!"

We both turn our heads when the umpire yells at us. “Watch the language in the dugout!” Dick. I don’t say anything else, but I grow even more upset as three people score on us, and everyone in the damn field makes stupid mistakes.

“Fred, there’s no point in putting me in whenever the hell you decide to swap us if they have twenty points on us.” Just as I say that, Noah throws the ball toward August to catch a steal, and he misses, letting it go right over his head, and two more people score. We’re off to a horrible start.

“Stop acting like we only win whenever you play, son. We’re losing because our captain is acting like a child instead of supporting and encouraging his teammates.”

I pace around the dugout while I think, and he’s right. I should be encouraging Noah. He’s a rookie and is probably even more nervous because he’s in my spot. I’m sure he thinks I’ll most likely be pissed at him, and I am pissed, but it’s not his fault I’m not opening today’s game. I stop pacing and turn to watch the game quietly.

The inning ends horribly but the team quickly makes their way towards the dugout and forms a circle around Coach Fred and I. Noah is the first to speak up as he nervously scratches his arm. “Coach, I think you should put Griffin in.” He keeps his eyes on the ground and looks discouraged.

“No.” He looks up at the sound of my voice, and I continue. “He wouldn’t have put you in if he didn’t think you could do this, so stand up straight and get your head in the game.” He nods and stands up a bit straighter.

August looks at Coach Fred like he’s about to plead for me to be put in the game, so I speak up before he does. “I’ll get put in whenever Noah needs to be swapped out, and that’s not anytime soon, so erase the speech from your mind, bro.” He gives me a confused look, and the rest of the team put their heads down.

What the fuck is wrong with them? “Okay, all of you need to stop acting like we already lost. They only have five up on us.”

Diego, our catcher, speaks up next. “Yeah, but *you’re* not playing.”

Coach shakes his head and then says, “It doesn’t matter if Sire isn’t playing. We win games because we work as a team, not because we rely on one player.”

Diego still doesn’t look convinced. “Yeah, but—”

I interrupt him before he can discourage the team any more than they are. “But nothing. You guys don’t need me to win. You need a good pitcher, and you have one, so put some more faith in our teammate *now*.”

My voice comes out demanding, and they all stand up a bit taller—now I’ve got their attention. “Noah, shake those nerves. Throw strikes and stop letting them get on base.” He nods in agreement.

I turn to August to scold him next. “You. Stop letting them steal. He threw you the ball, and it went right over you.”

He throws his hands up in defeat. “He’s throwing all the balls too high. I’m used to you—”

“It doesn’t matter what you’re used to. Get used to Noah before you cost us the game. If he’s throwing too high, jump.”

“How high, your majesty?” He’s clearly pissed I’m not playing right now, but I’m going to be put in eventually, so he needs to grow up.

“As high as you fucking need to, moron.”

I turn back to Noah, but he says what I was thinking. “I’ll throw lower.” I look over at August with an “I told you so” glare, but he still looks like something is bothering him. Before I ask him what’s up his ass, he starts ranting.

“Walker is out there.”

I roll my eyes at him and let out an annoyed breath. “He’s out there every time we play against the Yankees, August.” Liam Walker is an asshole we played against in college who we somehow can’t seem to escape. He likes to piss us off every chance, and it feels childish to say we’re still rivals, but by definition, we are.

“Stop letting him piss you off. You know it’s only going to make him feel good. Ignoring him and kicking his team’s ass is going to feel better.” August nods with a smirk.

“Start acting like a team before I kick all of your asses.” They all laugh, but I wasn’t joking; we better not lose our first game. I put my hand in the middle of the circle, and the rest of them follow. “Dodgers on me! Dodgers on three! One, two, three!” We all shout Dodgers and clap twice, and then the team gets ready to bat. Coach Fred gives me an approving nod, and we watch the game in silence.

Noah pitches for two more innings, then I head to the pitchers’ dugout to warm up before I’m swapped in for the next few innings. I start off with my right hand and almost switch to my left, but I remember what Vidia said and decide against it. I’m not making that mistake again.

I strike out a few players and keep the others from scoring, and we’re up eleven to nine by the time I’m swapped out again. When the last inning rolls around, the score is the same, and we just need one out to win.

One of our other pitchers is up, and it’s like the entire field holds their breath as he throws a curveball. The batter swings and misses by a long shot. The umpire calls an out, solidifying our win.

The majority of the crowd is booing, but that’s expected for away games. It just means we’re doing something good. I was definitely annoyed about not opening and for being pulled off the field after I instinctively threw a few balls with my left hand, but I got to pitch, and we won.

The team starts making their way to the dugout as Coach Fred walks over to me. “I heard you yelled at our physician.” Who keeps telling him everything?

“Yeah because she—”

“She didn’t do anything, Sire. Your agent was the one who told me you needed to take it easy if I decided to put you in.” I let out a sigh. Jackson is such a dick. I’m telling his daughter Santa isn’t real the minute I see her.

“You know what you have to do, son.” Yeah, I know, but I don’t want to. The team runs in before I can object. After our little celebration in the dugout, I head straight for her before she leaves.

She’s putting something in her purse when I walk in, and she has her back to me. I almost turn around but just spit it out before I back out. “Vidia, can I talk to you for a second?” She completely ignores me and walks right past me, leaving the room, but I follow after her.

“Vid.” She abruptly turns around, and I almost bump into her.

“I have places to be, so if you’re injured, Asher can take a look at you.” Asher must be the blonde guy I bumped into earlier.

“No, I’m not hurt. I just wanted to say sorry for earlier.”

“Go to hell, Sire.” She turns back around, but I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her to me. Her touch sends a jolt of energy through me, and she’s looking up at me, kind of dazed, but she’s frozen in place—like she got the same feeling and doesn’t know if she should move or not.

“I went easy today, like you said.”

She scoffs and smirks while shaking her head in disbelief. She places her hand over my arms and slowly slides from my grasp. “Nice to see you don’t need that hearing aid after all.”

“What?” She smiles, although it’s clear she tries not to, like she doesn’t want to find me funny or share a laugh with me. “I’m sorry, Vid. You were right. It wasn’t that serious.” After going easy today, I realize I can play like this for at least a few weeks.

“You should learn to just listen to me. It’ll save you a lot of energy.”

I shrug in response and give her a weak smile. “I like our whole enemies thing—keeps things interesting.” She looks up at me and shakes her head with a small smile before rolling her eyes.

“Or maybe you just like having an excuse to talk to me, even if it’s arguing,” she teases, and I go still for a second. She looks between my eyes, waiting for a response, but I only shrug.

I don't know, Vid. Maybe.

Chapter Twelve

SIRE

STOP ACTING LIKE THAT AND just come with us.”

August seriously needs to learn to be more independent. I don't get why he acts like he can't go anywhere without me. If anyone else told him they didn't want to go to brunch, he wouldn't bat an eye.

“Lis—” He turns to Lisette, who's lying on my bed like it's hers. “—tell him to come with us.”

“Go with them,” she says in a bored tone and turns back around, trying to nap, although I already told her to get out of bed.

I'm about to pull my shirt over my head when August aggressively snatches it away. “Who the fuck gave you that?”

I look down at the marks on my chest he's pointing at and roll my eyes. “I told them not to do that shit.” I snatch my shirt back and pull it over my head, but I feel August staring at me in disbelief.

“Them!?” His eyes practically come out of his socket, and I almost burst into a laugh, but then his face is covered in disgust, and he puts his hands up. “Please do not tell me you had that threesome with those sisters.”

Lisette slowly turns to us. “And please do not say it was in this bed.” I respond with a smirk, and she rolls off the bed so fast she actually falls. I break into a laugh and turn back to August.

He looks like he just threw up in his mouth, and I bite back a laugh. “I hope you catch herpes.”

I freeze. “You must be having a stroke if you think I slept with those girls raw.” Clarity fills his face, and he looks like he remembers who he’s talking to. I’ve never been dumb enough not to wrap it up—correction, I’ve never been dumb enough not to wrap it with anyone besides one person, but look where that got me...

“Why would you let me lay in your bed? You dumbass.”

“I told you not to.” I shrug Lisette off, and she takes her hoodie off like it’s infected, then walks into my closet, but I follow after her before she can steal my shit.

“I thought you said you were done sleeping around.” Worry fills August’s voice, and I let out a sigh before turning to him. Earlier this year, I was struggling badly, but I didn’t think it was bad because I wasn’t using drugs or alcohol. That was until I noticed I was having sex with any and everything in a skirt. It didn’t get that bad because I didn’t let it, and August is, thankfully, the biggest cock blocker.

“I am done.”

“Those hickeys *scream* otherwise.”

I roll my eyes and send him a glare. “I *am*,” I say again. “I bumped into them and invited them upstairs. It was completely unplanned, and besides, it makes up for the months I haven’t been with anyone.” After that weird feeling I got when Vidia was holding me for dear life on the plane, thinking we were going to die, I needed to distract myself. I don’t add that part, though.

August keeps his eyes on me like he’s trying to tell if I’m lying or not, but I’m not. “You’re still a traitor.” Here he goes with this bullshit again. He sounds just like his little menace. I

don't understand why he thinks I have to live as a celibate because Vid and I aren't together.

I walk further into my closet and snatch my hoodie away from Lisette before she can pull it over her head. "You sound just like your girlfriend," I tell August, shoving Lis away.

When I turn to my less annoying sibling, a hint of a smile grows on his face at the mention of Hazel, and I roll my eyes at him. "If it makes you feel any better, the sex wasn't any good."

"Ew, stop talking about this while I'm here." She grabs another one of my sweaters, but I take that one, too.

"Stop touching my shit. Go hang out with Sage and steal her clothes." She rolls her eyes at me and complains about how our sister's stuff is too lavish for her or something. When I steal a glance at August, he nods like he's thinking.

"That actually does make me feel better. You should be with V. Stop wasting your time with other women." He says this anytime I so much as look at another girl. He's so pro-Vidia, and it's annoying as fuck sometimes.

"Vidia was good for you." He nods a few times, and Lis joins in.

"Yeah, I like her most out of the other girls you've been with." She holds one of my shirts against her like she's shopping in my damn closet, and I just give up and let her take what she wants.

"Yeah, same," August chimes back in. "And once you get everything together so you aren't on the verge of a sex addiction, you can get with her." I close my eyes at his words, and I can feel Lis watching me.

"Sex addiction?!" I shoot August a glare, and he looks guilty but then proceeds to explain my January fuck fest to her.

"I thought you didn't want to hear about my sex life?" I cut in when it gets embarrassing, but Lis ignores me, and August continues explaining how I had women in and out of here—his words.

Lis turns to me when he's done and looks serious. "You're done?"

"Yes, I already said that." She studies me for a second.

"Did it feel like you needed them? Like with drugs?" I steal a glance at August, and he's watching me carefully.

"A bit, yeah..." I mumble, and I can feel the disappointment in the room. "But it didn't feel like that with the sisters the other night. I'm fine." They both nod and look like they believe me.

I turn to Lis now. "I'm supposed to be *your* sponsor. You came here to talk and haven't." She turns back around, avoiding me again, and goes back to shopping in my closet.

"Okay," August starts, and he sounds hopeful. "That's good to hear because you would literally glow like a damn star when you were dating V in college. You're not glowing now."

He studies me for a second, and I start to grow uncomfortable as his green eyes bore into me. "You're actually not glowing at all." He turns his head to the side, pushing from the door frame when something clicks. "Are you okay?"

I turn away from him, trying to avoid his gaze, and pick out a pair of shoes. "Sire..." I let out a sigh and turn to him before slipping my sneakers on.

"You remember when you were craving donuts the other night?"

A smile grows on his face, and he nods at the memory. "Yeah, I was thinking about them all day. It was like I could taste them. The craving was so bad I woke up in the middle of the night for the ones I wanted and drove across town to the only place that was open twenty-four hours."

He chuckles, and I give him a single nod. "Yeah, that's how I've been feeling lately, but it isn't for donuts and drugs instead." He goes still. I turn away again to slip my shoes on, but I can feel him watching me.

"Hey!" We both turn to Lis, who's smiling. "I felt like that last night. Twins." She holds her hand up for me to high-five,

and I smile at how good she is at turning a bad moment into a good one.

August looks concerned beyond comprehension. “Lis... are you drunk?” My head immediately snaps to her, trying to figure out if she is, and she rolls her eyes.

“It’s called personality, August. Don’t assume the addicts are being addicts because they’re struggling. It’s rude.” He looks like he genuinely feels bad for offending us, and I break into a laugh. Lisette’s a fucking asshole.

August quickly catches on and then turns to me. “So you are having bad cravings again, and you go and have a threesome?” I let out a sigh.

I shake my head at the way he puts it. “No, it isn’t like that this time.” He looks like he doesn’t believe me, and worry flashes across his face. “It isn’t, August. I didn’t have a bad craving then call them up here. It just happened, and besides, that feeling to immediately do it all over again wasn’t there once we were done.”

I go on, trying to reassure him that although I’m still struggling, I’m not substituting it for sex. “I went to a few meetings and spoke to my sponsor. After months of excruciating celibacy, I’m testing the waters.”

“Testing?” he says, and I nod in response.

“Testing with a threesome is bold,” Lisette mumbles, and I push her into my racks of hoodies.

“Shut up.” She trips, and a few of my clothes fall on her. I don’t help her up and turn to August. “I’m not on the verge of a sex addiction. I don’t know. Maybe it was just them, or maybe earlier this year was just a phase, but I don’t want sex. I want to get high.” I say it all in one breath, and August has the softest look in his eyes.

I don’t say anything else and walk over to the back of my closet for a hat. “Which one?” I let him pick, and he chooses my brown and pink LA Dodgers fit. Once I throw it on, I turn back around to him but don’t exit my closet. “Stop looking at

me like that. I've been struggling with my addiction for years."

He nods, but when a sad look crosses his eyes, I immediately wish I didn't tell him that I haven't been doing so good. "You know I'd do anything to make this easier for you, right?"

I nod once and give him a small smile. "Will you let me have a cheat day and cover for me as I get high? For old time's sake." He stares at me with a very concerned look covering his face.

"That isn't funny." He shakes his head, and I nod once. *Not funny, got it...* When I look over at him, he's still staring at me. "You know I hated covering up for you in high school and even more that day four years ago, so please don't joke about that."

"Asshole move, Sire. Booo!" Lis finally crawls out of where I pushed her, and I somehow just realize August was right.

"You *are* drunk." She looks at me like she's caught and doesn't say another word as she walks out with her head down. I let out a sigh and turn back to August when I realize he's still watching me.

"I'm sorry, August." I shake my head and look down at the floor, feeling like an asshole for joking about that. August was always there to clean up my messes and lie to everyone for me when I was high as shit, and I'm an asshole for making him do that, whether I was under the worst influence or not.

"It's fine, Sire."

"It's not." My eyes meet his, and he gives me a weak shrug. He still looks worried, and I let out another sigh. "I really am fine, August." He opens his mouth to say something but quickly closes it. "What?" He looks like he isn't going to say whatever it is but goes on.

"How come it's always me you lie to?" I take a step back but try not to show it on my face that his words sting. "I know you beat yourself up about it, so please know I'm not mad at you for it or hold it against you, but..."

He shakes his head before going on. “You hate lying to Mom and refuse to hurt poor Sage’s feelings. Lisette is clearly just numb to whatever the fuck you throw at her, and I love Dad, but he’s too busy with work to notice anything wrong with you. It’s always *me* you seem to have no problem lying to or making me cover for you when it comes to your addiction.”

I nod slowly, taking his words in, and he looks like he wants to take it all back at whatever look is on my face. “I’m sorry.” He shakes his head as he quickly tries to take it back.

“Don’t apologize, August.”

“No, I shouldn’t have brought it up right now. A part of me wants to know, yes, but you’re struggling right now, and—”

“I’m always struggling, August, and you’re always there.” He looks over at me, stops moving around nervously, and sort of goes still. “I know it’s wrong, and me being on whatever drugs doesn’t excuse it, but... it’s easier to lie to you and ask you to do fucked up shit for me because you’re still going to be here in the end.”

I’m not sure why, but a smile reaches his mouth as I go on. “God, August, I think I could stab you in a major artery, and you’d bleed out with a smile on your face, going on about how you know I did it for a good reason.”

He laughs softly, and I give him a weak smile. “I won’t lie to you anymore,” I promise him. “And God please forbid it, but if I relapse and I make you cover for me, I’m giving you permission right now to beat me up, take me against my will, and have me admitted into rehab or one of those scary shock therapy camps.”

He throws his head back with a laugh, but I mean every word. Just because I know he’ll never leave my side doesn’t mean I get to keep testing his love for me. It isn’t fair.

He walks over to me with his arms open, and I almost back away but let him hug me. “It’s me and you til the wheels fall off.” A smile spreads across my face, and I hug him back.

“And even when they fall, we’re pushing that shit across the finish line” I finish for him, and he squeezes me tighter before

pulling away.

“Sorry again for joking about that. I was trying to go about this the way Lisette does.” Humor is her coping mechanism, but I don’t find it helpful, so I won’t be joking about that again. I don’t get how that’s supposed to help, but whatever.

At the reminder of Lis, August turns to me, and he looks worried all over again. “What’s up with her?”

I shake my head in response. “If she’d talk about it, I’d know.” We walked out of my closet to find our youngest brat on my living room floor, crisscrossed.

August immediately gasps when he sees what she has. “Is that a turtle?!” She smiles as she nods and holds the little thing in her palm so August can see.

“Didn’t I tell you not to bring that shit over here?” They both turn to me like I just offended their mother.

“He’s my emotional support animal. I love him.” She holds him closer like I just threatened to make turtle soup.

“He’s a turtle,” I deadpan, “who you got two weeks ago. You do not *love* him.”

“He’s her emotional support animal, Sire. And she does love him. We both do.” August jumps at her defense perusal and sits on the floor with the damn turtle. I roll my eyes at them and walk over to the couch.

“You’re coming to brunch with us, right?” I sigh and shake my head at him.

“No. Your girlfriend puts a strain on my brain. I swear she’s constantly bullying me about something that had nothing to do with her and happened four years ago.” She obviously holds grudges for way too long. One may argue that so do Vidia and I, but that’s different. That night directly affected us, and it had nothing to do with Hazel.

August pulls his phone out, replies to whoever texts him, and then looks up at me. “Did you just say she bullies you?” He’s fighting back a smile, and I roll my eyes as I take a seat on my couch.

“She does bully me.” As if on cue, my phone rings with a text.

Little menace:

Stop being a bitch and come to brunch. My man unfortunately wants you here. Try not to stab my best friend’s back again while you’re here.

I turn my phone to August, and he just laughs. Asshole. “My queen has spoken. Let’s go before we’re late.” He taps Lis’s turtle goodbye, then gets up.

“Let’s go, Lis.” I turn to her, but she only shakes her head.

“Oh, absolutely not. Sage told me you and Vidia argue like a divorced couple. I’m sobering up, and I’m going to need another shot if I have to deal with that.” A part of me is upset that she was drinking, but I can’t help but laugh at her words.

“Fine. Stay here until I get back so we can talk.” She gives me a thumbs up and says something about setting up an obstacle course for her ninja turtle.

I knew I was going to end up going to brunch even though I told August I wasn’t, which is why I got ready after the third time he asked.

We walk into our garage, and August makes a run to his orange Lambo. “Three Gs to whoever gets there first.”

I smile at him and make a run for it. “Where to?!”

“That bakery you’re always at!” I slide into my matte black Ferrari and race out of the garage. I’m always at the bakery because I own it, but August doesn’t know that. No one knows, actually.

A friend from NA would always bring amazing sweets to our meetings, and he always talked about how he dreamt of opening a bakery but couldn’t afford it because of how his life spiraled after his addiction.

For his two-year soberversary, I bought the bakery for him and everything else he needed to jump-start his business. I

didn't do it because I pitied him but because he deserved it, and I had more than enough money to not help. I'm glad I did because people from different states come to eat Tony's pastries.

Smoking August's ass, I climb out of my car as he speeds into the parking space behind me. "I'll take those three Gs in cash."

"You fucking cheated!" He's such a sore loser. I lean against my car, crossing my arms across my chest.

"There's no rules to illegal street racing, August." He should know that since we both raced in high school. We were actually really good but stopped once we went to college because we couldn't risk our scholarships.

"You took two red lights, Sire."

"They were definitely yellow." They definitely weren't, but they were on dead streets. I stopped at the red lights on the busy roads. There's a small breeze, and a whiff of vanilla hits me. I turn my head and see Vid; her outfit makes it seem like we matched on purpose with her white tee and light-washed jeans.

Hazel follows next to her and rolls her eyes at me. "Yellow means slow down, Traitor, and August, why are you racing? That's dangerous."

I roll my eyes and push myself out of my car. "Live a little, Hazel."

Vid chimes in on her best friend's side. "You can live without putting yourself in danger." Oh, she shouldn't be talking. August starts defending himself to Hazel, saying that he was being careful, and I turn my head to the side, questioning Vid.

"My memory may be off, but I recall you liked riding passenger while I sped down the highway." She was also riding something else, but I leave that part out.

She rolls her eyes and walks toward the bakery. "Your memory is off." I follow behind her and help her remember.

“I don’t think so. I vividly remember going one-twenty down the highway with you,” I say low enough just so she can hear, “and your legs on the dashboard while I made you—”

She cuts me off, elbowing me in the stomach, and I hold back a laugh. She remembers. I admit that was very dangerous, but we were horny college kids. Plus, the highway was pretty empty, considering how late it was.

We reach the restaurant, and Hazel says she wants to eat outside, so we do. Since August and his headache want to sit across from each other, I end up sitting next to August and across from Vidia.

I don’t hate the seating arrangement since it was this or sitting next to Hazel—it’s just that it brings back way too many memories of our double dates.

There are already four menus on our table, and the waiter comes to us about five minutes after we’re seated to give us all water with a basket of croissants. August tells the waiter we need more time, but he’s the only one who’s being indecisive.

“Bro, just get whatever Hazel is getting.”

He turns his head as he looks at the picture of the cheese omelet. “What are you getting?”

I show him my order, and then he looks at Vid, and she tells him her order. He flips the page to look at the picture as if he doesn’t know what the fuck French toast is.

After maybe another ten minutes, Tony comes over to our table instead of our previous waiter. I give him a smile and rise from my seat to give him a hug. “Hey, Mr. Griffin, are you guys ready to order, or should I give you more time?”

“We’re ready, Tony, and what’d I tell you about calling me that?” He claims it’s a respect thing to him, so I stop bugging him about it. Whatever he wants, I guess.

Tony turns to Vid first for her order, but she keeps her eyes on the menu and spins the ring on her pointer finger. She never liked ordering food herself.

“I’ll have the cheese omelet and a passion colada smoothie,” Hazel speaks up. She steals a glance at Vidia, then adds, “Make those two passion coladas, please.” He writes it down, and when he turns to August, he tells the waiter he’ll have the same as her with orange juice. Then he asks for my order, and I give it to him. He gives me a nod while writing it down, then turns back to Vid.

“And what can I get for you?” She steals a quick glance between Tony and her menu.

“Um...” It’s bothering me how nervous she’s obviously getting, so I speak up for her.

“She’ll have the Cuban-style French toast.” She finally looks up and gazes into my eyes before she looks away to give Tony a quick smile, handing him her menu. We thank him, and he takes the rest of our menus.

We all talk about nothing in particular, and by that, I mean Hazel and Vid gang up on me for twenty minutes, and then our food arrives.

“Who chose to have brunch in a bakery?”

Hazel, of course, answers me with an attitude. “It’s a bakery *and* cafe, Sire.”

“No shit, Hazel. I asked who—never fucking mind.” Vid and August laugh at our interaction, and I focus on my plate. Once we’re done eating, the waiter takes our plates and asks if we want dessert. Vid once again doesn’t make an effort to speak up, so I order her cake.

“Two slices of tres leche, please. No cherries.”

Hazel tells him she wants chocolate hazelnut cookies. When he walks away to get their desserts, August speaks up. “Speaking of hazelnuts, V, why do you call her hazelnut?”

Vid turns to him, shrugging. “I honestly can’t remember. I’ve been calling her that since before grade school.”

Hazel shakes her head. “I was hanging upside down by my feet on the monkey bars, and she said Hazel is nuts, then the

name hazelnut just stuck.” That’s corny, but I don’t feel like getting bullied anymore, so I stay shut for a change.

Vid laughs as she recalls the memory, and I smile at the sound of it. “That is so corny, but I could’ve sworn I saw the word hazelnut somewhere and made the comparison in your name.”

“Yeah, that was a little after you started calling me hazelnut.” Vid nods, remembering, and the waiter returns with the desserts. When he places a slice of cake in front of me, I slide it to Vid, but she slides it back.

“I only wanted one.”

I shrug my shoulders and slide it back to her. “Save it for later then.” It’s her favorite, and it’s a small slice, so I know she’ll eat both pieces. She surprisingly doesn’t argue. She gives me a small nod, then eats her slice of cake and the second one. I knew she wanted it.

After a lot of bickering with the entire table, I paid for our meal. We’re all walking in no specific direction as we enjoy the weather.

“Help! We need a doctor!” We all turn around, and Vidia searches for where the man’s voice is coming from. “Please, does anyone know CPR!?” She runs into a sketchy ass alley, and I follow behind her.

There’s a guy passed out with a needle in his arm, and the one that, I’m assuming, called for help is doing chest compressions. Vidia rushes over to them and checks the passed-out guy’s pulse, then looks up at the one doing chest compressions. “What’s your name?”

“Larry.” He’s scratching his arms a bit too much, and I take a step back.

“Hi, Larry, my name is Vidia. I’m a doctor. Can you tell me what happened?” He doesn’t answer her, and Vidia looks down at his hand placement on the guy’s chest.

“Call nine-one-one.” I start dialing, and Vidia pushes Larry aside and opens the passed-out guy’s eyelids. I’m no doctor, but his pupils look very small.

I can't tell if that's bad or not because she stays calm and turns to Larry. "What did he take?" He's pacing and twitching like he's on some shit, and I want to grab Vid and get the fuck out of here.

I have my phone to my ear as I get a voicemail. What kind of fucking operator misses a damn emergency call? "The cops aren't fucking answering."

She starts panicking a bit since the guy under us doesn't look too good and yells. "Answer me! What did he take!"

"Heroin!" She quickly reaches for her bag and pulls out some sort of nasal spray, which I'm assuming has naloxone in it. She sprays it into the guy's nose, and I'm pretty sure it only takes two or three minutes to work, but I don't think he's breathing anymore.

"Vid..." She feels his neck again. When she doesn't get a pulse, she immediately starts CPR. She places her hands where they need to be for mouth-to-mouth, and I immediately push her aside to stop her. "Vidia, are you insane!? Do you at least have a mouth barrier or something?"

This man is clearly homeless or something, and she can contract so many things from him. She pushes me back with a lot more force than I pushed her. "I'm a doctor, Sire. I'm not going to just let him die because I don't have a damn mouth barrier."

She leans down before I can stop her again and blows into his mouth. "Vidia, what the fuck!"

I take a step to her, but she gives me a warning look. "I swear to God, you better not stop me again, Sire." I run my hands through my hair and then hear sirens behind us. Larry makes a run for it, and two paramedics rush in, but she tells them she's a doctor.

They thankfully place a mask on the guy and use the bag thing, but there's no point now since she already made mouth-to-mouth contact three damn times. I watch her do CPR on him for what feels like forever, but it's too late. He's gone.

One of the paramedics stands up and takes a step back. “Doctor Gomez, he’s gone.”

“I can save him.” We know she can’t, but we let her try for another five minutes.

She looks like her arms are starting to get tired. I bend down on the ground next to her and put a hand over hers. “He’s gone, Vidia.”

She frantically shakes her head and keeps up with the CPR. “Vidia, look at me.” She turns her head in the opposite direction of me, and I pull her face to mine.

She has tears in her eyes that are threatening to spill but doesn’t stop the chest compression. “You need to stop, Vid.”

“No.” She squeezes the bag when the paramedic doesn’t, then goes back to compressions.

“She needs to stop.”

I turn to the idiot paramedic. “Didn’t I just fucking say that?” He looks at his buddy, but neither of them speaks up again. Vidia wipes her cheek on her shoulder and is still doing CPR but a bit slower since she’s been at it for fifteen minutes straight.

“Vidia—”

“No, Sire!” I briefly close my eyes and let out a sigh for what I’m about to do. When I open them back up, I stand and wrap my arms around Vid’s waist, lifting her up.

She kicks and fights for me to put her down, but I ignore her demands and pick up her purse. “Put me down now, Sire!” Her voice breaks, and I would do anything she wants right now, but not that. She’s just going to rush back to save someone who can’t be saved.

“Sire!” She fights me until I put her down outside the alley where we left August and Hazel. As soon as her feet touch the ground, she turns for the alley again.

I step in her way, and she looks up at me. “Move.” She takes another step to the left, but I block her again. She pushes me, but I don’t move an inch, so she pushes me again.

“I could’ve saved her!” She shoves me another time. “You should have let me save her!” When she lifts her arms to push me again, I grab them.

She’s looking at me with teary eyes, but I can still see the anger in them. “Him, Vidia. He was a guy. Why do you keep saying her?” She looks at me confused, like she didn’t even notice, and that’s when I realize she’s making this about her friend who passed. God, of course this shit triggered her.

“This isn’t about her, Vidia.”

“Shut up.”

I bend down so we’re at eye level with one another. “You couldn’t have saved either of them. It wasn’t your fault.” I thought I got this through her head years ago. She pulls her arms from my grasp and wipes her tears. August and Hazel are staring at us but don’t say anything.

“Let’s go. You need to go to a hospital and get checked for any—”

“I know what I need to get checked for.” She snatches her purse from me and storms off. I let out a frustrated breath and turn to Hazel.

“Make sure she goes to a hospital. She gave a homeless guy mouth-to-mouth.”

“Of course she did.” She rolls her eyes, not surprised to hear Vidia would even think of doing something dumb like that. She just can’t help herself when it comes to saving someone.

“Make sure she goes, Hazel.” She puts her hand up, surrendering at my tone, and she says she will. I turn to walk away but then turn back. “And make sure she talks to someone about Serenity.” She gives me a confused look, most likely because she didn’t know I knew about her.

“About Serenity? Why?”

“Stop asking questions and just make sure she talks to someone, Hazel.” She makes another confused face but with a mix of disgust.

“Alright, damn, I will.” As I’m walking away, I hear her say, “You care so damn much, you go talk to her.” Yeah, I fucking want to.

When I walk back into my apartment, Lis is cooking. Scratch that, she’s burning something.

“Hmm.” I pretend my burnt apartment smells amazing. “Is that turtle I smell?” She turns around so damn fast I won’t be surprised if she just gave herself whiplash.

“What do you have against Piglet?” I’m confused for a second before I realize that’s her emotional support pet’s name.

“You named your turtle Piglet?”

“Yes.” She turns back around, and I freeze when I walk into the kitchen. It wouldn’t be fucked up if I slapped her, right? I know she’s a girl, but she’s my sister, so it doesn’t count. I take in a deep breath and turn to her.

“I know you didn’t put that shit in the bowl I eat out of, Lisette.” She waves me off with my spatula. I glance at her fucking turtle swimming in my favorite bowl.

“You can clean it, Sire.”

“*You* can clean it, the fuck. I—” I decide I’m done with her. “Just keep it.” She chuckles, and I shake my head at her. She serves two plates of something I’m not even going to try, then sits next to me at the counter.

“Why do you look like that?” She circles her forks around my face, and I run a hand down my face, telling her not to worry about it. I just want to fucking talk to Vidia, but I’m going to let everything that just happened settle.

“What’s going on with *you*, Lis?” She lets out a sigh and moves her burnt food around her plate.

“I got fired.” She steals a glance at me like she’s waiting for some huge angry reaction, but she should know she isn’t going to get that out of me.

“Why?” She picks up a fork full of whatever the hell she made, but when she puts it to her mouth, I slap it out of her

hand. “I know your life is hard, but please don’t poison yourself right now. I like having you around.” She bursts into a laugh and shoves me playfully.

“Asshole.” I chuckle in response and take her plate to the trash before making something actually edible. “I got fired because I’m too depressed to go to work, and I’m depressed because I have to go to work, but now I don’t, so I’m depressed that I’m jobless.”

When I turn to her, she has her head in the palm of her hands. “So do you want a job or not?”

“I want a million dollars.” I turn around completely and study her for a beat.

“Do you actually think a million dollars will solve your problems? Because I’ll sign the check right now, Lis.” She looks up at me and watches me for a few seconds like she’s trying to make sense of my words.

“I was joking. I can’t take your money either way.” She shakes her head and runs a hand through her hair.

“Of course you can, Lis. It’s not like I don’t have it. Seriously, if financial issues are what’s stressing you out, then say the word, and your problems will be solved.” She shakes her head softly, and I roll my eyes. She never wants to take a helping hand, even when she’s stuck in a damn ditch.

“You can’t throw money at my problems.”

“I can since I’m a millionaire.” I smile, and she laughs, but it comes out weird. “Lis...”

“It’s not that. Sire. I’m not broke—I just don’t want to work—but I will be broke if I don’t work.” She shakes her head at whatever she just remembered. “It’s *so* draining.”

“Then don’t,” I say without hesitating.

“What?” She sits up completely now, and I lean against the counter across from her.

“You need to put your mental health first, especially given your history of self-harm. If having a job is mentally

exhausting, then don't worry about needing to work. I'll take care of everything, and you take care of your mental health."

"Sire—" I cut her off before she could turn down my offer.

"Please, Lis. If you want to paint your feelings away and never go to work again, consider it done. Let me do this for you. All you have to do is give your sobriety and mental health your best shot. You got this, Apple Jack."

The biggest smile lights up her face at my nickname for her. I barely ever call her that anymore, but when I do, she knows I'm serious. Lis is an *amazing* fucking artist. She finds peace in painting, so if she says she doesn't want to work and sit home and paint, then she's getting what she wants.

"Are you sure?" I roll my eyes at her, and she only smiles bigger. Without a second thought, she walks around the counter and pulls me in for a hug. "I'll pay you back every penny when I'm as famous as Picasso."

"So I'm never getting paid, noted." She pulls away, and before I can even make a run for it, she punches me in the gut. "Asshole." I struggle to pull in a breath, and she walks over to the little green thing.

"Did you hear that Piglet?" She taps his head. "Uncle Sire is going to buy you the biggest tank I find." I throw my head back with a laugh. Of course, she doesn't have a proper home for this shit.

"Don't tell me you bought that thing off the road."

"Okay, I won't." She walks off with Piglet, and when she turns to give me a smile, I feel more hopeful than this morning. She's going to be okay. But then I think about the shit show that went down half an hour ago, and I wish I could say the same about Vid.

Chapter Thirteen

SIRE

IT'S NOT LIKE THAT." I deny August's stupid claims about me still having feelings for Vidia. After the shitshow in the alleyway the other week, I've been trying to be a good person and reach out to her more than often. He thinks that means I want to start a damn family with the little shit or something.

"Bro, you said, 'Talk to me, my love.' Stop lying to yourself." I roll my eyes at him. She was talking to Hazel about it the other day, and when I saw her tearing up, that slipped out.

"I was just comforting her. Leave me alone." I take a sip of my Sprite and scroll through my phone.

"I'll leave you alone when you admit you still have feelings for her." God, he's so damn persistent. When I don't reply, he smirks and takes a sip of his bourbon. We're in Texas for the game we just won by a long shot.

The team wanted to come out to the hotel bar, and although I'm not drinking, I joined them to prove to August that I'm fine. He didn't want to drink around me or even come down here to celebrate, so here I am. Reassuring him that I have everything under control.

“You are horrible at giving directions, August.” We turn to see Hazel and Vidia, who are both in tight, very short dresses.

August downs the rest of his drink before pulling Hazel onto his lap. “Not too bad if you found us.” He kisses her temple, and I fake a gag, which makes him gag over Hazel, and I break into a laugh at his weird reflex. He can’t hear people gag, so I do it to bother him.

Hazel flips me off, and I grab her finger and twist it. She pushes my hand away, and Vidia moves from the middle of us and stands on my left to order a drink.

The bartender nods after taking her order and walks away to make her drink, but I stop him when he passes me. “No cherries.” He gives me a confused look. “No cherries in her piña colada.” The bartender nods in understanding.

Before he can walk off, Vidia stops him again. “Um, no. Extra cherries, please.” He quickly leaves before either of us can change our minds, and I turn to her, confused.

“You hate cherries.”

“No, I don’t. Mind your business, Gryffindor.” I smirk while shaking my head. She only asked for the extra cherries to prove a point. She hates them, and I know she does.

About half an hour later, and it’s mainly just the team here. We’re lounging in the middle of the bar on the couches.

“Twenty dollars to the pair that looks the hottest while taking body shots.” I chuckle in response to Diego. He’s so random. My eyes wander to Vidia at the other end of the couch, and all the memories from college come flooding back.

She looks over at me as if we’re both thinking of that night but quickly looks away. “Vid, aren’t body shots your favorite?” She takes a sip of her drink and glares at me over the rim of her cup.

I watch her as she places her cup down and shakes her head. “Nah, skinny dipping is more my thing, though.” We share a knowing look, and one of the other players speaks up again.

“Shit, is the pool still open?” The bar is full of laughter, but I send her a warning look. *She better not even try it.*

She rolls her eyes, then picks up her drink again, and I notice she still has three cherries sitting at the bottom of her cup. “Why the extra cherries if you weren’t going to eat them?”

“I am.”

“Go ahead then,” I challenge, and she scrunches her nose at the cup but quickly tries to cover her disgust. I bite back a smile and watch her as she pops the cherry into her mouth.

She slowly chews it as if it’s going to blow up in her mouth if she chews any harder. Putting her out of her misery, I slide down the couch so I’m sitting right beside her and place my hand in front of her mouth with a napkin.

She immediately spits it out, and I’m honestly surprised she wasn’t a bit more stubborn about it. “Asshole.”

I open my mouth to retort, but that Adam guy from her job walks up to us and sits on the other side of Vid. I hate that he’s also our travel physician. I highly doubt we even need two. “Hey again.” *Again?*

Vid turns her back to me so she can face him. “Hey, Asher, where’d you go?” Oh... I knew it was something with an A.

When he hands her another piña colada, I lightly laugh when I see the extra four cherries he got for her, and they both turn to me. Vid gives me a warning look. “Don’t start, Sire.” Oh, I’m definitely starting.

“I think it’s so sweet that he paid enough attention to notice how much you *love* cherries.” I’m holding in a laugh, and poor Asher is smiling proudly beside her.

She rolls her eyes and turns back to thank him for the drink. When she looks down at her cup in pure disgust, I stifle a laugh and quickly take a picture of her. She looks so mad, but it’s cute. *Cute? Shut up, you’re proving August right.*

“This dress looks really good on you.” He plays with the bottom of her dress, and I feel myself growing annoyed.

I scroll through my phone, trying to ignore them, but I still somehow manage to hear her seductively whisper in his ear.

“It looks better off.” Oh, I know she did not just say that shit. I turn to her slowly and bring a hand up to her hair. I’m careful to pick one singular curl before giving it a yank. She turns around again, more annoyed this time.

“Ouch.” She says in a bored tone.

“Oops. Must’ve got caught on me.” I glare at her and poke the side of my cheek with my tongue. Asher whispers something in her ear, and they both get up and walk out of the sliding door that leads to the back. He has his hand on her back and is slowly moving it way too low for my liking

I pick up my cup of water and get up to go outside. The lights leading to and inside the pool are all that’s illuminating the patio out here. My eyes adjust to the dark, and I spot them on one of the pool chairs.

My blood boils seeing Vid sitting on his lap with her hand in his hair. I shouldn’t even care this much. I turn to leave but whip back around when I hear one of their muffled moans. Fuck no.

“Vidia.” She looks at the sky as if I’m bothering her or something. *Rude*. Asher leans back in the chair, and my eyes flick down to his hands on her inner thigh. He seriously needs to stop touching her. “Get up, Vidia.”

“Excuse me?”

I realize how demanding that came out and try to lighten my tone since I know she’ll only do the opposite of whatever I say. “I need to talk to you.” My voice is softer, but it sounds forced, so I clear my throat. I actually do want to talk to her, but she doesn’t give me the chance.

“I’m busy, Sire. Fuck off.” *Little shit*.

“It’s important.” I’m close to dragging her off of his lap so she has three more seconds.

“I doubt it.”

I let out an annoyed breath. She obviously isn't going to let me win this, so I glare at Asher and nod my head toward the door. He gets the message but doesn't get up as fast as I want him to. He says something in her ear and then puts something in her hand. They both stand, and Vidia puts whatever it is in her bra. It looks like a key card to his hotel room, and I feel my jaw clenching.

I walk toward her as Asher passes me. "Green doesn't look good on you, Gryffindor." I'm wearing all black, so it's obvious what she's implying.

"I look good in everything. Your words, not mine." I smile at the memory of her telling me that. It feels like a lot more years than just four.

"I also said you were a cock block—" I throw my cup of water in her face before she finishes her sentence. I wasn't cock blocking shit because she wasn't going to sleep with him.

She gasps and wipes the water off her face. "Are you fucking kidding me!?"

"You looked thirsty." She snatches the cup from me, and in one quick move, she scoops up some of the pool water and throws it in my face. I should have expected that, so I'm not going to be too pissed about it.

"Oops." I scoff at her and wipe my face with the front of my shirt. When she walks past me, I grab her arm and pull her in front of me. Our eyes lock, and without looking down, I grab the key card from in between her boobs.

When she goes to reach for it, I put my hand above my head. "I'm not about to play this game with you, Sire."

"I don't care. I just have two questions, then you can go." She crosses her arms over her chest and waits for me to ask. I look between her honey-brown eyes, mesmerized that even with the little bit of light out here, they still sparkle the same.

"How are you?"

She studies me, clearly confused. "That was your important question? Give me the damn card." She goes to reach for it again, but I keep it over my head.

“Answer me.”

“I was fine until you came along.” I falter a bit, not sure if she meant when I came along tonight or in her life in general. I assume she notices, but she doesn’t correct herself, and it makes me fear her answer. I knew she hated me, but does she regret our good moments?

“Second question?” Unpleased with her first answer, I debate whether I should ask the second one or not. She taps her finger on her arm impatiently.

“Answer truthfully, Vid.” She lets out a sigh, and so do I because she’s so difficult.

“I’m fine. Why do you care so damn much? In case you suffered a brain injury when they hit you in the head earlier today, we’re not on good terms, and we never will be.” I smile at the reminder of literally getting a baseball smacked to my head at this afternoon’s game. Thank God for my helmet.

“I care for the same reasons you still care about my addiction.” No matter our history, it doesn’t exist for her when it comes to my addiction, and it doesn’t exist for me when it comes to her shitty dad or her past with her friend whose death she still apparently blames herself for.

Her eyes soften a bit, and I can see her entire body relax. “I’ve been talking to Hazel. I cried. I’m fine...” Her eyes dart to the pool as she finishes. “Thank you for caring.” I give her a nod, although she still isn’t looking at me.

“Can you talk to me about it?” I ask my second question.

“No,” she answers quickly. I try not to show I’m offended, but I should’ve seen that coming. “Not unless I need to.” She adds, and then her eyes meet mine.

“Need to? You don’t want to?” She studies me for a second and shakes her head softly. Like she thought of something dumb.

“I don’t get it, Sire. We’re so hot and cold. You’re screaming at me one minute, then apologizing and wanting to talk the next.”

“I haven’t screamed at you in…” I try to think of how long it’s been.

“Two weeks.” I look down at her and feel a smirk on my face.

“You’ve been counting?” I tease, and she rolls her eyes. “Come on, Vid. You know the shit you did to me is out the window when it comes to this.” Her gaze hardens again, and I wish I could alter my words.

“The shit *I* did to you? Not the shit you did to me?” She reminds me that night and everything after it was my fault, and I shake my head at her.

“Don’t,” I say softly. “We were doing good.” She rolls her eyes and folds her arms across her chest again.

“Just give me the key, Sire.”

And just like that, we’re back to cold. Fine. “If I give you this card, are you going to go up to his room and let him fuck you?” My voice is laced with more bitterness than I intended, and a sinister smile slowly grows on her face. She gives a light chuckle as she studies me.

“Yup.” She pops the P, and I immediately fling the card into the pool. Her head turns to where it lands, right in the middle of the deep end. I smirk as I watch it sink to the bottom of the pool.

She turns back to me, her mouth a gape. “Wow, that was very mature of you, Sire.”

“You’re so damn thirsty for him, go ahead and swim for it.” Her eyes light up as if she just got an idea. She shrugs her shoulders, then reaches behind her back, and I hear her zipper opening.

I keep my eyes focused on hers as her dress drops to her feet. Not seeing any bra straps in my peripheral, my eyes cast down her body, and she’s, of course, naked. I lightly laugh and look off to the side, fighting the urge to keep my eyes on her.

I turn my head to the pool at the sound of the water splashing. *That little shit is actually swimming for the damn*

key card. It only takes her two tries to dive all the way down twelve feet to retrieve the card.

I watch as she puts the card between her teeth and swims toward the stairs. I keep my eyes trained on hers as she makes her way back to me. She doesn't stop to pick up her dress and walks right past me. *I think the fuck not*. I quickly turn to grab her waist and cover her from anyone who could be looking out from inside the bar. "Do not play with me, Vidia." I keep my eyes locked on hers.

She's fighting back a laugh as she steps into her red dress and pulls it back up. She turns around and says, "Zip me up." I start zipping the dress up just a bit but stop.

"You'll put your pride aside and talk to me whenever anything Serenity or your dad-related is bothering you."

She turns her head to the side and rings out her hair. "This isn't our college days. I'm not going to turn to you whenever I'm upset."

"I wasn't asking." I know her. I know she wants to talk about it, and if I can ask her for help when it's about my addiction, then she can do this.

She lightly shakes her head, but I can see a smile on the side of her face. I finish zipping her up, and when she turns to walk away, I snatch the key card from her hand and throw it back into the pool. Before she gets a chance to argue, I put my hand on her waist, pushing her forward.

"Walk. Now."

She smirks, and as we walk back inside, I hear her mumble, "Jellybean." *I'm not jealous*.

Chapter Fourteen

SIRE

DAMN, THIS WINNING STREAK FEELS good.” I crack a smile at how happy August sounds, but I’m also pretty excited. We’ve won all of the seven games we’ve played so far, and today, we literally just spanked the Blue Jays. Today’s win feels even better because they were talking so much shit about beating us.

“Maybe you guys have a lucky charm.”

I look over at Vidia. I always called her our lucky charm, and maybe it’s in my head, but it’s almost like she’s trying not to look at me after saying that. We walk into the juice bar after August, and a few people quickly rush to us. We’re still in our uniforms, so people recognize us ten times easier. A little boy, maybe nine or ten in my jersey number, reaches us first.

“Hi. Oh my god, I can’t believe it’s really you. You did so good today, like really good.” I chuckle at how nervous he seems. I like it when fans notice me, but I love it when it’s kids. It makes me feel like I’m inspiring them or something.

“Hey, kid, I appreciate you coming to watch the game. Did you want me to sign that?” I point at the baseball and pen he’s holding, and he nods quickly before handing it to me.

“What’s your name?” He tells me his name, and I sign his ball and make it out to him. When I hand it back, he gasps like he can’t believe I just did that, then thanks me and runs back to his parents.

August is taking a picture with two little boys, and before I walk away, they call me into the picture. “Are you two really brothers?” I look down at the kid and give him a nod. He looks between August and I in disbelief.

The older kid turns his head to the side like he’s confused. “Does it get annoying having to play with your brother? Because my brother annoys me when we play sometimes.” The younger one, who I’m assuming is his brother, elbows him in the stomach.

August and I break into a laugh. My favorite part about meeting a bunch of kids is how opinionated they are. “Yeah, it gets annoying,” I admit.

August turns his head to me like he wasn’t expecting that answer. “So then we’ll kick you off the team.”

I playfully shove him, and the little boys throw their heads back laughing, and then the older one objects. “No, don’t kick him off. You need each other to win. You two are the best duo.” August and I give each other a smile and then finish taking the picture.

After maybe ten minutes of talking to more fans, taking pictures, and signing things, we walk over to the girls, and I force myself not to look at Vidia.

They ordered our smoothies for us, and I’m about to take a sip of mine when I notice Vidia looking at her piña colada like it has live bugs in it. She’s so dramatic.

Rolling my eyes, I reach over and pick the cherry out and pluck it off the stem, throwing it into my mouth. “Problem solved.” A small smile grows on her face, but it’s gone as fast as it appeared, and I think I imagined it.

When she looks up at me, she gazes between my eyes like she wants to say something. “Thank you,” she mumbles

instead, but it's clear she wants to say more, so when she walks off, I pull her back to me.

"Talk to me," I say softly, and she studies me for a few seconds but then shakes her head and walks out. She's been trying extra hard to avoid me after I told her to talk to me if she was upset about Serenity and the alley shit, but I can tell she's upset.

August nor Hazel question the extra stiffness between us and kiss each other goodbye as we head for our cars. Since the girls came to the game together, they head in the opposite direction as August and I walk to our cars in the stadium's private parking lot.

"Can we go to the Museum of Illusion later today?" He really is still a kid. August has been wanting to go to this place for weeks now, and I've been saying next week for the past month.

"Who's coming with us? And don't say it's just us if your menace and her little shit best friend are 'coincidentally' going to be there." He's done that shit twice now, and I don't know if he thinks I'm just dumb or a complete moron, but I know he's planning this shit.

"Can you stop acting like you don't like it when all four of us hang out together?" I don't mind it, but Vid and I are being passive-aggressive half the time, and her best friend is just aggressive.

I take a sip of my mango pineapple smoothie as we cross the street to the stadium's parking lot entrance. "It's not that I don't like hanging out with them. It's certain settings we can't be at together, and a fucking museum, where I'm sure children and fans are going to be, is not the place for the three of us to be fighting with each other."

If other people saw the way Hazel, Vid, and I argue, they would think we genuinely want each other dead. Maybe that's how Vid and I felt once upon a time ago, but I don't think the hatred is there anymore; then again, I don't know what to think anymore.

For Vid and I, arguing is a defense mechanism. We don't want to face the past, so we fight in the present to avoid it. At least, that's what Kayden, my sponsor, said. I disagreed with him because that shit sounds stupid.

As for Hazel, though, she's just sticking by her best friend's side, and although I give her shit for it, I would do the same for August, so I guess I can't be too mad at her. She's extra as fuck, though.

I turn over to August because he's taking a while to answer me, but he isn't even next to me anymore. I turn around, and he's holding his head like he's in pain. I make my way to him and roll my eyes because I know he's faking whatever injury this is supposed to be. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Brain freeze!" He sounds like he's in pain, but I can tell he's acting for whatever attention-seeking reason it is this time.

"The smoothies aren't even that cold, you bitch."

He starts running like there is a damn lion chasing him, so I run behind him instead of asking questions. I look behind us, but no one is there. "Double or nothing!" This dick. He wants to race again after losing our last one.

I should've known he was going to call a rematch since he didn't pay up. He gets in his car first and speeds out about a minute before me. Cheater.

I speed out of the parking lot and zoom down the street. I notice August's orange Lambo a few cars in front of me. I swiftly swerve between the lanes to get in front of him.

When we get to a red light, he drives up beside me. I hear an engine that doesn't sound like his roaring. I look over, and there's a red Bugatti with pitch-black tints obviously challenging the two of us.

I don't have a good feeling about this, but before I can tell August anything, the light switches from red to green and the two of them take off. I gain speed and follow behind them, quickly catching up.

Whoever this guy is stays a car ahead of me the entire time. August suddenly speeds past the both of us. When I pass the red Bugatti, they cut in front of me and then try to cut in front of August, but there's another car way too close for him to get in.

“What the fuck is this asshole doing?” With August in the middle lane, I move from his right to his left, trying to get away from this dick. I keep the same speed as August and try to signal him to forget the race, but he picks up speed.

August starts getting way too close to me, and I notice it's because that other idiot is getting way too close to him. I slow down so August can get into my lane in front of me.

Before he can move into my lane, whoever this dick is jolts into August. I slam on my brakes but hit August anyway, and his car goes spinning and crashes right into a fire hydrant, setting it off.

“Holy shit!” I rush out of my car as water fires everywhere and run to August.



“LA DODGER STARS SIRE GRIFFIN and his brother August Hale get into a car crash after participating in a street race with the infamous red Bugatti.” I exit the news app and don't even bother reading the article Jackson sent me.

It only happened a few damn hours ago, and we didn't even speak to anyone, yet they have a whole article on it. It's probably all bullshit.

Before I can shut my phone off, it lights up with a call.

“Thank fuck.” Lisette looks relieved as I answer her Facetime call.

“Awe, you care about me?”

She rolls her eyes as she wipes the paint from her face. “No, I just can't remember if you updated your will since you became a millionaire. It would suck if you died before making sure to leave me something.”

“Oh, fuck you.”

She throws her head back with a laugh, and I can't help but join her.

“I did update my will, and you're not in it.”

“Liar.” She doesn't miss a beat as she calls me out, and she's right. Of course, she's in my damn will. “Is August okay? I thought you guys gave up street racing?” I let out a sigh at having to repeat this since I just got off the phone with my other sister.

“We did, and he's fine. It was his idea.” August never really gave up racing, and I know he misses it, but today proved we clearly can't do that shit anymore.

“Oh, I know it was his idea. You're the idiot for always listening to him.” I flip her off, and she doesn't look at the camera, but I can tell she saw me from her smirk.

“Did you call to make sure your favorite person was okay or to bully me?”

“I didn't even ask about my favorite person yet, but how's Mom?” I flip her off again, and this time, she chuckles before grabbing her phone to show me Piglet's new tank.

I smile at how happy she sounds as she goes on a tangent about how her turtle looks happier than he was in my bowl, and I'm sure he is. After a while, someone calls her, so she lets me go.

I walk into my living room, and I'm reminded why I went into my room. Hazel has been yelling at August for the past twenty minutes, and I'm actually more scared of her than crashing earlier this afternoon.

We obviously weren't going to tell her, but apparently, that asshole was with someone in a car behind us, and they recorded it, hence how there's an article about it.

I can hear their entire conversation from next door, and if she knocks on my door to scold me, I'm going to act like I'm not home. I'm flipping through the channels on my TV in the

living room when I hear my phone ringing again in my room.
Please don't be Mom.

Sage already called me to see if I was okay. She was in the middle of a photoshoot or something, but her makeup got ruined from crying. She wasn't even mad; she was just glad that we were okay. Hazel should take notes from our loving sisters.

I pick up my phone from my bed, and it's a Facetime call from Vidia. What the fuck? *Why is she Facetiming me?*

I remember how she used to Facetime me when she was mad so I could "see how serious she was," but I doubt this is about the race, so I answer.

"What—"

"Sire! Thank God you answered." What the hell is happening? She has tears in her eyes and sounds scared as fuck.

"Where are you?"

"Come on, sweetie. Let me in."

"Please don't do this!" Her voice cracks, and I feel my heart stop.

"Vidia. What the fuck is happening?" I sprint to my closet and put a sweatsuit on since I'm in underwear. I hear her break down crying, and when I look down at the screen, I can't see much.

"Vidia, I need you to answer me!"

"There's—AH!" There's a huge banging sound, and she drops her phone.

"Vidia! Where are you!?" I quickly put my shoes on and race out of my room.

"You killed him, and now I'm going to kill you, baby." She killed who?

"Who the fuck is that?"

"We're going to have some fun first."

“Vidia! Share your fucking location with me! I’m on my way.”

“Please, I’m begging you.” God, she sounds fucking terrified right now. She starts sobbing, and when I look at the screen again, it’s black. She didn’t pick her phone back up.

“Vidia, are you home?! Send me your address!” There’s more banging, and I don’t think she can even fucking hear me. I run out of my apartment and barge through August’s door.

He’s sitting on the couch, and Hazel is standing in front of him. “Oh, glad you—” I cut her off before she rants about the car crash that means nothing to me right now.

“Where does Vidia live?!”

August turns to me from the couch, confused. “What?”

“Where the fuck does she live?!”

Hazel crosses her arms. “I’m not telling you, Tra—”

“ANSWER THE FUCKING QUESTION!” They both jump and turn more concerned. I swear I’ll strangle the address out of both of them.

“Let’s have some fun. I’ll give you 100 Mississippis to let me in.”

“The cops are on their way! Go away, please!” I doubt this maniac even understood her through her sobs.

“One Mississippi!”

They both look down at my phone, just noticing Vidia’s cries, and turn even more scared. I walk over to them as I say, “You two have three fucking seconds to tell me her damn address or I swear you’re both dead.” August stands up at the coldness in my voice and stands in front of Hazel.

“Seven Mississippis!” Hazel grabs her phone, and she loses the color in her face. Vid must’ve called her first.

“What?!”

“He has a gun. I sent you her location. Leave NOW!” Her voice has so much panic in it that I can barely recognize it.

“*Eleven Mississippi!*” I run out while putting her address into my GPS. She’s eight minutes away. “*Sixteen Mississippi!*” I can make it there in three.

“Vidia! Vidia, can you hear me?”

“*Twenty-six Mississippi!*” I swear, I’m killing this son of a bitch if he touches one goddamn curl on her head. I run into the garage, and since our other cars are getting fixed, I slide into my Tesla.

“Vidia! Are you still there?” All I can hear is that lunatic counting and her cries for help. I speed out of the garage and do a very illegal U-turn in her direction. I glance down at the phone, and I see it moving.

“Vidia, I’m almost there!”

“*Forty Mississippi!*”

“You’re not going to make it, Sire,” she says between sobs and gasps for air. I have sixty seconds to make an eight-minute drive. I press down the gas and hit 140mph.

“Vid, you need to hide. Okay? I’m almost there, but you need to hide.” I steal another glance at the screen, and she’s frantically looking for a place to hide.

“*Forty-six Mississippi!*”

“If your closet has a lock, go in there!” I speed past two red lights and swerve between every lane whenever there’s a car in my way.

“*Fifty-three Mississippi!*” The speedometer hits 150mph as I hear her start praying in Spanish. Fuck, she sounds so goddamn desperate.

“Tell my mom—”

“Tell her yourself, Vid. You’re not dying tonight.”

“*Fifty-seven Mississippi!*” The GPS says I’m two minutes away. I’m passing every car in a blur, but I still feel like I’m not going fast enough.

“I’m hanging up. Okay, Sire?” What?! I look between my phone and the road frantically.

“No! Don’t hang up, I’m almost there, Vidia.” I almost don’t recognize my voice at how rushed and panicked it sounds. I hear her sniffing and struggling to speak.

“I-I don’t...” Fuck, go faster! I hit my steering wheel, but that obviously doesn’t help. “I don’t want you to hear me die, so I’m hanging up.”

“You’re not dying, Vidia. Do you hear me?”

“Seventy Mississippis!”

“I’m so sorry about everything between us.” There’s more banging on the door, and she screams again before breaking into another sob. “I never said sorry, mi amor, but I am.” It’s hard to understand her between every gasp of air she pulls in, but I do. I just don’t answer her and pray I can make this car fucking fly to her.

She breaks into another sob, and I feel my chest tightening. I glance down at her to find her watching me with broken eyes. “Stop looking at me like that.” Her voice is softer now and I look between her and the road.

“Like what?” I quickly switch lanes and run another red light.

“Like you need me or something. I’m trying to hang up but you’re looking at me like— “

“I do need you, Vidia, and you’re not dying, so stop—” She screams one last time before the line goes dead.

“Vidia?!” I look down at my phone before switching lanes again. “Fuck!” I grip the steering wheel and somehow step on it harder. I pull in front of her apartment complex, not wasting time parking. Running into the building, I frantically search her apartment. When I find it, the door is broken open like someone shot the lock.

“Vidia!” I look around the living room, and it’s a fucking mess, but she’s not in sight.

“AHH! GET OFF OF ME! HELP M—” I run toward her screams, but they sound muffled. I race into her room, and it’s

empty. I turn my head to the struggling sound coming from her bathroom and run in there next.

“Stop making this so—” I yank him off of her, and he falls out of the tub onto the ground. Why does he look so familiar? Before I can think, he points his gun at me, and instinct kicks in. I quickly snatch the gun from him, and it’s too easy. I silently thank my dad for teaching the twins and me how to disarm someone. *Props of having a dad in the FBI.*

I point the gun at him, and he crawls backward, but I grab a fist full of his hair, keeping him in place, and that’s when I recognize him.

It’s Larry from the fucking alley the other week. That’s why he kept rambling about Vidia killing someone. “I should kill your sorry ass right fucking here.”

“Sire!” Vidia breaks into another cry when I press the barrel against his forehead.

“Do it. If you don’t, I’ll just be back for her, and—” I hear Vid gasp when I pull the trigger. Son of a bitch doesn’t even have any more bullets.

He lets out a sinister laugh, and I slam the gun against his head. Again, and again, and again. I go blank, and someone is pulling me off of him.

“Bro, he’s unconscious. You’re going to fucking kill him!” *That’s the point.* I push him off and reach for that asshole again, but two officers walk in, and August stands in my way again.

When the fuck did August get here?

My eyes fall on the son of a bitch on the ground, and his face isn’t even recognizable. He is so damn lucky that the gun was empty. I hear someone gasping for air and turn my head. *Shit.* Vidia is still crouched in the tub, crying.

She’s holding her knees to her chest, trying to keep her ripped shirt closed, and she’s covered in blood. I bend down to her level and search for where she’s bleeding from. When I reach to touch her, she lightly flinches. “My love, where are you hurt?” My voice is soft, but she doesn’t answer.

I reach for her again, slower this time, and she lets me touch her. “It’s not my blood.” Her voice comes out so low I can barely hear her.

One of the officers makes their way to us, and when he reaches for her, she flinches again, a lot more this time. “Please, don’t,” she pleads, and I swear my heart breaks.

“Ma’am, we need to check you.” He sounds bored. Like this is an annoyance. I imagine his shift was coming to an end before he got this call. He reaches for her again, and she inches toward me and squeezes her eyes shut.

“She told you not to fucking touch her. Back the fuck up,” I bark at him, and he falters a bit.

“Sir, I—” He sees my warning look and takes a step back. The other officer decides to play Captain Obvious and says, “We need to get a report.” No shit.

I keep my eyes on Vid as she cries in my arms from in the tub, and August loses his shit behind me. “What you *need* to do is get this lunatic the fuck out of here!”

“Sir, you need to calm down.” I feel my jaw clench, and the only reason I don’t turn around and punch law enforcement is because I’m still holding Vid.

“Calm down?!” August sounds even more pissed. “Maybe you’re blind, so let me—” A pair of now broken glasses hit the ground next to me, and when I turn, both officers are in shock.

“There’s still an unconscious crazy person on the floor between us. How about you do your damn job and get him the fuck out of here. She’s clearly in shock and can barely speak, and you want a report while her attacker is still in the room?! We’ll go to the fucking station when she can give a report, you morons!”

“I’ll give the report now,” Vid whispers to me as August keeps yelling.

“Sir, I—”

“Stop calling me sir! I’m not a middle-aged white man!” I shake my head when Vid flinches as his voice raises, but

there's no stopping him. "Why the fuck did he get here before you!? Maybe if you can do your goddamn job—"

"I'll give the report now—" Vidia speaks louder, and August looks down at her, his voice a hell of a lot softer as he talks to her.

"V, you—"

"I want this to be over." She looks up at him and then over at me, and I let out a sigh before giving her an encouraging nod.

She keeps her eyes on me as she answers their questions. She tells them about knowing him prior to today from the alley; he broke in, and they struggled in the living room where she cut him. She definitely put up a hell of a fight before calling me, and that's evident in the living room. *That's my girl.*

"I know this is hard for you, but I need to ask. Were you raped tonight?" Her eyes start to water again, and I feel my jaw clenching. I search her eyes for an answer but can't decipher the look she's giving me. She looks between my eyes like she's trying to stay focused and takes a deep breath.

"I wasn't." A new sense of relief washes over me at her words, and I hold her a bit closer.

"Ma'am, are you sure you—"

"She said she wasn't. If that's all you need, get the fuck out." They end up taking Larry, if that's even his real name, out of the apartment after she refuses to go to the hospital.

"I had to literally threaten Hazel to stay in my car out front until I knew it was safe, but I don't think I want her to see all this." He's right, she shouldn't. The house is a mess, and she'll just break down if she sees Vid like this. She's going to blame herself for missing her call, and we don't need both of them crying right now.

I wait for Vidia to tell us what she wants to do, but she doesn't. "Take Hazel back to her place. Tell her Vidia is okay, and she's going to spend the night with her." Vidia closes her eyes, and my heart sinks when a few more tears fall.

“Hazel moved in with me, remember?” August reminds me. *Right...* “But you can stay with us, V. I’ll pack your—”

“I’ll take care of it.” August doesn’t reply, then walks out after a beat, leaving us alone. “Let’s get you cleaned up.” She opens her eyes and looks right at me.

“You pulled the trigger.” Her voice comes out with no trace of emotion, and I let out a sigh.

“It was empty, Vid—”

“You didn’t know that. You were going to kill him.”

“I’m still going to kill him.” I correct her, and she looks between my eyes, trying to find a trace of a lie, but there isn’t one. “He’s a dead man walking for what he did to you tonight and if—”

“You’re going to lose everything you have if you take his life. Your career. Sire, are you insane?”

“What I have now means nothing to me.” *I don’t have you.*

She doesn’t protest again, but I know she’s just saving it for later. When I reach for her shirt, I pause and look into her eyes, asking a silent question. When she gives me a nod, I take it off, leaving her in her bra and underwear.

“Thank you. For everything you—” She stops, trying to catch her breath, and I know she’s thanking me for more than helping with her shirt, but I don’t want her to feel like she owes me anything because I helped her tonight.

“It’s okay, Vid. Don’t thank me for that.” She shouldn’t have needed me because she shouldn’t have been in danger to begin with. I know I got here as fast as I could, but I wish I had gotten here sooner. Saving her from even just a minute of extra pain and fear would’ve been worth it.

I throw the shirt to the side. It’s ripped and covered in blood, and I could be wrong, but I think it’s mine. It looks like the one she’d wear when she’d slept over at my place back in college. *She kept it?* I shake my head at the possibility. When I turn back to her, she’s taking off her last piece of clothing.

I keep my eyes off her and turn the water on. Grabbing her washcloth, I soak it under the faucet and pour soap over it. I bring down her detachable shower head and run the water over her.

She keeps her eyes on the blood draining away, and when I scrub her arms, she takes the cloth from me and wipes away the bloody handprint on her mouth. I briefly close my eyes and take a breath, trying to calm myself. *If that motherfucker makes it tonight, he's dead tomorrow.*

When I look back at Vid, she's scrubbing the rest of her body. I pull her head in and press a kiss onto her forehead, then walk out of the bathroom, letting her shower.

When I go to close the bathroom door, she stops me. "Wait! Where are you going?" God, she still sounds so scared.

"I'm not going anywhere," I quickly reassure her. "Shower, and I'll pack a bag for you." Her bathroom is in her room, and I can see right into her closet across the room. The closet doesn't have a door, so it makes sense that she tried to hide in the bathroom.

"Don't close the door. Please."

"Okay." I open the door wider and walk out. When I turn back around, she's still looking at me, and the fear in her eyes makes me feel like I'm dying. Like I'm drowning, running out of air by the second.

I take a ragged breath and try calming my breathing as I walk over to her closet. I grab a duffel bag and then stuff it with as many clothes as I can fit. I know her, and she's never setting foot in this apartment again. I'd pack everything in her damn closet, but we don't have time for that tonight. I'll come back for the rest. I just need to get her the fuck out of here.

I don't pack any of her work clothes even though I'm sure she'll fight me about wanting to work tomorrow anyway. Once her bag is packed, I walk into her room and throw it on her bed. When I look into the bathroom, she's scrubbing her face aggressively.

I grab her towel and walk into the bathroom. She keeps her eyes in front of her. At nothing. What the fuck is she doing? I remember how she aggressively cleans when she's mad to keep busy, but this isn't that.

"Vid, you don't have anything on your face." She keeps scrubbing, and if she goes any harder, she'll break her damn skin. "Vidia."

"I feel it." All of the blood on her body is gone. What is she feeling? I gently pull her hand away, but she pulls it back to her face again. I look around the ground and carefully pick up the biggest piece of the shattered mirror.

"Look, Vidia. Nothing is there." I hold the piece of glass to her face, and she examines herself. She looks away and starts hyperventilating.

"I can still feel his hand on me, Sire." Her hands start shaking, and I have no idea what the fuck to do.

"Vidia... Vid, look at me." I cup her face in my hands, and her eyes finally meet mine. "What do you feel right now?" She puts her hands over mine and takes slower, deeper breaths.

"You."

"Okay, so just think about that. Can you do that?" She nods, and after two or three minutes of her tracing my hands over her face, her breathing is back to normal.

I wrap her in the towel and lift her out of the shower since there's glass all over the floor. I set her on her bed and turn around as she gets dressed. When I hear her walking to her closet, I turn back around.

She walks out with a pair of black sneakers matching her black leggings and oversized hoodie. I want to make a joke about her wanting to be like me since I'm also in all-black, but I keep it in.

When she makes her way back to me, something hits her window, and she hugs me as if we'd be sucked into the ground beneath us if she let go. I hug her back, and she's trembling in my arms. I glance over at the window and notice it was just a tree branch but bring her closer either way.

I soothe her hair as I hold her. “I got you, Vid. I’m not going to let anyone hurt you again. I promise.” My voice breaks, so I quickly swallow the lump in my throat, and I tuck her wet hair behind her ear.

She slowly pulls away and spins the ring on her finger. “Please don’t make promises you can’t keep.” Her voice is still so quiet, but I can hear how numb she sounds. I’m already looking at her when she looks up at me, and maybe one of us just stepped on glass, but I could’ve sworn I heard my heart just break a bit more. I let out a regretful breath as I run my hand through my hair.

“Vidia, we never talked about that night. I—”

“We don’t need to. Enough was said.”

I keep my eyes on her and shake my head softly. “Not nearly enough was said, Vidia.”

She avoids my eyes and turns to grab her bag, but I take it from her, and we walk out of her apartment with her glued to my side. Not another word said. The entire car ride is silent, and when we reach August’s door, Hazel swings the door open and pulls Vidia into her arms. They silently cry into each other’s arms for a few minutes in the doorway.

“I’m so sorry I missed your call.”

“Shut up, Hazelnut.” I hear them softly laugh, but it sounds so broken, and when Hazel looks up at me from Vid’s shoulder, she mouths, *‘Thank you, Traitor.’* I give her a weak smile and flip her off. Her smile spreads, and she rolls her eyes at me.

They walk into the apartment, and when I go to walk to my door, I hear them both say, “Wait!” When I turn back around, they’re holding the door open for me.

Biting back a smile, I walk in, and August is on the couch with a bunch of pillows and blankets. When Vid walks over, he stands and pulls her into a hug. “I’m sorry I missed your call, V.” When they pull away, Vid turns to both August and Hazel.

“If you two missed my call because y’all were fucking, I’m sleeping next door because at least *he* picked up.” They both laugh softly, the mood thankfully lightened, and Vid smiles, but it doesn’t reach her eyes.

We all sit on the couch as Hazel replies to Vid, “We were actually arguing, but Sire only answered because he *wasn’t* fucking anyone since he gets no bitches.”

I reach over Vid to throw a pillow at Hazel, and we all break into a laugh. When my eyes fall on Vid’s smile, I feel my heart grow twice in size. If that’s even possible.

Chapter Fifteen

SIRE

ARE YOU SURE YOU HAVEN'T noticed anything out of the ordinary?" My dad sounds like he is moving around on the other end, and I reassure him, again, that nothing "out of the ordinary" has happened since the break-in.

The minute he heard about what happened, he's been trying to take the case from the cops, but I doubt it's necessary because we're positive the guy from the alley was just high out of his mind and wanted revenge, although his friend dying wasn't Vidia's fucking fault.

"Okay, well, you're coming to this weekend's training. The twins will be there, and I'm having August bring Hazel. Please encourage Lisette and *especially* Vidia to be there."

I shake my head, although he can't see. Since our dad is in the FBI, he's been taking the twins and me on trainings, and we go every couple of months to, as he says, "keep us sharp."

"I don't think she is ready to hear a bunch of gunshots and fight off pretend attackers, Dad. Thank you, though, I'll tell Lisette to go." He goes on about how I should still go, but in all honesty, since the twins and Hazel are going, I don't want to leave Vidia here alone, even if it's just for a few hours.

“You should also teach her some defense techniques, like the new ones we did at the beginning of this year—”

“Dad—”

“—and she should know how to disarm someone. I taught the four of you that when you were ten, so show her.” I let out a sigh and tell him I would. I appreciate his concern, but she’s not ready for any of this.

Once I hang up with my dad, I use the spare key August gave me and walk into his apartment. It’s usually unlocked, but it’s still early in the morning, and they, of course, lock it at night, but Vidia was also really paranoid, so he’s been keeping it locked for her. He even had the chain on it the other day, but if she feels safer, I’m not complaining.

I make sure to keep quiet as I head into the living room, but I notice Vidia is already awake. Her head snaps to me when she hears my keys, and I go still when I notice the fear in her eyes. “Sorry,” I quickly blurt out. I should’ve announced myself instead of creeping up on her like that.

She relaxes, shakes her head that it’s okay, and turns back around. She’s on the couch with one leg up and her arms wrapped around it. I look into the hallway before sitting next to her, and it looks like August and Hazel are still sleeping.

Vid’s pillows and blankets are on the couch, but when I look over at her, she looks like she hasn’t slept since the break-in, and that was days ago.

It’s been weird. Of course, I understand why, but she’s been so quiet. It’s just unnerving not hearing her laugh or yell at me or even her smart replies. She’s just... silent. And she stares into nothing quite a lot.

She talks, of course. Mainly to Hazel, so maybe it’s just me. Maybe I was wrong, and we’re still on bad terms because she’s quiet whenever I’m around.

“Have you eaten?” She takes a few beats to respond, then shakes her head softly. “Wanna come next door? I can make you something.” She takes in a breath like it’s taking too much

of her energy to even keep her eyes open, and now I really do think she hasn't been sleeping.

She nods softly again, so we get up and walk a few steps to my place. She looks around, taking it all in, although it's not much different from next door besides the furniture. She turns to the door like she's waiting for something, and I realize she wants me to lock it, so I quickly do.

She nods to herself before she heads to the couch. She pulls one of the pillows onto her lap as she plays with the string coming out of it.

"What are you in the mood for?" I head for the kitchen and look over at her when she doesn't reply. "Vid?" Her head snaps to me like I just pulled her out of her thoughts.

"Sorry." She shakes her head, and I tell her not to apologize, but she does again. "I'm not really hungry." If she didn't look so tired, I'd joke and ask why she'd agree to come over so I could make her food.

"I think you should try to get something in your stomach. Do you want fruit or cereal?" She shakes her head no, but I take her a bowl of pineapples anyway. When I hand them to her, she gives me a weak smile before taking them.

"I know this is probably a dumb question, but how have you been?"

She looks over at me, and her eyes cut between both of mine. "I'm okay." She shrugs, and I shake my head softly.

"No, you're not, Vid." The smallest hint of a smile grows on her face, and this time, it reaches her eyes, and the shine I love is back for a split second.

"Why'd you ask then?"

I chuckle softly at her smart reply and pull her in for a hug. She tenses against me for a second, but then she relaxes and leans into me. I kiss the top of her head and take in a deep breath of her hair, needing to be grounded.

When we pull away, she looks up at me, and a weird look crosses her eyes. "Are *you* okay?"

I let out a sigh and slouch onto the couch but turn to her. I almost tell her I'm fine, but it doesn't feel right to lie to her after everything. "Not really, no." She puts the bowl of pineapples on the coffee table in front of us and hugs the pillow that's still on her lap before turning to me.

"What's wrong?" A small smile grows on my face at her question. I think she's the only person who doesn't just assume it has to do with my addiction when I'm upset.

I say I'm having a bad day, and understandably, everyone assumes I'm going to relapse and tries to help, but that's not always the case... It is today, though. All I've been able to think about these last few days are her screams. The fear I felt. The anticipation was eating at me as I tried to get to her as fast as I could.

That night is eating away at me, and that voice keeps telling me a drink will take it away, and on the really hard days, it tells me a pill or two will take it away faster. I've been doing good at ignoring it and going to see Vid instead. Seeing with my eyes that she's fine, at least physically, puts me at ease.

"I need a meeting." I let out a sigh but then shake my head. "I need more than a meeting, Vidia." Her eyes search mine for an answer. "It feels like all I need is to get high." I finally admit it out loud, but she doesn't falter. Instead, she nods and rises from her seat.

I look up at her, confused, as she starts to put her shoes back on. "What are you doing?"

"We're gonna go to a meeting." She says it like it's a no-brainer, and I chuckle softly.

"It's eight o'clock in the morning, Vid. Even if there was a meeting right now, it's too early for that shit." She looks at me with a knowing look. Like I shouldn't say that because it's never too early to deal with my addiction.

"I spoke with my sponsor last night. But I'll go to one later." I reassure her.

"Promise?"

I hold my pinky out to her, and she looks down at it, and the weirdest feeling of déjà vu washes over me. After a beat, she interlocks our pinkies, and we both lean in to kiss our thumbs. “I’ll go with you.” She nods at me and takes her seat next to me again.

She hasn’t left this building since the break-in, not even for work like I thought she would. We’ve all tried to get her out and see the sun and all that bullshit, but she’s refused, yet she voluntarily wants to go out now? I don’t bring it up and smile to myself instead.

“Your turn,” I say, and she turns to me like she doesn’t know what I mean, but then clarity fills her expression. She looks like she’s shutting down again, but I quickly stop her. “You know the rule. If I have to open up, so do you.”

She grabs her bowl of pineapple and eats one, stalling for a few short beats. She looks like she’s thinking, and at first, I think she decides not to tell me whatever’s on her mind, but then she turns to me. With the way she’s looking at me, I’m dying to know whatever it is.

“He’s crazy.” Her voice comes out just above a whisper, and I almost look around the room to check for who she’s trying to keep from hearing her. “He was banging on my door and just screaming like a crazy person.” She shakes her head, and her voice is at a normal volume now.

The asshole who attacked her, Larry, was high as shit and followed her home that day. The cops saw him on the street cameras. I remember how he kept yelling about Vidia killing someone, so I’m assuming he blamed her for not being able to save his friend in the alley and wanted vengeance, but that wasn’t her fault. He’s just fucking insane.

I don’t interrupt her and let her finish because she hasn’t spoken about the break-in. Not even to Hazel—I know since I asked. “He was trying to break my door down, and suddenly, I was seven again, in my mom’s arms, hiding from my dad.” Her brows raise a bit like she surprised herself.

She’s never spoken about her dad. Maybe once or twice, but never about actual things he put her through. She had such a

high and strong wall up in college because of him that it took her months to let me in... Then, I ruined it.

“No te preocupes, mi vida.” I feel a hint of a smile grow on my face at how beautiful her accent is. “That’s what she’d whisper to me before kissing my nose and leaving me in the closet to try to calm him down.” My smile is wiped clean as I see tears build in her eyes.

“I tried calming him down too.” I can’t tell if she’s talking about her attacker or her mother’s attacker. I decide not to call him her dad anymore because bad parents don’t deserve that title. I don’t know how he treated Vid. I remember her telling me he never hit her, but good dads wouldn’t hurt the mother of his kids.

“I keep replaying that night in my mind, but my brain keeps flashing between him and my dad. I can’t tell the difference anymore, and I feel like I’m going crazy.” Her voice breaks, and I pull her into my embrace.

“You’re not crazy.” She sniffles and nods a few times like she’s trying to convince herself. I squeeze her a bit harder. “You’re *not* crazy,” I whisper into her hair one last time, and her grasp tightens around me.

“Maybe your brain is trying to wrap it all into one memory to save you from one more traumatic experience.” She pulls away and chuckles softly.

“You took one neurology and psychology class in college, and you know the brain so well.” I actually made them my major since it was interesting as fuck, but I don’t correct her and reach forward to wipe the tear from her cheek.

“I was thinking of being a therapist if baseball didn’t work out.”

“Well, gracias a Dios that it did.” She chuckles, and I think I know what she said since Hazel says that a lot. It sounded teasing, so I playfully throw the pillow back onto her lap.

“Yeah, my net worth is hundreds of millions now,” I tease, and she rolls her eyes before throwing the pillow back at me. “Paparazzi don’t follow therapists, though. Maybe I really

should've been one," I say, more to myself. No matter how long I'm "famous," I'll never not be annoyed by them.

After a beat, I turn back to her. "I wanted to ask you something." She nods softly for me to go on, so I do. "You know my dad is a federal agent..." She nods again, and I can see the crease in her brows forming. "Well, at the bureau, they have this training for the close family of the agents, and he always takes the twins and me. He was wondering if you wanted to come this weekend."

She looks like she's thinking, and I'm surprised she didn't immediately shut the idea down. "What do you guys do there?"

"It's defense techniques, learning how to disarm someone —" She starts shaking her head— "getting out of someone's hold, shooting range, and—"

"No, that's okay. Maybe another time." She shakes her head again, and I just give her a nod because I was expecting that. I asked on the off chance she'd say yes, but she's clearly not ready, and that's fine.

When she lets out a yawn, I fully turn to her. "You haven't been sleeping, have you?" She shakes her head and yawns again. "Come on." I get up from the couch and hold my hand out to her.

"You can take a nap in my room." She looks down at my hand before shaking her head. "Come on, Vid. It's a lot more comfortable than my couch and ten times more comfortable than August's couch." She looks like she thinks about it for a second, but I pull her hand and drag her to my room.

"Just sleep." She looks around my room and surprisingly doesn't put up a protest as she crawls into my bed. I smile to myself when she gets into the side opposite of mine. *She looks like she doesn't belong better anywhere else.*

I head back to the living room and watch a few episodes of my show, coming to check on her every few minutes, but she sleeps soundly for about an hour. I checked, and there's an NA meeting later today, so I decided to get in the shower.

I keep my head under the hot water, trying to let it wash my thoughts out, but it's no use. I feel my heart racing and that familiar feeling of heaviness dawns on me. I clench my jaw, waiting for it to pass, but the urge lasts what feels like forever.

I know I shouldn't. I know better, but I let myself think of how that drink would feel. The hot water washes down my back, and I imagine it's a sip of alcohol burning its way down my throat before it settles in the pit of my stomach, and after a few beats, it'll burn there, too.

After another sip, each of my fucked-up thoughts will leave. I'll finish the cup, then a few more. It'll feel good, but Oxy will feel better. I feel myself clenching my jaw, but it's true, and there's no point in denying it.

The surge of euphoria that'll come with it. I tilt my head back, soaking in the memory of the feeling, and God do I fucking want it right now. It'll be so damn easy. An hour of uninterrupted blissfulness. Nothing left to bother me. No unwanted thoughts to eat at me. I'd be perfectly detached.

I need a fucking meeting. *I need to get high more, though. Right?*

"No." I pull myself out, and I don't want to, but I do. I turn the shower to the coldest setting and force myself under it. I didn't get the cold shower thing at first, but Kayden, my sponsor, told me it had something to do with increasing levels of beta-something, which binds some shit the same way as drugs.

It doesn't feel like I'm on drugs, which is what I feel like I need, but I stay under the freezing water. "Forty-seven more days," I remind myself. "I've been sober for three hundred and eighteen days. I'll finally make a year sober in forty-seven." I keep repeating that, trying to remind myself of what I've been working for.

"One year sober. That's the goal." I keep telling myself as the cold water starts to become uncomfortably freezing, but I stay under. "I relapsed after being sober for six years." I feel my heart sink at the reminder. "For the last four years, I

haven't been able to make a year sober, but I will in forty-seven days."

I repeat that all one more time before getting out of the shower. I walk into my closet to get dressed, but as I pass Vid, I stop for a second to watch her. *She's okay.* I take in a deep breath and nod slowly. *She's okay, and you're sober. It's okay.*

I nod again, agreeing with myself as I walk into my closet. As I'm pulling my pants up, I hear Vidia mumbling, and I peek into my room. She's still sleeping, but her eyes are scrunched.

I watch her for a few beats, and she turns a bit. I go further into the closet for a shirt. Once I do, I pick out a hat, but then there's a scream from my room, and my blood runs cold.

I drop the hat and rush out of the closet. "NO!" I run to the bed as Vidia continues screaming, but when I look over her, she's still sleeping. I feel my heart pounding against my chest as she shakes her head softly but screams bloody fucking murder.

"Vidia." I soothe her hair, trying to wake her up softly. I know what it feels like to be jumped out of a nightmare, and waking her up softly is better, but she's stuck. "Vidia, wake up, my love." I shake her and soothe her hair again, and she's sweating like crazy. Like she's running for her damn life.

"Fuck, Vid. Come on, wake up." I shake her a bit harder, and she jolts before jumping awake and gasping for air.

"No! Please!" She scooches away and grabs her neck as she gasps for air.

"Hey, hey, it's okay. It's me." I sit on the bed and move closer to her. She looks around frantically, and as her eyes land on me, she becomes more aware that she's awake and tries to calm down.

"You're okay," I reassure her. "Take slower breaths, Vid." If she keeps breathing like that, she'll start hyperventilating and panicking even more. I take her hand in mine and draw shapes in the palm of her hand, trying to keep her with me.

She closes her eyes and nods softly, trying to focus on her breathing. After a few minutes, she's a lot more calm. I reach over to the mini fridge beside my bed and hand her a water bottle. She thanks me before taking it and downs half of it.

“What was it about?”

She looks over at me and closes the water bottle before shaking her head dismissively. *Fair enough.* I give her a nod and run a hand through my damp hair, and it still feels cool from my freezing shower.

She's picking at her nail polish, and I study her for a beat. “I just had a really bad urge to get in my car and drive to Fairwood side.” Her eyes cut to mine, and we both know what that side of town is like. I've gotten Oxy from a... friend over there a few times in the last few years, and I've only used it once. Every other time, I've turned to alcohol to drown out this feeling.

Her eyes fill with more concern than whatever her nightmare was about. “Sire—”

“I'll get in my Range Rover since no one seems to recognize me in that car. I'll get them in powder instead of pills so I can quickly take a hit before changing my mind.” I admit how I'll go through with throwing my life away again, but I don't look up at her and shake my head to myself instead. I feel the bed dip as she leans over to take my hand.

“It was a memory,” she starts, and I turn to her. “I heard Mami yelling for me in the middle of the night, so I went to her room. I heard things falling like they were fighting, and I knocked on the door because he got mad when I didn't knock.”

I watch her with careful eyes as she swallows like her mouth is suddenly dry. “She yelled for me to come in, so I opened the door softly, and just as I did, he grabbed her by the neck.” Her eyes are distant, like she's stuck in the memory.

She moves her hand to her neck like she's still in the dream. “I tried to help her, and he pushed me. That's when the dream switched to when I tripped. In an instant, I was in my

apartment, and he was chasing me. He was choking me like he didn't know the strength of his own hands.”

He did. He knew, and he was trying to hurt her, but I don't tell her that. That son of a bitch is apparently still alive. He's hanging by a thread, but he's fucking hanging. I went to the hospital to pay him a visit, and he was in a coma.

I heard the nurses saying he flatlined twice, and I know it's their job, but I'd pay any money for them to let him croak. It would be easy to finish what I started, but he has cops on him twenty-four hours. They'll be gone, they'll be distracted or go on a bathroom break, and he'll get what he deserves. I'll make sure of it.

“That's when I stabbed him.” I look back at Vid; her voice is above a whisper, but she gasps when the words are spoken and covers her mouth.

“You were trying to stay alive, Vid,” I remind her because she says it like she feels guilty for defending herself.

She shakes her head, and her hand trembles over her mouth. She goes still and stares into something behind me. An eerie feeling settles over me, and I have to turn around to make sure there's nothing there. “He was going to rape me.”

I close my eyes briefly, wishing I could take that entire night away. That night and the one we had four years ago. I wish I could just take away all her damn pain, but I can't, and knowing she's hurting makes me feel like every last one of my bones is disintegrating.

“But he didn't, Vid. Remember that part, okay?” I try to reassure her, but I feel like nothing I can say in this moment would be enough. She looks over at me and shakes her head softly.

“What are we gonna do?” She sounds so... lost. Just how I feel. I don't respond to her because I don't know the answer. Instead, I pull her in for a hug and rest my head on hers.

“Everything will work out in the end.” *At least, I hope it does.*

Chapter Sixteen

VIDIA

Four Years Earlier

I TURN AT THE SOFT knock on my door. Hazel usually just walks in while announcing she's entering, but after I tell her to come in, my eyes land on Sire.

"Oh." I'm a bit surprised to see him here this late. I don't mind, of course, but he usually texts me that he's on his way, and he didn't. "Hey." He sends a smile in response and takes a seat on my bed.

I turn back to my mirror and add a few finishing touches to my makeup. Graduation is nearing, and I'm practicing a new makeup look that I want to do, but I don't think I like how it's coming out.

I turn to Sire, and his eyes are already on me. "What do you think about my makeup?"

He doesn't miss a beat as he responds with a smile. "You look beautiful." I let out a soft sigh in defeat and thank him. I appreciate that, but it's not what I asked. I call Hazel in, and

she walks into my room with a makeup brush in hand; she's also practicing.

"Is this color combo better?" She studies my eye shadow for a beat, and I turn my head to the side, giving her a better look.

She goes to respond, but Sire beats her to it. "Why don't you guys let my sister do your makeup?" He doesn't have to tell us which sister he's referring to. I don't know if Lisette does makeup since she isn't wearing much anytime I see her. Sage, though? Just from her social media, I know she's a makeup God.

"You don't think our makeup looks good?" Hazel puts a hand on her hip and points the end of her makeup brush at Sire as if it were a deadly weapon. I look between the two of them, and I know she's joking, but I can tell Sire doesn't.

"Vid looks amazing." He nods toward me. "You look like a ghost," he says accusingly, and I stifle a laugh. Hazel glares at him with setting powder still on her face, so she really does look like a ghost, but she isn't done with her makeup yet, not that Sire can tell the difference.

"I'm great at doing makeup, asshole." Sire rolls his eyes at her like he doesn't believe a word coming out of her mouth.

"Yeah, well, you clearly aren't a professional, and Sage is." He leans back in my bed like he doesn't care to help her anymore, and I laugh softly at their interaction as Hazel turns back to me.

"Creo que el rosado se ve mejor pero me gusta el azul."

I turn to the mirror and study my eyeshadow. My eyes cut to Sire in the mirror as he sits up and looks between the two of us like he's trying to figure something out.

"Stop talking shit in Spanish." He squints his eyes at Hazel, and she smirks, clearly knowing that's what he'd assume.

"She wasn't—"

"No need to lie to him, V." I throw my head back with a laugh at how she sounds like she just achieved something.

Without another word, she walks out, but I don't miss her smirk when Sire slouches a bit.

I get up to make my way over to him. I wrap my arms around his neck, and he hugs my waist. "I wasn't lying. She really wasn't saying anything about you." I kiss the top of his head before he tilts his head up to look at me.

"Yeah, I figured." He looks at the door like he's making sure she isn't in earshot. "I don't think she likes me." I chuckle in response and plant another kiss on his head.

"She doesn't like anyone, but she's only teasing you." He looks like he's trying to figure out if I'm lying or not. "Why do you care if she likes you?" Sire doesn't seem like the type to care if people like him; that sounds more like August.

"She's dating my brother, so I would like to get along with who he's dating, but more importantly, she may as well be your sister. Of course, I don't want the people you care about to hate me." I try to fight back a smile but immediately fail. *He's so perfect.*

"She doesn't hate you, mi amor." A smile creeps onto his face, and he pulls me in, leaning his head on my chest. I wrap my hands around his head and just hold him for a few beats, but he seems... off.

"You okay?" I whisper into his hair, and when he takes in a deep breath, I can tell he isn't. He doesn't respond and instead pulls me onto the bed with him so I'm straddling him.

I keep my hand wrapped around his head as he lays his head on my chest. He breathes even out like the sound of my heartbeat soothes him.

"I was thinking," he starts, and I rest my head on top of his as he goes on, "you know what's one of the worst things about dealing with an addiction? For me, at least?" I go still for half a second, not expecting him to say that.

"No." I pull away so I can see him, but he won't meet my eyes. "What is it?" He steals a glance at me but looks away again.

“I can never reflect on the shitty part of my childhood or think about the hard stuff without getting that urge to run from my feelings and get high.” He shakes his head, almost like he’s disappointed, and before I can say anything, he goes on.

“It’s not like I want to, you know?” He looks over at me, and I give him a soft nod. “I graduate from one of the best colleges in the country soon, and then I’ll play my last college baseball game, and there are going to be a bunch of scouts there. To watch *me*.”

He says it all like he can barely believe any of it, and I can’t help but smile proudly. “If you told me seven years ago that I’d be doing all of this and sober, I wouldn’t believe it for a second.”

His brows scrunch like he’s thinking of something else. “God, if you told me I’d be *alive*, I wouldn’t have believed it.” His voice comes out just above a whisper, like he’s talking more to himself than me, and I feel my heart sink at the sound of disbelief in his voice. I’m realizing how he really can’t believe he made it this far, yet he did.

“But you are.” I cup his face so he’s looking at me. “You’ve come a long way, and you should be proud of that... I am.” He gives me a small smile and squeezes me a bit tighter.

“That’s what I was thinking about.” He goes on. “I was buying a tux for graduation, and then it hit me that we’re *graduating*, and I just sat there, thinking of all the shit I went through to get here.”

His eyes leave mine again before he goes on. “The urge to go get high, to take away the weight in my chest that appears whenever I think about what the woman who gave birth to me put me through, or how I practically traumatized my brother with the shit I put him through before he begged our mom to adopt me.”

He shakes his head again, and it’s clear he’s beating himself up about this. I don’t know what pain his birth mom made him endure besides the car crash, but it’s obvious it was more than just that. I don’t know what he means by traumatizing August, but I say the one thing I know he needs to hear right now.

“It wasn’t your fault.” His eyes snap to mine, and he looks between my eyes and lets out a sigh of what seems like relief. “What your mom put—”

“Don’t call her that.” He shakes his head quickly, but I don’t miss the flash of hurt that passes through his eyes. I feel like an idiot for even saying that considering that’s not what she is, and he’s never referred to her as that.

“What *she* put you through wasn’t your fault. You were a kid, and you were also a kid when you fell into drugs, which also wasn’t your fault. Addiction is a disease, not a choice, and while it isn’t an excuse, I’m sure you didn’t traumatize August.”

He shakes his head like I’m wrong about that last part, or he just refuses to believe it. “I did.” He nods softly, then shakes his head. “He thinks I haven’t noticed, but whenever I’m sleeping, he puts his finger under my nose or checks my pulse. Whether I’m napping on the couch during the day or in my room in the middle of the night, he’ll come in and make sure I’m breathing because he thought I was fucking dead when we were kids.”

I study him for a second, realizing there’s so much about his childhood that I know nothing about. So much pain I want him to unpack with me—so much pain I want to take away from him.

I pull him in and just hold him. “Let me say this because I know you, and you’re probably thinking about it.” I pull away so he can see my face. “Whatever happened with you and him when you were kids, August doesn’t resent you for it.”

“How do you know?”

“Are you serious?” I almost laugh at his ridiculous question. “Sire, you said he quite literally got on his knees and begged for you to be his brother, not that the adoption made you two more brothers than you already were.” I remember him saying it was just a formality since they were practically already family.

“Maybe he’s just a clingy golden retriever, but August clearly loves you more than anything on this earth. I can’t speak for him, but I highly doubt he holds anything against you, especially if it’s related to your addiction.”

He looks like he’s thinking, and it surprises me that he even has to think about it. After a minute, he nods softly and rests his forehead on mine.

“I feel better.” He closes his eyes and takes in a deep breath, like this moment is all he needs. “I am so fucking glad I broke that self-sabotaging habit and didn’t go get high before such an important day.” He sounds so relieved, but I pull away at his words.

“Wait, you were thinking of getting high?” I look between his eyes, and he looks up at me like he’s scared to answer.

“Yeah...” He slouches a bit, but a warm smile reaches my lips.

“And you came here instead?” He looks between my eyes quickly, and there’s a spark in his. He nods softly and leans into my neck, taking a deep breath before sighing.

“Yes, Vidia.” He says it like it’s a no-brainer. “You bring me peace.” I feel my chest tighten at his words. I think that’s the most genuine thing I’ve ever heard. We both want him to stay the night, but there’s going to be too much going on in the morning, so he leaves. Still, when he does, I notice he’s lighter, like he needed that, and I’m grateful it was me that he needed.

Chapter Seventeen

SIRE

The Present

WELL, YOU LOOK LIKE SHIT.”

I draw in a deep breath as Lisette walks in. I don't bother responding to her and settle back onto the couch with Kayden. Obviously, I feel like shit, too, since my sponsor is here. Lisette is just an asshole perusal.

“Why is it so depressing in here? I thought I was the one who needed to take antidepressants. Get your own personality.”

I shake my head at her. She walks into the living room and opens my curtains, letting light seep into the sad fucking room.

Her eyes land on the table when she turns back around, and her entire demeanor changes. She looks up at me, over to Kayden, then back to the cup of alcohol. She watches me for a few seconds before she stands straighter.

“Is today our cheat day?”

I shake my head and let out a scoff because I genuinely thought she was going to say something fucking helpful right

now. I let my eyes fall shut as I lean my head against the back of the couch.

“What do you mean *cheat* day?” Kayden asks, and he sounds worried. Before I can answer, Lisette explains.

“Cheat day, you know?” He doesn’t answer. “It’s when we’re allowed to get high or drunk, but it doesn’t count, so we’re technically just as many days sober.” She sounds hopeful and certain in her statement, and I almost let a small smile break through, but the weight on my chest is too heavy to feel the relief of her words.

“How often do you two do this?” I ignore him, although it sounds like he’s facing me now.

“Not that often. We only get one cheat day a month.” Her voice is full of so much seriousness that when I sneak a glance at Kayden, his jaw is on the floor. He turns his entire frame to me, and to say he looks concerned is an understatement.

“Sire, when was the last time you had a cheat day?” I shake my head at his dumbass for believing my even dumber sister and let my eyes fall shut.

“I think it was like three weeks ago,” Lisette answers for me and sits on the other end of the couch.

“Okay, you need to stop doing that, and *you* need to not encourage that...” He waits for something, and then Lis tells him her name. “Lisette, you shouldn’t encourage—wait, Lisette, like Lis? His sister?”

“Awe, you talk about me?” I let out a sigh and open my eyes. Instead of entertaining her, I lean forward for the cup of liquor. Just as I lift it to my nose, Lisette literally slaps it out of my hand.

“Woah! I was fucking joking.” My hand is still frozen in place as if I were holding the cup, and I turn to her slowly.

“Did you just—”

“Yes, get over yourself. I’m not August. I’ll hit you whenever I want, and you won’t do shit. Now what the hell is wrong with you?”

“I wasn’t going to drink it. Calm down.” She turns her head to the side, and her face scrunches like I’m an idiot.

“No? What were you going to do? Consume it?” I chuckle softly and lean my head back onto the couch.

“It’s an exercise we’re doing,” Kayden explains. “It’s to give him a sense of control. He feels overwhelmed but isn’t drinking. Knowing that feels good.” I look over at the bottle of alcohol and remind myself that one of my greatest temptations is within arm’s reach, but I’m not taking it. I take in a deep breath, and the whiff of spilled alcohol feels like it seeps into my blood.

The image of the spilled drink and broken glass drags me back to my childhood and the beating that came after spilling *her* drink. My blood suddenly runs cold, and I think I might be sick.

“Okay... well, it doesn’t look like it’s working because you look like you’re about to cry.” I squeeze my eyes shut at the reminder, and I feel the room go still. “Um, do you need me to get the twins so they can hug you or something?”

“Are you always like this?” Kayden asks.

“I’m picking up on some judgment on that side.”

“That’s because I’m judging.”

“Fuck.” I rise from the couch and blink the stinging from the back of my eyes. The pair behind me are silent as I collect myself. “I can’t do this shit.” I look up to the ceiling and squeeze my eyes shut again.

“You can’t do what? This shit called life? Because suicide is also my thing, be yourself, Sire.” I try to draw in a breath, but I feel like the weight in my chest is too much, like I’m suffocating and might collapse.

“Wow, Sire was not joking when he said humor was your coping mechanism.”

I force myself to breathe in as much as I can and turn to Lisette. “I know—” I choke up and have to force in more air

before trying again. “Being assholes is our entire relationship, but please, okay?”

She watches me for two whole seconds before there’s a new look in her eyes. “What is it?”

I pace the room, unable to bear the thought of sitting still. “Nightmares.” I shake my head as I go on. “Not of the crash but everything else. Everything reminds me of her, and I—” My voice breaks, and I turn away from both of them.

“We were out earlier,” Kayden starts, explaining why I called her. “This old man passed by him while smoking a cigarette. He grew so frantic and ripped his shirt off. He said —”

“His scars felt like they were burning,” Lisette finishes for him, knowing the routine by now. I’ve been able to smell burning cigarettes for years, but these past few days, everything is... a trigger, as Kayden said.

“Did something happen?” I turn to her, and at the bored look I give her, she shakes her head. “Besides the break-in, Sire. I doubt that would’ve fucked you like this.”

I shake my head in response and pace the room again. “Vid was...” I stop short, feeling as though it’s not right to tell them anything she opened up to me about.

“She what?” Kayden urges.

“She woke up screaming earlier this week and opened up about her abusive dad, and I—”

“And it triggered you, so now you can’t stop thinking about your abusive bio bitch Mom,” Lisette bites out, and I can’t help but give her a hint of a smile at the fact that she shares a hatred for that woman with me.

Lisette and I were neighbors before I officially moved in with the twins, so if she wasn’t there for the shit my m— surrogate put me through, she heard it. I think she hates her more than I do, if that’s even possible.

“I think you should talk about this with Vidia,” Kayden voices, and I turn to him slowly.

I study him for a few seconds, but he seems serious. “Right...” I start. “I should just invite her over and say, hey, Vid, I know you literally cannot sleep because you’re having nightmares about the attack you just endured and memories of your fucked up dad, but funny thing, you opening up to me actually triggered some fucked shit about my childhood so listen to my shitty life.”

Lisette fills the entire room with her laugh, and I watch her for a few seconds and can’t help but laugh softly. Kayden looks between the two of us, then shakes his head, almost in disbelief.

“You both handle trauma weirdly.”

“Yeah, we also do this thing called abuse substances when it gets really tough. Be grateful we’re laughing about it.” At that, I laugh, but it comes out weird, and I sit back on the couch.

I glance back at the bottle of liquor, and I’m starting to wish I could have one of those cheat days Lisette is always talking about. I feel the two of them watching me, but I turn to Lisette first.

“I agree with Mr. Judgy Pants over here.” She nods toward my sponsor. “You said she also opened up to you, so maybe it’ll be good for both of you to just, I don’t know, trauma dump or something.”

I immediately shake my head at the idea, but she goes on. “Look, I know you, Sire. I don’t think you even talk to the twins about the shit Fiona put you through.” My eyes squeeze shut at the sound of her name.

“I haven’t seen Vidia in years, but based on the last time I saw her and how you talk about her, she won’t judge you for it, and she’ll definitely be willing to let you rant all about it.” I take a deep breath, and to my surprise, Lisette takes my hand in hers. “You can’t keep it all balled up.”

I look between her piercing blue eyes, trying to get myself to agree.

“Coming from someone who does this”—She lifts her shorts, revealing scars on her thighs—“to myself when I keep

it balled up, talk to her.” I take in a deep breath and rub my thumb along her scars.

“When was the last time you cut?” I ask, wanting the focus off of me for one second. I look up at her, and she gives me a smile, but knowing her, that smile can either mean she’s going to say last night or last month.

“I’m two months clean tomorrow,” she says proudly, and the dark mood that was once settled over me somehow vanishes.

“Shit, really?!” She nods excitedly, and I pull her in for a hug. “I’m so proud of you, Apple Jack.” She hugs me back, but a full thirty seconds barely passes before she pulls the ends of my hair.

“You asshole!” I grab her hair, and only then does she let go.

“We were getting a bit too sentimental for my liking.” I roll my eyes at her, and she only smiles. “Okay, seriously, talk to your girl.” My head snaps up to her, but she only sends me a bored look. “Don’t bullshit me.” She points her finger at me warningly, but I don’t deny any feelings I may or may not still have for Vidia.

The two of them walk out, and I watch the bottle of alcohol for I have no idea how long. I end up putting it away and cleaning the mess Lis made. Before I can change my mind, I send Vidia a text, and minutes later, she’s knocking on my door.

“Hey,” she says softly, and I only give her a small smile. I lock the door behind us as she walks in. We settle onto the couch, and I have no idea where to even fucking start.

“You okay?” I turn to her and only look between her eyes. Her features look so soft. She has her hair tied in a messy bun, and bags are starting to form under her eyes, but even so, she just looks so... pretty. So effortlessly beautiful. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to understand how it is humanly possible to look as beautiful as she does.

“Sire?” I shake my head and remind myself to breathe.

“No,” I finally answered. “No, Vid, I’m not.”

She turns to me and puts one leg on the couch. “You look like you haven’t been sleeping.”

“Have you seen a mirror lately?” I retort, and when she laughs I don’t even want to talk about everything that is bothering me anymore. I don’t care about the shit that triggers the abuse I was put through. I think I just found the cure to *everything*, and it’s this girl’s laugh.

When she looks back over at me, she seems more serious. “I know you didn’t want to talk to me about your nightmares on the plane to your first game, but I shared what my nightmare was about the other day, so you know the rule.” She gets comfortable on the couch, but I don’t give in that easily.

“You only shared once I shared about wanting to get high.” She sits back in her seat at my bluntness. “So if I remember the rule correctly, you’d have to share something new for me to go again.”

She looks down at her hands and fiddles with her ring. I keep my eyes on her, and it’s obvious she doesn’t want to go first, so I do. “My bio mom—” I shake my head at my words because she doesn’t deserve a title anything remotely close to a mom. “Fiona, she used to... um...” I look down, unable to find the right words.

“My parents and I went out one night,” Vid starts, and I’m relieved she doesn’t make me go first. “It had been eight days since he last hit her. I know because I was actually counting.” I let my eyes meet hers, and she looks like she’s trying to keep it together. I admire her so much when she talks about tough shit like this because my lungs can’t seem to fucking do their job at the thought of Fiona, yet she sits here and looks so strong.

“My mom had put her septum earring in, and she never wore it, but she did that day. The whole night, I couldn’t take my eyes off her nose. I thought it was the prettiest piercing.” I smile at her. She looks up to her mom so damn much. I never even met her dad, but I hate him for hurting someone Vid loves so much.

“Some random ass guy on the street complimented her nose ring, and God...” She shakes her head, and I feel her entire

mood shift. “The entire drive home, he yelled at her to admit she was sleeping with that random guy.”

I shake my head but go still at her next words. “He ended up ripping it from her nose that night.” She looks down at her hand now. “I didn’t see him do it, but from how her nose looked the next morning, it was clear.”

“Vidia...” I don’t even know what to say, but she looks up at me and gives me the saddest smile; it shouldn’t even be considered one.

“Your turn,” she pushes. “Don’t make me go twice in a row. That’s not how this works.” I give her a small smile, but I know it looks as gloomy as hers.

“The door was broken in our house, so it’d slam no matter how you’d try to close it, and it was heavy as fuck for a six-year-old.” I look down at my hands again as I go on. “She’d just get so angry, and no matter how much I’d apologize, she’d hit me.”

I feel her go still beside me, and I want to stop, but the words just spill past my lips. “Hit is an understatement. She’d beat the shit out of me.” I look up at her now; surprisingly, her eyes are on me. “These last few days, every nightmare I have is a new memory of her.”

Vid shakes her head softly as she watches me. “Do you know where she is now?” Her question throws me off, but I’m glad she doesn’t offer me an apology or some shit. I think for a second but only shrug.

“I like to imagine she died a painful death. That she knew it was coming and whatever it was took her out slowly.” I wait for the shock to pass her face, but it never comes. Instead, she nods, almost like she understands. “Your dad?”

“Got into a bar fight and was beaten to death.” She chuckles softly. “Talk about irony, huh?” I shake my head, letting out a scoff.

We’re quiet for a while, and when I look back over at her, she looks so lost in her head. “Hey.” I reach for her hand, and

when her eyes meet mine, they're glossy. "What is it?" She quickly blinks away her tears and shakes her head.

I want her to say whatever it is, so I offer something up first. I turn to the side and rest my arm on the top of the couch so the tattoo on my ribs is in her view.

"I remember the meaning of your tattoo." My head snaps over to hers. "The crash she caused..." I only stare at her for a beat, but she's serious; either way, there's no other way she'd know.

"You remember?" I told her that story years ago, and it was, like, five in the morning when I did.

"Of course I do, Sire." I feel a smile touch my lips, and she looks like she's about to say something, but I beat her to it and tell her I also remember what she told me that night. A small smile reaches her lips, and she nods in response.

"You remember the meaning, but I never told you why I got it here." She shakes her head softly, and I take her hand, running her fingers along my side. I watch as a crease grows between her eyes, but just as her finger passes one spot, she looks up at me.

"Are those...."

"Yeah." I drop her hand, but she keeps it in place, rubbing my scars as though she can rub them away. "If you ask her, she'd say it was an accident, but she used to burn me with her cigarettes."

Vid shakes her head softly, her eyes still on my tattoo, or more so, what's hidden under it. "If I'm ever given the chance to ask her anything, I think I'd end up in jail." I smile down at her, although her eyes aren't on me. Vid is too nice to do whatever she thinks she'd get arrested for, but the thought of it makes me feel better.

"Your turn." She lets out a sigh, and when she pulls her hand away from my side, I almost drag it back.

"When people found out that my dad was hitting my mom, they all thought she was so dumb for staying with him and—"

“She wasn’t,” I quickly counter. She looks over at me like my words mean everything to her, but it only upsets me more that no one else has told her that.

“He threatened her.” She goes on, “He said he’d kill me if she ever left him. She wasn’t an idiot.” She shakes her head, and her eyes fall to her fingers again.

“She didn’t marry and have a baby with someone who was hurting her. He started hitting her once I was older. She told me he was a completely different person before I was maybe five, and I just feel like if she never had me, she would’ve never had to—”

“Don’t even say that, Vidia.” She shakes her head, and I tilt her chin up so she meets my eyes. “I’m one hundred and ten percent sure if she could choose to never have you and also not have to go through that with him, she’d choose to have him put her through hell all over again.”

I’ve only ever seen her and her mom interact a few times besides a few phone calls, but I know her mom loves her more than anything on this earth.

“Yeah, but—”

“But nothing, Vid, nothing you could’ve done can change what he did, and you simply being born had nothing to do with him being an abusive son of a bitch.” She nods softly, and I reluctantly pull my hand from her face.

“I think your mom would kill you if she heard you say that.” She chuckles softly, and I only watch her, not even wanting to blink away from her smile.

She tells me it’s my turn again, and my eyes feel heavy, like I might knock out in the next few seconds, but I don’t want my conversation with her to end so soon, so I share again.

“The day after I was adopted, she told me she wished she aborted me.” I can literally see the moment Vidia’s heart sinks. “She ruined a great day for me like always.”

I know it’s technically her turn to go next, and maybe it’s the fact that I haven’t slept in two days, but I can’t stop the word vomit. “I think from not so bad to horrible, I’ll rank the

shit she did to me as—being late to pick me up from school, the cops would come after two hours, but then my mom would pick me up when she got the twins.” At the mention of my real mom, Kat, I notice Vid’s smile.

“Then there’s her barely feeding me.” I pause as I think about what’d go next. “I think the beatings and burnings are tied, but the crash is definitely next, or maybe that one is tied with her leaving me at a crack house. I think she was trying to sell me for drugs.”

When I hear a soft gasp, I look back up at Vidia, and I’m somehow reminded she’s still here. She shakes her head softly, and I immediately want to take my words back because she looks sad, and that’s the last thing I want her to feel right now, or at all.

“Don’t cry for me.” I smile up at her, and she quickly blinks her tears away. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not, though.” She blinks faster, and I pull her in before she cries. “I feel like nothing else I have to share would be on the same level as any of that.” She sounds so defeated, but I can’t help but let out a bitter laugh.

“It isn’t a competition for the worst childhood, Vid.” She laughs bitterly under me before pulling away.

“No, either way, you won by a long shot.” I give her a weak smile and shrug. “I remember you telling me she lost her parental rights when you were already in high school. Why’d it take so long?”

I let out a sigh and slouch in my seat to lean my head on the side of the couch. “I never went to the hospital for any of my injuries, so there was no evidence.” I shake my head at another reminder.

“When I first met Lis, I was climbing her fence for an apple that fell from her tree. She thought I was breaking in and started throwing apples at me, and her aim was shit.” I smile at the memory and the reason I call her Apple Jack, her stupid apple tree she loved so much.

“We obviously became close after that, and one day, we climbed her tree, only I didn’t know how to get back down.” I shake my head at how Lis bullied me for days after that. “She called for Fiona, but she never came, so I was stuck for hours. When she finally did come, she told me to jump, and she’d catch me.”

Vidia shakes her head, clearly sensing what’s next. “I broke my arm on the fall, and she didn’t even take me to get it checked. A whole week I sobbed, but the minute Kat saw me, she knew something was wrong and got me to a hospital.”

“Remind me to thank her when I see her.” I give Vid a smile and remind myself to call my mom because it’s been too long since we spoke.

“So you met Lis, then the crash happened, and you met the twins, but—” I shake my head, cutting her off.

“I met Lis the day I was stealing her apples.” Vid chuckles softly. “Then I met August in class. I was seven.” She nods as I go on. “That whole year, we were together almost every day. The crash was when I was eight, but I still lived with Fiona since it was somehow deemed an accident.”

“How?!” Vidia shakes her head in disbelief, and I continue.

“At this point, I was at home with the twins almost every day and slept over almost every other weekend.” I take in a breath as the harder part comes. “Fourteen is when Lis and I fell into the wrong group and started using. A year later, Fiona almost burned the house down cooking meth or some shit and went to jail. By the time she was out, I was already adopted.”

Vidia nods softly, putting the timeline together in her head. “That’s...”

“A lot, yeah.” I run a hand through my hair, feeling suddenly very small now that that’s all out. The weight in my chest lifted somewhere along the time we were talking, so I guess talking to her worked, but there’s one more thing I add.

“If there’s one thing I could change about my childhood, wanna know what it would be?” Vidia watches me carefully as she answers.

“That Fiona was a good mom to you?”

“No.” I shake my head, feeling like I didn’t answer fast enough. “If she was even a quarter of a better mom, there’s a possibility that I would’ve never met the twins or my parents.”

She keeps her eyes on me as I say the one thing I wish I could say to the woman who brought me into this world. “That she never made it out of the car the night of the crash.” Vidia doesn’t move a muscle as I go on. “That she sank to the bottom of that lake with me and felt the fear I did as water filled her lungs. That she died.” I wait for her to start looking at me like I’m a monster for thinking that, but her eyes only soften.

Slowly, she reaches forward and cups my face in her hand as she wipes the tear I didn’t know fell onto my cheek. “You were dealt a shitty hand, Sire,” she spoke softly, and I let my eyes fall shut, leaning into her touch. “Yet you came out on top and in spades.” I look over at her, and she offers me a smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “Think about the irony of that whenever you have another nightmare of that bitch.”

I let out a chuckle, but it dies on my tongue. Slowly, I turn my head over and kiss the palm of her hand that’s still holding my face.

Chapter Eighteen

SIRE

L A DODGERS STAR SIRE GRIFFIN may be facing manslaughter charges for beating a man to death. Rumor has it Vidia Gomez was on the scene. If her name sounds familiar, that's because she's the daughter of the one and only Vanessa Gomez. The amazing MLB coach of the Tampa Bay Rays—

“You can shut it off. I’m aware of what happened and who was involved since I was there.” I’m honestly very surprised word of the break-in didn’t get out sooner, but I guess with that asshole dead, they had something better to report.

“Do you want to lose everything you worked so fucking hard for?” I ignore Jackson and take another swing when the machine spits out the ball. I find the batting cage to be a good place to blow off steam, but my idiot agent is ruining that. I understand now why people say don’t do business with your friends.

“Sire, answer me!” His voice echoes through the cage, and I roll my shoulders back before taking another swing.

“Lower your voice, Jackson.” My tone is a lot calmer than his unnecessarily fucking loud one, and I can hear him let out a frustrated sigh from behind me. He doesn’t say anything else as I take a few more swings, not missing any.

When the machine stops, I turn to Jackson. “Start it again for me.”

“No. Did you even read this article?” I don’t understand why he cares so fucking much about the press. I get that it has an effect on my “image,” but more than half of it is bullshit, and my true supporters know what to believe.

“You know I don’t watch the news or read articles, especially when they’re about me.” He shakes his head, annoyed that “I don’t keep up with the media circling me.”

I step out of the batting cage to start the machine again, but he puts his hand over the button, forcing me to have this conversation with him.

“You need to speak to the press.”

“Like hell I do.” I fucking hate them; they always twist my words, and they’re rude as fuck. *No, thank you.*

“I can’t fix this for you, Sire.”

“Well, that’s your fucking job, so fix it.” He runs his hand down his face, and I take the opening to start the machine again. I get back into the cage and get in position to bat again.

“I tried, Sire. They want to hear from you.”

“You know what?” I swing my bat when a ball comes at me, and it rockets across the cage. “I don’t see the point in talking to them since—” I take another swing when the machine lets out another ball.

“—all that shit is fake. I’m not facing charges, and—” The sound of the bat colliding with the ball echoes throughout the mostly empty room.

“—even if I was, I’d sit behind bars with a fucking smile on my face for killing that son of a bitch who dared to put his hands on—”

When I take my next swing, the top half of the bat breaks and goes flying with the ball. Great, there goes another bat. I let out a sigh before throwing the bottom half across the batting cage and climbing out.

Jackson is looking at me with a concerned look on his face. “Sire...” He hesitates before asking a question I’m sure he doesn’t want the answer to. “Did you go back to the hospital and do anything that could have worsened that man’s condition?”

He keeps his voice in a hushed tone, like he’s afraid someone would hear him, although we’re the only ones in here since I own the building we’re standing in.

I did go back to the hospital. Twice. And both times, he was guarded by officers, but someone saw me go in the day he gave the fuck out.

“Define worsen his condition.” A look of panic washes over his face.

“Oh my God.” He covers his face, and I roll my eyes at how dramatic he is.

“Calm down, Jackson. The grim reaper got to him before I could.” He looks over at me like he’s still worried, probably because I’m not freaking out about being accused of murder. “Do you really think I’d tell you even if I did do it?”

I wouldn’t admit anything incriminating to Jackson, not because I don’t trust him, because I do, but because he has a daughter. Isa needs him, and I wouldn’t put him in a situation where he could lose her.

He shakes his head at my question like he doesn’t care whether I told him or not because I shouldn’t be killing people to begin with. “If the media asks you if you regret beating that man half to death, technically leading to his death, I need you to say you do.”

I don’t miss a beat as I respond with a shrug. “Well, I don’t, and as a recovering addict, I don’t feel comfortable lying to the entire world.” *That’s bullshit.*

“Oh bull-fucking-shit! Do not pull the addict card because you’ve lied about a lot more.” Here he goes with this again.

“If you’re referring to me lying about whether or not I told Isa that Santa isn’t real, then I’ll come clean. Yes, it was me, and I don’t regret that either. It’s time she found out.”

“She’s four years old, you dick.” I open my mouth, but he puts a finger up, cutting me off. “You know what? You aren’t allowed near my daughter anymore.”

“Shut the fuck up, Jackson, your daughter likes me more than you.” Isabelle has been calling me Uncle Sigh since she could speak, so there’s no way he’s just not going to let me see her.

I actually haven’t seen her in a while. I make a note to myself to pick her up early from school later today. Jackson will be pissed, but that’s the point.

“Sire, I know you and Vid have—”

“Don’t call her that.”

“I know you and *V* have history, and it’s very honorable of you to defend her the way you did, but she’s fine now, and you have to think about what’s at stake here.”

“She’s not *fine now*.” My voice comes out more bitter than I intended, and a sympathetic look covers his face. Jackson went to college with Vid and me, so he knows her to an extent, and when he says he knows we have “history,” he means he knows we dated. No one besides August knows what really happened between the two of us.

I think about her for a second as I pack my bag. She would agree with him, and I hate that she still has control over me. “What do you want me to tell the press when I speak to them?”



I PASS BY THE BAKERY on my way home but stop in my tracks and turn back around. Walking in, I quickly buy something. On my way here, I saw someone sneaking a picture of me, so I know paparazzi are going to be flooding this place soon.

I think the coast is clear, but I’m proven wrong as soon as I walk out, and cameras are in my face.

“Sire Griffin! Over here!”

“Are the allegations true?”

“What do you have to say to your fans?”

I plan on ignoring them, but then I remember my previous conversation with Jackson. I let out a sigh as I turn back around to face them. A few of them look surprised and excited, considering I never stop to talk to them.

A woman in a red blouse puts her mic to me first. “Is it true that you are facing manslaughter charges?”

“No.” I keep all my answers short like Jackson told me to. It makes it harder for them to twist my words.

“Is Ms. Gomez okay?”

“She’s safe, yes.”

“Do you regret killing that man?” There’s the million-dollar question. *No, I don’t.*

“I didn’t kill him.” That part is true. I took part in his death, maybe yeah, but he technically didn’t die at my hands. Unfortunately, he died from something related to his wounds. Vid was the one who stabbed him, but that was obviously self-defense, so no one’s facing any damn charges that they keep rambling about.

“Are you and Vidia Gomez together?” *Where do they get these fucking questions?*

“No.” I turn to walk away, but they follow me, as I expected. One of the male reporters asks his questions louder than the rest, so it’s the only one I can hear.

“So, is she on the market?” The fuck? I spin around on my heel. A few of them take a step back, but the daring ones hold their cameras and microphones closer.

“She isn’t an object or a piece of ass that’s up for sale, so no, she isn’t on the fucking market.” Who even says that shit? The one who asked if we were together speaks up again.

“That sounds pretty defensive for someone who isn’t with her. The fine men of California just want to know if the hotshot doctor is up for takes.” *Up for takes?*

“She isn’t.” A smirk grows on a few of their faces at my tone. I don’t know what the hell they’re trying to get out of me, but they’re starting to piss me off. This is why I don’t talk to them.

“If she isn’t single, then who’s the lucky man she’s with?”

“What? No, she—”

“Rumors say she’s dating her coworker Asher Brown. What’s your take on that?” Where are they getting this from? She *isn’t* with that asshole, I know because I made August ask Hazel but how did that rumor even start?

“She isn’t dating Adam fuckface.” I storm away and climb into my car before they can get any more questions in.



I WALK INTO AUGUST’S APARTMENT, and my eyes quickly land on Vid at the kitchen island. She’s in a blue oversized hoodie with her hair in a slicked-low bun. My eyes travel down her bare legs, and I can’t tell if she’s wearing anything under, but I’m going to assume she is.

I place her virgin piña colada in front of her with a slice of tres leche. She glances down at the sweets, and then her eyes cut up to me. She sends me a questioning look, but I only walk around the counter to get her a fork.

When I was walking past the bakery, I thought of her, so I bought a slice of her favorite cake and her favorite drink. It’s no big deal.

She doesn’t question me and takes a sip of her drink as I hand her the fork. “Thanks.” She keeps her eyes set on the counter, but I can still see the dark circles forming under her eyes.

She still hasn’t been sleeping. I kept making up excuses for her to come next door, and she ends up taking naps there, but they usually end with her waking up screaming. Every other time, she’s at August’s, so I come by to keep an eye on her. If she caught on, she didn’t say anything.

“You’re not going to work tomorrow, right?” I try to convince her otherwise one more time. She sends me a knowing look and takes another sip of her piña colada. We have a game tomorrow, and she’s decided she’s ready to go back to work. We’ve been arguing about it, but she won, like always. I decide to give up on making her stay because I’ll be playing at the game, so she’ll be closer to me there than back here.

“What is it?” She just shrugs again and twirls her fork in the milk of the cake. Something is obviously wrong, but I hate how quiet she’s being. I lean my elbows on the counter so I’m at eye level with her from across the counter.

“He’s dead.” She whispers it like it’s a secret, but it’s all over the media, mainly because we were involved. I don’t like to say we’re celebrities, but we technically are, and the media sure does treat us like it.

“Yeah, I—”

“I killed him.” She sounds like she’s in some kind of shock and can’t believe it. I watch her carefully as she buries her face in her hands, shaking her head. “I’m a doctor. I’m supposed to help people, and I—”

“You didn’t kill him, Vid.” I quickly cut her off from her thoughts. She uncovers her face and looks at me like she wants to believe what just came out of my mouth.

“I did, Sire. One of my friends from the hospital said they heard around, and he died from an infection caused by the stab wound. I—”

“Well, you have a shitty friend, and they’re wrong. I went to the hospital. He died from some brain shit. I was the one that beat the shit out of him, Vidia.”

She looks between my eyes, trying to see if I’m lying, and I really hope she can’t tell that I am. That son of a bitch did die from something related to her stabbing him, but I’m not going to let her blame herself for this.

After a few seconds, she just nods, then looks back down and takes a bite of her cake. “Is that why everyone is saying

you're facing manslaughter charges?" No, but that lie will work in my favor right now.

"Yeah, but I'm not." She nods again and looks a bit relieved. When she takes another bite of the cake, she rubs the back of her neck like it's in pain. "August's couch isn't too comfortable, huh?" She shakes her head no and keeps her eyes on the cake.

I look over her shoulder at Hazel and August, who are clearly trying very hard to keep their hands off of each other. "Come on." Vid looks up at me, confused, and I nod my head to the horny couple on the couch.

She shakes her head, then grabs her cake and drink. Hazel innocently smiles at Vid as we leave, and when she turns to me, we flip each other off at the same time, and both slightly smile at the weird coincidence. Although neither of us would ever admit it out loud, we both know we could never really hate each other.

When Vid waits for me at my apartment door, I nod toward the elevator. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"I have to pick someone up. Come with me." She looks between August's door and me while twisting her ring nervously.

"Nothing is going to happen, Vidia." Her eyes come off from the floor, and she looks up and nods as she walks toward the elevator with me. As soon as we step in, my phone dings with a message.

Lis:

So do I need to bail you out of jail or do the twins and I need to come up with a plan to break you out again?

I laugh softly at the memory of getting arrested in high school. I was stupid for taking a joy ride in a cop car while high, but we're going to blame that on my addiction. That's not the part I laugh at, though. I was only detained for a few

hours thanks to having a district attorney for a mom, but the twins and Lis came up with a very shitty plan to break me out. It involved distracting cops with donuts, and I love them, but all three of them are idiots.

Not this time but keep donuts on standby in case

I tuck my phone into my pocket, and when I look over at Vid. I notice her going to say something but stopping herself. “Hm?”

She looks over at me while shaking her head. “No, you’re probably busy.”

“I’m not. We only have one errand. What were you going to say?”

She plays with her ring again, and I want to take her hand in mine in an effort to calm her nerves, but I decide against it. “I was going to ask for a favor, but I’ll ask Hazel later.”

“You know I’ll do anything you ask, Vidia. Just say the words.” I gaze into her honey-brown eyes, and I swear it’s like looking into another world.

“Did you hear me?” *Was she talking?*

“Sorry, I couldn’t hear you.”

“I asked if you could stop by my apartment and pick up my birthday box. It’s under my bed. I’d get it, but—”

“I’ll get it.” She gives me a weak smile and then walks out of the elevator as I follow behind her. “Your mom really still sends you a gift for every day of your birthday month?” She smiles while nodding. Her and her mom have a really close bond, and it’s cute that they keep small traditions like that.

“Did you tell her about—”

“Yeah,” she cuts me off. “Which car are we taking?” She quickly changes the topic before I bring up the break-in. The fact that her attacker died is obviously messing with her, but I decide not to push her to talk and remind myself to speak with her later, maybe after she gets some sleep.

She looks around at all of the six cars in the garage. Only three of them are mine, while the others belong to August.

I walk over to my Range Rover and open the passenger door for her. She thanks me as she slides in, and I walk around to the driver's side. Once I'm in, I look over at her, and she's putting the seat belt behind her back.

I smile at the fact that she still does that. It defeats the purpose of the seat belt, but I know she doesn't like how it feels on her chest. I reach over to the glove compartment, pull out a strap cover, and hand it to her.

She looks down at it, and a warm smile grows on her face. "Do you just carry these around for your passengers?"

"Just the weird ones who don't like how seat belts feel." I look over at her and give her a small smile as she chuckles softly. She takes the cover with a smile on her face that I can't seem to look away from.

I make it to her apartment but park up the block in case it triggers her or something. I see her twisting her ring again and give her hand a reassuring squeeze. "I'll be right back, okay?" She gives me a nod, and I quickly rush toward her apartment to retrieve her birthday box.

The cops had someone clean her house, but either way, I know she's never going back there. I was going to have someone pack her things, but I don't want her to think I'm forcing her out, so I'm having them stand by until Vid says it's okay to start packing her things.

I make it back to the car in maybe two minutes and hand her the box. I know she opens one every day, so she's a few gifts behind. "I'll open them at home." She shakes her head as she corrects herself. "I mean, at August and Hazel's place."

"Or mine." She looks over at me, and I can tell what she's thinking. "You know I have a more comfortable couch, but either way, you can have the bed."

"Sire, I—"

"You already come over all the time to nap. You may as well stay with me." She turns her head to the side, but I beat her to

whatever she was going to say. “Think about it.” I face forward again and drive out of the parking space.

We made it to Isabelle’s school around twelve thirty. She still has about an hour and a half of school left. Perfect.

“Come on.” She follows me out of the car without asking any questions. That’s one of my many favorite things about her, that she’ll follow me to the end of the earth with no question. I’d also follow her into the fiery pits of hell, and I’m sure she knows it.

I sign Isa out of school, and when I see her running toward me, I crouch down at her level. “Uncle Sigh!” She jumps into my arms, and I lift her, then I give a small squeeze.

“Hello, pretty girl. How was school?”

“Well, I didn’t finish yet, silly.” Smart ass.

“Oh yeah? Well, I can take you back.”

“No! No!”

“No? Are you sure?” I blow a raspberry into the crease of her neck, and she starts dying of laughter. God, I missed her. It’s only been a few weeks, and I’ve spoken to her on the phone, but I’m starting to feel worse for not stopping by to see her sooner.

I hear Vidia laughing at us, and I turn to look at her. Before I can introduce her, Isa speaks up. “Who are you?” She turns her head to the side and dramatically raises one of her eyebrows.

A small smile grows on Vid’s face. “I’m Vidia, what’s your name?”

“My name is Isabelle. But Uncle Sigh calls me Isa, and Daddy calls me Belle. Wow, that’s a big sweater! I want one.” Vid looks down at her hoodie and then breaks into a short laugh.

“Is this Jackson’s baby?”

I give her a smile and look down at Isabelle. Her curly blond hair and gray eyes are definitely all Jackson. “Yup.” We start

making our way back to my car, and Vid looks down at Isa, who's holding my hand.

“Oh my God, she's so big. I haven't seen her since she was like, what? A few months old?”

As I nod, another smile breaks through at the memory of when the two of us first met Isa in the Aquarium four years ago. I remember Isa's mom being there, and I feel my mood shift.

Jackson told me Isa asked for her mom the other day, and he didn't even know what to tell her. I definitely feel for them because everyone deserves to have a mom, especially Isabelle. Maybe that's why a part of me feels obligated to her. Like I'm trying to fill the void we both have from a missing parent. I know I say Kat is my mom, and she is because my bio mom doesn't deserve that title, but still...

I opened the passenger door for Vid and then the back door to put Isa in her car seat. I'm strapping Isa's seat belt when she tries to whisper but fails. “She looks like that girl you show me. The one you always talk about. You know, the love of your—”

“Let's get ice cream!”

“Yay! I want ice cream!” I climb into the driver seat, and when I steal a glance at Vid, she's biting back a smile. Little shit heard her.

We drive into the drive-thru of Baskin Robbins, and I look in the mirror at Isabelle. “What flavor do you want, Isa?” She taps her chin like she's trying to solve the hardest math problem. She always ends up getting the same flavor anyway.

“Cotton Candy! Can I get a cone this time?”

“No. You make a mess every time you get it.”

“I won't make a mess this time. Please, Uncle Sigh.” She intertwines her fingers and holds her hands under her chin. She's so spoiled. It's my fault, but still. I turn to Vid, and she's already looking at me. I'm assuming she's entertained by Isa and me.

“Chocolate chip cookie dough in a sugar cone?” She looks a bit surprised, maybe that I remembered, then nods with a smile. Her mood seems lighter than before, and I’m glad I brought her with me.

I order our ice creams, and Isa ends up getting hers in a cone like she wanted. I’m about to drive off when my phone buzzes with a message.

Agent Jackson Jones:

Where the fuck is my daughter.

Ugh, I quickly go into his contact and change his name, then smile when he texts me again.

Isa’s annoying ass dad:

I’m pressing charges for kidnapping.

That name suits him a lot better, and he’s a fucking liar. I reply and tell him he isn’t going to do shit, I’m literally on her blue card. It’s not kidnapping.

When we get to the apartment, Vidia puts her birthday box on my kitchen counter and then digs through it, probably looking for the certain numbered ones.

She pulls out a few gifts, and Isa’s eyes light up. “Can I help you open them?”

“Of course, you can. Come on.” I watch Vid as she helps Isa onto the kitchen island. “Let’s clean this first.”

Isa tries to secretly look at me, then fails to whisper once again. “Don’t tell Sigh I made a mess.” I pretend I’m doing something and bite back a smile at her horrible effort of a whisper. Vidia pinky promises her she won’t tell me even though I’m standing a few feet from them.

When Vid kisses her thumb, locking in the promise, her eyes fall on mine, and in the three seconds we’re looking at each

other, I'm taken back to all of the promises we made to each other.

From our first. *"I won't do it again." She squints her eyes at me as if she'd be able to see if I'm lying. "Promise?" I walk over to her and hold out my pinky. "Promise."*

To my favorite. *"I'll take more pictures." She doesn't look too happy, repeating after me, but she's too beautiful not to want to take pictures. I lean over and hold my pinky out to her. "Promise?" A smile grows on her pretty little face. "Promise."*

To the only one I broke. *"I'm not going to hurt you, I promise."*

When she looks back at Isabelle, I'm pulled back into reality. I shake my head at the thoughts of things I can't change, no matter how much I want to. She's twisting her ring again, and I can't help but feel like we were both just sucked into the past.

I'm reminded of what I wanted to give her the other day and walk into my room to find it. It doesn't take long since I've kept it in the same drawer since I moved in. When I walk back, they've already opened all of Vid's gifts.

I make my way to Vid and hand her the small jewelry box. "One more."

She looks down at it and turns her head to the side. "Sire—"

"Just open it, Vidia." She shakes her head and lets out a sigh as she takes the small box from my hand. When she opens it, I can tell she immediately recognizes the ring. She looks up at me, dumbfounded.

"You kept it?"

I look between her eyes, trying to figure out if that's a good or bad thing. I'm going with the former.

"Well, I searched for two days in the heat after you threw it at me that night, so yeah, I kept it." She looks up at me with a sad smile and lets out a soft chuckle. She moves her matching best friend ring to her middle finger and places the one I got

her four years ago on her pointer but hesitates before slipping it on completely.

“This doesn’t change anything, Sire. It has the same meaning as when you first gave it to me. It’s just a ring for when I’m anxious.” I nod my head so she can put it on, but the ring never had the same meaning to us. It meant the complete opposite to me as it did to her.

There’s a heavy knock on the door, tearing our gazes from each other. Vid jumps a bit, and I give her a reassuring smile. I lift Isa from where she is on the counter and set her down.

“Your annoying dad is here.” She runs to the door, and her little feet pitter-patter on my hardwood floors. I open the door, and before Jackson can tell me off, Isa hugs his leg.

“Daddy! I had so much fun with Uncle Sigh today.” I give him an *I told you so* smile, and he rolls his eyes at me.

“You did? Well, Uncle Sigh didn’t tell me he was picking you up from school early. You missed math.” He looks up at me, then adds, “Again.” He’s looking at me like he’s about to kick my ass, but he wouldn’t dare in front of Isa, so I’m safe... for now.

“It was a surprise.” Isa nods her head and says it like she’s so sure, as if she planned the surprise. I quickly recall how Vid jumped, scared at the hard knock, and scold Jackson.

“Don’t knock so hard next time.” That maniac who broke into Vid’s apartment must have made her nervous about loud knocking, so I’ll be sure to tell August not to knock so loud when he comes over.

Jackson looks over at me, clearly annoyed, but I go on before he can. “And they shouldn’t have math at the end of the day. The kids are already tired.” He opens his mouth to say something, but at the sound of a muffled laugh, his head snaps to the side, and his eyes quickly soften.

“Vidia.” I turn to her, and she has a warm smile on her face.

“Hey, Jackson.” He walks further into the house, and I close the door behind him, making sure to lock it.

“How are you?”

“I’m holding up.” She keeps saying that, and I don’t know if it’s starting to sound more believable because it’s true or because she’s better at voicing the lie. “Your daughter is beautiful.” Isa looks between them, and she covers her mouth like she’s shy.

“And she’s very smart. I don’t think she needs math.” Vidia steals a glance at me, and I hold back a laugh as Jackson shakes his head. They catch up quickly, but after a while, Jackson has to leave, and I find myself happy it’s just the two of us for however long she decides to stay today.

Chapter Nineteen

VIDIA

Four Years Earlier

I ALMOST REACH THE BOAT, and I can see it's a lot bigger than I expected. I've always wanted a boat party for my birthday, and Sire said he could find someone with a boat. I'm a bit surprised he got it for free.

It's decorated with blue and gold streamers. I can see Sire, shirtless in swim trunks, tying gold balloons that spell out my name, and I feel myself smiling.

I climb into the boat and make my way to him. Once I reach him, he's already sitting, and next to him is a slice of tres leche along with piña colada, both missing the cherries they usually come with.

I look between the sweets and him, not being able to stop the smile creeping onto my face. He pulls me onto his lap, kissing the side of my face. "Do you like everything?" I nod excitedly as I look around the boat again.

He kisses my neck a few times, but then someone calls him. I stand from his lap just as Sage reaches us in an emerald

green bikini, holding a bunch of balloons and what looks like a gift.

“Happy birthday, pretty!” Her eyes land on my chest. “Oh my god, your tits look so freaking bomb in that bikini top.” I laugh at how excited she sounds and give her a hug while thanking her.

When we pull apart, she hands the gift to me and then gives the balloons to Sire. “Here you go.”

“You were supposed to bring these twenty minutes ago. She’s already here.” He laughs at her and shakes his head. “Just give them to August.” Sage shrugs and apologizes shyly before walking off.

“Augustus!” she calls out, and my head snaps in her direction. Wait, is that his real name? When my eyes land on August, he’s telling her to stop calling him that, and I break into another laugh. She’s literally going to be the life of this party. I’m so glad she was able to make it.

When I turn back to Sire, his eyes are on my ass. I tap the bottom of his chin, and he looks up at me with a smile. “You should take these off.” I smile and untie the scarf that’s covering the bottom of my bikini. When he leans in to kiss me, I curve him and walk away.

I hear him laughing behind me, and just as I turn my head, he slaps my ass. I burst with a laugh because I was expecting that, but *hijo de la gran puta*, that hurt.

The rest of the party gets here, and the boat starts moving. We’re all listening to music and having a good time for about half an hour, then I’m told we’re staying here, and the anchor is thrown into the water. I look around, and we’re in the middle of nowhere, but the water doesn’t look too deep.

Not having seen Sire in a while, I go in search of him. I quickly notice he isn’t on the main level, so I head inside the boat and find him sitting on the couch. “Hey.” At the sound of my voice, he looks up at me and offers me a smile, but it doesn’t reach his eyes.

“Are you having fun?” he asks as I close the distance between us, taking a step between his legs and wrapping my arms around his neck.

“I’d be having more fun if you were out there with me. Why are you just sitting in here?” He shrugs his shoulders and smiles again, but he seems off. “What’s wrong?” He takes a few seconds to reply, then lets out a soft sigh.

“I don’t want to ruin your birthday. I had this whole thing planned, but...” He trails off, and I feel myself growing confused.

“But what? And what did you plan?” Getting me this boat was more than enough, so now I’m curious as to what else he has planned, but I’m more focused on why he thinks he’ll ruin my birthday.

“I’ve never been this far into the water.” He kind of just leaves that in the air, but I quickly catch on, and my heart sinks a bit.

“Oh my god, Sire.” I take a seat on his lap. Why the hell didn’t I think of that? I should’ve known he most likely wouldn’t feel comfortable being in the middle of the damn ocean. He still has nightmares about the car crash his bio mom caused in the lake. They’re better now, but I should have known something was wrong.

“I’m fine.”

“Sire...”

“No, really, I am.” I search his eyes for any sign that he isn’t. “I thought this would be harder, but I’m good. I just came in here to search for a life vest.” He chuckles softly, and I give him a sad smile.

“You can’t swim, can you?”

“I can.” I shoot him a confused look because if he can swim, why would he need a life vest? As if he read my mind, he shrugs. “I still wanted to make sure there were life vests. You know, for reassurance or whatever.”

“Well, there are.” He nods and takes a deep breath, like knowing that calms him.

“Okay, come on, I want to show you something.” I don’t ask any questions and follow him. We go out to the rest of the party, and a few people are jumping off the boat into the clear water below us.

Sire takes my hand, and we walk to the edge where they’re jumping off from. He looks down at the water like he’s unsure about something. “We don’t have to jump.” He turns to me, and I point to the ladder. “We can climb in.”

An appreciative smile lights up his face, and he gives me a nod. Once we’re in the water, I keep my eyes on him, and he looks nervous, but for the most part, he’s doing fine.

With a proud smile, I swim closer to him and leave a short kiss on his cheek. “You’re doing so good.”

He leans in and kisses me quickly, then takes my hand. “Okay, I think I’m good to go.”

“Go where?” His face lights up, and he nods his head to something behind me.

“Follow me.” Once again, I don’t ask questions and follow him, but not even a minute passes before he turns to me and grabs my hand. “Don’t let go, okay?” I reassure him that I won’t.

It’s a bit harder to swim while holding hands, but we do. We make it pretty far out to where the water is darker beneath us, like there’s a drop or something.

“Okay.” He pulls something out of his pocket and then hands me a pair of goggles that cover your nose. I’m a bit confused, but I wait for him to explain. “Just signal to me when you need to come up for air. Okay?”

“What are we looking at down there?” I glance down at the water, but although it is clear, I can’t see the bottom.

“You’ll see.” He sounds excited and quickly puts his goggles on. I do the same and take a deep breath as we dive

under the water. I stay holding his hand as we swim a few feet down.

The water is crystal clear, and I can see a beautiful, colorful coral reef. He takes us a bit deeper, and my ears feel weird at the pressure of being this far under. We quickly make it toward the edge, where the drop starts, and then he points to something in the drop. I look over and almost gasp when I see a fever of rays.

God, there are hundreds of them! I look over at him, and the biggest smile grows on his face when he sees how excited I'm getting. He makes a weird face and points behind me again.

When I turn, one of them is swimming right for us. *OMG, it's so close I can touch it.* It glides right in front of us, and Sire sticks out our intertwined hands, and we skim the wing of it. Oh my God, it's kind of slimy. Okay, this is amazing, but I can't hold my breath anymore.

I signal at him, and we make our way back up. Once our heads break through the surface, we both take in deep breaths. "That was amazing! Oh my God!" He laughs, and I throw my arms around his neck.

"God, they were huge! Did you see them?!" I go on excitedly before he can answer me. "We just swam with fucking stingrays—or mantas? I don't care, oh my God." He laughs again, and I give him a kiss as a thank you for planning this for me. I force him to dive a few more times with me before we head back to the boat.

"Ya were gone for long." Sage eyes us suspiciously.

"Please don't tell me ya were fucking in the middle of the ocean." Lisette chimes in beside her, and Sage makes a face of disgust. We both laugh at her absurd assumption, but when we don't deny it, they both look sick.

I head for the table of food to pick on a bit of everything. A few people are still doing flips off the top of the boat, and others are just dancing. I look around at everyone and smile because everything is going perfectly.

I'm talking to Sage and Lisette when I feel Sire's hands come around me. "Sorry, girls, but I need to steal the birthday girl for a second." I feel a smile growing on my face at just the sound of his voice.

"This honeymoon phase the two of you are in is so cute." Sage looks at us in awe. "I'm rooting for ya." *I'm rooting for us, too.*

Sire leans against the railing of the boat, pulling me into him. "Are you having fun?" I smile up at him, nodding.

"Best birthday ever." Swimming with rays definitely takes the cake for the best birthday gift, and I got over thirty gifts, so that says something. He smiles and then leans into me. Our lips meet perfectly, like always, and I snake my hands up his chest and in his hair. I feel his hands on my hips slowly making their way to my—

"Hey! Watch your hands, loser!" I let out a laugh at Hazel, and Sire flips her off while grabbing my ass firmly. I swat his hand away, and he looks back at me, smirking.

He moves my hips so I'm rubbing against him as he leans down to my ear. "You look beautiful." When he pulls back, he's staring at me like I'm the only human he's ever seen. His eyes travel down my body, and he leans down to kiss me from my neck down to my boobs.

"Get a room!" Lisette yells this time, but I hear all of them giggling behind us. Obviously, they're messing with us on purpose. Sire rests his head on my shoulder.

I smile when he lets out a sigh. I run a hand through his damp curls and whisper in his ear, "There's a room on the lower level. With a bed." I checked earlier for no specific reason...

I pull back a bit to see him, and he has a smirk on his face. I give him one last kiss and take his hand in mine, leading us downstairs. We get into the room, and before I can even close the door, Sire is already kissing me and removing my cover-up again.

Without breaking the kiss, we walk backward and fall onto the bed. Sire pulls away and puts his hands on the sides of my head, caging me in. “What does the birthday girl want?” I look between his eyes as he stares down at me like he’s willing to do anything I ask if I just say the words.

I want a lot of things, but I settle on the one I want most. “I want you to taste me.” He smirks down at me before leaning down to my neck, and I rock my hips against him, needing more.

“The birthday girl wants you to taste something else.” He laughs in the crease of my neck, then kisses his way down to my boobs and sucks between them.

“Am I warmer yet?” His eyes cut up to mine, and I shake my head.

“Nope.”

He smirks and makes his way down, then he sucks on my stomach right above my bikini, and I feel another ache between my legs.

“Warmer?”

“Almost.” My voice comes out as a whisper, and he’s still smirking up at me as he slowly pulls my bikini bottoms off. He plants wet kisses all around me before his lips finally land where I want them. He slowly kisses me then I feel his warm tongue glide along my clit. “You taste good, my love.” When he starts sucking, my back arches, and I let out a moan.

My stomach dips as he moves his tongue down to my entrance and then back up. I start rocking my hips against his mouth, but he grabs my hips, keeping me in place as he slides his tongue in me.

“Sire.”

He groans against me, and I let out a louder moan at the feel of the vibration. He works his way back up to my clit and sucks on me again, then, without warning, he thrust two fingers into me.

“Mmm, fuck.” I feel him smirking, and he licks me in circles as he fingers me harder. I lean my head back and grab the pillow next to me, drowning my louder moans, but then I feel him lift his head, stopping.

“Let me hear you.” Without a second thought, I move the pillow from my face and let him hear the sounds I make for him. He sucks me one last time before I come with his face between my legs. His tongue dips back into my entrance, and I pull on his hair as he sucks all of me up.

He makes his way back up to me, and I pull him in, tasting myself on his lips. His fingers are still in me, and when he slowly takes them out, I bring them up to my lips and lick them. *I do taste good.*

He watches me through dazed eyes as he puts his fingers in my mouth. I suck on them while holding eye contact, and when he goes deeper, I try not to gag. He smirks down at me and then moves his hand to kiss me.

“Beautiful.”

I bite my lip as I move my hands down his perfectly sculpted body and dip my hands into his trunks. He sucks in a breath, and I give him a slow stroke.

“Your turn.” He quickly shakes his head and reaches for my hand.

“Uh uh. Today’s about you, my love.”

“I want to.” I tilt my head up so our lips meet and pull his trunks down, but he breaks the kiss.

“You can taste me another day. Promise.” I let out a sigh. “What else does the birthday girl want?” I pull him in and kiss his neck as I work my way to his ear.

“Birthday sex.” We still haven’t slept together, and right now will be a really fucking good time for our first. He groans, and I wrap my legs around him and move my hips along his erection.

“Vidia,” he says breathlessly, and he looks between my eyes like he’s trying to keep it together, but he doesn’t need to. I

want all of him.

He leans over to the drawer and opens it, but it's empty. Dammit. He lets out a sigh and looks over at me with a sorry look. "I didn't bring any."

"Why not?" He chuckles, probably at how offended I sound. I shake my head before he can answer. "It's fine. Just pull out."

"Vidia." He closes his eyes like he's struggling against saying no to me. "That's risky. You and I both know that." I honestly don't care for a condom; I know we're both clean since we got tested.

"I'm on the pill, Sire. Just fuck me already." He laughs, probably at how impatient I sound, but I don't care. He looks down at me like he's considering it. "If you don't want to do it raw, I get that." He lets out a sigh, his eyes still between my legs.

"Oh, trust me, I want to." I feel a smirk growing on my face, and his eyes cut up to me. "Are you sure?" I nod, and he nods once before leaning in. His lips find mine as I work his pants off.

He aligns himself at my entrance, and when I look down at him, he... is a lot bigger than he feels. I look back up at him, and he's smirking. *Arrogant asshole*. I don't think he's ever been humbled before, so I do it for him.

"I've seen bigger," I say confidently, although I definitely have not. His smirk is gone before I can blink, and he squints down at me, trying to see my lies.

"You always have to make a smart fucking comment," he bites out, and I try to hold back my smirk at his almost angry voice. "Do you ever shut up?" My jaw drops just a bit as I let out a laugh.

"No, but you can try to make—" Without warning, he thrusts his full length in me, and I tilt my head back with sounds I've never heard myself make. "Sire!" I arch my back at the feel of him filling me.

“What was that?” He pulls out completely, and I pant, trying to catch my breath.

“You’re such an assho—” He thrust back into me, and I shut my eyes. “Fuck.” He comes down on me, and a second later, I feel his lips on mine as he starts stroking in and out of me at an even pace.

He kisses me with nothing but tongue as he swallows my moans. As he starts going deeper, I suck in a breath, putting my hand down to where we meet. I feel around him, and he isn’t even halfway in. When he goes a bit deeper, I place my hand on his lower stomach, keeping him from going any further.

“Do you want me to stop?” I shake my head because the pain is starting to feel really fucking good. “So move your hand.” I let out a satisfied sigh at his stern tone.

When he tries to go deeper, I let out another whimper but push him a bit. He leaves a trail of kisses along my jaw before settling near my ear. “If you don’t want me to stop, move your hand, Vidia.” He goes still when I don’t move my hand from between us, but I move my hips to keep the friction between us.

I feel him smirking against my neck, but he doesn’t tell me to move it again. Instead, he moves my hand for me and holds both of them in one of his, keeping them above my head.

I smile to myself, a part of me wanting to end up in this position. He keeps fucking me, and I feel a knot in my stomach as he thrusts deeper.

“Fuck.” He sighs against my neck, and I moan at the sound of him struggling to keep it together. “You feel so good, my love.” I let my head fall back as I soak up his praises.

“Say that again.” The words spill through my lips breathlessly as I adjust to him and start to rock my hips harder. He pulls away to look at me, and his eyes alone tell me he’s struggling to keep control.

“You feel better than any drug, Vidia.” I smile, not sure if that’s a good thing or not, but before I can think to respond, he

lets out a soft moan. I just watch him, satisfied.

His eyes meet mine as I lift my hips to fuck him harder. “I want to see all of you, Vidia.” I let my eyes fall closed, but they immediately snap open when I feel him pull on my bikini top, breaking it.

“Sire!” He completely ignores me as he throws the broken top aside. “I really liked that,” I say more to myself.

“I’ll buy you twenty more.” He takes my nipple between his teeth and sucks while I grind my hips against him. He lets go of my hands and holds my hip with one hand as he holds himself on the bed with the other.

I run my hands on his back as he starts thrusting into me faster. I hold onto him, my nails digging into his back. “Fuck, Vid!” I look down at where he is deep inside me, and we fit perfectly together. “You like watching me fuck you?” I bite down on my lip and simply nod.

He leans forward, keeping us inches apart. “You’re so beautiful.” He pulls my bottom lip from between my teeth and takes it between his, biting down.

I pull on his hair, and he bites down once more before letting go. He strokes me harder, and I wrap my legs around him when a familiar feeling settles in my stomach.

One of his hands goes to my legs, trying to undo them, but I keep them around him. “I thought you said to pull out.” His voice is strained, like he’s almost there.

“Don’t.” That was probably a dumb move, and clear-headed me would agree, but I know he’s close, and I don’t want him out of me yet. Besides, I’m on the pill. It’s fine.

“Vidia.” A smile grows on my face at the sound of my name on his lips. I said I didn’t like it when he used my full name, but when he’s on top of me like this, losing control deep inside me, all I want to hear is him screaming my name.

He only goes harder, and I arch my back and clench around him, finishing for the second time. I pull him down to me, and he digs his head into the crease of my neck as he finishes. “Holy fuck.”

We pant in each other's arms, catching our breaths for a few beats. When we pull away, it's him who moves first to look into my eyes. "I..." He hesitates as he searches my eyes before trying again. "Happy birthday, beautiful." I smile against him as he leans in to kiss me.

Slowly, he pulls out of me, and I let out a soft sigh at the empty feeling. I look down at the mess we made but smile to myself. I feel Sire's eyes on me and look up at him.

"What?" I ask, and he only shakes his head but watches me in a sort of awe. We lay in each other's arms for a few minutes, but I start hearing people upstairs asking for us. *Wait...*

"Sire... if we can hear them from down here, that means they can hear us." Oh my god, they totally heard me.

He kisses my forehead, reassuring me. "The music up there drowns out your screams, my love." Okay, good. Hold up.

"I was not screaming."

He gets up from the bed, shrugging. "If you say so."

"I was not!" I reach over for a towel and wipe myself before getting off the bed and heading for the door.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?" I let out a laugh and pick up my cover-up. Did he actually think I was going up like this? Since the skirt I was once wearing is a scarf, I wrap it around my chest and then tie a bow between my boobs, and it actually looks like a shirt.

We go back upstairs, and I hear August telling someone I'm back. He's horrible at whispering. Hazel walks out with a cake and sparkling candles while the song "Birthday Bitch" plays on the speaker.

It's tradition that we dance to this song together. I do my best runway walk toward her, and when she says, "Fuck it up if it's your birthday, bitch!" I bend down and start shaking my ass as everyone starts cheering me on.

Hazel gets behind me, like every other birthday of ours, and grinds her front against me as a guy would while smacking my

ass. We both break into a laugh as the candle goes out. Sire makes his way to me as they change the song and slides his finger along the bottom of the cake.

I see it coming, so I run before he gets the chance to put the frosting on my face. I make it to the end of the boat, but then I have nowhere to go. “You’re cornered, beautiful. Don’t make this harder for yourself.”

“Fine.” I take a step to him, and before he can put it on my face, I say, “Let me lick it off instead.” I gaze up at him, and he looks down at me, smirking. I open my mouth, and just as he brings his finger to my mouth, I turn us and push him off the boat.

I burst into a laugh as he tries to hold his nose before hitting the water, smearing the frosting onto his face. As soon as he’s under, he swims to the surface just as fast. “You little shit!” he calls up to me, wiping the water from his eyes.

I break into another laugh and run away as he heads for the ladder. He built the courage to jump off the boat with me earlier, so I know he’s fine. A few hours go by, and I’m staring off into the sunset with Sire, literally. The sky is a perfect mix of purple and pink, and it’s so satisfying to me how it can be so many different colors every day.

“It’s so pretty, right?”

“Yeah... beautiful.” I look over at him, and he’s looking down at me with a warm smile on his face.

“I have a present for you.” Another one? Everything he did today, the flowers, the boat, the manta rays, it was all more than enough.

He pulls my hand and takes me to the middle of the boat. I keep my eyes on him as he pulls out a pastel blue velvet jewelry box and gets down on one knee. *What the fuck is he doing?* I hear a few people gasping around us, and I feel my heart in my ass.

“Sire, get the fuck up.”

“Let me do this, Vid.” He takes my hand in his, and I stare at him in complete shock. “Vidia, I—”

“Sire. Do. *Not.*” I will literally jump off of this boat and drown myself.

He throws his head back, laughing, and stands. “God, you should see your face. Would it really be so bad if I proposed?”

“Right now? Yes. Not only because we’ve only been dating for a few weeks, but our engagement anniversary would be on my birthday. It takes away the specialness from each other, so when you propose, don’t do it on any special dates.”

A smile grows on his face, and I squint my eyes at him, but he only returns the look. “*When* I propose? You want me to?”
Eventually, maybe... Yes.

“Shut up.” He chuckles softly, and I shake my head at him. “Did you really buy an empty jewelry box for this shit?”

This time, he gives me a bored expression. “No, smartass. Here.” He hands me the box, and when I open it, my breath gets caught in my throat. God, it’s so pretty. It’s a four-leaf clover ring, and the leaves are shaped like hearts with a bunch of diamonds in each of them.

Just as I go to touch it, it spins. “It’s an anxiety ring. I know you twist yours when you’re nervous, but it’s a tight fit, so you can spin this one instead.” I look up at him, and he gazes into my eyes.

I take back what I said about the rays being the best gift ever. This ring is the best, and not because it’s... I don’t even know how many karats, but because he was thoughtful enough to get me an *anxiety ring*. I didn’t even know those existed.

“Do you like it?” I blink a few times, realizing I was staring.

“Yes, Sire. I love it. Thank you.” I go on my tippy toes to kiss him, then slip the friendship ring Hazel got me onto my middle finger. I take the ring he got me out of the box but stop before slipping it on completely.

I don’t want him to get the wrong idea with this ring. I think we’re too early for any of that “promise ring” stuff or whatever.

“What does this ring mean to you if I wear it, Sire?”

“That you are mine to the end of time.” I look into his eyes. That’s what I was worried about. He gives me a smile, but it seems forced. “God, you are so scared of commitment. It’s just a ring for your anxiety, Vid. Put it on,” he urges, and I let out a small, relieved breath and slip it on.

When I look back at him, he’s looking down at the ring on my finger, and he isn’t looking at it like it’s *just* a ring but like it just made me his forever.

Chapter Twenty

SIRE

The Present

I WAS SENT OVER TO kick your ass.” I roll my eyes and turn my back to him.

“Don’t start.” I hear him creep behind me, and I pick my head up from my phone but don’t turn around to him. “Do not touch me, August.” He lets out a sigh, and I turn just a bit to see him drop his hand from the corner of my eye.

He takes a seat next to me at the counter. “So...” he starts. “What’d you two fight about this time?”

“We didn’t. Mind your business.” I don’t ask him how he knows anything because I’m sure I can guess, but he tells me anyway. I tried explaining to Vidia what really happened back in college, but she claimed she didn’t want to know and ended up leaving.

“Well, Hazel saw something wrong with V the second she walked back in, and she wouldn’t say anything, so Hazel sent me to beat it out of you. Let’s do this the easy way.” I let out a scoff. We both know he isn’t going to do shit the hard way.

I almost tell him both he and his girlfriend need to mind their business, but I turn to him instead and let out a sigh. “I feel like we just go in circles.”

He nods in understanding. “Yeah, you two confuse me. Some days, I think, yay, they might be getting back together, and others, I’m like, oh, we need to get the restraints.” I give him a weak smile at his facial expression.

“I don’t get it.” I shake my head, feeling a headache coming.

“You don’t get what? Why she hates you? Because she thinks the entire time you two were together was nothing but actual dog shit, so...”

I freeze and turn to him, surprised he just said that. “Well, it wasn’t.”

“Why don’t you two just talk?” I let out a scoff at how easy he put it.

“I literally just tried.” I turn to him now. “But she always pushes me away, claiming enough was said.” I mimic her as I shake my head.

August is quiet for a few seconds, and when I turn to him, he only shakes his head like he feels bad for me. “You need to make more of an effort, Sire.” I open my mouth to tell him I’m fucking trying, but he cuts me off.

“She doesn’t know what really happened, and sure, she doesn’t let you explain, but don’t complain when you’re letting her walk away. If I let Hazel walk away from every fight, I think we would’ve broken up the first month we got together.” I smile softly, but he sounds like he means every word.

“Make her listen, Sire. Tie her to a damn chair if you need to because it hurts watching you two fight when it’s obvious you both still care for each other.” I run a hand through my hair and think about his words, but he’s right.

“Yeah... I’ll make her listen.” I just have no idea how. August thankfully changes the topic and tells me Hazel was joking about not wanting me at her beach party tomorrow, even though I already knew that. Vid didn’t want to do

anything for her birthday last week, and we tried to make it special, but we're celebrating both of them tomorrow.

He helps me pack my beach bag, but he really just wants to see what he needs to pack. The entire time we're getting my things together, I think about what I'm going to do to get Vid to talk about our past.



"I CAN TAKE THAT PICTURE for you." Both girls who were just shocked to see *me*, now stare at Sage dumbfounded and look at each other, trying to confirm they're seeing the same thing.

"Oh my God," the blonde says, her mouth a gape. Sage chuckles softly at their reaction, and I'm glad the attention isn't on me anymore.

"You're Sage Loana," the one in braids says next, and Sage nods with a smile. "Like *the* Magic Model Sage Loana Hale." She sounds like she's in disbelief to even be breathing the same air as my sister, and I smile proudly. Sage got into serious modeling two or three years ago, and ever since Magic Model signed her, her career blew up.

She's had a huge following on social media for, like, ever, but she has millions now. "That's me. I love your hair, by the way." They both gasp, and the girl runs a hand through her braids in shock.

"I think I might get that design next. Do you mind if I take a pic to show my stylist?" Before she can even get her sentence out, the girl in braids is nodding her head. Sage takes a picture of the design of her braids, and I swear both girls almost pass out.

"How about *I* take your picture?" I hold my hand out to the girls, and they nod as they stand next to Sage like they're afraid to touch her.

"Well, don't stand like strangers." Sage wraps an arm around one and makes a kissy face toward the other's cheek. I take a few pictures of them and laugh at their reaction.

“Please tell me your brother is here,” the one with the braids asks us, and I notice the blonde turn as red as a tomato at the mention of August. Sage tells them he is, and when I call him over, they suddenly get shy.

“What’s up?” August smiles at them. I chuckle when they look at each other for help. When they don’t speak up, August holds a hand out to them. “What was your name?”

I can’t help but laugh again at his flirty voice that I’m sure he doesn’t even notice he uses. They tell August their names, and he shakes both of their hands. “Those are beautiful names for beautiful girls.”

They both blush, and all three of us take a few pictures with them. “I can’t believe we just met the entire Hale family. What are you guys doing here?” I start picking up our things from the sand as August tells them we’re here for his girlfriend’s birthday, and I don’t miss the disappointment that flashes through their eyes at the reminder that he’s not available.

We wave goodbye as Sage hugs both of them before we head for our spot on the sand. I settle the last of our things near Vidia, and August goes over to sit next to Hazel.

“They were cute,” Hazel tells him, and when I look over at her, she doesn’t look bitter or jealous, only like she’s teasing. I know she’s also into girls, so I can’t tell if she’s being sincere or not.

“Yeah, they were,” August smirks at her, and they both laugh quietly, sharing some sort of inside joke.

A few minutes after we’re settled, Hazel gets up from the sand. “Last two in the water have to be the designated drivers!”

We all race up from the blanket we laid out and go running for the water. The hot sand burns under my feet as I run a bit slower behind them.

Vid and the twins make it to the water first, so Hazel and I are DD. I clearly don’t drink, so I’m driving back either way, but Hazel doesn’t look too happy.

“It’s my birthday, so I get to drink.” August and her bicker for a bit, but we all know he’s going to let her get her way. I look over at Vid and give her figure a slow sweep. She looks good in blue, as always, but something about the pink bikini she’s in somehow makes her look even better.

“Stop staring at me, loser.” She flips me off with a smirk on her face. Little shit loves starting with me.

“No, and I let you win, so shut up.”

“Make m—” I splash some water in her face, cutting her off, then lift her before she can splash me back and throw her in front of me.

She lets out a squeal as she hits the water. When her head breaks through the surface, she’s laughing, but then a strong wave hits her. I start laughing as she’s forced under again. She tries to come up again, but another wave hits her.

My laugh sobers when she comes up this time. She’s gasping and looks disoriented. I quickly make my way over to her, but she’s swept back under before I make it to her.

“Vidia!” I frantically search the water for her and feel myself start to panic. I turn to the side when I hear her coughing.

“Is she actually drowning?” I don’t bother responding to Hazel, but she starts swimming her way to Vid.

No, she’s fine. She’s okay. The lifeguard starts blowing their whistle. It sounds like a warning alarm going off in my head over and over and over again. Three times they blow their whistle, and suddenly, everyone is watching us, and I can hear their worried whispers. *She’s okay.* A guard makes their way over anyway, but I keep looking for her.

I can’t hear her coughing anymore.

“Vidia!” *Was she dragged under?* My heart is pounding in my ears. It’s all I can hear, but I think I’m yelling; I can’t tell. *Where is she?!* I’m spinning in circles, looking for her familiar hair, but everything begins to blur with how quickly I scan the water.

“Do you see her?” the guard asks someone. I think he’s talking to me, but I can’t answer him. I need to find her.

“Vidia! Vi—” The minute I spot her, it’s like my hearing comes back as I zone back in. “Vidia, are you okay?!” I scoop her up and quickly bring us to shore.

“Sire.” I can’t tell if she’s laughing or crying, but I can’t bring myself to look down at her in case it’s the latter. I lay her on the sand and crouch down to her level, cupping her face. She lightly laughs as she pushes my hands away, but I grab her face again, needing to hold her.

“I’m fine. God, that’s embarrassing. I swear I can swim.” She turns to someone, the lifeguard, I think, but I pull her back to get a better look at her.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Sire, I’m fine.” The playful look on her face vanishes when she notices the panic that’s most likely still in my eyes. “The current was just stronger than I thought, and I couldn’t get my balance. I’m fine.” I shake my head and pull her closer.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have thrown you in like that. You could’ve drowned.” Why the hell did I do that? This isn’t a pool. She could’ve been dragged under. I know what that feels like. I don’t want her to know what that’s like, not for even a split second. Why would I throw her like that?!

“Sire, I’m *fine*.” She pulls away again and holds my hand right above her heart, and the soothing beat of it suddenly calms me. “I wasn’t drowning. You don’t need to apologize.” I take in a deep breath, trying to calm myself.

“Hey, are you okay, V?” Sage comes over with the others, and Vid tells them she’s fine. “Sire?” I only give Sage a nod, and she doesn’t look convinced, but when she looks over at Vidia, she gives her a nod. August and Hazel are close behind, but after they see Vid is fine, they all turn back, giving us space.

“Breathe,” she whispers. I take a deep, ragged breath. After a couple of seconds, I take it all in, and I don’t feel like I’m

suffocating anymore. “I didn’t know drowning still triggered you so much.”

I don’t say anything and get up, wanting to put more distance between us and the waves crashing behind us. She keeps her hand in mine as we walk back to our blanket. I let my eyes fall shut as I sit back down.

I keep my eyes on Vid, and when she turns to me, she offers a weak smile. “You’re still shaking.” She takes my hand again, and I leave a soft kiss on the back of her hand. “Sire, you were fine at my boat party in college. Did something else happen?”

“I was fine because you were by my side, Vid. Nothing else happened, but I thought you were in danger again.” When I look up at her, she’s gazing at me with the softest look in her eyes.

“Well, I wasn’t,” she says softly, and I only nod in response, trying to convince my brain that she’s fine. I need to get this fucked up memory of drowning out of my head.

I’m about to look back at her when I see something gray in the sand. I pull it out and smile softly at what it is. A toy stingray, about the size of the palm of my hand. I look up at her, and her eyes are on the toy with a small, almost sad smile on her face.

I hand it to her, and she turns it in her hands and then looks back up at me. “We’re not going back in the water for a while, so get comfortable.” Her smile grows a bit. She doesn’t object and lays next to me on the blanket. I lay on my back as she’s on her stomach, and we tan in silence for a while.



“YOU TWO HAVE BEEN LYING here for almost an hour. You’re going to burn.” I put my hand over my eyes to look at August.

“Fuck off.”

He kicks sand in my face while laughing, and before I can even sit up straight, he takes off running. Little bitch.

I turn over to Vid before I go after him. She's lying on her back now, so I lean on my elbow and hover over her so that I'm blocking her from the sun.

"I feel better. Thank you for staying out of the water with me." I quickly lean forward to kiss her forehead and get up before she can reply.

I walk toward August, and he's still running ahead of me. "It was just a joke, Sire. Don't hit me." He says it like I regularly abuse him or some shit. He puts his hands up, surrendering as I make my way to him.

"I'm not going to hit you. Stop backing away, August." He eyes me suspiciously, then stops.

"If you hit me, I'm telling Sage." He always says this and never tells her. When I reach him, I give him a smile and then kick his feet from under him. As soon as he hits the sand, I start kicking a bunch of it in his face.

He starts yelling about it being in his eyes, but I keep kicking it on him so it gets in his mouth. "You always have to be extra!" In a blink, he grabs my feet, and I'm on the sand next to him.

"You started it!" We start wrestling and rolling in the sand. "Ouch!" I feel a sharp pain in my back, but it doesn't feel like he punched me. When I turn, there's a football behind me. I look up, and Hazel is standing a few feet away with her arms crossed and another football in hand.

"That asshole has good aim." I let go of him because she gets ready to throw the next one. Little menace. He stands and then quickly kicks a bit more sand on me but doesn't run this time.

"Don't call her that, and yeah, we've been working on it." He smiles proudly and puts his arms up to catch the ball. When she throws it, she completely misses and hits him right in the—

"Fuck!" August falls to his knees, cupping himself.

"Guess you still need to work on that aim." I tap his shoulder twice, and Hazel comes rushing to his side.

“At least now he can’t have those kids you hate.”

“Shut up, you dick.”

“I’m a dick, and his doesn’t work anymore, thanks to you.” She flips me off but has a rare smile on her face and is obviously trying not to laugh. I chuckle in response and walk back to the blankets. Sage is tanning and taking pictures of herself; her dark skin shines with how much tanning oil she lathered herself in.

When I reached our area, Vid wasn’t there anymore. I look toward the water, and she’s making her way out.

“Why do you have a bucket of water?”

“I want to build a sandcastle.” I feel a warm smile growing on my face, but it washes away when she dumps the entire bucket on me. I gasp at the cool feeling of it on my hot skin, and just as I open my eyes, I shut them again because I see her scooping sand, which she throws on me next.

“You little shit.” I wipe my hands over my eyes, and when I open them, she has the biggest smile on her face, like she was proud of that. I see a camera flash in the corner of my eye, and when I turn, a girl hides her camera shyly like she didn’t mean for the flash to be on.

For her sake, I pretend I didn’t notice and take Vidia’s hands in mine. This time, when the girl beside us sneaks a picture, Vid leans into me. Maybe I’m imagining it, but it’s almost like she melts into me naturally.



“AWE, THANKS, TRAITOR.” I GIVE Hazel a small smile while shaking my head. She walks over to her fridge, saying she’s going to use the gift I got her right now.

Everyone knows how obsessed she is with smoothies, and I’m surprised she didn’t already have one of these fancy blenders.

“Okay, can you open all of these now?” Sage looks around the table full of gifts like they’re hers, but I know she’s just

excited to see everything Hazel got.

“I want to wait until August is out here. He got me those, and I like seeing his reaction when I open them.” She has a small smile on her face, but it’s quickly gone, and her normal bored expression is back as she tries to put the mini blender together.

“He got you *all* of these?” We all look around the table, and it’s definitely a lot of shit, but if you know August, this all makes sense. He loves buying gifts, especially for Hazel.

Vid and I turn our heads toward their bathroom when we hear a loud thud, and Sage jumps up from her seat in concern. We look at each other and then back at Hazel, waiting for her to react, but she just waves it off like this is a normal occurrence.

“August doesn’t like the new shower rug I got, so he takes it off when it’s his turn to shower but always slips. He’s fine. He just has to learn the hard way.” She goes back to adding fruit into her blender while Vid and I start laughing. My brother is a fucking idiot.

“Are you sure he’s okay?!” Sage asks, and Hazel responds with a nod, but Sage doesn’t look convinced. She walks over to the bathroom and knocks on the door before putting her ear to it.

“August?” When she doesn’t get a response, she closes her eyes and opens the door. “August, are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” She nods and goes to close the door but stops when he speaks up again. “Wait, why were you the only one who came to check on me?” Sage looks over at us and shakes her head before responding.

“I’m the only one who cares about you, Twin.” She says it so dramatically and hopelessly, like they’re the last two people on the fucking planet. I roll my eyes at her, and she closes the door.

“Okay, we’re out of here. We also need to shower.” I still somehow have sand everywhere. I walk over to the door, waiting for Vid.

She's only been staying with us for about a few weeks and kind of alternates between whose couch she stays on. She's still against staying in my bed but usually just sleeps at whoever's house she's at the latest, so I've been making sure it's mine, which means she's also been showering over at my place lately.

Hazel side-eyes me, and then we stick out our tongue at the same time. Okay, this is weird.

“Get out of my head and my apartment.”

I roll my eyes at her, and when Sage goes to hug Vidia, Vid kisses her cheek.

“We need to hang out again. I've missed you,” Sage says, and Vid replies saying they will, but Sage pulls her in for another hug before we walk next door.

“You can shower first.” She takes way longer, but I like how the entire bathroom smells like her vanilla soap after she showers.

“Duh, why would I let you go first?” Maybe because it's my apartment? I don't say that, though, since I like how comfortable she's getting here. I heard her telling Hazel she was looking at apartments, but when she brings it up to me, I'll convince her to stay with me longer.

As we walk in, she turns her head back, and I flip her off. She turns back around, but I don't miss the smirk that grows on her face. I swear she bothers me on purpose.

She grabs a few things from her bag in the living room and then heads to the bathroom. My trunks are dry, so I lay on the couch and scroll through my phone as I wait for her to get out.

About an hour later, she walks into the living room in an oversized black T-shirt and her wet curls behind her shoulder. “Sorry, I took so long. I—”

“It's fine.”

She lightly smiles, shaking her head. I keep my eyes on her as she walks toward the kitchen and says, “Can I—”

“I already told you to stop asking. You can have whatever you want.”

She nods once, then makes herself a bowl of cereal, saying she'll buy me more, but we both know I'm not going to let her do that. I leave to take a shower, and when I walk into the bathroom, I smile at the scent of her still lingering in the midst of her hot shower. *It's not weird... She smells really good.*

When I walk back into the living room after my shower, she's watching *Prison Break* on the couch. A smile grows on my face, and I take a seat next to her.

I start moving my arms a bit at the discomfort, and she turns to me. “Does it hurt?”

“No, it just feels weird, like when you can't crack your knuckles.” I extend my arms again with a bit more force, trying to pop it, but she stops me.

“Stop doing that. Here.” She holds her hand out to me, so I turn and give her my arm. I let her move it around and do some weird massages as I stare at her, trying to memorize her features.

I'll never get used to how beautiful she is. Her skin is glowing a golden brown. Her complexion matches my caramel one, but we're both a lot darker from all the sun we got today. My eyes travel her face and land on the beauty mark on her nostril.

I'm tempted to kiss it, but she'd probably punch me in the face. If the amount of beauty marks you have actually determines one's beauty, then she needs a lot more because she's gorgeous, and one isn't enough.

“What?” I zone back in and just shake my head in response.

“Nothing.”

“Then why are you staring?” *Because I still love you.*

“I just realized how ugly you actually are.” *You're still the most beautiful person I've ever seen, and I'm still in love with you, always have been.*

“Screw you.” She smiles and pushes my arm back to me. I lightly laugh it off but give my arm back to her because I want to feel her touch again.

She takes it and goes back to what she was doing. “You should have listened to me.” Her eyes meet mine, and I know she’s talking about the day I injured my arm.

“I know, Vidia. If I could go back, I would, and I’d do a lot different.”

Chapter Twenty-One

SIRE

HELLO, ISA'S ANNOYING ASS DAD." Jackson gives me a confused look through the phone.

"Is that what you have me stored as?"

I nod while walking to the kitchen so I don't wake up Vid. "It suits you, but speaking of the superior one of the two of you, put her on the phone."

"She's taking a nap. Listen, this is important." It probably isn't that important, but I listen anyway. "I need to go take care of something this weekend, but I have no one to watch Belle. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important, but can you please do me this favor and—"

I cut him off because he's rambling and taking too long to ask. "Yes, I'll watch her, Jackson. Why are you making it seem like it would've been an issue to ask me?" I literally "kidnap" her from school all the time; of course I'll watch her for a weekend.

"I don't know, you've never stayed with her overnight. She actually hasn't stayed with anyone besides my mom overnight, plus V is staying with you so—"

"Vid won't mind. Are you dropping her off, or am I picking her up?" I watch him through the Facetime call as he gets out

of his car.

“We’re actually already downstairs. Buzz me in.”

After a few short minutes, he walks in with a sleeping Isa in his arms. One of her eyes twitch, and I can tell she’s faking it so she can be carried. Little brat. I don’t rat her out, and Jackson lays her on the couch with Vid napping on the other end.

“Everything she needs is in here.” He keeps his voice low and places a pink bag on the coffee table. “Don’t let her have sugary cereal, at least not for breakfast, and please don’t forget she’s allergic to—”

“All berries. I know. I didn’t meet her yesterday, Jackson. Stop telling me what to do.” I’ve known her since before she could walk, and I was there when she had her first allergic reaction to strawberries. It was scary as fuck and pretty hard to forget.

“You have a serious issue with authority, and she’s my *kid*, so let me finish.” I roll my eyes and let him go on. “Her EpiPen is in there in case she eats something with berries. She’s usually good with asking for ingredients in new food, but please carry it everywhere you go.”

I give him a nod as he continues. “She can stay up a bit later since it’s the weekend, but don’t let her mess up her sleeping schedule. She needs to nap, or she’ll be fussy. Oh, and she has ballet at—”

“At nine am tomorrow,” I continue, mocking his voice. “Make sure her hair is in a bun but on the top of her head. She doesn’t like low buns since she can’t see them in the mirror while she dances. She drinks milk before bed, and she likes it cold. Anything else I already know?”

He gives me a smile because he knows, besides him, I know her best. “Thank you, man.” He bends down to kiss her forehead and whispers that he loves her. “Okay, I need to go.”

“Where exactly are you going?” I wouldn’t normally ask, but I let my curiosity get the better of me because he never lets Isa have sleepovers.

“Out of state for some family stuff.”

I only nod in understanding and he walks for the door but then turns to me. “Please put your ego aside and call me if anything happens to her.”

I tell him I will.

“No, seriously, Sire. I don’t care what it is or what time. I won’t be pissed, just call me.”

“Jackson. I will, but nothing is going to happen to her. I got her.”

He looks over at the couch, then takes a deep breath while nodding. He goes to walk out but walks back over to her to give her another kiss and it’s clear he’s never been away from his kid for a night. After he makes me promise to actually pick up the phone when he calls so they can talk, he walks out.

As soon as the door closes and I turn around, I see Isa’s head shoot up from the couch. “Good morning, Uncle Sigh!”

I chuckle as I make my way over to her. “Just because you just woke up doesn’t make it morning, you little faker.” It’s almost six o’clock. She giggles as I lift her from the couch, but at the reminder of the time, I make my way over to Vid. She needed to be up at six for an appointment.

She starts to wake up before I can reach her and rubs her eyes, adjusting to the light as she sits up. “Good morning, Viola!” Isa leans forward, wanting to be put down, so I let her go.

“Her name is *Vidia*.” I correct her with a soft chuckle.

“Good morning, Isabelle.” Vid looks a bit confused but still embraces Isa when she goes to hug her. She checks the time on her watch and then looks up at me.

“Jackson needed to do something. She’s going to stay with us for the weekend.”

“The whole week? Yay!” Isa runs off, and I don’t bother crushing it to her that she’s only staying for the weekend, not the whole week.

I look back over at Vid as she stands from the couch and stretches. Her cropped shirt rises, causing her bra to show a bit. I clear my throat and bring my eyes back to her face, but she's already looking at me.

“Uh, I hope you don't mind that she's staying with us. I—”

“I don't mind. This is your house, Sire.” I just nod, and she shifts her weight between both feet like she wants to go on. “I think I found an apartment. That's actually what my appointment is for.”

I feel my brows furrow. I know she's been talking to Hazel about looking at apartments, but I didn't think she'd find a place this soon. I thought she'd at least bring it up to me before making the appointment. Not that she needs to... but still.

“Reschedule your appointment. We have to go do something.”

She gives me a confused look. “Go do what?”

“Something.” I walk off and call for Isa. She walks into the living room with an innocent smile on her face. “What did you do?” I tease.

She giggles and climbs onto the couch. I squint my eyes at her, and she covers her smile with her tiny hands.

“Are we actually going to do something, or do you just want me to cancel my appointment to go view the apartment?”

“Both.” I cross my arms, and Vid does the same. “Why are you in such a rush to leave?”

“Sire, it's been weeks, I can't live here forever.”

“Yeah, you can.” I immediately regret saying that, and not because I don't mean it, I do, but she looks like she wants to run for the hills. “I mean, you can stay as long as you need, and if that's forever, then—”

“It's not. I've stayed long enough, and the plan was to stay with Hazel, not you.”

“Technically, you’ve been staying with both of us.” She barely ever sleeps next door anymore, thanks to my plan, but during the day, she splits her time evenly between my place and next door with Hazel and August.

“Why are you so adamant that I stay?”

“Because.”

“Because what?”

Because it’s been four years since we’ve spent this much time together. Because I’ve missed the last four years of your life. Because I don’t want to be apart from you for another minute. Because I’m still in love with you.

I shake my head at everything it’s spinning with because if I say either of those things, she’ll really run for the hills. “Let’s go. We’re going to be late.” I look over at Isa and nod my head toward the door. I grab my keys, but before we walk out, Vid also grabs her car keys.

I go stop her, but she speaks up before I can object. “You two can go. I can’t reschedule my appointment.”

“I planned this for us, Vidia. Not for Isabelle and I.”

“Planned what, Sire?” I look down at her keys still in her hands, but she puts them behind her back as if she knew I was going to snatch them from her.

I let out a sigh and plead with her. “Just cancel. I promise it’ll be worth it. If it isn’t, I’ll personally get you an appointment to go see any apartment or house you want.”

She looks like she’s considering it, then lets out a sigh and hangs her car keys back up. I open the door for her, but just as I walk out, I quickly grab Isa’s EpiPen from her bag.

We head for the garage, and Vid and Isabelle make their way to the Range Rover when they see the lights flick on as I unlock it. I open the passenger door for Vid and then buckle Isa into her car seat.

As soon as I get in, Isa starts with her guessing game. “Are we going to get ice cream?”

“Better.” I can feel Vid eyeing me, but I don’t turn to her and pull out of the garage instead. “Are we going to Disney World?”

I keep saying better to all her guesses, although the place we’re going to won’t be better than Disney, not to Isa, at least.

After a lot more guesses, I pull in front of the bakery, and the girls look out the window, confused. “This is not better than Disney, liar.” I glance at Isabelle in the mirror, and she has her arms crossed with an angry face. Little brat.

“Yeah, *liar*.” I look over at Vid, and she also has her arms crossed, but she’s fighting a back smile, most likely because she knows the bakery wouldn’t be my surprise location.

I roll my eyes at her with a smile and step out of the car. As I walk into the bakery, Tony is already waiting for me.

“Hi, Mr. Griffin, here’s your special order.” He hands me a basket, but I don’t take it since there’s a slight change in plans now that Isa is with us.

“Hey, Tony, do me another favor and switch out everything that has berries for anything chocolate flavored instead.” He nods like it’s not an issue, maybe because there weren’t many pastries with berries.

After putting the basket in the trunk, I head to our destination. It’s about a thirty-minute drive, so I make sure to keep Isa talking so she doesn’t fall asleep.

She sounds tired when we arrive, but as she looks out her window, I can tell she’s wide awake again. “Wow! Look at that!”

Vid and I look over at all of the light-up animal sculptures, and I notice she’s biting back a smile. It’s Light Up The Night at Grand Park tonight. They have huge sculptures of a bunch of different animals, and they light up in different colors.

This isn’t why we came here, but I knew Isa would like it. I planned on coming after Vid’s appointment because I didn’t think it was to go see an apartment, but since I got her to cancel, we’re here a bit earlier than the actual surprise.

Getting out of the car, I open the door for the girls, then grab the basket and bag from the trunk. We walk through all of the light-up sculptures, and although this wasn't a part of my plan, Vid seems to be enjoying them just as much as Isabelle is.

We take a few pictures of Isa next to the sculptures, and we walk around as she names a few animals. "Woah, what's this one?" I look up at what she's pointing at and feel a smile grow on my face.

I look over at Vid, and she's still looking up at the huge light-up animal sculpture, absolutely mesmerized.

"It's a stingray." When Vid looks over at me, we both share a knowing look and hold each other's gaze, reminiscing. I can't tell what she's thinking, but I hope she's thinking of the good memories.

"I like the happy feet penguins better." We both give a light laugh at Isa and let her pull our hands to the penguin sculptures.

We finish off the exhibit walking through a rainbow tunnel, and the entire time Vidia is staring at the lights around us, my eyes are glued on her. *Please let this go well.*

I lead us up a hill, and we can see all of the sculptures from up here. Vid and Isa walk over to the edge and look at all of the different lights. I lay out a blanket from the bag I brought and place all of the pastries out.

"Cupcakes!" Isa skips toward the picnic and stands next to me on the blanket. She puts her hands behind her back and sways back and forth as she watches the sweets. "May I have one?"

"Yes, ma'am." I hand her one, but she pauses before taking a bite. "No berries. You're good." She has the biggest smile on her face as she bites into the chocolate cupcake. I look up at Vidia as she makes her way to us.

"A picnic and a light-up zoo. If Isa wasn't here, I'd say you planned a date, Gryffindor." Her voice is laced with a teasing tone, and I bite back a smile.

"Do you want it to be a date?"

She sits in front of me, and her eyes roam all of the sweets, landing on the tres leche. She finally looks up at me when she realizes I'm waiting for an answer and shrugs her shoulders. I don't push her, mainly because I don't want her to say no.

We talk about nothing in particular as we try all of the different desserts. After a while, the lights in the animal sculptures go out, leaving only a few streetlamps to illuminate the park, and I take that as my cue.

Isa gasps and runs off to the edge of the hill. Vid and I follow after her, and when we reach the edge, I watch Vid as her eyes light up when the people below us light lanterns.

A few of them let their lanterns go, and they float up right in front of us. After a few minutes, there are about a hundred all around us. With where we are on the hill, the lanterns are in our reach.

Vid finally turns to me, and I feel a ping in my chest when I see the smile on her face as she notices the lantern and lighter in my hand.

“You remembered?”

“A promise is a promise.” We hold eye contact, and it's like we're taken back to four years ago. The day we made it official, she was watching *Tangled* because it's apparently her comfort movie.

I hear Vid sniffing, and when I turn to her, there are tears in her eyes. “What's wrong, my love?” She gives me a weak smile and gestures toward the TV.

“He loves her so much, like who takes a girl they just met on a boat ride to see something she's dreamed of for years?” I'm still confused as to why she's getting emotional since she said she watched this movie hundreds of times, but I don't question her.

I pull her in so she's leaning against my chest as she watches Blondie and the other guy sing about seeing the light. “I've always wanted to do that.”

“Sing on a boat?”

“No asshole, the lanterns. Ever since I first watched this movie, I wanted to be Rapunzel and see the floating lights.”

I look down at her, and she’s still watching the movie as if she’s seeing it for the first time. “I’ll take you to see the floating lights.” I lean forward and place a kiss on her forehead. “Promise.”

Keeping my eyes on her, I hand her a lantern and light it. She doesn’t let hers go until mine is lit. Isa doesn’t like the fire, so she watches from a few feet behind us on the blanket.

Together, we hold our lanterns over the edge and slowly let them go. I watch Vidia as she stares at our lanterns floating in front of us. She’s so beautiful. There isn’t too much light out here, but the yellow light from the fire of all of the lanterns illuminates her face, and I can’t take my eyes off her.

“I am so obsessed, oh my God,” she says softly, her eyes still in front of us.

“Yeah, so am I.”

She turns to me, and I just want to pause this moment and keep her in it forever. She looks so happy, like nothing can ruin this moment for her. I hope that’s true.

Taking a deep breath, I blurt out the reason I planned this. “I want you to give us another chance.” She looks confused, but I can see the moment it hits her, and I quickly go on. “I still love you, Vidia.”

She goes still, searching my eyes. “Sire—” She shakes her head softly, but I cut her off.

“I know what you’re going to say, okay? You don’t want to get hurt again, but it’ll be different this time.” She looks over at me with a sympathetic look, and I can’t tell if it’s for me or herself.

“I won’t hurt you ever again, I prom—”

“Don’t. Don’t make empty promises, Sire. Not again.”

I look between her eyes, and I know she’s talking about the last time I made that exact promise and broke it. I reach forward and take her hand in mine. “It’s not an empty promise.

When we get back, I'm going to explain everything to you." We hold each other's gaze for what feels like forever. She reluctantly pulls away, and I feel my heart sink.

She opens her mouth to say something, but I speak before she does. "Don't say no." I probably sound desperate, but I am because I don't want to be apart from her anymore.

"Sire..."

"Let me explain what really happened, then you can think about it, okay? Sleep on it before giving me your answer about us." I shrug my shoulders, and she gives me a weak smile and nods her head. I try not to read too much into it, but a part of me knows her answer, and I'm going to have to do a lot more than some lanterns to change her mind. I just hope my explanation will be a good start.



"HERE, LET ME GET HER." I take Isa from Vid as we step into the elevator. I thought all of those sweets would give her a sugar rush, but she was out like a light as soon as I put her into the car.

With my hands full, Vid takes my keys, and she opens my apartment door for us. My alarm goes off, and Vid flips the pad open. "What's the code?"

"0614." She goes to put it in but freezes and looks back over at me. "Like the date? June fourteenth?" She's looking at me like she can't tell if I'm joking, but she doesn't comment about the code being her birthday.

"You have ten seconds before it alerts the cops." She has more time than that, but I don't want her to confront me for that being my code after all these years. It's just easy to remember.

I walk into my room, quickly change Isa into her pajamas, and lay her on my bed. When I walk back into the living room, Vid is on her phone.

“Did you see this?” I walk up to her to get a better look at her phone. I roll my eyes at the entire article claiming I’ve been spotted with *the* Vidia Gomez and hints about us allegedly dating.

“The media is so annoying.” Vid agrees but then starts to worry that Jackson will be upset about his kid being all over social media.

“I doubt he’d be pissed. He knows how the media is. It’s not really our fault.” She nods to herself, and I turn to her. “I was serious earlier, Vid. I want to talk about what happened between us.”

She turns to me but immediately looks back down at her phone. “I’m tired, Sire. Can we—”

“No.” I cut her off, and she looks surprised, but the minute I see her guard come up, I grab her hand to keep her from running. “Just hear me out.” I don’t give her a chance to reply or run as I start.

Chapter Twenty-Two

VIDIA

Four Years Earlier

DO YOU THINK THIS MATCHES?" I tie the top of my bikini and turn to Sire. His eyes scan my body before he nods slowly.

"Do those not go together?"

"Uh uh." I turn to the mirror, trying to decide if I like how my bathing suit looks. I couldn't find the bottoms for my pink top; I think I packed them, so I just paired my white bottoms with pink flowers, and I think it's fine, so whatever.

Sire comes from behind me, wrapping an arm around my waist as he leans in to kiss my neck. "You look good, but your whole ass is out in these." He tugs the bottom of my bikini, and I place my hand over his.

"Is that bad?" I tease, and I feel him smirk against my neck.

"I'm not complaining." I laugh softly as he rubs my butt. I turn my head in the mirror and rub my hand down my stomach. I know I gained a bit of weight, but I can't tell if that's why I look weird or my mismatched bikini.

Sire looks up at me in the mirror and then moves my hand from my belly. He looks at me from head to toe one more time before turning me so I'm facing him. I watch him as he leans forward, kissing my stomach softly.

“What was that for?”

“You were looking at yourself weird.” He kisses my belly again, and I try my hardest to fight back a smile. “Beautiful.” He picks his head back up and kisses my forehead.

I wrap my arms around him, and he rests his chin on the top of my head. “I love you.” I let out a sigh and look up at him, gazing into his eyes.

I love you too, and I'm sorry I can't bring myself to tell you. He stares at me like he really is in love with me, but he doesn't look like he's waiting for me to say it back.

I love that most about him, how patient he is with me, how he doesn't expect anything from me. I smile at him, still getting used to him telling me he loves me, still trying to believe him.

I lean closer to him, and for reassurance, I ask, “How much?” A smirk grows on his face. He keeps his eyes on my lips and then licks his.

“I just showed you how much I love you. Three times, actually.” God, his voice alone drives me insane. I feel a pool of warmth between my legs and squeeze them together. He notices how hot and bothered he made me and his smirk grows into a smile. “Take these off and get back in bed.”

“Uh uh.” I laugh softly and move his hand from my ass. “I want to make it to our last college party, and you're making us late.”

“Me?” I nod and take a step away from him. “You didn't seem to be complaining ten minutes ago when my tongue was ___”

“Finish getting dressed.”

He smirks down at me, but I quickly turn, and I pick up the Tampa Bay Rays jersey my mom gave me from the floor and

throw it on top of my bathing suit. It hangs low enough, but I throw on some shorts either way.

When I notice Sire wince from the corner of my eye, I turn to face him. “How’s your arm?” I glance down at the cast he needs to keep it in until his upcoming surgery.

I still can’t believe he injured himself in the last game of his college career. There were *so* many sponsors there for him, but I think they were impressed he finished the game, although I told him not to.

“It’s fine.” He sort of shrugs, but it’s clear he’s in pain.

“Do you still want to spend the summer with me in Maryland?” I smile at the idea alone.

At graduation last week, it was announced that I got into the new sports medicine program at John Hopkins. They even offered me a summer internship, and I didn’t want to leave Sire while he was injured, but he said he’d come with me.

“Of course I do.” He doesn’t miss a beat as he replies and leans forward to kiss me. “I’m going to book my flight today.” I smile up at him, and my chest tightens at the way he looks at me.

“Did you tell your family?” I know they talked about him moving in with his parents or Lisette after the surgery for more support because he can’t really take anything for the pain, and he’s definitely going to want to.

“Yeah, Lisette’s on my ass about it, but that’s nothing new.” I smile at the mention of her, but it quickly fades at the thought of *why* she’s on his ass, and Sire, of course, notices. “What are you thinking about, my love?”

I let out a sigh and stand a bit straighter. “Why don’t you want to take any medication after the surgery?”

He can, of course, take Ibuprofen or Tylenol, but after something like surgery, stronger meds like narcotics are usually prescribed. While he is obviously addicted to narcotics, he can take some after his surgery because his pain still matters.

Sire lets out a sigh and kisses me softly. When he pulls away, he rubs my hand as he answers. “It’s not like I don’t think I can take whatever they prescribe me and *not* abuse it.” He shakes his head at whatever he just thought of. “When I was abusing drugs, I was at the lowest point in my life, Vidia.”

“I don’t ever want to be in a headspace like that ever again.” He searches my eyes like I’m capable of keeping him sober and he’s desperate for me to do so. I give his hand a reassuring squeeze as he goes on.

“I don’t want those meds in my reach. I trust myself now, but when I’m alone with my thoughts and when the pain is unbearable, I don’t know how desperate I’ll get.” He lets out a soft sigh as he goes on. “When I found out I was getting adopted, I flushed every damn pill I had with Lis by my side and swore to myself I wouldn’t relapse if the Hales took me in for good.”

“I can’t go back on that promise. I’d be betraying not only myself but my siblings.” I give him a nod and pull him in for a hug.

“You’re a lot stronger than you think, Sire, and I have faith you won’t relapse.” I pull away so he can see me as I continue. “I know you want to spend the summer with me, and I also want you to, but I really think you’re going to need your family and their—”

“I’ll have you.” I go still before my head snaps up to him. I look between his eyes as he watches me. “Right?”

“Yeah, of course you will.”

“So I’ll be fine.” He says it with so much certainty. Like I’m all he needs and will ever need to be okay. I’m sure that’s not healthy, but it sure does feel good to be needed by someone. Craved almost with the way he looks at me.



“WHAT TOOK YOU TWO SO long?”

Sire and I share a look, then turn back to Hazel and shrug. She doesn't question us further and hands me a cup. Since I drove here, I don't grab it, but Sire does instead.

He's been drinking a lot more since he injured his arm like Lis said he would, but I don't mention anything and let him drink because he keeps saying he's fine and isn't substituting drugs for alcohol. Besides, we're at a party.

"Sage!"

I turn at the sound of August's voice and his eyes are on his sister, who's letting his teammate touch her ass.

When August turns, I can see how pissed he looks as he calls out to Sire. "Tell your sister something."

Sire sips his drink while shaking his head. "Devin!" His tone is demanding and cold. Both Sage and Devin turn to look at him, and without another word, walk away from each other.

"Why the fuck do they only listen to you?"

"Because you hold no weight, you bitch."

August elbows Sire in the stomach, and when Sire does it back, he winces. August immediately apologizes, but Sire doesn't reply and downs the rest of whatever was just in that cup.

The baseball team calls the boys over, so the girls and I walk out to the back. We're near the pool when Sage turns to us.

"So..." She has a scheming look on her face, and I don't even want to know what she's thinking, but she says it anyway.

"How pissed do you think my brothers would be if I hooked up with that hot teammate of theirs?" I look over at Hazel, and she sips her drink as her eyebrows rise over the rim of her cup.

"Considering they told all of them you were off limits, very pissed." Sage looks like she's considering it anyway, but I doubt any of the baseball boys would risk their lives like that.

Hazel shrugs when Sage turns to her for an answer. "Just don't tell them. What you don't know can't hurt you." They

toast their cups, and before I can say that Sire will find out, someone replies from behind me.

“Cheers to that, right, Vidia.” I turn around, and one of the baseball players, Brent, is towering over me. I take a step back, and a smirk grows on his face.

“Uh, I guess.”

He scoffs and rolls his eyes. “Wouldn’t you want to know something, even if it was going to hurt you?” I think about his question for a second and try to decide if it has a deeper meaning to it or if he’s just drunk.

“I don’t know, it depends.”

“Depends on what?” A smile grows on his face as if I were amusing him. I look back over at the girls, but they’re having a separate conversation, paying us no mind. “What would it depend on, Vidia?” Why does he keep saying my name like that? Maybe he is just drunk, but he almost has a mocking tone when he says it.

“How much have you drunk?” He takes a step closer to me and leans in a bit.

“Not much.” I can smell the alcohol on his breath that says otherwise. “I can still take you upstairs and fuck you however you want it.” *Huh?* I go still and just blink a few times. There’s no way I heard that right.

“You’re drunk. You should walk away now.”

“Let’s walk away together.” He takes another step toward me, but I step back again.

“Let’s not.” I try to walk off, but Brent pulls me to him before I can.

“Get your hands off of me.” I shove his hands off my waist, but he grabs my arm.

“Are you deaf or just stupid?” I feel the warmth radiating off Sire from behind me, and Brent quickly lets go of my arm. He eyes the two of us from head to toe in pure disgust. I can’t tell if the alcohol is making him sick or us, but I’m going to believe it’s the former since I didn’t do shit to this guy.

“What is so special about this bitch?” *What is this asshole’s problem?* His eyes cut down to my jersey, and he smirks back up at us. “Besides her mom, of course.” *My mom?* Before I can say anything, Sire stands between Brent and me.

“Watch your fucking mouth.” Sire’s tone is cool and calm, like a scary calm. Brent chuckles, and I get a feeling this is not going to end well, for Brent at least.

I know he and Sire are friends, especially since they’re teammates and all, but I also know Sire looks like he’s about to throw a punch.

“Just let it go...” I watch Sire’s jaw tighten, but he pays me no mind and keeps his eyes on Brent.

“I got to hand it to you, Sire. I mean, I really wasn’t expecting you to keep this up for so long.” I look back over at Brent, but now I’m just lost.

“Shut the fuck up. I already told you—”

“Stop lying. Come on, dude, you already got what you wanted. Just pass her over.” *Pass me?!*

“Excuse me, dickhead. I’m not *something* you can just ‘pass over,’ so—”

“Go find Hazel, Vidia.” Sire’s tone is demanding, and I look over at him, but before I can object, Brent breaks into a laugh. I stare between Sire and him, trying to figure out if this is some sick inside joke I’m on the outside of, but Sire’s scold doesn’t falter.

“God, does she think you love her or something?” When neither of us answers him, a playful smile appears on his face. “*Do you love her or something? Oh, this is so much better than I thought.*”

“What the hell are you talking about?” He opens his mouth to answer me, but Sire grabs my arm.

“Nothing, let’s go.” He tries pulling me away, but I pull my arm out of his grasp and turn back to Brent. *Wouldn’t you want to know something, even if it hurts you?*

As if he read my mind, a sinister grin forms on his face. “You can’t be that stupid. I know you’re not just a pretty face. I’ll let you put the pieces together.” I am so confused. When he doesn’t make a move to tell me what the fuck he’s talking about, I try figuring it out.

He asked what was special about me besides my mom. I look down at the jersey of her team. I don’t think he’s ever met my mom, but I can see how she would be special, considering how well-known she is. My mind keeps raking through everything he said. *Sire already got what he wanted.* What did he want?

“You’re almost there, come on.” Is this a game to him? Sire places his hands on my waist and turns me toward him. He doesn’t look as pissed anymore but worried instead. It only makes me want to know even more.

“Let’s go,” he pleads with me. He isn’t as demanding as before, and I feel a pit in my stomach.

“What did you want?” I stare into his eyes and try to figure it out. As far as I know, graduating was at the top of his want list. That and... *No.* I go still, and I hear Brent chuckling beside us.

“So she’s not just a pretty face.” I turn to him and look between Sire and him. *No. He’s lying. He wouldn’t.*

“You’re lying.”

“I didn’t even say it.” His grin grows twice in size, and I feel a tightness in my chest. As Sire takes a step toward me, I take one back and keep my eyes on Brent.

“You still look a little lost. Do you want me to spell it out for you?”

“Brent. Shut the fuck up before I knock your goddamn teeth out.” Sire’s in his face now, but Brent clearly still finds this amusing.

“I think it’ll be easier coming from you.” He fakes his sympathy and places a hand on Sire’s shoulder. Sire immediately shoves his hand off and pushes Brent.

“Woah, what did I miss?” Buzz, their other teammate, stumbles between them with a bottle of tequila and a stuffed penguin. “Can you hold my son, please?” He hands me the penguin, and I take it instead of questioning him and his very drunk self.

“Sire, hi. I didn’t see you there.” Sire ignores his drunk teammate and keeps his gaze burning on Brent.

“Buzz, perfect timing. Sire was just going to tell Vidia about the plan.” Before I can question him, Sire’s fist connects with his jaw. Brent loses his balance and stumbles backward.

“What plan?” As the words leave my mouth, Brent sends a sinister smile my way.

“How he’s been using—” Once again, Sire punches him but a lot harder this time, and Brent actually falls to the ground.

He’s been using? Did he relapse?! Brent spits out blood on the ground next to him and stands but doesn’t swing back at Sire. Instead, he chuckles like he wants to get hit.

“Did you...” I stop myself from asking because I don’t want to bring up his addiction in front of everyone out here who now has their attention on us. Sire turns to me with regret covering his expression. *Please say no.*

“I didn’t.”

“But he said you’ve been using—”

“You.” My head snaps toward Brent, and then I slowly look over at Sire. *Me?*

“That’s what this is about?” Buzz says, but I keep my eyes on Sire. “I thought we already discussed this.”

“Discussed what?” I ask against my own nerves.

“Nothing.” Sire tries dismissing it, but I don’t let him.

“Discussed. What,” I ask again, my voice more firm, my eyes still on Sire.

“The plan, you know, Sire sleeping with you so that your mom can call in some scouts and secure his seat in the MLB.” Buzz says it like it’s simple math, maybe because he’s drunk

as fuck or because it was that simple for them. Either way, I feel the heaviest weight on my chest hearing it out loud.

Sire briefly closes his eyes, knowing he fucked up, then opens them and stares at me, waiting for a reaction, but I trust him. I trust Sire, and I know he wouldn't do that. *He wouldn't.*

He moves toward me and takes my hand in his but doesn't say anything, and his silence worries me.

"Tell me it isn't true, Sire." He shakes his head softly and takes my hand in his again.

"It—"

"This is starting to feel a bit melodramatic, don't you think?" I ignore Brent and tug on Sire's hand. He turns back to me and watches me carefully.

"It isn't true, my love." I shake my head at the uncertainty in his voice.

"You have a horrible poker face, Gryffindor."

"Vid, I can explain." He wipes my tears, but I move his hands off of me and blink away my tears because he doesn't get to see how hurt I am.

I shove the stupid penguin back at Buzz and force my feet to walk back into the house. I pick up the pace when I hear Sire following behind me and quickly make my way through the party, out the front of the house.

"Vidia!" Ignoring him, I keep walking toward my car and try to catch my breath, but I can't. I feel a knot in my throat, and I can't breathe. I feel like I'm suffocating. I stop in my tracks and try to calm myself down.

"Breath, my love."

"I'm trying!" I take in a ragged breath and take a step away from him. "Don't call me that."

"Vid—"

"It was all a lie. Wasn't it? Everything between us was—"
My voice breaks, and I hate myself for how weak I sound. "Answer me!" The weakness in my voice is suddenly gone,

and I'm left with anger. Angry he isn't explaining, angry I was so stupid.

"It wasn't all a lie, Vid. I love y—"

"Don't say that. No, you don't."

"Yes, I do." He takes his hand in mine, but his touch isn't the same anymore. It's like I don't even know him. I feel my stomach turn like I'm going to be sick, and I pull away.

"You're a liar," I say in disbelief. I can see the hurt in his eyes, but I don't feel any pity for him. "I should've known, and I should've never given you a chance. You clearly didn't deserve it, and you didn't deserve me or the future my mom granted you."

"I didn't lie."

"You didn't? So you guys didn't discuss using me to get to my mom?" He avoids my eyes, and I let out a scoff.

"Well, technically we did, but—" I feel all the trust I had in him fade.

"Go to hell." I turn to leave but pause. "You know what?" I pull the jersey over my head and ball it up before throwing it at him. "That's all you wanted, right?" He looks down at the jersey on the floor, the beautiful stingray on it facing us.

I shake my head at him, and when I walk away, he grabs hold of my hand, but I push his arm away hard. I hear him wince behind me, and I spin around. I glance at the injured arm he's holding and then look into his eyes.

"When you make it to the major league, and you will, thanks to *me*, I want you to remember this moment every time you throw a pitch or swing a bat and your arm hurts because it will." *It's going to hurt like I'm hurting now.*

"You're going to feel like your arm is deteriorating, and I hope it does. I hope your arm never heals and the future you used me for is thrown away, and you're left with nothing."

His expression is unreadable, but that's not what I wanted. I want to see the hurt on his face, but he's emotionless. "You don't mean that."

“The same way you didn’t mean it when you said you love me.” I turn on my heels before he can respond and head for my car.

“Vidia, please. I do love you.” He sounds desperate, but I don’t care. I spin back around, my hands shaking with anger.

“Stop saying that! You don’t love me.”

“I swear I do.”

“Well, I don’t.” My voice is cold, and I almost don’t recognize it. I slip the ring he gave me off of my finger, and my eyes stay locked on his as I throw the ring as far as I can in the trees behind him.

Just like that, it’s gone, and everything we had with it, or everything I thought we had.

When I climb into my car, he doesn’t make a move to even stop me. I can see him in my mirror, and he looks broken. *Good.* I look ahead and drive away from him and away from all the lies he’s ever made me believe.

My apartment is in the other direction, but I just need to get away. My mind is racing with all of our good memories, and I feel like they’re fading, tarnishing, and the flaws in them are peaking through. The signs I missed were finally clear as day.

“And then the two of you kissed, right?”

“No, Hazel. You aren’t even listening to me. I’m only telling you this to explain to you that he is acting differently.”

“Okay, when did you notice this change?” I take a few bites of my pizza, trying to remember.

“Earlier this year.”

He didn’t start flirting with me because he started seeing me differently or because of the hot dress I was in; he saw me with my mom that day and recognized who she was. I shake my head in disbelief and continue driving, putting as much distance between us as I can.

“How’s your day going, beautiful?” That was the first time he called me that.

His team walks past us, talking. "This is definitely going to work." One of them mumbles, but I don't give it much thought.

Turning back around, Sire is looking at his team weirdly. "What?" I go to look back, but he stops me. The same day he started calling me beautiful, Brent was the teammate who said this is definitely going to work... This being Sire using me. God, that was months ago.

My eyes begin to blur again, but I quickly blink my tears away and grip the steering wheel.

"I'm proud of you, Sire." He kisses my forehead, pulls me in again, and whispers into my hair.

"Thank you, Vidia."

That day changed everything for us. From that day forward, we spent almost every day together. I took so many damn naps with him so *he* could get some rest. I feel like such an idiot.

Sage looks between the ball and me, and I can see her connecting the dots. "Wait, you're the one with that famous baseball coach mom, right?" I honestly hate when people recognize who my mom is because they ask for favors... Sage and the boys don't seem like the type to do that, so I don't hide it and confirm with a nod.

I was wrong. I guess he was the type to use me for my mom. I wipe my tears and make a left, driving with no destination. I just need to get as far as I can.

He groans into my mouth, and then he swallows my moan as he enters me with two fingers. The first time he ever touched me like that, made me crave him. All that pleasure for all this pain.

"She's who I was talking about." Why was he talking about me?

"What was that?" Brent turns to me, surprised that I heard him over the music, but before he can answer me, his friend with a buzz cut speaks up for him.

"You're the daughter of a famous coach. Sire screws you and—" Brent elbows him before he can finish.

I asked Sire about what he meant, and he lied right to my face. I come to a stop sign and close my eyes for a second, but the tears don't stop.

"I've made it very clear that I want to be with you, and all you keep doing is push me away." I had a good reason to push you away. I open my eyes and continue driving. That same day, I asked him if there was anything else he wanted to tell me, yet he said no. He lied. Again.

I don't recognize any of the streets I'm on and try to find my way back home because I'm so tired. Of the lies, of feeling like a fool. The puzzle pieces are falling into place, and I hate the image it's forming. I don't even know what to believe anymore.

"God, I love you." He places a soft kiss on my lips. I go still, and I feel a pit in my stomach. Like something is off.

Everything was off. Everything was a lie. After aimlessly driving, I head back the way I came and make my way home. In fifteen minutes, I'll be in bed in the comfort of my own pain—pain he caused.

"I'm not going to hurt you, I promise." But you did. You broke your promise, Sire.

My vision is blurring again, and I'm so tired of crying. Tired of feeling like this. I go to wipe my eyes but quickly grip the steering wheel when bright headlights blind me.

I try slowing down and switching lanes, but I can't see anything. In an instant, all I feel is the impact of both cars colliding, and my stomach dipping as my car flips and everything goes dark.

Chapter Twenty-Three

SIRE

Four Years Earlier

SHE'S WAKING UP." I SHOOT up from my seat and stand by the doctor over Vid. *Please let her be okay. Take me if you need a life, but please let her be okay.*

She slowly opens her eyes, adjusting them to the light. The doctor checks her pupils, and Vidia looks confused.

"Vidia, can you hear me? My name is Dr. Mclain. Do you remember what happened?" I stand beside her in anticipation for a sign that she's okay, that she's not in any more pain than what I already caused her.

"How did I get here?" She reaches for her forehead and then pulls back with a wince when she touches her wound. I hate myself even more at this moment for letting her walk away. This would've never happened.

"Your boyfriend ran here with you. He's a lot stronger than he looks." The doctor tries to lighten the mood and chuckles, but the air is still stiff. I ran here with her because there was no damn service to call for help in the ditch she was in.

A few people who were on their way to the party saw the accident, and when I heard them describing Vidia's car, my mind raced with the endless possibilities of what could've happened to her, so I ran.

Vidia looks over at me, just now realizing my presence, and it's as though all the cloudiness in her eyes fades, and she recalls everything from tonight.

"He's not my boyfriend." Her voice is cold, and I feel my heart sink. I can't tell if I'm still out of breath from running here, but it's suddenly harder to breathe. *She's angry. She doesn't mean it.*

Vidia pulls the IV out of her arm and sits up to leave but lets out a gasp of pain and hunches over. Out of reflex, I reach for her. "What's wrong?" She takes a deep breath and then sits up straight again.

"I'm fine. Stop touching me." I reluctantly pull away and keep my touch off of her.

"You shouldn't leave. I still—" Vid interrupts the doctor and throws the blanket off.

"I said, I'm fi—AH!" Her knees go out as she tries to stand, and my arms go around her waist, catching her. She doesn't comment about me touching her, but the pain is written all over her face. It hurts me to even look at her.

I look down at her, and my eyes widen a bit. "Vidia, you're bleeding." Blood trickles down her thighs, and I feel myself start to panic. I can't remember if she was cut from the glass when I dragged her out of the car. Dammit, I should've checked.

The doctor presses on her stomach. "AH! AH!" I feel my breath get caught in my throat, hearing how much pain she's in, and against her wishes, I hold onto her hand. Maybe for my own relief, but either way, she doesn't pull away.

"Let's check for internal bleeding."

"Why the fuck didn't you check for that when I first brought her in?" My head flicks down to Vid when she winces in pain again. I clench my jaw and give her hand a light squeeze as I

take a deep breath, calming myself because she doesn't need me to argue with doctors right now.

The idiot doctor pours a jelly type of liquid onto Vidia's stomach and then rubs her with some sort of control that's connected to a computer screen. Vidia watches the screen, so I do the same, but I have no idea what we're looking at. It's just a black and gray screen, but since Vid's in pre-med, she seems to know what we're looking at.

The doctor stops moving the control, and I feel Vidia pull her hand out of my grasp. "There's no heartbeat. I'm so sorry for your loss."

"What?" I look down at Vidia, confused, because her heart is clearly beating, and I'm no doctor, but I know her heart isn't in her stomach.

She's staring down at her stomach with a blank expression, and when the doctor whips away the jelly, she clings onto her stomach like she doesn't ever want to let go.

"What do you mean by no heartbeat?" I ask, but I seem to be the only one who's confused. Vidia just closes her eyes, obviously still in a lot of pain.

"The baby doesn't have a heartbeat. It didn't survive the crash. I'm sorry, but she's miscarrying." I stare at the doctor, soaking in her words. *The baby?* I look back down at Vidia. My eyes travel down to her stomach, where her hands are still wrapped around herself.

"You're pregnant?" *Was pregnant.* I feel a chill run down my spine, but as soon as the words leave my mouth, Vidia lets out a sob. I drop onto the bed beside her and pull her into my chest.

She fights against me, but I hold her anyway. Needing to hold her, knowing she needs someone to hold her. She lets out a scream in pain, then another sob, louder than the last. After the longest minute of fighting to push me away, she gives up and lets me pull her into my arms.

She was holding back her tears before, not letting me see her pain, but now she doesn't hold back and lets it all out as the

entire night hits her in one blow.

When she grips me, I look down, and more blood is streaming between her legs. I squeeze my eyes shut at the sight and hold her tighter against my chest. “I’m so sorry. I’m sorry. I’m so so sorry.” My voice cracks, and I can barely hear my own voice over her screams.

I know she’s the one in all the pain, but it physically hurts seeing her like this. Hearing her scream and cry like her world just came crashing down around her. In a way, I’m sure it did.

I feel my own tears start to form, but I fight to keep them at bay. I did this. I shouldn’t be the one who’s crying. “This is all my fault.” *Please forgive me for this.* Against my efforts, tears roll down my cheek.

I keep whispering to her how sorry I am, but my sorries won’t bring back our baby. A baby I didn’t know was growing inside her. A baby we would’ve been amazing parents to, given the chance. That chance was stolen from us tonight, and it’s all my fault.

A sob of my own breaks through, and we hold each other as she cries so hard that nothing comes out, and her screams go silent. “I didn’t know. I swear I—”

“Shh, I know, bab—” I cut myself off, not even wanting to say that word. “I know, my love. It’s okay.” If she knew she was pregnant, she would’ve told me. I try to think how this is possible and then remember the few times she forgot to take her birth control.

“It’s not okay, Sire. None of this is okay.” She sounds destroyed, and I feel her begin to shutter against me, falling into another silent cry, and tears begin to blur my vision again.

“I know.” I smooth her hair and kiss her forehead as a few more of our tears fall.

“Sire?” Her voice is so soft that I can barely hear her.

“Yeah?” She takes a while to respond. I begin to think she didn’t say my name to begin with.

She looks up at me and wipes my tears, then pulls away and squeezes her eyes shut like it hurts to touch me, to even look at me. “This isn’t your fault, but—” Her voice cracks, and she takes in a ragged breath. “But I need you to leave.” I feel myself go still against her.

“Vidia...”

“Please.” Her voice is soft again, just above a whisper. Her eyes are still shut, but tears are somehow still streaming down her cheek. I reach to wipe them but stop myself. She can’t even look at me; she doesn’t want me to touch her. She doesn’t want anything to do with me.

She says this isn’t my fault, but her actions say it is, and her actions are definitely a lot louder than her words right now. I rise from the bed, and she keeps her eyes shut tight as she pulls her knees to her chest and wraps her arms around herself.

She begins to sob again, and I just want to hold her, take it all away. She doesn’t deserve this. She’s obviously still in a lot of pain, that much I can see, even with her eyes closed. I just can’t tell if it’s emotional or physical. Maybe it’s both.

I take one last look at her, trying to memorize her. Even if I never want to remember this day, if this is the last time I’ll see her, I want to soak in as much as I can.

Taking in not nearly enough of her, I turn around and walk out, leaving two pieces of myself behind. This is my fault, whether she wants to admit it to both herself and me or not. *She hates me.*

VIDIA

I FEEL SO EMPTY. EVERYTHING hurts, but I still feel... empty, like nothing’s there. I finally open my eyes when I know Sire is gone and look back at my stomach.

“I’m so sorry. I’m a horrible mom, and you’re not even here yet.” *Yet? Yet means it’ll be here eventually, but it won’t. Not ever.* I break into another sob and hold myself. I should’ve known I was pregnant. I shouldn’t have been driving so fast.

I hear someone coming in, and I can tell by the weird perfume smell it isn’t Sire. When I look up through teary eyes, the doctor is writing something, and an intern is staring at me. I pull the sheets over me, knowing what’s coming but not wanting it to come.

“Vidia, I know this is very hard for you, and you’re in a lot of pain, but we need to—”

“I don’t want to.” My voice comes out so low and numb I could barely hear myself. She wants to make sure my uterus is empty, that my body passed the baby I didn’t even get to meet or name or even acknowledge for more than a day.

“Vidia, you—”

“I said no. Give me my discharge papers. I’m leaving.” Confirming this will make it real, and this can’t be real. I feel a weight on my chest, and it’s so hard to breathe. I feel like I’m fucking drowning in this place.

“I need you to understand what will happen if you leave and the tissue is—”

“The baby,” I correct her. “It’s a baby not tissue. It’s my baby.” She lets out a sigh like this is harder for *her* than it is for me. Like *her* baby is the one that’s dead inside *her*.

I feel my eyes blur again and throw the sheet off my lap; there’s blood on the sheets between my legs but no clots.

“Vidia—” I move her arm off me, and the simple action hurts, but either way, I rise from the bed and pull the curtain, making my way to leave.

I limp away but only make it a few steps when another pain shoots through my stomach. I suck in a breath of air and crouch over, holding my stomach. “Why does this hurt so fucking much?”

I try to stop myself, but another cry breaks through, and I fall to my knees. I'm so fucking tired. I can't do this. Not alone. Someone is screaming, and when I look around, everyone has their eyes on me.

I'm the one screaming. I cover my mouth with my hands, trying to cover my sobs. Arms come around me, and when I open my eyes, I recognize it's Hazel, kneeling down on the ground with me. "I just saw Sire walk out. I was so worried. Are you okay?" *No, I'm not okay. I don't think I'll ever be okay.*

"Me duele. Todo me duele, Hazel." I doubt she can understand me between my sobs, but she cups my face and wipes my tears.

"Let's get you off this floor, okay?" I nod and throw my arm over her shoulder.

"Ahh ah!" I feel my knees going out, but she holds me tighter.

"I got you, V." The intern leads us back to the bed I was in, but I don't want to be here. I turn to Hazel, and she looks like she's fighting back tears, seeing the blood in the bed and the ultrasound screen, putting the pieces together.

"I want to go home."

"You need to let me check you, Vidia." I shut my eyes at the sound of the doctor's voice. The thought of it alone hurts too much. "It'll be fast, and I promise you'll feel better once it's over."

I keep my eyes shut, not wanting this to be real. Waiting to wake up in Sire's arms. Waiting to wake up from this nightmare and get up and go to our last party together, where we'll have the best time.

"Vidia." Someone is touching me, but with my eyes closed, I can't tell if it's Hazel or the doctor, so I pull away and touch my stomach.

"I didn't even know I was pregnant." I open my eyes and look over at Hazel just as she wipes her tears. "It's not fair," I say, shaking my head.

“I’m so sorry, V.” She hugs me, and I break all over again. “You need to let them do this, okay? Just a quick check, and I’ll take you home. Okay?” I don’t respond and hold her in silence.

Just one check. I pull away while sniffing and give her a small nod. She looks over at the doctor and gives them a nod. We sit in silence as the doctor gets everything she needs. When she walks back in, I quickly grab Hazel’s hand in fear.

“Are you ready?” I squeeze my eyes shut and nod. She puts the gel on my stomach to check, and I keep my eyes close and away from the screen.

I go to my happy place, and I’m mad it’s him. I think about how freeing it felt swimming with the manta rays on my birthday, how light I felt with him. Like I was floating, how perfect that day was. Watching the sunset with him, how he pretended to propose, the ring.

I think about the size of my baby in the ultrasound. I must’ve gotten pregnant that day. The first time we slept together.

I hear the doctor take her gloves off, telling me it’s over, but when I open my eyes, I know it isn’t. That’s the look Jen had me perfect, the bad news look.

“Vidia, your body didn’t pass the ti—” She quickly corrects herself. “The baby, I know this is hard, but—”

“Has your baby ever died inside you while you didn’t even know it was there?” Her eyes widen a bit at my outburst, but I’m fed up with her acting like she can sympathize with me.

“No, however—”

“That’s what I thought.” She stays silent for a second and then continues with even worse news, somehow making this night ten times worse for me.

“Your baby is still in your uterus. I need you to come back in about two weeks so we can check again, and we might need to do a D&C.” I stare at her for a few seconds, then look over at Hazel to check if she heard what I did, but she closes her eyes and lightly shakes her head.

“You can come back on—”

“I’m not coming back.” I suck in a breath and bite my tongue so I won’t scream again. There’s a throbbing pain between my legs, and my stomach feels like I’m being stabbed with a fucking chainsaw. When I feel something warm trickle down my legs, Hazel shoots up from her seat.

“Vidia, that’s a lot of blood.”

“You said you’d take me home after that one check. She checked, and I want to go home.” She looks down at the floor with a sad look in her eyes.

The doctor rushes over to me, and when she sees the blood, she turns to the intern. “We need to do the D&C right now. Go get—”

“No. No one is taking my baby from me. I’m going home.” I try to take a step, but I’m in too much pain to move. I close my eyes and try to catch my breath, but it feels like I’m fucking dying.

“You won’t be in any more pain once we remove the tissue.”

“The baby! Stop talking about it like that’s not what it is, a baby.” The intern is staring at me like she’s about to call for a psych ward, but maybe she should because I’m starting to feel like I’m delusional. *This isn’t happening.*

“And I *will* be in pain. I’ll be in more pain because my baby will still be dead!”

“Vidia...” I look over at Hazel, and she looks like she’s trying to keep it together for me but is failing.

“No dejes que se lleven a mi bebé.” Hazel doesn’t answer but hugs me instead, and we sit back on the bed. “Prométame, Hazel.” I feel her shudder against me as I start sobbing in her arms. “Please,” I beg.

“It’s not up to her, Vidia.” I feel the bed sink as the doctor sits on the edge of it. I pull away from Hazel and wipe my tears as I look over at the doctor.

“Please don’t take my baby.” She gives me a sad look, like she isn’t going to listen to my pleas, but I beg either way. “I

didn't know I was pregnant, I swear. I'm sorry for yelling at you."

"It's okay that you yelled. This is hard for you, and I'm sure you didn't know you were pregnant, Vidia. You were only six weeks." I flinch as she says *was* six weeks instead of *am* six weeks, as if I'm not pregnant anymore. But I am.

"I can be a good mom, I promise, just—" My voice breaks, but I keep going. I need to keep going. "Just please don't take my baby. Please let me keep it."

"I'm sure you would be an amazing mom, Vidia." I give her a small smile, but it's wiped clean by her next words. "But not to this baby." I slowly close my eyes and let my head fall.

"But I want *this* baby. I want *this* baby to grow."

Hazel takes my hand in hers. "You can still be an amazing mom to this baby." My head snaps to her. "By letting it go, V." She gives me a reassuring nod, but I shake my head with teary eyes. Pulling my hand away from her, I place it on my stomach.

"I want to watch my belly grow and take cute maternity pictures and—" I let out a sob as it hits me that I'll never have everything I'm envisioning. "I want to record everyone's reaction as I tell them I'm pregnant." I cling to myself, thinking about how I didn't even get to have a happy reaction. *Sire would've been so happy. He would've told the whole fucking world he was going to be a dad.*

"I want to pick names with him and argue about how we're not naming our baby after him, then we'll laugh when I call him arrogant." I let out a small laugh at the thought of it, but it falls into another sob.

I'm not sure if they can even understand me anymore through my cries. *I would've been a good mom. I know it.*

"Please, just let me keep it, please, please don't take my baby."

"Vidia, you know I can't do that."

“It’s still in my uterus, it’s fine.” I sound desperate, but that’s because I am.

“You saw there was no heartbeat, Vidia.” I shake my head, forcing my tears to stay at bay.

“It’s fine. It’ll grow and—”

“It won’t grow.” The doctor interrupts, but I ignore her and continue with my dream. Maybe speaking it into existence would work.

“I’ll get to see them walk and talk and—”

“Your baby is gone and—” Why does she keep saying that? It’s still inside me.

“Sire and I will place bets on its first words, and I’ll—”

“You’ll die if I don’t take it out, Vidia.” I squeeze my eyes shut as she takes away all my hope. Although I know it’s false hope, I still hang onto the thought of our life with this baby.

“You know you need to let her do this, Vidia.” I keep my eyes closed, not wanting to face Hazel. If I ask her to take me home, I know she will. She won’t force me to go through with this, but Dr. Mclain is right. I’ll die if I don’t, maybe not now, but eventually, I’ll get an infection and feel worse than I do. After sitting in silence in what feels like forever, I agree to let her take away the last thing of us I have.

“Ready?”

“No!” I quickly close my legs and turn to Hazel. “I can’t do this.” She wipes my tears and gives my hand a reassuring squeeze.

“I promise you, you can.” I close my eyes while shaking my head. *I can’t. Not without him.*

“I want him to be here. He should be here.” I’m somehow not out of tears and sob as I hold onto Hazel like my life depends on it. It feels like it does. It feels like I’m not going to be able to survive this. *Not without him.*

“Do you want me to call him? I think he’s still outside with August.” He didn’t leave?

I think about it for a second but shake my head. “I don’t need him,” I say, still angry, remembering the party and the argument that got me here.

“Of course you don’t *need* him. You don’t need anyone.” I look over at Hazel and nod, keeping my chin held high. “I asked if you *wanted* him.” I shake my head. *I don’t need him.* I give the doctor a nod for her to begin and squeeze my eyes and Hazel’s hand at the discomfort.

“You’re doing good, Vidia.” The doctor tries to reassure me, but my chest feels like it’s being crushed, and I can’t breathe. I try to take in a breath, but I can’t, and I feel myself panicking.

“Stop,” I somehow choke out.

“Vidia, I can’t stop once I start. I told you—”

“She said stop!” The doctor freezes at Hazel’s tone but doesn’t move to take everything out of me. I turn my head at Hazel and frantically shake my head.

“I can’t do this.”

“Yes, you can. You’re already doing it.”

“No, I need Sire. I want Sire.” She gives me a reassuring nod, but when she gets up to get him, I squeeze her hand, not wanting to be alone.

She squeezes my hand back and nods in understanding, then turns to the intern. “Go to the waiting room and ask around for Sire Griffin. If he’s not there, go out to the parking lot and look for an orange BMW and bring his ass here.” I give her a smile, and not much later, he rushes in.

He looks like he hasn’t slept in days. His eyes roam over everything going on, and he seems confused, but he doesn’t question me. Instead, he lays on the bed, cradling me as Hazel still holds my hand on the other side. I look up at him, and he’s already staring down at me with red, puffy eyes.

“Are you—”

“No, the baby is—” I stop myself, not strong enough to reassure him that I’m not taking the baby out by choice. That the baby really is gone and that I don’t blame him.

“You’re going to be okay.” He kisses my forehead as he soothes my hair. Not asking further questions, just holding me as the doctor continues.

After what feels like forever, she says, “We’re almost done, Vidia. Just a little longer.” Hazel squeezes my hand, and Sire kisses my forehead a few times.

I quickly pull away and look up at him before our baby is gone for good. “Quick! Pick a name.”

“What?” He looks confused as he wipes his tears.

“Pick a name before she finishes, hurry. You pick for a girl, and I’ll pick for a boy.”

“I want to pick for a boy.”

“Fine, just hurry.” I look over at the doctor, and she looks up at me like she’s going slower for us.

“Sire junior for a boy.” *I knew it.* He says it so confidently, too.

“You arrogant asshole.” We both give a light laugh, but it sounds sad, and the doctor tells me not to move.

“Fuck, I’m so fucking sorry, Vid.” I reach up to wipe his tears and let my hand linger so I can hold him.

“Shh, just pick a different one, hurry.” I look between the doctor and him. She looks like she’s just waiting for us to pick names, but I can’t tell if she’s done or not.

Sire gives me a small, sad smile and then tells me to go first. “Fawn for a girl.” I picked that name out years ago. He wipes my tears and places a small kiss where it falls on my cheek.

“That’s perfect.” I give him a sad smile and nudge him to say his.

“Bellamy for a boy. We could call him Bell for short. I know that sounds like a girl’s name, but—”

“It’s perfect.” We gaze into each other’s eyes, both tearing up, and I wish more than anything we could’ve raised this baby together. No matter what happened earlier tonight, in this moment, I wish we could’ve been parents to this baby.

“All done.” I tear my gaze from Sire, and the empty feeling in my heart somehow feels bigger.

Chapter Twenty-Four

SIRE

Four Years Earlier

WHY WOULD HER RING BE out here, Sire?”

I swear he doesn't listen to me. “I already told you she dropped it over here. Just look, August.” I crouch in some bushes and keep looking.

“We've been looking for two days. Sire, you just had surgery. You need to be resting. It's hot as fuck out here. Just buy her another one. Shit, I'll fucking pay for it. Can we just go?” I ignore his complaints. He isn't the biggest fan of the heat, and it's July in Cali, but I'm not going to stop looking.

My head snaps to the right when I notice something shining on the ground. I walk over and let out a breath of relief when I realize it's her ring. “Got it.” August smiles and nods for the car.

“Finally.”

I make my way back to him but trip on something, or nothing, because when I look down, nothing is there.

“Are you drunk?”

“I don’t know, Mom. Am I?” I softly chuckle to myself and stand back up.

“What, bro?” August sounds very confused, but I shake my head in response. Vid would’ve got the reference. She made me start *The Vampire Diaries* with her. She would’ve laughed at my joke.

“Do you think she’ll watch it without me?” I let out a sigh because, of course, she will. She’ll do a lot without me.

“Who will watch what? Sire, it’s only two pm. You’ve been drinking a lot these past few days.” I walk to his car while spinning Vid’s ring. *This thing is so cool.*

“I’m great at getting gifts.”

“What are you talking about?” I don’t respond again and climb into his car and lean my head back as I close my eyes. “Sire, what’s going on with you? I haven’t seen you like this since high school.” Since I was on drugs, he meant.

August was at the hospital with us, but he doesn’t know about the baby; I doubt Hazel will tell him since it’s not her story to tell. Neither of them knows we broke up, but I’m sure Vid will tell Hazel if she hasn’t by now.

“I fucked up.” I rub my temples as I feel a headache coming. August lets out a sigh and starts the car. The drive feels longer than what it is, but everything feels longer. Time feels like it’s going so much slower without her. I stumble into our apartment and flop on our couch.

“You should go to a meeting.”

“No.” He doesn’t press it anymore and lets me sleep the day away.

I hear someone talking but can’t make out what they’re saying. God, my head fucking hurts. I open my eyes and sit up, rubbing my hands through my hair.

“What time is it?” I close my eyes again because the light is bright as fuck in here.

“It’s 3:15.” August sounds worried, probably because he woke me up, and he knows I hate when he does that shit.

“I only slept one hour?” *Time is really fucking with me.*

“You slept twenty-five hours. It’s Sunday.” *Shit.* I open my eyes, and my head whips to the other end of the couch because that is not August’s voice anymore.

“You called my fucking sponsor?” I squint my eyes at Lis. Her blond hair is in a messy bun, and her blue eyes are piercing me with annoyance. She’s probably been calling me lately; I wouldn’t know since I blocked her yesterday.

“Now I’m just your sponsor, Sire? Ouch.” I roll my eyes at her. “And yes, he called me because he cares about you. What’s going on, Sire, and why did you block me?” I rise from the couch and make my way past her.

“Because you were calling too much.”

“I called twice.” Okay, yeah, but I didn’t want her help. I don’t deserve it. I open the cabinet where we keep our liquor and pull out a half-empty bottle of Hennessy. I open it, but she snatches it from me before I can take a swig.

“Give me the bottle, Lisette.”

“Wow, my full name? Someone’s mad.” I roll my eyes at her mocking tone and snatch the bottle back. I throw my head back, taking a long drink, and I feel it burn my chest, but I don’t chase it down with anything.

“You’re officially using alcohol as a substitute for drugs, Sire. Do I have to remind you how bad that is?” God, her voice is so annoying. I walk past her with the bottle in my hand and head for my room.

“I already know. I just don’t care.” I shut my door, but it doesn’t slam because she stops it and walks in after me.

“Then tell me.” I let out a breath in annoyance. She just wants me to hear it out loud because “saying it makes it real” and all that bullshit, but like I said, I don’t give a shit.

“Using alcohol as a substitute for drugs isn’t going to do any more good than it will do bad. It’s just as bad as using drugs itself and will end in becoming an alcoholic or relapsing,” I

say in a mocking voice, then take another deep swig from the bottle.

I take a seat in my spinny chair and slowly turn myself a few times. Lis stops me and turns the chair so I'm facing her. "So you're knowingly killing yourself?"

"I'm drinking, Lis. I'm not overdosing like you did." She takes a step back like my hurtful words physically move her.

"Sire!" My eyes stay locked on Lisette's as August starts yelling. "What the fuck is wrong with you?! She's trying to help, so shut the fuck up and stop being a fucking dick! Apologize, and don't *ever* say that shit again!"

Lis holds eye contact, not backing down, not showing I hurt her, but I know I did. That was the point. "He's just being a bully because he's trying to push me away. Well, guess what, Sire? Throwing my suicide attempt in my face isn't going to make me walk away from you." Guess I'll have to keep trying. I take another drink and spin my chair so I'm not facing her anymore.

"If you don't talk to her, I'm calling Sage." I close my eyes for a brief second. He knows I hate seeing Sage hurt, and it's going to hurt her when she sees me like this and when I push her away because I will when she tries to help.

"I don't need any of you to help me. I'm fine."

"That's another dollar for saying you're *fine*, but make it ten for being mean." I take another swig, trying to drown her out. "And you're not fine. You're being a little bitch because you're in pain after your surgery, and Vidia got in an accident. I heard she's fine, so what really happened?" I spin back around so I'm facing Lis again.

"She's not *fine*, so shut the fuck up." I feel my blood running hot, and I can't tell if it's from the liquor or how pissed that just made me.

Lis looks taken back this time, and she stares at me, almost in shock. "What happened?" Her tone is a lot softer now like she sees something on my face that worries her.

“It’s none of your fucking business. Leave.” She does the opposite and flops onto my bed. Why the fuck did I have to pick such an annoying sponsor? She sits there, lecturing me, but I don’t listen and try to finish the bottle until we wrestle for it. She somehow wins and takes it.

I close my eyes for a few seconds, but when I open them, my room is empty and a blanket is thrown over me. Okay, maybe it’s been a few hours. When I reach for my phone, it’s only four pm.

I squint my eyes at the date and notice it’s four pm, Monday. *Shit.* I should stop doing this, but it feels good. I can’t feel the pain in my sleep. I get up from the chair and stretch while rubbing the pain in my neck.

They could’ve moved me to my bed, but whatever. I walk into the bathroom to brush my teeth and shower. When I go to grab my soap, I notice Vidia’s vanilla-scented one next to it.

I stare at it for a few seconds and grab it. Closing my eyes, I take a breath of it. *God, I miss you.* I pour some and wash my body in it, needing a reminder of her. When I finish showering, my head is still pounding, and so is my fucking arm. I’m really starting to regret not asking for stronger meds.

As the idea sparks, I walk over to August’s room and search for the only thing close enough to what will help. I check his nightstand and then his sock drawer but don’t find them. After checking a few more locations, I find his ADHD meds. August usually doesn’t take the Adderall he was prescribed unless he has a test or something he needs to focus on.

I take the bottle and walk back to my room, sitting on the edge of my bed. If I do this, six years will be down the drain. My arm has been killing me, and like Vid said, I’ve been wanting to take something for it. I’m not sure if this will feel as good as the pills I do want, but it’ll feel good...

I think about everything else she said, to call her if I was going to relapse. I’ve been calling her since I left the hospital, and she hasn’t answered. I went to her house, and she wouldn’t even answer the door. Not even Hazel answered to say something mean to me. *She hates me.*

Knowing she won't pick up, I call anyway. It goes to voicemail, but I call three more times because I really fucking need her right now.

"What?" My eyes widen at the sound of her voice. She answered?

"Vidia?"

"Do you not know who you were calling?" I've never heard her voice laced with this much anger. I'm almost afraid to speak.

"I need you." I can't bring myself to tell her I have a bottle of pills in my hand, so I hope she knows what I mean.

"Needing me wasn't a part of the plan. This sounds like a you problem." I hear someone say her name in a surprised voice in the background. Hazel is most likely listening. Nosy ass.

"Don't *Vidia* me."

I stop their bickering before she hangs up. "Can we talk?"

"No. Goodbye."

"Wait! You said to call you if I ever needed you." I say her exact words in hopes she catches on that I'm about to throw away my sobriety. "I really need you, Vidia." I should be calling Lisette for this. She said to call her too, and she's my sponsor, but she's not the one I want to hear right now.

"Well, I didn't mean it, so call someone who cares, and don't ever call me again. Sounds like a *plan*?" I hear Hazel gasp on the other end, and then the line goes dead just like my insides because I feel like she just ripped my heart out.

I want to believe that she's just angry and doesn't mean it, but I can't keep lying to myself. She hates me because she thinks I was just using her, and she blames me for her miscarriage.

I open the bottle, and I stare at the pills for a few seconds. "*Don't ever call me again.*" I put the pills on my nightstand and then grab the display cube that the signed baseball is in.

The one she gave me for making six years sober. I push away my thoughts of her and what the gift meant.

Technically, taking one of these wouldn't be relapsing...

Snorting two of them definitely will be.

"Fuck it." Before I can change my mind, I crush two pills. I pull out my wallet and line the powder with my ID card. Without thinking, I lean over and throw away everything I worked six years to build.

There goes your promise to the twins.

"Shut up." I close my eyes, and the thought of taking one more pill sounds really fucking good right now if it'll make these guilty thoughts go away. I made that promise when I was a kid. It barely counts.

That promise kept you sober for six years.

"Fuck!"

Someone rings the bell, and I jump out of my thoughts. I dust off the corner of the nightstand, then wipe my nose. I walk out of my room and quickly put the bottle of pills back. When I swing the door open, Sage walks in with two cups of coffee. *I'm kicking August's ass when this shit wears off.*

"Hey, bonus brother." She walks in and keeps her eyes on me, trying to analyze me. I fake a smile and take the cup of coffee from her hand.

"Hey." I take a sip, and she stays staring at me.

"You don't look drunk?" I'm so glad I chose to shower and look presentable.

"Because I'm not." I walk past her and sit on the couch. She turns around but doesn't sit next to me.

"August said you've been drinking a lot lately. He's worried about you."

"August is a liar." That's a lie. I'm the liar.

"August wouldn't lie to me. Especially not about this." I take another sip of my coffee and shrug my shoulders.

“Well then, he exaggerated because I’m fine.”

“Okay, good.” She walks over to the kitchen, her heels clicking against the tiles. She opens our cabinets and takes the last bottle we have, thanks to my drinking spree.

“You don’t mind if I take this then, right?” Sage doesn’t drink, so I shake my head because I know what she’s doing.

“Go right ahead.” I close my eyes and wait for the euphoric feeling I’ve been dying for to run through me. I hear her walk into the hallway leading to our rooms, but she comes back out after a minute.

My eyes land on the bottle of pills in her hand, and I can’t bite back the smirk on my face. “August told me to pick these up.” Her voice is soft, almost like she doesn’t want to take the pills and liquor from me, but she does. I know August sent her because he knows I wouldn’t say no to her. They know what they’re doing.

But they’re too late. You already broke your promise to them.

“We’re not doing this because we don’t trust you, Sire. We’re trying to help you.” *You shouldn’t.* She tosses both things she just confiscated into her bag and walks over to me.

“I was thinking about you last night, and I was really worried.” She takes my hand and kisses the back of it. When she notices her lipstick stain, she rubs it away shyly. “But I kept thinking about the day we announced you were officially joining the family.” She looks so fucking hopeful, and I have to turn away from her.

Why couldn’t she come to give me this speech five minutes ago? You’re too late, big sis. I already fucked up.

“I kept reminding myself what you told us.” I squeeze my eyes shut, and my chest feels like it burns and squeezes all at once. “You sat us all around the living room for a family meeting while you gave a big speech on why you’ll never use drugs again.”

She chuckles softly at the memory, and I swallow the lump in my throat. “You made us all cry as you went in a circle,

listing things about each of us that will keep you sober.” I shake my head softly, but then I suddenly feel lighter as those pills finally hit.

Sage tugs on my hand, and I turn back to her. “Oh, don’t cry.”

I chuckle softly and blink rapidly to keep my tears from spilling. She looks up and fans her eyes. “You’re going to make me ruin my makeup.” She laughs softly.

When she looks back over at me, I start to wish I didn’t take the pills, but I did, and a part of me is glad for it because the high is starting to wash away the guilt.

“I’m running late for my photoshoot, so I have to go. Can we get dinner this Friday? Me, you, Lis, and August?” She turns her head to the side, her pretty smile beaming.

“Sure, Sage.” She studies me for a second, then nods softly.

“Promise me you’re okay?” I’m looking right at her as I lie.

“Promise.” She smiles and bends down to place a short kiss on my cheek, then walks out, leaving me to enjoy my high.

I stare up at the ceiling as everything floats away. My headache, the pain in my arm. The pain in my chest after hearing how cold Vidia was with me. I feel the hole in my chest start to fill back up again. The hole left behind when I heard the doctor say our baby didn’t have a heartbeat.

“Why did I stop?” Why would I ever stop getting high when I can always feel like this?

“Why did you stop what?” I turn my head toward August. I didn’t hear him come in. When I turn my head back, I notice the time says **6:14**. How ironic is that? Wait. Have I been sitting here for a fucking hour?

I turn back to August as he sits on the other end of the couch. “How long ago did you get here?” My voice comes out a lot more confused than I wanted it to sound.

“Twenty minutes ago? When you opened the door for me?” *Shit*. I think for a second, and I remember that happening vaguely. I sniff in when I feel my nose running.

“Are you okay?” He sounds scared, but he shouldn’t be. I didn’t take enough for an overdose. A few more, however... I lightly snicker at that. *However*. It’s such a weird word. How. Ever. I lightly chuckle, then turn to August.

“I’m fine, Hale.” We only ever call each other by our last names to bug each other, but he doesn’t look like he thinks it’s funny. Party pooper. Buzz killer. I hold back a laugh and get up from the couch to go into my room because his vibes are ruining my high.

“Vibes. *Vibes*.” That word feels so weird. It kind of vibrates. Everything is a bit hazy, but that’s just the way I like it. My phone starts ringing, and I almost don’t answer until I notice the area code. I clear my throat and put on my professional voice.

“Hello?” *Why did I say that in a girl’s voice?* I cover my mouth and hold back a laugh.

“Hi, this is Fred Chamlet with the Los Angeles Dodgers.” I snicker at his last name and cover it up with a cough. Chamlet. *It sounds like chowder*. Focus.

“Is this Sire Griffin?”

“Yes, it is.” *I used my man voice this time. Good job.* I keep zoning in and out as he tells me how much of a great player I am and how he loved watching me at our last game. A few of the other sponsors called me already, but I was waiting for the Dodgers. They’re the dream team and all.

“I’d like to set up a meeting with you and your brother, August Hale. We normally do meetings separately but make exceptions for siblings.” I tell him how flattered I am, trying to voice some enthusiasm, but that’s hard when you’re as high as a fucking kite.

He goes on to say what the meeting will entail, hinting that he’s going to offer us a seat on the team. I can’t help but think about what Vidia said. “*When you make it to the major league, and you will, thanks to me.*”

It’s not official yet, but it’s safe to say I made it. I wish I could tell her that this was never the plan.

“Are you still there?”

“Yes, sorry. That sounds great, thank you again Mr—” I quickly stop myself from laughing and clear my throat. “Mr. Chamlet.” He says he’ll see me tomorrow, and when I flop onto my bed, I hear August’s phone ringing. After a few minutes, he comes barging into my room.

“Guess who just fucking called me!”

“Fred Chowder with the Los Angeles Dodgers?” I mock Mr. Chamlet’s voice and lightly laugh. August’s brows furrow a bit, and then his smile somehow grows.

“Fred Chamlet.” He sounds like he’s correcting me, but I’m pretty sure that’s what I said. “Did he call you too? Holy shit, we’re going to the fucking major leagues!”

I squint my eyes at him, unable to tell if he’s actually jumping up and down or if these drugs are just making me see shit. I don’t think I like Adderall. I need Oxy... Now.

“I know it’s not set in stone, but aren’t you excited?”

“Ecstatic.” I fist pump the air. He frowns, his excitement wiped clean, and walks out of my room, leaving me to feel, once again, utterly alone.



“ARE YOU READY?”

“No, I can’t tie this stupid fucking tie.” I yank the tie off and throw it onto the bed. When I turn to August, his tie is already tied around his neck.

“Hazel did it for me,” he says with a shrug. “Here.”

He hands me a black tie matching his, and it’s already tied. All I have to do is readjust over my head. I reach for it and then pause. Hazel can’t tie a tie. I remember during graduation, Vidia tied it for both of us. I feel a knot in my throat, but I clear it and then take the tie from him, mumbling a thanks.

We head for the door, and I grab my keys. “I have to make a quick stop. I’ll meet you there.”

“Stop where? The meeting with Fred is in twenty minutes, Sire. You’re—”

“I’m not going to be late, August.” Before he can voice another protest, I walk out and head for my car. When I make it to the frat house, Brad walks up to my car.

“What’s up, bro?” He daps me up, and we make our exchange. I give him a ‘thank you’ nod, and he taps the tops of my car before I speed off. I drive into the parking lot and park next to August’s car. I check the time, and I still have eight minutes before I’m late.

I reach into my glove compartment and pull out a random pamphlet. I place it on my lap and then look around the car for something to crush with. I notice Vidia’s pastel blue hydro flask and reach over to the passenger door, grabbing it.

I place one Oxy pill onto the pamphlet before I quickly crush and sniff it. When I pick my head back up, my eyes lock on hers. I can’t tell if she just saw that, but I don’t care. I get lost in her eyes, and the view is better than any feeling these pills can give me.

She rolls her eyes and starts to walk off. I quickly wipe my nose, grab her water bottle, and get out of the car, following after her.

“Vid!” She ignores me and picks up her pace, but I catch up. “Here.” I hand her her water bottle, grateful for an excuse to talk to her.

“Keep it.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Well, neither do I.” She doesn’t want it anymore because I was the one who bought it for her. It was the second time we went to the aquarium when she helped me overcome my fear and held me as we walked under the tunnel of water.

I didn’t have a panic attack as she held my hand, and I wanted to thank her, so I bought her this. Now that I think

about it, it was a dumb thank-you gift.

“Your nose is bleeding.” I bring my hand to my nose and wipe the blood away. This is such an annoying side effect of sniffing. She stares at me, and for a quick second, it looks like she’s concerned. If she was, it’s wiped off her face, and she looks mad again.

“Vid, can we talk?”

“I don’t ever want to see you again, Sire. Can you just do that one thing for me?” Without another word, she walks off, and I don’t stop her. She’s hurting. We just lost a baby we didn’t know we could’ve had, and she blames me. I tell myself I’ll give her space before explaining that I was never using her.

The meeting goes by quickly, or at least it feels like that due to the Oxy. He asks me about my injury, and August does most of the talking when I take more than five seconds to think of an answer.

He tells him about my surgery and how I’ll be in physical therapy but reassures him that the doctors said I’ll make a full recovery. I zone out, and I think I look like I’m paying attention because August and I are shaking Fred’s hand before I know it, thanking him for meeting with us.

“I should be thanking the two of you, really.” *I beg to differ since he’s the one offering us a seat on his team.* He says he’ll fax over the paperwork for us to sign, and once we do, it’ll be set in stone. We’ll officially be on the LA Dodgers.

As we walk out of our coach’s office, August heads for the bathroom, and I notice Vidia and our coach talking about something. Neither of them looks very happy.

“Is everything okay, V?” *V?* How does Fred know her? She turns to us and then makes it clear that she also knows Fred.

“Hey, Uncle Chammy.” *Chammy?* It clicks in my head that Fred is one of the coaches Vid told me about. The one that has a history with her mom. They apparently never dated, but he was around a lot when Vid was younger. *What are the fucking odds?*

My dream team, linked to Vidia. Of all coaches and sponsors I've been looking at for years. She's linked to him.

"I was just asking the baseball coach here what his policy was on his team using drugs." I feel my heart skip a few beats, and the high I was previously in is gone as reality snaps. *What is she doing?*

"Well, I hope he has zero tolerance for it because I certainly do." My eyes lock on Vidia, and there's a fire in her eyes I've never seen before. *Don't.*

"In that case, you probably want to drug test the captain since he's an addict, and I just saw him sniffing something in the parking lot." I go completely still, and I feel like I forgot how to breathe.

I'm hallucinating. They laced the Oxy with something, and I'm fucking hallucinating. There's no way in fucking hell she just said that shit. Fred looks over at me, and so does our coach. They watch me for a response, but I'm stuck. *Am I even breathing?*

Maybe I'm too high to respond or too high to be mad at her, but I simply cannot grasp the thought that she just said that. She stares back at me like she has no regrets that she just used my addiction against me.

The addiction I told no one about besides the five people I call family and her. We hold eye contact and speak with our eyes. *You're a fucking traitor, and this is low as fuck. No matter what I did to you, this is fucked up, and I'll never forgive you for it, so go straight to fucking hell.*

As if she somehow understood me, hurt flashes in her eyes, and she spins on her heels, walking out of the office, knowing she just threw my entire fucking future away.

I zone out as I sit back down. Fred says something about trusting Vidia with his life. *Yeah, I did, too.* He apologizes and then says I need to take a drug test, and if I pass, I can still be signed with him. When he walks out, August walks in.

"Sire?" I look up at him, and he looks worried. He's been worried for the past few days, but right now, I feel all of the

events crashing down on me. *I need another hit.*

“I need you to take the test for me.” Disappointment covers his expression, and he runs a hand down his face.

“What the fuck, Sire?” He lets out a breath, still very worried.

“Why do you sound like you’re not going to pass it?” I lightly snicker. Although this isn’t very funny, the drugs make me feel as though it is.

“The problem is that *you* won’t pass it!” He shakes his head and just stares at me in disbelief. “When?” He sounds so damn hurt.

“It doesn’t matter, Au—”

“Yes, it does. Answer me. When?” He’s trying not to sound mad, but he obviously is. My shoulder slouches a bit, and I run a hand through my hair.

“Yesterday.” He closes his eyes as he shakes his head. “And five minutes before the meeting started.” My voice is low in case anyone is outside listening. His eyes shoot open in concern.

“You’re high right fucking now?!” he whisper shouts, then starts pacing the room. “Sire, what the fuck is wrong with you?” I play with Vidia’s ring and realize why she plays with it when she’s nervous. It’s kind of soothing, but so are drugs.

“How high are you?”

“Okay, I guess. Hi, how are you?” He looks at me like I’m absolutely insane. Did he not just ask me how I was doing? I squint my eyes, trying to remember, but that doesn’t sound right. Obviously, he knows I’m not doing good.

“Fuck me.” He shakes his head as he rolls his eyes, and I eye him suspiciously.

“Uh. No. We’re basically brothers, you weird fuck.” My voice comes out concerned, and I am. *I knew he was gay.* “I’m proud of you for coming out.” I shrug.

“Sire, what the fuck!?” He sounds so confused, and I lightly laugh but stop when I see him scolding me and look around the room. *Awkwardddd*. I was joking, jeez.

“Calm down, August. Just pee in the stupid cup for me, and everything will be fine. They won’t even notice.”

“And everything will be *fine*? Nothing will be *fine*, Sire. You’re high as fuck and fucking relapsed, and now you want me to also risk my future for you by doing this?”

“Well, when you put it that wa—”

“It’s—I—I’m not putting it any fucking way. That’s exactly how it is.” He’s talking with his hands now, telling me he’s getting mad.

“Are you not going to do it?” I ask with sarcasm and a smile because I know he will, but then he hesitates and avoids my eyes. My smile is now gone, and I shoot up from my seat.

“August.” He finally looks at me, but there’s regret and hurt in his eyes. “If you say no, you’re dead to me.” He stops pacing, and his mouth gapes open, but I don’t take it back. I meant it. Maybe that’s the drugs talking, but I feel myself start to grow frantic. I need another hit. I need to get out of this damn room, and I’m going to say anything I need to get out of this.

He lets out a scoff. “Wow. I forgot how much of a fucking dick you are when you’re on drugs.”

“Just fucking do it, you—”

“You are in no fucking position”—He points at me—“to be demanding shit from me!”

“Lower your voice before someone hears you.”

“No! Shut the fuck up and fuck you!” He turns to walk out, but when he opens the door, he slams it shut again and whips back around to me. “The last time I passed a drug test for you, you said it wouldn’t happen again, and look where we are now.”

“August—”

“Don’t *August* me. Dammit, Sire, the last time I did this for you, you were gone for two fucking days, and I found you passed out in a fucking alley.” His eyes start to water, and we both turn away from each other, not able to face the pain. We were only fifteen when I scared him like that, but he never brought it up until just now.

“I thought you were fucking dead. Fuck, I can’t go through that shit again, Sire.” He sounds so fucking traumatized, but he goes on. “So what did I do? I got on my fucking knees and begged Mom to save you because I knew you would’ve ended up dead if we didn’t take you in.”

“Okay, August. I get it.”

“No, you don’t get it. You don’t fucking get it. Look at me!” He bangs on the table between us, and I turn to face him. His eyes are red, and he wipes his cheek as a tear falls. He snuffles and stands a bit straighter, and his voice is calmer. “If I do this again, you’re going to rehab. Today.”

“What?!” I sound as if he just said the most absurd shit ever, but he practically did. “No, I don’t need rehab.” My voice comes out frantic because *I can’t go back there*. He ignores me and continues.

“You go to rehab after you tell me what happened with Vidia—”

“No, I—”

“Stop saying no because you don’t have a fucking choice!” I take a step back at his tone. He’s never yelled at me before. Not like this. Even when I said all that fucked up shit to Lisette the other day, he yelled, but he didn’t raise his voice like this. With such authority. I sit back down and stare at Vidia’s ring in my hand.

“You have ten minutes before they come back with that drug test, so start talking, or I walk. I don’t give a shit if that means I’m dead to you because I would rather be dead to you than you actually ending up dead.”

I let out a sigh and start with what happened at the party but skip over the miscarriage because it still feels too fresh. He

asks what Brent was talking about, and I rub a hand down my face.

I really fucking wish I could go back in time right now.

“Look, it’s your girlfriend.” August throws the paper of his straw at me, and I look up from my phone, searching the restaurant. My eyes quickly land on her, and I feel my breath get caught in my throat at the sight of her. She’s so fucking beautiful.

She’s in a pastel blue, skin-tight dress, and she’s sitting across from an older woman who kind of resembles her and looks oddly familiar.

“She’s not my girlfriend.” I turn back to August. “Not yet, at least.” I bite back a smile, and he’s shaking his head.

“I don’t get why you don’t just ask her out. You made me invite you two out with Hazel and me, but you can’t ask her out yourself?” I shake my head at him because I’ve already explained this to him.

“She doesn’t date, so I need to ease my way in, or she’ll just shut me down and run.” I shrug, and August smirks at me. I had them invite us on their date so I could get on a date with her without her thinking it was a date.

I’m not sure why she doesn’t date, but this plan of mine to slow her into it by going on double dates with my brother and her best friend will work. I know it. We’ve already been on two, and I’m going to keep having August invite us.

“I really doubt she’ll shut you down and run. We had fun, but either way, there’s no way she’ll reject you. You’re the second most popular guy at school.”

“What do you mean I’m the second most popular? Who’s the first?”

“Me. Duh.”

I snicker and look back down at my phone. “I’m the captain. I’m the most popular; Hale.” I don’t care for popularity, but I know it bugs him.

“And I’m the co-captain. We share responsibilities, Griffin.”

“He’s still the most popular.” Buzz sits across from us, and a few of our other teammates trickle into the booth.

“Holy shit, is that the coach of the Tampa Bay Rays?” I look around the restaurant and then follow Brent’s eyes on the woman sitting across from Vidia. “Wait, that girl goes to our school, right?”

I confirm, and he goes on to say how they look alike.

“Is she her daughter?!” He sounds dumbfounded, but I don’t get why. He goes on, raving about how she decides what scouts are called for our school this year, but what does that have to do with Vidia?

August says he’s going to the bathroom, and when he passes her, she looks over to our table, and her eyes lock on mine. She’s still smiling at something her mom said, and I can’t bring myself to tear my gaze from her.

“Imagine the benefits that come with dating the daughter of a famous coach.” I tune out whatever they’re talking about, and my eyes slowly sweep down her figure. “It’ll be so easy too. Step one, fuck her. Step two, string her along until you meet her mom. The rest is given.”

I watch her cross her legs, and as I stare at her, I feel myself smirking. She mouths, “cheater” at me. She’s clearly still stuck on the fact that I won when we went bowling.

Instead of telling her, once again, that I didn’t cheat, I flip her off. She bites back a smile and slowly puts her hand where her legs are crossed. Then, because she knows that’s where I’m looking, she flips me off. I chuckle and shake my head.

“Well, if that’s the plan, I want to execute it.”

“No way. It’s my plan, and I get to do it.” That grabs my attention as my brain plays catch up, and I realize they’re talking about her.

“Too bad. She’s already mine.” She isn’t an object we should fight over, but I didn’t like how they were talking about fucking her.

“So, you’re going to be the one who executes the plan?” I hear Vidia’s laugh from across the room, and I turn back to look at her. God, I love her laugh.

“Sire?” I roll my eyes at their interruption and turn back to Brent and Buzz.

“No, that’s beyond fucked.” Buzz laughs, and Brent only rolls his eyes.

“Here you go, being all noble.” I ignore him and turn back to Vidia. I’m so making her mine. “You don’t have to lie to us to make yourself feel better about using her.” Buzz laughs beside us when I flip Brent off. He doesn’t let it go the rest of the dinner, but I keep brushing him off, not thinking much of it.

“So, using her was never part of the plan?” I look over at August and rub my palms on my legs. Fuck, I need to get out of here and get high. Just one more time, then I’ll go to rehab like I promised.

“No, August. Does that even sound like me?” He opens his mouth to reply, but the door opens. Fred and our coach walk back in, drug test in hand.

They look over at me carefully. “Ready?” I look over at August, and he slightly nods his head.

Chapter Twenty-Five

VIDIA

The Present

I DON'T RESPOND FOR A few minutes after Sire explains everything. I wouldn't know where to start. Maybe I should remind him it isn't his fault I miscarried. Or that I'm sorry for not being there when he relapsed... like I promised I would.

I still can't let go of how guilty he seemed at the party that night when Brent first said he was using me.

"Why didn't you just tell him you weren't going through with this *plan*?" Was it because he was? God, it is so hard to trust him.

"I did, Vidia." He takes my hand in his, desperate to make me believe him. "Multiple times, but he was a jealous fuck who couldn't get that through his head." I shake my head softly.

It makes sense... A part of me wants to believe him, but I don't want to look stupid if I do, and he's just lying.

"You don't believe me." He pulls his hand away and is watching me like I crushed all hope he had. "Vidia, all the

‘benefits’ that come with you will never be better than you alone. All the money and the fame. My dreams of playing in that jersey on that field every week will never be better than calling you mine.” I stare between his eyes, searching for a lie, but I struggle to find one.

“I liked you long before I knew who your mom was. You alone will always be enough. My feelings were genuine, Vidia, and if you want me to call my coach right now and quit the team to prove it, I will.”

He wouldn't. He wouldn't give up his dreams and everything he has to simply prove a point. Because that's all he'd be doing... Proving a point. Him quitting wouldn't guarantee that he wins me back.

Still... I'm tempted to see how much truth his words hold. After believing it was all a lie, I need to know if he's telling the truth.

“So do it.” I surprise myself when the words leave my mouth, but he doesn't even flinch. He turns to head for the kitchen and grabs his phone. I follow behind him, and he turns his phone to me, showing as he hits call and puts it on speaker.

The phone rings a few times. It's pretty late, so I doubt his coach will answer, but he does. I feel my heart rate pick up, but Sire doesn't show any indication that he's nervous at all. As if he isn't about to throw his entire career away.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Coach, I'm just calling to let you know I'm resigning from the team. I won't be at the next game or any of the following.”

My mouth gapes open, and I'm sure his coach has the same reaction because he's silent on the other end.

“Excuse me, son?”

Sire looks up at me and stares into my soul. “I'm quitting the team. I'll have my agent email you.” With that, he hangs up. “I'll text Jackson right now, and he'll have my contract pulled. I'll probably have to finish the season, but I won't start again next spring and—”

“Call him back.”

“What?” He looks at me, confused.

“You proved your point, I believe you. Call him back.”

“No, I—” His phone starts ringing, but he doesn’t answer.

“You quit for me. Now, answer and apologize for me. Kiss his ass if you need to. I would never let you actually throw your life away.”

He has a small smirk on his face. “But you just did?” I squint my eyes at him.

“I knew papers would need to be signed, and your agent, maybe even lawyers, would need to be involved. It’s the Major League, not the Little League. You can’t just quit over the phone. The gesture was cute—I get it, point proven. Now answer before he actually kicks you off his team.”

He smiles at me and then answers the phone. “Sorry about that, Coach. I was trying to win back the love of my life.” He winks at me, and I fake a gag. He starts to laugh and then immediately turns serious as his coach tells him something.

“No, Coach.” His coach yells something I can’t make out. “Yes, Coach... Of course, my apologies... I understand.” My eyes slightly widen because that sounded serious. He ends the call, and I quickly ask what he said. “I’m suspended from playing until further notice, and he took away my title as team captain.”

He sounds like he’s trying to mask the disappointment in his voice, and I feel horrible for letting him go through with that. “I thought baseball was your life.” I remember him once saying that.

“I thought I already told you I love you more than life.”

I let out a sigh and walk over to sit on a chair at his kitchen island. “This doesn’t change anything, Sire.” When I look over at him, hurt is written all over his face, and I want to take it back, but it’s true. We can’t just get back together.

“So you’re not going to give us another chance? You said you’ll sleep on it.” He sounds so disappointed, like a kid

having their candy taken away, but I *did* say I'd sleep on it...

"I know, but it just feels weird if we just got back together."

"Why?" *Because I'm a horrible person.* I shake my head of my thoughts, but I feel like shit. He didn't even fucking do anything to me, and I used his addiction against him? There's a special place in hell for people like me.

Sire tilts my chin up and looks between my eyes. "What's wrong?" I move my chin from his grasp, and he takes a seat in front of me. I look down at my hands and play with my ring, and I'm grateful that he gives me a second to collect my thoughts.

"I'm sure you want an explanation or apology—"

"No explanation you give will excuse what you did. You used my addiction against me for the sake of your revenge." He looks at me like he's waiting for me to be angry at him for not letting me explain, but I can't be mad. Not when my explanation isn't good enough.

"I saw you in the parking lot. I didn't see you actually take the drugs, but the blood in your nose and your eyes were a dead giveaway." He looks down like he's disappointed in himself or ashamed.

"I outed you to your coach out of anger. I wanted to hurt you the way you hurt me. I wanted to take away the future I thought you used me for." He doesn't look up at me, but I go on.

"I don't have a better explanation or reason, but I wish I did. I know I can't go back and change things, but I wish I wasn't so spiteful because the second I saw how much I hurt you, I wanted to tell them it was a lie."

"It wasn't, though." His eyes finally meet mine, and he looks the same as he did four years ago. Hurt. "It wasn't a lie, and I needed to be outed because if you didn't try to throw my life away, with how fast I was spiraling, I definitely would have."

"That still doesn't make it right, and I am *so* sorry, Sire," I say it because I am, and I know he needs to hear it right now,

but also because I've been wanting to apologize the minute I told his coaches he was an addict.

"Yeah, me too, for not trying harder to explain. After I came out of rehab, I should have gone to you in Maryland and made amends, but I didn't because I knew you'd keep hurting if I let you believe I was using you. I wanted you to be in as much pain as I was in after you told them about my addiction, and that's part of the reason I didn't explain when you first came back."

"I could've ended our arguing the minute I saw you at that doctor's appointment, but when my eyes landed on you, my anger came rushing back as I remembered what you did."

"Sire—"

"Don't." His tone is soft as he cuts me off from apologizing. I know I don't deserve it, but God, I want him to forgive me.

"I'm sorry I let you walk away that night."

My eyes cut to his, and when I see the guilt on his face, I shake my head, but he goes on anyway. "I'm so sorry for the crash, Vid." He squeezes his eyes shut like the thought of it physically hurts him.

I rise from my seat, stepping between his legs, and for the first time in what feels like forever, I hug him. *Really* hug him. His arms immediately go around my waist, and he's clinging onto me like he's been deprived of my touch.

"It wasn't your fault," I whisper against his hair, and I feel him shaking his head.

"It was."

"It wasn't," I say in disbelief because I can't believe he's really been blaming himself for my miscarriage all this time. I pull back a bit and hold his face between my hands. "You weren't the one who was drunk driving and ran me off the road." He pulls me in closer, resting our foreheads against each other.

"You were the one that dragged me out of my car and ran to the hospital with me in your arms."

His eyes meet mine, and he musters a small smile. “It was only like three or four blocks away.”

I break into a laugh, and he smiles at me like he’s never heard my laugh. “There it is.”

“What?”

“That laugh of yours that I love.” I look between his eyes, but that weight in my chest only feels heavier. He’s so damn perfect. I shake my head and his brows furrow at whatever look is on my face. “What?”

“You shouldn’t want to be with me after what I did, Sire.”

“Vid—” I take a step back, but he quickly grabs my hand, keeping me close. “You were hurt after losing the baby. You were angry and said things you didn’t mean. That doesn’t make you an evil person.”

I tilt my head down, but he immediately forces it back up. “I want you, Vidia. I think it makes perfect sense that we ‘just get back together.’ Why wouldn’t we?” I offer him a soft smile, and his face only lights up.

“I’ll sleep on it,” I say warningly because he looks too happy.

“So you’re not saying no?”

“I’m not.” A smile grows on his face, but I quickly take away his false hope. “I’m not saying yes either, Sire.”

“But you’re not saying no?” I let out a sigh because he’s only going to hear what he wants.

“I’m not saying no.” He’s grinning from ear to ear and pulls me in again. I melt into his embrace as he wraps his arms around me. I can’t believe I lasted these past four years without him. I know I said this doesn’t mean we’re back together, but I don’t think I want us to *not* be together any longer. *I just need to get over this guilty feeling, and maybe we can.*

I turn my head to the side at the sound of a cry. Isabelle walks, rubbing her eyes, and I remember we aren’t alone.

“Don’t move. I’m going to get her back to bed.” I give him a small nod, and he kisses my forehead, then walks over to Isabelle and lifts her.

“You didn’t make me milk.” He wipes her tears and carries her into the kitchen.

“You were sleeping.” I watch them interact, adoring how much he loves this little girl. He makes her a bottle but then puts the cold milk into a sippy cup when she says she’s a big girl. “Big girls don’t cry for milk.”

“I didn’t.” She tilts her head down and snuffles. “I miss daddy.” I tilt my head to the side at how upset she sounds, and my heart breaks for her. Jackson apparently didn’t give many details as to where he was going; she sounded excited to stay over earlier, but she obviously wants her dad.

“Hey, I thought Uncle Sigh and I were better than your dad?” She looks over at me, noticing my presence, and smiles.

“You sleep over too?”

“Yup. It’s a big sleepover.” Her smile widens, and she lets out a yawn.

“Okay, time for bed.” Sire walks out of the kitchen with her, but she stops him.

“I want to sleep with Vidia!” They both look over at me, waiting for a response.

Sire senses my hesitation and quickly steps in. “You two can have my bed. I can take the couch.” Before I can decline, Isabelle does for me.

“No, we all sleep in your room. It’s a slumber party.” Sire looks over at me, and I don’t miss the smirk on his face. He’s been trying to convince me to sleep in his bed while he takes the couch for weeks.

“Okay, let me change into my pajamas.” I give in for Isabelle’s sake, but Sire smiles like I’m doing it for him. Isa doesn’t respond and drinks out of her sippy cup, already falling back to sleep in his arms. I change in the living room and then meet them in Sire’s bedroom.

When I walk in, Isabelle is already fast asleep in the middle of the bed. My head turns to the sound of footsteps, and Sire walks out of his closet shirtless with a pair of black basketball shorts. My eyes linger on his bare chest for a second, then land on his eyes, but he's scanning my body, probably trying to figure out if I have pants on.

He clears his throat, then walks over to his bed and taps the place beside him. *Nice try.* I walk to the other side of the bed and climb in with Isabelle between us. When I steal a glance at Sire, he's looking at me with everything but innocence.

I feel my face heat under his gaze and quickly rise from his bed. "She's already sleeping. I'll just sleep on the couch."

"No." Before I can walk away, he shakes Isabelle, waking her. "She's awake, and she wants you to sleep with us. Right, Isa?"

I look down at her, and she looks right at me with her big, tired puppy dog eyes. She reaches a hand out to me, then opens and closes it, calling me over. I look over at Sire, and he has an innocent smile on his face.

He reaches over to my side and lifts the covers. I mouth, *asshole*, but he only smirks and taps the bed. Swatting his hand away, I climb back in and turn so my back is facing him.

I feel the bed move, and then the light is shut off. Sire climbs back in, and after a few minutes of silence, he says, "Hey, Vid?"

"Yeah?" I feel him move a bit, like he's turning to face me.

"Thank you." I lay in silence for a while, trying to understand what he's thanking me for. Maybe he means for not saying no to us or for reminding him the crash wasn't his fault.

"For what?" He takes a while to respond, and I start to think he fell asleep.

"Everything." His voice comes out with what sounds like a yawn, and I let out one of my own. My eyes fall shut, and while thinking of whatever "everything" is, I fall asleep.



AN ALARM GOES OFF, JUMPING me out of my sleep. The smell of something burning fills the room, and I quickly look around the bed, but Isa and Sire are gone. I grab my phone in case I need to call for help if it's an actual fire and walk out of the room.

When I turn the corner, Sire is fanning the fire alarm with a pillow, and Isa is doing the same, but she's so tiny that she's just fanning the wall. I can't help but chuckle at the sight of them and the messy kitchen.

Sire looks over at me and then slouches his shoulders with a frown. "We wanted to make breakfast in bed for you. I'm sorry we woke you."

Before I can reply, Isa runs to me and hugs my leg. "Good morning, Vidia! We're making you breakfast because Sire says you have something important to tell him." I look up at Sire, and he runs a hand through his hair uncomfortably.

I didn't think he'd take it literally when I said, "I'll sleep on it," but he's obviously expecting my answer today. I smile at both of them but don't respond to her and tell them I'm going to brush my teeth.

When I walk back into the kitchen, most of the mess is gone. The egg yolk is wiped off the counter, along with the pancake batter. I take a seat next to Isabelle, and Sire makes a smiley face with whipped cream on top of her pancakes.

When he's done making her food look cute, he turns to me. "Good morning, beautiful." I just woke up and definitely don't feel all that beautiful, but with the way he's smiling at me, I believe him. He hands me a plate. My pancakes also have a smiley face, but there are eggs and bacon on the side, unlike Isa's plate.

"Good morning." I take the plate from him with a small smile. "Thank you." I go to dig into my plate but stop myself because Sire isn't sitting with us yet. I grew up being told it's

rude to eat without everyone at the table, so I wait for him, and when he takes a seat next to me, I take a bite of my pancakes.

My eyes widen slightly at the taste. I stuff my face with a bit of everything and close my eyes. “Mm, this is really good.” I should’ve taken him up on his offer to make me breakfast weeks ago.

“Why do you sound so surprised?” I look over at him, and he shrugs as if the apartment doesn’t smell like it’s still on fire. “Isa wanted to make her own breakfast.”

“And you let her?”

He shrugs again and takes a bite of his pancakes. “She said she’s a big girl, and she is. I like to let her be independent.” I can’t tell if he’s joking or not, but I don’t think he is.

“So you let her use the stove and burn the food?”

“How else would she learn?” He takes a bite of his bacon as if letting a small child use the stove is okay.

“She’s four, Sire.”

“And a half!” I look down at Isabelle between us, forgetting she was there, and her face is covered with whipped cream. “May I have more whipped cream, please?” I glance at her plate; she hasn’t touched her pancakes yet. All she ate was the whipped cream.

“Yes, you may.” Sire reaches for the whipped cream, but I stop him.

“No, you may not.” Jackson called to remind him not to let her have a sugary breakfast. Her pancakes are practically drowning in syrup. I look back over at him with challenging eyes, and he doesn’t object.

“Sorry, Isa, but the boss has spoken.”

“Awee, please?” I turn to her, and she pouts her lip. When I look at Sire, he’s already looking at me for a response, but I don’t change my mind.

“No means no, and your dad is the one who said no.” I try to put some of the blame on her dad so I’m not the complete bad

guy, and she lets out a huff, obviously used to getting her way with Sire.

He widens his eyes a bit and, under his breath, says, “Jeez, at least we know who’s going to be the strict parent with our kids.”

I choke on a piece of bacon as I register his words. I almost argue that I could be a fun parent but stop myself because he said *our* kids. I take a drink of my orange juice and try not to make it obvious I heard him.

“I have ballet. We need to go!” Isa tries to climb off her chair, but Sire stops her.

“We’ll go when you finish eating.”

“I cannot go late.”

“Well, then, you better hurry.” Without another word, she finishes her syrup with a side of pancakes, as do Sire and I. I take our plates and go to wash them as Isa runs off to get dressed.

“What are you doing?”

“The dishes?” Sire looks at me like I just said the most insane thing ever.

“I can do them.” He reaches for the dishes in my hand, but I move them from his reach.

“You cooked, let me cl—”

“No.” He takes the dishes from me and places them in the sink. I ignore him and turn, but he moves me away from the dishes. He leans in front of the sink and pulls me by my waist so I’m standing between his legs.

“So...” He has a smile on his face that I can’t look away from as he rubs small circles on my waist. “Do you have anything to tell me?” He sounds like a happy kid. I let out a sigh and take a step back, out of his touch.

“Sire, when I said ‘let me sleep on it,’ I didn’t mean I’d literally take one night to think about it.”

“What is there to think about, Vid?” He says it like there’s no reason I should be questioning us getting back together. I try to come up with a reason to give him but can’t think of one since he wasn’t even using me... He never lied about anything.

I only offer him a weak shrug, wanting to tell him, *again*, that he shouldn’t want to be with me, but I know what he’d say. I just need to believe it.

He looks between my eyes and then shakes his head like he thought of something. “Look, I’m willing to wait for you, however long you need, but it can’t be like last time. You’re either all the way in or all the way out.” I know he’s talking about how I wanted to be with him last time but refused to call him my boyfriend.

I don’t say anything in response and try to walk off to think, but he pulls me back to him. “What was that?”

“What?”

He smiles down at me and shakes his head. “We need to work on your communication skills, my love.” I feel my brows furrow and take a step back, but he keeps me close with his hands still on my waist. “And you need to stop walking away from me.” Our faces are inches apart, and I tell myself to pull away, but my body doesn’t listen.

“That ends right now. Got it?”

My eyes are glued to his lips as he speaks, and I only nod my head softly. His lips curve into a smirk, and when my eyes meet his, a playful look is dancing in them. “Remind me why we shouldn’t just get back together?”

His voice is just above a whisper, and he *snickers* when I look back down at his lips. This time, I force myself to lean back just a bit because our faces are dangerously close.

“Because...” I start.

He turns his head to the side, and I shake mine. “Because it’d be weird,” Is all I come up with.

“*What* will be weird, Vidia?” He leans down, and I can’t bring myself to pull away. “We talked things out. It’s not like we’re just jumping back into things. You’ve been back for months, and I think we eased our way back perfectly fine.”

“Yeah, well—” Whatever excuse I had shrivels up and dies in my throat as he looks at me like he’s undressing me with his eyes.

“Well?” He leans in even more, and our lips barely graze before I suck in a breath. Every alarm in my head goes off, and I turn on my heels. “Uh uh.” He turns me back around just as fast and sends me a pointed look. “What’d we just say?”

No walking away. I cross my arms in defeat because I hate this new rule. I don’t like all this confrontation, and I think I should be able to walk off and cool down. Not everything needs to be talked about. *We need to work on your communication skills, my love.* Ugh. I hate that he’s right.

“Why do you look like you’re getting angry?”

I squint my eyes at him, but he only returns the look. He lets out a sigh when I don’t reply and kisses my forehead. “I feel like you’re struggling to trust me, but we’ll work on it.”

I let out a sigh and uncross my arms. A part of it is trusting him, sure, but deep down, I know he wouldn’t have used me. These past few years, that thought was always in the back of my head; I was just too scared to find out on the off chance that it was true. Now, though... It’s the guilt that keeps me from letting him be mine again. I don’t feel like I deserve him, but I give him a nod and tell him I’ll work on it.

“I have to get ready for work.”

“Call out. I want to spend the day with you.” He sounds hopeful as he turns his head to the side.

“I can’t. I have a meeting, and you spend every day with me.” I remind him I’ve practically been living here the past few weeks since the break-in. I sometimes sleep next door at Hazel’s, but if I’m still at Sire’s and it’s getting late, I just crash here. He thinks I haven’t noticed he’s been making me stay over on purpose, but I have. I just don’t mind.

“Okay, but today is different.” He takes his hand in mine, spinning my ring. I look down at our hands, then up at him, and he looks like he wants to tell me something, but before he can, Isa walks in.

“I’m ready!” She’s not ready because her hair is a mess, and her leotard isn’t tucked into her tutu.

“Where are your shoes?” I lightly chuckle when I notice she’s barefoot and is sliding her feet along the floor. They’re probably slippery because of her stockings.

“Can’t find them.” She shrugs and turns her cute little head to the side. “It’s okay. We take off our shoes sometimes.” I look over at Sire, and he’s shaking his head with a smile.

“You can’t—” He lets out a breath, not bothering to explain to the four-year-old in front of us that she can’t just walk outside barefoot. “Just look for your shoes, please.” She walks off while sliding her feet along the floor, and I hold back a laugh.

“You’re really going to leave me alone with her all day?” he teases.

“Jackson left her to you, so yes.” I honestly don’t mind staying with her, but I have a lot of patients to see today and a meeting, as I said.

“I wanted to spend the day with you. Today is—”

“I left my shoes at home!” Isabelle interrupts him once again, and she sounds petrified, as if she wasn’t okay with not having them a minute ago.

“They’re in your bag, Isa.” We both look over the counter as she walks to her bag.

“I found them!” I lightly laugh at her as she lets out a relieved breath and dramatically wipes her forehead.

“What were you going to say today is?” Before he can reply, my alarm goes off, telling me I have ten minutes to leave before I’m late. “Shit, I need to go get ready.” I walk off to get dressed but don’t miss the regretful look Sire gives me, so I stop.

“What is it?” He shakes his head and gives me a reassuring smile.

“I’ll tell you later. Go get ready.” With that, I walk off.

Chapter Twenty-Six

SIRE

AFTER DROPPING ISA OFF AT ballet, I drove back to my place. Before walking into my apartment, I glance at August's door.

I think for a second if I want to go over. After that feeling I got to drink on the way here, I realize I need to talk to him. Before I change my mind, I walk over.

His door is unlocked once again, so I walk right in. I glance around his living room, but he isn't in sight. "Yo!" A second goes by before he replies.

"In here!" I follow his voice to his room. He's sitting at the mirror, taking his braids out. "Can you help me with this one? I think I made a knot." I smile at how nervous he sounds, and I make my way over.

I start detangling his hair, and when I steal a glance at him in the mirror, he looks scared, so I decide to mess with him. "Um..." His fear grows, and I bite back a smile. "I think you're going to have to cut it."

His eyes widen, and his hands shoot up as he tries to undo the knot he created. "No, no, no." His voice is panicked as he runs his fingers through his hair, trying to find the knot, and I finally break into a laugh. When he notices I was joking and

already brushed his tangled hair, he lets out the biggest sigh of relief.

“Please don’t fuck with me like that,” he pleads, and I let out another laugh. I think he loves his hair more than his life.

I lean against the wall as he continues taking his braids down. I keep my eyes on him, kind of amazed by how focused he is. August can’t stay still for more than a minute, but when it comes to his hair, his ADHD makes him hyperfixate.

After about a minute or two, he glances over at me and then looks around for something. “Where’s Isabelle?” I tell him I dropped her off at ballet, and he looks almost offended. “And you didn’t bring her over to say hi to me?!”

“We were running late,” I explain. He nods once, and then his eyes light up like he remembers something.

“I think I should do ballet.” He watches me carefully for my reaction, but I don’t give him one since I’m no longer surprised by the shit that comes out of his mouth.

“Sure, August.” My tone is bored, but a smile grows on his face, and he nods again, happy with my approval for whatever reason.

“Why don’t you seem more excited?”

“That you want to start ballet like a four-year-old girl?”

His jaw drops a bit. “No.” He sounds defensive. “That you have Isabelle for the weekend. I was expecting you to come in here doing backflips.” I roll my eyes at his exaggeration, but he’s right, I do love watching her.

“You’re the only one who gets excited enough to do backflips.” He opens his mouth to object but then closes it again because he knows I’m right. “I am excited about having her for the next few days, though. Jackson never lets her sleep out of the house, so I’m kind of honored.” I smile proudly.

“I’m not surprised that you’re the only person that gets nights with his daughter. You’re trustworthy and have known her for, like, her whole life,” he says as he takes his last braid down. I nod, agreeing.

“I made a year sober,” I blurt, not being able to hold it in any longer. His head snaps to mine, and then he jumps out of his seat and stares at me.

“Really?!” I break into a laugh at his excitement, and when I start to nod my head, he literally jumps up and down. My laugh grows as he shakes my shoulders before pulling me in for a hug.

“Congratulations!” I thank him, and when he pulls away, he looks so damn proud of me. I feel my smile fade a bit, and he quickly notices. “What?” I shrug my shoulders, but before I change my mind, I just spit it out.

“I wanted to drink earlier, on the drive here, actually.” His smile doesn’t falter. For some reason, he still looks like he’s proud of me, and that’s somehow all I needed.

“But you didn’t.” I shake my head. “Okay? That’s all that matters.” I give him a smile, and he pulls me in for another hug. I wrap both arms around him, and I can literally feel him buzzing with excitement because I never hug him like this.

I give him one last squeeze, mainly because I also need it. I pull away and lean against the desk he was sitting on. When I look back over at him, he’s smiling so hard I’m sure his cheeks hurt.

“Vid and I talked last night.”

He sits back in his chair as he begins to detangle his curls. “About?”

“Everything...” I wait for his reaction, and once he registers what everything means, his eyes widen so much I’m surprised his eyeballs don’t fall out.

“Shit.” He puts the brush down, giving me his full attention. “How’d that go?”

“Honestly,” I start, “a lot better than I was expecting.”

He looks taken back but smiles. “So, ya are finally back together?” He sounds so excited, you’d think it was his relationship that was just fixed.

“No,” I say, and my voice comes out more discouraged than I intended. Even August looks a bit disappointed. “I wish it was that easy, but we have some shit to work through.” He nods in understanding as he picks his brush back up.

I feel like Vid doesn’t fully trust me, but I think there’s still something else stopping her from letting us be together. I just can’t figure it out, and she needs to talk to me if this is going to work. I let out a sigh and turn back to my brother.

“But I’m glad we talked through everything. I needed to... make amends with her.” He nods again but keeps his focus on his reflection as he works the brush through his hair.

“That’s actually why I came here.” I watch as a small crease grows between his brows. I take a quick, deep breath, building a bit of courage as I go on. “I’m so sorry, August.” He freezes and slowly turns to me.

“It’s okay...” He sounds uncertain, then adds, “What did you do, though?” I shake my head with a small smile at how quick he is to forgive me. He honestly shouldn’t.

“Everything I put you through. I shouldn’t have asked you to take that drug test for me. In college and in high school.” He puts the brush back down and sort of shrugs.

“You needed me.”

I shake my head. “You shouldn’t have needed to do something like that.”

“You already apologized.” He shrugs again. I think about both of the bullshit apologies I gave him, and with the way he looks at me, I know he’s thinking the same as I am.

“Those weren’t good enough apologies.” This time, he doesn’t say anything. “Saying you’re dead to me if you didn’t take the drug test was wrong on so many levels, and I know I can’t take my words back, and sorry isn’t going to change what I said, but I didn’t mean it.”

He nods a few times, but before he can say he forgives me because he’s too good to me and will, I go on.

“In high school...” I take in a deep breath. “The day after you took the drug test for me, I disappeared.” He looks away, and I feel a knot form in my throat but force it down.

Our parents were fighting about the damn test for days. Mom said she trusted me and didn’t want to test me; Dad said I needed to earn his trust, which was fair. I lied to them a lot when I was abusing drugs.

To get them both off my back, I said I’d take the test, but really, I had August take it for me... then I was gone for two days.

“I got into an argument with—” I shake my head, not even wanting to say my birth mother’s name. I hate even calling her that. August nods in understanding, and I go on. “I went looking for Lisette, and since... my surrogate was next door, she saw me.” I shake my head at the memory.

“She was a bitter bitch like always, and we got into it. I swear to you, August, when you took that test for me and I told you it was the last time, I meant it, but then I saw her, and she said all this fucked up shit to me, and I—”

I clear my throat and force another lump down. “I just wanted to get her out of my head, so I left and got high. The next day, I felt too guilty to go back home, so I got high again. That’s when you found me.”

August doesn’t say anything, but the look in his eyes kills me. If I could change anything in my entire life, it’d be that day.

“You scared the fuck out of me, Sire.”

“I know, kid.”

He shakes his head softly, and he looks defeated.

“Stop trying to spare my feelings and just say it.”

He looks up at me and only shakes his head, but I urge him to get it out. “I felt like the worst person on the planet those two days.” I nod for him to go on because we’ve never talked about that day, and we need to. “I passed the drug test for you, and mom and dad were so damn happy because they thought

you were sober. So when you disappeared, I covered for you and said you were staying with Lis.”

“I had to search for you alone not to blow our cover. I kept trying to convince myself that you were fine, but when I found you—” He shakes his head and turns away from me.

“I’m so fucking sorry, August.” My voice is just above a whisper, and he keeps his head turned as he goes on.

“I thought you were dead.”

“I know...” I close my eyes at the pain in his voice. After he woke me up in that alley, he just held me and sobbed. I was so fucking confused. I thought Sage or Mom died. It wasn’t until he wouldn’t stop saying he loved me that I realized he thought *I* was gone.

After that, we went home and had to act like nothing happened in front of our parents but especially in front of Sage. August never brought it up again, but ever since that day, he constantly checks if I’m breathing when I’m asleep.

“You’re the best thing to ever happen to me, August.” His eyes cut to mine, and I swear they light up, but they still have a hint of sadness in them.

“Stop fucking with me.”

I chuckle softly at the way he’s literally on the edge of his seat. “I’m serious. I know I act like you’re an annoying bitch, and you are, but I couldn’t live without you, and I definitely wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you.”

He’s still staring at me like what I just said was hard to believe. “What about V? You act like you can’t breathe without her.”

I shake my head as I correct him. “I struggle to breathe without her. I actually couldn’t breathe without you. You saved me, August.”

The biggest smile grows on his face, and he rises from his seat, pulling me into his embrace. “You’re forgiven. You always will be. No matter what, okay?” I let my eyes fall closed, relieved, and it’s like a weight is lifted.

“Me and you til the wheels fall off?”

I smile, and he squeezes me to complete my line. “And even when they fall, we’re pushing that shit to the finish line.” He chuckles softly, and I somehow pull him closer. “I love you, kid.” As soon as the words leave my mouth, he pulls away in shock.

“Did you just say you love me without me having to force it out of you?!” I roll my eyes and play it off because he looks so happy, I think he might actually start doing backflips.

“Maybe. Don’t be weird.” I quickly walk out of his room, but I hear him follow close behind.

“I love you too, Sire!”

I let out a sigh. “That’s great. I’m leaving now.”

“Okay, bye.” I almost reach the door when he adds, “Love ya!” A chuckle escapes me, and I shake my head at him. He’s never going to shut up about that. Heading for the elevator, I text two more people I need to smooth things over with. After reliving everything from the talk I had last night, I feel like I have a lot of apologizing to do.

When I make it to Sage’s apartment, she’s waiting for me at the door with the biggest smile on her face. “Hello!” She puts one hand in the air as I step out of the elevator.

I break into a laugh at her excitement and make my way over to her. The minute I’m close enough, she wraps her arms around me like she hasn’t seen me in ages. I lift her with ease and spin her like always.

She bursts into a laugh, and I place her down again. “I don’t get how you can still do that.”

I led her into her apartment and closed the door behind us. “I can still do that because you’re still not heavy.” She looks like she doesn’t believe me, and I kiss the side of her head as we settle on her couch.

“I was so happy when I saw your text. Look at this.” She pulls out her iPad from behind her and starts showing me planes with green interior design.

“Isn’t it so cute?!” She watches for my reaction with a smile as she swipes through all of the pictures. It’s all emerald green, and it gives a rich vibe. Those are her actual words.

“Yeah, I like it. Are you thinking of getting a jet?” I would tell her not to since she can always use mine, but once her mind is set on something, there’s no telling her otherwise.

“I was actually thinking of doing this cute makeover on... your jet.” She smiles innocently, and I only smile at her as I shake my head.

“Sure, Sage.”

“Really?!”

“If it’ll make you happy, then paint the entire plane green.” She tells me that’ll be too overwhelming before tackling me with a hug. I can’t help but laugh at her excitement as she goes on with more ideas for the plane.

I want to hear her plans, but I tell her she can do whatever she wants so I can talk to her about the reason I came here.

“You can plan that special night.” I leave that in the air, and she turns her head to the side but then shoots up from her seat, just like her twin did.

“Did you?!”

“I did.” She quite literally fucking screams before pulling me up from my seat. She wraps her arms around my torso and runs in place with her happy feet. I throw my head back with a laugh at her excitement.

“I’m so so *so* proud of you, Sire!” I wrap my arms around her head, but she quickly tells me not to ruin her hair because of some video she needs to record. I settle for a kiss on the top of her head before we sit back down.

“I spoke to Vid.” She turns to me and closes her iPad so she doesn’t get distracted. I quickly give her the run down, and when I bring up the miscarriage, she cries, so I end up hugging her as I finish the story.

“That’s a lot.” She snuffles, and I chuckle softly. “No wonder you two wouldn’t talk to each other. You guys lost—” Her lip

trembles again, and I pull her back in.

“Please stop crying, Sage. We’re okay.” She nods and takes a deep breath. When she looks like she won’t fall apart, I tell her the other reason I came here. “I’m making my rounds and making amends.” She turns her head to the side, and I can’t help but smile because she has the same chunky round face as when we were kids.

“I made a promise to all of you when I found out I was getting adopted, but I made another one specifically to you.” She smiles at me, hopefully as ever, and it pains me that I broke that promise.

After I gave my huge speech to the entire family, telling all of them why I’d stay sober, I pulled Sage aside and told her I’d especially stay clean for her. Seeing Sage cry is like being gutted, and she cried every damn time I was high, which was a lot. I told her I’d never make her cry again, and the day August told her I was going to rehab, she fucking sobbed.

A huge part of me didn’t want to go to rehab, but hearing my sister break down the way she did? August didn’t even have to admit me because I did it my fucking self.

“I lied to you, Sage.” She leans back like she can’t understand me. “When you came to check on me after August sent you, I was high, and I lied.”

“Oh...” She nods a few times, but she doesn’t look like she has anything else to say.

“I genuinely think it would’ve taken me twice as long to get sober if it weren’t for you, August, and Lis. In high school and the last four years.” She searches my eyes, and a smile slowly grows on her face.

“Really?”

“Of course.” I pull her into my embrace, and she rests her head on my chest. “Sobriety doesn’t work if you don’t do it for yourself, and I did. I got sober for me, but you three were that second reason, Sage. I’m sorry I broke my promise, but I won’t again.” I mean every damn word, and when she pulls away, I can tell she knows that.

I let her ramble for a while about new ideas for the plane. Some are actually cool, and others are too girly, but I don't say no to her because I know she's going to have her way in the end.

After saying goodbye to Sage, I make my way to my last stop. I should've saved the easier conversation for last, but Lisette will make this easy for me. Or maybe she'd be an asshole. It really depends on the day with her.

The minute Lis opens her door she studies me. "Do you mind if I paint you?"

"Yes, I mind. I—"

"Yeah, no, I was just asking to be polite. Sit in that chair." She points to the seat in front of her easel, and I flip her off but sit anyway.

"Where's Piggy?"

"Piglet." She corrects me on her dumb name for a turtle and points to the other room. I quickly get up to see the little thing, mainly because I bought her a bunch of shit for his new tank and wanted to see how she set it up.

Ever since I told Lis she could be a stay-at-home artist and now mom to this turtle, she seems lighter. She still has bad days, sure, but not having to work clearly took a lot of stress off of her, and she says her depression isn't as bad. I take a glance around her room, and she's definitely been painting her feelings away.

The entire room is full of portraits. I know I told Lis she wouldn't be the next Picasso, but I was lying out of my ass. Half of these look like she took pictures on her camera and printed them.

"Don't touch my shit!" She calls out from the living room, and I think of biting my tongue and being the bigger person, but I choose against it.

I walk back into her living room and glare at her. "So you can touch and steal my shit, but I can't stand in your messy ass room for more than five seconds?"

“My room is not messy, asshole. Sit your ass.” She points at the seat again, and I roll my eyes before sitting. She is in sweats and a hoodie, but both are covered in paint. You’d think she bought them like that.

“Do I pose or what?” I grumble, and she chuckles before tossing an apple at me. “You’re joking.” She clearly bites back a laugh and hides her smile behind her easel. I hold the stupid apple for her as she gets to painting.

“You plan on selling any of these?”

“Yeah, I just haven’t got to it, but I need to soon because it’s starting to feel super cluttered in here.” She looks around her apartment, and cluttered is an understatement. I wouldn’t be surprised if her hand fell off from how many paintings she’s made.

“Well, you can always make a Famoura account for your art and have Sage repost a few pieces of your work.” Sage just hit ninety million followers, and her fan base is crazy supportive. I think August gained a million followers in one day after Sage tagged him in some post.

“I’d probably get more orders than the paintings I have.” Lis chuckles softly but says she’ll talk to Sage about it. After a few minutes, I ask to see her canvas, but she doesn’t let me.

“Are you going to say whatever it is you came for?” My eyes cut to hers, and she’s too focused on her artwork to look back over at me, but it’s clear she’s waiting for my response.

“How’d you know—”

“I know you, Sire.” She looks over at me before looking back at the canvas. “And I know you didn’t come to check on Piglet. Don’t use my son as an excuse to see me.” I can’t help but laugh at how ridiculous she sounds for calling the turtle her son.

I don’t say anything, but when she looks over at me again, she urges me to say it, so I do. “Two things,” I start. She nods and waves her paintbrush impatiently. When I tell her what today is, the only reaction I get is a smile.

“The twins were jumping with joy when I told them.” I cross my arms and act hurt. “This is why I favor them.”

“Oh, bullshit.” I bite back a laugh at how dramatically she rolls her eyes. “You know damn well you appreciate that I’m not as soft and gooey as them.” I break and give her a laugh because she’s right. I adore the twins, don’t get me wrong, but asshole Lis is a great change.

“Second thing?” She turns her head at her canvas and chews the end of her paintbrush before fixing whatever mistake she clearly made.

“You can tell me you’re proud first,” I tease, and she lets out a dramatic sigh. When she looks over at me, she’s smiling, but I can tell she’s being serious now.

“You know I’m beyond proud, Sire. I never once doubted that you’d get that bronze chip.” I give her a smile but look away because talking about my sobriety with Lis makes me shy. I think it’s because she, of all people, really gets it.

“You got that black NA chip, right?” I nod, and her smile only grows. Black NA chips mean two or more years sober, and while I’ve been struggling to get an AA chip, my NA one means just as much.

“I want to be like you when I grow up,” she says in a dream-like state, and we share a laugh. She forces me to say the second reason I came as she gets back to painting.

After I went over what happened with Vid, I thought about the things I said to Lis, and I know I fucked up with her the most. Once I was home from rehab, I didn’t move in with her like I said I would. She bugged me for months, but I kept drinking and pushing her away.

“I’m a dick.” I shake my head at myself. I’ve done a lot of self-reflection today, and that’s the only word I could come up with to describe myself.

“We already knew that. Would you like me to draw you a penis for a head?” I throw the apple I’m still holding at her, and she bursts into a laugh. When she looks over at me, she shakes her head at whatever look is on my face.

“Okay, we’re being serious. What dick move did you make this time?” I let out a sigh and shift in my seat.

“I shouldn’t have said that shit to you when you were trying to help me.” I shake my head but force myself to look at her because she deserves at least that.

“This again? You already apologized.” She’s right, I did, but after thinking about exactly what I said to her, she deserves another apology.

“I know, but I feel like you forgave me too easily since you wanted your brother back.” She doesn’t say anything and looks like she’s focused on her painting, but I go on because I know she’s listening.

“I think I’d actually kill someone if they spoke to you the way I did and threw your suicide attempt in your face like that.” I keep my eyes on her, and she quickly looks between me and the canvas.

“Well, don’t go and try killing yourself. That’s my hobby, find your own.” Her voice is so... bored and *casual*.

“Oh my God, Lisette.” I shake my shake, and she actually laughs. She’s seriously unhinged because there’s no other reason why dark humor is her coping mechanism. “I am saying sorry because you deserve to hear it, but I know it doesn’t change anything, so I swear to you that I’m going to be a better brother and sponsor.”

She only nods, not a care in the world, but I know her, and I know she cares, so I go on. “I can’t help but feel like it’s my fault you relapsed, so—”

“No.” She points the end of her paintbrush at me. “It wasn’t your fault. Don’t you dare take on the weight of my relapse. You want to feel bad about the mean things you said when you were hurt, then fine. You want to hear me say it? Yeah, you hurt me, but guess what, Sire? We’re addicts, and hurt people hurt people.”

“You’re forgiven for being a mean drunk and not because I wanted my brother back but because you *are* my brother. I wouldn’t be able to stay sober if I continued to be angry at

you, so I'm forgiving you for myself, too, but don't you *dare*"—She stabs the air in my direction with her brush again —“blame yourself for *my* relapse. What do we say in meetings?”

“Lis—”

“Sire.” She holds her brush sharper, and I think she thinks she can actually hurt me with it. I let out a sigh and answer her.

“Relapsing is no one's fault but our own. It's not because someone offered to buy us a drink or sell us the drugs. It's not because of who we fought with that day. Addiction is a disease, but we have to choose to stay sober.”

She nods a few times and takes a breath. “It was my choice to throw away my six years. It had nothing to do with you. Be a great sponsor and an even better brother, but don't for one second do it out of guilt.”

I nod once, and she turns back to her painting. After a few seconds of silence, I try to speak up, but she beats me to it. “If you apologize again, I really am going to give you a dick for a head. If you want to be all mushy and cry, go to the twins. I'm not the sibling for that shit.”

I break into a laugh, and I'm grateful as fuck that she's an asshole sometimes. I've had enough mushyness for today, so I stop apologizing and let her finish her portrait of me. Once she finally shows me, I swear my jaw drops.

I get up to get a better look at it, and if I hadn't watched her paint for the last few hours, I would have believed this was an actual picture.

“How the fuck do you do that?” I almost touch it before she whacks my hand with her brush. “How much for it?”

“Don't be ridiculous, Sire. Just take it.” She turns and wipes her hands clean.

“Lis, you spent hours on this actual masterpiece. Don't sell yourself short. Give me a price.” When she notices I'm being serious, a new look covers her face. She walks back over to

the canvas and studies it for a few seconds before turning to me.

“Half a mil.”

“Okay, I can write a check or—”

“Sire.” She laughs at something, but I can’t tell what’s so funny. When she notices I’m not laughing, her eyes widen. “Wait, you’re serious?” Is she not?

“Lisette,” I point at the painting again. “Do you not see this?” I’m not being biased when I say her work is priceless. I wasn’t even fucking posing like this, yet she captured every single detail. From the bits of green in my eyes to the two small beauty marks above my lip. She even perfectly captured the weird pear-shaped birthmark above my eyebrow and the scar on my nose.

“No, just buy me more supplies or something.”

“Lis—”

“No, really. That’s what I’d spend the money on either way. Buy me as many supplies as you think the painting is worth.” She tries to brush it off like it’s no big deal, but I don’t miss the way her cheeks reddened.

I turn back to her work, mesmerized. “I know you drown out your feelings in your paintings. Are you sure your depression is getting better?” I tease, and when I steal a glance at her, she’s already starting a new one.

“Never mind. Go ahead and send me that half a mil with asshole tax.”

I shove her off of her stool, causing her to fuck up her painting. She looks like she’s about to hit me when she gets up, so I quickly grab the portrait she made of me and sprint out, making my way to see Vidia as Lis yells from behind me.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

VIDIA

THIS DESERVES A DRINK.” I laugh at how excited Hazel is at the excuse to get drunk. I finish signing the last page and then hand it to the realtor.

“Congrats, this place is officially yours.” She hands me my keys, and I can’t help but smile. This place is twice as big as my last apartment, and it’s fully furnished, so it looks beautiful.

“Thank you.” I give her a small hug, and she walks out, leaving Hazel and I to my new apartment. I walk over to my new couch and flop down on it. It’s L-shaped and huge, so I’m obsessed.

Hazel takes a seat next to me and throws her feet over my legs. “Have you told Mr. Griffin about this?” I roll my eyes at her nickname for Sire.

I let out a sigh because I know he’s going to hate that I’m moving out of his place. “No, I didn’t tell him. To be fair, I’m not obligated to.” I sound like I’m trying to convince myself, and Hazel catches on.

“What’s going on with you two?” She eyes me suspiciously, and I can’t hold my tongue as I spill everything Sire told me. “Shit.” Hazel stares at me, and I only nod.

“I’m a bad person, right? I mean, he wasn’t even using me, and out of spite, I told the most important person about his addiction? I’m evil.” I cover my face with my hands and shake my head.

“You’re not evil, V. We’re never wrong, remember?” I chuckle softly at how serious she sounds. “Say it with me, babe. Even when we’re wrong, we’re right. Gaslight him.” I throw my head back with a laugh but immediately feel bad all over again, and my face quickly falls.

“Oh, babe.” I look over at Hazel, and she shakes her head softly. “You thought he really did hurt you, and you were mourning on top of that. Sure, it was fucked up, but he was still signed with his dream team, so it cancels out.” She shrugs but then cringes at the look on my face.

“It doesn’t make it okay, though.” I shake my head softly.

“No, but you can’t be stuck on this forever.” She watches me carefully before adding. “Don’t tell Mr. Griffin, but August told me that he ran to him earlier today to tell him you two talked.” I can’t help but smile at the bond he has with his siblings. I’m sure he told all of them we’re getting back together.

“I’m not surprised he did.” I shake my head, but then she gives me a weird look. “What?”

She turns her head to the side, fluffing her big hair. “August said that Sire told him you two aren’t back together because you guys need to work through things? He made it seem like Sire was upset about it, and I know I give him shit, but I’ve always been secretly rooting for him on the off chance that what happened between you two was all a misunderstanding, and it was, so what’s up?”

I let out a sigh and undo my hair tie because I feel a headache forming. “We’re working on it.” She looks confused, but I don’t elaborate.

“And you can’t work on it while being together?” I look down at the ring he bought me and give it a light spin. I watch

the four heart-shaped leaves of the clover spin, mesmerized as always. I forget how pretty it is sometimes.

“I guess we can.” It’s really just me that needs the work. *I* need to communicate. *I* need to trust him. I don’t get why even he wants to be with me.

“Stop it.” I look up at Hazel. “You look like you’re overthinking your entire life. Stop it.” I sigh again and rub my hands down my face.

“I don’t deserve him, Hazel.” Her brows crease before she moves her legs from on top of me and turns on the couch to face me fully.

“You don’t think you deserve to be loved the way he loves you?”

“It’s not—”

“Look, I know you feel like shit for what you did, but he clearly wants to be with you either way. You just said you two decided to work past it, so *do* that... Get past it if you really want to because that man loves you. A whole lot, like I think he might actually die for you. You deserve to be loved like that.” I don’t answer for a few seconds, then look up at her when she continues.

“I know you, V. You’re just scared to admit it, but you’d die for him too. I know you love him just as much as he loves you. You’re just scared, so you act like you don’t. You’re scared to be hurt, so you act like you don’t care, and you say things you don’t mean.”

I look back down and play with the loose threads of my pillows. She’s right. Everything she said was right. “He’s so patient, Hazel.” I shake my head as I think about how he didn’t get upset once this morning or when I blew him off when he came to visit me at work, but to be fair, I was pissed after what happened at my meeting.

“He’s perfect, and I—”

“Oh, he’s *far* from perfect.” Hazel laughs but turns more serious when she sees I’m not laughing. “Okay, no one is perfect, but if anyone is, he’s not. He’s arrogant and hates

being told what to do. Don't even get me started on how mean he is to my boyfriend." I can't help but laugh at her last part. Sire's mean to his siblings out of love, but I don't say that.

"I can list a hundred and one reasons why anyone would want to be with you, Vidia, but it won't make a difference because you need to hear it from him, so *talk* to him." She nudges me, and I only give her a weak smile.

"Stop being so hard on yourself. People fuck up, especially in relationships. It's not going to be perfect, but at least you have each other to get through it."

"True." I shrug, and I'm starting to feel a lot better.

"Yeah, I'm always right, so just get back with him so he can stop calling August at all hours asking for advice." I feel a crease grow in my brows, but I can't help but smile.

"He calls August for advice?" I doubt August gives good advice, but it's cute that he talks to him about us.

"Yeah, and he's always at our place, so get back with him so he can be here instead." I laugh at how annoyed she sounds. Sire and August are inseparable, so even when I do get back with him, he'll still be there a lot.

"August is at Sire's house just as much, so don't act like that."

"I never said he wasn't. I swear I don't get why August thought it was a bright idea for them to be neighbors. Do they not get tired of each other?" I laugh again because she and I are the same way. We always want to hang out together. She just doesn't see it that way.

"It's because August is clingy as fuck." I hate clingy boys, but it's not annoying when August does it. It's cute, like a puppy. She laughs, and as if on cue, her phone rings. She turns the phone to me, and it's a call from August. We both roll our eyes with a smile and then she answers.

"Hey." She puts the phone on speaker and raises her brows at me.

“Hey, gorgeous.” She smiles to herself and mouths for me to ‘wait for it,’ and after a beat, August adds, “Can I still come by your job tomorrow?” We both stifle a laugh, and I mouth ‘clingy.’ She holds back a smile and tells him she’s going to be too busy on her shift.

“I won’t get in your way.”

“Yes, you will, August.”

I lightly chuckle at her tone. She’s always so passive-aggressive, it’s honestly hilarious.

“Okay, well, what time will you be home? I have a surprise for you.” I look over at Hazel and raise my brows, but she only rolls her eyes.

“Sure, you do.”

“I actually do this time.” Hazel looks like she doesn’t believe him but is obviously entertained.

“Goodbye, August.” He lets out a sigh, and then it sounds like he blows her a kiss. She air kisses the phone in return, and I realize Sire was right. They’re grossly in love. It’s cute, though.

“See, he’s clingy,” I say, proving my point.

“No, I just left before he woke up, and he hasn’t seen me all day, so he’s extra horny.” I throw my head back laughing, and she only lightly chuckles. I keep my eyes on her smile, and I love seeing how happy he makes her. It feels like ages ago when she was smiling at his texts and claiming they were *just* messing around.

“How are you two?” I feel like these last couple of weeks have been all about Sire and me; we barely talk about her and August.

She smiles as she taps her phone. “We’re good, like really good.”

“Yeah?” I can’t help but smile at how happy she sounds. Anyone with eyes can see how happy she and August are when they’re with each other.

“Yeah, I wish he’d freaking propose already.” She sounds annoyed, and I can’t help but laugh at her. Hazel has been talking about wanting to marry him for months now, and I have no clue why he hasn’t given her a ring because, like she always says, he’s obsessed with her.

“He’ll propose soon,” I reassure her, not because I know something she doesn’t but because I know how much August loves her. “I’m glad you’re happy, though. You deserve it.”

“You can be this happy too. You also deserve it.”

I give her a small smile and chew on my lip. Yeah, I just need to believe it. When I don’t respond, she doesn’t push it and looks around my living room. “This place is huge. I’m sure you’ll sleep peacefully knowing this is all you.” She smiles, proud almost, as she glances at my floor-to-ceiling window that looks over downtown.

I rest my head on the back of the couch as I think about her words. I’m probably not going to sleep much tonight. I look around my apartment, and then my eyes land on the door.

I haven’t been alone much since the break-in, and I love everyone for being by my side after that night, but... I don’t know how I’m going to make it here tonight. I feel my chest tighten at the thought, and as I feel my nerves build, I turn to Hazel.

“Let’s go have that drink.”

She jumps off the couch and holds her hand out to me. We walk out of my new place and head for the bar, where I try to forget all of the memories that are flooding my head about the last time I was in my own apartment.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

SIRE



ARE YOU OKAY?" I'M NOT too concerned, just a bit confused. I thought Vid was going to sleep next door because it was getting late, and she said she was with Hazel, but now she's at my door.

"Fine." She stumbles a bit as she walks in, kicking off her heels. Her feet must hurt. She walks over to the couch, but I guide her to my room, wanting to sleep in the same bed as her again. To my surprise, she doesn't even object and follows me to my room.

I throw the tee shirt she wore last night at her and sit on my bed. She puts it on over her dress, and I chuckle but try to keep quiet because Isa is knocked out on my bed.

Vid sits on the corner of the bed, and I make my way over to her. Once I reach her, I pull her shirt off. "You need to take your dress off first, Vid."

"Right." She lets out a sigh, like it takes a lot of effort to get undressed.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Maybe she’s just tired; it is almost two am.

“Mhm.” She stands and then turns her back to me. “Unzip me, please.” She sounds exhausted and is slurring her words a bit, but I’m also tired, so I don’t pay any mind and drag the zipper to her dress down.

My eyes fall on her bare back. I follow the movement of her hands as she slowly pulls the tight dress down her waist. For a quick second, I take in the sight of her and then look away.

Once she has the oversized shirt over her head, I look back over at her just as she turns to face me. “I ever told you how pretty you are?” I love it when she calls me pretty. I smile at her, and she moves a hair from my face. *What is she doing?*

“No, you haven’t. Go ahead.”

She laughs, and I just stare at her, mesmerized by the sound.

“You really are pretty, Sire.” She gets on her tippy toes, and I swear my heart races as she slowly leans into me. The second our lips meet, I go still.

I don’t pull away to question her and pull her in instead, taking what she’d give. Our lips move in sync, and I kiss her slower, soaking in the moment. I feel deprived of her. Of her touch, her kisses, all of her. I slide my hands up and down the side of her thigh and deepen the kiss, wanting more of her. *All of her.*

When my tongue glides along hers, I go completely still at the taste of alcohol. I feel a rush at the familiar taste, and I want more than anything to continue kissing her. I just don’t know if it’s to taste her or the liquor, and that’s the damn problem.

I pull away and let out a sigh. “Dammit, Vid.”

She leans into me again, but I take a step back, putting much-needed space between us and the temptation.

“What’s wrong?” What’s wrong is that I’ve been trying so fucking hard not to drink, not to relapse, and the taste of alcohol on her tongue makes me crave it more.

“Why are you so drunk?” My voice is covered in disappointment, and I feel my shoulders slouch. Any sponsor would tell me to cut her out of my life right this second because I really don’t need people around me to be *this* fucking drunk.

Instead of answering me, she climbs into my bed. With Isa on the other end, Vid is in the middle. She taps my side of the bed, and I let out a sigh, running my hand through my hair.

If I just go to sleep, I won’t want to drink.

I climb into bed with her, and she wraps her arms around me. “I didn’t want to be alone, so I came back here.” Alone?

“Where were you going to sleep?” She wouldn’t have been alone next door. I’m pretty sure both Hazel and August are home.

“You’ll be mad when I tell you, but just remember I love you.”

My eyes quickly shut because hearing those words physically hurt. “Please don’t say that.”

“What? You will be mad.”

“No, that you love me. Don’t say that. Not right now.” I open my eyes to look at her, and she’s looking up at me, confused.

“Why not?”

“Because I—” I stop myself, but she probably won’t remember this in the morning, so I continue. “Because I’ve been waiting for you to say those three words to me for the last four years. Because since the day I first told you I loved you, I wanted nothing more than for you to say it back.” She blinks a few times, and I wipe an eyelash that falls on her cheek.

“Because when you threw your ring and jersey at me and said you didn’t love me, I felt like the floor was caving in under my feet. Because you’re drunk, and you don’t mean it, and I need you to mean it. I need you to love me back.”

She closes her eyes and rubs circles on my bare chest with her index finger. “I didn’t mean it when I said I didn’t love you

that day.” She opens her eyes again and looks up at me. “I love you, Sire. I mean it.” I feel like every problem I could ever come across fades hearing her words, and I close my eyes as I try to believe her.

“Do me a favor and tell me again when you’re sober, okay?” She doesn’t answer, and when I look down at her, she isn’t rubbing my chest, and her breathing evened out. She’s already asleep.

“Please tell me again when you’re sober,” I say, in hopes maybe she’ll remember and say the three words I so desperately want to hear.

I feel like I twist and turn for hours, and the entire time, I try to put as much distance between Vid and me as this bed can offer. I almost get up to sleep on the couch because every time she touches me, even a slither, I feel myself getting more mad.

This year was so hard for me, but I did it. I earned my bronze chip in AA, and I wanted to spend the day with her, yet she was out getting blackout drunk? I didn’t even get to tell her what today was because she blew me off when I went to see her at work.

I roll over for the hundredth time, but by the time Isa wakes me up, it feels like I only slept a few minutes. I make breakfast for her, and we stay in the living room as Vid sleeps the day away, but after a few hours, Isa starts acting like a brat.

“You little shit.” I wipe the apple sauce off my face. This is the second time she did this.

“No, you a shit!” My jaw drops as I hear her curse for the first time ever. I lightly chuckle because I know Jackson will be pissed. I don’t know why she’s so cranky, but I don’t care, so I throw applesauce back at her.

She lets out a small gasp, but she shouldn’t be surprised because the last time she threw sauce on me, I threw it back. I’m not staying hit by a kid. Call me childish all you want.

“I’m telling Daddy!”

“Daddy’s not here, you little shit. But I’m calling him right now and telling him you’re saying bad words.”

She holds her heart and scrunches her little nose as she makes an angry face. “You would *not* tattle tale.”

“I. Will.” I press call and let the Facetime call ring. He answers a lot faster than I expected.

“Is everything okay? Where’s Belle?” He sounds worried, and I feel kinda bad for calling him for this stupid shit... Oh well.

“She’s right here, and she’s misbehaving.” I look over at Isa, and she’s scolding me with her arms crossed. I forgot how much of a brat she is. I turn the phone to her so her dad can see what I have to deal with.

“Daddy! Come get me. Uncle Sigh’s not my friend anymore.” I gasp and turn the phone back to me.

“Don’t come get her.” I look up at Isa. “We are still friends, don’t say that.” I was only joking; I love watching her.

“Don’t tattle tale.” This manipulative little b—

“What did you do, Isabelle?”

She takes the phone from me and distracts her dad, talking about how she misses him and asks where he is. Wow, she is good at this.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Belle. Go take a nap.”

She hangs up, and they say they love each other. She hands me my phone. She’s cranky because she needs a nap? Okay, maybe Jackson’s right, but she could be a “big girl” like she says she is and just go to sleep instead of throwing shit.

“Nighty time, Uncle Sigh.”

I smile at her words for nap and nighttime, then kiss her forehead and cover her with her blanket on the couch. I clean up the apple sauce we threw at each other, and then when I notice it’s almost time to go, I go change into my baseball uniform. I change in my closet, not wanting to wake up Vid.

When I head back out, I pause in front of my bed and watch her for a second. She has to get up soon to come work at the game, and I think of waking her, but then I think of why she’s

still sleeping at three fucking pm. I feel myself growing annoyed all over again and decide I'm not waking her up. She needs to deal with the consequences. She got drunk; she's responsible for getting up for work.

As I walk back out of my room, I notice her starting to wake up. She must've heard my thoughts or something. *Weirdo*. Not sparing a glance at her, I walk out of the room and head to the kitchen. I hear her walk out behind me, but then the bathroom door closes, and the shower is running.

She walks into the kitchen as I'm filling up my water bottle, fully dressed in her navy blue scrubs and her hair in a high ponytail.

"Hey."

I don't respond verbally and instead just nod toward her, then go around the counter, taking a seat. She opens the fridge and cabinets and then turns to me.

"Wanna make breakfast again?" She sounds hopeful and has a beautiful smile on her face, but I look down at my phone, replying to a message.

"Nope." It's also three in the afternoon, so it wouldn't be breakfast. She actually would've had breakfast with us if she wasn't sleeping off her hangover.

"Oh... Okay." She sounds discouraged, and I feel bad for being cold to her, but she deserves it. Maybe she doesn't remember the part of my story where I said I became an alcoholic in college after everything happened, but I did, and she breached my sobriety last night. It was inconsiderate.

"Are you ready for today's game?"

"I'm suspended, remember?" I want to add that it's thanks to her, but I don't because no matter how mad I am at her, I'm not mad for not being able to play. It was my choice to do that for her.

I'm still going to the game, of course, because I need to prove to my coach that I still want to be on the team. Although I said I'd give it up for her, and I would if she asked again, I'm still a part of a team, and I still need to show up.

“Is that what’s wrong with you? Because you—”

I look up from my phone, cutting her off by sliding my sobriety chip across the counter to her. “I made one year sober.”

She looks down at my chip and smiles so damn big it almost washes away my anger. “Today? Congr—”

“Yesterday.” I quickly shut her down. “I wanted to spend the day with you, but you were busy getting blackout drunk and stumbling through my apartment.” My voice is ice, and she slowly closes her eyes. When she opens them, they’re full of regret.

“Sire, I’m so s—”

“Don’t even bother apologizing, Vidia. Why were you so drunk last night?” I want to hear her explanation before her apology. She plays with her ring, but I don’t go easy on her. I need her to understand this.

“Answer me, Vidia.” I don’t raise my voice and keep calm instead. Mainly because Isa is sleeping behind us but also because I don’t want this to be an argument. I’m tired of arguing with her.

“Something happened at work and—”

“What something?”

“That doesn’t matter, I—”

“It does. What something?” I’m not letting her out of this. She needs to explain. If not, then fine, her choice, but I’m not putting her above my sobriety. Not again.

“Why do you care so much? I just—”

“Why do I care?” I lean back in my seat because I can’t believe she just said that. “Yesterday was all I’ve been working toward. Three hundred and sixty-five fucking days without a drop of alcohol.” I tap my chip against the counter before pushing it closer to her.

“That has been my one goal,” I point to my chip, “and I finally did it after four damn years of feeling like a failure,

Vidia. Then you kissed me, and I tasted the liquor on your tongue, and I wanted to drink again.”

Her eyes slightly widen as she takes a small step back, and that’s when I realize she doesn’t even remember kissing me, which only upsets me more.

“Do you know what that feels like? To work so damn hard for something then feel like *that* by the one person I wanted to celebrate with. On top of that, I’ve been dying to fucking kiss you, Vid, and I finally get to, and *that’s* how I feel?” I hate that I don’t sound as mad as I feel. Disappointment is all my voice is laced in.

“I didn’t know I—”

“You did,” I cut her off, “and anyone at my NA or AA meeting would tell me to cut you out of my life because I don’t need people around me who are inconsiderate enough to breach my sobriety the way you did. Especially not right now.” It’s clear my words shock her, and she looks so hurt I almost take it back.

“God... I am so sorry, Sire.” I shake my head softly, unable to hide the disappointment that’s surely on my face. I look down at my sobriety chip, turning it in my fingers a few times, and she stays silent.

I give her a few more seconds, but when that passes, she still doesn’t say anything. I look up at her, trying to figure out why the hell she isn’t offering me something better than a weak apology, but when my eyes land on her, I notice a new wave of panic settle over her, like she’s so lost in her thoughts.

“What—”

“Maybe we really shouldn’t be together.” She shakes her head, and I feel my brows furrow.

“What do you—”

“No, you’re right.” She shakes her head again like she doesn’t want to say whatever’s on her mind, but she does, and I feel myself grow frantic. “I really am sorry about last night, Sire, and I know you want to work things out between us, but I

obviously don't deserve you. I don't know why you're so hell-bent on us getting back together. I mean, I—”

“God, Vidia, I feel like I haven't been able to breathe properly the last four years without you. *That's* why I'm hell-bent on getting back with you. I'm hopelessly fucking in love with you.”

She's stuck in place for a few seconds but doesn't say anything.

“Why are you so willing to give up on us?” She doesn't answer, and I feel myself growing annoyed. “Answer me. I'm done putting in a hundred percent while you only put in fifty, so can we drop the self fucking pity.”

“I'm—”

“No, Vidia. If you want me to cut you out of my life for the shit you pulled last night, here's your out.”

A crease grows in her brows, and she drops her arms. She opens her mouth to say something and then stops herself.

“If you want to leave and walk out on us, there's the door.” I push because I need to make sure she wants this to work between us as badly as I do. She looks over at her exit and then back at me, and the look she gives me makes me feel sick, but I push harder.

“No more late-night talks about our fucked-up nightmares. No more naps on my couch, no more *nothing*. You leave, and we're done. I won't fight for us anymore. I'll leave you alone, my love.” I bite my tongue for letting that name slip, but she doesn't react.

She nods once, walks out of the kitchen, and I go still. *Please don't walk out.*

Let her.

I try to convince myself that if she leaves, I really am done. I want to be with her, so so badly, but not badly enough to put her above my sobriety. That's not fair to me, so I won't try to convince her otherwise, not when my sobriety is on the line.

She shows me I don't need to when she takes a seat in front of me. I let out a small breath I didn't know I was holding and turn to her.

"I thought it was only pills. I didn't know you weren't drinking." I guess I didn't make that clear yesterday. I won't let that happen again.

"Before I relapsed, I was using alcohol as a substitute for drugs. You saw the start of that." She nods, clearly remembering. "That's obviously never good, and I ended up using again."

She holds eye contact, not interrupting as I continue.

"When I got out of rehab, I kept drinking. August and Lis got Sage involved, and eventually, I came to terms with my alcoholism, and I tried to stop. I couldn't, though, not for long at least." She takes my hand in hers, but I pull away. Her touch alone drives me insane, and I need to stay focused. We need to have this talk.

"I've only turned to Oxy twice since our fall out, but I haven't been able to stay sober for a year because I kept drinking. Not until yesterday. That's why I made that big breakfast. That's what I wanted to tell you. *That's* why I wanted to spend the day with you, and when I went to pick you up for lunch, I wanted you to come to my chip ceremony."

She puts her head down, and it's obvious she feels bad, but I need her to say it. "Sire—" She cuts herself off, shaking her head. *Say something, Vid.*

"A sorry isn't going to make up for how I acted yesterday, but I swear, I'm so fucking sorry, and I don't want you to cut ties with me or give up on us. I'll make it up to you." She grabs my hand, and when I pull away again, her entire face falls. It makes me want to reach for her, but I force myself not to.

"Tell me what was wrong with you yesterday." I know she wouldn't get that wasted for no reason. She takes in a breath and then starts ranting about her day, going on about some argument with some asshole at her job and her being hangry.

“And you came in at the wrong time.” That’s it?

“You couldn’t have just told me that?”

“I did.” Okay, she did, but she was being rude about it.

“That’s why you got wasted?” This time, she looks down, but I don’t push her to speak and wait for her instead.

“This is probably the worst time ever to say this, but…” She says it all in one breath, rushing to get it over with: “I kind of got an apartment, and yesterday, I kind of sealed the deal when I went to sign the papers. I started thinking about being all alone there and how I was alone during the break-in, so I went to have a drink but got wasted since I was on an empty stomach.”

I stare at her for a minute, trying to make sense of her jumbled-up words. This is what she was talking about last night. About me being mad and her not wanting to be alone. She got an apartment?

She peeks up at me like she’s waiting for the other shoe to drop. Like I’m going to lash out, but I don’t. Instead, I say, “Congrats on your apartment.”

Her head snaps up to me. “What?”

I only shrug in response.

“You’re not mad?”

“I didn’t want you to move out, but I’m not mad that you did. It was unrealistic to think you’d stay here forever, especially when we’re not actually together yet.” I still think it’s dumb she got her own place when she’s moving back in once we’re officially back together, but I don’t tell her that.

“Right.” She nods like she’s happy I understand.

“I’m not too happy that you didn’t tell me. You’re not obligated to, but obviously, you thought I should know since you thought I’d be mad.”

“Yeah, I know.” She looks everywhere but my eyes.

“Do you? Seriously, Vid, you need to work on your communication skills because if you want this to work

between us—”

“I do.” Her eyes meet mine, and I feel a small smile grow on my face, hearing her finally say it out loud. “I want this to work, and I’m going to work on communicating and not walking away.” She looks down at her hands again. “And all my other flaws,” she mumbles, and I tilt her chin up so she can see me.

“You’re flawless.”

A small smile creeps on her face, and she shakes her head softly. “I promise I’ll work on it, Sire.”

I give her a single nod, choosing to believe her. She holds her pinky out to me, and we intertwine our fingers and then kiss our thumbs before pressing them together, sealing the promise.

“Anything else we need to sort out?”

She looks like she’s thinking, then a sad look covers her eyes, and I’d do anything to change the look on her face. “A part of me feels guilty you relapsed.” She looks past me, but I turn her face so her eyes will meet mine, and before I can say anything, she speaks up.

“You called me a lot after the accident, but the one time I answered, I knew you needed me. You said you did, and I had a feeling it was because you were thinking of using again, but I told you I didn’t care. I let you throw away your sobriety out of spite.”

“That wasn’t your fault.”

“Sire—”

“No, Vidia. You said it wasn’t my fault we lost our baby, and now I’m telling you it wasn’t your fault I relapsed. *I’m* responsible for my own actions. I chose to get high again. It was *my* fault, not yours.”

“But I—”

“It isn’t up for discussion. It wasn’t your fault.”

She looks into my eyes like she’s trying to believe me.

“Say it.” I slowly let go of her chin, and she repeats after me.

“Like you mean it.” I make sure my words aren’t harsh but encouraging instead. She takes a deep breath and tries again.

“It wasn’t my fault you relapsed.” She nods a few times, like she’s trying to believe herself, and after a beat, I lean forward and place a soft kiss on her forehead.

“So what else do we need to hash out? Because I want you. *All* of you.” I take her hand in mine. “I’ll respect it if you don’t want to give us another chance, but not if it’s because of something as silly as you blaming yourself or thinking you don’t deserve me because you deserve everything this life and the next has to offer.”

She smiles but then cringes when something clearly comes to mind. “I told my mom about your plan to use me for her, so she kind of hates you just a bit.”

My mouth gapes open. “Vidia?!” She covers her face, but I pull her hands down. “How am I going to get in her good graces after something like that? Get your ass on the phone and tell her the truth. *Now.*”

“I did.” I feel my brows furrow, but she goes on. “After the break-in, she knew I was staying here more than next door with Hazel, and I told her you and I were getting on better terms...” She looks down at her hands. “She thinks I’m an idiot.”

I tilt her chin up. “You’re not.” I press my lips against her forehead. “Is there any hope of her liking me again?”

She peeks a glance at me and only shrugs. Well, this a just fucking great. Vidia adores her mom, and I adore Vidia. *What the hell am I going to do now?* I let out a sigh but then think of something I also need to tell her. “I moved all of your stuff from your old apartment into storage.”

She looks a bit confused, then relieved. “Oh my God. Thank you.” She lets out a breath, and when she holds her chest, I laugh at her. “I was dreading having to go back there for my

things.” I knew she wouldn’t be mad, but I was expecting her to be stubborn and say how I should’ve asked first.

“You definitely should’ve asked if I was okay with it.” There it is. *I spoke too damn soon.* “What if I was moving back in?”

“You weren’t.” I know her, and she was never going back there after the break-in.

“True.” We both laugh and then I quickly shush her when I notice Isa turning in her sleep.

“Okay, this is our fresh start.” She nods a few times, and I can’t stop the smile that creeps on my face.

“So does this mean we’re back together?” I tug on the bottom of her shirt, and she watches me carefully. There’s some sort of internal battle going on in her pretty head, but I give her a chance to gather her thoughts and silently hope she says yes.

“Shouldn’t I work on all the things I promised to work on before—”

“We can work on that and be together.” I pull her hand, bringing her between my legs. “Just say yes.”

“Sire...”

“We’ll take it slow,” I offer, only because I think it’ll make her feel better, and I just want her to be mine. She nods slowly, like she likes the idea of that. I immediately pull her closer, but she moves her head to the side before I get to pull her in for the one thing I want.

She kisses her two fingers and holds them out to me. I look down at her, clearly confused. “Can’t I just kiss you for real since we’re together?”

“You’ll have to wait until after our first date.” She’s holding back a smile, and now I *really* want to kiss her.

“We already had our first date.” I place my hands on her hips, but as I pull her to me, she moves my hands.

“Fresh start means our first date never happened. Either way, we’re taking it slow, so stop touching me. I barely even know you.”

I break into a laugh, and as she walks off, I smack her ass.

“I *knew* you were going to do that!”

“And you let me.”

She turns around and squints her eyes at me.

“You wanted me to do it, just admit it.”

“Maybe, but that’s the last time.” She points her finger at me, and I bite back a smile.

“Fine.” She has the biggest smile on her face as she kisses her fingers again and holds them out to me. I shove them away and squint at her.

“If you want to kiss me, it’s going to have to be for real.”

She bites back a smile and then walks off. *She totally wants to kiss me.*



THE TEAM IS ALREADY IN the dugout, but our coach still isn’t here yet. August walks over to me with the biggest smile on his face, like he has important news. I don’t question him because, one, he’s always smiling like that, and two, he’s going to tell me anyway.

“Guess what?” Called it. He sounds more excited than usual, and I’m actually intrigued as to what it is.

“What?”

His shoulders slouch a bit, and he turns his head to the side. “You have to guess.”

I let out a sigh and entertain him like I always do. “Hazel is pregnant?” My tone is bored, and it was honestly a random thought, but his jaw literally drops.

“How’d you know!?”

My eyes widen, and I turn my entire body to him. “You’re fucking lying!” My voice sounds a bit too excited, and it surprises me. *No way in hell.* I mean, it’s obviously possible, considering they fuck like bunnies, but no fucking way. I always figured he’d have kids before me or Sage, but I thought he and Hazel would wait longer, and I also thought she didn’t want kids.

“Nah, I’m fucking with you.”

I suck my teeth and slouch in my seat, he’s so annoying for that.

“It’s the next best thing.”

I think for a second, then, just to fuck with him, I turn back with a smirk. “You and Hazel broke up?” His brows furrow, and he looks offended.

“How is that the next best thing?”

“Because your girlfriend is mean as fuck. She’s a menace, too. I don’t see what you see in her.” Hazel has always been a bit of a grump, but she’s extra mean to me because of what went down with me and Vid. Although that literally has nothing to do with her. Maybe now she’ll be nicer to me.

“She’s actually so sweet.” To him, he means. And that’s on a good day. “That actually brings me to what I was going to say. You know how she’s the manager down at that marine animal rescue center.”

“Mhm.”

“Okay, so get this. She’s letting me bottle-feed one of the seals today.” He waits for me to react, but I only give him a confused look. This is why he was so excited? “I’ve been begging her for weeks, and she finally caved. Isn’t she so sweet?” He says the last part like he’s in a dream-like state.

“Sure, August. She deserves a girlfriend of the year award.”

“Right!”

I chuckle at him, and he smiles so damn big.

“I have news, too. Guess what?” I mimic him, and he turns to me before looking to the side, thinking.

“Did you buy a turtle?” He sounds so damn excited, and I roll my eyes at him.

“You and Lis and these fucking turtles.” I shake my head at him, and he fills the entire dugout with his laugh.

“I have no other guess that could be better.”

I look over at him and give him a small smile. “I got my girl back.” I try to play it cool, but when he literally shoots up from his seat, I burst into a laugh.

“You got your girl!”

I somehow laugh harder, but it’s cut short by the sound of someone clearing their throat. When I turn, my eyes land on our coach.

“Circle around for the line-up.”

I get up with the rest of the team and circle around Coach Fred. I know I’m not playing, but I still want to hear the lineup.

“We’re switching it up a bit today.” I avoid his gaze. We’re switching it up because I’m not playing... since I’m suspended. “First up, Noah. Following, Diego, August, Justin ___”

“Wait, why isn’t Sire batting fourth?” I always bat fourth, but the team doesn’t know I’m suspended. They’re about to be really pissed, but whether I’m captain or not, I should tell them.

“Because I’m—”

“Because I said we’re switching it up.” Coach interrupts. He goes on to list the rest of the lineup, and no one else speaks up when he still hasn’t said my name, but I don’t miss their questioning glances.

“Closing, we have Henry, Nick, and Sire.” I look up from the floor at Coach Fred. I’m playing? He looks over at me and then holds his clipboard against his chest. “Anything you want

to say to your team before we go out there, Captain.” *I’m still captain?!*

“I thought—”

“You can thank the love of your life,” he says, mocking my voice from when I said that to him over the phone. Vid talked to him? I feel a smirk growing on my face at the thought of her talking to my coach for me. God, I love that girl.

“Let’s kick some Blue Jay ass.” The team cheers, and then we all put our hands in the middle, saying Dodgers on three. The team goes to warm up, but I grab my water bottle and turn to Fred.

“I need to fill my bottle.” I hold up the bottle to him as I back up out of the dugout. He can’t see it’s a full bottle since it isn’t clear, so he just nods, and I quickly make my way into the stadium.

When I walk in, Vid and that Asher kid are having a heated stare-off like they were just arguing. “Am I interrupting something?” Asher breaks eye contact with her first and looks over at me. He just rolls his eyes and walks out, mumbling something under his breath.

“Say it with your chest!”

I lightly snicker at Vid. She’s so petty. I make my way over to her, and she starts reorganizing things that don’t need to be organized. I wonder if she knows she does this every time she’s mad.

“What was that all about?”

“*Nothing.*” Her tone is dismissing and sharp, but instead of being bothered by it, I turn her so she’s facing me instead of the cart she’s angrily reorganizing.

“What did we talk about?” She’s still learning how to be better at opening up, so I’ll just have to help her. Her eyes meet mine, and she takes a deep breath.

“He’s been such an *asshole* toward me ever since I came back to work.”

“He’s the same coworker you got into an argument with at your meeting yesterday?”

“Yes!” She lets out another frustrated sigh. “I’m pretty sure he’s jealous that we’re together because he had a thing for me, but I don’t give a shit, and that doesn’t give him the right to call me names.”

I falter, and I feel my brows furrow. “What’d he say to you?”

“He called me a *whore*.” She says it like she can barely believe it, and I’m taken back for a second, but then I feel my blood boil. *That fucking dick*. I turn to walk away to find that asshole, but she grabs me.

“Sire, wait.”

“I’m kicking his ass, so don’t convince me otherwise.”

“Oh, I’m not.” *She’s not?* “I’m fed up with that asshole, but kick his ass after your game. They might bench you for ‘getting physical.’” She puts it in air quotes, and I can’t bite back the smile that breaks through.

“You talked to my coach,” I say at the reminder of being benched. She proudly smiles at me as she nods her pretty head. “What’d you say to him to get me back in the game?”

“Nothing much, really.” She shrugs like it really was nothing. “Just that you’re my bitch who asks ‘how high?’ whenever I say jump and—”

“Okay, I get it.” God, she’s making it sound like I’m whipped for her or something. Maybe I am, but whatever. She laughs but doesn’t tell me what she actually told my coach.

“Why’d you do it?” I ask instead, tilting my head with a smile. She clicks the pen she’s holding and gives me a shrug, then looks back up at me like she remembers our promise.

“I felt bad that you couldn’t play. I know you did it for me, but you shouldn’t be the only one making sacrifices and proving your love.”

I feel a smile growing at that word. “So, this was you proving that you lo—”

“Enough communicating,” she blurts, and I squint my eyes at her.

“You can’t stop communicating in the middle of communicating. That’s not communicating.” I’m getting sick of this word.

“Baby steps.” She quickly kisses her two fingers and holds them out to me. I’m also getting tired of not being able to kiss her. Fuck this fresh start, and fuck what I said about slow. Instead of kissing my own fingers, I lean down and quickly press my lips against the two fingers she just kissed. A smile grows on her face, and she presses her fingers to her lips.

“This is so childish—”

“Shhh.” We both start laughing, and I roll my eyes at her.

“Thank you for talking to my coach, beautiful.”

She’s biting back a smile, and I feel like it’s because I haven’t called her that in a while. I’ll make sure to call her beautiful more often.

“Anytime, pretty boy.”

Rolling my eyes at her, I turn to leave so she can’t see the smile that’s fighting to break through at her nickname for me.

Just as I turn, I feel her hand coming down on my ass. “I knew you were going to do that.” I turn back to face her, and she has a proud smile on her face.

“And you didn’t stop me. I know you like it, Gryffindor. It’s okay to admit it.”

“Oh, fuck off.” My face scrunches, and I walk out of the room, her laugh still ringing in my ears.



“HEY, ASSHOLE.” MY FIST CONNECTS with Asher’s jaw, and he stumbles back a bit. “I have a question.” I punch him again, right in his perfect nose. Well, not perfect anymore.

“If my girl’s so much of a whore, how come you didn’t get to fuck?” Before he can answer my very rhetorical question, I

grab a fist full of his shirt. “Do yourself a fucking favor and put in your two weeks’ notice because if I find out you so much as look at her the wrong way again, you’re going to be drinking your meals out of a fucking straw.” I let go of his shirt, a lot rougher than needed.

“Got it?” He nods and spits out blood. “Couldn’t hear you, what was that?” I take a step to him, and a smirk grows on my face when he takes two back.

“Got it.”

“Got what?” We both turn to Vid, and she’s looking at us with her arms crossed. How long has she been standing there?

“I’m putting in my two-week notice,” Asher mumbles. I steal a glance at Vid, and she’s obviously happy but doesn’t say anything and nods her head toward the back of the parking lot instead. Without wasting another word on him, I follow her through the parking lot.

“Thanks for that.”

“You don’t need to thank me for defending you, Vid. It’s the bare minimum. He disrespected you.” She doesn’t say anything and just nods as we continue walking to wherever her car is. Lights to a blue Porsche light up, and Vid throws her bag in before turning to me.

“When the hell did you get this?” I walk around the car, admiring it and its red rims. I look up at her, and she smiles at me, holding out the keys.

“It’s yours.” What? My jaw drops a bit as I look between her and the car. She bought me a *car*?

“You’re lying.”

She drops her hand, pulling the key away from me. “Yeah, I am.”

I can’t help but laugh as I roll my eyes at her. “You asshole.”

She playfully shoves my shoulder. I wouldn’t accept this gift either way; I already have three cars.

“It’s a late birthday gift from my mom.”

I nod and lean against the hood. She walks over and lets me pull her between my legs. “So...” She starts playing with the belt of my pants like she’s trying to keep her hands busy, but then she freezes and drops her hands. I can’t help but snicker.

“You’re thinking dirty thoughts.”

She looks up at me, brows furrowed. “Am not.”

“Mhm.”

She rolls her eyes at me and smacks my hands from her waist. I place them at my side on the car instead and lean back a bit.

“You’re going to pick up Isabelle?” I give her a small nod. Since we were both at the game and couldn’t really watch Isabelle while we were here, I dropped her off at the same friend she had a playdate with yesterday.

I asked Jackson, of course, and he said it was fine as long as we got her as soon as we could. I don’t think I ever noticed how damn overprotective he is of his daughter until now, but I don’t blame him one bit. If anything, I admire him for that. He loves her, and you’d think parents shouldn’t be admired for that, but there are parents out there who treat their kids the complete opposite of how Jackson treats Isa.

“What are you going to do?”

She just shrugs and bites her lip in thought. “Going to my apartment, I guess.”

I nod again and tell her I can have someone take her things to her new place from storage. She thanks me and then shifts her weight on each foot like she wants to say something else, but instead of asking, I wait to see if she’ll tell me on her own.

“So,” she starts again. It’s obvious she wants to tell me something. She’s trying to communicate, and it’s cute, so I don’t help her. She’s got this. “Do you want to come see my new place?”

I study her for a second. I doubt that’s what she wanted to ask, but baby steps. “Yeah, sure.” I shrug and push myself off her car and check the time. “Do you mind picking up Isa? I

need to shower and change out of my uniform, but I'll just meet you at your place." She nods, and I go get Isa's car seat to put it in her car. I'm sure she'll tell me whatever it is later.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

VIDIA

I LIKE THESE.” ISA POINTS at a very colorful bouquet of flowers. I think about getting them for a second, but they don’t seem right.

“Do you think Uncle Sigh will like them?” I ask her.

“I don’t think so.” She scrunches her little nose as she shakes her head. We keep walking around the flower shop, and I’m starting to wish I knew his favorite flowers.

“Wait.” Isabelle abruptly stops in her tracks, and I almost bump into her tiny frame. “Are we getting flowers for Uncle Sigh?” She looks up at me and turns her head in thought.

“Yup.” I think for a second, then ask, “Do you know his favorite flowers?” It’s probably a long shot, but she’s very observant, and this seems like something she would’ve asked him.

She taps her chin like she’s trying to remember, and I can’t help but smile at how cute she is. Spending these last few days with her has definitely shown me why Sire loves this little girl so much.

I watch her as she puts up one finger like she remembered. “Daffy Duck!”

I feel my eyebrows crease, and I turn my head a bit. Daffy Duck? After a few seconds, it hits me. “Do you mean Daffodils?”

“I think so?” Her shoulders slouch a bit. “I can’t remember, just yellow Daffy Duck flowers. He likes those ones.” Yeah, she means Daffodils. I give her a smile and then take her hand as we go search for them.

“Why are we getting flowers for Uncle Sigh? He’s a boy.”

I smile down at her as we keep looking for the flowers. “Flowers aren’t only for girls. Just because he’s a boy doesn’t mean he can’t have girl things.” She just shrugs her shoulders, and I can’t tell if she’s even giving what I said much thought. I see some of his favorite flowers and then have them wrapped.

“Can I give them to him?” She reaches for the flowers as I take them from the cashier, but I give her my hand to hold instead.

“I’ll give them to him since I’m making a surprise for him.”

Her big gray eyes light up as if the surprise was for her.

“Is it Uncle Sigh’s birthday?”

I shake my head and continue to lead us to my car.

“So why are we surprising him?”

I try to think of a good way to explain last night to her. I still feel like the worst person ever for blowing him off, then going to get drunk when he wanted to spend his soberversary with me. I think he did something with his siblings, but still. That’s why we’re surprising him, but instead, I tell her, “Uncle Sigh was mad at me, so we’re trying to make him happier.”

I don’t know if he’s still mad or not. He didn’t seem like he was still upset. Not after I spoke to his coach, at least, which I also did because of last night. I can tell he doesn’t want to argue anymore, but if it was me in his shoes, I’d definitely drag out this morning’s argument.

He’s so patient with me. I’m working on convincing myself that I deserve him, so that’s why I’m making myself feel a bit

better and doing this for him. I put Isa into her car seat and quickly buckle her in.

“Okay, we need to pick up a few more things for the surprise, then we’re going to my new house.”

“Can we get ice cream?”

I tell her we’ll pick some up on the way back and get into the car to buy the rest of the surprise.



“WE DID A GOOD JOB!” We didn’t do much, but I still look around the dining room with Isa, admiring all the lit candles and the made table. I didn’t really have much time to set up our “first” date, and Isa is with us, so it won’t be perfect, but it’ll be our perfect.

I already started making dinner, and it should be done by the time Sire gets here. Since we were in college, he’s always taken longer showers after his baseball games, so we have some time.

“Are you sure my dress is good?” I don’t know why I’m asking a four-year-old for her opinion on my outfit, but I’m a bit nervous. I know we technically already had our first date, but I want to show him I’m done putting only fifty percent into us.

Isa looks at my lavender dress. It’s casual since I’m not sure what Sire is wearing. I don’t want to make him feel underdressed, and we are literally just in my house. It’s a bit tight and is off the shoulders, but I think it’s okay.

Isa agrees and gives me a thumbs up, then says she has to use the bathroom and walks off. I quickly go to check on the food. I made shrimp alfredo because it’s the fastest meal I could make.

I saw a box of those red lobster biscuits, so I also got that. Isa and I make them together once she’s out of the bathroom, but the dough was very sticky, so I’m praying they come out good.

I pop them into the oven and sit on the couch with Isa. “Look at my new game.” She says it with a yawn and turns her iPad to me as she puts her dog avatar in a dress.

After a few minutes, the doorbell rings, and I hesitate to open it, but I know it’s likely just Sire, so I head for the door.

I look through the peephole and let out a small breath of relief when I see him and not some maniac like the last time I opened the door to my apartment.

Sire’s outfit is also casual: black jeans and a white tee shirt. I take in a breath, then open the door.

His eyes immediately fall on my dress as he gives me a slow sweep with a small smile. “You look pretty.”

I give him a smile and step aside so he can walk in.

“Thank you.”

He enters, and I close and lock the door behind him.

“Does your new place not have brighter lights?” He jokes as he looks around the dimly lit apartment. I lightly chuckle, then grab the flowers from the kitchen counter before he sees them.

When he turns to me, he looks spectacle and is holding back a very obvious smile. He’s so pretty. I hand the flowers to him but can’t bring myself to say anything.

“These for me?” I know he just wants to hear me say it, but with the way his eyes are gazing at me, I can’t, so I just nod. He takes the flowers from me, then a smirk grows on his face, and he tilts his head a bit, mocking me.

“Cat got your tongue?”

I look away so he can’t see my smile, and he chuckles at that. He takes a step closer to me and takes my hand in his, stopping me from nervously spinning my ring.

I watch him as he tilts his head down just a bit and brings my hand to his mouth, planting a soft kiss on the back of it. “Thank you for the flowers, my love.” I stare at him, frozen for a few seconds. *The candlelight makes him look perfect.*

“You’re welcome.” I clear my throat when my voice comes out just above a whisper, and a smile grows on his face.

“Can I take a nap in your room, Vidia?”

I snap back into reality and turn to Isa. “You don’t want to eat first?”

“I already ate ice cream.” She says with a yawn. Her nap was cut very short earlier since we had to leave for the game, so I can see why she’s tired. I tell her it’s okay to sleep in my bed, and Sire reminds her to take her shoes off.

“You let her have ice cream before dinner?”

I walk over to the oven and check on the biscuits. “You let her have a very sugary breakfast yesterday.”

“Touche.”

I lightly laugh and walk back over to him. He’s looking into the dining room, at the rest of the candles and the made table. I’m sure he put two and two together. “I could be wrong, but I’m pretty sure you’re supposed to ask someone out before surprising them with a dinner date.” Smartass.

I roll my eyes at him and elbow his arm. “If I would have asked, it wouldn’t have been a surprise, but if you wanted to be asked out, just say that.”

He leans against the kitchen island and pulls me between his legs. “I wanted to be asked out.” He crosses his arms. As I break into a laugh, he drops his arms and pulls me in a bit more.

“Sire, would you do me the honor of going on our first date with me?” I look up at him, and he has the biggest smile on his face. I don’t think he’s ever been asked out before; then again, I’m pretty sure he did all the asking out.

“The honor would be mine.” He leans into me, but I turn my head so his lips land on my cheek. When I turn back, he’s already looking at me with squinted eyes.

“You’re not even going to wait until the end of the date? Maybe get to know me better or something.”

He looks like he's tired of this "fresh start," but I know it's only because he wants his lips on mine. He rolls his eyes, then pulls back a bit, kissing his two fingers and holding them to me. I feel my heart burst at the sight of him. He really is perfect.

I kiss my two fingers and tap his. "I thought you said this was childish?" He rolls his eyes and bites back a smile. I know he likes our fresh start kisses.

"It is childish, but you clearly like them for whatever reason, so..." I like them because they're cute, and he looks funny kissing his fingers. I don't tell him that last part and very quickly kiss his lips before speed-walking to the stove.

I start to serve our plates, and when I glance back at him, he has the biggest smile on his face as he licks his lips, savoring my peck of a kiss.

SIRE

I'M SMILING LIKE AN IDIOT over a tap kiss from a girl I've kissed hundreds of times. *Get a grip.* I clear my throat and try to wipe the smile off my face, but Vid already saw it. I walk toward her as she starts serving the second plate, and it smells amazing.

"I didn't know you could cook." I go to take a shrimp from the pot, but she slaps my hand away.

"Wait until we're at the table."

"Okay, jeez." I chuckle softly, and she shakes her head. I watch her as she takes out a tray of biscuits from the oven and then melts butter with what looks like garlic. My eyes stay on her as she pours it over the biscuits and places them all neatly on a plate.

I'm pretty sure her dress is new. It fits her like a glove and stops maybe two inches below her ass. She looks really fucking pretty, but she looks pretty in everything. She's just overall really fucking beautiful.

"Did you wear that dress for me?" I say, thinking out loud. She was in scrubs earlier but would have changed into some shorts or an oversized tee shirt in the comfort of her home, yet she didn't.

She looks down at her dress and then up at me. "Do you not like it?"

I feel another smile growing on my face. *She totally wore it for me.* "Yeah, I do."

She smiles, and it reaches her eyes. Just to see her squirm, I add, "You look good, but you also look good in nothing."

Her mouth opens just a bit. I laugh when she looks everywhere but me.

"No more inappropriate comments."

I slowly nod at her with a smirk, and she takes the plates to the table but avoids my eyes. I don't know why she's acting so nervous. We've been on plenty of dates. It's really cute that she did this for me, though, and I appreciate that she's putting in more of an effort, but I can tell she's partly doing this because she still feels bad about last night, and she shouldn't. This morning was our fresh start.

I pull out her chair at the head of the table and then take my seat to the left of her. "Are these red lobster biscuits?" I practically jump to get one because these are literally my favorite. God, this woman is the best.

"Yeah, but I think Isa and I made them wrong, so just warning you."

"I'm sure they're great." I take a bite, and they are *not* great or even good. I go still and turn to her, but she looks like she's waiting for my response. I chew on the doughy texture and fake a smile. These are definitely not cooked in the middle.

“Are they good?” They taste like fucking Play-Doh, and I would know because Isa made me try her Play-Doh ice cream multiple times, but she’s smiling at me all hopefully, and I can’t bring myself to break it to her, so I just nod with a smile.

I want to spit this shit out so bad, but she keeps her eyes on me with a pretty fucking smile, and if she keeps looking at me like that, I’ll end up eating all her shitty biscuits.

She takes a bite of her shrimp and grabs a biscuit. Since she isn’t looking anymore, discreetly as possible, I act like I’m cleaning my mouth with the napkin and spit out the uncooked biscuit. I eat some of the shrimp alfredo to get rid of the bitter taste in my mouth, and I’m glad it tastes better than her biscuits. When I look up at Vid, she takes a bite of the biscuit, and I wait for her reaction, but she only hesitates for a quick second before continuing to chew with a smile.

There’s no way she actually likes it. She must have got one that was actually cooked. “Mm, they are good,” she says between chews. “Finish yours.” She takes another bite from hers like she’s actually enjoying them, and just because she asked, I grab the Play-Doh biscuit and reluctantly take another bite.

She looks so fucking happy; I think I really would eat all of these shits to keep that smile on her face. When I force down the raw biscuit, I feel it coming back up but swallow it again with a smile.

She grabs a napkin and spits out the biscuit I thought she swallowed and burst into a laugh. “These taste like shit, Sire.”

“Oh, thank God.” I spit out this shit, and her laugh grows. I watch her laugh uncontrollably with a smile. I don’t get how someone’s laugh can sound as perfect as hers.

“Why did—” She starts laughing again and can barely get her words out. I smile at her and continue eating more of the pasta, thanking God it tastes amazing because I would’ve ended up also eating shitty pasta for her.

“Why did you eat it if it tasted like fucking Play-Doh?” We both throw our heads back, laughing.

“I didn’t want to hurt your feelings, and you looked so happy when I said they were good.” Hearing myself, I realize how ridiculous that sounds. August would call me a whipped bitch for this, but I couldn’t care less. I’d do anything she asks, with a smile.

She shakes her head, still smiling. “Uh uh.” She swirls her fork in her pasta. “You’re better than me because I’m sorry, but I’m not eating Play-Doh for you, babe.” She eats her pasta, and I freeze a bit at what she called me.

She clearly doesn’t notice, and I can’t tell if she meant babe like how she and Hazel call each other babe or babe like *babe*. I go with the latter but don’t say anything and continue eating. I can’t help but smile at her the entire time.

We finish eating everything, and I help her clear the table. She grabs her failed attempt at biscuits and holds them out to me. “Are you sure you don’t want them before I throw them away?” She’s fighting back a smile as she looks up at me.

“I might die of food poisoning, Vid.”

“And you were going to eat them for me.” *Damn right I was.* She shakes her head and walks off, throwing them away. Taking our dishes to the sink, I start cleaning them, and she leans against the counter beside me.

“I could do dishes, you know.”

I glance at her, and she has her arms crossed.

“I know, but you don’t have to.”

She doesn’t voice another protest and lets me do the dishes. I don’t look back at her, but I can feel her eyes on me the entire time.

“Stop staring at me.”

“No, you’re pretty.”

I turn to look at her, and the weirdest feeling of déjà vu washes over me, but I shake it off. I dry my hands on a towel and then turn to face her. Placing my hands on the counter at her sides, I cage her in.

“Thank you for this.” It’s the first time someone has planned a date for me, and it was perfect. She’s perfect.

“You’re welcome.” She looks up at me with a small smile, but then her eyes light up. “Don’t move.” She rushes to grab something from her bag and then turns to the fridge. She keeps her back to me, covering whatever she’s doing in the fridge.

After a few seconds, she turns around, and I feel a smile cover my face as she walks over to me with my favorite Carvel’s ice cream cake and a number one candle.

I glance down at the cake, and in blue writing, it says, Happy One Year soberversary! with hearts all around it. When I look back up at her, she’s already watching me.

“I’m proud of you, Sire.” The soft fire from all of the candles gives us just enough light to see each other, but I can see the small smile on her face. “The last four years, you have not been a failure.” She shakes her head at what I said earlier today.

“It’s called a journey for a reason, and I wish I could’ve been there with you these last few years, but I wasn’t, so I promise, even if we don’t work out, I’ll be here for every soberversary to tell you I’m proud because I’ll never stop being proud of you for making the choice to stay clean every day.”

I don’t know what to say at first, but she holds the cake closer to me. I blow out the candle and put the cake aside so I can pull her in for a hug. “I’m holding you to that.”

She pulls away to look up at me. “Good. I mean it this time.”

I nod once, a smile still unable to be wiped from my face. “It’s the end of our date.” I lean in a bit but don’t close the distance between us. A smile grows on her face, and I can tell she knows what I mean when her eyes flick down to my lips.

“It isn’t.”

“No?”

Her eyes are still on my lips, and I feel myself smirking.

“Uh uh.”

“What else did you have planned?”

“A movie.”

I lean down so my mouth is by her ear. “I can think of something better.” I lean back to see her eyes, our lips inches apart. We’re close enough to feel each other’s breath, and I think she’s holding hers.

“Like what?” she teases. Instead of telling her, I show her, bending slightly to put one hand on her thigh. She leans in just a bit but then leans back so our lips never meet. Slowly, I drag my hand up her dress, and her breath hitches.

“Sire.” She puts her hands on my chest but doesn’t push me away.

“Hm?” I keep my eyes trained on her for an answer, but she keeps her eyes on my lips and then licks hers. I start to bring my hand higher up her inner thigh. I almost forgot how smooth her skin feels.

“I thought—” She cuts herself off, and I keep my hand in place, not moving it higher.

“Go ahead.”

She lets out a sigh like she’s disappointed. “I thought we were going slow.” I hate that I told her that shit.

“I thought you liked it when I went faster?” With the look she’s giving me, I doubt she wants to go slow, either. She bites back a smile and holds eye contact.

“I said no inappropriate comments.”

“That wasn’t inappropriate. Your mind is just in the gutter.”

“You know what you meant.” She squints her eyes at me, and I definitely do know what I meant because my mind is the one that’s in the gutter, and I don’t want to go slow. I want to rip this dress off her and take her right here on her kitchen counter.

I don’t say that, though, and instead leave it up to her. “I wouldn’t mind speeding things up a bit, but do you still want

to go slow?”

She bites her lips and looks off to the side like she’s thinking about it. After one second too many, I remove my hands from her and pull back a bit. She looks at me with a mix of confusion and disappointment.

“I didn’t even say anything.”

“No, but you hesitated, and that’s enough of an answer.” I give her a damn *fresh start kiss* and press my lips to my fingers before holding them to her. “Slow it is,” I say with a nod. It won’t kill me to go slow, and even if it would, it’s what she wants, so she’s getting it.

Her smile grows, but she doesn’t kiss her fingers. “You can get a real kiss.” I feel a smirk grow on my face, and she adds, “But no tongue.”

“That’s my favorite part.” I turn my head a bit and pull her to me by her waist.

“Tongue kisses are not taking it slow.” She gives me a pointed look, which I return.

“I can tongue kiss you very slowly, Vidia.”

She rolls her eyes at me as she bites her lip. I hold her chin, and with my thumb, I drag her lip from between her teeth. She looks up at me through her thick lashes as I lean down, taking her bottom lip between my teeth and lightly sucking on it. She said no tongue, nothing about this. Slowly, I release her lip and lean into her completely. Our lips meet, and I soak in the moment. As tempting as it is, I keep my tongue to myself. When I pull away, she still has her eyes closed, and maybe I’m imagining it, but it’s like she didn’t want the kiss to end just yet.

“So, what movie did you pick for us to watch?”

She looks up at me through hazy eyes and boldly says, “Forget what I said about slow.”

I throw my head back, laughing. Her mind changed that quickly and without tongue?

“Uh uh.” I take her hand and lead her to her couch. “It’s too late to change your mind,” I tease, and we both flop down on her couch. When I look over at her, she has her legs crossed and is tapping her knee.

“What are you thinking about?” I have a few guesses, but I want to hear her say it. She looks over at me with a smirk.

“You.”

“What about me?”

“I can show you what I’m thinking.” She leans over, and my eyes flick down to her mouth as she licks her lips. She leans in a bit more but then grabs the control in the middle of us and leans back.

“But you said I can’t change my mind.”

I bite the inside of my cheek and roll my eyes at her. Little shit. I let out a slightly frustrated sigh, and she tries to hold back a laugh.

“Oh, so you don’t like it, but it was okay when you did it?”

“Put your movie on, Vidia.” She laughs, and we watch the movie in comfortable silence.



“ARE YOU SURE YOU’RE GOOD to stay here alone?” I fix Isa on my shoulder as Vidia opens the door for us.

“I’m fine, Sire. I need to be able to be here alone.” I don’t believe her. She said it herself last night that she didn’t want to be here alone, but she’s right. She needs to get used to being alone in her own place again.

“Okay.” I don’t walk out just yet and turn to face her. “Tonight was the perfect first date, by the way.”

She looks down at the floor and kicks her feet a bit. I love how nervous she still gets around me.

“What are you doing tomorrow?”

I almost tell her I'll be free tomorrow, but then I remember I made plans that I can't reschedule. "I'm hanging out with my sister, but I'll see you on Monday," I reassure her, but Vid looks a bit confused, so I remind her what Monday is.

"At our physical therapy session or check-up? Whatever it is." I think it's just a follow-up, but as Vid remembers, she shakes her head.

"Oh yeah, about that." She hesitates before going on.

"What?" I lean against the door frame.

"We're not going to have our next two check-ups at the office anymore." I feel a crease grow in my brows. "I took on this other patient, but since I was booked, I switched out your sessions for him."

I open my mouth to respond, but she quickly beats me to it. "I know I should have communicated that with you, but I honestly forgot, and he was super sweet and has been trying to get an appointment with me for months. Plus, you—"

"Vid, it's fine." I lightly laugh at how quick she is to explain herself. "I don't think I need the follow-up, but if I do, you can just do it whenever we're together. I just liked having an excuse to see you at work," I admit, and she smiles.

"We can spend my lunch breaks together." She gets on her tippy toes to kiss me, but I move my head, so she kisses my cheek instead.

"Taking it slow, remember?" I tease, and she laughs.

"Jerk."

With a smile, I lean down and kiss her. "Good night, Vidia. Call me if—"

"I'll be fine. Good night, Sire." I wait for a second, but she seems like she really will be okay, so I walk out.

When I get into the elevator of my apartment building, I peek down at Isabelle. "I know you're awake, Isa. Can you walk, please?"

“Ugh, okay.” She tilts her head back as she lets out a sigh, and I put her down. When we walk around the corner, I notice Jackson, but he doesn’t see us yet, so I quickly turn back with Isa and squat down to her.

“Dad’s here early.”

A smile grows on her face, and she goes to walk off, but I grab her. “Remember what we said we’re telling him?”

An evil smile grows on her face as she nods. I chuckle at her and get back up.

When we reach him, Jackson squats down to hug Isa. “I missed you, princess.”

“I missed you too, little bitch.”

My hand flies to my mouth. *Holy shit!* I didn’t think she’d actually do it. I try not to laugh as Jackson pulls back from their hug in utter shock.

“Excuse me?” He looks up at me, and I shrug my shoulders as I fake my surprise.

“You’re a little bitch, Daddy.” She nods her head like she’s so sure in her statement, and Jackson’s jaw literally drops. I break into a laugh but then cover my mouth again, trying not to blow my cover, but it’s too late.

Jackson gets up and looks between the two of us. “Did you teach her that?”

I shake my head, but I can’t stop smiling.

“How was your day, little bit—”

“Isabelle!” Jackson looks down at his daughter. “Do *not* say that again.” He uses his strict dad voice, and Isa looks scared. When she looks over at me, I give her a thumbs up and nod for her to go on.

“Okay, little bitch.”

I break into a laugh because she said exactly what we rehearsed. She’s a tiny genius. Jackson is looking at me like he wants to punch me in the face, but I know he won’t hit me in front of his daughter.

“This is not funny. Why would you teach her that?” He looks pissed. Just what I wanted. I don’t know why, but I find it genuinely funny when others are mad.

“Lighten up, you little bitch. She’s cute.” I point at Isa, and we both look down at her. She smiles up at us, proving my point. His kid is adorable, and it’s hilarious when kids curse. No one can convince me otherwise.

“Yeah, light up, little bit—”

Jackson gets down at her level. “If you say that again, you’re going straight to time-out. Do you understand me?” Isa’s shoulders slouch a bit, and she looks like she’s going to cry.

“Why do you always have to ruin everything?” I go to reach for her, but her annoying ass dad swats my hand away. I swat him back and look over at Isa.

“You’re not going to time-out. Don’t cry, Isa.”

He gets back up and turns to me. “She is going to time-out if she says it again.”

I roll my eyes at him and look over at Isa. When I wink at her, signaling the next thing we practiced, she slightly shakes her head, but I nod that it’s okay that she does it. When Jackson looks over at her, she furrows her brows like she’s mad and sticks out the middle finger at him. I laugh again and quickly take a picture of her. I’m making this shit my lock screen.

Jackson squats back down and covers her hand in his. “No iPad for the whole week.” Is he kidding right now?

“But Daddy—”

“No buts.” He shakes his head, and his voice is stern. She starts to cry, so I pick her up.

“Come on, Jackson, it was a fucking joke.” I smooth Isabelle’s hair and tell her not to cry.

“Jokes are meant to be funny. Give me my kid.” He reaches for her, but I turn from him and hold her closer to me.

“No.” I can’t believe he really made her fucking cry.

“Why do you always have to make me the bad guy?” He crosses his arms as he shakes his head.

“I have to keep up my fun Uncle Rep.” Isa picks her head up from my shoulder, and I wipe her tears.

“You’re not babysitting her ever again.”

I ignore him and kiss Isa’s cheek. “You’re not going to time-out, and you can use your iPad all you want.”

“But Daddy—”

“Your dad’s a little bitch.” She laughs, and when I look over at Jackson, he’s shaking his head at us, but it’s obvious he’s holding back a smile. I know deep down he finds this funny, and if it was anyone else’s four-year-old, he would have been laughing.

“You’re teaching my daughter not to respect me.” I look up at the ceiling as I roll my eyes.

“Oh my God.” I look over at him and, with all seriousness, say, “She respects you a whole lot. She didn’t even want to do this, so I bribed her. Stop making your kid cry.” I hand Isa to him, and he kisses her forehead.

They come inside to grab her bag, and when Isa asks if we’re having another sleepover, I almost tell her yes, but Jackson says they can’t since she was cursing. *Asshole.*

“Am I going to be in time-out?”

“No,” I say before Jackson does. I’m “kidnapping” her from school for a week straight if he puts her in time-out for this.

“We’ll talk in the car.”

She lays her head on his shoulder, and he goes to walk off but flips me off first.

“Call me if he puts you in time-out, princess!” She gives me a thumbs-up and then wipes her cheek again.

When I get in bed, my phone starts ringing. It’s a Facetime call from Vid, and I quickly answer. “Hello?”

She's still in the living room but is lying down with a blanket. "Hey."

I hear singing in the back, and I think she's watching another movie. "Are you watching Rapunzel? Again?" I watch her lower the volume and get a bit more comfortable on the couch.

"Yeah, I kind of needed it." She lets out a small sigh. I know it's her comfort movie, and I'm starting to think she's having a hard time being alone in her own place. She didn't want to talk about the break-in earlier, but it's understandably still affecting her.

"Are you okay?"

She nods her head with a small smile, but it looks forced. "I'm fine." She sounds like she's trying to convince herself, and I realize she is when she wipes a tear.

"Vidia." I rise from the bed. "I'm going to pick you up, okay?"

"No, I'm fine, Sire." She sits up, and I reluctantly sit on the edge of the bed. She closes her eyes like she's trying to calm her breathing. I wait for her to say something, but a few minutes pass, and she doesn't.

"Talk to me, my love." My voice comes out soft, and she looks at me on the screen.

"My—" She looks up to the ceiling and blinks away her tears. This is fucking breaking me, and I just want to be with her.

"My neighbor knocked on my door to introduce himself, but he knocked really hard, and when I went to check the peephole, I obviously didn't recognize him, so—" She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. The loud knocking scared her, and she didn't recognize the man, so now she's unsettled.

"Nothing's going to happen, Vidia." She shakes her head, but I go on. "You're safe there."

"You don't know that, Sire." She shakes her head again with her eyes closed. "You *don't know*."

I let out a sigh and run a hand through my hair. She's right. I don't know that for sure. I think of what I can do, but she doesn't want me to get her, and being with her is the best thing I can come up with. I remember seeing security in front of her building and get an idea.

“Will you feel better if security is sitting outside your door?”

She just shrugs her shoulders and then lays back down. I watch her as she props her phone against something so I can still see her lying down and she doesn't have to hold the phone up.

I remember that Jackson has to drive past her apartment to get home, so I quickly text him to stop by and tell the guard to stand in front of her door for a few hours.

Isa's annoying ass dad:

I shouldn't even do you this favor since you showed Belle that shit

This isn't for me ,it's for Vid. I'm sending you \$300. Give it to the guard and if he ask for me just lmk.

Fine but I'm only doing it for V and you still can't babysit my kid anymore

“If you're busy, you can call me back.”

I get off of pause and go back to the Facetime call. “No, I'm not busy.” She nods and puts a hand under her head. “The security guard to your building is going to stay out your door for a while, okay?” She gives me a sad smile and lets out a breath.

“Thank you.”

“Always, Vid.”

“No, really, thank you for everything. You're so patient with me and...” She stops like she's trying to think of more. “You

would eat Play-Doh for me.” She throws her hands up a bit, and I lightly chuckle as she watches me with a warm smile.

“I—” She stops herself again. “I appreciate you.” She appreciates me? I try to hide the confusion on my face, but I can’t help but think that she meant more than “appreciate.”

“I *really* appreciate you, Sire.”

I sense her words have a deeper meaning to them and give her a smile. “Got it.”

She looks like she’s relieved that I understood. She’s taking it slow, so for now, this phrase will be the substitute for the three words she actually wants to say. The three words I really want to hear her say.

“I appreciate you, Vid.” *I love you, Vid.*

Chapter Thirty

SIRE

I GO NEXT DOOR, AND without knocking, I walk into my brother's apartment. I hear Hazel obnoxiously sigh from the couch as the door closes, so I make my way to the living room.

"He isn't here. Go home."

I roll my eyes at her, then flop on the other end of the couch. "I actually came to see you."

She looks up from her phone, and I can't tell if my words confused or annoyed her. "What favor do you need?"

"I do *not* need a favor." I try to make my voice sound convincing. I do need a favor, but how did she know that? "Can't I just come to see how my brother's girlfriend is doing without an ulterior motive?"

She rolls her eyes and lays back down. "You sound just like your sister." I throw my head back laughing because Sage said that yesterday when I was with Lis and she randomly stopped by. She's nosy as fuck, though. I didn't come here for information.

"Okay, I do need a favor."

She locks her phone and crosses her arms. "And why should I do you this favor?"

“To see your best friend happy.” I give her an innocent smile, and she squints her eyes like Vid does. Hazel denies it, but they spend so much time together that they kind of act the same.

“What do you want?” I fully turn to her and get comfortable on the couch.

“A dog.” She just stares at me for a few seconds. I know I can get a dog from anyone, but Hazel is the only person I know for sure will know about this.

“Be specific, idiot.” I ignore her rude name for me and describe what I’m looking for. “I can definitely find one for you, but you’re looking to spend a chunk of money.” That isn’t a problem, but I ask anyway.

“How much?”

“Forty-five to sixty-five thousand, but—”

“That’s a *chunk*?” That isn’t even a tenth of my bank account. I can spend that on Vid. I can spend triple that on her if she asks.

Hazel turns to the side like she remembers something. “I forget you and August are literally millionaire, professional baseball players sometimes.”

“Yeah, I can tell.” I look down at her old sneakers, and before I can look back up at her, a pillow hits me.

“These are my favorite pair of shoes, you ass.” I laugh and throw the pillow back at her, but she catches it.

“Good catch. You and August are still working on that?”

She nods proudly. Hazel isn’t the sporty type and barely understands baseball, but she practices with August for some reason.

“Okay, send me the guy’s info, and don’t tell Vid.” I get up to leave, but she speaks up with a smart reply.

“Why would I tell her if it’s a surprise?”

“I don’t know.” I shrug and turn to her so I can see her reaction to my next sentence. “You’re a dumb bitch

sometimes.” Her jaw literally drops, and her eyes fully widen as she gasps. *Loudly.*

I would’ve never called her that, but her reaction was worth it. Plus, for all the hard times she’s given me, I should have called her that a while ago.

“I’m telling August you just called me a *bitch.*” She says it like I just committed a crime, but I may as well have.

“Please don’t.” I’m definitely not scared of him, but when it comes to Hazel, he can be a bit... intimidating.

“Too late, I’m texting him right—” I quickly walk over to her and snatch her phone from her hand, throwing it on the other side of the couch. “Hey!”

“Do not tell August. I was joking, and he’s going to hit me, then I’m going to have to kick his ass. You don’t want that, do you?”

She crosses her arms, testing me. “I really hope you know that if you and August ever *actually* fought, he’d beat your ass.”

I throw my head back with a laugh, but she seems serious. “Hazel, you’re overestimating your boyfriend. Sorry to break it to you, but no, he wouldn’t.”

“Do you want to bet on it?”

“That’s a bet neither of us will win because we’ll never *actually* fight.” I think of all the times I’ve hit August, and he’s only hit me back less than half of those times.

All the other times we’ve fought, he’s never really hit me. He’s not one to start a fight, and although he’ll definitely end one, he’ll never hit me.

“We’ll see about that.” She says it like she’s cooking up a scheme. Little menace.

“We won’t see because he’s a bitch too. Send me the dog guy’s info. I want to pick it up today.”

“Today? Who do you think you are? A celebrity?” I just stare at her. “Oh, right.” Yeah... I turn to leave, but Hazel

stops me.

“Congrats, by the way.” I turn back to her, but the minute I do, she picks up her phone again. “Sorry, I missed the big night Sage planned for your soberversary.” I bite back a smile at whatever this is. Hazel’s being nice... to me. I don’t ask if she was abducted by aliens and take what I can get.

“Thanks, and don’t worry about it.” I shrug off the fact that she was drinking with Vid that night. I’m sure it was her idea, too, but it’s whatever.

“I’m not worried.” She rolls her eyes, and I shake my head at her. “August was just upset that you were upset, so...” She shrugs. “I’m not sorry for doing what I was doing, though.” My brows furrow, and she looks up at me now.

“I had a great time fucking your girl.”

“Fuck. You.” She clearly bites back a laugh. “You wish you slept with her.”

“I have. Your girl fucks good.” She says it so damn seriously I can’t tell if she’s fucking with me or not.

“Shut up.” I know Hazel is bisexual, and she’s always making comments like that or flirting with Vid, and I can’t tell what’s a joke and what isn’t, but I know she’ll only tell me it’s true to fuck with me, so I leave.



I WALK INTO VID’S APARTMENT complex right on time. She got off of work a while ago, so she should be home. A few people stare at me, but I can’t tell if it’s me they’re looking at or the huge rottweiler walking beside me with no leash.

When I make it to her door, I look down at the dog before knocking. “Sit.” On command, she sits and stares back at the door. This is going to be fun.

With a smile, I knock on Vid’s door and give her new dog a pat on the head.

“Hey.” She looks down at the dog, and her eyes widen a bit. “Hey!”

I give her a hug, but she pulls away quickly and pats the dog. “Oh my God. You are so cute.”

I smile at her as she pets her. Her tail wags back and forth, but she doesn't move since I didn't release her.

“He is so well-behaved. He's like a statue. Oh my God, who's dog is this?”

“Yours, and it's a girl.” She looks up at me, a bit confused, and then a smile grows on her face. I turn back to the dog and say, “Go ahead.” Without hesitating, she playfully jumps on Vid, practically knocking her over. I watch Vid laugh, and I feel like nothing else matters but this. That smile on her face.

“What's her name?”

“Athena.” Athena looks up at me at the sound of her name, and then she walks into her new home as Vid stands back up.

“Do you like her?”

“Of course I do!” She practically jumps into my arms, and I hug her, bringing us into her apartment. “Is today a special day I forgot about?”

I lightly laugh as I shake my head. “No.” She still looks a bit confused at the random surprise, so I explain. “I know how you aren't too comfortable being at your new place alone after the break-in, so I thought a guard dog would help you feel safer here.”

She gives me a smile I'd kill for. “Sire, you didn't have—wait, she's a guard dog?” She looks back at Athena with a huge smile on her face. I should have led with that. “Wait, okay, what are the commands?” She sounds so excited, and I just stare at her staring at Athena. *This girl deserves everything on this damn earth and then some.*

“The usual sit, stay, and rollover of course—”

“Yeah, yeah, what do I say for the fun stuff.”

I break into a laugh. “She's not a toy, Vidia.”

She leans down to rub Athena's belly. “I know that. I've just never seen a guard dog in action, and I've always wanted

one.”

“I know.”

She looks up at me, and she’s biting back a smile. She only brought it up one time in college, but I remember her saying she always wanted a guard dog, preferably a rottweiler. She thinks they need extra love, along with pits, because everyone thinks they’re mean and scary. It feels like we had that conversation in another life, but I don’t think I could forget anything that comes out of her mouth.

Athena sneezes, and Vid tears her gaze from mine. “Salud.” She laughs and gets back up. She looks at me like she’s waiting for me to teach her the commands, so I show her my favorite one first.

“Okay, I’m going to go outside and knock on your door. Point in that direction and say her name, then “away” but with authority.”

“Got it.” She nods, and I walk out.

VIDIA

WHEN SIRE KNOCKS ON MY door, Athena gets up from lying on her back and looks between the door and me like she’s waiting for a command. When he starts banging louder, she gets in front of me protectively.

I point at the door like Sire said and say, “Athena, away.” As soon as the command is spoken, she lets out a loud chain of barks. Sire is still knocking, but I can barely hear over her barks.

“Okay, stop.” She keeps going, so I assume that isn’t the right command, so I try another. “Heel.” I raise my voice a bit, and she immediately stops barking and sits in front of me. I

know she isn't a toy, but this is so cool. I can't believe he got me a freaking dog.

No, I can't believe he remembered I even wanted this specific dog. I walk over to let him back in. As soon as I open the door, I hug him again. "Have I ever told you how perfect you are?"

He hugs me back, and I feel like no one can touch a hair on my head with his arms around me like this.

"No, go ahead."

I laugh and look up at him. "You"—I pause for suspense and get on my tippy toes—"have a few flaws you can work on." I pull away, and he breaks into a laugh as he pulls me back into him.

"Well, I don't think *you* have any flaws."

I look up at him with a small smile. "I disagree. No one's perfect." I shrug my shoulders, and without intending to, my voice comes out a bit sad. When I look up at him, he gives me a soft look.

"Last week was a fresh start, Vid. No more blaming ourselves for things." I nod once and hold my head higher, deciding to listen to him. He smiles at whatever look is on my face and plants a soft kiss on the corner of my mouth.

We end up taking Athena to the park, and by the time I'm back home, it's dark out, and we're all tired on the couch.

"I'm going to head home, okay?" Sire lets out a yawn, and I glance down at him. He's lying on my stomach, but when he blinks away the tiredness from his eyes, I don't want him to leave.

"Can't you stay here?"

His eyes cut to mine, and a smile slowly grows on his face. I can't help but smile at how happy he is that I asked, and before I can tease him about it, he leans forward for a kiss.

Chapter Thirty-One

SIRE

DO YOU NOTICE ANYTHING DIFFERENT?" Vid puts her hands on her hips, and I give her a once over, but she looks as good as always; nothing looks different. I scan her slower, and at the sight of something on her scrub top, I walk over for a closer look.

"Is that supposed to be me?" I lean over at the sticker on her top and burst into a laugh at the big head version of me. It's like those cartoon drawings the twins and I got at Times Square.

"Yeah." Vidia chuckles, and she rubs her finger over her sticker. "August ordered them from some site. He said you said they were stupid?"

"Because they are." I laugh again when I look down at it. "It looks cute on you, though. You should always wear me around." I smirk down at her, and she playfully pushes me out of her way as she walks for the door.

"I'm only wearing it today, so don't get used to it."

I shake my head at her with a smile and follow her out. We ride to my game in comfortable silence until Vid gets a phone call. It sounds like she just answered a Facetime call, but when I hear her mom's voice, I quickly steal a glance at Vid.

“Cion, Mami.” Her mom replies with something in Spanish, and a smile stretches across my face because her mom has the same beautiful accent as Vidia. They get lost in their own conversation, but I tap Vid’s lap because I feel rude for not saying hi.

She turns to me, and I whisper for her to let me greet her mom. We get to a red light, and she glances at her phone and says something in Spanish before turning the phone to me.

“Hi, Ms. Gomez.”

Vidia cringes, but I don’t know why. Her mom just watches me with a bored look for two whole seconds that feel like an eternity.

“Hola.” *Fuck. I should’ve said hi in Spanish.* I only smile in response, and I’m grateful at fuck when someone honks, pulling my attention away from her. Vidia turns the phone back to herself, and they start talking again.

I have absolutely no clue what they’re talking about besides when Vidia says, *Mami* and *por favor*, but it sounds like they’re arguing about something, although neither of them is yelling. Her mom actually sounds very calm, but her tone seems passive-aggressive.

When Vidia lets out a sigh and looks up to the ceiling of my car while mumbling something, I put my hand on her leg again. She rests her hand over mine, and after they exchange a few more words, she ends the call.

“You okay?” I steal a few glances at her as I drive, and she doesn’t look okay.

“She’s so stubborn.”

When I look back over at her, she’s looking out her window.

“Good to know you get that from her,” I tease, but my attempt at lightening her mood doesn’t work. She shakes her head, still turned away from me. “Hey...” She doesn’t look at me, so I hold her chin and turn her face to me.

“What were you guys fighting about?”

She shakes her head and turns so she's out of my grasp. I don't force her to talk since she obviously doesn't want to and decide if she's still upset later, I'll tell her we need to talk.

"Did you tell your mom about us?"

I turn to look at her, and I feel my brows furrow as I turn back to the road.

"I mean, like everything. How I thought you were using me, the baby, you relapsing, us getting back together. All of it."

"Yeah, my love, why?"

"What did she say?"

I look over at her and then quickly back to the road, but she's watching me now. "Well, she knew I relapsed since I went to rehab." We can all thank August for that. I wasn't planning on telling our parents, but he was right; they deserved to know. I couldn't just disappear for two months.

"I didn't tell anyone about why we ended things or about the baby until recently, actually."

"Really?"

I look over at her at the shock in her voice. "Yeah, Vid." I shake my head softly. "It hurts too much to talk about. Only August knew."

She nods, lost in her thoughts, and I want to ask her why she suddenly wants to know, but I'm going out on a limb and guessing it has to do with her mom.

"Well..."

I rub her leg, and she goes on. "What does your mom think about us being back together?" I think about her question, and a pit grows in my stomach at the worry in her voice. Now I'm sure she's asking because her mom said something about it.

"She's ecstatic..." I see her nodding from the corner of my eye. "But she's not the one who grew a hatred for me and went four years believing I used you." I look over at her, and she shrinks in her seat.

“What did your mom say, my love?” I keep my tone light as I urge her to spit it out, and she lets out a sigh before she does.

“She doesn’t think we should be together and thinks you’re manipulating me, which in itself sounds stupid because I’m not that dumb—”

“You’re not dumb at all.”

“And I literally haven’t told her anything about us besides that we’re working things out, so I’m not sure where she got that from, but she’s just been making these comments about how she’ll be here when you hurt me again and—”

“I’m not going to—”

“You know what? It doesn’t even matter. I don’t care what she thinks.”

“I beg to differ.” She doesn’t respond, and I’m tempted to pull over to talk, but I’m going to be late for my game, and she clearly needs to cool off, so I keep driving and quickly pull into the stadium.

After parking, I go around to open the door for her, but before she can walk off, I pull her back to me. “I know you say you don’t care about her opinion, but I also know you care a lot or you wouldn’t be this upset.”

“I’m just annoyed. I don’t care that—”

“Vid, didn’t you just order a new dining table because she made a comment about the one you had? You two are like best friends. I know you care.”

She shifts her weight between her feet as she rolls her eyes. “I got rid of that table because I didn’t like it. She just pointed it out and fully convinced me.”

“So if she convinces you that we shouldn’t be together, then what?”

Her head snaps up to me, and a crease grows between her brows. “What?!” I almost tell her to forget it but stop myself from walking off because we just discussed this, so I force myself to talk to her.

“You just said she’s been telling you this for a while now, and she’s clearly getting in your head if you’re asking me what *my* mom thinks.” I grab her hand as I go on. “I don’t want to get in between you and your mom, Vid, and I’m definitely not going to make you choose between me, so if us being together is putting a strain on your relationship with her, then—”

“Then what, Sire? We should break up to satisfy her?” She snatches her hand away from mine. I look down at where our hands once were together, then back up at her, and her face softens.

“I’m sorry. I *don’t* want to fight.”

I smile at how she sounds like she’s reminding herself and give her a quick kiss.

“Us being together isn’t putting a strain on my relationship with her. She just... She needs to get to know you.” She holds my hand again, and I nod, more to myself.

“Yeah, no, you’re right. I should’ve been making more of an effort.” I shake my head at myself. “We should invite her for dinner.”

Vid chuckles softly and shakes her head at me. “Baby steps, *mi amor*.” Right... I’m sure dinner would be very fucking awkward.

“Okay, I’ll start with talking to her on the phone when she calls you, but I need to learn Spanish, so can you hurry up and teach me?”

She breaks into a laugh, but I’m being serious. When she looks back at me, she just shakes her head with the biggest smile. “I love you.” She plants a quick kiss on my lips and walks away. I almost follow but then freeze. *What did she just say?*

She looks back at me from over her shoulder, and I don’t think she even realized what she just said. “What?”

“You love me?”

She fully turns, and I can’t tell what expression is on her face. Shock, maybe? I don’t know. I just know I’ve waited so

damn long for her to say those words to me, and she just did.

She said it so effortlessly, too. Like breathing. “Can you please say it again?” I close the distance between us and take her hands in mine.

She has a smile on her face, but she seems nervous. “I love you.” She sounds like she’s trying it on her tongue.

“You do?”

“Well, I said it, didn’t I?” She looks shy, like she can’t believe she even admitted her love for me, but she did.

“Say it one more time.” I close my eyes and lean my forehead against hers.

“Sire...” She laughs and pulls away a bit. “You’re going to be late to—”

“I don’t care.” I look between her eyes, and I immediately get lost in them. “You don’t know how long I’ve waited for you to tell me that. I don’t care if I’m late. Say it one more time.”

She laughs, but I’m so serious. I thought her laugh was the most perfect thing ever, but the way she says she loves me definitely takes the Carvel’s fucking cake. She leans in and slowly kisses me, then pulls away and says what I’ve actually been dying to hear.

“Te amo, Sire Griffin.” Now *that* I understand. I take in a deep breath, soaking in her words. When I open my eyes, she’s looking up at me like she meant it. She’s looking at me like she loves me. *Really* loves me.

“I’ve been waiting four years for you to say that, and now that you have...” I wrap an arm around her waist and bring her closer. “I *really* want to take you in my car right now.” I want to fuck her until she’s *screaming* to the world that she loves me. I plant soft kisses on her neck, but she pulls away with a laugh. When she walks back to my car, I think she’s taking me up on my offer, but then she pulls out my baseball bag I was forgetting.

“Our first time after we’re really back together will not be in your car.” I let out a disappointed sigh, but she’s right. She definitely deserves better than that.

She walks over to me with a smirk on her face. “Wait til later. It’ll be worth it.” She walks off, but not before I smack her ass.

“I knew you were going to do that!”

“And you *let* me.”

She looks back at me as she bites back a smile and squints her eyes at me. I walk her to the sports physician’s room and then head to the locker room *after* making her tell me she loves me again.

“What’s got you smiling like that?”

I look over at August with a smile because I can’t wipe it off even if I try. “I have a good feeling about today’s game,” is all I say because if I say I’m smiling like this because of Vid, he is going to tease me since I always tease him about Hazel making him smile like this.

When we walk out on the field, the crowd immediately starts cheering. August waves at everyone, like always, because he’s an attention whore. When he goes to autograph things for the people closest to the field, I follow behind him for a change.

“Wow, someone played the lottery.” *It feels like I won the lottery.*

“Shut up.” We both sign a bunch of baseballs, a few hats, and jerseys, and then the game is about to start, so we wave goodbye.

Our opponents are batting first, so the team heads for the field. I throw my warm-up pitches, and with all the smiling I’ve been doing, my cheeks hurt. Vid did her follow-up or whatever, and as we both expected, I’m cleared. It feels *so* good to be pitching at normal speed again, not needing to hold back anymore.

When the first batter comes to base, I get ready to throw the first pitch. The crowd is loud, but I block them out and stay focused on where I need to throw the ball. I release the ball, and in a flash, the batter swings, but it's already in my catcher's glove. I throw two more strikes, and just like that, we have our first out.

The next batter comes and goes like the last. When the third one is up, our catcher, Diego, holds up two fingers between his legs, signaling a curveball. I give him a nod and then get in position.

The batter swings and surprisingly hits. It's a line drive, and reflex takes over as I move my glove to the left and catch it before it passes me. The crowd roars, and some people shoot up from their seats.

Feeling generous, I throw the ball into the crowd, and everyone in that section dives for it. When I walk into the dugout, my teammates start tapping my back, and when August slaps my ass, I barely give him a reaction.

“Okay, what the actual fuck? Why are you so damn happy?”

“It doesn't matter,” Coach says before I get to. “Just keep playing like that, son.” I nod at him with a smile. I doubt anything can ruin this day, and I can't *wait* to go home with Vid later.

The entire game, she's all I can think about. I keep going over how she told me she loved me in the parking lot, and I want to hear her say it again. I get close to calling her twice during the game, but I want to see her when she says it.

I feel like I'm on a high as I play. No. This feels better than a high. *Loving* her and being loved *by* her is better than any goddamn high.

I get an idea while I'm pitching during the third inning about what we're going to do after the game, and as soon as I get back in the dugout, I text Jackson so he can help with the surprise. He makes me swear to never show Isabelle another curse, and after I quickly do, he says he'll help me.

“We are spanking them out there!” one of my teammates starts, and it’s like a domino effect as the rest of the teams get hyped. August goes out to bat, and before we know it, the game is over, and we won by a long shot.

I celebrate with my team in the dugout before quickly rushing out, but on my way, Kayden calls. I decline it, but he immediately calls back. I roll my eyes and answer so we can get this over with and I can be with Vid without interruptions.

“I’m fine.”

He’s quiet for a few seconds, and then it sounds like something is moving around. “Where are you? We can meet.”

I feel myself smiling at his concern, but it’s not needed. “No, I really am fine. I’m just busy, so let me call you back.” I’m nearing the physician’s room, and I can hear Vidia’s laugh, but Kayden doesn’t let me hang up.

“You said not to let you skip our weekly calls, so let’s talk, and you can go back to being busy.” I let out a sigh and lean against the wall. After I told him about wanting to drink the day I made a year sober, he wanted to do weekly updates, and I stupidly told him to keep me accountable to actually answer his calls. *Dumb move.*

“How’s your sister?”

I feel my brows furrow and stay quiet for a second. “For your fucking sake, I’m going to choose to believe you’re asking about Lisette.” Kayden chuckles on the other end, but I’m sure if he saw my face, he wouldn’t find this funny.

As far as I know, he only ever met Sage once when she planned the night of my soberversary celebration, and they didn’t speak much, but then I remember Lis talking about that message Sage got from someone with a K or L, so it better have not been Kayden who was sending my sister dirty messages.

At the reminder of my other sister, I add, “And if you are asking about Lis, I’m going to also choose to believe you’re asking about her sobriety and not just her.” I roll my eyes when he laughs again.

“Are you always this protective of your little sisters?”

“Yes,” I answer without hesitation. “And Sage is actually older than me.” I kick something on the ground as he replies.

“Well, I was only asking about Lisette’s sobriety. I sadly have a girlfriend.”

I feel my brows furrow at his words. “Sadly? What can possibly be sad about having a girlfriend?” I clearly wouldn’t fucking know because my girlfriend loves me. I feel myself smiling again.

“Yes, sadly, because your sisters are hot as fuck. Sage—”

“Yeah, I’m going to punch you in the face the next time I see you, so you better hope I don’t feel like relapsing any time soon.”

He laughs on the other end, but my bored expression doesn’t falter, and I really hope he doesn’t think I’m joking. He tells me he was only messing with me, so I update him on Lisette. While I’m her sponsor, I’m still new to this, so Kayden has been giving me advice but I never overshare out of respect for Lisette’s privacy.

She hasn’t self-harmed and she also makes two months sober soon. I only tell Kayden that she’s been doing really good and smile to myself as I think of what obnoxious gift I’m going to get her. Everyone makes a cute effort to get us nice things and make the day special, but it’s been tradition for us to give each other cheesy gifts. She got me socks that said “Sober AF” for my one-year soberversary, so I need to top hers with something worse.

“That’s good to hear. Last week, we said you’ll start thinking of small goals you want to set for yourself to keep you motivated. Do you have a goal?”

Two immediately come to mind. “Learning Spanish and winning over Vidia’s mom.”

“How are things going with you and Vidia?”

I smile at the mention of her and push myself from the wall. I peek into the room, and she has a beautiful smile on her face

as she looks at something her new coworker is showing her. After I made that Asher guy quit, Vid immediately got a new coworker, and she claims she loves her.

“Perfect,” I say, and it comes out breathlessly. I remind myself to take a deep breath.

“Perfect?” Kayden sounds like he’s teasing, but I don’t even care. “I saw another article about you guys dating. You haven’t even confirmed it to the public, but after you took her to that lantern show, the media has been obsessed with you guys.”

I feel myself smiling, but I roll my eyes because I hate that paparazzi got so many pictures of what was supposed to be an intimate moment.

After a beat, Kayden adds, “Is she the one?”

“Fuck yeah, she’s the one.” Vidia’s coworker signals toward me, and when Vid turns to me, her face lights up. She makes her way over and tippy toes to kiss me. “Thanks, Kayden. I gotta go, though.” I keep my eyes on my girl as I hang up.

Her brows furrow as she looks between my phone and me. “Kayden? That’s your sponsor, right?”

“Yeah.”

She nods slowly, and I lean forward to kiss her again. “I’m okay. It was just our weekly call.” She nods again, and her smile is back.

“You ready to go? I have a surprise.” As I expected, she asks what it is, but I don’t give any hints as we leave.

Chapter Thirty-Two

SIRE

CAN YOU JUST TELL ME where we're going?"

"Nope." I look over at Vid and let my eyes linger on her for a bit longer than needed, admiring the dress she changed into. I can see now why pastel blue is her favorite color. She looks so beautiful, and it might be because it complements her brown skin so well, but I think she just always looks like this in my eyes.

She reaches for her blindfold, but I quickly grab her hand. "Hey! No peeking, you little shit." She throws her head back laughing as I keep leading her to our destination.

"Okay." I place my hands on her hips and position her so she's facing forward. "You can look now." She takes her blindfold off in a hurry. Impatient as always.

I wait for her reaction as I look between her and the field of sunflowers. A smile slowly grows on her face. She looks down at the picnic, and when her smile grows twice in size, so does mine.

"You really outdid yourself this time."

I glance back down at the luxurious picnic. It's definitely a step up from the last picnic we had at the lantern show. The blanket is fluffier, and there's a bunch of pillows. There's also

a short table this time with platters of different foods and desserts.

“Do you like it? I was thinking of getting those tent things, but—” She shuts me up with a kiss. *Okay, I’ll take that as a yes.* I immediately kiss her back, pulling her in, melting into her.

She pulls away first and glances at the flowers. “Why a sunflower field?”

“They’re your favorite.” I hesitate for a second, then feel my shoulders slouch. “Don’t tell me your favorite flower changed...”

She laughs again, and I realize she was only teasing. *Little shit.* She takes my hand, and I let her guide me into the field. I keep my eyes on her as her face lights up the further we walk. Her smile still hasn’t left her face as we continue. I don’t see what she finds so fascinating about each flower she stops to look at; they’re all identical, but I don’t burst her bubble.

“I kind of want some.” She looks like she wants to pick one but hesitates and looks over at me. “They’re so tall, I’d need to cut them.” I tell her I’ll be back and run to the picnic blanket, then quickly make my way back to her and hand her a pair of scissors.

“How did you—”

“I know you, Vid.” There was no way I was going to bring her to a field of her favorite flowers and she wasn’t going to walk out of here with at least ten. A warm smile is on her face, and she gets on her tippy toes to quickly kiss me.

She cuts one and brings it to her nose to smell it. When she tries to cut another one, she’s still holding the first flower, so I help her out and hold it for her. I follow her around as she picks the ones she wants and hands them to me. All of the ones she leaves behind look exactly like the six in my arms, but once again, I don’t tell her that.

She hands me the tenth flower and turns to me. “Woah, I didn’t know I picked that many.” I only smile at her. “Can I get a few more?” She turns her head to the side with a hopeful

smile, and I only nod. She can have the entire field if she wants it.

“Are those getting heavy?” She hands me the fifteenth sunflower, and I can’t really see much because she’s picking the biggest ones.

“No, they aren’t, but how many do you plan on getting?” I tilt them down so I can see her, and her shoulders slouch a bit.

“They’re just all so pretty. I want them all.”

I feel a smile grow on my face. “You do?”

“Yeah, but that’s impossible.” She lets out a sigh, and I grab her hand.

“Nothing’s impossible. They’re all yours.” I kiss her forehead and guide her back to the picnic.

“What do you mean they’re all mine?” She lightly laughs, and I go to explain, but then I hesitate and look around at all the land. It’s a lot of acres... When I look down at her, she’s still smiling at the huge field of flowers. *It’s worth it.*

I put down the flowers she picked, and then we both sit on the blanket. She picks at bits of the food as I lean back on my elbows, watching her.

“What?”

I shake my head, and she bites back a smile. “Stop staring at me.” She throws a pillow at me, but I catch it and place it behind my head, keeping my eyes on her.

“Beautiful.”

A smile grows on her face. She places her hand on the other side of me, caging me in as she leans in, her lips landing on mine. I softly place my hand around her throat, pulling her closer. I let her deepen the kiss, sliding her tongue along mine, but when she lets out a soft moan, I pull away. She looks disappointed, but then I say, “I have one more surprise,” and her somewhat sour expression is replaced with yet another smile.

I lean behind her and grab her present. “You never opened your housewarming gift.” Sage made her have a housewarming party, but she didn’t see what I got her, so I grabbed it when we stopped by her house. She unwraps it, revealing a framed picture of us.

She lightly chuckles as she stares at it. “This is so cute!”

I look down at it and can’t help but smile. She’s on my shoulders in the middle of the baseball field. It was right after my last college game, so I was still in my uniform, but instead of looking at the camera, we were looking at each other. We had just won the game, so I wanted a picture on the field, and Sage insisted we recreate some post she saw, so she helped Vid climb my shoulders.

“That was the day I said I loved you.” She looks up at me, and I’m already staring at her. That was also the day we graduated, so, sure, we have better pictures from that day. This was taken *right* after I said I loved her. With the way she’s gazing between my eyes, I know she knows that.

“I love it.” She leans in again, kissing me. “I love *you*.” I try not to smile so hard, but when she laughs, I know I am. I’ll never get used to her saying that.

“*I* love you.”

Her eyes light up like she just remembered something. “I also have a gift for you.” My brows furrow a bit, but I don’t say anything and watch as she grabs something from her bag. She pulls out a baseball keychain with three keys. “Here.”

I take them from her and look back up.

“You can have one drawer.”

A smile slowly grows on my face. “Just one?” I tease, and she squints her eyes at me. “So why are you giving me a copy of your mailbox key?” I squint my eyes back at her.

“I mean... you *can* move in.” She shrugs shyly.

“Do you want me to move in?” I know she wants me to, but I just want to hear her say it. She gives me a shy smile and turns her head to the food, grabbing a grape.

“You’ve been sleeping over every day since you first spent the night, and you leaving to go get clothes is annoying, so moving in will be more convenient.”

“Convenient?” I poke the side of her ribs, and she squirms a bit. It’s been a couple of weeks since I got Athena for her and first slept over, but she’s right; leaving just to change is pretty annoying. I just want to hear her say it.

“Yes, Sire. Move in with me or else.” She squints her eyes at me, and I throw my head back with a laugh.

“Or else?”

“Yup.”

“Or else what?” I lunge at her before she can reply, attacking her with tickles. “Huh?” I can’t understand her through her laughs, so I ease up.

“Stop it!” I don’t and blow a raspberry in the crease of her neck instead. “Sire!”

“Or else what?”

“Nothing! Nothing!”

“What happened, tough guy?”

She tries to fight me off, and I eventually stop tickling her and just drop my dead weight on her. She taps my back, and I rise just a bit so she can breathe. “Get off.”

“Kiss first.”

She gives me one, then taps my back.

“Magic word?”

“Please!” She laughs again, and I shake my head softly. “Pretty please?”

“Uh uh.”

She looks up at me, and we just gaze at each other for a few seconds. “I love you.” With a smile, I get off from her, and when I help her up, she takes deep breaths like a dramatic little shit.

She looks around the picnic again, and she looks so happy, I could keep her here forever. “Tell Jackson I said thank you.” I feel my brows scrunch, and while I want to take all the credit, he did do all the work.

“It was *my* idea.”

“When did you even think of this?” I tell her it was while I was playing earlier, and she only nods. We keep eating the rest of the food, talking about nothing in particular. The sun is starting to set behind her, and it looks gorgeous, but the view in front of me is even more breathtaking.

“Open.” I do as she says without a second thought, and she tries to throw a grape into my mouth, but it hits my forehead. “Damn, let me try again.” She grabs another one but misses once again and hits my eye.

“Your aim is shit.”

“Shh, let me try again.” She’s going to miss, but I let her. When she throws it this time, I move my head to the side so I catch the grape in my mouth, and her hands shoot up with excitement.

“That was a good one!” We both laugh, and I don’t bother telling her she definitely would have missed it if I hadn’t gone out of my way to catch it because she seems happy she made it.

“Here.” I get a grape and turn to her. “Let me try.” She scoots back a bit, and I shoot. She squints her eyes at me as she chews on it, and I grab another one, also making it.

“Okay, this is too easy. I’m too close.”

I break into a laugh because she’s just a sore loser. “We’re the same distance as when you—”

“Uh uh, you have an advantage.” She stands, so I follow with a handful of grapes. She takes about five steps back and crosses her arms like she already won. When I make the first two, she pouts.

“You’re cheating.”

I break into a laugh, and all of the memories of when we first went out on our bowling date came flooding back. “Vidia, how can I cheat? I’m throwing grapes—”

“Again.” She takes five more steps back, putting a bit of distance between us. I go to pretend I’m going to shoot, and she moves her head to the side.

“You little shit. *You’re* the cheater.”

She starts *giggling*. “Okay, fine. Go.” When I throw the grape and aim for her forehead, she has a smug smile on her face.

“Ha! You don’t have a perfect aim.” She says it in an *I told you so* tone, and I only roll my eyes.

“Mhm.” I bite back a smile and take a seat back down on the blanket. She walks back to me with a smile on her face. Little shit.

“Let’s dance.”

“What?”

She holds her hand out to me.

“There isn’t even any music, Vid.”

She reaches for her phone and looks like she is playing a random song. “What song is this? We can’t even dance to—”

“Sure we can, come on.”

I look up at her, and she looks so happy. Wanting to keep her that way, I stand. She throws her hands around my neck, and I place mine on her hips. We sway back and forth for a bit before I speak up again. “This is such a weird song to dance to.”

“Shh. I just hit shuffle.”

I feel myself smiling, and she rests her head on my chest. After a few beats of swaying, she pulls away to look up at me with a smile, and I just kind of stare into her eyes.

“What?” Her eyebrows scrunch, and I shake my head with a shy smile.

“Ready for the spin?” Before she can answer, I twirl her a few times as she laughs, and it’s like I’m watching her in slow motion. The edges of her dress come up a bit as she spins. Her hair looks like it’s floating around her, so it’s covering her face, but I can see a slither of her smile.

I pull her back into me and dip her. She lets out a shriek of surprise, and when I pick her back up, she’s still laughing. “I thought you didn’t want to dance?” she teases, and I kiss the top of her head softly.

“I didn’t.” I rest my chin on her head and listen to the lyrics as we sway from side to side. We dance in a comfortable silence, and when the tempo picks up, we pull away from each other and then pull back in a few times.

When she looks up at me through her thick lashes, a sad smile touches her lips. “I wish we didn’t waste those four years hating each other.”

I give her a small smile as I shake my head. “I never hated you. I could never hate you, my love.” She gives me a weird look, like she feels bad about something. I lean in to kiss the sad look from her face. “I am sorry we wasted that time apart, though.”

She shrugs and looks over to the side. “Maybe we needed it.” I feel my brows furrow but don’t say anything. “I feel like we both grew with those four years apart. Besides, I left to Maryland for Hopkins. Long distance wouldn’t have worked.”

I study her for a few seconds, but she doesn’t look over at me. “You don’t think we could survive in a long-distance relationship?” At the sound of my voice, she turns to me.

“Maybe now we can, but not back then. I wasn’t as good at communicating, apparently.” She playfully shoves me, and I squint my eyes at her.

She was right, though; we both grew. Maybe she’s right about the long-distance part, too. I want to believe we could withstand anything, but maybe we needed that time apart.

She takes my hand and leads us back to the blanket. “It doesn’t matter. We’re together now.” I feel a smile growing on

my face and lay my head on one of the pillows.

Instead of lying beside me, Vid straddles me and lays her head on my chest. I know no one is around for miles, but I pull the sides of her dress down and keep my hands on her waist.

“Did you have anything else planned?” she asks, and I rub circles on her hips.

“Nope. We can watch the sunset, and then I’ll take you back to your place.”

“*Our* place,” she corrects.

“Our place.”

She looks up at me, and my eyes fall on her lips. She notices, and a smirk grows on her face. I watch her as she leans in, kissing me slowly before dragging her lips to my neck. I move my head to the side as she sucks on my neck, likely leaving a mark. I let my hands slide along her thighs, up her dress. I reach for her underwear, and when I feel their lacey fabric, a smirk grows on my face. “Let’s go home.” I try to get up, but she pushes me back down.

“Or we can stay here.” She has a daring look in her eyes that I can’t say no to.

“Fine.” In a quick move, I flip us so I’m on top. She lets out a soft laugh, and I just gaze at her for a second. I push a curl out of her face and lean in so our lips meet. My tongue slides across her bottom lip, begging her to open her mouth.

When she does, our tongues dance together, and I let out a soft sigh that she swallows. *God, I missed her.*

She wraps her legs around me, pulling me closer. When she raises her hips to grind against me, my blood rushes to my dick, and I let out a low grunt. I pull her dress up and glance down at her. I can’t help but smile at her sexy underwear.

“Satisfied?”

“I will be once they’re off.”

She reaches for them, but I stop her and continue pulling her dress up until she stops me.

“What’s wrong?”

She glances around the empty field. “What if someone comes?”

I try to bite back a smile. “I don’t mind giving them a show.”

Her eyes widen a bit, and she playfully shoves me. “Sire!”

I chuckle and slowly kiss her neck. “You weren’t worried about someone coming two minutes ago when you suggested we stay here.” She turns her head to the side, and lets out a satisfied sigh when I start sucking on her neck.

“I’ll just leave my dress on.”

I freeze and lift my head so my eyes can meet hers. “No, you won’t. Either I get to see all of you, or we go home.” There is no way I’m fucking her with this dress on.

“I don’t want to wait anymore.”

“So take your clothes off, Vidia.” I pull her dress up again, and she looks around one more time. I can’t help but laugh at how nervous she seems when this was *her* idea. “Vid, no one is coming. I made sure.”

I rented out the entire field for the day. I figured she would have already assumed that since there aren’t a bunch of people in here picking flowers.

“Well, you should have said that sooner.”

I burst into a laugh at how fast she takes her dress off. That’s more like it. I give her body a slow sweep. Soaking in how perfect she looks in her matching white set. I slowly leave a trail of kisses from her neck to her chest, taking my time as I remove her bra and give each of her nipples my attention.

“Beautiful.”

She gives me a shy smile and looks away. I don’t know why, but I love it when she gets all shy whenever I compliment her when she’s half-naked. I keep leaving soft kisses down her side. She shivers under me when I take her underwear between

my teeth and drag it down her thighs. Before I can bring my head between her legs, she's pulling me up to her.

"We can skip foreplay." What? Fuck no. I feel my brows furrow as she starts undoing my belt.

"No. We can't." She opens her mouth to protest as she keeps trying to take my belt off, but I grab both of her hands in one of mine and hold them above her head. "Stop being so impatient," I warn. I'm taking my time with her.

"Please, Sire."

I feel my dick twitch at the sound of her begging and briefly close my eyes. "The more you ask, the slower I'm going to go."

She lets out a sigh but doesn't put up another protest. I slowly trace the side of her body and watch goosebumps grow on her skin. I lean into her neck as my hands slowly land between her legs. I smile against her neck when I feel how wet she is. I rub her in slow circles and breathe in her scent. Her breathing is ragged, and I kiss her neck softly as I enter her with two fingers.

She arches her back as she lets out a soft moan. Without warning, I add another finger a bit harder, and she moans louder. I keep moving my fingers in and out of her at a steady pace, kissing my way to her chest and bringing one of her nipples between my teeth.

Her hands squirm under my hold, but I only hold them tighter and continue sucking on her before moving to the next. "Faster." She sounds out of breath, and I smile against her skin and finger her slower.

When she lets out a frustrated sigh, I give her what she wants. My eyes stay trained on her as I watch her begin to unravel under me. I bring my lips to hers just as I rub her clit with my thumb. She sucks in a breath, and I take her bottom lip between my teeth. I feel her walls clenching around my fingers, so I pick up the pace and lean back to watch her fall apart.

A groan escapes me as she comes undone beneath me. I swear I can watch her finish all day. “Come like that for me one more time, then I’ll fuck you however you want it.”

Her eyes are full of lust as I work my way between her legs. I drag my tongue from her entrance to her clit, savoring her taste. “I missed this.” I enter her with my tongue, but she scoots away from me.

I let go of her hands so I can hold her hips and drag her back down. Greedily, I suck every last drop of her. She runs her hand through my hair and tugs hard. I grunt against her, and she lets out a moan at the vibration of it.

“Wait.”

I freeze, still between her legs, and look up at her. She tries to catch her breath but doesn’t say anything, so I continue. *She tastes better than any drug.*

“Hmm, wait.”

I look up at her again, and nothing in her expression says she wants to stop. “I’m not going to keep stopping whenever you want to catch your breath. Pick a safe word.”

She looks down at me in thought as I kiss her inner thigh. “I don’t know a safe word. You pick.”

“No.” I continue kissing up her thighs, and I feel her relax even more.

“Why not?”

“I’m not going to be the one screaming it. Hurry up and choose.”

“Look who’s impatient now, and I’m not going to be screaming anyth—”

I let out a low scoff, then push three fingers into her.

“Colada!”

I pull out and let out a laugh. “That’s your safe word? Colada?”

“Yes.”

I snort at her ridiculous choice, and she squints her eyes at me before she shoves my face back down. Without any more interruptions, she lets me devour her. I ease two fingers into her again as I suck on her clit. I feel her clench around my fingers, and when I look up at her, her eyes are rolling back, but I didn't get nearly enough of her. "Not yet."

"Sire."

I replace my fingers with my tongue. She wraps her legs around my neck and lets out a satisfied sigh as I rub her clit in slow circles.

"I'm going to come."

"Not. Yet." Slowly, I slide my tongue up and down her as she tugs on my hair and begs me to let her finish.

"Look at me." Her eyes meet mine, and she looks like she's about to lose it. I suck her clit one last time and then give her a kiss. "Go ahead." My tongue enters her again as she loses it.

I let her pull me by my hair, but before our lips meet, I whisper into her ear. "Good girl." I smile to myself when she shudders beneath me. Our lips meet, and when she licks herself from my tongue, I moan into her mouth, but she quickly pulls away.

"I wanna hear that again." She gazes between my eyes, and with how she's looking at me, I'll make any damn noise for her.

"Make me." A smile grows on her face as she accepts the challenge. My eyes stay on hers as she takes my bottom lip between her teeth and works off my belt.

She pushes me on my back, and a smirk grows on my face as she climbs on top of me. "Take your clothes off."

I smirk at her demanding tone but don't blame her. She's on full display at my request, and I haven't removed a single piece of clothing yet. She doesn't pull her gaze away from mine as I strip for her. I throw my shirt next to her dress. My pants follow next. When I reach for my underwear, she breaks eye contact and glances down at me.

I slowly pull them down for her, and I watch her as she licks her lips. “Are you done staring?”

“Yup.” She makes a popping sound at the end of her word. My eyes stay trained on her as she pulls her hair into a ponytail. She touches her wrist for something, then looks down at her hand. “I don’t have a hair tie. Will you do the honors?”

I feel a smirk grow across my face as I grab a hold of her hair. She leans down slowly, and the anticipation is killing me, but then she freezes. “Just don’t let any of it get in my hair.”

“Swallow all of it. Problem solved.”

She looks up at me as she rubs her hand down my cock. “Whatever you want.”

My mouth slightly falls open as I gape at her. “Say that again.” My voice is just above a whisper as she slowly pumps me.

She drags her eyes up to mine, and she gives me the softest look as she says, “You can have whatever you want, Sire,” so seductively. Precum spills at the head of my dick, and she doesn’t break eye contact as she sucks it up. A throaty sound rises from the back of my throat at the view.

I let my eyes fall shut as my grip on her hair tightens. *Fuck me.* My breath hitches as she licks me like a fucking lollipop from base back up to my tip. She’s barely even started, and I’m about to lose it. She’s given me head before, but this time is different. She’s... better at it. My jaw clenches at the idea of her tongue on anyone else’s dick.

She sucks my tip again but then stops. “Are you always this mad when you’re getting blow jobs?” When I don’t answer her, she slowly takes my length in her mouth.

My eyes stay glued on hers as her head bobs up and down, taking more of me each time. She does something with her tongue, and my head falls back onto the pillow behind me. She feels so fucking good, it pisses me off. When my eyes land on her and I notice the smirk on her face, I can’t stop the words that spill past my lips.

“How many times have you done this?” *Don't answer that.* I won't be satisfied with any answer she gives me. I watch her as she raises her head, a grin plastered on her face.

“You're hot when you're jealous.”

I let out a frustrated sigh, and when she opens her mouth again, I shove her head down, forcing her to take all of me. When she gags, I smirk to myself and force her down again. Her eyes start to water, but she continues sucking me off. My head falls back down when she comes up and uses both of her hands.

“Don't you want to know how many times I've done this?”

“Unless you want me to fuck you til you can't walk, I suggest you don't tell me.” I open my eyes to look at her, and she looks like that's exactly what she wants. “Do not test me, Vidia.” She gives me an innocent smile before leaning back down.

She doesn't use her hands anymore, and I stare at her through hazed eyes as she goes all the way down, taking my full length.

“Fuck, Vid.” My grip tightens on her hair as I keep her down. Her eyes find mine, and it takes everything in me not to come when she moves her hand between her legs.

“You like that, don't you? You like having my dick in your mouth?”

“Mhm.”

My eyes fall closed at the vibration of her hum against me. Her tongue swirls around me again, and I let out a soft moan for her. When she lets out a moan of her own, I look down at her again and watch as she plays with herself while sucking on me.

She moans every time I move her head, making her take my full length down her throat. “That's it.” I slowly shove her down one more time, and at the sound of her gagging, I lose it and shudder beneath her.

My eyes stay glued on hers as she lets me come in her mouth. She strokes me with one hand as she sucks my tip, not letting a drip fall from her lips. *Fuck, she really is perfect.*

I rub her cheek with my knuckles, then slowly drag her lips apart. She opens for me, revealing a mouth full of my cream, careful not to let any spill.

“Swallow,” I demand. She keeps her mouth ajar so I can watch as she does just that, swallowing every last drop of me. “Fuck. Me.” I let out a soft sigh at the sight of her.

I don't think she heard me until she's crawling over me. She has a mischievous look on her face as she leans in. “Three other people,” she whispers against my lips. I let out a scoff, and just before her lips can meet mine, I grab a hold of her throat and flip us so I'm on top of her.

She fucking *laughs* and holds my wrist, but my grip only tightens. She still has a pretty little smile on her face as I choke her, but it's about to be wiped clean.

I lean into her ear and whisper, “You're going to regret saying that.”

“I don't think I am.” She doesn't miss a beat as she replies with her smart-ass comment. I can't help but chuckle at how much she loves to test me. I swear she gets off on it.

“What did I say was going to happen if you said it?” When her smile grows, I choke her a bit harder, but it doesn't falter. She *likes* being choked.

“That you were going to fuck me til I couldn't walk.” She shrugs her shoulders and looks right into my eyes as she says, “I'm calling your bluff, Sire.” This time, a smirk of my own grows at the challenge.

I align myself with her entrance and lean into her ear again. “I'm not carrying you home.” I feel her pulse quicken under my hand, and before she can come up with another smart reply, I'm thrusting into her, harder each time.

I let out a satisfied sigh at how good she feels. She moans louder with each thrust, and I soak up the sound of her.

“I wanted to fuck you nice and slow for our first time.” I give her softer strokes, and we both sigh in pleasure at the different pace. “But you just had to run that pretty little mouth of yours.” I fuck her harder than before, and she digs her nails into my wrist, still around her throat.

“Sire!”

I let go of her throat to leave a soft kiss on her neck. “Yes, beautiful?”

She tilts her head back, and I smile into her neck before biting down on her. She runs her hand through my hair, pulling on it. I grunt into her neck and let her pull me until our lips meet. I kiss her a lot softer than I’m fucking her, but none of it goes underappreciated as she moans into my mouth. I swallow her sounds and let one out in return for her as her legs wrap around me.

I pull away to watch her tits move with each thrust, and *fuck* does she look good. I immediately lean down, needing to taste them. Her hands find their way through my hair again as I take her nipple between my teeth and lightly suck it.

“Fuck me,” she says breathlessly, and I smile as I kiss my way to her other nipple.

“I’m already doing that, my love.” I slow my pace a bit and watch as she catches her breath, but just before she can fully recover, I speed up and fuck her nice and hard again.

“Holy fuck, Sire!”

“Look at me.” Her eyes meet mine, and she looks like she’s struggling to keep them open. “Does this feel good?” She nods her head as she arches her back.

“Look at me and say it.” She lets out another moan, and then her eyes are on mine again.

“You feel so good, Sire.” I let my eyes fall closed and tilt my head up, soaking up her praises. “Please don’t stop.” I don’t. I keep going until I give her what she wants.

“Vidia.” I let out a soft moan into the crease of her neck, then suck just where she likes it. “Can I still have whatever I

want?” I feel her nod and pull away so I can see her.

“Use your words.”

“You can have—” Her breath hitches a bit as I pick up the pace of my strokes. “You can have whatever you want, Sire.”

“I want to come inside you,” I say, a bit too quick, eager almost.

“Okay.” She sighs as her eyes roll back.

“Say it, Vidia.”

She lets out one last moan as she falls over the edge. “You can come inside of me. I *want* you to come inside of me.” And just like that, I finish inside her and make the very sound she wanted to hear. She leans up, our lips colliding as she swallows all the sounds I make for her.

She pulls me down so my body is over hers, sweaty as we both try to catch our breath.

“We’re not anywhere near done, in case you thought we were.” She shivers under me, and I smile into her neck.

Chapter Thirty-Three

VIDIA

I FALL OVER TO THE side after I finish *again*. That's... I don't know how many times now. This man is the definition of determined, but I am not complaining. I probably shouldn't have doubted him when he said I wasn't going to be able to walk out of here because my leg is starting to shake a bit.

"I love you." He leans over me and slowly kisses my neck. God, I don't even want to look down at how many marks I have.

"You're not fucking me like you love me."

He laughs into my neck, then leans up to look into my eyes. "You're the one that wanted this." He smiles down at me so pretty, and I just want to make love to him... This is a lot better, though.

"Damn right I did."

He smiles bigger as he leans in, kissing me like he loves me. Like I'm all he needs. My leg twitches a bit harder, and he pulls away to look down. When it shakes again, a smug grin grows on his face.

"Stop smiling like that. You're not the first to have my legs shaking a bit." *Yes, he is.* But the look on his face was worth the lie. I one hundred percent get off on testing him.

He briefly closes his eyes as he takes in a deep breath. “Vidia,” he says warningly, and I feel a pool of warmth form between my legs as my heart rate picks up. Getting him all worked up should not be this sexually satisfying. When his eyes meet mine, I know I’m in for the hardest railing of my life. I almost take back my words, but I know it’s too late.

“You’re lucky I don’t have anything to keep your damn mouth closed with.” My mouth drops a bit, and I let out a scoff. “My hand will have to do.” Before I can object, he presses his hand against my mouth.

I lick his hand, but he only smiles. I nibble him softly, and his eyes widen, warning me not to. “I’ll bite you right the fuck back. Don’t try—” He doesn’t get to finish his sentence as I bite down on his hand.

He groans in pain but doesn’t pull away like I expected him to. Instead, he leans into my neck. I try to push him away, but with his weight against mine, there’s no point. I beg him not to, although it’s hard to make out my words.

He bites my neck, not nearly as hard as I thought he would, but still hard. I tap his hand for him to release my mouth, but he doesn’t and blows a raspberry in my neck.

I laugh against his hand and try telling him to let go, but it’s useless. “What was that?”

I try to form some coherent words, but once again, they come out muffled.

“You want me to fuck every other man out of you? Okay.”

I bark up another laugh and shake my head no. He squints his eyes and releases his hand from my mouth.

“Why the fuck not?” He sounds so offended I can’t help but laugh.

“Do you not see my legs, Sire? Can I catch a break?” We’ve barely gone ten minutes between the last three rounds.

“They’re still moving, which means you can still walk. I’m not done yet.”

I bite back a smile. Deep down, I want to know if he can really rail me until I can't walk. "Just give me fifteen minutes."

"Nope."

"Ten."

"No. Now." He drags me down by my waist so I'm right where he wants me. "You shouldn't have said that shit." He has a fire in his eyes that I am *not* ready for. He goes to enter me, but I quickly put my hand over my heat, and his eyes dart to mine.

"Move your hand, Vidia." I should not love how demanding he sounds, but God, I do.

"Wait."

"That's not the safe word." After a beat, a smirk grows on his stupid, handsome face when I don't use the safe word, but I don't say it because I don't *want* to. I want *him*. How ever he'll let me have him.

"Move your hand, or I'll move it for you." A swarm of butterflies takes off in my stomach, and I let out a soft whimper, moving my hand.

"Atta girl."

"Is it too late to apologize?"

"Yup."

"How about beggi—Fuck!" I let out a gasp as he slams into me so hard I swear I see stars. I cover my mouth because I feel like screaming, and there is no way I'm giving him the satisfaction, especially not after all the times I said he couldn't make me.

He smirks down at me, and I want to say something to piss him off again, but with how hard he's pounding into me, I forget what words are. He lets out a grunt as he somehow thrusts into me harder than before. I moan loudly into the palm of my hand and squeeze my eyes shut. I feel him come down on me, leaning into my ear.

“Don’t make me tell you again, Vidia.” I move my hand from my mouth and pull him onto me, dragging my nails down his back. “Fuck, Vid!”

He grips my hips, digging into my side. Against my effort, I moan loudly, and when it sounds too close to a scream again, I bite down on his shoulder. He groans loudly, in pain almost, and pulls away, giving me a chance to steady my breath. He looks down at his shoulder, and his eyes slightly widen as he wipes himself. It’s dark, just a bit of light out, so it’s hard to see, and I think it’s just my drool, but I quickly sit up when I notice it’s blood.

“Oh my god.” I wipe his bite mark. There isn’t much, but I definitely broke his skin. “I am so sorry.”

“It’s fine.” He pushes me back down nonchalantly. “I’ll just give you one to match.”

I quickly put my hands on his chest before he could lean down. “Please don’t.” He smirks, but I’m not joking. “I’m serious. Like *coladas* serious.” He can tease me all he wants for using the safe word, but I am not into bleeding and honestly didn’t mean to bite him that hard.

He leans down and softly kisses my cheek. “Fine. No more biting.”

I smile to myself and smooth out his hair. He starts moving again, and I wait for him to go harder, but he doesn’t.

“You know I love you, right?” He kisses me so softly, a feather of a kiss, before he pulls away so I can respond. We gaze into each other’s eyes as he gives me slow strokes.

“Yeah?”

He kisses the corner of my mouth and slowly kisses his way to my neck.

“Why’d you ask?” I run my hand through his soft hair for the hundredth time and kiss the side of his head twice.

“I’m about to fuck you like I still don’t like you.”

My breath gets caught in my throat, and I feel him smile on my neck. A part of me wants him to continue like he is now, to

keep making love to me, but then he throws one of my legs over his shoulder, and I'm too excited to object.

“Any last words?”

I throw my head back with a laugh at his cocky smirk.

“Who do you think you are?” His huge ego is really showing right now.

“Yours.”

I smile up at him, but it's quickly whipped off my face as he starts pounding me. He was *not* joking about fucking me like he doesn't like me because—

“Ahh! Sire!” I force my eyes open to look at him, and he looks like he is enjoying this *way* too much. My head falls back onto the pillow, and when I bite down on my lip to cover a scream, I feel his thumb trying to drag my lip from between my teeth.

I move my head to the side and push his hand away. He lets out a low laugh and leans into my ear. “No one's around for miles. No one can hear your screams.” I let out a muffled moan at the sound of his voice alone.

“Scream for me, my love.” And just like that, simply because he sounds *so* good asking me, I scream for him. He moans loudly at the sound of my screams. I want to quiet down so I can hear him better, but he's thrusting into me so hard, it's starting to actually hurt.

“Sire, wait!” He doesn't. I put my hand between us, trying to push him off. “Wait, wait, wait.” He freezes.

“That doesn't sound like the safe word, Vidia.” I don't respond and just try to recover. He kisses the side of my leg and then pulls it off of his shoulder. “Do you remember the safe word?” I love that he does that. I know that's the point of a safe word, but still.

“Yes, Sire. I just—” I don't finish my sentence and just take a deep breath. He pulls out of me just a bit so it feels like I can breathe. When my eyes meet him, I give him a nod, and he leans forward to plant a kiss on my lips before continuing.

We both know I didn't use the safe word, but he still gives me way softer strokes, and I can't stop the smile that creeps onto my face.

He notices and squints his eyes at me. "Wipe that smile from your face before I make you *beg* me to stop."

I chuckle softly despite his very demanding tone. I pull him into me for a kiss before he can think of going through with his threat. His tongue quickly finds mine, and before I know it, we're both swallowing each other's moans, finishing for the other. He falls over, bringing me with him so my naked body is draped over his. My eyes fall closed as he rubs my back in circles. I try to fight the sleep that's threatening to take over. I'm sure he'd let us stay here in this field of my favorite flowers if I asked, but I want my bed.

"You took it really well." He kisses the top of my head, and I try to bite back a smile, but it breaks through.

"I made you stop." I look up at him, and he doesn't look fazed at all.

"So? You still did good. You didn't even say *coladas*." He bites back a smile, and I squint my eyes at him for making fun of my choice of the safe word. It was the first thing that slipped out.

I let my eyes fall shut again, but he taps my hip. "Don't fall asleep."

"Mhm." I feel myself dozing off, and he taps my hips again. "I'm just resting my eyes, Sire." I feel his chest shake with a soft laugh under me, and I smile at the sound of it. I feel my breath start to even out as tiredness takes over.

"Vid... Vidia."

"I'm awake." *Now*.

"Liar. Let's go."

I let out a sigh and roll off of him. The sun set a while ago, but the lamps around the field give up just enough light to see our things. I look around for a napkin to clean ourselves. When I find one, he grabs it before I can. I expect him to pass

it to me, but he drags it up my inner thigh and wipes me clean. No one has *ever* cleaned me after sex. When a pool spills out of me, his eyes dart to mine.

“How is this turning you on?”

“You should see yourself.”

He smirks and goes to wipe between my legs but freezes and leans down, using his tongue instead. My breath hitches, and I want him to keep his head there, but I’m so tired, I’d be surprised if I have any more orgasms in me right now.

“You do know there’s some of you there, right?”

He nods with his head still between my legs as he licks me clean. “We taste good.”

I throw my head back with a laugh and take another napkin so I can finish. He gets dressed beside me and then grabs my bra and underwear. I, once again, expect him to just pass it to me, but he pulls my underwear up my legs and then straps my bra for me. It takes him a couple of tries to clip it, but he blames it on the dark and claims he knows what he’s doing.

Next is my dress. I lift my arms for him as he pulls it over my head, and when it’s on, he leans in and softly kisses me.

“If you’re sorry for how hard you fucked me, you can just say so,” I tease, and he rolls his eyes.

“Should I be sorry?” He glances at me, and I shake my head, not able to hold back my smile. He nods once, then throws all of the food into the basket lazily.

“Let me do it if you’re not going to put it back neatly.”

“We’re not even going to eat it. It’s going to the trash.” Is he insane? This is too much food to just throw away.

“We can give it to a homeless person or a shelter.” I neatly pack the basket with food. Once everything is packed and ready to go, he holds his hand out for me to stand.

I take it and rise to my feet, but my knees immediately go out. Sire’s arms go around my waist, catching me right before I fall.

“Did you just trip on air?” He laughs softly, but I go still.

“Yeah?” *No.* Oh my god. My legs start shaking uncontrollably the harder I try to stand on them, and I quickly sit back down.

“You good?”

“Yup.” I smile at him innocently, and he squints down at me. When my leg shakes again, I grab it, trying to make it stop. “The floor is comfy.”

“No, it isn’t. That’s why I got this fluffy-ass blanket.” He holds up said blanket, but then his eyes land on my leg when it jerks again. He tilts his head to the side as a smirk grows on his face.

“Can you stand?” He sounds too damn happy, and I almost swing at his balls. Then we’ll both be struggling to walk.

“Yes, I can stand,” I answer too defensively, and he laughs but then covers it with a cough when I scold him.

“Okay... so stand.”

I let out a huff and slowly close my eyes. *He is never going to let me live this down.* “I’m tired.” That’s technically not a lie. “You go ahead and take everything to the car.”

He shakes his head.

“I’ll wait for you here.”

“Nope. Get up.” He smiles down at me, waiting for me to tell him I can’t, but there is no way I’m saying those words.

I let out a sigh and hold out a hand. He gives me his, a smile still plastered on his face, and he pulls me up. When my knees go out this time, he doesn’t try to catch me. I steady myself on his arm, but then he pulls away, and I fall.

“Asshole,” I mumble. He barks up a laugh, and I bite my tongue.

“Chop chop, Vid.”

I try to stand again but stop when I feel my legs shake too much and let out a sigh. “I’m trying, Sire. How about you help

me? This is your damn fault.”

“Technically, it’s yours. Now let’s go.”

I roll my eyes at his smug smile and finally stand. My legs are wobbly, and I’m too afraid to take a step.

“Ladies first.” He holds a hand in front of him.

“Okay. So go ahead.”

He squints his eyes at me and then pushes my hip, causing me to lose my balance. I trip a bit but thankfully somehow don’t fall. “Ha.” I smile at him, and he rolls his eyes.

“Whatever.” He starts walking in front of me, but when I take a step, I fall on my ass again. When I let out a frustrated sigh, he turns back to me and loses it. Like this is pure comedy or something.

“I knew it!”

“Congrats,” I say sarcastically. “Is this your first time? Because it isn’t—”

“Vidia. I swear to fucking God I will leave your ass right here if you say some slick shit.” I quickly bite my tongue before I call his bluff. No man has ever had me like this before; I just wanted to wipe his smile clean.

“Can you walk or not?” I let out a sigh in defeat and slightly shake my head no. “I can’t hear you.” This dickhead.

“No,” I mumble.

“What was that?”

“Sire! Stop being mean.”

He sighs and walks over to me. “I’m sorry.” He leans down and kisses my forehead. “Want me to carry you?” I look up at him and nod. “Too bad I’m a man of my word. I’m not carrying you home.” I swing at him, but he takes a step back, and I barely miss him.

“I *was* joking, but now....”

I roll my eyes and flip him off. Whatever. I stand again on wobbly legs. I take a deep breath and take a step. My leg goes

out again, but he catches me.

“I’ll carry you home, my love.” He sounds sincere this time. “All you have to do is say I’m the best dick you ever had and pledge allegiance to me.” He has to be delusional. I can’t help but laugh at how seriously he just said that shit.

“I would rather *crawl*.”

He lets out a scoff and pushes me away. I thank God I don’t fall on this hard ass ground again.

“Fine. Then get on your knees and go ahead. I’ll meet you at the car.” He kisses the side of my head and hands me all of the flowers I picked earlier.

He starts to walk away, and once he makes it a fair distance, I try to walk but stumble and call out to him. “Wait!” He slowly turns, a smug smile still present. “I’ll say it once we’re in the car.”

“Say it now.”

I let out a sigh and thank fuck no one is here to witness this. “You’re the best,” I mumble the rest under my breath, way too low for him to hear.

He makes his way over to me. “What was that?”

“Sire! Enough with your games. I want to go home.”

“Okay, jeez. What’s up your ass?”

“Thankfully, not you,” I mumble, but he of course heard.

“I can arrange that.” He teases and I roll my eyes at him and his stupid grin. I think he’s going to turn around so I can get on his back, but instead, he bends down and throws me over his shoulder, carrying me to his car without voicing another tease.

On the way back to my—*our* place, we drive in a comfortable silence.

“Why are you smiling like that?”

I stop cheesing and turn to Sire. “Just thinking about how we’re going to be living together.” A smile grows on his face, and he places his hand on my thigh, giving it a light squeeze.

After a beat, I turn back to him. “Are you scared you’ll get tired of me?”

“Who said I’m not already tired of you?” He’s clearly biting back a smile, but I shove his hand away from my thigh anyway.

“Well, if you’re so tired of me, then we don’t need to have sex any—”

“I was joking.” He says it so quickly I throw my head back with a laugh. “And I won’t get tired of you. In my head, we’ve practically been living together since the—” He cuts himself off and steals a glance at me.

“The break-in?”

He nods and gives my thigh a reassuring squeeze. “You haven’t brought it up in a while, but you can if you need to talk.” I look out my window, but I know his eyes are on me. “You can talk to me about anything, Vid. The break-in... your shitty dad.”

“I know I can.” I put my hand over his and just hold him. A few minutes go by, and I’m grateful he doesn’t push me to talk, but a part of me wants to. I take a deep breath and squeeze his hand, needing to ground myself. “I prepared myself to die that day.”

His eyes dart to mine, and he holds eye contact for a second before looking back to the road.

“When I looked through my peephole that night and saw him with a gun, I—” I force myself to stop, not wanting to walk through the events of that night.

“I mentally prepared myself to die.” Memories of my phone call with Sire come flooding back, how I told him to tell my mom I loved her, then hung up on him because I didn’t want him to hear me die.

“I was ready to die, and then I... didn’t. I didn’t know what to do with that.” I shake my head softly. “Of course, it was a good thing, but... I don’t know, it was just weird, but before I could make sense of any of it, you happened.” My eyes are already on him when his head snaps in my direction.

“In a way, I got you back after you picked me up that night. I didn’t talk about the break-in because at first I didn’t want to, but then, and maybe I’m just now realizing but, I didn’t need to talk about it after a while.”

His eyes stay on mine, and that’s when I notice he pulled over somewhere between the time I was gazing at him. He doesn’t say anything and lets me go on. “It probably wasn’t healthy, but when I got that small piece of you back, it was like that part of me that was ready to die came back to life, and I was all healed.”

There’s probably a word for that. Trauma bonding or some shit, but I don’t want to label it. I want it to just be ours. Not something that also happens to other people.

“I didn’t prepare myself for you to die that night.” I didn’t expect him to say anything, but I don’t stop him. He intertwines our fingers, and we hold onto each other.

“That wasn’t an option in my mind. It was only saving you or dying along with you, and I know that’s codependent as fuck and unhealthy, but I don’t give a shit.” I smile over at him, and he cups my cheek with his other hand.

“I felt like I was *dying* as I raced to you. A race against time that I was so scared of losing.” When his voice breaks, I swallow the lump in my throat and give his hand another squeeze.

“But you won.”

He gives me a weak smile and leans his head against mine.

“I love you.” I let my eyes fall as I wait for him to say those same words back to me.

“I love *you*.” He kisses me softly before letting out a soft sigh and taking us home.

Chapter Thirty-Four

SIRE

I FEEL AROUND ME ON the bed, then open my eyes when I don't feel Vid near me. *Ugh*. I hate not waking up next to her. For the past week that we've been living together, waking up in her arms has been my new favorite thing on this earth.

I get up and walk into the bathroom to freshen up. Once I'm out of the shower and dressed, I run a hand through my damp hair, walking into the kitchen where I find Vid.

She has her back to me, talking to someone on her phone. She says something in Spanish, and my brows crease at how unsettled she sounds. As I get closer, it sounds like her mom on the other line, but I'm not sure. I've spoken to her on the phone twice since we last spoke, and both calls were tense. My Spanish is improving, though. I know all of the colors and can count to forty-nine. The twins say I'm practically bilingual... Hazel and Vidia do not.

I snake my arm around Vid's waist, pulling her back to my front. "Good morning." I kiss the crease of her neck.

"Morning." She pulls her phone from her ear, and when she mutes it, I notice it's her mom. "Wanna say hi?"

"Yeah, I think I can ask her how she's doing too." Vid smiles up at me, and I practice with her first. She unmutes the

call and then tells her mom I'm here.

"Hola, Sire." Her mom's tone doesn't sound as annoyed as the last time we spoke, so I take it as a win.

"Buenos días, como estás?" She is quiet for a second, and I look over at Vid, but she only smiles proudly.

"Bien... gracias por preguntar." All I get from that is good and thank you, so I smile at the phone although she can't see me. I know her mom speaks English fluently, but out of respect for her culture, I can at least learn to speak in her native language, so that's what I'm doing.

She says something else, and I look over at Vid for translation. She shakes her head and then rolls her eyes, but I know it's not at me when she looks back at her phone. "Yes, Mom, he really did move in with me."

"Hmm." I look between the phone and Vid, not sure of what to say. "Bueno..." I know that word means good, but she doesn't say it like it's good. I start to feel like it's one of those words that have more than one meaning, like Vid was telling me.

She says something else, and I watch as Vidia presses her hand to her forehead. "It was *my* idea, Mom."

"Mhm."

Vid opens her mouth in response but quickly closes it, taking in a breath.

"Bueno, hablamos más tarde."

"Ma, no. Don't be like that cuando él está parado aquí mismo. That's so rude." I completely tune out whatever she's saying and smile at the way she can switch between both languages like that.

They go back and forth a few times before her mom lets out a sigh. "How is it living with my daughter, Sire?" My head snaps down to the phone, and I feel my brows raise. This is the first time she's directly asked me something, and in English.

"It's really good, I love living with her." I pause for a brief second. "She doesn't know how to dry herself after a shower,

though, so she leaves a trail of water all the way to the room.” I hear her snicker, and then I add, “I slipped two days ago, and last night she left a wet trail again, so I slipped... again.”

I swear I hear her mom muffle a laugh, but Vidia doesn’t even try to hide her laugh. If the roles were reversed—actually, no. The roles *wouldn’t be* reversed because I wouldn’t do that shit after the first time she fell. I wouldn’t even let her fall the first time. She watched me bust my fucking ass and didn’t even attempt to help or warn me that the floor was wet. Little shit.

“Are you okay?”

I smile at the phone again, and when I glance at Vid, she looks so hopeful. “Yeah, I’m fine. I only—”

“She needs to leave more water next time.” My. Jaw. Drops. She sounds just like Hazel. I one hundred percent believe it now that they all grew up together. Vidia is hysterical in front of me, so I choose to believe her mom is joking.

“Okay, I really do have to go. I have a game soon.”

“Buena suerte!” I smile proudly for remembering that, and Vid gives me a high five.

Her mom thanks me before going on. “V told me you guys are packing the rest of your things today?” I confirm and expect her to say something passive-aggressive like before, but to my surprise, she doesn’t. “Don’t let her carry any of the heavy things. She was complaining about leg pains.” My eyes snap up to Vidia, and when she shoves my arm, I have to bite my tongue not to laugh.

When we say bye to her mom, I’m beaming at Vid. “She loves me.”

“That went really well, but I’m almost positive she was just pretending to be nice because I told her she was hurting my feelings by being rude to you.” My shoulders slouch, but she only shrugs. “At least you made her laugh. That sounded real.”

“Is this actually making you sad?”

She lets out a sigh before shrugging again. “I just need to give her time. I know she’s just being a protective mom and stuff. She was a lot meaner to girls I stopped being friends with in high school, so this is honestly not bad.” I nod in response, and she hops off her seat with a smile.

“I’m off from work today. Wanna turn in your key to—”

“Yes.”

She laughs at the excitement in my voice, and we get ready so I can be fully moved in.

VIDIA

“STOP TRYING TO LIFT THE heavy shit.” Sire takes one of the boxes from my arm. “You have leg pains,” he mocks, and I squint my eyes at him.

“It’s not that heavy.”

He drops it back in my arms, and when I almost drop it, he quickly catches it with a laugh. Okay, it’s heavy. I stare at him with a small smile as he laughs. After a few beats, I break my gaze away from him and look around his room. He has a few small nick-nacks that still need to be packed, so I walk over to them. “Where’d you get this from?” I picked up an egg-shaped snow globe with an easter bunny in it.

“Sage gave it to me.” He comes from behind me and takes it. He shakes it and keeps his eyes on it as he watches the snow fall around the bunny. “It was the first Christmas I spent with them, and since they weren’t expecting me to be there, I only had a few gifts compared to the mountain of gifts the twins had. She felt bad and gave me it.”

I smile at how thoughtful Sage is. I'm sure he has hundreds of stories where she does small things like that. "That sounds like Sage."

He smiles and shakes the snow globe again. "Yeah. Halfway through opening gifts, I guess she noticed I wasn't opening anything and ran upstairs, claiming she forgot one more for me." He snickers at the memory. "I knew she already had this because I spent Easter with them that year and remember her getting it." I can't help but laugh. I love that Sage always does that, tries to make everyone around her feel better.

"I thanked her anyway and of course acted like it was the coolest gift ever, but I really did appreciate it. She ended up letting me open the rest of her gifts, but they were all girly clothes, so she forced August to let me open his." He has a warm smile on his face and is staring at the snow globe like all the memories from that Christmas are trapped in it.

"How old were you?" He shrugs and wraps the snow globe in bubble wrap.

"I don't know, eight, maybe nine." He places the wrapped snow globe into a box.

"Why were you spending Christmas with them?" I know he wasn't invited since he just said they weren't expecting him.

"Fiona... my—"

"I know." I nod, reminding him I know she's his bio mom. He only ever told me about her that one time, besides in college, I mean, but I'm glad he's opening up about her again.

"She was passed out that entire weekend. I spent Christmas Eve next door with Lis, then Christmas day with the twins."

I smile at how light he seems talking about this. He sounded like he was suffocating when he first opened up about his abuse. He looks back at the shelf and picks up a cool-shaped rock. It's iridescent, shining a few shades of blue and green when he turns it.

"This was from the first time I went camping with the twins and our parents." He turns it in his hand, a grin spreading on his face. "August and I fell into a poison ivy bush while

fighting over this rock.” He shakes his head with the biggest smile, and I throw my head back, laughing at the idea of that.

“Was it worth it?”

“Fuck yeah. Look how cool this shit is.” He holds it up, and it shines a shade of blue, almost purple. It is pretty cool. He picks up a pink seashell next. “This one is from the first time I went on a real family trip with them. I was terrified to swim because... Well, you know.” He shakes his head softly. “Anyways, I learned to swim that trip and dove for this.”

I smile to myself because I’m starting to notice a pattern with everything on this shelf. It’s reserved for everything Sage and August related.

“Where’d you guys go?”

“Puerto Rico. They were planning on going somewhere else. I can’t remember right now, but I didn’t have my passport, so they switched the location last minute.” He hands me the seashell, and I turn it in my hand.

“Did they already adopt you by then, or was that before?”

“No, we went on this trip before I was adopted.” I remember he got adopted at fifteen, so it must’ve been before high school. Maybe it was a few years after their first Christmas.

“I was twelve.”

I give him a small smile as I think about that. I doubt my mom would’ve let me travel with any of my friends at twelve, besides Hazel, of course, but we went on family trips together. Her mom and mine, just the four of us. I wonder if Fiona even knew he went on that trip. “How much convincing did it take to let you go?”

“Not much.” He shrugs. “I told Sage to ask for me, afraid to ask myself, but our mom of course said yes.”

I smile, but that’s not what I met. “Did it take much convincing from Fiona?” Realization crosses his face, and he shrugs again, turning to the shelf.

“I wouldn’t know since I didn’t ask her.” He sounds bitter, angry almost. “She was AWOL that week, and it was either go

with them or stay home alone and risk starving.” I freeze at how mad he sounds, and his switch gives me whiplash. When he turns back to me, his tense shoulders immediately drop.

“Sorry... I don’t want to talk about her anymore.”

“Okay.” I keep my voice light and grab the bubble wrap between us. We wrap the few glass things on this shelf, but after a while, I speak up again. “Have you ever considered going to therapy?” I make sure to keep my tone casual so he isn’t offended.

He turns to me and studies me for a second before shaking his head.

I nod and turn back the shelf, picking up his little league trophy. “After the break-in, I was thinking I should go, but I don’t know.” I put the trophy in the box, and I feel him watching me, so I turn back to him.

“Maybe you should.” He shrugs. “Maybe *I* should.” He sounds like he’s just thinking out loud now, but I give him a small smile and lean forward to kiss the sour expression off his face.

I pull away, and he reaches above me for something on the second shelf. He took his shirt off a little while ago, but as he leans over me now, my eyes land on his tattoo, and with the fresh conversation of Fiona, my mind goes to the scars he covered.

I reach for his side, rubbing his tattoo softly, and now that I know they’re there, I can feel them so easily. My heart suddenly feels heavy, but I lean over and plant a soft kiss on his scars.

I feel him go still, and when I glance up at him, he’s only staring at me dumbfounded. I trace my thumb along his side, feeling for the rest of them, and every time I feel a round-shaped scar, I leave a soft kiss.

He suddenly takes a step back, and before I can question him, he cups my face, and his kiss tells me everything I need to know.

Chapter Thirty-Five

VIDIA

WELL THE GAME ISN'T OVER yet," Sage says shyly as we enter our private booth, and I can't help but laugh. We get free tickets to the boys' game, and since she hasn't seen them play in a while, here we are.

"Maybe not, but it's halfway done. I don't get why you changed four times if you were going to wear your first option." Each outfit was more dramatic than the last, so I'm glad she decided on the first one, but did she need to take an hour?

"I didn't know I'd end up picking the first—" She gasps, and my head snaps to her. "They have M&M's!" She rushes over to the table of candy and picks up the entire bowl of M&M's, taking them to the couch with her, only to trip and spill half of them onto the ground.

"Omg! Do you think this will get us banned?!" She quickly bends over and pushes them all into a pile.

"Yes," I answer without missing a beat and look out to the field. I've never watched from up here. It's actually really pretty.

"I'll take the blame, don't worry." She tries to reassure me, and I shake my head at her with a smile.

“You should take the blame if *you* spilled them.” I let out a soft laugh and when I turn back around, she’s still trying to clean her mess, but she looks like she’s growing frantic.

“Sage, we’re not going to get banned.” She literally lets out a relieved breath and wipes an imaginary bead of sweat from her forehead. “There’s a broom in the corner, but just clean later and come watch the game. Sire is up to bat.”

She walks over to me. “Oh, we’re winning. Yay!”

I glance at the scoreboard, and we are literally getting our asses kicked. “We’re home team, babe.”

“Oh.” She slouches a bit. It’s only halfway through, so we could make a comeback, but with it being eight to nothing, I doubt it.

We watch as Sire takes a swing but misses. He glances back at the catcher like he said something and then shakes his head. When he misses again, he looks back down at the catcher. They look like they’re having a conversation, but then the catcher stands and flips his mask off.

They get in each other’s faces, and I notice the umpire and both of their coaches run toward them. They announce on the loudspeaker about how it looks like it’s getting heated on the field, but before I know it, Sire is throwing a punch.

“Oh God.” I shake my head as I watch the mess unfold.

“What the hell is happening?!” Sage leans forward, and we watch as Sire’s coach starts yelling, but Sire’s focus is on trying to hit the catcher. The pitcher from the opposing team walks up to Sire from behind, and he looks like he’s about to jump in, and then he does.

Sage gasps when he swings at Sire from behind, but before Sire can even turn around to defend himself, August comes out of nowhere and drags him away from Sire so damn hard he falls on his ass. He tries to stand, but August punches him back down, and all hell breaks loose as more of the opposing team comes closer. Sire’s team is already on the field before anyone can reach him and August, blocking the other team from them.

“Oh my god. It’s about to be a brawl.” Sage sounds a bit too worried. Like a huge fight is the worst that can happen, and maybe to her, it is.

“They won’t let it get that far.” They prove my point, and security is quickly defusing the situation. Everyone backs away, and we get a clear shot of Sire punching the catcher, who is now on the ground.

“What the hell did that guy say to him?!” I glance at the big screen and notice the last name on the catcher’s jersey.

“Walker?” I say more to myself. After a second, I remember where I know that name from and let out a scoff. “*That’s* why Sire looks extra pissed.” Sage asks who he is, but I wave her off.

“Nobody important. He and Sire didn’t like each other in college, mainly since Liam went to our rival school. I can’t believe their drama was carried out this long, though.”

“What?!” Sage leans forward as if she can get a better look. She glances at the big screen, and when they show Walker spitting blood onto the ground, she lets out a gasp. “No. No, no, no...”

“Calm down, Sage.” I can’t help but laugh at how worried she looks. “Your brothers aren’t going to get arrested or anything.” She nods like that really does make her feel better as she keeps her eyes on the field.

Sire’s coach tries pushing him to back away from Walker, but he doesn’t move. August ends up practically dragging Sire back to the dugout. I flop down onto the couch and let out an annoyed breath. “Well, that was a great game.”

Sage turns to me. “Are they going to cancel the rest of it?”

“No.”

She flops onto the couch next to me.

“Your brothers aren’t going to play anymore though, so we may as well go.” Sire is definitely going to be suspended for this, and depending on how mad Fred is, so might August.

Sage and I end up leaving after she picks up her M&M's, and we go shopping instead. I have no idea where she plans on putting everything she bought, but I'm sure she'll find space or make it.

We get back to my place about an hour later, and my feet are killing me. Sage insisted we go to her favorite shoe store, so we spent most of our time trying on heels and walking up and down a fake runway. Sage has been a model for a while, so she naturally gave me tips on my runway walk, and while I admit it was fun, my feet don't agree. I don't know how she does it so gracefully.

We texted Hazel and Lis to come over since Sage said she needed a girl's night, so they make it over a few minutes after us.

"This sweater is ugly." Hazel tosses my new sweater aside. "But those pants are cute." She nods toward Sage as she models for us. After spending the whole day with her, I realize I need to go see her next runway show in person.

"I don't think I like how I look." Sage looks down at herself, and Lisette literally throws a cup at her. "Ouch!"

"If you make a mean comment about your body, I'm deleting every social media app from your phone and beating your ass. You're literally a model and the prettiest in this room." She turns to Hazel and I. "No offense." I break into a laugh, and Hazel shrugs.

I haven't hung out with Lis since college, and I'm just realizing how much I missed her.

"None taken." Hazel turns back to Sage and shamelessly checks her out. "You're hot as fuck, Sage. If you and August weren't related, I'd suggest a threesome."

"*WHAT?!*" Sage looks petrified. Lis and I are hysterical as she stares at Hazel, and my best friend just shakes her head in response.

"And this is why I wouldn't suggest one," Hazel says, her tone as bored as ever. Sage walks back to my room to change

into the next outfit for the try-on haul she insisted on giving us until her phone rings.

Lis reaches for it for some reason. “Who’s chocolate and peanut emoji?” We turn back to Sage, and she spins to face us so fast I’m surprised she doesn’t fall on her ass.

“No one! You can just ignore—”

“Why the *fuck* are you ignoring me?”

Lis holds the phone out to us and smirks at the guy on the other line.

“And don’t even say you aren’t, Sage Loana.”

Lis mutes the phone as Sage makes her way into the living room. “Wow, he’s using your middle name? He sounds hot.”

“Lisette. Please—”

She unmutes it. “Can you state your name for the record?” Lis speaks into the phone, and Sage looks like she might actually jump into a black hole. I stifle a laugh at them. Lis is such an asshole and obviously finds bothering her sister entertaining.

“Who the fuck is this?” Sage reaches for her phone, but Lis stalks backward with it.

“I asked first.”

“I don’t give a shit. Where the fuck is Sage?”

Lisette’s brows raise, and I look over at Hazel, who gets comfortable for the show.

“Oh, you are *rude*.”

He lets out an obviously annoyed breath.

“Can you just tell us if you’re Mr. L or Mr. K who texted her that dirty message?”

“Lisette!” Sage lunges for her phone again, but Lis pushes her, and while she’s a lot smaller than Sage is, she pushes her pretty hard. *Siblings at their finest*.

“Mr. who? Sage, I swear—”

“No one texted me!”

“Where are—”

Lis hangs up and tosses the phone back to Sage. We all look at each other as Lis takes her seat again as if that didn't just happen. Sage's phone starts ringing again, and she lets out a sigh as she turns it off.

“Your boyfriend is rude. I don't think the boys will like him.” She says it and smiles as if this were the best news ever.

“If you tell August or Sire—” The door opens, and we turn to find her brothers. I look between the girls, then the boys, then back at the girls.

Sage glances at Lis, then turns to her brothers with a smile. “Hey—”

“Your sister's a whore!”

“OH MY GOD!”

I'm dying of laughter as Lisette smiles at how flustered Sage gets all over again.

“Stop fucking calling her that, Lisette,” Sire bites out.

“So it's okay when she does it? No, this is payback for telling you about what's his face.”

“You don't even remember his name,” August snickers.

“Exactly, so shut up and stop calling her names.” Sire sends Lis a glare, and she only flips him off.

“Yeah! I'm allowed to... to mingle.” Sage sounds like she's also trying to convince herself.

Sire walks in and flops beside me on the couch just as August pulls Hazel on top of his lap.

“Who are you mingling with?” Sire wraps an arm around my waist and lays on my stomach.

“Who even says mingling anymore?” August rests his head on Hazel's shoulder, rubbing his hand up her leg.

Both boys are still in their uniforms, and they look exhausted. I can only imagine how badly their coach yelled at

them for the stunt they pulled at today's game. Instead of bringing it up with them, I turn to Lis.

"Why do you keep bugging her about this guy?" I remember she was also teasing her at my housewarming party the other week.

"When we were younger, the boys literally did not let her date. I mean, they beat up the guy she lost her virginity to." I look down at Sire in shock, and he has his eyes closed with a small smile on his face. "So whenever she's seeing someone, I make it a thing to rat her out at the amusement of their anger, but she does it to me, too. Sire just fucking babies her."

I feel Sire shaking his head under me. "I do not baby her, you just take shit too far. All she did was tell me you had a guy over, and you've been calling her names for weeks."

"Yeah, because you and August came to my apartment and scared him away, and it was her fault!" I don't know if this makes me happy I'm an only child or sad I missed out on teasing a sibling. Hazel's the closest thing I have to a sister, and she never let me tease her like this.

"Y'all are annoying," Hazel mumbles, then tells August she's ready to leave, but he only smiles at her.

"Be nice." He leans in to kiss her, but she moves her head and gets up from his lap. I can't help but laugh at how ridiculous they *all* sound.

"Be grateful we stopped beating up your *and* her boyfriends a long time ago," Sire voices.

August laughs softly and turns to them. "Sage's last one was actually decent. That new guy you had over did not wash his hands after using the bathroom and was mean to you."

"Wait until you meet *her* new one," Lis mumbles, and Sire picks his head up to look at her. When I glance at Sage, she looks like she looks beyond worried, so I quickly put her out of her misery and save her from her siblings.

"She's joking." I turn Sire's face back to me. "What was that on the field today?"

He lets out a sigh, but August answers instead. “Walker is such a fucking bitch. That’s what happened.” Hazel is back with my first aid kit and picks up his head to clean the cut on his eyebrow. When he winces, she shakes her head at him and swats his hand away when he tries to stop her from touching it.

“He always wants to fucking talk shit. I’m going to knock his damn teeth out the next time I see him,” Sire adds, and they both look like they’re getting mad all over again.

“Don’t you think this rivalry between you guys is getting old? It’s been what? Six years?” I move Sire’s hair from his face and notice a bruise starting to form on his cheek.

“Seven,” they both correct me at the same time. I can’t believe we started college that long ago. I tell Sire to go and get ice for his face, but he shakes his head, too lazy to get up.

“I have to go.” Sage grabs her bags, but she has a weird look on her face. She waves us bye, and I move Sire’s arm from around me to walk her out.

“You okay?” I tilt my head to the side, and when she looks up at me, she looks so hurt. I start to wonder if Lis bugging her really did upset her, but she didn’t seem this bothered five minutes ago.

“Yeah... I just forgot I need to film a video today, so now I won’t be able to post it on time.” She smiles, but it doesn’t reach her eyes like usual.

“Okay...” I open the door for her and step out. “If you’re worried about your brother finding out about Mr. Chocolate and Peanut Emoji, just know I’ll make sure to tell Sire to leave you alone, and he’ll tell Lis to fuck off.”

She laughs lightly and looks a bit more hopeful. “I don’t really care that Lis was being a pain. She’s just getting me back for snitching on her, and she thinks Sire is soft with me.” She shakes her head with her pretty smile. “She makes sure to be a headache and a half with me to make up for Sire ‘babying me.’” She does air quotes, but Sire really is a lot softer with her than he is with his other siblings.

She laughs again and already seems better, so I start to believe her when she said she was upset about not being able to post her video. I know she takes her job seriously.

“Well, hopefully, you can film and edit the video tonight.”

“Yeah.” She hugs me goodbye, and I wait for her to get in the elevator. She turns her phone back on as she waits, and the second the screen lights up, a few messages come in, and she gets another call.

I act like I don’t notice and head back inside. As soon as I walk in, I freeze. “I was gone for two minutes.”

“Get the fuck off of my hair!” Sire tries to get out of Lis’s hold and ends up grabbing her hair in return. He pulls it so damn hard it looks like he breaks her neck.

“Okay, okay!” They both let go, and Lis gets up with a smirk playing on her lips. She goes to walk off but kicks Sire first. Just as she runs off, he trips her, and she falls on her face.

I try to hold back a laugh, but Sire and August are hysterical. Hazel gets up from August’s lap and glances at Lis on the floor. She shakes her head at her, but there’s a small grin on her lips.

“I want to go.” She taps August as I pass her.

“If you don’t want to hang out with me anymore, just say that, Hazel.” I sit back down, and Sire lays back on me. Hazel looks at me, rolls her eyes, and turns back to her boyfriend.

“Get up.” He rises at her command, and she looks back over at me. “I do want to hang out with you, but these two”—She nods at Lis and Sire—“drained my social battery.”

She walks over and kisses me goodbye on the cheek. I feel Sire quickly raise his head, and he looks between the two of us. “Did you just fucking kiss her?”

Hazel answers before I can. “Yup.” Sire looks back over at me as she walks off. August laughs at us and leans over to hug us both goodbye. Sire tries to push him off from us but struggles with the way he’s laying on me. August squeezes us

all together once more before pulling away to hug Lis and Athena.

“She was joking, right?” I look back down at Sire, and he looks like he really wants to know. I can’t help but laugh.

Chapter Thirty-Six

SIRE

I LET MY EYES FALL shut as Vid presses her lips to my forehead. When I open them, she's already watching me with a beautiful smile on her face. I smile up at her from the bed, admiring how pretty she looks so early in the morning.

"Go back to sleep." She tells me quietly, but I rub the tiredness from my eyes, and I shake my head as I sit up in bed.

"Wait for me. I want to drive you to work." I get out of bed, and when I glance back at her, she's still watching me. "What is it?" She only shakes her head softly before pulling me in for a hug.

I hesitate for a second, then wrap my arms around her. When she looks up at me, she's just smiling. "I love you."

I feel a smile stretch on my face and kiss the top of her head. "I love *you*."

She pulls away and says she's going to walk Athena. I get ready fast so she isn't late to work on her first day back after being off. I walk into the kitchen when I'm ready, but Vid isn't back with Athena yet.

I quickly make her some coffee but turn at the sound of my phone ringing. When I reach it, I realize it's Vidia's phone.

It's her mom, but I just let it ring. I go in search of Vid's work cup, but then her phone starts ringing again. I glance back at it, and it's her mom again. I keep my eyes on her phone, thinking if I should just answer and figure, what's the worst that can happen.

"Hola, mi niña preciosa."

I smile to myself because I one hundred percent understand that. "Hola, Ms. Gomez, Vidia just went downstairs."

"Oh..." She's quiet on the other end for a beat, and I open my mouth to say something, but she beats me to it. "I was just going to ask V about you. I've been getting phone calls about your fight."

I let my eyes fall shut and run a hand through my hair. I think all of her baseball associates know I'm dating her daughter, and they all also saw the fight. Of course people are calling her to talk shit.

"What did you want to ask her about me?" I ask shyly, only because I have no idea what else to say.

She fires back immediately. "Why do you think it's okay to put your career on the line for the sake of your ego? This is baseball, not hockey, and we don't punch our opponents."

I look up but remember Vid isn't here to save me. "I don't think it's okay..."

"Well, was it worth it?"

I know my answer, but I hesitate because I don't know what answer she wants to hear. I settle for the truth. "Absolutely."

She is quiet for a few seconds. Then, "Good." My head snaps down to the phone. "Violence is never okay, so if you're going to hit someone, it *has* to be worth losing something you love."

I dwell on her words, and I can't help but think about her late husband. Before I can respond, the door opens, and her daughter walks in. I keep my eyes on her and smile when she smiles down at Athena.

“If the thing I love is baseball, then yeah, it was worth it.” Vid looks up at me, and I look between her eyes. “If it was her on the line, then absolutely not. I would’ve let him kick my ass and not swing back once.”

A crease grows in Vid’s brows, and I realize I was thinking out loud. Before she asks what I’m talking about, she glances down at her phone in my hand. She looks back up at me and raises a questioning brow.

“Good,” her mom replies, and a smirk grows on my face. I tell her Vid is back, and they start talking as I pour Vid’s coffee. We make our way out, and once we’re in the car, they say bye to each other.

Most of their conversation was in Spanish, but I assume her mom told her what we spoke about because Vid doesn’t question me.

I glance down at my phone at the sound of an email coming in. “Can you check that for me, beautiful?”

“Uh oh.” I steal a quick glance at her just as she looks up at me from my phone. “It’s from your coach.” *Fuck*. He told August and me to look out for his email, but I thought he’d take more than a day to send it.

Vid starts reading it, and I cringe at how mad he sounds through a damn email. “You can just skip to the part where he says how long we’re suspended.” It takes her a second, and she has to scroll a bit.

“August has to sit out the next three games...” She scrolls a few times. “As for your idiot brother—wow, he is pissed. He hasn’t addressed you directly in the entire email.” I look over at her, and she gives me a worried look, which makes me worried about what the next line is.

“You have to meet with him tomorrow to discuss your punishment. Then the next two paragraphs are him calling the two of you every word for idiot.” I keep my eyes on the road and start to think if beating Liam Walker’s ass really was worth it... Yeah, it was.

When I pull into Vid's job, I walk over to open her door and walk her upstairs.

"Hey!"

A brunette with long hair turns, and I realize it's Tori, the new coworker.

"I thought you didn't work today?"

"I needed to." She shrugs. "Asher's former patients keep popping up. His shit was so unorganized." I roll my eyes at the mention of that guy, but I'm glad I got him to quit because Vid seems to genuinely like this new girl.

I pull Vid's hand, dragging her to me. "I'll see you later, my love." I kiss her and nod goodbye to Tori before leaving.

When I get back to my car, my phone lights up with a message, and I see August tagged me in a post. I open it and find a picture of two baby stingrays with the caption, 'I want one,' and a sad emoji. The logo in the back of the picture looks familiar, and I'm positive it's from Hazel's job, so he must be there. August is constantly at work with Hazel. He's so clingy.

I end up calling Hazel, but she ignores it, so I call August. "Hey, what's up?" He sounds as perky as ever, and I can't help but smile.

"Put your girlfriend on the phone."

"For what?" There's rustling on the other end like he's making his way to her.

"So I can speak to her, August. Why else would I ask you to put her on the phone?" There's a pause of silence.

"Well, why didn't you call her yourself? This is my phone. We don't share one." I open my mouth, but he keeps rambling. "You know, I was actually happy when I saw you called. I thought maybe you'd want to talk to me. I haven't seen you in days."

"I saw you yesterday, August." My tone is dry because we literally saw each other at our game, and then he came over. He's being dramatic, like always.

“I already told you, seeing each other at games doesn’t count. That’s our *job*. Do you not like hanging out with me anymore? Because I feel like ever since you moved out, I’ve barely seen you.”

“It hasn’t even been that long since I moved out?” I look around, confused. He’s like a golden retriever with attachment issues, I swear. I’m just now noticing this is the reason he wanted to be neighbors.

“Why do you sound like you don’t care?” *Because I don’t.* I sigh again and change my tone.

“I do care, and I do want to hang out with you. You’re at Hazel’s job, right?”

“Yeah, wanna come?!” He sounds happy again, and I roll my eyes and put him on speaker before driving off.

“Yeah, sure!” My voice sounds weird to my ears with how chirpy I made it.

“Okay, see you here.” I chuckle at how quickly his mood changed. “I love you, bye.”

“Bye.” I try to hang up before he can harass me, but I’m too late.

“You have to say it back.” *This is why I don’t call him.* I clench my jaw and let out an annoyed breath.

“I fucking love you, August. Goodbye.” I say through clenched teeth, and I can hear him smiling on the other end. When I hang up, he’s chuckling, and I swear he does that shit on purpose.

When I make it to Hazel’s job, August is waiting for me at the doors with a smile. I try to bite back a smile, but it breaks through because he’s smiling like an idiot. I hand him a bag, and we walk into the animal rescue center.

“You got me a gift?!” He digs into the bag, and I roll my eyes at him.

“Yup, don’t have a heart attack.” I only make it a few steps before he’s hugging me. I stand there with my hands at my side for a second but choose not to be an asshole and hug him

back. I tap his back twice, then quickly pull away, but he stays hugging me.

“August. People are staring. Get the fuck off of me.”

He laughs as he pulls away. As we start walking again, he opens his box of Mike and Ikes. “So what’d I do to deserve a whole bag of my favorite candy?” He has a horrible sweet tooth; it’s honestly disgusting, and he doesn’t need the sugar rushes since he’s already hyper, but I felt like getting him something, and candy is what he’d like the most.

“For being a good best friend.” He shoots me a look like he’s offended, and I correct myself. “For being a good *brother*, August.” He smiles, satisfied. I don’t get why he finds so much satisfaction in me calling him my brother. It’s like he needs the constant reminder.

“I’m always a good brother. I should get candy more often,” he says between chews with a handful of candy in his mouth.

“It’s a thank-you gift too.” We head up the stairs, and I glance at him. “You could have let me get my ass kicked at the game, but you jumped in when that bitch snuck me from behind.” I turn to look at him, but he looks confused.

“Did you see Coach Fred’s email?”

“Yeah.” He smiles. “Did you read the part when he called us dumb fucking fucks?” He breaks into a laugh, and I can’t help but join him.

“Did *you* read the part where you’re suspended for the next three games?” He nods and shrugs like he really doesn’t care, but I still feel bad. “Thanks.” I give him a small smile, but he looks confused again.

“Don’t thank me for that. Was I supposed to let you get jumped? On live TV at that?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Exactly, don’t thank me. And don’t feel bad that I can’t play either because I bet you do. It’s bullshit, but I couldn’t care less. I wasn’t going to let that shit slide, and if I see Walker and his bitch ass teammate, we’re jumping them. See

how he fucking likes it.” I throw my head back with a laugh at how mad he sounds. He’s rarely ever mad, but when he is, it’s hilarious.

I figured with how close we are to the playoffs, he’d be more upset, but I was clearly wrong. I should’ve known, though. I mean, it’s August, for crying out loud. Of course he cares more about defending me than anything.

When I spot Hazel bottle-feeding some ugly animal, I make a beeline for her. She sees us before we reach her and rolls her eyes at me. “What do you want?” I swear I don’t see what August sees in her. She’s so mean, and he’s... not. He’s a ray of fucking sunshine, and she’s just... mean.

“He came to hang out with me.” August throws his arm around me, and I don’t need to look at him to know he’s smiling. Hazel looks between the two of us and then scoffs.

“Sure he did.”

I roll my eyes at her and throw August’s arm off of me. “Where are those two stingrays you brought in earlier?” I know she must’ve rescued them today because August usually goes with her on the “rescue missions,” as he likes to put it.

“You mean Mr. and Mrs. Ray?”

I turn to August. “You named them?”

“No, those are horrible names. Sage did. She saw my post and said we *must* name them after the stingray in *Finding Nemo*.” Of course she did. She’s been obsessed with that movie since I met her. I look back at Hazel.

“So where are they?” Whatever the thing is in front of her finishes the bottle, and Hazel stands. She nods her head for me to follow, and a few tanks down are the stingrays in question.

I lean down to get a better look at them. They’re about the size of my hand, and they’re cute. Perfect. “What’s wrong with them?” They wouldn’t be here if they were healthy, so I turned back to Hazel.

“They have this weird disease scientists just discovered. They’re endangered, so we—”

“Are they going to die?”

“Most likely not. We’re—” I wave her off and try to cut to the chase, but she opens her mouth again. “Don’t *wave* me off, the fuck?”

“Sorry.”

She rolls her eyes, and I wait for her to finish, but she doesn’t add anything else.

“So how much for them?”

A smirk grows on her face, and she crosses her arms. I immediately know she’s about to give me a hard time, but I don’t care how much arguing it takes or how much it costs. Vidia’s entire life would be complete if I bought her one of these, let alone two.

“Why the sudden care in animals? I thought you came here to hang out with your brother.”

I briefly close my eyes when I sense from a mile away what’s coming.

“Wow,” August says in disbelief. “And here I thought you really came all this way to hang out with me.”

I glare at Hazel and turn to August. “I did. I even got you the candy, remember? I just happen to also need to talk to Hazel about the rays.” I honestly did want to thank him for what went down on the field. I was knocking two birds with one stone by coming down here.

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not.”

“You don’t want to hang out with me anymore.” He says it like he can’t believe it, like it actually hurts him.

“I do.” I can’t believe I’m even going back and forth with him right now. Maybe it’s because I feel bad since he’s kind of right. We haven’t been hanging out as much as we usually do.

“Okay, so let’s hang out later today.” I almost agree, but I want to talk to Vidia. I was thinking about what she said about therapy, and after she brought it up a second time, I think I’m

considering it, but I want to talk to her; I don't know how that's going to go, so I'd rather not have to fake a smile for August.

"I can't today."

"Okay, so tomorrow." I almost agree again, but I need to speak with our coach tomorrow. Knowing him, he'll keep me busy all day as extra punishment.

"You know I can't tomorrow, but—"

He hands the bag of candy I gave him back to me. "Take it."

"August, stop being a dramatic bitch. We'll hang out the day after tomorrow. You can have all the candy you want and sleep over at mine and Vid's place. Happy?"

He pulls the candy back and smiles. "Fine."

I turn back to his annoying girlfriend.

"Can Hazel come?"

I let out a sigh, and Hazel's smile grows. "I thought you wanted just the two of us to hang out?"

"I never said that. It'll be fun, come on, like a double date sleepover." I let out another sigh and agree so he can shut up. "Wait, Sage might feel left out. Can she come too? Maybe we can invite whoever her boyfriend is."

"We're not inviting him to a fucking sleepover."

"Right... Well, he can come over and doesn't need to spend the night—"

"August, no."

He shakes his head with a smile. "Okay, but Sage can come, right?"

"Of course she can, August." I wasn't going to say no to Sage, but Hazel can definitely stay the fuck home for all I care.

"And Lis and Piglet?"

"August," I warn, and he fucking giggles. I let out a sigh but give in because he's smiling at me all hopefully. "Lisette can

come without the fucking turtle, but if she tries to fucking hit me, everyone has to leave.” He nods, and without another word or adding anyone else to the damn sleepover, I turn back to his menace.

“Now how much for them?” I circle back to the point. Hazel picks up a tray of milk bottles and walks across from where we’re standing.

“They’re not in your budget.”

“I don’t have a budget.” Like I said, I don’t care how much they cost. She sits on the ledge of one of the lower tanks, and another ugly animal swims to her.

“This isn’t a pet store, Sire. Nothing here is for sale.” I let out a scoff, and she starts bottle-feeding it.

“Everything is for sale for the right price. Besides, you know they’re for Vidia, so stop giving me such a hard time.”

She glances up at me and squints her eyes. I wonder who she got that from because they both do that eye squint thing. “Pet rays are illegal in LA.”

“Well, unless you’re the cops, I don’t see the issue. You basically own this place. Just give them to me.”

She turns back to the thing she’s feeding, and it looks like it’s starving with the way it basically eats her hand. “Where do you plan on putting them? In your tub? Your apartment didn’t look big enough for a sixteen-foot stingray last I checked, let alone two.” They grow that big? Maybe I should just buy her an aquarium and fill the whole place with every kind of ray instead of trying to take one home.

“Can’t he adopt them and keep them here?” August snaps me out of my thoughts. I turn my head to him, and he’s just casually eating his second box of Mike and Ikes. I look back down at Hazel and tilt my head to the side in question.

“Why didn’t you just tell me I could adopt them?”

She shrugs her shoulders. “I wanted to see how much effort you’d put into it.” What does she gain from that? I don’t bother questioning her, and when she looks up at me, I wait for

her to go on, but she doesn't and clearly enjoys making my life difficult.

“Well?”

“They're not up for adoption.”

I throw my hands up in defeat. “So put them up for adoption, Hazel.” I know it's in her power; she runs the show over here, or at least she makes it seem that way. “You wanna see how much effort I'll put in? I will literally rob you for them, so choose.” I'm almost positive I can scoop them into a bucket and make a run for it right now.

I didn't see any security when I walked in. I look around real quick. There's a door about twenty feet away, and I think it leads to the parking lot. When she breaks into a laugh, I look down at her, confused as to what's so funny but more confused because I don't think I've heard her laugh before, at least not in a long time.

“Are you scoping the fucking perimeter? Checking your damn exits?” I deny it. I'd be able to get away with them either way. Her laugh sobers up, and she actually wipes a tear from how hard she was laughing.

“I like your determination. I'll give you the adoption papers tomorrow.” I feel a smile growing on my face.

“Get them now.”

I spend the next few hours with August after he harasses me, but before I know it, it's time for me to pick up Vid from work. I'm extra excited to see her since I couldn't have lunch with her. August made me feel bad and pointed out that I'll see her when I go home, and since I chose to leave him and not live next door anymore, I won't see him for a long time. Those were his exact words.

I'm leaning against my car as I wait for Vid to come downstairs.

“Hey.”

My head snaps to the right, and a smile grows on my face.

“You are so hot. Do you think I can get your number?”

My brows furrow, and I send her a glare. “I have a very beautiful girlfriend. Fuck off.”

Vid breaks into a laugh, and I smile at the sound before pulling her into my embrace. She wraps her arms around my neck and looks up at me. “Is that actually how you’d turn a girl down?”

I kiss her forehead and then her lips. “Yes.” She laughs again, and I open the passenger door for her. I walk around, and when I slide in, she’s smiling down at the seatbelt cover. I put them in all of my cars for her.

“How was your day?” She tells me it was the same old, same old, but good nonetheless. When I pass our apartment, she asks me where we’re going.

“It’s a surprise.” She surprisingly doesn’t ask any more questions as we head downtown.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

VIDIA

I LOOK BACK DOWN AT my phone to see my stingrays again. *My* stingrays. I shriek, and Sire breaks into a laugh.

“You’re still looking at those pictures? We left them twenty minutes ago.”

Yeah, but I miss them already. Sire let us stay until closing because I didn’t want to leave them. They are so cute; I still can’t believe he adopted them for me. I didn’t even know that was a thing!

I nod, and Sire laughs. He grabs the mail and then holds my shoulders as he leads me to the elevator and our apartment because I keep my eyes on the pictures the entire time. I feel like my life is complete.

When we walk in, I put my phone down and give my eyes a rest. I flop onto the couch, and Sire lays next to me, hugging my lower waist. I soothe his hair, and he lets his eyes fall shut. I watch him for a few seconds, and then he speaks up.

“So, I was thinking.”

“Uh oh.”

“Oh, fuck you.” We break into a synchronized laugh. When I look back down at him, he’s already watching me with a

perfect smile on his face. “It’s about what you said, about starting therapy?”

I turn my head to the side. I only ever brought it up twice, but I didn’t think he was giving it any thought.

“Mhm?”

He sort of shrugs. “I was thinking of going.” His words surprise me, but I try not to show it.

“Yeah?”

He nods softly, and I lean over to kiss the top of his head. “I think you should go too.” He glances up at me, and I think about it for a second. “I think it would be good for both of us.” Yeah... That’s the main reason I brought it up to him in the first place, but I didn’t commit to it because when I brought it up to my mom, she said I didn’t need therapy, and I guess her words just stuck.

“We should try.” I shrug, thinking out loud.

“Yeah?”

I give him a nod, and he smiles, leaning forward to kiss me. When he lays his head back on my stomach, I lean over to the coffee table for the pile of mail. Most of what I sort through is junk, but when my eyes land on a specific one, I open it, confused. My eyes scan the paper, and it looks like a lease or a contract, but I’m confused as to why my name is on it.

“Do you understand this?”

He glances up at me and holds his hand out for the paper. When I see a crease grow in his brows, I grow worried and peek at the paper again.

“Dammit, I thought I had more time.” He mumbles about how *they’re* fast, but I’m still lost. “I should’ve checked the mail first,” he says to himself as his eyes scan the paper one more time.

“Well, what is it?”

His eyes snap to me from the paper like he’s remembering I’m here. “It’s your sunflowers.” I feel my entire face scrunch.

I've never been this confused before. He smiles, then sits up to pull me onto his lap, so I'm straddling him. "When I took you to the picnic in the sunflower field, you said they're so pretty, and you wanted them all."

"Uh-huh..."

"So you have them all." He plants a few kisses around my neck. "Sign the papers, and the entire field is yours." *What?!* He pulls away to look at my reaction. My eyes slowly widen at the realization, and I swear his eyes shine at the sight of my shock.

"You bought me a field of fucking sunflowers?!" I shoot up from his lap and look down at him. He said nothing was impossible, but holy shit. I think back to how big that field was, and it was *huge*. "Sire, how much did all that land cost?"

He pulls me back to his lap and snakes his hands up the side of my shirt so he's touching my bare waist. "It doesn't matter. You wanted it, you got it." He has to be insane.

"But Sire—" He shuts me up and kisses me. I give in and melt against him, letting his tongue explore my mouth. We pull away, lips swollen, and rest our foreheads against each other.

"Just give me an estimate."

He shakes his head as he bites back a smile. "It was ninety-seven acres, so let's see how good your math is." I bite him lightly for being a smartass. We both break into a laugh, but when we sober up, I try to actually do the math. I don't know how much each acre cost; it would depend on location. It's not too far from here, so—

"Stop doing the math." He cuts me from my thoughts and tickles me. I break into a laugh and fall on my back. He comes over to me and keeps his eyes on me. "Are you going to sign the papers?"

I lean over to grab them and let my eyes scan through the papers, trying to make sense of them. "What am I even going to do with almost one hundred acres of sunflowers?"

With a smile, he pulls me up so we're sitting, facing each other. "I know it's your land, but we can build a house."

I look up at him, and his eyes shimmer with hope at the idea. I feel myself smiling at the thought of it. "Our backyard will literally be a sunflower field," I say in disbelief, and he smiles at me as I picture the whole thing in my head.

"We'll have an infinity pool since you apparently love skinny dipping." I throw my head back as I laugh at the fact that he remembers that. "The entire house will have floor-to-ceiling windows since you like those too." He quickly kisses me before pulling away to see me again, and I can't stop smiling.

"Oh my god, the house is going to be huge!"

He chuckles into the crease of my neck.

"What are we going to do with all that space?"

He kisses my neck, then pulls away so his eyes will meet mine. "We'll fill it with kids."

I go still for a second, and he waits for my reaction.

"That's a whole lot of kids."

He laughs and kisses me twice. "You're right." He kisses me quickly again. "We should get a head start and start making them now." I'm hysterical with laughter, and he kisses down my chest and tries to pull my shirt up, but I stop him.

"How many?"

He turns his head to the side in thought. "However many you want."

He tries to kiss me again, but I shake my head at his answer. "No, answer for yourself."

He doesn't even hesitate as he answers. "Four."

I ask why, and he goes on. "I grew up in a quad. It works." He shrugs, and I give it a thought for a second.

"What if three of them are closer and one is left out?"

“Then we’ll make another.” He kisses me again as I burst into another laugh. I think of it all. The huge house with floor-to-ceiling windows. The infinity pool and sunflower backyard. God, we’ll have enough space for a whole baseball field.

When Sire starts sucking on my neck, I run my hand through his hair and pull him away. “I’m not signing the papers.”

He looks confused and then disappointed. “Is there a specific reason why?”

I quickly kiss him, then pull away to look at him. “I don’t want it to be my land.”

His brows furrow.

“I want it to be *ours*. What’s mine is yours, of course, but I want us to sign them together.” A smile so big grows on his face it hurts to even look at him.

“Deal.” We lock it in with a kiss, and it feels like we’re sealing our fate as our clothes fall onto the floor, and we get lost in each other. Making love and maybe even those kids to fill the huge house.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

SIRE

Two Months Later

VID'S HEAD SNAPS IN MY direction as I walk into the apartment. I hang my keys and make my way over to her on the couch. She opens her arms to me with a smile, and I immediately lay on top of her, laying my head on her stomach.

“How was therapy?”

I peek up at her with a smile. I really like this routine we've gotten into. I talk to the shrink, then come home and tell her how it went, or I don't. She never forces me to, but I like telling her about it. “We had a breakthrough.”

Her entire face lights up, and she leans over, kissing the top of my head. She came to my first few sessions with me because I was definitely struggling at first talking to a stranger. I didn't say anything at all the first week, but Vid helped. She ended up spilling her soul about her dad and even about the break-in. I think she was doing it to show me I could do it, too, but clearly, she also needed it. She somehow seems lighter. I go to my sessions alone now, and Vid started going to see her own therapist.

“You did?” She sounds so damn happy. I lean up and kiss her. “Wanna tell me what it was?”

I let out a sigh and dig my face in the crease of her neck, breathing in her scent. She runs her hand through my hair and doesn't push.

“It was about my addiction.” After a beat, I add, “The root of it.” I always figured it was shitty genetics. Family history of addiction equals I have an addiction. It made sense, but the shrink has other ideas.

“Do you feel better knowing it?” I feel myself smiling at her question. I like that that's what she asked instead of asking what the root was. I lean up to look at her and kiss her nose. She smiles, and I just stare at her in a daze.

“I didn't at first. The shrink says I was in denial, but I think it's just choosing not to believe it was true.” She breaks into a laugh and then cups my face.

“That's the definition of denial, babe.”

I squint my eyes at her. I know that, but saying I'm in denial doesn't sit right with me, but after today, I know I was.

“The root of my addiction is lack of family involvement.” Her brows scrunch, but I get why because it's the same reason I was in denial. “I didn't think that was the reason at first. My siblings and parents have always been my family. They involved me a lot, but it was the lack of family for that first decade of my life and from my bio family.”

“The twins one hundred percent fill the void now, but I grew up watching how Mom was with the twins, and while she treated me the same, I went home to someone who was her complete opposite.” Vid watches me carefully and kisses the top of my head before I go on.

“I always felt involved in all our family activities, but there was always that voice in the back of my head telling me I didn't belong with them.” We talked about how I didn't want to be in the family picture when they first adopted me, and that's when it clicked.

She gives me a small smile and runs her hand through my hair. “You do belong with them, and now you belong with me too.” She leans in, quickly tapping a kiss on my lips. “I’m your family now.”

I feel a smile touch my lips as I look between her soft eyes. I love this woman. Everything about her I just love. She’s so beautiful, and not even her face, but... her entire soul and being is just—God, I love her. I want to spend the rest of my existence in her presence. How ever she’ll have me.

A brow suddenly forms in between her eyes, and I feel myself smiling at that, too. “What?” She turns her head to the side, and my smile grows. Instead of answering, I shake my head and bury my face in the crease of her neck.

“I feel better about tomorrow’s game too.” My voice comes out a bit muffled, but I’m sure she understood me. Our team hasn’t gotten eliminated so far, but tomorrow is the last game of the World Series, and it’s going to make or break us—August’s words, not mine.

I would call him dramatic, but he’s right. It’s the *World Series*, so we’re all a bit nervous about this game, whether we admit it to each other or not.

“Well, I’m glad you feel better about the game. I just want to give you a heads up, though.” She taps my head, but I don’t look up. “I’m going to be rooting for the other team.” At that, my head shoots up, and I look at her. I almost climbed off at her.

“The fuck?!”

She breaks into a laugh, and I squint my eyes at her.

“Did you forget who you’re playing against tomorrow?” I squint my eyes at her harder, and she bites back a smile. “You’re playing against my mom’s team, Sire. How am I supposed to bet against my own mother?” She laughs again when I climb off of her and fold my arms.

The main reason our team is so nervous is because we’re playing against Tampa. Not just because it’s the Tampa Bay Rays but because Vid’s mom is their coach. I’m sure she can

coach the worst team in the league and make it to the playoffs, maybe even win.

We've only made it to the final round of the playoffs twice since I signed with the team four years ago, but both times, we've lost to Vanessa Gomez. I know we technically lost to her team, but it feels like losing to her.

Vid grabs my chin and turns my face so I'm looking at her, and I shoot her a playful glare. I can't really be mad; she's her mom, and I'm only her boyfriend.

"I was only teasing. Change your face." She smiles when I smile and kisses me. When she tries to climb on top of me, I playfully push her off.

"Uh uh. Bet all your money on her team." She laughs and straddles me anyway as I go on. "When we whip their ass tomorrow, and you're broke after you lose that bet, I'll still let you have some of my hundreds of millions that this hand is worth." I wave the hand I pitch with in her face, and she playfully shoves it away, hysterically laughing.

"That hand wouldn't even cost *one* million if it wasn't for me." She points at her chest. "You know, the one that healed you." She pokes my chest and reminds me of the physical therapy that put me back in the season.

"You were also the one that made me a better pitcher," I mumble and immediately regret saying it as she shoots up.

"So you finally admit it! My advice did help!" I throw my head back as I laugh at her excitement. When we first met, she told me I wasn't throwing my best at my first game. I was an arrogant asshole, as she put it, and told her thanks, but I knew what I was doing. I pitched the way she told me to the next day, and here we are now.

I hook my finger into the belt loop of her jeans and pull her closer, but she looks like she's waiting for my response and doesn't sit on me. "Yes. I admit it." I quickly give in and pull her back onto my lap. Her smile is beaming, and I no longer regret saying it.

“You may as well also admit that you were being an arrogant asshole.” I bite my cheek so I don’t say the words. I deny it way too much to just admit it now. She crosses her arms, still on my lap, and she waits for me to say it.

“We can sit here and wait all day.”

“No, we can’t. We have a flight to catch.” We’re leaving for Florida tonight for tomorrow’s game, but when I try to stand, she pushes my chest. With a small grin, I wrap an arm around her waist, standing from the couch while carrying her. She breaks into a laugh and tries to stand, but I wrap her legs around myself.

At the sound of our front door opening, my head shoots in that direction, as does Vidia’s. August walks in with a smile, like he’s happy to be fucking home. As if he lives here.

“Hey, guys!” His eyes cast down on Vid and me, the way I’m carrying her. “Were ya about to do dirty things?”

I roll my eyes at his disgusted face. Vid quickly turns back to me, shyly avoiding my eyes. “No,” she answers too quickly, and I feel myself smirking. We weren’t going to do anything; we definitely are now, though.

“Yeah, we were. She was just about to fuck me. Leave.”

“Gross!”

I ignore August and keep my eyes on Vid. She pulls the front of her shirt up, covering her face, and I laugh at her embarrassment. She’s only acting like this because of the idiot in front of us.

I lean forward a bit so my mouth is by her ear. “Stop acting like you don’t want to,” I say low enough just for her to hear. She sneaks a peek up at me, and although the bottom half of her face is still covered, I can tell she’s smiling from her eyes.

“We have a flight to catch, so stop being horndogs.”

I shoot August a glare, but he doesn’t see it because he’s sitting on the damn floor with Athena on his lap. Vid climbs off of me, and I grow more annoyed at my brother. “August, what did I tell you about making copies of my fucking keys?”

He looks up from the dog at my tone, and he looks confused. “I told you not to leave them lying around, and besides, I don’t get why I can’t have a copy. I gave you a pair of my house keys.” Yeah, and I gave them back to him. His door is always unlocked anyway, but I don’t need a key to his house because I don’t live there. Something he doesn’t understand.

“You can’t have them because you come unannounced. It’s rude.”

He looks completely offended and stands from the floor. “Hazel was just complaining to me that *you* walk in without knocking.”

“I always tell you guys when I’m going over, though, and your girl complains about everything.”

“Do you not want me here? Me, your own brother.” Here he goes with this shit again. I swear he says shit like that just to make me feel bad, but I know he probably really thinks that because he sounds so hurt. It’s not that I don’t want him here; it’s the fact that he can call before literally walking in.

“We want you here, August.” Vid walks over to him, and I roll my eyes at how soft she makes her voice to reassure him. “You can keep the key. Just call before coming, okay?” He smiles at her, and I roll my eyes at him again. Vid gives him a hug, and when he leans down, he wraps one arm around her waist and stands up straight, lifting her with him.

“Put her down.” He fucking laughs but doesn’t and spins with her instead. When I make my way to them, he literally drops her right before I can reach him. Vid stumbles a bit, and he breaks into a laugh when he sees my face.

“I only did it to piss you off, calm down.” He holds his hands up in surrender. “You were being mean.” He shrugs, and I roll my eyes at him. When he turns and grabs our bags for us, I snatch Vidia’s bag from him. He laughs again, and I shove him, biting back a smile.

“Okay, we’re going to be late.” Vid opens the door for us. “Let’s go.” We drop off Athena at the dog sitter and head for

the airport.



“I’M NERVOUS.” I TURN TO Vidia, and she gives my hand a reassuring squeeze.

“You should be.” Well, that isn’t very fucking reassuring. She laughs at whatever expression is on my face, and I look out the window of our ride. We’re on our way to Vida’s mom’s house, and my palms are actually sweating.

I’m well aware that I already met her mom, but that was four years ago. Since then, she’s grown to hate me because my *awesome* girlfriend ratted on me and told her mom I broke her heart.

“Wait, you’re actually scared?”

I turn back to Vid, and she seems genuinely confused. “Of course I am Vidia. She hates me.” I’ve spoken to her almost every time she and Vid are on the phone, which is a lot, but I can’t tell if we’ve made progress. We played against her team a few times, but she was too busy to actually talk to me and wasn’t staying in town for long, so we couldn’t invite her over.

“She doesn’t hate you.” Vid shrugs shyly. “She just doesn’t like you very much and would prefer if I dated someone else.” Oh God. I sink into the back seat and run my hands down my face. This is going to be a nightmare.

“I already told you, Sire. It doesn’t matter what she thinks.”

“And I already told you, Vidia. Yes, it does,” I immediately counter. “You care a lot about your mom’s opinion, and even if you didn’t, *I* do.” I keep my face buried in my hands, and she hugs my head, kissing the top of it.

“You’ll survive.” I don’t think I will. A few minutes later, we’re in front of a huge white house. I grab our bags and look toward the house. Brick floors make two paths leading to the house. Between the path is a pretty big patch of grass and one single palm tree.

“Woah.” I look up, taking in the size of the house one more time. “Why am I just remembering your mom is a billionaire?”

Vidia laughs beside me and tries to take one of the bags, but I don't let her. “You should see our house in DR.” She looks around with a smile. “I kind of missed it here.” A nostalgic look is on her face. I know she didn't grow up here, but they moved here from New York when she was in high school. She says she prefers LA, but I'm sure she loves it here, mainly because this is where her mom is.

“We'll get an apartment here and visit more often.” I kiss her forehead, and we make our way into the house once Vid enters a code. I look around as we make our way through the entrance. This entire house is gorgeous. The ceiling is incredibly high, and the floors look like they were just polished. We enter the living room, and Vid spins with open arms, letting out a sigh.

“God, I missed this.” She walks over to the couch, and instead of walking around it to sit, she rolls over it, disappearing. She peeks her head up and waves me over. “She's not home, you can breathe.” I let out a breath and make my way over to her.

I walk around the couch, unlike she did, and flop down next to her. “What was that you were saying about not caring about her opinion?” I look ahead out the floor-to-ceiling window, matching ours, that looks out the backyard.

She shakes her head at me. “Were you being serious about getting an apartment here?”

“Yup.” I turn to her, and she has that beautiful smile I love on her face. I pull her onto my lap, kissing her slowly. “We're here for a week with nothing to do besides my game tomorrow. We can look at a few places if you want.” She gives me a nod before leaning in again, her lips finding mine.

“This feels familiar.” I pull away from Vid at the sound of her mom's voice and practically throw her off my lap so I can stand. “At least your pants aren't down like last time.” She descends down the stairs, and I painfully close my eyes at the reminder of how we first met.

“Cion, Mami,” Vid says as she chuckles and rises from the couch to kiss her mother’s cheek.

“Dios te bendiga.” Her mom kisses Vid’s cheek, then looks over at me, and I give her a shy smile.

“Hi.” *Say something else, idiot.* “How’ve you been?” We’ve been speaking in English on our last few phone calls, but now I wish I greeted her in Spanish.

I remember what Vid said about kissing her cheek instead of shaking her hand, so I quickly made my way to her. She must be able to tell my intention because she leans in, and we sort of sideways hug as our cheeks brush over each other.

“Good, and yourself?”

“Good.” *Good? You moved in with her daughter a few months ago, and you’ve only been good?!* “Great, actually,” I correct myself, and she only nods, clearly studying me. I feel my skin burning under her gaze, and I quickly look away to Vid for help.

“So,” she quickly saves me, “I see you got the couches you’ve been dying for.” She taps the seat next to her, and I go back to my seat on the huge white couch beside her. Her mom sits on the loveseat a few feet from us.

“Mhm, don’t they look better than the other ones?” She looks at her couches like she’s in love with them, so I’m assuming Vid wasn’t being dramatic, and she really was dying to get these.

“They definitely do, but the other ones were so comfortable. Did you get rid of them?” Vid asks.

“Of course not. I moved them to the other sala. I couldn’t just throw them away. *Estas loca?*” I know sala is living room, and I smile at her last part.

Vanessa looks at me like she’s waiting for me to say something, so I do. “You have a very nice house.”

“You’ve only seen la sala.”

“And you have a very nice sala.” I give her a cheery smile, and she only nods. I can’t tell if that nod was good or bad, so I

look back over at Vid. She gives me a small smile, but I can't tell if it's a *you're doing good* smile or a *stop talking* smile.

I try not to slouch in my seat, although I want the couch to swallow me whole. I can't believe we agreed to stay here with her for the week, but I, of course, couldn't say no to her and make her hate me more, so here we are. For a week.

"How's your Spanish coming along?"

"Muy bien." I nod with a smile, and Vidia laughs beside me.

"Bueno..." I learned that exactly means 'well' and not in a good way. "I'll act impressed for V." I slouch a bit at her bored tone but try not to show that her words affected me.

"Ma, don't be like that. He's trying." Vid's tone is soft, like she doesn't want to speak up to her mom, but I know she isn't scared of her; she just hates fighting with her.

"De la misma manera que trató de usarte." No way am I trying to figure out what she said, not only because she said it fast but because her tone alone tells me it wasn't good.

I look over at Vid for any indication of what she said, and her face alone tells me I was right. It wasn't good. "De verdad, Ma. I already told you that was a misunderstanding. If you invited us to stay here so you can be like this, then nos vamos." She sounds upset, but I can't help but smile at the way she switches between languages. *I love it when she speaks Spanish.*

"You're right." I look back at her mom, and she sounds like she also feels bad. "Disculpe."

"Decir lo a él, no a mí."

Her mom looks over at me with a small smile. "Are you hungry?"

Vidia sighs, but I give her mom a smile anyway. "Starving." We ate on the way here, but her mom doesn't know that, and the house smells like she cooked before we arrived, so we eat.

Dinner goes a bit better than whatever went down in the living room. Her mom keeps throwing slightly mean comments at me that I take, but for the most part, it's good.

Vidia is back to smiling, and it's clear she missed her mom, so I'm glad we're staying for the rest of the week.

"I wish Hazelnut would've stayed." I'm very glad Hazel and August got a hotel instead of also staying here with us, but I don't say that because Hazel may as well be her other daughter.

"I think she mentioned she is planning on hanging out with you while we're here," I say instead, and that makes her smile. We continue eating, talking about nothing in particular, and although I wasn't that hungry, I asked for seconds because she's a really good cook.

"No! That is not how it happened." Vidia is in a laughing fit as we both try to tell the same story to her mom differently.

"Yes, it is." I chuckle, and she shakes her head, still laughing. "Okay, so how did it happen?" When I glance over at her mom, she watches us with a warm smile on her face. I'm not one hundred percent sure if I won her over after dinner or if she's only doing it for Vid.

"You tried scaring me, and my dog attacked you. There's no other way to put it." I squint my eyes at her, and when she does it back, I attack her with tickles.

"Admit it, Vidia." She laughs and shakes her head. "Admit it." I continue tickling her, and when I hear her mom laughing in front of us, my smile somehow grows.

"She told the dog to attack you, didn't she?"

"Yes!" We're all a laughing mess on the couch. I did try scaring Vidia; that part of her retelling was the same, and Athena did end up attacking me. That's true, too, but Vidia literally said, "Get him." The only reason I still have my leg is because Athena thankfully recognized me and realized we were playing, so she only playfully bit me, but it still kind of hurt, and even her playful growls are scary.

"Even your mom knows. Just admit it, you little shit." I shut my mouth as soon as that last part leaves my mouth, but I quickly relax when her mom breaks into a laugh at my nickname for her daughter. I definitely won her over.

“Fine, I did, but—” I immediately reach for her, and she tries to squirm away, but I grab her before she can, and I playfully bite her neck. She lets out a shriek, and I do it again.

“You don’t like it, huh?” She breaks into a laugh. “I’m telling Athena to get your ass, see how you like it.”

“You better not.” She squints her eyes at me, and I roll my eyes. I know I already knew she commanded Athena to get me, but I’m a bit shocked. She denied it so much I thought I was hearing things.

When I look back at her mom, she’s watching our interaction in a sort of awe. “You said you prefer cats, right?”

She nods with a smile. “They’re a lot calmer. Dogs need too much attention.” She waves off the idea of a dog with her hand.

“That much I agree with. Athena isn’t attention-obsessed like a puppy, and maybe that’s because she went through a lot of training, but she seeks attention quite a bit.” I think it’s because she’s getting used to all the attention August gives her when he comes over. Vid and I, of course, don’t neglect her, but we don’t sit on the floor with her hours on end like he does.

“No, I couldn’t have such a huge dog. V sends me pictures all the time, and she’s cute, but—aye, no, I can only imagine the drool on my couches, no, no, no.” I laugh at how she makes it seem like dirtying her couches would be a nightmare.

“She doesn’t drool... much.” I’m still laughing at the way she scrunches her face as she shakes her head no.

“I don’t like dogs porque hacen un desastre.” I know that means a big something, but I turn to Vid in question.

“A big mess,” she whispers, and I nod. She turns back to her mom, and I don’t miss the smile still on her face. “Sire was the one that got me Athena.” I give her a small smirk for the way it sounds like she’s talking me up.

“And he’s crazy for doing such a thing.” I give a short laugh and wrap my arm around Vid, pulling her into me so she’s leaning against me.

“Estoy loco por ella.” I don’t have their heavy Spanish accents, but I don’t think I butcher it too bad or even at all because her mom gives me another smile.

“Did I show you the stingrays he got me?”

Her mom’s brows rise a bit. “Stingrays?” I nod at her with a smile, and Vid pulls out her phone for a picture of the rays we adopted. “You’re so easily bought, V.”

“Why’d you say it like that?”

I look between them because I missed something.

“So... disappointedly.” Her mom did say it like that, but I think she was only joking.

“Aye, Vidia.” She rolls her eyes at us. “Everything is forgotten and forgiven because of a cute dog and a stingray? Or was it all the land he also got you? I didn’t raise you to be... tan materialista.”

“Gran padre de dios.” Vid looks up to the ceiling, clearly annoyed. “Ya me voy porque ni siquiera puedes intentarlo para cinco minutos.” She gets up and says we’re leaving, but I grab her hand, stopping her.

“I didn’t buy her anything to be forgiven.”

“Forget it, Sire. She—” I cut Vid off and continue making my case to her mom because this tension between them is obviously bothering Vidia. She and her mom are super close, and I don’t want this to fuck that up.

“I’ve never gotten her anything with the idea that ‘this will make Vidia forgive me for trying to use her.’” Her mom studies me as I go on. “Which I didn’t, by the way. I know she already told you that, but I never planned on using her to get to you or the MLB.”

She doesn’t look like she believes me, but I can’t be mad at her for being a protective mom, so I continue. “This ring I got her four years ago.” I hold up Vid’s hand, and her mom’s eyes drop to it, then back up to me.

“I gave it to her for her birthday. I noticed she played with an old ring she had whenever she got nervous, so I looked into

it and got her this anxiety ring. She and my sister are about the same ring size, so I dragged her to five stores to try on a bunch of rings.” Vid shakes her head as she chuckles softly.

“That’s beside the point, though. She spins that ring when she’s nervous. She spun it three times within the hour we’ve been here. Once, when you asked me how my Spanish was, then again while we were eating and you asked how her therapy was going.”

“And the third time?” Her mom asks.

“Right now,” I say without even glancing at Vid, but from the corner of my eyes, I notice her drop her hand to her side. Her mom has a slight smile on her face, so I go on.

“I got her Athena not because she was a cute dog that she’s always wanted but because after a psycho broke into her house, she had nightmares for weeks, and the first day she got her new apartment when she should’ve been celebrating, she couldn’t fathom the thought of sleeping there alone. I got her a dog so she can sleep better at night.”

Vid sits back down next to me, but I keep my eyes on her mom. “All that land I bought her? When I took her to the sunflower field that first time, her smile wouldn’t leave her face. She kept glancing out into the field, and it was like she could’ve stayed there forever in pure bliss. Now she can.”

“I spent almost three million dollars on her to see her smile.” I hear Vidia let out a small gasp, and her mom’s eyebrows rise just the slightest, like she’s *almost* impressed, so I finish off so she can be.

“That smile is also the reason I adopted two of her favorite animals for her. While her best friend was giving me a hard time when trying to buy the damn things, I was plotting a robbery at a rescue center for two stingrays so that Vidia could smile when she looks at pictures of them three times a day.”

Vidia grabs my hand.

“*That’s* why I bought her all those things, not to be forgiven. You can’t buy forgiveness. All is not forgiven because I

bought her things but because I put in the work and *tried*, and all is definitely not forgotten.”

“I catch myself watching her sleep sometimes and wish I could go back in time to four years ago so that I never hurt her. If that doesn’t impress you, then please act like it does for her, just for now, and I’ll say it all again in Spanish on Christmas when we come to visit again.”

A smile finally grows on her mom’s face, and she crosses her arms. “Por fin.” I feel my brows crease, and I look between her and Vid. Realization crosses Vid’s face, and she shakes her head with a smile.

“He took enough blows for you?” I’m missing something again. Vid notices my confusion and explains. “I didn’t know that’s what she was doing, but—” She shakes her head before continuing.

“She likes to push and push people until they push back, testing how long they’d last and how they’d react.” Before I can respond, her mom speaks up.

“I just wanted to know if you’d stand up to me for her. You’re the first boy who has.”

I turn back to Vidia, needing to know if this means what I think it means. “She doesn’t hate you.” I feel a smile growing because it feels like I just passed some really weird and really fucked up test. Her mom stands and opens her arms to me. I immediately shoot from my seat and hug her back.

“Let’s see how long you can last in the ring tomorrow.” She reminds me that we’re friends today, but we’ll be enemies on that field tomorrow.

“I’ll make it to the final round.” She smirks at my confidence.

“We don’t get participation awards for the World Series. If you make it to the last round, you have to win, or it was all for nothing.” I try not to back down, even with the intimidating stare she’s giving me. I don’t know why I’m surprised she takes baseball this seriously, but she does, so I can’t lose to her tomorrow.

“I’ll make sure someone gets you a participation award for just trying tomorrow.” I hope my cockiness doesn’t come off too strong, but she only scoffs as she turns away with a smile.

“Don’t push your luck, playboy.” When she’s out of the room, I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding and turn to Vid. She has a smile on her face, but her brows rise a bit.

“She won’t let you live that down if you don’t win tomorrow.” Yeah, I didn’t think so.



“FUCK!” MY HEAD SNAPS TO August at his sudden outburst.

“We’re fucking losing!” His words put a pit in my stomach. I usually don’t care this much about losing as long as I played and did my best but shit. It’s different now; it feels like I have to win to also win over Vid’s mom.

“Calm down, August.” He doesn’t. He takes his hat off, pulls his scrunchie off, and his box braids fall around his face. He starts taking out one braid and then re-braiding it. *Shit*, he must be really nervous.

“Hazel is going to kick your ass if you fuck up your hair.”

His eyes shoot to mine, and he quickly re-braids his strand of hair and ties it back again so he won’t nervously play with it. He made Hazel braid his hair in cornrows last night, only to change his mind and get box braids this morning. She won’t be pleased with him taking his braids out.

“Sit the fuck down, August. You’re making everyone nervous.” He’s pacing the dugout, and every batter that goes out onto the field looks scared because of him. He’s always one to have it together, so he needs to get it together.

“Go do a fucking cartwheel and make us laugh—we need it.” He’s good at making us laugh, but he stops pacing and turns to me offended.

“Do I look like a fucking clown?” I chuckle at his tone, and he shakes his head with a smile. That’s more like it. A few of our teammates go to bat, but no one scores like we need them

to. When it's August's turn to bat, he rushes over to me and sits next to me on the bench.

“What are you—”

“I'm not going. Send somebody else.” He can't be for real. I turn so I'm fully facing him.

“Don't be a fucking idiot. We can't change the lineup, you know that. Go out there, now.” We don't have time for this bullshit, so I'm not entertaining him today.

“Sire, we have two outs.” He says it like it changes the fact that he still needs to go either way. “We're losing, and it's the last inning. If I strike out, that's it. I cost us the game.” He sounds so fucking scared, petrified even. I let out a sigh and put my hands on his shoulder.

“We're only losing by one point. I'm batting next. All I need you to do is get on base, and I'll bring you home.” He looks hesitant, and I give his shoulder a soft shake. “Just get on base, August.”

“Okay.” He nods, and I let out a breath. “They're fast out there, though, Sire. What if—”

“You're faster.” I look into his eyes and give him a firm nod. He smiles, then hugs me, and I quickly hug him back. “Okay, go.” He squeezes me before letting go and runs onto the field. I get up to watch him play. It helps my nerves because he makes it look so easy; you would've never guessed he was so nervous with the way he gracefully swings, hitting a double.

My eyes follow him across the field as he runs to second base. The opposite team throws in the ball quickly, but August is faster and safely makes it to base. *Good job, kid.* I nod and grab my bat, walking out on the field.

I get into position and take a deep breath as the pitcher looks over his shoulder to August, checking if he's going to steal, but I doubt August will. I watch the pitcher carefully as his shoulders lift and fall, clearly letting out a breath.

When he throws his first pitch, I let it pass me and don't swing. I'm proven that was the wrong choice because the

umpire calls a strike. I shake that one off and get ready for the next one.

As it comes hurdling my way, I take a swing, but I am late on it, and the ball passes me. The crowd starts yelling, and I turn to August to find him stealing third. I quickly take a step back and glance at the catcher. He's looking for the ball, but by the time he grabs it and throws it into the field, August is already on third.

I feel myself smirking when I hear the catcher for the Rays mumble a curse. August stealing definitely just made him nervous. We only need one point to tie the game and two to win. *You can do this.*

I step back on home plate and study the pitcher before he throws. *You have two strikes.* I can't miss this one. I take a step back before he throws his pitch and take a deep breath. Fuck, I should not be this nervous. *It's just a game.*

I glance over at August, and he's hunched over with his hands on his knees, watching me. We hold each other's gaze for a second, and then he nods. I nod back and get back onto base.

I raise my bat and get back into position. The pitcher slightly turns to the side and holds his hands up by his mouth, preparing to throw. In a quick move, he's lifting his leg and launching the ball my way.

Without thinking, I swing, and at the sound of my bat hitting the ball, I take off. I run without watching for the ball, but as I hear everyone yelling, I glance in the direction the ball went.

I reach first base just as I turn my head to look, and the ball leaves the field, landing in a crowd of fans who dive for it. *Holy fucking shit!*

"Yeah, Sire!" I glance over at August in shock. He's at home base. *The game is tied.* "Come on!" At the reminder that I still need to run, I take off but come to a jog when I realize the ball isn't in the field anymore.

I smile to myself and hold up one finger as I jog the bases. On my way to the last base, my entire team is already out on

the field, by home base with August. I run to them, and they clear the plate for me.

As soon as my foot touches home base, solidifying our win, the entire team is cheering and jumping, tapping my back and head. “Let’s fucking go!” I throw an arm up in the air in excitement.

I feel someone grab me, and before I know it, the team is holding me in the air. I throw my head back laughing, and when I turn, they also lift August right beside me.

“We fucking did it!” August leans over to hug me. We’re both still laughing when he practically tackles me. With the way he threw himself at me, everyone holding us up is caught off guard, and half of us are falling over.

I rise to my feet, still laughing, as I give August a hand up and hug him again. “We did it!”

He squeezes me, and then my feet suddenly are in the air.

“Congratulations, boys!” We all turn at the sound of Vanessa’s voice. Half of the team thanks her, and the other half is sort of in shock because this is the third time we’ve played against her in the World Series, but it’s the only time we’ve won.

Her eyes land on mine, and she nods her head to the side before walking a few feet away. I follow behind her with a smile I can’t seem to wipe. “Would you like your participation award as a trophy or ribbon?”

She chuckles as she shakes her head. “Trophy. Everyone knows ribbons aren’t real awards.” I throw my head back with a laugh, grateful as fuck that I finally won her over.

“So,” I start, “do I have your blessing now?”

Her brows slightly furrow a bit, but then her confusion is gone. “My blessing? You plan on proposing to my daughter?” I can’t tell if her tone is approving or not, but I don’t let it get to me.

“Eventually, yes, but I meant your blessing to date her.”

She nods a few times in thought and hums to herself. “Men don’t usually ask the family for their blessing just to date.” She turns her head to the side, and I can tell she’s glad I’m not other men. “And if I say no?”

“I’m not going to break up with her if that’s the answer you’re looking for.” No way in hell I’m letting Vid go. Whether I won her mom over or not. “But then I’ll just keep trying to impress you and ask you again in a few hours in Spanish.” She laughs at my jab.

“I love your daughter, and she loves you, so yeah, I want your blessing to simply date her because your opinion of me matters to me.”

She nods once, not bothering to cover the smirk on her face. “You had my blessing months ago.” She quickly notices the confusion on my face. “When you answered her phone call and ran to save her? I know you two weren’t on good terms back then, but you were man enough to answer her call when she needed you. That’s the kind of man I want for my daughter.”

“You don’t only have my blessing to date her but also to be the one standing at the altar at her wedding.” I feel my chest swell, hearing that. I pull her in for a hug, and the minute I release her, I’m being tackled to the ground.

“You did it!” Vidia kisses me before I can recover from being thrown to the ground. I burst into a laugh and wrap my arms around her as I kiss her again, still on the ground of the field.

“We can start building that house we talked about,” I tell Vid, and she looks between my eyes. I watch them shine brighter than any star as her smile grows.

“I thought you wanted to wait on building it?”

I shake my head and quickly kiss her. “We don’t need to wait anymore.” Her smile somehow beams brighter at my words. “Being with you feels like that first breath after drowning.”

She looks between my eyes, and hers suddenly soften.

“You’re my breath of fresh air, Vid. I plan to live out the rest of my life with you in our huge house and our backyard full of your sunflowers.”

She cups my face and pulls me in for a quick kiss. “I love you, mi amor. If that’s the plan, then I’m all in. As long as it’s with you.” I close the distance between us, and we lock it in. *This* is a plan I can go through with.

The End

Epilogue

SIRE

Five Years Later

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN here again?” I watch from across our bedroom as Vidia stares at herself in the mirror. She turns her head to the side, then turns her body.

“Are you sure I don’t look weird in this?” I let out a sigh and walk over to her. The dress she’s wearing hangs very loose; you can’t see her figure at all, which is the reason she wore it today, but she feels self-conscious because this isn’t the dress she wanted.

“You look beautiful, my love.” I kiss her forehead, then lean over and kiss her belly next. When I lean back up, she’s watching me with teary eyes.

“Vid.” I turn my head to the side and laugh as I pull her in.

“I’m sorry. I just love it when you kiss my stomach.” Her voice breaks, but I burst into a laugh anyway at how emotional she’s been. “Okay, I won’t cry again. Let’s just go.” She quickly pulls away and grabs my hand, leading us out.

We descend down the stairs, but she stops when we reach the bottom and looks out our window. With it going from the floor to the ceiling like she wanted, it looks out the backyard at the rest of the party.

“You’re good?” I glance down at her, and when she nods, I lead us back out. We walk over to everyone else, and Vid walks straight to August.

“Let me get her.” She holds her hands out to our daughter in his arms, but he pulls away greedily.

“My wife asked for her daughter, August.”

Vid smirks as always when I call her my wife. It’s been three years since I watched her walk down the aisle to me, but she still smiles the same every time. August gives Mariana one last hug and then kisses her head before giving her up to her mom. As soon as she’s in Vid’s arms, she leaps for the ground. “Down!”

Vid pulls her closer and rubs her face against our daughter. “Let me hold you.”

I smile at how demanding her voice comes out. Mariana tries to push her away, but Vid only holds her tighter.

“No, Mami!”

I walk over to them and kiss Marina’s head. “Let your mom hold you.”

Vid’s been crying about how she’s getting big too fast. I tried reassuring her that she only turned two today, but that somehow proved her point. Mariana sighs in defeat and goes limp in Vid’s arms, resting her head on her shoulder. Vidia smiles up at me, thanking me with her eyes, but then our daughter shoots her head back up.

“No more!”

Vid sighs, then leans over to put her down, and I laugh as Mariana walks off like she owns the place, but she may as well with how bossy she is. She definitely gets that from her mom. I pull Vid into my side and kiss the top of her head.

I pull her hand so we can sit with everyone else. I help her down the three steps that lead to our inground seating area. We sit on the couch around the fire pit, and I make Vid sit on my lap. She's been complaining that she's heavy; she's not, but I think it reassures her when I let her sit on my lap or even carry her up the stairs.

"I'm going in the bouncy house." August shoots up from his seat, and I shake my head at him.

"Wait, me too!" Sage shoots up next. "I didn't want to be the only adult in there, but let's go together."

I laugh at them and take a sip of my Sprite.

"Don't crush my daughter in there!" Vidia calls out to them as they race to the purple, castle-shaped bounce house. We let Marina pick out most of what she wanted for her birthday party. Vid says I need to stop spoiling her, but it's her birthday, so she can have whatever she wants.

Shit. It's her *birth* day. At the reminder of my gift, I kiss Vid's cheek and move her so I can stand. "Be right back." I quickly run into the house to grab her gift. On the way back out, I pass my mother-in-law talking with Hazel's mom.

"Para ti." I hand her one sunflower, and she smiles down at it, thanking me. I continue walking through the backyard to my wife. Once I make it back to her, I hand her the bouquet of sunflowers wrapped in a big pastel blue bow.

She smiles at her gift and then takes it. "Thank you, mi amor." I lean down kissing her. While it is our daughter's birthday, it's also my wife's birth day. It's the day she went through unbearable pain to bring our beautiful daughter into this world after nine long months. I show my appreciation to her for that every chance I get.

This morning, I went out back to the sunflower field and picked her twenty-six flowers. Nine for the nine months of being pregnant with Mariana. Fifteen for the fifteen hours she was in labor and two for the two years we've got to hold our daughter in our arms.

“Uncle Sigh! Titi Vid!” I turn my head to Isabella as she makes her way to me. “Right, it’s okay if I carry Mariana?” She folds her arms as she waits for my answer. I look up at Jackson, and he shakes his head, silently telling me to say no. I smile at him and then respond to his daughter.

“Yes, you can carry her.” Jackson rolls his eyes at me, and I chuckle at him. “She’s about to turn ten, Jackson. She’s old enough to carry my kid.”

“If she drops her, I don’t want to be blamed for it.” He puts his hands up in surrender and takes a seat with the rest of us. I notice Vidia spinning her wedding ring, and then she turns around.

“Make sure you hold her back, Isa!” Vid calls out to her. Mariana does like to throw herself sometimes, but it’s fine. Kids take falls. It’s not like she’ll be falling from very high. Isa is about four feet tall.

“She’s going to drop her.”

I turn my head to Lisette, and she laughs as she watches Isa try to pick up Mariana. “Just let her walk, Belle!” She calls out to Isabelle. I turn back around just as Mariana throws her head back and falls onto the grass from Isabelle’s arms.

“Oh my god!” Vidia shoots up from her seat, but I grab her hand.

“If she didn’t cry, just leave her.”

She looks down at me with the most panic in her face. “Are you insane?!” I bite back a laugh only because of the stern look she gives me. “Do you not check on her after she falls when I’m not home?!” I do, not that she falls much when Vid isn’t home, but I check on her. It’s just that she’s fine almost every time she falls, but as soon as we ask her if she’s okay and baby her, she fakes a cry for attention.

“Does me not checking on our daughter after she falls sound like something I would do?”

“Yes.” She answers so quickly I’m offended. “She said she’s a big girl once, and you let her run with it. Letting her do a bunch of crazy shit. She’s not a big girl, Sire.”

I take her hand and sit her back onto my lap. “I like to see her be independent, and I don’t let her do crazy shit *all* the time, beautiful. I let her jump into the pool once.”

She turns to me and is looking at me like I’m crazy. “Exactly my point. She can’t swim, and you let her jump anyway.” I laugh at the memory but cover it up with a cough at the way Vidia glares at me and quickly defend myself.

“I kept telling her not to jump, and what’d she do? She kept jumping, and I kept catching her before she hit the water. After the fifth time, I let her ass go in.” Vid rolls her eyes at me, but Mari was being a little shit and wouldn’t listen to me. “She didn’t jump in after that, and now she can swim. No one got hurt.” I kiss her neck, and she mumbles that I’m crazy, but my method worked.

I was literally right next to her when she jumped, and I didn’t leave her in for long. Either way, she learned her lesson the hard way, as kids need to sometimes. Vid is a bit overprotective, but I don’t tell her since she got offended the last time I tried telling her.

Mariana walks up to us and holds out her arm. “Band-aid.”

Vid takes her arm, searching for any cuts from her fall, but she doesn’t have any since she only fell from four feet onto the grass.

“Does it hurt, mi vida?”

Mariana nods her head as she pouts her lip. She’s in a band-aid phase and wants to put one on every excuse she gets. Her arm is fine because I watched her fall, and she fell on her butt, not her arm.

“Here.” I take her hand and pull her closer. “Let me kiss it better.” She smiles up at me, and I plant a kiss on her perfectly fine arm.

She turns to Vid next. “Mami, dale beso.”

Vidia smiles at her as she leans forward and kisses her arm. I smile proudly at how perfectly she speaks Spanish. I think she’s better at it than English, but I’m definitely not complaining.

“Titi.” She turns to Hazel next with her arm out. “Besito.”

“No, you little faker.” I roll my eyes at Hazel for saying no to a two-year-old, but I’m honestly not even surprised. When Mariana pouts, Hazel pulls her onto her lap as Mariana laughs and kisses her a bunch of times, up her arms and on her face.

I watch them with a warm smile as Hazel rubs her “hurt” arm. “Sana sana, colita de rana, si no sana hoy,” She looks over at Mari to finish.

“Sana mana!” We all break into a laugh as Hazel and Vidia correct her at the same time.

“Sanará mañana,”

Mariana repeats after them, and Hazel kisses the top of her head. “You’re spoiled rotten, you know that?” Hazel pinches her cheek, and I smile at their encounter.

“You my fairy God Mami, you spoil me.” I chuckle at how she says Hazel’s her fairy Godmother instead of just Godmother. August walks toward us and scoops Mariana from Hazel’s arms.

“And I’m your fairy Godfather.” He throws her so high into the air that Vid and I almost jump out of our seats before she lands in his arms.

“August!” We both yell, and he turns to us, confused.

“I’m not going to drop her, jeez.” His eyes widen at our panic, and he holds Mariana closer to him.

“Don’t throw her that damn high.”

He laughs at the worry in my voice and goes back to tossing Mariana into the air a few times, a lot lower than he previously was. A while later, we’re singing Happy Birthday to Mariana and taking pictures around the cake.

“Make a wish, Mari.” Vid leans over with our daughter in hand so she can blow her candles. Everyone cheers once she blows them out, and she looks up at us and then whispers in her mom’s ear.

“I wish I say the secret.” I don’t tell her that her wish won’t come true now that she said it but just kiss her forehead and look down at her mom, kissing her too. I slide my finger along the bottom of the cake and tap both of their noses, then lick my finger.

They both burst into a laugh, and I watch their smiles, beyond happy that they’re identical. Vidia’s smile is still one of my favorite things about her, and I’m glad our daughter has it, along with the rest of her face I was convinced she looked like me at first, but my mother-in-law showed me baby pictures of my wife, and our daughter is her spitting image. *Maybe the next one will look like me.*

Vidia hands out the candy bags to all of the kids, but when I hear Athena barking, my head snaps to the side. Just as I look, Mariana stands up straight and takes a step away from our infinity pool.

“I didn’t.”

I squint my eyes at her when I see her hide the remote control to the pool cover behind her back. She shrugs her shoulders with a guilty smile on her face. “I promise!”

I squint my eyes harder and bend down, walking toward her with my arms out to get her. She tries to run away, but Athena gets in her way, and I quickly catch her. I snatch the remote from her and wave it in front of her. “Are you lying to your dad?”

She shakes her head and giggles, and I’m usually the fun parent, but this isn’t funny. I lift her and turn more serious as I stand back up. “Where did you find this?”

She shrugs.

I give her a pointed look and wait for her to budge but she doesn’t. “*Where?*”

She lets out a sigh and goes limp in my arms. “In the cocina.” I shake my head and have no clue how she reached the kitchen drawers, but I’ll make sure to keep this somewhere else.

I adjust her so she can look at me. “If you want to go into the pool, you have to ask. No more taking this.” I show her the remote, and she nods.

We walk back to the party, and I’m glad Vidia missed this because she would have yelled at me for not putting the remote in one of the guest rooms like she said, but now I know to just listen to her.

Sage holds her hands out to us, and Mari leaps into her aunt’s arms. “Wanna go swimming?” she whispers to my daughter, and Mari quickly tells her yes.

“Mom said no swimming today.” I burst their bubble. Vidia said she didn’t want to be stressed about the kids being in the water, so no pool it is.

Sage tells Mariana she’s sorry when she pouts and pulls her closer, hugging her. “Okay, I know I said there was no hard feeling when you guys made Hazel and August her Godparents, but I’m jealous.” She kisses the top of her head and lets out a sigh.

I honestly felt bad not choosing Sage as Mariana’s Godmom. It was only fair that Vid picked one person and I chose one, and since she didn’t have anyone besides Hazel as an option, it made sense that she was her Godmother.

“Don’t worry, Sage, I’m jealous too.” Lisette leans over and kisses Mariana on the cheek. Of course she was also someone I considered to be my daughter’s Godmother, but like I said, Hazel was a no-brainer because of Vid.

Jackson was an option for Godfather, too, considering he made Vid and I Isabelle’s Godparents, but I of course had to pick August before him. That much was obvious.

Vid comes over to us, and when she gives me a small nod, a smile grows on my face. “You can be our next kid’s Godmother,” I say, and Vidia leans into me with a smile.

“Yeah, but that’s like what? In two years.” Sage slouches, and Vidia smiles at her.

“Or in a few months.” Vidia pulls her dress tighter around her, revealing her baby bump. Everyone gasps and rushes over

to hug and congratulate us.

“Wait, what the fuck, you’re huge. How did you hide your stomach for so long?” Hazel rubs her belly as Vid laughs.

I look down at my wife’s stomach and smile to myself. There were some complications at the beginning of her pregnancy. She was bleeding a lot, and it was all just scary as fuck. Some lady also touched Vid’s stomach and told us we would have a blue baby. Vidia is convinced she gave us mal de ojo and rubbed an egg on her stomach for some reason, but we just decided not to share the news in case anything went wrong. She’s been great, though, and our baby is healthy.

“Wait.” Sage looks like she just remembered something. “So who gets to be the Godmother, me or Lis?” I look over at Lisette, and she shakes her head with a small smile, silently telling me it’s okay to pick Sage.

“Both of you,” Vid says. I know they both can’t be the Godmother, but I’m sure Vid tells them they can so none of them will feel bad, which will make her feel bad. Lisette looks confused but smiles anyway.

“We can’t both be the Godmother. It’s okay if you choose Lisette. I understand you knew her longer, and she’s your favorite.” I smile as I shake my head at Sage’s sad tone. I only knew Lisette two years before I met her, and she knows I see them as equal.

“You both can be the Godmother if there are two babies.” *Two?* My head snaps over to Vidia, and she’s already watching me with tears in her eyes.

“Two?” She nods with a smile as a tear runs down her cheek. “We’re having twins?!” She nods again and laughs softly. *Holy shit, we’re having twins!* I pull her in for a hug with the biggest smile on my face.

“I wanted to tell you so bad.”

I pull away and kiss her as she cries.

“I was scared one might not make it, so I didn’t want to tell you there were two in case, but—”

“Vid, you—”

“I’m sorry.”

I shake my head and pull her closer. “It’s okay, my love, but don’t ever take on the weight of something like that alone. You don’t need to protect my feelings. We’re in this together.” She nods against me, and I pull away to look at her. As if she can read my thoughts, she goes on.

“They’re both okay. You know it’s a high-risk pregnancy, but they’re both healthy.” She looks down and rubs her belly. “I still think that girl who said they’d be blue gave us mal de ojo.” She sounds upset, but I laugh lightly and pull her in for another hug, holding her incredibly close. “Are you mad?” she whispers against me, but I don’t think anything she can say right now can make me mad.

“Of course not, my love.” I wipe her cheek and then kiss her where her tears fall. “Please stop crying, beautiful.”

“You stop crying.” She wipes my cheek from the tear I didn’t know was there, and we both let out a weak laugh.

“It makes sense why your stomach is so much bigger than when you were this far along with Mariana.” I lean down and kiss her stomach. I think I might actually scream in excitement. My body feels like I’m actually going to burst.

“You said it wasn’t that big when I asked you last night!” She playfully pushes me away from her.

“That’s because you kept crying about it. I didn’t want to make you feel bad.” She squints her eyes at me, and I do it back at her. Our moms come to hug us after we have our moment and congratulate us on the twins. *The twins.*

“Wow. Who would have thought you’d be the one to have twins?” August looks between his twin and me. I take Mariana back from Sage and kiss her cheek.

“Did you know Mami had two babies in her belly?” She nods with the biggest smile on her face. *This was the secret she wished to tell earlier.*

“Supreme!” I laugh at her word for surprise and hug her. Vid is staring at us in awe, and I pull her in on the hug. I bury my face between my daughter and pregnant wife, and that feeling is there again, like always.

Extend Epilogue

VIDIA

Three Years Later

NO MINE!”

“Hey!” The boys turn to look at me, guilt written all over their identical faces. “Are we supposed to snatch things?” They both shake their heads and drop the toy car before running out of the room. I let out a sigh and turn back around.

“Your brothers don’t listen very well,” I whisper to Mariana, and she covers her mouth as she giggles.

“They’re babies, Mom. They’re not big like me.” I laugh at how grown up she thinks she is. The minute we brought Zamir and Agustín home, she was in this big sister mode. It was adorable to watch, but I wish they’d stay this small. I lean over and kiss her cheek.

“Okay, piggy or bunnies?” I start detangling her curls, and she taps her chin as she thinks. She does this every time and always picks the same hairstyle.

“Piggies.”

“Really?” I’m surprised she switched it up today. I finish doing her hair and add a bow to each pigtail before lifting her from the counter.

She takes off running for the door the minute her feet land. “Daddy!” She runs into Sire’s arms, and he lifts her. A warm smile creeps on my face as I watch him close his eyes and hug her incredibly close.

“How was your day, princess?” He kisses her forehead, and she goes on about her day with her grandma Kat, as she watched the kids for us today, then the rest of her day with me once I was home from work.

“But then Zamir threw the mac and cheese at Agustín and then—”

“Agustín threw it, *mi vida*,” I correct her as she rats out her brother to their dad. She mixes up the twins sometimes, but she can tell them apart quite often. It’s impressive for a five-year-old.

She finishes off her story, and Sire listens to the whole thing, intrigued, as if she’s saying the most interesting thing ever. I’ve grown to love that most about him since the kids started talking. The way he listens to them.

He puts her down, and she walks out of the room, leaving my husband and I. He pulls me into a hug, and we both sigh in each other’s embrace.

“What’s wrong?” we both ask at the same time. We laugh softly, and I look up at him, my arms still wrapped around his neck. “You first.”

He shakes his head no. “You first, beautiful.” I smile up at him and get on my tippy toes to kiss him.

“Your sons have been a pain in my ass today.” He throws his head back, laughing, but I’m being serious. They’re usually very well-behaved—well, no. *Zamir* is usually well-behaved; Agustín, on the other hand, isn’t, but we’re two for three with how good Mariana is, so I can’t complain too much.

“Oh, now they’re *my* sons?”

“Yes, you know I always let them be yours when they aren’t my usual angels.” He laughs again, and I smile up at him. “No, seriously, Agustín is in a menace phase. He behaves badly on purpose, amor. Today, I told him not to pick off the petals from my flowers, and he looked me right in the eyes as he picked off a handful!” My jaw actually dropped when he did it, and I had to turn around so he wouldn’t see me laugh.

Sire laughs at his son’s behavior and kisses my forehead. “I’ll talk to him.”

I sigh again and rest my head on his chest. “Your turn.”

“It’s not nearly as bad as your horrible day,” he teases, and I look up at him.

“I didn’t say my day was horrible! I said your son was behaving horribly. The rest of the day was great.” I shrug, and he laughs. My day was great; work was good as always, and I got to hang out with Sire’s mom for a bit before she left. It was great until his kid was tearing my poor sunflowers apart, along with the rest of the house.

“The press conference went too damn long,” he grumbles, and I laugh at how it’s been years, and he still hates them. You’d think he’d get used to it by now. “No, seriously, now it’s too late for us to go.” His shoulder slouch, and I lean up to kiss him.

“I called and told them we’ll be late. We can still go if you want.” His eyes light up as he smiles down at me.

“I want to.” He nods quickly, and I smile at him. “Do you still want to?” He sounds so excited, even if I didn’t want to do this, I couldn’t tell him no.

“Of course, I want to. We gave this a lot of thought, and we’ve technically talked about this since we first met.” Realization crosses his face as he remembers our conversation about adoption in the aquarium all those years ago.

“Okay.” He nods once. “Let’s go.” I smile at him, and he pulls me in. Our lips meet, and his tongue quickly finds mine. I deepen the kiss, and it quickly becomes rushed and messy.

His hands slide down to my butt, and when I let out a soft moan, he groans, pulling away. “Your son is sleeping in his own damn bed tonight.” I break into laughter, and he pulls me in again for a quicker kiss. Agustín has been sleeping with us, and I told Sire not to let him, but he spoils the kids, and now our son has gotten into this bad habit.

“I thought you liked it when he slept with us?”

He smirks down at me and quickly kisses me again. “I do.” He taps two soft kisses on my lips before pulling away again and saying, “I like sleeping with you more, though.” I laugh lightly, and he leans in again, kissing down my neck.

“Well”—I tap his chest twice—“that’s too bad.”

He pulls away and looks down at me, confused. “And why’s that?”

“I told you not to let him sleep in our bed, and what’d you say? It’s only one night, Vid.” He laughs at how I mock him. “Now it’s been two weeks, so until you start actually listening to me, you can keep your hands to yourself.” I take his hands off my waist, and he’s still staring at me like he’s confused.

“So, we’re keeping sex from each other now, Vidia?” A tingle of pleasure shoots from my stomach straight between my legs just from the way he says my name. He looks down, and a smirk grows on his face when he notices me squeeze my legs together.

“Consider it motivation.”

He grins as he slightly shakes his head.

“And don’t say my name like that.”

His smirk grows as if that just interested him. “Say it like what, *Vidia*?”

I bite back a smile and squint my eyes at him. “Like you want to do dirty things to me because you can’t.” I don’t plan on actually keeping anything from him. I just want to see how quickly he’ll get Agustín back in his own bed.

“If this is the game you want to play, then so be it, but you won’t win.” He lightly traces the side of my body, from my hip

up to the side of my torso, and a chill runs down my back. “It’s not too late to call it quits, Vid.”

I feel a smirk growing on my face as I try to remember why that sounds so familiar. It takes me a minute, but my smirk quickly grows into a smile.

“If you’re scared I’m going to win, that’s all you have to say, Gryffindor.” When he throws his head back laughing, I realize he also remembers.

He keeps his eyes locked on mine as he calls out into the hallway. “Agustín!”

I bite back my smile at how he pronounces our son’s name. He was worried he’d sound like a gringo when saying it, but he picked up an accent the last few years speaking a lot more Spanish with the kids, and he says his name perfectly.

His eyes pierce into mine challengingly. I hear the kids, most likely Mariana and Zamir, saying *ouu* like Agustín is in trouble, and then I hear small footsteps running our way.

“What’s up, Doc?” Sire and I smile but keep our gaze on each other, neither of us backing down. Agustín is obsessed with Bugs Bunny; it’s how we got him to eat carrots, but now he won’t stop saying *what’s up, Doc?* Especially since he found out I’m a doctor.

“No more sleeping with Mami and I.” A smirk creeps on my face as his eyes continue to bore into me like I’m the one in trouble.

“What? Por que?!”

Sire doesn’t look away to answer, not wanting to lose whatever silent game we’re in. “Because Daddy said so. You’re a big boy. You can sleep in your own bed like sissy and twin.” I hear Agustín sigh beside us, but I refuse to look away from his dad.

“Can I stay one more night?” From the sound of his voice alone, I know he’s giving puppy dog eyes, and Sire’s jaw clenches because it’s his weakness with the kids.

“Awe, pobrecito, let him sleep with us one more night.” I tease, and Sire lets out a sigh. When I smirk at him, he squints his eyes at me, and I bite back a smile, knowing I’m making this harder for him.

“No. Last night was his last night.”

“Please?” Agustín drags out the pleading word, and I think Sire is going to fold, but then his eyes slowly sweep down my body and then back up to my eyes as he shakes his head.

“No, Agustín. You need to sleep in your own bed.”

I bite back a laugh, and Sire’s jaw clenches again.

“Are you playing the staring contest? Mami won. Can I play next?”

I give Sire a cocky smile, but he still doesn’t give in and doesn’t look away.

“No, you can’t.” Sire somehow stares harder. “I’ll talk to you about today’s behavior later, Agustín.” I try my best to stop smiling because I don’t want my kid to think I’m laughing at him for being in trouble when I’m really laughing at his dad’s struggles with self-control.

“Am I in trouble for breaking the sunny flower?” Agustín sighs, then adds, “And throwing the mac and cheese?”

“Hablamos ahorita.” With that, I hear little Agustín’s footsteps walking back down the hall, and then Sire shuts the door and locks it.

I wait for him to do something, but he only leans against it and stares at me. “I was expecting you to start ripping my clothes or something after locking the door?”

He grins as he shakes his head. “We’re keeping sex from each other, remember?”

“Yeah, but—”

“No buts, Vidia.” I swallow at the way he says my name again, but my throat feels dry, and I feel like I’m burning under his stare. “You know, I actually like this idea.” He pushes off the door and slowly walks to me, like a lion

stalking its prey. I go still as he keeps his heated gaze on me, softly moving my hair from my neck.

“You’ve been tasting a bit...” He slowly leans down to my neck. “Addictive lately.” He plants a feather-light kiss on my neck, just where I like it, and I practically shiver.

He moves up to my ear and whispers, “Maybe this sex strike will be good for me.” With that, he completely pulls away and somehow leaves me feeling empty. He leans against the door again, so nonchalantly, like he’s not also feeling what I am.

I try to catch my breath. When his eyes fall on my chest, watching the way it moves up and down, I try to take in a normal breath but end up holding my breath entirely.

I’m not going to let him win this, so I give a light shrug. “Well, in that case...” I bite back a smile and he squints his eyes at me. “Maybe we really should have a sex strike. Especially if you say I taste *addictive*.”

His brows furrow like he suddenly can’t tell him I’m joking, but I continue teasing him. “Your soberversary is coming up, so we can wait until then.” I nod like the supportive wife I am, and he pushes off the door.

“That’s not for another two months?”

“And a half.”

“But—”

“No buts, Sire.” A grin grows on his face as he catches on. I turn to grab my bag, and I know he’s watching me, so I sway my hips a bit.

Sire gets the kids ready and in the car. On the way there, we remind them to have good behavior at the orphanage. A few weeks ago, we explained to them what adoption was and how Sire was adopted. The twins were thrilled at the idea of another sibling, but Mariana threw a bit of a fit. I think it’s because we mentioned the new kid we’re bringing home might be older, and she wants to be the oldest.

Sire and I agreed we’d adopt the oldest kid at the orphanage, so we had to try to explain to Mariana that she’d still be the

twins' big sister. She thankfully came around. I know she's just a kid, and we're the adults, so what we say goes, but I don't want to bring a new kid into our lives and have Mariana resent them.

When we pull in front of the building, Sire turns to me before shutting the car off. Before he can even say anything, I beat him to it. "I'm sure."

He smiles and nods once before helping me get the kids out of the car. Sire takes my hand after knocking on the door and I pull in a deep breath.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hale, welcome."

I look over at my husband and he's already watching me with a smile. When we got married Sire wanted to change his name and take the name of the family who saved him. I knew he wanted to change his name when he was adopted so I loved the idea the minute he voiced it.

The social worker lets us in and somewhere along the time we've been here, Sire and I get separated. I go around with Mari, and I assume he's with the twins, meeting the other kids. This house is pretty big, and there are about thirteen kids total, but I don't think I've gotten around to meeting them all.

"Can we adopt a girl so I can have a sister?"

I smile down at Mari and tell her maybe because I don't want to make any promises. We're going to change not only our lives but the life of whoever we decide on, and I feel so guilty that I can't adopt them all. Most of the kids light up when they meet Mariana and compliment her dress.

"Vidia!"

I turn to Sire as he whisper-shouts for me. I glance up the stairs, and he waves me over. "Come here, hurry."

I feel a crease grow in my brows and walk up the stairs. He disappears before I make it to him, and I look into two bedrooms before I find him. I walk into the room to find him sitting on the floor. There are two bunk beds in this room, like the other two. I glance around, confused, before I notice a little girl on the bottom bunk.

I stand next to Sire to get a better look at her. She's already in her pajamas, unlike the more formal clothes the other kids are still in. My eyes fall on her shirt and do a double take when I notice it's an under-the-sea shirt. It's sea blue with a few different marine animals, but my eyes draw into the stingray. I don't think much of it and give her a smile.

"Hi."

She only smiles in return, and I turn to Sire in question, but he keeps his eyes on her.

"How old are you?" I ask, trying to get her to say something.

"Nine." I give her another smile. She's the oldest we've seen, so maybe this is why Sire was so excited for me to meet her.

"This is my wife, Vidia," Sire introduces me. "Can you tell her your name?" Sire turns to me and keeps his eye on me excitedly. *What is going on?*

"Sapphire."

I look over at her with a smile, but then it clicks, and my head snaps back to Sire. He nods like he's also in shock. I turn back to Sapphire, and she moves her hair from her face, revealing a small scar across her eye. "Sapphire Majena."

I stare at her, and I can't bring myself to look away. When I was pregnant with the twins, this random lady came up to me and touched my belly. She didn't ask, which was the first weird thing, but I also wasn't even showing at the time. She told me I would have a blue baby, and I was worried she was foreshadowing one of my kids choking or giving us mal ojo, but... her *name* is blue.

I study the little girl in front of us for a minute. Her hair is pin straight compared to our other kids, and it's light brown, like my dyed parts. Her eyes meet mine for half a second, but I notice how dark they are.

I look over at Sire, still in disbelief. "This is a bit weird, right?" I whisper to him and steal a quick glance at Sapphire again.

“I mean, a little, yeah, but Lisette’s spiritual ass would say it’s a sign.”

“Who’s Lisette?” We both turn back to the bed and give her a smile.

“My sister,” Sire explains.

She nods a few times, and when she moves her hair again, I lean forward. “Would you like me to help you tie it?” I gesture to her hair, and she nods, turning around so I can tie half of her hair up. I’m not sure how long we sat on the floor and talked to her, but our kids find us soon after.

“I have a painting like that in my room.” Mari points at the stingray on Sapphire’s shirt.

“You like to paint? Me too.”

I smile, and Sire pulls me into him.

“I didn’t paint it by myself. Titi Lis helped me. My cousin, Isa, and my brothers helped us too, so some parts are messy, and Mami won’t let us fix it because the twins will be sad, but it’s my room.” I can’t help but laugh at Mari as she goes on. I keep my eyes on them as they keep talking, watching Sapphire come out of her shell.

“What are you thinking?” Sire whispers into my ear, and I turn to him.

“I think this is just a coincidence...” I steal a glance at Sapphire before looking back at Sire, and he’s still watching her. “But I also know this is the third orphanage we’ve visited, and we keep saying we need a sign. Her name aside, this *feels* right.”

Sire smiles softly and kisses the top of my head. “Sapphire?” Her laugh is cut short from something the twins did, and she turns to us. “How would you like to come home with us?” Her face lights up, and when the twins and Mariana practically tackle her with excitement, the room is filled with all of our laughter, and I know this is the right thing.

Whether this is just a coincidence or a huge sign, this feels right. I know it because when the four kids get up from the bed

and rush over to hug my husband and me, we feel complete.

Acknowledgments

Ashley... I have no idea what this book would be if not for you. For starters, everywhere I wrote “coach” would’ve said “couch” hahah! You were my editor since the beginning, when I had no plot and wrote those first shitty chapters and you stood with me til the very end so thank you so much! You’ve read so many different versions of this book and never complained once but instead encouraged me when I felt like giving up. Even when I finished writing, you helped

**with every other step. I love
you times infinity babe!**

To everyone in the private story, thank you all so much for the death threats to finish this book, you kept me going! (even if it was against my will hahah) You guys were the first to meet Sire and Vidia and inspired me to publish this book when I originally planned to simply post a few chapters online or something. I hope this was an *okay* book!

Thank you to my family and all of my close friends who supported my dream to become an author, especially my parents, my biggest fans. To my mom who called me almost every other day asking when I was going to publish this, thank you for the harassment whenever I got lazy! To my dad who is convinced the most random characters were written about him (they were not haha) here is your time to shine in the acknowledgments, thank you for correcting all of my silly Spanish mistakes! To the rest of my family, if you guys didn't

**get the clean version, I'm sorry
for traumatizing you with the
smut scenes, please don't bring
them up at the next family
dinner...**

To my readers, thank you for picking up my book and giving it a chance! I hope you loved Sire and Vidia and their story. I would appreciate it if you left a review on any platform of your choice. Yes, I seek validation but I honestly love feedback in any way to grow as a writer!

About The Author

Janiah Benitez is a nineteen-year-old, hopeless romantic. When she isn't reading or writing she's thinking about what she'll read or write next. She is currently in college double majoring in marine science and English but not so secretly wants to drop out and become a full-time writer and open a book store.