

A romantic couple is silhouetted against a vibrant sunset sky. The man is on the left, and the woman is on the right, with her arm around his shoulder. They are standing in a field of tall grass. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and light blue, with some clouds. The overall mood is intimate and romantic.

Ryan Pharis

Through the
FIRE

A marriage on the rocks
Novella

Through the Fire

A marriage on the rocks novella


Ryan Marie

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For anyone who has walked through fire and made it out on the other side.

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A Note to Readers

This story contains elements of an affair and sexually explicit scenes. If you find these topics emotionally triggering, please practice mindfulness and do not continue

The only song you'll need

"Sorry Seems To Be The Hardest Word"
Elton John

Chapter One

Luna

My nails click against the wood table in sync with the ticking of the clock as I look at the time, again. 9:45. I guess those 7:30 dinner reservations were an afterthought now.

I decide to send another text, hoping that this time I will get a response.

Me: Can you at least text me back so I know you're not dead in a ditch?

I wait for a few minutes, staring at the screen for those three little dots to appear. Nothing. The text shows delivered but not read.

I let out an exasperated sigh and decide it's time to peel myself out of the dress I bought special for tonight. But just as I stand from my chair, I hear the garage door start to roll open.

I make my way through the kitchen and into the laundry room where I wait for the door to open. The engine of the car rumbles as it pulls in. The steady purring stops when the car is turned off. A door slams, shoes clack, and finally the doorknob turns before the door swings open.

"Holy shit, Luna," Roman says with a startle. "You scared the shit outta me. What are you doing?" He eyes me up and down and I wait for recognition to slap him in the face.

I stand there with my arms crossed and my very practiced, very

used, resting bitch face. I purse my lips and narrow my eyes but still, he says nothing and just stares.

when I don't speak he mumbles, "whatever," and moves past me.

I stomp after him as he makes his way inside. He enters the kitchen and moves to the refrigerator, opening it and grabbing a water, cracking the lid and taking three big gulps before pulling it from his lips. when his eyes met mine again I decide it's time to clue the asshole in.

"So, do you remember what was supposed to happen tonight?" I ask.

He looks at me confused and twists his face. "No. Why are you so dressed up?"

"Nothing comes to mind?"

"No, Luna. I'd rather you just tell me than play these little games. Be a nagging bitch and just get it over with," he sneers.

"A nagging bitch? Are you serious right now, Roman? If I'm a nag it's only because someone made me that way."

"Oh god. Here we go again," he groans and walks toward the stairs.

I follow after him and scowl at the back of his head.

God, I just want to punch him in the throat.

"Are the kids in bed?" He asks as we pass their rooms.

"No, Roman, they're not. They're at my parents. Remember?" My tone is snarky and bitter. Just like my heart, lately.

He crosses the threshold into our room and straight to the closet where he takes off one shoe then the other and places them on the shelf.

"Where were you?" I continue with my interrogation.

He sighs. "I was at Dumonts. You know that. We went for a couple of drinks to shake off a tough week."

He undoes his pants and peels them down his legs. His thighs are muscular and such a contradiction to the professional and proper suits he wears daily.

"Hmm. Another one, huh? Last week it was to celebrate someone's birthday. The week before that it was guys night. then there was the end of a case, a new hire, a promotion. There's always a reason," I snap.

"Yeah well, you do your girls night thing all the time, too," he argues back.

“I have a girls night *once* a month. And it’s usually at one of our houses so that the kids can play since I always seem to have them. And I have maybe one glass of wine. I never get drunk.”

“*You always have the kids,*” he rolls his eyes. “Well they’re kind of your job. I have an actual job where I get paid so I can afford this giant house and luxury cars you adore, and the fucking multitude of activities the kids are in.”

“You’re such an ass. I gave up my career to be home for our kids. We agreed on that. In fact, if I remember correctly, you are the one who encouraged it,” my voice screeches.

“Luna, I’m tired. Okay? Can we argue about this tomorrow? I’m gonna take a shower.”

He yanks his arm through the sleeves of his dress shirt and tosses it in the hamper with his pants and socks. He buzzes past me in just his boxers and into the bathroom. Before he can close the door on me, I squeeze my way in.

“Ah, fuck. What?!” His voice booms and echoes in the expansive space.

With his back to me, he reaches in the shower and turns on the water.

“I guess your little drinking binge with the office was more important than the date night *you promised me* weeks ago!” My anger finally boils over. “You know the one that you told me to get a sitter and a new dress for?”

His head falls back and I hear him whisper, “shiiit.”

“Yeah. That one.”

With his hands on his waist he turns with sagging shoulders. “I’m sorry. I totally forgot. It’s just been a long week and my mind slipped. I’m sorry.” His voice is calm now and he walks with gentle steps to where I stand.

I turn my head and cross my hands over my chest, trying to hide the tears building in my eyes. when he wraps his arms around me and nuzzles his face into my neck, I stiffen.

“I’m an ass,” he says into my hair.

“I know.” It’s the same old song and dance we seem to be doing on a weekly basis.

He goes out with the guys to happy hour, stays out late, then comes home drunk and I argue with him over it. The next thing that follows is usually me spread out underneath him as he apologizes for being a dick...again.

“I promise to make it up to you. I should’ve put a reminder on my calendar and I didn’t. I won’t let it happen again.”

“That’s what you always say, Roman.” I turn to face him as he pulls back and my eyes widen in shock. “What the fuck is that?!”

I reach out and swiped my fingers across his neck where it's stained pink. "What?" He asks, jerking back from my touch.

He looks in the mirror that is now starting to fog from the steam billowing from the shower, and focuses on the spot I just touched. He sees the smeared lipstick and his face pales.

"Luna, it's not what you think. We were all--"

"Fuck you! Who were you with? Who is she?" I demand.

"Just the guys from the office." His voice shakes and he holds his hands up in front, preparing to ward me off.

"*Just the guys?* Did Trey or Sam start wearing lipstick?"

"No. After a while, a couple of the paralegals joined us. We were all just having a few drinks, but then one of the girls started ordering shots. I only had one. Swear."

I roll my eyes. "Heard that before."

"No. Seriously. I was just drinking beer and you know I can't mix beer and tequila. But she had already ordered a bunch so I took one. As I was throwing it back, I felt her reach up and kiss my neck. I spilled the damn shot and immediately pulled away."

"Liar!" I scream so loud that the neighbors can probably hear me. Thank God the kids aren't home.

"I'm not lying, Luna. She's been a pain in my ass since she started there. Flirting and finding ways to be around me. I've told her a hundred times that I'm married. She won't back the fuck off," his voice pleads with me to believe him.

"Which one? What's her name?"

"You haven't met her," he replies.

"I don't give a fuck. What's her name?"

He knows I 'm like a dog with a bone. I won't give up until he tells me what I want to know.

His cheeks puff out with a gust of air. "Leilani. She was hired about six months ago and technically works for Howard, but she helps out where needed. She's been helping me with the Farmer case which is why the other girls invited her out."

I clench my jaw and ball my hands into fists. Without another word, I spin on my heel and stomp back downstairs. I make my way over to the dining room table where I know I left my phone.

"What are you doing?" Roman asks as his bare feet pad down the stairs

after me.

I open my phone and send a text to Dani.

Me: I need to get out of here. Can you meet me?

The dots immediately appear and a second later she responds.

Dani: Roman?

Me: Yup. Who else?

Dani: Meet you at The Crest in twenty.

Me: K. Thanks. You're the best.

Dani: <I know gif>

I darken the screen and notice Roman just standing there watching my every move.

“Who are you texting?” He asks, his voice demanding and curt.

I don't respond. Just walk into the laundry room where my purse hangs from the hook with him hot on my heels.

“Luna!” He shouts and grabs my elbow, turning me around to face him. “Who was that and where are you going?”

“Not that it's any of your business asshole, but it was Dani. I'll see you later. Don't wait up.”

I yank my arm from his grip and open the door out to the garage.

“Like hell! You're not going anywhere until we talk,” he continues as he follows me out the door.

I click the key fob to unlock my door, and the lights to my Jag blink.

“There's nothing to talk about, Roman,” I tell him as I pause at the door. “I'm done fighting and 'talking' about the same old shit. You go out and get wasted, forget you have a family, then yell at me for being a nagging bitch. It's the same goddamn song and dance we always do. But this time you pushed me too far.”

I reach for the handle and pull on it, but the door slams shut when he smacks his hand on it.

“What do you mean I pushed you too far? What the fuck, Luna?”

“It means...your little whatever it is with *Leilani* has finally broken my back. I'm done, Rome. I have no more fight in me. Call your little whore because I'm done.”

His brows scrunched in anger and his face turns beet red.

“I didn’t do anything with her.” His anger is seething through his gritted teeth. “*She* kissed *me* and I pushed her away. That was it. She’s not my anything.”

“I don’t care. I’m too tired to care, anymore,” I sigh.

His face falls and I see his Adam’s apple bob as he swallows.

“Well I care, so don’t fucking tell me you’re done. Now go inside and we’ll talk about it.” He takes a step back, letting his hand fall away from the car door.

I shake my head. “No. I don’t want to be around you right now. I need some time away because all I really want to do is punch you in the face. And I really don’t feel like spending the night in jail. It’s done. Over. I can’t do this anymore. I’m too old and too tired to be putting up with your shit.”

He rears back like I actually did punch him and stumbles. His mouth opens and closes and a plethora of nonsensical words tumble out.

Before he can do any more, I open my door and get in. I press the start button and my engine purrs. My seatbelt clicks into place, my mirrors show all is clear behind me, and I tap on my playlist when the screen syncs up.

Tove Lo blares from the speakers and I set the car in reverse. Before I back out I look over to where Roman still stands. He’s just staring at me, practically unblinking. He isn’t angry or sad. He just looks defeated.

I watch as his chest rises and falls with each deep breath. I can see it in his eyes that he doesn’t want me to leave, but I don’t have it in me to stay.

So with that, I back out and watch as the headlights illuminate him until I turn the wheel and drive off.

Chapter Two

Luna

“I think we need another drink,” Dani, my best friend and unofficial therapist, says.

“No Dani, I don’t think I should have anymore.” I sip down the last dredges of my vodka and cranberry. “I should probably get home soon.”

Dani flings her head in my direction, her long blonde hair whipping like a lasso and her brows arch.

“Like hell you’re going home. He’s pissed and you not answering his calls and texts has only made him angrier. I will not allow you to go home to that ticking time bomb.” She turns her attention back to the bartender to order another drink.

I hope it’s water.

“D, be serious. I’m sure he’s angry but probably passed out by now. It’ll be best if I go home. I’ll just sleep in the guest room.”

I feel my phone buzz for the umpteenth time this evening. I start to ignore it like I had all of the other times he texted, but decided to check it.

Roman: I’m worried. Are you okay? Where are you? Please answer me.

Huh. It doesn’t feel so great when the shoe’s on the other foot.

Me: Now you know what it’s like to worry about whether your spouse is dead or in jail or in your case, screwing some whore.

Roman: Luna, I swear! I didn't do anything with her. Please just come home. Please.

I stare at his last text, wondering if his last words were those of actual worry or just a ploy to get me home and argue some more.

“Um, no. You can stay with me. I’m not letting you go home to that asshole. I will not be woken up by the hospital calling me because he slapped you into a coma,” she says, reading our text exchange over my shoulder.

“Oh my god. You’re ridiculous. Roman has *never* raised a finger to me. He’s pissed but he’d never hit me. Ever. Do you hear me Dani?” I snatch her hand from midair and tug her to look at me.

She pulls her gaze my way and I see the incredulous look on her face. She doesn’t believe me but it’s the absolute truth. If I told anyone if Roman ever hit me, it’d be her.

“Fine,” she concedes. “He doesn’t hit you but he’s still an asshat and you’re not going back there tonight. I mean it Lu. This shit between you two has to stop.”

I feel the lump build in my throat again. My lips press together and give her a slight nod and drop my eyes to my lap.

“Oh babe. I’m sorry,” she coos and wraps her arms around me. “It’ll be okay.”

I sniff and swipe at my tears. “I don’t think so, D. I think this might be it. I can’t...I can’t do it anymore. It’s just too hard,” I hiccup.

“Lemme ask you a question.” I look at her and wait for her to continue. “Do you still love Roman?”

I nod and clarify. “I do. I love him. The problem is that I don’t know that I’m *in* love with him any longer. I don’t think I love him enough to keep fighting.”

She nods her head and continue to rub my arm.

After a moment of silence she says, “why don’t you come stay with me. Just for tonight. I think you both need a little time apart. then tomorrow you can go home and talk after you are both rested and calm.”

I chew on my lip, not sure what the right thing to do is. She’s right that we could both use a little cool down before we talk, but I worry that this will only intensify his anger.

I can’t think of him. I always think of him first, kids second and me last. I need to make myself a priority, because the way I’ve been doing it isn’t working. He may be mad but it’ll be better in the morning.

“Okay. I’ll stay over tonight. But I have to be home early. My parents are bringing the kids after lunch and I don’t want them to be there when we inevitably fight.”

“Good. Let’s finish this drink and we’ll head out.” She picks up her cocktail and takes a sip.

“I’m going to text Rome and just let him know.”

I pull up my text app and send a message to my husband with nervous fingers.

Me: I’m going to stay the night with Dani. Be home in the morning. Talk then.

Rome: No. Please Luna. Just come home now.

Me: I think we both need some time to cool down.

Rome: Dammit Luna. Get. Home. Now!

There it is. The barking command. I can practically hear his snarky tone as he orders me around. The all too familiar voice that tells me to *‘quit arguing and just do it’*, and *‘why do you have to be such a bitch?’*.

His hands may not hurt me, but his words have always done a fine job at that.

“What’d he say?” Dani asks, finishing her drink.

With a sigh, I tell her, “Oh, you know. The usual. Do as I say, not as I do.”

“*Dammit Luna*,” she says, doing a damn good impression of my husband. “Amiright!”

“You sure are my friend. He ordered me to get home. Now more than before I just want to go back to your place and sleep.”

“Then let’s go.”

She mimes to the bartender for her credit card and the bill. Once it’s signed, we hop off our stools and she links her arm with mine.

“Bitch, you know you’re my soulmate, right?” Her lopsided smile warms my heart.

“I know, D. I know. And you’re mine.” I pat her hand and walk to where our cars sit.

Dani lent me some sweats and a t-shirt once we were back at her place, and

she hugged me before I shuffled off to her guest bedroom. I cozied up under her fluffy down comforter and stared through the slats of the blinds that I left open. The moonlight filtered in, casting shadows across the walls.

I refuse to sleep in darkness tonight. I need the small sliver of light to keep me from drowning in my sobs like I often do when the blackness falls. Sometimes it's the black of night that hides my tears, and other times it's the pitch black of my closet behind a closed door.

But tonight, I won't let myself fall. Tomorrow will bring a new wave of sorrow and anger and I just know, without a doubt, a new level of loneliness like I've never felt before.

I close my eyes and pray for sleep when my phone buzzes on the nightstand. I huff out a gush of air and debate on whether or not to answer it.

I give in and reach over, slide the bar at the bottom of the screen and bring the phone to my ear.

"Hello?" I croak.

"Luna. Please come home, baby. I'm sorry." Roman's voice is broken and slurred.

"Rome, just go to sleep and we can talk in the morning. You've obviously been drinking more and it's best if you sleep it off."

"No!" He shouts, and I hear something slam. "I need you...I need you to come home. I can't sleep without you."

I toss my head back on the pillow and take a deep breath in and out.

"Yes, you can. And soon enough you'll be doing it often."

"Baby," he chokes out. "Don't say that. I can't live without you. I swear to *God*, I didn't do anything with Leilani. It was all her. I love you."

"It's not just about that, Roman. There's so much—" I hear a jingle as something smacks hard against something else. "Where are you?"

"I'm here. For you," he slurs.

I bolt upright and squeeze the phone in my fist.

"Where's here, Rome?"

Before I get an answer, I hear a knock at Dani's front door.

I fling off the covers and jump out of bed. I'm out of the bedroom and rushing down the hall when another knock comes.

Dani's door creaks open just as I pass it. Her head pops out and she asks with a groggy voice, "who the fuck—"

"It's Roman," I whisper. "Go back to bed. I'll take care of it."

She shakes her head but turns and heads back to bed, closing the door

behind her.

I rush to the front door and disarm the alarm before opening it.

Roman stands there with one arm braced on the door frame and the other hanging limply at his side, keys grasped in his grip.

“What are you doing here?” I grit through my teeth.

“I came to get you.” His eyes are glazed over as he stares at me.

“You’re blitzed. I can’t believe you drove here like that.” I step out onto the porch and close the door behind me. “What the fuck, Rome?”

He stumbles back and I reach out to steady him before he tips over. He sways like an old pine tree in a windstorm.

“I couldn’t wait until tomorrow. I had to tell you now and then bring you home where you’re supposed to be.” He drops his hands on my shoulders, giving me his full weight.

I struggle a little and shuffle my feet until I feel solid. I let my hold on his waist go and wait for him to do the same. Instead, he squeezes my shoulders harder and then tugs me to his body.

I collide with an “oompf” and I’m forced to wrap my arms around him. He nuzzles his face into my neck and the smell of whiskey invades my nostrils.

“I never meant to hurt you. You’re my life, Luna. I’ll never do it again.”

“Do what?” I ask, dread swirling in my belly.

“It was...” his body trembles and I hear his voice break. “It was one time but it meant nothing.”

I step out of his hold and push him back. My body shivers and I can barely hold back the tears building.

“What are you talking about?”

He takes a few stuttering steps and plops down on the stoop. He drops his head into his hands and I hear him snifle.

“I kissed her, but that’s all. Well not *all*, but I didn’t sleep with her. I swear.” The way his voice wobbles tells me he’s crying and I struggle with wanting to comfort this broken man and desperately needing to choke him.

“Who, Roman? Who did you kiss? Leilani?” I ask, my voice trembling with a mixture of disparity and anger.

“Fuck no,” he sneers and lifts his face to meet mine. “That bitch drives me crazy. I’d never touch her.”

“Then who?” I try to control my volume so as not to wake Dani’s neighbors.

Roman looks down again and murmurs, "A-Angela."

My breath hitches and the tears that threatened to fall begin pouring down my cheeks.

"Your assistant?" I gasp.

He nods his head, still staring at the ground.

I feel weak and in danger of falling to the floor, so I lean against the brick and plaster my hands on the wall to hold me up.

"It was once, Luna. *Once*. And I swear to god I didn't sleep with her. It was the biggest mistake and it'll never happen again." His body continues to vibrate as he cries. "I promise. Please just...just come home. We can talk, you can be angry and then we can be us again."

"Be us again? Are you fucking insane? We'll never be us again." I let my anger and hurt boil under the surface and we grow quiet. Only the sounds of the tree frogs croaking can be heard.

I break the silence and ask, "if you didn't fuck her then what did you do?"

He looks at me with pleading eyes, begging me not to make him say it. I glare back, unwilling to let him get out of this.

"Sh-she...we kissed and she gave me a..." he lets his words trail off and chooses to let me draw my own conclusions.

It isn't very hard to figure out how that sentence ends.

"When?" I demand.

"About a year ago."

"A *year*? A fucking year ago? Jesus Christ." I finally let myself sag to the ground, the concrete was cold and unforgiving.

Just like my heart is about to be.

"Where?" My voice is flat and devoid of any emotion.

"It doesn't matter. All that matters is that I knew it was wrong and I stopped her. I told her it would never happen again and it hasn't." He gets up from where he sits and moves to be next to me.

I don't have the energy to shove him away or tell him no. I'm numb.

"It matters to me," I mutter, flatly.

He sighs as he sits next to me and places his hand on my thigh. I jerk away and he releases me.

"At the office." His voice is low. So low I almost don't hear him.

I snort and shake my head.

"She's married, Roman," I remind him and he nods. "How many times have we been around her and her family during company parties? How many

times has she smiled and waved at me when I've been by your office since then?"

"I know. I know. I'm sorry. I hate myself for it."

"That makes two of us," I bite out.

He winces but doesn't move to say more.

"I'm moving out," I tell him.

"No, baby. Please don't do that. We can--"

"It's not up for discussion," I cut him off. "This has been over long before you let that whore suck you off. Tonight pushed me to the edge and what you just told me...I can't stand to even look at you. How the hell am I supposed to stay married to you, after this?"

He starts to cry again and leans over, dropping his head into my lap. This time, I don't bother pushing him away.

"We've hurt each other too much and I won't live like this anymore. The kids and I will stay with my parents. We can discuss what comes next. I can file or you can. I don't care."

"File? What are you talking about?" He bolts upright and stares into my eyes.

"For divorce, Roman."

"No. No no no no. We're not divorcing. I'll make it better. I promise. Don't leave me," he begs.

"You left me a long time ago. Maybe not physically but emotionally. And there's nothing you can do to make this better. We're irreparable." It's an admission to myself more so than a statement to him.

"That's not true. We are. You're the love of my life, Luna. I can't live without you." His crying grows harder and his words are mixed with tears and alcohol.

"You're going to have to learn to," I tell him.

"No," his head moves from side to side rapidly and he wraps his arms around me. "I'll change."

"No you won't. You've said that before and it's only gotten worse."

It is really and truly over. I thought that earlier tonight, my words were just empty threats. That we'd be angry for a few days but then go back to existing. In my heart, I didn't really believe that tonight would be the end of my marriage.

"I don't think you should drive home. You've had too much to drink. You can sleep on Dani's couch and we'll leave in the morning. My parents are

bringing the kids home after lunch. We don't have to tell them we're separating but we need to figure out what to say about us moving out."

He nods his head that is pressed against my thighs.

"You stay. I'll leave." His words are muffled and defeated.

We sit there in silence for a few more minutes before I urge him to release me and stand. He gets to his feet then reaches out for my hand. I hesitate for a moment but eventually I slide my smaller hand into his larger one.

I stare at them, his light brown skin contrasted against my lighter skin. My tan will fade and soon I'll lose my summer color. Soon, all the color in my life will fade and all that will be left is a sad and dreary existence.

Chapter 3

Luna

We enter our house, each of us dragging our feet and not wanting to face the road ahead. We reach the kitchen and I slump against the wall.

“Are you hungry?” I ask him.

“No babe,” he answers. “Go shower. I’ll make some coffee.”

I look at him and nod before going upstairs to our room.

Our room.

It will never be ours again. We’ll never sleep as husband and wife in this bed again. Will we sell this house? How can I afford to live here? I’ll need a job. What will happen to the kids? Poppy is so young. She’ll go from having mommy around all day to being stuck in a daycare with strangers who won’t love her like I do.

And then there’s Hunter and Helene. They’re only six but they’re old enough to understand what us divorcing will mean. No more family dinners or vacations. No more movie nights with mommy and daddy, snuggled on the couch. No more cuddling between us when the nights are too scary.

I turn on the shower and stand under the cold water. The stream hits my skin like little knives, but I don’t feel the cold. And I don’t feel when the water turns to scalding or how it burns my skin. All I feel is hollow.

I don’t know how long I stand under the water, but I flinch when I hear the shower door swing open and see Roman standing there.

“Jesus, Luna. Your skin.” He reaches in and shuts the water off, then pulls me out and into him.

I look at my arms and see that they're an angry red. My entire body looks as if it's been held over a roaring fire.

I begin to shiver and feel a warm, fluffy towel being wrapped around me. Roman tries to get me to walk to our room, but my body shakes so violently that I can't take a step.

He bends down and swoops me up into his arms, carrying me through the door like he did when he carried me as his new wife into our hotel room. I'm placed on our bed and I fold into myself, still trembling.

I don't move a muscle. I can't focus my eyes on any one thing. I just sit.

I feel the towel being pulled off of me and then my arms being lifted above my head. Something falls over me and my legs are gently extended, one and then the other. Soft cotton slides up my legs, warming my freezing skin.

A strong arm wraps around my waist and I'm lifted and pressed against a warm body. The soft fabric is tugged over my hips and butt until it rests on my waist.

I'm gently laid back on the bed again and then the warmth disappears. I stare at the ceiling fan and the blades spin slowly, a low whirring sound filling the room.

"Sit up, baby." Roman pulls my attention away from the swirling and helps me to sit.

He climbs on the bed and settles behind me. I feel his fingers in my hair and a brush combs its way through my wet strands. Gentle swipes from my scalp to my ends continue one after the other.

Another minute passes when I feel his arms circle around my shoulders and his face lays on my shoulder.

"I'm so sorry, baby. Please. Please forgive me. Don't leave," he cries.

I shake my head giving him the only answer I can manage.

"I'll fix this. I promise. I'll give you the space you need but I refuse to let you go."

I swallow the hard lump in my throat and pry my lips apart. "It's not up to you anymore. You lost the right," I croak.

He hugs me tighter to his chest like he can stop me from leaving. His sobs start to spill from his mouth and it breaks my heart.

This big, tough man who I've never seen shed a tear is losing himself completely in my arms. I feel the depth of his pain because it's my pain, too.

when we love, we love hard. Our highs are so high. But when we fight,

we break each other piece by piece. We sling words like bullets, hitting where it'll do the most damage. We just can't continue to kill each other slowly.

"I need..." I don't know what I need.

I need coffee. I need space. I need our life back. I need to feel that soul crushing love that was there before. I need for this to have never happened.

I push out of his arms and scoot off the bed. My face is wet and I realize I'm crying. I wipe away my tears and walk downstairs. I don't hear him following behind me.

In the kitchen I find a plate of fruit and toast, and a mug of now cold coffee sitting at the table for me. I pick up the mug and walk it to the microwave to warm it.

The ding sounds and I open the door to remove it. It already has my one sugar and creamer in it—I can tell— so I take it over to the couch, bypassing the food.

I sit and sink into the plush cushions. My gaze moves around the room, taking in all the little things that say a family lives here.

Pictures litter the bookcase. Roman and I holding the twins after they were born. The four of us huddled together, admiring a pink faced and crying Poppy. Our first vacation to the beach. Hunter, Helene and Poppy sitting in the sand, their little faces kissed by the summer sun.

Poppy's face smeared with chocolate, her green eyes and curly black hair a shocking contrast. The twins smiling with backpacks too big for their bodies hanging from their shoulders on the first day of kindergarten.

A crystal frame showcasing a young bride and groom, smiling with fresh love in their eyes, completely blind to the heartbreak that lay ahead.

It's all here. Our life in photos.

My eyes roam until I find myself staring out the windows. The morning sun shines across the street just outside where Hunter and Helene learned to ride their bikes. Visions of Roman hustling down the street, one hand on the back of each bike, guiding our babies as they peddled their feet. All before work became his priority.

"Luna."

I spin around to find Roman standing just inside the living room. His body is tense and he looks like he's afraid to move an inch towards me.

I don't say a word. I just stare, memorizing every line, every wrinkle, every hair on his head. His every feature is branded into my brain, but I still

soak up all the little details that will change over the years. The years we will spend apart.

He takes small, slow steps towards me until he's right next to me. He sits on the cushion beside me, close enough that I can smell the sandalwood of his body wash from his shower. His hair is still damp and his soft curls are messy.

"Baby. Your coffee is cold," he says and pulls the mug from my hand. "Let me get you a fresh cup."

"I don't want one," I say.

He nods and sits back down, placing the mug on the coffee table. He reaches over and takes my hand, clasping it between his.

"I'll tell the kids that I'm going on a business trip," he says calmly. "I'll stay at my dad's for the week. That will give us some time to talk about things."

I don't pull my hand from his. I relish in the warmth it gives me.

"This isn't permanent, Luna. We can work this out. I'll go to counseling or...or whatever you want. But I'm not letting you go." His voice cracks again and I'm surprised either of us has any strength to talk. "I'm going to go into the office on Monday and take a little time off. The case is finished and there's nothing pressing. I'll tell Howard I have a family emergency."

"That's not necessary," I reply.

"It is. We'll use the time alone while the kids are at school to just be together and work it out."

I shake my head slowly from side to side. "It's going to take more than a few days to work things out."

"Fine. then I'll take off however long we need. I'll take a sabbatical if I have to."

"You don't understand, Roman." I yank my hand from his and stand. "You can take off a lifetime and it won't be long enough. This can't be mended. We are broken beyond repair."

I pace around the room and begin picking up toys that sit on the floor. Poppy's baby doll sits in its stroller, the hair frizzy and tangled from her attempts at playing beauty shop.

"Don't say that," he begs. "We can and we will. We owe it to ourselves to make it right. It'll never be like this again. You'll see."

I stop and find myself standing at the table where the plate of food he prepared for me sits. I pick it up with trembling hands and slam it against the

floor.

“We’re done!” I scream. “You can’t fix this. You cheated. You broke your vows and I’d be a fool to stick around and wait for you to do it again!”

He jumps to his feet and rushes over to me. He drops to his knees and grabs ahold of my hands.

“I’m sorry. I’ll never let anything like that happen again. I was so stupid and it’s the biggest regret of my life. Just...just let me make it right.”

He’s crying harder now and I can see that he’s kneeling in the broken shards of the plate.

“Get up, Roman. You’re going to cut yourself.”

“I don’t care. I want to bleed. I want you to see that I only bleed for you. Nothing and no one matters more. I’ll give you every last drop of my blood, my every last breath to prove that you’re the only one I want forever with.”

I tear my hands from his and walk over to grab the broom and dustpan. All I can focus on right now is cleaning up this mess before the kids come home. It’s my job to keep them safe and give the illusion that everything is just fine.

A skill I’ve practiced and perfected.

Roman watches me from the same spot as he sits back on his haunches. I can feel his eyes tracking my every move but I don’t dare look at him.

I fall into the rhythm of sweeping the broom back and forth, and watch as the pieces —food and plate— gather into a jumbled heap. I scoop it all in the dust pan, take it to the trash can and dump it before putting the broom away.

I walk past Roman as if he’s not there and go upstairs. In our bathroom I put on a bit of tinted moisturizer to help erase the evidence of my crying and lack of sleep. It helps very little as my eyes remain red rimmed and swollen.

I dig through my nightstand and pull out my reading glasses. I only wear them at night but they’ll mask my eyes enough to hopefully not have my parents questioning me.

I twist my hair in a sloppy bun and start to amble towards the hall when Roman steps in. He closes the door behind him and I hear the soft snick of the lock.

“Please unlock the door. My parents will be here soon,” I tell him on a sigh but he ignores me.

Instead, he creeps to where I stand until we’re so close that my breasts just skim his chest. The contact makes my nipples harden and I can tell he feels them.

His hands skate up my arms, from my hands to my shoulders and into my hair. He massages my scalp and pulls it free from the rubber-band holding it up.

“Roman, what are you doing?” My voice is a cracked whisper.

He lifts my glasses from my face and sets them down on the dresser before continuing to roam over my body.

I close my eyes and swallow the moan threatening to spill from my lips. His warm hands feel so good running along my collarbone. He slips his fingers inside the collar of my shirt and ghosts over my skin.

His head dips and he places soft kisses from the hollow of my collarbone up to my jaw. I hear him inhale my skin and feel his exhale. His breath is hot and smells of mint.

My body and brain are at war with each other as I try desperately to walk away. The heat coursing through my veins has my pulse thumping and overrides any rationale.

Roman moves from kissing along my jaw to flicking my lobe with his tongue, then sucking it in his mouth. The moan I tried to suppress finally breaks free. The sound is like a starting gun and he moves swiftly to remove my shirt.

“Roman, no. We can’t,” I say, unconvincingly.

“Yes, Luna. We can.”

His big hands palm my breasts and he pinches my nipples. The sweet pain sends a shock straight to my core. I try to fight it, but he knows just how to play my body.

I feel the dampness between my legs and I press them together to relieve the ache. Roman sees this and slips his hands inside my leggings. His hands squeeze the globes of my ass and his mouth replaces his fingers on my nipples.

I lose the battle of will and let my fingers dig into his still damp hair. My head falls back and I revel in the pleasure he brings me.

I feel him dip slightly and then I’m being hoisted up in his arms, my exposed ass resting on his forearms. He spins so that the bed sits just behind me, and he lays me down with steady control.

Once my body is flat, he slides my leggings down and off leaving me completely bare. His shirt and sweats follow mine and I’m left with the view of a sensual masterpiece.

His muscles are defined as he flexes under my gaze. The deep olive tone

of his skin looks like warm honey. He slowly drops to his knees and begins kissing his way up my body, reaching my apex but not diving into my wet core.

My clit throbs in anticipation from having him so close to where I need him to be. My hips begin to move and I press back into the mattress. His hands begin to slide up my body, gripping my breasts and squeezing.

I groan and close my eyes, my senses on overload. My skin is covered in goosebumps and I feel like an electric current is rolling through me. His mouth comes down on my pussy and my body erupts.

“Oh god,” I breathe out.

His tongue dips inside of me and I feel the vibrations of his moan. The tip of his nose brushes against my clit and I bow my back. He flattens his tongue, licking me up then flicking at my nub, over and over.

I’m pulsing with desire for more, sinking my nails into his head and gripping his short strands. My movements ignite him and he digs in with gusto.

He eats me like the fountain of youth is inside me. I try to squeeze my thighs together with the building pressure, but he uses his hands on my inner thighs to keep me spread open.

He licks harder and faster, and my breathing stutters.

“Right there,” I moan. “I’m almost there.”

He focuses on bringing me to the edge and drives two fingers inside of me while he sucks my clit. He pumps them his fingers in and out, then crooks his fingers to hit my spot.

In the blink of an eye I’m skyrocketing towards bliss. White hot stars flash behind my lids, and a feeling of weightlessness has me suspended in a state of ecstasy.

“Yes. Aahhh. Don’t stop,” I cry.

He doesn’t let up until he feels my body start to slack. I’m still trying to catch my breath when I feel him push through my swollen lips.

He buries himself to the hilt and lets out a deep growling moan. His arms bracket my head as he leans on his forearms., rolling his hips and pulling out to the tip before driving forward in one long, leisurely thrust.

He picks up a steady rhythm and I grip his back. I’m panting and my body is extra sensitive. The short coarse hairs of his chest rub against my tender breasts while my pussy pulses.

Roman’s cock is soft and hard, the perfect contradiction. He’s long and

thick and he reaches my spot again as his gyrations grind down on my clit. Another deep thrust and the fireworks explode once more.

I'm climbing higher and higher when I feel his movements become fast and erratic. His breathing is heavy and I feel his dick pulse before his body grows tight, and I feel him pouring inside of me.

Hot spurts of cum fill me up. I hold onto him with all the strength I have left. When his body turns limp, I feel tears leaking from the corners of my eyes. My body is soaring but my heart is aching. I don't know how I'm going to move on without him.

I let Roman capture my mouth and kiss me long and hard. I give him all I have left, letting our kiss be the last goodbye.

He has yet to pull out of me and I feel his dick grow soft. But still, he kisses me with a fury. He takes my head in his hands and positions me in a way that gives him the best access.

Our tongues dance and I taste my musky juice that coats his tongue. His kisses grow more frantic and it isn't long before I feel him start to harden.

"No, Rome," I murmur against his lips and place my hands on his chest. "Stop."

He pushes up on his hands and hovers above me, watching me with a confused look in his eyes.

"What's wrong?" He asks.

I let my legs fall from his hips and wiggle out of his embrace.

"I can't do this."

I scoop up my clothes and rush into the closet, shutting the door and taking solace in the dark.

What did I do?

How could I have been so stupid? I'm a fool, like always. I let him use his sweet words and he plays me like a violin, knowing the exact strings to pluck to make my body sing.

This is over. I won't let him pull me back in.

I redress and come out of the closet to find him standing there. His shoulders sag and he looks so...vulnerable.

"Luna," his voice is raspy and his eyes are once again glistening with unshed tears.

"This was a mistake. It won't happen again. I'm going downstairs to wait for the kids."

I storm past him, turning away as he tries to reach out for me. It's more

difficult to pull away from him than it is to just give in. Which is what I do every time we fight. Every time he pulls this shit, I give in with the simplest touch or attention from him.

I've been able to forgive him for staying out late or forgetting plans. But this time...this time he forgot he had a wife and let that tramp put her mouth on him. This is something I don't think I'll ever get over.

Chapter 4

Roman

I walk downstairs to find Luna unloading the dishwasher. She slams the cabinets just a little too hard and closes the drawers a bit too rough. Glasses clink and silverware shuffles.

Her body is tense and I can see the damage I've done in her eyes. *How could I have been so stupid? What did I do?*

I've plunged a knife into my beautiful wife's heart. That pain...I put it there. I'll do anything I have to in order to fix this. To fix us. Whatever it takes.

"Would you like some help?" I ask her.

She looks up at me with scrunched brows.

"Since when do you offer to help? You're usually the one barking orders." She scoffs and goes back to what she was doing.

I think back to all of the times I've come home from work and done nothing more than eat and mosey off to bed or watch tv. I'm always tired from a long day at work, but I've never once thought about her days.

Kids, school, cleaning, cooking, errands, kids activities, homework, and Lord knows what else. She's the first one to wake and the last one to sleep. I don't think I've ever offered to do anything to help.

Jesus. I have a lot more work than just proving to her I made a huge mistake with Angela. Biggest regret of my life.

"Um," I struggle to say something. "Why don't you call Dani and see if she's up for lunch or shopping or getting your nails done today. I'll spend the

day with the kids.”

She drops the cup in her hand and I’m thankful it’s plastic. Her face is frozen in shock and all she can do is blink. She looks like she didn’t hear me.

“Lu, did you hear what I said?” I try to ask in my gentlest tone.

“Yeah. I was just thinking it was a joke and waiting for the punchline,” she blanches.

“No punchline, babe. I know you’d like time away from me and I thought…” my words trail off and I shrug.

Once again she silently stares at me. I open my mouth to say more but am interrupted by the sound of the doorbell.

“I’ll get it,” I say quickly.

My nerves cause my heart to jackhammer as I make my way to the door. My in-laws are the most amazing people and I worry what they’ll think of me once this all comes to light. No doubt Luna’s dad, Jake, will want to shoot me, and her mom, Estella, will probably cut off my balls and feed them to me *before* Jake shoots me between the eyes.

I’ve hurt their baby girl and I won’t blame them for how they respond. But I will prove to them as well that I can change and will make this all right.

I unlock the door and swing it open. All five faces —Jake, Estella, Hunter, Helene and Poppy— are bright and cheery. My heart instantly breaks that I’m about to ruin it all.

“Daddy!” The kids shout.

I crouch down and scoop them all up when they run into my arms. They giggle as I squish them together and lay sloppy kisses all over their tiny faces. I loosen my hold on them but Poppy stays attached to me with her arms wrapped around my neck. Standing with her hanging off of me like a little monkey, I welcome my in-laws.

“Morning, Stella,” I greet her with a side hug and kiss to the cheek.

“Hi my handsome son.” I feel my heart drop and a lump the size of Texas form in my throat.

Despite having a son of her own —Luna’s twin brother, Lane— she has always called me son. She has since before we even married.

I lost my mom my senior year of high school and when Luna and I met her sophomore year in college and Estella learned of that, she stepped in as the mother I needed, showering me with love and attention. The same way her daughter always has.

I don’t deserve either of them.

“Hey Jake,” I hold out my hand to him and, as usual, he pulls me in for a small hug and pat on the back.

“Mornin’, Rome. Did you two have a good night?” He asks with a smile.

I swallow and give him a tight smile that doesn’t reach my eyes.

“Thanks for watching the little monsters. I hope they behaved,” I say, skipping over the details of our night.

“Oh, they’re angels. Always perfect angels. And we enjoy having them. You two should do date night more often.”

“Yeah. We’ll do that,” I tell him. “Come in. Luna’s in the kitchen. Are you all hungry?”

Estella walks ahead of us and I hear her talking with my wife. The kids are laughing and both talking over the other about their fun night with PopPop and Honey.

“We had a late breakfast. The kiddos slept in a bit. I’m afraid we kept them up late with movies and popcorn. Sorry ‘bout that,” he winces.

“No worries. Being spoiled and breaking mom and dad’s rules are what sleepovers with grandparents is all about,” I assure him.

We step into the den and I spot the twins already pulling out toys while cartoons play on the tv. Poppy wiggles in my arms and says, “down, daddy. I wanna pway wif bubba and sissy.”

I set her on her feet with a kiss to the top of her curly head and she scoots off.

My attention turns back to Luna and her mom. Estella cradles her daughter’s face in her hands and swipes away an errant tear.

“What’s happening there?” Jake asks in a hushed voice.

I just shrug and he walks away to where the women stand.

I can’t look away. I wait for the moment that their faces change and dissolve into anger when she tells them. I was hoping we could tell them together, away from the kids, but the hurt is palpable and written all over her face. I don’t think we’ll have the chance to be alone.

Jake hugs Luna and she hangs on to him tightly. My breath stutters as Estella makes her way over to me.

“Roman? Is everything okay?” Her face is awash with concern and confusion as Luna obviously didn’t tell her like I thought she would’ve.

“Uh...maybe we should all talk in my office,” I suggest.

Estella’s worry grows tenfold and she nods her head. Jake’s arm is now wrapped around Luna’s shoulders whose eyes are glistening. I amble over to

them with fear in every step.

“Luna, babe,” I say and wait for her to look at me. “Do you want to talk with your parents in the office?” My voice shakes and I feel Estella’s hand wrap around my arm.

She supports me when she should be pushing me away.

Luna can’t get words out but nods her head in agreement.

“Kids,” I call out and all three faces turn to me. “Mommy and daddy need to talk with PopPop and Honey. You three stay here and play. Be good. No fighting,” I warn.

“ ‘K,” they all reply.

I lead the four of us to my office and guide Estella to the leather recliner and Luna to the plush chair behind the desk. Jake takes a seat on the arm of the recliner next to Estella, and I stand behind Luna with a hand resting gently on her shoulder.

I feel her tense when I do that, but I refuse to pull away. I need her to know that I’m here, that I’m sorry, and that I will never leave her side.

“Mom, dad,” she speaks up, struggling with her words.

I give a light squeeze and she looks up at me. I quirk my lips in a ghost of a smile and she understands what I’m conveying.

“Jake, Estella,” I continue with a deep breath. “I screwed up. In the worst way.”

I watch as Estella’s face falls and Jake’s spine stiffens. I can feel my pulse vibrating through my body but trudge on.

“Last year, I did...something I am so ashamed of. I hurt my wife in the most unimaginable way and confessed to her last night after I forgot about our date night.”

“Oh, Roman,” Estella begins to cry.

I look at Luna and see her silently crying along with her mom. Jake watches me with a stern eye, shaking his head in disbelief.

“I can’t,” I choke out. Clearing my throat I try again. “I can’t tell you how incredibly sorry I am. I’ve damaged the trust and faith Luna has in me, and I can see that I’ve done the same with you.”

I steel myself for the next words. “I will do *anything* to rebuild that trust...with all of you. It was one time and yes, one time too many, but it will *never ever* happen again. I just...I just want to fix this.” Warm tears track over my cheeks and puddle in the hollow of my neck.

“I’m filing for divorce,” Luna interjects.

I look at her with sorrow in my eyes. “I don’t want that,” I say in rebuttal. “It’s not up to you,” she growls.

“Calm down for a moment, Princess,” Jake says, his hands held out in front of him. “Before you do anything hasty, why don’t you two talk. This just happened last night?” Jake looks to me for confirmation and I nod. “It’s still a fresh wound. Just take a minute before you decide anything.”

“What?” Luna snaps. “Are you serious, dad?”

“Luna. Your dad is right. Don’t make any rash decisions in the heat of the moment.” Estella stands and walks over to the two of us.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” she says through gritted teeth.

“Luna, watch your language,” her dad cautions.

“Sir, I told her I’m willing to give her some space. But I won’t let her go. I can’t.”

“Again, *Roman*, it’s not up to you,” she says with fire in her eyes, then turns her attention back to her parents. “He’s moving in with his dad. We’re telling the kids he’ll be out of town for work and visiting on the weekends. During those weekends, I’ll stay with you or Lane or Dani.”

“That’s not what we decided-“

“It’s what *I*’ve decided,” she yells.

“I think this is a mistake. You two can work this out.” Estella speaks gently as she comes to rest in front of Luna, holding her hands.

“Princess. I think you two should see a counselor. The church has an excellent one and-“

“Stop!” She screeches at her dad. “You guys can’t be serious with this. *He cheated* and waited a year to tell me. And now you want me to just go to counseling and all will be forgiven?”

Estella looks at Jake and he scrubs his hand over his face and into his short hair.

“Luna...many years ago I...was unfaithful to your mother,” Jake says with difficulty.

My eyes widen in shock as does Luna’s. Emotions filter over her face. Shock, sadness, anger.

“Daddy. How could you?”

“I’m not proud, much like Roman, and I am deeply ashamed. It was at a low point for your mother and I. You and Lane were young. Right around Poppy’s age. I was working a lot, trying to make the company a success, and

your mom was busy with you kids. It's not an excuse and it sounds stupid now to my ears, but all the attention was focused on you and Lane and I felt...neglected.

"I was so used to the praise and attention and the doting from your mother so much that, when it turned to you two, I was jealous. I sought the attention of someone else who was willing to give it."

"Mom," Luna says with sympathy.

"Listen, dear," her mother instructs.

With a deep sigh, Jake goes on. "It went on for months. Each time I was with her, I felt an extreme wave of guilt. Yet...I couldn't bring myself to end it.

"It wasn't until your mother found out after following me to a bar, one night. She had suspected something may be going on and took it in her own hands. She caught us drinking and kissing and confronted the two of us. Loudly...in the bar...in front of a very enthralled crowd."

"How can you just speak like it's no big deal? Mom?" Luna's voice is laced with anger.

"Luna. This happened a *very* long time ago and it's long forgiven. I had resigned myself to being a single mother when I finally agreed to counseling after my mom suggested it."

"Boy, was your grandma pissed," Jake says, obviously remembering the moment like it was yesterday. "I thought your grandpa was going to mount my head over his fireplace."

"Your father did the whole begging on bended knees, and I stubbornly refused to even listen to him," her mom explains.

"As you should've," Luna interjects.

"That's what I told myself. But what I failed to realize was that this man was my entire world. He's human after all, and humans make mistakes. Small ones and big ones. We promised to love each other through the good times and the bad and I owed it to both of us to see if we could weather the storm and make it out safe."

"We started counseling." Jake sits in the vacant recliner and leans forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. "The counselor told us that in order for your mom to even think about forgiving me and moving forward with our relationship, I would have to lay it all out there. I had to give her the dirty details.

"It killed me to relive it all. I watched as each session took another piece

of her. Bit by bit, I broke that beautiful woman apart. I vowed to do anything to win her back.” He blinks rapidly, obviously falling back into a time he'd rather forget.

“And I,” Estella adds. “Had to make the decision of where to go once I had all of the information. I was so angry. I couldn't understand how he could justify his actions by claiming a lack of attention. But that made me look deep into myself. And when I did, I didn't like what I saw.

“I placed all else above my husband and our marriage and took for granted that he'd always be there. Knowing how I had left him by the wayside helped me to see how little I valued him. Another woman picked up on that and swooped in when he was vulnerable.”

“I can't believe what I'm hearing.” Luna pushes out of the chair causing me to stumble back and her mom to jump to her feet.

She paces around the desk and we watch her like a predator about to attack any one of us at any moment.

“I saw how sorry he was. I could tell it was a mistake that he'd regret for the rest of his life. And in that moment, I chose to forgive him with the understanding that it was two strikes and you're out. I learned to place the anger, piece by piece, into a metaphoric box. When it was full, I closed it up and sat it on a shelf, far away from the happy times. I won't forget it happened, but I choose not to let it into our everyday lives. It's there, collecting dust and untouched. Where it will always stay.” Her mom finishes and waits for a response.

When the moment of silence grows, her dad adds more.

“I am a flawed man, Luna, but I am also a remorseful man and I've done the work to repent and be the man that you all deserved. Yes, I slept with another woman. Had a relationship with her outside of my marriage. But I am not a cheater. I made a one time mistake, recognized that, and became the man I vowed to be on the day of our wedding. I think this holds true for Roman,” he says.

I feel this is my opportunity to plead my case and think cautiously about my next words.

“Baby. Everything your dad just said is exactly what I am feeling. Except for the feeling neglected. You give me more than I deserve. I let a sly woman convince me it was what I wanted. It was a weak moment that I stopped before it got to sex.”

Her parents look confused with knitted brows and questioning eyes.

I turn to them and give as much of an explanation as I can manage. “I didn’t sleep with her. She did...something, but I realized what a huge mistake it was and stopped it before it could become something worse. It was once. I swear to you both. I’ve been riddled with guilt everyday since, but thought if I just stayed on the straight and narrow, she would never have to find out.”

“Then why-“ her mom begins to ask but is stopped when Luna speaks up.

“Because he forgot about our date night and came home with someone’s lipstick on his neck. That’s why?”

“Roman,” her dad drawls.

“No, no, no.” I explain. “I was taken by surprise when I wasn’t paying attention. She reached over and kissed me and I immediately pushed her away. I told her not to touch me and fully intend to report what happened to HR on Monday. There were witnesses. Other people from the office saw what happened and can back me up on it.”

“This isn’t one of your fucking cases, Roman. And I am not a client you can manage,” she snaps.

“I know you’re not and I’m not treating it as such. It’s because of what happened last year that I am so cautious of being around any woman. I address the women in my office as professionals and leave it there at the end of the day.”

I walk around my desk and stop in front of her as Estella and Jake watch on.

“I love you with every piece of me, and need you more than I need air to breathe. Let me prove to you that I can make amends.” I reach out for her hands, but she jerks away and steps back.

“What about the drinking? The going out on a constant basis? You’re at work or the bars more than you are home. The kids and I get your leftovers and lemme tell ya...they aren’t good.”

I nod and drop my head in shame because she’s right. I give them what little I have left at the end of each day and it isn’t more than a few words.

I’ve neglected her. Sex is a duty for her and the intimacy is nonexistent. And it all falls on me.

“I’ll stop it all. I’ll go to counseling, with or without you. And I-I’ll still move out for a little while-“

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” her dad adds.

“Jake. She needs the space and I’ll give it to her. Whatever she needs,” I tell him then shift focus back to Luna. “But I refuse to believe this is the end

of our story.”

She stares into my eyes with tears building. Her lip quivers and my dam breaks. I let my tears fall without a care that my in-laws are watching me fall apart.

I step forward and take her in my arms. She lets her arms hang at her sides, not reciprocating, but she doesn't push me away.

“We'll give you two a minute.” Her mother passes us, giving us both a gentle pat before leaving with Jake.

The door shuts behind them and it snaps Luna from our solitary moment.

“No,” she shakes. “We're sticking with what we talked about. You're leaving and eventually, the kids will get used to you not being here everyday and then we can end things, amicably.”

“It won't be amicable, Luna. I'm going to fight for us. That's a fact,” I insist. “I'll stay with my dad like you've asked, but I really want us to try counseling. Please, baby? Please?”

Her jaw clenches and her nostrils flare. Her head moves back and forth slowly as the tears keep trailing down her face.

“Please, Luna. Please? Please. Pl-“ I sputter through my tears and feel her slipping further away.

She moves to the door and says, “I'm going to go say goodbye to my parents. If you still want to spend the day with the kids, I'll fix their lunch before I go.”

Her voice is cold as is the look in her eyes. She opens the door and walks out, leaving me standing in a puddle of my own grief.

Chapter 5

Luna

I woke Sunday morning to an empty bed and remembered that I told Roman to stay in the guest room downstairs until he moved out.

The room felt cold. Unwelcoming. It felt like someone else's room. It was the room of a happy couple. That wasn't us.

My head was still spinning from yesterday's revelations. My dad's confession sent me on a tailspin. What shocked me more was how my mom so willingly gave her forgiveness. I just don't understand.

All the memories I have of my parents are good. I watched them always being in each other's arms. They never shied away from showing affection in front of me and my brother. My dad came home from work and made a beeline for mom everyday. He always greeted her with a hug and kiss, and she welcomed him home the same way.

Whenever we'd drive in the car, the two of them held hands like teenagers. They talked about everything and never argued. At least not in front of us. Even their silent moments were spent together. Dad would watch the football game and mom would be right by his side, reading or knitting.

She was always in his arms and rarely did they separate to let us kids between the two of them. I see now how they always put each other first. They held their marriage above all else. It was their number one priority and in making it so, Lane and I grew up seeing what a happy marriage was truly like.

When our friend's parents were divorcing, ours were sending us off to our

grandparents so they could have a weekend alone. They never felt guilty for taking the time for just them. And we never felt neglected.

But I just don't know that I'm as strong as mom. I don't know that I can "put it all in a box" and not bring it back when an argument arises.

The sound of little feet pounding on the stairs brings me out of my haze. I realize that the kids may question why daddy is sleeping downstairs and I hustle to get out of bed.

After quickly brushing my teeth, I make my way to them and come to an abrupt stop when I find Roman in the kitchen plating pancakes while the kids sit anxiously at the table.

"Wha-what are you doing?" I ask, surprising him and the kids.

"Mornin' mommy," they say.

Poppy hops down from her chair and waddles over to me. She holds her arms up, wordlessly asking me to pick her up. I scoop her up into my arms and give her a kiss on her little pink lips.

"Hi mama," she whispers.

"Hi Poppy-seed," I whisper back.

The mornings are always her quiet time. While Hunter and Helene jump out of bed with the energy of Tasmanian devils pumped full of caffeine, my sweet Poppy needs a good hour to warm up. Her voice is a little raspy and you'll find her whispering her way through our morning routine.

But once that little girl is fully awake, she has the energy to outrun her siblings.

"Are you hungry, babe?" Roman calls out from where he stands at the stove.

"Um, not really," I reply.

After Roman offered to stay with the kids so I could go out without them yesterday, I ended up spending the time alone. I needed to think without the opinions of my best friend or brother. Both of whom would have a very strong opinion on what I should do, and I could almost guarantee with certainty that they would not agree with mom and dad.

"You didn't eat much for dinner."

I lift one shoulder and let it fall without saying anything.

When I came home from my day of solitude, Roman had ordered takeout and was setting up cartons of Chinese food when I walked in. He served up all my favorites, but I barely picked at it. My nerves were doing a number on my appetite.

He gives me a small nod and turns off the burner after stacking the last pancake.

“Okay little gremlins. Let’s eat,” he calls out and they all cheer.

This is a side of him that I don’t ever recall seeing before. Too little, too late.

I put Poppy back in her chair, clipping her in with the little belt.

“I’ll get some milk,” I tell him.

“I’ve got it, babe,” Roman says, quickly, setting down the plate on the table and scurrying off to get the kids cups.

He comes back juggling three sippy cups and two mugs of steaming coffee. He carefully sets down the mugs then passes out the correct cup to the corresponding kid. Lord help us if we mix up the cups. The wrong color could set the mood for the entire day.

I take a pancake from the stack and set it on Poppy’s plate, then cut it into bite size pieces and pour syrup on top. Bacon and sausage are also on the table and I pick up a piece of bacon—a bit on the crispy side—and set it next to the pancake bites.

Poppy licks her lips and picks up the bacon with her chubby fingers and swirls it in the lake of syrup. She puts it in her mouth, leaving a stream of syrup in its wake, and says, “mmmm” with a giggle.

My face lights up from her pure innocence and I look up to see the same expression on Roman’s face. Only he’s watching me and not Poppy.

I quickly look away and move to help the other two with their breakfast, but I notice their plates are already full and they’re focused on cutting into their own pancakes.

Hunter’s tongue pokes out between his teeth as he saws the knife back and forth, working his pancake into mush. Helene is slowly and meticulously cutting a small piece so as not to disrupt the rest of her pancake.

Boys versus girls. It’s a real thing.

“Luna,” I look up when Roman calls my name. “Please have just a little bit. I don’t like that you’re not eating.”

His eyes are pleading with me and he extends one of the mugs to me, prepared just how I like it.

I take hold of the mug and decide to have a little to appease him.

He smiles when I take the smallest pancake from the stack plus one slice of bacon and sausage, each. He knows I can’t resist breakfast meat.

We all eat with only the sounds of the kids groans of appreciation. Poppy

ends up ditching her fork and uses her fingers to shovel pieces in her mouth. Her face and hands are coated in sticky syrup, and she occasionally pushes a wayward curl out of her face that ultimately ends up sticking to her head.

That's going to be fun to clean up.

Hunter inhales his first pancake and quickly goes to work on another. Helene digs into her food with precise cuts, making the least amount of mess.

Maybe she'll be a surgeon with that slow and steady hand.

I have no more than ten bites before I can't stomach any more. Roman notices when I set my fork and knife down and push my plate away. He draws his brows together but says nothing. When the last bite is swallowed, I move to start cleaning up.

Before I can even stand from my chair, Roman says, "okay kidlets. Dish duty. Hunter and Helene, you're going to help me clean the kitchen."

He reaches out and starts piling plates on his arms like a skilled waiter.

"Daaaad," Hunter whines.

"I don't know how to do dishes," Helene says with a quivering lip.

Bless her sensitive little heart.

"Well then. No time like the present to learn. C'mon." He spins on his heel with his mini-me —Hunter— right behind him. Helene makes slower moves to follow.

She walks carefully to the kitchen, carrying her empty cup with her. She still wears her pink nightgown and fluffy unicorn slippers. Her long brown hair is a mess of waves cascading down her back.

It drapes down to her waist but I don't have it in me to cut her beautiful hair. It's thick with natural highlights and everything a grown woman would kill for.

In contrast to his sister, Hunter's hair is inky black and cropped close to his head. Just like his daddy's. He wants nothing more than to be just like his dad and copies him in every way he can. From his haircut to the way he walks is all Roman.

The twins share the same hazel eyes and tan skin, but their mannerisms couldn't be more opposite.

My heart aches watching Roman work with the kids to clean up the breakfast mess. They're going to miss out on moments like these as a family. They'll have time with just dad when he has them, but I don't know that we will do this once our divorce is final.

My throat grows tight and tears form when I think about another woman

stepping into my shoes. Will she know that the twins like their PB&J on “fluffy bread” with the crust cut off? Will she be gentle when combing Poppy’s hair? Her tender head requires patience when working through her riot of curls.

Will she love my babies the way they deserve?

A little crack forms in my heart and my chest grows tight as I struggle to take a deep breath.

Roman has a giant smile on his face while he and the kids work together, but it quickly falls when he looks up and sees the look on my face.

“Luna?” He says as he dries his hands and begins to walk to where I sit.

I shake my head. “I’m fine,” I say quickly and fumble to free Poppy from her seat. “I’m going to give this sticky monster a bath.”

I scoop her up and hurry up to the girls bathroom. I look over my shoulders and see Roman standing there with his chest heaving and the corners of his mouth turned down.

when I step into the bathroom, I start filling the tub with warm water and dump some bubbles in. Stripping Poppy out of her pajamas that are glued to her body with syrup is a struggle.

She wiggles and wiggles her way out of her cotton shorts covered in mermaids. Her head pops free from her top and I swing her up in the air and into the tub with a splash.

I watch her play with the few toys I placed in the tub, and work my fingers through her damp hair. I scrub gently and use a cup to carefully pour water over her head and rinse out the suds.

I cherish the moment but my mind starts to wander much like it did downstairs and I sniff as a few tears run down my cheek.

Poppy looks away from her toys and notices.

“Mommy are you sad?” Her little voice is filled with so much concern.

“I’m fine, my little Poppy-seed.”

She splashes as she works to stand up. Her arms and legs are covered in bubbles that drip down her body. She steps to the edge of the tub and wraps her arms around me. She’s warm from the water and soaks my pajama tank. But it’s the best hug ever and I couldn’t care less about my sopping clothes.

“Don’t cwy, mommy. Be happy. ‘K?” I nod my head against her neck and squeeze tighter. “Want daddy to kiss you and make it awl better?”

This causes me to sob out loud and I feel Poppy’s hands pat my back just like I do when I’m trying to soothe her.

My babies are going to be so crushed when they don't have this everyday.
How do I do this?

Chapter 6

Luna

On Monday morning, I struggle to make it through our usual routine. I scramble eggs for the twins as they sit on the couch, watching cartoons with sleep remnants still in their eyes

I forget to adjust the setting on the toaster and end up burning the toast.

“Shit,” I mutter, low enough so the kids won’t hear.

“You okay?” The deep rumble of Roman’s voice causes me to jump and I drop the crunchy toast on the floor. “Here. Let me do this.”

He steps to me, dressed in a crisp light blue dress shirt with yellow tie and navy dress pants. His soft, tight curls are perfectly tamed and he’s let the scruff on his jaw fill out over the weekend. He’s so handsome it hurts.

He squats down and picks up the dropped toast and dumps it in the trash can. then he takes a paper towel from the holder, wets it and pats it over the crumbs, collecting every last crumb.

I watch him with absolute amazement. It’s like watching a stranger move about my house and doing it better than I can.

He slaps his hands together to dust off any crumbs sticking to him, and turns to me. He places a gentle hand on my hip and lays a warm kiss on my forehead.

“You make some new toast and I’ll get the twins dressed. Are their clothes laid out?” He asks and I slowly shake my head up and down. “Ok. Be back.”

He walks out of the kitchen and claps his hands, snapping the kids out of

their tv induced fog.

“Good morning my little monsters. Upstairs and I’ll help you get dressed while mom finishes your breakfast,” he orders but they don’t move. “C’mon. Up and at ‘em.”

They amble off the couch and trudge up the stairs, Roman following right behind.

I go about making new toast and just finish plating their cheesy eggs when they come bouncing back in. I set their plates down on the counter and they climb up on the barstools.

I turn around to get their juice but Roman has beaten me to it and sets them down next to their plates.

I keep blinking my eyes wondering when I’ll wake from this dream. It has to be a dream.

Right?

“I have no clue how to fix Helene’s hair so I’ll leave that to you. Can I help with their lunches?” He asks.

Who the fuck is this man and what’d he do with my husband?

“Um,” I stutter. “Their pasta salad is already made and their oranges are in their kits. I just need to pack them and add a drink. Hunter likes apple juice and-“

“Helene likes flavored water. I got this.” He smiles and opens the fridge to retrieve their food.

The twins sit at the counter eating their food, so I walk over to them. Helene’s hair is a mess since I neither braided nor rolled it in curlers or scrunched her hair after she bathed last night, and I’m going to pay for it this morning.

“I messed up last night, huh?” I ask her, touching the tangled bird's nest that has rooted in her hair.

“Yup,” is all she says.

“You want a French braid?”

“Yes, please. Two!” She exclaims.

“Okay, Princess.” I move over to where Hunter sits and rub my hands over his frizzy curls. “And how about you? Want a braid, too, my handsome son?”

“Moom,” he whines, trying to hide his smile.

I chuckle and say, “finish eating. I’ll go get the stuff for your braids. Hunter? when you’re done head upstairs and brush your teeth. I’ll come up to comb your hair when I’m done with Helene’s.”

“ ‘k, mom,” he mumbles through a mouth of eggs and a little spittle flies out.

Twenty minutes later and both kids have eaten, brushed their teeth and gotten their hair combed.

“You kids get your shoes. I’m on drop off duty this morning,” Roman calls out from his office.

“Huh?” Hunter quips.

Roman walks into the mud room and all three of us just stare at him.

“Daddy,” Helene says in a soft voice. “You never take us to school.”

He squats in front of her and says, “I know, sweet girl. And that’s a shame on me. From now on, whenever I don’t have to be to work early, I’ll take you to school.”

“Yay!” They both shout, arms in the air and jumping up and down.

“Plus...I want to talk to you.” He looks to me then back to the kids. “I have to go out of town this week so I need you to be extra good for your mom. You both are going to have some duties to help out while I’m gone.”

“No, daddy. Why do you have to go?” Helene’s pouty lips frown and she looks like she’s on the verge of tears.

Roman blinks rapidly trying to dry the moisture building in his eyes.

“I’ll be back this weekend. then we can do something fun. Okay?”

She nods then wraps her arms around his neck. He keeps her in his arms when he stands and reaches for her backpack.

“Roman, you’re wrinkling your shirt,” I point out.

“It’s okay,” he says in a hushed tone. “Ready little man?” Hunter nods and I help him with his backpack.

Roman leans down and kisses my cheek. “I’m only working a couple of hours and then I’ll be back. Probably around eleven.”

He doesn’t give me time to respond, just opens the door and shuffles the kids out and into his truck. Once they’re belted into their booster seats, he gets in and starts up the engine. He sets it into reverse and begins slowly backing out. Once he’s cleared the garage door he waves and hits the clicker.

I watch until the door is firmly shut and walk back inside to fully soak in this morning’s turn off events.

A couple of hours later, I’m sticking wet clothes into the dryer while Poppy colors when my phone rings.

I let the wet clothes drop back into the basin and reach for my phone buzzing my the side pocket of my leggings.

My brother's name flashes on the screen and I prepare myself for what's to come.

Sliding the bar over I put the phone to my ear and say, "Bula Vinaka Beachside."

"Ugh. You're still saying that? Grow up, Lu," he says and I can just hear the eye roll.

"Whatever. You're just a salty queen. What do you want? I'm busy." I balance the phone on my shoulder and go back to moving the clothes from one bin into the other.

"Mom told me about Rome."

I freeze and almost drop the phone from where it's perched.

"Hello?" He says after too many seconds of me being silent.

"Yeah," I say, clearing my throat. "I'm here."

"Well. when were you going to tell me?"

I take a deep breath in and out before I continue, "I was going to call you tonight...after he moved out."

"Move out!" He shouts and again, I almost drop the phone. "What do you mean he's moving out? Mom said you guys were going to counseling."

"No. Mom and dad said we should go to counseling. I told them he's moving out and we'll work our way through filing for divorce."

"Woah woah woah. Divorce? What the hell, Lu? It can't possibly be that bad."

"Don't tell me you agree with mom and dad? Jesus...sometimes I think you guys love him more than you love me." I protest. "It's been bad for a while, Lane. Friday night was just the straw that broke the camel's back."

"Mom said he didn't even sleep with the bitch," he says and I hear the click clack of his keyboard.

"No, Lane. He didn't fuck her. He just let her suck his dick under his desk like a common office whore."

My words are spiteful and my tone is too harsh.

"Mom said it only happened once? Do you believe him?"

"I think. But he came home with lipstick on his neck. He swears it was nothing. Some THOT kissed him when he was throwing back a shot. He said he told her to back off and that he is planning on reporting it to HR today. But I mean..." I trail off.

"Sounds...plausible?" I huff and he keeps going. "Listen, sis. I know Roman can be a dick sometimes, but has he ever given you a reason to doubt

him? Has he ever lied to you?"

"Yes, Lane! When he let a married woman who is not his wife suck him off! He lied. He gave me reason to doubt. He made me never want to trust him," I shout.

"Gotcha," he drawls. "So tell me about this THOT. What exactly happened?"

I give him all the details exactly as Roman relayed them to me. when I'm finished I wait for him to respond.

"I'm going to finish up this report and then I'll be there to pick you up."

"Wa-what? No. I have Poppy. And I have to get the kids from school. I can't just leave," I remind him.

"Just...give...me...one....okay. Mom said she'll watch Poppers and we won't be gone long. We'll grab your crotch goblins from school on the way back to your house."

"Lane...where are we even going?" I ask.

"Just be ready," he commands. "Wear a hat and a pair of sorority-girl-with-a-white-claw-hangover sunglasses. We don't want anyone to see your face. Be there soon."

"No. Wait. Where are-" he hangs up ending my line of questioning.

I sigh and finish moving the clothes to the dryer then walk over to where Poppy is still coloring quietly.

"Hey there's my big girl. Whatcha doing?" I sidle up next to her and crouch so I can look into her eyes.

"Colorin' a picktur for daddy." Her little fingers grip a brown crayon as she fills in the face of her dad. "It's too dark for daddy's skin."

"No baby. It looks perfect. Daddy will love it." She smiles up at me and I give her a kiss on her cheek. "Guess what?"

"What what what?" She asks excitedly.

"Honey is going to come play with you for a bit while I go with Uncle Lane."

"Yay! Honey and Unky Lane!" She cheers.

I make a snack of apples and peanut butter and go about picking up around the house. I lose track of time and jolt when the mudroom door swings open and I hear Poppy yell, "daddy!"

I look at my watch and see that it's much earlier than Roman said he'd been home. I walk into the den and find them sitting on the floor while Poppy feeds him one of her apple slices.

“Hey,” I say.

He rolls over and looks at me with a panty melting smile. “Hey babe. Got off sooner than I thought.”

I fold my lips between my teeth and nod.

“My mom was planning to come over and stay with Poppy while I run a quick errand with Lane,” I explain.

“Oh,” he pops up and stands while Poppy wraps around his leg like a monkey. “Okay. Well...I can stay with her. Tell your mom not to worry about coming over.”

I nod and walk off to text my mom.

Me: hey mom. Rome got home early. Don't worry about coming over to watch Pop. Thanks anyway.

Mom: okay sweetie. I'll call you later. Love you.

Me: love you, too mom.

I pocket my phone and go upstairs in search of a ball cap and sunglasses. I changed into my favorite pair of athletic shorts, a loose t-shirt and my favorite Houston Wranglers hat.

I'm sliding my sneakers on when I hear the doorbell ring. I practically fall over myself trying to rush down the stairs before Roman can get to the door.

I don't make it.

“Hey Lane,” Roman greets, cheerily.

“Hello douche canoe,” he says back.

“Lane!” I snap at him.

“It's okay, Luna. I deserve that.” His voice is low and the shame is written all over his face.

I glare at my brother and wait for him to say something but leave it up to him to not even acknowledge that he was being an ass.

“Babe, I'll grab the twins from school. You two enjoy some time together.”

“O-Kay,” I say in disbelief.

“What would you like me to feed Poppy for lunch, and what time is her nap?” He asks as if this is totally normal behavior for him.

“Uh she...she can have pasta salad. I made enough for the both of you. Her nap is at one and she usually sleeps no more than an hour.”

“Ok. You two have a nice time,” he kisses me on my cheek and walks

back into the den.

Lane looks at me and mouths “da fuck?” and I push him out the door.

We settle into his car and once the door is closed, he lets loose.

“Who the hell was that man in there?” His pupils are blown out and he looks as if he’s seen Michael Myers coming our way.

“He’s been like this since Saturday,” I tell him. “Where are we going?”

“So this THOT—what’s her name?” He asks, glancing at me with a side eye as we drive out of my neighborhood.

“Leilani,” I growl.

“Ugh. Sounds like a stripper.” I chuckle and he asks, “what kind of car does she drive?”

I look at him confused and tell him, “shit. I don’t know, Lane. I don’t even know what *she* looks like.”

“Hmm,” is all he says.

“You make me nervous when you don’t say anything. What’s going on in that dark and dangerous mind of yours?”

“Leilani works for Rome?” he asks.

“No. She’s Howard’s paralegal,” I correct.

He nods then demands, “give me your phone.”

“Uuumm, no! I don’t trust you,” I tell him and grip my phone tighter in my hand.

“Stop being a bitch. Just give it to me.” He holds out his hand and wiggles his fingers.

I reluctantly hand it over and he proceeds to unlock it.

“Hey! How do you know my passcode?” I ask.

He gives me a look and says, “really? The kids’ birthdays.”

We come to a stoplight and he thumbs through my contacts., then presses one and brings the phone to his ear.

“What’s Howard’s last name?” He whispers.

“Lane?” He arches his brow and waits for me to answer. “Mendez,” I grunt.

“Hello. Howard Mendez, please,” Lane says to whomever answers. He’s silent for a moment then, “ok. Maybe I could speak with his paralegal regarding a matter. Leilani, I believe.” Silence. “Yes. That’s right. Leilani Watkins. Thank you. I’m in hold,” he whispers.

The light turns green and we’re off to God only knows where.

“Hello Mrs. Watkins,” he says when she answers the phone, I assume.

“My apologies. Ms. Watkins. I’m calling from Lacey’s Love Emporium to inform you that you’ve been selected as the winner of our monthly gift card drawing.”

‘What?’ I mouthe.

“I know, right,” he says with a roll of his eyes and a shake of his hand. “We have a fifty dollar gift card for you to spend in our store. The only catch is you have to be able to pick it up today. Do you think that’s possible?”

He mimes a puppet talking on and on as he listens.

“Fab! The card will be waiting at the cash wrap under your name. You just have to tell the ladies at the front. See you at 11:30. Byeeee.”

He ends the call and blows a raspberry with his tongue, then pulls into a parking spot in Market Street, a local shopping and restaurant area.

“Too easy. That bitch didn’t even ask how her name was entered. Anyhow. That’s step one. Step two...stay here,” he orders.

“No. Lane, wait.” He’s out of the car with the door slamming behind him before I can finish my sentence.

I watch him as he walks to the store he said he was calling from and he steps inside.

I have no idea what he’s doing, but I don’t have a good feeling about it.

My phone buzzes on the center console and I pick it up to see a text from Roman.

Rome: Hi babe. I just wanted to let you know that Poppy is good and will have her lunch soon. I talked to my dad and he said I can stay there this week. He wasn’t too happy with me. I’d like to be able to spend the days with you and work through some of this. What do you think?

He just won’t stop. How can I get him to understand that there will be no working through anything? Between him and my parents, I feel like I’m the bad guy here.

Me: I can help you pack when I get home. I really don’t think there’s anything to work through. You cheated, I’m done, end of story.

Rome: Please, Luna. Just give me a chance to make things better.

My finger hovers over the keyboard. My heart wants so badly to give in. I just have to be strong and stick to my guns. No second chances. He let

another woman touch him in a way only I can.

Me: I'll think about it. I won't promise anything.

Rome: Okay. That's fair. I'll be waiting. I love you, Luna. With my entire being.

I stare at his words but don't respond. I know that not saying I love you back will kill him, but that's exactly what I want. Petty? Yes. Does it make me feel better?

I don't know.

The door opens startling me, and Lane gets in.

"What did you do Lane?" I ask him.

"Nothing. I simply told the sales lady that my friend is a little shy when it comes to buying toys, and that I told a little lie that she won a gift card to get her to come in."

"Oh my god," I groan and slam my head back against the headrest.

"Sweet Miss Brittany is going to keep the card for her and when she picks it up, act like she won it. Then, we wait to see what she looks like and what car she drives and BINGO! We follow that bitch back to the office."

"No, Lane. No. I am not going to jump her like a goddamn fifteen year old punk. What are you thinking?"

What has my life come to?

"We're not going to jump her, you freako. We're going to leave her a little snack." He thumbs his finger at the back seat.

I turn around and see a grocery bag with what looks to be lunch meat.

"I hope she likes bologna." He breaks into a fit of laughter.

I cannot do this. I may be angry but I don't think I'd go as far as damaging property.

"What if we get caught? We could go to jail, Lane!"

"Good thing you know a lawyer. And I think he owes you one," he says with a sassy wink.

"You are the worst brother ever. I'm the good twin. You're corrupting me!" I shout.

"Quit being so dramatic. Now, this is for you." He hands over a plastic card with Lacey's Love Emporium across it.

"What for?" I ask.

"Duh! How are we gonna know who little Miss Lei-on-me is? You're going to go in there and look around. when a customer goes in, stay close and

listen. then, buy something and follow her out.”

“Nuh uh,” I say, shaking my head. “You do it. I’m not buying anything from there.”

I try putting the card in his hand but he pushes back at me.

“Oh lort. Get over yourself, you damn prude. Buy yourself a new B.O.B or something kinky. Oooh. Buy some crotchless panties.” He claps his hands rapidly and his eyes light up with excitement.

“Ew. No. I’m not buying those. You do it. You’re a skank. Buy something you can use with Kyle.”

He rolls his eyes. “Nope. It has to be you. The clerk already saw me. It’d be weird if I didn’t know who she was after saying she was my friend. Just fucking buy something.”

“Fine,” I concede and blow out an annoyed huff.

I grab the door handle to exit the car but Lane stops me.

“Wait,” he says, grabbing my arm. “Not yet. We have like...an hour. Before you do need to make a phone call.”

I draw my brows together and ask, “call who?”

“Roman’s slutty assistant.” My eyes go wide and I shake my head. “Oh yes, honey. You’re going to confront that bitch and let her know that you know about her little ‘oral presentation’ she gave your husband.”

“Lane...I-I can’t do that. She’ll say something to Rome,” I tell him, my voice filled with panic.

“Then warn her that you’ll cut a bitch if she does. Make her fear *you* more than God. Do it,” he insists and picks up my phone, holding it out to me.

I stare at the damn thing sitting in the palm of his hand like it might burn me if I touch it. I can’t do this. No way. What would I even say? My breathing turns heavy and my hands start to shake.

“I can hear what you’re thinking. We’re twins. Remember? I know you better than you know yourself. Now...call,” he insists.

I blow out a deep breath and take a moment to think about what I’m going to say. I close my eyes and a vision of Angela on her knees, her mouth wrapped around Roman’s-

“Ok,” I say, rage burning in my eyes.

I touch the contact for Roman’s office and wait for her to answer.

“Speaker,” Lane whispers.

The line clicks and I hear, “Roman Hart’s office. Angela speaking.”

“H-hi Angela.” My voice squeaks and I clear my throat. *I can do this.*
“This is Luna Hart.”

“Hi Luna. How are you?” Her nasally voice makes my skin crawl.

Any apprehension I had about confronting her simply vanishes.

“Well, not so great,” I responded.

“Oh gosh. I’m sorry to hear that. Um,” she pauses. “Roman isn’t here. He left early.”

“Oh, I know. He’s at home with Poppy. I didn’t call to speak with him.”

“Um. Okay.” I can hear her confusion.

“I need to speak with you.” My voice is firm as my confidence builds.

“Wh-what about?” She asks with absolute fear in her tone.

“About you and my husband cheating.”

The line goes silent and then, “Luna. I don’t know wh-“

“Save it, Angela. Roman told me everything. No need to play an innocent. Lord knows you’re not.”

“Luna. I’m so sorry. It was one time. I swear to you. And I felt horrible. We didn’t even have sex,” she whispers, I’m assuming, so no one will hear.

“And the fact that you *just* sucked my husbands dick makes it so much less offensive than having sex.” I’m on a roll now. “How could you? How many times have we had dinners as two families? I’ve gone to your kids’ birthday parties. Jesus, Angela...I buy your fucking Christmas gift every year.”

“I-I know. I’m-“ her voice quakes.

“*You’re sorry.* Yeah. Got it. What made you think that you could coerce my husband into having an affair? Roman was obviously weak, but you preyed on him.”

I have no idea if it was her or Roman that initiated the whole thing, but we’re about to find out.

“I-I...I saw the amount of time he’d been spending at the office and he was so stressed and we worked late nights together. I just...I got carried away. But, but, he stopped it. Before it went any further. He didn’t even... you know, finish,” she explains.

“Wow. Wow! That makes it all so much better. The old working late night excuse. Typical. Tell me something, Angela,” I continue. “Did you get on all fours and crawl under my husband's desk like a basic office whore? Did you choke on his cock? It’s big, isn’t it? I bet you did.”

The car shakes and I look over to find Lane pumping his arms in the air

and circling his hips.

“Luna. Please,” she sobs.

“Oh save me the drama, you fucking cunt. Now...as far as I see it, you have two options here. One,” I say, holding up a finger. “You type a nice little email to my husband informing him that you will be resigning from your position as his slut-I mean assistant.”

“I can’t quit. I need this job. I have a family,” she balks.

“And so do I! But you fucked that up. Now Roman is going to be a part-time dad because you couldn’t be a decent human being and keep your whorish mouth away from him.”

Her breaths are fast and stuttered. She sounds like she’s about to fall into a panic attack.

“As I was saying...you are going to let him know that, due to personal reasons, you will be resigning. Let’s give it...a month. I will even make sure Roman gives you a nice letter of recommendation. Hell, I’ll proofread the damn thing. But you will quit. If you don’t, then there’s option number two.”

“Wh-what’s option n-number two?”

“I call your husband and tell him aaallll about your little late night office escapades.”

“No. No no, please Luna. Please don’t do that,” she pleads.

“I’m sure he’ll want to murder Roman, much like I did, but he’s much bigger than Phil so I think he can handle himself.”

“Luna,” she sobs. “Please. I can’t-“

“You can’t what? Hmm? You can’t let your husband know you’re a cheating cunt-bag?” I look over to Lane who gives me a thumbs up and mouths, ‘*good one*’. “I really hate to punish your family for the sins of the wife, but it has to be done. If you won’t quit, then your husband should know what you’re up to at the office. Who knows? Maybe Roman isn’t the first,” I threw it out there.

When the line goes eerily silent, I get my answer.

“You dirty little slut. There *is* more. Wow. This just got a whole lot more interesting. What’s it gonna be, Angela? Door number one, or door number two?”

I make the sound of a clock ticking and wait to hear her answer.

“I wonder if the other wives would be interested in knowing that there’s a whore working with their husbands. I bet that would raise a lot of-“

“I’ll quit!” She shouts. “I’ll quit. Please just don’t...don’t tell my

husband.”

“Smart girl. Now,” I straighten my spine and feel my smile spread a mile wide. “Let’s talk about this email. You’re going to blind cc me on it as well as HR. I need to be sure you aren’t a sneaky bitch and try to worm in some way to blame me. Because this isn’t my fault. It’s yours, Angela.

“Next, once you resign, you will never, *ever*, speak or contact my soon to be ex-husband again. When you’re at work, you address him as Mr. Hart and get your work done without the chit chat or office banter. When you’re finished, you scurry that little bony ass of yours out the door and pretend like you’ve never met the man.”

“I don’t understand. If y-you plan to divorce him...why all this?” She hiccups and snuffles her way through her words.

“Because, you see, you’ve ruined my life. And if I can’t have mine the way it’s supposed to be well...neither will you. Eye for an eye, bitch.”

I hear her trying to muffle her crying and...I don’t feel the least bit sorry.

“So. If we understand each other I just have one last thing to say. If you ever see me on the street, at the grocery store, at the fucking bank...you will immediately turn around and walk away. No wait-scratch that. You will *run* away. Because if I catch you, you best believe you will wish you were dead.”

“Are you thr-threatening me?” She gasps.

“You better fucking believe it. If you so much as look at me or Roman, I will rip every piece of that frizzy-ass mop you call hair out. Strand by strand. And that’s just to start. Don’t. Fucking. Test me. I have nothing left to lose. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes.” She stutters.

“Good. Well, you have emails to write and classified ads to search. If you’re unable to find another assistant job, I know the corner of 5th and Fondren is always looking for women with your talent. Bye, Angela.” I end the call before she can say anything else.

“Yes bitch. Savage queen. Slay, mama, slay. Damn, Lu. I didn’t think you had it in you,” he smirks. “All I can say is, welcome to the Petty Side.”

I breathe out a sigh and feel a little bit lighter than I was this morning. Who knew revenge would feel so good?

“I need a coffee or a shot of energy before I deal with whore number two.”

“Oscar Meyer has a way with W-H-O-R-E sluts,” Lane sings.

I laugh and throw my arms around his neck.

“Thank you for standing by me. I love you, Lane,” I tell him through a choked sob.

“Always, my little moonchild. I love you too, Lu.”

Chapter 7

Roman

I sit on the front porch, staring at my phone while the kids blow bubbles on the grass after school.

I read then reread the email I just received.

To: Roman.Hart_esq@broussardmurphylaw.com

From: Angela.Joyner@broussardmurphylaw.com

CC: Rachel.Hood_HR@broussardmurphylaw.com

Re: employment

Mr. Hart-

This email serves as my formal notice of resignation from my position as P.A. to Roman Hart, esq. effective October 18, 2023, one month from today.

It has been a pleasure working for you and everyone at Broussard & Murphy but due to personal reasons, I must terminate my employment.

I will be more than happy to aid in the search and training of my replacement to make this transition a smooth and seamless process.

Once again, I thank you for the wealth of knowledge you've provided along with the opportunity to work with such an amazing group of professionals over the last five years.

With respect,
Angela Joyner
Assistant to Roman Hart, esq.
Broussard & Murphy, PLLC.

I just can't believe this. What could've caused her to make such a sudden change. She said nothing to me this morning. In fact, it was just another Monday.

I'm still sitting in absolute shock when I see Lane's car pull into the driveway. I watch as Luna laughs then gives her brother a hug and kiss on the cheek. She waves goodbye and exits the car.

Lane flips me the bird then backs out and drives away.

"Mommy!" All three kids shout.

"Hi my babies," she calls and bends to pull them in for a hug.

I smile watching how she loves our kids. Making me hate how I have neglected her and let everything she does go unappreciated.

She kisses each kid and they start jabbering away about their days. The four of them walk, practically tripping over each other, up to the front door.

Luna's smile lights up even the darkest of days.

In her right hand I notice a bag that reads, *Lacey's Love Emporium*.

What the fuck?

She finally looks at me and the smile and love that graces her face is replaced with an impassive look.

"Hi, baby. Have a good time with your brother?" I ask and lean in to kiss her.

She leans away from me and I end up kissing the air.

A devilish smirk appears and she says, "it was just what I was needing."

I look down at her bag and she watches as my eyes try to search the contents, but black tissue paper hides what lies inside.

"Just a little something Lane bought me," she says nonchalantly.

I gulp and follow her and the kids inside.

"You three go wash your hands and I'll make you a snack before homework," she tells them.

"Daddy already helped us with our homework," Hunter tells her.

"Oh," she says, stunned, and stands at attention. "That's...a surprise."

"They didn't have a whole lot, so I thought we'd get it out of the way," I explain.

“Well,” she says, lost in thought. “Why don’t we help daddy pack for his trip before I make dinner. Yeah?”

Okay. Guess she’s serious about the whole ‘get the fuck out’ threat.

The kids’ faces droop and they drag their feet up the stairs.

“I d-don’t want daddy to g-go,” Helene hiccups.

“Oh my sweet girl. You’ll see him this weekend. Okay? In fact, you three get to have Daddy-Little Monster night on Saturday while mommy goes with Uncle Lane and Auntie Dani.”

“Really!” Hunter asks.

Yeah. Really? I wonder.

“Uh huh,” she replies, then looks to me.

The look she gives me lets me know that this is not up for discussion, and I get a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“I’ll, uh, get my suitcase,” I whine, hoping the melancholy in my tone will have her changing her mind.

“Ok,” she says, a little too gleefully.

When I enter the room with my empty suitcase, she and the kids are laying out pajamas, undershirts and socks. Helene is organizing the socks by color while Hunter dumps several pairs of lounge pants on the bed.

“Daddy doesn’t need that many pajama bottoms, Hunt,” Luna kisses his forehead then turns her attention to me. “Will you need more *casual* clothes for your trip?”

My trip.

“Yeah. Just jeans. I can...” I point to the closet and she nods.

I step inside our shared closet and begin pulling a few pairs of pants from the hangers. I come to the end of my row and look at the neatly organized row of Luna’s dresses.

I finger the different fabrics in all colors and patterns. Each one I can link to a specific event she wore it to. My hand lands on a fitted red dress and memories swirl.

I can picture her, standing at the reception for work in that dress. It hugged her every curve and she wore red lips to match. Her dark hair fell in waves over one shoulder and every man’s attention was on her. She turned the heads of every person within five hundred feet.

My body hums at the thought of that night and I lean in, bringing my nose to the silky fabric and inhale. I close my eyes and picture her wearing that and walking toward me, a seductive smile on her face.

How could I have done this to her?

No woman holds a candle to her. There isn't another woman in the world I'd want but her and somehow, I let myself fall for the words of a conniving woman.

I'm such a prick.

"What are you doing?" Luna's raspy voice says from the closet entrance.

I open my eyes but don't let go of the dress I run between my fingertips.

"Just remembering the night you wore this. You were so beautiful. You're always beautiful, but that night you looked...magnificent."

Her cheeks tinge pink and I can see her trying to suppress a smile.

"Luna," I try to find the right words to ask her-no, beg her, to give me a chance to show her I'll change. "Can we-"

"I'm going to go start dinner," she says abruptly and walks out.

An hour later and I've reluctantly packed my bag for my stay at my dad's for the week. I place it in the mudroom and walk back into the kitchen where Luna and the kids are finishing making dinner and dancing to music playing from the speakers.

"Daddy," Helene calls. "Come dance with us." She holds her hand out for me and I happily take the invitation.

She releases her hold on her mom and I take her in my arms. Luna still sways and shakes with Hunter clasped in one hand and Poppy in the other.

I lift Helene off her feet and she places her little hand in my shoulder, her other resting in my bigger hand. I spin her around and she giggles as her long hair still in braids whips around.

"Me, daddy. Me too," Poppy whines.

I bend down and pull her up so that I have each of my girls close to my chest. They smile and laugh when I shimmy and dip. Their smiles are contagious.

I look up and find Luna watching us. A wide beam on her face. We lock eyes and I see the sparkle that is always there when she observes how I play with the kids. It takes her only a few seconds to drop her look of contentment and turn away from me. My heart practically falls out of my chest.

"Hey girls," I whisper so only they can hear. "Why don't you dance with your brother so I can dance with mommy. Yeah?"

They nod enthusiastically and work their way out of my arms.

"Hunt! Dance wif us," Poppy calls out in her little lisp.

Helene snatches his hand out of Luna's and the girls circle him with their

arms.

Luna stands transfixed on them and I take advantage of the moment and slide my hand into hers, tugging her close to me.

She stumbles with a gasp but I bring her so close that a strand of hair couldn't fit between us and she holds her breath.

I don't speak. I simply wrap an arm around her back, splaying my hand across the small of it, and begin moving side to side. I stare into her deep blue eyes, mesmerized by the swirls of light and dark blue. The way the light shines on them makes them look like sea glass, polished by the sand and gleaming in the sun.

The song is definitely not meant for slow dancing but I don't care. Just having her in my arms is the best feeling in the world and the last thing I want to do is rush it.

I let my head fall to the hollow where her neck meets her collarbone. I inhale her scent and nuzzle my nose against the column of her neck. I trace it up to her lobe and place a gentle kiss just behind the shell of her ear.

"I love you so much, baby. Please don't give up on me. Let me make this better," I whisper in her ear.

Her breath stutters and I pull back to see her eyes closed and her lip tremble. I touch her lips with mine and kiss the corners of her mouth. Then I take in her full lips, her top one just slightly larger than the bottom, and get lost in their softness.

I part my lips and lick the seam, doing my best to coax them open. When she responds my heart soars, and I release the breath I didn't realize I was holding.

Her arms come up to circle around my neck and I wrap both of mine behind her, my hands moving up to play in her hair.

We get lost in each other, lost in the moment and I'm seconds away from sneaking her upstairs when I hear, "ewwww. Mommy and daddy are kissin'."

Luna's eyes snap open and she pushes me away like I'm a fire that scorched her. She heaves and her chest rises and falls with each gasp of air. Her fingers come up to trace her lips and I can see how her dainty fingers shake.

"Dinners ready," she says in a breathy voice.

I swallow down the lump in my throat and give her a curt nod. "C'mon kiddos. Let's set the table."

I give her the moment she obviously needs to compose herself.

After dinner I help with cleaning up and then move to getting the kids ready for bed. Well...one kid. Luna is the expert who can juggle all three at once.

The look on her face when I step in to help proves to me once again what a complete and utter ass I have been. Something so small as putting Poppy in her pajamas and helping her brush her teeth is a simple task to me, but means the world to Luna.

I make a promise to myself that I will do better, be a better man, for both my wife and my kids. She deserves more. She deserves *everything*.

“All right my little flower. Time for bed,” I tell Poppy once we’re finished with brushing her teeth. “Let’s say goodnight to mommy and bubba and sissy.

She places her hand in mine and together we walk to Hunter’s room, first.

“Hunt!” Poppy shouts, hopping up on his bed where Luna is tucking him in. “Night, bubba.” She crawls up to him and wraps him in a tight hug.

“G’night, Poppy-seed. Love you,” he replies.

“Luv you.” They give each other a sweet kiss goodnight and she jumps off his bed.

“I’ll be right in to say goodnight to my girls. Go with mommy, okay?” I tell them.

My three beautiful girls walk out of Hunters’s room, giving me a moment alone with him.

“Hey little man. I need you to take good care of your sisters and help mommy while I’m gone this week. Okay? Can you do that for me?”

He looks at me with his big hazel eyes that look so much like mine and says, “okay daddy. I promise.”

I recognize the way my son wants to be just like me and if the love of my wife isn’t enough to get me to change my ways, this kid right here is. I want him to grow up and treat a woman with love and respect, and he can only do that by having an example of what a real man should act like.

“Thanks, buddy. I need you to do one more thing for me,” I say and he nods. “At night, I need you to give mommy hugs and two kisses. One from you and one from me. I don’t want her to go to bed sad. Yeah?”

“I’ll give her the biggest hug and biggest kiss ever ‘cause you’re big.”

“That’s right. Good night, son. I love you and I’ll see you in a few days.”

I lean over and kiss his forehead. He wraps his arms around my neck and squeezes.

“Love you too daddy.” His voice is muffled with his head buried in my shoulder.

I turn off his lamp and walk into the girls room to find the three of them laughing and whispering. Three matching smiles light up my world when they look at me.

“What’s going on here?” I ask and join them on Poppy’s bed.

“Nuffin” Poppy says, but her mischievous look tells me something different.

“Hmm. That sounds...suspicious.” I narrow my eyes at them. “I guess I’ll have to tickle it out of you.”

I dig into their sides with my fingers and they giggle and squirm, feet kicking and heads thrown back. I give them sloppy kisses and pull away when they beg me to stop. They’re out of breath and their cheeks are rosy pink from the exertion.

“Into bed with you two.” I pull back the covers and Poppy crawls in.

I tuck her tight, kiss her little lips, and boop her on her button nose.

I move to Helene’s bed where she sits against the creamy, tufted headboard, a huge smile on her face.

When I bend to hug her, I whisper in her ear, “be good for mommy and I’ll see you in a few days. I love you, my beauty.”

She hugs back and whispers, “I love you daddy. Please hurry home.”

My sensitive girl’s voice trembles and I squeeze her a little tighter. I release her and turn off the lamp that sits on the nightstand between the matching beds.

Luna gives each girl a hug and kiss and whispers “I love you’s” in their ears.

She walks towards the door and I grab her hand and lead her to our bedroom. I shut the door and watch her make her way into our closet. I follow her in and again, close the door.

She signs and says, “you should go, Roman. I’m sure your dad and Paula are waiting up for you.”

“They can wait a little longer.” I walk up behind her and wrap my arms around her, pulling her tight with her back to my chest. “I’m so, so sorry Luna. I’m going to change. I’m going to be a better man for you. Just please...don’t leave me,” I choke out.

“Roman. Too much has happened and this last thing...I just don’t know if I can forgive you.” She pulls out of my embrace and opens a drawer from the

large dresser that stands in the middle of the large space.

“Please? I’ll do anything. Tell me what you want and I’ll do it.” I stand next to her and glide my fingers through her hair, skimming her neck as I do.

Dark circles hang under her eyes and I can see they are the slightest bit swollen. *I did that.*

God. I just want to kick my own ass. I want to go back in time and stop myself before I let Angela worm her way into my head. I let my guard down and let the primal part of me take over. All I thought about was feeling good for a minute and forgot about what it could mean for the years to come.

One minute for a lifetime of hurt.

I let myself be the kind of man I’ve always despised. The kind of man I vowed to never be. I despise myself.

“Will you let me try?” I ask.

She stares into my eyes and I search for something to give me hope. Her mouth opens but no words escape.

I drop to my knees and wrap my arms around her thighs and rest my head on her stomach.

“I need you Luna. I can’t breathe without you. Please.” My voice cracks and I struggle to hold back my emotions.

She lays a hand on my head and lets her fingers dig into my hair. I turn my head and place kisses on her soft stomach. Images of her with a swollen belly carrying our babies flood my mind.

I press my forehead against her and on my knees, there in our closet, I pray for one more chance.

“Roman,” she whispers. “Roman. Stand up.”

I release her and wipe my face on my sleeve. I rise to my feet and look into her eyes. Her head is bent back so that she can meet my face.

“I...I will try to get past this because I love you. With all my heart. But you hurt me. You’ve broken my heart.” Her words trail off in a flood of emotion.

“I know. I know and God what I wouldn’t do to take it all back. But you have to believe me...it meant absolutely nothing. I stopped it and immediately after I was sick. I mean, I was literally sick, bent over the toilet emptying my stomach, sick.”

Her jaw clenches and she gives me a curt nod in understanding.

“I don’t know how you can prove it to me, but it has to be big. I have to be able to trust you again, and right now...it’s going to be difficult.”

“I understand,” I reply. “But I’ll do whatever it takes.”

She inhales deeply and says on an exhale, “I think you should go. I need some time alone.”

Nodding, I tell her, “okay, baby. I’ll text you when I’m there. And I’ll call you tomorrow during Poppy’s nap time. I’d like to talk with you.”

I don’t give her a chance to respond and take her in my arms. I kiss her hard and deep, like it’s the first and last time. when I pull away, tears leak from the corner of her eyes. I wipe them away and step back.

I watch her and she watches me as I walk backwards to the door, open it and leave.

Tomorrow is day one of my self improvement. Tomorrow starts when I work to win my wife back.

Chapter 8

Luna

By Friday, I've fallen into a routine not much different from when Roman is home. Aside from eating alone with the kids and crawling into bed alone at night, very little has changed. It proved to me that I can do this on my own if it comes to that.

Everyday, however, Roman has called me multiple times. During Poppy's nap time like he said he would, when the kids get home from school, to say goodnight to them and to talk to me.

He's asked me about my days and he's told me about his. On Wednesday he gave me the shock of a lifetime.

He told me that he found a therapist that he will begin seeing twice a month. He said he thinks he needs an unbiased third party to point out his flaws and help him change. He told me he already knows he's flawed and what he should do, but having someone else to guide him and hold him accountable is necessary.

He asked that I go with him after a few visits on his own, and I agreed. I promised him I'd try to get past this and I won't go back on my word.

He's been working remotely from his dad's office and said he's been busy, searching for a new assistant since Angela has given her notice. I gave him an Oscar worthy performance and acted totally surprised when he told me. He said it was actually a relief and that it was best to start over.

He also told me how his dad really let him have it on the first night...and the next day...and the next. His dad has never been so harsh on him, and he

said the disappointment he saw in his dad's eyes was worse than if he'd have stabbed him in the heart.

His dad texted me on Tuesday telling what a dumbass his son was, but that he can see the regret in his eyes.

Now it's Saturday morning and I'm woken up by a sound coming from downstairs. I jolt awake and my heart begins racing and look at the clock that reads seven a.m. My nerves rattle and I look around the room for some type of weapon I can take with me to check out what's going on.

I remember the bat that sits in a corner of our closet, deciding against the gun in the safe. I white knuckle the bat in one hand and grip my phone in the other and slowly creep down the stairs.

A thud echoes followed by a hushed "shit" and I lower the bat recognizing the voice as Roman's.

I make my way past the kitchen and follow the sounds into the laundry room. when I turn the corner, I see Roman studying the settings in the washer.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

He startled and jumps back, slightly.

"I, uh, I'm doing some laundry. My clothes from the week," he says, pointing to the open suitcase. "Why do you have a bat?"

I look down at the weapon in my hand and back to him. "I heard noises and needed something to fend off an intruder. I don't like using the gun."

"Well thank god for that," he exhales a sigh of relief. "I'm sorry to wake you, baby."

He takes the few steps to meet me and kisses my forehead.

"It's okay."

"I'm sorry I'm here so early, but I just couldn't stay away a minute longer. I missed you and the kids so much."

"They missed you, too," I tell him, leaving out the fact that my heart ached for him every night and each morning.

He gives me a tight smile when I mention the kids but not me.

I move past him and press a few buttons. The washer door clicks and the sound of water pouring into the basin fills the room.

"I can do that," he says.

"I'm sure you can. But I'm saving your clothes from shrinking to Hunter's size." I smirk and he chuckles.

He tips the top of his suitcase with his foot and it falls shut.

“I was hoping I could take you all to breakfast this morning.” His hands circle my waist and a riot of goosebumps breaks out across my body. “I know you’re—that you have plans tonight, but I’d like to spend a little time with you this morning.

He remembered that I told him about going out with Lane and Dani tonight, which I am regretting. With the way my week has gone—lonely and busy—the last thing I want to do is spend the night being bounced around a crowded dance floor.

“Um, sure. Is it okay if we go around nine? The kids and I stayed a little late watching a movie last night, and I’d like to let them sleep in.”

“Of course, he says. “I need a shower, anyhow. Dad’s shower sucks. He has this misting shower head and I felt like someone was spitting on me every time I stepped in. Throw in that I was practically eye level with the damn thing and it was just horrible all around.”

I laugh and picture my big husband in the small guest bathroom shower, squatting to wash himself. His dad is a big guy, too, but he and his wife had their master bathroom built out to accommodate that.

Obviously the other bathrooms didn’t get the same treatment.

I laugh and he does the same.

“I need one, as well. But you go ahead.”

“No. You first. I’ll make us some coffee,” he leans forward and cups my face, rubbing his thumb across my cheek.

I nod and spin around to go upstairs.

I start the shower to let it warm up, stripping off my pajamas and take a look in the mirror.

I’ve lost a little weight as my appetite has been nonexistent. My misery over the last week’s events have weighed heavily on me, and I just haven’t been able to stomach food. Small bites at dinner to keep up appearances for the kids, but I mostly just pushed my food around the plate.

My skin is paler than usual, and my eyes look dull and the closer I look at my hair, I can see the oily roots. My hair is about ninety percent dry shampoo at this point as I couldn’t find the energy to have to wash and style it.

I am a mess. I should just tell Lane and Dani that I don’t feel well.

The mirror begins to fog and I move to get in the shower. I adjust the temperature and close my eyes as I lean my head back. The water cascades over my body like a warm embrace. And despite the heat, a shiver crawls over me.

I bring my fingers to my hair and work them through the strands, making sure they are fully soaked.

I let my mind wander as I stand under the spray. I'm so lost in thought that I don't hear the bathroom door open and only blink my eyes when I hear the creak of the shower door.

My heart lodges in my throat from fright, and I see a naked Roman stepping in. My eyes eat him up.

I notice he looks like he may have lost a couple of pounds, as well. He's still broad and full of hard lines and cut muscles, but his cheeks are slightly sunken in.

I tense as he moves closer and watch him until my eyes can no longer see him when he steps behind me. I hold my arms over my breasts like some prude virgin. I hold still and wait for...I don't know what I wait for.

Breaths fall heavy in and out of my nose when I feel his fingers massage my scalp. He pulls away only to return to my hair, working shampoo through it.

My eyes fall closed and I moan at how good it feels. The way his strong fingers knead my head is like heaven. The rainfall shower head pours down from above us and the sensation of the handheld shower rinsing through my strands has me lost in the moment.

He continues on, conditioning my hair then washing my body. He's gentle and takes care with every inch of my body. His eyes are focused on his task, but I watch him in rapture. When my body is thoroughly washed and sudded up, he grabs the hand held shower head again.

He moves the water over me the same way his hands would caress my naked skin. From my neck down to my toes, he makes sure I'm completely rinsed off.

Just when I think he's going to stop, I gasp when the pressure of the rapid water touches my core. I snap my eyes open and see how intensely Roman watches me.

"Roman," I whisper.

His hand guides the water as if he were licking through my folds. I should stop him but my body aches for his touch.

My nipples are hard and sensitive and his thumb brushes over one pebbled nipple. I let out a raspy moan when he drops his head and sucks me into his mouth.

His tongue swirls and flicks at it. He lays kisses from one breast to the

other and nips at my burning flesh. His mouth falls into a perfect rhythm with his hand and I feel the tingle building inside of me.

I grip onto his shoulders when I rise to my toes. My body shakes, the desire overwhelming. He bites my nipple then sucks on me, hard. The water flows vigorously as he moves it closer and closer. The pressure on my clit inundates me and I'm on the brink of my orgasm.

My breathing comes in quick and short surges. My fingers curl into his shoulder, my nails digging into his skin. They sink deep causing him to hiss.

The feeling of lightheadedness begins to take over. His lips brush against my ear and he growls, "come for me, baby. Let me feel your body shake."

In a blaze of glory, my orgasm roars through my body. I can hear the moans that fall from my mouth as if I'm watching an out of body experience. And just when I hit my peak, I start to free fall.

I suck in air but my lungs seize the release. Roman's mouth kisses and licks up the column of my neck until he reaches my mouth where he captures my lips and swallows the cries that push through.

My muscles finally relax and my legs give out. Roman wraps his arm around me and replaces the shower head. I'm panting and feel completely boneless and my limbs hang loose at my sides.

The water stops and I'm lifted into Roman's arms. He steps out of the shower and reaches for a fluffy towel and covers my body with it and moves me to the bedroom where he lays me down.

I'm too far gone to even care that I'm soaking the sheets.

He glides the towel over my body and once my skin is dried and warm, he takes my hair in the towel and squeezes the excess water. My eyes flutter open and I take in his glorious body with water trickling over each hard muscle like a stream rippling over boulders.

"Stay right here, baby. I'm going to wash off real quick," he whispers in my ear.

I think I nod and murmur "Mhm", but I'm so gone it all feels like a dream.

I must fall asleep because I flinch when a heavy arm drapes over me.

"Shh," he says into my hair. "Let's sleep for just a few more minutes."

And with that, I fall into a blissful abyss.

"Mommy, daddy, mommy, daddy!"

High pitched voices cut through the silence, jolting us awake. The mattress shakes as three little monkeys bounce up and down.

“Hey, hey. Be careful,” Roman warns, his voice groggy from sleep.
I start to sit up but realize I’m completely naked under the sheets.

“Roman,” I whisper. when he looks at me I motion towards my bare body under the sheets.

“Who wants to go out for breakfast?” He shouts.

“Me!” They all cry out in unison.

“Okay. Go brush your teeth and I’ll be right there to pick out some clothes.”

They hop off the bed, one at a time, and rush off their respective bathrooms.

Roman walks into the bathroom and returns holding my robe open for me. I step out of bed and he wraps it around me.

“Go get ready. I’ll take care of the kids.”

He kisses my hair and steps around the bed and out the door.

What is going on?

Chapter 9

Luna

My phone buzzes and I pick it up to see a text from Dani.

Dani: ETA is five mins. Be ready bitch.

Me: ready to go, skank.

Dani: be on the lookout. I don't want to have to come to the door for you. I might stab Rome in the neck if I do.

Me: no stabby hands. You can't afford to end up in jail. See you soon.

I slip my phone into the back pocket of my jeans and take a last look at myself.

I decided to keep it simple. Black skinny jeans with a split cuff, a white bodysuit with spaghetti straps, my Gucci belt and a pair of light grey suede pumps. I left my hair down in beach waves and kept my makeup neutral, adding a cranberry red lipstick.

My outfit may say "girls night", but my mood is definitely ice cream and Netflix".

I'm just not feeling up for a boisterous night out, and I'm still angry with myself for falling into Roman's arms yet again.

I should've pushed him away in the shower. I should've told him no after giving in to him the Saturday before. Instead, I got lost in his touch and how good he made me feel. He wanted me. Desperately. And to be honest, I

wanted him just as much.

The problem is by giving into our cravings, I'm giving him a false sense of security in our relationship. I'm still so furious, so deeply cut from what he did. But yet, I keep letting him into my body, letting him think that all is forgiven.

My words tell him one thing while my body welcomes him. My actions are definitely ringing louder than my words.

I step into the foyer and hear the kids shrieking. I peek into the den and see them piling on top of Roman's back while he acts like a crazy bear.

Poppy hangs off his neck, her little body draped down his back, while Helene and Hunter hang onto a leg. They grip for dear life as Roman stomps around the open space, growling.

He reaches behind him and grabs Poppy, flinging her head over butt, and tosses her on the couch. She bounces and her chocolate curls spring up and down.

The twins stare at him wide eyed as he begins to shake one leg and then the other. Their arms flail and they lose their grip. He lowers his leg so that when they fall, it's only an inch down.

Once he's free from being a climbing wall, he looks up and freezes with his eyes on me. The kids chase each other around and don't notice the two of us gazing intensely

"Wow!" He says. "You look..." he strides over to me with a walk that is all him. Sexy and confident. "You look fuck hot, baby."

He whispers in my ear and his warm breath tickles my neck. I smile at the compliment but suppress it just as quickly. I can't let myself be swept up by this man who feels so new yet so familiar.

"Thanks," I say, clearing my throat. "Dani will be here any second. You guys have fun. Text me if there's an emergency."

He gives a weak, sad smile before squeezing my hand and kissing my cheek.

"I'll wait for you," he tells me.

"No. Don't do that. It'll be late. I'll just see you in the morning." I step around him quickly and shuffle over to the kids. "Bye my little monsters. Be good for daddy and don't eat too much junk food."

They say goodbye with hugs and kisses, and I stand up and walk back to the front door. From the opaque glass of the front door, headlights beam through the darkness letting me know Dani has arrived.

I twist the door knob and turn to look over my shoulder. Roman stands there, hands fisted and jaw clenched, but his eyes are somber and pleading. I can see that he wants to beg me to stay.

Beg me, Roman. Ask me to stay.

“Have a good night,” I call out.

He grins and replies, “have fun. I love you, Luna.”

I give him a weak smile as my only response and walk out, shutting the door behind me.

The night went from something I was dreading to just what I needed. I’ve been able to push all thoughts of Roman and how he looked when I walked out the door to the back of my mind. With two small exceptions.

At one point a song came on that gave me flashbacks to a night when we were out with friends shortly after the twins were born.

It was our first time away from them and Roman kept trying all night long to take my mind off of worrying about them and to just focus on having fun.

when the same song came blaring through the speakers he grabbed my hand, not saying a word, and pulled me to the dance floor. He shoved his way through the throng of people until we were hidden amongst the masses.

He tugged me close to him and began to move our bodies as one. Our hands roamed over each other while our eyes drank the other in. Our bodies were slick, not just from sweat but lust, too.

My pulse was throbbing when he snaked a hand between us. He held me close with one arm around me and the other crept closer to the hem of my shirt dress. He gathered it up until his fingers grazed over the front of my panties.

“*Roman,*” I moaned.

He slipped one long digit under the soft underwear and drug his finger through my seam. I gasped and when he pulled away and brought his finger to his mouth, sucking it clean, I practically came right then.

I claimed his mouth and we clashed, our tongues twisting and tasting. He returned his hand to my core and yanked my panties to the side and sunk two fingers inside of my pussy.

He growled against my lips. “*So warm and wet, baby.*”

The music continued to bump and in the middle of a crowded dance floor, surrounded by packed bodies, my husband made me come all over his

fingers.

Thinking about it now made my nipples tingle and I had to fan myself off.

The second time he wandered into my thoughts was when I could've sworn I saw him standing in the corner, watching me. But when I blinked out of my gaze, I saw that it was someone else.

Sweat coats my body and drips down my cleavage. I lean into Dani and yell, "I need water."

She nods and motions for us to go.

I look back at Lane but he's lost in his latest boy toy, Johar. We decide he'll be just fine on his own and make our way to the bar.

We squeeze between a few guys and when we catch the eye of the bartender, we call out for waters.

I take a long gulp of the ice cold water and it cools me, slightly.

"How are you doing, babe?" Dani asks me.

"Good," I say. "I'm having fun. Thank you for dragging me out."

She puts her hand on my arm, stopping me from taking another swig, and looks intently at me.

"No. I mean how are *you*? Really."

The look in her eyes tells me she's asking about Roman and me and not my mood here in the club.

I sigh. "I don't know, D. I'm so confused. One minute I'm pushing him away, the next I'm pulling him in."

On the drive over to the bar, I told Dani all about how my morning started. She fanned herself off and said, "lord, my loins are on fire just thinking about him fucking you with the shower head."

"I'm so angry with him. I'm furious. I want to hurt him as badly as he's hurt me. But dammit, Dani...I can't breathe when I think of not having him in my life."

Dani sets her glass on the counter and places her hands on my arms and looks at me with such sincerity.

"Luna...no one will fault you for giving your husband a second chance. There is no shame in making a marriage work."

My nose stings as tears threaten to fall.

"Lane will judge," I tell her.

"Lane needs to calm his tits. Your marriage has no effect on his life. Y'all are fraternal twins, not conjoined. Although...I'm thinking he wouldn't be too mad about sharing a bed with your fine ass man."

I chuckle at the pure truth of that statement.

“But seriously, babe. I am so mad at Rome for what he did to you, but I know what a good man he really is. I teeter between wanting to chop his dick off, grinding it to mince meat and force feeding him, to shaking him and telling him to wake up and grovel at your feet. I’ve witnessed your highs as a couple and now I’m seeing you at your lowest. I wouldn’t be a real friend if I told you only what you want to hear. So...here it goes.

“I love you both, very much. Roman has had many asshole moments, but you’ve equally matched him with your bitchy ones. I do believe that this is the one and only time he has done this, and I believe, deep in my heart, that he is remorseful. I won’t tell you to give up on that lying bastard and take him for everything he’s worth. That’s not you. I will tell you that you need to really think about what you want for your future.

“Is the trust damaged beyond repair, or is it worth saving? Will you be able to live a life without him? Will you be okay with seeing him during kid hand-off? Will you be okay seeing him with a new wife, a new life? Can you see yourself with another man? If the answer is no to any of those, then...I think you stay and fight.”

She finishes with a shrug and a tear in her eye. *This girl.* My sister at heart always speaks with such truth and clarity. And she’s right. I am devastated by what he did, but I don’t think I can live without him.

It may take a long time, but I need to try. I owe it to us to see if it can be mended.

I swallow down the lump in my throat and give her a soggy smile, a single tear streaking down my face.

“C’mere,” she says and pulls me into a hug.

I squeeze her back then pull away. We both wipe the dampness from under our eyes and laugh.

“Wow. Kind of depressing club talk, huh?” I say.

“You know, the club scene hits a lot harder at thirty three than at twenty three. And by hard I mean it hurts. Wanna get outta here?” Dani asks me.

“Yeah,” I say, twisting up my face. “I do. Let’s tell Lane. I’m sure he’ll be okay with his snack.”

She takes my hand in hers and we strut over to where my brother grinds on Johar like a bear trying to scratch against a tree.

I watch the way everyone dances sensually and think about the two of us with other people and...I just can’t. Roman is it for me. He’s my everything.

I have to find a way through this and back to us.

Chapter 10

Roman

The darkness surrounds me and the silence is too quiet as I lay in our bed, staring at the ceiling.

I look at the clock and it reads twelve forty-five. I pick up my phone and bring it to life to check for any texts or missed calls from Luna, but there's none.

I put my hands behind my head and take a deep breath. I've been going out of my mind all night wondering what she's doing. Are you guys hitting on her? Of course they are. Would she let them buy her a drink or dance with them? Would she let another man put his hands on her body?

Fuck.

Images of some jackass with his hands on my wife has me wanting to punch my fist through the fucking wall. Before my screw up, I could say, without a doubt that Luna would never let anyone other than me touch her like that.

But now...I don't know. And that scares the shit out of me.

I scrub my hands over my head and yank my hair. This is killing me.

I fling the covers off of me and swing my legs over the side of the bed just as I hear the front door open and close. Instead of rushing out to see her, I crawl back under the cool sheets and wait for her to come upstairs.

Her steps are quiet as she pads up the stairs. There is no clicking of her heels on the hardwood, so she must've taken her shoes off so she wouldn't wake us.

The door is quietly pushed open and she tiptoes in. I calm down and remind myself to not fly off the handle and bombard her with questions and accusations.

“Hey,” I say with a croak. “Did you have a good time?”

“Oh. Hey. I didn’t think you’d be awake. I hope I didn’t wake you,” she whispers.

I shake my head. “No. You didn’t wake me. I couldn’t sleep.”

She gives a quick nod then walks into the closet. A minute later she comes out holding a satin pink pajama set and heads straight into the bathroom.

I hear the shower start and ten minutes later, she’s walking out with wet hair and fresh faced. I sit up against the headboard and watch as she moves around the room.

She takes her phone from her purse and plugs it into the charger. Next, she walks out of the room and reruns holding a glass of water. She gets her birth control pills, swallows one down then walks out of the bathroom, shutting off the light and over to her side of the bed.

I hold the covers open for her to slide in. “Thank you,” she says softly.

I don’t say anything and wait for her to decide if she wants to talk or sleep.

“Roman?” She whispers.

“Yeah,” I say and turn my body to face hers.

I prop myself up on my elbow and look down at her, blinking my eyes to bring her into focus. Only a sliver of moonlight shines from the slit in the curtains.

She takes a deep breath in and out and chews her lips before continuing.

“I want to try.” Her voice is hushed as if she’s telling me a secret.

“You do?” I ask, jack knifing out of bed.

“Yes. But,” she stops me and comes to sit against the headboard. “There are a few things we need to discuss.”

“Anything, baby. Whatever you want.”

I sit like an eager puppy, waiting for her to throw me the smallest bone.

“I don’t want to keep telling the kids you’re on a work trip when you’ve never taken one before. So...you can move back. But there will be no more sex.”

“What? Why?” I snap.

“Because it makes everything too...too muddled. I can’t think clearly

when you do things to me. And I want to go into this with a clear head.”

As much as I hate to pull away intimately from her, if that’s what she needs that’s what I’ll give her. If she thinks sex will cloud her judgment then okay. Personally, I think sex will bring us closer but this is about what Luna needs to move forward.

“Okay. I understand. But can...can I kiss you?” I plead. And yes, I sound pathetic, but I’ll take whatever scrap she’s willing to give me.

“I guess a kiss is okay. But hands stay above the waist, buddy. Got it?” She asks and I nod. “Ok. So, in addition to no sex, I would like to go with you once a month to counseling. I think it’s important for you to still go on your own, but we need some help with us.”

“I think that is a great idea. I meet with the therapist next week. I’ll ask her what she feels is a good timeline for us to visit together.”

She goes back to chewing on her lip and stares at the ceiling. I can tell she has a lot going on inside her head, and I can tell it’s weighing her down.

“What else? Tell me whatever it is you need. Don’t hold back, Lu. I need to hear it all just as much as you need to get it out,” I tell her, hoping it calms some of her nerves.

With a quick breath, she says, “I need to know if there has been anyone else. Is there anything that I might find out that you’re hiding from me? Because I swear to God, Roman, if-“

“No. Nothing else. No one else. I swear to you. I told you about what Leilani did —and I absolutely reported her and had Trey to corroborate the events— and...you know. But that’s it. I promise. You will find no skeletons or secrets or, or, or anything.”

I hold my breath and pray she can see the truth in my eyes. Angela was the biggest mistake of my life and I’m still not sure how I let things get carried away. But there hasn’t been and never will be another woman other than Luna.

She’s my whole life, my entire world. Just her.

“I...I’m not saying this means all is forgiven and forgotten. I know it’s going to be hard but we have to have complete honesty when talking about our problems and what we need out of this to move forward. I’m going to try but please...just don’t rush me.”

“Never,” I assure her.

She nods and then rolls over, effectively ending our conversation. I don’t push. I slowly climb back under the sheets and inch by inch, move closer to

her. I smell the coconut of her shampoo and I want to dive into her and drown. My hands itch to touch her body. I want to ravish her until she understands that she is the only one for me.

Instead, I carefully lay my arm over her and spoon behind her. She tenses for a moment then relaxes into my hold. She doesn't move, doesn't wiggle or say a word. She just lets me hold her and for now, that's enough.

My first session with the therapist went well. Our initial conversation went much like the one I had with Luna. Be completely honest, no lying, no holding back, and be open to hearing things you may not like but need to know.

Dr. Brooks has counseled many couples on infidelity. She was professional and didn't make me feel like I was being judged as a horrible person. I kept waiting for her to react and tell me I didn't deserve my wife, but that never came. She didn't immediately psycho-analyze me. She simply asked me to tell her everything. And, as much as it sucked, I did.

We also discussed a time for Luna to join me and decided I'd have two more sessions alone before including her. Dr. Brooks wants to talk about the "why's" behind my cheating as well as prepare me for what Luna may say once were in a neutral zone.

Work was busy with me taking off the week before and with the added addition of finding a new assistant, I was stressed. More than one night I could've easily worked past the time my family was in bed, but I forced myself to put it down and go home. The work would be waiting for me the next day. Spending time with Luna and the kids was my top priority.

Friday night came fast and we decided to make it a family night. We took the kids to their favorite pizza place, then stopped at the arcade for a few games and treats.

By the time we got home, all three kids had crashed from their sugar high's. I carried the twins up to bed, one on each shoulder, while Luna took Poppy. Together we were able to change three very sleepy kids and tuck them in without them so much as fluttering an eye.

When Luna and I climbed into bed that night, she didn't wait for me to hold her. She rolled into me, her chest brushing against mine, and kissed me goodnight.

It started as a sweet touch of the lips but quickly turned heated. Her hands moved to the back of my head as she pulled me in closer. She threw her leg

over my hip and I let my hand roam from her foot up to her ass, grabbing one luscious globe and squeezed. She moaned into my mouth and my dick sprang to life.

Our heated make out went on for a few more minutes before I pulled away.

“Baby. I want to rip your clothes off and ravage your beautiful body. But I don’t want to cross the lines you set in place,” I said, hoarsely.

“You’re right.” Her voice held a bit of disappointment as did her eyes. “Good night, Rome. I love you.”

My throat grew tight and it felt like the oxygen had been ripped from my lungs.

She told me she loved me.

I’d said it to her every night, every morning and pretty much anytime I thought of her. I sent texts while I was working and called every lunch hour just to hear her voice and tell her how much I loved her.

But this is the first time in weeks that she had said the words to me.

“I love you, baby. So much.”

She nuzzled into me with her arm and leg still draped over me, and fell asleep. The smile on my face was still there when I woke the next morning.

It was a great week. As was the next and the next.

Chapter II

Luna

It's been four weeks since Roman confessed to me about Angela, and three weeks since I decided to not throw it all away.

In those three weeks, Roman has returned to the man I fell in love with. He's attentive and playful, and he puts me and the kids above all else. I'm falling in love with my husband all over again and I'm ...not scared.

It's Friday afternoon and I just pulled out of the parking lot of the kids school after picking them up. Hunter has a haircut appointment and Poppy needs a new pair of sneakers, so it's off to the mall we go.

As I push Poppy in her stroller with Helene hanging by my side and Hunter skipping ahead, an idea comes to me.

"Hey my little monsters. How'd you like to have freezer Friday and movie night?" I ask them.

"Yay!" They cheer in unison

Freezer Friday is something Roman and I started back in college. Every once in a while when we had no parties to go to or studying to do, we'd spend a Friday night together walking the frozen food section of the grocery store.

We'd pick out food that could only be heated in the microwave or eaten cold, then we would snuggle close to watch a movie and enjoy our culinary treats.

When the twins were four and Poppy was wearing me thin, Roman came home from work with a bag full of chicken nuggets, french fries, veggies

—‘cause kids— ice cream and sparkling water and declared freezer Friday was making a comeback.

Since then, freezer Friday has been the kids favorite family nights.

With the kids on cloud nine, we finish shoe shopping for Poppy and add a new dress for Helene and a Wranglers baseball cap for Hunter. We load back into my SUV and head for the grocery store to pick out tonight’s menu.

All three kids hang off of the cart and hop on and off it like a trolley when they search the freezers for what they want. The basket is loaded with nuggets, smiley face potato cakes, fried zucchini, egg rolls and three different kinds of ice cream.

“Okay kiddos. I think we’ve got enough food to cause a solid stomach ache. Let’s go pay and get home,” I tell them.

We unload our food on the conveyor belt and make a little small talk with the cashier as she rings us up. The beeps of the scanner sound all around us and conversations between cashier and customer carry over the low hums of music.

The last bag is loaded into our cart and the cashier gives me my total. I pull out my debit card and I’m about to swipe it when I hear a familiar voice.

“Looks like you’re having a girls night,” says the cashier at the register behind me.

“Sure am. It was my last day at my job and I need mucho alcohol to wash away the thoughts of my boss and his bitch of a wife.”

The nasally voice sends chills down my spine and I know immediately who it belongs to.

“Can you believe my boss fired me because his wife was jealous of me?” She continues. “Ugh. I am so glad to not have to ever see that witch again. My boss...well let’s just say he’ll stay a key character in my fantasies.”

The two women laugh and I slowly spin around. My anger is boiling at the surface and I have to remind myself that my kids are with me.

I take a small step closer to where they stand and say in a low voice that only they can hear, “maybe your boss’s wife wasn’t jealous but angry that her husband’s assistant thought that getting on her knees was in her job description.”

The cashier looks at me with shock written all over her face and Angela meets my gaze, a palpable fear radiating off of her.

“L-Luna,” She stutters.

“Keep my husband out of your fantasies and don’t let me ever hear of you

speaking about me like I'm the villain in this story. Whore," I growl.

Turning back around, the young cashier's eyes are wide with disbelief and the kids are oblivious, occupied with talking about what movie they want to watch. I swipe my card, punch in my PIN and jam my card back into my wallet.

"Let's go kids," I bark and take hold of the cart with a grip so tight, I feel like I could snap the handle right off.

The kids step up and wrap their arms on the edge of the cart and I push us out of the line. As I pass by Angela I mumble, "fucking bitch."

I fume all the way home and can barely muster a "mhm," or "we'll see" when the kids ask a question. I pull into the garage and usher the three of them inside before returning to get the grocery bags.

I unload each bag and feel my rage spiral into pain. Tossing the frozen items into the freezer, I stomp off to my bedroom and pull out my phone and stab out a text.

Me: D-I really need to get away tonight. I'll tell you later but I can't face Roman. You free?

Her response is quick.

Dani: Yes. I'll pick you up at eight. Are we doing a wine and cry night or laugh and dance night?

Me: Laugh and dance. I can't shed another tear.

Dani: Ok, babe. See you later. <kissy face emoji>

Me: <heart emoji>

I walk into my closet and pick out something to wear. I find a bag and stick my clothes and shoes inside. I add my makeup so that I can get ready at Dani's. I don't want Roman to see what I'm wearing tonight.

I go back downstairs and set my bag down by the front door. Roman always comes in from the garage, so he won't see my bag until I'm walking out the door.

At seven o'clock my phone buzzes with a text notification.

Rome: leaving the office. Any plans for tonight?

I clench my jaw and force myself to reply as if nothing is wrong.

Me: Freezer Friday. I already got stuff and the kids are excited.

Rome: perfect. That's just what I need after this week. See you soon. I love you.

I don't want to tell him the same but I have to unless I want him to be suspicious. If he suspects I'm upset, he'll call to talk and I won't be able to hide the truth in my voice.

Me: love you, too.

I shove the phone in my back pocket and go about prepping tonight's dinner. Oven preheating, air fryer on the counter and paper plates stacked on the island next to napkins and utensils.

I'm on autopilot going through the motions. The kids' laughter is like white noise and I hear nothing else but the thoughts racing through my mind.

At seven forty, I hear the garage door rolling open and steel myself to face him. I'll wait until Dani texts me that she's outside to tell him I'm going out.

The sound of the door closing snaps the kids' attention from what they're doing and they shout, "daddy!" and run to him with outstretched arms.

"Monsters!" He calls out in return.

Hugs and kisses are exchanged before he walks over to me.

"Hi, baby. How was your day?" He leans down and kisses my lips hard.

I close my eyes and kiss him back while trying to keep my breath steady. He groans into my mouth and I detach myself from him slowly.

"It was...good," I reply.

His arms circle my waist and he holds me close to him.

"I missed you. It was a helluva day and I am so glad to be home." He kisses my forehead then crook his neck to check out what food I'm serving tonight. "That's quite the spread," he says when he spots all of the empty boxes laid out.

"Yup. It's a Hart kids special." I squeeze his arms and step out of his hold, turning to check on the food. "It should all be done in a minute. Why don't you go change."

He comes up behind me and sticks his nose in my hair. He inhales and moves to my neck where he runs his nose and tongue down from my ear to my collarbone. He nips at my skin then sucks.

"I wish I could eat you for dinner," he growls.

I squirm, acting as if his touch tickles me. He chuckles and takes a step back. “Be right back,” he says and smacks my ass.

I jump and almost drop the nuggets that I’m plating.

“Go wash your hands, kids,” I order them.

I grab one dish and walk it over to the table, then return to the kitchen for another until everything is spread out.

I feel a buzz in my pocket and pull it out to see a text from Dani.

Dani: turning down your street. Two minutes.

I quickly toss the oven mitts in the drawer and hustle to where my purse is hanging, fling it over my shoulder and stuff my phone inside.

My hands begin to shake and my insides tremble with panic. I’m seriously rethinking my rash decision but then the words Angela spit come rushing back and the anger returns.

“So what movie are we watching tonight?” Roman asks when he comes back into the den.

He sees the purse hanging from my shoulder and cocks his head to the side with confusion and knits his brows.

“Are you leaving?” He asks.

“Everything is ready to serve and kids picked out a movie.” I speed past him but he catches up to me at the door.

He slams his palm against it before I can yank it open.

“What the hell, Luna?”

“I’m going out with Dani,” I say flatly.

“I don’t understand what’s going on. You said-“

“I know what I said. I had an entire night planned before I ran into your *whore* at the grocery store. Now...I can’t stand to look at you.” He jerks back in surprise. “Get out of my way.”

My voice is harsh as I say the words through gritted teeth.

“Baby...I thought we were moving past this. Did she say something to you? Talk to me,” he begs.

“She didn’t say anything to me. But the cashier got an earful about her boss’s bitchy wife and the fantasies he starred in.” Hot air is pouring from my nostrils and no doubt my eyes are spitting fire.

“I-I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” he chokes. “Please don’t go. Let’s talk through this. Just like we said we would. Just like Dr. Brooks suggested.”

“I can’t right now, Roman. I can’t be around you tonight.” My phone

buzzes again and I know it's Dani letting me know she's here. "Dani's here. I need to go."

He shakes his head as his eyes plead with me to stay. "Don't go." His voice is raspy and clogged with emotion.

"Get. Out. Of. My. Way," I spit.

Reluctantly, he drops his hand from the door and I tug it open. I don't even say goodbye to the kids. I just walk out and slam the door behind me.

I practically run to the car but before I open the door, I look back and find Roman standing on the porch. The headlights illuminate him and I see the pooling of tears in his eyes and the trickle running down his cheek.

I turn away and force back my own tears. If I start crying I'll give in and run back to him. I refuse to let him wear me down tonight. I need to stew in my anger without him around.

I open the door and step inside and we drive off. I fight with myself to not look back. I lose.

I look back.

He stands there, watching the tail lights until we fade away.

My body is slick with sweat and a hard body is pressed against my back. The remnant of my drink mix with the melting ice in the glass that I hold above my head. With my eyes closed I dance and let the music wash away my pain.

On the drive over to Dani's house I didn't speak a word. Once I was in the safety of her home, everything that had happened that afternoon came pouring out of me.

I sobbed until my chest hurt and my eyes were swollen. Dani held my hand the entire time and cried alongside me. When I was finished, she guided me to her couch and sat me down, and brought me a glass of wine and an ice pack for my eyes.

"Rest here for a bit," she said, then kissed my forehead.

She went off to her bathroom to shower and let me have a moment. She always knew exactly what I needed before I did.

I let my head fall against the back of the couch and placed the cold ice pack over my eyes. Next to me my phone buzzed and buzzed with text after text. I ignored every one of them. After another minute the texting turned into calls.

I silenced it and focused on clearing my head.

When I felt human again, I joined Dani in her room and got ready for the

night.

We decided on eating before the bar and ended up at a Tapas restaurant in Market Square along the waterway.

We spent two hours there, eating and pushing Roman and Angela as far away from our thoughts as we could. The sangria we consumed warmed my belly. When the pitcher was empty, we paid our bill and took an Uber to the club.

“You okay?” Dani’s voice has me opening my eyes.

My movements are slow from all of the alcohol flowing through my veins. I give her a sloppy smile and a thumbs up. She smiles at me and goes back to dancing with a tall man with blonde hair and brown eyes.

He’s okay looking. Average height, blonde hair cropped closer at the sides and a little floppy on top. He’s nice to look at but he doesn’t hold a candle to Roman.

We made small talk at the bar before he bought me a drink then asked me to dance.

The music bleeds from one song into another and I make no move to walk away. I spin along to face him and he grips my waist and pulls me closer.

I let the hand not holding my glass rest on his shoulder as we sway left to right. My eyes close once more and a body rolls into me, forcing me even closer to my dance partner.

I stumble and laugh and he does the same. Then he does something that takes me by complete surprise. He kisses me.

At first I resist, but then I think about Roman sitting in his chair in his office with Angela’s head between his legs, bobbing up and down his hard length. That image wipes away my better judgment and I return the kiss.

His tongue is warm but he doesn’t move it the way I like it. He’s sloppy and uncoordinated. His lips are thin and not at all like the soft pillows that Roman’s feel like.

Dread floods me and I snap my eyes open.

Oh god. What am I doing?

I yank my head back and try to push him away, but his grip on me is tight and I struggle against him.

“Stop. Let me go!” I yell but he doesn’t budge. “Stop!”

His fingers dig into my back and I wince as his nails bit into my skin. Fear bubbles inside of me and I frantically begin to search Dani out.

My head spins on a swivel but I can't find her. My heart speeds up and I feel like I'm going to be sick. Just as I feel a tear start to fall, the guy is yanked off of me.

"Get your fucking hand off of her, dick face."

I look up to see Roman standing there like a bull about to attack. He grips the back of the guy's neck and I watch in shock as he squeezes the neck in his grasp. The guy's eyes bug and his face turns a dark shade of red.

He's going to kill the guy in front of dozens of people.

"Roman! Stop!" I yell. He makes no move to let go so I say it again.

He meets my gaze and whatever he sees on my face has him dropping the guy like a bag of rocks. His chest heaves and his body shakes with rage.

I stare up at him and grab his hand. Without another word I pull him through the crowd and off the dance floor.

We stand at the edge and the adrenaline that hit me just moments ago fades, leaving me a mess of nerves.

"Rome, I'm s-sorry," I hiccup.

His lip trembles and his body is tight with anger. With a force I have never felt before, he crashes his lips to mine in a bruising kiss.

I cry and he swallows them down. His fingers weave into my hair and he wrenches my head back. I hiss from the pain of him tugging at my roots but keep kissing him.

He pulls away with a pop and clutches my hand, dragging me out of the club behind him. My feet shuffle quickly as I struggle to keep up with his long strides.

He leads me around the side of the building until we're standing in the back alley.

"Roma-" My words are cut off when he pushes me back against the brick wall.

His fingers circle my neck in a possessive grip. He doesn't put any pressure or try to hurt me. It's a show of ownership. He's reminding me that I am his.

Guilt takes hold of me once again and I shake with silent sobs. Roman's face softens and his hand moves to my jaw while his other one braces against the wall.

He hovers above me, still silent. His eyes search mine and I try to communicate how sorry I am.

He licks his lips and drops them to mine. I envelope him in my arms and

anchor myself to him like I'm a sinking ship and he's my lifeboat. His large hand rakes up and down my body, branding every inch of me with his touch.

In a flash, he scoops me up and slams me back against the wall. I wrap my legs around him, my dress hiking up, and steady myself for the beast that is about to be unleashed.

Chapter 12

Roman

When I watched Luna drive away I felt my heart stop beating for a minute. The progress we had made over the last few weeks had vanished in an instant.

I was furious at Angela. I knew she didn't know my wife and kids would be at the same store as she had been, but the fact that she was spitting lies had me blinded with rage.

I struggled to stay calm while the kids and I ate. I laughed when they did and crawled along the floor when they wanted to play monster. But all the while, my mind was racing with thoughts of where she had gone.

Once the kids had settled to watch the movie, I excused myself to make a few phone calls.

As much as I didn't want to do it, I dialed Angela's number and waited for her to pick up. when she did, her voice trembled.

"He-hello?" She muttered in a hushed voice and laughter rang out in the background.

"You fucking bitch. How dare you talk about me or my wife. You better not ever fucking think about us because I'll find out if you do. I swear to god I will ruin your life the way you've ruined mine, you manipulative wench. Stay. The fuck. Away."

I ended the call before she could respond. I said the last words I would ever speak to her and blocked her number. I set aside my anger so I could make another call.

My finger hovered shakily over his name then made the decision to text. I was too chickenshit to talk.

Me: I know you hate me, but I need your help. Please? I need to find Luna.

I waited and waited, praying for the three little dots to appear. when they finally popped up I breathed a sigh of relief. then they disappeared and I closed my eyes and sagged against the wall. Without his help I had no chance at fixing the mess this night turned out to be.

A ding brought my attention back and I fumbled with the phone.

Lane: You know, you're a real dick hole. I shouldn't help you with shit. But because you love my sister and she, for whatever reason, still loves you I'll see what I can do.

Me: Thank you! Something happened this afternoon that made her mad. when I got home she said she was going out with Dani and just left. I need to find her. Do you know where she could be?

Lane: Gimme a minute...

I stared at those three words with such intensity and my heart hammered in my chest. My screen lit up with another text.

Lane: They're eating now but going to Spark when they're done.

Me: Thanks, man. Truly. I hate to ask but, do you think you could stay with the kids for a bit? They'll be going to bed soon.

Lane: Suuure. I'm out with a couple friends. Give me an hour or two?

Me: Yes! That's fine. You're a lifesaver.

Lane: <life preserver emoji>

I pocketed my phone and returned to the kids to wait until Lane arrived. The kids were so excited when Uncle Lane showed up that they begged to stay up a little longer. Lane assured me that he'd get them to bed soon and to just go find my girl and beg for mercy.

I pulled him in for a tight hug that obviously shocked the hell out of him because he didn't move or even blink.

I ran out of the house so fast I left dust in my wake.

When I got to the club and was finally let in, I searched the faces of everyone there for what felt like hours. When I finally spotted her, what I saw made my blood curdle.

There in the middle of the dance floor, surrounded by hoards of people, was my girl pressed up against another guy and dancing up on him like she was fucking single.

I started to shove my way through when I saw the asshole kiss her. I waited for her to push him away but instead, she embraced him. I saw red and was ready to murder the bastard.

I kept my eyes on them as I neared and witnessed as something snapped in her. She tried to wrestle away from him but he was relentless and wouldn't ease his hold.

With a strength I didn't know I possessed, I ripped the douche away from her and squeezed until the prick's face turned ten fucking shades of red.

In that moment I didn't care how many years I'd end up in prison for, I was going to kill that motherfucker with my bare hands.

Luckily Luna's panicked voice allowed me to release him before I ended up in stripes.

I was angry, I was jealous, I was shattered. I had been given a taste of my own medicine and it was bitter. My wife let another man not only lay a hand on her, but his mouth was on hers. His tongue was in her mouth. I wanted to force my way back to him and finish what I started but instead, I poured all of my boiling anger into a punishing kiss.

Now I had her up against the wall outside of the club and I was seconds away from fucking her mad.

Her skin tight dress is stretched over her hips and I drag it higher over her hips until only her small thong is covering her pussy.

With rough movements, I shove my hands in her panties and plunge two fingers inside of her.

"Aahh!" She cries out.

She's wet and she coats my fingers. I slam my fingers in and out of her. I don't care that I'm manhandling her out in the open where anyone could see. I know I'm being cruel in the way I'm touching her, but I can't reason with myself to slow down.

"Don't you ever let another man touch you the way that fucker did," I roar. "I will murder anyone who dares to talk to you. Do you understand me?"

Her eyes are closed and her head smacks the unforgiving brick. Her mouth hangs open and she nods, but that isn't good enough.

"Look at me!" I growl and grip her face, squeezing her cheeks and forcing her to meet my eyes. "You are mine, Luna. If you wanted to get even you succeeded sweetheart. But let me see that shit again and I will kill them with my bare hands. The score is even. You made me feel your pain, but it won't happen again. Say you understand?"

"I understand," she chokes out.

"Good. Now I'm going to fuck you so hard that we'll put a dent in this wall. then I'm going to take you home and punish you more until you can't walk. My cock will be imprinted on the sweet pussy of yours that you feel me for days."

Her moans are my green light.

I hold her up with one hand and work on my pants with the other. Our eyes are locked on each other, desire seeping from our pores. Luna's breasts rise and fall rapidly.

When I'm freed from my boxers, I tug her panties to the side and line up with her core. I kiss her sweetly then drive into her hard and unforgiving.

"Roman," she wails. "Fuuuuck."

Her pleas cut through the thick air of the warm fall night like a knife, and I sink my teeth into her shoulder just to hear her cry louder.

"Mine," I grunt with each thrust. "You belong to me, Luna."

"Yes," she whimpers.

"These tits are mine," I say, then drop my head to bite them. "These lips...mine." I tug her lip between my teeth and suck. "This pussy, so fucking sweet, is mine." I drive my hips deeper and plunge into her harder.

"Yours. All yours," she moans and I feel her walls clench around my cock.

I steady myself and let one hand drop between us. Dipping into her panties, I begin flicking her clit with my thumb. She calls out my name into the night when I start to alternate between flicking and rubbing her clit while pumping into her, harder and faster.

Her tits are squeezed tight under her dress giving her the most delicious cleavage. I dip my tongue between them, tonguing like I would her pussy.

On my next thrust I pinch her nub and roll my hips when I push inside of her. then...she soars.

"Fuck. Yes ye-yessss! Don't stop, Roman. Harder," she begs and I do just

as my sweet girl asks.

Her pussy is tight and I can feel her cum all over my dick. She's still flying high when I finally let my own orgasm burst.

"Goddamn! Fuck baby, you feel so good. So..."

I release every drop into her. Something caveman unleashes and I revel in flooding her with my cum. I want the evidence of our fuck dripping down her leg. I want her to remember that it's me she belongs to.

Just me. Always me.

Our bodies fall slack and my legs begin to shake while I try to hold us up. I nuzzle into the crook of her neck and leave open mouth kisses up to her jawline.

She's breathing heavily and her arms barely hold on to me from where they're perched loosely on my shoulders.

Her eyelids flutter and she blinks them open. Her pupils are large and only a thin ring of blue outlines them. I watch as they fill with tears and run down her cheek.

I slowly set her down and kiss her tenderly. "Let's go home," I say and hold out my hand to her.

She nods and stutters her breath. She places her hand in mine and I hold her steady while she fixes her dress.

"My phone," she says in a raspy voice. "Dani has it."

"Okay. Let's go get it."

I escort her back into the club which, thankfully, no longer has a line to get in. I show the bouncer our stamped hands and he let us in.

I grip Luna's hand tightly in mine as we search for Dani. when I spot her in the corner with some guy, I pull Luna closer to me and move quickly to where they stand.

"Roman?" She blanches. "What are you-"

She stops when she sees Luna holding my hand. Her eyes move from me to Luna and back again.

"I'm taking her home. Are you okay to get home on your own?" I ask her.

"Uh, yeah. Sure."

Her date locks eyes with me and says, "I'll make sure she gets home safely."

I size him up from head to toe then threaten, "if you touch a hair on her head without consent, I'll hunt you down and rip every ball hair out with tweezers."

“Fuck, man. Chill. I swear she’ll be safe. Here,” he says and sticks his hand in his pocket and produces his wallet. He opens it and pulls out a card. “Here’s my info. You can text me and I’ll send you a pic. I appreciate that you’re looking out for her but I promise, I’m a good guy.”

I take the card from him and study it. when I look up at him again I note the intensity in his eyes then see how he holds tight to Dani’s waist.

“Okay,” I concede. Turning to Dani I ask, “can I get Luna’s phone? I’ll have her call you tomorrow.”

Dani opens her purse and hands over Luna’s phone. I snatch it from her hand and give her a small nod of my head before plowing through the crowd and out of the bar.

When we arrive home, Lane is passed out on the couch with all three kids hanging off of him, snoozing and snoring. Luna takes in the scene and chuckles.

“I’ll take Poppy if you grab the other two?” She whispers.

“Okay, but who gets Lane?” I raise an eyebrow at him as I scoop up the twins in my arms.

She looks him over and shakes her head. “I’ll help him into the guest room.”

We take the kids to their rooms and tuck them in. I follow Luna downstairs and tell her, “I’ll take care of him. Go take a shower. I’ll be sure to lock up.”

I lean down and kiss her cheek and see her eyes so full of emotion. So much pain lies in them. The pain we both created exists in her eyes and lives in her heart. I hate it.

She nods and turns on her heel and up the stairs.

“Lane, buddy. Let’s get you to bed.” I shake his shoulder and he opens one eye.

With a groggy voice he asks, “did you get your girl?”

“Yup. Now, c’mon. You can sleep in the guest room.”

Lane holds up his arms lazily and lets them hang. He uses the same eyes as my wife’s like weapons and batted his lashes.

“Not happening, Lane. Get up.” There is no way in hell I’m carrying a grown ass man to bed.

“You owe me, big guy. Without me, your wife would still be out having the time of her life.”

He arches a brow and purses his lips. He isn’t going to budge which

means I have to be the better man.

“Fuck me,” I mutter and bend down to gather Lane in my arms.

“I’d love to Roman but sadly, my sister says you don’t bat for my team.” He pats my cheek and I give him a grim smirk.

He holds on to me and I walk into the room and drop him on the bed like a sack of moldy potatoes. He bounces with a thud and shrieks.

“Oooh. So alpha. Lu said you liked a little rough play,” he teases.

“Jesus Christ. Go to sleep. Thanks for watching the kids.”

I leave him to his own inclinations and check the doors and set the alarm before making my way up to our room.

The lights in the bedroom are off, but a sliver of light coming from the bathroom shines across the floor like a beacon.

I pad across the plush carpet and slowly push open the door. The glass shower enclosure is fogged over and steam billows out, obscuring my view of Luna. But I don’t need to see her to know what she’s doing.

Her sobs can be heard over the rushing water. My body moves on pure instinct, no coaxing needed.

The door creaks as I drag it open. There, huddled in the corner of the shower, sits my girl. She’s curled into herself and her body shakes with brutal sobs.

“Luna,” I speak softly.

She brings her gaze to mine and I shatter. Her face is streaked with black from her mascara. She looks so small, so broken and battered.

I turn off the shower and snatch a towel from the rod. I approach her with caution like she’s a frightened animal.

“I-I-I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m-“

I draw her into my arms and try to soothe her as she continues to repeat the words “I’m sorry” over and over

“Shh, baby. Shh. Don’t cry. It’s okay. It’s all going to be okay.”

My jeans soak up the water from the tiled floor as I sit there, comforting and reassuring her but I couldn’t care less.

“I’m s-so horrible. I don’t know w-why I did i-it.” She heaves and weeps harder than I’ve ever seen her before.

“Let’s get you to bed.” I hold her tight to me and use every muscle to stand up.

My shoes squelch against the floor and my jeans hang heavy with water from my hips. I sit her on the edge of the bed and sort through my shirts to

find one for her.

I found my threadbare TCU shirt and unfold it.

“Here, baby. Lift up your arms.” She holds up her arms and I slide the shirt over her naked body.

I tug it down her back and she hisses. I squint my eyes but can’t focus in the dim light. Reaching over, I turn on the lamp then move around her.

Lifting the shirt I see angry red scratches, crisscrossing her back.

“Fuck! Luna, your back. Shit. It’s all my fault.”

I jump off the bed and run back into the bathroom. I rip the drawers open and tear open the cabinets searching for ointment for her scratches.

Walking back over to her, she sits defeated and hunched over, I know we are at our rock bottom. That means we can only go up from here. We have to.

Right?

She doesn’t move as I gently roll up her shirt. She only slightly flinches when I carefully dab each scratch, soothing the pain. When every scratch has been tended to, I right her shirt and sit the ointment on my nightstand.

“Baby,” I caution. “Lay on your side so your back heals. I’ll be right back. Okay?”

She doesn’t respond with words or even a nod. She just lets her body sag and fall to the bed with a soft thud.

I pull the covers over her and go into the bathroom to peel off my wet clothes.

When I settle back down next to her, I wrap my arm around her, making sure not to press up against her back, and I feel her body tremble in my hold.

The events of the night are hitting her like an 18-wheeler and I just know the adrenaline from dancing and the angry sex is gone. Her body is crashing and I fear she may fall into a panic.

I gently run my hands through her hair, combing it away from her face. I place kisses on her neck and whisper, “tomorrow is a new day. We’re going to make it through this. We’ll be in the light again. I promise.”

I continue to soothe her until I feel her breathing even out.

Tonight was the end of our self destruction. It’s time to forge through the ashes and come out stronger on the other side.

Chapter 13

Luna

Bright rays beckon me from my deep slumber. My body feels weak and I struggle to open my eyes. They feel sandy and tender and recognize the signs that I spent too much time crying.

I pry them open and blink until I'm no longer blinded by the searing sun. Stretching my arms above my head I hiss when I feel stinging pain radiating.

It feels like hot poker are digging into my skin. The shirt I'm wearing cracks and tugs as it pulls away from my body.

I lay still until the heat I feel on my back cools, and I search my mind for reasons why I feel so battered.

Drinks. Lots of them. Music, dancing, kissing. Oh god! I kissed another man. Roman saw me.

"Nononono," I shake. "What did I do?"

I bring my hands to cover my face in shame. I let my anger cloud my judgment and I allowed someone who was not my husband to touch me.

I cheated.

Another flash of memory hits me. Roman and I having sex outside. The pain in my back was remnants of our romp against the brick wall.

We had sex...outside...in the dirty alley of the club. Jesus.

I rub my eyes and look around the room for evidence of a fight. My eyes land on my nightstand where two white pills sit next to a large glass of water and a couple of crackers.

I reach over and grab the pills, pop them in my mouth, and wash them

down with the water. I gulp until it's gone then fell back on the mattress still clutching the empty glass to my chest.

Aw shit! Lane spent the night which means he's going to be waiting for me to give him every last dirty detail. I'm barely holding myself together, I just don't know if I can handle Lane and all of his drama.

Footsteps sound on the other side of the door, then a soft knock comes. The knob turns and the door is pushed open at an eerily slow speed.

"Lu," Lane's voice is cautious and low. "You awake?"

I situate myself against the padded headboard as he enters and closes the door behind him. I pat the bed next to where I sit and he climbs on until we're sitting shoulder to shoulder.

We look at each other for a beat before I burst into body wracking sobs. He pulls me into his arms and squeezes me tight. He holds me like I might float away on a strong gust of wind.

"L-Lane. I screwed up," I choke out. "I-I-I..."

"Aw babe. Don't cry. Take a deep breath and tell me what happened. And before you do that let me preface this by saying Rome is downstairs, fixing the kids breakfast and telling them that mommy needs some extra sleep and a warm bath, so not to bother you until they have eaten, brushed teeth and dressed for the day."

I pull my head up to meet his equally astonished look and he shrugs.

"Okay. So I guess he's not packing a suitcase and taking the kids away," I sigh.

"Wh-why would he do that?"

I give him all the details of yesterday starting from Angela at the supermarket to getting screwed up against a brick wall. A myriad of emotions plays over his face. He's outraged, shocked, sad and then...well I can't one hundred percent be certain but it looks like he's a tiny bit turned on when I tell him about the sex in the back alley.

when I'm finished we're both crying. I pull up the collar of my t-shirt and wipe my face on the inside. Lane is swiping at his tears like they offended him and he's trying to bitch slap them away.

"Wow. That's...that's a lot, Lu. Did you do this to get back at him?" He asks.

"No. Not at first, I guess. It really started with just needing to be away from him. We've been working through things, slowly but working nonetheless. But when I heard Angela talk about not only *me* but about her

having fantasies about Roman...I lost it. It was either get out of the house and away from him or use my one call from jail to you.”

“Thank Jesus you went with the former. I am broke as an old hooker and I ain’t got money to be bailing your ass outta jail.” He pokes at my side and I giggle at both the tickle and his ability to make me smile when the world seems so dark.

“And all Roman had to say was that you two would work it out? He didn’t call you nasty names or beat the guy up?”

“Oh no,” I laugh, unamused. “He definitely wanted to kill the guy. He turned into fucking hulk before my eyes. I was legit worried he was going to break the dude’s neck.”

“Ooh. So hot. Did he rip his shirt and pants off?”

“You’re a slut,” I chide and he shrugs like ‘*yeah, so*’. “No ripping of any clothing. Well, aside from my dress and panties a little in the alley.”

“Ugh! Why can’t I find a man who wants to rip off my dress and panties in a dirty alley?” He whines.

“Any hooow. He did not scream or call me names or threaten any violence. He scooped me up from the shower floor, dried me, dressed me then just...held me.”

I think about how gentle he was with me in his arms. I cried myself to sleep but before I drifted off, he kept his mouth by my ear and whispered that we’d be okay, that he loved me, that we’ll find the way back to us.

Lane twists his mouth and chews the inside of his cheek. I can see he’s holding back which is so unlike him. Lane is honest to a fault, sometimes. His honesty can border on cruelty but...that’s Lane.

“Say it because the way you’re scrunching your face is going to give you wrinkles,” I tease.

“With the amount of Botox in my face right now, I should barely be able to blink much less wrinkle.” He exhales deeply and continues. “I’m still angry at Roman for what he did but...”

He stalls so I roll my hand indicating for him to keep going.

He rolls his eyes and says, “he really is trying, Lu. And the fact that he is still here, trying so hard for you after you went all revenge kiss at the club, well, I think he’s worth it. And I believe him that it was a one time thing.”

“I do, too,” I groan and toss my arm over my eyes.

“I mean...the poor guy didn’t even finish. He must’ve had a raging case of blue balls. Not to mention the panic of ‘*oh shit! What did I do?*’. He

could've gone the rest of his life having never told you and you'd be none the wiser. Were you planning to tell him what you did had he not seen it for himself?"

I peek an eye out from under my arm and feel this intense wave of nausea hit me like a tsunami. I don't know how to answer that. I don't have time to think about what I was going to say to Roman about what occurred. I mean, I'm sure I would've said something. Eventually.

Right?

"Mhmmm. That's what I thought," Lane gives me a wickedly mean side eye.

"I didn't even have time to think about what I was going to say because he was there before I could even think that far," I protest.

"Whatever. Don't care. What I do care about is your happiness and even though things have been tough between the two of you, Roman has always made you insanely happy. Most people would help you pack a bag after learning what he did. But they don't know him like I do and I *know* you're his everything. His oxygen, his sun, his moon —get it? Luna...moon. Ba-dum-dum, psh— you're the blood pumping through his veins. And I'd say he's the same to you."

It's not a question but I confirm, anyhow.

"He's human. He's flawed and he made a *huge* error in judgement. But he's your flawed human and you love him enough to forgive. But only once! If that sexy beast so much as smiles at another woman, you have crazy angry sex one last time then throw his ass out."

He laughs as do I, tears still falling from our eyes.

"So...here's what we're gonna do. You're going to wash your face 'cause you still have last night's mascara on. Brush out that sad excuse for hair and your teeth, then go downstairs."

"Your words are so eloquent. You should be a motivational speaker," I say in my most sarcastic tone.

He flips me off and keeps going. "Go hug and kiss your husband like you mean it. Later tonight, I am going to play the part of awesome, fun Uncle Laney, and you and your husband are going out."

"No Lane. I can't ask you to give up another night. We'll do it some other time."

"It wasn't asking. I'm telling you. I haven't spent much time with your crotch goblins, and I kinda miss listening to three very loud conversations at

one time. Also, I have recently become the proud owner of an air fort and telescope, and I really need some tiny humans to help me test it out,” he says, nonchalantly while inspecting his nails.

I lean my head on his shoulder and lock our fingers together. I’ve struggled over the last three weeks to commit one hundred percent to healing as a couple. I said the words but deep down, I wasn’t wholly in it. I had a piece of my heart that I was safeguarding in the event I needed a little bit to carry on for my kids if this all crashed and burned.

But Lane opened my eyes, not to mention the events of last night, and now I know I’m all in. I have to fight for us as hard as Roman is. I won’t give up on us.

I take a deep breath and sit up tall, straightening my spine. “Okay. I can do this. Right? Can I?”

He smiles and nods, squeezing my hand to reassure me.

“Lord, give me strength,” I whisper.

Chapter 14

Roman

“You three be good for Uncle Lane. Understand?”

“Yes, daddy.” Three little voices assure me.

Luna bends over and gives each one another hug, another tickle and another kiss. when she stands, Lane wraps her in an equally crushing hug and whispers something in her ear. She nods and blinks back the moisture building in her eyes.

when they separate I pull Lane in for a hug of my own.

“Thank you,” I murmur. “For everything.”

He pulls back with a pat on the back and a smile. “Anytime. Especially if I can get carried to bed.”

“Oh god. Why?” I let my eyes roll to the ceiling and laugh.

Lane and Luna both laugh and the kids follow suit, not knowing why, but do it anyhow.

I take Luna’s hand and wave goodbye to them all and walk her out to the car.

The drive to the restaurant is short and quiet. Luna keeps her gaze focused on the world flashing by us, but she keeps her hand locked with mine the whole way. She’s contemplative. She’s nervous. She’s scared.

So am I.

She hadn’t talked much today. She came downstairs late morning after sleeping in and gave the kids sad smiles and hugs. They went on and on about their night then went back to playing.

She walked over to where I stood against the kitchen counter, cautiously. As she neared me, I set the coffee mug in my hand down. Her eyes were locked on mine and when she reached me, she slowly wrapped her arms around my waist and buried her face in my chest.

I felt my shirt grow damp and knew she was crying. I wiggled my arms under hers and circled her small waist with my hands and I lifted her up while her arms went around my neck. We held onto each other tightly, her feet dangling above the ground, and just existed.

She cried into my neck and I let my face fall into hers. No words were spoken but we conveyed every emotion with our bodies. We spoke to each other in a way that only two people who are one half of the other can.

After that moment in the kitchen, we tip-toed around one another for the rest of the day. Carrying on with household chores and tending to the kids. It was like we knew that a big conversation was going to happen this evening, so we had to save up all of our words for tonight.

We get seated at our table and a server quickly comes to take our drink orders. Once he leaves we sit looking at one another in silence. I reach my hand across the table and grab hers.

She swallows roughly and bites down on her trembling lip.

“Don’t, baby. Please don’t cry,” I beg.

She threads her fingers with mine and I feel her start to relax.

I scan the restaurant that is bustling with patrons. We sit in a booth tucked in a far corner and I couldn’t be happier to be away from the buzz of the main dining room.

I lean over the table and with my other hand, I rub my knuckles over her cheek.

“You are my world, Luna. Nothing will ever change that. I’m not angry at you, baby. It hurts, but I’m not upset with you. You were hurting and it was all because of me. I feel like I pushed you into this.”

“No Rom-“

“Yes, Luna. My actions caused this. You are not to blame for any of this.”

She opens her mouth to speak but the server returns with our drinks and a bread basket. We don’t look over the menu but order what we’ve had on past visits. Mainly to get the server to leave.

We watch him retreat to the kitchen and then turn back to our conversation.

“The past couple of years have been hard,” she says with despair in her voice. “That isn’t just on you. It takes two to make a marriage.”

“But the last year,” I interrupt, “the troubles are all because of...I’ve been on edge and absolutely racked with guilt. I’ve worked harder because it was so difficult to look at you. Witnessing how amazing you were, how you are, makes me feel like scum.”

A single tear tracks over her cheek and she shakes her head.

“I drank to try to forget about what I’d done,” I push on. “But the more I drank, the further away from you I got. I’ve been hanging on by a thread. A very worn, frayed thread and the night I confessed...it snapped. After you left that night I lost it.

“I looked in the mirror and saw a man I despised. I saw a monster, a coward. I knew I wasn’t worthy of you and never would be. But I’m selfish, Luna, and I can’t...” I choke on my emotions bubbling in my throat. “I can’t lose you.

My words are strained. The strong walls that men hold back their emotions with are starting to crumble, but I don’t care. I want to watch it fall to ruins. I want nothing between me and Luna.

“Can we...try? For real this time?” She asks, unsure of herself.

“We were trying.”

She shakes her head and I watch as her face turns to something that looks like regret.

“I wasn’t...I wasn’t all in. I had one foot out the door and I think that’s why I let *her* words hit me so hard. I was just waiting for something to give me that reason to pull away. But this morning...”

She takes her hand from mine and reaches into her purse, producing a tissue. She gently dabs her face and her eyes then crushes it in her hand.

“This morning when I woke, I felt worse than I had after you confessed. It hit me that I could really lose you and it was then that I realized...I don’t want to do this life without you.”

I can hear the pain in her voice but I’m smiling. Not because she’s hurting but because she said she needs me. She wants me. She wants *us*.

I push my way out of the booth and rush to her side and take her face in my hands, crushing my lips to hers. I don’t care who sees us or what they think. My wife is here and always will be. Nothing else matters in this moment.

I murmur against her lips, “I love you. I love you. Always, baby.”

She shakes her head and I feel her smile against my mouth. I reluctantly pry my lips from hers because I'm about two seconds from being arrested for public indecency.

"Wanna get outta here?" I ask.

Her button nose scrunches and her head bobbles rapidly in agreement.

I stand and search for our server.

"Excuse me, sir," I call out to him. "Something has come up. Can we get the entrees to go and the bill?"

"Of course. I'll be right back," he says and hurries off.

Luna wipes her face clean again and stands up from the booth, ready to flee.

"There's a hotel not too far from here. Wanna spend the night with me, Mrs. Hart?" I growl into her ear.

"Mr. Hart. How very naughty," she feigns then smiles. "Yes. The answer is always yes."

The server returns with our food and the tab and I pull out several bills that is more than enough to cover the tab and a generous tip for our waiter.

I scoop up the bag with our food and Luna's hand and haul us out so fast, she practically has to run to keep up.

Tonight is a fresh start. We walked through the flames and now we would forge our way through the ashes.

Epilogue

One year later...

Roman

The door clicks softly to the girls room after several minutes of soothing Helene. We decided that it was time for the two of them to have their own rooms, but they wanted none of that.

Helene couldn't stand the thought of Poppy being alone at night because sometimes she has bad dreams and she needs to hold her hand. And Poppy, my sweet girl, said that sometimes she has to sing Helene to sleep because she gets the wiggles. Whatever that means.

So, after listening to their reasons why they couldn't be apart, I assured them that I would speak to their mom about it. But I already know what she's going to say.

Eventually they'll want their own space but for right now, they're still babies.

I step quietly down the hall to where a soft glow shines through the door. The sound of Luna's voice softly humming makes my heart beat a little faster and a little harder.

I peek in and watch as she gently rocks back and forth with our newborn Theo in her arms. We put our hearts and souls into rebuilding our marriage and possibly reconciled a bit too much. Just two months after that night at the restaurant where we committed to being "all in", we found out Luna was

pregnant.

Our family of five expanded to six and now our lives are complete with the arrival of Theodore, our gift from God.

Luna's eyes catch mine and she smiles so brightly it makes my chest ache with bliss. It was a bumpy road to forgiveness for Luna, and we definitely went through some difficulties when we had to spill our honest feelings to the therapist. But we worked through those tough times and came out stronger than before.

Stronger than ever.

Luna stands from the rocker and places Theo gently in my arms. I kiss his downy soft curls and inhale his sweet baby scent. He is absolutely perfect with his round cheeks and dark hair. His long eyelashes fan over the tops of his plump cheeks and flutter when I lay him in his bassinet.

The two of us stand there staring at him in such awe. We weathered the storm and in the end, when the sun was shining again, he was our rainbow.

"Were the other three this peaceful?" I whisper.

"No," Luna replies with a soft chuckle. "They were not. Don't you remember how fussy Poppy was?"

"Oh yeah. I remember."

"And the twins were like little gremlins, constantly feeding and pooping and crying. Good grief I was afraid to let you touch me after them."

Luna bends down and places one more kiss on Theo's chubby little face and takes my hand. She pulls me to our bed and climbs in with me following closely behind.

She lay on her side, facing the bassinet where he sleeps and I move in close, spooning her from behind. Resting my head on her shoulder, I watch her as she watches our son.

She is stunning. She takes my breath away every time I look at her. I lost track of the amount of times I fell to my knees, thanking God for her.

I kiss the nape of her neck and move slowly up the column. I breathe her in, craving her smell, and kiss the spot behind her ear that makes her body tingle. She moans and sinks further into my arms.

"Just one more week," she whispers.

"I know. I'm not pushing. I just can't stand to not have my hands and lips on you when you're near me. It's like...a sin not to."

I feel her face spread into a smile and continue my kissing journey down the back of her neck and across to her shoulder.

“You’re killing me, Roman.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, not at all sorry, and pull her face to mine.

She cranes her neck over her shoulder and meets my lips. We twist and turn our tongues together like a slow, sensual dance. I’m addicted to this woman and I will never get enough.

“Have I told you how insanely happy you make me,” I rasp.

She chuckles, “maybe a time or two. You make me equally happy.”

“I want to continue to make you happy for the rest of our lives. So tell me baby...what can I do to make sure that always happens?”

She rolls over and takes my face in her soft hands. Her eyes search mine and I hope that she can see the fire she lights that burns with a fierce hunger.

“Just love me,” she whispers, her breathy voice hitting me in my chest. “Love me and never let me go.”

“That’s easy. Always, Luna.”