

A SPICY CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

UNTIL WE CONFESS



LILLY HENDERSON

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CONTENT WARNING

This book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language that may be offensive to some readers. It is intended for adults 18 and over.

*** TRIGGER WARNING ***

This book deals with the loss of a child/pregnancy. Some scenes may be difficult for readers who have experienced a similar loss. My heart goes out to all my readers that have struggled with pregnancy or have had to endure the loss of a child.

For those who have suffered the loss of a child, whether before or after birth, I encourage you to reach out for support; you are not alone!

The Tiny Miracles Foundation - <https://ttmf.org>

Dear Reader,

I am so excited you're here! Thank you so much for picking up this story, the first installment in the *Until*-series. I hope you'll enjoy reading about Ben and Amy's journey as much as I enjoyed writing it. So get ready for some laughs and tears, for a lot of warm, fuzzy feelings and a pinch of drama. But most importantly, with this sweet and sexy contemporary office romance, you can look forward to a guaranteed happily ever after and no cliffhanger.

This book is the first in a series of stand-alone novels, each telling the story of a different couple from a group of friends you might just fall in love with. They are stories perfect to get lost in, with relatable characters and all the feels.

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ONE

AMY

Damn Murphy and his stupid law.

How can so many things go wrong in a single morning? After my hair straightener bails on me, I intend to wash down my frustration with a sip of coffee. But the hot liquid burns my tongue instead, and I spill it all over my favorite lilac blouse. My toaster mocks me further, spitting out a charred slice of bread, and as I rush to the bedroom to change, I stub my toe on the dresser.

With a groan, I drop onto my bed to assess the damage and massage my aching foot until the pain subsides. I wiggle my toes, and they all move as they should—dodged that bullet.

This Monday couldn't have started any worse; this Murphy guy was right: *anything that can go wrong will go wrong*.

Letting out a heavy sigh, I hobble to the closet to pick my second favorite shirt and examine my outfit in the floor-length mirror. *Great, dull white blouse and simple black skirt it is*. My long hair tied back in a plain ponytail doesn't do much to enhance my appearance either. At least it's summer and too hot for tights; with my luck, I'd spot a run or two in them.

Another sigh passes my lips, turning into a groan. I might be too hard on myself, but it's not every day that I start a new job; I want to look perfect. Describing the circumstances as nerve-racking only scratches the surface when I consider my new workplace to be one of New York's most successful advertising agencies.

Wilson & Partners has been on the list of top companies for over three decades, and I landed the job as a personal assistant to one of the two partners. Saying I'm nervous is a massive understatement, so I blame my morning chaos on extreme jitters.

I draw in a few calming breaths, smiling at myself in the mirror. “You can do this, Amy,” I tell myself, noticing with a peek at my watch that I must leave right now or I’ll be late.

After snatching my purse off the kitchen counter, I head out the door, ignoring the thermal mug containing the last of my morning coffee—it’s not worth the risk.

The subway ride to Manhattan is smooth, and I arrive in front of the large glass doors of Wilson & Partners with a few minutes to spare. With a deep breath, I wipe my sweaty palms on my skirt and enter the spacious lobby.

Everything around me buzzes with activity; men in expensive suits and women in elegant dresses come and go, phones ring, and soft chatter fills the air. My gaze lands on the reception desk, and the corners of my lips lift when I recognize the blonde next to it.

Lauren.

Like me, she’s in her mid-twenties and the first friend I made since moving to New York two months ago. Our connection was instant when we met in a yoga class, and her quirky and cheerful demeanor is a welcome morale booster to my sometimes gloomy mood.

We also bonded over our jobs and found it amusing that we both work as personal assistants. Lauren is Greg Aberdeen’s PA, and when his partner, Luke Smith, needed a new one, she informed me about the job, so I owe it to her that I’m here.

Striding up to Lauren, I straighten my clothes and clutch my purse, repeating my mantra for today—*you can do this*. Her familiar face eases my nervousness, but my heart still pounds in my chest.

As soon as our eyes meet, she beams at me. “Amy, hi! I’m so excited you’re here.”

“Hey, Lauren! I can’t tell you how relieved I am to see you. Thanks for coming down to meet me.”

She waves off my remark. “No problem. I figured you’d appreciate a friend to greet you on the first day of a new job. I

remember how nerve-racking *my* first day was.”

Her overwhelming kindness makes me feel much better, and the knot in my stomach loosens. I stumble after her into the elevator and lean against the cool metal wall, letting out another deep sigh. Lauren presses the button for the tenth floor while I smooth down my blouse with a grimace. “Gosh, I’m so nervous.”

“Try not to worry.” Lauren gives me a reassuring smile. “I told you everyone here is welcoming. It’s easier said than done, but remember, I’m only a few floors or a phone call away if you ever need anything.”

“Thank you.” A pleasant warmth spreads through my body. Something about Lauren drew me in from the start, making me feel at ease in her presence. She’s genuine, and I’m grateful for having a trustworthy friend.

“You’re very welcome.” She checks her watch. “There’s still time if you wanna sit down for a calming cup of tea.”

With a nod, I place my palm on my chest, holding in another *Thank You*.

The elevator doors open on the tenth floor, and Lauren steps forward. “Did Luke give you a tour when you interviewed for the job?”

“Yes, he did.” I follow, looking left and right. “Not sure I remember my way, though.”

“Don’t worry,” Lauren says with a chuckle and points to the right. “The open-plan office is over there, as is Luke’s.” But she turns to the left. “Come on. The break room is this way.”

Last week, Luke interviewed me in a conference room on the fourth floor before showing me around my workspace on the tenth floor. The enormous building with its multiple floors impedes my good sense of direction, contributing to my growing anxiety. But as a quick learner, I’m sure I’ll figure it out in no time.

Another mantra I have to keep telling myself—*I’ll figure it out*.

During the tour, Luke introduced me to some colleagues, who gave me a friendly welcome, but many desks in the open-plan office were empty due to a meeting. So I haven't met most of my co-workers yet, but Luke's comment that everyone is on a first-name basis calmed my nerves and made the job even more appealing. A serene, laid-back atmosphere is what I need.

We enter the empty break room, and Lauren insists I sit while preparing an herbal tea for me. "There you go, hun," she says, placing the mug in front of me and taking a seat. After eyeing me up and down, she gives me a thumbs up. "I love your outfit."

I snort. "Are you serious? I had a horrible morning." While recounting what happened, I warm my palms on the cup. Even though it's August and a typical hot summer's day, my hands are icy.

"Oh, no." Lauren chuckles at my misfortunes before leaning forward and tapping my forearm. "Stop worrying so much. You look fabulous." Her lips stretch into an amused smile. "And I'm not saying that because I've only seen you in workout clothes."

Her words cause a fresh wave of tranquility to wash over me, and I sip my tea while Lauren tells me more about her boss. "Greg joined the company soon after Luke. He's an attorney, so our department handles the legal side of the business. Luke's background is in marketing, and all the graphic designers work under him."

I nod, having learned some of the backstory already. My job as Luke's assistant involves coordinating the graphic designers' work, so I hope to get along with my new colleagues.

While we chat, the tension in my muscles eases. The quiver in my stomach sticks around, though, and I accept it as my companion for the day. At least, the worst-case scenarios dissipate, and my leg stops jerking. It's time to quit overthinking and do this.

As if on cue, Lauren glances at her watch. "Shall we?"

I straighten up, squaring my shoulders. “Yes.” I rise from my chair, toss the hot tea remnants into the kitchenette sink, and place the mug in the dishwasher.

I’m ready.

Lauren leads the way, and I take in my surroundings as we pass desk after desk with people engrossed in their work. I like that the interior designer decided against cubicles, giving the space an even brighter and friendlier atmosphere. Even with so many people working in one enormous room, the noise level is not excessive.

This department is in charge of graphic design—a field I’m unfamiliar with since my last job was with a real estate firm. But Luke reassured me it wouldn’t be an issue.

We approach a door with a black and gold nameplate stating our destination, and once again, irrational fears take over. What if I make a complete fool of myself and everyone realizes I’m a lousy assistant?

No, Amy! Stop worrying! You are a hard-working woman who can handle any situation! So breathe.

Deep in self-encouraging thought, I almost bump into Lauren when she slows down and says, “Hi, Ben.”

“Hey, Lauren,” he responds before lifting his gaze.

And our eyes meet.

I never believed people when they said time stood still at a specific moment, but it does. My heart rate picks up but for entirely different reasons than before. I’m not aware of anything around me anymore. The world could cave in, and I wouldn’t care as long as I could continue staring into those dark-brown eyes. The charm they radiate sucks me in, causing a warm, tingling sensation to course through my body.

Before I grasp what’s going on, Lauren’s voice forces me back to reality. “Here we are.” She knocks on the door and ushers me into the office. “Luke, Amy Franklin is here.”

“Thank you, Lauren. I’ll take it from here.”

I flinch when my new boss speaks, reminding me what to focus on. Lauren squeezes my arm before leaving, and the door closes behind her with a soft click, which I barely register. My mind is still outside, processing what happened, but I snap out of it when Luke stands in front of me.

“Welcome to my department.” His smile widens as he shakes my hand. “I’m sure you’ll love it here, Amy.”

Still lost for sensible words, I blink at him and nod.

“Please, sit down.” Pointing to the chairs next to his desk, he returns to his seat.

As I follow his request, my gaze wanders through the large office with the tall windows. The soft morning light floods the room, adding to the comfortable atmosphere. I roll back my shoulders to ease the tension that has gripped me again.

Luke flicks through a folder. “Let’s go over some last details, shall we?”

While we discuss my tasks and a typical workday at Wilson & Partners, I study my new boss more closely, trying to figure him out. He looks to be in his forties, with graying black hair, high cheekbones, and full lips. His features are attractive, and he is, without a doubt, a charming man—an excellent trait for someone who works in advertising.

“I will introduce you to the company’s CEO, Patrick Wilson, once he returns from his business trip,” Luke says with a broad smile.

“Sure.” I wipe my palms on my skirt yet again, struggling to maintain eye contact as my thoughts revolve around what’ll happen next.

“Excellent. If you have no more questions, I’ll accompany you to your desk.”

“Uh, no, no questions ... L-Luke.” I still have to get used to calling my boss by his first name.

As we rise from our seats, the earlier encounter retreats to the back of my mind. I must concentrate on the essential

matters: my new job and not some good-looking guy I spotted in passing.

Outside Luke's office, we stop at a large desk, and my breath hitches when I realize this will be my workspace.

The man responsible for my flustered state sits at the desk across from mine.

TWO

BEN

What a crappy start to the week.

I glare at the screen of my tablet, grinding my teeth.

“Thanks, Ben. I owe you one,” my colleague says with a broad grin before returning to his desk.

“Uh-huh.” I blow out my cheeks and roll my tense shoulders back. Why on earth did I agree to fix these diagrams for a presentation my not-so-talented co-worker screwed up? I have to finish the graphics for a different ad campaign due today, but that’ll have to wait now.

This fits right in with my sour mood. After a shit weekend and yet another fight with my dad over his health, because he’s careless with his medication, I didn’t hear my alarm this morning. I forgot my coffee when I rushed out of my apartment thirty minutes late, and the crowded subway annoyed the fuck out of me. When I reached the building of Wilson & Partners, my expression should have scared everyone off.

Unfortunately, some people aren’t scared off by anything, so instead of letting me do my job, my colleague had the audacity to approach me.

I glare and grumble some more when a familiar voice calls my name.

“Hi, Ben.”

My lips stretch into a grin. A chat with my friend will bring a welcome distraction. “Hey, Lauren,” I say before lifting my head, intending to direct a grateful smile at her, but she’s not alone.

That’s when my gaze falls on *her*.

She walks behind Lauren, fixing her big, beautiful eyes on me, causing my breath to hitch. When a blush suffuses her

cheeks, something funny happens to my entire body, especially my groin. Wow, I can't remember the last time eye contact had such a powerful effect on me. As she saunters by, a hint of her sweet, flowery scent fills my nose and does even funnier things to my brain.

What the hell is happening?

Before I grasp what this woman causes in me, Lauren's voice snaps me out of my haze. "Here we are."

Then she's gone.

With my mouth agape, I stare at the office she disappeared into. She was real, wasn't she? A glint in her eyes evoked sensations I thought were lost, and I wonder if this is a dream. At the same time, I've finally woken up from the nightmare that has been this Monday morning.

Leaning back in my chair, I close my eyes and draw in a slow breath. *Calm your damn hormones, Ben.*

At the sound of Luke's door, my eyes snap open. Lauren waves as she strides past my desk but doesn't stay for a chat as she usually does.

"Lauren, wait," I call after her.

She stops in her tracks, raising her eyebrows. "Yes?"

"Who was that?" I jut my chin toward Luke's office, and she squints at the door.

"Amy, Luke's new assistant," she says, turning back to me, eyebrows still raised. "She's the girl I met at my yoga class, remember?"

Damn. The mental image of that woman in tight yoga pants is the last thing I need. I'm a grown man, for goodness' sake, and not some horny teenager.

I shift in my seat. "Yeah, I do; I just didn't expect ... that." I point my finger at the office door, doing a shit job of pretending to seem unfazed.

"What did you expect?" She raises her eyebrows a little higher.

“She doesn’t resemble the ones he usually preys on.”

Lauren laughs. “What are you talking about?”

“Come on.” I roll my eyes, huffing. “He didn’t hire his last assistant based on her skills.” This isn’t just my opinion of my boss, as he supposedly had his hands on every willing female in this company, including his former assistant. I shudder at the memory. “No one was worse than that blondie. Sorry, no offense,” I add, giving Lauren a half-smile.

Waving off my remark, she sits on the edge of my desk. “None taken. I know what you mean.” She runs her fingers through her long blonde hair with a chuckle. “Give the new girl a chance. She’s nice.”

She thinks the new girl is nice? Damn, I may be in trouble. I’ve known Lauren for a few years, and she’s an expert at reading people. Her first impression was never wrong, so if Luke’s new assistant is nice, it’s a deadly combination.

“What’s that look on your face?”

Lauren’s question tears me out of my thoughts, and I direct my attention back to her, grimacing. “It’s nothing, just the usual Monday morning,” I murmur.

Lauren slaps my shoulder. “If your weekend had been anything like mine, you wouldn’t glare and grumble.”

“Please, spare me the details.” I groan at what she’s referring to. Lauren and her flings, an endless story.

She smirks at me. “Oh, sweetie, I think your mood would improve if you got some.”

“Lauren, stop.”

“No, I’m serious.” She leans closer. “You need to get laid,” she whispers for my ears only. “How long has it been?”

Leaning away from her, I shake my head. I’m not having a conversation about my non-existent sex life again. “You’re hopeless, Lauren.”

“Yes, and I gotta go. See ya.” She hops off the desk, straightens her skirt, and takes off toward the elevators with a wave.

Once Lauren is out of sight, I glance at the desk across from mine. *Her desk.* I tap my fingers on my knees, anticipating the new girl’s return. It’s unlike me to overthink situations, but our first encounter threw me off.

Finally, Luke’s door opens, preventing my thoughts from going places I don’t want them. My boss ushers Amy out, and her gaze wanders through the room. She bites her lips and rubs her arm when they stop at her desk. Our eyes meet for a second before Luke clears his throat to grab our attention—not enough time to check if I’ve gone crazy or not.

“Ben, let me introduce you to your new colleague, Amy Franklin.”

I rise from my chair and move around my desk, stretching out my hand. “Uh, yes, hi. I’m Ben.” My large, warm hand envelops her smaller, cold one. Her eyes linger on our hands a moment longer before she lifts her gaze.

Yup, there’s my answer; I’ve gone crazy. As I stand in front of her, sensations surface that I haven’t felt in forever.

I take in her appearance: her simple yet elegant outfit, her light-brown hair tied back in a perfect ponytail, her cheeks, which still have that tinge of pink, her rosy lips. And, of course, her eyes, which are a captivating greenish color and radiate warmth and kindness, even in her apparent nervous state.

She blinks at me before she says, “Hey, um, I’m Amy.”

Offering her a warm smile, I let go of her hand. The smile she gives me in return is slow and soft—and damn sexy, causing my lips to stretch even wider. Shit, this weird urge to grin at her worries me. I feel like a damn teenager, unable to act like a normal person in front of a cute girl. And cute she is. Gorgeous even.

We only shook hands, and now, my only thought is how touching her felt fucking fantastic. I’d love to touch her again.

Of course, Luke has to ruin the moment when he speaks. “Ben will be your go-to guy for everything concerning the graphic design parts of our ad campaigns. If you have any questions, ask him.”

He stares at Amy too intently, and I wonder if she’s on his list yet. I cringe at the smile he gives her, suppressing the strong desire to grind my teeth. I’d love to wipe that smirk off his face.

“I’ll leave you to it.” Luke squeezes her shoulder before turning around and disappearing into his office.

With narrow eyes, I gaze after him until Amy sighs. I direct my gaze at her while she scans the large room, and my mouth does that crazy thing again, lifting in a silly smile. “Make yourself at home,” I tell her.

She pulls out the chair, sinks into the seat, and runs her palms over the smooth surface with a short, sweet laugh. “Wow, so much space. My last desk was half this size.” She examines my desk and bites her lips. “When I see yours, it also means more room for chaos.”

I inspect my mess and chuckle. “Oh, um ... yes, right. But I’ve got it all under control. I can find everything I need.”

“So genius controls chaos?”

“Exactly. I hope you’re not a neat freak?” I raise my eyebrows, and she grimaces. Oh no.

“Not a neat freak, but I need my workplace to be tidy.”

“Oh boy, I’ve made a striking first impression then.” Ignoring the slight nervousness in the air, I shove my hand through my messy hair when Amy snickers at my remark. Damn, I’ve never heard a happier sound. Lauren was right; she seems nice and genuine, the total opposite of her Barbie-like predecessor.

“That’s fine.” She waves off my comment. “I’m all for second chances.”

Her words make my stupid heart skip a few beats. They tug at something deep inside me, and she utters them so

casually that I wonder if she realizes their impact. “That’s good.” The corners of my lips lift in a subtle smile. “As Luke said, ask away if you have any questions. And later, I’ll show you around.”

“Sounds like a plan.”



Over the next few hours, Amy works her way into her tasks. We engage in small talk, and I answer her questions, telling her the most important things about her new workplace and our colleagues. Luckily, the nervous tension eases, but I still wonder what about her drew me in. I keep stealing glances at her, and when she catches me staring, her lips stretch into a sweet and sexy smile. It causes a lightness in my chest that makes me question my sanity.

Around noon, Lauren shows up at our desks. “Hey, you two.” Tilting her head to the side and pointing her thumb at me, Lauren offers Amy a thoughtful expression. “What’s it like to work with this good-for-nothing?”

I chuckle. “Charming as usual.”

“You know me, love.” Lauren narrows her eyes at me. “At least you look more cheerful than this morning.” Resuming her earlier spot on the edge of my desk, she looks back and forth between us. “What are you guys doing for lunch?”

I check the time. “Paul is meeting me downstairs. We’re trying that new Chinese place down the street.”

Lauren grimaces. “Ugh, I don’t like Chinese. Amy, what about you?”

She shrugs. “I don’t have plans.”

“Do you want to join me?” Lauren asks, leaning closer to Amy. “My favorite sandwich place is just around the corner. I

could tell you everything you need to know about your new colleague.”

I huff out a breath. “Don’t believe a single word she says.”

With a chuckle, Lauren turns her gaze to me and starts one of her silly staring contests, which I’ll win. I always do.

Sure enough, Lauren averts her eyes after three seconds. She turns to Amy, who watches us with her eyebrows squished together. “Oh, I’m sorry,” Lauren says. “Just ignore that. Will you still have lunch with me? You know I’m a nice person.”

I can’t suppress a hearty laugh, which Lauren ignores. Poor Amy; she must think we’re crazy. This playful banter between Lauren and me has become a habit I much appreciate on dull and aggravating workdays.

“Um, yeah.” Amy crinkles her nose. “You two seem kinda weird, but I’ll give you a chance.”

Lauren and I burst out laughing, and when Amy joins in, that lightness from earlier returns.

“Thank you, Amy.” Lauren hops off my desk, her expression turning serious. “Now, are you guys ready? I’m starving.”

THREE

AMY

What a turn of events.

Despite my mishaps this morning, today turns out to be the most pleasant first day at work, all thanks to my new colleague.

While my first encounter with Ben left me breathless, the more we talk, the more the weird tension in the air subsides. All morning, we chat. He shows me around, and we chat more—about work-related topics only, but we always have a subject to dive into.

Yes, the nervous tingle in the pit of my stomach lingers, especially whenever our eyes meet over our desks. That's when I have to keep my hormones in check. Every time I stare into Ben's magnetic brown eyes, heat rises within me, and my fingers itch to run through his messy, dark hair. His chiseled face with high cheekbones and full lips and his tall and muscular physique stir feelings inside me unsuitable for the workplace. I've seen my fair share of good-looking guys but never felt an instant attraction like this.

To act more like the adult I supposedly am, I ban thoughts about Ben's gorgeousness and charm from my head, and by the time Lauren shows up, I'm as cool as a cucumber. I hope.

"Now, are you ready? I'm starving," Lauren says, urging us to move. "A delicious sandwich is calling my name, so hurry."

With a relaxed smile, I grab my purse and follow her and Ben to the elevator. She pushes the call button before turning to Ben. "Did you hear? We're not having drinks on the fifth floor this Friday, but the next."

"Oh, okay, I'll be there," he responds. "What about you?" He raises his eyebrows at me, giving me this sweet smile that makes my heart flutter.

I crinkle my nose. “Um, I don’t know. Drinks? Here? Is everyone invited?”

“Yes,” Lauren says. “Once a month after work, we meet for drinks on the fifth floor; they have the nicest lounge area. It’s at the firm’s expense, and colleagues from all departments will attend. And afterward,” she adds when the elevator doors open, “a few of us go out for more drinks at O’Reilly’s, a cozy Irish pub just around the corner, so wear your cutest dress.”

My cutest dress? Oh my. My mind goes a mile a minute; I haven’t had a night out in forever. Do I even own a cute dress or anything decent for a night out?

Deep in thought about my choice of clothing, I step forward to enter the elevator at the same time as Ben. We collide, and when I step back, so does he. I flinch, hesitating because I’m not sure what to do next. Goodness, did I leave my brain at home today?

With a low chuckle, Ben places his hand on my lower back, steering me into the elevator. Drawing in a slow breath, I avert my eyes. I don’t want to detect anything on Ben’s face that tells me he feels this too—the attraction, sexual tension even.

I gaze at Lauren, who seems oblivious to what’s happening, thankfully. “So are you coming?” she asks.

Having drinks with colleagues and going to a pub after? An evening with Ben around? Is that even a question? “Um, I guess. I mean, yeah, I could check it out.” I internally roll my eyes at myself. So much for cucumber-cool.

During the elevator ride, Lauren rambles on about that night, but I struggle to listen. The pounding in my ears from my hammering heart is too distracting.

We arrive on the first floor half an eternity later, and I let Ben and Lauren exit before following them. The lobby is even busier than this morning, with everyone leaving their desks to grab lunch.

Ben stops next to a guy with a full beard, who is just as tall and handsome, but his smile is nothing like Ben’s. “Hey,

Paul,” Ben says and points to me. “Meet Amy, our new colleague. Amy, this is Paul, and that’s Hank.”

Only now do I notice the dog, an adorable Golden Retriever.

“Oh, such a pretty boy.” I crouch down to say hello but realize I haven’t even properly introduced myself. “Oh my gosh, I’m sorry.” I take Paul’s outstretched hand. “Hi. It’s nice to meet you.”

Paul laughs. “You too, Amy. And don’t worry,” he adds with a wink, “I’m used to Hank stealing all the attention.”

“Good, you finally realized,” Lauren chimes in before greeting Paul with a peck on the cheek. “Hey, Paul.”

“Lauren, hi. We missed you last Friday.” Paul chuckles. “Well, Henry missed you.”

Lauren snorts. “Sure. Anyway,” she says, linking her arms with mine, “go ahead and enjoy that Chinese food while Amy and I will indulge in the best sandwiches around.” She waves, dragging me after her before anyone can speak. We practically flee the scene, and I bite my lips to keep in the laugh.

“Lauren, slow down,” I pant once we’re outside and turn a corner.

Lauren shrugs. “Sorry, I’m starving, so before anyone gets hurt, I need food, pronto.”

We continue at a much more pleasant pace, and I finally ask, “Are you friends with Paul as well?”

“Yeah, I’ve known him for a bit. He’s in a band with his two buddies, and they play at O’Reilly’s every Friday. You know,” she adds when she notices my furrowed brows, “that Irish pub.”

“Oh, right. So there’s live music. That sounds like fun.”

“It is. You’ll have a blast.”

“And who is Henry?”

Lauren slows her pace before coming to a stop. “Um, Henry?”

I blink at Lauren. Did she just blush?

“Henry is Paul’s friend and bandmate. You’ll meet him next week too. Anyway,” she says, thwarting my plans to ask the questions that lie on the tip of my tongue, “here we are.”

She ushers me inside a tiny place I would have walked by without noticing. A handful of tables fill the interior, and only a few decorations adorn the walls, but it feels cozy. I’ll trust Lauren with this—just as I trusted her with the job offer.

Lauren orders our lunch, and as I sit at the last free table, my gaze wanders through the place, and my thoughts wander with it. Meeting Lauren was a case of serendipity, as was her telling me about the job opening. When I left my hometown on the west coast two months ago to start over in New York, I didn’t expect to find decent work this soon. But being unemployed was better than staying in the one place where I fell apart.

A deep sigh passes my lips. With a heavy heart, I reminisce about last year’s events. Leaving my past behind and starting over to be happy again—that’s my goal, and getting to know Lauren and landing this job are excellent first steps.

“What’s that somber look on your face?” Lauren places a tray with food on our table and sits across from me. “Here, eat this. It will lift your mood.”

Grateful for Lauren’s cheerfulness, I grab the grilled sub sandwich. “This looks delicious.”

“It is, and it makes all your worries vanish. Dig in.” She gestures to my plate before taking a bite of her sandwich.

We enjoy our lunch in a few moments of silence before I let out a content sigh. “You were right; this tastes amazing.”

“I’m glad you like it.” Lauren beams at me. “Finally, we can chat properly without Beverly shushing us.”

Beverly, our yoga instructor, isn’t our biggest fan. According to her, we disrupt the relaxing atmosphere with our babbling.

I cover my mouth so I don't spew my food. "Yes. Poor her, always having to reprimand us," I say in between giggles.

"Where exactly are you from?" Lauren asks. "I don't think you ever gave me any details. You said west coast, right?"

I nod. "I grew up in a tiny fishing village in Washington State."

"Wow. New York must be a scary place."

I shrug. "Yeah, kinda. Spending almost all my twenty-six years there didn't prepare me for what awaited me in the Big Apple."

"I can imagine. What about your parents? Did they just let you go?"

I grimace. "They weren't happy when I let them in on my plans to move to the other side of the country. They can be overbearing," I add before taking another bite from my sandwich.

Lauren offers me an understanding nod. "It's hard to leave everything behind—your friends and family, and all things familiar."

"True, but I needed a change of scenery, and a fresh start far away from home sounded appealing, so here I am."

"Good." She taps my arm. "I'm glad you took up yoga and ended up on the mat next to mine."

My lips stretch into a slow smile. Her words touch me, and I appreciate her so much already. When I moved to New York, I was determined to make this work—despite the doubts and a strong sense of uncertainty that have been my constant companions. Lauren helps me see the light at the end of the tunnel, and not only with her talent to always have the right words for whatever mood I'm in.

Before I can tell her any of this, she steers our conversation in another direction, sliding her chair closer and leaning forward, saying, "Now, spill. How was your morning? How is everyone treating you?"

“It’s like you said. They’re all nice and friendly. Work kept me busy. I had to answer so many calls and emails that I had no time to think about my nervousness.”

Lauren grins. “So you had no problems adjusting to the different field of work?”

“No, no major problems. Also, Ben was a tremendous help with everything.”

She snickers. “Yeah, he’s a good one.”

While we talk about the man I only met a few hours ago, it’s a constant struggle to keep my lips from stretching into another one of those weird smiles. He’s a good one indeed, but in a different sense than Lauren implies, or at least, I hope so. “How long have you known each other?” I ask, fishing for details.

Lauren taps her chin. “Hmm, we met close to two years ago when I started my job at Wilson’s. It took me a bit to warm up to him and his brooding manner. He used to be so serious and gloomy but opened up once we started going out.”

My eyes widen. That’s not the answer I hoped for. “You two are dating?”

Lauren guffaws. “Oh no. I didn’t mean going out on dates. We go out with our group of friends, including Paul and Henry, and their bandmate Jack, and whatever girls they bring along. We mostly spend time at O’Reilly’s or the Avalon, one of New York’s hottest nightclubs.” She leans closer, a mischievous gleam in her eyes. “Come with us next time. I desperately need female support; going out with the boys makes it hard to meet cute guys.”

I laugh at her enthusiasm, even though I’m not 100 percent on board with all this going-out business yet.

While Lauren plans our night out, I lean back in my chair, a happy smile plastered to my face. I have things to look forward to—a feeling I missed dearly.

One of these things is returning to my desk and enjoying the view.

Sometimes, acting like a teenager is the best remedy for a heavy heart.

FOUR

BEN

It's been four days since I met Amy, and for four days, work was more enjoyable than ever.

We talk all the time, about anything and everything, and in between, we do our jobs. She tells me about her former position with the real estate firm and her annoying boss, and I tell her about how Luke's last assistant repeatedly messed up his appointments. We mostly chat about lighter topics, like our favorite movies, and her taste in that department is questionable, but that doesn't diminish the feeling of an inexplicable connection between us.

"I refuse to believe you've never watched a single Avengers movie," I say, filling a second mug with steaming coffee before handing it to Amy, and we sit at a table in the break room. "Even if you're not into the plot, don't all women drool over the actors?"

Amy hides her smile behind the cup, and after taking a sip, she leans back in her chair with a sigh. "While I appreciate a nice display of male hotness, I can't ignore the plot and how it doesn't pull me in."

Male hotness? I chuckle at the mental image of her *appreciating the display* while I shove the thought about her type back into the far corners of my mind. I won't go there.

"But I've watched all the Star Wars movies as a kid," she says.

I take in a deep breath, inhaling the rich aroma of the coffee, and for once, it's not Amy's sweet, flowery perfume that fills my nose. Since we met, I also did my best to ignore the effect she and her scent have on me, making my heart skip a beat and that sort of shit. My inner hormonal teenager has to

shut the fuck up. “I never understood the hype about those,” I say before more unwanted thoughts surface.

She lifts one corner of her mouth, her gaze unfocused. “It probably has to do with childhood memories. I remember watching the first movies with my parents, so maybe I’m just nostalgic.”

I avert my gaze from her sweet smile because it makes my lips stretch in this weird, silly manner. Dammit, I’ve known her for four days, so this isn’t the time to suggest a movie marathon. Not yet.

No, not ever. *Don’t go there.* Bad idea.

We finish our coffees over more small talk before returning to our desks. As soon as we sit down, Luke’s office door opens, and he and the company’s CEO, Mr. Wilson, exit the room. They stop next to Amy, who rises from her chair.

“Amy,” Luke says, “this is Patrick Wilson.”

“Ms. Franklin, it’s nice to meet you.” Mr. Wilson shakes Amy’s hand, offering her a warm smile. “I hope everyone gave you a friendly welcome and that you settled in all right.”

“Um, yes. Very. Hi, Mr. Wilson. Thanks for this opportunity.” A faint blush creeps up Amy’s cheeks as she clasps her hands together and blinks at our boss.

She’s so cute when she’s nervous.

My eyes snap to Luke when he speaks while displaying a wide grin. “Amy’s doing an outstanding job so far and proves to be a true enrichment for our team.”

I internally groan at his words and grind my teeth, refraining from scoffing at Luke’s sleazy demeanor. He’s right, of course, but how he says it doesn’t sit well with me. His gaze flickers to mine, and he curls his lips as he squints at me.

Yes, the dislike is mutual.

I turn my attention to Amy, who waves off Luke’s remark with a chuckle. “Oh, I don’t know about that.”

“I will see for myself,” Mr. Wilson says, still smiling, “but I trust Luke’s judgment. Either way, I look forward to seeing you at our weekly meeting tomorrow.” With a curt nod, he steps back. “You too, Mr. Taylor,” he says, directed at me. “Until tomorrow, then. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

Luckily, Luke trots after Mr. Wilson to the elevator; I couldn’t have handled any more of him.

“Wow, Mr. Wilson is nice,” Amy says, stopping my internal grumbling.

Our eyes meet, and the tension leaves my shoulders. “Yeah, he’s successful for a reason. With his charisma, he sells anything to anyone, convincing them it’s what they always wanted.”

“I bet.” With a low laugh, she grabs a pen and a letter from her to-do pile. “How come he addresses Luke by his first name and not the rest of us?”

“He, Luke, and Greg go way back,” I explain, “even though he’s at least fifteen years older than them. Their families have strong ties. Mr. Wilson took over the company from his father in the early nineties, but Luke and Greg didn’t join him as partners until the early 2000s. While Greg and Luke didn’t hesitate to introduce the first-name-basis habit, Mr. Wilson tolerates it but never went along with it.”

Amy nods, chewing on her pen, and I draw in a slow breath through my nose and hold it in. Again, I have to force my gaze away from her and her rosy lips.

To distract my thoughts, I check my phone and notice a missed call from my dad. I curse under my breath. He never calls when I’m at work. “Ugh, my father tried to reach me.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“I’m not sure yet.” I grimace as I hit the call button and press the phone to my ear. Tapping my fingers on my desk, I wait for him to pick up. When he doesn’t answer after the third ring, I end the call, cursing more.

Amy chuckles, and I lift my gaze to meet hers. When I furrow my brows at her, she grins, an amused glint lingering in

her eyes. “You’re the most impatient person I know,” she says.

I clamp my lips together. She’s got a point. “Yeah, that’s one of my flaws. It can be irritating, especially when I want to accomplish something, but my colleagues refuse to keep up. That’s why I’d rather work alone.”

“I hear you.” She opens her mouth to say more, but my vibrating phone cuts her off.

“Ah, sorry, that’s him. Hey, Dad,” I answer. “What’s wrong?”

“Why do you assume something’s wrong?” Of course that’s his only greeting; he never bothers with a simple *hello*.

“Have you looked at the time? Aren’t you at work?”

He huffs. “Yeah, I am. Not a good day, though. I need to see my doctor this afternoon. Can you take me? I shouldn’t be driving.”

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I squeeze my eyes shut and draw in a slow breath. “Have you been taking your meds? Or have you been eating crap again? Dad, this is no laughing matter.”

“I know,” he grumbles.

Oh, does he? I doubt it. My father has recently been diagnosed with diabetes, and being in his early fifties, he claims he’s too young to deal with that kind of shit. So he doesn’t. Thanks to his proclivity to have a few drinks too many in the past, he also deals with liver problems, but he doesn’t care about that either.

“I’m trying, Ben, but it’s not always that easy.”

“Don’t eat crap and take your damn pills. There, sounds pretty simple.”

He lets out a heavy sigh. “Yes, simple. Anyway, will you pick me up after work and take me to my doctor’s appointment?”

It’s no use starting another fight, so I keep in a groan. “Yes,” I tell him through clenched teeth, “I will.”

“Thanks, Son.”

We end the call, and I drop my phone on my desk a tad too forcefully. After everything that happened, I wonder why I put up with him.

“Is your dad all right?”

I find Amy’s worried gaze. She crinkles her nose, still chewing on that damn pen.

I run my hand over my face to get rid of the scowl. I won’t let this get to me. “Yeah. My dad wants me to take him to his doctor’s office later.” I take a deep breath and hold it in as I swallow my annoyance. “I should be glad he keeps his appointments.”

“What does your mom have to say about this?”

I shift in my chair; this question was overdue. “Um,” I say, “my mom died when I was seven.”

Amy’s eyes widen, and her hand flies to her chest. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t, uh, I mean—”

I shake my head with a smile. It’s funny how other people are more uncomfortable with this topic than I am. “Don’t worry; it’s okay, so stop looking at me like that.”

A tinge of pink colors her cheeks when she bites her lips and averts her eyes. Rubbing her forehead, she meets my gaze and offers me a sad smile. “Okay, um, I’m sorry for your loss. I’m a good listener, so if you ever want to talk about it ... or not.”

Her struggle for words makes me chuckle. “Thanks, Amy.”

“So, um”—she plays with a small piece of paper in her hands—“Lauren called while you were on the phone and forwarded a message for you.”

She hands me the note, and I squint at the words. “What the fuck does this say?”

She crinkles her nose. “It says, ‘Meeting with client Mr. Sanders Tuesday three p.m.’ ”

“This doesn’t say Tuesday.” I bite my lips when she glares at me, but the corner of her mouth twitches, making it harder to keep in the chuckle.

“Maybe you need glasses?” she suggests.

I laugh, still looking at the piece of paper in my hand. “No, sorry. How can someone so beautiful have such messy and indecipherable handwriting?”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, my heart stops. Did I just act like the biggest idiot and call her beautiful?

Well, it’s true. She’s the prettiest woman I’ve seen in a long time, but I have no damn business telling her that.

“Hey!” she scolds. “My handwriting is not messy.”

Good, we’re concentrating on the handwriting part of my statement.

“You had to translate this, so ...” I let the rest of the sentence dangle; no need to say anything else I shouldn’t.

Huffing out a breath, she takes a sticky note and her pen. I lean forward with raised eyebrows, watching her write. Once she’s done, she meets my gaze, offering me a smirk. I accept the note from her, and when I read it, I can’t contain the laughter. It says in perfect handwriting:

Dear Mr. Taylor,

Would you be so kind as to shut up?

Sincerely,

A. Franklin

I shake my head with another chuckle. “So you *can* write legibly.”

“I admit it gets messy when I’m in a hurry and write fast. As long as I can still read it, it’s all good, though.”

“Are you implying sometimes even you can’t decipher your writing?”

She bites her lips, giving me the unspoken answer I expected.

“That’s funny,” I say, “considering you prefer things neat and in order on your desk.”

She holds my gaze for another moment before she cracks up. I join in, and just as every time she laughs, I feel a tingle in the pit of my stomach.

She regains her composure first, drawing in a deep breath. I force myself to stop laughing, too, when she points to the note I still hold in my hands. “You get my meaning?” she asks.

“Yes, ma’am.” After sticking the note to the bottom of my computer screen, I check the time. It’s half an hour until our break. “Are you meeting Lauren for lunch?”

“No, she has a date with Henry, which is not a date, as she assured me repeatedly.”

My lips stretch into an amused smile. “Oh, did she?”

She shoots me a glance. “What’s the story with those two?”

“They like each other, but they don’t act on it. Go figure.”

Amy taps her chin. “I did wonder why she avoided the topic whenever it came up.”

I shrug. “We don’t question it anymore. They must untangle the ‘we’re just friends’-mess themselves.”

“True,” Amy says, gathering the papers she’s working on. “So I’m free for lunch. Do you have plans?”

I study her before responding. My inner voice of reason doubts that spending even more time with her is a good idea. I tend to ignore that voice lately.

So I tell her, “No, I don’t. Do you fancy anything in particular?”

She grimaces. “I don’t know many places as I lack the friends to go out with. Lauren is my only one.”

I lean back in my chair. “I can’t imagine what it must be like to move to another city so far from home. Don’t you miss your family and friends?”

A deep frown forms on her forehead when she sighs before opening and closing her mouth a few times, making me mirror her expression. “Sorry,” I say to keep her from answering what she feels uncomfortable with. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

She waves her hand. “No, it’s fine. My parents and I didn’t part ways in peace. They don’t support my decision to move to New York. I do miss them and my friends, but I’ll focus on my new life here.”

I take in her words, wondering what it is about today that we touch heavier topics. I rarely talk about my dad and even less about my mom. The fact that I open up about it confirms my suspicion: something about Amy draws me to her, no matter how hard I try to ignore it.

Damn, I’m much too close to developing a silly crush. Which I can’t act on. She’s my colleague, but what’s more important, I can’t expect her to accept the baggage I come with.

So this will be lunch with a colleague, maybe even a friend.

But nothing more.

FIVE

AMY

Time never flew by as it did over the past twelve days.

But I've enjoyed no job as much as this one. I faced only minor problems adjusting to the new field of work. Attending business meetings is more interesting, and Luke is a much more pleasant boss than my former employer.

Then there's Ben. Sweet, charming, and funny Ben. I'd love my job a lot less without him. I should feel embarrassed about how often I steal glances at him, but damn, he's hot with his wild, dark hair I want to run my fingers through and his brown eyes I could lose myself in.

It's not his looks that draw me in, though. The attraction pulling me toward him is more than skin-deep. He stirs emotions inside me that I didn't expect to still be there. Whenever we chat, he understands whether we talk about music or our complicated family issues.

Ben doesn't mention his mom again, but venting about his dad does him good. He listens when I analyze my strained relationship with my parents, and voicing my troubles helps me see matters from a different angle.

Sometimes, I struggle to concentrate on my work, though. His desk is like a magnet for my wandering gaze, diminishing my ability to think straight.

Forgotten is the email I'm supposed to send when I focus on the note he stuck to the bottom of his computer screen. My note, the one I wrote after he called me beautiful. That moment last week still makes my heart skip a beat or two. I don't know how I kept my cool in the situation when all I wanted to do was scream. I can't recall the last time someone called me beautiful, even though he certainly didn't mean it like that. It sure doesn't help with the silly crush I ward off with all my might. Despite the attraction, I mustn't cave in and develop feelings for my co-worker. Bad idea.

“Are you ready?”

I flinch when Ben tears me out of my daydream. “Excuse me?”

He chuckles. “What were you thinking about so hard?”

When I meet his gaze, my body temperature shoots up, and I cover my flushed cheeks with my palms. “Um, nothing. What did you say?”

The smile he gives me does nothing to calm my hormones. “Are you ready?” he repeats.

“Oh yes, almost.” I sit up straight, checking my email inbox one last time.

It’s been a busy Friday—the end of a busy week. Many meetings, new clients, and current ad campaigns filled my boss’s schedule, which I had to keep updated. Not always a simple task, but I managed.

So today is *the* Friday. Ben and I are about to join our colleagues for drinks, and afterward, we’ll go to that Irish pub Lauren praised.

After shutting down my computer, I gather all the files from my desk and put them on the finished pile. I turn around when Luke’s door opens. “I’m off to the meeting with Mr. Sanders,” he says and adds with a subtle smile, “I’ll see you on the fifth floor later.”

“Okay, bye, Luke,” I respond, returning his smile.

“Bye, Amy.” He turns to leave, offering Ben a curt nod. “Bye, Ben.” Some unintelligible grunting is the only answer he receives before he walks off.

I blink at Ben, who glares at Luke’s retreating form. He doesn’t like our boss, and I have yet to find out why. He won’t say anything about that topic, even though we talk every chance we get.

As he probably won’t explain now either, I don’t bother trying, so I rise from my seat and grab my purse. “Shall we?”

Ben’s gaze snaps to me. “Um, yes.”

When we arrive on the fifth floor, Ben leads the way, and I take in my surroundings. As we approach an open lounge area with comfy chairs and couches, I spot a few familiar faces among the many colleagues who gather around the tall tables. While sipping champagne and munching away at the snacks, they engage in lively conversation. Ben grabs two glasses of sparkling wine, handing me one as we stride up to Lauren.

When she lifts her gaze from her phone, she waves, her eyes crinkling at the corners. My lips stretch into the same cheerful smile she displays. Lauren is another reason I come to work with a lightness in my step every day.

Over the past two weeks, I spent most of my lunch breaks with her, getting to know her better and liking her even more. It's wonderful to have a girlfriend to chat with again. When she told me she moved to New York four years ago, leaving her hometown of Chicago, I realized why we connected right away. She also left her old life behind. Maybe for different reasons, but she, too, started over in a foreign city.

I love how she doesn't have a filter, making me blush whenever she tells me about her weekend flings. And I love how she doesn't press for details about my past. Instead, she reassures me daily that coming here was the right decision.

"Hey, guys." Lauren hugs me tight before greeting Ben with a peck on his cheek. "You made it."

"The last meeting wouldn't end," Ben explains with a heavy sigh.

"Ugh, hate when that happens," Lauren says. "So, Amy, you still don't regret you took this job?"

I chuckle at the grin she gives me. "No way." I hold up my glass. "Free champagne? That's a first for me."

Lauren follows suit, clinking her glass with mine. "Awesome. Ben," she says after taking a sip, "have you convinced Amy yet to join us at the Avalon next time? She keeps stalling me."

I narrow my eyes at her. "Stalling? All I said was I have nothing to wear." When she mirrors my expression, I swallow

a laugh.

“Stalling, girl.” She points her finger at me. “We’re going shopping, so you won’t have an excuse. Consider the night out as the official initiation ritual. You’re part of our circle now. Right, Ben?”

We fix our gaze on Ben, who looks back and forth between us. “Um, yeah,” he mumbles. “The circle part, at least. Not sure about the initiation. That sounds like some sorority nonsense.”

With a sigh of relief, I press my palm to my heart. “I should consider myself lucky it’s only a night out. I’ve heard worse stories during college.”

“See?” Lauren says. “Only a night out.” She gives Ben a playful nudge. “Come on, stud, work your magic and convince her to join us.”

Ben blinks at Lauren while I cover my mouth with my hand to contain the laughter. He’s not happy about the nickname.

“Stop glaring, Ben,” Lauren says. “Just telling it like it is. That’s what all the ladies think when they ogle you, right?”

Ben snorts. “How would I know what they think?”

“Oh, please.” Lauren rolls her eyes with a dismissive wave. “You must notice how they drool over you, slipping you their phone numbers one after the other. Only you never call, breaking those poor girls’ hearts.”

I observe their exchange, taking in any new information it reveals about Ben. He shakes his head with a low laugh before Lauren adds, “At least Amy is prudent enough not to fall for your charms.”

Oh my goodness. The sip of champagne I take goes down the wrong pipe, causing an uncontrollable coughing fit. Lauren’s words catch me off guard, evoking memories of all the little moments between Ben and me during the past two weeks—all the glances and coincidental touches that make me question my sanity. Fighting this crush on my colleague is a tremendous challenge, and I’m close to surrendering.

So me, prudent? I don't think so, but no one needs to know this, least of all Ben.

While I try not to die of either choking or sudden embarrassment, Lauren slaps my back. "Amy, are you okay? You're supposed to *drink* the champagne, not inhale it."

Once the coughing fit is over, I take in one last deep breath. "You're telling me this now?" I say, fanning my face. "Phew, sorry about that."

With a chuckle, Lauren takes the glass from me. "No more for you."

Ben hands me a glass of water, which I accept with a grateful smile and a long sigh. "So we established I'm not to be trusted with champagne. What's next?"

Lauren cackles. "We hang out a bit, chat, exchange the latest office gossip—that sort of thing. Later, we're off to some real fun at the pub."

The gleam in her eyes makes me chuckle, and I wonder if this has anything to do with Henry, who I've heard so much about. "I can't wait to meet your friends."

"You'll love their music," Ben says after the coughing incident. "From what you've told me, it's like your favorites."

I nod, only managing an awkward smile. My brain still obsesses over Lauren's remark and what Ben thinks about it. *If* he gives it any thought. He probably doesn't, and I shouldn't care.

"It's gonna be packed tonight." Lauren checks her watch. "We should leave early. Ben, will you save us a table while we change?"

I furrow my brows at Lauren. Change? I didn't bring a dress.

When she sees my expression, she grins, bumping her shoulder with mine. "I knew it. But don't worry; I brought two dresses, so you can borrow one."

"Yay." I crinkle my nose, struggling to keep my reaction as neutral as possible. After everything I've learned about

Lauren and her extroverted nature, I'm not sure a dress of hers is what I'd wear.

So while we hang out, chat, and exchange office gossip, I wonder what I've gotten myself into.



I was wrong.

The outfit Lauren talked me into wearing is rather innocent. The knee-length, sleeveless navy piece doesn't feel too tight on my body. It shows off only a bit of cleavage, and the soft material feels fantastic. This could be part of my wardrobe. I expected a shorter and tighter dress, but Lauren said it was only a night at the pub and reiterated her statement about going shopping for our night out at the Avalon.

Lauren's dress, on the other hand, is a sexy red number that makes her ass look fabulous. It hugs her curves and shows off her toned legs tastefully—a stunning outfit that's sure to impress.

The pub is within walking distance of the office. The cheerful smile won't leave my lips as we amble along Manhattan's streets in the last weeks of the summer heat. I look forward to a fun evening.

As soon as we walk into O'Reilly's, the laid-back, friendly atmosphere typical of an Irish pub captivates me. Lively chatter fills the air, and the scent of beer and a large crowd hits my nostrils, but not in a bad way.

We weave through the guests when Lauren spots Ben at a booth in the corner. He rises from his seat as we approach and gestures for us to sit down. "I'll be right back," he says, dashing off.

While we take our seats, I gaze after him. He jogs over to a small stage, where I recognize Paul. Two other guys stand next to him; they must be Henry and Jack, his bandmates, but

before I can figure out which one is Henry, someone stops at our table.

“Hey, Lauren.”

I scan the stranger’s face, who gives my friend a beaming smile before meeting my gaze. He raises his eyebrows, his smile widening.

“Oh, hi,” Lauren says. “I didn’t know you’d be here tonight.”

He shrugs as he pulls out the chair across from me. “I felt like saying hello. It’s been a while.” His eyes stay on me while he speaks. “Who is your lovely friend?”

“This is Amy, our new colleague. Amy, this is Aaron.”

With a charming smile, he holds out his hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Amy. Wow, Ben failed to mention how gorgeous you are.”

My eyebrows shoot up as I shake his hand. Who is this guy?

“Aaron is Ben’s younger brother,” Lauren says.

Yes, that explains it. I study Aaron, concluding that the family resemblance is deniable; Aaron’s hair is curlier and lighter, and his eyes are more greenish-brown compared to Ben’s warm chocolate color. Sleeve tattoos cover the skin of both his upper arms, and I wonder if Ben also has any ink on his body. So far, I haven’t spotted anything.

Another thing sets them apart: the first impression Aaron conveys couldn’t differ more from his brother’s. He sweeps his gaze over my body, not at all worried about hiding his interest.

“But unlike Ben, Aaron is after any girl wearing a short skirt,” Lauren says, supporting my theory.

Aaron glares at her before focusing his attention on me with another dazzling smile. “Don’t listen to her. I’m a nice guy.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I lean back. “I’ll have to see for myself, then.”

“With pleasure.” He wiggles his eyebrows. “How about I invite you for a drink at the bar later?”

His forwardness makes me chuckle. I don’t usually like guys who come on too strong, but maybe I’m easy prey for the alluring charm that seems to be a family trait. “You’re not wasting any time,” I respond.

“Is that a yes?”

“We’ll see. So why hasn’t Ben mentioned he has a brother?”

Aaron lifts his hands, palms up. “I’m not the perfect sibling to be proud of. Where is my beloved brother, anyway?”

“Here.”

Ben appears out of nowhere and pulls out the chair next to Aaron, plumping down with a glare directed at his brother. The sudden tension in the air between them is palpable.

So much for a fun evening.

SIX

BEN

What the fuck is my brother doing here? I haven't talked to him in three weeks, not since we had another fight about the shit he's still involved in.

And tonight, he dares to show up and join us at our table? Damn, he makes me angry.

When I approach our booth, I clench and unclench my fists, swallowing the urge to punch his face with how he leans over the table, hitting on Amy.

"Where is my beloved brother, anyway?" he asks, finally putting some distance between him and the woman I don't want him to talk to.

"Here." With too much force, I pull out the chair next to him and glare at Aaron as I sit down, but he just smirks at me.

Time to ignore him.

I turn to Lauren and Amy, who observe our silent exchange with furrowed brows. "So you girls arrived. Took you long enough."

Lauren huffs. "Hey! You can't rush the transition from work attire to gorgeous perfection." She waves her hand in front of her body before resting it on Amy's arm. "Right?"

"Um, sure." Amy bites her lips, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. My gaze lingers on her ponytail, and pictures pop up in my head of that ponytail wrapped around my fist, and—oh hell no, not going there!

"You're right," I say. As much as I want to keep my eyes off her, they wander over what I see of her body. She wears this cute blue dress, which is none of the dresses I'm used to from Lauren, not clinging to her like a second skin. It still shows off her boobs in a classy way, making it a challenge not to stare at them. "You look, um, stunning," I mumble when

our gazes meet. We keep eye contact before I can't help but focus my attention on her lips. Damn, those lips. This evening will be torture.

Of course my brother ruins the moment when he speaks. "Did you deliberately conceal how pretty your new colleague is?"

A low grumble emanates from my chest. How the fuck does he know about Amy? Ugh, Dad must have told him. "Ease up, Aaron," I tell him.

"Oh, stop it, guys," Lauren says with an annoyed puff as she gets up, pulling Amy after her. "Come on, girl. Let's get a drink."

I gaze after them before turning to my brother. "You could have called instead of just showing up."

He snorts. "Would you have answered?" He takes my glare as his answer. "Thought so." He leans back in his chair, stretching out his legs. "Dad wants us to reconcile."

"Of course," I scoff. "Was he the one who told you about Amy?"

"Yeah. I had to endure another one of his talks about how he's waiting for us to bring home a nice girl. When he asked for details about the new *female* colleague you had mentioned, I said I couldn't give him any, as you were ignoring me."

I groan. I told my father they had replaced my boss's annoying assistant. That teaches me to make forced small talk.

"He went on about how we must make up," Aaron continues. "Family matters above all."

I lift a single eyebrow. "He said that? He, of all people?"

"I know. He's such a hypocrite." Aaron turns his body to face me. Taking in a deep breath, he holds it in before releasing it through his lips. "Look, Ben, we've been through hell and back. I made some poor decisions in the past, but so did you. You need to stop this pretentious shit."

“Shut the fuck up,” I growl. “Is this your idea of reconciliation? Yes, I made mistakes too, but I stopped being stupid. Have you told Jackson to back off?”

I roll my eyes when he presses his lips together. Of course he hasn't.

With a grunt, he shoves his fingers through his hair. “It's not that easy.”

“You sound like Dad. Get your shit together. Stay away from that guy, and please, stay away from Amy.”

He stares at me before lifting his lips in a smirk. “You like her.”

I grind my teeth. “That's not the point.” Fuck, I should have kept my mouth shut. The stupid smirk lingers on his face, confirming my worry that he won't stay away from her.

With a low laugh, he turns his head toward the bar. “She's cute, I agree.” He meets my gaze, rolling his eyes at my glare. “Relax, I'm just making conversation.”

I refrain from responding to his remark because the girls return to the table, placing two bottles of beer in front of us.

“You're welcome,” Lauren says as they take their seats. “Next round's on you.”

“Thanks, ladies.” Aaron lifts his drink before taking a swig. “So, Amy,” he says, and I tighten the grip on my bottle. “Tell me something about yourself. Are you new to the city?”

Amy meets my gaze before responding to Aaron. “Yes, I moved here from the west coast about two months ago.”

“That's quite a move. Did you come by yourself, or did you bring your boyfriend?”

“Goodness, Aaron,” Lauren says. “Why don't you ask Amy out already?”

My gaze snaps to Lauren. I blink at her, ignoring the burning pain in my jaw from grinding my teeth. As much as I like Lauren, I could kill her right now.

“I did, if you remember,” Aaron retorts. “She hasn’t said yes yet.”

All eyes are on Amy, who opens and closes her mouth a few times and fidgets in her seat. A faint blush creeps up her neck, but before she can speak, the pub owner, Bryan O’Reilly, interrupts our conversation, stepping on the small stage to announce tonight’s musical guest.

When Paul, Henry, and Jack play their songs, our conversation slows down, but my brother still shows too much interest in Amy. I curse myself for telling him to back off, and I can only hope this evening won’t turn into a disaster.



Two hours later, it’s settled. I’ll kill Aaron. With the umpteenth deep breath, I shove my fingers through my hair, giving myself another calm-the-fuck-down pep talk. This *is* a disaster.

While we had more drinks and some finger food, listening to the music and chatting as far as the noise allowed, my brother shamelessly flirted with Amy, asking her question after question. I know his talent to charm any willing female’s panties off, so it’s no surprise Amy enjoys the conversation, laughs, and gives him the answers he asks for. She keeps her distance, though. Whenever Aaron leans closer, she leans back, which confirms my first impression of her. I don’t know Amy well enough already, but she doesn’t peg me as the kind of girl who falls for some guy’s charm too easily.

Or I’m just telling myself this so I don’t give in to my earlier urge to punch my brother.

I check the time. Yes, I spent the past 120 minutes watching Aaron flirt with Amy instead of barging in because I have no fucking claim on her.

The music stops, pulling me out of my thoughts. After a round of applause and a promise to return in two weeks, Paul, Henry, and Jack join us at our table. My tense shoulders relax when the guys sit down and start a conversation, thus diverting Amy's attention away from Aaron.

"Hi, Amy, was it?" Paul asks. "Great to see you here."

"Yes, hi," she responds, shaking his hand and Henry's as well, while Jack gives her a quick wave when they introduce themselves. Soon, we engage in a lively group chat, and I breathe more easily when my brother grows quiet.

"Paul, help me get some drinks?" Jack asks his friend to follow him, and a few minutes later, they return to our table with a tray filled with an assortment of beverages. "Enjoy," Jack says. "That's all the party you're gonna get for my birthday."

"Oh, that's right," Lauren says. "Happy birthday, Jack."

Everyone grabs a glass or a bottle, and when Paul raises his drink, we follow suit. "To Jack."

While I sip my beer, my gaze repeatedly wanders to Amy and that radiant smile on her face. Her rosy cheeks make her look so damn sexy, and her sweet laugh makes my insides tingle. How am I supposed to fight this crush any longer? Acting on it still isn't an option.

My mood lightens the more Amy talks to Lauren and the other guys, but my brother has this exceptional talent. So when I stand at the bar, waiting for our next order of drinks, I glance over to the table, and sure enough, Aaron is at it again. He moves to the bench next to Amy and engages her in a one-on-one conversation.

I scrape my hand over my face with a groan and flinch when Lauren turns up next to me. "Are you glaring at them because it's your brother or because it's Amy?"

I narrow my eyes at her. "Huh?"

She points to the table, a smirk playing on her lips. "Come on; this scenario bugs you. Is it because you know Aaron is

usually up to no good and you pity any woman he chats up? Or is it because someone else flirts with Amy?"

I swat at the air. "I have no idea what you're getting at."

"Of course not." With a chuckle, she helps me carry the drinks to our table. She doesn't dig deeper, but her questions will come; that's for sure.

Amy accepts a glass of water from Lauren. "Thanks. That's my last one for today." She tilts her head back, briefly closing her eyes. "It's been a long day; I need to go home soon."

Lauren checks her watch. "Yeah, good idea. Do you want to share an Uber?"

"Yes, I'd love to."

My lips stretch into a slow smile when Amy takes Lauren up on her offer. I expected Aaron to suggest taking Amy home, and judging from his hardened expression, they indeed thwarted his plans.

"Okay." Lauren types away on her phone. "Our ride will be here in about ten minutes."

After finishing their drinks, the girls get ready to leave, saying goodbye. Amy receives a hug from everyone and a "Looking forward to seeing you again."

When she stands in front of me, her arms envelop me in a quick but warm embrace. Luckily, the moment with her body pressed against mine is over before my brain shuts off and refuses to let go. Before stepping back, she plants a soft kiss on my cheek, and I bite my lips, holding in an appreciative moan.

"Thanks for an enjoyable evening." She beams at me, making my stupid heart flutter.

"You're welcome. I'm glad you had fun. Welcome to our circle of friends."

Her smile widens, and the sparkle in her eyes makes me forget all the aggravation from tonight. No, it makes me forget everything around us. The tiny part of my brain that still works

keeps me from leaning in and brushing my lips over hers, though. So I step back. “Get home safe.”

“I will. Bye, Ben.”

“Bye, Amy.”

“Bye, everyone,” Lauren calls with a wave and drags Amy after her out of the pub.

Once they’re gone, I turn back to the others. I feel my brother’s stare, but I refuse to acknowledge it.

We finish our drinks as well and get ready to head home too. While Paul, Henry, and Jack pack up their instruments, I wave goodbye to Bryan behind the bar and exit the pub.

“Ben, wait.”

I groan, stopping in my tracks when my brother calls after me. “What do you want?” I growl as he catches up with me.

“About Amy—”

I point my finger at his chest. “I swear, if you touch her, you’ll regret it.”

“Bro, seriously, what is it about this girl?”

“She’s nice and genuine. She doesn’t deserve to be dragged into any kind of mess, and that’s all you have to offer.” I refrain from adding myself to that statement, but we both know the same goes for me.

“Oh, come on. Stop being so melodramatic. But I get it; you like her. She will never know, though, will she? Because that’s what you do: keep people at a distance.”

“This isn’t a therapy session, Aaron. Just leave her alone.”

He holds up his hands. “Not making any promises. Well, I better go.” Before I can yell at him, or worse, punch him, he takes off, and I muster up enough willpower to let him. It’s no use fighting with him over this. He’s always been the annoying little brother, doing the things he knows irritate me. He loves to push my buttons to this day.

I curse under my breath as I make my way home. As I walk, my brother's words replay in my head.

What is it about this girl? I don't know, but it's driving me out of my mind.

SEVEN

AMY

Lauren and I step out of O'Reilly's into the muggy New York City air. It's past eleven p.m., but Manhattan's streets are still busy.

Our ride picks us up, and I tell the driver my address first as it's closer than Lauren's.

"Did you enjoy tonight?" Lauren turns to me, resting her knee on the middle seat between us.

I can't contain a happy smile. "It was the best night out I've had in forever." I won't reveal it was the *only* night out in forever. I can't remember the last time I had drinks with friends.

"That's good. Aaron was so obtrusive, though," she adds, grimacing.

I wave my hand. "It was okay. Otherwise, I would have told him to back off."

The truth is, it's been even longer since anyone flirted with me so openly, and a tiny piece of me enjoyed the attention. That it came from the wrong brother puts a damper on it, though. More than once, I caught myself wishing Ben would show the same interest in me, but then I remembered how it's still a bad idea to fall for a co-worker.

Lauren chuckles. "Aaron is also obstinate. If he wants you, he's not gonna back down like that, and he wanted you, girl."

I snort. "Something tells me Aaron chats up a lot of ladies, so if I turn him down, he probably has ten other women at his beck and call. If I were looking for a one-night stand, he'd be a good choice, but that's not me."

"You got that right." She narrows her eyes at me. "So what are you looking for?"

I blow out my cheeks, slowly releasing a long breath. “I’m not looking for anything.”

Tilting her head to the side, Lauren raises her eyebrows. “Did you leave anyone behind at home?”

Rubbing my chest, I bite my lips. “No,” I say after a moment of hesitation. “That ended a while back.”

“Did he hurt you? Is he the reason you escaped your old life?”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “He’s part of the reason, yeah.” Unwanted memories hit me as I fumble with the hem of my dress, avoiding Lauren’s gaze.

She leans over, placing her hand on my arm. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. You don’t have to talk about it.”

I turn my head to give her a grateful smile. “Thanks. That is a story for another day.”

She offers me a warm smile in return as she sits back. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Sighing, I relax into my seat. “What’s the deal with Ben and Aaron?” I ask, changing the subject to escape the images from my past.

Lauren shrugs. “They bicker a lot. Something about a difficult youth and their dad acting like a total ass after their mom died. I don’t know all the details; you should ask Ben about it.”

I nod. While she’s right, doubt swirls inside my mind. Is it a good idea to dig deeper and ask Ben about his troubled past? It’s hard enough as it is to keep my growing feelings for him at bay.

A soft tingle starts in the pit of my stomach when I remember how he looked at me earlier. His gaze was so intense that it affected every fiber in my body. Another hot shiver ripples down my spine with the same force as before, and I rub my forearms to get rid of the goosebumps that erupt across my skin.

Something in his eyes made my heart beat faster, and now, worry creeps up on me. I meant what I told Lauren; I'm not looking for anything—I shouldn't. My last relationship broke a huge part of me, and putting myself back together took too much effort to carelessly give in to the next best crush.

“We're here,” the driver announces.

After handing him some money, I hug Lauren goodbye. “Thanks for tonight. I had so much fun.”

She offers me a wide grin. “The pleasure was all mine. Next week, I'm dragging you to the Avalon.”

With a soft laugh, I exit the vehicle and stride to the front door, waving at Lauren before the car drives off and I step inside the building. With a deep sigh, I shuffle up the stairs to my second-floor apartment.

I drop my keys on the small table by the door and rummage through my purse to retrieve my phone. While I amble to the bedroom, I unlock the screen, and a few messages pop up. My heart skips a beat when I see Ben's name, and a frown forms on my forehead when I also notice a message from Aaron. Was it too early to give him my number, and did I give in to his charm too easily?

No, I didn't give in. I was open to a new acquaintance.

Pushing the unwanted thoughts aside, I read Ben's text first.

Ben: Hey, I hope you got home okay.

My lips inevitably stretch into a smile as I text back.

Amy: I did, thanks for asking, and thanks for a great evening.

I watch the screen to see if he responds, but when he doesn't, I open Aaron's message.

Aaron: Amy, it was a pleasure to meet you. When can I take you out for that drink?

He doesn't beat around the bush, further confirming my first impression of him.

Amy: Not sure. I'm a busy woman.

I'm about to toss my phone aside when it beeps with a reply from Aaron.

Aaron: I'm a patient man. Let me know. Or is there anything going on between you and my brother?

My eyes widen. What makes him think that?

Amy: What do you mean?

Aaron: He acted like your bodyguard.

Did he? I scratch my temple, thinking about what to answer him.

Amy: We're colleagues, that's all.

Ben probably won't tell me about their issues with each other, so I push my luck tonight and send another message.

Amy: Why couldn't he stop glaring at you?

Aaron: You noticed, huh? It's nothing. Sibling stuff. He'll get over it. So are you agreeing to that drink?

Amy: I don't want to raise false hopes, Aaron. As you said, you're a nice guy, that's all.

Aaron: Damn, that hurt. No woman ever rejected me this coolly.

To underline his feigned outrage, he sends a few open-mouth emojis, followed by a laughing one.

Amy: You'll get over it, I'm sure. Now, it's late and I need some sleep. Good night, Aaron.

Aaron: Good night, Amy. Sweet dreams.

With an amused smile, I place my phone on the nightstand. As I saunter to the bathroom, I grab my PJs, and while I change and brush my teeth, I ponder Aaron's effect on me. I enjoyed the attention he paid me, but was it Aaron, or was it the attention? Does thinking about him make my body tingle?

When I return to bed, I check my phone again. Ben texted back, causing my stomach to flutter at once. There's my answer. Full body tingles.

Ben: You're welcome, but I didn't do much. I'm glad you had fun. Good night, Amy. I'll see you Monday.

I want to say so many things, but I go with a simple message.

Amy: Good night, Ben. See you Monday.

The smile lingers on my lips as I slip under the covers. Fatigue takes over, making Ben and whatever this thing is between us the last thought before I fall into a deep sleep.



On Monday morning, I enter the Wilson & Partners building with a racing heart. This feels like a replay of my first day two weeks ago, only that the source of my nervousness is of a different kind.

I spent my weekend unpacking the remaining boxes that had been glaring at me since I moved in. While I turned my apartment into a home, I ignored the world outside. After everything found its new place, I camped out on the couch, binge-watching my favorite series. For the first time in forever, I enjoyed the alone time.

In between, Lauren and I texted back and forth, and I succumbed to her insistence on buying a dress for me. On Friday after work, we have a shopping date.

Today, my thoughts are otherwise occupied, though. Over the past two days, I also spent a lot of time mulling over my silly crush. Aside from the fact that crushing on a colleague is not advisable, I realized Ben didn't show signs of reciprocation. He was nice and charming, but my mind may have been constructing things beyond a simple, friendly welcome.

He was the perfect friend and colleague. Nothing more. So I must disregard my hormonal reaction to him, because that's what it is—hormones.

When I arrive at my desk, I drop my purse underneath and sink into my chair with a long exhale. It's still early; only a few colleagues sit at their desks, and Ben isn't one of them.

Before I get lost in thoughts about him and how to tackle the feelings I shouldn't have, Luke walks into the office and stops at my desk. "Good morning, Amy."

I turn in my chair to face him, returning his wide smile. "Good morning, Luke."

He waves me after him. "I have a few tasks for you."

I do as he asks, and once we're in his office, he hands me a stack of files from his desk. "These go to HR, and these"—he grabs more files—"to the legal department. Please schedule an appointment with this client." He adds another letter to the pile. "And you have to reschedule my meetings on Wednesday afternoon; I won't be available."

Taking in a quick breath, I square my shoulders. "I'll get to it right away."

"Thank you. Oh, one last thing." He jogs around his desk to grab a file from the drawer cabinet. "Could you hand this to Ben? He called to say he'll be late, and I'm attending a meeting in ten minutes. He has to finish his part of the campaign." He points to the folder. "I'm meeting the client this afternoon instead of tomorrow."

I nod, wondering about the many changes in his schedule I don't know yet. "Okay."

"Ben knows what needs to be done," Luke adds, "but if he has any questions, I'll be back around noon. I emailed you about the appointments that came up over the weekend."

I press the stack of files to my chest, mentally repeating my list of tasks. When he sits down in his chair, starting a phone call, I return to my desk and arrange the folders before checking my email inbox. My eyes widen when I read the

email Luke mentioned. He must have had a busy weekend; most of his schedule changed.

While I add and change all appointments for this week, Luke leaves for his meeting. Even though my brain is busy, my thoughts wander to Ben and why he's late today. I hope he's okay.

When he arrives half an hour later, I know he is. He never looked better. Or hotter.

Damn hormones. My pulse races as soon as I catch sight of him and his irresistible smile. Those stupid butterflies in my stomach go berserk, setting off a heat wave through my entire body.

“Good morning.”

Two words and I'm done for. His voice sends another hot shiver down my spine, ruining all my plans to keep my cool. The determination I mustered up over the weekend to restrain my physical reaction to him vanishes into thin air.

I'm screwed.

“Good morning.” I have to clear my throat to utter these simple words. My eyes stay on him as he sits and starts working.

“Did you have a good weekend?” he asks while sorting through the mess on his desk.

“Um, yes. It was nice and quiet,” I say, my gaze on his shirt. It fits him like a second skin, showing off his toned arms and giving me a good idea of the muscular chest underneath.

Damn, Amy, quit the ogling!

I take in a deep breath. “And yours?”

He shrugs. “It was all right. So what did I miss?”

Good idea; stop the small talk. Time to concentrate on essential matters. “Luke asked me to give you this.” I rise from my chair, handing him the folder. “He was supposed to meet the client tomorrow, but they rescheduled for this afternoon. So you have to finish whatever you had to today.”

“Damn,” he mumbles as he looks through the papers. “I wanted to leave early.”

I gape at him. “You come here late and want to leave early? What kind of work ethic is that?”

He chuckles. “It’s an exception. An old friend is in town until tomorrow, so it’s our only chance to catch up.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Hmm.”

“Shit, Amy,” he says with a hearty laugh. “Stop looking at me like that. I swear Luke’s okay with this.”

“If you say so.”

“If not, I’ll ask you to put in a good word for me.”

I furrow my brows. “How’s that supposed to help?”

“Didn’t you notice how he looks at you?”

“How he looks at me?” I respond in an uncertain tone. “What are you talking about?”

With another chuckle, he rises from his seat and walks around his desk. He leans against mine next to my chair. “Remember what I told you about his reputation?” he asks for my ears only, and I nod, unable to form a coherent answer.

“Amy, you are on his list.”

I blink at him. “That’s stupid.” With a shake of my head, I smack Ben’s arm. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about. No, I didn’t notice how Luke looked at me, and he never made any advances or said anything inappropriate.

“Think about it. You know I’m right.”

I groan. “Shut up, Ben. Go back to your desk and do your job.”

Stifling a laugh, Ben does as I tell him. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

I lean back in my chair with a sigh, but as much as I think about it, I don’t see it. “No, I stand by my answer. I never get that much attention from men.”

Ben snorts. “I don’t believe that for one second.”

“Well, your brother was the first guy to ask me out in ages.”

He grimaces. “My brother asked you out?”

“Yes. I haven’t agreed yet, though.”

“Don’t do it.”

“Why not? What’s your problem with him?”

“He’s just—” He rolls back his shoulders. “He’s bad company.”

“Care to give more details?”

Shoving his hand through his hair, he lets out a deep sigh. “Please, turn him down. Go out with me instead. Tomorrow night?”

EIGHT

BEN

Have I completely lost my mind? Have I not told myself repeatedly over the weekend I'd stay away from Amy?

Fuck, I'm screwed. She does things to me I can't fathom. As soon as she flashes me her sweet smile, my gloomy world gets a whole lot brighter. Being close to her evokes sensations of the strangest kind.

The best kind.

But now, she tells me my brother asked her out, and something short-circuits in my brain. No, he can't have her. Neither can I, but the stupid part of me seems to disagree.

Is it too late to take back what I said?

Yes, you idiot.

Amy blinks at me, opening and closing her mouth a few times, scratching her head. "Tomorrow night? Um, yeah. But, um, just so I don't—" Fidgeting in her seat, she lets the rest of the sentence dangle in the suddenly heavy air between us.

I give myself a mental slap for causing that confused look on her face. "Shit." I hold up my hand to stop her from saying more. "I'm sorry; that came out wrong. Yes, you shouldn't go out with my brother, but that's not why I asked you. I want to explain things that I can't go into at work. Let me try again." It's too late to back down, so I might as well do it right as she deserves. "Amy, can I take you out for drinks tomorrow night?"

A subtle smile plays on her lips, replacing the frown on her face. "Yes, I'd like that."

I deserve another slap for the deep hole I dug myself. There's no way out of this anymore.

We can go out and have drinks as friends, right?

Before we can discuss the details about this friend date, Rosa, our human resources manager, enters the office and stops at Amy's desk. "Good morning, dear." She displays her usual beaming smile, and Amy returns it. Rosa's always upbeat attitude makes everyone smile. Her cheerfulness must have something to do with her upcoming retirement.

"I have a few documents for Luke," she says. "Is he in his office?"

"No, he's in a meeting. I'll pass them on to him." Amy accepts the folders from Rosa and hands her some files in return. "I have some for you as well."

"Thank you, love." Rosa turns to leave before throwing me a warm smile. "Ben, hello. How is your father? Did everything go all right this morning?"

"Yes, thanks for asking. He's fine."

"That's good." With a curt nod, she's off.

When I turn to Amy, I meet her curious gaze. "What happened this morning?" she asks, but adds, "Oh, I mean ... you don't have to tell me if—"

"No, it's okay. I had to take my dad to an appointment. They changed his medication, and he needed another check-up. Unfortunately, his car broke down last night, so he also needed a ride."

"Is he feeling better?"

"Yeah, he is. Doesn't mean he'll watch his diet, though."

Amy's ringing phone cuts our conversation short. Even though I prefer small talk with her over my actual work, I gotta get going if I want to finish earlier today, so I dive into my project. After ending the call, Amy excuses herself to run some errands.

My usually wandering gaze stays on my tablet because Amy isn't in her seat, but my concentration bids goodbye. Even when she doesn't sit across from me, thoughts about her are just as distracting.

And now we have a date. As friends. Only as friends.

If I repeat it in my head often enough, it'll hopefully stick and prevent me from doing or saying more stupid things.

For the rest of the morning, I focus on the finishing touches of the project. I make good progress until Amy asks around noon, "Are you taking a lunch break?"

Sitting up straight, I rub my stomach. "Yeah, I could use some food."

"I'm meeting Lauren at Gordo's. Do you want to come along?"

"Ah, that sandwich place she always gushes over. Never tried, always wanted to."

With a wide grin, she claps her hands. "I'm a fan too. They have the best Italian club sandwich."

My growling stomach agrees with the idea. "I'd like that."

Amy checks the time. "Lauren told me to meet her there; she accompanies Greg to some appointment outside the office." She grabs her purse. "Let's go."

More colleagues leave for their break, and we join them on their way to the elevator. When we step inside, I conclude that next time we wait until most of the staff has left before we take our break.

We stop on every floor, with more people piling in, and I step closer to Amy to make room. Despite the many scents that fill the surrounding air, it's her perfume that hits my nostrils, making me want to lean closer and bury my face in the crook of her neck. I want to inhale her intoxicating scent, and I want to press my lips to her skin, which looks so soft and delicious.

Every agonizing second I stand so close to her, with our bodies touching, I lose another piece of my sanity. When we arrive on the first floor, my hand does this more than stupid thing, resting on her lower back to usher her forward.

I clench my jaw, banning thoughts from my mind about my hand wandering down to touch her delectable ass.

Dammit, Ben, get a grip!

I remove my hand when we emerge from the building, and the warm and humid midday air hits us as we walk past the crowds. I'm looking forward to the end of summer and the cooler temperatures. The heat is only bearable on a beach by the ocean and not in the middle of the city.

As we march down the street, someone rushes past us, bumping into Amy and making her lose her balance. She trips, and I reach out on instinct, catching her in time as she curses under her breath and clings to me as if she were afraid to fall if I let go.

So here we are, Amy in my arms, and it feels fucking amazing. The summer warmth is nothing compared to the heat that floods my system, with her body so close once more. We stare at each other, and I don't know if it's the surprise about the almost-fall or the proximity.

My dysfunctioning brain finally orders my mouth to talk. "Are you all right?"

"Um, yeah, that was, uh, close," she mumbles. "Wow, you have fast reflexes. Thanks for preventing my fall."

I chuckle. "Yeah, I moonlight as a knight in shining armor."

Blinking at me, she furrows her brows before bursting out laughing. "Ben Taylor, did you just reveal your secret identity?"

I join in her laughter. "Don't tell anyone." I shift my weight from one foot to the other. "Can I let you go?"

"Of course." Loosening her grip on me, she steps back and straightens her clothes. With her hand on her chest, she offers me a quick bow. "Again, thank you, kind sir, for catching me."

"Anytime, Princess."

She squints at me, a glint of amusement twinkling in her eyes. The soft giggle that passes her lips makes my heart skip a beat, and I realize I am fighting a losing battle. Time to admit my feelings and generate as much willpower as possible not to act on the inevitable crush.

“Amy? Ben?”

We turn toward the voice and watch Lauren approach. I let out a slow breath, relief pouring over me—she’ll serve as the perfect chaperone.

She comes to a stop next to us, greeting first Amy, then me with a peck on the cheek. “Can we hurry up? I’m starving.”

Amy chuckles. “All right.” She points to me. “I brought Ben along.”

Lauren directs a playful smile at me. “So I see.” She examines my expression, and her smile turns into a smirk. She doesn’t voice the question she must be dying to ask. It gives me hope she won’t make any comments during lunch, either.

One can always hope.



“Done.” With a deep sigh, I lean back in my chair and check my watch. “I made it in time.” I glance at Amy, who was busy answering phone calls and emails all afternoon.

She throws me a quick smile, but before she has the chance to say anything, her phone rings. Her gaze flickers upward as she groans. “I hate Mondays.” She draws in a deep breath, plastering a smile on her face before answering the call. “Wilson and Partners, Luke Smith’s office. How can I help you?”

I watch her while she uses her sweetest voice, jotting down a few notes. I bite my lips to contain a chuckle. Her brows furrow, and she crinkles her nose. I could stare at her for hours.

I’m not sure if it’s for the better that Luke emerges from his office at this very moment or not. He glances at Amy,

who's still on the phone, and walks over to my desk. "Ben, did you finish the project?"

I hand him the folder. "Yes. I just sent you the email."

"Good. Thank you." He gives me a fake smile before turning to Amy.

"I will. Thank you, and goodbye." She ends the call and acknowledges Luke with a curt nod. "Hey, Luke. These people requested a callback."

He accepts his messages from her. "Thanks, Amy." He scans the notes, and his lips stretch into a smile—not a fake one. "So how did you like your first two weeks? I hope everyone is treating you nicely?"

Amy nods. "Yes, they are." She points to me. "Ben, in particular, helped me find my way around."

His usual charming smile falters for the shortest moment, but not too short for me to notice.

Yes, Luke, she's talking about me.

I know it pisses him off, but he carries it off well. He makes more small talk before vanishing inside his office without so much as another glance at me. I direct my gaze at Amy, and when our eyes meet, I smirk.

"What?" she asks.

"Did you notice?"

She raises a single eyebrow. "How Luke was friendly and nothing more?"

I laugh. "How it annoyed him you mentioned me."

"I am not on his list, Ben." Rolling her eyes, she shakes her head. "Anyway, don't you have a date with your friend?"

"I do." I tidy up some of the mess on my desk before rising from my chair. "See you tomorrow."

"Have fun. See you tomorrow. Bye, Ben."

I curtsy. "Bye, Princess."

She bites down on a smile. "Is that a new thing now?"

“Maybe.” With a wave and a pleasant lightness in my chest, I head out. The cheerful grin stays on my lips as I step inside the elevator.

It stops on the seventh floor, and before I finish my thought that this is Lauren’s floor, the doors open and the woman in question stands in front of me.

“Ben! What a coincidence. Are you leaving?” She leans against the wall next to me.

“Yeah, finishing early today,” I explain. “Where are you going?”

“Running some errands, like collecting the mail from the reception desk.”

Lauren scrutinizes me the entire way to the first floor but doesn’t speak until we step out of the elevator. “So, Ben ...” She narrows her eyes at me. “Spill. Are you into Amy?”

Knowing the question would come makes it easier to keep my composure. “Don’t be ridiculous. We work together, and the company frowns upon that.”

“You didn’t answer my question.” With her gaze fixed on me, she taps her chin. “Well, maybe you did.” She leans closer, whispering, “Make your move fast, though. Aaron has his eyes on her too.”

I snort. “My brother has his eyes on every woman he meets.”

She pats my back with a chuckle. “Okay, Ben, you go on pretending, but you’ve been smiling a lot more since Amy started working here. I like that.” She wraps her arms around my shoulders for a quick hug before taking off toward the reception desk.

With a deep sigh, I continue on my way, Lauren’s words replaying in my mind. She’s wrong about one fact: I don’t pretend anymore. Yes, I am into Amy; this instant connection is too strong to ignore. I don’t fight off the warm feeling in my chest whenever she’s near any longer—I can’t.

But I still won't allow myself to act on it. I won't make any advances. We will go on this date tomorrow so I can explain to her why.

What a fortunate coincidence I'm meeting my old friend today. It will remind me why I can't burden Amy with my past.

NINE

AMY

Did I think I was a nervous wreck on the first day of work? I was wrong. That was nothing compared to how I feel now.

Ben and I agreed on meeting at O'Reilly's, as I already know and like the place. Standing in front of the pub, I check my phone for the umpteenth time. I'm still ten minutes early, still worried Ben will text saying he changed his mind and wouldn't meet me tonight.

My sandal clicks on the pavement with every fast tap my left foot makes, and my right hand is glued to the base of my neck, where my pulse flutters.

Checking my outfit, I wonder if the black capris and lilac off-shoulder blouse were the right choices. Should I have tied my long, straight hair back in a ponytail instead of wearing it down?

Not that I could change anything about it. Ben will be here any minute, and I must calm down already.

Taking in a slow breath, I roll my tense shoulders back. It's been a hectic day at work, leaving no time to think about this date, and now, the accumulated nervousness erupts into my current anxious state.

At first, I didn't know what to make of Ben's invitation. He said he wanted to talk. So is this a date between friends? Or more? Do I want it to be more? At least one thing's for sure: my thoughts are a mess.

A moment later, I spot Ben, and my racing heart skips a beat or two. If I had any doubts left about my feelings for him, how my body reacts to his sight is an obvious answer. When our eyes meet, he gives me his signature sexy smile. My legs feel like jello, and every inch of my skin tingles. I was so determined not to give in to this crush, but it was all in vain.

The next question is: do I act on it? We're still colleagues, and I don't know the company's policy on dating co-workers.

I take one last deep breath before Ben stands in front of me, and his smile widens when he says, "Hey, Princess."

As if his new name for me wasn't enough, his gaze wanders over my body, sending hot shivers up and down my spine. On top of that, the memory of me ending up in Ben's arms yesterday awakens more butterflies in my stomach. I'm not into silly pet names at all, but this whole Princess business makes my heart hammer.

My hormones already dance the salsa, but I'm close to fainting when he adds, "You look stunning."

I bite my lips, holding in the comment about how hot he looks in his dark gray cargo shorts and the white shirt that clings to his torso in the most delicious way. If I want to act like a halfway sane person tonight, I better ban the indecent mental images from my brain.

I tighten the grip on my purse. "Thank you."

"Shall we?" He points to the door, and we step inside. "You wanna sit down while I get us a drink? What would you like?"

"A Coke, please."

He nods, and after agreeing on which of the few remaining free tables we'll occupy, he walks over to the bar.

After taking a seat, I let my gaze wander through the pub. It's not as busy as last Friday, but more guests than I expected on a weeknight fill the spacious room. The chatter almost drowns out the Irish music playing in the background.

Shortly after, Ben joins me at the table, placing two glasses of Coke in front of us.

"Thanks." As I take a sip, I close my eyes, enjoying the sensation of the cold drink running down my throat. It's a pleasant contrast to the heat Ben triggers inside me. Maybe I should have started with a beer to let the alcohol relax the tension in my body.

To distract my thoughts, I start a conversation. “I love this place. I’ve never been to an Irish pub because we don’t have one where I grew up.”

“How is living in a big city compared to the small-town lifestyle?” Ben asks.

I shrug. “It cuts two ways, but so far, the good outweighs the bad.”

“What’s bad about it?”

“The cost of living is much higher, and with so many people, it’s so anonymous. It took me ages to find someone to connect with. And it’s loud. I miss the ocean air and the soothing sound of waves crashing ashore.”

Ben nods. “Coming here must have been daunting. I grew up in the suburbs, where it’s quieter, but I’m used to the busy life. I can’t imagine living in a small town where everyone knows everyone. So what do you like about New York?”

I scratch my temple. “More opportunities in any area of life. If you’re hardworking, it’s easy to find a job, and New York offers so many things to do and see. As I said, meeting people isn’t difficult, but finding the ones you want to hang out with is tricky. I consider myself lucky to have met Lauren.”

And you, I almost add. But I don’t. That would be stupid.

We continue talking about the differences between small-town life, the bustle of New York, and all the city has to offer. The more time passes, the more my posture relaxes, and a happy smile stays on my lips—I’m at ease in his company.

“By the way, how was the date with your friend?” I ask as we finish our second Coke. “Did you go out for drinks?”

“No, we went indoor rock climbing.”

“Indoor rock climbing?” I blink at him, tilting my head and studying him. “Hmm, I should have figured you’d do exciting things in your spare time.”

He throws his head back with a laugh. “Exciting?”

I cross my arms over my chest with a chuckle. “More exciting than having drinks and chatting. You probably need compensation for the long days at the office.”

He nods. “True.”

“And you don’t get a body like that from sitting around all day.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, my breath hitches. I cover my cheeks as a hot flush creeps up my neck, but while I cringe, Ben’s amused smile widens.

He raises a challenging eyebrow as he leans forward and rests his elbows on the table. “A body like that?”

With a huff, I swat at the air. “Oh, come on! Don’t pretend you’re not aware of your athletic build.”

Ben bites his lips, and I wonder if he enjoys my embarrassment. The moment is over soon, though. The easiness that spending time with him entails erases all uncomfortable feelings. With him, I can just be.

“Thank you,” he says. “I’ll take the compliment.”

I roll my eyes with a soft laugh. “You’re welcome.”

“You want another drink?” He points to my empty glass.

“Um, yes. I’d love a bottle of that beer I had last week.”

He nods. “Ah, yes. I know. I’ll be right back.”

While Ben walks to the bar, I check the time on my phone. Wow, we’ve been here for almost two hours. Luckily, the quivering feeling in the pit of my stomach is gone. I may be enjoying this evening too much, though.

Before I slip my phone into my purse, I notice a message from Aaron.

Aaron: Hey, Amy. I know I already told you I was patient, so I’m just checking in to ask how you are. But I wouldn’t complain if you let me know when I can take you out for a drink. A.

“What’s so funny?”

I look up from my phone, accepting the bottle of beer from Ben, who takes his seat across from me. “Thanks,” I say. “I was laughing at your brother’s persistence.”

Ben’s gaze hardens, and he shoves his hand through his hair with a sigh. “He texted you?”

I furrow my brows. “Ben.” Our eyes meet, and his expression softens. “You said yesterday you wanted to talk about things? Will you tell me why you don’t get along with your brother?”

Ben leans back in his chair with a deep breath. “A lot happened between us. We were close growing up. We’d always stick together, have each other’s back.” He takes a swig from his bottle, and his gaze wanders through the room, only resting on me every now and then. “As you know, our mom died when I was seven, and Aaron had just turned four. A car accident. Our grandparents took us in after because Dad worked as a construction manager. His job included being away from home for several weeks and even months at a time to oversee a project. We were fine with him being absent so much; we were used to it.”

The frown on my forehead deepens as I understand why he has a strained relationship with his father.

“Unfortunately,” Ben continues, “my grandma died when I was fourteen, and my grandfather’s health issues made it impossible for him to look after us by himself. So my dad had to work on local sites only or do administrative work. He hated it. It meant he couldn’t escape the memories any longer.”

“He preferred being away from home so he didn’t have to face the loss of your mom?”

Ben shrugs. “Something like that, yeah. Things changed for the worse. Dad had never established a deep bond with Aaron and me, and he blamed us for having to give up his job. He wasn’t the best father, to put it mildly. He couldn’t care less

about what we were up to as he was more interested in booze and women.”

He draws in a slow, steady breath. “We had no other family. We got involved in some bad shit, met the wrong kind of people, treaded illegal terrain. But we felt like we finally belonged somewhere. It took us years to figure out or care that what we were doing could end us up in prison. Or worse. The friend I met yesterday”—he pauses, rolling his shoulders before meeting my gaze—“helped me leave everything behind. That was five years ago.”

The fact that Ben speaks about illegal activities and prison sends a cold shiver down my spine. He doesn’t go into detail about what kind of illegal activities, leaving me wondering what he did. Pickpocketing? Mugging people? Burglary? I don’t voice my questions, though; not yet, at least. I watch him with furrowed brows as he carries on.

“I begged Aaron to quit as well, but he wouldn’t listen. He wanted to live that life. We didn’t talk for three years until he came to his senses two years ago. He found a job on the security team at a bar in Midtown, where he still works. Unfortunately, he hasn’t cut all ties with everyone from our past.”

With a deep sigh, he scrapes his hand over his face and leans forward, fixing his intense stare on me. “That’s why I hate to see my brother throw himself at you. You never know if you’ll end up in trouble.”

I loosen my tight grip on the bottle and study Ben, biting the inside of my cheek. He shifts in his chair, furrowing his brows. Maybe I should be more cautious. Maybe I should reconsider my feelings for him after learning about his past. But I don’t because that’s what it is—his past.

“I understand,” I say. “Thank you for telling me.”

He draws in a deep breath, his fingers tapping on the table. “I wouldn’t blame you if you don’t want anything to do with me after tonight, but please know that’s not me anymore. I have—”

“Ben, stop.” I rest my hand on his forearm, but only briefly. “Our past doesn’t define us. Yes, it influences how we see certain things and react to specific situations, but it doesn’t mean we can’t change. I’m not the same person I was a year ago; I also have a messed up past. On a different level, but still.”

Ben’s lips lift in a tentative smile. “Okay,” he breathes. “What happened?”

I slump my shoulders, grimacing. “Bad relationship that ended even worse. It was ... well, I did—”

Ben holds up his hand. “It’s okay. You don’t have to tell me.”

My tense muscles relax. “Okay,” I repeat his earlier response. “Thanks.”

Ben holds my gaze, bringing back that fluttery sensation in my stomach. The pull toward him is stronger than ever because he gets me, even without knowing all the details.

He is the first to avert his eyes, checking the time. “Well, it’s late. Shall we call it a night?”

He’s right; it is late. So we finish our drinks and each call an Uber as Ben’s place is in another direction from mine. As we wait outside, Ben turns to me, saying, “Thanks for an enjoyable evening, Amy. I’m sorry for ruining the mood with my story.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Don’t be ridiculous. It was an enjoyable evening. I’m glad you confided in me instead of leaving me wondering.”

His lips lift in a slight smile, but he doesn’t respond, only stares at me. My heart rate picks up when I detect that indefinable something in his eyes again. A soft tingle ripples through me, making me wonder if he feels this attraction, too, or if I’m the only one who wants to lean in.

Oh damn, did I just lean in? And did he too?

“Amy,” Ben whispers.

When his spicy scent fills my nose, I definitely know we stand closer than a moment ago. A rush of adrenaline makes me dizzy, and my brain refuses to work. I'm unable to breathe while my pulse pounds in my ears. I have to bite my lips to refrain from moaning, but when Ben's gaze flickers to my mouth, a soft sigh escapes me.

My hands itch to do something—wrap around his strong shoulders and close the last inches between us, for example. Instead, I wipe my sweaty palms on my pants.

“Amy, I—” Ben still doesn't finish his sentence, and I frown.

With a quick intake of breath, I open my mouth to say something, but he cuts me off.

With his lips.

So many things happen at once: he presses his mouth on mine and buries his fingers in my hair; I let out that desperate moan as my hands cling to his waist, pulling my body closer.

My mind is a complete blank, and my body is on autopilot. My eyes flutter closed as Ben increases the pressure on my lips and I grant his tongue access. A wave of heat surges through every part of me, making me oblivious to my surroundings.

His soft lips feel even better than I imagined—and I thought about them a lot. His delicious scent is just as intoxicating as the feel of his body touching mine. This is it. This is what I've been dreaming of this entire time.

Unfortunately, the dream is over before it began. A rush of cool air hits me when Ben breaks all body contact.

My eyes fly open with a gasp, and judging from Ben's pained expression, he not only pulled away physically. He curses under his breath while I stand rooted to the spot, unable to utter a single word.

“I'm sorry, Amy,” he murmurs. “I shouldn't have. This isn't a good idea. I'm sorry,” he repeats, taking another step back. “My ride is here.” He points to the curb, where a car pulls up. Before I unfreeze from my state of shock and

confusion, he's gone, leaving me wondering what on earth just happened.

TEN

BEN

I'm the biggest idiot on the planet.

The morning after what could have been the perfect date, I berate myself for acting like a fucking moron. I should have known my feelings for Amy would overwhelm me; I should have known every time she's near, my resolve to stay away crumbles to dust, but stupid me expected to ignore the attraction between us.

All the way to work, memories about how we talked and laughed make my chest feel tight. I could have sat there all night with her, especially since the mood didn't shift even after I revealed parts of my story. I couldn't give her all the details.

With every dragging step that brings me closer to the office—to her—my heart beats heavier in my chest. Heat rushes through me at the memory of how enticing Amy looked last night. Her ass looked perfect in those pants, capturing my gaze whenever I glimpsed at it. The blouse showed off her bare shoulders, igniting a desire to run my lips over her skin.

More heat burns its way through my insides when I reminisce about the kiss.

Fucking shit, that kiss. It wasn't even a proper kiss, yet it gave me a taste of her, leaving me wanting more.

Only I can't have more. Like a bucket of icy water, that thought sends a shiver down my spine. Everyone close to my brother serves as possible leverage as long as he's still involved in our former boss's ongoings, and I won't let Amy be a part of this.

If only I could give her a reasonable explanation without telling her the whole truth and acting like more of a moron. I shouldn't have buckled under the longing to finally feel her lips on mine, and I shouldn't have left her standing as I did. I made a colossal mess of things.

I have no clue how I heard my phone ping with the notification that the Uber had arrived, but it tore me out of my dreamland, bringing me back to my senses. After vanishing without another word, I lay awake most of the night, mulling over what to tell Amy when I'll have to face her at work. I came up empty.

My stomach churns as I enter the Wilson & Partners building. My pulse pounds in my ears when I step into the office on our floor, and I hold my breath when my gaze falls on Amy sitting at her desk.

Being engrossed in work, she doesn't notice me until I sit across from her. She lifts her eyes, meeting mine, and her expression is like a punch to the gut. Her lips don't lift in the usual sexy smile, and her eyes show no sign of the sparkle I usually detect.

"Hey, Amy," I say. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Ben." Her voice is as emotionless as the look on her face.

Damn, I loathe myself.

With a deep sigh, I shove my fingers through my hair. "Amy, about last night—"

"Yes?" Leaning back in her chair, she crosses her arms over her chest when I don't finish the sentence.

"It's ... complicated." I grimace at the poor excuse of an explanation. "It's not you, Amy."

She huffs. "Sure. That's what they always say. I didn't think you'd be the type to deliver cliché lines."

"I'm sorry, really."

"So you said. Look, it's fine. If you don't feel that way about me, I accept that, but don't give me bullshit excuses."

I let out a deep sigh. Maybe I should tell her everything, hoping she'll keep it to herself. I'd do anything to erase her hurt expression.

I open and close my mouth, but before I can speak, Luke steps out of his office. He greets me with a cool glance before addressing Amy. “Are you ready?”

Nodding, she gathers her notepad and a pen. “I’ll be gone all morning, attending meetings with Luke,” she explains, leaving me to gaze after her.

Groaning internally, I tear my gaze away from her retreating form. Walking away from me is probably the smartest move. With gritted teeth, I go over my to-do list for today, but my mood ruins everything. Without Amy sitting at her desk significantly improving my day, something vital is missing. My concentration is out the window, along with my motivation.

Things don’t improve when Amy returns just before lunch. She hardly acknowledges me. I should have expected that she’d pull back.

It’s not until Lauren shows up to get her for their lunch date that she displays a genuine smile, and it makes my chest ache.

“Hey, guys.” Lauren shows her usual grin, but it falters when she looks back and forth between Amy and me. “Is everything all right?”

Amy grabs her purse from under the desk. “Sure. Why wouldn’t it? Can we go? I’m starving.” She must already know Lauren and her talent to detect the slightest imbalance because before they take off, she gives me the worst fake smile. “Bye, Ben. See you soon.”

I return her smile to go along with what I assume is her plan to sidetrack Lauren. “Bye, ladies. Enjoy your lunch.”

My faux smile widens when Lauren furrows her brows. Yeah, she doesn’t buy it. She fixes her gaze on me as she walks behind Amy but refrains from commenting on the tension in the air.

I let out a long breath once they’re gone. What a fucking predicament I put myself in! Even though we can never be

more than friends, I don't want to lose Amy. But will she forgive me for my stupidity? For leading her on?

Maybe we can talk this out once the emotions don't run high anymore and at least save our friendship. But that would mean no more little moments, no random touches, no meaningful looks.

As much as I'd hate that, I better get used to it. I screwed up.

That's just my fucking luck.



“Ugh, finally! Get your ass over here, Ben. I'm starving.” My brother's voice echoes through the hall as soon as I enter my dad's house.

Taking in a deep breath, I walk into the kitchen, where everything is ready for our monthly dinner.

“Sorry I'm late,” I grumble as I join Aaron and Dad at the table. “Had an unplanned meeting.”

“Don't worry about it,” my dad says, handing me a plate. “I'm glad you made it.” The wrinkles around his eyes deepen, diminishing the tension in my body.

I know he means it. After years of not caring about anything as far as Aaron and I were concerned, nowadays he attempts to make up for his mistakes. He apologized for his behavior after the shame of his actions caught up with him.

After Mom's death, Dad grieved for years, but once he was over it, he changed his ways drastically—and not for the better. The bar a few blocks from our house became his second home. Frequenting the different beds of whatever willing women he met, he was hardly around.

All that ended a few years ago when his doctor predicted liver failure if he didn't abstain from alcohol. Thanks to

regular AA meetings, he hasn't touched a single drop since and got his life back on track.

Only his eating habits are still a matter of concern. The fact that he has diabetes hasn't caught on yet.

"Dad, should you be eating this?" I point to the table laid with a large double cheese pizza and an assortment of sodas.

He waves off my remark. "Calm down, Ben. It's fine. Dig in."

I don't know why I still give a shit, but I do. It's not that I've instantly forgiven him for his absence, but in the end, he's right: it's only the three of us. Even though Dad and Aaron keep annoying the fuck out of me, I'm willing to believe that we can become the family we should have been years ago. It's what Mom would have wanted.

So here we are, once a month. I usually shove away my irritation toward them, even when Aaron lets on he hasn't cut ties with Jackson as he claims and Dad pesters us about bringing home nice girls and making grandbabies.

Fat chance with my reluctance to let anyone in and Aaron's proclivity to change women like he changes his underwear.

Tonight, it doesn't take Dad five minutes to bring up the beloved topic. "So, Ben, how's that new colleague of yours? Have you asked her out yet?"

Aaron's gaze snaps to me. "Yes, Ben, have you?" He raises one eyebrow, studying me with a growing smirk.

"That's none of your damn business," I grumble.

Aaron bursts out laughing. "Did she turn you down?"

I glare at him. "Eat your pizza before it gets cold. What about you, Dad?" I ask, diverting the attention away from me. "What's happening with your neighbor? What's her name? Jennifer?"

His gaze flickers upward. "Jannie, and that's nothing. Aaron, did you get that promotion?"

My brother frowns. “Not yet. The more important question is ... did you fix your car?”

I shake my head with a chuckle. Dodging questions is our specialty.

“Yeah,” Dad says, “it’s running. May only be temporary, though.” He stuffs half a slice of pizza into his mouth before he continues, “Aaron, didn’t you mention you know someone who could hook me up with a new car?”

Aaron rubs his chin. “I do, yes. My colleague’s cousin is a car dealer.”

My jaw tightens as I flinch at the word *dealer*. Is it a colleague my brother is talking about or someone else entirely? He better not include our father in some illicit business. Dad still has no idea about the shit we were involved in, and I’d like to keep it that way.

For the remainder of dinner, we manage a halfway decent conversation before our dad moves to the living room to turn on the TV to watch whatever sports game is on. Aaron and I stay back to clean up the kitchen.

After trashing the empty pizza box, I turn to my brother. “Is it really your colleague’s cousin with the car dealership?”

Aaron studies me with furrowed brows. “Of course. Why are you asking?”

“Because it wouldn’t be the first time you’re entangled in shady business.”

“That’s ridiculous. What the fuck is wrong with you? I wouldn’t do that to Dad. And why are you in an even pissier mood than usual?”

I clench my jaw. Because it’s day number two of radio silence between Amy and me, but he doesn’t need to know that. I tried to explain myself again today but failed miserably. So Amy pulled back further, and I had no choice but to give her some space.

“The last time I saw you so wound up was because of a woman. Is this about Amy?”

“Has she responded to your text?”

His lips lift in a smug smile. “Ah, there it is.” He chuckles. “She has, but she hasn’t agreed to a date. Have you told her you like her?”

I shove my fingers through my hair. “As long as there’s a slight chance that Jackson comes crawling out of his hole because he thinks you owe him something, I’m staying the hell away from Amy. I can’t drag her into any shady shit.”

“Damn, Ben, relax, will you?” Aaron gives me a shove. “I don’t owe Jackson anything anymore. That’s done and over with.”

I roll back my tense shoulders and search his face for any indication he’s lying.

Even though I spot nothing, relief won’t come, and I definitely won’t change my mind about staying away.

“Seriously, bro,” Aaron says, “if you don’t make a move, I will.”

“The fuck you will! You don’t even know her.” I stand in front of him, glaring. I may be two inches taller than his six-foot frame, but he’s not at all impressed.

The smirk is back on his face when he responds, “She’s cute; that’s enough for me. And her lips, damn! I bet they’d look incredible wrapped around my cock.”

A growl emanates from deep in my chest as I fist Aaron’s shirt and push him against the wall. “Do. Not. Touch. Her!”

Still smirking, he chuckles. “Damn, you’ve got it bad. What’s holding you back? She’s not Becca.”

I draw in a sharp breath. That’s the reminder I needed, the main reason I have to stay away from Amy.

I let go of Aaron and take a few steps back. He watches me, and finally, his face turns serious. “Look, I’m sorry, but you gotta stop this angsty shit.”

I hold up my hand. “Save it.” With a deep sigh, I grab the drinks from the table. “Come on. Let’s join Dad before he

finds us quarreling and gives us another lecture.”

ELEVEN

AMY

“Yes, girl, that’s the one!” Lauren claps her hands, squealing.

I wish I could share her enthusiasm, but after two hours of shopping, my energy level is below zero. Somewhere, a large coffee and a chocolate muffin are calling my name.

I study myself in the mirror of the fifth store we checked out this afternoon. The purple cocktail dress I’m wearing is a knee-length, one-shoulder, sleeveless little number that hugs my curves and shows off my boobs. I didn’t know I had this much cleavage.

With an appreciative sigh, I run my palms over the silky material. Turning around, I scrutinize the outfit from behind, and my lips lift in a smile. “You’re right.”

Lauren snorts. “Of course I am.” She stands behind me, opening my ponytail and splaying my hair over my shoulders. “In that dress and with some glamorous makeup, you’ll turn so many heads at the Avalon.”

I squint at her. “Sure.” My smile falters as much as I want to keep up the happy façade in front of Lauren. It’s day number three of the awkward tension between Ben and me, and I haven’t felt like smiling since he said he shouldn’t have kissed me.

As soon as another sigh leaves my lips, Lauren frowns. “Amy.” Her eyebrows draw closer together. “Will you talk to me already? You’ve been acting strange for three days, and it’s driving me nuts.” She turns me to face her, grasping my arms and giving them a gentle squeeze. “Did something happen with Ben? He’s been acting strange too.”

I grimace. Maybe it’s time to confide in her as she may have an explanation for Ben’s behavior. I blow out my cheeks and rub my stomach. “You wanna grab a bite somewhere? I have to sit down for this, and I’m hungry.”

“I’ve got a better idea. Shall we go to my place, order food, and make ourselves comfortable on the couch?”

I rest my hand on my chest before pulling her into a hug. Her kindness and support overwhelm me again, and still in the best way. “Thank you, Lauren. I’d love that.”

So an hour later, we sit on Lauren’s sofa, devouring the Italian pasta we ordered and sipping a glass of delicious red wine.

“Thanks for going shopping with me today,” I tell my friend in between bites.

“It was a pleasure. Without you, I wouldn’t have spotted those gorgeous shoes, so I have to thank you.”

I chuckle. “How can you walk in six-inch heels? I’d break my ankle in no time.”

“I have a thing for tall men, and I don’t want to dislocate my neck during a kiss.”

Suppressing a grin, I throw her a sideways glance. “How tall is Henry?”

Her gaze snaps to me before she narrows her eyes. “What does it matter how tall he is?”

“Oh, come on, Lauren. I see how you look at him.”

She purses her lips. “Well, Henry is six inches taller than me. That’s all I’m saying.” She stuffs more noodles into her mouth, avoiding my scrutinizing gaze.

“Why don’t you go out with him?”

She releases a slow breath through her lips, and after finishing her food, she places the plate on the coffee table. “I’m not sure I like him that way. He’s a good friend, and I’m not ruining that.”

I nod. I don’t mention it makes no sense if how Henry looks at her is any indication.

“So do you wanna tell me something?” she says, thus ending our talk about her dating life.

I pick at my food before placing it next to Lauren's empty plate. After taking a sip of the wine, I lean back with a sigh. "It's complicated." I hate to use Ben's words to describe the situation, but that's what it is.

"As in ...?" Lauren waves her hand in a go-on motion. "Did he hit on you, and you didn't like it?"

"No. Well, not exactly." I furrow my brows. "What makes you ask that?"

"I'm not blind, Amy. Ben has transformed into this whole new person since you started working at Wilson's." She crinkles her nose. "Until three days ago. Now, he's his old grumpy self."

At least she knows what's up, so I don't have to beat around the bush. "He asked me out."

Lauren's eyes widen. "He did? Wow! And you said no?"

"No, I agreed."

She throws her hands in the air. "Dammit, girl, do I have to worm everything out of you? What happened?"

I lower my head, swallowing hard. "We went out Tuesday night. We met at O'Reilly's and had a perfect evening." I pinch the bridge of my nose as the memories of just how perfect it was wash over me. "He told me about his past."

"Oh." Lauren purses her lips. "And that didn't sit well with you?"

"What? No! Why?"

"I don't know the details about what they were involved in, only that he and Aaron were part of some gang, and that sounds scary enough. I won't speculate about the specifics because that's in the past."

The new information about them being in a gang doesn't surprise me. "That's what I told him. He said he changed, and I believed him."

"So what's the problem?"

"We kissed."

She gapes at me. “You kissed.”

I nod.

“I still don’t see the problem, Amy.”

“The problem is, he pulled back and left me standing there like an idiot. The next day, he told me he couldn’t do this. Let me quote him: ‘It’s not you.’ That’s all I got.”

Lauren sucks in a sharp breath. “He did not! What the fuck, Ben?” The glare on her face makes me feel better; it’s comforting to know she sides with me and that I’m not overreacting.

“The past three days at work have been rough.”

“I can imagine.” She shakes her head. “Men. Ugh! I’d love to slap some sense into him.” She turns her body to me, tucking one leg underneath her, and rests her hand on my forearm. “Maybe he needs a few days. I haven’t seen him with anyone in forever; perhaps he forgot how to act like a normal person around a woman.”

She grabs her wine glass and empties it in one go. With a chuckle, she sinks into the cushions and tilts her head to the side, giving me a wide grin. “So you and Ben?”

I crinkle my nose. “That would have been the plan. I’ve never experienced such a strange instant attraction, and the more we talked, the more I felt attracted to him. I didn’t expect to feel such a pull toward a man ever again.”

“What? What do you mean?”

I shift in my seat. “What I left behind in my hometown broke me in so many ways. My ex is a cheating scumbag, and I’m still coming to terms with my past.”

Lauren’s lips lift in a sad smile. “I know where you’re coming from. I moved to New York to flee from the memory of my ex too.”

“What did he do?”

She presses her lips together, her eyes cold when she whispers, “He was abusive, but that’s all in the past. I was

lucky enough to escape the situation.”

“Oh, honey, I’m so sorry.”

Lauren waves her hand. “That’s okay. It’s over, and it won’t happen again.”

Silence envelopes us as I let that piece of information sink in. The past trauma sure is another reason we connected right away.

“Anyway.” Lauren squares her shoulders. “Let’s not talk about depressing stuff that lies behind us. Tell me about the kiss.”

I giggle, sinking deeper into the couch. The aftermath of that kiss may be messy, but the short moment Ben’s lips were on mine awakened the butterflies in my stomach. It still sends an intense tingle through my body. “It was, um, good,” I murmur.

“Good?” Lauren throws her head back with a laugh. “Why that silly smile, then? It must have been marvelous. You can’t deny it; your flushed face says it all.”

I cover my cheeks. “You’re right. It was marvelous, which makes it all the worse. After what I’ve been through, getting involved with a man wasn’t even on my list. With Ben, though, I can’t help it; something draws me to him, and I was convinced he felt the same. Stupid me.”

“Hey, don’t say that.” She scowls at me. “You’re not stupid. You can’t control who you fall for. I refuse to accept that was his last word. Ben is a good guy; he doesn’t lead anyone on. Maybe he doesn’t want to rush things. He may be whistling a different tune tomorrow night when he sees you in that sexy as fuck dress. You know,” she says with a nonchalant shrug, “appeal to his other head.”

I blink at her before we burst out laughing. Despite the tightness in my chest, Lauren kindles new hope that this isn’t the end of whatever has developed between Ben and me.



After a night of restless sleep, I spend all of Saturday fretting about the evening. Confiding in Lauren helped me see the situation from a different perspective. She brought up a fair point: it's only been two-and-a-half weeks since Ben and I met, and things did evolve fast.

I stayed at her place after we chatted for so long that I was too tired to go home. I slept on her couch and left this morning, and we agreed she'd pick me up for our night out at the Avalon.

Fresh out of the shower, I throw on my underwear and oversized sleeping shirt. While I dry my hair, I have to keep my mind from going to worst-case scenarios once more. Is it a good idea to go out tonight? Won't the tension between Ben and me ruin everything?

I make another mental note to stop myself from drinking too much; I ate next to nothing today. Instead, I had glass after glass of water, but my throat still feels uncomfortably dry.

After adding the finishing touches to my makeup, I analyze my appearance in the bathroom mirror. My long hair falls over my shoulders in loose waves, and my makeup is elegant and discreet, with a hint of smokey eyes and some rouge. Before leaving, I'll add nude lip gloss to complete the look.

Wow. I don't recall the last event I dolled up for, and I hope I did a decent job. I take in a slow breath through my nose and release it through my lips. At the thought of what may happen tonight, my heart races. I press my hand to my stomach, where a hint of nausea still lingers.

"It's all good," I tell myself as I walk into my bedroom. I get my new dress from the closet, but before I can admire its beauty on my body, my phone rings.

After checking the caller ID, I throw the dress on my bed with a deep sigh. “Great,” I grumble but plaster on a smile before answering. “Hey, Mom.” There, that didn’t sound too bad.

“Hey, sweetheart.”

Hearing her voice still evokes mixed feelings. While it’s a source of comfort and familiarity, it also conjures up not-so-happy memories.

“It’s been so long. How are you?” she asks.

I drop on my couch and put my feet up on the coffee table. “I’m good. Finally unpacked the last box.”

“Really? That’s excellent.”

The tone of her voice doesn’t match her words, reminding me why we haven’t spoken much since I moved to New York.

“And how’s your new job?”

“I love it.” And that’s the truth—if I shove the drama with my co-worker aside.

The line is quiet before my mom asks, “So you’re not coming back home soon?”

I squeeze my eyes shut and grimace. “Mom, we talked about this. I *need* to be here. I need to live my life, stand on my own two feet.”

A deep sigh is her only answer.

“Please, Mom,” I continue. “Try to understand.”

“Sweetie, I am trying. I just miss you.”

“I miss you too. Once I get some days off, I’ll visit. And you can visit too.”

“Yes, love, but you know of your father’s fear of flying.”

I nod. Of course. “You could visit me alone,” I whisper.

“I’ll talk to your dad, okay?”

“Okay.”

“So,” she says on a long exhale, “I saw Noah at—”

A gasp escapes my lips, and my entire body stiffens. “Don’t mention his name!” I cut her off.

“But, Amy—”

“No, Mom!” I rise from the couch and pace up and down my tiny living room. I rub my chest, where my heart thumps against my ribcage. My parents don’t know the entire story; all they know is horrid circumstances tore my ex and me apart, but they are in the dark about his despicable behavior.

“I’m sorry, sweetie,” my mom says in a soft voice. “I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay,” I say with a deep sigh. “Just don’t talk about him.”

The ensuing silence gives me a moment to calm my nerves. I’m about to apologize for snapping at her, but my doorbell rings.

“Mom, I gotta go. My friend is here; we’re going out tonight.”

“Oh, sure. Have fun and call me soon.”

“I will. Bye, Mom.”

After ending the call, I press the buzzer. Expecting Lauren, I wait by my open door, and as soon as she rounds the corner and beams at me, I can’t help but smile. “Hey, welcome.”

“Hey, Amy.” She greets me with a peck on the cheek before eyeing me up and down with furrowed brows. “Why aren’t you dressed yet?”

I wave her inside. “Sorry, my mom called, but I’m almost ready. My new dress patiently awaits its grand debut.”

She claps her hands. “Hurry. I need a drink.”

With a humorless laugh, I rush to my bedroom. “Me too, believe me. A strong one.”

And while I slip into my dress, a newfound determination to enjoy myself tonight surfaces. Unrequited feelings or

thoughts about matters that lie in the past won't ruin my night out.

TWELVE

BEN

“Ben?”

My gaze snaps up from the drink in front of me. “Uh, what?”

Paul chuckles. “Henry asked if you wanted another beer, but I see you’re still working on your first.”

“Um, yeah.” I take a swig from the bottle and grimace when the warm liquor slides down my throat.

How long have we been here?

Well, I know it’s been half an hour because I’ve checked my damn watch every two minutes.

I check again. 8:43 p.m. It’s early for clubgoers, but the Avalon is already packed. Dance music blares from the speakers, and it’ll increase in volume as soon as more people fill the dancefloor.

“Why the fuck are you nervous?” Henry asks, bringing my attention back to the guys.

“I’m not nervous.” I wrinkle my brows as he, Paul, and Jack study me with smug smiles.

“Whatever, man, I need another drink.” Henry rises from his seat, and Jack follows suit, accompanying him to the bar.

“So, Ben, my friend,” Paul says, fixing me with an intense stare. “What’s the deal with the new girl?”

“Amy?” I tap my fingertips on the table, avoiding his gaze. “She’s ... nice.”

“Nice. O-kay. Is she coming too?”

“Yeah, she’s become good friends with Lauren.” Running my fingers through my hair, I lean back, resisting the urge to check the time again. Luckily, Paul hasn’t asked more specific

questions yet, so I can continue to pretend Amy is nothing more than a new friend.

“Oh boy,” Paul says with a low whistle, looking past me. “Tonight will be torture for poor Henry.”

I follow his gaze, and when I spot Lauren, I laugh. Paul is right; Lauren is dolled up to the nines, ready to kill more of Henry’s brain cells. Her body is clad in what is the definition of a little black dress. Her long, blonde hair is tied back in a high ponytail, and her lips are painted in a shade of bright red that would drive any man crazy.

She captures my attention for a moment only because walking behind her is Amy. I suck in a sharp breath as I take in her appearance.

All of a sudden, everything around me is silent. No more thumping bass, no more chatting, no more clinking glasses. The only sound is the whooshing of blood pulsing in my ears. The people fade into the background. All I see is her.

The purple dress hugs her perfect curves, drawing my attention to her cleavage. Call me sexist, but I can’t avert my gaze from the swells of her breasts, and I have to order my dick to cool the fuck down. Fuck, yes.

Damn, stop thinking about fucking, Ben!

I run my hand over my face with a groan, squeezing my eyes shut, but as soon as they open, they stay on Amy. As she and Lauren approach, my mind races. How am I supposed to act around her? We haven’t had a proper conversation for four days. I miss her. I miss the smile she would direct at me and the glint in her eyes when we’d talk about the silliest things. I miss her laugh and how she’d make me laugh.

I miss the person I am when she’s around.

On their way over, they run into Henry and Jack. Henry greets the girls with a peck on the cheek, his lips lingering a moment longer on Lauren. Jack gives them his usual wave before they join Paul and me.

“Finally! What took you so long?” Paul asks, saying hello in the same manner as Henry.

When Lauren greets me, I imagine she directs a scowl at me, but it disappears immediately. “Hey, Ben. Sorry,” she says, “we grabbed a bite on our way here. Had to get rid of the guys that chatted us up.”

When Amy stands in front of me, she gives me the fastest peck in history before sitting on the chair farthest away from mine. Yeah, I deserve that.

Henry’s lips lift in a mischievous smile when he addresses Lauren. “Why didn’t you drag them along?”

Lauren snorts. “Oh, please. The last thing I need is more testosterone surrounding me. Why don’t you bring some girls for a change?”

“Working on it,” Paul says and empties his drink, pointing to the bar. “Spotted a cute one over there. Come on, Jack, be my wingman.”

With a groan, Jack rises from the seat he just occupied. “Because that worked so well the last time?”

Paul gives him a shove. “You better learn from your mistakes, my friend.”

We gaze after them before Henry and Lauren start a conversation. Amy and I quietly observe, and while my gaze stays on Amy, she doesn’t acknowledge me. I unclench my jaw, ridding myself of the mental images of some guy flirting with her. If I had been there, no chatting up would have happened.

I groan internally. What’s with the possessive act? Amy is not mine to protect, but damn, I can’t stand the thought of anyone being close to her.

“Amy, what do you want to drink?” Lauren is about to rise from her chair when I stop her. This will give me a moment to breathe.

“No, stay put,” I say. “I’ll get you something. What would you like?”

“Thanks. A Cosmo, please. You?” Lauren raises her eyebrows at Amy.

“Um, yeah,” she responds. “Same for me.”

Even though her voice sounds different over the surrounding noise, it still makes me tremble and tingle. I miss her voice.

With a nod, I stride to the bar. While I wait for my order, I try to clear my head, but I fail miserably. Amy is all-consuming, and I’m in this much deeper than I thought. A way out is nowhere in sight.

When I arrive back at the table, Jack has returned too. Paul hasn’t.

I place the glasses in front of everyone, and Amy gives me the tiniest smile. I clench my teeth as I sit down and pay attention to the ongoing conversation.

“They all have day jobs besides being in a band,” Lauren explains. “Paul is a high school teacher. And Jack is a what?” She looks at him for help.

“I’m a medical device engineer,” Jack says. “Sounds more complicated than it is.”

“Oh, I know what that is,” Amy says. “My cousin works for a company that maintains the medical equipment at the major hospitals in Seattle. Such an interesting job. And what do you do besides making music?” she asks Henry, who dismissively waves his hand. He hates talking about work.

“Just some boring office job,” he responds. “I’m a junior manager, so not at all exciting.”

While we chat and I watch how Amy enjoys herself, the knot in my stomach tightens. I want to make her laugh again. More of my resolve to keep my distance crumbles, making me question my reasons for doing so.

After finishing her drink, Lauren turns to Amy. “Do you wanna dance? What about you guys? Ben? Henry?”

Henry shakes his head. “I’m too tired; just returned from Europe this morning.”

“Ah, that’s right. Your business trip. Okay, you’re excused.”

“And you know how I feel about crowds,” Jack says, delivering his usual explanation.

“Ugh, fine.” Lauren points to me. “You don’t have an excuse, so move your ass.”

With a groan, I follow Lauren and Amy to the dancefloor. The idea of being close to Amy makes my stomach flutter.

And indeed, watching her dance is a new kind of torture. How she sways her hips and throws her head back has me mesmerized. I’ve never seen anything sexier.

Goodbye, resolve.

My determination to fix our issues grows, so a plan forms in my mind as we return to our table. I’ll let Amy catch her breath before asking her outside.

Unfortunately, I forgot the one person who enjoys making my life difficult. Drink in hand, Aaron joins us with a radiant smile. “Hey, everyone. What a coincidence.”

I gape at him, and when our eyes meet, I mouth: *What the fuck?*

Aaron’s stupid grin widens, and his only answer is a casual shrug.

With clenched fists, I watch how he sits next to Amy, soon engaging her in conversation.

The next half hour passes in a hazy blur. I pretend to pay attention to whatever everyone else says, but my mind and gaze focus on my brother and Amy. She laughs at his jokes and returns his smile, but at least she still keeps her distance.

Fanning herself, she points to the stairs leading to the roof terrace, and a moment later, she makes her way through the crowd.

As soon as she’s gone, I gain Aaron’s attention. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

He nods, still with that smile I want to wipe off his face. He follows me to the bar, where we stand in line to order another drink.

“Really, Aaron? Is this your way of staying the fuck away from her?”

He raises one eyebrow. “I never promised I would. Have you looked at her? She’s hot, and if you don’t pull your head out of your ass, I’ll snatch her.”

Fuck, this is frustrating. I curse under my breath, realizing it’s no use. A serious conversation with him is impossible.

I have to get out of here. Fresh air will hopefully clear my mind.

Yes, I need an excuse to check on Amy.

I turn my back on my brother and rush up the stairs to the roof terrace. I spot Amy immediately. She stands a few feet away, arms crossed over her chest. She taps her foot, scowling at the guy in front of her, and as I stride closer, I catch their conversation.

“Can I buy you a drink?” the buffoon asks.

“No, thank you,” she responds with a huff, stepping back, but he leans in.

I stop next to Amy and drape my arm around her shoulder. How her body feels pressed up against mine distracts me momentarily, but I snap out of it to glare at the guy. “Is there a problem here?”

He shakes his head, finally backing off. “Uh, sorry, I didn’t know.” Without another word, he takes off.

Amy turns to me, and I have to remove my arm. I instantly miss the contact, but her icy stare makes me frown.

“Thank you, but I had everything under control,” she says.

“Didn’t look like it.”

With her arms still crossed over her chest, she glares at me. “What are you doing here?”

I shove my fingers through my hair with a deep sigh. “I wanted to see if you’re okay. My brother can be pushy.”

She holds up her hand. “Please, I don’t need another talk about how Aaron is bad company. Let me form my own opinion.”

“I only want to protect you. You know I care about you.”

“Oh, do I? Is you saying you regret our kiss caring about me?”

“I never said I regretted it. I just ... I have my reasons.”

She huffs. “Reasons that lie in the past. I don’t care who you were; I care about who you are now. Yes, everything progressed fast, so if you need more time, I respect that. But then you have to accept that the proximity between us isn’t easy for me to handle. I need some space, especially if you stick to your decision that you don’t want to be with me.”

I open and close my mouth a few times, about to admit I do want to be with her, but before I can utter a word, Amy shakes her head.

“Don’t bother; I understand.” She turns on her heels and rushes to the stairs.

I remain behind like the idiot I am, still too afraid to take the plunge. With a heaviness in my limbs, I watch her walk away, struggling to run after her.

I haven’t let anyone in for so long that I forgot what it’s like. Selfish me ignored that Amy was in, and I pushed her back out. Fuck, I have to fix this.

Pushing my shoulders back, I deeply inhale through my nose before trudging down the stairs to join Jack at our table. “Where is everyone?”

He points behind him. “Dancefloor.”

I scan the crowd until I spot them. Henry and Lauren engage in some heavy grinding, and next to them, Aaron has his hands on Amy. My nostrils flare as I observe them. Aaron’s face comes dangerously close to hers, and I suspect he said something in her ear. Amy pulls back, narrowing her eyes at him.

That’s the moment it happens. Aaron kisses Amy.

Fuck, I can't watch. I look at the ceiling and draw in a deep breath. My boiling blood sends waves of uncomfortable heat through my veins, but when I return my gaze to the horrible scene, Amy's gone. She's no longer in my brother's arms, no longer lip-locked.

I catch sight of her just as she leaves the club, and my brother is about to follow her.

"Shit," I mutter, taking off after them. I reach Aaron before he steps out the door. "I can't believe you did that," I growl as I grab his arm.

"Oh, you saw?" Aaron laughs. He fucking laughs. The urge to punch him has never been stronger.

"Good," he says. "Then you go after her. You're welcome," he adds as he shoves me toward the exit.

I have no time to ponder the possibility he didn't do this to spite me. I rush outside, looking left and right. My heart skips a beat when I locate Amy a few feet away. I break into a run, hoping she'll stop for me.

"Amy, wait!"

THIRTEEN

AMY

So much for not letting anything ruin my night out. From the moment I set foot inside the Avalon, my muscles tensed. When Ben noticed me, all my nerve endings stirred and tingled. His smoldering gaze sent hot shivers up and down my spine, leaving me yearning for his hands—not his eyes—to caress my body.

Ignoring the desire for him, I waited. I wanted him to make the first move, but he didn't. Instead, Aaron turned up, adding to the emotional chaos.

It's past midnight when I storm out of the nightclub. I text Lauren, telling her I'm going home before looking for an available cab. Chances are I'll find one quickly; it's still early after all, and most people just arrived.

I walk over to a waiting car but stop in my tracks when Ben calls my name.

“Amy, wait!”

His voice causes a strange quiver in the pit of my stomach, and goosebumps erupt all over my skin at the thought of him coming after me. This is a good thing, isn't it?

He catches up with me, and his eyes search my face for something. “Amy, please.”

His words are a mere whisper, but how he says my name floods my body with warmth. I clench my fists to resist the urge to reach for him. Lowering my gaze, I bite my lips, which still tingle from the kiss.

The kiss from the wrong brother.

I guessed Aaron's intentions but did a shit job of not encouraging him. I should have told him to ease up; instead, I treated him like my other new friends. When we danced, I

should have removed his hands from my waist before he whispered something in my ear.

Just say the word, and I'll take you to my place.

Before I knew it, his lips were on mine. I didn't return the kiss, but pulling away took me much too long. The surprise paralyzed me, but as soon as I came to my senses, I shoved him off me, telling him to stop his advances.

So now I'm here, outside the club, staring at Ben, who stares back at me. With a heavy sigh, he shoves his hand through his hair, as he's done so many times tonight. "Amy, I'm sorry about my brother. I told him to quit his usual games, but he didn't give a shit. What did he say to you?"

My heart sinks. "Ugh, is this about Aaron again? Call me when you're ready to talk about you and me." I brush past him, continuing my earlier search for a ride home. When a cab stops at the curb, dropping off more partygoers, I rush over and drop into the back seat. I have to get out of here, fast.

I tell the driver my address, but before we can take off, the other back door opens and Ben slips into the car. A gasp escapes me. "Are you kidding me?"

"No," he says. "I'm going with you. We need to talk."

I glare at him, and he holds my gaze until the driver interrupts the tension-filled silence.

"Ma'am?"

I clear my throat, averting my eyes. "Fine," I mumble, leaning forward. "Let's go."

So we go. During the ride home, more silence fills the space between us. Attempting not to overanalyze the situation, I watch the city rush past. My racing heart pumps adrenaline through my system, and I can't stop my brain from forming its own opinion.

There are only two outcomes: either Ben tells me we can't be more than friends, ultimately ending what blossomed between us, or he'll say he's willing to throw whatever was holding him back overboard and give us a shot.

I still hope for the second option.

The cab stops in front of my apartment building, and before I can search my purse for cash, Ben pays the driver.

“Whatever,” I murmur. With a groan, I stumble out of the car. While I stomp to the front door with Ben tagging along, my different emotions fight for dominance.

Am I nervous and worried? Yes.

Am I angry and disappointed? Also yes.

Am I turned on by the thought that Ben may be checking out my ass as he walks up the stairs behind me? Maybe.

A deep sigh passes my lips when we enter my place. “Do you want a drink?” Even though I speak in a low voice, my question uncomfortably disrupts the silence. Or it’s the silence that’s uncomfortable.

Ben shakes his head, and after a moment of hesitation, I lead the way to my living room.

“Nice apartment. So cozy.” After slumping into the couch, Ben lets his gaze wander through the room.

“Thanks.” I kick off my shoes and sit on the opposite side of the sofa, one leg tucked underneath the other. I watch him tap his fingers on his knees. Does his heart race as fast as mine? Does he have the same tingles in his stomach? “So, um —” I clear my throat to get rid of the lump that has been there for a while.

Ben directs his gaze at me, and our eyes lock. A frown forms on his forehead, and I crinkle my nose. His frown vanishes, and instead, his lips lift in a subtle smile. He turns to face me, propping his arm on the backrest. “You look cute when you do that.”

At his words, the butterflies explode in my belly. I rub my face with a groan, contemplating our situation. “Ben, you confuse the heck out of me. What are we doing?”

He runs his hand through his hair, a gesture that makes me squirm in my seat. I want to run my fingers through his hair too.

Talk about confusion. *Focus, Amy.*

“I don’t know,” he whispers. “I’m sorry about what happened. Amy, I’m scared shitless. It’s been so long since I’ve felt this way about anyone. No, not true; I’ve never felt this way about anyone. It’s so intense. In less than three weeks, you’ve become such a good friend. In your presence, I’m so at ease, so happy. What will happen if we cross that line? This is a feeling that I don’t want to lose.”

I blink at him. I understand where he’s coming from, and I don’t like that; it complicates the situation. My shoulders relax, though; his straightforward answer eases the frustration.

My turn to be straightforward. “This is exactly what will happen if we go on like this. Only being friends with you is no longer an option. I’ve already crossed the line, and I’m on the other side with all these feelings and hopes for you and me together.” Leaning in, I hold my chin high. I’ve had so much time to think about my speech that I don’t have to search for the right words. “What part of you are you shielding me from? Is this about your past?”

He grimaces. “People got hurt because of what I was involved in.”

“Exactly. *Was*. You’re not anymore, are you?”

He shakes his head.

“Is your brother?”

Ben’s chest heaves with a heavy sigh. His silence is the answer I expected. Aaron is still entangled in the mess that is their past. “Is this somehow gonna affect me ... us?”

“That’s what I can’t be sure of.” He buries his face in his hands. “I know Aaron wouldn’t deliberately endanger anyone close to him. That doesn’t mean it couldn’t happen.” His voice holds so much sorrow that my chest aches. This is torture ... for both of us.

I scoot closer to Ben until my knees touch his leg. The gentle contact causes my heart to pound against my ribcage, and when I rest my hand on his forearm, it races a few beats

per minute faster. He's warm to the touch compared to my cold hands. "Ben, look at me."

He does, and his troubled expression makes my insides churn. Option number two—Ben being willing to give us a shot—seems more unlikely than ever.

"I'm not afraid, Ben," I whisper. "Yes, I don't know what you did and why it involves the danger of getting hurt, and I don't need to know. I trust you, and if you can live in peace, so can I. Or are you constantly afraid that something will happen to you?"

"No, I'm not, but the knowledge of what lurks in the shadows preys on my mind. I can't ignore it, and I could never forgive myself if anything happened to you."

"So this isn't about you being afraid that if we cross the line, we might ruin our friendship?"

With a tentative shake of his head, he responds, "I can't let anyone pay for the mistakes I once made."

"So that's it?" I grimace, tightening my grip on his arm, and his muscles flex under my touch. "It's over before it even began?" With a groan, I jump up and pace back and forth in my tiny living room. Cursing under my breath, I struggle to order the million thoughts that run through my mind. I should care that he's concerned about my safety, and I should understand his reluctance.

But I can't. I can't grasp this abstract idea of potential danger, and I hate that his past meddles in his present—and future. Now this is a feeling which is not abstract at all.

Still pacing, I bury my fingers in my hair. "What a mess," I say. "I have a fucked up past, too, you know? What my scumbag ex did should deter me from trusting a man ever again. But even though the force that draws me to you is more than frightening, I trust you. Only because something *might* happen, we can't stop living. We mustn't let our past direct our future. It won't benefit anyone if we stay in our miserable little bubble. So, Ben"—I stop, facing him—"if you don't want to be with me because you don't feel attracted to me, that's fine.

But don't reject me because you think I'd be better off without you."

Ben stares at me. Nothing more. He sits there, his gaze fixed on me, not moving a single muscle. His blank expression gives nothing away, either. I press my lips together and grind my teeth so hard that my jaw burns.

"Damn," I mutter, continuing to pace. I don't even register that Ben rises from his seat until I spin around and bump into his hard frame. I suck in a sharp breath when he pulls me into an embrace.

"Oh, Amy." His voice is merely a whisper, but it sends an electric jolt through my body, all the way down to my toes. "You're right. It's crazy and silly and stupid because, despite all efforts to stay away from you, I can't. The past four days, life was as it had been before you, and it sucked. Miserable little bubble perfectly describes where I am."

I tilt my head up, meeting his gaze. "Don't stay away then," I breathe, leaning closer, just an inch. "Take the leap. Be happy."

Ben furrows his brows, and I wonder if he's fighting an internal battle or if the war is lost. Again, I wait while the physical closeness sends shivers through me, and my senses jump into overdrive. His scent tickles my nostrils, and the heat his body radiates fires up my already burning insides.

He blinks at me, and his intense gaze elicits a soft moan from my throat. My tongue wets my parched lips, drawing his attention to my mouth. I refrain from leaning in another inch. I want *him* to close the distance between us—to make the decision.

And then, something in his eyes changes. I swallow a startled gasp when he presses his mouth on mine. My heart skips a few beats before I realize what's happening: he took a leap.

My eyes flutter closed as I drink him in—his touch, more of his scent, and his taste. After less than two seconds, he

deepens the kiss, not bothering to explore the outside territory. He wants more, and I'm happy to oblige.

Our tongues meet, making him groan and me whimper. This first kiss—our first proper kiss—induces a major physical reaction. My entire body responds to him. Jolts of desire and heat and whatnot blaze through my veins, sending an overwhelming tingle through my limbs.

My brain may be on standby, but I'm hyper-aware of Ben. I love how he buries his fingers in my hair, pulling me closer; I love how his lips move against mine, leaving me breathless, and I love how a low growl emanates from his chest, making me tremble.

It's a deep and wet and sensual kiss—a perfect kiss that I want to last forever. But like last time, Ben is the one to pull back, only that the look on his face doesn't crush all my hopes. His soft expression makes my heart flutter, and my lips stretch into a happy smile.

When he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, I lean into his touch. "So we give this a shot?" I ask.

A grin is his only answer before he seizes my hand and pulls me after him to the couch, where we land with me on his lap. I shriek, but he closes my mouth with another passionate kiss. So we're not done yet. Fine by me.

My dress rides up my thighs as I straddle him, but I don't care. His hands wander to my ass, making me care even less. Who would have thought the evening would end like this? Not me.

Wait, who's talking about an end? Is this the end of this night? What if he wants more? Do I want more? After all the pent-up desire and frustration, my body screams for release. But right now?

With Ben's tongue roaming my mouth, it's impossible to form a coherent thought—let alone an opinion—on how I want this to progress. My mind is occupied with all that is him, and the longer we kiss, the more my body requests.

I'm ready to beg him for *more*, but without warning, he tears his mouth away from mine. "Fuck, Princess." He buries his face in the crook of my neck. His breath on my skin makes me shiver, and his name for me makes me melt.

"I love how you say that."

He tilts his head back, meeting my gaze with a slow smile. "You mean Princess? I love saying it, *Princess*." He brushes his mouth over mine before pushing me back, thus putting more distance between us. "Don't take this as a rejection. Let me do this right; let me take you on a date so we can talk more."

I squint at him. "We've been on a date."

"An actual date. Let me take you to dinner. I'll pick you up at seven, or maybe six?"

I chuckle. "I'm available at five thirty, but I'm also free for lunch."

"Lunch it is." Ben can't keep a straight face any longer either, so we burst out laughing. Any remains of the heaviness in my chest vanish, leaving an invigorating lightness behind. Ben presses a tender kiss on my lips and lifts me off him. "I should get going before I can't stop myself."

He's right; we shouldn't go any further tonight, but I already miss the body contact. It's with bittersweet sensations I accompany Ben to the door, but I'll see him again soon. He won't push me away anymore.

"Good night, Princess," Ben whispers after one last lingering kiss. "Sweet dreams."

"Good night, Ben."

My longing stare makes him chuckle. "Tomorrow, Princess."

With a subtle smile, I watch him disappear around the corner. With my hand on my stomach, where the butterflies still party, I float to the bathroom. It takes me forever to change out of my dress, brush my teeth, and remove my makeup—I keep zoning out, reminiscing about tonight's

events. When I finally drop onto my bed, I'm sure I won't find any sleep soon—not with Ben's promise.

Tomorrow.

FOURTEEN

BEN

I should work on my patience. *Torture* is what describes this morning best. I can't sit still or manage anything productive. I leave my apartment thirty minutes too early and arrive way ahead of our agreed time in front of Da Nonna—the Italian restaurant near Central Park I suggested for lunch. After pacing up and down, I tap my foot and cross and uncross my arms. Yes, torture. Tortuous anticipation of my reunion with Amy.

After another glance at my watch, I lean against the wall and rub my protesting stomach. I'm still figuring out what it complains about, and a few causes come to mind.

No sleep? Check.

After I left Amy's apartment, my adrenaline level was through the roof, keeping me awake for most of the night. The hormones rushed through my veins and the thoughts through my brain.

No breakfast? Check.

My appetite fell victim to the constant distraction that is Amy. Nothing else is on my mind except for her.

The worst case of butterflies in my belly? Check.

The mere thought of seeing her again has my entire body tingling. I underestimated the effect surrendering to the craving for her would have.

I can't determine what flipped the stupid switch in my brain last night. The fear lingers that my decision will come back to haunt me, but what Amy said about not giving our past so much power over our future hit a nerve. Once I threw caution to the wind, the reward was overwhelming. I was miserable without her, and keeping the resistance up would have taken too much strength. After Amy let on that she

wanted more, I couldn't ignore the fact any longer that it added to her misery too.

I look left and right until I spot the woman who occupies my every thought. Our eyes meet, and she hurries over. Like last night, when she entered the Avalon, all I see is her. I take her in from head to toe: her hair tied back in a messy bun with a few loose strands framing her face, her top clinging to her torso, and her shorts showing off her long legs. I wonder how many heads she turned on her way here. If I asked her, she'd say none.

"Hey, Ben." She stops in front of me—too far for a kiss, but close enough for her flowery scent to hit my nostrils. "Sorry, am I late?"

"No, you're not." I snake my arms around her waist, pulling her closer. "Hey, Princess," I breathe on her lips.

With a sexy smile, Amy rests her palms on my chest and goes up on tiptoe to align her mouth with mine before closing the last inch between us. The softness of her body evokes an immediate reaction, easing the tension in my shoulders. She melts into me, and my foggy brain shoves any remaining worries aside.

To fight the urge to deepen the kiss—we're in public, after all—I keep my hands on her waist and don't bury them in her silky hair as I crave. I pull back reluctantly, our lips the last parts of us touching until we break that connection too. We stand only one foot apart, but the distance is too far already.

Amy tilts her head, studying me with a soft smile. "I meant to bring it up yesterday, but you distracted me." Her smile widens when her fingertips dance over my cheek. "You haven't shaved for a few days."

"True." My hand scrapes along the five-day stubble.

"I like it." She bites her lower lip, and my heart skips a beat.

"Noted. Shall we go in?" I need a distraction, or I'll suggest going to a more private place.

We enter the restaurant, joining the many other people enjoying a Sunday lunch. The waiter leads the way to one of the last free tables, and after perusing the menu, we order red wine and pasta.

Amy inspects the interior. The midday sun lights up the large room through the glass front of the family-style restaurant. The furnishings and decor give off a genuine Italian vibe, making you feel like you stepped into a trattoria somewhere in Italy.

“I love this place.” Amy’s eyes land on me, and her cheeks turn a tinge of pink when she notices my gaze on her.

I frown. “This isn’t the fancy dinner I had in mind, but I hope it’s okay.”

A low laugh passes her lips when she leans closer, whispering, “It’s perfect, and I couldn’t have waited until dinner to see you again.”

We lock eyes, grinning at each other like lovesick teenagers—at least, that’s how I behave in her presence. The tingles in my body intensify, conjuring up indecent daydreams. “Same,” I whisper back.

The blush on her face deepens. She clears her throat, lowering her gaze. “So, um, what do we do now?”

I chuckle. “The same as usual? Talk and laugh—only with touching.” I grab her hand and intertwine our fingers. My thumb brushes over hers, and I can’t help but stare at our joined hands. Forgotten are all the bad ideas—dating a co-worker or dating anyone, rushing into this. But I’m helpless against the magnetic connection between us. With her, I feel at ease. Without her, restless.

Amy’s giggle draws my attention back to reality. “What’s so funny?” I ask.

She shrugs. “It needs to sink in.”

“What does?”

“That you want me.” She wrinkles her nose, and that expression is so adorable that I almost miss the meaning of her

words.

“Amy.” I scowl at her. “I’ve wanted you from the start. From the very first day. My reasons for holding back remain, but you were right about that bubble of misery. It’s time I live. I went through some bad shit, saw things I’d rather forget. But I can’t compare our situation to that. This is different. And I want to tell you so much—everything. And I will. It’s just gonna be—”

She holds up her hand, and I’m glad she stops me from rambling. “Ben, I know, and I understand. I’m not pressing for details. I also have things to tell you, but it’s hard to talk about them.” She swallows before drawing in a deep breath.

With what she insinuated, I can imagine what those things are. Her idiot ex broke her heart; I don’t need all the details. I will listen once she’s ready to open up, but that isn’t today. “Come on; let’s put the heavy subjects aside for now. We have all the time in the world to talk. We both want this, so let’s not question it.” I gently squeeze her hand, and her lips finally lift in a sweet smile again.

So we chat. While we enjoy lunch, we savor each other’s company, and afterward, we enjoy the pleasant weather with a stroll through Central Park. We amble side by side, talking about all the things to do in New York and adding them to our list of future dates. I take Amy’s hand, and our fingers intertwine as if it’s the most natural move. Her touch makes me breathe easy, but at the same time, a hint of restlessness ripples through my body. Is it too early to suggest we go home, where we’ll be alone?

To distract my thoughts, I concentrate on our conversation while I take in my surroundings. It’s not as hot today, which draws people outside. Families, groups of friends, and joggers cross our way, leaving only a few free spots on the benches and lawns.

A guy passes us, his eyes fixed on Amy. He doesn’t even notice how I glare at him, and of course, Amy doesn’t realize the creep checks her out.

“Idiot,” I mumble once he stopped staring.

Amy furrows her brows. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, nothing. Just this guy ...”

She looks left and right. “What guy?”

I chuckle. “Thought so. Princess, a guy walked by and ogled you.”

She narrows her eyes and snorts. “Yeah, sure. Shut up.” She bumps my shoulder with hers, and I laugh.

I sweep my gaze over her body. “Doesn’t surprise me, though. Your outfit is—”

“Is what?” Amy stops and turns to me. “An invitation for guys to *ogle*?”

“Damn. That’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean, then?” She raises a challenging eyebrow, and one corner of her mouth lifts with it. Good, I may not be in serious trouble.

I shove my hand through my hair, keeping a straight face. “I may be projecting here. You’re wearing a perfectly normal outfit for a casual day out, but my only thought is how damn sexy you look.” To hell with holding back. She needs to know what she does to me.

Amy crosses her arms over her chest, pressing her breasts together. Such a teasing little minx. “We should go to my place so I can change out of these clothes and slip into a potato sack.”

Fuck, yes. Talk about a quick shift in mood. My racing pulse sends a wave of heat through me. To say I feel impatient puts it mildly. I lean closer, breathing in her scent. “That sounds like an excellent plan.”

Amy stares at me with her alluring eyes, unblinking. “Let’s go then.”

The next half hour passes in more of a blur. We don’t speak, and we don’t touch. We just look. The journey to Amy’s apartment is sheer torture. After admitting to her how sexy she is to me, it’s all I think about. I want her sexy body

pressed up against mine. I want to kiss her senseless, and I want to sink into sweet oblivion.

When we finally enter her place, things move fast. As soon as Amy closes the door, I press her up against it, making her gasp. I don't give her time to catch her breath. My mouth finds hers in a passionate kiss that leaves no room for doubt. I want her.

Amy moans into the kiss, and I groan in response as her fingertips slip under my shirt, stroking the skin on my waist. My hands find their way to her ass, and I press her body closer, drawing another gasp from her. I wonder if she feels how hard I am.

"Fuck, Princess," I growl in between kisses, "I don't want to seem too eager." I pull back a few inches to meet her gaze. "Please don't feel obliged to go any further. We can take things slow."

Amy fists my shirt. "Noted." She crashes her lips to mine, continuing the mind-blowing kiss. "My bedroom is over there," she informs me in between more kisses. "First door on the right."

Fuck. That's it. I need her. All of her. Now. "Noted." I pick her up and wrap her legs around my waist. I stumble into the room and navigate to her bed, where we land with a thud. We scramble to the middle of the mattress, all without breaking our kiss.

My body slips between her thighs, and I get lost in everything that is Amy. Her scent, her taste, her moans—it's all intoxicating. Her body underneath mine sends me into that oblivion I craved, and how my name repeatedly falls from her lips fires hot shivers down my spine. Desire already courses through every inch of me, and we haven't even started.

My hands slip under her top, caressing her soft skin. Her hands do the same, exploring my chest. I break our kiss to take off my shirt, but before I lean down to find her lips again, she rests her hand on my pecs.

“Wait.” She tilts her head, staring at my skin. “I’ve been wondering if you had tattoos.” She outlines the ink on my ribcage with her fingertips, and her feather-like touch makes me shiver. “What do they mean?”

“Can we talk about this later? I want to devour you first.”

She locks her lust-filled eyes with mine. “Of course.” Sitting up, she takes off her top and makes quick work of her bra as well. “Don’t gape, Ben,” she says when I stare at her. “Put that mouth of yours to good use already.”

With a chuckle, I oblige. Our lips and tongues meet, moving together in the same sensual rhythm as before. If I had any working brain cells left, they are dead now that my bare chest presses against hers. The sensation of skin on skin spurs on my need for her, and I press my pelvis to her center. A loud moan emanates from her throat, and she wraps her legs around my waist, undulating her hips.

I growl in response as I brush my mouth over her neck, nibbling here and there, leaving a trail of gentle kisses over her skin on my way to her breasts, where my tongue and thumb circle her nipples.

I want to take my time with her, explore her, savor every inch of her, but her moans echo through the room, and they increase in intensity, chipping away at my ability to hold myself back. My breathing grows heavier as I kiss my way farther down her body. I’m not sure how long I can keep up a slow pace.

Amy’s shorts and panties join the rest of our clothes on the floor. My palms caress her thighs, opening her legs to make room for me. With delicate kisses, my mouth closes in on her core, and with every inch, she writhes more.

I’ve never been so eager to taste a woman as I crave to taste her. With the first flick of my tongue over her clit, she gasps. With the second, she moans my name. She’s soaking already, making it easy for my fingers to slide inside her wet center. While she clenches her inner muscles around them, she arches her back and moans louder. She must be close to her release.

But out of nowhere, she pulls back. “Wait!”

I frown. “What’s wrong?”

“If you keep going, I’ll come within the next ten seconds.”

“So?”

She shifts left and right, biting her lips as she averts her gaze. Her cheeks turn a darker shade of pink. “Um, I, well, I ... shit.”

Her hand flies to her eyes, but I grab it and kiss the inside of her wrist. “You what, Princess? You can tell me.”

“It’s just, uh, when I climax ... that’s it. It’s over. I don’t have multiple orgasms.” She swallows, and her shoulders slump. “I want you to be inside me when I come,” she adds in a whisper.

My mouth stretches into the widest grin. “Fuck, that’s so sexy. I want to be inside you, too, when you come. What makes you so sure?”

She grimaces. “I’ve tried. It never happened for me.”

I nudge her back on the bed. “We’ll see about that. Can I make you come now?”

With a tentative smile, she nods, and I capture her lips in another kiss. I give her more time to let go, and once her body relaxes and the kiss turns more heated and demanding, I resume my position between her thighs.

It does take her about ten seconds to climax. When the waves of her orgasm wash through her, I kiss my way over her trembling body. Making a woman come has never turned me on more, and I’m eager for a replay.

I brace myself on my hands, looking at Amy. She takes my breath away. Eyes closed, she inhales deeply before her lids flutter open and she grins at me.

“That was incredible,” she murmurs.

With a chuckle, I whisper in her ear, “*That*, Princess, was number one.”

FIFTEEN

AMY

Did I call my orgasm amazing?

That was a lie. It wasn't amazing; it was magnificent, marvelous, incredible, glorious, ten-out-of-five-stars spectacular.

My last non-self-induced climax is a blurry memory, but I can't recall ever coming this hard from a man's fingers and tongue alone. Ben knew how fast to go and what pressure to apply, and thinking about future encounters makes me shiver.

When Ben whispers something in my ear, a burning desire unleashes in my lower abdomen, blazing its way through every cell in my body.

"That, Princess, was number one."

I want to ask out of how many, but I'm rendered speechless. Ben doesn't give me a chance to utter any sensible words, anyway. He presses his lips on my skin, over and over, while his hands roam my body. They caress my ass, stroke my stomach, massage my breasts.

Usually, I relax after an orgasm, reveling in the fulfilling sensations. Not today. Unadulterated lust simmers under the surface, waiting to be set loose as Ben's earlier words replay in my mind.

We'll see about that.

A delicious promise he's eager to keep, judging from how he finds all my sensitive spots. He listens to my every response to his caresses, spending more time doing what makes me moan and writhe underneath him. That alone is one of the biggest turn-ons.

Another is the erection he presses against my core. It must feel painful by now, with his shorts still restraining his cock.

“Why don’t you take these off?” I tug at the button, and Ben props himself up on his arms.

“Happy to.” He lowers his gaze to where I undo his pants and shove them down as far as possible. It’s not enough to rip them off him, but his dick is within reach. So I reach.

Ben hisses when I wrap my fingers around his length, stroking him and running my thumb over his tip. Damn, he feels good in my hand.

“Fuck, Princess,” he growls. “You know I’m not the most patient guy, and what you’re doing doesn’t help.” He lowers his mouth to kiss my lips—urgently, demanding more, now. “Do you have a condom?”

I freeze. Shit.

Ben chuckles, and his breath on my neck makes me tremble. All of him and what he does makes me tremble, and for a fleeting moment, I wonder if it’s the fact that I haven’t been intimate with a man in so long or if it’s *him*.

“It’s okay,” Ben murmurs. “I brought one.”

“Just one?” I blurt out.

Ben pulls back, and his lips lift in a smirk. “So greedy.”

I squeeze my eyes shut as heat creeps up my face. Where the heck is my brain-mouth-filter?

“Don’t worry, Princess; I have more than one.” With an amused laugh, Ben gets off me, and I yank my pillow over my head. I shiver at the cool air that hits me without his body on top of mine, but the distraction from my embarrassing moment is over when Ben tugs at my foot. “Stop hiding.”

I emerge from under the pillow and prop up on my elbows. Tingles rush through me when my gaze falls on Ben standing at the foot of my bed in all his naked glory, condom in one hand, stroking his dick with the other. I press my thighs together, struggling to relieve the tension in my throbbing core. A faint moan passes my lips when I watch him roll the rubber down his length.

With predatory ease and heat in his eyes, Ben kneels on the bed, scooting closer until his body pushes mine back into the sheets. One scorching kiss, then another. My heart hammers in my chest, sending liquid heat through my veins. My breathing is shallow before I keep the air in altogether.

“Are you ready?” Ben murmurs onto my lips.

A brief nod is my only answer. A lustful haze surrounds me, shushing the voice inside my head that keeps reminding me we’re about to cross the line with no turning back.

After placing his tip at my entrance, he slides in just an inch, and I let out the breath I was holding before I gasp when he pulls out and pushes in deeper. He repeats the movement until he’s all the way inside. He buries his face in the crook of my neck with one hand on my breast and the other on my ass. I dig my fingers into his shoulders, holding on for dear life.

Ben groans when my grip on him tightens. “Are you okay? Should I stop?”

“No!” I scream, and this time, I don’t care how lasciviously greedy I sound. “Don’t stop. Don’t fucking stop.”

He doesn’t. His thrusts are slow at first, but soon, he picks up the pace. I respond to his every move, arching my back and tilting my hips, until we find a common rhythm. My eyes flutter closed from all the overwhelming sensations. Every fiber in my body is electrified, making me buzz with an unbridled need for more.

“Look at me, Princess. I want to see you come.”

Ben’s deep, growling voice does funny things to me. The tingling in my lower abdomen intensifies, and my body tenses in the most delicious way. My rational thinking tells me it can’t be; I can’t be approaching my next orgasm. But when I open my eyes and meet his gaze, things I’ve never experienced before wash over me. I bite my lips to keep myself from screaming out loud.

Ben chuckles. “Please, don’t hold back. Scream for me, babe.”

“Oh fuck.” I groan when he hooks his arms under my knees, tilting up my legs to drive deeper into me. With every thrust, he brushes over my clit, and I clench my inner muscles around him. It’s happening.

“That’s it, babe. Let go.”

At Ben’s words, I surrender. I plummet over the edge as an even more intense orgasm than the first seizes my body, and after more fast and erratic thrusts, Ben follows me.

Oh my sweet goodness. Not even in my wildest dreams could I have imagined it like this. I have no words to describe what’s happening in my brain or body.

“And that was number two,” Ben says, finding my gaze, and his knowing grin makes me chuckle.

Once the realization hits me that I had two orgasms in a row, my eyes widen. “It happened. I can’t believe it.”

“If you give me a moment, I’ll show you again.”

I blink at him, and Ben’s satisfied smile widens. I open my mouth to respond, but he closes it with a slow kiss. Compared to our earlier passionate kisses, this one is unhurried and easy, sending me into a state of calm and relaxation. I could do this forever.

The moment ends when Ben draws back, sliding out of me. I frown at the sudden emptiness, and he chuckles. “I’m just trashing the condom, but don’t you worry; we’ll do that again.” After pressing a tender kiss on my cheek, he rises from the bed, and I point the way to the bathroom.

While I wait for his return, I lie on my back without the usual urge to hide my body under the blanket. A thin layer of sweat covers my skin, and the heat from our intimate encounter lingers. When Ben joins me in bed, I face him, and we gaze at each other.

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear with a soft smile. “You’re beautiful.”

Snorting, I bury my face in his chest. “That’s not possible. My makeup is ruined, and my hair is a disaster.”

“Don’t be silly.” With a chuckle, he brushes his fingertips over my shoulder and down my arm. Goosebumps erupt all over my skin, and when he wraps his muscular arms around me, a satisfied sigh escapes me. I crave to stay here forever.

I remember Ben’s words from earlier in the restaurant. We both want this, and we shouldn’t question our actions. It feels too good to be wrong, too right to be a bad decision. It may blow up in my face if we realize after a few days, weeks, or months it was only physical attraction—hormones that made me imagine sensations that weren’t there. But a firm belief surfaces that this is nothing like what I’ve experienced with the last man in my life.

Only time will tell if that voice is right.

“You’re so quiet. Is everything okay?” Ben asks, tearing me out of my thoughts.

I lift my gaze to meet his, giving him a gentle smile. “Yes, it’s all good. Perfect.” I press a soft kiss on his lips before propping my head on my hand and studying his chest more closely. “Will you tell me about them?” I trace the ink on his skin, resting my fingers on the flower and the letter S, situated left of his sternum, close to where his heart sits.

Ben lowers his gaze, and with a deep sigh, he covers my hand, pressing it to his chest. “That’s in memory of my mom. It’s a forget-me-not, her favorite flower. Her name was Sarah,” he adds in a whisper.

“It’s stunning.” I outline the delicate blue flower buds with his hand still covering mine. I want to ask about his mother, but the hesitation before he answered holds me back. He’ll tell me, eventually.

“And this?” We both gaze at the three words on the side of his right ribcage.

Suffer. Learn. Change.

He shrugs. “No hidden meaning behind this one. I suffered, I learned, and I changed.”

He makes it sound so easy, but we both know it’s not. “I can relate,” I say, meeting his eyes. “Yours was a different

kind of suffering, but I also learned and changed.”

Ben’s soft gaze makes my heart flutter, and when his fingertips caress my cheek, the butterflies in my stomach awaken from their post-orgasmic bliss. “Why does it feel like we’ve known each other for much longer than three weeks?” he asks.

I shrug. “We spend a lot of time together—more than other couples do.”

His lips lift in a subtle smile, and when I realize what I’ve just said, I gasp. Couple? “Oh, I mean, uh—”

The smile stays on his face. “I know what you mean.”

I purse my lips. “This is moving so fast. Three weeks ago, the last thing on my mind was letting a new man into my life.”

With a soft laugh, Ben pulls me into an embrace. “Yeah, it is fast, but we couldn’t stop it any longer,” he murmurs into my hair. “From here on, we’ll work on this one step at a time.” He kisses the top of my head, and his tenderness makes me tingle all over. “Even though the hot sex doesn’t leave many steps to take.”

A hearty laugh emanates from my throat. “True.”

“Anyway,” Ben says, turning on his back and hauling me with him. I land on top of his body with a shriek. “How about I show you again now?”

A few hours ago, I would have laughed in his face, but he’s already proved me wrong once. So I don’t object and let him show me again.



The next day, I sit at my desk at work, staring at the screen of my computer, reading the same sentence for the fourth time. My concentration is non-existent, with Ben sitting

across from me. Our eyes meet every few minutes, and a constant smile is plastered on our faces.

Again, my gaze flickers over and falls on his lips. The same lips that did all these incredible things to me. A hot shiver rushes through me because the pictures are still crystal clear in my mind. Ben made me come four times yesterday afternoon. And once more before he left close to midnight. I wouldn't have minded if he had stayed over, but we'll save that step for later.

I suppress a needy whimper when my thoughts crash into the gutter. In my head, he sweeps his mess off his desk and lifts me on top to devour—

“Your expression gives me so many naughty ideas.”

My eyes snap to Ben's when he speaks, and my hands fly to my burning cheeks. Busted. My only way out is feigning ignorance. “What expression?”

Ben bites his lips and leans closer. “Were you thinking about me taking you on my desk?” he whispers.

Damn, I shouldn't have told him about this little fantasy of mine. I cross my arms over my chest, swiveling left and right. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

A smug smile appears on his face. “One of these days, you and I will work overtime, and once everyone's left the building, we'll do everything you just thought about.”

Another needy moan makes its way up my throat, but it gets stuck when Lauren turns up out of nowhere, dropping files on my desk. “Hey, you,” she says. “These are for Luke. Do you have any for Greg?”

My hand flies to my chest when I snap out of my haze and blink at her. “Um, hi. Yes. And this”—I hand her a folder—“uh, it's for, um, Mr. Wilson, but, uh, Greg needs to, um, sign.”

Accepting the folder, Lauren narrows her eyes at me and opens and closes her mouth, studying me more closely. My heart rate picks up the longer she stares at me, and it skips a beat when her gaze shoots to Ben and she gasps. “Oh my gosh.

You're smiling." She points to me. "So are you." Now to Ben. "You fucked," she whisper-yells.

My poor heart. After Lauren's realization, it stops beating entirely. At least no one is close enough to overhear.

"Lauren!" I choke on my spit, and my cheeks burn hotter than a moment ago.

With a sparkling smile, Lauren presses her hand to her chest. "I'm so relieved. All this sexual tension was getting unbearable." She looks back and forth between Ben and me, and before we can comment on anything, she says, "Okay, kids, I have more errands to run. See ya. And behave." She points her finger at us again before she disappears.

We gaze after her, mouths agape, unsure what to make of this. "What just happened?" Ben asks. "Why didn't she ask more questions?"

I scratch my temple. "Hmm. She might not have any and accepts the facts."

Not even a second passes before my phone vibrates, and I read Lauren's message, laughing.

Lauren: I want all the details!!!! Lunch later?

I meet Ben's curious gaze. "The interrogation begins at noon."



"How on earth did this happen? When did it happen? How many times did it happen?" Lauren bombards me with questions before I even take the first bite of my sandwich. We're at our usual place when it bursts out of her.

I lay my lunch on the tray, and after taking a sip of my drink, I lean back in my chair. “Okay,” I say with a sigh. “I’ll answer the *when* first.”

Lauren leans on the table, her eyes fixed on me, as I recount the events from Saturday night; how he came after me and we talked. How he went home and we met for lunch the next day—yesterday. How we talked more about the things that were holding us back.

“And then you decided not to give a fuck and fucked?” Lauren asks while I chew the first bite of my food.

Luckily, I’ve gotten used to her missing filter; otherwise, I would have choked on my sandwich. “Well, yeah, kinda.”

“Kinda?” Lauren laughs out loud. “Girl, you’re glowing. And don’t get me started on Ben. I’ve never seen such a joyous look on his face.” She rests her hand on my forearm. “I’m so happy for you two. So how was it?”

I’m not one to kiss and tell, and I’ve never shared intimate details with someone I just met two months ago, but again, something about Lauren makes me trust her. And true to my high-school-girl behavior when it comes to Ben, I’m dying to share details of the view on cloud nine. “You know how sleeping with someone for the first time can be awkward? When neither knows what they’re doing because you’re unfamiliar with each other’s bodies?”

Lauren furrows her brows. “Yeah, sounds familiar. Please tell me that’s not how it went. Did he rock your world?”

Pictures flash in my mind of how Ben rocked my world, and then some.

“Oh damn,” Lauren says. “He did. Look at you. What a smile. You’re one smitten kitten.”

Smitten kitten? I open my mouth to protest but close it. She’s right. I’m so infatuated with Ben and the sensations he evokes in me with a simple look. The passion and the burning intensity he touches me with make me lose my mind, and how my entire body tingles when he whispers my name drives me just as insane. A part of me is craving more of that.

And that part is much louder than the part screaming at me to fucking take it slow.

SIXTEEN

BEN

My blissfully oblivious state lasted for one day. It hasn't even been forty-eight hours since Amy and I yielded to our cravings, and tuning out my worries already bites me in the ass.

Grinding my teeth, I glare at my phone's screen, reading and rereading my brother's text.

Aaron: Come and see me after work. I gotta tell you something.

I still have fifty-five minutes on my lunch break. Amy just left with Lauren, and after considering my options, I decide to pay Aaron a visit. Mondays, he's usually in early, and the Kingston Bar, whose security team he's a part of, isn't too far from the office, so we should have enough time to discuss whatever this is.

As I rush past the many people, too many possible topics pop up, and they all leave a sour taste in my mouth. What could he tell me that's not bad news?

My pulse races as I enter the bar. It's an upscale place in Midtown, which is usually busy at night—and three days a week when they serve lunch. My eyes scan the interior, and my tense muscles relax when they find the site almost empty.

“Hey, Ben.”

I turn to the voice and spot Daniel, one of my brother's colleagues and friends. He walks up to me, stretching out his hand to shake mine. “Haven't seen you for ages. How are you?”

“Good, and you? Looks like a quiet day.”

He glances at the few guests. “Yeah, for now. Are you here to see Aaron?” When I nod, he points to the bar. “Sit down. I’ll get him for you.”

Before my thoughts take the route to more worst-case scenarios, my brother shows up, occupying the stool next to mine with a frown. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

I tap my fingers on the counter. “Hello to you too. You said you needed to talk to me?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t expect you to show up here right away.”

I grind my teeth. “I have to know what it is. Things ... are different now.”

He studies me with narrow eyes. “Different?” Realization must have hit because he cracks up. “Oh damn. Please tell me you pulled your head out of your ass and made your move. No, wait.” He holds up his hand. “The better news would be you didn’t, and Amy realized you’re a dickhead. I could try my luck again. Totally get the appeal. She’s nice and funny. So innocent compared to us, and her ass is perfection.”

With every word he speaks, more muscles in my body tense. I wonder how sincere his speech is or if he only wants to piss me off. “Would you shut the fuck up already?” I growl. “Yes, Amy and I are a thing now, so back off.”

Aaron cackles. “Why do you worry? She rejected me, remember? How come you changed your mind? I thought you didn’t want to drag her into any *danger*.”

I fight the urge to punch him for using air quotes on the word *danger* as if it were a trifle. “Don’t be smug about this, but you were right. Amy isn’t Becca. The circumstances are different, and history won’t repeat itself.”

He blinks at me. “I was right,” he repeats. “Wow, am I dreaming?”

Glaring at him, I shove his shoulder. “Don’t make me regret it.” And I mean all of it—telling him he was right and starting something with Amy. “Now spill. What happened?”

He pushes his shoulders back with a complacent smile. “I talked to Jackson.”

A cold shiver runs down my spine, and I open my mouth to yell at him. I fucking knew it involved that scumbag.

Aaron holds up his hand to stop me, though. “Relax. I did what you wanted. We had a chat and agreed I didn’t owe him anything anymore. I paid my debt.”

I furrow my brows. “As easy as that? Are you kidding? And you believe him?”

“He let you go, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t as important to him.”

“Of course,” he scoffs, rolling his eyes. “If it makes you feel better, there’s more. I met with Wallace, and we had a nice, long chat. I agreed to help him with something, and in return, he’ll get Jackson off my back for good.”

My eyes widen. Involving Wallace isn’t my brother’s brightest idea. Yes, he helped us out in the past, but I don’t trust him, considering he’s Jackson’s father and a corrupt cop. “Aaron, are you sure about this? What’s this *something*?”

“Nothing you need to worry about. Again, relax. It’ll all be good.” He rises from the bar stool. “Now stride into the sunset and live happily ever after with Amy.”

He walks off without another word or glance, leaving me glaring after him. I have more questions I won’t receive any answers to, though. So I return to work with new worries swirling in my mind. Maybe I can still stop whatever this is between Amy and me—no need to take risks.

That last thought vanishes into thin air as soon as I enter the office and catch sight of Amy sitting at her desk. There’s no stopping anything. My stomach flutters, my heart rate picks up, and an unpleasant chill rushes down my spine just thinking about ending it. I can’t, and I don’t want to. Being with Amy has already changed my world, and I can’t give that up.

When I drop into my chair, she raises her eyebrows at me. “Where were you?”

“Aaron wanted to see me.”

Her eyes widen. “Is everything all right?”

“All good. I promise,” I add when she frowns. “How was lunch with Lauren? Did you have to spill all the beans?”

Her amused smile tells me the subject change worked. “Every little detail down to what a disappointment you are in bed.”

I snort. “You tell me this now? After I made you come four times?” I add in a whisper.

She holds up her hand, wiggling her fingers. “Five.” She winks at me, and I chuckle.

“Spending time with Lauren rubs off on you.”

She leans back in her chair with her hands behind her head. “It does. I’m sorry.” She bites her lips, keeping them from stretching. “So did you have lunch when you met with your brother?”

“I grabbed a bite from one of the street vendors. That’ll have to do until dinner.”

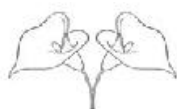
Amy crinkles her nose. “That’s not much. How about I serve you a proper meal tonight?”

I look left and right, checking if any colleagues are within earshot before turning back to Amy. “Only if you’re a better cook than I am a lover.”

She squeezes her eyes shut and covers her mouth with her hand. Watching her struggle for composure sends a wave of warmth through me. This is it; this is what it feels like to live my life.

Alive. That will be my next tattoo.

Gone are the worries and doubts. Time to enjoy the sunset.



After one week, Amy turned me into a damn addict. For the past five minutes, I've stared at her desk and the empty chair. This morning, Luke dragged her along to his meetings, and she's noticeably absent. I have no clue how I got through my workdays before her. It's too quiet despite the buzz surrounding me with colleagues chatting and phones ringing. I miss the sweet sound of Amy's laugh and her pen tapping on her notepad whenever she's deep in thought.

"Hey, Ben." Lauren drops a few letters on Amy's desk before shoving some of my papers aside to sit on the edge of my desk. "Ugh, you and your mess. If I were Amy, it would drive me crazy."

"Hi, Lauren. So nice to see you." With a fake smile, I gather the documents and neatly stack them on a pile. "There. All better. How was the meeting?"

She shrugs. "The usual. Poor Amy. She said Luke has meetings all morning?"

"Yeah. She'll be back around noon."

Lauren displays a wide grin. "So, how was the first week?"

"Good." I'm not sure what details she's fishing for, and I prefer not to give her any. No need to tell her that all Amy and I do is talk during working hours and indulge in non-verbal communication afterward.

"I love the smiles on both your faces." Lauren presses her palm to her chest with a dreamy sigh. "Looking at you makes me feel all fuzzy and warm inside."

I agree. That's what I experience with Amy. Her presence eases all tension, and when we don't touch, I think about touching her. Her smooth skin under my fingertips, her scent in my nose, and her taste on my lips is my new favorite state of being.

"What are we doing for her birthday next week?" Lauren's question puts an end to my daydreams.

“I’m taking her to dinner. She said she didn’t want a party. Can you convince her to celebrate her birthday with yours, as it’s only two weeks later?”

“I could do that. Good idea.” She hops off the desk when my phone rings. “Okay, I’ll let you get back to work. See you!”

Once she’s gone, I answer the call, and while I talk to Rosa about interviews for a job opening in the graphic design department, my cell phone vibrates with an incoming message. My lips stretch into a smile when I read the preview of Amy’s text on the screen.

Amy: Hey handsome. You busy?

Juggling two tasks at once isn’t easy, but I focus on the call and text Amy back simultaneously.

Ben: Making important calls that concern my job, unlike other employees who prefer to play with their phones. Aren’t you at a meeting?

Amy: Still waiting for the client to show up. So you can multitask. Didn’t know that.

Ben: I have lots of hidden talents you don’t know about yet.

Before reading Amy’s response, I end the call with Rosa, and instead of continuing with my work, I lean back in my chair, grinning at my phone.

Amy: Can’t wait to find out! Do any of those talents include your desk?

Biting my lips, I fight the urge to laugh out loud.

Ben: What was that fantasy of yours again?

Amy: It starts with you sweeping off your mess. All of it. Which is a lot. Then you grab me and throw me down on the desk.

Ben: Then what?

Amy: Whatever comes next involves a lot less clothing.

Heat rises within me. I draw in a slow breath through my nose before typing my response.

Ben: Ms. Franklin, are you sexting me?

Amy: During working hours? I wouldn't dare!

Ben: Too bad. I'd love to hear more about your fantasies about you on my desk. Naked.

Amy: You'd be naked too.

Ben: That sounds like an interesting plan. I'd run my hands and lips all over your body.

This time, it takes her longer to respond, and I wonder if she's also playing out the scenario in her mind.

Amy: Wouldn't that be some smoking hot sex?

Ben: Oh, it would. If only our colleagues weren't present. Unfortunately, my dick isn't aware of them. I need a bathroom break.

All I can think of is Amy's hot, naked body underneath mine, and my pants are way too tight all of a sudden.

Amy: You wanna do it in the bathroom?

I run my hand over my face before checking if anyone pays any attention to me, but everyone is engrossed in work.

Ben: I do, yes, but you wouldn't be involved, at least not physically. Those bathrooms don't give you much privacy.

Amy: Excuse me? Don't you dare jerk off in the bathroom!

Ben: What is your alternate solution?

Amy: The other day I was lost and discovered a cozy storeroom down the hall. I have needs that desperately need to be taken care of, too, you know?

Ben: If you ask nicely, I could help you with your issue.

That's my last text because a colleague shows up with too many questions. How can anyone expect me to form a decent thought or a coherent sentence in the state I'm in? I hope he

doesn't ask me to come to his desk—the prominent bulge in my pants is hard to hide.

I stuff the phone under my thigh while I do my best to help, and a moment later, the vibrations of another text send tingles through my body.

I must focus harder.

How many questions does this guy have? I suppress a groan and another one when Amy turns up out of nowhere and sits down on her chair. My gaze flickers to her for a fraction of a second. Her cheeks are flushed, and her hot and bothered expression sends more jolts of desire through me.

Damn.

Finally, the badgering colleague has all his answers and removes himself from my desk. I snatch my phone to read Amy's text.

Amy: Please, Mr. Taylor, would you be so kind as to fuck me in the storeroom?

SEVENTEEN

AMY

What on earth has gotten into me? When I sent Ben that first innocent message, I never expected our conversation to turn me on like nothing else. The mental images of Ben's hands on my body spurred me on, and by the time I returned to my desk two minutes ago, I was soaking.

I squirm in my seat as I watch Ben talking to a colleague. Has he read my last text yet?

Oh no, he hasn't. As soon as the colleague disappears, he retrieves his phone. Biting my lips, I examine him with narrow eyes, and when he suppresses a grunt and coughs, I rise from my chair. My sweaty palms straighten my skirt, and as far as my hammering heart allows, I keep my voice calm when I say, "I take that as a yes."

Our gazes lock when I saunter past him, and the heat in his eyes almost makes me climax right here. I draw in a deep breath as I walk to that storeroom down the hall. After checking if the coast is clear, I slip inside. The overhead lamps flicker on, flooding the small, windowless room with fluorescent light. Tall shelves line the walls, holding countless folders and files.

Not the most romantic setting, but in a minute, I won't care where I am as long as Ben presses his body against mine.

While I amble along the shelf, running my finger over the thin layer of dust, the door opens and closes with a quiet click. I look over my shoulder to where Ben leans against the wall, still gripping the handle.

He tilts his head. "Ms. Franklin."

I turn around, holding his gaze. "Mr. Taylor."

Ben's chest heaves with a deep breath before his eyes flicker to the door. "There's no lock."

His husky voice sends hot shivers down my spine, making me tremble as I take step after step backward until I reach the only part of the wall that's not covered in shelves. "Then you must be quiet," I whisper.

Ben chuckles. "Oh, I don't think I'll be the one having a problem with keeping the noise down." He draws in another deep breath. "Are you sure about this?"

"Are you?"

His lips stretch into a smirk as he lowers his eyes to the prominent bulge in his pants. When he lifts his heated gaze to meet mine, I undo my blouse, button by button. He watches every move of my fingers until the blouse hangs off my shoulders, giving him a good view of my cleavage. He stares at my chest, and just when I'm about to tell him to step closer and kiss me, he crosses the room with three wide strides. I gasp when he buries his fingers in my hair, pulling my mouth to his. He devours my lips, and when his tongue demands entrance, I let him in. His deep, sexy hum vibrates through every cell in my body, and I gasp when he frees my breasts from my bra, massaging and caressing them while his tongue roams my mouth, swallowing my moans.

I flinch when Ben pinches my nipples a little harder than usual, and the slight pain passes through me, making more wetness pool at my core. I press my thighs together, clenching my inner muscles to ease the throbbing. My fingers find the button of his pants, but when I slide my hand inside, he stops me.

"Not yet, babe."

A groan passes my lips, and I want to protest, but he drops to his knees, lifts my skirt, and tugs at my panties. My head falls back against the wall as my eyes flutter closed, and my hand covers my mouth, muffling the loud moans.

Ben spreads my legs, kissing my inner thighs left and right. He shaved this morning, and his smooth cheeks feel amazing against my skin. I can't decide if I like his three-day stubble better or his cleanly-shaven jaw. I've experienced both

in the past week, and he was more passionate after he shaved, as if the possibility of beard burn held him back.

Today is no different. Ben zeroes in on my dripping core, and I arch my back when his lips circle my clit. He sucks hard, rubs fast, and plunges his fingers deep. Hot shivers ripple up and down my spine, sending me into sweet oblivion. Even with all the foreplay, it shocks me how quickly I come undone. I clutch at his shoulders for support when his talented mouth and skilled fingers take me to that blissful high and the waves of my orgasm wash through me.

I don't even notice how Ben rises to his feet until he breathes in my ear, "There you go. All taken care of." He captures my lips in a scorching kiss, and I moan when I taste myself on him.

We come up for air, and I rest my palm on his cheek with a goofy smile. "Yes, thank you. You can return to your desk now."

With a chuckle, he wraps his arm around me and jerks me into his chest, pressing his erection against my hip. "Not yet. I agreed to fuck you in the storeroom, and that I'll do thoroughly."

My smile widens when I open the zipper of his pants and he lets me slide them down his legs, freeing his hard length. Ben braces himself against the wall and fixes his eyes on me when I kneel in front of him. A deep growl emanates from his chest as soon as I wrap my fingers around him, stroking up and down before my mouth joins the party of rubbing, sucking, and licking.

I'm about to finish him off, but he snatches my wrists and pulls me back up. "I need to be inside you. Now." He leans down to fumble with his pants. Even though he needs less than five seconds to produce a condom and roll it over his erection, I fidget, ready to explode if he doesn't hurry the fuck up.

Once we're all protected, I grab his dick, and when Ben lifts my leg, I place him at my entrance. With a single thrust, he dives in, and I gasp as he presses himself hard against me.

He lingers for a moment, and I enjoy the sensation of him being buried deep inside me.

Ben groans when I tighten my inner muscles around him. “You’re killing me, Princess.” He moves, slowly, back and forth, and I clutch at his shoulders when he picks up the pace. He sucks in a sharp breath as I dig my nails into his skin, but I don’t care if I leave a mark. All I care about is that he plunges into me, over and over, faster and harder.

In the past week, Ben proved multiple times that I’m very much capable of coming more than once. His exact words were: “Whoever tried before must have been an idiot.” Like every day since we first slept together, I’m on the verge of another orgasm in no time. Ben’s thumb rubs my clit, making me lose control, pushing me over the edge, and with my climax, he finishes too.

Still clinging to each other, we pant, and a few minutes pass until Ben leaves a tender kiss on my lips and steps back. He runs his fingers through his hair, shaking his head. “Damn, what are you doing to me? I’ve worked here for three fucking years, and I’ve never been this close to getting fired.”

I huff. “No, it must be something you do to me. I’ve never behaved this recklessly during work, either.” I straighten my clothes and button my blouse while Ben zips up his pants.

He leans closer to whisper in my ear, “It must be something we’re doing to each other. So, what happened to you attending meetings all morning?”

I shrug. “The client rescheduled last minute, and Luke told me he had other things he’d do instead and didn’t need me for those.” Inhaling deeply, I fix my hair—or try to, as Ben made quite a mess of it. “I need the bathroom. I’ll go first, okay?”

With a knowing smirk, he nods, and I grimace. Slowly but surely, it sinks in what a stupid idea this was; I suspect my expression screams *just-been-fucked*. Pushing my shoulders back, I stride to the door, peek outside, and hurry to the restroom.

One look in the mirror confirms my suspicion. Yep, the glow on my face says it all. At least Luke isn't in his office, and I don't have to accompany him to any more meetings.

After splashing my face and untangling the mess that is my hair, I step out of the restroom with one last deep breath. I almost make it back to my desk when someone calls my name. I stop in my tracks and turn around, forcing my lips to lift in a smile when Luke strides toward me.

"Amy, there you are." He hands me a stack of letters. "Please dispatch these. I sent you an email with meetings you have to schedule."

I press the letters to my chest, willing my heart to beat less frantically. "Okay, I'll get to it right away."

He nods, keeping his eyes on me. He opens his mouth to say something but closes it again. His brows furrow. "Are you okay?"

So much for calming my racing heart. It's about to burst out of my chest, and heat creeps up my neck. "Um, sure. I'm fine." My lips stretch into a forced smile, and I let out a small breath when he nods again.

"Okay." He looks past me to my desk. "I was looking for Ben. Do you know where he is?"

"Uh, Ben? No, I don't know." Fuck, fuck, fuck! The burning heat in my cheeks intensifies, and I avert my eyes. After clearing my throat, I add, "I'll tell him you're looking for him."

Luke narrows his eyes, but when I expect him to comment on my flustered state, he smiles. "Yes, thanks. He can find me in Greg's office." And without another word, he disappears.

Once he's out of sight, I squeeze my eyes shut and groan. What was I thinking? I return to my chair and let my head fall on my desk.

"Hey, Princess. Are you all right?" Ben's voice makes me flinch, and when I lift my gaze and eye him up and down, I groan again. Why doesn't he look like he just got some in the storeroom?

I lean closer. “Please tell me you can’t tell by my face that I’ve done something totally inappropriate at work.”

Ben smirks. “Sorry, babe. You do have that glow.”

I bury my face in my hands. “Damn. Luke was here.”

“I know. I ran into him on his way to the elevator.”

My gaze snaps to him. “Did he say anything?”

“No, he just asked me if I talked to Rosa.”

I lean back in my chair with a deep sigh. “Will we get in trouble?”

“No, Princess,” Ben says with an affectionate smile. “Stop overthinking. That’s never a good idea.”

I let his words sink in. It’s true; overthinking ruins everything. So I stop, and instead, I enjoy the memory of the most exciting sex I’ve ever had.



“Damn, what a week.” With a deep sigh, Ben drops on the couch next to me, and I scoot closer. He drapes his arm around my shoulder, and we enjoy the closeness in comfortable silence.

Ben is right; it has been a busy week. For the past four days, he worked on a big campaign with other colleagues in a conference room on another floor.

Today was the second day in a row Luke dragged me to out-of-office appointments, and seeing so little of Ben was weird. We made up for it after work, but only for a few hours because every night, we say goodbye and sleep in our respective beds—alone. After almost three weeks together, we haven’t taken the staying-overnight step yet, but everything else moved so fast that we put it off.

My lips lift in a slow smile as I rest my head on Ben's chest and listen to his steady heartbeat. My body relaxes, and pleasant drowsiness takes over—I'm at ease with myself and the world. This has become a natural state for me since I've been with Ben.

Every so often, though, I remember why I came to New York. My plan to forget my past works almost too well, but Ben still deserves to know what happened. Several times I've tried to tell him. It never felt right.

Even now, I couldn't disrupt the peacefulness. Ben's thumb draws lazy circles on my shoulder, sending tingles through my body, and when he presses a soft kiss on my forehead, I let out a satisfied sigh.

He tightens his embrace, and when I lift my head to smile at him, he lowers his mouth to find mine in a slow and gentle kiss. It's simple, yet it stirs emotions inside me that were buried deep. Everything about Ben evokes sensations I thought were forgotten and lost: trusting a man, feeling at ease in someone's presence, and being content with everything.

Ben is well on his way inside the walls I built.

We still don't speak a single word. Our lips do a different kind of talking. Ben brushes his mouth over mine repeatedly, and the softness of his touch mesmerizes me, igniting the usual desire to be closer to him.

We lie back on the couch, his body on top of mine, and his hands stroke every inch of me. Ben leaves tender kisses along my jaw and neck before our lips meet again in a slow and deep kiss, with his tongue caressing mine.

This moment is so different from most of our other intimate encounters. It's not driven by lust and desire but by something more profound. It's not some carnal need we're satisfying but a sensation I can't quite explain yet. Exploring each other's bodies so slowly and sensually is just as intense.

"So, Princess," Ben whispers, and I chuckle when his breath tickles the sensitive spot behind my ear. "Are you excited about your birthday tomorrow?"

“Hmm.” I bite the inside of my cheek, and my brows furrow. “Not sure. Where are you taking me for dinner?”

Propping himself up on his arms, he chuckles. “Nice try. I’m not telling you.”

“What about my present? Can you give me a hint?”

His only answer is a raised eyebrow.

I pinch my lips together. “How about you give me an early present?”

He narrows his eyes. “An early present?”

I nod, slipping my hands under his shirt. “Stay the night,” I whisper. An intense flutter rushes from my stomach through the rest of my body when Ben gazes at me. His expression is so soft and affectionate that it makes my heart skip a beat. Warmth radiates from my chest, flooding every fiber inside me, and when his lips lift in one of his disarming smiles, all my nerve endings tingle.

I shift underneath him, and my greedy hands tighten their grip on his shirt. I part my lips, and a soft moan escapes. My racing heart can’t stand the anticipation for much longer, so I lift my head, bringing my mouth closer to his. “Is that a yes?” I breathe.

Ben closes the last inch between us, and his kiss leaves no doubt: it’s a yes. His hands encircle my waist, and I gasp when he sits up, pulls me with him, and rises from the couch. He strides to my bedroom, where he lays me down on the bed and we continue the deliciously slow kiss.

The intensity with which I feel him in every cell of my body is overwhelming. He consumes my every thought, takes me to places I’ve never been to.

This is how we spend the rest of our first entire night together. We explore each other’s bodies and enjoy the closeness. Sometimes with tenderness, sometimes with passion, and when I eventually fall asleep in Ben’s arms, my last thought is how I’ve never experienced anything like this before.

EIGHTEEN

BEN

I've never been a nervous person, always taking things as they come. Feelings never dictated my actions.

Not anymore, and not when it comes to Amy. From the day we met, my emotions took over. First, I worried about getting too close to her, doubted my ability to let someone in, and regretted my past activities. Since we crossed the line three weeks ago, a lightness has taken over; I'm calm in her presence but fidgety when we're apart.

Checking the time, I step from one foot to the other, shoving my hand through my hair while I wait for Amy to come downstairs so I can take her out for her birthday dinner. She refused to let me into her apartment as she needed another five minutes to get ready, so I pace up and down in front of her building. It's been less than three hours since I've seen her at work, but after staying the night at her place yesterday, I'm more reluctant to say goodbye than before.

My thoughts race. I was the one who told her not to overthink anything, and here I am doing it myself. Will she like the restaurant I chose? Will she like her present? And will she ask me to stay the night again?

What a sentimental sap I've become.

But I don't care, and I don't care that I spin around when the door opens; I don't care that I hold my breath when I spot Amy. Yes, she takes my breath away. Stunning is the first word that comes to mind when I drink in her appearance. The sleeveless, white sundress with floral print clings to her body so deliciously. It's ankle-length and not very revealing, but I know what's underneath, and it makes my heart race. I already know what she smells like even though she's too far away for her scent to hit my nostrils; her flowery perfume is imprinted in my olfactory memory.

But what kills me is her smile. It's soft and sexy, and she doesn't smile at anyone else like that, not at Lauren, not at Luke, no one.

It's my smile.

She saunters over and stands right in front of me, and in her heels, she's almost my height, so no bending or stretching is necessary to press my mouth to hers for a lingering kiss. Relief floods my system, erasing all nervous tension.

"Hey, thanks for waiting." She runs her hands over my chest before grabbing my hands and intertwining our fingers. "Sorry for making you stay out here. With you in the next room, it would have taken me much longer to get ready."

My gaze wanders over her body. "We may not have left," I mumble, and she chuckles while the cutest blush suffuses her cheeks. "Shall we?"

She nods, and on our way to the restaurant, she asks question after question about where I'm taking her instead of waiting the twenty minutes we need to get there. I don't cave, which is a miracle because I always struggle to deny Amy anything.

As I said, sentimental sap.

But again, I don't care. The gleam in her eyes when she realizes I chose a Korean restaurant is priceless.

"You remembered," she whispers, glancing at me with the brightest smile. Yes, I remember how she told me that the most exotic place in her hometown was a Korean restaurant, and she and her parents would go there once a month. It's one of her happy memories growing up—memories of a better time, she called it. I hated her sad expression when she said it, making me wish once more I could meet her ex and inflict some pain on him.

"This is the best present ever. Thank you." She leaves another tender kiss on my lips before we walk through the door.

"Way to put pressure on me and my actual present," I mutter as I trudge behind her, and my comment makes her

chuckle.

We sit in a quiet corner of the busy place, order drinks and food, and engage in the usual comfortable small talk.

“Did Lauren finally convince you to celebrate your birthday with hers?” I ask.

“Yeah.” She crinkles her nose. “We’re going to the Avalon, so it’s not an official birthday party but a night out. I can accept that.”

“Why don’t you want an official party?”

“It’s weird. I know you and Lauren well, but I’ve only met the others a few times.” She lets out a small sigh as she grabs the drink the waiter just served. After taking a sip, she leans back, tilting her head. “By the way, did you tell Aaron it was my birthday?”

I grimace. Damn. “I might have mentioned I’m taking you out, yeah. Why?”

“He texted to wish me a happy birthday.” She bites her lips, keeping them from stretching into a smile.

“What?” I ask because she sure is not telling me everything.

“He asked if you screwed up yet.”

I let out a heavy sigh. “Seriously? I’m gonna have to smack him next time we meet. Does he text you often?”

She shakes her head. “Well, you know he messaged me after the incident at the Avalon, apologizing for the kiss.”

I remember. Amy showed me my brother’s message, which still makes my blood boil. He did apologize, but he also repeated his offer to take her on a proper date.

“Today, he asked if I was coming to your next family dinner,” she adds.

My eyes widen. “Oh. Um, do you want to?” I frown. “I’m sorry I haven’t introduced you to my dad yet. He can be a bit much to handle. He’ll ask you a million inappropriate

questions, and he's in no way inferior to Aaron in his flirtatious manner."

"I know; you told me." She covers my hand with hers, giving it a gentle squeeze. "I'm in no rush to meet him. Yet," she adds with a slight smirk. "How is he? He had no more emergencies due to medication negligence, right?"

I chuckle. "No, he's been better with that. Still eating crap, but it is hard to teach an old dog blah blah blah," I say, waving my hand and rolling my eyes.

Amy props her chin on her hand, leaning closer. "So did you say he still works in his old job?"

"Not exactly. Since his health worsened, he stopped the on-site part of his job completely and made peace with the administrative work. He says he prefers the boring office job over suffering a heart attack from the stress that was overseeing so many different projects on-site."

Amy frowns. "His heart too?"

"Yeah. That's what alcohol does to a person."

"Good thing he came to his senses." With a deep sigh, she leans back in her chair, and the waiter interrupts our conversation a moment later when he brings the food. The smile is back on Amy's face as she inspects her bowl. We both chose a variation of Bibimbap, a Korean rice dish with sautéed vegetables, beef, and a fried egg.

I watch Amy dig in; unlike me, she's had this kind of food before—I'm a newbie. She uses the chopsticks with ease while I struggle, and when I curse under my breath, she laughs softly. "No, like this," she says, adjusting the sticks in my hand.

I keep watching her, and with some practice and patience I don't own, I shove some food into my mouth. I must look like a total idiot, but Amy doesn't comment, just smiles.

While I fight with my dinner, her earlier words come back to my mind. My dad came to his senses.

“What’s that somber expression all about?” Amy asks, and I lift my gaze to meet hers.

I pinch my lips together, drawing in a slow breath through my nose. “What you said about my dad ... well, I never grasped how grief could do that to him.”

She studies me before asking, “Will you tell me about her? Your mom?” Her voice is so soft that it almost gets lost in the surrounding noise.

Drawing in another long breath, my gaze fixes on the napkin I fumble with. “I don’t remember much. I do remember that Aaron was such a pest, already annoying the shit out of me as a toddler. Mom would read to us every night, and he would throw a tantrum when we wouldn’t read one of his books.” I rub my palm over my breastbone, brushing away the hollow feeling in my chest. As much as my brother aggravated me, those were good times, and I hate that we couldn’t make more memories. “So Mom let him choose the story but whispered in my ear she’d read to me later when he was in bed. She always kept her word. She taught us the importance of family and that no matter how often we fight during the day, at the end of that day, we’re brothers and must stick together.” My lips lift in a slight smile. “It’s the only reason I still talk to him and my dad.”

Amy nods, fixing her gaze on her food. She stirs the vegetables and the rice, and I admire the grace with which she uses the chopsticks. Judging from her pensive expression, though, her mind isn’t in a happy place.

“How are things with your mom?” I ask.

With a deep inhale, she furrows her brows. “They’re okay, I guess. Could be worse. She calls me once a week, telling me she wants me to come back home.”

I press my lips together so I don’t curse under my breath. The thought of her returning home makes my chest ache. She says she’s happy here, but what if she changes her mind one day?

With a soft chuckle, she leans closer, grasping my hand to entwine our fingers. “Don’t worry,” she whispers. “I’m not planning to. My life here is too great to give up.”

I mirror her soft smile. “Good.” I want to ask about her past, about what it is her ex did to her other than cheat. She never specified, but how her face falls whenever she thinks about her old life speaks volumes.

I don’t want to see that expression on her tonight; it’s her birthday, and we’ll celebrate that by making new memories worth reminiscing.

So we stop talking about annoying family members and the past. We finish our food, and yes, even *I* manage to empty the bowl. It was a delicious meal in gorgeous company, and while we wait for our dessert, I retrieve a cloth pouch from my pocket and slide it over. “Happy birthday, Princess.”

She fixes her soft eyes on me, and the glow in them sends a wave of pleasant warmth through me. She places one hand on her chest and picks up the small bag with her other. “Thank you,” she whispers with a genuine and radiant smile. She opens the cord and lets the contents fall into her palm. She inspects it, stroking it with her fingertips, and the longer she does, the faster my heart beats.

It took me a while to find a present, and it wasn’t until a couple of days ago that I bought the bracelet Amy now examines. It’s made of tiny plain silver beads, and according to her, the kind of jewelry she wears. I only added a little something to make it a personalized gift—a crown charm.

“I love it. It’s beautiful,” she croaks, the emotions evident in her voice, and I let out the breath I was holding. Beaming at me, she holds out her arm. “Would you?”

I take the bracelet and put it around her wrist, and when she holds the small pendant between her fingers, she says after a long exhale, “Thank you so much. I love it, really.” She meets my gaze with a broad and sexy as fuck smile. “I’ll have to express my gratitude once we’re alone.”

I throw my head back with a laugh before I smirk at her. “Oh no, babe, this is your day—and your night. It’s not about me, it’s solely about you, and you can do whatever the fuck you want with me.”

She bites her lower lip and narrows her eyes, making my body ache for her. “You mean I can use you for my total gratification?”

“Please, do.” This woman kills all my working brain cells with one look, and when she says things like that, she makes me throb with need. My mind conjures up images of our past sexual encounters, adding to my impatience, and I look around to check if the waiter finally brings our damn dessert.

When my gaze falls back on Amy, I’m ready to knock over the table and jump on her. She shifts in her seat, her cheeks flushed. At the base of her throat, I detect her pulse flutter, and her nervous state makes my heart race too.

“I’ve been meaning to talk about something,” she says before emptying her drink in one go. She places the glass on the table, her gaze fixed on a drop of water that runs down the side. She wipes it with her thumb and leads her hand to her mouth to lick it off.

I stare at her, not daring to blink so I don’t miss anything. She runs her tongue along her upper lip, and when she takes in a deep breath, my gaze snaps to her heaving chest and the hint of cleavage. I already picture my tongue licking the delicious swells of her breasts—amongst other parts of her luscious body.

The heavenly sight is so distracting that I almost miss her next words.

“I’m on the pill, and clean.”

I blink at her, making sense of what she said, but my dick understood. I’ve been growing harder since she started talking about gratification, and now I have to deal with the most painful erection ever. “Fuck,” I growl as I wipe the sweat off my forehead before wiping my trembling hands on my pants. I’ve never wanted a woman as much as I want her, and that’s

not only because she just implied we skip the condoms. It's everything that has happened these past three weeks. All our talks show how well we fit, and the intimacy between us is so intense that it leaves me breathless—and more impatient than ever to be alone with her.

So after telling her I'm clean, too, I suggest we pass up on dessert—at least at the restaurant. To my dick's relief, Amy agrees, and I settle the bill.

Time to go home where she can do whatever the fuck she wants with me.

NINETEEN

AMY

Two months.

That's all it took to make me act like a total nutcase whenever Ben isn't around. It wasn't as bad at first, but today I realize I've been staring at his empty chair for the past five minutes, unable to concentrate on my work. And this is me whenever Ben attends a meeting or is gone for longer than half an hour.

Total nutcase. I'm surprised Lauren still puts up with my infatuated self, but she claims she benefits from the happiness I radiate.

Yes, I'm happy. No heaviness drags me down anymore; the only pain I withstand is my facial muscles burning from so much smiling. Two months into our relationship, Ben and I experience every day how we fit, and that is the best damn feeling after a long stretch of worry, stress, and insecurity. No more apprehension lingers even though things evolved at a frightening speed; satisfying mere carnal cravings wasn't our only motive. With him, everything comes as naturally as if we've known each other for much longer, and I've never been as comfortable around anyone as I've been around him.

"Stop daydreaming, missy."

My hand flies to my chest, and I spin my chair around with a gasp. I face a giggling Lauren, who drops a stack of letters on my desk.

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle you." She points her thumb at Ben's desk, asking, "Where's your Romeo?"

My eyes widen. "At a meeting. And shush, woman." I look left and right. "We don't want anyone to hear you."

Even though the company doesn't have a no-dating policy, a relationship between colleagues is frowned upon, so

Ben and I keep it low. No kissing, hardly any touching, and definitely no more sex in the storeroom.

Lauren laughs. “Relax,” she says, leaning against my desk and crossing her feet at her ankles. “Are you guys coming to O’Reilly’s tonight?”

I grimace. “It’s been a hectic week, so I was looking forward to a quiet evening at home. Do you want to go to the movies tomorrow?” I add when Lauren pouts. “As compensation? I know I’ve been neglecting you lately.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Damn right you have. But it’s okay, and yes, let’s go see a movie tomorrow.”

“Can I come?” Lauren and I turn to Ben, who drops into his chair with a sigh. “Hi, Lauren,” he says before directing his gaze at me. “Hey, babe,” he mouths, and my lips stretch inevitably.

“Oh my goodness.” Lauren groans and pushes herself off my desk. “You guys are too cute for me to handle right now. And no,” she says, pointing her finger at Ben. “You can’t come. Girls’ night. Ask Paul or Jack if they want to hang out.”

Ben raises his hands. “All right, I get it. I can spend one evening alone.”

Lauren arches an eyebrow. “Good. Okay, I gotta run. See you later.”

She disappears around the corner, and I turn to Ben, the smile still on my lips. “How was the meeting?” I ask.

He gathers some papers from his desk, letting out a deep sigh. “Boring. Too much talking, and the worst part is I have another meeting after lunch.”

My shoulders drop, along with my smile. “Really? That sucks.”

Ben shoves his hand through his hair. “I know. I’m so glad it’s Friday.” He opens his mouth to say more, but something cuts him off. He retrieves his phone from his pocket and stares at the screen with furrowed brows, muttering, “Damn.”

“What’s wrong?”

Ben draws in a deep breath before meeting my gaze, and the frown on his forehead makes my stomach churn. “Aaron texted. He wants to see us tonight, at our dad’s place.”

“Us? As in you and me? And why at your dad’s place?”

“Yes, you and me. He doesn’t say what it’s about or why at my dad’s.” He stares at his phone as if it might give him some answers, but when it doesn’t, he drops it on his desk. With a groan, he shoves his hand through his hair again. “What a shit day.”

I tap my fingers on my thighs, ignoring the lump in my throat. After checking the time, I rise from my chair. “Come on. It’s almost lunchtime; let’s grab something to eat and take our minds off this until tonight.”

With a weak nod, Ben follows suit, and when he walks next to me with a stooped posture, I know that taking our minds off anything will be difficult.



That night, we drive to Ben’s childhood home, and conflicting emotions swirl inside me on our way into the suburbs. Ben has been tense the entire day, and even though he did his best to cover up his feelings, I felt his mood in every cell of my body.

A small part of me looks forward to tonight, though. It’ll be the first time I see where Ben grew up, and it uncovers another one of his layers. Opening up about his past is still difficult for him—for both of us. So I never pushed him to introduce me to his dad or show me where he spent his youth. As Ben explained earlier, I won’t meet his father tonight because he’s attending a weekly meeting, but I don’t mind. We’ll save it for another day.

As we walk up to the beautiful, small two-story house in the quiet neighborhood, I tighten my coat around my body. The chilly late-October air makes me shiver, and I grasp Ben's hand, intertwining our fingers.

"You okay?"

I nod to his question before my gaze wanders. It's hard to see much in the late evening darkness, but a few glowing street lamps illuminate a perfectly mowed front lawn and the path leading to the house's small porch.

"I wish I had taken you here earlier, under different circumstances," Ben mumbles, squeezing my hand.

"Ben, it's okay."

"I know; you keep saying that. Still, I'm sorry this is such a mess."

I stop and make him turn to me. "Ben, really. It's okay. I'll meet your dad eventually. We're both not that great at dealing with our parents. I haven't told my mom about us either."

After two months with Ben, I'm certain this is more than a fling and worth telling my parents about, but I don't. My mom wouldn't understand. In her head, my ex and I still have a chance because she loves him. I should tell her what happened, but I can't bring myself to do it. I'm afraid that voicing my memories will tear open the old wounds.

"As you said," I tell Ben, "it's a mess, and complicated at that."

His lips stretch into a soft smile—the first since this morning. I press a tender kiss on his mouth before we continue on our way. He rummages in his pocket for the key, but the front door opens, and a middle-aged man walks out. He's tall, almost the same height as Ben's six feet and two inches, with graying dark hair and a short full beard. The fine lines around his eyes deepen when he displays a dazzling smile.

"Ben," he says. "What are you doing here?"

Ben rubs his neck. "Oh, um, we were in the neighborhood and wanted to say hi. Sorry to drop by unannounced."

He waves his hand. “Don’t be silly. You can come by any time. Unfortunately, I’m, uh, meeting some friends, and I can’t reschedule.”

“Oh, that’s right, sorry,” Ben states before turning to me. “Amy, this is my dad. Dad, this is Amy.”

Ben’s dad stretches out his hand, his smile widening, and the resemblance to Aaron is uncanny with that beaming grin. “Amy, I’ve heard so much about you. I can’t believe my son hasn’t introduced us yet.”

We shake hands. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Taylor.”

He waves his hand. “Please, none of that. Call me Philip.” He checks his watch. “Sorry, kids, I’m running late for, uh ... well, my friends are waiting for me, but please, come by again. If you wanna stay for a bit, there’s drinks in the fridge and cookies on the counter.”

“Cookies? Dad,” Ben grumbles.

“Yes, Son. Okay, my meeting. Um, with friends.”

With a wave, he dashes off, and I smile at his jovial demeanor. Ben told me his dad attends AA meetings every Friday, which is nothing to be ashamed of. I don’t blame him for hiding that fact, though; we’ve just met.

“Come on, let’s wait inside,” Ben says, tugging at my hand.

I chuckle as I hurry after him. “Your dad is nice.”

“Yeah, because he was in a hurry. He’ll turn on the charm next time.”

We walk inside, and I take in the interior. The place is spotless, as far as I can tell. We cross the large hallway with stairs leading to the first floor, and I catch a glimpse of the living room as we pass. It’s small, with clean white walls and sparsely furnished, but it looks inviting, especially the huge couch.

“Why did Aaron want to meet here?” I ask as Ben keeps walking.

“I have no idea. He knew Dad wouldn’t be home tonight, which gives us privacy, and that makes me nervous.”

“Why?”

He shrugs. “Just a vague premonition.”

We enter the spacious kitchen with a dining table and a kitchen island that holds the stove. The room is as spotless as the rest, and I internally chuckle at the thought that the tidiness gene must have skipped Ben.

I take off my coat and hang it over the back of a chair before walking over to the large French doors leading into the backyard. “Your dad has a pool?” I turn to Ben with narrow eyes. “Why the heck did we spend a scorching summer in the city instead of hanging around here? Now it’s too cold outside.”

“I’m sorry, Princess.” He stands behind me and wraps his arms around my waist. He buries his face in my hair and presses my body closer. “I didn’t want my family to ruin this,” he mumbles before leaving a feathery kiss on my neck.

As much as I enjoy the proximity, I don’t like the tension rolling off him in waves. His fingers dig into my hips a little too deep, and he grinds his teeth, making the knot in my belly tighten.

“Why is this bothering you so much?” I whisper.

Ben huffs. “I have this unnerving sense of foreboding that Aaron is in trouble again. It’s a bad sign that he wants to see us both tonight. I don’t want you to get involved in anything related to our past.”

I turn around in his embrace and rest my arms on his shoulders. “Hey, stop worrying. It’s probably not what you think,” I tell him with as much confidence as I can muster, but his expression says he disagrees.

“Oh, Princess,” he murmurs, brushing his mouth over my forehead. “I worry about you getting in the middle of something dangerous. I want you to be safe.”

“Ben, I *always* feel safe with you,” I whisper, and my body trembles as his mouth wanders over my cheek to my neck, leaving tender kisses on my skin. An intense shiver runs down my spine when his fingers slip underneath my sweater, caressing my lower back.

My eyes flutter closed, and I lift my head. Ben finds my lips for a kiss that conveys the sincerity of his words; he’s concerned about my safety—about me. I press myself closer and return his kiss with a little more force than usual to let him know I trust him, and to put his mind at ease and stop his worrying.

A soft moan emanates from the back of my throat, and his kiss makes me oblivious to everything around us. Our little bubble bursts, though, when someone clears their throat. “Oh, please. No making out in Dad’s kitchen.”

Ben and I flinch and turn to Aaron, who shakes his head at us with an eye roll and an exaggerated sigh. Ben drapes his arm around my shoulder, and I cross my arms over my chest as we watch Aaron place a bottle of whiskey on the counter and rummage through the cupboard to get glasses. “Does anyone want a drink?”

A low grumble vibrates through Ben and, because he still presses my body close to his, through me as well. “You brought alcohol to Dad’s house? What the fuck, Aaron?”

“Relax, I won’t leave it. This calls for something a little stronger. So?” He looks back and forth between us.

I shake my head, and Ben scowls at his brother. “Just tell us why you wanted to see us and why here.”

Aaron pours himself a drink and takes a sip. With the glass in his hand, he paces up and down before sinking into a chair with a deep sigh. Ben and I are rooted to the spot, our eyes on him.

“How much of our past does Amy know?” Aaron asks.

Ben sucks in a breath. His brother’s question confirms his fears. “A little,” he snarls.

“Does she know about Jackson? The drugs? Becca?” Aaron continues.

My posture stiffens, and Ben’s grip on me tightens. I lift my gaze to his face and frown at his flared nostrils and the stern look he fixes on Aaron.

When Ben doesn’t respond, Aaron lets out a humorless laugh. “Judging from your expression, she knows nothing. Do you want to tell her, or shall I?”

“Aaron, why?” With a groan, he shoves his hands through his hair, and when he lets go of me to pace back and forth, a coldness hits my body that makes me shiver.

“Why does she have to know all the facts?” Ben asks. “She knows I screwed up; I don’t want to burden her with the rest.”

Aaron snorts. “You’re too fucking good for this world, Ben.” He turns to me. “Amy, your precious boyfriend used to be a drug dealer.”

Grimacing, I rub my chest, where my heart races after it skipped a beat or three. I meet Ben’s gaze, and his pained expression makes me cringe. “I kinda figured it had something to do with drugs,” I say. “Either that or you were part of a gang of burglars or something.”

Aaron chuckles. “Not too far off. We know how to pick a lock and steal a car. We have many talents.”

“Fuck, Aaron,” Ben snaps. “This isn’t the time to joke.” With another groan, he stands in front of me and takes my hands in his. “Amy, I’m so sorry. I should have told you about this, but—”

I shake my head. “Ben, I understand. Learning the facts doesn’t change how I see or feel about you.” I take a deep breath. “But now that you started the story: who is Jackson? And Becca?”

With a dejected sigh and slumped shoulders, Ben explains, “Jackson was our boss. He provided us with the drugs and told us what to sell to who. Aaron’s best friend, Eric ...” Ben pauses and glares at his brother. I follow his gaze and

furrow my brows when Aaron's jaw tightens along with his grip on his glass at the mention of his friend's name. "He died of an overdose," Ben continues in an indistinct voice, drawing my attention back to him. "Becca was his girlfriend. She had nothing to do with the gang, but she knew of Jackson. She blamed him for Eric's death and threatened to get the cops involved. Jackson didn't like that, and one night, one of his goons paid her a visit. We don't know what went down, but she ended up in the ICU, barely hanging on to life."

I blink at him, struggling to process everything he just said. The ringing in my ears grows louder the more of the story I understand. Thoughts swirl in my mind, making it nearly impossible to form a coherent sentence. I have so many questions but can't voice a single one. "That's terrible," is all I can utter.

Ben nods. "No one involved the police, and Jackson wasn't arrested. Once Becca was well enough, she disappeared, went into hiding. We don't know what has become of her." He lets go of my hands and places them on my cheeks. "That's why I was so reluctant to get close to you. People end up hurt—or dead."

Aaron huffs. "Well, too late now." He rises from his chair to refill his drink.

Ben narrows his eyes at his brother. "Will you finally tell me why we're having this conversation? What did you do? And what the fuck does Amy have to do with this?"

Aaron straightens up and squares his shoulders. "You remember the deal I told you about? The one I had with Wallace? Turns out the guy I helped him bust was about to do a huge deal with Jackson."

Ben takes a step toward his brother with clenched fists. "You've got to be fucking kidding me. I told you not to trust Wallace."

I watch them with wide eyes and a hammering heart, but while my whole body trembles with fear and confusion, Aaron remains cool and rolls his eyes at Ben.

“Yes, I know,” he responds. “And I’m sorry, but the damage is done. Jackson knows I interfered. He knows you’re my brother. And now, he also knows Amy is your girlfriend.” He empties his drink and grimaces before adding, “And as *you* know, a girlfriend serves as great leverage.”

TWENTY

BEN

I've been angry at my brother before, more often than not. We picked countless fights over the years and aggravated the shit out of each other.

But what I experience now goes far beyond that. Adrenaline rushes through my system, accelerating my heartbeat and breathing. I clench my fists so hard that my nails dig into my palms, but I ignore the pain. All I concentrate on is not beating the shit out of Aaron.

I *want* to beat the shit out of him. My entire life, I've never been angrier at anyone than I am at him right now.

And I'm just as angry at myself for letting this happen. I knew it. I should have stayed the fuck away from Amy, shouldn't have caved. Now it's too late, and the woman who means more to me than anyone else is entangled in this clusterfuck.

I draw in a long breath through my nose, but it does nothing to calm the rage inside me. "I could kill you," I snarl.

"Could someone please explain what this means?"

I flinch when Amy speaks, and her shaky voice tears my attention from my brother. My stomach churns when I take in her pale face and the deep frown on her forehead. Fuck, what have I done? I want to pull her into my arms and hold her tight, keep her safe, but my body refuses to move.

Aaron responds before I snap out of my stupefied state. "I owe Jackson, and if I don't deliver, he may want to have a little chat with you. Don't worry, though; I've got it under control. Jackson wants me to get him some info on another deal, and I will deliver."

A fresh wave of anger washes through me, making me feel even more on edge. With one wide stride, I stand in front of him and grab him by his shirt. "Everything under control?"

Aaron, I swear, if anyone gets too close to Amy, you'll regret it."

Aaron raises his hands but doesn't step away. "Calm down, Ben. I also have friends. They'll keep an eye on Jackson's guys—and Amy. Jackson follows me around, but not you—yet."

"Which means they followed you here."

"No, I made sure they didn't. Doesn't matter, though. He knows I'd warn you, but he won't act until after the deadline he gave me."

I let go of him and step back. "Which is when?"

"I have until the end of this month."

"That's in ten fucking days, Aaron. How are you gonna do that?"

"Leave the details to me. I have a plan. You just need to stay low."

With a heavy sigh, I run my fingers through my hair. This is a damn nightmare. The prickling sensation in the back of my neck intensifies, and getting oxygen into my lungs becomes harder with every shallow breath I take. My inner voice rages at me, blaming me for letting this happen, and when I gaze at Amy, my heart stops. I have no clue how to erase her pained expression, and I can't think while we're in my dad's kitchen with Aaron. "I need to get out of here. Come on, Amy, I'll take you home."

I grab her hand, and she lets me pull her after me. We don't speak a word. The entire way to Amy's apartment, I'm quiet. At least on the outside, but thoughts, worries, and fears rampage inside my head.

We enter her place, and as soon as the door closes, she forces me to look at her. "Will you talk to me now? Please."

I grimace. It's only fair to answer her questions, as much as I hate to tell her more about the fucked-up mess that is my past. "What do you want to know?"

“Come on.” She seizes my hand and leads the way to her living room. We drop on the couch, and she turns to me, one leg tucked underneath her. “Who is Wallace?”

I run my hand over my face with a sigh. “He’s Jackson’s father—and a rogue cop. He knows about his son’s activities, and being a scumbag himself, he grants Jackson protection from judicial persecution. Wallace won’t let Jackson cross certain boundaries, though, which means we turned to him in the past to help us get Jackson off our backs.”

“Certain boundaries?”

I swallow hard. I still don’t want to tell her every detail, but now that she’s part of this, she deserves to know, and judging from her strong posture and determined expression, she won’t let it go. “Yeah, Wallace tolerates drug trafficking but no other goods. He busted a few deals Jackson wanted to make. They mainly involved arms. Wallace doesn’t know everything about his son’s dealings, though, so whenever we got wind of something, we benefited from that information.”

I let out a heavy sigh. As I recount what we used to do, I realize once more what a risky game it’s always been. Aaron and I were lucky Wallace liked us and that Jackson respects his father for incomprehensible reasons.

“Ratting him out kept him at arm’s length for a while,” I continue. “I never understood how their world worked but never questioned it. Same goes for the situation Aaron is in now. Maybe Wallace did this on purpose, or maybe it was an unfortunate coincidence that they busted one of Jackson’s business partners. It doesn’t change the fact that Aaron screwed up and we’re in a mess.”

Amy scoots closer, diminishing the physical distance between us. “What do we do now?”

I shrug. “As Aaron said, stay low. I’ll talk to him again; he has to give me more details about this. I want to know what we’re dealing with and what his plan is. I’ll stay with you until this is over.” My insides still churn when I look at her, the knowledge of my mistake swirling in the forefront of my mind. I will make this right; I will face the consequences. Amy

will certainly end our relationship once this is over, and I can't blame her. She may even want some distance now, but I can't let her out of my sight. "I can sleep on the couch," I whisper before averting my gaze.

"What? No! No, no, no! Don't pull back, Ben." Amy cups my face with her hands, forcing me to look at her once more. "I need you. If you sleep on the couch, I will too." She glares at me, telling me what she thinks of my suggestion. And just in case I misinterpret her angry stare, she adds, "Don't even think about leaving me just because of this. We'll get through this; we'll find a way out. I don't blame you for anything or wish we hadn't crossed the line. Don't you dare allow these thoughts, you hear me? I'm not scared of them. The only thing I'm scared of is that you don't want to be with me anymore. So please, stay, and not only physically."

I stare at her as her words sink in, but before I grasp their meaning, Amy crashes her lips down on mine with an urgency that takes my breath away, and I can't help but return the kiss. Her speech makes me rethink my opinion on the reaction I expected from her. I'll think later, though. My brain is occupied with my physical response to Amy: my shoulders loosen, I breathe more easily, and I let go of my worries for now.

As we deepen the kiss and her tongue seeks mine, my skin tingles, and when she buries her fingers in my hair, I shiver. My hands wander from my legs to her thighs until they rest on her waist, with my fingertips brushing over the skin underneath her sweater. With a low moan emanating from her throat, Amy presses herself closer, and when an *Oh, Ben* falls from her lips, I'm done for. How she says my name makes my heart race, and I soak up all that is Amy: the delicious taste of her lips, the intoxicating scent of her perfume, and the soft feel of her skin.

I'm at my favorite place, where I'm oblivious to all worries and doubts.

"Take me to bed, Ben," Amy breathes, and the need in her voice makes me tremble. It's the same need that rushes through me, a need to be as close to her as possible. Despite

my remorse over the situation, I can't let her go, so I wrap my arms around her to pick her up and grant her her wish.

I stride to her bedroom and lay her on the soft sheets, all without breaking the kiss.

Everything happens with urgency—how we rip off each other's clothes, how our hands roam each other's bodies, how we kiss passionately. All my negative emotions from this evening retreat to the back of my mind, making room for overwhelming desire and unbridled lust.

I caress her body, every part of her. Her luscious lips, her delicate neck, her perfect breasts with the taut nipples that I take into my mouth, first the left one, then the right. I trail my fingertips over the soft skin of her stomach before following the path with my lips. The familiar scent of her arousal hits my nostrils when I slip between her thighs, turning need into insatiable hunger. I'll never get enough of this woman.

She screams my name when I put my mouth on her, and she arches her back when I slide two fingers inside her wet core. Over and over she pants my name, and her moans electrify every cell in my body, making me buzz with anticipation. When I savor the wetness between her thighs, the buzzing turns into trembling. After she finds her first release, I don't wait for her to catch her breath like I usually do; I need to be inside her.

So I sit up, spread her legs wider, and position myself at her entrance. Our gazes lock as her chest heaves with one last deep breath before she gives me a brief nod. As soon as I sink into her, her eyes flutter closed and her hands grip the sheets. Fervent desire floods my body when I watch her give in to passion while I revel in every second I'm buried deep inside her, skin to skin. Since we've skipped the condoms, the sensations of her wet and soft core wrapped around my dick drive me out of my mind—every time anew.

I grab her hips, holding her in place when I slide in and out of her, soon finding *our* rhythm.

While we move together, we don't speak a word; we don't need words. Our bodies talk, expressing our feelings—feelings

we haven't said out loud yet, but they're there. This isn't plain sex, and we both know it.

As I drive into her, slowly, deliberately, I get lost in her and her touch. Bending down, I devour her lips, and her kisses pull me deeper into intense pleasure. She's all around me, the only one I feel, hear, and see.

My release approaches faster than I want, but there's no escape when she tilts her hips, changing the angle so I stimulate her clit with every thrust. She climaxes, screaming my name again, and pushes me over the edge with her.

We need a few moments to come down from our blissful high, and while we do, we cling to each other, still panting and with our skin covered in a thin layer of sweat. This is the best kind of exhaustion.

It's only reluctantly that I pull out and roll my body off her, and I draw her close instantly, with her back against my chest. Burying my nose in her hair, I deeply inhale her comforting scent.

A tiny part of me still thinks I should build some emotional distance, but Aaron is right—the damage is done. If I pull back, Amy won't be any safer. So I ignore that part, and I ignore my anger. Instead, I wrap my arms around her tighter. She's mine to protect now, and that I will, with all my might.

No, leaving her is no longer an option.

TWENTY-ONE

AMY

My favorite start to the day is waking up in Ben's strong embrace, and this morning is no different. I gradually return from a dreamless sleep, and when I stir, so does Ben. He wraps his arm around my waist and pulls my body into his chest. "Good morning, Princess," he mumbles into my hair, making goosebumps erupt over my bare skin.

A slow smile spreads on my face, but it falters as more details of last night resurface. All the chaos and confusion return, causing the same uncomfortable flutter in my stomach. Ben's past is still hard to grasp, and I can't fathom the seriousness of the situation Aaron put us in. So at some point yesterday, I worried more about Ben wanting to break up with me because the remorse weighs heavily on his shoulders. I tried my best to convince him to stay and make him understand that I wanted him to. I think he got the message between rounds two and three of passionate sex, and after a night of lovemaking, I feel more at ease today.

As I reminisce, I realize something about last night feels different. Even though we've been together like this many times, this time, it wasn't about being joined only physically. A deep bond connected us from the beginning, but what was infatuation at first has evolved into something much deeper. The need to be with him is no longer mainly physical. It has become an all-consuming desire.

So when I turn in Ben's arms and face him, staring into his eyes that hold so much warmth and affection, I must admit to myself that he's become the most important person in my life. He's my rock, the one place where I feel safe.

I have completely and utterly fallen in love with him.

"What's that smile on your face, Princess?" Ben murmurs in his deep, sexy morning voice, and it makes my body tingle all over.

When his hand travels over my back to my ass to draw me closer, my mind goes to its happy place. “Nothing,” I murmur in response. “I’m just glad you’re still here, next to me.”

I don’t want to tell him about my feelings in our after-sex haze, not when he so distractingly presses his morning wood against my thigh.

“There’s nowhere I’d rather be.” Ben chuckles before brushing his mouth over mine, eliciting a soft moan from me. One kiss leads to another, and one touch leads to more exploring.

No, it’s not exploring anymore; it’s revisiting. I know every inch of him, and his lips have tasted every part of me. Ben’s hands caress every familiar curve, and my mouth does all the things that make him moan.

We indulge in each other once more before we leave my bed past ten o’clock, and after a quick shower, we sit at my small kitchen table, enjoying a delicious breakfast. Ben made the best pancakes I’ve ever eaten, and I wonder why he hasn’t informed me about this talent of his before.

“I told you I’m gifted in many areas,” he says while I stuff the rest of my third pancake into my mouth.

“I thought you were talking about sex,” I mutter before taking a sip of coffee. I lean back in my chair with a sigh, rubbing my stomach. “Well, this was *really* close to a foodgasm.”

“Close?” Ben gapes at me in mock outrage. “Oh, please. The sounds that left your mouth were the same as the ones earlier in your bed.”

I lift my hands with a soft laugh. “Okay, you’re right. So what else can you cook?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary, sorry.” He points his index finger at me. “But I make delicious grilled cheese sandwiches.”

I grin at him. “Great. So we’re having those for lunch. I’ll provide dessert.”

He raises a single eyebrow, and I throw my head back, laughing at the suggestiveness of his expression. “Ben! I was talking about actual dessert.”

“Of course you were.”

He joins in my laughter, and I enjoy the lightness that radiates through my body. Being with Ben in my apartment, joking and laughing, almost makes me forget last night’s events.

But only almost.

So after cleaning up the kitchen, we move to the couch and snuggle up, and I ask, “What’s gonna happen next? With Aaron, I mean.”

Ben draws in a slow breath. “He’s gonna call me tomorrow night with more details. I probably won’t be able to do anything about the situation but look out for you. So if you’re okay with it, I’ll stay here for the next few days?”

I lift my head off his chest and give him a brief smile. “Totally fine by me.”

I want to ask more, but my ringing phone interrupts our conversation. I hurry to the kitchen, where I left it on the counter. I squint at the screen and frown—unknown caller ID. I stare for another moment, contemplating if I should answer, but before the call goes to voicemail, I hit accept. “Hello?”

The initial silence on the other end of the line makes my pulse race, but my heart stops beating when the caller speaks. “Hey, Amy. It’s me.”

An ice-cold shiver runs down my spine when I recognize his voice. I cover my mouth with my palm as a gasp escapes me. I blink rapidly, trying to analyze the situation. My body goes numb, and I have to grab the edge of the countertop as dizziness takes hold of me.

“How did you get my number?” I finally bring out through gritted teeth.

A sigh is his only answer, and for a fraction of a second, I’m tempted to end the call and keep ignoring him and what

happened between us. But that won't solve anything. "Noah, why are you calling me?" I ask in a shaky voice.

Another sigh. "I know things didn't end well, but I want to talk about everything—and apologize."

I suck in a sharp breath. "But I don't want to talk to you. You can talk to my attorney."

"Please, Amy. I'm sorry about what happened. I regret my actions, and I hate how we parted."

Funny he speaks of hate. The roaring in my ears grows louder as I tighten my grip on the countertop. I have to squeeze my eyes shut to ignore the urge to crush my phone in my hand.

"Noah, I don't want to discuss anything with you."

Another moment of silence increases the tension in my shoulders. He takes a deep breath before he says, "I'm in the city."

A fresh wave of coldness floods my body, and I'm about to drown in it. "In New York?" No, this can't be true.

"Yes. Amy, please. Just one meeting to talk about everything in peace."

I shake my head in an attempt to regain my ability to think straight. "I have nothing to say to you," I growl, "and there is absolutely nothing you could say that would change anything."

"Amy," he says in a low voice as if to soothe a toddler. "You can't avoid me forever. We both know that."

With a strangled whimper, I lower my head and close my eyes. I rub the back of my neck to get rid of the tension, but realizing he's right makes it impossible for my rigid muscles to relax. "Okay," is all I say, even though it doesn't feel okay at all.

"Okay," he echoes my response. "Thanks."

"It's nothing to thank me for. We'll talk about the essentials, that's it." I rub my forehead to think of the best way

to go about this. “Where are you staying? I’ll come to your hotel room so we can talk, and I’ll ask a friend to come along.”

With a long, low sigh, he agrees. “Fine.”

“As you have my number, text me the name of your hotel and room number. This afternoon at three?”

“Yes, that works.”

“All right then. Bye, Noah.” And without giving him a chance to say any more, I end the call with a frustrated groan. Damn, this is not how I wanted this to happen. I still haven’t told Ben any details about my past relationship and why things ended. I always chickened out, never feeling ready to relive the pain. Now, I have no choice but to tell him the truth.

As I wipe my sweaty palms on my shirt, the thought lingers that it’s for the better. This is the impetus I need.

I turn around to join Ben in the living room, but I stop in my tracks when my gaze falls on him standing in the doorway. My hand flies to my chest. “Oh my gosh. Don’t sneak up on me.”

“Sorry, Princess,” he mumbles, but he delivers his apology with tight lips and furrowed brows, and it fails to calm my racing heart. We stare at each other for another few seconds before he asks, “Who called?”

My lips stretch into a fake smile, and I have no idea why. This isn’t a moment to look any kind of happy or amused. I rub my chest before choking out, “That was my ex.” I swallow the lump in my throat when Ben narrows his eyes.

“Your ex?” His neutral tone sends an unpleasant shiver down my spine and increases the tension in my body. But when I grimace, Ben’s expression softens. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop on your conversation, but I couldn’t ignore how aggravated you sounded during that call, and I’m worried. Does he want to meet?”

I let out a long breath, and when he steps closer, pulling me into his embrace, I relax. “Yes. He’s in New York and wants to talk.”

Ben's posture stiffens, and a low grumble emanates from his chest. "And you agreed."

I nod at his statement. So he heard that part of the conversation. "Will you come with me? I don't want to face him alone."

Ben's head flinches back, and he locks his gaze with mine. "Why? I mean, of course I'll go with you, but are you afraid of him?"

I shake my head. "It's not what you think. He wouldn't hurt me—physically. He's done a lot of emotional damage, so I'm not keen on seeing him. Your presence will help." I rub my chest, where my pounding heart pumps blood through my trembling body. Dread at Ben's reaction to the truth I've hidden from him claws its way to the forefront of my brain. "I have to tell you something," I say. "I should have told you this long ago but never plucked up the courage."

The frown on his forehead deepens. His curious stare makes my heart beat even faster, and I'm not sure I'll find the courage now. I was so stupid to keep this from him.

"Ben, I—"

My phone pings in my hand, making me flinch. I step away from Ben's embrace and read the text that pops up on the screen. "Of course," I scoff. "He's staying at the Manhattan Junior suite on the twenty-sixth floor of the Four Seasons. Still such a show-off."

"That's a pretty expensive place to stay."

I lay my phone on the countertop and run my hand over my face to get rid of my scowl. "Yeah, he comes from money. He works twenty-four-seven to add to his bank account—if he isn't screwing women he's not supposed to."

Ben grimaces. "I'm sorry that dirtbag did this to you."

I hold up my hand. "No, don't. Don't feel bad about it. It happened, and it's over. It hurt, but I survived."

He offers me an understanding nod as he grasps my hand. "So what did you want to tell me?"

My brows furrow, and I bite the inside of my cheek. Can I do this? I open and close my mouth, but words fail me. My mouth is dry, making me wish for a tall glass of water.

Yes, maybe we should have a drink first. I have some vodka somewhere. That may help bring the words out.

My entire body feels itchy, making me second-guess my decision to tell Ben the truth now. I've thought about this scenario so many times, and it never ended well. So many possible complications held me back. Damn, why do I have to tell him?

Because Noah is back in my life, and he wants to talk about the one unresolved issue that still connects us.

I clutch my arms to my chest, where my heart hammers like mad, and I suck in a long breath to get some oxygen to my brain. How do I shut out these worst-case scenarios? Will he be angry? Disappointed? Will he leave me?

“Amy?”

Ben's soft voice tears me out of my mental haze. Our eyes meet, and the concern he shows breaks my heart. “Promise me you'll hear me out, okay?” I croak.

He shifts from one foot to the other but nods.

So I finally say the words I should have said two months ago. “I'm married.”

TWENTY-TWO

BEN

This is a nightmare. It has to be. Everything Aaron dropped on us yesterday and Amy's last words right now can't be true.

Yes, that's it. This is one long, dreadful dream. I only have to wake up, and things will return to normal. A normal where no Jackson threatens my girlfriend if my stupid brother doesn't deliver; a normal where the woman I love didn't just tell me she's married to someone else.

I stand in front of Amy, unable to move a single muscle. A wave of nausea sets off in the pit of my stomach as my anger from last night returns. Anger at fucking everything. What the hell is happening? How could she keep something like this from me?

"Married?" I grumble.

With a pained expression, Amy stretches out her hand, reaching for mine, but she pulls back, covering her mouth instead. She closes her eyes and draws in a deep breath.

"You asked me to hear you out," I mumble, breaking the heavy silence. "What else do you have to say?"

Her eyes snap open, and she wraps her arms around herself. "I'm so sorry," she whispers. "I couldn't tell you earlier, even though I should have, but I couldn't. And it wouldn't have changed anything, would it? Noah and I are over, and I'd still feel the same for you."

Snapping out of my stupor, I rake my fingers through my hair with a deep sigh. She doesn't deserve my anger, so I shove the bitter thoughts aside. Instead, other unwelcome feelings surface. "Amy, you're legally his. You're his wife. Is this your way of keeping your foot in the door? It would be easy to return to him, wouldn't it?"

Her eyes widen. "What? No!" She throws her hands in the air, pacing up and down a few steps. "I just couldn't deal with

the divorce,” she adds, directing her pleading gaze at me. “I wasn’t dealing well with everything, so my priority was getting better—physically and mentally. The legal details were at the bottom of my list, and he didn’t push it either.”

My entire fucking body feels like it weighs a ton. Breathing is a challenge, and all reason seems lost. I hate myself for these negative emotions boiling inside me. I should be understanding, and I should comfort her, but all I can think about is that she’s not free. She isn’t mine. “How long are you planning on staying married?”

She bites her lips and rubs her chest. “Ben, don’t. Don’t insinuate. It’s over between him and me. For good.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. Damn, this is only getting worse. I hate how we stand in front of each other, at least five feet apart, out of reach. My eyes snap open when she draws in a shaky breath, and when I meet her sad gaze, I wince. “Fuck, I can’t deal with this right now,” I grumble as I storm out of the kitchen. The room feels much too small, and I need to get out of here. I can’t think straight, and I can’t do anything about it.

“Ben, wait.” Amy runs after me and catches hold of my hand as I’m about to open the front door. Her touch sends a jolt of electricity through my body. It kills me that I have to reject her usually comforting touch. As much as I want to stay with her, I need to clear my head first. The news has to sink in, and I have to order my thoughts. “I’m sorry, Amy. I need a moment alone. I’ll call you.”

I free myself from her grip and leave without looking back.



After wandering the streets, I realize I can’t deal with this alone. I consider calling Paul to talk about this mess, but I can’t. He’s unaware of the details about my past too.

That leaves only one person, as much as I hate this option.

With clenched teeth, I dial my brother's number, and after a quick call, he agrees to meet me at the Kingston Bar, where his shift is about to start.

During the subway ride to Midtown, I replay the earlier conversation and order the facts. Amy is married, but it's to a guy who cheated on her and broke her heart. Getting over that relationship cost her a lot of strength, so she had none left to end their marriage officially. I get that. I do. But deep down, my inner voice screams at me that she's still his.

When I enter my destination, I spot Aaron sitting at the bar chatting to the blonde bombshell of a bartender. Well, flirting. The girl must be new; I haven't seen her before.

"Sorry to interrupt. Hey." I drop on the stool next to him, and he glances at me.

"Ben, hi." He turns back to the woman. "Sharon, I'll catch you later, okay? Gotta talk to my brother." He points his thumb at me and gives her a charming smile.

"Sure, Aaron," she purrs, and I'm sure they already have all sorts of plans for *later*.

"So, what's up?" Aaron turns to me once Sharon busies herself with rearranging the liquor bottles on the shelf at the other end of the bar.

I shove my hand through my hair with a deep sigh. "Tell me more about Jackson and this fucking deal you agreed to."

He furrows his brows. "I can't tell you more right now. You'll have to wait until tomorrow night. I'll know more then. First, I have to speak to some people."

I grunt. "Fine."

My brother studies me, brows still furrowed. "What's gotten your panties in a twist? Where's Amy, anyway?"

I avert my gaze, wiping my finger over a non-existent stain on the bar. "She's ... at home."

He squints at me. “Trouble in paradise? I thought you didn’t want to let her out of your sight.”

“That’s none of your business,” I grumble, still rubbing the spotless surface. “Just tell me when this will be over.”

“Oh damn.” Aaron chuckles. “Come on; I told you not to worry. I have a plan. As soon as I figure out where to find this guy Jackson used to make deals with, I’ll make a quick trip, do as Jackson wants me to, and return. Voilá. All good.”

“Why can’t Jackson find him himself?”

“Ugh, Ben, stop asking stupid questions. Because, okay? Leave it to me, and don’t meddle. Stop worrying about Jackson.”

“This isn’t about Jackson,” I snap.

Aaron taps his fingers on the bar, leaning closer with his narrowed eyes fixed on me. “Fuck, Ben, get it out already. We both know you want to. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? What else happened?”

I glare at him before lowering my gaze. A huge part of me is still furious with him for dragging innocent people into his fix, but this other small part reminds me we’re still brothers and that I can count on him. He’ll listen. He’ll probably make fun of me, but he’ll be honest and supportive. “Amy got a call this morning from her ex,” I say. “He’s in town and wants to meet.”

Aaron barks out a laugh. “Are you jealous? Is he here to win her back?”

“I have no clue, but that’s not the problem.” I draw in a deep breath as the emotional pain tightens its grip on me. “That guy isn’t simply her ex—he’s her husband. Amy’s still married to him. That fucking moron is still her damn husband.” My heart aches as I say it out loud. I can’t deny it hurts that she didn’t trust me enough to tell the truth.

My gaze snaps to Aaron, who bursts out laughing. “Are you serious? I knew there was a reason I liked her so much.” He places his hand on my shoulder with a smirk plastered on

his face. “Are you breaking up with her? Please tell me you will.”

I swat at his hand. “Fuck no. And shut the fuck up. I couldn’t do that. But she’s married, dammit.”

“So what? She doesn’t love the guy anymore. She ran away from him, remember?”

“How do you know so much about her story?”

“I asked her if she left anyone behind, and her reaction was unequivocal.”

I nod. With a deep sigh, I rest my elbows on the bar and bury my face in my hands. Aaron’s got a point; Amy came to New York to forget her past, including her ex. Husband or not, whenever she mentioned him, the hurt and pain were obvious in her eyes. So why are they still married, and why didn’t Amy tell me? “She lied to me,” I mumble, letting my head hang low.

Aaron snorts. “Are you fucking serious? Did you ask her if she was married, and she denied it?”

I throw him a sideways glance, which he responds to with a huff. “Thought so. And you kept the extent of your former wrongdoings from her, too, didn’t you? Sometimes, certain things are better left unsaid. Do you know her reasons for keeping this from you?”

I grimace as I remember how she asked me to hear her out before she dropped that bomb on me. I didn’t. I didn’t let her explain why she hasn’t come out with the truth until today. Instead, disappointment overpowered me, and I drew my own conclusions. I was so convinced that her motivation was a lack of trust that I didn’t even consider hearing her out.

A groan ripples through me. I hate it when my brother is right. Turning in my seat, I point my finger at him. “I detest you.”

A slow smile spreads across his face. “I know.” He leans closer, placing his hands on my shoulders and shaking me. “You’re annoyingly uptight. I can’t believe I’m telling you this, but get the fuck back to her and talk shit out. She

probably had her reasons. You, of all people, should remember that everyone deserves a second chance. If she didn't tell you she's still married, it means nothing to her anymore." He checks his watch before directing his gaze at Sharon, who's busy at the other end of the bar. "Are we done here?" He turns back to me. "I've got things to do."

Rising from the stool, I groan. "I'm sure you do." We stare at each other, and it's one of the few moments where I have to admit I'm grateful for my brother—just not out loud. Aaron screwed up, but I trust him to fix things. He's got my back, and I've got his.

Now I need to fix things with Amy. If I hurry, I'll make it in time for the meeting with her ex. She needs support, and I'll ignore my questions and hurt feelings for now. And afterward, I will let her talk, and I will listen.

TWENTY-THREE

AMY

“How are you holding up?”

I direct my gaze at Lauren as we walk side by side toward the Four Seasons, one of New York’s most luxurious hotels. It’s still early, so we amble along the street as if we didn’t have a care in the world.

Only I do have a care. Several. It’s two thirty p.m., thirty minutes until I’ll come face to face with my past. And instead of my boyfriend, who I wanted to have by my side for support, Lauren accompanies me.

After Ben stormed out of my apartment, I paced my living room for half an eternity. I cried and cursed and was at a total loss, and I still am. Ben said he would call me, but when will that be, and what will he tell me? That he can’t be with me any longer? The secret I kept from him sure is reason enough to end things.

In my moment of despair, I called Lauren and told her the truth about still being married. As shocked as she was to learn the details of my relationship with Noah, she expressed her support and agreed without hesitation to accompany me to confront my ex. I couldn’t face him alone.

As we near the hotel, I draw in a deep breath and tighten my coat around my body. An icy wind picks up, making me shiver. “Not too good,” I answer my friend’s question. “I dug myself a pretty deep hole.”

Lauren offers me a sad smile. “Sweetie, you’re not the first person to screw up, and if you wanna hear my two cents, you didn’t even screw up.” She stands in front of me, grabbing my hands. “I know you feel terrible about all this, but you had your reasons for keeping this to yourself. For you, it made sense not to touch on this sensitive topic. I may not be married, but I sure have things in my past I don’t want to dig up. All it takes to cut ties with your past is a simple signature

under a document, and you'll do that once you regain your strength. It's not like this scumbag is a threat to your relationship with Ben."

My lips stretch into a tentative smile, and I squeeze Lauren's hands. "Thank you," I whisper. "But Ben has every right to be mad, so I wouldn't blame him if he wanted to break up."

Lauren snorts. "Don't be ridiculous. Ben is crazy about you, so you'll talk this out once he's calmed down. I'm sure."

Her soft tone soothes me, and tears well up behind my closed eyelids when she wraps her arms around me in a tight hug. But unlike my desperate tears from earlier, these are a sign of relief. Knowing she stands by my side replaces the unpleasant tingling in my chest with comfortable warmth.

"What would I do without you and your soothing words?" I croak.

She tightens her embrace with a chuckle. "That's a question we don't have to answer. I'm here, and I'll help you through this." She steps back, still holding on to my shoulders. "Are you ready?"

A half-sob, half-laugh escapes me. "No."

Lauren pulls me after her, not giving me any more time to reconsider and run off. "Well, I am. I wanna see the guy who was stupid enough to let you go."

I force out a shuddery breath. The closer we get to our destination, the faster my heart beats and the sweatier my palms become. My thoughts return to Ben, wondering what he's doing or thinking, and the fact that we have issues to solve doesn't help with my mood.

I lower my gaze to the ground, where my feet drag over the pavement, and I struggle not to trip. Another challenge is getting enough air into my lungs and, thus, oxygen to my brain. I need to pull myself together if I want to face Noah with my head held high.

"Oh my gosh," Lauren mutters and seizes my wrist, and I yelp when she comes to a sudden halt, stopping me with her.

“What happened?” I furrow my brows, checking left and right to figure out what’s going on.

“Yes, I knew it,” she mutters again before beaming at me. “I knew he wouldn’t let you down.”

“What the heck are you talking about?” My eyes search for an answer to my question, and my entire body comes to a standstill when I see him. My heart skips too many beats, my breath hitches in my throat, and all my muscles freeze.

All because Ben stands a few feet away, hands buried in the pockets of his jeans, head low. His gaze meets mine, and we stare at each other, unblinking, unmoving. I don’t notice anything around us anymore. The chilly October air no longer bites at my cheeks, and the other people on the street fade into the background.

I’m not sure how many seconds go by, but out of nowhere, my brain orders my lungs to draw in a breath and my feet to move forward. And they not only move, they run, so I close the distance between us in no time. When I throw my arms around his shoulders and bury my face in the crook of his neck, I inhale his familiar scent.

A sob escapes me when Ben hesitantly places his hands on my waist. I get it; it’s not like everything is magically fixed, but that he showed up is a good sign. I hold on to him, not willing to let go, ever. Words fail me, so I cling to him as if he were my lifeline. “You’re here,” I mumble in a shaky voice, and my sobs intensify, especially when he returns the embrace. His arms encircle my body in the usual comforting way, and I feel safe again.

I pull back from the hug to search his face for any indication of his current mood: a smile, a frown, anything, but his expression is blank, except for the look in his eyes. I want to press my lips on his, but his expression conveys an uncertainty that holds me back. Hesitation hangs in the air between us, and I know it’s too soon.

But we’ll get there. I hope.

Ben breaks eye contact when Lauren shows up next to us. “So happy you’re here,” she tells him before playfully punching his arm.

A hint of a frown forms on his forehead, but it’s gone as fast as it appeared. “I had to. I couldn’t—” He doesn’t finish the sentence, but I know his answer when he gazes at me.

He couldn’t leave me alone in this.

“Thank you,” I whisper, but I still don’t receive any response from him. With a heavy sigh, I step back, giving him space. I lower my gaze and wipe my sweaty palms on my pants for the umpteenth time this afternoon. After glancing at my watch, my heart pounds harder against my ribs. It’s time. “Okay, let’s go.”

With a deep breath, I turn to walk through the large glass doors into the hotel. I’m hardly aware of my surroundings, how Ben and Lauren follow me inside the luxurious foyer, the few guests walking past, or the hotel employees scurrying around.

My mind is a mess as we step into the elevator. I struggle to stop the worries about what awaits me as I draw in breath after breath, leaning against the wall with my eyes closed. A low sigh passes my lips when I notice Ben’s presence next to me. The warmth his body radiates envelopes me, and he grasps my hand. I don’t open my eyes when he intertwines our fingers, giving me more of the reassurance I need.

Even though my muscles won’t relax, with Ben close, some weight lifts off my shoulders.

The ding of the elevator announcing our arrival on the twenty-sixth floor makes me flinch, and my eyes fly open. The surrounding silence grows heavier, making my stomach roil worse than before. Only a few more steps until I come face to face with my past.

I check the note with Noah’s room number again, even though I know what it says, and we exchange one last glance when we stand in front of his door. Ben’s blank expression

gives me no reason to breathe a sigh of relief, but his presence alone reassures me, just like Lauren's smile.

"We're here for you," Lauren whispers before I muster every bit of courage to lift my hand to knock.

Footsteps sound from inside, and when the door swings open, I draw in a sharp breath. As soon as my eyes meet Noah's, memories wash over me, and the bad ones outweigh the good. I haven't seen him in almost a year, but he looks exactly like I remember him. His caramel blond hair is still neatly cut, and his facial features I once found so attractive are still the same. His brown eyes still seem to look right through me, but what used to cause a pleasant tingling sends an icy shiver down my spine now.

Not even the smile he directs at me can hide the fact that nothing is left of the love we once shared, and his stupid grin falters when he realizes I'm not alone. His gaze flickers from Lauren to Ben before it settles on me. "Amy, hi. It's good to see you."

Liar.

I press my lips together to hold back the word, and instead, I introduce everyone. "Noah, this is Lauren. And that's Ben." My eyes meet Ben's, and when he gives me a quick nod, I meet my ex's gaze, ready to take the next step. "Okay, let's talk."

Noah frowns. "Amy, can't we have this conversation alone? You and me?"

"Nope," I respond to his request, shaking my head vigorously. "You can say whatever you have to in front of them. I don't know how well I'll deal with you. Can we come in so we can get this over with?"

With a sigh, he steps aside to let us enter the spacious suite. It's way too big for one person, but he's always valued his space to do as he pleases, in every sense of the word. For a fleeting second, I wonder if he plans to entertain female company here—or already has.

We move into the living area, but instead of taking in the interior, I concentrate on Noah and the impending confrontation. My nerves are stretched to the max, and the tension in the air is palpable. Ben and Lauren stand behind me as I face Noah, who steps toward me.

He lets out another sigh, taking another step closer. “Oh, Amy. I never wanted it to come to this.”

I hold up my hand, shooting him a glare, and he stops. The tension inside me builds up even more than before, and I don’t know when anger will overpower me and I’ll explode. Every cruel thing he did comes crashing down on me, and I clench my fists to stop them from shaking. “Why are you here?” I ask through gritted teeth.

He takes a deep breath and runs his hand over his cleanly-shaven jaw. “This meeting is long overdue. We either need to sign the papers, or ...”

When he doesn’t finish the sentence, my mouth falls open. He can’t be serious. “Or?”

Again, his gaze wanders to Lauren before it lingers on Ben a moment longer. I could wonder if Noah speculates about the nature of the relationship between Ben and me, but I don’t give a fuck.

Meeting my eyes, Noah continues, “I wanted to see you, Amy. I miss you. I want to give us another try. Please, don’t throw away what we had.”

“Excuse me?” I snap. “I can’t even remember what we had before it all went down the drain. What part of this do you think is worth fighting for?”

He lifts his hand, intending to touch me, but he thinks better of it when I keep glaring at him. “But I do,” he says in a low voice as if to calm me. “I remember what it was like between us before you slept with David.”

I gasp. “How dare you? How dare you throw that in my face? You’re the one who destroyed everything. You had been fucking your secretary for months when that happened. We were over!” I yell, pointing my finger at him with tears

welling in my eyes. I knew seeing Noah wouldn't be easy, but that he brings up every dirty detail of our failed relationship kills me.

He grimaces. "Please, just listen to me. What happened with Rachel was a mistake, and I regret it so much."

"That comes a little too late. You cheated on me for months. MONTHS! Over and over, you lied to me when you promised everything would be fine. And then, in my darkest hour, you took refuge in her arms instead of staying by my side. When I needed you most, you preferred to fuck Rachel while I was in the hospital after losing OUR baby!"

When Lauren gasps, I remember she and Ben are still here. I never intended to drop these facts on them like this, but the excruciating pain in my heart sends me into dark oblivion. My gaze stays fixed on Noah because I don't dare look at my friends, afraid to see their shocked or pitiful expressions. I take a deep breath before telling Noah through clenched teeth, "You'll hear from my attorney soon. I will leave now, and I never want to see you again."

Noah grimaces. "Amy, please. I don't want to talk through our attorneys." His voice increases in volume when he adds, "I don't want to sign the damn divorce papers."

I squeeze my eyes shut and draw in a shaky breath. This is a nightmare. He can't be serious. While I look for an answer to his preposterous statement, a hand on my arm makes me flinch, and my eyes fly open. I gasp as my gaze falls on Noah, who had the nerve to touch me. Without giving it a second thought, I swat his hand away before slapping him. Hard. A loud smack echoes through the room when my palm makes contact with his cheek. I must admit it feels good when he recoils, holding the left side of his face, but it doesn't ease my pain.

Pain that is threatening to crush me all over again.

I cover my mouth as a sob escapes and more tears fill my eyes. I spin around, meeting Lauren's gaze first, and her pained expression is like a stab to my heart. I wish I had confided in her sooner, but the pang of regret I feel toward her

is nothing compared to what burns through every part of me when I lock eyes with Ben.

His face still doesn't show any emotion, which makes this all the worse. Keeping my marriage from him is bad enough, but the circumstances of my breakup add to the complications. Will we even be able to fix this?

All of a sudden, breathing is a struggle, and my entire body shakes. The room seems to close in on me. I need to get out of here. I need to breathe. So without another word, I turn around and rush out the door.

TWENTY-FOUR

BEN

The past twenty-four hours have been a damn rollercoaster ride of emotions. I lived through them all: anger, remorse, worry, as well as bliss, lust, and love. Learning the truth hurt, but a longing to hold Amy took over.

When she threw her arms around me, I couldn't let go of all the negative sensations, though. Yes, I hid things from her, too, but only to protect her. What she kept from me felt like proof she didn't trust me with a piece of her—a big and important piece.

That was until I witnessed this encounter. An hour ago, I thought her greatest loss was that of a husband—instead of *just* a boyfriend. The details I learned shake me to my core, and my skin tingles with discomfort as I try to grasp what Amy went through. I can't, and I regret not giving her a chance to tell me the entire story.

The accusations and hurt feelings that have been expressed hang in the air like a dark cloud, and when Amy rushes out the door, a heavy silence stays behind. I'm rooted to the spot, unable to move a single muscle.

The idiot, whose name I refuse to acknowledge, still rubs his cheek, and I hope the pain will linger for a long while. That bastard deserves more than a slap in the face. What he did is unforgivable, and it's beyond me how he can live with himself after his vile actions.

My eyes widen when he steps forward as if to follow Amy. I block his way, furrowing my brows. "Where do you think you're going?"

He fucking dares to glare at me. "Someone should check on her. She's mentally unstable."

I gape at him, and Lauren gasps. "You damn moron," she says. "You disgust me."

My thoughts exactly. He tries to stare me down, but I don't budge, straightening up and clenching my fists instead. I want to punch him.

"Ben, don't." Lauren places her hand on my arm, but I don't take my eyes off the idiot. "It's not worth the trouble. We should go too." She tightens her grip, adding to the urgency in her voice.

I break eye contact to find Lauren's pleading gaze, and with a curt nod, I turn back to the prick, pointing my finger at him. "Stay away from her," I say before following Lauren, not giving him a chance to respond.

Unpleasant heat flushes through my body as we step into the elevator, and I draw in slow breaths to keep my anger at bay. I drag my fingers through my hair, sighing repeatedly, anxious to find Amy to comfort her and take away her distress.

My gaze snaps to Lauren when she speaks. "Wow, I had no clue. Poor Amy."

I rub my chest, mirroring her pained expression. "And I was the fucking idiot who left her to face this alone."

Lauren places her hand on my arm, this time in a soothing manner. "You didn't know. You're here now, and that's what counts. Once we find her, you'll take her home and look after her."

I nod, stepping from one foot to the other while staring ahead of me. When we arrive on the first floor, I bolt out of the elevator before the doors are fully open. My eyes search left and right, but there's no sign of Amy inside the hotel. My brain can't form a plan in case I don't find her soon. Who knows where she ran off to.

The fresh October air hits my face when I step out of the hotel, providing some relief for my heated skin. More relief floods my system when I look left and spot Amy leaning against the wall. I frown, though, as I take in her bent posture. She rests her hands on her thighs, and her torso heaves with a deep breath.

I hurry over, and she only notices my presence when I rest my hand on her shoulder. “Amy,” I whisper.

She straightens up and flinches at my touch, and I frown when she steps away from me. Taking in quick, shallow breaths, she covers her forehead with her hand. Her eyes are wide, and I fear she’s close to hyperventilating.

I grasp her shaking hands and utter a quiet *thank you* when she doesn’t pull back. She stares at me, unblinking, and her mouth opens as if to speak, but she remains silent. With a pained moan, I pull her into an embrace, wrapping my arms around her tight. She stills, but only for a moment before a sob escapes her, then another. Her cries grow louder while her entire body trembles, and she fists my shirt, desperately holding on and pulling me closer.

Her emotions overwhelm and scare me, and I swallow hard, but the lump in my throat won’t vanish. My hurt pride doesn’t matter anymore; all that matters is that I get her away from here and help her recover.

“Ben.” Lauren’s soft voice tears my attention from Amy, and I raise my eyebrows at her. “I arranged a cab.” She points behind her to the waiting car. “Take her home.”

With a grateful smile, I nod and lead Amy to our ride. She draws in deep breaths as we get in the back seat and drive off. No one talks until we walk into her apartment, where we drop our coats on the couch and I make her sit down and face me.

“Princess,” I whisper, cupping her cheek. “Talk to me. What can I do?”

She inhales a quivering breath before leaning into my touch. Her eyes fall closed with a heavy sigh. “I have no clue why I agreed to this meeting,” she says, eyes still closed. “I thought we could have a rational conversation, but I was wrong.” Her eyes open, meeting mine, and the pain is so evident in her gaze that it makes my chest feel even tighter. “I’m so sorry, Ben.”

I frown. “Don’t apologize. I understand.”

“I couldn’t tell you.” She removes my hand from her cheek to hold it with hers. “It would have led to more questions that I wasn’t ready to answer. You would have asked why we didn’t go through with the divorce, and I couldn’t tell you it was because I was struggling with my mental health after losing my baby.” She adds the last words in a barely audible whisper. Wiping a tear that rolls down her cheek, she fixes her gaze on our hands. “I feel so terrible you had to find out this way,” she continues. “I should have told you about him much earlier.”

With a low grumble, I shake my head. She shouldn’t feel like this, and it’s my fault she does. “It’s okay. I’m here now and willing to listen if you want to tell me the complete story.” Because I’m sure there’s a lot more.

Closing her eyes, she inhales a deep breath before saying, “So Noah ... we met in high school. From the start, I had a crush on him, which he didn’t know and much less returned. After school, we went our separate ways, but a few years later, our paths crossed again.”

She pauses, her gaze lingering on our joined hands, and after another deep breath, she says, “He worked at one of the local charters for sports fishing—a company owned by his uncle. I ended up as his PA, and I believed it was fate when we met again, especially because he finally noticed me too. He asked me out on a date, and things proceeded fast from there. I quit my job and started working at the real estate business, so people wouldn’t talk about him having an affair with his secretary.”

A humorless laugh erupts from her. “The irony.” She lifts her gaze to the ceiling before meeting my eyes with a weary sigh. “Within one year, we were married and lived a perfect life in a gorgeous little house—my happily ever after. I thought it was my fairytale come true, but I realized only slowly that it was my worst nightmare. I wasn’t in love with him, only the idea of him and his potential.”

She squeezes her eyes shut, grimacing, and the pain in my chest worsens. I don’t interrupt her, and she explains, “At some point, I noticed he was acting differently. He spent a lot

of time at work, going on business trips. At least that was his excuse. I confronted him about it, but he appeased me—dismissed my concerns as ridiculous. And then,” she says, grimacing and wiping more tears off her cheeks, “I got pregnant. I thought that would bring us closer together again. He was so happy, and for a while, things improved. Until about a month later, when I caught him pants down between his assistant’s spread legs. I was so stupid I didn’t see it before. Such a damn cliché.”

She rubs her chest as she lets out another shuddery breath. “I broke up with him and told him I never wanted to see him again. I moved out of the house and lived with my parents. That was when this other thing happened.” She avoids my gaze as her chin drops to her chest. “I wish I could at least call it a drunken mistake, but I was stone-cold sober—just an emotional wreck. And David, Noah’s colleague, was there to pick up the pieces; I was desperate for comfort, and he offered it, but I hate myself for sleeping with him.”

I lift her chin with my finger, but she still won’t meet my gaze. Squeezing her eyes shut, she shakes her head. “Look at me, Amy. Please,” I beg her. “Stop blaming yourself.” When her eyes flutter open, I say, “Maybe it was a mistake, but what your ex did was despicable. How did things proceed from there?”

She bites her lips, but just when I think she won’t talk, she continues in a shaky voice, “A few weeks later, Noah came crawling back, asking for forgiveness. He told me he had ended things with Rachel. He wanted to be with me, and he wanted that baby, even after I confessed what had happened between David and me. He didn’t care and wanted to make up for his mistake. I believed he could give me the family I wanted, so I fell for his lies. But when I was six months pregnant—”

A heartbreaking sob erupts from her. After rising from the couch, she searches her coat pocket and retrieves a packet of tissues. Pacing back and forth, she blows her nose and wipes more tears from her eyes. Unable to sit still any longer, I jump up as well and stand in front of her. Engulfing her in an

embrace, I press her head against my chest and stroke her hair. “You don’t have to go on if you don’t want to,” I whisper.

She shakes her head. “No, I do. I must. You need to know everything,” she mumbles into my shirt before letting out a slow breath. “I lost the baby. One day, I was bleeding heavily, and we only found out then that our daughter had a cardiac anomaly. Noah didn’t say it, but I knew he blamed me, and that was the final straw, so I left him. There was no point in trying to fix it, and I only learned after I ended things that he had never broken off his affair. I was devastated for so many reasons. My parents never found out about Noah’s affair; they still think losing our baby tore us apart. I was so ashamed of all the things that happened.”

Amy lifts her gaze. “I started seeing a therapist. With her help—and also my parents’—I got my old life back, the one before Noah. I moved back into my parents’ house, and after a year, I filed for divorce. Noah refused to sign, but I didn’t care. I had more pressing matters to handle. I wanted to leave the place behind that held so many dreadful memories, so I came to New York.”

I loosen my embrace and cup her face, and my thumbs caress her cheeks. I’ll need a while to grasp her story with all the details, but I understand enough. “Thank you for telling me all this.”

A deep frown forms on her forehead. “I know you’re angry. I’m sorry for not telling you sooner, and I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted to leave me now.”

My eyes widen. “Stop that nonsense. I don’t want to leave you. Yes, I was mad, but I understand why you did it.”

She clutches at my shirt, the frown still present. “Are you sure? I’m still terrified that you’ll leave me. Ben,” she whispers, “you’ve become the most important person in my life in the few months we’ve known each other. I couldn’t stand losing you.”

Adrenaline rushes through my veins, making my nerve endings tingle and my heart pound in my chest. My thoughts and emotions are still all over the place, but I’ve never been

more sure about anything than I am about the words I utter next: “Amy, I won’t leave. I couldn’t, because I love you.”

She sucks in a sharp breath and tightens her grip on me. Her chin quivers, and I feel uneasy about my declaration, but her lips stretch into a subtle smile before she responds, “I love you too.”

“Good.” I let out a huge breath before brushing my mouth over hers. Once, twice, a third time. It’s not enough, but we still have issues to talk about. “So what happens next? You’re still legally married, after all.”

She grimaces. “I know. That’s why I’ll have to call him to sort this out.”

“You mentioned he comes from money. Will this cause any problems? Rich people can be difficult.”

A small chuckle leaves her lips, and damn, that sound lifts an immense weight off my shoulders. “I don’t think it will. Thanks to a prenup, he doesn’t have to worry about me snatching any of his wealth. Sorry to disappoint you, but I’m poor.”

A cathartic laugh emanates from deep within me. Most of the heaviness from this afternoon lingers, but a lightness shows itself that I only experience with Amy—the woman I love more than anything.

When I find her lips again for a kiss, I feel complete. We have a lot of talking to do, but today, we took another step in the right direction. While I first saw her secrecy as a lack of trust, today’s events prove that I was wrong. Amy trusts me with her most vulnerable part—her heart.

And I intend to keep it safe.

TWENTY-FIVE

AMY

Not being able to stop crying sucks. Big time. At some point, I don't even know why I cry. Is it because I saw Noah again? Is it because I realize I'm not over what happened at all? Or because I feel like I failed—like I destroyed every chance I had for a happy future with Ben when I didn't tell him everything sooner?

It's been a little over twenty-four hours since the pain of my past resurfaced, and I've been miserable since. Pictures keep flashing in my mind—memories of when I was in the hospital or when Noah confronted me with the truth about his affair.

The only thing that keeps me sane is Ben. He hasn't left my side since I told him everything, so I'm unsure why I can't stop thinking I ruined everything. I can't believe how forgiving and understanding he is. He keeps telling me he got over his anger pretty fast because he can't fall out of love with me just like that.

His words make me cry even harder.

Ben and I spend this Sunday at his place, with me cuddled up to him on his couch. When I'm not crying, we talk, and I tell him more about my old life and the fiasco that was my marriage.

"I'm sorry I'm such a mess and so insufferable," I sob in another crying fit after retelling the story of how Noah confessed his affair. How he stood there all calm and casual while I was on the brink of throwing all our—well, his—expensive china at him.

"No need to apologize, Princess," he responds in a soothing voice, pulling me into an embrace. "And you're not insufferable. I meant what I said: I love you, and I'm not leaving you."

With a shaky breath, I wrap my arms around his torso. “I love you too. So much,” I whisper, and while I try to hold back more tears, I mull over Ben and me and our relationship. I remember our talk before we took the leap into the unknown and started dating. I told him not to let his past affect his future. Now, I don’t want *my* past to fuck up any chances for a happy future with him. I need closure.

Pulling back from him, I find his gaze and say, “I have to go home.”

He blinks at me. “Um, okay. You want me to take you?”

I shake my head. “No, that’s not what I mean. I have to go to my hometown and finalize the divorce. Noah has to sign those damn papers, and I have to visit the grave of my baby and mourn. I have to leave all the awful memories behind so I can return to New York and be happy here—with you.”

Ben draws in a slow breath and releases it before saying, “Okay. Sure.” He studies me, tucking a strand of my messy hair behind my ear. “Can I come with you?” he whispers.

I blink at him, unsure if I should smile or cry harder. He doesn’t ask if I need him to accompany me or if I want him there. He asks if he can come—*he* wants to be there.

“Okay,” I croak. The thought of showing him where I come from and introducing him to my parents doesn’t even scare me. It leaves a comforting feeling behind.

“We just need to figure out what story to tell at work,” Ben says. “If we want to keep a low profile and not expose our relationship, we can’t ask for leave at the same time.”

“You’re right.” I take in a deep breath before blowing out my cheeks. “I should call Noah first and see what he says. We need to make an appointment with our attorneys.”

Ben nods, giving me a reassuring smile. Leaning in, he leaves a tender kiss on my lips that awakens the familiar tingles in my belly, making me forget about the outside world and its troubles for a moment. Pulling back, I rest my forehead against his with my eyes closed. Once I can be sure I’ve

calmed down enough to speak, I lean back and grab my phone from the coffee table.

“Do you want me to give you some privacy?” Ben scoots to the edge of the couch, ready to stand, but I seize his hand.

“No, stay.” I pull him closer, intertwining our fingers and holding on tight for encouragement. With a hammering heart, I dial Noah’s number, and he picks up after the second ring.

“Amy, hey.”

His voice sends an icy shiver down my spine. “Hi, Noah.” Keeping my voice from shaking is impossible, as much as I want to hide from him how he affects me. “I’m calling to talk about the divorce,” I continue. “We both know there’s not a chance we can fix things, so we must go through with it. Please,” I add in a whisper.

Noah sighs. “Amy, I want to—”

“No,” I cut him off, my voice more steady. “I don’t want to hear about what you want. I don’t care; those times are over, and I need closure. Please, do a good thing for once,” I plead.

After a moment of heavy silence that feels like forever, he takes a deep breath and says, “Okay. If that’s what you want.”

I release a long breath through my nose as a fraction of the weight lifts off my shoulders. “Yes.” I squeeze my eyes shut, thinking about how to do this best. “I need to talk to my boss, and once I know when I can fly out to Washington, I’ll let you know.”

Noah agrees, telling me he’ll book his return flight for Tuesday before I unceremoniously end the call. Dropping my phone on the couch, I cover my face with my free hand—my other still clings to Ben’s. Fresh tears well up in my eyes as so many emotions threaten to overwhelm me that I can’t think straight or breathe properly. Once again engaging in self-blame and regretting my past actions, uncertainty about my decision to return home arises. I’m unwilling to leave New York—my new home. But I must. I must chase away the ghosts of my past.

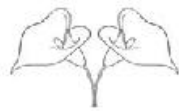
I'm so deep in thought that I flinch when Ben drapes his arm around my shoulder to pull me close. He wraps his other arm around me as well, engulfing me in a warm embrace, which eases the tension and reminds me that I'll have him by my side.

We lean back, and Ben plays with my hair as I rest my head on his chest and listen to his steady heartbeat.

"I'm here, Princess," he murmurs. "And that's a promise."

I sink further into a state of calm as my eyes fall closed. His familiar scent fills my nostrils, and a pleasant shiver ripples through me when he presses a soft kiss on my forehead.

This is where I want to stay—safe in his arms.



Four days later, I step out of the airport in Seattle, and the sun sends its rays down as if to mock my somber mood. After my six-hour journey, I have another two-hour drive ahead of me before arriving at my parents' house.

Ben will follow me to the west coast tomorrow after calling in sick. He'll take the earliest available flight out, arriving in Seattle at ten a.m. It will be less than twenty-four hours without him, but it's already too long.

I took two days' leave, and Luke was very understanding when I told him I had a family emergency back home. While I feel bad for lying to him, I'm more worried about what my visit home will bring. My stomach churns at the thought of seeing Noah again and facing my past.

It's not only him I face, though. Seeing my parents also evokes mixed emotions. While my mom was ecstatic when I told her I would visit, the news that it was only to finalize the divorce put a damper on it.

My parents insisted on picking me up, and as I look left and right for them, I spot my mom first. When a warm smile spreads across her face as soon as our gazes meet, my eyes fill with tears, and they roll down my cheeks when she wraps me up in a motherly hug.

“Hi, Mom,” I croak. “It’s good to see you.”

“Oh, it is, sweetheart,” she says, stepping back to inspect me. Wiping my tears away with her thumb, she squeezes me once more before letting me go so my dad can say hello.

“Good to have you back, Amy.” He hugs me just as tight as my mom, and feeling their love calms my nerves. “Come, let’s get you home.” My dad grabs my suitcase and leads the way to their car.

How they welcome me after our not-so-great farewell a few months ago lifts my mood, and I’m optimistic we can have a good talk.

The first part of our journey is quiet, and I’m glad my parents give me some time to fully arrive. I stare at the landscape rush by outside—a sight I know so well and also missed, as reluctant as I am to admit it. Despite the terrible memories, this is home.

My phone beeps with an incoming message, and when Ben’s name flashes on the screen, a happy smile spreads on my lips.

Ben: Hey, Princess. I hope you had a pleasant flight and that you arrived safely. I miss you and can’t wait for our reunion.

Amy: Flight was okay. I can’t wait either. Being here feels weird. It’s all familiar, but something vital is missing. I mean you, in case you didn’t get it. See you tomorrow. I love you.

Ben: I love you too. And I did get it. I feel the same.

Before I can type out my answer, I receive another message. This time, my heart sinks—it's Noah.

Noah: Hey, Amy. Welcome back. Just confirming the appointment tomorrow. 3 p.m.

With shaky fingers, I text back.

Amy: Thank you for taking care of it.

Noah: You want closure, so I had no choice.

Amy: Noah, please don't be like that. We both know things between us can never be how they once were. I could never trust you again. And I love someone else.

Noah: You're right. I fucked up. I don't deserve your trust anymore. But it's hard for me to let you go. I realize it's too late, and now I have to live with the consequences of my actions. I just hope you can forgive me someday.

With a deep breath, I throw my phone in my purse. I can't answer him right now. Luckily, my mom chooses that very moment to start a conversation.

“So tell us more about your life in New York.” She turns in her seat to face me in the back. A frown forms on her forehead when she adds, “I'm sorry our calls were always so short. I've had so many questions, but it was so hard to ask them.”

“Oh, Mom.” I place my hand on her shoulder, and she rests her palm on top. “I know my disappearing act wasn't

easy for you, and I'd love to answer your questions now." My lips stretch into a subtle smile, and my mother smiles in return.

"Okay, so you found a nice place to stay? In a safe neighborhood?"

I nod. "It's a cute little apartment. I took some pics to give you an idea." After retrieving my phone and opening the photos, I hand it to my mom. "It's the perfect size for me and close to the subway, so I can get to work easily," I explain while she looks through the images.

"This is lovely," she says.

"And who is this man you told your mother about?" my dad asks, and his grumbling voice makes me chuckle. I may be twenty-seven, but my father is still suspicious of the new man in my life.

"His name is Ben," I tell him. "I met him at work, and he's great. You'll like him."

He throws me a glance in the rearview mirror, which elicits a soft laugh from me. He's not convinced yet.

As we drive home, I tell my parents more about my new life. My mom wasn't kidding when she said she had many questions, but I'm willing to answer them all. My parents also fill me in on what happened in our small town while I was gone.

While we talk, I remember that I still have to ask my mom why she thought giving Noah my new number would be a good idea, but I'll leave that for later. Now, I want to be nostalgic, only thinking about the carefree times I had here. I don't have any friends left because we drifted apart and scattered all over the country as the years passed, but I have my parents and their love.

They are my happy past, and my new friends and my new love on the east coast are my happy future.

Only one step left to cut ties with the unpleasant memories. It's a step I'll take with more ease once Ben is by my side again.

TWENTY-SIX

BEN

I didn't know time could pass this slowly. Yesterday, I left work a couple of hours earlier to play the part in my sick leave and drop Amy off at the airport. A quick phone call after she arrived at her parents' place last night was our only contact, and I can't wait to hold her in my arms again.

I'm one of the first ones out of my seat as soon as the plane touches down and the passengers are allowed to exit. People must think I have a bounty hunter on my heels with the speed I rush out of there, and I only slow down when I step out of the airport and spot Amy waiting for me. I drop my duffel bag, and she sprints into my open arms and jumps at me, holding on like a monkey. I bury my face in the crook of her neck, inhaling her sweet scent like some hopeless addict.

"Damn, I missed you, Princess." I wrap my arms around her tight until she tries to pull back. I let her, but only to find her lips in an all-tension-relieving kiss. Fuck the world and all its worries. I have my woman back.

Yes, I know it's only been one day and not an entire month.

Amy gasps when we come up for air before her hands find mine and our fingers intertwine. "I missed you too," she says with the happiest smile I've seen on her all week.

After another lingering kiss, I tell her, "This is the longest we've been apart since we started dating. I'm never letting you go anywhere for that long alone again."

She chuckles, and the vibrations of her soft laugh reverberate through me, sending the best kind of tingles down my spine. "Who knew you'd be such a clingy boyfriend."

I snort. "Not clingy. I take care of what's mine."

Her smile widens, and I love her radiant aura. Her flushed cheeks and the gleam in her eyes make my heart race, and

when my gaze falls on her delicious mouth, I can't help but look forward to being alone with her.

“What's that expression all about?” she asks, tearing me out of my daydreams and pointing to my silly grin.

I bite my lips to contain the smirk, but she sure knows what *that expression* is all about.

“You're aware we're staying in my old bedroom at my parents' house, right?”

I chuckle. “That won't keep me from touching you.”

“Hey.” She lets go of my hands to smack my arm before turning around. “You're lucky my father allows us to stay in the same room,” she tells me over her shoulder, motioning me to follow her.

After grabbing my bag, I hurry after her until we reach a large SUV. I glance from the car to Amy and back to the car. “You know how to drive this?”

She raises a single brow at me. “Why wouldn't I?”

“Because it's huge.”

Her eyes narrow before one corner of her mouth lifts in a half-smirk. “I can handle huge.”

It's my turn to narrow my eyes at her, and when she lowers her gaze to my groin, I have to stop the mental images of what she implies. I'm unsure if I should groan out of sexual frustration or laugh at her unusual flirtatiousness. Either way, I feel more optimistic that she'll be her old self again soon. This past week has been tough; she's been so tense, and helping her relax is at the top of my list.

I've not been very successful so far.

Without another word, Amy saunters around to the driver's side of the car, and I drop into the passenger seat, ignoring her remark for now. We can discuss later how she *handles huge*.

“Have you talked to Lauren?” I ask once we're on our way.

“Yeah, she called me on her lunch break. They had a meeting this morning, and Luke mentioned nothing that suggested he doesn’t buy your story. He didn’t question it.” She glances at me, suppressing a smile. “Should we feel bad for lying?”

I shake my head. “We’re reliable, hard workers, and entitled to a day off, so stop worrying about it.”

A soft laugh passes her lips. “Okay, I’ll stop. Anyway, we have a two-hour drive ahead of us, so if you want to catch up on some sleep, go ahead.”

“Nah, it’s okay. I don’t want to waste the time I have with you.”

Her lips stretch into a smile, but a moment later, it falters. “You’re coming with me to see the attorney, right?”

“Of course. The appointment is at three?”

She nods as her grip on the steering wheel tightens and lets out a deep sigh. “I’m nervous about facing him.”

I rest my hand on her thigh, and she places her palm on top, gripping my fingers. “Don’t worry. I’m here, Princess. We’ll get you through this.”

She nods without taking her eyes off the road, and we continue on our way in a long moment of silence. She’s deep in thought, but she’ll share when she’s ready. It’s another tough day for her, and I already try to come up with ways to keep her mind off it.

The list of things that could distract her from the apprehension is still too short, but Amy breaks the silence, diverting my attention to her. “Any news from Aaron?” she asks what I least expected. She shouldn’t also worry about that particular predicament. “Has he called you back?”

“Yes,” I respond. “He’s in Arizona to find the guy he was looking for. Let’s hope he’ll stay out of trouble and solve the issue with Jackson.”

She nods, lips pressed together tight. She claims she doesn’t worry about Jackson, but it must add to the stress she

suffers.

For the rest of the drive, we only touch lighter subjects, ignoring the appointment with the attorneys later and details about Jackson. Amy tells me about all the places she wants to show me in her hometown—which isn't a lot. It's a small town, after all, but I can't wait to see where she grew up, and even meeting her parents doesn't worry me.

At least not until we pull up to a beautiful two-story house with a small porch. Amy parks the car in front of the attached garage, and I let my gaze wander, taking in the peaceful neighborhood and the perfectly maintained front garden.

“Are you ready?” Amy asks, giving me a knowing smile.

“No.” I grimace. Why the fuck am I nervous all of a sudden?

With a chuckle, Amy grasps my hand and pulls me after her. “My parents will love you.” She stops, turning to me. “Like I do. Well, not exactly like I do, but you get my meaning, right?” She plants a soft kiss on my lips. “I love you, Ben.”

“Love you too, Princess.”

Amy drags me into the house, and I don't have any time to take in my surroundings because Amy's parents already await us in the hallway. They smile, and their genuine expressions ease the nervous tension.

“Mom, Dad, this is Ben. Ben, that's my mom and dad, Linda and Peter.”

“Welcome, Ben.” Amy's mom greets me with a hug, and her dad stretches out his hand.

“It's great to meet you,” he says.

“You too.”

“Are you hungry?” Amy's mom asks. “I'm about to start lunch, so you can eat before your appointment.” She gives her daughter a quick nod and a reassuring smile.

Amy's ringing phone keeps her from answering. When she pulls it out of her pocket and looks at the screen, she frowns. "It's Noah. Excuse me." She disappears around the corner without another word, leaving us in an awkward silence.

"Okay, um, do you like fish?" her mom inquires. "We got some fresh fish from the market this morning, and I wanted to make some Fish'n'Chips."

"That sounds great," I respond.

"Amy can show you to her room once she finishes the call. You must be tired from the long journey. You can rest until the food is ready," she suggests, and I nod. A nap sounds appealing.

Luckily, it was a quick call, and a moment later, Amy returns. "They moved our appointment," she explains with a frown. "The attorney had some emergency to sort out, but he agreed to a meeting tomorrow to sign the papers."

"Oh, okay," her dad says.

Amy groans. "I wanted to get this over with, and now it's another day." She finds my gaze, and I mirror her frown. I hate the visible tension in her body.

"Mom, is it okay if I show Ben to my room? I need a moment."

"Of course, love. I'll call you once lunch is ready."

Without hesitation, Amy seizes my hand and pulls me after her, up the stairs, around the corner, and into the last room on the left. She closes the door behind us and leans against it with a heavy sigh. Her eyes close, and her chest heaves with a deep breath. I can't take my eyes off her, not even to look around her room. She's on edge, and I'm desperate to help.

I open my mouth to ask what I can do when a frustrated groan emanates from her throat before her eyes fly open and find mine. "Damn," she mutters, "I haven't felt this tense in so long, and I don't know how to stop." With furrowed brows,

she studies me. I'm unsure what she's looking for until she whispers, "Would you fuck me?"

My eyes widen, and I almost choke on my saliva. Didn't expect that. "What? Now?"

"Yes. Now. I need to stop thinking about this appointment. I don't want to think at all, at least for a few moments. So would you fuck me?" she repeats her request.

I shake my head with a chuckle. "Your parents are downstairs."

She pushes herself off the door and stands in front of me with only inches separating our bodies. "You said yourself that wouldn't stop you from touching me. And I can be quiet."

Another laugh wants to pass my lips, but Amy silences me with a kiss—a hot and demanding kiss. My heart beats faster already, but with her mouth on mine, it pounds in my chest, sending jolts of desire through every part of me—but especially down south. I can't deny that her forwardness turns me on, a lot, and I grow harder with every stroke of her tongue against mine.

"I need to feel you," Amy breathes in between more fervent kisses, and her fingers undress me. She doesn't meet much resistance because I need to feel her too. This past week, Amy's mind was occupied with a lot of things, and intimacy wasn't one of them, so there was no sex for days and hardly any touching, which was fine. But now, impatience spurs us on and makes me oblivious to my surroundings. Forgotten is the fact that we're in her parents' house with them downstairs.

A low growl forms in the back of my throat when she undoes my pants and reaches inside. Amy moans when she finds my throbbing cock that's screaming to be released. With one swift move, she pulls down my pants and underwear and sinks on her knees in front of me, but when she wraps her fingers and lips around my dick, I stop her. "None of that. I'll explode soon, and I want to feel you around me. Now." I turn my head to find her bed, but this time, Amy stops me.

"We can't fuck on the bed. Squeaky mattress."

“Uh, okay, what—”

Again, Amy cuts me off with a kiss. So we stand in the middle of her bedroom, tear at the rest of our clothes until they all hit the floor, and let our hands roam each other’s naked bodies. Damn, she feels so good, and her sweet, *quiet* moans are the sexiest sounds, so I’m ready to come without her touching me sooner than I want.

I seize her wandering hands, holding them behind her back, while my mouth explores the swells of her breasts before my lips find her hard nipples.

“More, Ben. I need more,” she breathes, breaking free from my grip and burying her fingers in my hair. Happy to comply, my fingertips brush over her stomach until they find the heat between her legs. A louder moan comes from her when I rub her clit before moving along and sliding my index finger inside her.

“Looks like you’re ready for me,” I growl.

“Always,” she breathes, and another growl leaves me when she spins around and holds on to the dresser in front of her. She presses her ass against my crotch, and with a look over her shoulder, she throws me a seductive smile. “I’m waiting.”

Damn, I love her demanding side. To align our bodies, I bend my knees and grab her hips. She goes up on tiptoe so I can sink into her, inch by inch, slowly—too slowly for her liking. She grumbles, tightening her grip on the edge of the dresser before moving her hips back to take me in deeper. I tighten my grip on her hips, too, so I can control the speed of my steady thrust, but she won’t have it. She pushes her body against mine, picking up the pace before her hand wanders between her legs, stimulating her clit. She’s letting go, finally. Seeing her sink into sexual oblivion is a great success in my eyes. As usual, knowing she enjoys what I’m doing to her, what we’re doing together, is hot as fuck.

That I don’t come within seconds is a damn miracle, even more so when she comes moaning my name, clenching her inner muscles around me.

Luckily, there are no decorations or other sorts of things on the dresser. So I don't have to make room when I slide out of her after I let her ride out her orgasm, turn her around, and lift her on top of it. "You gonna come again for me, babe?" I sink on my knees in front of her, spreading her legs wide to make room. Our gazes lock as I put my mouth on her, my tongue teasing her as she loves it. Keeping eye contact while eating her out is also on my list of top turn-ons.

But I don't mind when her head falls back with a moan, and she covers her mouth to keep the noise down. Watching her come undone is on that list too. "Fuck," she mumbles repeatedly, undulating her hips to find more friction. Again, I comply and give her what she needs, and in less than a minute, her second climax makes her body tremble.

Panting, she still covers her mouth with one hand while her other reaches for me. She pulls me up, and before I know it, our mouths fuse in a hot and wet kiss.

"Thank you. That was exactly what I needed," she breathes as I help her off the dresser. "Your turn now, and don't you dare stop me again." After another deep kiss and with her hand wrapping around my still throbbing erection, she runs her lips over my pecs and abs. Back in a kneeling position, she resumes her earlier mission to suck me off.

This time, I don't hold back and come within seconds. I let out a long, low moan, doing my best not to make too much noise. I join Amy on the floor, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her with me so we lie on the floor with her on top of me. Reveling in the usual after-sex high, we hold each other, letting our heartbeats and breathing return to normal.

Despite the hard floor under my back, I'm calm and relaxed, and my eyes fall closed. My hands stroke Amy's sides before resting on her perfect, round ass. I'm about to doze off when a knock on the door makes us flinch.

"Amy, lunch is ready," her mom announces. "So meet us downstairs once you're done with your, um, nap."

Amy lifts her head from my chest. "Okay, Mom. Thanks. We'll be right there." Grimacing, she buries her face in the

crook of my neck. “Shit, I’m sorry,” she mumbles.

With a chuckle, I envelop her in an embrace. “Don’t worry about it, Princess. I could have made a worse first impression. At least I proved I satisfy your needs.”

“That you do,” she says on a long exhale. “That you do.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

AMY

I can't remember any other day I dreaded and longed for at the same time. Today, I'll become a free woman again. I won't be Noah's wife any longer, but I'll have to face him one last time before that can happen.

It's still early on this Saturday morning, so early that everyone else is still asleep as I tiptoe out of my room, leaving Ben to rest a little longer. We talked long into the night, and I fell asleep in his arms. I wouldn't know what I'd do without him. He reassured me, boosting my confidence and pointing out my strengths. Having him here with me as a reminder of what awaits me after this is over helps me pull through.

I walk into the kitchen to prepare a pot of coffee and sink into the chair at the table with a deep breath. The invigorating aroma of the brew fills my nose before I take a sip, and the scent envelopes me in a moment of peace. I look forward to more of these moments when I return to New York—with my friends, but especially with Ben. As painful as my revelation was, it brought us closer together, and since we confessed our love, I feel more at ease than ever despite the impending ultimate confrontation with my past.

Leaning back, I close my eyes, and my tense muscles relax. A slow smile spreads across my face when silent footsteps echo through the quiet house, and a moment later, I sense Ben's presence in the kitchen before he speaks. My eyes flutter open, and my heart skips a beat when I meet his loving gaze and see the tender smile on his lips. He lingers in the doorway, resting against the frame with his hands buried in the pockets of his jeans.

“Hey, Princess.”

His soft voice makes my nerve endings tingle, easing more of the nervous tension in my body, and I return his smile. “Good morning. Would you like some coffee?” I point to the

pot on the countertop, and Ben pushes himself off the doorjamb with a nod.

After filling his mug, he joins me at the table, sitting across from me. Reaching for my hand, he leans closer to place a soft kiss on my knuckles. “How did you sleep?”

Our fingers intertwine, and his thumb brushes over the back of my hand. The tenderness of his touch and his entire demeanor almost make me ignore the unpleasant answer to his question, and despite the lightness I feel in Ben’s presence, I can’t keep from frowning. “Not too good. I tossed and turned a lot, as you may have noticed.”

He presses his lips together and nods. “I did. Tell me what I can do to help. But remember, it’ll all be over soon, and then I’ll take you home with me.”

I squeeze Ben’s hand as my lips stretch into a half-smile. *Home*. “I love the sound of that,” I tell him.

“I love you, Princess.”

My smile widens. “I love you too.”

We grin at each other like lovesick fools, immersed in our own little world, so neither of us realizes when my mom enters the kitchen.

“Good morning, kids,” she says, her cheerful voice penetrating our bubble.

“Hey, Mom.” I tear my gaze away from Ben and let go of his hand, watching her pour herself a cup of coffee. “I hope we didn’t wake you.”

She waves dismissively as she joins us at the table. “You didn’t. I’m always up early; you know that.” She turns to Ben. “How are you liking our little town so far?” She gives him a wide smile, making me chuckle inwardly.

I feared my mother would have a hard time accepting the new man in my life, but after spending the afternoon together yesterday, it’s safe to say she’s taken a liking to him. My parents were genuinely interested and asked question after question about our jobs and life in the big city.

“I love it,” Ben responds. “It’s so peaceful compared to New York.”

“I can imagine.” She leans back in her chair with a sigh and a tight grip on her mug. “No, I can’t relate.” A frown forms on her forehead as she turns to me. “I’m sorry, love. I should have been more interested in your life, job, and new friends. Instead, I clung to the idea that you’d return eventually.”

“It’s okay, Mom.” With a soft smile, I place my hand on her forearm, and she covers it with hers. “Some things need time. All this wasn’t easy for you either.”

She squeezes my hand with a curt nod. “It hit me what I was missing out on when you announced you’d be bringing your boyfriend. That came unexpected, making me realize if I had shown more interest, you wouldn’t have hesitated to tell me about your new relationship.” With a growing smile, she turns back to Ben. “I’m so glad she found a good man.”

My heart skips another beat when Ben meets my gaze, and my pulse races when he tilts his head, an enamored smile stretching his lips. “Thank you.” He returns his gaze to my mom. “And I promise I’ll do my best to keep her happy and safe.”

Under different circumstances, I’d find his statement cheesy, but I know he means it. He shows me every day. The smile on my mom’s face says it all—she approves. She’s not one to be sweet-talked into liking anyone, so her blessing tops everything off.

With the smile still on her lips, my mom rises from the chair. “Are you hungry? I’ll prepare some breakfast.”

Our growling stomachs answer for us, and while we eat and chat more, a certainty settles inside me that everything will be all right. I can face the appointment this afternoon with optimism and confidence. Ben and my parents will support and catch me, should I fall.



“Please sign here.” My attorney places the required forms to file for divorce in front of me with an encouraging smile on his face. For the past half hour, we went over the details of the process. Signing the forms is the first step before submitting them to court, and in about three months, the divorce will be final.

With a racing heart, I pick up the pen. Even though I know what it says, my eyes skim over the Petition for Dissolution of Marriage until they land on the end of the document, and without hesitation, I sign.

With a slow breath, I place the pen on the papers and slide it over to Noah. He sits opposite me next to his attorney, and although his presence brings back all the tension that Ben eased, some of the weight has just been lifted off my shoulders.

Until I meet Noah’s gaze. So far, I’ve hardly acknowledged him, only greeting him with a curt nod when we met in front of the office. No eye contact and no shaking hands. I noticed his eyes on me, though, and now that our gazes lock, I draw in a sharp breath. He used to look at me like that when our world was still in order, and for a moment, I dread he won’t sign and will want to continue fighting.

Closing my eyes, I lower my head. A strangled whimper escapes me, and I flinch when Noah rests his hand on top of mine. As soon as my eyes fly open, he removes his hand, and once he’s sure I’m watching, he signs the document.

“Okay, we’re all done here,” Noah’s attorney says, breaking the heavy silence. We exchange a few more words of thanks before exiting the office. Once Noah and I step outside into the bright sunlight, I take in a deep breath of fresh air, letting the relief sink in. It’s done. No more heavy burden drags me down now that my marriage is officially over.

I turn to Noah, and for the first time in forever, I can give him a subtle smile. He doesn't deserve it, but now that this is over, I finally breathe easy. He's no longer part of my life, and I can say my last goodbye. "Thank you for agreeing to finalize the divorce," I tell him, even though he doesn't deserve that either. He deserves no cordialities and, least of all, gratitude, but I have found my peace and allowing any more bitter feelings will disturb my calm.

"Of course," he responds, but not very convincingly. He opens his mouth to say more, but I hold up my hand.

"No, save it. I don't want to hear anything else from you. We're done. I don't want to talk to you ever again." Without waiting for his response, I turn on my heels and walk to the parking lot, where Ben awaits me, leaning against my parents' car.

As I approach, he pushes himself off the vehicle, and when our eyes meet and my lips lift in a smile, the frown on his forehead disappears. He walks toward me, and we close the distance between us in no time. He envelopes me in his strong arms and says, "Hey, Princess." He presses a soft kiss on the top of my head. "How did it go?"

"I made it quick and easy. Noah wanted to talk, but I didn't let him. Nothing he has to say matters to me anymore. This is finally over. Can you believe it?"

Ben tightens his embrace. "I'm so proud of you."

As the relief sinks in further, my lips stretch into a smile—a genuinely happy smile. Ben's words add to the lightness that spreads inside my chest, and all negative thoughts vanish.

Now I only need to do one last thing.

Taking in a deep breath, I step out of his arms. "Hey, um, there's something I wanted to do." I shift from one foot to the other. "Will you accompany me to the cemetery?"

He lifts his eyebrows and studies me with his head tilted to the side. I wonder if I asked too much, but a soft smile plays on his lips, and he responds, "Of course."

So a short while later, we stand in front of a small tombstone, and I clutch at Ben's hand for support. We haven't spoken a single word on the way here, and silence still envelopes us as I place a bouquet of calla lilies on my daughter's grave. They're my favorite flowers and will always remind me of her. My eyes fill with tears as I read the inscription, remembering the fateful night one-and-a-half years ago. I draw in a shaky breath as I rub my chest. Pressing my trembling lips together, I swallow to get rid of the lump in my throat, but it lingers, just like the heavy feeling in my heart.

I didn't expect to react this strongly, but standing here reminds me of how much I miss her.

I flinch when Ben steps closer and drapes his arm around my shoulder, but I lean into him a moment later, relaxing a little.

"Emilia," he murmurs. "That's a beautiful name."

A sob escapes me as I nod. "She was beautiful." My voice is a mere whisper as I let the memories wash over me. "She looked so perfect. A perfect baby, only her heart failed her." I wipe my cheek as the first tears fall. "It was the worst night of my life, but I'll forever cherish the few hours I held her in my arms. Three hours," I croak.

Ben wraps his other arm around me, and I place my head on his chest. He comforts me without saying a single word.

"For so long," I continue, "I wished I could turn back time and do everything right so she could be born healthy and live. It took me forever to accept that it wasn't my fault."

"I'm so sorry you had to go through this." Ben presses his lips on my head as he caresses my back, slowly stroking up and down.

I let out another shaky breath. "So much had gone wrong, and I blamed myself for everything. I wondered what I did to drive Noah into another woman's arms. It made me feel like a failure. First, I was a poor wife and then a terrible mother."

"Oh, Amy, you were neither." Ben steps back and cups my face. His thumbs wipe away more of my tears. "You know

that now, right?”

With a heavy sigh, I nod. “I do, after a long while and lots of hard work.” I draw in another deep breath. “Thank you for being here.”

Ben’s soft smile makes my tummy flutter, and when he presses a tender kiss on my lips, I feel a little lighter already. My daughter’s death will leave an eternal hole in my heart, but today, I can have closure. The divorce is through, and I couldn’t have done anything differently to prevent what happened. With that knowledge, I let go of my anger toward Noah; I no longer want to harbor any feelings for him—good or bad. I let go of the guilt and the what-ifs.

Later, as Ben and I head to the car, hand in hand, I leave my past behind and walk toward a happy future. A future with a great man by my side. A man I love more than anything and who shows me every day he loves me just as much.

And I’m determined not to let anything come between us.

TWENTY-EIGHT

BEN

Referring to my earlier email, I'm informing you we moved the appointment.

Earlier email? Appointment? I blink at my computer screen, trying to make sense of the email I just received from Luke, but my brain fails me. I'm on my fifth cup of coffee since I arrived at work not even two hours ago, yet the sleepy haze won't lift.

Amy and I returned from the west coast yesterday, and it was way past midnight when our heads hit the pillows and we passed out. I wanted to skip another day of work, but Amy insisted we show up. She didn't want to draw any unwanted attention to our absence, which means I'm hardly able to function. Luke's email about a meeting this afternoon makes no sense.

"Hey, Ben?"

I meet Amy's gaze, and my eyes narrow when I take in her rosy complexion. She looks as beautiful as always, and I'm not sure how she does it; no one can tell she's as exhausted as I am.

"Lauren wants to meet for an early dinner tonight," she continues. "We could go to a place nearby and meet you here afterward?"

Narrowing my eyes further, I tilt my head, trying to understand what she's telling me.

"You have no idea what I'm talking about, right?" A chuckle escapes her lips, and my brain shuts off, leaving only one thought—how badly I want to kiss those lips. While we're in bed. My soft and warm bed.

"Ben?"

My gaze snaps from her mouth to her eyes, and I rub my forehead with a groan. “Yes. Sorry. I can’t concentrate. So what’s this about coming back here tonight after dinner?”

Amy points to my screen. “Didn’t you get the email? Luke wants you to attend this meeting tonight, with the new client. I know you don’t want me to go home alone, so I could meet you here after my dinner date with Lauren.”

“Oh, of course.” I grimace. First, because I’ll need a nap if I have to attend another meeting tonight, and second, because Amy is right. I don’t want her to wander the streets alone. Aaron still hasn’t resolved his issues with Jackson, so his threat still hangs in the air. I’m not even sure if I want her to meet Lauren.

“Oh, Ben.” Amy leans closer with a sigh. “I don’t like the look on your face. It’ll be fine. Lauren and I will go to this Italian place a couple blocks down. It’ll be busy, and I won’t be alone.”

I let out a deep sigh in return. “Okay, fine. But keep your phone close at all times, and call me if anything seems suspicious.”

Amy shakes her head with a soft laugh. “I will. Promise. But I’m sure nothing will happen. Have you heard from Aaron?” she adds in a whisper.

“No.” With a frown, I check my phone for a message from my brother. We talked yesterday before Amy and I returned to New York, and he assured me everything was going according to plan. The fact that he only has a couple of days left before Jackson’s deadline is up worries me, though. Aaron guaranteed he’d get the info Jackson wants by tonight, but doubts linger.

“It’ll be okay, Ben.” With an encouraging smile, Amy gathers some files from her desk and rises from her chair.

My frown deepens. Amy shouldn’t be the one reassuring me—it should be the other way around.

“I have to run some errands,” she says, straightening her clothes before walking around her desk and stopping next to

my chair.

I take in her appearance—and her way-too-short skirt. It ends just above her knees, but combined with her black heels, her legs look a mile long—and way too inviting. Just like that, memories of the past weekend flood my mind. The intensity was overwhelming. Amy didn't only let go of her past and all the trauma, she also let herself go when we were together, making it some of the most passionate sex I've ever had.

And now, all I can think about is how good those legs would look wrapped around my waist.

“Stop staring, Ben.”

Amy's voice brings me back to reality—a reality where I'm neither in my bed nor have her legs wrapped around me. “How could I not? You look stunning.” I have no idea how I gather enough willpower not to pull her closer for a kiss but instead emphasize with a smirk how gorgeous she is.

“Haha, okay,” she laughs. “I'll be back soon; you can tell me more about that then.” With a wink, she turns on her heels and saunters off, leaving me staring after her—well, at her delicious ass.

I need to get a grip.

Clearing my throat, I turn back to my computer screen to reread Luke's email. Just as I'm about to respond, my boss's office door opens, and he strides toward my desk.

His gaze lingers on Amy's empty chair before he directs it at me. “Ben, did you read my email?”

I unclench my jaw to say, “Yes, Luke, I did.”

“I want to go over some details before the client gets here,” he adds, “so please meet me in my office thirty minutes prior to the appointment.”

A nod is my only answer, and Luke nods in return. More than happy to watch him leave, I lean back in my chair with a low groan. Something about his behavior today pisses me off. How he greeted Amy and asked about her family didn't sit right with me. It's been a while since Luke gave off the

impression that he had his eyes on her, and although nothing of his demeanor this morning was evidently inappropriate, it left a sour taste in my mouth. His smile was a little too bright and his interest a little too much. Amy noticed nothing, as usual, but I didn't point it out either. No need to stir anything up.

Once I'm left in peace, I reread all emails concerning tonight and start working on the file I need for the meeting. While I do, my mind keeps wandering, though. I'm anxious to hear news from my brother, and as long as I haven't, I have a bad feeling about Amy going out with Lauren. It'd be ridiculous to ask her not to go, so I don't, especially when she returns to her desk just before noon, beaming at me.

"Lauren has another meeting in the late afternoon, but once she's done with that, we'll grab a bite." She slumps into her chair with a happy sigh. "I'm looking forward to a girls' night. We have so much to catch up on."

I give her a smile that hopefully doesn't look too forced. "I bet. A lot has happened this past week."

"True, and I can't stress enough how relieved I am that it's over. It will feel so good to tell Lauren all about it. We can talk about more positive things again. It'll be a great evening."

My smile almost falters because the queasy feeling in my stomach gets worse. Jackson won't leave my thoughts, and I hope Amy is right and I am wrong.

Hopefully, it'll be an excellent evening.



"I'll have my attorney look over the contract." With a subtle smile, Mr. Peterson, the new client, gathers his papers and rises from his chair.

"Of course." Luke follows suit and stretches out his hand to shake Mr. Peterson's. "I'm looking forward to good

cooperation.”

“Me too.” Mr. Peterson turns to me with a smile. “Thank you for your presentation, Mr. Taylor. Very impressive.”

I rise from my seat to shake his hand. “Thank you. And I’m looking forward to working on this campaign.”

After more small talk, we say our goodbyes, and I return to my desk to finish up some last things. It’s seven thirty p.m.; half an hour before Amy and Lauren agreed to return to the office after dinner.

Amy just sent me a message, saying everything was all right—no need for me to worry. I still do, of course, but the fact that she’s enjoying her evening lightens my mood.

“You should go home, Ben.”

I look up from my desk and meet Luke’s gaze. “I will; just a couple more things I need to do.”

He nods. “By the way, I agree with Mr. Peterson,” he adds. “Excellent work.”

“Thank you, but I can’t take full credit. Amy helped me.”

His eyebrows shoot up, and he directs his gaze at her desk. “Amy? Wow, she has so many talents.”

I bite my lips; no need to tell him to shut up. I don’t like him talking about her like this, and no less with that undertone, but I can’t say that.

“Yes, it made sense to have a woman’s opinion on the ideas for the campaign.”

Luke rubs his chin, nodding. “True.” He looks back at me. “You two seem to get along well.”

I hesitate. Is he fishing for details? “Um, yeah. She’s great to work with.”

“She *is* doing an outstanding job,” Luke says, and I grow more fidgety with every word that leaves his mouth. “Really can’t blame you for being so sweet on her; she’s so easy on the eyes too.”

I open my mouth to respond, but I can't think of an answer that won't get me into trouble. What the fuck? Is he serious?

"Anyway," he says before a nasty insult passes my lips. "I'm off. See you tomorrow." Without waiting for a word from me, he walks toward the elevator.

Yeah, good riddance. I can't fucking believe him. It shouldn't surprise me, though. He's never been one to hold back with these sorts of comments about women in front of me. This just shows he suspects nothing about a relationship between Amy and me, so a part of me should be glad.

Another part of me wants to punch him.

My ringing phone interrupts the mental images of me doing just that. A frown forms on my forehead—it's not my cell but my work phone. Who calls me at this time of day? My first thought is not to answer, but that queasy gut feeling from earlier makes me pick up. "Hello?"

"Ben, my friend. It's been a while."

My heart stops. An icy shiver runs down my spine, and the cold spreads through my entire body. He's right—it's been a while, yet his hoarse voice is branded into my brain, so I recognize it immediately.

With wide eyes, I draw in a slow breath before responding, "Jackson. To what do I owe this ... displeasure?"

He laughs. He fucking laughs. It's a deep, throaty laugh that makes me shiver. "Ah, Ben, still the funny one."

"Get to it. Why are you calling?" Even though I'm sure of the answer—it probably has to do with my idiot brother failing to meet his end of the deal they have—I have to know this isn't about Amy.

"Oh, Ben." He lets out a heavy sigh, and every time he says my name, I clench my fist harder. "Aaron is slacking. I'm not sure I gave him the right incentive to finish this job. Doesn't he care at all about your girl's well-being?"

“Stay the fuck away from her,” I say through clenched teeth, suppressing the guttural roar that wants out. Jackson sure suspects how furious I am, but not showing too many emotions around him has always been the wiser choice. “Aaron still has time to deliver, so don’t be stupid and ambush an innocent woman.”

The line is quiet for a moment too long, and the ringing in my ears increases in volume. When his chuckle disrupts the silence, a fresh wave of cold rushes through me. “Amy really is gorgeous. Congrats, Ben.”

I suck in a sharp breath. No, this can’t be. He’s not telling me he’s watching her right now. “Stay away from her,” I say. “And don’t talk about her like that.”

But he doesn’t shut up. “That skirt and the black heels make her legs look great. I don’t know how you concentrate on work when she’s around.”

While scenarios play out in my head where I punch Jackson’s ugly face, I grab my cell from my pocket and type out a message to Amy.

Ben: Please tell me you’re still at the restaurant, surrounded by lots of people.

“The deadline isn’t up yet,” I say, pointing out what is the last piece of hope I’m clinging to. If he knows what Amy is wearing, he must be close. “Aaron will deliver.”

“Relax, Ben. Nothing’s gonna happen to your precious woman. Yet.”

I’m inclined to end the call so I can rush to the restaurant where Amy and Lauren are, but as long as Jackson talks to me, I know he hasn’t approached Amy. “What do you want from me?”

“Easy,” he responds. “Set your brother’s ass on fire. Make him hurry. I want my info, and I want it now.”

I tap my fingers on the desk, my eyes glued to the screen of my cell, waiting for Amy's response. She has to be at the restaurant. Please, let her still be there.

"To show I'm sticking to my word, I'll introduce myself to Amy. You want me to pass on a message or something?"

"You fucking moron. You'll regret it if you lay a single finger on her." My shaky voice is a telltale sign of the rage that boils inside me, and it's a damn miracle I don't crush the phone in my hand.

"We shall see who regrets what, Ben." After another chuckle, he adds, "Twenty-four hours. Tell Aaron that."

The click indicates he ended the call, and when I jump from my seat and grab my things to finally get to Amy, I receive a message from her.

Amy: Just left. Heading to the office now. Lauren had a major headache, so I sent her home. Hope that's okay. See you in about ten.

TWENTY-NINE

AMY

“Girl, you look like shit, and that’s putting it mildly,” I say, resting my hand on Lauren’s and giving it a squeeze.

She grimaces, rubbing her temple. “I *feel* like shit. Gosh, this headache is killing me.”

I study our half-eaten plates of pasta before meeting her pained gaze. “You should go home. Don’t worry about the food. Or me. You belong in bed.”

The frown on her forehead deepens. “Are you sure you’re fine to return to the office alone?”

I wave off her question. “Of course.”

As per Ben’s request, I didn’t fill Lauren in on Aaron and his deal with Jackson—and the warning the latter expressed if Aaron didn’t deliver. If my best friend knew some criminal was after me, she’d insist on accompanying me. Ben will be pissed when I show up alone, but I can’t expect Lauren to chaperone me—and I don’t want her to either. Her face is as white as a sheet, and tiny beads of sweat cover her forehead. No, I’ll go back without her.

Nothing will happen anyway.

After I convince Lauren to go home, we exit the restaurant, and once her Uber rounds the corner, I take in a deep breath of the fresh evening air. Zipping up my coat, I head to the office and accelerate my step when it starts to drizzle. Due to the weather and the falling dusk, fewer pedestrians than usual cross my path, and I push the unwanted thoughts aside that maybe I should have called Ben to pick me up. No, I won’t let this interfere with my peace of mind.

My phone vibrates in my purse, and I grimace when I read Ben’s text, and I draw in a deep breath as I type my answer, letting him know I just left.

An uneasy sensation settles in the pit of my stomach. Why would Ben say that he's hoping I'm still at the restaurant? I check left and right as I hurry down the sidewalk. After realizing I'm holding my breath, I suck in some air, internally berating myself for letting the nervousness take hold of me.

People rush past, and I wonder if anyone would even notice or let alone help if some shady guy approached me with less than good intentions.

No! These thoughts must stop. Jackson won't come near me as long as the deadline isn't up—Aaron repeatedly assured us of this, and I believe him.

With another deep breath, I will my feet to move slower. No need to barrel along the street. If only I could also will my heart to beat less frantically and the nervous tension in my body to disappear, but no such luck.

I check my phone for a response from Ben. Nothing. The phone almost slips out of my sweaty palm when I stuff it into my purse with a shaking hand. Awesome, fear tightens its grip on me. Groaning, I come to a stop and tilt my head back with closed eyes. In an attempt to focus my thoughts on anything but Jackson, I reminisce about last weekend and the wonderful time Ben and I had. It's a struggle, but soon, pictures flash in my mind of how I showed him around my hometown and how we had dinner at the Korean restaurant I had told him about, inspiring him to choose the location for my birthday gift.

I think back to the walk we took along the beach, hand in hand, in deep conversation, smiling at each other. The same smile spreads across my face now, and the tension in my shoulders eases. I open my eyes and continue on my way with a much calmer heartbeat.

After taking the first steps, I stop in my tracks, though. A deep, husky voice comes from behind me, sending unpleasant shivers down my spine. "Hey, gorgeous. Walk with me." The guy wraps his fingers around my upper arm but doesn't apply any pressure, but in my petrified state, I don't defy him. I can't. I can't even move my head to look at whoever guides

me along the sidewalk, past other pedestrians who, as expected, don't give us a second glance.

"You know who I am, so no introductions needed, right? I advise you to keep quiet, gorgeous," he goes on. "I'm not here to hurt you, but I am an impatient person." He draws in a deep breath and lets it out with a sigh. "Aaron doesn't take this seriously enough, I'm afraid."

He talks in an indistinct voice, and my hammering heartbeat in my ear makes it almost impossible for me to understand his words. Taking in air and, thus, much-needed oxygen becomes more difficult with every step he drags me after him, and when I suck in a wheezing breath, he stops.

"Relax," he says, turning me to face him. He grabs my other arm and leans me against the closest wall. I blink at his chest before I dare to lift my gaze to his face. Everything happens in some blur as if this were a strange dream, and when I take in his features, my first thought is that he looks nothing like I expected him to. Not shady or like a drug lord. He's tall, taller than Ben, and rather slim. His cleanly-shaven jaw and his dirty blond hair don't intimidate me either, but when I meet his blue eyes, I see it. No, I feel it—he exudes an unpleasantness I've never experienced before, and an icy chill ripples through my body.

"Relax, gorgeous," he repeats. "I just want to talk to you. I wouldn't even touch you, but I'm afraid you'll collapse. So calm down." He narrows his eyes while mine are still as wide as saucers. "All I want is for you to tell Aaron he has twenty-four hours left. I already told your precious Ben, but I think Aaron needs a stronger incentive. If I don't hear from him before tomorrow night, I'll have you picked up for another chat." He leans in, making me cower away from him. "You got that?"

Now that he's even closer, his scent hits my nostrils, and his aftershave worsens my nausea, so I hold my breath to avoid inhaling more of the pungent smell. No sound leaves my mouth, and my body is still paralyzed, so I can't nod either.

Luckily, Jackson backs off, and I suck in a sharp breath. He looks left and right until his gaze lingers on something in the distance to his left. I can't tear my eyes away from him as much as I hate the view. One corner of Jackson's lips lifts a fraction as he turns back to me. "Time for me to go, gorgeous. It was a pleasure to meet you. You remember what to tell Aaron, don't you?"

Without waiting for an answer he wouldn't have received, he walks off, leaving me staring after him. My legs shake, and they're about to give in. My back slides down the wall, but two strong arms prevent my fall before I hit the ground. Relief floods my body as a different scent fills my nose—a familiar and calming scent that eases the full-body tension at once.

"It's all right; I got you," Ben breathes in my ear, and even though his voice is shaking and his tone shows he's close to exploding, it soothes me.

"Ben," I croak, wrapping my arms around his torso and clinging to him.

He tightens his embrace, muttering through clenched teeth, "I'm gonna fucking kill him."

I want to ask who, but I still can't utter any sensible words, and in the end, it doesn't matter if he means Aaron or Jackson.

"Come on; I'll take you to my place."

The entire way to Ben's apartment, no words pass my lips while he keeps cursing under his breath. He repeatedly asks me if I'm okay, to which I only nod, and he asks if I'm sure. In the backseat of the Uber that Ben ordered, I press my body as close to his as possible, showing him I am okay as long as he wraps his arms around me. Ben understands, only letting go of me when he unlocks his door. Once we enter his pitch-black place, he turns on the lights in the hall and grasps my hand, leading me to the living room, still mumbling profanities.

Although his demeanor radiates anger and annoyance, I can breathe easy. I'm here with Ben, and I'm safe. The earlier

encounter feels more and more like an awful dream, and I push the unwanted memories to the back of my mind.

A familiar voice greets us as soon as Ben switches on the living room lights. “Damn, what took you so long?”

My heart skips a beat, and I gasp, but I let out a relieved breath when I recognize Aaron sitting on Ben’s couch.

Ben freezes, and a low grumble emanates from his chest. He tightens his grip on my hand to a point where it’s almost painful, and I squeeze his hand and pull on his arm. “Don’t,” I whisper because Ben sure is moments away from lunging at his brother.

Ben turns to me, grinding his teeth, but his features soften when he meets my gaze. “I’m gonna punch him,” he mumbles.

I shake my head. Ben can’t start a fight now because I need answers. “Let him talk. Please.”

“Yes, listen to your girl,” Aaron interjects, rising from the couch and holding up his hands. “I want to explain.” He lets out a deep sigh before adding, “Please.”

Ben draws in a slow breath through his nose. “Fine. Explain. Start with how you got in here.”

Aaron rolls his eyes, huffing. “Oh, please, your lock is no challenge for me.”

With a growl, Ben takes a few steps toward his brother, pulling me after him. They stand inches apart but don’t touch. “You broke into my fucking apartment?”

“Calm the fuck down, Ben. That was a joke. You gave Dad a spare key, remember?” He holds up the key, and Ben snatches it from his hand.

“Why are you here?” Ben asks.

“I wanted to talk to you.”

“Couldn’t you have called?”

“Oh, please. If I had called, you would have yelled at me and hung up. You wouldn’t have listened.”

“And you think I will listen now?”

“If you don’t, she will.” He points to me, and I close my eyes, pinching the bridge of my nose with my free hand. Ben still has a firm grip on my other. On a long exhale, I whimper; I don’t want to get in the middle of their brotherly quarrels.

“Amy.”

My eyes shoot open at the soft tone of Aaron’s voice.

“I’m sorry about what happened tonight,” he says. “I just returned from Arizona and was ready to meet Jackson, but when I called his sidekick, Victor, he let on that Jackson was already on his way to pay you a visit. Did he touch you?”

I shrug, meeting Ben’s gaze, who fixes his eyes on me. “He, um—” I have to clear my throat to get rid of the lump. “Not really. He showed up behind me as I walked back to the office after dinner with Lauren. He led me down the street and held on to me when I was close to collapsing. So he—”

“It doesn’t make it any less horrifying just because he didn’t inflict physical pain on her,” Ben interrupts, focusing on Aaron again.

“I know.” Aaron runs his fingers through his hair with a sigh—a habit both brothers share that makes them look so much alike. “Listen, there was no way he would have done more than remind you of my deadline. It was a busy Manhattan street with too many people around. That’s not his MO. If he wants to hurt you, he drags you into a dark and lonely corner.”

“Yes, but it worries me he doesn’t shy away from approaching someone with others around. Amy could have made a scene.” With a huff, Ben lets go of my hand to pace back and forth across his small living room. I’m not sure how long he’ll be able to hold himself back.

Aaron holds up his hands again. “He knew she wouldn’t. You know how well he can read people. His tactic worked; he scared you, and we all know he isn’t kidding about his threats if I don’t deliver.”

Ben spins around, shooting his brother a death glare. “Deliver then!”

“I’m working on it. Just—” He draws in a slow breath before he continues in a low voice, “accept my apologies, please. I never meant to drag either of you into this.”

“I don’t give a fuck about your apologies,” Ben sneers. “Get your shit together and stay out of trouble after this. Stay the fuck away from Jackson. And also from Wallace.”

A deep frown forms on Aaron’s forehead—the first I’ve ever seen on him. It’s this whole side he’s showing tonight that I haven’t seen before. Usually, he doesn’t give a shit about Ben’s warnings, always telling him to back off. Tonight, though, the remorse is evident on his face, and his slumped shoulders are a telltale sign as well.

When his chin drops to his chest with a deep sigh, I clench my teeth, suppressing an unwelcome emotion. I shouldn’t feel sorry for him; he screwed up. Yet I do, but I won’t tell him. Even though tonight’s images are more blurry now, the panic still lingers in my bones—a sensation Aaron is responsible for. I may not be as livid as Ben, but forgiveness isn’t on my agenda yet, either.

A heavy silence fills the air, and no one moves an inch. The tension increases, ruining the little bit of calmness inside me that Ben restored earlier, and it feels like forever until Aaron speaks. “I gotta go. Again, I’ll sort this out. Tonight. Promise.” Without another word, he rushes past me and out the door.

Stunned, I gaze after him until he slams the front door shut, making me flinch. I flinch again when Ben pulls my body into an embrace, but a moment later, I sink into him, wrapping my arms around him and resting my head on his chest.

“I’m so sorry, Amy,” he murmurs into my hair. “What can I do? Tell me.”

“Stay with me. That’s all I need.”

“I will. Promise.”

I lift my gaze to his eyes. “And let’s not talk about this evening anymore, okay? I want to distract my thoughts.”

Ben nods, lowering his mouth to meet my lips in a soft kiss, and so we spend the rest of the evening distracting our thoughts from the incident that’ll probably accompany us for another long while.

THIRTY

BEN

It's been six weeks since the Jackson incident. Six weeks, and it's still on my mind more than I want it to be.

The day after Jackson ambushed Amy, he called to say he wouldn't bother us anymore, as much as he enjoyed meeting my girlfriend. I've been on edge ever since. I'm very familiar with the mind games he loves to play, and I hate that it's working. He occupies my thoughts, making me suspicious of every stranger that looks at Amy for a second too long, and my brain always conjures up worst-case scenarios. What if Jackson feels like playing another one of his games just for the fun of it?

For the past weeks, things have gradually improved, though, at least for Amy. The days after that evening were rough, and she woke up in the middle of the night drenched in sweat. Walking outside, leaving her or my place, became more and more of a struggle, and she realized she needed someone else to help her—I couldn't do the job. She called her therapist from back home and is now her old self again, thanks to regular phone sessions.

If only I could say the same about myself. The nagging voice in my head won't shut up, no matter how many times my brother vows that he cut ties with Jackson and also with Wallace. A few days after the incident, Aaron and I had a long talk, and he claimed they agreed no one owes anyone anything any longer. With everything that has happened in the past, I'm finding it hard to believe.

Or it's my deeply rooted mistrust.

I've hardly seen or talked to my brother since. He texts Amy, which pisses me off, but I keep my mouth shut; I don't want to make yet another scene. Amy reassures me he's not obtrusive, just checks in on her.

“Oh my gosh, Rosa. Isn't that a bit much?”

I look up from my tablet, where I should concentrate on a project instead of going over all the sources of my current frustration. My gaze lands on Amy, who sits up straight in her chair, her expression a mixture of amusement and disgust. She scrunches up her face, but a sweet laugh escapes her lips as she watches our human resources manager, Rosa, put up an inflatable Santa.

Christmas is Rosa's favorite season, and as it's less than four weeks until the grand holiday, she brings out the umpteenth box of decorations. After only half an hour, it looks like a Christmas store threw up on our floor.

"Darling," Rosa says, waving off Amy's remark with a chuckle. "One can never overdo decorations at Christmas."

Amy's lips stretch into a smile when she turns back to her desk, but it falters as soon as our eyes meet. "Oh, Ben." She lets out a quiet groan. "Will that frown ever disappear?" She points to the tiny elves Rosa placed on everyone's desks. "How can you not be filled with glee when you look at these?"

I grimace. "Sorry, but the festive mood won't settle in."

She checks her watch with a soft sigh before meeting my gaze. "How about some coffee in the break room? I could use a few minutes away from my desk."

"Sure," I say. A hot beverage sounds like a great idea to get rid of the fatigue—and also the constant chill that has a firm hold on my body. After saving the files on my tablet, I follow Amy to the break room, grab two mugs, and fill them with the hopefully invigorating brew. I join her at the table, plopping down on my chair with a groan. "I'm sorry, Princess. I'm so insufferable."

Amy pats my forearm. "It's okay. But I've gotten over it, so you should too. We didn't even celebrate your birthday two weeks ago because you didn't feel like it."

"Amy, there you are." Luke strides into the room, interrupting our conversation. He stands next to our table, giving Amy one of his signature beaming smiles.

I want to throw up.

“I’m off to an impromptu meeting with Patrick and Greg. I sent you an email with a list of tasks that need to be done today.”

The genuine smile Amy displays in return shows she’s not at all suspicious of Luke’s behavior toward her. I know him, so I notice Luke’s subtle flirting, and so far, Amy has put off any of my remarks concerning our boss’s improper conduct.

“Sure, I’ll get to it right away,” Amy responds.

“Thank you, Amy.” Luke leans closer to her without registering the glare I direct at him. “I’m sure you won’t have any trouble, as usual,” he says as his smile widens.

Fucking shit, he’s laying it on thick today. It’s not that he’s wrong—Amy is excellent at what she does, but I don’t like Luke’s ulterior motive.

To stop me from telling him to fuck off, I take a sip of my coffee, almost spitting it out right after. “Ugh, I forgot the sugar. Excuse me.” Grumbling, I rise from my seat. Maybe some distance will help restrain myself, but while I pour the missing sugar into the mug and stir with my back turned to them, I can’t help but eavesdrop on their conversation.

“You’re doing an exceptional job,” Luke says, and I flick my gaze to the ceiling, groaning inwardly. Is he still not done?

“Thank you, Luke,” Amy responds. “That’s so kind of you.”

As I turn around to watch the scene unfold, Luke flashes his pearly-white teeth at my girlfriend. “Nothing to thank me for. On the contrary, I would like to show my appreciation by taking you to dinner on Friday night.”

Oh hell no. My mouth falls open, and I almost drop the mug. Is he fucking serious? He’s asking her to dinner while I stand mere feet away?

I push myself off the counter as Amy clears her throat before saying, “Oh, Luke, again, that’s very kind, but I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Is everything all right?” I chime in. She sure knows how to turn him down herself, but I can’t switch off the urge to protect my woman. I stand behind Amy, placing my free hand on her shoulder while the other clutches at the cup. I need all my willpower not to hurl the hot coffee at him to wipe the stupid grin off his face.

Luckily, it vanishes on its own when he studies us, his gaze lingering on where I touch Amy before he lifts his eyes to meet my glare.

Maybe this isn’t the best time or place to fill him in on our relationship status, but I can’t take his shit any longer. Amy has worked at Wilsons for four months, and since then I’ve watched him ogle her and listened to his misplaced remarks. I’m surprised he’s waited this long to ask her to dinner, but I’m more than happy to clear the air.

“Sure,” Luke responds, narrowing his eyes. “I was just telling Amy what a wonderful employee she is.”

“And asking her out,” I scoff. “Don’t you think that’s a little inappropriate?”

Luke huffs. “Ben, you don’t have to act like her big brother.”

I clench my jaw, responding through gritted teeth, “Not her big brother, her boyfriend.”

Amy gasps, spinning around in her chair to gape at me, while Luke’s posture stiffens. “So the rumors are true?” he asks. “You two have an affair?”

I snort. “Not an affair. A relationship.”

“Ben!” Amy’s eyes widen before she turns to Luke. “I’m sorry, we would have said something, but—”

Luke holds up his hand. “It’s okay, Amy.” His gaze flickers between us before it settles on me. “But you should know that a relationship between colleagues is frowned upon. Don’t let this affect your work.”

I roll my eyes. “A relationship is frowned upon, but asking your assistant to dinner is okay?”

“Ben,” Amy snaps, grimacing at me. “Stop.”

She’s right. Now I am the one who acts inappropriately. No matter how wrong Luke’s behavior is, he’s our boss. I draw in a deep breath, returning to the kitchenette to dump the remains of my coffee in the sink. I need to remove myself from the situation before I say more things I may regret later. “I’m sorry, Luke,” I say, walking past him to return to my desk.

Leaving Amy to deal with our boss alone is a shitty thing to do, but I would have made everything worse had I stayed.

I regret my decision the second Amy shows up. Her pale expression tightens the knot in my guts that has been sitting there for much too long. With a deep sigh, she sinks into her chair and leans back, closing her eyes and rubbing her temples.

“I’m sorry I ran off,” I tell her.

“It’s okay,” she responds, opening her eyes and blinking at me. “You would have only made it worse, anyway.” A subtle smile plays on her lips, making my tense muscles relax. “I explained the situation to Luke and told him you had some family affairs going on—to present him with a reason you were flipping your shit.”

I grimace. “Ugh, what did he say?”

She wrinkles her nose. “He apologized, saying he didn’t mean for it to come across like he was asking me out—he meant it strictly professional.”

I snort. “Of course he did.”

Amy raises an eyebrow at me. “Ben, let it go. Luke also reiterated his warning. We mustn’t let our relationship affect our work, or it’ll have consequences.”

“Consequences?” I shift in my chair. I don’t like the sound of that.

“He didn’t elaborate, but I’m guessing we wouldn’t be sitting across from each other any longer.”

“Perfect.” I rub the back of my neck, ignoring the impending headache.

“Calm down, Ben. It’ll all be good. Just don’t jump at his throat again.” Amy’s eyes fall closed, and she grimaces when she rubs her stomach. “Ugh, the coffee doesn’t agree with me.”

My eyebrows squish together as I watch her draw in a slow breath. Her upset stomach has been bothering her lately, and I’ve told her more than once to see a doctor; maybe the stress was too much.

“Do you wanna go for a walk after work?” I ask. The fresh air will do both of us some good.

Amy agrees, and for the following hours, I go through the motions of working until it’s time to call it a day. It’s already dark outside when I wait for Amy in the lobby because she has to run one last errand. When we leave the building after five p.m., we zip up our coats even though the temperatures at the beginning of December are still mild.

Amy’s hand slips into mine, and the comfort of having her close washes over me for the first time today. I hate how our circumstances interfere with every moment we have. I want to savor my time with Amy, but instead, I mull over too many things.

“Are you feeling better?” Amy asks when I draw in a deep breath and release it through my lips.

I squeeze her hand and run my thumb over hers. “Yeah. I’m glad this day is over. Has Luke said anything else to you today?”

“No, he acted like his usual, *professional* self. No comments, no questions, no more warnings.”

“That’s good. And how are you feeling? How’s your stomach?”

She crinkles her nose. “So-so. It’s fine now, but I may want some chamomile tea when we get home.” She turns to me while we wait at a red light and wraps her arms around me. “And some TLC,” she adds as I envelop her in an embrace.

“You got it.” I press a soft kiss to the top of her head before the light turns green and we cross the street to take a stroll through Central Park. The walkway we amble along is still busy with people walking their dogs and joggers running their evening rounds. The street lamps illuminate our way, and the city lights in the background give everything an almost romantic atmosphere.

A genuine smile stretches my lips as Amy and I engage in easy conversation, and when we turn around to head to the subway station, I look forward to a relaxed evening on the couch with her in my arms.

While Amy tells me about her parents’ plans to visit over Christmas, I let my gaze wander left and right. I watch the people walk by until my eyes land on an ominous figure leaning against a tree a few feet away. Arms crossed over his chest and head bowed, the guy has a cap pulled down low over his face so I can’t see his eyes. I know it’s a guy—his physique and broad shoulders give him away. Plus, an unnerving sense of familiarity washes over me. I know him.

I fix my eyes on the man, squinting to make out more details, but he stands too far from the street lamps. It’s not before we almost pass him that he lifts his head and our gazes meet. A half-smirk appears on his lips while an icy shiver runs down my spine.

Steve. One of Jackson’s goons.

What the fuck is one of Jackson’s guys doing in Central Park, hiding in the shadow as Amy and I happen to walk by? This can’t be a coincidence, and there’s only one explanation: my brother lied and screwed up again, so Jackson sent Steve to spy on us.

I clench my fist to stop my hand from shaking, and I do my best not to crush Amy’s fingers. Blood whooshes in my ears, drowning out Amy’s words. She keeps talking, so she doesn’t notice what’s going on.

Steve’s eyes stay on us, and I fix my gaze on him until we walk past and I would have to turn my head. I swallow a

grumble that wants out and accelerate my step, almost pulling Amy after me. Time to get the fuck away from here.

“Ben, what’s wrong?” Amy asks as I hurry along.

“Nothing,” I mumble, avoiding eye contact. “I just want to get you home. It’s getting cold.”

The entire way to Amy’s apartment, I remain silent, only giving her monosyllabic answers to her questions as she struggles to understand what’s happening. At some point, she stops asking, but when we stand in front of her door, she turns to me. “Okay, Ben, enough. Tell me what the heck is going on.” She clutches at my coat, adding in a whisper, “Please.”

With a deep sigh, I run my hand through my hair, averting my gaze. “I saw one of Jackson’s guys at Central Park, and I’m not sure if we’re being followed.”

A gasp escapes her lips, and when I return my eyes to her, I frown. This is exactly what I didn’t want anymore. I never wanted to see that expression on her face ever again, but there it is: the worry and concern.

“Fuck,” I grumble. “Look, I want you to go inside and lock the door, and don’t let anyone in.”

Her eyebrows furrow. “What do you mean? Aren’t you coming in?”

I shake my head. “I have to speak to Aaron and find out what’s going on.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“The fuck you are,” I snap. As soon as the words are out, I regret the tone of my voice. Amy flinches and bites down on her bottom lip. *Well done, idiot.* I drag my fingers through my hair, pulling until it hurts. Seeing her like this and knowing I have to leave her to sort shit out yet again makes my chest feel tight, but I have to do this.

“I’m sorry.” I squeeze my eyes shut. “Now go inside and lock the door,” I repeat as I meet her pained gaze. “I’ll call you as soon as I know more.” I retreat, hesitantly, unwilling to leave her, but I must. As I turn around and rush down the stairs and out of Amy’s building, her hurt expression is branded into my brain, fueling the rage inside me.

I have to talk to my brother; it’s time to find out what’s going on—and for that punch I’ve wanted to deliver, and tonight, no one will hold me back.

THIRTY-ONE

AMY

All night long, I stare at my phone. I don't sleep; I don't eat; I do nothing but lie awake and wait. My thoughts race as they have been ever since Ben left. What made him snap like that and, worst of all, leave me behind, wondering and waiting?

I check my watch for the umpteenth time since yesterday evening. Under normal circumstances, this would be the moment to get ready for work.

Normal. I can't remember what that's like.

With a huff, I hide under my blanket, curling up into a fetal position. I wrap my arms around my knees, pulling them tight against my chest. My eyes are dry; no more tears will come after crying for hours, but the heaviness lingers in every cell in my body.

Ben hasn't called or messaged, so I still struggle to fathom what's going on. He suspects Jackson followed us again? But why does it take him all night to figure out what's happening?

And why doesn't he let me know he's okay? Maybe he's not?

A whimper escapes me as all my muscles convulse, as they have done repeatedly over the last hours. The stomach cramps increase in intensity, and a wave of nausea adds to my miserable state. Bile rises in my throat as my body tries to get rid of my non-existing stomach content. I don't want to throw up on my bedroom floor, so I drag my aching limbs out of bed and hope my shaky legs will take me to the bathroom in time. I almost collapse in front of the toilet, but my trembling hands hold me up.

Once the vomiting and dry-heaving stop, I rest my head on my arms, unable to move or get up. Shit, what's wrong with my stomach? All the stress adds up, and Ben's behavior from last night is the damn cherry on top.

When I close my eyes, I see his hard and dismissive expression. The tone of his voice breaks my heart every time I remember how he told me to go inside my apartment.

Minutes pass, and I only breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth, but my racing heartbeat won't slow down. Gathering all the strength I can muster, I heave myself up and stand at the sink. A look in the mirror confirms my suspicion: my reflection stares back at me with red, puffy eyes and smudged makeup.

With a groan, I rinse my mouth before returning to bed and resuming my earlier position. I grab my phone, but it shows no signs of a call or a message, and it's driving me out of my mind. I consider calling him again, but leaving another voice message won't change a thing.

But I need to talk to somebody, so I call Lauren, and luckily, she picks up after the first ring. "Good morning, sweetie," she says in her usual cheerful voice. "How are you?"

I draw in a shaky breath. "Hey. Not too good. I'm not coming in today; I'm not feeling well."

"Oh no, what's going on?"

While I don't like the worry she expresses, hearing her voice calms my inner turmoil; at least she is still there. "Just a stomach bug," I tell her.

"Is Ben coming to work, or is he taking care of you?"

I grimace as the mention of his name causes a sting in my chest, and a sob escapes me. "I—I don't know if he's coming in or not. I haven't heard from him."

During the ensuing silence, I can very well imagine Lauren's puzzled expression. "What are you talking about?" she asks. "Amy, what's happening? What do you mean?"

"It's a long story." I let out a heavy sigh. "Will you come over after work? I can explain then."

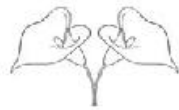
"Of course. I'm already at my desk, and I'll skip lunch so I can finish as early as possible, all right?"

"Okay," I croak.

“Hang in there, hun. Call me if you need anything.”

“I will. Thank you.”

We end the call, and while worry and dread still swirl in my mind, I’m much calmer after talking to Lauren. I inform my boss about taking sick leave today, and comfortable drowsiness takes over as I fix my thoughts on how I can always rely on my best friend, and finally, sleep comes.



My ringing phone startles me awake, and as soon as I realize what sound it is, I answer without checking the ID. “Hello? Ben?”

“No, sorry, love. It’s me, Lauren. I’m in front of your building, but you won’t open. Are you okay?”

“Shit. Yes.” With a groan, I sit up in my bed and rub my forehead. A throbbing headache starts beneath my temples, and a huge lump sits in my parched throat. “Hold on. I fell asleep.”

I stumble to the door and buzz her in, and a few moments later, she rounds the corner. As soon as she sees me, she hurries over and envelops me in a warm hug.

“Gosh, Amy, you look like shit. Talk to me.” She links her arm with mine and drags me after her to the couch. “Sit. Have you had any food today? Or at least some tea or water?”

I sink into the cushions, pulling up my knees into my comfort position. “No, nothing.”

Lauren wrinkles her brows. “We need to get some nutrients into you,” she says as she rises from the sofa and disappears into my kitchen.

While she rummages through my cupboards, my heavy eyelids droop. Even though my body still aches in all places,

having Lauren here eases the tension, and I'm once again grateful to have her as my best friend.

When she returns a few minutes later, she hands me a mug. "Here's some herbal tea with lots of sugar. Drink," she says, urging me on when I grimace. "Small sips."

When the warm liquid runs down my throat into my empty stomach, my body protests at first, but the pain subsides more with every sip.

"Will you tell me what happened? I've been worried all day," Lauren says, "especially since Ben wasn't at work either."

My eyes snap to her. "He wasn't?" When Lauren shakes her head, I curse under my breath, and a different emotion rises within me. I clench my jaw, and I'm close to crushing the mug with my bare hands. How can Ben disappear like that?

Lauren tilts her head to the side and moves her hand in a go-on motion. After taking another sip of the tea and drawing in a deep breath, I tell my best friend everything. I recount all the things I learned about Ben's criminal past—most of which Lauren is already aware of—down to how Jackson ambushed me a few weeks ago. She stares at me as I give her the details of the story, listening without interrupting until I finish. "That's when he ran off, leaving me to deal with this alone, and I haven't heard from him since." I place my empty mug on the coffee table and sink back into the cushions, wishing I could hide from everything, including the physical and emotional pain.

Lauren sighs. "I can't believe he would do that to you." She shakes her head before fixing her gaze on me. "Are you afraid you're in danger?"

I shrug. "I'm more worried about Ben. Not much else is on my mind. Not knowing is the worst, and I—"

My phone rings, making me flinch. With a hammering heart, I grab it from the coffee table, and when I read Ben's name on the screen, my breath hitches in my throat. More

adrenaline surges through my veins when I answer. “Ben? Are you okay? Are you safe? What happened?”

“Yes, I’m safe, and you are too.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, and tears well up behind my eyelids. Relief floods my system, but confusion sticks around. “Will you come home, then?”

Silence fills the line, and my heart rate picks up. I clutch at my shirt, and unpleasant chills run down my spine. “Ben?” I ask when he doesn’t respond.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t. I’m sorry I dragged you into my world.”

I whimper at the ugly turn this is taking. “Your world? What the fuck are you talking about? That isn’t your world anymore. You just said it was all good; we’re all safe.”

“Yes, but how do I know nothing will ever happen to you?”

“You can’t, and it’s okay. We can’t let this direct our lives, Ben. We’ve had this conversation before.”

“I know. But seeing that look on your face last night—I hated that. I don’t want to put you in these kinds of situations anymore.”

My pulse pounds in my ears, and my posture stiffens as a disturbing ache settles in my chest. “What are you saying?”

He takes in a deep breath. “Maybe we should stop seeing each other.”

“Are you breaking up with me?!” I jump out of my seat but drop back down when a wave of dizziness hits me. I lean my head on my hand, covering my face with my palm. “Are you fucking kidding?”

“I—I don’t know. I want to protect you, and it’s probably for the best if—”

“No, stop right there. That’s nonsense. You can’t do this. We work together.”

“I will ask for a transfer.”

His statement hits me like a ton of bricks, and I suck in a sharp breath. No, he can't be serious.

"Amy, please, try to understand."

"No, I don't understand, and I don't want to try. Call me when you've come back to your senses." Without waiting for an answer, I hang up and hurl the phone on the seat next to me. It bounces off the couch and lands on the carpet with a loud thud.

This is a nightmare. Someone wake me up, please. I bury my face in my hands, and one sob after another makes my body shake. I let my tears fall, and Lauren scoots over, pulls me closer, and wraps her arms around me.

"Oh, hun," she says, "I'm here; you'll be all right, you hear me?" She rocks back and forth, but neither that nor her presence ease the agony inside me.

The meaning of Ben's words still has to sink in; the thought he's serious about a break-up is too surreal. A sudden coldness hits me to my core, making me shiver, and the nausea returns full force.

"Fuck," I mutter, jumping up and rushing to the bathroom.

When I rinse my mouth after getting rid of the tea I just had, Lauren appears in the door. "You okay? Do you want me to take you to a doctor? You haven't been feeling well for a few days, right?"

Nodding, I bend over at the waist, rubbing my stomach. "It's been bugging me for a bit, and now nausea and throwing up join the party."

Lauren draws in a slow breath and crosses her arms over her chest, studying me with her head tilted to the side. "That's not your stomach, love." She points to where I press my palms to my lower abdomen.

I follow her gaze before our eyes meet. Her raised brows make me furrow mine. "What are you getting at?"

"When a woman experiences pain in her lower abdomen *and* throws up, another reason comes to mind besides a

stomach bug.”

I snort. “Don’t be silly. It’s probably my nearing period.”

Lauren crosses her arms over her chest. “Well, are you bleeding?”

“Not yet,” I respond with a frown, and she raises her hand, palm up.

“Which supports my theory.”

“Lauren, I am not pregnant. I’m on the pill.”

“Have you always taken it regularly? Have you been sick at some point? Taken antibiotics? You want more reasons the pill isn’t one hundred percent secure?”

I rub my temples and press my lips together. I’d love to ignore Lauren’s suspicion, but her theory makes my mind race. When was my last period? Does Lauren have a point about me not taking the pill regularly? Did I miss a day?

“Fucking shit,” I exclaim as it hits me.

“Yes?” Her eyebrows raise another fraction.

“I was kinda out of it when Noah showed up, and with the time difference between the East and the West Coast, I may have screwed it up.” I grab two fistfuls of my messy hair, letting out a frustrated groan. This can’t be happening.

“You know what?” Lauren grabs my arm and pulls me after her to the couch. “You sit down, relax, have another sip of water,” she says, rushing to my kitchen and returning with a drink, “while I run to the pharmacy to buy a pregnancy test.”

Once she’s out the door, I do as she tells me, minus the relax part. I wet my dry mouth with the water before biting my nails. My foot won’t stop tapping, and my heart is close to exploding in my chest. No way my body will relax.

Time stands still while Lauren is gone, and my head spins with worry and fear. What if I’m pregnant? How do I tell Ben? When he finds out, will he take back his words, only because I’m expecting his baby? What if he doesn’t? Will I be a single mom?

If I am pregnant. Fear turns into dread, and unpleasant tingles set off in my chest. Memories of my last pregnancy wash over me, and I squeeze my eyes shut, covering them with my trembling hand. With deep breaths, I try to control the sense of oncoming panic, but if Lauren doesn't return soon, I won't be able to stop the anxiety attack.

Okay, Amy, think.

Instead of conjuring up worst-case scenarios, my next tactic is something I remember from my therapy sessions. Unfortunately, panic attacks were a regular occurrence for me in the past, and just like then, I must find my way back to reality now. I open my eyes and fix my gaze on the first object I see: the glass on the coffee table. I breathe in and out, in and out.

It'll all be okay.

I repeat that mantra in my head until the panic subsides, and finally, the key turns in my lock, announcing Lauren's return.

"Okay, here. Now go pee." She hands me the test, but when I just stare at her, unmoving, she pulls me up with a deep sigh and wraps her arms around me in a tight embrace. "You'll get through this, I promise. You'll sort things out with Ben, and no matter what the result of that test is, we'll find a solution to all your worries. I'm here for you. Always."

Her soothing tone and knowing she means every word she says give me a tiny boost of confidence. "Thank you," I murmur into her shoulder, and after one last squeeze, I let go and vanish into the bathroom.

I don't know how I even manage to pee, but a few drops later, I place the stick next to the sink, staring at it with wide eyes and a hammering heart. When the result shows, my body goes numb.

Shit.

The two lines leave no question, and I wait for any emotion to arise, but there's nothing. My mind is a complete blank, except for one thought: today is on top of my list of the

worst days of my life. My boyfriend breaks up with me right before I find out I'm pregnant.

Fucking perfect.

THIRTY-TWO

BEN

“Get your damn ass off my couch, Ben.”

I grunt when my brother kicks my foot, which hangs off the sofa while I stare at the ceiling, trying to figure out why I am such a fucking idiot.

I got off the phone with Amy two hours ago. Replaying the call in my head in a constant, taunting loop, I can't decide what to do. Her expression when I left still haunts me, and I was so confident it was better to end things between us. But when I heard her voice and realized how upset she was, doubt crept up on me, and I've been second-guessing my decision since.

It would forever haunt me if she got hurt, physically or mentally, only because of my relations with the past, but leaving her isn't the way to accomplish it.

“Are you still mulling over last night?” Aaron pushes my legs off his couch and drops into the cushions. “It was just a misunderstanding. Don't you see that?”

With a deep sigh, I sit up and rest my elbows on my knees. Burying my face in my hands, I shake my head. “I know it was. Steve was tailing someone else, and it was only a damn coincidence we walked past.”

“By the way,” Aaron says. “You're welcome. I loved spending hours on the phone last night to get a hold on Jackson and find out that you're just fucking paranoid.”

With a groan, I jump out of my seat. “I'm sorry, okay?” Pacing back and forth in his living room, I banish the fact from my mind that I made a huge mistake. We were never in danger, and I didn't need to leave Amy—the one thing she asked me not to do.

So the damage was done.

The longer I ponder what to do, the less confident I am that we can fix it. A part of me wants to stay away from her to avoid situations like last night in the future. Maybe Amy won't forgive me for how I reacted, but another part—a much bigger part—wonders how I could ever go on without her.

“Why are you still here, anyway?”

I jerk to a halt at Aaron's question, wondering if I should confide in him. Rubbing the back of my neck and taking in a deep breath, I say, “I'm not sure if I can return to Amy.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “Why not?”

“I hurt her ... bad. I messed up.”

“So what? You apologize and explain everything to her. She's the best damn thing that ever happened to you, and you can't just give her up like that.”

I furrow my brows. “Seriously? *You're telling me this?*” Aaron's efforts to make me see reason surprise me, but not in a bad way, and even though his attempts are futile, I appreciate this rare moment where I'm glad to have him as my brother. “It's not that easy. You should have seen the hurt in her eyes. It was horrible, and I was responsible for it.” I slouch my shoulders with a heavy sigh. “You're right; I am paranoid. Everything is a potential threat, making me jump to wrong conclusions, as last night proved.”

“Damn, Ben, you need professional help.” Shaking his head, he rises from the couch, mumbling something about stupid as he strides to the kitchen. Yup, the moment's over.

“Why are you doing this?” I call after him.

“Doing what?”

I follow Aaron, and as I enter the kitchen, he hands me a soda before sitting at the table. I join him, responding, “Convincing me to fix what I screwed up.”

He takes a sip of his drink, then another. Our eyes meet, and he flicks his gaze upward with an exaggerated sigh. “You're miserable without Amy, and she's got it just as bad.

Go figure. If you don't fix this, you will break her heart, and I don't want to see her heartbroken."

"Wouldn't that be your moment?"

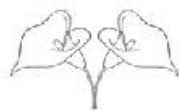
"What the fuck is wrong with you? Amy loves you, and no matter how much I want her, I know I can never have her."

"So you admit you have feelings for her?" This time, his words aren't surprising. I've always suspected he harbors feelings for Amy.

"We're not discussing this now." He huffs, avoiding the topic as usual. "We're discussing your stupidity. And I don't do feelings, as you know," he adds, rising from his chair after checking his watch. "If you don't get your head out of your ass and apologize, you're even more stupid than I thought." He finishes his drink, leaving me staring after him with a deep frown forming on my forehead.

"I'm off to work," he says, grabbing his keys and phone on his way out, "which means I'm throwing you out. You coming?"

With the umpteenth plaintive sigh, I shuffle after him, and while he makes his way into Midtown, I return home because I'm still unsure if I can face Amy and apologize for my stupidity.



The following day, I drag my aching body to work. For the second night in a row, I didn't sleep. Aaron's words still replay in my mind, especially since I couldn't pluck up the courage to contact Amy. Facing her at work isn't the smartest choice, but acting stupid seems to be my new MO.

When I enter the office, I spot her immediately. Like every other typical day, she sits at her desk, flipping through a folder.

Typical. I miss that.

With slow steps and a hammering heart, I move toward my desk, my eyes fixed on her. She hasn't noticed me yet and only does when I sit in my chair. Her gaze snaps up, and when it meets mine, she crinkles her nose, and it does the strangest things to my body. I love this look on her because it's so adorable, but today, it makes my chest feel tight.

Amy opens and closes her mouth several times, but no words come out. I'm about to say something when she pushes back her chair and jumps up. The color leaves her face, and she covers her mouth and rushes out of the office.

I gaze after her with furrowed brows and a racing mind. What just happened?

"Good morning, Ben."

I spin around to face Luke, who stands next to my desk, arms crossed over his chest and eyes narrowed. So he's in a grim mood too. I clear my throat before saying, "Good morning, Luke."

"Is everything all right?" He points to Amy's desk. "Amy seemed a little flustered this morning. Are you both feeling better?"

I shift in my seat, doing my best to hold his piercing gaze. "Um, yes. All good. We just had ... it's been ... well ..."

"Yes?" His eyes narrow further, and I fear I won't be able to allay his suspicion for much longer.

"Oh, hi, Luke." Amy returns before I can answer my boss. "Do you need anything?" she asks as she stops next to him without acknowledging me.

"I was just inquiring about your well-being." He flicks his gaze between us. "It seems something is off between you. I told you not to let your relationship affect your work. We get suspicious if you both call in sick on the same day."

Amy presses her lips together and straightens her skirt. "I'm sorry, Luke. It won't happen again. Let me assure you, we're fine. No need to worry."

He gives her a long stare, and before turning back to his office, he throws me a quick glare. Yes, I understand. If we don't get a grip soon, he'll lecture us about how he was right and that a relationship between colleagues is toxic to job performance.

Amy sinks into her chair with a sigh, drawing my attention to her. She looks pale, and the dark circles under her eyes underline her exhaustion. I wonder if she didn't sleep either.

"Are you sure you're okay?" I ask when she still avoids my gaze.

"Yes, I'm fine," she responds with her eyes fixed on her computer screen.

"Then what was that just now? Is your stomach still bugging you? You should see a doc—"

"I'm fine, Ben," Amy snaps, meeting my gaze. "You should stop worrying about my health and talk to me instead." She draws in a deep breath and leans over her desk to continue in a whisper, "Are you still serious about the breakup and asking for a transfer?"

I grimace. "Amy, I—" My throat closes up as I still can't find the words to explain. "Let's not talk about this here. Can I take you to lunch?"

Her expression hardens. "No, I'll be gone for most of the day, including lunch. Meetings with Luke."

"After work, then."

"Fine."

And that's the last word she speaks to me, and her silence is agonizing. I've never had to endure a more tortuous workday. Worry and dread swirl in my mind, and restlessness has a firm grip on me every minute she's gone. Forming a decent train of thought is impossible, as is concentrating on my work. Unsettling thoughts about Amy's health and how on earth I can explain everything occupy my brain.

Her question keeps repeating in my head. *Are you still serious about the breakup?*

If only I knew. No, I don't want to break up with her, but part of me thinks it's for the best. How can I promise her something like last night won't happen again?

At four thirty p.m., it's safe to say my work performance suffered severely. I'll have to compensate for the crap I created today, or I'll have to answer to Luke.

Slowly, the floor empties until I am one of the last employees left. Amy still hasn't returned from the previous meeting, and my restlessness grows. The edgy feeling in my stomach sticks around, as does the dull headache beneath my temples. Damn, I drank too much coffee, making my heart race even faster too.

As much as I order my brain to calm the fuck down, I fail, and when Amy appears a few moments later, my chaotic thoughts distract me so much that I can't move a single muscle.

I do notice, though, that she looks even paler and more exhausted. She drops some files on her desk before sinking into her chair with a sigh. "What a long day," she mumbles. "So can we talk now?"

I gape at her before checking left and right. No one is within earshot, but I didn't expect her to address the elephant in the room straight away. "Um, yeah. But I have no idea where to start."

"Let's start with the obvious," she says. "Why, Ben? Why do you think breaking up with me is the best solution?"

I screw up my face. "Because I can't keep hurting you. With my past, there's always a chance that situations like this recur."

Amy grumbles. "Shut up. We've talked about this, over and over. Your past is just that—your past. I got over it, so why can't you?"

"I don't know. I'm just too afraid."

“And breaking up is the better option?”

I run my hand over my face, drawing in a deep breath. “What will happen next time? Maybe you won’t be so forgiving when I hurt you again as soon as I freak out over nothing because I see a potential threat.”

“Then stop.” She flicks her gaze upward before throwing her pen on the documents in front of her with a groan. “You know what? This is useless.” She gathers the papers on her desk and forcefully stacks them on top of the folders in front of her computer screen, mumbling under her breath. Once she tidied up her workplace, she grabs her purse with a heavy sigh. “Bye, Ben. See you tomorrow.” She utters her words with her gaze directed anywhere but at me, fleeing the scene.

My internal voice of reason screams at me to run after her, but my body stays put, letting my inner idiot win. The stupid part of me is still not sure how to fix this—if we can fix this or if I irrevocably damaged what we had.

I sit and stare ahead of me for I don’t know how long, willing my body to move. With my mind running wild, my gaze lands on the sticky note that’s still stuck to the bottom of my computer screen, and when I read it, it hits me like a freight train.

Dear Mr. Taylor,

Would you be so kind as to shut up?

Four months later, it reminds me of how we started, of how strong my attraction toward her has been from the very first day—from the very first look. No, there’s not a chance I can give us up.

Does Amy still feel the same?

Only one way to find out.

THIRTY-THREE

AMY

Men are idiots. The entire male race is stupid beyond belief. Why is proper communication so hard for them? Would it be so difficult to say, *I'm sorry, I messed up; can we sort this out?*

No, they prefer to act like their brain is a meaningless appendix they reserve for stupid shit instead of what matters.

My journey home is a complete blur, with my thoughts revolving around Ben and how I wish he would have come after me when I stormed out of the office. Exhausted from all the mulling and pondering, I enter my empty apartment, feeling hollow and numb without Ben.

Groaning, I slam my keys on the table by the door and watch with another grumble as they slide over the surface before hitting the floor with a loud thud.

“Great. Awesome day.” With a huff, I kick off my shoes and slip out of my coat. Next stop: the couch. Flinging my purse on the carpet in front of the sofa, I throw myself into the cushions, intending to stay here for the rest of eternity and ignore the world outside and all its troubles.

With my eyes closed, I draw in a deep breath, then another, trying to empty my mind of all the unwanted emotions. It seems to work until a wave of nausea reminds me of the myriad of problems I have to solve. I place my hands on my lower abdomen. “Poor baby,” I say with a heavy sigh. “What a messed-up start in life. But don’t you worry, little one; I’ll figure everything out.”

To keep from sobbing, I check the time. *Damn, I almost forgot.* It’s already five thirty p.m., and in a half hour, I have to leave. *So much for staying on the couch!* But I’m glad that my doctor’s office offers late appointments so I don’t have to wait another day. A messed-up start in life indeed if I forget something this important. But I blame Ben, the moron. Yes,

it's all Ben's fault. Idiot Ben, who I want to hate for his stupidity but can't.

Because I love him.

Tears burn in my eyes, and a whimper escapes my lips. What if he sticks to his decision to end our relationship? How do I tell him I'm pregnant? But more importantly, how will he react? Will a baby change his mind? Do I want him to change his mind just because he's the father? A definite and resounding 'no' echoes through my brain, answering the last question.

The doorbell rings, tearing me from my gloomy thoughts, and I hide under the cushion with a moan. *No, I won't answer that.* I shake my head, still under the pillow. I want everyone to leave me alone.

Yet, it sounds again, and when I continue ignoring the infuriating noise, my phone rings.

Curiosity gets the better of me, and I grab my purse from the floor and dig for my phone, expecting it to be Lauren. But my breath hitches as Ben's name flashes on the screen. My eyes fix the phone while I weigh my options. Should I pick up or not? My brain says to stall while my heart screams at me to answer him.

Who am I kidding? Before the call goes to voicemail, I hit accept. "What do you want?" I cringe at the gruff tone of my voice, but I feel somewhat better when he answers in the same tone.

"Please, open the door. I want to talk."

I throw the cushion aside and sit up, rubbing my forehead. "Now you want to talk? Well, I wanted to talk earlier in the office."

"The office isn't the best setting for such a conversation. So *please*, will you let me in?"

"Fine," I say with a huff, ending the call before shuffling to my front door with a hint of reluctance. My finger hovers over the buzzer. I don't want to succumb to the hope simmering under the surface yet. With every second that

passes, my heart beats faster, wondering if he's here to reiterate the breakup or if he's willing to fix things. When I press my hand to my lower abdomen, a new sensation washes over me. The realization that I can't tell him I'm pregnant until we talk everything out leaves a sour taste in my mouth. But it's for the best because I must know his true feelings first. Knowing I can't put this off any longer, I push the dreaded buzzer.

As soon as he rounds the corner, our eyes meet, and my heart rate picks up another notch. For a split second, I forget about my anger and what happened, and I have to hold myself back. Jumping into his arms is not the smartest move.

"Hey." With his hands buried in his pockets, he walks into the apartment, turning to me after I close the door. A hint of his scent hits my nostrils, making me frown. Gosh, how I miss his scent.

"Hey," I echo back, and my response sounds like a whisper because of the blood whooshing through my ears, silencing all the surrounding noises.

"Thanks for letting me in." One corner of his lips lifts a fraction, and my frown deepens. I miss his smile.

Focus, Amy. Reconciliation first.

Yes, reconciliation. Not a final breakup.

He shifts from one foot to the other, rubbing the back of his neck. "Sorry, I've had too much coffee today. I wanna talk, but I need the bathroom first."

"Of course. You know the way. I'll wait on the couch."

With a nod, he rushes off, and I return to the living room and sit on the sofa, tapping my foot. New questions swirl in my mind, and I wonder if I should let him talk first. Or should I straight out announce that I don't accept the breakup?

Too much time passes, and with each moment, the nervous tension in my body increases. I flinch when my phone pings on the coffee table, reminding me of my upcoming doctor's appointment. Damn, we need to hurry; I have to leave in twenty minutes.

“What’s this?”

I lift my gaze to meet Ben’s when he speaks. I furrow my brows at the deep frown on his face before realizing what’s happening. Once I understand, I gasp and jump off the couch, but I’m at a total loss for what to do or say next.

He’s holding up the pregnancy test I took yesterday. I must have left it on the bathroom counter like some idiot.

Who’s the stupid one now?

I rush to his side, trying to snatch the test from his hand, but he holds it out of my reach.

“Amy,” he says with more urgency in his voice. “Is this yours?”

His intense stare freezes all my thoughts, and I have no clue what to tell him as all rational words disappear from my mind.

“Is this yours?” he repeats, calmer.

I nod.

“You’re pregnant?” he whispers, staring into my eyes.

I nod again, not trusting myself to speak.

Ben blinks at me before focusing his gaze on the thin white test gripped between his fingers. He rubs his forehead and blows out his cheeks before sucking in a deep breath and stepping back.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I didn’t mean for you to find out.”

His eyes widen and snap to me. “What?! You weren’t gonna tell me you’re pregnant?”

I hold up my hand. “No, that’s not what I meant. Not like this. I wanted to talk first and see where we stood. Do you want to fix what’s broken or not?” I bite my lips as my eyes fill with new tears. I can’t read Ben’s reaction, and not knowing what this news means to him is torture. “I’m sorry.”

Seconds that feel like an eternity pass, and Ben doesn’t move or speak.

I can't stand his silence as he stares at me. "Say something," I tell him, hoping to trigger a reaction, but he just opens and closes his mouth without uttering a single word. I wipe a tear from my cheek, and as I'm about to step away, he reaches out and grabs me, wrapping me in an all-consuming embrace. Every emotion inside my body stills. All but one: the familiar sense of calm that only Ben provides. On a long exhale, I try to disregard all apprehension, but it won't vanish. For two days, I longed to be in his arms, but now that I'm here, I can't release my fears. I can't mute the evil voice in my head and erase the doubt and uncertainty.

"I love you so much, Princess."

At his words, another sob escapes me, and I pull away from him. "That's why I didn't want to tell you before we talked. Now I'm afraid you're only saying you love me because you knocked me up."

His eyebrows shoot up as he shakes his head. "Excuse me? No." He grasps my hands, intertwining our fingers. "That's not true. I'm saying what I came to tell you. I love you, and I don't want to break up."

"Please don't say things you don't mean. Let it sink in first. Remember, you were so determined I'd be better off without you." I cross my arms over my chest, challenging him.

He frowns. "I'm sorry I said that. While it's true to some extent, I'm more certain than ever that being without you is something I never want to experience again. I know we have more issues to sort out, but I'm confident we can do it together." Ben glances at my stomach. "As a couple, a family."

I take a shaky breath. "Still, you need to let the baby news sink in. You're probably in shock. At least I was when I found out yesterday. Will you come to the doctor's appointment with me? I gotta leave now."

He furrows his brows further. "You were going to the appointment alone?"

I run my thumb over his forehead to even out the frown. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't tell you. You just told me you

wanted to break up, so I couldn't tell you about this pregnancy and ask you to come along. I hope you understand."

He nods, and a small sigh passes his lips. "I get it. I'd love to come with you."

So he accompanies me. Silence envelopes us as we leave my apartment, and the entire way to the doctor's office, Ben doesn't speak. I'm curious about what's going on in his head, but he's not ready to share yet. He never lets go of my hand, though, providing enough of a boost to calm my racing thoughts.

When we enter the exam room, a rush of adrenaline surges through me. We're moments away from finding out if I'm pregnant, and a part of me still dreads that thought. Will everything turn out well this time?

My doctor acts immediately after I tell her my story. "Let's not keep you waiting any longer," she says with a reassuring smile before asking me to sit on the examination chair. "I'll perform the ultrasound now so you finally know if you're pregnant and if the baby is all right."

Ben stands next to me, gripping my hand, almost too tight. My nervousness subsides, if only a bit, and having him here makes everything less scary.

He's by my side, and that's all I need.

We fix our gazes on the screen, and when the doctor finds what she's looking for, a fresh wave of tears fills my eyes.

It's there. A tiny gummy bear with a beating heart.

"Congratulations," the doctor says. "With the info I have and these measurements, I can tell you that you're right at eight weeks pregnant." She looks at the chart on the desk next to her. "Your due date is mid-July. Over the following months, I'll see you for regular checkups, and if only the tiniest thing feels off, call me or go to a hospital. Nobody will judge, especially after what you've been through."

I hardly register what she says because my eyes are glued to the screen, and once we leave the office, they stay fixed on the sonogram picture the doctor gave us.

“Can I see it too?” Ben asks, startling me.

I jerk my head up, searching his face. He finally breaks his silence after not giving me the tiniest hint about his feelings. With a subtle smile, I pass him the little piece of paper—proof of how our lives will change.

We continue on our way down the street, his hand still enveloping mine while he studies the picture. “This is so surreal.” He sucks in a breath before continuing. “I was so mad you didn’t tell me. And to think I almost missed this moment. I understand why you did it, though, so I’m pissed at myself for nearly ruining it.”

I let out a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry. It would have sucked if you had missed it, but luckily, it all worked out.”

“It did, and I have no words to describe what I’m feeling right now. We have so much more talking to do, but please know that I want you, I want us, and I want this baby. Our baby.”

The goofiest smile I’ve ever seen on him appears on his lips, and the last bit of tension leaves my body. I almost trip, though, when he stops in the middle of the sidewalk, turning to me and taking my hands in his. “You know I love you. I’m sorry I acted as I did, and I promise I’ll do everything in my power to prevent something like this from happening again. You and I, that’s it. Amy, you’re my person. Before we met, I was restless, like a piece of me was missing. Although I was fine alone, I only realized that when I met you.”

He draws in a long breath while I stare at him, mesmerized, wondering what else he has to say. “On that first day,” he goes on, “you said something. You’re all for second chances. Princess, you’re my second chance, and I intend to do everything it takes to keep you.”

I don’t even notice I’m crying until Ben cups my face and wipes the tears off my cheeks. “Wow,” I croak. “So you’re not taking me back because you knocked me up?”

Ben chuckles. “First, it’s not me who’s taking you back. You need to take me back. Second, this baby is the icing on

the cake. It's you I want, and I can't wait to start a family with you, even if it scares the shit out of me." After a deep breath, he adds, "Amy Franklin, you make me indescribably happy, and I want to spend the rest of my life making you just as happy. Will you marry me when your divorce is final?"

Once his words register, my heart skips a few beats, and I gape at him. "Are you crazy? I love you too, much more than words can express, but you're out of your mind."

"Nope, I've never been as sound as I am right now, and I'm not letting you go again."

I shake my head with a chuckle. "I don't need a marriage certificate to know that we belong together. Not yet."

Ben smirks. "Okay, later then."

Before I can protest, he closes my mouth with a kiss—a sweet and sensual kiss that makes my legs feel like Jell-O. His lips on mine are the last bit of reassurance I need. I'm not only Ben's second chance, he's also mine, and I have found my person in him too. Yes, we will work this out, together, whatever it takes.

So even though we stand in the middle of a busy New York street, kissing and holding on to each other, it's only him and me.

Forever.

EPILOGUE

AMY

One year later

After grabbing a glass of water from the dining table, I step out of the cute beach cottage onto the terrace with the breathtaking view over the ocean. I close my eyes as the salty air fills my lungs and the sunshine warms my face.

It's week two of our vacation at one of the most beautiful beaches in the U.S. Virgin Islands, and we enjoy every moment of the relaxing atmosphere away from busy New York.

My gaze lands on Ben, who rests on the lounge in the shade. Did I just call the sight of the ocean breathtaking? A pleasant tingling rushes through my body when I take in the view: my boyfriend with our beautiful six-month-old daughter, Isabella, resting on his chest, both with their eyes closed.

Reminiscing about the past year, I stare at them with the biggest smile on my face. I never had to worry about significant complications during my pregnancy, yet fear always lurked in the back of my mind. The last weeks were even harder to endure due to premature labor, and Isabella was born one month too early but perfectly healthy. I couldn't have done it without Ben; he was by my side every step of the way, providing me with the strength I couldn't muster until we held our daughter in our arms. Bella turned our world upside down, but in the best kind of way. Ben reconciled with his dad, and even the relationship between Ben and Aaron has improved, so Bella is blessed with a proud grandfather and a great uncle.

While it wasn't always easy, Ben and I worked hard on our relationship, and we're more than happy about where we are now and where we are heading.

My life couldn't be any better.

Or could it?

I bite my lips and sit on the lounge next to Ben and Bella, placing the glass of water on the ground. I inspect my wrist and the charm bracelet Ben gave me for my birthday last year. It's another reminder of how we belong together, and so far, it's been enough for me. Ben still makes me feel like the luckiest girl on earth and never misses a chance to show me his love.

But Ben wanted more. He proposed three times this past year, and every time, I turned him down. It never felt right, even though I love him more than anything and want to spend the rest of my life with him.

When a sigh escapes me, Ben opens his eyes, meeting my gaze. His lips lift in a slow smile. "Hey, Princess," he whispers.

I crinkle my nose. "Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't." Ben grasps my hand to place a tender kiss on my wrist beneath the bracelet.

Bella stirs at the movement, and shortly after, her eyes fly open. As soon as she recognizes me, her entire face lights up with the cutest smile.

Ben chuckles when she fidgets left and right. "I guess my time with her is over."

I laugh. "She must be hungry and probably smells her food source nearby. She is a true Taylor." I accept Bella, giving Ben a gentle smile. He returns it, but his smile doesn't reach his eyes. He sits up and directs his gaze at the ocean with a thoughtful expression.

"Ben," I whisper.

He turns his head back to us, and Bella jumps up and down on my lap, screeching, which makes Ben's lips stretch. "Daddy loves you too, little princess."

Bella cheers and babbles until a sound close to *dada* leaves her mouth. Ben's eyes widen, and he jumps up, taking her in his arms, whirling her around with even more laughter.

He plants a big kiss on her cheek before staring at me with the widest grin ever. “Did you hear that? She said her first word.”

I burst out laughing. “Sure, if you want to tell yourself that, go ahead—*dada*.”

Ben rolls his eyes and holds his hand out to me. He pulls me up and drapes his arm around my waist, leaving a soft kiss on my forehead. I close my eyes and relish in this embrace with the two most important people in my life, and I feel nothing but pure love and bliss.

Ben brushes his lips over mine, murmuring, “I love you.”

I draw in a slow breath, ignoring my racing heartbeat. “Ben,” I start, and my pulse quickens more. “There’s something I wanted to say.” I bite my lips, unsure how to put this, wiping my sweaty forehead. My eyes close as I take in another deep breath. When they snap open, they meet Ben’s gaze as he watches me with his head tilted to the side.

“Yes?” he asks, raising his eyebrows.

What I’m about to say makes my skin prickle, but the fluttery sensation in my stomach subsides when I look from him to Bella, who’s been watching us. “I, um—” I swallow the lump in my throat. “I want to be a Taylor too.”

Ben narrows his eyes at me. “You what?” He shakes his head and blinks at me.

I pull back a little and take his free hand in mine. “You are the love of my life, and I never want to be without you. And so that everyone knows, I ask you now: Will you, Ben Taylor, marry me?”

Ben goes still, only opens and closes his mouth a few times, but no sound escapes him. I bite my lips, worries forming in my mind that I’ve said the wrong thing, but a tentative smile appears on his face. “Are you serious?” He throws his head back with a laugh before meeting my gaze. “Amy Franklin, it would be my greatest honor to make you a Taylor.” He presses his lips on mine, a low moan coming from the back of his throat.

If Bella weren't in his arms between us, that kiss would surely turn into something inappropriate for her eyes soon, and as if on cue, our daughter screeches and claps our faces so we turn our attention to her. Ben leaves a peck on her cheek. "Bella, did you hear that? Your mom wants to marry me." He pulls back from our embrace. "Wait here," he tells me as he rushes inside with Bella still in his arms.

He returns not even two minutes later, and I gasp when I spot the small black box Bella holds in her tiny hands—even though it shouldn't surprise me that Ben always has a ring handy.

"Okay, now we're doing this right." Ben kneels in front of me, places Bella on his leg, and grasps my hand, displaying the sweet smile I love so much. "Amy Franklin," he declares, "I have loved no one the way I love you, and I will love no one so much. Every day you make me the happiest man on earth, and every day, I want to make you just as happy. Will you *finally* marry me?"

A laugh escapes me at his use of the word *finally* before a sob follows. "Yes, I will marry you," I choke out before covering my mouth with my free hand while Ben takes the box from a fidgeting Bella and opens it. It's not my first time seeing this ring, but it never looked as beautiful as now.

Ben slips the ring on my finger, rises to his feet, and locks Bella and me in his arms. "Later," he breathes in my ear, "when Bella is asleep, we'll celebrate this properly, and I'll show you how happy you make me."

At his words, the usual hot shiver runs down my spine, and a pleasant tingle forms in my lower abdomen. The sensations he evokes in me are still as intense as they were on the day we met.

Was it love at first sight? We *thought* we loved each other from the start, but it wasn't until we fully opened up and confided in each other that genuine feelings formed. I believed I would do him a favor by keeping my past from him, and he was certain he would protect me by doing the same. We were wrong.

We didn't fall in love until we confessed.

And today, one-and-a-half years after meeting Ben, I feel whole and calm and happier than ever. I still don't need a marriage certificate to prove we belong together, but I want to show off my little family, and this next step feels right.

Ben's last words replay in my head. *I'll show you how happy you make me.*

Until now, he kept all his promises, and I'm sure he will keep this one too.

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Much Love

Lilly

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lilly Henderson is an ardent enthusiast of all things romance. What started as a reading obsession turned into a passion for writing. Spicy contemporary romance is her forte, and she created her own little world with relatable characters that will make you laugh, cry, and swoon—and yearning for more. She takes you on a journey of sensuality, bliss, and a tad of drama.

Crafting stories that will make your heart race is her escape from her daily routine of taking care of her two girls and a cat, on top of working as a nurse. So she knows a thing or two about the importance of losing yourself in a great story—preferably sizzling and sensuous—every once in a while.

So, get ready to lose yourself in the pages of Lilly Henderson's novels, where desire and delight come together in a symphony of emotions. Are you prepared for an unforgettable literary journey? Join Lilly on a thrilling ride through the world of love, lust, and laughter, heading to a universe of steamy romance that knows no borders.

If you'd like to stay in touch or reach out, you'll find her on:

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SNEAK PEEK

UNTIL WE SURRENDER

BOOK 2

The series continues with book number two, telling Henry and Lauren's story—a friends-to-lovers romance that will make you swoon. Here's a little excerpt:

ONE

LAUREN

Fuck, what a night.

What started as a fun evening with my friends at one of New York City's hottest nightclubs turns into a nightmare. I storm out of the Avalon to get some desperately needed fresh air. My eyes fall closed as I lean against the wall and let out a slow breath, welcoming the chilly February air on my burning skin.

Dammit, I need a drink. Or better, five.

“Lauren?”

My eyes fly open and land on my best friend's worried face.

“Are you okay? What's wrong?” Amy asks, resting her hand on my forearm and giving it a squeeze.

I grimace, struggling to shove what I just witnessed into the far corners of my mind. “Why did I agree not to drink any alcohol tonight?”

“Oh, hun.” She crinkles her nose. “You didn't have to pass on drinks to do me a favor.”

I wave off her remark. “It sucks to be the only sober one, but right now, I wish I were hammered.” My pounding heart agrees, and I rub my chest to get rid of the tightness that spreads through my body—to no avail.

“Why are you upset? Talk to me.”

Amy's soft voice and comforting touch do nothing to ease the agitation. With a slow shake of my head, I swallow the painful lump in my throat. “They kissed,” I whine, unable to handle the emotional chaos that swirls inside me.

Amy chuckles. “Ah, I see.”

My gaze snaps to her, and I furrow my brows. “Why is that funny?”

“Oh, Lauren.” With another soft laugh, she pulls me into an embrace and rubs my back. “We can finally cut the crap and talk about your feelings for Henry.”

I snort. “There’s nothing to talk about. He has other things in mind. *And* his mouth.”

Amy releases me from the hug and narrows her eyes at me. “But you admit you have feelings for him?”

I run my hand over my face, not worrying about ruining my makeup. “No. Well, maybe. I mean—fuck, I don’t know.”

My best friend grasps my hand, directing her piercing stare at me. “But *I* know. It’s the way you look at him.”

The way I look at him? What does that even mean? Henry is one of my closest friends and has been for over a year. I don’t look at him differently.

Amy’s laugh tears me out of my thoughts. “It’s true; don’t deny it. You two have been dancing around each other ever since I met you, and whenever I bring up the topic, you evade my questions. Why can’t you say it? Why can’t you acknowledge your feelings for him?”

With a deep sigh, I close my eyes and ponder Amy’s question. Is there anything to acknowledge? Do I have feelings beyond friendship for this man, who always makes me feel at ease in his presence?

Again, my pounding heart agrees. “Because,” I say, eyes still squeezed shut, “it scares the shit out of me. We all know Henry’s reputation and that he isn’t likely to settle down with one woman.”

“Whoa, who’s talking about settling down? How about one step at a time?”

A hearty laugh escapes me. “Please,” I say, meeting her gaze, “let me in on your knowledge of taking it slow, you with your boyfriend of five months, being four months pregnant.”

“Hey!” She shoots me a glare as she places her hand on her growing belly. “Boyfriend of *six* months.”

I raise a single eyebrow as she keeps glaring, but her lips twitch. Staring contests are my favorite, even though I’m not good at them, so I’m the one who bursts out laughing first. “I’m sorry, Amy. You know what I mean.”

“Of course I do.” She joins in, and laughing with my best friend lifts some of the heaviness in my limbs.

She hits my arm. “What are we gonna do about you and Henry now?”

“If only I knew.” I draw in a deep breath, waving my hands in front of my body. “I’m not relationship material either, but when Henry shoves his tongue down another woman’s throat, it makes me wanna scratch that bitch’s eyes out. It never used to bother me before.”

“So what changed?”

I shrug. “I have a few answers to that.” Too many. A throbbing headache starts beneath my temples; it’s time to call it a night. “Ugh, I wanna go home and wallow in self-pity.” I point my thumb at the club entrance. “I can’t go back in there and watch the nightmare unfold.”

Amy nods. “I’ll come with you.”

“No, you don’t have to. You enjoy the rest of the evening.”

“That wasn’t a question.” She retrieves her phone from her purse and types out a message. “I’ll let Ben know.”

I nod, pacing back and forth, struggling to clear my mind from the confusing thoughts. Relief washes over me, though, because Amy will walk me through this. She’ll help me see through the chaos in my head. She’s my best friend for a reason. Since we met last summer, we have shared a blind understanding, and we can rely on each other under any circumstances.

When Ben, her boyfriend and father of her child, exits the club, he joins us, looking back and forth between Amy and

me. “What’s going on?” He drapes his arm around his girlfriend’s shoulder, pulling her closer to leave a tender kiss on her mouth. Amy melts into him, a soft sigh escaping her lips.

I avert my gaze, keeping my fingers crossed that they don’t start a make-out session. I haven’t decided yet if their constant need to touch is annoying or cute.

“I’m going home with Lauren,” Amy explains. “She’s not feeling well.”

Ben frowns. “What’s wrong? Is there anything I can do?”

Amy shakes her head. “This calls for a girls’ night with lots of ice cream. Right?” she asks, directing a wide smile at me.

“Right.” The laugh that emanates from my chest eases more of the tension in my body. “But, um, Ben, could you not mention to the others that I’m feeling off?” I ask before sharing a knowing look with Amy. I don’t want anyone—especially not Henry—to know. It could lead to questions I’m not ready to answer.

“Yeah, just say we left because I’m not feeling well,” my best friend says.

Ben shrugs. “Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow, babe.” He wraps his girlfriend up in a hug, pressing his lips on hers once more.

When they deepen the kiss, I roll my eyes with a chuckle. There it is. They’re unbelievable. “I’ll get us a ride home,” I mumble as my two friends dive into their own little world and don’t hear or notice anything around them any longer. I stride to the curb, watching a few cars drive by, and when a cab pulls up to drop off more partygoers, I seize the opportunity.

When I turn to Ben and Amy, they’re still lip-locked. His hands move to her ass, and I’m sure they’re moments away from ripping each other’s clothes off. Too many hormones fill the air as soon as one stands within a one-mile radius of the other.

“Amy, come on,” I call.

Her groan echoes through the night, and I chuckle when she reluctantly pulls away from Ben. I sink into the back seat, and when she joins me a moment later with a wide grin plastered to her face, she lets out a happy sigh.

“Are you sure you’ll survive one night without him?” I ask.

She snorts, throwing me another glare. “Don’t you dare make fun of us. Payback is a bitch; remember that.”

“Ugh, my feet are killing me.” With a deep sigh, Amy sinks into the cushions of my couch and kicks off her shoes. “I’m not too sad we left early.”

With a laugh, I grab my emergency stash of ice cream from the freezer and join Amy, handing her a spoon. “Dig in.”

Silence fills the air between us as we relish the delicious flavor of Ben & Jerry’s. They’re two of my favorite men for a reason, sending me into sweet oblivion for at least a few moments.

“How are things with Ben?” I ask in between spoonfuls of chocolate fudge brownie.

The cutest smile spreads across her face when she responds, “Good. We’re happy, and after our rough patches, everything feels comfortable. But we’re not here to discuss Ben and me,” she says as her smile turns into a smirk, “but you and Henry.”

I snort, stuffing more ice cream into my mouth. “There’s no *Henry and me*. We’re friends, and while he acts like a manwhore, I’m losing my mind.”

Amy bursts out laughing. “A manwhore? Come on; he’s not that bad.”

“I see him with a different girl every weekend.”

“Bullshit. You don’t even see him every weekend. Sure, a lot of women are after a good-looking guy like him, but he doesn’t peg me as a man who takes advantage of that.”

I stuff another spoon of ice cream into my mouth, letting it melt while Amy’s words sink in. “He may not take advantage of it, but I do think he enjoys the attention that comes with his looks—and being in a freaking awesome band.”

With his two best friends, Paul and Jack, Henry provides live music at O’Reilly’s, an Irish pub in Manhattan, every Friday night. Over the past years, they’ve gained many fans, and most of them only come to the pub to hear them play.

“And he has your attention too,” Amy says, the smirk still present on her face. She’s enjoying this way too much. “Why are you such a mess?”

I draw in a slow breath through my nose and release it through my mouth. “I’ve always liked him,” I say. “Talking to him feels easy, and he’s been a good friend from the start. All your teasing about it being more never bothered me. Neither did it bother me watching him hook up with all these women. Until”—I take in another deep breath, reminiscing about a particular evening a few weeks ago—“this one night at the pub, after their gig.” A pleasant shiver runs down my spine as I remember what happened. “This guy was hitting on me, not getting the hint to fuck off. Henry must have noticed because he stepped in. He draped his arm around my shoulder, pulled me into him, and left a fleeting kiss on my temple.” A soft sigh passes my lips. That kiss was so gentle and sweet, and when I looked into his eyes, I caught a glimpse of a different Henry. For a brief moment, he was neither the good friend nor the womanizer.

I turn to Amy, who watches me with raised eyebrows. “Since that night, I haven’t been with anyone else. It felt wrong.”

Amy offers me a curt nod. “I see. Do you want to discuss it with him?”

I gape at her, shuddering as an icy chill runs down my spine at my friend's suggestion. "Are you crazy? Of course not. I don't want to ruin what we have."

"So you'd rather watch him make out with other women?"

I grimace. The mental images of what I witnessed earlier still make my stomach churn. "I can't talk to him, so yes." Until tonight, it was easier to endure, though. I usually had a few drinks or was busy flirting with another guy. Next time we go out, I need to make sure either, or better, both scenarios apply. I'll probably turn into an alcoholic.

"What's that look on your face?" Amy asks.

I turn to her, only now noticing my furrowed brows, and I rub my forehead, evening out the frown. "Too many thoughts," I say.

"Tell me."

I press my lips together, swallowing the ever-present lump in my throat. Where to start? "That night Henry saved me from that guy—" I let out a long breath. "First, any other guy pulling that stunt would have pissed me off. I'm very well capable of getting rid of unwanted attention myself. The fact that it was Henry didn't irritate me, though. Second, when he looked at me, something in his eyes caught my attention, and I've felt this pull toward him ever since. My body is drawn to him like a magnet."

"Only your body? Are you telling me you only want to sleep with him?"

Scratching my temple, I open my mouth, but no words come out. Amy's question forces me to analyze all these new and weird sensations, and it's not an easy task. After blowing out my cheeks, I say, "Maybe. Or I need to get laid. It's been a while, and now there's this hot guy I enjoy ogling *and* talking to. This is so confusing; he's not even my usual type."

"Which is?"

"I prefer dark hair over blond. A little stubble. Henry with his cleanly-shaven jaw and his blond hair and baby blue

eyes...” Gosh, those eyes. I could stare into them for hours, and his hair is so inviting to run my fingers through. “And his chiseled abs,” I mumble.

“His chiseled abs?” Amy chokes on her ice cream. “How do you know about Henry’s chiseled abs?”

I cover my burning cheeks with my hands. Dammit, I never blush, so why now? “I, um, I might have walked in on him while he was changing.”

Amy’s eyes go wide before she barks out a laugh. “Girl, you have some explaining to do,” she says, waving her hand in a go-on motion.

My lips stretch into a slow smile, and I sink into the cushions with a soft sigh. “That happened before you and I met, after one of their gigs at O’Reilly’s. I was looking for Paul, who had offered to take me home after I’d had a drink or two too many.” A chuckle escapes me as I remember that night. “Bryan told me he was in his office to get his stuff.”

Bryan is the owner of O’Reilly’s, and he lets the guys use his office to leave their belongings when they play.

“So I walked to the back and entered the room without knocking. I found not only Paul but also Henry, who had just taken his shirt off.”

Amy guffaws. “You didn’t have the decency to avert your eyes, did you?”

I snort. “Of course I didn’t avert my eyes. This is how I know about his abs, and the more I think about it, the surer I am that this is only a physical craving. I want him to shove his tongue down *my* throat, dammit.”

“Why don’t you make the first move?”

I rub my forehead with a deep sigh. “I don’t want to ruin our friendship. But I also want to grab his butt and lick his abs and—” I cover my eyes with my hand, groaning. “See? I’m losing my mind.”

Amy places her spoon on the coffee table and turns her body to face me. Resting her hand on my forearm, she directs

another one of those intense stares at me. “*You* need to make that decision, hun. Either you make a move on him or keep watching him make a move on other girls. But who knows? Maybe he likes you too.” With the way her lips stretch into a smirk again, I’m sure she keeps another comment about something in the way Henry looks at me to herself.

Huffing, I place my spoon next to hers and press my hand to my stomach. I feel nauseated from too much ice cream. Or is it the thought of me making a move on Henry? I’ve never had a problem approaching a guy or making the first move, but with him, everything’s different. What if he likes me too? More than a friend.

At the last thought, my heart rate picks up and my stomach protests. I don’t remember the last time I developed feelings for a man beyond physical attraction.

“When was your last relationship, anyway?” Amy asks, making me wonder if she can read my mind. She probably can, because that connection we shared from the very first moment we met has only gotten stronger since she walked into my yoga class and sat down on the mat next to mine eight months ago.

When I take a minute too long to think about my answer, she gasps. “Don’t tell me that was five years ago with your scumbag ex from Chicago.”

I grimace. “Fine, I won’t tell you then.”

“You’re kidding. You haven’t had a boyfriend in five years?”

“There were a couple of guys, but they were just flings. Nothing serious. I told you I’m not relationship material.”

“Oh, hun.” Amy places the tub with the half-melted ice cream that was still on the couch between us on the table to pull me in for a tight embrace. “I’m so sorry that moron screwed you up that badly.”

I want to feign surprise and tell her that’s not at all what happened, but my ex Sean screwed me up badly, and getting out of that abusive relationship cost me too much.

“Don’t let him be the reason you don’t trust another man again,” she says. “You should give this Henry-thing a shot. He’s a great guy.”

Wrapping my arms around my friend a little tighter, I let her soothing tone wash over me, but it can’t erase the worries that swirl in my head. Amy’s right; Henry’s a great guy. I can trust him, and he would never hurt me—not like Sean did.

But will that be enough?

TWO

HENRY

Fuck, what a night.

What started as a fun evening with my closest friends at the Avalon, one of the hottest nightclubs in New York City, turns into a blurry haze of confusion.

I shouldn't have had that last drink; my slightly inebriated state clouds my senses, and it's only slowly sinking in what the woman standing in front of me is up to. She runs her index finger down my chest with a flirty smile, making me shudder. No matter how hard I fix her lips, the surrounding noise drowns her words. Their horrid shade of pink adds to the confusion swirling in my mind.

Another shiver ripples through me, and I intend to step away from her, but she uses the time I need to move to her advantage. She fists my shirt and pulls her body closer, causing the hair on the back of my neck to lift.

Before I know what's happening, she presses her lips on mine. A grumbling noise erupts from my chest, and I have no clue why in the world this woman shoves her tongue down my throat. There's nothing wrong with women being forward and making the first move, but if a first move is *this*, I pass.

Yes, I definitely shouldn't have had that last drink, because instead of pushing her away, my brain wants to come up with an explanation. What gave her the impression I was up for this? Was it how I returned her smile?

Okay, Henry, focus. Her motivation doesn't matter; it needs to stop. "Whoa, wait," I say and get her off me with a firm grip on her hips.

Gasping, she steps back and blinks at me before a frown forms on her forehead. "I'm, um, sorry," she slurs. Yup, she shouldn't have had her last drink either. "Was that too much?"

She averts her gaze with a pout, and her shoulders heave with a deep breath. “I thought that eye contact meant something.”

My brows furrow, and I rack my brain, struggling to make sense of her words. “What eye contact?”

“On the dancefloor, earlier. You checked me out.”

I may not be in total control of all my senses anymore, but I didn’t check her out. Won’t tell her that, though; I’m still a gentleman. “Sorry if I gave you the wrong impression,” I say, “but I’m not interested.”

“Fine. Excuse me.” Without another word, she storms off.

I gaze after her until she disappears into the crowd, and with a shake of my head, I return to my friends. Clenching my jaw, I push past the people, careful not to make any more eye contact with strangers.

“There you are.” Once I reach our table, Paul hands me a bottle of beer, looking left and right behind me with a smirk. “Where’s your new friend?”

I accept the drink with a huff. “Shut up.” After taking a large swig of the alcohol, I welcome the cooling effect it has on my parched throat, dismissing the earlier thoughts about having had enough for tonight. Time to wipe this incident from my memory.

“So it didn’t work out? Was it because she was brunette?”

I roll my eyes. “It had nothing to do with her hair color and all with the fact—”

“—that she wasn’t Lauren,” Paul murmurs, and even over the loud music surrounding us, I understand his every word. Or maybe it’s because he never passes up on a chance to comment on anything Lauren-related. I’m used to his teasing when it comes to her, and it’s not getting to me.

So I ignore him, like usual, and let my gaze wander through the Avalon. I spot Ben and Jack, who return from the bar with more drinks in their hands.

“Henry,” Jack says, mirroring Paul’s smirk. “You’re back. Alone. You two looked kinda cozy.”

“Not you too,” I grumble. I’d rather forget the incident from a moment ago. “Where are the girls?” I ask about Lauren and Amy, who were at our table before this woman viciously attacked me on my way from the restroom.

“Um, Amy wasn’t feeling well, so they went home,” Ben explains.

I nod, taking another sip of my beer and ignoring the slight pang of disappointment. I was looking forward to spending more time with Lauren. It’s not like her to take off without saying goodbye, but at least she left with her best friend and not with another one of her weekend flings.

“I don’t get why you don’t ask her out on a proper date.”

I turn to Jack after he disrupts my gloomy thoughts, and my raised eyebrows make him chuckle.

“Come on,” Paul chimes in, “that expression of utter frustration speaks volumes. I agree with Jack, but you know that already.”

“I do, and I would appreciate it if you stopped pushing the issue.”

“Ben,” Paul says, turning to my one friend who’s sensible enough to stay out of these kinds of conversations, “what does Amy say to this? As Lauren’s bff, she must know everything first-hand.”

Ben holds up his palms. “I don’t meddle. Whatever Amy tells me stays between us.”

“Ugh, what a killjoy,” Paul mutters while I shoot Ben a grateful smile. The ongoing discussion about Lauren and me makes me sound like a broken record. *We are friends, nothing more.* Especially Paul is much pushier these days when he attempts to reason with me, but I won’t make a move on Lauren just because they think I should.

“Can we change the subject?”

Paul responds to my request with an exaggerated sigh. “Fine. Let’s talk about that business trip of yours next week. Is that still on?”

“No, Dad postponed it. He has some other skills to teach me first.” Flicking my gaze to the ceiling, I empty my drink. Work is another topic I’m not keen on diving into tonight. Or ever.

“Hey, guys.”

I turn to the voice coming from behind us and groan inwardly when my eyes meet Lindsey’s. Just what I needed. She’s an old acquaintance, and with her, I have to watch my every move; she’ll take anything as an invitation to flirt.

“Hi, Henry.” Damn, too late to show my indifference. She leans closer with a sultry smile, and her overpowering scent hits my nostrils, making me lean back.

“Hello, Lindsey,” Paul says, grabbing her attention, and she throws him an even wider smile before greeting the rest of our small group.

“Ben, hey. And Jack.” She lets out a long breath and fans herself. “Gosh, you guys. It’s about a hundred degrees hotter over here.”

Luckily, she’s not too picky about who she flirts with, but unfortunately, she turns back to me. “Henry, care to dance?”

I clear my throat. “Um, I, actually, *we* were just taking a small breather.” Better save her from more efforts to get any of the other guys to join her on the dancefloor. “Maybe later?”

“Sure. I’ll hold you to that.” She slaps my upper arm with a laugh before winking at me and turning on her heels.

Gosh, what’s it with the women this evening?

Once she’s gone, Paul bursts out laughing, slapping my arm like Lindsey just did. “Second one tonight, Henry. You’re on a roll.”

I snort out a laugh. He knows too well how I hate the kind of attention that comes with superficialities. These women

know nothing about me except how I look, and, in Lindsey's case, that I play in a band with my two best friends.

"Let's get you another drink." Paul is about to drag me after him, but I pass up.

"I should head home." Checking my watch, I grimace. It's not that late yet, but I don't feel like staying any longer. "It was an exhausting day," I explain when everyone stares at me with raised eyebrows. I shrug, preparing myself to defend my decision to leave, but no one objects. So I leave.

I draw in a deep breath once I step out of the Avalon. The fresh night air feels pleasant on my heated skin, and while I'm disappointed tonight didn't bring the desired effect of making me forget about the strenuous day, I look forward to falling into bed.

My penthouse on the Upper West Side greets me with desperately needed silence. Noise and crowds failed to calm me down like they normally do, so a different approach might relieve the tension in my body.

With a little too much force, I slam the door shut behind me, stride through the large living-kitchen area, and drop my keys on the kitchen island with a deep sigh. As rubbing my temples and emptying a bottle of water no longer ward off the impending headache, I opt for some painkillers. My ears ring from the loud music, and for a fraction of a moment, I wonder why I even agreed to go out tonight.

Because your friends usually help you get your mind off the stress, my inner voice reminds me. Only that it didn't work today.

I retrieve my phone from my pocket, intending to shut it off for the day, but a notification on the screen thwarts my plan. A voicemail from my father. This is one downside of working in a family business; my dad calls me whenever he pleases, and as he isn't familiar with the term *off-hours*, a

work call at nine thirty p.m. on a Saturday night is nothing unusual.

Just to make sure he doesn't have something family-related to announce, I press my phone to my ear and listen to what he has to say.

"Henry, hello." My father's gruff voice makes me shudder. "I arranged a business dinner next Friday, and you will attend as well. Your assistant received the details from me. I invited another guest I want to introduce you to. On Monday, we'll have to discuss today's meeting again. I'm not happy about the outcome."

The beep announces the end of his message, and I wonder why it still surprises me he never says anything personal to finish a call, like a *take care* or whatever.

With a deep sigh, I switch off my phone and grab another bottle of water, emptying it on my way to the only remedy that'll help now—my piano. I slump down on the stool and place my fingers on the keys. My eyes fall closed as I draw in a deep breath, and before I know it, a soft melody fills the otherwise quiet space around me. It's the one song I always play when my head is too full and my thoughts won't stop running: Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata.

I replay today's events over and over, trying to figure out what caused this restlessness inside me. This fidgety feeling is not a new state, but it's rarely as strong as tonight.

Yes, the day has been beyond stressful, and the meeting my dad mentioned is just the tip of the iceberg. He has high expectations regarding my work as a junior manager at the company that's been in the family for decades, and according to him, I failed to meet these expectations today.

Another fact intensifies the tightness in my chest. This other guest my father intends to introduce me to—it's his term for setting me up. It annoys him I haven't married one of our business partners' daughters yet. He's all for high social standing and marrying into the right family.

Too bad I don't fit into the perfect picture he wants to force me into.

With my mind still occupied with likely reasons for my stronger-than-usual agitation, I play the Moonlight Sonata in an endless loop, just like my thoughts swirl in my head. I open my eyes and fix my gaze on the New York City lights while my fingers dance over the keys, and a frown forms on my forehead. Usually, playing the piano is my escape, and my head is empty of all worries, but tonight, I struggle to forget about my stress-filled day.

Friday night. My dad certainly scheduled the dinner on purpose for the one day that is *my* day. Every Friday night, I meet with my two best friends, Paul and Jack, and we play for our fans at O'Reilly's, an Irish pub in Manhattan. A few years ago, we discovered our mutual love for music, and today, here we are: Paul playing the guitar and singing, Jack as our drummer, and me sitting behind the piano. What started as a hobby turned into a regular gig once a week at a packed pub, with guests coming only to see us perform.

A fact my dad knows and detests. He's always working, expecting the same from me, and that I'm part of a band doesn't sit well with him, so he uses every opportunity to remind me of it.

Sometimes I wonder if he even remembers I'm not only his employee but also his son.

After drawing in the umpteenth deep breath and playing the Moonlight Sonata goodness knows how many times, I finally relax. The tension leaves my shoulders the more I push all these thoughts aside until only one remains: the night out at the Avalon also failed to ease the day's strain for a single reason in particular.

Identifying the source of my agitation helps me deal with it, even though it's a source I have to ignore for now. Because timing is everything, especially with *her*.

With one last deep sigh, I close the fallboard and rise from my seat. As I head to my bedroom, one corner of my lips lifts a tiny fraction.

The right time will come; I just need a little more patience.

REVIEWS

Dear Reader,

Writing has always been a labor of love for me, and your support means the world. If you've enjoyed my latest work, I kindly ask you to take a moment and share your thoughts through a review. Your feedback is not only invaluable to me but also helps others discover the story. Whether it's on Goodreads, Amazon, or your preferred platform, your words have the power to make a difference. Thank you for being a part of this literary journey, and I look forward to hearing your thoughts.

Warm regards,

Lilly Henderson