



A WORTHY
Love

A. E. VALDEZ

A Worthy Love by A.E. Valdez

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Thank You

Author's Note

I wasn't sure I'd share this story when I started writing it in late 2021. There were many times I doubted myself and the direction of the words I'd written. I remember calling my best friend and telling her the struggles I was having with writing the topics in this book. She told me to write what I feel *called* to write, not what I *think* I should write. A call came for this story that wasn't silenced until I put the last word on paper.

With that said, this story contains explicit language, vivid descriptions of sex, abuse, death/dying, violence, miscarriage/abortion, pregnancy/childbirth, and blood. Please take care of yourself while reading.

To my readers –

Your existence means you are worthy.

Prologue

Asher

Marriage has never been a thought for me. Especially not a last minute one in Vegas. But here I am, watching Marisa brush her teeth after slipping into some wedding dress we picked up on the strip. I thought she was joking when she asked me to marry her.

“C’mon, Ash. You’re telling me you don’t want to do something wild in Vegas for the sake of Vegas?”

“I was thinking of taking two strippers back to my room as wild. And here you are asking me to marry you for... what?”

“The memory. The thrill...” She holds onto my arm, looking up at me. “And just to do it one fucking time because I doubt I’ll ever get the chance.”

“Why not?” I cock my head to the side. She’s funny, gorgeous, has natural curves some would go under the knife for, and the way those hazel eyes stand out against her deep copper skin... I’m not understanding why she doubts she’ll ever get married.

“Because...” She straightens up. “It’s not gonna happen. Unfortunately, my acceptance hasn’t rid me of my desire for the experience.”

“And you’re choosing me of all people? Are you that drunk?”

“I was drunk... okay, I’m still a little drunk, but this is a sober decision.”

I study her, crossing my arms and leaning against the wall. “Marisa Banks wants to marry me, Asher Blaine, for the experience?”

“Correct. We can get it annulled right after.”

I raise a brow. “This isn’t a setup, is it? We won’t get to the chapel and you’ll start yelling I’ve kidnapped you or some shit, will you?” She’s never wanted to give me the time of day and now she wants to marry me.

She falls into a fit of laughter. “No, no. Although, that would’ve been funny. I really want to marry you for the experience.”

“You know I’m going to be a shit husband, right?” I can’t believe I’m entertaining this.

“Give me...” She grabs my hand, looking at my watch. “Your best eight hours. Besides, most of them will be in bed.”

Her words go straight to my dick. “Oh, you want the experience, *experience*?”

She rolls her eyes, waiting for me to catch up. “Yes, Ash. Wedding, dick, and all.”

As much as I’ve thought about making her cum and tasting it, I don’t want her to feel obligated to fuck me. “I’ll marry you. We don’t have to fuck though.”

Raising a brow, she scoffs. “Did you not tell me earlier tonight you can show me some appreciation?” She runs her hand along my jaw. “I want some fucking appreciation, Ash.”

I hold her gaze. “I’ll give you whatever you want, Risa.”

Smiling, she interlaces her fingers with mine and pulls me along behind her. “I want a dress.”

“No ring?” My eyes are glued to her ass as she walks in front of me. When she stops, I run into the back of her.

Whipping around she asks, “You want to buy me a ring?”

“Do you want one?”

“I–yes.” She blinks, almost like the thought takes her by surprise.

I glance at my watch. “We’re down to seven hours and forty–five minutes. Let’s go. I’m trying to skip to the bed part.”

She turns to face me after fixing herself up. “How do I look?”

I try to act as though I haven’t been watching her the whole time. “You look,” I clear my throat. “Gorgeous. Ready to walk down the aisle to marry the worst mistake of your life?”

She snorts with laughter. “Trust me. You’re not.” The tone of her voice makes me wonder who she’s thinking about when she says that. She grabs my hands. “Let’s get married.”



Walking back to the suite, Marisa looks at the diamond-encrusted band on her finger. She smiles at it, but tries to hide it when she realizes I’m looking at her. I was willing to buy her a rock. She insisted on a simple wedding band. I didn’t want one. This experience is for her, not me. I’m content with her being my first and last—and only—wife. As we approach our suites that are right across the hall from each other, she stops between the doors.

“Which room?”

“Mine.” I pull the key card from my pocket. “No one will think anything of you calling out my name.”

“I asked for eight hours of your best, Ash. Not your arrogance.”

I let out a belt of laughter. “Damn. You did.” After we step through the door, I pull her toward me. “So let me show you my best.”

She inhales sharply as I kiss her neck.

Marisa

He shows me his best again and again... and again. It almost pains me to admit I've lost count of how many times he's made me come as I moan his name.

He's between my thighs as the sun rises, making my legs shake. I know I'm going to be sore when all of this is over. For right now, I'll enjoy the pleasure he's giving me. Tangling my fingers in his curls, I grind against his mouth. I've tried to keep it down, hoping we don't wake our friends.

None of them know, nor will they ever know, I married and fucked Asher tonight. This will be between us and will quickly become a faded memory... *maybe*. I'm wondering if I'll even belong to myself after his touch. My breath hitches as he licks my clit, causing me to fall into another climax.

"Fuck, Ash..." I cry out. He swirls his tongue around my center, tasting every drop of my release.

He climbs up my body, leaving a heated trail of kisses in his wake. Grabbing the sides of his face, I bring his lips to mine, tasting myself on him.

"Another round?" he asks, running his hands over my body.

Grabbing his length, I line him up with my entrance as he thrusts into me. I usually don't scratch during sex, but it's a knee-jerk reaction with the way he stretches me out. He by far has the biggest dick I've ever taken. I had no idea what I was getting myself into until he pulled it out. I didn't know whether to say I was kidding about fucking or drop into a full split on it.

Needless to say, I've dropped it, backed it up, and have bounced all over him tonight. He gives me time to adjust to his thickness. Once he feels my body relax, he begins to move. Truth be told, big dicks aren't my thing. Sure, they're impressive, but a lot of dudes fall into the pussy like they're wielding a sledgehammer. I thank the sex Gods somewhere along the way Asher learned how to properly use the power he possesses. I'll gladly reap the benefits of what he's working with.

Wrapping my legs around him, I welcome each thrust of his hips. He grips my curls, picking up the pace. His moaning in my ear is my undoing. It calls to something primal in me, causing me to succumb to another wave of pleasure. I try to commit the sounds of him to memory. His thrusts become harder, deeper. Gripping my thigh, he pulls my leg over his shoulder. I sling my other leg over his shoulder, allowing him to go deeper.

"Risa, shit." he groans. He's deep. I grip the sheets, trying to hold onto something. "I'm about to..."

His hips stutter as he tips over the edge. Something may be wrong with me. He hasn't even pulled out yet, and I'm already thinking of him making me come again. Holding the base of the condom, he slides out of me. Pulling it off, he tosses it in the trash beside the bed and I grab a Kleenex to wipe him off. He watches me with a curious look, but doesn't say anything. Lying beside me, he pulls me into him. The feeling of his arms around me make me feel... wanted. Even if it's fake, I'll take

it. I've been craving the feeling of something other than what I have been lately.

“Thank you for tonight, Ash.”

“This is far better than my stripper plan.”

I clap a hand over my mouth as I laugh. “Same. The girls had to talk me out of going home with one.”

“Glad you didn't.” He kisses my shoulder.

I can't help but wonder how perfect this would be if this were real. Too bad it isn't.



Asher gave me exactly eight hours of his best, and then turned into a shit husband. I'm pulling my suitcase along behind me after saying goodbye to Harlow, Quinn, Sevyn, Acyn, Kyrell, and Zane. Despite Asher's fuck up, this weekend with my closest friends, celebrating their bachelor and bachelorette parties, was exactly what I needed. Unfortunately, I have to meet Asher to sign the annulment papers. He's waiting in the hotel lobby.

This would be easier if he wasn't so fucking good looking or if memories of him making me come weren't on repeat. I sure know how to pick egotistical assholes. He has the build of a professional athlete, muscular and lean. I'm considered tall, but he towers over me. His white t-shirt clings to his muscles

like I shamelessly was last night. Looking up from his phone, his brown eyes meet mine.

I bite back a smile at the memory of me clocking him with a remote square in the forehead. It didn't do any damage; his face is still perfect, but it brought me satisfaction. Looking at his full lips as they turn up into a smile, I lick my own, fighting the urge to kiss him. Instead, I focus on the gold chain around his neck as it glints against his smooth, deep brown skin.

“Risa.” He nods, straightening up.

“It’s *Ma* – risa. Not Risa.”

“You didn’t seem to have a problem with it last night.”

My blood boils. “Yeah, that was before you told all our friends we fucked after I asked you not to.”

I wasn’t embarrassed, but he ruined a good memory with his fucking mouth. He has the decency to look remorseful... for a few seconds.

“They thought you were missing, *Risa*.” I hate that I love the way my name rolls off his tongue. “I had to let them know you were in my bed all night. You should be thanking me.”

I scoff. “Your arrogance has you in a chokehold. Tell me, does it consistently fuck you over with no lube?” I shove his clothes I wore at his chest. “I want no memories of you.”

He has the audacity to smile. “As much as you wish you could,” he tugs on one of my curls, “you’ll never forget the feeling of me inside you.”

“You’re forgettable, Ash.” I wish I could say that with confidence, but my pussy says otherwise.

I hold up my hand, pulling off the ring he gave me. Well... try to pull. He watches me with amusement as I struggle to get it off my finger.

“Need help?” He’s wearing a cocky smile.

“No...” I say through gritted teeth before I get it off. I hold it out to him. “Do what you want with it.” He takes it and then grabs my hand, sliding it back onto my finger. “W-What are you doing?”

“You said to do what I want with it. I want you to keep it.”

“I don’t–”

His phone rings. “The car service is here. C’mon, you can berate me on the way to the airport.”

I stare after him for a few seconds before following him out to the car. He takes my bag, putting it in the back. He’s giving me whiplash, being an asshole one minute and a gentleman the next. I climb into the backseat, and he slides in beside me. After the excitement of the weekend, I have no energy to berate Ash. I can ignore his existence though.

“You’re not going to talk to me?” Reaching into my purse, I pull out my earbuds. “Fair enough.” He nods, chuckling.

I don’t turn on my music. Instead, I get lost in my thoughts. The past couple of weeks have been an emotional rollercoaster. One minute I thought everything was falling into place, only to realize it was a façade. Why does it seem as if

nothing can go right? I can't help the tears that prick my eyes. Celebrating Harlow at her bachelorette party helped keep these thoughts at bay. Even though I don't want to admit it, Asher nearly helped me forget. But now, I'm alone again, and there's nothing to silence my thoughts.

I instinctively sniffle, forgetting Asher is beside me. Thankfully, we pull up to the airport. Getting out, I feel his eyes on me. He hands me my bag, and I wait for him on the curb as he grabs his. I quickly wipe my face, but more tears replace them. My eyes would betray me right now.

“Risa, I’m—”

“Do you have the paperwork? I’ve gotta catch my flight.”

“Yeah...” He watches me as he pulls the papers out of his backpack.

“Do you have a pen?” He hands one to me. “Where do I sign?”

“Uh... the red tab is yours.”

I quickly scrawl my name below his. “Thanks for the memory.” I try to force a smile. “Even if you were a shit husband.”

He takes the annulment papers and pen from my hand. Opening his mouth to say something, I interrupt him. “You have my number. Let me know when it’s done. Bye, Ash.”

Without a second glance, I leave him on the curb. Why can't anything go right? He's going to think I'm crying over him.

Shit... maybe I am. One thing I know for sure is, when I'm alone I only have to worry about myself.

Almost a week later, I get a text from Asher. After we left Vegas, I came to help teach at a friend's yoga training in California.

Ash: Hey. We're both officially single again.

Marisa: Good riddance.

I stare at the text, twisting the ring he gave me around my finger.

Ash: We both know there's no bite behind that text. See you around, Risa.

Our best friends are married, I'll have to see him again eventually. Maybe by the time I see him again, I'll have forgotten how he made me feel.

"That's a fucking lie..." I mutter to myself.

1

Marisa

I sit, curled up on my well-worn couch with candles lit, lights off, with Chinese food from my favorite spot, and the remote control clutched in my hand ready to binge watch a show. I stab at a piece of chicken and have it halfway to my mouth when I hear a knock at the door.

Glancing at the time, I wonder if I forgot about plans with friends. Usually they blow up my phone if I'm running late. I let out an exasperated sigh as I get up and peer through the peephole. My heart nearly stops when I see who it is.

I quickly duck away, pressing my back against the door. I clasp my hand over my mouth and clutch at my chest as if I can still my hammering heart.

"Marisa, are you there?" The deep voice I used to love in my ear calls out.

Why the fuck is he here? I buried what we had in the dirt and left it where I left him. Yet here he is, trying to resurrect it.

"Marisa... please." His tone of voice changes. It's softer. I hear the sadness in it. "Marisa... if you're there... I'm sorry."

There's a soft thud against the door and then a sliding noise.

I'm too scared to check if he's still there. Tears prick my eyes and I curse myself for being so fucking weak. My heart beats wildly as I foolishly contemplate opening the door for him. Loneliness is a bitch. It'll have you considering doing things you normally wouldn't do for the sake of temporary comfort.

I haven't seen him since the disastrous dinner at his house... his wife's house... whose ever house it fucking was—I've been avoiding him like the fucking plague. This is the first time he's dropped by, but it's also the first time I've been home since his wife tried to embarrass me. I make a mental note to park in the garage from now on.

“I love you, Marisa. That part of me is real. What we had was—*is*—real.”

Whatever we had wasn't love. The man I thought I knew and the man outside of my door, telling me he loves me, are two entirely different people. One is a figment of my imagination, a dream while the other is nothing but a lying stranger. I suddenly feel sick. Repulsed by the fact I fell in love with a lie. That thought sobers my loneliness up real quick.

I rub my eyes, refusing to shed any more tears over him and hating myself for still loving him. He caused me a pain that love can't mask. Turning off the TV, I grab my phone and head to my room. I turn on my white noise machine, put my phone on do not disturb, and bury myself underneath the covers.



When I moved out here to Portland, I didn't know if I'd continue teaching yoga. I had no plan when I arrived. Not even a place to live. One of my best friends, Harlow, is a few hours away in Washington state. She's close, but not close enough. I know without a doubt she wouldn't hesitate to make the trip to me if I ever needed her. To this day, over a year later, I still can't tell someone why I moved here when asked. The only explanation I can ever come up with is that it felt right. I wanted a fresh start and to move off of the little island I called home my entire life.

The first few months weren't easy. I had enough money from selling my yoga studio on Galveston Island that I wasn't worried, but having no place to call home was stressful. I stayed in an Airbnb while I searched for a place. Initially, I wanted an apartment or a townhouse. The few applications I filled out fell through. It was discouraging. But when I drove past this cute little purple bungalow—it called to me.

I had only rented back in Texas, and buying a house right off the bat when I wasn't sure whether I wanted to settle in Oregon was terrifying. Regardless, I listened to that pull and got in touch with the realtor. Two months later, I was calling the little purple bungalow home, and it was the best decision I made.

I lean against the counter, drinking my smoothie as I look at my schedule. It's a busy day of private lessons and two group

sessions. I've created a small but mighty community through my hot yoga studio—Sol Movement. About six months ago, I opened up a juice bar inside called Ambrosia. I was hesitant at first because I knew nothing about food service, but with the encouragement of friends, I opened it anyway. It isn't only about the money for me, it's the community my businesses have brought together.

My phone chimes with an alert that there's been an accident on the usual route I take to the studio. I'll have to take the longer way. I quickly grab my things and send a text to my client to let them know I might be a few minutes late.

I'm startled when I open my door and a man falls at my feet. Screaming, I drop my smoothie and jump back into my house, trying to slam my door closed, and he screams as it hits his head. Once my eyes focus on the man now covered in my bright pink dragon fruit smoothie, I realize it isn't any random person.

“Reese! What the fuck are you doing here? Did you sleep on my porch?” I glance around, clutching my chest.

He's writhing on the floor, holding his eye. The glass cup that held my smoothie is inches from his head.

“I wanted to see you. Needed to see you.” He looks at me with his uninjured eye, smoothie hanging off his long lashes.

I cross my arms, looking down at him. “You don't need or want anything from me. Now move! I'm going to be late for work, and you know I have no issue slamming this door on your head again.” He deserves much more than that.

“Wait, wait! No. Just give me a second.” He struggles to get up, his hand slipping in the smoothie.

I snicker. Entertained by his disarrayed, pitiful state. While he struggles, I grab a rag from my kitchen and launch it at his face. He goes to wipe the smoothie from it.

“Uh uh, clean up my porch.”

He glances down at his clothes before straightening to his full height and meeting my gaze. I’m not as tall as him, but I straighten up as though I am.

His brows pinch together. “You cut your hair. It – you look _”

I cut his sentence short by slamming my front door and locking it. “Clean this up and never stop by here again. Got it?” I whip around, glaring at him. He reaches for my arm as I push past him, stopping me in my tracks.

“I only wanted to make sure you were okay and to tell you _”

I take a step away from him, breaking the hold he has on me. “Tell me, how’re your wife and kids? Do they know that you’re at the whore’s house right now?”

“Marisa, I’m so sorry. I – it’s complicated.”

“Complicated?” I scoff. “What’s complicated about having a wife and kids? That’s easy fucking math to me.”

“I’m sorry.” He hangs his head.

“Your apologies don’t mean shit to me,” I spit. “You don’t mean shit to me!” Tears sting my eyes. I wish I believed those last words. He was everything to me. We were everything. Well, I thought we were.

He calls my bluff, pulling me toward him, and his lips crash into mine. For a moment, I allow myself to melt. To remember what it’s like to be lost in him. All I saw was him. That was the problem. All I saw was him while he was seeing everything else. I shove at his chest, breaking the kiss. I shove him again, and my hand connects with his face, slapping him before I can register what I’m doing. His head snaps to the side. My eyes widen as I take a step back. He grabs his jaw, opening and closing it a few times before looking at me.

“I deserved that.”

My hands are trembling, and I’m not sure whether I’m shaking with rage, pain, or sadness. “J-Just leave me alone, Reese. It’s what’s best for both of us.”

I turn before he can see the tears fall.

Once I’m safely in the yoga studio’s parking lot, my phone chimes with a text. It’s the group chat I have with Quinn, Sevyn, and Harlow.

Sevyn: Morning heauxs!

Harlow: I have your kids, Sev. I know you were heauxing the most out of all of us last night.

Quinn: Marisa, did you make it home?

Marisa: Yeah. Reese stopped by. I've gotta teach a class.
I'll talk to y'all after work. Love you.

Sevyn: That motherfucker.

Harlow: We'll be there in no time. Say the word.

Quinn: Count me in. I can catch a flight.

I fucking love these girls so much.



A twinge of pain in my hand serves as a recollection of this morning's events. Apparently, Reese living in my head rent free wasn't enough. Today I have a constant reminder of him as I move through my yoga flow. Not that I could forget, even if I wanted to. I'd give anything to have someone obliterate the past six months with him from my brain. Six months of fucking lies and deception wrapped up in a perfectly handsome package. Before my mind spirals into thoughts of what we used to be, I force it back to the present.

Taking a deep inhale, I guide my class into savasana. "Settle your minds and bodies. Thank yourself for showing up today. Take as long as you'd like, as long as you need. I'll be outside when you're ready. Namaste."

I turn up the music a notch before I exit the room. Exhaling as I close the door behind me.

“I’ve got the towels ready. Did you need help with anything else today?” Natalie, my receptionist, asks me.

“Thank you. No... I think I’ll be good. Where are you off to tonight?” I smirk, taking notice of her makeup and cute outfit. She dresses casual most of the time, but tonight she's wearing an airy, thigh length skirt. I watch her fix her freshly silk pressed light brown hair and check her makeup in the mirror. Her rich sepia complexion looks like it's glowing with the golden hues she's wearing. When she's satisfied with her look, she puts on her clear framed glasses, turning her attention back to me.

“Oh,” she waves her hand. “Just a date. Nothing major. With Eric...” her voice trails off as she clears her throat.

“Eric? As in quiet barely says two words, Eric?”

She gives me a shy smile. “Yes... he’s not that quiet once you get to know him.”

“I had no idea you were getting to know him. Did he ask you out or stare at you until you caved?”

She tosses her head back with laughter. “He asked me a couple of days ago after a class. It was funny because I knew he was going to do something out of the ordinary. He was just lurking after class, and you know how he usually beelines it out of here. But he waited until everyone was gone and asked me out to dinner.”

“Aw, Natalie! That’s really cute.” At least her love life isn’t as disastrous as mine, and I love that for her.

“Stop it! It’s just dinner and–”

Before she can finish her sentence, the topic of conversation enters the lobby. I try my best to not make it obvious we were just talking about him. “Great job in there today, Eric.”

“Thank you, Marisa.” He smiles and nods without making eye contact.

I gape at him. Usually, he doesn’t utter a single word to me. I look at Natalie, who is looking at him with stars in her eyes.

“Natalie.” He looks at her. “I’m just gonna get ready and then we can go.”

“Okay.” She smiles and watches him walk back to the showers.

“Oh my God! You two are way past the ‘getting to know each other’ phase.”

“We’re just talking,” she says casually.

“Right... just talking.” I smile at her.

The rest of the class trickles out, and I offer them cold towels while giving them words of encouragement. Tonight’s class was fun because it was filled with people who have been with me since I first opened a year ago.

It started with Marty and his partner, Keith. They were the first people to walk into Sol Movement and take a class with me. I didn’t know Keith worked for the news station until he asked me to do an interview, highlighting my business a few weeks after beginning classes. He works at one of the of the

biggest news stations in the city. The interview helped my business grow into what it is today. Not knowing anyone here initially made me hesitant to continue on with teaching yoga, but it's what I love to do. It's what I've been doing since I graduated from high-school. I like to believe it's my calling.

I have so many students astonished by what they're able to do once they begin a yoga practice. It's not just about impressive poses and being flexible. Yoga is about so much more than that. It's about finding a home in yourself.



When I arrive home later that night, the smoothie mess is cleaned up and replaced with a bouquet of roses. I stare at them, contemplating stomping on them, but take them inside. A card slips from the bouquet and falls to the floor. I let out an exasperated sigh and pick it up.

Marisa,

If I could turn back time, it would've been you.

-Reese

Would've, could've, should've, blah fucking blah. I throw his meaningless card and roses in the trash on the way to my room. As I strip out of my clothes, I do what I've been doing since our "split", which is mentally picking apart our relationship. I keep asking myself how I missed the fact he had

a wife and two kids. Was I that dumb and naïve, or was he just a damn good liar? None of it felt fake until it was.

My phone rings and I head toward the living room to dig it out of my bag. When I see the screen, it's a picture of me, Harlow, Sevyn, and Quinn.

“Hey!” I say to Harlow and Quinn as they appear on the screen. “Where's Sev?”

“They're at Zane's parents' house,” Harlow says. “What happened with you?”

Letting out an exasperated sigh, I collapse on the couch. I dive right into what happened this morning with Reese. It's only been a week since I stopped talking to him. The wounds are still fresh, deep, and fucking excruciating. Him being on my doorstep this morning was salt in them.

“It's hard because I know, without a doubt, he's a lying piece of shit. But I still... love him. I'm at war with myself to leave him alone or give in. When he kissed me today, I was this close,” I hold up my fingers a pinch away from each other, “to giving in and letting him have me.”

“What stopped you?” Harlow asks.

I shrug. “He's fucking married, and I really have no clue who he is. Is Reese really his name? Was that his apartment? Was what we had real, or am I making it all up? There are so many unanswered questions. And why am I still hung up on him after all he's done?”

“Because we can still fall in love with an idea... a dream,” Quinn says.

“But how was I so fucking stupid?” I say, and the tears fall.

“You’re not stupid, Marisa. It could’ve happened to anyone.”

“Yeah, but...” I angrily swipe at my tears. “I don’t wanna sound like an envious bitch, but look at you and Quinn. I’m happy for you both, I really fucking am, but why the fuck did this have to happen to me? Why couldn’t it happen to some raggedy bitch who enjoys fucking married men? Now I’m terrified to fucking date. What if the next guy has six wives and wants me to join or some weird shit?”

Harlow snorts, trying to bite back a laugh. She fails at holding it in, and we’re all laughing again.

“That’s not gonna happen, Marisa.” Harlow giggles. “You make it seem like Acyn was the first guy I met. Although I wish that were true.”

“I love how we never say your ex’s name.”

“With good reason,” Quinn interjects. “Fuck him.” Harlow and I laugh.

“I guess you’re right. It’s just I want the cute shit and love, too.”

“And you’ll get it because you fucking deserve it,” Quinn reassures me, and Harlow agrees.

“Thanks guys.” I sniffle, wiping my nose. “I’ll be alright... eventually.”

“You will be, and we’ll be here with you every step of the way until you are.” Harlow says.

“Alright.” I let out a heavy sigh. “I’m gonna wind down and get some rest. I love you both.”

We say our goodbyes, and I’m left wondering if I’ll ever be alright again.

2

Asher

I stupidly volunteered to sit in on a meeting for my uncle. I'm bored outta my mind, sketching in the margins of my notepad, as a monotone voice drones on at the front of the boardroom.

I get the feeling I'm being watched and glance to my right. The newest intern is staring at me with lust in her eyes while biting her lip. I give her a blank expression before returning to my sketch. If she knew what was good for her, she'd leave me alone. A pair of nice tits and a pretty face aren't worth the fallout that would inevitably happen. I never shit where I eat.

"Mr. Blaine?"

My eyes snap to the man at the front of the table. "Yes?"

"Are you and your uncle wanting to proceed with these building plans?" He adjusts his glasses.

This meeting could've easily been an e-mail. No wonder my Uncle Jax asked me to sit in on it. "Yes, we can move forward."

He gives me a skeptical look, pursing his lips, probably annoyed I was sketching instead of listening to him carry on. I raise a brow, challenging him to say something. He clears his throat, adjusts his collar, and wraps up the meeting.

I let out a long exhale as I rise from my seat. Before I can reach the door, the intern steps in front of me.

“Hi, I’m—”

“Not interested,” I finish her sentence.

She blinks as her smile fades. I’m sure she’s not used to being turned down, but if she’s here to find a boyfriend or fuck her way to the top, she’s with the wrong company. I make a mental note to bring it up with Lenora; she manages the interns.

“Excuse me.” I sidestep her and continue on with my day. There’s enough pussy in the world that I don’t have to hunt for it at work.

Stepping into the elevator, I hit the button for the top floor. When I reach my uncle’s office, he’s on the phone staring out at Seattle as though it’s his kingdom. In some ways it is since he’s designed and built a lot of it.

He turns to face me with a smile. “I’ve gotta run. Ash just walked in.”

While he says his goodbyes, I realize he’s talking to my aunt, and I take a seat on one of the buttery leather chairs near his desk.

“How was the meeting?” he asks, sitting in the chair beside me.

“I don’t know why you’re asking when you know damn well it was boring.” He chuckles. “Why do you let Scott conduct those meetings? He has as much personality as a doorknob.”

“Do you want to handle them?” He smirks.

“I would sum all future meetings up in a three-sentence email,” I say, setting some papers for him to review on his desk. “These are the plans. You can double check, but we’re ready to move forward with the project.”

“Thank you.” He skims over the papers before setting them aside. “Are you enjoying being back in Seattle?”

“I love LA, but Seattle will always be home for me. Also, how could I pass up on the morning ambushes from your daughters? Nothing like ear drum piercing screams and a knee to the balls to wake me up in the morning.”

He tosses his head back with laughter. “They love having you around. It was hard for them when you left to start the LA office.”

“Yeah...” I look down at my hands. “I know.”

I moved in with my aunt and uncle when I was twelve. My parents couldn’t decide whether they were in love or wanted each other dead most days. If my father was gasoline, my mother was the flamethrower. I’m a product of their chaos,

and they left me to sort through the pieces they left behind in their wake.

“Your professionalism and performance with our clients in Paris secured us future contracts,” he says, pulling me from my thoughts. “You know I’m trying to scale back and be at home with Genevieve and the kids more. It’s only a matter of time before you’re the Vice President of Blaine Architecture.”

A rush of excitement courses through me. Uncle Jax has been preparing me to take over his architectural design firm since I graduated high school and went off to college. Being with him at work nearly every day after school uncovered my love for architecture and design.

“Thank you, Uncle Jax... for taking a chance on me.”

“You’ve never been a risk, Ash. You’ve always been a sure thing.” He claps me on the shoulder before rising from his seat. “Are you coming to Ivy’s recital tonight?”

Ivy, Haelyn, and Laynee are his daughters. They’re more like sisters to me than cousins. I call them my nieces because it’s the title that makes sense to others without me having to explain my past.

“She told me I’m going, so I’ll be there.”

“She’s thirteen going on eighteen.” Grabbing a tablet from his desk, he hands it to me. “There are two projects coming up that I’d like you to consider taking on as project manager of design. First option is a resort in Cabo San Lucas. You wouldn’t have to stay for an extended period. It would only be

two weeks, maybe a month tops, for you to oversee a few things.”

“What’s the second option?” I ask, staring at the tablet. Sun, sand, and beautiful women never sound like a bad idea to me, but I like to explore my options.

“Portland, Oregon. We got the Titan Tech contract, thanks to you. The design you presented last week in LA impressed them. They signed the contract with us within hours after your meeting. The space they bought in Portland needs to be gutted, remodeled, brought up to code—the works.”

“Restoration.” I smile, looking up from the tablet.

“I knew that would get your interest.”

That’s the only reason I took the job in Paris, because it was purely restoration work of old buildings. I love to mix modern with old to create something new. But Portland also catches my attention for an entirely different reason.

“I’ll go to Portland.”

“Really?” He crosses his arms, giving me a curious look. “Portland over Cabo? I’d thought you’d choose Cabo because it’s easy given you just got back from traveling.”

I grin, handing him the tablet. “You know I’m always up for a challenge.”

Memories of raven-colored curls fisted in my hand replay in my head.



I pull up to my best friend Acyn's house. He's outside washing his 1966 Mustang GT. I'm pretty sure he'd fuck that car if he could, and I can't say that I'd blame him.

"Didn't think you'd stop by." He smiles, giving me a hug.

"Wrapped up meetings early. Making love to inanimate objects again, Ace?" I nod toward the Mustang.

"Fuck you."

"Where's Grey?"

"He should be—"

Greyson, our childhood best friend, pulls up behind my car. He slams his door as he makes his way toward us.

"Selene rant incoming," Acyn says. "Three... Two..."

"She's driving me fucking insane, man." Grey rubs his hands down his face. "In-fucking-sane."

I try not to laugh, but I'm an asshole and laugh anyway. "I hope that ring you got her is returnable."

"Yeah, you'd fucking love if we didn't work out, wouldn't you?"

I put my hand on his shoulder to stop him from pacing, causing him to look at me. "No, I wouldn't. But I'm also not going to allow you to be delusional."

He glares at me. I'm waiting for him to protest, but he deflates with my words. His shoulders sag, and he collapses into a lawn chair.

"I'm fucking... exhausted." He rubs his eyes.

Acyn pats his back. "We give you shit because we care about you. Never because we want to see you down."

Grey nods as his features harden. "I know. I just rather not talk about it right now," he sighs.

"Fair enough." Acyn returns to cleaning his car.

"I'm taking a project in Portland." I take a seat next to Grey.

"Portland? No exciting places to jet off to?" Grey asks.

"Well... I could've gone to Cabo, but I just got back from Paris. Besides, we're working on a new location for Titan Tech. I owe it to Kyrell."

"Yeah... but still—Portland over Cabo?" Ace raises a brow.

Harlow, Ace's wife, comes outside. She kisses Ace before turning to say hello to Grey and me. "Are you taking me to Cabo? I wouldn't mind Portland either, so I could see Marisa."

Ace's eyes snap toward mine, and he narrows them before turning his attention back to Harlow.

"Wherever you wanna go, I'll take you." Ace smiles at her. "Maybe we can go see Marisa this weekend?"

Harlow claps her hands together. "Yes! I think she could use a pick me up right now."

I raise a brow, wondering why Marisa needs a pick me up. Grey is side eyeing me, and I know they're going to give me shit as soon as Harlow leaves. Even if she wasn't in Portland, I'd still choose to go there over Cabo. That's what I tell myself at least.

"I'll talk to Sevyn. Maybe we can make a family trip out of it. I'm running to the store. Do you guys need anything?"

"Nah, I think we're good." Ace glances at me.

"Oh yeah, I'm good, Harlow. Thank you." I smile at her.

"Yeah, all good. Thanks, Harlow," Grey says.

"Alright, I'll see y'all in a bit." She kisses Ace before getting into her car.

We watch her pull out of the driveway. Acyn rounds on me once she's driving down the street. "Portland makes a little more sense now."

"What are you talking about?" I pick at a piece of imaginary lint on my pristine pants.

"You sure play the role of the idiot well." Grey laughs.

"I can't be close to home or what?" I shrug.

"Home or Marisa?" Ace asks. "Have you even talked to her since Vegas?"

I unbutton my collar, letting out a sigh. "Not since she told me to go fuck myself."

They burst out laughing. Everyone knows we slept together, but no one knows we got married. I'll keep that promise to her

at least. I won't admit to them I've texted her a few times since then. She'll only reply in emojis, and it's usually the middle finger accompanied by a smiley face.

"Did you apologize?" Grey asks.

"For what?" I knit my brows together.

"Oh, you thought her trying to murder you in Vegas was foreplay?" Ace chuckles. "Nah... I think she really fucking hates you."

"Hate is a strong word..."

"Loathe?" Grey points at me.

"Damn." I chuckle. "You guys have no faith in me. Besides, who said I'm gonna see her anyway?"

"Got her outta your system?" Ace exchanges a look with Grey.

I wish I could confidently say she is, but the way my dick wakes in response to thoughts of her prove otherwise.

"We fucked and moved on." I shrug, pulling my phone from my pocket. There's a text from her in response to my text this morning. It's her signature middle finger and smiley face. Loathe may be fitting, but it makes the corners of my mouth twitch.

"In true Ash style," Grey chuckles, shaking his head.

I hook up for release—not for forever. They always give me shit about it. Ace is married and expecting his first child. Grey is engaged, and even if it is rocky, I know he loves his fiancé.

Zane is Ace's brother in law. He and Ace's little sister have been married for almost five years. Kyrell, the fourth member of our group, is also expecting his first child soon and is madly in love with his girlfriend, Quinn. Then there's me... the last man standing. I wasn't bothered until we went to Vegas. I can't help but wonder what the purpose of being successful is if I have no one to share it with.

"When do you head out for Portland?" Ace asks as he stands back to look at his car glimmer in the sun's rays.

"Probably this weekend. I wanna spend some time with Jax, Genevieve, and the girls."

"How are they doing?" Grey leans back in his chair. "I haven't seen them in forever."

"Ivy has a recital tonight. You're more than welcome to come."

"I'm sure Harlow would be down. What time?"

"Six. I'll text you the address. Are you coming, Grey?"

"Yeah, I'd rather not go home any sooner than I have to. Plus, it'll be fun to see your family again."

I met Ace and Grey shortly after I moved in with my uncle. Meeting them saved me from myself. We quickly became inseparable, and we haven't broken the bond since.

"I've got another meeting to get to. I'll see you at the recital."

"See you soon." Acyn gives me a two-finger salute.



The meeting isn't really for business. It's for my pleasure.

She presses her hands into my chest as she rides my dick.
“Fuck, Asher. I've missed this.”

My gaze shifts from her bouncing tits to her face. She's looking at me like I can give her the world. I probably could... if I wanted to.

I respond by flipping her on her back. She brings her legs up over my shoulders as I pound into her. This isn't a time for talking unless it's in expletives or moans. Hers grow louder as she nears her climax. I wrap one hand around her throat and grip her thigh with the other. I slide my hand down her thigh to her clit, applying pressure with my thumb and moving it in circles.

“You missed me fucking you?”

“Yes... yes...” she cries out.

“Prove it. Come on this dick.”

It only takes a few rubs before she arches her back, fisting the sheets, and calls out my name.

“That's right. Get it all over my dick.”

I watch my shaft slide in and out of her with each thrust. My skin heats as I near my climax. She moves her hips with mine. It doesn't take me long before I'm coming. I groan as ripples of pleasure make my body shake. My hips slowly stop

pumping. But she moves her hips until she's sure she got all of my release. She gives me a languid smile as I pull out of her. I get off the bed and go into the bathroom to take off the condom, throwing it away.

When I return to the room, she's sitting against the headboard with her gaze trained on me.

"That's it?" she asks. "Don't you ever want more, Asher?"

I withhold the sigh in my lungs as I pull on my pants. This is the dance we do every time. I've been clear with her since we started whatever this is years ago. Her eyes remain on me while I put my clothes back on. I pat my pockets for my phone and my keys. My phone is there, but my keys aren't.

"Looking for these?" she asks, dangling them from the tip of her finger.

I reach for them, and she moves them out of my reach. She grabs my hand, pulling on my arm for me to sit with her. "Elle... why do we do this every time?"

"If it bothers you so much, why do you come back to me?"

"It's what we do." I shift my gaze from her to the floor. "Why do you let me back in every time?"

She tosses my keys in my lap. "Because I lo—care about you. Are you that fucking stupid?"

"You couldn't possibly love me, Elle. I've done nothing for you to love. We fuck. That's it. What is there to love about that aside from the release?"

We met our freshman year of college, but we've never been together. Our relationship is purely sexual. As we near thirty, she wants more and to settle down. She thinks I'm the one. I know I'm not.

"Don't you get lonely?"

"It's not about loneliness. Do you honestly think we would last if we were to get together? I've heard you moan more than I've heard you speak. What do we have in common?"

"We're both successful." She scoots closer to me, wrapping her arms around my middle.

"That's not enough."

"How will we know if we don't try?"

"I'm leaving for Portland this weekend." I glance at my phone to check the time. "I've gotta get going. A family thing."

She unwraps her arms from around me and collapses back against the pillows. "You're insufferable."

"You'll thank me when you're with the man of your dreams." I stand, grab her hand, and kiss the back of it. "Then I'll just be a smudge on your rearview mirror."

"A sexy smudge with a big dick." She smirks.

I chuckle. "Later, Elle."

"Bye, Asher." She smiles. "Call me when you're back in town."

Elle is the closest thing I've had to a girlfriend. We don't talk about personal stuff, but we've consistently been in each other's lives for the past nine years. She's confused our sexual relationship with love. Or maybe she loves me in her own way, and I don't care to see it.



I know nothing about ballet, but to me, Ivy is the best ballerina in the world. I'm surprised at how graceful she is on stage, considering she attempts to tackle me to the ground daily. It feels like old times with Ace, Grey, and Harlow sitting beside me. When it ends, we give Ivy and the other dancers a standing ovation.

In true Ivy fashion, she bulrushes me when she finds us in the crowd. "Did you see me, Ash?" Her eyes glitter as she looks up at me.

"I did." I pull the flowers I've been hiding from behind my back. "You're the best ballerina I've ever seen."

She squeals and takes them. "They're pink!" she exclaims, turning to her mom and dad to show them. "Look at the pink roses."

"Those are gorgeous, honey." Genevie smiles. "We can dry them out so you can keep them."

Ivy bounces up and down, clutching the bouquet of roses to her chest. Laynee, the youngest, pulls on my hand with crocodile tears in her eyes.

“How come I don’t get a bouquet?”

“Because you didn’t do anything...” Haelyn says. She’s the most practical of the three.

I kneel in front of Laynee. “Do you want to pick some flowers at home and make your own bouquet?”

Her brown eyes gleam, and she nods her head with a grin. “Yeah. Can we do it tonight?”

I glance at Jax, and he cuts in. “Tomorrow, Laynee. We’re going to get some food.”

“I promise that we’ll make you your own bouquet tomorrow after school.”

“Okay.” She kisses my cheek.

“I’ll take money.” Haelyn smiles, holding out her hand.

“If you help me pack my things, I’ll give you a dollar.”

“A dollar?” She screws up her face. “I’ll sue you for child labor.” We burst out laughing as Haelyn glares at me.

“Always value yourself.” Harlow winks at her.

“Shall we go to dinner?” Jax asks. “It’s getting late and you three have school in the morning.”

The girls groan as we leave the theater.



We had our fill of food at The Cheesecake Factory. Ace, Harlow, and Grey stand to leave. They took one car, and Grey has to get back home.

“Thank you for letting us join you tonight,” Harlow says to Jax and Genevie.

“It was our pleasure. We’ll have to do something again before Ash leaves for Portland.” Jax smiles. “Ace and Grey, it’s been great to catch up with you guys. I’m proud of the men you’ve become.”

“Thank you,” Ace and Grey say in unison before hugging Jax and Genevie.

“Harlow, we’ll have to set something up for pictures soon. I’ll call you tomorrow morning. Is that okay?”

“Perfect!” Harlow smiles.

Genevie owns a luxury designer consignment shop. She started it online, but recently bought a store and wants professional photos.

Walking to the doors, I say my goodbyes to Ace, Harlow, and Grey. “Thanks for coming.”

“I have to admit, Ash, it was cute seeing you with the girls. Makes you a little more human,” Harlow teases.

“I’m a gentleman.” Ace and Grey laugh while Harlow gives me side eye. “When I want to be,” I add.

“That sounds about right,” Ace says. “We’ll see you later, bruh. If we don’t see you before Portland, we’ll see you when

we visit Marisa.” He winks.

“That’d be fun,” Harlow says.

Clearly Marisa doesn’t bring me up in her conversations with Harlow, Quinn, or Sevyn. I’m not sure if that’s a good or bad thing. Harlow is like Ace, in that regard though. She doesn’t share business that isn’t hers. That’s why I’m close to Ace and Grey because we can trust each other with anything.

I return to the table and take a sip of my soda.

“That was nice to catch up with them,” Jax says.

“Yeah. I didn’t realize how long it’s been.”

“Harlow is a sweetheart. She’s perfect for Acyn.” Genevie smiles. “Greyson’s fiancé couldn’t come?”

“She was working.” I’m not sure if she was, but it’s better than saying they’re fighting.

“Maybe next time.” She smiles. “Girls, let’s get ready to go.”

They gather their things while Jax pays for our dinner. “You know, I’m old enough to pay for my own things now.” The corners of my mouth turn up.

“You’ll always be a child to me, Ash. No matter how tall you get.” He chuckles, handing the card to the server.

When Jax introduces me to people, he refers to me as his son. We have similar features since he’s my dad’s brother. I thought Genevie saw me as an inconvenience when I moved in with them because they had no kids. But everywhere we went,

she told people I was her son. She still says that. I didn't understand how they could love me at first. But they gave me a home and more love than I could ever know what to do with.

Later that night, there's a knock on my door. "Come in," I say, pulling a t-shirt over my head.

"I'm surprised you're staying in here and not the guest house." Jax surveys my teenage room. The only thing that's changed is the bed is bigger. My posters of bands, race cars, pictures, drawings, and trophies still line the walls.

"Doesn't matter where I stay. I don't know peace with the three musketeers running free."

"None of us do." He laughs.

"What's up?" I lay on my bed, propping my arm behind my head.

"There was something I wanted to talk to you about... and you may already know." He sighs, scratching his jaw. "I'm not sure if you keep up with it or not... but your mom has a clemency hearing."

I can't shift my gaze from him. His eyes meet mine, and we stare at each other until I break eye contact, choosing to stare out the window instead. "Oh."

"I don't know if it'll be granted. She's been in prison for sixteen years. I didn't think they'd even consider her for a hearing."

"I didn't think she'd ever get out..."

“From the way they explained it to me, laws change, causing people who weren’t previously eligible to become eligible. She also has a new detective and lawyer looking at her case.”

My chest constricts. “Oh.” I swallow.

“I know it’s a lot, but I wanted you to know so you’re not blindsided in case they tried to contact you.”

My eyes meet his. “Yeah... thank you.”

“Did you... wanna talk about it?”

“Nah, I think therapy was worth the investment.” I smirk, and he laughs.

A silence falls between us. I don’t think about my parents too much. Nothing good comes from it.

“Genevieve and I love you... you know that, right? We love you like you’re our own. You *are* our own.”

“I know.” I smile at him. “I couldn’t deny that even if I wanted to.”

He nods. “Good, good. I’ll leave you alone. If you ever wanna talk. I’m here. We’re here... goodnight.”

“Night, Jax.”

I blankly stare at the ceiling as the door closes. The night that changed my life feels like forever ago. I occasionally have night terrors, but my brain did a good job blocking most of it out. The sight and scent of blood will always make me queasy. Every once in a while, I discover a new trigger I didn’t know I

had. Therapy has helped me immensely, but I never thought about the possibility of her being free again.

Letting out a sigh, I turn off the light. Unwillingly ready for the nightmares to plague me as memories of that night play on repeat.

3

Marisa

I survived the week of trying to get back into a routine. After everything blew up in my face, it was best for me to get away. I haven't seen Reese, but I've heard from him. Harlow told me to block all communication. It was harder than I thought it'd be. A small part of me wanted to keep the door open because whether or not I acknowledge it, I still love him.

Last night, I tried to drown the memories in alcohol which led me to the predicament I'm in this morning. My conquest of the night comes out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist. I bring my mug of coffee to my lips and take a sip as I enjoy the view. It's a relief to see he's fuckable. The thought of fucking him again crosses my mind, but I have no business falling into another relationship of any sort. The irony of me not knowing this man's name and being upset with Reese for lying is not lost on me. It's one thing to be aware you don't know someone and then fucking them. But another thing entirely when you fall in love and unknowingly eat up lies they fed you.

He smiles at me as he disappears into my room to find his clothes. I pour him a cup of coffee in a disposable travel cup to take when he leaves if he wants. A few minutes later, he reappears fully clothed. He really is handsome with a clean-shaven face, sharp jaw, full lips, and rich brown skin.

“Uh... thank you for last night.” His voice is smooth and deep.

The corners of my mouth turn up. “I don’t know that anyone has thanked me for sex before.” Yeah, fucking him again seems highly plausible.

“That’s a shame.” He winks. “I’m Zion, by the way.”

“Marisa.” I hand him the cup of coffee. “It has a little sugar and a dash of creamer.”

“Thank you.” He takes a sip. “It’s good... um, I don’t wanna make this awkward—”

“Then don’t.” I shrug.

“Do you want my number? And maybe we could... do this again sometime?”

I think about it for a second before grabbing my phone and unlocking it.

“I’m not looking for anything serious right now.” I hand it to him.

“Neither am I.” He shrugs, typing his number in. “I’ll let you enjoy your weekend.”

“Yeah... you too.”

He tips his cup of coffee toward me with a smile before heading for the front door. I smile to myself as I hear it close. After my cup of coffee and a short yoga flow, I check my phone and laugh when I see what he called himself.

Marisa: Nice name.

Gratitude Fuck: I wondered how long it'd take you to see that.

I'm not sure that we'll ever meet again, but he's made me smile, and I've fucking needed this. It's Saturday, which means I get to chill. I hired two other instructors because working seven days a week was killing me. Resting is hard when being in motion keeps my mind off things, but I draw myself a bath anyway and put on my favorite playlist.

Once the bubbles are brimming near the tub's edge, I lower myself into the warm water. The comforting smells of sandalwood, amber, and a hint of vanilla surround me. My body melts as I rest my head against the bath pillow and close my eyes.

I soak until it becomes lukewarm. Letting out a sigh, I pull the plug and stand as it drains. I turn on the shower and rinse my body.

As I wrap my hair up in a towel, my phone rings. A picture of me and my mom from the day I moved here appears on the screen.

"Hey, Mom." I smile.

“Hi. How are you, honey?”

“Good. Getting ready to go down to the farmer’s market. How are you, Killian, and Destiny?”

My brother and sister, Killian and Destiny, live with my mom on Galveston Island.

“We’re doing alright...” She lets out an exasperated sigh. “The car broke down again.”

“Mom...” I try to keep the frustration out of my voice. “I told you to get a new car with the tax return money you got earlier this year. That car isn’t worth it.”

“I know, but I thought the last repair would fix it.”

“It’s twenty–two years old, Mom! It’s time to let it go.”

She laughs, shaking her head. “You’re right, but I currently don’t have the money for that.”

“You don’t have savings?”

It’s just us four. Our dad left when I was fourteen. He fell in love with someone else, started a new family, and we rarely hear from him. Let alone get any financial support. My mom didn’t find out she was pregnant with Destiny until after he left. I was a sister, second mom, and provider at fourteen. I’d work cleaning houses and watching other people’s kids until I was able to get a better, more stable job at sixteen. I’ve been helping my mom financially since then, which is probably why she struggles with money now. I don’t know what else to do other than help.

“The kids always need something, Marisa. Destiny is in cheerleading and the uniforms for that alone are ridiculous. But I can’t be without a car, or I can’t get to –”

“I get it, Mom. You still need savings. I’ve been telling you this since I left Galveston over a year ago.”

Before I moved, I was still helping her buy groceries and pay bills even though I wasn’t living with her. Distance has helped, but I still feel like we’re in a partnership. I wish we had a mother-daughter relationship.

“I hate to ask, but do you think you can help me out with a down payment for a new car? It’ll be the last time I ask for money, Marisa. I promise.”

I’m not well off. I don’t have mountains of cash sitting in the bank. The only thing that sets me apart from my mother is I’ve learned how to manage my finances. If I lend her money for a down payment, that means I won’t be able to upgrade the heating system like I’ve been wanting to at the yoga studio. She also can’t be without a car. Her job is a half an hour away off the island.

“Look around at dealerships and I’ll help.” A twinge of resentment settles in my chest. I know I don’t have to help her, but if she can’t get to work, the financial situation will only get worse.

“Thank you so much, honey.”

“Yeah. I’m going to finish getting ready.”

“Love you, Marisa.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

Hanging up the phone, I let out a sigh. It’s not a question of whether I love her. We’re close, and we talk about a lot, but I still wish the dynamics of our relationship were different.

A little while later, I pick out a cute outfit for the farmers’ market. Spraying conditioner on my curls, I hear a knock at the door. A part of me wonders if Zion forgot something. All he had were clothes, car keys, and a phone. There wasn’t much to leave behind.

When I peer through the peephole, it’s covered. I let out a sigh, resting my forehead against the door. My Saturday was off to a good start. I might murder Reese if he’s here to ruin it.

I open the door with an annoyed expression that quickly turns to shock.

“Harlow!” I squeal, launching myself at her.

She gives me a tight hug. “Hey, babe. We thought you’d love some company.”

“I fucking love you.” I pull away from her to give hugs to Acyn, Sevyn, and Zane.

“You look sexy on a Saturday morning.” Sevyn smirks.

I step aside, waving them in. “Oh, I was going to the farmer’s market. Which sounds boring now that you guys are here.”

“I was going to call, but thought we’d just show up instead.”

“I’m glad you did.” I smile. “Do y’all have a place to stay? If not, you’re welcome to stay with me.”

“Nope.” Sev plops down on the couch. “We’re seeing where the weekend takes us.”

“Yeah, if it’s too much, Marisa, we can find a—” Acyn begins.

“Stop. It isn’t. It’s great to see you guys. Did you want to go to the farmer’s market with me? They have good food and sometimes music.”

“I’ll go anywhere that has food right now,” Acyn says.

“Same,” Zane adds.

After I finish getting ready, we pile back into Zane and Sevyn’s SUV and head to the market.



I grab a bottle of wine and some snacks to join the girls in the backyard. Acyn and Zane are perfectly content sitting in front of the TV after spending the day running around with us.

“If you two want snacks, help yourself. I also have beer.”

Acyn kicks Zane’s foot. “Go get us beers and snacks.”

“Bruh, you made me drive all damn day. You get the shit.”

I grab the six-pack for them and some snacks. “Enjoy.” I dump them on the coffee table.

“Thanks, Marisa.” They both smile at me.

I shake my head with a smirk as I head back outside. “I think the men have had enough of our bullshit today.”

“They’ll be alright.” Harlow stretches out on the lounge chair.

Sevyn grabs the bottle of wine and pours two glasses, handing one to me. I glance at Harlow, who has already torn open a package of chips.

“Do you miss drinking?” I take a sip of my wine.

“Me?” She points at herself. “Hell no. What am I missing out on? A hangover?”

“You’re right, but I’m still going to enjoy this wine,” I say as Sevyn clinks her glass with mine.

“How have you been?” Harlow asks.

“Alright.” I shrug, running my finger around the rim of my glass. “Thanks for encouraging me to block Reese’s number. It’s helped a lot.”

“I know from personal experience if you feel done, you’re done. I know it’s hard... really fucking hard.” She squeezes my hand and gives me a small smile.

“Thanks, Harls.”

“You always have us,” Sevyn says.

“I know. That’s what makes this a little easier.” I shift in my seat and look into my glass of wine. “I also, um... slept with some random guy last night. He left a little before y’all arrived, actually.”

“Was the dick good?” Sevyn asks.

“He gave me a few orgasms. I’d say it was good. I’m—”

Acyn steps out on the porch to talk to Harlow. “Sunshine, we’re gonna go see Asher. We’ll be back in a few hours.”

Asher’s in Portland? If Vegas wasn’t still on repeat in my head, I would invite him over, but fuck him.

“Alright.” She smiles. “Have fun. Bring us back food. Like a pizza or something.”

He leans down and kisses her. “Whatever you want. I’ll call you on our way back.”

“Tell Zane he better get his ass up off that couch and come say goodbye to me.”

“I’m coming, woman!” Zane shouts from the living room. “I had to put on my shoes.”

Me and Harlow fall into a fit of laughter while Acyn shakes his head at Sevyn.

“What? I want my husband to love me.”

“I do love you.” Zane steps onto the porch and kisses her. “We’ll be back.”

Once they’re gone, I ask Harlow, “Asher visits Portland? I thought he lived in LA.”

“He’s been in Seattle since the wedding for work. He travels quite a bit, actually.”

“Have you talked to him?” Sev asks with a smirk.

“We were cordial at the wedding reception. He’ll text me to be fucking annoying, and I respond in emojis.”

“Emojis?” Harlow cackles. “You’re both petty as hell.”

“I have a very serious question.” Sevyn sits up, clearing her throat. “Was your hook up last night better than Asher?”

Harlow tilts her head to the side, nodding. “Good question, Sev.”

I roll my eyes, taking a drink of my wine as they stare at me. Part of the reason I’m annoyed with Asher is that I enjoyed our night together more than I thought I would. He’s arrogant and infuriating, but he made me feel so fucking good. In bed, naked, he made me feel like a goddamn queen. It’s an entirely different story when we’re clothed.

“I already gave you guys the dirty details. Isn’t that enough?”

“Your hesitation and response proves that, unbeknownst to you, Asher has in fact given you the best dick of your life,” Harlow says into her candy bar as if she’s an announcer. Sevyn cackles, tipping sideways onto the couch.

“I do know it, you fucking bitch!” My shoulders shake with laughter. “I didn’t want to say it out loud, but since you’re airing my shit out, he did. I can’t deny it, and I’m glad I got to experience it.”

“That’s right,” Sev says with laughter. “No shame!”

“No regrets!” I grin.

After our fit of laughter, Harlow asks, “What else is new with you?”

“Aside from my man troubles? I’ve been trying to think of a way to do some updates to the studio. The one I taught the yoga teacher training at in California had infrared heating. I want that for Sol Movement, but the savings I have is going to help my mom get a new car. I don’t want to get another loan. I’m nearly done paying off the one I currently have. Taking on another job is entirely out of the question. My plate is already full.”

Sevyn sprawls out on the couch. “You need to stop sending your mom money.” I open my mouth to protest, but she holds up her hand. “I know it’s easier said than done, and you’ll stop when you’ve had enough. Now for money. Have you considered getting a temporary roomie? You—”

Harlow’s ringer cuts through our conversation. “It’s Quinn.” She smiles, answering it. “Hey! Look who we’re with!” She flips the camera around. Sevyn and I wave.

“I’m so jealous.” Quinn frowns. “I miss you guys. What are you all talking about? Make me feel like I’m there.”

“Marisa wants some extra coins to do some updates to her yoga studio. Sevyn suggested a roomie.” Harlow fills her in, but leaves out the part about my mom. They all give me shit for financially helping her, but none of them were raising siblings like I was at fourteen.

“You have the space, Marisa,” Quinn says. “You could have a three or six month rental agreement. It’d be perfect for a

student.”

“Exactly.” Sevyn says.

“Yeah... but guys, I like my space.”

“Would you even see a roomie?” Harlow asks. “Especially if they’re in school or working? You have the room with a bathroom. You wouldn’t have to share anything but the kitchen.”

“Honestly, Marisa, coming from someone who had roommates, you won’t even notice them half the time.” Quinn says. “Plus, it’s nice to have someone to talk to when you want to socialize.”

I guess that’s true. I’m the most social out of our group. When I have free time, I like to be out. Maybe a roomie wouldn’t be such a bad idea.

“How bad do you want that heat?” Sevyn asks, wagging her eyebrows.

“Why did that question sound so sexual?” I laugh.

“Because it’s Sev,” Harlow says.

“Oh yeah, you’re one to talk. Knocked up over there,” Sevyn retorts.

Quinn cackles. “I miss you guys, but I have to pee now. Damn pregnancy bladder. Marisa, consider a roomie. It would be temporary anyway. Love you bitches, even though you’re gathering without me.”

We say our goodbyes and spend the next few hours outside, laughing and talking. The thought of a roomie is now on my mind. I'll think about it more after they leave. Right now, I want to enjoy my time with the girls. Acyn and Zane return with pizza and wings. I can't help the twinge of disappointment when I see Asher isn't with them.



The weekend ends too quickly. Seeing Harlow, Sevyn, and the guys was what I needed.

“Call me if you need anything at all. We're only a drive away.” Harlow wraps me in a hug.

“I will. Thanks for coming.”

“If you need someone to beat Reese's ass, let us know. We'll handle it,” Sevyn says.

I toss my head back with laughter. “I doubt it'll come to that, but thank you for having my back.”

“Good to see you, Marisa,” Acyn says.

“Yeah, thanks for letting us eat all your food,” Zane adds.

“I'm not sure how you two afford to feed yourselves, but you're welcome anytime.”

“Remember, we're always here,” Harlow says, waving out the window.

“I know. See y’all soon.” I wave them off and watch them drive away until I can’t see them anymore.

I let out a sigh as I close the door behind me. Maybe I need a dog. My house is too fucking quiet now. Grabbing my phone, I sprawl out on the couch, turn on some music, and decide retail therapy will do for now.

In the middle of filling up my cart, a notification appears on my phone informing me it’s my little brother’s birthday is in a few days. I stop shopping and hit the button to start a video chat. He picks up after a few rings.

“Hey, Sis.” He smiles.

I sit up on my couch, staring at his face. “When the fuck did you grow a beard, Killian? Aren’t you like twelve or something?”

He smooths his hand over his face. “Correction, seventeen about to be eighteen. I’m trying it out. Not sure I like it.”

“You look like a grown man. Shave that shit off.”

He laughs. “I am a grown man.”

“Yeah, yeah. Who pays your bills?”

“You and mom, but that’s beside the point.” He grins.

“Funny how you conveniently forget that point when you’re talking about you’re grown. What does your overgrown ass want for your birthday?”

He sighs. “My senior trip is coming up, and I really wanna go, but mom doesn’t have the money for that she says. I’ve

tried getting a job, but she wants me to focus on school and scholarships. She said she'll make it work, but you know how she is."

By make it work, she meant she'll wait for him to call me as if I didn't send her almost ten grand for a down payment on a new car. "Send me the information." Killian shouldn't have to suffer because mom can't manage her money.

Sitting up, he grins. "Really?"

"Yes, on one condition."

"What?"

"When you come visit me this summer, you have to work the smoothie bar and be responsible for cleaning the studio. I don't mind sending you money, Killian, but you're going to have to work for it."

"Can I keep the money that's left over once my senior trip is paid off?"

He's definitely my brother. "Of course. This is grown ass man behavior." I smirk. "Where's Destiny?"

"Cheer practice or something like that."

"We got the beauty, and you got the brains."

He nods, then sucks his teeth. "Fuck you!"

I cackle. "Maybe not, since it took you longer than necessary to get that." I hear mom holler his name. "I'm gonna let you go. Email me the information. I love you."

"Alright, love you too."

Ending the call, I listen to the girl's advice and look into the possibility of a roommate. If someone rented the extra room for at least three months, six months the most, I could get the infrared heating system and do some other updates without needing a loan. My goal is to elevate the studio, making it a better experience for current and new students. I'd be more comfortable if my potential roommate is someone I know. The desire to update the yoga studio outweighs my doubts. I'll post it to the bulletin at the studio first. If that doesn't work, then I'll post it somewhere else. I open my computer and get to work on designing a flyer.



He takes my hand, pulling me into his room. Silver slivers of light shine through the curtains, silhouetting our bodies. His fingertips brush along my shoulder as he sweeps my hair to the side.

“Tell me what you want...” His deep voice calls to the pulse between my thighs.

My heart races with anticipation as I inhale a shuddering breath. I told myself I wouldn't end up here, but I found myself craving a release. *Desperately...* craving a release.

“Tell me...” he kisses my shoulder, “what you...” he kisses my neck, “want...” his hand caresses my breast before grabbing my neck, pulling me flush against his body. “I want

to hear it from those lips before you get on your knees and wrap them around me.”

I’m torn between wanting to throat chop and appease him, because those words make my pussy throb.

“I want you to fuck me... then I’ll consider sucking your dick.”

He whips me around to face him, claiming my mouth, and our tongues intertwine. I moan as he nips at my bottom lip.

“Oh, you will,” he says with his hands on my hips, walking me back toward the bed. “But I’m a gentleman and believe ladies should always go first.”

I chuckle softly. “You a gentle—” my legs hit the bed, causing me to fall back onto it.

“Yes, a gentleman. You thought all that shit talk was for show? You can pretend to hate me—” He pulls his shirt over his head, exposing his broad chest and sculpted abs. “But after tonight, I know you’ll never forget me.” He grabs my ankle, pulling me to the edge.

“Spread your legs so I can see how wet you are for me.” He unbuckles his belt, dragging it through each loop with his eyes locked on mine.

I open my legs, and he inhales sharply. Stepping closer, he trails his fingertips up my leg. “What happened to your panties, or is this a regular thing?”

“I lost them earlier tonight,” I simper.

“Mmm... either they didn’t fuck you or didn’t fuck you right because you’re drippin’ for me.”

“You don’t shut up, even in bed?”

He chuckles smoothly. “I do...”

His brown eyes darken as he sinks to his knees and slips his hands underneath me, gripping my ass. I can barely breathe as I watch him hover above my center, holding my gaze. Every thought leaves my head as he drags his tongue across my clit. I fall back against the bed as a bolt of pleasure ricochets through my body. He grips my ass tighter, holding me in place, as he swirls his tongue in widening circles.

I’ll let him talk all the shit he wants if he does this to me... repeatedly. I pull his hair, needing something to hold on to. He grunts in response and dips his tongue inside me. I was expecting a quick release and to head back to my room, not this level of pleasure. I’ll get the quick release as I feel my climax building. My body tingles, growing hot with each swipe of his tongue.

“I’m about to come...”

He slows his pace. I grip his hair tighter, wondering what the fuck he’s doing as I’m pulled back from the edge. Sitting up on my elbows, I look at him. His pace quickens again, bringing me to the cusp before slowing down... *again*. It’s a fine line between euphoria and torment that I find myself reveling in. As if he’s the moon and I’m the ocean—he pushes and pulls me back in. The build of the release is going to be earth shattering as he brings me to the edge of my climax.

“Ash, I’m going to fucking—”

A jarring alarm causes me to bolt upright. I look around, disoriented, wondering what the fuck happened to Asher. When my eyes land on my phone on the coffee table, I collapse back onto the couch.

“A goddamn wet dream...” I mutter.

My heart is thrumming, accompanied by an ache for release between my thighs. I’ve dreamed of our night together countless times. I have no business doing so, given what happened in Vegas. Not only did he possibly give me the best dick of my life, but then he was an entitled asshole after our night together. I’m a grown woman and understand it was just sex for us both, but to brag about it in front of our friends sent me into a blind rage. Well, not totally blind. I was able to hit him dead between the eyes with a remote. But, I’ll gladly allow dreams of Asher to replace the ones of Reese.

Pick your poison, Marisa, and take it to the head.

I set my computer aside last night intending to go to bed, but binge watched a show and passed out on the couch. Grabbing my phone, I check the time. Forty-five minutes until I have to be to the studio. I slept through my first two alarms. Maybe I’ll call my gratitude fuck after work. My body is begging for release. For now, I need a shower, food, and to get my ass out the door.



There's an expensive car parked in my space when I arrive at the studio. It isn't a designated space, but most people know I park there because it's easier to carry stuff in. I grumble to myself as I grab a box of new merchandise from the back of my car, struggling to balance it with my bag, water, and keys.

Natalie meets me at the door, taking the box from my hands.

"Morning!" she beams.

"Hi. Is there a new student?"

The corners of her mouth turn up. "There is."

"Cool. How was your date with Eric?"

Natalie avoids looking at me. "We spent the weekend together..."

"Spent the weekend together as in... slept together or...?"

"Shh..." she hisses. "He's in there." Her head nods toward the studio door.

I suck my teeth. "He isn't going to hear me. So, how was it?"

"Marisa! Don't you have a class to get to?"

I glance at the clock on the wall. "Shit." I point my finger at her. "I wanna know how everything else went. You don't have to tell me about the dick."

"Oh my God!" She squeaks, ducking behind the computer.

Laughing, I set my things down. "You had a good time, right?"

“Of course.”

“That’s all that matters.” I say, haphazardly piling my curls atop my head. “Can you hang this up on the board for me?” I hand her my “in search of roommate” flyer.

“Damn, I wish I had known you were looking for a roomie. It would’ve kept me from moving in with my sister. I love her but—siblings are siblings.”

I smirk, knowing all too well. “I didn’t even know I’d be looking for one until yesterday. I plan to update the studio with the extra cash.”

“That’s awesome. I have a few people in mind. I’ll pass along the info.”

“You’re the best, Natalie. I gotta get in there. See you in an hour.” I take a deep breath, leaving all worry at the door.

“Good morning, everyone.” I shut the door behind me. “For those of you who don’t know me, I’m Marisa.” I adjust the music and roll the blinds up. Light floods the room, providing a soft glow.

“I’m grateful that you came to your mats today. It isn’t easy climbing out of bed in the morning and making the choice to be in a 105-degree room.” Chuckles ripple through the room as I walk to my mat at the front that Natalie graciously setup for me. I lower myself down and sit cross-legged. “Remember why you showed up on your mat today.” I look around at all the familiar faces. “Be here—” One face is a little too familiar.

His brown eyes meet mine, and there's a smug smile on his lips.

4

Asher

Marisa smiles warmly at everyone in the room. When her eyes land on me, her smile fades. My mouth twitches as I try to keep a straight face. She blinks before closing her eyes, trying to find her words, and addresses the class again. As she talks, she steals glances in my direction.

Acyn and Zane told me they were staying at Marisa's when I saw them on Saturday. Unsurprisingly, she didn't invite me to join in on their weekend activities. After they left, I stalked her social media and found her studio's website. I wasted no time signing up for her eight a.m. session. If I'm going to be in Portland, I may as well enjoy myself.

She instructs the class to stand. Her back is to me, but her eyes flit to mine in the mirror. I've never done yoga before, and I'm not exactly sure what I signed up for. I work out to maintain my physique, but I wouldn't claim to be flexible, and my balance is questionable.

Marisa guides us through a breathing exercise. I'm sweating from simply breathing and wondering why anyone would choose to workout in these conditions. As we get into poses,

she models the pose, then walks around the room helping people. She has a grace about her in the way she moves that I never noticed before. While she seems to walk around the entire room, she avoids coming anywhere near me.

The initial poses are doable, but as the class progresses, they become more difficult. I find myself struggling to keep my balance. Looking around the class, everyone seems to at least have a grasp on the poses. Even the older gentleman who could be my grandfather is doing better than me.

“Dancer’s Pose,” Marisa announces. “Turn the palm of your right hand up at your side.” She holds her arm up near her body as if she is holding a tray. “Reach back and grab your foot from the inside. If you have a shoulder injury, or they’re tight, you can reach back, grabbing your foot from the outside.” She shows both holds. “Remember to root down in your standing leg for balance. Stretch your left arm up, and kick back into your right hand, leaning forward.”

Some people are in the pose before she finishes her instruction. I try to do as she instructs, but I don’t need the mirror to show me I fucking suck. Marisa is biting her lip, trying to keep a straight face as she walks around the room. She glances at me a few more times before taking pity on me. If I was struggling to keep my balance before, I have zero fucking balance as she walks toward me.

“Find a focal point. It’ll help you keep your balance,” she says.

This is the most she's talked to me since we saw each other at Acyn and Harlow's wedding reception. I put both feet on the ground, look in the mirror, and focus on her.

"Now, shift your weight to your left foot. Root down. Hold your right palm out and reach back to grab the inside of your right foot. Yeah, like that." She encourages me as I follow her instruction. "And now stretch your left arm up." I hold her gaze in the mirror as I listen to her. She doesn't seem thrown off by me staring at her. "Good. Now kick into your hand as you lean forward. The harder you kick into your hand, the easier it is to maintain your balance."

I lean forward, focusing on her, surprised I'm maintaining my balance. She stands to the right of me, her body facing mine. Her hand gently brushes my left arm to straighten it and her other hand touches my back leg, causing me to tilt forward a little more.

She smells... warm, comforting. I pick up notes of vanilla and something else I can't place. Maybe honey... definitely something sweet, but not overbearing.

"Good job, Ash." She smiles before stepping away and resuming the class.

I didn't realize I was actually holding the pose with ease. Before I can respond, she moves on to another student and instructs us to do the other leg. I try to keep her as my focus, but quickly realize I need to look at something that isn't moving. Instead, I have a stare down with myself in the mirror. I'm drenched in sweat. When she gives us a moment to get

water, I peel off my shirt. I'd take off everything else too with the way my balls are sweating, but I doubt that's acceptable. I toss my sweaty shirt to the side of my mat, adjust the waistband of my shorts, and look in the mirror. Marisa quickly looks away as my gaze catches hers. Putting my body through a sixty-minute workout is worth it for that reaction. It'll be screaming at me later tonight when I'll inevitably collapse.

The rest of the class flies by as we move through the poses. I'm grateful to lie on my mat at the end. While the class was rigorous, it was also relaxing. I can understand why people put themselves through a hot yoga class.

"I'll be right outside when you're ready. Namaste," Marisa says.

I lie on my mat, staring at the ceiling, not wanting to seem too eager to see her. Instead of getting up and following her, I wait until everyone else leaves, ensuring I have a chance to talk to her and so she can't dismiss me. She's out in the lobby, leaning against the counter, and talking to the woman who helped me get checked in.

Her hazel eyes meet mine. "Good job, Ash. I was worried I was going to have to go in there and check on you."

"Thanks." I chuckle, rubbing my shirt over my face, causing my curls to stick to my forehead.

"First time in hot yoga?"

"Yep, and I doubt it'll be my last."

She straightens up, raising a brow. "Is that right?"

“Yeah, I’ll be sure to leave five stars for the instructor.”

The receptionist’s eyes dart to mine and then to Marisa.

“What are you doing here, Ash?” She crosses her arms.

“Ace didn’t tell you? I’m temporarily living here as I oversee a project.”

“Living here?” Her voice goes up a notch.

A smile tugs at my lips. “Yeah, I have to admit, I’m surprised you didn’t invite me to your place this weekend.”

“Surprised?” she scoffs. “I thought I left you in Vegas.”

I chuckle smoothly. “I told you that you’ll never forget me.”

“Anyway,” she sighs before turning her back on me to talk to the receptionist. “Natalie, what’s on the schedule for today?”

I take that as my cue to fuck off and head down the hallway toward the showers.

When I return to the lobby, Marisa is alone. She’s bent over digging through some box. I enjoy the view of her ass before she straightens up and turns toward me, letting out a yelp. I reach out, grabbing her wrist, and catch her before she topples over the box.

She pulls out an earbud. “I didn’t hear you.”

“Sorry I scared you.” I smile, letting go of her wrist.

“It’s alright.” She looks at my bag slung over my shoulder. “Have a good day.”

“Actually,” I adjust the strap of my bag. “I wanted to apologize.”

Her brows knit together. “For what?”

“Vegas. I’m sorry I bragged – ”

“Oh, it’s – ”

“– about giving you the best dick of your life.” I finish with a smirk.

She blinks. “Please,” she rolls her eyes. “It was alright. Nothing memorable.”

Marisa has a good poker face. I’d almost believe her if she didn’t cross her legs, squeezing them together, as she leaned against the counter. The subtle movement gives her away, and I bet if my hand was between her thighs, my fingers would be wet.

“Mmm... nothing?” I take a step closer to her.

She swallows as she looks up at me. “Nope.”

“Would you...” I reach out and brush my fingertips along her collarbone. “Like a reminder?”

Memories of her wrapped around me play in my head. Honestly, they’ve been on repeat every day since.

“Why?” She brushes my hand away. “So I can forget again?”

A low chuckle rumbles in my chest. “You’re a fucking liar, Risa.”

Her demeanor changes. “You have no idea what a fucking liar is.” She shoves her earbud back in, stepping around me to put the stuff in her arms on the shelves.

I was trying to smooth things over. Not make them worse. I touch her shoulder and she turns to face me. “I didn’t mean that negatively. Sorry if I offended you.”

“It’s fine.” She shrugs, looking at the floor. “You’re an offensive person.”

I let out a genuine laugh. “I... can be. I guess.”

She raises her brows with a smile. “Guess?”

“I’m gonna leave you to—” I wave my hand toward the shelves “— getting organized. You have a nice studio, by the way.”

The pride is clear in the way she beams at me. “Thank you. You should try the smoothie bar.”

I check the time on my phone. “Maybe next time? I’ve gotta fight traffic to get to work.”

“Oh, yeah.” She nods her head. “I know that battle all too well.”

“Nice ring, by the way.” It’s the one I gave her. Instead of it being on her left hand, it’s now on her right.

She looks down at it. “Oh, yeah. I— it’s pretty.”

“It looks good on you. See you around, Risa.”

She smiles, shaking her head. “You’re the only person to call me that.”

“The only person who will ever call you that...”

“So arrogant.” She puts her hand on my chest, pushing me toward the door. “See you around, Asher.”



Francesca, my assistant, greets me as I walk into my office.

“Good Morning, Mr.—”

“Francesca, we’ve been over this. I’m just Asher.”

“It’s called professionalism.” She hands me a cup of coffee as I lead the way to my office.

“Really? That’s an unfamiliar word for me.” I smirk as she huffs, scrolling through her tablet.

Francesca is a family friend. Her mom works at the office in Seattle and we’ve known each other since we were teens. Genevieve and Francesca’s mom have tried to set us up on multiple occasions. My aunt thinks I’m a respectable man. I’m a man, but I’m far from respectable. I’d eat Francesca alive. Figuratively and literally. I go on dates with one goal in mind: to fuck by the end of it. I’ve done us both a favor and have respectfully declined every time. I thought they stopped their matchmaking efforts until I learned she was going to be my personal assistant for this project.

It has nothing to do with me not finding her physically attractive. Francesca has smooth, tawny skin, light brown eyes, full lips, and wavy brown hair. She has a slender,

modelesque stature. I don't have a specific type. I've been with all shapes and sizes of women. Her appearance isn't the issue. It's the fact that Francesca's family is too close to my own. I know myself well enough, and I'd rather not ruin the relationship between the two.

"You have a video call scheduled with Jax at 10:30 a.m. and then a meeting with Luis, the project manager of the construction, at noon. I need to know where you want me to order lunch from."

"It doesn't matter. I trust your judgement. What else for the day?"

"You also have another meeting with the design team at 1:30 p.m."

I toss my bag on my chair and sit at my desk. "Great, a day of fucking meetings. Make sure there's food for the afternoon one as well. Can you also order me a smoothie, please?"

She stops scrolling and looks at me. "A smoothie?"

"Yes, Francesca. You know the thing with fruits and veggies. Sometimes brightly colored." I type in my password.

"I know what a smoothie is." She straightens up. "But I thought you liked coffee."

"I do. Just not today."

"Okay, do you have a specific place in mind?"

I think of telling her to order from Marisa's smoothie bar, but instead say, "Whichever place has the highest ratings." I'll

try hers the next time I see her. Which will probably be sooner rather than later. I open up my browser to see about a monthly subscription to her studio. Initially, I signed up to annoy her, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy her class today. It'll be a pleasant addition to my workouts.

“Alright, anything else, boss?” She smiles brightly.

“Bye, Francesca.” I don't glance up from my computer.

She laughs on her way out the door.



Every day, I leave for the city before the sun rises and arrive home after it sets. Maybe if I wasn't staying with my grandparents, I wouldn't have such a commute and long days. But I'd prefer to stay with them instead of a hotel or Airbnb. They live on five acres of land, with two horses and a few chickens, nearly an hour outside of Portland. After the hustle and bustle of the city, it's nice to come to their place.

“Oh good, Ash. You're home,” my grandma says without looking up from her book. “I finished dinner about a half hour ago. It should still be warm.” It's dark in the living room except for the lamp she has attached to the top of her book.

“Thank you, Gigi.” I kiss her cheek. “I'm starving. Where's Pops?”

“In front of the television, watching some show.”

I chuckle. “I'm going to change, then I'll eat.”

“Alright. I’ll get you a plate ready.”

“Gigi, you don’t have—”

“Hush.” She sets her book aside as she gets up from her chair.

While she fusses over me, I head into the living room to find Pops sitting in his chair. “Ash, my boy. You’re home.”

“Hey, Pops.” I kiss him on the cheek.

“How was work? Anything exciting happen?”

“At work? Not really. I took a yoga class today, though.”

He pulls his eyes away from the TV. “That bendy stuff?”

“Yeah.” I chuckle. “That bendy stuff.”

“Huh... I didn’t take you for the flexible type.”

“I’m not.”

He tosses his head back with laughter. “Hell, I wanna see that then.”

“Thank you for your confidence.” The corners of my mouth turn up.

“Anytime.” He pats my leg. “Did Grandma tell you there’s dinner for you in the kitchen?”

“She did. I’m going to change and then eat.”

He nods, turning his attention back to his show. I grab my bag and trudge up the stairs. My body aches in places I didn’t think possible. When I enter my room, I let out a sigh of relief and kick off my loafers. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I

unbutton my shirt before collapsing back onto it. If Gigi didn't have dinner ready for me, I'd gladly fall asleep right now. I pull my phone from my back pocket and check my messages. I'm surprised to see a text with words from Marisa after I texted her earlier today.

Asher: Thanks for letting me watch you bend over for an hour.

Marisa: LOL Maybe you'd have some balance if you weren't staring at my ass.

I let out a bark of laughter before typing out a text.

Asher: You have a valid point that I'll choose to ignore.

Setting my phone aside, I shrug out of my button down and dig through the drawers for a t-shirt. My phone lights up with a text message.

Marisa: Offensive and stubborn. This is your world and we're just living in it.

Asher: Glad you got the memo.

I pull on some sweats and grab my phone as she sends me another text message.

Marisa: How was your day?

Asher: Long. I just got home. Yours?

Marisa: Same.

She follows up with her signature smiley face and middle finger, letting me know our conversation is over. I chuckle as I head back downstairs. There's a plate of food on the table when I enter the kitchen. I've told Gigi countless times I can do things on my own, but she tells me I'm her favorite grandchild. A small part of me wonders if she says that to make me feel better because of what happened. My whole family treats me like I have "fragile" stamped on me at times even though it's been sixteen years.

Gigi loads the dishwasher as I sit at the table. She has rich, earthen brown skin, white curly hair down to her shoulders, and deep brown eyes. She isn't very tall and calls me a beanstalk when I joke with her about her height. I was a lanky teen. When I run into people from high school, or even the first few years of college, they don't recognize me because of the muscle I've gained. I'm not scrawny anymore, but I'll always be a beanstalk to her.

"Thank you for dinner, Gigi."

"Of course." She smiles. "Are you tired of the commute yet?"

I take a bite of food. "Your cooking is worth the commute."

“This is why you’re my favorite.” She sits down across from me. “We love having you here. You’re always welcome, but if you want to stay in the city, we don’t blame you.”

“To be honest, the commute sucks. The project may run longer than we expected, given all the work that needs to be done. I’m thinking of selling my house in LA.”

“How often are you home?”

“Maybe for a few days every couple of months.” I shrug before taking a drink of water.

“That’s not a home.”

“You’re telling me.” I chuckle. “Gigi... can I ask you something?” I set my fork aside.

She sighs, sitting back in her chair. “If it’s about your mother, I already know.”

I look down at my plate. “Do you think she’ll get out?”

“The question is, how do you feel about the possibility of her getting out?”

“Everyone makes it—”

“I asked about you. Everyone else be damned.” Gigi doesn’t believe in sugarcoating anything. I got that trait from her.

“She’s my mom. I’ve always loved her. I was confused and angry for a long time. And I still am. Why didn’t mom and dad go their separate ways before everything went bad?”

She grabs my hand. “My boy, I wish I knew that myself.”

A silence falls between us. No one knows what to say when it comes to my parents. I'm the only one who knows what it was truly like living with them. They struggled to love each other. If one could even call what they had love. Something drastically changed in their relationship at some point, and it only escalated from there. They tried to hide their fighting, but I could always hear their shouts and screams.

“No matter what happens, grandpa and I will always be here for you.”

“I know.” I nod, giving her a smile that doesn't quite reach my eyes.

Marisa

Seeing Asher post-wet dream was a cruel joke from the universe. When he came out of the yoga room, dripping with sweat, I wanted to lick every inch of his body. The man is delectable, and he knows it. It'd be easier to brush him off if I hadn't already fucked him and was still dreaming about it. Which is why I stubbornly refuse to give in to sleeping with him again. Instead, I sent a text to Zion who's making it hard to remember Asher's existence with the way he's buried inside me right now.

I didn't give him any time to speak when he arrived. He's only here to make me come. I sat on his face, and now he has me on the edge of the bed with my ass up in the air, rubbing my clit as he pounds into me from behind. We don't need to talk when we make each other feel this good. I'm nearing the climax I've been thinking about since this morning.

I spread my legs further apart. "Harder!" I gasp. "Fuck me harder!"

He indulges my desires. Cries of pleasure spill from my lips. I push my ass back against him, grinding down, matching

his thrusts. He grunts, grabbing a fistful of my hair. My orgasm rips through me, causing my body to quake. He plunges into me hard and deep.

“Your pussy is so fucking tight. I’m—”

His words are replaced with a groan as he comes. I’m spent as he thrusts inside me a few more times before pulling out. I lie still for a moment before rolling over and watch him pull the condom off.

“You’re not seeing anyone... right?” I ask, watching him walk to the bathroom to throw the condom away. I sit up on the edge of the bed, knowing it’s a little too late to ask this question. “There isn’t someone out there who thinks you’re in a relationship?”

He chuckles as he pulls on his boxers. “I’m not a cheater.”

A sense of relief washes over me. “Good.”

“What about you?”

“Nope. I’m a one-man woman... when I’m in a relationship,” I add.

“I know what you meant. You’re single. You should enjoy it.”

“I am.” I get off my bed and wrap myself in a robe. “What are your plans tonight?”

“Studying.” He pulls his shirt over his head.

“What are you studying?”

“I wanna be a pharmacist when I grow up.” He grins. “What about you? What do you do?”

“I own a yoga studio and smoothie bar.”

“Damn. That’s impressive. And here I am, thirty years old and still living with a roommate.”

Laughter escapes me, and his eyes meet mine as a smile appears on his lips. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to laugh. But the way you worded it... made it sound worse.”

“It’s alright.” He shrugs. “You have a nice laugh.”

The tips of my ears burn as I bite my lip. “Thank you. And if it’s any consolation, everything will be worth it.”

“Thank you for that... and the release.” He presses a soft kiss to my lips. “I better get going. I have an early class.”

“Uh... you’re welcome.” I’m still unsure of how to respond to him thanking me for sex.

“Anytime.” He nods.



I haven’t heard from anyone since I posted my roomie flyer two weeks ago. The girl Natalie told me about already found a roommate. Upgrades to the studio aren’t necessary, but I’m always looking for ways to provide the best experience. When I did a search online, I would be the only studio in the area with an infrared heating system. The businesswoman in me is always looking for ways to stand out. I take a break from

staring at my computer screen and look around the smoothie bar. It's busy for a Wednesday afternoon. I wave at familiar faces as they walk in.

Asher hasn't been back since his first session a couple of weeks ago. He's sent me a few texts here and there, but I'm back to being petty and responding only in emojis. Once I got my fix from Zion, the desperation wore off. I pull my phone out of my jacket pocket as it vibrates with a text.

Gratitude Fuck: Where was your smoothie bar again?

Marisa: I never told you.

Gratitude Fuck: LOL I was trying to be smooth.

Marisa: If you want to see me again just say that.

Gratitude Fuck: I want to see you again.

A smile spreads across my face as I read his text. I'm not getting my hopes up, but it's fun to flirt.

Gratitude Fuck: How late are you there?

Marisa: Until 8.

I text him the address. He replies a few minutes later.

Gratitude Fuck: I'll try to be there before you leave.

Marisa: No pressure.

Since Natalie went back to school part time, I picked up some of her hours. It's only a few times a week, and I felt it unnecessary to hire someone for something I don't mind doing. Checking the time on my phone, I gather my things. I have a 5:30 class, then I'll be at the front desk the rest of the evening.



The class was packed. Even though I didn't do a full yoga flow, I'm dripping with sweat. Natalie hands me a towel as I step out into the lobby.

“Do I have time to take a shower before you leave?”

“Yeah, go ahead. I got it.”

“You're the best.” I smile at her.

Since I'll be the receptionist for the evening, I want to look presentable. I quickly shower and apply some light makeup before returning to the front desk.

“Alright, Natalie. I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Thank you so much for letting me leave early. I also posted your roommate flyer online. That way, you'll actually get a roommate.” She winks.

“That makes me nervous as fuck, but I'm here for it.”

I subconsciously knew posting the flyer at the studio wouldn't get much traction. That's why I posted it here

because it's a safe option.

“Trust me when I say you don't want a roommate you're related to.” She gathers her things, slinging her bag over her shoulder.

“I'll take your word for it.” I chuckle. “Enjoy your class. See you tomorrow.”

Natalie waves at me over her shoulder as she walks out the door. The next class begins in fifteen minutes. Looking at the schedule, it's nice to see the class is full. Every time I see that, I get butterflies. When I first opened my studio here in Portland, I didn't know anyone. It felt like jumping out of a plane with a questionable parachute. It didn't matter I had successfully run a small yoga studio back on Galveston Island. I was still scared I'd invest time and energy for nothing. A year later, my worries were pointless. I have two thriving businesses and I couldn't be more proud of myself. Drystan, the evening instructor, walks in.

“Hey Drystan. How are you?”

“Good. How's our class looking tonight?”

“Full. Mat to mat.”

He claps his hands together. “Everyone will have lost ten pounds by the time I'm done with them.”

“You take great pride in making people question their existence, don't you?”

He smiles. “Nothing like a good, hard—holy man!”

I follow his gaze to the door to lock eyes with Asher. Holy man is right. He's wearing tight black workout pants that leave little to the imagination with a top that is clinging to the contours of his muscles. My desperation is back with a vengeance, laughing at me.

"Risa." He nods with a sexy half smile as he nears the desk. His eyes roam over my attire. "You're not joining us tonight?"

"She's not, but I am." Drystan smiles. "Hi, I'm Drystan. Your instructor."

"Asher. Your student." He shakes his hand, and Drystan looks faint.

"As he said," I nudge him to let go of Asher's hand. "I will not be joining you tonight. I'm covering for Natalie."

"Mmm... I was hoping to see you sweat."

Drystan gasps, and I scratch my neck as heat creeps up it. "I bet you were." I turn my attention to Drystan. "Your class starts soon."

He snaps out of the trance Asher has him in. "Oh, right! Yes, my class."

I snort with laughter as he reluctantly heads toward the locker room.

"What are you doing later?" Asher brings my attention back to him.

"I'm here until eight. Then I'll head home."

“Want to get some food with me after I’m eye fucked by Drystan for an hour?”

I toss my head back with laughter. “How can I say no to that offer?”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t.” He smiles, turning toward the locker room.

Drystan walks past the desk and narrows his eyes. “I want all the dirty details on that man.”

Shaking my head, I smile as Asher reappears and follows Drystan into the yoga room. I’m impressed Asher showed up for a class tonight. Either he enjoys yoga or he’s committed to trying to get in my pants again. Possibly both... *hopefully* both.

Zion walks in a few minutes later and smiles when he sees me. I didn’t think he’d stop by.

“Hey.” I smile, giving him a hug.

“I wanted to see you and actually get a smoothie.”

“Be my guest.” I hold my hand out toward the smoothie bar entrance.

“What’s your favorite?” He studies the menu.

“I love Sol. Vibes is a close second.”

He nods. “Sol it is then, please,” he says to Tate, the cashier, before turning to me. “Did you want something?”

“I’m okay, thank you for offering.”

Zion pays for his smoothie, and I lead the way to a table. “How was your class?” I ask as we take our seats.

“Passed my test. Makes all the difference when you have a clear head.” He smirks.

Tate sets his smoothie in front of him. Zion removes the paper wrapper from the straw and dips it into the smoothie. He looks at me as he takes a sip.

I put my elbow on the table and cradle my chin in my palm. “So... how is it?”

“Good... really good.”

I lean back in my seat with a satisfied smile. “I knew you’d like it.

“I wanted to see you... outside of bed. The smoothie is just a plus.”

I grab the straw wrapper, crumpling it with my fingertips. “Zion... you’re really sweet, but I just got out of a mind fuck of...” Of what? Can I even call what Reese and I had a relationship knowing what I know now? “A mind fuck of a... situation. I’m truly not ready for anything past what we have going on... if that’s what you’re wanting.”

Leaning forward, he rests his forearms on the table. “I’m officially divorced as of a month ago. I’ve also got a two-year-old son who is everything to me.” He looks at me. “I can’t commit to anything right now other than myself, my son, and school. I’m not looking for a relationship. I like you as a

friend... well, I enjoy fucking you too—" I laugh. "You're genuine... refreshing."

"You're just gonna lay it all on the table right now?"

"Yeah." He shrugs, sipping on his smoothie.

I bite my lip, contemplating his words. His honesty about his life has me reconsidering a friendship with him. "We can be friends. I don't know that we'll see each other regularly, but I wouldn't mind going out occasionally. Casually," I say as a reminder.

"I'm simply asking for friendship. Whatever that entails."

I stare at him, still unsure. "Okay."

"Alright." He smiles.

We settle into an easy conversation until it's almost time for Drystan's class to end. Zion glances at his watch. "I've gotta pick up my son."

"Oh yeah, no need to explain. Does he live with you?"

"No." He tosses his cup into the trash. "Joint custody."

We walk out into the hall and he stops at the bulletin board near the entrance, reading a few of the flyers.

"You're looking for a roommate?"

"No offense, but fuck no. That's a clusterfuck waiting to happen."

He doubles over with laughter. "That's fair."

"It's a hard pass for—"

A deep voice resonates behind me. I know without turning around it's Asher.

ASHER

When I get out of class, Marisa isn't at the front desk. Knowing her, she ghosted me. She enjoys the back and forth as much as I do, even if she feigns annoyance. Returning to the lobby after showering, I hear her voice and follow it to find her near the entrance, laughing with some guy.

"I thought you left."

She turns to face me. "Nope. Talking to a friend."

There's a pause as the guy looks between me and Marisa. Clearly she isn't going to offer an introduction, and the guy extends his hand toward me.

"Zion."

I shake his hand. "Asher."

"Nice to meet you. I was joking with Marisa about being her roommate."

"You're chatty, aren't you?" Marisa says, snatching the paper from his hand.

"Sometimes, but this is the first time we've really talked," he says, looking at her.

Marisa chuckles as she pushes him toward the door. "Don't you have somewhere to be?"

The guy laughs. “I do. I’ll see you later. You should hang that flyer up at the University. I bet you’ll have a roommate within a week.”

“I’ll think about it.” She says.

He leaves without another word. Marisa turns to face me. “Um... I’ll go get my things.”

“That wasn’t awkward at all...”

She laughs, swatting at my arm. “Shut up. I’m already regretting telling him where I work.”

“Rule number one of random hook-ups, never ever tell them where you work or live.”

“I’ve fucked myself on both. Literally.”

I let out a belt of laughter. “Makes it a little hard to ghost if they know those things.”

“What are you? The hook up guru?”

“No. I’m someone who likes his privacy.” I follow her to get her things she left at the front desk.

Tate, the smoothie bar cashier, appears and smiles when he sees me. “Asher! I was wondering when I’d see you again. Guess what?”

Marisa pops her head up from behind the desk, looking between us.

“What’s up, Tate?”

“I have an interview for a summer internship at Blaine Architecture. My parents are ecstatic. I didn’t think they’d

choose me because their internship program is prestigious.”

“Told you it would work out.” I smile.

“Yeah, thank you for the reference. I won’t let you down.”

“I only provided a reference. You got the interview on your own.”

Tate smiles and turns his attention to Marisa, who’s still gaping between the two of us. “I’m heading out for the night. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He walks backward, waving.

Marisa blinks. “Oh great, thank you, Tate. Have a good night.” She looks up at me after he’s out the door. “How the hell do you know Tate?”

“We talk when I come in for smoothies.”

Her full lips are slightly parted, making me want to taste them as she tilts her head to the side. “How come I haven’t seen you come in?”

“Maybe because you’re not here...”

“Wait,” she puts her hand on her hip. “You really come here for yoga and smoothies? Not just to get in my pants?”

I raise a brow. “Do you want me in your pants?”

“I—what? No. I was—” she stammers. “Let’s go.” She walks past me. I grin at her as she rolls her eyes. “Where are you taking me, anyway?”

“Wherever you want to go.” I hold the door open for her. “I’ll drive.” She glances at her car, then at me. “Unless you would feel more comfortable taking your own?”

“I’ll go with you.” I open the passenger door for her. “Why are you being so nice?” She looks up at me with one foot in my car and her hand on the door.

“I’m not as bad as you make me out to be, Risa.”

“You’re not exactly a gentleman either.”

“No, but as you know, I believe ladies should always go first.”

She can lie and tell me our night together wasn’t memorable, but it’s written all over her face that she hasn’t forgotten. “I—we should go eat.” She slides into the passenger seat.

I can’t help the smile on my lips as I close the door behind her.



Marisa directs me to a BBQ food truck that’s lit up by string lights with picnic tables scattered in front of it. I open the door for her to get out of the car. She has nothing to say about my gentlemanly ways this time.

“Do you like BBQ?” she asks as we approach the food truck.

“Hate it.” I scrunch up my face in disgust.

Her eyes widen, her mouth goes slack, and she stops in her tracks. “What?”

“I’m kidding.” I chuckle. “Your face was priceless though.”

She sucks her teeth, letting out an exasperated sigh as she nudges past me. “You can starve. I’ll eat.”

I join her at the window to order, bumping her shoulder. “What are you getting?”

“Smoked wings and curly fries. They’re to die for.”

The attendant comes to the window and Marisa orders her food. They turn their attention to me. “And what can I get for you?”

“I’ll have what she’s having.”

“Alright, that’ll be eighteen even.”

Marisa holds up some money. I snatch it from her hand and hold up my own that the attendant takes with a chuckle. She still has her hand held up, gaping at me as I pocket the change.

“I could’ve paid.” She puts her hand down.

“But did you?”

“No, jackass! You took my money.”

Letting out a rumble of laughter, I take a step closer to her. “I’ll give it back.”

Wrapping my arm around her waist, I slide the folded bill into her back pocket.

“I’ll only ever take what you freely give me, Risa. I don’t have to steal.” I whisper in her ear. Her breath hitches when my fingertips brush against her waist as I pull my hand away.

“Order’s ready,” the attendant announces.

I step away from Marisa to grab the plates of food. “Where do you want to sit?”

Taking a steadying breath, she says, “Uh... anywhere is fine.”

She leads the way to a table, and I hand her a plate as we take our seats. We’re the only people here. The roaring hustle and bustle of the city turns into a faint, soothing buzz at night. Between work and my commute, I haven’t had time to go out like I normally would. There’s also the lack of having friends to go out with here. I can have a good time by myself, but it’s more fun when you’re committing fuckery alongside someone else.

“It’s nice what you did for Tate,” Marisa says in between bites.

“Oh yeah, he’ll probably spaz when he realizes he’ll be working with me.”

She cocks her head to the side. “Does he not know your last name is Blaine?”

“He doesn’t.” I take a bite of a wing. “He’ll figure it out... eventually.”

“Tate will most definitely faint.” She laughs. “Will you be here through the summer?”

I nod as I take a sip of water. “I’m working on a project for Titan Tech. Kyrell hooked it up since it was his dad’s company. I’ll be here until the end of summer at least.”

“Where are you staying?”

“I’m a bit of a nomad right now. I spoke with a relator about putting my house in LA on the market. That’ll be happening next week. Right now, I stay with my grandparents. They live nearly an hour, give or take, outside of Portland.”

“An hour?” Her eyes widen as she checks her watch. “It’ll be late when you get home.”

“It’s alright. I’m in good company.”

She cracks a smile before taking a drink. “What is it you do exactly? I know you’re an architect or something, right?”

“Or something.” I chuckle. “I’m an architectural engineer at my uncle’s architectural engineering firm.”

“That sounds impressive.” She takes a bite of a curly fry.

“It is, in a way. The buildings I’ve designed will be here long after I’m gone. It’s... humbling.”

“Your face lit up when you said that. You’ll have to take me to something you’ve built some time.”

“I can do that.” I finish my food, pushing my plate aside. “Why are you looking for a roommate?”

She presses her palm to her forehead, closing her eyes. “Harlow, Quinn, and Sevyn had suggested it because I want to upgrade the heating system in my studio to infrared.” She lets out a sigh. “I...” She hesitates. “Help my mom out financially sometimes. Since it’s just us. Well, I have a brother and sister too, but they’re not old enough to work. I had the money, but

she needed a new car so... I gave it to her. But now that means I'm back at square one."

"Do you have to take care of her financially?"

"No. It's a bad habit and I have no clue why I'm telling you all of this." She takes a gulp of her drink.

"Who takes care of you if you're taking care of her?" Even though my parents aren't around, I know I have Jax, Genevieve, and my grandparents to help if I ever needed it.

She shrugs, poking at the curly fries before meeting my gaze. "Me." There's a flash of sadness in her eyes.

I can tell the direction of this conversation is making her uncomfortable and decide to change it. "A roommate is a smart idea. Do you live in a house?"

"I do." She beams. "I bought it shortly after I moved here. It's spacious and honestly, I got such a good deal I prepared myself to be haunted for the rest of my life."

"Are you being haunted?" I chuckle.

"Nope, just a girl who got lucky."

"Will I ever get an invite, or does Vegas still have your panties in a twist?" She narrows her eyes. "I'm curious because the dude you were talking to at the studio knows where you live *and* work."

She groans. "Don't remind me. The good news is, he's nice, good looking, can fuck—wait, why are we casually discussing the guy I'm hooking up with?"

“*You.*” I point at her. “You’re discussing your fuckup. I’m listening.”

“He’s not a fuckup,” she says defensively. “I just haven’t been making the best choices lately. You’re proof of that.”

I toss my head back with laughter. “You’re telling me if we had a do over, you wouldn’t have married me in Vegas?”

“I said I haven’t been making the best choices, not that I have regrets.”

I have a smartass remark on the tip of my tongue, but I swallow it. I pull back slightly, rubbing my jaw. She’s made our night together seem like the worst mistake of her life. Usually, I’m indifferent to how a woman feels about our time together. I make sure we’re both satisfied and don’t care what happens after that. With Risa, it’s different because we have a weird love–hate relationship that works for us.

“You’re speechless? Did my words boost your ego so much you’re about to implode?” She grabs our empty plates, tossing them into the trash, and smiles at me over her shoulder.

“For future reference,” I say as I get up from the table, “I like my ego stroked, not boosted.”

She wrinkles her nose. “Of course.”

On the way to the car, she loops her arm through mine.

“Thank you for dinner tonight.”

“Anytime.” I open the car door for her. “Maybe we can do it again.”

“Don’t be hasty.” She slides into the seat, closing the door behind her.

On the way back to her studio, she takes over my car. Making herself comfortable as she connects her phone to the Bluetooth, playing her music, and takes off her shoes. I watch her out of the corner of my eye as she lets her hair down.

“Comfy?” I chuckle.

“It’s been a long day. Food makes me sleepy.” She rests her head against the seat. But as we near her studio, she grabs my arm. “Stop!”

“What the fuck?” I slam on the brakes, causing her bag to fly off her lap.

“Cut your lights.”

“Marisa, what the—”

“Just do it, Ash!”

I cut my lights and pull off to the side. “What the fuck is going on?”

She nibbles on her lip as she squints toward her studio. “There’s a car there and I think it’s my ex’s.”

I follow her line of sight and sure enough, there’s a car parked next to hers. “So... is this like a stalker situation? Because I can beat his ass or there’s a gun in the glove compartment.”

Her head whips toward me. “A gun? What could you possibly need a gun for?”

“Situations like this.” I point toward the car in question.

She lets out an exasperated sigh, looking at the car. “Would you really beat his ass for me?”

I unbuckle my seatbelt and shrug out of my jacket.

She stares at me. “What are you doing?”

“Beating his ass.”

“Ash, no!” she grabs my arm. “It was a hypothetical question.”

“Listen, Risa. I don’t know what he did, but the fact you’re avoiding your own studio is telling. Did he hurt you?” She looks away from me, but I gently grab her chin. Her gaze meets mine. “Did he hurt you?”

“No.” Tears well in her hazel eyes. She blinks, looking away from me, causing a tear to roll down her cheek.

I wipe it away. My jaw tenses as I look between her and the car. He hurt her. Whether it be emotionally, physically, or both, it has the protective instincts I didn’t know I possessed on overdrive. Risa is headstrong—stubborn—but is crumbling at the sight of a car. I nod my head, making up my mind.

I turn my body toward her, resting my elbow on the steering wheel. “You have two options—” her eyes snap to mine as I hold up my fingers “—I rip him outta his car and choke him or I take you home. I’m leaning toward choking, but it’s your call because we can’t sit out here all night.”

She bites her lip, looking off to the side. I'm surprised she's contemplating her options. "Can you take me home, please?"

I pull away from the curb without another word. We ride in silence for a few blocks before I say, "Risa, I need you to tell me where we're going."

"Shit, sorry." She squeezes her eyes shut. "Um, take a left at the next light."

"Put your address in." I point to the dash. "I'll use GPS."

She puts it in with shaky hands. Once she's done, I grab her hand and trace small circles with my thumb. I'm not sure if it's calming, but when I used to have panic attacks, my aunt would do this, and it would help. We pull up to her house a few minutes later. It reminds me of her. It's a vibrant purple, even in the dark, with lush greenery surrounding it. I cut the engine and steal a glance at her. She's staring at her hands, avoiding looking at me.

"Thanks," she says before clambering out of the car.

I let out a sigh, banging my head against the headrest as she walks to her door. She doesn't look okay, and I'm torn between letting her go and going after her. I get out and follow her. She turns, looking at me, pulling her key from the lock as her door swings open.

"What are you doing?" She quirks a brow.

"Didn't you say sleepover?" I step past her, inviting myself in.

She smiles, shaking her head and following me inside, locking the door behind her.

I look around. “This is—”

She wraps her arms tightly around my middle, resting her head on my chest. I cautiously hug her back. We stand in her kitchen, hugging each other for a while before she pulls away, looking up at me. Her eyes glance at my lips as she bites her own. She grabs the sides of my face, pulling me toward her, crashing her lips into mine.

I run my hands over her body as I pick her up, gripping her thighs, and place her on the counter. Her teeth graze my neck, causing my dick to twitch achingly. We frantically pull at each other’s clothes. In seconds, she’s naked on the counter in front of me. I stand between her legs with my dick pressing against her thigh.

I rub my thumb along her bottom lip. “Do you want me to fuck you?” She sucks on my thumb as I dip it into her mouth. I catch her gaze. “I need to hear you say please, like a good girl.”

6

Marisa

“Please...” I breathe out, looking into his eyes.

Him wanting to protect me with zero hesitation has me wanting him to fuck me every which way till Sunday. If we’re gonna have a sleepover, it may as well be a naked one. His mouth is on mine again as our tongues intertwine. I wrap my legs around him as he picks me up.

“Bedroom?”

“Down the hall to the right.” I moan as he sucks on my nipple.

He lays me down on the bed, hovering over me and kissing every inch of my body he can. He rolls us over, pulling me on top of him. Straddling him, I sit up, turning on the lamp next to my bed.

“I like to see what I’m doing.”

“I appreciate the view.” He bites his lip, and it’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. I move up his body until I’m hovering over his face. “You’re fuckin’ dripping for me. Let me get a taste.”

He grips my hips, pulling me down onto his face. Pleasure floods through me. I toss my head back, letting his tongue do most of the work as I wind my hips. As my climax builds, I grab a fistful of his hair. I'm not ashamed to admit that I've been with my fair share of people. Ash gives the best head a girl could ever get in her lifetime. Some lovers treat their partner's orgasms like a chore. Asher gets just as much pleasure from me coming on his tongue as I do from the release. He reaches up, wrapping his hand around my throat as I grind against his face. I hold onto his forearm while the fingertips of his other hand brush gently against my nipples.

"I'm gonna fucking come..." I moan and dissolve onto his tongue seconds later.

My orgasm rips through me. He sucks on my clit, dipping his tongue inside me, lapping up the wave of my release. I slowly lift my hips, looking down at him between my legs. My essence is glistening off his lips and beard. Scooting back and leaning forward, I kiss him, sucking on his bottom lip before biting it. Sitting back up, I reach into the top drawer of my nightstand and pull out a condom. Tossing the wrapper aside, I put the condom in my mouth.

Ash puts his arms behind his head, giving me a curious look. I wink at him before moving down his body until my mouth is hovering over his dick. He inhales sharply as I use my tongue and lips to roll the condom onto him as far as I can go before he hits the back of my throat. I use my hand to roll the condom on him the rest of the way before sucking on him hard and slow as I come back up. He sinks his fingers into my

hair, gripping it, and bringing my mouth to his. Placing his other hand on my lower back, he rolls on top of me.

“Ready?” He looks down at me.

“Yes, fuck me—”

He buries himself inside me in one swift thrust, stretching me out and stealing the breath from my lungs. My nails dig into his back as I bite down on his shoulder, letting out a needy moan. I should’ve fucked him the first day I saw him. Denying my body this level of pleasure is a crime. Sitting up, he loops his brawny arms underneath my thighs, spreading me wide for him as he thrusts into me. I trail my hand down my body until I touch my clit. It’s still sensitive from riding his face.

“Play with that pretty pussy for me, baby, until you come on this dick.”

I let out a pleased hum, not only from pleasure, but from the way he talks to me. He could say nasty shit in my ear with his deep, husky voice, and I’d cum from that alone. His strokes quicken, and I grip the headboard with my freehand. He pulls my leg over his shoulder, gripping my thigh and grazing his teeth along my leg. I squeeze my eyes shut, turning my head to the side, feeling myself on the edge of my climax.

“Uh uh, look at me when you come.” He holds my chin, making me look at him. I open my eyes and they lock onto his. “Good girl, now come for me.”

I’m naked, being fucked by him, but looking into his eyes as I unravel is a level of vulnerability that I haven’t yet

experienced. I topple over the edge into ecstasy, crying out his name. He thrusts into me with abandon. I spread my legs further, welcoming his release. A few strokes later, he lets out a hoarse, rough grunt as he spills into me. As his thrusts come to a slow halt, I let myself melt into the mattress.

He pulls out of me and drags the condom off of his length. I grab a wipe from beside my bed and wipe him off.

“Um...” He looks down at my hand with a raised brow. “I’ve never had a partner clean me off after sex before. It’s kind of hot.”

I smirk, looking up at him. “Me wiping the cum off your dick turns you on?”

He shrugs. “A little.”

“Noted.” I climb off the bed, wrapping the condom in the wipe, and throw it away in the bathroom.

I grab a shirt from my dresser, slipping it over my head, before crawling back onto the bed. I lie next to Ash. He’s already pulled his boxers back up and has his arms folded behind his head, staring up at the ceiling.

“Risa... what was that tonight?”

“Sex.”

“No, the way you reacted to your ex.”

“I...” My voice trails off as I fidget with my hands, trying to find the words. “If I tell you, can we drop it immediately after?”

“Can I ask one question after you tell me?”

I turn on my side, propping myself up on my elbow. “One.” I hold up a finger. “But then we drop it.”

He studies my face before saying, “Alright.”

“He... wasn’t who I thought he was. And I was in love with him. Am in love with him... I don’t fucking know. Either way, I fucking hate myself for falling for him. I’m still processing it. Wait, no...” I rub my eyes. “I’m doing everything I can to erase him from my memory.”

“You know that never works, right?”

“Is that your question?”

“No, it’s a statement. If he can bring you so far out of your character that I don’t even recognize you, you’re giving him too much power.”

“You don’t even know me, Ash.” I look down at my comforter, tracing lines along it with my finger.

“I don’t, but I know whoever you were with him isn’t who you really are. You’re confident, unapologetic—you are who you are. Straight, no fucking chaser.”

I can’t help the smile that spreads across my face. “Straight, no fucking chaser. I like that. You think I’m confident?”

“Yeah, that’s why I like you.”

I scrunch up my face. “Like me?”

His full lips turn up in a smile. “Tolerate? Is that a better word choice?”

Scoffing, I splay my hand over my chest. “Excuse me! You’re the one who barged into my house.”

“Very nice house, by the way. I can see why your fuck buddy wanted to move in.”

“Ha-ha. Hilarious.” I roll my eyes, wondering if I gave Zion too much information. “None of your hookups know where you live?”

“A few of them,” he shrugs, “but they know they’re not welcome to stop by unless invited.”

“You’re ruthless.” I shake my head.

“I know none of them are permanent. Why pretend? If I’m fucking with the one who is the one, I’ll know.”

“How would you know if you’re so detached?”

I wouldn’t have used the words confident and unapologetic to describe myself. I’d use them to describe Ash, though. His confidence is sickening, and if he offends someone, it’s their problem. Not his. Vegas was my indoctrination to his ways.

“Because,” he looks at me, “I imagine if I were to get attached to someone beyond the physical exchange, I would know without a doubt they’re the one. I’ve yet to get attached to someone.”

“You’ve never been in love?”

“Nope.” He doesn’t bat a lash. “Lust, never love.”

I’m not sure if it’s sad or impressive that he’s made it this far in life unscathed by the clutches of love. Then I remember

I'm trying to erase the past six months from my brain. I envy him for never knowing this pain.

“Do you believe it exists?”

“Yes, because I've seen glimpses of it in those I care about. I'm not entirely hopeless. I just don't give a fuck about finding it right now.”

I stare at him a moment. “I just had the thought I'm not sure if it's sad or impressive that you've never been in love, but I envy you. I wish I never fell because it's bullshit. Don't do it.” Looking away from him, I fidget with the hair tie on my wrist.

He sits up, leaning against the headboard. “What did he do to you?”

Groaning, I cover my face with my hand. “Of all the questions, Ash...”

“You said I get one question. That's my question. And you have to answer honestly.”

“Fuck...” I mutter, shaking my head as he chuckles. “There's so much. Where do I even start?”

“The beginning.”

I let out a puff of air. “We met at a bar, hit it off, and didn't even fuck on the first night. Instead, we talked. He didn't feel like a stranger. He felt like someone I'd known for a lifetime. It felt different. After we hung out that first night, we were hanging out all the time. Within weeks, I felt myself falling for him. The fact everything moved so fast should've been a red flag for me, but I treated it like a green light.

“He was caring, charming, attentive... swoon worthy. But six months in... it all came crashing down. I got invited to a dinner party by a friend. To my surprise, he showed up too. When I was on my way to say hi to him, he beelined it for my friend and kissed her. Turns out the lady who I thought was my friend is his wife. How was I supposed to know he had a family? He had a goddamn apartment! We went on trips together, spent days together, he even took me fucking ring shopping the week before that God forsaken party.”

I rub my eyes, shrugging. “It’s a suffocating feeling to realize everything you thought you knew was a fucking lie. His wife called me a whore in front of everyone. Wait, no,” I make air quotes, “his ‘whore mistress’ to be exact. She wanted to embarrass me, I guess. But I told her if she was more of a whore like me, he wouldn’t be in my bed. It was a fucking mess. He claims to love me, but I was just a novelty at the end of it all.”

Asher is staring straight ahead. I’m wondering if he tuned out, but he takes a deep breath before looking at me. “I don’t know what the fuck that was, but that wasn’t love. Should’ve let me beat his ass.”

“That’s your conclusion?” I raise a brow. “Beat his ass?”

“Risa, you chucked a remote at my head and tried to kill me with your stiletto in Vegas...”

I burst into laughter. “Because you’re a fucking asshole!”

“I’m an asshole? I’d say I’m a goddamn saint in this situation.”

I grab my chest, trying to catch my breath. “I fucking hate that you’re right.”

“Of course, I’m right.”

And there’s that sickening confidence. “Goodnight, Ash.” I smack him in the face with a pillow. “You can sleep on the—” I get a mouthful of pillow. When I brush my hair out of my face, he’s staring at me with a smug smile. “How dare you!”

“I dare. Pull that delicate flower bullshit with someone else. I’m not the one.”

I narrow my eyes, smacking him with the pillow again. He smacks me back.

“I should’ve taken your fucking eye out with my stiletto.” I sit up, getting better leverage, and smack him again... and again... until we’re two grown people in a fucking pillow fight.

“No one ever taught you not to hit a girl?” I smack him with all my force.

He lets out a belt of laughter. “Is that what you are? The way you’re hitting me with that pillow says otherwise.”

I gasp. “You little fucking—” I hold the pillow like a baseball bat, pulling it back over my shoulder, and swing.

Catching my wrist, he flips me on to my back and then pulls my wrist overhead. He pins me to the mattress and wedges his knee between my thighs.

“What is your deal with fighting me?”

I defiantly lift my chin despite him having the upper hand.
“It’s a visceral response.”

A low, smooth chuckle resonates in his chest. “You being soaked for me a visceral response as well?”

My t-shirt has ridden up, exposing my center. I bite my lip as the ache between my thighs begs for release. “I—”

“Want me to make you feel good?” His eyes darken as he looks down at me.

I nod my head yes.

“Say it.” He holds my gaze.

“I want you to make me feel good.”

He keeps my wrists pinned to the mattress while he drags his other hand up my thigh, intensifying the anticipation. A shiver ripples through me. Running his fingers along my wetness, I let out a moan as he swipes them across my clit. He dips his fingers inside me and slowly pumps them in and out. My breath quickens as he finger fucks me. Pulling them out, he massages my clit in slow circles. He moves his knee to the side, making me spread my legs wide. Sweat breaks out across my skin as my climax builds. He pushes two fingers inside me while his thumb applies pressure to my clit. I try to move my arms to grip the sheets, but he still has my wrists clutched in his hand. My hips buck, and I grind against his fingers.

“Good girl, fuck my fingers just like that.”

I move my hips in unison with his fingers as he brings me closer to my release.

He presses his body to mine so we're chest to chest. His lips brush against my neck as he whispers in my ear, "Come for me."

His words cause me to open like a dam. I let out a shuddering moan as I come and bite down on his shoulder.

He growls, "Good fuckin' girl."

My passionate moans turn to languid whimpers as he continues to pleasure me. He drags his fingers out of me, bringing them up to my mouth. I look into his eyes as I part my lips and suck my essence off of them. His eyes remain on mine as he slides them out, running the pads of his fingers along my lips.

"Mmm..." he grunts, letting go of my wrists. "Night, Risa."

He walks out, shutting the door behind him. Moments later, I hear him in the living room, trying to make himself comfortable on the couch. Wise choice. There wouldn't have been any sleep in my bed. He could've slept in a guest bedroom, but I'm not that nice. I stretch, rolling over on to my stomach with a satisfied grin on my face, and fall asleep.

Marisa

Pulling my curls into a bun, I walk out to the kitchen and peek into the living room. Asher is still asleep on the couch, hanging off both ends. I cover my mouth to stifle my laughter and head back to my room to get my phone to take a picture. Clearly, I'm still harboring negative feelings toward him about Vegas. After taking the picture, I head into the kitchen to make my morning coffee. Usually I have a smoothie, but I need caffeine after staying up late to enjoy Asher. It was worth it.

I watch Asher get up from the couch, stretching his limbs as they crack. He's so goddamn fine. The annoying thing is he knows it.

"Sleep well?" I bite back a smile.

"Fuck no. That couch is fucking terrible."

His discomfort brings me satisfaction. "You could've slept with me." I shrug.

"Sleep? Nah, we would've done everything but that."

"I don't see the problem."

He joins me in the kitchen. “We both have businesses to run.”

“You’re so responsible.” I smirk.

“Mmm... no. I love money. Where’s your other bathroom?”

“Oh, down the hall. First door on the left. You can use the one in there. There are extra toiletries underneath the sink.” I turn to grab my cup of coffee. “Would you like some?”

“Yes, please.” He turns and heads toward the room.

I start his coffee and lean against the counter, drinking mine. Moments later, I hear Asher’s voice.

“Hold the fuck up, you had a whole extra fucking bed?” He hollers, reappearing in the kitchen.

I can’t hold my amusement in any longer as I burst into laughter. “You could’ve looked!”

“Risa! I’m six fucking six and you didn’t think to tell me about a whole other bed? Had me sleeping on a fucking loveseat! Try to be respectful and all I get are aches and fucking pains!”

“It’s not my fault you’re a skyscraper. I actually find my couch rather comfortable, thank you very much.”

He closes his eyes, taking a deep breath. “It’s too fucking early to be dealing with your petty bullshit.”

“I didn’t ask you to stay over. You welcomed yourself in.”

“Yeah, and what were you gonna do? Fucking cry over a worthless piece of shit all night by yourself?”

“I—no...” I scoff. “I would’ve cried for like an hour.” It’s a lie. I’d intended to cry myself to sleep. “Why do you care?”

“I don’t, but I also don’t mind being a distraction. You know what, I’m gonna go get ready.”

He leaves me alone in the kitchen. The only people I ever open up to are Harlow, Quinn, and Sevyn. I haven’t even told them I’m still pathetically crying over Reese. Something about Asher makes me feel comfortable. We’re more similar than I care to admit. We won’t be holding hands, skipping through a field anytime soon, but I’m glad he stayed over last night. Finishing my cup of coffee, I head to take a shower. Hopefully, he’ll drop me off at my car on his way to work. I didn’t think the couch plan through.

He’s sitting on the uncomfortable couch, scrolling through his phone, and drinking coffee when I enter the living room to find my sneakers.

“Can you please drop me off at my car?”

“Why do you think I’m still sitting here?”

He’s a little annoyed about the whole couch situation still. I lace up my sneaker, trying to think of something to say to smooth things over. Sarcasm is the only thing I can think of and decide to keep it simple. Standing, I clear my throat, feeling ridiculous.

“Ash,” he looks at me, “thank you for staying last night.” I turn, trying to avoid a conversation, and run into the couch,

tripping over it. Thankfully, I catch myself before hitting the ground.

He has a satisfied smile on his face when I look at him. “Karma is a bitch, isn’t she?”

“Shut the fuck up.” I cackle and head to my room to grab my things.



“What perfume do you wear?” he asks on the way to my studio.

“That’s such a random question.” I smirk.

“Yeah, the smell is unique, and I can’t place it.”

“You wouldn’t be able to because it’s a custom blend of oils. Not really a perfume. Sandalwood, amber, and vanilla.”

He nods his head. “I like it.”

“Thank you.” I smile, but it fades as we drive down the street to my studio.

I brace myself for the possibility of Reese sleeping in his car all night. If he slept on my doorstep, I wouldn’t put it past him. I relax when I see Natalie’s car next to mine and not his. Asher snorts with laughter when he sees Zion walking into the studio.

I groan, trying to keep the smile off my face. “Ash, this isn’t funny.”

“You replaced one problem with another.”

“No, Zion is... nice.”

“Be real, Risa. You’d eat his balls for breakfast and not in a good way.”

“I think...” I turn in my seat, facing him, as he parks. “I didn’t know he barely signed his divorce papers a month ago. It’s a little overwhelming because I think I’m the first woman he’s been with since his ex-wife. If he gets attached to me, he’s in for a rude awakening.”

“Damn, freshly divorced? I say this respectfully. You know how to pick them.”

I cradle my head in my hands. “Don’t I fucking know it. All I want is good sex but end up getting fucked in the figurative sense.”

He laughs, giving me a brilliant smile. “You’re having fun, right?”

“Yeah, but—”

“No, no buts. You’re enjoying yourself. Leave it at that.”

“After everything... I just wanna be happy, you know?” I shrug, looking at him.

“Yeah...” He scratches his jaw. “I know exactly what you mean.”

He’s never talked about personal things, but his somber expression tells me his words are a hidden confession of heavier things. I’m not one to pry. I can barely handle my shit,

let alone trying to help someone sort through theirs. But I'm a damn good listener if someone were to need it. I lean across the center console and press a kiss to his cheek. He's an asshole, but no one deserves unhappiness. When I pull away, his brows pinch together with the left one raised. He looks utterly fuckable.

“Thanks for the ride. I'll text you.”

“You'll text me?” He chuckles. “I call bullshit.”

“Ooh a challenge, Ash? I love proving you wrong.”

He smirks. “Bye, Risa.”

I throw him a smile over my shoulder as I get out of his car and shut the door behind me. Asher fucking me last night left no room for me to think of Reese. Every day since I met him, I'd wake up and go to bed thinking about him. Last night and this morning were the first time in months he wasn't on my mind.

Walking into the studio, I'm met by the smells of palo santo and sage. Natalie is walking around with a smudge stick, wafting the smoke around.

“Reese was here this morning.”

“Is that why you're smudging?”

“Yes, and no. Girl, I don't know what you gave that man, but he is obsessed with you. He looked physically hurt when I told him you were on a date with a guy.”

“With Asher?” My nose wrinkles. “Far from dating. We’re just friends... sort of.” I would need to have amnesia before I’d date Asher so I could experience his dick for the first time again and forget he’s an asshole.

“Drystan said he was flirting with you.” She smirks while giving me side eye.

“I am so pleased to know that you two are having staff meetings without me.”

Laughing, she claps her hand over her mouth. “We’re concerned employees.”

“At least FaceTime all of us next time. Tavyn is back today, isn’t she?”

Tavyn is the other yoga instructor. She’s been on vacation with her family for the past week.

“She is. Were you still thinking of hiring another instructor?”

“It honestly slipped my mind with the events of the past few weeks.”

Hiring another instructor or two would let me offer more classes and also ease the stress of when someone is on vacation or other life events.

“I’ll work on something this morning to post and run it by you before I do. Sound good?”

“Natalie, you’re the best. Don’t tell the others I said that.”

The corners of her mouth turn up. I met Natalie through Marty and Keith, my first students, and we quickly became friends. Sol Movement wouldn't be what it is today without her. It'll be hard to let her go when she moves onto better things after she graduates college.

"I'm telling everyone," she says, taking a seat at the front desk.

I head to the locker room to set my things down and my phone chimes with email notifications. There are two inquiries about wanting to rent the room. Reading through them, one is from a college student and the other is from someone who moved to the area and needs a temporary space. Both seem like suitable candidates. Checking my schedule, I can have them stop by tomorrow or the following day. The thought of having a roommate makes me anxious, but getting another job isn't realistic while running two businesses.

Setting my bag down, I respond to their emails, letting them know when they can stop by and that they'll need to submit background checks prior to an agreement being signed. Before I put my phone away, I type a text to Asher.

Marisa: Told you I'd text you.

I fix my hair so it's not in my face and take off my shoes, putting them away. My phone chimes with a reply from Asher.

Asher: I'm surprised it's words.

Marisa: You don't seem like the texting type.

Asher: Your assumption is correct.

Marisa: You're a lot quieter than I thought you would be.

Asher: Have I ever been loud?

Marisa: Your arrogance is loud.

Asher: Confidence.

Marisa: Sure, babe.

Marisa: I have two potential roommates.

Asher: Don't forget background checks.

Marisa: I'm not dumb.

Asher: I looked into the heating system you want. That'll be a nice upgrade.

I stare at my phone, shocked he actually looked into the things I want to do.

Marisa: It will. I gotta head into class.

I end our conversation with my usual middle finger and smiley face emoji. He responds with a middle finger and yawn emoji. Laughing, I toss my phone into my bag and prepare for the morning classes.



I'm looking forward to having the rest of the day to myself. Natalie stops me on my way out, coming around the desk with a smile on her face.

“Want to go out with me tonight?”

I splay my hand across my chest with a smile. “I'd love to go on a date with you. Where are we going?”

“Eric's friend is opening a rooftop bar. A wristband,” she holds them up, “gets us four free drinks and an appetizer.”

“Free alcohol and food? Count me in. What should I wear?” Natalie is one of my favorite people to hang out with. I've never not had a good time with her.

“Anything that's sexy.”

I'm already piecing together an outfit in my head. “Are we going together or are you going with Eric?”

“Together. Eric won't show up until after work, and he'll bring some friends.”

“Hot nerds?” I fan myself. “Girl, you're going to make it hard to choose!”

“Why choose? I fully support whatever you get into. You know this.” She grins and tells me more about Eric's friend who owns the bar.

ASHER

Since I'm new to Portland, I agreed to come out with a couple of co-workers when they mentioned alcohol and food. Now I'm regretting it. Partying has lost its luster for me. The drinks were good but the food has as much flavor as salted cardboard. I'm sure you're paying for the view and appealing drinks more than anything.

There are some women who've caught my eye but none I'd want to fall into bed with. Let alone carry on a conversation with to even get to that point. As I'm finishing off my drink so I can get the fuck out of here, a laugh catches my attention. Turning my head, I see inky black curls cascading down a woman's back.

I know that laugh and ass anywhere. Unsurprisingly, she's surrounded by men. She looks like she's glowing as the sunset burns in the sky. The way she commands them with her presence alone is enthralling. Each of them are hanging off each word she says, hoping to catch her attention. She places her perfectly manicured hand that's glittering with the ring I gave her on one of the guy's arms as she laughs.

Looping his arm around her waist, she leans into him. I'm contemplating whether or not I want to burst the bubble of the guy who's looking at her like he's going to get lucky tonight. I finish the rest of my beer, tell my friends I'm leaving, and head toward the exit instead.

The only way to leave is to walk past her. My hand is on the door when I hear her say my name.

“Ash?”

I turn to see her, and all the men she's talking to, staring at me. "Risa." I smile as if I haven't been watching her the past half hour. "How are you?"

She surprises me by giving me a hug. "Good. Have you been here long?"

"Yeah, a couple of hours with some co-workers. I was just leaving."

"You don't want to have a drink with me?"

I glance at her circle of suitors. "I don't want to interrupt your evening. I'm not sure the Marisa Banks fan club would enjoy my company."

"Them?" She snorts with laughter. "Those are Eric's friends. He and Natalie are around here somewhere."

Looking at her eyes, her full lips, and the way her top hugs her breasts, I say, "I'll have a drink with you."

She smiles, grabbing my hand, and pulls me toward the bar. "Have a good night, gentleman." She gives them a salute, leaving them gaping after her.

Goddamn. This woman is amazing.



One drink turns into several. I'm feeling buzzed and Marisa is intoxicated. I switch to water because I have to drive to my grandparents' house tonight. Eric's friend has been generous and given us free drinks all night. He and Natalie are fun to be

around. I've talked to Eric a few times before or after classes. I was surprised to learn he's a professional gamer. At first I thought he was joking until he told me how much he makes from streaming, sponsorships, and winnings.

"Yeah, I just bought my first house. It's old, needs a lot of work, but I figure it will be worth the investment in the long run," Eric says with Natalie sitting on his lap as intoxicated as Marisa is. "I have the floor plans, but no clue what I'm looking at."

I chuckle, downing the rest of my water. "Bring them to the studio, and I can look at them. Or we can meet up some other time."

"Ah, man. That'd be great."

"Oh my God!" Marisa exclaims. "Asherrrr is fucking amazingggg!" She slurs my name. Her southern drawl is more noticeable.

"Am I?" She's definitely intoxicated if she's singing my praises.

Resting her head against my shoulder, she moves closer to my neck, inhaling deeply. "You always smell so fucking good." She buries her face in my neck, taking another deep breath. "Soooo good."

"I want to smell too." Natalie tries to get up off Eric's lap and he wraps his arm around her waist, pulling her back. "Eric, let me smell him!"

“Marisa, baby, I’ve been looking all over for you.” Some guy appears, staring at Marisa with a smile on his face. It’s the guy she was laughing with earlier.

She points at him. “Joseph? Wait, no...” She giggles. “Matthew? Oliver?” She continues rattling off names.

“Liam,” he corrects her.

“Oh, right, right. You are so handsome.” She pats his arm. “What can I help you with? These are my friends.” She smooshes my face. “Asher, this is... Lucas – ”

“Liam,” he says, trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice.

“Doesn’t Asher look like he could be a model or he was chiseled by the hand of God?”

“Yesss!” Natalie slurs. “The bone structure.” She does a chef’s kiss motion with her hand. “Very good bone structure, Asherrr.”

“Thank you.” I laugh with Eric.

“Eric...” Natalie grips the collar of his shirt. “You have good bone structure too. Can I sit on your face later?”

Marisa gasps before leaning against me as she laughs. “Natalie!”

Eric looks torn between embarrassment and wanting to carry Natalie out of here. I try to hide my laughter. Marisa turns to me with a look in her eye that lets me know she

wouldn't mind sitting on my face that's chiseled by the hand of God later either.

"Ash, can I—"

"Were you ready to get out of here, Marisa?" Liam interrupts.

"Me?" Marisa sounds confused. "Did I say that?" She looks at me. "I guess I'm going home with Elijah." He grabs her arm, attempting to help her up. I hold onto her. "Oh, Ashhh, Ryan wants to take me home."

"Risa," I wrap my arm around her waist. "What's his name?" I point at the guy who's still holding her arm. He has about ten seconds to let go before I break his fingers.

She looks at him. "Um... Christian."

"No, love. I can't let you leave with him."

"I can't?"

"No."

"Who the fuck are you?" the guy spits out. "Her daddy?"

Marisa giggles. "Zaddy!!" Natalie echoes her.

"I'm the guy who's going to break your fucking hand if you don't let go of her arm."

Eric slides Natalie off his lap. "Let go of her arm. None of us know who the fuck you are."

"You're not going to do—"

Grabbing the wrist of the hand that's wrapped around Marisa's arm, I apply pressure, making him let go. As soon as she's free, I twist it until I hear a cracking noise. He falls to the floor, holding his hand.

"If you don't get the fuck out of my sight, I'll break the other one before I break your fucking jaw." The guy scrambles to his feet, running in the opposite direction.

"Damn. That was impressive." Eric smiles, patting my shoulder.

I'm definitely ready to leave now. "I better get her home. Bring the floor plans. I'd be happy to help."

"Alright," he says, helping Natalie to her feet. "I'll see you soon."

"Risa, let's go." I pick her up, tossing her over my shoulder.

"Wee!" She yells, holding out her arms.

I can't help but laugh. Following behind Eric and Natalie, we say goodbye once we reach the parking lot. I'm glad I stayed because I hate to think of what the outcome would've been otherwise.

Unlocking my car, I lay Marisa on the backseat. Getting in, I pull up her address on the GPS that she put in the other day. She falls asleep within seconds. I laugh to myself, knowing she's going to feel it in the morning. Free drinks are fun until you can't remember up from down.

Pulling up to her house, I realize I don't have a key. Maybe I should've taken her to my grandparents place. I notice she

has a gold chain across her body and a small bag is at the end of it. I unzip it to find her phone and keys. I'm surprised those two things fit in there. I unlock the door first and then carry her inside.

Setting her on the bed, I pull off her shoes and bag. Pushing her on her side, I put a pillow behind her in case she vomits and then cover her with a blanket.

“Ash...”

I'm surprised she's coherent. “Yeah?”

“You're a good husband.”

“Risa.”

“Hmm?”

“We're not married anymore.” She must be more drunk than I thought.

“No.” She frowns with her eyes still closed. “But you're the best husband I've ever had.”

I try not to laugh. “I'm the only husband you've ever had.”

“Exactly. The best.”

“You're sweet when you're drunk.” I move her curls out of her face.

“No. It's just cause it's you.”

I'm not sure how to respond. “I – mmm... go to sleep, Risa.”

“Stay with me? I hate being alone.”

Kicking off my shoes and stripping down to my boxers, I grab a blanket and lie next to her. “Sleep. I’ll be right here.”

Marisa

Walking out to the kitchen, my mouth waters as my head throbs. Asher's making bacon and eggs. I climb onto a bar stool and rest my head on the counter.

"It's impressive that you're awake right now."

"My head feels like someone is splitting it open with an ice pick."

I hear him chuckle. "Yeah... you were pretty drunk. Told me I have a face chiseled by the hand of God."

Sitting up, I gasp. "No... did I really?" The smug smile on his face lets me know I said a lot of shit he's going to hold over my head.

"Tell me, do you really think I could be a model?"

"No." My face heats. "Please tell me you're joking! Did I really say all of that?"

"Yep." He nods his head. "Natalie was agreeing with you too."

I look at him between the slits of my fingers. “What did Eric say?”

“We both found it entertaining. Until some guy tried to take you home.” I notice the change in his demeanor.

“What?”

He plates the food and looks at me. “Risa...” I swallow at the serious tone of his voice. “Things would’ve gone entirely different for you last night if I wasn’t there. Please, the next time you go out drinking, take someone who you know you can trust. It’s fucking terrible you have to think that way, but that’s the world we live in, and I’m not always with you.”

“I’m sorry you had to babysit me.” My stomach turns in knots at the thought of what could’ve happened and what did.

“I didn’t mind.” He shrugs. “Eric and I got to know each other while you two got shit faced.”

I groan, covering my face with my hands. “Good to know I thoroughly embarrassed myself and almost got kidnapped.”

He chuckles, visibly relaxing. “I enjoyed the embarrassment. The kidnapping, not so much. But I’d never let anything happen to you. You’re always safe with me.”

I feel warm all over and it’s not from embarrassment. He slides a plate of bacon and eggs toward me with some pills on the side.

“Eat. You’ll feel better. I’ve gotta go home to get ready and grab some of my stuff.”

“You made breakfast... for me?”

“Yeah. I’d eat with you, but I don’t have time. Hope you feel better.” He grabs his keys and puts on his sneakers. “Later, Risa.”

“Bye Ash.” I watch the door close behind him.

He stayed with me last night knowing it would be an inconvenience for him. Maybe he isn’t so bad after all.



My hangover has finally subsided. I thought I was going to puke or pass out in class today. I have to get it together. I’m meeting with potential roommates this afternoon. As I’m walking out of the studio, I respond to another inquiry about the room. Natalie posting it online made all the difference. Zion catches me in the parking lot. I’m surprised he sat in the smoothie bar all morning, supposedly doing work for school. While I appreciate how nice he is, seeing him at my studio for hours isn’t the type of relationship I wanted.

“I was wondering if you wanted to hang out tonight?”

I pique a brow. “Hang out as in fuck or hang out as friends?”

“Both.”

I know I said I wanted to be friends with him, but the thought of getting into another relationship makes my skin

fucking crawl. No matter how casual. I'd also like to avoid being someone's replacement or rebound freshly off a divorce.

"Zion... you know this is just sex, right? When I say I don't want more, I genuinely mean it."

"I respect that, but I'm only looking to have fun right now, too. You're honest and fun, two things that are hard to come by these days."

I nod, smiling. "I had to make sure we're on the same page."

"We are."

"Alright." I open my car door, tossing my stuff in the backseat. "You can come over at 6:30ish, but bring food and drinks."

"Anything in particular?"

"Nope, surprise me. I'll see you later."



After a shower, I have enough time to straighten up my house and light a candle before the potential tenants arrive. My phone buzzes with an email notification. The third person interested can be here right before Zion is supposed to come over. Maybe I'll have a roomie by the end of today. It'll be an adjustment sharing my personal space with someone else, but the girls have been giving me pep talks. They've convinced me it won't be as bad as I'm making it out to seem. Quinn

reassures me I'll be fine. She's the most meticulous one of us all. If she could do it for over a year, I think I can manage a few months. Hopefully.

All doubt goes out the window when someone knocks on the door. "Here goes nothing." I whisper to myself. Putting a smile on my face, I open the door to reveal a girl who looks younger than my brother.

"Hi, I'm Melanie." She flashes me a smile that's as perky as her personality. "I'm here about the room for rent." She has brown hair that's cut into a blunt bob, glasses, bright brown eyes, and rich ebony skin.

I extend my hand out to her. "I'm Marisa, welcome to my home." Stepping aside, I wave her in.

"You have such a beautiful place. The purple exterior is to die for. I love it. And the inside..." she gasps, "is even better. You look young to have a house this nice."

"Uh... thank you... I'm twenty-eight. Are you newly graduated?"

"I know I look young, but I'm twenty-one and work part time as a bank teller. I'm in school full time, and I'm hoping to begin tutoring in a few weeks. If I get the room, I'll hardly be around. But I still wanted to try living on my own... kind of."

She is a ball of energy. I like her personality. "Do your parents live in Portland?"

"Yeah, about fifteen minutes from here. Is it pathetic I'm not moving further away? I really just want the experience of

living on my own.”

I offer her a smile. “No, it’s good you’re testing the waters before diving in headfirst.”

“I thought so, too.”

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t envious of people who have parents that are there for them at the drop of a dime.

“Ready for a tour?” I push the intrusive thought out of my mind.

“Yes.” She smiles brightly.

I begin the tour in the kitchen, and we work our way through the house while talking about our personal lives. I learn she’s an only child after her parents struggled with infertility for years. They are very involved in her life. While that’s awesome for her, I don’t want someone’s parents checking in on them or randomly stopping by. I’m not sure if that’s something I’d be able to deal with regularly. I save the guest room for last.

“It’s spacious in here.” She inspects the room.

“You’d have your own full bathroom. It’s through that door right there.” I point toward it.

She looks around for a few more minutes. “It’s perfect. I’ll talk to my parents. They’ll probably want to meet you before I move in.”

I’m not a babysitter. Kids aren’t even a thought in my mind. Harlow and Quinn are both having babies, and I’m looking

forward to being the fun aunt. I'm sure Melanie would be an amazing tenant, but she's still a kid. Her parents' being heavily involved could be problematic. I don't want to give up my dick appointments, and I don't live the most exemplary lifestyle.

"Yeah, no problem." I smile.

It wouldn't be bad to meet her parents and see what they're like. I'm sure they're co-signing everything she does and are paying rent for her, even if she has a job. It would mean I'd be stress free. If she's as busy as she says she is, she won't be here that much. I can schedule my fuckery around when she isn't here. With my luck, she'd come home early one day, and I'd be spread fucking eagle on the couch or something. I'll think a little more about this. I walk with her outside. There are a few minutes before the next person is supposed to arrive.

"It was a pleasure to meet you and—"

A dark blue, almost black, SUV with blacked-out windows distracts me as it pulls into the driveway. I know nothing about cars, but I recognize the Lamborghini logo on the hood. Momentarily, I'm worried about it being Reese, but remember he couldn't afford one. He had money, but not this kind of money. Even Melanie is staring at the car, curious about who the driver is.

The door opens, and my mouth drops. It's Asher. He's wearing a perfectly tailored, muscle hugging suit with shades. He flashes me a blinding smile that makes me forget I'm

talking to Melanie. He walks up to me, extending his hand. I shake it, looking up at him, confused.

“I’m Parole Officer Davidson. Lovely afternoon, isn’t it?” He smirks as my eyes widen and so do Melanie’s.

“Asher —”

“Ah yes, that’s why I’m here. To inform you, your ex-boyfriend, Asher Tremblay, is due to get out of prison soon for his attempted murder charges.”

Melanie gasps. “No, no Melanie, this isn’t true. He—” I try to explain.

“He will be out by the end of this week,” Asher adds, trying to hide a smile threatening his lips.

Melanie’s mouth is hanging open, looking between Asher and me.

“Melanie, I promise I—”

“You’re having me get a background check when your ex-boyfriend is in prison for attempted murder?” Melanie shrieks.

“No! He isn’t. This is—”

“Look, I’m not judging you and your—” she looks me up and down, holding her hands up “—life choices. But... I don’t think this will work.” She backs away slowly to her car.

“Melanie, wait!” I take a step toward her, and she gets in her car at lightning speed. She nearly runs over my mailbox as she tears away from my house. I round on Asher. “What the fuck

is wrong with you?” I shove at his chest. Of course he doesn’t move a millimeter.

He laughs hysterically. “Did you see her face?”

“You fucking asshole! She was going to rent the room! Leave!” I shove at him again. “Before the next tenant gets here and you really fuck up everything.” Glancing down the street, I pray to the universe they don’t show up while he’s here.

“My apologies, love. I left that part out.”

“What part?” My stomach drops to my feet.

“I emailed you about the room earlier today. I’d like to see it.” He takes off his shades, tucking them in front of his shirt. The top few buttons are undone, giving me a nice view of his chest.

I close my eyes, rubbing my temples. “Asher... please tell me this is a fucking joke.”

“I am Calvin Cocque.”

Groaning, I look up at the sky. “The last name says it all. I knew it sounded too much like ‘cock’ to be real.”

“It’s a real last name.” He smiles. “Now, are you going to show me the room?”

“Asher, please leave so I can hopefully rent the room to someone else.”

He looks down at his nails. “I had my assistant clear my schedule. I can do this all day, sweetheart. And if there is any doubt, I will fuck up the next meeting as well.”

I growl. “You’re a fucking pain in my ass! Why can’t you let me have this?”

“I considered it until you had me sleeping on the couch after I blessed you with the best sex of your life... yet again.” He smirks.

“It’s not my fault you’re a goddamn giant!” I bite back a smile, remembering the pictures I have on my phone.

He sighs. “Listen, smalls—”

“Hey, I’m 5’9.”

“—You’re going to have me as a roommate.” He crosses his arms.

“No! How is this even going to work?” I pace back and forth. “We fuck each other, Ash! I can barely stand you, let alone seeing you every fucking day. How? How will this even work?”

“Um... I pay you rent. At least I imagine that’s how renting works.”

I suck my teeth, glaring at him. “You clearly can afford to rent a nice ass Airbnb or stay in a ritzy hotel,” I say, pointing at his car. “What the fuck are you bothering me for?”

“Truth is, I hate staying in hotels and Airbnb’s for an extended period, no matter how nice they are.”

“Not my problem.” I shrug.

He turns, heading back to his car. I hold my breath in hopes he’s leaving. Instead, he grabs something off the passenger

seat. I let out a puff of air as he walks toward me.

“There’s a year’s worth of rent in here.” He holds up the envelope. “Well, it’s a check.”

“A year?” I raise a brow. “The agreement is only for three to six months.”

“I know, but after looking at the cost of the heating system, installation, and the upgrades you want to make to the locker room, you’re going to need more than you’re thinking. Trust me, I do this for a living. I know what I’m talking about.” He pulls a paper out of his suit jacket, handing it to me. “Look for yourself.”

Unfolding it, I look it over. It’s a breakdown of the costs to do everything I want, and it’s a few thousand over what I was originally thinking. While I could easily dip into my personal savings, it’s something I’m trying to avoid. Owning a house is different than renting and having someone else cover the costs if something breaks. If you add my businesses on top of that, it’s a lot, and I’m not trying to put myself in a bind. I don’t have anyone to fall back on if I ever need help financially.

The money is tempting, but I don’t understand why he wants to live here of all places. “Don’t you live with your grandparents? I bet they love having you around.”

“They do, but I think you’ll love having me around more.”

I scoff, rolling my eyes. “Ash... this won’t work. We’re...” My voice trails off as I try to think of a word to define what we are.

“Friends?” He offers.

“Mmm... are we?”

“Do we have to be friends for you to take my money?”

I bite on my lip, eyeing the envelope with the check. “Don’t you think this will get complicated? And what the hell are we going to tell our friends?”

“They already know we fuck.” He shrugs. “Wouldn’t you rather have me living in your house instead of that teenager?”

“She wasn’t a teen... although she looked young as hell. And she isn’t even a fucking option now, since she thinks my ex-boyfriend is a fucking psychopath.”

“It isn’t a far off assumption...”

I narrow my eyes, laughing. “I can’t fucking stand you!”

“If you’re not down for this, I respect that,” he says, stuffing the envelope back into his suit pocket.

“Wait!” I grab his wrist. “Wait, wait, give me a fucking moment to think. You ambushed me with your bullshit. Give me a second to take it all in.”

“Risa, you don’t have to—”

“You know this is probably—no, it is—a terrible idea, right?” I look up at him.

“We’ll have a great story to tell one day then.” The corner of his mouth tips up.

“Ash...” I grip the collar of his button down, resting my head against his chest. “Did you really take the time to make a

spreadsheet for the cost breakdown?”

I know it’s something small and mundane, but I’m not used to people doing things for me. It makes me feel gushy in multiple ways.

“Yeah... is that a bad thing? I wanted you to see the cost of everything.”

“No... it’s just—fuck,” I place my hands on my cheeks, “I can’t believe I’m saying this. When do you want to move in?”

“You want me to move in?” A smile spreads across his face.

“Not necessarily, but... where else am I going to find someone willing to pay me a year’s worth of rent in advance? Now, when do you want to move in before I change my mind?”

“Today.”

“Like... now?”

“Yep.” He pulls the envelope from his suit and hands it to me. “Now. I have a moving truck waiting for me to confirm my address.”

“*Your* address? You’re fucking bold.”

“We’ve established this.” He winks.

“Since you’ve left me with no choice—”

“Stop acting like I took you hostage and made you take me in. If you didn’t want me here, you’d tell me. But something tells me you want me here.”

“I want your money. Let’s clear that up.” I open the envelope and look at the check. A grin spreads across my face. Clutching it to my chest, I look at him, then back at the check before squealing and wrapping my arms around his neck. “I get my fucking dream studio!”

He hugs me back. “Told you it would be a nice upgrade.”

“Thank you,” I say, unwrapping my arms from his neck and clearing my throat. “I have to call the other person. Don’t need you trying to convince people I dated a potential serial killer.”

He tosses his head back with laughter. “That girl was too gullible. What parole officer drives a Lamborghini and dresses this nice?”

“You know what...” I point at him, nodding my head in agreement. “That is a damn good question. Can’t imagine them being so pretentious either.”

His smile fades as I fall into a fit of laughter. “Fuck you, Risa.”

“You have, and you enjoyed yourself.”

“Mmm...” he grunts.

“Wait, what does that grunt you do all the time mean? Is that satisfaction or uncertainty?”

He turns his back to me, pulling out his phone, and making a call. Probably both knowing him. While he’s busy, I make the call to the person who was supposed to arrive later this evening. Thankfully, they’re understanding. I’ve got a roomie, although he’s the last person I’d expect to be living with me.

Reese wanted to move in a few weeks after we met, and I always sidestepped the topic. Our relationship was a whirlwind, but I was in no rush to move in with him. We stayed at each other's places often, but I loved being able to come home and decompress.

Now I'm wondering what the fuck I'm gonna tell the girls. They'll think I let him move in because his dick is that good. While it is, that wasn't on my mind. He has what I need, and I'm going to take it.

"I have to get an extra key made for you. I'll be back in a bit."

"They'll be here in five minutes. It shouldn't take them too long, and then we can go together if you want?"

"Uh... sure. I'll go grab my bag."

I disappear into the house, head to my room, and close the door behind me. Sending an S.O.S. text to the group, I wait for them to respond before starting a video chat.

"Are you okay?" Harlow asks.

"If it's Reese, we can be there in no time to beat his ass," Sevyn says.

"Oh God, please tell me it isn't him," Quinn groans.

"No, no. It's not Reese. I got a roomie."

"Babe, no offense," Harlow says, "but that's not really an S.O.S. text. It's—"

“Asher is my roomie,” I blurt out, cringing and biting down on my knuckles as I pace my room.

“What the fuck?” Quinn gasps.

“It’s the dick, isn’t it?” Sevyn smirks.

“How?” Harlow’s brows pinch together.

“It’s a long story...” I tell them about him ambushing me and me falling for the stupid last name, Cocque. They all try to hold back laughter. I have to admit, it’s a funny name. They’re impressed by him pretending to be a parole officer to scare off Melanie, but they also agree she was gullible.

“After that, I decided to take his money and get what I want.”

“I love this energy, but are you two still fucking?” Sevyn asks.

I cover my face with my hand. “We had sex the other night...”

“We knew you wouldn’t stop fucking him.” Harlow smiles. “How was it sober?”

“Guys...” I pace my room. “He could split me in fucking two, and I’d die happy.”

We fall into a fit of laughter. I wish I could confidently say something negative about Asher’s sex game, but there are no negatives.

“The good news is, I get my dream studio!”

“We are so happy for you, babe.” Quinn smiles.

“Sunday chats are about to be juicy!” Sevyn cackles.

“No... no. I’m gonna try to not fuck him. Try...” I hardly believe the words coming out of my mouth.

“Um... good luck with that.” Harlow snorts with laughter.

“I’m fucked. I know it, and you don’t have to tell me. But we’ll enjoy the ship until it sinks to the bottom of the fucking ocean.”

I hear the commotion of the movers in the hallway. My brain hasn’t really caught up to the fact Asher is moving in. This could go well or terribly wrong. Or maybe a bit of both. Either way, I hope it’s fun.

“Enough about me and my current situation. How are you guys?”

“Ky and I are finishing up the baby’s room this week. It’s so cute.” Quinn smiles.

“Send us a video.” I roll my eyes. “Talking about how cute it is, but not sending proof.”

“For real,” Harlow adds.

“I will, I will,” Quinn reassures us.

“I’m two months away from graduation, which means Zane is taking me to Italy.” Sevyn squeals.

“I’m excited, but jealous. I want to go,” I whine.

“I’d invite y’all, but this trip is a honeymoon for us. Kid free for almost two weeks. I may fuck around and come back pregnant.”

“Sevyn!” We say, cackling.

“What?” She shrugs. “All that alone time with Zane? I’m going for fashion and dick.”

“Honestly, if you went for anything else, I would be extremely disappointed,” Harlow says with a grin.

“Risa,” Ash knocks on my door, “are you ready?”

“I love that he calls you Risa,” Quinn says, looking doe-eyed.

“Nicknames are telling,” Harlow adds.

“Stop it” I whisper. “I’m coming—”

“In more ways than one!” Sevyn hollers loud enough Ash can hear it. They giggle.

“All of you are going to hell.” I grab my bag.

“We’ll save you a seat,” Harlow says. “We love you!”

I hang up the phone and open the door to Asher’s cocky grin. “Shut it. Let’s go.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

We head outside, and he opens the door for me. I don’t know why I’m taken aback by him having manners. He’s not disrespectful, he’s just honest and outspoken. A little too outspoken for his own good. I note his car smelling brand new as I slide my ass into the leather seat.

“Did you just get this?” I ask as he gets in.

“Yeah, after I dropped you off, they delivered it to my work. I’ve been waiting for it.”

“I love the smell of a new car.”

“Me too.” He smiles, pushing the start button. “It smells like money.”

The corners of my mouth turn up as I buckle my seatbelt. He places his arm behind my seat to back out, and the scent of his cologne wraps around me. I take deep breaths as I pretend to be interested in my phone. It makes me want to bury my face in his neck and inhale. There’s nothing like a good smelling man who takes care of himself. I sync my phone to the car’s Bluetooth. Asher looks at me when I press play and Jhene Aiko comes through the speakers.

“Taking over my car?”

“You took over my house.”

“A room isn’t a takeover. It’s cute how you’re trying to convince yourself you didn’t want me to move in.”

“I didn’t.” I look out the window. “You’re fucking persistent.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” he says proudly.

“Only you. What did your grandparents say?”

“I told them last week I was looking for a place. They knew it was only a matter of time before I got tired of the commute. It was exhausting. Your place is ten minutes from my office. I saw an opportunity and took it.”

“We’re too similar.”

“You’re just now noticing this?” he asks, glancing between me and the road.

“I didn’t want to notice it before. But now you’re forcing your way into my life.”

Laughter resonates in his chest. “You’re dramatic. If you told me to get the fuck out, I’d leave. Is that what you want?” I stare out the window, ignoring his question. We come to a stop at a light. He grabs my chin, giving me goosebumps, and coaxing me to look at him. My eyes meet his. “Tell me you don’t want me around, Risa.”

“Since I can’t seem to get rid of you, I guess I’ll get used to you being around.” I try to keep my eyes on his, but they flit to his lips for a fraction of a second.

“All those words and not once did you say you didn’t want me around...” He runs his thumb along my bottom lip.

“The light’s green...”

He slowly releases my chin, turning his attention back to the road. I can’t deny I’m attracted to him or I wouldn’t be fucking him. Maybe our similarities make me comfortable or maybe it’s because I can be myself around him. My personality intimidates a lot of men, but Ash seems to revel in it. Unfortunately, that doesn’t make him any more bearable.

“Where are we going?” I ask, not recognizing where we are.

“To get the key made and then to get food for you to cook me dinner.”

My laughter resounds through the car. “Cook you dinner? You’re outta your fucking mind.”

He smiles. “I knew that would strike a nerve with you.”

“I don’t know what you thought this was, but this,” I motion between us, “ain’t that.”

“You’re too stubborn for me to think we’re anything other than fuckemies.”

“Fuckemies?”

“That’s what I said. Enemies who fuck. I’ll cook. You’d probably poison me otherwise.”

“You’ll cook for me?” I ask with a smile.

“Yeah.” He shrugs. “Not that hard to make a packet of ramen.”

I curl my lip, side eyeing him. “Ramen? A twenty-cent packet of ramen?”

“Look at you, being picky after I offered to cook for you.” He pulls up to a lock and key place.

“Yeah.” I unbuckle my seatbelt. “I doubt a pack of ramen will satisfy you either.”

“It takes a lot more to satisfy me, but you already know that.” He holds my gaze for a moment before getting out of the car and opening the door for me.

My mind floods with thoughts of our bodies pressed together. I’m definitely dickmatized. I push the thoughts out of my mind as we walk inside. It doesn’t take them long to make

the extra key. Ten minutes later, we're on our way to the grocery store.

“Where do you shop?”

“Trader Joe's is my favorite. Are you really going to cook tonight?”

“I am.”

“You won't burn my house down out of spite, right?”

“Good idea, but I'd build you a new one if I did.” He pulls the car into a parking spot.

I study him, trying to figure out if he's serious or not. Who casually says they'll build someone a house? It's hypothetical, but I fixate on it. We've done nothing but go back and forth with each other since we met, and now he's suddenly being nice. Or seems to be anyway.

“Are we going in, or are you going to stare at me?”

“Oh, yeah...” I tear my eyes away from him and get out of the car.

I send a text to the group chat as he grabs a cart.

Marisa: He's being nice. My brain doesn't know what to do.

“Is there anything you don't like?” he asks. “Aside from me?”

“I don't like fish... or you.”

“Alright. Avoiding fish. Can’t avoid me since you want me around so damn bad.” I glare at him, sucking my teeth. “Anything else you don’t like?”

“No, that’s really the only thing I don’t like.”

He nods as I follow alongside him. My phone vibrates in my pocket.

Harlow: Asher isn’t mean. Arrogant? Hell yeah.

Quinn: What he did in Vegas was shitty. I wouldn’t say he’s mean though.

Sevyn: Asher is far from mean. I’ve known him for years. He’ll be the first to give you the shirt off his back. But an asshole? Yes.

I look at Asher as he reads a bag of chips before shrugging and tossing it in the cart. There isn’t a time I can recall him being blatantly mean, other than him telling everyone we had sex in Vegas. I would’ve told the girls anyway, but he told the guys too. Which was a dick move, but he did it to be funny and not to be mean. Even if I’d wanted to kill him in that moment and still do.

“I’ll be back. I’m gonna go grab some stuff.”

He nods as he stares at the shelves. I venture to where the ice cream is and take my time picking one out. My freezer has an unnecessary amount of it already, but I like options. I grab the ice cream and a few more things on my way to find Asher.

Finding him near the checkout, I drop my things into the cart as he looks at what I got.

“You like ice cream and sweets?”

“I’d live off them if I could. What about you?” I may be a yoga instructor and sling smoothies, but I love junk food.

He shrugs. “I’ll eat them, but they aren’t my favorite. I prefer a savory and sweet combo.”

He wasn’t trying to be sexual, yet here my body is, reacting as though I’m feral. “I’ll share.”

“You? Share?” he scoffs.

“I know I’m bitchy, but—”

“Mmm... that’s a common misconception of confident women—that they’re bitchy,” he says, loading the groceries onto the check stand.

Asher is the last person I’d expect to consider the misconceptions of women. I’ve never seen him around other women aside from Harlow, Quinn, and Sevyn. When we get together, he’s alone. I saw him flirting in Vegas, but as far as I know, the only person he hooked up with was me. Maybe he isn’t such a playboy after all. I snap out of my introspection when he puts my groceries with his.

Grabbing a divider, I separate our stuff. “I can pay.”

“You can.” He smirks, removing the divider. “But I will.”

“Why won’t you let me pay?” I grab for the divider again, and he knocks it out of my hand, causing me to laugh.

“When you’re with me, I’ll pay because I can and want to. Is this going to be a fucking problem, Risa?”

“I can—” He gives me a look. “Fine. Pay. Spend your money on me.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do, but you always want to fight.”

It’s weird letting someone else pay for things. I’m used to being the caretaker and provider. It’s second nature in all areas of my life. I want to see everyone I care about doing well. When I’d go out with Reese, I’d pay because it’s what I’m used to, but he never stopped me either. Yet here Asher is, refusing to let me pay for anything. I also think it’s because I follow the narrative of being an independent woman, but I want to be fucking soft and taken care of too. Can I have the duality of both? Independent with a soft space to land.

He pays while I get lost in my head. Something I’m doing a lot of lately. I follow him out to the car, getting in when he opens the door for me and staring out the window while he loads the groceries. He gets in, starts the car, and heads back to my house. I’m silent most of the way, but I need to say something out loud.

“You know,” I continue staring out the window, “I think I was looking at my ex with rose-colored lenses.”

“Yeah.” He comes to a halt at a stop light. “I am all too familiar with that. I think we want to see the best in those we care about.”

His words make me wonder who he learned that life lesson from. “Wanna talk about it?”

“Nah.” He glances at me. “That’s what I have a therapist for. But I don’t mind listening to you process.”

“I didn’t think you’d want to.”

“You’re always fighting me...”

“I am not. We’re talking right now.”

“Five minutes of fucking peace,” he says, turning on the street to my house.

I clap my hand over my mouth, laughing. “It’s not that serious. I–shit.” I smack my palm to my forehead as we near the house. “Shit, shit, shit.”

“What?” he asks, looking around. “Don’t fucking tell me your ex is back.”

“I forgot I invited him over.”

“Your ex?”

“Zion! And he was supposed to bring food. Completely forgot about him.”

A slow smile spreads across Asher’s face. “This will be an interesting evening.”

9

Asher

I could drive past her house, but I want to see how this plays out. After meeting Zion the other day, I imagine me living with Marisa will be a hard pill for him to swallow. She sees him as dick, but I can tell he sees her as more.

“Can’t believe I forgot he was coming over.”

I pull my shades down my nose, looking over the top of them at him. “He’s easily forgettable.”

“Ash!” She shoves my arm. “Be nice.”

“Oh, please, Risa. You’re asking me to be nice to another grown ass man?”

“He’s going through a lot...” She looks down at her hands.

“How is that my problem?” I take off my shades, tossing them on to the dash, and look at her. Narrowing my eyes, I ask, “You’re not pity fucking him, are you?”

“What?” She hesitates. “No. I didn’t know about his divorce until the other day.”

“Maybe not before, but when you’re fucking him later, remember you’re fucking him out of pity. Then come climb on top of me.” I unfasten my seatbelt.

She sucks her teeth, scoffing. “It’s not a pity fuck.”

“Uh huh... you won’t even know I’m here.”

“Oh, please,” she says, waving her hand at me. “I always know when you’re around.” I watch her as she looks out the window before grabbing her bag. “What?” she snaps.

“Nothing. I’ll get the groceries.”

Marisa loves to act as though my existence is a nuisance to her. It probably is since I’ve taken it upon myself to annoy her. While I am tired of the commute to and from my grandparent’s house, I could’ve easily found a space to rent elsewhere. I was actually planning on it until I saw she had a room for rent, and I’m a man of opportunity.

Zion smiles when he sees Marisa, and I can’t blame him. She’s wearing a skintight jumpsuit that nearly matches the color of her opulent copper skin, with her raven colored curls cascading down her back. He glances at me a few times while I get the groceries.

Marisa grabs my arm, pulling me to her side when I get to the front step. “Zion, you remember Ash, right? From the studio.”

“Yeah.” He smiles, looking confused.

“Ash needed—”

“Wanted.” I nod.

“—a place to stay. Since I had the room for rent, and we know each other—”

“Inside and out.” I smirk, and she elbows my side.

“I thought he was the safest person to live with.” She brushes her curls out of her face and smiles to smooth it all over.

“I didn’t realize you two were... friends.” Zion shoves his hand in his pocket as he looks between us. He’s trying to figure out if we’re friends that fuck or friends that hang out.

“Not to interrupt, but Risa, can you open the door so I can put the groceries inside? The keys are in my pocket.” I raise my arms up, giving her room to get the keys. Marisa shoves her hand in my front pocket while I smile at Zion. She continues talking as though her hand isn’t near my dick. If she wasn’t frazzled by forgetting he was coming over, she’d remember that her keys are in her bag, but I’m not going to tell her.

“Yeah, Ash and I have known each other for a while. He’s an architectural engineer in town on business.”

The keys are in my left pocket, but I let her feel around a little more. I’m impressed she remembered my title. I thought she was feigning interest when I told her.

“You’re not living here... permanently, then?” Zion’s eyes are glued to Marisa, digging around in my pocket.

“Damn, Risa, I think it’s the other one.”

She pulls her hand out and slips it into the other one. Her hand stills when she brushes against my dick, but she recovers quickly.

“Uh... I don't know how long he is.” Her eyes widen, and I snort. “I mean, I don't know how long he'll be here for. Found the keys!” She pulls them from my pocket with a smile.

“At the end of it all, I could end up here. Not sure yet. But it'll be fun living with Risa.”

Zion smiles and nods before turning his attention to her as she opens the door. “Did you still want to have dinner tonight?”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever you brought, I'll eat.” The door swings open as she pulls the key from the lock.

“Okay, and will you be joining us?”

“Me?” I set the bags on the kitchen counter. “No, no. I'd never want to impose on a date.”

Marisa whips around, brushing her curls out of her face. “A date?” She chuckles nervously. “This isn't a date. We're just hanging out. You can join us.”

I know damn well this isn't a date, but I wanted to stir the pot... and be an asshole. “Alright.” I shrug. “I could eat.”

Zion's shoulders slump as he lets out a low sigh while Marisa gives me a bright smile. Poor guy. He'd probably be good for her if she'd let him be. But that's his issue, not mine.

“What did you bring?” She looks at the bag in Zion's hand.

“Fish. I thought we could figure out a side together. Also some beer, too.”

Marisa bites her lip. “Oh...” She quickly glances at me.

I brush my fingers across my brow before covering my mouth, hiding a smile. The one thing she doesn't like he brings.

“Is that okay?” Zion looks between us.

“Fish isn't my favorite...” She cringes.

“Don't be modest, Risa.” I nudge her shoulder.

She folds her arms, glaring at me. “Okay, to be honest... I hate it.”

“Shit, Marisa.” He covers his mouth. “I'm sorry. I—”

“Didn't know. And that's okay. Ash and I went grocery shopping. We can cook for you.”

“We can?” This plan backfired in my face. She jabs my ribs. “Right, we can. Would fucking love it. I'm gonna go change first.”

“Yeah, wouldn't want your Gucci suit getting dirty.”

“Prada, love. It's Prada.” I wink at her before heading to my room.

I'll have to get the rest of my stuff from my grandparent's house this weekend. Although I'm sure I'll go shopping before then. I love spending money just as much as I love making it. Maybe I'll take Gigi with me. She told me she expects to see me for Sunday dinners as long as I'm in Oregon. She'd never

let me live it down if I failed to show up. I change into some sweats and a t-shirt. I'd rather do anything else than join them for dinner. Nothing against Zion, but being a third wheel has never been my thing. With that thought, I put on my sneakers and grab my keys. Marisa comes out of her room at the same time.

“You're leaving?” She looks at the keys dangling from my hand.

“Risa, no matter what you want to label it, this is in fact a date. He wanted to make you dinner.”

“So did you.”

“That's not the same. He and I are nowhere near the same.” I shake my head. “And you know that.”

She grabs my arm, pulling me back into my room and closes the door behind us. “You're not, but please stay. Please.” She clasps her hands together, looking up at me.

Her hazel eyes are pleading with me and the only thing I can think of is how good she looks, begging. “Why? According to you, you don't even want me around.”

“I said that?” She scrunches up her face, pointing at herself.

I chuckle. “Risa – ”

“Ash, I don't trust myself. Okay? Is that what you want to hear?” She paces the room. “Maybe I am fucking around with him out of pity, or maybe I am just that fucking lonely and trying to forget everything. If me trying to forget everything involves a hot nerdy guy who may be clingy, so be it. But

maybe I'm just as fucking pitiful as him, too." Shrugging, she throws up her hands.

I cross my arms, straightening up to my full height. She matches my stance, staring up at me. We hold each other's gaze for a moment. We're both stubborn and could stare at each other all evening. I let out an exasperated sigh without breaking eye contact.

"Fine." I take my sneakers off. "I'll be your third fucking wheel."

She squeals, wrapping her arms around me while mine remain folded. "Thank you."

"Oh, I wouldn't thank me just yet." I smirk. "We'll see how the night goes."

"I may regret this." She nods. "But we'll cross that bridge when we get there."

She opens the door, and I grab her arm, pulling her back. "For the record, you're not pitiful."

"Oh." She scratches her neck as her eyes meet the floor. "Thanks."

"Anytime." I smack her ass as she steps out into the hallway.

She cackles. "This isn't a team fucking sport."

"May as well be with the way you have me third wheeling it right now. Can I at least suggest a tag team later?"

“Ash! Shut the fuck up. Besides, the circumstances have to be just right for me to be that kind of girl.” She winks at me over her shoulder.



After Marisa and I cook side by side while Zion kept her company, I grab the plate of carne asada off the counter, taking it out on the patio. Marisa appears seconds later with the rice, beans, tortillas, and guacamole.

“I didn’t think you knew how to cook.” She sets the guacamole down.

“It’s not as though you’ve allowed yourself the pleasure of knowing me.” I grab a chip, dipping it in the guacamole and take a bite.

She opens her mouth to reply, but Zion steps on the deck with the beers in tow. “You like beer, right?”

“Yeah... a little too much.” She smiles, grabbing one from the case.

“I remember you in Vegas.” Grabbing a plate, I take a seat, knowing I’m opening a can of worms. If I’m going to be the third wheel, I’m going to have fun.

“You two went to Vegas together?”

“Not alone.” Marisa scoops rice onto her plate. “We went with our friends for their bachelorette and bachelor parties, but we did a lot of stuff together.”

“That we did.” I fold the taco, taking a bite. She kicks my shin under the table, causing me choke on my food with laughter.

“I’ve never been to Vegas.” Zion fills his plate with food. “Do you get together with your friends a lot?”

“Yeah. We try too. We’re like a family.” She takes a sip of her beer.

“So... Ash is like your brother?”

Marisa spits out her beer. “Absolutely not!” She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. “Sorry. He’s...” she looks at me and I put my head down as my shoulders shake with silent laughter. “He’s a... friend.”

I look at her, leaning back in my chair. “Am I a friend?”

She shrugs, nodding her head yes as Zion stares between us as though he’s watching a tennis match.

I lick some guacamole off of my thumb. “I’m sorry, Risa. I didn’t hear you. We’re friends?” My brows knit together.

“Yes, Asher.” She gives me an over-exaggerated smile. “We’re friends.”

It looks like it hurt her to admit that. She’s the one who made up a villain scenario about me in her head. I smile at her before taking a drink of my beer.

“So,” Zion clears his throat, “where did you live before you moved in with Marisa?”

“My grandparents...” I feel like I’m on a date now. He’s barely said two words to me all evening.

“Oh, being an architectural engineer, I thought you’d have your own place.”

“I did. Back in LA that recently sold for five million dollars.” A grin spreads across my face as I let the number settle between us. He’s out of his depth with me. “Not sure what the point of getting a place here would be if I don’t know what I want to do. Besides, Risa is so accommodating. Do you have your own place?”

Marisa rests her head in her hand, letting out a sigh.

“No,” he looks down at his plate, “I have a roommate. I’m studying pharmaceutical sciences.”

“Oh...” I nod. “Hope that works out for you.”

Marisa takes a large bite of food to avoid talking. I’ve never understood people who try to shit on others. Especially those who have no business attempting to do so. If he actually talked to Marisa, instead of worrying about whether we’re fucking, he’d realize she doesn’t care about money. He turns his attention to Marisa to avoid embarrassing himself any further.

“Thank you for helping with dinner, Ash.” She smiles.

“Better than ramen?” I wink, rising from my seat and grabbing my plate. “As riveting as this conversation has been. I’m going to finish settling into my room.”

“Oh, okay.” Marisa looks up at me.

I walk into the house and hear Marisa's steps behind me a few seconds later.

“He didn't make you mad, did he?”

I turn the faucet on, washing my plate under the warm water. “With his pharmaceuticals sciences major? No. We are not the same. But he's trying to figure out whether I've fucked you better than he has. You know he wants more than what's in between those thighs, right?”

“Ugh.” She sticks out her tongue, gagging. “Is it that obvious?”

Drying my hands, I turn to face her. “Yeah. Pretty obvious.”

She sighs, letting her head fall back as she stares up at the ceiling. “Alright, I better go back out there. What are you doing besides abandoning me?”

“You're heavy with the guilt trips, huh? Good thing I'm immune.” I smirk. “Um... probably draw.”

“Draw? You draw?”

“Yes.” I lift my shirt. “Some of these pieces I drew myself. Acyn did the others.”

She leans closer, placing her fingertips on my chest. “Really? Which ones?”

“This one,” I point to my ribcage, “is mine.” It's a skull with a snake running through it.

She places her hand on my chest, running her fingers over it. “That's really—”

“Hey Marisa, did you—” Zion interrupts, but stops when he sees Marisa’s hand on me.

“She’s admiring my tattoos.” I grin at him.

“Yeah,” she continues, running her hand over my chest. “I just found out he draws.”

I try to put my shirt down, but Marisa’s hand is still on my hand chest. “Excuse me, Risa.”

“Oh, sorry.” She moves her hand away. “Are you sure you don’t wanna hang out with us?”

I smile at her. “Night, Risa.”

Stopping by the fridge, I grab a bottle of water before heading to my room. Collapsing onto the bed, this is the first time in weeks I’ve been home before midnight. I doubt I’ll find any sleep. It’s become a rarity since Jax told me about the possibility of my mom being granted clemency. I haven’t spoken to her in sixteen years. Once she went to prison, she stopped calling and refused visits. We haven’t heard anything back about her hearing, it could be months before they set a date. For now, I’ll swim in my fucking anxiety.

Getting up, I grab my phone from the dresser and sit on the edge of the bed as I check it. I return a missed call from Jax.

“Gigi called me to tell me the gossip of you moving out.”

I chuckle, falling back onto the bed. “It’s not really gossip. I found a place ten minutes from the office.”

“I’m surprised you lasted as long as you did all the way out in the sticks.”

“I don’t mind the solitude. How are you guys doing?”

“Good, good. We miss you.”

“Tell the girls I’ll be—”

He scoffs. “Not them. Me. It was nice to not be the only man in the house. You took the brunt of the makeovers and tea times.”

“You miss me for purely selfish reasons.” I laugh.

“Not afraid to admit it. My nails are twenty different colors.” He chuckles. “Did your house ever sell?”

“Within a couple of days of it being listed.”

“Do you know where you’ll settle next?”

“Not a fucking clue.” I shake my head, rubbing my eyes.

“We’d always love to have you in Seattle, but Portland isn’t far. In fact, we were talking about taking a trip to see Gigi and Pops in a couple of weeks.”

“They’d love that. Uh... can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“Have you heard anything more about my mom’s hearing?” She’s always brought up with caution. Not because Jax hates her, but because none of us know how to talk about it.

He lets out a long, low sigh. “Not yet, but you can always contact—”

“Nah. I’m only curious is all. Thanks for keeping up with it though.” I feel the lump in my throat. “Listen, I’m gonna let you go because this is the first time in weeks I’ve been in bed early.”

“Yeah, yeah. Of course. Call if you ever need anything, Ash. We love you.”

“Love you guys, too.”

Ending the call, I grab my bag to find my ear buds. Once they’re in my hand, I set them on the bed next to my phone while I put on my running shoes. All I want is to feel my fucking lungs burn and to clear my head. I pull on a hoodie and put my ear buds in. Marisa and Zion are on the couch watching TV.

“Hey, you wanna—”

“I’ll be back.” I call over my shoulder to her as I step outside.

The nights are getting warmer as we enter the summer months. I tilt my head from side to side, cracking my neck, and then crack my knuckles. Looking down at my phone and opening my music app, I click on “Something In The Way” by Nirvana. I turn it up loud enough to drown out the noise in my head, and then I take off down the street.

Trees, cars, and houses blur past me as I gain momentum. Running provides me a level of clarity that nothing else can. I stopped running from my past when I realized I didn’t have to let it define me. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t a part of who I

am. Without my grandparents, uncle, and aunt, I wouldn't be who I am. If it weren't for their love.

Funny how I fear it, but I wouldn't be here without it.

Asher

As I walk up the driveway, I see Marisa at the door with Zion. I swipe my hand through my curls that are stuck to my forehead with sweat. Her eyes meet mine, but I don't say anything. My music is still blasting in my ears. Zion steps aside to let me through. I head for the fridge for a bottle of water and lean against the counter as I take a drink. Marisa's clothes are different. She's wearing an oversized shirt with tousled hair.

I smile to myself, knowing she did in fact fuck him out of pity. Glancing at my watch, I was gone for almost two hours. Not my best time for running ten miles, but my head is clearer, and I feel like myself again. Downing the rest of my water, I turn to see Zion attempting to kiss her, but she turns her head to the side, and he kisses her cheek. I chuckle as I toss my water bottle into the recycle bin and head for the shower.

I peel off my sweaty clothes and make a mental note that I need a hamper. I'm not a neat freak, but I like order. Stepping into the shower, the warm water soothes my muscles. There's a bottle of conditioner that smells like Marisa's curls. I

squeeze a healthy amount into my hand and massage it into my scalp. Once I've washed all the sweat out of my hair and off of my body, I get out, apply some lotion, and put on a pair of boxers.

Marisa's feet are slung over the back of the couch when I walk through the living room. She sits up, looking at me with wet, freshly washed curls, and she's wearing a different t-shirt.

"Attempting to shower your pity fuck away?" I pull on one of her curls.

She swats my hand away, laughing. "Fuck you. Where'd you go?"

"Running."

"Are you okay?" She gets up, following me into the kitchen.

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be?" I pull the sliced pineapple I bought earlier out of the fridge.

"Because your energy seemed... off."

"You're observant." I look at her as I put a piece of pineapple into my mouth. "And you felt that way because it was, but I'm good now. How was your date?"

"It wasn't a fucking date." She hops up on the counter. "Can I be honest with you?"

"Always."

She takes a deep breath, sighing heavily. "All I want is good sex and occasional company. Is that bad?"

“No.” I take another bite. “That’s not a bad thing. Why would it be?”

“Because,” she says with a shrug, “before Reese, I never really dated. There were people I’d see regularly, but nothing official. Then I met him and got swept up... now I want to break free of whatever hold he had and get back to me.”

“He’s named after a fucking piece of candy?”

She tosses her head back with laughter. “That’s what you got out of all I said?”

“I felt it needed to be mentioned. Now.” I set the pineapple aside, taking a step closer to her. “Can I tell you something?”

“Tell me.”

Standing between her thighs, I rest my hands on the counter. “You’ll never get back to who you used to be because that version of yourself no longer exists. Let her go.”

“I don’t know, Ash.” She looks away from me.

I tilt my head to the side, catching her gaze. “I don’t believe that. You know, but you’re not ready to face it. That’s okay, too.” I sweep the curls out of her eyes. “The woman sitting in front of me is stubborn as hell, but she’s fucking amazing, too.”

She laughs softly. “I want to argue with you, but it’ll only prove your point.”

“Exactly.”

Holding my gaze, she leans forward, softly pressing her lips to mine. Pulling back, she says, “Sorry, I –”

I slide my hand around the back of her neck, gently pulling her toward me. Stopping an inch from her lips, I wait for her permission. She kisses me again, but doesn’t pull away. I dip my tongue into her mouth, and she moans. The kiss becomes greedy as I thread my fingers through her hair and slip my hand underneath her shirt, kneading her breast. She wraps her legs around my waist, scooting to the edge of the counter. I press kisses along her jaw before kissing her neck.

“Ash...”

“Hm?” I graze my teeth against her neck.

“I just—I was just with him.”

A low, smooth chuckle resonates in my chest. “Risa, you could be with a million other people, and you’ll always think of me. Tell me.” I nip at her ear, and she inhales sharply. “Who were you thinking of as he fucked you?”

“I’ll never admit to that,” she breathes out.

“You don’t have to. I already know.”

She wraps her arms around my neck, bringing my lips to hers. Lifting her off the counter, I carry her to her bedroom. We crash onto the bed, and I pull her shirt off before my lips are back on hers. She fumbles around in her nightstand for a condom while I suck on her taut brown nipple. Her fingers tangle in my curls as I kiss my way down her body.

“Ash, wait, I – ”

Stopping, I look up at her. “Yes?”

“You don’t think it’s... weird that I was just with someone?”

I hold her gaze. “No, I think it’s weird that you’re trying to stop me from making you come right now.”

“Are you sure?”

“Tell me to stop, and I will. If you don’t want to do this, we don’t have to. But I can assure you, I truly don’t give a fuck.” She has a better moral compass than I do.

She looks down at me for a few seconds before flopping back onto the pillow.

“Open for me.”

Her thighs slowly part. This is the only time she gives herself freely to me. My dick aches as it twitches at the sight of her glistening center. Running my fingers along her wetness, I rub her clit.

“Did he make you come?” I grab the condom from her hand.

She bites her lip, covering her eyes with her hand as she shakes her head yes.

“How many times?”

I take my thick length out of my boxers and roll the condom on. Her eyes are on me. I rub the tip of my dick against her clit, causing her to inhale sharply as she grips the pillow.

“How many times, Risa?” I rub my dick against her clit again.

“Once,” she moans.

“Mmm... you have more to give me than that, don't you?” I push into her tight wetness, watching as I stretch her out. Stopping once the head disappears inside her, I rub her clit. I wrap my hand around her throat, feeling the pulse in her neck against my palm. She opens her eyes, looking at me. “Do you have more to give me?” I rub her clit in slow circles.

“Mmhhh...” she moans, shutting her eyes.

“Look at me.” Her eyes focus on me again. “Do you?”

“Yes, Ash.” She spreads her legs further apart.

“Fuck,” I slam into her, and she lets out a cry of pleasure. “I love when you say my name. Give me what you got, baby.”

I pull out of her slowly, rubbing her clit and push back into her, keeping this rhythm until she is close to her climax.

“Ash.” Her eyes lock onto mine. “I'm so close,” she pants. “I'm gonna come.”

I keep the pressure on her clit and thrust into her. She grips the pillow as she comes for me. Her pussy pulses around my dick and I almost topple over the edge right after her. I bury myself in her as she trembles. Her moans grow softer as the last waves of her orgasm course through her. I look at her essence coating me as I pump into her a few times.

“Again? I want to see what you have to give me.” I lightly brush my fingertips against her sensitive pearl, causing her to twitch and moan.

Her eyes open, focusing on me. “I have waves, baby. Dive into them,” she simpers.



This is the second time I’ve woken up next to Marisa. Her face is in the crook of my neck with her leg slung over my waist. During our climax sprint, I learned she has oceans within her and I happily drowned in the waves. My intention was to go to my bed, but neither of us could move after. At least that’s the story we’re telling ourselves. Grabbing her phone off the nightstand, I check the time. I should get ready for work, but the way she’s wrapped around me and the comforting scent of her keep me in place.

Last night was the first night I’ve slept since Seattle. She stirs, pressing her face against my neck before throwing her arm across my chest. I try to avoid cuddling because it always feels forced on my end. But I find myself trying to keep my body still and my breathing steady to not disturb her. I’ve never lived with a woman before and never imagined living with one I am sexually involved with. Admittedly, it was a rash decision, but I’ll enjoy the situation now and worry about consequences later. I really don’t know where I’ll be at the end of all this. With Jax wanting me to take over the company, selling my house in LA, and my mom possibly getting out of

prison, there's a lot hanging in the balance for me. My commitment issues are shifting into a desire for something permanent. It used to be fun to travel all over the place, but now I want more and to have roots.

Marisa stirs again, and her arm jerks, connecting with my throat.

“What the fuck, Risa?” I choke out, pushing her arm off me.

“What?” She startles awake, pushing her hair out of her face.

“You throat chopped me!”

She covers her mouth. “I’m sorry. I sleep like a fucking windmill.”

“Yeah, I’ve learned that.”

“Can you breathe? Knowing you, you probably deserved it.”

“How? When I have your mane of hair in my face and your limbs wrapped around me like an anaconda?”

“Oh, cry me a fucking river.” She rolls her eyes. “You must’ve enjoyed it if you allowed it.”

“Did you know you snore? The worst fucking sleep of my life.” I sit up, leaning against the headboard.

“I do not.” She smiles, nudging me with her foot as she ties her hair up. “What time is it? Don’t you have somewhere to be besides my bed?”

“You’re better when you’re sleeping.”

She tosses her head back with laughter. “You’re an ass.”

“I know this.” I get off the bed. “Take a number, sweetheart.”

“As fun as last night was,” she says on a long stretch, “get the fuck outta my room.”

She pushes me toward the door, waves, and shuts it in my face. I’m not sure if I’m turned on or annoyed that she reminds me of myself.

Marisa

I run myself a bath. The comforting scent of the milk and honey bath salts wafts around me. As I wait for the tub to fill, I connect my phone to the speaker. I’m sore from last night’s festivities, and a smile spreads across my face as memories replay in my head. I’m straddling a thin line and probably fucking myself in the process. Zion wanted to stay over last night, but I asked him to leave after we had sex. I don’t blame him for being lonely after his divorce. However, I don’t want to be the one to fill that void.

Sleeping with Asher wasn’t my intention, especially not after I’d just slept with Zion, but I can’t help myself with him. Correction, I *don’t* want to help myself. I lost count of how many times he made me come. It isn’t just the sex though. It’s the way he talks to me, as if I can do anything and am insane

for thinking otherwise. From our interactions in the past, I didn't know he thought so highly of me.

Taking my hair down, I let my robe pool at my feet and get into the warm water. After soaking for a few minutes, I immerse myself until I need air. I do this a few times. The feeling of being weightless and the water trickling down my scalp soothe me. With my body relaxed, I scrub myself down with a coffee sugar scrub, shampoo my hair, and lather in a deep conditioner. Soaking in the tub until the water cools, I pull the plug and watch the water go down. Standing, I turn on the shower and rinse out my hair and the bathtub. I learned the hard way not to let conditioner sit in the tub when I found myself wrapped up in my shower curtain one morning trying to stop myself from breaking a hip.

Wrapping a towel around myself, I swipe my hand across the fog on the mirror. My hair is already growing back after my post-Reese chop. I brush my teeth and go through my after-bath ritual of putting on lotion, doing my makeup, and picking out my clothes. My phone buzzes with a text message.

Harlow: Did you survive the first night?

I feel my face heat. While I more than survived the first night, I'm embarrassed to admit I slept with him again.

Marisa: I did... and slept with two men.

As expected, my phone rings seconds later.

“At the same time?” There’s a hint of a smile on her lips.

Quinn joins the chat seconds later, followed by Sevyn.

“Two?” Quinn’s toothbrush is hanging out of her mouth.

“It hasn’t even been twenty-four hours, and here comes the tea,” Sevyn says happily.

“I’m regretting sending this to the group chat.” I look away from the phone.

“Okay, but at the same time?” Harlow shuts a door behind her.

“It wasn’t on purpose...”

“You accidentally slipped on to two dicks?” Quinn wipes her mouth with a smile on her face. Sevyn cackles, and Harlow snorts with laughter.

“Fuck you all.” I laugh.

“Babe, you’re doing enough fucking for all of us right now.” Harlow says through laughter.

“First of all, it wasn’t together. It was one after the other.” I pull on my panties and put on my bra. “The guy I’ve been hooking up with came over, and then Asher... I have no explanation for him.”

“Wait, was Ash there when you were banging the other guy?” Sevyn raises her brow.

“No, we had dinner together, and then he went out.”

“This sounds like a fucking soap opera!” Quinn smirks. “Dinner with both and then you bang them?”

“I... yeah, I guess it sounds impressive when you say it like that. In reality, I forgot Zion was coming over. No thanks to Asher.”

“I’m sorry.” Sevyn cups her hand around her ear. “All I’m hearing is double penetration.”

Harlow cackles. “Sevyn!”

“I haven’t unlocked that level of heauxry... yet.”

“We support all the heauxry, babe!” Harlow smiles.

I knew they were going to put me through the ringer for this, but at least they’re supportive.

“Yeah,” Quinn says, shrugging, “enjoy yourself.”

“Can we meet the other guy?” Sevyn takes a sip of her coffee.

“Absolutely not. We’re only hooking up.” Zion is already blurring the lines. There wouldn’t be a line if I let him meet my friends.

“A picture?” Quinn suggests.

I narrow my eyes. “Hmm... I’ll think about it.”

Harlow sucks her teeth. “I hate to cut this short, but I have to be at the studio in forty-five minutes. But text me, okay? Love you guys.”

“Yeah, I’ve gotta go, too. I have a checkup this morning with the midwife.” Quinn puts mascara on her lashes.

Sevyn's twins ambush her. Emery, her daughter, sits on her lap, and Eli, her son, wraps his arms around her neck. "Looks like my children need me. Keep us posted on the eggplant situation."

I toss my head back with laughter. "I will. Love you guys."

We end the call, and I toss my phone on the bed with a sigh. It's hard when your best friends have these amazing lives with their significant others while you're struggling. I would be lying if I said I didn't want that too. I'm just scared I'll never find it. Pushing those thoughts out of my mind, I put my hair into boxer braids and finish getting dressed.

When I enter the kitchen, Asher is shirtless, wearing only his slacks, cooking breakfast. If I didn't know any better, I'd think this was a dream. I unabashedly admire his muscular frame as I take a seat on the barstool.

"Hungry?" He turns around with a pan in his hand while flipping a pancake with the other.

My eyes watch his arms flex as he plates the pancake. I'm hungry, although it isn't for breakfast. This is food porn taken to new heights. Something about him makes me insatiable.

"Risa? You tired or what?" He has a lopsided grin on his face. I took too long to respond.

"Oh, what are those?" I snap out of my filthy thoughts and point at the plate. "They look like pancakes... but fluffier."

"These," he says as he grabs some strawberries, "are Japanese Souffle Pancakes. My nieces love them." He scatters

strawberries over them, and then sprinkles them with powdered sugar.

“You have nieces?” I notice the way his face lit up at the mention of them.

“Three of them that drive me insane, who I’d do anything for. Including learning how to make these pancakes and homemade whipped cream.”

The way he speaks of them makes me smile. “They live in Seattle?”

He nods as he slides a plate of pancakes topped with strawberries, powdered sugar, whipped cream, and a small cup of syrup. “This looks like something from a magazine.”

Grabbing a fork, he cuts a piece and dips it into the syrup. He offers me the first bite, holding the fork up to my mouth. I open, taking the bite and close my eyes as I savor the taste. “That’s delicious.”

He holds the fork out for me to dig in. “Glad you like it.”

“Is this something I can expect every morning or...”

“While my cooking skills seem impressive, the menu options are limited.”

“That’s alright, I can eat these every day.” I take another bite.

“This relationship is feeling one sided. You’ve yet to cook anything for me.” He looks at me, licking the whipped cream off his lips.

I lick my own, before eating a strawberry. “To be honest, I eat a lot of takeout... since I live alone. It’s kind of depressing for me to cook for myself.”

“I’m here now.” He smiles. “You’re not alone.”

I laugh softly, shaking my head. “You want me to cook for you that damn bad?”

“Not really, but I’m not gonna say no to a home cooked meal.”

“You are so charming.” I nudge his arm. “Let me know what you like and I’ll consider it.”

I typically try to fill the silence, but this is nice, us eating breakfast together. Maybe we can be friends. Funny how I can fuck someone, but the thought of anything past that makes me want to run for the hills. I’m not any better than him. I want commitment without committing. Even before Reese I was like this; he only exacerbated the issue. It was too reminiscent of my dad leaving us for his new wife and the baby on the way.

“I should probably get to the office.” He rises from his seat, putting his plate in the dishwasher.

“Okay, thank you for breakfast.”

He walks by, stopping behind me, and I feel his hand on my shoulder before his fingertips brush against my collarbone. It causes my body to wake in response. He continues trailing his hand up my neck, applying light pressure, coming to a stop

under my chin. Tipping my head back against his chest, he plants a kiss on the top of my head.

“Have a good day,” he mutters into my hair.

It feels like he poured warm water over my head as the feeling of warmth trickles down my body. Such a simple gesture elicited a not so simple response. I run my hand down my neck, clearing my throat, as he disappears into his room. After I quell whatever the fuck I just felt, I finish my food and put my plate in the dishwasher. A few minutes later, he reappears with a black leather bag slung across his body and is rolling up the sleeves of his dress shirt. I roll my eyes, taking a sip of my coffee as if I needed any more imagery of him being sexy seared into my brain. His earbuds are in, and he’s talking to someone who sounds like they could be in trouble from the agitated tone of his voice.

He waves at me as he talks to the person in his ear and walks out the door. Leaning against the counter, I slowly sip my coffee. I always thought of Asher as this detached playboy. Now I’m seeing a different side of him, and I’m not sure how to feel about it. He’s insightful and surprisingly caring. I’ve more than established I’m attracted to him, but what about –

No, Marisa. Don’t even go there.

This wouldn’t even be a thought if he wasn’t living with me. Asher is everything I thought he wasn’t in the best way possible to my dismay. He listens without trying to fix things. Well, aside from him wanting to beat Reese’s ass. But

sometimes I just need to unload without a resolution being the response.

I wash my coffee cup and put it back on the mug rack. Maybe I should stop sleeping with him. I'm sure that's only adding to these conflicting emotions. He should've never kissed the top of my head like that. Now I'm having unrealistic thoughts. There could never be anything more than what already is between Asher and me. He doesn't want commitment and I fear it. I annoy myself because sometimes, like right now, I want more. But most of the time I'm guarding myself out of fear of getting hurt. Maybe one day I'll figure out what the fuck I want. I decide today isn't that day as I put on my shoes and head to the studio.

Asher

I'm annoyed when I arrive at the office. Materials for the Titan Tech project are delayed, which will delay the project overall. It's always a possibility, but something I hope doesn't happen. Francesca is waiting at the door for me, as she always does.

“Good Morning Mr. Blaine.” She enunciates each word in a high-pitched tone.

“Asher.”

I ignore the cup of coffee in her hand. I'm not in the mood for petty bullshit this morning. If I ask someone to do something, like address me by my first name, I expect them to do it. Her heels click along behind me as she tries to keep up.

“The materials – ”

“I know.” Tossing my bag onto my desk, I loosen the knot of my tie, pulling until it unties. It makes a swishing sound as it slips through my collar, and then I unbutton the top few buttons of my shirt. “What else?” Her silence pulls my

attention to her, and she's staring at my hand, undoing the buttons. "Francesca?" I bark.

She jumps. "What?"

"Is that all?"

"No." She clears her throat before rattling off the rest of my schedule for the day. Meetings, meetings, and more fucking meetings.

I nod. "Thank you. Close the door on your way out."

Before I can get settled into my day, my phone rings. Glancing at it, it's a number I don't recognize. Normally I ignore them, but decide to pick up.

"Asher Blaine."

I'm met by an automated voice. "Hello, this is a pre-paid, collect call from an inmate at Washington Correctional Institution. This call is subject to recording and monitored. To accept charges, press one. To refuse charges, press two."

My heart rate spikes, and I break out in a cold sweat. I'm momentarily frozen until the automated voice repeats itself. I press one with a shaky hand, wondering if this is actually happening. Sixteen fucking years and *now* she calls?

"Asher?" A soothing voice resounds in my ear.

It's familiar and hasn't changed. It's the same voice that would sing lullabies to me and say, "I love you". My hand clutches my phone to my ear as I try to catch my breath and find something to say.

“I—I’m sorry it’s been so long. I just thought—”

“How did you get this number?”

“Asher—”

“How did you get this number?”

“Gigi.” She whispers.

A silence falls between us. My jaw ticks. I knew this already. Gigi is the only person my mom would talk to. She never talked to me. I’m her only child and she never called, wrote, or even tried after she was convicted. Gigi says it’s because of shame. I don’t give a fuck what it was. She left me alone.

“I’m not ready for this.”

“A—”

I hang up before she can finish. Pushing away from my desk, I rest my elbows on my thighs and cradle my head in my hands. I try to fucking breathe through this moment. Memories of being twelve and reporters asking to speak to me flood my mind. Many people go through trauma without a witness. It’s different when your mother’s case is high profile because your dad is a police officer. I was homeschooled for two years after it happened. My aunt and uncle did their best to soften the blow, but the damage was already done.

With my heart beating erratically in my chest, I call Gigi.

She answers after a few rings. “Asher, how is—”

“Why did you give her my number?”

She falls silent. A rare occurrence for her.

“Ash, she’s—”

“Why does she want to talk to me after only talking to you all these years? I’m her flesh and fucking blood. All she has left. And she still chose you. Why?”

“Ash, you’ve got to understand she despises herself for what transpired. I felt I owed it to her since James—”

“It’s not your place to correct his wrongs, Gigi. My dad did what he did and —” I grind my teeth together, trying not to raise my voice.

“It’s not yours either. Would you rather me not talk to her?”

“No, I’d rather her not have abandoned me. I can understand not knowing how to explain it when I was twelve, but I grew up, and she never fucking tried. Not once.”

I wish I could hate my mom, but my memories of her won’t let me. She was the best mom in the world, which made her choosing to not talk to me excruciating.

“I should’ve told you, and for that, I am sorry. I thought—”

“You had no right, Gigi!” I can’t keep the bite out of my tone. “I’m twenty-eight, not a little boy anymore. I don’t need my hand held.”

“Ash, I’m sorry.”

I stand, pacing the room. “I can’t do this right now. I’ll talk to you some other time.”

“I love you, Asher.”

I nod my head, as if she can see me, before hanging up. The urge to chuck my phone at the glass window is strong. This morning has gone downhill fast. There is too much going on. I know Gigi meant well, but a heads up would've been nice. Glancing at my watch, it's not even eleven in the morning, and I want to be alone. If I told Jax what was going on, he'd understand and tell me to take the day off. But I also know if I tell him, he'd get upset with Gigi and it would start a fight between them. Jax respects I need to come around in my own time.

My first meeting isn't until two o'clock. Gathering my things, I decide to leave the office. I can't get any work done right now, even if I wanted to. My phone chimes with a text and I'm expecting to see Gigi's name, but it's Marisa.

Marisa: Care to meet up for lunch? No, I'm not cooking.

Despite my dark mood, I chuckle. The day she cooks for me will be the day pigs fly and hell freezes over.

Asher: Sure. Did you want me to pick you up?

Marisa: Yeah. You can choose where we'll eat.

I'll do anything to distract myself right now, and she's a beautiful distraction.



She slides her ass into the front seat, and her scent invades my senses like it always does. I covertly inhale deeply as she buckles her seatbelt. Using her arm, she brushes her curls out of her face and smiles.

“Hi.” She looks like pure fucking light.

“Hey.” I put my arm behind her seat and back out. “Were you teaching this morning?”

“Yeah.” She slips off her shoes and puts her feet on the dash. Only she would have the audacity to do that in a two hundred thousand dollar Lamborghini Urus. It doesn’t bother me, but if anyone else did it, they’d probably find themselves on the side of the road.

“Do your feet always smell?” I roll my window down for dramatic effect.

She turns to me with a smile, and her middle finger raised in the air. “Fuck you. If you weren’t driving, I’d shove them in your face. But I’d rather not die.”

She’s giving me the hits of serotonin I desperately need after the shit show of this morning. “I’m dying right now.” I cover my mouth and nose with my hand.

“My feet do not stink!” She pulls one of them to her nose, inhaling. I laugh hysterically at the sight. “They smell like laundry detergent, you jackass.”

“Do you not like shoes?”

“I would be barefoot all the time if I could.” I’m not a foot person, but every time her feet have been over my shoulders, they’ve been manicured. “Where are you taking me?”

“Somewhere that doesn’t have fish.”

“Aw...” She sticks out her bottom lip. “You do care.”

“Uh huh... sure.” I nod.

She laughs, swatting my arm, and then turns up the music. We don’t talk the rest of the ride, just vibe. Fifteen minutes later, we pull into the parking lot of a Mexican restaurant. It’s one place I’ve discovered as I’ve been familiarizing myself with Portland. She loops her arm through mine as we walk inside.

“This place smells delicious. I’ve never been here.”

“I found it last week.” Grabbing the restaurant door handle, I hold it open for her. “The food tastes as good as it smells.”

“What do you recommend?” She studies the menu as we stand in line.

“I’m basic and get tacos.”

“Always a good choice. Oh, they have elotes!”

“What’s that?”

“An orgasm in your mouth is what it is.”

“That’s what I have you for.” The corners of my mouth tip up as I side eye her.

Her head snaps toward me. “Shush!” She looks around to make sure no one heard.

“Oh, so you can say orgasm? But I can’t say you’re my source?”

“This is a family establishment, Ash.”

I chuckle smoothly. “I’m going to need you to expound on what an elote is, then?”

“It’s grilled corn on the cob with cojita cheese, mayo, sour cream, chili... just try it. It’s good.”

“Alright, what do you want?” We’re up next in line.

“Two asada tacos, an elote, and a small horchata.”

I order myself the same thing. The elote doesn’t sound that good, but I’ll try it because she seems to love it. Instead of horchata, I order jamaica. She digs in her bag when the cashier says the total. I grab her arm, causing her to still, and pay for the food. She rolls her eyes, saying nothing, and shoves money in my pocket as they hand me my change.

“Where do you want to sit?”

She turns, looking at the tables. While she’s distracted, I slip the money back into her bag. “Outside.” She turns her attention to me. “It’s a nice day.”

“I’ll agree with you on that.”

“Did it hurt?”

“What?” My brows knit together.

“For you to agree with me.”

“Yeah.” I put my hand over my heart. “I think I felt a chest pain just now.”

She rolls her eyes, grabbing my hand, and pulls me toward the outdoor seating. “We better grab a table.”

The afternoon lunch rush has arrived and tables are filling up fast. I follow her to one that is away from the crowd. Before I can take a seat, they call our order number. I grab our food and return to the table. Her eyes are on me as I take my plate off the tray.

“Try it.” She points at the elote.

“Like... now?” I glance at it, then back at her. “You’re gonna watch me take a bite?”

She nods her head with a smile. “Yes.”

“This isn’t weird at all.” I grab the corn, bringing it to my mouth. “You’re really going to—”

“Eat it, Ash,” she snaps.

“Eating. Goddamn.” Taking a bite, I chew slowly as I decide whether I like it enough to take another. I do. “It’s good.” I lick my lips before wiping them with a napkin.

“Good?” She raises a brow.

“Orgasmic? I nudded in my pants?” She tosses her head back with laughter. “Is that what you wanted to hear? Jesus, forcing me into a bite.”

“I was excited for you to try it. Do you really like it?”

“Yeah, it sounded gross at first, but it’s good.”

Giving me a satisfied smile, she picks up her taco and takes a bite. After a few moments of us eating, she looks at me as she sips on her drink.

I stop with a taco in mid-air and stare back at her. “What?”

“Are you okay? You seemed tense earlier.”

“You’re good at reading people.”

She looks down at her drink as she stirs it with the straw. “It’s a trauma response. Not a gift.”

“What do you mean?”

She looks at me as her curls whip across her face in the wind. “After my dad left, my mom’s moods were unpredictable. Sometimes it felt like she was taking it out on me and my brother. As if it was our fault he left.” She shrugs. “But I had to anticipate where she was emotionally a lot. To the point it became second nature. I love her, but it wasn’t fun to feel emotionally responsible for an adult. Now, unfortunately, it spills over into all of my relationships.”

I wasn’t expecting her response to be so deep. When I was younger, I had to predict my dad’s moods a lot. He was a good dad to me, but with my mom, as a husband, he was different.

“How’s your relationship with your mom now?”

“Good. I mean, it wasn’t terrible back then. She didn’t beat us or anything, but... I—we’re good now. She just... I just wish I could’ve been a normal teen. You know? I didn’t want to have to worry about helping raise my brother and then my sister or even helping provide... but I did. And I’d do it all

over again, but... you don't realize how things are sometimes until you're an adult and look back on it."

"That's a lot of responsibility. How old are they?"

"My brother, Killian, will be eighteen this weekend, and Destiny, my sister, will be twelve soon. Do you have siblings?"

"Nope. Just me. I'll tell you right now, my parents are a complicated topic, but maybe one day I'll tell you."

"That's fair." She smiles. "I don't expect you to share anything you don't want to."

"Also... thanks for caring enough to ask if I'm okay."

"I don't." She smirks, shrugging her shoulders.

"Of course not. So... how's your boyfriend?"

She glares at me. "He isn't—" she growls with frustration. "I don't even know why I bother. You like to get under my skin. I'd swear off dick if I knew what was good for me."

"Is that right?"

"Yep," she says, nodding her head. "No dick for me. It's why I'm in this situation in the first place." She takes the last bite of her taco and dusts off her hands.

Crossing my arms, I lean forward, resting my forearms on the table. "You wanna bet on it?"

Swallowing, she straightens up in her seat and flips her hair over her shoulder. "Yeah, I'll bet on it."

“You’re really going to swear off sex?” She nods, looking unsure of her random decision. “Is this for a set amount of time or until you cave?”

“You think I can’t do it?” She raises a brow.

“I don’t.”

She scoffs. “I’ve gone without sex before.”

“While you’re sleeping doesn’t count, Risa.”

She gasps, covering her mouth. “Are you saying I’m a – ”

“No.” I shake my head. “I’m not. Enjoying sex doesn’t make you anything.”

I’d be the last person to cast stones. I’ve never held that judgement of someone if they enjoy sex. We all have our vices. Mine happens to be having gorgeous women on top of me. Marisa matches my energy. Which means she’s going to take this bet competitively, and I’ll love making her cave.

“Are we betting?”

“High stakes?”

“This isn’t Vegas.” She smiles.

I study her a moment, trying to decide on a bet. “If you cave, you have to cook dinner for me.”

“Really?” She scrunches up her face. “That’s– ”

“Nude, with high heels on, complete with a happy ending, and you as dessert.”

Her lips are slightly parted as she stares at me. “I—” She runs her fingers down her throat, swallowing. “That is a very well thought out, vivid description.”

“I have a vivid imagination. You can wear an apron if you’d like. Now, what do you want on the slim chance I lose?”

“So confident it’s disgusting.” She points her finger at me. “Does this mean you’re not fucking anyone either?”

“We can play that way if you want. It’ll make the reward of winning you that much sweeter.”

“Winning me?”

“Yes.” I brush her curls out of her eyes, tucking them behind her ear. “Win.”

She looks at my lips as she licks her own. For a moment, she looks as though she wants to retract the bet. But of course she doesn’t.

Meeting my gaze, she asks, “What do I get when I win?”

“Whatever you like.”

She looks up at the sky in thought. “Mmm...” Her eyes meet mine. “I want you to wait on me hand and foot for a day, like a goddamn Queen. Breakfast in bed,” she ticks each one off with a finger, “draw me a bath, fan me with a big ass leaf —” a laugh escapes me “—a full body massage... everything. I want to be properly taken care of with you at my beck and call. Clothes are optional.” She smiles, finishing her horchata with a loud slurp.

I give her a half smile as I hold her gaze. After telling me she helped raise her siblings and her mother provide, I doubt anyone has taken care of her. There's also no way in hell Reese's pieces was doing her right in any way.

Extending my hand out to her, she looks at it before placing hers in mine. "Bet. Your wish is my command, love."

"I feel like I'm making a deal with the devil." There's a glint in her eye and a smile on her lips.

A slow, smooth chuckle resonates in my chest. "The good news is we'll both be fucked in the end."

Marisa

After making the bet with Ash, I keep wondering if I truly can live without sex. I mean, of course I can. But I guess the question is, why would I want to? I wish I could blame Reese, but I was like this long before I met him. Sleeping with whoever because it makes me feel good. Reese was the first person who had me considering settling down. It was more than just sex; I saw the possibility of more. Maybe this bet will help me get clear and intentional about what I want. Or drive me insane.

Driving home from work, I have all my windows down while singing at the top of my lungs. It helps me unwind. I swing by my favorite Chinese food spot, looking forward to a night at home, curled up on my couch, watching Netflix. Asher's car is already in the driveway. While my neighborhood is nice, his Lamborghini sticks out like a sore thumb. Maxwell, my neighbor, is distractedly watering his begonias as he drools over Asher's car.

"New car?" He chuckles and waves.

“It’s not mine.” I grab my stuff from my trunk. “It’s my roommate’s.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you had a roommate.”

“Yeah, I’m sure he’d be happy to talk about cars with you.” I snicker to myself as I slam my trunk shut, knowing Asher will hate that.

“Really?” His eyebrows shoot up to his hairline. Not wanting to seem overly enthusiastic, he clears his throat, and adds, “Only if he wants to.”

Maxwell and his wife, Faith, are some of the nicest people I’ve met. When I moved in, Faith brought meals over every evening for the first week. She didn’t want me to stress about unpacking and cooking. I tried insisting that she didn’t have to, but she did it anyway. They had their first baby about six months ago, and she’s adorable.

“Of course he would! I’m going to head inside,” I hold up my bag of food, “and eat. Tell Faith I’ll come over this weekend to see her and Violet.”

“Will do.” He nods. “Have a good evening, Marisa.”

I give him a wave of my hand. Stopping at the mailbox, I put the letters in my mouth as I open the door. Once inside, I kick it shut behind me and drop my bag near it before heading for the kitchen. Setting everything down, I take off my shoes. The house is quiet for Asher being home. He may not even be here for all I know. Wanting to change into something more

comfortable, I head to my room. But I stop in my tracks when I get to the living room.

“What the fuck?” I mutter.

Heading down the hall to Ash’s room, I knock on the door. “Come in,” he hollers.

I open the door and try to back out when I realize he’s fresh out of the shower. “Oh.” I cover my eyes and ram my elbow into the doorframe. “Fucking shit, you little fucker!” I grab my elbow, dancing around in a circle, waiting for the pain to subside.

He laughs hysterically as he pulls up his boxers. “You’ve seen me naked, Risa.”

“Are you thirst trapping me on purpose?” I know all too well he takes excellent care of his body. Seeing him with nothing on makes me question this bet.

“I’d never.” He pulls on a shirt. I stare at him, forgetting why I came to his room. “Did you need something?”

“Uh... yes. I—” Glancing down the hall, I remember why I’m in his room. “Where the fuck is my couch?” My well-worn one has been replaced by a brand new one.

“If you don’t like the color, we can replace it. But my decorator thought it matched better with the décor of the room.”

It’s a lush forest green and looks far better than the one I had. “You have a decorator?”

“Yeah... how else would I furnish a house?”

“Right...” More proof we are in an entirely different tax bracket. “Would it have hurt you to ask me?”

“Yes, probably.” He puts his hands on my shoulders, turning me around, and drapes his arm over them as we walk to the living room. “Sit.” He gestures toward the couch. Crossing my arms, I glare up at him. “See, this is why—” he lets out an exasperated sigh “—Risa, love, can you please try the couch?”

It annoys me I find the gentle tone of his voice sexy. Rolling my eyes, I sit on the couch. I sink into it as though it’s a marshmallow. It’s plush and heavenly. Yep. Far better than the second hand one I had.

He sinks next to me. “The look on your face tells me you like it.”

I prop my feet up on the footrest. “It’s... amazing.”

He gives me a pearly white smile. “Next time, I’ll ask.”

“No need... I would’ve said no out of spite.”

He tosses his head back, letting out a rumble of laughter. “At least you know you’re difficult.”

“With you? Yeah. Always.” I rest my head against the couch, considering falling asleep. “Oh, there’s Chinese food if you want some. Did you have plans tonight?”

“Nah, I just wanna chill. Today was long.” He rubs his eyes before staring up at the ceiling.

“Good Chinese food and Netflix are the perfect remedy for that. Followed by wine and a face mask.”

“Face mask?”

“Yes, you need one.”

“The fuck is that supposed to mean?”

I cackle, reluctantly sitting up. “I’m going to change, then we can eat, watch Netflix, drink wine, and wear face masks.”

“How in the hell did I get dragged into your girl’s night?”

“It’s called self-care. Get into it.”

He snatches the remote off the coffee table. “I’ll choose what we watch.”

“Fair enough,” I shrug. “In case you’re wondering, I love action movies.”

My favorite home attire is an oversized t-shirt and nothing else. I put on panties for both our sakes. I refuse to lose the bet. Although... I slide them back down my hips. If he were to come on to me, then technically he would lose. I’d wear lingerie, but I want to be subtle... for now.

Asher is scrolling through shows when I walk through the living room to the kitchen. “Are you hungry?”

“Yeah. I’ll eat with you.”

I grab the food, paper plates, drinks, and take it to the living room. Accidentally dropping the plate, I bend over to pick it up and sit next to Asher.

“Okay, what do you want?” Opening the bag, I pull out the containers and silverware. “I got General Tso’s, sweet and sour chicken, egg rolls, rice, and yakisoba noodles.” I unwrap the silverware from the plastic, waiting for a response. When I don’t get one, I look at him and his gaze is pensive. “What?”

“Really, Risa?” His voice is deeper than usual.

“What?” I shrug, raising my hands.

“No panties?”

“Oh!” I snort with laughter. “Stop looking at my ass.”

“It was right in my face. I don’t know why you expected better of me.”

“Right... you telling me to walk in on you naked should’ve been a sign.” I open the containers and fill my plate with food. “Help yourself.”

“You’re not gonna bend over for me again?” He smirks, grabbing his plate. “Do you watch anime?”

“I haven’t.” I glance at the screen, seeing an anime show pulled up titled *Castlevania*. “If you wanna watch anime, let’s watch anime.”

He presses play as he slurps noodles into his mouth. I settle into the couch as I eat my food. It doesn’t take me long to get into the show. There’s lots of action and vampires. Two things I love in my books and movies. Before I know it, my plate is empty. I was starving.

“Do you want wine or beer?” I ask, getting up from the couch to throw my trash away.

“I’ll have some wine with you.”

Putting a bag of popcorn in the microwave, I lean against the counter and check my phone. There’s a text from a number I don’t recognize. I open it up to read the full message.

Unknown Number: Marisa, can we please talk?

I don’t even have to ask who it is. He got a new number just to text me. Maybe I need to change my number. I don’t understand why he’s hung up on me when he has a life. We were a fling. He needs to move on like I have. Or am trying to. I’m half tempted to suggest marriage counseling for him and his wife so he’ll leave me alone, but I ignore his text instead.

The beeping of the microwave pulls me from my thoughts. Setting the phone down, I pour the popcorn in a bowl, grab the wine, and the glasses as I head back to the living room. Asher is fully engrossed in the show. He tears his eyes away from the TV when I put the bowl of popcorn in his face.

“Thanks.” He gives me a half smile as he takes it from my hand.

Pulling the cork from the bottle, I pour us glasses of red wine and take a gulp of mine. I’m trying my best to not allow Reese to have an effect on me. I constantly berate myself for not being stronger and getting over him faster.

“Is this what you do most nights after work?” Asher’s smooth, deep voice fills my head.

“Yeah, I used to go out a lot. I’ve found myself wanting a slower pace. At least when I’m not trying to drown in alcohol and... men.” Which seem to be my coping mechanisms of choice.

He studies me. For a moment, I think I’ve shared too much, but he smiles. “There are worse vices. I like your openness.”

“It’s over sharing.” I shove a handful of popcorn in my mouth. “I can’t seem to shut the fuck up around you.”

“I wouldn’t want you to.”

A weird sensation happens in my stomach. I feel like I’m dropping from a rollercoaster. “Uh... what about you?” I try to shake the foreign feeling.

“Drive home, hang out with my grandparents, chill, and sleep. I don’t have time for anything else. And believe it or not, a slower pace becomes more appealing with each passing day.”

“What happened to the Vegas Asher?” I smirk, taking a sip of my wine.

He chuckles. “He’s still here. I partied a lot, but only slept with you. To be honest, I haven’t hooked up with someone random in a while.”

I narrow my eyes, resting my cool wine glass against my cheek as I study him. “You’re not who I thought you’d be.”

I viewed him as the typical playboy. Money, cars, clothes, looks that cause you to overlook the flaws, and have you ready to risk it all. But the problem is... I'm having trouble finding any damning flaws.

He rests his head against the couch. "There's a difference between what I allow people to see and what I allow them to know." His gaze meets mine. "You'd only seen me before, and now you're getting to know me. Although, I have to admit, I am an asshole." He flashes me a smile.

I burst into laughter. "At least you know."

"Well aware, but don't care." He shrugs.

"So edgy," I tease, grabbing another handful of popcorn.

"Fuck you." He laughs.

"If I wasn't so damn competitive, I would. But I intend to win."

He shifts, turning his body towards me. "Have you ever been on an actual date?"

"Mmm... with Re—"

"Nah." He shakes his head. "Reese's pieces doesn't count, love."

"What counts as a date?"

"Your question tells me you've never been on one."

"I've been on dates, but commitment was the furthest thing from my mind. Honestly, I'd go on dates to get to know them enough to fall into bed with them later, not walk down the

aisle. Now I'm wondering if I spent too long fucking around and missed my opportunity."

His question jogs my memory. Now that I think about it, Reese and I never really went anywhere on a date. We'd always travel somewhere, which I thought was lavish. But we never went to the movies or out to dinner at a local place. The bar I met Reese at is one I know for a fact his wife would never step foot in. When I thought she was my friend, I had suggested it and she turned up her nose as if I had asked her to chop her arm off. It's downtown in a questionable area, but the food and drinks are good. It all makes sense now. I take a gulp of wine to wash the bitterness out of my mouth.

"Missed opportunity for what?" He raises his brows.

"For love..." My words get lost in my throat as I look into my empty wineglass. "Maybe I missed my chance."

I can feel his eyes on me. He does that a lot after I say something. "You blame yourself for what happened?"

"Yeah, for being naïve. I'm usually not that dumb."

"Naïve or vulnerable?"

My eyes meet his. "Vulnerable..." I say softly. "I'd rather not open up to people."

"Can I say something?"

"What?"

"You'll never understand why he lied because it isn't in your nature to lie. Remember, you're straight, no chaser. Being

vulnerable doesn't mean you're weak. It takes strength to be open. If he lied the entire time, who's really the weak one?"

My lips tingle to kiss him, but I bite my bottom lip instead. "I never thought of it that way."

"Take your power back, love." He turns his attention to the TV.

I get up to grab my phone from the kitchen. This whole time I've been thinking I'm the weak one because I was honest and open. Sitting on the couch again, I open my phone to see another text from Reese.

Unknown Number: I can see you've read my messages.

Please talk to me.

Marisa: Put this energy into marriage counseling with your wife. I'm not the one and never will be. I don't want you.

For the first time, I actually believe the words I say to him. There's no longing for it to be what once was. I send the text, block his new number, and look at Asher. "Ready for face masks?"

"No." He chuckles. "But go ahead."

"You'll thank me later. C'mon." I tug on his arm. "Get up."

"Isn't this supposed to be a relaxing experience?" He reluctantly rises from the couch.

"It will be when you stop resisting." I pull on his wrist, leading him to my bathroom. "You can sit while I get the

stuff.” I point toward the tufted bench in front of my vanity.

He sits, letting out an exasperated sigh. I giggle, knowing I am going to enjoy myself. “It won’t hurt, you know? In fact, I bet you’ll want to do face masks with me again.”

“Don’t get your hopes up.” He watches me pull things out of the cabinets.

“First, we exfoliate. You’ll have to come wet your face for this.”

“You just told me to sit down...”

“Ash, enjoy the moment with me, okay? Can you do that? Please?”

He rolls his eyes as he gets up from the bench. I have to admit, his annoyance is kind of cute. He wets his face with warm water, then looks at me. “Now what?”

I scoop some matcha face scrub out of a small glass jar and wipe it on his face. He glances at himself in the mirror before closing his eyes as I rub it in. His face relaxes as I move my fingertips in circular motions. Asher already has flawless skin, but there’s nothing wrong with a little extra care. Plus, I’m enjoying the up close view of his face.

“I can’t decide if this smells good or not.”

“You have a thing for scents.” I smile as I continue to move my fingertips around his face.

“They’re great for memory recall. I’ll never forget a smell... or taste.” He peeks at me.

My skin heats and the tips of my ears burn. I can't deny the sudden rush to my center either, but I ignore it. "Are you saying you want to remember this moment?"

"Can we wash this off yet?"

I laugh, taking a step back from him. "Go ahead, grouch." He washes his face off, and then I dry him with a towel. "How does your skin feel?"

"Soft." He looks at himself in the mirror, turning his face side to side. Grabbing the jar of face scrub, he turns to me. "Ready?"

"Oh, I can do it myself." I try to take it from his hand, but his grip on it is firm.

"Wet your face, Risa."

"Ash, I can—"

"Wet your face."

"Fine." I wet my face, then look at him. "Remember, cir—"

"I know, Risa." He scoops some face scrub out of the jar. "Close your eyes."

I flinch when he swipes it across my cheek, but relax as his fingertips move in slow, small circles around my face. I've had facials before, but this is different. I feel like I'm melting. It's the same feeling I had when he kissed the top of my head before leaving for work this morning. Instead of trying to push the feeling away, I lean into it because it feels good. My jaw goes slack, causing my lips to part. And to think I was going to

do this myself. Of course, I'm stubborn and will never let him know how good this feels. My eyes flutter open when he presses the softest kiss to my lips. I watch him pull away and put the top back on the jar.

“Wash your face, Risa.”

Staring at him with my mouth open, I snap out of it. “Right.” I bump into the sink and fumble with the faucet as I turn on the water. He chuckles as I splash warm water on my face. My body screams for him while my mind wonders what the fuck is going on here.

He gently dries my face. This is a stark contrast to the man I know in bed. Unfortunately, I find myself highly attracted to both. “What next?”

“Toner, then the masks.” I grab a cotton pad, put some toner on it, and then wipe it onto his face.

“This one definitely smells good.”

I laugh, tossing the cotton pad into the trash. “Maybe you'll always remember me.”

“Who told you you're forgettable?”

He grabs the toner off the sink and puts some on a cotton pad. I close my eyes, not even protesting this time. He wipes the toner across my face, and I melt again. I thought this was going to be a funny, chill time. It is chill, but I'm not used to this. To someone taking care of me. He presses another soft kiss to my lips.

“Ash!” I push at his chest. “Stop it.”

“What?” He laughs, backing up. “Do you really want me to stop?”

I’d never say no, so I move onto the next step. “Ready for the face masks?”

“Took us long enough to get here.” He smirks. “Put it on me, love.”

I apply a generous amount of the CBD glow mask to his skin. “Aw, you look cute in pink.”

He lets out a rumble of laughter, opening his eyes, and looks at himself in the mirror. “Of course I do. I look good in everything.”

“How do you breathe with such suffocating arrogance?”

“I think it’s an art.”

I scoff, rolling my eyes as he grabs the face mask off the counter and scoops some out. “How much do I put on?” He swipes a little on my face.

“Make it thick. Like yours.” He bursts into laughter. “That didn’t come out right, but you know what I meant. Pervert.”

“You said it. Not me.” He continues applying the mask. “You have a gorgeous face.”

My eyes snap open. “What?”

“You have a gorgeous face and a few freckles on your nose. That’s cute.”

“I—thank you.”

He smiles, putting the top back on the jar. “Can we take a picture for my nieces? They’ll never believe I did this.”

“Why?”

“I let them paint my nails. I draw the line at face masks.”

“Painted nails sound a little more extreme than face masks.”

I raise a brow.

“No, they want to make their own face masks with kitchen ingredients. I never know what they put in that shit. It looks suspect whenever they do it. I swear I saw the little one, Laynee, put ketchup in hers.”

I can’t stop laughing at the look of horror on his face. “I would choose nails over face masks too. Let me grab my phone.”

“You can use mine.” He pulls it from his pocket and unlocks it.

Looking at the screen, it’s a picture of the squad when we went to Vegas. That weekend couldn’t have come fast enough for me. I just had the falling out with Reese and his wife a few days before. Then marrying Asher helped me forget all of that, even if it was only for a night.

“That was a fun weekend.” I open the camera and point it at him. “Smile.”

“I meant a picture of us together. I’m shit at taking pictures.”

“Oh, yeah. I can do that.” I go to pull my hair out of its makeshift bun, but he stops me.

“You’re gorgeous.” He stands behind me, wrapping his arm around my neck, and pulls me against his chest as he smiles. “Just take the goddamn picture.”

I toss my head back with laughter as I capture this moment.

Asher

It's Sunday, which means come hell or high water, I better be at my grandparents' house for dinner. I headed out early from Marisa's to spend the day at theirs and hopefully go on a horseback ride. I contemplated whether or not I should go because I haven't talked to Gigi since earlier this week. But I'm not one to shy away from something because it makes me uncomfortable... well, I don't shy away from most things. My mom is an entirely different story and with good reason.

I'm surprised to see Jax, Genevieve, and the girls stepping out of their suburban. I talked to him on Friday and he didn't say anything about visiting Portland. The girls attack me as soon as I step out of my car.

"Surprise!" They squeal.

I laugh as I hug them. "I didn't know you guys were coming."

"Neither did we." Jax pulls me into a hug.

"We arrived yesterday afternoon." Genevieve kisses my cheek. "I had to pick up some items for the shop in Portland.

We wanted to surprise you today, since Gigi said you'd be here."

"Are you surprised?" Laynee asks.

"I am." I grin at her.

"Can you take me out on the horses later?" Haelyn looks at the stables.

"Yeah, whatever you guys want to do."

"I also invited Francesca." Genevieve smiles at me. "She said she'd be here later in the afternoon."

"Gen. I – "

"She's not his type, Mom." Ivy chimes in as she types out a text on her phone. I'm not sure when she got so old or observant. She's only thirteen, but isn't wrong.

Genevieve looks at me. "What's wrong with Francesca? She's beautiful, smart, and you've known her forever."

"I think Ash can pick out his own mate when he's ready," Jax says, wrapping his arm around my shoulders as we head into the house. Gigi meets us at the door, pulling us both into a hug.

"My boys." She smiles.

"Hi, Mom."

Gigi pulls back, giving Jax an appraising look. "Mom? With how little you visit me, you'd think I was a stranger." I try to swallow my laughter, but it bubbles up anyway. "I see my grandson more than the son that came from my—"

“Mom, I get it. I apologize. I’ll make more of an effort.”

It’s funny watching Jax become a child in the presence of Gigi. “You should’ve known this was coming. When was the last time you were here?”

“Ash, you’re not helping.”

“You can’t even remember, can you?” Gigi rests her hands on her hips.

Pops comes into the living room, holding a pair of tongs. “Stop giving these boys a hard time, Joy.” He kisses Gigi on the cheek.

“Avery, if your son would come see his mother regularly instead of once a year, I wouldn’t have to!”

“You know you two can always come visit us in Seattle, right?”

“Why would we want to go to the city?” they say in unison, with a bewildered expression.

Jax and I laugh. My grandpa retired as a Sergeant from the Seattle Police Department shortly after I moved in with Jax and Gen. After that, they moved out of the city and never looked back.

“Am I here to eat, or am I on trial?”

Gigi smiles, pulling him into another hug and kisses his cheek. “You know I love you, son.” Before I can head out to the backyard to hang out with the girls, Gigi pulls me aside. “I wasn’t sure you’d come.”

I lean against the doorframe. “I’m still upset, but I wouldn’t miss time with you.”

“You know she loves you, right?”

“Gigi...” I let out an exasperated sigh. “Love doesn’t make it okay. Let me come around in my own time. She took hers, let me take mine.”

She grabs my hand, patting it. “Okay, Ash. Okay.”

I wish I was mad at my mom. Anger is an easier emotion for me to get over. I can work that out of my system. But the hurt and sadness has rooted itself so deep in my being and continues to grow. I stopped going to therapy a few months ago because I finally felt I was in a good place. And I was, but this shit is adding an extra layer for me to peel back and examine. I was learning to make peace with not talking to her, and now she wants to talk to me. It’s enough to make anyone question themselves.

“I’ll be outside if you need me,” I say, ending the conversation, not wanting to fuck up my mood.

The sun kisses my skin as I walk into the backyard. Haelyn calls my attention. “Ash, I’ll race you across the monkey bars.” My grandparents have a large jungle gym that hasn’t been used since the last time the girls were here.

“Prepare to lose, runt.”

“No cheating.” She points her finger at me.

“I’ll still beat you. Even with my legs crossed.” I’m too tall to be racing across these monkey bars, but I’ll do it anyway.

“Wanna bet me twenty dollars?”

“Make it twenty-five, and you better pay up when I win.”

“Fine.” She holds out her hand, and we shake on it.

“Laynee, can you keep track of who wins?”

“I’m busy,” she says, arranging her stuffed animals around a small table for what looks like a tea party.

“If you keep track, I’ll play tea party with you.” Haelyn tries to bribe her.

Laynee’s big brown eyes look at Haelyn. “You will?”

“I promise.” Haelyn puts her hand over her heart.

“Okay.” Laynee pops up from the table, causing her curly ponytail to bounce. “I’ll keep track.”

“Remember, no cheating,” Haelyn warns.

“Afraid to lose?” I chuckle.

“On your mark, get set, go!” Laynee screams.

I give Haelyn a few second head start because this isn’t a fair race, but I let her think she has a fighting chance. I take no time to catch up with and surpass her, winning the race.

Laynee squeals with delight when I reach the other side. “Good job, Uncle Ash!”

“Laynee! You’re supposed to be on my side!” Haelyn laughs.

She scowls. “But I love Uncle Ash. He plays tea party with me.”

Haelyn rolls her eyes. “Again?”

“Sure.”

We race across a few more times and on our last time across, I slow down, letting her win.

“You owe me twenty-five dollars.” She holds out her hand.

“Uh-uh. Play with Laynee, like you promised, then I’ll pay you.”

Laynee smiles, nodding her head. Haelyn groans. “Ash, that isn’t fair.”

I quirk a brow. “Haelyn, you know it isn’t fair to make promises you never meant to keep.”

She lets out a puff of air, causing her curly bangs to fly up. “I know. C’mon Laynee, let’s play tea party.”

Laynee jumps up and down, dragging Haelyn to the tea table. I slip off my sneakers and socks, letting my feet sink into the lush green grass as I walk across the lawn. Reaching the trampoline, I climb on, jump in the air, and land next to Ivy. She bounces and falls on her back, laughing.

“How’s ballet?” I ask, sitting up.

Her face lights up as she re-situates herself next to me. “I love it. Will you still come to recitals?”

“I’d never miss one.” I pull my phone out of my pocket. “Guess what I did?”

“What?” She scoots closer.

“A face mask.”

She narrows her eyes. “I don’t believe you. You won’t even do them with us and you let us do anything to you.”

I hand her my phone, showing her the picture of Marisa and me with the face masks on.

“You did!” She grins. “Who’s the girl? She’s really pretty.”

“A friend.”

“What’s that?” She cups her hand around her ear. “A girlfriend? Girls, Ash has a girlfriend!”

Haelyn and Laynee gasp, abandoning their tea party, and run toward us. “Ivy, I’m never telling you anything again.” I reach for my phone, but she rolls away from me, laughing.

“Let us see, Ivy!” Haelyn helps Laynee onto the trampoline then climbs on, grabbing the phone from Ivy. “You did facemasks with her?”

“Why do you girls act as though I’ve betrayed you?” I toss my head back with laughter.

“Because you never let us!” Haelyn protests.

Laynee grabs the phone, studying it. After staring for a while, she looks at me. “Is she a princess? She’s pretty.”

“Yeah, she is pretty,” Haelyn agrees. “Shocking that she’s with you.” I laugh, reaching for my phone, but she grabs it from Laynee. “What’s her name?”

“Marisa. And no, she isn’t a princess nor my girlfriend. We’re friends.”

Haelyn grins, and I already know she's plotting on me. "Let's call her and see what she says."

"Haelyn!" I lunge at her, and she takes off, scrolling through my phone, with the girls close behind her. I hear the dial of the video call as they climb up to the tallest tower of the jungle gym. Marisa's voice comes through the phone a few seconds later.

"What do you—wait, you're not Ash," Marisa says.

"No, I'm Haelyn."

"And I'm—I'm Laynee." She stands on her tiptoes, trying to see the screen over Haelyn's shoulder.

"I'm Ivy. We called to tell you you're really pretty."

"Oh." Marisa chuckles. "That's nice of you to say."

"Have you kissed my uncle like the princesses on TV?" Laynee asks loudly.

"Okay, that's enough." I climb to the top of the tower. "Laynee, how do you even know about kissing? You're five."

She glares at me. "I'm five and a half."

Ivy grabs the phone and goes down the slide. The girls follow her. I look up at the sky, regretting showing them the picture.

"Have you kissed our uncle?" Ivy grins, looking up at me.

"Uh..." Marisa hesitates. "Yes, I have." I hear the smile in her voice.

“But you’re not his girlfriend?” Haelyn scrunches up her face, wondering how that works.

“No, I’m not. We’re friends. I’m sure Ash can explain it.”

I slide down and snatch the phone from Ivy. “Thank you, Risa, for making this confusing for them.”

She cackles. “Too bad you didn’t turn into a prince.”

Laynee’s eyes widen. “She’s a princess?”

“This has gotten out of my control.” I laugh, looking at Marisa.

“I can see you’re out of your depth. It’s a rare sight that I love. Who knew three little girls could do that to you?” She smiles.

“Yeah, and now I have to explain how we’ve kissed without you being my girlfriend.”

“Good luck with that.” A smile spreads across her face. “I’m gonna let you get back to your interrogation. I’ve gotta call my brother, then I’ll be next door.”

“I’ll see you later.”

“Bye!” The girls yell, waving.

“Later.” She waves at them. “Thank you for calling to tell me I’m pretty. You know how to make a girl’s day!”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “Later, Risa.”

Ending the call, I look at the girls and the unforgiving smiles on their faces. “I have no words for you three.”

“She’s really nice,” Ivy says. “Can we meet her?”

“Uh...”

“If you kissed, doesn’t that make her your girlfriend?”
Haelyn asks.

“She must be a princess because she said you didn’t turn into a prince.” Laynee replies, as if that explains it all.

“I...”

“Have a girlfriend,” Haelyn finishes.

“No, I—”

“Mom!” Laynee shouts, running toward the house. “Ash has a girlfriend who’s a princess!”

“Oh my God.” I run my hands down my face. “Ivy...”

She giggles, taking off for the house with Haelyn behind her. I slowly walk inside, wondering how the fuck this got away from me. It was one goddamn picture.

Francesca is in the living room, looking at the girls as they tell everyone that I have a girlfriend. Suddenly, having a girlfriend doesn’t sound as bad if it means it gets through her delusion that we’ll end up together.

“You have a girlfriend?” she asks loudly, causing everyone to look at me.

“I have a friend who is a girl.”

“We called her. She’s pretty.” Ivy sits next to Genevieve.

“She’s a princess.” Laynee climbs onto Jax’s lap. “Ash said we can meet her.”

“I never—”

“They’ve kissed.” Haelyn puts a piece of candy into her mouth. “But dad, didn’t you say we can only kiss people we’re in love with? Since that isn’t Ash’s girlfriend, does that mean we can kiss whoever we want? Even if we’re not in love?”

Genevieve and Gigi side eye Jax, laughing. “I told you that would backfire, Jax.” Genevieve says.

“I’m going to let you explain that one.” I wink at Jax, taking a seat. He looks at me, clearly out of his depth as well.

“Can we see the picture?” Francesca asks, crossing her arms.

“No.”

“Maybe we should eat?” My grandpa thankfully offers me an out.

I get comfortable on the couch, shutting my eyes and listen to Jax stumble through how two people can kiss without being in love. I’m not sure why he thought his explanation would work to begin with. The girls were bound to find out you can have relationships without commitment. But if they were my daughters, I’d be honest with them to protect them from guys like me. I hope to God they make good choices as they get older because I’m not above fighting a kid.

“Ash.” My aunt pats my leg. “Will you help Francesca carry the drinks in from the car?” I open my eyes, staring at the

ceiling, dreading the next few hours of matchmaker hell.

“Sure, Genevieve.” I pull myself off the couch, inwardly groaning, and follow Francesca outside. When she opens her trunk, it’s clear she didn’t need my help.

“She must be pretty amazing if she has the girls swooning over her.”

I stack the two cases of soda on top of each other, pulling them out. “Is this all?”

It’s unclear to me whether Francesca truly sees me as future husband material or if she feels obligated to try because she’s had it drilled into her head I am the one.

“That’s it.” She closes the trunk. “How did you two meet?”

“Does it matter?” I head toward the house, not wanting to engage in this conversation. I wish I knew why Genevieve won’t give up on trying to put us together.

“Do I know her?” She falls in step beside me.

“Do we have any mutual friends?”

“No, but—”

“Francesca,” I interrupt, stopping in my tracks, turning to face her. “No disrespect, but what I do and who I do it with is none of your fucking business.”

Her eyes widen before they narrow, and she storms back into the house. Great, now work is going to be fucking awkward.



Lying on the couch in a food coma, I consider taking a nap, but the girls would never let that happen.

“Ash, can we go ride horses?” Haelyn stands over me, staring at me with her bright brown eyes.

Riding horses after eating a few plates of Gigi’s infamous Sunday dinner is the last thing I want to do. But I also told her we could, and I’ll miss them when they’re gone.

“Yeah, let me—”

“Haelyn, grab your sisters so we can head out. It’s going to take us a few hours to get home.”

“Dad!” She whines. “You said I could ride horses today, and Ash already agreed to take me.”

“Jax...” My aunt puts her hands on his shoulders, guiding him to the recliner. “Remember when you said you wanted to slow down?” She massages his neck and shoulders as he sits. “I thought that was the whole point of promoting Asher.”

As much as she hopes, Jax will never slow down. He put everything he had into Blaine Architecture, building it from the ground up to the international company it is today. A break isn’t something he’s accustomed to. He’ll take a few days, or weeks off, but he loves what he does and is devoted to it.

“Gen, that drive is four hours.”

“We’re already here Jax, and the girls haven’t had this much fun since... well, I can’t remember. Can you?”

He relaxes into her touch. Jax and Genevieve are the reason I believe love exists. Not only because of their love for me, but the love they have for each other. Their relationship isn’t perfect; no one’s is, but they fight and fall back into each other. It’s a stark contrast to what I witnessed with my parents growing up. For a while, I wondered if hate was love. Believing love exists is one thing. Falling in love is something I try to avoid at all costs.

“I can’t remember.” He shuts his eyes.

“Would a few extra hours hurt?”

“I guess not.”

“You should go with them,” she suggests, patting his shoulder.

“What?” His eyes snap open, and I chuckle.

Jax falls for this every time. Genevieve charms him. He gives in, and then she pulls the rug out from under him. They’ve been together for twenty years, and you’d think they were two kids in love.

“The girls would love that. Plus, you’d get to spend some time with Ash.”

“Alright.” He sighs. She wraps her arms around his neck and kisses his cheek. “Haelyn, ask your sisters—”

“And Francesca.” My aunt eyes me.

“—Yes, and Francesca, if they want to go with us.”

I rub my temple, letting out a heavy sigh. She’s kept her distance since I told her to mind her business. I know her distance is only temporary. It’s not the first time I’ve had to be frank with her, but I can only hope it’ll be the last. Genevieve means well, but is concerned because I’ve never had a girlfriend, nor have I introduced them to anyone. She fears my parents damaged me. They did, but not beyond repair... at least, I don’t think.

“Who is the woman you’re seeing that the girls were carrying on about?”

“I’m not seeing her. We’re friends.”

“Kissing friends?” She tilts her head to the side. But then her smile fades and her eyes widen as she realizes the type of friendship Marisa and I have. “Oh... ohhh. Oh. I am—” She straightens up. “That’s great that... you have... friends like that. To help you in that way.”

Jax lets out a guffaw of laughter. “I tried to tell you he’s an adult, Gen. He doesn’t need help.”

“I’m sorry.” She cringes. “I still see you as a kid and—”

“It’s cool, Gen.” Wanting to cut this conversation short. “Thanks for always seeing the best in me.”

“Oh, I don’t see you any differently now that I know—well, I just was worried—” She looks at Jax. “Your parents...” He shakes his head, warning not to bring them up. “I worry about you is all.” Her eyes meet mine.

“I know, and I love you guys. I’m a little offended you thought I was a twenty-eight-year-old virgin, but can we drop my sex life?”

Genevieve relaxes into laughter as the girls appear in the living room with Francesca.

“Let’s go, Ash!” Haelyn says, disappearing outside again.

“Ash.” Laynee tugs on my shirt. “Can I ride with you?”

“Of course you can.” I grab her hand as we walk outside.

While Jax, Haelyn, and I get the horses ready, I overhear Francesca talking to Laynee. They’re sitting off to the side on a bale of hay.

“Laynee, would you mind if I rode with Ash?”

I watch Laynee out of the corner of my eye. Her brows pinch together as she scowls at Francesca. Seconds later, she climbs off the bale of hay, walking toward me with her teddy bear clutched to her chest. I quickly pretend not to notice and continue getting Stardust, the horse, ready. She tugs on my shirt, motioning for me to get closer.

“Yes?” I kneel.

“Francesca...” She glances over her shoulder at her, then leans closer to me, whispering in my ear. “Francesca wants to take my place. Do I have to be nice?”

“You should always be nice, but being nice doesn’t always mean you do what others ask of you. Do you want her to take your place?”

“No.” She shakes her head.

“Okay, then tell her no. You don’t need permission to tell someone no, Laynee.”

Being the youngest, Laynee gets bossed around a lot by the other two. I’m also relieved she didn’t give up her spot, but I wanted it to be her choice. Apparently Francesca is going to keep trying. I’m now wondering if her interest in me is because of our families’ involvement or if she’s romanticized a relationship with me in her head. The latter sounds more realistic. Laynee stares down at her teddy bear’s ears before marching back to Francesca.

“You can get your own horse.”

Francesca looks stunned, and I swallow my laughter. Yeah, Laynee will be just fine.

Marisa

Holidays and birthdays are a little harder now that I don't live near my family. I thought about flying home for Killian's birthday, but he said he'd rather visit me this summer. It'll be fun to have him here for a few weeks. My phone rings, and for a second, I'm thinking it may be one of Asher's nieces, but it's Killian.

"Happy Birthday, Killian!"

"Thank you, sis." His beard he was growing is gone, making him to look like a baby again.

"How's your birthday?"

"Good." He smiles. "Mom is having a party, which I think is more for her than me."

I chuckle. "She's so proud of you."

"She's proud of all of us. But your package came, and I wanted to open it with you."

Tears prick my eyes. "I really wish I could be there."

He squints at the phone. "Are you crying?"

“No. Fuck no.” I sniffle, wiping tears from my cheeks. “Why would I miss you?”

He lets out a belt of laughter. “To be honest... I miss you too. It isn’t the same without you here, but I’ll see you in a few months. Are you coming for graduation?”

“Absolutely! I would never miss that.”

He props his phone up, grabbing the box, and slicing it open. Pulling out the bubble wrap, he glances at me with wide eyes. “No fucking way!” He tears his gift out of the box. “You got me a VR headset?”

I smile at his joy. Killian loves gaming. It’s his favorite pastime. He’s even considering going to school for it. “What does it look like?”

He chuckles. “I wish I could hug you. Thank you, Marisa.”

“You’re welcome. I’m sure mom will be thrilled now that you have, as she says, more things to fry your brain.” Mom thinks all the technology in the world is only around to keep us sedated. Which may be true, but that doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy it. “What else do you have planned today?”

“Hang out with some friends... and my girlfriend.”

“That sounds—Killian! You have a girlfriend?”

“I do.” He gives me a cheesy smile. “It’s new, but I like her.”

I stick out my bottom lip. “Aw... Killian. That’s so sweet. Send me pictures of you two!”

“I will, but don’t tell mom, please. She just... I don’t know. It’s all academic with her. Anything else is an unnecessary distraction or frying my brain. I got the grades, the scholarships, and I’ve never been in trouble. I want to be a teen.” He collapses onto his bed, letting out a sigh.

Trying to find my words, I let a silence fall between us. “She means well—”

“I know.”

“—But I also know it can be suffocating.”

His brows pinch together. “I don’t know how you did it, Marisa. Taking care of me, Destiny, having a job, going to school, and then opening that yoga studio. Don’t you feel you missed out?”

I wave my hand, trying to brush it off. “I don’t miss things when I don’t think about them.”

“It was fucking awful when dad left, but it wasn’t your responsibility to pick up the pieces.”

Killian is wise beyond his years. “Yeah... but if I hadn’t picked up the pieces, everything would’ve fallen apart.”

He studies me for a moment. “I think mom would’ve figured it out.”

I tried to let her figure it out. Killian doesn’t remember me having to get mom out of bed in the mornings when dad left because she was depressed. I wouldn’t want him to have those memories. There were many nights after Destiny was born that I had to cook dinner, get both kids in bed, and then off to

school and daycare the next morning because mom was either working or didn't come home.

I'd rather not dive into those memories on his birthday. "Moving out was a breath of fresh air. Do you remember my first apartment?" I snort with laughter.

A few months after I graduated high school, I moved into a very questionable studio apartment. Mom was doing okay financially, and the one good thing about working was that I had savings. It was only a few miles from mom's place, but it was freeing to have my own space. A month later, I took a yoga training to become an instructor and fell in love with it. I worked my regular job at the restaurant and part time as a yoga instructor. Eventually, part time became full time, and I left the job that was getting me by for the one I loved. I helped run a small yoga studio on Galveston Island that eventually the owner sold to me. Before I knew it, the studio was thriving, and I had moved out of that crappy studio to a nicer apartment with an ocean view. Everything I have, I've worked hard for, but it's come with the price of missing out on a lot.

"Yes, and I'm positive that building should've been condemned." He chuckles.

"Without a doubt."

"Mom was worried you were going to get murdered. But you loved having your own space."

"I did." I smile. "Back then, I didn't realize I was missing out on anything. I did what I had to do to make sure we were okay. Do I wish mom would've been more responsible? Yeah,

I do. But I can't dwell on it because it already happened, you know?"

"I'm sorry you missed out on so much. Thank you for always taking care of me."

"I always got you, Killian." I smile. "Annd this conversation got heavy for no damn reason."

He laughs. "It did, but all this needed to be said."

I take a deep breath, changing the subject. "You're officially eighteen. Proud of you." I say to him as he smiles. "Make sure you send me pictures."

"I will. I should probably get ready."

"Can't believe you have a girlfriend." He rolls his eyes as I smile. "Have fun. And I mean that. Really have fun and be carefree. You deserve that, Killian. Just don't do anything that will land you in jail."

He grins. "If that ever happened, I'd beg for them to lock me up because it would be a lesser sentence to what you and mom would do to me."

"You know your limits, and I appreciate that." I chuckle. "Enjoy your birthday and text me pictures. Love you."

"Love you too, sis. Bye."

Hanging up my phone, I let out a heavy sigh. Sometimes I wonder what my life would've been like if I had the opportunity to enjoy my youth. I'm still young, but it's not the same as being carefree while living with your parents. I feel

horrible feeling any negative emotions toward my mom because I know she did the best she could. Therapy would probably do me some good, but I'm not ready to unpack this and peel back layers just yet.



A couple of hours later, after decompressing in a shower and getting ready, I'm knocking on Faith's door. I told her I'd stop by for lunch. I'm grateful she's turned into a friend and lives right next door. After the conversation with Killian, it'll be nice to get my mind off things.

"Hi Marisa." She opens the door, pulling me into a hug. Faith is wearing a white cotton dress that is a cottage core dream and has waist length braids that are gold at the ends. She modeled for a few years before marrying Maxwell and starting a graphic design business.

"Hey Faith. Where's the little one?"

"Sleeping, but I'm sure she'll be up soon. For now, I will take some much needed, uninterrupted girl time."

"I won't argue with that. How have you been?"

"Great." She smiles, leading me toward their dining room. "I made some toasted ham and cheese croissant sandwiches and strawberry orange mimosas."

"Now I feel bad for not bringing anything."

She waves her hand. "Please, all I want is to hang out with you."

"Thank you for having me."

She hands me a mimosa. "What's new with you? Maxwell said you have a roommate now?"

"Oh... yeah. He's a friend."

"He?" She perks up.

"Yes, he." I chuckle. "We're just friends. He's only here temporarily, and I needed a roommate to cover some upgrades for the studio... so here we are."

"I've seen his car, but have yet to see him. You two should come over." She raises her hands up at my dubious expression. "Super casual. Not a double date or anything. I'll even invite other people if that would make you feel better."

"Um... maybe. I'll ask him."

"Do that." She smirks. "Do I dare ask about the other guy?"

I roll my eyes, leaning back against the chair. "He fell asleep on my porch a couple of weeks ago."

"Girl... if desperation was a person." She scoffs. "I thought he was a good guy."

Faith knows every detail about my relationship with Reese. We had dinner with them a few times. "He's a good liar."

Violet's cries carry to the dining room. "I better go get her before she has a nuclear meltdown. Give me a second."

“Of course.” I finish my mimosa in a few gulps and pour myself another glass. There are too many thoughts swirling in my head that I want to silence.

Faith reappears a few minutes later with Violet in her arms. She’s six months old and gives me a toothless smile when her brown eyes land on me.

“She’s gotten bigger in the few weeks I haven’t seen her.” Standing, I take her from Faith’s arms, and Violet immediately grabs for my necklaces.

“Oh, she crawls now and loves wreaking havoc in the kitchen.”

“As she should. She’s adorable.” Violet has the softest brown curls, with big brown eyes, and rolls for days.

“Tell me if I’m out of pocket, but do you want kids someday?”

“Me?” Violet climbs down from my lap and beelines for the kitchen. “Uh... to be honest, I’m not sure I want kids. They’re cute and all, but I’m perfectly happy without them.”

“They’re a lot of work. I don’t blame you.”

“I know it is. I raised my siblings. They are my permanent birth control.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that...”

An awkward silence follows. “Yeah, it’s no big deal.” I shrug my shoulders, brushing it off. “I do want to get married

one day, though. Maybe I'll change my mind then, but I've never dreamed of having kids."

"I understand. Sorry for asking such a personal question."

"Please, Faith. You know I don't mind talking to you."

"I know." She cringes. "But it's a heavy topic. I shouldn't have even brought it up."

"Faith, honestly, you're making it weird by thinking it's weird."

She tosses her head back with laughter. "This is why I'm quiet. I feel I say the wrong thing."

"I'm loud and still say the wrong thing."

"I'm glad you moved in next door or I'd probably have no friends," she jokes. Faith and Maxwell are social butterflies.

It's nice to have Faith so close. We're in entirely different seasons of our lives, but we can still relate to each other. I have to admit, I've wondered how things will change once Harlow and Quinn have their babies. When I first moved in, Faith hadn't had Violet yet, and after she was born, we only got closer. It helps ease my worry when I spiral into the thoughts of my best friends moving on in their lives. I'm moving too, but in different ways.

We spend the rest of the afternoon eating and catching up. When Maxwell comes home, I take it as my cue to leave.

"Should I take it personally that you're leaving now that I'm home?" he asks, greeting us in the living room.

“No, I’ve been here most of the day.” I glance out the window at the setting sun and see Asher’s car pass their front window. I try to suppress the smile that threatens my lips. “And no offense, Maxwell, but I’m here to see Faith and Violet. Not you.”

Faith cackles as he nods, chuckling. “That’s fair. Did Faith invite you and the roommate over for dinner or something soon?”

“She did. I’ll talk to him and let you guys know. For some reason, I feel this is just so you can hopefully get a look at his car.”

“I’m not afraid to admit my motives are selfish.” He shrugs.

“I like honesty.” I smile, slipping on my shoes. “I’ll see you guys soon.” Before I walk out the door, I give Faith and Violet a hugs and kisses on their cheeks.

The house is quiet when I get home, but there’s a plate of food on the counter with tinfoil on it. I consider eating it just to bother Asher, but I’ll play nice tonight. Instead, I follow the music to the backyard. He’s lying on the hammock with his eyes closed. Bending over him, I gently place my hands on the side of his face, causing my curls to brush against his forehead.

“I didn’t even hear you.” He opens one eye.

“How are you not scared right now? I would’ve been pissing myself.”

His chuckle is low and smooth. “It takes a lot to scare me.” I park my ass on his lap and he grunts. “Comfortable?”

“Yeah. You?” I smile.

“More comfortable than I should be.” He puts his arms behind his head and I can feel him harden beneath me. This probably wasn’t the best idea for either of us. “How was your day?” He pulls on one of my curls.

“Good. Called my brother. He has a girlfriend now. I still remember changing his diapers and telling him to shower.” He laughs. “He’ll visit for a month during the summer. Maybe you’ll get to meet him.”

“Do you want me to meet him?”

“Well... you’ll kind of have to if you’re living here...”

“Yeah, but I can make myself scarce.”

I suck my teeth. “Now you wanna make yourself scarce after you’ve moved in?” He lets out a rumble of laughter. “Now you wanna be fucking considerate?” I can’t help but laugh along with him. “Where was this energy when you barged in, Officer Davidson?”

“I did what I had to do to get what I wanted.”

“What do you want? To annoy me?”

He nods his head, shrugging. “Yeah... pretty much.”

“Idiot.” I shake my head. “How was your day with your grandparents?”

“Good, my aunt and uncle were there.” He smiles and it lights up his eyes. “It was a really fun day.”

“Can I ask you something? And you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

“Shoot.”

“Did they raise you?”

He stares up at the darkening sky as the stars glitter across it. “Yeah, I’ve lived with them since I was twelve.”

I can tell this topic makes him uncomfortable. “The girls are cute. Called me just to tell me I’m pretty.” I flip my hair over my shoulder and he laughs.

“They’re a handful, but yeah, you have a fan club now.”

“What sparked them to call me?”

Sighing exasperatedly, he rubs his eyes. “I showed them the picture we took when you made me do a face mask with you.”

“Oh, please. You fucking loved it.”

“And to be honest, I think that’s the first time they’ve ever seen me with a woman.”

“Wait... what? Not even your aunt and uncle have seen you with a woman?”

He shakes his head. “Nope.”

“I’m not sure why I find this shocking. Not even once?”

“No, I’m cautious about who I bring around those I love. But Laynee is convinced you’re a princess, so now you kind of

have to meet them.”

He’s twirling one of my curls around his finger. His words make me feel something I’ve only felt with him. The sensation is alarming. “You’ll have to buy me a really nice dress, you know that, right? Oh, and we’ll have to show up in a carriage. Really play into that fairytale fantasy for her.”

He chuckles. “She’ll lose her mind if we do that.”

I squeeze in next to him in the hammock, resting my head on his arm. “Yes, but imagine how epic that would be.”

“You’ll actually let me buy you a dress?” He brings his hand to my thigh, drawing small circles.

I try to breathe and ignore the sensations. Which is fucking impossible. “Yes.” I’d more than likely let Asher do anything he wants to me. “And you’re not going to win this bet.” I swat his hand away. “Stop trying to seduce me.”

“Is it working? I’ve barely touched you.” He breathes against my neck, nipping at my ear.

“No...” I whimper, giving myself away. “And besides, judging the stiffness in your jeans,” I slowly rub my hand against him, “it wouldn’t take much to make you lose.”

“I don’t know what the fuck I was thinking with this bet.”

“That you’d have the upper hand, and I’d submit. Look where your arrogance got you.” Meeting his heated gaze, I can tell he’s ready to, “Give in, Ash.”

He chuckles smoothly, running his hand up my thigh. “Let’s see how wet you are for me first.”

I part my legs, giving him enough space to lift my skirt and dip his hand into my panties. His fingertips brush against my clit, sending a bolt of pleasure through me. He slowly pushes a finger inside me and my breath hitches. I’m torn between wanting him to stop and craving release. The last time we had sex, I lost count of how many times he made me come. That should’ve been enough to get me through this fucking bet, but it only gave me an insatiable lust for him.

“Do you want me to make you come?” The slow circles he’s rubbing around my clit are steadily bringing me closer to the edge.

“I... I can’t think. It feels good. You feel good.” My mind is mush. Would it be so bad to give in?

“What do you want, Risa?”

“I want... you...” Are the only words I can manage before his lips are on mine.

Is he giving in? Am I giving in? Are we both giving in? When we slept together in Vegas, I thought it would be another one-night stand. This feels like... more. But I don’t even know what more is. The last time I thought something was more, it blew up in my face. I only know he makes me feel good... beyond the sex. I’m not sure whether to lean into it or if I should avoid it. Crossing my leg over his body, he grips my ass. He turns, pulling me with him, but the sudden shift in weight is too much for the hammock.

“Shit, we’re going to—” Before he can get his words out, I feel the hammock tipping.

He wraps his arms around me, protecting me from the fall as we topple to the ground. He grunts as I land on top of him. The hammock follows, and Asher’s phone untangles from it, hitting me on the back of the head.

“Fuck!” Grabbing my head, I can’t help but laugh hysterically.

Asher cracks up, pulling my head to his chest and rubs the now tender spot where I got hit. “Are you okay?”

We lie on the ground laughing until my stomach hurts. I can’t remember the last time I laughed this hard when I wasn’t with my best friends.

Catching my breath, I lift my head. “Thank you for breaking my fall. I would’ve expected you to save yourself.”

“No.” He sinks his fingers into my curls, massaging my scalp. “I’ll always be a soft landing space for you.”

Yeah... I’m fucked.

Marisa

Since the night on the hammock, sometimes Asher looks at me as if he sees something that wasn't there before. He cooks breakfast every morning after telling me he only knew a few recipes. Either he lied, which I know he wouldn't, or he's learning new recipes just to make me breakfast. As we sit at the table, he scrolls through his phone with his shirt unbuttoned, exposing his chest and abs. How am I supposed to eat?

He glances at me, and I smile. "Do you not like it?"

I pick up a strawberry, dipping it in whip cream and lick it off. "It's delicious." His eyes remain on my mouth as I lick my lips. "These are crepes, right?"

He tears his eyes away from my mouth. "Yeah. It's my first time making them. They may not be the best."

"They're good. Thanks for breakfast." My phone chimes with a text. It's from Natalie reminding me of our seven a.m. spin class. Letting out a puff of air, I slump in my seat and groan. Past me was more ambitious than future me. I have

spin, then I'll teach the nine a.m. class at the studio. Clearly, I wasn't thinking.

“What is it?”

“I agreed to go with Natalie to a spin class, and I'm regretting my choice. Have you ever been? It's hell on wheels for an hour.”

“You have good stamina.”

“Yeah, for riding you. Not for riding a stationary bike.”

He lets out a belt of laughter. “I'd be happy to take part in a warmup round.”

“And lose the bet?” I scoff. “I'll survive.” I'm holding onto my willpower by the thread of a spider's web.

“You should go running with me.”

“No.” I shove a bite in my mouth. “I'd only slow you down.”

“I'd enjoy the company.” Standing, he grabs his empty plate from the table and puts it in the dishwasher. “Think about it. I've gotta get going.” He kisses the top of my head before buttoning his shirt, tucking it in, and grabbing his things as he heads out the door.

I've realized the kiss on the top of the head is a weakness of mine. I pretend to be indifferent when inside I'm melting. He does it as if it's second nature. I haven't brought it up because I enjoy it and don't want him to stop. We've spent a lot of time together lately. I've canceled plans to go out drinking and

dancing to spend a chill night at home watching movies with him. While I miss the sex—a lot—I’m learning a different level of intimacy. Spending time with someone, being yourself, can be just as satisfying. Something I never thought I’d say. He went from being the perfect distraction to being a friend.

Glancing at the time, I shovel the last few bites into my mouth before grabbing my things to meet my fate.



Wheezing, huffing, and puffing—relief washes over me when the instructor ends the class. I collapse against the handlebars, attempting to catch my breath. The hour was torturous, but I feel the post-workout high settling in. My legs wobble as I put my weight on them. Natalie is winded, but not nearly as bad as me.

“How often do you torture yourself?”

She smirks, taking a gulp of water. “Four times a week. More if I have the time.”

“Four? And here I am, struggling with one.” We grab our things and head out to our cars. I lean against mine, guzzling the rest of my water.

“You haven’t come out dancing or drinking the past few times. He can come too, you know?”

“Who?” I turn away from her to fix my hair in the window’s reflection.

“Asher. Don’t play dumb with me.”

Turning around, I chuckle. “Me not going out isn’t because of him.” *Half-truth.*

Crossing her arms, she smirks. “Then why?”

“Because there isn’t shit out there for me but a hangover and a one-night stand. I’m sick of myself and of not knowing what I want. The alcohol and hook-ups made it worse. I know I seem fine, but the whole thing with Reese really fucked me up. It made me question myself, something I rarely do.” Looking down at my sneakers, I blink back tears.

She wraps me in a hug. “I didn’t realize you were struggling.”

“I’m... just taking a step back from everything.”

“I know it’s hard, Marisa, but it’s okay to admit that your relationship with Reese affected you. Pretending that it didn’t isn’t doing you any favors.”

“I hate that you’re right. Can’t we just pretend he never existed?”

“We could... but that would require murder, and I don’t think we’d last in prison.”

“Who said we’d get caught?”

She hugs me tighter as we fall into a fit of laughter. I’m coming to terms with the fact I loved Reese. I have to remind

myself, like Asher did, that my vulnerability isn't a weakness. I would never knowingly get involved with a person in a relationship. I've seen firsthand what it does to families, and I could never contribute to the cause of shattering one. But Reese never gave me a choice. I'm tired of shouldering the blame for what he did. Even when his wife found out, she still blamed me and not him. I've been blaming myself this whole time, wondering how I didn't notice, but it's not my responsibility to ask men if they're cheating on their wives.

Catching my breath, I pull away from Natalie. "Thank you."

"Of course. I always got your back."

ASHER

I can't remember the last time I went this long without sex. A while ago, my therapist suggested sex is a coping mechanism for me. I thought it was bullshit until I made this bet with Marisa. Now I realize he was right. We've had countless heated moments over the past few weeks—I'm sure that's not helping—but no release. As a result, I've been working out more, which is why I'm at her studio after taking the seven a.m. class, trying to work through pent up frustration. It was working until I saw her bent over the receptionist desk, casually talking to Natalie. She's not even doing anything sexual, but here I am wishing it was me bending her over.

“Thanks for making me sweat.”

“Always a pleasure,” she simpers, brushing her curls out of her face. “Thought you could use this.”

I take the smoothie she’s holding out to me, brushing my hand against hers. “Thanks.” I take a sip. “Hey, are you going to deposit that check? When I was going over my accounts yesterday, I noticed it hasn’t come out yet.”

It’s been a little over a month since I showed up at her house unannounced and became her roommate. I thought she would’ve wasted no time depositing it.

“Yes, but... I need help.” She fidgets with the ring I gave her. “And I know you’re busy so—”

“With what?” It’s easier pretending I’m busy versus admitting that I’m grappling with being attracted to her beyond being inside her.

“Once I buy the system, they recommend hiring an electrician for installation. And then, for the additional showers in the locker room, I’m not even sure where to begin with that because I’m sure I’ll need a plumber or something, right? Like someone who knows pipes and water?”

I hide my smile by taking a sip of my smoothie. “Yeah... you’ll need someone who knows pipes and water.” She went into this thinking it would be a do-it-yourself project, but it’s not, and I know she isn’t used to asking for help. “What are you doing for lunch today?”

“Nothing, I’ll be off before then since I’m only teaching the morning classes.”

“Come to my office. I’ll get everything together, and then you can decide what you like best.”

“Really?” She smiles, and then it fades. “Only if you have time. I don’t want to take away from your job.”

“I’ll make time for you.”

“Oh. Okay. Yeah...” She clears her throat, looking away from me. “I’ll be there.”

“Bet.” I grab the back of her neck, pulling her toward me, and kiss the top of her head. Natalie gapes at me from over the top of her computer. “I’ll see you later. Thank you for the smoothie.”



Arriving at the office, Francesca is waiting for me and frowns when she sees I have a smoothie in hand.

“Good morning.”

I wish I could say she calmed down after the weekend at my grandparent’s house, but it only seemed to be another green light for her. “Morning. What’s my schedule?”

She rattles off the countless meetings I have today. I don’t know why I ask. It’s always meetings.

“Can you move my noon meeting to another time or reschedule? And block out two hours.”

“Move?” She stops in the doorway of my office. “But you never reschedule...”

“Which should tell you I have something more important to tend to.”

“What—” I give her a pensive look. “Okay, I will speak with them and let you know the new time.”

“Thank you.” Glancing at the clock, I have about two hours before I have my first meeting. Luckily, it’s virtual. I can multitask while listening to Scott, from the Seattle office, drone on about something that could’ve been an email. Opening my computer, I research electricians and remodeling companies that can carry out the upgrades to Marisa’s yoga studio. I’m not above throwing my last name out there to get things done faster for her.

Francesca re-appears a while later. “They were happy to reschedule. Although, I couldn’t give them a reason for it.”

“The reason doesn’t matter now that they’ve rescheduled, does it?” Most assistants know every single detail of their boss’ lives, while everything on mine is strictly professional. Anything that isn’t work related, I handle myself.

“Are you meeting with someone here? Should I call out for lunch?”

“Mmm... yeah.” I forgot it’ll be lunchtime. “I’ll order it, though.”

“Oh... okay.” She presses her lips into a thin line as she backs out of my office, closing the door.

Once she’s gone, I call the Mexican restaurant Marisa and I have frequented together and order her favorite.



Since the restaurant doesn’t have a delivery service, I had to go pick it up. When I arrive back at the office, I see Marisa standing at Francesca’s desk.

“You’re here for Mr. Blaine?” She’s giving Marisa an appraising look.

“Mr. Blaine?” Marisa snorts with laughter. “He’s just Ash to me.”

I could get used to Marisa calling me Mr. Blaine. Maybe I’ll throw that in there when I win the bet. But the thought of taking her on my desk right now is all I can think of. She’s wearing baggy jeans that somehow still hug her ass, a top that shows just enough skin, and her curls are piled on top of her head. She’s effortlessly gorgeous.

“What’s your name?”

“My name is M—”

“Hey. I had to grab the food. I should’ve texted you.”

“It’s alright. I only just arrived, Mr. Blaine.” She smirks, looking up at me.

I've never liked anyone calling me that until now. "We can eat in my office." I try to ignore the growing stiffness in my pants.

"Lead the way." She steps aside.

"Oh, I didn't get your name," Francesca chimes in. "For parking..." she adds.

"I'll take care of it. Thanks." I place my hand on the small of Marisa's back, leading her toward my office. When I turn to shut the door behind us, Francesca is leaning over her desk, staring at us.

"Wow, the view from up here is amazing. It's hard imagining you being serious." She walks around my office, looking at my accolades and décor.

"I'm not. I spend half the time drawing or on my phone during meetings."

She tosses her head back with laughter. "But you must work hard to be in the position you're in."

"I do. My uncle didn't hand me anything. He let that be known early on. We can sit over here." I set the food on the table near the window that overlooks the Portland skyline. She sits and watches me pull the food out of the bag. "How was your morning?"

"Good. I hired a new instructor, which gives me some more breathing room."

"Were you wanting to step back from the studio?"

“No.” She unwraps the straw, sticking it into her drink. “I don’t think I could. I love what I do too much.”

“I understand that. Oh,” I grab a file off my desk, “these are the people I’d recommend for what you want done.”

She clutches the file to her chest. “Thank you.” Relief washes over her face. “I want this to be done right, and didn’t know where to start.” She grabs my hand. “Seriously, thank you.”

Her touch causes my body to respond. Not with lust, but a feeling I’ve only been able to feel in her presence. “Yeah, let me know if you have questions or need anything else. I’d be happy to set everything up for you when you’re ready.”

“Really?”

“Why do you always sound shocked when I offer to help you?”

She takes a bite of her elote as though she’s chewing my question. “I’m... not used to asking for help. Or even people helping me. You’re the last person who I thought would be helpful.”

Marisa is used to carrying everything. Initially, I thought she was being stubborn—she is—but now I realize it’s what she’s accustomed to. Staring into her hazel eyes, I realize I’ve grown attached to her, and have no problem carrying whatever she gives me.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” She sips on her drink.

“I—nothing. I’m not sure if I should take your comment on me being helpful as offensive and start an argument or not.”

She cackles. “I meant it respectfully, Mr. Blaine. You’ve just surprised me. I had a very different idea of you before.”

“And now?”

“Now...” She sighs, catching her breath. “I see more.”

“More?”

“Yeah, having you around isn’t so bad.”

“Goddamn, you make me sound like a stray dog you had to keep.”

“Stop twisting my words!” She falls into another fit of laughter. “I’m trying to be nice for once and you’re looking for non-existent subliminal messages. I see more, and I enjoy having you around. Can we leave it at that?”

“Yeah, I’ll take your backhanded compliments.” I let the amusement show on my face.

“Thank you for lunch. I’m used to you cooking breakfast for me now. When I didn’t eat this morning, I thought my stomach was going to eat itself.”

“You could’ve asked me to make you something.”

“It was five a.m., Ash. I’m not that mean.”

Giving her a blank stare, she sucks her teeth, throwing her straw wrapper at me. “I didn’t say anything.” I chuckle.

“No.” She glares at me. “But your judgy ass eyes did.”

“I looked at you like I always do. Now I know the five a.m. version of you is nicer than the noon version.”

Looking down at her plate, she realizes she has nothing left to throw and gives me the middle finger. “This food is too good to be arguing with you right now. Let me eat in peace.”

Smiling, I shake my head and finish eating without another word.

She eats the last few bites before opening the file. Flipping through a few of the papers, she pulls one out. “This person’s work is beautiful. I never thought I’d say that about a shower.”

“You’re talking to an architect, love. I get it.” She flips the paper around, showing me which one she picked. It’s the one I would go with if it were my studio.

“Beautiful.” She lays the paper on the table. “Who do you recommend for the heating system?”

“I’ve worked with all of them, but it depends on how long it takes for the system to get here and their availability. But since you haven’t deposited the check to order the system—”

“I’ll do it today, Mr. Blaine. Thank you for putting this portfolio together for me.”

I watch her, and her eyes snap to mine as a smirk appears on her face. “You want to be my secretary?”

“I don’t do well with orders. Besides, Franny seems to love her job and you.”

I let out a sigh, loosening the knot of my tie, pulling at it until it unties, and it makes a swishing sound as it slips through my collar. Marisa watches my movements, but quickly looks away, pretending electricians are more interesting. “I’ve known her since I was a kid and she likes me. I don’t know why. I haven’t given her any reason to.”

“I can see why.” She says, absentmindedly reading the papers.

“Are you being... nice or?”

“Huh?” She closes the file, setting it back on the table.

“You said you can see why.”

“Yeah... you’re an asshole—” I laugh “—but you’re caring, nice when you want to be, and you love hard.”

My brows pinch together as I tilt my head to the side. “Love?”

“Yeah. Love. You forget our best friends are married. I see how much you care for your friends and family. The love you have for them is palpable.” She shrugs. “I imagine that if you ever allow yourself to fall in love, you’ll fall hard. It’ll be passionate and pure devotion. That same love, passion, and devotion will heal any pieces of her that are broken and make her whole.” Her eyes meet mine. “At least that’s how I imagine it’ll be.”

I hold her gaze, struck silent by her words. I’ve never imagined myself with someone. At least not until her. And even now, the picture is still blurry.

She tears her eyes from mine, looking down at the file. “I’ll deposit the check and order the heating system. Then we can figure out which electrician is available and schedule.”

“Right.” I blink. “Are you leaving?”

“I don’t want to keep you. You look good in a suit, by the way.” She gathers the trash on the table, throwing it away.

“Thank you. I’d hope so, given how much I spend on them.”

She cracks a smile. “You don’t need the money to look good, Ash.”

Usually, I’m quick with the responses, but she’s throwing me off balance today. Since Vegas, she’s invaded my thoughts. I’ve tried to keep her off my mind, but I’m realizing I don’t want to. “Thank you... uh, where are you going after this?”

She fiddles with things on my desk, avoiding eye contact. “Zion wants to get together. Don’t worry.” She holds up her hands. “I told him I’m unfortunately practicing abstinence at the moment. It seemed to work as an attractant instead of a repellent.”

“He’s a guy, Risa. I know you think he’s so sweet—” I make air quotes and she giggles “—but he still thinks like a man and wants to be the one to make you give in.”

“Zion?” she scoffs. “Please, he’s too nice. I need to be dominated at the end of this. Not just fucked. Which is only a service you can and will provide when I win.” She smiles smugly.

I rise from my seat, sauntering toward her. Standing inches apart, I grab her chin, making her look up at me. “You want only me, Risa, because you know no one will compare.”

Bringing her hand between us, she presses her palm to my chest. “Your heart is beating wildly... does that mean you feel the same for me?”

Hesitating only a breath, my lips crash into hers. I lift her onto my desk, causing things to clatter to the floor. Her hands thread through my curls as she moans into my mouth. It’s one thing to confess to myself how I feel, but another thing entirely to say it out loud. Besides, I can show her better than I can tell her. My hand slips under her shirt, and I groan, pressing my dick against her, when I realize she’s not wearing a bra.

“You don’t play fair...” I squeeze her breast before brushing my fingertips against her nipple. I unbutton her jeans and slip my hand in them to discover she doesn’t have any panties on either. “Did you come here today intending to set me up?”

“No.” She bites my lip. “This is just a plus.”

I rub her clit as she hikes her legs further up my waist, spreading them wider. She bites down on my shoulder, stifling a moan. Pulling me on top of her, we knock the rest of the stuff off my desk. I keep the pressure on her clit as she tries to keep quiet. She intoxicates me. We don’t have to be in close proximity for her to have a hold on me like she does in this moment.

A voice cuts through Marisa’s moans. “Asher, your two – ”

Marisa tries to push me off her, but if I move, Francesca will get a peep show. I calmly pull her shirt down, press a kiss to her lips, and help her sit upright. Turning around, I block her from Francesca's view, and feel Marisa rest her head against my back. Francesca is frozen in place, staring at my disheveled state.

"You were saying, Francesca?" I fix my shirt, buttoning it up. Marisa groans behind me, and I try my best to keep the amusement off my face.

"I—um—oh, your two o' clock is here and... did you want me to tell them you're..." She glances at Marisa's legs on either side of me. "Preoccupied?"

"No." I look at all the stuff scattered on the floor. "Take them to the conference room and tell them I'm finishing up a meeting."

"Right... a meeting." She nods, backing out of my office and closes the door behind her.

"That tone wasn't condescending at all." Marisa chuckles, pushing me away from her and hopping off my desk. "You've never heard of a lock?"

"You've never been here before. There wasn't a need."

She looks up at me and brings her hands to my hair, fixing my curls. "I wouldn't drink or eat anything she gives you. It may be poisoned. I can't win the bet if you're dead."

I let out a bark of laughter. "Is that all you care about? The bet?"

“I guess I care a tiny bit about you, too.”

“Mmm...” I run my thumb along her bottom lip. “A small, almost non-existent piece of me cares about you, too.”

“Non-existent?” She bursts into laughter. “You know how to make a girl feel special.”

“Have fun hanging out with Zion.”

“Shit, that’s right.” Pulling away from me, she grabs her bag and the file. The way she has made that man forgettable in her head is impressive.

“I’ll see you at home.” Standing on her tip toes, she presses a kiss to my cheek before heading toward the door.

“Later, Risa.”



My mind is distracted after Marisa’s visit. I can’t remember anything from the meeting to save my life. Francesca became overly helpful by straightening up my office. At this point, I’m going to let her do what she does. There is nothing more I can say or do to let her know I’m not interested. I didn’t expect her to walk in on Marisa and me, but I thought she’d get the memo, not double down on her efforts.

My phone rings as I enter my office. It’s Jax. “Hey. The Titan Tech project is back on schedule.”

“I knew it would be with you being project manager.” A sense of pride washes over me. My uncle trusts me with a lot.

It upsets those with seniority, but they keep their opinions to themselves because my work speaks for itself. “Word is you had a woman visit you at work today?”

I chuckle, taking a seat at my desk. “Since when did you become a gossip king?”

“If it’s about you, I listen. Who’s the woman?”

“Who’s gossiping about me?” Francesca enters my office, setting a cup of coffee on my desk with a smile.

“You’re elusive, Ash. People take notice when you do something out of the ordinary.”

“Was it Francesca?” I swivel around in my chair and stare out at the skyline.

“No, I actually got a couple of emails from people at the Portland office. And Genevieve may have heard from Francesca’s mom, Penelope.”

“I’m glad to know that my comings and goings are the talk of Blaine Architecture.” I’m used to people talking about me. I didn’t have a choice but to get used to it when I was younger. It doesn’t bother me, but it might, depending on what was said about Marisa. “What was the gossip?”

“That a beautiful woman stopped by your office today, but didn’t leave a name.”

“She’s a friend... and I’m renting a room from her while I stay here. Please keep that between us.”

“Of course, I know you like your privacy, which is why I wanted to call and talk to you. It must be serious if you’re living with her.”

“We’re friends. She’s best friends with Acyn’s wife.”

“Does she have a name? It’ll be strictly confidential.”

“Marisa. And they were right... she is beautiful.” I’ve never felt this way before and I’m not sure if I should be annoyed or relieved that I can feel this way after I thought I wasn’t capable.

“You’re not like them, you know?”

My heart constricts in my chest. Whatever feelings were kindling are doused at the mention of my parents. The memories of them remind me why I stay single.

“You don’t know that. What if I am?”

I can hear him get up and move around, then it falls silent. If he’s at the office, I know he’s staring out at the skyline like I am right now.

“Your dad...” his voice trails off. It’s hard for him to talk about my parents. But he tries for me. “He was my brother. We were best friends. When... everything happened.” He can’t bring himself to say it, and after sixteen years in therapy, I still struggle to say it, too. “You’re not him, Ash. Don’t let your fear of being like either of them keep you from being happy. I’ve watched you avoid attachment from anyone outside of our family and a few friends over the years... and I’m sorry they did that to you. I’m sorry they were your first experience with

love. You've done the work to not let them define you. Don't start letting them define how you love. If Marisa makes you feel something, anything at all, pour into her. Give her everything you've got."

Squeezing my eyes shut, I feel the tears fall down my face. "I—I don't know that I can. Something feels... broken that I've been trying to fix... I don't want to be like this. I just am. It's easier to keep up the façade that I want to be alone than admit I'm fucking terrified to get close to anyone."

I thought Marisa and I would fuck and move on. But something in me got tangled with her, and I haven't been able to break free of the hold she's had on me since.

"What if it doesn't work out?" I could be feeling conflicted and Marisa may not feel the same. Although I'm not sure that it would stop me because it seems beyond my control.

"Then you loved, Ash. Don't let the fear keep you from falling."

"You make it sound so easy."

"It isn't. But nothing worth it ever is."

Nothing in my life has been easy. I don't know why I expected anything less of love. I'm not even sure if this is love. I only know I haven't been able to escape the feelings I have for her. Repeating his words in my head, I wonder if I'm brave enough to fall. Marisa was chewed up and spit out by love, but I still see the hope for it in her eyes. If she's brave

enough to hope for something that caused her heartache, then maybe it's worth falling for.



I left work early after realizing I was too distracted to do anything other than be lost in my thoughts. Arriving home, I relax as I walk through the door. Marisa isn't home. Simply being in her space has the same calming effect as if she is. I'm usually not home this early during the week. Vegging out in front of the TV and eating sounds like the perfect thing to do. Heading to my room to change, I order some wings and hop in the shower to wash the day away.

By the time I get out of the shower, my phone chimes with a text that the food delivery service is near the house. I pull on my boxers and sweats, skipping the shirt, and head out to the living room. Grabbing the remote, I scroll through the countless streaming channels to find something to watch. My food arrives before I can decide. The smell of wings makes my mouth water as I grab a drink and settle into the living room. It feels different being home without Marisa. She talks a lot. It's not a bad thing. I'm just used to hearing her voice and having someone to talk to. I choose the show *Baki* and dig into my food.

A few minutes later, I hear the familiar jingle of Marisa's keys as she unlocks the front door. "Honey, I'm home!" I chuckle to myself and wait for her to find me in the living

room. “Ash! You’ll never guess what I saw on the way home.” She grabs a wing, blocking my view of the TV.

“What?”

“A carnival!” She exclaims, taking a bite of the wing.

“Oh, that’s fun.” I wait for her to move so I can continue to watch my show, but she doesn’t. My eyes meet hers. Her hazel eyes look at me expectantly. “Um...” I lick the sauce off my thumb. “Did you want – ”

“Yes! Oh my God! You’ll go with me?”

“Do I have a choice?” She swats me with her bag which is much heavier than it looks. “I’m kidding. Give me a half an hour to get ready.”

She twirls on the spot. “Yes! Let me put on something cute.”

“Okay...” I’m not sure what else she could put on to look better than she does right now. She literally skips to her room while singing, and I make a mental note she loves carnivals.

Marisa

I nterlacing my fingers with his, I pull him toward the carnival grounds with a bounce in my step. I can't help the smile on my face. There's something nostalgic and whimsical about carnivals. The glowing neon lights draw me in while the smell of funnel cakes and caramel popcorn make my mouth water.

Seeing the carnival on the way home reminded me to enjoy myself. I'm finally crawling out of the hole I was left in when Reese's lies were exposed. I wanted to get over him as quickly as possible. My brain and emotions have yet to catch up with that desire. Instead of fighting it, I've accepted this is where I'm at. Torn between love and hate.

"Have you not been to a carnival before?"

"Once," I look at him over my shoulder, "before my dad left. It's one of my favorite memories." He left and everything changed. Joyful moments were far and few between. I hold on to the good memories to keep my bitterness at bay. "What about you?"

"Have you met my nieces?"

Laughter tumbles from my lips. “I’ll take that as you’ve been to countless ones.”

“Correct.” He nods.

“I know it’s childish for me to be excited about a carnival, but I want to have fun.”

He drapes his arm over my shoulders, pulling me into him as we walk. “So what? We’ve got to let our inner child out to play, right? It won’t hurt for us to put the adult shit aside and play for a few hours. Let’s get tickets.”

Asher buys us wristbands for unlimited rides and games. They wrap the neon green bands around our wrist. “Where to first, Risa?” I point to the giant, multi-laned slide with hills. “I bet I’ll make it to the bottom first.” He winks, pulling me toward it.

“You sure love to bet when the odds are against you.” I nudge him out of the way when we get to the gate, grabbing the mat for the slide from the carnival attendant’s hands. “Good luck.” I begin the climb to the top.

“At least the view is pleasurable.” He says from behind me, smacking my ass.

I yelp, putting my hand over my ass as I laugh. “Stop! There are kids. Can’t take you anywhere.” We finally get to the top, and I choose the lane that’s in the middle and Asher sits at the one to the right of me. His long legs surpass mine, and he smirks.

“You’re already cheating.”

He doubles over with laughter. “How? They’re my legs!”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m still going to win.” Straightening up, I wait for the attendant to tell us to go.

“Ready?” The attendant asks.

“Yes.” We say together.

“On your mark, get set, g– ”

I don’t wait for them to finish before I launch myself down the slide.

Asher protests behind me, causing me to cackle. “You little cheater!”

“I’m sorry I don’t speak loser.”

When I glance over my shoulder, he’s already gaining on me, and before I know it, he grabs the corner of the mat, slowing me down.

“Ash! That isn’t fair.”

“And you launching yourself like a fucking torpedo is?” Wheezing with laughter, I try to loosen his hold, but he grabs my wrist. “You’re not going anywhere.” He yanks my mat back, making us side by side. “I’ll take this loss with your cheating ass.”

Laughing uncontrollably, I give up and lean against his shoulder as we slide the rest of the way down. When we reach the bottom, I fall onto my back with laughter.

Ash holds out his hand for me. “Good to know you play dirty when you’re losing.”

Placing my hand in his, he pulls me to my feet. I lean against his chest, trying to catch my breath. “I do what I must.”

Shaking his head, he asks, “Where to next?”

“Your choice.” We step into the throng of people. He interlaces his fingers with mine. A jolt of emotions floods through me. I wish I could stop them, but that’s the same as asking the stars not to shine.

“How do you feel about being tossed around?” Tearing my gaze from our hands, I look at him. The corner of his mouth turns up.

“Love it,” I simper.

A low, smooth chuckle resonates in his chest as he pulls me toward a ride with the words ‘Hyper Loop’ on the gate. It’s brightly colored and spins around in the air while simultaneously flipping upside down.

“This is the tossing around I’m subjected to because of your bet.” Letting out a sigh, I listen to the screams and laughter of the people on the ride.

“I’m not forcing you to do anything, love. Feel free to give in.”

“And give you what you want? Never.” This bet has taught me how stubborn I am. I’d rather prove a point than give *myself* what I want. Shit, what I need.

We’re not in line long. The adrenaline rushes through my veins as we’re seated and strapped in.

“Ready?” He grabs my hand.

“Are you holding my hand for yourself or because you think I’m scared?”

“Purely selfish reasons. I have a fear of heights.”

My eyes widen. “Ash, what the fuck? Why are we on this ride?”

“I have to get over the initial fear and then I can enjoy myself. I’ll be fine once it starts.”

“Your hand is literally sweating in mine.”

“I’m nervous.”

I can’t help the laugh that bubbles up in my throat. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Lots of things.”

“Why would you go on a ride that catapults you into the air when you have a fear of heights?”

“I don’t know. Things are a little more bearable with you. You know what? Talking about it isn’t helping. I promise I’ll be—” the ride starts “—fuck!”

My heart skips a beat with his words, and my stomach plummets to my feet as we’re launched into the air. Asher screams, causing me to scream, and then we’re both fucking screaming and laughing, completely out of control. I can’t remember ever feeling this carefree or secure with my hand in his as we whip through the air.

I allow myself to indulge in this moment.

The ride doesn't last long before we're being lowered back to the ground. My stomach hurts from laughing. Looking over at Asher, his eyes are closed with a satisfied smile on his face.

"We didn't die." He exhales, causing me to fall into another fit of laughter.

We spend the rest of the evening enjoying every ride and game available. Asher won me a giant stuffed purple unicorn with a pink mane that has glitter. I'm taking letting my inner child out to play very seriously. It's unexpectedly been one of the best nights of my life.

My stomach growls. "I'm starving."

"Did you want to eat here, or do you want to go somewhere else?"

"I refuse to leave without funnel cake and cotton candy."

"What stand are we going to?"

There are nearly as many food stands as rides. I choose the one with the pictures of funnel cakes and corn dogs on the side. It has the shortest line. While I've had an amazing time, I'm ready to go home and crash. A chill runs through me as the wind picks up.

"Cold?"

"No." I shiver again as goosebumps appear on my skin.

"You can pretend to not be cold or you can have my hoodie."

He pulls it over his head before I have time to respond. His t-shirt gets caught, exposing his abs. God, how I miss those fucking abs. I miss being on top and—

“I’m not sure why you’re stubborn about things that benefit you.” He slips the hoodie over my head.

“Excuse you. I can dress myself. Thank you.” Spitting curls out of my mouth, I shove the unicorn at his chest.

“You’re welcome.” He grins, holding onto it while I slide my arms into the sleeves.

His sweatshirt and the smell of him warm me from the inside. “I hate that you smell so good.”

“Still pretending to hate me?” He chuckles.

“I don’t hate you. I just...”

Wrapping his arm around my shoulder, he pulls me into his chest. “You just?”

“I just hate how much I feel—oh my god.” I gasp, burying my face in his chest, and he wraps his arms around me.

“Uh... are you okay?”

“No... I think I saw Reese. He must be here with his family.” I take another peek around Asher’s arm. “Yep, definitely him.”

“Why are you hiding? Fuck him.”

“I don’t want to cause—”

Asher grabs my chin, making me look at him. “He made the choice to do what he did. It’s not your responsibility to make

him comfortable. Besides, didn't his wife try to embarrass you?"

I nod with my chin in his hand.

"Okay, take back your power. Fuck him, fuck her, and fuck them goddamn kids too." Laughter bubbles up in my throat, spilling from my lips. "Yeah, I said it. Fuck that whole family. What are you gonna do? Cower away each time you run into them? Nah, not the Marisa fucking Banks I know. You'd let me have it. In fact, you have. Keep that same fucking energy, love."

His words strike every heartstring I have, making it beat for him. "Right... keep the energy." I tear my gaze from his, taking a deep breath.

Standing next to Asher, we continue to wait in line while I hope Reese doesn't notice me.

"Marisa?" *Dammit.*

"Yes?" I turn to face him, staying glued to Asher's side.

"I thought..." His eyes dart to Asher. His arm is draped over my shoulders. "I... uh, thought that was you. You look—"

"Dad! Dad!" Two kids, a boy and a girl, run up to him. They're his spitting image. "Can we go on the rollercoaster again? Mom said—"

"Reese, did you—" Jessica's eyes land on me. She looks as though someone threw ice water on her face.

“This is fucking awkward.” Asher announces. I nudge him, biting back laughter.

“Hi.” Reese’s daughter waves with a smile. Young. Innocent. Has no clue I’m the enemy.

“Harper!” Jessica scolds. “What have we said about talking to strangers?”

I scoff, causing Jessica to glare at me. Anger burns in me. Fuck them all. “Pretending to be a decent human in front of your children? That’s rich.”

“Marisa.” Reese says in a clipped tone, pulling money from his pocket and handing it to his son. “Take your sister and go play a game.” The kids look between me and their parents before heading for the booth with water guns.

Once they’re gone, he turns his attention back to me. “You could’ve—”

“No.” I hold up my hand. “You don’t get to tell me what I should’ve, could’ve done. I’m not a fucking pet, Reese.” I step forward, causing Jessica to shrink. “Or your wife. Thank fucking God for that.” My heart races as my anger grips me. “I won’t heel like a good little housewife, if you can even call her that, or your kids. But that’s why you were fucking me, right? For the thrill.”

“Marisa, be respect—”

“Reese, I think—” Jessica grabs his arm, trying to pull him away.

“No, both of you are going to hear what I have to say. You want me to be respectful? Where was the respect when she,” I point at Jessica, “called me a whore in a room full of people?” My eyes narrow. “You knew your husband was fucking me for months before you spoke up! But woe is fucking me, right? Did you get off on it? Or did you realize you’re a frigid bitch who can’t do better?”

Jessica’s mouth falls open. Reese frowns, looking down at his feet. A deafening silence follows. “I’m sorry, Marisa.”

“Reese.” My body shakes with rage as his eyes meet mine. “If you see me, pretend you don’t fucking know me. Forget about me like I’ve forgotten about you.”

He swallows hard, causing his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. He looks at me one last time before turning in the opposite direction, leaving Jessica scurrying after him.

Standing in silence, I watch them disappear into the crowd. I let out a shuddering breath, leaning against Asher. Thankfully, we’re next in line. I need something to eat to calm this anger that is turning to hanger.

Asher breaks the silence. “I will say, it’s fucking nice to not be on the receiving end of your wrath for once. I’m so fucking proud of you.” He kisses the top of my head as I lean into him, knowing he’s got my back.



After arriving home, I took a long bath. It helped soothe my raw emotions. Grabbing my bag of neon pink cotton candy, I head to Asher's room. His door is closed. I knock gently, thinking he may be asleep.

"Come in."

"Are you naked?"

"No." He chuckles.

I open the door slowly. The lights are off except for a lamp that makes it look like he has a sunset on his wall.

Grabbing his blanket, I ask, "Mind if I lay with you?"

"No." He scoots over.

I climb into bed with him. Making myself comfortable. After a moment, I open the cotton candy. The bag rustles loudly. He side eyes me. "What? I'll share."

"No... it's just I normally don't eat in bed."

I tear off a piece of cotton candy, putting it in my mouth. "You're missing out, babe."

Tearing off another piece, I hold it to his lips. He opens his mouth for me to feed it to him. We do this; me eating a bite and feeding him one in silence for a few minutes.

"Thank you for tonight." I meet his gaze. "It was fun to be carefree for once."

"Of course. You deserve that."

I do what I've been wanting to do all night and press a kiss to his lips. Pulling away, I hold his gaze. For these few

seconds, with our chests pressed together, my heart speaks to his.

Asher

Staring out the window, zoning out. My therapist, Dr. Whitlock, pulls me back to the present.

“Asher?”

I focus on him. “Yes?”

“I lost you for a second.” He smiles.

I’ve been seeing Dr. Whitlock since I was twelve. I briefly stopped seeing him earlier this year, yet here I am again.

“I’m distracted lately.” I sigh, resting my head against the couch.

“Where is your focus going?”

“That’s a loaded question.”

“Is it your mother?”

“That and...” I sit up, meeting his gaze. “I’m growing attached to someone.”

“Is this a bad thing?”

“Yes, because despite my efforts not to, I’m still... drawn to her.” Truth be told, my efforts lately have been non-existent. It’s more exhausting pretending not to care than showing I care.

“May I ask a question?” I nod. “Why are you so determined to be alone?”

“Doc... c’mon.” I scoff, running my hands down my face. “You know my history.”

“No, I know your parents’ history. You have yet to give me any. Unless you’ve had a partner I don’t know about?” He holds my gaze, waiting for an answer.

I chew on the inside of my cheek. “No... but what if at some point, hypothetically, we get together and I can’t give her what she needs?”

“Asher, no one can give someone all of what they need. That’s an unrealistic expectation. If you two get together, you’ll pour into one another in different ways. Are you thinking of asking her out?”

“No.” I shake my head, looking out the window. The question makes me feel physically ill. “Fuck no. She might tell me to go fuck myself. I can’t quite tell whether she hates or likes me most days.”

He chuckles. “Are you afraid of rejection?”

“All of it. I’m afraid of all of it. Why should I put myself through something that might break me? I’ve been broken before. I refuse to be in a position like that again. It’s why I’ve

been seeing you most of my life.” Cracking my knuckles, I roll my neck. “It’s the same reason I don’t want to talk to my mom. Why? When she’ll probably disappear from my life again.”

He falls silent, looking down at his notepad before setting it aside. “Asher, life comes with zero guarantees. We don’t know what’s to come. Do you want to spend the rest of your life wondering what could’ve been?”

I try to live my life without regret. But I know, without a doubt, I’d regret not trying with Marisa. “No.”

“If you want to get technical, everything is a risk, Asher. There’s risk in not taking a risk. I guess you have to ask yourself, would the regret be more bearable than the outcome of the risk?”



Therapy always leaves me feeling emotionally drained, no matter how much better I feel after. I left work early to go for a run near the Willamette River to clear my head. Once I’m done, I lean against the railing, overlooking the river, and wait for my heart rate to return to normal. My ringer cuts through the music blasting in my ear buds. Pulling it out of my pocket, it’s a number I don’t recognize. My heart rate spikes again, knowing it’s my mom. Fuck.

Regret or risk? I ask myself. Regret or risk?

I press the green button to answer, waiting for the automated message, and then press one to accept the charges.

“Asher?”

A lump lodges itself in my throat, keeping me silent.

“I-It’s okay. You don’t have to speak... or even listen. I only want you to know I’m sorry for not speaking to you all these years. I’ve regretted what I did every day since then and that I abandoned you. The shame I feel is crippling. I know that’s not an excuse... I-thank you for listening. I love you, Ash. So much.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Sixteen years...”

“I’m not asking for forgiveness, Ash. I don’t believe I’m worthy of it. I’m asking for you to—”

“Let you in again?” The anger drowns out the sadness. “Do you know what it’s like to go to a support group for kids with parents in prison and to be the only kid whose mother refuses to talk to them? Refusing visits as if the sight of me fucking repulsed you. Do you know what that’s like? You were my world! The one constant I had in that shit storm you two created.” My voice cracks. Taking a deep inhale, I try to steady my voice. “Losing you hurt more than losing him. So much fucking more...”

“Ash—” She cries.

“I’ve gotta go.” Swiping fallen tears from my face, I close my eyes. “I heard your apology... and that’s all I can do right now.”

“I love you, Ash.”

Hesitating a fraction of a second, I hang up without another word. “Fuck!” I shout, causing people passing by to side eye me and scurry along.

I couldn’t keep the venom out of my words, but I wanted her to feel a fraction of what I’ve felt. While I’m grateful for her apology, it doesn’t erase the pain. Instead of going home, like I had planned, I take off running again.



I pull into Marisa’s driveway as the sun sets. Resting my head against the seat, I contemplate driving out to my grandparent’s house. Talking to her wouldn’t be a bad thing, but I don’t want to talk about it. I really want a hot shower and sleep. With that thought, I get out of the car and head inside.

“You’re home!” She smiles brightly. It fades when she looks at me. Her eyes narrow, and she dips her finger into the bowl of whatever she was mixing. She walks toward me and holds her finger up to my lips. “Taste it. You look like you can use some sugar.”

My eyes cross as I stare down at her finger. “What is it?”

“Cupcake frosting. Now, taste it.”

Grabbing her wrist, I put her finger into my mouth, sucking off the frosting. She inhales sharply as she stares at me. “Lemon?”

“Huh?”

“Lemon.” I chuckle. “Is the frosting lemon?”

“Oh, yeah. Yes. It’s lemon.”

I let go of her wrist. “It’s good. What are the cupcakes for?”
There are two trays of frosted ones on the counter.

“I’m going next door.” She tears her gaze from mine and grabs the bowl, taking it to the sink. “Are you okay? Not to be a bitch, but you look like hell.”

“I’m alright.” She raises a brow. “Alright, I had a really rough day that I’d prefer not to talk about.”

“I understand.”

“The frosting helped.” I smile, and she laughs softly.

“If you wanted to... or felt up to it, you’re welcome to come next door with me. I also understand if you want to be alone too.”

“I don’t want to be alone.” It sounded appealing until I saw her. “I’ll go. Just give me time to take a shower and make myself presentable.”

“Of course. Take your time. I don’t have to be there for another hour anyway.”

“Is it chill, or do I need to bring the razzle dazzle?”

She tosses her head back with laughter. “Razzle dazzle?”

“Yeah, casual or dressy?” Her laughter picks up my mood.

“Casual.” She leans against the counter, holding her stomach, attempting to catch her breath.

“I’ll be back.”

After I shower and dress, I walk back into the kitchen to find Marisa in a lavender colored top that pops against her burnished copper skin. “That color looks nice on you.”

She looks down at her top, then meets my gaze, smiling. “Thank you. I love your subtle razzle dazzle.”

“Thanks.” Chuckling, I smooth my hand over my brown jersey cotton t-shirt that I paired with white pants. “Is purple your favorite color?”

“Yeah, what about yours?”

“Green. Preferably a deep forest green.” Her hazel eyes have flecks of forest green in them.

“I love that color, too.” She covers the cupcakes. “Would you mind helping me carry these?”

“Of course.” Grabbing them off the counter, I follow her out the door.

As we walk across the patch of grass between the two houses, she gives me the rundown on who will be there.

“Faith and Maxwell are amazing. They have a daughter named Violet. She’s a doll. Then the Jefferies from across the street,” she nods her head toward a white house directly across from hers, “will be here too. Stanley and Wade own a mobile dog grooming business that has taken off. Everyone is around

the same age as us. They're like family to me." Her face lights up with a smile as she knocks on the door. "I think you'll love them."

"I'm sure I will." It's clear from the way she speaks of them they mean a lot to her. I'm honored she invited me to be with them tonight.

"Faith said she'd invite more people, but I don't know who."

A tall woman, with a baby on her hip, opens the door and pulls Marisa into a hug.

"Faith," Marisa pulls away, putting her hand on my arm. "This is Asher. Asher, this is Faith."

She extends her hand out to me. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"You too." I shake her hand. "Marisa has told me so much about you and your family."

"Ah, Marisa is a gem." She winks at her and waves us inside. "Come in, come in. You can set the cupcakes down in the kitchen."

I follow her and Marisa to a spacious, all-white kitchen. The designer in me always takes notice of the details in people's homes. "Beautiful home."

"Thank you. Do you work in design?"

"Sort of. Architectural engineer with a deep love for design."

“Passion,” Marisa chimes in. “He’s very passionate about his work.”

The corners of my mouth tip up as I look at her. I told her about my work one time and she picked up on the love I have for it then.

“Makes it feel less like work, doesn’t it?” Faith sets her daughter down, who crawls over to me and inspects the laces on my shoes. “Violet, no chewing, baby.”

“It does until I’m in meetings all day.” Kneeling in front of Violet, I hold out my hand. She looks up at me, smiles, and then pulls at the bracelets on my wrist. “Their curiosity is fun at this age.”

“Do you have children?”

“No. Three nieces.”

“I bet they’re a handful.”

“Depends on the day.” I stand upright again. Violet cries, reaching her arms out to me.

“Oh, you don’t –”

I pick her up and she stops, but stares at me for a moment before smiling. “She’s fine.”

“Careful, she won’t want you to put her down.” Faith chuckles. “Let me go find Maxwell. I’ll be back. Everyone else should arrive shortly.”

“Let me find out you’re a baby whisperer, Ash.”

“Not even close, but how could someone not love me?”

She scoffs, rolling her eyes. “I was about to say you’re cute with kids, but never mind. You definitely need no reassurance.”

Faith reenters the kitchen with her husband.

“Hi, I’m Maxwell. I’m sure Marisa has told you about me drooling over your car.”

“No.” I shake his hand. “She hasn’t. Do you like Lamborghinis?”

“I like cars.” He grins. “Have you been following the NBA playoffs? I was about to put on a game if you wanted to join me.” He grabs a case of beer from the fridge.

“A bromance in the making.” Marisa teases, and Faith laughs.

“I’ll join you.”

“Great. Then you can tell me more about your car.”

I follow him to their living room and hear Marisa and Faith mutter, “Men.”



As the evening progresses, more people trickle in. Some have kids, others are couples or single, but everyone is warm and inviting. Coming out with her was the right idea instead of sitting at home spiraling into my thoughts. Maxwell and Faith grilled chicken and steaks, while everyone else brought a side

dish. After running as much as I did today, it was a relief to see a table full of food and have a few helpings of it.

Walking outside as the sun sets, I settle outside on the patio. While I love a good party, after the events of today, I'm craving some quiet. The quiet doesn't last long as people join me outside. Marisa sits next to me, resting her arm on my leg as she leans into me.

"Enjoying yourself?" She holds out a beer.

"Yeah." I take it. "Thank you for the invite."

"Of course." She nudges my shoulder, taking a sip of beer. "I would've dragged you here if necessary."

"Drag me?" I chuckle smoothly. "I would love to see that."

"You're too big for all that, but don't underestimate me. Seriously, though, if you ever need to talk, you know you can talk to me, right?"

Looking at my bottle of beer, I rub my thumb over the water droplets on the label. "It's fucking complicated." Letting out a sigh, my eyes meet hers. "Thank you for being willing to listen though."

"Any—"

"Marisa?"

I turn my attention toward the voice at the same time as Marisa.

"Oh, hey, Jeremy."

A guy stands there, holding his arms out, waiting for Marisa to give him a hug. She glances at me, chuckles nervously, and walks into his waiting arms.

My jaw ticks as my teeth grind together. I have no right to be annoyed but I am. Of all the moments to interrupt, it had to be this one.

“You look great.” He pulls away from her, drinking her in.

“Thanks.” She laughs softly, brushing her curls out of her face. “I thought you were saving children or something... overseas.”

“Not saving.” He smiles. “Just providing dental treatment.”

He’s a dentist. That explains the bad bucktooth veneers he can barely close his mouth around. If I were to knock them out, I’d be doing him a favor and us a public service so we don’t have to look at them anymore.

“Right, the dental thing. How did that work out for you?”

“It was nice, but I’m happy to be home.”

“I bet.” Marisa smiles, shoving her hands into her back pockets. An awkward silence settles between them.

“I—I’m actually happy you’re here. Are you still dating Reese?”

Marisa freezes for a second and then turns her attention toward me. “Have you met my Asher—I mean my friend, Asher? He lives with me.”

“Lives with you?” He asks, extending his hand out to me. I shake it out of courtesy. “Jeremy, nice to meet you.”

I nod, tipping my beer in his direction. Marisa sits next to me, resting her hand on my leg. “Yeah, we live together,” she repeats.

“Oh...” His brow furrows as his eyes dart between Marisa and me. “Uh... I—I was wondering if you’d be interested in going on a—”

“Hi, babygirl,” Marisa says to Violet as she appears, interrupting Jeremy mid-sentence. She picks her up, snuggling her to her chest and yawns. “You’re tired? Let’s go find Mommy, shall we?” She stands. “It was good to see you, Jeremy.” She steps around him.

Jeremy looks at me. I stand, patting him on the shoulder. “In case you were wondering, that was a subtle fuck no. Pleasure to meet you.”

Even though he only attempted to ask her out, I hated watching it.

She has awakened a part of me I’ve tried to keep sedated. There’s something about her that has called to me since the first time I met her. It was easy to ignore initially and claim I only wanted what was between her thighs. I told her she’d never forget me, and the truth is, I’ll never forget her. Even if I wanted to. Being in her space has made what I feel for her undeniable.

Risk or regret?

I'd regret not trying to be everything she needs.

Entering the house, I look around to see if I can find her. She's coming back down the stairs when I reach the living room.

"Hey." She grabs my hand. "I'm gonna say bye to a few people and then did you want to go?"

"If you're ready, I'm ready."

I wonder what Jeremy did or didn't do that has her wanting to leave. It seems like others are leaving too as they say their goodbyes. I'm used to parties going into the wee hours of the morning. This must be what it feels like to be an adult with responsibilities.

Maxwell pulls me into a hug, catching me off guard. "Nice to meet you."

"You too," I say, patting his back. "Let me know when you want to go on a drive."

His face lights up. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. You have my number. Text me."

"I will. Thank you both for coming."

"Wipe your drool, Maxwell." Marisa laughs. "We'll see you later."

She pulls me toward the front door after saying bye to a few more people. Once we're outside, I can't help but to ask her.

"Why do we not like Jeremy?"

"We?" She smiles.

“Yeah, we.”

She sighs. “We were fuck buddies for a while. He wanted more. I didn’t. Shortly after that, I met Reese. You know that story. Jeremy took it pretty hard, according to Maxwell, that I said no to him and yes to Reese. He decided to go overseas and do whatever it was that he did. I didn’t think I’d see him again. Jeremy...”

“Has a stick stuck up his ass?”

“Yes.” She snorts with laughter. “He wants an entirely different woman than who I am. Sweet guy, but it wouldn’t work.”

“You and these sweet guys...” I open the front door to her house.

She covers her face with her hand. “I know. I know. I want nothing to do with them, but I can’t seem to stop fucking them. Actually, thanks to you,” she kicks off her shoes, “I’m not fucking anyone.”

“I’m always available if you want to change that.”

She pats my cheek. “You’d love that, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, I would.”

“Not gonna happen.” She flips over the back of the couch, grabbing the remote. I join her, and she puts her feet in my lap. Wrapping my hands around them, I massage them and a moan spills from her lips.

“Been a while?”

“Shhh...” She closes her eyes. “Just do the thing with your hands to my feet.”

Chuckling, I do as she asks. The look of serenity on her face is one I don't want to interrupt. We sit in silence as I massage her feet and contemplate how the fuck I'm going to ask her out. We've been out together countless times. The intention is different now. I've never been on a date for someone's company. I also haven't wanted to know everything about a person like I do Marisa. Annoying her and pissing her off? I know how to do that well. But I want to know the depths of her soul.

“Do you want to go on a date with me?” My heart races.

Her eyes snap open. “You're asking me on a date?”

“Yeah... I'm pretty sure that was the question.”

“A real date?” She sits up, brushing her curls out of her face. “Like in the movies where we dress up, you buy me flowers, and we go to a fancy restaurant where we flirt for hours. And then we head back to my place, well, our place, and you give me a chaste kiss that turns greedy. But we stop and leave each other wanting more? Yeah.” She nods. “I'll experience that with you.” She smiles.

“Uh... yes, that is... what I'll aim for. That is extremely detailed. Flowers, fancy restaurant, flirting, greedy kiss... I can't promise the kiss will be chaste. There is nothing chaste about what I want to do to you. But.. yeah, I can do that.”

“Okay. When?”

“Tomorrow?”

“What time?”

“Seven?”

Grinning, she lays back down, putting her feet in my lap.
“I’ll be ready.”

“Okay...”

I can plan the date of her dreams in less than twenty-four hours, right?

Marisa

Walking into the studio the next morning, I can't keep the smile off my face. The butterflies still haven't left my stomach. I've tried to ignore what I feel for Asher out of fear of the energy not being reciprocated. But trying to ignore my feelings for him is like trying to ignore a fire that's set me ablaze. He seems to avoid attachment at all costs, and I've been reckless enough with my heart. I don't want to offer it up as sacrifice to be broken again, but with him... it's a risk I'm willing to take.

My phone vibrates in my bag. Pulling it out, I see a text from Asher.

Ash: How tied are you to the fancy restaurant fantasy?

Marisa: I'll go wherever you take me. I'd rather create my own fantasies.

Ash: Are we naked in your fantasy?

Marisa: Damn! Wine and dine a girl first! Did you ask me out just to fuck me?

Ash: I don't always wanna fuck, Risa. Sometimes I just want to be in your space.

Staring at his text, I try to calm my heart as it skips several beats. He wants to be in my space.

No expectations. Just me and him.

I asked if he wanted to date me just to fuck me as a joke. I expected our usual banter, not such candor. Asher and I are one and the same. Wanting commitment but fearing attachment. It requires vulnerability. The last time I was vulnerable, I was left to sort through the wreckage of my emotions. But my heart doesn't give a fuck about fear or the pieces it was left in because there's a chance for it to be mended.

Walking back out to the lobby, I'm met by Natalie as she sets her bag down and turns on the computer.

"Good morning." The smile is still stuck on my face.

"Morning..." She raises a brow, placing her finger on her chin, and tilts her head to the side. "You seem... happy... or excited this morning. You're usually not this chipper."

I bite my lip, trying to contain my smile. "Asher asked me out on a date."

"Look at you, grinning like a Cheshire cat. I knew you liked him."

"He... makes me feel seen." Looking down at my hands, I shrug. "Safe... seen and safe."

Natalie wraps me in a hug. “I love this for you.”

“Thanks, Natalie.”

“So happy for you. He’s too good looking for you to be acting like he ain’t shit.”

Pulling away from her, I try to be serious. “Looks aren’t everything.”

She sucks her teeth. “Now, you *know* that’s bullshit.”

“I wish I could be a better person and argue, but I can’t.”

She snorts with laughter, taking a seat at the reception desk. “Guess what I’m doing this weekend?”

“Fucking Eric?”

“I’d rather it be that, but I’m meeting his parents.”

“What?” I gasp. “That’s huge! Are you excited?”

“You don’t think it’s too soon?” She runs her hands through her hair. “I mean, it hasn’t been that long.”

“Does it feel too soon for you?”

“No,” she says without hesitation. “I really like him... but what if I meet his parents and they hate me and then he changes toward me?”

“Pfft! Please! They’ll adore you.”

“You think so?”

“Of course. You have nothing to worry about, but I also understand that you’re nervous.”

“Alright.” She takes a deep breath. “I’ll try to chill out.”

I give her an encouraging smile and look at my phone as it vibrates with a text.

“Shit. I forgot I have a doctor’s appointment this afternoon. Do you have to go to classes today?” I respond to the text, confirming I’ll be there.

“No. I only have online classes today.”

“Awesome. I’ll have to leave here a little earlier and hope I’ll have time to buy something cute for my date.”

“What’s the appointment for?”

“Just a routine checkup.” Glancing at the time, I have twenty minutes before the first class starts. “Better get in there to warm up. Can you please check when the new heating system is supposed to arrive? I need to give the electrician a more accurate date.”

“On it, boss.”

I chuckle as I tie my hair up and head into the hot yoga room.



After rushing to my appointment, I’m sitting on the exam room table, swinging my feet back and forth, waiting for the doctor to return. She wanted a blood panel done to check my mineral levels since I struggle with anemia. I’m already prepping myself for the inevitable lecture she’ll give me about

not taking my iron pills. There's a light knock on the door, and Dr. Forrester appears seconds later.

Looking at the tablet in her hand, she smiles. "Marisa, you already know you need to be taking the iron pills I prescribed you."

"I know, but they make my stomach hurt, and I feel worse than if I weren't taking them."

"I'll have the nurse include some gentler iron pill options for you to buy. Please take them."

"Sure thing." I nod. She looks at me over the rim of her glasses. "I promise!"

"Do I need to remind you of your fainting spells you were having earlier this year due to low iron levels?"

"I know." I cringe as the memory of me fainting in the middle of a class replays in my head. "You're right. I'll take them."

"Good. Now are you happy with the depo shot for birth control? I know you were asking about the IUD when you came in for your shot last time."

"I'd rather switch to the IUD. With the summer months approaching and the increase in travel, I can't always guarantee I'll be home to get it when I should."

"Did you want to do it today? We'll just need a quick urine test. Then you won't have to come back to the office."

"Does it matter that I got my shot a few weeks ago?"

“No, it’s better to do it before you need your next shot to avoid gaps in protection.”

“Let’s do it, then.”

“Okay. Do you have any questions or concerns?”

“Nope. Oh... wait... how long do I have to wait to have sex?” While I know it isn’t about sex tonight, I’m not going to rule it out as a possibility. I’d rather be safe.

“Twenty–four hours. You may also experience light spotting.”

“Sounds good.” I’ve held off for a month. What’s another twenty–four hours?

She grabs a urine cup from the cabinet and holds it out to me. “Take this to the bathroom down the hall.”

Grabbing the cup, I hop off the exam table and head to the bathroom. While I pee, I piece together outfit options. I think I’ll go with a dress, something flirty, and whatever heels I can find in my closet. I have more shoes than I’ll ever know what to do with, even though I hate wearing them. After placing the cup in the steel box attached to the wall, I head back to the room. Maybe I should text Asher and ask him if I should be casual or razzle dazzle. The memory of him saying razzle dazzle makes me laugh to myself as I sit on the exam table.

Pulling out my phone, I text him.

Marisa: Casual or razzle dazzle?

Asher: Haha. A mix? You look good in anything. I should know. I've seen you first thing in the morning.

I clap my hand over my mouth as I stifle a laugh.

Marisa: The fuck is that supposed to mean?

Asher: That you look sublime at any given time.

I guess I'll have a perma-smile. Is this what swooning is? Asher is... charming. I take a deep breath as butterflies dance in my stomach. *Chill, Marisa.* I text him while I wait.

Dr. Forrester reenters the room and sits on the stool, wheeling closer to me.

"Marisa..." She takes off her glasses, holding them in her hand. "You're pregnant."

The smile I thought would never leave my face today fades. "What?" My heart thrums against my chest and sweat breaks out across my brow.

"Looking at your records, there was a gap between your most recent shot and the previous one. You have to take it on time for it to be—"

"Effective." I finish for her as I unblinkingly stare at a point over her shoulder. She continues talking, but I can't hear her because my heart is beating too loud. The air isn't quite reaching my lungs, making me feel nauseous and dizzy.

"Marisa?"

“Yes?” I blink, causing a tear to roll down my cheek.

“I know this pregnancy wasn’t planned, but please know you have options.”

“Options?” I brush the tear from my face. “How many weeks?”

“Do you remember when your last period was?”

Holding my head in my hands, I try to remember. I’ve always been terrible with keeping track. The headache that is creeping up my skull is making it hard to think. “I—I don’t remember...”

“Would you be open to an ultrasound today to see how far along you are? If you’re not up for it, I understand.”

“I—yeah. Ultrasound.”

“Okay.” She stands. “Do you want some water?”

My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. “Yes.”

“I’ll be right back.”

I say nothing in response as she leaves me alone. How the fuck could I be so reckless? I smack my palm against my forehead several times. I have no business having a baby. Minutes ago, I was excited about going on a date. And now I’m thinking about a baby. Me as a mother is something I can’t even imagine. Dr. Forrester returns with a cup of water. My hand trembles as I take it from her. I set it aside after a few seconds. My stomach is in a million knots.

“If you’ll follow me to the ultrasound room,” she says gently.

Getting off the exam table, my legs don’t feel like my own. I know I’m here, living, breathing, but I don’t feel like I am. The room is a few doors down. It’s dimly lit, providing an ominous feeling. I stand in the center of the room, staring at the ultrasound machine as if it’s the enemy.

“I’ll give you a moment to undress from the waist down. You can use this sheet,” she sets a white one on the table, “to cover up.” She disappears again.

I fumble with the button of my jeans as my hands shake. What the hell am I going to do? I’m not ready for a baby. Lying on the exam table, I stare at the ceiling.

Dr. Forrester reenters the exam room with a medical assistant. “Okay, Marisa, we’re going to do a transvaginal ultrasound today. There shouldn’t be any pain, but you will feel pressure. Do you want to see the baby?”

“No,” I say a little too quickly. The medical assistant looks at me, and I feel the judgment radiating from her. “Does she have to be here?” She has the decency to avert her gaze. A judgy glare is the last thing I need right now.

Dr. Forrester glances over her shoulder. “Please give us the room, Bethany. I’ll call if I need anything.” The girl nods and leaves. “I apologize. I should’ve asked.”

“It’s fine.” *No! Nothing is fucking fine right now.* I want to fucking scream while crawling out of my skin. Instead, I

breathe.

“I’m going to begin the ultrasound.”

I nod, feeling a tear roll down my cheek. I wish I wasn’t alone. Closing my eyes, I try to relax as she inserts the wand. The pressure isn’t bad, but it’s uncomfortable.

“I’m taking a few quick measurements to see how far along you are.”

I lie still, barely breathing, as I wait for her to finish. The room is quiet except for the clicking of the buttons she presses on the ultrasound machine. A few minutes later, she pulls out the wand. I take a deep breath as I look at her.

She pulls off her gloves, tossing them into the trash. “From the measurements, you’re about twelve weeks along.”

Tearing my eyes from hers, I stare at the ceiling again.

“Marisa, I know this is hard for you – ”

I tune out the rest. She doesn’t know the fear that’s gripped me within the last hour. This isn’t what I want. But who do I have to blame but myself?

“How does that sound?” Her voice comes back into focus.

“Good,” I respond, having no clue what she just said.

“Okay, I’ll get the information together, and you can grab it on your way out. And Marisa,” she takes a few breaths, “please call the office any time. We’re here for you.”

I nod as she exits the room. Everything becomes a blur. I barely remember putting on my clothes or Dr. Forrester

handing me a stack of pamphlets on my way out. Climbing into my car, I become aware of them in my hand and toss them onto the passenger seat.

Staring out the windshield, the silence becomes loud.

The weight of the situation crushes me. I allow myself to crumble, letting out a sob.

Asher

I was going to make reservations at a fancy restaurant, but I want our date to be memorable. After lying awake half the night thinking of ideas, I finally thought of something she'd never forget. Instead of sitting in meetings all morning, I setup everything for our date tonight. As expected, my phone lights up with a call from Jax.

“Are you ill?”

I chuckle, tearing my eyes away from my computer screen.
“No. Preoccupied.”

“Francesca called worried about you because you haven't answered any calls, nor did you show up at the office this morning.”

“Has she?” I glance at the missed call and text alerts from her on my phone.

“Are you okay? You never take a day off. It's fine if you need some time. I understand, but I still wanted to check in on you.”

From the tone of his voice, I can tell Gigi has been talking to him about my mom again. “Did they miss me at the meetings?”

“You know your presence is always noteworthy. Is the stuff with your mom—”

“No.” Cutting him off, I lean back against the couch. Letting out an exasperated sigh, I rub my hand over my face. “Yes, it fucking bothers me, and no, I don’t want to talk about it right now. If you must know—”

“I’d like to know.” I can hear the smile in his voice.

“—I’ve asked Marisa out on a date. And you know me, I can never do the bare minimum and have to go all out. I spent the morning planning because I asked her on a whim last night, and I want it to be perfect.”

“You’re going on a date?”

“Why do you sound shocked?” I chuckle.

“I’m not... okay, a little shocked, but in a good way.”

I stare out the window for a few breaths. “I’d rather see where this goes than wonder what if.”

“I understand.”

I hear the jingling of Marisa’s keys as she opens the door. “I’ve gotta go. Love you guys.” Snapping my laptop closed, I set it on the coffee table.

“Love you too. Have fun tonight.”

I end the call as I head to the kitchen. My phone vibrates with a confirmation text from the restaurant I hired to cater food for our date tonight. Walking into the kitchen, I check on the order from the florist.

“You’re home early. Do you like Jamaican food? There’s other options too, but I thought their menu sounded the best.” She’s unusually quiet. I shift my gaze to her, putting my phone in my back pocket.

Her hands are splayed across the counter, and she’s staring into nothing. She looks... lackluster compared to how vibrant she usually is.

“Risa, are you okay?” Her gaze is vacant as she stares straight ahead. I gently touch her hand. She’s shaking. “Risa, what’s wrong?” Her eyes move to my hand covering hers, and a tear splashes onto my skin.

Her eyes meet mine. They’re a darker green than usual and filled with tears. “Ash...” she whispers. “I fucked up. I really, really fucked up. I fucked up. I—” Squeezing her eyes shut, she puts her hand over mouth, and lets out a sob.

“Risa...” I pull her toward me and wipe away the tears falling down her cheeks.

“I really fucked up. What the fuck am I going to do?” She grips my shirt and has a panicked look in her eyes. She lets go of me, pressing her hands to the side of her head. “I feel like I can’t fucking breathe. I can’t do this, Ash. I can’t fucking do this. I can’t—” Her breath gets caught in her throat, and it

comes out as a strangled cry. Gasping for air, she leans against the counter.

I gently place my hands on the side of her face, making her look at me. “Breathe, Risa.” There is sadness and torment in her eyes. “Risa, breathe with me”

“I can’t,” she whispers.

Grabbing her hand, I press her palm to my chest. “Inhale. C’mon, baby, you gotta breathe with me. Look at me and fucking breathe.” She focuses on me through the tears. “Breathe.” She inhales with me. “Again. You’re having a panic attack. Exhale.” She lets out a shuddering breath as I count for her. “5... 4... 3... 2... 1... breathe for me again.”

Her breathing is still erratic, but at least she’s trying. Panic attacks are familiar to me, like an old friend. I don’t get them anymore, but they were so bad at one point, I thought I was dying. It’s terrifying to feel like there’s not enough room for your heart to beat. Me going through it is one thing, but watching her go through it and the helpless expression on her face makes me want to take whatever she’s feeling away.

Her breathing slowly returns to normal. She hasn’t taken her eyes off me for what feels like an eternity.

“Ash...” Her eyes are vacant again. She’s looking at me, but not really there.

“Risa?”

“I feel funny.”

A split second later, she passes out, falling against my chest. I catch her as her knees buckle. Picking her up, I carry her to the couch.

“Risa...” I rub her cheek.

Her eyes slowly open. I let out a sigh of relief and cradle my head in my hands. The last time I felt this many emotions, I was calling an ambulance for my dad.

“My head hurts...” she says hoarsely.

“You passed out. Let me get you some water. I’ll be right back.”

She nods her head as she rubs her eyes. I get up and head to the kitchen. Grabbing a cup, I fill it with water. That’s when I realize my hands are shaking. Not only my hands, but my whole fucking body.

“Get a fucking grip...” I mutter to myself. “She’s okay.”

At least I think she’s okay. Reentering the living room, she’s lying down with her arm over her eyes.

“Drink some water.” I sit next to her as she takes the glass.

Sitting up, she downs the water and then wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. “Was I out for long?”

“Less than a minute.” She sets the glass down on the coffee table and lies back down. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She looks everywhere but at me. “No... b—because I don’t know how.”

“Did someone hurt you?” I wipe tears from her face.

“No.”

I nod, looking away from her, rubbing the back of my neck.
“Okay... I am – if you want to talk I’m–”

“I’m pregnant, Ash,” she blurts out.

My eyes snap to hers and we hold each other’s gaze for a few breaths. “With my–”

“No.” Her eyes widen, and I can’t help the wave of relief that washes over me.

“Zion’s?” She shakes her head. “Oh, shit...” I can’t keep the surprise off my face. “Reese’s?”

“Yes...” she whispers, looking away from me.

Leaning forward, I press my elbows into my thighs and run my hands through my curls. The only sounds in the house are her sniffles as a silence falls between us. Do I comfort her? How do I comfort her? Clearly, she’s not okay. I don’t want to just sit here, watching her cry, but I don’t know that there’s anything I can say to bring her any comfort. Sitting up, I grab her wrist and gently pull her toward me until she’s flush against my body. I wrap my arms around her and settle into the couch. For some reason, this makes her cry harder. I momentarily freeze, but decide to hold her a little tighter.

“You don’t have to pretend to care, Ash. I get it if you want nothing to do with me now.”

I pull away from her to get a better view of her face. She still won’t look at me. I place two fingers under her chin, forcing her gaze to mine. “You think I’m pretending? The only

time I've ever played make-believe is when my nieces ask me to. I'm intentional in everything I say and do with you. I don't believe in fairy tales, Risa. But you... I believe in you and that you'll get through this."

She cries again. Okay, so maybe I'm not the best hugger or pep-talk giver? "Why are you so sweet to me?" She sobs.

"Jesus Christ." I let out a sigh. "I thought I was making things worse."

"No, no." She snorts with laughter and a snot bubble comes out of her nose. I try to keep a straight face as she attempts to wipe it away, but smears it instead.

I crack up. "You look fucking pitiful." Grabbing the hem of my shirt, I use it to wipe her face.

"Ash, that's gross!" She pushes my hand away.

"I'm not the one blowing snot bubbles."

She tosses her head back with laughter. "Listen, it's been a rough fucking day. You'd be blowing snot bubbles, too."

"I'm fucking with you." I wrap my arms around her again.

She lays her head on my chest. "I don't know what to do, Ash."

I sink my fingers into her hair, massaging her scalp. "What do you want to do?"

"I'm not ready for a baby." She hesitates. "I—I don't want a baby." It's barely a whisper as the words leave her mouth. "Reese being the father doesn't matter. I know he's worthless,

but I think about me... and I just never dreamed of kids. And definitely not like this. I don't know. I need time to think."

"Whatever you decide, I'll support you as much as you'll let me."

Her eyes meet mine. They're a lighter green now compared to when she got home. My feelings for her become undeniable as she wraps her arms around me.

"You don't think I'm a bad person?"

"This is your choice, Risa. And whatever you decide, I support you." This isn't my place to tell her what she should or shouldn't do. I'll never know what it's like to have a baby and can't even fathom the weight that's on her shoulders right now. But I can support her.

"I'm sorry I was so dramatic."

"I'm used to it."

She shakes with laughter. "I never would've thought you'd be... thanks for everything, Ash."

I kiss the top of her head, and she hugs me tighter. There's not a lot that I care for outside of myself, but I'd do anything for her.

A little while later, she's dozing off with her head laying in my lap.

"Ash, our date," she mumbles, half asleep. "Sorry I fucked it up. I was going to look so good."

I chuckle. “Shh. Sleep, Risa. I’ll give you shit about it later.”

The date is the least of my worries. It slipped my mind while I was helping her calm down, and then we got to talking. Checking the time, there’s still a few hours before 7. I send off a few texts; one of them is to my uncle.

Ash: Would you mind if I worked from home tomorrow?

He replies seconds later.

Jax: Are you running off to get married?

Ash: Yep! Vegas wedding.

Little does he know his joke is a truth. Playing with Marisa’s curls, I wait for his response.

Jax: Haha! The project is running smoothly. The ship can momentarily sail without you.

Ash: Thanks.

Jax: Laynee wants to know when she can meet your girlfriend.

Ash: They’re still on about that? She isn’t my girlfriend.

Yet... and now I’m not sure that will ever be.

Jax: Yep! Every. Single. Day.

Ash: Sucks to be you.

The girls can be relentless when it comes to getting what they want. Especially Laynee. She has no problem wearing someone down.

Laying my head against the couch, I rub my eyes. Going from one emotion to the polar opposite of it is exhausting, and I feel that's all I've done for the past two days. My fight-or-flight response has been activated too many fucking times. With my mom, it's too be expected, but with Marisa I thought I was going to have to kill someone. Closing my eyes, I let the exhaustion win.



I wake to my phone vibrating in my hand and Marisa still sound asleep on my lap. Grabbing a pillow, I gently move her onto it. I try to be as quiet as possible as I tiptoe to the front door. Opening it, I'm met by the florist.

“Mr. Blaine, we have your flower delivery.”

“Yeah.” I cover my mouth as I yawn. “Thanks. I'll show you where to set everything up. Please try to be quiet.”

“Of course, Mr. Blaine.” She smiles at me as she slips off her shoes at the door.

I lead the way to the dining room. “I’m not sure if there is enough space in here or if you’ll need the patio.”

“May I see the patio, please?”

“Yeah.”

When we get to the patio, she smiles. “This will do. I can work some magic here.”

“Alright. There’s a side gate if that would be easier?”

“Much easier. If you’ll open it for me, I’ll get to work, and you won’t even know I’m here.”

“Okay.” I smile, making a mental note to tip her again.

After unlocking the gate, I head back inside to check on Marisa. She’s still sound asleep. I consider sitting beside her again, but I don’t want to wake her while the florist is here setting up. I have no idea how to decorate for the dinner. Can I design awe inspiring buildings? Yes. Do I know how to set up a table for a dinner? No. Décor isn’t my forte. I wasn’t planning on doing this myself, but now I’m going to have to figure something out.

Quietly rummaging through the cupboards, I look for plates and whatever else I need to make a table look nice. I’m considering having us eat out of the food containers when I find matching plates. Grabbing those, I reach for champagne glasses and remember that she’s pregnant. This isn’t how I imagined things going, but things rarely do. That’s part of the reason I fell in love with architecture. I can design something in my head and then see it brought to life, exactly how I

imagined it. When my life was chaos, that control comforted me.

I guess we can drink out of champagne glasses. I may not know how to decorate, but I know how to improvise. Gathering all the stuff I found, I head out to the patio. One thing about Marisa is when she sleeps—she’s knocked out. Stepping outside, the patio looks like what I saw when I looked up ‘romantic date nights’ online but better.

“This looks incredible.” I turn on the spot.

“Thank you.” The florist smiles. “I’m almost done.”

I set the plates on the table and then stare at them as if my mind will magically set them in place. Pulling out my phone, I search for the proper way to set the table.

“Do you need help?”

“Is my struggle that obvious?” I raise a brow.

The corners of her mouth turn up. “Yes.”

“I don’t want it to look like I just threw it together. Which is what I want to do.”

“I could set a table in my sleep. My name’s Pamela, by the way. Do you have any cloth napkins?”

“Asher. Nice to meet you. Uh... I can look.”

“You’ll also need silverware.” She chuckles.

“Right.” I nod, setting out to find cloth napkins and silverware.

Less than a half hour later, Pamela has taught me how to set the table and also how to make a napkin look like a rose.

“Thank you. We would’ve been eating on the floor out of food containers.”

She laughs. “Something tells me your girlfriend wouldn’t mind that.”

“This is our first date...” Well... is this still a date? “I had something else planned, but stuff came up.”

She looks around with wide eyes. “If this is the first date, you’ve set a very high bar for yourself, my friend.” She pats my shoulder.

“I have a penchant for being ostentatious.”

“Clearly, in the best ways.”

Chuckling, I rub the back of my neck. “I try. Thank you for your help.”

“No problem. Enjoy your evening.”

After Pamela leaves, I head inside to change my shirt and to see if I can wake Marisa from the dead.

Marisa

Opening my eyes, I see the sun is setting. I stretch and realize I’m lying on Asher’s lap. Looking up at him, he’s scrolling through his phone with his ear buds in. He pulls one out as he looks at me.

“I needed that nap.”

“You drool.” He pulls the other ear bud out, setting them on the coffee table.

“Fuck you.” I let out a mix of a yawn and a laugh.

“Hungry?”

“Starving.” He gets up abruptly, causing my head to flop against the couch. “Damn, should’ve just shoved me off your lap.”

“I didn’t want to be rude.” He winks. “Let’s go eat.”

Sitting up, I pull my knees into my chest. “Oh, Ash, I don’t want to go out. I look like a hot mess. I was just blowing snot bubbles out of my nose, remember?”

“Vividly, but I said let’s go eat, not let’s go out.”

“Did you cook?”

He holds out his hand, shaking it in my face. “Just get up off that perfect ass of yours and follow me for the love of—”

“Alright, alright.” I put my hand in his and he pulls me to my feet. “Only because you said my ass is perfect.”

“You talk about me being arrogant.”

“Hey, you said it. I was just agreeing.”

“Did you grill?” I follow him toward the backdoor.

“Mmm... something like that.”

When we get to the patio, he steps aside. I gasp at the sight of it. My jaw nearly drops to the floor. We only took a few

steps and stepped right into a movie scene.

“Ash...” Purple wisterias hang from the ceiling. Arrangements of lush greenery, purple orchids, and a pink flower I don’t know the name of are placed around the patio. The table is beautifully decorated for two with candles, place settings, silver platters with food, and napkins in the shape of roses.

“Since the plans changed, I thought I’d bring our date here.”

“You still... want to date me?”

“No. I just wanted to see how pretty these flowers were in person. I’m thinking purple is my color.”

Sucking my teeth, I shove his arm. “You can never let me have a moment.”

He chuckles, wrapping his arm around my shoulders. “I want to date you, but like I said, it’s just to be in your space.”

“You don’t want me, Ash...” I shift uncomfortably in his hold, looking down at my hands. “I’m a mess.”

“You’re right...” My eyes snap to his. “I don’t want you... I need you.” He steps in front of me, his daring brown eyes meet mine. “A want is fleeting—optional—while a need is how the moon needs the sun to shine. You’re a need for me, Risa.”

He presses a soft kiss to my lips. A chaste kiss, wiping any thoughts from my mind. “You lied...”

“What?”

“You said you couldn’t give me a chaste kiss.”

“It didn’t seem like the right time to bend you over the table.” The corner of his mouth turns up.

I laugh softly. “I don’t know that I’m ready for all this, Ash.”

“This is nothing more than to show you I’m not pretending and I care. No expectations.”

I search his eyes, looking for a reason to not say, “Okay.” It’s hard to find one when everything about him is right.

Marisa

We spent the night eating, talking, and laughing. Something I didn't think I'd be doing after my doctor's appointment. But Asher's presence makes it hard to not enjoy myself. Despite the magic of last night, waking up this morning and the realization that I'm pregnant drops on me like a ton of bricks. There is too much for me to consider whether I decide to keep the baby, give it up for adoption, or have an abortion—none of them are simple choices. I'm not sure if the nausea that's settled in the pit of my stomach is from the pregnancy or my anxiety. Probably a mix of both. Trying to sleep in is a joke. Regardless of what I'm going through, my internal alarm clock wakes me up at six a.m..

Rolling over, I cover my face with the blanket. I shouldn't have had dinner with Asher last night. But then again, what else was I supposed to do? Wallow in self-pity? Drown myself in tears? None of that will do me any good. Now that I'm pregnant, I can't imagine Asher wanting anything to do with me. But he says otherwise, and I can't doubt his words, no matter how badly I want to. Checking the time, I decide to stay in bed until Asher leaves for work. I'm riddled with shame

despite him being supportive. I'm scared he'll see all my flaws in the light of day and not want to be around me. It's selfish of me to even hope for him to stay.

Tears sting my eyes. I finally have the possibility of a good thing and it's pulled from my reach. Refusing to shed a tear for a predicament I got myself into, I tear my blankets off and decide to start my day with a bath. I texted Natalie and the team last night that I'd be out of the studio today. I'm not sure that a day will help me figure things out, but I need space.

After a hot bath, I check the time. Asher should be gone to work by now. Tying my curls up in a bun, I head to the kitchen for a cup of coffee. It's quiet. Maybe I should've gotten up to talk to Asher for a bit. I hate the silence.

“You're awake.”

I jump, turning to see Asher sitting at the kitchen island with his computer in front of him. “Why are you here?” I clap my hand over my mouth. “No, I didn't mean it like that. I just meant I thought you'd be at work.”

“Technically,” he waves his hand at his computer with a smile, “I am at work.”

“You're working from home?” I raise a brow.

“Yeah, unless you want to be alone I can—”

“No. I—I just didn't expect you to be home.” I turn to the cupboard, grabbing a coffee cup and keep my back to him. “And I don't want to be alone...” I admit.

There's a silence, but I'm too afraid to look at him. When I turn to start the coffeemaker, I run into his solid frame. The cup slips from my hands. He catches it before it crashes to the floor and hands it to me.

"Thank you." I'm inches from his chest, but I keep my eyes on the cup. He brings his hand up between us, placing his fingers under my chin, making me meet his eyes.

He holds my gaze for a few breaths before putting his arms around me, pulling me flush against him. I wrap my arms around his middle as if he can keep me together. The tears I refused to cry earlier fall freely. I melt into each second his arms are around me. We stand holding onto each other until I feel exhausted from crying.

"I'm scared, Ash. What if I make the wrong choice?"

"It's not about making a right or wrong choice, Risa. It's about doing what's best for you. When you do what's best for you, nothing else matters." He kisses the top of my head.

Sometimes doing what's best is the hardest choice. No matter what I choose to do, I fear I'll never be the same.

"Are you hungry?"

"Not really, I just want my coffee and to wrap myself up in a blanket."

"I'll make your coffee. You can find the blanket."

"I can do—"

“You’re really going to fight me over making you a cup of coffee?” He takes the cup from my hand.

“Did you... stay home for me?”

He starts the coffeemaker, sets the cup beneath it, and turns to face me. “I did. Do you want to argue about it?” Raising his brow, he looks unnecessarily handsome as he stares at me with his arms crossed.

“I—no.” Biting my lip, I try to hide a smile. “I’ll go find my blanket.”

“Yeah.” He nods. “You do that.”

Remembering all the pamphlets Dr. Forrester gave me, I grab them from my car before I get comfortable on the couch. Wrapping the blanket around me, I sift through them as I feel the overwhelm settling in. Asher appears a few seconds later with a steaming cup of coffee in his hand. I grab the pamphlets, not wanting him to see them, and take the cup he’s holding out to me.

“Thank you.” I take a sip. He sits down beside me and grabs one of the pamphlets from my lap. “Um...” I try to take it from him, but he moves it out of my reach.

I feel my face heat with embarrassment as I watch him read the pamphlet titled ‘Adoption’.

“Huh...” he says after a long silence. “I didn’t know that there are open and semi-closed adoptions.”

He’s actually reading it? I take a sip of my coffee and stare at him over the rim of the cup. “Neither did I. What’s the

difference?”

“Open adoption means the biological parents have an opportunity to receive updates about their child. Maybe even visits. Semi-closed is when the birth parent can receive updates post-adoption through the adoption agency, but their information is private.”

I hug the cup of coffee in my hands. “I—I don’t know that I could do an open adoption. That would be torture, I think. Because you’ll always be reminded of what could’ve been.”

“True.” He nods. “But I think the updates would be nice. Just to know they’re safe, happy, and healthy. I don’t know... that’s a tough choice.”

“Tell me about it.” I let out an exasperated sigh as I set the cup on the coffee table.

He reaches for another pamphlet and eyes the stack, spilling out of my lap. “They gave you a lot of reading material.”

“Yeah.” I rub my eyes. “Do you... do you think I have to tell Reese? If this were you, would you want to know?”

He puts the pamphlet back in my lap and rests his head on the couch. “I’m probably not the best person to ask this question... because—well, I guess it depends on if you want him to be involved. And ultimately you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

“Would you want to know?”

“Risa...” He looks at me. “My opinion doesn’t matter here.”

“It matters to me.” I look away from him.

“Yeah... but I’m not him, love. I can support your choices. Shit, I’ll even stand ten toes down with you in whatever you decide, but I’m not going to tell you what to do. You need to be solid in your choice so that you know in your heart... your soul that you did what’s best for yourself. That’s all that fucking matters is that you do what’s best for you. And sometimes, Risa... doing what’s best for ourselves means we disappoint others.”

I stare down at my hands for a few breaths. “I don’t feel qualified to make these decisions...”

He chuckles and interlaces his fingers with mine. “Even the most qualified person doesn’t know what the fuck they’re doing. We’re all winging it.”



One day off work turns into the rest of the week. Today, I have to go in because the heating system is being installed. Instead of a full day of classes, the studio and smoothie bar close at noon, and the electrician arrives at three. I’m hoping to avoid seeing anyone because I don’t want them to ask me how I’m doing. I’m not okay. The only person I’ve talked to lately is Asher. I’m anxious and exhausted. Food won’t stay down. Sleep is non-existent. Getting out of bed at noon to make myself presentable to meet the electrician was a struggle.

Pulling into the studio, I'm relieved to see that everyone is gone. Glimpsing myself in the mirror after taking off my shades causes me to put them back on. My eyes are bloodshot from the lack of sleep and all the crying I've been doing. I've read every pamphlet three times over and have read everything I've found on the internet. Instead of making a choice, I've overwhelmed myself with information. I haven't talked to Reese. Although I've stared at his number on my phone. What would I even say when I don't know what I want to do? I don't want him trying to sell me another lie wrapped up as a beautiful dream.

I loved Reese. But was more in love with what could've been and the idea of promises. He painted such beautiful dreams. Stringing my heart along until I fell into depths of him while he stood on the ledge, watching me crash and burn. There is nothing he can offer me now and nothing I'd take from him.

Not wanting to dwell on thoughts of him, I get out of my car and head into the studio. My body instantly relaxes as the comforting smells of palo santo and sage wrap around me. This studio is my second home. I open the door to the hot yoga room and let the heat seep into my bones. Dropping my keys and shades next to me. I kneel, getting into child's pose. I relax and let my body melt to the floor. Yoga hasn't been high on my list of things to do the past week, and my body has missed it. I slowly rise when I hear the front door open. Heading out to the lobby, I'm met by an electrician in a navy blue jumpsuit.

"Hi, I'm Marisa. The owner."

“Nice to meet you.” He shakes my hand. “My name is Carlos. If you’d like to show me where the heating panels are and the room, I can get started.”

“Okay.” I smile as I feel the rush of excitement for the first time in days. “It’s hot in here because the heat hasn’t been off for long, but I can open the emergency exit, and feel free to leave the classroom door open.”

“I’ll be just fine.” He nods with a smile. “Thank you.”

After I show him where the panels are, he tells me it’ll take him a couple hours to get everything installed. Instead of watching him work, I head into the juice bar to find something to eat and to make my favorite smoothie. It’s the first time I’ve been out of the house since I went to the doctor’s last week. Grabbing my rice bowl and smoothie, I head outside and sit on the small patch of lawn in the front of the studio to let the sun hit my skin.

It doesn’t take me long to finish eating. When I’m anxious, my stomach ties itself in knots, causing me to feel nauseous. Instead of the food making me want to puke, it calms my stomach and I feel satiated. Pulling my hair out of my bun, I lie back on the grass. Maybe feeling the earth beneath me will help me feel grounded and clear my cluttered thoughts. I’m not sure how long I lie in the sun, breathing with intention, when I hear a car pull up. Opening my eyes, I see Asher’s Lamborghini pull up next to my Jeep.

He steps out of his car, and my stomach drops like it does every time I see him. I can’t help the smile that spreads across

my face as he saunters toward me.

“Do you have my location on?”

He sits beside me in a suit that’s far too expensive to be nonchalantly sitting on the grass in. “Carlos sent a confirmation text to my phone.”

“Ah, makes sense.” Asher took care of everything for me with the electrician and locker room remodel.

“The sun looks good on you, Risa. How are you feeling?” He looks at the empty rice bowl and smoothie cup.

“A little better.” I smile. “Forgot what it’s like to be out in civilization.”

“Crazy how the world goes on without you, huh?” He lies on his back, closing his eyes and takes a deep breath.

“It’s refreshing to know I don’t have to be here managing things every day.”

“Imagine that. You don’t have to do everything by yourself.” The corner of his mouth tips up.

“Shut up.” I laugh, shoving his arm. “Thanks for... letting me be alone without leaving me alone.”

The past week would’ve been impossible without him. I needed the space to just be and he held that space for me.

“No problem.” He pulls on one of my curls. “Are you excited to finally have the studio you’ve dreamed of?”

“Yes.” I grin. “He shouldn’t be too much longer. How was your day?”

“Francesca hasn’t poisoned me yet, so I’d say pretty good.”

I toss my head back with laughter. “She could be waiting for the right time.”

“I’ll stay vigilant.” He smiles.

We spend the next hour soaking up the sunshine and keeping each other company. Carlos comes out of the studio and I jump to my feet.

“Is it done?”

“Yeah. I just need to grab my tools and clean up. You’re welcome to take a look.”

Forgetting Asher, I run inside. I’ve been waiting for this moment. Asher is close behind me with Carlos.

“Can I turn them on?”

“They’re already on.” He chuckles. “I’ll be out of your hair in just a minute.”

I never thought I’d be excited over some heaters, but here I am with a ridiculous smile on my face. The new heaters are sleek and camouflage into the wall. This is a much needed high after the low I’ve been at. Asher talks to Carlos before he turns to me and says goodbye.

“Thank you, Carlos. Have a good evening.” Once I hear the front door close, I squeal and jump on Asher. Wrapping my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist. Gripping my thighs, he holds me against him. “Do a flow with me?” He says nothing in response. “Unless you don’t want to.”

“I do. It’s just nice to see you smile.”

“Sorry I’ve been so depressing lately.”

“You don’t have to apologize. I’m going to change because doing hot yoga in a suit sounds like a death trap.”

“Oh, right!” I unwrap myself from around him. “Forgot you’re in a suit.”

He chuckles. “I’ll be right back.”

While he changes, I find some music, draw the blinds, and dim the lights. The temperature rises and I feel like I’m myself for the first time in days. Asher reenters the room in black shorts with his perfectly sculpted body on display.

“Should I have stripped for you?” He chuckles, unrolling his mat.

I tear my eyes away from his chest. “I wouldn’t have said no.” I’m a fucking mess. “Did you want me to guide you through the flow?”

“Mmm... I think I can keep up.”

I smile at him in the mirror. “Let’s do it.”

Moving my body is exactly what I need to move through the emotions that I’ve been stuck in. Sweat blankets my skin, trickling down my face and back, as I release my emotions onto my mat.

Inhale. Three-legged dog. *Exhale.* Plank and down to chaturanga.

Inhale. Cobra. *Exhale.* Down dog.

Asher keeps up. I'm not surprised since he attends classes five days a week—whether I'm here or not.

I move, he moves, and we breathe together. A reflection of one another. We become each other's focal points, keeping eye contact as we move. I used to find looking into his eyes intimidating. Now... I see pieces of myself that have found a home in him. We move through the rest of the flow in tandem.

Lying in savasana at the end, Asher's hand brushes against mine. Grabbing his hand, I interlace my fingers with his. He squeezes mine in response as we lie in silence.

“Ash...” My heart beats wildly in my chest with a truth on the tip of my tongue that I've been too afraid to speak.

“Risa?”

“I—I want an abortion.” The words tumble from my mouth.

He brings the back of my hand to his lips, pressing a kiss against it. “I support you, Risa.”

Turning my head to the side, he meets my gaze. “Don't you want a reason?”

“Is you not making this choice for yourself reason enough? You don't have to give me a reason... unless you want to.”

I turn on my side, propping myself up on my elbow, and rest my head against my palm. “I... knew the second the doctor told me I was pregnant that I didn't want to continue with the pregnancy. But I thought after a few days I'd change my mind because Harlow and Quinn are having babies, and they're happy. I tried to convince myself that I'd love motherhood and

be a great mom but that didn't happen. I've been miserable, trying to force myself to do something I haven't wanted to do since the moment I found out."

Asher sits up, crossing his legs in front of him. "Did it feel good to say this out loud?"

"Yes." I sit up. "You're not disappointed in me?"

He cocks his head to the side, raising a brow. "Disappointed? Risa, you could've told me you're running off to marry Reese's pieces, and as long as it's what you want, I will support you."

I snort with laughter. "Reese's pieces." He smiles. "Can I ask you something?"

"Mmm..." His brow furrows. "Go ahead."

"Why do you care so much?" That sounded harsher than what I meant for it to. "Not that I don't want you too... but why? I haven't always been the nicest." The images of me attacking him with my stiletto and hitting him with the TV remote flash across my mind.

He lets out a heavy sigh. "Because... I know what it feels like when someone doesn't give a shit about you."

My heart hurts for him. Sometimes I see glimpses of sadness in his eyes, and it makes me wonder who hurt him. "I care about you, too."

"You don't have to say it." He nudges my arm. "I've known for a while."

“Classic Ash.” I smile, shaking my head.

“Hey, at least I’m consistent. But seriously, how are you feeling? Are you okay?”

“I feel better after getting out of the house and moving. It’s too early to tell if I’ll be okay. Eventually I will be.”

“Have you talked to Harlow or Quinn?”

“No...” I look away from him. “I haven’t.”

“Maybe they could—”

“I’m ashamed, Ash. They’re both pregnant and fucking happy.” Tears prick my eyes as I look at him. “What if they see me differently or think something is wrong with me because I don’t want a baby? I’ve wanted to talk to them, but the shame I feel tells me they’ll hate me. I’m dreading facing anyone here at the studio. No one knows, but I feel like everyone is fucking judging me. Even the goddamn medical assistant judged me when I said I didn’t want to see the baby.” He wipes a tear from my cheek as I look away from him. “I’m just fucking ashamed. I know that sounds dramatic...”

“No... I get it.” My eyes snap to his. “Well, sort of.” He shrugs. “But I... understand.”

We’ve been living together for a while now and I still look at him in awe every time he says something nice or encouraging. “I’m curious why you don’t show this side of yourself more often?”

He gives me a smile that makes my heart stutter. “Can’t have the entire world falling in love with me, Risa.”

No... *just me.*

Asher

Music blasts in my headphones as cars and trees blur past me as my feet kiss the pavement. Checking my watch, I just hit the three and a half mile mark. I keep pushing. I'm trying to quiet my loud thoughts. Since talking to Marisa, my mom has been heavy on my mind. Have I been too harsh on her? When Marisa brought up how shame was keeping her from talking to Harlow and Quinn, two people she loves and adores, it made me wonder why would my mom be any different? I've given Marisa understanding and support while my mom has been lucky to get a minute of my time. Maybe it's easier to talk to people who you don't have a history with. Like therapy.

I was young and naïve, with no clue that those you love could abandon you. My whole family—my whole life—was decimated in a split second decision. The woman who gave birth to me, who brought me into this world with so much love, also taught me how cold and cruel the world could be. My dad, he taught me you can love someone and still hate them at the same time. I grapple with both lessons and probably will until my last breath.

But then Marisa... she's teaching me that regardless of those lessons in love, it's still worth falling for.

After running eight miles, I return home with my head a little less cluttered. Opening the front door, and stepping into the kitchen, I'm met by Marisa cleaning up a shattered plate. Instead of using a broom, she's trying to pick up the shards with her hands.

"Risa, you're going to cut yourself." I open the pantry and grab the broom hanging inside the door.

"I—I just wanted a fucking bagel, and it slipped." Her voice is uneven and rushed.

Squatting in front of her, I grab her hands. They're shaking, and she won't look at me. "Hey... what's wrong?"

She focuses on my sneakers. "I..." Her voice trails off.

I wait for her response, but she still won't look at me or utter a word. "Can we at least move away from the shattered plate? I'll make you something to eat."

She nods, allowing me to help her to her feet. "You don't have to make me anything. I don't think I could keep it down anyway."

While she sits on one of the bar stools, I clean up the mess. "Why are you up so early? Couldn't sleep?" Most mornings I'm up at 5 a.m. to give myself time to work out and eat breakfast before heading to the office. She's gone into the studio to teach for a few hours the past couple of days, but hasn't been up as early as she used to be.

“I have an appointment. At the clinic at eight.” She fidgets with her hands. “For the... for the... abortion.” Her voice is just above a whisper.

“Oh... sorry.” I didn’t know, or I wouldn’t have been so nonchalant with asking her why she’s up. Sorry isn’t the proper response either. Wait, how do I respond to this? Hope it goes well? Good luck? “Do you... want me to go with you?”

“You have work. You’ve wasted enough time on me. I’ll be fine.”

Crossing my arms, I tilt my head to the side. “You’ll be fine... Is the plate any indication as to how you feel right now?”

Her eyes flit to the trash as she laughs softly, placing her head in her hands. “I’m a fucking mess.”

“We all are.”

“You?” She points at me. “You’re one of the most put together people I know. If you’re a mess, then I’m absolutely fucked.”

“Mmm... nice packaging doesn’t mean the contents aren’t fucked up.” Her brows pinch together as her eyes search mine. It’s been buried too long and too deep for her to find anything.

“I’m not a damsel in distress.”

A low, smooth chuckle resonates in my chest. “I’m no fucking knight in shining armor. You know... you’re a paradox.”

“Me?” She points at herself.

“Yeah...” I saunter toward her, placing my hand under her chin, making her eyes meet mine. “You want someone to care for you, but when they do, you spend every ounce of your energy trying to prove you don’t need them. I don’t want to save you, Risa. I’m well aware you don’t need saving. That’s one of the many reasons I find myself drawn to you. If you don’t want me to go with you, I respect that. But don’t isolate yourself just to prove a point that I’m already aware of.”

“I hate feeling... weak.”

“You’re not weak. This situation requires a different version of you that you’re not familiar with yet.”

She holds my gaze. “What about work?”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

“Yes.”

I nod, releasing my hold on her chin. “I’ll get – ”

She wraps her arms around my middle in a tight hug. I remember my therapist told me about the power of hugs when I was twelve, and how they release oxytocin which in turn lowers our stress levels. That day I went home and hugged my uncle as hard and long as I could. It was the first time since my life was turned upside down that I didn’t feel like I was drowning. Wrapping my arms around Marisa, I hug her back.

“Thank you.”

I kiss the top of her head in response.

Marisa

A heavy silence sits between us as I stare out the window while Asher drives. I welcome it. I don't want to talk. I just want to be lost in my thoughts. While I know this is what I want, it's still difficult for me to say out loud. There are a million questions running through my mind.

What if I want kids one day and can't have them? What if I change my mind immediately after it's done? What if I can't look at myself in the mirror again? What if someone finds out and hates me for it? What will I tell my future partner?

The only thing that's muffling the doubt is that I'm doing what's best for me. My heart pumps frantically in my chest, and my palms become sweaty as Asher pulls into the parking lot of the clinic. Staring at the building, I remain frozen in my seat.

“Do you want me to go in with you?”

“No. I just... no, you being here is enough.” I try to unlatch my seatbelt, but my hands are trembling, and I keep missing the button. He grabs my hand, calming it, and then unlatches it for me. “Thanks. I'll be back.” I don't look at him as I reach for the handle and clamber out of the car. If I do, I may fall apart.

The cool air of the building hits my skin as I step inside. Why are doctor's offices always freezing? After checking in

and filling out the necessary paperwork, I take a seat on one of the fake leather chairs. I can feel my toes sweating in my sandals. My phone chimes with a text, causing me to jump.

Harlow: We're planning the gender reveal party. Will you be out of town anytime soon?

I re-read the text countless times until tears blur my vision. Ironic she's planning a gender reveal party as I sit in a clinic waiting to be called back for an abortion. I want to tell her, but I can't bring myself to do it.

Marisa: Nope! Can't wait to celebrate with you guys.

I overdo it on emojis, put my phone on silent, and toss it back into my bag. As I'm zipping it up, a nurse appears and calls my name. I shoot up from my seat and follow her.

She weighs me before taking me back to a room and checks my blood pressure. After a round of questions, she tells me that the doctor will want to speak with me before they begin the procedure. Pulling out my phone, I text Asher.

Marisa: It may take a while. I can call you when I'm done if you want to go home.

Asher: I'm good. I have snacks and my phone.

I was too preoccupied with my bullshit this morning that I didn't even notice he grabbed snacks. It makes me laugh despite my mood.

Marisa: Snacks?

He replies, but before I can read his text, the door opens. Looking up, I feel all the air has been sucked out of the room as Reese appears. My phone slips from my hand, clattering to the floor. Him walking toward me causes me to scramble off the table and back into the wall. I look at him with wide eyes, taking in the stethoscope wrapped around his neck, the pristine white jacket, and the file clutched in his hand—*my file*.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I choke out, finally remembering to breathe.

“I work here,” he says calmly.

“Work here? You told me you work – ” I squeeze my eyes shut, the realization creeping in that *nothing* was real with him. “You lied about... everything?” I read the name scrawled across the front of his jacket. “Reese Villarreal? Your last name isn't Miller?” I place my hands on the side of my head as if I can keep my mind from reeling.

I feel... violated. If I could go back to the night we met, I would've run like a bat out of hell. I thought I was just meeting some good looking guy at a bar. Not this. Looking at him now, under the fluorescent lights, he disgusts me.

“I used my mother's last name... with you because—”

“Because you knew you were going to fucking lie?”

“It’s complicated, Marisa. I didn’t—” He takes a step closer. I hold out my hand, warning him. “I didn’t think I would feel the way I do about you.” He drops his hands at his sides.

“So you lied?” Tears threaten my eyes, but I blink them away. “Would it have been so hard for you to be honest with me?”

“I thought we’d just be a one-time thing... but you ended up meaning so much more to me.”

There were plenty of opportunities for him to tell me. “Bullshit. Everything you say is a fucking lie.” Grabbing my phone off the table, I shove it in my bag. “I can’t do this right now. I have enough on my fucking plate and refuse to waste another second on you.”

“Wait, Marisa!” He grabs my arm. I look down at his hand, imagining myself breaking each one of his fingers.

“Don’t you ever— ” I wrench my arm from his hold “ — touch me.”

“I’m sorry.” He holds up his hands, backing away from me.

Glaring at him, I brush my curls out of my face and head for the door.

“Marisa... is the baby mine?”

I freeze with my hand on the knob. Dropping my head back, I look up at the ceiling, blinking back tears, not wanting to face this truth. If I lie, that makes me no better than him.

“Yes...” I turn to face him. “The baby is yours.”

“You weren’t going to tell me?” His brow furrows.

Taking a deep breath, I try to will myself to stop crying. But it’s no use. The tears fall anyway. He tries to wipe them away, but I cower from his touch, backing against the door.

“No.” I square my shoulders. “I wasn’t.”

“Don’t you think I have a right to know?” He searches my face.

I narrow my eyes at him, pinning my arms across my chest. “A right to know? Are you seriously acting as if you have any rights here? I don’t even know who the fuck you are.”

“Jessica and I weren’t together when I met you.” He rushes out as if that excuses everything.

“Why does that matter?” I throw my hands up. “You still lied. Do you honestly think I care about what you and Jessica had going on?”

“We decided to separate.” He continues on as if I care to listen. “Part of the separation deal was that I’d get an apartment and she could have the house with the kids. I didn’t think I’d meet anyone. Especially not you. For the first time in a long time, I was happy.”

“About what? Lying?”

“No.” He frantically runs his hands through his hair. “You made me feel... alive. I felt like I was just existing before I met you.”

He could've fucked a sex doll and it would've been liberating compared to his frigid bitch of a wife. "None of this matters. You don't matter. We sure don't fucking matter."

"It does matter!" He looks at me with a plea in his eyes. "I wanted to have it all with you. Still want to have it all with you... but Jessica came back and said she wanted to try again. I told her I met you."

"Wait..." I take a steadying breath, holding up my hand. "You told her about me?"

"I had to. She... we... she's my wife." I gape at him. "I know it sounds fucked up, but I told her so she could understand I moved on."

"Had to because she's your wife? But lied to me when I supposedly make you feel so goddamn alive? Makes total sense, Reese. But continue on with your little sob story." I motion my hand in the air for him to hurry.

"She used the kids against me."

"Not my fucking problem." I shrug.

"Jessica wasn't going to let me see them. She threatened me with a custody battle. They don't deserve that."

"But I deserve this?" I splay my hand across my chest. "Instead of telling me the truth, you continued to lie to me while she knew exactly who I was? And then both of you strung me along? You had me thinking you were my boyfriend while she had me thinking she was a friend?" I grind my teeth,

clenching my hands into fist, causing my fingernails to cut into my palms.

“Marisa, I know I fucked up. It’s fucked up. I know it, and I’ve regretted it every day since. I’m—”

A nurse enters the room. “Dr. Vill—”

“Give us a moment, please. Miss Banks is having second thoughts.”

The way the lies spill from his lips so effortlessly is astounding. Asher is right. Doing what’s best for me means I’ll disappoint others. I’m about to disappoint Reese because there’s no way in hell I’m having second thoughts or changing my mind.

“Oh, okay.” The nurse closes the door, leaving us alone again.

“Marisa...” He grabs my hands. “We can make this work. You, me, the baby. We can—”

“We can what, Reese?” I shrug. “Pretend like you didn’t lie to me the entire time or that you don’t have a wife and two kids? That we’ll ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after? This isn’t a fairy tale, Reese, or one of your lies. This is real life. My life. And you know what?” I scoff, “I never loved you! I loved the idea you gave me.”

He drops my hands at the sting of my words. Running his own through his hair, he paces the room for a few seconds before meeting my gaze. “Are you getting the abortion out of spite?”

“No.” I say firmly. “This has nothing to do with you. It’s my choice.”

“It’s my baby.” He crosses his arms, looking down at me.

“Your baby, but still my choice. I’m not arguing with you about this Reese.”

“I won’t allow you to get an abortion.”

I suck my teeth, cocking my head to the side. “Allow me? The fuck are you gonna do, Reese? Have me committed?”

“I am a doctor... and you sound fucking crazy right now.”

“I sound fucking crazy?” Losing it, I take a step toward him. “Try me, Reese. I’d welcome the opportunity to drag you, your wife, and your fucking kids through the mud. You may be well connected, but I have my connections, too. I will ruin you and everything you’ve ever worked for. Something told me to hold on to all those texts, emails, and voice messages from you and Jessica. I was of sound mind when you were fucking me and sucking on my pussy, right?”

“Or what about all those angry voice mails from your wife threatening my life? Now look at you,” I tug on the lapel of his coat, “a doctor telling a patient she has no rights. I will burn you,” I poke my finger into his chest, “and every goddamn thing you care about to the fucking ground if you ever think to threaten me again. Now, get the fuck out of my way before I scream bloody fucking murder and cause a scene.”

With his chest heaving, his eyes bore into mine before he swallows and steps aside. I bolt out of the room, down the hall,

and barrel through the entrance. Reaching Asher's car, I hop in and press my back into the seat, trying to calm my nerves.

“Are you—”

“Just drive, Ash.”

“Risa—” Before he can finish his thought, Reese appears at the entrance, looking in both directions. He's never seen Asher's car before and doesn't realize he looked right at us. Asher pulls out of the parking lot without another word.

Once there's distance between us and the clinic, I cradle my head in my hand. “Can you pull over?” Breaking out in a cold sweat, my stomach flips.

He comes to a stop as bile rises in my throat. I fumble with the handle, stumble out of the car, and puke on the side of the road. Could this day get any better? There's nothing for my stomach to expel, causing me to dry heave until I can't breathe. Asher's sneakers appear as I stare at the ground, waiting for the urge to throw up to subside.

Holding out my hand to stop him from coming closer, I back away. “I'll ruin your shoes.”

“They're replaceable.”

Straightening up, I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and look into his eyes for the first time since I shattered the plate this morning. Everything hits me, pulling me under like a riptide, refusing to be buried any longer. I break down, letting out a sob. Asher wraps me in his arms. I cling to him, letting myself cry. All this anger and sadness has to go

somewhere as my tears wet his shirt. I don't understand how Reese could lie about everything and then act like we could have a happy ending. Jessica never told me Reese offered me up to her like a lamb to slaughter. There isn't a word to describe the level of deceit I feel right now. Did he know that she was stalking me? Probably not; he's arrogant enough to think he had both of us fooled. I pull away from Asher, wiping my face.

“Ready to go home?” He rubs my back.

“I am... but I might ruin your car.” My stomach still hasn't settled.

He gently guides me toward the door. “It's replaceable. You're more important.”

Pausing only for a moment, I slide into the seat and tip it back. Resting my head against the window, I close my eyes. Asher places his hand on my thigh and traces small circles with his thumb. Grabbing his hand, I hold onto it tightly, wondering when I'll be able to come up for air.



Later that afternoon, after calling another clinic to set up an appointment for tomorrow, I sit with my knees hugged to my chest at the table on the patio. Asher appears with a cup in his hand and sets it in front of me. I peer inside, it's tea with a stick of cinnamon and a slice of lemon.

“It's ginger tea.”

“It smells good.” I smile, picking it up off the table.

“How are you feeling?”

I watch the lemon float. “Terrible. He lied about every—fucking —thing.” I scoff, rubbing my face as I lean back, crossing my legs in front of me. “I didn’t know he was a doctor. I didn’t know his last name wasn’t Miller but Villarreal. Or that he told his wife about me and that’s how she showed up to my studio.” Taking a sip of the tea, I shrug. “He told me he wouldn’t allow me to get an abortion. I jokingly asked if he would get me committed and he went on about being a doctor and how I sound fucking crazy.”

“He what?” The muscle in his jaw twitches.

“It’s fine. Well... it’s not fine, but I threatened to go public with the text messages and voice mails he and his little wife left me. That seemed to sober him up.”

“Do you have them?”

“Oh, yes!” I nod with a smile. “Lots of them. His wife became a little unhinged after the dinner party. She left me voicemails calling me every foul name in the book while also threatening my life. All I’ve wanted to do is move on. That’s it. But I feel like I got caught up in whatever fucked up web they weaved, and I keep getting pulled back in. I just want to be done with it all...”

“What did he expect?”

“That we’d have this fairy tale life. Me, him, and the baby... plus his wife and kids. He’s fucking delusional.”

“Mmm...” He grunts. “You should’ve at least let me beat his ass.”

I toss my head back with laughter. “You’re still with that?”

He grins. “I feel it’s warranted.”

“I probably would’ve allowed it today.” I bring my cup to my lips.

“Shit.” He stands, holding his hand out to me. “I’ve got time and bail money. Let’s go.”

Spitting my tea out, I cackle. “Stop it!”

“I’m ser—” The doorbell rings, interrupting his crusade.

Shaking my head, I rise from my seat. “I’ll get it. It’s probably a package. I shop a lot when I’m sad and depressed.”

When I peer through the peephole, I’m surprised to see Francesca on the other side with some papers in her hand. I put a smile on my face and shock is written all over her own.

“Hi Franny. Are you here for Ash?” I lean against the door, waiting for her response.

She blinks, trying to wipe the surprise from her face. “I – uh...yes. I’m here for, Ash. Weren’t you the woman at the office the other week?”

“In the flesh.” This time I give her a genuine smile.

“You live with him?”

“Uh uh, babe.” I shake my head. “He lives with me. I’ll get him for you.”

Walking back to the patio, I smile at Asher as I plop down at the table. “Mr. Blaine, the president of your fan club is here to see you.”

“The president of—” He groans. “Francesca?”

“Looks like she’s here with some documents, going through Asher withdrawals. Poor girl. Throw her a bone.” I wink.

“Fuck off, Risa.” He heads inside the house.

I grin. “Aye, wait. Are you embarrassed of me or what? She didn’t even know you live with me.”

He pokes his head back out the door. “No, quite the opposite, love. I protect what I care about.”

Marisa

Since my appointment isn't until early afternoon, I decided to teach the early morning classes. Natalie fixes me with her gaze as I step into the lobby. She knows something is up but hasn't asked me yet.

"Alright, Natalie. I'll see you on Monday." I try to beeline for the office.

"Actually," she gets up, rounding the reception desk, and stands in my path. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Oh, I really—"

"It'll only take a minute."

Biting my lip, I nod my head. "Alright." I reluctantly follow her into the office and shut the door behind us. Grabbing my bag, I lean against the desk. "What's up, Natalie?"

"Marisa..." She takes a deep breath. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." I wave my hand, dismissing her question. "I was just sick. No big deal. People get sick all the time, Natalie."

She crosses her arms, jutting her hip out. “Really, Marisa? Everyone else may be fooled, but I’m not.”

“It’s—” The look of worry on her face makes me swallow the excuse I was about to give her. “There’s just... a lot going on.” I drop my bag back in the chair. “Too much going on.”

“You know you can talk to me, right? Shutting people out isn’t going to help with whatever you’re going through.”

I was hoping to avoid this conversation. It’s hard for me to lie, but it’s especially hard to lie to Natalie because she genuinely cares and has always been supportive.

Taking a deep breath, I rub my eyes. “You’ll see me differently, and I can’t take anymore shit right now.”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.” Uncrossing her arms, she lets them fall to her side. “I’m worried is all. You haven’t been yourself lately.”

Letting out a sigh, I slump into the chair that’s in front of the desk. She sits in the one beside me, and rests her hand on my shoulder. “I’m pregnant. It’s Reese’s baby. I’ve already made the choice to have an abortion. I understand if you see me differently because I’m not quite sure how I see myself anymore either.” Every word shoots from my mouth at rapid fire. A silence follows, causing me to swivel my head to look at her.

“Me too,” she whispers, holding my gaze before she blinks. “Not with Reese’s baby – ” I can’t help but laugh “ – but when I was eighteen. I’ve never told a single soul.”

“No one?” At least I’ve had Asher. If I had no one I think I’d go insane.

She shakes her head. “Well, now you know. My parents are very religious... I don’t regret it, but the weight of not talking about it is heavy.”

“Soul-crushing.”

“I’m sorry you’re going through this.” She grabs my hand, squeezing it. “But you’re not alone, and you don’t have to be.”

Leaning forward, I wrap my arms around her and hold her tight. “Thank you.”

“When’s your appointment?” She asks after I release her.

“This afternoon... Asher’s taking me.”

“Asher?” There’s a hint of a smile on her lips.

“I don’t have the time for your nonsense, Natalie.” I chuckle.

“He’s a really good guy, Marisa. Let him take care of you.”

“He called me a paradox.” She waves her hand, coaxing me to go on. I sigh, rolling my eyes. “He said I want someone to take care of me and when they do, I spend all my energy trying to prove I don’t need them.”

Laughter bubbles up her throat, and she claps a hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry...” She snorts. “He’s just—He’s right, Marisa. Not to bring up the ex, but Reese didn’t take care of you nor did he express any interest in what you like. It’s okay

to be taken care of. Eric spoils me, and if he ever stops I will leave him.”

“He’s created a monster.”

“Listen, I’m not trying to go back to the dating apps.” She shrugs. “But this isn’t about me. Do you need anything?”

“No, I think I’ll be okay. You’re okay... right?”

“No regrets. You’ll be okay. I’m here, but something tells me you’re in very strong, capable, and willing hands.” She wags her brows.

“Stop it.” I laugh softly. “I have no desire to have sex right now and... I’m not sure he’ll want me after all this.”

She gasps, leaning back. If she had pearls on, she’d be clutching them. “First of all, I can’t pretend I didn’t have the same fears because I did. The desire will come back when you’re ready. Second of all, what we’re not going to do is base our self-worth on this moment. You’re doing what’s best for you. Never doubt that.”

“I’m a mess, Natalie.” This feeling is exhausting and I’m wondering if it’ll ever end.

“And there his fine ass is with a dustpan and a broom, following you.”

“Damn!” I clap my hand over my mouth as I laugh. “Why do I gotta be dusty?”

“You know what I mean!” She grins. “He’s here for you and so am I.”

My phone trills in my purse, pulling it out, a text from Asher scrolls across the screen.

“It’s Ash. He’s almost here.” Standing, I grab my bag.

Natalie rises from her seat, wrapping me in a hug. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“I will. Thanks, Natalie.”

Asher pulls up as I walk outside. He brought me to work this morning since I’ve been advised not to drive after my appointment. I triple checked that Reese doesn’t work at the clinic I’m going to today. The only reason I went to the clinic he works at is because my doctor recommended it when I told her I wanted an abortion. When I got home after the cluster fuck of yesterday, I did a deep dive search on him. While several doctors work with him, he owns the clinic, sits on the medical board of doctors for the state of Oregon, and his social media pages, although scarce, only have pictures of him with his kids. When we were involved, we spent a lot of time with my friends, at his place or mine, and would travel on weekends. It makes sense now because someone would’ve recognized him if we were haphazardly going on dates around Portland. It also made me realize I could ruin him if I want to.

Opening the car door, I slide into the cool leather seat. “Thank you for making time for me.”

“I’ll always make time for you. But,” he clears his throat, “I’m also happy to get out of the office.”

“Why?”

“I’m concerned Francesca will try to poison me with the murderous looks I had to endure all morning.”

I let out a belt of laughter. “What did you do to that woman?”

“Nothing!” he says, merging into traffic. “Not a single fucking thing. I’ve never led her on or gave her any indication whatsoever that I’m interested in her. But this morning, she acted as though she caught me cheating on her with you.”

“You’re hard not to like, Ash. Believe me, I tried.” I slip off my shoes, propping my feet up on his dashboard.

He erupts with laughter. “You make me sound like a fucking burden.”

“Not at all.” I grin. “You just... surprised me. I thought you were the community dick slinger with no depth.”

“Goddamn!” He puts his hand over his heart. “My morals are gray, but I have standards. It’s not like I was fucking any and every woman I saw. If that were the case, I would’ve fucked Francesca a long time ago.”

“Aye.” I hold up my hands. “What your dick does or doesn’t do is none of my concern. I’m just saying what I thought before you weaseled your way into my life.”

“Weaseled?” He raises a brow. “Don’t act like you don’t want me around.”

I smile, resting my head against the seat. Not giving him a response. “What did you think of me before all of this?”

“Mmm...” He scoffs. “You don’t wanna know.”

“The fuck is that supposed to mean? I can take it. Tell me.”

“I’m well aware you can take it.” The corner of his mouth turns up. “But that doesn’t mean I’m going to tell you.”

The smile on my lips fades as the realization sets in that I actually care what he thinks of me. I’ve been hell-bent on proving I couldn’t care less when I wear the perfume I rarely wore before, every day now since he told me he likes it. My hair is usually up, but I leave it out now because he likes to wrap my curls around his fingers and give me scalp massages. Crossing my arms, I stare out the window. The question is, what wouldn’t I do for him?

“Are you pouting?”

I snort with laughter. “No. Lost in thought.”

“You dropped that subject so easily. I’m concerned.”

“Do you want me to fight you?”

“No.” He smiles. “You just always have something to say.”

“I’m actually worried about what you’ll say.”

We ride in silence until he comes to a stoplight. “You know that moment you realize you’re fucked, and it’s not necessarily in a bad way?”

“Yeah.”

He nods, fixing me with his gaze. “That’s how I felt when I met you.”

I forget to breathe as I look into his eyes. He looks away, causing me to blink, as the light turns green, and he focuses on the road. When I look out the window, I see the sign for the clinic in the distance. It snaps me out of the haze his words had me under, bringing me back to reality. The butterflies that were in my stomach turn to knots as he parks. Cutting the engine, he doesn't say a word. We both stare at the building.

“I'll be here.”

I nibble my bottom lip as my palms sweat, and my heart rate quickens. “Would you—would you go in with me? You don't have to if you—”

The sound of him unfastening his seatbelt grabs my attention as he opens his door, stepping out. Seconds later, he appears at my side, opening the door for me.

“I got you.” He holds his hand out. Placing mine into his, I step out of the car. He wraps his arms around my shoulders, and his warmth calms my nerves.

Entering the clinic, it doesn't feel sterile even though it's pristine, causing me to relax a little more. The staff greets me with a warm smile as I give them my information. She hands me a clipboard with papers to fill out.

“Take a seat and the nurse will call you back shortly.”

I smile and head for the seat that's near the window with the sun hitting it. I'm shivering from breaking out into a cold sweat. Asher sits next to me and rests his hand on my thigh as I fill out the papers.

“Your middle name is Belle?” I look at him, and he has a smile on his face. “Like the princess?”

“Yes.” I narrow my eyes, trying to hide my smile as I wait for him to talk shit.

“Marisa Belle... Marisa Belle...” He says my name as though he is tasting it and trying to decide if he likes the flavor. “Marisa Belle... that has a nice ring to it. It suits you.”

I don’t know what to feel between the cold sweats, my anxiety, and him repeating my name like a mantra. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Risa Belle.” He lifts his leg, resting his ankle on the knee of his other.

This time I can’t hide my smile. “What’s your middle name?”

“James.” He looks out the window. “It was my father’s name.”

My brow furrows as he says *was*. That means his father is... gone? Or not in his life. He said his parents are a complicated topic. I don’t have much time to ponder it when a nurse appears and calls my name.

“You should really go by Marisa Belle,” he suggests, grabbing my hand as he stands.

If I were alone, I’d be spiraling into the dark abyss of my thoughts. Berating myself for being so irresponsible. The thoughts and inner voice are still there. They’re just muffled in Asher’s presence. Keeping a firm hold on my hand, he walks

beside me as we head through the doors. She gets my weight, height, and blood pressure before taking us into a room. Crossing my legs as I take a seat, I nervously wiggle my foot back and forth. Asher slides his foot underneath mine, causing me to stop and look at him. He smirks, and I return his smile. The nurse asks me a series of questions about my medical history for a few minutes.

“The doctor will be in shortly to go over a few things. Are you wanting to get an IUD today?”

“You can do that?” My brows knit together.

“Yes.” She smiles. “It can be inserted immediately after.”

While I’m grateful Asher is here, I try to forget he’s sitting beside me. I didn’t consider the questions they’d ask me. Not that he seems to even notice. His foot is still keeping mine from wiggling as he scrolls through his phone. Glancing at him, I notice he has his ear buds in and I hear the faint sound of music. Him respecting my privacy, even though he knows me intimately, makes my heart thrum in my chest.

He notices I’m staring at him and pulls out an ear bud. “Do you need me?”

Yes. “No. I just—nothing. Put your ear bud back in.” He chuckles, putting it back in, and resuming whatever he was doing on his phone.

“Is he the—”

“No. He’s a friend.” She gives me the same smile Natalie gives me when I talk about Asher, knowing I’m full of shit.

“I’ll have the IUD put in today.”

She nods, picking her computer up off the counter. “I will let the doctor know. And were you wanting sedation? It’s not enough to put you to sleep. It will help you relax if you want and need it.”

“Yes, please.” I need all the help to relax I can get.

After the nurse leaves, I turn to Asher. “Did you hear any of that?” He doesn’t respond as he focuses on his phone. Before I can nudge him, there’s a light knock on the door and the doctor enters. She’s tall with deep brown skin, and her brown hair falls in loose waves over her shoulders.

“Hi. I’m Dr. Castillo.” I shake her extended hand. “I wanted to ask you a few questions that I’m sure you’re tired of answering—” I laugh because it’s the same round of questions every time “—and then we can get started.”

Her voice is calming as she talks me through what will happen during and after the procedure.

She hands me a small white cup with a single pill in it and a small bottle of water. “You’ll need to take this. It will cause you to dilate—you’ll experience cramping—and it takes about forty–five minutes to work. Adeline, the nurse, will be in to check on you periodically. If you have questions, don’t hesitate to ask either of us.”

“Thank you.” I put the pill in my mouth—it’s slightly bitter—twist the cap off the water bottle, and wash it down.

She smiles as she stands and exits the room. I turn to Asher, nudging him. “Can you get my bag from the car, please? I forgot it.” It has clothes that are more comfortable for me to change into after my appointment.

“Yeah, you’ll be okay by yourself?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll be back.”

While he’s gone, Adeline comes in to check on me and gives me a gown to wear. I feel the cramping already and nausea. The nausea is a mix of anxiety, my shot nerves, and the medicine I just took. Asher returns, holding my bag. Taking it from him, I stand, pulling off my belt first.

“Do you want me to step outside?” His eyes are on the floor.

I’m not sure what I want. He’s seen every inch of me, but I feel too vulnerable right now and two seconds away from puking. “I’m sorry. I know it’s ridiculous, but would you mind?” He nods, kisses the top of my head, and slips outside.



A short while later, Adeline reappears. “We’re ready. How are you feeling?”

“Sick, but that’s to be expected, right?” The cramps have progressively gotten worse and I’m ready for all this to be over.

“Unfortunately, it is.” She gives me a small smile. “If you’ll follow me this way,” she holds the door open for us. “Will he be joining you in the room for the procedure?”

“Yes, I will,” Asher answers for himself. “Wait, Risa, can I talk to you for a minute?”

I glance at Adeline, she steps aside, giving us some space. “What is it, Ash?”

He rubs the back of his neck as his brows knit together. “Will there be blood?” He grabs my hand. It’s sweaty. “I can’t do blood, Risa. This isn’t like my fear of heights. I will panic and pass out.”

He looks how I feel inside. “Ash...” I press my palm to his chest, feeling his wild heartbeat. “You don’t have to be with me. I know you’ll—”

“No, I want to be.”

“I—”

Adeline steps in. “You don’t have to see anything. I can face the chair the other way. That way, you can still be with her.”

“Oh, thank God.” Asher leans against the wall, visibly relaxing.

I can’t help the laugh that escapes me. “Ash... you scared the shit out of me.”

“I’m sorry.” He wipes his brow and removes his cuff links, slipping them into his pocket before rolling up his sleeves. “It didn’t occur to me until I heard the word surgery and thought

about blood. You asked me to be with you, so I'm going to be with you – passed out or not.”

I toss my head back with laughter and Adeline joins me. “I have no words.”

“It's fine.” The corners of his mouth tip up. “I'm fine. Let's go.”

Entering the procedure room, my resolve settles in. Causing my worries and fears to fall silent. I know this is what's best for me. My choice hasn't wavered since Dr. Forrester told me I was pregnant. After I lie down, Adeline puts an IV into the back of my hand for the sedation medicine. Within a matter of minutes, my body relaxes.

Asher sits beside me with his eyes focused on my hand.

I squeeze his, and his eyes snap to mine. “Thank you for being here.” This past week and a half has been hell on earth for me. It's taken toll on my body and soul. But Asher has been a light through it all. Tears pool in my eyes and one escapes, sliding down my cheek.

“Okay, Marisa.” Dr. Castillo says. “We're going to begin.”

Leaning forward, Asher wipes the tear from my cheek and holds my hand snugly between both of his. He presses a kiss to my knuckles with his eyes on mine. “Always here for you, Risa Belle.”

Asher

Pulling into the driveway, I turn to look at Marisa as I cut the engine. She's leaning against the window with her eyes closed.

"Risa, we're home." She reaches for her seatbelt without opening her eyes, trying to unbuckle it, but keeps missing the release button. I unbuckle it for her. "I'll help you out."

When I open the door, she squints her eyes when the sun hits her face. "I have a headache."

"Yeah, they said that would probably happen with the sedation."

She grabs my hand as she steps out of the car, and even though she doesn't need it, I still help her into the house. She pulls off her shades, tossing them onto the counter, and slides out of her shoes.

"Do you want something to drink or eat?"

"No." She rubs her temple, closing her eyes again. "I'm going to go to sleep." Walking away, she stops in her tracks. Turning around, her eyes meet mine for a split second. They're

glossy and the same dark green they were last week after her doctor's appointment. "Thank you, Ash." She says softly with her eyes on the floor before turning and disappearing down the hallway.

I hear her bedroom door shut seconds later. Letting my head fall back, I let out a sigh and rub my hands over my face. The past week I've tried to be present without hovering. I want her to be okay, but I know no matter how badly I want something for her, there's nothing I can do. I know better than most that's not how grief and trauma work. There are moments you feel great, you're laughing and joking, but then the next second you remember every single detail and it pulls you under again. She's going under despite how tightly I hold on to her.

Looking around the house, I decide to do what I always do when I feel overwhelmed – run. I don't want to leave her alone, but if I stay here I'm going to hover. Heading to my room, I change into my running gear. I stand in the hallway for a good five minutes, trying to decide if I should tell her I'm leaving or not. Walking toward her room, I stop, turning back around, but then deciding if she comes out of her room and I'm not here I don't want her to worry. I knock softly, there's no response.

Pulling my phone out, I send her a text letting her know I'll be back soon. But in case she misses the text, I leave a note on the counter. Grabbing my keys, I lock the door behind me. Maxwell is outside watering his flowers as I make my way to the end of the driveway.

“Hey, Asher.”

I wave, not really wanting a conversation right now. “Hi.”

“Do you and Marisa want to come over for dinner later?”

“Uh... I have a thing later actually. Work meeting for an international client. You know those time differences.”

“Oh yeah,” he nods, “those meetings suck.”

“Well... I’m off for a run.”

He waves as I put my ear buds in. Not giving him a second glance, I take off down the street. I’m not sure when Marisa will be up for being around people again. I know I’m definitely not in the mood to be around anyone right now. Well... Marisa, but I’d have to be dead to not want to be around her.

Hitting my stride and reaching the six mile mark, my thoughts still haven’t calmed down. I’ll keep running until they do. My ringer cuts through the music. It’s a number I don’t recognize, and I already know it’s my mom. Staring at the screen, I contemplate answering it. My mood is already dark. Thinking of Marisa, I answer her call.

“Asher...” She says my name as though it’s a question.

“I’m here.”

“Are you busy? You sound busy. I can call back another time.”

“If I was busy I wouldn’t have – ” I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to keep the bite out of tone. “I’m not busy. I was—am—

running..." I sit on a patch of grass on the side of the road. I'm sure I look insane given the fact this isn't an area anyone would randomly sit. Oh fucking well.

"Oh your father used to—"

"I know." I'm more like him than I care to admit.

"Right... yeah."

Going down memory lane isn't what I had in mind. "Did you need something?"

"No... well they gave me the date for the hearing, and I don't know if they informed you or not."

Gripping my phone a little tighter, I bite the inside of my cheek. "No, they contact Gigi and Uncle Jax. He only tells me if I ask. And I never ask." I stopped asking about her a few years after she went to prison. She wouldn't see or talk to me, so what was the point?

"Oh..." She falls silent.

I let the silence settle like dust as the cars rush past me on the road. I'm torn between letting her in and doing everything I can to keep her out. I take a cleansing breath. "It's really hard for me to give a shit, you know that right?"

"I know..." Her voice is just above a whisper.

"Because what if you're denied clemency? Will you go back to refusing to talk to me? What if I let you in and you abandon me again?"

"I won't, Asher. I promise."

I pluck a blade of grass, laughing bitterly. “You can’t make me promises. You promised you’d always be there when they took you, and we both know how that turned out.”

“Asher, if I could go back in time – ”

“Taking a trip in an imaginary time machine does neither of us any favors. Besides, where would that leave you? Probably buried in the ground beside him. I’ve never hated you for what you did... because I was there with you... in the middle of it all.” I take a steadying breath. “I hate how you fucking left me. That’s what I hate.” My vision blurs as words that I’ve always wished to say to her spill from my mouth.

“He—I know I should’ve taken you and left... but he was a police officer, Asher.”

An automated voice interrupts us. “Two minutes remaining.”

Rubbing the back of my neck, I look up at the sky. “When is your hearing?”

“Next month. Gigi has all the information. I told her I wanted to tell you myself. If you’re not there, I understand. But... I just wanted you to know.

The automated voice interrupts again. “One minute remaining.”

“Yeah... I’ll—I’ll think about it.”

“I love you, Asher.”

“I...” The words are on the tip of my tongue. “I’ll talk to you later.”

The call disconnects. “Fuck.” I mutter, squeezing my phone in my hand. This has been one hell of a day. I feel a drop of water on my skin. Looking up at the sky, I see the rain clouds rolling in. Fantastic. Maybe I can beat the rain. Standing on my feet, I turn on my music and race toward home.

As I run down the street Marisa’s house is on, the sky opens up, drenching me. Once I reach the driveway, I hunch forward, resting my hands on my knees and let the rain bring me peace as it washes my thoughts away. After standing in the cold rain, I head inside. Taking off my shoes and socks at the door, I head toward my room. Marisa’s door is still closed. I feel the urge in my hand to knock, but decide I’d better take a shower first. I smell like sweat and rain.

After a hot shower, I pull on some sweats, and my stomach rumbles in protest. I haven’t eaten anything since breakfast, and it’s already dark outside. Sushi comes to mind, but Marisa doesn’t like fish. Heading to the kitchen, I look for the menu for her favorite Chinese food spot. It’s hanging on the fridge buried underneath the other menus we’ve collected. Pulling it out, I order her favorite. Sweet and sour chicken, egg rolls, and a side order of noodles. I order beef yakisoba for myself with egg rolls. Even if she doesn’t eat with me, she’ll be hungry eventually and I want her to have something she likes. The app gives me an estimated delivery time of forty-five minutes. While I wait, I grab some cut up pineapple, water, and sit on the couch.

The conversation with my mom replays in my head. She really could be getting out. At first it was just an idea, now it's real. Grabbing my phone off the coffee table, I call Gigi.

She answers after a few rings. "Hi, Ash. How are you, honey?"

"Good." Her soothing voice brings a smile to my face. "How are you and Pops?"

"Still alive and kickin'. Oh, grandpa and I will be out of town this weekend."

"What?" I sit up. Truth be told I wasn't going to visit them given Marisa isn't doing so great right now. But they're always home. "You're actually leaving your little farm?"

She sighs exasperatedly. "Jax said if I want them to visit more often, Grandpa and I have to make an effort."

"Wow." I chuckle smoothly. "You're going to spend the weekend in the big city?"

"Gives me hives just thinking about."

"You're dramatic, Gigi. Besides, Jax and Gen have a nice house in a quiet neighborhood. You'll be alright. The girls will be ecstatic that you're visiting."

"That's the only reason I'm going. For the girls."

I let out a belt of laughter. "Doesn't matter Jax is your son, huh?"

"He had me for eighteen years. It's the girls' turn. What will you do without me this weekend?"

That's why I love Gigi, she's a force of light. I haven't stopped smiling since she answered the phone. "I'm going to hang out with my friend."

"A friend? Is that the woman the girls were carrying on about?"

"It is. But keep it to yourself, Gigi." I don't need her discussing my personal life with my mom just yet.

"Under lock and key, my boy."

"Thank you." Even though she gave mom my number, I know she hasn't told her much else about me because she's leaving that up to us to sort out. "Mom called me..."

"Did you answer?"

"Reluctantly... yes." She sucks her teeth. "I'm trying, Gigi." I shrug as if she can see me. "Well... I'm going to try. Are you going to the hearing?"

"Of course. You're welcome to ride with me."

"Mmm... I don't know." I haven't seen my mom since I was twelve. Then to attend her clemency hearing and deal with the anxiety of whether or not she'll be let out makes me not want to go. "Gigi... why is she getting a clemency hearing now?"

She's silent for a few breaths. "A woman came forward..."

"A woman?" My brows knit together.

"Yes... and her story was very similar to your mother's. This is something you need to talk with her about because it's

not my place to say.”

“No, no, Gigi.” I stand up, pacing. “That’s not fair. Who is this woman?” There’s a long silence. I’ll wait as long as it takes for her to tell me who the fuck this other woman is.

“Ash... you know their relationship was complicated—”

“Please tell me.”

“Your father... he was involved with someone else.”

“When was this?” I try to think back to when everything changed. At one point, my parents were happy, and then they weren’t. At least they seemed happy. I wonder if my dad’s involvement with this woman caused that shift.

“From what your mom has told me, you would’ve been nine.”

The time frame is right. “What did she come forward with?”

“That she experienced abuse from him too... that she—she lost their baby because things got really bad one night.”

“Lost... their baby?” My chest feels like it’s caved in as I sit on the edge of the couch, trying to breathe. “She was pregnant?”

“Yes...” She admits and I hear the regret in her tone. “They didn’t take her claims seriously at first, but a detective, who wasn’t afraid of James being a police officer, finally did a bit more digging. She uncovered multiple 911 phone calls, pictures, and hospital visits. James was involved every time.”

A knock on the door startles me. I forgot I ordered food. “This is... a lot to take in.” I answer the door, hand the delivery driver a tip, and take the bag from his hands. “Thanks,” I mutter distractedly as I close the door. “Who is this detective?”

“Her name is Kim Watson. She said she tried to contact you.”

“That name sounds familiar...” I set the bag of food on the counter and something clicks. “She called me before I moved here to Portland. I didn’t give her the time of day because I thought she was a reporter.” I’m trying to wrap my mind around this new piece of information. This means there’s a real chance she could be granted clemency.

“If you’re up to it, you should call her.”

If I talk to her, it will mean I’ll have to recount what happened that night. “Mmm... maybe. I’m sure she read my statement. There’s not much more for me to offer.”

“Only if you want to, Ash.”

“Yeah...” I pull my food out of the bag. “I’m going to eat, Gigi. Try to have fun in Seattle this weekend.”

“Of course it’ll be fun. I’ll be there.”

I laugh, taking a bite of an egg roll. “Love you, Gigi.”

“Love you too, Ash. Goodnight.”

Putting my phone in my pocket, I grab my food and head back to the couch.

After eating, my eyes become heavy with sleep. I make no move to get up from the couch as I watch *Castlevania*. The rain is pouring outside and all the lights are off. I try to keep my eyes open as I watch a fight scene. It's no use, I let them close, allowing my body to rest.

A while later, I wake to Marisa covering me with a blanket. She crawls in beside me, slinging her leg over my waist and buries her face in my neck. Her curls brush against my face, and I inhale the scent of her as I kiss the top of her head. Grabbing the remote, I turn off the TV, plunging us into darkness. The rain is still falling and a flash of lightning momentarily lights up the living room. Pulling her closer to me, I sink my hand into her hair, massaging her scalp.

“Risa belle... aren't you happy we're not stuck on that little ass loveseat you called a couch?” A quiet laugh causes her shoulders to shake. “I got you food. Are you hungry?”

I feel her shake her head as I hold her in my arms. “I just want to be with you.”

I hear the slight quiver in her voice that's thick with emotion. She's been crying. I hold onto her a little tighter. Hoping that she'll always feel secure in my embrace.



Warm sunlight floods the living room. I slowly remember Marisa coming to sleep with me on the couch, but it's cold beside me. Sitting up, I lean forward, resting my elbows on my

thighs and rub my eyes. Thank fuck it's the weekend. Normally I'm all about work, but this past week has taken a toll on me emotionally. Not because of Marisa, but because of the stuff with my mom. It's dredging up memories from the past I've tried to forget, but have been pushed to the forefront of my mind. Twisting my body, I stretch and crack my back, neck, and fingers. I wonder where Marisa is. Heading into the kitchen, there are empty cartons of food scattered across the counter. At least she's eaten. I worried she wouldn't. Looking out at the patio, I see her raven colored curls poking out over a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. I head to my room to grab a hoodie, and then I join her outside.

I sit beside her on the couch. She has a cup of coffee hugged between her hands.

"Morning." She smiles, looking into her cup.

"Morning..." I hesitate. "Are you—how are—are you okay? How are you?"

She laughs softly. "You don't have to walk on eggshells around me, Ash. You're always honest with me. Don't stop now." Her eyes meet mine. They're a soft green again. "I'm alright..." She shrugs. "I feel everything's changed, yet nothing's changed at all. I just need time I guess."

"Take all the time you need." I lean back against the couch, listening to the birds chirp around us.

"Thank you for the food... and for being my personal pillow."

“You drool when you sleep,” I wink. “But anytime.”

“I do not!” She laughs. “I barely slept. I was awake, listening to your heartbeat and the rain.”

“I love thunderstorms.”

“Me too. They’re chaotic, yet calm... like me.” She takes a sip of her coffee. “Are you going to your grandparent’s this weekend?”

“Nope. They’re going to Seattle. Why? Do you want me gone?” I side eye her with a smirk on my lips.

She shakes her head, looking away from me and picks at the tassels on her blanket. “I don’t want to be alone...”

Plucking up one of her curls, I twirl it around my finger and watch it spring back. “I’m all yours.”

“Can I... tell you something?” She bites her lip, turning to look at me.

I nod, waiting for her to continue.

“I feel... so fucking relieved.” She closes her eyes, turning her face toward the sun. “Does that make me a bad person?” Taking a deep breath, she focuses on me again.

I sweep the curls out of her eyes. “No, Risa Belle. Not at all.”

She smiles, leaning forward and presses a kiss to my cheek. “Can I tell you something else?”

“Yeah.” I say as she rests her head on my shoulder.

“Last night, while listening to your heartbeat, I learned that yours and mine have the same rhythm.”

Marisa

Lacing up my sneakers, I give myself one last look in the mirror. Asher and I hung out the entire weekend. We slept, ordered takeout, watched movies, and didn't leave the house. Even though I've been sleeping, I'm exhausted. It's not a physical exhaustion, it's emotional. For the week leading up to my appointment, I was in fight or flight – constantly flipping between the two extremes. I haven't quite come out of that yet. But a slow weekend is exactly what I needed. I love being around Asher. The only thing he expects from me is for me to be myself.

Entering the kitchen, he's already slinging his bag over his shoulder and smells like everything that brings me comfort.

“You're going to work today?” He takes a bite of an apple in his hand as he picks up some papers with his other.

I wasn't sure last night whether I was going to the studio. “Yeah, I'm just going to be in the office. They start the remodel of the locker room today.”

“That's right.” He nods, slipping the papers into his bag. “Are you excited? Let me know if you have any trouble. I'll

try and stop by on my lunch.”

“Yeah.” I smile. “Oh, it’s fine. You have your own stuff going on.”

“Nah, I’ll be there. I’ve gotta run.” He kisses the top of my head. “Later, Risa Belle.”

The way the butterflies ignite in my stomach when he calls me Risa Belle is ridiculous. “Bye.”

Opening the door, he has one foot out when he turns to look at me. “You look good in red, by the way.” He smiles as he steps outside, closing the door behind him.

I look down at my outfit. “Noted.” I mutter to myself with a smile. Letting out a sigh, I look around the kitchen. While I’m happy to go to work to give me something to do, I’m still dreading it. My phone rings somewhere in the house, I follow the noise. I haven’t even glanced at it all weekend. I find it wedged in the couch. Pulling it out, my mom’s name flashes across the screen.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Hey. Is everything okay? I couldn’t get ahold of you all weekend.”

“Yeah.” I walk back to the kitchen to start my coffee. “I went out this weekend. Reception wasn’t that great.”

I’ll never tell my mom I had an abortion. I’d never hear the end of her judgement. I remember one of my cousins got an abortion and the whole family found out. My mom told me she was weak for having one because she had us three kids and we

turned out just fine. She left out the part where I became a stand-in parent and provider as a teen because she had no support.

“You need to tell me these things, Marisa. I worry about you.”

“Sorry, Mom.” I grab my cup of coffee and take it out to the patio. “How are you guys?”

“The kids are great. Killian is packing for his senior trip already even though it’s a month and a half away.” That brings a smile to my face. “And Destiny has a cheer competition in a couple of weeks.”

“That’s awesome. Where at? I’m glad she’s found something she’s passionate about.”

“Yeah...” She sighs. “It’s an expensive passion.”

Ah, that’s the reason for this call. Not to really see how I’m doing, but to complain about money to see if I’ll step in and save the day like I always do.

“If Destiny needs something, she can call me.” I’m not in the mood to play bank today.

“Oh... okay, I’ll tell her to call you. But we’re going to have to drive and –”

“I need you to be my mom for once. Not my partner or an extra parent, but my mom!”

“I–I am your mom.” She stutters.

“No. You’re not. When do you call me to see how I’m doing without there being some money favor to ask for? I’m your daughter. Not a bank. I understand dad leaving was hard, but stepping up wasn’t my responsibility. It was yours!”

“Marisa, that’s not true.”

“Don’t try to tell me the reality I remember isn’t real. Taking care of Killian when you couldn’t get out of bed because you were so depressed. Or me staying up all night with both of them when they were sick so you could sleep for work the next morning. I got multiple jobs to help you while you always had one. It was hell! I missed out on a lot. I’m not going to ignore that truth anymore and neither can you. Stop calling me for money and to handle things you should handle as a mother.”

“Marisa—”

“I’ve gotta go.”

Tears sting my eyes as I hang up the phone. For once I just want to be a fucking child talking to her mom. It’s harder than what I thought it would be to not give her money. I feel like I’m disappointing her even if it’s what’s best for me.



Getting any office work done has been impossible with the noise of the construction. I’m grateful the yoga room is on the other side of the building, with the lobby and smoothie bar in between, or I’d consider cancelling classes. Once I finish

payroll, I join Natalie at the reception desk. She's finishing up a call as I slide into the seat next to her.

Hanging up the phone, she turns to me. "Hey. Are you hungry? Want to go to lunch?"

"Yeah. Let me get my stuff. I'll meet you outside."

Natalie takes me to a restaurant that serves sandwiches and soup. I order a cheese zombie with tomato soup and a fresh lemonade. She orders a vegan feta and spinach grilled cheese sandwich with a lemonade as well. Once we have our food, we find a table away from the lunch hour hustle and bustle. Before I can take a bite, my phone chimes with a text.

"Sorry, let me get that."

"You're fine. I have food in front of my face. Nothing else matters." She takes a bite.

Looking at my phone, it's a text from Ash.

Ash: I've got some stuff I need to take care of here at work. I won't be able to stop by.

Marisa: No worries. I'm at lunch with Natalie.

Ash: Enjoy. Let me know how things are going. Are you feeling okay?

"Let me take a guess." Natalie sets her sandwich down, taking a sip of her drink. "Is that Asher?"

It's too late to hide the foolish grin on my lips. "Yes."

“Why are you two not together?” She sips her lemonade.

I respond to his text before silencing the ringer and shove it back in my bag. “Because... I don’t need to be in a relationship right now. And besides... I’m not sure that he wants a relationship either.” She raises her brow, giving me a skeptical look. “What?”

“Nothing.” She tilts her head to the side, squinting her eyes. “I’m just trying to figure out how dense that skull of yours is.”

“Excuse you!” I laugh. “I really don’t know if he wants to be in a relationship, and I don’t know that I’m ready. Like what am I gonna say? ‘Hey... I’m a fucking dumpster fire of a mess but let’s be together?’”

“More or less... yeah.” She shrugs. I take a bite of my sandwich, hoping she’ll drop the subject. She doesn’t. “All I’m going to say is, he’s been with you through it all and hasn’t shied away. His actions speak for themselves.”

“I just need some time before I jump into another relationship.”

She offers me a smile, giving my hand a quick squeeze. “Take all the time you need... but don’t miss out on things because you think you have to give yourself penance.”

Dipping my cheese zombie into the tomato soup, I wonder if I am giving myself penance even though I don’t regret my choice. “Did you feel... relieved after you had your abortion?”

“Yes.” She swallows her bite of food. “Yes, I felt so relieved. It wasn’t easy, but I’m grateful I didn’t force myself

into parenting when I knew I wasn't ready. And to be honest, I was hard on myself afterward too, even though I was relieved."

"Okay, so, I'm not going crazy being relieved one minute and sad the next?"

"No." She chuckles. "You're not. As much as you want to be a beautiful, artistic mess, Marisa... you're pretty fucking normal."

I toss my head back with laughter. "Just let me be! Existence is pain." I pretend to dramatically faint in my seat.

She smiles, shaking her head. "Be as dramatic as you want. Just know I'm always rooting for you... and Asher."

I thought the feelings I have for him would be fleeting. Instead, they've only continued to grow. But the stronger they become, the more I try to deny them. I've always struggled with worthiness. After dad left, it was hard not to question my self-worth. Then I got involved with Reese and that only added to my doubts.

But then there's Asher... he has me doubting my doubts.



This has become our nightly routine over the past week. Sitting on the counter, I watch Ash move around the kitchen as he cooks us dinner. I'd wondered if my sex drive would ever return, but I feel the rekindling of glowing embers as I

appreciate his tattoos and the coveted V shape that disappears beneath the band of his sweats. How the fuck is this man my roommate?

“I have eyes, you know? Show some fucking decorum, Risa.”

My eyes snap to his as one corner of his mouth turns up. “I was admiring the artistry of your tattoos.” I shrug innocently. “Maybe if you’d put a shirt on instead of parading around half naked.”

He eyes my exposed thighs. “Is that my shirt?”

“Yes.” I admit unapologetically, hugging it to my body. Grabbing the collar, I bring it to my nose and inhale his scent. “They’re soft.”

“Maybe if you’d stop taking my shirts, I’d wear one.”

“If you cooking me dinner shirtless is the price I must pay, so be it.”

He lets out a short bark of laughter. “Such a heavy price.” He brings a spoon to my lips, brimming with sauce. “Taste it for me.”

His smooth, deep voice and those words make me think of everything but food. Opening my mouth, he puts the spoon in. I close my mouth, licking it clean, and swallow. He pulls it out, waiting for my response.

Licking my lips, I smile. “It’s really good.”

His eyes drift to my lips. “You have...” Bringing his hand up between us, he brushes his thumb across my bottom lip before putting it in his mouth and sucking on it. “Sauce... on your lip.” He finishes his sentence.

The kindling flames turn white hot. His lips are always soft and perfectly kissable. At least from what I remember. I need a reminder. Leaning forward, my lips meet his. It’s gentle and quick. He brings his hand around the back of my neck, pulling me toward him. His mouth covers mine as I let out moan. Yep... still soft and kissable.

He runs his hands down my body, lighting me up with his touch. Gripping my thighs, he pulls me to the edge of the counter and flush against his hard body. His lips move to my jaw, then my neck, and he pulls up my shirt, exposing my breasts.

I should stop him, but I don’t.

He takes my nipple into his mouth, teasing it with his warm tongue. I press my body into him, moaning I slide my fingers into his hair. He growls as I tug on his soft curls. I’m losing myself in him and –

The doorbell rings, slicing through the sexual tension.

Asher pops off my breast. “You expecting someone?”

“No. You?” It’s too late for packages. “It could be Faith or Maxwell...” I adjust my t-shirt. “Or Franny with more papers for you to sign.”

“Sure fucking hope not. I’ll get it.” He sighs, reluctantly straightening up and adjusting himself. A smile teases my lips as he winks at me. “Turn the sauce off, please?” He points at the stove.

Once he’s gone, I exhale. What the fuck am I thinking? It’s like I can’t help—wait—I don’t want to help myself around him. But I also don’t know that I’m ready to have sex again. If my pussy and heart made all the choices, I would’ve said fuck the doorbell and rode him on the counter. I’m trying to think with my brain but that’s hard to do when my brain short circuits with his touch.

Hopping off the counter, I remove the simmering alfredo sauce from the stove and turn it off.

“Is... Marisa here?” The voice that is all too familiar carries down the hallway.

I join Asher at the front door, standing at his side my eyes land on a disheveled Reese.

“Why are you here?”

“I tried to contact you but you’ve blocked me.” He steals a glance at Asher before focusing on me again. “Can we talk... just us two?” Asher stands solid in the doorway, preventing Reese from entering or me from leaving. “Only for a moment?”

Asher leans against the door frame. “I’ll be right here if you need me, Risa.”

I squeeze past him. “It’s fine.” I splay my hand against his chest, gently pushing him back inside. His brow furrows as he looks at me. “It’s okay, Ash. If I’m not back in five minutes,” I glance over my shoulder at Reese, “you’re free to do as you wish.” Reese’s eyes nervously flit to Asher.

“You promise?” Asher gives Reese a menacing sneer, and he looks so goddamn sexy.

“Promise.” I bite back a smile, nudging him in the house. It doesn’t do anything; I might as well be pushing against a boulder.

Asher stares at Reese for a moment longer before nodding and reluctantly retreating into the house. Taking a deep breath, I face Reese.

“Why are you here?”

He takes a step closer. “Is he... living here?”

“That’s none of your concern.” I pin my arms across my chest. “Why are you here, Reese?”

Running his hands through his hair, he paces from one side of the porch to the other before looking at me again. “I wanted to apologize for... everything. I’m truly sorry, Marisa. I know it sounds selfish, but I didn’t see things clearly until I saw you the other day.”

“Okay... thanks.” I turn to head inside.

“Wait... Marisa. I’m sorry for the lies and the way I treated you. I know you don’t believe me, but I love you. That part of

me is real. You deserved better, and I'm sorry I didn't give you that."

He's saying everything he should've said months ago. Not that it would've changed my mind, but some fucking remorse on his end would have been nice to see.

"I shouldn't have lashed out at you at my office the other day. When I went home I talked to Jessica and—"

"What?" My blood is simmering, but my tone is icy.

"Marisa..." He dares a step closer to me. "When I saw you and learned that you're pregnant... it felt like a sign."

"A sign?" And I'm the crazy one? "For... what?"

"I was talking to Jessica. She's been wanting another baby, and she thought—well we thought—that we could care for the child until you're ready. That way you don't have to go through the abortion."

The blood rushing through my ears sounds like a river with treacherous waters. "Excuse me?"

"We can take care of the baby. Only until you're ready. It's the least I can do—"

Tears in my eyes cause him to blur as my body shakes with rage. "Let me get this straight. You want me to have a baby so you and Jessica can raise it?"

"Only temporarily until—"

"This is your fucking sign? Instead of knocking up your wife for real, you think that me having a baby for you two—"

two people I fucking despise—is the solution?”

“Marisa—”

“I’m the fucking crazy one?” My voice rises. “When you think I would have a baby for you and your wife to raise?” I can’t stop the tears that spill from my eyes. “Do you know how fucking sick you sound? Here I was foolishly thinking you were showing some fucking remorse! But you’re only here to try and get more from me.”

“I’m thinking in the best interests of the baby... and you.” He adds me in as an afterthought. Like I’ve always been.

“There is no baby!” I scream, chest heaving as my heart pounds. “Looks like you’ll actually have to fuck your wife for once.”

I don’t know why this hurts. It’s not surprising, but this cuts me so fucking deep. I’ll stand by my choice until the day I die and forever after that. But the fact he is on my porch, trying to manipulate me with a half ass apology to have a baby for him and his wife really takes the fucking cake. Something in me shifts, creating a chasm in my soul.

“You did this on purpose, didn’t you? Because you hate me.” He’s looking at me like I’m the enemy.

“No.” I angrily swipe the tears from my face. “I did it for me.” Truth is, I didn’t hate him. But now I do.

The door opens and Asher appears. I turn to look at him. He takes one look at me before heading for Reese, who backs

away and ends up falling into the bush. I stand in front of Asher, blocking him. I've taken all I can handle tonight.

“Ash...” My voice cracks. “It isn't worth it. Just—let's just go inside... please.”

I hear Reese scrambling to his car, like a coward. Asher hesitates before wrapping his arm around my shoulders and guiding me inside.

“Risa...” He gently grabs my chin, coaxing me to look at him. “What happened?”

I swallow the lump in my throat, refusing to meet his gaze. “Nothing. I'm tired. I'm going to lie down.” Breaking the hold he has on me; I head to my room.

I liked to believe, despite the bullshit, Reese and I had *something*. Maybe I am crazy. This confirmed that there was never love, only lust. It was always just sex. When I found out he was married, I never expected him to leave his wife. I left instead. Leaving doesn't mean the emotions disappear. I wanted it to be him so fucking badly it's embarrassing. Maybe that's what caused me to miss the signs that are glaringly obvious now.

A knock on the door resounds in my room. I remain quiet, hoping he'll go away. Instead, he slowly opens the door, peering into my room.

“Risa...” he whispers.

I take a shaky inhale of breath and turn over, covering myself with the blanket. “Go away, Ash.” Seconds later, I feel

him pulling on the blanket. “Ash, leave me alone.”

“Do you really want me to leave you alone?”

“I don’t want you to see me as a sniveling mess over a man who I know isn’t worth the tears. But I can’t help it.”

“What good is suffering alone doing you?” He scoops me into his arms, carrying me down the hall to his room.

“Why can’t we sleep in my bed?”

“Mine is more comfortable.”

I let out a snotty laugh and wrap my arms around his neck. He isn’t wrong with his California King and high thread count sheets. He sets me on the bed and pulls the blanket over me before turning off the light. I feel him climb in beside me. He pulls me against him, my back to his chest, and wraps his arms securely around me.

“You can fall apart with me. I’ll keep you safe.” He kisses my hair.

His words cause the chasm that was created earlier to open and release the emotions I’ve been holding in for so long.

Asher

She falls asleep crying, while I lie awake wondering if I can get away with murder. He isn't worth life in prison, but they'd have to find a body for that to happen. She was just starting to trust herself again, and whatever he said derailed her. The only reason I didn't beat his ass last night is because she asked me not to. He's lucky she was there, next time I'll ensure he won't have any luck. My shrill alarm cuts through my thoughts. I swat at my phone on the night stand, silencing it. She stirs momentarily before stretching and wrapping herself around me again.

I can't miss work even though I want to. Representatives from Titan Tech arrive today and want to see the building site in person. While someone else could handle it, I like to take care of clients from the beginning, end, and beyond. I move her arm off my chest, but she wraps it around me again. I wait a few minutes. If she didn't wrap herself around me like an anaconda with the grip of a crab, I'd be in the shower by now. Not that I'm complaining. I like the feel of her on me.

When I move, she stirs. “You know, you could just push me off you instead of wiggling around like jello.”

I let out a rumble of laughter. “You would’ve called me an asshole if I did that.”

She puts her head underneath the covers. “We’ve established that you are. It wouldn’t surprise me.”

“Woke up and chose violence today, huh?” Her giggle is muffled. “That’s fair.”

She pulls her blanket down, so only her eyes are exposed. “It’s not fair. I’m sorry.”

I press a kiss to her forehead. “I’m used to – wait, what’s the opposite of an asshole?”

She raises her brow. “Bitch?”

I nod, letting out a sigh. “You said it, not me.”

She gasps, swatting at my arm. “That’s rude!” I’d believe her if she weren’t smiling.

“What?” I ask, sitting up on the edge of the bed. “I didn’t say anything.”

Disappearing under the covers, she sticks her middle finger out from beneath them. I chuckle, getting up from the bed and heading to the bathroom.

When I return to the bedroom, Marisa is still a lump on the bed. “Are you going to the studio today?”

“Later,” she mumbles.

“Are you hungry?” Walking into my closet, I pull out a crisp button down, slacks, and my belt.

“No. I just want to lie here a little longer.”

I pull on my shirt and pants. Walking to the bed, I pull the comforter down. She looks at me. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” She grabs for the covers, but I pull them down further out of her reach.

She tosses her head back, laughing. “Ash!”

“Answer the question. Are you okay? And answer honestly.”

Smoothing her curls out of her face, she rolls her eyes. “I’m not, but I will be. Can I have the blanket back now?”

We hold each other’s gaze. My phone chimes, interrupting our stare down. “Fine. I’m here if you want to talk about it.”

Sitting up, she snatches the covers from my hand. “Is this a real down blanket? It feels like a cloud.”

“Nice deflecting. You’re lucky I’ve gotta go to work.”

“Ooo, I’m so scared.”

A chuckle resonates in my chest. “You talk a lot of shit.” I snatch the blanket off her entirely, and she curls up into the fetal position.

“I fucking hate you!” She cackles.

Leaning over the bed, I kiss her wild curls. “You wish you could hate me, Risa Belle. See you later.” I launch the blanket at her face.



Before the meeting with Titan Tech, I decide to make a call to the detective who has been working on my mother's case. She answers after a few rings.

“This is Detective Watson.”

“Hi. I'm Asher Blaine. Calling about my mother, Mina Blaine.”

She's silent for a moment. “Ah, yes! You hung up on me.”

I would apologize, but I'm not sorry. “Yeah... you sounded like a reporter.”

“I can understand that.” She chuckles. “They haven't stopped contacting you after all this time?”

“Mmm... no. Not when the case made national news. Why did you want to speak to me anyway? If it's for an interview... I'm not really up for that.”

“No. I only wanted to inform you of what's going on and why I looked into her case again in the first place.”

“My grandma told me something about a woman coming forward recently.”

I hear her shuffling around papers. “Not recently. Her name was already in the file. I just did a bit more digging.”

“Wait, the police talked to her?”

“Yes, when she saw your mother’s case on the news back in 2004 she came forward because she recognized your father.”

I consider her words for a moment. “But why did you pick up my mother’s case again? She got life without parole.”

“May I speak candidly?”

“Of course.”

I hear movement and the sound of a door closing. “I’m sure you’re aware that the police department will do anything to protect their own. Even if that means ignoring someone’s truth. What your mother accused him of wasn’t something they wanted to face. Not from one of their own. Evidence was presented, strong evidence, but it intentionally got buried so your mom would too.”

The father I knew at home and the police officer the public knew were two entirely differently people. “What makes you think they’ll take what this woman has to say into consideration now?”

“Because I won’t let there be room for them not to.”

I lean back in my chair. “I admire your... tenacity.”

“Most are annoyed by it,” she says, chuckling. “I’ll take that compliment. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome...” My tone is quizzical. There’s a knock on the door, and Francesca appears seconds later.

“Titan Tech just arrived.” She announces. I nod, acknowledging I heard her.

“Detective Watson, thank you for your time. I’ve got a meeting to get to.”

“Of course. If you have any questions, contact me.”

Rising from my seat, I hesitate before hanging up the phone.
“Detective Watson...”

“Yes?”

“I really hope you’re right. My mother hadn’t talked to me in sixteen years until the possibility of clemency was on the table. There is a lot riding on this. For her... and for me.”

There’s a moment of silence before she speaks.
“Understood.”

“Thank you.” I hang up the phone.

I looked into her before calling. She’s a pariah at the current police department she works for. When I saw she had transferred multiple times over the past ten years, it was a red flag until I learned why. She searches for the truth, even if she outs one of “their own” in the process. Justice is truly justice in her eyes. No matter the fall out. While I gave up on hope a long time ago, I can’t help the sliver of it I see glimmering in the distance.



After work, I head to the yoga studio. Marisa is teaching evening classes tonight, and I’ll take any opportunity to watch her move. I hope her day turned out better. The meeting with

Titan Tech went well. I enjoy getting to know clients past a business deal. It builds trust and creates lasting relationships.

Walking into the studio, I'm met by Natalie.

"Hi, Asher." She smiles brightly.

I wave. "How are you?"

"Good. Oh," she holds her hands up, "wait right here. I need to grab something for you to take to Marisa." She disappears before I can ask any questions and reappears less than minute later. "This is for her." She hands me a box.

"Okay..." I take it from her. "Why don't you just give it to her? She'll be here soon anyway."

"She's not coming in tonight. Said she wasn't feeling well."

"Did she?" I raise a brow, smelling bullshit from a mile away.

"Yeah, Drystan is filling in for her tonight."

Great, I get to be eye fucked for the next hour. I'm close to telling him he's going to have to take me to dinner if he continues to look at me the way he does. "Cool."

"Tell Marisa I hope she feels better."

"Oh, I will." I take the box and head toward the locker room.

Arriving home, I find Marisa sprawled on the couch with my blanket and an assortment of snacks litter the coffee table.

"Hi..."

She jumps when I speak, looking over her shoulder at me. “You fucking scared me.” Grabbing her phone off the coffee table, she checks the time. “It’s already eight?”

“Uh... yeah.” I can’t help but notice she’s in the same clothes as yesterday. “Took the day off?”

“Yeah.” She rubs her hands down her face. “I just needed... time.”

I haven’t asked her what Reese said because I don’t think she’ll tell me, and I don’t want to ruin her mood if she’s starting to feel better.

“Are you hungry?”

She waves her hand at the table. “Can’t you tell I’ve been eating all day?”

I glance at the table then back at her. “For real food. Not crap.”

“Are you cooking?”

“Fuck no.” She laughs. “We have delivery for a reason. Or we can go somewhere.”

“Do I look like I want to go anywhere?” She pulls at her shirt.

“No... you look like you’ve taken up residence on the couch but it may be nice to get some fresh air.”

She looks at the mess on the coffee table, contemplating my words. “I’ll put on some leggings, but I’m stealing one of your hoodies.”

“Be my guest.” She can have all my hoodies if she’ll get out of the house with me. Sitting around all day isn’t doing her any good.

She reappears five minutes later. “I brushed my teeth,” she says, grinning.

“Am I going to have to make a gold star chart for you like the one I made for Laynee?”

“I know you meant that as an insult, but there is nothing wrong with positive reinforcement. Also, if they’re Lisa Frank stickers,” she smiles at me over her shoulder, “count me in.”

“Lisa Frank?” I follow her out the door. “Really?”



Marisa’s one day off has turned into days. I know there’s no time stamp on healing, but she only leaves the house with me. I’m worried about her. Seeing her on the couch for the fifth morning in a row in the same hoodie and leggings reminds me to check in on Reese. It’s been busy at work, leaving little time to get into fuckery.

I know where he works, but I need to know where he lives. Francesca’s rattling off my schedule when I interrupt her.

“I need the afternoon. What time is my last meeting?”

“It ends at...” She glances at the tablet in her hands. “2.”

“Perfect.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

“Sort of.” I rise from my seat, grabbing my phone off the desk. “Does Oliver still work in tech?”

“Um...” She pulls off her glasses. “I think so. I can call and ask.”

“No. I’ll check myself. Thank you, Francesca.”

Oliver is the person who knows a guy who knows a guy for illegal, or borderline illegal, shit. I head to the tech office before my first meeting. It doesn’t take me long to find him. He has hair so blonde it’s almost white, and nothing he wears ever seems to match, but it works for him.

“Hey Oli.”

“Asher.” He stands, giving me a handshake. “What brings you to my office—” he glances around “—cubicle? Something wrong with your computer?”

“Nah.” I pull up a chair beside him, taking a seat. “Nothing work related and I’d like to keep it that way.”

He glances over his shoulder. “Need more shrooms?” He nudges my arm, wagging his brows.

“Maybe another time.” I say, trying to focus on beating Reese’s ass. “Today I need an address. Remember to keep this separate from work.” If shit goes south, I don’t want there to be a connection with the company.

“Address. Got it. Got it.” He nods, chewing on his gum excitedly. “Do you have a name?”

“First name, yes. But I know where he works.”

“I’ll figure it out.” He grabs his bag, pulling out a laptop.
“Where does he work?”

I give him the name of the clinic. “His first name is Reese.”

“Ha!” Oliver laughs. “Like the candy?”

My lips twitch with amusement. “Exactly like the candy.”

Oliver scrolls on his computer for a minute before turning it toward me. “Is this him? Reese Villarreal?”

Glancing at the picture of him, you’d never guess the shit he’s done to Marisa. He looks like a family guy. People thought the same thing of my father. “Yep, that’s him.”

“Right on.” He glances down at his watch. “Give me a few hours. I have some things I need to handle before I can play FBI.”

“No rush. I won’t need it until this afternoon.” I rise from my seat, buttoning my suit jacket. “Oli... did you want an office?” I didn’t consider it before. The tech guys at the Seattle office have their own offices. I’m not sure why he doesn’t have one when he’s been here for a while.

His eyes widen. “I’m not complaining. I—”

“Consider it done. You got to speak up for what you want, Oli.”

“Well... while you’re here what about another work laptop on the company’s dime?”

“Give you a fucking inch,” I glance around at his state of the art tech, “and you take a mile.”

“I’m kidding.” He tosses his head back with laughter. “You and Jax have always been good to me.”

I give him a genuine smile. We’ve tried to create a company that people enjoy working for, and we’ve accomplished that.



My phone vibrates with a text as I gather my things from my office. It’s from Oliver, and Reese’s address is attached to it. Things haven’t been the same for Marisa since he showed up last week. She still won’t tell me what he said, but whatever he said fucked her up. So... why not do the same to him?

He lives in an affluent neighborhood just outside of Portland. According to the information Oliver gave me, he recently moved out of his apartment and is living at home with his family again. I’ve met guys like him before. Their obsession with upholding an elitist image overrides the reality that they’d rather be chasing pussy. So instead, they get married, have the two perfect kids with the big ass house and the Stepford wife to boot. Once they’ve reached the societal standards of perfect, they realize they never wanted any of that shit in the first place. The whole time they wanted to get their dick wet and make money.

Shit, that’s all I wanted to do until recently, and then Marisa happened. Or I happened to her if she tells it. We happened to

each other, and for once I want more. It's unfortunate for Reese because he chose to fuck with the one person I will do anything for. Parking near his house, I unbutton the cuffs of my shirt and roll up my sleeves. A car passes me, momentarily blocking the view of his house but then it pulls into the driveway. That must be him... or his wife. At this point she could get it too. But my issue isn't with her. It's with him.

Without looking, I reach for the bat lying on the backseat that I bought on the way here, specifically for this occasion. This has been a long time coming, and I'm going to enjoy it. After my mom went to prison, the kids at school were ruthless which meant I had to be too. I learned how to fight pretty well before my uncle and aunt pulled me out of school. Gripping the bat, I feel the adrenaline seep into my bloodstream.

The driver door opens and Reese steps out. I open my car door, ready to do the same, when his daughter climbs out of the back seat, followed by his son. My eyes remain on him as I contemplate educating his kids on the fact their father truly is a piece of shit. I'm holding the bat so tightly, my hand aches. A million thoughts run through my mind. What if I'm enjoying beating his ass and one of the kids gets in the way? While I don't give a fuck about them, I wouldn't want to unintentionally hurt them. Even on my worst day, I have morals.

I close the door, causing Reese's attention to turn toward my car. He can't see me, but he stares in my direction and a look of panic flashes across his face. While he may not know for sure it's me, he certainly recognizes my car from it being

parked in Marisa's driveway. Good. He needs to realize he can get fucked up at any given time. I start my car, making a show of driving past his house. I'm not really driving, more like creeping. He wraps his arms around his kids shoulders, trying to hurry them inside, but they're too busy trying to show him something. I roll my window down enough just for him to see me. Terror is etched on his face as I lock eyes with him and continue down the street. Yeah... at least he knows who the fuck I am.



Marisa's lying on the couch in the same position she was in this morning when I walked out the door on my way to work.

"Pack a bag." I grab the remote, turning off the TV.

She freezes with a Snickers bar halfway to her mouth. "For what?"

"To travel, Risa."

"Oh, Ash I—" she whines, but warning flashes in my eyes. "To where?"

"Pack clothes for hot and cold weather and for swimming. And whatever else you think you'll need."

"That's very vague," she grumbles, picking a piece of popcorn off her hoodie and popping it into her mouth.

"You have two options." I unbutton my shirt. "Pack your own bag and come quietly."

She raises her brow, crossing her arms. “Or what?”

Pulling my shirt off, I hold her gaze. “Or I throw you over my shoulder in the outfit you’ve been wearing for God knows how long and into the backseat of my car. Your choice, love.”

She gapes at me and then smells her hoodie. “That was a little harsh.”

“Yeah...” I shrug. “And so is the way you smell.”

She audibly gasps this time, sitting up. Finally, she fucking moves. “I’ve been through a lot, Ash.” Her eyes brim with tears. “And—and you attacking me isn’t helping.”

“Attacking? Risa, I told you to pack a bag.”

“You said I smell!”

I swallow a laugh. “Do you?”

Her eyes narrow. “Yes, but—”

“Okay, so get your ass up and shower. Be ready in an hour. Or all you’ll have to wear are some stinky ass leggings and my hoodie that is now a biohazard.” I wouldn’t let that happen, but I doubt she’ll call my bluff.

Wiping her eyes, she stands and crumbs fall from her lap. “Fine... fine. I’ll go.”

I stand with my hands resting on my hips as I watch her slowly make her way toward her room. “I’ll be checking on you in five minutes.”

She flicks me off and I let out a short bark of laughter. There’s the fire. “I have no problem putting you in the car

naked, Risa. One hour.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She slams the door shut.

Looking around the living room, I pull out my phone and call the maid service. I’ve let her wallow in self-pity for days. If she didn’t want to come, she wouldn’t be taking a shower. I wouldn’t have forced her, but she’s turning into a ghost of a shell. I fucking miss her.

After packing my bag and letting the cleaning service in, I check on her. I slowly open her bedroom door to see a suitcase on the bed with clothes haphazardly tossed in it. *She’s trying, Ash. Go easy on her.* I knock on the bathroom door.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fucking showering, warden!” she shouts. “Did you want to watch or what?”

“I’d love to watch, but did you use soap?”

I hear the shower turn off. Seconds later, she wrenches the door open. Her hair is wrapped in a towel with another tightly wrapped around her middle, and she looks somewhat human for the first time in days.

“Yes, asshole. That’s the purpose of a shower.”

I missed fighting with her. Call me fucked up. “I’m surprised you’re familiar with the term shower.”

“You know,” she squeezes toothpaste onto her toothbrush and angrily brushes her teeth. “I could just stay home.” She says around a mouth full of toothpaste.

“And do what? Wallow?” I step into the bathroom. “I know you’re going through it. I’ve watched you and have been here this whole fucking time. But what I’m not going to do is watch you sink deeper without at least trying to pull you up.”

Looking at me in the mirror, she stops brushing her teeth. “I —” She spits in the sink. Her brow furrows as she tries to find her words. “I don’t want to feel this way. Telling myself I’m fine and being fine aren’t synonymous.” She looks at me with her glossy hazel eyes. “I mean it’s pretty obvious I’m not fucking fine, but... I want to be.”

She quickly wipes away a tear that escapes down her cheek. Pulling her into a hug, I kiss her wet curls. “I’m not asking you to be fine, Risa Belle. I’m just letting you know I’m here and I see you.”

Marisa

This week has been an emotional hell. Actually, the past few weeks have been fucking awful with only glints of light in the form of Asher. He's not an anchor for me. More like a lighthouse, guiding me through the treacherous waters back to myself.

I hope I make it back to myself.

Who would've thought the man I wanted to kill in Vegas is the one holding my hand, encouraging me to hold on. I watch him out of the corner of my eye and take in the sharp angles of his face and the smoothness of his skin. He's backlit by the sun shining through the window, looking like he belongs in a magazine. Not driving me to some undisclosed location because my emotions have consumed me.

The scenery changes from the concrete jungle of the city to the breathtaking, lush greenery only Oregon has to offer. I'd ask where we're going, but he refuses to tell me, and I don't have the energy to argue. I've slept more than a bear in hibernation, and I'm still exhausted. I rest my head against the window and watch the rays of sunlight filter through the dense

trees. Getting out of the house is exactly what I need despite giving Asher a hard time. I didn't even look at what I packed, but I hope it's enough for where we're going.

A little over an hour later, Asher pulls off onto a tree lined, winding dirt road. It's whimsical with the way the trees cover the sky, causing the sunlight that's filtering through to be hued emerald and gold. Asher steals a glance at me with a smile on his face as I roll down the window. I hang my head out and let the warm breeze caress my skin. As we drive further into the canopy of trees, I notice a white, weathered sign.

Little Slice of Heaven

Est. 2008

Joy & Avery

Shortly after the sign, the trees start to thin, opening up to a sprawling green lawn and a grand white farmhouse sitting upon a hill. There are stables off to the right with the most gorgeous horses I've ever seen lazily grazing in the pasture. Their manes whip in the breeze making them look majestic.

Asher pulls up to the house, cutting the engine, and unbuckles his seatbelt. "We're here." He smiles, getting out of the car and opening the door for me.

"Where's here?" Not that I'm going to complain. It's breathtakingly gorgeous. I slide my hand into his waiting one.

"My grandparents' house," he says, pulling me toward the crimson-colored front door.

“Grandparents?” I follow him up the steps and take in the decorated porch that has a swing hanging on the far left side that’s gently swaying in the breeze. The scenery and whimsicality of it all makes this moment surreal.

“Uh... Ash. Are you sure you want me to— ” I don’t get to finish my sentence as the front door opens and we’re met by a woman with white hair, warm brown eyes, and the same smooth brown skin as Asher.

He towers over her, wrapping her in a hug. “Gigi.” I feel the warmth in his tone as he says her name.

“Ash. You’re here early. We weren’t— ” When he steps aside, her eyes land on me.

“H–Hi. I— ”

She surprises me by pulling me into a hug. “Welcome.” The way she squeezes me makes me feel like I’m coming home. “I’m Gigi. And you are... Marisa?”

I quickly glance at Asher. He’s told her about me? “Yes, I’m Marisa. Pleasure to meet you.”

“All mine, honey. I’m sure you’re starving. Come inside and you can meet Avery, my husband, while I start dinner. Then Ash can give you a tour after he brings in your bags.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he chuckles. I glance over my shoulder at him as Gigi takes me inside. He’s already heading down the steps to grab our things.



His grandparents are sweet and funny. Avery is the same height as Asher and lean like him too. He has grey hair with a full beard and rich ebony skin. I haven't had a chance to say anything to Asher because I've been too busy enjoying myself as I talk to his grandparents.

“What do you do for a living, Marisa?” Avery asks.

“I'm a yoga instructor. I own a yoga studio and smoothie bar in Portland.”

“Smoothie bar?” He asks.

A chuckle resonates in Asher's chest from where he sits beside me. “Yeah, Pops. They make healthy smoothies and juices.”

His brows shoot up. “Really? A whole bar for that?”

“Yes.” Laughter bubbles up my throat at his surprised expression.

“As you can tell, we don't leave our Little Slice of Heaven too much.”

“May I ask, how did you come up with the name for your place?”

Avery smiles wistfully as Joy returns from the kitchen and sits next to him. “We purchased this home and land when we were...”

“Our life seemed to be in a torrential down pour,” Joy fills in for him. “And we wanted a space where we could find peace.”

“Yes.” Avery nods, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. “We’d lived in and served the city of Seattle most of our lives. It was time for us to get out and find our Little Slice of Heaven.”

The love between Asher’s grandparents is palatable. “It definitely lives up to the name. It’s gorgeous here.”

“Ash, why don’t you take Marisa on a tour before it’s dark outside?”

Asher stands, holding his hand out to me. “Let’s go, Risa Belle.”

My cheeks warm when he says my nickname. Rising to my feet with my hand in his, I smile at him and then at his grandparents who are looking at us like they know something we don’t.

“By the time you two get back, dinner should be ready,” Joy calls after us.

Asher leads me out ginormous sliding glass doors to the backyard. There’s a pool, hot tub, trampoline, and a child’s jungle gym. Turning to my right, there’s fire pit with Adirondack chairs surrounding it that have chenille blankets draped over the back with plush pillows in the seats.

“Is this place even real?”

“My grandparents took the term ‘little slice of heaven’ literally.” He smiles at me. “Feel free to enjoy any of this stuff while we’re here... even the jungle gym.”

I let out a soft laugh. “It sounds tempting.” He leads me toward the stables and the horses come closer to the fence as we get near. “Do you ride them?”

“Yes. Have you ridden a horse?”

“No.”

He looks at me like I’m bullshitting. “Never?”

“I swear. I’ve never ridden a horse... because they terrify me even if they are gorgeous.”

As we near the fence, Asher holds out his hand, and the one with a luminescent black coat nudges against it. He strokes its nose, and the horse leans into his touch.

“This is Stardust.” The champagne colored horse neighs and stamps a hoof as he stands beside Stardust. “And this is Pegasus. As you can see, he loves attention. They’re gentle. You can pet them if you want.”

I take a cautious step closer, mimicking his movement, and hold out my hand. Pegasus nudges against it. His nose is soft like velvet, inviting me to pet him. I run my hand along his smooth nose and gleaming fur.

“Beautiful...” I whisper.

“We can go for a ride – ” my eyes widen “ – together... if you want.”

“I’d love that.” I keep petting Pegasus, but feel bad for Stardust and pet him too.

“I’ll be right back.” Asher says, already walking away.

“What?” I can’t keep the panic out of my voice. Even though they’re behind a fence, that doesn’t mean I want to be alone with them.

He lets out a short bark of laughter. “You’ll be fine, Risa Belle. Just pet them.”

Pegasus nudges my hand like I owe him something, making me to turn my attention back to them. I’m not sure why I have a fear of horses when I’ve never been on one. We didn’t have pets growing up. Not even a goldfish. My dad didn’t like them, and after he left there was no way we could afford them. I think it’s just a fear of the unknown. Maybe I should get a goldfish.

I hear the crunch of Asher’s footsteps on the gravel behind me. Turning to look at him, he holds up two bright red apples. He tosses one in my direction.

I catch it. “Are these for us or the horses?”

He takes a bite. “Both. But I brought them for the horses.”

“Will they bite me?”

“Don’t put your fingers in their mouth.”

“Wow...” I scoff. “So helpful and comforting.”

“You’re overthinking this. The most aggressive thing they’ll do is nudge you to pet them.”

On cue, Pegasus nudges my shoulder, blowing out a haughty breath. “Geez! Alright!”

“See.” He laughs, standing beside me. Stardust approaches Asher since Pegasus is an attention whore and now wants the apple in my hand. He holds the apple flat on his hand like it’s a tray, and Stardust snatches it, eating it in one crunch. “Your turn.”

“My turn? He ate that thing in one gulp.”

Asher doesn’t speak. He stands behind me. My back flush against his chest. Gently wrapping his long fingers around my wrist, he guides my hand up, and I follow what he did with Stardust. Opening my palm and letting the apple balance on it like a tray. Once the apple is in clear sight, Pegasus snatches it. I stare at my hand, looking for any signs that he took a piece of me with him. Seeing that I’m still intact, I let out an exhale with a laugh.

“Scared for what?” He kisses the top of my head and grabs my hand. “C’mon, there’s more to see.”

“More?” I ask in disbelief, looking back at Stardust and Pegasus as they happily return to grazing in the field.

I follow along behind him as he leads us toward what looks like a small wooden house. As we get closer I see chickens freely roaming around. A little further down the dirt path is a pen with baby pigs running and snorting around in them.

“Do your grandparents take care of all of this land by themselves?”

“No. They’ve hired some local people, a couple of teens and adults, to help them keep up with everything.”

Joy and Avery are full of energy, but even the most energetic person would need help maintaining the beauty of this place. As we walk past the chickens and pigs, we come to a path that leads into the woods. I’m glad I wore sneakers and jeans instead of the sundress and sandals. The path we’re on is well worn. I listen to the wind whisper through the trees as he leads me deeper into the forest.

“Scared of a horse, but haven’t asked why I’m leading you into the woods?”

“One,” I step over a fallen branch. “Even if I ask, will you tell me?”

“No.” He flashes a smile at me.

“Thought so.” The corners of my mouth tip up. “And two, you’ve never given me a reason not to trust you. So if you’ve led me out here to kill me, make it quick and painless.”

He tosses his head back with laughter. “I’ve brought you here to hopefully put some life back into you. Not take it.”

The trees start to thin, and I can hear the sound of water. Walking a little further, my eyes land on a creek with crystal clear water. Just when I thought this place couldn’t get any more gorgeous. I audibly gasp. The water shimmers as the final rays of the day reflect off of it, causing it to look like diamonds are floating downstream.

Leaning against a tree, I stare at the flowing water. “This place is incredible. Not just the scenery.” I meet his gaze. “Your grandparents too. I can see why you tried to make the commute work.”

He shoves his hands in his pockets and looks at me with a smile that makes my heart stutter.

“What?” I try to sound annoyed, but return his smile. It’s hard not to looking the way he does.

“Nothing.” He shrugs. “You just... I missed your smile.”

I grin like a goddamn Cheshire cat. If I could melt into a puddle on the floor I would. Instead, I launch myself at him and squeeze him tight.



Dinner was delicious. I would’ve licked my plate without shame, but his grandma brought out dessert.

“Thank you, Joy.” I smile, taking the bowl from her hands that holds a steaming piece of peach cobbler with a scoop of vanilla bean ice cream.

“Call me Gigi, honey. Everyone else does.” She hands the other bowl to Asher.

“Thank you, Gigi,” he says.

“You’re welcome, honey.” She kisses his cheek then surprises me by kissing mine too. “I’m happy you’re here,

Marisa. Pops and I are off to bed. You kids enjoy yourself.” Without a second glance, she leaves us alone.

He rises from where we’re sitting at the kitchen table. “Do you want to eat this by the fire outside?”

“Are you kidding? Of course I do!” I get up and follow him through the glass doors that lead outside. “I get to watch you build a fire?”

He flashes me a grin over his shoulder. “Is that a turn on for you?”

I scrunch up my face with thought, wondering out loud, “Do I have a lumberjack kink?”

“Lumberjack?” He lets out a belt of laughter. “I should’ve worn a flannel shirt.”

“Asher Blaine in flannel?” Even his socks look expensive.

“I’ll wear flannel just for you, Risa Belle.” He winks, handing me his bowl, and then he grabs some firewood.

Taking a seat on one of the chairs near the pit, I watch him lay the wood inside it. I look up at the star scattered sky and silently thank the universe for Asher bringing me here. While I’ve traveled to countless exotic places for yoga, nothing compares to the beauty of this place. Maybe because it feels like home.

Asher pulls me from my thoughts, rubbing his hands together. “Ready to be turned on by my woodsman skills?”

I clap a hand over my mouth, stifling my laughter. “Wow me, baby!”

“Alright, now watch this.” He crouches down, balancing on the balls of his feet. I watch with rapt attention, trying to hold in my laughter. His hand moves to the side of the pit, I hear a click followed by a burst of flames.

I gape at him for a few breaths and then fall into a fit of laughter. “You’re a fucking tease.”

He stands on his feet and sits beside me. “How? I started the fire.” There’s a ghost of a smile on his lips.

“I thought you were going to show me how good you are with your hands.”

He shrugs, taking a bite of peach cobbler and then slowly pulls the spoon out of his mouth. “I can start other fires.”

My body heats like the flames he just started. “I guess your fake fire will do.” Grabbing my spoon, I focus on my peach cobbler, trying to ignore the feelings he ignited. “Should I call your grandma Gigi?”

“It’s up to you, but everyone does call her Gigi. Well... everyone who matters.”

My eyes linger on his lips that I’m sure taste like peach and vanilla before meeting his gaze. “How did she get the name Gigi?”

He smiles. “From me. I couldn’t say grandma, so I called her Gigi and it stuck.”

“That’s cute.” He side eyes me. “What? I mean it. That’s cute. I love the relationship you have with them.”

“Yeah... she and Pops are something special.”

We fall into a comfortable silence with the fire crackling in front of us, eating our dessert. I don’t take him bringing me here lightly, but I also try not to over think it. We’re friends after all. Friends who were planning a date before I fucked it all up. And even then... he still followed through with the date and made sure I had the best time possible even if I was falling apart. Am falling apart? No. I’ve already fallen apart and am now trying to pick up the scattered pieces. Except... I feel like some of them are missing now. Or maybe they are pieces I need to let go of? Maybe I’m not missing anything and need to get to know this new version of myself like Asher said. I’m pulled from my thoughts when I feel him take the now empty bowl from my hands.

“You went away for a second.” He says, setting the bowls aside.

“Oh... yeah.” I rub my eyes.

“Are you tired?”

“No. I’ve slept enough. I was just thinking about... everything.”

“Mmm... want to talk about it?” He catches my gaze.

I take note of the way the flames of the fire are reflect in his eyes. “I...” He grabs my hand, pulling me onto his lap and wraps a blanket around our shoulders.

“I’m cold.”

I snort with laughter and rest my head against his chest. “You feel warm to me.”

“Yeah... because you’re on me now. But... you were saying?”

Winding the frayed edges of the blanket around my fingertip, I try to find my words. “Reese came over to tell me...” A lump forms in my throat. It still hurts to think about or say out loud. Asher patiently waits for me. “He came over to offer me a half ass apology but... he also told his wife about the baby.”

I feel Asher tense beneath me. “Why? He’s lied about everything else.”

“Because... they wanted to raise the baby until I was ready... supposedly.”

“They what?” He rears his head back so our eyes meet.

I look down at my hands. “Wanted to raise the baby.”

“What in the actual fuck?”

“H-He said that Jessica had been wanting another baby, and this was a sign. That they’d only raise the baby until I was ready.” Tears pool in my eyes. Annoyance courses through my veins. Not with Reese or Jessica, but with myself for even crying about this. “I told him I got an abortion, and that was the end of it.”

“What kind of twisted shit is that?” He pinches the bridge of his nose, letting his head fall back against the chair. “Wow... I’ve heard a lot of wild shit but that really... is the worst. He has a whole fucking wife, but they wanted you to carry the baby? Get the fuck outta here.”

“It fucked me up because I realized I meant nothing to him... at all.” I shrug. “I naively believed that we had something after everything and... at the end of it all I was just a release.” Sniffling, I wipe at my nose with cuff of my sweater.

“I hate that he’s made you doubt yourself.” He grabs my chin, making my gaze meet his. “I want you to know, Risa Belle, that you’re incredible and always have been. Fuck anyone who makes you doubt that.”

Asher says it with such conviction that it warms me to my core, leaving no room for me to doubt his words. I melt into him as he holds me in his arms.

Marisa

We stayed up for hours talking last night. Asher listened to every single word and didn't judge me. Not that I expected him to. The suffocating fog I was under dissipated with each word I spoke. I've slept a lot over the past few weeks, but it wasn't restful sleep. It was an escape from my mind. The last thing I remember was climbing into bed with Asher. I crashed and slept the best I have in weeks. The sun seeping through the sheer white curtain is what wakes me. Slowly opening my eyes, I stretch and finally don't feel the exhaustion that had taken residence in my body. I don't feel Asher pressed against my back. When I roll over, I see a little girl with a mane of brown curls sitting in the corner. It startles me for half a second.

"Hello..." I croak.

Her head snaps up from the paper she was just furiously scribbling on. "Hi..." Before I can say another word, she hops off the chair and bolts out of the room.

"That wasn't creepy at all..." I mutter to myself, bringing the blankets back up to my chin.

I start to doze off again when the door opens and Asher appears. “You *are* up. Did Laynee scare you?” He lies down beside me.

“A little.” I laugh softly before yawning. “But she took off before I could figure out who she was.”

“Yeah she wasn’t supposed to be in here.”

“Wait... what time is it?”

“Just past eleven.”

“What?” I sit up. “Why didn’t you wake me? Now your whole family thinks I’m lazy.”

“Because you were sleeping. No one gives a fuck, Risa. I just woke up thirty minutes ago myself.”

I crash against the pillows that feel like clouds. “I really hope I don’t wake to find this is all a dream.”

He chuckles, wrapping one of my curls around his finger. “Why would it be?”

“Because I’ve been in a state of perpetual hell for a few weeks. These pillows are soft as fuck. The comforter is warm, yet cold. Gigi cooks like a goddamn world class chef. Pops could be a standup comedian if he wanted. The views here are something out of a fucking movie. And you’re here lying next to me. I’m having a hard time accepting this is my reality when only yesterday I was wearing the same clothes I’d been in for a week. Why didn’t you bring me here sooner?”

“Would you have come willingly?” He cocks a brow.

“No—” he lets out a bark of laughter “—but you know I’m stubborn.”

“Damn right you are.”

I take a deep breath. “I refuse to let you steal my peace this morning.”

“Why?” He rolls to his side, propping himself up on his elbow. “Because you’re stubborn?”

I give it one hell of a shot before throwing a pillow at his face. “You don’t deserve my peace.”

“I don’t want your peace. Give me your chaos.” He throws his pillow at me.

Our laughter fills the room as we launch pillows at each other. I missed being carefree with him. He wakes something in me that was dormant before he crashed into my life. Once we have no pillows left, we collapse onto the bed, facing each other.

He brushes my curls out of my eyes, cupping my chin. “C’mon, I want you to meet the rest of my family.” My body warms with his words and touch. “But do us all a favor and brush your teeth first.”

“Oh, fuck you!” I smooch his face, pushing him back onto the mattress.



I felt like I was in a bottomless, dark hole not even twenty-four hours ago. Now I'm looking at myself in the mirror, feeling hopeful. When Asher told me to pack a bag, a small part of me felt relieved. Hopeful for something new and unknown. I was in the dark not realizing I'd need someone to turn on the light.

I've been in a state of depression before, but I'm not always aware that's where I'm heading until I wake up, feeling sick with zero motivation for the bare minimum. Even things that make me feel good – taking a shower, brushing my teeth, moving my body – become impossible tasks. Once I'm in the dark, it's hard to find my way out. The clinic I went to offers counseling. I'm going to make an appointment when I get back.

Everything is fine right now while I'm here with Asher in this surreal place, but I worry about when I go back home. What if I fall into the dark again? Glancing at Asher, something tells me he'll always be willing to turn on the light for me, and I for him. But I also don't ever want him to feel like he's responsible for holding me together. Although, I don't mind if he holds me.

He's lying on the bed, scrolling through his phone, while I finish getting ready to go downstairs to meet his family. I'm glad I grabbed my makeup bag. While the glow is returning to my skin, it's still slightly lackluster from the neglect it's endured over the past few weeks. I hadn't given meeting his family much thought until I'm applying highlighter to the bridge of my nose. What if they don't like me? Do I care if

they don't like me? Asher and I aren't together, why would it matter? A little voice whispers—*it matters*.

I turn to face him. “Ash.” He puts his phone down, giving me his full attention. “Are you sure you want me to meet your family?”

“Yeah.” He raises his brow. “Why? Do you not want to meet them?”

“No, I do. I'm just wondering if you had a lapse in judgement or something.”

“A lapse of judgement about you?” He points at me. “Doubt I'll ever have that problem. Okay...” He rubs the back of his neck. “Vegas was a lapse of judgement on my part, but do I regret it? Fuck no.”

I toss my head back with laughter. “Of course not. I'd expect nothing less.”

He sits up on the edge of the bed. “Are you nervous?”

“No... okay... a little, and I don't know why. I typically don't give a damn what people think.”

He sits beside me on the bench at the vanity. Draping his arm over my shoulders, he meets my gaze in the mirror. “Because you matter to me.”

My heart is still healing from the last time someone said that.

“In what way?” My confidence and self-worth have taken a beating right along with me the past few weeks. I need to hear

him tell me the ways I matter and still see the promise in his eyes.

He opens his mouth to respond, but there's a knock on the door followed by the voice of a child. "Ash, Gigi said to tell you and Marisa that brunch will be ready in five minutes."

Tearing his gaze from mine, he responds. "Thanks, Haelyn. We'll be right down." He turns his attention back to me. "Are you ready?"

"Oh..." I blink, hoping he'd finish his sentence. Maybe now isn't the time to rush through our feelings. "Yeah, I'm ready." I fluff up my curls.

Rising to his feet, he leans forward, kissing the top of my head. "You look gorgeous, Risa Belle."

As we enter the dining room, we're met by three little girls who look nearly identical aside from their height differences. They rush to hug Asher at the same time, and it has to be one of the cutest things I've witnessed.

He hugs them back. "My three favorite musketeers." When he pulls away, they look at me expectantly. Putting his hand on the small of my back, he introduces me. "Marisa, I'd like you to meet Ivy." He points to the tallest of the three girls. "She's the one who decided to call you."

Ivy smiles without regret as I extend my hand out to her. "Call me anytime." My smile matches hers.

"Really?" Her eyes brighten.

"You've just opened a can of worms." He chuckles.

“I think I’ll survive the consequences.” I wink at Ivy.

Asher continues my introduction. “This is Haelyn.”

“The smartest one.” She gives me a brilliant smile. Ivy elbows her. “What? It’s not my fault I got the brains.” Ivy rolls her eyes.

“Nice to meet you.” I smile, shaking her hand. Her attitude reminds me of Asher.

“And last, but certainly not least, we have Laynee.”

I squat down to her eye level. “You mean I didn’t dream of a little fairy girl this morning?” She giggles, shaking her head. “Nice to meet you.” I shake her hand. “Your wings are beautiful.”

“Thank you.” She says softly, turning around to give me a better view.

We’re joined by his aunt and uncle. I rise to my feet, offering them a smile. My heart rate quickens as I look at them.

Asher wraps his arm around my waist, resting his hand on my hip. It’s doing nothing to help my heartbeat, but it’s distracting me from my nerves. “Jax, Genevieve, I’d like you to meet Marisa.”

Jax uses both of his hands, giving me a warm handshake. “Pleasure to meet you.”

If I didn’t know he’s Asher’s uncle, I’d think he’s his dad. Standing an inch or two shorter than Asher, he has the same

lean build as him. Even their smiles are similar. Jax doesn't look much older than him either—gotta love the power of melanin—with short curly hair that's faded on the sides and light brown eyes.

Genevieve skips the handshake, giving me a hug. “It's so nice to meet you.”

She's beautiful. Her jet black hair is pulled into a sleek, low bun. Her brown eyes are complimented by her sharp, winged eyeliner, and her red lips pop against her sandy brown skin.

“Thank you for having me.”

Gigi and Pops enter the dining room, carrying trays of food.

“Don't lollygag or it'll get cold. Sit down, eat up.” Gigi smiles. “How did you sleep, Marisa?”

“The best I've slept in weeks,” I admit, taking a seat at the table between Asher and Ivy.

“That's good, honey. You're welcome here any time.”

I know she means it. They've welcomed me with open arms, helping me find the elusive peace I've been hoping for.

“Oh, Ash, grab the tray of mimosas off the counter, please?” Pops asks.

This place truly is a slice of heaven.

“Can I have one?” Ivy looks at Genevieve expectantly.

“Absolutely not.”

Asher reappears with the mimosas, setting them in the center of the table.

Gigi grabs a glass off the tray. “You can have one...” Ivy squeals taking it from her as her sisters protest. Putting it to her lips, Gigi says, “Although, it doesn’t have any alcohol in it.”

Ivy suddenly doesn’t look as thrilled. “You’re thirteen. Enjoy your youth.” Genevieve grabs a glass, taking a sip.

“I’d listen to your mom. Enjoy being thirteen and having zero responsibilities.” I smile at her before taking a sip. It takes everything in me not to gulp it down. At this point I’m convinced everything Gigi touches turns to gold.

She lets out a sigh. “Fine. I guess you’re right.”

Genevieve scoffs with a playful smile. “Oh, because she says it, it’s suddenly cool?”

“Yeah, mom. Look at her.” She gives her a look of incredulity.

Filling my plate with food, I try to keep the smile off my face.

“Are you from the area, Marisa?” Jax asks.

I swallow my bite of French toast, wiping my lips with a napkin. “No. I’m from Texas.”

“I thought I heard a southern twang.” Genevieve smiles.

“Oh, yeah. It’s more prominent sometimes.” I never thought I had an accent until I moved here.

“Like when you’re annoyed or mad.” Asher bumps his leg against mine, giving me a wink.

“Two of my emotions you’re well-versed in.” I quip. The adults do nothing to hide their laughter.

“How did you two meet?” Genevieve asks.

“She’s Harlow’s best friend,” Asher fills in, taking a bite of his food.

“Acyn’s Harlow?” she asks, and Asher nods. “Oh, she’s a sweetheart. I own a luxury consignment shop in Seattle. She has been so helpful with teaching me more about photography.”

“Harlow is amazing.” Talking about her makes me realize I need to call the girls. Thankfully they’ve been just as preoccupied with life over the past few weeks as I have. I’ve tried to stay active in the group chat to keep them from worrying. I’m not lying to them, but I still feel guilty by keeping such a life-altering experience from them.

“I’ll have to stop by your shop next time I’m in Seattle.”

“You’ll love it.” She smiles. “All the designer a girl could ever want.”

Conversations continue on around the table. Jax and Genevieve get a moment of peace to chat while Avery keeps the girls enthralled by his story about a fairy house in the woods. Asher slings his arm over the back of my chair after clearing his plate.

“I thought designer was too pretentious for you?”

“No.” I finish my mimosa. “You’re too pretentious.”

He chuckles. “Says the woman who steals my clothes every chance she gets.”

“I’ll never regret it.” I shrug, taking my last bite of French toast.

A chill ripples through me as I feel his fingertips brush against my back. Looking over my shoulder at him, I see he’s staring at one of my curls as he wraps it around his finger. His eyes meet mine, and he smiles. I kept my hair in a bun over the past week and haven’t let him close enough to touch it.

“Enjoying yourself?”

He lets the curl wrapped around his finger spring back into place before plucking up another one. “Yes.”

I shake my head, laughing softly before turning my attention back to the tray of mimosas. As I reach for one, I notice Genevieve is watching Asher play with my hair. Jax gets up from the table, announcing he’s going to help Laynee wash her hands. Genevieve tears her eyes away from Asher and meets my gaze.

“What do you do for a living, Marisa?”

“I own a yoga studio and a smoothie bar.” Taking a gulp of mimosa, I don’t know why I’m suddenly nervous. Asher is still playing with my hair.

“Successful and beautiful.”

“Thank you.” I tuck my curls behind my ear, unsure of where this conversation is going.

“Do you and Asher get to spend a lot of time together?”

Jax is nearly out of the dining room when he stops and turns around. “Gen, that’s really none of our business.”

“Forgive me if I’m overstepping.” Her eyes flit back to Asher.

I look at him over my shoulder. He finally pays attention to what’s going on when he notices we’re looking at him.

“What?” He looks at me and then at Genevieve. “Sorry, I zoned out.” But he doesn’t stop playing with my hair.

“I was just asking Marisa if you two spend a lot of time together, considering you’re both so busy.”

Jax interrupts. “And I was just telling Gen, it’s none of our business.”

“Oh...” Asher shrugs. “We live together.”

The silence that follows his statement is deafening. I can’t tell whether Genevieve is upset, happy, or both. Jax doesn’t look quite as stunned as Genevieve. Gigi and Pops are smiling as they look at Asher. I don’t think he realizes he just dropped a truth bomb. Wait no, it’s Asher. He knows, but doesn’t care.

“Living together?” Genevieve echoes.

“Yeah. She needed a roommate. I needed a place closer to the office. We know each other. Why not live together and solve both our problems?”

How is he so nonchalant when Genevieve is clearly struggling to take this in?

“You two live together but aren’t together?” She points between the two of us.

“Correct,” I fill in, and Asher sits up, resting his hand on my thigh.

“Cool.” Haelyn says. “Can we visit you?”

“Sure... if your parents allow it.” I say, looking between Jax and Genevieve. She’s too focused on Asher who’s now focused on his hand as his thumb rubs small circles on my thigh.

“It’s something we’ll talk about.” Jax offers me a warm smile, but Genevieve isn’t budging.

“Did you know this?” She reluctantly tears her eyes away from Asher, turning her attention to Jax.

“I—”

“Gen,” Asher calls her attention. “I’m not a little kid anymore, remember? You honestly thought I was a virgin until recently.”

This isn’t a moment for laughter, but I can’t keep it from bubbling up in my throat. “You? A virgin?” I clap my hand over my mouth, forgetting there are kids.

“C’mon girls,” Gigi says.

“Yes,” Avery adds. “Let’s feed the horses and check on the pigs, shall we?”

“But what’s a virgin?” Ivy asks as Gigi ushers them out the door.

Jax lets out an exasperated sigh. “Asher, you’re really making parenting impossible lately.”

“Sorry.” He smiles, but it’s unapologetic. “Why is Marisa and I living together a big deal?”

“I just...” Genevieve looks down at her hands. “I want to be involved in your life. I know I’m not your mom, but – ” She rises from her seat. “Never mind. Excuse me.”

Asher’s brow furrows as he watches her walk away. Her reaction... is deeper than us living together.

“What the hell did I do?” he asks Jax, bewildered.

Jax rubs the back of his neck before rubbing his eyes. “It’s not you, Ash. She’s just on edge about the case...” He quickly glances at me before focusing on Asher.

Case? I’ve been so wrapped up in my own stuff, I didn’t consider he could be going through something of his own while trying to keep me from drowning. Now I feel awful for not asking how things are going for him. I didn’t think I was selfish, but apparently I am.

“Think you can hang tight? I’m going to talk to my aunt.”

“Yeah.” I smile. “I’ll hang out with the girls.” He kisses the top of my head before leaving me alone with Jax. I down the rest of my mimosa before grabbing my plate and heading into the kitchen to put it in the dishwasher.

“I hope he isn’t giving you too hard of a time.” Jax says from behind me in the doorway.

Shutting the dishwasher door, I turn to face him. “Ash? Never.” The corners of my mouth turn up.

He chuckles. “That bad?”

“Oh, where do I begin?” I lean against the counter. “I have a list of things he’s done to give me a hard time.” His shoulders shake with laughter. “But... the good stuff outweighs it all. He’s a good guy.”

Laynee enters the kitchen, clutching a teddy bear to her chest. “Marisa, will you please play tea party with me?”

“I’d love to.” I smile at her as she grabs my hand. “I’m being summoned by the fairy princess. I’ll talk with you later.”

Jax smiles. “Good luck.”



I now know why Jax said good luck. The girls haven’t let me have a moment of peace since I entered the backyard. I’ve had multiple tea parties with Laynee, run up and down the jungle gym playing tag with Haelyn, and jumped on the trampoline with Ivy. Am I even in shape? I’m struggling to keep up.

“Marisa.” Laynee meets me at the bottom of the slide after I avoided Haelyn tagging me. “Can you play with me again?”

“Sure.” I smile even though I really want to take a nap.

Grabbing my hand, she leads me to the table that now has a new setup of stuffed animals. At least she tries to switch things up. Sitting down, she puts a plastic crown on my head.

“You’re the Queen. I’m the princess.”

I adjust my crown, turning my nose up into the air. “As you wish.”

She giggles and pours a questionable liquid into cups. It looks like there are pieces of grass and dirt. I’m hoping she doesn’t expect me to drink this. Footsteps approach, turning Asher leans close to me.

“Want to sneak away, Queen Risa?”

I eye the teacups filled to the brim with dirt and grass water. “Yes. Please save me.”

He smiles, straightening up. “Hey Laynee, I heard Gigi has ice cream.”

She whips around so fast her sunhat almost flies off her head. “Ice cream?”

“Yep. Glittery sprinkles too.”

She drops her teacup. “I’ll be back.” Without a second glance, she runs inside.

He grabs my hand. “Run. They’re quick.”

Nearly falling on my face, I tightly hold onto Asher’s hand and lose my crown in the process. The only reason I’m keeping up with his long strides is because he’s pulling me along behind him. We run into the stables where Stardust is saddled.

“Ready to ride a horse?” He grins, placing his hands on my waist.

If I wasn't desperate to escape, I'd protest, but my need for quiet overrides my fear. "Yes."

"Put your foot in the stirrup. I'll help you up." He hoists me onto Stardust and swiftly gets on behind me. "Don't worry. I got you."

He wraps his arms around me, grabs the reins and clicks his tongue a few times, signaling Stardust to run. I let out a mix of a scream and a laugh as we take off. We don't slow down until we're well into the woods on a trail that is different from the one we took to the creek.

Smoothing my hair out of my face, I let out a sigh. "Thank you for saving me."

I feel a chuckle vibrate in his chest with my back flush against him. "Anytime."

"They're all sweet, but how in the hell do Jax and Genevieve keep up with them?"

"I don't know that they do. But you'll be all they'll talk about for a while."

"Thank you," I peer over my shoulder at him, "for introducing me to your family. It means a lot to me."

"They adore you."

"Even Gen?"

He lets out a sigh. "Yeah, that was about something unrelated to us living together. I mean she's shocked, but mind you, she thought I was a virgin too."

I lean into him as I fall into a fit of laughter. “I thought you were joking.”

“I wish I was. It’s a little insulting.”

“How did the topic of your virginity even come up?”

“Uh... she asked if we were kissing friends, and then she put it together what kind of friendship we have.”

“Excuse me?” I turn around as best I can to look at him.

“Don’t fall.” He smirks.

“Why would you – ”

“Aye, you’re the one who said you kissed me. Unlike you, I can keep my mouth shut.” Opening my mouth to respond, I close it again. “Wow... silence. Not even an argument?”

“If I wasn’t afraid of falling off the horse, I’d retaliate, but I know my limits.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t let you fall.”

“Did you smooth things over with Gen?”

His arms tense around me. “Yeah... I actually wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Okay...” My palms start to sweat. His tone went from playful to serious in a nanosecond.

“Nothing bad... well...” He hesitates. “It’s just something I’ve been wanting to tell you.”

“Ash, I’m sorry I’ve been so self-absorbed the past few weeks.”

He scoffs. “And you call me pretentious?” I laugh softly, causing some of the tension to leave my body. “If I didn’t want to be here for you, Risa Belle, I wouldn’t be.”

Asher

Earlier that day while Marisa was being initiated into the three musketeers...

“Gen...” I find her on the front porch swing, wiping tears from her face.

“Ash, I’m fine.” She turns away from me as I sit beside her, but I pull her into a hug.

“What did I do?”

“Nothing. You didn’t do anything.” She pulls away from me.

“You taught me not to lie. Why are you lying to me right now?”

She laughs, remembering the time I stole a cell phone from a kid in class and did a terrible job lying about it. “How do you remember that?”

“I had never seen you serious before, and I remember being terrified you and Jax were going to kick me out.”

Her eyes widen. “What? Ash, we would’ve never done that.”

“I know that now, but you’re formidable when you’re upset... like today. So what’s going on?”

After letting out a sigh, her gaze meets mine. “Ash, you’re like a son to me. Ivy is our first born, but you taught me how to be a mom.” She grabs my hand. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but... with the possibility of Mina,” she hesitates, “of your mom being released, I’m feeling... displaced. It’s not that I’m not happy, because it’s what’s best for you. For all of us –”

“Gen, she’d never replace you.” She looks at me with uncertainty. “I know she’s my mom, and I love her, but you and Jax, to me, are my parents.” I lean back into the swing, stretching my legs out in front of me, and try to find my words. “I can see why you’d be worried because I’m worried, too. I’m torn between wanting her around and wanting nothing to do with her at the same time.”

She’s silent for a few breaths before asking, “Does Marisa know what happened with your parents?”

Looking at my hands, I rub the pad of my thumb against my opposite palm. Everyone knows, yet no one knows. “No... what if she thinks something is wrong with me?”

“Ash...” She gently places her palm on my cheek, coaxing me to look at her. “Then she’s not the one for you. You don’t have to tell her, but with your mom potentially getting out, the media is going to talk about it.”

“I don’t want to go through this again.” The flash of cameras, the headlines, and endless string of questions replay

in my head.

“You’re not alone. You have us, and I’m pretty sure you have her too.”

I furrow my brow. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, Marisa will be there for you too. If you let her be.”



As we come over a hill, I hear Marisa audibly gasp at the sight before us. It’s a small meadow with irises and other various wildflowers. The blanket of vibrant colors seems endless.

“This is remarkable,” Marisa says as we come to a stop.

I climb off the horse and then hold out my hand to help her. She’s looking around in total awe. “Your hand, Risa.”

She looks at me then at my hand. “Sorry!” I chuckle as she grabs it. “I’m just—this is stunning.” She says distractedly. “How do you not spend every waking moment here?” I help her keep her balance as she clumsily slides off Stardust. “It’s a real life dream.”

“I’m glad you love it here.” I hold her hand as we walk into the meadow.

“Love is an understatement.”

When I told Marisa to pack a bag, I had done it with the intention of taking her to Seattle to visit Harlow. I thought maybe she would know how to pull Marisa back in from the

deep end. When we got in the car, I had a strong feeling to bring her here. The look on her face is confirmation as to why. She needs this, and so do I. Focusing on her has kept me from hyper-fixating on the situation with my mom. I'm doing exactly what I encourage her not to do. Keeping it all inside. I'll try and take my advice for once.

“Do you mind if we sit?”

“I'd sleep here if you asked me.” She stops walking and lays down in the grass, splaying her arms and legs out. Her curls tangle with the wildflowers, making her to look ethereal. I stand watching her, trying to commit this image to memory in case she wants nothing to do with me after.

She opens her eyes. “Are you going to lay with me?”

I smile, joining her. The day is perfect with clear skies, ample sun, and a light breeze. Closing my eyes, I focus on breathing. The only person I've talked about my parents with is my therapist. Ace and Grey know what happened because we met while I was fighting some kids at school about it. When they jumped in to help me without question, that's when we became inseparable. They knew what was in the media but didn't ask, and I never talked about it. Ace and Grey were the first people to accept me, aside from my aunt and uncle, without question. Choosing to tell Marisa is a big step for me, but one I'm ready to take.

I turn my head to look at her, surprised to see that her hazel eyes are already on me. She smiles, grabbing my hand and

turns her face toward the sky. My heart rate quickens as the words are about to spill from my mouth.

“Remember how I told you my parents are a complicated topic?”

“Yeah.” She looks at me. “I figured you’d tell me if and when you wanted to.”

“I’m ready to talk about them... I think. I want to.”

“Okay. I’ll listen.”

“Where do I start?”

“The beginning.” She smiles.

“Smartass.” She laughs and so do I before taking a deep breath. “Before I lived with Jax and Gen, I lived with my parents, and there was a time that we were happy. At least I was happy. I’m not sure if my parents ever were or just tried to make things work for my sake. I wish the good memories were what stuck with me, but the bad is what haunts me.”

She squeezes my hand, giving me courage to continue. “Slowly the animosity between my parents became palatable. I think they thought they did a good job of hiding it because they weren’t fighting in front of me. That didn’t matter, I could still hear it. Their fights went from raised voices, to screaming matches, to physical altercations. I’d eventually fall asleep and wake the next morning to the house completely torn apart and my mom trying to cover bruises. My dad would have them too, but nowhere near the severity my mom did. She was no

match for him. He was my height, but not as lean. For context, imagine me fighting Gigi.”

Marisa’s eyes widen. “She’s tiny.”

“My mom isn’t much bigger than her. Not that it matters. Things shouldn’t have reached the point they did in the first place. To be honest, I could never quite tell what they were fighting about. I was seven when things took a turn between them. By the time I was ten, the physical fights were happening every night. There were times my mom had to miss work because there was nothing she could do to cover the bruises. Eventually she had to resign.”

Marisa’s brows are drawn together, but her gaze never wavers from mine. “I tried to tell my teacher what was going on at home, but she didn’t believe me because my dad was a police officer. She asked if he was harming me, and I answered truthfully that he wasn’t. But I wanted her to help my mom and she told me that was ‘adult business’ that I didn’t need to worry myself with.”

“What? As long as it wasn’t you getting hurt, it was okay?”

I shrug, remembering the anger I felt. “Yeah. At least that’s how I took it.”

“That’s bullshit.” Marisa shakes her head. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt. I’m listening.”

“I know you are.” I smile at her, but it quickly fades.

“My grandparents and I have always been close, but at the time, Pops was a police officer too. I didn’t tell them

because... what if they didn't believe me or do anything about it either?"

"You couldn't have known, Ash. And honestly, you were ten... it shouldn't have been your responsibility to begin with."

"Yeah, but I always wonder now if I would've said something then if things would be different." A lump forms in my throat as memories vividly replay in my head, transporting me back to the night that changed everything. "After attempting to tell my teacher, things continued to escalate at home. Until one night... everything changed for all of us." I immerse myself in the memory, letting it replay in my head like a horror film.

I didn't think things could get any worse, but they did. Dad arrived home from work that evening in a mood. Mom always tried to act like everything was normal even when things were falling apart. Regardless of what was going on, we had dinner as a family. It was an expectation my father held for reasons only he would understand. Maybe it was his way of acting like we were a normal, happy family.

Mom was usually quiet and meek when he was home, but her look and posture was one of defiance that night. The hatred she had for Dad was radiating from her. I knew in the pit of my stomach something bad was about to happen. But I didn't think it would end the way it did.

After dinner, I watched a little TV with Dad, took a shower, and went to bed. Mom came in my room as I was drifting off to

sleep.

“Ash, baby, are you awake?” She runs her fingers through my curls.

“Yeah.” I answer groggily. “Are you okay?”

“Of course I’m okay.” She could be bruised and bloodied and that would still be her response. “I just wanted you to know that I love you.” I feel the weight of her on me as she gives me a hug. I wrap my arms around her neck, hugging her back. She holds me for a long while. The scent of her perfume wrapping around me. “I love you so much, Ash. I’m sorry things have been terrible.”

“It isn’t your fault, Mom.” I assure her, even though I don’t know if it’s either of their faults.

“No, but I can make it right.”

“I knew something was wrong, but nothing ever felt right in our house. Even though my dad didn’t harm me, I was still afraid of him.” Marisa holds my hand tighter.

I fell asleep that night with her holding me, but I woke to screaming and loud bangs. Tearing out of my bed, I ran downstairs. It took my brain a moment to comprehend what my eyes were seeing when I entered the living room. Mom stands with her back against the wall holding a gun out in front of her.

“I had to make it right, Ash. I had to make it right. It’s the only way.” She repeats, violently shaking with tears streaming down her face.

“What? Had to make–”

I feel something wet beneath my feet. Looking down, expecting to see water, but it’s too dark to be water. My heart races and mom’s voice becomes muffled as she repeats herself. Turning slowly, I see streaks of blood trailing down the wall.

Dad is a heap on the floor, struggling to breathe.

He’s holding his neck as blood seeps through his fingers and is clutching his chest with his other hand. His eyes meet mine. I try to take a step toward him, but slip in the puddle of blood. Landing at his feet, I scramble to my knees, crawling toward him, and press my hands to his neck.

“D-Dad?” He places the hand that’s clutching his chest over mine. I try to move my hand to stop the blood that’s flowing from the hole in his chest. But he catches it, holding it tightly. I look at him, confused and he barely moves his head telling me no. “I-I can help you.”

“Ash...” He gargles my name, and blood trickles down his chin. “I’m... sorry.” His eyes slowly close before struggling to focus on me as he tries to breathe.

“No. It’s okay. You’ll be okay. It was an a-accident. Right, mom?” I turn to look at her but she’s still hysterical.

My dad places his hand on my cheek, pulling my eyes to his. “I... love –” he coughs up blood “– you.”

“I – I love you too. But we can – ”

His eyes become vacant as his fingertips slowly slide down my face, and his hand falls into my lap. I stare in disbelief with

my hands still pressed against his neck. I wait for a sign that he's still with me.

"Dad! Dad!" Looking back at mom, I scream, "Do something! Call 911! He's dying!"

She sobs, collapsing to the floor, and puts her hands over her ears. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I had to make it right."

I look back at dad, knowing he's dead... knowing I'm all alone.

"I don't know how long I sat there with him soaked in blood." Marisa gently wipes the tears from my face. "I don't remember calling 911 or them taking my mom away. My first memory I can recall after that night is of me at my dad's funeral. I didn't talk to anyone for weeks until they let me see my mom again. I was angry, and still am, because I didn't think it would come to that. I felt guilty for wanting things to go back to how they were. Yeah... our family was shit, but it was better than my dad being dead and my mom in prison."

I'm not vulnerable with people out of fear of their response, but Marisa pulls me into a hug, wrapping her arms tightly around me.

She feels like my homecoming.

I haven't felt settled in a long time. After moving out of Jax and Gen's place, nothing ever felt like home. With her arms wrapped around me, I realize homes aren't places— they're people.

"Marisa..." I mutter into her hair.

She hugs me tighter, restricting my air flow. I had no idea she was this fucking strong. “It’s okay, Ash. I got you.”

“Risa... you’re choking me.”

“Shit!” She let’s go of me. “I’m sorry. I just—”

I raise a brow, pulling her back into me. “I didn’t say let go.”

She laughs, burying her face in my neck. “Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah.”

“Did your mom get a trial?”

I let out a sigh, trailing my fingertips up and down her arm. “The trial was more of a media frenzy than a search for justice. My dad was a police officer and my mom killed him. That’s all people cared to see, never mind evidence or testimonies. Even with the evidence proving my dad did abuse my mom, they chose to ignore it and convict her. I don’t think they wanted to face that a police officer was capable of doing what he did to her. They chose to bury her and the truth to save face.

“Once she was convicted, we had to wait for her sentencing. While we waited, it was decided that it would be best for me to live with Jax and Gen. They were newlyweds when this happened, but they insisted on taking me in. My dad’s death, the trial, and the media coverage were a lot for my grandparents. Gigi wasn’t doing well, and Pops was trying his best to hold it together for them both. They lost their son in

two ways. His physical death and the son they thought they knew.

“Jax struggled too. Initially, he didn’t want to believe his brother was everything my mom said. But after listening to me and my mom, it was hard to deny the reality of who my dad was. I wasn’t going to trick myself into hoping she got off. I knew she would do time. Shortly after her conviction, she was sentenced to life in prison. Washington State doesn’t have parole, and conditional release is rare. I had held out hope that somehow she wouldn’t get life. My dad did all the things she said he did. But... when the judge said life... the little bit of fight my mom did have left was snuffed out.”

A silence falls between us as I remember the moment I realized I’d never see my mom again.

“Have you maintained a...” I can tell she’s trying to find the right word. “Relationship somehow?”

“I saw her maybe two times in prison, and talked to her a handful of times on the phone, before she stopped contacting me.”

“Stopped contacting you?” Her brows knit together.

“Yeah, she stopped calling and refused visits. I guess she thought she was doing what was best for me. Either way I was fucked. Everyone heard the story and had their theories whether she was in my life or not. It didn’t make it better for me, things actually got a little harder. I was angry for years... still am. Above all, I was hurt because... she took my dad and

then she took herself away from me too. Sixteen years later and those feelings have only intensified.”

“All these years, and she hasn’t spoken a word to you?”

“No... well, not until recently.”

Marisa bolts upright. “You’ve talked to her?”

“Yeah. She reached out to me.”

“When?”

“She got in touch with me for the first time shortly after I moved here.”

“Fuck. You’ve been carrying all of this *and* me around?” She shakes her head. “What the fuck, Ash?”

“What? I didn’t want to talk about it.”

Crossing her arms, she narrows her eyes. “Yet here you are telling me to spill my fucking guts? Take your own goddamn advice you idiot.”

I let out a belt of laughter. “The fuck do you think I’m doing right now?”

“Yeah, that’s like you casually sitting in a room that’s on fire saying you’re fine.”

“I’m fine.”

She scoffs. “Biggest lie I’ve ever fucking heard. Are you really fine?”

Her eyes search mine, and I have to ask myself if I am okay. “Yes... and no. Before I moved here Jax told me she could

possibly be granted clemency. If she is, that means she would be released. At that time, it was just an idea... but she got a hearing date. The detective and lawyer working on her case seem confident. She may have a good chance of getting out.”

“That’s good... right? Her possibly getting out? How do you feel about it? I have so many questions, sorry.”

“You’re good.” I chuckle. “I should probably feel something, right? Sixteen years and my mom is possibly getting out in a state that has no parole. But I don’t know what to feel because nothing has happened nor is it guaranteed.”

She’s silent for a few breaths as she looks around at the flowers, swaying gently in the breeze. “I wouldn’t know what to feel either. That’s a lot to process.” She looks at me. “What I do know is you’re not alone.”

Her words sooth my apprehension. Looking in her eyes, I momentarily get lost in the swirls of jade and umber shining bright in the sun’s rays. I’ve missed seeing the light in them. She blinks, breaking the trance they have me in and lies in the grass again.

I lie next to her, and she interlaces her fingers with mine. “We’ll be alright... right?”

“Is there another option?”

“No... I’m barely crawling out of the other option. Is Gen mad we live together?” She looks at me with concern in her eyes.

I shake my head. “She’s struggling with the possibility of my mom getting out. We all are.”

“How is your mom’s family taking this?”

“They disowned us. It wasn’t really a loss because we weren’t that close anyway. Jax still struggles with how to feel towards my mom. And... I get it. She took his big brother away. It seems either people stood with her or hated her. But here I am stuck in this grey area between hate and love. It makes me...” My voice trails off. We’re going deep and I’m not sure I want to take it there right now.

“Makes you... what?”

I close my eyes and admit my fears. “It makes me wonder if I’m like them. If I were to ever be in a relationship if it would be tumultuous. It makes me afraid to...”

“Love.” She finishes my sentence.

Opening my eyes, I look at her. “Yeah.”

“I can tell you right now, you’re nothing like them. At all. You may be their son, but you’re your own man who has a big ego—” I laugh “—but you... you’re kindhearted and compassionate. Whenever you do fall in love, you’ll fall hard, but she’ll be worth falling for.”

She holds my gaze before laying her head on my chest. I know she can hear my erratic heartbeat.

She doesn’t realize that *she’s* the one worth falling for. The one I’ve already fallen for. Or maybe she does... and wants nothing to do with me now.

“You don’t see me... differently?”

“No.” She slings her leg over mine and wraps her arm around my middle. “Ash... I hope you know you did everything you could. They’re your parents, but what they did as individuals isn’t your burden to bear.”

I inhale deeply, feeling the lump in my throat, not realizing how badly I needed to hear that. “Thank you.” I press a kiss to the top of her head.

“Always.” She scooches closer to me.

I sink my fingers into her curls, massaging her scalp. Her words are the key to the shackles I put myself in all those years ago. Healing is an interesting thing. Sometimes, it feels I’ve made no progress. Other times, I realize I’ve climbed treacherous mountains to be standing here today. The pain doesn’t go away, but the bite of it doesn’t grip me as hard as it used to. Sharing the darkest piece of myself with Marisa didn’t magically heal me. But she did silence the fear that was keeping me from truly living by accepting me as I am.

Without the love and support of my family and friends. I wouldn’t be here.

“Risa, are you ready to go?”

The sun is setting, and it will take us about a half an hour to get back. She doesn’t respond. I brush her curls out of her face to see she’s asleep. Smiling, I rest my head against the grass again.

Instead of waking her, I close my eyes and savor this moment.

Asher

Opening my eyes, I'm slightly disoriented until I feel Marisa lying on top of me and Stardust nudging my foot. It's dark outside, and I hear thunder rumbling in the distance.

"Fuck... I fell asleep," I mutter as a good sized rain drops falls on my forehead. "Risa, get up. It's getting ready to rain."

I only meant to close my eyes for a minute. Pulling my phone out of my back pocket, I see it's just after 9 and there are a few texts from Gigi.

Gigi: Let me know you two are safe. I think a storms coming.

Marisa is still knocked out. The woman could sleep through a fucking tornado. I try to wake her gently, but resort to shoving her off me.

"What the fuck – wait, where are we?" She grabs her forehead, squeezing her eyes shut. There are wildflowers stuck

in her curls. “Oh, the meadow. What time is it?” Scrunching up her face, she looks at the sky. “Is it raining?”

“You’re cute when you’re confused.” I chuckle, calling Gigi as Marisa flicks me off before stretching and rising to her feet.

“Hey Gigi.” She answers after a few rings. “We fell asleep and – ”

“Fell asleep? What were you two doing?”

“Sleeping...”

“She’s a gorgeous woman. I– ”

“We were just sleeping, Gigi.” I run my hand down my face and Marisa laughs.

“If you say so.” I hear the smile in her voice. “Are you two on your way back? Or will you be keeping each other warm?”

“I should’ve texted you.”

She chuckles. “Let me have my fun. First time you’ve ever brought a woman around us.”

“And will be the last.”

“That feels like a promise, Ash. Do you want me to wait up?”

“You don’t have to. We’re leaving now.” I wedge my phone between my shoulder and ear, helping Marisa onto Stardust.

“Alright. Turn the stable light off so I know you’re home. I’ll see you two in the morning.”

“I will.” I climb on behind Marisa. “Night, Gigi. Love you.” Hanging up my phone, I slide it into my back pocket and grab the reins. “Ready?”

“Yeah.” She leans against my chest as if she belongs to me.

I try to ignore the electric feeling and signal Stardust to take us home. Halfway back, the skies open up and rain pours down on us. Within seconds we’re soaked. Marisa laughs, leaning her head back against my chest and holding her arms out to the side. Her soaked curls still have remnants of wildflowers tangled in them and raindrops cling to her lashes.

From the moment I met her, my soul knew something was different. It intrigued and terrified me. I tried my best to ignore I felt anything at all even if it was only an inkling. Ignoring was easy because we argued more than anything.

I wonder if we fought so much because we both knew if we let our guards down there would be more. The outcome of us is inevitable.

The lights from the house grow brighter as we draw closer. I guide Stardust into the stables. Getting off, I help Marisa down before removing the saddle and making sure the gate is closed.

“Let’s go.” I grab her hand, turning off the light to let Gigi know we’re back, and then we dash for the house.

We’re almost to the fence when Marisa slips in a puddle of mud. She grabs my arm, letting out a yelp as she falls. I try to stop her, but I slip and go down too. The look of shock on her face is priceless.

“Why are you looking at me like I’m the one who slipped first?”

Laughter tumbles from her lips as she looks down at her mud covered jeans. “You couldn’t catch me?”

“Nah, love. We’re both going down.” I say, standing and helping her to her feet. “I love how you’re ignoring the fact you took us both out.”

She smiles, grabbing my hand as we run to the side door that leads to the laundry room. We remove our shoes before stepping inside. Grabbing two towels from above the dryer, I hand one to her. We dry off the best we can before heading upstairs. The house is quiet, I’m surprised everyone is asleep already.

Gigi setup an extra room for us both, but Marisa ended up sleeping in mine last night. When we get to the top of the stairs, she heads into my room again. I’m not going to complain. A lamp is on, casting a soft glow. Everything is put back in order after our pillow fight this morning. I constantly tell Gigi she doesn’t have to clean up after me. She does it anyway.

Marisa looks in the mirror, wiping her face with a towel. “That rain was fucking freezing. The mud was no help either.” She turns to look at me, tossing the towel aside.

Her shirt clings to her breast, drawing my attention to her hardened nipples. I try to dismiss the thought of being insider her, but she pulls off her jeans, giving me a perfect view of her

ass. She's wearing a thong that I'm imagining pulling to the side when her eyes catch mine.

Smiling, I grab the hem of my shirt and peel it off. When my eyes land on Marisa again, she's in front of me. I pause with my shirt halfway off.

“Are you—”

She crashes into me. Her lips meet mine, and I can't help the groan her touch elicits. Pulling my shirt off the rest of the way, she tosses it aside. I hesitate only a moment before my hands greedily roam over her body. She wraps her arms around my neck and, gripping her thighs, I wrap her legs around my waist. Sitting on the bed, she straddles my lap and threads her fingers through my hair, bringing her lips to mine again.

My hands become reacquainted with the body I can't get out of my head. Kissing her neck, I graze my teeth just below her earlobe, causing her to moan. I pull at the hem of her shirt, taking it off her. Bras and panties are optional for her, which is always a pleasure for me. I cup her breast in my hand. Fuck, she's perfect. I want everything she has to give me, and I want to give her everything I am.

“Risa...”

“Hm?” She hums, pressing kisses to my neck as her hips wind.

“I—are you sure about this?” My dick painfully presses against my jeans, wondering why the fuck I'm questioning *this*

moment.

“Fuck the bet, Ash.”

“The—” She kisses me. I grip her hair, holding her in place as I pull back to look at her. “Bet? You think this is about the bet?” I release my hold on her curls. “This isn’t about a fucking bet, Risa. We’re past that now.”

Her eyes search mine. “What are you saying?”

“You know exactly what I’m saying.” I hold her gaze. “I want you. Not just your body. All of you. I want every single fucking piece.”

She looks away as her brows knit together. “I’m a fucking mess, Ash. What’s that you said? Pretty packaging. Fucked up contents.”

I hold her chin, making her look at me. “Then I’ll pick up each piece and carefully put them where they belong until you’re whole again.”

She stares at me as if she’s trying to find doubt in my words. “What if—What if we don’t work out? What if I’m fine now, but not tomorrow? What if—”

“Give me your fucking worst, and I’ll give you my best.” Her lips part, taking a sharp inhale of breath as she holds my gaze. “Risa Belle, all I know is you’re worth falling for... I love you.” I surprise myself as the last part spills from my lips, but it needed to be said. My heart races. Her grip on my shoulders tightens.

I mean every word. It's me and her, or I don't fucking want it. I watch her last piece of apprehension fall away.

Placing her hands on either side of my face, she kisses me before saying, "I love you, too."

Grabbing her by the back of the neck, I bring her lips to mine. I don't know where this is going, but I know I want it all with her. The good and the bad. Whatever she has. I want it. I've wanted nothing or anyone as badly as I do her.

For so long I thought something was wrong with me, but all that time, I've simply been waiting for her. We fit together like two puzzle pieces. Connecting and realizing we're home.

I flip us over before kneeling at the end of the bed, pulling her to the edge as my mouth hovers over her.

"Can you keep quiet?" I slide her panties off her.

She looks at me between her thighs, biting her lip and shakes her head yes. I dive in, devouring her center. She grips my hair, holding me in place. I've missed the taste of her on the tip of my tongue.

"Ash..." she moans. I can tell from the cadence of my name as it spills from her lips that she's close to the edge.

I slow the swirls my tongue makes around her sensitive bud, bringing her back from falling into the ecstasy she craves.

"You asked me to keep quiet and now you're doing this?" She grips the sheets with frustration and pleasure.

A low chuckle vibrates in my chest as my tongue teases her center. I don't want her to just come for me. I want her to unravel and come completely undone for me. She reaches the cusp of her orgasm quicker each time before I slow and bring her back from the edge.

“Again...” she breathes out.

My mouth stays on her clit as I dip my fingers into her wetness. She inhales sharply. This time I want her to come. It doesn't take much before she pulls my hair so tight that I have to loosen her grip. An impassioned moan spills from her lips, filling the room. It's loud enough I know I'm not the only one who heard it. Grabbing a pillow, she covers her head, trying to stifle her unrestrained cries of pleasure.

Her back arches and her body shakes. I grip her hips, keeping her in place until I'm done.

Marisa

It's impossible to keep quiet as my release ripples through me like shockwaves. I unravel and melt into the mattress. I fucking missed him. The lack of physical contact caused us to connect on an emotional level that neither of us expected.

We fell in love.

That was never a part of the plan. Yet here I am, knowing this man could ask me for the air in my lungs and I'd give it to

him. I've known since before we happened in Vegas that I'd seal my fate once I let him touch me. But I did it anyway.

It was naïve of me to think I'd ever been in love before him. That wasn't love. No, love is a bond found in friendship, trust, and vulnerability.

He is love. *This* is love. I can feel it in every touch, look, and word. It radiates off him.

The intensity of the orgasm makes me gasp for breath as I see a burst of stars. I know it's been awhile, but this is how my body responds to Asher. He's the captain as he guides me into ecstasy. One orgasm isn't enough for him. No, he knows I'll always have more to give him. As I come down from my first one, he keeps his mouth on me until I shatter for him again. He doesn't stop until I pull away, gasping for air.

"I need to fucking breathe, Ash." My voice is hoarse from screaming into the pillow.

He climbs up my body. I bring his lips to mine, wanting to taste myself on him. "Tapping out?" He smiles against my lips.

"Please, this is a warmup." I rub my hand over his erection before unfastening his pants. Him being hard for me makes the pulse between my legs throb. "I want you inside me."

He pulls away to remove his pants, letting his dick hang heavy. My pussy screams for him to be inside me, but my mouth waters to taste him. I can have both.

Grabbing his length, I pump my hand along it. He groans letting his head fall back. I slide off the edge of the bed, getting on my knees for him. He grabs a fistful of my hair, making me look up at him as his other hand cups my chin. His eyes are full of raw desire and pure fucking love.

He runs his thumb over my bottom lip. “I’m warning you now, if you wrap those pretty lips around my dick I’m fucking your mouth until I cum. And then I’m going to bury myself inside you... all night.”

His warning is a welcome invitation. He inhales sharply as I press kisses along the V at the bottom of his abs. This man is devastatingly handsome and knows it. But now he’s mine and I’m going to savor him. Holding his gaze, I keep a firm grip on his shaft as I press kisses around it. His lips are slightly parted as he looks down at me. I run my tongue along the tip, lapping up his essence. He lets out a moan that vibrates in my pussy. I flick at the tip again as I watch his chest heave, anticipating the moment I wrap my lips around him. Teasing him a little longer with flicks of my tongue and soft kisses, I slowly take him in mouth.

“Good fucking girl...” he breathes out.

I’m intoxicated by the scent of rainfall and freshly laundered clothes as I swirl my tongue over the velutinous ridges of him. I work his length with my mouth and hand while the other massages his balls. He drops his head back as he thrusts his hips to match my sucks, teasing the back of my throat.

“Risa...” he moans my name, looking down at me.

I respond by sucking him harder. He pulls my hair tighter, teetering on the edge of pleasure and ecstasy. I rest my hands on my thighs, letting my mouth do the work. He growls through gritted teeth. Hollowing my cheeks, I suck his soul out of him. His knees buckle as his body momentarily tenses and then relaxes. My mouth is filled with his warm, slightly sweet release.

His eyes are trained on me as I swallow it and continue sucking until he releases my hair. I slowly drag my lips off his length, coming off with a pop. Before I can wipe my mouth, he catches my wrist, pulling me to my feet. His lips crash into mine as he grips my thighs, picking me up, and I wrap my legs around his waist. He sucks on my lip, tasting himself on me. My skin prickles with heat and desire. I’ve never had a guy suck their own release off my lips. But Asher is incomparable. I tried to forget the way I felt when he touched me. But now I couldn’t imagine not being wrapped up in him.

He gently lowers me to the bed, his lips only leave mine to say, “You’re fucking gorgeous, Risa.” His hands tenderly caress my curves. “I love every single piece of you.”

His mouth covers mine again, leaving me breathless. Not just from the kiss, but his words too. He’s been teaching me what love is since he stubbornly invaded my life. Our tongues dance as his fingertips massage my clit, making me to hum with pleasure. Propping himself up on his elbow, he glides the tip of his dick along my wetness.

“Always ready for me...” He presses a kiss to my lips.

I spread my legs further apart. “You’re teasing me now. I want –”

He plunges into me, causing my breath to hitch. I drag my nails along his back as my pussy tightens around him.

“Tell me what you want, Risa Belle...” He mutters against my neck.

“This...” I breathe out. “You...” His eyes meet mine. “Us...”

He holds my gaze as he slowly moves his hips. “Us.” He interlaces his fingers with mine, bringing our hands above my head. “You and me, Marisa.”

I get lost in his eyes and the sensations taking over my body. I’m not perfect, and neither is he, but this moment with our bodies intertwined is as close to perfection as I’ll ever be. He grabs my thigh, slinging my leg over his shoulder. The spot he hits with the next stroke makes me fist the sheets in my hand and bite down on my lip as my eyes shut. When I focus on him again, he has a hint of a smile on his lips. He revels in giving me pleasure as each stroke teases the knot building in my core to come undone.

I turn my head to the side, closing my eyes. Asher massages my breast before sliding his hand up my throat, and his fingers cup my face as he turns my head to look at him.

“I want to watch you come undone for me, baby. Focus on me.”

My breathing becomes ragged as I near the edge of my climax. He's about to catapult me into oblivion, and I welcome it. I drink in the sight of him above me. His curls cling to his forehead, eyes on me, as sweat coats his skin. I run my fingertips over his chest, down his abs, and dig my nails into his back as I do exactly what he wants, toppling over the edge.

“Good girl.” He says, putting my other leg over his shoulder and wrapping his hand around my throat. “Come for me.”

His fingers dig into my skin as he grips my hips and slams into me. Each stroke more euphoric than the last. My body is buzzing with pleasure. The sex is different when you're connected to the body pressed against yours. We're not just fucking for release.

We're making love as our souls intertwine.

It doesn't take him long before he's falling into oblivion with me. His thrusts slow as he wraps his hand around my ankle and kisses my calf as his eyes meet mine. I give him a lazy smile as he trails kisses up my leg, over my stomach, breasts, and neck until he finally kisses my lips. He rolls over, pulling me on top of him.

I lay my head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat return to normal. Once I catch my breath, I put my hand on his chest and rest my chin on it. I swipe the matted curls from his forehead and massage his scalp, wondering if this is a dream.

Me and him. *Finally.*

“I love you, Ash... thank you for seeing me when I couldn't even see myself.”

He opens his eyes, planting a kiss on my forehead. “I love you too, Risa Belle. I'll always see you through whatever storm comes our way. Even if we slip and fall in the fucking mud together.”

I laugh and a low chuckle vibrates in his chest as I snuggle up to him, knowing I'm home.

Marisa

I don't remember falling asleep, but my body still tingles from Asher's touch. We definitely made up for lost time. We talked and cuddled in between the love making. A part of me worried if I fell asleep that I'd wake up to it being a dream.

Instead, I wake lying on his chest with his arm wrapped tightly around me. He's already up, scrolling through his phone. I don't move, wanting to enjoy this moment. Looking at his screen, I see he's flipping through pictures of our faux wedding. I left my phone in the hotel room that night, but still wanted memories so he used his phone. He never sent me the pictures though.

"How long were you going to hide these from me?" I ask, sitting up enough to look at him.

The corner of his mouth tips up. "You never asked. Didn't think you'd want the memories."

I grab his phone, looking through the pictures. "For being as trashed as I was, I look alright."

He bought me a wedding dress. It's a vibrant white with a sheer bodice, sleeveless, and it barely covered my ass. The bottom has feathered fringe that adds a touch of elegance. It's beautiful with the way it catches the light in the photo.

"Gorgeous, you mean?" He pulls me into him, giving me a kiss. "Well... after you brushed your teeth and didn't reek of alcohol."

I toss my head back with laughter. "You said yes to my wild idea!"

"And I'd do it again. Alcohol breath and all."

"Aye, I brushed my teeth for you!" I lie on his chest, scrolling through pictures. "Who would've thought we'd be in this moment right here?"

He rubs his hand up and down my arm. "Honestly, I knew there was something different about you when we met. It was a different form of knowing."

I grab his hand, interlacing our fingers. "I get it. It's beyond attraction."

"Yes."

"It's not love at first sight. It's knowing that you're in the presence of someone who truly sees you."

"Exactly. I thought I was fucking crazy." He chuckles. "I didn't know what to do with you. So I..." He shrugs his shoulders. "Decided to be an asshole."

I suck my teeth. "Nice defense mechanism, Ash."

“It’s not like you were a fucking walk in the park, Risa.”

I wasn’t an outright bitch to him, but he knew how to work a fucking nerve. “I was nice to you... initially.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. I enjoyed it. I’m probably fucked up, but I saw it as foreplay.”

I erupt with laughter. “I’m just as fucked up as you then. All that energy had to go somewhere.”

He wraps both his arms around me. “Yeah. We were inevitable.”

I know that happiness comes from within, but he makes me unbelievably happy. The past few weeks have been rough. If he wasn’t here with me, I’m not sure when I would’ve come up for air. I know I’m capable of surviving on my own, but that doesn’t mean that I want to. As much as I tried to tell myself I’m fine by myself, I knew I wasn’t. It’s easier to pretend you want to be alone then to accept the fact you are.

When Asher moved in, a part of me was relieved I didn’t have to be alone anymore. I got significantly more than just a roommate. He cares for me without expecting anything in return. The gestures are subtle. Spending time with me when he could be anywhere else, entertaining my ideas, supporting my dreams, and above all helping me realize I’m worthy of so much more than I thought I was. Nothing compares to having someone care for you simply because they *want* to. My nose stings as tears pool in my eyes. An overwhelming sense of love and contentedness wash over me. I’ve cried for a million reasons. Sheer happiness isn’t one of them.

I try to stop myself, but I'm hopelessly in love with him. Sniffing, I wipe my nose. My body stills. I don't want him to know I'm crying like a smitten idiot... even if I am a smitten idiot.

He stops scrolling through his phone, setting it aside. "Are you... crying?"

I've cried enough lately. He knows good and damn well when I'm crying. "No," I lie.

He pulls away from me, but I keep my arms wrapped tightly around him so he can't look at me. "You're being fucking ridiculous, Risa. Let me see your face."

"I'm fine. I'm not crying. Just go back to looking at your phone."

"So fucking stubborn." He pries my arms from around him, pushing me back. I drop my head, causing my curls to cover my face. "You are so goddamn difficult. Look at me." He grabs my chin, sweeping the curls out of his face, and wipes the tears from my cheeks. "Let's try this again, why are you crying?"

"I'm—"

"Clearly crying." I finally look at him, and he has a hint of a smile on his lips.

"I'm just... I'm crying because of you."

"Uh... okay." He rubs his forehead. "Did I do something or...?"

“No. I’m crying like an idiot because you make me so happy.” His face softens. “I’m overwhelmed by how much I love you. These are happy tears.” I take a deep breath, hoping I can stop crying.

Leaning forward, he presses a kiss to my lips. “I love you, too.” He pulls me on top of him, causing me to straddle his lap. “I’ll always want to know all your thoughts and feelings.” I shriek with laughter as he flips me on my back. “No matter how ridiculous you think they are.” He trails kisses down my body until he reaches my center. “As much as I’d love to stay in bed with you all day, we have to eventually show our faces. But first...” Gripping my hips, he pulls me closer to him and settles between my thighs. “I want a taste of my girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend? You didn’t even ask me properly.”

He gives me a devilish grin. “You’ve always been mine, Risa Belle. And will forever belong to me and I to you.”

Asher can have me anyway he wants me, and he does as I let out a moan, threading my fingers through his curls.



Sitting poolside after taking a dip, I watch Asher run around with the girls. They adore him. The relationship he has with his family is beautiful. I’ve only had two days of what he’s had his whole life. But it came at a price for him. When he told me about his parents, my heart ached. I could feel the pain in his

words and see it etched on his face. My dad and I are estranged, but I couldn't imagine watching him die.

When he told me things were complicated with his parents I thought they weren't on speaking terms. Not that neither of them weren't around at all. That's the interesting thing about trauma, often times there are no physical scars or wounds to indicate you've been to hell and back. Yet, you're carrying the crushing weight of the trauma around every day. He's been carrying around a burden all these years that was never his to begin with. I know I can't take the pain away, but I know he doesn't have to carry it alone.

My phone rings, and a photo of me and the girls lights up my screen. I smile, excited to talk to them.

"Hello." I pull off my shades.

"Are you on trip?" Quinn asks.

"I'm making a mental note to steal that bathing suit when I'm at your house next," Sevyn says.

"Ah, finally all of us on one call at last." Harlow smiles. "Where are you though?"

"If y'all would let me talk I'd tell you." They give me annoyed looks, letting out sighs and rolling their eyes. "I am... at my boyfriend's grandparents' house."

Their jaws drop. "Wait... what?" Harlow squints at me. "You have a boyfriend and you're at his grandparents' house?"

"Marisa would be the one to get a whole new life in a matter of weeks." Quinn smiles.

“Are you going to tell us or...” Sevyn sets aside a dress she was working on.

I flip the camera around, zooming in on Asher running around with the girls. All of them freak out.

“All that shit talk for what?” Harlow cackles. “I’m so fucking happy for you!”

“Finally!” Quinn squeals.

I turn the camera back on myself and am beaming.

“Look at that smile!” Sevyn exclaims. “And you’re hanging out with his family?”

“Give us every single detail,” Harlow says.

I don’t let my smile slip, even though I know I’m holding out on them. They think I’ve been busy traveling and working, not going through it. If it were anything else, I’d tell them everything, but I’m not ready. “Since he moved in, we’ve gotten closer... and now here we are. I’m really fucking happy.”

“You’re glowing. You don’t even need to tell us you are.” Quinn smiles.

“His grandparents’ house looks like a luxury AirBnB.” Sevyn adds.

“Damn near.” I laugh, telling them all about Gigi and Pops. It feels so good to talk to them. “Enough about me, what have you guys been up to?”

“Me and Ky are planning a babymoon.” Quinn smiles. “I want to do something just us before the baby gets here.”

“Where to?” I ask.

“That’s the problem. I can’t decide. I’ll probably have Ky pick and surprise me.”

“That’ll be fun. Ky is good at planning stuff,” I say.

“Zane and I are jetting off to Italy in a few weeks.” Sevyn gives us a smug smile.

“I’ll be awaiting your pregnancy announcement. Bring me back something pretty.” I smile.

Harlow snorts with laughter. “We’re good. I have a small—” she angles the camera to show her body “—bump.”

I can’t help the squeal that escapes me. “Harls! You look so fucking cute!”

I wasn’t sure how I’d do with them talking about their babies, but I feel nothing but love and happiness for them. We catch up for a little while longer before Sevyn has to go because the twins won’t let her talk any longer.

“Love you guys!” I wave as I hang up the phone.

Setting it aside, I sit in the sun. It was refreshing to talk to them and feel somewhat normal. When I’m ready, I’ll tell them every detail, but right now I’m still processing.

Getting up a little while later, I throw my towel over my shoulder and head inside to clean up before dinner. I feel

Asher's eyes on me as I walk to the door. Peeking over my shoulder, sure enough his eyes are glued to my ass.

“Aye!” I snap my fingers, getting his attention. “My eyes are up here.”

He chuckles, licking his lips. “Those are pretty too.”

I grin like a fool and disappear inside.

After showering and getting ready, I chat with Gigi and Genevieve while helping them prepare dinner. Asher appears with Jax at his side. We haven't had any alone time since this morning. He flashes me a smile and a wink, causing my body to respond. I never thought such simple gestures would do it for me, but here I am squeezing my thighs together, trying not to chop my finger off with a knife.

Asher rests his hand on the small of my back, making me put the knife down for my own safety.

“Jax and I are running to the store to pick up some stuff for smore's, do you need anything?”

“No.” I look up at him as he sweeps my curls out of my eyes. “I'm good.”

He rests his hand on my hip. “You'll be okay while I'm gone?”

I glance at Genevieve and Gigi who are talking to Jax. “Of course.”

Nodding, he runs his fingertips along the bodice of my sundress, grazing the tops of my breast. “Purple looks fucking

good on you...” His fingertips reach the strap and he gently tugs on it, making it snap against my skin.

I giggle because I know his thoughts are filthy and he can't act on them. “Thank you.”

He cups my face and brings his lips to mine. The kitchen falls silent, but the kiss feels too good for me to care... until he pulls away.

“Later, Risa Belle.”

“Bye,” I squeak, pressing my fingertips against my lips.

“Ready, Jax?” he asks, turning around.

The three of them are gaping at us. Asher doesn't seem fazed.

Jax clears his throat, blinking rapidly. “Uh...” He glances at me. “Yeah. Let's go. We'll be back, Gen.” He kisses her cheek. I don't know that she notices because she still has a look of shock on her face.

Gigi smiles at me before tending to the sauce that's on the stove. Since we haven't been together much today, none of them had the chance to pick up on the fact we're together. And of course, Asher didn't utter a word. Watching their reactions was entertaining. Once they're gone, Gigi and Genevieve turn their attention to me. Picking up the knife, I resume cutting the vegetables with a grin so big my cheeks hurt.

ASHER

Thoughts of bending Marisa over in the kitchen are still on my mind as I climb into Jax's SUV. If we were home, we wouldn't have left the bed today. I lick my lips at the thought of tasting her, and rest my head against the seat. My intention was to take it slow and wait until she was ready, but she kissed me. I wasn't going to take a piece of her when I wanted all of her.

I can see Jax glancing at me every few seconds out of the corner of my eye. We're nearly to the store when he finally speaks.

"How has your weekend been?"

I can't help the smile that tugs at my lips. "You've been with me the entire time. Why don't you ask me a more direct question?"

"Alright." He straightens up, clearing his throat. "Are you and Marisa a thing now or, are you just into PDA?"

Smirking, I look at him. "Both."

He's trying to keep his eyes on me while also focusing on the road. "You two are together? She's—"

"My girlfriend," I finish for him.

"For real? No bullshit?"

"No bullshit. Feel free to ask her if you'd like to verify."

He sucks his teeth, scrunching up his face. “Smart ass.”

I let out a belt of laughter. “You’re the one who asked.”

“I thought you two were just...” His voice trails off.

“Fucking?”

“Ash...” He says my name in a tone that lets me know he isn’t happy with my word choice. “I was looking for a more respectable term.”

I shrug my shoulders. “May as well call it what it was. And we were... but that wasn’t enough because I love her.”

Slamming on his brakes, he nearly runs into the back of a car. “Love?”

“Yes, love. Can you keep your eyes on the road, please? I’d like to make it back to her.”

“Yeah, sorry.” He shakes his head, focusing on the road. “It’s just... you’re so quiet. I know she’s important to you since you brought her to Gigi and Pop’s house. I’m not sure why I’m surprised you two are together now.”

“When I talked to Gen yesterday...” I hesitate, not wanting to bring up my parents. “She asked me if Marisa knew about mom and dad. And of course I hadn’t told her. The only person who I’ve ever talked about it with is my therapist. But Gen said if I can’t tell her or she sees me differently than she’s not the one. So I told her... not as a test, but because I wanted to be vulnerable with her... for her to really know me.”

He pulls into the parking lot and backs into a space. Turning the car off he asks, “What did she say?”

“That it isn’t my burden to bear. I did the best I could.” Rubbing my chest, I look at him. “I didn’t know how badly I needed to hear that from her until she said it. I know you guys have been telling me that all these years. Hell, even the therapist. But you guys would love me regardless. She could’ve seen me differently, walked away, but she stood with me and told me I’m not them and for the first time it clicked.”

He smiles, resting his head against the seat. “After your mom’s trial, and everything that came out about James, I was terrified Genevieve was going to leave me. I couldn’t help but wonder if she was worried I’d turn out like my brother. If I wasn’t worried about that, I worried whether she could handle all the shit being slung our way by the media.

“I remember talking to Gigi about it because Gen and I were newlyweds. She told me the same thing we’ve been telling you: that I’m not James, and Gen loves me. I didn’t believe her. Until one night,” he laughs, shaking his head, “Gen told me that if I didn’t stop acting like she was two seconds away from leaving, she would.” I toss my head back with laughter. “She let me know she wasn’t going anywhere and that we were in it together.” His eyes meet mine. “But I needed to hear that from her because she’s my wife, my partner. Words can be like medicine when they come from someone you love.”

“Yeah.” I nod as Marisa’s words echo in my head. “I’ve spent my whole life trying to heal, believing something was

inherently wrong with me, but now I realize I was never broken in the first place.”

Smiling, he pats my arm. “No, you never were.”

As we’re walking into the store, Jax gives me a hug. “In case you didn’t know, I’m proud of you.”

I hug him back. “I do, but it’s always nice to hear.”



Marisa lets out a sigh as I pull into the driveway. “I’m going to miss your grandparents’ place.”

Chuckling, I cut the engine. “We can go anytime you want.”

“Next weekend?” Her eyes light up.

“Whenever you want.”

“Wait,” She grabs my arm. “Did they like me?”

My brow furrows. “Gigi and Pop gave you an open invitation to visit. They loved you.”

“They could’ve said it to be nice.”

I cock my head to the side. “Do you honestly think Gigi says anything just to be nice?”

A smile slowly spreads across her face. “No. But what about Jax and Gen? They – ”

“Love you too. Everyone loves you, Risa. Including me. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

She tosses her head back with laughter. “Honestly, yes.”

“And I have the ego? I tell you I love you, and you act brand new.”

“It feels good to hear.” She shrugs, flipping her hair over her shoulder.

Getting out of the car, I open her door for her. “I’ll say it until you get sick of it.”

“That’ll never happen.” She kisses me after stepping out of the car.

I grab our bags as she heads to the front door. She’s still messing around with her ridiculous amount of keys when I join her.

“Hurry up.” I smack her ass as she fumbles with the keys.

She squeals, trying to stop my hand. “Stop smacking my ass and I could.”

Finally, the door swings open. She’s barely over the threshold when I toss the bag aside and grab her, spinning her around to face me. Picking her up, the keys clatter to the floor.

“You have no idea how badly I want to hear you say my name.” I kiss her neck, kicking the door shut behind us.

She wraps her arms around me. “About as badly as I want you inside me?”

“We have the rest of the night to see how many ways I can make you come.”

Biting my bottom lip, she soothes it with a kiss. “Make me say your name then.”

Carrying her, I head to the living room and we crash onto the couch. The bedroom is too far away, and my dick is tired of being restrained. My only thought is burying myself inside her. Sliding her dress up her thighs, I can see her panties are wet, causing me to groan.

“Take them off for me.”

She listens, hooking her thumbs in the tiny strings on the side. My heartrate quickens as I watch her drag them down her thighs. I inhale sharply when I’m met by the sight of her glistening center. I pull her panties the rest of the way off and toss them aside and she lets her thighs fall open.

“Have you touched yourself in front of someone else before?” I caress her thighs.

“No... why?” She raises a brow. “Do you want to watch me?”

“Only if you’re comfortable.”

“That’s not what I asked. Do you want to watch me?”

Gripping her thighs, I pull her to the edge of the couch. “Yes, I want to watch you.”

She smiles, biting her lip. “I just wanted to hear you say it.”

I’m about to respond when she pulls her dress up further, exposing her navel. She slowly trails her hand over her breast, causing her strap to slip from her shoulder, down her stomach,

and I greedily watch as her fingertips meet her clit. My dick twitches in response as she lets out a soft moan.

“You are perfection,” I mutter, watching her play with herself in a trance.

The pressure I feel in my pants from my dick pressing against them probably isn't healthy, but I want to enjoy the view before I fall into her. She dips her fingers inside, coating them with her essence. I watch as her pussy goes from wet to dripping. Keeping my eyes on her, I unbuckle my belt, pulling my pants and boxers down. She spreads her legs further apart, anticipating me sliding inside her. Holding my dick, I line myself up with her entrance. She pauses.

“Don't stop, Risa Belle. I want to watch you play with yourself while I fuck you.”

Letting her head fall back, she lets out a moan as she rubs her clit. I pull the top of her dress down, exposing her breasts, and run my hand over her throat before holding the back of her neck, making her look at me.

“I want you to watch, too.” I thread my fingers through her curls, gripping her hair.

She keeps her eyes on me as I slowly push into her wetness. Letting out a shuddering breath, I watch myself stretch her out and disappear inside her. I wait for her to adjust to me before I pull out and plunge into her again.

“Ash...” she moans.

There's something about the way my name spills from her lips that makes me have to restrain myself from pounding into her.

"Keep playing with that pretty pussy for me, baby." I hook my arms underneath her legs, spreading them further apart as I grip her ass cheeks and thrust into her.

"Shit..." she breathes out, resting her head against the couch as she rubs her clit.

Drinking her in, it hits me like a wave how much I love her. Not that I didn't know, but she was at her worst, and I asked for more, and she's freely giving it to me. She could've said no or that she wanted to wait. I half expected her to, given the hand she's been dealt lately. Instead, she took my hand and fell with me. After all of it, she's completely open for me. Not just physically, but in every way that matters.

She has given me the last fragment of herself to love and protect. I'll never take that lightly.

"Ash..." Her eyes lock onto mine.

She's about to, "Come for me, Risa."

Her back arches, and her nails dig into my arms. I let out a growl. Fuck restraint. Now that she's completely satisfied, I put her legs over my shoulders, and pound into her. She calls out my name as pleasure floods her. My love for her, the sight of her, the feel of her... all of her is my undoing. I fall, meeting her in the euphoric high that we can only find in each other. I told myself I wasn't capable of feeling what I do with

her. But then she came along, challenging everything I thought I knew about myself and what I thought I knew about love. Once I've ridden out the waves of my release, I relax and lay on top of her. She wraps herself around me.

“I'm never letting you go.” She kisses my neck.

I press a kiss to her shoulder. “I'd never want you to.”

Marisa

I thought things would change between us now that we're together. The only thing that has is the title of boyfriend and girlfriend. Truth is, we've belonged to each other this entire time. There's a deeper intimacy now, but we'd be fools to think we ever had a choice. I was the girl rolling her eyes when my friends said they couldn't control the feelings they had for someone. Now I'm the girl who understands. Sure I could've denied all my feelings, pushed him away. But I would still feel drawn to him. It's an inexplicable feeling. All I know is, everything about him makes my soul sigh in relief knowing he's by my side.

Sitting on the yoga studio lawn, we finish up our sub sandwiches. Since we got together, meeting up for lunch has become our thing. It's been a week and a half since we became official. I was vehemently against living with someone I was sexually or emotionally involved with. Protecting my peace and having alone time were more important to me. We may still be in the "honeymoon" phase of our relationship, but I want Asher all in my space, spending as much time together as we can.

My phone trills with an alarm, cutting through our conversation. “Damn, I’ve gotta go.” I grab my wrappings and empty cup.

“Where?” He’s lying on his side, propped up on his elbow with a raised brow.

“Meeting with the therapist today, remember?”

“Shit, Risa.” He presses his palm to his forehead. “I forgot. Work has been insane and—”

“Ash,” I kiss him. “Chill. We may be together, but we still have lives outside of each other.”

“I know, but I didn’t even ask how you’re feeling about talking with a therapist.”

“You know,” I wipe a chip crumb off his lip. “I love how you care for me.”

“Wow... I’m living up to Acyn standards? Those are pretty fucking high.”

“Acyn standards?” My brows knit together.

“Yeah, when we were in Vegas, you told Harlow you love how Acyn cares for her.”

“You remember that?” I stare at him, impressed.

“Of course I’m going to remember. It involves you.”

I get the swooping feeling that happens when you drop from a rollercoaster hill in my stomach. “Why did we wait so long?”

“You’re stubborn.” He shrugs, sipping on his soda.

I gasp, chucking my sandwich wrapper at him. “Me? What about you?”

“Aren’t you going to be late for your appointment?” He grins.

“You’re right. I don’t have time to entertain your bullshit today.”

He stands, holding his hand out to me and helps me to my feet. “Do you want me to take you?”

“Um...” I tug on my ear, fiddling with my earrings. “No. I need a minute to myself before I get there.”

He holds my chin, coaxing me to look up at him. “Never feel bad for wanting time to yourself.”

“It’s just... you can’t always hold my hand, and I want to do this by myself.”

He pulls me closer to him, kissing the top of my head. “I get it. I’ll see you later this evening.”

Standing on my tip toes, I kiss him. “Love you, Ash.”

“Love you, Risa Belle.”



A few days after we got home from his grandparents’ house, I told him I wanted to see a counselor. Of course he supported my decision. What doesn’t he support when it comes to me? I had planned to see the counselor they assigned to me at the

clinic. The problem was, I'd only get three visits and they'd be in the clinical setting. After that, I'd have to find my own therapist. Asher suggested skipping the clinic's counseling, and finding a therapist of my own I can see regularly.

He helped me find all the Black female therapists in the Portland area that were accepting new clients. From there, I narrowed it down to three I felt would be a good fit for me. After phone interviews with each of them, there was only one I talked to with ease. Hopefully I feel the same during the in person session today.

Dr. Ellis reappears with the bottle of water I requested in her hand. She has curly short and round glasses with thick translucent frames that slightly enlarge her deep brown eyes. Her rich, terracotta skin is complimented by her salmon-colored blouse.

With a warm smile on her face, she asks, "What brings you here today?"

Twisting the cap off the water, I take a gulp and let out a long sigh. "I guess I'll start at the beginning..."

Talking has never been a problem of mine. I've told her damn near everything except my blood type. From my dad leaving, to raising my siblings, moving to Portland, everything over the past few weeks, and the glimmer of fucking gold that is Asher. I have to force myself out of my spiraling thoughts that's giving me motor mouth.

"Sorry. Am I talking too much?"

“No.” She smiles. “This is your time.”

“I know it’s a lot.” I rest my elbow on the armrest and cradle my chin in my hand. “And even though things are going good right now, I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“Can we back up a moment to a more recent event?” She asks and I nod. “How are you coping since the abortion?”

I stare into space, not wanting to tap into those emotions. I answer honestly anyway. “I think something may be wrong with me...”

She sets her pen atop the notepad in her lap. “Why do you think something is wrong with you?”

I shift in my seat, shrugging my shoulders. “Because... I’ve felt nothing but relief. Even though Reese believes I did it out of spite, I had an abortion because it’s what’s best for me. But shouldn’t I feel some remorse?”

“There’s no rule book on the right emotional response to events in our lives. You feeling relief lets me know you made the right choice for yourself.”

“Yeah... well, I guess I do feel shame mixed with the relief.” I admit, not meeting her gaze. “I feel like it’s something I have to hide for the rest of my life.”

“Do you want to hide it the rest of your life?”

“No, I don’t. But how do I tell the people I love?” I think of Quinn, Harlow, and Sevyn. “What if they want nothing to do with me?”

“What if they do?”

My eyes snap to hers. “What?”

“What if instead of expecting the worst, you imagined for a moment what it would be like for you to tell the people you love and they accepted you with open arms?” She glances down at the notepad. “Asher didn’t see you differently or turn his back on you, did he?”

“No... quite the opposite, surprisingly.”

She tilts her head to the side. “Marisa, have you ever stopped to think that you mean just as much to others as they do to you?”

“I...” My vision becomes blurry as tears pool in my eyes. “No. I’m not used to people caring for me.”

A silence settles between us as I think about her question. I love my mom. She did the best she could, and it’s hard to admit to myself her best wasn’t enough. Dad leaving didn’t fracture only our family as a whole. It fractured my chance at a mother–daughter relationship. Instead of a being a sibling, I was a second mom. My childhood went out the door when dad did.

“It’s hard to let people in. To allow ourselves to be cared for. I’d like you to imagine what that would look like for you. Marisa,” my gaze meets hers, “you deserve to be cared for.” I stare at her. Unsure what to say. “Can you say that out loud?”

“Even if I’m struggling to accept it?” She nods her head with a smile. Taking a deep breath, I exhale the words. “I

deserve to be cared for.”

“It can be scary to let others care for you because it requires vulnerability and an acknowledgement that we can’t do it all on our own. You don’t have to do it all on your own, Marisa.”

I came to therapy expecting to simply talk, not be split wide open. It’s not painful, but it’s scary diving into the dark pools of wounds. There’s a lot for me to talk about. More than I realized. Before leaving the office, I setup an appointment for next week. Getting into my car, I head to the studio, happy I get to decompress on my mat.



Arriving home, there’s no light in the windows. Asher’s here, but maybe his night owl ass went to bed early for a change. It’s just past nine. I taught the evening classes tonight. Grabbing my stuff from the back, I wave to Maxwell and Faith who are sitting on their front porch. I’d stop to chat, but I really want to strip out of my clothes. It’s been a long day.

Opening the door, I nearly drop my stuff when I see lit candles and rose petals creating a path. My heart skips several beats as I smile. Tossing my stuff aside, I follow the trail. As I near the bedroom, I hear music playing softly. Pushing the door open, I continue on the path of rose petals to the bathroom where I hear water running. As I round the corner, I’m met by Asher as he lights a candle he’s holding in his

hand. Taking a deep breath, I inhale the scent of jasmine and ylang ylang with a hint of rose.

“You’re home,” he says without looking at me. “I didn’t think it’d take this long to light this many fucking candles.”

I laugh softly as I walk toward him. He’s shirtless with grey sweatpants slung low on his hips. “All this for me?”

“All for you, Risa Belle.” He sets the candle down on the edge of the tub that’s brimming with bubbles. He wraps his arms around me, pulling me close and giving me a kiss.

“I’m not sure what I did to deserve you.” I hug him tight.

“Was your worthiness ever a question?”

“To me? Yes,” I admit.

Pulling away from me, he asks, “Really?”

“Well... yeah.” I shrug. “I mean I know I’m gorgeous—” he chuckles “—but I’m also a little chaotic. There are other women who — ”

He cups my face, running his thumb across my lips, silencing me. “I’m not concerned with other women. They aren’t you.” All I can do is nod as I stare into his intense gaze. “Do you need a lesson on how worthy you are?”

“I—yes. Yes, I do.”

A low, smooth chuckle resonates in his chest as he places his hands on my hips, backing me up. Once we’re in front of the mirror, he turns me to face it. His eyes remain on mine as

he reaches for the scrunchie holding my curls in place. Setting them free, they cascade over my shoulders.

“We’ll start here.” He sinks his long fingers into my hair, massaging my scalp. “Not only do you have hair worthy of a shampoo commercial—” I cover my mouth, letting out a snort of laughter. “—but you’re also fucking brilliant. Successful all on your own.”

I smile at his words as he cups my chin in his hand, causing me to hold my head a little higher. “And these hazel eyes.” He gently rubs his thumb along my cheek. “Are the only eyes that have ever truly seen me.”

Grabbing at the hem of my top, he pulls it over my head. His hand trails up my arm, causing a shiver to ripple through me. His fingertips brush against my collar bone before he presses his palm against my chest, over my heart. “And the heart that beats in your chest is pure and the only one that loves me... and all my bullshit.” I let my head fall back against his chest, laughing.

He kisses my neck as he slides his hands into my pants, and peels them off my legs. I step out of them, standing only in my panties as I kick them aside. He rubs his hands over my hips, waist, and cups my breast as he holds my gaze in the mirror. “You wear your confidence like armor. It’s sexy as hell. But when it falls away,” he slides my panties down, letting them pool at my feet. “And you let your soft parts show, that’s beautiful. And I’ll always have your back,” he kisses my temple, “like I do now.” Wrapping his arms around my

shoulders, he holds me tightly against his chest. “I’ll protect and love the soft, vulnerable parts you’ve given me. All I see in you, Risa, is worthiness. That should never be a doubt or a question in your mind, because you’re fucking worthy.”

Tears prick my eyes as his words take up residence in my soul. I’ve never felt more vulnerable and loved as I stand in front of him completely naked.

“I love you, Ash.”

He sweeps me up into his arms, kissing my lips. “I love you too, Risa Belle. Now, let me show you you’re worthy.”

“Show me? You just—”

“No. I told you. I still need to show you.”

I become aware of the pulse between my thighs at the sound of promise in his voice. He sets me down in front of the tub, holding my hand to help me in. Steam rises above the bubbles and my body instantly relaxes as the hot water wraps around my legs. I submerge myself to my neck, watching Asher. He grabs the band of his sweats, pulling them down. I watch with hungry eyes as he does the same with his boxers. His gaze meets mine, and he gives me a devilish grin.

I smile, biting my lip and wait for him to join me. Once he’s seated, I press a kiss to his lips.

“Turn around,” he says, grabbing the shower head as I settle between his thighs. “Tilt your head back.”

I listen, unsure of what he’s going to do. He turns the knob on the tub and warm water soaks my curls. My shoulders

shake with a shiver and he chuckles.

“That’s one of my favorite feelings.” I let my eyes close.

“Water on your head?”

“Mhmm. Warm water. It’s calming.”

I hear him turn the water off and set the shower head back in the holder. He opens a bottle and seconds later, I feel his fingers in my hair. The smell of my conditioner fills the air. I let out a sigh as his fingers work it through my curls.

The mantra from the therapist repeats in my head. I deserve to be cared for. If I could suspend us in these love-soaked moments, I would.

Smiling, I ask, “Remember when I told you that you’d fall hard when you fell in love? I said you’d be passionate and deeply devoted?”

“Yeah. In my office.” He continues his massage. Rubbing the pads of his thumbs against the base of my skull. I nearly forget my words.

“It’s true, and I’m so fucking happy it’s me.”

Pushing my hair to the side, he kisses my shoulder. “I knew you were right the moment you told me that. I was already in love with you.”

“You were?”

“Risa,” He turns the water on again. “You may not have known it, but I know you felt it.”

I can't deny that. It's as though the air around us is charged, and it's a frequency only we can feel. My words get lost in my throat as he rinses the conditioner out of my hair.

"I had a response, but I'm in heaven right now."

"Good," he says. I hear the smile in his voice.

He's intentional, taking his time. After a few minutes of letting the warm water run over my head, he turns it off, setting it aside again. Putting his hands on my waist, he turns me around to face him and brings my lips to his. Our tongues dance around each other as I deepen the kiss. He tastes sweet. Like pineapple and strawberries. His favorite snack... besides me.

His hands roam over my body, pulling a moan from me as his fingertips brush against my nipples. He makes me wetter than the water we're sitting in right now. I let my head fall back as he trails kisses down my neck. I inhale sharply as he takes my nipple into his mouth, swirling his tongue around it. His hands grip my ass, pulling me closer to him. I moan as his dick presses against my clit.

He moves his hands to my waist, turning me around. Gripping my hair, he pulls my head back, whispering in my ear. "I want you to sit on it."

Lifting my hips, I waste no time reaching between my thighs and grab his dick. Lining him up with my entrance, I slowly sit on it. The grip he has on my waist tightens. One of his hands slides up my body, and he wraps his fingers around my throat, guiding me the rest of the way down his length.

“Good fuckin’ girl...”

I bite down on my lip, moaning. My body hums with pleasure as he slowly moves his hips. I happily bounce on him.

“Keep riding me.”

He doesn’t have to tell me twice. Closing my eyes, I hear him turn on the water as he keeps one hand on my hip. Seconds later, nothing prepares me for the jolt of pleasure that shoots through me as he directs the shower head at my clit. I grip the sides of the tub.

I feel his hands in my hair, grabbing a fistful of my curls. “Did I tell you to stop?”

“No.” I moan, not even realizing I’d stopped moving as the water pressure massages my center. Him filling me up and the shower head on my clit has me ready to tip over the edge. He thrusts his hips, causing me to grip the sides of the tub harder. “Asher...”

“Say my name, baby, while you ride me.”

Moans spill from my lips as if I have no control of my body. I wind my hips, pushing myself closer to the edge. I’m torn between wanting to prolong this feeling and needing to release the pressure that’s building in my core.

“Tell me,” he presses his chest to my back, keeping the pressure from the shower head on my clit. “Are you worthy?” His hand is still in my hair, holding me in place.

“Yes.” My response comes out as a pant.

“Yes, what, Risa?”

“I’m worthy.”

Letting go of my hair, he wraps his arm around me, cupping my breast in his hand. “I didn’t hear you...” He breaths against my neck, causing goose bumps to break out across my skin. “Say it again.” He moves his hips with mine.

“I—I’m worthy.” Never thought saying affirmations could be this enjoyable.

“Again, Risa. Louder,” he grits out.

“I’m worthy!”

“Don’t you ever forget that shit.” He wraps his hand around my throat.

“Ash, I’m gonna – ”

“Come on this dick, Risa.”

My body feels like it’s reached its maximum pleasure capacity as I come hard for him. Holding me tighter, he falls with me. The sounds of our lovemaking reverberate off the bathroom walls. Trying to catch my breath, I turn to face him. He wraps his arms around my waist, pulling me flush against him, and rests his head on my breasts. We sit wrapped up in each other, coming down from our high.

Pressing a kiss to the center of my chest, he looks at me. “Never doubt your worth, Risa.”

“I won’t now.” I hold his face in my hands. “There’s something powerful about shouting ‘I’m worthy’ while riding

your dick right before I come.”

He gives me a brilliant smile. “You’ll never forget. I’ll be here if you need reminders.”

“You’re talking about reminders when you just took my heart, soul, and breath?”

“Not right now. In the near future.” He raises his brow. “Unless...”

I kiss him softly. “This water will run cold soon, but you can warm me up in bed.”

Marisa

Leaning against the counter, I drink my coffee as I watch Asher move back and forth through the house. The past week, he's submerged himself in his work. He has his ear buds in, talking business as he gathers the papers scattered across the table. I don't want to sound needy, but I miss him. He's been getting home later, and we haven't spent much time together. Except for in the evenings when we talk for the thirty minutes before he falls asleep. Grabbing his keys off the counter beside me, he turns and heads for the door.

My eyes narrow as he closes the door behind him. He didn't even bother to acknowledge me. His bag with his laptop and papers is still sitting on the table. Setting my coffee down, I grab it and rush out the door after him. He's already heading back up the walkway. I hold his bag out to him, and he reaches for it, but I move it behind my back. His brow furrows as he looks at me. I point at his ear buds, mouthing for him to take them out.

"Amaury, I'll speak with you when I get to the office." He ends the call. "I need my bag." He smiles.

“You can have it... after you answer my question.” He cocks his head to the side, waiting for me. “Are you okay? Is something going on?”

“I’m fine, Risa.” He pulls me into his arms and kisses the top of my head. “Work is demanding lately.”

The words don’t match his body language. He’s going through the motions. His hug and kiss feel mechanical as if he’s doing it only to appease me. “Right... work.” I hold his bag out to him. “I’ll see you for lunch.” I can’t help my voice rising at the end as if it’s a question.

“I’ll be working through lunch.”

A lump forms in my throat as he lies to me. “Okay. Bye.” I turn, heading back inside.

He gently grabs my wrist, rubbing his thumb over my pulse. “I love you, Risa.”

If I speak, he’ll hear the sadness in my voice and I don’t want to seem ridiculous. I smile, pulling my wrist out of his hand and head back inside.

Grabbing my phone, I send ‘911’ text to the group chat. Within minutes, I’m on a video call with Harlow, Sevyn, and Quinn.

“Asher’s lying to me.” I angrily swipe a tear from my cheek.

“About what?” Quinn asks.

“I don’t know. Everything. Things have been... off between us for the past week. Maybe the honeymoon phase of our relationship is over?” It’s only been a month since we got together. “Maybe he’s already tired of me or changed his mind about wanting a relationship?”

“Did you ask him?” Harlow asks, applying highlighter to her cheeks.

“Yes. He lied. Blamed work. This sounds superficial, but we haven’t fucked in a week. Which no big deal right? We don’t always have to have sex. Except we have sex every day... multiple times a day and now nothing. Then,” I pace the length of the living room. “This morning. He didn’t even acknowledge me.”

Sevyn shovels a spoonful of cereal into her mouth. “Make it so he can’t ignore you.”

“Yeah.” Harlow and Quinn agree.

“What?”

“Go somewhere he can’t leave,” Sevyn clarifies.

“Corner him?” I scrunch up my face.

Covering her mouth, she laughs. “You make it sound aggressive, but yes. Show up at his office. Don’t leave that room until he’s fucked you and has told you what’s going on.”

“Sevyn!” Harlow cackles along with Quinn.

“What?” She shrugs. “She wants answers. She’s going to have to show him what his negligence will cost if he keeps this

bullshit up.”

“I have to agree with Sevyn’s idea.” Harlow admits.

“Me too.” Quinn agrees. “Get some dick and answers.”

Sevyn smirks. “And you two talk about me.”

I laugh in spite of the pit of anxiety in my stomach.
“Okay... you guys are right.”

“Operation Dick and Answers is underway!” Harlow shouts, making us laugh.

“If it’s any consolation, we all go through rough patches in our relationships. Whether they be major or petty.” Harlow and Sevyn nod in agreement with Quinn.

“Alright.” I take a calming breath. “I won’t kick him out.”

They laugh and we talk for a while longer. Ending the call, I feel much better. I head to my room to find something sexy, but not over the top. Pulling out multiple outfits, none of them feel right. I glance at the clock to realize it’s nearly lunch time. I’ve spent my morning talking to the girls and trying to find a damn outfit. Looking around my closet, my eyes land on a black leather trench coat. A smile spreads across my face. I’ll go for the direct approach. I grab the trench coat and toss it on my bed. Opening my dresser, I dig through my panty drawer searching for a set I bought at some fancy lingerie boutique a while ago. I find it hiding in the back of the drawer. It’s a mesh set with intricate floral embroidery and a garter belt with straps that wrap around my thighs.

Heading into the bathroom, I prepare myself for Operation Dick and Answers.



Wearing a leather trench coat in the heat of summer probably wasn't my best idea. Regardless of me nearly suffering a heat stroke, I look like a bombshell. I walk into his office building, taking off my shades and tousling my curls. I don't need to look around to know all eyes are on me as I stride down the hall to the elevator. I'm a woman on a mission. Turning side to side, admiring my reflection as I wait for the doors to open, I'm glad I went with the red bottoms instead of the strappy heels.

The doors open, and I'm met by a group of men not much older than me dressed in suits. I have to bite my lip to keep the smile off my face as their jaws drop. If Asher ignores me looking like this, we'll have a repeat of Vegas. Yet another good reason I wore stilettos.

"W-What floor?" the tallest of the men asks.

"22." I smile, staring at the doors. They must not realize I can see their reflections as they all stare at the back of me.

"Do you work here?" the one directly behind me asks.

"Nope." I focus on the numbers above the door. 17, 18, 19.

"Do you live here?"

"Yep."

“Would you be able to tell us a good place to get drinks tonight?”

I look at them over my shoulder. “Velvet isn’t too far from here. Good atmosphere and drinks. Lots of pretty women.”

“Will you be there?”

Getting off the elevator, I ignore his question and head to the restroom to touch up my lipstick one last time. A few minutes later, I head for Asher’s office and notice the door is closed. Maybe he wasn’t lying about working through lunch. Francesca looks at me with an air of annoyance. Poor girl is still bothered by me.

“Hi Franny.” I give her a bright smile.

“Francesca,” she corrects me. “He’s in a meeting right now.”

“Is he?” I reach into my coat, adjusting my tits. “All the better. How’s my lipstick?” I pout.

“G–Good,” she stutters.

“You and I could be friends, Franny. In fact, I know the perfect man for you.” I clap my hands together with excitement as Zion crosses my mind. “He’s a really nice guy.”

Crossing her arms, she raises her brow. “You want to set me up?”

“Yeah,” I shrug. “Why not? Wait, let me show you a picture.” I pull my phone from my clutch, searching for his Instagram profile. “Isn’t he good looking?” I wag my brows as

I show her his pictures. “Plans to be a pharmacist. Hopefully little kids don’t deter you.”

Her mouth is slightly open as she practically drools over his picture. “No, no. I love kids.”

“Perfect.” I lock my phone screen and shove it back in my purse. “I’ll text him to ask if I can give you his number. He responds pretty quickly. Remind me before I leave.”

“Did you sleep with him?”

“Yes,” I answer shamelessly.

She scrunches up her face. “Why would I want to be with him then?”

I run my tongue across my teeth, giving her a smile as I press my palms into her desk. “Franny. I’m a free woman. Maybe if you didn’t have your head so far up Asher’s ass for God knows how long, you could’ve been living your best life too. It may come as a surprise to you, but most men our age have already been with multiple partners. None of that shit matters at the end of the day when there’s a connection. Now, do you want his number or not?”

“Yes,” she squeaks.

I pat her hand. “That’s what I thought. Now excuse me while I go offer myself up as lunch.”

I push against Asher’s office door, and it effortlessly swings open. All heads swivel my way. He’s sitting at the table with three other men.

“If you look here...” Asher’s voice trails off as his eyes meet mine.

“Gentlemen.” I recognize the three men from the elevator. “We meet again.”

“What?” Asher asks, looking between them.

The tallest one swallows hard. “We met on the elevator.”

“Right.” Asher gives them a pensive look. “Give me and my *girlfriend* the room.”

The three of them shoot up from their seats and scurry out of the room. I lock the door behind them. Turning back to Asher, I untie the knot at my waist, letting the trench coat pool at my feet as I saunter toward him. His eyes fill with desire as they trail up my legs, drinking me in. He moves his chair back, making room for me to sit on the table in front of him.

I spread my legs, and he runs his hands up my thighs. “Tell me,” I loosen his tie. “How do you neglect me when I look like this?” Removing his tie, I wrap it around my neck.

Gripping my thighs, he pulls me to the edge of the table. He rises to his feet, kissing my neck and threads his fingers through my curls, taking a deep breath. “Clearly, I’m an idiot. You’re fucking perfection.”

I was going to talk to him first. That idea goes out the window as his lips crash into mine. Acting like I’m starved, I grab at his belt. Once it’s unbuckled, I push his pants and boxers down. He slides my panties to the side, rubbing his thumb against my clit. Grabbing his dick, I guide him as he

pushes into me. I moan not caring who hears. He unfastens my bra, freeing my breasts. I lean back as he takes one into his mouth.

My hand slips on a stack of papers as I try to hold onto the table, causing them to scatter on the floor. He thrusts into me, letting me know he's missed me just as much as I've missed him. One of his hands is in my hair while the other grips my thigh, hugging it to his waist. I wrap my arms around his neck. He picks me up off the table, gripping my ass, and presses me against the window.

He fucks me as though he's trying to find something in the middle of me. Not just the orgasm I'm on the cusp of. The tingling sensation starts in my toes, shooting up to my center as I'm flooded with pleasure. I bite down on his shoulder, stifling my cries. He pounds into me harder. Hitting the spot that just made me unravel. His breath becomes ragged as he nears his release. Warmth fills me as he lets out a low, rough grunt.

Riding out the waves of his climax, he holds onto me. He rests his head against my shoulder. After a moment, he takes me with him as he sits in the chair. Straddling his lap, I tip his head back. His brown eyes meet mine. There's a mix of emotions swirling in them.

“Tell me what's wrong, Ash.”

He closes his eyes, letting out a sigh. “Next week is my mom's hearing.”

“Ash.” I grab his face, and he opens his eyes. “You know you can talk to me, right? I’d rather you talk to me than lie.”

“I didn’t want to flip my shit on you. You’ve been doing so much better and—”

I press my finger to his lips. “Your shit is my shit.” He smiles. “Are you going to the hearing?”

His smile quickly fades. “I want to, but what if it doesn’t go well?” Worry is etched on his face.

“Regardless of their decision, would you regret not being there?”

“Yes,” he says without hesitation. “I haven’t physically seen her in sixteen years.”

“Then we’ll go.”

“You’ll go with me?” He raises his brows.

“Yes. What? You thought you’d pour into me and I wouldn’t reciprocate? No, baby. We take care of each other and grow together. Got it?”

He chuckles, pulling me flush against him. “Understood. I fucking love you.”

“I love you too.” I hug him tight. “When is the hearing?”

“Monday,” he mumbles against my chest. “Her lawyer, and Detective Watson, are confident she’ll get released. She can start over. Start fresh. And...” His eyes meet mine. “I want that for her. I know what she did wasn’t right, but neither is

what my dad did. After all she's been through, after the system fucked her over... she deserves that."

"She does. We'll be there for her."

He kisses my neck before asking, "Did you not bring anything else besides yourself and a trench coat?"

"I did not." I beam at him. "Had to get your attention somehow."

"I'm sorry for not being present."

"I understand." I press a kiss to his lips. "Talk to me in the future, alright?"

"I will."

Putting my feet on the ground, I climb off his lap. "I should let you get back to your meeting." My phone chimes with a text. "Oh, it's Zion," I say, pulling it out of my bag.

He rises from his seat, adjusting his pants, and fastens them. "Zion? You still talk to him?"

"No, but I told Francesca I would set them up."

He lets out a rumble of laughter. "Look at you, playing matchmaker."

"Don't they seem like they'd go together?"

"They do." He grabs two bottles of water from the mini fridge, handing one to me.

I open the water and guzzle half of it as I watch Asher open his coat closet. Next thing I know, a blur of white is being launched at my face.

“What the hell?” I cackle, pulling it off of me.

“A shirt. For you.”

Holding it out in front of me, I see it’s a white Armani button up. “What’s wrong with my outfit?” I turn on the spot.

“Nothing.” He licks his lips. “When you’re with me. Listen, I’m not trying to break somebody’s jaw for them saying some out of pocket shit about you.”

I toss my head back with laughter. “Is this jealousy?”

“No...” He says defensively. “Maybe. Will you just put the fucking shirt on, Risa?”

“Aw... Ash. I didn’t take you for the jealous type. I noticed you enunciated each syllable in girlfriend when you said it earlier.” I wrap my arms around his middle. He takes the shirt dangling from my fingertips and unwraps my arms from around him. Holding it open he waits for me to put my arms through the sleeves.

I laugh as he pulls it on me. He tries to keep the smile off his face but his eyes are alight with amusement. Once he’s fastened the final button, he smacks my ass. I let out a yelp. Stepping back, he tilts his head to the side with his hand on his chin.

“Somehow... this is sexier.”

“Is it the tousled hair?” I pose, jutting my hip out. “Or the sky high heels?”

“No, love. It’s just you.” He pulls me into his arms, kissing the top of my head.

This is my Ash. I melt into his embrace. “I better go before we spend the rest of the day fucking in your office.”

“Good idea. I’ll see you in a few hours. And thanks... for being here for me.”

I brush my fingertips against his cheek. “Always.”

He opens the door for me, and the three men are sitting on the couch just outside his office. Judging from the looks on their faces, they heard everything. Asher leans against the door frame. I slide Francesca the card I wrote Zion’s information on. “Call him.” Turning my attention to the men, I smile. “Gentleman, Mr. Blaine will see you now.” I curtsy.

Looking at Asher over my shoulder, he shakes his head with a smile on his face. “Later, Risa.”

I wink, flipping my hair over my shoulder, and saunter down the hall.

ASHER

We arrived in Seattle late last night. I haven’t slept since Friday. My nerves won’t let me. It’s the morning of the hearing. A feeling of dread has taken up residence in the pit of my stomach. A lot is happening today. I get to see my mom for the first time in sixteen years. She could be granted clemency and start over. If she is released, how is she going to adjust to

being in the world again? Will it be hard for her? It has to be better than prison. I hope.

Standing in front of the mirror, I remember the tie in my hands, I attempt to do the knot correctly for the umpteenth time. It still comes out fucked up. I yank it loose, pull it over my head, and toss it on the bed.

Marisa picks it up, loosening my shit knot and puts it around my neck. Her hands quickly tie the knot I couldn't. As she cinches it, she stands on her tiptoes and kisses me.

“You have a lot of skills.”

She smiles, smoothing her hand down my tie. “I had to teach Killian, so I taught myself.”

It'll never cease to amaze me that she raised her siblings. She talks about them as if they're her children. In a sense, they are.

“How are you feeling?” She tilts her head to the side, putting her earrings on.

“Like I'm going to puke and pass out.”

She bites her lip, snorting with laughter. “What a fucking combination. Sounds like a bad hangover.”

I collapse onto the bed, letting out a sigh. “Sixteen years, Risa. This feels surreal.”

“Did you tell her you'd be at the hearing?” She joins me on the bed.

“No. I wasn’t even sure I’d be here until we got in the car last night.”

“So you’ll both want to puke and pass out?” She smirks.

I let out a belt of laughter. “Pretty much.”

She grabs my hand, holding it tight. “She’s about to lay her eyes on you for the first time since you were a boy and see the amazing, brilliant man you’ve become. Let the moment be what it is. Soak it up. All you need to think about is yourself and her today. Nothing else matters.”

I meet her gaze, tucking stray curls behind her ear. “Thank you for being here with me... and threatening my life last night to get me in the car.”

“I’m always here to provide a subtle push... literally.” She grins.

“You’re a lot stronger than you look.”

She rests her head on my shoulder, twisting the ring around her finger. “What’s the real reason you still wear that?”

Pulling it off, she holds it up. “Would you believe me if I told you that was the best night of my life? I’m not talking about the sex either. I wanted to feel something other than the sadness and regret that shadowed me. Even if only for a night, I wanted to experience easy, carefree love. You gave that to me. And I wore it as a reminder that someday I’d have that. It became a part of me... like you are now.”

I’m silent for a moment as I watch her twirl the ring between her fingertips before putting it back on. “And then I

was a total asshole the next morning.”

She raises her hands up, shrugging her shoulders. “You said it not me.”

“I’m sorry I treated you that way.”

“I used it as fuel to divorce you.”

I toss my head back with laughter. “At least I made things somewhat easier.” There’s a knock on the door. “Come in.”

Jax peeks his head in. “Did you want to ride with us?”

Talking with Marisa momentarily soothed my worries. I don’t feel ready for my mom’s hearing, but with her by my side, regardless of what happens, I’ll be okay. “We’ll take her car.”

I don’t know what my mood will be like after the hearing. I love my family, but they treat me like I’m fragile. This morning at breakfast, they were looking at me as though I’d crumble any minute. Then there’s Marisa, who shoved me into the car last night to get me here. I’m glad she did because I would’ve been filled with regret.

“Okay, we’ll see you there.” He closes the door.

Marisa stands up, holding her hands out to me. “Are you ready?”

Taking them, I rise to my feet and pull her into my arms. “With you by my side? Yeah.”



I'm sitting between Marisa and Gigi, feeling like I'm ready to crawl out of my skin. Marisa puts her hand over mine as I adjust my tie for the millionth time. Hooking her finger in the knot, she loosens it.

"You're going to strangle yourself if you make it any tighter," she whispers.

"Is it hot in here to you?" I swipe my palm across my forehead.

She grabs my hand, tugging on it. "Let's get some air. We still have ten minutes."

"Air. Right. Yes." Standing, I follow her out to the hallway.

Once we're out of the hearing room, I lean against the wall and hunch over, resting my hands on my knees. "I'm on the verge of a fucking panic attack."

"Let's sit." She grabs my hand, guiding me down to the ground with her. "Ash, you have to breathe." Loosening my tie, she takes it off. "Can you breathe?"

Bringing my knees up to my chest I cradle my head in my hands. She gently pulls on my wrist, causing me to look at her. "I-I don't know."

"Can you breathe with me?" I nod my head. "Inhale. 1... 2... 3... Exhale 1... 2... 3... 4... 5..."

For a moment, all I see is her. Her calm hazel eyes, the rise and fall of her chest, the scent of her perfume, and the feel of her curls brushing against my hands. As I breathe with her, the sounds around us slowly come into focus. The hallway didn't seem busy a moment ago. People shuffle around us as Marisa kneels in front of me with my hands in hers.

“I don't want to rush you, but it's almost time. Do you want to go back in?”

“Yes.” I take a few deep breaths before standing on my feet again, pulling her with me. “I'm ready.”

We rejoin my family in the hearing room. Gigi pats my leg as I sit down. I feel better than I did just moments ago. There aren't many people in the room with us aside from some news people. We couldn't stop them from coming since all hearings are open to the public. The Governor appears, making my heart rate quicken. That means it's getting closer to—

My thoughts get interrupted as the doors to our left open and my breath gets caught in my throat. Two people appear and behind them is my mom. Her eyes are on the floor, but then she looks up, scanning the room. I squeeze Marisa's hand, waiting to see if she recognizes me.

Time slows down as our eyes meet. Hers gloss over as I feel the sting of tears in my own. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but it's as if she was frozen in time. Despite being in a place that hardens most, her features are soft. The last time I saw her brown eyes, there was no light in them.

Looking into them now, I see the spark she had in them when we used to laugh and play together.

Her brown hair that has the same curl pattern as mine, is the same length it's always been. She never wears it long because she hates the feel of it. She smiles, giving me a cautious wave. It's still warm and inviting. I don't respond, staring at her in a trance afraid she'll vanish if I blink. Before my brain can provide a response, the officer to her right motions for her to take a seat. She holds my gaze for a few more seconds before sitting with her back to me.

I snap out of it when Marisa pries my hand off of hers. "Shit, Risa. I'm sorry." I whisper.

She flexes her hand a few times. "It's okay, Thanos."

Her joke catches me off guard, and I try to cover my laugh with a cough. Gigi nudges me and my mom looks at me over her shoulder with a smile on her face.

Grabbing Marisa's hand, I massage it as the hearing begins. I stare at the back of my mom in disbelief. She's only feet away from me. Sixteen years feels like it was just yesterday. I only half listen to her lawyer speak. I've lived through everything she's covering. I'd rather not relive it.

Instead, I rewind my memories to when mom and dad were happy. When we'd play board games, go on bike rides, and stay up late watching movies. I remember laughing with them until my stomach hurt. There was a time I was their world and I could see the love they had for each other in a glance or smile. I can only guess what happened between my parents

that turned their loving looks into violent fights. Instead of remembering the bad, I force myself to focus on the present as her lawyer speaks.

“The blatant negligence of the police department has cost Mina Blaine sixteen years of her life. My client is aware that what she did is wrong, but it was also an act of survival. We have records of multiple 911 calls from the Blaine household. Mina was crying out for help, but was stifled by her husband and the insidious ideology that the police department protects their own. Her son, Asher Blaine, went so far as to ask a teacher for help. He was told his father was a police officer and the issues at his home were adult problems. There was negligence not only from the police, but the school district as well.”

I’ll never forget that teacher and the fear in her eyes when I told her the nightmare my home life was. That’s when I learned that silence is a loud answer.

“James Blaine was untouchable, and he knew it. What was Mina expected to do with her life in danger? She wasn’t the only victim of Officer Blaine’s violent rages. A former girlfriend, Sasha Allen, who he was with while married, lost a child at his hand.”

I remember my dad taking me to a woman’s house. It had to have been hers. My stomach twists. He was a man I loved, in a sense, but feared more. I’m still not sure how to separate the father from the monster. They were one and the same. If my

parents didn't have me, would they have split before everything imploded?

My dad never physically hurt me, but he used me as a weapon. He'd threaten my mom she'd never see me again if she left. He frequently talked about having the power to make her disappear. Even at my young age, I learned my dad didn't become a cop to protect and serve. He became one because he liked being in power and control. Once, he took me on a weeklong camping trip without telling my mom. When we got back she was sick with worry. I thought we had gone camping to spend time together, not for him to control her.

I like to think he loved me. Maybe in his own way he did, but I never saw it until I was trying to stop him from bleeding out. That was the first and last time I felt real love from him. When I told my mom it hurt more when she went away than when he died, I meant it. Marisa interlaces her fingers with mine as she listens to the hearing.

“Governor, we ask that Mina Blaine be granted clemency for the failure of our justice system. When she asked for help, she was silenced. When given a trial, it was not fair. Today, we are joined by James Blaine's mother, father, and brother not in hopes that she goes back to prison, but in support of her being freed.”

I listen as the lawyer makes her compelling closing remarks and hold my breath, waiting for the Governor to speak. He rifles through papers before clearing his throat, and fixing my mom with his gaze.

“Mina Blaine, the negligence and failure of our systems has cost you sixteen years of your life. After hearing the statements and reviewing the old and new evidence, we are granting you clemency.”

My mother sobs, hugging her lawyer and then turning to hug Detective Lawson. I feel Marisa squeeze my hand and Gigi wrap her arm around my shoulders. Overwhelmed with emotion, tears stream down my face. I let out everything I’ve kept inside the past sixteen years. A moment I never thought I’d see is happening in front of me. Mom is free.

The governor continues speaking, letting us know she will be released Friday. Thinking about three more days feels longer than her sixteen year sentence. Countless questions run through my head. I hope she’ll answer them when we have the time. For now, I just want to hug her.

Standing as the hearing ends, I approach the area where she’s sitting, pulling Marisa along behind me. At this point, my hand feels like it’s superglued to hers. My mom doesn’t notice me at first until Detective Lawson taps her shoulder, pointing in my direction.

She whips around, launching herself at me. “Ash.”

I wrap my arms around her, nearly pulling her over the railing that divides us. “Mom.”

The hug lasts only a few seconds before she’s directed to follow the officers that escorted her in. “I love you. I’ll see you Friday.”

Letting go reminds me of the last hug I gave her as a boy. Now I'm a man, letting go with the knowledge that she'll be home soon. She kisses my cheek, and follows the officers, stealing glances at me from over her shoulder. I keep my eyes on her as I watch her walk toward the doors and disappear behind them. I'm not sure how long I stand there, stunned that she's coming home. I snap out of it when I hear the shutter of cameras. Jax, Gen, Pops and Gigi are to my right, blocking the media's view of me.

I'm relieved and elated that this is finally over. Turning to Marisa, I wrap my arms around her in a bear hug. Reporters call my name as they ask me countless questions at rapid fire. This is a story they haven't been able to let go since it happened.

"I'm so happy for you, Ash," Marisa whispers in my ear with her arms snugly looped around my neck.

There are reporters scattered all over the room including out in the hallway, hoping they'll hear me speak. Sixteen years changed a lot, but it didn't change my desire to talk to them.

"I'm not sure how we're going to get out of here." I thought the media frenzy would've died down.

"Fuck them." Marisa looks at me. "You walk out of here with your head held high. Give them a taste of that Asher Blaine ego."

Even when my emotions are shot, she makes me laugh. "With you by my side?"

“Always.” She interlaces her fingers with mine.

I hold Marisa’s hand and Gigi loops her arm through mine as we walk out to the flashing lights of cameras and roar of reporters.

Marisa

I nstead of returning to Portland, we decided to stay in Seattle until his mom is released. I'm sitting on the veranda at his uncle and aunt's house, drinking coffee, when Asher throws a newspaper down on the table in front of me. I jump, nearly spilling on myself. Looking at him, he grins. I'm ready for an argument, but he's shirtless, sweaty from a run, and looking fucking delectable.

I choose violence anyway. "Why are you here?"

Pulling his earbud out, he plops on the chair beside me and takes the bagel I was about to eat. "What was that? I couldn't hear you." The look on his face lets me know he heard me loud and clear.

Reaching for the paper, I unfold it. It's the Seattle Times. The headline reads "Vindication After Sixteen Years of Silence". There is a large picture of Asher hugging his mom. The moment is raw and beautiful. Tears sting my eyes as I stare at the picture. A tear falls on the paper, causing me to look further down. It's a picture of me and Asher. We're walking out of the courthouse holding hands, his other hand is

in the air, trying to block the cameras, but his eyes are on me and mine on him. If love were a picture, this is it.

“Front page?” I continue to stare at the picture of us.

“Yep. You and me, Risa Belle.” He smiles as he eats my bagel.

“How do you feel?”

He exhales, sinking down in the chair and splays out his long arms and legs. “Good. I feel good. Want to hear something crazy?”

“I love crazy.”

“That felt directed at me, but I’ll let it slide... for now.”

The corner of his mouth tips up. “I’ve had a lot of anger for years that I’ve tried to control out of fear I’d become my dad. My anger wasn’t with the world, it was with my mom. But yesterday... when I hugged her, every single bit of that anger melted away. I still have questions, and it may sound crazy to realize this only now, but all these years all I’ve wanted is my mom back.”

Setting my coffee down, I get up and hug him. He pulls me into his lap. “I’m so happy that you and your mom are finally getting the peace you so rightfully deserve. I’m also proud of you for doing something that terrified you.”

Placing his hand on the back of my neck, he pulls me toward him until our lips meet. It’s never just a kiss with us anymore. It goes from a spark to flames in a split second. Those flames are quickly doused when Laynee appears.

“Hi, Laynee.” I wave at her over Asher’s shoulder.

She sits down in the chair beside us. “Uncle Ash, can you take me for ice cream? Mom said it’s not a breakfast food, but if you said yes, then we could go.”

Asher chuckles. “Yeah, we can. Are you coming with us? Or are you going to Harlow’s?”

“I already made plans with the girls. Were you down to get together with everyone tonight? Quinn and Kyrell should arrive soon. This will be their last chance to see everyone before the baby is born.”

“Yeah, of course. I’ll do anything to make time go faster. I can’t wait until Friday.”

I turn my attention to Laynee. “Before I leave, we’ll have to go shopping.”

She bounces in her seat. “With you?”

“Yes.” I smile. “We’ll have to take your sisters with us too.”

Her shoulders slump, a little disappointed. “Okay.”

Asher and I can’t help but laugh. “I’m going to get ready. I’ll see you at Harlow and Acyn’s place.”



An hour later, I’m almost ready when my phone lights up with a call from my mom. I haven’t spoken to her since our spat.

“Hi, Mom.” I don’t want to fight with her.

“Hi...”

A long silence follows. I switch to my ear buds while she finds her words and continue getting ready. While I may have sounded harsh, I meant every word.

“I needed to hear what you said to me. Even if it was hard. Marisa, I’m sorry for putting so much on you. I never stopped to think how it affected you.”

Putting my makeup brush down, I take a deep breath. “I didn’t want to realize this because I thought we had a good relationship. As I got older, I realized I didn’t have a childhood because I was too busy raising my younger siblings and helping you financially. Thinking about it makes me resentful.”

“I’m sorry, Marisa.”

“I know you’re sorry. Unfortunately, sorry doesn’t make it okay. I’m still processing, but I do appreciate your apology.”

“I understand.” She hesitates. “What does this mean for us?”

“You’re still my mom, and I love you. I want you to be my mom. Not my partner. I’ve thought a lot about boundaries, and I need you to stop asking me for money. There is no reason why you need me to support you financially. I have my own life I’m trying to create. It’s hard to do that when I’m sending you money for things that are your responsibility to pay for.” I almost slip up and say I wouldn’t mind helping out, but

remember my boundaries. My heart races and my palms sweat as I wait for her response.

“Okay...” She lets out a long exhale. “You’re right. I will respect your boundaries.”

“I already promised Killian he could come later this summer, and I’ll—”

“It’s okay. I’ve got it covered... I reached out to your dad to start helping with things for the kids.”

I’m stunned. “You did?”

“Yes. I’m ashamed to admit I was too prideful to ask before. My pride has gotten in the way countless times. I didn’t think it would damage the relationship we should have had all this time.”

“There’s still time, Mom. I’m glad he’s willing to help. What about you and Destiny?”

“We’ll arrive a week after Killian, if that’s okay?”

“Of course, Mom. I’m just happy you’re coming to see me.”

“Marisa... you know I’m so proud of you, right?”

“Yeah, Mom. I’ve never doubted that.”

We talk for a few more minutes. I tell her all about Asher. She’s excited to meet him. I’m grateful we were able to get past this. I want and need my mom in my life.



I missed the girls more than I realized. We've spent the afternoon, talking, laughing, and enjoying each other's company. Nothing compares to your best friends.

"All I know is I'm ready to have this baby. Pregnancy and summer do not mix." Quinn announces.

"When are you due again?" I ask, staring at her stomach. She looks gorgeous, but also like she could pop the baby out at any second.

"A few more weeks. Give or take.."

"You're almost there, babe." I take a sip of my mojito that Sevyn made me.

"How are things with you and Asher?" Sevyn asks, wagging her brows, and giving me a wink.

"Good... amazing."

"Fucking fabulous is more like it," Harlow chimes in as she sets a charcuterie board on the table in front of us. "I saw you two on the cover of the Seattle Times this morning."

"Oh yeah, guess I should be less worried about the dick he's giving you and ask how he's doing?" Sevyn downs the rest of her mojito.

I toss my head back with laughter. "He's happy. He's good."

"We're all so happy for him and his mom. We didn't know until we saw the newspaper, but we're here if y'all need anything." Quinn takes a bite of a cracker.

"Yeah. Asher's pretty private."

“I don’t blame him at all.” Harlow twists the cap off her water.

“So, are you and Asher going to join the baby club?” Sevyn asks.

I nearly choke on my drink. “What? No. I don’t even want kids.” My heart races. I’d rather not hear me and babies in the same sentence.

“Never? You and Asher could make some cute kids,” Quinn says around a mouthful.

“Guys... we just got together. Can we chill on the baby talk?”

“Yeah, Sevyn,” Harlow smiles. “Let them fuck for a while first.”

While they carry on their conversation about babies and Godparents, I get lost in my thoughts. I wonder if Asher wants kids one day? Would I want to have a child with him? Am I bad person if I have a baby with him in the future even though I just had an abortion? Wait... would I have a child just to make him happy? What if he wants to have a child and I don’t and then our relationship ends? What if I ask him about kids and then—

“Earth to Marisa.” Harlow snaps her fingers. “Are you with us, babe? You look like you’re about to throw up? We can go inside if it’s too—”

“I have to tell you guys something...”

“Why did the tone of that statement make me nervous?” Quinn asks, putting her cracker down.

I take a deep breath shaking out my hands. “Okay... Um... I–y’all remember Reese, right?” They all express their annoyance at the same time, making me laugh nervously. “A couple of months ago, I went to the doctor for a checkup for my anemia and to get an IUD. And found out I was pregnant.” I say it all in one breath out of fear I’ll never say it. They gasp and stare at me with wide eyes.

“I–I decided that same day, I wanted an abortion.” I stare at the water droplets dripping down the side of my glass as I tell them about getting an abortion, going to Reese’s clinic without knowing, Asher taking me to both appointments and staying with me. I let it all out. I tell them about Reese showing up at my house with his stupid fucking idea. I’m embarrassed, but I’m trying to let people care for me. They can’t care for me if they don’t know.

Taking a deep breath, I say, “I didn’t tell you guys sooner because I was worried how you’d react and my therapist said–”

Harlow wraps me in a hug before I say another word. Quinn and Sevyn join her. Next thing I know, I’m in an unexpected group hug. My eyes brim with tears and stream down my cheeks.

“I’m sorry you felt like you couldn’t talk to us. We love you. No matter your choice,” Harlow says, and I can tell she’s crying.

“I feel like a bitch for bringing up babies.” Sevyn sniffles. “I’m sorry. Harlow’s right, no matter your choice, we fucking love you.”

“We all got your back, babe. Through everything.” Quinn wipes my tears away before swiping away her own.

“I love all of you so fucking much.” I wrap my arms around them as tight as I can.

“Also, fuck Reese.” We laugh as we cry. “I felt that needed to be said. I wish nothing but bad things upon him,” Harlow says.

I’m not sure how long we hug each other for. Hugging them and hearing they’re here for me no matter what, helps a piece of me get put back in place that I lost along the way.

“Are... all of you... crying?” I recognize Acyn’s voice.

We break away from the hug. Asher, Acyn, Kyrell, Zane, Greyson and Selene, Greyson’s girlfriend, are staring at us clearly wondering what the hell they just walked in on.

“All of you are crying? What the hell?” Asher asks.

Kyrell plops down in a chair. “I’m used to this. Quinn cried on the flight here because the clouds were so fucking beautiful’.”

Quinn cackles. “Fuck you, Ky. They were pink, fluffy, and fucking beautiful.”

“Whatever you say, Angel.” He smiles at her.

Asher sits next to me, pulling me into his chest, and kisses the top of my head. “You good?” he asks for only me to hear.

“Yeah. I was just talking with the girls about everything.” He nods, understanding and hugs me a little tighter.

I look at Sevyn as she grins at us. “I knew the BDE was too good. Now look at you two.”

“Sev!” I gasp. Asher gives me a curious look.

“I’m not sure why you’re surprised Sevyn is announcing this to everyone.” Zane sits next to her, kissing her temple.

Harlow cackles along with Quinn. “Not so fun being on the receiving end is it?”

“What’s BDE?” Selene asks.

“Babe, I wouldn’t—” Greyson starts.

“Big Dick Energy,” Sevyn announces to everyone.

“O-Oh.” Selene’s eyes widen, glancing between Asher and me.

“This is a conversation I’d rather not fucking have.” Acyn wraps his arms around Harlow’s waist, palming her belly as he laughs.

“I agree with Acyn. However, I’m oddly curious.” Kyrell pulls Quinn onto his lap.

“Vegas.” I shrug. “Y’all already know what went down there.”

“Or up...” Harlow grins.

“Damn, Sunshine. You’ve been spending too much time with Sev,” Acyn exclaims as laughter fills the air.

“You told them I have a big dick?” Asher’s head is tilted to the side as he looks at me with a smug smile. He’s eating this up.

“I may have…” I shrug, remembering the conversation perfectly. “Are we going to eat or are we going to talk about Asher’s BDE? No thanks to Sev.”

She blows me a kiss. “You’re welcome.”

“Yes! Please, let’s eat.” Acyn announces, relief washing over his face.

I smile, looking around at my friends and the love we have for each other. There isn’t a place in this universe I’d rather be.

ASHER

Sitting around the fire at Acyn and Harlow’s house, Zane passes me a joint. I grab it, taking a hit, and pass it to Acyn. The girls went inside to watch movies and probably talk shit about us after we got back from dinner.

“It’s a trip you’re not single anymore.” Grey smirks.

“It’s a trip you’re not single yet,” I retort. “I’m surprised Selene showed up today.”

“Honestly,” he takes a long pull on the joint. “Me too.” He exhales, laughing. We laugh along with him.

“Damn, how times have changed.” Acyn sits up, throwing a log into the fire. “We’re in relationships and going to be fathers. Except for Zane... he jumped the gun and has years on all of us.”

“Shit...” Zane shrugs, drinking his beer. “I still don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. Don’t ask me for help.”

“None of us do.” I pat his shoulder.

“Sure as fuck don’t!” Kyrell exhales a puff of smoke. “Nothing like a plot twist in your own life.”

“I try to avoid those,” Acyn says. “Unless they’re good. Speaking of, Ash, how are you feeling about your mom coming home?”

It’s hard to avoid talking about my mom now since we graced the front page of the newspaper. Everyone had an idea of what happened. Now they know. When I saw that we were on the front page, I worried what the article would say. The media dragged my mom over hot coals sixteen years ago. I read it with caution and was relieved to see they told the truth. People who were once angry she killed a decorated police officer are now supporting her.

“I’m... fucking happy.” I normally keep everything under wraps, but I’m going to hold my head high like Marisa told me to.

“Damn right you are!” Kyrell shouts as they whistle and clap.

A sense of belonging washes over me. Even when I've felt alone, I've never truly been alone. I'm surrounded by people who have nothing but love for me. My mom and I still have a long way to go. *She* still has a long way to go. I know without a doubt that with genuine love and support, anything is possible.

Asher

My heart races with excitement as Marisa and I wait outside the correctional facility for my mom. She'll be walking through the gates any minute. I feel like a little boy. This moment isn't only for me now as an adult. It's also for the younger me who was terrified and filled with rage. He needs this moment too.

I stop pacing as the sound of weathered gates creaking open catch my attention. This time when I see my mom, it's only her. No officers at her side. She gives me a smile that rivals the brilliance of the sun. The happiness radiates from her. At first, her steps are unsure, but then she runs toward me. I welcome her hug as she crashes into me.

"Ash." She sobs.

"Welcome home, Mom."

We hold onto one another as the gates shut behind us, closing sixteen chapters of her life. She pulls away from me, studying my face. I resemble my dad. For a split second, I worry it's going to be an issue for her. But she gently brings her palm to my cheek, giving me a smile.

“This moment feels surreal.” She places her hand on my chest. “I just have to be sure you’re here.”

“I’m here.” I wipe the tears from her cheeks. “Are you ready to go?”

“Yes. Please get me out of here.”

I take the bag from her hand. “Mom, this is my girlfriend, Marisa.”

Marisa smiles, extending her hand out. My mom ignores it, giving her a hug. “Nice to meet you. You and Ash are perfect together.”

“Thank you.” Marisa returns her hug.

Marisa insists on my mom sitting up front with me as she climbs into the backseat. For some reason, I’m suddenly nervous. Gigi and Pops offered mom a place to stay and a job on their farm while she gets back on her feet.

We’re finally face to face, and I’m not sure what to say. As we drive away from the correctional facility, I watch my mom out of the corner of my eye. She’s staring at the side mirror, watching the place that kept her confined and silenced disappear behind us. Once we’re on the main road, she lets out a long exhale, resting her head against the seat.

A silence settles in the car. I don’t want to turn on music in case she wants to talk, even though I have no idea what the hell to say. Marisa suddenly appears in the rearview mirror, sliding to the center seat and buckling herself up. She smiles at

me as she leans forward, gently tapping my mom on the shoulder. Opening her eyes, Mom turns to face her.

“Please tell me Asher’s most embarrassing childhood story.”

My mom tosses her head back with laughter. The sound is beautiful. “You think I only have one?”

I let out a rumble of laughter. “Thank you, Marisa, for forcing me to relive my most embarrassing moments.”

“Only to humble you when the time calls for it.” She smiles innocently at me in the mirror.

“Let me think...” She’s silent for a few seconds before smiling. “Alright, we’ll start with when he was four and decided he’d take off naked down the street after a bath.”

Marisa falls into a fit of laughter. “How did he get away?”

My mom laughs so hard at the memory there are tears in her eyes. “Ash has always been a runner. Mix that with water and soap and he’s faster than The Flash.”

Catching Marisa’s gaze in the mirror as we laugh. I mouth that I love her as my mom tells her the story of me running naked through our neighborhood.



The drive to Oregon felt short as we talked and laughed together. I’m grateful Marisa got to share this moment with me. She talked to my mom more than I did. Which was fine with me because it gave us time to adjust being around each

other again. Once we arrived at my grandparents' house, everyone swept my mom into the house. Jax, Gen, and the girls left Seattle early this morning to spend the weekend with us. I think Jax and Gen were worried how things would go between mom and me. I have to remind myself this is an adjustment for them too. I'll always see them as my parents, even with mom here.

Standing on the porch, I stare at the trees as they sway gently in the breeze as the sun sets. The door opens behind me, and I turn to see Mom.

She smiles, clasping her hands together as she steps onto the porch. "Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all." I take a seat on the swing.

Sitting beside me, she fidgets with her hands. "Y-You look like your dad." I rub my hand over my jaw, wondering if this is a good thing. "You're handsome. He was handsome too. You have my eyes though."

"Yeah." I smile. "That's what everyone says."

A silence falls between us. It's not uncomfortable. I can tell she's trying to find her words.

"I-I'm sorry for abandoning you."

"I'm not sure you had a choice."

"No." She grabs my hand. "I did, and I made the wrong ones. We always have a choice."

“What was your other option? To get killed?” She looks down at her hand holding mine. I stare at her, wondering if I was too blunt. There’s no reason to sugarcoat it. We lived through it together. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Anything.” She squeezes my hand.

“What happened between you and dad? Am I romanticizing the past or were you two happy at some point?”

Holding my hand in hers, she sits back in the swing. “We were happy in the beginning, but somewhere along the way, we drifted apart.”

I pinch my brows together. “How?”

“James asked me to marry him shortly after we found out I was pregnant with you. He proposed a few weeks before he went to the police academy. His dream was to follow in his dad’s footsteps. After he graduated, we got married and started our lives together. You were born six weeks later.”

I was too young to care about the story of how my mom and dad got together. Now I listen with rapt attention.

“You were six months old when I decided to go back to school to become a teacher. James encouraged me. Joy and Avery helped us a lot with you while I was in school and your dad was working. By the time you were four almost five, I graduated and got my first job at the local elementary as a third grade teacher.”

Her gaze becomes distant as she continues. “When we got married, we were young. We believed we’d be happy and

together forever.” She scoffs. “We were naïve. You can be married, but that doesn’t mean you stop growing and changing. When you were seven, I found out your dad was having an affair. Not just with one woman. Multiple women. The only reason I found out is because I got an STD, and your father is the only person I had ever been with. When I confronted him about it, he broke down, and told me everything. I loved him... and forgave him. He told me he’d change, and I believed him.”

“He didn’t change, did he?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

She shakes her head. “He didn’t. He just got better at hiding it. I was none the wiser until I received a call one day from Sasha.”

“Wait...” I hold my hand up. “Sasha? The woman who lost the baby? That Sasha?”

“Yes. Her.”

“You knew her?” This is going deeper than I thought it would.

“Yeah. Sasha and I were best friends in high school. We all grew up together.”

I lean forward, cradling my head in my hands. “What the fuck?”

“That was my exact reaction when she called to tell me she was pregnant with James’ baby. It put me in a tailspin.”

“Yeah.” I stare at my sneakers. “I can imagine.”

“Again, I confronted James. But this time, something had shifted. He wasn’t the same person anymore. Or maybe he was exactly who he’d always been, and I could see it clearly then. That was the first time he hit me. When I told him, he backhanded me. Immediately after, he apologized and started crying. I was too stunned to respond. We were together for seven years, and he’d never so much as raised a finger at me.”

“Did you tell someone?”

“I remember telling my mom, and she asked me what I did to cause it and reminded me his job was stressful.”

I crack my knuckles. “That’s a disgusting response.”

“Yeah.” She rubs her palms against her jeans. “But I stayed. I became resentful. He did nothing but lie to me. A lie to cover a lie to cover a lie. I trusted nothing that came from his mouth. Things took a turn for the worse when...”

Looking at her, I notice tears falling down her face.

“Asher...” she cries. “All of this is my fault.”

“Mom, I don’t—”

“I slept with someone else, and he found out.”

I’m stunned into silence. Not because she cheated on my dad, hell, I would too at that point, but because she thinks all of this is solely her fault. “How does that make it your fault?”

“Because I was angry. I should’ve listened to myself and left. But I stayed because I wanted to try and make things

work. When I realized nothing was going to change, I had an affair to get back at him. If I would've just left then—”

“He could've left too. In fact, he should've left. Sometimes, in the moment, we feel like we're doing what's best even if, in hindsight, we realize it wasn't. Regardless of that, he never should've abused you. There will never be an excuse for that.”

“If I would've left, he would still be alive and—”

“He wasn't going to change. Stop thinking he was. You told me there's always a choice. He had a choice too, and he chose to consistently make bad ones.”

She wipes the tears from her face, looking at me. “I ruined your life.”

“Ruined?” I quirk a brow. “Have you seen my life? Jax, Gen, Gigi, Pop, and the girls love me so deeply I can't fathom what it's like for someone not to care. You haven't met my friends yet, but they're like family and always show up for me. And my girlfriend, well,” I smile, “you've met her. She's my heart walking outside of my body. I have a life filled with more love and support than I know what to do with except soak it up.

“After dad died and you went to prison, I was in the dark for a while. I carried a lot of anger and sadness. I went through a kaleidoscope of complicated emotions. I was sad because you were taken from me and angry because you chose to sever your life from mine. All I wanted was my mom back. I wanted you back. And now you're here.”

She hugs me as she cries. “I’m sorry, Ash. I just couldn’t face you after what I’d done.”

“I didn’t understand then, but I understand now. Mom,” I break the hug, looking at her, “you have to forgive yourself, or you’re still going to be in prison.”

My forgiveness isn’t enough. She’s going to have to do the work to forgive herself. I had to do the work to realize there was nothing I could do to save either of my parents.

Holding my gaze, she touches my cheek. “You’re right.” She smiles. “Jax and Gen did a beautiful job raising you.”

“They did, and you did too.” I can’t give Jax and Gen all the credit. She nurtured and loved me too. “I want to apologize for how abrasive I was when you tried to contact me. I wasn’t sure whether I wanted to talk to you. Truth is I didn’t think you’d get out. I didn’t want to become emotionally invested.”

“No need to apologize. Thank you for letting me into your life again. I hope that we can continue to build a relationship.”

“That’s my hope too.” I tightly wrap my arms around her. “I’m happy you’re finally home, Mom.”

I’m not sure what’s to come. All I know is it’ll be better than what we came from.



In the early hours of the morning, right before sunrise, I lie tangled with Marisa. This past week has been a rollercoaster of

emotions that I'm grateful to step off of. I talked with mom for a few hours last night. After we waded through the heavy stuff, we talked with ease. We didn't resolve everything. There's still a lot of stuff for us to get through, and we'll meet that when the time comes.

She told me her plans of wanting to help other women who are in situations like she was and is thinking of going back to school. Mom has always loved teaching and offering guidance. I'm really proud of her. When night had fallen, we gathered around the fire pit with everyone for s'mores. It was a nice welcome home for her. Gen and Mom were still talking by the fire when Marisa and I came to bed. I was relieved to see the worries Gen had about Mom being home dissipate once they had a chance to talk.

Marisa stirs, causing her curls to brush against my face. "I thought you were sleeping."

"No. Someone wouldn't let me get any sleep." She looks up at me with a smile on her face.

"Says the woman who was on top of me until just a few minutes ago."

"Never said I wasn't willing." She stretches, smooching my face with her hand.

I push her away from me, and she dramatically flops to the side. "Damn. I would hate to be up against you in a lawsuit. Probably show up with a neck brace and crutches for breathing in your direction."

Laying on her side, with her arm folded underneath her head, she gives me a smile that lets me know she'd destroy me if she wanted to. "At least you know what I'm capable of."

Brushing the curls out of her face, I rub my thumb along her cheekbone. "Yeah, it's a turn on."

She covers her mouth, stifling her laughter. "I knew something wasn't right when I clocked you with that remote."

I rub my forehead, remembering that moment vividly, and thoroughly enjoying myself. "I love a good time."

She rolls her eyes, laying her head on my chest and wraps herself around me. I trail my fingertips along her arm.

"Would you mind if my mom stayed with us for a few days? After she's settled?"

She sits up, looking at me. "No. Why would I mind?"

"Because it's your house..."

She raises a brow, tilting her head to the side. "It's *our* home."

"Yeah, but—"

"Ash." She presses her fingers to my lips. "It's *our* home. She's welcome any time. Besides, I don't recall you being this considerate when you moved in."

I grin. "Look at us now though, Risa."

"Speaking of which," she narrows her eyes. "Would you happen to know why the money for the heating system and renovation is still sitting in my account?"

“Is it?” I sit up, leaning against the headboard. “That’s crazy.”

“So crazy.” A hint of a smile is on her lips. “When I called to ask why, they told me someone had taken care of it.”

“What a generous person. We should find out who it is and thank them.”

She holds my gaze, waiting for me to say something. I simply stare back at her. “Why did you do that for me?” Her face softens as she looks down at the sheet. “That was long before we were together.”

“Because you’re you. That will always be the only reason I need.” Holding her chin, her eyes meet mine. “I plan to spoil you every chance I get, Risa Belle. Is that going to be a fucking problem?”

“I – ” She bites her lip. “No, sir, Mr. Blaine, sir. No fucking problem. Just tell me how you want it. Cause goddamn.”

I laugh, pulling her into my arms, kissing her neck. “I want you in every single way.”

“You already have me.” She straddles my lap, bringing her lips to mine.

Asher

I t's been three weeks and I'm still trying to get used to the idea my mom is home. My brain still thinks she's in prison. I have to constantly remind myself she isn't. It's always a surprise when a text appears from her on my screen. She feels bad for not visiting us yet, but I reassured her it's okay. Her adjusting and getting settled is more important. Besides, Marisa and I would rather go to my grandparents' house.

Except last weekend. Marisa has been gone for a weeklong yoga retreat in Tulum, Mexico. I've missed her like fucking crazy. The house is too quiet, and I've slept terribly. I'm used to her being wrapped around me all night. Thankfully, I've had work to distract me, and she arrives home today. Although after the realization I've had today, I'm not sure whether she'll be happy to see me or not.

Marisa's car is already parked in the driveway. Unbuttoning my shirt as I walk through the door, I head to the mini bar in the living room. I pour myself some whiskey, down it, and immediately pour another. Marisa appears, wearing one of my

t-shirts, and she stops in her tracks as she watches me down my second glass.

“Wanna talk about it?” She grabs a glass. “Or drink together? Maybe both?” Standing on her tiptoes, she presses a kiss to my lips. “I missed you.”

Setting my glass aside, I pull her into my arms and inhale my favorite scent. Her. “I’ve missed you too.” I kiss her neck and relax into her.

“Ash... what’s wrong?”

I hold her for a few more breaths before speaking. “I moved here for a project, Risa. That project ended today.”

She pulls away from me, uncertainty clouds her eyes. “Okay... what are you saying?”

“I’m saying... I don’t know what that means for us.”

“What?” her eyes narrow.

“I travel a lot usually, and I don’t know where I’m going next. I—”

She scoffs, pouring herself a drink. “So... what? I’m temporary? Are you breaking up with me to gallivant around the globe?”

“Gallivant? I—”

“Yes, Asher.” She says my name like it’s a stain she can’t get rid of. “Gallivant. Trot. Fuck off.” She downs her shot of tequila and pours another. “Did you enjoy yourself while you were here at least?”

This has taken a turn. “Risa, I’m not—”

“Spit it out, Asher.” I fucking hate the tone she’s using to say my name. “If you’re going to break up with me then fucking do it!”

Grabbing her shoulders, she glares at me as I bring myself to her eye level. “Risa, I’m not breaking up with you.”

Her face softens. “You’re... not?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Are you breaking up with me? You sound hell bent.” I try to keep the smile off my face.

“No. But you said you didn’t know what that meant for us and —”

“If you didn’t jump to conclusions without a goddamn parachute, I would’ve been able to finish my thoughts. I don’t know what that means for us because I don’t know how you feel about me traveling, and I understand if you don’t want to do the long-distance thing.”

I watch her face change from one of confusion to... anger. It flashes in her eyes.

“You jerk!” She tosses her shot in my face.

“Fucking shit, Risa!” My eyes burn as they’re soaked in tequila.

She gasps. I hear the shot glass clatter to the floor because I sure as fuck can’t see it. “I’m sorry. I—wait.” Her tone changes again, letting me know she’s not done. “No, I’m not sorry!

You fucking jerk! I come home, excited to see you, only to be met with your dramatics—”

“Oh, I’m fucking dramatic?” I bump into the cart with the drinks, trying to reach for a towel or something, anything, to dry my eyes.

“Would it have been so fucking hard for you to start off asking me how I feel about you traveling instead of saying,” she imitates my voice, “I don’t know what that means for us?!”

“Risa! My eyes are on fire!” I’m trying to listen to her yell at me while hoping I’m not going blind.

“Good!” She chucks a towel at my face. “How dare you scare me like that!”

Catching it, I wipe my face and blink rapidly. The burn slowly tapers off. When I open my eyes, Marisa is glaring at me with her arms crossed. Two things happen. I grab her, pulling her into me and claim her mouth. As she moans into mine, I know I want to spend the rest of my life with her. She goes to wrap her arms around my neck, but I catch her wrists, turning her around.

“We’re not in Vegas anymore, Risa, and you will be punished.”

“I’d love to see you—”

Flipping her over my shoulder, I cut her sentence short. “I don’t have to try. I do.” Holding onto her legs, I carry her to our room.

“Ash!” Laughter tumbles from her lips. “I’m sorry!”

“I accept your apology.” Kicking the door open, I sit on the bed and put her over my knee. “But you’re still going to get punished.”

She props herself up on her elbows, looking back at me as I shrug out of my shirt. “What’s the safe word, sir?”

I raise a brow. She loves this just as much as I do. “Your pick, love.”

She thinks for a moment. “Peach.”

“Peach?” Grabbing a fistful of her t-shirt, I pull it up, exposing her perfectly round ass.

“Yep, peach.”

“Eager to be taught a lesson?” I smooth my hand over her supple skin, palming her ass.

“Yes.”

I grab one wrist and then the other, bringing them behind her back and hold them in my hand. She turns her face to the side and I brush her hair out of the way.

“Yes, what?” I swiftly spank her. She gasps and goosebumps appear on her skin. I soothe the sting, rubbing my palm in circles over where my hand connected with her flesh.

“Sir.” She smiles. “Yes, sir.”

“Good girl. Do you deserve to be punished?”

“Yes.”

“I wait to hear “sir”. She doesn’t say it. The sound of my hand slapping her ass fills the room. This time she moans as she bites her bottom lip.

“Did you forget so quickly?” I soothe the sting again.

“Yes–No, sir.”

Grabbing her panties, I pull them down to her thighs. They’re soaked in her arousal. “Let’s try again,” I rub my hand over the curve of her ass. “Do you deserve to be punished?”

“Yes, sir. Punish me.” It spills from her lips as a needy plea.

“You’ve attacked me with a stiletto.”

“You deserved–” I spank her with more force. Her toes curl.

“You threw a remote at my head.”

“I didn’t miss,” she says proudly. “Get it right.”

My hand stings as I spank her three times in a row. She cries out, but doesn’t submit. My handprint glows a deep crimson against her rich copper skin.

“You divorced me.”

“I–” Her sentence gets caught in her throat as I spank her again. She bites the sheet. Flexing my hand, I shake out the pin prick feeling and then soothe her skin.

“You filed for the annulment! It wasn’t a divorce.” Her voice is muffled with the sheet in mouth. She spits it out. “And then you sent a fucking text saying it’s over! A goddamn text!”

“Never know when to shut that fucking mouth of yours, do you?” I massage her ass.

She bites down on her lip. I can tell she's contemplating how she wants to respond. Waiting a few breaths, she's still quiet. I spank her again. She lets out an unrestrained cry and her nails dig into my hand wrapped around her wrists.

"Do you?" She shakes her head no. "That's not an answer, Risa." The sound of my hand meeting her flesh fills the room along with her moans. My dick painfully presses against my pants as she writhes in my lap.

"And then you threw your drink in my face. It fucking stung by the way."

"Good," she quips.

I cock my hand back this time, spanking her so hard she jumps.

Brushing her hair aside, I lean forward and whisper in her ear. "Remember your safe word, Peach."

"I won't need—"

Always confident. She lets out a cry of pleasure as I spank her. My hand stings as I spank her again, and again, and again until the sweet word, "Peach!" spills from her lips. I immediately stop.

"Peach!" She pants, anticipating a spank that doesn't come.

Releasing her wrists, I lean forward, soothing the sting with my lips, pressing kisses to her tender skin. Pulling her into my arms, her thighs hug my waist as she sits on my lap, grinding against me. She brings her lips to mine, dipping her tongue into my mouth as she unbuttons my pants. I pull her shirt off

her, tossing it aside. Climbing off of me, she slowly lowers her chest to the bed, spreading her arms out in front of her, leaving her ass up in the air. I welcome her invitation. Taking my pants off, I grip her hips and plunge into her. She fists the sheets, calling out my name.

I couldn't leave her even if I wanted to. I've intentionally kept my distance from women for years, thinking I was better off. And I was... until I met her. It quickly became obvious that she is everything I could want or hope for in a partner. Now I couldn't imagine her not being in my life.

I wrap my arm around her waist and massage her clit. She spreads her thighs further apart, arching her back.

“That’s right. Open for me, Peach.”

Sitting up, she grips the headboard as she throws it back for me. It’s a beautiful view. I watch her ass bounce on my dick as I thread my fingers through her curls. Leaning back slightly, I thrust deeper into her, stretching her out.

“Oh, fuck...” she whimpers.

“Too much?”

“No, no, no... give it all to me.”

Bringing my left knee up, I do as she asks and bury myself. Her pussy tightens around me as her breath hitches.

“Ash...” She chokes out.

She cums for me, letting go of the headboard, and buries her face in the pillows. Her cries of pleasure are still loud even if

they're muffled. I grip both of her hips, pulling her back against me as I pound into her. If there is a paradise, I'm as close as one can get. Stars spot my vision. Holding onto her, I brace myself as I plummet into ecstasy. My hips stop, but hers don't. She slides up and down my length, taking all of my release, and soul, with her. I watch as she comes off my dick, leaving me coated in her essence. She stretches out on, melting into bed, and I collapse on top of her.

“Ash!” She giggles, trying to push me off her. “You're heavy.”

I roll over, pulling her with me. She buries her face in my neck. I rub my hands over her body, paying special attention to her ass.

“I didn't hurt you, did I?”

“No.” She looks at me with a smirk. “Do you think I'd ever have a problem telling you if you did?”

“Absolutely not.”

“You'd never hear the end of it.” She grabs my face, licking my cheek.

“What the—”

“You taste like tequila and sin. My two favorite flavors.”

I let out a rumble of laughter. “I taste like tequila because of you... and the sin.”

“I'm sorry I jumped to conclusions and threw alcohol in your face.” She gently brushes her fingertips against my

cheek. “I thought you were leaving me.”

“Risa, I’d never willingly leave you. I wasn’t sure you’d want to be with me if I start traveling again.”

“It’s adorable you think you could get rid of me so easily.” She pats my cheek. “The real question is, do *you* want to travel? I support whatever you decide.”

“No. I traveled before because no place felt like home. Then I came here, and you changed everything. And now that my mom is home... leaving isn’t something I want to do.”

When I took on the project here in Portland, I knew it would eventually come to an end, and I’d be onto the next thing. At that point, I wanted more. I didn’t know what the more was, but now as she lays on top of me, I do.

“Can’t you talk to Jax? He seems understanding.”

“We meet tomorrow. One thing he told me from the beginning is he won’t hand me anything. I want to be vice president and eventually president, which means I have to put in the work.”

“Ash...” She threads her fingers through my curls, massaging my scalp. “We’ll make it work. I’m not going anywhere. I love you,” she presses a kiss to my lips, “so fucking much.”

“Love you too, Peach.”

She snorts with laughter, clapping a hand over her mouth. “It was the only word I could think of in the moment. You had me bent over your knees.”

“I dig it. I’ll gladly never look at a peach the same.”



Walking into the board room, I take a seat beside Jax. He’s on a call. I make myself comfortable and wait for the rest of team to trickle in. Last night, I couldn’t sleep, anticipating what today’s meeting will bring. Glancing at my watch, it’s five minutes till the meeting begins and we’re still the only two here. I guess it doesn’t matter since Jax is still talking on the phone. Tuning him out, I pull out my phone to see a text from Marisa.

Risa Belle: Can we join the mile high club if you start traveling again?

Asher: Shit we can do that regardless. Let me know where you want to go.

Risa Belle: Anywhere you are.

I smile at my phone like the lovesick fool that I am. At least I know she’ll be by my side wherever I’m at in the world. Jax ends his call, giving me his attention.

“I apologize. The summer internship program started today, and apparently no one knows what they’re doing.”

“Isn’t this the fourth year your office has done this?” I chuckle at the look of annoyance on his face.

“Fifth. They’re intimidated by having someone follow them around even though they signed up to be a mentor.”

“Mmm... teenagers can be intimidating. Have you met your oldest daughter?”

“You know... I didn’t think of it that way. You’re right. She told me she didn’t want to be seen with me the other day. I’m pretty sure that’s what a knife to the chest feels like.”

“And you’re wondering why your team is panicking over a group of temperamental teenagers who are going to be with them for the next four weeks? That’s why.” Looking around the room, we’re still the only ones here. “Speaking of team, why are we the only ones here?”

“Because I’m only here to see you.” He switches from my uncle to the businessman I admire. “Needless to say, the Titan Tech project was successful.” I smile as he pats my shoulder. “I still remember when you showed me your first building design when you were fifteen.”

He has it hanging in his office beside a picture of the first building I actually designed. Jax always cheers me on, even when I stumble.

“I’m not sure I’ve ever told you this, but you became my dad when you didn’t have to. Thank you for being the man I needed so I could become the man I am now.”

“You’ll always be my son, Ash.” His voice is thick with emotion. “I’m so very proud of you.”

“Thank you.” I blink away tears.

Taking a deep breath, he gives me a smile. “I wanted to tell you in person that you’ll be Vice President of Blaine Architecture come tomorrow morning.”

My heart races as I gape at him. “What?”

His smile grows. “You were born for this, Ash. That is if you still want it?”

“Of course I want it! Are you kidding me?”

“You’re the future of this company. I wouldn’t want anyone else by my side.”

I run my hands down the sides of my face. “I thought I was a few more years away from this moment.”

It was only a year ago when Jax first mentioned the idea of me becoming Vice President. There was understandable pushback from those in the company who had seniority. They didn’t believe I had what it takes to manage Blaine Architecture in the way Jax has. He built his company from the ground up, and now has offices all over the world. I never took him wanting to make me vice president lightly even though others did because of my age. Over the past year, Jax has given me multi-million dollar projects to handle, and I’ve hit each one out of the park while securing future business.

“I knew you were ready a year ago when you said yes without hesitation.”

“I’m going to have to let this sink in. Does this mean I have to move to Seattle?”

Marisa's life is here. I couldn't ask her to give up her dream to live mine. My mom is here, and Seattle isn't far away, but the move would restrict how often I could see her. She's finally home, and I don't want to miss any time with her.

“Do you want to move?”

I hesitate, hoping my answer doesn't cost me this opportunity even if I am willing to stick by it. “No. Everything that matters to me is here. Not that you, Gen, and the girls don't. I just—”

“I get it, Ash.” He smiles. “My dream was to move to New York City and start my company there. Then I met Gen in Seattle and the rest is history. The Portland office is our second largest, it would make sense for you to live here.”

I'm at a loss for words. I hug him instead. He chuckles, patting my back. “Thank you, Jax. For everything.”

Sitting back in my seat, Jax tells me what to expect tomorrow and the days following. Only a few months ago, I didn't know where I'd be at the end of this project. Now I know, without a doubt, I'm exactly where I belong.

Asher

Arriving home, I find Marisa sitting on the couch with her knees hugged to her chest, staring at the TV. She's watching the news.

"Something happen?"

She jumps up, whipping around to face me. "I didn't hear you come in. Ash... oh my God. I did something crazy a few days ago." Grabbing my arm, she pulls me toward the couch.

"Should I be worried?" I raise a brow, sitting beside her and watching the TV. "If it's on the six o'clock news I'm definitely worried."

"I didn't think anything would come of it. You know?" She shrugs, twisting the ring I gave her in circles around her finger.

"No... I don't know because you haven't told me anything."

Tearing her eyes away from the TV, she focuses on me. Her eyes are alight and wild. "You know Keith, right? His husband is Marty. They usually attend the morning classes together."

"Yeah. What about them? Did something happen?"

“Okay, so...” She pulls the ring off her finger, fidgeting with it. “I—I was talking to Keith a couple of weeks ago about Reese. As you know, I talk a lot and I’ve always felt comfortable talking to Keith. When I finished telling him about the run in at the clinic and him showing up, he asked me if I still had the texts and the voicemails. They’re on my phone still.” She grabs it off the coffee table, holding it up. “And he asked to hear them. I was hesitant at first but then I thought, ‘Why am I protecting someone who made my life an absolute living hell?’ So I let him listen.”

I listen to her patiently even though I want her to spit it out. “He listened and said he’d be willing to do a special on it since he works for the news station. I said no at first because it would be easy for anyone to write me off as a mistress scorned. But he called me earlier this week saying Reese had intentions of running for mayor.”

“Wait... what?” Of course he wants to be a fucking politician.

“And your words kept playing in my head ‘take your power back’... so I did.”

“You did?”

A red banner with the words “Breaking News” appears on the screen, grabbing our attention. Keith appears, dramatically shuffling a stack of papers, looking pensive. If anyone can tell a story, it’s this man.

“I’m Keith Easton with Rose News, bringing you the latest happenings in our beautiful city. From the good, the bad, to the

downright ugly.”

“The mayoral election is coming up quickly, and earlier this week, the candidates were announced. It’s our duty, and promise, here at Rose News to provide you with the most accurate, and up to date information. Dr. Reese Villarreal, who announced his candidacy only days ago, has dropped from the race.”

“We have received exclusive text messages, voicemails, and photos of Dr. Villarreal proving he was engaged in an extramarital affair only months ago. This story becomes even more twisted when we learned once his wife found out, she proceeded to stalk the woman. She left voicemails and text messages making threats on the woman’s life. That woman has rightfully decided to stay anonymous...”

Marisa took her power back in her own way. I still remember being parked outside his house, ready to beat the living shit out of him. I’d still do it if she asked me, but she needed this for herself. She needed to do this in her own way. And I’m so fucking proud of her.

The segment is only a few minutes. As it ends, she takes a deep breath, turning off the TV, and looks at me. “I couldn’t let him go quietly. Not when he has the whole goddamn city thinking he’s a saint.”

I pull her toward me, wrapping her in a hug, and kiss the top of her head. “How do you feel?”

“I feel...” She pulls away from me enough to look up at me. “Relieved. Happy. A little less crazy. While all of this was

going on, some people knew, but they didn't know. Does that make sense?"

"That makes perfect sense." It's reminiscent of what happened with my parents. Everyone knew the story but they didn't truly know what happened.

"Now everyone knows, and he can't pretend like nothing happened while I pick up pieces of myself. This isn't about revenge. It's about my peace."

I grab the sides of her face, kissing her lips. "I'm so fucking proud of you. You deserve peace, happiness, and all the good shit. This is better than me beating his ass—" She bursts into laughter "—which I will still gladly do by the way."

"I know you would." She grins. "I'll be surprised if he shows his face after this." Her mouth falls open as her eyes widen. "Fuck him. How did the meeting go? I was so caught up in myself that—"

I let my smile fade, giving her a somber expression before looking away from her. "It went—"

"Ash, stop!" She pulls on my shoulder, making me look at her. Her eyes are filled with worry. "What happened?"

"I'm... going to be Vice President come tomorrow morning! I get to stay in Portland." I grin at her, holding my arms out to the side.

"What?!" She squeals, launching herself at me. "That's amazing, Ash!"

“Thank you, Risa. I wasn’t expecting him to promote me, but I’m happy he did.”

“You deserve it!” Pulling away from me, she smiles. “We should celebrate! Go out to eat or something fancy.”

“Razzle dazzle fancy or upscale casual?”

“Razzle dazzle, baby!” She twirls, shimmying her shoulders. I let out a belt of laughter. “I want to go somewhere I can wear a gown and you a tux, preferably with your top few buttons undone.”

I raise a brow. “That’s detailed. You’ve thought about this?”

“Fantasized.” She winks. “Now get ready.”



She says the restaurant she picks has one of the best views in the city. I wouldn’t know because I’m too busy looking at her. She’s always captivating, but tonight she shines a little brighter. The way her dress clings to her curves has me wanting to skip all of this to be home in bed with her.

“You’re staring again.” She smirks.

“Because you’re all I see.” The waiter severs my gaze as he pours wine into our glasses.

She looks at me over the rim of her glass as she drinks. The candlelight dances in her eyes, catching the brown and green hues. “If Vegas were my only indication of where we’d be, I

wouldn't have imagined this moment. Yet here I am, living in a waking dream with you."

I hold her hand, interlacing our fingers. "I used to think love, soulmates, and happily ever afters were bullshit. Then you came along in all your stubbornness and proved me wrong by simply existing."

She tosses her head back with laughter. "Why did you have to add stubborn in there?"

"I'll let you answer that yourself, Risa." The corner of my mouth tips up.

"Ash... can I ask you a question?" Her smile slips a little and her eyes become distant.

"Anything."

"Do you want kids... some day?" I lean back in my seat, studying her. "I'm trying to process everything with my therapist. We got on the subject of kids in the future because Sev, Quinn, and Harlow had brought up us having kids. It wasn't something I considered before. Then I started spiraling, wondering if you want kids because I'm not there yet and I don't know if I'll ever be. And if it's a deal breaker, I totally understand." She downs her entire glass of wine, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, and lets out a long exhale.

I keep my eyes on her as I take a drink. "Honestly," I set my drink aside, "When you told me you were pregnant, I was relieved the baby wasn't mine. I'm not ready for a baby right now. It's not about the financial stability or having the house

with the white picket fence for me. It's about emotional maturity and my mental health. I saw what happens without those two things in a relationship. I'd never wish that upon anyone and for damn sure not my own kids. Do I want them some day?" I shrug. "Maybe. With you I want everything. But it isn't a deal breaker if you don't want kids, Risa."

"That's the thing." She brushes her curls out of her face. "I know right now I don't want kids. I'm not ready. But that doesn't mean my choice is set in stone... right? Does it make me a bad person if I want kids in the future? Because Ash... I didn't think you and I would happen. Especially not after everything. But here we are, and I see a future with you... that maybe someday would include a kid or two. I don't know... my therapist said it's okay if I change my mind down the road. I'm sorry to lay this on you now. Jesus, I know how to ruin a good moment."

Leaning forward, I rest my forearms on the table. "Risa, you're allowed to change your mind. You're not going to be the same person you are now tomorrow, in a year, or even in ten years. I'm fine with someday, maybe."

She smiles, visibly relaxing. "Do you think I'm crazy?"

"No. I know you are." She gapes at me. "But I love you anyway."

"I wish I could argue this point," She rolls her eyes. "But the only thing I can say is I love you too."

Our waiter returns. "Would you be interested in dessert?" He looks between the two of us.

Marisa glances at me before saying, “No. I think we’re ready to go.”

“Very well.” The waiter nods, leaving to get our check.

“I have something better in mind for dessert.” She gives me a brazen smile.

“You?”

“All you can eat, babe.”

My taste for her is insatiable as my dick twitches in responses. The waiter returns, I pay in cash, leaving him a hefty tip. Judging by the look of shock on his face, it doesn’t happen often even though this is a top rated restaurant.

Walking behind her, I smack her ass as we head for the exit. She turns around, wrapping her arms around my neck as we stumble out the door with our lips locked. The valet clears his throat, waiting for one of us to give him a ticket. Marisa lets me go while I dig in my pockets for it. Handing it to him, I loop my arms around her waist, kissing her neck.

She leans into me, tilting her head to the side to give me better access. Seconds later, they return with my car. The valet hands me my keys, and I give him a tip before opening the door for Marisa. As soon as we’re in the car, she takes off her shoes as always and puts her feet on the dash. She looks at me, smiling. I chuckle, shaking my head, and focus on the road.

“Where were you going to take me for our first date that I royally fucked up?”

I glance at her. “You act like you intentionally did it. I only wanted to spend time with you and I got that.” She smiles. “I can still take you there if you want... minus the razzle dazzle.”

She laughs. I’ve missed seeing her this happy and carefree. “I’ll love it even without the razzle dazzle.”

Thirty minutes later, we’re in an elevator at the Titan Tech offices, going to the top. I’m trying not to laugh at the look of disappointment on her face. She’s barely spoke since we pulled into the parking garage. Clearly, coming to an office building wasn’t her expectation. She’ll get over it once we reach the top. The elevator slows and the door dings. Marisa quickly glances at me, trying to keep a neutral face, but fails.

“You wear disappointment so well.” I wrap my arm around her neck, kissing her temple.

“I’m not—” Her mouth falls open as the elevator doors open. “Where are we?”

“We’re at the top of the Titan Tech building. You didn’t think I’d bring you to an office for fun did you?” Interlacing our fingers, we exit the elevator.

“I was momentarily disappointed because I really thought you did, but I was going to stick beside you.”

I laugh. “Glad to know even if I fail, you’ll still support me.”

“Of course.” She smiles. “Did you... design all of this?”

“Yes.” I grin. “From the ground up. They wanted a place employees could unwind. I designed a rooftop oasis for them.”

“Ash, this is gorgeous.” She turns on the spot, taking in the lush greenery, warm lighting, plush seating, and waterfall fountain. “I’d want to work here simply for this space. It doesn’t even feel like we’re in the city.”

“This was my favorite part of the project because it’s not ordinary.”

“Knowing what you do and seeing it in person are two entirely different things. I knew you designed stuff – ” A low chuckle resonates in my chest “ – But Ash, this is extraordinary.” She stands in front of the fountain, staring into the dark, rippling pool of water.

Standing behind her, I wrap my arms around her waist. The moon and the outline of us is reflected in the water. “I’ve been around the world. Nothing compares to the beauty I see and have found in you.”

“Do they have cameras up here?”

“No, they haven’t–”

“Good.” She turns around, crashing into me. Her lips meet mine, holding her flush against me. She pulls at my belt, working to get it undone. I don’t know how she got this dress on, but I’m about to figure out how to get it off. I back up, pulling her with me. The back of my legs run into one of the loungers and we fall onto it. My hands finally find the fucking zipper on her dress. I tug on it, watching the dress slide off of her shoulders, and pool around her hips.

Once she has my belt and pants undone, I slide them down. She holds my dick in her hand, keeping her eyes on me as she lifts her hips and then sits on it. I grunt, gripping her hips as she plunges me into her warmth. Her head falls back as she moans.

“Goddamn.” I inhale sharply. “I wasn’t expecting you to just sit on me like a fucking throne.” I try to catch the breath she stole from me.

Opening her eyes, they’re dark and filled with desire. “Why not?” she simpers, lifting her hips slightly before sinking back down onto me. “Are you not mine?”

“Fuck.” I groan.

“Is that a yes?” She moves her hips, grinding on me. Her nails graze my skin as she grabs a fistful of my shirt.

“Yes.” I let out a shuddering breath. “Hell yes. All of me is yours.”

Leaning forward, she brings her lips to mine, giving me a soft kiss. “You have all of me too...”

Sitting up, she slowly moves her hips. Keeping a steady rhythm. I push her dress up her thighs, exposing her center. Bringing my thumb to her clit, I heighten her pleasure.

“Fuck, Ash. You feel so good.” She leans back, grabbing her heels, and spreads her thighs for me.

I watch her revel in the pleasure. The movement of her hips, the bouncing of her full breasts, and the moans spilling from her lips have me edging my climax. She moves her hands up

the curve of her waist and massages her breasts. Her eyes lock onto mine. For a while, her eyes were a storm of sadness. As she moves on top of me, all I see is certainty and power. The rise and fall of her chest quickens and her pussy tightens around me. She's about to come for me. I keep the pressure on her clit. She takes a sharp inhale of breath before letting out a moan. Her hips stutter, losing the rhythm as she succumbs to the pleasure.

Sitting up, I wrap my arm around her waist, grabbing a fistful of her curls.

“Give me all of it, Risa.” I thrust into her, picking up the rhythm.

Her nails graze my back as she bites down on my shoulder. She moans into my ear, causing a shiver to ripple through me. I grip her hips, bouncing her on top of me as I plunge into her. The tingle she's been teasing since she sat on me erupts as I fall over the edge after her. She puts her hands on my shoulders, riding my climax. I tremble with each movement of her hips. She slows, relaxing onto me, and rests her forehead against mine.

“If they had cameras, I'd ask for a copy,” she says hoarsely.

I pull her flush against me, laughing. “I wouldn't mind reenacting this at home and recording it.”

“Ooo a sex tape.” She presses a kiss to my lips. “Count me in.”

“We should probably go before the security guard comes looking for us.” I pull the straps of her dress up, helping her with her zipper.

She fixes her hair. “It’d make his night more interesting.”

I chuckle, giving her my hand as she stands on her feet. “Don’t really need us fucking on top of the Titan Tech building to be the talk of the office.” She smiles. Standing, I fix my shirt and pants.

Marisa wraps her arms around my middle, looking up at me. “You’re the only person I’d ever want to be on top of the world with.”



The next afternoon, I startle Marisa when I drop a box onto the reception desk. She clutches her chest, glaring at me with a smile on her face while Natalie laughs.

“You said you weren’t coming by.” She stands, leaning over the counter to give me a kiss.

“I wasn’t until the meeting got pushed back.”

“Is this box for me?” She picks it up, tilting it side to side.

“No. I just thought it was a nice box.” She sucks her teeth, rolling her eyes. Natalie laughs at our exchange. “How are you?” I turn my attention to her while Marisa opens the box.

“Good.” Natalie smiles. “I was telling Marisa we should get together for a double date. Eric is free on the weekends.”

“Oh yeah, that sounds—”

Marisa gasps, slamming the box shut. “Asher! What the fuck?” she hisses, nervously glancing at Natalie.

“What?” I ask, trying to keep the smile off my face.

Natalie reaches for the box. “What is it?” Marisa slides it away.

“Nothing. Just—” Marisa rounds the desk, holding the box to her chest. Grabbing my arm, she pulls me toward the office. “I’ll be back. We’ll be back. It’s nothing.”

I snort with laughter, following behind her. “You’re making it into something with how secretive you’re being.”

She shoves me into the office, kicking the door shut behind us. “Are you fucking kidding me? An apron, heels, and a G-string?” Tearing the top off the box, she pulls out the apron.

“I thought you’d like it since it’s your favorite color.”

She puts her hands on her hips, glaring up at me. “I thought you said we weren’t about the bet.”

“Correct. You and I never have been nor will we ever be about a bet. I wanted all of you, not just a piece of you.”

Her lips part as she stares at me, momentarily losing her fire. Taking a deep breath, she reignites the flames. “Then why the hell are you delivering this outfit to me at my job?”

“A bet is a bet, and I intend to collect, Risa. You said fuck the bet, not me.” I pull on one of her curls, twirling it around my finger. “I said *we* aren’t about a bet, which *we* are *not*.

Therefore, I want you to cook dinner for me. Naked, in heels, complete with a happy ending, and you as dessert. The apron is optional.”

She crosses her arms. “You’re so fucking annoying. You know that, right?” There’s a hint of a smile on her lips.

The corner of my mouth tips up. “You’re going to do it then?”

Shrugging, she looks inside the box. “Those Saint Laurent heels are tempting...” Grabbing the box, I put the lid back on. “What are you doing?”

“Holding onto them until you make up your mind.”

She gapes at me. “You came here to be a menace didn’t you?” I try to suppress my laughter. “Here I was thinking how sweet it was for my boyfriend to surprise me, and you’re proving otherwise.”

“No, I came here to see you...” Wrapping my hand around the back of her neck, I kiss her. “And annoy you.”

She shoves at my chest, laughing. “At least take me to lunch.”

“I can do that.” I smile, following her out of the office.

When she gets to the reception desk, she grabs her phone off the counter. “Natalie, we’re going to lunch. Did you want anything?”

“An iced coffee, please.”

“I got you, babe.” Marisa smiles at her.

I wrap my arm around her neck, pulling her into me as we walk outside. We're almost to my car when another pulls up in front of it, blocking us from leaving. Marisa's steps momentarily falter, but I keep my arm around her as we continue walking. Reaching my car, I unlock it and open the door for her. Reese hops out of the car with his eyes trained on Marisa. He's bold today.

"You thought I wouldn't recognize the texts and voicemails?" He stops feet away from us. Wise choice. "Do you realize what you've done?"

She laughs in his face, which makes me laugh, causing him to quickly glance at me. "Oh, Reese." She pouts. "Looks like you've had a rough time." As she takes a step toward him, I do too. Her voice becomes dangerously low. "When I told you I could destroy you, I fucking meant it."

He raises his voice. "I've spent years –"

"Being a piece of shit." Marisa drowns out his voice. "You've accomplished nothing but being a piece of shit. The only person who feels sorry for you is your wife. Go home to her."

"Jessica was right, you're a fucking whore," he seethes.

I was fine letting her defend herself until now. "Want to say that a little louder, bruh?"

"This has nothing to fucking do –"

"Wrong." I step in front of Marisa, pushing her behind me. "This has every – fucking – thing to do with me because she is

everything to me. I fucking love that woman more than I love myself, and that's a lot of fucking love." Marisa giggles behind me. "Your first mistake was getting out of your car. Your second mistake was calling the woman I love a whore, so now what I'm going to do is beat your fucking ass and make you apologize."

He scoffs. "You're not gonna do shit."

Marisa

Asher rolls his shoulders, cracking his knuckles and neck, and shrugs out of his suit jacket. Handing it to me, he says, "I've gotta go in, love."

I blink, taking the jacket from him. The look in his eyes tells me there's no talking him out of it. Not like I want to anyway. Reese deserves every ill thing coming his way.

When I don't say anything, he nods. "This will be quick."

Asher moves quickly, grabbing the back of Reese's neck and slams his face into the hood of his car. He briefly looks around while still holding onto his neck like he's a puppy. Reese cries out in pain as blood spills from his nose and mouth.

"No one taught you manners?" Asher asks through gritted teeth.

"I'm gonna fucking—"

Asher kicks the back of his knees, making Reese kneel in front of me. “I want you to fucking apologize for being a worthless, lying piece of shit.”

Reese spits blood at my feet. “Go to hell.”

I back up as Natalie, Drystan, and a few other employees come outside to see what the commotion is. All of them stand behind me, watching Asher. None of them liked Reese. That should’ve been my first red flag.

Asher knees him in the mouth, causing Reese’s head to snap back. He writhes around on the ground for a moment before Asher forces him back to his knees.

“Let’s try this again, apologize to Marisa for being a worthless, lying piece of shit. Real loud now since you seem to have no problem getting loud with women.”

“M-Marisa –” Reese snivels.

“Nah.” He smacks the back of Reese’s head, causing me to laugh. “Don’t utter her fucking name. I told you to apologize for being a worthless, lying piece of shit.”

“I–I’m sorry...” Reese says and blood spills from his mouth. It looks like he’s possibly missing a tooth.

“For what?” Asher asks, pulling Reese’s hair forcing his eyes to meet mine.

“For being a w–worthless, l–lying piece of shit.”

“All together now,” Asher orders.

“I–I’m s–sorry for being a l–lying, w–w –worthless piece of s–shit.”

“Again!” Asher barks. “Loud and fucking clear.”

Reese repeats his words. Tears and snot, mixing with his blood. How the mighty have fallen. After countless empty apologies, the one that Asher forces from him is genuine. I watch Asher, towering over Reese as he makes him bow on his knees and submit to me. The love I have for Asher roots itself deeper, realizing all his love, passion, and devotion has made me whole. Not because he’s pieced me back together, but because he’s protected the pieces while I found a home in myself again. Asher keeps a firm grip on Reese’s hair and squats in front of him, looking into his wide eyes.

“Don’t even think of her, got it?” Reese tries to nod, but Asher tightens his hold on his hair. “You’re a doctor, right?” He tries to nod again. “Then you understand me when I say it would be good for your health to forget her existence?”

“Y–Yes.” Reese stutters.

“If you find yourself struggling with this, or think of doing something as stupid as you tried to do just now, remember me beating the shit out of you until it sinks in. I was generous today. If you even think of creating a next time, I know where you live, and I will bury you. Do you understand?”

“I – I understand.” Reese gulps, trying to control his tears.

“Good boy.” Asher smacks the side of his face, pulling him up by his hair. “Now get in your car, and remember what I told

you.” He shoves him, causing him to hit the side of his car and crumple to the ground.

Despite his pain, he wastes no time scrambling into his car. Asher brushes off the front of his still pristine shirt as he watches Reese peel out of the parking lot. Natalie, Drystan, and everyone else cheer.

“Can you give us a minute guys?” I ask, glancing back at them. They take their celebration into the studio.

Asher grabs his jacket, but I keep a firm grip on it, making him to look at me. “How do you know where he lives, Ash?”

He holds my gaze. “I was there with you through it all, Risa. I’d do it again, but don’t think it wasn’t hard for me to watch you go through it. I felt helpless. He took so much from you and felt no remorse. I was going to correct it. I found out where he lives, got a bat, and I was going to do much more damage than I did just now. I spared him because his kids were with him. If you’re upset about that, I understand. But I’m not going to apologize because I’m not sorry.”

I let go of his jacket. “I’m not upset or sorry either. A little turned on? Maybe.”

He lets out a rumble of laughter, rubbing his hand over his face. “I thought you were mad.”

I wrap my arms around his middle, looking up at him. “No. How can I be mad about you protecting me? That’s sexy as hell.”

Chuckling, he places his hand under my chin, bringing his lips to mine. “I love you, Risa Belle.”

“Love you too, Ash.” I kiss him again. “Looks like I’ll be wearing those heels after all.”

“Good, because the sight of his blood made me fucking sick.” He gags, wrapping his arm around my neck, and I snort with laughter. “But I’d do it again for you.”

Marisa

I've completely lost and found myself in Asher. I remember watching my friends get into relationships, wondering when it would be my turn. Now here I am with a man I can't see myself without. He loves me in a way I didn't know was possible to be loved.

Sitting on the back porch, I pick out gifts for Quinn and Kyrell's baby. He was born a few days ago. I can't wait to meet and hold him. We'll be flying to LA at the end of the month to spend a few days with them.

I hear Asher pull up in the driveway. Moments later he's walking through the back door with a bouquet of purple orchids and calla lilies. Kissing the top of my head, he hands them to me.

"How was your day?" He sits beside me.

I'm too busy looking at the flowers. "These are gorgeous. Thank you." I press a kiss to his lips. "Good. I have to admit, I'm enjoying not always having to be at the studio."

Part of my healing has been allowing others to take care of things. My therapist reminds me frequently I have to give others the opportunity to care. In an attempt to do that, I asked Natalie if she'd be interested in being the manager of Sol Movement. She didn't hesitate since she's getting her degree in hospitality management. It's allowed me to take a step back and not have to be at the studio every day. My hope is that one day, Sol Movement will be a full service spa. Asher even came up with a couple of designs as to what the spa could look like when I do decide to expand. It's still a while away, but it's exciting to be dreaming up what will someday be.

He smiles. "Did Laynee call you yet?"

"No..." I grab my phone, checking to see if I missed her call. "Why?"

"She is having a princess-themed birthday party. I had an idea to rent a carriage and show up as a prince with you as the princess. What do you think?"

He tugs on one of my curls, twirling it around his finger. "That's adorable! She'll freak out. Are you buying me a dress and crown?" I grin, batting my lashes, already knowing he'll give me whatever I want.

"Remember when you used to fight me for paying for your meal?"

I brush my curls out of my face. "I was insane and didn't know what I was missing out on." I lean forward, pressing a kiss to his lips. "Spoil me."

“Do you want to go shopping now or—”

I snap my laptop close, hopping to my feet. “Now is good.”

He chuckles, following me into the house to get ready



A few hours, and countless shopping bags later, I’m pulling gigot style sleeves up my arms with assistance from one of the dress shop employees. As soon as I saw this dress, I had to try it on. It’s white satin, floor length, with a corset style bodice, the bottom flares out with a train, and has a thigh high slit. It’s extra but I’m in love.

Looking in the mirror, I make the dress swish with the sway of my hips. The slit isn’t noticeable until I move. Elegant and sexy. The woman who’s helping me pulls the curtain aside, presenting me to Asher. His jaw drops. He sits frozen in the chair for a few breaths before sauntering toward me. Holding out his hand, I put mine in his and he twirls me around. I giggle, truly feeling like I’m in a fairy tale.

“Risa Belle, that’s the one.”

“You don’t think it’s too much?” I smooth my hand down the front. “It’s a little kid party after all.”

“You’ll never be too much.”

“It’s nearly two thousand—”

“It doesn’t matter. Do you want it?”

I bite my lip, staring into the mirror. “Yes, but for one day?” I tilt my head to the side, admiring the softness and beauty of the dress. I’ve already imagined how my hair and makeup will look.

“No, it’ll be a day to remember. Do what you want. Have fun. Plus...” He pulls a crown from behind his back, fixing it atop my curls. “It suits you.”

I smile so hard, my cheeks hurt. “Alright, you’ve twisted my arm. I’ll get the dress if you insist.” I let out an exasperated sigh, shaking my head.

His deep laugh fills the space between us. “You were difficult to convince.”

Standing on my tiptoes, I press a kiss to his lips. “Now, I need shoes.”

“You know,” he follows behind me. “For someone who hates shoes, you sure do have a lot of them.”

“A necessary evil, babe.” I wink at him over my shoulder. “If I’m not going to be barefoot, I may as well look cute.”



Instead of staying with Jax and Gen, Asher booked us a room in a lavish hotel for the weekend. Sitting in a fluffy, white robe, I sip on a latte as I enjoy the view of Elliot Bay. Asher comes out of the shower with a towel slung low on his hips

and kisses me on top of the head. The simple gesture will forever make me melt.

“What time do we have to arrive at the party?”

“Gen said around 1. We’ll meet the carriage ride people near their house and arrive in all our glory.”

I snort with laughter. “You’re really enjoying this aren’t you?”

“Yes.” He grins. “Have you seen me in my suit and you in that dress? Laynee might faint.”

“We do look pretty damn good.”

He makes his voice high pitch, mimicking mine. “You’re so full of yourself, Ash. Come down off your high horse.” He scoffs. “Look at you now.”

I toss my head back with laughter. “You’re rubbing off on me.”

“In more ways than one.” He winks.

“I enjoy all the ways.” I smile, putting a strawberry in my mouth. Joining me at the table, I watch him pull the silver top off his plate. “What did you order?”

“Peaches and cream French toast.” He smirks, taking a bite. “Almost as delicious as the real thing.”

Finishing my latte, I set my cup aside. “You have a bit of—” I stand, leaning across the table, and lick the corner of his lips. “—Cream.” I pull away, but he grabs my robe, pulling me

toward him until our lips meet. “I’ve got a spa appointment in forty–five minutes.”

“That’s nice.” He pulls on the knot of my robe, causing it to come undone. “I want a taste of the real peaches and cream.”

I round the table, standing between his legs. He grips my ass. “Unless you...” He kisses the butterfly tattoo on my hip. “Don’t want...” He kisses just below my belly ring. “Me too...” His tongue meets my center, teasing my clit.

A jolt of pleasure grips me. “Dammit, Ash...” I moan, dropping my head back. “If I look a hot mess, I’m blaming you.”

“Nah, you always look as good as you taste.” Standing, he grabs my waist and picks me up. I wrap my legs around him as he kisses my neck and breasts. He sets me on the bed, grabbing an ankle and pulling me to the edge.

Dropping to his knees, he trails his hands up my outer thighs. “Open for me, Peach.”

Falling back against the bed, I open for him.

Asher

Marisa fixes her crown for the millionth time in the reflection of the car's window. Grabbing her hands, I pull them away from her head and hold onto them.

“You’re stunning. You look like a real life queen.”

She smiles, relaxing. “A queen?”

“Princesses are cool and all,” I untangle one of her curls from the crown. “But you’re the definition of a queen.”

Even if the afternoon sun weren’t illuminating her rich copper skin, she’d still be radiant. I drink her in daily, wondering how she’s mine. She could be with anyone, anywhere, but here she is with me, playing dress up to make my six year old niece happy. She owes me nothing, but always gives me everything.

“We need pictures.” She opens the car door, grabbing her phone off the seat. “I wish Harlow were here. We look too good to not remember this moment.”

She asks the carriage driver to take a few pictures of us. He gladly obliges. We pose for pictures until Marisa feels

satisfied. When she gets her phone back, she smiles as she scrolls through them.

“Okay, I’m ready. I don’t know why I’m so nervous.” She puts her hand in mine as she climbs into the carriage. “I could show up in a thrifted 80’s prom dress, and Laynee would still be ecstatic to see me.”

“She would.” I climb in behind her. “Although she may call you out on your lack of fashion.”

She falls into a fit of laughter. “Gen has raised her well. And it makes sense where your love for clothes came from.”

“Does Gen strike you as the type of person who would allow anyone near her not to shine?”

“No, and my closet thanks her.”

Gen is always giving her stuff she finds and thinks will look good on her. I’ve enjoyed watching Marisa seamlessly fit into my family as if they’re her own. Most of the time, Gigi, Gen, and my mom would rather see her than me. I can’t even pretend to be hurt because it’s hard to not want to be around her. The carriage jolts forward, taking us down the street.

Marisa squeals, holding my hand. “This is unreal! Look at me,” she poses, “a real life queen. And I’m grateful we have a hotel room so I can thoroughly enjoy you and that suit once we’re done.”

“Shit, me too.” I press a kiss to the back of her hand that’s intertwined with mine. “I plan to knock that crown sideways once we get back to that room.”

She crosses her legs, revealing her thigh as she squeezes them together. “Please don’t talk dirty to me right before a child’s party. I can’t have dick on my mind for the rest of the afternoon.”

I give her an amused look, resting my hand on her thigh. She narrows her eyes at me, brushing my hand away, and covers her leg with her dress. “Goodness, you act like you didn’t just have me all morning.”

Leaning toward her, as we wait for the gates to open to Jax and Gen’s house, I trail kisses up her neck. “If I could have you every second of every day, I would, Risa Belle.”

“You may not physically have me all the time, but you have my heart and soul,” she says before bringing her lips to mine.

We get lost in the kiss until the carriage comes to a slow halt. “Ready?”

“Yes, let’s go play King and Queen for a day.”

Climbing out of the carriage, I hold my hand out for her. She places hers in mine, looking down at her feet as she descends the steps. As she gets out of the carriage, our families appear, along with Laynee’s party guests, and our closest friends. She doesn’t notice anyone until she hears the shutter of Harlow’s camera and the gasps of ten little girls who are staring at her in total awe.

Marisa looks up, stopping in her tracks. “Killian? Mom? Destiny?” They wave at her, smiling. She tears her eyes away from them. “Ash, what is—”

Before she can finish her sentence, I kneel before her on one knee. Stunned, she covers her mouth. I reach into my suit jacket pocket, pulling out a black, velvet ring box. Tears fill her eyes.

“I fell for you long before you fell for me. It took my ego and my heart a while to accept that.” She laughs, wiping tears from her cheeks. “I used to think love wasn’t worth it, then I met you and realized you’re worth falling for. I’ve fallen so deep into the depths of you, I can’t see myself without you. Marisa Belle Banks,” I hold her hand, “Will you marry me?”

“Yes!” she announces with a smile on her face. “I’ll marry you.”

Taking the ring out of the box, I slide it onto her finger. Rising to my feet, everyone cheers and she crashes into me. I wrap my arms around her waist, picking her up, and twirl her around. She brings her lips to mine. I’ve never felt this happy and at peace in my life. Setting her back on her feet, she looks at the ring, glinting in the sun’s rays. It’s an 18 kt gold band with a two carat, cushion cut white diamond surrounded by four smaller purple diamonds.

“Ash... I get to spend the rest of my life with you.”

I wipe her tears. “It’s you and me, Risa Belle.”

Smiling, she wraps her arms around my neck. “I love you, Ash.”

“I love you too.”

Holding her hand, I press another kiss to her lips as our families, friends, and Laynee's party guests join us.

In the beginning, we couldn't stand each other. Now we're choosing one another, knowing we were always meant to be. As we head inside to celebrate Laynee and our engagement, I know the piece of myself I felt was missing is her. She's the other half of me. Our souls knew before our hearts did that we belong together.

She didn't think she'd find love. I didn't think anyone could love me. Those were lies we told ourselves. The truth is, we weren't willing to settle for anything less than what we've found in each other—a worthy love.

Epilogue

Asher

Arriving home after a run, I sit on a bench in the backyard to take off my shoes and catch my breath.

Marisa steps onto the porch. Judging from the smile on her face, she's about to tell me something. "You're back! Okay." She holds up her hands. "Hear me out, I have a wild idea."

"The last time you had a wild idea, we ended up married."

"Correct." She beams.

I peel off my sweaty t-shirt, waiting for her to fill me in. Instead, she's still looking at me with a radiant smile. Raising a brow, I ask, "Are we just going to smile at each other or...?"

"What if..." Her voice shakes with excitement. "We got married in Vegas?"

"Seriously?" I cock my head to the side. "You don't want to do it big?" We've been engaged for a little over a month, and every time Gen, Gigi, or our moms bring up wedding plans, Marisa gives vague answers. I'm leaving the wedding planning to her because I want it to be whatever she desires.

She sits on my lap, wrapping her arms around my neck. “You gave me a dream proposal, and you treat me like a Queen. If I asked you to hire someone to carry me from room to room, I’m sure you would.”

“Damn right.” I chuckle. “You deserve the world.”

Pressing a kiss to my lips, she smiles. “But I want *our* world. The one with just you and me with the people we love the most in a place that changed our lives. Sure, an extravagant wedding would be fun, but it wouldn’t be as meaningful as marrying you again in that little chapel in Vegas like we did the first time.”

Pulling her closer to me, I kiss her again. “Then let’s get married in *our* world.” Squealing, she momentarily cuts off my air supply as she tightens her arms around my neck. “Risa... air...”

“Sorry!” She loosens her hold. “You really want to get married in Vegas? Or did you want an extravagant, magazine-worthy wedding? Because if that’s what you—”

“All I want is you by my side for the rest of my life, and any lives beyond this one. It’s us, Risa Belle.”

She straddles my lap bringing her lips to mine. For a moment, we get lost in each other.

“Grow up and get a room.” Killian says, taking a seat across from us.

Marisa pulls away, letting out a sigh. Grabbing a pillow, she launches it at him, hitting him square in the face.

I let out a bark of laughter. “Learn to save yourself and duck.”

“Why are you always throwing things?”

“Yeah, Peach, are you sure you weren’t a pitcher at some point?”

Marisa glares at me, before turning her attention to her brother. “Killian, why am I suddenly regretting letting you stay with us?” She moves off my lap onto the bench.

He smiles. “Because I’m your little brother, and you love me.”

“Do I?”

Marisa talks a lot of shit, but she loves having Killian here. He’s been working in the smoothie bar full time while Tate has been in Seattle at the internship with Blaine Architecture.

“Yes, and besides, I’ll be moving out soon anyway.”

Marisa gapes at him. “To where?”

“Thought you were regretting –”

“Shut up, Ash. Killian, where the hell are you moving to? What about college?”

“I’m going to college here.”

Marisa’s brows knit together. “What?”

“As much as it pains me to say this,” he says. “I’ve missed you.” I try not to laugh, but Marisa notices, giving me a death glare and jab to the ribs. “I wanted to be closer to you, so I

applied to colleges here in Oregon and Washington. I got into Reed College, which isn't that far from you and –”

Before he can finish his sentence, Marisa launches herself at him. She has me, my family, and our friends, but there is nothing like having your *own* family close to you.

“Killian! Why do you do this to me? When do you start? Oh, you'll need a car and stuff for your dorm. What about tuition? And –”

“Marisa...” He pulls her off him. “Why do you think I've been working? I've been saving money. I have enough for a car, and for tuition, since I got the brains of the family, I have scholarships.”

I let out a rumble of laughter. She sucks her teeth, pointing her finger at him. “First of all–”

“I'm kidding, I'm kidding.” He holds his hands up in front of him, ready to block whatever she may throw. “I got it, Marisa.” He reassures her. “You don't have to take care of me like that anymore.”

Marisa stares at him. I see the tears glistening in her eyes. “I'm always going to want to take care of you.”

“I know, but... I've learned a lot from Ash, Jax, and Pops since I've been here. I'll be alright, Marisa. You can care about me, but I'm not your responsibility. You're getting married, starting a life. Let me start mine... okay?”

At first, Killian was really quiet, but then we got to know each other, and now he's like the little brother I never had. He

goes running with me in the mornings, visits my grandparents' house as if they're his, and even went to the water park with Jax, Gen, and the girls. Killian never had an opportunity to have the influence of another man in his life. Now he has me, Jax, and Pops.

“When did you grow up?” she asks, pulling him into a hug. “I’m so proud of you. We’re so proud of you.”

“Thank you, but has anyone ever told you that your hugs are near death experiences?” Killian rubs his neck as soon as Marisa pulls away.

“I’ve told her this multiple times,” I say in a sing-song tone.

“Oh, please! You love it.” She rolls her eyes.

“Of course, I do. Doesn’t mean everyone else does, Peach.”

“Why does he call you Peach?” Killian raises a brow.

Marisa doesn’t visibly blush, but I can tell when she’s nervous, making me chuckle. “Uh...” She scratches her neck. “How badly do you want me to give you the birds and the bees talk?”

Killian’s brows knit together before his eyes widen. “Oh!” He sticks out his tongue, making a gagging noise. “I never should’ve asked.”



Visiting Gigi and Pops, we sit in the living room as we tell my mom, Gigi, and Gen that we’re getting married in Vegas.

“Vegas?” Gen’s voice has taken on a high pitch. “Like... a shotgun wedding?” She’s looking between Marisa and me as if we’ve lost our minds.

“I’ve never been.” Mom says, smiling. “When are we dress shopping?”

Since she’s gotten out, we’re getting to know each other again. It’s been difficult for her because she still sees me as a little boy. And while I know she’s my mom, she isn’t my mom in the emotional sense, even though she’s trying to be. It was hard for her when she realized Gen sort of took her place as my mother, and I still go to her for most things.

Before I proposed to Marisa, I talked to Gen about it, but didn’t think to mention it to mom. We were all talking one day, and Gen brought it up, and I could tell Mom was upset. That’s when I realized I still have some resentment and anger toward her because I felt she didn’t have a right to feel that way. She wasn’t there. I’m grateful she’s here now, but gratitude doesn’t erase the past.

After that, we decided to see a therapist. Things are getting better and it’s helping us to get to know one another on a neutral ground.

“Soon as possible because I’d like us to get married within the next six weeks before Killian starts college.”

“*Weeks?*” Gen is still waiting for the joke that will never come.

“You know, Pops and I went to Vegas once. Had the time of our lives. I can’t wait to –”

“Ash... Marisa...” Gen rubs her temples. “You two have been engaged for a month, give or take, and now you want to get married in Vegas in a matter of weeks?”

I turn to Marisa. “Is that what you want, Risa Belle?”

“Yes. It’s exactly what I want. Aside from you.” She smiles.

Gen gapes at us while Mom and Gigi try to keep from laughing. “Vegas? It’s so –”

“Them.” Gigi smiles.

I’m sure she was going to say something much worse before Gigi cut in.

“But why Vegas?”

“Because–” I begin.

“Gen,” Mom touches her hand. “This is what Ash and Marisa want, we don’t need to know the why.”

I beam at her. It’s a small gesture, but it means a lot to see her stepping in for us.

Gen takes a deep breath, letting out a long exhale. “Alright, let’s plan this wedding.”

Epilogue

Marisa

***F**our and a half weeks later...*

I admire the way my dress glints and gleams as I look in the mirror. It's an off the shoulder mermaid-style dress, hugging every curve, with a train that sweeps behind me. My curls are swept into an updo with a few loose ones framing my face. The crown I wore when Asher proposed is sitting atop my head.

Harlow brushes some glitter across my collar bone. "Marisa..." Tears pool in her eyes.

"Don't you fucking start," Sevyn warns.

"I thought I'd stop crying over everything once Jasiel was born, but that was a lie," Quinn says, holding Jasiel, who's sleeping, in her arms.

Somehow, we managed to pull together my dream wedding in a matter of weeks. Ava, Harlow's aunt who is a decorator, helped with the planning. Needless to say, the elegant lavender

and deep forest green colored décor is breathtakingly gorgeous.

My mom enters the room. Tears are already in her eyes as she grabs my hands. “I am so happy for you, Marisa. You look stunning.”

“Thank you, Mom.” I give up on trying to blink back tears.

Our relationship has improved and is slowly evolving into the mother-daughter dynamic I’ve always hoped for. I wish I would’ve had this support as a kid, but I’m grateful I get to share these moments with her now.

“We’ll see you out there.” Harlow gives me a kiss on the cheek. Quinn and Sevyn follow behind her, kissing me on the cheek too.

“Alright, honey. I better go take my seat.”

She tries to walk away, but I hold onto her hand. “Mom, can you ask Ash to come here?”

“Yes.” Her brow furrows with worry. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I just want to see Ash.”

“Okay...” Uncertainty laces her tone.

Moments later, there’s a knock on the door. “Come in.”

“Your mom said—”

“Wait!” I hide behind the door. “You’re not supposed to see me.”

“Risa, you just sent for me and—”

“I know. I know. Because I wanted to talk to you.”

“If you’re breaking up with me right before walking down the aisle, I regret to inform you, that I will throw you over my shoulder and kidnap you.”

I toss my head back with laughter. “Please, don’t threaten me with a good time. It’s funny you think I’d ever give you up, willingly or otherwise.”

“Then what is it?” I hear the smile in his voice as he backs into the room.

Closing the door, I turn my back to his. We keep walking backward until we’re back to back. He touches my hip and then squeezes my ass.

“Ash!” I giggle.

“What? I can’t see you so I may as well feel you up.” His hand brushes against mine as he grabs it, interlacing our fingers. “Talk to me, Risa Belle.”

“Ash... what if... one day you wake up and decide you don’t want to be with me anymore?” I know it sounds ridiculous, but that’s what it felt like with my parents. One day my dad was there, and then he wasn’t.

I feel him turn around. “Ash, we’re not –”

“And since when have we given a fuck about what we’re supposed to do? Look at me, Risa.” His tone is gentle yet commanding. Turning to face him, he inhales sharply, drinking me in. “Good thing I’m seeing you here first instead of

walking down the aisle. Or I wouldn't have been able to do this..."

He crashes into me, his mouth covers mine, and our tongues dance around each other. The sliver of doubt I had disintegrates as he kisses me. Pulling away, he rests his forehead against mine.

"You'll always be a need for me, Risa. Always. You can doubt and question everything in this universe, but not the love I have for you. It's unwavering. What's that thing you say about us?"

I look up at him. "We have the same heartbeat."

"Exactly." He cups my face, rubbing his thumb along my cheek. "Shit may not work out for other people, but that's not us. We're both straight, no fucking chaser." I laugh, remembering the first night he spent at my house. "It's you and me, Risa Belle."

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I bring his lips to mine. "I love you."

"Love you too. Now..." He spins me around, smacking my ass. I lean into his chest as I laughter tumbles from my lips. "Can we get married, Peach? I'm trying to get to the part where you're naked on top of me."

"This is reminiscent of the first time we got married."

"Mmm... I'm not trying to give you my best hours anymore, Risa. I'm giving you the rest of my life."

This man has my heart, soul... *everything* that I am.

Killian meets me out in the hallway to walk me down the aisle. When I approach him, looping my arm through his, I notice his eyes are glossy.

“Are you... crying?”

“What?” He whispers. “Fuck no. There’s dust in the air.”

My shoulders shake with laughter. “Yeah... okay.”

“Marisa, you look gorgeous. I’m honored to be your brother.”

I look at him as the music starts playing that we’re supposed to walk out to. “You would make me cry before walking down the aisle.” I gently dab at the tears underneath my eyes. He takes out a handkerchief and dries the tears for me. Smiling, I say, “I’m honored to be your sister.”

I look down the aisle just in time to see Laynee, with fairy wings strapped to her back, throw the last handful of flowers. “Let’s do this...”

Everyone rises from their seats as Killian walks me down the aisle. I focus on Asher. I hear the sniffles around the room, and I don’t want to have snot running down my face by the time I get to my soon to be husband. However, I’m not sure this is any better. He looks fucking handsome. Asher was definitely chiseled by the hand of God. I know he can tell what’s on my mind because he gives me his brilliant smile that makes me weak in the knees.

Reaching the front, Killian kisses the top of my hand before placing it in Asher’s. He joins the rest of the groomsmen. I

smile as I meet Asher's gaze.

“Shall we begin?” the officiant asks. We both look at him, nodding. He stares at us for a moment, squinting as if he's thinking. “Haven't you two been here before?” he asks loudly.

A silence falls over the chapel. “What? No... we just have familiar... faces...” I look at Asher who is trying not to laugh at my shitty attempt to act like I've never seen this man in my life.

“No, no. I never forget a face. You two got married not too long ago. I remember you were the last couple to get married that night.”

I refuse to look at our family and friends as they murmur amongst themselves and launch questions at us. It turns chaotic fast as everyone speaks at the same time.

“Marisa?” My mom says. I hear Killian laughing like he always does when she uses that motherly tone.

“Wait... you disappeared that night to get married?” Harlow asks.

“While we thought you were missing?” Quinn adds.

“I love how you told us all about the BDE, but conveniently left out the marriage.” Sevyn smirks.

I groan as Asher laughs. “So much for keeping it between us.” He winks.

“You two already got married?” Gen asks.

Asher's mom is smiling and shrugs. "At least I get to be here for this one." Gigi and Pops nod, agreeing with her.

"Damn, not even an invite, bro?" Acyn smiles at us. "We were all here."

"For real, I'm a little offended," Kyrell adds.

"I thought we were better than this." Zane shakes his head, faking disappointment.

"Here we thought he was off with strippers, and he was getting married," Greyson says, grinning.

"Strippers?" Jax asks.

"What's that?" Haelyn looks to Gen who stumbles over her answer. I put her out of her misery instead.

"Okay, okay." I hold up my hands. "We did get married –"

"I knew you two were here before," the officiant says triumphantly.

"But, right now, I'm trying to make this man my husband... again." I smile at Asher.

"You heard my wife," he holds my gaze. "We're going to get married again, and we *might* answer your questions afterward. Is that going to be a problem for anyone?"

Silence falls over the chapel, and the officiant prepares to resume the ceremony once again.

"I told you you're the best husband I've ever had."

"Your one and only."

Thank You

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