



BOSSHOLE
Lawyer

BELLA BRANDON

BOSSHOLE LAWYER

A DAD'S BEST FRIEND, FORCED PROXIMITY
ROMANCE

BELLA BRANDON

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Epilogue

Also by Bella Brandon

CHAPTER 1

AUBREY

I swear whenever something is time sensitive or important the universe decides to shit on me. Today is both of those and I'm currently stuck in a traffic jam, which is eating up the time I have left to get to the office. I left a whole hour early, and yet some idiot has decided to cause an accident and the freeway is clogged up for miles. At least that's what it feels like. Maybe it isn't *miles*, but I have just been sitting here on the same stretch of road, creeping forward inch by inch for the last forty-five minutes.

I don't have time for this, I glance at the minutes on my dash's clock as they count down further to my failure of a morning. My fingers tap an impatient beat on the steering wheel as I turn up the radio and listen to the negativity spilling from the droning voice of the newscaster. The news is a poor decision to try and use as a distraction, but well, you live and learn.

I squint at the road ahead as traffic looks like it's finally clearing up, and as I pass by an unfortunate wreck of twisted metal, I sigh in relief. In the end, I'm able to zip past the congestion that held me captive for so long. Though I try to keep my speed under control, I can tell I'm pushing the limits of legality. God, Dad would be so angry right now.

I swing into a parking spot as soon as I find one in the structure and then rush through the sliding glass doors of the firm's building. My stomach twists as I check my watch and notice I have around eight minutes left. How did it get this late? I jam my finger against the elevator's button multiple

times, hoping like some sort of child it will make it arrive faster.

The slow glow creeps down the numbers while it descends toward the ground floor, and I silently curse the steel box for taking its sweet time. My mental frustrations are interrupted when a man steps up beside me. I feel the heavy weight of his gaze dragging over my body, observing every twitch of my anxious muscles until the doors in front of us finally open.

“Floor?” He asks as we step inside.

“Oh! Ummm, twelve,” I murmur, my words jittery. I brush my hands over my hair to make sure any flyaways go back in place.

Still sensing his eyes on me, I finally glance over and get a good look at the man. His hair is dark blonde, cut slightly longer but swept away from his face, a perfect look for a businessman. His charcoal suit looks expensive and brings out the dark green of his eyes, making them glimmer almost like gems. I drop my attention, unable to continue to stare at him due to my nerves, back to my watch, and then glance quickly back at the numbers showing how close we are to the office. If we don't hit any delays, then I should make it with two minutes to spare.

“Running late?” He asks, betraying a hint of mirth.

I turn to him once again and he has the most annoying and condescending smirk on his face. I think this is the first time in my life I've hated someone on sight. It seems like he's mocking my pain. I sneer, my lip curling back from my teeth, even though I know, I *know*, it will probably come back to bite me in the ass. He's going to the twelfth floor too since no other button was pressed, and he's very likely a client.

But the fact he feels the need to point out the obvious, the stress that's pressing into my back, makes me snap back. “Not necessarily.”

I resolutely stare at the doors in front of me, silently counting down the seconds in my head as I wait for the telltale bell of arrival. I can feel his attention still settled on me, but I

refuse to acknowledge it. However, I can't help the sassy remark that rolls off my tongue.

"If you're so interested, why don't you take a picture? It will last you longer," I mutter, just loud enough for him to hear. It's a lame retort, but this stranger is bringing out the childish defiance in me.

He laughs, a low rich sound that sadly has my toes curling in my shoes. Damn, if he wasn't such an ass I could see him being attractive.

Don't lie to yourself, that incessant thought that loves to point out how wrong I am, says. *He's still gorgeous even with his attitude.*

It seems I can't get away with anything today, not even in the safety of my own mind. I breathe a sigh of relief as a soft chime announces the twelfth floor, and the doors slide open. I nearly run out before I remember to slip into work mode, and carefully walk as fast as physically possible—closer to a jog—down the corridor to the secretarial desk. I barely look up until I hear Derek's voice.

Derek is bubbly, a ray of sunshine in a world of shades of gray, and being around him is nearly addictive. He's the closest thing I have to a friend, though it's more like an alliance from my side of things.

"Morning, Aubrey!" He cheers, a wide smile on his face.

I shoot him a much smaller grin back and wave even though my speed doesn't slow, "Sorry, running a smidge behind."

"The meeting has been moved to room 218," he calls.

I curse and immediately turn on my heel to dash back down the hall and turn right. Sadly, that turn sends me hurtling into a person holding a teetering stack of paperwork that goes fluttering to the floor. My eyes dart further down the hall to where the door to the meeting room waits for me, then down to where the man frantically scoops up the fallen papers, his face torn in a mixture of frustration and panic.

I sigh, "Fuck it."

If I'm going to be late at least I'll have a clear conscious. I kneel down with an apologetic smile and he looks up at me gratefully as we work together to gather the materials.

And I pointedly ignore the low, familiar chuckling I hear behind me.

CHAPTER 2

LIAM

Today is my first day back at the firm in three months. It's almost comical walking back into the building, as I feel the nostalgia of the years I spent growing here, learning, and becoming the man I am today ripple through me. There's a sense of relief, as if I'm coming home. I feel more comfortable here in this building than I do at my own office. Perhaps it's due to all the hours I spent studying for cases in the archives.

Yet, I know this feeling of comfort will soon be ruined, as I'm apparently being handed a newbie to mentor for the coming future. I can already feel the rising pressure in my temples, signaling a tension headache, at the thought of all the incessant and dumb questions they will inevitably throw my way.

However, thoughts of my coming doom are soon forgotten when I see *her* waiting at the elevator, tapping her toes and radiating antsy energy. My lips quirk upward in amusement until I step beside her and can't squelch the desire to speak to her. I recognize her, just barely. It's been nearly seven years since I saw her last. I think she was in her senior year of high school then, her body just coming into its curves. Now, the daughter of my best friend and mentor is far along into adulthood.

Just a little over ten years younger than me, I can tell how gorgeous Aubrey is as my eyes rake over her form. Her hair is pinned back into a serious bun, tawny and straight. It would be perfect for being taken seriously if not for the nervous energy of a green lawyer she puts out. Her honey brown eyes cut into

me almost as much as her scathing comments but all it does is make me laugh. She used to be so quiet and withdrawn, now she has claws.

As soon as the doors open, she darts out of the elevator while I'm left grinning. I amble behind her and though I'm also running late, I don't carry the same panic Aubrey does. After a while in this sort of work, I've learned that how I project myself is more important than time. As long as I'm not fifteen minutes behind, I'll be just fine. To be honest, I'm mildly envious of Aubrey and the bright, new glow she has surrounding her. It won't be long before she loses it.

I stride down the hallway to where the meeting is being held, and when I turn the corner, Aubrey is on her hands and knees, facing away from me. Her pencil skirt stretches tight around her ass and hips as she carefully collects papers from the floor and hands them to one of the paralegals. My lips twitch as I step around them, offering no help. I have somewhere to be after all.

"Don't be too late, wild cat," I call over my shoulder.

She murmurs something under her breath, and I can guess from the tone of it exactly what she's saying. Definitely an insult. I chuckle as I turned into room 218.

"Ah! It's so good to see you, Liam," Jacob Winters beams as soon as he turns around, his smile wide and making his brown eyes glitter.

The gray streaks in his dark brown hair are more pronounced than when we met, and I meet his smile with a rough shake of the hands and a quick hug. The office isn't really a place for such a greeting, but it's been months since I've seen my best friend, and I have to admit I'm thrilled to see him.

"It's great to see you too, I can't believe how good it is to be back. Looks like things stayed together in my absence," I joke, earning a laugh from my old mentor. "Though, I hear you have a new member of the team for me to work with?"

Jacob nods. “You know her, in fact. However, she is uncharacteristically late.”

He glances at the door with a dull spark of concern in his normally flat eyes. Most people wouldn’t be able to notice it. I’ve just worked with Jacob for so long that it’s natural for me to look for these minuscule changes.

I raise my brow curiously. There is one woman that comes to mind, and I just left her cleaning up papers in the hallway. “Well, she isn’t truly late until it hits fifteen minutes.”

He shoots me a glare. “That only works for you.”

“It works for anyone as long as they have the right attitude,” I smirk.

Just then the door creaks open, and a familiar face pokes her head through, an apologetic smile curving her soft lips as she greets us.

“Good morning, I apologize for my tardiness,” Aubrey says, her speech overly formal. I half expect her to bow. She catches my gaze and blinks in surprise, narrowing her eyes slightly before throwing her mask back on and giving me a welcoming smile.

“It’s good to see you again, sir. I am glad you found your way,” she looks toward her father questioningly.

“Ah, I hope you two remember each other?” Jacob motions between us. “Just in case, Aubrey, this is my friend and protégé Liam Ainsley. And Liam, this is my daughter Aubrey.”

Aubrey’s eyes widen comically this time, and there’s no hiding it. Not that I blame her, we only met a couple of times in the past, but I’m sure she’s heard about me far more often. Her cheeks flush a light pink as she offers me her hand and a smile that doesn’t reach her eyes.

“Hello, Liam. It’s nice to see you. Again,” she says and though she looks embarrassed, her voice is strong, as is her grip.

“Nice to see you too Aubrey, you’ve grown up well,” I say cordially, though while I’m faced away from Jacob, I can’t help but let my eyes wander her curves once again.

There was once a time I could never have imagined Aubrey as an adult. Now that she *is* and standing before me, I can barely believe this woman is the shy, bookish high school girl I once knew. I feel the desire to tease her so I can watch the fading pink on her cheeks grow to a bright red. But I reign in the want and instead focus my mind on the work ahead.

“You will officially be mentor and mentee from this moment on. Aubrey has shown a great grasp of the law and politics needed to grow in this field. I expect a lot from you two,” Jacob says stiffly.

He glances at the clock on the wall before readjusting his suit and scooping up his briefcase. He nods to me and his daughter, showing her no favoritism. Just as I’d expect from the old man.

“I have somewhere to be. You’ll be in good hands Aubrey.” He then strides out the door without a second glance.

Aubrey stiffens when the door clicks shut, but when she looks at me, it’s with sparks in her eyes. There is no nervousness left, no panic or fear, just indignation and hunger. Not a lustful hunger, but a greed for knowledge and to prove herself. I recognize that look, I used to have it myself. I occasionally still feel that fire run through my veins when a particularly hard fight awaits me.

“I’m not working really until tomorrow, just collecting some paperwork today. However, I need this from the archives,” I tell her, whipping out a piece of paper to write a quick list that relates to my upcoming case. “I will explain this case when you are ready. I look forward to working with you, *wild cat*.” I cut her an arrogant smirk because I can’t help myself.

I laugh as she bristles but snatches the list from me, hostility flickering in her pupils. “Don’t be a jerk. It will make this so much easier.”

I raise a brow, surprised at her bluntness; that cordial, polite newbie vanished as quickly as her father's presence. With the list in her hand, she disappears through the door without even a farewell or glance in my direction, and I watch her go in amusement. She's definitely Jacob's child. Working with her will be interesting and possibly quite fun. With a small smile tilting my lips, I follow behind her.

CHAPTER 3

AUBREY

Thankfully, in the two days since I met Liam, I haven't been late again. It's not a long stretch but it's enough to give me a false sense of security. Liam is still away from work, taking a couple of days to himself, but he's supposed to be coming back today. So I'm waiting patiently in his personal office with a cup of coffee for both him and myself.

I got here far earlier than him, not that it makes him late, since he still has twenty minutes before he's supposed to arrive. But I feel jittery, eager to start learning from the supposed protégé of my father. I hope we get along better than we did before.

That hope seems to be a lost cause since he arrives with five minutes spare and a smirk that pulls at his lips. The way he looks at me makes me squirm in my own skin, like he isn't taking me seriously. Perhaps he's not, or maybe this is a test. I'm not sure but I am not about to let him throw me off my game, no matter what.

"Here, I don't know how you take your coffee but I thought you might like something," I push the flat white I bought towards him.

"I usually drink my first cup black, and then the rest with sugar and milk," he says as if I asked for the info, almost like I'll need it in the future.

Will he make me do coffee runs regularly? I am *not* here to be his assistant. I force my face not to scrunch in displeasure. Instead, I smile so much that my cheeks start to hurt,

reminding me of the times my father brought me to parties to shake hands and pretend to show me off in front of the crowd. But the truth is he's never really talked about me unless it's an introduction.

I sip my coffee calmly even though my emotions roil underneath my mask of control. My mentor takes a deep gulp from what I thought was a steaming mug of caffeine, but apparently he has a mouth and throat of steel because all he does is sigh in satisfaction. If only I could handle heat of that level without burning myself.

"Alright, let's get started," he says and takes a seat behind his desk with a look of confidence. "Grab a chair."

Liam motions to the seat across from him and I perch on it, trying to control my buzzing excitement even though I'm nearly sitting on the edge of the cushion. His eyes squint at me and this time the way he observes me isn't with lust, but with a cold calculation as he weighs my abilities in his head. I clench my jaw and straighten my spine, eager to appear brave and willing under his intense gaze.

"Do you know anything about the case I'm on right now?" He asks.

I shake my head while I allow the warmth from the cup in my hands to ground and focus me.

"Well, the gist of it is a member of a small gang in L.A. has been accused of first-degree murder. We are defending him," he states, his stare growing sharper as if waiting for me to react.

Internally I respond viscerally, pulling back from the words as if they burn me. However, outwardly all he sees is a scrunch of my nose and tilt of my head. I don't like the idea of defending murderers. If I had a choice, I would be the one prosecuting the case. The man should be thrown in jail if he killed someone. But it isn't my job as a lawyer to render the verdict. Still, the itch of discomfort in me grows until words spill from my mouth.

“Did he do it?” I ask, and I immediately have to swallow back a scream of annoyance at my own stupidity. I’m not the one defending him, it isn’t something I need to know.

Liam latches onto my mistake like a starved dog with a bone. “Well, well, well. Nosey little kitten, aren’t you? You know what they say about curiosity, wild cat.”

He taps his fingers against the side of his nose, and I stiffen at his condescending tone, but bite back my desire to lash out, “I’m sorry, sir.”

“Don’t apologize to me. Though... I *do* think I’m getting hungry. Why don’t you run down and get some donuts from the bakery that has that cute paw print on their designs, hm?” He says dismissively, and though he phrases it like a question, I know from the tilt of his chin and the stupid smirk creeping dangerously onto his lips that he won’t let me worm my way out of this errand.

My smile goes from awkward but flexible to frozen in place, and I talk around my gritted teeth. “Of course.”

I leave as he powers up his desktop, my fingers tingling with the desire to clench into fists. Instead, I force my body to be confident and relaxed, even though it’s clear he’s pushing me away for my misstep. It seems like we won’t be getting along after all. I don’t know if it’s his fault or mine. Maybe both, I can’t keep my emotions in check around him yet. He’s too good at poking and prodding at the cracks in my armor while he seems to be anything but interested in teaching me.

The day continues like this, where I’m sent fetching things, refilling coffee, and grabbing paperwork that seems unnecessary since it’s just as easy to find in the online archives. I know I’m being punished, but I can’t figure out the meaning behind it. I asked a question I shouldn’t have. I know this already, I figured it out with just the way he spoke to me, but Liam is taking it upon himself to teach me a lesson. And he hasn’t stopped irritatingly pressing on my nerves and continues sending me near across the building for menial tasks five times in an hour. Like a freaking secretary and not an attorney in my own right.

My feet are aching by lunchtime.

I hobble back into the elevator with our lunch, remembering vividly when I first met Liam in here. I know I met him a few times years ago, but I don't even remember it. It was likely at one of the family parties, either a barbeque or the winter friends and family dinners that we had around Thanksgiving. But I can't remember what he looked like, if we'd talked, or anything. Which is honestly pretty normal for me. I wasn't the kind of girl to be proactively social if I could help it, so usually at family gatherings I found a book and a quiet corner to read until my mother dragged me into an interaction.

I glance to the side, where Liam stood just days ago, where he looked at me and teased me with a flirting edge to every word. Where he'd not only annoyed me but also made my stomach flutter slightly. Now I just want to punch that stupid smirk off his face, or better yet, argue how I can be helpful.

The burritos are warm in my hands, and they better be fucking worth it. Liam sent me to a food truck a mile away from the office, and traffic is so bad right now, the only choice I had was to walk. I'm cursing myself with each painful step through the twelfth floor towards Liam's office, feeling the blisters rubbing against the insides of my heels.

When I reach his door, he's busy with a phone call. His voice is sharp and confident, delivering information succinctly and directly. I wait outside the door until I hear him call for me.

His brow lifts as he watches me. "Ah! You found it did you?"

"Yes, it's hard to miss since it's bright green," I grumble, rolling my eyes.

As soon as I plop down, I sigh and reach out to hand him the bag, working my heels off in the process to examine the damage to my feet. When I don't feel the bag leave my hand I look up and frown. Liam is watching me, a soft purse to his lips and a barely there crinkle between his brows.

“What?” I ask, tucking my feet further to the side as if to protect them from his penetrating stare.

“Why are your heels so red? Do you have blisters?” He stands as he takes the bag from my still outstretched hand and lays it on the desk without a second glance.

He rounds the desk and I immediately push further back into the chair in surprise. My toes curl on the ground and I fight against the desire to make myself smaller, or hell, even run away. I feel so incredibly exposed with the way he’s observing me, picking me apart piece by piece.

Without warning he kneels down in front of me, in his pristine black suit and shiny oxfords. He touches the floor like it’s no big deal, and to be honest it shouldn’t be, but Liam just looks so above it all, so put together and perfect. He looks like he should never filthy his hands with the carpet, let alone my naked foot he now has propped up on his knee. I feel my breath hitch as his fingers run the edge of my arch and his thumb moves up to caress my calf just above my Achilles tendon. The gentle touch has goose bumps pebbling my skin and sends a shiver down my spine. I can feel his body heat and the callouses on his fingers. Considering his posh lifestyle, I wonder how he got them.

I recognize the look in his eye now that he’s staring at my bloody heel. He’s concerned. I don’t know why that’s surprising to me, I’ve just never seen that emotion cross his features. He rotates my foot a little more and once more circles his thumb against my calf in a soothing gesture.

“Why didn’t you say something?” He asks, though it almost sounds like there’s a note of accusation in it.

“Why would I say anything?” I ask incredulously. “Of course I have blisters! You’ve been sending me running around the whole building all day. In heels, no less! I mean for god’s sake, what did you think was going to happen? You made me walk a mile *and back* to get food. Are you that dumb?”

I gasp in a breath, my body still shuddering under his touch, even as his expression grows harder with each word.

“So it’s my fault you didn’t say anything? That you didn’t stop me to say your feet were literally bleeding? I am not so heartless that I would force you to continue like this,” he sneers and pushes my foot off him, moving to a standing position. “The first aid kit is in the break room. Take care of that, then go home.”

“But-”

“No,” he snaps and rounds on me, placing his hands on either side of my chair and boxing me in.

I suck in a sharp gasp, painfully aware of his clove and coffee scent, that his shoulders are immensely broad and that he has me at his mercy. Though I want to be angry, childish, scream at him...he is ultimately right. I didn’t tell him, and I can only stare as his dark green eyes search my face for the acceptance he knows will come.

“*Go home,*” he says, sternly, tilting his chin before clicking his tongue and pushing off my seat.

I have no option but to follow his orders, meekly nodding my head even though in my mind I’m cursing him to hell and back. Still, I take care of myself in the break room, wincing as I clean the open blisters and press a band-aid to them, and then limp in shame down to my car. Once I’m safely closed inside, I let out a scream of frustration. It seems my good streak has finally run its course. I’m inevitably doomed to make a fool of myself in front of Liam Ainsley.

CHAPTER 4

LIAM

I run my hand down my face, annoyed with myself for letting Aubrey put herself in such a situation. I pushed her too far. I should have noticed the way she limped instead of focusing on the way she'd stood against the very foundation of the law. Never let your emotions get the better of you, never let them stand in the way of taking care of a client. Her morality doesn't matter right now, it isn't like she's far enough along to handle this case or choose her own yet.

I never meant to cause her pain though, and those blisters were bad. What I shot back at her, that she should have told me, was right to an extent. I'm not at fault for her not telling me her problems, I'm not a mind reader. Yet, I still feel guilt and anger at myself for letting her feet bleed. If I'd just observed closer I would have noticed. Thinking back on the day, I can see now how her movements grew stiff as time wore on, the clench of her jaw when I asked her to leave the comfort of her chair and fetch something useless across the building.

I need a drink and a friend, but my first choice, Jacob, is out of the question. Despite Aubrey's accusation, I am not dumb enough to complain about a daughter to her own father, no matter how impartial he can be. I scroll through my phone landing on Chris, my old friend from law school.

Want to catch up later? I need a drink.

CHRIS

Sure! Same place as usual?

I SLIP BACK into work after sending the last message, trying to focus only on the files in front of me and not the woman I sent home. Slowly, the day creeps into evening and blue skies shift into orange, and I pack up my briefcase right as the purple begins to encroach on the fluffy clouds.

I call a car to come pick me up and by the time I leave the building, I'm dipping into the backseat and giving the address to my favorite bar, where I can get a burger and some good draft beer. I'll chase my headache away with some greasy food, amazing fries, and a buzz.

"Liam!" Chris calls as soon as I step out of the car. He stands waiting for me by the door, as if I need an escort.

I snort but clap the man on his shoulder. "Chris, it's good to see you."

"Same, you've been gone for awhile, man," he grins. His usual dress shirt has been exchanged for a worn band t-shirt. He obviously got off early enough to run home and change. Or, more likely, he keeps several changes of clothes in his own office, a practice I've never quite caught onto.

"Ah, overseas work sucks," I shrug. "Makes me miss home."

He throws his arm around my shoulder, pulling us into the bar. "Hope you don't mind getting your suit dirty. I'm sure the grub here won't be kind to ya."

I laugh and shake my head, happy to see my old friend again. "It'll be worth the dry-cleaning cost."

"Always is," he agrees, and we step through the door of the small establishment.

The bar we frequent together is often quiet, and more of a sit-down joint than anything. It serves good food and even better drinks, but surprisingly only the local crowd seems to know about it. I prefer it that way though, it makes it easier to unwind after a busy day. I let Chris guide me to a booth and I

flop down on a bench, my hand coming up to immediately loosen my tie.

The scent of fried food, cooking meat, and draft beer fills the air. It makes my stomach rumble, and despite the hefty burrito I had for lunch, it feels like I didn't eat today at all.

"So, what happened?" Chris asks as soon as he sits down across from me.

I shake my head. "Let me at least get a drink."

He flashes me a toothy smile and waves down a waiter. "Alright fine. Is Jacob busy or something? I thought he was your usual go-to."

"Wasn't an option this time, and you can't talk to him about this," I shoot him a firm look to make my point clear.

He raises his hands in surrender. "I got it, okay?"

When the waiter approaches, we both order a local beer and I ask for a shot of whiskey with mine. I just need something with a bit more of a kick before I dive into the complicated mess of my new mentee. I search the menu intently, trying to pretend I'm not mildly obsessing about my own issues as I figure out what burger I want. It's not like I'll go for anything different from my usual: a burger with mushrooms, bacon, and Swiss cheese. Maybe I'll switch it up with the fries, perhaps I should get onion rings instead. As I consider my options, I notice Chris staring at me intently.

I sigh. "What is it now?"

"I dunno, man, you seem pretty down today. Or maybe tired?" He cocks his head. "I can't quite figure out which it is."

"You really need to learn patience," I cut back with a scoff and finally down my shot, enjoying the warm burn down my throat.

"Awe, c'mon we have our drinks now," he jokes.

I shoot him a look of annoyance before I sip my beer and finally settle on onion rings and nod at him to flag down the waiter again. After we put in our order for dinner I finally sit back against my chair and sigh.

“Alright, well I have a newbie to the firm that I’m mentoring directly,” I tell him, cutting straight to the point.

“Oh, well I didn’t think something like that would bother you,” my friend says in surprise.

“It doesn’t. The problem is *who* she is. She’s Jacob’s daughter.”

Chris’s glass of beer pauses halfway to his mouth. “No shit?”

“Exactly.”

Chris cocks an eyebrow. “I thought she was in high school?”

I stifle a groan. “She just passed the bar, idiot, she’s 25.”

“Huh,” he says contemplatively before taking a rather large gulp of beer. “When did we get so old?”

“Can we get back on track?” I snap impatiently. “Jacob wants me to mentor Aubrey, making how I handle things far more sensitive, and I know I haven’t been doing a good job of it so far.” I sigh, shaking my head. “But I don’t know how to explain it. She gets under my skin. Everything she does, I have to stop and watch. And then the things she says seem so irritating,” I grumble, running a hand through my hair.

“Sounds like you have a thing for her,” Chris says nonchalantly before taking another sip from his beer.

I wrinkle my nose. “She is too young and totally off limits.”

He laughs. “Man, like you have any say in what you want to fuck? If you did, men wouldn’t be constantly served divorce papers for being unable to keep it in their pants.”

I narrow my eyes and think it over, about the way Aubrey constantly pins her hair back and though it exposes her neck so beautifully, I would pay money to see her take it down. I think about the way she wears minimal make up, how her skirt hugs her hips and gives me near indecent thoughts that I refuse to acknowledge. And then I remember sharing the elevator with her, how I pushed her just to see that spark in her eyes and feel the lash of her words.

No, I refuse to believe I want to fuck my best friend's daughter. Yet, I feel a slight swelling and eager twitch in my pants, showing me that my refusal means nothing.

I press my forehead against the heel of my hand and groan. Completely unable to deny I'm currently imagining her skirt falling to the floor and the buttons of her shirt popping open to expose her lace framed breasts. Oh god, I can't do this here, not now. I need to focus on relaxing.

"Tell me about the wife," I say when our food is placed in front of us.

Chris thankfully takes the bait, though I'm certain he knows I'm deflecting. I listen in on his family life, learning that they are expecting a second child, though it was completely accidental, and for a moment I forget about my woes.

We part ways after drinking enough to have a pleasant buzz, and we take separate cars since we live in opposite parts of town. The ride to my apartment doesn't take long, but knowing I'm going home to a cold bed and even colder shower oddly makes me feel lonely. Maybe hearing about Chris's happy, domestic family life has me feeling out of sorts.

"We're here, sir," the driver says, pulling up to the curb in front of my building.

"Thanks, keep the change," I say, passing him probably far more than he needs but I'm too worn down and distracted to care.

"Thank you!" The man says in surprise, and I merely grunt in response.

I have more money than I need, and my home reflects that. A penthouse apartment sprawling on one of the highest floors of the high rise. Its outer wall is nearly all glass, giving a beautiful view of the city lights glittering below. This place was one of my first purchases after I reached partner and received my new pay raise. But it was also a show of power after not being able to afford anything but a one bedroom for so long. Now, however, the extra five rooms, three bathrooms, home gym, and just sheer unnecessary excess of it all makes

me feel empty. I'm the only one here besides the orchids I so lovingly tend to. I come home to no one. Perhaps I need a pet.

I smirk at the nonsensical idea that I would even have time for a goldfish while I toe off my shoes in the entryway and drop my jacket and tie in the dirty laundry basket. Thankfully the semi I was sporting earlier has gone down with the help of alcohol so there is no need for a cold shower.

When I step under the spray of warm water, I'm reminded why I spent so much money on this shower. The space and the flexibility of the smart tech alone have been well worth the cost. I sigh as the heat beats against my back rhythmically, lulling me into a sense of security. I dumbly allow my brain's walls to collapse, and it leaves me prey to my imagination.

Aubrey is in my mind's eye, her brown hair falling in layers to frame her face. It's such a different look, especially paired with the golden shimmer in her brown eyes, that spark she often has when she wants to argue or snap back with a witty comment. I want her like that, underneath me. I want to sink my fingers into the curve of her hips and draw her close. I want to pound into her until she comes so many times that she's breathless and finally begging for mercy. I want to conquer her, make her mine.

Oh god, I really do *want* her. I want my best friend's daughter, I want the woman I'm supposed to teach. I want everything I shouldn't have.

I bite my lip as my hand grips my erection tightly, trying to fight off the need to fuck into my fist with animalistic intent. But it's a losing battle as my fingers loosen and begin to stroke the soft skin of my dick, instantly relieving the ache. I hiss out a breath, imagining how she would feel, imagining it's her cunt or her wet mouth instead of my palm.

I press my free hand against the stone of my shower wall and lean against it, falling onto my forearm as I thrust my hips in tandem with my fist. I fuck forward, my mind spinning as I imagine her under me, screaming for more, begging for less... I can't choose, they both sound delicious in my fantasy. Fire licks up my spine and my skin tingles as I feel my impending

high. The water rushes over me, the humidity and heat making any oxygen impossible to breathe in, too wet and sticky. It catches in my throat, just as I exhale. Finally, with a groan so deep it rattles my chest painfully, I come.

I watch with bleary eyes as my sins wash down the drain. I just jerked off to something, someone, completely unattainable and yet I was entirely unable to control myself. I couldn't stop. I want Aubrey, I can't deny that now. I want her so badly that just the thought of her has my cock kicking to life again. I am so totally and utterly fucked.

CHAPTER 5

AUBREY

That's it! I am not dealing with this fucking shit anymore. I stare at the burger bag in my hand with irritation. I'm tired of running these stupid errands for Liam. He's thankfully pulled back on the number of miles he was running me during the day, but he won't let me touch any information regarding the case unless it's to hand off paperwork.

This has gone on for almost a week now. It's pissing me off and I know Liam can tell, I feel it from the way he watches me, that he's just waiting for me to explode. Except I don't plan to. I won't give him the satisfaction. He wants me to be less naïve and more professional? Challenge accepted, buddy.

"I'm headed home, unless you need me for anything else?" I ask him, pausing briefly while packing my bag.

He shakes his head, narrowing his eyes at my calm demeanor, but seemingly unable to put his finger on what's wrong with me, "No, go ahead. Be careful getting home."

It's moments like this, when he says those soft and sweet little things that are generally expected in society, that throw me off guard. Liam doesn't hand them out to just anyone. It almost makes me feel guilty for what I'm about to do. Still, I just shoot him a smile over my shoulder as I swing my bag over my shoulder and leave with a wave.

"Sure thing, sir. Don't work too hard."

Instead of pushing the button for the ground floor like I normally would, I hit the sixth, watching intently as the floor levels glow as I pass them. I'm headed to the archives to learn

about the case we're to defend on. If I am going to argue my way back into Liam's good graces, I need to do it like a good lawyer with an informed debate to convince him that I'm more useful as a partner than as a gopher.

I exit the elevator and make my way down the hall and into the massive room that holds the older information that has yet to be transferred over to the digital archives. I'm not sure it ever will be. The stacks are massive, filled with endless file cabinets and rows of folders on bookshelves. It smells like ink and old paper, almost like walking into a library. The scent is nostalgic, and I can't stop myself from inhaling it. It reminds me of when I would play down here as a little girl and pretend I was solving the world's oldest mysteries. That must have been long before Liam worked here.

I reach into my bag to pull out my thermos of fresh coffee I grabbed before leaving the office. I suspect I'll need it, as I'll be pouring over big words in small print for several hours. Legal jargon will give anyone a headache, even those of us who work with it daily. I check the list I wrote down and then begin my deep dive into the world of gangs and murders.

I pull out file after file, frowning down at the tiny text and convoluted words that have become my life over the last few years. My brain immediately begins deciphering phrases and I slowly start piecing things together. I'm not certain what is going on in the beginning, but it seems like this man's testimony doesn't match up with the events of what happened the night he supposedly shot down a woman and her family.

I purse my lips sometime later as I take another sip of coffee, frowning when I realize I'm running low. I wonder how long I've been at it. There aren't any windows in this part of the building, but I'm distinctly aware of the ache in my dry eyes. I rub at them and check my watch to see I've hit the three-hour mark. I should probably start heading home. I've been here long enough that it's unlikely I'll run into Liam on the way out.

I close the folder in front of me and blink rapidly, trying to encourage my eyes to moisten as I stretch my back and groan in delight at the satisfying pop in my spine. I slowly put all the

papers back, moving about half the speed I normally would because I feel like I'm in a fog. My brain feels like it's been rudely yanked out of the world of the written word and I'm currently unable to process reality.

I rub my eyes one more time before I finally pack my thermos away and sling my bag over my shoulder, then head quickly out to the elevator once again. Moving my body has my mind finally waking up, and I'm turning over everything I learned today. Tomorrow, I will face Liam with every piece of information laid out on the table and fight for my right to be a part of this case.



THE NEXT MORNING when I march into the office, my fingers twitch nervously. My inner introvert is rearing her ugly head and I desperately need her to *go away*. I need my bravery, my strength, and that impossible confidence I can project when put in front of a jury. I try to summon that persona I so regularly call upon when facing something that makes me uncomfortable.

I brought coffee for Liam once again, all in hopes of buttering him up: a brand new, rich black blend from the bakery downstairs. I lean against his desk as I wait for him, forcing myself not to fidget. The position of my body and even the way I breathe is meant to project power. I'm not afraid of rejection. I refuse to let my anxiety take control. *I will not lose*.

He strolls in like he owns the place, which I suppose he does, but it's the sheer aura of confidence he produces that gives people pause. While mine is skin deep, his seems to live in his bones. Liam is almost arrogant in the way he moves. It makes lesser men and women curl up in defeat. It makes me strive to match him.

"Coffee?" I offer, holding out the cup.

He takes it with a grunt of appreciation, a frown on his face as he checks his phone. All looks of displeasure vanish once he takes his first sip, and I swallow back my preen of

satisfaction. His brow lifts in surprise, and he looks at me like he hadn't noticed I was here until now.

"This is good," he murmurs.

"I've learned your preferences by now," I answer calmly.

"Hm." He's suspicious if the look on his face tells me anything.

I waste no time. It's now or never. "Do you have ten minutes to talk about something?"

"I have eight," he says, his answer definite and non-negotiable.

"That's enough," I glance to the side. "I looked through the folders in the archive relating to the case."

I wait for his response, but he doesn't necessarily look surprised, more like pleased. He nods at me to go on while he takes a seat behind his desk and continues to nurse his coffee.

"I realized this case goes pretty far back considering some of the older information is kept in the archives," I explain slowly. "Also, it's been at a standstill for a while because of the instability of the evidence. For awhile it was considered a cold case. But somehow the man we are defending got it pinned on him, even though the evidence is... questionable."

His smile grows. "Took you long enough."

Now it's my turn to look surprised, or perhaps shocked would be a better word. "You wanted me to go behind your back?"

"Lawyers don't always play nice," Liam states, as if it's the most obvious answer in the world.

"I think I hate you," I say with no amount of regret.

"That's fine. As long as you can work with me," he shrugs. "Eight minutes are up."

He cuts into my speech quickly with a look of self-satisfaction as I squirm, despite myself. I'm sure he just loves it, judging by the way his smirk grows.

“Looks like you finally got your head out of your ass and into the game. Welcome aboard.” He stands up to his full, intimidating height and sticks out his hand. “Don’t make me regret it.”

I shake his hand firmly, staring him straight in the eye with a tilt to my chin. “I will make you apologize by the end of this.”

His grin turns sharp and his eyes glitter with a hunger I don’t quite understand in this moment. “I look forward to it.”

That’s how I find myself sitting with Liam, taking notes and reading over paperwork that he’s already memorized, in hopes of catching up to him. I still do some of the running around, getting lunch, coffee, and information, but it’s far less often since he isn’t trying to keep me busy or put me through my paces. Instead, he seems to want to use me like how I should be used. He wants a mentee, someone who can assist him as his second chair.

I feel myself glow at the thought of rising to that position. Still, I have found I still don’t necessarily get along with Liam, despite how my eyes wander to him to stroke across his face like a caress. He is gorgeous, but his attitude still leaves a bad taste in my mouth, and I doubt that will improve much. He played games just to get me to do what he wanted instead of saying anything outright. Liam is the exact reason people hate lawyers; he’s slimy and underhanded.

I can’t imagine coming to like him, but I’m dying to learn as much as I can from him.

CHAPTER 6

LIAM

It's been several days since Aubrey finally came to her senses and figured out a way around my torture. I honestly expected her to figure it out sooner; she's a smart girl. But her morals really are much higher than I expected, and I wonder how she's going to survive in the gray world of law. She interests me, though I am certain I annoy the fuck out of her.

Yet she's still in the office after I dismissed her early. I walk back in and hum curiously, making her glance back up at me.

"I thought you were leaving," she says simply.

"I am, just picking up my things. I told you, you can go home. Going deaf now, wild cat?" I grin.

I can practically see her spine stiffen as she narrows her eyes and spits out, "No! Just busy. I want to be as prepared as possible."

"Awe," I coo. "I remember when I was like that. So cute." I say it deliberately to piss her off. I can't help it. I love seeing the effect I have over her when I rile her up.

"God, you are the biggest ass," she snarls, lobbing an eraser at me.

I laugh harshly as it bounces off my jacket. "I am a lawyer after all."

She ignores my jab and I make my way out, checking my briefcase once again. A piece of paper flutters out but is almost immediately forgotten as I verify the contents of the file I'll be needing.

“See ya tomorrow,” I toss over my shoulder and walk out the door without lingering to hear her response.

Not wanting to risk my beloved Jaguar, I forego the comfortable drive and head toward my destination on foot. After a quarter of a mile, the clean streets begin to give way to filth and litter, where large garbage cans spill over and plastic bags blow down the sidewalk. Chipped pavement and potholes longing for attention clutter my path, so different than the recently paved roads just a few blocks away. I draw myself taller and grip my bag a little tighter, trying to find comfort in my usual confidence. But it isn't a lie that I feel unnerved by the strange, eerie calm and lack of people on the streets.

Still, I move with a purpose, pushing my nerves down deep, until I hear the clatter of a glass bottle against the asphalt. Hyper alert, I spin around to see a familiar woman standing there surprised and looking around like a scared rabbit, a white paper clutched in her hand. I stalk towards her with a mixture of fear and irritation swirling in my gut.

“What are you doing here, Aubrey?!” I hiss, grabbing her by the shoulder.

She stiffens and I'm not surprised. I know I'm coming at her harshly, but I don't want her in this part of the city. She is too soft, too vulnerable. I need her to understand the danger she's potentially putting herself in.

“I-I'm just bringing you this! You need it right?” She stutters in surprise.

I glance down at the document she holds, letting out a slow exhale and gently taking it from her. It's a piece of research material I need for the current case I'm headed to. A case for someone who can't afford a good lawyer and definitely needs someone better than what they would assign to her. I grunt and nod.

“Yes, I do need this, thank you.” I slip it into my briefcase before looking back at her with narrowed eyes. “But you shouldn't be here. It's dangerous in this area.”

She puffs out her chest. “Then why are you here?”

I smirk, invading her space and forcing her to back up. Her breath comes quicker and her honey-colored eyes dart to the side. There is no escape route though, and in seconds I have her pressed against the textured brick of a crumbling wall. I keep pushing into her until we're sharing the same air, and I can smell the spiced apple on her breath from lunch. I lean over her, resting on one forearm as my other hand tilts her chin up until she finally looks me in the eye.

"I'm here because I need to be," I whisper.

I can see her desire to run as clearly as the prey she embodied earlier. I bite my lip and drag my thumb down the underside of her chin, shifting my hand to cup the back of her neck. Her pulse beats wildly beneath my fingers, her blood pumping as if she just ran a mile. I made this happen. I caused her to feel this way. Her pupils are blown wide and cheeks lightly flushed with the most delicious shade of pink. She wants me as badly as I want her, doesn't she?

Without thinking I lean forward, relishing in the way her breath catches in her throat. I let my air flow from my lungs, feeding it into her space, feeling the heat of her under my hand and watching the way her eyes dance for me. I want to tell her how she's been driving me crazy, how I feel wild around her, but I don't. Instead, I watch intently as she unconsciously licks her lower lip.

I use the tip of my thumb to tilt her chin further up and drop my head down until our lips are almost touching, so that if either one of us flinches we will cross that millimeter of space. Finally, Aubrey moves, but it isn't to brush her mouth against mine like I'm hoping. Instead, she pushes her palms flat against my chest and I follow the pressure. I let her push me away, fighting to avoid showing my disappointment.

"Just what the fuck do you think you're doing!?" She practically screeches.

I scoff. "Showing you what could happen in this part of the city."

"You are such an ass, I swear," she groans and throws her arms up before spinning around and stomping away from me.

Thankfully, she's headed back the way she came, back to the office hopefully. I sigh in relief and then rub my hand across my face, horrifically aware of the boundary I just crossed. I can't believe I almost kissed her. What the hell was I thinking?

"Damn, get your dick back in your pants," I mumble to myself, trying to shake away the memory of her lips so close to mine.

Maybe Chris was right. No, I *knew* he'd been right as soon as I'd gone home and jerked off to the thought of Aubrey. I need to get myself under control. I can't let that line be crossed. She is, and will remain, completely and totally off limits.

I groan as I remember her gaping pupils as they looked at me as if I might gift her with the most euphoric pleasures. She'd wanted it too, if just for a second. I laugh incredulously, we need to be careful, extremely careful. There is something between us that is just waiting to explode.

Grumbling to myself like the cranky old man I'm becoming, I attempt to fix my hair that got slightly unseated from its perfect office persona, and continue my walk toward where my client is waiting for me.

CHAPTER 7

AUBREY

I feel his fingers against my skin. His teeth snagging where he touched just seconds before. I don't know who he is, just that I know him from somewhere. He smells like clove and interwoven between the warmth of the spice is the bitter tang of coffee.

I sigh as he strokes along my neck, pressing kisses in the wake of his fingers, and nipping my sensitive flesh. My body wriggles and a hiccupping gasp leaves my mouth as I encourage him silently to touch me more, perhaps lower. My lips are pried apart as I pant, suffocation threatening me since I can't seem to bring in enough air. It feels so good, especially when his touch wanders to the curve of my breast and he tests the weight of it in his wide palm.

"So beautiful," he growls.

I recognize that voice, but in the depths of my dream-addled mind I can't place it. I can only open up for him, encouraging him to explore more. He hums out his agreement and I gasp as I feel the flat of his tongue roll over my nipple. Why can't I see? It's so dark, but his embrace is like a sprinkle of light in the shadows. Electricity shoots through my nerves each time we make contact, and soon my body is arching toward him eagerly.

He chuckles, a sound that I can feel in my very bones. It pulls my tendons tight and makes me curl in pleasure. But he pins me open, encouraging me to let him take over. I can't help but acquiesce, it's what I want. I need him to take over and pull out all the worry from my mind and chase away all my stress.

His nails lightly scratch over my ribs and down my stomach. He nips between each bone he touches, gentle and almost loving bites of his teeth against my fragile skin. His tongue runs back up the path he made, soothing any sting he might have left behind. His hands haven't stopped moving though, and they finally halt in the crease of my thighs, rubbing small circles and tracing nonsensical patterns. The gentle movements are almost ticklish, and I squirm under him until he presses a loving kiss to my sternum.

He doesn't stay there though, his teeth once again finding home in my skin, this time biting my neglected nipple. I cry out, trying to move my body away from him until I feel him roll the nub into his mouth and suck in a way that's almost apologetic. Not being able to see him has me trying to predict his next move, but I never can. I'm at a complete loss and he is hungry for all of me.

I feel his greed every time he presses his bare skin against mine. I tremble beneath his strong body, feeling tears prick my eyes as frustration creeps to the forefront of my thoughts. I am aching, liquid heat pooling between my thighs and the pulsing of my clit nearly painful.

"Please," I nearly sob. "Please, touch me."

"Oh, but I am," he murmurs, his mouth moving down to the silken skin under my breast. "Isn't this enough?"

"No!" I gasp, feeling the wet heat of my tears rolling down my cheeks.

"Do you want more then?" He asks, and I can practically hear the arrogant smirk in his voice.

"Yes!" My voice cracks and shudders.

He scoffs, the sound so familiar it burns. "Then open your eyes, Aubrey."

I WAKE WITH A GASP, my heart racing behind my ribs and hands shaking as they grip the familiar sheets of my bed.

I'm home, I am not with a man. Yet I still feel the familiar stickiness clinging to my panties and thighs.

I throw my arm over my sweaty forehead and sigh. God, what the hell kind of wet dream was that? I fully blame it on Liam and that stunt he pulled last week. The way he looked down at me when he had me backed up against that filthy wall...like he wanted to eat me, no, *devour me*.

If I am being honest with myself, I wouldn't have fought him if he had. I wanted to kiss him in that moment. Hell, I *still* want to kiss him. His emerald eyes are always hypnotic when he looks at me and at the time it was probably the worst it had ever been. This desire that exists between us, this burning flame I know is there just as much as he does, is so hard to ignore.

What makes it worse is how much he still irritates me. The way he seems to delight in teasing me and pushing me into reacting drives me insane. Yet I can't say I hate Liam Ainsley anymore.

No... I don't agree with his ways, not at all, but I don't hate him. I yearn for him, I crave him. I find myself staring at him more often than not, and his mind fascinating. I just wish he would open up a bit more. I can tell his guard is still up with me, as if he is testing me. But even though I want his trust, I am not sure I want what comes with that trust. For a man like Liam, letting down his walls is a way to more of a relationship than I could ever want from a man like him, and soothing my curiosity is not worth that.

I drive to my favorite morning café after getting ready for the day, with jittery nerves causing my fingers to tap a hasty beat on my steering wheel. I stop in the small parking lot on the corner of the firm's block and order not just my coffee, but the usual drink I get for Liam. Surprisingly, right as I am reaching for the cups, a large and familiar hand grabs them first. I look over my shoulder to see my mentor standing there, a sharp grin already tugging at his lips.

"Ah, I was right," he says simply.

“Liam! What are you doing here?” I ask, blinking up at him in surprise.

I don't even have a chance to put my defenses up, and I'm certain from the way his smile grows he saw something special in my unprotected expression. I shake my head in hopes to bring myself back down to earth.

“Well, I was going to get coffee, but unless you really need an extra jolt... I assume one of these is mine?” He raises one of the cups with a smirk.

My lips curl involuntarily at his joke but I quickly try to put them back into a neutral line, “Yes. That one.”

I point at the slightly smaller one and he looks at it with a frown. “I don't know if this is some way of saying I need to cut back on caffeine or what.”

He takes a deep gulp and once again I am amazed how he doesn't burn himself. I can't even take a tiny sip from mine for fear of scorching my tongue. So instead I blow a stream of tepid air through the tiny hole punched into the lid and follow him out of the door.

“Big news today, y'know?” He says casually.

I squint my eyes and can't deny the nervous squirm in my stomach. “Yeah?”

My request for more information is vague, I know that, but I don't trust this man, not even if I could pick him up and throw him. I watch him through suspicious eyes as his throat works down another steaming swallow of coffee.

“The case is moving further,” he says. “In three days we are going on a road trip to L.A.”

My eye nearly twitches while he chuckles. Why a road trip? Isn't it more economical to go by plane? Yet, Liam only seems giddy by the prospect of the case finally gaining traction, and I watch him through mild incredulity. Is he eager to work or does he have a different plan in mind? This man is nothing but puzzles to me and I think that's half of what keeps sucking me in.

We spend the day studying for the upcoming case and it's getting late by the time I am blinking back tears from my eyes and wiping grit from between my lashes.

"I don't think I can look at another page," I groan, stretching so far that my back pops and my sternum shifts. I let out a tiny, involuntary squeal at the sensation, and I don't miss how Liam shifts in his seat.

"You've put in a lot of work today, wild cat," he says with a satisfied sigh. "I think you'll make a great second chair in this case."

"Yeah, we— Wait! What did you say?" I sit upright like my spine is struck by a bolt of lightning.

My heart hammers away against my ribcage. Did he really say we are going to share this case? Am I prepared for this? I feel like I am but... my breath is coming too fast, and I know I'll start hyperventilating if I don't get a grip. He grins at me, like the cat that ate the canary. Like he knew it would blow my mind just to hear him say this.

"I said, I need you as my second chair. I mean, if you think you can do the job, that is. I'm sure I can find some other idiot to fill in who would do just as well," he raises a brow, hanging the bait in front of me and waiting for me to snap at it.

I can't help but do just as he expected, because honestly, he gets under my skin. He pokes at all those soft and sensitive spots that I try to hide until finally, I lash out.

"I'll make you eat those words," I huff, leaning eagerly over the desk.

"I expect nothing less," he says with an arrogant tilt of his jaw. "So I expect you to be packed and even more prepped in three days. Got it?"

I roll my eyes, but nod anyway, tamping down on my desire to squeal. My first big case and this one is growing curiuser with each page I turn.

CHAPTER 8

LIAM

Oddly enough, I'm looking forward to the car ride with Aubrey. I want to learn more about her. She is very much an enigma, from what I have noticed around the office. She seems completely in control, except around me. She is often seen eating lunch alone unless she eats with me, though I occasionally see her share a coffee or a snack with Derek, one of the assistants. She seems similar to how she always has been, disconnected and antisocial. But I know there is more to her.

Am I the only one who can see beyond the mask, who can pull out her true emotions? Because to be honest, she's often quite moody and is quick to snap back. Her smile is precious to her and not easily given, and her laugh is something I nearly cherish because it's so rare. I have come to like Aubrey, not just lust for her. I don't just want her; I want to see beyond that barrier she keeps up. But is it fair of me to ask that when I am far from letting my own guard down with her?

I'm considering how this trip may or may not change the dynamic between us as I stand outside her apartment, waiting for her to meet me. I lean against my Jag, hands shoved deep in my leather jacket when she finally comes down. She's dragging behind her a dark purple bag but that's not what catches my attention.

What is most interesting to me is her casual wear. She comes out wearing a loose, swoop-necked sweater, the color of periwinkle blue matched with a pair of dark blue, well-worn jeans. Her hair is down for the first time since she started working at the office and her eyes are bright with excitement.

She's a completely different Aubrey, free and expressive, as if she isn't trying to hide who she is behind a perfect work mask.

She greets me with a hesitant smile, something that could be barely considered more than a twitch of the lips as she says, "Morning Liam!"

Her voice is perky and bright, something I am completely unused to, but she seems ready to go. I'm not sure when she stopped calling me 'sir,' but I find that I rather like the sound of my name on her lips. I don't think she realizes how long we are going to be in the car, though. Perhaps she knows by a logical sense how many hours and miles it will take, but driving to L.A. always ends up being enough to make me stir crazy, especially through all that endless desert.

"Good morning," I say with a swift nod, before grabbing her luggage from her hands. "Ready to head out now?"

"Yeah, can we stop to get coffee?" She asks, turning to look at the car behind me, her eyes widening almost comically. "Is this one of the newer Jaguars?"

I smile proudly, patting the shiny black hood of the car that I have come to love taking with me on trips.

"Won't that be uneconomical?" She asks with a raised brow.

I nearly scoff but instead go with a shrug. "The gas is on my tab. This is my favorite car for road trips though. You'll see."

Opening the trunk, I toss her bags in the back save for her purse and clamber into the front seat. She stares at the door in front of her, almost as if expecting it to open on its own or perhaps expecting me to get back out and open it for her. But I have no desire to. I am trying to avoid wooing her, trying *really* hard to keep that line in the sand close to canyon deep.

I turn on the engine and roll down the window to shout out to her. "Staying here after all?"

She scrunches her nose at me, a look I find more adorable than I should, and she opens the door of the car with more force than needed and closes it behind her with a tight snap. I can't help but wince at the rough treatment of my Jag. However, once Aubrey's inside her eyes light up and she is

practically melting back into the deep bucket seats, and I watch in just as much pleasure when she enjoys the one item in my life I truly love.

It's strange seeing all these unguarded sides to her. I'm not even sure she is aware of how expressive she is. As we start out on the road, I take a detour to get coffee and Aubrey pulls out a book.

"You don't get carsick?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "Only in the back seat."

Silence falls between us as my hand finds its home on the steering wheel, and I finally roll down the window to let a breeze in while I prop my elbow on it. The wind whistles through the car and with a wince I roll down Aubrey's window halfway in hopes to ease the pressure. I can sense the look of disdain she sends me as soon as her pages get rustled in the wind. I bite my lip to hold back a smirk and avoid acknowledging her.

"Do you *have* to have the windows down?" She asks, her voice taking on a nasal tone in her annoyance.

"No," I respond, my voice snarky. "But it's how I prefer to drive."

"Why can't you just use the air conditioner like a normal person?" She offers.

"It's my car, I'll drive how I want to. Remember I can always leave you here," I taunt.

She doesn't press back, instead she huffs in her frustration and leans further over her book to protect the pages from the breeze. It's not even like it will rip the paper, it's more like it distracts her from reading. I take a strange, petty pride in being the cause of her distraction.

The ride goes mostly like that for the next few hours, bickering about the radio station or the fact that she wants silence to concentrate, arguing on where to eat, and questioning whether to stop for a bathroom break or not.

Eventually, I'm at the end of my rope and agree to stop for lunch early even though the traffic is next to nil and we would make better time if we continued on now. Though Aubrey seems incapable of waiting and is annoying me enough it's causing my head to pound. I roll my jaw as we pull into a small town, looking for either fast food, or if Aubrey has her preference, a diner.

She of course gets the win. I'm not certain if it's because I can't bear the arguing anymore or if it's because I want to see her smile. It's strange these feelings I have for her. It's like a mix of frustration beyond understanding and the desire to see all she hides or cares to show. I want to know everything about her. Is that what it is?

I contemplate these unanswerable questions as I pull into the classic diner. Its outside is nothing but a chrome shell with wide windows and a neon red sign saying they're open twenty-four hours a day. As soon as I cut the engine, we walk into the restaurant and the smell of fresh pancakes, syrup, frying meat, and something fruity greets us.

I inhale deeply and I can hear my companion do the same. We wait at the front until a waitress looks up from the table she is tending and sends us a glowing smile.

"Be right with ya folks, choose anywhere ya like," she chirps, and wanders into the kitchen scribbling something on the pad on of her tablet.

I motion to Aubrey. "After you."

She graces me with a smile, it's mostly genuine but beneath that gentleness is a bit of joking as she nods and says, "Don't mind if I do."

She seems in a better mood now that she is out of the car and food is sitting just a few minutes away. She sits across from me at the table and once the waitress places the menu in front of us, Aubrey starts devouring the pictured foods with her eyes. I smile, I can't help it. Sometimes she looks so young and it's because she is so in the moment and able to enjoy the little things.

“Do we have a limit per meal?” She asks. It’s as if she still thinks the firm is delegating the business expenses.

I smile behind the menu. “Don’t worry about it.”

She looks over the booklet in her hands and narrows her eyes suspiciously, but doesn’t say anything. Instead, she continues to study her options until she finally settles on what she wants, dropping the menu to the table with finality. Nothing in this place would be able to break a normal wallet, let alone mine.

“Why are you so unworried about the budget?” She asks.

I laugh. “Because I’ll handle anything over it.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Do you really have that much disposable income?”

“Well, I can say I make plenty of money and I don’t do a lot of useless spending. Too busy filling my time with more work,” I say with a flippant wave.

The lunch goes amicably. Aubrey ends up getting some sort of breakfast thing instead of what I view as an appropriate lunch menu item, which I of course can’t help but point out over my massive burger. She does that nose-scrunching thing again and I imagine what it would feel like to kiss her breathless, what she would look like with a dumbfounded face instead of that sassy look she has on now as she cuts into her stuffed French toast.

As we sit, we speak about the upcoming case and Aubrey has more questions than I can give her answers to. I have my suspicions, I expect not only is the man we are about to defend, Alejandro Santiago, innocent, but I believe he is being set up. But after such a long time I can only wonder who is pulling the strings. However, I don’t want to voice my questions to my young counterpart because I truly have no basis behind them, but gut instinct.

“But why would the evidence show up now? Why are they still searching for this cold case? Did they bring someone in special for it?” She asks.

I smile softly. “That’s not necessarily our job. Though it would be nice to know and likely make our job easier. It’s not required to protect his innocence. The police will take care of all of that.”

Her face falls and I understand. Still, I brush off the desire to reach out to her and instead, pick up the check and pay at the register. I glance over my shoulder at Aubrey to see her gathering her things slowly, running her thumb along the strap of her bag thoughtfully. She is lost in her mind, confused, and I recognize that look from when I was younger. A look that says she wants to do more because she feels like something is missing. Such a nosey little thing, but curiosity is what makes a great lawyer.

We climb back into the car with a relatively comfortable feeling between us, though I wonder if her silence is due to a feeling of unfulfillment with the lack of answers. Her face remains drawn through most of the ride to our first hotel, not even her book enough to distract her.

“Is this really our hotel?” She asks as she pulls out her bags.

A bellhop takes it all from her and helps pull out the duffel I have for myself.

“Yes?” I raise my brow. “Is there a problem?”

“It just seems excessively fancy for a business trip, especially since we are only staying for one night,” she says looking up at the towering, glitzy building.

I laugh. “Get used to it. If you travel anywhere, do it in style.”

She looks at me with a mixture of surprise and disdain. “Have you always been this wasteful?”

My good mood shrivels in upon itself and I grumble so low that I wonder if she can even hear it. “Might as well waste when I can. Not like I’ve had much of a chance before and nothing’s stopping me now.”

She appraises me and the admittedly cryptic tone of my words. It’s just a slight shift of her eyes, and if I wasn’t looking at her I wouldn’t have noticed. But still, a strange flit

of emotions cross her expression. It's like she doesn't know what to do with the vague information I've dumped on her. I don't blame her, I wouldn't know what to do either.

I approach the concierge desk and wait quietly as the poor hostess seems to be kowtowing to a woman on the phone. I can practically hear the staticky voice as it insults the girl across from me, her face twisting into a look of near panic as she tries to placate her.

"I'm so sorry, ma'am," she mutters as soon as the other woman on the phone takes a break for air. "It seems there's a large event happening nearby and all our double rooms are booked."

She pauses, typing something on the computer and seeming to sift through some files. She shakes her head as the voice begins to yammer away again, even though the other woman can't see her. The concierge is very expressive and her hands make calming motions.

"No, no, everywhere else is having the same problem...No, I'm sorry, I can't do that... Really, I do apologize...Yes, I will transfer you to my manager," she sighs, and when she presses the button, finally hanging up her phone, her shoulders move so deeply with her breath that not even the blinding plastic smile she affixes on her face can save her.

I offer my sympathy with a sheepish smile as if I can somehow make it better, but she just shakes her head, responding to my awkward expression. "I'm sorry about that, sir. How can I help you?"

"Sounds like you're pretty full?" I ask.

"Sadly, yes," she responds. "There is a large marathon in town eating up the extra rooms and any rooms with multiple beds."

"Do you have *anything* with double beds?" I'm sad to say my voice has a hopeful tinge.

She shakes her head as she searches through her database, clearly fearful I'm about to give her the same horrible treatment as the banshee on the phone. "All I have left is a

single bed, a double, and a queen. Though we do have cots and one with a couch.”

“I’ll take the one with a couch,” I say quickly, and she smiles, seeming thrilled that she isn’t about to get yelled at again.

I understand that feeling probably more than I should. It isn’t something I experience often anymore, but I have been on the end of a tongue lashing more often than not. I waited tables to put myself through law school, so I know all too well the woes of the service industry. I smile genuinely at her and thank her before making my way back to Aubrey. She takes the news that we’ll be sharing a room about as well as I expect. But to be honest, I’m so ready pass out, I can’t care right now. I can deal with her tantrum once we get into the room.

CHAPTER 9

AUBREY

I can't believe he actually accepted a single room. Let alone one with a single bed! I give him an earful once the door closes behind us and we're alone. I whirl around on Liam, seeing the exhaustion in his eyes and choosing to ignore it.

"What the hell were you thinking?" I snarl. "A double bed? What about an extra room?"

"There's a marathon in town, everywhere is booked to the nines," he says nonchalantly, not even looking at me as he slowly shrugs off his leather jacket and begins to unbutton his shirt.

"What are you doing!?" I screech, and even I wince at how shrill my voice goes.

He raises a tired eyebrow. "Getting ready to take a shower."

"Go in the bathroom at least," I hiss, pushing at his broad shoulders when he doesn't move on his own.

He snorts but follows my desperate attempts to get him to move. "Alright, alright. It was just my shirt."

"I don't want to see any of you without clothes," I nearly gasp at the unnecessary words that tumble from my mouth because of how untrue they are.

"Sure... ri-ight," he agrees sarcastically with a laugh when I slap his bicep and finally close the door behind him with a snap.

I can barely breathe at the thought of sharing a room with Liam. Especially now that I've been having the occasional

not-so-innocent dream about him. My newly blossoming anxiety makes all the confusing thoughts about the case from earlier disappear. So I snag my book and change into my pajamas as soon as I hear the water turn on. I look around and tuck myself into one of the small armchairs in hopes of distracting myself from the flock of butterflies swarming in my stomach. It isn't the best choice since my attention span is unusually short right now, but it is the only decent option I have.

I am annoyingly aware of the sounds that come from the bathroom. Every *thunk* of something being set down or when he occasionally curses, which I couldn't help but stifle a giggle at. But what makes me stiffen the most is when the sound of the water stops, and I nearly panic at the thought that he might walk out in just his towel.

Thankfully, although I'm begrudgingly disappointed, when Liam emerges he's clothed, his hair a mess from the towel and looking disheveled, something I'm not usually privy to. He wears a soft cotton t-shirt and a pair of worn jeans. Never once have I pictured him looking so casual. He looks at me just as surprised.

"I was thinking of heading out to get dinner, maybe relax a bit?" He offers it as a suggestion, giving me a chance to turn it down.

I glance down at my sweats and ratty shirt with a look of longing, but I also want to feed the beast in my stomach that decides to rumble just then as if to remind me how hungry I am, and though room service is always a thing, I am also frugal despite the wealth I come from. I sigh in defeat and nod.

"What did you have in mind?" I ask as I stand and rifle through my things to find a simple skirt and blouse.

"Nothing that needs you to be *that* fancy but if you want to wear it go ahead, I sure as hell ain't going to complain," Liam answers, his gaze slightly hooded as he looks at the length of the skirt and my legs in comparison.

I roll my eyes and offer him a sassy grin before walking into the bathroom to change. I swipe some pink gloss across my

lips and touch up my eyeshadow with a light blush and peach color mix. It's simple and completely me. Satisfied with the upgrade, I walk out of the bathroom to find Liam scrolling on his phone. He greets me with a blank face, however since we are both people who are meant to read nuances in expression, I can see the flare of excitement in his eyes and the way his right cheek caves in an obvious showing that he is biting it. It's definitely a confidence boost being able to render him speechless like this.

Finally, Liam clears his throat and gestures to his phone. "There's a game bar not too far from here. Figured we could relax, get some nice greasy food, and maybe have a drink or two."

Surprisingly, though the probable noise level of this place is often not something I would ever choose, I agree readily. It sounds like a great way not only to calm down but perhaps build some trust and maybe even learn a thing or two about my guarded mentor. I slip on a jacket with him guiding the way and we head down to the lobby.

I expect to get into the car, but Liam says it's just a short walk away, and the weather tonight is warm and welcoming like those strange desert nights can be. The air smells faintly of desert rose as we walk down a dimly lit street, something I would feel terrified doing if not for the large man escorting me. Why do I feel the sudden urge to take his hand?

As we turn onto a main street, the lights begin to grow at increasing intervals and the glow reassures me even more of our safety. The smell of sand and earth is broken up by the scent of nearby restaurants cooking dinner for the locals and marathon runners alike.

I smile softly, the familiar feeling of a mix of summer spiraling into fall blends through my blood. I haven't been this far out west in years, but I still remember it vividly. My family and I used to come here to various parts of the southwest every year, during my summer vacation in school. I don't have time now and especially not during college, but in high school I remember staying up late out on the balcony of our hotels and reading books by the light of the moon.

Tonight, I walk as a grown woman, with a man I have apparently known since back then. Yet now I look at him quite differently. I glance at him out of the corner of my eye, hoping not to gain his attention. Liam seems lost in our surroundings though, and I am free to watch him unguarded.

“Ah, here we are,” he says as we walk up to what is probably called a bar but looks far too upscale for that, even if it has noisy arcade games and pool tables littering its floor.

The clientele as we walk through the door are welcoming, those who sit at the bar raise a glass to us and shout greetings. I assume these are the locals. I can't help but giggle and Liam waves back. I feel free tonight and though a large part of me still wants to curl up back at the hotel room and read myself to sleep because that's normal and safe, I am still grateful he brought me out tonight.

His arm rests casually on my shoulders and I fight like hell not to melt into his touch. As he guides me to a nearby pool table, I finally realize the fatal flaw of tonight; I don't know how to play any of these games. I look up at Liam as he releases me and walks off to the bar to order what I assume to be either dinner or drinks to start with, and I stand awkwardly at the pool table rolling my pointer finger across the green felt.

“You okay?” He asks.

I look up to see him coming back with a number placard and two glasses of water.

“Yeah, I just-” I pause and glance back down at the pool table. “I don't know how to play these games.”

His smile is bright and doesn't dim. “Don't worry. I've taught many how to play pool. We'll just play solids and stripes, hm?”

I nod, silently, feeling self-conscious under his gaze and the knowledge that I know nothing about something so simple. It's embarrassing, actually. My childhood was filled with work and studies, and the only fun I found was within books. I never even played with friends; I was painfully shy as a child and didn't necessarily know how to make them. And now that very

antisocial nature stays as a habit, something so stuck within my DNA that I can no longer break it.

Still, Liam doesn't tease me like he usually would, seeming to understand my nervousness. Instead he pushes one of the glasses into my hand and walks over to a wall where long lacquered sticks rest in a rack. He picks one up and motions for me to do the same.

"These are called cues," he explains as he holds up a small blue square and rubs it on the tip.

He passes it to me and I do the same, once I realize it leaves behind a fine blue powder, I figure out it's chalk. It makes sense since the balls we are about to play with are heavy and smooth. The chalk must stop the blunt cue tip from bouncing off. I walk over to the shiny wood table waiting for us and wait for him to line up the colored balls waiting in the basket he had grabbed at the bar.

"Alright, so this triangle helps line everything up," Liam continues, and I appreciate that he's giving me such a simple demonstration but not trying to make me feel stupid, the way he's sometimes prone to at the office. This is a different Liam; he moves and speaks so casually. He reminds me of my father, in a weird way. Whenever he's in his work suit, he's all business, and it's hard to have a real conversation with him. The minute he slips into jeans or sweatpants though, he's a different man entirely. He's *dad*, the man who can make me laugh and tease my mother.

I watch intently as Liam lays out the necessities as if he's teaching me the most important points of a case. I absorb things I have never once given a thought to, and I never wondered if I would be adding this into a space in my brain. Games aren't my thing, but Liam is patient with my questions, more so than he is when explaining the law.

"So, watch me," he leans over the table, the slim end of the cue nestled neatly in between his pointer and middle finger.

His thumb seems to be holding it steady, as if guiding it, and I am enthralled by the smooth movement of it sliding against the inside of his fingers. His forearm flexes with each glide of

his cue and once he seems comfortable with the progress of his muscle memory, he moves the white ball into an area I can't seem to understand the point of.

“The white ball is the only ball you hit. It's called the cue ball. And this... is called breaking.” He narrows his eyes and with a surprising amount of precise force, he hits the cue ball forward, smacking it against the mash of colors waiting on the table, and I watch in awe as they spiral away from each other.

Several solids and one stripe fall into the holes, which he ends up calling pockets later on. He claims solids after that and explains I have to hit only the stripes in. Both of us are aiming for the eight ball, but only after all of our colored balls are in the pockets, otherwise it's an automatic loss. It seems easy enough, but once I'm leaning down over the table with the cue stick balancing awkwardly between my fingers, I realize I have no idea how to aim, how to hold things, and sliding the lacquered wood on my skin correctly is much harder than I expect.

I stand up, bite my lip, and hold tightly to the stick in hopes to protect my pride. Liam looks at me, smiling understandingly.

“Trust me, it's always easier than it looks,” he says, and I nearly jump out of my skin when his hands lightly touch my hips to reposition me.

My skin prickles and stomach flinches even though he isn't even touching anything but my skirt. I shiver, but he says nothing about it, and I wonder if maybe it's all in my imagination.

“What are you doing?” I ask after clearing my throat.

“Moving you into the correct position. What did you think I was doing?” He flashes me that cheeky smile I have gotten so used to. “Now, keep your waist back a bit, we're gonna aim for that ball there.”

He points ahead and presses down gently on the middle of my back. I suck in a sharp breath and painfully note how hard my heart is pounding. He towers over me, and his arms come

down on either side of me. For a moment I can't think, I feel dumb. I tremble as he shifts to the side, and I can feel part of his front press against half of my back as he looks closely at our target. His face is just beside mine and I can smell the fresh mint of toothpaste on his breath.

"Pick up your cue," he encourages me gently.

"Oh yeah," I say dumbly and do as I'm told.

His hands immediately begin to move my fingers into place, adjusting my grip and stroking across my tense knuckles so he can get loosen them up.

"Just relax, you don't need to be that tense. Think of it like loosely gripping a pen. Your fingers are just the guide, your arm and wrist are the only things you use to hit it with," he breathes, and I can feel his words brush across my ear.

I swallow and nod. I try to focus, I really do, but my eyelids are fluttering with a threat to close because all I want is to get swept up in his scent of spice and his words as they tell me how to move my hands. Finally, he steps back and I gasp audibly, I can feel my face flush as he snickers behind me. I take my first jab with the cue, and it sends the striped ball I'm aiming for spinning away toward the edge of a corner pocket, but it doesn't fall in. Instead, it wobbles promisingly until it finally decides to stay firmly on the green.

"Damn," I sigh.

I look over my shoulder to see Liam's eyes lingering lower, on my waist, and when he finally glances up at me, he grins like a kid caught eating cookie dough.

"Damn indeed," he winks. "Good shot though."

He strides around the table and the way he leans over it looks so natural. His shirt tightens across his muscles, and I find my gaze wandering his body, every movement that causes a flex in his tendons. I lick my lip and my eyes meet his in this moment. He's no longer looking at his shot, instead he is watching me as I melt before him and the sheer amount of confidence he produces.

The smirk that curves his lips is familiar, safe, and I find it easy to slip into my defiant expression to hide the way I am nearly falling apart. He laughs when he finally turns his attention back to the job at hand and sends a ball flying straight into the middle right pocket. I know I have no hope of winning, but it feels so good to joke around and forget the stress that's waiting for us in just two days.

Liam helps position me again as he sees me flounder with the current shot, but this time he doesn't step back, his hands riding a little high on the hem of my skirt. So high in fact that I can feel the tip of his thumbs brush the sensitive skin of my waist. I sigh and my lids slip half closed, my hips back against the front of his pelvis. I can't help the shiver that bristles my skin as his lips drop to brush against the side of my neck. I know we're losing this battle, toeing the line in the sand, and coming dangerously close to stepping right over it. But it's so good.

As his hand starts to drift further down, bunching the material of my skirt under his palm, the sound of a throat clearing causes us to jump apart. Our food has arrived, and the waiter is there wearing the biggest shit-eating grin, not showing an ounce of shame. I'm the only one who seems embarrassed in any form since Liam's watching how I react, a stupid smirk tugging at his lips.

I can't help but want to smack the shit out of him. Instead, I focus on the food, the one safe thing in the vicinity.

CHAPTER 10

LIAM

Dinner isn't a distraction for long. The two of us quickly get wrapped up in another pool game after we eat enough that our stomachs stop growling. It's easy to forget the outside world when Aubrey is smiling shyly and laughing at our mistakes. She opens up about why she had never been a kid who played games. Not that I'm surprised, she was much more of a bookworm when she was younger.

Now I'm showing her how to shoot behind her back, and she is arching just slightly across the pool table. I'm seconds from losing all control. As I'm repositioning myself, I find I'm leaning more onto her body than I need to, I'm pressing into her and that heat between us from before never went away. It's there bubbling beneath the surface.

It's how I find myself with my nose buried in the junction of her shoulder, breathing in her light fruity scent. It's how I find her pulling at my hand to lead me further back in the hallway that leads to the bathrooms, trying to find some privacy in the dark shadows. We can go back to the hotel, it's not far, except for the fact that I can't imagine waiting another second without her taste in my mouth.

"You sure?" I ask, and I'm not even sure why. It's not like I expect her to say no. It's more like I want her to say she needs me.

She nods against my chest, her hands grabbing my distressed cotton shirt. It stretches in her strong grip and I tilt her head up. I look at her, really *look* at her. I see the flush of her cheeks and the gaping wide pupils filled with lust in the shadows of the bar. We are in a public space, but it doesn't

matter to either of us, we are too far gone. We've both been silently craving this for weeks.

My mouth descends on hers and she immediately gasps, opening slightly for my tongue to flick in past her teeth. She tastes like sweet alcohol from the drink she had with dinner, some fruity cocktail with a neon color. I chase that flavor like it's my last hint of something good, I swallow her small moans like oxygen, and I can't help but turn every new tilt of the head and new position of my mouth more aggressive, more hungry. My teeth nip at her sensitive and fragile skin, she in return sucks on my lip, and I feel an unbearable pressure building in my cock. It's thickening, hardening, painfully so, and I want nothing more than to slide it past the place where I now have my tongue. I want to fuck her throat like I want to breathe.

My fingers move from cradling her head to sliding down her throat. My thumb pauses as her pulse jumps under it, and I relish that I caused it to happen. I use the pad of my finger to tilt her chin deeper into the kiss while my other hand trails further down, tracing her collarbones, the dip in her blouse where the soft swells of her breasts are. Aubrey shivers against me once again, encouraging my exploration.

My hand drops, holding the weight of her breast and thumbing the hardening nipple under her layers of clothing. She mewls into my mouth, finally breaking free to gasp in a breath. Quivering under my explorative touch, she hiccups out an exhale in surprise as I bend my head to gently nip and suck at her neck. Not hard enough to leave a mark, but from the sounds she makes she definitely appreciates the attention.

I pull back to watch her spun out gaze follow me in despair. "Gonna answer me, wild cat?" As I ask the question, I flick a teasing finger over her nipple again, reveling in her surprised gasp.

"Yes! Please, I need you," she nearly sobs, and I groan at her frantic words.

I dip my head further, licking a soft line down her throat and over her cleavage, scraping my teeth over the soft mounds of her chest. The hand cupping her breast trails further down,

wrapping comfortably around her waist and appreciating just how small she is compared to me. I drag her closer and roll my hips against her, stuttering out a relieved grunt as just that small amount of pressure relaxes the growing ache in my pants.

I move slowly even though I know where we are, but I don't want to rush this. I want to enjoy every sound, every taste, and every touch of Aubrey. My fingers quickly pop open the top buttons of her blouse just enough that the lace of her bra is visible, and I dip further to suck her nipple through the textured material of one of her cups.

She squirms above me, throwing her head back against the wall behind her, and arching under my insistent ministrations. Her fingers wind their way into my hair, and I groan as she tugs at a handful. My fingers dip under the hem of her skirt, flirting with the soft skin of her thighs and stroking them until they tremble.

I lick back across her cleavage, inhaling the scent of apples that rests between them. My teeth find home in the flesh, gently cradling it and sucking until I feel the heat of a bruise form under my tongue. Slowly, my fingers creep toward the crease of her thighs, snagging the edge of her panties tauntingly. I smirk against Aubrey's delicate skin as I hear her muffle a gasp.

I trace her slit through her panties, and it's obvious how badly she needs me by the slickness of her arousal leaking through them. My thumb is already wet and warm to the touch, and I watch every twitch of her face as my fingers slip into her underwear. Aubrey doesn't stop me, just looks at me with sparkling, honey eyes just on the edge of tears in the dark, and her legs widen to welcome me closer.

I huff out a pleased groan and whisper as I kiss her neck, "That's it, that's perfect."

My hand delves into the soft skin of her pussy, stroking her and watching as she stiffens, and then brings a palm up to her face to bite into the tender flesh. I'm not sure which I like more, the muffled sounds of her moans or the way her legs are

threatening to collapse out from under her. Her hips roll into my palm as I press the heel of it against her mound, grinding it against her clit as I gently press a single finger into her entrance.

I feel her tighten around me, seemingly trying to push me out and suck me in at the same time. The sound that comes out of me as I feel her tight stretch is sinful, dark, and throaty. I would never fit with her like this, but I shake my head against the thought. I have no intention of taking this past where we currently are. No intention. I say that to myself, yet I also never had any intention of taking it this far. Still, I can't help it and she's dragging my face up for another bruising kiss, putting the bubbling feeling of guilt in my stomach at ease.

She rocks against my touch, encouraging my finger to move, and I do exactly as she wants. Searching for that spot that has her clamping down so hard that I almost feel like she is going to break my finger. The slide of her arousal helps though, and soon her eyelids are fluttering as I pull back, and she lets out a louder moan than either of us expected. I quickly drop my lips back to hers to swallow her sounds.

I sink an additional finger into her as I feel her muscles relax around me. Pushing all the way to the last knuckle and scissoring wide until she thrashes. Then I drag back towards her entrance, flicking my fingers quickly until she is writhing in my grasp and screaming in my mouth.

Her teeth sink into my lip viciously, but I honestly don't care. I *love* the pain that accompanies the pleasure. I'm grinding against the curve of her hip, and for the first time in years I feel like I could come without even touching myself. Her sweet need, her feral desire, it's all rolling over me in waves and pushing me further and further toward my own end. But I want Aubrey to come first and I can tell she isn't far off. Not with the way she is writhing, and her nails are scratching at my shirt.

She pulls away long enough to wheeze, "G-gonna—"

She can't finish, twisting and tightening up on my fingers, and her jaw drops in a silent scream. She pulses around me,

desperate for more, but I just ease her through it, softening my strokes. She's so beautiful, breathtaking, even as I watch the haze clear away as her orgasm ebbs.

And I notice the moment Aubrey's brain switches back on.

She pushes at my chest, her breath coming even faster, the panic setting in. I stop and retreat completely, suddenly feeling like I have ice flowing through my veins. I ignore the slick on my fingers, and that my cock is still half hard. Nothing has been said that shows we are completely stopping, and I ignore the fact that she is still flushed with wide pupils and that expression looks so delicious on her.

"What... what did we do?" She whispers and her voice is near horrified.

I'm not sure whether it's my ego or something more fragile that takes the hit, but I answer full of snark. "Well, I'm pretty sure I just had my fingers in your pussy."

Was this her first time? I knew she was tight but didn't seem *that* tight. She doesn't snap back, instead she just shakes her head and darts around me before I even get a chance to stop her. She's fixing her blouse and smoothing out the wrinkles in her skirt as she rushes out of the back hall and I'm left standing confused and feeling like I crossed an unforgivable line.

It takes me longer to shake myself out of my stupor than I expect. I wash my hands in the bathroom, trying to use the scent of soap to clear my senses of Aubrey. But she's still alive in all my senses. I can still see her, taste her, feel her, and smell her. It drives me nearly insane even as I pay the bill, despite the odd looks I get from the waiter. I wonder if he saw Aubrey run, or maybe he heard us. I honestly don't care if he did.

The walk back is far less welcoming than the one to the bar. It's gotten colder, but the worst part is the silence. Somehow even with the nightlife surrounding me, it seems painfully quiet. The walk seems to stretch on forever with my head screaming at me for how dumb I acted.

I shove my hands into my pockets and lament the awkwardness that is waiting for me back at the hotel room. I wonder if I've potentially cut my relationship with my partner into ruins. Not that I suspect Aubrey would say anything to her father...she was a willing participant in our tryst, and I know her well enough to know she'd never implicate me in such a way.

I step over the threshold of our shared hotel room.
"Aubrey?"

There's no answer. I look around the entryway corner to see her fast asleep in bed, or what I assume is fast asleep. Her hair is wet so she must have taken a hurried shower. I don't press to check to see if she's faking. If she is, she obviously isn't ready to talk. Instead, I lay down on the couch, not even changing into sweats. I just want today to be over.

CHAPTER 11

AUBREY

I was barely awake last night when Liam came back from our disastrous pool lesson. I was aware of his presence, but I couldn't pull myself out of the grasp of unconsciousness.

The time has passed to talk about it. Now this morning I'm sitting across from him eating room service scrambled eggs and reading my book. We're preparing to leave for the rest of the drive, but I feel an uncomfortable fluttering sensation in my stomach. It's exhausting. I have been on edge the entire morning, but Liam seems no different. I can't read him at all nor how he feels about what happened. Hell, I don't even know how I feel about what happened.

I put my chin on my hand as I set my fork down, feeling my appetite ebb, and focus instead on the words in front of me while Liam finishes his breakfast. I think the worst feeling is shame. I lost myself last night. I lost myself to the incredibly strong desires I have for this man sitting across from me. I actually *begged* him to continue. He gave me several opportunities to say no and I refused to take them.

Biting my lip, I rub my grinding jaw joint in hopes to ease the anxious pressure. It doesn't, but at least the pain changes and for now it's more bearable. I glance up at Liam from under my lashes but he's not looking at me, he's focused on his notebook, scribbling something in pen. It nearly makes me laugh, it's almost cute. He has one of those cheapo erasable pens I always used in high school, and I have to roll my lip between my teeth to muffle a scoff. However, he hears me making a noise and looks up at me.

Liam's eyes seem to soften as he shoots me a gentle smile. In this moment I know he's thinking about last night too. There's almost a desperation in those emerald eyes, like he wants to make sure I'm okay without breaching my comfort levels. I appreciate him so much at this moment, even though I want to rag on him for using a pen that 'supposedly' erases and everyone knows it doesn't. I send a grin back to him that's half hidden by my hand, but he seems to take it to heart and turns back to whatever he is doing.

We leave the hotel with a calmer air between us. Though the awkwardness still knits around our bodies waiting for a chance to tighten, it's a bit easier to ignore. My hair is loose once again, and I'm wearing a pair of sand-blasted jeans with a t-shirt from my favorite band I've had since my freshman year of college. The collar is frayed, and there's a large hole on the seam of the shoulder from a soldering accident in jewelry making class. It's something that holds a lot of good memories, and the worn cloth is comfortable, so wearing it today seems like a no-brainer.

It doesn't take long for the world to shrink inside the car and the tension to become unbearable once again. It's not long before I am dragging out my book again due to being unable to carry on a conversation. The nerves seem to be mostly on my side, and I hate that I feel so awkward riding next to this man just because we couldn't stop ourselves last night.

The memory hits me like a punch to the gut, the shadows of the back hallway falling across Liam's face and sharpening his cheekbones and jawline. I remember the taste of his lips, the smokey flavor of bourbon still lingering on his tongue, can still practically feel his fingers as they trace my body before finally sinking into my heat, his breath heavy against my throat as he brought me to my peak. I'm once again painfully aware that I don't regret doing that with Liam. It felt right. He made it *so good*. I just wish it had gone differently.

I push the buzzing thoughts away from the front of my mind, paranoid that Liam will *know* and choose to ridicule me further. Instead I focus on the words in front of me, letting them take me away to a world where I'm not me and don't

have to worry about these mundane things. I lose myself in a fantastical world of kingdoms and political intrigue. It becomes hard to even drag my eyes away from the page to check where we are on the road.

Before I know it, it's almost lunchtime and the sound of Liam's cell phone ringing drags me out of the book's universe once again. I glance over to him, realizing the call isn't coming from the car speakers like it usually would if it was attached to his Bluetooth. I also notice he isn't wearing his earbud that usually sits in one ear. He curses and I raise a brow in curiosity.

He glances down at his phone, and I don't even bother nagging him to keep his eyes on the road, considering I've done it countless times before. He shakes his head and swipes the call, silencing it. I blink in surprise.

"Spam?" I ask.

"No, I don't think so, but I don't know the phone number either and can't exactly answer." He shrugs and cuts his eyes back to the road.

That's all I'm offered as a form of communication for the next hour until my stomach finally rumbles and he snorts out a laugh. I shoot him a glare that has no real heat to it, and he looks around for the next potential exit.

"Could just grab a burger at a fast-food joint?" He offers, and I can tell by his tone that he expects me to shoot him down.

"Sure," I agree and honestly, I'm too tired to try and sit and order somewhere. That would mean looking him in the face as I eat, and I don't think I can bear the mortification. And I'm not mentally prepared to deal with strangers either. I am just having a hard time with the way my muscles are constantly tense due to the embarrassing situation I still can't keep off my mind. We need to talk about it, to clear the air, but I don't know if Liam is up for it yet. I'm not even sure I'm ready.

I sigh and shift a bit in the seat, drawing Liam's attention, he stares at me for longer than I expect, checking the road

occasionally.

“Everything ok?” He asks.

Of course, it's not, I want to scream. Instead, I breathe deeply, gathering control of my emotions before I start the conversation neither of us wants to have.

“I’m sorry about last night,” I say, trying to keep my voice firm.

He falls silent and I glance over after a moment when he doesn’t answer me. He’s watching the road as if it’s the most interesting thing in the world, but his grip on the wheel tightens until his knuckles turn white. I wait, letting him digest the words I’ve said before he answers me.

“Oh,” he says, as if that answers all my silent questions.

Oh...? Oh!? That’s not something you say after you finger a girl in the back of a bar. Especially not after she apologizes. Tears prick my eyes and threaten to roll down my cheeks, but I don’t let them. I refuse to cry over this, over *him*, and a single moment where I lost my control. I feel sick and my appetite evaporates, but I know I need to order something to keep his suspicion and nagging away.

I don’t push the conversation to continue, and Liam doesn’t offer me anything more out of his own volition. I let myself fall silent, only breaking it long enough to give him my order to repeat to the speaker box in the drive-thru.

More long, agonizing hours pass. I must have fallen asleep at some point because I find myself being shaken awake by a familiar weight. I blink open my eyes to see Liam’s palm on my shoulder and the comforting warmth of it seeping through my clothes. But it only takes long enough for my vision to focus before I reluctantly draw back from him, putting not only a physical barrier of space between us but also an emotional wall. He pulls back, narrowing his eyes for no longer than a breath before shaking his head and motioning at the hotel.

“We got issues,” he says, his tone grave.

“Again?” I ask, my nose scrunching in distaste. I notice that our surroundings are significantly darker than before, and a simple glance around reveals we’re in a parking garage.

He shrugs. “Apparently. That call I ignored earlier was from the hotel.”

I sigh and rub my temple. “What’s going on?”

“There’s some construction going on at their other hotel, and that fucking marathon is moving through this city too.” My stomach drops. I don’t want him to finish talking because I instinctively know my inevitable fate. “Because they’ve had so many incoming requests for rooms, their system went haywire.” He slouches back in his seat. “And well, they only set us up for one room since they couldn’t remember the number.”

I throw my hands up and cradle my head. I nearly scream as I rock there for a moment, my anxiety finally bubbling over into an excess of emotions and the tears begin to fall. I am so pissed off but now at least I have a reason to cry. It’s humiliating and childish, but I don’t even care.

“Hey,” Liam breathes and his arms curl around me. “It’s okay, there’s no *real* issue here.”

I am so passed being able to push him away. I’m so exhausted and tired from fighting with myself, and I let him comfort me in a half hug as he shushes me and rubs my arm. After a minute or two, I quiet down, hiccupping dry sobs. I finally pull away from him, shaking my head and wiping my tears with the back of my hand.

“Sorry,” I whisper, and we both know I’m apologizing for multiple things.

“No reason to apologize,” he murmurs, rubbing an impossibly gentle hand down my back, and I know in my heart that’s his answer to my last request for forgiveness as well as this one.

We move through the hallway with a complimentary basket of some sort waiting for us in our room and supposedly free room service for the night. I intend to take full advantage of

the room service, but I'm just glad I don't have to drag my own bag anywhere like I would have to in cheaper motels. There are some perks to sleeping at ritzy places. I knew this from childhood; Dad is also someone who likes to sleep in luxury, but I still work for all my money. Not that my mother couldn't somehow convince my father to help me out if I really needed it. But I don't want to need it. If spending a couple of nights at the Motel Six saves me several hundred dollars then I will take that over comfort.

I still feel like I'm dragging 25 pounds behind me because I'm so exhausted from today. How can sitting in a car all day be this draining? I doubt I'd be so tired if Liam would let me drive, but I've long given up asking him. Apparently I'm not to be trusted with his precious Jag.

I'm lagging behind Liam, who keeps looking over his shoulder with a worried expression, as if he thinks I might keel over any second. He might be right, after that breakdown it feels like whatever energy I had left is spent. We make our way past excited tourists and marathoners before he stops at a door and swipes the keycard. I inhale deeply, gratefully, and follow him inside the room.

It smells of freshly laundered sheets and on top of the pillows are those chocolate mints I'm addicted to. I snatch up the entire handful before Liam even notices them. He's looking at the complimentary basket; it holds cheese, cured meats, and some wine. It looks like the snacks will be taken care of, then.

On the other side of the bed, pressed up against the wall is a cot large enough for Liam to sleep in and have a smidge of space. I look at it in surprise, apparently we won't have another couch for him to flop on.

"I can take the cot," I offer since I'm smaller and it will likely be more comfortable for me.

He shakes his head. "If your father found out, I would never hear the end of it. Jacob would never be okay with his daughter taking the worst of a situation."

I scrunch my nose. “I don’t think you know my father as well as you think you do.”

Liam laughs and waves me off. “Just go take a shower, unless you want to sleep in clothes that smell like fast food.”

I frown and sniff the front of my shirt, smelling the vestiges of French fries. I purse my lips and stick my tongue out at him before taking the first shower. The clothes I come back in are the usual ones I choose for relaxation, a ratty t-shirt that has no business being used to cover my body and fuzzy pajama bottoms.

“Do you want to order room service?” I ask as I run a towel viciously over my hair.

“Mhm. Kind of too tired to go down to the dining hall or go outside at all,” he responds, gathering some clothes. “Feel free to get whatever you want and just get me a sandwich with meat of some sort.”

The door clicks firmly behind him, and I try not to think about what is happening behind it. How he’s unbuttoning his shirt and slipping his pants down. Instead I focus on the menu and order not only the sandwich but also a couple of smaller things I think Liam might like. I, however, am delving headfirst into a pasta dish with a side of garlic bread. I just need something carb-loaded to feel a bit of that comfort I would if I was safe in my home.

I hear the shower turn off several minutes after the food arrives, and it hits me that this was a much longer shower than Liam took yesterday. Maybe because this will be where we are staying for the next few weeks and he’s trying to settle in. Maybe he felt as gritty as me from being in the car all day. I’m not sure, but I hear the bathroom door open, and as I look up to tell him where his food is, I’m gobsmacked by the sight of sweatpants and a naked stomach still dripping with water.

My gaze creeps further up, following the trail of rivulets and tracing the muscles they crawl over. I finish at his eyes, those incredibly dark greens that sparkle with mischief as he waits for me to finish eye-fucking him. And damn him, he knows, basking in the sun as I stroke his ego.

“What the hell is with you and walking around without a shirt?” I try to save face.

“I’ve never walked around without one before,” he corrects and crosses his arms.

“No, but you’ve almost stripped one off in front of me,” I snarl.

He shakes his head. “It’s just a shirt. Is the food here?”

I avert my eyes and point vaguely in the direction of his sandwich and extras, and he makes some sort of excited sound. I only dare to sneak a glance when his back is completely turned. I try to remember this moment, painting his image in my head for the weeks to come.

CHAPTER 12

LIAM

Waking up in the morning is a bitch and a half. My back is completely out of whack and my neck has the most irritating crick in it. I cannot survive another night on that cot. There has to be a better option. Perhaps the floor?

I stare in irritation at the cause of my misery when Aubrey saunters into the room, already dressed and primped for the day. We are meeting the client later in the afternoon and she is vibrating with excitement. I can't help but smile even though the fact that she looks refreshed after a good night's sleep makes me jealous.

"What's wrong?" She asks, studying my face from across the room.

"The cot sucks," I grunt.

"I told you I could take it," she says with a shrug.

"I don't think it has anything to do with how big you are," I say with pursed lips.

She flounces over as if intent on proving me wrong and lays across the cot before her face screws up into a scowl and she shifts a couple more times. She scoffs and shifts again before finally throwing her hands up in exasperation.

"Yeah, that definitely sucks, you're right," she says and shakes her head. "Neither of us can use that. I'm not sure the floor will be much better though." She looks all around her at the hard-packed carpet and crosses her arms, thinking. "I think we actually have to share the bed."

Her voice sounds horrified and to be honest, no matter how much I would love to be under the same blankets as Aubrey, I don't think it's a good idea either. Jacob would punch me into the stratosphere if he knew. And if my behavior at the bar is anything to go by, I wouldn't be able to keep my hands to myself. But fuck, I can't function on sleep like this, and the more days I spend having crappy sleep, the more my cognitive mind will falter. No one wants a dumb and sleep-deprived lawyer.

"Yeah, alright," I sigh and rub my hand over my face in frustration. "Fuck, this definitely isn't going to plan at all."

She shakes her head and looks up at me with soft eyes before nudging her head towards the door. "Want to go get breakfast?"

I swear all she thinks about is food, and the fact that she thinks a meal could make me feel better makes me smile. It's so simple, something pure and innocent, another person showing concern in their own way while I'm feeling down. That in itself is enough to make me feel slightly better.

"Sure," I say, motioning for her to lead. "They have one of those buffets, right?"

"From what I read," she responds and wanders out the door with me following close behind.

The morning has very little chitchat beyond anything involving the case. But I've come to realize that neither of us is talkative in the morning. I look down at my tablet, having brought it down to breakfast with us, and I glance up long enough to see Aubrey with her nose buried in her book. It's a familiar sight I have grown used to during this travel with her. She always has a book with her, either on her phone or stuffed in her purse.

Most of breakfast is silent until Aubrey asks, "Do you know when we are going to meet him?"

She is marking something on a page and I wonder if the book isn't for fun. The pages are that kind of textbook white I've seen before and grown oddly used to over my years as a

lawyer. But she doesn't look up at me, instead she is busy reading another line and I wonder how she can possibly absorb my words while reading something else. I've seen her do it, though, so I know she can.

"Yes, around 1 p.m. We are meeting him closer to downtown so we will have to leave maybe close to an hour early," I say with a sigh. Even though we're staying in the nicer part of Hollywood, driving through tourist packed streets is going to cost us precious time.

I turn back to my tablet and begin to review the case files for probably the thirtieth time. I swear this is one of the most complicated I've ever been assigned. It's oddly vague. I keep reading though, in hopes of catching some little clue I might have missed. I don't though, I never do.

"Do you think it will go well?" She asks, once again highlighting a part of her page.

"Never know until I'm there," I say. "And with the amount of information we have, I am even less unsure."

The time for the meeting comes faster than I expect. It feels awkward driving in the car again, especially with the way Aubrey seems to be anxiously tapping her fingers to the beat and isn't snarking about the music being too loud. She isn't reading, isn't trying to start an argument, just lost in her thoughts right now and she's obviously uncomfortable with whatever those thoughts are.

The traffic is horrific on the 101, some sort of lunchtime rush that I knew would happen. I've lived in enough big cities that it has become second nature to prepare for these parts of the day when traffic moves at a snail's pace. Still, people seem to be irritated and in a rush, honking horns, trying to weave in and out of cars, and yelling inside their vehicles. I sigh and rub two fingers across my brow, trying to ignore how ridiculous they all are.

The thick crowd of cars is slowly moving and we're making enough headway that I feel we will make it on time. Even though I keep flicking my eyes back and forth to the clock and road, I am still aware we are within fifteen minutes of the

meeting spot. We are meeting at a café, and the warm mugginess of L.A. would lend well to sitting outside.

Finding a parking spot is nearly impossible and I finally settle for one that barely fits the Jag, even though it isn't exactly what one would call a big car. As I'm setting everything up to leave the car behind, Aubrey collects the papers and briefcases. She is far more useful than anyone I've had to work with before, anticipating our needs before I have to ask anything of her.

Before I know it we are walking into the café and I'm typing out a message to our client saying we are there. He finds us quickly enough, probably because we actually look the part of our jobs today.

"Mr. Santiago?" I ask, holding out my hand in greeting.

"Please, call me Alejandro. You're doing so much for me, the least I can do is wave away the pleasantries," the man says.

He has a kind expression, darker skin, with slightly graying hair and scruff that makes him look even more tired than the shadows under his eyes do. I know from his file that he's in his mid-forties, though living a life of hardship seems to have added a few years to his appearance. He shakes my hand and then Aubrey's, and I return his smile, liking him immediately. There's a frankness to the man's demeanor that tells me he's going to be a cooperative client.

"It's nice to meet you both, your boss is saving my bacon," Alejandro says. "Let me buy you some coffee. And if you're hungry, lunch is on me."

I am about to wave him off but there is a shine of pride in his eyes, so instead I accept his offer with gratitude. "I'm not sure how much saving I'll be doing. Your case is very strange."

Aubrey nods with a frown wrinkling her forehead. Alejandro raises his brow and tilts his head.

"How so?" He asks as we walk to the counter to order food. "I found it strange enough that they offered me bail on a murder charge."

“Well let’s find a place to sit and we can talk about things,” Aubrey says.

We all order something to drink and eat, then find our way outside where it’s quiet, and most patrons are scattered around and separated from each other. A lone table sits in the corner of the patio and several empty tables surround it. It’s the perfect place for discretion.

“So, I have to tell you my story first. I won’t say my past is anything perfect, in fact I got into a lot of shit when I was younger. I *did* run in a gang and did my fair share of... unsavory activities. But I never killed no one, luckily enough,” Alejandro says, looking down at his interwoven fingers before his expression turns pleading as he turns it towards us.

I nod and Aubrey’s small palm lands on his hands, cupping them comfortingly. There is understanding in her eyes when she looks at him. She trusts him and so do I, especially after reading the files.

“We believe you,” I say, just as the food comes and we all clam up until the waiter leaves.

Food takes precedence for a few minutes, and we find comfort around each other by asking about life. I learn Aubrey likes cream puffs and I file that knowledge away for some later date.

There’s a shift in her personality all of a sudden as she presses for more information. “So, what do you remember about the night in question?”

He pauses for a moment and I watch him through calculating eyes, but he just seems to be thinking back on things. Alejandro takes another bite of his sandwich before shaking his head and shrugging.

“Not much. I think I was drunk or high, I spent most of those nights either of the two. Unless I was working the streets and selling. But I hadn’t been put on sales much during those times,” he says rolling the words over his tongue thoughtfully.

I nod. “That’s actually to be expected. If you had shot anyone you would remember that night better, I would

assume.”

Aubrey thinks for a moment. “Do you have any enemies in the gang?”

He whistles lowly. “That’s gonna be a long list. People don’t get out of the gang easily. I made a lot of enemies that way.”

Slowly, a list is formed to hand off to the police until Alejandro tells us, “Uh...the police haven’t really been looking into my side of things.”

Aubrey nearly flies into a rage. “What? Why?”

He blinks as if surprised by her confusion. “I mean, I’m a nobody from the gang. But the folks that was shot had bigger connections.”

He falls silent and looks thoughtful.

Aubrey tenses and bites her lip. “Do you think someone is setting you up?”

“That’s exactly what I think,” he answers with a loose nod. “Don’t know who, and obviously I can’t do much about it.”

“No, but we can,” I murmur lower than they can hear.

CHAPTER 13

AUBREY

*A*fter we leave Alejandro, I look up at Liam. My hand grips my bag a little tighter as we dart through the crowd on the sidewalk; Downtown LA is a whole different ballgame from back home, and I'm not taking any chances. Liam isn't slowing down and I know he expects me to keep up, like I always do. He doesn't slow down for me, that's not our relationship. Our relationship is me chasing after him and catching up for long enough for him to be surprised.

I relish those moments too, when he looks at me with wide eyes and laughs deeply. I love surprising him with wit and sharp comments. I've begun to enjoy him as a person. Though I still see myself arguing with him, in the future I see it for different reasons. I don't hate him now, but with that barrier disintegrating there is nothing to protect me from my desires.

"I'm sorry," I say quietly.

"What?" He asks, and I'm not sure if he is joking in the beginning or not. "What did you say?"

Seeing that he really hasn't heard me, I apologize again. "I said I'm sorry."

Liam scrunches his nose and tilts his head. "For what? You did great back there, better than I expected."

I am not sure if I should be insulted or not, but I decide to ignore him since he obviously means no harm. His expression is too soft for that.

"No, I mean," I inhale deeply. "I meant that I used to think you were an ass. You still are but... I think you are generous

too. You're kind. You go out of your way to help people."

He raises a brow curiously. "What do you mean?"

"Don't play dumb. This is a pro bono case, isn't it?" I say, crossing my arms.

He clicks his tongue and narrows his eyes. "Yeah. C'mon let's get out of here while we can."

Once again, he tries to redirect the conversation and this time I let him. "Anyways, I'm just sorry I was so harsh on you."

I smile cheekily at him and walk to my side of the car, shifting the bags in my hand to open the door. Once inside, it's easier to breathe, the pollution and smog from outside seem to filter through the vents so it feels less heavy, and the press of bodies doesn't exist so it feels less claustrophobic.

For once, Liam doesn't roll down the windows and instead uses the A/C. The cool brush of air across my cheeks is a welcome feeling and I sigh in appreciation. He chuckles as he looks over at me and the way I nearly melt against the seat.

"It's a scorcher today," he murmurs.

"Yeah, uncomfortably so, actually," I respond. "By the way, you remember that day I brought your paperwork in the city?"

He pulls out of the parking spot with care and slowly drifts into the stream of traffic driving past. Everything he does is with smooth confidence when he is behind the wheel, his movements calm and timed to perfection. The traffic has lightened compared to how it was when we arrived, and the way back to the hotel is relatively easy. We slip in and out between cars without causing a fuss and before long we pull back into the parking garage.

"Liam?" I prompt.

"I remember," he says shortly.

"Well, back then, since you were in a sketchy part of town, I thought that maybe you were going to do something... well, less savory. Something illegal," I say slowly. "I don't think you were, learning what I did today."

“Well, that’s good, because I wasn’t,” he says, offering nothing else.

“Are you going to tell me if I ask?”

“No,” he says. “But maybe later on I will *show* you.”

I blink at him in surprise as we exit the car and cross through the lobby doors. It’s a relief once again since the day only seems to be getting hotter outside. Without even stopping, we walk up to the room, prepared to shelter ourselves from the heat until dinner and input the notes I took today into the system.

The room is oddly welcoming after being surrounded by so many people today, and I let out a happy sigh as soon as we step past the doorway. Liam raises his eyebrows and scoffs.

“Is it really so hard being out with others?” He asks.

“Yes,” I answer bluntly without a second thought.

“Why?” He turns, shucking out of his jacket and carefully removing his shoes.

“I’ve never been someone who likes being around a lot of people. Much rather be reading. But that doesn’t always work with my family or my job. So I’ve learned how to fake it,” I say as I place our briefcases down and begin to dig through my suitcase for something comfy to wear.

“Do you have specific books you prefer?” He asks. It’s nonchalant but it sends a feeling of shock through my system.

My hands pause in the bag, and I stare at the shirt in my grasp for awhile. I don’t remember when I was last asked that. My mother knows, of course, my father last asked that when I was still a young teenager, and I haven’t gotten close enough to anyone else for them to even be interested. But for Liam to ask about something so personal and special to me has my heart racing. It’s both a terrifying and humbling experience to have someone take an interest in me.

“I have my preferences, but I generally read a few different genres. With non-fiction I lean toward research material in law or something involving carnivorous plants. With fiction I

like..." I pause, feeling a flush rush to my cheeks. "Romance and fantasy."

"Romance, hm?" He says, and I can hear that teasing lilt in his voice again.

I want to run and hide from his scrutiny. I can feel the ribbing coming from him, but I quickly grab my clothes from my suitcase and stalk past him toward the bathroom.

"Yes, romance!" I snap before shutting the door tight behind me.

I can hear the fucker laughing outside the door and I huff in frustration at myself. I can't believe I let him work me up again with just a couple of words. I sigh, looking at myself in the mirror, rubbing my cheeks, and looking at the brown of my eyes intensely. I still look tired. I massage the circles starting to grow and purse my lips to the side before I finally start exchanging my work clothes for something soft and warm.

I walk outside the bathroom to see Liam stretched across the bed on the side I didn't use last night. His torso is bare again and I have to stop in my tracks and force my gaze away from him so I can breathe. I can feel the weight of his stare on me, and I hear the bastard huff in amusement. He doesn't even try to let me off the hook. He doesn't let me pretend I don't exist and crawl into a book to hide. Instead, he stands and invades my space, forcing me to look up.

His finger curves under my chin to keep it propped upward and makes me focus on his face instead of his muscled chest. I shiver involuntarily when his skin touches mine and my breath hiccups nervously in my chest.

Liam is sizing me up, judging what he sees in front of him with calculating eyes before he leans down and whispers in my ear. "You better get used to this. We'll be sleeping side by side tonight."

He releases me then, grabbing his tablet and flopping back down on the bed, immersing himself within seconds. I, however, am stuck to the wall still, my legs trembling slightly and his scent still deep within my senses. He doesn't laugh this

time nor spare me a glance. Instead, he gives me time to collect myself and so I use it to slow my fluttering heart rate with steady breaths.

Once I push off the wall, I feel like a newborn fawn unsure how to use my legs. I've never been this affected by a man, a point of pride if I say so myself. But Liam obviously isn't any man, and he knows it. He drives me crazy and part of me realizes he only holds this sway over me because of whatever these slowly growing feelings are.

I drag myself over to a chair in hopes of spending the rest of the day buried in my book, nursing my bruised ego. After a couple of hours, when the sun is dipping behind the horizon, I've nearly forgotten my previous predicament. Until I'm interrupted by a fully dressed Liam in his t-shirt and jeans, bumping my foot with his own.

"Yes?" I ask, a bit irritated.

"Dinner?" He offers. It's just a single word, but it has my heart palpitating all the same.

I nod. "Did you want room service?"

He shakes his head. "Thought I'd take you out."

I know he means nothing by it, but the way he phrases it is nerve-racking. I roll my lip in between my teeth, and I wonder if he is doing this on purpose. But he isn't, I can see it in the clear green of his eyes, he's just asking a simple question right now. I nod, dumbly, feeling like a bobblehead, but he doesn't respond with any more than a grunt of affirmation. He's letting my awkwardness slide under the radar this time and I appreciate his mercy as I quickly change my clothes into something a bit more acceptable for going out. Which of course is just a pair of jeans and a button-up top.

He chooses a restaurant that is sit-down but nothing fancy. It's an Italian place that ends up having the best fresh bread appetizers I've ever had. I'm afraid I may actually get too full on them.

"You like the bread?" He asks, watching me with a smile curling his lips.

“Who wouldn’t like this bread, except maybe someone forced to be gluten-free?” I am absolutely tearing into another chunk of rosemary focaccia, certain that I can die happy after this meal, whatever awkwardness will come with sharing a bed with this force of a man.

He snorts but is also enjoying a piece dipped in olive oil and balsamic, just a bit slower than my demonic speed. It’s like I’m worried he might eat it all when he’s only had two pieces versus my four. He is watching me with affection warming his gaze, something I refuse to acknowledge it.

Once the main entrees are out, I bring up our case and what we learned from our lunch with Alejandro, wondering who could be behind it all.

“Are we going to give the information to the cops?” I ask.

“I’m not sure, I usually don’t go without the proper channels, but I’ve done it before. It seems like they aren’t a huge help anyway. I’m not surprised, but I would like to check that for myself,” he says after he swallows a bite of food.

I nod. “It would be good to know.”

Going forward, I know how dangerous this job will be. This isn’t a normal case and I see the unspoken concern shimmering in Liam’s eyes.

CHAPTER 14

LIAM

We're headed back to the hotel after the best dinner of our trip so far. I've learned so much about Aubrey today; she eats bread like a fiend, loves fantasy and romance novels, and is incredibly quick when it comes to figuring out links within tough cases. She keeps surprising me. I'm enjoying her company more than I should, beyond just teaching her and watching her grow. I've become greedy and want to know more about her. I feel possessive of this knowledge.

I search for an answer to what this feeling could be, and only one comes to me as I drive with my hands gripping the wheel tighter than usual. I am interested in Aubrey. I want to see her underneath me, I want to hold her, I want to kiss her, and I want to take her out more. Fuck. Fuck! I am so utterly ruined.

I sigh and bite my inner cheek with such force that I'm surprised the skin doesn't split. But it stops me from speaking those words to her as soon as I understand what I'm feeling. I need to remember who she is, who I am. I am her father's best friend. I am her mentor. I can't do this. I can't cross that line.

The ride back is without conversation and she seems comfortable with it. She quietly sings along to some old Billy Joel song that's on the radio, tapping her fingers happily against the armrest on the door. I, however, only feel awkward, my muscles bunched and starting to vibrate. I have never felt this drawn to a woman, never felt so out of control of my own emotions.

"We're almost there," I say calmly, belying my inner conflict.

Suddenly Aubrey goes silent, her tapping slows to a stop and her entire side of the car is wrapped in this impenetrable quiet that I don't understand. At a stop light, I glance over at her and frown.

"Everything okay?" I ask, tilting my chin.

She sighs and speaks calmly, but bluntly. "I think I like you."

My stomach drops when she turns to look at me. I immediately avert her gaze and face forward, panic taking hold. I feel like I can't swallow, maybe I can't even breathe. No, this wasn't ever supposed to happen. She wasn't supposed to say anything, she wasn't supposed to feel something. *Fuck!*

I thought I was screwed before but now, now I'm really and truly damned. My hands tremble in the darkness on the steering wheel and I clench harder until my knuckles turn white, trying and failing to get the shaking under control. I have never felt so useless. My emotions are leading me by the nose and everything in me wants to respond to her, to grab her and kiss her senseless. I want to take her up to the room and sink deep inside her. But I fucking can't. I reel back my instincts viciously.

My pride and my confidence are in tatters, so I do what I do best, and fake it. The one thing I'm good at faking is being an arrogant asshole. It's how I get away with coming to a meeting fifteen minutes late. It's how I intimidate people just by entering the room.

"No, you don't," I say clearly. "You can't."

"What do you mean?" She bristles. "I know what I feel."

Her voice is calm but there's a cool quality to it, like chilled water under thin ice that's slowly cracking under my feet as I walk across a lake. I know I'm marching to my doom in this scenario when I respond to her. I'm stepping so far out onto that ice that there is no land on either side of me, nothing to save me, no one.

"You are my prodigy and Jacob's daughter. I can't—we can't—cross that line," my words are steady and strong, but I

know that inside I'm hoping she doesn't push, because I feel fragile and like my resolve is waiting to shatter.

"I'm also a woman. I'm not a teenager anymore. I know what I want, and I've seen what you want." Her words are just as confident as mine, except I hear the quiver of vulnerability behind them.

I pull into a parking spot in the garage and turn to look at her, only for her to catch me off guard with a kiss. Her lips are soft and taste of sugary sweet crême brûlée. I can't help but follow her lead for a few moments, too shocked to do anything but let her turn me into a hungry beast. Then the switch flips and I'm taking control, pushing her back into her seat as I unclip my seatbelt. I remove hers as well so I can easily control the tilt of her head and lick my way into her mouth.

There's a hint of vanilla lingering on her tongue, laced with the rosemary from the bread and dinner. I'm chasing the flavor, rolling over her palate for more of a taste. She moans for me, her body arcing with need and her fingers running through my hair. It's still in place from work earlier but from the way she is grasping at it, it won't be for long.

We share our breath each time we break apart only to come back together again with needy touches and gasping groans. It's all heady desire and the windows are already fogging up. I know where this is going. I know I can't stop it, and I no longer want to.

We finally break apart and I press my forehead against hers, catching my breath and feeling hers puff against my mouth. I swallow, lick my lips, and sigh as I cup her cheek in one hand. I take in how breathless she is and how her hand is twisted in the cotton of my shirt. She's beautiful.

"Want to go up to the room?" I ask, in the gravel of my voice there is a clear desire and a request for more.

My thumb strokes across her cheekbone and she nods before saying, "Yes."

CHAPTER 15

AUBREY

The lobby is bright when we enter, too bright compared to the safety of the car in the dark parking garage. I stand beside Liam as we wait for the elevator, our fingers intertwined loosely and his thumb drawing soothing patterns on the back of my hand. He meets my gaze right as I look up at him, and my breath catches when I see his pupils swallowing up the color of his irises, only a thin ring of green left. Desire, thick and passionate, flows within those eyes, threatening to drown me if I stare for too long and I shiver with need, causing him to tighten his hold.

Even in the elevator, nothing changes but the position of his hand; his arm curls around my waist and his fingers slip under the hem of my shirt. His skin is warm against mine as he traces those swirling patterns into the dip of my waist. It's an intoxicating sensation, something that makes me arch against his side and take in a shuddery breath. It catches painfully in the bottom of my chest, and I whine as I twist against him, only to have him add fuel to the fire by pressing a gentle kiss against my temple.

"Patience," he whispers just loud enough so I can hear it.

I melt against him and let him draw me into a bubble of slowly burning passion, climbing higher and higher just like the elevator we ride. By the time we arrive at our floor, it's become a roaring flame. I step out into the hallway, my fingers once again weaved between Liam's. He leads me after that, tugging me impatiently behind him toward our room. At our door, he claims a quick and vicious kiss from me. Something

that speaks of not only what is to come, but what he's feeling right here, right now.

He swipes the keycard fast and as soon as we are in the room, he kicks the door shut with his heel while he tilts my head up to claim my lips again. It's aggressive and demanding, everything that makes Liam who he is. He's confident as his hands pull my light blouse over my head and tosses it to the side. I instinctively move to cover myself, but he stops me, a low animalistic growl rumbling up his throat as he pins my wrists behind my back with one hand. I feel so small in his grip, but it's addictive. I feel safe, I trust him, and I want him to take over.

"Don't hide," he whispers.

I nod. "Okay."

I'm all soft sighs and whispered encouragements as he presses light kisses down my neck and across my collarbone. His lower teeth scrape my sternum and I take a step back until we are tumbling onto the bed, causing me to giggle because I truly can't believe this is happening. Didn't I used to hate this man?

Liam's fingers gently work my pants open. He isn't working fast, even though he kisses me like he's trying to devour me, open mouthed and sloppy across the swells of my breasts. Still, nothing else is hurried. He takes his time with me, each new zipper tugged down or button undone is followed by a brush of skin worshipping the newly discovered area. It feels so good, like I'm being coveted.

I feel his teeth sinking into my skin, light bites that cover the thin flesh over my pulse points, my ribs, and my shoulders. Finally, he stops long enough to drag down my pants, showering me with gentle presses of his lips on my legs with each inch he uncovers. I can't stop squirming now, my clit is throbbing and begging for attention, and to keep myself under control I sink my fingers into the blankets underneath me and grip them like they're my anchor.

Liam slows when my jeans pool at my shoes, where he makes quick work of them and my socks. Finally, when

everything is gone but my underwear, he nips my ankle and kisses his way up to my knee, where he sucks a mark into the soft and sensitive inner skin. My leg kicks gently at the sensation and he clicks his tongue. He grips my leg tighter and adds a bit of teeth to the suction, making my head spin. I have *never* experienced attention like this before, like I'm being savored...*worshipped*. As if my body is the only thing keeping Liam on this earth.

My hips lift off the mattress and shift in a desperate attempt to find some friction. "Stop teasing," I whine.

He doesn't offer me a response, instead he moves on to the crease of my thigh and licks the dip just at the edge of my panties. He's so close, I can feel his warm breath flutter across my slick pussy. But he leaves the place where I crave him the most untouched, instead making his way slowly up my torso, zigzagging a path with his tongue.

I arch beneath him until I feel him reach under my back and flick open my bra. My arms immediately clasp it tightly to my front. I'm not used to being this exposed to someone, and the attention has me clamming up. Liam's eyes go soft in the darkness of the room, and he gingerly removes my hands, his touch devastatingly gentle as he slides the straps down until I'm bare to him.

"Don't worry, don't hide. You have no reason to," he whispers, placing open mouthed kisses against my breasts and sucking my right nipple into his mouth, only to scrape his teeth across the sensitive flesh. "You're beautiful, Aubrey."

My chest aches at his words, and I heave in a gasp as his fingers stroke the wet stripe of my slit soaking through my panties. I tremble and twitch as he pushes them aside and slips his knuckles along my swollen and wet flesh. My entire body surges, electrified by the nerves firing off in my body. It's violent and greedy; I wonder if I have been this needy since the night at the bar.

I grip his wrist tightly and his fingers stop, his eyes lock on mine as he waits for me to work past the lump in my throat.

"Too much," I slur.

“Trust me,” he reassures me. And I do. I’m nervous, but I do trust him.

“Yes,” I breathe, just barely loud enough to be heard.

There’s something that glitters in his eyes, something I can’t quite recognize but I know I should. But his fingers are circling my clit achingly slow, teasing me until I’m panting. My hand is still clasping his wrist but it’s more to hold him still so he doesn’t retreat. Now my hips are thrusting against the friction he’s creating and it feels so fucking good.

I’m practically whimpering and my nails are sinking into the skin on the underside of Liam’s wrist. He bites out a hiss as I feel the skin break slightly, but even in the dark I can see his hips moving lightly and intermittently against the bed.

Slowly, I feel his hand shift, the pad of his thumb takes over the position on my clit while one finger slides into my entrance and stretches my spasming walls. I tighten around him, snapping down on the appendage like a vice and fucking down onto it.

“Look at you, so shy before but now you are gagging for it, aren’t you?” He whispers.

His words are crude but his touch remains gentle, especially when he places a kiss on my leg and lifts it over his shoulder, crooking his finger in a way that has my back bending and stars sparkling behind my lids. He chuckles darkly, it’s thick as molasses as his voice grows huskier, and he adds another finger, causing a burn that feels so damn good.

I naturally pull away for a moment, but he stops me with a firm hand on my hip, though he doesn’t move his fingers, just waits until I adjust. Finally, I silently push down on his touch, waiting for him to pick up the pace again, and he reads my movements perfectly.

My breath is starting to come in short, harsh pants, and I feel that painful tension in my muscles. It’s coiling tighter and tighter each time his thumb circles my clit, each time his fingers brush over that spot inside me that has my head spinning and my voice crying out. I know my orgasm is

rushing to me, ready to push me over the edge only to catch me in a whirlwind of sensations and emotions. I can't catch my breath, any air I expel seems to come back far too fast. It's like I'm stuck with too much oxygen in my lungs, and I can't use it right.

"Come for me, Aubrey," Liam encourages, likely feeling the way I'm squirming or maybe the way I'm pulsing around his fingers.

"C-can't," I stutter with a whine.

"Yes you *can*," he hisses.

Right as I'm about to whimper out a complaint again, he dips down and pulls my panties further away. I feel the heat of his breath against me just before his mouth replaces his thumb. His tongue rolls talentedly over my throbbing clit and suddenly I'm screaming and falling apart with violent twitches.

He lets me ride through it with gentle licks and strokes of his fingers. Nothing too overstimulating, but enough that I can shudder through the last vestiges of my orgasm and enjoy every bit of it. When it gets to be too much, I finally push at his head with a sigh and he pulls back. His fingers don't leave my throbbing center though, instead they just stay still other than the occasional scissoring motion that makes me moan weakly.

I am wrecked, and Liam slides up to look at me, blanketing my body with his own, his expression concerned and contemplative. He considers me and his free hand cups my cheek.

"You sure?" He asks.

I nod. "I'm fine. I want to."

He swallows and I can actually hear the click of his throat. He delicately presses a third finger inside me, testing the laxity of my walls. When he can fit comfortably, stroking my insides until I'm breathless again and panting, he flashes that devious smirk of satisfaction that used to irritate me. Now all I want is to be the reason for that smile.

He leans back to disrobe, and I only now realize Liam has been fully clothed this whole time. I had lost all awareness but my sense of touch. I watch hungrily as he exposes himself and I'm finally allowed to fully enjoy the show. His thick girth is intimidating, probably because, well...I've never done this before. I've never had anyone close enough to share my first time with, but this is different. This feels *right*.

He fishes a condom out of his wallet and rolls it down onto himself. In a flash, he's back over me, fisting his erection to relieve the pressure. I watch, unable to hide my fascination as I watch the glisten of my slick and the lube from the condom combine on his cock. He shines beautifully in the glimmer of the low light from the city streets outside.

I feel so small when he finally lowers himself down over me, but also so immensely safe. He is gentle in the beginning when he presses forward, and I tense at first from the intrusion. It's so much more than the three fingers he had in me, or at least that's how it feels.

"Relax," he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

"I can't, it hurts," I whine, squirming to move away from him.

"Hurts?" Liam goes still and stops my writhing with a gentle hand cupping my head, forcing me to look him in the eye. "This isn't... is this your first time?"

His eyes are narrowed above me as he waits for my answer.

"Yes," I whimper.

"Fuck... so fucking fucked," he hisses, but I can tell from the look on his face he can't go back, he can't stop any more than I can.

I shiver around him as he sinks in further and stops, his lips prying mine open to kiss me so deeply, I've forgotten about the thick cock that feels like it's splitting me apart. I can feel my walls tighten around him and encourage him deeper until finally, he is seated all the way inside and he breaks our kiss with a groan. Spit clings to our lips, keeping our mouths connected just like we are connected down below.

“More,” I rasp.

“Let yourself adjust,” he admonishes. “We don’t need to rush, wild cat, we shouldn’t.”

The nickname I used to loathe now soothes the ache as he trails the back of his fingers down my sides, over the dips of my waist, the curve of my ribs, and the soft skin of my breast. I cry out, squeezing tight around him and hearing him choke out a low gravelly moan at the tension. Finally, it seems like the waiting is too much and he pulls back, dragging his length through my tender flesh until he thrusts forward. I tremble and mewl, my fingers finding purchase on his shoulders as he throws my legs over his arms and works himself in and out of me until all I can do is gasp.

My words have fallen silent, no curses or calls to a higher power, no demands for more or for him to slow down. Pain has given way to exquisite pleasure, and Liam fucks me so deep and so hard that he’s pressing the air from my lungs, and I can’t breathe it back in fast enough. I am suffocating in this passionate humidity we are creating and I love every second of it. It’s making my muscles tense painfully fast and I’m reaching for the edge that is waiting for me to tumble over.

I can feel Liam’s cock twitching inside me, eager to come just as much as I am. We’ve been building up to this moment, and finally now that we are joined and chasing our high together we can’t wait to jump for it.

I twist in upon myself, my body clamping down on him, and finally I come. My moans are guttural, ripping so deep from my throat and chest that it hurts. Liam follows me over, sinking his teeth into my shoulder to muffle the roar that he lets out as his hips lose their momentum in his moment of bliss.

For a moment we stay like that, his teeth still buried in my flesh until finally and carefully he opens his mouth, staring down at his work with appreciative eyes. From how sore that portion of my shoulder is I know I will have a nasty bruise. It feels good though, this new sensation of exhaustion and togetherness.

He pulls out and I wince at the emptiness and ache he leaves behind. But soon enough he is cleaning up, even wiping me with a warm towel because I'm unable to move. I gaze at him through droopy lids as sleep calls to me, and soon he is tucking me in, with his body spooning mine. The next thing I know is the darkness of unconsciousness dragging me down.

CHAPTER 16

LIAM

I wake up to the warmth of the sun creeping across the blankets and heating my skin. I'm already unbearably hot thanks to the addition of a soft body in my arms, but the heat is welcome, and I don't want to leave the blankets or the woman snuggled against me. The memory of last night is hazy until I take a deep breath, and Aubrey's scent of herbs and apples fills my senses. I slowly blink my eyes open and look down to see brown hair spilled across my chest, and I sigh in contentment.

Until rational thought catches up to me.

Shit, it whispers deviously in my head. *You fucked up big time, Ainsley.*

Jacob is going to murder me. Not only did I have sex with his little girl, but I took her virginity. What the hell am I going to do? She was so gorgeous last night, spread out beneath me and flushed from the heat of our two bodies. She felt so good too. Like she was meant for me.

I slide an affectionate hand through her hair. She stirs for a moment and my movements still, but she settles back against me with a sigh. My hand brushes her hair again, wishing she would wear it down more often. Pushing the limits of how long I can linger in bed without waking her, I huff and finally get up.

I slip out from under her and carefully rearrange a pillow under her head before starting on a shower. I can still feel the itch of sweat on my body; parts I wasn't able to clean well enough last night but didn't bother me at the time. I turn the

nozzle and stand beneath the hot water, silently going over everything that happened last night. I can hardly believe it, but my cock surely has no issue with claiming her last night. It twitches to life at the memory, and I want her all over again. I want her more than just once.

Aubrey is beautiful, smart, snarky, and has so many hidden parts I want to pry open and explore. I want her to open up to me and tell me everything that worries her, everything that she loves, and everything she lives for. I want to be more than just a one-night stand. I want to be *more*....

I frown down at the water droplets sliding off my skin and I hate that I can't have her. It can never work out, not with our current status quo. If she was someone else... maybe. But if she was anyone but Aubrey Winters, I wouldn't want her.

Once I am finished and dressed, Aubrey is just starting to stir but I force myself to ignore how adorable she looks. Instead, I start compiling notes right away and checking out names for the case. I focus on work instead of the gorgeous woman still naked in our shared bed. Unless she brings up what happened last night, I won't mention it myself. The logical part of me knows that's for the best. Even if I'm distinctly aware of her scent still clinging to my freshly washed skin.

I'm typing away and thoroughly lost in my notes by the time I hear her sigh in that precious 'I just woke up' kind of way. It's that morning inhale that I would love for her to take of my skin, while I slowly work her back open for me, fingers massaging her wet heat, before settling between her legs. My cock twitches to attention at the thought and I quickly refocus on the words in front of me.

She hums behind me. "Liam?"

I grunt in response and hear her shift on the bed before gasping, followed by the sound of her frantic footsteps. I chance a glance over my shoulder to see Aubrey's bare back and ass as she bends over her suitcase and scrambles for clothes. A smirk creeps across my face. My gaze lingers hungrily, knowing I won't allow myself to indulge like this

again, but as soon as she turns around, I'm already looking back at the screen of my laptop.

"Um," Aubrey says, and I hear the rustle of clothes against skin. "Did you want to get breakfast?"

I spare her a look and she has wide, pleading eyes, as if she knows she isn't supposed to ask questions yet. The atmosphere is charged, but I turn my attention back to the words in front of me, typing away until she clears her throat, and I sigh.

"I'm not that hungry. You can order something if you want," I offer dismissively, my stomach feeling pinched and slightly nauseous.

She nods in agreement and I see it just out of the corner of my vision. I focus back on my work, and it isn't until the food arrives that I speak to her again.

"I think we should check the streets for some more information involving Alejandro's past," I tell her.

She freezes across the table from me. "We really aren't going to involve the police, are we?"

I look up and see she is eating a towering stack of pancakes with a side of eggs. I bite back an affectionate smile as I notice the glisten of syrup on the corner of her mouth. The most primal part of me is dying to wipe it clean with my tongue.

I swallow the temptation and turn my attention to her question, shaking my head. "I won't be bringing them in until we have something to make them interested. It's obvious someone is pulling the strings and we need something... anything... to make them sit up and take notice so that it's impossible to brush it off."

Aubrey grows silent but I can practically hear her thoughts as her mind slips into overdrive. With each bite of food, the concern on her features grows more marked.

"I won't let anything happen to you," I promise, and when she looks up I meet her gaze steadily.

For a moment, everything I project is confidence and ease until I see her sigh and relax. She sends me a smile, one I can't

help but return, even though mine is just a slight quirk of the lips. Still, it seems to put her at ease as she nods.

“Where will we be going to look for information?” She asks after a couple more bites of food.

My grin turns secretive as I say, “My old neighborhood is a great place to start.”

Her expression turns into pure surprise. “You used to live here?”

“Only for a short time when I was a young lawyer, before I got picked up by your dad,” I tell her with a lazy shrug.

“Wow,” she whispers. “What a coincidence.”

Except it isn't. I keep tabs on my old city, and when I can lend a hand, I do. I feel something for L.A. It's my home, compared to the rest of the places I've skipped around. This place, as overcrowded and smoggy as it is, has always called out more to me than anywhere else.

I wait for her to finish the last bite of syrup tainted eggs, and I wince at the thought of what they must taste like, though she looks happy as can be. I stand, finishing my last sip of coffee, the one thing I've put in my stomach for the morning, and grab a jacket just in case, though the muggy air likely means I won't need it. I nod my head towards the door in a silent question and Aubrey quickly grabs her purse, phone, and shoes.

We wander outside together and she is almost bouncy in her steps. She seems to feel well enough, even after the aggression with which I took her last night. My fingers twitch as I remember the feel of her skin under my fingers. I viciously push the recollection out of my head and my footsteps increase in pace. As if the faster I walk, the quicker I can escape my persistent phantom senses.

“Can we walk there?” Aubrey asks.

“No, I used to live in a shitty part of town. We're driving,” I tell her with finality. She cocks a brow at me, and I know it's because she can't picture me, the suit with money, living among the slums. “L.A. is expensive, especially when you're

young. Besides, if we have to go to a different neighborhood due to a lead, I want an easy way to do it.”

I keep the windows rolled up as we start out because it’s just too damn hot out, and with the air as still as it is, not even the wind caused by the moving car helps any. It’s stifling outside and I know within seconds we are going to be sweating through our clothes. I rub my hand across the back of my neck and sigh shortly.

Aubrey is frowning out the window and reaching for the bottle of water that has been sitting in the cup holder. However, once she takes a sip, she scrunches her nose and spits it out all over my car floor.

“Hot?” I laugh.

“Ugh, just like everything else in this place,” she complains.

My laugh grows richer, and she shifts uncomfortably in order to hide her flushed face from me. It makes me want to kiss it, to pull her attention back to me. But I don’t, I can’t. So instead I let silence fall between us until she finds a station to drown out the painfully awkward quiet growing in the car.

CHAPTER 17

AUBREY

Liam obviously doesn't want to talk about last night, and it makes talking about anything other than work near excruciating. My mind keeps trying to steer me in the course of asking the why's and what's. I don't need to though, not yet. I can give him a day or two to think things over. Hell, I can probably use that time to do the same. Lord knows I need to understand how I feel.

I know I like Liam, more than I should, but I am not sure I am ready to jump into a relationship with him. But I also don't just want to leave it as a business partnership. So, what are we? Well, right now we are two people who have definitely crossed a line and are stuck in a mortifying limbo. I sigh and stare out the window, watching the waves of heat rise off the asphalt.

Liam picks a decent parking spot in a part of the city that is definitely lower in status than the ritzy place we just left. But it doesn't have crumbling buildings or like I'd want bars on the windows if I ever move here. It just looks like a lower-income neighborhood. Like my apartment, with its one bedroom and out-of-date appliances.

I still can't imagine Liam ever living here. I look at him as he fixes his focus firmly on parallel parking between two cars. I realize I don't know any of his past, nor much about the current Liam either. I am starting to learn though in the time we spend together, like how he has a competitive streak. He likes his coffee a very specific way, he prefers his breakfast during breakfast and lunch during lunch, and he likes to lavish others as well as himself and doesn't seem to spend a lot of

money on anything but work or travel. Oh, and cars, he loves sports cars.

But what makes Liam who he is? I stare silently at his profile as he puts the car into park but pauses before turning the key. He swallows as he looks at the buildings surrounding us, and I join him in observance. What does he see when he looks around? Does he see things he loved? Or does he see shadows of his past he wishes he could escape?

I don't break the thick silence as he finally turns off the car and the sound of the stereo and the A/C drift away. He is the one to finally shatter it by reaching into the back and grabbing his briefcase. We aren't dressed like lawyers today, so I'm surprised he grabbed one, but I let him do as he wishes and follow his lead by reaching to grab mine.

"We'll only need one, just in case," he says as he stops my hand with a feather-light touch. "I don't want to draw too much attention."

I look forward before I turn my attention to him for a second. He meets my gaze for what feels like the first time in hours. I twitch under his gaze, something that paints heated words silently across my skin with just one sweep of interest. I need to focus, so I turn away quickly and reach for the car door.

I step outside into the suffocating heat. The still air is muggy, and I feel instantly like I'm drowning in the sticky warmth invading my lungs. The main street is clean, though the fronts of houses look worn and have weeds sprouting up in the gardens and in the cracks of the sidewalk. However, as we walk, I can see in the downside streets and alleyways signs of graffiti and other darker parts of the city.

"Where are we going?" I ask, feeling my skin prickle as we pass by a bunch of young men and women shouting raucously and pushing each other around.

"An old hangout of mine," he shrugs. "Don't worry, this place is pretty innocuous."

"Doesn't seem to be," I say nervously.

“You’re fine, safe with me,” he reassures and tousles my hair, which is slicked back in a ponytail.

Of course, that ruins the sleek look and flyaways kick up. I scowl at him and knock away the offending hand. He chuckles and warmth flutters through my stomach.

“About what happened last night—” I start.

“We’re here,” Liam cuts in, immediately ignoring what I was about to say but sending me a look framed with narrowed eyes. It says don’t question it, don’t bring it up. He doesn’t want to talk about it, just like I suspected, and perhaps that means he wants to forget about it completely. Maybe that is the right course, maybe we should pretend we haven’t seen each other naked. Simple, Liam.

He wanders ahead of me to an old looking corner store, one that literally looks like it is one step away from falling apart yet somehow is still standing, still operating from the looks of it. I step hesitantly behind him, eyeing the structure with suspicion but he doesn’t slow, seeming to trust the near collapsing store.

Once I gulp down my insecurities and stride into the store with my fake confidence shining bright, I hear excited chatter.

“Liam!” An older woman lights up and scurries around the counter while a young man watches behind the register. “It’s so good to see you, *mijo!* You become a big time lawyer and don’t come see me anymore.” She titters away, reaching Liam and pulling him into her tiny arms for a bruising hug.

“Sorry Mrs. Trejo, but living in another state doesn’t offer for easy visiting,” Liam says with a casual shrug. He towers over the gray haired woman as he returns her embrace with a softness I haven’t seen from him before.

Mrs. Trejo is the picture of a well-aged beauty, her once dark skin paling with age and beginning to wrinkle, while her face brightens in a wide smile and softened by crow’s feet. Even though she is a little hunched she moves with grace and confidence in herself. She gazes at Liam like he’s a long-lost

child, and from the obvious affection and endearment, *mijo*, that's exactly the way she sees him.

Her attention falls on me as I walk fully into the store. "Hello honey! I don't think I've seen you around. Please let me know if you need help."

"Actually, this one is with me," Liam tells her, and his arm falls comfortably around my shoulders when I step next to him.

"Hello ma'am," I nod my head once in greeting. "I'm Aubrey."

Mrs. Trejo's eyes twinkle mischievously as she cuts her eyes to Liam, "You never bring friends around with you. *¿Tu novia?*"

My face heats under her scrutiny and I discreetly shrug off Liam's touch. I know enough Spanish to know she's asking if I'm his girlfriend, and I'm already dying inside because he refuses to acknowledge that we had sex only twelve hours ago. Liam lets his arm fall to the side as he shrugs and shakes his head.

"You got it wrong, she's a business associate," he says casually. "We're in town because of a case. Figured I'd stop by here as well. I'm looking for Sam, know where he might be?"

Mrs. Trejo seems surprised but doesn't pry, she just nods and pauses for a bit as if she is thinking.

"Sammy should be at home, feel free to go there and ask around. Hope everything is okay, *mijo*," she says.

Before we leave, she hands us both a donut and though I am stuffed from breakfast I still manage to find space for the custard-filled pastry. Stuck within the world of rich vanilla bean pudding-like filling, I follow Liam mindlessly, not paying an ounce of attention to our surroundings.

"We'll be there soon. Sam's an informant for the police in a local gang, he often helps out in cases that I'm a part of," Liam confides in me with a low voice.

I stop mid-bite and look up at him as he continues to power through another mouthful of sweet goodness. I swallow nervously but continue to eat bite after bite until my teeth are nearly glued together with pastry. I stop long enough to chew and swallow.

“Is this Sam guy... a good person?” I ask.

“I would say so, he used to be a good friend of mine before he joined the gang. Things got too hairy for me then and we grew apart. Now we are more like friendly acquaintances who benefit from knowing each other,” he shrugs. “I was trying to get away from my shitty past. Moving here was supposed to be my new start. I couldn’t have friends who could ruin that.”

I keep my focus straightforward even though I want to see his expression. What was so bad in his life that he had to escape? What had made him so picky with his friends? I finish the last bite of my donut, only left with the sticky glaze on my fingers, and once I’m sure Liam’s not paying attention, I start to work it off with my teeth and tongue.

Liam is taking longer with his donut and the poor thing is wilting in the heat. Yet, I don’t say anything like I usually would, instead a silence falls between us once again, only broken by the occasional passing car and the tap of our shoes against the pavement.

We stop in front of a small apartment building with beige paint that is likely four shades darker than it should be from dust and dirt, and its walls are a mixture of stucco and brick. I can only imagine how unkempt it is inside. Landlords in low-income areas always care more about the checks they receive the first of every month rather than the well-being of their tenants, that’s a universal truth. I follow Liam through the front door and to the stairs. The elevator is old and not even he seems to trust it.

“Do you know where Sam lives?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he mumbles. “He’s been here since he was a teenager.”

We stop in front of a worn door with signs of patching and a metal number seven that looks like it has been recently replaced. Liam lays down a sharp series of raps with his knuckles and waits. At first, there are no signs of life from the apartment, but then I hear the creak of a door from inside and something falling or scuffing across the ground followed by a series of curses.

I stifle a giggle behind a fist and Liam scoffs with a shake of his head. I look up at the man standing beside me, a small smile tweaking my lips even though my hands are twitching nervously by my sides. He gives my shoulder a squeeze in what I'm sure he thinks is reassuring, and it would be if it weren't for the fact that it is Liam who's trying to help me feel better. My insides still squirm wonderfully when he touches me but it's starting to turn sour now.

"Who is it?" A groggy voice calls through the door.

"Get your ass moving, Sam. Need some info," Liam calls back. "And I don't want to do this through the door."

There's a beat of silence before the voice says, "Liam?"

The door slowly creaks open and stops because of the chain keeping it locked. A pair of sleepy, muddy brown eyes peek around the door through the crack, and Liam raises a hand in a cheeky sort of way. The freckle-faced, lean-looking man blinks for a few seconds before nodding shortly and closing the door. After only a second, the door swings wide open again to reveal a gangly man with medium brown skin who looks like he never grew passed his teenage years. Tall and thin with a mop of unruly brown hair, his smile is bright and reminds me of Mrs. Trejo's. I wonder if they're related.

"Who's that?" He mumbles, flicking his eyes at me in question.

"Someone who works at my firm," Liam answers. "She's safe, don't worry."

Sam nods with a relieved sigh and waves us in. I follow Liam inside a worn-down apartment that looks worse on the outside than on the inside. The appliances and furniture are a

little old, but everything is clean and well cared for. The house smells of potpourri and something garlicky and stew-like coming from a crockpot on the counter. It's a warm place that speaks to me of safety and love. I look up at Liam and see him take a few steps further in before he stops and stares at every corner, inhaling like he's just walked into his birthplace.

"Your mom still knows how to cook," he remarks.

"Always will," Sam closes the door behind us and I hear the click of the locks engaging. "Did you see her?"

"Yeah, it's how I found you. How's your dad?" Liam asks.

"He died last year. Heart attack. All that smoking," Sam offers softly.

Liam hisses, movement halting as he stares at his old friend with something akin to empathy. "I'm sorry, man," he says, his voice so low I barely hear him.

It's almost as if he lost his own father. Tears are already glossing his eyes as silence falls over all three of us, and I feel like I'm intruding on something private. I don't interrupt as they both wallow in the pain I can see physically rising within their forms. Whether they are still best friends or not, it is obvious they are still connected through people and history. That isn't something that just goes away, and it shows on their faces as they share a look about the man that had such a huge impact on both of their lives.

Sam shakes his head and waves toward the worn couch. "C'mon sit down. You didn't come here to reminisce."

My hand touches Liam's arm and I draw him even further from the memories he is reliving, and he nods with a grunt, following my lead to the seat we were offered. The cushions welcome us with a warm sinking hug, something that's been born into them through years of use. It feels safe and comfortable, and for a moment we let the silence linger again as Sam settles across from us in an overstuffed armchair.

"So," I start, trying to encourage Liam's brain to jumpstart because I have no idea where he wanted to start.

He thankfully clears his throat and picks up the ball as he sits down, and that confident air I'm used to falls back onto his countenance.

"We are looking for some information on the murder involving Alejandro Santiago. Do you know anyone that might have information, or do you know something yourself?" He asks.

Sam exhales through his teeth. "Man, don't ask for nothing easy." He's rubbing the back of his head looking awkwardly to the side before Liam prompts him with a cough.

"Yeah, alright, I know someone. But they would recognize your face," Sam says. "Check out Chet Semoore."

Liam frowns. "That little shit?"

"That 'little shit' ain't so little anymore. He's the leader of the gang running these parts," Sam crosses his arms with a sigh.

I mentally make a note of the name. It sounds like Liam shouldn't go talk to this guy, so if I can talk to him first that would be the best course. Poking my nose around wouldn't be too hard since no one knows me here. I press my lips together and let the rest of the conversation fade into the background since it doesn't seem that relevant.

Before I know it, the men are standing and I'm blinking out of my reverie where I was playing the possible conversation I might have with this supposed gangster. I hurry to stand with them. There's a clearness to Liam's gaze as he fixes it upon Sam this time. He reaches out a hand, and there's a warmth exchanged between the two of them as they shake and say goodbye.

"See you soon," Liam says, and even I can tell he doesn't mean it.

Sam laughs lightly and shakes his head. "No you won't. But that's all right."

He promises Liam not just with his words but with his bright smile, that comforting one he shares with his mother. He promises his friend that the past is the past, that they've lost

whatever it is that used to hold them together, but that he will always be there, drifting like a shadow in the background. I can see it in every breath he takes that he wishes he could fix things. Liam does too from the way he drops his eyes to the side, but wounds this old don't get fixed so easily.

"Thank you," I whisper softly after Liam has moved out the door.

"Take care of him," Sam says, looking intently at me.

"I will. If he lets me," I promise, even though I know he never will.

"Come on, Aubrey," Liam calls from down the hall.

I make a noncommittal noise and meet Sam's eyes for a moment with a nod and trot to catch up with my mentor. He turns to leave again with a furrowed brow, concern lacing his expression.

"Did you get all the information you needed?" I ask.

"Hm? Oh yes, I would say we did," he says, though his words are distracted.

"Is everything okay?" I stop him with a tentative hand on his back.

He pauses and looks over his shoulder at me. "Yeah, it's just... talking to Chet is going to be hard if we want to do it subtly without involving paperwork. He pretty much hates me."

I hum in appreciation of the complications as we continue walking, a plan already starting to form in my head.

But that planning comes to a screeching halt when I find a note taped to the passenger side of the car, away from Liam's prying eyes. I discreetly unfold it, taking in the words directed solely at me.

Keep your nose in your own business, girl, or you ain't gonna like when my men get their hands on you. Go back home. You only get one warning.

My blood freezes in my veins. The writing is near illegible but the message is clear. I don't even register the traffic we're battling on the way back to the hotel, and luckily Liam is so caught up in his own memories he doesn't pay me any mind.

Back in the safety of our hotel room, I read the words over and over in the bathroom, trying and failing to keep my trembling at bay. I won't let them scare me. I can't. I'm too invested in this already, so I crinkle the letter up and shove it into my pants pocket before grabbing ahold of my nerves and walking out. Liam looks up and smiles before he glances back down at his laptop. He doesn't need to know, he'd only worry unnecessarily. But I did need to talk to someone, and only one face comes to mind.

My fingers hold my cell phone lightly, as I stare down at the name Derek. With the truckload of work I've had with Liam, I barely had any time to spend with my friend while at the office, and I've missed his sage advice. I finally press call and wait to hear the cheerful voice as I sit outside in the hallway, away from Liam's prying ears.

"Hello?" Derek's greeting immediately makes me smile a bit, imagining him sitting at his usual place behind the assistant's desk.

"Derek," I respond. "Hi."

"Aubrey! You sound like hell. You never call. What's going on?" He rapidly fires questions, immediately honing in on the hopeless tone of my voice.

"Slow down, I'm tired today, Derek," I murmur, resting my head against the textured wallpaper.

I drag my finger through the pressed carpet, circling the design on it with lazy movements. I'm not ready to talk about myself yet, so instead I refocus on him.

"How was your day?" I ask.

"Hm," Derek says suspiciously but goes along with my silent request. "It was all right. Same old, same old. Your father is on a reign of terror since one of the new associates

almost fucked over a huge settlement with a newly poached client.”

I laugh lightly and nod. That sounds like Dad. He always wants things running smoothly, we all do, but when anything goes wrong he has a hissy fit. A tantrum that a toddler would be proud of, and it sends the entire firm on tenterhooks.

“I miss you guys,” I whisper, just loud enough for the phone to pick up and hopefully low enough that my voice won’t carry into the room across from me or the one where Liam sits just behind me.

“I know, I miss you too! Your smile would make this so much better, honey,” he says with a laugh and my grin widens.

“How is that new guy you’ve had your eye on?” I wheedle.

“Easily flusterable,” he chuckles. “Blushes in the cutest way, don’t know how he will make a good lawyer.”

“You are just a shark,” I sigh.

“So why did you call?” He asks again.

I inhale deeply before finally confessing. “I got a threat. This case is much more complicated than we expected and it’s leading us down some dirty paths without police help.”

“A threat?”

“A letter telling me to stay out of it, or else, ya know?” I rub my hand across my face in frustration.

“Shit. Have you told Liam?” He asks.

“No, I don’t think I will. It’s just an empty threat,” I say softly, trying to settle the panic in his voice.

As much as try to soothe Derek, he’s making me all the more aware of how dangerous this is. He doesn’t even know what’s going on and yet he’s worried. I *know* all the shadows lurking around every corner and know that those words on the page are anything but empty, but I can’t let this derail our investigation since the police aren’t doing anything.

My fingers curl into a tight fist, dragging my nails against the carpet as I exhale, prompting Derek to turn away from my

problems once again and tell me about what he has planned for tomorrow. For now, I can imagine I'm back home at the office, and I'm not slowly falling apart in L.A. with my partner none the wiser.

CHAPTER 18

LIAM

Things have gotten tense between Aubrey and me. But I am not sure if it's because of my inability to talk about that night or if it's because of something else. Since we came back from talking to Sam, she has since been acting more and more squirrely.

I watch her from across the room as she types away on her laptop, her eyes occasionally darting to her phone. We've been stuck in limbo the past two days as we try to track down Chet covertly. God, what I wouldn't do for some fucking police help. The possibility that I might have to hire a private investigator becomes more and more realistic by the day. She isn't offering me eye contact, fully focusing on her task and I give up eventually, letting the internet search I'm running once again suck me in.

Words flicker across the screen as we both work across from each other. I thought it was going to be a lot easier finding this bastard, but it's almost like he's disappeared.

"Found anything on your end?" I ask over the screen of my computer.

"Huh?!" Aubrey nearly jumps because she flinches so hard at the sound of my voice, but then hisses sheepishly and shakes her head. "No."

I narrow my eyes at her critically and she shrugs helplessly. But she doesn't offer me any more information as to why she is so damn jumpy. Instead she drops her gaze and begins to rifle through some documents she has spread out on the table. Yet, I know she is just doing it to busy her hands and ease her

anxiousness. I frown but don't ask any more questions, instead casting my sight outside where the sun is dropping down behind the horizon.

"Did you want to get dinner?" I ask.

"I can run out and get it, we still have a lot to do here," she offers, gesturing at all the information we still need to track down.

"Yeah," I sigh and rub the back of my neck. "Why not? We've been doing room service way too much, could use a change of pace."

"There's a Japanese restaurant just a few streets down. Could grab you some ramen? I'm craving sushi," she says with a nod.

I contemplate it. She knows I don't eat sushi, not even the basic California rolls or avocado rolls. It's something about the combination of sticky rice and chewy seaweed. It's strangely savory and sweet but it doesn't taste good to me. I find it mushy, chewy, and vegetal. I wrinkle my nose at just the thought of it.

"Sure, grab me some tonkatsu. Extra pork belly and have them add an egg," I say as I start up a new search for a P.I.

She nods as she begins to pop her feet into her shoes and sweep her jacket on. She looks at me and her stance is tight and uncomfortable. I consider going with her but from the way she exhales and uses the breath to draw herself up tall, seeing that confidence flash onto her face and settle over her posture like an old friend, I decide it's best to let her get away for a moment. A short walk will do her some good.

She sends me a smile that doesn't quite seem as strong as usual but would fool anyone else as she pockets her cell phone and walks out the door. As soon as I hear it click tight behind her, I groan and lean back into the chair.

"What's wrong with her?" I sigh to myself and run both my hands in frustration through my hair. "Fuck it."

I pick up my cell phone and bring up Jacob's number. Though I have avoided talking to him since the night I took

Aubrey in my arms, I don't think I can ignore it anymore. If anyone knows what's going on with her, it will be her father, and perhaps if he doesn't, at least he'll listen to me and have some insight.

"Hello?" His gruff voice comes across the phone and I smile, listening to his fingers fly across the keyboard and knowing he is still at the office.

"Hey, Jake," I answer.

He scoffs in annoyance at my nickname, something he always hates.

"Liam, why are you calling this late?" He asks, straight to the point as per usual.

"What, no 'how've you been?'" I ask with a teasing lilt in my voice.

"Get to the point. You never call on a case unless you are stuck and you're currently cutting into my work hours," the typing has stopped, and I can hear the chair creak as he undoubtedly leans back and sighs.

"Tch, fine," I give in with a click of my tongue and place my feet on the table in front of me, just to play chicken with the floor and lean on the chair's back legs like an idiot. "It's your daughter. She's acting twitchy."

I can hear the change in his tone as he says, "Twitchy?"

He's gotten sharp and nervous, like any father would. Aubrey doesn't see this side of him, but it shines clear as day to me. He's worried, and I press my lips in a thin line as I feel guilt race through me at the thought of distressing him.

"Since a couple days ago, she's been nervous," I respond soothingly. "This case has gotten messy, worse than I expected, and we've stalled out a bit. But I'm not sure that's what's bothering her."

Jacob sighs again, only this time it's weary and bone deep, not the sound of someone irritated but the sound of true concern. It's something only I or his wife would be privileged

to hear. I wait patiently for him to respond as he likely calms himself down.

“Have you asked her?” He finally comes out and says, which to be honest, I thought he’d have something far more insightful.

He doesn’t offer anything else though and I nearly laugh in exasperation, because I’ve been so busy worrying about her and trying not to talk about the other big elephant in the room that I feel like I’m the dumbest man on the planet. Jacob’s annoying bluntness is right as always, and I shake my head at my own stupidity.

“No,” I admit, and I hear him snort in disbelief.

“Sometimes you are the smartest man I know and sometimes it’s like you’re still a dumb rookie,” he scoffs, and immediately my worries dissipate. “Ask her, she’s more likely to tell you than she is me.”

We talk a little more about the case and he urges me to at least consult with a private investigator. I agree and we hang up when I expect Aubrey to be walking through the door any minute. She doesn’t though and it’s not long before another hour passes and I’m starting to dial her phone number.

She doesn’t answer. I swallow, and a niggling sensation begins in the back of my head, whispering words of doubt and fear. I breathe out a sigh and watch the sun finish its descent behind the horizon and the sky finally turn a dark black.

I’m exhausted but I drag on a coat to check the streets. I wander down to the sushi restaurant where she had gone to pick up dinner and ask about her. They say they recently saw her; our order was running late when she came to pick it up, so she stepped outside. I feel the tension coiling in my chest as I leave the restaurant, not even paying attention when they call after me about the food.

I’m outside when my phone vibrates, and relief washes over me in waves when I see it’s a text from Aubrey.

AUBREY

Sorry I'm running late. Had to run to the drugstore.

I ignore the voice in my head telling me to ask her *which* drugstore so I can meet up with her. She's a grown woman, and she clearly wants some space from me.

The air outside has chilled quite a bit by the time I make it back to the hotel room, and I hope the thin coat Aubrey took with her is warm enough. But I sit down on the bed, anyway, preparing to wait for her to get back.

Without recognizing the signs, I begin to fall asleep. Before I hear back from her or see her walk through the door, my eyes slip close, and my breath slows. Unconsciousness grabs me tight and drags me into a dreamless sleep, and for that time my worries drift away. I don't think about how my associate is still gone, nor the fact that I'm missing her touch. I don't worry about the case or the fact that we are treading water and not moving forward at all. All I know is warmth, darkness, and peace.

CHAPTER 19

AUBREY

I wake to a pounding headache and clouded thoughts. My brain is scrambled and my memories confused. My eyes are still closed, and I inhale sleepily, the smell of dust and mold, plaster and ash, rise to meet my senses. I shift to rub at my throbbing temple, but my hands won't move, and I frown as I shift a bit harder. My body stays firmly in place, restrained against what feels like a chair.

The rest of my awareness trickles in slowly. Thick cotton fills my mouth, drying out my tongue as it presses tightly against it. I crack my eyes open slowly, and dim light greets me. At least whoever bound me hasn't blindfolded me too. My eyes slowly adjust, and though the dull lighting drifting from old lamps isn't much, it's enough for my head to scream harder, demanding safety behind the black of my lids.

Where am I? That's my first thought. What happened? That comes next, as I try to sift through my foggy memories from last night. The last clear thing I remember is walking down the street to the glow of the Japanese restaurant on my way to pick up dinner. I rack my aching brain harder, trying desperately to remember what happened next. I should be able to, it's there, flittering at the edge. But it doesn't come as obviously as I want, it comes in feelings...the sensation of a hand wrapping around my mouth, a cloth smelling of oranges and maybe... acetone? It tasted sweet as it pressed tight across my lips and over my nose, and I remember struggling only for something solid to come down on the back of my head. I remember gasping futilely against that hand and falling. But after that... nothing.

Dammit, I guess the threats really weren't empty. The only thought that comes to mind is the letter and those dangerous words floating in front of my eyes as they promised something vague and deadly. I should have told Liam. God, I hope he's okay. I hope *I'm* okay.

I strain my eyes to investigate the gloom of the shadows for any sign of life, but no one is here. All I hear are faint voices, sharp and angry. They're in a different room, arguing. The words are muffled, so much so I can't make out anything beyond a few snippets here and there. Phrases like... 'what were,' and 'fucking idiot.'

It sounds like someone isn't too happy with a situation, but whether that situation involves me or not, I'm not sure. All the voices sound deep and masculine, and the desire to scream for help rises within me. But biting down on the thick knot of material in my mouth, I know it will barely carry. Instead I struggle against the chair, testing my bonds and looking over my shoulder in hopes to see what's keeping me captive.

Layers of rope hold my shoulders and arms in place while it feels like plastic zip ties hold my wrists behind the chair and my ankles to the legs. Someone *really* doesn't want me escaping. I look around the room frantically, taking in the crumbling plaster from various holes knocked into the walls. A thick coating of dust covers the tables and shelves, and it seems like this place hasn't been lived in for a long time.

The shock of waking is quickly wearing off, pure terror creeping into its place. I've been kidnapped. I'm tied up. I'm *gagged*. I don't know where Liam is and I can't move or call out. I know the statistics... There is a *very* real chance I won't leave this room alive.

Are they going to send pieces of me to my dad, one finger at a time? Whoever my kidnappers are, they could hurt me irreparably in so many ways, and with my legs spread as they are, I'm vaguely grateful to still be wearing my jeans rather than the usual pencil skirt.

I'm fighting not to hyperventilate as the voices drift closer. I rub the zip ties in a panic against the corner of the chair,

hoping to weaken the plastic as I pull them tight between my limbs. I know my prayers will likely go unanswered, but I work at it anyway as my eyes dart around looking for something else more useful that I may be able to use.

Soon, the two bickering men round the corner into the area where I am being kept and I freeze my movements, staring at them with fear running rampant through my veins. They look rugged, the younger one has a fresh bruise blooming across his cheek, and he seems to be trying to appease the other one.

“I don’t know why you brought her here!” The older man says, shoving his hands deep into the pockets of his leather jacket and shaking long, dirty blonde strands of hair out of his face. “It’s going to cause us trouble we can’t afford. Especially with the cops breathing down our necks already.”

“The cops are on our side right now, Chet,” the smaller and younger man nearly whines, twisting his hands together nervously. “But these two are sniffing around too much. We need to stop them before they turn the tide.”

I narrow my eyes, my stomach twisting violently in a mix of fear and anger as I look at the pair who ruined my night and probably my life. I lurch forward in the chair subconsciously and the two of them stop arguing long enough to look at me. Chet Semoore, the man we’ve been looking for, sighs tightly and pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Well, there’s no going back now. *Fuck*,” he hisses just loud enough I can make it out and I curse at him, though the fabric in my mouth garbles the words into nonsense.

I assume my thoughts come through clearly enough in my tone as he gives me a sardonic smirk and shrugs helplessly. It’s a look that says this isn’t his fault, that somehow places the blame on me, and it just makes me all the more angry.

“Sorry, sugar, but I sure as hell ain’t about to turn you loose now,” he crouches in front of me, and I wish for a second my ankles were unbound so I could kick him in the groin.

He seems to read my mind again as he stares back into my scrunched face.

“So, what do you want to do with her?” The man who is obviously Chet’s underling asks from behind him.

“Let’s wait for things to settle down. We can’t let her go now, she’s seen our faces. Which means—” Chet reaches into his jacket pocket and produces a black switchblade. “-she needs to be taken care of ultimately.”

I hate the whimper of shock that escapes through my gag as the blade releases. My eyes burn with tears I refuse to shed as Chet’s blue eyes lock on mine, dragging the edge of the blade down my cheek. He’s just trying to scare me...there’s no way this is happening. I’ll close my eyes and be safe in my hotel bed, and this nightmare will soon be forgotten in the waking hours.

“Kind of a shame,” Chet murmurs as his blade drags lightly down my throat, my pulse pounding against it as his eyes rake down my body. “Liam always liked the prettiest girls.”

He gives a humiliating snicker and winks at me before standing and pocketing the knife. “Give me some time to decide what to do with her,” he says dismissively to his underling, not sparing me a parting glance as he disappears around the corner, his lackey at his heels.

I let out a shuddering breath, the tears finally falling in thick streams down my face now that I’m alone again. *Decide what to do with her* can mean a lot of things, and I’m all too aware that putting a bullet between my eyes would be the kindest way Chet could deal with me.

I don’t have much hope of escaping under my own steam any time soon, but it doesn’t stop me from trying. I’m not sure how long I drag the zip ties against the corner of the chair before I finally give up with a frustrated sigh, my skin aching from holding the plastic too hard against my own flesh. It doesn’t feel like I have any cuts yet, and I keep trying to twist and turn to get a good look, but I don’t see anything.

While distracted with checking my own physical health, the sound of footsteps causes my head to fly up again. I freeze uncomfortably, my breath coming faster and painfully hard as

I wait for the owner of the noise to appear. Has Chet already decided my fate?

It seems my worry was for naught because the person who appears is no more than a young woman, her features soft and making her look extremely out of place after the harshness I just experienced. She looks a little older than me, maybe late twenties or early thirties.

I blink at her as she presses her finger tightly against her lips before I finally nod in agreement. Not that I can actually make a noise anyway, especially since she doesn't offer to remove my gag. I watch her warily as she approaches and sits across from me on the old couch, kicking up a small cloud of dust that she ignores with a tight smile. She's petite, with golden brown skin and big, expressive eyes the color of oak. Her dark hair falls around her shoulders in thick, natural waves. I don't know why, but I'm surprised to see freckles painted across her nose.

I wait for the woman to move, to speak, but it's several moments before she does. I begin to relax, feeling marginally safer under her gentle gaze, or perhaps it's just that I'm so exhausted already that I can't stay tense. Either way, when she clears her throat, I jump so hard I move the chair with me.

"Oh sorry, I just... didn't want you to be scared of me," her gaze flicks to where Chet and the other man disappeared. "I'm not going to remove your gag just yet. I don't know when the others will be back. But I want you to know I won't hurt you. In fact I will probably take care of you while you are here. Since the men will ignore you as much as possible."

I stare at her with wide eyes, trying to absorb all the information she is telling me. I want to relax at the idea that the men will leave me alone, but I can't blindly believe her. And it's not like she could overpower them if they tried. My headache seems to be worsening again and I want nothing more than to fall asleep and wake back up at the hotel. I wait for her to say more but she doesn't. I wonder if perhaps she'll let me go to the bathroom and I will be able to run away.

“I heard them talking about you,” she says again quietly, her voice softer than before. “You’re one of the lawyers helping Alejandro.”

That gets my attention and I tilt my head to show my curiosity.

She sighs and looks back at the door before she hesitantly says, “He’s my boyfriend. We... we’d planned to run away together. But getting me out of the gang is hard.”

I blink hard in surprise. I likely look dumbstruck, but she doesn’t offer me any more information. My mind is running at the speed of light and tears prick my eyes because of how much my head aches now. My thoughts are blurring as my head pounds, and I wonder absently if I have a concussion. It’s not even a true worry right now. I have to figure out a way out of here. I have to survive.

I stare at the woman across from me, the woman I don’t know the name of but will likely be the key to me escaping certain death. For now, I don’t think there is anything I can do beyond proving my trustworthiness as much as possible, and praying this headache goes away.

I nod slowly, attempting a small smile around the cloth jammed in my mouth, and from the way her gentle grin grows, I can tell she sees it. I need to survive this, to get back to Liam and make sure he’s safe. To clear Alejandro so he and his girlfriend can leave and live the life they deserve.

I have no choice but to put my faith, and my life, in this woman.

CHAPTER 20

LIAM

The sounds of arguing and cursing surround me as I sit in the local police station. Officers are yelling at people in handcuffs and those who are being processed are anything but friendly or cooperative. I'm beside a desk, tapping my foot so hard that my entire leg jiggles. My fingers are tapping against the faux wood on top of metal drawers that the policeman, who is assisting me, is trying to work on. He gives me an annoyed look.

"Sir, could you please stop making the desk move?" He asks as politely as possible.

I nearly snap at him, but instead I shake my head and shrug. "Sorry, just a little worked up."

I draw away from the desk just far enough that my restless leg won't continue to upset him. He's typing away as he listens to my story, but I know he isn't filing a missing person's report. It hasn't even been twenty-four hours yet, the sun is just barely warming the sky, and he can't do anything to help me.

"Come back when it's been twenty-four hours. Then I can fill out a report for you," he says begrudgingly.

"Just a report? She doesn't even know the area. We are looking into gang activity for a case," I'm rambling now, panic is setting in and I'm desperate. "She shouldn't have been gone for longer than an hour! She was just picking up dinner!"

I haven't told Jacob yet. The fact that I may have to call him and tell him his daughter is missing on my watch terrifies me.

Almost as much as not knowing whether I will ever see Aubrey's face again. That alone shakes me to my core.

I know very well she didn't run off alone. Somebody grabbed her. Are they hurting her? Is she breathing? I can't imagine how scared she is right now. I'm so fucking stupid. Why the hell did I let her go alone? Looking back, the drugstore text clearly wasn't from her. It was too direct. Aubrey would have used an exclamation mark, maybe even an emoji. I should have caught on right then. And why the fuck did I *fall asleep* when I knew deep in my gut that something was wrong?

I was an idiot to try and deny how much I loved her. No, I still *love* her because I refuse to believe she is anything but missing. I have to tell her how I feel, I won't accept any alternative. I failed Aubrey, and I will kill any and all bastards who laid a finger on her, who dared harm a single hair on her head.

My phone rings right as I am about to lay into the officer sitting across from me. I look down at the caller ID only to see the words 'Unknown Number' flashing back at me. I close it after swiping to decline the call and focus back on the problem at hand. No one seems to want to help me, nor do they seem worried about the fully grown adult I can't get ahold of.

I stomp out of the station with frustration running thick through my gut. No one will help me and I made zero progress. I don't want to be stuck waiting until tomorrow. My phone vibrates in my pocket, alerting me to a voicemail. I think back to the call I ignored, and snatch my phone, pressing the voicemail button and raising it to my ear.

'Hello sir,

I am calling about your associate Aubrey Winters.'

I freeze in my steps halfway through the lobby and glance around before darting off to the side. My heart leaps into my throat hearing Aubrey's name, and I wait with bated breath.

There's a pause in the words and the female voice turns into nothing but heavy breathing as the sound of faded male voices

comes across the recording. Then there is the sound of a door clicking closed quietly.

‘Aubrey is being held captive by the gang you have been looking into. At a house Chet uses as one of his home bases. The address is...’

She rattles off a street address that I recognize from one of the shittier neighborhoods. I chew my lip as the message drops off right after providing me with no more information. I play it again and receive no more facts than what I had gleaned from the first time. But hearing that Aubrey is still possibly alive provides me with a feeling of sheer relief. I want to demand proof from this woman, but with no number to return the call, I’m left with no options.

I breathe out a sigh. I know this may be a trap to get me as well as Aubrey, but I can’t ignore the possibility that I might be able to save her. I immediately place a call to Jacob and then turn on my heel to rush back upstairs to the floor that just turned me away.

“Hello?” Jacob says and his voice immediately makes my hair stand on end as my stomach flips.

“Hey Jake,” I mutter, my voice gruff and I clear my throat as much as possible to hopefully hide my anxiety.

“Liam? Why are you calling again?” He asks, and I can practically taste the suspicion in his words.

“There’s been a problem,” I say, the sound of typing stops on the other side of the phone.

“What kind of problem?” Jacob asks.

I take a deep breath and just go for it, knowing drawing it out won’t help me. “Aubrey went missing last night and I think she’s been abducted.”

There’s a pause on the other end of the line. The atmosphere is near chilling through the phone, and I know without a doubt that this will break our friendship. It hurts, but my anxiety over Aubrey’s safety is stronger.

Eventually, his voice comes through. “Why did you wait so long to tell me? What makes you think she has been taken?”

“I waited because we had a falling out, I wasn’t sure if she took off or not. But I got a voicemail today at the police station,” I tell him, and quickly give him a rundown of this morning’s events.

Jacob sighs, the sound tired and pained. He is trying to keep himself under control right now. He is angry and we both know it, but it stems from him being terrified, just like I am. Just like my hands refuse to stop trembling, I am sure that’s why his breaths are shaking each time he inhales.

“I’ll have her back in the next few hours,” I promise.

He grunts. “You better or I’ll be out there this evening and I will never leave her in your care again.”

I am not even sure he understands how much that hurts me to hear him say it. Aubrey is the most precious thing in his life, and for me to lose that trust...it shows that our relationship would be beyond repair if anything happens to her. I need her back for myself just as much as I need her back for Jacob. I need her back *unharm*ed. Aubrey may be in the presence of another woman, but one woman won’t be able to stop a group of men from taking what they desire from her.

I huff out an affirmation and we both hang up without a farewell, leaving me to finish my journey back upstairs to get the police on my side. As I march back onto the floor I need, I catch the eye of the officer I spoke to before. He raises his brow in surprise and leans over to say something to one of the others. It looks like he’s bad mouthing me, and for once I doubt the confidence I wear so often is working as it should. I imagine there are thousands of cracks in the mask I usually rely on so heavily, it’s only natural.

But I ignore the way he watches me as I walk back in and throw myself down into the chair with irritation making my jaw tight. I flip open my voicemail and click speakerphone before pressing play. As the woman’s voice begins to speak the officer’s face slowly begins to turn green.

“I need your help,” I say bluntly.

“You need S.W.A.T’s help,” he corrects hoarsely.

Yet he nods all the same, writing down the address as he presses the message to play again and listens intently.

“What gang were you investigating?” He asks.

“Chet Semoore’s,” I respond.

All the color drains from the man’s face including the green tinge, and he quickly places a call. I zone out by then, alleviation floods me as I send a text to Jacob about the update. He doesn’t answer but I know he’s seen it. He won’t be far from his phone right now.

Within just a few hours a raid has been planned. I am allowed to ride along but I’m pretty sure it’s just because I refuse to be left behind and threatened to follow them to the scene. I refuse to rest until Aubrey is in my hands.

I place my head against the window of the cruiser I’m riding in, taking note of the anxiety I feel building. It’s not even fear of what I’m heading into or the fact that I could take a stray bullet. No, this is a visceral fear that has to do with what I might find when I get there. Will Aubrey be okay? Is she still alive? Will she be injured? How could I have let this happen to her? She is my responsibility and beyond that— I look forward as the streets grow filthier— I love her.

CHAPTER 21

AUBREY

Alejandro's girlfriend is named Grace. I almost laugh at how fitting it is. She originally said something longer but I had no hopes of pronouncing it, she said her nickname was Grace and I was welcome to call her that.

I'm not sure how long I have been in the building. The windows in the room are covered in tarp so I can't see outside, but I'm certain it hasn't been more than a day. Grace takes care of me during that time, wiping the dried blood from the back of my head and making sure I get water to drink as long as I don't scream when she removes the gag. I can't do that to her or to myself. Alerting the men wandering around the house, I am certain would be a death sentence.

She only unties me once so I can go to the bathroom when I whine enough about it. During that time, I overhear the men talking about the police. Funny enough, it isn't the way I expect, not with fear or anger, but with whispered words that sound like a conspiracy. I take note of the names, repeating them in my head as they discuss the crooked officers I assume are helping them.

My muscles ache by the second day. Grace won't untie me, and I don't fully blame her; the men can't know she's on my side. But I've been restrained in the same position for too long. My wrists and ankles are raw from the zip ties, and I can feel my skin chafing beneath my shirt where the ropes hold me to the chair. My headache has eased slightly but it's only a small relief. Grace has been able to sneak me bits of food here and there, but it does nothing to appease the ache in my stomach.

I'm lost in my own misery when all hell breaks loose. There is the sound of someone yelling outside the house, but because I'm being held in one of the back rooms, I can't distinguish their words.

The men seem to be on edge and Grace isn't around. I haven't seen her since this morning, fueling my anxiety at what's to come. I cannot deny the situation makes me twitchy. I feel like something big is happening and they've all forgotten about me.

I don't like being forgotten about in a hostage situation. I don't like being in this situation *period*. I tug at my bindings again, a regular habit when I'm left alone. My wrists burn and I'm certain they're bruised and possibly abraded from the zip ties scraping against them.

I rock back in the chair, trying to shift the ropes, but it does nothing and instead I almost lose my balance and fall. I squeak in surprise and carefully lean forward so that I fall back down on all four legs. The sound of a door slamming catches my attention and my head snaps up.

It's Grace. Her brown eyes are wide and her chest heaves with labored breaths. She looks like she has seen something terrible, or like someone is chasing her, but I don't hear anyone behind her.

I watch and wait for that explanation that hangs silently in the air. My own breaths are starting to grow panicky as I grow agitated.

"What's going on Grace?!" I hiss into the unnaturally still room, but it comes out garbled due to the gag.

She doesn't answer me, and it's then I realize the shouting has stopped and the rest of the house has gone absolutely silent. The hair on the back of my neck prickles and I feel the corner of my eye twitch as I try to listen for something, anything. After a time, I hear the scuffle of feet and a metallic click.

It's a sound I know but I can't place, but it's something that makes me freeze and my chest catch on an inhale. I'm scared,

so much more scared than I have been since being here. I look to Grace but she is still pressed against the door, breathing like a terrified rabbit, and her arms have started trembling.

“*Grace?!*” I cry out with a little more emphasis, hoping she understands.

She seems to blink out of whatever stupor she’s in and then rushes to my side, pressing a finger against her lips once again, and then rushes to undo my bindings. I try not to squirm in impatience, especially as she picks up the scissors to cut me out of the zip ties. We manage to get through it without any injuries and I rush to remove my gag.

“What’s happening?” I whisper.

She shakes her head. “I’m not sure. I think the police are here.”

I stiffen again. “That’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

“Yes, for you. But the men who took you will fight, there may be casualties. And I...” Her eyes flick to the side.

“I will make sure you are safe. You haven’t done anything but help me,” I say.

“But I didn’t save you,” she says with a frustrated frown.

“It’s more complicated than that, and you know it,” I say quickly. “You’re as much of a hostage as I am.”

She looks at me with despair, but a twinge of hope shines in her eyes. “Come on, we can’t stay here.”

My movements are clumsy after being bound for so long, and Grace has to support me with an arm around my waist as she leads me deeper into the dilapidated house. This place is much bigger than I thought. She drags me into a dark room with broken wood and boxes all around, but it seems to be the farthest place away from the chaos.

“We can wait here until they are distracted,” she says in a low voice.

The room smells of dust and mildew and my nose grows itchy, but I hold in my sneeze. Grace seems desperately scared

and worried about silence. Pins and needles assault my aching muscles now that they're finally able to move freely again, and I bite back a groan at the discomfort.

Suddenly, there is a loud banging sound and shouting, followed by the unmistakable fire of gunshots. I wince and crouch down along with my new friend, who finds it necessary to also take cover behind one of the larger crates.

I can feel a shiver run through my spine but hide any outward expression. I focus on the voices instead and where the stomping of the feet are moving. It doesn't sound like they are too close yet, and I wonder if it would be best to escape now.

I grab Grace's hand and haul her upward, rushing toward the door only to crack it open. There is no one waiting for us, so I creep out into the creaking hallway, pulling Grace behind me.

"Go through the kitchen," she says in a strained whisper, and I turn to run toward the room where hardwood turns into tile.

My hand is still clasped tightly around her arm and she struggles to keep up, but I won't let her fall behind. She stumbles once on the slick tiles right as a bang goes off in the other room. We both instinctively crouch lower. That was much louder than the bullets we've heard, and all at once I understand that we are at serious risk of being shot and killed if we don't get out of this house. I haul her forward, keeping her on her feet as we rush to the back door.

I don't stop once when we finally reach the peeling door, yanking it open and hauling us through. I nearly fall down the back steps at the momentum, but instead of eating cement, I'm steadied by a solid pair of arms. A warm, familiar embrace. I don't even have to see his face. The adrenaline that's kept me alive up until now abandons me in a whoosh, and I burst into tears against Liam's chest.

His muscled arms surround me like a cage, collecting me and pressing me against his solid warmth. I sob, unable to catch my breath to take in his scent like I so terribly want to. But I know right now, in this moment, I am okay. I'm *safe*. If

Liam is here, he's brought the big guns to save us, pun not intended but totally accurate.

"Thank god," he whispers as he presses his lips against the crown of my head. I can't tell if it's a kiss or not but I don't care.

My hand has left Grace's arm and I'm clasping onto Liam's shirt. I sense him lift his head to look over at her.

"Who are you?" He all but growls, and I feel him stiffen against me protectively.

"It's o-okay," I sniffle against him, my voice muffled until I pull away. "She's been a f-friend."

My voice stutters as my breath comes to me in great, shaking gasps. I look to Grace with glossy eyes and nod.

"Y-you don't have to stay with them anymore. You want to be with Alejandro right?" I finally manage to get ahold of myself as I sniffle air back into my lungs and look at her seriously.

She nods shyly and locks eyes with Liam. "I would have helped her escape sooner if I could have."

"You'll have time to explain," Liam says with a shake of his head, focusing his attention back down at me.

His thumbs drag across my cheeks, rubbing away the tears that continue to fall, only now they aren't accompanied by uncontrollable sobbing. I lean my head into his wide palm, and he kisses my forehead, then my temple.

"I'm so sorry," he whispers against my skin. "I shouldn't have let you go alone."

"It's not your fault," I soothe him.

My hands run down his torso, reminding myself that he is here, he is real, and I really am out of that place. I glance over my shoulder for a moment to see Grace still standing there, looking slightly out of place. Yet, Liam drags my attention back to him.

“I’ve been an idiot,” he murmurs, just loud enough for me to hear.

Then his lips touch mine. It’s a gentle kiss, like he’s reaching out to touch cracked glass that has the possibility to shatter at any minute. His lips work mine over until I am shuddering in his grasp and pliable. He doesn’t use tongue or teeth, but each brush of his lips is soft and filled with affection. Like he is pouring love into every place we make contact. He breaks away from me and breathes softly against my lips before dropping a kiss on the bridge of my nose.

“We have so much to talk about, but not here. We need to get away,” he says firmly and motions to Grace to follow us.

She nods and follows close behind as he leads us out of the gated yard through a fence overgrown with ivy. There is a S.W.A.T. van outside the house, but the fight isn’t happening in the streets. The house is filled with shouts and the occasional gunshot, however, they have tapered off quite a bit.

I follow him across the street until we reach a police cruiser that is still running and an officer is waiting in it. As soon as we clamber into the backseat he takes off, glancing in the rearview mirror at us and the scene we left behind. I am tucked against Liam’s side; my trembling finally starting to settle as I take in the damage to my wrists.

Dark purple bruises decorate my skin in a thin line, and there are spots where scrapes deepen into small cuts. Suddenly my vision is obscured by Liam’s hands gently covering the injuries. I lift my gaze to his and he gives me a soft, reassuring smile.

“You’re safe,” he promises. “That’s all that matters.”

He places another, lingering kiss on my forehead and I can’t help but believe him. With him beside me and heading to the station to reunite Grace with Alejandro, it seems like everything is falling back into place. I even have information to help crack the case open. I’m safe now, and with those words repeating over and over in my head, I finally let myself relax against Liam completely.

CHAPTER 22

AUBREY

We're all dropped off at the police station to give statements. I keep the names of the dirty cops to myself for now, uncertain who we can trust. Grace is picked up by Alejandro, who looks like he's just gotten the best surprise in the world.

"I didn't expect to see you ever again," he murmurs, pressing desperate kisses all over her face.

"I always wanted to leave, but I couldn't. Chet would have killed me," she meets his desperate kisses with ones of her own.

"I know, but you are here now," he reassures, pressing their foreheads together.

It takes a little convincing, but I vehemently assure the police that Grace is innocent in all this, and she's not involved in my kidnapping. The reunited couple leaves relatively quickly after that, and Alejandro praises us while Grace gazes at him like she's seen an angel. Liam is smiling just as wide as I am, and we're allowed to leave not long after that.

I'm back in his car and feel not only safe, but comfortable for the first time in two days. I am not terrified I will be hurt or killed at any second. The weight that lifts off my chest feels massive, and I inhale deeply while I ride inside his car. It smells so familiar, so warm, and his hand winds through mine to remind me it's all real, and he won't be letting me go back to that place ever again.

"I'm so glad you're safe. I was so fucking scared," he admits.

I clench his hand tighter and lean against the warmth of his bicep, rubbing my cheek against his shirt. I sigh, and he chuckles lightly in a way that I can tell is releasing tension.

He leans over as he stops at a red light and kisses me, only this time it isn't soft, it's all thick and passionate. His tongue flicks against my lip, rolls passed my teeth and brushes against my palate. I moan for him, eager to feel him against me. I intertwine my fingers tightly into his hair and try to drag him closer. I want him inside me, to become a part of me, to feel the safety of him pressed against me. We aren't able to be that close in the car but I crave it like oxygen.

His hand cups my cheek as he pulls back, his thumb stroking across the place that had been glistening with tears earlier. I look at him, showing him with my eyes the near agonizing passion flaring within me. Liam nods and takes off as soon as the light changes to green and bathes the car in its cool glow. I am unable to let go of his hand until we are in the parking garage of the hotel again.

My heart is racing, and I can't tell if it's because of what happened or what I know is about to happen. His fingers trace the lines of my hands, dancing in between the delicate webbing and up to my wrist. It's maddening and doesn't stop until he leaves his side of the Jag to open my car door.

When I step out he pushes me against the side of the car, only closing the door once he has his hands on me. He kisses me deeply, aggressively, with a demanding tongue and fierce teeth. He nips at my sensitive lips and trails down to my jawline. I throw my head back and tangle my fingers into his hair again, tugging it lightly and reveling in his appreciative growl.

“Let's get you upstairs,” he says.

I nod, panting hotly against his ear and grinding over the bulge growing in his pants. He eagerly guides me into the elevator and grins down at me, a look of sheer delight on his beautiful face. There is a deeper emotion still lingering, like he's still celebrating that I am safe and back by his side.

Once in the elevator, his kisses are light, not lacking the passion from before, but more focused on affection and reminding us that we're both safe rather than what will be taking place in just a few minutes. The steady dings of the elevator let us know that we will be arriving on our floor soon. It's funny, I briefly remember the first time we met in an elevator, and how far we've come since that little spat.

Liam pulls away just long enough to take a long look at me and dive back in before the final bell announces our arrival. This last kiss is long and sweet, lazy and open, it's one that I can barely return because I'm trembling so hard and gasping for him. He pulls back and wipes a thumb just underneath his lower lip, watching me with appreciation as my breath stutters in my chest and my face flushes bright under his attention.

"You are so beautiful," he whispers in my ear before weaving his fingers through mine and facing the elevator doors.

That movement, those words, somehow steal my breath faster than his kiss did. I melt against his side as he leads us to our door, flipping the keycard in his hand with adept fingers. I imagine what those fingers will be doing to me in just a few minutes, and swallow hard.

Once the door closes behind us, I'm reminded of when I was last in this room, that I am secure here. That I couldn't be safer anywhere else than with Liam beside me. His touch is soft as he removes my borrowed coat and pushes me toward the bathroom. I follow his lead, confused as to what he has in mind. Doesn't he want me? I look to the bed, and he chuckles.

"Let's get you washed up first," he says.

"Oh my lord, you *are* an angel," I whisper dramatically.

He laughs loudly, a sound that rolls over me in warm waves and makes those last vestiges of tangled anxiety unwind and disappear. I let him spoil me as he turns on the water and drags my dirty clothes off my exhausted body. I'm too tired to even attempt to cover myself from his eyes, not that he's looking at me that way right now. He's more interested in making sure the water is a comfortable temperature. He ushers me in

passed the fogged glass doors, and I groan in contentment as the hot water massages my aching skin. Liam surprises me by joining quickly after.

He is naked, so naked, and I haven't seen him like this except that one night. I have a hard enough time keeping my eyes to myself when he walks around without a shirt. But now, having him in front of me with the lights on, completely naked, I have no hope. I run my hand over his skin, slowly growing slick with water.

I blink up at him, water from the showerhead slowly makes its way down my face. Liam's gaze is heated but controlled, and his hand covers mine while I travel lower, closer to where he is already half-hard, waiting for my touch.

He gently removes my hand and backs me up against the cool tile, making me arc away from it and into his torso, hissing from the temperature change. He smiles as he takes my lips in a fierce and demanding kiss.

"Let me take control tonight," he whispers. "I want to worship you. Show you how much I missed you. Show you how much I love you."

I gasp softly at his confession, but he kisses me again before I have a chance to say anything. He doesn't want me to. I need a moment to process anyway. We went from not talking about our relationship to confessing love? My head is spinning and I'm not sure if it's from the leap of emotional changes or the way his tongue forces the air from my lungs.

It's hard to breathe with how deep his kisses are, the way my body is burning up, and the humidity surrounding us from the hot water. But it's a good feeling, so *so* good. Instead of the last few days which I spent in terror, Liam is rewriting all those scared moments I had with just his touch.

I writhe in his grasp, my skin sliding across the tiles as he presses against me tighter, forcing me to stay still. I let him take the reins. I *need* him to. His kisses wander from my lips to my jaw and my neck. His teeth bare down, my blood pulses violently as he sucks a mark into my skin, laving over the spot with his tongue. I shudder in excitement as he lowers in front

of me to worship the underside of my breasts with confident and lazy strokes of his tongue. Slowly, he licks the water from my skin until I think I am going to go mad.

I shift again and he growls, an entirely animalistic sound that has my toes curling. But Liam listens to my body's needs and sinks lower, scraping his teeth along my ribs and pressing light kisses along my torso and stomach as he goes to his knees. The affection is so gentle it makes me giggle.

His lips curl into a smile against my skin, and his thumbs trace light circles on the inside of my hip bones while he nudges at the apex of my thighs with his nose. He inhales deeply, sighing as if my scent is something he was worried he would never experience again. My legs widen for him and his hands move from the grip on my waist down to spread me wide so he can lick a stripe over my clit.

My head immediately falls back against the tiles and I gasp in the wet air. Liam hums in appreciation as my nails sink through his hair down to his scalp. They scrape across the skin when he latches his lips around my clit and sucks and rolls the little nub. My legs naturally want to close around him but his wide palms spread enough to keep them open, my mind able to drift and just enjoy the sensations.

Instinctively I try to drag him closer to me, which is impossible, but my hands grip tighter and try anyway. He opens his mouth wider so his tongue can lave all the way to my entrance. Stars burst behind my eyelids as he refocuses on my throbbing clit and moves his hand to slip a finger into my heat. It feels like this is where he belongs, and my walls clench tight around him.

He encourages me with a curl of his finger, brushing against that spot again, the spot that has me moaning and twisting on his hand. Echoes of my cries bounce off the shower walls and back into my ear, reminding me over and over how good it feels, how much I love his tongue on me.

Liam adds another finger and I look down to meet his gaze. It's not only heated, but also powerful. It screams words that he can't say, tells me how much he cares about me. It's within

his stare that I feel myself rocketing toward my orgasm. I try to breathe deeper, to calm down and slow myself, but I can't, and at the end of the breath I finally scream the pleasure blossoming in my body.

I ride it out on his face and fingers. I feel his tongue rub roughly against my sensitive clit as it throbs in time with my heartbeat. I can't breathe but it's almost perfect like this. *Almost*. I want him inside me though, I want to feel his heart beat with mine.

Right as the waves of pleasure trickle away from my body he adds another finger, stretching me, and I squeal at the burn of pleasure from his three digits pushing me to my limits. He chuckles, pressing his face into the dip of my hip adoringly as he looks up at me. His fingers pump slowly, keeping my limbs twitching from the wonderful sensation of slight overstimulation.

My hands are still buried in his now wet hair, my breath coming heavy as I watch him through a heavy-lidded gaze. Liam spreads his fingers inside my pussy, and I writhe, my groan long and pronounced. He grins sharply as he curls the tips of his fingers sharply against that deliciously dangerous spot again and my walls tighten up on him so much that his digits are forced together.

“Fuck,” I slur deliriously.

“Yeah? I have every plan to,” he says with a proud smirk.

I'm too far gone to even swat his shoulder in admonition. Rather, I'm too close to already falling apart again as he stretches me out over and over. But I don't want to come without him in me. I want him with me, I want him to feel just what he does to me.

“W-wait,” I stutter.

His fingers pause instantaneously, and he looks at me with curiosity. “Everything okay?”

I nod my head. “I want you.”

I motion downward to where his cock curves toward his stomach, the head flushed with eagerly pounding blood.

He looks at me hard for a few seconds before he nods. “Of course, don’t need to ask twice.”

Liam surges to his feet and kisses me with such force that I can taste myself on his tongue. It’s something addictive, the flavor of the two of us mixed together in one place. The humidity of the air invades my lungs again and steals my breath just as much as his lips do. It’s the best drug, it tastes better than chocolate. It’s so good it makes my toes curl and my head spin, it makes me arch and wind my fingers together behind his neck as I try to pull him deeper into me so he can never leave. I don’t ever want to let him go again.

Liam’s arm lifts my leg, resting my knee on the crevice of his elbow, and making me have to stretch onto the ball of my foot. I sigh as he dips down just enough so he can press into my eager walls. I’m just loose enough that it doesn’t sting but I can still feel him breach me, pushing me wider than before, and my mind fights it for a moment, screaming that I can’t take it. Just like the first night, but right as I’m freezing up, he thumbs my clit and I melt for him. I become pliable and welcome him as he slides home.

“That’s it,” he groans. “So, fucking good for me.”

He leans his forehead against my shoulder, taking a moment to revel in the feeling just like I do when my walls clamp around him and I feel so full. It’s perfect like this, we are together, just like I needed. He shifts and I gasp as he withdraws and pushes back in enough that I feel new parts of me filled. My shiver is near-violent as I take in how delicious it feels. He’s so deep, dragging and pushing in all the right places.

“Liam,” I whine, “please.”

I nearly whimper when he listens to my request. He rocks backward while he presses his forehead against mine, catching my gaze so I can’t slip back into my thoughts. I feel frozen, caught within time, unable to move forward even though I feel him shifting against me, inside me. He fucks me slow, drops a kiss against my cheeks until he’s right back to staring at me. It’s like he wants me to know without a doubt the burning

affection he has for me. Because I can see it, right there, dancing in the green of his eyes. Just like dappled sunlight shining through the leaves of the forest, waiting to burn my skin as soon as I step out of the trees unprotected.

My breath catches on my pleas for mercy, on my begs for more. It's almost painful how good he feels filling me up. I can't feel anything or think of anything else but him. He's taking over my mind, my emotions, and my senses.

Liam is splitting my pussy so wide I feel like I will never be right without him inside me, like he's carving me to fit him perfectly. He's still taking his time, our breaths mixing together in the heat of the shower.

"God, please, I need more," I mumble, my eyes rolling in my head.

"Look at me," he demands. "Look at who's making you feel like this. And then I will give you more."

I gaze back at him, feeling exposed and vulnerable and he drops his head to my shoulder, biting into the flesh as his hips pick up speed. My sounds of pleasure spiral out of control, reaching new heights. The sloshing noises of my slick and my erotic voice only make me more aroused and Liam seems to feel the same.

I can feel him throb within me and his occasional sighs have turned into grunts and curses muffled by the meat of my shoulder. I shiver in delight in his arms as he grows more impatient. His touches grow frantic until finally his free hand settles on my nipple and twists and pinches it until my voice reaches a new octave.

He eventually releases my marred skin and presses healing kisses to the spot, but that just makes me all the more aware of how much he is enjoying this. How much he feels me around him.

"Fuck, so fuckin' perfect," he snarls, groaning out a growl in my ear.

I throw back my head. My body is tensing again, promising that I am reaching that peak we've been climbing. I can feel

him breathe out a gentle sigh against my neck.

“I can feel you. You’re close,” he rasps.

He’s right, I don’t try to deny it. I nod loosely, and it feels like my bones are melting but my muscles are turning to steel. It’s all too much. It’s like I am flying over the edge of the world, catapulted to the end of time with only one person following me.

“So good, so close,” I whine.

He hums out an agreement, the sound broken apart by a moan as I clench down on him right as he’s rocking out of me. It seems never-ending, the throbbing and how I will release and then grasp him tight again. My hands scratch furrows down his back when my mind and body start getting too eager to reach my peak.

I’m meeting his every thrust the best I can, dropping from my tiptoes and then pushing back up onto them. I’m looking right at him, but I can’t really see, the steam filling the small space too much, and my vision is beginning to blur from the ecstasy. It’s perfection, euphoria, and I think I might taste each sound he makes on my tongue.

Finally, the knots in my muscles implode, all seeming to unwind at once with such a ferocity it forces a scream out of my lungs, only to have it break into silence. I clamp down on Liam’s cock, my body trying its best to milk him for all he’s worth. He grits his teeth and I can tell he’s trying to hold on, trying to make it last a bit longer, but he can’t stop himself. His thrusts grow irregular until finally he pulls out and I feel a warm splash against my stomach.

I look down and even with my dizzy vision, I’m able to make out the silvery white streams of thick liquid washing off my body. He’s flushed and using the wall to hold himself up, but even though he looks like he is about ready to pass out any second, he grins at the sight of me covered in his come.

He presses a kiss to the corner of my mouth and whispers, “I love you so much.”

I catch his kiss firmly on the mouth, still unable to say anything back to him, because though I know what I want to say, what is desperate to bubble out of me, I am too scared to say it. After everything that's happened, I still feel unstable, unsafe, and I just want to sleep now. I want to be wrapped up in Liam's arms and stay there for a good twenty-four hours.

He seems just as exhausted as I am as he slowly lathers shampoo through my hair and soap over my body, but during the entire time from the shower to the bed, he doesn't once ask if I love him back. For that, I am grateful.

CHAPTER 23

LIAM

I startle awake from a dream that was more like a nightmare. One where I didn't make it to Aubrey in time, where I couldn't save her. So seeing her next to me and feeling her curled into my side makes me sigh in relief. She's living, she's *breathing*, and still in a deep sleep.

I brush away a strand of errant hair from her face and my eyes zero in on the damage to her wrists and the bruising on her arms and torso. The sides of her mouth are rubbed raw, with pink chafing creeping up her cheeks where she fought against a gag.

Fury and frustration build within me. I couldn't spare her the fear, but I was at least able to save her. I refuse to let Aubrey suffer anything like that ever again. I can't think about what might have happened if Grace hadn't been in that house, if she hadn't called me.

I bring Aubrey closer to me, a protective instinct rolling through my chest. She stirs at the action but doesn't wake up. She startled awake several times during the night, and each time it would take a minute for her to remember where she was. All I could do was assure her with my voice and my touch that she was safe, and her body would relax into mine, breathing in my scent as she drifted off again.

It isn't until almost half an hour later, thirty minutes of me reminding myself how lucky I am, that she finally opens her eyes.

"Morning," I murmur, pressing a chaste kiss against her warm forehead.

Her skin is still flushed from the heat created between our two bodies and trapped by the blankets. When she sits up, she has blossoms of pink rolling across her back and shoulders. I smile and let my fingers delicately trail down her spine.

“Morning,” she rasps, her voice still gravelly from sleep as she looks over her shoulder at me and rubs a knuckle across her eye. “How long have you been up?”

I shake my head. “Just a few minutes.”

She doesn’t need to know what I’ve been struggling with. Aubrey has enough issues and lasting trauma facing her.

She nods mutely when a yawn steals whatever words she was thinking. But then her vision focuses as the gears work in her head. She’s remembered something important, blinking her tired eyes wide as she stares at me.

“I know something about the case,” she says.

I tilt my head, confused. “What do you mean?”

“When I was abducted,” she says with a dismissive wave of her hand. “They talked about some dirty cops. I remember the names.”

I brighten, bolting to a sitting position. “Fuck.”

Aubrey nods again. Her body, which was slumped with morning sleepiness just a few seconds earlier, is now buzzing with excitement. She grabs my hand.

“We can win this,” she hisses. “We even have a witness other than me. Grace.”

“Do you think she will go on record?” I ask.

“I think she is tired of being under the gang’s thumb,” Aubrey says. “Maybe she could be pardoned for other gang activity by giving a statement.”

“We need more evidence though,” I say. “We are talking about going after cops.”

“What about talking to Sam?” She questions. “He knows a lot and he’s an undercover informant. Not everyone will know he is working for our side.”

I nod, considering her. “I’ll ask around.”

Aubrey purses her lips. “What time should we leave?”

“I said I’ll ask around,” I push her back down into the bed. “You need to rest. You’ve had some very busy days, wild cat.”

As soon as her head hits the pillow, her eyes droop again. I can tell she hasn’t had enough sleep the last few days. She looks at me appreciatively though she tries to pout. It doesn’t work at all. Instead I tuck a small bunch of hair behind her ear and press another kiss against her temple.

“Just let me take care of you for a bit,” I beg. “I was so scared. I know you were too.”

Finally, she gives in and sighs. “Fine. But be careful. I don’t want you getting in trouble either.”

“Chet and the others have been taken in. I’m in much less danger from them now. The officers are far less likely to move without them,” I say thoughtfully. “They probably think they’re still safe.”

I rub one of my thumbs across the apple of her cheek. I just want her safe and to recuperate. I don’t want her to worry, but in order for that to happen we need to win this case, which means I need to tread some dangerous waters. Once she’s asleep again, I order room service and some food for my breakfast along with coffee, but most importantly there is food left for Aubrey to eat when she wakes up. She only ate some vending machine snacks at the station yesterday, and I realize I don’t even know if she was fed during her capture.

She is still deep in dreamland when I write the note for her and leave the Do Not Disturb sign on our door. It’s time to track down my old friend. It isn’t hard, Sam is where he always is, and this time he is a bit more jittery than he was last time.

“Hey, how are you?” I ask, taking a seat down on the sofa before he even offers.

“Shit,” he says. “You caused quite a stir among the gangs. Now with Chet and his boys gone there’s a huge struggle for the next top dog.”

“Yeah, they kind of forced my hand,” I sigh and shake my head. “I had no intention of going in so hot but...”

I explain what has happened over the last few days and Sam tenses.

“I can’t believe those shits brought a civilian in,” he spits.

There are times when I forget that Sam isn’t still a gangster, that he is working for us. It’s times like these when his lips twist in anger and his brows scrunch tight in a frown. His eyes dance with the desire to punch the shit out of someone and his hands twitch in frustration.

There was a time in Sam’s life when he was climbing the ranks, when he was feared in the streets. Not that he likely still isn’t when he gets pissed. But now he’s one of the good guys, and one of our best allies.

“I need to ask you about a couple names, but I need them to stay absolutely confidential,” I say.

Sam’s attention shifts to me again. His interest is piqued and his anger smooths away from his face. He leans back against the chair and props his chin on his knuckles, and once again I feel the chill I used to feel when we were younger. But I’m not some stupid green lawyer anymore fresh out of law school. I’ve faced much more dangerous men than Sam. And I know my one-time friend could never hurt me over information like this. Yet, this is his informant face, sharp, intelligent, and curious. A dangerous combination.

“You know I’d never double-cross you, for mom’s sake alone. That woman would kill me otherwise,” he laughs, breaking some of the tension, and so do I.

Though we both grow silent after it, reminiscing of the times we’d get into trouble and she flew into a rage for our own sake. She protects us by getting angry at us. She protects us by getting angry for us. She is such an amazing woman and makes the world a better place.

I drop the names of the officers and Sam’s eyes grow wide. He spits out a curse and slams his hand against his chair.

“Those are some big names...one of them isn’t just an officer. One is a detective and one is a police chief,” Sam scratches at his stubble.

I frown and chew the inside of my cheek. “Do you think we can get these guys?”

Sam pauses and leans back until his head is hanging over the back of the chair. “I think you will have to make a deal. Very few will stand against them otherwise.”

“Yeah, I was afraid of that,” I sigh and rub an irritated hand down my face.

I talk with Sam for a little longer before heading out and making a call, dragging out the officer on the lowest rung of our group in hopes to offer him a tantalizing deal. I set up to meet him later that day, intending to let Aubrey come with me if she feels up to it. I am heading back to the hotel with a half dozen donuts in a bag from Mrs. Trejo’s shop, hoping to brighten any lingering gloom around Aubrey.

She’s awake when I walk through the door and she smiles at me, though there is still a dullness to her eyes. I can’t tell if it’s because she is tired or if it’s because she is scared. Still, I return her smile and place the donuts in front of her, watching her eyes sparkle just a bit more as she searches inside for the one she wants. Without even thinking about it I place a kiss on the crown of her head, causing her to pause in her search for the perfect donut.

“I wanted to say...,” she swallows. “I can’t say I love you yet. But I do care about you, a lot.”

She avoids my eyes, seeming to be ashamed of being unable to return my feelings in the same way. I merely shake my head and ruffle her still messy hair.

“Don’t worry about it, I never expected you to respond right away,” I assure her earnestly. “Caring is more than enough for me right now.”

Aubrey seems to deflate a little in relief, and I’m glad. The last thing she needs to be concerned with right now is my feelings.

“I’ve figured out how to get some more evidence,” I tell her as she finally pulls out a donut.

She looks at me expectantly and nods with a mouthful of donut, encouraging me to continue.

“I made an appointment to talk to the lower officer that got caught up in this mess. I think he will talk,” I say. “You can come if you are feeling up to it. It’s not until later.”

“I would like to, even if only to observe. It would be a good learning experience. Besides, I want to see this through. To the end.” She looks down at her empty hand, which has subconsciously clenched into a fist.

I smile even though she can’t see me. Not even the abduction has shaken her resolve or her pursuit for justice. She will make a great lawyer.

“Alright, eat up then, and drink some coffee so your brain can function. I’m sure you are still exhausted,” I say, and brush a hand down her head again.

She nods, and once against the emotional tiredness is back on her face. She looks like she has run the gauntlet of her family’s parties three times over. I lean over and she meets me for a sugary kiss. I swipe my tongue across her lips to gather the glaze still stuck there and she whines adorably.

“Hey! Get your own!” She hunches over the last of her donut as if she’s afraid I might steal it directly from her hands.

“Mmm, but the addition of your taste makes it so much sweeter,” I say with a cheesy grin.

She snorts at me and laughs, and it’s worth the cringey line. I eventually lean over to grab a glazed twist and enjoy the still warm pastry.

The early day passes by with ease. We lounge in the hotel room and Aubrey eventually takes a shower. Her hair is still wet when she comes out, and I can’t help pulling her to the bed and kissing her senseless. But we don’t go passed that. By the time she is dressed and I’m in a suit, we need to head down to the police station to question our subject. It’s strange going back to the same station to do our business. Some of those

officers were a part of the raid, and I believe they are safe. But we can't trust anyone else.

Still, I'm on edge when we step through the entrance and go up to the floor we need. I'm fighting the urge to pull Aubrey close to my side, but instead settle for being hyper-vigilant. Focusing on where she is, how far away she is from me, and if I think it's too far, I step closer. I know it's ridiculous, but after what happened I don't think I'll be back to normal for a while. Nor will she.

The interview goes well and the officer accepts the deal for becoming an eyewitness. He gets reduced time. Turns out he got sucked into it due to his higher-ups blackmailing him.

We finally leave and I feel relief having this thing put behind us. It's pretty much open and shut now. With three eyewitnesses, one being my second chair, though she can't exactly sit in as a lawyer now, we shouldn't have any issues. But when I look at Aubrey standing beside me in the elevator, she is pale. I assume once everything is tied up, things will go back to normal.

I didn't expect to be so wrong.

CHAPTER 24

AUBREY

I thought I would be okay once Liam and I got back home, once we stepped through the firm. The case with Alejandro went swimmingly. He and Grace are already looking at getting married.

Things for me, however, only seem to get worse. I am struggling with adjusting back to normal. Derek is calling me regularly because after the first day back I haven't been coming to work. Even Dad stops by once with Mom and she takes in the state of my apartment. The state of me. They know what happened to me, but aren't pressing me for answers, knowing me well enough that I'll talk about it when I'm ready. Neither of them say anything criticizing though, which is unusual, especially for my father, but it just shows how bad things have gotten.

I've fallen into depression. It's hard to get up, and leaving home is impossible. It's exhausting, with the nightmares plaguing me every night. I'm having a hard time cleaning, which is a huge red flag. I like things clean, organized, and where they belong. But now I barely notice the dirty dishes and empty glasses. I live my life with my nose buried in my favorite books, books I've read ten times or more before. I can predict each turn and twist in these books so there is never a surprise. I don't want to be surprised right now.

No, right now I want safety, comfort, and familiarity. I just want to feel like I did before. But I can't, I can't get those memories of fear to leave me alone unless I'm reading. The radio or television always have to be on, drowning out any noise from the outside. I know I can lose my job this way. I

know if I wasn't my father's daughter I wouldn't still have a spot back at the firm. But I can't bring myself to care. I'm too tired.

There's a knock at the door on my third day I'm out, or is it the fourth now? I sigh, expecting it to be Derek since I've been dodging his calls the last two days. But it's not. It's Liam I see through the peephole, standing there with a plastic bag in his hand, looking behind him awkwardly as he waits for me to respond. A small part of me thinks about ignoring him, it would be the easiest thing to do. But most of me desperately wants to see him, to hear his voice. He's the only person I want to talk to.

I slowly open the door, looking up at him through tired eyes, and I vaguely recall it's been days since I washed my hair. I'm aware I look a mess but his eyes light up like I'm a drink of water in the L.A. heat. My brain tries to shove horrible memories back into my mind at the thought of L.A. but I push it away by motioning Liam to come in.

He follows me inside and thankfully, like the angel I once called him, he doesn't mention the clutter all over my apartment. It doesn't stop me from feeling shame though. With anyone else I wouldn't care, but with Liam things always follow their own path. I feel like I need a nap already.

"You haven't been to work," he says.

I laugh, though it isn't warm. It's a bitter sound, but the frustration isn't aimed at him. I shake my head and look at him fondly.

"Always straight to the point," I grin. "No, I suppose I haven't."

I don't answer his fishing, and I hope he will drop his questions. But lawyers are naturally curious individuals. I don't have a prayer of shaking Liam off this trail.

"Why not?" He asks, shooting me a glare that says 'don't shit me.'

I shake my head and plop down on the couch, "I'm not sleeping well. And leaving the house is too hard."

He looks around again, seeming to categorize all the clutter. “Nightmares?”

My grin turns sardonic. “Yeah.”

“So you’re still scared?” He asks, his tone unreadable.

I nod, unable to meet his gaze. Yes, I’m fucking scared.

“Why didn’t you tell me this over our texts?”

I shrug. “What could you do?”

“Come here. So you aren’t alone, at least. What about therapy? I mean fuck, you went through some heavy shit, Aubrey. You’re bound to have lingering trauma over this,” he says with a frustrated sigh, but I think it’s more towards himself than me.

I glance away from him and frown down at my hands. “Can you just stay with me tonight? Sleep in the same bed with me?”

“That won’t fix anything,” he crosses his arms.

“No, it won’t. But I may get a good night’s sleep. And right now I’m just hoping to have a better tomorrow,” I admit.

His eyes soften and he slowly comes over to lay a kiss on my forehead and place the plastic bag in my lap. “There’s some chocolate in there, and a new book I thought you might like.”

That’s all it takes. For the first time since I got back, I cry. It isn’t heavy uncontrollable sobs, but rather gentle and cleansing. It feels good, like a purge. Liam sits with me, letting me curl up against his side until the tears disappear. Then, while, I settle into the new book and decide to accept something different and new, with some delicious chocolate of course, Liam begins to do something I never expected. He cleans up my mess of an apartment. He works quietly, so much so that he melts into the background, and I let him do it because I know I need it right now. I need him to take care of me.

He continues to do little things all day, making sure I have tea or water, fixing me healthy food instead of instant noodles

or peanut butter and marshmallow fluff sandwiches. He also somehow convinces me to find enough energy to let him bundle me into the bathtub and spoil me with a slow lather and gentle massage. I don't think I have ever felt so loved in my life. It's almost enough to make me forget why I was upset for days.

Yet, when night falls and I'm standing in front of the bed, it's impossible to ignore what will be waiting for me once I lay down. But this time I'm not alone. I look to the other side of my full bed where Liam lies stretched across it, watching me as I silently panic about the insomnia and the eventual nightmares that will take hold of me tonight. He waits patiently, his confident demeanor like a promise that he will be my shield against all the bad still left in my mind.

He doesn't push me to crawl under the covers, but he does open them, showing me that I will be able to press up next to his bare torso and feel the heat of skin against my cheek. That's what finally decides it for me. I crawl under the blankets with him and immediately press the side of my face against his pecs, listening to the slow hum of his heartbeat, and I sigh as my body melts into his. The anxiety slips away from me like sand through open hands, and I look at him in the dim lamplight.

"Thank you," I whisper and follow it up with something I'm certain he's been waiting to hear. "I love you."

He doesn't make a big deal of the words that slip out of my mouth, he just responds, "I will always be here for you. I love you too. Now sleep."

I sleep better than any other night since coming back from L.A. Every time I startle awake or my brain tries to induce a nightmare, the steady sound of Liam's thrumming life under my ear breaks through my subconscious and tears apart all my fear. I wake up without feeling drained, with my face still pressed up against his warmth and the smell of his skin under my nose. For the first time in what feels like forever, I feel rested.

But Liam is still with me and it's a work day, so I immediately shake him awake. "Liam wake up. Don't you have to go into work today?"

He wakes up and blinks at me sleepily before shaking his head. "Nah. Your dad gave me the day off. Told me to come check on you. In fact, he apparently knows about us. I am supposedly 'obvious' when concerned."

I grimace. "Fuck."

He, however, snorts. "It's alright, he's not unsupportive. Though I also wouldn't call him supportive either."

"He's like that with whomever I date," I say with a half smirk. "Don't take it personally."

"Ah I don't. I do however hate that I can't talk to him about you," he says as his arm flops over his eyes dramatically.

I laugh and he smiles. He lurches up to grab me around the middle and drags me further under the covers, rubbing his overnight scruff across my sensitive neck. I squeal and try to pull away only to notice that he is rocking his half-hard cock across the curve of my thighs. I squirm more and turn to face him with a raised brow.

"Really?" I ask even though I'm going breathless by the gentle nips and open mouthed kisses he is leaving on my skin.

"What? Never heard of morning wood?" He teases, and then drags himself down my body to pull my sleep shorts off.

He kisses each of my thighs with lingering touches before he lifts both my legs over his shoulders and nearly folds me in half. He's wasting no time this morning and his excitement is rushing through me too. Liam slips his fingers into the edges of my panties and his fingers brush my slick lips. I want him to hurry up, but despite my urging, he takes his time opening me.

He shoves his sweats down finally and reaches off to the side where apparently he has stashed a condom. Once he's prepped, he leans forward and twines one of his hands with mine. When he pushes into me I can't breathe, it's like he's filling up my entire torso. I gasp desperately against the

feeling of suffocation, but Liam just squeezes my hand and pauses.

“Slow down, relax,” he soothes.

I force myself to accommodate him, force my lungs to stop seizing, and eventually my body adjusts to the new position. As soon as Liam feels me loosen and relax, his speed and strength pick up fast. I can tell he has no intention of taking today slow and I don't mind. In fact it's almost what I need. I need it hard and fast and so primal I can't think.

All I'm doing is holding on and gasping in air with guttural moans spilling from deep within me, sounds I feel coming from within my spine. With my impatience, and my desire for control back in my life, I shift my legs so one circles around Liam's waist, and he slows down just enough to eye me curiously. I begin to tip him, and he goes with it.

Soon I'm on top, and quickly taking over our rhythm, riding so fast that the man beneath me has leaned back on his hands to give me better leverage. His hips meet mine with the sinful sound of slick skin against skin. I'm panting loudly again, moaning out my need with my nails digging crescent moons into his pecs. Liam's not doing much better, he's grunting in my ear, whispering words broken words of affection. Compliments that don't make any sense because they just spill into each other endlessly.

It's perfect, hot and sweaty. We are so connected it feels like we're one person, and I don't think I've ever felt more fulfilled. I finally come with Liam on my heels, his body straining under mine, tendons pulled tight and teeth grinding against each other. My body is fighting to arc over him until I almost fall back onto his thighs.

We sit like this for as long as possible, with our bodies nearly fused together. But when he pulls me off, I whimper at the loss, and he hisses from overstimulation.

When we clean up, I finally say what I've been thinking about since last night. “Maybe you're right about therapy.”

He looks up surprised, but once against doesn't say anything, and once again I'm grateful.

EPILOGUE

I've been living with Aubrey for a year now, and we've been together for a year and a half. I sold the penthouse in exchange for a smaller, warmer, mid-century modern house just outside of the city. A place the two of us can make a home.

Some people say I'm rushing things, but even Jacob now approves of my choice. Still, having her father agree with me proposing to his daughter doesn't help with my nerves.

Aubrey is now a full-fledged associate of the law firm. She also is going to therapy every week, though soon she'll be tapering off, so now seems as good a time as any to pop the question. I keep having to consciously ignore the box in my pocket. I have found myself running my fingers over the black velvet several times today. She hasn't noticed thankfully, probably because Jacob has been the best wingman ever and has been piling the paperwork on her. I only feel mildly guilty.

I am taking her out to eat tonight, at one of the only restaurants in town with a massive aquarium. She's been really into mermaid and sea creature books lately, so I figure the thought will be appreciated. We are leaving early for our reservations and I am counting down the seconds.

Surprisingly, the day isn't as horrible as I think it is going to be. I feel like it's going to drag a lot more, but it doesn't. Instead, I'm flying down to her desk with a grin on my face as she looks up at me in complete confusion.

"Come on," I say and quickly begin to grab her things.

"Where are you going?" She asks.

“*We*, my dear, are going out. Already got the big man’s okay.” I am practically bouncing on my feet, and I know I am the farthest thing from covert.

Aubrey looks at me oddly before glancing down the hall, and I see Jacob nod at her. She carefully saves and closes everything down on her desktop, and then organizes her files like the good little lawyer she is. We are walking out of the lobby when Derek, the only person she calls a friend so far, waves goodbye and sends me a thumbs up when she turns away. God, how many people knew about this? My hand nervously touches my pocket.

The ride to the restaurant is silent on my side, except for the occasional grunts or single syllable answers in hopes to throw off any suspicion. Aubrey, however, is so excited about a current case that she is eagerly chattering away about it and hasn’t yet realized how my leg won’t stop jiggling. In this way, I’m incredibly glad for her one-track mind.

The way her face lights up when we walk inside is breathtaking. The actual lighting for the private room is dim and has different shades of blue or purple, while the main light comes from the aquarium. All sorts of large saltwater fish fill it, just living their lives. Aubrey is bubbling.

“Oh my god!” She nearly screams, pulling at my sleeve.

“Do you like it?” I ask.

She nods mutely, her eyes and attention completely focused on the blue world in front of her. Small shellfish, sharks, rays, various corals, tangs, and other species of community fish swim around in what seems like a never-ending tank.

The food is just as great but what I really look forward to is dessert. We’re eating and she is babbling sweetly about her recent book venture, but I can barely focus on her words because I’m obsessing about the fact that the little box in my pocket can make it or break it for me.

“What’s wrong with you tonight, Liam?” She breaks me out of my reverie and I wince.

“Ah...” I pause, trying to find a way to explain myself but for once in my life, I can’t find a way to bullshit. “Fuck it. Nothing ever goes to plan with you, wild cat, so I might as well get used to it.”

My words are filled with adoration as I reach into my pocket to pull out the box that’s been tormenting me all day. I hold it under the table out of sight for a bit.

“What do you mean?” She asks.

“Aubrey,” I swallow hard, and chew my lower lip for a bit and she waits patiently for me, recognizing my anxiety. “I’ve never been so in love with someone, with anything, my entire life like I am with you. I had this kind of cutesy thing planned, but I realized I’m not a cutesy guy, and our relationship is based on far deeper things than singular moments that go perfectly.”

She is listening intently, giving me that wide-eyed stare she does when she knows I’m saying something important.

I finally stand and then sweep down into that characteristic kneel. “I’ve watched you grow in work, in life, and fight through one of the hardest things someone can go through. You amaze me every day, you drive me mad, and I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life becoming crazier because of you. Will you marry me?”

I think the world freezes then. I only know it hasn’t because of the rise and fall of her chest. No one else exists outside of the woman in front of me. I wait for her answer for what is likely only a few seconds as she takes in my words, but it feels more like hours.

Finally, she squeaks out a soft, “Yes. Of course, you idiot. I’ve been waiting since we moved in together.”

She’s got a tear trailing down her cheek when I slide the diamond ring on her finger. It glitters just as brightly as the gemstone, and I wipe it away like I always do. I will always be there to share her tears, wipe them away, and make her smile. Aubrey is mine now and I am hers, forever and always. And I

will be forever grateful for that one night I did something stupid.

The End.

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When my brooding, smoking hot neighbor bangs on my door early one morning, I'm more than prepared to give him *anything* he asks for.

Even be his emergency babysitter.

Jake Ward has been a puzzle ever since he moved next door.

One minute he's gruff, sizing me up with those chestnut eyes.

The next he's a doting parent, laughing and smiling with his son.

The more I get to know him, I recognize a darkness deep within him.

He's haunted by his past.

By the ghost of the woman he failed to save.

But not even a fireman can save everyone.

My nights with him are *seriously* hot enough to scorch,

And I see so much of myself in his sweet little boy.

I'm in serious danger of falling for Jake.

I just hope he can rescue me when I do.



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