



**BROKEN  
CLOCKS**

DANIELLE ALLEN

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## **Broken Clocks**

According to my grandma, a broken clock being right twice a day meant that in any given situation, perfect timing only happens twice.

I fell for William Grayson in a matter of minutes. The connection between us was undeniable, but our timing was off. I was dating someone and by the time I was single again, he was taken. And a year later, when we finally got together, it was clear that we were soulmates. But circumstances out of our control cut our time short.

We were a little older, a little wiser, when our paths crossed again. I was entering a new phase of independence in both my career and my life. He was growing professionally and moving to a new city. And even though our timing was off, it was still clear that we were soulmates. But for the second time, circumstances out of our control cut our time short.

My grandma was a wise woman, but my love life taught me that there's no such thing as perfect timing.

There's just timing... Because nothing is perfect.  
There's just right now... Because tomorrow isn't promised.

For as long as we'd known each other, William and I just wanted to be together. It was as simple and as complicated as that.

# DEDICATION

*To Love.*  
*To Life.*  
*To Living Life.*  
*To Loving Life.*  
*To Loving Love.*  
*To LWT.*

# PROLOGUE

---

*My Dearest Layla,*

*I don't have many regrets. But I regret not telling you that I had cancer. Please don't be mad at your mother either. I forbade her from telling you. I wanted to tell you myself. But the more time passed, the harder it got. But that's no excuse. I should've been honest with you. But I will say this... Your mother knew, and she shifted from my child to my nurse. She didn't ask me how I was doing to hear my stories anymore. She asked me how I was doing with managing my pain and taking my pills. She worried about me, not because I was still missing your grandfather, but because I was sick. But with you, my lovely Layla, we would sit back and talk about any and everything. With you, my love, I could forget.*

*This does not absolve me from keeping you in the dark. But I hope that it can show you that I didn't do it to hurt you. I did it to free you. I did it to free us. If I could do it over again, I wouldn't have told your mother. So please, don't hold it against your mother. And please, don't hold it against me.*

*Even though I'm sure you're angry, please don't hold it against me. Please don't forget that I was there for you as much as you were there for me. Who talked to you about sex and birth control when you were too embarrassed to talk to your parents? When you got caught with condoms, who said they were hers so you didn't get into trouble? Who didn't tell your parents when you stole her condoms?*

*And if you're really angry, please don't forget who covered for you when I caught you and Jenelle on her birthday, drinking with two boys in my house when you thought me and your grandfather were going to the casino? She may have been twenty-one, but you weren't.*

*And if you're really, really angry, please don't forget that Nana loves you, and that you are my best friend—right after your grandfather. And right after Rose. But none of the old biddies I had book club or church functions with held a candle to you.*

*You kept me young. You kept me honest. You kept me company. You were my light, and the moment your mother had you, I knew that you were going to be the golden goose. Not just because you're my only granddaughter. And not just because you look more like me than any of my children do. You, Layla, are something special.*

*When your grandfather passed away, I didn't know what I was going to do. But I will never forget the day it happened or the fact that I woke up and he had stopped*



*breathing sometime after some early morning canoodling. We had gotten up to have coffee, watch the news, talk on the porch, and then we returned to bed at eight. After a tumble in the hay, we fell asleep and when I woke up, my watch had stopped at 9:27 a.m. When I looked at the clock in the room, it was about 9:50 a.m. I tried to wake him and called emergency services a few minutes later. They were here at 9:58 a.m. He was pronounced dead soon thereafter. They said he'd been without oxygen for at least thirty minutes.*

*There is no one who can tell me that he didn't die at 9:27 a.m.*

*For the last three years, I've missed him, but I didn't dwell on it. I knew we would be reunited again. So, I focused on the fact that there is so much life to be lived and I need to take advantage of it. A broken clock is only right twice a day. Any other time, you're just guessing and trying to figure it out. So, seize the day and the opportunities. You don't get an unlimited amount of times to get something right or to capitalize on it in the way God intended. God knows that we're flawed humans, so he gives us a second chance to get it right.*

*You get two times for the timing to be perfect, and everything lines up just right. If you miss the opportunity the first time, make sure you jump on it the second time. Don't settle. Be patient, and wait for it to come around again. If you do that you'll have few regrets and plenty of stories. You'll have a love life for the ages. And if you're lucky, maybe it'll be with one man. And if you're luckier, maybe it'll be with three. You'll have a job that won't feel like work. You'll have at least one friend you can count on. You will see humor in things and not take yourself so seriously, while at the same time knowing your worth.*

*I want you to have that kind of life, Layla. You're still going to die at the end of it, but you will have lived. And when you die, you won't be afraid because you'll know that you lived, you loved, and you laughed. So, to my dearest Layla, I leave you my watch that I got from the love of my life to remind you that a broken clock being right twice a day means that in any given situation, perfect timing only happens twice.*

*I love you. I'll be waiting for you when it's your time. We'll have new stories to tell each other. Because the first thing I'm doing when I get to heaven is kissing my husband. The second is to find Rose because you know she died owing me twenty dollars.*

*Never forget that Nana loves you.*

*Love Always,  
Nana*

---

## CHAPTER ONE

---

I exhaled slowly as I watched William Grayson walk away from me and out of my life forever. There was no way he wasn't going to get that promotion. He had just finished his second interview and from the sound of it he would be the head of the Philadelphia division in three weeks. Not only was he great at his job, I knew from personal experience he was extremely good at taking charge.

My tongue slowly slid between my full lips as my eyes skated over his six-foot, three-inch frame. The way his black suit stretched across his professional football player build left the promise of an even better view underneath the tailored fabrics. I stared at his close-cut Caesar haircut and let my gaze slip down to his black leather shoes. Even without seeing his smooth, unblemished skin, his straight, white teeth, and his dark brown eyes, anyone would be able to tell he was fine. Sexiness radiated off him from every angle.

I don't think I blinked until he was completely out of the restaurant and the door was starting to close behind him.

"What was that?" Jenelle McFarland practically yelled from across the table.

My head snapped back toward my best friend in shock. My eyes darted from her to the door Will left out of and then back to her. "What? Nothing! Why are you so loud?!"

Glaring at me, a little amused smile played on her lips. "Don't play coy with me. What's going on with you and Will?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I lied, glancing at my watch. "Look at the time! It's 9:27 already!"

“That watch always says that and has needed a new battery for six years so cut the shit.” She pointed at me. “You and Will just undressed each other with your eyes.”

I let out a loud laugh. “No, we didn’t.”

She dropped her fork, and it clanked loudly against her plate. “Layla, it couldn’t have been any more obvious that you two want each other.”

“That’s not true,” I argued, my face getting warm. “We broke things off over two years ago. We are just friends now. You know this already. We are just friends.”

She shook her head. “Listen to me... I had to avert my eyes at one point because I thought I saw him pull his dick out and put it on your plate.”

“Shut up!” I laughed so hard my body shook. “That did not happen.”

“Okay, okay.” Jenelle’s giggles mixed with my own. “But those weren’t ‘I used to want you two years ago’ looks. Those were ‘I want you right here and right now’ looks. I mean the eye-fucking was so intense, I was about to toss my cookies.” She crossed her arms. “And that’s not a euphemism... I ate an embarrassing number of cookies this afternoon, so I would have literally vomited cookies all over this table.”

My shoulders shook uncontrollably, but I covered my mouth in an effort to muffle my laughter. After two straight minutes of giggles, we both calmed down.

“I needed that laugh,” I sighed, still grinning. “It’s been a stressful week.”

She lifted her almost empty wine glass and gave me a nod. “You’ve had a lot going on. But it doesn’t help that you are repressing your feelings and emotions.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not repressing anything. Moving is stressful. Starting a new job is stressful. Being far away from my best friend is stressful.”

“Yes. Yes. And hell yes! The actual moving part of moving sucks. The uncertainty of starting a new job sucks. And even though we won’t be able to yell for each other from the other room anymore, we’re only going to be fifteen minutes apart.”

“I know. But living with you for the last year has spoiled me. What am I supposed to do without you borrowing my clothes without asking?” I joked.

“And what am I going to do without you singing loudly and off-key every morning before work?” she returned.

Reaching across the table, we squeezed each other's hand and exchanged bittersweet grins. After a breakup with a man I had no business dating, let alone living with, I moved into Jenelle's townhouse and remained for nine months. We'd always been close, but the last year had strengthened our bond.

Sitting back in our seats, she sighed. "Well, at least this can be our Friday night happy hour spot. Hello, Lavo!"

My eyes danced around the trendy new restaurant. Lavo was centrally located between my new apartment and the townhouse Jenelle owned. Bringing my glass to my lips, I nodded. "I like the way you think because these happy hour specials are on point."

"The entire menu is on point. And when it's warm, they have a rooftop space that overlooks downtown. Next time I'm going to come here hungry, so I can eat what I want."

I pointed at her. "Or next time don't eat all those damn cookies before we go out to eat."

She laughed. "Ah yes, that is what happened. I guess I'm repressing the memory of my gluttonous cookie intake just like you're repressing your feelings for Will."

"That again?" Shaking my head, I took a bite of my salad and chewed. I could feel Jenelle's eyes on me and when I glanced at her, she sipped her wine knowingly. I swallowed the leafy greens. "Fine! Do I still have nothing but love for him? Of course. Do I think he's a great man? Yes. Do I still think he's sexy as hell? Absolutely. Would I still"—I leaned forward and lowered my voice—"fuck him? Hell yeah!"

Lifting her glass in the air, Jenelle gave me an approving nod. "Okay!"

"And even with all that being true, I no longer date men I have no future with... so Will and I are just friends. That's all it can be. That's all it'll ever be."

Jenelle's eyebrows shot up, and she pursed her lips. I waited for her to say something, but she remained silent.

I cleared my throat. "A relationship wouldn't work with us. It didn't work then. It wouldn't work now. And honestly, I'm not even interested in pursuing anything serious with him or anyone. I just want to focus on me. This year is going to be all about making money."

"Yes, but didn't Will say he was up for that job in Philly?"

"Yes...?"

“And if he gets the job, which we already know he will, he’s moving to Philly?”

My brows furrowed in confusion. “Yes...?”

“So, next week, he’ll be starting a new life in Philly?”

“Yes!” My voice elevated in exasperation. “What’s your point?”

“This might be your last weekend to have him blow your back out one more time.”

I heard her words just as I was swallowing the swig of water I’d just sipped. Somewhere between my body’s reaction to what she said and my brain’s memory of what he did to my body that summer, I choked.

“What?” I screeched, the sound garbled by a laugh-gasp that simultaneously escaped.

“Timing is everything... right?” Jenelle giggled as I gave her a flabbergasted look.

“You two look like you’re having a good time,” the waiter pointed out, appearing unexpectedly. He looked between us with a huge smile as he poured wine into our empty glasses. “On the house,” he noted with a wink. “Celebrating something?”

Reeling from Jenelle’s words, I just shook my head.

“Yes! My best friend has a new job, a new place.” She paused and gave me a look. “And a new opportunity to get her back aligned.”

“Congratulations!” The waiter looked between us and smiled. “Very good reasons to celebrate! And you know what... I saw a chiropractor just a couple of weeks ago, and I instantly felt better.”

The laughter bubbled up inside of me, and I tried to keep it together. My entire body shook, and it wasn’t until he walked away that I could look at Jenelle. As soon as our eyes met, we both cracked up.

“See, go ahead and call Will and let him give you the adjustment you need.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “You’ll instantly feel better.”

I felt the heat on my cheeks, between my legs, and in my chest. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not? I still don’t understand why you two even split. I’ve never understood your relationship. You two had so much fun together and then all of a sudden, you two decided to be friends. Within a month, he started dating that social media model”—she rolled her eyes dramatically— “and you started dating Thomas. And then that was it. You two have been ‘friends’ ever since.” She used air quotes to emphasize her sarcasm.

“We are friends—well, we’re friendly. And a relationship between us is not viable.”

“But we’re not talking about a relationship. We’re talking about sex with someone you care about in order to de-stress. We’re talking about the hottest goodbye sex. We’re talking that post-Valentine’s Day dick.”

“Oh my God!” I cackled, and then I cleared my throat. “I guess it has been a while since I had sex with anyone.”

“A while?” she sputtered. “You’re basically a virgin again. You and Thomas broke up forever ago and besides that brief hookup—”

“You mean that quickie that resulted in a pregnancy scare?” I corrected her.

“Whatever. You let that pregnancy scare scare the sex out of your life.”

I laughed, but she wasn’t wrong. I glanced at my cell phone and then picked up my wine glass. It had been a long time and William really had a way with my body.

*I shouldn’t though... should I?*

“No, no, no... I shouldn’t,” I answered my own question into my hands as I covered my face. I sighed before meeting my best friend’s eyes. “We had our one good summer. Our moment has come and gone.”

“Maybe it has, maybe it hasn’t.” She lifted her left shoulder and held her hands upward. “But what was it your Nana used to say? Even a broken clock is right twice a day.” Jenelle delivered her argument in a sing-song voice as her eyebrows wiggled. “Well, let’s consider seeing Will again being the second time the clock is right.”

I quietly considered what she’d said. Staring at my Nana’s watch, I looked at the hands as they remained frozen in place.

*She’s not wrong...*

Jenelle shrugged her shoulders. “But obviously, it’s your call. If you really don’t think it’s a good idea, don’t do it. I’m not trying to talk you into anything you don’t want to do. I just saw the way the two of you were looking at each other and figured why not climb that tree one last time before he moves away? You’ll get the closure you never got, and you’ll roll into your first day of work feeling like a new woman.” She gave me a small smile. “But I get it. Will is...different.”

I swallowed hard, glancing at my phone.

“Anyway, I’m probably just horny since Mike’s been out of town,” Jenelle continued. “I’m projecting and living vicariously through you.”

“How are things with Mike?” I asked, changing the subject so I didn’t have to deal with my own feelings at the moment.

Jenelle’s face lit up. “Mike is enjoying his time in Japan. The first week was all business meetings, and this week he’s getting more time to just enjoy himself. Let me show you what he sent me earlier.”

As she messed with her phone, I slipped mine off the table and into my lap.

“Isn’t this gorgeous?” She showed me a selfie of Mike with the neon-lit skyscrapers of Tokyo in the background.

“Are you talking about Tokyo or Mike?” I teased as I sipped wine and masked my nerves.

She giggled and stared at her phone.

Quickly, I looked down at my screen and moved my thumb over the keyboard.

**Layla:** *I want to give you a proper goodbye. Will you be home in an hour?*

Looking up, I nodded at Jenelle’s story. Her entire face glowed every time she spoke about Mike. I didn’t even think she realized she was telling me a story she’d already told me before. It was looking as though absence was really making her heart grow fonder.

“So, I take it that you two aren’t just casual anymore...?” I asked, distractedly.

Part of me wanted to tell Jenelle I was sending the message so she could help me perfect my flirt technique. But the larger part of me didn’t want to have the conversation about what hooking up with Will meant. I didn’t want to talk about how Will made me feel. I didn’t want to talk about the status of our relationship. I just needed a release.

So, I kept the decision to myself and before I could lose my nerve, I hit send.

“...and it’s not just that he’s so hot, he’s so thoughtful and sweet, too,” Jenelle swooned.

“He is. You two seem to make a good pair. When does he come back?”

The phone vibrating in my lap shot directly to my clit. My entire body tingled. I knew it was him before I even looked down at the screen.

**William:** *I've been waiting for this text for over two years. I'll leave the door unlocked.*



## CHAPTER TWO

---

**F**iddling with my watch, I stood outside of Will's apartment door feeling that pull that I always felt when I was around him. It was as if our bodies knew the other was around and called out in need. Tightening the belt on my coat and then patting my long, straightened hair, I tried to calm the butterflies in my belly.

I inhaled and then exhaled before turning the doorknob and pushing the door open.

*Let's do this!*

"Will—," I started to call out before my words got lodged in my throat.

The smell of scented candles or incense burning tickled my nose, transporting me back to the summer we spent together. The smooth R&B music seductively played in the background. But the sight of a shirtless William Grayson in a pair of grey sweatpants literally took my breath away.

"Layla..."

My name sounded like a song as it passed over his lips.

I swallowed hard. "Hey." I closed the door behind me and posed against it. "You're looking...well."

He licked his lips as his eyes raked over my fully covered body. "So are you."

I smirked, finally feeling the nerves dissipate. Pushing myself from the door, I slowly walked toward him. My heels clicked against the hardwood floor. I dropped my handbag on the end table, and I watched him watching me as I approached.

He reached out, taking my hands and pulling me into his hard body. "I can't believe you're here." He brought his face within an inch of mine and

hovered above my lips. "I've missed you. I've missed having you in my arms." His minty breath skated across my face with his whispered words in tow. "I've missed kissing you."

My lips parted slightly before I could muster the strength to turn out of his grasp. "Not yet." Giving him a sexy look over my shoulder, I slipped my hand into his and pulled him toward the loveseat. "Follow me."

"What are you doing?" he asked, the smile evident in his voice.

"Take a seat," I demanded, pushing him gently.

He sat down and then back against the dark grey cushion. "I don't know what's going on... but the view from here..." His sentence trailed off as he checked me out.

Smirking, I went to his sound system across the room and turned the volume up. As the sensual melody of the song filled the room, I watched his eyes follow my fingers as I unbuttoned my knee-length coat. Swaying my hips, I sang the lyrics of the song to him as I played with the belt. The unbuttoned flaps of the coat exposed my cleavage and my thighs as I moved to the beat.

William let out a low whistle.

A new song came on, a sexier song, and I got into it and did a seductive dance to the music. When the singing started, I started singing as well. I was off-key, but passionate as I sang about the things I'd do to him. I rotated in a circle, dipped down low, and swiveled my hips. Each movement giving him glimpses of my skin.

"You are so fucking sexy," he groaned as his eyes stayed glued to my body.

I danced until I was directly in front of him. He opened his legs wider, so I could get closer. Slowly undoing the belt of the coat, I let it ease away from my body, dropping to the floor.

"Holy shit." His mouth dropped as he caught his first glimpse of my black lace G-string and bra set.

Standing between his opened legs, I took my time utilizing the moves I'd seen in strip clubs and music videos. I took my time removing my bra and I felt sexy and empowered by his reaction. By the end of the song, I was breathless, turned on, and distracted by the sizeable bulge in his pants.

"Layla...that was the sexiest shit I've ever seen in my life," Will exhaled slowly.

“I’m glad you liked it,” I murmured, glancing at the distinct outline of his dick pressing against the fabric of his sweatpants.

He ran his hands up the back of my legs, palming my ass. “I didn’t like it. I loved it.” He groaned as he rested his forehead against my belly, pulling me even closer to him. He kissed my panty line, whispering something I couldn’t hear.

“Will,” I moaned wantonly, feeling the power shifting as I started to succumb to his touch.

He looked up with a mixture of lust and desire all over his face. The want in his eyes instantly got me wet.

“Say my name like that again,” he murmured as his tongue brushed against the crease of my thigh.

“Will,” I murmured, my legs shaking.

Rocking backward, he pulled me forward until he had me straddling his lap, my legs bent on either side of him. His hands found their way to my hips and with slow deliberate movements, I felt him pressing against me through the cotton of his sweatpants. I moaned as I countered the action, rotating my hips against him.

My nipples were so hard, they hurt. I cried out when he latched his warm mouth on one while toying with the other. Squirming in his lap, I held his head firmly to me as he captured each nipple between his teeth and ran his tongue across them.

“I like that,” I whispered, undulating my hips. “That feels so good. Please, don’t stop.”

He repeated the action two more times before he returned his soft lips to mine. As our kisses became needier and more insistent, I could feel the rapid bursts of air from his ragged breathing. He whispered my name hoarsely before closing his eyes and putting his head back.

I put my hands on his shoulders and started grinding on him harder, sexier. I wanted him to want me so bad that he felt like he’d burst.

“Layla...” he hissed between clenched teeth. “You don’t understand how much I’ve missed you. I want to savor this. I want to take my time. I want to stretch this night out as long as possible... but if you keep grinding on me—”

Leaning forward, I pressed my lips against his, silencing him.

The kiss was hot and needy. His arms enveloped me, holding me tight as he deepened the kiss. We moaned into each other’s mouths as I felt him

get even harder beneath me.

My panties were soaked.

I lightly sucked on his bottom lip. Trailing kisses from his lips across his cheek, I whispered against his ear, “Don’t worry about taking your time and stretching this night out. Just worry about stretching me out.”

Groaning, William responded, “I had a plan. I want everything to be perfect for you.” His hands cupped my round ass and pulled me into him harder. “Shit.”

“Forget the plan.” I bit his earlobe gently before kissing my way down his neck and over his collarbone. Sitting up straight, I looked into his dark brown eyes. “I need you inside me.”

His mouth crashed into mine, and all the pent up sexual tension between us exploded. His tongue played with mine in a way that gave me chills. He pulled out of the kiss briefly to grab onto the armrest and push himself up. He stood up with me still attached to him. I wrapped my legs around his waist and kissed him hard. Taking his time, he slid me down his hard body, never letting his lips disconnect from mine. The kiss transformed from wanton, unfiltered lust to deep, meaningful adoration.

My heart, and time, stood still.

When he pulled away, I pouted playfully, and he chuckled to himself. He brushed the loose strands of hair from my forehead and stared at me. I could feel how much he cared for me in his touch. I could see it in his eyes. But as his full lips parted, I heard it in the way he said my name.

“Layla?”

“Yes?” I answered breathily.

His hand found its way to the apex of my thighs. His fingers skimmed the damp lace lightly.

“All that for me?” he whispered, his mouth hovering over mine. He slipped his finger inside my G-string and grazed my sensitive flesh. “I hope you don’t have anywhere to be later.”

I sucked in a sharp breath, and my leg shook.

Swallowing hard, I tried to regain control of the situation. I ran my hand over his bulge. “I plan to be on top of this.”

He froze for a second and smirked. “What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing yet. But soon...” I slipped my hands into his sweatpants and wrapped my hand around his girth. We both sighed in unison. “This.”

The air instantly became thick. I could feel how badly he wanted me. He closed his eyes and ran his hands up my arms until he cupped my face. He exhaled before looking at me and the moment he did, I saw it.

Butterflies ripped through my chest and my heart fluttered.

I resisted the urge to nuzzle my head into his palm. I wanted one last hot, sexy fling—no feelings, just sex. Instead of staring into his eyes, I focused on his delicious lips.

His tongue ran from one corner of his mouth to the other. “I’ve missed you.”

I pushed my lips up against his.

He pulled out of the kiss fractionally, still holding on to my head. “I miss you.”

Ignoring the flutter, I tried to tilt my head up to continue kissing, but he held me in place.

“I want to hear you say it,” he demanded sexily. “Because I can taste it in your kiss.” He took his hand off my face and slipped the tip of his finger between my legs, against my soaking wet G-string. He caressed my flesh before putting his finger in his mouth. “And I can taste it here.”

My entire body clenched.

I tried not to be affected by him, his words, his closeness, or the sight of him. But watching him lick my wetness from his fingers unnerved me. I took a step back and he followed.

“I want you to admit it,” he demanded sexily, forcing me to take another step backward.

“Admit what?” I whispered.

I was so turned on that thinking clearly wasn’t an option anymore. I needed distance from him so I wouldn’t get caught up in the moment. I took two steps back and bumped into the wall.

Smirking, he closed the gap. “Admit that you’ve missed me.”

Our lips touched briefly, and I whimpered.

“Admit that you feel this between us.”

I tried to kiss him, but he held my head firmly in place, just out of reach.

“Not until you admit that what we have is real. I know you’ve missed me—”

“It’s just sex,” I lied.

“—like I’ve missed you. So, no kissing until you admit that regardless of all other circumstances, you and I have something real.”

“No emotions, just sex.”

“You’re lying.” He brought his mouth closer. “It’s never just sex with us. It’s never just anything with us.”

I was quiet for a moment. “I want you. I need you. Please, Will. Please...” I begged, knowing he couldn’t resist when I’d beg. “Please fill me—”

His mouth crashed into mine, interrupting my sentence. The deep-seated want and carnal desire completely consumed us. His tongue played with mine in a way that made me long to feel it all over my body.

That thought alone gave me chills.

As the kiss intensified, we pulled each other closer, kissed each other deeper, grinded against each other harder. Without breaking the kiss, I pushed his sweatpants off his hips. I felt him step out of them, and it took everything in me not to pull away so I could stare at his cock. Instead, I let my hands play over his muscles, feeling the ridges of his chest and the definition in his arms.

My hands had a mind of their own as they dropped lower and lower down his sculpted abs. I ran my hand over his hardness. I felt the entire length and width of him. It was hot and heavy in my hand. I stroked it worshipfully, in awe of it.

*Hello, old friend.*

The low groan that erupted from him when the palm of my hand rubbed against him vibrated through the kiss and caused my entire body to tremble.

I inhaled deeply. Trailing kisses to my ear, he growled softly, “Turn around.”

I heard him, but the sound of his voice was so sexy that I couldn’t move. My body was on fire. All I could do was open my eyes and stare up at him.

“Turn around,” he repeated, his voice raspier. I could see the effect I was having on him, and that turned me on even more.

With his hands on my hips, he turned me around. Caught between the wall and Will’s body, my breathing became labored. I could feel him, heavy and hard, resting against my ass. I almost lost it. Not having had sex in months, the yearning inside me had reached unspeakable heights, and my knees started to shake.

“Step out of your shoes,” he commanded, bending to help me. “I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

With his assistance, I quickly got out of my shoes and felt instant relief once my feet contacted the hardwood floor. Sliding my shoes to the side, William kissed his way up the back of my thighs before biting my butt cheeks. As he sprinkled kisses over my lower back, he peeled my G-string from my body.

He palmed my left ass cheek before giving it a light smack. “You have a perfect ass, Layla.” He gave my right cheek a similar smack.

“Put your hands on the wall,” Will commanded.

I did as I was told.

He pulled my hips backward and massaged my curves. I was so distracted by how good his warm hand felt that I lurched against the wall when he ran an unexpected finger across my wet slit. “I love your ass. Did you know that?”

“Yes,” I gasped, both answering the question and confirming that his fingers were doing an excellent job. “Oh, yes.”

“Mmm,” he grunted, stilling himself for a moment. “You are... soaking... wet.” His voice broke as he moved his wet finger over my clit.

“Oh...God, yes,” I panted, gyrating my hips in time with his finger as he slowly made circles against me.

“Do you know what I want to hear you say?” he asked, pressing his free hand on the small of my back. His voice was strained as the sound of my wetness seemed to distract him. “Mmmm...”

“No,” I moaned as he slid the entire length of his finger inside of me. I opened my legs wider for him. “What do you want me to say? I’ll say anything. I’ll—ohh!”

My reply broke off into an inaudible gasp as he added another finger. He teasingly moved both fingers in and out of me. I moaned loudly as he pushed in as deep as he could and then pulled almost all the way out. He repeated the motion.

I felt myself tightening around his fingers as he increased the speed.

“You know what I want to hear, Layla.”

Desperately grinding on his hand, my orgasm was building to the point of no return. “Yes, yes...”

“Say it,” Will demanded as he rubbed the pads of his fingers against my g-spot. I could feel his hard cock against my hip as he played with me. “Say it.”

“I’m—I’m almost...there,” I panted as he instinctively knew how to touch me.

“Not yet,” Will grunted, pulling his fingers out of me and causing me to whimper involuntary.

Before I had a chance to complain, I felt the heat of Will’s mouth as he buried his face in me from behind. His tongue felt like it was everywhere, but specifically concentrated on my clit.

I lost it.

“Oh God,” I sighed loudly, bending my body more to give him better access to all of me. I rested my head against the wall and placed my hand on his head.

He moaned. The vibrations created a new level of tension throughout my body causing me to moan his name repeatedly. In response, his tongue slid across my sensitive flesh causing my mind to go blank as I arched my back violently and bucked against his tongue.

“God, yes, yes, yesssssssss...” I wailed wantonly.

With that, the tension that had been building since the moment I texted him released from deep within my core and spread deliciously through the rest of my body. I feverishly gyrated against his hand and tongue while gripping the back of his head between my legs.

His arms wrapped around my thighs, holding me in place as I rode the entire wave. My body writhed in pleasure. He continued working his tongue; he never stopped tasting me.

Once the last wave of pleasure vanished, I realized Will was up standing behind me, holding me up with his arms around my waist and kissing my back and shoulders. I opened my eyes gradually and tried to turn around on shaky legs.

“I got you,” he whispered as he turned me around to face him. Licking his lips slowly, he watched me as I panted. His chest heaved in time with mine as we stared at one another.

Moving closer, his face within an inch of mine, he growled, “Say it.” His tone was rough, but his eyes were pleading

“I miss you,” I admitted breathlessly. “I’ve missed you.”

A slow, satisfied smile crossed his face. “I’ve missed you, too.”

He barely got the words out before his mouth covered mine hungrily. I put my arms around his neck and deepened the kiss. Without warning, he



lifted me, cupping my ass. I quickly wrapped my legs around his hips, and he locked his arms in place.

“What are you doing?” I murmured between sloppy, yearning, longing kisses.

“Making sure you never forget that you still love me.”

“Wh-what?” My gut twisted, and my heart pounded in my chest. “I never said I still love you.”

He smirked, carrying me the short distance down the hallway. “Just wait. You will.”

Kissing me the entire way, his fingers dug into my thighs as he carried me into his bedroom.

When we stopped moving, I slowly pulled my lips away from his. He had candles lit which cast a soft glow around the room. I smiled at the sweetness of the gesture—he wasn’t a candles kind of guy. When I returned my eyes to his, the fluttering deep in my belly intensified.

There was no one and nothing I wanted more than I wanted him in that moment. As he slid me down his muscular body, he looked as if he wanted to devour me. My feet only touched the ground for a second before I took a seat on the edge of the bed.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” Will whispered as he stroked himself.

I licked my lips as I watched his hand move over the nine familiar inches. I couldn’t believe I was there either. I swore I wouldn’t ever go backward and I’d always leave the past in the past.

But there was something about William Grayson.

Wanting to tease him like he teased me, I held his gaze as I slowly slinked my way to the middle of his king-sized bed. I ran my hands over my breasts, rolling my nipples between my fingers. Reclining back against the pillows, I let my legs inch open. Propping myself up with one arm, I let my other hand move over my belly and stopping at the apex of my thighs.

William’s eyes were trained on my hand and the subtle movement of my fingers as he quickly dug into his nightstand and pulled out a condom. He slipped it on and climbed on the bed.

My eyes closed in anticipation. I let my head sink deeper into the pillow, and I inhaled sharply. I could feel him staring at me, and it was so sexy having him watch me play with myself.

The thought of him finally filling me, stretching me, taking me the way he used to was making me heady. Dipping my finger inside my wetness, I

moaned.

The second the sound escaped my lips, William was on top of me.

I kept my eyes closed as he parted my lips with his tongue, kissing me with a passion I'd never experienced before.

Breaking the kiss, he spread me open wider. I licked my lips when I felt him pressed against me. My body was practically begging for him, but seconds passed and he hadn't pushed his way in. I opened my eyes to find him staring at me.

"Layla..." Will rubbed his cock over my throbbing clit.

"Mmm, yes," I breathed, excitement rippling through me.

"Tell me what you want." The sexy grit in his tone gave me chills. "What do you want from me?"

"I want you to fuck me. Please. Will, please." I rotated my hips. "I want you to make me coo-oh my God," I cried out as I felt him push the tip into me. My eyes started to roll back in sheer ecstasy.

"Look at me."

I tried to focus on him and as soon as I did, I felt myself become wetter. Groaning, he mumbled something under his breath, and my heart seized. I didn't hear him clearly, but I could've sworn he said he loved me.

He ran his hands up and down my thighs as we stared at one another. My heart rate increased, and I was sure he'd said it.

"You want it?" His voice was louder, clearer, and full of want. There was nothing like feeling desired by him. He didn't just lust after my body, he lusted after all of me—the feeling was all-encompassing, and it showed in every move he made.

My head tilted back, and I cried out again as he applied more pressure. "God, yes..."

"Open your eyes. Look at me." He uttered the demand with the same gentle force as he was using to grip my thighs. I could hear and feel his restraint. "Open."

I let out a muffled grunt as I struggled to maintain eye contact.

"Shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit..." His voice broke sexily as he inched his way in. "God, you...are so...fucking...tight. I miss... fuck." With each inch, he filled me, stretching me out deliciously. "I miss how perfect your pussy is."

Staring into his eyes as we both adjusted to the tight fit sent a fresh wave of chills down my spine.

Moving slowly at first, we both let out a euphoric sigh as we settled into a familiar groove. He leaned forward and kissed me hard.

“Do you know how bad I’ve missed you? Do you know how much I want you, baby?” Will asked, before his tongue played with mine again.

The feeling of fullness felt so good that I almost forgot to answer him. “Show me,” I murmured.

“Show you what?” His voice was low, gruff, sexy as hell.

“Show me how bad you’ve missed me.”

It felt so good to have his dick rubbing against my walls, but when I looked into his eyes, I felt his soul rubbing up against mine.

The panic in my mind mixed with the yearning in my body and I felt exposed. I tried to look away, but I couldn’t.

He saw it.

He saw my heart.

Our faces were close, and I felt a flurry of emotions. I thought he was going to kiss me again, but he stopped. His lips hovered over mine as he gradually worked himself as deep as he could go. “I love you,” he breathed.

His words washed over me and in turn, I pushed my lips up to meet his. When he pulled out of the kiss, he looked at me, into me as he sat up.

My heart thudded in my chest and knots coiled in my belly as he moved in and out of me. My lips parted, but I couldn’t bring myself to say it.

I felt it.

I know he knew I felt it.

But I couldn’t bring myself to say it.

“You don’t have to say it with your words,” he murmured, lifting and kissing my calf.

As if something snapped inside both of us, he pushed my legs as far back as they could comfortably go. He lifted my hips and adjusted me before he started ramming into me. To heighten my pleasure, he toyed with my aching clit, causing me to whimper.

“Yeah, I remember,” he uttered so softly I had to read his lips. “I still remember what you like, baby. Keep those pretty eyes open. Keep them open for me.”

It was so hard not to close my eyes when the most distinct pleasure was radiating through my body.

“Yeah, that’s it. I still remember how to take care of your pussy. And do you know why?”

I breathed heavily, unable to answer.

“Do you?” He brought his free hand to my nipple and pinched, causing a new sensation and a new wave of heat to course through my veins.

I shook my head.

He stared into my eyes for a beat too long. “Because this is my pussy,” he uttered thickly, pushing himself deeper.

“Oh, God,” I groaned loudly.

My eyes fluttered closed as each moan grew louder than the one before it. I clawed at his arms as he pounded into me over and over again. I felt so full as he touched spots I’d forgotten existed. I was at my breaking point, but his voice pushed me over the edge.

“Let me feel it, Layla,” he begged, using long, deep strokes to make sure no part of me went without being massaged. “Give it to me.”

“Oh shit...Oh—I—oh God,” I began, unable to get the words out as I worked my hips harder, meeting him thrust for thrust.

I’d hit the point of no return.

“Let me—oh shit,” he groaned as my body started to shake.

Hearing his deep guttural moans spurred me on as I gave myself to him and allowed him to take full ownership of my body. His impending orgasm provoked mine as we thrust into each other with reckless abandon. Each stroke harder and more intense than the last. Feeling him lose control was it for me. The tension that had been building released from deep in my core and spread throughout the rest of my body. I feverishly gyrated against him as I experienced the most massive orgasm I’d ever had.

“Layla,” he groaned, his body becoming rigid.

I had no control of my pulsating body as we climaxed together. My mouth opened, yet no sound came out as the ultimate pleasure took over.

As our bodies came down from the high we were riding, all I could hear was our heavy, satiated breathing. Collapsing beside me, William laid in sated silence for a few minutes before going to discard the condom. He returned, climbing behind me and spooning me.

*What did I do?* I wondered, silently cursing myself as exhaustion and satisfaction took their toll on me. I was instantly comfortable in his arms and as sleep washed over me, I resented my body betraying my brain. *I know better than this.*

I knew starting something with someone I had no future with was a bad idea. I knew starting something with Will was a bad idea. I knew it two

years ago, and I knew it when I texted him. I had ten solid reason why Will and I would not be a successful couple, and nothing had changed in those two years. I was still Layla Walker and he was still William Grayson. And no matter what feelings existed between us, a relationship with us wouldn't work out.

His lips brushed my shoulder before he yawned my name. "Layla?"

"Hmm," I mumbled.

"Goodnight, baby."

"Goodnight. I love you," I breathed sleepily.

My entire body tensed, and my eyes flew open. *Oh shit.*

## CHAPTER THREE

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I massaged the back of my thigh because after our last round, I caught a cramp. William had hit a spot that was so perfect that my entire body seemed to overextend itself as I climaxed.

*And this is why you always stretch before exercising.* I smiled in amusement against the pillow. *Oh, but it was worth it. I love him—sex. Sex. I love sex. Yeah, it's time for me to go. I'm losing my mind.*

I looked at the clock for the first time that morning and did a double take. My heart stopped.

9:27 a.m.

“What are you doing?” William asked as he returned to bed after discarding the used condom.

“I don't know if I can walk,” I joked, kneading my thigh muscle harder.

Grinning, he slipped under the sheets and pulled me into him, my back to his front. Nuzzling my neck, he growled, “Good.”

I giggled as his kisses tickled my skin. “I was supposed to leave an hour ago. Why is that good?”

He trailed his lips down my shoulder. “Because that means you can't leave.”

I rolled my eyes, but my heart fluttered. “You are so full of shit.”

“If you think I'm so full of shit, why are you smiling so hard?”

“I'm not!”

His deep rumble of a laugh was warm, comforting, and extremely sexy. Burying his face in my hair, he held me tight. “Yeah, okay.”

“I'm not,” I argued, relishing the moment.

“Okay, whatever. You know denial is—”

Turning my head so that I could see him over my shoulder, I interrupted, “If you say denial isn’t just a river in Egypt, I’m leaving.”

“Is that too corny for you?”

“Yes.” I nodded, my eyes wide. “Absolutely. And I will leave. I will get up and walk out the door.”

Pressing his lips against my cheek and then my lips, he whispered, “I still have one more round in me. So, you can’t leave until I get my fill.”

I laughed, turning my head slightly. “Well, what if I’ve had my fill? What if I’m ready to go home?”

Semi-hard and pressing against my ass, William lowered his voice. “Because if you were ready to go home, you wouldn’t still be here. We both know you don’t do anything you don’t want to do.”

I smiled. He was right about that. I interlocked my legs with his.

“Something about being pressed up against you makes me want to stay in bed all day,” he admitted as his stomach rumbled.

“Your empty tummy would say otherwise.”

He chuckled. “Well you wore me out, and I worked up an appetite.” He dropped a kiss on my shoulder before asking, “How would you like it if I made you breakfast?”

I was famished. Just talking about food made my mouth water. “I would like it a lot. I would like it so much, in fact, that I might be willing to thank you in a really, really special way.”

“Well in that case...” Throwing the sheets from his body, William sprung out of bed. “Bacon, eggs, pancakes...” He scrubbed his face with his hands. “If you’re going to do what I think you’re going to do, I’ll break out the waffle maker and fry up some chicken.”

Stretching my limbs to each corner of the bed, I let the sheet slip below my breasts. “Chicken and waffles? Yes, please! That sounds amazing.”

His eyes zeroed in on my nipples and he licked his lips. “I’m going to get started on breakfast. Stay just like that.”

I giggled. “I’m going to take a shower.”

“Just make sure you don’t put anything on when you’re done.”

I rolled my eyes. “As you’re pulling your basketball shorts on.”

His phone vibrated, but he didn’t check it. He slipped it into his pocket and continued to stare me down.

“Layla...” He gave me a look as he pulled on a t-shirt. “I’m not going to cook with my dick out.”

“Fair point,” I acknowledged as he moved toward the door. “But I’m going to miss staring at it.”

Turning to walk out of the room backward, he grabbed his package and smirked. “You’ll see it again soon. Don’t worry.”

“I better!” I yelled after him.

Climbing out of bed, I strolled to the en suite bathroom. Everything was exactly where it was a couple years ago. I grabbed a towel and wash cloth from the closet and when I turned around, I froze.

My caramel skin was flushed, my flat-ironed hair had curled, and my eyes were alive. Slowly, I took a few steps forward and placed the towel on the counter. I hardly recognized myself. I didn’t look stressed. I didn’t look anxious. For the first time in months, I looked relaxed and happy.

Shaking my head, I smiled as I turned on the shower. *The power of good sex.*

The hot water massaged my sore muscles and rinsed the hours of sweaty sex from my body. I lathered with Will’s soap and each time I inhaled the musky scent, my heart swelled. Every time my soapy washcloth crossed a sensitive part of my body, my brain flooded with images of the night we’d had. We’d expressed how we felt for one another with our bodies, and as much as I wished it hadn’t slipped out of my mouth, with our words. The magnitude of how much love and affection still existed between us after not being together for two years was remarkable. I loved him. I’d always loved him. And I didn’t think that was ever going to change.

After our first round I’d fallen asleep for a couple of hours, he woke me up with a kiss. The kiss deepened, and something changed. The hot, mind-altering fucking of our first round was replaced by the slow, sensual love making of our second round. It was just as passionate, but it was different; we were different. Although he didn’t say it again with his words, he said it with his body—repeatedly. And I said it back—each and every time. We woke up and had another hot sex-session. I’d never felt so thoroughly satisfied. Our sexual chemistry was unparalleled, but it was more than that. We were connected—mind, body, and soul.

As I dried my body off, I glanced at myself in the mirror again. I couldn’t deny how refreshed I looked. I couldn’t ignore the light and fire in my eyes. I couldn’t pretend my body didn’t feel as relaxed as it looked. But the hardest pill to swallow was how I felt.



“Layla! Food will be ready in five minutes,” Will called out before I heard his light chuckle.

Grinning, I shook my head. “Give me five minutes and I’m there.”

I grabbed a t-shirt from his top drawer and a pair of boxer briefs from the second drawer. After a quick swipe of deodorant and a slathering of lotion, I slipped on his clothes and made my way to the kitchen.

“It smells so good in here,” I gushed, inhaling deeply. I climbed onto the barstool and sat at the kitchen bar. “I used your toothbrush.”

He turned with his eyebrows raised. The look of disgust on his face was priceless. “Ugh...”

The guttural laugh that erupted out of me was pure and carefree. “I meant I used your unopened toothbrush that was under your sink,” I explained between bouts of laughter. “I’ll get you a new one to replace it.”

“Oh!” He laughed. “No, that’s fine. You don’t have to replace it.”

“I can’t believe you thought I meant your used toothbrush.” My head fell back as another round of laughter flit through me. “That’s so gross! But the look on your face was hilarious.”

“I’m sure it was.” He turned toward me, placing two plates on the bar. “That’s not something I would ever guess you would do, so it caught me off guard. That’s some nasty shit.”

“It is. The amount of bacteria and—you know what”—I shook my head — “we are about to eat so let’s not talk about it.”

Will dropped a kiss on the top of my head, my cheek, and then my lips as he walked around me and took the seat next to me. “So, no talk of the food particles and the germs that linger on toothbrushes while we eat, got it.”

I giggled, pushing his arm. He grabbed my hand before I could remove it from his bicep. Interlocking his fingers with mine, he stared into my eyes. That one look sucked the humor out of the room.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said softly. There was so much sincerity in his eyes, in his words, in his touch that I felt overwhelmed.

“I’m glad to be here,” I admitted, my heart pounding. Tearing my eyes away from his, I eyed the food. “And I’m glad you cooked. This looks so good. Thank you.”

I bowed my head and said a quick prayer before glancing over at him.

His lips brushed against the back of my hand before he let it go. “You’re welcome. I hope you like it. I’ve been perfecting breakfast.”

“So, all of your conquests get this type of sendoff in the morning?” I joked. But after the words left my mouth, I thought about how it sounded and cringed.

I didn’t mean to put him in that position, and I knew better as soon as the words were out of my mouth. I was attempting to have a hot and sexy hookup, but my joke came off as a little jealous and insecure. I didn’t mean it like that, but I knew it was a possibility that he’d take it like that.

After a moment of silence, he smirked. “First of all, conquests don’t get breakfast. And second, you’re not a conquest.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” I bumped him with my shoulder as relief settled over me. I smiled at him as I poured syrup over my entire plate.

“But if you want to know anything, you can ask.” He took a bite of his waffle. “Anything at all.”

“I should’ve gotten more information from you before sleeping with you.” I shook my head. “What’s done is done now. I probably don’t want to know.”

“I know I don’t want to know.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s because there’s nothing to know.”

“How do you know there’s nothing to know on my end?”

I giggled as I chewed my food. “Because I know you.”

“Ouch!” He put his hand over his heart. “That’s how you feel? You think I’m out here sleeping with any and everybody?” He gave me a pouting lip and sad eyes. “That hurts.”

“I don’t think you’d tell me if you were sleeping with any and everybody anyway.”

“I wouldn’t lie to you.”

I rolled my eyes. “So, you’d answer any question I asked you about your dating history over the past two years?”

“Yes. Anything.”

I took another bite and chewed contemplatively. “Are you sleeping with any and every one?”

“No.”

I tapped my chin. “Have you had a one-night stand?”

“Yes.”

“A lot of them?”

“No.”

“Do you always wear a condom?”

“Yes.”

“Who was the last person you were with?”

“You.”

I pushed his shoulder. “You know what I mean,” I snickered. “Before me.”

“Ohhh.” He took a big bite of his waffle before he answered, “Molly.”

“You haven’t had sex with anyone since you and Molly the Model broke up?” I couldn’t hide the astonishment in my tone. Even though he didn’t appear to be lying, I didn’t believe him. After a few seconds, I shook my head. “I don’t believe you.”

“No, there were others. But I ran into her a couple of months ago, a couple of weeks before Christmas. Neither of us were seeing anyone at the time and we happened to be at a mutual friend’s Christmas party.” He shrugged. “I was in no position to drive home so she offered to take me—but she took me to her place instead. One thing led to another.”

I studied his face. “Did that rekindle the flame?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Not on my end anyway.”

“Are you currently seeing anyone?”

“No.”

Surprised, my eyes widened. “You’re not seeing anyone?”

“Don’t look so shocked. I’ve been working my ass off for this promotion so I hadn’t had time to do anything with anyone. And I haven’t seriously dated anyone in a long time.” He paused momentarily. “Haven’t been able to find another you.”

Not allowing the pitter-patter of my heart to distract me, I narrowed my eyes. “Hmm, well how long were you with Molly the Model?”

He exhaled and crammed chicken breast in his mouth. He chewed for longer than necessary before answering. “Six months or so.” Turning his head, he looked at me. “She was a rebound.”

*Of course, she was. You started dating her immediately after we ended.*

I shrugged. “Just curious. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“And the thing with Molly wasn’t that serious. We weren’t in love or anything.”

“Is that why it ended?”

Smirking, he shook his head. “No.”

“Did you cheat on her?”

He stopped chewing and wiped his mouth slowly. “Technically, no. But according to her, the answer would be yes.”

I felt my eyebrows shoot up as I silently implored him to tell me more. He never seemed like the cheating type so his response caught me off guard.

As if he heard my thoughts, he nodded. “Okay. We never had the conversation about us being together so in my mind, we weren’t in an official committed relationship. But according to her, us hanging out somehow made us a couple.”

I didn’t want to tell him that Jenelle followed Molly the Model on social media, and we saw all the photos she posted of the two of them. He didn’t post them on his page, but she definitely staked her claim on her page.

My brows furrowed. “You don’t understand why she thought you two were a couple?”

“No.” He shrugged and chewed his food. “We never had the conversation. I never told her I wanted to be exclusive with her. Every time she asked what we were doing, I told her we were hanging out or we were spending time together.” He shook his head. “So, I don’t know where she got the whole couple thing because I never called her my girlfriend.”

I rolled my eyes.

“What? I didn’t.”

“Did you see her often?” I asked, stabbing at a morsel of chicken.

“Yes.”

“Did you take her on dates?”

“Yes.”

“Did you spend the night at each other’s houses?”

“Yes.”

“Did you hang out with each other’s friends?”

“Yes.”

“Did you have sex with her regularly?”

“Yes...?”

“Did you meet each other’s parents?”

He shook his head. “No. Well, I met hers at her birthday dinner. But I’ve only introduced two women to my mother.” He gave me a look. “And she only liked one of the two.”

I tried not to smile, but Mrs. Grayson loved me and I loved her just the same.

“Okay so, let me get this straight...” I took a large bite of my waffle and chewed, holding my forefinger in the air between us. I swallowed and then took a swig of water. “You dated her, spent quality time with her, hung out with her friends and family, had sex with her regularly, celebrated her birthday with her and went on at least one trip with her... and you don’t know how she was under the impression that you two were together?” Throwing my hands up in exasperation, I exclaimed, “Men!”

He chuckled, rubbing a hand down his face. “I never told her she was my girlfriend, though. There was no conversation about exclusivity.” He was visibly still amused as he tried to stop laughing. “But in my defense, I was used to doing everything I was doing with her with you, so I kind of just...kept doing them. I wasn’t trying to—stop looking at me like that!”

Giving him the eye, I shook my head. “Men.”

He laughed harder. “Can we change the subject?”

I gulped a mouthful of water before I playfully gave him the eye. “I thought you said I could ask you anything.”

“You can...” He chewed his last bite. “But you sounded like you were taking Molly’s side and that’s not how this friendship works. You take my side always. No matter what.”

“Unless you’re dead wrong...” I lifted my shoulders. “Or when you’re using the most ridiculous form of man-logic where you pretend that your actions aren’t completely contradicting your words and then accuse the woman of acting crazy. Like in the situation with Molly the Model.”

“Okay, okay.” Grinning, he held his hands up in surrender. “You’re right.”

I nodded. “As I usually am.”

“I know one thing you’re not right about...”

My eyebrows shot up as I turned to face him. “And what’s that?”

“You and I not being perfect for one another.”

I gave him a look before I scoffed. “Stop that! You agreed with me.”

“I was young. Now that I’m a grown ass man, I know what I want.”

Pushing his shoulder, I giggled. “Stop it! You and I both know we wouldn’t work out long term. It’s not worth it since we want different things.”

“The Bible says something like God never said life would be easy, He said it would be worth it. So that means we’ll be worth it.”

Trying not to laugh, I pinched the bridge of my nose and closed my eyes. “Where in the Bible does it say that?”

“I’m going to be honest with you... I don’t know.”

The laugh rushed out of me. “What? So, where did it come from?”

Putting his hands up, he gesticulated before admitting the truth. “My grandma said it the other day. And she said it was from the Bible.” He shrugged. “It’s a true statement though. I mean, I don’t know if it’s Biblical truth, but it’s modern day truth.”

Still amused, I stared at him adoringly. “We always had a good time together, didn’t we?”

“Always.”

We held each other’s gaze long enough that the humor evaporated.

William pulled my chair so that I was practically in his lap. “I want you.”

The heat crept up my neck. “I know you want me. You showed me that twice last night and a third time this morning.”

“That’s not what I meant.” His fingers trailed my inner thigh until it got to the hem of his boxer briefs. “Well, that’s not only what I meant.”

“Stop.” The word faltered on my lips and I heard the uncertainty in my voice. I cleared my throat and pushed his fingers away. “You know I can’t think when you touch me.”

“Well, I can’t be around you and not want to touch you.”

I rolled my eyes and tried not to let the corners of my mouth turn upward. “William.”

“Layla.” He paused and just gazed at my face.

We silently glared at one another until we both burst out laughing.

“So, Mr. Eastern Construction Civil Engineering Supervisor, how does it feel to oversee an entire department?”

“I haven’t gotten the job yet.”

“But you will.”

He gulped his water down. “And if I get the job—”

“When you get the job,” I corrected, covering his knee with my hand.

His smile was magic.

“When I get the job,” he restated. “I’ll be in Philly for at least three months, and then I decide between returning here or staying there to manage projects. And regardless of what I end up doing, I can’t leave without telling you how I feel and what I want...and what I want is you.”

My chest got tight as I inhaled. “We still want different things. As great as this has been, we both know it wouldn’t last.”

He was quiet as my words hung in the air between us. He grabbed my hand and held it. “I meant what I said last night. It wasn’t just because I missed you or because of the sex. I love you.”

I swallowed hard. “I love you, too.”

“I’ve been thinking—”

I leaned forward and kissed him, stopping him from continuing. I didn’t know what he was going to say, but I was so sure that he was going to discuss us being together and that scared me. Part of me was scared because it would ruin the good terms we were on since we stopped dating. But the other part of me, the part that stared me down in the mirror, was scared because I was in love with William Grayson.

He pulled out of the kiss and gazed into my eyes. “I know you’re scared.”

My stomach was in knots and my heart rate tripled. But the look he gave me kept me silent and forced me to hear him out.

He let go of my hand and cupped my face. “I know we’ve spent the majority of the time we’ve known each other convinced that we wouldn’t work long-term. But I can’t imagine long-term with anyone but you. I know we have some things we don’t see eye-to-eye on. But I’ve never felt for anyone what I feel for you. I’ve tried, Layla. I’ve tried, and it doesn’t happen because they aren’t you. So, I’m putting it out there..” He swallowed hard and held my hand a little tighter. “I’m in love with you. I want to be with you.”

My eyes started to sting as I felt myself losing the stronghold I’d had on my feelings. “The things we don’t see eye-to-eye on aren’t small things. If I’m being honest, I feel the same way. I love you and I miss you. But we aren’t compatible because—”

“We’re good together,” he interrupted, his eyes pleading with mine. “I know what you’re going to say, but listen...forget the reasons why we wouldn’t work and focus on what matters. You love me and I love you. That should be all that matters.”

My words felt heavy on my tongue before I released them. “It should be, but you know that’s not how relationships work.” I let my lips brush against his. “Even if we could forget the reasons why we wouldn’t work, our timing couldn’t be worse.”

“Why? Because of the Philly opportunity? Layla, we would work because we work.”

“William...” I closed my eyes and let his syrupy sweet breath graze my face.

“Layla.” He fingered my hair before his quiet admission. “You are the fire that burns in me, and no other woman can compete with that, let alone extinguish it.”

My lashes fluttered open. I stared into his eyes, basking in his gaze.

I felt his hold on me.

I felt his love for me.

I felt myself...relenting.

I opened my mouth to tell him no, to tell him it wouldn't last, to tell him it wouldn't work, but the words got stuck in my throat. The only thing I could think to tell him was that I loved him.

“I love you. I don't want to lose you,” he whispered.

My eyes instantly watered as my feelings, my wants, my desires collided with the truth of our doomed relationship. It was the impossible choice between heartache now or heartache later. I swallowed hard, the image of my happy face in the mirror flashing in my mind.

Silence settled around us as we continued staring into each other's eyes.

“I love you,” I whispered honestly, my voice raw with emotion. “I do want this. I do want you.”

His eyes widened as he took in the answer he'd hoped, but didn't expect to get. “Are you saying what I think you're saying?”

“I—”

Both of us jumped as someone banged loudly on the door.

“What the hell?” he grumbled, as we both stared at the door. He turned back toward me. “I'm not expecting anyone, and this conversation needs to happen.”

I nodded.

He was right. We needed to have the conversation. My gut instinct was telling me that I needed to kill the idea of us getting back together in both of our minds once and for all.

*It's the only way we'll be able to move on.*

But my heart told me that he was the one for me. My heart told me that William Grayson was the soul that mated with mine. All I had to do was tell



him that I was saying exactly what he thought I was saying. Because when I answered him, I was telling him that I wanted to be with him.

*But is that what's best?*

Another round of aggressively loud knocks forced us to break eye contact.

Without me drowning in his gaze, I was able to breathe and think clearly. I cleared my throat softly. "Did you not pay your rent?" I whispered. "No judgment. Well, a little judgment, but only because you just got that new watch."

We both snickered.

"Yes, I paid my damn rent." He stood up, kissing me softly as he rose. "I'll get rid of them and then we can finish this conversation."

I nodded, but said nothing.

As he made his way to the door, I made my way to the living room. My clothes were still scattered around the living room and if the person on the other side of the door was his mother, the last thing she needed to see was my bra and panty set.

I glanced at Will as I stuffed my undergarments into my handbag. He looked through the peephole for a long time before he took a step back.

He glanced at me with a strange look on his face as he shook his head.

Another round of knocks rained down against the door.

"Who is it?" I whispered the question as I placed my coat on top of my bag.

"It's Molly."

My eyebrows flew up. "What?"

*Molly the Model is here?! Now!?!*

He started to walk away from the door. "I don't know why she's here. She hasn't been here since we stopped dating." He scrubbed his face with his hands. "She'll go away in a minute."

I felt my eyes narrowing before the thought fully formulated in my mind. "Open the door."

"What?" He had a panicked look in his eyes. "Why? We need to talk."

Sitting on the loveseat, I covered my exposed legs with my coat. "And we can talk after she leaves. Open the door."

*If they are together and he lied, I will kill him.*

He shook his head and just as the knocking started again, he swung the door open. "Yes?"

“Well hello to you too, William,” Molly snapped.

I couldn't see her through Will's footballer's frame, but her tone indicated extreme annoyance.

“I don't appreciate people stopping by unannounced,” he countered.

“You don't answer my calls. You don't respond to my texts. How else am I supposed to get in touch with you?”

“We haven't spoken since Christmas and it's about to be March. Before then, we hadn't spoken in over a year. Why would you need to get in touch with me?”

“Because I'm pregnant.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

---

The word pregnant loudly ricocheted off the walls of the room, the walls of my eardrum, and the walls of my brain. The sixty-second silence that followed was even louder.

“What?” William uttered in distress.

“I’m pregnant!”

“Wh-what? How?” William stammered in confusion. He laced his fingers behind his head.

“And I’ve been texting you and calling you. I’ve been trying to meet up with you and you’ve been ignoring me,” Molly retorted, pushing her way past a stunned William. As soon as she saw me, she stopped in her tracks. Turning her head to him, she screeched, “Are you kidding me? Seriously? The girl from the picture?! You swore you two were just friends!”

I quirked an eyebrow, but I remained silent. Molly the Model was dressed in a skintight, long-sleeved bodysuit and sky-high heels. Between her wardrobe and her long nails, I didn’t feel like she was going to fight me. But I still kept my eye on her just in case.

William ran his hands over his face. “What do you mean you’re pregnant? I-I’ve always used protection.”

“Oh, so now after you’ve been ignoring me, you want to have this conversation right here and now? On your time? Doesn’t matter that I’ve been calling and texting, asking you to meet with me for the last few weeks.” Her voice shook angrily and had bite.

“You came here to talk, so talk!” William couldn’t keep still. He laced his fingers and rested them on the top of his head. Rocking on the balls of his feet, his anxiety level was palpable. He looked like he was preparing to

run. “Answer my question. What do you mean you’re pregnant? Do you mean that your period is late or that you are actually pregnant? And I...” He took a sharp breath. “And are you saying that I’m the father?”

“Oh, now you want to talk,” she snapped, grabbing at her purse, messing with the leather straps. “If you would’ve answered the phone, I could’ve explained everything to you. But no, you didn’t have time to answer any of my calls. But I guess you were too busy playing house with your little girlfriend. I should’ve known. We just slept together a couple of months ago and I see you wasted no time getting back with her.” She gestured her head toward me and then placed her hands on her hips.

“What?” The question spewed out of me without warning.

I thought I had said it quietly to myself, but Molly turned to look at me, narrowing her eyes.

“He told me that you two were just friends and that I had nothing to worry about since you two realized you didn’t have a future. And now look... you obviously fucked him. You—”

“Don’t speak to her like that,” William interjected, his voice crackled thunderously. “In fact, don’t speak to her period. You have something to say? Say it to me. You don’t talk to her.”

“She needs to know that in two months, this could be her. She could be the one standing in front of a stranger, trying to get you to listen. Trying—”

“All I’ve been trying to do is listen, Molly!” His voice boomed across the room with such a command that even the appliances stopped making noises. “You aren’t saying anything except I didn’t call you back. So, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t call you back. Now, explain to me what is going on here! Because I’ve always used protection, Molly. And you’re on birth control.” William started pacing. “I’ve always been careful. How-I—what?”

She slinked across the room closer to him and pointed at his chest. “The night of the Christmas party—”

“We used a condom!” He stopped abruptly. “I know that for sure. The night was hazy, but I know that for sure.”

“Yes, we did. But condoms break, things happen.” She glanced over her shoulder at me. “All I know is that the timeline adds up.”

“Are you serious?”

Instead of answering his question, Molly opened her purse and pulled out papers folded in half. Her entire body language changed as she reached out to hand him what looked to be proof that what she was saying was true.

Her hand shook slightly, and she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. Anger had turned to fear in a matter of seconds.

*What does it say?*

They were standing a few feet apart and I felt like a voyeur on the outside of the drama unfolding between them. I knew I should've excused myself from the conversation. I knew I should've just gotten up and left. But I was waiting for a sign. I wanted to know that either the dates were off, and he wasn't having a child with Molly or that Molly was just full of shit.

"Due September fourteenth," she snapped.

Will's eyes flicked over to me momentarily, and I saw hurt in them. That was the confirmation I needed. My stomach dropped, and my chest tightened as I watched the scene unfold in front of me.

*William is going to be a father.*

I was going to be sick. I needed to get out of there. But I was statue-still. Sitting there motionless, I drowned in my feelings. The man I loved, the man I'd just had the most incredible night with, the man that almost convinced me to be with him moments ago, was having a baby with another woman. But not just any other woman... He was having a baby with the woman he had quickly moved on to after our breakup.

"I don't want to be that guy, but I have to ask, Molly..."

"It's yours! Of course, it's yours! And I can't believe you would—"

"I believe you," he interrupted, still staring at the paperwork. "I just had to ask. It's not like we were together. There would've been no judgment from me if you didn't know."

"Well, I do know. And it's yours!"

"Okay. Okay." He nodded, clenching his jaw. "Okay."

William was a good man. He was hardworking, dedicated, kind, and honest. He was going to do what was right for his child and the mother of his child. He was gainfully employed and mature. Although not prepared for the unexpected surprise Molly dropped on him, he was ready for fatherhood.

"This is a lot for me, too," she whispered, her voice soft, almost baby-like. She took a couple of tentative steps toward him. "I'm scared, too."

Finally ripping his eyes away from the document, he gave her a look that filled me with both pride and disappointment. "We'll figure this out."

With a heavy heart and a watery smile, I stood, putting on my coat. "I should go," I managed to choke out before slipping on my shoes.

“Layla,” William called out gently.

On my way to the door, I forced a sad smile as my gaze bounced between the two of them. “You two have a lot to talk about. I’m going to go.”

“I’m sorry.” He looked torn between wanting to comfort his tearful ex and wanting to chase after me. “I don’t know... I’m sorry. I’ll call you.”

I shook my head as I opened the door. “Goodbye, William.”

The door almost closed behind me when I heard him. “Wait!”

I kept walking toward the stairwell.

“Wait! Layla, wait,” William yelled before catching up with me and grabbing my arm.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath as he spun me around.

My heart beat wildly in my chest as I prepared myself. Swallowing the tears of hurt and disappointment, I squared my shoulders and looked at him.

He opened his mouth and then it snapped closed. We just stood there, staring at one another for at least two full minutes.

The deep rumble of his voice had an unsteady shake to it as he brought his face closer to mine. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” I murmured.

“I love you, Layla.”

I nodded. “I love you, too.”

“We didn’t get to finish our conversation from earlier...” He exhaled roughly. His eyes were filled with agony as he searched my face. “The day after we broke up, I went to your place and I stood outside of your apartment and waited for you to come home.”

My eyebrows flew up in surprise. “What?”

I had spent the night with Jenelle because I was too sad to be alone that night. I had no idea he had stopped by. It was the first time I was ever hearing about it.

“I wanted you back. Despite what we said wouldn’t work between us, I still wanted you. I knew then that our breakup was a mistake. There was no scenario I could imagine where we didn’t end up together eventually. There’s no one else for me. You’re it.”

I put my hand on his chest, allowing the quick beats of his heart to imbed itself in my memory. My lip trembled, but I remained silent. If I would’ve opened my mouth to say anything, I would’ve cried. Swallowing several times in a row, I managed to move the lump in my throat.

Cupping my cheeks, William brought my face closer to his. He was silently staring at me. The longer he held my gaze, the harder it was for me to ignore my feelings.

“Before we were interrupted earlier, I wanted clarity on what you’d said. I was going to ask you one more time if you would consider pursuing this thing between us...” The pause was long and drawn out before he began again. “I was willing to give up the new location, the extra money, and the title change so I could come back after training and start a life with you. And before I could tell you that, Molly knocked on the door and...”

His voice faded out and then he cleared his throat.

I nodded slightly. I was there. He didn’t have to finish the sentence.

“I want you, Layla. I want to make this work. As soon as she said she was pregnant, I was thinking that if I am the father of this baby, then that changes things. I would be able to get everything I wanted. I would be able to have you and a child. I would be able to be with the woman I love and have a legacy.” He stared at me, into me, assessing me. “I want you.”

My eyes filled with tears that I tried desperately to blink away. *I want you, too. I love you.* My heart quickened, grabbing onto the shred of hope that our time had finally come and the baby was the piece we needed in order to come full circle. *Maybe we can do this. Maybe we can make this work. Oh my God, maybe this is the moment we’ve been waiting for. I want to at least try—*

“But I have to take care of Molly. I have to do what’s right for my child right now,” he interrupted my thoughts in a strained whisper.

My lips parted slightly as the sting of heartbreak and rejection pierced me. I exhaled the hurt that I was filled with because I knew he was in a difficult position and was doing what he thought was best. And on some level, I knew it was the right thing. But I shouldn’t have gotten my hopes up. I shouldn’t have allowed myself the fantasy of us being together, making a life together, us making it work. The fall from that paradise was long and the impact was brutal. Even if my mind knew that he was doing what he thought was best, my heart was going to take a lot longer to understand.

William kissed my shocked mouth. “I meant everything I said earlier. I meant everything I didn’t get a chance to say until a minute ago. I love you and I want to be with you,” he uttered hoarsely. “But you deserve everything, and I can’t give you everything right now because...” He closed

his eyes and rested his forehead against mine. “My mom went through this alone, and it was... I’m not going to do that to Molly because I refuse to not be there for my child.”

I put my hands on top of his hands, which were still holding my face. “You’re nothing like your father,” I breathed, assuring him in a voice barely above a whisper.

“The first few moments of finding out I was going to be a father, all I could think about was you and us,” he admitted quietly.

He opened his eyes and beyond the wetness of unshed tears, I saw a mixed bag full of emotions. He had enough on his plate without the added complications of the relationship stuff with me.

“I didn’t think about the child or the mother of my child. I thought about us. It was selfish—just like him. That’s something my father would’ve done.” His chiseled jaw trembled slightly before he spoke. “As much as I love you and want to be with you, I won’t make the same mistakes that my father did. Even though this isn’t how I planned—”

I pressed my lips against his, smothering his words, ending his sentence. “William, you are nothing like your father,” I repeated softly, earnestly. He held me tighter and kissed me harder before I pulled away slightly. “It doesn’t matter that your very first thought wasn’t on the pregnancy. Nothing about this weekend has gone like you’ve planned it. Plans change. But what hasn’t changed is that you’ve always wanted to be a father. That’s the difference. And another difference is that you’re an incredible man. And because you’re an incredible man, you’re going to be an incredible dad.”

His hands slid down to my shoulders and then down my arms until we were holding hands. He looked as if he was holding back his emotions as what I said resonated with him. “Can I call you once Molly leaves?”

My heart thumped in my chest as I stared into his dark brown eyes. Happiness, sadness, confusion, and anxiety swirled around his pupils and I nearly got lost in the whirlpool. He was happy to be having a child; I could tell. His sadness, confusion, and anxiety were partially because it was an unplanned pregnancy and not with the person he wanted to be with.

*And then there’s me.*

I knew that some of the weight on his shoulders was because of our relationship and the feelings we felt for one another. The fact that fatherhood was upon him clearly made him happy, but the uncertainty and



the timing of our rekindled relationship complicated his happiness. And I didn't want to complicate anything in his life.

"I love you, William Grayson." Swallowing hard, I squeezed his hands. Ignoring the pit in my stomach, the heaviness in my chest, and the burn behind my eyes, I squared my shoulders. "But this is goodbye."

Before he could say anything to change my mind, I turned on my heel and rushed toward the stairwell.

"Layla!"

Ignoring him, I charged ahead. I didn't look back, but I knew he didn't follow me. I didn't stop moving until I got to my car.

*It's okay. It's for the best. It's okay. Everything is okay.*

The gravity of everything didn't hit me until I saw a man with his two kids walking down the sidewalk. The older kid ran ahead while the father held the other. The sheer joy on his face as the little boy he was holding grinned up at him was a reminder that Will and I both did what was best. We did what we had to do. He did what he needed to do, and I did what was in both of our best interests. If we remained in contact, it would just prolong the hurt. As happy as we were together and as romantic as it sounded over breakfast, we wouldn't have lasted. We would've eventually had to confront the main reason we ended in the first place.

"At least now you get what you want," I murmured aloud as I pulled out of the parking spot.

I drove on autopilot. I didn't remember when I made the decision not to go home, but somehow I made my way to Jenelle's place, using my key to let myself in. I heard the shower going so I sat in the living room, staring blankly out the window without seeing a thing.

"Layla?" Jenelle called out from her bedroom after a while.

Wiping my face, I cleared my throat. "Yeah, it's me."

"Oh, good! Jamila's in the shower and I heard a noise, so I got nervous." Her laugh carried down the hall, and I heard the steady sound of her feet padding down the hallway. Just before she entered the living room, I ran my finger under my eyes.

Jenelle was rubbing lotion into her skin and barely glanced my way. "Missed me so soon?"

"Yes."

The sound of my voice alerted her to something being wrong because she looked up and gasped. "What's wrong? What happened?"

“I have to tell you something.” My voice was strained and a little hoarse from the sobs that were collecting at the back of my throat. “Jamila’s in the shower?”

She rushed over to me, taking a seat in the chair right in front of me. “What’s wrong? Yes, she is. She’s surprising our parents today.”

I loved Jamila McFarland as if she were my own little sister. The twenty-five-year-old singer was on tour with her bandmates, living her dream. She graduated from Richland University with a business marketing degree to please her parents, and then she started touring. Although she met William during the summer we were together, she didn’t know how or why we ended.

Lowering my voice to barely a whisper, my eyes instantly watered as I spoke. “I went to William’s last night.”

“What?” Her eyes widened, and her hand went to her chest. “How? What happened?”

“I sent him a text and asked him where he was going to be when we finished dinner.”

“What?!” Jenelle’s jaw dropped. A scoff burst out of her. “You made the call? You went for it?!” Once I nodded and grinned, she squealed, pumping her arms up and down. Leaning forward, she prodded, “Oh my God, what happened next? Oh! Does your voice sound like that because you were...” She made obscene hand gestures in front of her face with her mouth open and her tongue sticking out. “...sucking dick?”

I laughed despite the sadness I felt inside. “I sound like this because there’s more to the story!”

“Mm hmm, and I see you didn’t deny it!” She bounced in her seat. “This is going to be good!”

It was good, and then it was bad.

“Oh my God,” Jenelle responded for the twenty-seventh time as she paced across the room. “Oh my God.”

I’d just gotten finished telling her how the amazing, dream-like night turned into an awful, nightmarish morning. From the moment I told her there was a knock at the door, she was up, biting her nails and pacing the room.

Clasping my hands together and sitting back in the chair, I concluded the story. “So, I drove here and...” I shrugged. “I don’t know. The end.”

“Oh my God.”

“I know. It’s crazy. The entire situation is crazy.”

“I just...” She moved her hands, gesturing in the air as she searched for the right words. “Molly the Model?”

I nodded.

“Is she sure?”

I nodded again.

“Damn.”

“Exactly.”

My best friend and I just stared at each other in silence before she crossed the room and sat on the floor beside my chair. She stuffed her hand between my hands until I relented and interlocked fingers with her.

She gave me a pained expression as she searched my eyes. “How are you?”

I shook my head. “Not great.”

She nodded, squeezing my hand. Her silent support was exactly what I needed.

“I just almost wish I would’ve never went to his place. I wish I would’ve just carried my ass home and spent my first night in my new apartment. I shouldn’t have opened that door.” I closed my eyes, keeping the tears that welled up behind my lids from falling. “It was hard enough to get over the first time. But this...”

“I’m sorry I encouraged you to do it.”

My eyes flew open. “No! I made that decision on my own. I knew the risks. I knew exactly what I was getting into and how it is when we cross paths!” I covered her hand, sandwiching it between mine. “I saw him and...” I lifted my shoulders. “I knew the risk. I knew it would be hard to walk away. I just didn’t expect...this.”

“The pregnancy?”

Clearing my throat, I answered, “Yeah.”

“No one could’ve anticipated that. No one.”

We were both quiet for a minute. I let my head fall back against the plush chair cushion, and I closed my eyes. The hurt and disappointment swirled inside me. The tears slipped through my tightly sealed lids and rolled down my cheeks in warm streams.

“Hey...” Jamila said softly, interrupting the comforting silence Jenelle and I were sitting in.

I opened my eyes, and the tears continued to fall. I wiped my face with my free hand and tried to force a smile. “Hey, Jamila. It’s good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you, too. But I don’t like to see you like this. You’re about to make me cry.” She crossed the room and hugged me. “Can I ask what happened? I walked in and heard the word ‘pregnancy’ and you were crying, and I don’t want to jump to conclusions...”

“Jamila, I don’t think—” Jenelle started before I cut her off.

“It’s okay.” My chin quivered as I stared at my best friend. I turned to Jamila who sat on the floor in front of me. “I’ll tell you.”

She stared up at me with her big, brown eyes. “Are you pregnant?” Her voice was soft.

“No.” I covered my face with my hands for a moment before swiping at my eyes. I took a deep breath until the urge to cry no longer consumed me. “Someone else is pregnant...” My mouth opened and closed, but I couldn’t get the rest of the sentence out, so I squeezed Jenelle’s hand.

“The man she’s in love with has a baby on the way with someone else,” Jenelle informed Jamila.

She gasped. “He cheated on you?”

“No.” I shook my head. “We weren’t together. We had just reunited and...” I shrugged because I didn’t know what else to say. I knew I had no real claim to William.

“And someone turned up at his doorstep claiming to be pregnant,” Jenelle finished for me.

“I’m so sorry, Layla,” Jamila wailed, her eyes watering. “Why weren’t you two together? Was this Thomas?”

Unintentionally, I frowned. “No. God, no, not Thomas.”

Jenelle snickered and Jamila flashed a rueful smile. “Well then”—she gasped, putting her hand over her heart—“You mean, the hot one? I mean Thomas was handsome, but the one before him looked like a milk chocolate Jason Momoa.”

I couldn’t help the half of a laugh that shot out of me. Her description was flawed, but accurate at the same time. I shook my head and smiled.

“I think you’re only thinking about his body,” Jenelle pointed out. Then she tapped her chin. “And when he had that beard.”

In typical little sister fashion, she became animated. “They look alike! The body, the beard, the smile, the mysteriousness, the chill personality, the dark eyes. They do!”

Although I couldn't deny that they shared the same muscular build and imposing physical presence, that was where the similarities ended.

"I think you're remembering his arms, but yes, that's him." I paused. "William."

"Yes! I always wondered what happened with you guys! Chill Will and Lovely Layla. You two were so grossly in love and all over each other at Richland SummerFest that year. Then I came back from tour a few months later and you were living with Thomas. What happened with Will?"

"Life happened." I sighed, thinking back on the day Jamilla was speaking of made my eyes water again. I cleared my throat. "He's always wanted to be a father... and now he's getting what he's always wanted. A kid." I took a shuddering breath as I wiped the tear from the corner of my eye before it could fall. Pushing through, I knew I needed to verbalize it. "We didn't work out because his forever included kids."

Jenelle silently grasped my hand with a firmer grip.

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. "And I can't give him that."

The room was still as my words hung in the air.

With wide, innocent eyes, Jamila stared up at me before she broke the heartbreaking silence. "I still don't understand."

"It's a long story," I whispered, my eyes watering again. "And I'd have to start at the beginning."

## CHAPTER FIVE

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**A**fter sustaining irregular periods for years and a steady weight gain that wasn't due to the "freshmen fifteen," I was diagnosed with Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome just before I turned twenty years old. By the time I'd spoken to my doctor, I was thirty pounds overweight and had a monthly spa date to get waxed everywhere. At the time, the worst side effect was the thirty pounds I couldn't shed and the frequent waxing. But the infertility aspect of PCOS never truly bothered me until I fell in love.

I met William for the first time three years ago at a summer cookout in the office park quad. The spacious, grassy courtyard area in the middle of four office buildings was packed with people from various companies. There was a decent band, delicious food, and a light breeze. It was the perfect afternoon for camaraderie and team building.

I was walking back to my building because I refused to use the portable restrooms that were bussed in for the event when I caught a glimpse of William. I got butterflies the moment I laid eyes on him. It wasn't just the way his broad shoulders and tall frame made me want to climb him. It wasn't just the way his clothes were stylish and professional, yet still had a ton of personality. It wasn't the haircut, the radiant skin, or the big, booming laugh that carried its way over to me.

It was his smile.

His smile was one that could melt panties with one single tick of his full lips. He was a good-looking man, but his smile was one that lit up the atmosphere around him. And when our eyes met and his smile widened to me, for me, I felt butterflies consume my belly.

Never taking his eyes off me, he appeared to excuse himself from the group he was with and headed in my direction. I slowed my steps, never stopping, as I waited for him to catch up.

“Hi, I’m William,” he introduced himself, extending his hand and a smile.

My lips had curled into a smile before I had even realized. “Hello, I’m Layla.” I shook his hand firmly.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Layla.”

“It’s nice to meet you too, William.” He held my hand long after the handshake should’ve been over. I bit my lip to keep from laughing. “Can I get my hand back, please?”

He chuckled. “I’m sorry,” he apologized, still holding my hand, but no longer shaking it. “You are just...wow.”

Tilting my head to the side, my lips curled upward. “I’m going to take that as a compliment.”

“Yes, please do.” He gazed into my eyes, causing a stir within me. “I don’t mean to stare; I just find you incredibly beautiful.”

“Thank you.” My voice hitched a bit. I felt my cheeks warm, less at his compliment and more at the fact that all his attention was on me.

“I came over to speak to you because I found myself staring at you from across the courtyard, and I didn’t want you to think I was just some creep.”

“I didn’t think that at all.”

We stared at one another for a beat too long.

“Are you seeing anyone?” he asked, taking a step toward me.

*Shit! Mark!*

Although I wasn’t in love or anything, I really was interested in Mark. He was a good man, and I really liked him. But the connection between William and I was undeniable. Something about him felt different. Still, I was a one-man kind of woman. “I am.”

“Is it serious?”

I hesitated for only a second before nodding. “I tend to only date one man at a time.”

William relented, but I saw a devious twinkle in his eye. “I understand.” A smile played on the corners of his lips. “That’s all I need to know...”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I smirked, tilting my head slightly.

He took a fraction of a step toward me. “It means that for now, it’s enough for me to know you’d be interested.” He winked. “That means I

have a chance.”

Interested didn't even begin to explain the way my body reacted to William. It wasn't just physical attraction and sexual desire. What I felt was deeper. I couldn't understand why every fiber of my being felt like it had met its match in his presence. But it was almost uncomfortable how comfortable I felt with him. That had never happened before.

*Mark.*

I was drawn to the handsome stranger in front of me, and he would definitely have a chance, but loyalty and faithfulness kept me in check.

With an opened mouth smile, I started to dispute his claim, but I giggled instead. “You are funny,” I acknowledged, not denying his claim.

“No, I'm serious... This is good. Because when things don't work out with that guy and you're mine, I know I won't have to worry about if I can trust you.”

Narrowing my eyes at him, I stroked my chin. “But will I have to worry about you?”

“If I have you, no other woman stands a chance.”

My heart thumped as I fell for him—hard.

“Hi, Layla,” Erin from my office spoke, stealing my attention.

As I glanced at her, I saw that her eyes were glued to William.

“Hi,” I replied, amusement dragging the word out longer than necessary. She didn't even acknowledge that I'd spoken. When Erin was out of earshot, I shifted my gaze back to William. “Does that happen to you often?”

His tongue slipped between his lips, wetting them, for the briefest of moments. “What?”

I felt that moment all over my body.

*Nope. This guy is trouble. My stomach fluttered. Sexy as hell, but trouble.*

Clearing my throat, I shook it off. “Never mind. My coworker was just checking you out—hard. Speaking of coworkers, where do you work? I've never seen you around here.”

“I'm a consultant for Eastern Construction.”

“So, you're a construction worker?”

His chuckle was like a low rumble. “No, I'm a civil engineer. I work on projects throughout Virginia. The corporate office is in Building C. I started at the beginning of the year.”



“Oh, nice! How are you liking it?”

“It’s been good.” His lips slowly spread into a sexy smile. “It’s even better now. What about you?” He pointed around at the four buildings. “Where are you?”

“I’m in Building A. I work for Tier 1. It’s an advertising and marketing firm.”

“Oh, I’ve seen that name around. Tier 1 does some of our advertising. What do you do there?” He looked at me with such intensity, I couldn’t help but believe he was sincerely interested.

I lifted my shoulders helplessly. “I come up with amazing concepts for companies and products that my supervisor takes credit for.”

His head fell back as he laughed.

When his laugh started to die off, I continued, “I haven’t actually worked on the Eastern Construction account, but I’m not surprised they are a client.” I gestured around the office park. “A lot of our accounts come from here.”

“You know—”

“Mr. Grayson,” an older man with salt-and-pepper hair and an expensive suit interrupted. “I need to steal you away from this beautiful, young woman.”

“Hello, Mr. East,” William greeted the good-looking man with a professional tone and a singular nod in his direction. He turned to me and lowered his voice. “I will find you once this is over,” he promised.

I nodded. “Until next time.” I stuck my hand out to shake his.

Flashing the smile that initially caught my attention, he lifted my hand to his mouth. The heat from his sexy, full lips coursed through my entire body. “Until next time,” he whispered before leaving me weak in the knees and short of breath.

William and I would cross paths every so often. He had started dating someone late fall through the winter. But he was single again when spring rolled around—or at least that was the latest office park gossip. Since I’d broken things off with Mark, I was interested in crossing paths with William since we were both newly available.

But of course, I didn’t see him again for a month.

The day I was tired of waiting and had the thought to call his office and just ask him out myself, I ran into him on my lunch break. He was headed to lunch as well so we decided to have lunch together. From that day

forward until the day we ended, we spent every single lunch and every single day together.

Our relationship lasted one hundred days, but our love felt like it would last one hundred years.

I had never felt more connected to someone as I did with William. We just worked. Everything about our relationship worked. We agreed on most things, but the things we disagreed on, we talked out. We had fun, but we also had deep, serious talks about life. Our relationship was a whirlwind, but it never felt like it was moving too fast. It was hard to explain what we had or how it evolved so quickly, but it was real and it was right.

For one hundred days, I found a home in his arms, in his heart, in him.

But the first time we seriously discussed children, we were eating cereal in his living room as we watched the news. We had plans to go to the county fair in the suburbs, and they were interviewing a young family who had gone the night before. We ate silently. I was watching and waiting for the weather report when I felt him staring at me.

“Am I chewing too loud?” I asked as I crunched the sugary goodness.

“No.” He laughed. “Well, yes, but you always eat your cereal loud as hell. That’s not why I’m looking at you.”

“I can’t let it get soggy,” I giggled as I shoveled the last spoonful in my mouth. Once I finished chewing, I questioned him. “Why are you staring at me?”

“Because you’re beautiful.” He gestured to the TV with his head. “And if we had a little girl like that, I know she’d be beautiful, too.”

I leaned over and gave him a quick peck on the lips. “We could just adopt that little girl, and that would be a win, win for everybody.”

Chuckling, he nodded. “True. But since I’m an only child, my bloodline dies with me if I don’t have biological children. I mean, I wouldn’t mind adopting one after we had one naturally.” He spooned a big bite of cereal into his mouth.

He looked like he was about to say something else, but I interrupted. “You’re a family man, huh?”

Chewing, he nodded.

“Oh, okay,” I replied contemplatively. Uncertainty crept into my mind as I tried to figure out where I would go from there. We hadn’t discussed having children before—not in a real way. But the way he looked at me as he nodded felt like the conversation was shifting away from hypothetical.

He finished his last bite before placing his bowl on the table. Turning his body slightly toward me, he grabbed my left hand and toyed with my ring finger. "Have you ever thought about...the future? Our future?"

My heart skipped a beat as I heard the nerves in his words.

*He's serious*, I realized.

"Yeah, I think about us. I think about what it would be like to spend my life with you." I tilted my head, resting it against the back of the couch. "I think about how being in your arms feels like the safest place in the world. And each night, I go to bed thinking there's no way I could love you any more than I do in that moment. And then I wake up, and somehow, I do. Each and every day, I'm more sure that you and I are soulmates."

He brought my hand to his lips. "I love you. I feel the same way about you. I've always thought I'd get married and have kids because that was what I was supposed to do: get the career, get the money, get the wife, and then get the kids. But this is the first time I've ever felt like it was something I wanted to do." He paused, still toying with my ring finger. "I want a life with you. I want you to have my children. I want to wake up next to you every day for the rest of my life."

My heart was racing. "Are you proposing?" I whispered, afraid of his answer. Even though it hadn't been that long, everything in me said yes to a question that wasn't even posed.

"When I propose, I'll be down on one knee with a ring worthy of you." He hesitated for a second. "What would you say if I did propose?"

"Yes," I answered without a moment of hesitation.

He exhaled his response. "Good."

"Did you think I would say anything else?"

He smirked. "I had a pretty good idea you would say yes, but the way your eyebrows shot up when you asked if I was proposing... I got a little nervous."

"Sounds like someone would marry me today if we weren't going to the fair," I teased, my cheeks hurting from smiling so hard.

"Fuck the fair, I'd marry you right now." He kissed my ring finger and then leaned forward to kiss my lips.

Butterflies tickled my belly. "God, I love you."

"I love you, too," he uttered as he deepened the kiss. "I'm going to move you in with me... change your last name... put a baby inside you..."

My heart stopped.

Before he could continue, I pulled out of the kiss. My eyes darted around the room as I contemplated how I would begin. “So, um, we’ve never really talked about children in a family planning kind of way,” I started uneasily.

“Hey...” William grabbed my hand and intertwined our fingers. “Look at me.” He waited until our eyes met to continue. “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. I don’t want you thinking I’m trying to get you pregnant or anything. I’m just saying that I know I want a family with you. I’ve always wanted to be a father, but you are the first woman I’ve ever wanted to go half on a baby with. I’ve always assumed I’d have a wife, but you are the first woman I’ve ever seriously considered to be my wife.” His lips slowly crept up into a smile. “I don’t just want a family. I want to create a family with you. That’s all I’m saying. I’m ready when you are.”

I searched his eyes and they were so warm, so kind, so loving. I’d never really been in love before William, so it didn’t hit me until that moment how PCOS could impact my life. Up until that point, kids were never something I considered an option, so it didn’t matter. But as the love of my life stared at me with his dreams of children I couldn’t give him sparkling like stars in his eyes, I knew what I had to do.

Resting my free hand upon his cheek, I leaned forward and kissed his lips. “I have to tell you something,” I whispered with my eyes still closed.

“That’s never good.”

My lashes fluttered as they opened, but I still couldn’t look at him. “I can’t have children,” I admitted, my voice small.

He was silent. After several seconds, I forced my eyes to meet his and it almost broke me.

His face seemed frozen in place, and I questioned if he’d heard me. I parted my lips to repeat myself, but the words wouldn’t come out again. The longer we stared at one another, the more uncomfortable I felt.

Finally, his eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “Did you say...?”

“I can’t have children,” I repeated slowly, a little louder than before.

He exhaled. The lines of confusion in his face melted away. He didn’t say anything, but he nodded so I knew he heard me.

The fact that he hadn’t responded to me was unnerving. Not knowing what else to do, I started to pull away.

“Hey,” he uttered, reaching for my hand again. He intertwined our fingers and stared in my eyes. “I love you.”

My heart stammered in my chest. “I love you, too.”

“We could adopt.”

Even as he said it, I could tell he wasn't completely sold on the idea. And while I appreciated that he loved me enough to present it as an option, I knew he didn't mean it. He'd just told me that he wanted to have a child naturally.

I knew what I had to do.

My eyes watered and I shook my head. “I don't think we should see each other anymore.”

“No.”

He brought his face to mine, kissing me gently. The tears I'd kept at bay threatened to spill out of me as he deepened the kiss. I poured every ounce of love I had for him into that kiss. With each sweep of his tongue against mine, I burned even hotter for him. My throat burned with unshed tears of sadness, my heart burned as it shattered, and my body burned with desire.

“Don't cry,” he murmured into my mouth as our lips met, slightly saltier.

“I'm not going to let you give up on what you want,” I told him breathily as tears dropped from the corners of my eyes.

His eyes watered. “I'm not going to let you give up on us.”

Without a word, we stared at one another, teary eyed.

If I ever needed confirmation about our love being real, it was proven in that moment. It was in that exchange that I knew that love, real love, our love was not just about feelings, it was about sacrifice. He loved me enough to give up on his dreams of having a biological child. I loved him enough to not stand in the way of his dreams of fatherhood.

Even though it was clearly breaking us both, we were willing and that caused another wave of sadness to hit me.

Finally breaking the silence, I mustered up the courage to do what needed to be done. “I'm not giving you a choice.”

“What?” he balked, creating a space between us that I felt instantly.

I sucked in a deep, shaky breath. “I can't imagine you not being in my life.” Tears streamed down my cheeks as the idea tried to form in my mind. I gestured to my face. “It breaks me down to even think about it.”

“So, stop... Don't say whatever it is you're about to say.” His response was simple and sounded easy enough. But he had no idea what he was

asking. He wasn't thinking about the future. He was thinking about the present.

"William Grayson, I love you more than you could possibly know. And because I love you, I can't bear the thought of you resenting me. You made it clear that you wanted a biological child. I asked you a couple of times to be sure and you said, without hesitation, that you wanted children that are biologically yours. And I can't give that to you. I never even wanted children because the choice was taken from me before I had the opportunity to really consider it, but for you, I would've if I could. But I can't. And you will rese—"

"I won't!"

Gripping his hand tighter, I gazed into his dark eyes. "You can't promise me that you won't resent me if you never have biological children."

"I don't think I would resent you," he replied earnestly, his hand tightening around mine as I openly wept.

"You don't think you will, but you don't know for sure."

"It's more important for me to know that I have you by my side."

"And I want to believe that because I want to be with you. But you've always wanted to be a dad. You're telling me that you're ready to give that dream up?"

He hesitated, breaking eye contact momentarily.

"Exactly." My stomach twisted. "You know I'm right."

"No, you're not," he argued. "I won't—resent you."

"Just think about it for a minute. Do you want to wake up one day, ten years from now, and feel unfulfilled because you don't have any biological children? Do you want that? Do you want to be sixty and then feel like you missed out on the one thing you said that you always wanted? What if something happens to me? What if something happens to us?"

He looked at me with such determination and focus that I could almost see the wheels turning in his head. He was considering what I was saying and even though that was what I wanted, I knew that meant he was going to stop fighting for me, for us.

The tears started to fall again as he just stared at me, saying nothing.

In a hoarse whisper, I added, "I'm not going to put myself in a position to find out if and when the resentment will come." I wiped my face with my free hand. "That's why we should be friends. We can't allow this relationship to get any deeper than it already is. We can't move forward

because this isn't going to be able to go anywhere. At some point, we would end." I exhaled unsteadily. "So, we need to be friends. If we're friends, we'll still be in each other's lives, we'll still keep in touch—"

"Fine," he interrupted me, his jaw clenching. "Just stop."

"I don't want you to be mad," I whispered, throat burning.

"I'm not mad. It's just..." He shook his head, looking away from me. "I'm not okay with this, Layla."

"I'm not either."

We were both quiet.

"We're not friends." He turned his head to look at me again. "We're never going to be just friends." He uttered the words so softly that if I wasn't looking at him, I wouldn't have heard them.

"For now, it's all we can be. But next lifetime," I promised, choking back a sob.

Pulling me into him, he rested his head on the top of mine. "I'm still holding out for this one."

We didn't make it to the fair. Instead, we spent the day in bed prolonging our final hours together. Every time we came, it brought us closer even though reality was driving us further apart.

When I left his apartment that day, we said we'd stay friends. But we didn't. We were friendly, but not friends. It was too difficult. We settled for following each other on social media and exchanging pleasantries whenever we'd run into each other in the office park.

## CHAPTER SIX

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“Hey Layla, it’s Bryce. There’s been a change to Friday’s meeting. I know it’s late, but if you could give me a call back, I’d appreciate it. I’ll send you an email with the details, but if it’s not too late when you get the email, call me. I just want to make sure you understand the changes. Again, I know it’s late and I know you’re off tomorrow, but check your email and then give me a call as soon as possible,” Bryce urgently rambled on my voicemail.

My supervisor’s message was a little unusual because it was almost nine o’clock at night. But as I walked into my apartment on Wednesday, I knew I wasn’t going to call him back. I was so tired that I wasn’t even sure that I was going to check my email. Dropping my gym bag to the floor and placing my cellphone on the console table, I dragged myself to my bedroom. I had just stripped away my sweaty t-shirt when I heard my phone ringing.

“Bryce, this better not be you again,” I muttered as I walked back down the hall in just yoga pants and a sports bra.

Picking up the phone, my stomach plummeted at the unexpected intrusion and I froze.

*William.*

It had been nineteen days since I left William’s apartment. It had been eight days since the last voicemail William left me that I hadn’t returned. And I didn’t know why I had convinced myself that since I didn’t call him back, I didn’t have to worry about him calling me again. But as I stared at my phone in shock, I realized I’d been successful in tricking myself into believing I’d heard the last from him.



The phone stopped ringing and I was still holding it, staring at my screen saver photo of me and Nana. My muscles were tight, and my body ached with the rigidity of my stance. But tension held me captive as nerves and shock mixed with longing and heartache. Letting out a shaky breath, I slowly started to begin to move. I was just about to put the phone down when it started ringing again.

William.

*He wouldn't call back to back unless it was important or necessary, right?*

Our last conversation didn't go well. He wanted to be friends, but friendship didn't work for us the first time, and it wasn't going to work for us a second time. If it were possible, I was more let down by us ending the second time than I was the first. With my heart beating louder than the phone was ringing, I hit the answer button.

"He-hello," I stammered as my voice shook nervously.

There was a pause before the deep rumble of his voice wrapped its way around my name. "Layla."

My heart seized, and I swallowed hard. "William."

"How are you?"

Shaking off what the initial impact of his voice did to me, I squared my shoulders and cleared my throat. "I'm well," I lied. "You?"

"I'm...I needed to hear your voice. I need to talk to you."

I didn't reply immediately. I pressed the phone firmly to my ear with a shaky hand.

"Layla?"

My voice was small. "Yes."

He exhaled.

I heard the hesitation on his end and it tore me up inside.

The last conversation we had was brutal. He wanted to tell me how he was feeling. He wanted to talk to me about Molly the Model's upcoming appointment. He wanted to tell me that he thought about me constantly. And I believe he was so caught up in how his life had changed drastically in one weekend that he never stopped to consider how I'd feel hearing about it.

Heartbreak and lovesickness quickly gave way to resentment and bitterness as I listened to him drone on about how much he loved me while simultaneously telling me about his week with Molly the Model. So, I

snapped, telling him to not call me again. He told me I was being “unreasonable” and “unnecessarily jealous”.

*Jealous.*

The moment I heard the word jealous, I saw red. The only thing I remembered was telling him to not call me again and that I had nothing else to say to him before hanging up. He texted and left a voicemail with apologies, but the damage was done. Even though I knew his apologies were sincere and that he didn't mean to be insensitive, I knew that a break from speaking to one another was exactly what we needed. I knew that our feelings were too real and too raw for us to just be friends. And while he felt like it was harsh and I was abandoning him, I had to think about what was best for me and my life.

I loved William so much and I wanted him to be happy. And his happiness included enjoying the miracle of this genetically gifted progeny growing in Molly the Model's belly. As much as I loved him and as much as I wanted him to be happy, I couldn't be on the baby journey with him. I couldn't listen to him take care of his child, by way of his child's mother, even though I was proud of him for stepping up and being a man. I cared for him, and on some level, was happy that he was happy. But on another level, a pettier level, I couldn't celebrate his happiness. To me, his happiness represented heartbreak and the end of us.

For that reason, I didn't pick up when he called back after I hung up on him. He texted me, and I replied to tell him that I loved him, and I wished him all the happiness in the world. I told him that our time was up. He called immediately, but I didn't answer. The message he left, his last voicemail, broke my heart, but I saved it.

Each day since, I had convinced myself that I was doing well, getting better because my crying spells were decreasing. But as I stood, with my eyes closed, pressing my phone to my ear, listening to him breathe, it all flooded back. The hollowness in my chest filled with water, drowning me. But I didn't hang up the phone.

“Layla...” His masculine tone faintly trailed off. “Layla, I'm sorry.”

“I can't do this again.” I shook my head, holding my emotions together. “I'm tired, William. I can't do it.”

“I'm not trying to do anything. I swear to God, Layla. I didn't call to do anything. I don't want to cause you any more disappointment. The last thing

I ever wanted to do was hurt you. I love you too much to ever want to intentionally cause you pain. I just... God, I just—I'm sorry."

He sounded distraught and just hearing him like that caused my stomach to churn.

"You are doing what you have to do for you. I accept that," I explained throatily. "But I have to do what I have to do for me. And you have to accept that."

He was quiet for a long time. "Don't completely cut me out of your life."

My eyes widened. "You were the one—" I stopped mid-sentence and let out a rough breath. I stormed down the hall toward my bedroom. "Never mind."

"No, talk to me. Say what you have to say."

I angrily yanked off my workout clothes before I spoke. "You are taking care of your responsibilities. Your responsibilities include your unborn child and the woman you impregnated. So, your time and attention are devoted to those things and I accept that. My responsibilities include me, myself, and I. My time and attention are devoted to those things. You made your choice, and so... I made mine."

He didn't say anything, but I could almost hear him frantically trying to dismantle my logic. "I mean—I just. I was under the impression that we were going to be friends."

"How? How, Will? How?" I yelled into my phone as the truth refused to be contained. "I am in love with you! Do you understand that? I'm in love with you and it kills me every time you speak about the thing that's making you happy. Every time I think about it, it hurts, okay? It fucking kills me! Is that what you wanted to hear? Is that what you wanted me to say? Does that make you feel better?"

"No, God, no. Layla... I'm so—"

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I clutched the phone in my hand.

"I told you I can't do this," I interrupted, a sob on the brink of bursting out of me. "I have too much on my plate and I don't have the energy to invest in this. I can't do it. You think I'm being spiteful and turning my back on you by not wanting to be friends when this is just self-preservation. I have to protect my heart."

"I—"

“So, I love you,” I continued, knowing I couldn’t hold back the pain anymore. My voice creaked through each word. “I’m happy for you. I’m glad you’re getting the child you’ve always wanted. I hope Molly the Model is happy and healthy. I hope your training is going well. I hope you get a raise and the title bump and everything else that you want because I love you, and I want nothing but good things for you. But because I love me, I have to say goodbye.”

Before he could say anything else, I hung up.

And I blocked his number.

I dropped my phone on my bed and walked across the hall to the bathroom. The moment I stepped into the hot shower and the water hit my face, I let the first tears fall. I cried as I lathered my body with soap and by the time I’d finished and started to rinse the suds off, I was shuddering with full blown sobs. Even after I was clean, dry, and buried under the covers, I still couldn’t stop bawling.

I was exhausted, so I didn’t remember falling asleep. But when I woke up, I felt awful. My body ached, and my puffy eyes were sore.

“Oh shit!” I jumped as I noticed my alarm clock.

I overslept. I had fifteen minutes to get twenty minutes away.

Grabbing a pair of jeans, t-shirt, and socks, I dressed in ninety seconds. I ran to the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth. I pushed my thick, coarse hair back with a headband then added my earrings and watch. Sticking my feet into a pair of black boots, I grabbed my leather jacket and ran out the door.

Somehow, I was only ten minutes late for my appointment.

“I’m so sorry,” I panted as I addressed the receptionist who was clearly new. “Layla Walker for Dr. Rose.”

“You almost missed your appointment! It only comes around once a year.” Her short blonde curls bounced as she shook her head disapprovingly. “Have a seat and we’ll get you back as soon as we can.”

I forced a small smile and sat in the waiting area of my gynecologist office. I was just about to flip through a two-year-old entertainment magazine when the nurse appeared at the door.

“Layla Walker,” she announced with a smile. “You may come on back.”

I rose to my feet and walked toward the clinic. “Hi, Nurse Tracey. How are you?”

“Ready for the weekend.” The petite nurse was always upbeat and friendly, with an infectious smile. “How about you?”

I entered the exam room, waiting until I sat on the table before answering. “I’m well. I just can’t believe how fast this year is going by.”

She paused before wrapping the blood pressure cuff around my arm. “I was telling Dr. Rose the same thing!” She shook her head as she started taking my blood pressure. “March is almost halfway over already.”

“I know,” I exhaled, thinking of the emotional turmoil that had taken place over the last three weeks. “Time is really flying.”

“You can say that again!”

After checking my vitals and weight, she left the room so I could change into the white and mint green gown. I’d just sat back down when there was a knock at the door.

“Knock, knock,” Dr. Rose said from the other side of the door, just before pushing it open. “Are you dressed?”

“Yes. Hi, Dr. Rose.” I smiled at the beautiful older woman with silvery-grey streaks in her dark hair. I’d been seeing her since I was fourteen years old, and I absolutely adored her. I liked to think of her as my medical mother. She wasn’t super friendly, but she was nice and knowledgeable.

We exchanged pleasantries as I got adjusted on the table. Nurse Tracey stood by the door while Dr. Rose picked up the checklist she’d filled out.

“Everything looks good.” The doctor paused, flipping to the next page and then back to the first. “Looks like you’ve dropped fifteen pounds since your last visit.”

“What?” My brows furrowed in confusion even as I smiled. “That doesn’t make any sense, but I’ll take it.”

She looked pointedly at me. “With your PCOS, that’s a significant drop from previous years. What have you been doing?”

“I haven’t had much of an appetite over the last few months. But I swear, I’m not seeing a fifteen-pound difference in my clothes,” I scoffed. “If anything, my pants have been a little snug in the waist. I’ve been feeling bloated.”

*Especially this last month.*

“No appetite and bloated?” Pushing her bright red glasses further up the bridge of her nose, she looked at me. “Hmm...when did that start?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe...” I thought back, but couldn’t really pinpoint the month it started. “I was already living with Jenelle. Maybe August?”

“The suppressed appetite and the bloated feeling?”

“No, just the lack of an appetite. I’ve been feeling bloated for the last month.”

Dr. Rose scribbled something down on the chart before passing the clipboard and pen to Nurse Tracey. Washing her hands, she grabbed a pair of gloves and began the exam. Pressing on my lower abdomen, she seemed to keep coming back to the same spot, making me flinch. “Hmm... It doesn’t feel like fluid.” She pressed again. I flinched again. “Does this hurt?”

“No.”

She pressed. I flinched.

“It tickles,” I replied with an embarrassed smile.

The crease between her brows evaporated as she gave me a little smile. “It’s okay if it tickles. I just wanted to make sure you weren’t in any pain.”

“No, I haven’t had any pain. Well, except for my back. But I’ve been working out more frequently to help with the stress of...my new job and life stuff. I got a massage last week and that helped a lot.”

“Exercise is a great stress reliever, but I want you to make sure you are using the correct form. You shouldn’t be experiencing back pain. Soreness? Yes. But not pain.” Sitting on the stool at the end of the table, she adjusted my legs. “Okay scoot down a bit for me please.”

The whole thing was over in a matter of minutes.

“Okay good. I want to do an ultrasound to check out what’s going on.” She looked over at Nurse Tracey. “Will you let Wanda know that we’re sending someone down?” Looking back at me, she smiled. “Are you able to give us a urine sample this time?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, great.” She stood, removing her gloves and tossing them into the trash. “Once you get dressed, Nurse Tracey will take you back to the bathroom and then to Wanda’s lab. And I want you to write down everything you’re eating for the next week. We want to rule out a gluten intolerance as to the cause of this bloat you’re experiencing. Is there anything else?”

“Um, no.” I shook my head as I considered her question. “Not that I can think of.”

“Okay, it was lovely to see you again, Layla. Send my regards to your mother.” She extended her hand and I shook it. “We’ll be in touch with your

lab results. If I don't see you before you leave today, have a good weekend and don't forget your food journal." She opened the door and then looked over at me. "Did that new receptionist give you any trouble?"

I rolled my eyes. "Not really, but she's no Pearl."

"You're right about that. You take care of yourself, okay?"

"Of course! Thank you, Dr. Rose." I waved to her as she exited the room.

Nurse Tracey was on her heels. "I'll be back in a few minutes to take you down to the restroom."

"Thanks," I replied, climbing down from the table.

I dressed, gave my urine sample, picked up lunch, and was back in my apartment before noon.

"Hello," I answered my phone as soon as I saw Jenelle's name pop up on the screen.

"Hey, what are you up to?" My best friend's excited tone seemed to echo through my empty apartment. "And why do you seem far away?"

"I have you on speaker phone. I'm looking for my little notepad. Dr. Rose said I needed to keep a food journal."

"Why?"

"Because I might have a—wait for it—gluten allergy."

"Oh my God!" Jenelle bemoaned loudly.

I laughed because I knew I was in for one of her tirades.

"I'm convinced the gluten allergy is a made-up concept! I'm serious, Layla, stop laughing! You better pray to God you aren't allergic to gluten because it's in everything. Everything! You will not be able to eat anything because gluten is in everything and then they tell us we should be gluten-free, so they can charge five more dollars for the gluten-free product! You know how I feel about this so I don't even know why you told me."

"You are so funny," I cackled as I wiped the tears from my eyes. I hadn't laughed that hard in a while. "I needed that laugh."

"You also need to pray it's anything, but a gluten allergy. Like unless you have celiac disease, which I don't think you do, gluten-free is not an option for you."

Laughing, I carried my bottle of water to the living room, sitting it on the coffee table. "First, you're not a doctor so I'm going to wait for Dr. Rose to get back to me about that. Second, how are you going to say that

being gluten-free isn't an option for me? This could be why I've been bloated."

"You can't be gluten-free, perpetually avoiding carbs, and flirting with vegetarianism. I wouldn't be able to go out to eat with you anymore. It's too much!"

"Stop it," I howled. "Stop it! My stomach." I held my belly as I laughed so hard, I snorted—which triggered her laughter.

After a couple of minutes, we calmed down.

"I have to go back into the building. My lunch break is almost over. But I called to update you..."

"Uh oh." I took a big bite of my sandwich and chewed quickly. "On what?"

I took another bite and waited.

She was quiet, and my face slowly fell.

"Jenelle?"

"So... you know I still follow Molly the Model on social media."

My stomach started to twist into knots. I placed the sandwich back in its wrapper. "Yeah...?"

"Well, she posted a photo... I didn't know if you wanted to know about it or not. But I figured it was better to hear it or see it from me than anyone else."

"I asked you to let me know if you saw anything interesting. If you're calling me about it, it must be interesting," I replied quietly. Swallowing hard, I asked, "What is it?"

"It's a...pregnancy announcement."

My heart dipped. "Oh?"

"Yeah, I can send it to you."

"Thank you."

We were both quiet.

I fiddled with my watch, staring at the hands frozen in place. I inhaled deeply. "What did it say?"

"It was a picture of her in a black shirt that says, 'does this shirt make me look pregnant?' in white and a pair of skinny jeans."

"That's it?" I whispered.

"He's not in the photo."

A rush of air exited my lungs. "Oh, okay. Cool."

*Thank God!*



“But um... she posted a caption with the photo and she tagged him.”  
I braced myself. “What did it say?”

“‘Looking forward to expecting the unexpected with you.’ And then she tagged him.” She paused. “I mean, it’s clear she’s talking about the kid.”

“Maybe.”

*Maybe not.*

We were both quiet.

“I know what you’re thinking, but I checked his page and there’s nothing that would indicate that they’re together.”

Without me having to say anything, my best friend knew exactly what I needed to hear.

I swallowed hard. “Thank you.”

“I have to get back into work, but are you okay?”

“I am.” I cleared my throat and spoke a little louder. “I am.”

“I’m coming over after work.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I’ll use my key. I’ll bring dinner—a gluten dinner.”

I let out a small giggle. “Goodbye, Jenelle.”

“See you in a few hours.”

As soon as the call ended, I looked at my text messages. Bracing myself, I clicked open the pregnancy announcement screenshot. My eyebrows flew up and my eyes bulged.

“Wow.”

Jenelle definitely downplayed the post.

Molly the Model’s post looked like an airbrushed ad campaign for some major retailer. In her pregnancy shirt tied to accentuate her curves paired with jeans that looked painted on, she appeared stylish. Her sky-high heeled boots and deep red lipstick made the look sexy. Her over-the-top glam photo just exuded so much confidence. And for the first time in a long time, I felt a pang of jealousy.

Logging into the social networking site, I went to William’s page. He didn’t post much, and he didn’t post anything about Molly or the child they’d created. I didn’t want to do it, but I clicked on her page. I wasn’t sure if all her posts were open to the public or not, but the last few photos were candid shots. One of those photos featured her make up done perfectly, hair splayed around her, serving the perfect pout—on William’s couch. I knew William’s couch when I saw it. The next photo was captioned with the

words ‘Rocky Balboa’ as she posed on steps, flexing her muscles in a pretty lavender dress and a plum coat. I knew the steps from *Rocky* were actually the steps of The Philadelphia Museum of Art—posted the day after he was supposed to move to Philly. The next picture was of her in the passenger seat of a car with custom brown leather that I would know anywhere—William’s car. And finally, the most recent picture posted was the pregnancy announcement.

My eyes watered as I stared at my screen.

*Jealous.*

Even though it pissed me off when he said it, it occurred to me that maybe he was right. It didn’t have anything to do with her flawless makeup and beautifully styled hair. It didn’t have anything to do with the fact that she was gorgeous and looked absolutely stunning in her designer outfit. It didn’t have anything to do with her subtle claim on him she was staking with her in his spaces. It wasn’t even her words that dripped romanticism and veiled wistfulness. As my eyes stared at the photo, I couldn’t help but read and reread her message to William.

“Looking forward to expecting the unexpected with you,” I whispered aloud.

I wasn’t sure if it was jealousy, hurt, or heartbreak that gutted me, but it was probably a combination of all three. As much as the words bothered me, not even those got under my skin like the hard truth. I was hurt, heartbroken, and jealous that the one thing that kept us apart was the one thing she could give him that I couldn’t.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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Wearing a fitted pair of black slacks that hugged my curves, a sexy black lace blouse, and a white blazer with black piping, I looked as good as I felt. Even though I was operating on minimal sleep, I needed my bonding session with Jenelle. Staying up late to watch movies and keep my mind off of William was the perfect prescription for my pain.

“Thank you.” I smiled at the barista as he handed me their biggest latte.

While I needed my girls’ night, I also needed a caffeine drip to get me through the long day. It didn’t feel like a Friday because of all of the stuff I had to do, but I felt better than I did the day before, my pants fit despite my bloat, and I had a great dream about Nana.

“Hello, how are you?” I greeted the receptionist as I entered the Tier 1 Marketing Firm.

I was at work early because I needed to review Bryce’s email and prepare for my meeting. I was in my new role as Account Manager for three weeks, but I had been doing the duties of an Account Manager for the last six months. The promotion was just a formality and a much-deserved pay increase.

Sitting down at my desk, I sipped my latte as the computer powered on. Reading the email, I was excited to fully invest in a project. As a team member, I was usually the brain behind the campaign, but it was my former supervisor who got the credit for the team. I was now the Account Manager and I would have a team under me. Grinning as I skimmed the tasks for the project, I began to read out loud.

“Responsible for brand management and branch identity, ensure cohesiveness of brand throughout online, print, and in-house design as it

relates to the overall brand of the parent company, planning and implementing branch opening campaign and marketing materials, remain—”

“Talking to yourself?”

I jumped, letting out a little yelp. “Bryce!” I put my hand to my chest, my heart racing. “You scared me!”

He ran his meaty hand through his brown hair. “You scared me first,” he countered with a cute grin. “I thought I was here alone and then I heard whispering.”

“Sorry,” I laughed, imagining how I probably looked as I grinned and read the email aloud. “I was just excited and preparing.”

“Had I known you were coming in early, I would’ve come by sooner. You never called, so I’m assuming you didn’t have any questions...? I wanted to make sure you were comfortable.”

“Yeah, I’m great! I’m just really excited about officially having my own account.”

“Come on.” He crossed his arms over his burly chest. “Karen didn’t do shit on her own. You’ve had countless accounts on your own. This is just the first one where you’re getting credit.”

I grinned and held my hands up in surrender. “Your words, not mine.”

“I know you think of me as just the gatekeeper between managers and upper management, but when I got here, I had to work under Karen for six months to get a feel for what the firm does.” He shook his head. “I know how she works. That’s why you were promoted.”

“Well, I’m glad my hard work paid off.”

He smirked. “It sure did. And now look at you...” He opened his arms wide. “You’re in this big ass office.”

I laughed. “That I share with three other people.”

“But you’re in here alone now, and you got the corner desk with the window view,” he enthused with a huge grin.

“That’s facing the woods!”

“But if you lean real close, you can see the back part of the parking lot. So, if anything goes down in the back row where no one likes to park, you’ll be an eye-witness.” He lifted his shoulders as I laughed. “I did hear that the hotdog cart guy and the coffee cart girl hooked up back there last year, so you might get a free show.”

“You’re funny!” I shook my head. “I heard that too, though.”

“I’m going to run out and get breakfast for the meeting. Did you want anything?”

I lifted my latte. “No, thank you.”

“Did you review the email? There’s only been a slight change, but since this is your first, I want to be sure you’re prepared for—”

“Bryce!” My tone was firm, but still pleasant. “I’m good. I’m feeling good. I’m looking good. I’m prepared.”

“You sure are.”

The way he gazed at me as he said it gave me pause. I wasn’t sure if he was referring to the fact that I looked good or that I was prepared for the meeting. I felt my eyebrows furrow and my head starting to tilt in confusion.

“Um, I’m going to go out and pick up the breakfast.” His eyes darted around the empty room. “Bridgette is going to set up the conference room with the materials.”

“Sounds good,” I said slowly as I watched him back out of the office.

“I’ll be back soon.”

“Bye, Bryce.”

*Weird.*

I turned back toward my computer and picked up my coffee.

Bryce was an attractive man, but I wasn’t attracted to him. I’d seen him around the office since I started working at the company and never once did he give me the impression that he was interested in me. But ever since I was promoted, there would be moments where he’d say or do something that almost felt as if he had a crush on me.

“Weird,” I mumbled, clicking Bryce’s email again.

Distractedly, I skimmed the body of it. I was going to click the attachment, but a new email popped up and caught my attention.

*Eastern Construction.*

It wasn’t unusual to see emails from William’s employer. We handled several accounts for Eastern Construction. But after our last conversation, it was really important for me to not think about him. I couldn’t let myself get distracted by him. We worked with many construction and real estate companies because of our work with Eastern Construction so their name was thrown around a lot. Even knowing that my very first account, the Burton Spencer Construction Company, was a referral from Eastern

Construction didn't make me think of William. But the random email that popped up filled my gut with anxiety.

I clicked on the message and then exhaled audibly, slumping back in my chair.

“Good morning!” Bridgette chirped as she pranced into the office. She put something on Juliet's desk and then turned to me. “Do you want a folder, or would you like me to put it at your seat at the conference room table?”

“Good morning.” I spun my chair around. “And you can place my folder on the table. I'm going to make a phone call and then take a minute to get my mind right.”

“No problem, I'll get you set up!”

I smiled. “Thanks, Bridgette!”

Turning my chair back around, I looked at the email with the Eastern Construction subject line. Smiling, I reread the short message.

*Congratulations on scoring an account with Eastern Construction. Getting on with them always leads to other big accounts. Proud to see you stepping out of the shadows and into the light. You deserve it. Regards, Marley*

Marlene King was one of the Senior Account Managers. She was nice but not friendly. She was one of those no-nonsense types who had been with the company for years. She made a name for herself in the company early and became the mother figure of Tier 1 Marketing. A kudos from her was heartwarming. More than that, the career guidance was a huge deal.

Grinning, I reread the email one more time. It didn't matter that she didn't know the exact project I was working on—she was working on four of her own. The knowledge that she thought of me and even emailed me from her personal email account was the confidence boost I needed for me to wow everyone at the meeting.

Suddenly, the quiet solitude of being in the office early and alone was a thing of the past. The morning moved quickly and before I knew it, I was walking down the hall to the elevator. The conference room was on our second level. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that I was the first one there. The breakfast spread looked delicious, but I didn't want to risk getting anything on my white blazer.

“How are you feeling?” Bryce asked just as I sat down at the head of the table.

“I’m feeling really good.” I smiled broadly. “I’m ready.”

“I knew you would be fine because I know you can handle anything.” He nodded, giving me a reassuring smile. “I’ll give you a minute and when I come back up, I’ll be with the client.”

“Thanks, Bryce.” I paused for only a second before I called out to him. “Hey, Bryce?”

“Yes?” He turned back to me as he pulled his phone out of his pocket.

“If you believe in me, why did you send me that email?”

“Bridgette thought I should.” He held up his phone. “They’re here. I need to take this.”

He answered his phone and walked away before I could say another word. I sat there, stunned, for a full minute.

*Bridgette? Why would Bridgette of all people tell Bryce how to supervise me? And worse, why would Bryce listen to her. Nope! Shake it off. I have a meeting to kill and then a cake donut to devour.*

I opened my folder just as Bryce walked in with two men and two women in tow. Flashing them a bright smile, I rose to my feet.

“Ebony, Natalie, Gordon, this is Layla Walker. Layla, this is the Burton Spencer Construction Company team,” Bryce introduced us as they shook my hand and took a seat. He gestured to the other side of him. “And this is Phillip East, CEO of Eastern Construction. Phillip, this is Layla Walker. She came up with the entire concept you loved so much.”

My eyes lit up as he approached. I’d never met Phillip East before, but his reputation preceded him. He was an unmarried multimillionaire with a charity that he not only funded but also worked. He had an engaging personality and some people joked that he was always recruiting for his next girlfriend because every few months, he would be seen with a new woman. But seeing the fifty-six-year-old executive with the salt-and-pepper hair and greying beard, I could attest to his hotness.

His skin was tan, and his hair was thick. Appearing to be in shape, his dark brown suit was a stylishly slim cut and fit him well. He had the slightest hint of crow’s feet around his eyes and a few fine lines on his forehead, but he somehow managed to look youthful and seasoned at the same time.

*Hard to believe he’s almost twice my age.*

His dark blue eyes pierced me as his lips spread into a smile.

My smile brightened as the good-looking, older man locked his eyes on me and gave me a firm handshake. I never understood how so many women—many in the office park—were seduced by a man they knew wouldn't commit to them. But in that moment, I got it.

"Layla Walker," Phillip addressed me, holding my hand a beat too long. "It is very nice to meet you."

Phillip East had the gift that all good salespeople and playboys had—charisma and charm. He had a way about him that just put me at ease. In just seven words, he made me feel like I was the most important person he'd ever met and that me and my ideas were safe with him.

"It's nice to meet you as well, Mr. East," I replied, pulling my hand out of his and taking my seat.

"Call me Phil." He took the seat closest to me on my right.

"Okay, Phil." I smiled. "Would you care for some coffee or a breakfast pastry?"

"I'm watching my weight." He patted his flat stomach. "But thank you."

"We have fruit as well."

He winked at me before standing. "In that case..."

While everyone slowly started to return to their seats, a man in a black suit came in. I didn't know his name and Bryce was engaged in conversation with Natalie, so I couldn't ask him.

*The names of everyone who was supposed to be in the meeting should've been in the email. Not an overview of the project I put together.* I took a breath. I wasn't really irritated with Bryce, I was just ready to get my first meeting underway. *Just breathe. It's not even nine o'clock yet.*

I fiddled with my watch absentmindedly and tried not to sit there grinning as excitement bubbled up inside me.

The Burton Spencer team sat on the left side of the table, leaving the seat closest to me on my left empty. The man I didn't know spoke to Phil, and they both came to the table, sitting on my right.

Phil smiled at me. "Layla, this is Matt. He's the finance guy. Matt, this is Layla. She's the idea woman."

Matt and I exchanged brief pleasantries, and then I noticed the time.

Once Bryce took his seat, Bridgette entered and took the seat next to him, ready for notetaking.

The seat next to me, on the left, was still empty. Looking around the table, I gestured to the empty seat. "Are we waiting on one more?"



“Yes,” Ebony answered. She looked at the door and then at her phone. “Our supervisor. But he sent a text a while ago and said he had to pick up some paperwork and he might be a few minutes late.”

“Oh okay.” I nodded. I glanced at my watch for theatrics and rose to my feet. “Well, I’ll just give a brief overview and hopefully he’ll be here by the time I’m done...” I looked down at the folder. “In your folders, there should be a—”

“Good morning, everyone.”

I froze.

Everything stopped. I couldn’t see. I couldn’t hear. I couldn’t think. Everything went black. Momentarily paralyzed, the smooth rumble of William’s voice made every hair on my body stand on end.

As my senses came rushing back to me, I realized I’d stopped breathing. Inhaling loudly, I snapped my head up just in time to see William passing everyone a sheet of paper.

*Don’t look into his eyes. Do. Not. Look.*

In navy blue slacks, a grey blazer, and a navy tie, William moved across the room like it was his own personal runway. My brain was still struggling to understand what was happening as I checked him out from head to toe. As I made my way back up his body, I lingered for a little too long on his lips.

*Mm mm mmmm.*

He looked good—which wasn’t unusual. But the unexpected sight of that gorgeous man in my first meeting for my first client was jarring. And if I wasn’t already thrown off by the enviable way his suit showcased his broad shoulders and muscular frame, his full lips spread, and he smiled.

His smile was irresistible.

His smile took my breath away.

His smile pushed me over the edge and as hard as I tried, I gave in.

Allowing a brief glance, I locked eyes with him just as he pulled the chair next to me from the table, so he could sit.

*Shiiiiiiiiit.*

I didn’t know if it was breaking all over again or if I was going into cardiac arrest, but my heart seized. The bandage had been ripped off. I felt exposed—actually, I felt overexposed. Everything that I thought I’d dealt with over the past few weeks came flooding back, twisting my stomach in knots. Remembering that I was in a room full of colleagues, I tore my gaze

away from him and scanned the room. Everyone seemed preoccupied by the interruption and the sheet of paper in front of them—except for Bridgette.

Bridgette was staring directly at me.

I did a double take, blinking rapidly.

“How rude! Where are my manners? Layla, this is William Grayson. He is one of our Civil Engineering Supervisors,” Phillip said, looking up from his paper to introduce me to the love of my life.

*Yes, but why is he here?*

He continued as if he’d heard my thoughts, “I wanted him to bring the schedule, but I didn’t even think about copies. Good thinking, Will!”—he looked back at me— “There’s a new business conference that I’d like for the entire Burton Spencer team to attend.”

“Oh... okay?” I glanced from Phillip to William.

“William, this is Layla. She’s handling the marketing for Burton Spencer. From the looks of this packet, you two will work well together.”

I gave Phillip a small, tight smile and nodded.

William spoke, pulling my attention away. “So, Layla is who I’d be working with? In Philly?”

My mouth was slightly agape as I was at a loss for words. “Wh-what?” I looked around the room to see if anyone else heard what I heard. No one else seemed alarmed. “In Philly?”

Bryce gave me a bewildered look. “In the email I’d sent you, I thought I’d mentioned that Burton Spencer was absorbed by Eastern Construction. In the attachment.” He gave me a look. “William Grayson is the site supervisor and will be your point of contact.”

*What the hell?!*

My heart was pounding loudly as I silently stared at Bryce. I knew the shock had registered on my face as my eyebrows felt like they were in the middle of my forehead.

And then it all made sense—the frantic, rambling message from Bryce, his email, his check-ins, Bridgette’s involvement.

“Oh!” I plastered a smile on my face and looked around the room, trying not to panic. “Okay!”

“I apologize...for being late,” William stated, taking the attention away from me. “Phil thinks it’s important that we attend this conference and I agree. It’ll give us a better idea of the landscape in Philly and how to recruit

and retain quality workers. What we learn at the conference coupled with what I've seen of Layla's work will surely make the Burton Spencer name construction gold in the city."

Everyone nodded enthusiastically, seeming to forget that I was having a mini-meltdown moments ago.

William looked at me, and I wasn't able to look away in time. "But again, I apologize. Please, don't let my intrusion interrupt your meeting." Although his words seemed work related, the look in his eyes told me he was apologizing for catching me off guard.

Butterflies circulated my chest cavity. I nodded once and silently vowed to not look his way again as I opened my folder.

*You can do this, Layla. You can do this!*

Fiddling with my watch, I responded in a chipper tone. "Not a problem, but apology accepted. Feel free to grab a coffee or a breakfast treat before we get started. You haven't missed anything yet."

"No, I'm—you know what, I'll grab some coffee."

My lip quirked upward slightly, but I didn't look at him. I knew that he knew that I needed a brief reprieve and him getting coffee bought me the time I needed.

Looking around the room and forcing the chaos of my feelings down, I asked, "Anyone else need a refill?"

Gordon and Phillip also decided to get refills while Natalie got another donut.

Taking a sip of water with my eyes closed, I said a quick prayer. I ran my fingers over the face of my watch.

*I only get one chance at a first impression. Yes, I was slightly thrown off by William, but I'm not skittish and I'm not incompetent. It's time for me to get my shit together. This is my shot. This could make or break my career. I'm not going to let a man, or anyone for that matter, jeopardize it.*

I inhaled my confidence and strength and then exhaled the nerves and anxiety.

*Let's do this.*

Once everyone returned to the table, I smiled brightly. "Now that we're all here, let's get started."

Aside from the fact that I kept my glances at William to a minimum, I handled my presentation with no problem. I didn't have to sell them on the marketing plan because they'd already agreed to it. I just needed to show

them my vision and how it would be beneficial to them in a new market. Even though my scope was for Baltimore and not Philadelphia, a lot of the demographics were the same.

I killed it.

When I was preparing the packets, I jokingly told myself that I expected applause after I finished, but when Phil started clapping, and everyone else joined in, I was completely taken by surprise. After a quick debriefing, everyone started moving toward the pastries before heading out of the conference room.

Phil was the last one to leave the table.

“Layla, I have to say, I’m impressed,” he complimented while staring me down. He tapped his folder. “If this is any indication, there are big things in your future.”

“Thank you. It’s quite a compliment coming from you, sir.”

“I’d like you to attend the conference next week. I know the guy who put it together. It would be a good way for you to get a feel for the direction I want to take Burton Spencer. It’ll also give you more insight on those areas you had questions about and we could adjust accordingly.” He lowered his voice and smirked. “It’ll also give you a leg up on the competition if you know what companies want from the inside and the outside. I’ll get you the information. I need to just call and let them know to expect you Monday.”

“Next week? As in Monday?”

“Yes.” Flashing me a smile that bordered on flirtatious, he leaned a little closer. “If I’m not mistaken, the first couple of weeks of handling an account, your priority is solely on that account, correct?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

He was absolutely right. That was the standard procedure for Tier 1 Marketing. And under any other circumstances it wouldn’t have been a problem. But William was going to be at the conference, at the hotel, in the city. I was trying to put as much physical distance as possible between us so that maybe my heart would get the hint and let him go.

“So, I don’t imagine there would be a problem. Correct?”

Since I was able to get over the initial shock of knowing I was going to have to work with William, I would be able to make it through a conference. I just had to continue to suppress my emotions and feelings for

five days. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but I knew I wasn't going to risk my advancement in my field because of a little heartbreak.

"It's not a problem at all. I just have to find my luggage to pack."

"Ah, Layla..." He stood and extended his hand. "It's been a pleasure."

"Likewise, Phil. Thank you for the opportunity."

"Thank you for bringing your A game. Oh!" His eyes bulged if he remembered something. Turning, he saw just two others still in the conference room with us: Matt and William. "Will! I need to speak with you for a second, please."

"Yes?" William approached us with uncertainty. He kept glancing at me uneasily.

"Please get all the information regarding lodging, travel, etc. to Layla before you leave. I have a meeting that I'm going to be late to if I don't leave now." Turning back to me, Phil smiled brighter. "Again, it was a pleasure. See you soon."

Matt looked at William and then at me...and then back at William. "Do you want me to wait for you or...?" He nodded. "Got it. Layla, it's nice meeting you. Will, give me a call."

Once the door closed behind Matt, William and I stood in absolute silence. Even though there was about five feet of space between us and no one else was in the room, it felt crowded and loud. Everything that I had buried in order to effectively do my job came rushing to the forefront. Everything that I felt the day we met, the day we ended, the day we said I love you, the day we found out he was going to be a father suffocated me, and I couldn't breathe.

Inhaling noisily, I put my hand to my chest and took a step backward.

"Layla..." His voice trailed off as he looked at me.

"You blindsided me today."

"You hung up on me and then blocked me. Why do you think I called on Wednesday? That was the day I saw the list of team members and your name was on it. Prior to that, we just picked the design we liked best and that was that."

"You should've started with that then and not..." I shook my head. "I'm at work and I'm not going to do this with you. Not here."

"We're going to have to talk this out so we can work together, Layla. We love each other too much to fuck up this assignment. I need this for my career just like you need this for yours. I know what it'll mean for you and I

want that success for you. So, I know you said we can't be friends, but we are going to have to be friendly."

"We can be professional." I made a face. "Friendly is too much like friends, and we are not friends."

He held my gaze. "You're right. We're not just friends."

*That's not what I meant and you know it!*

I opened my mouth and then closed it, unable to speak. He knew that wasn't what I meant. But as my heart tumbled in my chest, I couldn't deny it.

Squaring my shoulders, I looked him directly in his eyes. "You can just email me the information and I can make arrangements for Monday."

He was quiet, and so was I.

"I miss you, Layla."

I couldn't breathe. Averting my eyes, I picked up my belongings. "If you need my email address, it's located on the business card inside the folder. And I'll go ahead and unblock you, so we can communicate efficiently."

He reached forward and touched my hand. Gasping, my skin caught fire the moment his fingertips brushed against me. I squeezed my eyes shut and breathed through the shiver that rippled through me.

"Layla," he whispered, pausing until I opened my eyes. "I miss you."

"I miss you, too." I swallowed around the lump in my throat. "I have to go."

I walked toward the door, holding everything I felt inside.

"I know you worked your ass off. It shows. Your presentation was nothing short of amazing," William stated, causing me to stop in my tracks.

I didn't turn around, but I stood still.

"You are nothing short of amazing," he continued. "I'm proud of you."

My eyes watered. Pulling the door open, I took a deep breath so I could steady my voice.

"Thank you. That's very kind of you to say," I replied, still not turning to look at him. "I'm proud of you as well."

"Can we talk? Please?"

*I'm not doing this here. I'm at work.*

I closed my eyes to prevent any tears from falling. My heart beat so loudly, I was sure he could hear it. "No. Not right now. Please email me so I can make travel arrangements before I leave for lunch."

Not waiting for a response, I walked out of the conference room and to the elevator. I waited until the doors closed before I was able to breathe again. Gasping for air, I clutched my folder to my chest and leaned against the wall. I quickly swiped under my eyes, just in case any tears managed to sneak to the forefront when I arrived on my floor. When the doors slid open, I rushed out, headed to the bathroom so I could cry in peace.

“Oh!” I yelped, recoiling back.

“Sorry,” Bridgette mumbled, staring at me wide eyed. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I lied.

She continued to stare, letting my truth hover over both of us. Awkward didn’t begin to describe that ten second delay.

She took a step closer. “I remember when you two dated. I was making copies for Bryce and saw the name and told him that he should let you know. I hope I didn’t overstep. I just didn’t want you to be blindsided. It was a last-minute change—well, they informed us of it at the last minute, at least.”

I put my hand on her arm. “I appreciate you looking out for me. Thank you.”

“Well, there’s one more thing.”

My eyebrows shot up. “What is it?”

“It’s on your desk.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

---

“Are you serious?” Jenelle yelled on the other end of the phone. “Are you kidding me? Those are your favorite! That is the most romantic asshole move ever!”

“Exactly! I guess that’s why he was late. Twenty-three white roses and one red rose,” I sighed as I dragged my luggage out of the closet. “And a note—”

“Of course, there’s a fucking note,” she bemoaned dramatically, making me smile.

I could always count on my best friend to make me feel better about anything.

“A note that just had 9:27 on it.”

“Wow.”

“Right?”

“Wow.”

“Exactly!”

“So, what does that even mean?”

“I know!” I threw my arms up in the air in confusion and shook my head.

“I mean obviously he’s referencing your watch, but what is he trying to say?”

Looking down at my gift from Nana, I stared at the hands. “Perfect timing.”

“Um... but it’s not.” Jenelle’s voice dragged the words out, and I could imagine the look of confusion on her face.

“Exactly,” I sighed, sitting on the edge of my bed.



“He lives in a different city and state and more importantly, he has a baby on the way.”

“And to make matters worse, we work together on this project now.”

“This isn’t 9:27. This is fucking 3:01.”

I laughed so hard that I started coughing. “Let me call you back. Better yet, I’ll see you when you get here.”

“I’m five minutes away so I’ll just see you soon.”

I sat up and tossed my phone behind me. Staring at my closet, I mentally planned out my outfits for the week. I tried to think about what I would wear if I were going to a Tier 1 conference. But in the back of my mind, I just kept gravitating to thoughts of William. So, while I pulled out several business appropriate outfits, I also pulled out my sexiest lingerie, panties, and bras. Even though I didn’t plan on letting him see any of them, I wanted the extra confidence wearing them brought me.

I was still holding a completely sheer teddy when Jenelle knocked on the door.

“I think that’s a bit much for day one of the conference,” she commented as she burst through the door. “At least wait until the last day.”

I let out a chuckle as I followed her down the hall to my room. “You are too much!”

She plopped down on my bed. “But seriously, are you taking that to the conference?”

I hesitated. “No.”

“You lying, slut!” She jumped to her feet.

“Okay, fine! Maybe! I was thinking about it!” I laughed, covering my face with the teddy. “Probably! I haven’t decided yet. Stop looking at me like that!”

She took the teddy from my hands. “This is sexy.” Giving me a look, she sat back down on the bed and crossed her legs. “But no.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

Looking at the garment and then at me, she shook her head. “I mean no. Don’t bring this with you. Don’t do this.”

My eyebrows furrowed, and I was at a loss for words. “What? How? You? What?”

It was completely unlike her to not encourage me to have sex—let alone be so finite about it. Between William’s message and Jenelle’s response, I was beginning to feel like I was losing my mind.

Holding it up, she replied, “Do you know what this says? This says ‘I came to the conference to fuck.’ This says ‘William, I know you have a baby on the way and even when I was thinking of still sticking it out with you, you said you needed all of your focus to be on Molly the Model and the baby. And then when you realized that that was the dumbest thing you could’ve ever done, you tell me to not be jealous. Then, to top it off, you try to have a serious relationship conversation at my job. And even though you did all that, I’m still going to let you fuck.’” She cocked her head to the side. “I’m not going to let you play yourself like that. You’re not going to set a precedent that he can do whatever he wants and you’ll just be ready to throw some loving his way.”

My shoulders slumped. “You’re right. I didn’t even think about it like that. But you’re so right. I shouldn’t fuck him.”

Jenelle held her hands up. “Well, wait... I didn’t say that. At all.”

“What?” I scoffed. “I’m confused.”

Holding up the teddy again, she clarified. “You can, should, and probably will fuck him. But you can’t make it look like you planned it. You pack that teddy, that’s some premeditated shit.” She looked around my bed and picked up a sexy bra and matching G-string. “This is just sexy. You could easily just happen to have this with you.” She picked up a sheer bralette. “This could go underneath a blazer—super sexy, super low key.” She picked out several other sets and placed them in a pile for me. “You’re single, he’s single—if you want him, sex should definitely happen. But because you two haven’t talked things out yet, you can’t let him know you plan on having sex with him.”

I laughed. “You are a genius.”

She nodded. “I know.”

I continued packing while listening to Jenelle’s day. I had put outfits for the conference and then optional outfits for evening events. It looked like I was going to be gone for a lot longer than five days, but I felt confident that there was no situation that would come up that I wouldn’t be prepared for. By the time the food we’d ordered arrived, I was completely packed with my bags by the door.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” I asked as Jenelle prepared to leave after dinner.

“I still don’t know. Mike said it was a surprise, but I still have no clue what it could be. I’ve been looking for hints, and he’s really not that good at

keeping things from me so I don't know what is going on."

I grinned at her, crossing my arms over my chest. "I love you two together."

She rolled her eyes, but couldn't stop smiling. "You are such a sap."

"I'm not a sap because I love seeing my best friend happy. Look at you... you're glowing. I love it."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah..." She wrapped her arms around me and squeezed. "Anyway, I love you and if I don't see you the rest of the weekend, I'll see you Friday when you get back."

"Yes, at our favorite new restaurant." Letting her go, I crossed my arms over my chest again. "Text me and let me know what the surprise is tomorrow. I'm so curious."

"You know I will. Hell, I'll probably do a video chat so we can both be surprised at the same time!"

I chuckled at the idea of that. "Have a good night and drive safe."

"You, too." She was almost out the door, but she turned and looked at me. "Hear him out."

"William?"

She nodded. "I keep thinking about his note. I know timing is everything and there is a lot of stuff going on with him right now and you two are working together. But..." Gesturing to my watch, she shrugged. "What are the odds that you and him are going to be on this trip together for a week? Do you know what I mean? Like how random is that?"

I nodded slowly. "It's crazy. I don't know what other way to describe it."

She lifted her shoulders in a slow shrug. "I do. And I hate to say it, but..." She looked at my watch. "3:01."

We probably laughed harder than we did the first time.

"But seriously," she started, backing away from my door. "What are the odds?"

## CHAPTER NINE

---

I paced back and forth as I waited for Jenelle to pick up the phone. My heels clicked against the tile floor as I crossed from one end of the bathroom to the other. The huge vanity mirror of Philadelphia's finest boutique hotel reflected my freak out perfectly.

"Pick up, pick up," I muttered as I felt myself starting to panic.

Sighing, I disconnected the call and tossed my phone back into my handbag. Looking at myself in the mirror, I adjusted my blazer. I looked good in the red blazer paired with the formfitting black dress and a sexy pair of pumps. My hair was pinned up into a bun on top of my head. And as I reapplied my red lipstick, I focused on my breathing and not my heart or my hormones.

*I can do this.*

As I headed to the bathroom exit, I heard my phone vibrating against something hard in my bag.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Hey girl!" Jenelle replied, chirpily. "How's the conference going so far?"

"It's a disaster. This was a bad idea. I need to leave."

"What? Are you serious?" Her laughter teased me through the phone. "It's not even noon on day one of the conference. How are you ready to leave already?"

"You know I purposely checked in at a different time than I told him I was going to check in. I ordered room service and didn't leave my room all night. I woke up early, but still slipped into the first session late so even if

he did see me, he wouldn't be able to talk to me. But then the session was starting to end early, so I ran here."

"And where's here?"

"The bathroom!"

"Why are you avoiding him? What's the worst thing that could happen?"

My William-induced anxiety kicked in. "He could try to talk to me about why we're never going to be together. He could try to talk to me about why we should be together. He could try to talk to me about his baby. He could try to talk to me about anything. He could look at me for too long. He could try to touch me. I just... I need a pep talk. I'm freaking out!"

"Okay, okay, I get it, but it's going to be okay," Jenelle reassured me. "And I know it's going to be hard, but you're going to have to rip the bandage off at some point. You aren't going to be able to avoid him for the entire week. So, isn't it better to just get it over and done with early?"

"Yes, that's what I thought, too. And then I saw that he was headed in my direction, so I ran out of the conference room and into the bathroom to call you!" I pushed my fingers into my forehead and rubbed in a circular motion.

"Oh! So, this freak out is fresh? Got it. Okay, just breathe." Her voice was soothing.

I inhaled and exhaled noisily. "I don't know what's happening to me. I'm usually good under pressure, but this has a lot on the line. This is not the time or the place for me to get emotional or to have an emotional conversation."

"Do you remember the other day when I thought Mike was going to break up with me and you told me to stop avoiding him and just go talk to him."

"Yes." I knew where the conversation was headed. "I need to take my own advice."

"Exactly! You told me that I needed to talk to him on my terms. For me to stop avoiding him and just set a time and date for us to talk. Put the ball in my court. So, that's what I'm telling you. If he asks you to talk, say no and then walk off. Don't let him try to trap you in a conversation you're not ready to have. You let him know you'll talk to him tonight, and you set the time. The ball will be in your court."

I nodded even though she couldn't see me. I already knew these things. I just needed to hear someone outside of myself remind me. I temporarily lost my mind as soon as I saw him moving toward me. I couldn't think straight.

"If I see him during this lunch break, I'll just tell him that I'm here to learn more about the construction business so I can stay on Phil East's good side. I'm here to go to the team building workshops. I'm here to learn so much that all companies all over the East Coast want to be branded and marketed by me. And I can't do that with tears streaming down my face."

"Exactly. But..." She hesitated "Why are you so sure he'll make you cry?"

"Because I might have cried a little bit last night thinking about this whole situation with him," I admitted, my voice low. "I hadn't even seen him yet and I was already preparing for my heart to be broken once again. Because honestly, there is no best-case scenario. He's—"

A flood of women entered the restroom noisily. I gave myself one more look in the mirror, and then I moved out of the way.

"Layla?"

"I'm still here. It must be time for lunch because a bunch of people just came in."

"Okay, you go out there and just remember everything you told me—same rules apply."

"Take the power back."

"There you go. Take the power back. You got this."

"Thank you so much."

"All I did was regurgitate what you told me to do the other day. You already knew what to do. But I'm happy to help."

"I needed to hear you say it though. I'm telling you, my brain shut down the moment I saw him heading my way. He has the nerve to be here looking extra good, knowing I'm vulnerable to his charms."

"You're vulnerable to that dick, too."

"Shut up," I groaned, stifling my giggle.

"But seriously, you are going to be fine."

"Thank you." I paused, feeling overwhelmed with appreciation. "Thank you for always being there for me. I feel so much better now."

"That's what friends are for," she sang. "And you do the same for me. Call me later and let me know what happens."

“I’ll video chat with you so you can watch live.”

She laughed as we said our goodbyes.

Twisting my watch around my wrist, I walked out the bathroom. *Maybe the lunch area will be so packed, he won’t even see—*

“Layla!”

I hated how my name on his lips sent chills down my spine. I closed my eyes and waited for the feeling to finish radiating through my body before I turned in the direction of his voice.

As soon as my eyes landed on him, all I wanted to do was go to him. Even as he leaned against the wall, his body rigid and tense, I could tell he was frustrated and nervous. Seeing that he felt the same way I did dissipated my nerves some.

“Hello,” I greeted him with a small smile. My heart pounded the closer I got to him. I stopped when I was arm’s length away. “How’s your morning going?”

He looked at me quizzically. “How’s my morning? Uh, let’s see... I was just in that boring ass session for two hours. Then, I finally take the one opportunity that presented itself to move to the other side of the room to be next to you and you get up and run away.”

“So...” I cocked my head to the side as I looked up at him. “You thought the session was boring?”

Stunned, his eyebrows lifted. “What?” Shaking his head, he begrudgingly let out a chuckle. “Why are you like this?”

A small smile played on my lips. I shrugged.

“Layla, please... can we talk?”

“Yes.”

A sigh of relief relaxed his shoulders and his body language changed. “Thank you.”

“But not right now. And not here.”

“When? Where?”

“Tonight. After dinner.”

“Can we at least have dinner together?”

“Not here. We need to keep this professional.”

“So, if I take you somewhere in the city, we can have dinner together.”

My stomach fluttered. It sounded like a date, but it wasn’t.

I cleared my throat. “Yes. We can have a conversation over dinner so that we can work together efficiently. Tomorrow is the first team building

day, and I don't want anything negatively impacting what we need to do professionally."

"Oh, that's it? That's the only reason you want to talk?"

I noticed a woman staring at us as she walked by. Bringing the focus of my gaze back to him, I lowered my voice. "I think the only circumstance that has changed is the fact that we're working together. Everything else is still the same, correct?"

He quietly stared into my eyes, his face hardening by the second.

"That's what I thought," I replied to his silence. "Our personal relationship hasn't changed because your situation hasn't changed. But if talking about it will help our professional relationship, then I'll see you tonight. Does meeting in the lobby at seven work for you?"

*I'll probably be starving by then. I should've said six.*

"Let's make it six," he answered, reading my thoughts.

I smiled and nodded. It was the little things that made me miss him most.

"William," a woman with a sharp tone interrupted. She didn't even acknowledge me or our conversation as she directed her attention to him. "Did you get the email from Mr. East? There's been an incident with—" Stopping abruptly, she tilted her head backward, in my direction. "I need to speak with you alone."

William looked concerned, but didn't hesitate to agree. "Yes, of course." He looked at me, and then he looked at his colleague. "Excuse me," he commanded as he brushed by her shoulder. Lowering his voice to a whisper, he promised, "I will find you as soon as I can."

I shook my head. "Take care of your business and I'll see you at six."

"Six in the lobby."

I nodded, and his lip curled upward as we silently said goodbye.

He turned, and with the woman in the brown pantsuit leading the way, he headed in the opposite direction of the conference rooms. I watched him until he disappeared, and then I realized that I looked like a smitten schoolgirl with hearts in my eyes.

"What am I doing?" I muttered under my breath. I quickly turned on my heel before recoiling "Oh!"

"Oh! S-so-sorry," Gordon sputtered, seeming just as startled as I was. "Sorry, Layla."



I shook my head. “It’s okay, but we may need to put a bell on you or something.”

“Sorry,” he laughed, running his hand through his red hair. “Just wanted to see if you wanted to eat lunch with us.”

“Oh, yeah, thanks.” I smiled. “I appreciate it.”

“I came out earlier, but I saw you and Will talking, and it didn’t seem like a good time to interrupt. So, I left and came back and then he was gone.”

I glanced at Gordon out of the corner of my eye. He didn’t ask a question, but I heard the question in his statement. I knew that whatever I said next was going to be the difference between the team seeing me as a marketing genius or a woman who fucks her way to the top. They didn’t know my history with William. They met me on Friday.

“Yeah, he’s in an Eastern Construction meeting with a woman—I forgot her name. But it seemed rather urgent. He said he’ll be back as soon as he can,” I replied. “I know which of the boxed lunches he’d want.”

“Oh...” He dragged the word out and made a face. “In a brown suit?”

“Yes. She seems nice.”

“Yeah, okay,” he muttered sarcastically. Changing his tone completely, he asked, “Do you think the afternoon session will be as boring as the first?”

“Um... I hope not.”

Lunch wasn’t bad. Gordon, Natalie, and Ebony were nice enough and the conversation was steady. I spent most of the time listening to them tell stories about how they got started. After lunch, we had two guest speakers. The first one was boring, but I was a little distracted looking for Will to come back. The second one was funny, but I was distracted by the combination of my nerves knotting in my empty stomach.

*I should’ve eaten more than a salad.*

I snuck out of the session a little before five to get ready for dinner. After a long, hot shower, I reapplied my makeup and slipped into a plunge push-up bra and matching thong. I reminded myself that it wasn’t a date, but with my smoky eyes, sexy tint on my lips, and beautifully pinned up hair, my stomach knotted in anticipation.

*It’s not a date. It’s just two people who used to date having dinner to discuss how we can move forward in a professional way. That’s it.*

I stood in front of the mirror in a formfitting, olive green dress with a deep V-neckline. I pulled on a black, motorcycle jacket, zipping it to cover my chest, and stepped into my spiked black heels. Twisting my watch around my wrist, I smiled at my reflection.

*Tonight's going to be fine.*

At six o'clock on the dot, I stepped out of the elevator, gripping my leather clutch. I walked toward the main entrance, catching the eye of a couple of people who I'd seen during the conference sessions.

"Wow," his deep voice carried from somewhere behind me.

I stopped in my tracks. With my eyes closed, I breathed in the sound and let William's appreciation brush against my skin. When I felt his hand on the small of my back, I looked over at him. Inhaling sharply, I gave him an appreciative once over.

"Wow, yourself," I greeted him.

Wearing grey denim jeans, a black button-up shirt, and black dress shoes, he flashed me his sexiest smile. His cologne wafted through the air, drawing me closer to him. It was clear that his intention was to seduce me.

Ushering me out of the hotel, we climbed into a car that was waiting for us. After thanking him for opening my door for me, we sat silently in the backseat until we arrived at a two-story brick building on the far end of South Street. The black cursive lettering made it a little difficult for me to catch the restaurant name.

"I'll get your door for you," William stated before exiting the car.

"Thank you," I told the driver, just as William opened my door. Taking my hand, he helped me out of the vehicle. "Thank you."

Instead of dropping my hand, he slipped his fingers between mine and the butterflies began instantly. I knew I should've pulled away, but it felt too good, too right. After a few seconds passed, I wouldn't have been able to pull away if I'd wanted to. Neither of us spoke as we entered through the glass doors.

"Welcome to Ms. Sheila's Soul Food." A woman with a thick New York accent greeted us. She stared at William for longer than necessary. "You look really nice tonight."

"I don't look as nice as my beautiful date, but thank you. We have a reservation," he smoothly deflected, still holding my hand.

"Oh, yeah, both of you."

She hadn't looked at me once, but I smiled because I understood where she was coming from. William looked incredible. Even though she wasn't doing a good job at her actual job by salivating over my dinner companion, I didn't mind because I remembered being the exact same way when I first saw him.

Shrugging it off, I replied anyway. "Thank you."

Tearing her eyes from him appeared to be difficult for her, but she managed to glance at me. "Of course."

Returning her eyes to William, she flushed. "Um, hi, yes... do you have a reservation?"

"Yes. Six-thirty. Greyson," William replied with the patience of a saint. "A mezzanine table was requested."

She returned her attention to Will. "We can get you seated right away if you'd like."

Smirking, he let go of my hand and wrapped his arm around my shoulder, pulling me into his side. "Yes, we'd like that. Thank you."

She glanced at me again, smiling brightly. "Right this way."

After leading us up a short flight of stairs that overlooked part of the dining area and to our table, she stared at him awkwardly. She just stood, grinning, as he pulled my chair out for me and pushed me in. He sat down across from me and picked up the large paper menu. I watched her as she continued staring at him and as he continued pretending like he didn't notice. The laughter was bubbling up inside of me, and I didn't know how much longer I was going to be able to witness the exchange.

William placed his menu down. "Uhhh, thank you."

"You're welcome," she giggled before she turned and scurried away.

As soon as she was down the stairs, unable to hold it in any longer, my amusement bubbled over into fits of laughter that quaked my entire body. It was only a few seconds before he joined in. We still hadn't said anything to each other, but each time one of us laughed harder, it triggered the other. Even as we looked over our menus, we continued to chuckle. We didn't pull it together until the waiter took our order.

As I watched him order, I realized that the laughter changed something. The lead that coated my belly had dissipated, and the tightness I saw in his shoulders was nonexistent. For the first time since we woke up together and enjoyed breakfast, it felt like us. All anxiety was gone. I looked over the table at William—not the man who's having a baby with someone else, not

the man who called me jealous, not the man who broke my heart, not my client and partner on the current project, just William—the love of my life.

“I’ll just have the Super Soul Salad with Italian dressing,” I ordered, handing the menu to the waiter.

“Would you like the breadsticks to go with it?” the waiter asked. “They’re free.”

I pursed my lips. I knew how my body metabolized carbs so I tried to stay away. But it felt like the moment he said breadsticks, the warm, garlicky smell entered my nostrils and I hesitated.

“You could get them and see how you feel. But if you say no, you won’t have them, and you might want them. But if you say yes, you’ll have them and if you want them, they’re here and if you don’t, I’ll eat them.”

Frowning, I nodded. “You make a compelling point.” I handed the waiter my menu. “But if I’m getting the breadsticks, I’m eating them. So yes, I’ll take them.”

William chuckled.

I grinned.

The waiter walked away, and then it was just us again.

I sighed audibly. “It feels good to laugh with you. I missed you. I missed...” My sentence trailed off as I struggled to articulate what it was that I was feeling.

“I missed you, too, Layla.” He shook his head slowly. “I’m sorry. For all of this.”

“I accept your apology for the stuff that was your fault. But not for all of it. Because it’s not all your fault. Some of it is just life.”

“Can we start over?” He leaned forward reaching for my hand. I gave it to him and he continued, “Can we please just start over?”

I squeezed his hand before trying to let it go. He tightened his grip, preventing me from escaping his grasp. The left side of my mouth quirked up and I gave in easily, continuing to hold his hand. As if the energy between us wasn’t electric already, feeling him grip me tighter caused a chill to run down my spine. But I held strong.

Exhaling through my nostrils, I pressed my thighs together.

*It’s going to be a long night.*

Taking my silence as an opportunity, he continued to make his case. “I just want a chance to do some things over with you. I don’t like the way

things ended with us. I don't like that things ended. And I just—can we please just start over?”

I cleared my throat. “How does that work? We pretend like you don't have a child on the way? We pretend like you're not playing house?” He opened his mouth as if he was about to say something, but I continued. “We can't pretend like this didn't happen. Because it did happen, Will. It is happening.”

He shook his head. “I don't know how it works, but I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make it work. Even when we weren't together for those two years, I knew if you needed me, you'd call and if I needed you, same thing. But now with this whole thing...” He rubbed his thumb against the back of my hand. “Not being with you was hard. But not having you in my life in any capacity doesn't work for me.”

“And having you in my life as you live happily ever after with someone else doesn't work for me.”

William's eyebrows furrowed in confusion as he eyed me warily. “Living happily ever after? I'm following through with my responsibility. I'm doing what I'm supposed to do. I'm not—do you think I'm with Molly?”

“It doesn't matter.” I looked down, feeling the sting of tears behind my eyes.

“It does matter.”

“No, it doesn't.” Meeting his stare, I blinked back the tears. “But it matters if she thinks you are. It matters what the truth is. It doesn't matter what I think. I just want to know what's real.”

“I'm not with her. There would be no logical reason for her to think I was with her. That's the truth.”

I quietly digested his words.

He let go of my hand and stood. Even though we were elevated, it felt like a private area despite the fact that anyone who bothered to look up could see us. Taking the couple of steps to my side of the table, he stood over me, forcing my eyes up as they remained trained on him. He leaned down, bringing his face close to mine. We were a little ahead of any kind of dinner rush, but the restaurant was decently packed. Yet, when his face was inches from mine, nothing else mattered. I didn't hear or see anyone but him.

With his hand dipping into the space between my jacket and my dress, William's fingers brushed my neck.

I felt that touch everywhere.

"You want to know what's real?" he whispered against the shell of my ear.

My nipples hardened. Swallowing hard, I asked, "What?"

He moved behind me. "Stand up, let me help you out of your jacket."

I stood, fully under whatever spell his words cast on me. My breathing changed as I looked straight ahead and waited.

I allowed him to remove my outerwear. As the sleeves slid down my arms, I couldn't help but think about him taking the same care as he removed my underwear later. Between my thoughts and him being so close, I felt exposed. Even though I was fully clothed and covered up, it felt like he was stripping me completely bare.

He put my jacket on the back of my chair and before I could sit down, I looked over my shoulder at him. When our eyes met again, I felt something pang in my chest. My heart faltered.

Turning me around and taking my hand, he placed it over his heart. "This is real. My love for you is real. Every single heartbeat beats for you. That's real. And I'm sorry. I'm sorry for any pain I've ever caused you because you are the last person I would ever want to hurt. That's real. And there is only one person I want to live happily ever after with and that's you. That's real."

His words were dripping in sincerity and vulnerability. I had no idea the conversation was going to get so real, so fast. But I was lost in it.

He brought his face closer and my lashes fluttered shut. I let out a shaky breath as I anticipated his kiss. My mind went blank. I couldn't hear anything over the pounding in my chest. Everything I felt—the want, the need, the desire, the longing—was vivid and intense. I couldn't pull away if I wanted to.

After what felt like a thirty second delay, I trembled as he softly pressed his lips against mine, allowing us to relish in the feeling of connectedness. He pulled back slightly, hovering just over my lips so that they were barely touching. My eyes opened to find his conveying the same mixture of love and heartbreak that was whipping through my brain.

I loved him, and he loved me. That was never the issue and it was never up for debate. He never had to prove his love to me or for me, and I knew

he felt the same. Our love was ours and it was forever. But again, our issue was never our feelings for one another. Our issues always resided outside of us. Our issues were always bigger than us. And as he looked at me, my breathing became erratic, and butterflies turned into bats in my belly. But it was my heart that did the most.

My heart sputtered wildly with the excitement of being in his arms, the warmth of his touch, the sweetness of his kiss. My heart sputtered wildly with the uncertainty of the moment, the fact of his impending fatherhood, the knowledge that our timing was wrong. My heart belonged to him in ways he didn't even realize, and I knew it was foolish to ignore the red flags. I didn't believe he would hurt me purposefully, but I knew that what kept us apart was outside of us.

"I love you," he murmured, his lips barely brushing mine as he said it.

"I love you, too."

He licked his lips and I knew he was about to kiss me again. I let my eyelids flutter closed.

"Pardon me?" our waiter interrupted, shattering the moment.

My eyes flew open.

We pulled away from one another. The moment I was out of his arms everything else came back into focus. The murmurs of the patrons enjoying conversations and the sounds of dishes clanking and scraping were just as present as the musicians who were warming up on the opposite side of the room. It was like I was waking from a dream as I looked around, confused.

"Your food will be out in a couple of minutes. I came to freshen your beverages and bring you bread," he explained, smiling knowingly at us. "Would you like anything else?"

"No, not at the moment. Thank you. Thanks," William answered, seemingly dazed.

The waiter turned and then paused. "Just a heads up... the other two mezzanine tables have seven o'clock reservations. One is downstairs now and waiting on the rest of her party." He lifted his eyebrows. "Just so you know."

I covered my face with my hands. "Thanks," I groaned, amusement stretched the word out and turned it into a giggle.

"We appreciate it, man," William said with a chuckle.

The waiter left and although we were still standing, the moment was gone.

We sat down and immediately grabbed our waters. After taking a sip, we stared at each other, moony-eyed for a while.

“So...” I started.

“So...” he returned.

I rotated my watch around my wrist and then ran my fingers over the face of it.

“Why are you nervous?” he asked as he picked up his wine glass.

“Who said I was nervous?” I questioned as nerves wound me up inside.

He winked. “You have a tell.”

I clasped my hands and put them in my lap. “I’m not nervous to be here with you or to be around you. But I guess I am nervous because like I said before, there’s no acting like nothing has happened or that nothing has changed.”

“I know we can’t pretend like nothing happened. I just want to handle it better. You’ve always done what you wanted so maybe if I handled it differently, you would still feel the same way. But I can’t live with the thought that the reason we are in this place is because I didn’t do what I should’ve done.”

“And what do you think you should’ve done?”

“Well, to start, I should’ve told you that we could figure this whole thing out together. I should’ve told you I could still be there for my child and be there for you. I should’ve reminded you that you are the most important person in my life.”

My stomach was in knots as I flashed back to the heartbreak and rejection that I felt.

*But I have to take care of Molly. I have to do what’s right for my child right now.*

I had cried myself to sleep many nights as those words replayed in my brain. I took a moment to look at the couple being seated at the table next to us. We were still far enough away to have privacy, but just knowing we had company on the mezzanine level had me hyper aware.

I cleared my throat and lowered my voice fractionally. “You said you needed to focus on taking care of Molly and the baby.”

He sighed audibly, scrubbing his face with his hands. “I know. I know. I hate that I put it like that. Like I didn’t have room for you in my life, too.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”



My eyes started to sting as I allowed his apology to touch where it hurt. “Apology accepted.” Putting my wine glass to my lips, I tipped in a mouthful of wine. I let the taste sit on my tongue for a second as I thought about the photos of Molly that were posted on social media. I let the sting subside a bit before swallowing it down. “But you were right.”

His brows creased. “What? What do you mean?” He shook his head. “I wasn’t.”

“You were. Your immediate reaction wasn’t just to make sure the mother of your child was okay. You said you needed to take care of her. Your child should definitely be your priority. And right now, your child is five months from existing outside of Molly. So, for the next five months, you will be making another woman, your ex-girlfriend, the ex-girlfriend you started dating immediately after we split, your priority.” I took another swig from my glass, but maintained eye contact the entire time. “There’s no room for me in that equation. There’s no space for me in that life.”

“There’s always space for you in my life. You live in my heart. You consume my thoughts. You run through my veins. Layla, I love you.”

“And I love you. But timing is everything.”

“Right. So, it’s not a coincidence that we’re here together right now.”

“No, we work for companies that often work together. When I say timing is everything, I’m thinking about the timing of when she appeared in your life moments after our first-time dating, and then after almost two years, when we attempt again, here she comes. It just feels like...we’ve missed our two opportunities for it to be right.”

*Timing is everything.*

He licked his lips. “Well even if that were true, we’re still in our second opportunity, right? And regardless of all that, we love each other.”

“I think the introduction of a baby into the mix pretty much concluded opportunity number two. And at the end of the day, what’s love got to do with it?”

“Don’t quote Tina Turner at me.”

The left side of my mouth turned upward slightly in an attempt to smile, but I was too sad to really give in to it. For the life of me, I didn’t understand how he didn’t see the issue. I knew that he knew it took more than love to make a relationship work, but when it came to our relationship, he was either in denial or he was being willfully obtuse.

“William...”

“I know,” he cut me off before I had a chance to continue. “I’m not trying to downplay the fact that there will be times when I will be with Molly. She has doctor’s appointments that I plan to be there for because it concerns my child. If she needs food, I’ll be there to make sure she’s eating enough to feed my child. If she needs medication or anything that affects her health, I will be there because it affects my child.”

I nodded. “Yes, as you should. And like I said before, you’re a good man and you are going to be an amazing father. It’s great that you’re going to be there for whatever Molly needs.”

“I feel like there’s a ‘but’ coming.”

“But where is the line?” I shrugged my shoulders defiantly. “If she has a bad dream and can’t sleep, are you going to hold her until she’s able to? If she has a craving in the middle of the night, are you going to go make the store run for her? If she has back pain and swollen feet, are you going to massage her? If she needs someone to talk to because she’s feeling emotional in the middle of the night, are you sitting up to talk to her? Where is the line? Because all of those things affect the pregnancy.”

“Come on, Layla. You know I wouldn’t do anything that would disrespect you.”

“I believe you. I don’t think you would do anything on purpose. I don’t believe you would hurt me intentionally. But you would do whatever you needed to do for your child because you’re that type of man. I don’t fault you for that. I’m just saying that I do know that if you are doing relationship type of things, who’s to say you won’t slip—”

Leaning forward, William narrowed his eyes at me. “I’m not trying to be with Molly,” he snapped. His voice was low and gritty. “I’m trying to be with you. I don’t want her. I want you. I only want you. I’ve always only wanted you. And yeah, it fucking sucks that I got someone pregnant just when I was about to get the girl of my dreams back in my life. You are the only person I want to spend my life with. You are who I want to give my last name to. So, yes, I’ll have to spend more time with Molly over the next few months. I’ll see her more often than I’d like. But I’m trying to come home to you every night. What don’t you understand about that? Unless you don’t trust...” His sentence trailed off and hung heavily between us as if a realization just hit him.

“And here we are...” The waiter interrupted the tension as he, along with another server, placed our food in front of us.

We sat silently, staring at one another until it was just us again.

“Do you trust me?” William asked, his jaw clenched as he waited for the answer.

“Yes,” I answered honestly. “But—”

“There’s no but. It’s a yes or no question.”

“And I gave you my answer. But I’m trying to expand upon it and let you know how I’m feeling.”

“I’ve been in a few relationships and I’ve been completely faithful in all of them. And I didn’t even love them. So, for you to question—”

I growled loudly, letting my head fall back. “Who is questioning you? Who? Who, Will? You wanted to talk, and so I’m talking. I’m trying to tell you how I feel.”

He lifted his hands in surrender. “You’re right, go ahead.”

“You and Molly are physically attracted to each other.” He started to say something, but I waved my hand in the air. “Just listen! I don’t give a damn about that. Not by itself anyway. But you two slept together. You two are still attracted to each other. You two are having a child together—a first child for the both of you. And you’ve been spending a lot of time together, and you are talking about how you’re going to be there for her through this big moment in both of your lives. So, it’s not that I don’t trust you. I do trust you. But I also know that things happen. I don’t think it would be on purpose, but I could see you wanting to be with the mother of your child. And I already know she’s hoping that happens. I could see you two falling into the mommy and daddy role, playing house to the point that it just feels right.”

William shook his head.

“Please don’t say it won’t happen,” I whispered, feeling a little exposed. “You can’t say how you’ll feel because you’ve never had a child with someone before. You don’t know how it’ll make you feel.”

He sighed, his eyes searching mine. “I don’t know what to do, Layla. I don’t know how to prove to you that you’re the only one that I want.”

My chin trembled as I lifted my shoulders in defeat.

If I was being completely honest with myself, I didn’t know how he could prove that to me either. I knew I was a catch. I knew I was perfect for him. I knew we were perfect together. Women hit on him all the time and I wasn’t threatened because I trusted him and I knew he wouldn’t jeopardize

our relationship. But the one thing I couldn't give him, Molly could. And that got under my skin like nothing else.

"Can I say something without you getting mad at me?" William asked.

I nodded, but couldn't bring myself to speak.

"I think you're full of shit."

My eyes opened wide and my jaw dropped. "What?!"

"You're telling me that you don't want to try this"—he gestured between the two of us—"because you're scared I'm going to leave you for Molly? If that's truly what it is and I'm off base, I apologize. But I think that's bullshit. Because you know damn well I wouldn't leave you for anyone." He ran a hand down his face. "I think you're doing this because of the baby. I think you think that I'll somehow love you less if another woman has my child."

I wasn't quick enough to catch the tear before it dropped. I swiped at my face. I wanted to storm off. I wanted to be angry. I wanted to not feel everything I was feeling.

"Tell me I'm wrong," he challenged.

My chest rose and fell as I narrowed my eyes at him. I swallowed hard, but I couldn't respond. I felt like I'd been punched in the stomach. More tears kept threatening to spill over, but I was able to keep them at bay.

Lifting his hand to catch the eye of the waitress that helped our waiter, William asked for to-go boxes and the check. Before she fully turned to go get our stuff, he was on his feet and pulling me out of my chair. Wrapping his arms around me, he pulled me close. I buried my face in his neck.

"I don't care that you can't have kids. I never did, Layla," he whispered softly against my ear. "I want you. I want you. Do you understand that? And I didn't plan this kid with Molly, but it happened and I'm going to love him or her more than any kid can possibly be loved. But that doesn't take anything away from how I feel about you. It never has."

The tears flowed freely, and I didn't even try to catch them. I just held on to William tighter and let the tears drop. I held my breath to keep from sobbing.

I heard William speaking, I guessed it was to the waiter, but I didn't let him go. I couldn't. I would've fallen apart instantly. After a few minutes, I gathered myself enough to unravel myself from him. Glancing at the table, I saw our food perfectly packaged and the bill paid. Picking up my cloth napkin, I dried my face and then pulled on my leather jacket.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized. It wasn’t like me to break down in public like that.

With the most understanding and loving look in his eyes, he smiled at me. “The only thing you need to be sorry for is the pool of snot you left on my shirt.”

Laughing loudly, I slapped at his outstretched arm before attaching myself to his side and allowing him to tuck me under his arm. “There’s no snot on your shirt!” I hissed as quietly as possible as I turned my head to better assess the dark, wet patch over his neck and chest area. “See, it’s just tears!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” He kissed the top of my head just before we descended the stairs.

On the way back to the hotel, I checked my reflection with one hand and held Will’s hand with the other. Although my eyes were still pink, it wasn’t obvious that I had cried my eyes out in front of a restaurant full of people. When we got out of the car, we weren’t the same people who were holding hands and giggling in the backseat. We walked with a foot of space between us and didn’t speak until we entered the empty elevator.

“I’m walking you to your room and then I’m returning to mine,” William announced as soon as the doors closed behind us.

I made a face. “That’s rather presumptuous of you,” I scoffed playfully.

He chuckled. “The whole team, except for you is on the fourth floor. They’re still trying to feel me out and there’s quite a bit of ass kissing going on, so they would notice if I rolled in before breakfast.”

Still making the face, I cocked my head to the side. “I don’t recall inviting you to stay the night,” I pointed out as we got off on the sixth floor. “You’re helping me with my leftovers. That’s it.”

As soon as we were in the room, he sat the bags down on the table and pulled out his food. He went to wash his hands and then sat back down at the table.

“Yeah, that plan to leave was abandoned quickly, I see,” I joked as I washed my hands. I grabbed the only two bottles of water from the complimentary welcome basket. When I sat at the table with him, he handed me plastic utensils. “Did you hear what I said?”

“Yeah, I heard you, but I was enjoying the silence. I knew you were going to come over here eating all loud and shit.”

I wasn't expecting him to say that so I choked on my water, coughing and laughing, yet unable to breathe.

"Oh shit! Are you okay? Put your arms up! Layla, put your arms over your head!"

"Stop!" I laughed, and quickly it turned into another round of hacking coughs.

His eyes were wide. His muscular body was perched on the edge of the chair, ready to leap into action if necessary. "Well, stop choking!"

"You're making me laugh, that's why I was choking!"

"Oh, okay. So, it's my fault you never learned how to drink out of a bottle? Got it."

"Whatever," I said dismissively as I grinned across the table at him. "Eat your food."

"You sounded like your mom just now."

"What's so funny is that she said the same thing when I was telling her about..." Stopping myself before the rest of the sentence slipped out of my mouth, I changed the subject. "Sooooo... how's your mom?"

"No, no, no..." He shook his head and leaned back from the table as if he were insulted. "She's fine. What were you about to say?"

I sighed loudly. "Fine! When I was telling my mom how I felt about being here this week, she said I sounded like her because of the anxiety. And she was having dinner so I told her to eat her food. And she said I sounded exactly how she imagined she sounded. Then she had jokes." I shook my head. "Anyway, how's your mom?"

"How did you feel about being here?"

I took a bite of my food and chewed it for a long time. "I was nervous, confused...excited." I hesitated before continuing. "Thank you for the flowers."

His eye brows shot up. "What flowers?" He was only able to hold a straight face for thirty seconds.

"Ugh!" I crumpled up a clean napkin and threw it at him.

"You're welcome." He threw the napkin back at me.

I didn't realize until an hour later when I was fully clothed, falling asleep in his arms that we had somehow started over.

## CHAPTER TEN

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“**A**nd you still haven’t slept together?” Jenelle screeched into my ear as I sat on the bed putting lotion on my legs in preparation for a big night out—as a team.

“No, we’re taking it slow.” I eyed two dress options, still undecided on what to wear.

“You are telling me that you and William, the man who looks like some sort of African god, spent Monday night, Tuesday night, and Wednesday night together, and nothing happened. Are you on your cycle?”

I giggled at the concern in her voice.

“No, we’ve just been talking and then falling asleep together. I mean, there’s definitely been kissing and touching and fondling and...you know.”

“Okay, well that’s a start. Because if your Nefertiti-looking ass told me that you two didn’t do anything at all, I would’ve called the police and reported you missing.”

“What? Missing?”

“Yes, missing! The Layla Walker I know basically had sex every day she was with William. So, this new pod-person ‘taking it slow’ and ‘talking about our hopes and dreams’ is sounding suspicious.”

I threw my head back as I laughed. “No, it’s really me!” I exclaimed playfully. “I don’t know, Jenelle. We’ve just been talking about everything and through everything. The first night, Monday night, we fell asleep talking and watching TV, just catching up. Tuesday night, I was down to fuck. I had the sexy lingerie under my t-shirt and sweats, the mood music was playing. I even ordered wine. But when he came in, I could tell

something was off. Come to find out, Molly had really bad chest pains and he was worried.”

“I’m sorry he was worried and that she’s having chest pains, but can I just say that I would’ve gone completely dry as soon as he said her name. Dry, like the Sahara Desert dry.”

I snickered. “Stop it! Honestly, because of the conversation we had Monday night, it didn’t rub me the wrong way like it would’ve before. But you’re right. I did lose interest in sex as we discussed his child’s mother.”

“Just say baby momma. You know you want to.”

That term had always irked my nerves for some reason.

“So, I asked about the pregnancy and before he told me anything, he asked me what I was comfortable with. He told me he didn’t want to mess things up with me. He said he didn’t want to scare me away by telling me too much too soon, but he also never wanted to keep anything from me. Ultimately, he wanted me to decide.”

“Mike asked me if I wanted hamburgers or hotdogs, but I digress. William is on some grown man shit right now! He is catering to your needs and shit! Listen, I think you made a mistake... You should’ve fucked him.”

Laughing, I switched Jenelle to speaker phone and continued getting dressed. “We talked about my feelings and how I had no reason to feel insecure about Molly having his baby. We talked about his feelings and how he had no reason to feel like he couldn’t talk to me about anything. Listen... it was deep. So, we ended up falling asleep holding each other.”

“And what was wrong with Molly?”

“Chest pains. She was upset because she had to do the pregnancy thing alone. He told me that every time he can’t be around, she says that and it’s starting to get to him. But the chest pains she was complaining about turned out to just be heartburn. He found that out yesterday. We talked about that for maybe ten minutes, and then we just laughed and played all night.”

“Not the kind of playing you needed to be doing, but still, that sounds amazing. I thought you were going to say something like ‘and Wednesday night, he brought over a pottery wheel and we played in the clay.’”

She was laughing so hard by the end of the sentence that I barely understood what she was saying.

When we both got our laughter under control, I fixed my hair and make-up as she told me about Mike’s six-month campaign for boyfriend of the year.



“He truly is the most romantic man and when you talk about him, you transform from ‘why didn’t you fuck him on sight’ to ‘Mike makes all the trees a little greener and the sky a little more blue.’ It’s cute,” I joked, smiling as I heard her amused cackling.

We talked for a few more minutes before saying our goodbyes.

“Which one am I going to wear?” I mused aloud as I stood in a sexy, sheer black plunge bra and G-string set with matching garter belt and nylons. I felt sexy and knew that either dress would look nice for a night out with the Burton Spencer team. But I needed to seduce William and make him reconsider taking it slow.

*Although, I do appreciate it. It’s so sweet of him to want to make sure he doesn’t mess things up by rushing anything with us. But um...*

The knock at the door caught me off guard, but there was only one person it could be.

With a smile, I slipped into my black spiked heels and adjusted the garter belt. Peeking through the peep hole, my smile got bigger.

“Who is it?” I asked playfully.

“The person you saw when you looked through the peephole.”

Stifling a laugh, I opened the door fractionally, hiding my body behind it. “I’m having a little trouble figuring out what I’m going to wear.”

“Does that mean you want me to pick?”

“Hmm... that’s a good idea.” I grinned at him as I backed up, allowing the door to open wider as I remained blocked from his view. “Come in.”

He walked through the door and before he could turn around to see me, I wrapped my arms around him, my front to his back.

“Layla, Layla, Layla,” he greeted me, rubbing his hands over my arms. We waddled together deeper into the room, stopping in front of the bed. He turned to face the closet. “I could probably pick the best dress if you modeled them for me.”

“Maybe...” I stretched the word out. “But I know we talked about taking it slow. If I am changing in front of you, we may go all the way.”

“Hey, come here.” He tried to peel my arms from him, but I wouldn’t let him go. “If you don’t feel comfortable, we don’t have to do anything. Come here. We can do as much or as little as you want. I just want to talk to—come here.” He let out an amused huff of air as he tried to shake me loose. He dropped his arms. “You know I could get you off if I really wanted to.”

“Oh, I know,” I replied seductively, moving my hands up and down his firm chest and abs.

He chuckled under his breath. “I meant, I could get you off my back if I wanted to.” Taking one of my hands from his chest, he lifted it to his lips. “But when we get back from dinner, if you wanted me to get you off, all you have to do is ask.”

I let go of him. “Do I have to wait until after dinner?” I asked, backing away and waiting for him to turn around.

“Damn,” William let the word slip out as he ran his tongue across his lips, wetting them. He didn’t move anything, but his head as his eyes drank me in.

Just watching his eyes move over my body was such a turn on. The raw attraction between us held me hostage as he quietly looked me over. The love I felt for him was all-consuming. I didn’t want to wait to have sex with him any longer. I needed him, and I needed that release.

I knew William was just as ready for us to have sex as I was. Wednesday night as we were playing and touching, kissing and stroking, he was hard as a rock, just like the two nights before. I knew that the moment he had slipped his finger inside me and felt how wet I was for him, he was ready for action. He’d gotten me off with his fingers and tongue and when I wanted to return the favor, I’d barely gotten started before he came. I knew it wouldn’t take any convincing, but he wanted me to be sure about us. And while I was sure about my feelings for him, a small part of me was scared to give in.

The “what if” made me hesitate.

I never got over William the first time and if I let myself go down the rabbit hole again, I didn’t think I would survive it. My mind, body, and soul reacted to his closeness as if nothing else mattered but us being together. The energy that traveled between us was equal parts sexual and sacred, erotic and ethereal. We didn’t just bring each other pleasure physically, it was also a spiritual experience. I got emotional whenever he looked at me with that intoxicating mix of love, lust, and worship.

I was lost in his eyes, and he caught me off guard when his hands slid across my bare hips. The feeling caused me to suck in a sharp breath. His fingertips danced along my skin. I couldn’t keep my eyes open. I wasn’t sure if he pulled me into him or if I naturally gravitated to his warmth, but as soon as our bodies touched, our mouths crashed together.

His hands slid down my body before cupping my ass and pulling me into his hardness. I moaned into his mouth, wrapping my arms around his neck. I wanted to climb him.

“How much time do we have?” I whispered, pulling away from him and sitting on the bed. I pushed myself backward, slithering to the middle and then crossing my legs.

“Forever.” His chest rose and fell as he looked at me like I was a feast he couldn’t wait to devour. His muscular arms flexed as he lifted my legs and spread them. “Lay back.”

I lay mostly naked before him and he eyed me hungrily. His tongue moved from one corner of his mouth to the other. I took one hand and tweaked my nipple as my entire body burned under his gaze.

“Will,” I breathed softly, moving my hands down my body. “I’ve missed you.”

My soft admission seemed to be exactly what he was waiting for as his brown eyes held a spark. A smirk slowly appeared on his lips. He pulled my legs more, dragging me toward the edge of the bed. He dropped down to his knees and trailed kisses from one hip bone to the other. “Are you offering me dessert before dinner?”

I moaned as he kissed a slow, sexy path past my belly button and in the valley between my breasts. He took his time as he covered my collarbone and my neck. The wet, leisurely kisses forced contented sighs out of me.

Balancing his body above me, he finally kissed my lips. Teasingly exploring my mouth, he used the hand that wasn’t propping him up to travel down my body. He started at the base of my neck and moved over the swell of my breasts. My nipples were so hard as they anticipated his touch. Slipping his fingers inside my bra, he massaged his way over each one.

I moaned into his mouth again. As badly as I wanted him to suck my nipples, I didn’t want him to stop kissing me. As his tongue wrestled with mine, I could taste his desire and I couldn’t get enough. I reached up and grabbed his head as I rolled my body against his. I didn’t want a quickie, but I knew we didn’t have much time and I needed him inside me. I wrapped my legs around his waist. His teasing had me ready.

I felt him smile against my lips. He kissed his way over to my ear. “I know what you want,” William breathed hotly against my ear. “You’re going to have to ask me for it.”

As he stood, my legs slipped, but still draped loosely around his hips. His hands skated across my belly, and his fingers dragged down my smooth skin and over the sexy detailing of my garter belt and G-string. He slid his finger along the material, following the heat, but not quite hitting the mark.

“Touch me,” I begged causing him to groan.

“We’re going to be late,” he told me as he slipped beneath the sheer black material and brushed against me.

“Yes,” I hissed as his touch radiated through my entire body.

“You’re okay with us being a little late?” he asked as he moved over my slit, dipping into my wetness before toying with my clit.

The noise that erupted out of me was primal as he spread my wetness around and rubbed me rhythmically. It didn’t take long for my body to be on edge. Because of the forty-five-degree angle I was in, I couldn’t do anything but take it.

“Oh, you like that?” he asked rhetorically as he parted my lips and slipped his finger inside. “What about this?”

I let out a noise that was akin to a silent scream.

He stopped, unwrapped my legs from around him, and repositioned himself over me. With his knee on the bed beside me, he was able to kiss me and play with me at the same time. With our mouths and tongues exploring, it intensified every place he touched me; it intensified our connection. But as soon as he slipped his middle finger into me, my head tipped back, and I moaned into his mouth. The kiss became almost desperate.

His tongue played with mine and I felt it everywhere. Something deep in my gut tightened. The buildup of my orgasm was fast and just when I thought I was going over the edge, he slowed down, calming my overheated body. He alternated between bringing me to the edge and just barely stoking the fire. I rolled my body to meet his hand as he moved in and out of me. His teasing had made me so wet and so ready for him that it drove me insane.

“Listen to how wet you get for me,” he growled as he pulled out of the kiss.

Hearing the want in his voice did something to me. I closed my eyes, focusing on the way he rubbed my g-spot. He touched me like I was necessary to feed his hunger. I responded like his touch quenched my thirst.

“Yes, yes,” I murmured. “I’m ready for you. I want you. Please... please...” I hated how needy I sounded, but William brought it out of me.

He kissed down my neck as he continued to stroke me. He didn’t say a word, but as he readjusted his position, I instinctively knew what was about to happen. A chill ran through me.

He pulled my G-string to the side. I felt his breath tickling my smooth skin as he settled between my legs. His fingers hooked upward, and my hips lifted again.

“Oh, yeah...that’s—oh shit!” I groaned as his mouth latched on to my clit. He swirled his tongue around and then sucked.

I saw heaven.

My body stiffened as I let out a noise that was part gasp and part moan. “Will...”

The sensation of heat exploding from my core and coursing throughout my body consumed me. I’d been hanging on the brink of orgasm for so long that when it finally came, I felt it everywhere. I closed my eyes tightly, relishing in the feel of him. My heart was pounding in my chest and my eyes were still clamped shut.

“Holy shit,” I panted as William kissed his way back up my body.

He pressed his lips against mine. “Thank you for dessert.”

“No, thank you.” I sucked on his bottom lip. “Now it’s your turn.”

He smiled, slowly rising to his full height. “Not yet.” He reached for my hand and placed it on his crotch. He groaned as I felt how hard he was, my fingers running along his dick print. Backing away from my touch, he chuckled a little. “You need to stop. You’re going to take me over the edge and I won’t be able to take my time with you.”

“We have all night for you to take your time,” I flirted, reaching out for him again. “I want you now.”

“I want you, too.” He licked his lips. “And tasting you has me wanting to slide in you right now.”

“Do it,” I whispered wantonly. “Please.”

“God, you’re sexy.” He dropped a kiss against my lips. “Don’t worry. I will be inside you before the night is over. Trust and believe that.” He looked over at the two dresses and pointed. “Wear the grey one.”

I went to the bathroom to quickly clean myself up and slip on the grey A-line dress. It didn’t show off my ass like the pink one did, but it was the perfect dress for a night out with colleagues. I touched up my hair and opted

for minimal makeup, just lipstick. Paired with my leather jacket, my outfit looked both chic and badass.

“How do I look?” I asked as I emerged out of the bathroom.

He eyed me from head to toe with an adoring smile. “You look beautiful.” He walked over and pulled me into a hug. “Everything about you is absolutely beautiful.”

I hugged him tight. “You give me butterflies. After all this time, you still do.”

He went to the bathroom to wash his hands and face before we left.

We arrived at Lucky Bar thirty minutes late, but we found Ebony, Natalie, and Gordon quickly. A night of dinner and casual conversation with the group proved to be a lot more fun than I anticipated. The night flew by and even though I was tired, I wasn’t ready for it to end.

Natalie was the first to head back to the hotel. Ebony, Gordon, William and I left maybe thirty minutes later. Because we were having a good time and not even thinking about it, we all climbed in the elevator together. When it stopped on their floor, Ebony and Gordon walked out, but William didn’t move.

Gordon looked back. I saw Ebony smirking, but she didn’t say anything. Looking at William and then me and then back to William, Gordon announced, “This is our floor.”

“Oh!” William exclaimed with a genuinely shocked facial expression.

It was clear to me that his shock was due to the fact that he forgot that we weren’t supposed to look like we were involved while we were at the conference—and going to my room would definitely blow our cover.

“I need to make sure Layla makes it safely to her room,” he offered flimsily.

I stifled a giggle as I told them goodbye.

“Okay, I have to ask you something, so I’ll wait for you here,” Gordon stated as the doors closed.

I pouted as William pulled me into him. My body was flush against his. Without a word, his lips covered mine.

“Mmmm…” I moaned excitedly as I wrapped my arms around him tighter.

His hands were everywhere before he backed me up against the wall. As he deepened the kiss, I snaked my hand between us, feeling how hard he was.

The elevator dinged. We pulled apart only long enough for us to make sure no one was there, waiting. We kissed our way to my room, stopping to laugh as we tried to get the key and get in without stopping our kiss. It didn't work, so we had to pull apart.

"I've been wanting to do that all night," he murmured against my ear as I tried to put the key in the door. "I hate having to pretend like you're not mine."

Feeling his breath on the shell of my ear as he said those words made me shake in anticipation. "I'm yours?"

"You will forever be mine." He grabbed my hips, pulling me into his erection.

I closed my eyes briefly as I felt his words. "Promise?" I replied as I finally opened the door.

"You are everything to me, Layla."

Turning to face him, I pushed my lips upward connecting with his. "Let me show you how much I love being yours." I stepped backward, but he didn't move with me, breaking the kiss.

"I can't go in." His eyes were dark and wild and his breathing ragged.

I took another step backward and grabbed the hem of my dress, slowly lifting it. "You don't want to come...in...?" I paused intentionally as I lifted the skirt higher, exposing my garter.

"Fuck," he growled, running his hand over the bulge in the front of his pants. "What are you doing to me?"

"Nothing yet." I continued lifting the skirt, high enough that my panties showed. "But if you come play, you'll enjoy every single thing I do to you."

"Shit, Layla." Ripping his eyes away from me, he exhaled. "If I go in, I'm not leaving."

With a smile, I dropped the skirt of my dress. "I understand." I moved toward him. "Handle whatever you have to handle with Gordon and then get your sexy ass back up here." I sucked his bottom lip and trailed my finger over the outline of his dickhead. "I have some unfinished business with him."

"If Gordon doesn't have an emergency, he's fired."

I laughed.

He kissed me while I was still smiling and then backed away. "I love you."

"I love you."

*Well shit...* I pouted as I closed my door and slumped against it. I was so hot and bothered for him. I wanted it bad. *Hopefully it won't take long.*

I showered, and as my body relaxed, I realized how tired I was. I didn't want to give up hope, but as time ticked away, I didn't think William was going to make it back. Still putting on the sexiest lingerie in my bag, I climbed in bed and set my phone on my pillow beside me.

*I'm just going to close my eyes for a second.*

My phone rang loudly, startling me awake. The sun pierced through the room, filling it with so much light that I could barely open my eyes. I squinted at the screen and didn't recognize the number. I answered it anyway.

"Hello?" My voice was deeper than normal and gritty. I tried to clear my throat and repeated myself. "Hello?"

"Hi, may I speak with Layla Walker?"

"This is she," I grumbled, pushing myself into a sitting position. I rubbed my eyes.

"Layla, this is Dr. Rose. I'm sorry to wake you."

I paused, glancing at the number again before speaking. It wasn't the office number. "No worries. What's going on?"

"I'd like to schedule a time for you to come speak with me at your earliest convenience."

I hesitated. "What's this about?"

"Can you come into the office sometime today?"

My heart started racing. She'd never called before, let alone to asked me to come speak with her. If I wasn't up before, I was up then. Clearing my throat again, I tried to swallow the ball of anxiety that was making it hard for me to speak.

"I'm in Philadelphia, but the conference is over at noon. Depending on traffic, I could get there in three hours. I'd want to be on the safe side and say four. Yeah, four. Can I have a four o'clock appointment?" I felt myself rambling.

"Four o'clock is fine. I will have the scheduler put you in my rotation. I will see you later today."

"Okay, thanks. Bye."

My phone slipped out of my hand and hit the bed. *This can't be good.*

Stretching my legs out, I realized I still had on my lingerie and I was un-fucked. "What happened to him?"



With shaky hands, I grabbed my phone and saw that I had no missed calls or messages from William. I started to call him, but I hung up immediately.

*What if she called to say I'm pregnant? Oh my God.*

I felt like I was going to be sick.

Packing my belongings, I kept going back and forth with staying until noon. I didn't want to disappoint William, Phillip East, or the whole Burton Spencer team, but I didn't think I was going to be able to focus at all. I needed to talk it out with someone, but I didn't want to talk to anyone about it, except William. But I couldn't talk to him about it because I didn't have enough information to talk to him about it. If he was freaking out because of his unexpected pregnancy with Molly, he was going to lose his whole mind if there was a second one.

"Great, not only did we not have sex all week, but we only had sex that one night since our break up. Sure, it was multiple times that night, but one night of passion and I could possibly be pregnant," I muttered. "What the fuck?"

I shook my head, pushing the thought out of my mind.

I'd showered, finished packing, and had dropped off my luggage to my car before entering the conference room. Even though I knew why I hadn't called William, I was a little annoyed that he hadn't called me to at least explain why he didn't show back up last night. I looked around for him first, because I always did. Even when I didn't realize I was doing it, I did it. And when I didn't see him, I looked around until I spotted anyone from the Burton Spencer team. Gordon's red hair stood out in a crowd, but that time it was Ebony in her purple and orange dress. It was bright and eye catching.

Forcing a smile to cover my nerves, I made a beeline for them.

"Good morning!" I greeted Ebony as I took a seat next to her.

"Good morning! How did you sleep?" The suggestive way she said it indicated that she knew something.

"I had a very uneventful night," I answered, watching her smile grow.

"Oh okay," she said in a knowing way. "Uneventful."

I didn't respond, but I looked away so I didn't laugh. Instead, I crossed my legs in the tight, black pencil skirt and glanced around the room. "Where's Gordon and Natalie?"

“I nodded off and Gordon was still loudly talking to Will about Lord knows what. Something about him being in love with Natalie. I just kept hearing his voice every now and again for at least thirty minutes before I passed out. Natalie didn’t answer the phone this morning when I called to see if she wanted breakfast.” She shrugged.

“Oh, that’s strange.” I looked around the room. “And question... where did you get your braids done? They look so good.”

“Thank you! BB’s Braid Boutique. Now, I have a question for you.”

I lifted my eyebrows. “What’s that?”

“Where’s Will?”

“I don’t know.” I looked around as casually as possible. “Maybe with Gordon and Natalie?”

“Maybe...” She eyed me suspiciously before beaming at me. “He looks really good.”

Tapping my chin, I nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I agree. He’s an attractive man.”

“I wonder if he’s seeing anyone.”

“Good question.”

She narrowed her eyes at me playfully. “Come on! I gave you so many openings to tell me. I know you two are hooking up.”

Feigning surprise, I put my hand to my chest and gasped. “What?”

“Ha, ha.” She rolled her eyes. “Anyone who has eyes and who is paying attention could tell there’s something between you two. I knew something was up at that meeting at your office. But if I needed proof, I saw you two on Monday night in the lobby. You had on this green dress—by the way, where did you get that from? It was hot, and I need that!”

“It’s from Tixi’s in D.C. Um... I didn’t see you in the lobby.”

“You didn’t see me because as soon as you saw Will, that’s all you saw. And he was no better. He had tunnel vision. It was cute. It reminded me of a movie or something. Like that kind of over-the-top feeling you get when you meet someone, and it’s love at first sight and they can do no wrong.” She had a wistful look in her eye. “That’s how I’m trying to be with my next man. If we can’t be googly-eyed over each other, then I don’t want it!”

I made my face as blank as possible. “I don’t even know what to say to that.”

She giggled. “Yeah, okay.” She nodded her head toward the doorway. “Gordon’s here. And just so you know, your secret is safe with me.”

“If there was anything to tell, I would say that I appreciated your discretion. But...” I lifted my hands up and shrugged my shoulders.

“Hey, Gordon!” Ebony greeted him as soon as he was within earshot. “How are you?”

“Hey, ladies. I’ve been better.” He plopped down in a chair. “Natalie’s mad at me, and I don’t know...” He shook his head.

“What happened?” Ebony asked.

“Is everything okay?” I was concerned but a little distracted as I checked my phone. The last speaker of the week was supposed to start at ten o’clock and I needed to get on the road as soon as possible.

“It’s a long story. Will is supposed to try to mediate, but he got a phone call and bolted.”

My head jerked upward. “What?”

“He got a call, packed his stuff, and left.” Gordon ran his hands through his red hair.

My stomach lurched. “What time?”

“I don’t remember.” He looked confused and preoccupied “We had only been talking for like an hour. Maybe a little more. So, maybe half past one...maybe?”

“In the morning?” I clarified.

“Yes.” His brows furrowed. “He got a phone call, packed his things, and left. He told me to let you all know he wouldn’t be back, but to take good notes.”

“What did it have to do with?” Ebony asked.

“I don’t know. I guess his wife or something must be having the baby.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ebony look at me. “What do you mean wife or something?”

Appearing annoyed, Gordon stood. “I assumed it was his wife or girlfriend or something. Why else would he take a call when he was in the middle of a crisis meeting with an employee? When he answered the phone, she sounded hysterical. I heard her and I was across the table from him. But the point of my story is that Natalie is mad at me and I don’t think it can be fixed. But the only thing you two care about is where Will went in the middle of the night.” He gesticulated with his hands, emphasizing his point. “I’m going to get a bagel and when I get back, I need some advice. Real advice.”

Before we could respond, he stormed off.

“He’s always that dramatic. But um... wife?” Ebony asked, her eyebrows in the middle of her forehead. Her pretty face looked worried.

I shook my head. “He doesn’t have a wife.”

“But someone is pregnant?”

My phone rang. Pointing to it, I rose to my feet. “I’m going to take this outside.” I recognized the phone number as the one from earlier. “Hello?”

It was an automated message, but I continued walking so I could have a moment to myself.

“This is an appointment notification confirming your four o’clock appointment with Dr. Rose and Dr. Feldman today. Thank you.”

I wasn’t aware that there would be anyone else in the appointment.

*Did she say ‘and’ or ‘or?’ because the idea of two doctors is even more concerning than just one.*

My stomach knotted. I walked toward the exit and replayed the message. I still didn’t know if I was meeting with Dr. Rose, Dr. Feldman, or both. I didn’t know what was going on and it was the not knowing that drove me crazy.

Tears started to prick my eyes. I took a few deep breaths in order to calm myself down.

Without thinking twice about it, I scrolled to his number and called.

*Ringin.*

*Rin—voicemail.*

He sent me to voicemail.

*I could be pregnant.*

The first thing I thought about as I stared at my phone.

*He ran home to take care of Molly. He left me...for Molly.*

My second thought.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to think about the situation rationally. He left without saying goodbye. He left without giving me a call. He left without so much as a text message. And when I called him, he sent me to voicemail. My throat burned with the vile taste of hurt and bitterness that coated it. I wanted to scream. I wanted to cry. I wanted it to not hurt. But I held myself together because I still had a job to do.

Choking back tears, I adjusted my pink top and strutted back into the building. Doing my best to put everything in the back of my mind, I put my phone on silent. I listened. I took notes. I networked. I did everything I

needed to do to ensure I maximized my last two hours at the conference.  
Because I didn't know what I was going back home to.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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“**A**re you following what we’re saying Layla? Do you understand?” I nodded as I scribbled down what they were saying through the tears that blurred my eyes. My voice started trembling as soon as I started to read my notes aloud. “Yeah, um...cancerous epithelial tumors are carcinomas... they begin in the tissue that lines the ovaries. They are the most common and most dangerous of all types of ovarian cancers because—and I’ve underlined this part—usually they don’t present themselves as a threat until it’s in a more advanced stage. You’ve looked at my X-rays and labs and found the same thing. You wanted me to come in for a biopsy. Dr. Feldman is an oncologist who is here to consult and willing to take me on as a patient.”

Wiping the tear that dropped to my cheek, I glanced up at the man and offered him another tight smile. He smiled back. He stood in the corner by the window while Dr. Rose sat beside me in front of her desk. After the initial shock, I could barely speak. I wished I had called my mom and dad or even Jenelle to meet me at the doctor’s office. But because I spent the three-hour drive praying I didn’t have an STD or a child growing in my womb, I didn’t call my family. I didn’t want to hear either one of those test results in front of them. I was so caught up in William and the fact that he never thought to reach out to me that it never occurred to me that it could be cancer.

So, I sat alone, with my only source of support while hearing the news being my long-time gynecologist and her trusted gynecologic oncologist.

“What stage am I?” I asked, my voice small.

Dr. Feldman spoke up. “Because of your transvaginal ultrasound, we were able to see a significant mass. And while most masses are benign, we felt strongly you should be screened immediately due to the fact that you were experiencing some other symptoms that are directly related to ovarian cancer.”

Dr. Rose added, “The back pain, the bloat, the pelvic tenderness, the weight loss, and most notably, the fluid I’d detected on your lower abdomen.”

“We won’t know anything definitively until after we run a few more tests. Those tests will be how we’ll determine the stage and prognosis. Once we know what we’re dealing with and how advanced it is, we will be able to determine the best way to treat it. If you’re available now, today would actually be a great day to do it...”

I found myself nodding, agreeing to be poked, prodded, and put together again in hopes of them discovering that it was all a big misunderstanding and they’d gotten my labs mixed up with someone else’s. I understood that they were going to do a laparoscopic procedure to test the fluid in my abdominal cavity. I was worried about the surgery because even though I hadn’t eaten much, I’d eaten earlier. As we walked out of Dr. Rose’s office, Dr. Feldman explained that he would be using pelvic laparoscopy to examine and biopsy the mass.

Because the office where Dr. Rose worked was connected to the hospital where Dr. Feldman worked, it wasn’t a long trek to Dr. Feldman’s neck of the woods. As we walked into the area where I needed to wait so they could finish prepping, Dr. Rose took my hand and squeezed it.

“Who do you want to call to let them know you’re here?”

“My mom,” I whispered, trying not to cry.

“Do it now. I’m going to check on Dr. Feldman, and then we should have you back momentarily.”

As she walked off, I pulled my phone out and called my mom.

She answered on the first ring. “Please tell me you’ve reconciled with Lover Boy.”

I wanted to laugh, but when I opened my mouth a sob escaped.

“Layla? Layla? What’s wrong? Layla?” My mom sounded panicked and even though it was muffled, I heard her cover the phone and call out to my dad.

I held my breath for a second and then exhaled so I could pull it together.

“Mom...” My voice was unsteady, but I was clearly audible.

“Layla, what’s wrong? Where are you? Are you still in Philadelphia?”

“I’m back in town. I’m...” I let out a huff of air. “I’m at the hospital. Dr. Rose called with my test results. They believe I have ovarian cancer.” I heard her gasp, but I pushed on and kept speaking. “I’m going to have a biopsy of more tissue to determine how bad it is and how far it’s spread.”

“Oh, Layla.” She was quiet, and I was sure she was crying. “Are you downtown?”

“Yes,” I whispered. “Dr. Rose is here. We’re on the sixth floor. Dr. Feldman is my...oncologist.”

“With rush hour traffic, it may take an hour and a half, but we’re on our way right now. Do you hear me? We’re coming right now, sweetheart. We love you.”

“I love you guys, too.” My eyes watered. “Thanks, Mom.”

“I love you, Layla!” My dad yelled from somewhere near Mom. “I’m praying.”

“I love you, too, Dad.”

After the call ended, I wiped my damp cheeks and made my next call.

Jenelle picked up on the second ring. “Hey!”

“Hey, how are you?”

The background noise was immediately gone. “What’s wrong? What’s that noise?”

“I’m at the hospital downtown.”

“What? Why?”

Taking a deep breath, I told her everything. I told her about the cancer scare, the biopsy that was about to happen, and about William and how he’d disappeared. It took me fifteen minutes, but I managed to tell her all the important points of what happened over the eighteen-hour period.

“Wow, wow. I’m so sorry, Layla. I just...wow. I’m at a loss for words and you know I’m never at a loss for words.” Each of her words were thick with so much emotion that I knew she was trying not to cry.

“Yeah, I know. There’s really nothing to say about the cancer stuff because I won’t know until I know. But if I’m being honest, I feel like I have it.”

“But you don’t know.”



“No, I don’t.” I was quiet, eyes welling with tears. “But I do.”

“Layla...”

“Blahhhhh! Hold on.” I shook my arms and legs and then wiggled my body. Taking a deep breath, I put the phone back to my ear. “Can we talk about the William bullshit for a minute? I want to get my mind off what’s about to happen.”

“Yeah, hold on.”

“Okay.” I sat back in the chair and my mind wandered to William.

*And he still hasn’t called me back yet!*

Closing my eyes, I let my head rest against the wall. It felt like it had been the longest day. And it was just hitting me how exhausted I really was. Realizing I was still on hold, I hung up. I figured she would call me back when she was done whatever she was doing.

My thoughts immediately went back to William. I didn’t know what was going on with him, but I knew I wanted to talk to him, needed to talk to him. I didn’t know what the doctors were going to find, but I knew for sure I had cancer. I didn’t feel sick or look sick, but as soon as they’d said it, I knew it. And the one person who could love on me and make me forget was missing.

*But if they tell me I only have a week to live, I am going to want to spend time with all my friends and family. But especially my parents, Jenelle... and William.*

Swallowing my pride, I made one more call.

The call was answered and then disconnected.

My mouth dropped open just as two fat tears dropped from my lashes. I felt like I’d been punched in the gut. I stared at my phone in disbelief for a few more seconds before another wave of sadness hit me.

Wiping my face, I tried to mentally brush it off, but that cut was a little too deep. Even as I told myself I was going to be okay and that it didn’t matter, I didn’t feel like I was going to be okay. I felt like my heart was shattering.

And then my phone rang.

*It’s about fucking time.*

“Hello?” I answered, trying my best not to sound like I was crying.

“Hey, sorry about that,” William replied. He sounded tired. “Molly took my phone and hid it from me.”

*Molly.*

I rolled my eyes—hard. But my tone didn't reflect it. "Why?"

He sighed. "I don't know. She's mad because she feels like she's doing this alone while I'm out living my life."

I swallowed hard. "Oh?" I feigned surprise. "Everything okay with the baby?"

"Yeah, the baby's fine. It's just the host that's a problem."

"I can hear you," Molly yelled in the background. "And I still need help!"

Ignoring her, I pressed on. "What happened? You left in the middle of the night and then I never heard from you...?"

"Oh shit, I'm so sorry. The plan was to call you when I thought you'd be awake. When I left, I wasn't thinking clearly. Molly has me down as her emergency contact because her family is in California. When the hospital called to say that she was there and explained what they were treating her for, I packed up my stuff and got here as quickly as possible. After I decided I didn't want to wake you up because of the time, I didn't think... I'm sorry. We didn't get out of the hospital until around four because they were trying to figure out what was going on with her. So, after eating, I'm just getting her home and comfortable now. The day kind of slipped away."

"Oh..." I didn't say anything for a second. I wanted to think carefully about how I was going to respond. "Okay..."

I wanted to ask him if I crossed his mind. I wanted to ask him if he thought of me once. I wanted to ask him so many things, but I was afraid of sounding insensitive. I was afraid that he would think I didn't care about the wellbeing of his child. I was afraid that both of us not having great days would result in an argument that I honestly didn't have the energy to participate in.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "I should've called or at least sent a text."

"Yeah."

He let out a sigh. "Please don't be mad at me. I can't deal with both of you being mad. I haven't slept in over thirty-six hours. I'm just trying to keep the peace right now."

"Ohhhhhhhh. Okay, I see now." My voice was soft and calm, never reflecting the storm that raged within me as I responded to his words. "You haven't picked up when I called because if you talked to me, it would validate her claim that you're out living your life while she's stuck incubating the baby?"

“I think so. I’m sorry, hold on for a second”—muffled movements and a door slamming— “I’m sorry, Molly’s trying to leave again. Let me call you back, okay?”

I opened my mouth to say goodbye, but he had already ended the call. My eyes watered and I truly struggled. I understood being that busy when dealing with someone who wasn’t being compliant. Nana wasn’t compliant in her final week when I stayed with her.

*But damn...that hurt.*

I ran my fingers over the face of my watch.

9:27.

With my health uncertain and mortality at the forefront of my mind, I couldn’t stop thinking about some of the choices I’d made in my life. I couldn’t stop thinking about regrets. I couldn’t stop thinking about what I’d do over if I had an opportunity to do it over. And my one and only regret would be initiating the break-up with the love of my life.

*I denied myself love—real love—because I can’t have kids. Even though I did it for his own good, I missed out on time we could’ve been together. I made the decision with him in mind. I did it for him. I thought we were saving ourselves from inevitable heartache and pain. But now, time isn’t on my side. But what if worst case scenario didn’t happen? What if we talked about surrogacy? Surrogacy is something we could’ve considered! That’s something we could’ve done! If we would’ve done surrogacy, they would’ve had to look at my ovaries sooner. Maybe Dr. Rose would’ve caught it earlier. Maybe it would’ve been someone pregnant with our baby instead of Molly pregnant with his baby. Maybe if I wasn’t so afraid of wasting time or getting hurt in the future, I would’ve had the man of my dreams, a surrogate carrying our baby, and a cancer-free exam. But nope. The man that I love is taking care of his pregnant ex and my ovaries are riddled with cancer.*

I wiped my eyes and glanced around the waiting area. My eyes landed on a couple who were holding hands while she rested her head on his shoulder. I didn’t know who they were or what they were waiting for, but my heart ached at the sight of them.

*William and I could’ve spent the last two years happy and in love. We could’ve done all the things we talked about doing—like learn the tango, visit Paris, have a chili cook-off, etc. I loved him, and I left him because I felt like it was the right thing to do. But now, I don’t know. I’m not so sure. Nothing in life is guaranteed. We could’ve figured something out. We*

*could've made it work. We're still in love now after so much time apart. Or maybe we wouldn't have made it work. Maybe we would've ended six months later. But at least it would've ended because it was supposed to, it would've ended because it was time.*

“And now I could be out of time,” I muttered to myself before dropping my face into my hands.

I was about to just let my guard down and cry the way I'd felt like I needed to cry all day. I was so frustrated with William because he'd disappeared on me all day. I was definitely going to let him know that his disappearing act wouldn't be tolerated again. But after he understood and apologized, I also was going to tell him that I wanted us to be together—officially. I didn't know what the future was going to hold or how much of a future I had left, but I knew that I didn't want to deprive myself of love anymore.

*I can't waste any more time. I can't—*

“I brought you this.”

I lifted my head up and the tears immediately started falling.

“Jenelle!” I whisper-yelled as I jumped to my feet, overwhelmed.

She held up the bag of food. “Sorry it took me so long. I had to wait for them to make more of the cake donuts you like.”

As soon as she put the food down on the table and hugged me, I started crying. I didn't ask her to come, but she showed up for me anyway. Two long minutes later, I pulled myself together. Wiping my face, I stepped back and looked at my best friend.

“Thank you so much.” I started getting choked up again. “I appreciate it and I needed that hug more than you know.”

“You don't have to thank me. What was I supposed to do? Sit at home and wonder what was going on? No, I needed to be here with you.”

“I just—thank you. It hasn't been a great day.”

“It could've been worse.”

I gave her a skeptical look. “How?”

“You could've also had a gluten-allergy,” she deadpanned.

For the first time all day, I laughed.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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“I would’ve called you back last night, but when I got home, I crashed. I slept for twelve hours. I woke up, called you, took a shower, called you, got dressed, and then called you on the way over here. I know yesterday was shitty, but is everything okay with us?” William asked Saturday morning when he stopped by my apartment unannounced.

*And wearing grey sweatpants.* I narrowed my eyes. *He knows exactly what he’s doing.*

“I was with my parents this morning and they just left,” I replied, stepping back so he could come in. Keeping my eyes off him and his sexiness, I focused on what I’d been thinking about since I got home from the hospital. “I didn’t want to have the conversation in front of them, but we need to talk.”

After a quick hug and a peck on the lips, I removed myself from his embrace.

He intertwined his fingers with mine. “That doesn’t sound good.”

I didn’t respond. I just followed him into the living room.

He sat down on one side of the couch, so I sat on the other. Giving me a perplexed look, he moved so we were sitting right next to each other. Taking my legs, he stretched them out over his lap. Taking my arm, he wrapped it around his neck. Putting his arms around my body, he rocked so that when we tipped back the other way, I was in his lap.

My heart beats quickened.

I stared at my black leggings, focusing on a white lint ball that was out of reach. I knew I needed to say it. I’d been practicing it all night. But being in his arms made it that much harder. Sitting in his lap with him kissing my

skin, running his hand across the small of my back, nuzzling his face against my flesh made it that much more difficult. But saying it while he looked at me like I was his world, like he would love me forever, like we were meant to be together, that made it nearly impossible.

Because I felt all those things, too.

We just clicked from day one and it was like we'd known we were going to be together from the moment we met. We loved and accepted each other. We didn't have to be anyone or anything other than who we were as our unguarded selves. I'd never experienced that before.

"Talk to me," William whispered, holding me tighter. "You won't look at me. You won't kiss me. You won't talk to me. What's going on?"

I stared down at my watch, and I could feel his eyes on my profile. My face flushed under his gaze and I let my eyes close, relishing in the feeling he gave me. I didn't know how much longer I was going to be able to experience it. With every second that ticked by, a little piece of me crumbled.

Slipping his hand underneath my red tank top, William stroked my back, sending chills down my spine. "Is this about Molly? Because she's—"

"It's not about Molly. Well, not completely," I interrupted, glancing at my watch. I let my head fall back as I blinked back tears.

"Layla," he breathed, pulling me closer. "You know you can talk to me about anything. No matter what."

I nodded, even though I knew this time was different. I knew I could talk to him about anything. I knew that we'd always been able to discuss, argue, and resolve. Having a difference of opinion never was an issue for us because we knew how to communicate. But I instinctively knew this was different, and I couldn't take it.

He kissed my shoulder. "What's on your mind?"

I couldn't breathe.

"Would you like something to drink?" I asked, pushing myself out of his lap. I scrambled to my feet. "Do you want water? I'll get you a water."

He didn't respond, but I went to the kitchen to get water and to catch my breath. It didn't quite feel like an asthma attack, but kind of. I wasn't sure, but I felt like I was having a panic attack. My chest felt tight, my head felt dizzy, and my vision was blurry. The amount of anxiety I felt about my predicament was overwhelming. Holding on to the counter, I gasped for air.

"Layla!"

Even with my back toward him, I heard the shock in his voice. But when he was kneeled beside me, he remained calm. Stroking my back and whispering that I'd be okay, he somehow lifted the weight that was on my chest. I started breathing normally and he stood, grabbing napkins to wipe my face. By the time the panic attack was over, he had me in his arms, kissing the top of my head, telling me that everything would be okay. With his arms around me and my face buried in his chest, I'd never felt more safe and secure.

"I love you so much," he uttered softly as he kissed the top of my head.

"I love you more than you could possibly know," I replied into his chest. Taking a deep breath, I lifted my head and looked at him. My teary eyes met his and my heart broke a little more. I could see that he could see it coming. I'd hoped that he could see how badly I didn't want to do it. But I had to take care of me.

A silent sob threatened to rip through my body, but I swallowed it down. I knew William felt it roll through me by the way he held me closer. I closed my eyes, squeezing them tight to keep the tears at bay.

Exhaling, I pulled out of the hug and grabbed his hands. "I don't believe in love at first sight, but I'm pretty sure that's what happened with you. Even though we didn't get together until after we were friends and had casually gotten to know each other for a year, I knew that there was something real between us from day one."

"You know I feel the same way about you." He let go of one of my hands and gently lifted my chin so I could maintain eye contact. "Like I told you the other day, you are my forever. There is no one else that compares to you. You are my everything, Layla. You're it for me."

Having him say those words to me, while looking into my eyes, cracked open my crumbling heart. My bottom lip quivered, and my body started to shake. My eyes burned with unshed tears. I tried to turn my head away from him before any fell, but he wouldn't let me.

"Don't hide from me." His voice was painfully soft, causing my breath to hitch. "Talk to me."

A tear fell, slipping down my cheek. The look on his face when he saw it broke my heart. His handsome face displayed his frustration, his fear, and mostly, his love. Using his thumb, he wiped the tear from my cheek.

"Layla..." The way my name rolled off his lips was a mixture of pleasure and pain. It crawled up inside me and burrowed in my chest cavity.

It was like he was begging me—to talk, to stay.

My heart drummed in my chest and I broke. A shuddering intake of breath forced tears to fall before I managed to pull myself together, swiping them away.

“Before yesterday, I thought this situation was too much for me. I thought it was too hard and I couldn’t do it. I mean, I really didn’t think I could, but for you, I tried. For you, I’d try anything.” I searched his face. “You’re the love of my life. When I tell you that I’m in this, I mean, I’m all the way in this. And so, it hurts when you’re...preoccupied.”

His finger stroked the curve of my cheek and he pulled me into his body. “I’m in this with you.”

I paused. Silence settled over us as I rested my head on his chest, listening to his heart beat.

“Are you?” I questioned softly, breaking the quiet tension that had built.

His body stiffened. “Am I what?”

Bracing myself, I forced myself to look in his eyes. “Are you in this with me?”

I saw instantly that I hurt him, which was last thing I wanted to do. But I needed him to understand that what he did—ignoring me, abandoning me, leaving me to play hero to Molly hurt me. Once he saw and understood the hurt he caused me, we would be able to move forward. But I’d hit a nerve. He stared at me, his jaw tightening.

“Come on, Layla. After everything we’ve been through, don’t question how I feel about you.” He dropped his arms from around me and scrubbed his face with his hands. “I’ve never quit on you or us! I’m in this. I’ve never been out of this. And you question my feelings?” He exhaled roughly, backing away from me. “That’s bullshit, Layla. Straight up bullshit and you know it.”

My face trembled as I stared into his beautiful, brown eyes. I gestured between the two of us. “It’s not bullshit.” I sighed. “We had a conversation not even a week ago and I was honest with you about how I felt about you and Molly. I told you that I didn’t want to feel like an afterthought.”

“You’re not an afterthought. You’re—”

“I told you that if you wanted to focus on your family, then you should do—”

“Fuck!” William growled in frustration. Moving fast, he backed me up against the counter and brought his face an inch away from mine. “Are you



listening to me? I'm standing here telling you that you are not an afterthought, you're in every thought. I want you... and only you. I don't know what else I can say to make you see that. I don't..." He gaped at me in disbelief and let his sentence trail off.

His frustration with me and the situation was evident, and it only served to trigger mine.

Staring him down, my chest rose and fell quickly. "You want me and only me? I'm your priority?"

His eyes narrowed as he placed his hands on the sides of my face. "Yes. That's what I've been saying. I only want you. You are my priority." He dipped his head down and brushed his lips against mine. "You say this isn't about Molly, so what's this about?"

"It's about *you* and Molly."

"There is no *me* and Molly. I told you that. We're having a child. She's pregnant. She doesn't have any family here. I am going to be there for my kid. That's it. I don't love her. I never did."

"I'm not your priority." I put my hand on his chest. His heart was pounding. "And yesterday made me feel like I don't fit into your equation right now."

"How can you say that? You know that's not true."

"You were supposed to stay the night with me. You went downstairs, got a call from Molly and left. You didn't think to even tell me bye, let alone what was going on. You left me half naked and waiting for you!" I loudly sucked in a mouthful of air. "And you said you thought about reaching out and then never thought about it again." The tears dropped, and I let out a loud cry.

"Molly thought she was having a miscarriage!" He barked back in exasperation. "I had to be there for her!"

"And what about me?" I roared, standing on my tip toes so I was more in his face. "What about me?" I hit myself in the chest for emphasis. As my truth was stumbling out, I felt exposed and vulnerable. "I needed you!"

"She needed me more!"

My entire body felt the impact of his words. I rocked backward.

My grip on the counter was the only thing keeping me standing. Tears streamed down my face because I knew that if I let go of the counter to wipe my face, I would topple over. I knew that my ability to stand was

contingent upon me holding on to something as my everything was slipping away.

Glaring at him, I asked, “So, you feel like you made the right choice?”

“Yes! She needed me. It was an emergency and she needed me. She was sick!”

“So, if you don’t think you did anything wrong, why did you bother apologizing?”

“Because I know me having a kid on the way is a lot, and you didn’t sign up for it, so I wanted to be considerate of how you felt!” He let his head fall back and growled. “But you’re making a big deal out of nothing!”

I was shaking as I listened to him invalidate my feelings.

“It’s not nothing! You chose her!” I shrieked, my voice flailing at the higher register. “When it came down to it, you chose her!”

“No,” he growled, matching my volume. “I chose the baby!”

Through gritted teeth, I pointed out for what felt like the tenth time. “For some stuff, she and the baby are the same thing right now! But for other stuff, she is your ex-girlfriend... another woman... another woman you had sex with... another woman who...”

*Who is giving you the one thing I can’t*, I finished in my head because I couldn’t bring myself to say that complete sentence out loud.

“But I’m not doing it for her. I’m doing it for the baby.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but words didn’t come out. Loud gasping breaths and cries for help were the only sounds I was able manage. I didn’t know how to make him understand where I was coming from without him assuming I was coming from a place of jealousy or anger. I’d opened up to him and told him how I felt, but he heard what I said differently. I didn’t know how else to explain it.

I was far beyond frustrated and I didn’t want to react or reply in frustration. But he repeated what he’d said earlier.

“She needed me because the baby needed me. And I told you that I am going to do everything I can to make sure this baby is okay,” he said sharply.

I squeezed my eyes shut and the counter tighter. My breathing was coming out in short spurts. I was shaking. When I looked at him again and saw his set jaw, defensive stance and overall confusion, I broke it down again. “So, you run to her in the middle of the night because she needed you... she was in the hospital. Okay, cool. But in the three hour drive it

took you to get there, you never thought, ‘maybe I should call Layla?’ And then, while she’s being taken care of by hospital staff, you didn’t think to call me all day or even return my call? So, after leaving without saying anything to me, you didn’t call me because you didn’t want to make her upset? That doesn’t sound like something you’re doing for the baby. It sounds like something you’re doing for Molly.”

He shook his head. “Don’t twist it around like that. Don’t you understand? My baby could’ve died! There is nothing I can do to protect it. There’s nothing I can do if Molly doesn’t eat or doesn’t follow the instructions or doesn’t read that baby manual or just doesn’t do what she needs to do when I’m not around. So, if I’m in the vicinity and I can protect him or her, I will.”

“This isn’t about Molly as much as it is about me.” My voice was low, measured. “I’m telling you what I need. The person who you said was your everything is telling you that she is hurt because you left her, you didn’t think to call her, you didn’t think to ask her how she was doing or feeling or anything. So yes, it’s about how you chose Molly over me. But while you keep putting the focus on Molly, you needed to put the focus on me.”

“You can’t do this, you can’t be so...”

“So what?” I asked, my tone was dangerously calm. “Can’t be so what, William?”

He scrubbed his face with his hands and muttered something under his breath.

“What was that?” I snapped. “I couldn’t hear you.”

“I said why are you making this so hard? This is crazy.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s crazy that I don’t want to be ignored or is it crazy that I told you that this situation made me uncomfortable? Or is it crazy because I specifically said I wouldn’t want something like this to happen and then something exactly like I described happened?” Opening my eyes wider, I gasped. “Or is it crazy because I’m reacting to my feelings being hurt by your actions and you keep trying to make the focal point your child’s mother?” Tilting my head to the side, I glared at him. “No, I’m serious. What’s crazy?”

He didn’t say anything. He just stood there, arms crossed, shaking his head.

“Please clarify for me what’s crazy about wanting my man to be my man and for me to not want to feel like I’m being pushed to the backburner

for some other woman.” I felt my annoyance give way to hurt. My tone changed. I found myself getting choked up. “I know that we are perfect for one another. But since your circumstances have changed, our circumstances have changed.”

“I feel like you want me to choose between you and the baby.” The forlorn look in his glassy eyes broke me, but it was the hurt in his voice that tore me up inside. He shook his head and added, “You are the love of my life, Layla.” He paused for a long time. “But that’s my child.”

Letting go of the counter, I looked down at my fingers, bruised, tender, and red, and I thought about my heart. I’d felt like I needed to hold on to the counter to stand. Even though it hurt the entire time, I toughed it out so I could stand. I continued my firm grip on it despite how much it caused me unintentional pain. I held on because I thought I needed to, and it continued to do what it had always done. It did what it was supposed to do. It was solid, consistent, and strong. Even when I needed it to be soft for me, to not hurt me, it needed to be unyielding for everything else, to hold everything else up. I didn’t get any relief for my hands until I let the counter go.

“I’m not asking you to choose me over your child. I’d never ask you to make that choice. I was telling you how I felt, what I could handle, and what I was comfortable with. I was telling you that I needed to be a priority. I wasn’t asking you to choose me over your child. I was asking you to choose me, prioritize me over your ex-girlfriend.” I wiped my eyes. “But you aren’t hearing me.”

Resignation on his face, William shook his head. His jaw tightened. “If you aren’t asking me to choose, what are you doing? Because you keep saying how I’m not making you a priority if I do anything for my child because Molly and the child are the same thing or—.”

“What? Is that what you got out of what I said? Oh my God,” I groaned. “Yes, Molly and your kid are one in the same. Going with her to her doctor’s appointments is something you’re doing for your child. Not picking up the phone or calling me all day because you don’t want to hurt Molly’s feelings, that’s something you’re doing for your ex-girlfriend. I don’t understand what you don’t understand about that.”

“If she’s upset that can have an effect on the pregnancy. I’m going to do everything I can to make sure the baby’s okay.”

“The endorphins released when having an orgasm can have a positive effect on the baby as well. Are you going to do your part and get her off?”

His lip curled in disgust. “No, that’s ridiculous.”

“Yeah and so is not picking up when I called or avoiding calling me to not upset her. So is basically being her boyfriend so she doesn’t get mad.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

“It is, but...” I sighed. Dropping my chin to my chest, I looked down at my watch. I twisted the timepiece around my wrist and tried not to breakdown. Inhaling deeply, I looked up at him. “Maybe our timing is off. As much as we love each other, this isn’t working.”

He swallowed a few times before responding. “What’s that supposed to mean.”

I swiped at the corners of my eyes, but the tears kept coming. “You need to focus on your baby and your new role. I need to focus on my new role and...other stuff. We have too much on our plates. Let’s just cut this now so that we can work together effectively and see what happens later.”

It was the opposite of what I wanted to happen, but we were not seeing eye-to-eye. I didn’t need the added stress of fighting for understanding and attention while also fighting cancer.

His eyes closed as he nodded slowly, fuming. The tension in his body was coming off him in waves. “So, that’s it?” he rasped. “Just like that? You’re running...again?”

My heart throbbed painfully. “It’s not that I’m running. It’s just that there’s a lot going on. A lot of life changes.” My voice cracked. “I think we need to adjust to the changes in our lives before... I don’t think this is going to work because we’re not on the same page.”

He didn’t say anything. He just stared at me and I saw it in his eyes. I didn’t know if he was agreeing with me or if he was giving up fighting for me, but either way, he was done, and it obliterated my soul

I put my hand to his face and he leaned into my touch. His forehead met my forehead. My body melted into his body. His nose brushed against my nose. I inhaled when he exhaled. Until finally, in the quiet brokenness of our goodbye, our lips met, still searching for unsaid words in each kiss.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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**I**t was awkward at first. That Monday morning when I had a video conference call with the Burton Spencer Construction Company, we spoke about the signage that was delivered and ensured that the numbers made sense. The amount of behind the scenes work that took place with construction companies was fascinating because I always just assumed they'd get a contract, build the structure, move on. But the bidding, the design, the oversight was all so much more than what I thought. Yet I spent the majority of the time staring at a computer-sized version of William.

We said we'd be cordial because we knew we couldn't ever really be friends. What burned between us was too real and too right for us to be anything platonic. He left my place Saturday afternoon as choked up as I was, but he didn't put up a fight. Part of me wanted him to even though I knew that our timing wasn't right. Part of me was glad that he didn't because I knew that I was never going to love or be loved quite like that again. But once he was gone and I got that guttural cry out of the way, I felt a little better. And once I told Jenelle the story on Sunday, I felt even better. Although I was still sad, I was proud of me for doing what was best for me.

So, when Monday rolled around, it was a little awkward because I just couldn't stop looking at him. Even the three-inch version of him was sexy. But we were professional, and we got through it. Tuesday, I had a conference call meeting with both William and Phil. It was a little less awkward, still incredibly professional, and I felt that it was a good sign. But Wednesday, I happened to see Molly's latest post on social media and left work to go home a couple of hours early. When I finished my crying spell and rage-nap, I took a screenshot and sent it to Jenelle.

*Maybe it's the hormones talking, but I am so thankful for my child's father. He has been my rock, my protector, my confidant, and my cheerleader. He is the most caring and supportive partner, and I wouldn't have wanted to go on this journey with anyone but him. If this unexpected surprise has taught me anything, it's that you never know what blessings may fall in your lap. Oh, and that Christmas Miracles do happen. I have nothing but love for you, Will!*

It had been two days and I couldn't stop reading it.

"Whatever it is, it must be very interesting," Dr. Rose pointed out as she entered her office with Dr. Feldman in tow.

Hitting the button to lock my phone, I tossed it into my handbag. "It's less interesting and more torturous than anything."

She gestured for Dr. Feldman to sit behind her desk in her chair. "So, why are you reading it?" she asked, looking over her glasses at me as she took the seat next to me.

I opened my mouth and then closed it. Leaning forward, I fished my phone out of my bag and deleted the screenshot. "You're right." Dropping the phone back into my bag, I grabbed my notebook and pen.

"Reading too much about ovarian cancer can be just as detrimental to the success of treatment," Dr. Feldman informed me.

The knot that had been in my stomach since I woke up that morning tightened. I looked from him to her back to him and then back to her. "So, I do have cancer?"

It wasn't really a question. I knew it a week ago when I had the testing done. But I still wanted them to say it.

"Yes," Dr. Rose took my hand.

"You have ovarian epithelial cancer," Dr. Feldman interjected. "Which is what we spoke about a week ago."

I nodded stoically. "What stage?"

Dr. Feldman looked at Dr. Rose.

*Well, shit.*

Dr. Feldman was the specialist. If he looked at Dr. Rose, it was clearly so she could be the one to say it, to soften the blow. I braced myself.

She squeezed my hand. "Stage Three."

I blinked.

*Well...shit.*

After thirty seconds of silence, Dr. Feldman started explaining. “What our testing found was that the cancer is in both ovaries and has spread into nearby organs in the pelvis...”

*T is for tumor... N is for lymph nodes... M is for metastasis...*

My mind started spinning as he used terms I’d never fully understood to begin with and wasn’t in the best position to try to understand in the moment. But he kept talking, she kept squeezing and handing me papers, and I kept nodding. We all had a part to play.

“The good news is that it has not spread to distant sites. But...”

*Anytime good news is followed by a “but,” it’s no longer good news.*

I saw his mouth moving, but I was on autopilot. I just continued nodding and accepting paperwork from Dr. Rose.

*Just because of the way they were talking last week, I didn’t think I was going to be at Stage One. But Stage Three? There’s only four damn stages.*

“You’re young and otherwise healthy, so we can be aggressive in our treatment...”

*Time is not on my side. Not in love. Not in life.*

“We’ll start with cytoreductive surgery because our goal is debulking. If we can remove as much of the tumor as possible, your outlook is much better than if we used other treatment options alone. The aim of debulking surgery is to leave behind no tumors larger than one centimeter. Now the downside... Because cancerous cells were present in both ovaries, they’d both need to be removed and you will not be able to become pregnant.”

It took me a few seconds to realize that my nodding alone wasn’t going to be sufficient for him to move on.

“Uh, that’s not a problem. It was already highly unlikely so”—I shrugged— “no harm, no foul.”

He eyed me. “It also means that you will go into menopause.”

I had a mental image of my mother and her hot flashes and constant worrying about a bald spot that I never saw. I rubbed my temple.

“Is all of this information in here?” I asked, pulling my hand from Dr. Rose and flipping through the pages.

“Yes, but we’d like to be sure you understand everything,” Dr. Rose told me gently. “Our best course of action is surgery then chemotherapy. We want to talk with you about what to expect post-surgery and what to expect during chemotherapy and how the drug carboplatin generally works.”



“We’d want you to start treatment early.” Dr. Feldman watched me intently. “So, we’d need to schedule surgery early. The earlier the better. Time is of the essence.”

I nodded. Organizing the papers and putting them in the folder.

He leaned forward. “Ms. Walker, do you under—”

“Yes,” I interrupted exasperated. “Surgery ASAP or certain death” Stuffing the folder in my bag, I jumped to my feet.

“Layla...” Dr. Rose started, rising out of her chair.

I lifted my hands up and backed away from her. “I got it. I just need a minute to breathe. It’s not like you were going to schedule the surgery for this weekend. I can call on Monday to schedule a surgery, right? You’ll both be here on Monday, right? So, we can schedule surgery to expedite menopause, we can plan chemotherapy or whatever else that’s going to poison my body to get what’s killing my body out, and we can do whatever else you two have concocted in this well thought out and well-meaning forty-page packet.” I walked backward toward the door. “I just need time to digest the information.”

I looked between them. Dr. Feldman looked surprised and Dr. Rose looked concerned. I looked at my watch before running my fingers over the face of it.

*It’s time to go.*

I waved as I left the room. “Thank you for your time. I appreciate all that you do. Have a good weekend. All of that.”

Standing outside of the office, I inhaled deeply. I tipped my head upward toward the sun and let it warm my skin as I exhaled. With my eyes closed, I just stood there, basking in it.

“Excuse me, miss?”

I opened my eyes to a middle-aged woman who looked confused. I did my best to smile, but I was pretty sure it looked like a grimace. “Hi, how are you?”

“Fine. Do you know where Dr. Rose’s office is? All of these office parks look alike.” Her white button-up shirt with two big blue flowers billowed in the wind and she held it down. “My mammogram shirt,” she explained.

I nodded. “Nice.” Turning and pointing toward the door I’d just come from, I offered a helpful hint. “It can be confusing because this side and the other side are Mulholland. That side of the hospital is Mulholland Street.

This side is Mulholland Drive. Just think of the drive abbreviation as doctor and you won't ever forget."

She laughed. "Thanks!" She started walking and then called over her shoulder. "Do you have the time?"

"No. I don't."

And that was the God honest truth.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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**M**y surgery was scheduled for the following Friday—one week after the official diagnosis, two weeks after I thought I could’ve possibly been pregnant. It went well and there were no complications. Health-wise, everything seemed to be on track.

After four days in the hospital post-op and ten days of recovery because I was in too much pain to move, I started my first of five cycles of chemotherapy. Each cycle was three weeks and I wasn’t sure how it was going to play out because that first cycle was rough. I had medications for post-operational pain, chemotherapy medication, and then medications to lessen the side effects of chemo. I completed my second cycle of chemo at the same time I was medically cleared to resume “normal” activities post-surgery. I was constantly with either my mom or Jenelle when I had chemo appointments because I was completely drained. My dad would sit with me on the weekends for a change of pace and so that mom and Jenelle weren’t giving me all their time.

Although the drug they were using for my chemotherapy didn’t take my hair, it changed its texture, becoming a little less coarse at the root. I wasn’t eating as much, so I lost weight—not enough to alert anyone to what was going on, but enough to kill my wardrobe. The things that used to fit my ass perfectly didn’t have the same wow-factor anymore. Not that I had anywhere to go because I had no energy, no drive, and no desire to leave my apartment. Again, health-wise, my recovery was on track and there were no complications. But my overall mental and emotional health was another story.

Spending two months of my life either in my apartment or at the hospital would've already been a lot. But spending two months alternating between sleeping and following up with Molly on social media was a lot. And three weeks into my recovery, William sent a text message to see how I was doing. We hadn't talked in a month outside of work emails. Although no one outside of Marley King, Bryce, and Human Resources knew why I was out, I was nervous receiving his "how are you? What's new?" text message out of the blue. But he didn't know anything. When I asked those questions in return, he informed me that he was having a little boy.

From that point forward, I obsessively checked in on their posts. She posted multiple times a day and she captured everything. He didn't post often, but when he did, it was about the baby and his excitement. It was clear that he was truly looking forward to fatherhood. And as I watched him living his life while I felt like I was dying a slow and painful death, I cried. For a long time, I cried every day for a different reason.

I cried because I was sad.

I cried because my body had rejected the idea of children with two different diagnoses.

I cried because I had never had the opportunity to want children.

I cried because I fell in love with a man who had always wanted children.

I cried because his mom had posted that she was finally going to be a grandmother.

I cried because I would've never been able to give William that excitement.

I cried because another woman was giving him the one thing I couldn't.

I cried because Molly was clearly in love with William.

I cried because I was jealous of her sappy posts about what an amazing man he was.

I cried because I knew what an amazing man he was.

I cried because I missed him.

I cried because I still loved him.

I cried because I knew I had done the right thing.

I cried because I knew he was happy.

I cried because seeing him happy made me happy.

I cried because I was happy.

And then one day, as I slowly trudged along from my bedroom to the kitchen, I realized I hadn't cried. I had no desire to cry. I had no doubt in my mind that I still loved him, but I was at peace. I still checked his social media account, and Molly's, but I was good.

So, I didn't expect to be overcome with emotion when I randomly saw him in the parking lot outside of Tier 1 Marketing Firm. During my first and only day at work to meet with HR, I caught a glimpse of the man who took my breath away.

My heart raced as I ducked down so he wouldn't see me. I didn't know why I was hiding. I had no reason to, but my immediate reaction was to hide. I put my hand on my belly to try to calm the trembling I felt, but just that brief glimpse of him did something to me.

*Maybe he's gone...*

I was about to peek and see if he was still outside when my phone vibrated noisily. Reaching over the middle console, I searched around frantically until I felt the cool metal of my phone. Snatching it, I saw that it was a text message.

**William:** *You know I can see you, right? And even if I couldn't, which I can, I know what your car looks like. So, I'm not sure what's going on, but get your ass out here and give me a hug. I haven't seen you in two months. Well, except for right now. Because I'm looking at the whole top of your head.*

I laughed before pushing myself up in the seat and looked over in the direction I'd caught sight of him a couple minutes prior. He was leaning up against a black SUV wearing burgundy dress pants and a crisp white button-up shirt. His black shoes, belt, and watch pulled the outfit together nicely. Just taking the time to devour him with my eyes sucked the amusement from my body. Licking my lips, I pushed my door open.

I stepped out of my car with a simple lavender wrap dress and pink heels. I grabbed my handbag and pink sweater and made my way over to him. I'd barely taken three steps before he pushed himself off his car and met me halfway. As soon as we were within a couple of feet of each other, my stomach flipped and my skin heated.

"Hi," I greeted him softly, just as he wrapped his arms around me and lifted me in the kind of hug my soul needed.

"Hi," he finally returned after setting my feet back on the ground.

We stepped back from each other, giving enough space to really look at the other, but still close enough to have a private conversation. My hand moved to my belly, hoping to settle the excitement. But I quickly realized it wasn't just the butterflies in my stomach. It was everything. His eyes traveled from my shoes, up my bare legs, over my hips, lingering at my breasts before moving along my neck and directly at my lips. My body was on fire in every spot he eyed until finally, my entire body was in system overload, and I felt faint.

I exhaled audibly and reached for the car beside us.

As our eyes locked, I knew I had his undivided attention just like he had mine. His full lips parted and if he said something, I was too lost in what we would always be to one another to hear it.

He stepped forward, entering back into my personal space. He ran his tongue from one side of his mouth to the other and my body felt it.

I swallowed hard.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, resisting the urge to put my hands on his chest.

"I'm about to go to a meeting." He licked his lips. "Wow, I was just thinking about you," he mumbled under his breath.

Grinning, I swatted his arm. "No! I mean, what are you doing back here? I thought you were in Philly!"

"I moved back last night."

My eyebrows flew up. "The training is over?"

"Yeah. It's been three months."

"Wow, that flew by." I cocked my head to the side. "Does that mean you didn't take the job?"

He shook his head. "No, I declined it."

"I'm sorry to hear that." I gave him a sympathetic smile.

"Don't be." He stared into my eyes. "I got the experience and training I needed for my promotion and raise, so it's all good. But I had some new and unfinished business here."

I nodded knowingly. *His kid is here. Or will be here anyway.*

"How's Molly and the baby? You said you're having a boy, right?"

I mentally rolled my eyes at myself. *Like I didn't see the social media posts or the gender reveal or that she calls him Deuce as in the number two as in William Grayson II.*

He smiled brightly. “Yeah, he’s about two months away from making his grand entrance. September fourteenth.” He looked elated. Reaching out, he grabbed my hand. “What about you? How are you?”

I wanted to tell him, but it wasn’t the time or the place. I let him hold my hand, running his thumb along the top of it. “I’m fine. Things got a little rocky for a minute, but I’m doing very well. Thanks for asking.”

His handsome features were shrouded in concern. “What do you mean? What was rocky?”

I shook my head. “Now’s not the time or the place.”

“Did something happen to you here?” His tone was tentative, but firm.

Clearing my throat, I shook my head. “No, I just don’t want to talk about anything personal at work.”

“Did something happen at work?”

“No, I’d just rather discuss it with you privately.”

“You know that if something was going on, if something was rocky, I’d want to know, right?” His brown eyes implored me to tell him. “Even if we hadn’t talked in a while, I’d still want to know if anything was going on with you. I’m always in your corner. Don’t ever forget that. I’m here.”

“I’m glad you’re here. I’m glad you moved back.” I smiled, trying to change the subject. “Same apartment or did you move somewhere else?”

He didn’t smile back. He had a fire in his eyes that ignited something in me. “If someone hurt you, I swear to God, I’ll jam this size thirt—”

“It’s nothing like that. I swear.”

He put his hands on the sides of my face, cupping my cheeks. He opened his mouth like he was about to say something, but then his eyes dipped down to my lips, and no words were spoken.

My breathing hitched, and my body somehow swayed into his.

“Layla,” he breathed my name like it was oxygen.

Staring up into his eyes, I felt that fluttering that only he gave me deep in my belly. My heart drummed against my chest. “Yes?”

“Have dinner with me.”

“Okay.” My voice was soft, light, barely audible.

“I’ll pick you up at seven.”

I nodded.

He rested his forehead against mine. “Promise me you’re okay.”

“I’m okay.”

I didn’t promise.

He looked deep into my eyes. “Whatever I can do to make it better, I’ll do it.”

The sincerity in his eyes coupled with the sweetness of his words took my breath away. I was so caught off guard. On one hand, we ended for a reason and he had a baby on the way. On the other hand, he was the love of my life. And even though we wouldn’t work as a couple, in his arms with him looking at me the way he did, none of that mattered. I was only able to think about how it would feel to kiss him.

I took slow, shallow breaths as his lips hovered over mine. If either of us moved a fraction of an inch, our lips would connect. The thought of kissing him made my skin hum in anticipation. Staring into each other’s eyes with his lips that close to me was too much. I wasn’t able to fight it anymore. My lashes fluttered closed when the desire to kiss him became too much.

All the air left my body when his lips brushed mine softly, gently. As forceful as the energy was between us, when it happened, our kiss was tentative, gentle, and painstakingly slow. His mouth moved over mine deliciously, making my lips tingle. He pulled away slightly.

I opened my eyes to find him staring at me.

“Seven o’clock,” he whispered, brushing his thumb across my full bottom lip.

With a chaste kiss goodbye, he hopped in his SUV and left me standing in the parking lot speechless.

I didn’t remember how long William had been gone, but I was still standing, thinking, reminiscing when Bryce rolled by slowly.

“Um... everything okay?” he asked, giving me an awkward look.

Looking around, I realized how crazy I had to have looked. “Yeah,” I answered. “Just enjoying the sunshine. I guess I got lost in my own world.”

“Oh, I thought it was because you were kissing Will.”

My eyebrows flew to the middle of my forehead. “What?”

“Yeah, Bridgette and I were walking out of the building and saw it.” He made a face. “If you two were trying to keep it a secret, the middle of the parking lot isn’t the best place to do it. I’m looking for a better parking spot, but I’ll see you upstairs.”

He pulled off and I sighed. Bryce had no reason to have an attitude about anyone I kissed. With a shake of the head, I went inside and discussed my options and my future with the firm.



Time seemed to accelerate as soon as I got home. Seven o'clock on the dot, there was a knock at my door. My hair was pinned up high so the red dress with the deep V-neck and an open back could be shown off. I wore black adhesive bra cups, but they didn't support my heavy breasts. I carried my black heels to the door and then slid into them before I opened the door.

"Wow," William whistled as I opened the door and let him in.

Grinning, I spun around in a circle so he could get the full effect. I knew I looked hot in the dress. If I was going to tell him about my diagnosis, I was going to look good doing it.

"Wow, yourself," I remarked, checking him out in his jeans and a white polo shirt that stretched over his muscular arms and chest, making him look even more defined.

*Or maybe he's just spent his free time in Philly working out.*

"Before we go to dinner, I have to say something," William declared, sitting on the couch in the living room. Claspng his hands together, he looked over at me.

I didn't respond because my heart was in my throat. I didn't know what he was going to say, but I was nervous. Running my fingers over my watch, I walked to the couch, but I didn't sit.

His eyes ran up my body leisurely, lingering where my dress met my thighs. I flushed as I watched him watching me. When our eyes met, seeing the lust in them turned me on even more.

"Please have a seat." He reached out and ran a hand from my bare knee to the skirt of my dress, slipping just the tip of his fingers underneath the hem. "You're too distracting standing above me like this."

I hesitated for a moment and then relented, sitting right next to him.

And waited.

The quietness of the apartment seemed magnified by the way he was staring at me. He reached for my hand and I allowed our fingers to intertwine.

I didn't realize how much I'd missed his touch until our fingers were intertwined. I'd hugged dozens of people. I'd clasped hands with my parents and Jenelle. But I hadn't had my fingers entwined intimately with anyone, but William in a long time. I'd missed that.

My eyes pricked with tears.

He brought my hand to his lips, brushing my knuckles. "Layla, I'm sorry for fucking this up before. I wasn't sure how to balance everything.

But having to run Burton Spencer from the ground up while dealing with Molly during the second trimester made me see what you were saying a couple of months ago.”

He looked at me for a reaction, but I didn’t give him one.

“It took a few days for me to realize that I was dead wrong.” He paused. “Please say something.”

As much as I wanted to just tell him that all was forgiven and pardon him, I couldn’t. “You apologized before and you still didn’t get it.”

He nodded. “You’re right. Before I was apologizing because you were hurt and not because I did anything wrong. I didn’t think I did. I thought...” He shook his head. “Bottom line, I was wrong.”

I could see the sincerity in his eyes and knew he meant what he was saying, but I was finally back in a good place in my life. I wasn’t going to let him mess with that.

“I hear you,” I replied softly.

“Let me explain... My training wasn’t really a training at all. I was the project manager. I made all the final decisions—of course, they had to be signed off on by Phil and a few others, but ultimately, I was the lead on the small restoration project. The first month was a breeze compared to the last two. The conference was the last week of the easy month, and that Monday when I got back to Philly, it was not a game. It was a lot of work, a lot of long days, and I had to prioritize.” He squeezed my hand. “Molly wasn’t feeling well and wanted me to come down to take care of her. I couldn’t and didn’t. And she figured it out. She had an ultrasound appointment, so I arranged my schedule to accommodate that. She wanted to go shopping and asked me to come back for that. I didn’t. And that was all in one week.”

“Oh, wow.” I frowned.

*Yikes.*

“Yeah...” He sighed. “But it made me understand what you were saying about my priorities. I was so focused on being a good father and what that meant, I wasn’t able to see anything else. And when I talked to my mom, she told me that I was a fool.”

I smiled because I could hear his mom saying it.

“She thinks Molly is great, but in my mom’s eyes, you are the second coming of Christ.”

“Just in your mom’s eyes?” I joked quietly.

He caressed my cheek with the back of his hand. “In my eyes, you’re everything. And you have every right to feel like my life is messy as fuck right now, because it is. You have every right not to trust what I’m telling you right now, but I hope you do. You have every right to say no right now, but I hope you don’t.” He took a deep breath. “I realized that I was showing Phil and Eastern Construction that I prioritized them by showing up, by being there, by making that commitment. I will do the same for my child once he’s born. But somehow with you, the woman that I will never stop loving, I was telling you that you were a priority, but my actions didn’t show it. So, for that, I apologize. Will you please forgive me? Will you accept my apology?”

My eyes were watering as I listened.

*Now that is an apology.*

“Apology accepted,” I whispered, scared that if I said anything too loud, I would collapse into a blubbering mess.

“Molly is carrying my child. But you are carrying my heart.” He paused. “I should’ve told you that you were the unfinished business I came back for.”

“Holy shit,” I gasped as he slipped from the couch and dropped down to one knee.

“Layla, you are the fire that burns in me. No other woman can compete with that, let alone extinguish it. You are my priority. You are my life. You are my love.”

My tears flowed freely. My heart beat erratically and excitedly.

*Yes! Oh my God. Oh my God. Ohmigod!*

He let go of my hand for the first time since I sat down. Digging in his pocket, he pulled out an emerald-cut diamond engagement ring.

It was stunning.

*Yes! Ohmigod, yes!*

“Layla Walker, will you marry me?”

I opened my mouth to scream “yes,” but that wasn’t what I said.

“I have cancer.”

If there was ever a moment where one could actually hear a record scratch when there was no music playing, that was it.

Gasping, my hands flew to my mouth as I realized that I’d just dropped a bomb on William after the most romantic apology, turned make-up, turned engagement speech. I searched his face as varying levels distress and alarm

played across his handsome features. I didn't want to say anything else, but I also wanted to tell him everything to fill the air between us. His stunned silence was understandable and uncomfortable.

"What?" he asked, concern filling his eyes as they got glassy.

I licked my lips. "I have stage three ovarian cancer."

"Layla," he started, getting off his knee to sit back down beside me. He wrapped his arm around me and pulled me into him. "I'm sorry. God, Layla, why didn't you tell me? I know I was wrong and you were upset with me, but why didn't you talk to me? Why didn't you tell me this?"

I opened my mouth and then closed it.

He saw my reluctance and pushed anyway. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I tried."

He leaned back as far as he could, which wasn't far at all. But it allowed enough separation for me to see his confusion and the way his eyebrows creased.

"When?" he asked in disbelief.

"The day I found out."

"When was that?"

We stared at each other for a second. I knew it would hurt him to know, but I wanted to be honest. So, I told him the truth. "The day I got back from the conference in Philadelphia."

It took a moment, but as the realization hit him there was nothing but pain in his eyes.

*Maybe I shouldn't have said anything right this second.*

"The day I left to go to Molly in the hospital?" he clarified, his voice cracking. He closed his eyes and let his head rest against the back of the couch. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. I'm sorry I was a shitty boyfriend. Hell, I was a shitty friend. Fuck."

My lips turned downward as I saw the tears slipping from his closed eyelids. I wiped his tears.

"I'm sorry. It's no wonder you never called me back that night." He opened his eyes and looked at me. "Thank you for loving me enough to forgive me."

"Thank you for loving me, period," I returned. "Everything happened the way it was supposed to happen. The last two months put a lot of things into perspective. I have a long way to go, but I think I needed to focus on myself for the last two months. It was tough, but..."

He nodded, but I could see he was still beating himself up about not being there for me. I could tell he felt bad, and the sympathetic look he gave me made me feel bad.

“I don’t want you feeling sorry for me.” My voice was adamant. “I just wanted you to know. That’s what I’ve been dealing with for the last couple of months.”

“Wait, is this...” He scrubbed his face with his hand. “Is this why Marley became the point of contact for the marketing with Burton Spencer?”

I nodded. “No one knew except for Marley and Bryce.”

“I’m such an idiot.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “I thought you left the account because of us. That’s why I didn’t reach out anymore. I thought if you were willing to give up your first solo account because of what happened with us, you were serious about us not dealing with each other anymore and I needed to work on my own shit.” He wiped his eyes with the heel of his hand. “I wasn’t here for you again. I’m so sorry. Come here.”

I was as close as I could possibly be unless I was in his lap.

As he slid me into his lap, it was clear even that wasn’t close enough. I rested my forehead against his. We stared into each other’s eyes.

“You don’t look sick,” he whispered. “But is that how you lost weight?”

I nodded.

“Is it gone now?”

I nodded. “No. I mean... I don’t know how to answer that.”

“What does that mean?”

“I have three more cycles of chemo to go. And it’s still early. There’s a whole packet I can show you and it’ll explain everything. But I would have to be cancer-free for five years before I could say it was gone.”

“Are you okay? Is there anything I can do?”

“You can treat me normally. Don’t try to treat me like a patient. That’s why hardly anyone knows because I don’t want anyone to treat me like...”

*Like something is wrong with me. Like I have cancer. Like I’m going to die.*

I didn’t finish my sentence, but he nodded anyway. “I get that.” He paused, staring into my eyes. “But you understand that I want to know everything because I want to know how I can help you. I don’t feel sorry for you. I’m sorry this happened. I’m sorry you’re going through this. I’m sorry I wasn’t here sooner. But I don’t feel sorry for you.”

My eyes watered. I brought my hand to his cheek. “Thank you.”

“With that being said, I’m hoping that you can understand that as the woman I love, you can’t keep anything from me—especially anything like that. Do you promise?”

I nodded.

We were both quiet for a second.

“Do you?” he inquired softly, a hand firmly on my hip, the other running up and down my back.

“Do I?”

“Promise?”

“Yes.

“Will you?”

“Will I?”

“Marry me?”

I took in a shaky breath as I lifted my head fractionally. My heart thundered in my chest as I looked at him. “You still want to marry me?”

“You still think anything would change that?”

Seconds passed, and we just stared at one another. His words penetrated my heart and dug into my soul. He said things I wasn’t aware that I even wanted him to say. He wasn’t a perfect man, but he was my perfect man. And my perfect man asked me to be his wife. I had so many emotions churning inside me that it was stifling. I couldn’t breathe.

Without warning, I moved forward and pressed my lips against his. It was an impulsive, involuntary reflex to his words. He responded instantly, wasting no time deepening the kiss, allowing his mouth to move over mine seductively. My arms circled around his neck, pulling him closer. His hands traveled on separate missions with similar results.

One hand roamed over my exposed back, caressing my skin and pulling me closer to him. His other hand stroked my cheek and worked his way down my neck, continuing down the deep V-neck of my dress. His touch ignited my bare skin. My nipples hardened thinking he was on his way to stimulate them. But instead, he rested his hand over my heart and then kissed me with so much passion that I moaned.

His kisses tasted like heaven as his mouth moved effortlessly over mine. His lips caused a sensation that coursed through my body as the kiss intensified. William wasn’t kissing me like he wanted to make up with me. He kissed me like he wanted to make a life with me.

Butterflies spread across my belly as he groaned. My mouth opened and his tongue teasingly caressed mine. His kiss sent shivers up and down my spine. Desire twisted in my gut so forcefully that I whimpered against his lips. I felt him harden underneath me and that turned me on even more.

Pulling out of the kiss, my chest heaved as I stared at him. He rested his forehead against mine and we sucked in air, trying to catch our breath. His hand was still over my heart, so I put my hand over his heart. His breathing matched mine. My heartbeat matched his.

“Was that a yes?” William murmured softly.

I shook my head. “No.”

“That wasn’t a yes?”

“No... that was a hell motherfucking yeah,” I squealed.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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“Holy shit, bitch! You’re engaged?” Jenelle screamed giddily as we sat at the trendy restaurant halfway between her place and mine. She grabbed my hand and pulled the ring closer to her face. It was the first time she’d seen the ring in person. “Oh. My. God. What does he do again? Rob banks?”

I laughed. “He said he used his tax refund money to get it.”

“You two weren’t speaking during that time, right?”

“No, we weren’t.” I was still grinning. “He said he knew that when he came back into my life, he wanted it to be permanent, and he wanted us to make a permanent commitment to each other legally and not just in our hearts.”

“You wouldn’t think a big, tough guy like that would be so romantic.” She let my hand go. “That goes to show you that you can’t judge a book by its cover.”

Tapping my chin, I mused, “It’s a nice cover though.”

“I’ll drink to that!”

We laughed all throughout dinner.

“So, what’s going on with you?” I asked, crossing my legs. “I feel like it’s been a busy week. We haven’t had much time to talk.”

“Mike and I started talking about living together.”

My mouth dropped.

“I know, I know.” She rolled her eyes, but she had the biggest smile on her face.

“This is serious, Jenelle! You two are a thing... like a big deal thing!”



“I know. I’ll have to turn in my pimp card and burn my little black book,” she joked.

“Let’s be clear, Mike took your pimp card and ripped that shit up the moment you two met.” I laughed. “You resisted it as long as you could, but the moment he went to Tokyo, you couldn’t hide it anymore. And you were barely hiding it before then!”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore.” She waved her hand dismissively as her face flushed. “When’s the wedding?”

“That’s what I want to know,” I baited her playfully as she tried not to show how amused she was.

“Stop it,” she giggled. “But um... seriously, have you two picked a wedding date? If I was hypothetically planning a vacation where Mike happened to also be vacationing at the same time, I’d want to make sure it didn’t interfere with my maid of honor duties.”

“Oh? You mean you’ve also dropped your ‘don’t bring sand to the beach’ attitude when it comes to bringing a man on vacation. What was it that you used to say in our twenties? You don’t bring a man on vacation, you bang a man on vacation?”

Her head fell back as she laughed. “I hate you so much right now! I don’t want to talk about this anymore!”

“Oh, we’re talking about this all night! Because before long, we’ll be discussing your wedding.”

“You know I don’t plan to get married. You know I don’t believe in marriage—*for me.*” She emphasized the last two words as she pointed to her chest. “For you and Will, absolutely. You two will be the poster children for marriage goals. But I don’t believe in marriage for me.”

“You also didn’t believe in dating your booty call... or having a committed, monogamous relationship... or living with a man...” I shrugged dramatically. “I guess with the right person, anyone’s mind can be changed.”

“Stop or I will make a scene, I swear to God,” she warned, pointing at me.

We both fell into a fit of laughter.

After dinner, I went home to find Will pouring over the cancer paperwork Dr. Rose and Dr. Feldman had given me. I had my next course of chemo soon and he wanted to be prepared. While William never made me feel like he felt sorry for me, every time he’d read or do research about

ovarian cancer, he would hug me a little tighter, hold me a little longer, and kiss me a little deeper. But he never actually initiated conversation about it.

My next course of chemo was the toughest yet. There was no change in my medication, so inexplicably I was experiencing new sleep related side effects. William and I had a lot of tough conversations that stemmed from how bad I felt combined with a recurrent nightmare I'd been having. It had to do with my death. I'd talked to Dr. Rose and another cancer patient who said it was quite common to have vivid, almost hallucinatory type of dreams and nightmares due to the chemo treatment, but I hadn't experienced it until that last round. Another recurrent dream had me having deep, philosophical conversations with Nana which ended up with me creating a bucket list of sorts.

William thought I was being paranoid and worried I was giving up on life. He even suggested therapy because he thought I was heading in a direction that bordered on suicidal. It took him a little while to understand that I wasn't planning my death as he originally thought. I was planning to make the most out of my life. I created a list of things I wanted to do with my life. I created a list of things I wanted to do for the rest of the year. But then I wanted us to create a list of things we wanted to accomplish as a couple for the year. Once I showed him what was on my list of things I wanted to do for the year, he not only understood, he got into it. But there was always a hint of something I couldn't put my finger on behind his eyes.

We weren't able to start on the things on either of our lists until I was feeling more like myself, but as soon as that happened, William and I hit the ground running. Because of everything it took to get us to where we were, our philosophy as a couple was to live in the moment. Our philosophy got us into trouble a couple of times, but nothing serious, and we never got arrested.

We went on a weekend getaway to Cape May. We saw an opera for the first time because I wanted to do that. We tried anal sex for the first time because Will wanted to do that. We tried things that were new to us both and regardless of if we loved it or hated it, we did it. And we cherished our time together.

It was a week's worth of stuff, but that little week made that summer the best summer of my life.

As August was starting to come to a close, I knew things were going to be different. We were a month away from William becoming a father. It

always felt real. My emotions being all over the place for most of the year confirmed that I always felt it was real that he was having a child with Molly. But it wasn't until I was in the car with my mother that it felt real for me.

"That was a great checkup. That's a wonderful sign. You've been preoccupied since we got here. How are you feeling?" my mother asked on our way back from my last appointment with Dr. Feldman until I was to start my next round of chemo.

"I'm okay," I replied, looking out the window. "I'm just tired, that's all. I was planning something special for William's birthday, and now I'll have to cancel it."

"What did you have planned?"

"A trip."

"Well, don't push yourself, sweetheart." She turned the corner and once she slowed to a stop, she reached over and grabbed my hand. "Just because you don't have chemotherapy next week, doesn't mean you have to push yourself. Last month, once you and Will got engaged, you did so much. It was beautiful to hear about your trip to Florida and the opera, but if you're not feeling up to it, don't push yourself. Your body is going through a lot and you're still healing."

"I know, Mom." I squeezed her hand. "I know. But I want to do something for him before he becomes a dad. I can tell he's getting more anxious the closer it comes to the due date."

Molly's caesarean section was scheduled for September fourteenth. Both William and I took off in anticipation.

"Well, what about you? Are you ready? You're going to be a step-mom."

"Oh, wow..." My brows furrowed. "I guess you're right."

I didn't know why that never occurred to me before, but it hit me like a ton of bricks when my mom said it. I couldn't stop thinking about it. Long after my mom dropped me off, I started freaking out a little.

*I'm going to be a mom. I'm going to help raise a little boy. I'm going to have to parent someone.*

When William returned home from work, he found me pacing the living room.

"This place isn't big enough for a kid, and the house won't be baby-ready since we can't get in until September first," I informed him nervously.

“I signed us up for a children’s first aid course. It’s on a Tuesday because you’re usually able to get off a little earlier on Tuesdays. Oh, and I hired a cleaning crew to come in and thoroughly clean on the first. Since you’ll be working up until the fourteenth and I start my next cycle of chemo on the first, we may be too tired to clean like it should be cleaned for a newborn. And I ordered some stuff for the nursery—ours, not Molly’s.”

He put his stuff down and smirked. “Look who has maternal instincts.”

I stopped pacing and threw a throw pillow at him. “Stop it! This is serious.” Covering my face with my hands, I let out a noise that was part giggle, part groan. “I’m not Molly. Molly’s his mom. But I’m going to be his bonus mom. And then it just hit me that I’m going to have a kid and how unprepared I am. I mean, of course I’ll love him and protect him and be a friend to him. But it hit me that I’ll also have to parent him whenever he’s with us. And I just—what are you laughing at?!”

“You are so cute right now.” He chuckled under his breath while his eyes danced.

I stomped my foot dramatically. “This isn’t funny!”

There was a light in his eyes. “No, it’s not funny.” Crossing the room, he wrapped me in his arms. “It’s beautiful. I like that you’re thinking of Deuce as your kid, too.”

“You’re going to be my husband. What’s yours is mine and what’s mine is yours.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

---

“Oh my God,” I breathed as I dismounted William’s muscular body and melted into a puddle beside him.

The only time I wasn’t conscious of what was going on with me was when he was touching me. The way he manipulated my body and brought me to orgasm made me forget everything.

He rolled onto his side so he could spoon me. “Thank you.” His heavy breathing was punctuated by the kisses against my shoulder. “Thank you.” He dragged his lips up my neck. “Thank you.”

“I’m sorry I had to postpone our trip,” I whispered. “I hope this is still okay.”

I’d had grand plans for us to go to Las Vegas to have a wild weekend. And although my checkup showed continued improvement and a good outlook, I missed the fine print about not flying. So, instead of a Vegas trip, we were spending the weekend in New York. It was easy to find something to do and when I saw that his favorite rapper was having an impromptu concert, I felt like it was the perfect location for a weekend of fun—within driving distance.

“Hey...” He raised his head, so he could see me better. “You don’t ever have to apologize. We have our whole lives together to do everything we want to do.”

“We can do Paris for our honeymoon.”

“See. Next year, we’ll be in Paris.” He rolled me onto my back and moved his mouth over mine seductively. “And right now...” He slid his hand down the middle of my chest, between my breasts. “I get...” His fingers danced over my belly. “To be...” His touch was more deliberate as

he reached the apex of my thighs. "In paradise." His finger slid across my clit with such subtlety that I barely felt it and yet felt all of it at the same time.

I shivered, moaning into his mouth as he deepened the kiss and dipped his finger inside my wetness.

For hours, we ebbed and flowed between raw, intense fucking and sweet, passionate lovemaking and back again. My body ached from physical exhaustion, but not from chemo. My body ached from complete and utter satisfaction. By the time we wore ourselves out, it was late afternoon and we were famished.

"We should get up so we can get something to eat before the concert," he pointed out even though he had his heavy body wrapped around me, holding me captive.

I giggled as I struggled to get up and failed three times.

Finally, after spending twenty minutes laughing and joking with our limbs intertwined, we got up, got showered, and got dressed.

A low, wolfish whistle chased after me as I walked past Will in a pair of skinny jeans and low-cut body suit. My hair was pulled back to show off my face and my cleavage. My five-inch stiletto pumps were impractical, but it really brought the outfit together and made my ass look amazing.

"You are sexy as hell." His eyes looked like he was memorizing the layout of my body. "Can you walk in those?"

"Yeah, of course." I gave him a look.

"But don't they hurt?"

"Yeah, of course." I gave him the same look again.

After we laughed, I held up my leather bag. "And that's why my flats are in here."

"Can you wear those when we get back home, too?"

"I'll wear these and nothing else."

"How did I get so lucky?"

"Saying stuff like that while looking like that," I returned playfully. I checked him out appreciatively. "If they mistake you for a celebrity and you get in there and leave with another celebrity, I'm going to be pissed."

He laughed. "I wouldn't leave you for any celebrity."

"Mm hmm." I gave him a look as he opened the front door.

He slapped me on my ass as I walked out in front of him. "This is forever."

I waited until he double checked that the hotel room door was closed. Holding my left hand up, I wiggled my fingers. My sizeable engagement ring catching the light, sparkling triumphantly. “Until death do us part.”

“I can’t wait until you’re my wife.”

I grinned up at him. “September twenty-seventh of next year, it will be official.”

Taking my hand, he kissed the back of it just as we got on the elevator. “It’s been official since the day we met. It’ll just be legally binding next year.”

There were people on the elevator, so we squeezed each other’s hands, but didn’t speak for the forty-five seconds it took us to get to the lobby.

“Hello, New York!” I greeted the city as we walked out of the hotel and onto the street.

I inhaled New York. It was such a high-energy city. Different languages being spoken, loud arguments, music, and traffic all collided to make the soundtrack of our night. It was beautiful. Up ahead two men were arguing about something, and the women they were with seemed to be doing the same.

“If we ever go on a double date like that, let’s just end it,” I whispered, gesturing with my head even though they weren’t looking our way to see me.

“I don’t think that’s a double date.”

“Why not?” I raised my eyebrows.

“Because friends don’t go at it like that—unless something happened. And if something happened, would you push Jenelle like that?” he asked, just as one of the two girls began to pull each other’s hair.

“No.” I shook my head for emphasis. “But maybe the men are friends and the women are just there for their men.”

“I don’t know.” He shook his head. “Something just doesn’t feel right about it.”

He kept eyeing the foursome and even though we seemed to be heading in the same direction, I didn’t want their bad night to negatively impact our date.

“You’re distracted.” Holding up my watch, I showed it to him. “It’s time to change the subject.”

He laughed.

“Have you thought about our wedding?” I asked curiously.

“Not really. I’ve thought about our marriage though,” he answered without hesitation.

I looked at him and felt my entire body heat. “This is how you got so lucky. And the reason why you’re going to get lucky again tonight.”

He kissed me and slipped his arm around my shoulders. “You’re beautiful and brilliant.”

I puckered my lips to receive a kiss. “And I’m keeping the shoes on.”

“You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“And I’m doing that thing you like.”

“Yes!” he yelled gruffly as he pumped his fist in the air. He kissed me again.

I laughed hard, not paying attention to where I was going. “I hope you know I was kidding!”

He chuckled. “I knew.”

“Your dick is way too big for anal. I mean, come on!”

“I was surprised you were able to take as much as you did.”

“Don’t ever say I never did anything for you!”

He laughed.

Will’s navigation app on his phone told us to turn right for the authentic pizzeria, so we did.

“It was because you’d gotten me so wet already! Since I was so turned on, it made it a little easier to be receptive to the idea. But damn, I soon realized I was walking into a trap!”

He howled, causing me to giggle.

With my right hand intertwined with his, I put my left hand over my mouth to mask my amusement. When I had control of my smiling, I removed my hand and narrowed my eyes at him. “I can’t believe you’re laughing at me! And after I’ve already written my vows.”

He smirked. “Your vows? For our wedding next year?”

“Yes!”

“Let’s hear them.”

I cleared my throat as we slowed to a stop at a not so busy intersection. “William Grayson, I love you. You weren’t a stranger when I met you. You entered my world as the love of my life and my life has been forever changed by you.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by the rapid fire of multiple gun shots.



Panic ensued. Sirens blared.

*Police. Fire. EMT.*

Everyone scrambled, running, pushing, fighting in all different directions because no one seemed to know from which direction it originated. Everyone scattered trying to vacate the premises. Everyone screamed, for help and out of fear. Everyone seemed terrified and hysterical.

Except us.

When I looked over at William, his mouth was set in a determined line as he pulled me, faster than my heeled feet would allow. I tripped twice, but he wouldn't let me fall. He wrapped his arm around my waist and tucked me in closer, almost carrying me with each galloping step.

Everything was happening so fast that I didn't feel any of what was going on around me. I never had a chance to feel scared. I never had a chance to feel worried. With William, I never had a chance to feel anything but safe.

Ducking into a doorway across the street from where we first heard the gunshots, he immediately pulled me into his chest, wrapping his arms around me. Breathing in my hair, he let out loud gasping huffs of air. His hands moved quickly over my back as if he was trying to keep me warm

I squeezed him tightly, burying my face in his shirt.

"You're okay. You're okay," he repeated into my hair.

"I know," I exhaled and turned my face upward to look at him. "You kept us safe. You kept me safe. Thank you." Lifting up onto my tiptoes, I pressed my lips against his. "Thank you for protecting me."

He took my head in his hands. "I'll do anything to protect you." Resting his forehead against mine, he looked at me with a mixture of love and fear. "I might not be able to protect you from everything, but everything I can protect you from, I will."

My heart broke.

And for the first time since I told him about my diagnosis, I saw that fear in his eyes again. He spent the last couple of months being strong for me. He researched and educated himself, prayed for me and with me, but he never projected fear. And I wished I could reassure him that I'd be okay. I wished I could tell him he'd never have to live without me. I wished I could wash the fear from his thoughts. But I couldn't.

My eyes watered. "I'm so sorry."

“What? You have nothing to be sorry about.”

I pulled back fractionally so I could make sure he was hearing me and not drowning in his own thoughts. “I would do anything to protect you, too. And I’m sorry I haven’t been protecting you.” I ran my hands over his chest before I rested one hand over his heart. “I dropped this bombshell on you and then never stopped to question how okay you’ve been. I’ve never considered that this is more difficult for you than you’ve let on. I’m sorry...”

*I’m sorry I didn’t know you were scared.*

“Don’t be sorry. God, Layla, don’t be sorry.” He kissed my lips, my cheeks, my forehead, my nose and then my lips again. “My job is to protect you. It’s my responsibility to be strong for you. You don’t have to be sorry.”

A tear tried to slip down my cheek, but William caught it with his thumb, brushing it away.

“I’m scared, too,” I admitted softly. “I hate this. I hate being sick. I hate having to squeeze in so much in the brief moments when I don’t have chemo or when I’m not feeling tired or sick. I wish things were different. I think about the fact that I have four more cycles of chemo to get through and it’s wearing on me. I think about it all, but I try to stay strong because I don’t want to be a burden to you. I don’t want something we can’t control to be your responsibility. I know when you asked me to marry you, you didn’t sign up for this. You—”

“Layla, I signed up for the whole thing. I signed up for all of you. I signed up for sickness and health. I signed up for the good times and the bad. I signed up for life.”

“You signed up for life, not for death,” I whispered, another tear falling.

“I signed up for until death do us part,” he assured me, clutching my face between his hands with more intensity. His voice lowered, gritty with vulnerability. “So, until death—mine or yours—we’re in this together.”

I closed my eyes, leaning into the touch, overwhelmed with so much love for the man holding me. “So, we live for today.”

We were quiet for a moment. The sounds of the restaurant filled my ears as I swallowed my emotions.

He swallowed hard. “Death is a part of life.”

I looked at him and nodded. “I know..”

“You are my future. You are my life. But at some point, we will die. Tomorrow’s not promised to any of us so, we have to live in the moment.”

“That’s so true,” I agreed. “That’s why I made the lists. I don’t want this negative death cloud surrounding us. I want to make the most of each day. I want us to maximize our time together.”

“And we will.” He kissed me gently.

Breathily, I replied, “I just don’t want to run out of time with you.”

“You won’t.” He pulled away ever so slightly. “We will make sure that we don’t. We will live in the moment.”

“This is our 9:27.”

He held my gaze for a moment before shaking his head. “With us, there’s no such thing as perfect timing because any time we’re together, it’s perfect.”

“Our whole relationship is 9:27,” I realized as his mouth covered mine seductively. My entire body shivered as our tongues touched.

“Ummmmm...” A feminine voice started before clearing her throat and causing our kiss to end early. “Did you two have reservations or...?”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

---

**E**ven though I'd been in a mood all week, I smiled as I heard the footsteps coming down the hallway.

Jenelle took me to the hospital and sat with me during my chemotherapy treatment. We were going to have lunch together, but I wasn't feeling up to it. She brought me home and decided to make lunch for us instead.

"Wow," Jenelle whistled as she sat down beside me in the living room of the new house. "That's all you paid to have the entire house cleaned and the movers move all the stuff in?"

I nodded, my head lulling against the back of the couch. "I got a great deal."

She stared at me. "Are you feeling any better?"

I smiled languidly. "Yes, thank you. And thank you for heating up the soup."

"You barely touched it." She gave me a playful look, pursing her lips. "You know I'm going to tell Will."

"I'm not that hungry."

"What's going on?"

I heaved a sigh. "You know chemo takes a toll."

She shook her head. "No, you've been in a mood all week. But not like a 'I'm so ready for this last round of chemo to be over' kind of mood. This is different—like man trouble kind of mood. And you weren't like this yesterday morning, but you were in this mood when I picked you up this morning. So, spill it. What's going on?"

“Um...” I exhaled louder, wrestling with admitting the truth out loud for the first time. “William and I had an argument last night, so I didn’t get any sleep last night. I’m tired.”

“I thought you two were doing this whole ‘time is of the essence so live each day to the fullest’ since you survived that shootout in New York.”

I let out a short giggle. Every time we told the story, Will and I made it even more dramatic. By the third time we told Jenelle about it, it was a full-blown gun fight.

“We were. And it was going well. And then last night we planned a candlelight dinner...” My eyes started burning. “It didn’t go well.”

“What happened? Oh no, don’t cry, Layla.”

I swiped under my eye. “I’m just tired.”

“Do you want to go upstairs? Do you want to lay down?”

I shook my head. “No, I just want to sit here for a minute.”

“Okay.” Jenelle grabbed my hand and squeezed. “And you know couples fight. No two people can be around each other and never have a disagreement. You two love each other. You’ll get through it.”

My eyes closed, and I offered a tight smile.

“What? Tell me,” she pressed.

“We disagree on things, but we’re always able to talk it out. It wasn’t just an ordinary fight. I said some things... I was just mad and sad and tired and...” I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

“What did you say?”

I was quiet for a long time. My eyes started watering and my stomach churned. “We were in the middle of a conversation. I was trying to tell him how I’d been feeling since we moved in and are literally five minutes around the corner from Molly’s apartment. For the last week, she’s called him more than she had when we were living in my apartment. So, when Molly called and said she didn’t know what was going on, but needed him to come immediately. I rolled my eyes. But when he jumped up and left, I just snapped. I was so upset. I haven’t found someone to sublet my apartment yet, so I thought about leaving and staying there for the night even though it’s empty. But I didn’t feel like it. And the longer I stayed up waiting for him to come back, the more frustrated I became, and I told him—”

The front door opened loudly causing my lips to snap shut. My head swiveled in the direction of the entryway.

“Layla?” William called out as the door slammed behind him.

“We’re in here,” Jenelle replied. She looked at me, lowering her voice. “Are you okay?”

I nodded, blinking back tears.

“If you’re wrong, apologize. He loves you. It’ll be fine,” she told me quickly before he entered the room. “Hey, Will!” She stood. “Good to see you.”

“Hey, how are you?” He hugged her. “Thanks for taking her today.”

“Of course. Now that you’re here, I’m about to head out.” She glanced back at me and winked. “But she didn’t eat her soup so...”

Will looked at my soup. “I’ll make sure she eats.”

“I’m right here, guys,” I spoke up, lifting my finger in the air.

“I’ll put this in the kitchen on my way out,” Jenelle laughed, picking up my bowl. When she walked behind Will, she mouthed the word apologize.

I nodded. “Thank you. I’ll call you later. Love you.”

Once she left the room, I forced myself to look William in his eyes. We held each other’s gaze silently until we heard the front door slam shut. My heart thudded as I saw a flash of the hurt in his eyes.

“I’m so sorry about last night,” I started, tears instantly sprung to my eyes. “I didn’t mean what I said. I’ve just been so tired and frustrated. I lashed out and I swear, I didn’t mean it.”

His jaw clenched, but he remained silent.

I stood up. “William, please say something.”

He slipped his hands in his pocket. “You need to eat. I’ll heat your soup back up.”

“No. Please, talk to me.” I walked toward him cautiously, fiddling with the face of my watch.

“What do you want me to say, Layla?” He shook his head and shrugged. “You told me that you have doubts about us. What do you want me to say to that?”

“I’m sorry I said that. It was out of anger and frustration. It isn’t a true reflection of how I feel.”

He stared at me. “See, that’s the thing... I think a part of you does feel like that. Just be real about it. What was it that you said? That I might as well have stayed the night with my little family?” He made a face and his brows furrowed. “Why would you say some shit like that? I thought we were past that.”

“I shouldn’t have said it.” I looked down at my socked feet momentarily, but forced myself to look him in his eyes and talk to him. “I was wrong, and I’ve been a mess all day about it. I’m sorry.”

His shoulders slacked, and the tension left his face. “What’s going on? Where is this coming from all of a sudden? After our weekend in New York, we’ve been doing all this shit together. Moving in together. Decorating together. Planning our wedding together. Getting ready for the baby together. Going to classes together. I’m with you. It’s perfectly clear that you’re who and what I want. I don’t understand why you blew up last night.”

I glanced around the room before I met his eyes again. “Since we moved to this side of town, she has called you every day. She’s wanted you to come over to help with bullshit tasks every single day. And you were gone for a little longer each time. Last night, we were in the middle of a dinner I spent so much time on... and I was just beginning to tell you about how I was feeling... and then she called—again.”

He took a step forward. “She’s pregnant, Layla.”

I tried not to roll my eyes—unsuccessfully. “I know. I get it,” I bemoaned irritably. “She’s pregnant. But didn’t you say her mom came into town yesterday? So, she has someone at her apartment with her until her due date.”

“It’s my kid and she’s due next week.”

“I know.” I rubbed my temples. “I know, and I hate that I feel this way. But every time she calls you and you go running, it just...”

*Reminds me of how she shares something with you that I never will.*

*Reminds me of how she’ll always have a part of you.*

*Reminds me of how insecure the unknown factors surrounding Deuce’s arrival makes me.*

“She’s pregnant,” he reiterated, annoyance tinging his words. “She could go into labor any day now so when I go running, as you say, it’s because I didn’t want her to have our kid by herself on the kitchen floor.”

“I don’t want that either. But her mom came yesterday, right?”

“Yes. And I still don’t want to miss the birth of my kid,” he retorted.

I was quiet for a second. “I get that.”

“So, what’s the problem?” Shaking his head, he laced his fingers and rested them on the top of his head.

“The problem is just...” My sentence trailed off, wavering as my insecurities threatened to spill out.

“Is just what?”

“I don’t like the way it feels.”

Exhaling, he dropped his arms and took my hands. “I’m doing the best I can. I’m trying here. I don’t know why you feel the way you feel. You’re telling me you don’t like the way it feels, but you’re not telling me how it feels. I don’t even know what I’m up against.”

“I don’t know how to describe it. But it feels like...” I considered my next words carefully. “Every time you leave, it feels like this is what it’s going to be like for the next eighteen years of our lives. Whenever she needs you, you’re going to drop everything to be there for her.”

“For my child. Not for her.”

I successfully didn’t roll my eyes, but only because they were filling with tears. “I know, I know. It’s just for your kid.” I closed my eyes and tried to get myself together.

He remained silent, but continued holding my hands, squeezing gently.

Tears started to force their way through my tightly shut lids as I tried to swallow the lump in my throat. Taking one of my hands out of his, I wiped my face. In a shaky whisper, I admitted my fear. “I’m scared that one day you’re going to leave and just not come back...” My voice becoming smaller and smaller as I forced the rest of the words out of my mouth. “I’m scared that the best thing for your baby boy will be for his mother and father to be together.”

*I’m scared he’s going to hate me for keeping his parents apart, I realized suddenly. Identifying the root of my emotional reaction over the past week almost made me more emotional. I’m scared William Grayson II aka Deuce will hate me.*

“Layla.” William closed his eyes and exhaled loudly. “I can’t do this right now.” He turned to walk away, ripping my heart out in the process.

“Will!”

He paused, but he didn’t look back at me. “I love you, but I need a minute.”

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled noiselessly to his retreating form as a silent sob shook my body. Through my blurred vision, I watched him as he left me alone in the living room.



Clutching my chest, I dropped to my knees and let the first wave of tears flow freely. I felt weak and dizzy. William had never walked away from me before and it hurt. It cut so deeply that his absence felt like a physical wound in my chest. I didn't like to break down so fully, but the thought of losing him made me vulnerable.

"Layla!" William exclaimed a few minutes later as he entered the living room with a fresh bowl of soup. He set it down on the table and immediately pulled me to my feet, wrapping his arms around me, holding me close. "What's going on?"

I buried my face in his chest, inhaling his scent as I cried harder.

"I don't know what to do." He sounded like he was at his breaking point. "What can I do? Talk to me."

"I'm scared," I started before the sob rippled through me.

"I'm not going anywhere. I don't know why you don't believe that, but I'm not leaving you for Molly or anyone else. I'm not—"

"What if the baby hates me?" I interrupted, finally admitting what was lurking behind my insecurity. Crumbling into a bawling mess, my body slacked and was only kept upright by William's strong arms.

He paused. "Layla...Are you serious?" He tipped my chin upward, forcing me to look at him. "Is that what you're upset about?"

I forced my eyes down, ashamed. "I'm sorry," I blubbered hoarsely. "I know it's dumb—"

"Layla," he cut me off and pulled me to the couch. "Listen to me," he started, adjusting me in his lap. "That's not dumb. That's..." He started chuckling to himself.

I wiped my face, eyeing him quizzically. *Why the hell is he laughing at me?*

Noticing me giving him the look, he shook his head. "I don't mean to laugh, but you're telling me that you've been feeling upset all week because you think Deuce is going to hate you?"

"I don't see why that's funny," I pointed out as I started to push out of his lap.

He held me tighter and his laughter faded. "It's funny because the closer it gets to the due date, the more I think about how I don't know what to do. My dad wasn't around so I don't have any first-hand experiences with fatherhood. For the past month, I've been thinking that I could end up fucking this kid up." He was still smiling, but he didn't have the amusement

in his voice anymore. “I’m scared he’s going to hate me. And you know why it took a little longer for me to leave Molly’s last night? Because after realizing it was Braxton Hicks, she said she wasn’t ready for the baby to come. She’s scared the baby will hate her.”

I wiped my face as I stared into his eyes. “Really?” I whispered.

He nodded. “None of us know what to expect. All of us are scared.”

My eyes watered again, but this time from relief. “Really?”

“Really,” he assured me, kissing along my jawline. “But you have to get out of the habit of thinking you’re not my family. You’re going to be my wife, Layla. And if I’m struggling with something, I need to know you’re not going to walk away. I need to know you’re in this with me. Because you’re my partner. She may be the mother of my child, but you are my partner in life. You are my soulmate. You are my wife-to-be. And I just need to know that you’re here with me and you’re in this with me.”

I put my hand over my heart. “Of course, I’m in this with you. I-I…”

My eyes widened.

I realized that every time I wondered if he were better off with Molly and Baby Deuce, he worried about me leaving for that same reason. It never even occurred to me that I was planting seeds of doubt in his head. I didn’t think about how my words were making him think that I was the one who would leave.

Drying my cheeks with my hands and then drying my hands on my shirt, I placed them on the side of his face. “You know I’m counting the days until I’m your wife, right? You know that nothing, but death can keep me away from you.”

He smirked. “That was from a movie.”

“I know,” I giggled. “I can’t remember which one, but it’s true though. You are my everything, William Grayson. I want to be by your side for the rest of our lives. I’m not going anywhere.”

“And you’re not going to let anything scare you away?”

“I’m not going to let anything keep me from you—especially my fears.” I kissed his cheek. “Especially my fears,” I reiterated, staring into his eyes. “I keep saying I’m going to live for today. But when it comes to you and this baby, I keep holding on to doubts and worrying about the future.” I kissed his lips. “But I’m going to stop doing that.” I kissed his lips for a little longer. “I promise, I will stop doing that.”

“Do you believe that I’m committed to you?”

“Yes.” Our lips met again. “Do you believe that I’m committed to you?”

“Yes,” he murmured against my lips. “Do you believe that I want you and only you?”

“Yes.” I nodded, deepening the kiss. When I pulled away, I asked, “Do you believe that I’m yours in every way imaginable?”

He grabbed my hip, moving me over his hardening cock. His tongue dancing with mine causing me to moan into his mouth. Butterflies unraveled the knot that had been pitted in my belly for a week.

Pulling out of the kiss, he stared into my eyes. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m feeling real good now,” I purred as I rotated my ass in a circle in his lap.

He started kissing down my neck, sucking and nibbling gently. “Are you feeling good enough to head upstairs after you eat?”

The pull deep in my belly got the best of me as I felt my nipples harden. “I’m feeling good enough to work up an appetite upstairs and then come back and eat later.” I climbed out of his lap.

“Grab a protein bar and meet me upstairs.” He stood, giving my ass a firm slap. “I’m about to make sure you know that you’re mine.”

I felt that shit all over my body.

Squealing, I ran into the kitchen as quickly as I could with my soup bowl. After dumping it, I grabbed a protein bar and two bottles of water. I happily bounded up the stairs as I took a bite of the peanut butter and chocolate snack. After stopping to take a swig of water, I walked through our bedroom door and froze.

Briefly choking on the water, my eyes were glued to William as he pulled his shirt off. I tilted my head to the side as I watched his biceps flex, his abs tighten, and his pectoral muscles move under his skin as he stripped out of the rest of his clothes. My eyes zeroed in on his dick and my lips parted.

“You are the sexiest man I’ve ever seen in my life,” I gushed.

“Is that right?” He walked over to me, forcing me to finally rip my eyes away from all nine inches of him.

“Hmm?” I stared at his lips distractedly. I just wanted him to kiss me.

“I love making up with you,” he growled as our bodies came into contact. He reached down, grabbing me by my ass and lifting me.

I squealed, holding the bottles tighter so I didn’t drop them. “Will!”

He put me down in front of the bed, taking the bottles out of my hand. I started to take the straps from my dress from my shoulder, but he saw me in the mirror. “Don’t touch it,” he demanded sexily. After placing the water and the protein bar on the dresser, he walked back over to me. “I told you,” he started softly, slipping his fingers under the straps of the dress. He kissed me softly and then trailed his lips down my neck and chest. “You’re the sexiest woman I’ve ever seen...” He tugged the fabric down my arm, exposing my breasts. He latched his mouth onto my nipple. “And you’re mine.” With a final yank, the cotton dress pooled at my feet.

I sucked in a sharp intake of air as his tongue swirled around my hardened nipple. He bit down lightly before making his way to the other breast. The familiar warmth curled in the pit of my stomach as his fingers hooked the sides of my panties and pulled them down my legs.

“Step,” he commanded, helping me free myself of my last bit of cover. “Get in the middle of the bed and spread your legs for me.”

*Oh shit...*

I sat and then scooted to the middle of the bed. I propped myself up on my elbows as I watched him watching me spread my legs slowly. I eyed him as he stroked his cock while watching me. It turned me on to turn him on.

“You don’t understand how badly I want to taste you,” he grunted as he kneeled on the bed.

My eyes closed, and my head fell back thinking about his tongue on me, inside me.

*Fuck you, chemo!*

“You can’t.” My heated warning sounded more like a plea than anything. My hips jerked upwards when I felt his tongue on the skin just below my navel. It was moving slowly downward. “Mmm, no, I don’t want—oh!”

I felt his hands on the inside of my thighs, pushing them further apart.

“I know what I’m doing,” he said huskily as he blew against my clit.

I clenched tight as waves of desire swept through me. “Will,” I moaned his name.

“You keep saying my name like that and I’m not going to be able to stop myself from licking all over this pretty pussy.” Each word he used felt like a soft flick against my clit and I squirmed. He was so close that if I jerked upward, his mouth would be on the epicenter of my pleasure.

That thought alone got me wetter.

“I know you want me to,” he teased seductively. “You know you love the way I massage your clit with my tongue while I slide these fingers in your pussy.”

He slid a finger inside me and I gasped loudly. It felt like I wasn’t able to pull enough air into my lungs as he quickly slid another finger into me.

“Mmmm,” he growled. “You’re thinking about my tongue inside you, Layla? Is that what has you so wet for me? Because it’s mine?” Moving his fingers quickly, he made me cry out, which seemed to only turn him on more. “Shit... you have no idea... how bad I want it. I want to eat you and then slide all nine inches in you... I want to nut all in this pussy.”

“Will,” I mewled, dragging his name out as my body burst into the flames his touch and his words ignited.

He growled. “I told you about saying my name like that. I warned you.”

“Oh God,” I groaned before apologizing unintelligibly.

“Shit, listen to how wet you are. Let me get a little taste, please,” he begged. “Please, baby, let me taste it.”

Hearing the want in his voice was pushing me closer to the edge.

He had two fingers sliding in and out of me and then I felt his other arm position move, resting his free hand on my pelvic bone.

“I know what you like.”

“Yes,” I agreed breathily as I felt my body giving in.

“You like when I suck your clit. You like when I eat this pussy until you—”

“Oh God!” I screamed a little as his thumb suddenly moved rhythmically over my clit, causing my body to start its slow descent into a free fall.

“Yeah, that’s it, baby. Give me all of that,” he groaned as I clamped down around his fingers.

“Oh. My. God.” I came hard and my hips jerked upward.

My heart was pounding in my chest as my entire body shot off fireworks.

*Now that is how you make up.*

I opened my eyes to the sight of him slipping on a condom. Licking my lips, I shuddered. I ran my hands over the peaks of my breasts before cupping them. Breathily, I called out to him. “William, please get—”

His phone rang with that specific lullaby ringtone, interrupting me and the mood.

The look in his eyes reflected how I imagined I looked: disappointed.

“I’ll ignore it,” he decided aloud, grabbing me by the ankles.

“No—oh!” I yelped in surprise as he pulled me forcefully, causing me to skate across our satin sheets. I giggled as his fingers danced down my calves, over my knees and down my thighs.

“I don’t want you to have any doubts about who I’m committed to.”

I swooned. The love I felt for him was palpable. “Come here,” I whispered, stretching my arms out toward him. As soon as he leaned forward, caging my head with his strong arms, I grabbed his face and pulled his lips to mine. I kissed him with the passion and love his words filled me with. “You’re mine,” I told him with a confidence I hadn’t ever felt.

He stared into my eyes and with a certainty I’d never seen, he replied, “And you’re mine.”

The phone stopped ringing and then immediately started again.

“Go ahead and answer it.”

He hesitated for a second before nodding. Dropping a peck against my lips, he pushed himself up and off the bed. “But if it’s nothing, I want your sexy ass bent over and ready for me.”

“Yes sir...” Biting my lip, I rolled onto my belly with my eyes never breaking from his as he snatched the phone from the nightstand.

“Hello?” he answered, walking back toward where my ass was positioned in the air waiting for him. Just before he reached it, he froze. “Are you sure?”

Hearing the anxiousness in his voice, I changed my position so I could face him.

“Okay. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, they’re on the way? So, I should... okay. Yeah, we’re going to meet you there. We’re leaving now.” He hung up the phone and looked at me with a mixture of panic and shock pinching his handsome features. “Molly’s having the baby. Right now.”

I nodded. “Okay, that’s good news.”

“Holy shit... it’s happening right now. Her water just broke.” His eyebrows seemed stuck in the middle of his forehead. “Right now.”

Even though all I wanted to do was retreat into panic mode, I crawled off the bed and immediately wrapped my arms around him. I rested my head on his chest, listening to his racing heart. “William, you are going to

be an amazing father. Deuce is going to be so proud to be William Grayson II." I looked up at him. "Get dressed. It's time to meet your little boy."

He was quiet for a second before he nodded.

We both scrambled to get dressed quickly. One of the parenting classes we attended talked about having a hospital go-bag for the expectant mother, but we decided to make a bag for us as we waited for the baby's arrival. He grabbed his go-bag and wallet. I grabbed our bottles of water, my handbag, and the car keys. We were out of the house and on the road in less than ten minutes.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

---

“I’m glad the two of you made up, but it’s too bad you didn’t get a chance to get it in. Make-up sex is the only upside to a fight,” Jenelle reasoned as we sat in the corner of the waiting room.

We’d been waiting for two hours since Molly was taken in the back and there had been no real developments. It was appearing as if Deuce had no intentions of coming any time soon. So, while Molly’s mom paced and asked questions and made calls, my best friend showed up to the hospital to both support and entertain me. I watched her animated expression as she waited for me to answer and I smiled.

*I’m truly blessed.*

“He took care of me.” I closed my eyes with a smile playing on my lips.

Jenelle elbowed me. “What? How?” She looked around, lowering her voice. “I thought you said he couldn’t perform oral on the same day you have a chemo treatment.”

“Well he can if we use a dental dam, but—”

“I’ve honestly never used one of those before. I don’t understand how they would work... or how I would feel anything.”

I shook my head. “It’s not the same, but if done right, it’ll get the job done.” I smiled, giving her a giddy look. “William Grayson has been blessed with many talents. Many, many talents.”

“Oh, God,” she groaned, rolling her eyes playfully. “Enough!”

“What?” I widened my eyes and shrugged my shoulders innocently. She elbowed me again and I giggled. “Anyway, we didn’t have any more dental dams, so he just used his fingers and I swear I came just as hard.”

“Bullshit!”



I raised my right hand. “I swear to God.”

Her eyes widened, intrigued. “Really?”

I nodded. “My man is really good—”

“The future Mrs. Grayson...”

My mouth snapped shut and my neck swiveled in the direction of William’s mom. “Hey, Ms. Grayson.” I grinned, standing to embrace her. “How are you?”

“I’m doing fine. Spending too much time worrying.” She looked over at Jenelle. “You must be Jenelle.”

“The one and only!” She stood, sticking her hand out. “It’s good to meet you.”

“I’ve heard so much about you,” Ms. Grayson exclaimed, pulling Jenelle into a hug. “You are the one that’s like a sister to Layla. The one who takes her to chemo.”

Jenelle nodded. “That’s me.”

Ms. Grayson took a step back. “I’ve heard so much about you. Thank you for taking care of her. She’s like a daughter to me.”

“Of course. That’s my sister.” She flashed me a smile. “And I’ve heard nothing but good things about you as well. Layla tells me that you’re pretty much the best mother-in-law in the world, so I’ve put off meeting my boyfriend’s parents.”

I laughed because while that reason wasn’t the entire truth, she did say that the other day.

Ms. Grayson laughed as well.

“Okay, I guess I need to find me some coffee. I was at a conference with Adam in Richmond and as soon as Will called me, I just hopped in my car and drove straight here. I’m going to go see if I can get some coffee and some information from Molly’s mother and then I’m going to head home to change.” She gave me a look. “I’ll let you two get back to your conversation.” With a wink, she added, “I don’t want to hear all that nasty talk about my baby boy anyway.”

My mouth dropped open as Ms. Grayson and Jenelle cackled with unhinged laughter.

Plopping down in the chair, I covered my face. “Oh my God,” I mumbled with equal parts amusement and humiliation.

“I didn’t hear what you said, but I could see it in your face. It’s how I look when I’m talking about Adam.”

Shaking my head, I waved my arms. “Nope. Nope.”

Laughing, she glanced over at Molly’s mom. “Okay, I’ll see you when I get back.”

“Bye!” Jenelle and I called out to her in unison.

“I love her so much,” I gushed, watching the fabulous woman in the yellow dress with orange and green flowers.

“Speaking of mothers...” Jenelle gestured with her head. “How was it meeting Molly’s mom under these circumstances?”

“She was fine. A little preoccupied and she’s been spending most of the time since we’ve been here on the phone with her husband and I guess other family members.” I shrugged. “The only issue was anytime William showed me any kind of affection. He kissed me before heading in the back with Molly and she had a perturbed look on her face.”

Jenelle giggled. “Perturbed.”

I rolled my eyes. “Anyway, what’s new with you? And thank you for coming.”

“Of course. You’re going to be a step-mom. This is a big deal.”

I nodded. “I know.” My stomach knotted. “I’m not ready.”

She held my hand. “You’ll be fine.”

I smiled. “I know. But I’m still not ready.”

“Next year this time, you’ll have a one year old and you’ll be preparing for a wedding.”

“Crazy, right?”

“And to think, you almost didn’t hit Will up for a booty call.”

I laughed. “This is true.”

“Everything happened the way it was supposed to. It was truly perfect timing.”

I thought of Nana in that moment. “A broken clock is right twice a day,” I quoted my grandmother.

“Looks like Nana was right.”

I looked at my watch, faithfully stuck on 9:27. “Yeah. Our second shot seems to be going pretty well.”

“Pretty well?” She grabbed my left hand and forced the ring in my face. “Pretty well? Ma’am, you’re getting married to the love of your life. Besides the whole”—she lowered her voice— “baby with someone else thing, this is perfect.”

I flashed her a rueful smile. “If I’m being completely honest, I don’t think this would’ve worked between us if everything that happened wouldn’t have happened.”

“Even Molly the Model’s pregnancy?” She had her eyebrow quirked with skepticism. “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” I echoed with complete certainty. “Everything happens for a reason. And the reason I ended things the first time was because I knew I couldn’t make him a father. No matter what he says, he wouldn’t have been happy. His life wouldn’t have been fulfilled. But he ended up getting Molly pregnant three months before we rekindle our relationship.” I shook my head in awe. “Molly was just Molly the Model, the rebound. But her purpose was greater. Her purpose was to be someone significant enough for him to procreate with since I couldn’t.”

“You’re in a real peaceful space right now.” Jenelle smirked. “Are you drunk?”

I let my head fall back as I laughed loudly. “No! I’m just... thinking about Nana and realizing that everything had to happen the exact way it happened in order for me to be here, now.

She tilted her head and stared at me for a few seconds. “All these epiphanies and happy thoughts and he didn’t get around to fucking you yet?” She nodded. “Yeah, he’s good. He’s a keeper.”

We fell into a fit of giggles.

Over the course of the next three hours, William’s mother returned, my parents arrived, a group of Molly’s friends had gathered, and Molly’s father was on a flight. Unfortunately, Deuce had his own schedule to adhere to because Molly had been in her room in the labor and delivery wing for a total of six hours and he hadn’t made his arrival. Jenelle and all of Molly’s friends left, but the three sets of parents were with me as we approached hour nine and still no baby. William’s best friend Carlos arrived bright and early in the morning, thinking the baby would’ve been born already. Three of Molly’s friends arrived at the same time as Carlos. But at hour eighteen, still no baby.

*How long does labor last?* I wondered as I freshened up in the bathroom. I hated to admit that I was ready to go home. But I was. *And after staying up most of the night and getting horrible sleep in uncomfortable chairs, I am going to be mad if I miss it when I head across the hospital for chemo.*

Jenelle came back with coffee and muffins for everyone at hour nineteen. Twenty-two minutes after I'd taken a bite out of my blueberry muffin, William came out to announce that his son was born and both mother and baby were doing well.

We all cheered as he hugged everyone, saving me for last.

My heart rate spiked as he approached me. Scooping me into his arms, he swept me off my feet, spinning us in a circle. When my feet touched the ground again, he crashed his lips into mine and kissed me with enough passion to leave us both breathless.

"Congratulations," I murmured as I stared into his dark eyes. "I'm so happy for you."

And I meant every word.

He didn't say anything at first. He just held me tighter, nuzzling his nose against mine. "Thank you."

"I mean it," I declared earnestly. "As you were in the back with Molly, getting to experience fatherhood, I just couldn't stop thinking about Nana." Looking at him adoringly, I tightened my grip. "For you to have the life that you were meant to have, we had to go through everything we went through. For me to have you the way I want you, the way I've always wanted you, we had to go through everything we went through. I'm so happy for you." I paused before blurting out, "Will you marry me?"

He smirked. "Nothing could keep me from marrying you," he admitted in a low, strained tone.

"September twenty-seventh. This year." My eyes widened. "I want to be your wife. I don't care about the big wedding. I don't care about the dress. I care that I'm your wife and that your child knows that even though I'm not his mom, I love him, too."

William's mouth covered mine forcefully. Impulsively, I moaned the moment our tongues met. He deepened the kiss sending chills up and down my spine. I opened my eyes when I felt his lips turning into a smile.

Pulling out of the kiss and turning to the group, he made an announcement. "Change of plans—Layla and I are getting married on September twenty-seventh. At the end of this month."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

---

I rolled my eyes as I listened to William pacify Molly. It had been three weeks since she had the baby and one thing was for sure: she was needy. I didn't even think it was an attempt to get a lot of face time with Will anymore. It was clearly her personality. I was seeing a new side to the picture-perfect Molly the Model with thousands of followers on social media. The usually confident woman had become increasingly whiny during the pregnancy. But since she left the hospital, she was completely helpless.

And it got on my last nerve.

I was sure she was overwhelmed and tired. Because of that, I tried to be more sympathetic toward her. I wanted to refrain from gritting my teeth when she called nonstop when she was taking care of the baby, and also when she called nonstop when William had the baby with him. Even though her mom was still in town helping her, she accused him of having it easier because I was with him to help. But because I was still undergoing my treatment most of the month, I didn't want to hold or be too close to the baby. The pamphlets and research that I did said it would be okay and that I was likely more at risk getting sick from the baby than vice versa. But still... I wasn't taking any chances.

I sighed heavily as I walked out of the bedroom, eyeing Will's muscular back on my way downstairs. I wanted to have that same euphoric optimism that I had on Deuce's birthday. I wanted to be the understanding, supportive partner that I was trying to be. But as my wedding day got closer, I found myself being more annoyed by Molly and her constant barrage of calls.

*It's still early, I told myself. Give it time. She'll stop acting like he's her partner and not just her co-parent.*

I tried not to think negatively. Or at the very least, I tried not to show it. But with my wedding day in twenty-four hours, I felt like I was about to explode.

“Hey! I just got your text,” Jenelle greeted me as I answered my phone. “So, I see the Brady Bunch high you were on finally wore off.” She cackled at her own joke.

Stifling a giggle, I sighed. “Does that make me a bitch?”

“A little. But only because you said, and I quote, ‘Sometimes I want to yell shut up and slap Molly across her pretty little face—soap opera style.’ So, the slapping was a little bitchy, but you also called her pretty. That kind of balances it out. So... I think you’re in the clear,” she reasoned playfully.

I laughed, letting some of my annoyance roll off me. “Thank you. I needed that laugh.” I heard commotion in the background. “What are you doing? Where’s Mike?”

“Mike is shopping for something to wear for tomorrow.”

“Oh! Aww! He doesn’t have to dress up tomorrow. It’s last minute. He can wear what he has.”

“So, you want him in a tux or will just a nice black suit work?”

I laughed from my belly. “What?!” I squealed, sitting on the couch in the living room. “I didn’t say that at all.”

“But didn’t you?”

“No, not at all! Let that man wear what he wants to wear.”

“Enough about me. What’s going on with you? You ready for tomorrow?”

“I’m ready for tomorrow, but I’m just...” I rubbed my face. “I wish I felt the prewedding excitement I’m supposed to feel. Don’t get me wrong, I’m looking forward to being Mrs. Grayson. But I can’t get in the wedding spirit because every couple of hours, we’re interrupted by something else that has to do with her. This wedding is super low key so it’s not like we had to do a whole lot to get ready for it. But I can’t get excited about it because it’s always something wrong with her—not the baby, her.”

“It’s like Molly is the child.”

“Exactly! That’s exactly what I almost said this morning when she called Will to come over because her mom needed to take a nap.”

“What? So, she couldn’t watch her own kid for a couple of hours?”

I shook my head. “I’m not a mother. I’m not judging her for being tired. I’m sure childbirth is ridiculous. My surgery was ridiculous, so I can only imagine the type of pain a tiny human coming out of you causes. I just don’t understand how she has her mom with her full time, and yet she is always calling my man to come to her rescue. My man! For stuff that has to do with her. And I wouldn’t be so upset if it wasn’t all the time, around the clock about the baby. But it’s always to say she’s tired and can’t sleep or that she wants something specific to eat, but doesn’t feel like making it herself. Oh, and just now, she called because her mom got up from her nap and is making her change her own baby’s diaper. I just can’t take it anymore.” I let out a deep breath. “Thank you for letting me vent.”

“Do you feel any better?”

I sucked air into my lungs and expanded my chest. “I really do.”

“Good. You want my advice?”

“Of course.”

“Tell Will that his baby mama is doing too much, and she is ruining what should be the most exciting time in your life. Also, let him know that now that you are done with chemo, your bachelorette party has been scheduled for October twenty-seventh. If he asks why it’s a month later, tell him that was our rain date.”

I laughed. “Yeah, I’ll tell him about the bachelorette party. He’ll somehow try to make it a coed bachelor/bachelorette party.” Leaning back on the couch, I smiled at how much I adored him. “And about Molly, I’m trying not to stress him out any more than he already is. He takes all her calls because he’s scared it’s going to be about the baby. He’s constantly worried. I don’t want to overburden him. I want to support him and be there for him. I’ll ask him how he feels about her calls. If he’s okay with it, I’ll deal for the next few weeks. But once they get into a rhythm, he’s going to have to put his foot down. Or I’m going to have to put my foot in Deuce’s mom’s ass.”

Jenelle’s shrill laughter on the other end of the phone made me laugh. I was about to make another comment and when I opened my eyes, I jolted at the sight of William leaning against the door jamb.

I sat up abruptly. “Uhhhh... William just walked in so I’m going to call you back.”

She laughed harder. “Did he hear the ‘foot in Molly’s ass’ comment?”

I was staring into his beautiful brown eyes, but I couldn't read his expression. "I think so. But I'm about to find out."

"Well, he needed to know. If he didn't hear you, she would've called him twenty-two times to tell him anyway. Text me and let me know what happens!"

"Text me a picture of Mike's new suit."

With a few extra giggles, we ended the call.

I placed the phone in my lap. "Heyyyyyyyyy, handsome!" The cheer in my voice raised the pitch as I greeted him. "How's Molly?"

Smirking, he made his way to the couch, sitting right beside me. "She's stressing out. Stressing her mom out. Stressing me out."

"I believe it."

"But there's a bright side."

"What's that?"

"She doesn't have your foot up her ass."

My mouth fell open before I snickered. Covering my face, I groaned. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"Don't be. You were letting it out." Brushing strands of my hair off my forehead, he smirked. "I told her she had to chill out and stop calling me for things that have nothing to do with Deuce."

My eyebrows flew up. "You did?"

He nodded, wrapping his arm around my shoulders. "Of course, I did."

I curled my body into him, resting my head in the crook of his neck. He kissed the top of my head and I relaxed into him.

"I gave her three weeks to get adjusted. I wanted her to get as comfortable as possible because I told her I was not going to be available until October first. I told her that we're getting married and then we are celebrating our marriage." He dropped sweet kisses on my forehead.

"And she was okay with that?"

He exhaled. "She's going to have to be. Besides, we have a weekly schedule that we put in place that'll start when we get back from Las Vegas. I'll have to pick up Deuce that Monday and then she'll have him that next Monday. Every Monday before work, we'll switch off."

I felt relief and contentment heat my cheeks. "That sounds good. All of it."

We were both quiet for a minute.

"Thank you," he whispered.



“For what?”

“For being patient with me and letting me deal with her in my own time and in the way I felt was best. I know it hasn’t been easy.”

I smiled. “You’re welcome. Thank you for handling it.”

He lifted his head from mine and tipped my chin. Dropping a kiss against my lips, he made my heart flutter. “Anything for you.”

Genuine excitement to be his wife overwhelmed my senses.

“Tomorrow is going to be perfect,” I murmured happily.

And it was.

Dressed in a short white dress and the sexiest black stilettos I could find, I walked down a black and white rose covered aisle while Jamila sang a romantic tune. It was a beautiful Fall evening. But with it being a Thursday wedding that we planned in three weeks, there were no more than forty people in attendance. My mom, brothers, some friends, and a couple of coworkers were on the left. William’s mom, some friends, fraternity brothers, and Phillip East were on the right. And while I knew Jenelle and Carlos were on either side of him, my eyes were trained on my future husband.

Dressed in a black suit that was tailored to perfection and a crisp white shirt, William Grayson looked like he was on his way to the ESPYs. His broad shoulders, wide chest, and muscular physique were in no way masked in his designer fabrics. With his smooth, unblemished skin, straight, white teeth, full, kissable lips, chiseled, clean-shaven jaw, and close-cut Caesar haircut, he exuded masculinity and raw sex appeal. But with the dark brown eyes that sparkled when he smiled, he radiated love.

*And he’s all mine.*

My tongue slowly slid between my glossed lips as my eyes skated over his six-foot, three-inch frame. From his fresh haircut to his black leather shoes, he was perfect. The way his black suit stretched across his professional football player build brought me back to that day in February when we happened to be at the same restaurant. We hadn’t run into each other in the two years we’d been broken up. But somehow, we’d ended up at the same place at the same time. Somehow, God and the universe knew that it was the perfect timing for us to cross paths.

“You ready, sweetheart,” my dad asked, patting my arm once we stopped at the end of the aisle. He took my hand and kissed it. His eyes

paused at my watch and a ghost of a smile played on his lips. “Nana would be proud.”

“I wish Nana would’ve been able to meet him,” I whispered as I hugged my father.

“I know, sweetheart. I know.” He pulled back and looked at me. Then he looked over at William and shook his hand. “You ready, son?”

William’s eyes danced. “Yes.”

My father switched places with William and addressed the group. “You may be seated.”

After a blessing and a funny, lighthearted message on marriage, my father married William and I in a rooftop ceremony at Lavo. When it was time to exchange vows, I was ready. I felt like I was reciting the words that had imprinted themselves on my heart long ago.

“William Grayson, I love you. You weren’t a stranger when I met you. You entered my world as the love of my life and my life has been forever changed by you. One of the most important people in my life died a few years ago. One of the things she always used to say was that a broken clock was right twice a day. She said it meant that you have two opportunities for perfect timing. When I think of every big life event that has happened to me or every opportunity I’ve seized, it’s been because of that philosophy. It has driven me to not give up just because the first attempt didn’t pan out the way I wanted it to. I’ve gotten so many opportunities because of that mindset. I’ve gotten jobs because of it, raises because of it. But what I’ve realized is that time is a gift—a gift that is only perfect when it’s with the right person. So, while Nana’s words allowed me to run for class president in eighth grade after losing miserably in seventh, her logic almost allowed me to give you up because the timing wasn’t right.” My eyes watered as I got lost in his. “A broken clock is right twice a day. But if we measured time in moments, in kisses, in laughter, in orgasms, in happiness, in love, clocks would be rendered useless. Thank you for rendering clocks useless.” My words trailed off as I felt myself being consumed with emotion.

Cooing and sniffles from the crowd shook me, reminding me that William and I weren’t alone. Although it wasn’t time, William leaned forward and pressed his lips against mine.

“Alright now, son,” my teary-eyed father playfully chastised William, causing our family and friends to chuckle. “That portion of the program isn’t for a few more minutes.”

“That’s a hard act to follow,” William addressed the crowd before turning his attention solely on me. “Like I told you when we were in that gang-related territory shootout—”

“Oh God,” I groaned, covering my face as our friends and family snickered. Everyone there, with the exception of our coworkers, had heard the story at least three times in the five weeks since it happened.

“Like I told you, there’s no such thing as perfect timing when it comes to us. We are 9:27.”

I nodded in agreement with a lovestruck grin on my face.

He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. Licking his lips, his eyes flicked between the paper and me. Shaking his head, he smiled sheepishly as he put the paper back into his pocket. “Layla, I knew there was something special about you the moment I laid eyes on you. I felt something, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. It wasn’t until we got together that I knew what it was that I felt. I’m not saying it was love at first sight. I’m just saying that the way the sun shined down on you and followed you like a spotlight during that cookout in the quad, I knew God was showing you to me for a reason. Again, I’m not saying it was love at first sight, but I know He created you for me. You don’t complete me. You make me more me. You make me more me than I could’ve ever been without knowing you. You make me better. You make me the best version of myself. But at the very same time, I would be incomplete without you. You are the definition of beauty, strength, and love. You’ve taught me so much about life and about time. So, for the rest of my life, I will give you my time. I know things haven’t been easy for us. I know there were some unplanned blessings that have occurred. I know there were some struggles we had to overcome. But as my grandma says, God didn’t say life would be easy, He said it would be worth it. I’m not sure if that’s a direct quote from the Bible, but I think it sums our relationship up. Everything that has happened brought us closer together. There’s no perfect time when it comes to us. We have right now. That’s the only time that’s guaranteed. And I won’t take it or you for granted. I love you and I thank you for agreeing to be my wife.”

Grabbing his face, I pulled his lips toward me and kissed him softly. The tears that had been running down my face the entire time he was speaking made our kisses salty, yet still sweet.

My dad cleared his throat and we pulled apart, blushing, remembering we weren’t alone. “By the power vested in me and as witnessed by family

and friends, I now pronounce you husband and wife. William, my son, you may now kiss your bride—again!”

To the soundtrack of cheers and whistles, laughter and giggles, I received a way too chaste kiss from my husband. Since the signal to the DJ was our kiss, our first dance song played. As we swayed to the music, the restaurant staff was supposed to be bringing out the appetizers and champagne. I told myself to glance over to that side of the patio to make sure they were doing it, but I was too lost in the moment. As I swayed with William, I couldn't help but feel different.

“What are you thinking about?” William murmured as he looked down at my face. He kissed my nose.

“How happy I am,” I answered him honestly. “All of the stress and anxiety that I felt this week, this month, this year.” I shrugged, pressing my body closer to his. “Gone.”

“So, you're saying I should've married you sooner?”

Looking at the gleam in his eye, I giggled. “That's not what I'm saying at all.” Sighing, I rested my head in the crook of his neck as we rocked back and forth to the beat. “I'm glad we made it.”

Tilting my chin, he leaned down to kiss me leisurely, romantically, sexily. “This was always going to end with us together.”

I melted into him. “I love you, Mr. Grayson.”

“I love you, Mrs. Grayson.”

*Mrs. Grayson!!*

“I'm your wife,” I breathed faintly.

“Until the end of time.”

With butterflies in my belly, I closed my eyes and basked in my happiness.

We only had the patio reserved until eight o'clock so by the time we finished our first dance, we immediately rolled into dinner. Once the festivities were over, we hugged and kissed everyone goodbye. We had an early morning flight to Las Vegas we were catching. Although our bags were already packed, we wanted to go home and consummate our marriage.

And we did.

Again.

And again.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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“**W**hat happens in Vegas stays in Vegas,” William called out from Deuce’s room as I walked down the stairs on the phone with Jenelle. The amusement in his voice made me smile.

I giggled. “That doesn’t include best friends.”

“So, it’s cool if I tell Carlos that it is possible to do the suspended scissors if—”

I laughed so loud and hard that I couldn’t hear the rest of his sentence. “Don’t tell Carlos that!” I yelped.

“Don’t tell Carlos what?” Jenelle asked, laughing along with me even though she didn’t know what I was laughing at.

“About the suspended scissors.”

“I still am amazed that you were able to pull it off. Upper body strength for the win!” Jenelle paused and laughed harder. “Wait, did you tell him that he couldn’t tell Carlos?”

We chuckled even harder.

Getting off the phone, I went to the kitchen and emptied the dishwasher. We’d only been home for a few hours, but we had so much energy—perhaps because we stayed up way too late and slept the entire plane ride back home. After such an amazing weekend away, it was safe to say that our honeymoon was a success.

An hour later, we were curled up in the living room watching television.

“This is it,” I declared out of nowhere. Lifting my head from his chest, I stared at my husband. “This is what Nana was talking about.”

His eyes lit up as he gave me a squeeze. “What did Nana say?”

“Basically, that if you really live, really laugh, and really love, you’ll have no regrets in life.”

Nodding, he leaned down and kissed me gently. “I agree with that. I’ve done more living with you.” He pressed his lips against mine again. “I’ve laughed harder with you.” His mouth covered mine sensually. “And I’ve never loved anyone more than you.”

Butterflies swirled within me as I looked into his eyes. “God, you make me so happy,” I uttered softly, running my hand over his chiseled jaw. “I love this life that we’ve built together. I love that our love has endured everything that it has. I love that I get to call you my husband. I love that you make me grateful for each minute of each day.”

The doorbell chimed.

“9:27, Mrs. Grayson.”

Dropping a kiss on my forehead, William got up to answer the door.

“9:27, Mr. Grayson.”

A few minutes later, I heard the soft clicking of heels against the hardwood floor of the hallway.

“Hi, Layla,” Molly greeted me.

I hadn’t seen Molly in two weeks, so my eyebrows flew up when I laid eyes on her. “Molly! You look stunning.”

“You think?” A slight hint of uncertainty in her tone as she waited for my approval. Wearing a pair of faded and distressed jeans that looked painted on, a lowcut, black top and black heels that were sky high, Molly was clearly back to feeling like her old self.

I nodded, standing and walking over to her. “You look gorgeous. Honestly, you look better than ever.”

And she did. There was a natural glow about her that was uncanny.

“Thank you. I needed to get out of the house, so we’re going to a karaoke bar tonight,” she informed me. “I just really need a night out. It’s been so much and…” Her voice trailed off and I could see in her heavily made up eyes that she was going to cry.

*Where the hell did Will go?*

“Well, I’m glad you’re going out.” Unsure of what else to do, I reached out and hugged her. “You deserve a night out and a good time.”

She hugged me back with force and I could feel the genuineness in her embrace. It was clear she needed the hug.

“Well, what’s going on here, Deuce?”

Will's voice cut through the room and Molly and I pulled away from one another smiling.

"Hey, baby!" I cooed, my vision fixed on the cutest little boy on the planet. I reached out for him and William gave him to me. Inhaling deeply, I sighed. "He smells so good." My nose rested lightly on his head as I inhaled his baby smell.

"Is this your first time holding him?" Molly asked, seemingly confused and amused by my reaction.

"Yeah," I answered.

She looked like she was about to ask another question, but William interrupted.

"I put the milk in the refrigerator."

"Oh yeah! That's what I meant to tell you to do when I came in, sorry," Molly apologized, pulling her phone out of her pocket. "I think there's something I'm forgetting. But everything should be in his bag." She kissed Deuce's head, his hand, and then his back. "I'm going to miss you. Mommy will miss you. But you have Daddy and...Layla."

"He's in good hands," William assured her.

She smiled tightly, and nodded.

"I'll walk you out."

They left the room and it was just me and the baby. I rocked him as I made my way to the couch. With his small little body curled against my chest, I felt so warm and content. I'd never wanted to have a baby, but I was so happy to take on a motherhood role with Deuce.

"You two look content," William said as he entered the living room.

I craned my neck to see the small grin on Deuce's face. His eyes were closed, but his little mouth was turned upward. "Look at that smile." I made a face as I looked back at his father. "Doesn't that mean he has gas?"

Will laughed, causing Deuce's eyes to open.

"He heard Daddy laughing and needed to see what was going on," I narrated.

The three of us sat on the couch like that for at least ninety minutes. We were in perfect harmony.

Until shit hit the fan.

"Why is he still crying?" I wondered aloud, perplexed by the completely dry, freshly changed, well-fed baby screaming in his father's arms in the next room.

We tried music, baby toys, singing, darkness, anything we could think of. But nothing worked.

“Check his bag again!” William snapped.

“For what? I’ve checked it three times,” I returned with the same attitude. “There’s nothing else in it.”

“I don’t know. There has to be something we’re not doing.”

“Obviously! That’s why he’s still crying!”

*He’s crying like he has real life problems. If I felt like crying like that, what would I need to feel better? A drink? Ha! A good cuddle always makes me feel better. Crawling into William’s arms and having him hold me—.*

I stopped mid-thought and adjusted my attitude. Walking out of our bedroom, I entered Deuce’s room where a stressed-out Will was still pacing back and forth with a shrieking baby.

“I love you,” I told him loud enough that he could hear me over the cries.

His face relaxed. “I love you, too.” He sighed. “I’m sorry that I snapped. I just don’t know what to do.”

“It’s a lot. He’s never whined like this before.” I took Deuce out of his arms. “Take off your shirt.”

“This is not the time for a striptease, Layla. Probably later.” He paused and then smirked. “Definitely later. But now, I need to get Deuce to bed.”

Snickering, I rolled my eyes at him. “Calm down, Magic Mike. Just take off your shirt.”

Grabbing his shirt at the back of his neck, he pulled it over his head and then off his arms. I knew he wasn’t trying to be sexy, but even as his child cried out, I couldn’t help but gawk at his unintentional sexiness.

“Now what?” he asked, pulling my attention away from his chest.

Clearing my throat, I pointed at the rocking chair with my head. “Sit there.”

He sat and then looked at me expectantly.

Turning the fussy baby around, I placed him on William’s chest. Deuce’s cries calmed instantly.

“Ta-da!” I wiggled my fingers as if I did some sort of magic trick.

“How did you know?”

“Well, we checked everything else. And unless he was sick, there was nothing really wrong with him. And I know sometimes, I just want to be held and I just figured it was worth a shot. He might hate the feel of that



shirt. But if Molly is breast feeding him, he's probably getting a lot of skin-to-skin contact. So even though we fed him the breast milk, he didn't get his skin-to-skin contact time. Now you're giving him warmth, and he's inhaling your scent."

"You're a natural."

I scoffed playfully. "At searching the internet and self-soothing myself?"

"At being a mom."

My entire body flushed. Instantly, I fell more in love with him.

The week went as planned. I worked from home most of the week, going in on Friday for a staff meeting. Will dropped Deuce off to Molly the following Monday and by that Sunday night, I found myself excited to spend time with Deuce again. So, when I heard Will opening the front door, I leaped to my feet and scurried to greet them.

"I'm starting to think you only love me because of the kid," William joked, kissing me before letting me grab the car seat with Deuce sleeping in it.

"And I'm starting to think you only love me for that thing I did last night," I whispered against his lips.

I tried to back away, but he pulled me into him.

"That's not why I fell in love with you, but it's why I married you."

I laughed, heading to the living room while he headed to the kitchen. "You're ridiculous."

We fell into a routine and it had ups—like when Deuce looked at me and smiled—and it had downs—like when I changed Deuce's wet diaper and he pooped on me. But I loved our life both on weeks we had the baby and on weeks we didn't. I wasn't just in love with our new normal. I was in love with my whole entire life.

By Sunday evening, as I dried the last baby bottle in the sink, I was exhausted—extremely happy, but exhausted.

"Layla!" William yelled from upstairs.

I dried my hands. "Yeah?"

"Come here, please."

I dropped the paper towel in the trashcan on my way out of the kitchen. I ran up the stairs. "What's up?" He looked over at me from the rocking chair and he, too, looked exhausted. "Awww, what's wrong?"

“Just tired. After I get him to sleep, I need to run to the store to get diapers. Do you need anything?”

“No, thank you. Wait, we’re all out of diapers? Already?” I made my way over to Deuce in his crib and rubbed his tummy. “You are peeing and pooping like crazy! Is it because you’re eating good? Is it?” I picked him up. “I love you.” Turning to William, I whispered against the baby’s curly tufts of hair. “I love your daddy, too.”

He winked at me.

After smothering Deuce’s head with kisses, I placed him back into his crib. “What else are you getting from the store?” I asked, crossing the room to reach him.

He stood, enveloping me into his arms. “Just diapers.”

I slipped my arms around his neck and studied his face. “That’s it?”

“Yeah. But if you wanted something, I’ll stop and get that, too.” He yawned. “I just need you to keep an eye on Deuce after I get him to sleep.”

I touched my fingers to his cheeks. “You’re tired. I’ll go.”

“No, it’s okay. I should’ve checked the number of diapers the other day when you asked. I didn’t know you put some in his diaper bag and I just assumed we still had more.” He planted a chaste kiss against my lips. “I didn’t check. I’ll go.”

I grinned. “Yes, you should’ve checked.” I kissed him back. “But it’s okay, my love. You’re tired and I get to sleep in tomorrow.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You didn’t ask me to do anything. I volunteered. I’m his stepmom. If he needs diapers, I’m getting him diapers. And I’m your wife. If you need sleep, I’m going to make sure you sleep.”

He looked at me adoringly. “What did I do to deserve you?”

“I’m not sure, but I can think of a few things you can do to thank me.”

Bringing his face so close to mine that our lips almost touched, he seductively replied, “Oh, is that right?”

I nodded, allowing my lips to lightly brush against his.

Before I knew it, he parted my full lips with his tongue and kissed me hard and deep. I ran my hands over his shoulders and neck, deepening the kiss. When he attempted to pull away, I whimpered and pulled him closer. He groaned in response.

He massaged his hands down the small of my back before moving over the curve of my ass. Pulling me flush against his body, I could feel how

hard he was and my body tingled with anticipation.

“If I don’t leave now, I’m never going to leave,” I whispered before meeting his tongue with my own. Pulling away fractionally, I opened my eyes. “You put him to sleep and then when I get back, I’ll put you to sleep,” I murmured sexily. Running a hand from his neck, down his chest, over his abs, before scratching gently across his hardening cock, I moaned lightly.

A guttural groan that started deep in his chest rumbled as he kissed me with enough intensity to dampen my panties and make my knees weak. “God, I love you.”

Batting my lashes, I tilted my head to the side. “How much?”

He let go of my ass, so he could grab my face. “Mrs. Grayson, there is no measure that could accurately measure the amount of love I feel for you. I told you. You are the fire that burns in me. Nothing can compete with that, let alone extinguish it.”

The words he used when he proposed sent chills down my spine. After another kiss was exchanged, I pulled away from him. “I’m definitely going to do that thing you like when I get back.”

Gripping my face, he brought his lips to mine. “Don’t act like you don’t like doing it.”

I let my head fall back as I laughed. “Whatever! I’ll be back in a minute.” Backing away, I pointed at him. “Just diapers? Nothing else?”

“Just diapers.” He yawned, picking up a noisy Deuce. “Thank you. Tell your other mommy thank you, little man.”

Deuce didn’t even look my way.

“He said thank you,” William informed me.

I giggled. “Oh, okay. I’ll be back.”

“Seriously, Layla. I appreciate this. I appreciate you.” He looked like he was going to say something else, but he stopped himself.

“I would do anything for you,” I reminded him. “You’re my husband and he’s my son.”

He looked at me earnestly. “Thank you for saying that.”

“Thank you for rendering clocks useless.”

We shared a sweet smile before I turned to go to the store.

“I love you,” I yelled from downstairs as I grabbed my keys.

The temperature had dropped so I pulled my cropped leather jacket together. Jogging to the car, I climbed in and started it. Connecting my phone to the speakers, I scrolled through my music playlist until I got to the

song William and I deemed our song. Hitting play, I sang as I backed out of our driveway.

By the time I got out of the neighborhood and to the main street, I was in full blown concert mode. I slowed for a red light and it was just at the part where the song built to a high crescendo and I closed my eyes and gave it my all. Keeping time with my finger on the steering wheel, I turned that solo song into a duet and I dedicated it to my husband.

*I love him—*

And then nothing.

My eyes were closed so I didn't see the car that hit me.

My eyes were closed so I didn't know there was a reason to panic.

My eyes were closed, but that wouldn't have helped anything since I was hit from behind.

My eyes were closed so when the car hit me, pushing me into the intersection, I didn't see the car that T-boned mine.

My eyes were closed so I didn't see the accident coming.

But I felt it.

I felt everything.

And then nothing.

## CHAPTER 21

WILLIAM

“**T**he last thing Layla said to me was one of the lines from her wedding vows. She said, ‘Thank you for rendering clocks useless.’ Then she was gone. She left to go get diapers. I told her I was going to go get them, but she saw that I was tired and insisted. She...” I paused, swallowing hard. “My beautiful wife stood in front of me, declaring her love for me and her plans for the future. And I was so caught up in her eyes and the way she says...said...” I swallowed around the lump in my throat again. “The way she said my name. The way she looked at me. The way she made me feel. I was so caught up in her that I didn’t realize that there was a chance that I would never see her again. It didn’t even occur to me that that could be the last moment I would see her alive.”

I coughed and then took a sip of water. Letting my eyes dart across the packed church that she grew up in, I felt my heart break just a little more.

“Take your time,” a female yelled out encouragingly as I got myself together.

“I was in the moment with her. I wasn’t on my phone. I wasn’t spaced out. I wasn’t distracted by anything else. I was in the moment with her.” It hurt too much to continue my point, so I looked around the packed church and my eyes landed on Molly who was holding our son.

“Layla told me that she loved Deuce like he was her own. She never tried to take his mother’s place. She just wanted to make sure he knew he was loved by all the adults in his life. She said if he needed diapers, she was going to get him diapers.” Molly smiled, kissing Deuce on the top of his head and I tore my eyes away.

I saw Layla's doctor, Dr. Rose and Nurse Tracey. I didn't immediately recognize them because they weren't in uniform.

"Layla and I talked a lot about death. A lot of people didn't know this, but she had cancer. Because of that, her mortality was a topic of conversation she'd revisit often. She created lists of things she wanted to accomplish and..."

*Things she wanted us to do before she died.*

I cleared my throat. "Layla didn't die from cancer. She didn't die from illness. She died because someone was texting and driving. My wife is gone because someone wanted to respond to a text message so bad that they took their eyes off the road and ran into the back of her." I pushed the heels of my hands into my eyes and held them there for a moment. I thought I was all cried out, but it looked like a fresh wave was about to roll through. After a deep breath, I took a sip of water. "I'm...devastated. This hurts more than anything I've ever been through. I lost my true love... the love of my life."

I took the handkerchief from my pocket and wiped my face. The burn in my throat had me tasting my loss over and over again. I tried unsuccessfully to swallow it away, but it remained. And I imagined it would remain for the rest of my life.

"But I'm up here today because I have no regrets," I whispered. "I would do it all over again. Knowing it would end abruptly, I would choose to spend the last five months with Layla as mine than to have five years with anyone else. Knowing everything I know now, I would still sign up for this brief time with Layla because she changed my life, she opened up my world, and she owned my heart. Together, we lived. We made the most out of every day together. And I know it was the cancer that prompted her to live that way. She prompted me to live that way. She taught me..."

I felt a tear threatening to drop so I wiped my eyes. Looking over the crowd, their tears falling freely, I momentarily longed to mourn privately. But I knew there was a message I was supposed to deliver.

"What Layla and I had was perfect. Not in the sense that it was without struggle, but in the sense that we were perfect for each other. She brought out the best in me and I like to think that I did the same for her. And we almost missed our opportunity to be together because things were messy. I'd just found out I had a pregnant ex, she was just diagnosed with cancer, I was training in another city, she was doing chemo treatments, etc. etc. But when two people are meant to be together, there's no such thing as perfect

timing. There's just timing. There's just right here, right now. That's the only thing that's guaranteed. Life can get messy and if you wait for perfect timing, you may miss out on something special."

"That's right," someone agreed from the audience, but I didn't look up to see who it was. Instead, I opened a letter with the words 'if I die' scrawled across the envelope. It was in her drawer of cancer paperwork, paperclipped to the folder.

"Layla wrote something down and I know she would've wanted me to read it to you." I cleared my throat.

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*As I sit here on my final day of chemo, I feel so full and happy. Having cancer is a bitch, but so is treating it. Fortunately for me, I have the best family, friends and doctors known to man. I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know if the cancer cells are going to continue to metastasize. I don't know if I'm going to die despite the aggressive round of chemo treatments. I don't know anything that's going to happen once I leave here today, but I've made peace with it.*

*So, to my angel of a mother and my saint of a father, if I die, know that I love you and I appreciate everything you've done for me. Know that it was your love and strength that got me through my toughest times.*

*To my beautiful best friend, if I die, thank you for your friendship and support all these years. You are the Blanche to my Dorothy, the Samantha to my Carrie, the Lynn to my Joan. And I am forever grateful that you convinced me to send that text message that night. Ha! Thank you for being you.*

*To my team at work (specifically Marley and Bryce), if I die, know that I couldn't have kept my job in the same capacity without your guidance (Marley) and support (Bryce) when I was diagnosed.*

*To my medical team (specifically Dr. Rose, Nurse Tracey, and Dr. Feldman), if I die, know that you did everything you could and I appreciate your hard work, your concern, and your care.*

*To Molly the Mother, if I die, know that I am so grateful that you were able to bless my husband with the child that I couldn't produce. I recognize that you are Deuce's mother. No one will ever be able to take that from you. I just want you to know that I loved him more than I could've possibly imagined. He wasn't my flesh and blood, but I lovingly and respectfully considered him my son.*

*To Deuce, if I die, know that I cherished every moment that I got to love you. You are a light in darkness. You are sunshine at night. You are your father's dream come true. Witnessing the joy you bring to his life brought me joy.*

*And last, but certainly not least, to William... if I die, know that I love you. Know that loving you gave purpose and meaning to my already purposeful and meaningful life. Loving you and being loved by you has been my motivation to live for the here and now. Being with you and then becoming your wife has been my biggest joy. Sometimes I'm overwhelmed by how blessed I am to be with you, to find my great love. We are perfect for one another. We are 9:27 and we will always be 9:27. You are the blessing I'd always asked God for and I don't know if you fully realize how*

*incredible you are. I love you. I'll always love you. Even now, I can't bear to write about loving you in the past tense because even if I die, the love I have for you won't.*

*To everyone in my life, if I die before I'm old and wrinkled and grey, know that I lived my life to the fullest. Know that I loved and was loved. Know that I experienced incredible highs and incredible lows and persevered. Know that I accomplished a major career goal. Know that I survived cancer at least once. Know that I found the love of my life... and I married him. Know that I got to experience motherhood after being told from a very young age I wouldn't. Know that I made my dreams come true. Know that I lived my life. Know that I loved my life. Know that tomorrow is not promised. Know that each day is a gift. Know that in order to die with no regrets, you have to live with no regrets. Know that time waits for no man or woman. Know that when your time is up, your time is up.*

*So as my Nana said to me when she knew I'd be sad, don't dwell on losing me. My loves, I know we will be reunited again. So, focus on the fact that there is so much life to be lived. Take advantage of it. A broken clock is only right twice a day. Any other time, you're just guessing and trying to figure it out. So, seize the day and the opportunities. You don't get an unlimited amount of times to get something right or to capitalize on it in the way God intended. God knows that we're flawed humans, so he gives us a second chance to get it right. So, get it right.*

*But when it comes to love, don't get so hung up on the timing. Just enjoy the time. When you're with the perfect person, there will never be enough of it.*

*All my love,  
Layla*

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# SNEAK PEEK

## Disasters in Dating Sneak Peek

I twisted to look at my ass in the mirror. The dark denim jeans hugged my curves and the cropped top made my B-cup breasts look deceptively large. The stark whiteness of my shirt made my skin glow. My thick, coarse hair was pressed and straightened, hanging in jet black waves past my shoulders. I spun around before putting in my white gold hoop earrings. I felt classy, but sexy. I felt nervous, but ready.

I was going on a coffee date.

*Well, two coffee dates... back-to-back... today.*

Two different men. Two different coffee dates. Two different coffee houses.

I'd been on the popular dating site TenderFish and after matching with several interesting and seemingly decent men in the city, my four best friends convinced me to set up a few lowkey dates with my favorite four on the upcoming Friday and Saturday. And all of a sudden, it was Friday, and I was nervous as hell. Although I'd been talking to the four men for a few days and they all seemed cool in their own way, I was a bit unnerved to be dating again.

"Desiree Johnson, get your gorgeous ass out here so we can see the finished product," Nichelle yelled from the living room.

I exhaled. "Okay, here goes," I mumbled uncertainly.

With one more glance at myself in the mirror, I took a deep breath and then walked out of my bedroom.

“Perfection! Absolute perfection!” Nichelle called out as I entered my living room. “The hair, the outfit, the makeup, that body, that face. You’ll have those boys eating out of the palm of your hand. Let me get a picture.”

Nichelle, with hair and makeup artistry skills and an eye for style, was the flirty fashionista of the group. She owned an online boutique which was where I got my sexy top. She also did my hair and makeup. Nichelle wasn’t just a flirty, fashion-loving, aspiring plus-size model, and former homecoming queen. She was a business woman and wife.

I posed playfully and laughed after the picture was snapped.

“Okay, I’m putting this online! This is too cute,” she stated, preoccupied with uploading the photo.

“Somebody’s getting some dick tonight,” Carmen started singing as she swung her hips in a circle. Dancing to the pop music video streaming from the TV, she threw in a couple of extra hip thrusts.

I laughed loudly. “Absolutely not! I’m not sleeping with anyone!”

She shrugged. “Don’t be so hasty! You could get there and…” She bent over and shook her ass, making it bounce.

I tried not to laugh, but I couldn’t help it. We all cracked up at her twerking.

Without a doubt, Carmen stood as the comic of the group. She always managed to crack a joke or do something silly to break the tension. The beautiful comedian had a sixth sense for recognizing the shift in mood, and she also knew how to brighten a room. If that wasn’t enough, our newly engaged, funny girl was an amazing singer. She was wildly inappropriate and a born star.

“I am not having sex with anyone today!” I yelled over the cackles of my friends.

“No sex on the first date. Statistically, sex on the first date doesn’t lead to long-term relationships because of the perception, not necessarily because of the sex itself,” Anika pointed out.

Our resident genius was beauty and brains personified. Although we jokingly referred to her as the mom of the group, at thirty, she was a few years younger than the rest of us. She graduated high school three years early and powered through her bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Being the youngest in most of her classes all her life resulted in her becoming quiet and shy in public settings. But the married Brainiac never shied away from pushing people toward love.

“I’m not having sex with anyone! I don’t know any of these guys well enough to have sex with them.” I closed my eyes and shook my head. “I know it’s been a while since I’ve had sex, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to sleep with the first guy I meet and get along with,” I said, placing my hands on my hips. “I’m a lady!”

“And a lady has needs,” Dyani replied, holding her hand up so Carmen could slap it. “Don’t fuck these coffee date guys after one cup of coffee. But if the coffee date goes long and turns into a dinner date...and the dinner date turns into a nightcap... You better cap the night off with some dick!”

The sound of laughter reverberated through the apartment and once we’d calmed down enough to speak, Dyani pulled out a lambskin condom—and the laughter started all over again.

“Just in case you need it,” she joked.

“Granola Girl is trying to set you up for pregnancy and STDs with this expensive ass condom,” Carmen joked, picking up the condom between her fingers. “This is not one-night stand protection. You know better.”

The emphasis she put on the word “you” took the laughter to a deafening level.

Dyani, with her bare face and simple, but sleek, high ponytail was our all-natural, free spirited adventurer—or as Carmen called her, our Granola Girl. She was natural in so far as she didn’t wear makeup or color her hair. She made soaps from organic ingredients and ate only non-processed foods. She made Native American jewelry from materials purchased directly from reservations, paying homage to her indigenous roots. She was adventurous because she was always trying something new: rock climbing, sky diving, salsa lessons. The stay-at-home-mom of the last three years lived for adventure before she met, married, and had a child with her husband of just under four years. She was a travel blogger and spent the majority of each year, for seven years, in different parts of the world. Since she stopped, she’d get her fix by creating adventures for us.

Constantly pushing us out of our comfort zones, she was the reason we left the resort on our Girls’ Getaway trips. She was the reason we did the Polar Plunge. She was the reason I created an online dating account in the first place.

“Listen, you guys are the absolute best and worst friends a back on the market single woman could ask for.” I looked around at my friends, my best

friends in the entire world, and smiled. “I appreciate you all rushing to be here to see me leave for my first date in twelve years.”

“Don’t think of it like that,” Nichelle said quickly, walking over to me. “This is a fresh start.”

“A new beginning,” Anika added.

When I looked at her, I saw a mixture of sadness, worry, pity, and hope. I did a double take and because she had turned to grab her drink, I couldn’t see the look anymore. But it stuck to me, stuck with me.

“Desi!” Nichelle called out, getting my attention back to her. I looked over at her, and she smiled. “You’re going to do great. Dating is like riding a bike.”

Carmen made a noise in the back of her throat. “Okay, I love you, Nichelle, but you don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. You’ve basically been married since college.” She looked at me and pointed. “Dating now is like riding a bike with a loose chain...and without a seat.”

“Well, damn,” Dyani elbowed Carmen. “We’re trying to hype her up, not psyche her out!”

“You’ve been off the market for like three and a half years now. You don’t understand how things have gone south,” Carmen countered before looking at me. “I’m doing you a favor by preparing you for the reality that’s out there. For every good catch, there are four fuckboys.”

“Those stats seem kind of high,” Anika chimed in, rubbing her chin.

I giggled. “If we’re counting all men who have ever lied, cheated, and played games...”

“Those who are always scheming on someone and something...” Dyani added, rolling her eyes.

Nichelle curled her lip in disgust. “And nothing is ever their fault.”

“Exactly,” I agreed with them both. “So, if we’re counting all men who have ever not known how to act as fuckboys, fuckboys have been around since the dawn of time. The name is new, but the behavior isn’t.”

“Yeah, you’re right about that. My cousin’s other grandfather, not the one we share, has a whole other family that no one talks about,” Anika agreed, nodding. “Clearly fuckboys aren’t new. But four out of five men on TenderFish being fuckboys seems high.”

Carmen looked at each of us like we’d lost our minds. “You are all so cute right now.” She shook her head before pointing into the center of her chest. “I was in this struggle recently. I was out here in these streets mixing

and mingling, so I have a little more insight than you do.” She took a step toward me. “Desi, don’t listen to logic. Logic has to go out the window from this point forward. Listen to your gut. You will meet men who will tell you that you are everything they want and need in their lives. They will want to spend every single day with you. They will tell you they want to build a family with you. And because of their earnestness and their availability to see you all the time, logically, it would make sense to believe them. Because who offers up lies about wanting all of those things? I’ll tell you who... fuckboys. Because as soon as you believe the shit they say, you’ll find out that they have four kids by four different women and a pregnant fiancé.”

“Preach!” Nichelle exclaimed, waving her right hand in the air.

“Shut up!” Dyani laughed, slapping Nichelle across the back of her thigh. “You haven’t been single since we were teenagers!”

“Yes, but I know people who are single and they are in the struggle,” Nichelle argued, making a face. “And you don’t know my life!”

It was funny because we all knew each other’s lives. We’d been friends for a lifetime it seemed, and there were no secrets between us.

Dyani stuck her tongue out at Nichelle.

“Anyway,” Carmen continued, picking up her glass. “I’d like to kick off this toast by giving you my ten rules for dating. While you’re embarking on this strange new world, never forget these.”

“How important are these rules?” Nichelle asked, staring at the crumpled napkin in Carmen’s hand. “It looks like you wrote it on a napkin, so they can’t be that legit. Just saying.”

With a laugh, Carmen balled the napkin up in her hand and threw it at Nichelle. It missed and hit me instead.

“Hey!” I grabbed my arm. “I’ve been hit. Looks like I can’t go on these dates.”

“No, no, no! You’re fine!” Anika stated hurriedly. Her words were accompanied by that look.

I looked away quickly.

Checking her watch, Dyani grabbed her glass and stood up. “We should get started. You have to leave soon so you won’t be late.”

“I’ll start,” Nichelle announced, clearing her throat. “Desiree, we are so proud of you for getting back out there. Now is the time to have fun, to sow

your wild oats, and to just live your life. You are happier than I've ever seen you, so don't let anyone try to steal it away from you again."

"We just want to see you happy and in love again, but this time with someone who deserves you," Anika said softly, lifting her glass.

"We are so excited for this next phase of your life. You will probably meet lots of new men. You'll probably have a rebound or two. You'll probably meet a fuckboy or four. But you will always have us so you are never alone," Dyani toasted with a soft smile.

"Okay, now for the most important pre-date information..." Carmen began, looking down at her phone and reading. "The ten online dating commandments are as follows:

1. Don't date a fuckboy. Don't fall for a fuckboy.
2. If it's too good to be true, nine times out of ten, it is.
3. The block button is your friend. After you meet up with these guys, if you like them, cool. But if not, block them on the site. If he texts you soon after he gets your number and asks you to come see him, block him from your life.
4. Don't give people the benefit of the doubt. If it doesn't add up, it's probably a lie—even if it is the dumbest thing in the world to lie about, it's still probably a lie.
5. Men will add a couple of inches to their height and their dicks, so be prepared to be disappointed.
6. If he asks you to send nudes, don't. But if you send nudes, don't show your face. And if you show your face, congratulations, you're a porn star.
7. Look for tan lines on the ring finger. Married men love TenderFish.
8. Technology has made sex easy, but relationships hard. If you want sex, that'll be out there in abundance. If you want a relationship, good fucking luck.
9. The men you think wouldn't do you like that will do you like that.
10. Dating should be fun. If you're not having fun, stop dating him!

There you have it. The Ten Online Dating Commandments."

We laughed our asses off even though it was good advice.

“That’s what online dating taught you?” I asked through my giggles. “I’m second and third guessing if I should go on these dates!”

“How important would you say these rules are?” Dyani asked, amusement altering the pitch of her voice.

Carmen’s eyes widened. “In order of importance... One, God’s Ten Commandments. Two, Biggie’s Ten Crack Commandments. Three, Carmen’s Ten Online Dating Commandments.” She shrugged. “Easy. In that order.”

“You are a hot mess.” I looked around. “All of you are.” With my arms stretched wide, I waited until we were in a five-way hug. “Thank you so much for everything. For being here. For supporting me. For not letting me back out of this. For helping me pick the guys to go on a date with. Everything. You four are the absolute best, best friends a girl could ask for. I love you all so much.”

“We love you, too!” They didn’t say it in unison, but close enough.

“Okay enough of this mushy stuff,” Carmen said, wiping the corner of her eye as we backed out of the hug. “Someone change the subject so I don’t cry.”

“Are we really going to act like Desi didn’t go into her room a B-cup and come back out a double D?” Dyani asked, gesturing to my breasts.

I laughed so hard that I started coughing.

“I thought she was smuggling two Cornish hens to her coffee date,” Carmen remarked, wiping her eyes.

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Disasters in Dating (Choose Your Dating Adventure)

[Disasters in Dating](#)  
[Brink of Disaster: That One](#)  
[Brink of Disaster: This One](#)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Broken Clocks is a reminder to appreciate life. It's a reminder to appreciate love. It's a reminder to appreciate time.

Tomorrow is not promised to any of us. We are not guaranteed to wake up the next morning. So, while we are here, we should live the life we want to live. We should make sure we are enjoying each day. We should make sure we are living and not just existing. We should make sure we are loving and not just tolerating. We should make sure we are genuinely happy and not just faking it for social media.

Sometimes life happens and it throws you for a loop. That loop can sometimes prevent you from living as fully. No matter what happens, it should always be a lesson learned. No matter what happens, it should never be an excuse to stop living, to stop loving, to stop learning.

Heartbreak is one of the most devastating loops that can be thrown. And sometimes the only way to know that you're healed is to love with your whole heart again. William, thank you for showing me that I have the capacity to love with my whole heart and sacrifice for the greater good. Layla, thank you for showing me the importance of time.

To my family and friends who have loved and supported me, thank you. I am blessed to have you in my life. I love you all to the moon and back.

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[www.authordanielleallen.com](http://www.authordanielleallen.com)

# PLAYLIST

## Broken Clocks Playlist

Music inspires me. The artists mentioned below wrote songs and lyrics that depict the mood of Desiree Johnson's journey in *Disasters in Dating*. If you haven't had a chance to listen to any of these songs, you should purchase them immediately and listen on repeat.

### **Broken Clocks**

SZA

### **The Need to Know**

Wale (feat. SZA)

### **When We**

Tank

### **Nothing Goes Undone**

Awir Leon

### **5AM**

Amber Run

### **Runnin' – Interlude**

Kehlani

**Easily**  
Bruno Major

**Changes**  
H.E.R.

**Unravel Me**  
Sabrina Claudio

**Every Kind of Way**  
H.E.R. Daniel Caesar

**Best Part**  
H.E.R.

**Blind Man**  
Xavier Omar

**My Friends**  
Oh Wonder

**Have Mercy**  
Eryn Allen Kane

**Blessed**  
Daniel Caesar

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