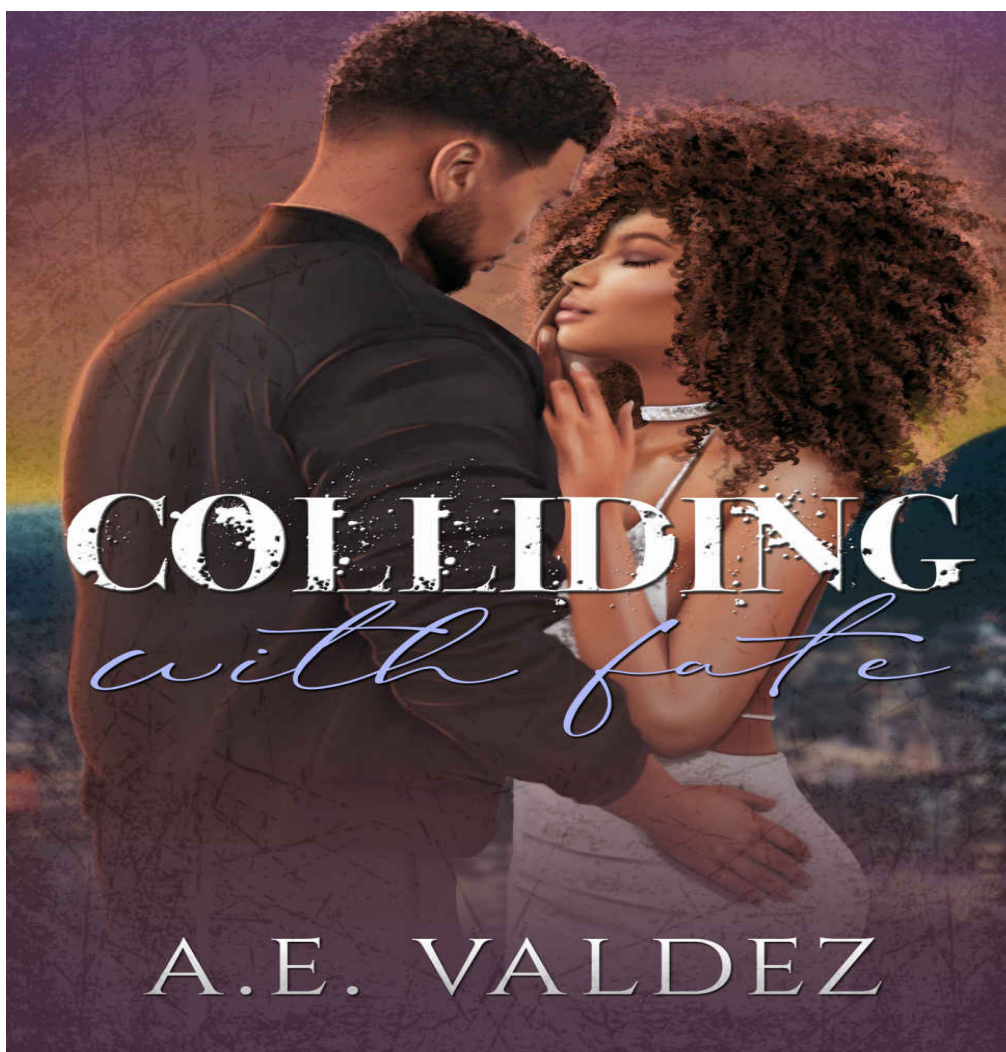




**COLLIDING**  
*with fate*

A.E. VALDEZ



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# **colliding with fate**

**a.e valdez**

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*For those who have loved and lost.*

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# CHAPTER 1

Kyrell

A pounding headache wakes me from my drunken sleep. The toilet flushes, followed by the sound of my hookup brushing her teeth. I find myself disgusted because that means she's using *my* toothbrush. I may have loose, almost non-existent morals, but I have my limits. Using my toothbrush is a hard limit whether we had sex or not. She comes out of the bathroom, naked, sauntering towards me.

The lust induced haze I was under has vanished and she looks different in the sharpness of the morning's light.

"Morning baby," she climbs onto my bed, "what are we doing today?" She tries to cuddle up to me and I recoil away from her.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed, fully awake, ready for her to leave. There's no *we*. Scanning my room, I see my jeans discarded haphazardly on my bedroom floor. I snatch them up and find my phone still tucked away in the pocket.

"I'll pay for your Uber." I announce hoarsely as I scroll through my phone after requesting her ride. There's evidence of my night on my Instagram. It looked like I had fun. My memory is still foggy because of a headache that's making my skull feel like it's splitting in half. In the future, I think I'll stick to my usual joint or two and call it a night. Too much alcohol makes me chaotic and reckless. I'd rather avoid it all together.

Scrolling through my texts, I see one from the only person I don't mind hearing from.

**Harlow: Are you coming to the engagement party?**



I begin to reply, but the girl laying on my bed sucks her teeth. It startles me because I momentarily forgot she was here. Last night was definitely the last time I will ever get drunk. I barely remember sleeping with her or what her name is.

“You’re really going to sleep with me and then kick me out?” she asks haughtily.

I pinch the bridge of my nose because her voice makes me acutely aware of the pounding headache I have. “You really didn’t think this was going to be the start of an epic love story, did you?” I don’t even remember what she looks like until I turn to watch her glare at me.

“What the hell am I supposed to do, Kyrell?” she shrieks, “We work together!”

“Fuck.” I mutter under my breath. Now that I’m looking at her—I realize who she is. “You’re the new hire.” I run my hands down my face. My stomach turns as I feel the bile rising in my throat. Maybe, just maybe, I have a fucking problem. “And correction, you work for me. Don’t get that part fucked up.”

“Regrettably.” She says.

“Look, it happened and we’re here now. We’re both adults and knew what we were getting into.” I knew what would happen, attending that party and throwing the drinks back like I was. “Let’s not make a big deal of this... Casey.” For fucks sake, I can’t remember her name and she works for me.

“My name is Cassandra!”

I snap my fingers. “That’s right. I was close. Anyway, chop–chop, your Uber will be here any minute to take you home... or wherever you want to go.”

She snatches her clothes up off the floor. “How considerate of you.”

As I watch her angrily stomp around my room, collecting her belongings, I notice she is wearing one of my t-shirts. “I’m gonna need my shirt back.” I say as I grab a joint and Tylenol from my nightstand. She already used my toothbrush. She can take that, but not my clothes.

She stops in her tracks, tears the shirt off, and chucks it at my face.

“Thanks.” I nod and let her get back to getting dressed so she can get the fuck out of my house. My concentration has moved onto the blunt between my lips. I cock my head to the side as I light it and she starts talking again before I can enjoy the first hit.

“You’re lucky there isn’t a human resources department or I would report you.”

I screw up my face in confusion. “Report me for what?” I shrug, challenging her claim. “Riding my dick?”

She growls with frustration, clearly upset with her life choices last night, but that isn’t my problem.

“If you’re going to make this awkward, you should probably find a different job.” I say.

“So, what do you do? Just fuck all your employees?” she asks as she yanks on her clothes.

“Actually, no, I’ve never slept with anyone who works for me. You were my first and last fuck up.”

If this were a cartoon, steam would be coming out of her ears. “Oh, so I’m a fucking mistake?” Her voice is like cutlery scratching against plates—shrill and annoying. I rub my fingers against my temples, trying to ease the pain of her voice and my headache.

Goddamn, she acts as though we’ve been dating. It was one drunken night. Bits and pieces of it flash through my mind as the haze clears. “Essentially, yes.”

“You’re a fucking asshole.” She spits at me as she puts her shirt on.

I take a hit of my joint. “So I’ve heard—” I exhale the smoke I just inhaled “—you still gotta catch that Uber, though.” I smirk at her as she snatches her purse off my dresser.

She flicks me off as she tears out of my bedroom. I follow her out because, while I don’t care about her feelings, I care about her possibly fucking up my house. When she reaches the

front door, she rips it open, and we come face to face with Stella—my housekeeper.

“Ah, Stella—looking as beautiful as ever.” I proclaim. Stella glances at me and the girl, who is giving me a scathing look. Instead of acknowledging her, Stella shakes her head and ducks into the house.

“Bye Kelsie.” I say as I wave.

“It’s not Kelsie, it’s—” I slam the door in her face before she can finish her sentence. Her voice was grating on my nerves. How the hell didn’t I notice the shrill pitch of it when I interviewed her the other day? I think her breasts blinded me. They were nice, but not nice enough to see again.

“You know Kyrell,” Stella says, cutting through my thoughts, “one of these days one of those girls is going to stick to you and you won’t be able to get her off.”

I chuckle. “Stella, I keep telling you, I’m not a gentleman.”

She tuts and shakes her head because she knows I’m full of shit. But she also knows a completely different side of me. “Have you eaten?” she asks.

“No, I had to clean up that mess.” I point towards the door, taking a final, long inhale of my joint before putting it out. Stella hates when I smoke inside even though it’s my house and I own a marijuana dispensary.

She scoffs and busies herself with preparing my favorite breakfast. Blueberry pancakes which I will coat with an unhealthy amount of butter and drench in syrup.

“How did your appointment go?”

She sighs and shakes her head. My stomach feels like it’s turned to ice as I watch her pour pancake batter on the griddle. “Stella...” my heart starts to race.

She finally looks at me, with a grin on her face. “Still in remission.”

I place my hand over my heart, letting out an exhale. “Why do you do that?”

She chuckles. “I have to make light of the situation. If breast cancer taught me anything, it’s to not take life too seriously.” She slides the steaming stack towards me.

“Are you happy with your new doctor?” I ask as I slather butter on the pancakes and bathe them in syrup.

“Yes, she’s nice. Although, I don’t want you paying for my appointments. You’ve already done so much.”

“Stella, you may boss me around in every other aspect of my life, but what I do with my money is my business. If I want to help, let me help... please. It’s the least I can do.” I feel her gaze on me as I scarf down the pancakes. Looking up, I give her a lopsided grin and she narrows her eyes. We hold each other’s gaze for a few seconds before she shakes her head with a smile when she realizes I’m not backing down.

“Careful, you may be a gentleman after all.” She quickly wipes away a tear as she turns around and starts cleaning up the kitchen.

“I help where I can. That’s it.” I stand after clearing my plate and give her a hug before putting my dishes in the dishwasher. “I gotta get ready for my workout. Thanks for breakfast.” She doesn’t say a word but pats my cheek with a smile and goes back to cleaning.

I hired Stella a week after I moved out to L.A. from Texas. I’ve lived here for almost two years now. She quickly went from being just a housekeeper to being like a mother to me.

She started working for me about two months after her husband passed away. They had recently retired after owning a bakery for nearly thirty years. A few weeks into their retirement, he had a massive heart attack. When I interviewed her, I couldn’t understand why she’d want to work while in the midst of grieving.

Her reply was simple. “I don’t want to be alone.”

I hired her that same day. But then, three months later, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. I swear she couldn’t catch a fucking break. So I did the only thing I could, I paid for everything. She didn’t realize what I was doing at first until

she stopped getting bills. Stella reprimanded me but was also grateful. I wanted to ensure she had access to the best care possible. If anyone deserved a break, it was her. Plus, she has to deal with my bullshit every day, even if she does it willingly.



I HUSTLE into the boxing gym I frequent to work through my bullshit. It's cheaper than therapy and I don't have to talk unless it's talking shit.

“You're late!” Cash, my trainer, hollers at me.

I glance at my watch. “I'm right on time.”

“Exactly, you're late. Right on time is—”

“Late. I get it. Are we training or not? Cause I can find other shit to do.”

Talking shit to Cash is like poking a hornet's nest. I know I am going to pay for it in the ring, but I don't care. I welcome whatever he throws at me, literally, because it helps stop the racing thoughts in my head.

He scoffs and nods his head with a cocky grin. “Bring that same energy to the ring.”

“My pleasure.” I say with a smirk as I shove past him to head toward the locker room. His eyes narrow as he anticipates handing my ass to me in the ring. Little does he know I'm silently praying to get through this in one piece because my headache hasn't subsided yet.

I haven't been training with Cash long. I pass by his gym on my way to and from my dispensary every day. To be completely honest, I only stopped in initially because of a woman I saw walking into the gym on multiple occasions. I decided I was going to try to shoot my shot to see if I could get her underneath me, but instead, I met Cash. Turns out the girl was his sister who is married. I may be a man with non-

existent morals, but I don't fuck around with women in relationships. Besides, Cash could kill me with his bare hands.

When I reappear from the locker room, Cash wastes no time putting me through a rigorous sixty minute workout. When my body is full warmed up, we move on to my favorite part, sparring. I put on my gloves, headgear and mouth guard—preparing to meet my fate. He's already pacing the ring like a damn lion as I walk towards it. I barely have time to get my guard up before he's throwing combinations at me. A grin pulls at my lips as I block his efforts, which only makes him punch me with more force. I knew this was coming, but still—I'm not ready.

All it takes is a split second of me letting my guard down and he delivers a right hook that throws me off balance as I fall against the ropes. I may be wearing protective gear, but Cash was once a professional boxer. I'm no match for him, but I know if I give up he will be relentless. I did that at one session and I will never do it again. He gladly served my ass to me that day.

I push off the ropes and he steps back with a grin on his face.

“Glad to see I taught your dumbass at least one lesson.”

I put my gloves up in front of me. “Shut the fuck up.”

Cash tosses his head back and laughs. “There's the fire.”

I don't give him any time before my fists are flying at him. He blocks them effortlessly, but I don't let up. I am determined to land at least one punch. My head feels like it's ringing as we dance around each other. He tries to hit me with a jab that I miraculously dodge, giving me the opportunity to hit him with a left hook. It lands.

Cash's head snaps to the side. His problem is that he tends to underestimate me.

“You left yourself open.” I say as his eyes stare at me with a bit of astonishment and admiration.

He grins, shaking his head. “Your punches are getting stronger. I was trying to knock your ass down again so I could

breathe.”

It’s my turn to crack up. “Now you know how I feel stepping into this goddamn ring, like a lamb to slaughter, three days a week.”

“Ah, c’mon champ. It isn’t that bad.” He says.

I give him a look of incredulity. “Would you want to fight yourself?”

“No,” he says without hesitation, “but that’s not the point. You pay me for this and you’re gonna get your money’s worth.”

“Oh, trust me bruh, I get my money’s worth.” I glance at the clock on the wall. “I gotta get to the dispensary.” I’m dripping with sweat and feel the burn in my muscles.

“Am I whoopin’ your ass same time tomorrow?”

“I’m a masochist, I guess, because I wouldn’t miss it.”

I stretch out on the bench in the locker room to catch my breath. My phone chimes with a text message and starts ringing simultaneously. I ignore them both as I stare at the ceiling. After a few minutes of silence, I remember I forgot to text Harlow back about the engagement party. I clear the notifications on my phone without checking them and pull up Harlow’s texts.

**Kyrell: You’re really asking me if I’ll be at my favorite person’s engagement party?**

I peel off my sweaty clothes before I head into the showers.

**Harlow: Aw, you’re fucking sweet today.**

**Kyrell: I’m like this all the time.**

She is the closest thing to family I have aside from Stella.

**Harlow: You should come early so you can spend time with Acyn and me.**

**Kyrell: Y’all miss me don’t you?**

**Harlow: Yep, I cry myself to sleep every night. What is life without Kyrell?**

**Kyrell: A wasted one.**

**Harlow: Dramatic. Text me your flight info once you have it. Miss you!**

Harlow and her fiancé, Acyn, live in Seattle. It's a short two hour flight I make as often as I can. Both of their families have adopted me like I'm their own. People assume my life is charmed because I grew up in an affluent family. It was anything but that. Money can't buy you a family that gives a shit. But we're all dealt a different hand of cards, aren't we?

I'm about to toss my phone into my locker before I head to the showers and it rings again. It's almost as if my thoughts summoned my family out of thin air. It's Elias, my father, if you can even call him that. I watch it ring, my heart rate increasing with the sound of each one. I stare at my screen as a voicemail notification pops up.

He never calls me. In fact, I can't remember the last time he called me. A text lights up my screen.

**Hey son, would you want to meet up for lunch? We are currently staying at our house in L.A..**

*We*, as if they've been here for me all along. I stare at the text as if it's written in a language I don't understand. This false sense of familiarity is foreign to me. Why would they want to meet up for lunch? I didn't even know they had a house in L.A..

I feel my anger and anxiety kick in like it always does with them. I'm twenty-four and the last time we actually had a family dinner was when I was nine. There were no dinners or loving, happy family events before or after that. I've only seen Elias sporadically since then. He always seemed too busy to spend any time with me. Yvette, his wife, the woman I unfortunately came from—I'm hoping there's a special place in hell for her.

My anger builds as memories I've kept locked away are forced to the forefront of my mind. I squeeze my phone in my



hand until I hear a crack. Only then do I release it and throw it against the metal of the locker, causing the screen to crack completely.

I'd almost forgotten about them... *almost* .

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## CHAPTER 2

*Kyrell*

It's been three days since I received the text message from Elias. I stare at the water rippling across my pool wondering if I should respond or not. I decide to put my head in the clouds, because the views are clearer up there, and light a joint. Even though Elias' text message put me on edge, I'm happy that my dispensary, Buds & Roses, is doing well. It's only been open four months and we are already exceeding projected sales each month.

I also have plans to release my line of chocolate edibles that I've been perfecting over the past year. I tried the traditional route of going to college, but it wasn't for me. Instead of pursuing a degree I would do nothing with I gave my all to something I love, Mary Jane. Not everyone agrees with it, but as more states legalize the sale and use of marijuana, the acceptance of it grows.

Stella appears and sits next to me on the lounge. I put out my joint out of respect for her.

"Oh don't stop on my account." She chuckles. "We're outside anyway."

I smile at her and exhale the smoke I was holding in. "I thought you were going home."

"I would if you didn't look so pitiful."

I give her a blank expression before asking, "Pitiful?"

"Yes, moping around here like the world is ending."

I toss my head back and laugh. "Do I pay you for this?"

"No," she pats my leg and winks. "This is on the house."

Shaking my head, the corners of my mouth turn up. “I’m fine Stella.”

“I would believe you if you had your usual company around or were as vibrant as you usually are,” she shrugs her shoulders, “but you aren’t.”

I haven’t been in the mood to entertain any women, or company as she calls them, the past few days. Usually my front door is revolving, but all I’ve done lately is work at the dispensary and chill at home. I told Stella about the text from my father because she asked what was wrong with me the next morning. She knows that the relationship with my parents is strained.

“How do you know I’m not taking things easy?”

“I know you well enough to know that you never take things easy. You’re either full force, or you don’t waste your time.”

I nod because she’s right. If I invest even a sliver of energy into anything, I’m all in. That’s why my business has done so well.

“You should respond and see what he says. It’s clear the curiosity is eating at you. You already expect nothing from them, so... would it hurt to see?”

I lean my head back against the seat. “People can still hurt you even if you expect nothing from them.”

She bows her head. “Well, I’m here if you need anything.”

“Have you drawn up my adoption paperwork yet?”

Her shoulders shake with laughter. “Oh yes, my lawyer is working on them as we speak.” She pats my cheek. “I better get home. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Later that night, I decide to text Elias back because Stella is right, my curiosity is killing me.

**Kyrell: When?**

He texts back almost immediately, as if he were waiting for my response.

**Elias: Would you like to come over tomorrow?**

I stare at the screen, going back and forth with myself, thinking whether or not I want to commit to this.

**Kyrell: Sure.**

**Elias: Great, it will be good to see you son.**

Son... why does he keep calling me that as if it means something? I let out a sigh and try to check my attitude.

**Kyrell: K.**

That's all I've got for him. I put my phone on do not disturb and drift off to sleep.



I SIT in my car at the end of their winding driveway. I've been on auto-pilot ever since I woke up this morning. That was the only way I knew I was going to show up this afternoon. If I thought about it too much, I would talk myself out of it. I had to switch off and just do it instead of mulling it over in my mind.

I put my car into drive and slowly make my way up their driveway. I take in their extravagant mansion. It's immaculate and deceptively homely looking. I grip the steering wheel and stare at the house for a minute, as if it will swallow me whole if I dare enter.

"You can still turn around..." I mutter to myself. My hand moves to the clutch but freezes when I see Elias come out the front door and wave at me. I feel my heart rate slowly rise with uncertainty. Elias has rich mahogany skin, dark golden brown eyes, and a head full of curls. He looks like he's fresh off a Ralph Lauren runway wearing a forest green polo shirt tucked into a pair of khaki pants with some Oxford style shoes. The only change I see is his jet black curls are now peppered with gray.

Seconds later, Yvette appears by his side waving like a goddamn beauty queen. It's hard to know what she truly looks

like with all the work she's had done and the makeup caked on her face. Her smile isn't really a smile, it's more of a sneer which looks sinister accompanied by her inky black eyes. She dyed her hair a platinum blonde that is a stark contrast against her ebony skin.

Although Elias was absent, there was warmth in his eyes when I was little. Yvette is just a stone cold bitch. I've only ever seen a look of contempt from her. It could also be the Botox though.

I cut the engine, still thinking about getting the hell out of here, but I open the car door anyway. My legs move me closer to them and take me up the steps where Elias embraces me in a hug. I keep my arms pinned down at my side. When I don't return the hug, he awkwardly pats my back. Yvette stays glued to Elias' side but nods with a smile in my direction.

Elias moves aside. "C'mon lunch will be this way."

I nod and follow him to their terrace. The table is set with enough food to feed twenty people. The shock must show on my face.

"I didn't know what you liked." Elias says with a shrug of his shoulders and a sheepish smile.

"So we had the cooks make everything." Yvette smiles.

I find myself hoping she never smiles again because it doesn't look right with all the work she's had done. She actually looks more like a ventriloquist dummy. I come to terms with the fact that I may have nightmares later. I nod and take a seat. I would say something but I don't know what to say.

I scan the table to see if there is anything that I would eat. Unsurprisingly, there isn't. Neither of them knows that I'm allergic to shellfish, so there is plenty of it.

"Do you want a drink?" Elias asks.

"Uh yeah, I'll have water."

"Oh, c'mon we have anything you want. Beer, wine—" Yvette starts.

“Water is fine.” I say flatly.

She clears her throat and waves over a butler I didn't even notice. I look around their terrace and realize they have a full staff for just two people. That's one thing I do know about them. They always do the most for everything—except their only child.

“So, what have you been up to?”

I look at Elias, and he offers me a smile. “Business.” I say and then take a sip of my water.

“Oh, just like your father.” Yvette claps her hands together.

Elias, well my father, owns a multi-billion dollar tech company. As a kid, I thought maybe if I followed in his footsteps and became a game developer we would have something in common. Maybe then he would want to spend time with me. A hopeless little boy's dream.

“What kind of business?”

“I own a marijuana dispensary here in L.A. called Buds & Roses.”

Yvette looks like she's smelled shit. A smile threatens to pull at my lips, but I would never give them the satisfaction of seeing joy cross my face. They could easily google me as pretentious as that sounds. I show up on there because of my dad. It's funny the media thinks that we're a private family because there aren't any pictures of us together on the internet. Little do they know that this is the first time we've been together as an awkward as hell family in fifteen years.

“That's a lucrative business.” Elias nods. “You could easily turn it into a chain.”

That was already my plan, and I don't need his suggestions or approval. “What am I here for?” They both stop eating and stare at me. “I haven't physically seen either of you since before I graduated high-school. What do you want from me?”

Elias looks at Yvette who then nods her head towards me. I raise my eyebrow because they are silently communicating as if I am not here. I feel the anger building.

He clears his throat and sets his fork on the table. “There’s no easy way to say this...”

I shrug my shoulders with annoyance. “So... just say it.”

“I know your mother and I haven’t been the best parents.”

Yvette places her hand over her heart, as if she can empathize when she inflicted so much pain on me. I still have scars from her—physical, mental, and emotional scars.

“You didn’t need to have me over for lunch to say this. It could have easily been a text or e-mail. You’re pretty good at those.” Every year for my birthday he sends me a generic happy birthday email and an insane amount of money. “Is this all you wanted?”

“No, son, it isn’t I—”

“Don’t call me that. You don’t have the right to call me that. I may have come from your nutsack, but we both know that doesn’t mean shit.” Okay, I may be a little angry.

Yvette audibly gasps. “Kyrell...”

I finally allow myself to smile and chuckle. “This is rich. It’s rich that you thought twenty-four years of neglect could be hashed out in one perfectly staged lunch.” I say with a shrug, holding up my hands waving at the ridiculous amount of food on the table. “I appreciate the sentiment, but I can think of a million things I’d rather do right now than be here pretending with the two of you.” I say as I slide my chair back.

“I’m dying.” Elias blurts out.

I stop only momentarily and Yvette’s sobs fill the space between us. That’s the first time I’ve ever seen her show any real emotion. It could still be an act for all I know. Not that I really care. She could be drowning in front of me and I wouldn’t make a move to help her.

“Buy a cure.” I say bluntly and rise from my chair to leave.

Elias places his hand over mine and I snatch it away. “I just—want a relationship with you.” He says with tears in his eyes.

I let out a maniacal laugh because I feel like this is all a really bad comedy. “No, you want your vindication.”

“Please Kyrell, just listen to him.” Yvette begs. “We even moved out here to L.A. to be closer to you. This is his dying wish.”

“I’m not a genie.”

“You ungrateful little shit.” She spits.

“Ah, there you are. I wondered when you were going to drop the whole mommy dearest act. You should have swallowed or aborted me, Yvette. It would have made your life a shit ton easier.”

Her nostrils flare. “I told you Elias! I told you he wouldn’t care!”

“Yvette, enough!” He demands.

She looks as though he slapped her. Her mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water before she huffs, crosses her arms and sits back in her seat. I’ve never seen him raise his voice at her. All I’ve ever seen him do is worship the ground she walks on. Shit, maybe he really is dying.

Elias cradles his head in his hands. “Kyrell, I understand this is all a bit much right now. Maybe you can come back another day or I can come see you?” he asks hopefully.

I can hear and see the words coming out of his mouth, but I still don’t believe them. As I got older, I got the idea that maybe Yvette was the problem and not Elias. But he was never there to stop her. I let the negative memories flood my mind because that’s all I have.

“I don’t know. I’ve gotta go. Thanks for the water.” I start to walk away. “I’m allergic to shellfish, by the way... not that you’d know.”





I TRIED NOT to think about what happened at lunch for the rest of the day, but it consumed me. Why did he wait until he's dying to try to build a relationship with me? I didn't even bother asking how much time he has left. People get predictions of life expectancy all the time and then end up living longer. The look on his face was undeniable. When he snapped at Yvette, that only confirmed for me that Elias probably wasn't lying.

**Kyrell: Hey are you awake?**

I glance at the time and realize it's almost 2:30 in the morning, but I can't sleep. Seconds later, my phone lights up with a call from Harlow.

"What's up?" she asks.

I dive right into what happened because this whole situation makes me feel like I'm drowning. She's never met my parents, but she knows they weren't a part of my life because we spent so much time together as kids.

"I don't know what to do or to believe." I continue after telling her about the whole ordeal. "I don't want to offer him any sort of vindication but..." I let out a sharp exhale and scrub my hand over my face. "I thought I would've killed for this moment, ya know? The moment that my dad actually wants me in his life. But now that it's here, I don't know that I want it."

There's a few beats of silence before Harlow speaks. "If he is sick, and you don't talk to him, would you regret it after he's gone?"

"Harls..." I collapse back onto my bed and stare at the ceiling. "You couldn't just say fuck him?"

She lets out a snort of laughter. "I could, but is that really why you want to talk about this at 2:00 in the morning?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "I don't know what to do."

"Do you have to make a decision in less than twenty-four hours?"

“He’s dying.” I say and rub my chest because saying it out loud makes it real.

“He is, but now you feel pressured into giving a dying man his wish. Do you want to talk to him simply because he’s dying? Or would you rather talk to him because you made the choice to?” I don’t say anything and she continues. “I know this is hard, but it’s okay to take space to figure out how you want to navigate this.”

We sit in silence for what feels like forever. After Harlow’s mom died, I remember sitting with her for hours. We didn’t talk or do anything. I sat with her because I knew what it was like to feel that deep void of loneliness. My parents were alive, but they were dead to me. That’s when we bonded.

“Thanks Harls.”

“Remember our tattoo? Rise and fall? We may fall, but we always rise. Don’t forget that. I’m here whenever you need me.”

“Rise and fall...” I repeat. That became our motto while we were sitting on the beach in Galveston one day, watching the sun disappear. It was her and her dad’s first Christmas without her mom. She was devastated. As we sat on the beach, we watched the rise and fall of the waves. We were two twelve year old kids who were dealing with more trauma than anyone should have to deal with in their lifetime. I told her we’re like the waves. It was the first time in months she had looked at me with something other than sadness in her eyes. It was momentarily replaced with curiosity.

“How?” she asked between sniffles.

“Sometimes we rise and sometimes we fall... but we always rise again.”

She smiled and wrapped her arms around me. I was pretty fucking proud of myself for making her smile and having something poetic to say at that age. Even though things were at an all-time low, we weren’t going to stay there forever. And we didn’t.

“I won’t keep you on the line. I just needed to talk.” I say.

“I’ll always be here. Are you gonna be okay?”

“Of course, when am I not?”

“You should come a few days early before the engagement party. Marisa, Quinn, Greyson, and Asher are all going to be here. It will be fun.”

Quinn and Marisa are her two best girlfriends. Greyson and Asher are Acyn’s best friends. I hang out with Asher occasionally since he lives here in L.A.. Quinn and Marisa I haven’t seen or talked to since Harlow’s birthday party. It’s been over six months, but I’ve always had a good time with them when we hang out.

“That would be fun, but I have so much shit to do here before I can step away for a few days.”

Buds & Roses may be successful, but I still need to hire a manager. I kind of fucked that up by sleeping with the potential candidate.

“Alright, well if anything changes, know that you’re always welcome here. Call me if you need anything.”

“I will. Night Harls.”

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## CHAPTER 3



I sip my red wine as I listen to my parents fawn over my brother for making partner at his law firm. I would've preferred my nursing school graduation celebration to be in California. However, my mother insisted that we needed to have the party here in Houston. I'm sure it was to show her friends that I was actually doing something with my life, even if I'm not engaged to the next eligible bachelor.

Being born into an affluent family, both of my parents care more about appearances and accomplishments than anything. My dad is a prominent judge in our city, which means our last name, Halifax, holds a lot of weight. For me, it feels like a ball and chain. I've been happy to break free and move out of the area. Of course, my parents, well, more so my mom, didn't understand why I would ever want to leave Houston in the first place.

"Jackson, we're so proud of you! This is what you've worked so hard for." My mom exclaims as she looks at him with admiration.

Of course she's dressed to the nines wearing a full length emerald green gown with an updo and diamond accessories. I have to admit the color of the dress accents her rich copper skin nicely. My mom is beautiful with high cheekbones, full lips, and dark brown eyes. People tell me I remind them of her, I hope that's only in looks and not in personality.

"We knew it'd happen, son. There isn't anything you can't do." My dad declares as he beams at him as he claps my brother on the shoulder.

The only thing I got from my dad is height. I remember cursing him when I was younger because I was taller than

most of my friends. Not by much, but enough for people to always point it out. As an adult, 5'9 isn't very tall, but when you're in the midst of puberty, female, and passing everyone in height, it makes you an easy target.

My dad's light brown eyes glitter with excitement as he praises Jackson. He's dressed in a navy blue suit with an emerald green pocket square that matches my mom's dress. I watch my dad wrap his arm around my brother with his gold watch and rings glittering against his smooth tawny skin as he embraces him.

My mom turns towards me, "Quinn, isn't this amazing?"

I take another sip of my wine in an attempt to wash the bitterness out of my mouth. Tipping my glass in the air towards my brother, I mumble, "Fantastic Jackson."

I almost forgot this was supposed to be a graduation party for me, with the way they are going on about him.

"Thank you, sis. Congratulations on graduating and getting a new job." He replies with a warm smile.

I roll my eyes as I empty the rest of the wine into my mouth. "Thanks, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to head back to my hotel."

"Quinn, don't you think it's rude to leave your own dinner party? Besides, we have so much more to celebrate now." My mom says.

I glide my tongue across my teeth as I contemplate whether I want to take it there or not tonight. Rising from my seat, I press my palms into the table.

"Don't you think it's a little rude that I just graduated at the top of my nursing class and landed an amazing job, but you and Dad still can't be happy for me? I thought this was a celebration for me but, as usual, everything is Jackson this-Jackson that." I wave my arms around animatedly and my family is looking at me like I've lost my damn mind. "Jackson, I'm happy for you, but would it have killed you to let me have tonight?"

My mother gives me a disapproving look as she glances nervously around at her guests. “You’re drunk Quinn. Maybe you should sit—”

“I’m not drunk, Mom,” I say with an exasperated sigh. “I had a small glass of wine. It’s going to take a lot more to get me tipsy and belligerent.”

“I’d say you’re doing a mighty fine job right now.” My mom snaps at me. She inhales deeply to re-compose herself because she doesn’t want to cause a scene, like I am. “Quinn, we have said we are proud of you. Now if you will just—”

“Right, you’re proud of me. Just not as proud of me as you are of Jackson.” As usual, Jackson doesn’t say anything because he eats this bullshit up. He would never dream of being on the bad side of our parents. He leaves that up to me. I don’t know how he ever made partner without a fucking spine. If our parents knew Jackson’s secret they would probably disown him. That’s why he makes sure to always try and outshine me.

I on the other hand am perfectly fine with being on their shit list. My whole life they’ve raised me to be a lady and told me what I shouldn’t do. They never told me what I could be—only what I couldn’t be. When I got into nursing school they were happy for me but not as happy as they were for Jackson getting into law school. They threw him a party and paid for his first years’ rent so he could focus on his studies.

Me, I got a congratulation and a question—if I’d found anyone to settle down with to take care of me. I’m twenty-four and I’m not ready to settle down yet. One day, I want it all. The house, the kids, and the fine ass husband, but right now I just want to live my life outside of my parent’s scrutinizing judgement. Jackson and I have always been held to different standards. He was told to chase his dreams while I was told to play it small.

Tonight’s bogus celebration dinner was another confirmation as to why I moved to Los Angeles a year ago to finish out nursing school. I started my studies in Houston but preferred the program in L.A. and decided to see if I could

even get in and I did. But I didn't have the backing from my parents like my brother did.

That has never stopped me from striving to get everything I wanted. I found some roommates, which helped keep the cost of living down, and then got a part time job working at an aesthetics spa that fit well with my crazy school schedule.

I knew that coming back home to Houston was going to be a challenge. I guess I had hoped that they would be as proud of me, if not prouder, as I am of myself. Clearly it was naïve of me to think that way.

I feel their eyes on me as I grab my purse and leave the table. Once outside, I exhale and hand the valet my ticket. I hear footsteps behind me and turn to see Jackson. He's the spitting image of our dad. The only difference is, he has some freckles scattered across the bridge of his nose and cheeks.

I let out an exasperated sigh. "What do you want?"

"I'm sorry about that back there." He says shoving his hands in his pockets as he stares at the ground.

"No you're not. You love that they're always on my ass and never on yours."

"I should have waited to tell them but I was so excited and—"

"Yeah, so was I. I was excited to have achieved something. It was silly of me to think that I finally did something worth celebrating." The valet pulls up with my car as I look over my shoulder at my brother. "I'd love to chat but I have better things to do." I grab the keys from the valet and thank him.

"Quinn, I really am sorry."

"I'm sorry too. Sorry that you're so scared of being who you truly are that you always have to eclipse me to make yourself feel better." I close my car door in his face. Despite the sibling rivalry my parents have created, Jackson and I still manage to have a pretty decent relationship. I wouldn't say we're best friends, but he is my brother even if he does try to one up me all the time. That's a beast our parents created that he continuously feeds.

Kicking off my heels as I enter my hotel room I look around for a menu to order room service. The food is always trash at the parties my parent's throw. I also order myself a bottle of wine. They may not celebrate me in the way I deserve, but I sure as hell will.

After my order is placed, my phone starts to ring. My two best friends, Harlow and Marisa pop up on the screen.

When I answer the call, they start singing the chorus of "Congratulations" by Post Malone. I can't help but sing along with them. These two always know how to make a shitty day better.

"Both of you are too much." I say with a grin on my face, shaking my head.

"Tell us everything! How was it?" Marisa says.

"It was good," I force a smile.

Harlow narrows her eyes. "You're lying."

"Hell yeah she is. Look at the constipated smile on her face." Marisa adds in.

"Excuse me, but my smile isn't constipated." I say, sucking my teeth.

"It sure looks like it is right now. What happened?" Harlow asks.

I tell them about the disastrous dinner. "Am I wrong for being so damn bitter?"

"No," they both shake their heads at the same time.

"No babe, you're not wrong. I would be hurt too." Marisa says.

"I would've reacted the same way. Jackson could've waited." Harlow reassures me.

Since Harlow lives in Seattle and Marisa now lives in Portland, I didn't see the point of them coming back to Texas. We can all meet up in a few weeks before Harlow's engagement party and do something then. Although now, I'm



regretting not having them here for my graduation celebration because at least I would have had a good time.

“We’re sorry you had a shitty night but know that we’re so damn proud of you!”

“Yes, so fucking proud!” Harlow adds and starts singing “Make Me Proud” by Drake.

“I miss you two.” I say through laughter as Harlow continues to sing.

Harlow’s fiancé, Acyn, appears in the camera and gives me a two finger salute, “Congrats.”

“Thanks,” I grin.

He kisses Harlow on the cheek and walks away.

“I am disappointed in Acyn’s parents for not having any more boys.” I say.

“Shit, me too,” Marisa says. “Try being around them. It makes you realize how single you really are.”

Harlow snorts with laughter. “I’ll file your complaints with them.”

“Please do because that is a fucking tragedy if I ever did see one.” I say.

“Well, maybe you’ll meet someone now that you’re free from your crazy school schedule.” Marisa shrugs.

“Maybe,” I say, not giving it a second thought.

Because of nursing school and work, dating hasn’t been on my radar. It wasn’t worth the bother. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t excited to spread my wings and see where they take me. I was offered a position working as a nurse at the aesthetics spa where I’ve been a receptionist for the past year. It isn’t my dream job but I love the doctor who owns the spa. When she offered me the job and told me the starting salary, I couldn’t say no. I can finally move out of the house that I share with roommates and into my own apartment. Not that I hate my roommates, but there is nothing like having your own space.

A knock sounds at my door. “I love you both for calling me, but I’m about to eat and drink a bottle of wine.”

“Wish we were there.” Harlow says with a sympathetic look on her face.

“We can always stay on the line and watch you eat.” Marisa adds.

I can’t help but laugh. “Okay, because that’s not creepy at all.”

We all fall into a fit of laughter. “It was a sweet idea in theory, though.” I say.

Another knock echoes through my hotel room. “I’m going to eat. I’ll see you both at Harlow’s engagement party in a few weeks anyway.”

“It’s been too long.” Harlow says as she blows me a kiss.

“Love you see ya soon!” They shout.

Once I get my food and wine, I make myself comfortable on the plush comforter of the bed and look for a show to watch while I eat. I settle on *Schitt’s Creek* and dig into my six cheese saccottini that’s covered in a pesto cream sauce with chicken. If anything, at least I know I made the right choice by following my heart to California, even if I do feel lonely.



THE NEXT MORNING, there’s a knock on my hotel door. I wonder who it can be as I answer it and see my brother standing there. I almost want to slam it shut, but instead try my best to contain my annoyance and silently invite him in by stepping aside.

He looks around the hotel room. “I wanted to see you before you left.”

“Why? To gloat?” I ask as I make my way back to the vanity to finish doing my hair.

“Quinn, you know that wasn’t my intention.” He says with regret in his tone and his head hanging. “I couldn’t sleep last night because I felt so bad for ruining your dinner party. I know mom and dad...” he struggles to find his words, “I know they can be difficult but they really do believe they have your best interests at heart.”

“Don’t do that.”

“What?” he asks with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Defend them as if they mean well, but don’t know how to do better. They know better but choose not to do better. I thought that me accomplishing something and working towards a dream would bring their elusive approval.” I shrug my shoulders. “That wasn’t the case. I’m going to learn to come to terms with it and you should too. Don’t waste your breath defending them.”

“Quinn—” He starts.

“I don’t want your weak ass apologies Jackson. I’m just glad I don’t live here anymore.” I say as I secure my brown curls into a ponytail.

“I envy you...”

I look at his reflection in the mirror as I finish up my hair. “Why? They adore you.”

“Yeah, they adore the version of me they want to see. But you, you’re exactly who you want to be unapologetically. I envy that.”

I soften a little bit with his words. I turn around to face him and lean against the vanity. “The only person stopping you from being yourself Jackson, is *you* .”

He looks at the ground and shoves his hands in his pockets. “You know what’s funny, after all I’ve accomplished, none of it would matter if they knew. You’ve heard the way dad and mom talk about people who are... who live alternative lifestyles.”

His sadness is palatable. I walk over to him and wrap him in a hug. “They would be fools to love you any less.” I pull

away from him. “You and Troy are always welcome to visit me any time.” His eyes widen as if I’ve summoned Satan himself. I roll my eyes. “You should own who you are. Fuck what mom and dad think.”

He looks at the floor. “I know you’re right,” he lets out a sigh, “I’m sorry it’s been like this for you. And again, I’m sorry for bringing up my news about becoming partner at your dinner party.”

“I’m used to you being a prick.”

He chuckles. “Damn.”

My mood lightens. “I’ve always been proud of you Jackson and I’m happy for you.” The alarm rings on my phone. “I’ve got to finish gathering my things so I can make it to the airport on time.”

“I’m going to miss you. You’ll come back to visit... right?” he asks hopefully.

I give him a sad smile because we both know this is the last time I will voluntarily visit my parents. I refuse to continuously submit myself to their judgement. “Come to Cali, you might like it.” I grab his hand. “If, and when, you’re ready to talk to them, I will be here for you every step of the way.”

He pulls me into a hug. “Thank you. I love you and I am going to miss blaming shit on you.”

“I know that is the only reason you want me here, ass.” I jab his side as he lets out a laugh. “Love you too. Now help me with my bags, peasant.”

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# CHAPTER 4



I stare at the glittering Los Angeles skyline from my apartment window as I sip on a glass of wine. I moved out of the house I shared with my roommates a few days ago. All I have now is my bed, laptop, dresser, some kitchen items, a closet filled with designer clothes, and a delicious bottle of red wine. I couldn't be happier, but I really need to get some furniture in here so that it starts feeling like home.

My phone chimes with a text. When I check it, I see my brother's name.

**Jackson: Happy moving day! Check your e-mail.**

I check my e-mail to see a new one from Ikea with Jackson's name attached to it. When I open it, there's a gift card for five hundred dollars with a note:

*I'm proud of you little sis!*

I call him and he picks up after two rings. "Thank you for the gift card! I was just looking around my apartment making a mental list of all the things I need to buy. This will help!"

"Who's the peasant now?" he asks.

"Hey!" I say as I laugh. "I'm starting out, okay? There is nothing wrong with humble beginnings."

"We all start somewhere." He says with a chuckle. "Just wanted to send you something to let you know that I'm in your corner."

"Thank you. I was serious about you coming and visiting me here. Wait a little while, though. I don't want you talking shit about my current living conditions."

He snorts. “You act like you’re living in a shoebox. And even if you did, I’d still visit you.”

I smile at his words. I’m grateful that despite our parent’s meddling and hovering we have been able to have a relationship. Jackson is an entirely different person when it’s just us versus when he’s with our parents. And I get it. He fears he can’t be himself with them and I, unfortunately, fear the same thing for him.

“I won’t keep you on the line long.” I say. “I know it’s late there.”

“Alright, sis. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

I end the call, letting out a sigh. When I initially started breaking away from the constraints of my parents, I felt lonely—kind of like a fish out of water. They paid for everything before I moved away, which was great in a lot of ways, but it kept me under their control. They had a say in every single thing I did. When I told them I was moving away to California, they informed me I would be on my own. I was cut off because it deviated from their plan for me. The thought scared me initially, but once I actually moved, found a place to live, and got a job—I realized I didn’t need them. That realization freed me but infuriated them.



I GLANCE at my watch and excitement makes my stomach somersault. In less than three hours I will be hanging out with my two best friends. While finishing up nursing school, my social life was non-existent. I was okay with it because I knew the momentary sacrifice would be worth it. Now I’m ready to loosen up and rejoin my friends after not seeing them for months.

“Ready for your trip?” Cynthia, my boss asks, as she pops her head into my office.

“Yeah,” my face brightens, “I am.”

“You’re going to Seattle, right?”

“Yep,” I nod. “For my best friend’s engagement party.”

“Those are always fun. Free drinks and food. Can’t beat that. When you get back, and since you’re not in school anymore, you should join the rest of the girls and I for a night out.”

“That sounds like fun. I’d love that.”

“Safe travels.” She says and leaves me alone once again.

I grab my bag before heading into the bathroom to change clothes. It isn’t my ideal dressing room, but I wouldn’t have had time to make it back to my apartment if I wanted to be on time for my flight. I put my work clothes back in the bag and call an Uber to take me to the airport. I could have left tomorrow morning, but I wanted to spend as much time as possible with Harlow and Marisa.

I step outside as the Uber arrives. I toss my bag into the backseat with me and send a text to our group chat.

**Quinn: Are you bitches ready to see me?**

**Harlow: Are you on the plane yet?**

**Marisa: We’ve been waiting on your ass for months.**

**Quinn: I’m OTW. Please tell me delicious, single men will be there.**

**Harlow: Trying to get the dust knocked off the box huh?**

**Marisa: Hell yeah she is.**

My phone rings, interrupting my texting session with the girls. A rare photo of my mom and I flashes across the screen as I watch it ring. I bite my lip as I contemplate whether I want to mess up my mood by engaging with her or not.

“Hello.” I try to keep the annoyance out of my tone.

“Hi Darling.” She says awkwardly.

“Mom...” I allow silence to fill the line as I shift uncomfortably in my seat. I haven’t heard from her since I

stormed out of my graduation “party”.

“You sound like you’re in the car. Where are you going?”

“Harlow’s engagement party. I’m on my way to the airport now.”

“How wonderful. At least one of you won’t die a spinster.”

I let out an exasperated sigh, “For fucks sake, Mom.” I massage my temple as I stare out the window, hoping for the call to disconnect.

“Quinn!” she scolds. “Maybe you’d have a husband already if you didn’t have such a potty mouth.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Mom, men love my filthy mouth.” Well, they would if I was actually getting some dick.

“I cannot believe this is the young woman I’ve raised!” she shrieks. It doesn’t matter that I’m thousands of miles away. She will still reprimand me for unladylike behavior. “This isn’t what I wanted for—”

“It doesn’t matter what you want for me, Mom. We want entirely different things.” It never fails. We always clash. “I’m your only daughter who just graduated from nursing school, has a stable job, is living on her own, and yet none of that matters because a man didn’t help me do it.”

She sighs. “I just want you to be happy.”

“Mom, have you ever stopped to think that maybe I am happy?” The airport comes into view and I silently thank the heavens. “I’ve gotta go, Mom. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Alright,” she sighs again. “I love you, Quinn.”

“Love you too, Mom.” We may not get along, but I love her. I wish she’d be proud of who I am and not who I could be.



AFTER A MUCH NEEDED girl’s night in Seattle with Harlow and Marisa, I’m clutching my bottle of water as if it’s a life raft. I



went a little too hard on the alcohol and weed last night with the girls. Letting loose is something I rarely do, but with them, I'll act a fool and enjoy every second. As I sit at the table, I admire the beauty of Harlow and Acyn's engagement party. Drinks are flowing, music is blasting, and people are thoroughly enjoying themselves. Harlow and Acyn are the closest thing to a fairytale I've ever seen. I'm a little envious. Not in the green-eyed monster kind of way, but I hope to have that when the time comes for me. Right now, I'm perfectly fine with being single and ready to mingle.

So, I look around the room for someone to mingle with. My eyes land on a man that just walked in and seems to know Harlow very well from the way he's laughing and talking with her. Unfortunately, I can only see the side of his face. His skin is a smooth, rich chestnut brown with a sharp jaw, and his hair is faded on the sides with a low, curly top. He has a diamond encrusted watch on his wrist, with a matching bracelet I'm sure is worth more than my car and a year's worth of rent. I'm mentally stripping him down as I greedily drink in his tall, muscular frame. He has a few tattoos on his muscular arms that look good enough to be wrapped up in and strong enough to pin me against—well, maybe I should find out if he's single first.

Harlow's fiancé walks over to them and hugs the guy. My interest in this man only grows. I wish he'd turn around so I could get a better look at his face. As if the universe hears my silent plea, he turns around. A smile is on his face and he is—*strikingly handsome*. His pearly white teeth offset his skin. The longer I drink him in the more I feel like I've spoken with him before. His eyes are a dark gray. Those same eyes catch mine, but I can't look away and he winks at me.

*I know him .*

He approaches me. “Quinn Halifax. I wondered if you'd be here.”

“Kyrell,” I say with a smile. “I almost didn't recognize you. You cut your locs off.” He must be working out because he looks more delicious than usual.

He runs his hand over his soft brown curls. “Damn, has it been that long since we’ve seen each other? I needed a change.”

“You look great,” I say. I’m sure he already knows this by the way I was just staring at him. He responds with a smile that I’m sure gets him whatever he wants in this life.

“Thanks,” he says. “You look edible.”

“Still a rolling stone?”

“I enjoy pleasure.” He says with a smirk.

The smoothness of his voice and that smile of his are causing my body to respond. “Ah, the gentlemanly way of saying you fuck anything with a pulse.”

He chuckles. “No, no Quinn. I have standards. But don’t worry, you fit all of them.” He says with that devilish grin. Yep, my panties are soaked. “Want to grab a drink and maybe make poor decisions later?”

I toss my head back and laugh. I don’t give him a yes or a no. Instead, I saunter towards the bar and he follows me.

*Kyrill*

My eyes roam over the way her shimmering gold dress is clinging to her curves. Quinn is art. Her skin is a smooth, copper brown with chocolate colored curls pulled into a tight ponytail on top of her head and bright brown, almond-shaped eyes that could probably see through the depths of all my bullshit.

Quinn may be besties with Harlow, but that hasn’t stopped me from wondering what she’d look like bent over without that dress. I try not to fuck around with Harlow’s friends, but the way she is looking tonight... I’m willing to risk it all. Even though Harlow is our mutual friend, Quinn and I know little about each other, other than the basics.

From the time I've spent with Quinn, I've noticed she is about her business. Part of the reason I didn't shoot my shot in the past is because she didn't seem interested in the hook up shit. You can tell she's the type who has a five-year plan and knows what she wants. Everything about her is meticulous. I prefer to live life in the moment and see where that takes me.

I'd fuck up her life in a heartbeat if she'd let me though. Tonight, she just might.

We reach the bar and she leans against it, giving me a better view of her ass. "You look thirsty." She says to me with a smirk over her shoulder.

"Parched." I say, standing next to her. She's trying to play me and I'll let her think that it's working.

I order a beer, despite me swearing off drinking a couple of weeks ago, and she orders wine. Once we both have our drinks, we head to the table.

"Why did you cut your hair?"

"Why? Do I look better with locs?" I ask, avoiding the question.

She laughs and looks at me over her wine glass as she takes a sip. "I already told you once tonight that you look good. How often do you like to have your ego stroked?"

"As often as possible." I say with a smirk. "Are you still in Texas?"

"No," she shakes her head and sets her wine glass on the table. "I moved out to California about a year ago to finish up nursing school."

I lean forward and rest my forearms on the table, intrigued. "Really? And you haven't called me to show you a good time?"

Her plush lips turn up into a smile. "It's not like I would've had the time, anyway. Between school and work... fun wasn't at the top of the list."

"There's always room for fun... and pleasure." I say, letting the words settle between us.

She shifts in her seat and crosses her legs. “I wouldn’t have been able to call you anyway.”

I tilt my head to the side. “Why?”

She shrugs and I notice how the fabric of her dress hugs her breasts. “I don’t have your number.”

“Where’s your phone?” I hold out my hand and tear my eyes away from her cleavage.

She pulls her phone out of her clutch and slides it across the table to me. I enter my number and give it back to her.

“Now, if you ever want company and a good time, you know who to call. Where do you work?”

I notice the way those brown eyes of hers light up when I ask her that question.

“I’m a nurse at an aesthetics spa.”

Of course she’s a nurse. I wonder if she’s into roleplay. “That sounds bougie as hell.” She shakes her head and laughs. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of that. What do you do?”

Quinn leans forward and touches the space in between my brows, causing me to instantly relax. “A variety of things, but mainly facials and Botox. You know this faint little wrinkle you have forming between your brows from years of furrowing it due to pent up frustration?” she asks with a smirk on her lips and I chuckle because she isn’t wrong. “I can take care of that for you... in so many ways.” She says as her fingertips gently brush against my face as she sets her hand back in her lap.

The strap of her dress slides off her shoulder. I reach out and place it back where it should be. Goose bumps appear on her skin. I lean closer to her and look into her eyes. “You want to take care of my pent up frustration?”

She looks at me through her lashes. “I could... but I didn’t necessarily say that I wanted to.”

I knew she was as uptight as that ponytail of hers. I chuckle, knowing that this is going nowhere tonight. While I enjoy her company, I want to spend some more time with

Harlow. From the way Quinn is talking to me, I know she'll eventually call me.

“Quinn Halifax, call me when you're looking for some fun, and above all, pleasure. I can show you how to properly let that hair down.”

I tug on one of her curls that was already coming out of that perfect ponytail and it springs free. She'll be fun to watch come undone on top of me... when the time comes.

“I'll consider it.” She says smugly.

When she comes to me, and she will, I intend to fuck that smugness right out of her.

I get up from my seat, lean down, and press a kiss to her cheek. “You will.”

She touches her cheek as if my kiss lit her on fire, but she says nothing. I smile at her one last time before I spot Harlow and make my way towards her.

I spend the rest of the night dancing with Harlow and talking shit with Acyn, Asher, and Greyson. Normally, I would have put in a little more effort to get Quinn out of her dress tonight but, I don't want to. My mind is still too clouded with thoughts of my sperm donor, Elias, and his impending doom.



“HOW LONG ARE YOU STAYING FOR?” Harlow asks me the next morning as we sit on their back porch having breakfast.

“Until tomorrow morning. I could leave today but I haven't seen you in a while. Have you two picked out a wedding date yet?”

“Hell nah.” Acyn says. “I told her we could always elope in Vegas. But she isn't down for that. I don't know bruh, I'm just along for the ride. All I care about is the moment I get to officially call her my wife.” Harlow radiates joy as he finishes his sentence and I can tell all she sees is him.

They are perfect for each other. I watched her go from being in a relationship with an asshole to Acyn, who worships her. I'm fucking happy for them. I wanted to do the whole commitment thing—or so I thought. Over the summer, I was dating a woman I thought I could settle down with. But she ended up sleeping with my best friend, who happens to be Harlow's ex-boyfriend, Hendrix. He was like a brother to me. We all grew up together. That experience snuffed out any curiosity I had about being in a committed relationship.

“Oh, speaking of wedding shit,” Acyn says, “will you be my best man?”

“Me?” I ask, a little taken aback. “What about Greyson and Asher?” I had assumed he'd ask either of them over me.

“What about them?” Acyn asks plainly.

“Neither of them wanted to be best man?”

“I didn't ask them.”

Acyn and I haven't known each other long, but he's always treated me like a brother. I feel just as comfortable with him as I do with Harlow. I'm honored he thought to ask.

“If you don't want to, that's cool too. I wanted to ask you first, though.” He says after my moments of stunned silence.

“Of course I do. Why would I say no?”

“Told you he'd say yes. This bromance is fucking cute.” Harlow says with a grin.

“Wait, did you tell him to ask me?”

“No, she didn't.” Acyn says. “I only asked her if she thought it was something you'd want to do.”

“Wow Ace, I'm honored.” I say. It takes a lot to evoke genuine emotion from me, but this brought me out of the fucked up mood I've been in over the past few weeks.

“Aw, let me take a picture.” Harlow's eyes tear up.

“Sunshine, you're making this way bigger than it is.” Acyn says to Harlow as he runs his hands over his face.

“Nah, fuck that.” I say. “This is major. Let’s take a fucking picture.”

“And you encourage her.” Acyn says as he shakes his head.

After Harlow takes her pictures, a thought occurs to me. “Wait, does this mean I get to plan the bachelor party?”

Harlow’s head snaps up from her phone and looks at Acyn.

“Yeah it does.” He says, not realizing the shit that’s about to go down by giving me that power.

Harlow’s eyes narrow at me. If looks could kill, I would be dead.

I crack up. “Harlow, do you honestly think this man would ever do anything to jeopardize your relationship?”

“No, that’s not the point,” she says, glowering at me. “I know how you party Kyrell and I will kill you.”

“I promise I’ll keep it R-rated.” I say.

Acyn smiles at me and Harlow smacks his arm. “It’s just a party, Sunshine.” He says.

“Right,” she says, “you tell yourself that when my bachelorette party comes around.”

I laugh as Acyn’s face falls. Spending time with these two always reminds me I’m not alone, even when I feel like I am.

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## CHAPTER 5

*Kyrell*

Sweat is stinging my eyes as I step into the boxing ring. I normally only box three times a week, but since talking to Elias, I've been here every day. Even the weekends. The upside is that I'm improving and Cash doesn't know what to do with himself now that I'm regularly landing punches.

The downside is that Cash has caught on and is making things more difficult. After cardio, weights, and a killer core workout, he wanted to spar with me. I stupidly agreed, even though my body is screaming. My arrogance may be the death of me one day. We'll see if that's today.

"Are you tired?" he asks with a smirk. "It's only one round. Three measly minutes. That's slight work."

Of course, he leaves out the sixty-minute workout I just endured. I'm almost positive Cash is a sadist. He enjoys this shit way too much.

"You're just mad because I knocked you on your ass the other day." The smile he was wearing, fades. I feel a small bit of satisfaction, but that's short lived as he starts throwing jabs. My lungs are fucking burning from trying to keep up with his ass.

After a minute of throwing jabs, Cash slows down. He was talking all that tired shit when he clearly is just as worn out as I am. I decide now is the time to act if I intend to get any punches in. I throw some jabs that he easily blocks.

"That's all you—" he says. I cut his words short when my right cross lands on the bottom of his jaw, shutting him up.

He stumbles backwards a bit and then looks at me with a grin. "Learning to push through. About fucking time. I'll let



you have that one today.”

I exhale, rip off my headgear, and collapse to the ground. “What the fuck is wrong with you? Do you enjoy this shit? The daily near-death experiences.”

He lets out a bark of laughter. “I should ask you the same thing.” He says, sitting next to me. “What’s going on that has you in here every day for the past two weeks?”

“Bullshit.” I say as I stare at the ceiling, trying to regain my breath.

“You have two options.”

I turn my head to look at him, giving him my full attention.

“You can either deal with it head on or you can let it slowly eat away at you. The choice is yours.”

“If it were that simple.” I say, shaking my head.

“It is that simple. You’re complicating it by wondering the what if’s instead of actually dealing with it and seeing what happens.”

I can’t argue with him because he’s right. Not talking to Elias isn’t doing me any favors. “Did you add therapy to my bill?” I ask him and he punches my arm.

“Smartass.” He smirks.

I’m holding my arm, trying not to writhe in pain. “You’re an asshole, but thank you for the advice.”

“Get the fuck outta my gym.” He says as he gets up and heads towards the front door to let his next client in.

I peel myself off the gym floor and head for the showers. I’m already thinking about skipping tomorrow’s boxing session as I feel the soreness settling into my muscles. Before I get in the shower, I pull out my phone to text Elias.

**Kyrell : Want to meet up for dinner tomorrow?**

I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. Dealing with it head on, I guess. He responds within seconds.

**Elias : I’d love that. Text me the address.**

I text him the address of some hole in the wall restaurant I like. It looks sketchy from the outside, but they serve the best food. I can't do the stuffy, white table clothed places he and Yvette enjoy. If he wants a relationship with me, like he claims, he's going to have to come into my world.



ELIAS and I pull up to the restaurant at the same time. I'm expecting him to be dressed in some ridiculously expensive suit, but I'm surprised to see he is wearing a Jimi Hendrix t-shirt, jeans, and some sneakers. This is the first time, in my existence, I've seen him wear jeans.

"This place looks questionable." He says. "I bet the food is good."

I can't help but laugh because that is exactly how I think. "Yeah, it's one of my favorite places."

"What do they serve here?" he asks as we walk in.

"They're known for their Pho." I lead the way to a table. He picks up a menu, but I already know what I want. The server recognizes me and takes my order.

"I'll have what he's having." Elias says as he hands her the menu.

Unsure of what to say, I drum my fingers on the table and look around.

"I'm glad you texted me." He says.

I nod, with a small smile, and look anywhere but at him. This is strange.

He must pick up on it because he clears his throat and asks, "What have you been up to?"

"Uh... I just got back from Seattle for my best friend's engagement party."

"Do I know him?"

“Her, and no... you don’t. You weren’t really around to know any of my friends.” I was trying not to say anything negative, but it’s the truth.

“I know,” he says as he looks at me. “I regret that.”

Things are getting unintentionally heavy, so I try to change the subject. “So, what is your diagnosis?” Well fuck, that’s not any better. “Or you can talk about whatever if you don’t want to talk about that.”

“No, it’s fine. I have pancreatic cancer.”

“Did you just find out or have you undergone treatments?”

“I found out a few weeks ago that it spread. I could continue to undergo treatments to prolong my life, but ultimately, there is no cure. They predict I have about three months... six if I’m lucky.”

“You seem at peace with this... you talk about it so nonchalantly.”

He chuckles. “What can I do? If I could buy a cure like you said, I would, but there isn’t one. Why fight the inevitable?”

I rub my sweaty palms against my jeans. A sliver of regret for my words to him at that disaster of a lunch creeps in.

“Listen, I was upset and—”

He waves away my words with his hand. “I deserve all the shit you have to give me. I regret it all. If I could rewind and change it, I would. All I have is right now and still at the end of this, I am abandoning you yet again. So yeah, maybe you’re right, me asking you for a relationship is a selfish form of vindication... but I’d rather have some time with you than none at all.”

I have replayed how this conversation would go repeatedly in my head. It never occurred to me I’d be speechless. “I—”

Our server places our bowls of pho in front of us. We thank her, and Elias doesn’t allow an awkward silence to settle in.

“This looks good. I’ve never had this before.”

I gape at him with my mouth slightly open. “How? You’re too well traveled to have never tried pho.”

“Well traveled? Yes. Well fed? No. Yvette has kept me on a healthy diet. Which apparently is pointless because I’m still dying.” He says with a smirk as he digs into his bowl.

As we eat, we talk about the nuances of life. What I’ve been up to, where I live, how my business is going. He asks me countless questions at rapid fire. Combing over all the details of my life that I share with him and soaking up every word I say. I actually enjoy talking to him. He’s easy to talk to.

“Are you dating?” he asks.

“No, I don’t date.”

He nods. “Do you want to settle down?”

“I am settled down,” I say with a smirk. “I have a place of my own. If you’re hoping for a wedding or grandchild before your death, I can tell you that neither of those are going to happen.”

He tosses his head back and lets out a rumble of laughter. It’s the first time I’ve heard him laugh since I was a kid. “You have the same wit as your mother.”

I scrunch up my face and quirk an eyebrow. “I highly doubt Yvette has any wit.”

“No,” he says as he tries to catch his breath from laughing so hard. “I meant—” his face falls and his carefree look is now one of remorse. “I’m sorry for the things Yvette said.”

I lose my appetite as he apologizes for her. I respond by pulling some bills out of my wallet and tossing them on the table. “This is on me.” I say as I rise from my seat. This isn’t a conversation I want to have.

“Y-You’re leaving?” he asks astonished.

“I am.” I turn my back to him and start walking away.

“Wait, can I see you again?”

I stop, not turning to face him, wondering to myself if I want to see him again. If I want to bother opening old wounds I've worked so hard to keep stitched closed. I shrug as I look at him from over my shoulder. "I don't know."

He nods, looking disheartened.

Exiting the restaurant, I work to push all the negative memories back into the lock boxes I've made for them in my mind. Once I'm in my car, I turn up my music to drown out the memories threatening to play in my head, and peel out of the parking lot. If he had any idea what that woman was like behind closed doors, he would realize an apology isn't going to fix how she treated me.

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# CHAPTER 6



**M**y first paycheck hit my bank account and I'm filling up my shopping carts like I'm Jeff Bezos. Thankfully, I've been saving money awhile now and can buy the furniture I've been swooning over on my Pinterest boards. I am pretty proud of myself in this moment because I'm doing all of this on my own. Boss bitch seems like a very fitting title for me right now.

The only problem is, I don't have a truck to haul all the stuff I want to buy at Ikea. I would order it online but their shipping is insane for reasons only they know and a lot of what I want to buy is only available in store. My phone rings and I answer it without looking at it while I continue to peruse the website.

"Hey babe!" It's Harlow.

"Hey girl, what are you doing?"

"I'm calling to check in on you. How are you settling into your new apartment?" she asks.

"I just got my first paycheck and am filling up my carts like I have a black card."

"I know the vibes." She laughs.

"I'm finally able to shop for furniture but I'm realizing I need a truck. I want to be able to see things in person, you know?"

"I understand. No hot guys to ask for help?" I can hear the playfulness in her voice.

"No, and it's rude of you to even ask knowing good and well I'm as dry as the Sahara desert right now."

She snorts. “Circumstances can change. You know, Kyrell has a truck he just got a few days ago. He posted it to his Instagram.”

My whole body is at attention at the mere mention of him. I’m low key annoyed with myself for it.

“I can’t ask him, Harls. That’s your friend.”

Plus, my ego is a little bruised from how he just left me at the table at their engagement party. My fingertips touch the spot on my cheek he kissed. He is a fucking sin that I wouldn’t ask for repentance from.

She sucks her teeth. “Girl, please. Kyrell is one of the nicest people on this planet. I bet he’d be more than happy to help.”

I contemplate whether or not I want to see him again. I mean I know I do but he also sounded so damn sure of himself that I would call and I’m stubborn. But I also want my furniture. I let out a sigh realizing I’m going to call him first just like he said I would.

“I guess I could see if he isn’t too busy.”

“Do you need his number?”

“No, we talked for a little bit at the party and he gave it to me.” The thought just occurred to me that he gave me his number and never asked for mine. His confidence is both sexy and infuriating at the same damn time.

“Call him. Put that man to work, babe.”

“Yeah, I suppose I could.”

“Alright, I’ve gotta go. I have a client coming in soon. I can’t wait to see your place.”

“Ok, I’ll text you later.”

I end the call and stare at my phone contemplating whether I want to contact Kyrell or not. I honestly can’t think of anyone else to ask. My friend who helped me move my stuff to my apartment moved back home and everyone else has cars

the same size as mine. I let out a sigh and mutter to myself “suck it up, buttercup”.

I search for his name and send him a text.

**Quinn: Hey Kyrell. It's Quinn.**

I toss my phone aside as my heart rate picks up with excitement to hear from him. *You are ridiculous* .

My phone chimes a few minutes later with a text.

**Kyrell: Hey. I was wondering when I'd hear from you.**

I decide to cut straight to the chase to let him know this isn't a booty call. Although I wouldn't be opposed to it—*focus Quinn* .

**Quinn: Yeah. I need some help and Harlow said you may be able to help me.**

**Kyrell: Yeah. What do you need?**

**Quinn: I just moved into a new apartment and I need furniture. I was wondering if you'd be willing to help me haul stuff in your truck?**

**Kyrell: Congratulations on the apartment. I got you. When do you want to do this?**

I smile at him telling me congratulations. Kyrell really is one of the nicest people even if he is a man whore.

**Quinn: Do you have time today? If not whenever is convenient for you.**

**Kyrell: I'm game. I think it would be easier for me to pick you up and then we can go to wherever you want. What time do you want me to be at your place?**

**Quinn: I can be ready in an hour.**

**Kyrell: I'll see you in an hour.**

I text him my address and leap off of my bed to go get ready. I'm embarrassed to admit how excited I am to see him.





I TIE my sneakers and glance at myself one last time in the mirror. I settle on wearing distressed denim high waisted shorts, a red cropped tank top, and white sneakers. My hair is tied in a ponytail with a few loose curls framing my face. Kyrell should be here any minute. I'm about to check the time when I hear a knock.

I'm met with Kyrell's panty melting smile when I open the door and he holds something out for me.

"A housewarming gift." He says as he steps into my apartment.

I take the bag from his hands. "Thank you. You really didn't have to get me anything."

"I know, but I did anyway." His eyes linger on me before he looks around my apartment. He's wearing some grey joggers, of course, with a fitted white t-shirt that looks like it can barely contain his muscles, and some black Balenciaga sneakers. "How long ago did you move in?" he asks. Interrupting me as I ogle him.

I clear my throat. "Uh, about two weeks ago."

"You have the perfect view of L.A. up here." He says, referring to the floor to ceiling windows in my living room.

"Yeah, you should see it at night." The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. "I just meant that—"

He chuckles. "I know what you meant, Quinn. We're just talking about views. Nothing more."

I feel the tips of my ears burn. I should have just left it alone. I'm trying so hard to assure him this isn't a booty call, but I'm making it obvious I sure as hell wouldn't mind if it was. "What did you bring me anyway?" I ask, setting the bag on the kitchen island.

"Shit to help you unwind." He says as he leans against the counter with his arms crossed. Watching me.

“I’m not as uptight as you think I am.”

“The fact you have to say that tells me all I need to know.” He says as his eyes glance at my color coded calendar on the wall.

Ok, so I may have a hard time loosening up. I know I keep blaming work and school for my dry ass sex and social life, but it’s really just *me* . I want to be a carefree fucking butterfly, but it’s hard for me to let loose. I used to be somewhat carefree when my parents were backing everything. I’m not afraid to admit that I was privileged growing up despite my parents unrealistic expectations.

When I moved out and was exiled, because my choices didn’t align with theirs, I had to become responsible. I went from paying for nothing my entire life to paying for every single thing in a matter of days. Woe is me, right? Poor little rich girl falls from grace and has to take care of herself when there are others who have never had the luxury of not worrying. I recognize my privilege, but that still doesn’t mean it wasn’t hard for me. I feared that if I did go out on dates, meet new people, try new things, loosen up, and have a little fun that I wouldn’t be able to accomplish what I had set out to do. And even though I’ve done everything to denounce my parent’s expectations of me, they’ve still seeped into me somehow. So yeah, I’m a little bit uptight. Ok...*a lot* . Though, I would never admit that to him.

Choosing to ignore his comment, I open his gift and pull out a bottle of wine and a bag of chocolate edibles. “Do you want me to be chill or in a coma?” I give him a quizzical expression.

The corners of his mouth twitch. “Nah, I’m just trying to help you chill. I made those by the way.” He says pointing at the chocolates. “You’ll have to let me know what you think.”

I go back to digging in the bag and pull out a candle and a small succulent plant. “Thank you.” I say as my eyes meet his. “This is very thoughtful of you.”

“Don’t mention it.” He says with a shrug as if this is standard for him. “Ready to go?”

“Yeah,” I say as I grab my purse off the counter.

Outside, he leads me towards an orange Jeep gladiator. “Harlow told me you just got this.”

He gives me a brilliant smile as he slides his sunglasses on and I find myself suddenly concerned with getting his brand new seats wet. “I did and I’m ready to haul shit.” He declares as he opens the door for me.

I start laughing as I climb into the front seat. I forgot how funny he is. I inhale the new car smell and rest my head against the seat. Seconds later, he gets in and looks at me.

“Where are we going?”

He leans close to me and smells so good. I’ve been around Kyrell a handful of times and never found myself this attracted to him. Maybe I never allowed myself to be attracted before. I push all thirsty thoughts out of my mind and answer his question. “Um, Ikea. Please.”



A FEW HOURS LATER, after I feel as though I’ve bought all of Ikea, I have all the furniture I wanted plus a few decorative items. I’m excited, but I’m also not looking forward to the hours of assembly.

“Do you mind if I invite a friend to help me get all of this up to your apartment?”

“Not at all. I was just mentally dreading having to carry it up.” I live near the very top floor and was sore for a few days when my friend and I moved my bare necessities. I’m not going to say no to more help.

His phone chimes with a text a few moments later. “Is it okay if I give him your address? He isn’t a weirdo although I do think he may be a sadist.”

“It’s fine. I’ll blame you if I end up getting stalked and haunt you if I end up murdered.” I say jokingly.

He nods. “Fair enough.”

Forty-five minutes later we’re back at my apartment. As we pull up a man who looks like he should be in action movies waves at us. He’s tall with rich brown skin, muscular, has a few tattoos, and gives off a “don’t fuck with me” vibe.

When we get out he gives Kyrell a dap. “Cash, this is Quinn. Quinn, this is Cash.”

“A pleasure to meet you.” Cash says as he extends his hand out for me to shake.

“You too. Thank you for coming to help carry all of this up to my apartment.”

“Not a problem. It’ll be a workout for me.” He says.

“Cash is my trainer who likes to whoop my ass three days a week.” Kyrell says.

I give him an amused look. “But you still go, so you must enjoy it on some level.”

“It’s better than therapy.” He says. “You can head up if you want. Cash and I got this. Unless you want to help?”

“No, no,” I say, holding up my hands. “I’ll leave that to you two.” He chuckles and, without warning, takes his shirt off and tucks it into the waist of his joggers. Causing my eyes to fall on his perfectly chiseled washboard abs. I’d love to wash my laundry on them. After a few seconds of staring too long, my eyes snap back to meet his. I smile guiltily and start walking backwards. “You have a nice eight pack.” *Yes, I counted* . “I’m just gonna wait for you guys upstairs.” Then I turn around and walk away as fast I can with my ears burning. It’s been too long since I got any and it shows.

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# CHAPTER 7

*Kyrell*

“Do you want me to help you put all this together?” I ask Quinn who looks overwhelmed as she stares at the pile of boxes covering her living room floor.

Her head whips towards me and a look of relief washes over her face. “You wouldn’t mind?” she asks.

“I wouldn’t offer if I did.”

She holds the sides of her face. “I was just trying to figure out how I was going to put a king size bedframe together by myself.”

“I was too. That’s why I asked.”

She laughs “I didn’t think this through. I just went with whatever I liked.”

“You mean you finally let go?”

She smirks and rolls her eyes. “Something like that. C’mon,” she says as she walks down the hallway, “my rooms’ this way.”

A little over an hour later, Quinn’s bed is put together.

“Thanks for helping me.” She says with a sigh as she looks around her room.

“Not a problem. This was better than what I was gonna get into tonight.” I say as I lay down on her bed. I can feel her eyes on me as I make myself comfortable. “You can join me. I don’t bite... unless you’re into that shit. Then I’m game.”

Instead of staring at me like she doesn’t know what to do with me, like she has been all day, she laughs and sits down next to me. “For the record, I’m not into biting.”

“What are you into?” I ask her. Genuinely interested in her response.

“*Me ?*”

“Yeah, what were you into before the world told you who to be?”

She blinks at me and then looks out at the city lights. Her hand goes up to her hair tie and I hold my breath as she slowly slides it down the length of her curls. She shakes her head once they’re free, making my dick twitch in response, and collapses on the bed next to me.

“Before the world told me who I should be?” She messes with her hair tie as she contemplates my question. Then her eyes find mine. “I was brought into this world with my life mapped out for me and a long list of unrealistic expectations.”

“Like what?”

This is the first time we’ve talked about anything personal. The few times I’ve been around her at parties we were too busy having fun to be bothered with the issues of our lives. Harlow may be our mutual friend, but I know for a fact she isn’t going to tell anyone someone else’s personal business.

“Like being the perfect Southern Belle.” She says with a fake smile. “Being raised to fit in a beautifully wrapped box even though the contents are shattered. I was raised to be arm candy and a good little housewife.” She shrugs. “Don’t get me wrong, I want a husband and kids one day, but I haven’t been given the chance to fucking breathe.”

“Quinn Halifax, were you a debutante?” I ask her with a smirk on my face.

“Unfortunately, yes.” She says, covering her face with her hands. “I didn’t have a choice. My parents, well, really my mom is... difficult when she doesn’t get her way. My dad just follows suit.”

“Yeah,” I say. Knowing all too well what it’s like to have difficult parents. “I take it they aren’t co-signing this?” I ask looking around her bedroom.

“Nope. And I know I shouldn’t complain, right? Because there are people who come from nothing and shitty situations, but the fact my parents did everything for me to not reach a dream of mine...” She sighs and shrugs. “It’s just a low blow, ya know? You’d expect your parents to be there for you and they aren’t. But then my brother...” She looks at me and then covers her eyes with her hand. “Sorry, I’m rambling.”

“No, I get it.”

“What about you and your parents?” she asks.

I glance at my phone, avoiding the question. That is not some shit I want to unpack with her. “I should get going.” I say as I sit up on the edge of her bed. “I didn’t realize how late it is.”

“Oh yeah,” she says sitting up next to me, “thanks for spending your Saturday with me. What we’re you going to do anyway?”

“Uh... work, probably make some edibles, and then call a friend...or two for a sleepover.” I say with a wink. She knows what I’m about so there’s no point in sugarcoating it.

She shakes her head and her curls fall into her eyes. “It’s not too late for a sleepover.” Then she gives me the same look she gave me at the engagement party. Looking at me through her lashes and curls with the hint of a smile on her lips. *Tempting me .*

But I call her bluff. “True. But I’m fine with chillin’ alone tonight. Plus you kept me company.” I say as I stand and walk towards the door.

I’m not going to play this cat and mouse game with her. Either she wants to do the horizontal tango or she doesn’t. Maybe I’m jaded after I lost track of my body count or maybe I simply want to hear her say she wants to fuck me.

Quinn follows me to the door. “Text me if you ever want to go out and do something besides furniture shopping.” I say.

“Damn, this wasn’t fun for you?” she asks.

“Your company was.” Then I lean down and place another kiss on her cheek. Again, she looks like I set her on fire. “Night Quinn.”

She’s speechless with her fingertips now touching the spot my lips just were. I smile and leave her there... *again* .



“YOU’RE GOING to be a great fit here, Lincoln.” I say to the guy sitting across from me who I just hired as my new manager.

“I got the job?” he asks in disbelief

“Yeah, why do you sound shocked? Is there something you’re hiding?” I ask jokingly.

He lets out a nervous chuckle, but then visibly relaxes. “No, it’s just that L.A. isn’t cheap and I’m running low on funds so landing a job before the money runs out is always a plus.”

“Well, you know your bud and managed a successful dispensary in Colorado. I checked your references and background. I don’t need much more information.”

“None of your current budtenders wanted the job?”

“I had trial periods with two of the potential candidates and they weren’t ready for the responsibility.” I leave out the part where I fucked the last manager I hired.

“When do I start?” he asks.

“Do you have any other obligations? Like kids or school?”

“Nope.”

“Alright, if you can be here tomorrow morning at 8:30 then we can go over the important stuff. I’ll work alongside you the first week to make sure you’re comfortable.”

“Ok,” he says with a smile, “I’ll be here tomorrow morning. Thank you Kyrell... er, Mr. Knight.”



I chuckle as I rise from my seat. “You can call me Kyrell. I’m too fucking young for formalities.” I say as I shake his hand. Plus, I don’t want a constant reminder of my heritage. “See you tomorrow, Lincoln.”

Jade, a budtender, comes into my office as Lincoln leaves. “What’s up Jade?”

“Um, well two things...”

“Okay... and they are?” I look at her expectantly.

“Can I come in a little later tomorrow? My babysitter can’t make it to my house until noon.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll be here anyway. What’s the second thing?”

“Oh yeah, there’s a guy out there asking for you. I offered to help him since you were in an interview but he said he’d wait.”

“A guy?” I ask confused.

“Yeah, I don’t know. He’s still out there.”

“Alright, thanks.” I say as I try to remember whether or not I set up another interview for today.

I follow Jade out to the main part of the store and stop when I see who it is. “Fuck,” I mutter under my breath. Just as I’m about to turn away he sees me and waves. I withhold my groan and make my way towards him.

“What are you doing here?” I cross my arms in front of me.

“I—” he hesitates and rubs his hand along the back of his neck. “I know I should have texted you but I knew there was a possibility you wouldn’t respond or would refuse to see me.”

“Why are you trying so hard now after twenty four years of dead silence?”

He looks at me with tired and sincere eyes. “Because I know,” his shoulders slump, “I know I let you down.” His eyes are silently pleading for me to not tell him to get the fuck out of my shop.

I'm not used to his sudden persistence to be in my life. Buried deeply, beneath all the festering bullshit, is the little boy who wanted his dad's approval. Not approval... *love*. That's all I fucking wanted was love. And for some pathetic reason that little boy still wants that.

Elias turns to leave. I let out an exasperated sigh. "Why did you stop by? To say hi?"

He turns back around, shocked that I'm still talking to him. "To see you and I thought that you could possibly help me... if you're willing?"

"Help you with what?"

"My doctor suggested CBD for pain management."

My brow furrows. "You're in pain? They didn't prescribe you pain meds?"

"It comes and goes. I want to avoid prescribed pain meds if I can."

I nod. "Understandable. That stuff can be addicting. Not that it would matter since you're dying anyway." I say with a shrug.

He stares at me. For a moment I realize I may have crossed the line, but I'm trying to decide whether I care or not. Then Elias laughs. Not a modest laugh, but a roar of fucking laughter and I can't help but smile myself.

"I guess you're right. I hadn't thought of that." He says once he catches his breath.

I start walking towards the counter. "I have just about anything you can think of. Gummies, chocolates, oils, lotions, creams—" I tick each word off on a finger as I say it "—bath bombs... however you want to try it, we have it."

"Can I try edibles? I read online that you're getting ready to release your own line."

He's been reading up on me? I mean it isn't surprising. Everyone has a digital footprint now a days. "Uh...yeah. I am. I can't sell them here until they're approved, though. You can

get some here in store today and I can give you some of mine,” I hesitate, “the next time I see you.”

Elias smiles. “That would be nice.”

“Have you gotten high before?”

“Yeah... about twenty years ago... maybe a little more.”

I swallow a laugh and clear my throat. “Alright, we’ll start off with something light. Don’t need you in a coma.”

“It probably wouldn’t be so bad.” He says with a shrug and a smirk.

Elias spends the next hour asking me questions about each product. It’s the first time I’ve felt comfortable talking to him and my mind is in the present instead of being stuck in the past.

“Ok, I think that gives me enough stuff to try.” He says looking down at his assortment of edibles. “Should I grab some joints too?” he gives me a quizzical look.

I glance down at his pile of edibles and CBD items. “I think you’ll be good unless you really want to be in a coma.”

He chuckles and slides the pile towards me. “Guess you’re right.”

I begin ringing up his assortment of items.

“This is a nice business you have here. Prime location too.” He says as he looks around.

“Thanks.” I say distractedly as I focus on ringing up the items.

“You know, I want to support you... as long as I can. Not just financially but—”

I hold up my hand. “I get it. You don’t have to make it weird.”

He smirks and doesn’t say another word.

“That’ll be two hundred and fifty dollars.” I say after ringing up all his items.

Once he's paid for everything he stands there as though he is contemplating whether or not he wants to say something else.

"Are you feeling okay?" I ask. I'd hate for him to keel over on the floor of my shop.

"Yeah, I was just wondering if you'd want to go fishing with me... this weekend?"

"Fishing? This isn't an overnight kumbaya type thing is it?"

"No." He laughs. "We'll be back by the end of the day. You can think about it. No pressure. Just know the offer is on the table."

I nod my head. "I'll think about it." I'm not sure if I want to be alone with him on a boat all day.

"Sure." He says with a smile and then holds up his bag. "Thank you."

"Yeah... any time."

He looks at me a few seconds longer and then leaves. I lean against the counter and watch him get into his car and pull out of the parking lot.

"Huh." I mutter to myself.

Maybe he isn't the devil I painted in my head after all.

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# CHAPTER 8



“**Y**ou should totally come out tonight!” My co-worker Savannah says. She practically bounces when she talks.

“Where are you going?” I ask. I’m not sure I want to go out now that my apartment is decorated nicely. I love to be home.

“The Vortex. I know you’ve heard of it. It’s the hottest club right now. Dancing, drinks, hot guys... the works.”

After Kyrell left the other night, I had a date with my vibrator and then I thought about ways I could let loose or “let my hair down” as he called it. Going out for a night of drinks and dancing sounds like the perfect opportunity.

“I’ll go. What time are you going?”

“Oh my God!” She’s bouncing in her seat now. “I was hoping you’d say yes! I can pick you up. I’ll be at your place around 11:30. Does that work?”

“Yeah, I’ll text you my address.” I turn off my computer and grab my bag.

“We are going to have the best girl’s night out!” She says as she claps her hands together.

Savannah may be a little quirky, but I’ve learned that she means well. During the drive home, I wonder what I’m going to wear tonight.



THE RINGER I set for my mom resounds throughout my apartment. Momentarily I stare at it, like I always do, before answering. I take a deep breath and answer.

“Hi Mom.” I say as I prop my phone up on my mirror in front of me.

“Quinn, why do you only text me and never call? And where are you going?” she asks, as she gives me an appraising look.

“Out.” I say distractedly as I finish my eyeliner. “To a club, Mom.”

She looks disgusted when I say the word club. My mom thinks that only the depraved go to clubs to engage in debauchery. “Why would you go to a place like that?”

“Uh, to have fun.” I shrug before applying my lipstick. “Maybe you should try it sometime, Mom. Let loose.”

She gasps. “I would never. And how do you expect to find a respectable man in a place like that?”

I roll my eyes, letting out an exasperated sigh. Me going out tonight has nothing to do with respectable men. I’d prefer to find one who’d do dirty things to me.

“Always a man.” I scoff. “It’s funny because I’ve been surviving just fine without one. Why do you insist upon pushing this issue?”

“Excuse me,” she says defensively, “for wanting to see my only daughter get married and give me grandbabies.”

My mom has had my wedding planned since before I was born. My dad told me countless times she’s always dreamed of having a girl. She got one. Just not the one she’d hoped for. I do like the finer things in life, but that doesn’t mean I need a man to sponsor my every move.

“It will happen one day, Mom.” I try my best not to roll my eyes at her. “Just not tonight. Tonight I want to have fun. Be a young adult for once.”

My mom gives me a stern look, as if I’m still a child. “You best behave yourself, Quinn, and remember what you

represent.”

I was raised to follow the rules. All kids are, but when your dad is a judge and your mom fears social ridicule, rule following is taken to a whole other level. I was raised to be a prim and proper perfectionist. I find comfort in rules, even if I want to break them. I knew telling her I’m going to a club would set her off, but I’m trying to break out of the box they put me in and not be so tightly wound.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Mother.” I say in my best English accent. She starts another sentence, but I cut her off. “Oh,” I say with mock disappointment, “my friend Savannah is knocking at the door.” I lie. “We’ll have to talk another time.”

She lets out a huff of air. “Alright,” she says reluctantly, “love you.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

I end the call and step into my walk-in closet to get ready. I slide into a short glittery, white bodycon style dress that hugs all my curves. The back dips low, accentuating my ass, while the front shows a peek of cleavage, with a matching choker collar. I run my hands over my body as I turn around in the mirror. Smiling at myself, I squeeze my breasts together before blowing myself a kiss.

“Quinn, you’re going to let your hair down tonight and have fun.” I look at my signature ponytail on top of my head. “Okay, not literally. Baby steps.”

My phone chimes with a text after my pep talk.

**Savannah: Get in loser, we’re going clubbing!**

I laugh and shake my head at the *Mean Girls* reference as I grab my clutch and keys off the counter.

When we get to the club, Savannah goes straight to the front of the line, flirts a little with the bouncer, and then we’re being escorted to the VIP section. It’s packed body to body, drinks flowing, and the music vibrates through my body. I have to admit that this is better than a night at home watching Netflix.

“What did you tell him?” I ask. “That you’d suck his dick?”

She simpers. “Funny you say that because Sebastian and I are friends with benefits. All sex—no strings. It’s perfect and comes with perks like getting into this club.” She says as she enters one of the VIP sections.

“How? How do you not catch feelings?” I ask as we settle onto one of the plush, velvet couches.

Savannah shrugs. “We have an agreement. Just because we’re physically attracted to one another doesn’t mean we need to be together.”

A waiter enters a few seconds later. “Sebastian said drinks are on him tonight.” She informs us. “What can I get you?”

“See.” She says with a shrug. “Perks.”

“I’ll have a mojito please.” I say.

“Make that two.” Savannah says excitedly.

I’m curious about this friends with benefits situation Savannah is in. “What’s the agreement that you guys have?”

“Oh,” she shrugs, “if one of us catches feelings we’ll end the friends with benefits arrangement. Which isn’t hard—he doesn’t do commitment and I’m currently not looking for a serious relationship. We both know what it is.”

Honestly, she makes total sense. Not every relationship needs to be a committed one. We settle in chatting as we’re given an endless supply of drinks.

A little while later, Sebastian appears with a group of friends. Savannah’s face lights up when she sees him.

“Who’s your friend?” he asks as he sits next to her.

“Quinn. We work together.”

Sebastian extends his hand. “Pleasure to meet you, Quinn.”

“You too.” I say with a smile.

“Thank you for the drinks.” Savannah slides her hand up his leg to his crotch.



I quickly turn my head away, not wanting to watch my friend feel up her boy toy. My eyes land on a guy who is staring at me. He has smooth brown skin, hazel eyes, curly black hair, and muscles that look like they are begging to be freed from his shirt he tried to confine them in.

He gets up and sits next to me. "I'm Jeremy, and you are?"

"Quinn."

He flashes me a smile. "Care to dance?"

"I'd love too." I set my glass on the table and turn to tell Savannah I'll be back, but she's too busy playing tonsil hockey with Sebastian. She'll be fine.

I let Jeremy take my hand and lead me to the dance floor. Once we're to the center, he turns me around so my ass meets his crotch. I move to the rhythm of the music while he matches me. I relax as we dance, but then I feel Jeremy's hand snaking its way down my body.

I grab it and slide it back to my hip. "Sorry." He says. "I didn't mean to let my hand wander. I'm a little tipsy."

A little tipsy my ass. He was coherent enough to introduce himself and lead me out here. His hand starts wandering again and this time it brushes against my breast. I pull away from him. "Um, I'm gonna go check on Savannah."

He grabs my hand and tries to pull me back towards him. "She's fine."

I pull my hand out of his. "Okay, but I'm not." I turn around and walk back towards the VIP section we were in and, unfortunately, Jeremy follows me.

"I'm sorry. I just thought that's what you were here for?"

I turn around to face him. "For what?"

"A good time."

"I am Jeremy" I say poking his chest. "But I'm not here to be freely groped. I just met you five minutes ago."

He scoffs. "You're dressed like—"

“I could be buck naked and I still wouldn’t fuck you.” I glare at him.

“Just another uptight bitch.” He says with a wave of his hand.

“Yeah, well, this uptight bitch isn’t fucking you tonight.” I walk off not giving him a second thought. Men are unfucking-believable. So much entitlement for being less than mediocre.

When I get back to our section, it’s empty. The server is there wiping down the table. “Hi, do you know where the girl went that was here?”

“Yeah, she left with Sebastian.”

I massage my temple with my fingertips. This entire night is trying me right now. That bitch left me. I let out an exasperated sigh because I haven’t even been in the club for two hours and I’m ready to go home. My intentions were good tonight, but for some reason the universe wanted to fuck with me.

I exit the VIP section and decide to stop by the bar for another drink while I wait for my Uber. I’m never going out with Savannah again. She left me with the creep of Sebastian’s group and then ghosted me.

*Kyrell*

I see her ponytail bobbing through the crowd before I see her face. My eyes were drawn to her because her white dress was glittering in the club lights causing her to stand out. I watch her take a seat at the bar and then place her head in her hand as she scrolls through her phone.

“I’ll be back.” I lie to the woman who is hanging off of me.

“Where you going man?” my friend asks. “The party is just getting started.” He says as he sits between four women.

“I think you’ll be fine without me.” I wink.

I make my way towards Quinn and sit next to her. “Rough night?”

She whips around to face me with her hand on her chest. “Shit Kyrell. You scared me.” She relaxes.

“You good?”

“I could be better. Dealt with a creepy guy and then my friend, who was my ride, ditched me. So I’m just waiting for my Uber.”

“Creepy guy?” I ask. “Is he still here?”

“I don’t know.” She says scanning the crowd. “Oh he’s over there” –she says pointing towards him– “he kept feeling me up on the dance floor and then tried to blame it on how I’m dressed.”

“I don’t think how you’re dressed has anything to do with respect. Are you okay?” I may be a man whore and an asshole at times, but I respect women.

“Oh yeah,” she waves her hand, “I would have either put my stiletto through his nuts or sprayed him with mace... maybe both.” She says with a shrug as if it’s an everyday occurrence.

I look at her for a moment to make sure she’s okay. “Kyrell, honestly,” she rests her hand on my arm, “I’m fine. It sucks but I’m fine.”

I signal for one of the bouncers to come over. Once he’s near me, I stand up to talk to him.

“Yes, sir?”

Quinn looks between me and the bouncer with curiosity after he calls me sir. “I thought I told Sebastian not to let that piece of shit back in here.” I say, nodding towards the guy who is now all over another woman. “Was I not clear?”

“You were very clear, sir. Sebastian let him in.”

“Where is Sebastian?”

“He left with his friend.”

I feel my annoyance rising. “Nico, get rid of him and make sure he *knows* he isn’t welcome here regardless of what Sebastian says. Then, call Sebastian and tell him if he isn’t back here in ten minutes, he isn’t going to have a job.”

“Understood, sir.”

I sit back down next to Quinn whose eyebrows are raised. “I apologize for that guy’s behavior. We’ve had problems with him before and I thought it was handled. Clearly it wasn’t.”

“You shouldn’t apologize for another man’s inability to keep his hands to himself.”

“Yeah... but men like that ruin it for the good guys.”

Her eyes glitter as she looks at me. “Are you saying you’re a good guy?”

“I like to think I am.”

“I have to ask. Do you own the club?”

“No, I’m just an investor. But what kind of investor would I be if I didn’t make sure the trash was properly taken out?”

“True.” Her phone chimes a few seconds later. “My Uber is here so—”

“You know... I can give you a ride home. I was getting ready to leave anyway. I can only handle the club for so long.”

“Oh, um... are you sure?” she asks looking around. “I don’t want to be a bother.”

“I’m sure. Are you hungry?”

“Starving actually.” She says as she opens the Uber app to cancel her ride.

“You look like an angel by the way.” I say, allowing my eyes to roam over her and appreciate her curves.

“What? Why do you say that?” she asks looking down at her outfit.

“You’re dressed in an all-white, glittery dress. Just missing some wings.”

There's nothing respectable or angelic about what I would do to her if she'd let me. I tell my dick to behave because she was just groped and for some reason I want her to know I'm a good guy... when I want to be.

She suddenly becomes interested in her clutch with a sheepish grin on her face. "Thanks Ky... I mean Kyrell. I didn't mean to call you Ky."

"You can call me whatever you want. I mean, technically I just called you an angel." Her eyes finally meet mine and she laughs. "Ready to eat? Or do you want a few more drinks?" I ask.

"Oh no, I'm ready to get out of here. No offense to you and this club, but I hope to never be back here."

"No offense taken." I say with a smile as I hold the door open for her. Quinn may be a little uptight, but she isn't afraid to speak her mind. I've always liked that about her.



WE STOP by a burger joint she recommends and then I take her to my favorite place for when I need to clear my thoughts. I set our sack of burgers and fries on the hood of my car and offer Quinn my hand to climb up.

"Uh, Ky... isn't this car a little too expensive to be sitting on the hood?" she asks as she surveys my Bugatti.

"Is it?" I ask with a smirk.

She shakes her head and chuckles. "I'm serious. What if I dent it?"

I shrug. "It's a car, Quinn. It's fixable and replaceable. Are you going to enjoy these burgers, fries, and this view with me or not?"

After a few seconds of thought, she places her hand in mine and I help her get situated on the hood. Once she sits down and looks out at the city lights, she gasps. Not loudly, but loud enough for me to hear and my dick to feel.

“Wow, this view is... incredible.” She says as she smiles at me.

“Yeah, it’s one of my favorite lookouts here in the city.”

“I can see why.” She says, looking back at the city as she unwraps her burger and takes a bite. “I can’t believe my friend left me tonight.” She shakes her head and scoffs.

“I take it you two aren’t close?”

“No, I work with her. We know each other well enough, but this is the first and last time I will ever go out with her.”

“Can’t say that I blame you.” I take a bite of my burger. “Those are the types of friends that lead you into fucked up situations. No matter how nice they are.”

“Right?!” She nods her head in agreement. “I knew something was off, but I promised myself that I was going to let my hair down more often and—” she abruptly stops talking as if she’s said too much.

I try to hold in a laugh, but I can’t. “Don’t tell me that you came out with intentions of fun and had to deal with a shitty friend and a groper.”

Quinn lays her head on my shoulder as she succumbs to a fit of laughter. “I tried, okay? It all started going downhill when I told myself the night was better than binge watching Netflix.”

“You did try.” I nod my head as I laugh along with her. “Failed miserably but, A+ for effort.”

“I guess the night didn’t turn out so bad.” She says sitting up right. “I’m sitting here with you, enjoying a burger, and a breathtaking view. I’m too afraid to say it’s better than a Netflix binge given my history with that.” She smirks.

“It is.” I say with a shrug. “What beats food and company?” I give it a thought “Ok, maybe sprinkle some weed and sex in there and I’m golden.”

“Sprinkle?” she asks while trying to hold in a laugh. “Please tell me how one sprinkles weed and sex into a

situation?” After the last word is out she tosses her head back and laughs.

“You know—” I make a sprinkling motion like I’m salt bae “—just sprinkle that shit in there somewhere.”

“You’re ridiculous. You know that, right?” she asks me once she regains her composure.

“I’ve been called worse, so I’ll take that.” I glance at her out of the corner of my eye and notice she is shivering. “Shit, are you cold?” I shrug out of my jacket. “Here—” I wrap it around her shoulders “—take this.”

“Thanks.” She says as she wraps it around herself a little tighter and then smells it. “I don’t care how weird this sounds... your jacket smells good.”

I chuckle. “Not weird at all... freak.”

“You know, I’m in this predicament because of you, right?” she says with a smug look on her face.

“Hold up, how the fuck am I responsible for your friend and the groper?”

Then she does a terrible impersonation of me. “Let your hair down, Quinn. Have fun... blah blah blah.” She says as she tilts her head from side to side and rolls her eyes.

“I told you to let your hair down. Not get left at the club. The groper... I can’t really speak on that, but I really am sorry that happened.”

“I told you I’m fine. Just another wild story to share with the girls.” She shrugs. “It’s funny that I ran into you tonight given you were the inspiration behind me going out in the first place.”

“Yeah, L.A. isn’t as big as people think it is. Someone always knows someone or something.”

I hop off the hood of my car to grab some bud and rolling papers. I feel Quinn’s eyes on me as I put the weed into the paper and roll a joint. I tilt my head to the side, as it dangles between my lips, and light it. I inhale and close my eyes as the smoke fills my lungs.

I slowly exhale a few seconds later and look at Quinn.  
“Care to join me?”

She was too busy staring at me to hear my question.  
“What?” she asks.

“Do you want some or do you just like staring at me?”

“I was staring at you, wondering if you were going to share.” She takes the joint from my hand with an air of confidence. I watch her put the joint between her lips, inhale deeply, and then she starts fucking coughing. Well, more like hacking and gasping for air. Her eyes are wide and she looks at me like I can save her. I roll off the hood of my car and onto the ground, overcome by my laughter.

Quinn continues to cough and curse at me at the same time. “Wha—” she coughs and gasps “—the fuck!” She chokes and starts coughing again. “Oh my—” She shouts and gulps in a huge breath of air and tries like hell to control her cough. “I saw my life flash before my eyes, Ky!” She says with a shaky voice that is now raspy from hacking.

I get up, still laughing at her, and lean against the hood of my car wiping tears from my eyes. “You were just so fucking confident I wanted to see how it played out.”

She takes huge gulps of soda while glaring at me. “My death would’ve been on your hands.”

“Oh, you’re a drama queen now?”

Quinn holds up her hand and points at the joint. “Fuck that. You can have that. I’ll stick to edibles.”

“You tried them?” I ask her.

“Yeah, I can’t even taste the weed in them which is dangerous.”

I chuckle. “For you apparently, it is.”

Once Quinn catches her breath she sighs and looks at me. “Tonight isn’t so bad after all.” A hint of a smile is on her lips as she tilts her head towards the stars.



I smile at her thinking it's been fun hanging out with her again and admiring how gorgeous she looks staring up at the sky.



WE PULL up to Quinn's apartment building a few hours later. "Thanks for the ride and food. Oh, and almost killing me."

I slide my hand down my face as I laugh. "I never told you to Hoover the joint."

"I wasn't—" she begins to argue "—you made it look easy so I followed suit."

"Quinn, I own a dispensary for fucks sake. What else would you expect of me?"

"Anyway," she says dismissing my question. "Thank you. Would you mind walking me up?"

"Of course." I make my way around to her side, open the door, and offer my hand for her to get out.

Quinn unlocks her apartment door, but doesn't open it. Instead, she turns back around and looks up at me. "Guess I'll see you around."

"Yeah," I say, shoving my hands into my pockets, "see you around."

My eyes flit to her lip as she bites it, causing my mind to think of all the positions we could be in. Quinn makes no move to go into her apartment. Her brown eyes look at me expectantly. Body language is one thing I'm well versed in. I take a step towards her, closing the distance between us, and place my hand on her hip. Her breath hitches, making my body wake in response.

"You're playing with fire, Quinn." I whisper as I gently press her against the door. "An angel like you has no business tempting a devil like me. I will ruin you and not feel bad about it."

“The devil was an angel too.” She says, looking at me through her lashes, still biting that plush lip of hers.

“So then tell me, Angel... what do you want?”

Her breathing is rapid. I run my thumb along the pulse of her neck. I wait a few breaths and she doesn't say anything in response. I knew she wasn't ready. I brush my thumb along her bottom lip and press a kiss to her cheek.

“Night Quinn. See you around.”

I'll be here when she's ready to be consumed by me.

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# CHAPTER 9

*Kyrell*

I hadn't forgotten about Elias asking me to go fishing with him. So I'm up early as balls on a Sunday morning when I could be sleeping. The truth is, after talking to him a few days ago at my shop, I'm not as against getting to know him as I once was. I painted him as a villain in my head and maybe that wasn't true. I'm trying to give him a chance. Yvette could burn in hell. I would never care to have a relationship with her and I'm glad she hasn't been with Elias the past few times I've seen him.

I throw a hoodie, some joggers, and sneakers on. Nearly forty-five minutes later, I'm pulling up to Elias' house. Glancing up, my eyes land on Yvette. She surveys me for a few seconds. I flick her off, and watch her eyes narrow before she gets into the car waiting for her. They pull away as soon as her door closes. Probably could have done without flicking her off, but now that I'm not a helpless little kid anymore, she will know exactly how I feel about her.

My hand is hovering, ready to knock on the door, when it opens.

"Good Morning, Kyrell. Your father is this way." A housekeeper says as they open the door. I follow behind them, but stop in my tracks when I see a familiar face.

"Charles?" I ask in disbelief as I stare at the butler who practically raised me. I had a sleuth of nannies, but Charles was always there for me.

He pulls me into a hug and I return it, wrapping my arms around him. "It's good to see you Kyrell." He turns his attention to the housekeeper. "I'll take him to Mr. Knight, James. Thank you."

“I had no idea you were working with my da—I mean Elias.”

“Oh yes, where am I going? Your father has been good to me.”

“That makes one of us.” I say as he continues to lead me through the house.

He knocks on a door and I hear Elias’ voice from the other side. “Come in, Charles. You know you don’t have to knock.”

“It’s courtesy, sir.” Charles says with a smile as he leads me into the room.

Elias is sitting on his bed and he doesn’t look so good.

“Can I get anything for you, sir?” Charles asks.

“No, thank you.”

Charles nods and bows out of the room.

“Morning. It’s good to see you.” Elias says. “Give me just a minute to finish getting ready.”

Now that I’m closer to him, it’s clear that he isn’t feeling well. “Are you... uh, sure about going today? Because I can come back another day if you’re not up for it.”

His shoulders slump as he sighs. “I’m in a lot of pain today. But I didn’t want to let you down.”

I furrow my brows. “If you’re in pain,” I shrug, “you’re in pain and you should probably rest. I’m not a child waiting around for his dad anymore.” I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Shit, I didn’t mean that to come out so harsh. I just meant... I’m not disappointed. I get it.”

He looks at me for the first time since I entered the room. “I’m sorry I’ve been a disappointment.”

“I’ve made peace with it. Well... not really. I’m actually a little fucked up from it, but I’m here standing.” I say with a smirk.

He chuckles. “You’re very honest.”

“Honesty is all we have.” I clear my throat. “Listen, I can come back another day if you want? I don’t want you to feel obligated to spend time with me.”

“I don’t feel obligated. I mean, you’re my son so I am obligated but—what I’m trying to say is, you’re more than welcome to stay and hang out with me.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I say as I shove my hands into my pockets. “I don’t want to be here when Yvette comes back if you plan to keep the peace today.”

“Yvette has gone to Paris for a few days with her friends.”

My eyes narrow. “She left you here... like this?” I gesture towards him with my hands out. “I mean... it isn’t really surprising given who she is as a person, but I thought for once in my life I saw her display a little emotion at that lunch we had.”

“She’s having a hard time dealing with the diagnosis.” He says without looking at me.

I scoff. “Right, leave it to Yvette to make this about herself.” I roll my neck, cracking it, and pop my knuckles as my annoyance bubbles up.

“You know...” he sighs. “It’s a lot more peaceful when she isn’t here and I shouldn’t say that, but she complicates everything if it isn’t how she wants it. So, I’d rather her jet off to Paris for a few days than be here with me, demanding things.”

He visibly relaxes after he finishes getting that thought out. I can imagine his life is pretty lonely when dealing with Yvette. I know all too well what that’s like. “I can... spend the day with you if you want?”

He smiles. “I’d enjoy that. I don’t like lying around in bed all day.”

I stand there awkwardly, not knowing what to do with myself. I’m second guessing offering to stay because I’m wondering what the hell we’ll do the rest of the day. I know I’m not obligated to stay but... *I want too* . And I’m annoyed

with myself for wanting to stay. For wanting to get to know the man I'm supposed to call dad.

“Do you like model ships?” Elias asks. Catching me off guard.

What the fuck, is what I want to say. But instead I say, “Uh...I mean...I guess. I don't know. To be honest I haven't built anything since I was a kid. I used to have a shit ton—excuse me, I mean—I used to have a lot and put them together and save them. Then I... didn't.”

I remember spending hours putting model ships, planes and cars together because I was alone so much. It was one of the things that distracted me from all the bullshit. I haven't cared to pick them up now because they are tied to memories I've buried deep away and have no desire to revisit.

He chuckles. “You're a grown man. You can say as you please.” He grabs his glass of water from the nightstand and takes a drink. “I got you all those sets. Not that you would've known that but... I did.”

I suddenly feel clammy. “Is there a bathroom?” I pull at the neck of my hoodie.

“Yeah, you're welcome to use the one in here or there is one across the hall.”

I dart out of the room to the one across the hall. I need space to fucking breathe because I suddenly feel like my air supply is being cut off. My breathing is labored, I'm sweating as if I've been working out, and my heart is pounding against my chest. I steady myself on the sink and splash some cold water on my face. I dare a glance of myself in the mirror and for a few split seconds I see myself as a little kid. I'm really fucking losing it. I sit on the edge of the tub and try to regain control before I start spiraling, but the memory invades my mind anyway.

*I'm five. Yvette comes into my room holding a glass of wine. She always has a glass in her hand when I see her. Her lips curve into a smile as she looks at me and then sets her glass on the nightstand. She walks towards the shelf that's*

*lined with all my finished model sets. Yvette stares at them for a moment, then she starts slowly sliding them off the shelf so they crash to the floor.*

*“What are you doing? Those are mine.” I say.*

*She ignores me and continues sliding them off the shelf. I try to salvage the ones she’s already broken, but she kicks me away from them as she sneers at me. I back up and scramble across the floor away from her. She picks up one of the models, throws it against the wall, and then laughs as it shatters. I move to the corner of my room to get away from the hurling pieces. When she turns back around, to grab another model, I make a break for the door. But she throws one at me that hits me right on the side of my head causing me to fall down.*

*Then she’s on top of me. Smacking me. Clawing me. Yelling at me. For reasons my five year old brain can’t comprehend. Her hands wrap around my neck. I try to break away from her, but she’s too strong. Slowly everything fades to black.*

*I wake up a while later when a nanny comes in.*

*“Kyrell... wake up...” she has a look of relief on her face as my eyes meet hers.*

*I scramble away from her, with wide eyes and fear, to the corner of my room. My knees are to my chest and my arms are wrapped tightly around them, trying to protect myself from what’s coming.*

*She holds her hands up and slowly walks towards me. “I’m not going to hurt you, but we need to take care of that cut on your head and get you cleaned up.” Her voice is gentle and inviting.*

*When she mentions the cut is when I become aware of the pain on the side of my head. I look down at my pants that are now soaked because I had wet myself at one point when Yvette attacked me.*

*After some reassuring words, the nanny convinces me to get up and follow her to the bathroom where she runs a hot bath and helps me get cleaned up. After the water soaks into*

*my skin, causing it to wrinkle, I ask her the question that is on my mind.*

*“Why does she hate me?” I look at her, but her eyes don’t meet mine.*

I never got an answer that day. But I got fucking scars and bruises. That nanny was fired shortly after that, and so was every one that followed her. When Elias revealed he got all the model sets for me, I felt a puzzle piece fall into place. I never understood why she destroyed them all, but I think I do now. For some reason, she always made it a competition for Elias’ attention when he was around.

Taking deep breaths I try to ground myself again. Maybe coming here wasn’t a good idea. Trying to have a relationship with him is doing nothing but bringing up wounds from the past. I haven’t felt this way in such a long time that it scares me.

I pull my phone out of my pocket with shaky hands and call Harlow. She answers in two rings.

“Hey, can—”

“I think I’m having a panic attack or maybe I’m finally fucking dying.” I say.

“Shit, okay, where are you?”

I look around the bathroom. “I’m in the bathroom at Elias’ house and I’d prefer not to pass out here.”

“First of all—you’re not dying. Can you breathe with me? Breathe in for a count of five and out for a count of five. We’re going to start off slow.”

I close my eyes and breathe as Harlow starts counting. “One... two... three... four... five... hold it. Exhale, slowly... one... two... three... four... five.”

We do another round, but I still feel like I’m going to crawl out of my fucking skin. “I don’t know that this is working.” I say while my leg bounces around like it doesn’t belong to me.

“What can you hear? Close your eyes and tell me what you hear?”



I close my eyes and try to focus in on what I hear. “The water running in the sink... your breathing... and the air blowing through the vent in the bathroom.”

“Breathe Kyrell.”

I focus on the running water in the sink and Harlow’s breathing. After a few rounds of breath, I notice that I’m starting to breathe normally and my heart rate is coming down. “Okay... maybe I’m not fucking dying.”

“You’re not.” She reassures me. “I think you were just having a panic attack, like you said. How are you feeling now?”

“Better.” I say as I continue to inhale and exhale shaky breaths. “I was fine and then... I got all clammy.”

“Do you know what triggered it?”

I cradle my head in my hand as a headache settles into my skull. “I uh, yeah... I do.”

“Was it being with your dad?”

“No...well yes and no. He said something that triggered a memory and it went downhill from there.”

“Kyrell...”

I let out a sigh because I already anticipate what she’s going to say. “Harls, I know.”

“All I was going to say is I’m here... if you ever want to talk.”

I sit in silence while I massage my temple. “I...” my voice is hoarse because of the growing lump in my throat. “I... fuck.” I rub my eyes as my growing headache feels like someone is stabbing me with an ice pick. “I had a really shitty childhood, Harls. I–my–well Elias’ wife...” my voice trails off. I’m not sure whether I want to bring this up with her or not. Fuck it. “She abused me... for years and now things I wanted to forget are being dredged up again.”

“Kyrell... I–I’m not sure what to say because I’m sorry doesn’t seem appropriate, but I am sorry that happened to you.”

I understand your hesitation now.”

“He said something today that just...” I let out an exhale and wipe my eyes. “I just feel dumb as hell for wanting a relationship with him after everything.”

“Kyrell, you’re not dumb for wanting a relationship with him. There’s nothing wrong with you wanting that.”

I nod. “Yeah, I know... I–this shit is heavy and I don’t want to dig through it.”

The only sound between us is the water still running in the sink and our breathing. “I’m going to say something that you may or may not agree with, but know I simply want what’s best for you.” She says.

“Okay, what?”

“Have you considered going to therapy? I think it might help to get all of this out of you instead of letting it–”

“Fester?” I ask.

“Yes... exactly that.”

Cash had mentioned the same thing and even gave me a few contacts. I’ve dragged my feet on making the call because I thought I was doing fine–until today.

“I’m here for you Kyrell. You can still call me anytime day or night.”

“I know. Thanks Harls.” I sigh. I don’t see how I can have a relationship with Elias and work through what comes up. “Maybe this is all a bad idea...”

“I don’t think it’s necessarily a bad idea. I think you just have to face shit you never thought you would. Kyrell, I’m sorry, but my client just walked into the studio.”

“Oh yeah, no problem Harls. Thanks for answering.”

“Are you going to be okay, though? I hate to just leave you.”

“No, no I can breathe. I think I’ll be okay.”

“Call me if anything. And text me when you’re home.”

“Okay... mom.” I always call her mom when she says something I’d imagine a mom would say.

She chuckles. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll check in later.”

I cradle my head in my hands for a few more minutes before I get up to turn off the water. I’m not sure that staying here is the best idea, not to mention that I’m now exhausted. I slip out of the bathroom and make my way down the stairs to leave. As I’m passing the kitchen, Charles stops me.

“You’re not leaving are you?” he asks.

“Uh...” I pinch the bridge of my nose. “I am. I can’t do this shit.”

“Come with me.” He says as he grabs my arm and guides me towards a stool in the kitchen.

“Charles, I’m not a kid anymore. Food isn’t going to make all my fuckedupness better.”

He ignores me. “I’m shocked that you’re here. When Elias suggested reaching out to you—I didn’t think he was serious. Then when I heard you showed up—it was the talk amongst the housekeepers.”

“Speaking of which, where were you that day? There were shellfish everywhere.”

Charles started working as our butler shortly after I turned nine. I should say as *my* butler because I was the only one ever home. My dad was still gone a lot and Yvette went away. I didn’t care where she went. All I know is that the abuse stopped and I could finally be a kid. He took care of everything not just managing the household staff. Charles did everything for me a parent should do, but got paid for it.

He chuckles. “I was visiting family. That was one reason why I agreed to relocate is because my family is here.”

I nod as he pulls stuff out of the fridge to make a sandwich. “Charles... can I ask you something.” His hands still and then he looks at me. “Do you think it’s stupid... that I’m here?”

Charles has a vague idea of what Yvette did to me. By the time he became my butler, the abuse had already stopped, but he noticed how I was around Yvette on the rare occasion she was home. He asked me about it once. I told him she hurt me and we left it at that. I wasn't ready to talk about it then and I'm not sure I'm even ready to talk about it now. But my intrusive memories say otherwise.

“No, why would that be stupid?”

“He didn't seem to want me growing up... so why now?” I ask seriously.

“That's a question only your father can answer, Kyrell. You know that.” He hands a plate to me with a sandwich and some chips.

I chuckle as I look at the plate. “And apparently I'm still nine...”

Charles grabs for the plate, but I slide it out of his reach. “I can take it back.” He says holding out his hand.

“Still no nonsense?” I ask before I take a bite.

“Nine or twenty-four, you get what you get.”

Elias enters the kitchen. “There you are Kyrell. I thought you had left.”

“No Charles found me and decided to feed me.”

Charles gives me a wink and a nod as he begins to clean up the kitchen.

“Did you want to help me finish up this model car I've been working on after you eat?” he has a glimmer in his eye like he's a kid again. I remember feeling the same way when I got a new set to put together. “Unless you don't want to. You're looking at me like I'm crazy.”

I swallow my bite of sandwich. “It's just that I didn't expect you to be into building model cars at your age.” I also think of the panic attack I just had after the mere mention of them.

He splays his hand across his chest. “Are you saying I’m an old man?”

“I mean, you look well-kept for your age—”

“Well kept?” He lets out a bark of laughter. “May as well call me the crypt keeper.”

Charles laughs along with Elias, and so do I. “I just meant you don’t hear older people openly admit they like to build model cars and other things.”

“True, but I’m dying anyway so I may as well play.” Elias says.

“I can’t argue with that. I guess I can help you put it together.” And hopefully I don’t have another fucking panic attack. My body is in flight or fight mode and it’s telling me to get the fuck out of here, but I find myself still wanting to stay.

“I also have a pirate ship I’ve been wanting to work on.”

“Okay,” I say, “I have to admit the pirate ship does sound pretty cool.”

“See. We’re all just kids at heart.” He says.

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# CHAPTER 10

*Kyrell*

**A**fter leaving Elias' house, I went for a drive to clear my head. I end up in the same outlook spot I went to with Quinn the night before. The only difference is she's not here and the sun is setting now instead of stars shimmering in the sky. I roll a joint, spark up, take a long pull and then send a text to Quinn as I exhale.

**Kyrell: How are your lungs?**

I can't help the smirk that's on my lips. She responds a few minutes later.

**Quinn: Fuck you.**

**Kyrell: I'm just concerned.**

**Quinn: Bullshit. If you must know I had a lazy day. Slept most of it.**

**Kyrell: Given the way you practically inhaled that joint I'm not surprised.**

**Quinn: Whatever. What are you texting me for?**

**Kyrell: I told you. I was concerned.**

**Quinn: Uh-huh. How noble of you.**

**Kyrell: I try.**

**Quinn: I'm gonna go take a bubble bath. I'll text you later.**

**Kyrell: Take me with you.**

She reads the text but doesn't respond. I shake my head and chuckle to myself as my mind imagines Quinn wet and naked. There's this look she gives me that makes my mouth water with the anticipation of what she'll taste like. I've been around her plenty of times before now and she has never

looked at me like that. But I also know she isn't ready to take it there yet. If she was then we would've hooked up after the engagement party. I know it bothers her that I sleep around and don't hide it. She's always made little remarks about it, but lately she looks at me like she's curious to know what it is that I have.

Quinn can gladly explore that curiosity with me anytime she wants. The thing about her is that I know she likes to be in control. She rarely does anything without overthinking it. Like the furniture, or her ten thousand post it notes she has with reminders on them, and her wall calendar that is color coded and meticulously planned out. She can have control until she's ready to give it up to me. Then I'll show her what it's like to let the fuck go and fully indulge in pleasure.

With thoughts of Quinn swirling around in my head, I finish off my joint and head home. I didn't see Stella today. She doesn't work on weekends, but she still insists on bringing me dinner as if I'll starve without her cooking. There's a note on the kitchen counter.

*Hope you enjoyed the day with your dad.*

*I made you some lasagna.*

Stella never refers to him as Elias. She always calls him my dad or father even though I don't. Ever since he came back into my life she's been hopeful that we'll mend things.

I open the fridge to find a small pan of lasagna that I will probably tear through later tonight. I ate with Elias. We had oxtail, rice, and beans for dinner. I'm actually glad that I decided to stay. I'm surprised by how much I enjoy his company even though I'm afraid to admit it out loud because what if all of this is just bullshit?

"Alexa, turn on the TV." I say once I enter my room. I lay down as my high kicks in and start watching the movie *Signs* when my phone vibrates in my pocket.

**Quinn: I would but there's no room.**

Attached is a picture of her holding a wine glass in a tub full of bubbles. I can see the tops of her breasts along with a

hint of her nipples and her full lips. My dick is suddenly at full attention.

**Kyrell: I can fit into tight spaces.**

**Quinn: Can you?**

She knows exactly what she's doing and I'm here for it.

**Kyrell: I can show you. Actions speak louder than words.**

**Quinn: Maybe after I finish this glass of wine.**

**Kyrell: How long are you going to keep up this resistance?**

**Quinn: Am I tempting you?**

**Kyrell: I think I'm tempting you and you're afraid of that.**

**Quinn: Maybe I'm in a relationship.**

**Kyrell: Nah. You know as well as I do you want me to fuck you. You're curious about what I can do to that body of yours.**

Again, she reads my text but doesn't respond. All this back and forth with her is entertaining... *for now*. I strip out of my clothes and step into the shower, hoping that it will take my mind off the hard on I have. It doesn't. I could easily call someone from my long list of sleepover buddies to take care of me, but the mood would be lost by then.

I grip my dick while Quinn's bathtub pic is practically seared into my memory. I stroke myself slowly as I think of her lips. Those plush lips I want to kiss, bite, and suck. Her eyes and that fucking look she gives me makes me grip my dick harder and pump my hand faster. And the way she calls me Ky. It makes me want to hear it spill from her lips while I'm buried inside her. With that final thought a shiver wracks through my body causing me to grunt and moan as I cum. I don't stop stroking my dick until all of my release is on the shower floor. "Fuck" I mutter. I rest my head against the wall and let the hot water cascade over me. I'm contemplating whether I should fall into some pussy tonight or not. I know whoever comes over isn't going to give me what I want. I let out an exasperated sigh because I thought by this point I would



have at least kissed her. I normally don't like to play games with women.

But for her, *I'll play* because getting to watch her come undone on my dick will be worth the wait.

Quinn

I bite my lip while reading his last text and set my phone aside. I've always had vibrators, but they have seen an increase in use since Ky and I have been talking.

Turning one on, I slip it underneath the blanket of bubbles and press it against my center. My head lulls back against the tub as pleasure shoots through my body. He's confident he's going to fuck me and my stubbornness has caused me to hold out so far. I don't think I can hold out much longer though. He wants me to give in and let go. I move my vibrator around my clit in slow circles. My imagination goes into overdrive as I think of his lips and hands all over my body. I move the vibrator in faster circles around my clit and moan as my release starts to build in my core. Everything about him is tempting, even that cocky attitude of his. I wonder what his dick looks like as I'm on the edge of my orgasm. I spread my legs as far as they can go and press my vibrator hard against my center. My toes curl and I cry out as I cum from thoughts of him.

I don't turn off my vibrator until I've ridden the last wave of my orgasm. I put it off to the side and grab my glass of wine. I feel satisfied, but not in the same way I would be if he had been filling me up. I'm hesitant to sleep with him for multiple reasons. Not just because he's confident I'll end up in his bed.

If I were to sleep with him and shit went left—what would that mean for my relationship with Harlow? I wouldn't want our friendship to be affected by the fallout. Even though I don't think either of us would let that happen I still wouldn't ever want to put her, or myself, in that position. I doubt she

would give a damn if Kyrell and I slept together, but it's still a question I think about.

I'm also a jealous person. I don't know how I would handle him sleeping with me and then going off to be with someone else. Even if I know we aren't exclusive, that doesn't mean I won't feel some type of way if that ever happens. Savannah made a friends with benefits relationship sound easy. As long as he doesn't tell me about his other sexual escapades, I think I'd be fine. I'd prefer friends with benefits over a relationship right now because I like my independence. Maybe after I get Kyrell out of my system, I'll start going on dates with the intention of it leading to a relationship. For now, I just want to have fun.

I finish my glass of wine and get out of the tub. It's late and I have to be up early for work tomorrow. I rub lotion all over my body, turn off the lights, and climb into bed naked.

Maybe I should just let go and enjoy myself.



"Do you want to go get a coffee with me?" Savannah asks with a hopeful expression.

"I'm good." I say as continue to focus on my screen.

She sighs and plops down, uninvited, in the vacant chair next to me. "I'm sorry I left you at the club."

I don't respond because I would never have left my girlfriend. Savannah isn't someone I want to get involved with, no matter how nice she is.

"So you're just going to be mad at me?"

I shrug and continue to stare at my screen. I'm only finishing updating patient records and it's more interesting than what Savannah has to say. Once she realizes I'm not going to talk to her, she gets up and leaves. I exhale and sit back in my seat as I watch her walk out to the front desk.

I pull out my phone and mindlessly scroll through social media apps when my thoughts drift to Kyrell.

**Quinn: Want to hang out tonight?**

My curiosity is killing me.

**Kyrell: Sure. You wanna come to my place?**

**Quinn: Yeah, text me your address. Do you want me to bring anything?**

**Kyrell: Just you.**

I can't help the foolish smile that's on my lips as I read his text. I mentally plan my outfit and decide what matters most is the lingerie I'll be wearing underneath. At least it will if I let go of my doubts and let things happen. I could be hyping myself up to sleep with him when we may just hang out. The thought causes me to chuckle because I know that if Kyrell gets me alone at his house, he is going to do sinful shit to me.

The last time I had sex was well over a year ago. I had an off and on fling, but we never took each other seriously. We maintained the relationship because our parents liked the idea of us being together and the sex was decent. I chose to focus on my career and my future—without the help of a man. My parents are firm believers in the old school ideology that the woman stays home and the man provides. I would love for a man to provide for me, but that's not my only goal in life like it was for my mother. Instead, I'll work, live alone, and set up dick appointments.



MY LEVEL of anticipation is ridiculous as I get off work and head home to get ready to meet up with Kyrell. I wonder if a trench coat with lingerie underneath would be a little too straight forward as I unlock the door to my apartment.

I turn on my music and tackle the task of deciding what to wear. Almost an hour later, after my closet is torn apart, I finally settle on a simple outfit. It's a silk, light pink crop top

with lace on the trim that ties in the front. It exposes my stomach, requires no bra, and hugs my breasts just right. I'll pair it with some high waisted black pants.

I feel like I'm getting ready for a date and have to keep reminding myself that it isn't. Date or not, I'm going to look edible. After my shower, I sit in front of my mirror singing along to Jhené Aiko, while I do my makeup. I don't wear much. I usually only do my brows, a few coats of mascara, and a pretty lipstick. Tonight, I decide to wear some eyeliner to make my eyes a little sultrier.

For once, I leave my hair out. Kyrell is always talking shit about my hair always being in a ponytail. I have a mane of thick, kinky, curly hair that cascades over my shoulders. It's easier for me to wear it in a ponytail or bun. But tonight, I'm going to let it loose. I stare at myself in the mirror as I fluff up my curls and shake my head trying to get them to fall just right. I let out a huff after a few minutes of trying and realize that I have to be happy with wherever they fall. I take one last glance in the mirror and smile because I feel sexy.



“HM...IS THIS RIGHT?” I mutter to myself while I check the GPS. “Damn, this is right. I thought my apartment was nice.” I mumble aloud.

When I left the city and started heading for the hills I thought he had given me the wrong address. I even called him to double check and he assured me it was right and to just follow my GPS. Now I'm staring at a stunning mansion with black stone exterior. I park next to his Jeep and notice his garage is full of cars. No wonder he seemed so unbothered by me possibly fucking up his car the other night. It looks like he could afford to buy several if he wanted to.

As I walk towards his door it occurs to me that I really don't know much about Kyrell. I know the basics—he's the same age as me, owns a dispensary, invested money into a nightclub, but did he acquire all this on his own? He's never

given me the arrogant rich boy vibes you typically get with men who think they've made it because they own a pair of exclusive sneakers and lease a foreign car. In fact, Kyrell has never flaunted his money.

I fluff up my curls one last time as I knock on the front door. When it opens, I'm greeted by a shirtless Kyrell. He has nothing on but a towel loosely slung around his hips and beads of water are trailing down his abs. He has a few tattoos scattered across his chest and legs.

I've never wanted to be water so bad in my life.

"Hey, c'mon in." He says as his eyes drink me in. "I just need to get dressed." He waits for me to stop ogling him and walk through the door. I step inside and look around. "Or we can hang out here. Either way, I need clothes." He says as I follow him through his house.

Does he really need clothes? I lick my lips out of fear I'm drooling. "Uh... nice house. I didn't realize you lived in the hills."

"You never asked." He says with a smirk. "I bought it a few months after I moved out here."

"How? If you were only twenty-one at that time?"

"With money, as does everyone else." He answers vaguely.

"Did you sell your soul?" I ask half joking, half serious.

He turns around to face me but doesn't stop walking. "Damn near." He says with a wink.

His answer intrigues me, but I can also tell that he isn't going to tell me anymore than what he just told me. He walks through a door and I follow him then stop abruptly when I realize it's his bedroom.

"I can wait out here for you."

"Oh you won't see anything anyway... unless you want to." He disappears into a closet that has glass doors and he lets go of his towel, exposing *everything*.

I audibly gasp, his eyes snap to mine and a grin spreads across his face as he pulls boxers up around his waist. I squeeze my thighs together as my eyes linger a little longer. I turn around and pretend to be more interested in his room, which is bigger than my entire apartment. He told me I have a nice view of L.A. but he can see everything from up here. The sun has almost set, but the hues painted in the sky are breathtaking.

“What do you want to do?” he asks pulling a shirt over his head. I’m disappointed as I watch his abs disappear beneath it.

“I don’t know.” I shrug “I could eat.”

“Do you want to go get food or order?”

“Do they even deliver up here?” I ask.

“I live in the hills, Quinn. Not the countryside.” He smirks.

“Whatever you buy me, I’ll eat.”

“How about I take you to a little restaurant that has the best desserts. Their food is good too, but the desserts are what they’re known for.” He says.

“That sounds divine.”

“Yeah and you look divine.” His eyes roam over me unapologetically. He hasn’t even touched me *yet* and my body responds as if he has. “Ready?”

“Yes.” I’m ready for whatever he’s willing to do or give to me right now.

He turns around and walks out of the bedroom. *Dammit* I was ready. I follow him through a hallway that leads to the garage. He could drive a different car every day of the month if he wanted too.

Kyrell stops when he gets to a motorcycle that looks like something Batman would ride on. I look at it skeptically when he hands me a helmet.

“Do not tell me we’re taking this crotch rocket of death through these hills?”

He tosses his head back and laughs. “I thought angels liked to fly?”

“This angel isn’t trying to get her wings early.” I say as I take a step back. “You have all these cars and you want us to ride on this?” I point an accusatory finger at the bike.

“Don’t you get tired?”

“Of what?” I ask crossing my arms.

“Of always questioning everything and never really living.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Being the way I am has kept me safe.”

“No,” his gray eyes meet mine. “It’s kept you caged.”

We have a momentary stare down before I toss my hands up in surrender. “Fine,” I say, rolling my eyes. “Let’s go.”

“Damn, you’re stubborn as hell.” He hands me a jacket.

“How many girls have worn this before me?” I ask, surveying it.

“Do you ever do anything without asking a question? So many questions. If you must really know, no one has worn that jacket but me. It’s just an extra one I have so it will be big on you. Now, are you ready to live a little?” he asks.

“I’m not uptight.” I say snatching the jacket out of his hand.

He holds up his hands in mock offense. “I didn’t utter a word.”

I throw the jacket on, zip it up, and slide on the helmet. Kyrell climbs onto the bike with all his gear on and motions for me to get on. He looks sexy if I’m being honest. I cautiously climb on, sitting flush against his back. He grabs my wrists and wraps my arms around him.

“You’ve gotta hold on. I’m also hoping this isn’t the only time you’re wrapped around me tonight.”

I feel my panties dampen, but he doesn't give me a chance to respond as he makes the bike roar to life. I hold onto him tighter as he heads down his driveway. When we're finally on the road, driving through the hills, I have to admit to myself that this is much better on the motorcycle instead of in a car.

It doesn't take long before he pulls off the road into the parking lot of a tiny restaurant. It's whimsical with lush, green vines creeping up the brick walls. I get off the bike first and take in the views from up here. I can see why people spend millions to live in places like this.

"This place is cute." I say shaking out my hair after removing the helmet. "The drive was beautiful too."

"And to think your stubbornness almost didn't allow you to get on the bike." He laughs and grabs my hand to lead me into the restaurant.

An hour later, we've eaten delicious Italian food and they place pieces of tiramisu cheesecake in front of us. Needless to say, I'm happy I said yes to dinner because I would have hated to miss out on this.

"They sell little pieces of heaven here." I say as I take a bite of the cake.

"I knew you'd like it." He says with a smug smile.

"Now what?" I'm almost finish with my cake. "Would it be inappropriate to lick the plate?"

"You can lick whatever you want." He says casually, but I know it means more coming from him. "Do you want to go back to my place or are you ready to go back home?"

I put the last bite into my mouth and set my fork down. "Is this a date? It feels like a date."

"I don't date, Quinn. You know that."

The way he says my name always gives me goosebumps. I lean forward, placing my elbow on the table, and cradle my chin in my hand. "I know... but why is that?"

He leans forward, resting his forearms on the table. "Why date when women willingly give me what I want? I don't see



the point in dating if I'm not ready to commit. It's a waste of time for myself and the other person."

"Have you dated before?"

"Yeah, I had a couple of girlfriends in high school." He looks down at his empty plate. "I dated a girl recently who I thought maybe I could see myself having a long term relationship with. But... she ended up wanting different things." His eyes meet mine. "By different things I mean she fucked Hendrix. So no... dating isn't a priority right now."

I cover my mouth. "I didn't know. Harlow didn't say anything. I didn't realize that girl he was with was..." my voice trails off because I wish I'd never asked. I remember Hendrix, Harlow's ex, showing up to her dad's going away part with a woman. That must've been her.

"Harlow wouldn't have told you. If you ask me questions, Quinn—you're going to get answers whether you like them or not. If you haven't noticed, I'm pretty straightforward." He says with a shrug.

"I know." I cover my face with my hands, embarrassed. "I ask a lot of questions and sometimes I ask the wrong ones." I say, leaning back into my chair.

"You question everything." He says with a smirk. "Is there anything you do without thinking?"

"Um... no. Not really." I admit.

"Do you date?" he asks.

"I've had boyfriends, but most of them were guys my parents found suitable. A few flings here and there, but nothing I'd consider serious. I kind of just want to have fun right now."

"You? Have fun?" he asks sarcastically.

I toss my head back and laugh. "I may have a slight issue with letting loose and going with the flow... following the vibes but... I want to."

"I can help with that." His words are filled with so much promise.

“I know.” My eyes meet his. “Let’s go back to your place and see where the night takes us.”

Kyrell gives me a devilish grin. “It’s about time you get out of that pretty head of yours.”

He pays for our meal, but stops at the counter on the way out. I wander off to look at all the trinkets in their gift shop. This place is perfect.

“Here.” He says. I turn around and he’s holding a bottle of wine out to me. “You seemed to enjoy their wine.”

I did and almost bought myself a bottle until I saw the price tag. “Kyrell, I can’t accept this. That’s a five hundred dollar bottle of wine.”

“I know.” He says. “I just bought it.”

“Ky, I-”

“If you weren’t over analyzing this situation right now, would you take it?”

“Yes.” I say without hesitation.

“Okay, so take it.” He puts the bottle of wine into my hand.

“Thank you.” I say, staring down at it. “This was a nice dinner.”

When we get to his bike, I wonder how we’ll get back to his place without the bottle breaking. It must show on my face because he takes it from my hand, lifts the seat of his bike, and places it in a compartment.

“Relax, Quinn. Remember... we’re seeing where the night takes us.”

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# CHAPTER 11



**W**e sit on a plush fur rug on his living room floor with Netflix playing in the background.

“I’ll be right back.” He says, getting up and heading towards the kitchen. He returns a few seconds later. “I want you to try this.” I look down at the square of white chocolate in his hand. “It’s raspberry white chocolate and yes, it’s an edible.” He says.

I open my mouth for him to feed it to me. It melts as soon as it touches my tongue. It tastes like I’m eating a chocolate dipped raspberry.

“Where did you learn to make chocolate?”

“YouTube and Stella, my housekeeper. What do you think?”

“It’s delicious. You really have a gift for making pot taste good.”

He chuckles. “We learned that smoking isn’t for everyone.”

“I’m never going to live that down, am I?”

“No, it was hilarious.” He says as he laughs at the memory of me almost coughing up a lung.

“Why are you so passionate about weed anyway?”

He lays his head back against the couch and stares up at the ceiling. “Because it helps with my anxiety and depression. It calms me and helps me function on days I feel like I can’t.”

“You have anxiety and depression?” I ask incredulously. Kyrell strikes me as everything but anxious and depressed. “You’re a walking chill pill.”

He chuckles. “That’s what you see, but you’re not in my head.”

“I’d like to see more.” I say as I look at him. *Rational Quinn has gladly left the building* .

He picked up on the tone of my words as he leans towards me.

“What do you want, Quinn?” he asks, inches from my face. His voice is low and almost a whisper. “Tell me, when was the last time someone properly fucked you?” he tilts his head to the side and his lips brush against my neck.

I know Kyrell isn’t going to give me what I want without hearing it from my lips because he knows how hard I’ve been trying to hold out. He’s been waiting for this—the moment I let go.

Suddenly, giving in seems worth it if it means he’ll be all over me and filling me up. My lips crash into his and he pulls me towards him. I straddle him. I moan when the bulge in his pants presses against my sensitive bundle of nerves. I tug at his shirt and peel it off him. Gripping my ass, he grinds against me, eliciting another moan. He grabs a fistful of my curls, guiding my lips back to his. My body has been *craving* his touch.

He flips us over so he’s on top, and trails kisses down my neck. He unties my blouse, appreciating the view of my now exposed breasts and takes one in his mouth. I inhale sharply as he swirls his tongue around my nipple. He unbuttons my jeans as he continues to suck on my breast. Once they’re unfastened, I lift my hips as he removes my jeans and panties. He positions himself between my thighs. My pussy is dripping with anticipation.

“What do you want, Quinn?” he asks while looking up at me with his mouth hovering over my pussy.

“Kyrell, are you ser—” His warm tongue runs along my clit causing me to moan and swallow my question.

“Tell me what you want.” He says. I let out a growl of frustration because I know he’s doing this on purpose. He

wants to hear me say it and I find myself insanely turned on by this.

“Why does—” My question gets lost when he licks my center again.

“You taste just how I imagined. Sweet. Now, tell me what you want.” He demands.

I gladly give in. “I want you to eat my pussy.”

His mouth devours me seconds later and his tongue is moving in ways I didn't think were humanly possible. I've wanted him to own me since the moment I saw him at the engagement party. I squeeze my eyes shut. The level of pleasure I'm experiencing right now is unreal. He spreads my thighs further apart with his hands as I grind my pussy against his face. I grab his head to keep him there because if he stops to ask me another fucking question, I may lose my shit. I'm panting, moaning, and probably speaking in tongues with the way he is feasting on me right now.

I feel myself getting ready to cum for him. It starts in my core and spreads through my body. My breathing becomes rapid and shallow.

I've never felt this euphoric when— “I'm cumming... ahhh, I'm cumming.” I moan.

Kyrell sucks harder on my clit, causing me to fall into oblivion.

I come undone for him.

Gripping the plush rug beneath us, I arch my back, letting out a mix of a moan and a cry. I always thought this type of orgasm was a myth.

Yet, here I am, having my soul taken from me.

He slowly stops sucking on my clit as my orgasm ripples through me. He gets up, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, and takes off his pants and boxers. His eyes are on me the entire time, but my eyes are appreciating the thickness and length of his dick. I really hope he can fit in tight spaces. If not, I'll make it fit if I have to. His hand is stroking up and

down the length of his shaft, but I'd rather be wrapped around him instead.

“I want you to fuck me, Ky.”

He grabs my hips, pulling me towards him and then he flips me over so my ass is in the air. His hands run along my back before smacking my ass. I moan with anticipation as I hear the tearing of foil and a few seconds later he runs the tip of his dick along my entrance. My breath hitches as he slowly pushes into me.

He moans and it's the sexiest thing I've ever heard. He thrusts into me the rest of the way, making my pussy contract around him. I can't help the loud moans that spill from my lips as he rubs my clit with his fingers and pumps into me. I feel myself nearing the edge of another climax.

“I'm gonna cum again.” I moan.

His hand wraps around my throat, pulling me back flush against his chest. I can feel his breath along the side of my neck as he commands, “Cum all over this dick like you've been wanting too.”

I let out an unrestrained cry of pleasure. I didn't even know I could be this loud during sex, but the intensity of this orgasm is almost more than I can handle. Ecstasy borderline insanity. Kyrell continues to pound into me and I welcome him. He applies a little more pressure to my throat as he thrusts into me. The sounds of our connecting skin and panting fill the space between us.

“I'm about to cum.” He chokes out, thrusting into me a few more times before he grunts and shudders as he reaches his climax.

Kyrell continues to pump into me until he's completely satisfied. Then he slowly pulls out of me. I collapse on the floor unsure if I'll be able to move. I don't remember the last time I felt this good. Even if I could, Kyrell just burned all those memories to cinders with his touch.

I watch him remove his condom and throw it in the trash. He lies down next to me with his eyes closed and a hint of a

smile on his lips. Sweat glistens on his body and somehow he is still hard! I'm wondering why I didn't give in sooner.

I wrap my hand around his length. His eyes snap open as he watches me stroke him.

"Again?" I ask, staring up at him through my lashes as I lick his cum off him while he moans. I would do anything to hear that sound from him.

He responds by pulling me on top of him and claiming my mouth.

*Kyrell*

I pin Quinn against my shower wall, with her legs wrapped around me, as I thrust into her. She's supposed to be getting ready for work or some bullshit like that, but this is more fun. Listening to her moan my name and watching her cum for me is almost as gratifying as being inside her. She bites my shoulder, causing me to growl and thrust into her harder as her nails dig into my back. I haven't gone round for round with someone in a while. Usually I have them out the door as soon as we finish or before they can utter "good morning". I've lost count of how many times I've made Quinn cum since we got back from dinner last night.

Her eyes snap open, as though she's shocked she's about to cum for me—*again* .

"Let go, Quinn." I say.

And she does. Her cries of pleasure as she climaxes make me thrust fervently into her. It doesn't take me long to find my release. I hold onto her as my orgasm rushes through me. "Goddamn!" My whole body shakes and shudders until every drop of my nut is inside her.

I still, holding her against the wall and rest my head against her shoulder while trying to catch my breath.

Quinn doesn't unwrap her legs from around me and I don't let her go.

"I have to get ready for work. And I'm not sure I have any more climaxes you can fuck out of me."

"I bet you do," I chuckle.

She kisses me. My dick responds, and she stops. "No," she laughs. "I don't have time for this." She unwraps her legs from around me. I reluctantly pull out of her.

"Do you even have enough condoms to keep up with yourself?" she asks as she lathers herself with soap.

"You'd be surprised." I wink. "You held out longer than I thought you would by the way."

"It was out of sheer stubbornness. I wanted to prove you wrong." She admits.

"How did that work out for you?"

"I still ended up underneath you. So I'd say, not well. Although it worked out in my favor and I'm extremely satisfied with the outcome." She gives me a smug look.

"I thoroughly enjoyed the outcome as well."

"Do you have a toothbrush I can use?" I'm slightly distracted by the bubbles and water running down her body.

"I have mine and no you can't use it." I say bluntly.

"Seriously, Ky?" She gives me an annoyed look.

"It's gross." We're in a stare down now.

She rolls her eyes. "I was just licking the cum off your dick and yet you think me using your toothbrush is gross?"

"That fucking mouth of yours. So pretty and dirty at the same damn time. And the answer is still no."

She splashes water in my face as she throws up her hands in annoyance. "So what am I supposed to do? Just go to work without brushing my teeth after slobbering all over you all night long?"

I crack up. "I have mouthwash."



“Mouthwash?” She sucks her teeth, gets out of the shower, grabs my toothbrush, and then she fucking licks it. I almost gag as I see a string of spit running from her tongue to my toothbrush

“There!” She says as she places it back in the holder. “Now you can’t brush your teeth either.”

I gape at her, uncertain if I should laugh or throw her over my shoulder, spank her, and then fuck her again. “Did you really just lick my toothbrush?”

She straightens up and crosses her arms defiantly. “I did.”

It’s hard to take her seriously when she’s naked, but I can tell she’s determined to stand her ground. Yeah, good luck with that. I get out of the shower, grab her, and flip her over my shoulder as I smack her ass. She lets out something between a yelp and a moan.

“At least spank me like you mean it.” She taunts.

“I will.” I say as I take her to my room. “When I’m inside you.” I toss her onto the bed.

“You’re going to make me late for work.” She says, but makes no move to get up.

“You should’ve thought of that before you licked my toothbrush. Feel free to leave and go to work.” I say with a shrug. Her eyes are fixated on my hands as I roll on a condom. “Or,” I look at her, “we can see how quick we can be.”

Quinn only takes her eyes off my dick to pull me on top of her as she wraps her legs around me again.



SHE ENDS up using my toothbrush anyway. May as well now that she’s licked it and I’ve licked every inch of her.

I watch her pull her curls into a ponytail. “You’re gorgeous.” I say.

Quinn is the *crème de la crème*. Not because of how she looks, that's just a plus. She is also intelligent. There is nothing better than beauty and brains.

She stops with her hands in mid-air and her face lights up. "Thanks. You look handsome naked." And she goes back to fixing her hair as if she just said the most normal thing in the world.

I snort with laughter. "So you're saying I'm only handsome when I'm naked?"

"Oh, you're strikingly handsome but—" her eyes roam over me. "—you're just handsome-er without clothes on."

"Oh got it, got it." I nod my head and the corners of my mouth turn up. "Are you wearing that to work?" I ask as she puts her clothes on from last night.

"No, I have an extra change of clothes at the office. Not like you'd share your clothes with me anyway, toothbrush overlord."

"I don't share toothbrushes. It's nasty."

"Oh, but you'll eat my pussy like it's your last meal?" she quips.

"That's... different." I'm not sure how it's different, it just is.

"Right, well I've gotta head out since you live in fucking Timbuktu and I have to fight the L.A. traffic."

"I'll walk you out." It was actually nice to have her around this morning. I grab her wine from the kitchen and hand it to her.

"What are you doing tonight?" she asks.

"Uh, I don't know. I don't have everything planned out like you do."

"Do you want to hang out again?"

"Sure," I shrug my shoulders. I'd probably come home and do nothing anyway. The opportunity to go out is always there,

but I've enjoyed my alone time lately. I don't mind Quinn being around though.

She stops in front of the door, stands on her tip toes and kisses me. "I'd love too. I'll text you later."

"Quinn..." I touch her arm and she stops walking out the door. She turns around and looks at me. "You... You know this doesn't mean we're together... right? I just don't want there to be any confusion." After the words are out of my mouth, I wonder if I said it for her or me.

"Get out of your head, Ky. You sound like me." She says with a grin.

I shove my hands in my pockets. "It's just that I didn't--"

"I'm a grown woman. I knew what this was before we hooked up... multiple times last night. I'm aware you don't want a relationship and I don't expect one from you either. I'm fine with being friends who occasionally indulge in pleasure with one another."

I've enjoyed every minute with her, but I have too much going on right now to be worried about a relationship. I can barely sort through my emotions, let alone dealing with another person's.

Stella opens the door and stops abruptly, staring between Quinn and I. "Stella, this is Quinn. Quinn, this is Stella my housekeeper, who is like a mother to me."

Stella gives me a look that lets me know she's going to interrogate me as soon as Quinn is out the door.

"Pleasure to meet you." Quinn extends her hand and Stella takes it. "Ky has spoken so highly of you. I've gotta get to work. Have a beautiful day, Stella." She turns her attention to me. "I'll see you later." She kisses me again, knowing full well Stella is eating this up, and then slips out the door.

"What did I tell you?" Stella asks as she heads to the kitchen.

"I don't know what you're talking about." I say as I watch Quinn get in her car.

“I told you one of those girls was going to stick to you.” She says excitedly. “And she is beautiful, polite... and how did she get stuck with you?”

My eyes snap to hers. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“She’s not your usual... type.” There’s a disapproving undertone in the way she says type. I usually bring women home for their looks not their conversation.

“It’s not what you think, Stella.” I sit down on a barstool and watch her flit around my kitchen like she does every morning when she gets here. It’s one of my favorite parts of the day—talking to Stella even if she is pressing me for information.

“It’s obvious she’s different.” I watch her pull out ingredients to make crepes.

“Well yeah, because we know each other.”

Stella latches onto that nugget of information. “So there’s history there?” she asks with raised eyebrows.

“Not that kind of history.” I scrub my hands over my face. “She’s best friends with Harlow. Quinn and I are just hanging out.”

“Hanging out all night?”

“Stella... I’m not in a space to be with someone else right now. Plus, we all know how the situation with Aubrey turned out.”

“Aubrey didn’t deserve you. You know that.”

Stella never liked Aubrey. She told me she had a suspicious feeling about her after they met. I shrugged off her comments at first, until I discovered what she was doing behind my back. Even though I felt something for Aubrey I still kept her at a distance. Looking back now, I realize I could tolerate her just a little more than the rest, but there really wasn’t anything special about her. What truly bothered me about the whole situation is that she lied and slept with Hendrix. Not that it would have felt better if it were some guy

I didn't know, but she knew how close I was to Hendrix and she still slept with him. That hurt more than her betrayal. Losing someone who I considered a brother.

“Anyway, enough about me. How are you?”

“Nice deflecting.” She says as she makes the perfect crepe. Removing it from the pan, she adds sliced strawberries, a handful of blueberries, sprinkles some powdered sugar on top, and then drizzles chocolate over it all.

My stomach rumbles as I watch her put it together. “That looks delicious.”

“You never told me how things went with your dad.” She hands me the plate.

“It was fine, but something I really don't want to talk about right now.” I take a bite of the crepe. “But I will say that I'm looking forward to seeing him again.”

“Good.” She smiles. “We don't always have to let our walls down completely. Sometimes all we need is a little light to shine through the cracks to make a difference.”

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# CHAPTER 12



“Can you give me that therapist’s information again?” I ask Cash after our morning workout session.

“Yeah, how are things going for you anyway?”

“They’re fine, but thought it would be good to talk to someone.” Harlow is really the only person I talk to about personal stuff and I can’t expect her to be there all the time. May as well talk to a professional and see how fucked up I am.

“I’m proud of you, man.”

I give him a questioning look. “Why? I haven’t done anything.”

“You’re trying to better yourself. That’s major.”

“The keyword is *trying*, Cash. There’s still plenty of time for me to fuck all of this up.”

He shakes his head with a smirk. “Exactly, you’re trying. That’s what matters.”

A few seconds later, my phone vibrates with a text from him that has the contact info. “Thank you. I’ll see you soon.” I turn to leave, but stop and face him. “Thanks for saying you’re proud of me.” He smiles and gets ready to say something, but I slip out the door before he can get too sentimental.

Cash is a role model to me. And to hear him say he’s proud of me is meaningful.

Once I’m in my car, I look at the name of the therapist, Dr. Amani Jones. I stare at the name and number for a few minutes, contemplating whether or not I should call now. I glance at the clock. It’s barely going to be 9:00. If I call now that means they may not answer and I’ll be able to leave a

voicemail. I'm still not sure how to feel about all this. I press the call button before I lose my nerve.

It rings a few times before a female voice answers. "Hello, this is Dr. Jones."

*Shit*, she picked up. I clear my throat. "Hi, I'm looking for a therapist... my friend gave me your info."

"You've called the right person," she says warmly. "What's your name?"

"Kyrell. Kyrell Knight." My nerves are causing me not to be as calm and collected as I usually am.

"Hi Kyrell, I'm Dr. Amani Jones. Did you want to set up an appointment?"

Do I? Even though I'm considering saying no I still say, "Yes. Yeah, sure. That sounds great."

She goes silent for a few seconds. "I have some time this afternoon. If you want to get in as soon as possible. If not then I—"

"I'll take it." I blurt out. Clearly I can't keep my fucking mouth shut. I'll have this whole spilling my guts thing on lock in no time.

"Great, I'll send you some paperwork to fill out ahead of time. What's your e-mail?"

I give her my e-mail. We talk for a few more minutes before hanging up.

I let out a long exhale. Fuck it, what is there to lose?



I SIT IN MY CAR, trying to calm my nerves by smoking a joint while I stare at the building the therapist's office is in. I almost cancelled multiple times throughout the day. I worked the front counter at the dispensary to keep myself from doing that. It worked until my phone chimed to remind me of my

appointment then the anxiety I had ignored all day, blanketed me.

I take a long pull of my joint, hold it in until I can't anymore, and exhale with a cough. I chuckle because it reminds me of Quinn. Memories from last night flash across my mind like a movie reel. I shake the thoughts out of my head because I'd prefer not to walk into my first therapy session with a bulge in my pants. Glancing at the time, I decide to go in. I can hear Cash telling me that being on time is late.

As I enter the office, I'm not sure what to do because there's no receptionist and it's eerily quiet. The only sound is the water from the fish tank in the corner. I take a seat, pull my phone out of my pocket and check the messages I've been ignoring all day.

**Quinn: Traffic is terrible. I'm gonna be late. I blame your dick if I get fired. I hope you like roommates.**

I laugh at her text.

**Kyrell: I told you to leave if you wanted.**

**Quinn: Easier said than done. It had been over a year. Had to make up for lost time.**

*A year ?* And here I was thinking something was wrong with me because I hadn't had sex with anyone for a couple of weeks. I begin to type out a text to ask her how she survived a whole year when the door opens and two women step into the waiting room.

"I'll see you next week," the taller of the two women says to the other. I'm assuming she's Dr. Jones. She looks slightly older than the other one and is wearing fancier clothes.

The other woman smiles in my direction as she walks out and says "Hi" to me. She's pretty, but I'm not about to get involved with someone from my therapist's office. Sounds like the start to a dumpster fire of a relationship. Once the woman is out the door, Dr. Jones turns her attention to me.

"Kyrell, welcome." She holds her office door open for me.



“Hi.” I stand and shake her hand before I step through the door. Her office has various plants, shelves lined with books, and plush seating.

“Make yourself comfortable.” She says as I sink into the couch. “Would you like water, coffee, or even a hot cup of tea?”

“Water, please.” My mouth suddenly feels dry.

“Okay, I’ll be right back.” She says with a smile.

I release the breath I had been holding in once she’s out of the room. My knee starts bouncing and I’m second guessing this whole path of “trying to better myself” that Cash put me onto. I stand and start pacing the room. How am I going to tell someone I don’t know about shit I don’t even want to remember?

Dr. Jones re-enters the room. I sink back into the couch.

“If you feel more comfortable standing, you don’t have to sit.” She sets the glass of water down on the table in front of me.

I grab it and gulp it down. “I’m fine sitting.” I breathe out once I finish the entire glass of water. “Thank you.” I say as I tip the glass towards her and set it back down on the table.

“Of course,” she says settling into a chair across from me. “How are you?”

Her question is so simple it catches me off guard. It brings me back to the present moment because I have to stop and think of how I am instead of focusing on my nerves.

“I’m... nervous.” I admit.

“First time in therapy?”

“Yeah, I wasn’t even sure I was going to make it.” I ease back into the couch.

“Why?”

“Because... I’m not really sure if I want to be here or not. My friend recommended you and I’ve been dealing with some stuff lately that I can’t seem to get a handle on.” I let out a

sigh. “So I thought I’d give therapy a shot and see if I can work on being less fucked up.”

“What stuff are you dealing with lately?”

I feel clammy as my heart rate quickens. “Can I lie down?”

“If that’s how you feel most comfortable.”

I lie down and prop my feet up on the armrest. I try breathing like Harlow taught me and it helps a little bit. “How am I supposed to talk to you?” I ask after a few breaths. “I don’t know you. How can I trust you?”

“We don’t have to talk today.”

I turn my head to face her and give her a quizzical look. “But that’s what I’m here for.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean we have to talk. I’m here to support you however you need. Even if that means sitting here in silence. Although I must admit, it does work better if you talk to me.”

“Right,” I chuckle and feel myself relax. “I guess I don’t know where to start.”

“What brought you here today?”

I cover my eyes with my forearm and don’t speak for what feels like an eternity.

“Elias is dying.” I say without looking at her. I haven’t admitted that to anyone other than Harlow. I told her and then kept it locked away ever since that lunch at his house a few weeks ago.

“Who’s Elias?”

I turn my head to look at her. “My dad.” She nods but doesn’t say anything. I stare at the leaves of one of the plants she has in her office as it sways in the air from the vent in the ceiling. “He has pancreatic cancer. His death is inevitable, even with treatments. Really a matter of when. We’ve never had a relationship... until now. It’s been almost a month since he and Yvette told me. But... now that he’s fucking dying he wants a relationship.”

“Who’s Yvette?”

I let out a long, low sigh. “My egg donor.”

She nods. “Are you mad?”

“I’m angry.” I admit. “I’ve always been angry. It’s an emotion I know well but also one I keep buried well, too. I’m angry with him. Yvette. Angry with my fucking life. I have everything yet nothing at the same time. But... he’s dying... and if there’s even a sliver of a chance I can get to know him... I’m pushing my anger aside and taking it.”

“How do you express your anger?”

“I don’t. Well... I do in a way. I started attending a boxing gym. It helps, but it doesn’t help with the rest of my issues.”

Dr. Jones doesn’t say anything for a moment. She waits for me to continue and when I don’t she speaks. “You can want a relationship and be angry with him. Those two feelings can co-exist. One does not need to erase the other.”

I sit upright and look at her, intrigued. “How?”

“Allow yourself to feel.” She says it as if it’s the easiest thing in the world.

“Right,” I scoff. “And be a mess?”

“Are you any more put together while holding it in?” She tilts her head to the side with the hint of a smile on her lips.

I lean back against the couch. “I guess not.”

“Do you know why you’re angry with him?”

“Yeah, he was never there. He didn’t leave me. It was worse. He was there without ever being there. You know most kids parents get a divorce or something tragic happens. I just somehow got stuck with parents who never gave a shit.”

“Was Yvette there?”

“Unfortunately.” I say bitterly. “On the rare occasion when he was home things were better even if he wasn’t mentally present. But when he was gone... my life was hell. Bad shit happened.” I get up and start pacing. She watches me walk

back and forth multiple times but doesn't utter a word. "I don't know if I can do this." I stop in my tracks.

"We don't have to talk about the bad shit if you're not ready."

I pique an eyebrow. "You can curse?"

"Yes," she chuckles. "Don't let the pantsuit fool you."

I laugh and take a seat back on the couch. "That was a dumb question."

"There are no dumb questions."

I let out a sigh. "I'm really not ready to go there today. I've known my best friend for fourteen years and I barely told her what happened. The only reason I told her is because I thought I was dying, but I was just having a panic attack."

"Have you had panic attacks in the past?"

"When I was a kid, but I didn't know what they were. As an adult I hadn't had one until last week. I've always had anxiety and depression for as long as I can remember."

"How do you cope?"

"I smoke weed, box at the gym, keep myself busy with work and I'm rarely alone. But the past few weeks I've wanted to be alone."

"Do you isolate when you're struggling to cope?"

"Yeah... I don't want to splash my shit on anyone and my tolerance for others becomes low."

She takes a moment to find her words. "Alone time is necessary to recharge, but isolation when you're struggling to cope isn't necessarily a good thing. I know you're aware of that. I'm not saying you have to throw a huge party, but staying close to those who you know you can trust during times of struggle is helpful."

"I don't want to be a burden to anyone."

"Kyrell, those that care about you will not view you as a burden."

“That’s what I’ve felt like for most of my life.” I admit.

“Rightfully so, if you’re dealing with parents who are not present and have no other familial connections, it is understandable that you feel that way.”

For twenty-four years I’ve felt like a burden and I’ve done everything I could to never have to rely on others. Whether it be financially or emotionally. I don’t want to give anyone the opportunity to make me feel unwanted again.

“Yeah...” is all I say as I contemplate her word.

“Our time is almost up. How are you going to spend the rest of the day?”

I think of Quinn. “I’m going to hang out with a friend.”

Dr. Jones smiles. “Good, and remember healing isn’t linear. It takes time and it doesn’t happen overnight. I’m glad you came and that we met today.”

I set up my next appointment and commit to seeing her weekly. Even though I didn’t tell her all the details of my life, I still feel better than I did when I first walked in there.

For the first time in a while, I feel like a weight has been lifted off my chest.

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# CHAPTER 13

*Kyrell*

Instead of heading home, I drive to Quinn's place. She never said what she wanted to do tonight, but hopefully it involves us being naked.

As I approach her apartment door, I hear music blasting and her singing out of tune. I stand there listening and laughing hysterically because she is fucking terrible. It's actually kind of cute how determined she is to hit those Mariah Carey notes. Such an ugly sound coming from a beautiful body.

I knock, and hear her say, "What the fuck?" loudly before she cuts the music. A few seconds later she opens the door.

"Oh," she says surprised, "hey Ky, sorry. I must've missed your text."

I lean against the doorframe. "I didn't text."

"You just stopped by... to see me?" she asks pointing at her chest.

"Yeah, why? Are you busy?"

"No, it's just that you said—" she brushes her curls out of her face "—I'm not busy. I was cleaning and singing along terribly to Mariah Carey. Come on in."

"So you know you suck?" I ask stepping through her doorway.

She glowers at me. "I know I can't sing. Fuck you very much."

"What?" I give her a quizzical look.

"You know," she says, "like the antonym of thank you. Fuck you very much, respectfully." She bows her head.

“I’m going to have to use that one.” I chuckle.

“Why are you here anyway? Wasn’t I supposed to go to your house?”

“Thought I’d save you the trip to Timbuktu.” I shrug.

“Hang on,” her eyes light up. “I have something for you.”

“Me?” She disappears into her room and comes back out with a wrapped gift. “You got me a gift?”

“Open it.” She says with excitement as she hops up onto the kitchen counter.

I tear through the paper and laugh when I see it’s a pack of toothbrushes. “Seriously Quinn?”

“As serious as you are about toothbrush usage.” She says through laughter. “That way, you never run out. That’s over a year’s supply.”

“I can see that,” I grin. “Thank you for this very odd but thoughtful gift.”

“You’re welcome,” she says with a shrug of her shoulders and a smile. “Are you hungry? I was about to make some chicken, rice, and vegetables”

Setting the toothbrushes aside, I rest my hands on her hips and stand between her legs.

“I’m hungry for you.”

She has a white tank top on with no bra. I kiss her neck and she inhales sharply. Her lips meet mine and our tongues become reacquainted with one another. I pull her to the edge of the counter. I break our kiss to put her legs over my shoulders and pull her cotton shorts to the side. No panties on either. She looks at me with anticipation in her eyes and then I bury my face between her legs.

Quinn’s eyes close as she lies back on the counter, opening up for me. I start off slow because I enjoy hearing her moans. They’ve been on repeat in my head all day. She puts her hand on my head and grips my curls. Her moans become louder as

she nears her climax. That's all I want. Her to cum for me. With a few more flicks of my tongue, she does.

She calls out my name and wraps her legs tighter around my head, locking me in place. I'm sure I could die happy right now. I keep licking her pussy until all of her release is on my tongue. She slowly relaxes as her orgasm shivers through her. I stand upright and she looks at me with a languid smile on her face.

"I don't have any condoms here." She says, adjusting her shorts as she sits up.

"Who said I wanted to fuck you?" I ask, helping her off the counter. "I just wanted to make you cum for me."

Quinn looks up at me like she wants to attack me. "We're gonna need to go get some. But we'll eat first cause I'm starving."

"I'm not gonna say no to that."

She turns on her music and sings along as if I'm not there. I find Quinn's confidence sexy.

"Do you want me to help?" I ask her as she pulls out ingredients.

"I got it," she smiles as she dances around her kitchen.

I sit on a barstool and watch her cook. I'm not sure why I came straight to her place after therapy. I mean, sure I wanted to hear her moan again, but it's not the only reason. I've enjoyed getting to know her. Sex is just a plus.

"How was your day?" she asks.

"Good... trained with Cash, worked at the dispensary and went to therapy... for the first time ever." The last bit spills out of my mouth before I can stop myself.

"Oh God, I don't know what I would do without my therapist. Did you like it?" she asks.

"You go to therapy?"

Quinn is so well put together... I can't see her having any issues. I mean I know her parents are difficult, but I didn't



think she would be in therapy over it. Unless there is other stuff going on in her life she hasn't told me. It's not like I tell her everything and I don't expect her to tell me everything either.

"Yeah," she says as she chops up some vegetables. "I've been going for about a year now. After the whole thing went on with my parents banishing me... I know I'm being dramatic." She laughs. "But it was hard. I felt isolated. I was in a new city, new school, new friends—everything changed. One of my roommates suggested therapy and it helped me not give up on myself. You know I'm stubborn and determined," she says with a smirk. "But that was a bit much for me. I mean yeah, my parents weren't the most supportive, but at least I knew they were there for me... until they weren't."

"Do you talk to them now?"

"Yeah, we talk it just feels strained, ya know? Usually ends up in a fight." She sighs. "I still love them, though." I hear the warmth and longing in her voice.

"I'm sure they'll come around one day." I reassure her. "Don't you have a brother too?"

"Yeah," her eyes light up. "Jackson. He and I have a pretty good relationship. I lucked out in the big brother department. Hopefully, he and his boyfriend come out to L.A. soon and you can meet them."

"I'd like that."

"What do you want to drink?" she asks, setting a plate of food down in front of me.

"I'll have whatever you're having."

"Think I'm going to have some Sauvignon Blanc," she says as she grabs a bottle from her wine rack.

"You're a wine lover, huh?" I ask as she hands me a glass.

"Honestly," she says with a smirk. "It just makes me feel fancy. I'm not a connoisseur by any means, but I can tell a good wine from a shitty one."

"Fancy," I chuckle. "So it's for aesthetic purposes?"

Her eyes look up to the ceiling as she thinks. “Yeah, pretty much.” She says as her eyes meet mine. “Truth be told I can’t have more than a glass. But, look at my cute little wine rack! How sophisticated do I look holding a wine glass?” she asks straightening up and giving me a smile.

“You are very classy, Quinn.” I say with a smirk. “With or without the wine.”

“Thank you.” She says as she sits next to me with her plate of food. “I’m going to be twenty-five soon and still feel like I’m a teen.”

“I think everyone feels like that. I don’t think it’s a bad thing, though. Means we’ll always feel young.”

We fall into easy conversation. She tells me more about her family. I learn her dad is a prominent judge in Houston and her mom does a lot of charity work. Quinn definitely grew up in the upper crust of society’s elite in Texas. For her to break away from all that to do what she wants is brave in my eyes. I know that those high society circles can be brutal. It also explains why she is so particular. She was groomed for a life of excellence.

“What are the rules for... this?” she motions between us.

I scrunch up my face. “Rules? Are there rules to sex?”

“No, but I think it’s good to have clear boundaries in place so we don’t cross them.” I think she’s joking until I see the look on her face.

“Quinn... it’s sex. The whole reason we’re fucking is to break and cross boundaries... especially you.” I smirk and go back to eating my food.

“Excuse me?” she scoffs.

“You’re excused.” I say, staring at her over the rim of my glass before taking a drink. She growls with frustration. I give her an annoying smirk. “It’s sex, Quinn. We don’t need rules. We’re two consenting adults who have phenomenal sex. I wear a condom, you’re on birth control... what more is there to discuss?”

She takes a deep breath. “I just want to know; can I stay at your house? Are we telling people about this? What if we catch feelings?” All these questions leave her lips at rapid fire.

“It truly is a gift how you make everything so significant.” I smirk.

To be honest, it’s rare that I see the same woman twice, intentionally. I’m a one and done type, but for Quinn I’ll make an exception to have her wrapped around me in as many positions as possible.

She slumps in her chair, letting out an exasperated sigh. “You’re so chill. It’s almost infuriating.”

I chuckle. “Not really. That’s just your perception of me. It makes you uncomfortable to not have rules or a plan. So let’s agree on this, okay?” She sits up, looking at me. “Let’s agree to indulge in pleasure and leave all inhibitions at the door. Fuck rules. Fuck plans. If either of us wants something different, then we say it and that’s it. We don’t need a contract, Quinn. This isn’t fifty shades.”

She tosses her head back, laughing. “Okay, alright, fine. Fuck rules. Fuck plans. But what if—”

I kiss her. It’s the only way I know to stop this spiral of questions. When I pull away, she pulls me back towards her, and then pulls away again.

“We need to go to the store so you can give me some Vitamin D.” She says as she puts our dishes in the sink.

“Vitamin D? That’s what we’re calling my junk now?” I ask.

“I’m sure I’ll think of other names. But that’ll do for now.” She kisses my cheek as she heads to her room to change.

I’m not used to all this affection. Not that it isn’t offered to me. I prefer to get what I want and leave. But with Quinn, she feels so good, that I want her to give me all of it.



“I DIDN’T REALIZE we were going on a legit shopping trip.” I say as I pull into the Target parking lot.

“Where else would we have gone, Ky?”

“I don’t know,” I say sarcastically. “Maybe one of the twenty corner stores we passed to get to Target.”

“Yeah, but that’s boring.” She says with a shrug as she gets out of my car.

“Not really if it means I’ll be inside you quicker.”

“Patience. The night will end with you inside me.” She loops her arm through mine. “Now, let’s go in here and buy shit we don’t need.”

Quinn does indeed grab a ton of shit she doesn’t need. Finally, an eternity later, we’re in the aisle we should have been in all along.

“Oooh, they have some called ecstasy.” Quinn says with excitement.

“It really shows you haven’t gotten any in a year.” I say trying to hold back a smile.

“Excuse you,” she sucks her teeth. “Sorry we don’t all just pass our shit around like candy.”

“I’m not as bad as you make me sound.”

“Uh huh,” she says distractedly as she goes back to looking at the boxes of baby stoppers.

“Kyrell?” A familiar voice says behind us.

Quinn doesn’t seem to notice. “Ok, bareskin sounds good. I wish they had bigger packs though because the way we go at it—” She stops abruptly when she realizes a woman is standing near us. Quinn’s eyes glance between me and the unwelcome woman.

“Sorry,” the woman says looking down at the basket in her hands. “I thought I saw you walking through earlier but—you look good. You cut your hair.”

I stare at her as if I don't know her. As far as I'm concerned, Aubrey is dead to me. The audacity she has to talk to me now as if nothing happened makes the anger I hide so well boil to the surface. I feel Quinn intertwine her fingers with mine, grounding me.

"Hi, I'm Quinn. Kyrell's girlfriend and you are?" she says in a sickly sweet tone.

I give Quinn a confused look, but I don't remove my hand from hers.

"Oh... um, I'm Aubrey. Kyrell and I used to—"

"Be nothing." I interject.

"You know, we'd really love to chat, but we have plans." Quinn says, as she waves the box of condoms in front of Aubrey's face.

I get an overwhelming urge to kiss Quinn. She starts to say something else, but I grab her catching her off guard and place my lips on hers. At first she isn't sure what to do, but then her body melts into mine. She wraps her arms around my neck and everything fades away. My fingers thread through her curls as the feel of her lips against mine intoxicates me. The kiss is both alluring and alarming as I feel myself getting lost in her. Something shifts inside of me and Quinn slowly pulls away at the sound of someone clearing their throat. When her lips leave mine, she takes a piece of me with her.

"Excuse me." An older lady says haughtily as she pushes her cart past us.

"I—uhm, we—" Quinn stumbles over her words.

I wrap my arm around Quinn's neck, who is still giving me a dreamy look, and turn my attention to Aubrey who is gaping at us with tears in her eyes.

"What she said—we have plans." I say to her.

"I'm sorry, Kyrell." She whispers. "That's all I wanted to say." She quickly walks away.

I thought I'd feel something if I saw her again, but I don't feel anything. It's hard to feel anything else when I'm in the

gravity of Quinn.

“So, those condoms and your cart full of random ass shit. Let’s go, Angel.”

“Right, yeah... bareskin.” Quinn nods as she holds onto my arm and follows me to the register.

As chatty as Quinn is, she doesn’t say much while we wait in line. She doesn’t even notice that I pay for her \$200 worth of crap. Not that it matters to me, but I thought she’d at least talk shit to me about it, but she seems lost in her thoughts. Maybe I shouldn’t have kissed her, but how could I not? I can’t really explain what came over me. I’m sure she felt the same shift that I did.

I put everything into the backseat of my car while Quinn gets in the front seat. I can’t tell whether she’s mad or trying to make sense of what just happened. I get in and look at her, but she’s looking straight ahead. Fuck.

She finally speaks when we’re on the road back to her house. “Can we go to the lookout? I wanna see the sunset.”

“Sure... if you want to.” I want to ask her if she’s okay, but she still won’t look at me.

We ride for the ten minute drive to the lookout in silence. When we arrive, the sun is barely setting. I put my car in park and turn to face her.

“Quinn, I’m—”

Before I can blink, Quinn lunges at me. Straddling me as her lips crash into mine. She kisses me with such intensity and fervor that our teeth almost clash together. I nip at her bottom lip, eliciting a throaty moan from her. Her hands grip my shoulders as she grinds against me.

“I thought you were mad at me.” I mutter against her lips.

“Mad? No.” She shakes her head. “I’m annoyed. You had no business kissing me like that.”

“I wanted to.” I say without regret, pulling her closer to me. “And I’m going to do it again.”

“And this is why we’re having car sex.”

I pull her shirt over her head, cupping her breast while I trail heated kisses down her neck. I see the goosebumps appear on her skin. Her fingers eagerly pull at my belt. I fumble with my free hand to find the box of condoms in the backseat. If trips to Target always end like this, I’m game. She lifts her hips enough to slip her shorts down her thighs before tossing them aside.

Quinn’s fingernails dig into my shoulder, steadying herself as she grasps my dick, guiding it into her slick entrance. She slowly, almost torturously, lowers herself onto me. Her lips are slightly parted, eyes shut, as she tosses her head back in revelry. The remnants of the setting sun shine through the windshield, causing Quinn’s hair to look like it’s glowing. She’s no angel, but she sure fucking looks like one with the final rays of daylight glistening off her skin.

I run my fingertips down her throat, over her breasts, tracing the curves of her body until they reach her clit. As soon as I touch her she responds with a buck of her hips, burying me in her to the hilt. I grunt, gripping her hip, as she interlaces her fingers behind my neck and starts riding me. I keep the pressure on her center.

Shimmering droplets of sweat appear on her skin as she picks up the pace. I run my tongue along her collarbone, tasting her. Her moans grow louder as she bounces on top of me. I’m meeting her thrust for thrust.

She says the three words I crave to hear from her lips, “I’m cumming, Ky.”

I grip her hair, making her eyes meet mine as her release splashes onto me. I thrust into her, chasing my own release. I bury myself deep in her with each pump. My heart is pounding and my body is tingling as the nut I’ve been chasing builds in my core.

“Fuck.” I grunt, gasping as my orgasm rushes through me.

Quinn’s shivers slowly come to a halt. I rest my forehead against hers as I try to catch my breath. Her tousled curls are

damp with sweat and sticking to her face.

“The just fucked look suits you.” I breathe out, running my thumb along her bottom lip.

“Thank you.” She smirks and slowly raises her hips until I’m no longer inside her.

She collapses back onto the passenger seat searching around for her clothes while I figure out where to put the condom.

“Oh,” she says as she grabs her purse. “Here.” She hands me a Kleenex she just pulled out of her purse. I take it from her and wrap the condom while she gets dressed.

“Sorry about your seat.” Quinn fixes her shorts and slips her shirt back on.

I look down at my soaked jeans as I refasten my belt. “Shit, you can fuck up my seats anytime you want.”

“You know...” her voice trails off as she lays her head back against the seat.

“Know... what?” I turn my head to look at her.

She covers her face with her hands and slides down a little in her seat. “I’ve never had an orgasm with a guy before. Until... *you* .”

“Excuse me?” My jaw goes slack. “How–how is that possible?”

“I mean... I’ve had orgasms before, but because of my own efforts. Not because a guy actually made me cum. So many men are clueless about the clitoris, but you... you’re like a clit whisperer.”

I shake my head, blinking rapidly. I’m not comprehending how anyone could not want to fuck every last drop out of her. “Let me get this straight, a guy has never made you cum? Besides me?” I point to myself.

She bites her lip while nodding her head in agreement. “It’s pathetic really, but true.”



“I—I am flattered.” I place my hand over my heart. “But what the fuck kind of dudes were you fuckin’ with?”

Then she erupts with laughter. “The look on your face,” she points at me as she wheezes, “is priceless.”

“Because I am... baffled. I mean what do you do if you’re not cumming? Just wait for him to finish?”

“Oh God,” she cringes and covers her face with her hands again. “Essentially...yes. I would either fake it or just get myself off.”

“Fake it?” My mouth falls open.

“You know,” she shrugs nonchalantly, “fake moans and stuff. Ok, this sounds really bad.”

“I really don’t know.” I cover my mouth with my hand as I laugh. “Fake moans? Enlighten me. I want to hear these fake moans.”

“I did it to make things go faster.” She admits. “I would moan about how good it feels and whatever else... but really I was just there praying to the sex gods for it to be over.”

“Okay.” I scratch my jaw, still a bit stunned. “It makes sense to me now how you went a year without sex. No one was doing it right.”

“You’ve never had bad sex before?” she asks me with a raised eyebrow.

“I have—everyone has. But I know how to please a woman now, as you know firsthand. Maybe when I was younger and didn’t give a shit there were some fake orgasms but now... I like for the experience to be pleasurable for all involved parties.”

“Okay, what’s the worst sex you’ve ever had?” she asks me with a smirk.

“We’re really doing this?”

“Yes,” she leans towards me. “I’m curious.”

I lie my head back against my seat trying to recall my worst sexual experience. “Okay, the one that tops my list is the

girl who puked on me as I was cumming.”

“What?” Quinn gasps.

“Yeah, it was at a party. We’d had a few too many drinks. I almost started puking too because some got in my mouth.” I shudder as I remember that night.

Quinn cackles. “She puked in your mouth, but you’re worried about me using your toothbrush?”

“I’ve told you,” I say with a smirk, “that was entirely different. She didn’t warn me she was puking. She just puked. Now I need to drink a gallon of mouthwash.”

“Just listening to that story makes me want to brush my teeth.” She says still laughing as she buckles her seatbelt.

“I am going to rebury that memory now.” I say, pushing it back into the shit I’d like to forget file of my brain. I start my car and put it in reverse, placing my arm behind Quinn’s seat to back out. “Now tell me about the unlucky fuckers who’ve never had the pleasure of making you cum.”

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# CHAPTER 14

*Kyrell*

I thought I had a sexual appetite, but then I met Quinn who is damn near insatiable. We're at her place, on her lunch break, going at it like we haven't done this a million times over the past couple of weeks. Her leg is over my shoulder while the other is wrapped around my waist, with my jeans around my ankles, as I fuck her against the door we just barely made it through. Her unrestrained cries of pleasure have become my anthem.

Her arms are wound around my neck causing her curls to brush against my face, making my skin tingle. Everything is heightened with her. I haven't been with anyone else since she came over to my house a couple of weekends ago. Not only because I haven't had the time, but because I know I'm not going to get this level of intensity with anyone else. It's addictive. The energy she gives me. Our exchange. There's a difference between fucking solely for release and fucking because it makes you feel like you're leaving this dimension.

My hand grips her ass cheek while my other hand is planted firmly against the door as I pump into her. Her lips find mine and she lets out a low hum of pleasure as her body starts to shake. She wraps her arms more tightly around my neck as her heavy pants fill the space between us. I become dizzy with lust, thrusting into her—desperate to reach my release. I let out a low, rough grunt, but don't stop pumping into her. She feels too good to pull out of. I lay my head on her shoulder instead as she slowly untangles herself from me.

I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket near my ankle. "Shit," I mutter. Pulling out of her and letting her feet touch the ground. I reach down, pull my pants up and retrieve my phone. Elias' name flashes across the screen.

“Hello,” I say panting.

“Hey, oh... are you busy?” he asks noticing that I’m severely out of breath.

“I was.” I say with a wink as I look at Quinn. “Now I’m not. What’s up?”

“I was wondering if you wanted to catch a Dodgers game with me?” he asks.

“Tonight?” Quinn’s eyes snap to mine, but then she quickly looks away pretending to be uninterested in what I have to say.

“Yeah, I understand if you have plans.”

“Nah, I don’t. Can you drive or do you want me to pick you up?”

“I think it will be better if you pick me up.” He says.

“Alright, text me the time and I’ll see you in a bit.”

Quinn hands me a bottle of water as I hang up the phone. “Who was that?” she asks.

I untwist the cap from the bottle and down it before I answer her. “Someone I’m not ready to talk about yet.”

She crosses her arms, looking at the floor. “Someone you don’t want to talk about but you’re making plans with?”

“Yeah, I—” then I realize why she has the sudden change in attitude. “It’s not a girl... if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Would it matter if it was?” she asks, turning away from me.

I follow her down the hall to her room. Normally I wouldn’t care if a woman I’m hooking up with thought I was on my way to be with someone else. But with Quinn—it isn’t just sex with her. We actually hang out in between all the fucking we do. I don’t really care to do that with anyone else. I gently grab her arm, turning her to face me.

“Quinn, if I were to start dating, I’d tell you. Besides, the person I am going to see is... family.” The word family leaves

my mouth with uncertainty.

“Oh.” She blinks. Then she sighs and looks down at her feet. “I like spending time with you. I know this is just sex and—”

“Is it, though?” I ask her, knowing I shouldn’t. “I like spending time with you too. Usually my relationships are with benefits. No friendships. Granted, we’ve spent so much time fucking over the past two weeks that I really don’t have time for shit else other than work and working out.”

She tosses her head back and laughs. “You’re a willing participant.”

“Very willing.” I say with a smirk.

“Can you at least promise me something?” she asks as her eyes meet mine.

“What?” Unsure if I should entertain promises I know I potentially can’t keep.

“That you’ll tell me if you ever want to start dating.” She says. “Even if it isn’t with me.” Her eyes meet the floor.

I put my hand under her chin, making her eyes meet mine.

“I promise.”

I can promise her that because if she were to start dating, I’d want to know. I don’t fuck around with women in relationships. Even if they aren’t serious. It complicates everything.

It’s been almost a month since we started hanging out and a couple of weeks since we hooked up. All I can admit to myself right now is that I like spending time with her.

“Okay.” She says with a satisfied smile.

“You could just say you’re attached to me.” I say jokingly.

“Oh,” she places her hand over her heart. “I’m not attached to *you*. I’m attached to the taker of souls hanging between your legs.” She says pointing at my crotch.

I let out a bark of laughter. “Where do you come up with these names for my dick?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugs and laughs. “I should start a twitter account or something for catchy dick names and phrases.”

“I’d follow that.” I say sitting on her bed as she changes her clothes to head back to work. “You should probably look in the mirror by the way. Your lipstick is smudged and your hair is sticking up all over.”

“Worth it.” She calls from her closet.



I PLAYED baseball throughout high school and for the year that I went to college. The only reason I even went to college is because I got a baseball scholarship. I love the sport, but it wasn’t something I saw myself doing professionally for the rest of my life. It was a dream that others had dreamt for me that I followed until I decided I wanted to see where my own dreams could take me. When I decided to do other things, I remember everyone thought I was insane for leaving it behind and moving out to California.

Luckily, I’ve never really given a fuck what people think.

I pull up to Elias’ house and he comes out moments later. He looks a lot better than he did the last time I saw him. I’ve seen him a few times over the past couple of weeks and I thought he was going to keep going downhill, but today he looks good. Yvette is still in Paris or probably dead. I’m hoping it’s the latter. Elias says he hasn’t heard from her. I should have known the dramatics she put on at the lunch were bullshit.

“How are you feeling?” I ask him as he sits in my car.

Charles is waving us off from the doorway. I smile and wave. I don’t know what Elias would do without Charles. He

takes care of everything for him because Yvette is never here. But Elias also seems to prefer it that way.

“Better. The doctor said there would be some good and bad days. Hopefully I have more good than bad days left in me.” He says with a smirk.

“I guess the good news is, you’re not dead yet.”

He nods his head in agreeance while laughing. “That’s very good news.”

Elias has become used to my morbid remarks about his impending death. I’m sure Dr. Jones would say my humor is a coping mechanism. I’d rather laugh with him than cry. If I’m going to create memories, they’re going to be fucking good ones.

Once we reach the stadium we head for the ticket booth. Elias hands them tickets for sky box seating.

“You know, I have season tickets for seats behind the plate. We can sit in the sky box if you want, but for the real experience you’ll want to be as close to the field as possible.”

“I guess we won’t be needing these.” He says.

“I’m sure you can get your money back if you want.” I didn’t want to say anything because he went out of his way to get tickets. But if I’m going to be at a baseball game, I want the best seats.

Elias waves his hand. “I have more than enough money that I won’t notice that’s even gone.” He turns his attention to back to the cashier. “The next family that walks in here, give them those tickets.” The cashier looks at Elias like he’s lost his head, but slowly nods in agreement. “Thanks.” He turns his attention back to me. “Now, let’s go watch a ball game.”

We settle into our seats with our popcorn and sodas.

“Are we here because you enjoy baseball or because you know I love baseball?” I ask, popping a piece of popcorn into my mouth.

“I know you love baseball and I enjoy it so why not come to a game together?”

“You know... I would have killed to have you at one of my games when I was younger.” I admit with my eyes fixated on the field.

“I know. Which is why I’ve set it up for you to throw the first pitch.”

A kernel of popcorn hits my windpipe causing me to gasp and cough. Elias slaps me on the back with a smirk on his face.

“What?” I gasp. “You did what?”

“You’re throwing the first pitch. These seats are perfect for me to watch.” He says, settling into his seat.

“I haven’t pitched since I was nineteen.” I say clearing my throat. “How did they even allow this?”

“I pulled the death card.” He says without regret.

I gape at him because he has just as much finesse as I do. Apparently the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.

“You don’t have to do it if you don’t want too.”

I see the glimmer in his eyes. “I’ll do it. I don’t know how good I’ll be, but I’ll do it.”

He claps his hands together. “Good. I was hoping you would. Here they come.”

Before I have an opportunity to register what he said a guy comes up and taps me on the shoulder. “Mr. Knight, if you’ll come this way.”

Elias gives me a shit eating grin and two thumbs up as they take me onto the field. The person leading me to the pitching mound is talking, but he sounds distant. The sound of my heart pounding in my chest and rapid breaths fill my ears. I feel the sweat trickle down my back as we near the mound. It’s not the crowd I’m concerned about. I’m worried how well I’ll pitch in front of Elias.

“Just relax and have fun.” The guy places a baseball in my hand and the sounds surrounding us invade my senses again, bringing me back to the present.



“Right,” I nod as I grip the ball. “I’ve done this before.”

“I’m sure you have.” He says in a falsely soothing tone and pats my shoulder. “No pressure.”

This fucker thinks I’m joking. I had a ninety-two mile per hour fast ball when I left college. Never mind that it’s been six years since I last stepped onto the mound though.

The announcer’s voice booms through the stadium’s speakers. “Kyrell Knight is going to be throwing out the first pitch of today’s game.”

I shake out my shoulders while the announcer continues talking about Elias as if he’s on his deathbed. I glance quickly at him and he is laughing in his seat like he got one over on them. He really is a big kid. I want to fall out laughing, but I have to throw this damn ball.

I inhale deeply, take a step back and pivot my foot as I follow through, sending the ball zipping through the air. It makes a satisfying smack as it lands in the catcher’s glove.

Elias jumps out of his seat and yells “That’s my son! That’s my fucking son!”

Everyone around him is clapping and looking at him like he’s insane. He doesn’t care though. He keeps clapping as though he just watched me pitch in the world series.

When I return to my seat, he jumps up and hugs me. My body goes rigid momentarily, but I relax, hugging him back.

“I’m proud of you.” He says with a shaky voice.

“It was just a pitch.”

“To some, but to me that was everything.” He says breaking the hug and gives me a brilliant smile.

For the first time I see him as *my dad* and not Elias.

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# CHAPTER 15

Quinn

I cinch my baby pink silk robe around my waist and wrap my hair up in a towel. I'm fresh out of a bubble bath, waiting for my coffee to finish, as I get ready for my weekly video chat with Harlow and Marisa. We started doing these chats after Harlow first moved away from Texas. Then I moved to L.A. and now Marisa lives in Portland. Each of us uprooted our lives to take risks and start fresh.

It's my turn to start the call this week. Once I have my coffee, I settle on my couch with a cozy blanket and call the girls. I love Sunday mornings for this very reason. Harlow picks up first.

"Hey love." She says as she takes a sip of her latte.

"Hey, where's Marisa?"

"You didn't get her random drunk "I love you" texts in the middle of the night?" Harlow asks with a roll of her eyes.

"No," I chuckle. "I didn't. What was she doing?"

"I guess she went out with some friends and got drunk. They don't realize they need to take her phone away from her if she's drinking."

Seconds later a disheveled Marisa joins the chat.

"Damn babe, you look like hell." I say.

"Well," she yawns, "morning to you bitches too." Her voice is hoarse and she looks like she'll fall back asleep any minute.

"You know you were drunk texting last night, right?" Harlow asks her.

“Oh God,” Marisa covers her face with her blankets and groans. “I’m sorry. One shot turned to two... then to ten... and then I lost count.”

“You’re here now.” I say.

She doesn’t respond, instead Harlow and I are met with soft snores.

“Poor tink tink can’t hang.” Harlow says. “Anyway, how are you?”

“Good, just work, friends, the usual.” I haven’t told her about Kyrell and me yet. Not that she would care, at least I don’t think, but I’m still nervous to tell her. “I’m actually thinking of going back to school.” I say.

It’s an idea I’ve had for a while, but wasn’t sure whether I wanted to commit to more schooling or not.

“Okay, why do you sound hesitant?” Harlow asks as Marisa continues to snore.

“Because I have to work. I can’t imagine having to go back to living with roommates now that I’ve had a taste of living solo. I would need money not just for living but also for my tuition. Master’s programs aren’t cheap, but it would only broaden my window of opportunity. I can’t see myself injecting the rich and famous with Botox for the rest of my life. It’s a job for now, but... I want something more fulfilling.”

“What do you want to go back to school for?” Marisa’s phone goes dead and Harlow snorts with laughter. “She needs help.”

“She’s gonna feel that when she wakes up in a few hours.” I say with a chuckle and continue. “I want to become a Nurse Practitioner. It would take about two years. I need to have more experience working as an RN before I apply, but I thought if I start saving and prepare over the next year, I’d be set. I’m thinking of getting a part time job that I can work on the weekends and start putting money aside.”

“It sounds like you have it planned out. Just do it. You know you got this in the bag. You’re a woman with a plan if I

ever did see one.” She smirks. “If you start preparing now, you won’t be as stressed when it’s time for you to go back to school. Maybe you’ll be able to save enough so you can work a little less and really focus on your studies.”

I had been stressing about this idea over the past week because I wasn’t sure if I sounded crazy. “Thank you for the reassurance, Harls.”

“What are best friends for?” she asks with a shrug. “Plus we’ll be here for you. Well I will be. I can’t speak for Marisa’s drunk ass.”

I toss my head back and laugh. “How’s the wedding planning going?”

“I am this,” she pinches her fingers together, “close to taking Acyn up on his offer to get married in Vegas. I’m a simple woman, you know? I just want to marry the man of my dreams regardless of who’s there, but that’s easier said than done with Sevyn, his mom, and Ava involved.”

“It will be beautiful, though. Even if it is a lot right now. But I also totally support eloping in Vegas.”

“Don’t tempt me.” She glances away for a split second. “Shit, I’ve gotta get ready to go hiking with Acyn and my dad. Text me later?”

“Of course.” I wave. “Talk to you later.”

As soon as I hang up with Harlow my phone vibrates with a text.

**Kyrell: Are you free today?**

**Quinn: If you’re asking me out then yes.**

**Kyrell: I am. I want to do something fun.**

**Quinn: Like what?**

**Kyrell: Really with the questions already? I’ll see you at noon.**

**Quinn: Fine. What should I wear?**

**Kyrell: Clothes. Be ready at noon.**

He's always vague while I want to know every single detail. I'm pretty sure he enjoys keeping me in the dark when I ask for them. I'm definitely learning to go with the flow when it comes to him. He's so laid back it's almost infuriating at times. Or maybe it's my need to always have a plan and feel like I have a handle on things. The only place I willingly, and happily, surrender to him is in bed.

Glancing at the clock, I realize I have enough time to polish my resume before I start getting ready. There are a few places I've found to apply that seem promising. I really love being a nurse, but I want to do something I'm passionate about. One can only be passionate about Botox and facial treatments for so long.



It's ten minutes till noon. I lost track of time while working on my resume. I quickly throw on some mom jeans, a lavender scoop neck crop top, waist beads with butterflies and some white sneakers. I braid my hair on the left side of my head, to a little past my ear, and leave the rest of it curly. This will have to do because I don't have time for anything else. Kyrell is punctual even if he is a walking chill pill.

I'm applying my lipstick when I hear the growl of a motorcycle nearing. I let out a groan. "This man really wants me to die." Grabbing my bag, I head outside to meet him.

"Of all the fucking cars you have, you choose this." I can't see the expression on his face because his helmet is still on.

He begins to remove it and sure enough, he has a smirk on his face that makes me want to fuck and strangle him at the same time.

"It's faster." He replies. "Plus, " he turns his face towards the sky, "it's a beautiful day. May as well take advantage."

"Right," I narrow my eyes. He isn't wrong. Everything is drenched in sunlight today without the scorching heat.

“Are you done over analyzing or...”

I snatch the helmet he’s holding out to me from his hand and put it on. “Can you at least tell me where we’re going?”

“No.” The motorcycle revs to life. “Just hold on.”

I lean into him, wrapping my arms around him like it’s where I belong.



HE PARKS us in front of building called Adventure Zone and cuts the engine.

“Now before you interrogate me, this is a place for fun and we’re going to fucking have fun, alright?” he says it as a question but there is finality in his tone.

“Okay,” I slide my helmet off, “fine. Geez. I wasn’t even going to say anything. It actually seems fun.”

He looks at me with both eyebrows raised. “Really? Or are you just bullshitting?”

“I mean a bit of both—” he laughs at me “—but I’m trying to keep an open mind, okay?” I shrug. “I’m here aren’t I?”

“You are.” He holds his hand out to me. “C’mon so I can whoop your ass on the go karts.”

“Please.” I scoff. “You haven’t seen me drive.”

“Actually, I have and it’s a near death experience.”

“Shut the hell up.” I snort. “I’m not that bad.”

He side eyes me as he holds the door open.

I raise my hands in defense. “I didn’t mean to run over the damn curb that one day or back into that car the other day. They were fucking accidents.”

“No,” he shakes his head following me into the building, “those are what we call near death experiences, love.”

“I’ll show you near death experience when I hand your ass to you right now.” I say, pointing to the winding track we’re approaching.

“Right, right. I’m sure you fucking will.” He says with a smirk.

It really does look like a lot of fun in here. There are arcade games, mini golf, laser tag, water games, and that’s just what I see as we walk through to get to the track.

Kyrell hands tickets to the attendant. “Do you come here often?” I ask.

“No, my first time here actually. I was looking at fun shit for us to do and found this place.”

I can’t contain the smile that appears on my face. Our relationship is physical, I know that, but my brain insists on merging the physical with the emotional. Kyrell is also just a nice guy in general. I can’t really take this as more from him.

*“But you want to...”* my brain whispers to me.

I’m torn from my thoughts when Kyrell asks, “Are you ready?”

“Ready to win? Yes, yes I am.” I say turning my nose up in the air as I step into the go kart. There are six other people getting ready to race too. I’m not worried about them. I just want to beat Kyrell so I can rub it in his face later.

“Even angels fall, Quinn.”

“That sounds like a threat.” I call to him as I fasten my seatbelt and put my helmet on.

“It’s a fact.” He says with a smirk.

One go kart attendant stands at the front of the track next to the traffic light that tells us when to go while the other attendant makes sure all the karts are started. My heart races as the adrenaline kicks into my system. I’ve never raced go karts before and truth be told I know I’m a shit driver, but I’m also determined to win.

I can feel Kyrell's eyes on me as he sits next to me. I raise a perfectly manicured middle finger and hear him start laughing.

"Racers ready?" The attendant asks. "Three," the light remains red. "Two," the light changes to yellow and I grip my steering wheel. "One," the green light flashes and I put the pedal to the metal zipping past Kyrell as I merge onto the track with the other racers.

There's a difference between looking at a track and actually being on it. The turns are a little sharper than I calculated and I keep bumping into the guardrail. I hear Kyrell laugh as he passes me. I jerk my steering wheel to get back into the middle of the track, but he's already two kart lengths ahead of me.

I gun it, pressing the pedal down as far as it will go. I pass one kart, biting my lip with determination to pass the next. I don't slow down enough for the turn, causing my tires to screech loudly. I remain focused on the track, focused on beating Kyrell's ass. My excitement builds as my go kart gains on the driver behind him. I'm almost there.

The driver bumps into the guardrail like I did, slowing them down a bit which allows me to zoom ahead of them. Now I'm right behind Kyrell. I decide to try and pass him on the left side and hopefully avoid bumping into the railing again.

I grip the steering wheel so tight that my nails dig into the palms of my hands. I'm determined to pass Kyrell and win this damn race. He slows down a little as we approach the curve and I take it as an opportunity to pass him.

But, like the bad driver I truly am, as we take the curve at the same time, I bump into him causing his kart to jerk to the right and he runs into the guardrail. The competitive spirit in me let's out a maniacal laugh. I can fucking win because that slowed him down enough. I flick him off as I pass him and the scowl on his face makes him look edible. I should probably be psychologically evaluated for my panties getting wet simply



from the sight of his furrowed brows. I'll hash that out with my therapist next week.

I'm pressing the gas pedal so hard that my foot is almost numb. The kart is being pushed to the limit and all I can think about is winning. I near another curve, but my brain shorts because I'm running on pure adrenaline and not thinking clearly. My foot doesn't release the gas pedal fast enough to take the turn without running into the guardrail.

I slam into it. My whole body jerks forward and the seatbelt digs into my chest. The Kart comes to a complete stop. Kyrell passes me seconds later, not even bothering to stop, as he races to the finish line. I try to break free of the guardrail, but the front bumper is wedged underneath it.

One of the attendants runs onto the track to help me. "Are you okay?" he asks.

Well thankfully someone is concerned. I glance over at Kyrell who has already parked his kart after crossing the finish line and he is laughing at me.

"I think you're just going to have to get out." The attendant says. "It got wedged in there pretty good."

I'm never going to live this down. Kyrell is going to talk shit about this forever.

"Alright." I say, trying to unfasten the seatbelt, but it's jammed. I let out an exasperated sigh and rest my head against the seat. "I think... I think my seatbelt is jammed."

"Damn, you really wrecked huh?" The attendant says with a smirk.

"Clearly." I say covering my face with my hands.

"Don't worry. We can cut you out of there."

"Cut me out?" My voice is high pitched. "Like the jaws of life?"

"Something like that." The attendant chuckles as he walks away.

If I could slide down in my seat, I would. But I can't because my fucking seatbelt is jammed. Glancing at Kyrell, he is now recording me and his frustratingly sexy smile hasn't left his face.

I groan and cover my face with my hands. The guy returns seconds later, though it feels like forever, and *cuts* me out of the seatbelt. As if things couldn't get any worse, the other drivers led by Kyrell, start clapping when I get out of the kart. I really want to be upset with him, but the way he is laughing makes it hard to be.

I bow as I approach him in an attempt to make light of the situation even though I wish I could erase those past few minutes from my life.

"I told you even angels fall." He says as he continues to record.

I give him two middle fingers and a fake smile. Once he's satisfied, he shoves his phone in his pocket and wraps his arm around my neck.

"You better feed me now that I've embarrassed myself."

"Whatever you want, speed demon." He says with a smirk.



WE'VE SPENT all day at the Adventure Zone. Dusk is starting to fall outside.

"I have to admit," I say taking a bite of ice cream, "today is the most fun I've had in a long time—maybe ever."

"It was a lot of fun." He agrees. "Although, I still think you cheated at laser tag earlier but... whatever."

"I didn't cheat! Why can't you just admit I'm better at laser tag than you?"

"That wasn't it. You cheated."

"Aw, suck it up buttercup." I say pinching his cheek. "At least you weren't embarrassed in front of others today."

“Priceless!” His gray eyes light up. “That was absolutely priceless. I can’t wait to watch that video later.”

“I’m going to delete that from your phone.”

“Bullshit.” He chuckles. “Do you want to leave after this or do you want to play some arcade games?”

“Mmm...” I scrunch my face up with thought. “We can go. I don’t want to be accused of cheating again simply because I’m better than you.”

“Why didn’t you have that same energy on the track today?”

“Fuck you,” I say through laughter.

He tosses our empty ice cream cups into the trash. I loop my arm through his as we head to the front doors. My eyes are drawn to a photobooth and I pull on his arm.

“Can we take pictures?”

“Yeah,” he says with a shrug. “Let’s do it.”

We duck into the booth and I sit on his lap as he puts the money into the slot. It starts counting down from ten and we get five seconds in between each shot.

I put my arm around his neck and he wraps his around my waist. “Quick, what are we doing?” he asks.

“Serious.” I say as we give the camera our best model looks.

“Funny.” He says making a face and I do the same.

The camera flashes as we laugh at how ridiculous we look. “Ok, now do—”

Kyrell kisses me before I can finish my thought. It doesn’t matter now because I couldn’t remember even if I wanted to. The kiss makes the feelings I’ve been trying to suppress, *blaze*

The last one is of me looking at him like he just took my soul and him smiling at the camera. A perfect depiction of us.

Kyrell grabs the strip of pictures once it's done printing. From the pictures, it looks like we're a couple not just fuck buddies spending the day together.

"Um..." I clear my throat. "These look nice."

"Yeah, I want one." He says paying for another set.

I stare at the strip of pictures in my hand while he waits for his to print. My brain feels hazy. I can't tell if I'm infatuated with his touch and how good he makes me feel, or if I actually have *real* feelings for him beyond that or maybe both.

I've spent more time with him lately than I've ever spent with a man in my entire life. Maybe I'm not catching feelings. Maybe it's our constant close proximity and exploration of one another that's making me feel this way. I don't even know if that's true though.

Being with him feels so genuine, so natural. It feels right and oh so fucking good. It's hard to not get swept up in his gravity.

"You good?" he asks. I didn't realize I had zoned out.

"Yeah, I was just thinking about how much fun I had today." I lie as I get up from his lap and exit the booth.

"Me too." He smiles. "Should we go?" Kyrell holds his hand out to me and I interlace my fingers with his.

My arms are wrapped tightly around him like I belong to him as he takes me home. Maybe in some ways I do and I'm just too afraid to admit it.

His words replay in my head. *Even angels fall ... well, crash in my case.*

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# CHAPTER 16



**Y**esterday was all fun and games but when I woke up this morning, I had bruises along my chest from the go kart's seatbelt.

**Quinn: I'd like to speak to a manager. I'm suing.**

I attach a picture of me in a lacey bra, before sending it off to Kyrell, to show the bruises and also to be a thirst trap.

**Kyrell: Goddamn those titties sittin' right tho!**

**Quinn: Thank you but please focus on my injuries, sir.**

**Kyrell: Sir? Shit call me that and I'll focus on whatever you want me too.**

**Quinn: I can't stand you.**

**Kyrell: Call me sir!**

**Quinn: No concern for me and my injuries.**

**Kyrell: I was distracted by the titties and you calling me sir but are you okay? Do you need me to hire a lawyer? That accident was pretty bad. I'm surprised you didn't get whiplash.**

**Quinn: You know what. Forget I even texted you.**

I can't help but laugh now that yesterday's embarrassing moment is behind me. The bruises don't hurt, they just look bad. My phone buzzes with a text back from Kyrell, but I ignore it because I've gotta get to work and don't have time for his shenanigans this morning.



SHORTLY AFTER I arrive to work, Savannah appears in the doorway of the break room. I pretend she doesn't exist as I have been for almost the past month. I'm not mad at her anymore. I simply don't have a desire to talk to her.

"There's a delivery guy here for you."

"Me?" I ask confused, with my spoonful of yogurt frozen in midair.

"Yeah. You have to sign for it."

"What the hell?" I put the spoonful of yogurt in my mouth and then set it aside as I head out to the reception area.

There's a guy standing there with a box. I'm wondering if I had a moment of insanity and accidentally had something delivered to my work address.

"Quinn Halifax?" he asks and I nod in agreement. "This is for you. If you could sign here first."

I sign. He hands me the box and leaves without another word. I take the box back to the break room and open it. Inside is a bouquet of all white roses with a note attached to it that says:

**Hope the bruises don't hurt too bad, Speed Demon.**

I snort with laughter, clapping my hand over my mouth. He is so fucking petty. I pull my phone out of my pocket ready to text him, but decide that I'll ambush him later at his work.

"Who are they from?" Savannah's nosy ass asks.

"A friend."

"A friend sends you all white roses?"

"Savannah, you wouldn't know what a friend was if they smacked you in the face with all the roses in the world." She looks as though I slapped her. I cringe because I don't have to be a total bitch to her. "That was out of line, but I do think it was messed up what you did."

"I know and I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking straight. I promise I'm not a shitty friend."

“That remains to be seen.” I say tucking the roses and the note back into the box.

“I would be mad too.” She says looking down at the floor. “I miss gossiping with you all day long.”

I have to admit my workdays are pretty dry without talking to Savannah. She tells me the most bizarre stories. The other ladies in the office are nice enough, but they aren’t fun if I’m being honest.

“Yeah, me too.”

She takes this as an opportunity to plop down in the seat next to me. “So, tell me, who sent you the flowers?” her energy is back.

“A friend.”

“Mmhhh, right.” She wags her eyebrows. “A friend.”

“We really are just friends. It’s just a physical relationship—you know to release some stress and have fun.”

Her hand clasps over her mouth. “You have a fuck buddy?” she practically shouts.

“Pipe down!” I hiss, glancing around the break room to make sure no one heard her. “I’m not telling your loud ass anything else. The whole office will know before the day is over.”

She shimmies back into her seat and makes the motion of zipping her mouth closed and throwing away the key. “I won’t say a word.”

“Thank you, but I’m still not telling you all the details.”

“Fair enough.” She straightens up with a smirk on her face. “But I’ve had plenty of fuck buddies and not a single one ever sent me flowers. Just saying.” She shrugs as she rises from her seat, giving me a wink.

I push Savannah’s words out of my mind because I already had a sleepless night thinking about Kyrell. I even see him in my dreams.



WALKING INTO KYRELL'S DISPENSARY, I'm greeted by a guy who looks like a model. He's tall, muscular with a chiseled jaw, curly black ringlets hang in his eyes, with smooth dark brown skin.

His voice is a deep rumble as he greets me. "Hi. Welcome in." My brown eyes meet his hazel ones. I'm momentarily rendered speechless. He smiles and it only makes my brain have a short circuit.

"Uh...h-hi. I'm looking for Ky." I stumble over my words.

"Who?" he asks raising an eyebrow.

I clear my throat. "Kyrell. I'm looking for Kyrell. Is he here?"

"Oh yeah, he's here. But if there's anything I can help you with, I'd be happy too."

Tempting. Very tempting. "No, I need Ky. I mean I want Ky." My eyes widen. What the hell is wrong with me? "I need to see Ky. Kyrell. I'd like to see him." I stutter.

"Sure thing. I'll go get him."

I let out a shaky breath once he disappears into the back room. Maybe I'm not catching feelings for Ky like I thought I was. If I was, I wouldn't be making a fool out of myself in front of some other guy. All he did was say hi and I malfunctioned.

"Hey." Kyrell says appearing from the back.

When he gets closer, he gives me a kiss on the cheek that my whole body responds to. God, he looks perfect in his baby blue shirt. I'm well acquainted with what's beneath it but I still find myself wanting to take it off him. His cologne clings to me as he wraps his arm around me in a hug. It's the same scent that clings to my sheets after he leaves.



“Hi, you know there’s some guy sending me flowers?” I ask with a smirk looking up at him.

“Really? He sounds like a pretty nice guy to me. I’d fuck him if I were you.”

I clap my hand over my mouth, letting out a snort. “Really? That’s what you suggest I do?”

“I’m going to suggest whatever benefits me in this situation. And it benefits me to have you bouncing on top of me like a pogo stick later.”

“Yes, sir.” I say looking at him through my lashes.

His eyes darken. “Don’t tempt me, Quinn.”

“I’m not.” I say with a smirk. “Besides I brought you food.” I hold up the bag in front of his face. “As a thank you for the flowers and petty card.”

“Are you okay, though?” he asks running his finger along my collarbone, making goosebumps appear on my skin.

“Yeah,” I swallow. “I’m good.”

“Good, let’s go eat.” He says and then turns his attention to the man who had me flustered. “Lincoln, I’ll be back in a little while.”

“Alright.” He says with a smile as his eyes flit to mine.

I could stare at Lincoln all day but... he isn’t Kyrell.

We settle on the grass beneath a tree at a park not too far from Kyrell’s dispensary. I’m trying to eat, but my mind is filled with so many thoughts that I can’t. Last night I made a decision that I’m not sure Kyrell is going to like. I don’t even like it, but I don’t know what else to do.

I’m falling for him after he specifically told me not to. At first it was purely physical, but then somewhere between our intertwining bodies, my feelings got entangled on him too.

“I think... I’m going to start dating. Trying to date.” I nibble on my lip as I look down at the grass.

I feel his eyes on me, but I don't want to look at him. For a few seconds, I don't think he heard me, but then I hear him slurping on his drink. It annoys me and makes me to look at him. He smirks, and I shake my head with a smile.

"You think or you are?" he asks.

"I am..." I tug at my ear and find interest in the grass again. "I want to."

He doesn't say anything as he sprawls out on the grass next to me. I look at him, waiting for him to say something. "Whatever makes you happy, Quinn. I want that for you too."

"Ky..." I say softly.

"Quinn, I've made my intentions clear from the start. This isn't going to change anything. Unless you want to stop seeing me. I get it if you do."

"No, no I do want to keep seeing you." I clutch at his arm. "We just said that we would tell each other if we wanted to start dating other people."

"And you were worried about me? Now look at you." He says with an amused expression as he looks at me. Sitting up, he puts a joint between his lips, slightly cocks his head to the right and lights it. His actions are so simple, but I find my heart racing as I watch him.

"I just... don't want you to feel obligated to give me more, when you so clearly don't want to date."

"I don't feel obligated." He takes a pull on his joint, holds it in, and then exhales. "I like being around you not just in you." A flicker of a smile passes his lips. "I enjoy talking to you and all your annoying questions—" I laugh "—you feel good. In many ways." He says and his eyes meet mine with an intensity that I have to look away from.

"Quinn..." He hesitates and looks at the joint in his hand. "I've been hurt a lot in my life. Let down a lot. I rarely let people in. I know I'm vague and seem like I don't give a shit... but I do. If I could give you me right now, I would. But it would be fragments of me. I'm fucked up. And you deserve everything. So if there's some fucker out there who can give

you that and make you cum... who am I to stand in the way of that?"

I laugh in spite of my heart constricting. Kyrell has been honest with me since the beginning. He even tried to warn me. I think that's what drew me in besides his looks, his unapologetic honesty.

I can tell that he's going through something right now that's heavy on him.

"You know... if you ever need or want to talk, I'm here. I know what it's like to feel alone. Maybe not in the same way as you, but you're not alone. I'm not asking you to let me in but if you ever want to... I'm here."

"I know." Then he leans forward and places his hand behind my neck, pulling me towards him, and kisses me. There's a difference in these kisses. We've kissed countless times, but these kisses have a different softness to them that gives me butterflies and makes my heart hammer against my chest.

I place my hand on his chest and feel his heart pounding too.

He pulls away and rests his forehead against mine. "I should probably get back to work." He plants a kiss on my forehead. "Want to hang out later?"

I open my eyes. "If by hang out you mean us being naked and you inside me, yes sir."

"You're playing with fire, Quinn."

"Light me up, baby." I mutter against his lips.



ONCE WE GET BACK to Kyrell's dispensary we talk in his office for a bit before it's time for me to head back to work. As I'm walking towards the door, Lincoln catches my attention.

“Nice to meet you.” He flashes me a smile as he leans against the counter.

“Yeah, you too.” I smile as I tuck my curls behind my ear.

“Let me get that.” He says as he opens the door for me.

“Thanks.”

“I wanted to ask you something...” his voice trails off as he looks at me.

I look around wondering what he could possibly have to ask me. “Shoot.”

“Can I get your number?” he must notice my eyes grow considerably larger. “That’s only if you want to.” He holds his hands up in defense. “Please don’t feel—”

“No, no.” I smile. “You can have it. I just—I was caught off guard.”

“Why?” he asks, studying me. “You’re gorgeous.”

I bite my lip in an attempt to contain the smile that wants to take over my face. “Thanks. Uh... I’ll need your phone to give you my number.”

“Oh shit, right.” He chuckles as he reaches in his pocket.

I take the phone from his hand and input my number. When I hand it back to him our hands brush against each other causing our eyes to meet.

“I’ll text you, Quinn. Truly was a pleasure to meet you today.”

I let out a nervous chuckle before clearing my throat and swallowing. “You too.” I smile. “Well, I gotta get going. I’ll text you later I guess.”

He smiles at me as I turn to head to my car. I steal a glance over my shoulder and his eyes are still on me. I turn around quickly and hope I don’t trip or make a fool of myself. He may not be Kyrell, but I can’t deny the way his touch made me feel.

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# CHAPTER 17

*Kyrell*

I knew that this was a possibility. That she would want more and I would have to tell her that I can't give her that. No matter how badly I want to. I told her multiple times, tried to warn her, that I'm not looking for a relationship. I wish I could say that it was strictly sex with her, but it's clear that it's not.

I've spent more time with her than I have with anyone. Even my ex, Aubrey. Now that I have something to compare it to, not that what I have with Quinn is comparable. I realize that my relationship with Aubrey was physical. She said she wanted more with me, and I liked her, so I agreed because I thought that we'd grow together. I was wrong.

I'm okay with being wrong, but I'm not okay with being lied to. I'm honest with everyone in my life and I expect the same reciprocity. If I don't want to tell someone something, then I don't. But I'm not going to lie to them.

Even though I knew Quinn would want more, I still wasn't ready to hear it from her. But I respect her decision because I'm not mentally in a place to be in a relationship right now. I'm trying to focus on working through the bullshit that consumes me when no one is around.

"Hey man, I wanted to talk to you." Lincoln says as he enters my office.

"What's up Lincoln?"

"That girl that was in here earlier," he points over his shoulder, "you two aren't dating are you?"

"Why?" I lean forward, resting my forearms on the desk.

"Oh, cause I asked her for her number before she left..."

My heart rate spikes as I lean back in my chair. “Did she give it to you?”

“Yeah,” he shrugs with a smug smile that I suddenly find annoying.

“Okay, so why are you asking me if we’re dating? She wouldn’t have given you her number if we were.” I say curtly.

“Yeah, but you two seemed... close.”

“Oh,” I raise a brow, “Quinn and I are very close.” A smirk tugs at my lips. “But, no, we aren’t dating.”

I have to suppress the urge to tell him that she and I have plans to fuck later, but I’m not going to put her business out there like that. I’ve never had a problem with Lincoln until this moment. I mean I can’t fucking blame him—Quinn is captivating.

“Good,” he says. “I think I’ll ask her out on a date.”

Why did I hire him? Can I punch him in the face or could I be sued for that? It may be worth it.

“Okay,” is the only word I can find.

He leaves my office with a smug smile still on his face. When Quinn told me she wanted to date other people, I didn’t think it would happen this fast.



I KNOCK on her door later that night with a pizza in hand. A loud thud followed by a string of expletives comes from her apartment. The more time I spend with her I realize how clumsy she is. She opens the door out of breath, hair wild, but she has a smile on her face.

“You good?” I ask trying to contain my laugh.

“Did you hear that?” she asks covering her mouth with her fingertips.

The laugh I try to hold in comes out. “Did you fall?”

“Yes, I got tangled in my sheets.” She smacks her hand to her forehead, “I was trying to be fast to let you in and... timber. I just fell. The sheets won.”

“How did I not realize how clumsy you were before?” I ask with a smirk.

“Because we didn’t spend as much time together before.” She says taking the box of pizza from my hand. I follow her to the living room.

“For as cautious as you are with everything, this trait of yours seems like an inconvenience.”

“It is.” She sets the box of pizza on the coffee table and we settle onto the couch while she turns on Netflix. “But I’ll be alright. I’m used to it by now. What do you want to watch?”

“Put on whatever.”

She chooses Schitt’s Creek and grabs a slice of pizza, putting a pepperoni in her mouth. “I have to tell you something.”

“What?” I ask with raised brows.

“Lincoln asked me for my number and I gave it to him.” She blurts out.

I chew my bite of pizza slowly as I watch David and Alexis go back and forth on the screen. “I know.” I look at her. “He told me after you left.”

“It isn’t weird?” she cringes.

“Why would it be weird?” I shrug. “It’d probably be weird for him if he knew we were fucking.”

She gasps with wide eyes. “Did you tell him?”

“No, I don’t tell other people’s business... or my own.” I really wanted to, though.

“Thank you.” She places her hand over her heart. “He wanted to go out tonight, but I said no.”

“Why?” I ask. I would have thought she would have said yes in a heartbeat.

She shrugs. "I have plans with you."

I want to punch the air and tell Lincoln to suck my dick, but I don't. I play it cool. "You know, in order for dating to work you have to go on dates, right?"

"Really? I didn't know that." She says with mock disbelief. "I know, but I'm taking it easy. I downloaded one of those dating apps and some of the texts I got activated my gag reflex."

"I can only imagine. Let me read some of them." I say so I can take mental notes of names and faces in case I need to run up on them later.

"Oh God." She covers her face with her hand. "Some of them are bad." She hands me her phone after opening the app.

**Guy: Hey, you're gorgeous. What kind of things are you into?**

**Quinn: Thanks. Um, I like to paint, take yoga classes, read, spend time with friends.**

**Guy: Oh, do you like to draw? Cause I put the D in Raw.**

"What the fuck?" I re-read it again as I chuckle. "Why did that escalate so quickly?"

"I don't know." She rolls her eyes. "As you can see I stopped responding after that."

"I can't imagine why." I keep scrolling and click on another one.

**Guy: Hey**

"Ohhh shit," I say covering my mouth.

An impish smile is on her lips. "You clicked on the dick pic didn't you?"

"Why did he send a dick pic out the gate like that?"

"I know, and it isn't even impressive." She says with a shrug of her shoulders. "Reminds me of yeti with the all the hair surrounding it."



“God, Quinn.” I gag. “It’s fucking disgusting.”

She snorts. “As I said, I’m in no rush to date.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” I say handing her back her phone. “That is now seared into my brain.”

“You wanted to see.” She chuckles. “Now you can suffer along with me. I’m deleting that shit now. If I meet someone, great. If not, oh fucking well but I’m not dealing with that shit.”

“And you shouldn’t. You’re too gorgeous for that fuckery.”

“Thanks Ky.” She smiles.

“I’m gonna use your bathroom.”

“Put the fucking seat down when you’re done—” she points a finger at me “—I almost fell in the other night.”

I raise my hands up in defense while smirking. “I’m sorry. I will.”

While I’m taking a piss I look around her bathroom. My eyes land on a small lavender object sitting on a tray in her bathtub. I’ve been in her bathroom and bedroom countless times and never noticed she had a vibrator. Wonder who she thinks of as she gets herself off. I wash my hands and head back out to the living room where she’s sprawled out on the couch.

“How come we’ve never used a vibrator during our sex sessions?”

“What?” Quinn asks confused. “That’s such a random question.”

“I saw one,” I sit down next to her, “in your bathtub and my mind started to wander. Why haven’t we used it and who do you think about as you cum?”

“Wait, are you me right now?” she asks with a piqued brow. “Because I thought it was my job to ask questions.”

“It still is but now I’m curious.”

She smirks. “I guess I didn’t consider it. But why do you care who I think of?”

“Because I want to know if you get off on thoughts of me.” I say bluntly.

“I bet you would like to know.” She says and goes back to watching TV. I get up and her head snaps back to me. “Where are you going?”

I don’t respond and continue walking towards the bathroom to get the damn vibrator. While I’m at it, I go to her room and start looking through her drawers searching for her other toys. I discover that the nightstand next to her bed holds a treasure trove of sex toys. Multiple vibrators, dildos and something that looks like a butt plug. With as much fucking as I’ve done in my lifetime, I should be familiar with some of this stuff but I’m not.

I’m about to make myself familiar though.

“Alright,” I say as I walk back into the living room with my hands full of sex toys. “You down to play or nah?”

Quinn’s eyes snap to mine. “You did not just go on a hunt for sex toys!” She falls off the couch, cackling.

“I did.” I’m trying to be serious, but I can’t when she’s rolling around on the floor. “I’m curious now and need you to educate me.”

She sits up gasping for breath with a smile on her face. “Wait, so you’re telling me that you’ve never been with a woman whose used toys during sex?”

“Correct.” I nod.

“Wow... but you’ve been with so many women.”

“I know, Quinn. I know. It’s a true tragedy.” I say shaking my head. “Which is why I need you to teach me.”

“Teach you?” she splay her hand across her chest. “I can do better.” She gets up from the floor and pulls off her socks, then her shorts, followed by her panties. Then she pulls her t-shirt over her head and loosens her curls, shaking them out.

“I’ll show you, sir.” She says with a smirk, now fully naked in front of me.

My dick is pressing against my jeans, begging to be freed. I lick my lips. “I’m at full attention.”

“I know you are.” She takes a step to stand in front of me. I reach out to touch her, but she stops me. “No, you’re gonna watch.” She says taking the toys, that I forgot I was holding, out of my hands. “We don’t need all of these.” Her fingertips brush against the bulge in my jeans. I’m pretty sure all my blood has rushed to my dick and I’ll pass out any minute. The fact she wants me to watch her makes me crave her even more.

“Sit.” She says.

I’m not sure that I can. I’m sure any amount of touch or pressure will probably make me cum in my jeans. I take the risk and sit down.

Quinn lies on the couch parting her legs. I want to bury my face between them, but she places her foot on my chest, keeping me in place. I groan. She looks edible. I can see from where I’m sitting that she’s wet. Her fingers run across her center while she turns on the vibrator with her other hand. A low moan comes from her and it calls to me. But I stay where I’m at, like she told me to, and watch her with hungry eyes.

I follow her hand that’s holding the vibrator as she slowly lowers it to her center. As soon as it meets her clit, she lets out a shuddering moan, and her head tips back. My whole body is tingling with anticipation. She moves the vibrator in circles around her clit, spreading her legs further apart, until one is slung over the back of the couch and the other rests on the floor.

I’m watching her in a trance. Her pussy starts creaming the longer the vibrator is humming on her clit. Quinn is panting with her plush lips slightly parted, her toes curled, sweat glistening on her body, while her free hand massages her breast. I have never experienced the pleasure that I get from watching her play with herself. I have also never been as horny as I am now in my entire life. My dick is aching for release. I’m about ready to beg her the same way I made her

beg me the first night we fucked. My eyes continue to follow the vibrator that is circling around her clit.

Quinn gasps, her eyes snap open, and lock onto mine. The look in her eyes is one of pure ecstasy. “I’m gonna cum.” She pants as her whole body shudders with pleasure. Her hips buck up off the couch as she cries out.

I can’t take it anymore, nor can my dick. I quickly pull my shirt over my head, not wanting to miss a moment of her suspended in ecstasy. My hands fumble to unbutton my pants, but once they’re undone, I pull them down enough for my dick to finally spring free. I groan as I wrap my hand around my length. I’m going to fall so deep in her right now.

I pull her to the edge of the couch and flip her around, bending her over it. I run my hand along her slickness.

“I want you to fuck me.” She moans.

I thrust into her warmth and let out moan. “Fuck.” I say through gritted teeth.

Quinn only amplifies the pleasure when she puts the vibrator back on her clit. My eyes roll back in my head when I feel the vibrations on my balls and dick as I desperately thrust into her. This woman very well may be the death of me and I’d welcome it.

I grab a fistful of her curls and grip her hip with my other hand. I’m surprised I didn’t bust as soon as I entered her. This moment with her is pure bliss. Quinn lets out a hoarse cry as she cums again. I’m panting, my heart is racing, and I feel like I’m going to pass out from the pleasure. But I don’t let up because I’m about to reach my release. Quinn’s filthy mouth is talking shit to me.

“Yes, give it to this pussy daddy.” She moans.

And that does me in.

I bust so hard I see stars. My breath momentarily gets caught in my throat as my orgasm trembles through me. All I can do is grunt and gasp for breath.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Quinn.”

Then everything momentarily goes black and I feel myself falling. I hear Quinn say my name, but I don't respond because my body feels weird.

When I open my eyes again, Quinn is hovering over me. "Oh my God." Her hand is covering her mouth and she looks terrified. "I thought I fucking killed you."

"What?" I ask as a dull ache starts at the base of my skull.

"You—you passed out and your head hit the coffee table and—"

"You know the sex is good if you pass out afterwards." I wink at her.

Quinn snorts with laughter. "Ky, I seriously thought something happened to you. My heart dropped."

The dull ache is now turning into a sharp pain. "No, I'm fine I may have cracked my skull open though."

"Let me see." She says. "Just roll over on your side. Don't try to stand up."

I do what she tells me. "Oh shit," she says. "You'll need stitches." I feel her pressing something to the back of my head. "Hold that there. Let me get my clothes on and take you to the hospital."

"Quinn, I'm sure it isn't that serious."

Her eyes narrow. "So what? Did I go to nursing school for shits and giggles? You have a gash from hitting your head on the fucking coffee table, Ky. Don't tell me it isn't that serious."

I look at the t-shirt she pressed to the back of my head and sure enough it's covered in blood. "I guess it wouldn't hurt to stop by the ER."

She rolls her eyes. "I mean, feel free to bleed out on my rug. I'll go back to watching Netflix until they come collect your body."

I laugh but stop because it hurts my head. "I said I'll go."

“That’s what I thought. Now, put your dick away and by the way, you owe me a new rug.” She says as she disappears into her room.

I glance down, still laughing, despite my piercing headache. “I want you to know you’re the best teacher I’ve ever had.” I call out after her.



AN HOUR LATER, I’m in a room waiting on the doctor to come stitch me up.

“Wild night, huh?” I ask Quinn who still looks terrified.

She chuckles, visibly relaxing. “Yes, I’m just glad you didn’t die.”

The doctor walks in. “Kyrell?” he asks glancing at my chart.

“That’s me.” I say with a wave of my hand.

“What happened?” he asks as he washes his hands.

Quinn’s eyes widen as she stares at me and I give her a playful smile.

“It was a sex injury.” I say trying not to laugh at the gasp that escapes from Quinn.

He glances at Quinn who has pulled her shirt up over her face. “Did you have fun at least?” The doctor asks.

Quinn mumbles “Oh my God,” from beneath her shirt. If she could disappear right now, I’m sure she would.

“It was the most pleasurable experience of my life, Doctor.”

He chuckles. “Right, well let me get you stitched up. The good news is that you don’t have a concussion despite the cut on the back of your head.”

The doctor numbs the area before he starts stitching me up. Quinn still hasn’t looked at either of us while the doctor and I

chat about the weather and baseball.

“Fifteen stitches. You’ll be like brand new in no time. What did you hit your head against?” The doctor asks.

“Her coffee table. I got a little lightheaded. Passed out.” I say with a smirk.

“Stay hydrated.” He pats my shoulder. “You can see your regular doctor for follow up in three to five days. I’ll fax the information over to their office.”

“Thank you doctor. Have a good night.”

Once he is out of the room, Quinn swats me with her bag. “You jerk!” She shrieks. “What happened to not putting my business out there?”

I shrink away from her while laughing. “He needed the full story to properly assess me. I had to tell him.”

Her eyes narrow. “I should have let you bleed out on my floor.”

“You like me too much to let that happen.” I say, wrapping my arm around her neck as we walk out of the emergency room.

“It’s an unfortunate circumstance, really.” She smirks.

“Unfortunate, wow.” I chuckle.

She stops abruptly once we reach her car, biting her lip. “I know you don’t stay the night often but... would you want to stay the night tonight? I was really worried that something bad happened to you.” She glances down at her keys. “I would just feel better if you stayed with me.”

Her brows are pinched together as her eyes meet mine. I can see now that she genuinely was worried about me. I pull her into a hug and plant a kiss on her forehead.

“I’ll stay. I’m sorry I worried you. But just so you know, that truly was the best sexual experience of my life. I would have died happy.”

She chuckles and pushes me away. “Get in the fucking car.”

“Hey, can I call you Killer Pussy now? KP?”

Quinn cackles. “Shut the hell up, Kyrell and get in the goddamn car.”

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# CHAPTER 18



“**Y**ou have got to be kidding me right now!” I’m staring at Kyrell who is holding a tiny ball of white fur in his arms.

“Look at it.” He says, holding a small, snow white kitten out to me.

“I am and I’m wondering if that bump to your head knocked all sense out of you too.”

“Guess her name.” He says as a smile threatens his lips.

“Ky...” I look up at the ceiling, wondering when this madness will stop. “If you named that cat what I think you named it.” I inhale deeply and look at him. He is trying to hold back a laugh.

“I couldn’t not name her Killer Pussy.” He says as if it’s the only logical name choice. “But we’ll call her KP to keep it G-Rated.”

“*We* ?” I shriek. “Where did this *we* come from and who the hell told you to get a fucking cat?”

I’m not going to lie. She’s gorgeous. All white, shaggy fur with bright blue eyes. He put a pink diamond studded collar on her. But that doesn’t mean I want a cat.

“Yeah, we.” He says with a bright smile. “Quinn, Ky, and KP.”

“You’re fucking ridiculous.” I say. “I’m not keeping her. That’s *your* cat.”

I grab my cup of coffee, ignoring Kyrell, and head to my living room. He unfortunately follows and plops down next to me with the white ball of fur.

“I’m allergic to cats.” I lie.

“Bullshit, look at her. How can you be allergic to something so cute?” he asks with his bottom lip sticking out, holding the kitten up next to his face.

I ignore him and pretend to be interested in something on my phone. He places the kitten in my lap. I begin to protest, but then she snuggles into me, rolling over onto her back, and purrs. In spite of me wanting to protest, I reach down and run my fingers through her soft fur. Her eyes drift closed and I let out an exasperated sigh. “Why did you bring this cat here?”

“It reminded me of you. The white fur, it’s pretty, a killer pussy... I mean, so many reasons.” He says resting his head against the couch with a smirk on his lips.

I shake my head and chuckle. “I wore white one time.”

“That’s all I needed for you to be stuck in my head.”

Butterflies ignite in my stomach. “Don’t you have a doctor’s appointment or somewhere else to be?”

He smirks. “The doctor said my sex injury healed up nicely.”

I roll my eyes because he won’t simply call it an injury. He’s referred to it as a *sex* injury as often as possible over the past week.

“I do have to stop by the dispensary for a bit today. Would you mind watching KP?”

“I knew you were going to do this.”

“What?” he asks unconvincingly, shrugging his shoulders.

“Leave her here so I’ll fall in love with her and keep her.”

“If that happens, so be it.” He winks at me.

“At least bring me back some food.” I call out to him as he leaves me alone with the little ball of fur.

A few hours later, my phone rings and a picture of Harlow and me flashes across my screen.

“Hey.” I answer.

“Hey babe, Acyn and I are going to be in L.A. this coming weekend. Do you want to get together?”

“Yes, of course.” I say.

“I know you’re talking to that Lincoln guy now. We should go on a double date.”

I told Harlow about Lincoln a few days after I gave him my number. We text a lot, but I still haven’t gone out with him anywhere. I’ve been hesitant because Kyrell and I are still hooking up regularly and Lincoln seems like a nice guy. But even though Kyrell bought me, well apparently us, a cat that doesn’t mean he’s ready for a relationship. I don’t necessarily want to sit around waiting for him to be ready either.

“Yeah, actually, that sounds like fun. It would be nice to get to hang out with him in a group setting first.”

“Perfect, I gotta run babe. I can’t wait to see you in a few days.” Harlow says.

“Yeah, you too. Talk to you later.” I hang up the phone and tap it on my palm wondering how I’m going to ask Lincoln out on this date. May as well be straight forward I guess.

**Quinn: Wanna go on a double date Saturday?**

**Lincoln: Yeah, I’d like that.**

**Quinn: I’ll text you the details.**

**Lincoln: I’m there.**

I smile at his texts like an idiot. KP stretches in my lap causing me to think of Kyrell. I’m not going to wait for him, I tell myself.

Instead, I try to push thoughts of him out of my mind and start looking for a sexy little dress to wear on Saturday.



THE ONLY THING on my mind this week has been my date with Lincoln. Okay, Kyrell may have been in a few thoughts here

and there. *Everywhere* . It's hard not to think of him when we're still spending time together. Frequently tangled up in each other.

"Are we still on for shopping after work today?" Savannah asks me during our lunch break. I've forgiven her for her transgressions against me at the club. It's been nice to talk to her again.

"Yeah, I need a dress for my date tomorrow. Well," I sigh, "I don't need one. I want one."

"I will find any excuse to go shopping. You don't need to explain yourself. Who's the lucky guy?"

"I met him a couple of weeks ago." It's been fun getting to know Lincoln. We text quite a bit and even more now that we're going on our first date.

"Is it the guy you've been hooking up with?"

"No." I shake my head. "This is a different guy."

"Are you still hooking up with the flower guy?" she smirks.

"Like he's my religion." I let out an exasperated sigh and Savannah cackles. "Is it bad that I'm still hooking up with him yet I'm going out with someone else?" I cringe.

She sucks her teeth. "Girl, please. You're single, right?"

"Yes." I sigh, putting my elbow on the table, cradling my chin in my hand.

"Then no. It isn't. You're not in a relationship with either of them." She shrugs. "Nothing wrong with dating around and seeing what's out there. Shit, even if you were fucking both of them it wouldn't matter because you're not with neither of them."

I shake my head. "I don't know that I could do that to Lincoln. He's the nice guy, you know?"

"Girl, I feel you. He's not the one you want, huh? He's nice enough. Would probably give you everything you dreamt of, but that's the problem, isn't? You want the guy who is

going to give you everything you dreamt of, but also drives you mad.”

“Yes!” I cackle. “I thought I was the only one. I was ready to hash this out with my therapist.”

“Nope, join the club.” She sighs. “But maybe see what Lincoln is like. You never know.” She shrugs, sipping on her drink.

“Yeah, you’re right.” I smile.

I’ve only ever seen Lincoln in person when I met him at Kyrell’s shop. He’s asked me out on dates and I’ve said no because of Kyrell. When I asked him out the other day I don’t think he knew what to do with himself. I’m going to go on this date with an open mind to see what happens. Who knows? Maybe sparks will fly between us.

*Kyrell*

It’s Saturday morning and Harlow is in town. I hug her so hard that I lift her up off the ground.

“I’ve missed you.” I say to her, twirling her around.

Normally her and Acyn stay with me, but they decided to stay in an Airbnb to get a mini vacation from the chaos of wedding planning.

“I couldn’t tell.” She smirks. “What are you getting into today?”

“Absolutely nothing. Are you and Acyn trying to chill later?”

“We have plans for dinner later this evening. You should come. Bring a lady friend... or whatever you call them. Quinn will be there with her date too.”

I feel the start of heart palpitations at the mention of Quinn and the word date.

“Oh, really?” She didn’t tell me she was going on an *actual* date. Not that she has too, but I thought she had let the dating thing go.

“Yeah, I think it’s their first date.” She says sitting on a barstool at the kitchen island, completely unaware of the small panic attack I’m having.

I bet it’s with that fuck twat Lincoln. That’s why she didn’t tell me. I should make that fucker work today.

“What restaurant are you going to?”

“Some place called The Veil. Have you been there?”

“Nope.” I say a little too forcefully.

Something is wrong with me. I’m thinking of all the ways I could make this date impossible for Quinn even though I told her not that long ago that I wanted her to be happy. Maybe I lied or maybe it’s because it’s with Lincoln and I’m triggered because it reminds me of the whole Hendrix and Aubrey debacle, but Quinn isn’t my girlfriend.

“Are you going to come?” Harlow asks. Pulling me from my thoughts.

“Nah, I don’t think so. You know dating isn’t really my thing.”

“I know,” she smiles, “but I still wanted to invite you.”



AFTER BREAKFAST, we share a joint, talk shit, and zone out in front of Netflix. I’m still contemplating ways to fuck up Quinn’s date when my phone rings. Elias’ name flashes across my screen.

“Hey.” I answer.

Harlow’s eyes snap to mine. She was so engrossed in one of her murder mysteries she’s startled by the sound of my voice.

“Would you want to come hang out for a few hours?” Elias asks.

I glance at Harlow, but she’s already gone back to watching her show. “Um, yeah, can I bring a friend?” Harlow’s eyes are on me again, with a crinkled brow, wondering what I just volunteered her for.

“Yeah, yeah. I’d love that.” Elias says excitedly.

“Alright, we’ll head out now.”

“Where are you taking me?” she asks.

I stand up and hold my hand out to her. “To meet my dad. Did you bring your camera?”

She gapes at me. I’ve never referred to him as my dad before. “Yeah, I mean, when do I not?”

“Good, you can take some pictures. I think he’d like that.” The truth is, I’d like it too. I don’t have any pictures of Elias and me together. Not even from when I was a child. Harlow’s a professional photographer and takes the best photos I’ve seen in my life. I know he doesn’t have much time left, but I’m hoping I can gift him a photo of us before his time is up. Plus, it will be a good way to get my mind off sabotaging Quinn’s date.

We pull up to his house less than an hour later. “Has anyone else met your dad?” she asks, wrapping her camera strap around her neck.

“No, just you. You know I’m a private person.”

“I know.” She smiles. “Maybe one day you’ll learn to let others in.”

“I let Elias in.” I say defensively as I ring the doorbell.

“Yes, but would you have if he weren’t dying?” She faces me with her camera held up to her eye and takes a picture of me as her words sink in.

I don’t have an opportunity to answer because Elias opens the door before I can.

Harlow gives him a bright smile and offers him her hand. “Hi, I’m Harlow.”

He beams at her. “Hi, I’m...” His voice trails off.

My eyes find Elias’. “Harlow, this is my...” I hesitate before saying the word, “dad. Dad, this is Harlow. My best friend I was telling you about.”

Elias looks on the verge of tears as he stares at me. This is the first time since I was a kid that I’ve referred to him as dad. Instead of making things awkward he turns his attention back to Harlow. “Kyrell has told me so much about you. You’re a photographer, right?”

Harlow talks to my dad as if she’s known him for as long as she’s known me. When I was a kid, I’d daydream about my dad meeting my friends and it’s surreal to actually see it happening. Harlow is right, if he weren’t dying, I probably wouldn’t have let him in. In fact, I probably would have let him die without having ever built a relationship with him. I also don’t know that he would have reached out to me either. Life has an interesting way of working out even if the ways in which it works aren’t ideal.

“I think the garden would be a nice place for photos and I want to get some candid shots of you guys as well.” Harlow says in total photographer mode. I’m glad I asked her to come with me. I’m looking forward to these pictures.

Charles serves us brunch out on the terrace near the garden. We eat, talk, and laugh as if we’ve been doing this our whole lives. I didn’t think this day would ever come. Once we’ve eaten brunch, Harlow takes pictures of us in the garden. Some are of us posed and some are of us laughing at things we said. I have no doubt that they will be amazing.

We head inside once Harlow is satisfied with the pictures she’s taken. She fades into the background and takes candid shots of my dad and me. We started building a model pirate ship a few weeks ago. We’re not quite done with it, but have been working on it steadily every time I visit. I told him he can work on it without me but he insists that it’s something we should finish together.



Harlow touches my shoulder. “Hey, I hate to interrupt, but I have to meet up with Acyn. I can catch an Uber if you want to stay here with your dad.”

“Nonsense. Kyrell can take you back.” My dad says. “Did you get some good shots?”

“Yeah.” Her face lights up. “I’ll edit and frame them for you. Kyrell should have them soon. Sorry I had to cut my visit short today but it was a pleasure to meet you.”

“You as well.” He says.

“I’ll wait for you out in the car.” Harlow says, leaving my dad and I alone.

Once she’s out of earshot he looks at me. “Are you sure you don’t want to try and marry her?”

I scrunch up my face and groan. “Dad, I don’t see her that way. I know she’s amazing but she’s marrying her soulmate. She and I are friends.”

He chuckles and holds up his hands. “Alright, alright I thought I’d ask even if it was a no.”

I shake my head. “I gotta get her back. Thanks for inviting me.”

He fiddles with a piece of the ship on the table. “It was good to hear you call me dad—you know—before I kick the bucket and all.”

I can’t help but chuckle. “Yeah dad, I know.” I shove my hands in my pockets, unsure of what to say.

He pats my shoulder. “Enjoy your evening.”

“Bye, Dad.” I smile and make my way out to Harlow.

After dropping Harlow off, my mind is back on Quinn. I try my best not to be petty and call a girl to go out with me so I can fuck up this date I’m sure she has with Lincoln. I try punching my punching bag, swimming laps, a shower, watching TV until I finally say, “Fuck it...” and call up some girl to go crash this dinner with me.



I HAVEN'T BEEN out with or in another woman since I hooked up with Quinn. I'm sure that's part of the problem, but I have no plans to correct it. I don't even bother getting out of the car to get my date from her house. I honk my horn a few times, send her a text, and wait for her. I'm terrible with names of people I don't give a shit about. I quickly glance at her name in my phone and see that it's Mercedes.

"Jesus Christ..." I mutter to myself.

I look up and a tall, modelesque looking woman comes bouncing out of the house in a dress that looks like it's two seconds away from a nip slip. Hell, maybe even a pussy slip the way she's holding onto the bottom of it to keep it from riding up. She's pretty, but I hope she isn't as annoying as she usually is. The way she's vigorously waving at me lets me know that I need to light up a joint pronto. I consider locking the doors and driving away as she reaches for the handle.

"I love your car." She says in a high pitched, nasally voice, as she slides her ass into the leather seat.

"Me too." I say as I put it in drive with a joint between my lips.

"I didn't think you'd call me." She purrs, running her hand along my arm.

I move my arm away. "Trust me," I take another hit of my joint. "I didn't either."

She laughs and it reminds me of a hyena. "Oh Kyrell, you're so funny."

"A real fucking comedian."

I forgot what it's like to have women tell me what they think I want to hear. Quinn asks me every single goddamn question and then continues to talk shit to me even if she's enjoying herself.

"What is *that*?" The hyena asks shrilly.

I follow her finger that's pointing at my clutch and I feel the corners of my mouth turn up. Looped around it are Quinn's panties. She's a contortionist on my dick if I ever did see one. I can fold her ass up like a pretzel. If I had noticed them before I left my house, I would have removed them. Maybe.

"Panties." I say nonchalantly while she looks at them like they're on fire.

"Why are they in here?"

"Why do you think, Mercedes?" I make no move to remove them out of sight and she for damn sure isn't going to touch them. "You know, I could just drop you back off and go by myself if you're uncomfortable."

Her eyes dart around the car, then to my diamond encrusted watch, and then to my leather Givenchy jacket. It's almost as if she's calculating the cost of the loss if I take her back home.

"No, no—I'm fine." She flashes me a smile.

"Figured."

I've met countless women like Mercedes. They're looking for a come up whether that comes from getting some rich idiot to fall in love with them or getting knocked up by one, they only want money. They want the life their friends claim to have on Instagram.

Mercedes tries to talk to me on the drive to the restaurant, but I keep turning up the music so I don't have to hear her. I know I should take my ass home and let Quinn have a nice date with a respectable gentleman, but I can't let that happen. I want her to be happy just not with anyone else. I tried to warn her that I would ruin her and not feel bad about it. And I'm about to do the same to this fucking date and enjoy it.



MERCEDES HASN'T STOPPED TALKING. The joint helped take the edge off her a bit, but not enough to numb me out of my

fucking mind. Hopefully she shuts up once we reach the table. I didn't tell Harlow I was coming because I wanted to surprise Quinn. Okay, I wanted to ambush Quinn. Even if she would've told me I'd probably still be on this petty shit I'm on right now.

I see them from across the restaurant. They're at a table that's a bit more private. They're all laughing and talking. Quinn doesn't even notice me as I approach the table.

Acyn does, though. He gets up out of his seat to greet me, drawing everyone's attention.

"Kyrell!" He gives me a dap and pulls me into a hug. "Glad you made it. How ya been?"

"Good man. Thought I'd join the party." I smirk. Quinn is staring at me like she's seen a ghost.

"You're just in time," Harlow smiles, "we were about to order food. Are you hungry?"

"Starving." I say as my eyes lock with Quinn's.

"Oh everyone, this is Mercedes." Thank fuck she's named after a car. Otherwise I don't know that I would have remembered it. Quinn's eyes narrow as she stares at me, then she glares at Mercedes but recovers quickly so only I notice.

Mercedes tries to sit next to Quinn, but I nudge her out of the way, sitting her next to Harlow, and I sit next to Quinn. She lets out an exasperated sigh when I brush against her leg as I sit next to her.

"Oh, shit. Hey Lincoln." I give him a dap. "I didn't even see you there."

"Yeah man, I have to admit it's weird seeing you outside of work." Lincoln chuckles.

"You two work together?" Harlow asks, pointing between me and Lincoln.

"Yeah, I hired Lincoln as a manager at the dispensary a few months ago."

"Oh, is that how you met Quinn?" Harlow asks Lincoln.

“Yeah, she came in one day and I asked her for her number before she left.” He says as he looks at Quinn. Fucking sap.

“How do you know Harlow?” Lincoln asks me.

“Oh, Harlow is like my sister. We go way back... she told me about the dinner tonight. I wasn’t going to come but I thought, why not?” So I can fuck this shit up.

“That’s cool that you guys are so close knit.” Lincoln says. “How’s your head by the way?”

“Oh the stitches?” I ask and Quinn’s eyes widen. “That was from a wild night.” I say to Lincoln with a wink.

“You had stitches?” Acyn asks.

“Yeah, it’s a funny story actually.” I say with a smirk. Quinn kicks me under the table.

“This is going to be good.” Harlow says, leaning forward, ready to listen.

“The other night, I was at,” I consider saying Quinn’s name, but decide against it, “Angel’s house.”

“Angel, who’s Angel?” Harlow asks.

“A woman I’m seeing. It’s a nickname. Anyway, we’re getting into it and—”

“Here comes the server!” Quinn says triumphantly. “What are you ordering?” she asks Lincoln. “Do you know what you want? I think I know what I want.” She says rubbing her forehead trying to cover her face.

“I want to hear this story.” Acyn says with a smirk. “But let us order food first.”

“Oh yeah, we should probably figure that out.” Harlow says. Everyone focuses on their menus.

“Kyrell, what should I order?” Mercedes coos at me, resting her arm on my leg as she leans into me.

If Quinn’s eyes could throw daggers, Mercedes would have countless knives in her chest right now.

“Order whatever you want, baby.” I say playing up this moment even though I want to be as far away from Mercedes as possible.

“How do you two know each other?” Quinn asks with narrowed eyes.

“Oh me and Mercedes?” I wrap my arm around her, pulling her closer to me. “We’ve known each other for a few years now. We hang out off and on.” It’s the truth. I met Mercedes at an event a few years ago and we’ve fucked a few times. But, she’s a clinger. I always have to cut her off. She’s not the type of person you invite to your house unless you want her stalking you. I knew she would be perfect for what I wanted to accomplish tonight.

“Is that right?” Quinn asks in a sickly sweet tone, crinkling up her nose as she smiles.

“Yep.” I say.

Everyone but Quinn and I are looking at their menus. Harlow and Acyn are talking. Mercedes is trying her best to read her menu and innocent Lincoln brought out his glasses to read the fucking thing.

“How’s your date?” I ask with a smirk.

“Great.” She says curtly.

“Fantastic.” I retort.

“Wonderful.” She says loudly and everyone’s eyes snap to her. “Um, Lincoln, can you order for me? I’m going to go freshen up.”

“Yeah, Q.” He says. I watch them unravel their intertwined hands.

Q? He has a fucking nickname for her? They’ve only been talking for a few weeks and they’re holding hands now?

I watch Quinn, and her ass, walk away. The server comes to take our order and Quinn still isn’t back a few minutes later. I pretend to get a phone call so that I can go find her.

“Damn, I have to take this.” I say to Harlow, pointing at my phone.

“Yeah of course.” She smiles and goes back to her conversation with Acyn, Lincoln, and Mercedes.

I pretend to walk to the front, but then quickly turn around and head down the hallway the bathrooms are in. Quinn is looking down when she runs right into my chest. I grab her, open a door labeled “Supply Closet”, and pull her in with me. I press her back against the wall with my hands on her hips.

“Can I help you?” she asks.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were going on a date with my best friend and fuck ass Lincoln?”

“Why?” she smirks. “Are you jealous?”

“Jealousy is a motherfucker I don’t know.” I’ve been jealous of other things but not of other people’s relationships... at least until now.

“Right... is that why you came to hunt me down? To tell me you’re not jealous?” she looks up at me through her lashes.

My only response is my lips crashing into hers. I’m not ready to admit any feelings to her or even myself. I just want to feel her. She starts pushing me away, I back off, but she grips the collar of my shirt pulling my lips back to hers. She lets out a soft whimper as my tongue slips into her mouth.

Her arms wrap around my neck as my hand travels down further to lift up the dress she wore for the clueless fucker back at the table. I slip my hand into her panties to feel she’s wet for me.

“You want me to fuck you?” I ask her, rubbing my fingers in slow circles against her clit.

“Yes.” She says breathlessly.

“Yes... what?”

“Yes, sir.” She moans as I keep the pressure on her center.

I turn her around and her palms slap against the wall. I unbuckle my pants and she pushes her dress up around her

hips as she backs her ass up towards me. I push into her as deep as I can go and she lets out a soft cry as she spreads her legs further apart for me. She fits me like a glove. I wrap her ponytail around my wrist, pulling on it to make her mouth meet mine as I fuck her.

“You like me to fuck you, don’t you?”

Her breath hitches as I pound into her. She tries to say yes but stops when someone tries to open the door. I pull her back with me so my back is against the door now.

“We’re fucking busy!” I shout.

“You better not stop.” Quinn breathes out. “I’m so close.”

I apply pressure to her center with my other hand. “Are you going to cum for me?”

She responds by meeting my thrusts as she throws it back for me. She lets out a strained cry of pleasure, trying to stay quiet, as she cums for me. The look on her face and the feel of being inside her, send me over the edge not long after her.

I watch her fall with me. In this moment, I realize she is the only person I would ever want to fall with. I know I came here because I didn’t want Lincoln, or any other guy, to have the chance to possibly know her in this way. The way that only I know her.

I want this moment, and any others with her, to be only for me. *With me* .

This revelation terrifies me. Slowly I pull out of her, locking the feelings away again.

“You’re not jealous, right?” she asks with a smirk as she adjusts her dress.

“I don’t have that emotion.” I say, buttoning my pants.

“Right.” She trails her hand down the side of my face. “I’m not dumb, Ky. You may not lie to others, but I hope one day you stop lying to yourself.”

Her lips meet mine and then she exits the supply closet.



I don't follow her to the table right away. Instead, I try my best to fix my disheveled appearance before I head back.

When I sit down, Harlow is staring at me.

“What?” I ask her.

She leans towards me. “You have Quinn's lipstick on your face. You may want to wipe that off.” She whispers to me with a smirk. I glance at Acyn who winks at me as he shakes his head.

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# CHAPTER 19



**M**y mind has been reeling since I left Kyrell in that supply closet. I went through the motions during dinner. Laughed when I was supposed to, smiled, flirted. I did everything one does on a date. Lincoln is amazing. He's smart, funny, and caring. The kind of guy you'd hope to meet.

But before I met him, I ended up falling into the arms of a guy like Kyrell. At first, it was causal and fun, exactly what I thought I needed. But then I slowly realized that I've been steady falling for him with every conversation, laugh, touch, kiss, stroke... everything was a fucking setup.

It's like a train wreck. I know I should turn away, but I still end up watching through the slits of my fingers with my eyes wide shut, hoping for a different fucking outcome.

I thought maybe I had been wrapped up in him for too long. Two months, almost three months, is such a short time to fall for someone. I thought getting involved with someone else would be the cure, would break the spell he seems to have me under. The real problem is, I don't even want to be wrapped up in anyone else but him.

I'm on a date with the kind of guy I had hoped to meet one day. But instead, I'm longing for the guy sitting across from me. The guy who's a walking train wreck. The terrifying part is I don't even give a fuck if he crashes into me. He could shatter me into tiny little pieces and it wouldn't matter. As long as I'd be with him—I'd go down with him.

"Quinn, are you ready to go?" Lincoln asks.

"Yeah." I smile at him.

We say our goodbyes. I feel Kyrell's eyes on me. My panties are still wet from my tryst with him, but I slide my hand into Lincoln's anyway. Maybe I'm just as fucked up as Kyrell after all.

I steal a glance at him and our eyes momentarily meet. His are devoid of any emotion as they survey my hand in Lincoln's. Kyrell smiles and turns his attention back to the girl named after a goddamn car. Lincoln pulls me in the opposite direction and I follow him.



WE PULL up in front of my apartment building a short while later.

"I'll walk you up." He says before getting out of the car and opening the door for me.

"Thank you." I say, slipping my hand into his.

When we reach my apartment door, I turn to thank him but am met with his lips. I'm stunned for the first few seconds. But then I kiss him back. Hoping I'll feel a spark of the flame I feel when Kyrell kisses me. Lincoln's tongue dips into my mouth and I'm still waiting for the spark. His hand on my hip pulls me flush against his body. I fist his shirt in my hand.

He squeezes my ass, but it's not like how Kyrell does it. His touch is tattooed on my skin. This exchange with Lincoln isn't going how I had hoped. It doesn't elicit the response I thought it would, not that I would have taken it further tonight anyway. Kyrell was just inside me not that long ago. That thought makes me pull away from him.

"Thank you for tonight." I say, letting him know that this isn't going any further. Lincoln is panty dropping fine. Except that these panties have already been dropped tonight and I don't want them to be dropped by anyone else.

"Thank you for the company. I had a good time. I'll text you later." He gives me another kiss before leaving.

Everything is right about him. He just isn't right for *me* .

KP curls around my legs as soon as I enter my apartment. I forget she's here half the time. She's either sleeping or playing, there's no in between. I cuddle her for a minute and then head for the shower. I already know I'm not going to sleep tonight. While Lincoln was kissing me, I made up my mind to go see Kyrell.



I ARRIVE at his house and ring his doorbell repeatedly in case he's fucking Mercedes and can't hear me.

He answers the door in boxers with a joint between his lips.

"Is Lincoln here too?" he asks, cocking his head to the side as he lights it.

"No, he dropped me off and went home. How was Mercedes?" I push past him to get inside. He shuts the door behind me and walks toward his backyard.

He shrugs. "I wouldn't know. I had her take an Uber home."

I gape at him. "You did not!" Not that I care, but still.

"I did. She annoyed me." He lies down on a lounge near his pool.

"Serves you right."

He stares up at the palm trees above. "I thought you would have been fucking Lincoln right now."

I lay down next to him. "Would you have cared?"

"He would have found himself unemployed."

"Why are you so fucking petty?" I cackle.

"I'm honest." He says with a smirk.

“Have you been able to be honest with yourself yet?” I counter.

He turns his head to look at me. “Why are you at my house, Quinn? Are you here to fuck, chill, or both?”

“Both.” I say staring at the palm trees. “I kissed him tonight.”

“Yeah, how did that feel?”

“Like... nothing.” I let out a sigh. “It felt like absolutely nothing.”

“You sound disappointed.” He chuckles.

“I already knew it wasn’t going to work out, but it was worth a shot.”

“Mercedes wanted to give me head. That’s why I got her an Uber. She’s a handsy little thing.” He says with a smirk.

My eyes snap to him. “Have you not been with anyone else... this whole time?” I ask with furrowed brows. I hadn’t bothered asking before because I truly didn’t want to know.

“Nope, I haven’t wanted to. Not when I’m dealing with Killer Pussy over here.”

“Shut the hell up.” I cackle. “*Your* cat is doing well by the way.”

“Which one?” he asks with a hint of a smile on his lips.

“What do you me—” I start to ask, but then it sinks in what he’s asking. I scoff. “The kitty between *my* thighs isn’t yours.”

“You sure about that?” There’s a challenge in his question.

“Positive,” I say almost convincingly.

He chuckles, sits up on his side to face me, and begins to slowly trail his hand along the exposed skin of my stomach where my shirt has ridden up. My body tingles. His fingertips swish back and forth along my skin until they’re teasing the band of my shorts. I’m holding my breath, anticipating his touch against my skin again.

He slips his hand into my shorts, slowly moving it down to the spot I crave for him to touch. “You’re not mine?” he whispers in my ear. His fingers hover just above where I want them to be.

I buck my hips, but he moves his hand to the side, avoiding giving me what I want.

“Why are you like this?” I groan.

“Are you mine?” he asks again. His eyes are on me, alight with pleasure.

His fingers caress the fold where my thigh meets my center. All I want is for him to fucking touch me. “You already know the fucking answer you arrogant son of a bitch.”

Kyrell chuckles. “Do I?” His phone vibrates and rings next to us. He ignores it.

My heart is racing and I feel the pool of wetness between my legs, waiting for his touch. It’s ridiculous how my body surrenders to him. I’d almost be ashamed if he didn’t make me feel so good. He’s staring at me, almost unblinking, as if he has all the time in the world to make me beg for his touch.

Instead of surrendering to his control, I take it. I push him back against the lounge by his shoulders, straddling him. I kiss and suck on his neck, feeling his dick pressing against my center. I grind against him and his hands grip my waist as I continue to kiss him. I make my way downward, leaving a heated trail of kisses down the center of his abs, as I run my tongue along the trail that disappears beneath his boxers.

His breath hitches. The only movement he makes is to lift his hips as I pull his boxers down. I wrap my hand around his thick shaft and stroke it down the length of him. His breathing becomes labored with his eyes tightly closed, lost in the pleasure I’m providing him. I swipe my tongue along the tip of his dick, causing it to twitch as he moans. I’m tempted to do it again, but I don’t. Instead, I wait. Holding him in my hand, not making a move. He looks down at me, wondering why my mouth isn’t on him yet, and I give him a wickedly playful smile.

He smirks as his head drops back against the lounge. "Jesus Christ." He mutters. "You're the fucking worst." His phone rings again.

"Are you gonna get that?" I ask keeping a firm grip on his dick.

"No, because I'm waiting for you to suck me off." I hear the frustration in his voice.

"Who says I'm going to suck you off?"

"Quinn," he groans, "don't do me like this."

"Then tell me, were you jealous?" I slightly move my hand, teasing him, and he grunts. I'm tempted to trace my tongue along the veins wrapping around his dick.

"I wasn't." He lies.

I lick his arousal glistening on the tip of his dick. "I guess I'm not sucking on anything tonight."

"Quinn." He growls with frustration, covering his face with his hands, while I try to suppress my laughter. "Fine, I was fucking jealous are you—"

His words get lost in his throat as I lick him from root to tip, taking him in my mouth.

"Fuck." He says in a whispered groan as his head falls back.

I swirl my tongue around the tip, sucking with light pressure as I move my lips down to meet my hand that's gripping him. My other hand cups his balls, he inhales sharply, and his hands thread through my curls.

Even though his hands are in my hair, I control the tempo. Sucking him slowly while listening to his rapid breathing and moans. My panties dampen with desire, knowing that he feels this way because of me. I increase the suction, moving quicker along the length of him. My hand is working his shaft with my lips wrapped around the tip, while my other cradles his balls, moving them around in my hand.

"Fuck Quinn. You feel so good wrapped around my dick."

His hands grip my hair tighter as he thrusts into my mouth, matching my sucks. My hand strokes him faster while my tongue and lips maintain their suction on him.

“Keep it right there. I’m—” His voice is strained.

He doesn’t have to tell me. I don’t stop. His warm cum fills my mouth seconds later as he shudders and twitches as his orgasm courses through him. I keep the suction and pressure on him, swallowing everything he gives me. I release him when he finally starts to relax again. He’s lying on the lounge, completely sprawled out, as I sit back on my heels. I wipe my mouth and smile at him.

“That kitty’s still mine.” He looks at me with a lazy smile and then lets his head fall back against the lounge again.

I snort with laughter and lie down next to him, staring at the night sky while he comes down from his climax. “Tell yourself whatever you need to, Ky.”

His phone has been ringing this entire time, and he still hasn’t made a move to get it.

“That might be important with how much they’re calling you.”

“I was preoccupied.” He chuckles. His phone rings again. “Shit, alright, alright.” He growls torn between wanting to lie with me and answering his phone. He finally snatches it off the table next to us and stares at the screen, bolting up right, causing me to do the same.

“What happened?” he asks the person on the other end of the phone. He looks worried as he frantically pulls up his boxers. “Alright, I’ll be there in a bit.”

“I’ve gotta go.” He rushes into the house and I follow him.

“Is everything okay?” I ask him, watching him look for clothes in his closet.

“Uhhh... I don’t know.” He says, distractedly pulling on jeans and throwing on a t-shirt.

He slips his feet into some boots and grabs his keys. I’m not sure what to say because he won’t tell me what’s going on



but whatever it is, it has him worried. I follow him out to his garage where he straddles his bike, making it rev to life.

“I’ll text you later.” He says.

I kiss him and he relaxes as my lips meet his. “Breathe.” I say softly. He inhales and exhales a shaky breath, nodding. “I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m here for you.” I say.

“I know. I’ll see you.” He slips on his helmet and takes off into the night.

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## CHAPTER 20



I peer through the window of my dad's hospital room, frozen just outside his door, unsure of what to do. Do I go in and face the reality of the situation or stay out here where I can still be in denial about it? He looks so fragile lying in that bed. No one would be able to tell that we were just together, talking and laughing not even twenty-four hours ago. Charles' gaze falls on me, but my feet remain planted where they are. He comes out to the hallway.

"He'd love to see you."

"I can't—I don't think I can go in there." My eyes are still fixed on my dad.

"You won't be alone."

"What happened? He was just—we were just fine. Everything was just fine."

Charles folds his arms as we both look at my dad through the window. "He had fallen asleep watching TV. When I went to wake him, he was unresponsive. I thought he..." his voice trails off and I feel my chest tighten and a shudder ripple through me because I know he thought he was dead.

He continues. "But I checked his pulse and called an ambulance. When they arrived, he had finally come to. But his sugar was low, so they thought it best to bring him here. He's slowly losing his appetite and sometimes doesn't want to or can't get out of bed."

I turn to look at him. "But he ate with me today."

"Yeah, that's with you." He chuckles. "Otherwise he hardly eats or does much of anything. It makes him ill or he's too tired. His whole demeanor changes when you're around."

“I didn’t think it was this... bad.” I admit.

“He doesn’t want you to see the frail side of him—the human side. He’s your father after all. You may be a grown man but he still wants you to see him as superman.”

I stare at my dad again. His skin is dull and his cheeks are sunken in. Things I didn’t notice earlier today. He seemed vibrant and full of life. But now—now he looks like he’s on his deathbed.

“Where’s Yvette?” I don’t want her here, but I’d thought she’d be here.

“She’s on her way back from one of her trips. She said she would arrive home tomorrow afternoon.”

I nod. Grateful she won’t be back soon so I can spend time alone with him. It’s hard for me to wrap my mind around how I came from that woman. I inhale deeply, gathering my courage to step inside the room. I don’t want to wake him, but I also want him to know that I’m here. I glance over at Charles and he gives me an encouraging smile.

I enter the room cautiously. The sound of the machine monitoring him is beeping steadily. I reach his bedside, looking at him, uncertain whether I should sit next to him on the bed or pull up a chair. I gently sit next to him on the bed. His eyes slowly blink open. At first, they look empty, almost vacant, but then they land on me and there’s a twinkle in them.

“Kyrell, I didn’t realize you’d come in.” He says weakly.

“I just got here.”

“I’m glad.” He smiles.

“We have one afternoon of fun and you decide to try and kick the bucket?” I ask him jokingly, trying to lighten the heaviness of the moment.

“As you can see, I was unsuccessful.” He chuckles.

“Damn, I didn’t think mediocrity was in our blood.”

This time, he lets out a rumble of laughter that causes him to have a coughing fit. I grab the water off the table, offering

him a drink. It soothes his cough, but I can tell it strained him. A doctor walks in seconds later.

“Mr. Knight, you gave us quite the scare. How are you feeling now?”

“Better—as good as I can be. This is my son.” My dad says pointing at me.

“I’m Dr. Stone, your dad’s oncologist.” He says, holding his hand out to me.

“Kyrell.” I shake his hand.

Dr. Stone leans against the counter, clutching his tablet in his hand. “Elias...” he adjusts his glasses. “The cancer is spreading rapidly and aggressively. At this point, we need to consider hospice care. They can provide you with round-the-clock care and pain management. I would still be your doctor, but unfortunately we’ve had this conversation. There isn’t—there isn’t anything more I can do.”

My eyes dart to my dad. It’s one thing for us to joke about his death. But it’s another beast entirely to hear it from the doctor in person. There’s no room left for denial and hope when the inevitable is creeping in.

“How much longer do you think I have?” he asks the doctor.

Dr. Stone shifts uncomfortably. “I can only guess.”

“Then guess.” My father demands.

“Days... maybe weeks. To be frank, Elias, I’m not sure you’ll make it through the next few weeks.”

A high pitched ringing begins in my ears along with my pounding heart. Sweat breaks out across my skin and their conversation sounds distant. I know I’m in the room, but I feel as though I left. I’m watching Dr. Stone and my dad talk, but my eyes are unfocused. We just had a great day. I don’t understand how the tide turned so rapidly.

“If you have any questions, please let me know.” Dr. Stone says to me, but I’m not tuning in.

“Kyrell...” My dad says.

“Right, yeah... none at the moment. Thank you.” I say, being brought back to the present moment.

Dr. Stone and my dad talk over a few more things before he leaves us alone in the room again. An eerie silence settles in the room.

“No more good days?” I let out a heavy sigh.

“It seems they are numbered.” He says, staring straight ahead.

I don’t know what to say. How can you say anything of comfort to someone who is dying? Instead of talking, we sit together in silence and that’s enough.

My dad falls asleep not long after the doctor leaves. I’m tired but my thoughts have me restless. It’s too real now. I have anger and sadness coursing through me. Two emotions that feel like polar opposites, yet they go hand in hand. My eyes burn as I try to take slow and steady breaths as the ringing in my ears begins again, accompanied by a headache. I feel a tickle on my cheek and swipe at it absentmindedly. When I pull my hand away, I realize it’s tears. I taste the salt as I lick my lips, inhaling a shaky breath.

I clench my hands into fist, squeezing as tight as I can, wanting to break something. The anger is overriding the sadness. There isn’t enough time. He’s going to die. I’m going to be alone again. Alone as I’ve always been. I’m torn between wishing he would have left me alone and wanting to cling to whatever time we have left.

I get up abruptly from the chair and make my way towards the door. Charles nods, not questioning why I’m leaving. I pull my jacket off as if it will help the suffocating feeling that has gripped me. Once outside the hospital doors, I gasp for air, hunching over and dry heaving. I feel like I’m trying to climb a mountain as I attempt to catch my breath. I reach into my pocket with shaky hands, pulling out my keys, as I stand upright and walk towards my bike. Maybe I shouldn’t ride on it, but I need to get away from this all.

I need to run from this all.

I reach my bike and scream, startling the birds. I scream because there isn't shit I can do about the situation except—accept it. My whole being refuses to accept it. The tears I didn't even know I could produce are falling freely now. I angrily swipe them away before I put my helmet on, rev the engine of my bike, and peel out of the hospital parking lot. I hug my body to my bike as I race through the streets, not giving a fuck about rules or traffic lights.

Once I've put enough distance between me and the hospital, I slow down, riding around aimlessly until I find myself in front of her apartment building.

Of all the places I could go, I choose her.

I knock on her door, one hand pressing against the doorframe, waiting for her to answer as I stare at my boots. Moments later, I hear sliding locks as she opens the door.

“Ky...” she whispers groggily.

The softness of her voice calls to my soul. My eyes meet hers and her brow furrows with worry. I know I look wrecked, but she places her hand on my cheek as she looks up at me.

“What happened?” her eyes scan my body for injury.

“I... wanted to be near you, needed to be near you.”

Our eyes hold each other's gaze, then I crash into her, kissing her. Pulling her body flush against mine I pour all the unsaid words into this kiss. She clings to me, wrapping her legs around my waist, and tangling her fingers in my curls. Quinn feels like peace to my chaos. I grip her thighs and our lips lock as I carry her to the bedroom.

I gently lay her down on the bed, kissing her neck, then lifting her top to suck on her breasts. Slowly, I kiss and suck my way down her soft skin to the warmth between her legs. I kiss her thighs, gently grazing one with my teeth. She gasps, anticipating when I give her what she craves.

She lets out a soft moan that soothes the ache in my chest when I run my tongue along her slickness. She tastes sweet

and salty like my favorite treat. I use my hands to spread her thighs further apart. I want everything she has to give me. She moves her hips slowly making her pussy glide across my tongue.

“Ky...” she breathes out. My name is her mantra continuously falling from her lips.

Quinn sits up on her elbows to watch me as she bites her lip. She loves to see me between her thighs as much as I love being sandwiched between them. I feel her eyes on me, but I’m too focused on providing her with pleasure. I dip my tongue inside her causing her to gasp and fall back against the bed, wrapping her legs around my back. My tongue swirls in widening circles around her clit, ready to bring her closer to the release I know she craves.

“Don’t stop... don’t stop...” she begs, “don’t—” Her back arches and her body starts to tremble as she cums for me. I don’t stop sucking on her clit until every last drop of her release is on my tongue. I kiss my way back up her body until I meet her lips.

She sucks my bottom lip, tasting herself on me. I slip her shirt off. Needing to feel our bodies pressing together. She removes my shirt, unbuttons my pants, and waits for me to take them off. Her eyes are hazy with lust, but they’re trained on me. She reaches out, stroking my length, causing a ripple of pleasure to move through me. I climb back on the bed, hovering over her, as I line myself up at her entrance. I feel her wetness on the tip of my dick. Her eyes are on mine as I slowly slide into her. She shuts her eyes, biting her lip, and hums with pleasure. I watch her take me in all the way to the hilt. Her plush lips are slightly parted now. I try to memorize the look of ecstasy on her face.

I begin to move my hips slowly, deliberately, wanting to prolong the feeling of her being wrapped around me for as long as possible. I rain kisses on her lips, neck, and face. Her legs are tightly wound around me while her hands grip my arms.

In these moments, everything else fades away. All I see is her. All I feel is her. When I fall into the softness of her my soul and sorrows are wrapped in peace.

“Ky...” she moans. Her hands are fist the sheets as her back arches, getting ready to unravel for me again.

I keep the same slow, steady pace. Pulling out of her and thrusting into her as deep as I can go. The sight of her cumming makes me want to cum too. But I want to savor her. I feel myself getting closer to the edge. She moves her hips with mine and I feel the tingle of my release building until I spill into her.

“Fuck, Quinn...” I grunt, pumping into her a few more times. I lay still on top of her—chest to chest.

Our bodies remain intertwined. Quinn gently runs her nails along my back. The sensation makes me want to fall asleep.

“Are you okay?” she whispers.

I focus on the sound of her breathing and the feel of her heart beating against my chest. “No... I’m not. I just need you right now. That’s all I know.”

She softly kisses my lips and wraps her arms tighter around my neck, but doesn’t say a word.

We lie entwined, not saying anything until I feel her breathing slow. I roll over, pulling her with me, to lay her on my chest. She wraps herself around me again, and we drift off to sleep.

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# CHAPTER 21

*Kyrell*

I wake to KP snuggled up next to my head. Quinn is still wrapped around me and the first rays of light are filtering through the windows. I don't move. I'd rather be suspended here with them in this moment than face the reality of what's coming.

I don't know what to expect. All I know is that my dad is probably going to have more bad days than good from here on out. Whatever the days are, I want to be there for them.

Quinn stirs and looks up at me. "Morning."

"Morning. Your breath smells like shit." I smirk.

"Fuck you." She says as she yawns in my face.

I chuckle. Everything about this woman is fucking perfect, but everything about me is not. She unwinds herself from me to stretch. I already miss her warmth. I watch her get up from the bed, put on her baby pink silk robe, and cinch it around her waist. She flicks me off as she walks into the bathroom to brush her teeth. I stare at the ceiling—at war with myself because I'm about to fuck all this up.

While she's brushing her teeth, I get dressed. When she comes out of the bathroom, I'm slipping on my boots.

"Leaving so soon?" she asks, sitting down on the end of the bed.

"Yeah..."

"Are you stopping by later?"

I force myself to look at her once I've laced up my boots. "Quinn... I—"

Her brown eyes look at me expectantly, waiting for me to finish the sentence that is caught in my throat.

“Quinn... I’m a fucking mess and—”

“Why does this feel like you’re saying goodbye?” her eyes glisten.

I lean forward, resting my forearms against my thighs, not wanting to look at the sadness in her eyes.

“Because... this isn’t fair to you. You deserve to be with some guy like Lincoln. I can’t—I can’t give you what you need.” I admit.

“I didn’t realize you were deciding what I do or don’t need.” She says, crossing her arms.

I swallow. “Quinn...”

“Why are you pushing me away? Why are you doing this?” A tear falls down her cheek. I try to brush it away, but she pushes my hand away from her.

“I don’t want to drag you down with me.”

“You—you won’t even give us a chance. You won’t even give me—” her voice cracks “—a chance.” She says, pointing at her chest. “I know you feel it too and you’re just being a stubborn asshole!” She throws her arms up in frustration.

“Because I don’t want to hurt you.” I admit.

“What are you doing now then?”

Her words feel like a punch to the gut. “Quinn—”

“You can leave.” She cuts me off. The finality in her tone puts a wall up between us.

“Quinn, I’m sorry.” I reach for her hand, but she snatches it away. She stands, scoops KP up in her arms, tears open her bedroom door, and waits for me to leave.

I slowly rise to my feet. She refuses to look at me. I don’t know what else I expected. I try to reach out to her, but she backs into the door, shrinking away from me. She stands in

front of me, chest heaving, clutching KP to her chest. I wait for her to say something—anything, but she doesn't.

She isn't going to hear anything that I have to say right now and I can't blame her. I respect her demand and leave. She follows me out to her front door, lets me out, and slams it in my face. I hear the sliding of locks, amplifying my choice, and a sob seconds later.

Quinn

I knew with everything in me that I shouldn't have slept with him last night. But I wanted to be there for him in any way that I could. Like a punch drunk *idiot*, I offered myself up on a platter yet, I'm still shocked I got ravaged and now only remnants are left.

The sex was different last night. It wasn't just sex. It was lovemaking. I've never made love before, but if that wasn't what that was, then I don't know up from down either. Usually, everything is a fervor between us. But last night... it was slow, gentle, and passionate. I thought it meant something, but I guess I was wrong.

I head back into my room, fall into bed, and wrap myself up in my blankets. What he doesn't know is that I'm a mess too. I'd like to blame him for my recklessness with my heart, but I wanted to feel what it was like to let go and just... *fall*. It felt so good on the way down. Indulging in uninhibited pleasure. It wasn't just the pleasure, though. It was being with someone who wanted you to be who you truly are, who made you feel free. The problem is, I fell and there was nothing there to catch me... and I knew that. Yet I still stage dived, hoping he would.

I'm trying to calm down, but my bed smells like him. The pillow is still warm from where we lay moments ago. Instead of being comforted by the scent of him, I'm annoyed. I get out of bed, tear all my bedding off, and angrily shove it into my

washer. I collapse against it, sliding down, and cry. I fucking hate this feeling.

My phone rings in my room. A small part of me hopes it's Kyrell, but I know it's not. I peel myself off the floor to look for my phone. I find it next to my bed. When I pick it up, I see that I have a missed call from Harlow with a text.

**Harlow: Breakfast this morning? Our flight leaves early this evening.**

I consider saying no, but spending time with her would be better than staying home all day thinking about him.

**Quinn: Yeah, I'll get ready now. Let me know where to meet you.**

I get ready and try to erase all evidence of my tears. Harlow doesn't know I've been sleeping with Kyrell and I certainly don't want to tell her about it now.



I MEET Harlow later at a restaurant that has an outdoor terrace. I see her scrolling through her phone at one of the tables.

She gets up and pulls me into a hug. "How did your night with Lincoln go?" she asks, sitting back down in her seat.

I slide into the one across from her. "He's really sweet. Took me back to my place, we kissed and then he went home."

A server comes to take our order. "What can I get for you guys?"

"I'll take a rose and raspberry smoothie bowl." I say handing them my menu.

"Oh, that sounds good. I'll have that too... and also some waffles. Oh, can I get a latte as well?" Harlow continues to scan the menu while I gawk at her. "I think I'll also take a chocolate croissant." She smiles at the server who is also wondering how many people will be joining us. "Add a fruit bowl to that too."

“Anything else?” The server asks.

“Actually, can you add a spinach feta wrap too, please? With some bacon on the side. Thank you.” She turns her attention back to me as if she didn’t just order enough food for five people.

“Is Acyn coming?” I ask.

“No, he’s hanging out with Ash and Grey.”

“Um... are you pregnant or something?”

Her eyes widen. “What? No... at least I don’t think I am.” She shrugs. “I mean I guess I could be. But no, I doubt it. Why? Why are you asking me this? I just got fitted for my wedding dress.” She says in a panicked tone.

“Because,” I laugh, “you just ordered enough food to feed us plus four more people.”

“Oh—” she waves her hand “—yeah. Acyn and I—well we—there’s a lot of sex, okay? I get hungry. I need my fuel, sis. I know you know what I mean.” She says, taking a sip of her water.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She leans forward, resting her folded arms on the table, giving me a smug smile. “Now, you didn’t actually think that I wouldn’t pick up on my two best friends fucking, did you?”

I cradle my head in my hands and groan. “Harlow, I can explain. I just—”

She chuckles. “Quinn, please, you’re both grown. What you two do is your business. Plus, the way you looked at each other last night also let me know what was going on before your little bathroom session even happened.”

I gasp, covering my mouth. “Did Kyrell tell you this?”

“No, he didn’t. But he did have your lipstick on his face when you two suddenly reappeared back at the table.”

“Oh my God.” I feel my ears burning. “We... just sort of happened. It all started at the engagement party. I mean, sure, I noticed him before. How could I not? But then he cut his locs,

gained more muscle, got some tattoos, a beard—a trap. He’s a thirst trap that I fell into.” I look down at my hands. “Has he talked to you? Do you—do you know what’s going on with him?”

Harlow leans back in her chair, giving me a thoughtful expression. “What happened between you two?”

I fiddle with my earring, unsure of where to start, so I start from the beginning. Telling her everything, from the first night at his house to everything in between, and this morning. Our food arrives while she listens to me let it all out.

“And I don’t know what’s going on with him, but... he’s pushed me away completely. That’s why I want to know.” I look at her. “Do you know what’s going on with him?”

“I do.” She nods, looking away from me to take a bite of her waffle.

“And?” I ask.

“Quinn,” she swallows, “I can’t tell you what’s going on with him because it isn’t my business to tell.”

I roll my eyes. “But we’re best friends.”

“We are, but he’s like my brother and—”

“Oh, so you’re choosing him over me now?” I ask haughtily.

“No—” she holds up her hand “—let me finish. That’s not what I’m saying and you know that. I’m loyal to those I love and with that loyalty comes privacy. Kyrell has to tell you when he’s ready.”

I feel the sting of tears in my eyes. “I just thought that with all the time we’ve spent together that he would let me in.” I look up at the sky, blinking back the tears.

Harlow places her hand over mine. “Quinn... I’m not going to tell you what to do. Only you can decide that. But he’s dealing with a lot right now. More than what he believes he can handle. By pushing you away, I bet he thinks he’s protecting you. In his own weird, fucked up way—it shows he cares. He doesn’t want you to get caught up in the fallout.”

“Yeah,” I look away from her, “that’s what he tried to tell me.”

“I’m not making excuses for his behavior or even saying you should wait around for him, but Kyrell is the way he is for a reason.”

I hear what she’s saying, but it doesn’t make it easier. I want him to let me in because he *wants* to, not because Harlow told me or even because I forced my way in.

“I know it’s hard.” Harlow squeezes my hand. “I’m here for you, for whatever you need. Even if that’s saying fuck you to him which I probably will.”

I chuckle. “You don’t have to tell him that... unless you want to. Then I support it.”

She snorts with laughter. “I’ll be sure to let him know. Are you going to be okay? I could stay a little longer if you want? I don’t necessarily need to be back to Seattle tomorrow. Acyn does, but I can stay and hang out with you for a couple of days.”

“Thank you, Harls. But,” I let out a sigh, “I think I’ll be okay. I just need time.”

“I understand.” She smiles at me.

I’m grateful she offered to stay, but I need time to myself to process. “So, when do we get to pick out bridesmaid dresses?” I ask, wanting to change the subject.

We spend the rest of breakfast talking about wedding plans and places we could travel to for the bachelorette party. I’m happy to talk about anything other than Kyrell. He’s on my mind enough as it is.



DESPITE TAKING one of Kyrell’s coma inducing edibles, I still tossed and turned all night. When I was asleep, I dreamed of him. When I’m awake, I think of him. I washed my sheets and his cologne still clings to them. I’m happy I don’t have to

work today. The office is closed because the doctor who owns the aesthetics spa took a weekend vacation. It works out for me, gives me an extra day to be in my feelings.

My phone starts to ring as I'm getting KP her food. The sliver of hope that it's Kyrell blooms in my chest. It isn't him, unsurprisingly, it's a number I don't know.

"Hello." I answer.

"Hi, is Quinn Halifax available?" The woman on the other end of the line asks.

"This is she."

"This is Yolanda, the director of Harmony Health Services. Is now a good time for you to talk?"

I had completely forgotten about the job applications I had put in. Harmony Health Services offers better pay and benefits than what I make at the aesthetics spa. If I could get a job with them, I wouldn't have to work two jobs. I could cover all my expenses, gain experience, have a flexible schedule and still put aside money for graduate school. When I applied, I didn't think they would even consider me because I don't have the experience requirement. I applied anyway because I didn't want to limit myself.

"Yes, now is a perfect time. A great time." Shit, okay. Chill, Quinn. Don't scare her off.

"Would you be able to come in for an interview later today? I know it's short notice if you can't then—"

"I'll be there." I cringe. "I apologize for interrupting. But yes, I am available."

"Perfect. I have availability at 3:30 today. Does that time work for you?"

"Yes, it does."

"Great, I'll see you then. You know where we're located, correct?"

"I do." Because I stalked the website, wishing I could get a job with them.



“Okay, I’ll see you later this afternoon.”

I hang up the phone and squeal. My love life may be a disaster, but my money will be right.

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## CHAPTER 22



Normally when I get ready for work, I go through the motions and my mind is stuck on what I'll do once it's over. Today, I'm dancing around my apartment with KP while singing at the top of my lungs. Getting ready for work feels different when you know that you're moving onto better things. Yolanda offered me a job with Harmony Health Services the day of my interview. I said yes without hesitation. While I can appreciate what I've learned at the aesthetics spa, it isn't where I saw myself being long term. I became a nurse to do something fulfilling and I feel that working at Harmony Health Services will provide that.

My high spirits give me the confidence I need to hand in my two weeks notice without feeling guilty.

"I can't believe you're abandoning me." Savannah whines.

"Don't be dramatic." I chuckle. "You act like work is the only place we can see each other."

"Who am I going to talk to?" she pouts.

"Savannah, you act like you don't know how to text."

"It isn't the same. Everyone else here is... older." She scrunches up her face.

We are the youngest people in our office. The other women are a little older than us and sometimes that makes it hard to relate.

"We can still get together."

"What's so great about your new job anyway?" she asks with a roll of her eyes.

“They offer home health services and they have a facility that offers palliative care. I’m not sure which I’ll be doing, but I’m excited for the opportunity because the pay and benefits are better.”

“I’m happy for you. This sounds like an amazing opportunity.” She gives me a genuine smile,

“It is. I’m going to miss you, though.”

“Yeah, yeah I know.” She says flipping her hair over her shoulder with a smirk.



THE NEXT MORNING, I pour a fresh cup of coffee into my mug as my phone lights up with a call from my mom. She’s been trying to call me since Kyrell was here last, but I haven’t felt like talking. I take a sip of coffee, deciding it’s best to answer instead of ignoring her.

“Hi—”

“Did you know Jackson has a boyfriend?” she asks in disbelief.

I panic, almost choking on and dropping my coffee at the same time. “W–What?” My heart beats wildly in my chest.

“Did you know?” she repeats her question.

I never hang up on my mom, but I do now and immediately call Jackson. It rings for an eternity before it finally goes to voicemail.

“Mom knows!” I shout into the phone. “She’s calling me, asking questions and I don’t know what to say because—” I run my hands through my curls as my heart hammers in my chest “—are you okay? I’m really worried about you now. Did you tell her? Please, call me back.” I enunciate every word.

Jackson was always terrified that our parents would find out he’s gay. I encouraged him to tell them before they found out on their own. The women our mom hangs out with are

gossip queens. It was bound to make the rounds of gossip at some point. Regardless, I had hoped that Jackson would be able to tell people on his own terms. My phone chimes with a text a few seconds later.

**Jackson: I know. I told her. I'll call once I have time. I'm walking into a meeting.**

I relax after reading his text.

**Quinn: I'm proud of you. Love you!**

My phone rings with another call from my mom. I pick up with the confidence that I'm not going to tell Jackson's business.

"Hey Mom. Sorry my phone disconnected." I cringe.

"Don't lie to me, Quinn. Did you know that Jackson has a boyfriend?" she asks me again, not missing a beat.

"Uh," I swallow, "yeah. I-I've always known."

Jackson told me a couple of years ago after he started dating Troy. He was so happy that he wanted to tell someone, but was hesitant to tell me because he wasn't sure what my reaction would be. I remember he started crying when I hugged him and said I was happy for them both.

It's been quiet for a little too long. "Mom..." I say cautiously. I'm met by sniffles on the other end. "A-Are you... crying?"

She sobs loudly, startling me. I expected her to say or do anything but cry. I'm not sure I've ever seen my mom cry now that I think about it. Not that she's without emotion. She definitely has a flare for the dramatics, but I've never seen her brought to tears before.

"Why do the two of you not want me in your lives?" she asks. I hear the desperation in her voice, as if she's exhausted.

"Mom, it isn't like that. It—" I start, but she interrupts me.

"Yes it is," she sobs. "I practically have to hunt you down to even hear your voice. You moved thousands of miles away.

Then Jackson is so private sometimes it feels like he isn't even my son."

I'm stunned into silence by her admission.

"What is it about me that you two hate?" she continues. "You'll talk to your dad, but not to me?"

My heart drops. "Mom... we don't hate you."

Hate is a strong word. My mom annoys me, but I don't hate her, neither does Jackson. Using my dad as a gauge for how much we like her isn't a good one. My dad is a man of few words. Our conversations typically consist of asking each other how we're doing, me briefly telling him about work, and then we hang up. He calls me for my birthday and on an occasional holiday, which I'm sure is at the encouragement of my mom. She's always been the glue, but it's clear she doesn't see it that way.

"Then what is it?" she asks.

I take a deep breath. This isn't something I want to hash out before work, but I also know she isn't going to let it go.

"Mom..." I hesitate. "I can't speak for Jackson, but for me, you're constantly criticizing everything I do. You're more concerned with me living up to your standards than with what I'm currently doing." I nibble on my lip. "It makes me not want to talk to you..."

"Quinn, I just want what's best for you."

"But who said that you get to decide what's best for me?" I challenge her.

A silence falls between us that stretches on for longer than is comfortable.

I hear her take a deep breath followed by a sniffle. "Perhaps I haven't always been the best at seeing things from your view. I apologize for that. I do love you, you know that, right?"

"Yeah, Mom. I do." I smile. Despite our differences, I know my mom is loving me in her own way.

“You know, my mother was the same way with me. Nothing was ever good enough. I’m sorry that I’ve put that onto you. It—” she hesitates “—was never my intention to do so.”

I remember when I was younger my grandma used to upset my mom with things she’d say. She was downright rude sometimes. I avoided her like the plague.

I soften towards her a little, letting out a sigh. “I’m sorry you went through that. But we don’t have to continue that cycle in our relationship.”

“I love you, Quinn.” She says and I hear the smile in her voice.

“Love you too, Mom.” I hesitate before asking the question that’s been on my mind since the first call. “How did you react to Jackson?”

She scoffs and my heart drops as I hold my breath. “I scolded him for not introducing me sooner. Troy is a lovely man. Handsome, successful, and completely smitten with Jackson.”

I let out the air I was holding as I toss my head back and laugh. “It went well then?”

“Oh yes, we had brunch together. I ran into them on my way into the restaurant to meet with the ladies. But quickly changed plans when I saw them walking in. Jackson was sadly mistaken if he thought I was going to let them get away. We had a lovely time.”

I’m smiling so hard my cheeks hurt. Jackson was riddled with worry and guilt for years. He must feel free now that he’s gotten that off of his shoulders. My mom and I talk with more ease than we’ve spoken in years. I didn’t know how much I needed to hear her apology for her attitude towards me. It loosens the constraints I’ve always felt wrapped up in. Despite our heart to heart, she still asked me about my non-existent future husband. Except this time, I could brush it off instead of letting it annoy me. She means well and I love her for it.



LATER THAT EVENING, I get a video call from Jackson.

“Tell me everything.” I answer, sitting up on my couch at full attention.

He chuckles. “I’m sure mom already filled you in.”

“She did, but I want to hear it from you.” I roll my eyes. “Duh! Now, go on. Spill the tea.”

“I didn’t intentionally introduce mom to Troy.” He says without looking at me. “But it was too late to turn around. She had already seen us. I swear, Quinn, I thought I was having a heart attack when our eyes connected.” He takes a deep breath while rubbing his eyes. “You know how mom always gives everyone that appraising look?”

I nod. “Yes, she calls everyone a peasant telepathically.”

He chuckles. “Exactly that. Our eyes met and then they fell down to my hand that was holding Troy’s. Her eyes narrowed for a moment before they widened...” his voice trails off.

“And what?” I coax him.

“They momentarily filled with tears.” He says shocked. “I didn’t know how to process her reaction. She walked up to us, kissed me on the cheek and then introduced herself to Troy. Of course she scolded me for not introducing them sooner—” I laugh “—but she was genuinely happy for me, Quinn.”

I smile at him as tears fill my own eyes. “I’m happy for you too—both you and Troy. Does dad know?”

He looks away and I see his jaw flex. “Uh... yeah, he wouldn’t even look at me. Just told me he needs time.”

“I can only imagine how hard that was, but with or without him, it’ll be okay.” I reassure him. “His loss, not yours. I’m so fucking proud of you, Jackson.”

“Thank you for always being there for me... even if I was a prick.” He winks.

“Correction, still a prick.” I tease.

He lets out a rumble of laughter. “Enough about me. How have you been?”

My mind momentarily thinks of Kyrell and him breaking things off. “I’ve been alright.” I say as though things are. “I got a new job. You know me—always with a plan.”

“What? That’s amazing!” He smiles at me. “Tell me about it.”

I fill him in on what I’ll be doing at Harmony Health Services and I fill him in on my plans for school. His excitement for me is just what I needed. We chat for nearly an hour before I check the time.

“I really just wanted to check in on you. Make sure you’re doing good, which clearly you are. I won’t keep you, though. Just know that I love you and I’m always here.”

“Same goes to you, little one. I know I’m shit with communication, but I always think about you.” He says.

“It goes both ways. But we know we love each other, right?”

“Of course.”

A few seconds later, we end our call. It was good to catch up with him even if we don’t talk often. But I know if I ever need anything, he’s only a call away.

*Kyrell*

My fists are a blur as my bloody knuckles connect with the punching bag. They’re wrapped, but that doesn’t matter with how hard I’ve been going. The only thing that has helped me feel slightly better lately is taking all my anger out on a punching bag and getting high. I’ve also seen Dr. Jones twice in three days. I’m trying my fucking best not to go off the deep end. I feel like I haven’t come up for air since I left the hospital the other day.



“You’re going to hurt yourself.” Stella says loudly over my blaring music.

I let my hands fall to my sides as sweat drips down my body. “I’ll be fine Stella.” I say through heavy breaths.

“You will, but that doesn’t mean you have to destroy yourself in the process.” She hands me a bottle of cold water. I twist off the top and chug it. “What are you doing today?” she asks.

I told her about my dad and she has spent more time at my house than usual lately. She arrives before I’m up and leaves later in the evenings. I know she’s worried and doesn’t want me to be alone.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. “I’m heading to the dispensary to talk to Lincoln and then spend time with my dad.”

I unravel the tape from around my hands as I walk towards a bin filled with ice water. “You know you don’t have to stay here Stella? I can be left alone. I’m not going to do anything stupid.” I say with a smirk, dipping my hands into the icy water. It instantly soothes my bleeding knuckles as the water turns a pale pink color.

“I know you won’t, but I still worry.”

I stare at my hands in the water as they go numb. “Thanks Stella—for everything.” It has been a relief to have her around more.

“Of course, dear.” She pats my cheek and heads off to do something else.

Once my hands are numb and the bleeding has stopped, I remove them and head for the shower. I’ve been avoiding seeing Lincoln because he’s a blaring reminder of Quinn. We haven’t spoken since I was at her house Sunday morning. I didn’t think I’d have such a hard time with not talking to her, but I miss her. I believe I did what’s best, but what’s best is a painful bitch. Call me a fucking masochist.



THE DISPENSARY IS BUSY. There's a line out the door, something I love to see. I may have wanted to punch Lincoln in the face, but I can't deny he knows what he's doing when it comes to business.

"Kyrell, good to see you man." Lincoln smiles as he rings up a customer.

"Hey, can I talk to you for a minute?" I ask him, pointing towards my office. "I know it's busy. Tell Jade to come to the front."

I head towards my office without waiting for a response. What I need to say to him won't take long anyway. He comes in a few seconds later and shuts the door.

"What's up?" he asks, genuinely concerned.

I lean against my desk. "I'm going to need you to run things for a while. I'll still be here, but I need to take a step back. I trust you enough to step up and handle things while I'm away."

"Is everything okay?"

I ignore his question. "Can you handle things?"

"Of course I can." He straightens up.

"Good, don't call me unless it's a dire emergency like we got robbed or someone got shot... got it?"

"Robbery and mortal injury. Got it."

"Right." I smirk. "That's all then. I'm going to be out for the rest of the day. I'll check in this weekend. You can always text me and I'll get back to you when I can."

"You won't have to worry about a thing." He says with a confident smile.

"I know. That's why I hired you." I say, sliding my shades back on.



I'M MET by Yvette as I enter my dad's house. She's sitting on the chaise near the window with a glass of wine and an almost empty bottle beside her.

"Oh look—" she slurs "—it's the golden child. The only person he—" she hiccups "—has ever cared about."

"Classy Yvette. Drunk before 11:00 a.m.. I wouldn't want to be around you either."

"He would've loved me if it weren't for you." She points a finger at me. "You messed everything up. You and that—"

Charles enters the room, interrupting her. "Yvette. Maybe it's time to lie down and get some rest." He tries to help her up.

She pushes him away. "I should've drowned you. He never would've known. Then he would've loved me. My whole life, wasted, on a worthless piece of shit like you." She spits.

I hear the ringing in my ears again. I cross the room in seconds, but Charles stands in front of me.

"Easy. She isn't worth it." He stands in front of me as a barrier between me and Yvette, who is now laughing. "Breathe Kyrell."

My eyes snap to Charles. "I'm not a little kid anymore. Stop telling me to fucking breathe." My chest is heaving as I contemplate ripping Yvette's throat out. It would only bring me temporary satisfaction though. I could wish all the ill will in the world and it still wouldn't be enough.

I shove past Charles and head upstairs to the room my dad is in. Before I reach it, I stop in the hallway, pressing my hands over my ears trying to silence the ringing in them. The sound of her fucking laugh only brings up another unwanted memory.

*This time I'm seven. I'm in the bathtub, she comes in, and locks the door behind her. I wouldn't have bathed if I had*

*known she was home. She sits on the edge of the tub, staring at me. My heart begins to race. I want to get out, but there's nowhere for me to go. I sit in the water, waiting for her to speak.*

*"What did you tell him?" she asks, swirling her hand in the bubbles.*

*"Nothing." I say, hanging my head.*

*My dad had been home earlier in the day before he took off for another trip. Before he left, he had come into my room to ask if everything was alright or if there was anything I wanted to talk to him about.*

*I wanted to tell him about Yvette, but I knew he was leaving. Even if I told him, I would be left alone with her again. She was already unpredictable. If she knew I talked to him about what she did to me, I'd be dead.*

*"Are you sure?" she asks, still swirling her hand around in the bubbles.*

*"Yes. I didn't say anything. I promise."*

*"Good boy." She smirks. "Because if you did," her hands stops swirling around the tub, "there would be serious consequences. You know that, right?"*

*I nod, not looking at her. Hoping she leaves.*

*"But in case you don't understand..." she says in a menacing tone.*

*Before I can react, her hand is around my throat as she shoves me underneath the water. I thrash as she holds me there, gripping my throat. I fight with everything I have. Scratching her arm. Screaming as loud as I can, knowing no one can hear me under water. The more I move, the tighter her grip becomes. My head hurts and everything slowly becomes blurry as what little oxygen I had runs out. My body instinctively gasps for air, but I only inhale water.*

*The nanny at the time bursts into the bathroom with another housekeeper and yanks me out of the tub. As I sputter and cough, all I hear is her laughter.*

*“What? We were just having a bit of fun. Think of it as a swimming lesson.” She says.*

*“Touch this boy again Yvette and I will be sure that Elias knows the monster you truly are. You won’t be able to manipulate your way out of it.”*

*Her laughter abruptly stops.*

*I’m gasping for air, coughing up water, and puking. The nanny is holding my head in her hands. “Breathe Kyrell. It’s okay. Breathe.”*

*“He’s taken everything from me.” Yvette cries. “Everything.”*

*The nanny wraps me in a towel, ignoring Yvette, and carries me out of the bathroom.*

My dad was never home enough to know what was going on. When he was home it was for hours, not days. He had to have known on some level something wasn’t right or he wouldn’t have asked me that question. I knew he was going to talk to Yvette about me. That’s why I didn’t speak up when given the chance. Yvette knew when to expect him home. I knew too because she was always nicer the days leading up to his arrival. Bruises would disappear, I’d eat again, and I would foolishly hope the abuse would stop. But it didn’t. It would be another two years before it stopped. It’s easier to say you’d speak up about abuse when you’re not the one getting abused. Yvette was, and still is, irrational and unpredictable. She lashed out at everyone, not just me. Although, I was her favorite target.

The ringing in my ears stops as my heart rate slows. I’m left with another fucking headache. I rub my eyes with the palm of my hand, letting out a sigh. Taking a deep breath, I roll my shoulders and shake out my arms before I enter my dad’s room. He’s lying in bed, propped up, watching a baseball game.

His eyes shift from the game to me. “I was wondering when you were coming by.” He smiles.

“Yeah, I should’ve texted. I had some business to take care of.”

“You don’t have to text. Come when you want. I was just watching the game. I had them bring in the ship for us to finish.” He says, pointing at the table in front of him.

My eyes fall on the table he’s pointing at. We’re not even half finished with it. I didn’t realize how hard it is to put together a model pirate ship. It’s tedious work, but it’s also allowed us to spend time together. After my run in with Yvette, I feel ready to crawl out of my skin.

“Would you want to go outside with me?” I ask. “To be honest, I really want to smoke a joint.”

“If you share with me, I’ll go.” He smirks.

“Never thought I’d be the kid who’d share a joint with his parent.” I grin.

“You’d be surprised. I was a rebel back in my day.”

I side eye him. “A rebel?” I scrunch up my face. “Really? You?”

I help him into his wheelchair. He can walk, but easily tires. He’ll move around the house by himself, but it’s quite a walk from his room to the garden.

“Yes,” he says, winded after getting into his wheelchair.

“I don’t know. You seem straight-laced.” I say as we walk towards the elevator at the end of the hallway.

“I am now. Sort of.” He says as we get into the elevator. “But when I was younger, I was unruly.”

“I’m going to have to take your word for it.” I smirk. I don’t know anything about my dad’s childhood other than what I’ve seen in pictures around the house. I never knew my grandparents either.

We settle under the shade of a tree in the garden. I needed to get out of that house. Being around Yvette triggers my fight-or-flight response. My body relaxes as I pull a tin box containing a joint I rolled earlier out of my pocket.

“I’m going to miss this.” My dad says with his eyes closed.

“What?” I mumble with the joint between my lips.

“Life. I’m going to miss life. I took far too much for granted. The simplest, little things I took for granted.”

I take a hit of the joint and pass it to him. “Inhale slowly. I don’t need you dying from a coughing fit.”

“I won’t.” He chuckles as he places the joint between his lips and inhales slowly. He coughs, but not terribly, and holds it in for a few seconds. Then he exhales, letting out a sigh. “See.” He coughs. “Not dead.”

I chuckle, taking the joint back from him. “I think we take everything for granted until we’ve lost it or are at risk of losing it. It’s the risk that makes us appreciate things.” I say, watching the palm trees sway in the breeze. My mind momentarily wanders to Quinn.

“I don’t think I’ve ever appreciated anything until now. You know, our family was in the oil industry before I branched off and went into the tech. I wanted for nothing growing up. It makes you jaded. My dad was very much like me, vacant and never really happy. I told myself I’d never be like him... yet I became worse.” He hangs his head.

“You know,” I say, “there’s nothing for you in the past. No matter how much you think it through, there’s not a single thing you can do to change it. We have right now—this moment. That’s what matters.” It’s part of the reason I am a “walking chill pill” as Quinn says. The future isn’t here yet and the past is long fucking gone. Why dwell in either when I can make the most of the moment I’m in?

“How did you become so wise?”

“Trauma does that to you.” I chuckle.

He stares down at his hands. “I’m sorry I caused the majority of that.”

I consider telling him about Yvette, but I don’t want to fuck up the vibe. “It’s alright. I just talk shit about you to my therapist.”

He tosses his head back and laughs. “That’s fair.” He says.

“I wanted to ask, when is your hospice care supposed to begin?”

“This afternoon. They’re stopping by to go over the details. Will you be around? I don’t think your mom—I mean Yvette, will be in a fit state to be present.”

“Yeah, I’ll stay here with you.” I say, choosing to ignore his mention of her. I’ve spent my sleepless nights researching hospice care and the best options available in our area because Yvette wasn’t going to do it.

“You’re a good son.” He says, patting my shoulder.

“That may be a premature statement.” I say jokingly.

“I mean it Kyrell. You’re a good son. You’ve turned into a respectable man without any guidance and you could have easily let me die without ever letting me in. But you’re here and I can tell it isn’t always easy but—well... I’m glad you’re here.”

I feel a tightness in my chest. “Thanks.” I say hoarsely. “I wish there was more time.”

“Me too.” He whispers. “Me too.”

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## CHAPTER 23

*Kyrell*

Everything cracks as I stretch out on the couch I moved next to my dad. I've stayed at my dad's house for the past few days. His pain is worse at night and I didn't want to leave him. The pain medications take the edge off, but he still suffers. They did intake for hospice care, but they said it would take up to a week before they place a caregiver with him. I feel things have changed drastically in a short amount of time. It's a moment by moment situation. Some moments, he's joking, laughing and everything seems great. Other moments, he's in pain, out of it and unable to carry on a conversation.

I had hoped that what the doctor said was wrong. That by some divine miracle, he'd have more time. We'd have more time. But it's apparent now that we're approaching the inevitable.

I don't want to wake him, but I also don't want him to wonder where I've gone.

"Dad..." I whisper, gently touching his shoulder. His eyes open, but they drift close again. "I'll be back, okay?"

He nods. "Thank you for staying. A nurse should be here today. I'll be okay."

"Do you want me to stay until they get here?"

"No, no." He opens his eyes. "I'll be okay. Go do what you need to do."

"Alright, I'll be back." His eyes are closed again before I finish my sentence.

I'm slipping on my jacket when I run into Yvette at the foot of the stairs. I stop momentarily to glare at her and then

keep moving because I don't have the energy to deal with her.

“If you're spending time with him in hopes of inheriting everything, you should know that he's leaving everything to me, including the company.” She sneers.

I stare at the ceiling. Trying to will myself not to say anything. But I can't. “You would think this is about money because you're incapable of any human emotion. Congratulations, the Botox has finally seeped into your brain. Fuck you, fuck the money, and fuck the company. I don't want it. I'm here for him.” I say, pointing to the ceiling above us. “My dad. It's a fucked up joke from the universe that it's him dying instead of you.”

She stares at me with her nostrils flaring, ready to lunge at me. But she doesn't. She knows I would love nothing more than to have a reason to kill her. Instead, she huffs and heads back up to her room. The least of my worries right now is money. I haven't really slept since I last spent the night with Quinn. It's been days. When I reach the front doors, I see that Yvette's bags are by it. She's leaving again, thankfully. Not once has my dad asked for her. Growing up, I thought she was his world because I knew it wasn't me. But now I see everything isn't as it seems.



I'M GREETED by Cash as I step into the gym. “Hey man, it's been a while.” He says, giving me a dap.

“Yeah, I've been busy.” I say through a yawn. I should probably rest, but I'm restless.

“I'm not trying to be a dick, but you look like you've been through hell. Everything alright?” he asks, placing a hand on my shoulder.

My instinct is to brush it off, make a joke and talk shit. But I feel like I'm fucking drowning right now. I don't know how I became the caretaker of my dying father, but it's more than I can handle.

“I ...” my voice trails off as a lump forms in my throat. “My dad is dying.” I say without looking at him.

“Fuck...’ He lets out a long, low sigh. “I knew something was going on. How are you holding up?” he asks.

“I’m not.” I sigh, sitting down on the bench, letting my shoulders sag. He sits next to me. “Somehow, I became his caretaker.” I scoff. “I never thought I would be watching over someone who is dying. I sure as fuck didn’t think it would be my dad. We didn’t talk until recently when he told me about his diagnosis. It’s not that I don’t want to be there for him... it’s that I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing.”

“You know I’m always here. I know you don’t like that kumbaya shit as you call it—” I laugh “—but I got you if you ever need to blow off steam or talk... like we are now.”

“Yeah, I was ready to tell you to go fuck yourself a few seconds ago—” he chuckles “—but it’s all too fucking much. My biggest concern used to be what pussy I was going to fall into for the night. Now... shit... that’s all pointless.” I say.

“I have to say, I don’t think anyone would know what to do if they were in your position.”

Cash is right. Death is a natural part of life, yet it’s taboo. No one talks about it until it blindsides them.

“Thanks Cash.”

“Anytime. Are you sure you want to work out today? You look like you need sleep more than a punching bag.”

“I probably do, but I’m so fucking restless even though I’m exhausted.” I say.

“How ‘bout this? We do a short workout to tire your body and then you can get some rest. Where are you staying?”

“At my dad’s house. Nights are hard for him. I’m hoping once hospice comes today that they can get his pain under control.”

“I think you should go to your place and rest. You’re not going to be able to rest there.” He says.

“Yeah,” I rub my eyes. “You’re probably right.”

“Of course I am.” He slaps my back. “Now let’s workout, bitch.”

I toss my head back and laugh. “Bet.”

I take Cash’s advice and head home after our workout. He said short, but it turned into our regular hour-long session, minus the sparring at the end. It’s what I needed because now I feel like I could fall asleep for a few days. I call my dad to let him know I’ll be back later this evening. I don’t tell him I’m exhausted or that I’m scared shitless. Instead, I tell him I have business to take care of. He sounds better now than he did last night, and this morning, so that eases my anxiety about not being there with him.

I send a text to Charles anyway.

**Kyrell: I’ll be back later this evening. Call me if anything happens.**

**Charles: He’s fine. The nurse arrived not too long ago and gave him something for pain. He’s comfortable.**

I head into the kitchen and Stella has left me food. Even though I’m not here she’ll come and check on things and make food for me to have when I am home. I practically inhale a plate of roasted chicken with mashed potatoes and vegetables. Once I’m finished, I head up to my room and roll a joint before I take a shower. I want to be as close to comatose as I possibly can. I need fucking sleep. When I step into the shower I see Quinn’s body wash. I have to admit, I fucking miss her. I’ve missed her since I left her apartment.

But I don’t want to drag her into this mess. I don’t have the energy to give to anyone else right now. She deserves more. So much more. I push thoughts of her out of my mind and let the steaming water cascade over me until I feel my high settle in. I don’t even bother getting dressed. I crash onto my bed and let my eyes drift shut.



WHEN I WAKE AGAIN, it's still light outside. I fumble around for my phone to make sure I didn't miss any messages but realize it's 6:30 in the morning the following day.

"Holy fuck." I mutter in a panic. I fell asleep around noon yesterday. I triple check my messages and make sure I have no missed calls. I don't have any, so everything must be good.

I quickly get ready. I didn't mean to be away for so long, but I have to admit that it feels good to have slept. Cash was right. I wouldn't have been able to sleep there, no matter how hard I tried. I toss some clothes into a bag to take to my dad's house and send a text to Stella to let her know I won't be home for the next couple of days.

As I pull up to my dad's house, I feel more relaxed when I remember Yvette won't be here. I'm relieved to see a car from the hospice center parked in the driveway. When I enter the house, I hear my dad's laughter and he's talking animatedly to someone. I follow his voice to the kitchen. He beams at me from where he's sitting at the table. When I turn to look at who he's talking to, I almost drop my bag.

"Quinn, this is my son, Kyrell." He says. Quinn almost drops the plate of food in her hands as her eyes land on me. "Kyrell, this is Quinn. My nurse." Our eyes remain locked onto each other and neither of us move.

"Hi..." I whisper.

"She's been so good to me while you were away." He says. "What happened to you anyway?" he turns his attention towards me.

"I... uh..." I stutter as I'm finally able to tear my eyes away from Quinn's. "I fell asleep." I say looking at him.

"You're welcome to sleep in one of the guest rooms. And you know you don't have to stay with me. I enjoy that you do, but I don't want you to be uncomfortable."

Quinn's eyes snap to mine and then back to the food in her hands. She hasn't said a word.

"I'm fine, dad. I just want to be sure you're okay." I say.

"I was about to try to eat some breakfast, care to join me?" he asks.

Quinn finally moves for the first time since she saw me. She walks past me, setting the plate of food in front my dad.

"I can—I can get you plate. If you're uh..." she clears her throat and tugs on her ear, "if you're hungry. I can do that for you. Get the plate. Get the plate of food for you... I mean."

I smile at her. "I can get it. Thanks Quinn."

She nods, turning quickly to leave the kitchen. My eyes are glued to her long after she's out of my sight. My dad clears his throat, drawing my attention back to him.

"Do you know her?" he asks.

"I do." I head towards the kitchen island to make myself a plate of food. I'd prefer not to have this conversation with him.

Instead of pressing the issue, he says, "huh..." and goes back to eating his food.

Why is she here? I thought she worked at a spa in West Hollywood. This seems like a major change of pace for her. I realize I've been holding my plate while staring at the food for longer than necessary. I clear my throat as I fill my plate. My stomach rumbles, reminding me I haven't eaten in over twelve hours. I settle next to my dad with my plate of heaping food.

"You're okay, right?" he asks. It reminds me of when I was seven and he asked me if I was okay.

I take a bite of food, prolonging my response. "I'm alright. I don't know why you're asking me when I should be asking you that."

"We both know I'm dying. I'm not okay, but I'm happy you're here."

I smile at him and decide to be honest. "I'm not okay either, but I'm happy to be here with you."

He pats my hand with tears in his eyes and nods his head. "I understand."

After eating two helpings of breakfast, we work on the model ship. We've finished painting and now we're ready to assemble it.

"Did Harlow send you the pictures yet?" My dad asks, watching me carefully assemble the pieces.

"Uh..." I say distractedly, trying to focus and carry on a conversation with him. Once the piece is in place, I turn to look at him. "Yeah, she said they should be here today. I plan to pick them up later."

"How do you know Quinn?" he asks. Now that he mentions her, I haven't seen her since she walked out of the kitchen. I wonder if she left.

"She's Harlow's friend. They met a couple of years ago." I say, avoiding his gaze.

I'd rather not get on the subject of Quinn right now. My heart felt like it stopped when my eyes landed on her this morning. It's been a couple of weeks since she kicked me out of her apartment. It's as though the universe is screaming at me, "*Here, look what you pushed away, you dumb fuck!*"

"She's a really nice young woman. Took good care of me yesterday and today." He says with a smile on his face.

"She is... amazing." I pretend to be more interested in sorting pieces than in this conversation. "Okay, and this piece goes where?" I ask him, holding it up.

After a few seconds, I turn to look at him to ask again, but he's fallen asleep. I set the piece down and put his blanket over him. We've had an eventful morning. This is the most active he's been in a few days. I was worried that things had taken a turn for the worse, but right now he's comfortable and content.

While he's sleeping, I head out to the garden for some fresh air. Instead of my usual joint, I eat one of my lemon crème white chocolate edibles. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Quinn. She stops halfway towards me, turns around and starts back the other way. I can tell she's deciding whether or

not she wants to talk to me. I'm hoping she does, so I don't take the risk of looking at her. She stops again, turns back around, and walks toward me.

"Hey..." She says softly, sitting next to me.

"Hi." I smile at her.

For a moment the only sound is the trickling of the water fountain and the birds chirping. She clears her throat. "I didn't mean—I didn't know he was your dad. I can ask for a different patient." She stumbles over her words.

"Why?" I ask, looking at her.

"Because... I don't want you to feel like I'm imposing." She says, biting on her bottom lip.

I position myself to look at her better. I'm tempted to sweep the loose curls out of her face, but I refrain.

"My dad likes you. He deserves the best care possible and you're providing that for him. Thank you."

Her eyes snap to mine. "It's my job, Ky—I mean Kyrell." She corrects herself.

"You can still call me Ky. Yeah... it's a job but, the way you interact and care for him—that's a gift."

"Thank you." She says as the corners of her mouth turn up.

"Are you working two jobs now?" I ask her.

"No." She shakes her head. "I quit my other job. I plan to go back to school next fall to get my master's degree. But... I need money and experience, so I found something that would provide that. My boss was gracious enough to let me stop working at the spa early so I could do some training before working with your father." She steals a glance at me for the first time since she sat down and smiles when our eyes meet.

There was always something special about Quinn. I know I give her shit about her need for rules and plans, but it truly is admirable.

"That's amazing, Quinn. I'm happy for you." She looks away from me again. I lean back, resting my head against the



bench.

“You... could have told me what was going on... I would’ve understood.”

I close my eyes. “I know.” I take a deep breath. “But I didn’t know how to say it.” I open my eyes and look into hers. “I was a mess when I showed up at your house that night. He was in the hospital and everything... became real.” My eyes burn with unshed tears, a feeling I’ve become well acquainted with. I rub them with my fingertips, pinching the bridge of my nose. Sitting up, I clear my throat and look at her.

Quinn wraps her arms snugly around me. My body tenses for a split second, but then I relax into her, wrapping my arms tightly around her as if she is the only thing keeping me tethered. Quinn is holding onto me so tightly that for the first time since my dad was in the hospital, I feel supported. Her embrace warms me more than the sun kissing our skin right now. She doesn’t say a word, but I can feel all the unsaid things.

Quinn begins to pull away first, but I don’t let her go. “Ky...” she giggles. “I’m working, ya know?”

“Are you? As what? A professional hugger?”

She’s laughing so hard she can barely breathe and I didn’t realize how much I’ve missed the sound. I reluctantly let her go because she is technically working.

She smooths her top down as she straightens up. Then fixes her ponytail with a smirk on her face. “You’re too much.”

“I needed a hug.” I admit.

“I know, that’s why I hugged you—you fucking octopus.” She smiles.

It’s my turn to laugh. “How am I an octopus?”

“Something about that grip of yours.” She says with a wink. “I’m gonna check on your dad.”

“Alright.” I nod.

I watch her walk away, but then she turns around to face me. “You’re still a stubborn asshole, by the way.” Then she turns on her heel and marches toward the house. I laugh and she flicks me off over her shoulder.

It’s ironic she’s wearing an all-white outfit again today. A literal fucking angel.

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## CHAPTER 24

*Kyrell*

The past few days have gone better for my dad. I know he isn't going to miraculously get better. But I do hope the rest of his days are filled with good memories and not pain. The only change is that Quinn is now his nurse. When Dr. Stone had mentioned hospice care, I thought that meant they were going to cease all care and let him die. It's been the opposite. Quinn has made sure he's comfortable so he can enjoy what time he does have left.

Not only has she been a comfort to my dad, but to me as well. I try not to bother her too much when she's here because I know it's her job. But knowing she is here has helped me breathe a little better.

"I'll be back." I say to Quinn as I pass her on my way out. It's early in the morning, but I promised my dad yesterday I would head back to my house to pick up the pictures Harlow sent.

She looks up from a tablet she's holding. "Oh, okay. What do you want for breakfast?"

"You know you don't have to cook for us, right?"

She shrugs. "I know, but if I tell your dad we're making breakfast together, he's more inclined to get out of bed."

I lean against the doorframe, resting my head against it, watching her scroll through the tablet in her hands. Her eyes flit to mine and she raises her eyebrows, waiting for me to say something.

"I like blueberry pancakes with lots of butter and syrup."

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asks, brushing her curls out of her face.

“Like what?”

“Like you want to... eat me or something.” She says, glancing over her shoulder to make sure no one is around.

“Maybe I do.”

She narrows her eyes. “Not gonna happen, buddy.”

“That’s what you thought before we happened the first time.” I flash her a smile.

“Keep your voice down.” She hisses. “I’m working. Stop harassing me.” The corners of her mouth twitch.

“Oh, right.” I nod, trying to keep a straight face. “I apologize for the intrusion, Nurse Halifax.” I wink.

She shakes her head, faking annoyance. “Bye, run along.” She says with a wave of her hand.

I chuckle and leave her alone. I have no plans of doing anything *with* or *to* her... even if I want to. I’m grateful she’s even talking to me. She could’ve asked for a different placement, but she stayed. I don’t know if it’s for my dad or for me... maybe both. Either way, she’s here.



I FIND Stella in the living room when I arrive back at my place. She’s folding a basket of laundry and watching a soap opera.

“A package arrived for you. It’s on the table.” She says without taking her eyes off the screen.

“Yes!” I clap my hands together, startling her. “I’ve been waiting on this.”

She looks at me for the first time since I arrived home and grins. “You seem... happy today.”

I collapse on the couch, letting out a sigh. “You’ll never guess who my dad’s nurse is.”

“Who?” she asks excitedly, suddenly more interested in what I have to say than the TV.

“Quinn. Quinn Halifax is my dad’s fucking nurse—pardon my French—is my dad’s nurse.”

“Ah-ha,” she gives me a smug smile. “What did I tell you?”

“Stella...” I say, already knowing where this conversation is going.

“Kyrell...” she says in a singsong tone. “I told you, one of these days one of these girls is going to stick to you. And well,” she raises her eyebrows with a grin, “it seems that you are stuck to her too.”

I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose. “I can’t give her what she deserves... right now.”

She grabs my hand. “I know you’re going through a lot. But all I ask is that you take note of how she makes you feel. I haven’t seen you smile in weeks and today... you’re so happy.”

Quinn is like a warm stack of blueberry pancakes doused in syrup. My comfort and delight.

“I understand why you’re hesitant to start something now.” She squeezes my hand. “But, don’t shut yourself off from a chance to be happy.”

I used to pride myself on how well I could go with the flow. But it’s hard to do that when everything is uncertain and death is the inevitable outcome.

“I’ve been an asshole to her, Stella.”

“Why does this not surprise me?” she lets out an exasperated sigh as she stands up.

I toss my head back and laugh. “You’re supposed to side with me! Not agree.”

She sucks her teeth, placing her hand on her hip. “Boy, us women have to stick together. As far as I’m concerned, she’s always right. It would do you well to remember that.”

I gape at her. She rarely gives me any input on my relationships with women. But clearly, she's found her voice.

"Let me get this straight," I say, cocking my head to the side. "I'm wrong... even if I'm right?"

"Yes, dear." She says, patting my cheek. "See, already understanding. It will make things easier when you two finally end up together."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that." I mutter.

"Mark my words," she says, raising her finger in the air, "you and that girl are fated for one another."

"I don't believe in fate. Life is too cruel for there to be such a thing."

"Say what you want," she shrugs, "but it isn't some happen chance that she's your dad's nurse. Of all the nurses in the state of California, she's the one who gets assigned to care for your dad." She winks. "Think about it Kyrell." She exits the living room before I can say anything in protest.

When I first saw her at my dad's house, I thought I was dreaming. I wasn't sure when I would see her again. I still feel I did the right thing for myself, even if it did hurt us in the process. Maybe that makes me an asshole. I don't know. At the time, I thought I was doing the right thing. But now she knows what's going on.

I wasn't sure what she'd say to me or if she'd say anything at all. I didn't want pity from her. She gave me nothing but understanding, which made me feel even worse for the way I treated her, as if the culmination of everything was *nothing*. She's trying to reinforce that wall that went up between us that day at her place. I'm tempted to press against it, to knock it down, but I also know it's her turn to let me in.



I SET the box containing the pictures down on the table when I arrive back at my dad's house. I wanted to wait to open it with

him. I head up to his room but hear Quinn's voice call out to me.

"He's still sleeping." She says.

I back up and peer into the study. She's sitting there with papers in front of her, staring at her computer screen with a pen in her mouth.

"Oh... what are you doing?" I ask, entering the study.

"Just charting." She says distractedly. "Did the pictures arrive?" she turns her attention towards me.

I've never seen her in glasses before and it's doing something to me. While my mind wanders to filthy thoughts, she stares at me, waiting for my answer.

"I didn't realize you wear glasses."

"Oh, yeah." She says, adjusting them on her face. "Only when I'm staring at a screen."

"They look good on you." Jesus Christ, I can't help myself.

"You would find me wearing glasses attractive." She shakes her head with a smile tugging at her lips.

"I'm sorry for everything." I blurt out.

She takes her glasses off, staring at them with wide eyes. "Wow... these things are powerful. They got an apology from your assholiness." She places them back on her face.

I know she meant that as an insult, but I still laugh. "Alright, I deserved that."

"You hurt me, Ky. I'm still hurt. But I also understand now why you did it. But that doesn't make it okay. I told you I'd walk with you and I meant that. I still do."

I don't deserve her. Not even as a friend. "I know I'm handsome and well put together on the outside," she scoffs, "but..." my shoulders sag, "I'm really a mess. And I truly cannot imagine trying to focus on someone else right now. I know I should have told you. I don't expect you to wait around for me to get my shit together either... I just need time."

“Who said I’m waiting around for you?” she asks, raising an eyebrow.

Jealousy slowly unfurls inside of me. “Oh... I didn’t—”

“I’m just kidding.” She says, laughing. “I mean, you saw how the dating app went and I have to get my shit together if I plan to go to school next fall. I will admit, Lincoln and I still text...and we’ve hung out, but we’re just friends.” She shrugs.

I curse myself for telling her to get with a guy like Lincoln. The urge to punch him is strong.

“Right... well, I won’t crash any more dates.” At least that’s what I say. I didn’t promise, so it’s still a possibility.

She laughs. “Ky, we’re fine. We were friends before, so why are you making this weird?”

I feel like the roles have been reversed and I don’t like it. Is this how every woman I’ve slighted has felt? Low key feelin’ like a monster right now. Quinn checks her watch, gathers her papers, and snaps her laptop closed.

“I better get Elias up. It’s almost nine.” She tries to walk past me, but I’m blocking her path and she runs into me, thinking I was going to move.

She looks up at me and I can’t fucking help myself.

Time slows down when my lips crash into hers. I fucking missed her. The feel of her on me, around me. It’s only been a couple of weeks, but my body reacts as if it’s the first time we touched. Her mouth hums against mine as she moans when our tongues meet. I thread my fingers through her curls, holding her flush against my body. I grip her thighs, wrapping her legs around my waist, and set her on the desk, causing things to clatter to the floor. I kiss her as if she’s the antidote to my pain.

Her hands fumble with my belt while I kiss her neck. “Ky... we shouldn’t be doing this. Your dad and—”

“You can stop.” I say, biting at her lip.

“My job.” She moans as I palm her pussy in my hand.



“Yep... you have a job.” I say as her hands finally undo my belt.

“I shouldn’t.” She says, gripping my shirt and kissing me.

I pull down her pants and she lifts her hips to let me. “But you are...”

She doesn’t say another word as she pulls me on top of her. I pull her panties to the side and thrust into her wetness. The feel of her wrapped around me again makes my breath hitch. She wraps one leg tightly around my waist, slinging the other over my shoulder, as I thrust into her. I sit up to rub my thumb in circles around her clit. She moans loudly, as she spreads her legs further apart for me, and I place my hand over her mouth to stifle the sounds. I don’t want any interruptions.

She takes my hand and sucks on my fingers. I didn’t think I had a kink for women in uniform. But her glasses, her nurse outfit, and the way she’s sucking on my fingers, while I fuck her on top of this desk say otherwise. I knew I missed her, but I had no idea how badly I craved her. I told myself not to kiss her, but she looked up at me and her lips were so inviting. And like the selfish fucker I am, I wanted to take everything she’d give me. Even if it was just one stolen kiss. But she kissed me back, pulled me into her, and welcomed me with open legs.

Quinn’s eyes squeeze shut as she breathes heavily and sweat glistens across her skin. She lets out a stifled cry as she turns her head and bites down on my arm where my hand is planted next to her. Biting wasn’t my thing either, but it is now. Her body tenses and jerks as she cums for me. She gasps as her leg tightens around my waist, locking me into place.

I’ve been holding back on nutting because I wanted her to cum first and didn’t want her talking shit later, but now that she has, I pump into her without restraint. The desk is scraping across the floor with each thrust—shit is falling everywhere. Quinn is trying her best to be quiet, but is failing, and then I cum. I let out a mix of a moan, grunt, and growl. I’m not sure what the fuck it was. But I just produced the most animalistic sound as my body shudders. I start to feel lightheaded again, but don’t pass out. Instead, I collapse on top of Quinn.

Our hearts beat wildly as we lie chest to chest trying to catch our breath. Quinn's eyes are closed with a blissful smile on her lips. I kiss her neck and she opens her eyes, checking her watch.

"I really need to work." She shakes her head, sighing. "I cannot believe this. I cannot believe you!" She says, shoving me off of her as she hops off the desk, snatching her pants up off the floor.

"I gave you plenty of opportunities to stop, Angel." I say with a smug smile.

"You cannot tell anyone about this. Not. A. Single. Fucking. Soul." She enunciates each word as she pokes her finger into my chest. "Got it?" She raises an eyebrow then pulls her pants back up cinching them around her waist as if that will keep me out of them.

"Yes, Nurse Halifax. I won't tell anyone I just fucked you senseless on the desk in the study." I say, refastening my belt. "Although, I think they should give you a raise and a gold star for that."

She smacks my arm as I laugh. "Ky, I'm fucking serious. Not a word."

"Quinn, I won't say anything. You make it seem like I'm going to call your job and tell them."

"It's not like you kept your trap shut about the sex injury." She glares at me while fixing her hair.

"That was funny, though. How is KP anyway?"

"Not the time, Ky. Not the time. Clean this mess up. I don't want Charles side eyeing me later. He knows I was in here." Quinn yanks the door open and, to her surprise, Charles is on the other side, getting ready to knock. She freezes, but recovers quickly. "Ky needed some... consoling." She says and then zips past him.

I collapse onto the couch. Charles is giving me a knowing look as he shakes his head. "You haven't changed much, have you?"

“You heard her—she was consoling me.”

“Right, I’m sure she was.” He says with a smirk.

Charles knows more about me than he’d care to. He caught me in a lot of compromising positions when I was younger. He let me get away with a lot of shit too. What can you tell a child when you aren’t their parent? I was a dick and took full advantage of that. Eventually, I calmed down, but he was with me through that wild teenage phase.

“I’m going to clean this up and shower. Then I’ll be down for breakfast.”

Charles shakes his head as he leaves me to clean up the study Quinn and I just wrecked.

When I get down the kitchen, Quinn won’t even look at me as she talks to my dad. Instead of pressing her buttons, I shut my trap as she says, and eat my blueberry pancakes she so graciously made for me.

“These are good Quinn.”

She finally looks at me. “Thanks, there’re extra blueberries and strawberries if you want some.” She says, sliding them towards me. I dump the bowl on my plate.

My dad stops eating as he looks at me. “I didn’t know you loved blueberries this much, you know your mo—” he starts but then stops. “Anyway, how was your morning?”

“Eventful.” I smirk, glancing at Quinn.

She gives me a warning look as she gets up from the table. I watch her go over to the counter, grab a knife, and mouth, “I will kill you” behind my dad’s back.

I try my best to hold in my laughter but something is wrong with me because I think she looks sexy threatening me.

“After we eat breakfast, Dad, we can open the box Harlow sent with the pictures.”

“I’m done,” he says, setting his fork down.

I chuckle. “Eager to see the pictures?”

“I don’t know what gave it away.” He smirks.

“I’m almost done.” I say with a mouthful of pancake.

“Take your time.” He says.

Quinn smiles at my dad as he practically bounces in his seat, trying to patiently wait for me to finish my food.

I put the last bite in my mouth. “Okay, we’re good.”

“I’ll clean up.” Quinn says, taking my plate.

“Thanks.” I help my dad back into his wheelchair. I grab the package as we head to his room.

I open the box once we’re in his room. Of course, Harlow has wrapped up everything nicely, all black paper with white satin ribbons.

I hand the pictures over to my dad. “You can do the honors.”

He smiles and unties the ribbon. He unfolds the wrapping, revealing the first picture, and puts his hand over his mouth, sobbing. It’s the photo of us laughing together in the garden. I don’t even remember who said what, but I do remember being happy at that moment. My eyes burn with tears. I’m usually not emotional, but these past two weeks have caused everything to be raw.

“These are beautiful.” His voice trembles.

I clear my throat. “Yeah, Harlow has a good eye. I’m glad she let me spring these on her last minute.”

“Me too.” He says, still looking at the pictures in awe. “You look so much like her... almost an exact replica.”

“Who?” I ask with a quirked brow as I look at the pictures over his shoulder.

“Your mom...” he’s staring at the photo, running his hand along it.

“I don’t know if I should be offended or if you’re joking. I look nothing like Yvette.”

He chuckles, but it turns into a cough. I grab his glass of water, offering him some. Once he catches his breath, he speaks again. “No, not her...”

“Okay, then who?” I don’t know if he is feeling well because he sounds delusional. I’m wondering if I should call Quinn in to check him out.

“Your... real mom.” He whispers.

I have to ask him, “Can you repeat that? I don’t think I heard you correctly.”

“Your real mom.” He says more clearly.

I look at him as if he has two heads. “I know it’s unfortunate that Yvette is my mother, but you don’t have to mess around with me.”

“Kyrell, listen to me.” His eyes meet mine for the first time since opening the package. “Yvette isn’t your mother.”

The look in his eyes lets me know he isn’t joking. “W-What?” I suddenly feel like I can’t breathe.

“I’ve made a lot of mistakes, Kyrell and—”

“No.” I say, shaking my head as the ringing begins in my ears. “No. Nope. T-This—you’ve got to be fucking with me.” I say, pacing the room. “This isn’t a mistake. You deliberately kept this from me. I’m twenty-four years old. Twenty-four!” I shout. “And you’re just now telling me that bitch of a fucking woman who treated me like absolute fucking shit, isn’t my mother?” I demand, staring at him. The anger that had been simmering below the surface begins to froth and boil over.

“Kyrell, I didn’t want to keep it from you I—”

“You what?” I shrug. “Thought you’d wait until you’re dying to clear your fucking conscious. You weren’t there for me, Elias!” I boom, enunciating every word. “You weren’t fucking there. You left me with some cunt when I had a mom. A mom!” I scream so loudly that I think I’m going to pop a blood vessel. “And you left me with her!”

“I didn’t know how to tell you.” He sobs.

I don't give a fuck. He could die in front of me right now and I wouldn't care. His tears mean absolutely nothing compared to what I endured my whole life. I allowed him in thinking, like a foolish child, that he wanted a relationship with me. But he was really building up to tell me this bullshit. That he kept me from the woman who gave birth to me.

My heart is pounding against my chest. I can't catch my breath. The ringing in my ears has brought a sharp stabbing pain to my skull. Sweat is dripping down my back. My whole body is shaking with rage.

"You're fucking dead to me." I spit at him. "I want nothing more to do with you."

"Kyrell, no, wait!" He says in a panicked voice, trying to get up from his chair but he's too weak.

"I've been waiting for twenty-four years. I'm done." Ripping the door open, I storm out of the room with Elias yelling after me. Quinn is in the hallway with wide eyes. I don't know how much she heard and I don't want to know either. I hear her footsteps following quickly behind me as I head for the front door.

"Ky!" She says standing in front of me so I can't leave. "Wait..."

"Quinn, move." I say. My jaw is so tense that I'm grinding my teeth. I'm taking breaths so deep, trying to calm myself down, that my lungs hurt.

"Ky..." she reaches out, touching my face. There are tears in her eyes.

"Quinn... just move please." I say through gritted teeth. "Please."

She stares at me for a few seconds, but then moves out of the way. I wrench the front door open. It flies back, hitting the wall, causing the glass to shatter.

"Ky!" Quinn calls. "Please, just wait."

The pleading in her voice causes my steps to momentarily falter. I don't want to face her. I can't stop the involuntary

tears from falling. There's a beast raging inside me that not even she can calm.

She finally reaches me, wrapping her arms around me without saying a word. And the tears that I was holding in are released like a broken dam. Something in me breaks that was barely holding itself together to begin with. The noises coming from me don't sound like me. All Quinn does is hold me tighter as I sob. I'm torn between not wanting her to let me go and crawling out of my skin. I feel like I'm floating outside of my body even though I feel her on me. A familiar feeling from when I was a kid. When everything became too much, I'd float away. It was easier to be outside of my body than in it.

"I just want you to know I'm here... you're not alone." Quinn whispers. Her voice brings me back to the present.

"I gotta go, Quinn." I say, unwrapping her arms from around me. "I gotta get out of here."

I glance at her before I step into my car. I know she wants to beg me to stay, but also knows that I need to get away. She touches the window and then backs away. I rev the engine and tear out of the driveway. I don't know if I can put enough distance between myself and Elias. I don't know if I can put enough distance between the demons of the past and the present. I feel like they're clawing at me, begging to be freed. For the first time in my life, I feel like letting them drag me down, and allowing them to win.

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## CHAPTER 25



I stand in the driveway, watching him speed away, until I can't see his car anymore. I wanted to beg him to stay, but I knew that was selfish to ask of him when the pain was so clearly etched on his face. There was nothing I could do but hug him. All I heard was yelling and the word mom. I wasn't trying to listen in, but Kyrell was shouting and I heard that word clearly.

I turn back toward the house, knowing that I need to check on Elias. Charles meets me at the door.

"What happened?" he asks.

"Ky... his dad—something about his mom." I say distractedly, as I feel the glass from the door crunch beneath my feet. My mind is on Kyrell, hoping that he's okay. He tore out of the driveway as if he were speeding on the freeway.

"Oh, no..." Charles mutters. "I—I'll clean this up."

"I'm going to check on Elias." I climb the stairs slowly, searching my brain for something to say. I'm not sure that there is anything I can say.

When I reach his room, he's slumped over in his wheelchair, cries wracking through his body. I gently place my hand on his shoulder and he looks at me with bloodshot eyes.

"Did he leave?" he asks, already knowing the answer.

"He did." I whisper.

"I've ruined everything." He says cradling his head in his hands.

I'm not sure if he has ruined everything. I hadn't realized Kyrell and his dad even had a strained relationship. When I



spoke about my family, he'd ask me enough questions so that he wouldn't have to talk about his. If I asked him, he'd change the subject or say something funny so I'd forget. Our relationship wasn't exactly one of depth at the time. I didn't expect him to tell me his whole life story or even to bare the dark parts of himself to me.

"Elias, let's get you to bed."

He doesn't say a word, just nods. I help him transfer to the bed and get situated.

He grabs my hand. "Can you try calling him for me? Please?"

"I—I can't get involved in this. Kyrell... he'll come back when he's ready."

"I don't think he will." Fresh tears fall down his face.

The pain between these two men is palatable. As much as I wish I could fix things for them, I know I can't. I swallow the lump in my throat, grab a tissue, and wipe Elias' eyes.

"You need your rest, so when he comes back, you'll have your strength." I say hopefully even though I don't fully believe the words. Kyrell was in so much pain that I don't know that he'll come back.

"You'll let me know if he does come back?" he asks.

"Of course." I smile.

He nods, closing his eyes, but tears are still streaming down his face. I wipe them away before standing to pick up the pictures that were in his lap. I can't help but smile when I look at them despite everything going on. They look happy. Kyrell looks so happy.

I take the picture on top and set it next to Elias' bed. I place the rest of them on his dresser. All of them are stunning. I turn the lights off as I leave the room, pulling my phone from my pocket. I search for Kyrell's name and call him. It rings, but eventually I get his voicemail. I send him a text.

**Quinn: I wanted to check on you. Make sure you're safe.**

I don't expect him to respond, but I still want him to know I'm here.

*Kyrell*

I still haven't come back to my body. I've been free falling since Elias told me Yvette isn't my mother. A million questions have raced through my mind. Who is she? Did she not want me? Is she even alive? Just another fucking layer of pain that I'm not sure I want, but curiosity is eating me up just as much as the pain is.

How was everything a fucking lie? I'm wondering if the past few months with him were even real. Did he really want a relationship or was he trying to soften the blow of what he had to tell me? My mind is full of unanswered questions. I go to the only place I feel safe—my house.

I strip off my shirt as I head for my gym to unleash some anger before I do something stupid. I don't bother wrapping my hands or wearing gloves, I just want to feel my hands wail against the punching bag.

Jab, cross, hook. Why did he choose to tell me this now?

Jab, cross, jab, cross. My knuckles start to bleed. I feel the sting as the cuts that were just healing open again.

Jab, cross, uppercut, cross, hook. What did he expect? That I'd be grateful he told me? That I wouldn't get upset?

Jab, cross, hook, *crack* . A pain shoots through my left hand. I try to punch the bag again, but an even stronger wave of pain shoots up my entire arm.

“Fucckkk!!!!” I scream.

I resort to kicking the punching bag. I kick and kick and kick until sand bursts onto the floor as the bag splits open.

I collapse to the floor, letting the sand cover my feet. The pain in my arm isn't allowing me to think of anything else. It numbs the rage, sadness, and the pain my soul feels. It numbs

it all. My body finally stills without the intrusive thoughts racing through my brain and I breathe. The anger is still running rampant through my veins, but it's simmering now instead of boiling over.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I check to see who it is.

**Quinn: I wanted to check on you. Make sure you're safe.**

I stare at the screen for a few seconds before locking it again. I close my eyes. My heart is still beating wildly in my chest. I don't want to put any of this on her. Even if she says she's here for me, this isn't something I'd want anyone to carry with me. I don't even want to fucking carry it.

Instead, I call the one person who I know won't try and carry it for me.

"Hello, this is Dr. Jones." She picks up after a few rings.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to will the tears to stop falling. "Dr. Jones..." my trembling voice gives me away. "I—I need your help."

"Are you safe? Where are you?"

"I'm home..." I sigh, allowing the tears to fall. "It's all too much."

"Kyrell, are you physically okay?"

"Yes, well I broke my hand—I think, but it wasn't intentional. I was just trying to let some anger out... on my punching bag. Not a person."

She lets out an audible sigh of relief. "I can be at your house in... twenty minutes."

"No, no. I can come to you." I say.

"It's not safe to drive if your hand is broken. I don't need you hurting yourself on the way here."

I stare at the ceiling. "Okay."

After she assures me she is on her way, I lie on the floor, trying to breathe. I'm not in a fit state to drive. The pain in my hand is becoming unbearable and I still feel disconnected from

reality. I peel myself off the floor and head for my kitchen. The only thing on my mind is getting some edibles in my system to take the edge off. I eat two of them. I go back to the gym, grab some wrapping tape and begin carefully wrapping my hand. It's already swelling. I try to wrap it the best I can, but the slightest touch causes pain.

Exactly twenty minutes later, Dr. Jones is on my doorstep.

"May I come in?" she asks.

"Yeah..." I say, stepping aside, allowing her to enter. "

"Where can we talk?"

I walk towards my backyard and I hear her heels click on the marble floor behind me. Once outside, I lie on a lounge, put a joint between my lips, and spark up. "I hope you don't mind. It's been a long fucking day."

"Care to tell me what happened?"

I look at the clouds in the sky as I take a hit of my joint before responding. "My dad... Elias," I correct myself, "told me today that Yvette is not my mother. It's some other woman who I've never met."

"How did you respond?"

"I yelled. Because... he has no clue what Yvette did to me." I sit up on the edge of the lounge and start bouncing my knee. "Yvette—she abused me for years. I'm not talking about a spank or even a whip with a belt. That would've been too kind for her. I would've welcomed that. No, she let me know she wanted me dead without ever actually killing me. But she wanted me to know that she could easily do it if she wanted to... and that my dad would be none the wiser because," I scoff, "he was never fucking there. She had a knack for manipulating and hiding things from him. He would be gone for days... weeks, sometimes even months, but I always knew when he was coming home because the abuse would suddenly stop. She'd be nice—so nice—shit, even I believed she was going to change. It was all bullshit. Every fucking thing was bullshit." I feel my body heat as the anger rises in me again.

Dr. Jones doesn't say anything. She watches me, waiting for me to continue like she does in all my sessions. That's why I like talking to her. She doesn't try to fix me. I let everything out. I tell her about the abuse I endured, every detail.

"But, I can honestly say, I don't think Elias ever knew. After spending time with him over the past few months, I can't imagine him allowing her to treat me that way."

"But you still feel he failed to protect you as a child?"

"Yes, because he did." I pinch the bridge of my nose as I feel the sting of tears again. "He left me. And now, I don't understand why he would keep my mother from me. I still don't understand why he was gone so much while I was growing up. He's never told me—he just apologized."

"Have you asked him?"

"No..." I let a silence settle between us. Again, she waits for me. "I'm afraid of what he'll say. I want to know why but... what if it adds another layer of pain to this already fucked up situation?"

"What if it doesn't?" she asks me. "The only way you are going to get answers to your questions is if you ask him. I can help you sort through your emotions, but ultimately, if you want real answers, you'll have to ask him. I know you're angry and sad. You have every right to feel those emotions, to sit with them and process. There's no time frame for healing, so don't feel rushed to get answers tonight, or even tomorrow."

"Yeah..." I let out a long sigh, "but he's dying." I lie back on the lounge, rubbing my eyes. The weed is doing its job as my body slowly rises to the clouds.

"He is." She nods. "But don't show up for the benefit of Elias. Show up because it's what *you* want."

As the high spreads over me, I feel the tension in my muscles release. "What if he dies and I'm not there?"

"Do you want to be there?"

I look at her. "Yes."

“You can be there for him and still feel everything you’re feeling. These emotions won’t go away after one therapy session or overnight. It may help to talk to him, but only you can decide what you want to do.”

As much as I want to be there for my dad, I realize I need space. “I need time.” I say. “I don’t know that I could carry on a conversation with him right now.”

“Take your time.”

“Thank you, Dr. Jones. Sorry if I worried you.”

“You’re welcome.” She smiles. “How do you feel now?”

“I feel... calmer.” Granted, the calm is probably from my high.

She checks her watch. “I have to be back at the office for another client. Do you have someone who can take you to the hospital to get your hand looked at?”

I glance down at my hand. The pain has become a dull ache that is easy to ignore. But I know once my high wears off, it’s going to be excruciating.

“Yeah, I’ll call someone.”

“You’re under the influence and you have a broken hand. Please don’t try to drive yourself.” She stands, slinging her bag over her shoulder, giving me a pensive stare as she waits for my assurance.

“You’re a real one, Dr. Jones.” I smirk. “I’m not going to drive right now. I’ll call someone.”

“Good.” She smiles. “Call me if you need anything. I’ll see you later this week?”

“Yeah.” I nod.

“Alright, take care Kyrell.”

I hear her heels click on the concrete by the pool, then across the marble in my house. I never knew what a relief it is to simply talk to someone who isn’t directly involved in my life. It helps lighten the suffocating weight on my chest. I feel like I’ve been jerked from one extreme to the other lately.

From happy to sad to angry to pain. I'm exhausted. My eyes feel heavy as I gaze at the clouds moving across the sky. I focus my mind on the sound of the water rippling in the pool. It slowly lulls me to sleep.



THE THROBBING PAIN in my hand wakes me. I'm disoriented for a moment, but then I remember I fell asleep outside. The sun is already setting. I fumble around for my phone to call someone to take me to the hospital. The only person I can think of is Quinn.

"Hello, hi, are you okay?" she answers.

"Yeah. Could you take me to the hospital? I'm pretty sure I broke my hand."

"How are you okay if you're asking me to... never mind, I'll be right there." She lets out an exasperated sigh.

"Thank you." I chuckle.

Forty-five minutes later, I get into Quinn's car. Her brown eyes are watching me cautiously as she nibbles on her lip.

"Hi." I tip the seat back to lie down.

"Hey." she says, putting her car in drive.

"I—" she stops herself, falls silent, and turns up the radio.

I turn it down. "I'm not ready to talk about it right now, but I'm willing to talk about anything else."

"How did you break your hand?" she asks, not taking her eyes off the road.

"I got into a fight with the punching bag. It won." I say with a smirk.

She bites down on her lip, but a smirk is on her face and then she snorts with laughter. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't laugh, but that's fucking funny." Her hand slaps over her mouth as she laughs. "I'm sorry."

“Don’t be.” I grin. “I like hearing you laugh.”

Her eyes dart between me and the road. “I’m glad you’re alright. I was worried about you. Does your hand hurt?”

“Yeah, it woke me up. I’m pretty sure I heard a crack when I was letting loose on the punching bag.”

She cringes. “That sounds painful. We’ll be at the hospital soon.”

“Thanks Quinn... for being here.”

She smiles, turns up the music and starts singing along horribly to Kehlani. Being with her keeps all the bullshit temporarily at bay. I relax into the seat and listen to her rock out.



QUINN and I wait in the exam room for the doctor. They already took x-rays and gave me something a little stronger than Tylenol for the pain.

“Kyrell Knight, we meet again and this time for,” he glances at his tablet, “a fractured hand. I hope this experience was as enjoyable as the first one.” He says with a smirk.

Quinn’s eyes widen as she stares between the doctor and me. “Unfortunately, Doctor, this experience was far less enjoyable.” I wink at her.

“I’d imagine not,” he says as he hangs the x-rays up in front of the fluorescent light box. “If you look here,” he points at my pinky finger on the x-ray, “you can see that it’s broken. It’s commonly known as a boxer’s fracture. A break in the neck of your pinky finger.”

“Will I have to get a cast?” I ask, already annoyed with myself for going so hard on that damn punching bag.

“No, we can use a splint. It needs to be immobilized for a minimum of three weeks while it heals.”



“Alright, wrap me up, Doc.” I say with a smirk, holding out my hand.

He begins wrapping it and asks, “What did you do this time?”

I let out an exasperated sigh. “I’m going through some shit and needed to release some steam on my punching bag.” I answer honestly.

“Mmm...” he says distractedly as he winds the bandage around my hand, wrist, and part of my forearm. “Nothing like ramming your fists into a punching bag when you’re upset. Glad you’re coping in a healthy way. I do hope things get better.” He says as he finishes wrapping my hand.

I honestly didn’t think my coping mechanisms were healthy, but I guess it’s better than intentionally harming myself or others. I’m doing the best I can right now, even if I do feel like I’m flailing.

“Alright, that should be good. Wrap it in a plastic bag,” he says, handing me a stack of clear bags, “when you shower to keep it dry. And I’ll fax this information to your regular doctor’s office.” He stands and pats my shoulder on his way out. “I hope I don’t see you again anytime soon.”

“Me either.” I laugh.



QUINN PULLS UP in front of my house and I stare at it. I’ve always loved the solitude this house gave me, but tonight it feels ominous.

“Would you... want to stay with me?” I ask, looking down at my wrapped hand. “We don’t have to do anything. I’d just prefer not to be alone.”

“You... want me to stay?” She asks, raising her brows. “I mean yeah, I’ll stay. I just didn’t—never mind. I’ll stay.” She smiles.

“Okay.” I return her smile and get out of the car.

I've become so accustomed to being sure that I don't have to rely on people that it feels strange to want someone to stay with me.

"Are you hungry?" she asks as we go inside.

I hadn't thought of food until this moment and my stomach growls in response. "Yeah, I'm starving."

"I'll make you something." She says, heading towards the kitchen.

"You don't have to. We can get delivery."

"It's not the same as a home cooked meal." She says, rummaging through my fridge.

I'm too busy looking at her ass as she's bent over to argue with her. Keep your dick in your pants, Kyrell. She already knows you enjoy her body now show her you enjoy her company.

Quinn turns around to face me with her arms full of ingredients that she sets on the counter. Then she ties her hair up. "Since you're injured, you can at least stir."

"Damn, I have to help?"

"Yes." She smirks. "You have a whole hand and three of your fingers work from your other. I know how skilled you are with your hands. You'll be fine." She says with a wink.

We make dinner side by side. I'm not sure what we're making until she plates it for us and we sit at the table. I take a bite and am shocked I helped make something so good.

"What is this?"

"Garlic butter chicken with wild rice. I love how you followed me blindly." She says.

"I know I don't have to worry with you." I say honestly as I take another bite of my food.

Quinn says nothing in response. She smiles, taking a bite of her food. I was worried that we'd get on the topic of Elias and the fight we had earlier today, but she avoids it. Instead,

she tells me about her plans for school and what she'll do once she's done.

After dinner, we settle on the couch. I lie down and she lies on top of me, resting her head on my chest.

“Quinn...”

“Yeah, Ky?” she asks with her eyes fixed on the TV.

“I'm sorry I hurt you.”

She lies still for a few breaths and then shifts to place a kiss on my chest over my heart.

“Thank you.” She says and snuggles back up to me without saying another word.

It doesn't take her long before she's asleep. She grounds me. I felt bad for leaving her there with my dad, to clean up the mess that I left in my wake. But somehow, she gets me. I don't know how that's possible when I don't even understand myself.

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## CHAPTER 26

*Kyrell*

**E**arly the next morning, Quinn and I talk in my driveway before she leaves.

“What are you going to do?” she asks.

“Uh...” I shove my right hand into my pocket. “I think... I’m going to get away for a day or two.” I say without looking at her. “I know it isn’t ideal given the circumstances but—”

“Do whatever you need to do, Ky. I’ll be with your dad and call you if anything.” She gives me a reassuring smile.

“It was nice spending time with you last night.” I say, brushing her curls out of her face.

“Yeah, it was nice spending time with you too.” She says, looking down at her keys. “I better get going. I don’t want to be late to work. I still need to go home and get ready.”

“Right, yeah.” I say, taking a step back from her.

“Bye.” She kisses me softly. For a split second, I want to drag her back inside the house, but I don’t.

“Later.” I say, waving as she ducks into her car. I watch her leave and feel some peace knowing that she’ll be with my dad.

While she slept last night, I looked for places to stay that are anywhere but L.A.. I found a small, secluded cabin near a lake that looked perfect. I booked that and a flight without thinking about it. If this happened six months ago, I would’ve booked a flight to Vegas or Miami to drown in pussy and alcohol. None of that is as appealing as it once was. I’d like to say it’s because I’ve grown up, but Quinn is the reason that no longer gets my dick hard. We said no strings, yet we’re tangled.

Later that afternoon, as I'm packing my bags, Stella eyes me with her arms crossed. She thinks it's unwise of me to leave, given the fragile state of my dad. I didn't tell her what's going on. The only people who know are my dad, Dr. Jones, and I. Quinn has an idea, but she doesn't know all the details. For now, I want to keep it that way. I think Stella is more annoyed that I'm not giving her a reason than me actually leaving.

"Why are you going now?" she asks.

"Because I need to get away." I say, tossing some jeans and t-shirts into the open suitcase on my bed.

"Did something happen between you and Quinn? Because running away from it won't fix it."

"No." I chuckle. "Nothing happened."

She huffs. "I don't see you for one day and your hand is broken. Now you're not telling me why you're leaving."

I stop what I'm doing and look at her. "Stella, I don't always want or need to tell you everything." She gapes at me. "I care about you and I know you care about me, but there are some things I'm not ready to talk about. Please respect that."

"Fine." She says, walking over to my suitcase and properly folding the contents. "You'll check in, right?"

"I'll try, but I'm not promising. That's the whole idea of getting away... to not check in." I smirk.

She swats me with a pair of jeans. "Don't be a smartass. It isn't becoming on you."

I toss my head back with laughter. Once I allow her to help me pack my things, she calms down. She acts as though I'm leaving forever when it's only two nights. I didn't want to stay away any longer in case something were to drastically change with my dad.

I need a change of perspective that only getting out of my routine can bring.

## Quinn

I try calling Kyrell, but I get his voicemail again. “Dammit.” I mutter to myself.

I’ve called him countless times since he left, but he hasn’t answered a single call or text. My stomach feels as though it’s in knots because now I’m wondering if he even plans on coming back. I don’t think he would do that, but whatever happened between him and Elias caused him to want to get away.

I look over at Elias. He’s barely eaten or gotten out of bed since Kyrell stormed out of here three days ago. He should be back today. He *better* be back today. I’ve been worried that Elias isn’t going to hold on much longer. He’s seemed to have lost all will to live since Kyrell hasn’t been here.

“Have you spoken to him?” he asks with his eyes on me after I hang up the phone for the millionth time.

“I’ll see him tonight.” I reassure him, even though the knots in my stomach are tying themselves a little tighter. His eyes drift back to the TV.

“We should go down to the kitchen and have some lunch.” I say more as a statement than a request.

“No, thank you.” He says flatly without looking at me.

I narrow my eyes. He needs to eat something. I’ve been nice and sweet Quinn for long enough. I refuse to let him die without Kyrell being here. “You’re just as stubborn as he is, you know that?” His eyes snap to mine. I’ve got his attention now. “He’s definitely your son.” Elias could easily tell me to go to hell, but he laughs. It quickly turns into a coughing fit, but it’s the most alive I’ve seen him in days. “You’re getting up Elias to at least eat something.”

He catches his breath after I help him with a sip of water. “Fine. I’ll get up, but I’m making no promises to eat

anything.”

I have a plan to get him to eat, but first I need to get him out of this bed. “Okay, fair enough.”

When we get to the kitchen, he watches me pull stuff out of the fridge. “I told you I’m not eating.”

“Oh, okay then.” I say, setting a sandwich onto a plate. “I guess I’ll just have to keep all my Kyrell stories to myself.”

His eyes light up. “You have stories about him?”

“I do, lots of them, but they will only be told if you eat something.”

He looks at the food, then back at me. “Alright, story first.”

“Uh uh, not so fast. Eat something first, then I’ll tell you something about him.”

“Fine. I’ll have a little piece of sandwich.”

I grin because I know I have enough to tell him so at least he’ll eat lunch. I know him eating may not make a difference, but I don’t want him to give up because of the inevitable outcome. We spend the next couple of hours talking about Kyrell. I tell him as many appropriate stories as I can.

“Are you and Kyrell together?” he asks.

“Uh... no. We’re not.” I say, clearing our plates.

“That’s a shame.” He says, shaking his head.

I clear my throat, wanting to desperately change the subject. “Um, are you ready to go back up to your room?”

“Yes, thank you for forcing me to get up.”

I toss my head back and laugh as I wheel him back to his room.

Later that evening before I leave, Elias says to me, “Tell him I miss him when you see him... please?”

“I will.”



I PULL up to Kyrell's house. No lights are on. The sinking feeling is in the pit of my stomach again. I get out of my car and sit on his doorstep. I refuse to believe that he would disappear without a word. The past few days have taken a toll on me, and I find my anger with Kyrell growing. Why would he disappear?

I scroll through my phone to see if maybe he texted me, but he didn't. No calls either. He also didn't tell me where he was staying. I have no clue where to call if he doesn't come home tonight. I wait for almost an hour when I finally hear a car coming up the driveway. It's his jeep. He looks scared to see me sitting on his front step. I can imagine this doesn't look good given the circumstances, but the petty bitch in me wants him to feel the panic I've felt over the past few days.

"Quinn, is everything okay?" he asks, clambering out of his car. "Is he alright? Are you okay?"

"Yes... well no. No, and yes to all of your questions. Where the fuck were you?" I ask, wiping my eyes. The weight of the past few days finally catches up with me, and I feel the sting of tears. "I tried calling you almost a million times. Ky, I honestly don't know how much time he has left. I've been so worried that you weren't going to be here and that—that he'd die. He's been refusing to eat. I had to literally bribe him with stories about you to even eat a few bites of a sandwich today. That's after three full days of nothing but little sips of water and nibbles of food."

He rubs the back of his neck. "I'm sorry Quinn. There wasn't any cell service. It wasn't my intention to fall off the grid." He says, shoving his hand in his pocket.

"But you did fall off the grid and you knew you were! So yeah, you fucking meant it. I get you needed time away but... this is a lot for me too, Ky. He asks about you constantly. You're all he talks about and I'm trying my best to not be in the middle, but I am. I haven't asked for a different patient



because,” I let out a sigh, “he’s your dad. I care about you and him. I just came to tell you... that if whatever happened between you two is fixable, try to fix it.”

“Quinn, I—”

“I don’t want apologies, Ky. You’ve made it crystal fucking clear that you’re not going to tell me what’s going on and I’ve respected that. But,” I raise my hands in the air, shrugging, “I’m tired of being fucking respectful. You act like I’m a threat when I’ve been here for you. Then you just fucking disappear and act like it’s okay.” I rake my hands through my curls, growling with frustration. He’s not saying anything, just watching me lose my shit. I cross my arms and glare up at him.

He takes a step forward. I take one backward. He takes another step forward. I take another step back, but feel the door behind me. Kyrell gently tugs on one of my tightly folded arms, pulling me into his. I want to resist, but my body melts into him. My jaw goes slack as I exhale, allowing my shoulders to sag and my arms to go limp at my sides. The tangled knots, made up of worry and anger, unravel.

“I hate you.” I mumble into his chest.

“I hate you, too.” He says. I can hear the smile in his voice. “It was selfish of me to leave you with all of this and for that, I’m truly sorry.”

“I know you are, but I’m still upset.” I become aware of the fact that he’s gently rocking us side to side as he rubs my back. My eyes become heavy with sleep as I find comfort in his embrace. All my anxiety slowly seeps away. “I should go. I’m exhausted.” My mouth says, but my body makes no attempt to break away from him.

“Do you want to stay with me?” he asks.

“Ky... sex isn’t going to fix this. It might help... but it isn’t going to fix this.”

“I really want to talk to you. I mean, sex would be nice, but I just want to talk to you.” His usually confident tone is laced with uncertainty.

“What about your dad?” I ask, looking up at him.

“I called Charles. He’s already asleep. He let me know he had an okay day, thanks to you. But I plan to talk to my dad in the morning.”

I sigh. “Fine, I’ll stay. But I’m taking over your bed.”

“I’m not going to complain.” He says with a smirk.

“It’s to talk, Ky.” I say more for myself than him.

Once inside his room, I make myself at home. I brush my teeth, strip down, put on a pair of his boxers and a t-shirt, crawl into his bed and bury myself under the covers.

“Comfy?” he asks as he strips down to his boxers.

“Very.” I inhale the scent of him surrounding me.

I hate that I can’t be mad at him, that I continuously find myself falling back into him. He turns off the lights, gets in bed and pulls me flush against him. For a few minutes, he holds me with his face buried in my neck.

“I don’t see you as a threat.” He says, breaking the silence. “It’s... really hard for me to trust people and let them in. Growing up...” His voice trails off and I hold my breath, waiting for him to continue. “Growing up, my dad wasn’t around at all. If he was, it was for a day. Never days. In between those days, he’d be gone for undetermined amounts of time.” He lets out a shaky breath.

“I wasn’t entirely alone, although I would have preferred it.” The way he says that sentence gives me goosebumps. “Most kids have monsters in their closets or underneath their beds—I had Yvette.” I can only see the outline of his face illuminated by the moonlight, but I can feel his heart pounding in his chest. “She was the nightmare of my childhood. I’d rather have been taken by the boogeyman than endure her. It all started shortly after my fifth birthday...”

I listen as Kyrell tells me the horrific details of his childhood. It’s a miracle that I’m lying here with him right now, listening to him recount the details of the abuse he endured. How can one be so ruthless towards their own flesh

and blood? I met Yvette on my first day working with Elias. She was cold and wouldn't give me a second glance. I had chalked it up to the fact that her husband was dying. I thought it was how she coped, not that she was a fucking vile human being. My eyes burn with tears. I want to rip that woman to shreds, do everything to her she did to him.

"I never understood why my dad wasn't there and why the woman I'm supposed to call mom, hated me. I was in the dark a lot. But the other day, my dad was looking at the pictures that Harlow took. He told me that I look so much like *her*. When he said that, I was assuming Yvette. Then he became serious and told me that... Yvette isn't my mom."

I can't help the audible gasp that escapes me. When I heard him yelling the other day, I didn't think it was anything like this. I didn't realize how strained their relationship was and then for Elias to spring this on him after all he's endured.

"When those words left his mouth..." His voice trails off as he lets out a shuddering breath. "It was as though all the old wounds were reopened and he rubbed salt into them as he sliced them open with four fucking words. How could he leave me alone with some woman that wasn't my mom? And where the hell is my *real* mom? I was livid and, to be honest... I momentarily wanted to hurt him so that he could feel a fraction of the pain I felt growing up. Is that bad?" he asks.

"No, it isn't bad, Ky. I think that's a pretty fair response." I gently run my fingertips up and down his arm. "Are you going to tell your dad what happened?"

He lets out a long, steady sigh. "I didn't want to at first because everything is already... complicated. But I'm tired. Tired of carrying all this stuff around, letting it fester, and eat away at me."

"I know you wish the circumstances were different, but he'd want to know. He adores you even though you may not feel that way. I see it. You are everything to him."

"I know. I'm realizing that now. I have a lot of questions that need answers, and I'm hoping he's able to provide them." He says.

“Do you think you’ll want to meet your mom... when the time comes?”

“I don’t even know if she’s still alive. It depends on what my dad is willing to tell me. I wanted you to know all of this because I’m struggling right now. I know you want more, and I want to be able to give you that, but I—”

I place my fingertips over his mouth. “Thank you.”

“For what?” he asks, confused.

“Letting me in and allowing me to know all of you. Even the parts that you think are too dark for me to see.”

I hug him tightly, pressing my lips to his. He’s hesitant at first, but then he deepens the kiss. I want more with Kyrell, but I also want him to not feel like he’s drowning. He’s giving me his best right now and I’ll continue to give him mine.

It doesn’t take us long to find our rhythm as we move together. It’s euphoric. The feeling of him being all around and inside me. He takes me on the steady ascent to my climax. My hips match the movement of his as he grips my ass, thrusting into me as far as he can go.

He flips us over. I gladly take the reins, slowly sliding up and down the length of him. His hand runs up my thigh, over the curve of my hip and waist, until he reaches my breast. He squeezes it, rolling my nipple between his fingertips, making me whimper. One hand plays with my nipple as the other travels down to the sensitive bundle of nerves between my legs. Even with a broken hand, those fingertips bring me so much fucking pleasure. I spread my thighs further apart as he massages my clit. I toss my head back as the electric feel of his touch has my body humming.

“Keep it there, Ky... keep it there...” Ripples of pleasure are shivering through me.

“You’re gonna cum for me?” He continues to massage my center.

“I’m gonna cum, I’m gonna cum...” I chant.

“That’s a good girl. Cum for me, Angel.”

The tingle explodes as I dissolve into pleasure, letting out a guttural cry, allowing the wave of ecstasy to consume me. He flips us over, spreading my legs apart, and thrusts into me. So much for just talking. I guess this is communication too, right? With our bodies pressed together in sync, inhibitions gone as we find a euphoric release in one another. I don't know what's to come, but all I want is right now with him.

What started off as slow and passionate has quickly become fevered as he nears his release. I love to watch him. The sweat dripping down his abs, the way he grips my thighs with desire in his eyes as he focuses on me. It's forever etched in my memory.

He closes his eyes and his brow furrows as his breathing becomes jagged. I know he's going to cum and seconds later his body tenses and jerks as he breathes out, "Fuck."

His orgasm ripples through him and his thrusts slow down. He collapses on top of me, burying his face in my neck, and presses a kiss to my collarbone.

"I swear I just wanted to talk." He says hoarsely.

I chuckle, trailing my fingers along his back. "Right, right. We knew that was bullshit as soon as we laid in this bed."

He laughs. "I was doing well, but then you kissed me."

"I have no regrets." I say with a smirk.

"Me neither. Thank you for listening to me." He says, rolling on his side and pulling me closer to him. "And being here with me."

"I'm exactly where I want to be, Ky."

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## CHAPTER 27

*Kyrell*

I didn't intend to completely disconnect while I was away, but it sure felt good to do so. When I got to the cabin and realized there was no cell reception, I considered finding somewhere else to stay. But the stillness of being completely alone kept me there. Getting away helped me clear my head as much as I could and allowed me to realize that I *want* to talk to my dad. I don't want to talk to him only for answers. I want to talk to him because before this, everything was going better than I expected. Whatever amount of time we have left, I want to spend it building a relationship with him, not harboring resentment.

When I arrived home and saw Quinn sitting on my doorstep, I knew she either had bad news, was angry, or both. My mind was so fogged with thoughts when I left, I didn't stop to consider that Quinn is dealing with a lot too... because of *me*. My intentions may be good, but they have the opposite effect. I didn't want to hurt her, I still did. I didn't want to involve her, yet here she is with me.

"Do you want me to be there with you?" she asks as we walk out to our cars the next morning.

I take in a deep breath. "I think it would be better if I talk to him alone, but thank you for offering." Truth is, I'd love to have her there, but I also know that this is something I need to do alone. I'm not sure what my dad will tell me or how he's going to respond to what I have to say.

"Alright, I'll see you in a little while. I have to go into the office today and check in with my supervisor." She studies me for a minute before getting into her car. "You got this, you know that, right?"

I smile at her despite the growing feeling of dread in my stomach. “I know. Thanks, I’ll see you in a bit.”

Thirty minutes later, I’m sitting outside my dad’s house. My nerves are getting the best of me. It seemed like a good idea to talk to him when I was just thinking about it, but now that I’m back here—I’m not so sure. Thankfully, Yvette isn’t here. She hasn’t been back since she left after he got home from the hospital. Good fucking riddance to her.

I take out a joint with shaky hands, put it between my lips, and light it. Resting my head against the seat, I inhale letting the smoke fill my lungs and then exhale. “Kyrell, you can do this shit.” I hype myself up even though it’s hard for me to believe it. I sit there, smoking until all that’s left is the roach. “Alright, let’s do this.” I tell myself as I get out of the car.

I let myself in and notice Charles in the kitchen as I walk past it. He nods at me but doesn’t say a word. I’m glad he doesn’t because it would have caused me to lose my nerve. I make my way up the stairs to my dad’s room, pausing outside the door before I enter. The same feeling of uncertainty I felt at the hospital grips me. I take a deep breath before entering.

“Charles, I told you, I’m going to wait for Quinn.” He says without looking at the door. He’s sitting in his wheelchair holding the picture of us in his hands.

“Can I join you?” I ask, and his eyes snap to mine. The picture slips from his hand, but I catch it before it slides out of his lap.

“You’re back.” His mouth falls open.

“I needed some time.” I set the picture on the table beside him as I sit on the couch.

“I—I understand. I shouldn’t have—”

I hold up my hand. “You should have. You already did. Even though it angered me, I’m glad I know.”

“Are you okay?” he asks, looking at my wrapped hand. “What happened to you?”

“Oh,” I glance down, “I was releasing some anger and landed a punch wrong. Don’t worry,” I say holding up my uninjured hand, “it was a punching bag.” Relief washes over his face. “Then, I went away for a bit to clear my head to decide what I wanted to do. And came to the realization that I still want you in my life... to have a relationship with you.”

He sobs, letting out a sigh of relief. “I was hoping you’d be back. Quinn kept saying you would be but I admit, I didn’t believe her.”

“Yeah,” I smile, “Quinn’s an angel.”

“She is. She told me I’m just as stubborn as you the other day.”

I toss my head back and laugh. “Sounds like something she would say.”

He chuckles, closes his eyes, and takes a deep breath before he looks at me again. “I’m so grateful you’re here.”

My knee starts to bounce as I rub my sweaty palms against my jeans, suddenly feeling hot.

“Do you...” I rub the back of my neck, “remember when I was nine and ended up in the hospital with a broken rib, arm, and knocked out front tooth?”

“Yes,” he says, shaking his head, “you had fallen off the bike ramp I had gotten you. You got banged up so badly I was sick with worry that entire flight back home.”

“Yeah,” I nod, “that’s what Yvette told you...” I say without breaking eye contact. My heart is hammering against my chest.

“What do you mean?” he asks, drawing his eyebrows together.

“You had just left the night before. The next morning, I wanted to try out the new ramp. When Yvette saw me getting ready to go outside, she told me to go back to my room. I listened... initially. But, as I sat there on my bed, I got angry because she wouldn’t let me go outside. So, I decided to ignore her and go anyway. She caught me trying to sneak



down the stairs. Remember in that house, we had the big spiral staircase?”

He nods but doesn't utter a word. I can tell everything is clicking into place.

“I started arguing with her and she slapped me for disobeying. Which I thought was kind of her considering I knew she was capable of far worse. By then, I was at a point where I didn't care what she did to me anymore. You weren't there. She abused me, so what did it matter what happened to me?”

My dad cries, holding his head in his hands. I take a shaky breath, knowing I have to continue no matter how hard it is for either of us.

“After she slapped me, I was determined to go outside. I turned to go down the steps when,” I take a deep breath, “she shoved me. My reflexes weren't fast enough to hold onto the railing. I remember thinking that was how I was going to die.” Tears fill my eyes as I recount the memory. “You could hear the bones cracking as I hit the steps. When I landed at the bottom, I remember not being able to breathe because the wind had been knocked out of me. Pain ripped through my entire body. Yvette came down the stairs after me and said that now I had permission to go outside, but I passed out. I don't remember being taken to the hospital. I only remember waking up and you were there with me.”

“Kyrell,” he sobs, “I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't know. I didn't know.” He repeats over and over again. “I thought—I thought she was—I knew she had been drinking, but I never thought she would hurt you. Please,” he begs me, grabbing my hand, “forgive me, I didn't know.”

“I—” my voice doesn't sound like my own. I clear my throat. “I realized when you told me about my mom the other day that you truly had no idea what Yvette had done to me. She did such a good job hiding it. Yvette always knew when you were coming home and made sure there was enough time for the bruises and cuts to heal.” I let out a shuddering sigh as I

willingly allow the memories to replay in my head. “It was a living nightmare for years.”

“When I arrived at the hospital,” he says, “she was in tears. She said she’d gotten drunk, passed out and when she woke, you were outside unconscious near the ramp.”

The bitter taste of hate is on my tongue as I listen to the lies she told my dad.

“I knew she drank, but I didn’t think she was an alcoholic,” he shakes his head, “I told her she either goes to rehab or we get a divorce. She chose rehab, but I never trusted her around you after that... I was worried about the wrong thing.”

I lean back against the couch, looking up at the ceiling. “She was sober that morning, by the way. I learned to tell when she had been drinking or not so I could avoid her. That day, I didn’t give a fuck, though. I’d had enough. I remember being so happy when she wasn’t there when I got back home from the hospital. But... then you left again. You hired Charles, and he was amazing, but he wasn’t you.”

When Yvette went to rehab is when the abuse stopped. Not because she got better, but because she was no longer around me. After that, she and I were never alone together. It was a blessing and curse. The nightmare stopped, but my dad still wasn’t around.

“Why weren’t you ever there for me?” I ask, pushing through the fear, leaning forward as I look him in the eyes.

His brows knit together before he looks away from me, taking a deep breath. “I wish I had some valid explanation... but there isn’t one. Not one that could help you understand why I wasn’t there. After your mom left I—”

“She... *left* us?” I feel like the air has been sucked out of my lungs. “Try to help me understand.”

“Your mother and I met when we were eighteen. I was drawn to her from the moment I laid eyes on her. We fell for each other hard.” A smile tugs at his lips, despite the tears in his eyes. “A few months after we started dating, she got

pregnant. I was both terrified and ecstatic. Being eighteen and having a child isn't the most ideal of circumstances, but we were determined to make it work. Your mom, Olivia—”

“Olivia.” I whisper to myself, committing her name to memory. Suddenly, she feels more real than simply being a thought in my head.

“She had a rough childhood. Her mom died while giving birth to her, and her father was on various drugs. She spent a lot of time in and out of the foster care system. She and I were from two entirely different worlds. I came from money and power while she came from nothing.” He inhales deeply. “I was supposed to marry someone else...” His voice trails off.

“Yvette?” I ask.

He nods. “But then I met your mother, and that changed everything. Yvette’s family came from old money. My dad wanted to merge companies with her father and Olivia being pregnant complicated that. When we told my parents, my father was furious. He told me I ruined my life and everything he had worked for. I think the only things my dad ever truly loved were money and power.”

“My mom never stood up to my father, always went along with what he said... but Olivia did.” He chuckles. “She stood up to him that day. Told him we were having you regardless of what they thought. I’ll never forget the look on my father’s face. He looked as though someone had sucker punched him. Olivia didn’t know the respect he usually commanded and, frankly, didn’t give a damn.”

This makes me smile to know that she was fearless. That she was willing to fight for and loved me long before I was born.

He continues, “When they realized we weren’t going to change our minds about having you... they seemed to accept Olivia.”

“Seemed?” I ask, with furrowed brows.

“Everything was almost perfect. It should have been a red flag for me, but I seem to miss those.” He pinches the bridge

of his nose, like I do, and squeezes his eyes shut. “My dad moved Olivia in with us, paid for everything, even seemed to try to build a relationship with her. Since my dad seemed to accept her, my mom was being nice to her too. Then you were born,” he smiles wistfully. “You’ve always looked like her. As soon as you were born, I told Olivia she must’ve made you by herself.”

I chuckle. “She did all the work, so it makes sense.”

“I know.” He smiles. “She adored you. Rarely put you down. I was lucky I even got to hold you those first few weeks.” The smile that lit up his face seconds ago, fades. “One morning, it was about six weeks after you were born, I woke to your cries. I remember stumbling over to your crib, making you a bottle half asleep, and sitting in the rocking chair. When I opened my eyes to see if your mom was waking up, because she usually did, I realized she wasn’t there. We stayed in the guest house and I thought that maybe she had gone to the main house for something. When I went to check, I couldn’t find her anywhere. I knew something wasn’t right. When I got back out to the guest house, I noticed a note sitting on the counter. It said—”

***Elias, take care of Kyrell. I love you both.***

“I sat there for hours with you in one arm and that note clutched in the other hand. I didn’t move until my mom came to look for me. I showed her the note. She didn’t seem surprised, instead she said she had feared something like this was going to happen.”

“What happened after Oliv–mom left?” I ask, with my heart jack hammering away in my chest.

“Nothing.” He shrugs, cradling his head in his hand. “I seemed to be the only one who cared enough to look for her. My parents and her father were of no help. It was like she vanished. A few months after she left, my dad started talking about me marrying Yvette again. He wanted that damned merger. The only thing on my mind was your mother. I wanted to know where she was and why she left. I waited an entire year before I started heeding my father’s requests. I married

Yvette, but I never loved her. It was a marriage of convenience. She knew this, but she thought my feelings would change.”

“One of our biggest arguments was over me not wanting to have children with her. I fear that it was the catalyst for what she did to you and I’m sorry for—”

“No.” I say, shaking my head. “Yvette made the choice to do what she did to me. There were a million, trillion other things she could have done. I will never allow anyone to ever make excuses for her or take blame for what she *chose* to do.”

His eyes remain on mine for a few seconds before he looks away from me. The silence between us becomes loud. He takes a steadying breathing, nodding his head in agreement, before he looks at me again with a pained expression.

“Olivia leaving... was almost the end of me. I felt I needed her like the air I breathe. She never came back, even though I hoped every single day that she would. Not for me, but for you. It was hard for me to be around you, and like a coward, I avoided you. You are so much like her. From looks to personality, even your likes are similar. When you dumped that bowl of blueberries on your plate at breakfast, I thought I was looking at her. She ate blueberries by the pound when she was pregnant with you.”

A warmth spreads through me, knowing that I’m like her in so many ways. “Did you ever hear from her again... at all?” I ask with raised eyebrows.

He shakes his head. “My father passed away when you were thirteen. I didn’t go to his funeral because our relationship became more strained over the years until we were entirely estranged. Shortly after he passed, my mom came to me crying. I thought she was having a hard time dealing with the loss of him. Instead, she was riddled with guilt. She revealed to me that my father,” fresh tears fall down his face, “made Olivia leave. He gave her an ultimatum—she could stay with me and he’ll make you and her disappear or she can leave of her own free will.”

“He would’ve... killed her? *Us* ?” Sweat breaks out across my forehead.

“My dad was capable of many things. Again, with money comes power. I don’t know that he ever killed anyone, although I had heard rumors, but I wouldn’t have put it past him. He told her this the day before she left, according to my mother. I’ve wondered every day why she didn’t tell me this.” He says, clenching his hands into fist.

I swallow, trying to process everything he just told me. “She was probably terrified. Fear causes us to do the opposite of what we want to do sometimes.”

“You’re right.” He nods. “I was angry with her for not talking to me, angry with myself, but most of all, angry with my father for thinking he could orchestrate my life. When it came down to it, she chose to leave. I think she thought by leaving she would protect you. Thought that I could provide you with a better life than she could. Shortly after she left, my mother took it upon herself to have someone track her down so that she could give her money to get back on her feet. I was furious when I learned this because she knew the anguish I felt—how badly broken I was, and they didn’t care. But those were my parents.”

He lets out a long, low sigh. “I began searching for her again once I knew what happened. But I wasn’t able to find anything. I hired a private investigator who was able to track her down and...” He looks at me. “She lives here in California in San Francisco.”

“What?” I gasp. “That’s only hours away from us.”

“There’s a manila envelope on top of the dresser.” He says, pointing to it. “It has all her information in there. I haven’t dared to open it, but the PI told me she never married or had any other children.”

I shoot up from my seat to get the envelope. “Why haven’t you opened it?” I ask, grabbing it off the dresser and sitting back down next to him.

“I didn’t think I’d find her. Now I have and... I’m dying. It doesn’t matter.” His shoulders sag as he looks down at his hands.

“Doesn’t matter?” I knit my eyebrows together. “Don’t you think she’d want to see you to know what happened?”

He looks at me with tears in his eyes. “What would I tell her, Kyrell? That I failed as a father? She asked one simple thing of me, to take care of you. I couldn’t even do that.” He cradles his head in his hands as sobs wrack through his body.

I look down at the envelope, flipping it over in my hand, and then back to him. “I forgive you... for everything.” I take a deep breath. “You did your best at the time. Sometimes our best is keeping ourselves alive. As a child I didn’t understand it, but as an adult I do.”

His eyes snap to mine. “I don’t deserve a son like you.”

I take a page from Quinn’s book and hug him. As he hugs me back, I feel the weight I’ve been carrying around for twenty-four years slide off my shoulders.

“I love you, dad.” I say for the first time.

“I love you too, Kyrell. Thank you for being life’s greatest gift.”

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## CHAPTER 28

*Kyrell*

I won't forget what happened to me, but I can choose to heal and move forward. As Dr. Jones said, healing doesn't happen overnight and initially, that's what I wanted. I wanted all the pain to go away so that I didn't have to deal with it. I forgave him, not for his own benefit, but for mine. It's a lot to carry around anger and resentment. It took a toll on me, both physically and mentally. If I've learned anything these past few months with him, it's that life is fleeting. It's too goddamn short to hold on to shit that serves no purpose. I let it go because I refuse to let it have a hold on me any longer.

"Have you opened it?" Quinn asks, eyeing the manila envelope sitting on the kitchen counter.

"No." I say, sitting down at the table. "When I first touched it, I wanted to tear it open. But I know that once I do, I'm going to want to go see her. I need time to process all this, and I wouldn't want to leave my dad right now. Which I know is contradictory because I just left a couple of days ago." I say, letting out a sigh.

"Mmm... yeah. That was before you talked to him, though. I wanted to throat chop you for what you did, but I understand why you did it."

I laugh. "Why do you always choose violence?"

"You do things to intentionally get under my skin." She narrows her eyes, giving me an appraising look. "I want to strangle and, " she looks around, "well you know." She says with a smirk. "No need to go into details here."

"What?" I ask loudly. "You wouldn't want my dad and Charles to know that you love when I fuck you?"



She crosses the kitchen so quickly it looks as though she teleports to standing in front of me. “Ky, I swear to all things unholy, I will kill you. I watch enough of *Snapped* to hide your body well.”

“How do you know I don’t find that shit sexy? We could make a game of it.”

She sucks her teeth, side eyeing me. “You would have a torture kink. Call me Miss. Halifax and we can play.” She says, plopping down in the chair beside me.

And maybe I do because my dick twitches in response to her words. I adjust myself and, of course, she takes notice.

“Ky!” She exclaims, shoving my arm, and laughing.

“What?” I ask innocently. “You started this, not me. You and that filthy mouth.”

“That wasn’t—”

Charles walks into the kitchen and she swallows whatever words were about to tumble from her mouth.

“Hi Charles.” She says, brushing her curls out of her face. Ever since we had sex in the study, she hasn’t been able to look him in the eyes.

“Quinn.” He smiles. “How are you?”

“Good, good. I was just talking to Ky before I left for the evening.”

“Are you staying the night?” Charles asks me.

“Yeah.”

He smiles. “I’ll prepare your room.”

“Thank you, Charles.”

Quinn gets up from her seat, grabbing her bag and keys.

“I’ll walk you out.” I say, following behind her.

“It’s a beautiful night.” She says taking a deep breath inhaling the balmy night air as we walk to her car.

“It is.” I say distractedly. “Quinn... can I ask you something?” I shove my hand into my pocket. My heart suddenly racing.

She turns around to face me, leaning against her car and shrugs. “Sure.”

“Why are you fuckin’ with me? Not that I’m not grateful. I just—how are you not tired of me?”

“I like being around you.” She says without hesitation.

“Yeah... but don’t you want a *real* relationship?”

Quinn sighs, resting her head against the car window while she looks up at the stars. “Yeah... I do. One day. But I’m a hopeless fucking romantic and I stress hopeless.”

I don’t say anything as I watch her stare at the stars. It reminds me of the first time we sat on the hood of my car, eating greasy burgers and fries, talking shit, with the glittering L.A. skyline beneath us, and her eyes were on the stars. Always on the stars as if she knows she is heaven sent and fell from them right into me.

“What?” her eyes snap to mine when she realizes I’ve been staring at her.

“Nothing.” I swallow, clearing my throat. “I mean just that—uh—would you even want to be... with me anymore? Now that you know... everything?” I rub the back of my neck.

She cocks her head to the side with a quizzical expression. “Wha—Ar—Are you asking me to be with you?”

“I want to be with you, Quinn.” She takes a sharp inhale of breath. I take a step towards her. “I know my life is crazy... but you’ve been my refuge—my peace. All I know for certain right now is that I want you. All of you. And if you don’t want to deal with all the shit I’ve got going on, I understand that too. But I—”

“Shut up.” She says and her lips crash into mine. Her lips and touch leave me feeling hazy. She’s pure dopamine. I’ve been addicted since the first taste of her. When we kiss, it’s

just us. Nothing else matters but the moment I'm suspended in with her.

I slowly pull away, breaking the kiss and rest my forehead against hers. "Was that a yes?"

She smiles, nodding her head. "Yes." She whispers.

I wrap my arms around her, burying my face in her neck as I inhale the familiar scent of her rose body wash. "Do you have to leave?"

"I can't stay at your dad's house, Ky. You know that. And," she shifts uncomfortably in my arms, "I have—well—had... plans." She says while biting her lip.

"Why are you nervous?" I ask, chuckling. "You act like you can't have plans."

"Cause the plans are with Lincoln..." she says softly, not meeting my gaze.

My smile fades as I take a steadying breath. *Keep it cool, Kyrell.*

"Lincoln?" I ask, trying to keep my voice even. "Is it a date or plans?" Not that it matters because I still have the strong urge to punch his fucking face.

"We hang out as friends." She shrugs, still not looking at me. "I was supposed to go to his place."

I gently grab her chin, running my thumb along her bottom lip, and her eyes meet mine. "Mmm... just to hang out?"

"Yeah, we're—"

I devour her words, covering her mouth with mine. My tongue greedily meets hers. I open the car door, causing us to stumble into the backseat with our bodies flush against one another. I slam the door behind us and make quick work of getting her pants off. She's become an expert at unbuckling my belt in record time. Except this time, I slide it off.

"Hold out your wrists." I say and she does as she's told.

I wrap my leather Hermès belt around her wrists, making sure it's snug, before I secure it to the handle above the car

door. Her hungry eyes are trained on me. I slide her panties off to be greeted by her glistening pussy. I run my fingers along her slickness and she closes her eyes, moaning.

“Keep your eyes on me, Angel.” They snap back open as I put my now glistening fingers into my mouth, licking her wetness off of me, and smirk. “Perfect.” I say as she bites her lip with hazy eyes.

I slide my boxers and pants down enough to let my dick stand at full attention, stroking my hand along my length. She opens her legs wider for me in anticipation.

“Tell me,” I say, lining myself up with her entrance. “Who...” I put the tip in, “do you...” I slide into her a little further, “belong to?” I ask, slowly pushing into her inch by inch as her head falls back against the car door. “Mmm... keep those pretty brown eyes on me.” I tell her, wrapping my hand around her throat. “Who do you belong to, Quinn?” I watch myself disappear inside her before meeting her gaze again. She wants to close her eyes, but keeps them on me.

A soft whimper escapes her lips as she moans out, “You. I belong to you.”

“You’re mine?” I ask, thrusting my hips, causing her breath to hitch.

“All yours.” She breathes out.

I trail my hand down her body until I reach her clit, applying pressure. She bucks her hips in response, gripping the belt her hands are tied up in. Her eyes watch my thumb rub circles around her sensitive bundle of nerves while I stay buried inside her. Breathy moans are falling from her lips as her pussy tightens around my dick, making it twitch in response.

“Fuck, you feel so good.” I groan, watching her as her eyes close.

I want her all to myself. All her time, attention, moans, smiles, laughs... I want it all. I’m unapologetically selfish and I’ll be damned if anyone gets a taste of what I have with her.

She rocks her hips against my dick as she nears the edge of her climax.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck. I’m—I’m cumming...” Her back arches as her body jerks.

I don’t stop rubbing my thumb against her clit. “Give me every last drop, baby.”

She shudders as she comes completely undone, crying out my name. I grip her waist once all of her release is on my dick, thrusting into her. The sound of my belt buckle hitting the window and her unrestrained cries of pleasure fill the car. My skin heats up as I maintain a merciless rhythm, chasing my own climax. She unravels one leg from around my waist, putting it over my shoulder, allowing me to go deeper.

“Fuck.” I grunt, gripping her thigh as I my muscles tense. My hips stutter as my release spills into her and my body shakes with satisfaction.

My thrusts come to a slow halt once I’ve ridden out my climax. Resting my forehead against hers, I take a moment to catch my breath. Quinn has a satisfied smirk on her face when I refocus my eyes on her. I unwrap my belt from around her wrists.

“Did you enjoy yourself?” I chuckle.

She nods her head with her eyes closed. “I did. First time I’ve been tied up and I must say I enjoyed myself.”

“Do your wrists hurt?” I ask as I kiss them.

“No, and even if they did, I wouldn’t care because that was fucking amazing.” She says, wrapping her arms around my neck. “I should probably let you get back to your dad.”

“Yeah.” I sigh. “I should. He’s probably going to go to sleep soon, but I still want to be here for him.”

“I’m proud of you.” She says, grabbing my face.

“Thank you.” I kiss her and then reluctantly pull out of her. “I wasn’t expecting to end my day like this.” I admit, pulling my pants up and sitting next to her.

“I imagine not.” She laughs. “But I’m happy it did.”

“Me too.” I close my eyes and rest my head against the seat. “What are you doing tonight?” I open one eye to watch her fix her clothes.

She snorts with laughter. “For someone so straightforward, you can’t ask me if I still intend on hanging out with Lincoln?”

“Do you?” I ask, now looking at her with both eyes.

“No, I don’t, because I have a jealous boyfriend.” She rolls her eyes with a smile.

“What did we just learn, Quinn?” I ask, pulling her into my arms.

“I don’t know. You may have to teach me again. I learn better with repetition.” She moves closer to my face.

I raise a brow. “Insatiable.” I chuckle. “My class is always in session for you.” I grab the back of her neck, pulling her into a kiss.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, sir.” She mutters against my lips.

I give her one last kiss before I step out of her car and she stumbles out behind me.

“Damn, you’re clumsy.” I say, catching her before she falls flat on her face.

“Mind your business.” She says as I open the door for her to get into the driver’s seat.

“You are my business.” I say, shutting her door.

She rolls down her window, grabs my shirt, pulling me towards her so our lips meet. “I like the sound of that. See you tomorrow.” She says, releasing my shirt and waving before she pulls away.

I watch her leave, a little stunned that I have a girlfriend.

Quinn

All my windows are down as I sing at the top of my lungs with a grin that's been on my face since I said goodbye to Kyrell. I zip into my parking space and practically skip up to my apartment. Once I close my front door, I dance around, finally letting out a squeal that I've been holding in. I have to admit that I was starting to wonder what I'd do if Kyrell was never ready for a relationship. I'm a patient person, but no one wants to wait forever. Neither does he, apparently.

I start a bath and search for my phone so that I can listen to some music. There's a text from Kyrell.

**Kyrell: Did you make it home? I know how you drive.**

**Quinn: I made it home safely. Fuck you very much.**

**Kyrell: Just checking in on my girlfriend.**

**Quinn: Aw, you're sweet even though I know it's bullshit.**

**Kyrell: Miss you already. I'm about to get you fired so you can stay with me.**

**Quinn: Why the fuck would you do that?**

**Kyrell: I'm selfish. You know this.**

**Quinn: I don't have time to entertain your foolishness. I'm getting in the bath.**

**Kyrell: Send nudes and facetime me when you're done.**

I laugh, shaking my head as I connect my phone to the Bluetooth speaker. Then I sprinkle some bath salts into the water, followed by a healthy squeeze of bubbles before I strip and get into the tub. My body instantly relaxes as the warm water envelopes me. I'm "Kissing You" by Des'ree plays as I rest my head against the bath pillow. I melt into the warm water as I listen to the music and feel like I'm on cloud nine.

KP hops up on the edge of the bath as she always does to stare at me. I snap a pic of her, sending it off to Kyrell.

**Quinn: A perv, just like you.**

**Kyrell: Killer Pussy! Does she always watch you bathe?**

**Quinn: If I don't let her in she meows outside the door and tries to claw it open.**

**Kyrell: So the name suits her?**

**Quinn: Unfortunately.**

I glance at the time. It's almost nine, which means Elias will probably go to sleep soon. Although I doubt that because he's so full of energy now that Kyrell's back. It's interesting the effect Kyrell's presence has on those around him. It shifts the entire mood of the room. I remember noticing that the first time I met him at Harlow's place in Texas. He doesn't allow you to not have a good time when you're around him.

Once I'm thoroughly soaked with my fingers looking like prunes, I get out of the bath. I decide to fulfill Kyrell's request by sending him a nude. I toss my phone on my bed, realizing that there are a lot of things I've never done before that I'm willing to do for him. No one before him was able to figure out where my clit was, let alone be able to tie me up. I couldn't imagine going through the trouble of being tied up for there to be no release. *Tragic*. And nudes, there was no one that I cared about enough before to send nudes to, even if they asked me for them. I for damn sure didn't want them having compromising pictures of me. But for Kyrell, I'll get caught in every compromising position imaginable and not give a damn.

My phone rings a few minutes later as I'm slipping my silk camisole over my head. It's a FaceTime call from Kyrell.

"I thought you told me to call you." I say, setting my phone on the dresser in front of me while I look for the matching bottoms to my top.

"Yeah, and then you sent a nude, Quinn. I wasn't going to wait."

I laugh as I pull the bottoms out from my drawer and slip them on. "You were just inside me," I glance at the time, "less than three hours ago." I grab my phone off the dresser and crawl into bed.



“Three hours too long.” He says. “Are you going to bed already?”

“No.” I shake my head as I make myself comfortable. “I’m too happy to fall asleep. What made you change your mind about us?”

“There was nothing to change. I never said that I didn’t care about you or want to be with you. I said I wasn’t ready for a relationship.” He lets out a sigh, lying back on his bed. “I still don’t feel like I’m ready, but I know I care about you.” He says, looking at me. “I told you I want you to be happy, but I want you to be happy with me.”

“Yeah, I got that vibe at dinner with Lincoln.” I laugh.

He smirks. “I told you I’m selfish. I would have fucked up any other dates too.”

I scrunch up my face. “Is that selfish or petty?”

“Both.” He says with a shrug.

“Can I ask, why were you so against relationships?”

“I... didn’t want to open myself up to the possibility of more pain. Being in a relationship means I have to be open. It was easier to be alone. I only had to consider myself. But then you came along and caused me to question if that was true.” He looks at me. “Quinn... I have no fucking idea what I’m doing. I care about you a lot... and I hope that’s enough for now.”

“Guess what?” I ask, and he raises his brows. “None of us know what we’re doing, Ky. I may seem like I have it all together with my color coded calendar—” he laughs “—but trust me, I don’t. You’ve seen how clumsy I am. But some guy taught me that sometimes it’s better to not have a plan and see what happens when I get there.”

“That guy sounds like a genius.” He sighs. “I’m trying to do that, but it’s hard right now.”

“I know and that’s alright.” I stretch out on my bed. “Did your dad already go to bed?”

“Yeah.” He chuckles. “He fell asleep mid-conversation. He said he wanted to watch movies with me but couldn’t hang. I think I wore him out today. It’s the most he and I have ever talked.”

“He was so happy to see you. I knew his entire mood would change once you guys talked.”

“Thank you for being there for him when I couldn’t be.”

“I’ll always,” I yawn, “be here for you.”

“I know.” He says. “And that’s why I’ll always be here for you too. Did you want to get some rest?”

“No, I’m not sleepy.” I yawn again and my eyes feel heavy.

He chuckles. “Guess I’ll just watch you fight your sleep.”

I smile, not opening my eyes. “I’m awake.” He stops talking and I drift off to sleep.

“Quinn...” He whispers and he sounds far away.

“Hmm?” I ask, half awake.

“You’re everything to me.”

I mean to respond, but I fall asleep and dream of him instead.



I WAKE with a jolt as my alarm goes off. I’m surprised to still see Kyrell on my screen. He’s sleeping, but I don’t even remember falling asleep. I’ve been exhausted these past few days. I end the call and send him a text.

**Quinn: I’ll see you in a little bit.**

I lie there, ready to drift back off to sleep when my alarm rings again. I get out of bed before I have another chance to close my eyes. At this point, I feel I could sleep all day.

An hour later, with the help of a cup of coffee, I'm walking into my favorite café for a fruit bowl and more coffee before I head to work. I stare blankly at the menu, wondering why the fuck I'm so tired when I hear a familiar voice behind me in line.

"Hey, I wondered what happened to you last night."

I turn around to face them. "Lincoln, hey, yeah sorry." I press my palm to my forehead. "I was a little tied up after work—I mean..." The tips of my ears burn. He has no idea what I mean, but my body sure as hell knows. "I mean, I had stuff to do after work that—I should've called you."

"It's all good." He smiles. "Maybe we can meet up later this week."

"Oh... um... about that—"

"What can I get you?" The cashier asks. I order my coffee and fruit bowl, then move to the side, letting Lincoln order.

He turns around once he's done and asks, "What were you saying?"

I suddenly feel nauseous and sit down at the nearest table. He sits in the chair across from me.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Yeah." I say giving him a half smile. "I just—it's that—I'm—I have a boyfriend now." The words stumble out of my mouth.

"Oh?" he raises his brow. "Have you... had a boyfriend this whole time or? I thought you weren't seeing anyone."

"No. I haven't. I—he just asked me last night and that's who I was tied up with. He tied me up. I—" My eyes widen and so do Lincoln's. I don't know why I'm so damn nervous. Lincoln and I weren't even close to dating. "I'm dating Kyrell. Kyrell is my boyfriend." I finally blurt out.

"Kyrell?" he asks. I look at him, nodding. He cocks his head to the side. "You know... I knew something was going on there. I asked him about it and he said you two were just friends."

“Well... we were at that time.”

“Even at that dinner, the way you two looked at each other. I just knew there was something more.” He says.

“We weren’t a thing then.” I reassure him. Leaving out the part that we were very much fucking at that point though. It would be different if Lincoln and I were seriously dating, but I don’t feel I owe him an explanation. After our first date, I was upfront with him that I wasn’t looking for relationship because I didn’t want to string him along. He still wanted to be friends and hang out with me.

“He’s a very lucky guy.” He says, nodding his head and looking away from me.

“I hope this doesn’t make things awkward.” I cringe, realizing that it probably will be.

“It won’t.” He reassures me. “You’ve been up front with me. I knew we were just friends. Maybe Kyrell will stop being an ass to me.” He smirks.

“Has he been?”

“Kind of, his whole attitude towards me changed once I asked about you. We were cool before that. But I can’t blame him. I’d feel the same way if I ever had a shot with you.”

Yeah, Kyrell is probably still going to be an asshole to him, but I don’t say that. “He can be that way.” Is what I say instead. I doubt Kyrell has told him about what’s going on in his personal life.

“Quinn.” The cashier calls my name.

I get up from my seat. “I’ll see you around.”

“Of course.” He smiles, rising from his seat, and gives me a quick hug.

I turn around, grabbing my order and wave at him before exiting the café. The few times I hung out with Lincoln were fun. He said he was cool with being friends, but it’s clear he had hopes for it to develop into something more. But I wasn’t attracted to him in the way that I’m attracted to Kyrell. He’s

nice to look at, very nice to look at, and a total gentleman, but  
Kyrell calls to my soul without having to say a word.

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# CHAPTER 29

*Kyrell*

I feel a lot lighter today. Talking to my dad helped more than I realized it would and then Quinn deciding to be with my crazy ass was the icing on the cake. I make my way to my dad's room to check on him. He's still sleeping. I decide to let him sleep while I work out in the gym downstairs. It's the first time in a while that I've actually felt like working out even though my hand is out of commission.

I work out for an hour before checking on my dad again. He's still sleeping.

"Dad." I wake him mainly to be sure he's still responsive.

"Hmm?"

"Did you want to get up now or in a little while?"

"Give me a little while and then I'll be ready to do whatever you'd like." He says without opening his eyes.

I chuckle. "Alright, I'm gonna go shower and eat. I'll be back."

I shower, then head downstairs to find something to eat when Quinn walks through the door sipping on a cup of coffee.

"You're sweet. You brought me coffee." I smirk, kissing her forehead while grabbing her cup out of her hand and taking a sip.

"Excuse you." She says. "That's mine."

"Oh, don't we share now?" I ask, taking another sip.

She narrows her eyes. "Fine, but don't touch my fruit."

"Fair compromise." I chuckle.

“Elias isn’t up yet?” She asks, getting down to business.

I shake my head. “No, I just checked on him. He wants to sleep for a little longer.”

“Alright.” She says as she sits down at the kitchen table.

I head for the fridge, pulling out some eggs and bacon. “How was your morning?”

“Uh... good.” She says, putting another bite of fruit in her mouth, chewing it slowly. “I saw Lincoln this morning.”

“Did you?” I ask, setting a pan on the stove with a little more force than I intended.

“Yeah, we go to the same café.”

That must mean he lives close to her. “What café is this?”

“I told him you’re my boyfriend, and that you tied me up last night.” She says, covering her face with her hands.

My eyes snap to hers. “What?” I ask, trying to suppress a laugh. “Why would you tell him about the tying up part?”

“I got nervous.” She groans. “I didn’t expect to see him there and then he started talking about hanging out again and it just... slipped out.”

“Good to know you crack under pressure.” I smirk.

“He said he knew there was something going on between us because you were an asshole after he asked you about me.” She says, putting a bite of fruit in her mouth as she stares at me.

“He shouldn’t have asked.” I say with a shrug.

She sighs. “He’s a good guy, Ky. He’s also done an amazing job running *your* business. You need to be nicer to him.”

Quinn is right about Lincoln doing an amazing job running Buds & Roses. I check in with him at least once a week even though I don’t need to. I’ve even considered making him partner when I expand next year.

“You know I’m right, despite what your jealousy tells you.”

“My jealousy doesn’t tell me anything.” I crack some eggs into the pan.

“You’re stubborn.” She rises from her seat and tosses her trash into the bin. “Make some for me too, please?” She asks, looking up at me through her lashes.

I kiss her, tasting the sweetness of strawberries on her lips. “Mmm... you taste good.”

“Yeah, and you taste like the coffee I wanted to enjoy.”

“You’re welcome to enjoy it on me.” I smirk.

“As much as I’d love to have you dick me down in this kitchen right now, I do have to work. I’m going to get Elias up. Make him some breakfast too, please? Thank you.” She says before disappearing around the corner.

Almost an hour later, Quinn reappears talking and laughing with my dad. He looks brand new with gel in his curls and a freshly shaven face.

“Kyrell made breakfast for us. Isn’t that sweet of him?” Quinn asks him while smiling at me.

“Dad, you look great.” I smile.

“Thank you.” He chuckles. “I feel great. To be completely honest, I prefer Quinn helping me in the mornings.” He says unapologetically. “That’s why I didn’t get up when you asked.”

Her eyes snap to mine as she claps a hand over her mouth to cover a smirk.

I gape at him. “Really? So just forget about your flesh and blood, huh?”

“Can you blame me? Look at my hair.” He says, running his hand over his curls. Quinn pampers him. I know she doesn’t have to, but she goes above and beyond for him.

“Actually, no I can’t.” I laugh.



“I can show you what to do if you want.” Quinn smiles, sitting down beside my dad.

“I’d love that since apparently my getting ready skills are subpar.” I tease.

My dad laughs. “I didn’t say that. I said I prefer Quinn helping me.”

“If you’d prefer Quinn, I won’t take offense to it.” I say to him.

He looks down at his plate, letting out a sigh. “I don’t want you to have to see me so... helpless.”

“I don’t see you that way.” I say. Quinn busies herself with putting food on his plate.

“You may not, but I was pretty independent only weeks ago. Now I need help with things I’ve been doing myself my whole life. It’s... demoralizing.”

My dad and I have talked about everything but the inevitable. I don’t think either of us is brave enough to bring up the subject. “I understand.” I nod.

“I’m just glad you’re here.” He gives me a bright smile.

“Me too.” I smile back.

Quinn sits down next to me. She has her glasses on, which momentarily distracts me from the heaviness that just blanketed us. She must have read my mind because she smirks and removes them, hanging them on her shirt, drawing my attention to her cleavage. Quickly realizing that wasn’t a good idea, as I stare at her breasts, she removes them again with a heavy sigh and sets them on the table. My eyes move to hers and I wink at her.

“How was your evening, Quinn?” My dad asks.

I turn to look at her with a smirk on my face. She is already visibly nervous, fiddling with her earring and avoiding eye contact.

“Yes, Quinn, how was your evening?” I ask.

“Good.” She squeaks. “I had a good—great evening.” She side eyes me.

“What did you do?” I ask her, enjoying myself way too much.

“You said you had plans, didn’t you?” My dad asks her.

“Yeah, I did... but I got...” Her voice trails off.

“Tied up?” I ask, raising my brows and resting my chin in the palm of my hand. Quinn is suddenly more interested in her phone. “Dad...” I turn my attention to him.

“Yes, son?” he asks, taking another bite of his food.

“Did I tell you I have a girlfriend?” My eyes remain on Quinn as she looks at me.

“No, but she must be special considering you were so against relationships when I initially asked you.”

“She’s an angel.” I haven’t taken my eyes off of Quinn as she looks between me and my dad.

“Can I meet her?” he asks between bites as he listens to the news on the TV.

“Yeah, Quinn, meet my dad. Dad, meet my girlfriend, Quinn.”

His fork clatters to his plate as he stares between the two of us. “Seriously?”

“I’m rarely serious, but I’m very serious about her.” I say, tearing my gaze from hers and looking at him.

His whole face lights up as he smiles at Quinn. “He’s lucky to have you.”

“Yeah... I think we’re lucky to have each other.” She says smiling at me.

I wink at her before turning my attention back to my dad. “What did you want to do today?”

“Is it alright if we take it easy? I’m a little worn out from all the excitement yesterday.”

“Yeah, whatever you want. We can work on the ship and watch baseball.”

“That sounds like the perfect day.” He smiles.

I wait for my dad to finish his breakfast and then we head to the den to work on the ship. We probably would have been done with it already if we hadn't gotten into that fight. I wish I hadn't missed those days, but at the same time it needed to happen for us to truly clear the air. My mom has been on my mind since my dad told me about her. I'm still trying to process the fact that I've had a mom out there who loved me all this time. After Quinn left last night, I thought about opening the envelope again, but decided to wait. I really want to focus on my dad right now. Even though I long to know who my mom is, I'm scared of what I'll learn when I do decide to open it.

When I was little, I used to imagine what it would be like to have a mother who loved me. I remember wishing that Yvette wasn't my mom. Now for that wish to be real, it's surreal. I also realize that I would have to open myself up to someone new again—that makes me hesitant to meet her. I understand the circumstances that she left my dad and I under, but what if she doesn't want me around or leaves again? I'm not sure that I can handle that.

I silence the thoughts in my head and focus on building this ship with my dad. Ever since he spent the night in the hospital, his hand eye coordination isn't the same. Now he tells me what to do and I piece it together. My dad's phone rings and he glances at it and ignores it. Eventually it stops ringing but immediately starts up again. He continues to ignore it.

“Uh, don't you want to get that?” I ask, looking up from the ship pieces scattered in front of me.

“No.” He says, looking at the ship's instructions. “It's that one right there.” He points at a piece near my injured hand. “I'm actually surprised you're able to do this with one and a half hands.”

I smirk. “You'd be surprised what I can do.”

“When does that come off?”

“Two more weeks... I think. I’m not sure honestly. I’ll have to ask Quinn.” Thankfully, only my pinky and ring finger are wrapped with the rest of my forearm so it allows me some mobility.

“I’m happy for you two, by the way.” He says. “Were you planning on asking her to be with you?”

“No, I wasn’t...” I say distractedly as I put glue on the tiny ship piece. Once it’s secured to the ship, I look at him. “But it felt... right.” I shrug. “I told her everything. And she stayed.”

I’m impulsive, but my choice to ask Quinn to be with me was something I had thought about long before the question came out of my mouth. But I didn’t think that she’d want to be with someone who has so many issues. When she stayed—I knew.

His eyes glisten with tears. “Oh c’mon dad, we’re not getting married. We’re just together.” I say.

He chuckles. “Let an old man have his moment.”

Charles enters the room. “Sir, Santiago is here to see you. Shall I bring him in?”

My dad lets out an exasperated sigh. “I guess. Although my instructions were clear.”

I look at my dad with a raised eyebrow wondering why the head of his security detail would want to meet with him now.

Moments later, Santiago enters the room. “Sir, Mrs. Knight wishes to speak with you.”

“I was very clear with my instructions Santiago, was I not?” His eyes and tone are cold.

“Yes sir, but—”

“She is no longer welcome here, nor is she Mrs. Knight. Why is this so difficult to understand, Santiago?” My father may be ill, but the look on his face lets anyone know he is not to be played with right now.

“Sir, she’s threatening to sleep outside the gates.”

“Let her.” My dad says with a finality in his tone. “But also let her know if she does, I will have her dragged off of my property kicking and screaming. Her choice. We’re done, Santiago. Take care of it.”

Santiago nods, glances at me and then exits the room. I stare at my dad, waiting for him to speak. He pretends not to notice me staring at him but then glances at me, sighs and puts the paper down.

“What she did to you, Kyrell, is unforgivable. If I had known I—”

“But you didn’t.” I interrupt him. “You didn’t know. We’ve spoken our peace, Dad. I’d prefer whatever time we have left to not be overshadowed by you regretting something that wasn’t in your control. I know you feel guilty, but don’t. Yvette’s mistakes are not yours. “Besides,” I grin, “you kicking her out brings me a small bit of satisfaction.”

He chuckles but his smile quickly fades. “You’ve shown me a lot of mercy, Kyrell. More than I deserve.”

“I’m tired, to be honest.” I sigh. “Tired of carrying shit around that I shouldn’t have had to carry in the first place. I set it down with you the other day for the first time in my life and that felt good.” My eyes meet his. “Now all I want to do is enjoy this time with you.”

“I can do that.” He says with a smile.

“Good.” I pull my phone out of my pocket. “I’m going to text Santiago to tell him to take a picture of Yvette losing her shit outside of the gates, so I can have one good memory of her.”

## CHAPTER 30

*Kyrell*

“Don’t forget,” Quinn says, “your appointment for your hand is this morning.”

I came to her house at an ungodly hour to spend some alone time with her. I’ve seen less of Quinn these days because she took on another patient. My dad, thankfully, doesn’t need total care, he only needs assistance. But that means Quinn can take care of more people. Which is good for them because she’s amazing, but it also means she doesn’t have as much free time. Which is more of an adjustment for me than her.

She was so happy to see me on her doorstep that she practically climbed up my body. We do see each other every day at my dad’s, but she’s there to work, not fuck around with me, or so she says. I keep trying to tell her that no one would know that I’m dicking her down, but she reminds me it’s her job. I guess it’s okay because we’ve gone round for round this morning. Now I’m lying next to her, wondering how I’m going to have enough energy to make it through the day.

I turn my head to look at her. “Are you coming with me?”

“No, I’m working, remember?”

“You and that fucking job.” I tease her.

She laughs. “Yeah, who needs a job, anyway?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, and you won’t listen.”

“What am I supposed to do for money?” she asks. “I can’t live off of hope and a prayer.”

“I’ll pay for whatever you want.”

“Ky, you’re not going to turn into my sugar daddy.” She says, shaking her head, laughing.

“I wouldn’t mind being your sugar daddy, though.” I smile. “But I also admire the fact that you’re about your business. I’m used to the high maintenance “take care of me” types with no aspirations other than being a trophy wife.”

“Basically the life my parents wanted for me.” She gags. “No thank you. Don’t get me wrong, I love to be spoiled—”

“Really? I haven’t noticed.” I glance at the orange Hermès box sitting atop her dresser.

“If you want to spoil me, spoil me. I’m not going to say no.” She shrugs as she gets off the bed and disappears into the bathroom to brush her teeth.

“Are you going to open it?” I ask her, noticing the ribbon is still tied around it.

A few days ago, I was annoying her while she was doing something on her laptop, and saw her looking at a bag. Well, she wasn’t really looking she was practically drooling—very similar to the way she looks at me. When she went to go help my dad, I decided to figure out how to buy it. It arrived at her place yesterday.

“You know that’s a Birkin, right? I still can’t believe you bought it for me.” She says as she pulls out clothes from her closet.

“It’s just a purse.” I say nonchalantly as I get up to find my clothes.

“No, that’s not just a purse. It’s a Birkin, love. Huge difference. Crème de la crème.” She makes a chef’s kiss motion with her hand.

“It makes you happy, that’s all I know.”

“No.” She says wrapping her arms around my waist as she stands on her tip toes to kiss me. “You make me happy.”

I pick her up, gripping her thighs, and wrap her legs around me. “See, now you’re going to be late for work.”



BEFORE I HEAD to my appointment, I decide to stop by Cash's gym. He's working with someone when I arrive so I sit on a bench by the doors and wait for him. Cash has checked in with me periodically over the past few weeks and I'm grateful he has.

"Long time no see. What the fuck did you do to your hand?" he asks, giving me a dap.

"Got angry and broke it." I say, glancing down at it. "I thought I told you this."

"Nah, you didn't. Judging by how it's wrapped, you did it while hitting something?" he asks, trying to suppress a laugh.

"Go ahead and laugh, jackass."

He lets out a rumble of laughter. "I don't know if I should be insulted that you've learned nothing or worried that you were angry enough to abandon all training."

I raise up my hands shrugging. "It's me we're talking about, so probably both."

He shakes his head. "How are you doing, though? When does that shit come off?"

"Good, all things considered. Been spending time with my dad, got a girlfriend—I'm a whole new man." I spin on the spot for dramatic effect.

His mouth hangs open. "You have a girlfriend? What poor girl has fallen victim to your advances?"

"Fuck you, Cash. Do you remember the girl whose stuff you helped me move a few months ago?"

He covers his mouth with his hand, letting out a gasp. "She's... with you?"

"Yes, asshole. She is! The fuck is that supposed to mean?"



“I’m fuckin’ with you!” He playfully punches my arm. “That’s great bro. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks man.” I glance at my watch. “I just wanted to stop by and see you in person and say thanks for checking in on me.”

“Don’t mention it.” He nods. “You never did answer about when you get that off.” He points to my hand.

“Oh, hopefully today, I’m heading to the doctor’s office now.”

“Good, means I can get back to whoopin’ your ass sooner rather than later.” He smirks. “Even after that comes off, it will still be another six weeks before we can begin to rebuild strength in that hand, but you’re a beast. You’ll have no issues.”

“Yeah, maybe I’ll get some time to stop by or it will have to be after...” My voice trails off. After what? After my dad dies? He’s doing so good that it’s easy for me to forget that he’s dying.

Cash puts his hand on my shoulder. “Take your time, man. Focus on you. I’ll be here whenever you’re ready, even if it’s not to box.”

“Thanks Cash.” I smile at him. “I’ll see you around.”



MY DOCTOR TOLD me that my hand healed well according to the x-rays. He warned me, like Cash, that I should ease back into boxing or any other strenuous activities. It feels weird to have it free after its been wrapped for so long. It’s obvious my hand and arm are weaker from lack of proper use. The thing I’m happiest about, besides being able to properly grip Quinn’s ass, is also being able to ride on my motorcycle again.

I love cars, but there is nothing like the freedom of being on a motorcycle. Before I head back to my dad’s, I stop by my place to drop off my car and get my bike. As soon as I hit the

road, I gun it going much faster than I should be, but I'm out of fucks to give.

When I arrive at my dad's house, he and Quinn are in the den, laughing together as they watch a show. I kiss the top of her head and hug my dad as I sit down next to them.

"I take it your appointment went well." She says, eyeing my helmet.

I hold my hand up, wiggling my fingers and flexing them. "Yep, just gotta get my grip game strong again." I smirk.

She rolls her eyes, turning her attention back to my dad. "I'll see you later this afternoon, Elias."

"Alright, thank you for keeping me entertained this morning." He says to her.

"Always a pleasure." She squeezes his shoulder and heads for the door.

"I'll be right back, dad." I say. He smirks, waving me off with his hand.

Once we're out in the hallway, I smack Quinn's ass, causing her to yelp. "What the fuck, Ky?" she whisper yells.

I flex my hand. "I just had to see if it still worked or not."

She tries her best to hide a smile by biting her lip. "I can't stand you. Is that why you came out here? To smack my ass."

"Partly." I shrug "But also," I step closer to her, "I wanted to kiss those plush lips of yours." Grabbing her waist, I press her up against the wall, thread my fingers through her curls, and kiss her. She tries to keep it chaste, but quickly abandons that idea as she wraps her arms around my neck, pulling me flush against her and dipping her tongue into my mouth.

Taking her lead, I run my hands over her curves, slipping one hand beneath her top and squeezing her breast. I fucking missed being able to use both hands to explore her body. I put my knee between her leg, making her open up for me and then slide my hand into her pants.

“We—” My fingers meet her center and whatever she was about to say gets lost in her throat as she lets out a whimper.

“You’ve gotta be quiet, Angel.” I whisper in her ear as my fingers slowly rub her sweet spot. My other hand grabs her thigh, pulling her leg up around my waist, giving me better access. I trail kisses along her collarbone, up her neck, and lick the spot just below her ear. She lets out a shuddering breath. “You like when I play with your pussy, don’t you?” She shakes her head yes, biting her lip with her eyes closed.

One of her hands grips my shirt while her nails from her other dig into my shoulder as I pick up the pace. She’s trying not to make a sound when my hand starts to cramp. *This is fucking bullshit* .

I slowdown in hopes that it will alleviate the growing ache in my hand. And it helps, until, Quinn whispers, “Faster, Ky. I’m so close.”

I’m going to try my best to give her what she wants. Hand cramp be damned. I usually want to prolong pleasure, but right now I’m in a race between making Quinn cum and my hand giving out. The pain is steadily building and I’m cursing myself for not listening to the fucking doctor. I should have used my other hand. This is the moment where I realized I fucked up. I’m wondering if I can switch hands when she spreads her legs further apart and bites down on my shoulder. Goddamn if my hand gives out now, she will never let me live it down.

“I’m about to cum...” she whispers.

As soon as the words are out of her mouth, my fingers won’t move. No matter how much I try to will them to move, they won’t. Right when she’s on the edge of her climax.

Her eyes snap open. “Why did you stop?”

I look at her with wide eyes. “I—my hand... it’s cramped.”

She groans. “Ky, you’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

I rest my forehead against hers. “I truly wish I was. I am— I—”

She snorts with laughter, covering her mouth. “Why would you use that hand when the doctor just told you not to strain it?”

“I overestimated my abilities, okay? I got too excited.” I’m looking everywhere but at her right now.

“Crawl before you walk, babe.” She kisses me.

I have no words and continue to stare at my hand that’s still in her pants. She cackles, and I can’t help the smile that tugs at my lips. Quinn is laughing so hard, she’s out of breath with her face buried in my chest.

“You look more disappointed than I feel and I was the one robbed of an orgasm.”

“I’m sorry. You still want to be my girlfriend, right?”

She grabs my face. “Ky, you’re so much more than just dick to me. Shit happens. You haven’t used that hand properly in weeks. If it’s any consolation, I still want you to fuck me later.” She kisses me. “You’re cute when you pout.”

“Damn, I’ve fallen from sexy to cute.”

She tosses her head back and laughs. “You’re Zaddy.”

I raise my brow. “Am I though, if I can’t even get you off?”

“Wow... you’re really dramatic.” She says, giggling while sliding my hand out of her pants. “Can you move it?”

“Yeah, now that it doesn’t fucking matter I can.” There’s still an ache, but not as bad as it was a minute ago. She takes my hand with a smirk on her face and massages it. The tension melts away. I close my eyes, focusing on her touch. “Mmm... that feels good.”

“Your wrap may be off, but you need to be careful still.”

“I know that now.” I smirk. “I’ll use my other hand for... extracurricular activities.”

“Wise choice.” She presses a kiss to my palm. “I’ve gotta go. I’ll see you guys later this afternoon.”

“Alright.” I kiss her and miss her as soon as her lips leave mine.

After going to the bathroom, I walk back into the room with my dad and plop down on the couch next to him.

“What was Quinn laughing about?”

“Nothing.” I say, flexing my hand. “Just something I said. What did you want to do today?” I ask quickly changing the subject.

“I want to go somewhere.” He says.

“Okay, where do you want to go?” I ask distractedly as I flip through the TV channels.

“Camping.”

My eyes snap to his. “Camping?” I raise a brow.

“Yeah, I’ve always wanted to go camping with you and do the whole father son thing, you know?”

“Right...” I nod my head wondering how I can make this work for him. “You want to go camping in a tent, like sleeping bags under the stars and shit—I mean stuff—or in a cabin?”

“A tent.” He says. “The proper way.”

“You do realize I have no survivalist skills, right?”

“Neither do I. That’s what will make it fun.” He says patting my leg.

I laugh, shaking my head. “Alright, let me figure out the logistics of it and we’ll go. It may have to be a few days from now so I can properly prepare, is that cool?”

“Perfect!” He claps his hands together with excitement.

We haven’t really gone anywhere over the past few weeks. I don’t blame him for wanting to get out of the house. I thought he’d say something casual like going out to eat or catching a game—not camping. Either way, I’m down. I just have to figure out how to safely do it. I’d hate to be in the middle of nowhere and something happen. I’ve been to plenty

of cabins, but I've never had to pitch a tent and roll out a sleeping bag. This should be interesting.

"I'm going to call your doctor to see what the safest way to do this is." I say as I scroll through my phone to find Dr. Stone's number.

I call him, but it goes to voicemail. I leave a message briefly explaining the situation and wait for him to call me back. I'm not even going to front, this sounds fun as fuck.

"He didn't answer, but do you want to go get some camping gear?"

"Do you know what we need?" he asks.

"Hell no." I laugh. "I figured we would find out once we get there."

He shrugs. "Sounds like a solid plan."

A little over a thousand dollars later, we've bought everything we could possibly need, including a lot of unnecessary shit. Like a crossbow I don't know how to use, but my dad said to get it. Who am I to deny a dying man his wishes? As we're heading home, my ringer cuts through the music I have playing, and announces that Dr. Stone is calling. I disconnect it from the Bluetooth and answer.

"Hello Dr. Stone."

"Hi Kyrell. My apologies for taking a while to get back to you. So your dad wants to go camping?"

"Yeah." I glance over at him as he stares out the window. "Can I safely make that happen?"

"He seems to be doing well given the circumstances. I would suggest taking a nurse with you if possible. That way you have help if there were an emergency while in a remote area. Although, I think he would be fine, but as a precaution it would be wise. The hospice agency that's caring for him now has overnight care available. I believe you just have to request it."

"Alright, I can look into that. Thank you."

“Kyrell,” he hesitates, “enjoy the time you have left with him. If he wants to go camping—go camping. Whatever he wants to do, do it.”

“Yeah... thanks Dr. Stone.”

I hang up the phone and my dad turns to look at me. “What did he say?”

“That we should probably take a nurse... just in case.”

He turns to look at me. “But we’re going camping?”

“Yeah.” I smile. “We’re going camping.”

Once we’re back to my dad’s, he’s pretty worn out and wants to take a nap. After I help him lie down, I look for a place to go camping. Most are RV parks, but my dad has insisted on camping the “proper way”. We’ll have to travel a little further for us to be able to do that. I’ll have to talk to him once he’s up again. Five hours is a long time for him to be sitting in a car, but whatever he wants, I’ll make happen.

Dr. Stone’s words have been echoing in my head. I know now isn’t the time for caution, but I don’t want to speed up the process either. I’ve become attached to him even though I know I’m going to have to let go. I thought I would find solace in the fact that my mom is still out there, but she’s not going to replace him. I’ve also wondered how I would respond if someone told me what my dad’s father told my mom. My dad is right. She probably thought she was trying to protect me, but why stay silent for all these years? Again, my mind is on an endless loop of questions.

I pull myself from my thoughts when I hear Quinn’s car pull into the driveway. She gets out, singing horribly—bless her—and climbs the steps to the front door.

“He’s sleeping.” I call out to her.

She clutches her chest, almost dropping the iced coffee in her hand as she turns towards me. “What the hell are you doing in the garage?”

“Sorting through the camping stuff we bought this afternoon.”

“You guys are going camping?” she asks, surveying all the stuff. “Is a bow and arrow necessary?”

“Crossbow and yes. Well, no, but I wanted it, so yes.” I grin.

She shakes her head. “Men.”

“I actually wanted to ask you,” I straighten up from looking through bags, “would you be able to come with us? I talked to Dr. Stone today, and he said it would be wise to take a nurse with us if we could. If not, I can call the agency and I’m sure they have someone who—”

“I can do it. Well, I think I can. I’ll call my supervisor in a minute.” She says without hesitation.

“Don’t want anyone else around your man?” I smirk. “I feel you.”

She scoffs. “What are you going to do? Get a hand cramp?”

I narrow my eyes at her as she cackles. “That was a low blow, Quinn. I’m still recovering.”

“Aw, poor baby.” She squishes my face with her hand, making me have fish lips. “Not everything is about you. I was thinking about Elias. We have a routine. I’m sure he’d be more comfortable if he had someone there that knows him.”

“Oh, I didn’t think of that.”

She rolls her eyes. “When are you planning to go?”

“This weekend if everything works out. He wants to camp with a tent and everything. I have no idea what I’m doing.” I say as I look at all camping gear.

“You can read, right?” She smirks.

“Yeah, smartass, I can read.” I laugh.

“It all comes with instructions. You’ll be fine. We’ll be fine. Besides, I think your dad would be happy sleeping on the ground with you.”



“Since when did you become so chill?” I grab her hand, pulling her towards me.

“I’m not, but I can tell you’re nervous when you have no reason to be. It will be fun.” She kisses me. “If you’re planning for this weekend, then I better call now to see if I can go with you guys.”

“You do that.” I smack her ass and she laughs.

I let out a puff of air as I stare at all the camping gear again. I’m going to wing this shit, hope for the best, and focus on having a good time with my dad.

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# CHAPTER 31

*Kyrell*

It's crazy how traveling a mere five hours from home can feel like a whole new world. I was worried about my dad having to travel such a long distance, but he loved it. I haven't been road tripping often because I prefer flying, but now I'm reconsidering. There is something about listening to music, cruising down the road, and being in the company of people you care about.

We arrive at the campground shortly after noon. The views are breathtaking. Nothing but clear skies, mountains, giant trees and a crystal blue lake in front of us.

"This is amazing." My dad says in awe as he stands next to me on the edge of the lake.

"Yeah it is. Good idea, Dad."

He chuckles. "I can't take all the credit. You made it happen."

"How are you feeling?" I ask. He looks a little tired, but happy

"I'm great." He smiles. "Where are we setting up the tent?"

I look over at Quinn, who already has the tent out. We make our way back to the car to help her. My dad sits while we figure out how to put it together. It isn't as hard as I thought it would be. We set it up near the lake between two trees. The only compromise I made with my dad was that we sleep on cots instead of the ground. I worried about him being comfortable. He protested at first, but when Quinn chimed in, it was suddenly a good idea.

It takes us less than an hour to pitch the tent. It has three rooms and is much bigger than I thought.

“Quinn, we’ll have to share a bed.” I hold up the air mattress box, smiling.

She glances at my dad who’s doing a good job pretending not to listen. “Good.” She says. I raise my brows at her lack of protest about being here to care for my dad and not fuck around with me. “That way, if a bear comes, you’ll get mauled first.” She smirks and my dad lets out a rumble of laughter.

“That’s all I am to you? Bear bait?” I ask, faking offense.

Quinn smiles, shrugs, and disappears into the tent.

“Sounds like you’ve met your match.” My dad chuckles. “She knows I don’t mind, right?”

“Quinn is a rule follower, Dad. I had to stop her from making an itinerary for this trip.”

“There is nothing wrong with structure!” Quinn hollers from the tent.

We both laugh at her protest. “We’d be lost without you, Quinn.” I holler back.

“Yeah, yeah.” She says coming out of the tent a few minutes later wearing baby pink cargo pants, a white bikini top that pops against her deep copper skin, combat boots, and glasses with a book clutched to her chest. As she walks past, she pulls her glasses down a bit, winks at me, and flicks me off so that only I can see. I chuckle and stare after her, thinking about bending her over in these woods somewhere.

I pull myself from my fantasy and turn towards my dad. “Did you want to rest before we get into something?”

“I’m fine.” He smiles. “Let’s go fishing.”

“Alright, let me set up everything on the dock and then we can head over.” Even though my dad is getting around well, I don’t want him to exert himself. I’m torn between being overprotective and letting him do what he wants.

“Do you want me to set up your rod?” I ask as we settle on the end of the dock.

“No, I can do it.” He says as he threads the fishing line through the rod.

I may not have survivalist skills, but growing up on Galveston Island, I learned how to fish. A few minutes later, I have my rod setup when my dad lets out a frustrated sigh. I glance in his direction as he attempts to tie the sinker to the line but keeps missing the hole. I wait to see if he can get it before I approach him and place my hands over his. He stills and hands me the rod. I don’t say a word as I attach the sinker, swivel, hook and bait.

I hand the rod back to him, offering a smile. His words about feeling helpless the other day have stuck with me. Since then, I’ve learned that I’m better off helping instead of asking if he needs it.

“Thank you.” He says as he takes the rod back. “Now, let’s see who catches the first fish.”

I toss my head back and laugh. “Bet. Be ready to lose.”

While we fish, Quinn comes over, takes a few pictures of us and then disappears into the tent.

“She doesn’t want to fish with us?” My dad asks.

“Nah, I don’t think fishing is her thing.” I can’t imagine Quinn willingly fishing.

“Who taught you how to fish?” he asks.

“Hendrix’s dad, we were like brothers and he taught us both. They used to take me fishing with them.”

His brow furrows. “You never told me why you two aren’t friends.”

I stare out at the lake, letting out a sigh. “He slept with a girl I was seeing.”

“Oh...” he says, letting silence fall between us before he clears his throat and asks, “Was she worth throwing a friendship away?”

“Huh?” I turn to face him.

“The girl—was she worth it?” he asks without blinking.

I stare at him for a few seconds, considering his question. “No, she wasn’t.” I admit.

“I’m not saying what he did was right, but maybe it’s time to let that go. It’s not doing any good to hold on to it.”

Hendrix has tried to apologize on multiple occasions. But I can hold a fucking grudge. “I don’t know...”

“Food for thought is all. Even if you don’t talk to him again.” He smiles and shrugs.

“Yeah, I...” My voice trails off when Quinn walks past us both, fishing rod in tow, and plops down at the end of the dock with her feet dangling into the water. She doesn’t say a word as she sets up her rod and casts it into the lake. Then she holds it between her thighs as she pulls out a mirror, smiles at me in the reflection, and applies some lip gloss.

“I didn’t think you knew how to fish.” I say, staring at the back of her.

“You never asked.” She looks at me over her shoulder, putting her earbuds in. “You two can talk. I’m listening to music.” She turns back around holding onto her rod, staring out at the water.

“I lost my train of thought for a second.” I say, tearing my attention from Quinn and turning back to my dad.

He chuckles. “Life is too short to hold grudges over things that don’t matter.”

“I know you’re right, but it takes me awhile to get to the forgiveness side of things.”

“That’s fair.” He says. “How’s your line of edibles coming along?”

“Oh, I kind of put that on the back burner. I have to get licensing and a facility to make them in. For now, I want to focus my efforts on opening another store, hopefully next year, and revisit the line of edibles in the future.”

“I’m glad you found something you love to do.” He smiles.

“Yeah, me too.”

Quinn jumps up from her seat, tugging on her line as she reels it in. I watch her, saying to my dad, “There’s no fucking way she caught something already.” My dad and I have been out here for a little over an hour.

Seconds later, she reels in a nice sized fish. She turns around to face us with a grin on her face, holding it out to me. “Here, can you clean it? I hate that part.” I take the flopping fish from her hand, speechless. “Try chicken.” She shrugs as she walks off.

My dad is just as shocked as I am as he laughs. “She won.”

“Whooped both our asses.” I say, tossing the fish into the bucket beside us. “Maybe we should try chicken.”

“We’re doing something wrong if it only took her a few minutes to catch something.”

After we switch our bait to chicken, sure enough, we catch our fish. “Unbelievable.” I mutter to my dad as I reel a fish in.

He chuckles. “Glad she’s here or we would’ve starved.”

We both caught decent sized fish, but Quinn’s is a little bigger. I check my watch. It’s early enough in the day that we can do some other stuff. “Did you want to head back to camp?”

“Yeah, we’ve caught our fish. I can cross fishing with you off my bucket list.” He gives me a satisfied smile. I help him stand steadily on his feet.

“You have a bucket list?” I ask with raised brows.

“A loose one.” He shrugs. “I make it up as I go.”

“Those are the best plans.”

Once we’re back at the camp, Quinn has already setup everything for cooking. We really would be lost without her.

“You can hang out with us. You know that, right?” I ask her as I set the bucket of fish on the picnic table.

“I know.” She shrugs. “But I’m here to support your dad if he needs it. He wants to enjoy this time with you. I respect that.”

I pull her towards me, wrapping her in my arms, and kiss the top of her head. “I truly don’t understand why you’re with my crazy ass, but I’m glad you are.”

She laughs, stands on her tiptoes and kisses me. “I must be crazy too if I’m with you.” She peeks into the bucket. “Are we eating now? Or were you two going to do something else?”

“Not sure. It’s whatever my dad wants to do.” I walk over to where he’s sitting beneath the tree. “What’s next?”

“Can we go on that hike?” he asks.

“Dad, I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

There’s a trail he found when I told him the campsite name that he’s been wanting to go on. It isn’t long and leads to an outlook but we just traveled five hours, fished for a few and I don’t know how he’ll do even on a short, easy hike.

“I’ll be fine Kyrell.” He tries to reassure me.

Quinn interlaces her fingers with mine. “Ky, it isn’t that far of a walk. We can drive to the trailhead. That way he only has to walk the short distance to the outlook. We’ll both be there to help him.”

I let out a sigh as Dr. Stone’s words replay in my head. “Alright, did you want to rest before we head out?”

“I’ll tell you when I need to rest.” He says with a smile. “I feel good. Fresh air makes a difference.” He says taking a deep breath.

I chuckle. “Fine. Let’s go.”



THE TRAILHEAD IS a short five-minute drive from our campsite. The hike wasn't bad either. It wasn't long, but it had a steady incline. Quinn and I walked on either side of my dad so that he was supported the whole way. Once we reach the top, my dad gasps. I didn't think it possible, but the view from up here is more beautiful than the one at our campsite. Quinn helps me get my dad seated on a bench and then sits on the edge of the outlook.

Sitting next to my dad, I pull out a joint. "Mind if I smoke?"

He smiles. "Only if you share."

I chuckle as I put it between my lips, cock my head to the side, and light it. I take a hit, cough a little, hold it in, pass the joint to my dad, and then exhale.

"This was worth it." I say, looking at the view of the trees and mountains as we sit in the clouds.

My dad takes a hit and starts coughing. Quinn turns around to face us then rolls her eyes once she realizes we're smoking a joint. "Do you want some?" I ask her.

"Nah, I'm good." She says, turning back around. I laugh at the memory of her almost hacking up a lung.

"Thank you for bringing me here. I needed this." My dad says.

"Whatever you want to do. We'll do it. Well, within reason." I add, and he laughs.

"Don't worry, I don't want to go skydiving or bungee jumping." He says.

I laugh. "That's why I added within reason, in case you came up with something wild like that." I look down at the joint in my hand, then back to my dad. "I've enjoyed getting to know you and spending time together. When I was younger..." I hesitate, "I thought that I'd hate you for the rest of my life. Then we started hanging out and I realized, albeit reluctantly—" he chuckles "—that we have a lot of similarities. I never really hated you. I was hurt because I wanted you



around. And yeah... the circumstances suck, but I wouldn't trade this amount of time for anything."

I see the tears in his eyes and feel the sting of them in my own. "It's going to be so fucking hard to let you go." I can't help the sob that escapes me. I pinch the bridge of my nose and squeeze my eyes shut as the tears start to fall.

My dad places his hand on my back. "I know." He whispers. "I'm sorry to leave you again, but know that I've loved every single minute with you and that I love you. I've always loved you and will love you... even when I'm gone."

I don't try to stop the tears. I let them fall in hopes they'll alleviate the incessant ache I have in my chest. "I love you too."

We pass the joint back and forth until the roach heats the tips of my fingers. I place it on the ground, stomp it out, and then toss it in the trash can near us.

"You know, your mother and I used to smoke together." He chuckles.

"No shit?" I ask, laughing.

"Yeah." He stares off into the distance. "She was a spitfire. Can you promise me something?" his eyes meet mine.

"What?"

"Promise me that when I'm gone, you'll go see her. You may not have me, but you'll have her. And she'll love you enough for the both of us." He says, looking away from me again and focusing on the clouds passing overhead. "Don't paint me as a saint when you talk to her either. Tell her the truth."

I hang my head, looking at my sneakers. "What if she doesn't want me around?"

He places his hand on my forearm, squeezing it. "She will, Kyrell." He pats my arm. "She will."

I let out a sigh. "Alright..." I nod my head despite my uncertainty. "I promise."

“Good.” He smiles. “Now, how are we going to make it back down this hill?”

We succumb to a fit of laughter. Quinn smiles at us. “Alright you two, let’s go before I have to carry you both.”



LATER THAT EVENING, Quinn helps my dad settle into bed while I clean up from our dinner. I almost burned the fish, but it was still good. All three of us sat around the fire eating, laughing, and talking until the stars glittered in the sky. It was a perfect day.

“He fell asleep before I put his blanket over him.” Quinn says as she comes out of the tent.

I pull her towards me, causing her to sit on my lap and kiss her. “You are the best thing to ever happen to me.”

She smiles, resting her forehead against mine. “Lay under the stars with me.” She whispers.

“Shit, I’ll do whatever you want me to do.”

She hops off my lap and slips into the tent, reappearing seconds later with a sleeping bag tucked underneath her arm. I interlace my fingers with hers as she pulls me towards the lake. She lays out the sleeping bag once we’re closer to the water and puts a blanket over it. I lie down first and she straddles me, leaning forward, kissing my lips first, and then trailing kisses down my neck. I grunt as she winds her hips, grinding against me. She sits up and takes off her top. I unsnap her bra, freeing her breasts and take one in my mouth. I swirl my tongue around her nipple and she lets out a soft moan. She grabs the bands of my sweats and boxers, pulling them down, letting my dick spring free. Her hand wraps around my length, stroking me.

“Fuck...” I mutter, closing my eyes.

I open them when I feel her hand release me to see that she’s taking off her shorts and panties. She straddles me again,

lining me up with her entrance and then slowly lowers herself onto me. I watch as my dick is consumed by her warmth. Her eyes meet mine once I'm buried inside her. I drink her in, memorizing the look of ecstasy on her face. She brings her hand to her clit, rubbing it, and then bounces up and down on my dick.

I thought that being inside her was enough to send me over the edge. But watching her play with herself while bouncing on my dick has me struggling not to bust in seconds. I grip her thighs as if it will help me hold on to the edge of the climax I'm about to reach. She bites her lip, trying to keep her moans quiet as she rides me. Her other hand is planted on my chest as her nails dig into my skin.

I move my hand up to her breast, playing with her nipple, and then wrap my fingers around her throat. She gives me a devilish grin as she pants.

"I'm gonna cum, Ky..." she moans.

Her head falls back as she unravels on my dick—dripping her release all over me. I take over, grabbing a fist full of her curls, pulling her flush against me as I sit up and thrust into her. She wraps her arms around my neck, spreading her legs further apart for me. It doesn't take me long to reach the edge of my climax and come undone with her. My body momentarily tenses.

"Fuck Quinn..." I rasp as the release I was chasing washes over me. Being inside her is better than a high. I'm addicted to her all the same.

"When you said lay under the stars, I wasn't expecting to get laid." I say, slightly out of breath.

"I did want to lay under the stars, but then you said I was the best thing to ever happen to you, so lay became laid."

I laugh, hugging her tighter. "You are."

She sits up, pulling my sweatshirt over her head, then looks at me. "Don't you think it's interesting that we've known each other for... what? Three, almost four, years now, but we never connected on this level until now."

I put my hands behind my head, staring up at the stars. “Stella would call that fate—for us to come together in this space and time.”

“Do you believe in fate?” she asks, pulling up her shorts.

I pull her back down to lie on top of my chest. “I didn’t until an angel crashed into me.”

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## CHAPTER 32

*Kyrell*

It's almost midnight when we pull up to my dad's house. We were supposed to leave earlier to make it back home at a decent time, but it was hard to leave. While we were there, it was easy to forget the reality of why we took the trip in the first place.

Quinn turns around to look at my dad, who's sound asleep. "I can help him up to bed." She gets out of the car, stretches and then opens the back door to wake him. I always find myself holding my breath when we have to wake him up. "Elias, we're home." She says.

His eyes snap open. "That wasn't a bad trip."

She laughs. "You slept for the better part of it."

"Exactly." He chuckles. "Not a bad trip."

She helps him out of the car and into the house while I grab the things that we'll need from the truck. The rest of the stuff can wait till tomorrow when I'm not exhausted. We crammed so much into two days that I'm surprised my dad still has as much energy as he does.

I set our stuff down in the entryway and head up the stairs to see if Quinn needs my help. Of course she doesn't. By the time I reach the door, she already has my dad in bed and he's dozing off again.

"Night dad." I say from the doorway.

"Night. See you in the morning. I had fun on our trip."

"Me too." I smile as Quinn turns off the light.

I follow her out into the hallway. "Are you leaving tonight?"

She yawns. “I’m considering it.”

“Considering?” I ask incredulously. If I feel like falling where I stand, I know the forty-five minute drive to her place is going to be questionable. I pick her up and she squeals. “You’re staying. I can only imagine how you drive when you’re sleepy.”

She laughs as I walk with her in my arms down the hall to my room. “I would protest, but unfortunately your suspicions are correct.”

“That yawn said it all. As soon as you yawn, I know it’s over with.”

I set her down on the bed. “I left the bags downstairs. Do you need yours?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “I’ll steal something of yours.”

“Fine by me.” I chuckle.

She strips out of everything, walks into the closet and returns wearing my t-shirt. “Did you have fun?” She asks, making herself comfortable beneath the covers.

“I did.” I smile. “It was nice to get away and spend time with him. It’s the most energetic I’ve seen him since he was in the hospital. It was perfect.” I wrap my arms around her.

“All that worry for nothing.” She mumbles against my chest.

“It’s hard not to worry. I feel like I’m—never mind.” I let out a sigh.

“You feel like?” she asks.

“Like I’m waiting for the worst to happen. I can’t even lie to myself and say it won’t happen because it’s just a matter of when. It’s a fucked up feeling.”

She presses a kiss to my chest, over my heart. “I know it’s hard. I wish I had the right combination of words to say to ease the pain. I know that’s not comforting, but we know what’s to come and that doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy ourselves still.”

“You being here with me is comforting enough.” I kiss to the top of her head. “I’m just grateful he isn’t suffering.”

“No, the opposite.” She says. “He’s enjoying his time. You should too.”

I think I may be more afraid than my dad, or maybe he’s accepted what’s going to happen and is choosing to make whatever time he has left happy. “You’re right.”

“Of course I am.” She smiles smugly.



THE NEXT MORNING, Quinn helps my dad get ready before she leaves to go care for her other patient. All my clothes now smell like campfire smoke or are dirty. I pop into my dad’s room.

“I’ve gotta stop by my house to get some things. I’ll be back in a bit.”

“Would you mind if I went with you?” he asks.

I smile. “Yeah, sure! I didn’t think you’d want to come.”

“Of course I do. I’ve never seen your house and I enjoy getting out of mine.”

“Alright. Let’s go then.” I chuckle. “I warn you—it isn’t that exciting.”

He gives me a wave of his hand. “You’re my son. Everything you do is exciting.”

On the drive to my house, a question comes to mind that I have to ask. “Where did you go when you weren’t home... when I was a kid?”

He pulls his gaze from the cars zipping past us. “I went to college, traveled, and then started my company.” He sighs. “Basically, anything to keep my mind and body occupied. I was home more often when you were younger.”

“I vaguely remember that.” I say, trying to pull up the foggy memories I have of my dad. Since I have so few, I was never sure if they were real or imagined.

“Yeah, but then Yvette wanted to start a family. I already had one even if it was broken. I felt if I had a family with Yvette—well, now I wonder if things would have turned out differently for you if I had agreed.”

“Stop trying to find ways to blame yourself for what happened.” I glance at him as we sit at a stoplight.

He looks at me. “It’s hard not to.”

The light turns green and I turn my attention back to the road. “I don’t blame you. Please don’t take the blame for something she did.”

He gives me a weak smile and goes back to staring out the window. I turn the music up to fill the silence as I get lost in my thoughts. My dad was dealing with a lot at a young age. I know it isn’t an excuse, but I try putting myself in his shoes. At eighteen, I was an unruly son of a bitch. Parties and pussy were all I cared about. If I had a child and the girl that I loved left us, I would go off the deep end too. One thing therapy has taught me is that we all handle things differently.

Two people can be at the same place at the same time and have two entirely different experiences. It’s easy to say that if I were him, I would have handled things differently, but the truth is, I don’t know how I would’ve handled it. He could have left and never come back too. But he didn’t. He did the best he could. I can’t fault him for that.

My dad whistles. “Wow, now this is a house.” He says as we pull into the driveway.

I smile. “You really like it?” When I bought my house, I put a lot of thought into it. Took me a while to find one. I didn’t want just a house. I wanted a home.

“Yeah.” He says in awe. “I actually considered getting a home in this area. I love that even though you have neighbors, you’re still secluded.”

“Why didn’t you?” I ask him as I park in the garage.



“Yvette wanted neighbors. Which I’m not sure why... she was never home to begin with.”

“Yeah, a lot of what she does makes zero sense.” I cut the engine.

He looks around my garage as I help him get out. “How many cars do you have?”

“An unnecessary amount.” I chuckle. “Right now, I have thirty-two not including my motorcycles.”

“You’ll have to show them all to me.”

“I’d love to, since some of them were bought with your money.”

He lets out a rumble of laughter. “Good, I’m glad you’ve spent your money well.”

“Want a tour of the house first?” I ask.

“Yeah, that sounds great.”

I didn’t think a tour would be exciting, but he’s enthralled. He loves all the baseball memorabilia I have in my office. Although he’s more interested in the few accolades I’ve acquired than the other stuff I’ve collected from professional baseball players.

“You box?” he asks when we get to the gym.

“Yeah, just for fun. Keeps me in shape and helps me release stress.”

“It would have been fun to watch you spar.”

I snort with laughter. “Why? To watch me get my ass handed to me?”

“You can’t be that bad.” He chuckles.

“I’m not good enough to watch. I would show you but,” I raise my hand, “I need to wait awhile before I put that kind of strain on my hand.”

“Yeah... maybe you’re not that great, considering you broke your hand.” He says with a wink.

I toss my head back and laugh. “Alright, get your jabs in while you can.” My phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it out to see a text from Quinn. “Shit.” I mutter.

**Quinn: Did you guys go somewhere?**

**Kyrell: Yeah. I meant to text you. We’re at my place.**

“What’s wrong?” my dad asks.

“Nothing. I forgot to tell Quinn we’d be here.”

“Tell her to join us.” He says as he looks around.

**Quinn: I’ll let you two hang out together.**

**Kyrell: My dad just said for you to join us. I want you here too.**

**Quinn: Alright I’ll be there in a bit.**

“She’ll be over soon.” I say to my dad, shoving my phone back into my pocket. “Want to go check out the cars?”

“Thought you’d never ask.” He smiles.



QUINN PULLS UP with groceries in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other as I’m showing my dad the motorcycles.

“Elias...” she says with a smirk as he stares at the motorcycle.

“I’m just looking.” He says, holding up his hands with a grin.

“Mhmm... sure.” She chuckles.

I take the bags from her hand and kiss her. “What are you making?”

“Me?” she snorts with laughter. “You are going to grill some chicken. Nothing fancy. I’ll help if you need it.”

“I think I can make some chicken.” I smirk.

“Can you? Because you said that about the fish and that almost went up in flames.”

My dad laughs, but tries to cover it with a cough. “She has a point.” He says, clearing his throat.

“Oh...” I laugh, nodding my head, “so neither of you like my cooking?”

“Calm down.” She rolls her eyes. “We ate it, didn’t we?”

“Yeah, because it was all we had.” My dad retorts.

They both laugh and I can’t help but laugh along with them, even though I have a feeling they’re going to roast me tonight.



AFTER I SUCCESSFULLY MAKE THE BBQ chicken, we sit around the table—eating, talking and laughing as the sun sets. Quinn clears the table once my dad puts the last bite of food on his plate into his mouth.

When she disappears into the house, he turns to me and asks, “How can we convince her to let me ride one of your motorcycles?”

“Alone?” I ask, quirking a brow. “Even I’m not going to go for that.”

“No, no.” He whispers in a hushed tone. “I don’t want to die sooner than I have to. I meant with you.”

“We can go.” I shrug. “It’s the perfect time for a ride.”

“Yes, but—” he stops talking as Quinn reappears and we both look at her.

“What?” she asks, glancing between the two of us as she sits down.

“I’m taking my dad for a ride on my motorcycle.” I say almost defiantly because I know it probably isn’t the best idea. Her eyes widen and she looks at my dad, who seems to be

holding his breath. “Quinn,” I grab her hand and her eyes snap to mine, “you said to enjoy the time, and that’s what we’re trying to do.”

She lets out a puff of air as she slumps back against her chair. “I have to say for the record that I don’t think this is a good idea. But... go and have a good time.”

My dad beams at her. “Quinn, you’ve truly been a light for me during this time. I know Kyrell refers to you as an angel and I want you to know you are one. You’ve taken amazing care of me. For that, I am eternally grateful for you.”

Tears pool in Quinn’s eyes, and she squeezes his hand. “Thank you Elias.” She whispers.

I get up and kiss Quinn on the top of her head. “The best thing to happen to the both of us.” I turn my attention to my dad. “Alright you sap, are you ready to ride or what?”

He chuckles. “I am.”

As we head for the garage, I think of Stella’s words about fate. Out of all the nurses in the state of California, Quinn got assigned to my dad. I’ve been grateful to share this time not only with him, but with her as well.

Quinn helps my dad into his jacket. Then I hand him the helmet. “We can talk while we ride. They have Bluetooth. Which one do you want to take?” I ask as I put on my gear.

He immediately points to the white one with neon green lights. “That one looks fun.”

“Good choice.” I smirk as I straddle the bike, then make it rev to life. Quinn helps my dad get onto the back.

“Hold on to Ky.” She says and then looks at me. “Do not drive like a psychopath!”

“I’m not you, Angel.” I say with a wink before sliding on my helmet. She narrows her eyes, but I see the hint of a smile on her lips. “Hold on, Dad.” I feel his arms tighten around me.

I drive slowly out of the garage and down my driveway, but when we get to the road—I take off. My dad’s laughter resounds through the speaker in my helmet.

“I feel like a kid.” He says.

I laugh as I take us down the winding road. “Don’t get any wild ideas.” As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I feel his arms loosen from around my waist. My heart sputters in my chest as I slow down. “Dad—”

“I’m fine. I’m just living.” He reassures me. I see him raise his hands towards the sky, spreading his fingers and hear his laughter again. When I hear how elated he is, I can’t help but let him live. His hands remain in the air only for a few seconds before he brings them down and tightens them around my waist. “Ah, it’s been so long since I’ve been on a motorcycle. I can see why you love them.”

“I’m glad you’re having the time of your life.” I chuckle.

“You know, Kyrell, I wasn’t really living until we started building a relationship. It’s unfortunate that I’m just now living. Don’t be like me. Live and soak up every single moment. Lean into them, even the moments that terrify you. That’s how you know you’re alive.”

I feel a lump in my throat, and tears blur my vision. As a kid, shit, even as an adult, I thought my dad was living this extravagant life. I believed that whatever was out there was better than me. When in reality, his whole life revolved around one life-changing moment. My mom leaving us was his breaking point, and it’s clear he never really recovered. At this moment, I understand why he doesn’t want to see her. Not because he doesn’t want to, but because it would make his parting from this life even more painful. He’d be losing her all over again.



THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON, my dad and I work on the ship. The past week has been the best one we’ve had yet. He seems a little tired today, but not enough to slow him down. I thought assembling and painting the ship was tedious until we got to the rigging for the sails. My eyes hurt as I stare at it.

“This might not be perfect.” I say with a furrowed brow as I concentrate on trying to get the sails right.

“It’s alright, neither are we.” He chuckles. “You’ve done an amazing job. I can’t believe we’ll actually finish today.”

I sit up straight from being hunched over to stretch, cracking my back and knuckles. “Yeah.” I smile. “It’s been a fun project to do with you. I’ve never assembled a model of this size before.”

“I bought the biggest one I could find.” He chuckles. “I knew that if I could get you to do this with me, we’d get to spend a lot of time together. Even if it was in silence.”

“I may have been an ass in the beginning, but my intention was always to spend time with you.” I admit.

“I would have been an asshole to me too.” He says and we both laugh.

“Was there anything else you want to do today?” I ask, turning my attention back to the ship.

“Nope, spend time with you. That’s it.” He says as he glances at his watch. “Quinn should be here in a few hours, then we can have dinner.” I chuckle, shaking my head. “What?” he asks.

“Nothing, you just... talk about her like she’s a part of the family.” I glance at him.

“As far as I’m concerned, she is. Don’t mess it up with her.” He says, pointing a finger at me with a smirk.

“No pressure.” I chuckle.

“Are you worried it won’t work out or something?”

“Mmm... in a way.” I shrug, looking down at the thread in my hands. “I think she’s too good for me. I’m bound to fuck up at some point.”

“You will mess up and so will she. But no relationship is perfect 100 percent of the time.”

“I don’t know if I should find comfort in that or not.” I laugh.

“Relationships aren’t easy. I know we’re sold the idea that once you’re with someone it’s smooth sailing. No one tells you about the rough waters or storms that will undoubtedly come. But you’re not alone. You can weather the storms together.” He says, taking a drink of the tea in his hand.

“Is that how you felt with mom?”

“Yes.” He says staring into his mug. “We loved each other, but that doesn’t mean we didn’t have our disagreements, but we always worked it out.” He smiles at me. The pain and longing are visible in his eyes.

“I understand why you chose not to see her again. You still love her.”

“I never stopped.”



A FEW HOURS and multiple breaks later, I clap my hands together as I put the last piece of the rigging on the ship.

“Anndddd... that’s it!” I smile at my dad, letting out a sigh of relief.

“Would you look at that?” he grins at me. “It’s done.”

“This was more fun than I had anticipated it being.” I admit.

He chuckles. “They are tedious, but enjoyable once you get going.”

“Where are you going to put this one?” I ask observing the ships and other various models on his shelves.

“That’s yours.”

I tear my eyes away from the shelves. “Really?”

“Yeah, as you can see,” he says pointing to the shelves, “I don’t have any room for it. Plus, it will be a reminder of our time together. And who knows, maybe one day you can do the

same thing with your kid... if that time ever comes.” He says with a smirk.

I feel a twinge of sadness. If I have kids one day, they’ll never get to meet him. All I’ll have are stories and memories. “Yeah... maybe.”

I hear footsteps coming down the hall, and Quinn appears. I smile at her, momentarily forgetting the sadness I just felt.

“Did you two finally finish it?” she asks, bending nearer to the ship, checking out all the details

“Yes, we just finished a minute ago. Would you take a picture of us?” my dad asks her.

“I’d be happy too.” She smiles.

Quinn takes some pictures of us holding the ship. I scroll through them after she’s done. My dad isn’t even looking at the camera. Instead, he’s looking at me with pride filled eyes. He’s said that he’s proud of me before, but it’s different seeing it in his eyes. I feel the lump in my throat before I clear it away, rapidly blinking my eyes.

“Should we eat something?” I ask them.

“Yeah.” My dad says. “I want a steak. I’ll even help cook, and then we can watch a movie.”

“Sounds like our evening is planned.” I chuckle.

Me and my dad cook dinner side by side. By the time we’re done, we have more food than we know what to do with.

“It’s alright.” He says. “We’re celebrating finishing the ship.” He smiles.

When we sit down to eat, my dad clears his entire plate.

“You weren’t joking that you wanted a steak.” I chuckle.

“You did a good job cooking it. It was tender.”

“We did a good job. Are you still up for a movie?” I ask him.

“Yeah, I might fall asleep, but I’m going to try.”



“You two go ahead,” Quinn says. “I’ll clean up.”

“Are you staying?” he asks her.

“I can, since I’m technically off in forty-five minutes anyway.” She says as she puts the dishes into the dishwasher.

“Great.” My dad smiles.

While Quinn cleans up, I help my dad get settled into his chair in the living room.

“I’ve had a good day today.” He smiles and his eyes are already drifting close.

“Me too. Dad...” I chuckle. “You’re already falling asleep.”

“I am not.” He says, opening his eyes wide, and I laugh hysterically.

“We don’t have to watch a movie.” I plop down on the couch and turn on the TV.

“I want to watch one with you and Quinn.” He says.

“Alright, your pick then.”

“Something with action. Maybe that will help me stay awake.” He chuckles.

“How about *Pirates of the Caribbean* since we finished the ship?”

“Perfect.” He smiles.

I put on the latest movie from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series. By the time Quinn sits next to me on the couch, my dad has already fallen asleep.

“He’s had an eventful week.” She says, laying her head on my lap.

“Yeah, we’ve spent a lot of time together, but this past week with the camping, him at my house, and motorcycle ride... it tops it all. Then finishing the ship today. I’m happy.” I’m surprised by my own words. It’s the first time I’ve truly meant I’m happy when I say it.

“I know you are.” She smiles and yawns.

“You too, Quinn?” I ask, laughing already knowing she is going to fall asleep.

“What? You’re comfortable.” She smirks.

I hear my dad’s light snores. I settle into the couch, draping my arm over Quinn and make myself comfortable. Before I know it, my eyes become heavy with sleep.



THE CREDITS ARE SCROLLING on the screen when I open my eyes. So much for movie night. Quinn wakes as I stretch my legs.

She stretches, glancing at the TV. “I was tired. Did you fall asleep too?”

“Yeah.” I glance at my dad. “We all fell asleep.”

She checks her phone, it’s just past nine. “I’m going to go to the bathroom. Help him up to bed. I’ll be right there.”

“Alright.” I lie on the couch for a little longer after she gets up. The past week of being on the go has finally caught up with me. I turn off the television, rising to my feet, stretch and then walk over to my dad sitting in his recliner.

“Dad, c’mon let’s get you up to bed.” I touch his arm, causing his hand to limply fall to his side. My heart races as if it knows what’s happening before my mind can comprehend it.

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# CHAPTER 33

*Kyrell*

I stare at his chest, waiting for the rise and fall, but it doesn't come.

"Dad..." I grab his hand. "Dad!" I say louder. "Dad!" I let out a guttural cry and kneel beside him. "No, no, no... Dad. No!"

"Quinn! Quinn!" I scream, holding onto his hand as though it's an anchor.

She comes running from the bathroom. "Wha—"

I can barely breathe as tears blur my vision. "T-Tell me this isn't fucking happening. Tell me! P-Please!" I beg her from where I kneel.

She stands by my dad's side to check his pulse. Her eyes meet mine seconds later, "Ky..." her voice cracks, "I'm sorry. He's gone."

The only sound I can make is a cry. I cry out to my dad to come back and not leave me alone again. Quinn kneels beside me and I cling to her as sobs wrack my body. My chest hurts and my breathing becomes labored as I try to wrap my mind around what is happening. The feeling of not being in my body washes over me as I look at my dad.

"We just had a good day. We were just—just talking. I didn't even get to say that I love him. I—" I bury my face in Quinn's neck trying to holding onto her as I'm catapulted into this new void.

"I know. I know. I'm sorry, Ky. I'm so sorry." She's sobbing too.

"I can't do this, Quinn. I can't. This is too much."

I couldn't prepare myself for the inevitable. I knew it was approaching, but the problem was that I didn't know when. I braced myself, had a constant reminder playing in my head, but it still hit me as though this came unexpectedly. This moment has torn me into a million shreds that I'm not sure can be pieced back together. There were so many things we didn't get to do or say.

This is the reason I didn't want to let him in. Not because I was scared, but because I knew I would be forced to let him go again. But I knew if I didn't let him in, I would regret it. It probably would have hurt even more because I would've been filled with the regret of not knowing him. He helped me know love. There is something different about the love of a parent. They love you unconditionally. You could be the biggest fuck up in the world and they'd still love and believe in you.

We never talked about what would happen after he dies, what he wants or even where he wants to be buried. I should've asked him. I should've been brave enough to talk to him. There's no room for should've, could've, would've. It just is. He's gone and this time he isn't coming back.

My tears are relentless. It's the only thing alleviating the pain that's settled in me. At least with physical pain, there are ways to alleviate it. Emotional pain can't be numbed like physical pain can. It's something that must be endured, no matter how excruciating it is. I stare at my dad, hoping naively that he'll somehow wake up. This all feels like a terrible dream. Quinn's arms wrapped around me aren't allowing me to lose touch with reality.

I slowly pull away from her and stare at my dad. "He's really... gone." I whisper. "Quinn... I don't know what I'm going to do."

She grabs my hand and my eyes meet hers. "You're not alone."

I hold on to her hand as I look back at my dad. "What—what do we do now?" I know that Quinn probably knows more about what his plans were since she was his nurse.

She snuffles, takes a deep breath, and her eyes meet mine. “I have to call my supervisor to let her know that he’s passed and she will inform the funeral home—” she looks away from me. “Then the funeral home will come to—” she sobs, covering her mouth, trying to recompose herself. I squeeze her hand a little tighter because I know this is hard for her too. “They’ll take him to prepare his body according to his wishes.” She says.

I don’t say anything as I look at my dad. This is all too much. “Do you need more time?” she asks.

I look at her with a blank expression already forgetting what we’re talking about. My mind is still trying to grasp what’s happening. “I—I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“Do you need more time... with your dad? Before I make the phone call.”

“Oh.” I wipe the tears from my face, but fresh ones replace them. “Uh... yeah, I guess. I don’t know.”

I feel like a lost kid, unsure of what to do and terrified of making a choice. I look at the clock on the wall. It’s just past eleven. “You can call.” I say hoarsely. I don’t want him lying here like this, even if I do want to spend time with him.

“Okay.” she whispers as she gets up off the floor. I hear her walk away and she reappears with a chair seconds later. “Here.” She says placing it next to my dad. “Sit.” Her hand grabs mine as she pulls me into the chair. “I’ll be right back, okay? I need to go make some phone calls. I’ll be right outside the room.”

I nod. She squeezes my shoulder before she leaves. Once I know I’m alone with my dad, I sob as I hold on to his hand. I bow my head, bringing his hand to my forehead. My shoulders shake with cries and I feel like I’m suffocating.

Quinn reappears and sits next to me. She wraps her arm around my shoulders, hugging me tightly. We stay like this, her holding onto me while I hold my dad’s hand, until the people from the funeral home arrive. The sound of the doorbell cuts through the silence.

“I’ll be right back.” Quinn says.

“Dad, I love you.” I whisper before kissing his hand and laying it back in his lap.

“Ky, I can ask for more time.” She says, placing her hand on my back.

I look at my dad for a few breaths, trying to etch into my memory how he looks before saying, “It’s alright.”

When she returns to the room, she’s with a man and a woman who have a stretcher behind them. I let out a shuddering breath, knowing I have to let him go. They introduce themselves, but they’re drowned out by the blood rushing through my ears. I hear Quinn respond for me, and then her voice slowly comes into focus.

“Ky...” she whispers.

I rise from my seat, kiss my dad on the forehead, gently run my hand over his salt and pepper curls, and then step aside for them. I stand next to Quinn, interlacing my fingers with hers as we watch them reverently move my dad from his chair to the stretcher.

They cover him with a sheet and wheel him towards the front door. I stop following them once I reach the front steps. I watch them, as if in a trance, gently put the stretcher into their van. When they shut the door, I flinch and Quinn holds my hand tighter. The woman approaches again and speaks. I try to pay attention, but my eyes are still fixated on the van.

I hear Quinn say, “I’ll let him know. Thank you.”

The woman gets into the van and they pull away. I watch them make their way down the winding driveway until I can’t see them anymore. My eyes flutter, breaking from the trance I was in, and I look down at my feet.

“I can’t be here...” I say without looking at Quinn.

“Okay... we can go—or I can take you anywhere you—”

“Can I,” my eyes meet hers, “stay with you... just for a couple of days?”

“Yeah, you can. Of course you can.” She turns to go back into the house and I let go of her hand.

“I’ll wait here.” I shove my hands into my pocket.

“Okay, I’ll be quick. I’m going to grab our things.”

An ache has settled into my chest and the thought of going back into my dad’s empty house makes it worse. Quinn comes back holding our things and locks the door behind her. She grabs my hand, pulling me towards her car and opens the door for me. I rest my head against the seat, closing my eyes that burn from all the tears. I open them when Quinn starts the engine and pulls out of the driveway. I watch my dad’s house disappear in the side mirror.

Once it’s gone, I feel the wetness on my cheeks again. I grab Quinn’s hand, holding it tightly, and place it in my lap as I stare out the window. I’m not sure what’s to come but maybe we can weather this storm together—if I don’t get swept up in it.

*Quinn*

The drive to my place was silent. He didn’t say anything, and I didn’t know what to say. I shut the door behind us as we enter my apartment. KP wraps herself around Kyrell’s legs. He picks her up, snuggling her to his chest, and lets out a sigh as he looks around.

“Um... I’m going to take a bath... will you be okay? Unless you wanted to join me?” My eyes widen when I realize how that might sound. “I didn’t mean—”

He gives me a small smile that makes me feel like there’s hope that he’ll be okay. “I’ll join you. I know what you meant.”

“I’ll get the bath ready.” I say, turning around and heading for the bathroom.

I let the bathtub fill up while checking my closet to see if I have any of his clothes. I find a t-shirt and some sweats. Tears fall down my face as I gather things for myself too. I wish that Kyrell didn't have to go through this or that I could somehow make it easier for him. I feel helpless. I sniffle, wiping my nose with the back of my hand, and run into Kyrell as I come out of the closet.

He wraps his arms around me and kisses the top of my head. I hug him back and cry. I should be the one comforting him, not the other way around.

"I should check on the bath." I say, pulling away. "I don't want the water to run over."

He follows me into the bathroom and leans against the counter as he watches me turn off the water.

"It's ready." I say, pulling my shirt over my head.

He pulls a joint out of his pocket, putting it between his lips before he strips. Once he's naked, he tilts his head to the side and lights it. He gets in the tub first, then I get in and settle between his legs. I turn on music to fill the silence and he pulls me against his chest, draping his arm over me. For the first time all night, I relax. Kyrell holds the joint up in front of my face.

"No." I shake my head and he chuckles.

"I'll never forget that." He says, and I hear the smile in his voice without having to see it.

"I wish you would." I smirk.

"Did my dad tell you anything about his funeral?" he whispers.

"Not directly, no. I only know what was in his file." I wondered if they ever talked about what would happen after he's gone.

He continues smoking his joint without saying another word. The funeral home said they would call sometime tomorrow to discuss preparations. Kyrell was still in a state of shock, so I doubt he heard a single word they said. He places



the joint on the bath tray and wraps both of his arms around me. We relax into each other as we try to hold each other together. I tried my best to keep my emotional distance from Elias, but when you're working closely with a patient daily, it's hard to not get attached. You come to know more about them than their family would ever know as you're ushering them to their death.

When I first saw the job description, I was not only hesitant to apply because of my lack of experience, but I also knew it would take an emotional toll on me. Regardless, I still went for it because I wanted to do something more with my life. Today was hard, the hardest thing I've experienced in my life, but I know Elias thoroughly enjoyed the time he had left. That alone, that he experienced joy in the midst of death, makes it all worth it.

Kyrell sniffles. I grab a washcloth, run it under some hot water for a few seconds, and turn around to face him. His eyes are swollen and red.

"Close your eyes." I gently press the warm washcloth to one eye, holding it there for a few seconds and then wipe it away. I do the same to the other before turning around to warm it again.

Instead he pulls me towards him, my back to his chest, so I'm sitting on his lap. He tenderly kisses my neck and my body responds as goosebumps appear on my skin. "Ky..." I whisper softly.

His hands slide over my slick, wet body. He rubs them over every inch of me he can reach—my thighs, stomach, and massages my breasts. His hand dips below the water, slips between my thighs, and his fingers find my sweet spot. There's a lot on my mind, but the moment he touches me, it goes silent.

"I just need to feel you..." He whispers, dipping a finger into me before he rubs it across my clit again.

My head falls back against his chest and his other hand cups my breast. We're both hurting. This isn't going to fix it, but it might momentarily keep the anguish at bay. I spread my

legs apart, an invitation for him to find peace in me. I can't take the pain away, but I can give him comfort. The truth is—I need some comfort too.

He responds to my invitation by lining himself up with my entrance and slowly pushing into me. It's hard to feel sadness when you're about to be catapulted into the height of ecstasy. Water sloshes onto the floor as he starts to move. I grip the edge of the tub, letting out soft moans as his fingers massage my center, bringing me closer to my climax.

I feel the release of my pleasure building as my body tingles. I close my eyes, focusing on the sensations, letting out breathy moans, ready to come undone—and *I do* . The intensity of the climax washing over me takes me by surprise. I call out his name, seeing stars, as pleasure ripples through me.

He pulls out, turning me around to face him before he buries himself in me to the hilt again. I wrap my arms around his neck as his lips crash into mine. His hand grips my curls while his other arm wraps around my waist, keeping me in place flush against him. He trails kisses down my neck before taking a nipple into his mouth. I grind against him, matching his thrusts. He lets out a moan that sends shivers through me.

His hands grip my ass cheeks, using them to bounce me up and down on top of him. I dig my nails into his shoulders as he pounds into me. I bite at his lip, soothing it with a kiss as I dip my tongue into his mouth. He moans into my mouth as he thrusts into me one last time before his muscles tense and he spills into me. I continue to ride him until I'm sure I've milked every last drop from him as he shudders.

He breaks the kiss, breathing heavily, and rests his head against my chest. We sit in the bathtub holding onto one another while our heart rates slow and until the water turns cold.

“We should try and get some sleep.” I say hoarsely. I unravel myself from him and get out of the tub.

We wrap ourselves in towels and head to my room. “I have some of your clothes in—” When I glance at him, there are

tears in his eyes. I stand between his legs where he's sitting on the bed and kiss them away.

"I'm sorry." He says, wiping his face, his gaze not meeting mine.

"You don't have to be sorry." I say, hugging him.

"I didn't think it'd hurt this fucking bad." He cries.

Tears pool in my eyes as I wrap my arms tighter around him. "I know, baby." I whisper. He clings to me as if I can protect him from what he's feeling. "Ky, let's get into bed. You need to get some rest."

He pulls away from me, sniffing, and nods his head. We crawl into my bed naked. I pull the covers over us and snuggle up to him.

He wraps his arms around me and kisses my shoulder. "I'd be lost without you."

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# CHAPTER 34



“**W**hat do I even fucking wear?” Kyrell asks frustratedly from his closet.

I stand in front of him and gently grab his face, making his eyes meet mine. “Whatever you want to wear.”

He lets out a sigh as he bows his head. “I know... I’m just irritated. I don’t want to go to the funeral and talk to people.”

The past few days, it’s only been us two. He hasn’t spoken to anyone else, except the funeral director, even though friends have been calling his phone. Harlow, Acyn, and Cash have all tried, but he hasn’t wanted to talk to anyone. After we went to dress Elias this morning for the funeral tomorrow, I encouraged him to call some of his friends. At first he didn’t say anything, but when we got back to his place, I heard him talking to Harlow and Acyn.

Elias had a short list of people he wanted to attend, none of whom Kyrell or I know, but we made sure to call to notify them. A lot has happened in the past forty-eight hours since his passing. I don’t think Kyrell has had time to grieve. We’ve been busy with funeral arrangements, even though Elias had everything planned out and his requests were simple.

“You know you don’t have to talk to anyone, right?”

“Isn’t that rude?” he asks. “How am I not going to talk to anyone when I invited them?”

I shrug. “I think it’s rude that anyone would expect you to carry on a conversation given the circumstances. You don’t have to talk.”

I see the hint of a smirk on his lips before he pulls me into a hug. “Thank you for all your support over the past couple of

days.”

“I told you I would walk with you.” I wrap my arms around him. “And I meant it.”

*Kyrell*

There are a few seconds after I wake up that reality hasn't set in yet. For those seconds, I think of my dad and what we could do for the day. But then, reality slowly creeps in and I remember he's dead. Grief courses through me like the blood in my veins.

This morning is the worst because today, I have to bury him.

Even when I'm awake, I still find myself thinking of him as if he's still here. My mind hasn't caught up to what my soul already knows. An ache settled in my chest the night he passed and the pain hasn't subsided. I'm wondering if it ever will.

I stare blankly at the mirror. I recognize myself, but I'm not myself. Quinn appears next to me and I turn to look at her. She's wearing a formfitting black dress with a set of glittering angel wings pinned to her chest.

“Where did you get those?” I ask, pointing to the pin.

Her eyes glance down at them, then back to me. “Elias gave them to me after the night at your house.” She runs her fingertips over the crystals. “I forgot about them,” she looks at me and brushes her curls out of her face, “but I thought today was a fitting day to wear them. I'll put them on my badge for work.” Her voice trembles as she finishes her sentence, and a tear rolls down her cheek.

I brush it away and wrap her in a hug. After a few moments, she pulls away, turns around and sweeps her hair to the side. “Can you zip me up?” she asks. I zip her dress and she turns around with a small smile on her face. “Do you know what you're wearing?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Going to his funeral makes it too real.”

I turn back towards the mirror and continue trying to make myself look presentable. My eyes are bloodshot from crying and getting as high as I can. I know I look like hell. My beard is disheveled too and I’m about to say fuck it all to hell because my hands are shaking when Quinn takes the clippers from me.

“Let me help you.” She pauses before she touches my face. “Unless you don’t want me to. I’m not trying to—”

“Thank you for taking care of me.” I say as I sit on the counter so she can reach me.

She gently holds my face, moving it from side to side as she trims and lines up my beard. “Done.” She says after a few minutes as she rubs her hands over my beard.

I turn to look at myself in the mirror. “Damn, you do a better job than my barber.” She laughs. It’s the first time I’ve heard her laugh in days and it makes me smile.

She sits on the bed while I pull out my clothes from her closet. I settle on a black long sleeve button down, black slacks, and some Manolo Blahnik loafers. “I guess I could wear a t-shirt and jeans... like my dad.” I say as I put my shirt on.

She laughs, falling back on and the bed and I can’t help but laugh too. “I can’t believe that’s what he wanted.”

Per my dad’s requests, he wanted to be buried in a t-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. “You read it,” I say while fastening my buttons, “he said he didn’t want to run around in the afterlife in a suit. I can’t say I fucking blame him.”

Of course, my dad found some way to joke about his death even after he’s gone. When I read that in his final arrangements, I thought I was reading it wrong. But then, the funeral director showed us the outfit. Sure enough, it was a well-worn t-shirt, some jeans, and Nikes.

She sighs, sitting up, and her smile fades. “It was a privilege to know him.”

I kiss the top of her head. I try to remember that Quinn lost him too. She got to know him alongside me and also knew him in a way that I never did because she cared for him.

“We should probably get going.” I say as I tuck my shirt into my pants and fasten my belt.

“Yeah.” She stands and interlaces her fingers with mine. “Let’s go.”



WE ARRIVE at the cemetery that deceptively looks like a park. My knee is bouncing uncontrollably and I feel sweat trickle down my chest. Quinn parks the car before she grabs my hand, massaging it with her thumb as we sit in silence after she cuts the engine. I should’ve smoked before we left. It would’ve taken the edge off my nerves. But I wanted to be fully present for my dad, even if that means feeling like I’m two seconds away from crawling out of my skin.

“I’m gonna be sick.” I choke out as bile rises in my throat. I clamber out of the car and puke up what little I ate this morning. How the fuck am I going to do this? I watched him wither away and now I have to permanently say goodbye. I dry heave until tears are streaming down my face and I can’t breathe.

Once my body is done trying to expel my anguish, I gasp for air. Quinn comes around and places her hand on my back, rubbing it in circles. I focus on the feel of her hand as I try to catch my breath.

“Do you want some water?” She asks.

I stand upright, leaning against the car for support. “Yeah.” I wipe my mouth. “Quinn...”

“Ky?” she asks in a questioning tone as she hands me the bottle of water.

“I don’t think I can do this.” I glance at the canopy my dad’s casket is under. There’s a fresh pile of dirt off to the side.

She places her hand on my cheek so my eyes meet hers. “If you don’t want to, we don’t have to. But,” tears pool in her eyes, “I fear that you’d regret it if you didn’t.”

The tears are free falling down my face. I make no move to wipe them away as I rest my head against the car. “Can we just... wait a minute?”

“Of course. Take all the time you need.” She says, rubbing my arm as she stands next to me.

I take a sip of the water. “Do you just keep bottles of water on deck?”

She smirks. “I have a lot in my purse. You never know what you’re gonna need.”

“Okay, Mary Poppins.”

She gives me the response I need by tossing her head back and laughing. I smile as I watch her even though my heart feels like it’s been ripped out of my chest.

“Fuck you, Ky.” she whispers with a smile on her face.

“Why are you whispering?” I side eye her.

“We’re in a place of resting. I’m trying to be respectful even though I want to disrespect you respectfully right now.” She smirks. “You know... I could’ve let you be thirsty with stank breath.” She says as she pulls a mint from her purse.

I laugh because this feels normal. It feels good. I’ve felt like I’ve been watching myself on a movie screen outside of my body. It’s the first time in three days I feel like I’m actually living.

“You wouldn’t do me like that.” I snatch the mint from her hand.

“Try me.” She smirks.

I put the mint in my mouth and choose silence. She rests her head against my shoulder as she stands next to me. The sound of other cars approaching cut through the reverence of the cemetery.

I let out a sigh. “I’m ready... I guess.”



I grab Quinn's hand as we slowly walk up the hill towards my dad's grave. She fearlessly leads the way while I fall behind her. Her eyes meet mine as she glances back at me over her shoulder. She gives me a small smile and squeezes my hand, letting me know she's got me.

I take shaky breaths as we walk the last few steps until we're standing directly in front of his casket. The lump in my throat makes it hard for me to breathe. I let out a cry that's been building in me since we got here. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to bear the pain that's consumed me.

"This is too much..." I gasp.

"Take your time." Quinn whispers.

She holds me as I cry. I hate feeling so broken and weak, but I can't be anything else right now. I tried to trick myself into thinking that I'd be able to handle losing him, that I'd be okay. But now that I have, I know I won't be the same person I was before. This has changed me and I don't know if it's for better or worse.

Quinn guides me to a chair off to the side. I sit, cradling my head in my hands as the sobs wrack through me. She's next to me all the while. Holding onto me, making sure that I know I'm not alone, even though I feel like I am. After a while, my cries subside. I wanted to come early, so I had time to sit with him and fall apart without everyone trying to comfort me. Straightening up in my seat, I grab Quinn's hand and stare numbly at the casket.

People start appearing. I recognize their voices, but don't make eye contact or speak. I wouldn't be able to carry on a conversation right now anyway. I feel people squeezing my shoulder and kissing my cheek, but I'm in a trance as I stare at my dad's casket. Quinn speaks for me. I squeeze her hand to let her know I'm here and I'm grateful she is.

A man, who I'm assuming is a man of God, stands at the head of my dad's casket. I blink rapidly as I turn my attention to him. I've never seen him before. I'm not even sure my dad had a religion. His expression is somber with his hands crossed in front of him. I glance around and all my friends are

here. Harlow, Acyn, Cash, Stella, Charles, and a few people from the dispensary. My circle is small but I would do anything for them. I find some comfort in knowing that I have them around me. The people who my dad asked to be in attendance are here as well. A few sharply dressed women and men.

The man clears his throat and starts speaking. “We’re gathered here to remember the life and legacy of Elias Knight...” He says glancing at me.

I quickly look away and focus on his casket. My mind wanders as I remember what it was like when he was here. All the moments we shared in such a short amount of time. He had the same impact on my life as if he had always been present in it. It was as though we hadn’t missed anytime together at all.

“He referred to his son, Kyrell, as his life’s greatest gift...” My eyes snap to the man who is giving me a warm smile. Not one of pity, but of understanding. I wonder if he knew about our relationship. My eyes remain focused on him as he finishes the eulogy. When he’s finished talking, the reverence that is only present in cemeteries falls over us again.

Quinn touches my arm and I turn my attention to her, not realizing I had zoned out. “They’re wanting to know if it’s okay to lower his casket. Are you ready? Or do you want more time?” she asks.

Everything has gone so fast, but I know my dad didn’t want a drawn out funeral. Now I have to say goodbye. My knee bounces because I know they’re waiting for me. Quinn gently places her hand on my leg.

“Only when you’re ready.” She whispers.

I inhale a shaky breath and I tightly grip Quinn’s hand as rise to my feet. She follows behind me as I walk to the casket. My trembling hand reaches out and I press my palm against the coolness of it.

“Goodbye, Dad. I love you. Till we meet again.” I kiss my fingertips and press them against his casket.

Quinn does the same and places a flower on it. I squeeze her hand letting her know that I'm ready. We stand off to the side and I nod to the funeral director who begins lowering his casket into the grave.

As it lowers into the ground, a piece of me goes with it. A piece of me I wasn't aware existed until I'm watching it be buried. I want to lock it all away—all the pain, the rage, and the grief, but it refuses to be silenced. I feel Quinn's curls brush against my cheek as she rests her head on my shoulder. For a moment, it's just me, her, and my dad. Her warm palm against my cold trembling one. She squeezes my hand and I squeeze back because I've realized no words need to be exchanged between us. Our hearts have telepathy.

Once the earth is closed over him, I look at the sky. The sun is shining, with fluffy clouds drifting past. It's a beautiful day. My dad would have loved to go out to his garden for lunch and let the sun warm his skin. My mind catches up to my soul as a new wave of grief hits me because all I have are memories. He's truly gone.

One would think it would be easy to readjust to life without him since he was absent for so long. But none of the time lost compares to the time we had together. Everyone starts to leave. The people my dad asked to be in attendance don't introduce themselves as they go. That's fine with me. I don't want to deal with formalities today. Harlow and Acyn wrap me in a hug.

"We love you and we're here if you need anything." Harlow says in my ear.

"I know." I bow my head. "Thank you for coming."

"We'll be here for another day. No pressure to get together, but if you want to we can." Harlow adds.

I hadn't considered being around other people and what would happen after the burial. Do I want to be around other people? I feel like I haven't slowed down since the night he passed.

“You know where to find me.” Cash says, before giving me a hug. “When you’re ready.”

I nod because Cash knows my temperament well. He knows the rage I harbored for so long, even the sadness. He follows Harlow and Acyn as they leave.

Charles wraps me in a hug. “I’ll always be here for you.” He says and I nod. He squeezes my shoulder before turning to leave.

Stella steps in front of me and kisses both of my cheeks. “My boy, you are so loved.” She wipes the tears from my face. “Call me if you need anything and I’ll be there.”

I give her a hug. “I will.”

I’ve only seen her a few times since I was staying at my dad’s house. I told her I would still pay her even though she wasn’t at my house like she used to be. Initially, she refused, but after a few days of thought she accepted it and has been visiting her sister. When I called her to tell her what happened, she already knew.

I watch her walk away as I realize my life is changed forever while everyone else goes back to normal. Not that I would wish this on anyone, but it only adds to the isolated feeling. Alone without being alone. Maybe I need to be alone to process, to grieve. I don’t want Quinn to feel like she has to take care of me. I’ll have to face myself, eventually.

“Do you want to stay a little while longer?” Quinn asks me.

I feel exhaustion settling into my bones and the only thought on my mind is getting out of here. I glance at my dad’s grave. “I—can you take me back to my place?”

“Yeah.” She nods. “Can we stop by mine for some clothes?”

“Quinn... I—I really need some time alone.” I say, meeting her gaze.

“Oh.” She glances away from me momentarily, so I don’t see the hurt in her eyes. “Okay, yeah, I can take you to your

place.”

I reach for her hand. “It’s nothing—”

“No, no. I get it.” She forces a smile. “Of course you need time to yourself.”

I know she doesn’t want to leave me alone, but she’s trying to be understanding. “At least for tonight. I really want to sleep and just be alone. I don’t want you to feel like you have to care for me.”

“I don’t feel that way, but I get it.” This time when she smiles, it’s a real one. “Shall we go?”

“Yeah, let’s go.”



WE PULL up to my place and Quinn turns to me. “Call me if you need anything. I’ll answer. It doesn’t matter the time.”

I grab the back of her neck, pulling her towards me, and press my lips to hers. “Thank you for understanding me. I also want you to know you look fuckable in this dress.” My dad’s death may have taken everything from me, but my attraction to Quinn is unwavering.

“Ky!” she squeals. I kiss her again as she laughs. Maybe some of the joy she feels in this moment will be transferred to me.

“Just need some time.” I say, rubbing her cheek.

“I know.” She glances down at her hands.

“I’ll text you later.” I say before getting out. She smiles but doesn’t say anything else.

She pulls away as I shut my front door. My house is eerily silent. I take off my shirt and belt as I head for my room. Sitting on my bed, I take off my shoes. I rummage around in my nightstand for rolling papers and then get some bud from my stash. After I’ve rolled my joint and spark up, I start a fire in my fireplace for the first time.

It's not cold outside, but I grab the clothes I wore to the funeral and toss them into it. The flames blaze momentarily and I watch it consume the clothing. Once it dies down, I draw the shades, cancelling out all light. I lie on my bed, finish my joint and then allow myself to fall into the darkness like I've been wanting to do since the night dad died.

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## CHAPTER 35



I've been trying to give Kyrell space. I'm not sure how much to push him, given everything he's going through.

He won't answer my calls and has only responded to two texts. I'm worried he's spiraling into a place that's going to be hard for him to get out of. I know he wants alone time, but it's been a little over two weeks since I've last seen him. He invited me over the day after the funeral. We ate dinner, talked, had sex, and I left for work the next morning. He was with me, but not really with me.

I'm struggling with knowing how to be there for him. Do I give him space or force my way in? I sigh as I stare at the sunlight dancing across my ceiling. I swing my legs over the side of my bed as I'm hit with a wave of nausea. I fall back onto my bed. I swallow hard and wait for the feeling to pass. The stress and exhaustion have caught up with me. Of course it would be on my day off.

After a few moments, the feeling subsides, and I sit up again. I sigh and cradle my head in my hands as tears prick my eyes. How can I be there for Kyrell if I can't even be here for myself? It's become routine for me to wake up, cry and start my day as if I'm not crumbling from the inside out. I cry for Elias, I cry for Kyrell, and I even cry for myself. I cry most for what once was. Everything seemed perfect even if we were on the freeway to everything falling apart. I just didn't think we'd fall so hard.

I wipe the tears from my face and head for the bathroom. A warm shower always helps. I turn on the water to the hottest I can stand it, letting the steam fill the air while I strip. As I step into the shower I let the water cascade over me. It soothes

my body and soul. I stay in the shower until the water runs cold.

While brushing my teeth, I decide that I'm going to Kyrell's house even if that means crawling through a window. I doubt it will come to that. Well, I hope it doesn't come to that.

Later that morning, I'm scrolling through my calendar to see if there's any way I can get more than two days off. Maybe getting away would help Kyrell. An entirely different thought occurs to me as I look at dates. My heart races and the nausea that I thought had subsided turns my stomach.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck..." I mutter as realization settles in.

I grab my purse and keys before I dash out the door.



TWENTY MINUTES LATER—AFTER almost running multiple red lights—I sprint into the store. Once I get to the aisle I'd wish to be in for an entirely different reason, I stand in front of the pregnancy tests. Why do they have them right next to the condoms? Is it a reminder to strap up so you don't end up in situations like this?

In the beginning, we were cautious, but then somewhere along the way we threw caution to the wind. We became reckless. I also may have put a little too much faith in my birth control. As I stare at the various boxes—each promising a better level of accuracy—I try to remember if I'd missed any pills. I'm well aware that it won't be as effective if it isn't taken religiously at the same time every day. I have a reminder on my phone specifically for me to take the pill. As I'm jogging my memory, I can't recall missing any days, but I'll have to check when I get home. Did I forget to take the pill or did I forget to log my period? Regardless, I'm an adult who knew the risks. We're both adults who knew the risks. But no one ever considers them in the heat of the moment.



How do I even tell him this? Wait, I have to see if I'm even pregnant to begin with. But what if I am? I've been trying to give him his space. But this... a baby. A baby. Oh my God—a baby! I can't even wrap my mind around it, let alone telling Kyrell who I'm pretty sure is hitting rock bottom. I let out an exasperated sigh, pushing the worrisome thoughts out of my mind. I'll panic, if necessary, after I take the test. I grab a box and head for the checkout.



I SET the pregnancy test on my bathroom counter, staring at it as if it may burst into flames. “Okay, Quinn...” I mutter to myself as I pace back and forth, “if you can take the dick you can take this pregnancy test.”

Before I open the box, I look inside my bathroom cabinet to see if I have missed any pills. I'm momentarily relieved to see that I haven't even though these past two weeks have been crazy. I shake out my arms and open the box with trembling hands. A baby wouldn't be the worst thing, but the timing definitely isn't right. I tear through the wrapping, pulling out the test.

After reading the directions, I plop down on the toilet, hold the test between my legs, and wait.

“C'mon...” I groan, trying to relax.

I take a few breaths until I calm myself enough to go. Once I've relieved myself, I set the test on the counter. I side eye it while I pull up my pants and wash my hands. I pace back and forth again while I wait.

I grab the instructions and re-read them. “Three minutes?” That feels like an eternity when my future hangs in the balance of the result. I set the timer on my watch, wondering what it would be like to be a mom. I pull my shirt up and look at myself in the full-length mirror to see if there are any signs of pregnancy. None that I see, for now. I have felt nauseous for a while but I've also been more stressed than usual lately. I can

also contribute my feeling of exhaustion to work and the past two weeks. The timer chimes from my watch, startling me.

My heart races again as I check the test results. My hands are trembling as my eyes try to focus on the words in the tiny window. I immediately set it down as if it's electric, covering my mouth with my palm. I pick it up again and stare at it until tears blur my vision. I carry it with me to my room and take my phone out of my purse.

I call Kyrell multiple times back to back, but of course he doesn't answer. I send him a text.

**Quinn: I really need to see you today.**

I nibble on my lip as I read the test again. Pregnant. I'm pregnant. When I looked at the calendar on my phone, I realized I hadn't logged a period for the past two months. My head has been elsewhere lately between starting a new job, everything with Kyrell, and losing Elias. It was the furthest thing from my mind.

Is now the right time to tell him? Is there ever a right time? I can try to blame myself to make it easier for Kyrell, but we both made this baby. While he may be going through a lot, I'm not going to go through this by myself.

My phone vibrates in my hand and miraculously, there's a text from him.

**Kyrell: Okay.**

**Quinn: I'm on my way now.**



WHEN I GET to his house, I ring the doorbell multiple times before I resort to pounding on it like I'm the police. I turn to go to his bedroom window when he opens the door. He looks like hell. His eyes don't meet mine as he stands aside, waiting for me to enter. I step inside and I can't take my eyes off of him.

“How have you been? Sorry for the mess.” He says as we pass the kitchen.

The state of his house is alarming and all of his blinds are drawn. At least he’s been eating, judging by dishes scattered all around his kitchen. I follow him to his room where he immediately crawls back into bed. I take a steadying breath as I contemplate what to do. I cross his room, open the blind and I’m shocked he doesn’t hiss at me like a vampire. Instead, he covers his head with a blanket. I grab it and slowly pull it down to expose his eyes. They’re bloodshot and he looks like he hasn’t slept in days.

“Ky, you’re taking a shower. C’mon, get up.” I don’t ask because it’s not a question. He needs to take a shower.

His eyes remain on mine before he sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose and squeezes his eyes shut.

“Okay.” He says hoarsely as if he hasn’t spoken since the last time I saw him.

I hold my breath, hoping I don’t have to drag him into the shower. He waits almost a full minute before climbing out of bed. But he finally sits up on the edge and then stands. I follow him into the bathroom and turn on the hot water while he strips down. Once he steps inside, I head back to his room and remove his sheets. I pick up all the trash scattered around along the way to the laundry room. I start a load and then head into the kitchen to clean up. It’s mostly takeout boxes with some dishes. I put the dishes into the dishwasher while throwing everything else away before taking out the trash.

I thought that maybe Stella would have been around, but it’s clear she hasn’t been, which means he’s been completely alone. The only two places he seems to have gone over the past two weeks are his bed and the kitchen. When I head back to his room, he’s still in the shower. I check on him to make sure he’s okay before I put new sheets on his bed.

When he comes out of the shower, my eyes trail up his body and I bite my lip, trying to be respectful of my grieving boyfriend. But damn, I want to lick every droplet of water off of him.

He chuckles. “I missed you too.”

“What?” I say, tearing my eyes away from his abs. “Oh... yeah. I—I’m sorry.”

“Nah, you’re good. I’m surprised you still find me attractive in this state.”

Focus Quinn! No matter how badly you want to jump his bones right now. I remember the reason why I’m here. My nausea mixed with nerves has me hoping I don’t puke all over him.

“I—um—actually wanted to talk to you about something.”

“What’s up?” he asks, letting his towel drop to the floor as he pulls his boxers up.

I sit down on the bed, suddenly feeling hot and rest my head in my hands.

“Are you okay?” he asks, sitting down next to me. I look at his eyes and can’t help the tears that pool in my own. “Quinn, what’s wrong?” he wipes a tear away. “I miss him too. I’m sorry I didn’t check in with you. I—”

“I’m pregnant, Ky.” I blurt out. He blinks, but his eyes don’t leave mine.

“What?” he asks.

“I’m preg—”

“But... you were on birth control, right? You were taking your birth control?” The panic is evident in his voice.

“I was, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that I can’t get pregnant. Birth control doesn’t always work...”

“Yeah, I gathered that.” He says, leaning forward, resting his elbows on his thighs and cradles his head in his hands. “Are you sure?”

I pull the pregnancy test out of my purse, sitting on his nightstand and hand it to him. He takes it and his eyes widen as he reads it.

“Holy fuck...” he mutters as he stares at the pregnancy test. “Quinn—I can’t—wow—” he takes a deep breath “—I can’t have a baby right now. I can’t be a dad. I can barely take care of myself and I’m even doing a shit job at that... let alone a baby. A human that is fully reliant upon us... I just...” He looks at me shaking his head.

“Ky, I know you’re scared, and the timing is shit but—”

“Did you do this on purpose? Is the baby even mine?”

His words sting as though he slapped me. “Excuse me?” I pull away from him.

He squeezes his eyes shut, letting out a heavy sigh before opening them again. There’s regret in his eyes when they meet mine, but the damage is already done.

“Quinn...” he reaches for my hand, “I didn’t mean—”

“Don’t.” I say, shaking my head and snatching my hand away. “Don’t act like you didn’t mean what you just said.” I try to steady my rising anger.

“I—I’m sorry. I—I just—” he stammers “—this is a lot to take in and I’m...” his voice trails off when he realizes there’s no adequate excuse.

“Do you really think I would get pregnant on purpose?” I scoff, rising to my feet. “Do you think I want a fucking baby right now? Or are you forgetting that I have hopes, dreams and fears too? You know,” I shake my head, “this is typical of you. Typical of Kyrell fucking Knight to only consider himself and what’s convenient for him!” My words are like daggers, but I don’t fucking care. I’m sick of his shit. “I’m well aware that this is a lot to take in, but surprise, you’re not the only fucking one who this affects.”

“Quinn, can we just—”

“No, apparently we can’t do shit because it isn’t convenient for you. I’m tired of waiting to fit into your goddamn life and feeling like I constantly have to prove myself. Is it yours? Is it yours!” I shout. “There wasn’t a fucking question when you were nutting inside me, was there? Now all the sudden you want to blame me when I didn’t make

this baby by my fucking self. And trust me,” I say looking at him, “I would’ve fucked Lincoln in a heartbeat, but you kept good on your word for that at least. You’ve ruined me and you don’t even fucking care.”

“Quinn, I’m—”

“Quinn nothing! Fuck you and fuck this! For you to even have the audacity to accuse me of something like that. Whether you like or not, this is your baby.” I snatch my purse off his nightstand, knocking his lamp over.

He grabs my arm, making me pause. I wrench it out of his grasp and step away from him. “I want nothing from you. Not a fucking thing. I’ll take care of the baby alone. Like I always fucking take care of everything.”

I storm out of his house and get into my car. I can’t put enough distance between us as I speed down the road.



I EXPECTED him to be upset, but I didn’t expect him to question whether the baby was his or not. That’s some Maury shit that he had no right to ask me. I am fuming, but above all, I’m hurt. And I’m tired of fucking crying. That’s all I’ve done lately besides work. He called my phone the whole drive home, but I ignored all his calls. There’s nothing for me to say that will lead to a productive conversation, and I don’t have the energy to argue. He meant what he said, even though he tried to claim otherwise. Kyrell is far too honest for me to believe otherwise.

Stepping into my empty apartment, I feel alone. I didn’t expect a celebration when I told him, but I thought that at least we’d be in this together. I need to talk to someone and I think of only one person who won’t judge me when I tell them, Harlow.

She picks up my video call after a few rings. “Hey.” A frown appears on her face. “What happened?”

The flood gates open as soon as she asks me that. All I can do is cry. I watch her get up from where she was sitting and go somewhere more private. It looks like she's at her studio. "Are you busy?" I sniffle.

"No, no. What's wrong?"

"Everything is such a mess, Harls." I'm not sure she can even understand me through my sobs. She doesn't say anything as she looks at me with worry in her eyes, waiting for me to continue. "I-I'm pregnant." I say and don't meet her gaze.

"Oh my God!" she says, causing me to look at her. Her hand is clasped over her mouth as she stares at me with wide eyes.

I brace myself for judgement. "I know, I know we should've been more careful but--"

"Oh please," she sucks her teeth, "we're past that now. I'm gonna be an auntie?" She squeals.

This definitely wasn't the reaction I was expecting. It's such a relief that I laugh. "Yeah... I guess you are."

"Did you think I was going to judge you? Have you talked to Kyrell?"

I look away from her again. "We talked, and it just led to a fight. Well... it really led to me yelling at him." I let out an exasperated sigh. "I know he's going through a lot right now, but so am I and I didn't want to go through it alone."

"You're right. You shouldn't, but what happened?" she asks.

I tell her what happened at Kyrell's house and how alone I feel right now. "I've never felt this alone in my life. Not even when I first moved to L.A. and didn't know a single soul."

"I wish I was there to hug you." She says. "You're not alone. I may not be there, but you can call me anytime you need. This is a lot for you to carry alone and you don't have to."

“Thanks Harls. I’m just not sure what to do about Kyrell. He’s called,” I shrug, “but I don’t want to talk to him right now. I’m hurt. I know he’s hurting too...” my voice trails off as the tears fall.

“Quinn, just because he’s hurt doesn’t mean that you can’t feel hurt. You know that saying, hurt people hurt people? It may be true, but that doesn’t mean we have to accept it and silence ourselves.”

“Yeah, but I feel bad.” I wipe the tears from my face. “Maybe I should’ve waited.

“No, you did what was best for you and the baby. Never feel bad about that. And you know what else?”

“What?” My eyes meet hers.

“You don’t have to figure everything out today. Take your time. Take care of yourself. You need rest. You deserve to rest. Kyrell will come around.”

I shake my head. “Harls, I don’t know...”

“He will.” She reassures me. “But I think some time focused on you will do you some good.”

I can’t disagree with her. My job focuses on caring for others and then when I’m not at work, I focus on making sure Kyrell is okay. I’m a caretaker, but now I need to learn to care for myself in the same way. Especially with a baby on the way.

“Harlow...”

“Yeah?” she asks with raised brows.

“I’m having a fucking baby!” We both giggle. It feels so damn good to laugh with her.

“I’m excited for you!” She squeals. “Trust me, Kyrell will come around. He’s a little lost, but he’ll find his way back to you both.”

My shoulders sag as I sigh. “I hope so.” I smile.

“Have you told anyone else?”



“No.” I shake my head with wide eyes. “Not even Marisa, but I will call and tell her soon. I’m worried about what my parents will say.”

“Have you talked to them lately?”

“Not really. My mom calls me routinely every Sunday evening. I haven’t even told her about Kyrell because I don’t want to answer her sleuth of questions about what he does for work and what tax bracket he belongs to. I get tired of her trying to convince me to go home and settle down with a nice southern gentleman.” I roll my eyes and nearly gag. My mother still has this delusion that I’m going to marry some man from an elite class, settle down and have exactly two point four children.

“I mean technically,” she tilts her head to the side, “you do have a nice southern gentleman... even if he is acting like a twat.”

I toss my head back and laugh. “I think they had a different timeline of events when it came to me having a baby.”

Harlow sucks her teeth. “Fuck their timeline. They’d be insane to not want to be a part of the baby’s life.”

“I can’t deal with the stress of their judgement right now anyway. I’ll tell them, eventually.”

She smiles at me. “Take your time and rest. Not all battles need to be fought in a day.”

“You’re the best friend a girl could ever ask for. Thank you for listening.”

“Always here for you. Call me anytime, day or night, okay?”

“I will.” I assure her.

“Alright, love you.”

“Love you too.”

I end the call feeling lighter. I’m going to take her advice and not try to figure everything out today. The universe must want to test me because my phone lights up with a picture of

me and Kyrell as he calls my phone. My hand hovers over it as I consider picking it up, but stops ringing as I reach for it. I put my phone back down because I need time. We both need time. What we've been through has made us closer, but has also made us strangers at the same time. There's a crack between us that neither of us knows how to fix. I hope we're able to repair it before it tears us apart.

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## CHAPTER 36

*Kyrell*

I'm angry with myself for fucking up the one thing my dad told me not to. Every word that spilled from her lips was true. I clutch the pregnancy test in one hand and my phone in the other, hoping that she'll call me back. I've read the words "pregnant" a million times since she left and it still hasn't sunk in. I knew this was a high possibility with the way I love to be inside her, but it was the furthest thing from my mind. I've been battling with grief and anger, but that doesn't excuse the things I said. She looked at me like I pulled the rug out from under her. I wanted to take the words back, tell her I'm sorry, but it was too late.

I've been doing the bare minimum to stay alive. When Quinn opened the blinds, it was the first time I'd seen the light of day since she was last at my house.

Wake up, get high, eat, sleep and repeat—that's all I've done.

I haven't had the energy for anything else. The only way to silence my reeling thoughts has been sleep. At least in my dreams, dad's still alive, even if it hits me like a ton of bricks when I wake that he isn't.

My doorbell chimes, and I run to answer it. I open it, expecting to see Quinn, but I'm face to face with a man I don't know.

"Can I help you?" I ask, squinting my eyes as the sun blazes behind him. When I block it out, I recognize his face, but I can't place where I know him from.

"Kyrell Knight?" he asks, extending his hand towards me. I glance down at his hand but don't take it. He smiles. "I'm Mr. Fitzgerald, your father's lawyer. Is now a good time?"

I shake his hand. “You were at his funeral?”

“Yes.” He nods his head. “I apologize for not introducing myself sooner. Do you have a moment to talk?” he asks again, glancing at the pregnancy test still clutched in my hand.

“Uh yeah. I guess I do.” I shove the pregnancy test in the pocket of my sweats and step aside for him to enter. “I’m not sure what business my father wouldn’t have handled prior to his death. I doubt I’ll be much help with whatever you’re here for.”

“Very nice home you have here.” He says, looking around and it makes me wonder if my father was in some kind of legal or financial trouble.

“Thanks...” I say in a questioning tone. I lead him to the living room, motioning my hand for him to sit as I take the seat across from him.

He sets his briefcase on the coffee table as he looks around distractedly. “You know, Elias wanted to buy a house in this area. Now I see why.”

I stare at him a moment. “Yeah, my dad said the same thing. Why are you here?” His eyes snap to mine. “I don’t mean to be rude, but what business would you have with me if my dad’s affairs were in order well before he passed?”

He smiles. “Of course Elias didn’t tell you.” He pulls out a stack of papers.

“Tell me what?” I ask, raising a brow.

“Elias left everything to you.”

I blink, then laugh awkwardly. “There’s been a mistake. He couldn’t have. He’s worth well over a few hundred million well... was.” I look down at my hands.

“You are Kyrell Knight, yes?” he asks, glancing down at the paper. “His son?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Then there is no mistake. Elias has left everything to you. Including his tech company, Titan Tech.”

I gape at him. “What—what am I going to do with a tech company? Better yet, what am I going to do with a few hundred million dollars?”

“One hundred and forty-two billion to be precise.” He says, adjusting his glasses.

I scoff and then laugh maniacally. All he does is stare at me with a smile until I recompose myself. “Billion? What the hell am I going to do with all of this?”

“Your father is leaving the choice up to you to either keep or sell the company. If you decide to keep it, he has everything in place to help you run it successfully for as long as you’d like. If you sell, he also has trusted buyers in place. The choice is yours.” He says as if this isn’t a lot for someone to handle. “He also has properties all around the world. Those are yours to do with as you wish as well.”

I’m no stranger to money and flashy things, but billions of dollars is a lot for anyone. What am I going to do with that insane amount of money? And then the tech company, I know absolutely nothing about tech past my phone, cars and a few programs on my computer. This is a lot for me to take in on top of everything.

“Didn’t he leave all this to Yvette?” I wonder if he changed his will based on what she did to me.

He chuckles. “Oh no, everything has been left to you since you were born. There was no mention of her in his will—ever. I became your father’s lawyer shortly before you were born. I met with him and your mother, Olivia.”

“My mom?” I remember the envelope sitting on my desk with all her information in it and the promise to my dad.

“Yes, I worked with your father for many years.”

I sigh and lean back against the couch. “Can I have time to think about all of this? I’m not in a fit state to make such major decisions right now.” I admit.

“Of course, your father said you’d probably need time.”

It's not even noon and I've been through two life altering experiences. One that I fucked up royally and one that I'm terrified I'm going to fuck up royally. "Where can I reach you when I'm ready to talk?"

He hands me a card with his information and the documents. "I want you to know that your father was always so proud of you."

"Thanks." I stand to walk him out. "I'll be in touch."

He shakes my hand before he steps through my front door. I'm being pulled in so many directions at the moment. Quinn, the baby, my dad, my mom, and now this inheritance. I feel like I'm drowning. Most people would kill for an inheritance of this size, but I don't want it. I would rather have my dad back.

I try calling Quinn again. It rings and rings before going to voicemail. Then my phone chimes with a text.

**Quinn: We need time.**

**Quinn: Space.**

**Kyrell: Can we talk?**

**Kyrell: I'm sorry.**

She reads both of my texts but doesn't respond. "Fuck." I mutter. What do I even have to offer her right now? I know I need to get out of this dark place I'm in, but I feel like there's no way out. Some moments I feel okay, but the majority of the time I feel like I'm out at sea without a life jacket. I'm treading water and getting fucking nowhere.

I peel myself off the couch and head to my office. The envelope I've been eager, yet reluctant, to open is sitting on my desk where I left it weeks ago. My fingertips brush against it as I wonder if meeting her can bring me peace. There's the possibility it could bring another storm that I'm not sure I can weather. I sit down in the chair, grab the envelope, and hold it as though it might explode. But the promise I made to my dad replays in my head.

*Promise me when I'm gone, you'll go see her. You may not have me, but you'll have her. And she'll love you enough for the both of us.*

I take a deep breath, tear open the envelope, and a picture falls onto my desk. My heart races as I reach for it. When I flip it over, the breath I took escapes me. I cover my mouth as I stare at the picture. I'm almost an exact replica of the woman smiling back at me. We have the same rich chestnut brown skin, matching gray eyes, the same dimpled smile and curly light brown hair.

I glance at the name printed across the top of the file, Olivia Young. Below it is her address in San Francisco. My eyes remain fixed on it as though I'll be teleported there if I look at it long enough. I'm currently sitting at my lowest point and feel I have nothing to lose if I go to see her. Fuck it. I feel the adrenaline coursing through me as I head to my room, toss a suitcase onto the bed, and pack some clothes. I don't know if I'll be welcomed. All I know is that I've gotta go see her.



I DECIDED to take the longer route to San Francisco and drive along the coastline. Driving helps me clear my head while enjoying picturesque views. The ocean thrashes against the shores below and the sun is setting, causing colors to bloom across the sky. I decide to pull off onto a turnout with a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean to stretch my legs and take in the view. I cut the engine and gaze out at the horizon.

It reminds me of the camping trip with my dad and Quinn. I didn't think I'd be missing her right now too. When I told her about my mom and after we got together, I'd imagined she'd come with me to meet her. I wonder if we're still together or if today was the end of us. Did I ruin us?

I pull the keys from the ignition and get out of the car. As I walk towards the edge, I shove them into my pocket, but I feel something else and pull it out. It's the pregnancy test that I'd

forgotten I put in there earlier. Sadness overcomes the adrenaline that caused this road trip.

I stand on the edge of the cliff, staring at the thrashing waves hundreds of feet below me. My stomach feels like it falls to my feet as my heart races. It'd be so easy to dive, to be pulled down, to let my pain be washed away. It's tempting to silence it all and not feel a thing. I miss not feeling. Being numb to the pain. I've felt alone, but this is a void with no depth. It's nothing but an expanse of sadness.

I stare at the waves, unblinking, wanting desperately to feel something other than sadness. I take a step closer, causing pebbles and dirt to plummet down to the crashing waves, until the toes of my sneakers are over the edge. My breathing is shallow. I hear the blood rushing in my ears as my heart jackhammers in my chest and I break out in a cold sweat.

All I'd have to do is fall, let it all go, wash it all away.

My vision blurs as tears well in my eyes. The only sounds are my erratic heartbeat, my rapid breaths, and the waves hammering below me.

The feeling of the pregnancy test slipping from my fingertips pulls me back to the present. I make a quick movement to grab it, to keep it from being swallowed by the ocean, forgetting I'm on the ledge. My foot slips, I shout as I teeter between life and certain death with my arms flailing. The safety of ground behind me and the rocky ocean ready to greet me. I fall backwards onto my ass, clutching the test to my chest as I scurry away from the ledge. I gasp for breath as I collapse onto my back, staring at the sky.

For the few seconds I teetered on the edge, I was certain I was going to fall to my death. The only thing flashing through my mind were Quinn and the baby. I didn't think of the sadness or the fact that my dad's gone. I only thought of *living* with her and everything I'd miss. I know I'm not ready to be a dad. But I don't know that anyone is ever truly ready to be a parent. I may not be ready, but I'm willing and I'm hoping that will be enough.





I CONSIDERED GETTING a hotel and waiting until morning before going to see my mom. But I felt drawn to her house. I sit outside, contemplating whether or not to knock. It's late and I don't want to startle her. A light flips on, illuminating the window and an outline of a woman comes into view. My heart gets caught in my throat as I sit frozen, staring at her. What am I going to say? What if she doesn't even recognize me? Or that could be an entirely different woman. Maybe it would be better if I went to the hotel and got some rest, but my hand is already pulling at the handle as I step out of the car. If I don't do it now, I'll lose my nerve and I probably won't come back.

I cautiously approach the house as I stare at the window she was in seconds ago. My feet climb the stairs until I'm standing at the front door with my hand hovering in front of it. I knock a few times, stand back, and hold my breath as I wait for her to answer. I feel lightheaded and have to remind myself to breathe. An outline of someone approaching the door startles me. I consider bolting and getting into my car. But she's already peering through the window as she unlocks the door.

When she opens it, I stare at her with a shocked expression that I'm sure matches her own. She places her hand over her mouth.

She reaches out to touch my face but stops in midair.  
"Kyrell?"

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## CHAPTER 37

*Kyrell*

She knows me. I don't utter a word as her hand hovers near my cheek, but then she covers her mouth as tears well in her eyes.

"I never thought—you—you're here." She opens her arms, ready to hug me. "May I?"

I swallow and nod. Her arms wrap tightly around me and my body tenses. It reminds me of the first time my dad gave me an awkward hug on his doorstep. Instead of my arms remaining pinned at my side, I hug her back. It's strange to embrace the woman who gave birth to you and not know her.

She pulls away, sniffing, and wipes her eyes. "Would you like to come in?" she smiles at me.

I glance back at my car, contemplating whether I want to go in. My eyes meet hers again and she's looking at me hopefully. I shove my hands in my pockets and nod. Her smile grows bigger as she leads me into her house. My palms become sweaty as I step inside, clutching the test in my pocket as if it's a talisman. Her home is warmly lit with pictures, art, and books covering the walls. My eyes roam over the pictures. Hardly any of them have people, but the two that do are of her with my dad, and one of them with me in their arms.

I get closer to the pictures on the mantle. My dad looked young, healthy, and happy. There isn't much difference between my father in this picture and the memories I have of him. I gave him shit for his age, but he aged well. He told me I look like her, and I do, but I see myself in him too.

"That was taken on the day we came home from the hospital." She says, standing next to me. I look at her out of the corner of my eye.

“Are you hungry?” she asks.

I shake my head no and return to looking at the pictures, unsure of what to say to her.

“Do you want some water?” Her hand gently touches my arm, causing me to look at her again.

I nod my head yes. My throat feels like sandpaper. Her face lights up before disappearing into the kitchen. A breath I had been holding in finally escapes my lips. I take a seat on the couch as sweat breaks out across my brow. I can't remember the last time I ate. My stomach is in such tight knots, I'm not sure I could eat even if I wanted to. She reappears with a bottle of water in her hand and a tray of fruit in the other. I should actually say a tray of blueberries with other fruit. Apparently, she still loves blueberries, like I do.

“Just in case you're hungry.” She smiles as she sits down next to me on the couch. “I didn't... expect to ever see you again.”

I take the cap off and chug it. I'm sure she probably thinks I'm fucking nuts for not uttering a single word since I arrived.

Her eyes are on me again, but there are tears in them this time. “I—I'm sorry I left you both.”

There's guilt radiating from her. “Why—” I clear my throat “—why didn't you come back?” It's comes out as a whisper. The silence is heavy as the grandfather clock in the corner ticks away.

The tears that pooled in her eyes are now streaming down her cheeks. My instinct is to console, but I stay frozen where I sit.

“I wanted to. I tried.” She says, glancing up at the ceiling. “Elias' father was not someone to be trifled with. I learned that the hard way.”

I look down at the water in my hands. “Yeah, dad kind of told me about that.”

“He knew?” she gasps.

“No,” I shake my head, “he didn’t know at first. He thought you just left us. But he knew there was more to the story. You were the missing puzzle piece for it to make sense. His mother told him the truth about the ultimatum after his father passed. He searched for you... for years and didn’t find you until recently.”

“He didn’t want to come with you?” she asks, and I hear the naïve hope in her voice.

My eyes meet hers. “H–He’s dead.”

It’s the first time I’ve said those words out loud to another person aside from Quinn.

My voice trembles. “He died a couple of weeks ago actually. I–I promised him I’d meet you after he was gone. That’s why I’m here.”

Her cry is different, but it’s one I recognize. It’s guttural, raw, and filled with pain. It’s a cry that comes from the depths of your soul when you’ve lost someone you love. I grasp her hand because it’s apparent that she never stopped loving him like he never stopped loving her.

“I–I’m sorry you lost him. That you lost us.” She cries.

I’m not sure what to say to this. I know my life would have been different entirely had they been together, but there’s nothing to be done about that now. I still want to know why she didn’t come back.

“You said you tried to come back... what happened?”

She sniffles, wiping her eyes, and grabs for a tissue. “Elias’ father...” she scoffs and looks like she wants to spit, “at first I thought he was bluffing. What person in their right mind would threaten to kill someone, let alone a baby?” Her eyes meet mine.

“At first, I didn’t believe him, but then I started thinking about you. What would happen to you if I stayed? I don’t think he would’ve ever hurt Elias because he’s his only child and a boy. But you and I... we were deviations from the plan. A blemish on the Knight name. I don’t know if your dad told you but I didn’t exactly come from a charmed life.”

I nod. “He said your father was a drug addict and your mother died while giving birth to you.”

“Yes and his parents always saw me as a threat. They never tried to get to know me, but they put on a good show as if they did. They took me in, paid for things, and introduced me to a life I had only seen in movies. But after you were born all that changed. I was given an ultimatum to stay and possibly put both of us in danger or leave and give you a chance to have a life I knew I couldn’t provide.”

“Money doesn’t fix or replace emotional things.” I say, staring at her and feeling a twinge of anger. “People have this common misconception that a life of luxury, filled with everything you can imagine, makes up for everything lost. But the things we lose, the things that truly matter, aren’t tangible. They can’t be bought. I had everything as a child but was well acquainted with loneliness.”

“I tried to come back to you. I did, Kyrell. I know that’s not good enough, but I did.” Tears stream down her face as her eyes plead with me. “The first time I tried to go back Elias’ father told me not to try again. He said that he wouldn’t be lenient a second time and that he wasn’t going to allow me to ruin what his family had spent generations building.” She swallows. “But I did try to come back a second time, with the help of Elias’ mother. You were ten months old, and she was watching you alone that day because Elias started going to college. Tobias, his dad, was away for business. Victoria contacted me the night before and told me if I wanted to see you I needed to stop by the following day. I did. I hadn’t seen you since you were six weeks old. The first thing you did when you saw me was smile.”

“I wanted to run with you and never look back, but,” she looks down at the crumpled tissue in her hand, “I couldn’t do that to your father. He already lost me. He didn’t need to lose you too. Victoria and I were in the playroom with you when we heard footsteps approaching. I naively thought it would be Elias.” Her eyes become distant as she stares at a point past my shoulder.

“It wasn’t him. It was Tobias. Victoria grabbed you from my arms as he wrenched me back by my hair. You screamed when she took you from me, but we both knew you wouldn’t have survived what followed.” Her eyes focus on mine again. “Tobias beat me within breaths of my life and then dumped me in an area of the city where drugs and prostitution were rampant. He knew not many questions would be asked about me being found there. When I woke up in the hospital, I couldn’t stop crying. I was hysterical to the point that I had to be sedated. I had fractured ribs, a broken nose, multiple missing teeth, my tongue was partially severed from biting down on it, both legs were broken, and I had a fractured skull. All the doctors and nurses thought I was a victim of a hit and run.”

Looking at her more closely now, I see a scar across her lip, her nose has a small bump, and there’s a scar above her left brow. I swallow as bile rises in my throat knowing what she sacrificed and risked that day just to hold me. To spend minutes with me. The fact she’s still alive is a miracle.

“I don’t tell you this to make you feel sorry for me. I tell you this for you to understand that even though I went through that, I would’ve done it again to see you—to hold you.” She says with sincerity. “Victoria begged me not to come back, gave me money, and told me to start a new life. But as you said... money doesn’t replace emotional things. I lost the love of my life and my child. Victoria and I both knew that if I were to risk seeing you again... it would be the last time I’d see you alive. I can only imagine what would happen if I were to attempt to see Elias. She reasoned with me that it was better to have the chance to see you again at some point in this life than die trying.”

“I never gave up, Kyrell. I loved you long before you were born and I still love you now. I’ll even love you in the lives beyond this one.” She grabs my hands and I look down at them.

I let a silence settle between us. “Dad said that you’d love me enough for the both of you. I have to admit, I thought it was bullshit. I thought you took the money and ran. He never

stopped loving you until his dying day.” I look at her. “He would’ve wanted you to know that.”

Suddenly, I realize she doesn’t need to know that my dad wasn’t there for the better part of my life. That’s not her burden to bear. She’s shouldered enough grief and trauma to last people lifetimes. I’m not going to villainize my father in his death because in the end, he wasn’t a villain. He was my dad, and he loved me even beyond his last breath.

“Where did you go... after?” I ask.

“I came here, tried to start over. I got lost for a little while. Became addicted to alcohol and drugs. It was the only way I knew how to cope with the pain at the time. I spent four years of my life lost in the bottom of a bottle and out of my mind.” Her chin trembles as she looks away from me. “I wanted to forget everything. I had no one, not a single soul, or so I thought. That’s how I felt. Alone. One night, I’d gotten so high that I nearly overdosed. When I awoke in the hospital, Victoria was there. I thought I was dead because I hadn’t seen her in years. She told me that this wasn’t the life you would have wanted for me. That when I’d see you again, I wouldn’t want to be ashamed of me spending my time in a bottle and strung out, if I even lived to see you. I was given a third chance at life and I wasn’t going to squander it.”

“It may sound crazy, but you saved me that day even though you weren’t there. The mere thought of you saved me.” She says as she smiles.

I do understand her. When I stood on the edge of that cliff, thinking of ending it all, the test slipping from my fingertips saved me. I was going to let myself fall, but the baby, my baby I created with Quinn—who I don’t even know yet—saved me.

I swallow as tears fall down my face. “You don’t sound crazy.” My voice is thick with emotion. “I understand.”

“I hope you can forgive me.” She bows her head. “I also understand if—”

“There’s nothing to forgive.” I smile at her.

“C-Can I give you a hug?”

I wrap my arms around her, causing her to sob. My dad may not have known all of what happened, but he knew I needed these answers. I come from two bloodlines of trauma and I refuse to create another one. I'll do everything I can to give my child a life filled with unconditional love and memories, not just things.



WE TALKED FOR HOURS. She wanted to know every detail of my life. I shared everything with her. Well, almost everything. I didn't tell her about the abuse or how my dad wasn't around for years. Those are both burdens I set down and have no desire to pick back up again. She shared stories and photos of my dad from when they were younger. I soaked it all up. It was the first time I hadn't missed him in weeks because I felt he was there with us.

The next morning, over blueberry pancakes, I ask her what she's done over the years.

"I hadn't touched a dime of the money Victoria gave me. It was blood money. But when I got clean and got my first steady job, I knew I wanted to go back to school. I did and became a psychologist. I specialize in trauma. Don't worry, I haven't been picking you apart." She smiles and I chuckle. "After I got my PhD, I bought this house we're sitting in now. I have a quiet but full life. Never married nor wanted more children, but I have friends who are like family."

"I have a family of friends too." I smile before taking another bite of my pancakes. I've already scarfed down two plates.

"There's something I have to tell you..." she wrings her hands together.

"What?" I ask nervously as the knots re-tie in my stomach.

"I'll be back." She gets up from her chair.



I set my fork down and let out a sigh as I look up at the ceiling. “Dad, I really can’t take anymore shit right now.”

She returns to the kitchen holding a thick book with papers sticking out from it in every direction. She sets it down on the table and places her hands over it.

“I—I’ve kept every scrap of information about you that I could find since you joined social media. I know it’s weird and I should have just gone to meet you but—”

I clear my throat. “I actually didn’t know about you until about a month ago. Dad... he never told me about you. He—well, I don’t think he knew how to. Before that, I was raised to believe that his wife was my mother.”

I can tell she didn’t know this because she stares off into the distance as tears well in her eyes and then stream down her face. “Oh...” she whispers without blinking. “I thought—I guess that makes sense.” She smiles, but it’s forced, and wipes the tears from her cheek.

“I’m not making excuses for dad but he went through his own personal hell too. It was a mess. Everything was a mess and I’m,” I shrug, “just trying to pick up the pieces to heal myself. If dad were here, he’d tell you he’s sorry for the way things went. He felt responsible for all of it.”

Her gray eyes meet my own and she grabs my hand. “Him sending you here is his apology. We’ve all done what we had to do to survive. I can’t fault him.”

I smile at her. “Can I see your FBI files on me?”

She tosses her head back and laughs. “I told you it was strange.”

“I’m joking. I really want to know what you’ve seen.” My mind thinks of all the wild shit I’ve posted from high school up until now. I don’t keep anything private either.

She hands me the book. The first few pages are filled with baby pictures, then it skips to me as a teen. There are pictures of me with friends, traveling, partying at college, and articles from when I played baseball are pinned or pasted to the pages. She has pictures of when I opened my dispensary and the

newspaper article attached to it. Memories flood my mind. This is a highlight reel of all the good things. All the things that gave me steady doses of serotonin over the years. I freeze on a page when I see the pictures I took with Quinn the day we went go karting.

“I noticed she kept appearing, so I put them in there. Is she a friend?”

“My...” shit, I don’t even know what we are, “she’s my girlfriend, but it’s complicated right now.” I continue to flip through the pages. My life went from random women, partying, and always being out to spending time with my dad and falling into Quinn. I freeze again when I see a picture of my dad, Quinn, and me when we went camping. Looking at the picture now, he looked so frail given how energetic he was on that trip.

“Complicated?” she pulls me from my thoughts.

I look at her. “Yeah, hold on.” I head to the room I stayed in last night and pull out the pregnancy test from the pocket of the sweats I had on. When I get back to the table, I set it down. Her eyes widen as she stares at it. “Complicated like that.” I point to the test. “But I said some things I shouldn’t have said.”

She picks it up, covering her mouth as she reads it. “I’m going to be a grandma. Wait, can I be—”

“There’s no question.” I smile at her as I pick the book back up.

“What did you say to her?” her eyes remain on the test.

I shift in my seat and clear my throat. “Basically,” I rub the back of my neck, “that she did it on purpose and it’s probably not even mine.” I cringe, saying it out loud.

Her eyes snap to mine. “Oh...”

“Yeah, I know. I messed up.”

“We all mess up.” She offers me a smile, “is she someone you see a future with?”

“She’s who I see everything with. She is everything. My everything.”

“Then it’s fixable. Give her time. The things you said were hurtful but not irredeemable. How long have you known?”

“I found out yesterday, then came here. Figured I had nothing to lose and wanted to fulfill my promise to dad.” I leave out the part about the visit from the lawyer. I’m not even sure what I want to do about any of that yet. “I tried talking to her, but she said she needed space. But I don’t want space to turn into us not being together because of something I said.”

“You can give her space and be there for her at the same time.”

“That sounds like a paradox...” My eyes focus on the last picture I took with dad hours before he passed.

“Support her emotionally. Try to imagine what she’s going through right now. Not with you, but as a woman. She’s becoming a mom, and the pregnancy isn’t planned.”

I close the book and look at her. “She’s probably terrified.” Quinn is meticulous. Almost everything she does is planned. For her to realize she’s pregnant with a baby she didn’t plan on and then having the courage to tell me. “Well now, I feel like an asshole.”

She chuckles softly. “Quinn is going through a lot right now, so are you. But you two have to be there for each other, especially now with a baby on the way.”

Both of us have been going through a lot, but Quinn has still managed to make time to check in on me. I hadn’t bothered calling or texting her until yesterday, after I fucked up. I let out a sigh, hoping that she’ll let me back in.



LATER THAT EVENING, we’re sitting on the porch after going out to eat. Spending time with her has been surreal. I’m hoping now that we’ve met that she can stop living her life as though

it's a punishment for what happened. I can still see the regret in her eyes when she looks at me. Both of my parents were living with burdens that were never theirs to carry.

"When are you going back to L.A.?" she rocks in her chair as she stares out at the horizon.

"Early tomorrow morning. I need a few hours' sleep before I take that drive."

Her eyes meet mine. "Do you think I could... visit you?"

I lean forward, resting my forearms against my thighs, and stare down at my sneakers. "Can I be honest with you?"

"Yes, of course."

I sit up, rubbing the palms of my hands against my jeans. "It's really hard for me to let people in. Even coming here to see you was done with pure adrenaline and very little thought. I had the envelope with your information in it sitting on my desk for weeks before I dared to open it. I want to have a relationship with you, but I'm still wrapping my mind around the idea that you're my mom. I have to let it sink in. I'm not trying to push you away. I've just been through a lot."

"Kyrell, take all the time you need. I'll be here." She smiles and rubs my shoulder.

"Thank you." I whisper.

Maybe that's all I needed to hear—that she's here for me. I'm in the unique situation of getting to know both of my parents late in life. I've known my dad is my dad my whole life, whether he was there or not. My mom, it's different. I'm almost worried that she'll slip away once it sinks in. I've only just met her, but the fear of losing her has been present since before I opened that envelope.

"You know, you're a lot like your father." She smiles warmly.

"Yeah," I chuckle, "I know."

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## CHAPTER 38



Lighting up a joint, I lean back against the seat as I stare at the building my therapist's office is in. I got home yesterday after spending nearly two days in San Francisco with Olivia. It feels strange to think that I have a mom. Even calling her mom feels foreign. I said it once and didn't say it again the rest of the time I was there. Despite that, I enjoyed spending time with her. She's patient, caring and has a lot of love to give. Everything about her is gentle. The polar opposite of what I knew as a "mother" growing up.

I take the last hit of my joint before I step out of my car. Quinn still isn't answering phone calls or texts. I have to admit I hate being on the receiving end of this shit, even if I put myself here. As I'm about to take a seat in the lobby, Dr. Jones opens the door of her office.

"Hi, you can come in. My client before you cancelled," she steps aside for me to enter. "Would you like water, coffee, or tea?" she asks before closing the door behind us.

"No, thank you." I take a seat on the couch and my knee immediately starts to bounce.

Her eyes flit to my knee then back to my eyes. "How have you been?"

Such a loaded fucking question. I rub my sweaty palm against my jeans and rest it on top of my bouncing knee. I take a deep breath and unload. "My dad died. My girlfriend is pregnant. Although, I'm not sure she's my girlfriend anymore and I met my mom. My real mom." I look at her and she's staring at me over the rim of her glasses.

She rests her hands in her lap. "That's a lot to happen in a span of—"

“Three, almost four, weeks.” I fill in for her. “My life has drastically changed in three weeks.”

“It has,” she nods. “How are you coping with the loss of your father?”

“I’m not.” I shrug. “After the funeral, I went off the deep end and isolated myself. I don’t know how to cope.” Tears fall down my face. “My way of coping is to lock it away until it rots and becomes toxic to myself and others.”

“Do you feel toxic?”

“I fucked up the one good thing I had going. So yeah, I’d say I’m pretty fucking toxic.”

“How did you fuck it up?”

I take a deep breath and lean back against the couch. “I accused her of getting pregnant on purpose and questioned if the baby was mine. I was scared. I’d just lost my dad and then this...” I shake my head. “I’m not trying to make excuses. It’s just a lot for me to fucking handle.”

“Why are you here today?” she asks.

I sit up to look at her. “To fix myself, so I stop fucking shit up.”

She smiles. “No, what is your reason for being here today?”

“I...” my voice trails off as I wonder what my reason is. “I’m here because I can’t get through this alone. I want to be a better person for myself, Quinn, and our baby.”

“Are those the words of a toxic person? I’m sure if you were toxic you’d only be considering yourself and not be sitting with me right now.”

I stare out the window, contemplating what she said. “Can I share something with you?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I don’t want you thinking I’m unstable,” I swallow. “I thought about taking my own life. I stood on the edge of a cliff and considered jumping to make—to make,” I rub my palm

over my chest as I try to find the words, “to make the fucking ache in my chest subside. For a few moments, I stood there wondering what it would be like to not feel buried by the grief, anger, and uncertainty. I am so fucking tired, Dr. Jones. So tired that the only way I thought I could find rest was by taking my own life.”

“Do you still feel this way?”

“Yes, but—well, no, I don’t feel like taking my own life. I meant,” I look at her, “the feelings are a little more bearable. They are less overwhelming. I don’t feel like I’m in the dark right now, but it’s easy for me to slip back into that space. Slip back into the dark.”

“What kept you from jumping?”

I pull the pregnancy test out of my jacket pocket. “This,” I hold it up. “Well, not necessarily the test, but the thought of missing out on my child’s life. I felt alone my entire childhood and I would never want that for them. And Quinn, even though she’s mad at me, I still don’t want to leave her alone. I can’t leave her alone.” I shove the pregnancy test back into my pocket. “They’re worth living for, a light in the darkness.”

A silence falls between us before she speaks. “Sometimes the only way to the light is through the darkness. But there will be little beacons of light along the way that will help see you through. There is a duality of dark and light. Remember, we can’t shine without the dark.”

Dr. Jones reminds me that healing isn’t linear. I won’t wake up one day to everything being perfect. Nothing is perfect. But over time, things hurt a little less.



QUINN’S CAR is sitting in its usual parking space. Hopefully, she answers the door. I’ve never been nervous to talk to her, but there hasn’t been so much hanging in the balance before either. I take a deep breath, get out of my car, and head up to her apartment.

I knock a few times and wait. After a minute, there's still no movement on the other side. I turn to leave, pulling my phone out of my pocket to text her, when I hear the door open behind me.

“Ky?” Her head is poking out of the door, with dripping wet hair, and a towel is clutched to her chest. “I was—are you okay?”

I try my best to keep my eyes from trailing up the length of her body. “Uh yeah... I wanted to see you.”

“Oh,” her brown eyes hold my gaze. “You can come in. I just need to wash this conditioner out of my hair. I’ll be right back.”

I have an urge to follow her into the shower because it’s been far too long since I last touched her. But I keep my thirsty ass in the living room. I remember the pink roses in my hand and set them on the counter. Seconds later, she reappears from the bathroom in a robe.

“Just a second,” she mumbles, with a hair tie dangling from her mouth as she heads to her room.

“Take your time.” I lean against the kitchen counter while I wait for her.

“Hi.” She says. Now fully clothed in her nursing scrubs with her hair pulled up in a bun.

“Hey...” my train of thought is lost. She’s fucking gorgeous. No makeup, all natural beauty.

“Are you okay?” she asks with a raised brow.

“Yeah, I’m better, but I wanted to apologize to you... in person. I’m sorry for the things I said, and I want you to know that I’m all in with you and the baby.” I set the pregnancy test on the counter.

Her eyes move to it. “You kept it?” she whispers.

“Yeah, I mean, I’m sure people think I’m fucking crazy carrying a pregnancy test around, but...” I shrug with a smirk.



She smiles, which makes me hopeful, and then her alarm on her phone chimes. “I’m going to be late for work.” She pulls her phone from her pocket, silences it, and looks up at me.

“Right, I’ll walk you out.”

When we get out to her car, she leans against it, but doesn’t look at me. I can tell she wants to say something from the way she’s nibbling on her lip, but decides not to.

“Quinn…” her eyes meet mine, “I know you may not want to be around me right now. I know the things I said hurt and I wish I could take them back. But just know that I’m here for you. I still want to be with you.”

Tears pool in her brown eyes. “I—I’m going to be late for work.” She says.

“Okay.” I nod, not wanting to let her go. I step closer to her, leaning down to kiss away the tears I know I caused before I press my lips to hers. I pull away a few seconds later. Her eyes are still closed, with her lips slightly parted, as if she wants more.

I’m about to lean in for more when her eyes flutter open and she clears her throat. “I’ll text you later.”

I step aside, opening the car door for her, and shut it once she’s inside. It’s clear she wants to push me away but is drawn to me in the same way I’m drawn to her. She can try to put a wall up, but I’ll knock it down. There’s nothing I want more than her.



LATER THAT EVENING, I get a text from Quinn. To be completely honest, I didn’t expect her to text me. She barely said anything when I saw her earlier today. Almost as if she wanted to be mad at me, but couldn’t be when I’m standing in front of her.

**Quinn: I made an appointment with the OBGYN for this Friday. Do you want to come?**

**Kyrell: Of course. Do you want me to pick you up?**

She types, then stops, then starts again. This happens four times before she sends me a text.

**Quinn: Yeah, it's at 1:30.**

**Kyrell: Did you want to get together before that?**

**Quinn: I've gotta get back to work. I'll see you Friday.**

I'll take that as a subtle fuck no. I let out a sigh, realizing that she isn't going to forgive me easily even if she wants to. With time, she'll see I meant all that I said. I just hope it's sooner rather than later.



AFTER THINKING about it for a few days and being able to clear my head. I call my dad's lawyer, Mr. Fitzgerald. I've made my decision. I made it the moment he told me, but I wanted to be sure it was one I was at peace with.

"I'm going to sell." A sense of relief washes over me as soon as the words are out of my mouth.

"Okay, as you know, your father set everything up, but we still need to have a meeting to inform the board members."

"How quickly can that be done?"

"Tomorrow morning. Would nine work for you?"

I'm supposed to pick Quinn up tomorrow for the appointment. "How long will the meeting be? We may have to reschedule."

"It should take only thirty to forty-five minutes. Your father was old school. He still liked to do things face to face even if he worked with technology."

"Yeah, I understand. I'll be there tomorrow morning. Do I have to speak?" I really don't want to talk to them. There isn't

anything for me to say. I don't want to work in tech. That was my father's dream.

"No, you don't have to unless you want to."

"I won't," I say bluntly. "Thank you, Mr. Fitzgerald. See you tomorrow."

I spent the better part of last night going through my father's paperwork. I was curious as to how I'm inheriting hundreds of billions of dollars when my father's company alone is only worth a few billion. I only vaguely know what my father's company does because I never cared to know. While he did make computers, he also made cybersecurity software as well as medical and military technology. His mind was brilliant, and he had his hands in everything.

From technology, to start-ups, rentals—he did it all. His grandfather had already created wealth by being a broker and working in real estate. Then his father started an oil and gas company back in the eighties. Which is why I'm now inheriting billions. I'm sure my father's dad is rolling in his grave right now knowing his bastard grandchild is inheriting every single dime. My dad knew what he was doing when he decided not to have any children after me. He gave the biggest fuck you to his dad and I'm proud to be a part of that.



I WALK into the building of Titan Tech, tying my tie, trying my best to look fucking presentable. I'm completely out of my element. Mr. Fitzgerald is waiting for me in the lobby.

"You look sharp, like your father." He smiles and extends his hand out to me.

I shake it, feeling a sense of pride that I even look close to anything like my dad. "Thank you."

"Everyone's here. There are twelve of us. You may recognize some faces."

“I doubt it.” I didn’t know any of my dad’s friends. He was more interested in me and my life than in introducing me to his. That’s not to say I didn’t ask questions. He didn’t want to talk too much about it and I’m not one to pry.

As I walk with Mr. Fitzgerald, I feel a hand grip my arm. I turn around to come face to face with Yvette. She reeks of alcohol and looks like she’s missed her Botox treatments.

“Elias left me nothing because of you!” She raises her hand, but I catch it midair.

My blood instantly boils. “No.” I say through gritted teeth. “He left you nothing because he despised you. How pitiful of you to spend your life with a man who never loved you. You were only ever a means to an end. Nothing more than a miserable drunk who will die miserable, decrepit, and alone. I, however, will go on living a full, happy, and filthy rich life.”

“You’re worthless!” She screams and it echoes through the lobby. Everyone’s heads turn as they murmur.

“Actually,” I smirk, “I’m worth one hundred and—” I turn to face Mr. Fitzgerald, “What was that number again?”

He clears his throat, adjusting his glasses. “One hundred and forty-two billion dollars, Mr. Knight.”

“Sorry, I didn’t hear you—what was that number?”

“One hundred and forty-two billion dollars,” he repeats much louder with a smirk.

“Right, one hundred and forty-two billion dollars.” I turn my attention back to Yvette with her wrist is still clutched in my fist. “But it’s never been about the money, has it? It’s always been about the fact that my dad loved me and never loved you. Yet, you call me worthless.” I scoff. “Who’s really the worthless one here?”

She wrenches her hand out of my hold. I gladly let go, and she stumbles backwards, falling onto her ass. I’m shocked to hear Mr. Fitzgerald snicker beside me before he quickly recomposes himself, which causes me to laugh, not giving a fuck who hears me. Yvette is in tears, scrambling to pick up

the contents of her bag. I would never put my hands on a woman, but I refuse to allow her near me ever again.

“I have a meeting to attend.”

“Would you like me to call security to have her escorted off the premises?” Mr. Fitzgerald asks.

“Yeah,” I turn to look at him with a smile, “that would be great.”

He waves security over with a flick of his wrist. Apparently, they were on standby, waiting for the okay. They pick her up off the floor where she seems to be having a tantrum as she thrashes around, trying to fight them off. People are still staring—some have their phones out, recording the spectacle she’s made of herself. I’ll never forget what Yvette did to me. I’ve considered making her life a living hell, but she’s already caged herself in her own. Karma is making her rounds, ensuring Yvette gets exactly what she gave. I don’t waste another second on her and turn to follow Mr. Fitzgerald into the board meeting.

“For the record,” his eyes meet mine, “I never liked her.”

“Really? I couldn’t tell.” I smirk.

When I enter the room, everyone rises from their seats while I walk to the head of the table with Mr. Fitzgerald. He was right. I do recognize some faces. Some of the people that I saw at the funeral are standing around the table, smiling at me warmly. They sit when I do.

“As you all know, this is Elias’ son, Kyrell.” Mr. Fitzgerald announces. “He’s here today because he has decided to sell his father’s company.” They’re all staring at me, or murmuring to each other, and I feel like I have to say something.

I rise from my seat and silence falls over the room. I’m not sure what I’m going to say as all eyes focus on me. “You all knew Elias Knight as the brilliant mind behind Titan Tech. I knew him as my dad. The man who loved to joke, sit in his garden, preferred t-shirts and jeans over suits, loved to watch baseball games, build ridiculously hard model ships and...

above all, he loved unconditionally. I never knew the side of him that each of you in this room knew. I know absolutely nothing about running a company of this size and, frankly, I don't want to learn either."

I take a deep breath. "Now that he's gone," tears sting my eyes, "there's a void that cannot be filled. This was my father's legacy, not mine. My dad never wanted me to be like him and I've never wanted to attempt to fill his shoes. It would be an impossible task. I honor my dad by living, not following in his footsteps."

All eyes are on me as I swallow the lump in my throat and sit back down in my seat. Mr. Fitzgerald pats my shoulder and addresses the members of the board. I tune out as I wonder if I'm making the right decision. After nearly a half an hour and countless signatures later, I've officially sold Titan Tech.

I remain in my seat as others rise from theirs. Mr. Fitzgerald leans down next to me. "Everyone would be honored to meet and speak with you."

I turn to look at him. "Me?"

"Yes, everyone in this room, including me, has been with Titan Tech since your dad first started it back in his college days."

I look around the room and a sense of relief washes over me knowing that my father's company is in more than capable hands. Rising from my seat, I follow Mr. Fitzgerald around the room as he introduces me to my dad's colleagues. Each of them has a story to tell of my dad. He touched and changed so many lives. I hang onto every word, soaking all of them in, as they remember who my dad was to them.

I glance down at my watch, knowing I've been here for longer than I intended, and realize I have to be at Quinn's place soon. Mr. Fitzgerald notices and ends the conversation, motioning for me to follow him back to the table.

"Your father left a letter for you."

I stare at his hands as they open his briefcase and pull out an envelope. He holds it out to me. I hesitate for a few seconds

before taking it from his hand. My name is scrawled across the front in my dad's writing.

"Did he tell you what it says?" I ask without looking up from the envelope.

"No, his only instructions were to give it to you after you decided."

I turn the letter over in my hands and then look at him. "Thank you, Mr. Fitzgerald, for everything."

"Call me Richard," he smiles. "You're welcome. Anytime you need anything, let me know. I'd be happy to help."

"Were you good friends with my dad too?" I ask. Talking with the board members, it was apparent that my dad kept a close circle around him. Everyone in the room spoke of him fondly and as if he was a good friend.

"Your father and I were best friends. He loved you more than anything, even if it took him far too long to reconnect with you." He smiles and closes his briefcase. "If you ever want to hear stories about your father, let me know. I'd be happy to share them."

"I'd enjoy that." I smile

"Maybe we can set up a time to talk? Whenever you're ready."

"Yeah," I nod.

We walk through the lobby together as he tells me what will happen next. He warns me that this will be major news in the world of technology. Apparently, no one knew, outside of the people in the boardroom, that he was sick. My dad wanted to enjoy the rest of his life in peace. Richard tells me I'll know when news breaks because it'll be trending. I'm not sure how I feel about that and hadn't considered it when I thought of selling. It wouldn't have changed my mind, but this changes the way I'll move around in my day-to-day life now. At least until the media dies down. A twenty-four year old billionaire isn't something you hear of often, inherited or otherwise.

Once I'm in my car, I tear open the envelope. I've been wishing that I could talk to my dad again. I unfold the sheet of paper with trembling hands.

**Son,**

***You are my legacy. Not the company, money, or other physical things I left behind. You are my legacy. My life's greatest gift. I'm sorry that I couldn't spend more time with you. The time we had was the best time of my life.***

***You're never alone because I'm forever with you in all that you do.***

***I'm proud of you and who you've become. Remember to live, lean into the moments that scare you. Love fiercely and unconditionally. Trust yourself because you know what is true. I love you, even beyond this life.***

**Love always,**

**Dad**

I re-read the letter countless times before I close my eyes, soaking in each word. Somehow, my dad knew that I'd sell. That I'd choose to not follow in his footsteps. We only had a few months together, but he tried to learn everything about me. He didn't talk about himself because he knew there would be plenty of people to tell me stories long after he was gone.

I am his legacy. He'll continue to live on in me, not through me. For the first time since his passing, the aching in my chest subsides.

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# CHAPTER 39



I'm taking my time and putting on some makeup today because Kyrell should be here soon. He tells me I don't need it, which I know I don't, but I still like how I can make my eyes pop with it. I glance at the time on my phone as it rings. It's my mom. I've avoided talking to her more than usual lately. I'm not sure how to tell her I'm pregnant. I feel I need to tell her now especially since I have my first appointment for the baby today.

"Hey Mom." I answer, dreading how this conversation will go.

"Darling, where have you been? I've been trying to reach you for days." Her voice is panicked as if she was ready to file a missing person's report.

"Calm down, Mom. I've texted you."

"A text isn't the same as a phone call, Quinn. Are you okay? Did something happen?"

I don't say anything as I stare at my very small, but visible, baby bump in the mirror. It's amazing to me how I went from a flat stomach to the smallest bump seemingly overnight.

"Quinn, are—"

"Mom, I'm pregnant." I blurt out before I can change my mind.

There's a few seconds of silence before she says, "You're what?"

"Pregnant." I repeat.

"How—wait, don't answer that." She lets out a sigh. "Were you not on birth control?"

“Yes, Mom.” I roll my eyes. “It just... happened.”

“Do you at least know who the father is?” she asks, and I hear the disappointment in her voice.

“No, I don’t have a clue.” She gasps and I’m sure she’s about to faint when I say. “I’m just kidding, Mom. I had—have—a boyfriend...”

“Which is it, Quinn? Had or have? The baby isn’t even here yet and he’s already a deadbeat?”

I let out an exasperated sigh. “No. He isn’t. It’s complicated.”

“Complicated how?” she pries.

I stare at my small baby bump in the mirror before answering. I tell her all about Kyrell. She knows who he is, but I didn’t bother to tell her we started dating. My mom is already relentless in the pursuit of marrying me off. I didn’t want to add to her crusade by telling her I have a boyfriend. She’d expect to hear wedding bells in the near future. As I talk to her, I realize how much I’ve missed Kyrell. I tell her everything from our casual friendship, minus the dirty details, to how we actually started dating, the fight, and about our appointment today.

“And that’s where we’re at right now.” I sigh. “I don’t know if we’re together or not.”

She’s silent for a moment and I’m worried that she’s passed out from shock.

“Quinn, I think you’re being hard on him. He just lost his father, who he sounded very close to, and now you’re pregnant. Whether you want to admit it, that’s a lot for any one person to take on. I doubt he was thinking rationally when he said those things.”

“So what,” annoyance is laced in my tone, “should I have just waited?” She never takes my side on anything. I’m always in the wrong.

“No.” She says, shocking me. “You did what’s best for you and the baby. I’m saying you need to give him some grace.”

Did you jump for joy when you read the pregnancy test?"

"No." I mutter. "I'm terrified."

"Why did you expect that reaction from him?"

"That's not what I expected," I say defensively. "I just thought he'd... support me. Us."

"Quinn," she sighs, "I'm not trying to excuse what he said. But, he just lost his father and can barely support himself. And from what it sounds like, he's been trying to right his wrongs. Have you?"

For the first time in my life, I admit my mom is right. "No."

After a few seconds of silence, she speaks. "Even though you were alongside him, he's the one who lost his father. You will never know what that was like for him."

There's a knock at my door and I already know it's Kyrell. "Mom, I've gotta get to my appointment."

"Quinn..."

"Yes?" I ask, pausing with my hand on the doorknob.

"I love you and I can't wait to hear about your appointment."

I'm a little stunned by her response. "You're not disappointed in me?"

"This is a bit of a shock. I can't deny that." She hesitates, letting out a sigh. "But you're an adult and it sounds like he makes you happy."

"He does... most of the time." I chuckle. Kyrell knocks again. "I've gotta go. I guess I'll call you later?"

"I look forward to it."

"Love you." I say.

"Love you too."

I hang up my phone and open the door. My mood goes from one extreme to the next. Kyrell is wearing a navy blue

button up and he's loosening a tie from around his neck. I swallow as I drink him in.

His grey eyes meet mine. "Hi," he says, rolling up his sleeves, "is this a shirtless party?" he smirks.

I look down, remembering I never put a shirt on. "Oh, no... I just—where are you coming from?" I step aside for him to enter.

"You're showing!" He exclaims with his eyes glued to my stomach.

"Yeah, a little bit. I woke up and there it was." I shrug.

"How are you feeling?" he asks as he sits on a bar stool at the kitchen island.

"Fine. Tired, sometimes nauseous. I would've killed for a burger last night."

"You could call me you know? I'd get you anything you'd want." His eyes are searching mine for any sign that I'm not still upset with him.

"Yeah," I look away from him. "I'm going to get my shirt and then we can go." I turn, heading to my room, before he can say anything. Maybe I'm more stubborn than I care to admit.

He's scrolling through his phone and staring at it intently when I return to the living room.

"I'm ready," I say.

He smiles at me. "You look gorgeous."

"Thanks." I brush the curls out of my face, trying to sound indifferent and follow him out the door.



WE DIDN'T TALK MUCH during the drive to the doctor's office. Even now, as we're sitting in the reception area, he hasn't said much. It seems like he has something on his mind as he checks

his phone for the hundredth time. Usually it doesn't annoy me, but today it does. I'm about to say something to him when my name is called.

"Quinn Halifax."

Kyrell immediately puts his phone away, all attention on me. He holds his hand out. I ignore it, and walk towards the woman who just called my name. She weighs me, takes my blood pressure, and asks a series of questions. Kyrell's eyes are on me the entire time.

When she leaves the room, I snap at him. "What?"

"Nothing," he smirks. "I can't look at you?"

I suck my teeth. "Well, at least say something instead of just staring at me like a stalker."

"Would I have to be a stalker if you'd stop pretending like I don't exist?" he asks, leaning forward.

I roll my eyes and scoff. "Please, you were on your phone the whole time. It's not like you really want to talk to me."

"Seriously, Quinn?" He shrugs his shoulders, raising his hands in the air. "What have I been trying to do since I apologized?"

"Maybe you shouldn't have accused me of such hurtful things." I don't know why I'm so upset with him. My mom was right, but I'm annoyed and tired.

"I—" he begins, but a knock on the door interrupts him. The doctor walks in, smiling at us both, and we return the smiles as if we weren't just arguing.

"Hi, I'm Dr. Hayes. Congratulations on becoming parents!" She shakes our hands as we introduce ourselves and then gets down to business. "Do you remember when you had your last period, Quinn?"

"No." I shake my head. I've tried to remember this countless times, but I don't have a clue.

"That's okay," she says, looking up from the chart, smiling at me. "How have you been feeling? Are you taking prenatal

vitamins?”

“I’ve been fine. Tired, nauseous—”

“Irritable.” Kyrell mumbles under his breath, so only I can hear as Dr. Hayes types away on her tablet. He smirks at me. I throw daggers at him with my eyes.

“No, I haven’t started prenatal vitamins. There are too many options and I wasn’t sure which would be best.”

“Not a problem. I’ll get a prescription for you before you leave today.” She turns her attention to Kyrell. “I assumed you’re the father when I walked in. I apologize for that. Are you the baby’s father?”

I narrow my eyes, mouthing, “Are you?”

“Yes, I’m the father,” he smiles at her. “The daddy,” his eyes meet mine again. My body betrays me as I feel a pulse for him between my legs. I squeeze my thighs together, clear my throat, and turn my attention back to the doctor.

“I’d like to do an ultrasound today since you’re not sure when your last period was. That way, we can get an estimated due date. It will also give us an opportunity to see the baby and hear the heartbeat.”

Kyrell’s face lights up and I can’t deny that it’s the cutest thing I’ve ever seen. He’s undeniably happy. Dr. Hayes instructs me to undress from the waist down before she leaves the room.

“We get to see the baby today and hear the heartbeat?” he grins at me. It’s the first time I’ve seen him genuinely smile since before Elias passed away.

I slip off my jeans and feel his eyes on me again. “Stop staring at me. I’m about to get my vagina probed.”

He shakes his head. “How do you think we even got here?”

“It’s not the same thing.” I laugh. “This isn’t for pleasure.”

“I bet I can give you some pleasure before she comes back.” He smirks, but the glimmer in his eyes tells me he’s

serious and I don't doubt him.

I'm curious as to what he'd do. It wouldn't take me long to get there. We haven't had sex in a few weeks. Which doesn't sound like a long time to most, but we were having sex every single day, multiple times a day. I lick my lips as I stare at him, but my thoughts are interrupted when the doctor knocks on the door again. It was probably for the best. She is the highest rated doctor covered by my insurance. I can't afford to be banned from her office and so far, I like her.

"Alright, let's see the baby, shall we?" she smiles as she sits down in her seat rolling closer to the ultrasound machine.

Kyrell pulls his chair closer to the exam table. Our eyes meet and he smiles at me. "I got you." He mouths. I return his smile before turning my attention back to Dr. Hayes.

"Quinn, I'm going to begin the ultrasound," she says, putting a clear jelly on the end of the wand. I nod, resting back against the bed, trying to relax even though my heart is racing. Kyrell grabs my hand and I let him. He squeezes it and I squeeze back. Not sure how that became our thing, but I'm glad it did. There's pressure and coldness, but no pain as she starts the ultrasound. Silence falls over the room. I hold my breath, waiting for her to say something.

After a minute of moving the wand around, she points at the screen. "If you look here," she smiles. "That's your baby, who seems to be dancing around. You probably won't feel movement for a while yet since it's your first baby, but it looks like you're about eleven weeks along."

I'm overcome with emotion and start crying. "I-wow," I look at Ky, "we made that."

"We did." He kisses my hand as he looks at the screen.

Dr. Hayes points out all the body parts even though they don't look like much right now. "Are you ready to hear the heartbeat?"

"Wait, wait," Kyrell says, holding up his hand. "I want to record this." He pulls his phone out of his pocket. "Do you mind?" he asks me.

“No, go ahead.” I’m actually glad he thought of it because I would’ve been wishing we recorded it later.

He pulls out his phone, while still holding my hand with his other, and starts recording. “We’re ready.”

I take a deep breath as she presses a button to turn on the sound. Seconds later, a whooshing and whirring sound fills the room, something I never thought I’d fall in love with. I look at the screen in total awe. I wasn’t sure what to expect at our first appointment, but it’s been emotional. I glance at Kyrell as he swallows, staring at the screen with tears in his eyes. When I see him crying, I start crying.

“Baby Knight at eleven weeks.” Kyrell says softly. “You’ve changed our lives and you’re not even here yet.”

Baby Knight. I bet his dad would be elated if he were still here. I also have a strong feeling my parents are going to spoil this baby rotten once my mom comes around. Ky is right, the baby isn’t even here yet and has already changed our lives.

Dr. Hayes gets measurements of the baby and gives us ultrasound pictures. The next appointment won’t be for another month, but we’ll find out the sex, if we want. I think it would be fun to do a gender reveal party, but I’m not sure what Kyrell would want. Watching his reactions today showed me he’s all in—at least for the baby. That’s all that really matters.

As we walk down the hallway to leave, Kyrell is focused on his phone again. It shatters the bubble we had just moments ago in the room. I thought he’d at least say something about the baby. When we get out to the lobby, he puts his phone away and focuses his attention on me.

“Do you want to stop by the pharmacy? So you don’t have to do it later.”

“No.” I say without looking at him. “You can just take me home.”

I march towards the doors, but he stops dead in his tracks in the middle of the lobby. I turn to face him and when his gray eyes meet mine, there’s a storm in them.



Kyrell

This back and forth with Quinn has given me whiplash. One minute she's hot, the next she's ice cold. She's avoided talking to me for the past week. I can be patient, but this is ridiculous. She's intentionally trying to be mad at me when I'm well aware I fucked up. I knew from the moment the words left my mouth. I thought after the appointment she'd be willing to talk to me, but we're back to square fucking one. I refuse to stay here.

"Why do you have to be so damn difficult?" For the second time today, all heads snap towards me. I don't care who hears.

Her eyes widen and for a second I think she's going to cry until she narrows them at me.

"You really want to do this here?"

"I asked you, why the hell do you have to be so damn difficult?" I'm not moving from this spot until I get an answer. People are murmuring now, but my only focus is Quinn.

She slowly walks towards me, without breaking eye contact, until we're toe to toe. "Difficult?" Her voice is dangerously low. "I'm being difficult?" She practically shouts.

"Yes, Quinn, you're fucking difficult and stubborn as hell. I'd like to know why." I match her energy.

She raises a finger, poking it into my chest. "You're the one who asked if I got pregnant on purpose," people audibly gasp around us, "you're the one who asked if the baby is yours! When I was fucking there for you through everything. Everything! I said I'd walk with you and I meant it. I went through hell with you but you—" her voice trembles slightly before she regains her composure "—you couldn't walk with me into this. Now that I'm finally not all over you anymore, I'm being fucking difficult? Why the hell are you here then if

it's so damn difficult?" She yells. I'm sure security has been called with how loud we're being.

"I love you." I say, everyone gasps and there are some awes, but Quinn is so busy unleashing every ounce of her frustration that she doesn't hear it.

She continues, "And if you think for one goddamn minute that I'm just going to fall back into your arms, back into—"

I say it louder this time, "I love you, Quinn."

"—you!" she shouts. "Wait... what?"

"I said I love you." I'll repeat it as many times as she needs for it to sink in.

"You... love me?" Tears pool in her eyes.

"I fucking love you."

She fans herself, coming off the tangent she was on. "I'm not crying. I'm just emotional because of the baby. I—you love me?"

I close the gap that was between us, holding her face in my hands. "Yes Quinn, with everything I am, I love you."

She wraps her arms around my neck, crashing into me as our lips meet. Applause breaks out from the people in the lobby.

Quinn pulls away only to say, "I love you too."



NOW WE'RE STUMBLING through the front door, pulling clothes off of each other, as we head for her room. Picking her up, she wraps her legs tightly around me, bringing her lips to mine. She moans into my mouth as our tongues touch. I want her wrapped around me for the rest of my days.

I bump into the bed when we reach her room. Laying her down, I trail kisses along her neck, over her collar bone and

then swirl my tongue around her nipples. She moans, digging her nails into my shoulders.

“I’ve missed you.” I murmur against her skin.

“Mmm...” she whispers, “show me.”

I continue kissing my way down her body until I reach her panties. She starts to take them off, but I move her hands, sliding them over her hips and down her thighs before finally pulling them off. Biting her lip, she looks at me with hazy eyes.

“Wrists,” I command. She holds them out to me. I loop one leg of her panties around her wrist, twisting it and then tying a knot. I put her hand above her head, wrapping the panties around one of the iron poles of her bed before tying up her other wrist. I press a kiss to her lips. “You good?”

“Yes,” she breathes out, spreading her legs for me.

Sinking to my knees, I worship her like I’m a devout believer and she’s my religion. I press kisses to her thighs before I reach her center. The moans spilling from her lips, as my tongue teases her clit, are my prayer. She drapes her legs over my shoulders, keeping me in place while she grinds against my face. I grip her hips and guide her, wanting to taste her at my pace.

She whimpers, desperate for release. “Please Ky...”

I stop tasting her. “You cum when I make you cum.”

She gasps when I dip my tongue inside her, making sure I don’t miss a drop. I flick, lick, and suck her clit until I know she’s on the edge of her release. Now that she’s really ready for me, I insert two fingers into her warm wetness, curling them as I keep my tongue on her center. Her body quivers as she pants before letting out a cry of pleasure that I know her neighbors can hear. I continue to suck on her as her thighs constrict around my head momentarily while she’s at the height of her orgasm and then she relaxes again. Her cries of pleasure become whimpers as she comes down from her climax.

I stand, wiping her cum from my chin and release her hands from the headboard. Grabbing her ankles, I pull her to the edge of the bed, unbuckle my belt and then take off my pants. Her hungry eyes are on me the entire time. She watches me stroke my dick before sitting up and taking it into her mouth. My head falls back as she sucks on me. I thread my fingers through her curls, guiding her tempo. One hand is wrapped firmly around my dick while her other one plays with my balls. I feel my climax starting to build in my core. Gripping her hair, I stop her sucks. She looks up at me, through her lashes with my dick still in her mouth and I almost cum from the sight.

“I need to be inside you.”

She keeps her eyes locked on mine as she slowly pulls my dick out of her mouth, making a popping noise when she releases me.

“Turn around.” I order her.

She bites her lip and turns around, kneeling on the bed, as she backs her ass up to me. I guide myself into her warmth, groaning as I watch my dick disappear inside her. Wrapping my hand around her throat, I pull her back flush against my chest before I start to move inside her. She moans as I graze my teeth against her neck. My breath hitches, heart racing, each thrust bringing me closer to the release I’m desperate to find in her. It doesn’t take long for me to get there.

The tension that has been building snaps. I thrust deep, one last time, before my body tenses and I spill into her. I let out a shuddering grunt as my orgasm ripples through me. After I’ve emptied into her, I slowly pull out, and Quinn sprawls across the bed, breathless. She turns around to face me as I lie next to her.

“I missed you too.” Her voice is hoarse.

I pull her closer to me, planting a kiss on the top of her head. “I know, you put up a good fight though.”

She covers her face, laughing. “I wonder if we’ll find the video of us arguing at the OBGYN’s office on the internet.”

“Probably.” I laugh. “The look on your face was priceless.”

“I hate when you put me on the spot.”

“I know. That’s why I did it there. If it were here, you could’ve easily told me to go fuck myself—” she laughs “—but I was done with the back-and-forth bullshit with your stubborn ass.”

“You knew I was like this when you first met me.”

“I did, and that’s one of the reasons why I fell in love with you. You’re not afraid to call me on my shit.”

“Did you plan to tell me you loved me?” she asks, sitting up and looking at me.

“No, when do I ever plan anything?” I grin and she laughs. “I mean, yeah, I knew long before today, but I didn’t plan to profess my love for you in the middle of a fucking OBGYN’s office. It will make a great story for our kid someday, though. It will be a lesson for them to learn how stubborn you are.”

She swats at my chest as she laughs hysterically. “I’m not that bad!” she says defensively. I side eye her. “Alright, I’m a little difficult.” She admits. “But again, you knew that.”

“I’m not complaining. We had great makeup sex.”

“That we did!” she stretches. “Pretty sure I’ll get a complaint from the building manager, but it’s all worth it.”

My eyes are on Quinn’s stomach as I wonder what our kid will be like. She grabs my hand, placing it over her small bump, and smiles at me. Hearing the heartbeat and seeing the baby today made it undeniably real. We sit like this for a few minutes in silence until her stomach growls.

“Want to get food?”

“Yeah, I want a burger and fries.” She leaps off her bed, grabbing her clothes.

Quinn

We're sitting at our outlook, on the hood of his car, with the glittering L.A. skyline beneath us. I'm scarfing down my food when I notice Kyrell side eyeing me.

"What?" I ask with a mouthful of food.

"Nothing, you're just hovering your food right now and I'm not sure if I should be turned on or terrified."

"Fuck you!" I cackle. "I'm pregnant. Leave me alone. I've been craving this for the past week."

He tosses his head back and laughs. "Why didn't you just go get a burger and fries?"

"Because," I shrug looking down at the burger in my hand, "it's our thing, you know? Well to me it is anyway."

It reminds me of the first night he brought me here after the club debacle. I was wearing that glittery white dress, he was in a black jacket, and we ate burgers and fries on the hood of his car like we are right now.

"I used to come here alone all the time," he looks at me, "but now I only come here with you." He brushes the curls out of my eyes. "It's our thing."

I smile and go back to eating my burger. His phone vibrates, he picks it up, and shuts it off.

"What's up with your phone today? You're never on it this much." I ask taking a sip of my strawberry milkshake.

"I have to tell you something." He says looking at me.

"Okay..." I take another sip of my milkshake. My heart races. "You're very serious right now."

"Yeah," he rubs the back of his neck, "I met with my dad's lawyer. He was actually at the funeral. Anyway, he stopped by my house after our fight. Richard, that's his name, told me that my dad left me everything."

I don't understand why Kyrell looks so uncomfortable. "That's not a surprise though, is it? You're his only child."

"No, that's not surprising. It's expected he would leave me everything but..." his voice trails off as he looks at me with uncertainty.

"But..." I coax him, taking another bite of my burger.

"My dad left me one hundred and forty-two billion dollars, Quinn." He doesn't blink, laugh, or smile.

I choke on the bite of burger I was about to swallow. Did he just say billion? Kyrell pats my back, trying not to laugh as I try to breathe. Finally, the piece of food goes down my throat.

"Did you just say billion?" I wheeze. "This isn't a fucking joke? Billion? He left you billions?"

"Billions." He nods. "I'm still trying to wrap my mind around it. Having money isn't new to me, but this amount... it's catapulted me into an entirely different lifestyle. Richard told me it would be big news once the sale of the company broke. He wasn't wrong. I've been trending along with my dad's company since we were waiting in the lobby at the OBGYN office."

"Trending?" I gape at him. "You've been trending this whole time and didn't say a word?"

"I mean," he smirks, "it's hard to talk when your girlfriend's pussy is in your mouth."

I laugh. "I'm just saying. Trending? Wow."

"Yeah," he nods, "you can google me. That sounds pretentious as fuck, but I'm not bullshitting you."

I pull my phone out of the pocket of my sweats, set my burger down, and type in his name. Before I type his last name, it shows he's trending. I stare at all the articles, tweets, and posts about Titan Tech and Kyrell Knight. I had no idea how big his dad's company was. I knew he was well off, but they never flaunted their wealth.

“Can you say something, please?” Kyrell asks. “I know it’s a lot to take in but—”

“I hit the baby daddy jackpot!” I look at him, grinning, and he blinks before he tosses his head back, laughing. All seriousness and worry are gone. “Did you think this was going to change things? Shit,” I flip my hair over my shoulder, “our baby is set for generations.” I can’t help but laugh as Kyrell cracks up next to me.

“I wasn’t expecting you to say that.” He says with the biggest grin. “Fuck, that was funny. Baby daddy jackpot.”

“I mean what else am I supposed to say?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugs, “I thought maybe you’d be weird about it. Because I’m having a hard time going from people not really knowing me to suddenly millions knowing me. Then I went from being well off to filthy rich overnight.”

“It’s an adjustment, for sure, but you’re not alone.” I rest my head on his shoulder, “We’re a team now. You, me, and the little one.”

“You two are the best thing to ever happen to me,” he says, wrapping his arm around my shoulders. “I should also tell you—I met my mom.”

I can’t help the gasp that escapes me. “How many secrets are you withholding?”

“You wouldn’t talk to me.” He chuckles.

“How was it? Tell me everything.” I say, sitting up to face him.

Kyrell tells me all about his trip to San Francisco to meet his mom. I listen to every word, feeling for them both. The selfishness of Elias’ dad tore apart their lives.

“I thought I’d feel an instant connection, that we’d hit it off, but it felt strange to even call her mom.” He admits.

“Ky, remember that you only recently found out that you had a mom. Then everything that happened when you were a child... give yourself time. Get to know her. Take things at your pace. There’s nothing wrong with that.” I rub his arm.



“You’re right, I know that.” He shrugs. “I guess I was expecting an instant connection.” He stares out at the glittering lights. “I want to tell you something else. I’ve been back and forth about whether or not I should tell you.”

“Is it bad?” I ask, suddenly worried.

“I—” his eyes are still fixated on the lights, “I considered taking my own life...”

“What?” I gasp. When he turns to look at me, there are tears in his eyes.

He tells me what happened and how he was exhausted by the grief and the pain. My heart plummets as I listen to every word. If I feel this way from simply listening to him, I can only imagine how he felt. I knew he was in a dark place, but I didn’t realize how alone he felt.

“I don’t feel this way anymore. The truth is, I’ve never wanted you to feel the need to fix me, Quinn.” He looks down at our interlaced fingers. “I never wanted you to bear my burdens. I know what it’s like to carry something that isn’t yours.”

“I’ve never seen you as broken, Ky. I just thought... I could help ease the weight of what you were carrying.” I rub my thumb along his hand.

“I know that now.” His eyes meet mine again. “I decided to tell you this because I love you and you’re my person. I’ve never believed in fate until I met you. But we kept getting pushed back into each other’s lives until we... collided with fate. You’ve made me feel worthy of love and helped me realize that I don’t have to do this alone. Thank you,” he kisses me softly, “for being my light in the darkness.”

I press my lips to his again. “I love you and I’ll always walk with you.”

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# CHAPTER 40



## *Three Months Later...*

I palm Quinn's growing belly, waiting for the morning kick. As if on cue, a little foot presses against my hand. I smile and kiss her belly. "Morning, little one," I mutter against her skin. Then I trail kisses over her breasts, up her neck until I reach her lips. She smiles as I kiss her. "Morning."

My favorite part of every day is this moment, waking up next to her. After we sorted things out and the social media frenzy died down from selling my dad's company, she moved in with me a week later.

"Morning," she stretches. "Are you ready for today?"

"Yes," I grin. "I was this close," I hold my fingers centimeters apart, "from asking them to tell me what we're having."

"I know," she laughs, "I saw it on your face. You could have found out you know?"

"Where's the fun in that? I want us to find out together. Plus, our family and friends will be here."

Quinn wanted to do a gender reveal party and whatever she wants, I give it to her. As soon as I agreed, she pulled up what she had planned out on her phone and started talking about color schemes.

"I know. I'm excited to meet your mom in person. Hopefully she likes me." She gets off the bed and slips into her robe.

This will be the first time my mom visits me in L.A.. We talk often, whether a phone call or video chat. Over the past

three months we've gotten closer and I'm finally ready to have her come visit. I wouldn't have wanted her to miss this.

"She's gonna love you. Like I do." I reassure her as I get off the bed and kiss the top of her head. She smiles at me. My mom adores Quinn. She'd rather talk to her most calls than to me. Granted, Quinn is more talkative than I am.

"Is Stella bringing the cake? Oh, and what about the food? The drinks too... we should probably--"

"Quinn," I grab her face, "chill. We hired people for all of that, remember? We're meant to relax and enjoy this moment."

She takes a deep breath, nodding her head. "I know. I'm just nervous and excited."

I kiss her. "Me too, but," I kiss her again, "let me help you relax in the shower. Then you can spaz if you want, okay?"

She giggles, wrapping her arms around my neck. "My favorite way to relax."

I pick her up, causing her to squeal and laugh as we head into the bathroom.



I LOOK myself over in the mirror before heading out to the kitchen. Quinn wanted us both to wear white and our guests are to wear either navy blue or baby pink. As I make my way to the kitchen, I look around at all the decorations. Our home has transformed into something that looks like a fairytale. There are navy blue, baby pink, and gold balloons everywhere. Stars and clouds are hanging from the ceiling. It really feels like you're walking in the night sky. We decided on a Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star theme and I have to admit, it looks amazing.

Stella swats my hand away from the cake she just sat on the counter. "Don't you dare touch that!"

"What? I was just looking." It's a two tiered cake. The bottom is navy blue and the top is baby pink. Both layers are

covered in gold stars and white clouds with “how we wonder what you are” written on the side of the top tier.

“You look nice this afternoon.” I say, pointing to her baby pink dress.

She narrows her eyes at me, knowing full well I was about to taste the icing. “Mmhmm... where’s Quinn?”

“Still getting ready. I told her everyone will be here soon and she said I’m not helping, so I left her alone.”

Stella chuckles. “Wise man.”

Quinn has times where I know not to get in her way. Today is one of them. “Rather not push my luck with her.” I smile.

“It’s interesting how you went from kicking women out left, right, and center to worshipping the ground Quinn walks on.” She smiles as she puts a platter together. “It’s a beautiful thing to see.”

“Isn’t that how it’s supposed to be? Well, maybe not the kicking out thing,” we both laugh, “but I’d do anything for her. She’d do the same for me.”

“You two were fated from the start. I knew it from the first time I met her.”

“How?” I pique a brow.

“You were softer with her, showed emotion. It was just a feeling.”

“Hmm, I guess you’re right.” No matter what happened, we kept being put back together. The doorbell rings, pulling me from my thoughts. “That’s my mom.”

I get up to find Quinn when she appears in the kitchen. She looks stunning in an all-white flowy dress, setting off her deep copper skin with a golden star crown sitting atop her curls.

“You look like an angel.”

“You always say that,” she smirks. “Thank you.” She kisses me. “Once you’re done staring, we should probably get the door.”

“Right, yeah, we should. You just look fucking gorgeous. Glad you’re knocked up with my child.” I smirk, interlacing my fingers with hers as we head for the door.

“Shut the hell up, Ky.” She giggles.

Quinn tries to contain her laugh as I open the door. My mom smiles at us, dressed in navy blue, before covering her mouth with tears in her eyes, and wraps her arms around us.

“I’m happy you’re here, Mom.” I say and she hugs me a little tighter.



LATER THAT AFTERNOON, surrounded by our family and friends, we prepare to cut the cake. Our home is filled with people we love, Quinn’s parents, Harlow and Acyn with their families, Quinn’s brother Jackson and his partner Troy, Cash, Quinn’s friends Marisa and Savannah, dad’s best friend Richard and a few people from the dispensary including Lincoln. Being surrounded by people who love and support us for such an important moment is priceless.

“Alright everyone, we’re ready to cut the cake.” I announce and a silence falls over the room. Everyone looks at us with anticipation. My mom appears with a cake knife, handing it to Quinn.

“Are you ready?” Quinn asks me.

“Always.” I place my hand over hers that’s holding the knife. “On three?”

“One...” She says.

“Two...” I follow.

“Three!” We say together.

We cut through the cake. When we pull the slice away, it reveals a navy blue center. Quinn gasps, letting go of the knife, causing the piece of cake to tumble to the floor. She wraps her

arms around me. We laugh and kiss each other. All our family and friends are hollering and cheering.

Quinn cries with a smile on her face. “A boy! We’re having a boy. I love you so much.”

“A boy.” My lips meet hers again, convinced I’m the happiest man alive right now. “I love you too.”

Quinn and I, we collided with fate. Fell, crashed, and fucking burned. But we fell together, crashed together, and we fucking burned together. Nothing is perfect. But me and her, *us* –we’re perfect for each other. When our son asks me if I believe in fate, I’m going to tell him the story of us... of how we came to be.

How we collided with fate.

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# EPILOGUE



*Thirty nine weeks...*

“Ky, I can’t do this...” I whimper as I hold on to him.  
“You’re already doing it,” he says softly, “and you’re doing fucking amazing.” He reassures me.

“You’re just—” another contraction washes over me.

I cling to Kyrell as if he can stop the pain. He keeps me from doubling over onto my knees. Tears sting my eyes. My stomach contracts, causing my body to become rigid. I try to breathe, but it feels impossible as the contraction reaches its peak. The breathing techniques I learned in the birthing classes are lost on me. Once it passes, I take a shaky inhale of breath. I lay my head on his chest.

“You’re just saying that because—”

“Because you’re the strongest person I know.” His voice resonates in his chest with my ear pressed to it, calming me. “You’re bringing our son into the world, Quinn. You’ve been keeping him safe, nourished, and helping him grow for the past nine months. You already know him better than anyone.” He pulls away slightly to look at me and wipes the tears from my cheeks. “You got this, Mama.” A hint of a smile is on his lips as he looks at me. I see nothing but admiration and love in his eyes.

I rest my head against his chest again. “I’m so tired, Ky.”

My eyes drift shut as he sways us side to side. I could easily fall asleep standing up. At the beginning of my pregnancy, I was exhausted and nauseous. Things got easier as I got further along to the point I was actually enjoying being pregnant. I felt lucky to not be sick, like the horror stories I’ve

heard of some women who are ill their entire pregnancy. That was until contractions started early this morning. They were subtle at first, but now I've been in active labor, with consistent contractions for what feels like an eternity. I'm falling asleep between each one. If Kyrell wasn't here to hold me up, I'd be on the floor. I'm questioning my choice to do this without an epidural, but I wanted to be able to move around during labor.

"Do you want to lie on the bed?" he asks me.

"I'm terrified to move." I laugh at myself because I know it sounds ridiculous, and he laughs too.

"To be honest, you're going to have contractions no matter where you are." He smirks and I groan because it's true.

"Okay, I'll try the tub. Maybe the water will help." I move, but feel the beginnings of another contraction. "Wait—"

"Quinn, try to breathe through it." He says.

I nod, trying to breathe with the contraction instead of fighting it. I look into his eyes as he breathes along with me while giving me an encouraging smile. The pain is excruciating, but breathing through the contraction helps dull the ache just enough that I don't feel like I'm dying.

"See," he smiles as my body fully relaxes after the contraction, "you got this." I smile at him. "Tub?" he asks with raised brows.

"Yes," I nod.

It's hard to tell we're even in a birth center. If it weren't for the few clinical elements of it, our room could be a high end hotel. Dr. Hayes was nice, but I would have had to give birth in the hospital for me to remain her patient. As I researched different options, I decided I wanted a more natural approach to my pregnancy and the birth. When I found my midwife, Paloma Ruiz, I loved her calm and nurturing spirit. Everything I want in someone who is going to be part of the most intimate moment of our lives.

Once we're near the tub, I strip down. Kyrell helps me step out of my leggings and slips my shirt over my head. I'm left in



a bralette and panties.

“Do you want me to get in with you?” he asks as he helps me over the edge of the tub.

My eyes snap to his. “You’d get in with me?”

“Yeah,” he shrugs, “why wouldn’t I?”

“I don’t know. It’s probably going to get messy.”

“And?” he asks with a quirked brow. “It isn’t going to stop me from being close to you, if that’s what you want?”

“Of course it is.” I smile at him.

My body begins to relax as soon as the warm water wraps around my legs. My eyes move to Kyrell as he pulls off his shirt. Thirty-nine weeks pregnant, in active labor, and I’m still attracted to him. Pregnancy only increased my sex drive, and he never complained.

“You know, that look on you’re giving me is why we’re here.” He chuckles as he slips out of his jeans.

I smile as I submerge the rest of my body into the water, fully relaxing. “No regrets... well until the next contraction comes. Then I’ll question my entire existence.”

He laughs as he climbs over the edge of the tub in his boxers. “Like I said,” he settles in the tub behind me, “you’re doing amazing.” He kisses my neck, wrapping his arms around me. “How do you feel?”

“This water is perfect.” I smile with my eyes closed but they quickly snap open as I feel another contraction. Tears prick my eyes again, not from the pain, but because I’m so fucking tired. “Fuck...” I mutter trying to breathe through it. Being in the warm water is helping the pain. I don’t feel frozen in place like I was while standing. I feel the contraction subside.

“I really need him to get out of me.” I whimper, resting my head back against Kyrell’s chest.

“I mean... you’ve never been inside you before. I wouldn’t want to leave either.” He says nonchalantly.

“Ky!” I say, covering my mouth as I cackle.

“What?” I feel his shoulders shrug. “It’s warm, soft, and tight. Kind of like a hug. Well, if the hug were wet, then it would be like one. A gushy, warm, soft, and tight hug.” I hear the smile in his voice.

The tears from exhaustion quickly turn into tears of laughter. “You’re so ridiculous!” I say, wiping the tears from my face.

“I’ve studied you. Trust me when I say he is comfortable as fuck.”

“Be that as it may, I need him to get out.”

I shift in the tub, sitting on my legs and resting my forearms on the edge. Kyrell’s strong hands rub my back and my eyes drift close. The feel of his hands and the water are the perfect combination.

“How am I going to do this when he’s here? I’m already exhausted.” The thought plants a seed of anxiety.

“Quinn, you do realize you’re bringing a whole baby into the world right now? By yourself?” he asks in disbelief.

“Not entirely alone. I have you.” I say softly as my mind reels, wondering what I’m going to do once he’s here.

“You do, and you’ll always have me. I’ll always have you. You’re never alone.” He kisses my shoulder.

I relax into his words. My mom kept insisting that we hire a full-time nanny. Kyrell, given his upbringing, was vehemently against that. Neither of us wants to miss any moments with our son. Even if that means sleepless nights. But I know everything will be alright because we have each other. I feel the start of another contraction.

“Can you apply pressure to my hips?” I say as I rest my head on my forearms. Instead of trying to brace myself for the pain, I lean into it.

I feel his hands pressed against my hips, like we practiced in the birthing class, and it makes the contraction slightly more bearable.

“Is that okay? More pressure?” he asks.

“No, that’s good. The contraction passed.”

His hands run up my back, resuming the massage. A minute later, there’s a knock on the door as it opens a sliver.

“Safe to come in?” Paloma’s voice asks from the other side.

“Yeah.” I say as my eyes shut again, already drifting off to sleep.

“How are you doing, Quinn?” she asks as she sits on the edge of the tub beside me.

I open my eyes to look at her. Paloma isn’t much older than me. She has long, wavy black hair loosely braided down her back, deep bronze skin, large brown eyes, and the most comforting smile.

“I’m tired and ready for him to make his appearance. How long have I been in labor? Is this normal? Should I be worried?” I can’t stop the questions that spill from my lips. I hear Kyrell chuckle behind me, already well acquainted with my endless questions.

Paloma smiles at me before glancing at her watch. “You’ve been in active labor for about four hours, which is completely normal for a first time mom. There’s nothing to worry about, Quinn. You’re doing great.” She places her hand on my back, then directs her attention to Kyrell. “About how far apart are her contractions?”

“They’re about ten minutes apart right now. An hour ago, they were about twenty minutes apart.” He says. I didn’t even know that he was keeping track.

“You’re getting there, Quinn.” She reassures me. “Trust your body. It knows exactly how to get your baby boy here. You have an excellent partner by your side and I’m here too.”

I nod my head, smiling. “Thank you Paloma.”

“I’ll be back to check on you soon, okay? But call me if you need anything.”

“We will.” Kyrell tells her before she stands and exits the room.

I’m still feeling impatient, but a little less so after Paloma assures me I’m getting there and to trust my body.

“Do you want to move to the bed? Or are you comfortable here?” he asks.

“I’ll stay here. Once it’s time to push, I might move.” I settle back down into the tub, against his chest.

“Whatever you want, Mama.” He kisses the top of my head like he always does.



A FEW HOURS LATER, after multiple positions, moving in and out of the tub, and even trying walking—the contractions come in strong, steady waves. Paloma enters the room after Kyrell called for her and looks ready to get down to business.

“Can I check how dilated you are?” she asks, pulling on gloves.

“As long as you tell me this baby is coming.” I say through gritted teeth. My body is running on pure adrenaline at this point.

I try to relax as she checks my cervix. It isn’t the most comfortable feeling in the world when you’re enduring contractions with fingers shoved in your vagina.

“Okay, Quinn, you can start pushing with your next contraction.” She smiles as she looks at me.

My already wild heart beats faster as I realize we’re close to meeting our baby boy. I turn to Kyrell and give him a weary smile.

“We’re almost there, Quinn. He’ll be here soon.” He reassures me.

“Are you comfortable like this, Quinn?” Paloma asks me.

I'm propped up on my back in the bed. "Yeah, I'm ready."

"Okay, Kyrell, are you catching him?"

"Hell yeah!" He says without hesitation. "Not gonna lie, I'm nervous. But I'm gonna do it."

Paloma chuckles and so do I. "Alright Quinn," she says, "we're ready when you are."

When the next contraction comes, I inhale deeply, and push with every ounce of energy I have left.



EIGHTEEN HOURS and not a minute longer. That's how long it took Jasiel Elias Knight to be born. He came into the world with a roar of a cry. Kyrell caught him with tears in his eyes and then placed him on my chest. It's the most surreal feeling to have the tiny human you've been carrying around for the past thirty-nine weeks placed on top of you.

He's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. He has a head full of soft brown coils, deep golden brown skin, and the cutest ten fingers and toes. He's only minutes old, but he looks like he's going to be Kyrell's twin. The only features he got from me are the shape of his little plump lips and his hair. To think—Kyrell and I made him. He's ours and we are his.

Kyrell settles next to me on the bed as Paloma encourages me to nurse Jasiel while she helps clean up after the birth. As soon as he was out, the pain I endured for hours subsided.

"You did it." Kyrell kisses my temple.

"Not without you." I smile at him and kiss his lips.

We both stare at Jasiel as he nurses. His eyes are closed, with his feet and arms curled up close to me.

"I wish my dad were here." Kyrell says as he stares at him.

"I know. Me too, but I'm sure there's a piece of your dad in him. He has his name, and came from you." I touch Kyrell's cheek, and he leans into my hand.

I finish nursing Jasiel and Paloma comes back into the room to teach us how to swaddle. Kyrell hangs onto everything concerning me or Jasiel with rapt attention. I'm listening to Paloma, but my eyes are on Kyrell. He's the best partner I could ever ask for. Watching him with Jasiel is a beautiful thing to witness.

"If you need anything, I'll be here. I try to give families their bonding time." Paloma offers us a warm smile. "Quinn, you were amazing. Rest up, Jasiel is in good hands." She says as she glances at Kyrell.

I rest my head back against the pillow, watching my two boys as Paloma leaves. He scoots further up the bed with Jasiel swaddled in his arms and plants a kiss on top of my head.

"I love you so much." He says.

"I love you too." I smile. I was exhausted not long ago, but now that Jasiel is here, I can't sleep. I want to watch him and Kyrell.

"Isn't he perfect?" he asks, staring at him in awe. "And all these brown curls? He got that from you."

"I think he's all you, babe."

"Me? Nah, he's a good mix between the two of us." I yawn and Kyrell's eyes focus on me. "You need sleep. We'll be good. I'm just gonna hold and stare at him."

I snort with laughter. "Watching you with him is everything."

He kisses me. "You're everything. Now sleep. We'll be right here." He settles on the bed next to me.

I interlace my fingers with his before I drift off to sleep.



I WAKE to Kyrell's voice. It's dark outside, which means I was asleep for a couple of hours. He's using a hushed tone as he

walks around the room with Jasiel. I don't immediately open my eyes because I can hear some of what he's saying.

"I can't believe we made you. Well, I believe mommy did. She makes anything she's a part of beautiful." He says, and I smile at his words. "Actually... her singing kinda sucks. Alright, to be honest, it's absolutely terrible."

I have to stifle a laugh because he always talks shit about my singing. I don't care if I'm terrible. If I know the words—I'm going to sing along.

"You're just a newborn," he continues. "I'm sure it won't bother you. You'll get used to it. I have, but I still make it a point to remind her sometimes she isn't Mariah Carey. Everyone can't wait to meet you. You have Grandma Olivia, who is my mom. She'll be staying with us a couple of weeks from now. Then you have Grandma Eliza, Papa Malcolm, and Uncle Jackson—that's mommy's family. Well, our family. I think Grandma Eliza would steal you if she could. We'll have to watch out for her."

I stifle another laugh because he isn't wrong. My mom has been talking about sleepovers, vacations, and whatever else she can think of. She met Kyrell for the first time in person at the gender reveal party. That's when she finally accepted that I was having a baby. She wanted to stay with us immediately after Jasiel was born, but I didn't know if I could handle that. While she's become more accepting, we still have our spats. For both of our sakes, I thought it'd be best to have Kyrell's mom come stay with us. But we agreed to have the first two weeks to ourselves to get settled in.

"Oh, we also have a cat named KP. Which is short for—" he stops and I bite my lip to keep from laughing "—you know what... mommy and I may have to rethink that name. The cat will always be KP to you. That's all you need to know."

"Then there's Papa Elias, who you're named after. He would've loved to be here," Kyrell lets out a sigh as he sways back and forth, "but he already lives in the stars. Don't worry, we have pictures and lots of memories. Now I understand what he said about me being his life's greatest gift. That's what you

and mommy are to me.” He kisses the top of Jasiel’s head. I feel the sting of tears in my eyes as I listen to him tell our son stories about his dad.



WE’RE RELEASED from the birth center twenty-four hours after Jasiel is born. No matter how comfortable a place is, there’s no place like home. When we pull into the driveway, it’s decorated with balloons and a “welcome baby” sign.

“Pretty sure that’s from your mom.” Kyrell chuckles.

“No doubt.” I smile at all the baby blue and silver balloons.

Kyrell parks and then opens the door for me to get out. I make a move to grab Jasiel’s car seat, but he stops me.

“I got him.” He offers me his hand to help me out of the car. I take it and wait for him to get Jasiel. “Alright,” he says, standing upright, “I’ll get you two situated and come back for the rest of our stuff later.”

I stand on my tiptoes to kiss him. “You’re the best.”

He smiles, interlaces his fingers with mine, and leads us into the house.

We get to Jasiel’s room, which is decorated in a nautical theme. The walls are a navy blue with white trim and gray accents throughout. The ship that Kyrell built with his dad is on a shelf above his dresser. The shelves below it have other model ships and cars built by his dad sitting on them. I put Elias’ fishing rod on the wall near the rocking chair. There are frames hanging along the length of the rod with pictures from our camping trip. There are two frames above Jasiel’s crib. One has a picture of Kyrell with his dad and the ship they built. It was the last picture they took together. In the other frame, I’ll put a picture of the three of us after Jasiel’s birth.

We worked on his room for months. We could’ve easily hired people to do it, but there’s no meaning in that to us.



Kyrell sets Jasiel's car seat on the floor and I kneel to get him out. He stretches, yawns, and makes a little noise as I bring him to my chest.

"We're home baby boy." I take off his hat and kiss his curls before I sit down in the plush rocking chair.

Kyrell sits in the one next to me. "Are you hungry?"

"Yeah, I could probably eat a cow right now." I admit as I help Jasiel latch on.

He chuckles. "Paloma says that's normal since you're nursing."

I look at him and notice he looks exhausted, but happy. "You could sleep, ya know?" I smile as I rock with Jasiel.

"I'll sleep when he does. Besides, I don't want to leave you alone." He yawns.

"Ky, I'll be fine. How 'bout you make something, we eat, and then we all sleep? Jasiel can nap in the co-sleeper next to our bed."

His eyes light up. "Okay, that sounds perfect. What do you want?"

"A big ass sandwich with spicy mustard and chips." My mouth waters at the thought.

"One big ass sandwich with spicy mustard and chips coming right up." He smirks.

As he disappears into the hallway, I whisper to Jasiel, "You have the best daddy."

Kyrell has made every effort to be the best father for Jasiel. He has attended therapy regularly, taken countless baby classes with me, read every parenting book he can get his hands on, and joined a father's group. I've always been proud of him, but watching him go into full dad mode over the past several months has been amazing. He fears that he'll end up not being there for Jasiel, which I never see happening. If anything, I'm going to have to remind him to take a step back every once in a while.

When I went to the mommy classes, some of the other women tried to warn me not to expect much from him. They complained that their partners or husbands left all the work up to them. They thought I was being delusional when I told them I'd never have to worry about that. I don't expect everything to always be 50/50, but I know Kyrell will always be there for us.

After Jasiel's done nursing, I make my way to the kitchen where Kyrell is finishing up the sandwiches. I sit at the kitchen island, holding Jasiel, while gently patting his back.

"Do you want me to get the baby swing thingy my mom got?"

"Swing thingy," I chuckle, "yeah. That way I can eat without dropping food on his head."

Kyrell sets our plates of food on the kitchen table before he heads to the living room to grab the swing. When he reappears, I hand him Jasiel and he buckles him in it.

"He doesn't complain much." I say with a smile as I watch him snuggle into the seat.

"Nah, he's chill. I bet that changes as he gets older though."

I take a seat with him at the table and eat my sandwich. "Yeah, it will. But for right now, I'm glad he's letting us get acclimated to this whole parenting thing."

"Right, don't hit us over the head straight out the gate. Let us warm up first." He chuckles.

I smirk. "We got this."

"We do." He nods while smiling at me.

We fall into conversation as I devour my sandwich and chips. He reminds me that his mom is coming in two weeks. When she was visiting last weekend, she talked with us about moving to L.A.. The six-hour drive from San Francisco to our place is a long one to make. Especially since she wants to be, and we want her to be, involved in Jasiel's life. Kyrell is looking into buying her a house near us. He was hesitant at first and asked me if it was a dumb idea. I told him it's an

amazing idea and there's no way she'll say no. He plans to tell her when she comes to visit. Olivia will stay with us for a month. I'm looking forward to it.

I barely stopped working a few days ago. Yolanda assured me I'd always have a job at Harmony Health Services. But it's important to me to be home, at least for the first year. Since I have the luxury to do that, I'm going to take full advantage. Then I'll go back to school to get my master's. We have it all planned out. Kyrell doesn't need to work, but he does for the same reasons I did. It gives him something to do other than being home. Aside from all the baby stuff, he's put his extra time into getting his line of edibles launched. It'll be another few months before the facility is ready. Both of us took a step back from our careers to focus on Jasiel. We feel that's what's best for him and us.

I lean back against the chair, letting out a sigh. "That was good, but now I'm sleepy."

He chuckles as he clears our plates. "Do you want to go lay down?"

"Yeah, maybe we'll both get some rest."

Kyrell gets Jasiel out of his swing and heads to our room. He puts him in the sleeper near my side of the bed while I change my clothes. I slip into some sweats and a cropped hoodie.

"I guess bras are pointless now." I shrug. I'm nursing so often that it's easier to not have a bra on. "Besides, my nipples are fucking sore." I say as I crawl into bed.

Kyrell snorts with laughter. "I'm not going to object to you not wearing a bra. I've got nothing on the sore nipples though." He says as he pulls a hoodie over his head. Then he climbs into bed next to me and pulls the comforter up over us.

"All worth it cause he's cute." I say, looking at Jasiel.

"He is. Thank God. Imagine having an ugly kid?"

I clap my hand over my mouth to keep from laughing. "Ky, stop it!" I whisper yell.

“What? Not every baby is cute. That’s not my fault.” He says with a chuckle. “I don’t know why you’re acting like a saint. You show me your friend’s ugly babies all the time.”

“Yeah,” I laugh, “but I wouldn’t say it to them.”

“I wouldn’t say it to them. But I for damn sure am not going to agree that they’re cute either.” He says with a shrug.

I bury my face in his chest as I laugh. When I open my eyes to look at him, he’s staring at me with a smile on his face. “What?” I ask.

“I know I’ve said it fifteen billion times,” he cups my face in his hand, “but I love you. Thank you for giving me everything I only dreamt of.”

“I love you too, Ky. And none of this would be possible without you, so thank you.” I kiss him and he wraps me in his arms.

I get comfortable snuggling into his chest, and begin drifting off to sleep as he rubs his hand up and down my back. I feel like I’ve just fallen asleep when Jasiel stirs. It starts off as little grunts, then quickly turns into cries.

Kyrell chuckles. “So much for being chill.”

I sit up. “It was good while it lasted.” I say with a mix of a chuckle and a groan.

“If you feed him,” he yawns, “I’ll stay up with him.”

“And you’ll sleep when?” I ask as I help Jasiel latch on.

“When I can.” He shrugs. “It’s a lot easier for me to sleep than you. I don’t have the milk.”

I chew on my lip, knowing he’s right, but not wanting to agree. We both need rest, and I don’t want him to be exhausted. He must read my mind as I weigh the options.

“We’re both tired, Quinn. But you need more rest than I do.” He sits up next to me. “We got this. Together, remember?”

“Together.” I smile at him as our lips meet.

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